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THE SINISTER SOUTHERN CONE:
MOOD, AFFECT, AND HORROR IN THE CULTURAL IMAGINARY OF ARGENTINE
AND BRAZILIAN STATE TERROR

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Dedicated to the victims and survivors of state terror:

their legacies, their memories, their ghosts.

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**The Sinister Southern Cone:
Mood, Affect, and Horror in the Cultural Imaginary of Argentine and Brazilian State
Terror**

Laura Colaneri

Abstract

This dissertation examines the narrative strategies that Argentine and Brazilian authors, filmmakers, and artists have used to respond to twentieth-century dictatorships. It analyzes the appearance of horror genre conventions in novels, a film, an experimental play, an experimental artwork, and archival sources, arguing that these conventions create the sinister mood, defined as a pervasive sense of fear and apprehension in response to ominous but shadowy threats of violence and death. It argues that the texts examined in this dissertation feature the sinister mood and use familiar horror aesthetics from cross-cultural filmic and literary traditions to make political violence more legible in the cultural imaginary of dictatorship; inspire an affective response in the reader or viewer that can help them approach the experience of state terror; and ultimately resist the shadowy nature of authoritarian power.

Chapter one examines esotericism, secret societies, and conspiracy, particularly the role played by Argentina's most famous esoteric practitioner, José López Rega—known as “el Brujo”—in history and Luisa Valenzuela's 1983 novel *Cola de lagartija*. It argues that, due to the shadowy, untransparent nature of Argentine politics in the 1970s, esoteric activities became conflated with behind-the-scenes political conspiracy, lending otherwise banal terror an aura of supernatural evil that exacerbated the atmosphere of fear and paranoia circulating through

everyday life, literature, and culture during this era. Chapter two analyzes how the film *Crónica de una fuga* (dir. Israel Adrián Caetano, 2006) portrays a historical Clandestine Detention Center using the visual motifs of the Gothic haunted house to make the political dissidents' experience of terror legible, while nevertheless highlighting the strangeness of space and time when horror lurks, detected but unacknowledged, beneath the everyday. Chapter three features another Argentine haunted house: the setting of Griselda Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros* (1973), in which audiences take an unsettling tour through rooms staging scenes of uncanny violence. It demonstrates that the play evokes both the Gothic haunted house and the haunted spectacle in order to create a sinister atmosphere that exposes how authoritarian power disguises itself and relay a demand from this troubled past to intervene in our own present. Chapter four examines how Artur Barrio's 1970 artworks featuring the *Trouxas Ensanguentadas* reappear the disappeared tortured bodies of Brazil's political prisoners as abject corpses, making terror affectively known to the spectator in order to counteract the powerfully obscure nature of the sinister mood. Chapter five similarly looks at how repressive attempts to disappear bodies are turned back against the military government. Reading the contradictory materiality of Evita Perón's embalmed cadaver in Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* (1995) as alternately monstrous and saintly, abject and beautiful, this chapter poses that the corpse's haunting curse reorients the sinister to hold repressors accountable for their crimes against the dead. Through its attention toward the appearance of horror genre conventions in cultural works relating to state violence and dictatorship, this intervention addresses the narrative and representative possibilities of genre, mood, and affect for portraying and contesting the legacies of state terror.

Introduction

In 1976, in Pilar, Argentina, a Spiritist medium with the Escuela Científica Basilio was participating in a ritual practice dedicated to the “materialización de familiares y amigos” when she played host to an unexpected spirit (Ludueña 2012: 623). The spirit was atypical at this gathering—which was usually filled with happy re-encounters between the living and their deceased loved ones—for one simple reason: no one had known that she was dead. Instead of feeling that they had been reunited with the woman, who had been friends with their daughter and had recently disappeared, the medium and her husband, who was in attendance and spoke with the spirit, felt “una intensa inquietud” at this encounter (Ludueña 2012: 629). Moreover, during the possession, the medium felt not joy or peace from the spirit, but pain and anguish.

The disturbing experience filled the medium, who had over twenty years of experience, with doubt and uncertainty over what had occurred, making her suspicious of her own experiences. Was this really the spirit of her daughter’s friend? How had she died? What had happened to her? Through this particular possession ritual, “El espíritu materializado, en suma, se había transformado en un símbolo —i.e., una *presencia* significativa— que interpelaba insistentemente a Blanca por su identidad, lo cual la llevó a desplegar una actitud de *sospecha* acerca del sentido de lo sucedido” (Ludueña 2012: 629). Unsure of whether to tell her daughter about this news she had received of her disappeared friend, the medium asked for proof of what had occurred from the spirits of el *Bien*. A few days later, the family received a call informing them that the woman’s body had been found among 29 other cadavers, murdered and dynamited in what would be referred to as la Masacre de Fátima.

The Argentine anthropologist Gustavo Andrés Ludueña originally recounted this story, based on interviews conducted with the Spiritist medium in 2004 and 2005, in a 2012 article,

which uses pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the individuals involved. The disappeared woman, who Ludueña refers to as Marta Shelter, was kidnapped on August 6, 1976, alongside her husband and father-in-law. Their family members immediately filed writs of habeas corpus to try to locate them. Although the medium reported receiving the news from one of her daughter's other friends that Marta's body was found alongside her husband and father-in-law, Ludueña noted that they were still officially considered disappeared.¹

However, as Ludueña notes in his article, the appearance of the bodies in Pilar shortly after the disappearance of Marta and her subsequent reappearance during a ritual of spirit possession is more important for what it symbolizes than whether Marta's body was identified. Through an analysis of this example, the anthropologist highlights how Spiritist practices of possession were “un mecanismo simbólico y performativo para la construcción de *presencias*” in a context in which absence was the defining characteristic of those who were disappeared by the Argentine dictatorship (2012: 615). At this early moment in the so-called “Proceso de Reorganización Nacional,” the status of the disappeared was deeply confusing; it was entirely unclear to the family members and friends left behind whether they had been arrested and were being held, whether they were missing or dead. Ludueña notes the strange category that the *desaparecidos* occupied: they were people that were both there and not there legally, socially, and politically, adding up to “una suerte de *cuerpos ambiguos*” (2012: 632), an ambiguity that the possessing spirit of the mediumship ritual seems almost tailor-made to symbolize. In fact, citing interviews with other members of Spiritist organizations during this time period, Ludueña

¹ Among the bodies found at that site on August 20, 1976, only 5 were identified at that time, and 14 bodies still had not been identified as of his writing in 2012. As of 2022, 25 out of 30 bodies had been identified, although I am unable to confirm whether Marta's was among them due to Ludueña's use of pseudonyms (Cecchini 2022).

asserts, “No fueron pocas las personas que –con seres queridos en aquella desafortunada condición—asistieron a la ECB por entonces, y podría decirse que también a otras agrupaciones religiosas, con el fin de reunir información o encontrar ayuda” (2012: 632). Such individuals would rather know about the fate of their loved ones and receive assurances that at least they had passed on to el Bien than live with the ambiguity of disappearance.

While the appearance of Marta’s spirit gave them an answer to this uncertainty, many questions still remained. All they knew was that their daughter’s friend was dead, in the words of Ludueña, “por razones que, por el momento, le eran desconocidas. Para ellos, súbita y dramáticamente, la joven pasó de la condición de desaparecida a la de físicamente muerta” (2012: 628). In short, for the medium, the experience was marred by uncertainty, ambiguity, pain, doubt, and shock. However, as Ludueña points out, the re-appearance of the disappeared woman also “hizo visible lo que el estado intentó ocultar” (2012: 636) within the marginalized space of the Spiritist ritual, constituting not only an exposure of the dictatorship’s state-sponsored terror, but a means for some Argentines to articulate and make sense of this experience.

I begin with this example because it evokes many of this project’s primary concerns. Firstly, the Spiritist practices of the ECB necessitate the belief that otherworldly forces are at work in the participants’ everyday lives. The role of the Spiritist medium during a possession ritual is akin to a kind of translator for these forces: as Ludueña notes, the ECB believes that the medium remains in control of their body, able to perceive the corporeal and emotive memory of the possessing spirit, but that their own spirit is temporarily displaced as they allow the other to speak through them. For Spiritist practitioners, these otherworldly forces are not usually anxiety-inducing, but a source of illumination.

However, the case outlined above creates a certain disturbance in this order. The reappearance of the *desaparecida* via the possession ritual at first brings forth despair, anguish, pain, anxiety, and uncertainty. In short, the experience is disquieting; the medium is unsure how to represent and translate for a spirit whose status—alive or dead—is uncertain, and doubt and insecurity haunts her. At the same time, however, the medium’s attention to and expertise in these otherworldly forces ultimately allows her to make this disquieting experience legible. As Ludueña argues, in cases like this, “la posesión opera como unidad legítima de enunciación para la canalización de expresiones no aceptables por vías más convencionales a través de la producción de discursos no reproducibles en casos normales” (2012: 620). In the marginal space of the Spiritist possession ritual, taking the material impact of otherworldly forces seriously therefore allowed its participants to identify and articulate the hidden practices of state-sponsored terror, undermining their haunting power and even, in a way, re-materializing the missing desaparecidos.

This dissertation proposes that the feeling that hidden, otherworldly forces were at work under the military governments of Argentina (1976-1983) and Brazil (1964-1985) was not unique to those who practiced Spiritism, and that finding a way to these disquieting experiences legible is a central concern for cultural production related to the dictatorship. I refer to this feeling as the sinister, which I define as a prevailing mood that characterizes both this historical period in these countries and many cultural works—literature, film, and art—that treat the dictatorships and their legacies. The sinister is characterized by a pervasive sense of fear and apprehension at an ominous threat of violence, but one which remains vague, at least partially hidden, difficult to pin down, and for that reason not concrete, but general. This quality of partial hiddenness or secrecy is central to the sinister: as Camila Maroja (2014) has argued, “only

partially revealed things can be hidden; in order to be hidden, events or images must be either sensed (via sensibility) or perceived (via sense). The phenomenon of the missing political prisoners, known as the *desaparecidos*, which registered emotionally through sensed fear, but was not epistemically perceived due to censorship, was thus a hidden fact” (27). As will become clear shortly, this quality of being sensed rather than known is one reason why an attention to mood is necessary for understanding this historical era.

The sinister is troubling and disquieting: it encompasses what has sometimes been referred to in literary criticism as *lo insólito*, the eerie, and even Freud (1919)’s uncanny.² The experience of the sinister is that of becoming trapped in someone, or something, else’s agency, one that is impossible to comprehend, as the elements that give rise to it are only partially visible, are easier sensed than seen and articulated. As such, the sinister is also characterized by uncertainty, doubt, and suspicion, as secrecy and experimentation with simultaneously partially

² The term *insólito* has been used in recent years by, for example, the Congreso Internacional Figuraciones de lo Insólito en las Literaturas Española e Hispanoamericana (Siglos XIX-XXI), which met at the University of León in 2014 and 2017, and Francisco Javier Ordiz Vázquez in *Estrategias y figuraciones de lo insólito en la narrativa mexicana (siglos XIX–XXI)* (2014). This term has been used largely to refer to the strange in fantastic and fantasy literature. Mark Fisher, in *The Weird and the Eerie* (2017), defines the eerie as, like the *insólito*, related to the strange, though not necessarily fantastic or supernatural; for Fisher, the eerie is created when what we have assumed is natural is denaturalized, and when our attention is drawn to alterity and the unknown. However, it does not necessarily involve the terrifying. Freud’s uncanny or *unheimlich*, which will be discussed more thoroughly later in this project, also involves the familiar becoming defamiliarized. As will become clear, the sinister shares many characteristics with these other categories, although it is not limited to the fantastic and is linked explicitly with fear and terror. Like myself, Hugo Vezetti (1997) defines *lo siniestro* as encompassing multiple meanings, including Freud’s uncanny:

La significación de lo ‘siniestro’ corresponde a un complejo de sentido en el que predominan la ambigüedad y la confusión. Uno de los sentidos de lo siniestro (lo aterradorante) corresponde a lo que siendo por mucho tiempo familiar (doméstico, íntimo y entranable) se reviste de las cualidades, enteramente novedosas, de lo incierto, lúgubre y amenazante. (8)

The role of an uncertain threat is, as we shall see, also central to my definition.

withholding and exposing the truth of the threat prevent full knowledge, giving rise to a paranoia that, while based on a real threat of violence, nevertheless feels unreal.

I define the sinister as a mood following the work of Jonathan Flatley in “Reading for Mood” (2017) and, to an extent, Hans Gumbrecht in *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (2012).³ In his article on the subject, Flatley responds to criticisms leveled against theorists of aesthetic experience and affect, arguing that an attention to a text’s mood and affect does not have to be relative or subjective. Rather, he advocates for “a critical method that is attentive to form without disavowing aesthetic experience, that sees the affective component of aesthetic experience as fundamentally historical and social” and seeks “to propose mood as a concept that will be helpful in that project” (2017: 140). Departing from Heidegger’s concept of *Stimmung*, Flatley further argues that,

in seeing how a particular formal practice addresses itself to a collective of readers whom it is trying to affect, we can also see how it contains a theory of those readers and the historical situation they find themselves in.

Mood is a concept that gives us a way to describe the feeling world of these readers, if we understand mood to name a collective affective atmosphere, one structured and shaped by social forces and institutions and particular to a given historical moment. (2017: 144)

In this sense, mood is neither purely historical or purely aesthetic, objective or subjective, static or dynamic. Rather, it operates in a fluid series of feedback mechanisms: contingent historical and structural circumstances produce certain atmospheres that find aesthetic expression in

³ Flatley objects to Gumbrecht’s approach as relying overly on the individual’s aesthetic or affective experience of the text, a criticism which rings true in Gumbrecht’s assertion that reading for *Stimmung* involves a “Lack of distinction between aesthetic and historical experience” (2012: 11). Following Flatley, I do not wish to fully eliminate this distinction or posit that aesthetic and historical experience are the same, but rather emphasize and appreciate the ways that they interact, often in distinct ways for readers depending on their own historical experiences or awareness. However, as will become clear below, several of Gumbrecht’s observations about mood and representation remains essential for my approach.

literature, film, and art, which in their turn shape the cultural zeitgeist; material and formal aspects of everyday life and texts contribute to the collective experiences of people/readers, which in turn alter how we interpret those material and formal aspects. Mood in Flatley's conceptualization therefore operates on multiple levels: it describes a historical atmosphere related to ideology and power structures; it refers to the mood of a particular text, which elsewhere Sianne Ngai (2005) has labeled tone; and it creates an aesthetic experience which has an affective impact on readers. As he further outlines, often "'Reading for mood' entails a speculative recreation of the understanding of the reader's mood embedded in a given textual practice, its theory-in-practice of the mood of its readers. What is the implicit theory of the reader or viewer's mood that we can see in this work's address to these viewers and its attempt to affect them?" (2017: 150).

Throughout this dissertation, I examine the sinister mood as it relates to each of these interrelated levels. On the level of history and political ideology, I argue that the sinister constitutes a deliberate technology of power employed by the military dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil. In Brazil, the right-wing dictatorship came to power via a coup in 1964 which ousted then-President João Goulart (1919-1976), and increased its repressive measures in 1968 with Ato Institucional Número Cinco (AI-5), which, among other changes, dissolved the legislature, instituted censorship, and suspended habeas corpus. In Argentina, a 1976 military coup overthrew the government of Isabel Perón (1931-), which, particularly after she ascended to the presidency upon the death of her husband, General Juan Perón (1895-1974), had been plagued by political infighting, economic instability, accusations of corruption, and violence from state-sponsored paramilitary forces. The new government, run by a military junta, targeted left-wing political dissidents and even their more politically mainstream associates. Through authoritarian

practices of state-sponsored terrorism—including the widespread practices of illegal detention, torture, disappearance, and murder—as well as censorship, both the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships deliberately spread uncertainty, fear, and paranoia, geared toward paralyzing citizens with the overwhelming feeling that they were trapped under the threat of a supreme power that they could not fully identify or grasp. As Flatley observes of Fisher (2009)’s concept of capitalist realism, which he interprets as a mood, the sinister in Argentina and Brazil therefore naturalized the current ideological order and protected the authoritarian regimes, since “In some moods . . . collective political action might not even enter one’s consciousness except as something impossible, futile, foolish, or obscure” (2017: 148).

On the second level, I posit that the sinister mood therefore makes its way into several literary, filmic, and artistic texts related to the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships. It is in some ways unsurprising that the sinister would populate texts related to these regimes: in a world where shadowy, unseen forces such as paramilitary organizations and military intelligence agencies intervene in and operate the government without oversight or transparency; where people vanish off the street, never to be heard from again; and where the broken remnants of tortured bodies wash up on beaches, it is easy to imagine there are evil forces at work. However, I also argue that the appearance of the sinister in these cultural productions is more than a mere reflection of this historical atmosphere manufactured by repressive states in service of their political ideology. Rather, by drawing our attention to and exploring the implications of the sinister, these texts—which span the dictatorships and post-dictatorships from 1970 until 2006—seek out ways to overcome challenges of representation that arise when discussing the dictatorships; make the sinister mood legible for both those who experienced the dictatorships

and generations that are now at a remove from these historical events; and contest the legacy of the authoritarian governments' shadowy and threatening hold over the nation.

The difficulty of expressing and narrating the violence and horror experienced under authoritarian regimes has been one of the themes most highlighted by scholars of Latin American dictatorships, and has engendered debates about the limits of ethical aesthetic representation that have coincided with discussions about whether it is barbaric or even possible, to evoke Adorno's famous saying, to write poetry after Auschwitz, as well as postmodern assertions about the referential limitations of language and mimetic representation. As Adriana Cavarero points out in *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (2009), "As violence spreads and assumes unheard-of forms, it becomes difficult to name in contemporary language" (2). More specific to the Latin American dictatorships, Francine Masiello argues in her contribution to *Ficción y política: La narrativa argentina durante el proceso militar* (1987) that literature faltered in the face of the invasion of metaphoric space conducted by state-sponsored terror in the Southern Cone. Further, as Fernando Reati explains in *Nombrar lo innombrable: Violencia política y novela argentina, 1975-1985* (1992) the new form of state repression that was disappearance transformed society so radically that it is difficult or even impossible to attribute sense to it or imitate it in fiction. For this reason, Reati claims, post-dictatorial literature often lacks bloody details or specificity about the brutal facts: they are so extreme that it is impossible to incorporate them into a coherent narrative. In *Violence in Argentine Literature: Cultural Responses to Tyranny* (1995), David Williams Foster similarly highlights how a focus on rhetoric in texts related to the Argentine dictatorship demonstrates a concern with whether communication is even possible. He argues that, while a documentary line of literary inquiry, in the form of *testimonios* and journalistic texts, seeks to identify what really happened under the dictatorship, write against the military

government's propaganda, and convince the people of the facts, other literary texts often blur the lines between history and fiction, using the fictional in order to demonstrate, if not a factual truth, then an allegorical one, and reconfigure national reality after it was dismantled by authoritarian rhetoric. Like Reati (1992), Foster (1995) is concerned with how literature attempts to demonstrate the extremes of violence under the dictatorship, arguing that it sometimes implements what he terms the neo-grotesque, since

historical reality is so horrible that its daily dimensions outstrip escapist fantasies of the grotesque, that the gap between averred morality and actual social practices is so vast and so hypocritical that it can only lead to a conduct of human affairs which, when seen from the distancing vantage point of cultural texts, can only be qualified as grotesque. (79)

As a result, in contrast to Reati (1992), Foster (1995) believes that literature does not shy from bloody details, potentially resulting in the duplication of the violence to which a text's characters have been subjected. He argues that the horrific and horrible as it appears in such texts are a reflection of material circumstances, and their monsters a reflection of abusive political power. Diana Taylor, too, notes in *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"* (1997), that many texts of this era actually involve a "fascination with eroticized violence" (4), leaving one to question how the violence and trauma of the past can be dealt with without reenacting it and retraumatizing the dictatorship's victims.

The implications of attempting to depict the extreme violence of the dictatorships, and the debate over whether it is possible or ethical to represent it, are central to my concerns in this project. These challenges have been undeniable at least since the Holocaust—for instance, in Primo Levi's meditations on the limitations of witnessing and testimony in *The Drowned and the Saved* (1985)—but have periodically been revisited in the wake of late capitalism's continuing

propensity for unspeakable atrocity throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.⁴ In cases of mass death and disappearance, the capacity of testimony is limited when the witnesses to violence do not survive: one recent engagement with this question in the context of the Southern Cone dictatorships is that of Megan Corbin (2021), who proposes a method of reading the “spectral testimony” of the objects left behind by victims of repression in a way “that at once satisfies our quest for information about the events of the past and calls attention to the impossibilities of our understanding of such monumental atrocity” (4).

As Taylor further notes, however, violence and trauma must be addressed; the question is how. Similarly, Idelbar Avelar highlights in *The Untimely Present: Postdictatorial Latin American Fiction and the Task of Mourning* (1999), that whether a situation *can* be represented does not prevent authors from trying; he argues that writing still seems compelled by an imperative to attempt to express the inexpressible and actively interpret and mourn the terror experienced under dictatorship. In the face of these narrative challenges, Avelar emphasizes the use of allegory to interpret this traumatic past, in addition to a technique that he identifies as “overcodification of the margins” and Daniel Balderston refers to as “oversignification,” that is, the act of supercharging multiple levels of meaning into a literary text in an attempt to express the inexpressible. Karen Elizabeth Bishop’s *The Space of Disappearance: A Narrative Commons*

⁴ Concerns about whether exposure to violence and mass death is desensitizing have been prevalent in both academic and popular discourses, from the public concern in the 1990s that violent video games would predispose our youth to engage in violent realities to the (post)pandemic indifference to the deaths of millions across the globe due to negligent and profit-driven public policies in regards to COVID-19. In a telling example, as cell phone availability has resulted in numerous recordings of the violent deaths of Black U.S. Americans at the hands of police being virally circulated online, a debate has often raged regarding, on the one hand, the importance of sharing those images in order to inspire mass movements to demand police accountability, and, on the other, the trauma and potential desensitization inflicted by repeated exposure to images of such violence.

in the Ruin of Argentine State Terror (2020) also focuses on how an attention toward disappearance as a narrative mode is one technique for creating alternative epistemologies that “instruct us in seeing and reading otherwise, accessing knowledge in new ways and often encoded forms, and understanding the absent as a dynamic agent capable of effecting change both on and off the page” (10), thus providing an additional way for addressing what seems unrepresentable—the narrative absence created by the violence of disappearance. As I will argue throughout this dissertation, a focus on the sinister mood is another way we can read these multiple levels of meaning and approach what seems otherwise inexpressible via mimetic representation.

In addition to the incapacity of language itself to narrate the experience of terror and repression, literature also clashes with the discursive authoritarianism of the dictatorships. That is, the official discourse of the state, which invaded every aspect of life, defined truth and reality, and manipulated language to fit its own ends, made it nearly impossible to write against the official story. As Marguerite Feitlowitz argues in *A Lexicon of Terror: Argentine and the Legacies of Torture* (1998), under dictatorship language was no longer trustworthy, with formerly “innocent” terms taking on a series of dark and violent connotations. Many critics, including Francine Masiello (1987), René Jara (1985), Nelly Richard (1998), Beatriz Sarlo (1987), and Eugenia Brito (1990), have identified how responses to this dilemma have included writing from a marginal space, against binaries and authoritarian discourse and in favor of pluralities, fragmentation, and hybridity, rejecting grand narratives and asserting the importance of alternative ways of interpreting the same events. Coupled with attempts to express the inexpressible, this postmodern impulse has resulted in formal experimentation in many works related to the Latin American dictatorships, destabilizing generic conventions and the distinction

between literature and history, fact and fiction. As we will see, all of the texts that I treat in this project incorporate some sort of formal experimentation: the two novels are examples of what Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (1988), has termed historiographic metafiction; the play eliminates the boundary of the stage and blurs the lines between actors and audience; the film combines elements of multiple genre cinemas with historical testimony; and the artwork is a performance-like “situation” taking place outside of the museum space.

The prevalence of this formal experimentation in the texts that constitute the focus of this dissertation can be explained with what Lauren Berlant has termed “genre flailing,” which the critic defines as “A mode of crisis management that arises after an object, or object world, becomes disturbed in a way that intrudes on one’s confidence about how to move in it” (2018: 157). Flatley further relates Berlant’s genre flailing to circumstances in which “Sometimes, the right mood does not seem to be available,” so that “a new mood or genre must be found or invented,” therefore necessitating “casting about in different ‘genres’ or ways of being in and making one’s affective attachments in the world” and “cobbling together or repurposing already existing moods to create a way of being together in relation to the newly disorienting conditions, problems, objects, and stimuli” (2017: 148-149). As such, the formal experimentation present in the texts analyzed in this project indicates the many “flailing” attempts to make legible an inherently destabilizing mood deriving from a violent history that resists representation.

This concern for legibility is also about helping readers or viewers at a remove from the dictatorships—either due to censorship or a generational distance from the events taking place—understand the violence that took place via affect, therefore bypassing some of the ethical and aesthetic challenges of representation. Many critics have highlighted the necessity of effectively

articulating the dictatorial past in order to combat official state policies of forgetting which remained prevalent throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and into the early 2000s, as well as to construct a historical memory for generations for whom past events will become increasingly inaccessible with the passage of time (Amador 2016; Rosenberg 2016; Spiller 2004; Ros 2012; Lessa and Druliolle 2011 Atencio 2014; Paz-Mackay 2017; Blejmar, Mandolessi and Perez 2017). As such, I argue that cultural texts have sought ways to reach across this discursive and generational gap via mood and feeling, as Gumbrecht (2012) has argued that mood “Can catalyze inner feelings without matters of representation necessarily being involved” (6-7) and that it creates immediacy and allows works to “make readers encounter past realities” (10). The sinister can therefore be thought of as inspiring a multitude of affects corresponding to what Sianne Ngai (2005) terms “ugly feelings”: negative, overwhelming, noncathartic, and affectively disorienting affects, including not just the obvious—terror—but also anxiety, depression, disgust, grief, confusion, uncertainty, doubt, and even the involuntary outpouring of laughter at situations invoking irony or black humor. In Ngai (2005)’s estimation, an attention towards these affects can help to bridge the gap between political agency and the aesthetic, since “For all its pettiness, the feeling calls attention to a real social experience and a certain kind of historical truth” (5). As such, I propose that the affective impact of the sinister mood in the texts I discuss throughout this project is both an effective way to help readers and viewers understand, on a bodily level, a historical experience of violence, and an attempt to seek out ways of regaining political agency and resisting dictatorial uses of the sinister to solidify authoritarian power.

As is evident from these descriptions, the sinister mood is intimately related to the experience of state terror, particularly the fear of being subject to violence that is beyond one’s control and comprehension, thus seeming almost otherworldly. In their flailing about amid

different genres, I therefore propose that the cultural texts treated in this dissertation have grasped on to many conventions of that genre which is most closely tied to fear: horror. As Argentine horror author Mariana Enriquez stated in a 2018 interview with David Leo Rice, “There’s something about the scale of the cruelty in political violence from the state that always seems like the blackest magic to me. Like they have to satisfy some ravenous and ancient god that demands not only bodies but needs to be fed their suffering as well” (n.p.) It is this dark and terrifying aspect of horror genre conventions which seems so effective at conveying the sinister atmosphere of the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships.⁵ While none of the texts that I study fit firmly within the horror genre per se, they do use the familiarity and affective weight of some of its genre conventions in order to evoke and make legible the sinister mood. More specifically, I emphasize how the otherworldly nature of sinister terror is expressed in the texts analyzed in this dissertation via the appearance of major genre elements. The project is organized into three parts, each of which corresponds to a particular convention or related grouping of conventions. Part one relates to esotericism, secret societies, and conspiracy; part two discusses haunted houses, the Gothic, and the specter; and part three features the corpse. The remainder of this introduction will lay out the key theoretical underpinnings and historical background informing each of these sections.

Part One: In the Shadows: The Sinister, Secrecy, and Political Conspiracy

It takes a conspiracy to orchestrate a coup. A group of powerful individuals, operating in secret, must meet, plan, gather information, strategize, determine who can be trusted and who

⁵ Relatedly, Adriana Cavarero (2009) has proposed the term horrorism as one which “helps us see that a certain model of horror is indispensable for understanding our present” (28).

cannot, who will aid them, who will allow them, and who would attempt to impede them. They must calculate the odds of their success, develop a propaganda machine that will justify their actions, and measure which direction the political winds are blowing, all to determine whether their violent disregard for prevailing democratic systems will be excused, supported, or condemned. Unlike a revolution or a civil war—both of which are more protracted conflicts that involve significantly wider swaths of the populace—a military coup depends upon the secrecy of the elite few for the advanced preparation needed to make a sudden overthrow a success. Similarly, paramilitary operations—especially those orchestrated by ostensibly democratic states, but also the death squads that do the dirty work of authoritarian dictatorships—rely on secrecy, or at the very least plausible deniability, to carry out violent and unlawful acts.

As we shall see in part one of this dissertation, historical occurrences of political secrecy and conspiracy are essential to the sinister. As I have outlined above, the sinister consists of the uneasy feeling that dark, unknown forces are at work—behind-the-scenes, hidden around corners, operating out of the shadows. Because of this secrecy, the location of the threat of violence cannot be pinned down: power operates beyond the grasp of the everyday citizen who is subject to it, haunting them from all sides. As such, uncertainty, paranoia, and rumor proliferate: conspiracy theories, strange anecdotes, and outrageous accusations all become plausible, because at their center is a grain of truth, a dark secret, an awareness that somehow, somewhere, someone has been plotting.

Part one therefore highlights the roles of secrecy, conspiracy, paranoia, and rumor in the production of the sinister mood. It posits that literary texts often engage with this historical tendency toward secrecy and conspiracy through a focus on the esoteric and even the occult, both subjects often treated in the horror genre due to the fear of the unknown that they often engender:

in these texts, coup plotters, paramilitary groups and authoritarian government figures appear alongside secret societies, cults, Spiritists, and conspiracy theorists. On the one hand, as I will trace below and throughout chapter one, these themes have historical resonances in both Argentina and Brazil, as various political figures associated with the dictatorships were rumored or confirmed to be believers, practitioners, and members of esoteric movements and/or secret societies. On the other, as I will argue, this cultural interest in esotericism extends beyond the historical: a focus on political esotericism and the sinister mood that its secrecy engenders allows authors to articulate the diffuse and terrifying feeling that powers and conspiracies beyond our control—even, perhaps, supernatural evils—are at work beyond otherwise banal authoritarian state violence.

Esotericism and the Political

At its most basic, Western esotericism is related to “that which is hidden, secret and only accessible to initiates” (Von Stuckrad 2005: 1). The esoteric refers not to one coherent object or tradition, but rather a culturally and historically contingent way of thinking and approaching spiritual, magical, personal, and even political knowledge and practices. As such, Western esoteric traditions range from ancient Greek cult rites such as the mysteries of Isis to modern Theosophism, Rosicrucianism, Masonic orders, and New Age practices, some of which repackaged or even wholesale invented “ancient” practices and schools of thought from Greece, early Christianity, and India and Tibet. As Kocku von Stuckrad (2005) broadly defines in his introduction to the subject,

The pivotal point of all esoteric traditions are claims to ‘real’ or absolute knowledge and the means of making this knowledge available. . . . The means, through which a discourse of absolute knowledge unfolds, relates to the dialectic of the hidden and revealed, thus with ‘secrecy’, but not in the sense that esoteric truth is accessible only to initiates. What

makes a discourse esoteric is the rhetoric of a hidden truth, which can be unveiled in a specific way and established contrary to other interpretations of the universe and history—often that of the institutionalised majority. (10)

In this way, esotericism can be viewed as a rejection of more mainstream knowledges and discourses, which are seen as hiding or papering over ultimate truths that only certain traditions and practices can uncover. Importantly, esotericism as a “pattern of thought” (von Stuckrad 2005: 3) is therefore ideologically ambivalent: for example, an esoteric tradition like Umbandism or Candomblé in Brazil can be read as a decolonial practice of resistance in the context of the historical criminalization of African religions,⁶ while on the other hand U.S. misinformation cults like QAnon have been viewed as part of a wider movement of “esoteric Trumpism” (Dougherty 2020).⁷ The hidden truth that esoteric traditions seek to uncover might consist of spiritual knowledge—connection with deities, spirits, or entities or personal self-actualization— or a more material “truth” purported to be discovered by conspiracy theorists, such as the belief that the Covid-19 pandemic was a left-wing hoax or Chinese bioweapon. Esoteric practitioners might be marginalized by gendered, racialized, or classed oppression, seeking hidden truths as a way to gain power, status, or knowledge in a hostile society; lost or disillusioned, seeking a more holistic and comprehensible understanding of a confusing and terrifying world; or elites seeking to justify and shore up their power and privilege through access to certain knowledges, discourses, and social circles.

Esotericism can find expression in a number of different individual and group practices, but due to its concern with secrets and hidden knowledge is often popularly associated with

⁶ See Ailton de Sousa Lima, Negreiros, & Ferreira Moura, Jr. (2020).

⁷ The late twentieth and early twenty-first-century alignment between the U.S. right wing, New Age esoteric practices, and conspiracy theory has been studied as part of a movement toward “conspirituality,” a term which was coined by Charlotte Ward and David Voas in 2011.

cults⁸ and secret societies. Secret societies, as broadly defined by Alan Axelrod (1997), can range from more or less innocuous social clubs to religious cults, radical political groups, and clandestine criminal organizations. What they essentially share are the separation of their members from the masses; the keeping of some sort of secrets among members; and initiation rituals.⁹ Even for the innocuous, Axelrod (1997) argues, “There is a threat of mysticism interwoven with almost all secret societies” (xi). This is perhaps due to the fact that, as Frank Jacob (2013) points out, our perceptions of secret societies are inevitably colored by popular, fictionalized stereotypes, unreliable historical sources, and conspiracy theories that crop up in the face of organizational secrecy.¹⁰ As such, esoteric practices, secret societies, and conspiracy theories or conspiratorial thinking are often linked.

The twentieth century saw frequent intersections between esotericism and authoritarian politics, particularly relating to Nazi Germany and World War II. Von Stuckrad (2005) explains,

Claims to truth and knowledge sought outside the Judaeo-Christian tradition could easily be linked with *volkisch* or Germanic racialist ideas. The alliance of anti-Semitic and anti-

⁸ I use the word “cult” here in the popular sense of the term, generally meaning a group outside the mainstream that has what most would consider to be strange beliefs, often with a charismatic leader, a highly hierarchical organizational structure, and an “us versus them” in-group mentality. However, while this may often be the popular perception of all groups with out-of-the-ordinary beliefs or practices, it is important to recognize that many esoteric groups such as the many Spiritist variations are more properly and neutrally categorized as religious sects.

⁹ León Arsenal (2006), in his discussion of Spanish secret societies, identifies four common characteristics of such groups: a small, closed, selective membership; hierarchical structures; rites of initiation; and the use of rituals and symbols.

¹⁰ In fact, some organizations, such as those that face religious or political repression by the state (as discussed by Jacob (2013)) and those that participate in culturally closed practices, have perfectly understandable reasons for secrecy. In other instances of political secret societies, as Axelrod (1997) points out, “its views are so far out of the mainstream that it cannot attract mass support. Essentially, a political secret society in a free country must either subscribe to a species of paranoia (as have some of the American nativist or anti-Semitic organizations of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries) or must advocate illegal means or ends: the use of terror as a political weapon, or the violent overthrow of a generally tolerated government” (xii). As we shall see, this latter description strongly resonates with the characteristics of right-wing military and paramilitary groups and networks throughout the Southern Cone in the late twentieth century.

Christian currents with racialist theories, which could in turn refer back to Theosophical ideas, led in German National Socialism to a political ideology, which made extensive use of esoteric and occult themes. National Socialism has been rightly described as a political religion, in which esoteric hermeneutics—for instance, the ‘gnostic’ symbolism of light—and individual occult groups have played a significant role. (134-135)

Theodor Adorno similarly observed patterns of esoteric thinking that underpinned authoritarian politics and fascism’s appeal to the masses. For example, in one essay, Adorno (1994) argues that “astrological irrationality” primed readers of the *Los Angeles Times* astrology column in the 1950s to accept “abstract authority” (38) and was particularly appealing because it “reflects the type of irrationality in which the total order of our life presents itself to most individuals: opaqueness and inscrutability” under capitalist alienation (42).¹¹ He elaborates further upon the dangers of encouraging these irrational tendencies and embracing conspiratorial and paranoid thinking:

This sect-like character, the claim of something particular and apocryphal to be all-comprehensive and exclusive, is indicative of a most sinister social potential: the transition of an emasculated liberal ideology to a totalitarian one. Just as those who can read the phony signs of the stars believe that they are in the know, the followers of totalitarian parties believe that their special panaceas are universally valid and feel justified in imposing them as a general rule. (1994: 121)

In Adorno (1994)’s view, then, esotericism as a pattern of thought is intimately linked with authoritarian claims to universal hidden truths that position their followers as members of an exclusive elite that is “in-the-know,” even as they encourage a total obedience to the authority that preaches that supposed truth.¹²

¹¹ In an analysis of Adorno’s work, Nederman and Goulding (1981) remind us that his critique applies not necessarily to all manifestations of the esoteric or occult; rather, “we must remember that popular or mass occultism differs from its original insofar as it is a commodity” (326). This is one possible explanation for the ambivalence of esotericism as observed above.

¹² A contemporary U.S. comparison with those who echo right-wing misinformation spread by Fox News and other propagandistic media organizations while claiming to be the only individuals who “think for themselves,” as opposed to “liberal sheep” who blindly follow the “mainstream media,” is frighteningly unavoidable.

Adorno's contemporary Hannah Arendt similarly traces the theoretical relevance of secrecy and paranoid thinking in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1973). In her examination of imperialist bureaucracies that ruled by decree in European colonies, she argues that "The ideal of such a political body will always be the man behind the scenes who pulls the strings of history" (1973: 216). This political ideal was brought home to European soil in two ways. First, those who saw themselves as "excluded from society and political representation"—what Arendt terms the "mob"—became "inclined to seek out the real forces of political life in those movements and influences which are hidden from view and work behind the scenes . . . beyond the formal realm of politics, operating . . . in lobbies, lodges, and the confessional" (1973: 108). That is, the mob became inclined to see secret societies and conspiracies everywhere, accusing in particular Freemasons, Jesuits, and, of course, Jews.¹³ Second, the mob, believing that political decisions were made as the result of secret conspiracies, became inclined to reject democratic politics and embrace becoming—or following—their own men-behind-the-scenes of politics. Arendt explains that, as such, under totalitarian governments, "Real power begins where secrecy begins" (1973: 403). Authoritarian power is inextricably linked with the esoteric and hidden.

Further, as Adorno also observes,

Within the pattern of modern mass delusions, the idea of conspiracies is always present—an idea doubtlessly of a projective nature. Encouraging 'behind-the-scenes' activities is an inconspicuous form of conjuring up such tendencies usually projected upon outgroups. Those who persistently blame others for indulging in conspiracies have a strong tendency to engage in plots themselves. (1994: 87-88)

Here we have another key aspect of the ambivalence of esotericism in relation to the political: those who subscribe to paranoid esoteric patterns of thought accuse others of operating secretly

¹³ A huge number of conspiracy theories are explicitly anti-Semitic or, if not directly accusing the Jews, at least share anti-Semitic characteristics.

and mobilizing conspiracies even as they themselves engage in and even celebrate this type of political action. It is for this reason that, for example, the Argentine military government from 1976-1983 saw themselves haunted by “subversives” at every turn even as guerrilla groups had already been effectively wiped out by the time they staged their coup in 1976.¹⁴ As we shall see throughout the following two sections, even those right-wing individuals and groups in the Southern Cone that did not explicitly believe in occult or supernatural subjects or practices nevertheless engaged in aspects of political esotericism. On the one hand, they paranoically believed they had access to hidden truths and knowledge of secret conspiracies: specifically, that they were the only ones who could “protect” their nations and even the whole of Western

¹⁴ As Avery Gordon (2008) argues, the military government’s obsession with communists and subversives that rationally did not exist was a projection of their own paranoid thinking. She elaborates:

The military saw specters, all right, and they were afraid despite all their manly posturing, and it did not matter one bit whether the phantoms they saw were their own malignant and grotesque reflections, because they acted like they saw ghosts and they possessed the power to make their actions matter. (125)

In reality, as Martin Edwin Andersen (2000) points out,

Cuando los generales tomaron el poder en marzo de 1976, la amenaza a los militares por parte de los guerrilleros izquierdistas había sido eficazmente aniquilada, y la capacidad operativa de aquellos estaba limitada a actos de terrorismo realizados al azar, aunque a veces fueran espectaculares. Aún antes de hacerse con el poder, los generales conocían la verdadera capacidad de los guerrilleros . . . o la falta de ella. En ningún momento los insurrectos representaron una amenaza real para el Estado. A fines de 1975, el Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP), la fuerza irregular más pequeña aunque la más virulenta, había sido diezmado. Y para ese entonces los dos líderes de la organización peronista de izquierda Montoneros estaban colaborando activa —y secretamente— con la inteligencia del Ejército argentino: uno voluntariamente, el otro después de haber sido capturado.

Los militares no sólo ocultaron esta información a la opinión pública: encomendaron a los departamentos de propaganda de sus servicios de inteligencia la tarea de fabricar una sombría amenaza terrorista omnipresente. Como si fuesen magos, los militares explotaban las expectativas de la gente presentándole lo que esperaba ver con el resultado de que creyera que lo estaba viendo. (27)

In contrast, the activities of right-wing death squads like the AAA before the coup significantly outweighed left-wing guerrilla violence.

civilization from subversive Communist plots. On the other, they themselves engaged in secretive practices and conspiracies to come into power, justify their regimes, and spread terror among their citizens. Those figures who allegedly practiced Spiritism or believed anti-Semitic or even extraterrestrial conspiracies were behind political happenings were simply the most extreme example of these esoteric patterns of thought.

Political Esotericism in the Southern Cone

The history of the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships in the twentieth century provides several examples of esoteric affiliations, interests, or rumors associated with key political figures. Right-wing politicians and dictatorship supporters, from lower-level paramilitary leaders to Isabel Perón and junta member Emilio Eduardo Massera (1925-2010), are alleged or confirmed to have believed in hauntings or the occult or participated in seances, secret societies, or other esoteric activities.

In Brazil, the case of Aladino Félix (1905-1985) is illustrative. Félix was a right-wing paramilitary leader connected to the military government who conspired to provide a pretext for tightening repression by organizing terrorist attacks made to look like they were perpetrated by left-wing guerrillas. From December 1967 to August 1968, Félix and 14 police officers set off bombs, stole guns and explosives, and robbed a bank; archival documents have recently confirmed that these attacks, including the bombing of the São Paulo stock exchange, an oil pipeline, and a secret police headquarters, were explicitly planned so as to provide an excuse for hard-liners in the government to put into effect extreme repressive policies such as Institutional Act 5, which would be implemented the following December. Moreover, Félix's conspiratorial political activities were related to his esoteric conspiratorial beliefs; in the 1950s, he had written

a book under a pseudonym about having had contact with aliens and also “claimed to be the messiah of the Jewish people” (Phillips 2018: n.p.). As Daniel Faria (2019) further explains, Félix believed that a superior alien race, which spoke Hebrew, lived on Jupiter and wanted to save humanity, which was threatened by aliens from the other planets, including Mars, which hosted a race of Communists. He also believed that Nostradamus had made some predictions which referred to himself and the role he would have in this alien struggle; other prophecies from Nostradamus indicated to him that Hitler was hidden somewhere in South America. Faria (2019) argues that these paranoid, esoteric beliefs are an example of Félix taking literally the Cold-War-inspired science fiction of the era and the anti-Communist propaganda of the military government: his esoteric beliefs and political actions were inextricable. Of course, despite Félix’s claims that his group acted in support of the military government, he was arrested and sent to jail in 1968 for his terrorist actions; while the Brazilian military government was “a força oculta que manipulava a tudo e a todos,” the parastatal nature of Félix’s group allowed military officials plausible deniability for their role in the conspiracy to strengthen their control over the Brazilian populace (Faria 2019: 234).

Here, we have an example where a political actor who believed in esoteric conspiracies himself engaged in secret plots, both subscribing to and spreading Cold War paranoia and parastatal terror. From Félix’s perspective, his messianic role in an interplanetary struggle is one and the same with his efforts to undermine the perceived Communist threat to Brazil: all is part of the same system, united by a paranoid pattern of thought, which only he can see due to his access to a higher, hidden knowledge. In Arendt (1973)’s words, conspiracy theory, esotericism, and ideology all resemble one another because they are all-encompassing and not reliant upon an objective reality, but rather “insists on a ‘truer’ reality concealed behind all perceptible things,

dominating them from this place of concealment and requiring a sixth sense that enables us to become aware of it” (471). Meanwhile, for those Brazilians on the outside, the origins of the violence and conspiracies enacted by Félix and other members of the military government remain obscured: their actions are perceived, nearly triggering this sixth sense, by the bigger picture is inaccessible. If an interplanetary struggle is too strange to be believed, so too, in some ways, is the idea that the military arranged to disguise its own violence as that of leftist groups in order to justify the perpetuation of even further state violence. The confusion engendered by this secrecy and its resulting paranoia perpetuates the sinister mood.

The connections between esotericism and the Argentine right-wing are numerous and will be elaborated in detail throughout chapter one, which will mention, for example, both Isabel Perón’s well-known connection to Spiritism—her adoptive father, José Cresto, was a Spiritist leader—and Massera’s association with the right-wing Italian secret society Propaganda Due in the course of its more in-depth exploration of Argentine politician José López Rega (1916-1989). Suffice it to say that esoteric practices such as Spiritism, secret societies, and conspiracies in Argentina have had an outsized impact on political events and cultural conceptions of this time period. Some of these esoteric associations have been confirmed beyond a shadow of a doubt; others, while often detailed in the popular press over the decades since the return of democracy, are either only minutely relevant or best taken with a grain of salt. However, regardless of their factuality, it is significant that these stories prove compelling even decades after the fact. Rumors of esotericism, cults, conspiracies, and superstitions lend a dark, supernatural aura and sense of paranoia to the authoritarian violence that took place during this time period, culminating in the sinister mood. Moreover, even the most outrageous accusations become somewhat plausible

when viewed in the context of historically confirmed secret conspiracies, such as Operation Condor.

Operation Condor: An International Conspiracy

While embodying none of the occult in the sense of the word meaning dark or supernatural, Operation Condor—the late-twentieth-century international alliance between South American militaries, supported by the CIA, which allowed for intelligence cooperation and targeting of political dissidents across borders—certainly resembles the esoteric in terms of the role of secrecy, the hidden, and conspiracy in its history. As J. Patrice McSherry writes in her 2005 monograph on the subject, accounts such as her writing on Operation Condor are “concerned with hidden power, the kind that operates parallel to democratic processes and in the recesses of military regimes, invisible and unaccountable” (xviii). Supported by intelligence, financing, and technology from the United States, Operation Condor allowed the military dictatorships in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Brazil to coordinate so as to arrest, torture, and assassinate exiles that were viewed as ongoing threats to their regimes.

The initiative stemmed from early connections between various intelligence communities: French operatives trained Latin Americans in counter-insurgency techniques developed in Algeria; Brazil developed its own intelligence network in the late 1960s; Argentina and Chile’s governments came to an agreement related to the assassination of Carlos Prats in Buenos Aires in 1974; and various military attaches from across South America held preliminary meetings that helped develop the shared network. Links were also developed with Italian fascists who were connected with the CIA through Operation Gladio. In McSherry (2005)’s words, Operation Condor and the parapolice and paramilitary groups that supported its actions

constituted the creation of a “parallel state . . . with access to a vast shadow infrastructure” which allowed military regimes plausible deniability as they violated human rights (8). Moreover, the covert nature of these operations allowed the governments to blame left-wing guerrillas for their actions and create a “pervading sense of ambiguity, unreality, and dread”—in my terms, the sinister—to spread terror and “consolidate power over society” (McSherry 2005: 9).

As such, Operation Condor was essential to spreading the sinister throughout the Southern Cone,¹⁵ and shares many of the conspiratorial and paranoid characteristics of esotericism as outlined above. For one, the secret is paramount, both for allowing the military operations to be conducted successfully and for allowing governments to deny involvement in Condor activities: only those with utmost loyalty can be made initiates to the hidden truth. Operation Condor even made “*use of criminal syndicates and extremist organizations and networks* to carry out operations,” (McSherry 2005: 10, emphasis original) which can be characterized as criminal or political secret societies. Moreover, the “counter-insurgent” tactics used by Operation Condor were self-justified by its participants’ paranoid beliefs, as “The Latin American militaries . . . began to characterize domestic conflicts as international communist conspiracies and portray themselves as the front lines in a global holy war” (McSherry 2005: 17). Even as the participants in Operation Condor saw conspiracies all around them, the early meetings establishing the networks that would become the initiative are characterized by McSherry (2005) as “evidence of a transnational conspiracy” (79). As she explains further, the

¹⁵ While this project concerns itself with Argentina and Brazil specifically, many of its conclusions about the sinister mood can be applied to the cases of the other Latin American countries ruled by military dictatorships at this time. While each nation’s history and politics are contingent and specific, through Operation Condor, these regimes learned from one another’s experiences, shared intelligence and covert strategies, and even conducted assassinations for one another when targets crossed national borders.

vast connections made constituted a worldwide conspiracy that incorporated multiple groups, including explicit secret societies:

as Operation Condor expanded, it became an extremist global network linking messianic military institutions, intelligence forces, right-wing civilians, paramilitary death squads, Masonic lodges such as Propaganda-Due (P-2), former Nazis, and other dangerous antidemocratic forces that mounted aggressive campaigns against all manner of political opposition. (McSherry 2005: 242)

In the history of Operation Condor, we can therefore see how hidden powers create a sinister atmosphere and conspiratorial, messianic thinking itself breeds conspiracies. In other words, feeling themselves paranoically under threat from a perceived international Marxist conspiracy, the military governments involved in Operation Condor engaged in esoteric political practices by creating their own conspiracy, dabbling in secrecy and controlling access to their hidden knowledge, leaving the everyday citizen to suffer from a growing, yet only ever partial, awareness of the sinister atmosphere their country had been plunged into. The sinister thus became a generalized mood of this historical time period.

The paramilitary groups, military coups, and dictatorships that spread terror throughout the Southern Cone in the late twentieth century meant that political events and the fates of ordinary citizens were unduly determined by unaccountable groups of oligarchs, intelligence officials, and military men. In the face of the extreme violence, terror, confusion, and paranoia that resulted from this political esotericism, it became easy to believe in conspiratorial ideas that indicated sinister forces were at work—whether these forces were wholly human or somewhere beyond. As such, even in historical instances where beliefs in the occult were only rumored, I argue that esoteric activities and practices became conflated with real-life behind-the-scenes political conspiracy, lending otherwise banal terror an aura of supernatural evil that further

exacerbated the sinister atmosphere circulating through everyday life, literature, and culture during this era.

In chapter one of this dissertation, “The Warlock, the Lodge, and the Triple A: Esotericism and Occult Necropolitics in the Argentine Imaginary of ‘el Brujo’ José López Rega and Luisa Valenzuela’s *Cola de lagartija* (1983),” I examine the role played by Argentina’s most famous esoteric practitioner, José López Rega—known as “el Brujo”—in history and fiction relating to 1970s Argentina and the 1976 military coup. I argue that an emphasis on López Rega’s esoteric practices and association with secret societies in both the popular press and literature speaks to the sinister atmosphere enveloping Argentina both immediately prior to and during the military dictatorship. On the one hand, I argue that dictatorial propaganda deliberately drew attention to López Rega’s well-known occultism after the coup in order to associate a sinister atmosphere with this figure, using him as a bogeyman that would justify the junta’s own violent measures. On the other, I posit that a focus on esoteric practices and conspiracy in novels such as Valenzuela’s accurately conveys the sinister mood of fear and paranoia that characterized this time period, attempts to untangle the secrecy and hidden forces at work under authoritarian governments, and proposes a continuity between the violent actions of López Rega and the dictatorship, insofar as they both engage in what I term an occult necropolitics.

With this term, I seek to bring to bear two common meanings of the word occult on Achille Mbembe (2003)’s concept of necropolitics. Necropolitics, which contrasts with Michel Foucault’s biopolitics insofar as it emphasizes less the regulation of life than “that the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides, to a large degree, in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die” (Mbembe 2003: 11), also highlights “Figures of sovereignty whose central project is not the struggle for autonomy but . . . *the material destruction of human bodies*

and populations” (Mbembe 2003: 14, emphasis original).¹⁶ The exercise of necropower is also often tied to increasing precarity of marginalized subjects and the erosion of the welfare state under neoliberalism (Lushetich 2018). Under state-sponsored terror in Argentina and Brazil, vast swaths of the population were made precarious and worthy of death or transformed into, in Mbembe (2003)’s terminology, the living dead, alongside even greater numbers who were systematically exposed to this death and violence and terrorized into subjugation, all in the name of neoliberal free market economic reforms. However, this politics of death was systematically hidden and made only partially accessible to the populace. Similarly, Natasha Lushetich, in the introduction to *The Aesthetics of Necropolitics* (2018), argues that “Apart from being spatially, physically and linguistically omnipresent, necroaesthetics is also (paradoxically) absent from sight because one of the goals of necropolitics—as management of death—is to destroy evidence. The necropolitical thus disappears into invisibility” (30). In the absence of a coherent view and in the presence of half-truths alluding to hidden secrets and conspiracies, it is easy to imagine that dark, even supernatural forces are at work behind otherwise banal violence. For this reason, I argue in part one that the sinister mood can present to us a vision of an occult necropolitics, with the word occult referring to both that which is hidden (in Spanish, *oculto*) and dark or evil

¹⁶ Notably, Mbembe (2003)’s work identifies race as a major factor behind necropolitics, while critics like Jasbir Puar (2017) have used the concept to address the precarious lives of queer and trans people of color. While my work does not explicitly address this racial component, there were certainly racial and postcolonial factors at play in Argentina at this time, as the terror inflicted by the dictatorship must be understood as being in service of the class and social interests of a patriarchal, heteronormative, white supremacist culture in the context of the anti-Communist backlash of the Cold War. As I will further note at certain points throughout chapter one, a significant portion of the terror enacted by the pre-coup paramilitary groups and the dictatorship was motivated by anti-Semitism and anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. See Feitlowitz (1998) for a discussion of the disproportionate number of Jewish desaparecidos.

magical practices.¹⁷ As we shall see throughout part one, a focus on esoteric practices, secret societies, and conspiracies speaks compellingly to the experience of the sinister that characterized Argentina both before and during its final military dictatorship.

Part Two: The Sinister and the Spectral: Haunted Houses and Clandestine Detention

Centers

An isolated, dilapidated mansion in the suburbs of Buenos Aires where political prisoners are detained and tortured. A mysterious house with many rooms where a roving audience witnesses isolated scenes of kidnapping and murder disguised by layers of absurdity, only to be whisked away by a friendly yet threatening tour guide. These settings, analyzed in part two of this dissertation, establish the sinister mood by utilizing elements of the well-known Gothic horror convention of the haunted house to represent the real-life political terror of Argentina's Clandestine Detention Centers. The Argentine government operated over 700 such centers from 1976-1983, where thousands of suspected subversives were held secretly, without habeas corpus, and tortured before being killed or, sometimes, released.¹⁸ Chapters two and three of this project ask what is accomplished by portraying these concentration camps as haunted mansions, arguing that implementing well-known aesthetics from the Gothic and horror more generally conveys the sinister feeling of being under threat by mysterious forces. In the haunted house, this threat and

¹⁷ Gordon (2008) similarly refers to the necropolitics of Argentina's military government as apocalyptic, arguing that "The authoritarian regime could not kill everyone, but the apocalyptic determination to destroy the living, to end the world (how else could we understand the governor's plan to kill everyone except the killers?), created a permanent menace and a collapsing fear" (124).

¹⁸ Initial reports immediately after the end of the dictatorship, such as the *Nunca más* report, identified around 340 CDCs (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) 1984a). As of 2015, the Secretariate of Human Rights of the Nation had identified 726 (Secretaría 2015).

the fear it induces is foregrounded aesthetically and paired with the historical circumstances of the dictatorship in order to make legible for the reader or spectator the affective experience of terror. The violence and trauma of imprisonment, torture, disappearances, murders, and other human rights abuses committed under dictatorships haunts and makes threatening the spaces of these texts, reaching towards us both from a buried past and from a present in crisis in order to lay bare the sinister nature of authoritarian power that is disguised beneath the everyday.

Latin American Gothic

Two key concepts that part two makes use of are the Gothic and spectralities. The Gothic is a literary tradition originating in England in the eighteenth century. Drawing from a combination of interests in the Dark Ages, antiquarianism, morality, barbarism, the taboo, and the ghostly—characterized by William Hughes in *Key Concepts in the Gothic* (2018) as “the darkness of the past” (3)—the Gothic, like Romanticism, grew in opposition to the Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress.¹⁹ However, Carmen Serrano (2019) points out that unlike Romanticism, which focuses largely upon beauty, the Gothic has a singular concern for its opposite: the dark and dreadful.²⁰

Though many of its conventions were established in the eighteenth century, in the nineteenth these elements were transformed and incorporated into other genres as the Gothic

¹⁹ Jonathan Dent, in *Sinister Histories* (2016), also argues that the Gothic’s particular way of looking at the past arose in response to Enlightenment forms of historical writing.

²⁰ Serrano (2019) explains, “The Gothic novels that first emerged in the eighteenth century were produced during a time when the dominant neoclassical style and the corresponding ideas associated with the Enlightenment were inspiring artists to produce artworks that were beautiful, balanced, and perfect. Gothic literature represented the opposite, preferring plots marked by excess in which instances of tyranny, imprisonment, and torture evoked dreadfulness instead of beauty” (5).

expanded beyond Britain (via both translation into other languages and the writing of new original works adapted to local settings). With the advent of cinema in the early twentieth century, Gothic conventions gained further traction as they were incorporated into early surrealist and expressionist films and became foundational elements of cinematic horror, as well as pulp fiction and film noir.²¹ Due to this adaptability—between languages, regions, genres, and media—critics have pointed to the difficulty of confining the Gothic to generic definitions or a particular time or place.²² However, in its most broad sense, the Gothic is concerned with the appearance of dark visions of the past that destabilize and continue to have an impact upon the present.²³ This darkness is key: in the Gothic, the return of the past is not a positive event, but rather “fear-inducing” (Serrano 2018: 6). Fear, Serrano argues, is “the cornerstone emotion of the Gothic,” and it is this feeling that ultimately unites disparate texts under the Gothic umbrella (2018: 6).

Though by no means exclusively constitutive of nor necessary for the Gothic, there are a few more concrete conventions of the genre in regards to plot, characters, and setting that tend to appear repeatedly in Gothic texts. These range from monsters such as vampires and ghouls to incest plot, and, key for this study, the haunted house.²⁴

²¹ See Serrano (2019: 53-67) and Hughes (2018: 6-7).

²² See Hughes (2018), Mulvey-Roberts (1998), Serrano (2019), García (2019), and Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz (2018).

²³ To cite a few critics: Dent (2016) writes that the Gothic is concerned with “dark stories and sinister pasts” that “return to haunt the present” and argues that “the Gothic is obsessed with the nature of the past and our relationship with it” (2). Mulvey-Roberts (1998) states that the Gothic is “a fiction concerned with the horrifying impress of past (and sometimes present) institutions and events” (8). Hughes (2018) points to “the disruptive potential that the past may have in the present day” as the one defining element of the Gothic (5), while Serrano (2019) echoes this tendency of the Gothic towards “destabilizing dominant notions about the nature of reality” (3).

²⁴ Whether certain conventions are more common or even necessary to constitute the Gothic is the subject of critical debate, and are subject to the historical context of the text. Further well-known tropes include what Mulvey-Roberts (1998) identifies as “the classic trilogy of necessary

Interest in examples of the Gothic in Latin American literature has increased over the past decade with the publication of criticism in what has otherwise been a neglected field for Latin Americanists. Even the most obvious examples of Gothic conventions appearing in Latin American texts, such as the vampire, had previously largely been ignored or subsumed into examinations of the fantastic, magical realism, or even science fiction. Scholars have pointed to various reasons for a rejection of the Gothic by Latin American writers and critics, including aesthetic assertions that the Gothic is a genre of bad taste and the desire to assert regional and national identities within a global market that have led to over-emphasis on magical realism.²⁵ Critics have convincingly argued, however, that much of what has usually been examined under one of those categories also contains Gothic elements,²⁶ and that an examination of the way the Gothic has been transformed in a Latin American context can provide fruitful insight into attempts to represent regional experiences of violence, imperialism, and the dynamic relationship between Latin American and European culture.²⁷

Gothic components—isolation, complicated setting, a threat possibly supernatural but more likely to be human and male” in addition to a brave heroine at the center of the story (103). Serrano additionally points to supernatural events, mysterious figures, monstrous villains, a sensitive hero, and the doppelgänger. Hughes (2018) dedicates a whole book, *Key Concepts in the Gothic*, towards a comprehensive survey of Gothic components, movements, and theories.

²⁵ See Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz (2018: 2-3) and Serrano (2019: 9-15).

²⁶ Serrano (2019) argues “that Latin American writers were attentive readers of Gothic literature and were drawn to Gothic-themed films, thus becoming thoroughly familiar with Gothic literary conventions, which they then selectively employed and transgressed in their fiction” (1). Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz (2018) point to the prevalence of Gothic elements such as ghosts, castles, time travel, metamorphosis, vampires and related monsters, the uncanny, and doubles in what has usually been termed the fantastic or science fiction.

²⁷ Serrano (2019) points particularly to the dynamic nature of literature and media, emphasizing the ways that Latin American writers traveled and consumed, experimented with, were influenced by, and influenced “European” genres via translation, publication, and participation in movements. In *Gothic Geoculture*, Ivonne M. García (2019) takes a “trans-American” approach in examining Gothic representations of Cuba, again emphasizing the mutuality of literary influences in a region haunted and threatened by the American empire. Gabriel Eljaiek-Rodríguez, in *Selva de fantasmas* (2017), discusses the utilization of Gothic elements in

As has previously been established, the Gothic is particularly malleable, and its conventions and tropes take on new shapes in Latin America. It might resemble what Latin American critics are otherwise inclined to call magical realism, including supernatural elements as part of an otherwise realistic portrayal of everyday life; however, Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz (2018) point out that, unlike magical realism, the Gothic doesn't normalize the out-of-the-ordinary, but rather fights (and fails) to resist it. In more contemporary works, it can be particularly concerned with "new terrors" under globalization "that often take the shape of old Gothic tropes: vampires, monsters, ghosts, witches, and zombies" (Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz 2018: 4). It may also undergo a process of what has been termed "tropicalization" and "defamiliarization" in which established Gothic conventions are transported into Latin American contexts in which they seem out of place, denaturalizing the familiar and experimenting with tropes that may be revealed as fit or unfit to speak to a Latin American reality.²⁸ For the purposes of this dissertation, I will emphasize how the familiar Gothic trope of the haunted house appears under the Southern Cone dictatorships, and how this use of a well-known convention in a particular Latin American cultural and political context operates and contributes to the creation of a sinister mood.

relationship to hybridization, mestizaje, and transculturation, in what he and others have referred to as the "tropicalization" of the Gothic. In the introduction to *Latin American Gothic in Literature and Culture* (2018), Casanova-Vizcaíno and Ordiz argue that, in the context of the McOndo movement, we can understand Latin American literature as being inevitably influenced by European, North American, and contemporary global strains of the Gothic because Latin American consume shared elements of a globalized culture.

²⁸ See Eljaiek Rodriguez (2017: 13-19). See also Edwards and Vasconcelos (2016).

Gothic Specters Haunting Spectralities Studies

The second key concept informing part two is that of the specter. In their introduction to *The Spectralities Reader: Ghosts and Haunting in Contemporary Cultural Theory* (2013), Maria del Pilar Blanco and Esther Peeren define the “spectral turn” thusly: “at the end of the twentieth century, a specific metamorphosis occurred of ghosts and haunting from possible actual entities, plot devices, and clichés of common parlance (‘he is a ghost of himself,’ ‘we are haunted by the past’) into influential conceptual metaphors permeating global (popular) culture and academia alike” (1). That is, in the Western world, ghosts and their associated hauntings were no longer possible “actualities” to be investigated, believed in, or disproved, as they had largely still been considered in the late nineteenth century, nor even mere metaphors. Rather, the specter became a “conceptual” metaphor, a form of analysis through which to theorize the world.

In this context, the haunting and the haunted house is theorized as a way of thinking through the relationship between history and our ethical relationship to past and future political projects, as in Derrida (1994); collective and personal trauma across generations, as in Abraham and Torok (1994); or a nostalgia for lost futures, as in Fisher (2012; 2014).²⁹ Per del Pilar Blanco and Peeren, theorizations of the specter therefore also often address the representational

²⁹ These critics differ in what they propose that the specter does. As Davis (2005) notes, Abraham and Torok seek to return the ghost to the order of knowledge; Derrida wants to avoid any such restoration and to encounter what is strange, unheard, *other*, about the ghost. For Derrida, the ghost's secret is not a puzzle to be solved; it is the structural openness or address directed towards the living by the voices of the past or the not yet formulated possibilities of the future. The secret is not unspeakable because it is taboo, but because it cannot not (yet) be articulated in the languages available to us. The ghost pushes at the boundaries of language and thought. (378-379)

In my emphasis on the sinister as a disturbing and disquieting mood that speaks to representational challenges, I follow Derrida (1994)’s conceptualization of the specter while acknowledging Abraham and Torok (1994)’s emphasis on the specter as associated with traumatic events.

challenges of conveying the historical memory of past traumas, as “Catastrophic personal and collective experiences are seen as eliding and literally rupturing comprehension” (12). Ribas-Casasayas and Peterson have similarly emphasized how “Haunting aesthetics . . . operate with an indirect, deliberately unrealistic approach that acknowledges the difficulty of narrativizing the past” (8), and highlights “untellable violence as a paradigm of the contemporary condition in an attempt to establish a more productive affective relationship with the lost or the unreachable” (9). Juliana Martínez (2020)’s concept of spectral realism also proposes that the spectral, while not necessitating the literal presence of ghosts in a text, can be a way of “parsing the complex interactions among representational practices, historical violence, and ethical concerns” (4), thus allowing for a way to address “recent historical violence without simplifying, exoticizing, or commodifying it” (13). As such, “The instability, confusion, and fear that violence engenders are incorporated into the works in an attempt to shake the reader or spectator out of his or her cultural and ethical stupor” (Martínez 2020: 20). In part two, I extend this aspect of haunting as related to the representational challenges of depicting historical violence, arguing that it contributes to the sinister mood, a focus on which allows us to better articulate its generalized historical nature and affective impact across time.

However, some uses of the specter as a conceptual metaphor can, as del Pilar Blanco and Peeren (2013) warn, allow the ghost to become “strangely unmoored from historical contexts” (14). It is essential to remember that contemporary ideas of what the haunting is, looks like, and evokes are inevitably informed by cultural and historical context, which in a contemporary, globalized world means, for my purposes, that it is shaped by the influence of not only local cultures, but also Gothic conventions of haunting as they have been built up and adapted since the eighteenth century and transmitted through media. For this reason, part two unites both of

these concepts in its analysis of the clandestine detention center as haunted house, maintaining the idea of the specter as not just metaphor but also potential actuality, as was the case for the Spiritist practitioners discussed in the beginning of this introduction. My emphasis on conventions of the Gothic horror genre thus differs from much of the spectralities scholarship in that it seeks to orient our focus towards the moments in which the haunting is more literalized, and how this contributes to the sense of being under threat and the disturbing nature of the sinister mood. By informing spectralities studies with the history and significance of Gothic elements in part two, we can be sure to situate the spectral within the cultural history that informs particular texts.

Along this vein, Eljaiek Rodriguez (2017) makes a major contribution by tying the Gothic to a foundational spectralities studies text, *The Shell and the Kernel* (1994), by psychoanalysts Nicolas Abraham and Maria Torok. Eljaiek Rodriguez (2017) points out that the Gothic's concerns with ghosts and monsters that represent an unnameable and secret past maps well onto Abraham and Torok's concept of transgenerational haunting, in which

El niño siente aquello 'de lo que no se habla' como un vacío —un secreto no reconocido en el nivel consciente del niño— y se constituye en un fantasma que atraviesa el discurso y las generaciones, por lo que se instala en muchos casos como un síntoma. . . . La vuelta de lo que, se suponía, había quedado enterrado —metafórica o realmente— y la dificultad de representarlo es un suceso al que se enfrenta y caracteriza la totalidad del movimiento gótico. (194).

This is particularly apt for Latin America, with Avery Gordon's groundbreaking text *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (2008) explicitly addressing spectrality in regards to Argentina's dictatorship and with spectrality as an analytic approach increasing in popularity over the last two decades as a way to examine historical memory and

intergenerational experiences of trauma under dictatorship, as well as the relationship of contemporary citizens to their country's past.³⁰

Silvana Mandolessi (2014) has also worked to combine a particular attention toward the Gothic with spectralities studies in her examination of hauntings in post-dictatorial Argentine literature. She points to elements of the Gothic and fantastic that have been used to create an affective impact and narrate disappearances under dictatorship, referring to spectrality and haunting as “direct derivatives of the gothic tradition” as well as “critical instruments with which to think politically” (Mandolessi 2014: 152).

The Haunted House in Latin America

Although scholarly attention has increasingly turned to the concepts of hauntings, the spectral, and the Gothic in the region, the haunted house more concretely has remained understudied in Latin America. In a contemporary, globalized world, ideas of what a haunted house is, looks like, and evokes are inevitably informed by the influence of these Gothic conventions as they have been built up and adapted since the eighteenth century and transmitted through media. However, as conventions that have proved malleable across languages, cultures, and eras, they are also adapted to fit local cultures and histories. Well-known, familiar tropes take on a new life as they are fitted to speak to specific circumstances: national traumas are expressed in ways that tap into transnational communities of meaning. As such, the haunted

³⁰ Examples include Raúl Marrero-Fente's *Bodies, Texts, and Ghosts: Writing On Literature and Law in Colonial Latin America* (2010); Maria del Pilar Blanco's *Ghost-Watching American Modernity: Haunting, Landscape, and the Hemispheric Imagination* (2012); Juliana Martínez's *Haunting without Ghosts: Spectral Realism in Colombian Literature, Film, and Art* (2020); and *Espectros: Ghostly Hauntings in Contemporary Transhispanic Narratives* (2016), edited by Alberto Ribas-Casasayas and Amanda L. Petersen.

house in Latin America generally, and in dictatorship-era texts in particular, is informed by these longstanding generic conventions even as it arises out of local realities.

The haunted house has a long cultural history, stemming originally from Gothic literature and its subsequent influence on horror film. In the Gothic, setting is a key convention that is frequently determinative of the plot: in the words of Serrano (2019), such works usually take place in “antiquated spaces, such as castles, abbeys, vast prisons, subterranean crypts, graveyards, and large old houses” (4). It is within such spaces that “often a secret from the past haunts the characters, both psychologically and physically,” inducing fear (Serrano 2019: 5). In addition to these classic Gothic settings, contemporary horror film often features abandoned institutional buildings, such as hospitals, orphanages, and asylums. In both traditional Gothic plots and contemporary horror, these secrets are frequently related to repressed histories of violence and death (particularly abuse, torture, and murder), the trauma of which remains impressed upon the material of the house itself.³¹ This concealment of a terrible past also puts the current inhabitants of the house into danger, as the originary trauma, left unresolved, continues to threaten its unsuspecting new occupants.³²

These repressed secrets often manifest through what Freud (1919) refers to as the uncanny (in German, the *unheimlich*, which translates more literally to the unhomely): a feeling

³¹ This materiality is key to Mulvey-Roberts (1998)’s definition of the Gothic as “a fiction concerned with the horrifying impress of past (and sometimes present) institutions and events” (8).

³² Well-known examples in horror films include *The Amityville Horror* (dir. Stuart Rosenberg, 1979), where new owners of a house are haunted by the evil spirit of a father who murdered his family there the year previously; *The Changeling* (dir. Peter Medak, 1980), where a mansion is haunted by the playful spirit of a neglected and murdered child; *The Shining* (dir. Stanley Kubrick, 1980), whose Overlook Hotel—allegedly built on a Native American burial ground—is haunted by unknown forces, including the ghosts of two children murdered by their father, the former caretaker; and *Poltergeist* (dir. Tobe Hooper, 1982), where angry spirits attack a family whose house was built over a former cemetery without the bodies being properly relocated.

that what was once familiar has been in some way changed, and has thus become threatening and terrifying. Mandolessi (2014), in her exploration of haunting related to the Argentine dictatorship, relies heavily upon this feature of the haunted house. She ties the haunting of entire nations under dictatorship to the existence of clandestine detention centers, of which populations were at least somewhat aware, but were unable to refer to directly or confirm. Under such conditions, she writes, “All space becomes contaminated with terror via the spectral presence of this ‘secret’ right in the middle of public space. Space which was once familiar now becomes haunted by the presence of a secret which threatens its inhabitants” (Mandolessi 2014: 153). The strange and terrible invades the familiar space of the nation and thus puts even the everyday citizen under a state of fear and threat from unknown forces—that is, the sinister. Interestingly, this also relates the haunted house to violation (in addition to concealment), as what is strange or unfamiliar might seem to invade and threaten what was the formerly safe, private sphere of the domestic abode.

As Eljaiek Rodriguez (2017) discusses, such a setting contributes to a sinister atmosphere that can serve as a backdrop to fear and hauntings from the past.³³ More than a mere backdrop, though, the haunted house can also serve as a source of terror itself, as Andrew Hock-soon Ng (2015) points out,³⁴ as well as a way of thinking through a changing relationship to a formerly familiar space. Like hauntings in the more general sense, the haunted house also often has a

³³ “El espacio desempeña un papel importante en las ficciones góticas: se recuperan espacios perdidos en el tiempo, ruinas y castillos retornan junto con sus habitantes vivos o muertos y crean una atmósfera siniestra, adecuada para apariciones fantasmales” (Eljaiek Rodriguez 2017: 20).

³⁴ He notes in his introduction to *Women and Domestic Space in Contemporary Gothic Narratives: The House as Subject* that “Arguably, that many of its narratives identify the house in the title seems to suggest that the architecture’s prominence exceeds its function as backdrop but is in fact the very thing that engenders terror” (2015: 1).

particular ethical concern, demanding acknowledgment or justice for the traumas or anxieties it bears witness to and thereby presenting the ethical imperative identified by Derrida in *Specters of Marx* (1994) as “learning to live *with* ghosts” (xviii).

Like the haunted house of the Anglo tradition, Latin American haunted houses are rife with layers of significance, from the psychological to the historical. As nations formed out of settler colonies characterized by violence, displacement, genocide, and slavery, the histories of Latin American countries are riddled with the potential for the traumatic origins of hauntings. Moreover, as a region generally classified as “developing” that thus also seems perpetually in a state of transition or becoming, always on the verge of an oft-desired modernity, it also is full of potential for what Maria del Pilar Blanco (2012) terms a “*present-progressive* conception of haunting,” that is, one which speaks to “how subjects conceive present and evolving spaces and localities” while looking towards an uncertain future (2012: 6). Part of landscapes that are, in Blanco’s words, “in the process of being transformed,” Latin American haunted houses speak both to a dark past that has been buried and an evolving present that puts existing structures under threat (2012: 16).

The Brazilian sociologist Gilberto Freyre (1900-1987) includes a telling discussion on a version of the haunted house in the preface to *Casa-Grande e Senzala* (1933) (published in English as *The Masters and the Slaves*).³⁵ Freyre, highlighting the importance of the architecture of the “Big House” of Brazilian plantations as representative of the nearly feudal power of the master, notes how these solid, enduring houses were built upon the sweat and blood of the enslaved—often literally. Even as he discusses how family members might be buried under the

³⁵ Freyre also includes an entire section on haunted houses, titled “Algumas casas,” in his study of the ghostly folklore of Recife, *Assombrações do Recife Velho* (1955).

house's chapel, making the dead quite at home with the living in the Big House, he recounts the legend of an owner who "was not content until he had had a couple of slaves killed and buried beneath the foundation stones" (1933: xxxv). The legend appears verified by excavations in which "all that has been dug up is the bones of slaves, executed by their masters and buried in the garden or inside the house without the authorities knowing anything about it" (1933: xxxix). Over generations, the Big Houses would inevitably fall into disrepair and give birth to what Freyre refers to as an "uncanny" folklore of apparitions, strange sounds, and unusual happenings. For Freyre, the Big House is a symbol of "the patriarchal system of colonization set up by the Portuguese in Brazil" (1933: xxxii). As such, its hauntings seem to speak to the violence and attendant traumas of the colonial past that have stayed hidden and unresolved even as their presence, like the Big House, remains visible in its state of decay upon the Latin American landscape.³⁶

On the other hand, in the setting of Julio Cortázar (1914-1984)'s "Casa tomada" (1946) we have a prominent example of the Latin American haunted house oriented more towards the uncertain futures of a changing landscape. Cortázar's short story details the experiences of a bourgeois brother and sister living alone in their decadent ancestral home in Buenos Aires. Even

³⁶ Of course, each Latin American country differs somewhat in its history of settler colonialism, though all include a legacy of African slavery and indigenous exploitation and genocide. Due to the extensiveness of the plantation system in Brazil and the relatively late abolition of slavery (1888), the role of plantation slavery has been well-studied in that country. In comparison, the legacy of African slavery and the experience of afrodescendents in Argentina has been understudied, although it has been gaining attention in the past few decades. Due to various "myths of black disappearance" largely resulting from deliberate processes of *blanqueamiento*, Argentina has often been perceived popularly as a "white" (i.e., majority European) Latin American country. Though by no means altering the reality that Argentine settler colonialism depended upon African enslavement, this erasure has resulted in an increased attention towards indigenous genocide, rather than African slavery, as the originary trauma at the foundation of Argentine settler colonialism in the popular imagination. For more information, see Edwards (2017).

as they painstakingly maintain the house against dust and grime (one might say, against the decay that marks the passage of time), the pair are slowly driven out of certain areas by a mysterious presence that takes over their living quarters room by room, until they finally are forced to abandon the house altogether. Published the year that Juan Perón first assumed the Argentine presidency, the haunted house of “Casa tomada” appears to speak to a particular anxiety about changing class dynamics within a society undergoing a significant transformation, as Perón’s appeal to the working classes was felt as deeply threatening by traditional Argentine elites. These two examples demonstrate the attachment that Latin American haunted houses can have both with a repressed violent past—whether that past refers more distantly to the violence of settler colonialism and slavery or to a more recent history of state-sponsored terror—and to dynamic, changing national circumstances.

Whether looking toward the past or the present and future, topics which will be addressed more thoroughly in chapters two and three, haunted houses inevitably are accompanied by feelings of threat, uncertainty, or doubt, comprising in my estimation the sinister mood. Del Pilar Blanco (2012) links haunting with crises of understanding and perception, while Gordon (2008) similarly observes that “Haunting occurs on the terrain situated between our ability to conclusively describe the logic of Capitalism or State Terror, for example, and the various experiences of this logic, experiences that are more often than not partial, coded, symptomatic, contradictory, ambiguous” (24). The ability to narrate or represent this historical experience is limited, since it can’t be approached as a “grand historical fact,” it can only be experienced (Gordon 2008: 63). While the ambiguity of the sinister mood thus points to the contradictory and partial ways that haunting can be experienced without attempting to resolve or exorcise it, I

propose that the familiarity of Gothic convention helps convey this experience as affect and make it legible enough to promote understanding for the reader or spectator.

This is particularly relevant for the case the clandestine detention centers, which, as I will elaborate upon more thoroughly in part two, allowed the Argentine dictatorship to instrumentalize the feeling of the sinister against the entire population, not just those who were detained within the centers' walls. As Arendt (1973) observed of the concentration camps during the Holocaust, although the population knows about this "secret," the fact that it cannot be spoken of openly means that "this never-communicated information loses its quality of reality and assumes the nature of a mere nightmare" (435). Moreover, the irrationality of mass extermination

gave the whole enterprise an air of mad unreality.

This atmosphere of madness and unreality, created by an apparent lack of purpose, is the real iron curtain which hides all forms of concentration camps from the eyes of the world. Seen from outside, they and the things that happen in them can be described only in images drawn from a life after death, that is, a life removed from earthly purposes. . . . The human masses sealed off in them are treated as if they no longer existed . . . as if they were already dead and some evil spirit gone mad were amusing himself by stopping them for a while between life and death. . . . Everything that was done in the camps is known to us from the world of perverse, malignant fantasies. The difficult thing to understand is that, like such fantasies, these gruesome crimes took place in a phantom world, which, however, has materialized, as it were, into a world which is complete with all sensual data of reality but lacks that structure of consequence and responsibility without which reality remains for us a mass of incomprehensible data. (Arendt 1973: 445)

What Arendt refers to as an atmosphere of mad unreality, which can only be described through terms evoking an otherworldly evil, constitutes the sinister mood, and the convention of the Gothic haunted house becomes, in the texts that I analyze in part two, the only way to make this atmosphere somewhat familiar and legible while preserving this unreal air.

In chapter two, "The Detention Center as Haunted House in *Crónica de una fuga* (2006)," I analyze the setting of the Argentine film *Crónica de una fuga* (2006), directed by

Israel Adrián Caetano, which tells the story of four prisoners' escape from one of the dictatorship's clandestine detention centers in 1977. Based on a 2002 book written by Claudio Tamburrini, one of the prisoners, the commercial film received several awards in Argentina and was one of the five highest-grossing films domestically the year of its release (Dillon 2019: 37). As we will see throughout this chapter, the film utilizes select conventions from the horror and thriller genres, particularly using familiar filmic conventions of the haunted house, in order to make the inaccessible experience of the clandestine detention center affectively legible to spectators at a remove from the dictatorship.

In chapter three, "A Haunted Spectacle: Griselda Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros* (1973)," I contend that the setting of Griselda Gambaro's 1973 play *Información para extranjeros* can be productively read as a haunted house, both in the Gothic sense and in the familiar sense of the interactive Halloween activity. The avant-garde work, which is non-linear and repeatedly draws attention to itself as a spectacle, is meant to take place in a large home in which groups of visitors are shuffled from room to room and scene to troubling scene by guides as though attending an open house put on by a demented realtor. Despite being written years before the 1976 coup that would install Argentina's last military dictatorship, the work also evokes the clandestine imprisonment, torture, and killings that would characterize the authoritarian regime. Though quite different in its point of enunciation from *Crónica de una fuga*, *Información para extranjeros* nevertheless evokes the Gothic as well, presenting its setting as a haunted house in order to expose the sinister tools of terror and power under Argentine authoritarianism.

Although these texts differ notably in form and intended audience, they serve as case studies here for several reasons. Firstly, and most obviously, each contains a haunted house: that

is, an architectural structure, usually originally built for domestic purposes (although institutional sites such as asylums, orphanages, and prisons also often appear in film and literature as haunted houses) that, in the world of the narratives, now serves as the setting for strange (often supernatural) and violent events that undermine its original status as private family sanctuary. Secondly, each text is a relatively well-known, fictionalized treatment of the Argentine dictatorship, but many elements of the works—most importantly, for our purposes, the key role played by the haunted house as setting—have gone underexamined. Finally, each work speaks to the haunted house on a distinct level, thereby teasing out its multiple layers of meaning as a narrative trope. In the first place, *Crónica de una fuga*'s haunted house is notable on a formal aesthetic level for how it uses literary and filmic conventions associated with the Gothic and mainstream horror to represent the detention center as a Gothic mansion. In *Información para extranjeros*, the setting also makes use of such conventions, but with a twist that brings the role of the spectator to bear on the haunted house's significance: by presenting its setting as a curated spectacle intimately involving the audience, Gambaro evokes both the uncanny and the contemporary haunted attraction in order to relate the experience of the Argentine dictatorship's sinister terror as terrifying spectacle.

These texts will be examined in reverse chronological order, as the relatively more straightforward depiction of the haunted house as Gothic horror setting in *Crónica* provides a helpful baseline from which to examine the more self-aware and ironic way that the trope is employed in *Información*. However, the years intervening between the works remain significant. *Crónica* was written and released, of course, in a post-dictatorial moment, decades after the fact, in which Argentina continued to struggle with the appropriate way to memorialize and reconcile with the terrors of its past. In contrast, *Información*, written at a time of great violence and

internal conflict that nevertheless preceded the dictatorship by several years, articulates an experience of terror that is almost prophetic to the present-day reader. As my discussion of the texts will demonstrate, both the historical moment in which the texts were written and the way that they may be read now, with the hindsight of the decades since the return to democracy, have an impact on the way they operate to create a sinister mood as experienced by the contemporary reader.

Part Three: Dangerous Bodies: Disappearance and the Corpse

In *The Space of Literature* (1982), Maurice Blanchot, reflecting upon the parallels between the image and the corpse, notes, “We do not cohabit with the dead for fear of seeing *here* collapse into the unfathomable *nowhere*” (259). That is, we require distance from the dead, rituals for properly disposing of their bodies, so as not to be threatened by their strangeness, their lack of fixity in time, space, and reality. For Blanchot, the cadaver, like the image—and, we might add, the specter—indicates a simultaneous presence and absence: though we see it in front of us, it inevitably refers back to something that is no longer, an event, an object, a living person that is gone. The corpse can only indicate the *absence* of the living person, even as its *presence* in space is overwhelming, as “the deceased rests heavily in his spot” (256).

Blanchot’s observation of the distancing mechanisms needed between the living and the corpse dates to 1955. While the French theorist’s thinking was no doubt informed by his experience of the recent horrors of World War II and the Holocaust—some of which he witnessed in France under Nazi occupation—at this time the dead in the Western world were also becoming largely relegated to carefully circumscribed spaces outside of those reserved for ordinary life: the hospital, the mortuary, the cemetery, the crematorium. In the mid-to-late-

twentieth century, therefore, while on the one hand humanity was faced with the overwhelming nature of World War II's corpses and the atrocities that had been done to them, simultaneously our rituals for treating the dead and dying worked to distance the general populace from the fear they invoked.

However, as Thomas Laqueur has argued in *The Work of the Dead* (2015), this does not entirely mean we stopped cohabiting with the dead. For Laqueur (2015),

We need to live with them in more or less close proximity. They define generations, demarcate the sacred and the profane and more ordinary spaces as well, are the guarantors of land and power and authority, mirror the living to themselves, and insist on our temporal limits. The dead are witnesses to mortality. They hear us and we speak to them even if we know that they, like all base matter, are deaf and dumb. (4)

From this perspective, even burial or the completion of other funereal rituals is not simply a way of getting rid of the dead or putting the corpse out of sight, but rather is a crucial part of living with them, instilling them in a type of community, creating cultural and social meaning from nature and biological death.

This is not to say that Blanchot (1982) is at all wrong. Rather, coupled with Laqueur (2015), he articulates a crucial contradiction: even as we are terrified, awed, and repulsed by the corpse, troubled by the simultaneous absence and presence it provokes, we are also drawn to it and its heavy symbolism. Recognizing its abject materiality, we nevertheless cannot bring ourselves to wholly reject it, particularly if it is the corpse of someone we loved, someone we felt in community with. As Laqueur (2015) insists, we are drawn to care for the dead, to cohabit with them as a class, as history, as memory, and so we are unable to shed what he terms the "enchanted" significance of the corpse despite its often troubling materiality.

In part three of this dissertation, I am interested in those instances in which we do cohabit not just with the dead, but specifically with their material expression: the cadaver. Putting aside

cultural differences in mourning and attitudes toward the corpse, even those societies that seem to prefer to rid themselves of their dead, to situate them firmly in the past and in their appropriate burial grounds, are sometimes forced to confront them when the rituals we otherwise would conduct to exorcize them from our lives break down. We cohabit with them not only in the spectral sense, but materially: embalmed corpses, saintly relics, and unexpectedly recovered remains are preserved, circulate, and pop up when we least expect them, further troubling our senses of presence and absence, place and space, here and nowhere. In these instances, we are both threatened and called to by the corpse that has not been properly disposed of, that has resisted our rituals, that continues to be “the unbearable image and figure of the unique becoming nothing in particular, no matter what” (Blanchot 1982: 257).

Disappearance and Reappearance under State Terror

Disappearance as a tool of state power under the Southern Cone dictatorships and, more particularly, the figure of the *desaparecido*, have received much attention from scholars over the past few decades. And for good reason: fundamentally defined by absence, a rift in time and space made by what once was there and suddenly is no longer, a memory that cannot be laid to rest because its mourning has been denied, the *desaparecido* is extraordinarily difficult to reckon with both critically and emotionally. From a legal and human rights perspective, a *desaparecido* is the victim of an abduction by or with the awareness of government officials whose ultimate fate or location is unknown.³⁷ *Desaparecidos* are often targeted for political reasons and detained and tortured before being killed and their remains disposed of clandestinely. In Argentina, the

³⁷ Definition paraphrased from the United Nations Human Rights Commission Working Group on Enforced or Involuntary Disappearances.

number of *desaparecidos* under the last dictatorship has been tallied at around 30,000; Chilean *desaparecidos* under Pinochet are around 3,000; and Brazilian *desaparecidos* under military rule from 1964 to 1985 number nearly 500.³⁸

As I have already alluded to, disappearance as a mechanism for enforcing state power in the Southern Cone can be considered a form of necropolitics. In such such governments, “the state of exception and the relation of enmity have become the normative basis of the right to kill. In such instances, power (and not necessarily state power) continuously refers and appeals to exception, emergency, and a fictionalized notion of the enemy. It also labors to produce that same exception, emergency, and fictionalized enemy” (Mbembe 2003: 16). In the Southern Cone, the disappeared were the “fictionalized enemy” that the state felt must be eliminated in order to shore up its own power.

³⁸ Throughout the following section, as well as in other discussions of historical background in this dissertation, I utilize examples of disappearance in Argentina, Brazil, and Chile. While there are many nuances distinguishing the Southern Cone dictatorships, the comparison between them is justified in many ways. As Caroline Silveira Bauer (2014) argues in her own comparative analysis of Argentina and Brazil, they shared many aspects in their strategies for spreading terror, the creation of a culture of fear, the disruption of daily life, the creation of a collective rather than an individual trauma, and the impunity and lack of consequences for disappearance after the transitions to democracy. While she points out that many of the key differences between Brazil and Argentina are related to the levels upon which repression operated—in Brazil, repression was more public and legally sanctioned, whereas in Argentina it was conducted clandestinely, without even the veneer of legality—she also argues that the difference in such strategies, as well as in the number of disappeared, is due to the fact that the Argentine regime was the culmination of an approach to state terror that built upon the experiences of other military dictatorships. Argentina took on a campaign of more general disappearance and extermination in order to evade the international attention received by actions such as Chile’s Caravan of Death, but also because it was more “effective” at preventing a leftist resurgence as had happened after Argentina’s last dictatorship from 1966-1973.

Disappearance is, unfortunately, not a method of terror unique to the Southern Cone dictatorships and continues there and elsewhere to this day. In just the past few decades, this tactic has also characterized both state and non-state terror in Syria, Sri Lanka, Zimbabwe, Mexico, and Columbia, among others. See Phillips (2007) for a report on the practice related to gangs and drug trafficking in Rio de Janeiro and Amnesty International (n.d.) for a general report on this human rights issue.

Disappearance not only eliminates particular targets that state power identifies as undue threats to its own perpetuation; it also spreads terror and anguish, affective states that work to repress activity that threatens the status quo. Activists and the marginalized go into hiding or exile or reduce their activities or visibility, fearing that they may become future victims of the state's necropower. The families of the disappeared are denied the possibility of mourning for those they have lost. Uncertain of exactly what has happened to their loved ones, entire social groups live in fear and silence.³⁹

Moreover, both the crime and the trauma it causes are continuous, as the lack of a body prevents any attempt at closure.⁴⁰ Because bodily disappearance forecloses the possibility of certain death and mourning, it can only evoke a temporal stasis that doesn't fit into our cycles of life and death, leaving us unmoored.⁴¹ As Laura Fandiño (2007) argues, disappearance's disruption of mourning rituals also ruptures our sense of geography, as death, which we expect to

³⁹ Silveira Bauer (2014) points out,

A perpetuação da angústia e da incerteza geradas pelo desconhecimento do destino do preso, como um crime que não termina, foi um dos principais fatores geradores do medo e do silêncio nas sociedades, obrigadas a conviver com as contradições da presença-ausência e da existência-inexistência dos desaparecidos. (89)

⁴⁰ As Virginia Saint-Bonnet (2019) reflects in her analysis of the relevance of the Antigone myth in Argentina, disappearance "pretendió prolongar el trauma indefinidamente en la comunidad, a partir de la ausencia de esos cuerpos-vacío, cuerpos-hiato, que en fatal paradoja, se erigieron como ausencia y presencia, constituyendo desde lo no expuesto la mayor muestra de espanto ante la sociedad" (4). Silveira Bauer (2014) further explains,

Mesmo que os desaparecidos sejam considerados mortos, trata-se de uma morte sem sepultura, uma morte que se carrega em vida. A melancolia gerada nos familiares e no entorno da pessoa desaparecida reflete a necessidade de se 'seguir adiante' confrontada com a percepção de 'abandonar um cadáver sem sepultura.' (89)

Disappearance precludes both individual and social attempts to go through mourning rituals, process the trauma of loss, and move on.

⁴¹ This is a major argument made by María Soledad García (2002) in her discussion of the Monumento a los Desaparecidos y No Identificados in the La Plata Municipal Cemetery. She emphasizes that "El cuerpo desaparecido abre la espera indeterminada del ciclo de la vida. Sin cuerpo, la muerte se expande en el tiempo y en la memoria recorriendo las formas y las siluetas de lo que no podemos representar" (García 2002: 13).

be confined to certain spaces like the hospital and the cemetery, converts “todo el país en un espacio de muerte” (46).⁴²

The parallels between the *desaparecido* and the specter are, at this point, well-established, the comparison having been made repeatedly by spectralities studies scholars in regards to not only the Latin American context of violence and disappearance throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, but also post-Civil War Spain and other nations torn by violent conflicts involving mass death like Vietnam and Cambodia.⁴³ In the Spanish- and Portuguese-speaking world, much of the scholarship on the figure of the *desparecido* as specter initially stemmed from discussions around historical memory and intergenerational experiences of past trauma. Under the dictatorships in these regions, memories of the victims of authoritarian governments were often suppressed by official historical narratives and censorship, and efforts to engage with this legacy under democracy have resulted in memories and historical counter-narratives appearing in the form of specters and aesthetics of haunting that challenge the relationship of contemporary citizens to their country’s past.⁴⁴ Perhaps most notably, Gordon (2008) dedicates a full chapter to analyzing the *desaparecido* as specter, arguing that “a disappearance is real only when it is apparitional because the ghost or the apparition is the

⁴² As Kerstin Mey (2016) notes, in the West, most of the time death is “removed from everyday life . . . and takes place in specialised institutions like hospitals, nursing homes and hospices,” marked by particular rituals that regulate it (145). By contrast, this cannot be the case under governments where disappearance is prevalent, in which death, unmarked by a body and unregulated by ritual, takes place both nowhere and everywhere.

⁴³ For treatments on spectral apparitions associated with the dead and disappeared in Vietnam and Cambodia, see Kwon (2008) and Arensen (2017), respectively.

⁴⁴ See, for example, Labanyi (2000), Keller (2015), and Colmeiro (2011)’s discussions of specters and historical memory in Spanish film, literature, and photography and Mandolessi (2014)’s analysis of hauntings and concentration camps in Argentine literature. Ribas-Casasayas and Petersen (2016) also brings together several chapters that examine both Spanish and Latin American post-dictatorial experiences of traumatic hauntings and painful absences.

principal form by which something lost or invisible or seemingly not there makes itself known or apparent to us” (63).

In the case of governments that have made use of disappearance as a tool of state terrorism, the location—or lack thereof—of disappeared bodies therefore becomes paramount for their own mobilization of the sinister as a technology of power. Thrown into rivers or the sea, buried in unmarked graves, or mutilated so as to become unrecognizable, such states attempt to rid themselves of the material evidence of their violations of human rights.⁴⁵ In so doing, the absence of a body precludes the possibility of conducting appropriate mourning rituals: where there is no corpse, death is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere. In this way, citizens under and after dictatorship are made to cohabit uneasily with the dead, and therefore continuously threatened by death. It is for this reason that so much critical attention has been focused upon disappearance, particularly on ways to trace the shape of the absence it leaves behind: for example, as Karen Elizabeth Bishop (2020) posits, it is important to view disappearance in literature not just as the dissolution or receding of form, but as something that “takes form over time in the narrative works that follow and, in so doing, takes up space and takes place” (26).

⁴⁵ As Crelinsten and Schmid write in their introduction to *The Politics of Pain* (1995), “Systems of torture seek to destroy evidence of themselves” (1995: 2). Jerry Dávila (2013) further explains, “Disappearance was really three kinds of crimes at once. It was murder, but it was also the crime of erasing that crime. The victim and the act were both disappeared. Since the crime’s existence was denied, its perpetrators, their actions, and the state’s role were concealed” (4). Sadly, the disappearance and reappearance of bodies is neither the exclusive purview of dictatorships nor a practice left behind in the twentieth century: in September 2014 in Guerrero, Mexico, 43 students from the Ayotzinapa Rural Teachers College were kidnapped and disappeared after being handed over to a drug cartel by Mexican police, with some of their remains being planted in a garbage dump to fit with the government’s narrative of events at the time (Reuters 2021); in June 2021, the bodies of young protestors disappeared by paramilitary groups working with police during mobilizations against the government two months earlier began to reappear in the Cauca River (Méndez Aristizábal 2021).

The disappearance of a body always leaves something behind, even when the cadaver is nowhere to be found, if only the weighty outline of absence.

However, scholarship focused on tracing the shapes of absence created by disappearance has often neglected how crucial corporeal materiality and strategic, controlled *reappearance* can be for the implementation of this tool of state power. I contend that, while many scholars have examined the *desaparecidos* of the Latin American dictatorships as specters, few, with the notable exception of Corbin (2021), have addressed the materiality of the bodies that are left behind. In order to establish terror among the general populace, all political dissidents cannot merely vanish without a trace: something must be strategically left behind. This trace or remainder can take multiple forms, from political prisoners who are eventually released after being held without habeas corpus to bodies (often anonymous ones) that are recovered. As Silveira Bauer (2014) points out, *desaparecido* is not necessarily an immutable category: political prisoners who were kidnapped and held clandestinely were temporarily disappeared from the perspective of their friends and family, even if later they were released or transitioned into being “legal” prisoners.⁴⁶ And released, tortured prisoners carry with them the physical, psychological, and emotional scars of their experience, marked by fear and a form of living death.⁴⁷ Paradoxically, the tortured *detenido* who is released after temporary imprisonment and

⁴⁶ Dávila (2013) similarly warns, “The regimes transacted their internal politics on the bodies of the opposition, whether alive, missing or dead. In this context, judging the regimes on the basis of the relative numbers of deaths they inflicted is misleading” (3). As an example, in Brazil, although numbers point to only 500 or so *desaparecidos*, an estimated 20,000 people were tortured during the dictatorship, many of whom were held illegally and denied habeas corpus (Meirelles 2021).

⁴⁷ Silveira Bauer (2014) notes the psychological death in the form of a total annihilation of the individual affecting even those who returned from their imprisonment: “Conforme o depoimento de um ex-presos político argentino, a ‘quebra’ da resistência significava uma morte” (70).

the corpse that is recovered after extrajudicial, state-sanctioned murder both provide a form of embodied death in the absence of the many others who were disappeared without a trace.

Moreover, the corpses of political prisoners, particularly those involved in guerrilla movements, were often used to justify the government's actions or to otherwise manipulate public perception. As Dávila (2013) points out,

If the act of disappearance was a kind of message that signaled the power of the regime over its perceived enemies, there were other ways in which the regime would convey that message, and these sometimes involved a body. It was common to array the bodies of those killed in ways that suggested they were engaging in armed actions when they were killed. This exercise conveyed the message that the regime engaged in just defense against a violent threat. At other times, a body appeared in order to silence protest, or the body was a message from one faction of the regime to another: that they were the ones in control. (5)⁴⁸

In other instances, bodies of *desaparecidos* turned up anonymously, with their identities and the circumstances of their deaths purposely obscured by authorities. Even as dictatorial states are haunted by presumed deaths without the bodies to provide material evidence and the ability to mourn, they are also populated by corpses with no one to recognize or bury them. The Equipo Argentina de Antropología Forense (EAAF), seeking to identify recovered remains of *desaparecidos* that have not been claimed by family members, notes that in many instances “al poco tiempo de ser asesinados, los cuerpos de las personas desaparecidas eran generalmente depositados en lugares públicos y una llamada ‘anónima’ alertaba a las autoridades de la comisaría local” (n.d.: n.p.) Picked up as anonymous transients suffering unknown deaths, the

⁴⁸ In another graphic example of using re-appeared bodies to send a message, Chad Redwing (2007) mentions how “During the Pinochet regime, dozens of headless cadavers with arms tied behind their backs appeared in the Mapocho River in Santiago and the Ñuble River near Chillán. These bodies served as reminders to all citizens that the consequence of yielding to socialist propaganda was corporeal death. In another grotesque incident, emblematic of the early years of extreme violence, Arauco Fishing Association, which produced canned seafood in Talcahuano, had to halt work for several days” because the fish had eaten from human corpses that had been thrown into the ocean (70-71).

bodies were then buried in municipal cemeteries under the label N.N. without being identified.⁴⁹ In Brazil as well, the first time that a former military officer admitted that he had tortured prisoners at the “Casa da Morte,” a detention center outside Rio, he also “admitted to directly conducting procedures specifically designed to prevent the bodies of political prisoners from being identified before they were thrown into rivers” (2021: Meirelles 61).

Similarly, bodies that were made to disappear by being thrown into the sea during Argentina’s infamous *vuelos de muerte* did not all simply vanish. In December of 1977, several bodies washed ashore in Santa Teresita and Mar del Tuyú, beach resort towns south of Buenos Aires, and were subsequently buried under N.N. in the nearby General Lavalle Cemetery. They were identified as the bodies of Azucena Villaflor, one of the founders of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, and two other activists in 2005 (*Río Negro* 2005). In another poignant example, during the most repressive years of the dictatorship, residents of the Paraná River delta watched as helicopters dropped bundles from overhead; they’d later encounter those bodies floating in the river. As *BBC Mundo* detailed in 2013, “Algunos lugareños vieron cadáveres colgados de árboles, que no terminaban de caer al río. A otros les cayeron cuerpos en sus propias casas, a través del techo. Otros, simplemente vieron cuerpos en el río con estremecedora frecuencia” (Hernández 2013: n.p.). Marcos Queipo, a retired mechanic, told reporters that, at first, he would open the bundles and find the bodies, but he found so many that eventually he stopped opening them altogether. When he reported the corpses to the police, they told him to be quiet about it or the same thing might happen to him (Hernández 2013). In each of these examples, *reappeared*

⁴⁹ The EAAF has been able to determine that these unidentified bodies belonged to *desaparecidos* because, unlike typical John and Jane Does, they were younger, had died violent deaths rather than due to natural causes, and were brought to cemeteries in groups (Equipo Argentina de Antropología Forense n.d.).

corpses—even as they were disguised or anonymized to give the regimes plausible deniability and to displace the evidence of their abuses—supplemented disappearance as a technology for spreading terror and silencing the populace.

Even as the overwhelming majority of their misdeeds are deliberately obscured by disappearing the evidence embodied in the corpse, authoritarian governments therefore also relied upon strategic reappearance—the re-discovery of some bodies—to instill terror in their populaces, bringing to bear the contradictory materiality of the corpse that Blanchot (1982) has observed.⁵⁰ In the case of disappearance, there is no body where there should be one; in the opposite circumstance, as when an anonymous, mutilated cadaver washes up on shore, the citizen under dictatorship is forced into an encounter with a corpse where there should not be one.

As I have argued, the sinister is a mood operationalized by the strategic introduction of a threatening, albeit partial, knowledge that serves as an index or indicator of what is absent. This partial awareness of what has been concealed by the state spreads terror while preventing it from being resisted head-on. In this context, the occasional reappeared body or the tortured body of the former political prisoner, marked indelibly with the evidence of state terror, serves this function. As Gordon (2008) writes, “the desaparecido always bears the ghost of the state whose power is the defining force of the field of disappearance . . . the traces of the state’s power to determine the meaning of life and death” (127). If the spectral apparition carries this mark of state power, I contend that the cadaver does even more so. This echoes what Achille Mbembe

⁵⁰ Emerson (2019) argues that this is also the case in the mobilization of necropower by drug cartels in present-day Mexico, in which “the dismembered corpse [is] left at strategic points throughout the city by warring cartels to confront residents with the ever-present possibility of death” (3).

(2003) has noted in the cases of survivors of political violence who nevertheless carry evidence of violence in the shape of wounds and amputation, taking on “the form of human shapes that are alive, to be sure, but whose bodily integrity has been replaced by pieces, fragments, folds, even immense wounds that are difficult to close. Their function is to keep before the eyes of the victim—and of the people around him or her—the morbid spectacle of severing” (35). Similarly, when we encounter a corpse that has been reappeared, the violence enacted upon the *desaparecido* is made briefly, partially knowable to us by the state—just knowable enough to overwhelm us with the sinister. The sinister, then, is also activated when the bodies of political prisoners are made to reappear, forcing those who encounter them to speculate on the conditions of their creation and to cohabit, not spectrally, but materially, with the dead. Whether the body is disappeared or eventually reappears, then, entire nations are haunted by an improper materiality⁵¹ and overcome by the sinister, the feeling that death and danger is potentially around every corner, simultaneously present and absent, visible and invisible, material and spectral.⁵²

However, the reappearance of disappeared bodies also provides multiple opportunities for countering the sinister terror mobilized by authoritarian governments through this manipulation

⁵¹ This improper materiality follows del Pilar Blanco (2012)’s assertion that the haunting constitutes a simultaneity which can be thought of not just regarding time, but also “as an event in which two spatialities are confronted with each other” (26).

⁵² This is especially the case because, as Robben (2015) notes, when buried in mass graves, often the location of the bodies of the disappeared was actually known to the populace, but they had no recourse for exhuming or identifying the corpses, leading to a sense of paralysis. This occurred not only in Latin America, but in Francoist Spain, a phenomenon which is discussed in the documentary *El silencio de otros* (dir. Almudena Carracedo and Robert Bahar, 2019). Robben (2015) argues that “Mass graves in the Southern Cone also functioned to occult massacres, destroy incriminating evidence, prevent martyrdom, and deny the bereaved relatives their mourning and their dead a proper mortuary ritual” (57), and when citizens identified these mass graves in Chile in 1978 and 1979, for instance, the government engaged in destructive exhumations which “reinforced the first meaning of mass graves as signifying a military victory, and affirmed the regime’s necropolitical power by condemning the relatives to an interminable search for their twice disappeared loved ones” (66).

of the corpse. With the goal of restoring dignity to the dead and reinstating them in their appropriate positions in their national communities, activists have spent the decades since the ends of the dictatorships in Argentina and Brazil searching for the bodies of loved ones who were buried secretly in cemeteries under stones marked N.N. (for the Latin *nomen nescio*, commonly translated to Spanish as Ningún Nombre) or left in remote places like the Atacama Desert.⁵³ Many human rights organizations have relied upon the recuperation and identification of skeletal remains to confirm the deaths of individuals suspected to have been disappeared and gather evidence for legal recourse. However, even when the remains of *desaparecidos* have been located, they are often anonymous and unrecognizable, leaving activists to make identifications through archival information, dental records, or DNA evidence.⁵⁴

Like these efforts by activists, family members, and human rights organizations, literature and art have also often relied upon encounters with the corpse to understand and resist state terror, albeit in different ways. Most recently, as noted above, Corbin (2021) has argued that “The reemergence of bodily remains actively defies disappearance with their ability to relate facts, fill gaps, and eliminate doubt, exhibiting the threat of the body object” (8).⁵⁵ In the cultural realm, corpses have had rich symbolic potential for working through the after-effects of dictatorship; in the words of Masiello (1987), post-dictatorial “fiction and history are littered with mutilated corpses and body fragments, grotesque metaphors for the decomposition of any

⁵³ For example, see Patricio Guzman’s 2010 documentary *Nostalgia de la luz*, which follows a group of women who search the Atacama for the bones of their disappeared family members.

⁵⁴ Discussing this process in Argentina, Laqueur (2015) argues that “Finding and then giving these bodies back their names is an act of making them reappear both as an individual commemorative act of mourning and a collective act that establishes disappearance as a fact—an act that had a cause—and tries posthumously to undo that fact” (432).

⁵⁵ Corbin (2021)’s analysis of the spectral testimony provided by material objects includes bodies that reappeared via exhumation.

desired whole” (4). Where activists seek to allow the families of the disappeared the opportunity for mourning and closure by completing the rituals Blanchot (1982) highlights as necessary, literature and art, as I will argue throughout part three, explore “dangerous bodies” and the strong affects they invoke in readers and spectators to draw attention to the state’s power of terror and mobilization of the sinister, and to turn the corpse’s power back against the state.

In *Dangerous Bodies: Historicising the Gothic Corporeal* (2016), Marie Mulvey Roberts uses the term “dangerous bodies” to refer to forms fitting under a variety of umbrellas, “from repressive corporate bodies, to the abject, sacrificial, blasphemous, suffering, wounded or rebellious body, capable of resistance, passivity, subjugation and subversion” (4). I appropriate the term here to encompass the multiple potentials of the corpses in the works I analyze. Said bodies can differ in how they express danger and toward whom: abject or monstrous, they can represent a sinister threat posed by the authoritarian state against its citizens or a form of resistance against a government’s power. Through their focus on the corpse, such works also emphasize the abject evidence of the state’s misdeeds, engaging the everyday citizen with the shocking nature of its crimes against humanity; materialize the work of behind-the-scenes, unaccountable actors, from military officers and civilian politicians to the torturers and death squads themselves; and deny the state’s mobilization of the sinister by using reappearance to create a physical manifestation of what is spectrally absent. They also seek to return a certain agency to the disappeared, allowing for the possibility of “reaparición con vida” by reviving their materiality and emphasizing affect over representation so that those who encounter the corpse may experience what Xavier Aldana Reyes describes in *Body Gothic: Corporeal Transgression in Contemporary Literature and Horror Film* (2014) as “a shared sense of the complexity of embodiment and the vulnerability of our flesh,” emphasizing “readers’/viewers’ awareness of

their own bodies, particularly of their vulnerability and shared experience of projected pain through vicarious feelings” (2).

Encounters with the corpse are therefore central in both texts featured in part three: Artur Barrio’s 1970 works of visual and performance art often referred to as the *Trouxas Ensanguentadas*, or *Bloody Bundles*, and Tomás Eloy Martínez’s 1995 novel *Santa Evita*. In the former work, discussed in chapter four, Barrio created bundles made of cloths, refuse, meat, blood, bones, and other detritus and left them behind in broad daylight in a public park in Brazil to be encountered by passersby. Part of a “situation” for the *Do corpo à Terra* exhibition held in Belo Horizonte, these bundles acted out the re-appearance of the tortured and abused bodies of the dictatorship’s political prisoners, forcing everyday Brazilians to encounter the abject evidence of the government’s human rights violations. I argue that the Bloody Bundles evoke anonymous, mutilated bodies in order to materialize the government’s misdeeds and force an encounter with the abject that allows the spectator to identify bodily with the overwhelming horror of state torture and murder, embracing the affective impact of the sinister mood. Moreover, Barrio’s work engages with questions of how to address the gory realities of extreme violence and the ethical complicities of portraying the monstrous.

In chapter five, I analyze the latter text—a fictionalized meta-narrative based on Argentine historical events—in which Eva Perón (1919-1952)’s cadaver, preserved by the careful work of an embalmer, evokes a supernatural power over its possessors as the military government that overthrew her husband seeks to keep it hidden and suppress its potent symbolism. Alternatively represented as beautiful and repulsive, saintly and monstrous, sublime and abject, Evita’s corpse ultimately turns the threat of the sinister against those who seek to wield power in Argentina, pointing towards the ways that the later authoritarian government’s

struggle for control of the nation would be played out upon the resistant bodies of the *desaparecidos*. I examine how these contradictory descriptions of Evita's corpse echo the dictatorship's treatment of its perceived enemies as both sub-human—bodies to be controlled via disappearance in order to maintain power—and an impossibly powerful existential threat to the nation.

Though the cadavers at the center of both works are extremely different—Barrio's bundles are anonymous, in pieces, and decaying, while Evita's body is well-known and beautifully preserved—I posit that the emphasis on reappearance simultaneously points to the ways that the authoritarian governments of Argentina and Brazil utilized the corpse to spread the sinister mood through the disruptive potential of the dead, and yet explores how to resist authoritarian attempts to disappear the bodies that challenge dictatorial power and turn the sinister against those officials who attempted to wield it over their populaces.

Sinister Potentialities

As is by now evident, the anecdote with which this introduction began, while a historical example, nevertheless features some of the horror genre conventions that govern the three parts of this dissertation: esoteric practices; the specter; and the reappeared corpse. As I have proposed, these elements all give rise to the sinister mood, demonstrating distinct yet interrelated aspects of this threatening historical atmosphere and the potentialities inherent in an attention toward the sinister and its affective impact. My intervention thus seeks to unite several productive scholarly approaches without losing sight of their historical, cultural, and textual specificity, combining an attention to both the forms that the sinister takes in cultural texts and the way that mood operates toward political and representational ends. This dissertation also

converses with the field as a whole by engaging with key questions of violence, memory, and contestations of power under and after dictatorship, addressing the narrative and representative possibilities of genre, mood, and affect.

Finally, the project will provide crucial context and develop analytical tools needed to address a recent explosion in horror literature and film throughout Latin America. The recent growth and popularity of works by authors that depict political violence while more explicitly associating themselves with horror and the Gothic, such as Mariana Enríquez (1973-), Samantha Schweblin (1978-), and Mónica Ojeda (1988-), attest to the need for broader scholarly attention toward their historical antecedents and influences in Latin America. While academic criticism of this corpus is still in its early stages, my work sheds light on this recent movement by addressing the historical, political, cultural, and textual implications of the use of the horror genre and the sinister mood to portray violence and terror under the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships.

Part One

In the Shadows:

The Sinister, Secrecy, and Political Conspiracy

Chapter One

The Warlock, the Lodge, and the Triple A: Esotericism and Occult Necropolitics in the Argentine Imaginary of “el Brujo” José López Rega and Luisa Valenzuela’s *Cola de lagartija* (1983)

—*los militares son unos animals, pero animales más o menos racionales. No se andan con brujerías.*
—*Las cosas que últimamente ocurren son de la más pura brujería, no me lo vas a negar*
—*Esta desgracia se repite cada tanto en la historia de la humanidad. Se llama fascismo.*

—Luisa Valenzuela, *Cola de lagartija* (1983: 18)

On May 3, 1979, the morning edition of the Argentine newspaper *Crónica* published a report on a strange series of items—described in its headline as “objetos de alucinantes ritos”—that were exhibited to reporters by the Federal Police: a ceramic doll with a removable head resembling the deceased president Juan Perón; a white cape; two brown stoles inscribed with the words “Alba-Rino”;¹ three necklaces; two onyx rings; and dozens of books on esoteric and occult practices. While *Crónica*’s choice of headline is certainly attention grabbing—the popular publication was known for its “tono popular y sensacionalista, en ocasiones casi bizarro”²—other newspapers, including *La Nación*, *Diario Popular*, *Clarín*, and *La Prensa*, carried similar descriptions and photographs of the items, with more or less sensational headlines.

The objects had belonged to “el Brujo” José López Rega, ex-Minister of Social Welfare and well-known astrologer and esoteric practitioner, who had left the country and gone into

¹ A report from *Diario Popular* on May 3, 1979, claimed that Alba-Rino was a religious sect.

² While certainly having a populist and sensationalist orientation, I do not mean to make a determination about the newspaper’s political orientation or trustworthiness at this time. Notably, *Crónica* was shut down by the Argentine government several times in its now fifty-year history, including once in 1974 by Isabel Perón, and once in 1978 by the Argentine military government. See *Perfil* (2019); Ciancaglini (2014); and Veiga (2008).

hiding shortly before the 1976 coup. The “exóticos objetos,” characterized by *Crónica* as forming part of López Rega’s “delirios” and “prácticas de ciencias ocultas,” were certainly attention-grabbing, with the various reports focusing particularly on the ceramic doll (Fig. 1). *Crónica* noted that the face could be said to resemble Perón, the famed Tango singer Carlos Gardel, or even López Rega himself, “a quien quizás le gustaba proyectarse en imagen como futuro ‘emperador de las tinieblas.’” The detachable head meant that a new face could be inserted into its place, personalizing the doll; *Crónica* claimed that “en el Norte argentino se utilizan figuras como ésa para realizar presagios.”³

³ Accounts of the doll’s purpose differed between reports: *La Prensa* indicated that “Según pudo saberse, el muñeco era utilizado por el ex ministro para ‘curar’ las enfermedades de Perón” and that its detachable head made it resemble figures used “en las ‘diabladas’ bolivianas” (Andean folk dances with pre-Columbian origins where some performers dress as devils). *Diario Popular*, perhaps taking the most creative liberties with its account, reported that the detachable head gave one the option of “Perón o el Monstruo” and claimed that “López Rega decapitaba una de ellas —se ignora cual— durante ominosas ceremonias secretas en las que impetraba presagios inenarrables de las potencias avernales.” As *La Nación* clarified in its report, the phrase “el Monstruo” refers to a dragon-like head that was the second option for mounting on the figurine. On February 19, 1980, *Diario Popular* revisited its original report on the objects, claiming then that the dragon head was representative of López Rega himself. *Clarín* features perhaps the least sensational descriptions of the objects, referring to them simply as “pertenencias” and arguing that the collection “inclina a suponer que entre sus especialidades no figuraba la ‘magia negra.’” Its report also points out the resemblance of the doll to Bolivian ones, taking pains to clarify that they are associated with carnivalesque festivals, not black magic, and also noting—somewhat dismissively—that the white cape “podría pertenecer a un ‘ilusionista’ de salón.”



Figure 1. *Press photo, Crónica, May 2, 1979. López Rega, José: Curanderismo folder. Fondo Editorial Sarmiento de Redacción Crónica, Archivos, Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno.*

While descriptions of the collection varied somewhat between reports, the notices are intriguing for several reasons. First of all, it is notable that they exist at all: why should the Federal Police, who seized the items as part of a judicial proceeding against López Rega, invite reporters to view this particular collection of objects, which “cabían holgadamente en una de las seis cajas de cartón que fueron retiradas en el procedimiento dispuesto por el juez Martín Anzoátegui, lo que indicaría que a otros no se los exhibió por su intrínseca falta de interés” (*Clarín*, May 3, 1979)? While in 1979 López Rega was in hiding from the Argentine military government, certainly these were not evidence that could contribute to locating or extraditing him, and his esoteric beliefs and practices had been well-known since long before he left his position of power in the Peronist government.⁴ Few of the articles describing the objects

⁴ An interview between Tomas Eloy Martinez and Juan Perón published in *Panorama* on June 30, 1970, described López Rega as “un colaborador que lo acompaña desde 1945 y que suele alternar su militancia peronista con la elaboración de textos sobre ocultismo” (66). Vicens (1983) claims that the first outright joke about López Rega’s esoteric interests and his influence on Perón appeared in *Clarín* in May 1972. His connections with the Spiritist Anael Lodge and the Escuela Científica Basilio were mentioned in an article on the subject in the December 7, 1972,

elaborate upon the context behind the judicial proceedings wherein these objects were seized, although at the time López Rega was being investigated for misuse of presidential funds and his role as head of the paramilitary, state-sponsored terrorist group the Argentine Anti-Communist Alliance (Triple A).

Later notices in the press clarified that the objects were seized from a residence on Gaspar Campos Street, a few blocks from the presidential palace, where Perón and Isabel had lived after returning from exile in 1973. After the coup, the residence “había sido mantenida bajo clausura con estrictas medidas de seguridad ya que se suponía podría encontrarse en su interior elementos valiosos para el esclarecimiento de la causa en instrucción sobre irregular manejo de fondos de la presidencia de la Nación” (*Crónica*, May 11, 1979). It seemed that 1979 was the earliest that the Argentine state was able to enter and search the house for evidence in the case, although “En la requisa a la residencia ordenada por el Juez Anzoategui solo encontraron elementos de magia, y de rituales que pertenecían al ex ministro de Bienestar Social José López Rega” (*Crónica* May 11, 1979). Nevertheless, even as the judge told reporters that “esos objetos tienen un alto interés ilustrativo para apreciar los rasgos de la personalidad del procesado, sobre cuyo concepto el tribunal debe formar criterio,” he admitted that, “Pudo saberse también que los elementos secuestrados no guardan relación directa con los delitos que se le investigan a López

edition of *Panorama*. On March 2, 1973, a few months before Perón would win the election that would result in his final term as president, the magazine *Así* published a five-page article entitled “Los secretos de López Rega,” in which it outlined his background in Spiritism and astrology and the contents of the esoteric texts he had written. The Montoneros, who were ideologically opposed to López Rega and other right-wing elements within Peronism, coined the nickname “el Brujo” in their publication *El descamisado*, according to an article published in *Cuestionario* in September 1973. That same article was dedicated to analyzing López Rega’s esoteric texts so as to examine his thinking prior to gaining political power and noted that many combative newspapers had at that point attacked him with caricatures and questionable anecdotes about his esoteric practices.

Rega sobre el manejo de fondos reservados de la Presidencia de la Nación” (*Crónica* May 11, 1979). The role of the ritual objects as they appear in these articles is therefore contradictory: they are relevant and yet not relevant to the case; they evidence the personality of the accused and yet are not evidence of his crime; they are described vividly while the reason for their seizure and display fades into the background.

Moreover, while López Rega’s involvement with the Triple A was well-known by this time, these reports mention neither the organization nor its violent activities.⁵ One would think that at least teasing a more explicit link between his *brujería* and the overwhelming, bloody violence executed by the Triple A would be an impossible temptation to avoid. Instead of focusing on this tangible connection to violence, many of the descriptions of these objects seem to attempt to bolster an association between López Rega and a vague, supernatural evil, or at least the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that López Rega believed he had such occult powers: a version of the same article, published by *Crónica* in an earlier edition on May 2, captions a photo of the figurine, “¿MUÑECO FATAL? Este muñeco de cerámica es el objeto más extraño de la

⁵ On July 6, 1975, *La Opinión* published a report by Heriberto Khan which included details from a military investigation in 1974 that linked López Rega to the Triple A after a lieutenant stumbled upon the operation in the Ministry of Social Welfare. *Manchete*, a newspaper based out of Rio de Janeiro, referred to the scandal that erupted at the discovery of documents linking López Rega to the AAA on July 26, 1975, shortly after he fled the country (Teixeira 1975). Throughout the remainder of 1975 and the beginning of 1976 before the coup, the press covered politicians and associates of López Rega as they were called to make statements before a commission investigating the case; most notably, Horacio Salvador Paino admitted to his role in helping to organize the death squad at López Rega’s instruction in February 1976. Paino would publish his version of events as *Historia de la Triple A* in 1984. After the coup, *La Nación* reported upon the opening of a formal judicial investigation into the Triple A on January 4, 1977, which accused López Rega of supporting the death squad as a way to further his personal power, “sembrando el terror para dominar.” However, the investigation also accused former Finance Minister Jose Ber Gelbard of supporting the AAA “para entregar a la Nación al Soviet.” Gelbard, notably, was a major rival of López Rega’s and had no connection to the AAA, although he was exiled after the coup and sentenced to death *in absentia* by the military regime; the inclusion of Gelbard was evidently politically motivated.

‘colección López Rega.’ Tal vez con él realizaba malos presagios.” Besides the obvious—sensationalism sells papers—why should these exaggerated descriptions place such emphasis on López Rega’s esotericism, without largely discussing the man’s whereabouts, the charges he faced for his actions as Minister of Social Welfare, or his role in the spread of terror and violence during the presidencies of Juan and Isabel Perón?

On one level, López Rega’s biography and uncommon beliefs, which have continued to capture the imagination in the decades since the articles describing these objects were published, form part of a search for an explanation for his unexpected rise to political prominence.⁶ A relatively uneducated, working-class man, who was uninvolved with politics before the mid-1960s, it seems somewhat unfathomable that he should reach such a position of power and influence between 1965, when he met Isabel Perón, and 1973, when he was named Minister of Social Welfare. Faced with this trajectory, historians and journalists have examined López Rega’s published texts and stories of his behavior seeking to shed light on his biography and personality. For example, sections of a lengthy volume that he published in 1962, *Astrología esotérica*, were reprinted, with commentary, in a July 1975 pamphlet as “una especie de historia mental, de identificación intelectual de su autor” that would make up “una pequeña contribución para mejor analizar la actualidad política argentina” (Duro 1975). The pamphlet advised “que el lector saque sus propias conclusiones,” but notably included quotations from more renowned astrologers who reviewed the book and declared him a charlatan, inept in the methods of “astrología racional.” The August 7, 1975, edition of the magazine *Gente* similarly reprinted brief selections from several of López Rega’s books, explaining that “En los últimos días han

⁶ Larraquy (2004) writes, “Si con el paso de los años *Astrología esotérica* despertó el interés de periodistas e historiadores fue porque . . . algunos intentaron encontrar en sus páginas las claves para deducir el método que su autor utilizó para manipular a la esposa del general Perón” (118).

aparecido en quioscos y librerías de Buenos Aires algunos libros de José López Rega. De estos libros . . . que revelan una faceta absolutamente desconocida del ex Ministro de Bienestar Social, mucho se ha hablado y poco se ha leído.”

These glosses, appearing around the time that López Rega was forced to resign from his position in Isabel Perón’s government on July 11, 1975, and go abroad as ambassador to Spain, can be seen either as emphasizing the man’s delusions of grandeur amid his downfall or genuinely attempting to understand how such a person could have gained so much power. While some writers have treated López Rega’s behavior and professed beliefs as the genuine, though absurd, illusions of an irrational narcissist, others have implied or openly concluded that they were all part of an elaborate performance meant to manipulate and impress those around him, particularly Isabel Perón. Isabel, who, as her husband’s vice president, would become president after his death in 1974, is repeatedly portrayed as having been impressionable and, as the adopted daughter of Spiritists and purportedly a believer herself, particularly susceptible to this type of performance.⁷ Still others have considered the tales of his mystical powers and the violence he wrought as compelling, or, at the very least, spooky enough to give pause: one archivist who I spoke to on a research trip in 2018, whose family had gone into exile due to the

⁷ Of course, whether López Rega’s practices were genuine, delusional, performative, or cynical are not necessarily mutually exclusive. See, for example, “Cantor, policía, ministro, hoy requerido,” *El Mundo* [Uruguay], Nov. 4, 1976, which describes how “Sensible a las influencias ocultistas, Isabel cayó rápidamente en las redes de este brujo (por llamarlo de una manera) atrevido y calculador”; Vicens (1983), who interprets López Rega’s actions over Perón’s corpse as a performance for those watching, since he had previously claimed that their bodies were linked (135); Gasparini (2005), who cites a psychologist declaring López Rega a charlatan and Perón’s doctor, who viewed him as a megalomaniacal manipulator (195-197); and Glasman (2010), who writes, “Más allá de los delirios ocultistas del ex policía y de su servilismo hacia la figura del general Perón, López Rega supo interpretar y utilizar las luchas intestinas del movimiento justicialista, y de no pocos aliados suyos, para hegemonizar bajo su tutela el conjunto del poder con una indiscutida identidad de derechas. (148)”

Triple A, described to me the bizarre experience of how, just as she was pulling a copy of López Rega's *Astología esotérica* off of the shelf to prepare for my visit the following day, all the lights in the building had gone out—a startling coincidence even for the most staunch nonbelievers. In this way and others, as we will see, the sinister mood associated with López Rega proliferated in the 1970s and continues to hold a certain amount of sway today, regardless of one's belief, or not, in his access to the supernatural.

On another level, these articles illustrate how an emphasis on linking López Rega and Peronism more generally to esoteric practices constituted a discursive strategy employed by the military government after the 1976 coup, which was explicitly and even aggressively Catholic, to further justify its takeover and position itself as a break with the earlier chaotic government. During his tenure as Minister of Social Welfare, López Rega had become wildly unpopular among essentially all sectors of Argentine political society: many long-time Peronist officials resented his ability to gatekeep access to the Peróns, while left-wing Peronists and union members blamed him for disastrous economic policies that devalued currency, increased inflation, and denied raises, demanding his resignation in a protest on June 27, 1975, where crowds chanted, “Isabel, coraje, al brujo dale el raje” (Larraquy 2004: 330). After the coup, the military government justified its extreme actions as necessary due to the economic and political chaos that had enveloped Argentina as a result of Isabel's incompetence and López Rega's undue influence.⁸ Pushing the association between such a controversial figure and dark, otherworldly

⁸ An August 12, 1977, report in *Somos* presents the military, particularly Massera, as having saved the country from López Rega by demanding that Isabel Perón send him out of the country (Montes de Oca 1977). On July 19, 1975, in an action referred to as Operativo Desarme, the military visited the presidential residence where López Rega and Isabel had been isolated since he was first forced to resign on July 11; there they seized a large number of weapons from his personal guard and he was sent to Spain on what was framed as a diplomatic mission. The report gestures conspiratorially toward “oscuros intereses” desiring Argentina's destruction that may

practices would serve to redirect attention from the regime's own repressive violence and anti-worker economic policies, presenting the Catholic regime as a positive break with the past.⁹ The Federal Police—elements of which had been actively involved in the Triple A before the coup and continued to engage in violence, disappearance, torture, and murder under the military government—thus may have deliberately brought press attention to the more sensational objects owned by López Rega in order to further discredit the former Peronist government and distract from their own sinister practices.

However, as we will see throughout this chapter, the practices of the military junta after 1976 were not a rupture with, but rather a continuation of, the violence employed by López Rega through the Triple A. The Triple A's paramilitary activities laid the foundation for the extrajudicial violence that would be employed more widely by the government after López Rega and Isabel Perón were no longer in power. As McSherry (2005) explains,

The Triple A as an entity vanished after the March 1976 coup, and command of its operatives passed to army colonel Suárez Nelson, under General Albano Harguindeguy.

These two officers, hard-liners in the army's most extremist faction, had condoned Triple

have been backing López Rega (12). It is important to note that *Somos*, along with the publication *Gente*, was tightly linked with the military government and often printed propaganda images made by military intelligence. See de Mizrahi (2011) and *Visión 7* (2010) for more information on the links between these publications and the dictatorship.

⁹ Among other accusations leveled against López Rega by the military government, he was charged with “haber oficiado una ceremonia no católica en el Altar de la Patria, por un sacerdote no perteneciente al culto católico apostólico romano, único culto oficial según nuestra constitución” (5). This information was included in a lengthy article on López Rega published in *Diario Popular* on February 19, 1980, which also referred to the esoteric objects seized by the government in May 1979 and linked López Rega to esoteric rituals allegedly conducted by Nazis who went into hiding after World War II. This non-Catholic ceremony was held at the site where the Altar de la Patria had begun construction on December 1974 and was presided over by an archbishop of the Iglesia Apostólica Católica Ortodoxa Americana, a charismatic evangelical sect (Larraquy 2018: 358-359).

A death squad operations before the coup. Many operatives were absorbed by the federal police, by SIDE, and by army intelligence battalion 601, and they went on to function in ‘task forces’ and death squads, some associated with Operation Condor. (75)

Immediately after the return to democracy in 1983, politicians such as Antonio Tróccoli, Minister of the Interior under Raúl Alfonsín’s government, pointed out that the military government modeled its methods of repression after the Triple A (*Tiempo Argentino*, April 22, 1983). Even as the military government pursued legal action against el Brujo and alleged to have requested help from European governments and Interpol to determine his whereabouts,¹⁰ they followed, refined, and expanded the same methods of repression—including particular techniques of kidnapping, torture, and murder, conducted by some of the very same members of the Triple A—to eliminate political opponents. As we will see throughout this chapter, this is reflected in the way that both media discourses and fictional texts relating to this period often blend together the shadowy machinations of political power that were at work during the years before the 1976 coup and those wielded by the military government afterward. Despite ostensible ideological differences between López Rega and the military junta, and the junta’s explicit Catholicism and many distinctions with López Rega’s esoteric characteristics, their shadowy behaviors and struggles for power amongst themselves are nevertheless portrayed as uniformly sinister.

Whether the articles focusing on López Rega’s ritual objects with which this introduction opens were pure sensationalism, genuine biographical and historical curiosity, regime

¹⁰ While notices were sent out by the Argentine government seeking the location of López Rega throughout the dictatorship and immediately after, Gasparini (2005) notes how, at least in Switzerland where López Rega resided in hiding for several years, these documents were marked to indicate that he should not be arrested. This casts into doubt whether there was actually any effort made to locate and extradite López Rega until his arrest in Miami in 1986.

propaganda, or some combination thereof, the persistent cultural interest in the esoteric that characterizes this violent era reveals a need to understand and convey the sinister and the shadowy machinations of political power that gave rise to it both before and after the dictatorship through an appeal to the secretive, the conspiratorial, the paranoical, and the occult. Impressed by the terrible impact of el Brujo's rise to power, writers of fiction, biography, and political analysis alike have portrayed López Rega as a sinister force that bewitched Argentina's political landscape, regardless of whether they view him as a calculated manipulator, *un loco*, or something else entirely (Fig. 2), but have also used their examinations of this figure to inform their analyses of the ongoing nature of state-sponsored terror after his downfall. As we shall see, López Rega's beliefs in the spiritual realm, and in his own ability to control it, are intimately linked with his actual rise to political power in the Argentine cultural imagination and with the dark forces that appeared to more thoroughly take over in 1976.¹¹

¹¹ López (2018) observes as much, arguing particularly that

Respecto a obras literarias o periodísticas posteriores, a López no se lo introduce al personaje desde sus concepciones o accionar político, su presentación siempre lo relaciona con sus prácticas o representaciones esotéricas, dejando traslucirse una implícita condena moral. (296)

For example, even as Vicens (1983) characterizes López Rega's spiritual practices as performative and delusional, he interprets his esoteric beliefs as fundamental to his violent politics. Glasman (2010) similarly interprets López Rega's spirituality as dedicated to the goal of obtaining political power. Journalist Santiago Pinetta refers to his quest to expose the truth about the Triple A and López Rega as an "exorcismo" (1986: 10).



Figure 2. *Editorial Cartoon*. Flash, February 29, 1996.

This is perhaps best demonstrated in Luisa Valenzuela's *Cola de lagartija*, in which López Rega is depicted as a megalomaniacal monster working dark magics to regain power while living in hiding in the Iberá Wetlands in the North of Argentina. As we will see, while many critics have turned their attention toward the roles of allegory, metafiction, narrative authority, and gender and sexual politics in the novel, most have neglected to take seriously the role played by esoteric practices, secrecy, and conspiracy in the text—with some even inaccurately subsuming these spiritual rituals under the labels of black magic or witchcraft—as well as their relevance to historical characterizations of both López Rega and this time in Argentine politics more generally.¹² Similarly, while journalistic and historical texts have

¹² Many of these critics examine the relationship between women's writing and the metafictional structure of the novel. Magnarelli (1988) comments extensively on Valenzuela's deconstruction of discourse, language, and gender throughout the novel, arguing that

COLA examines, deconstructs, and demystifies the bases of that power and magic. In other words, it is a novel about rhetoric, about language which creates realities, about language with all its magical powers, about language which no longer elicits a past referent but, on the contrary, creates a future referent. It is about how saying becomes

detailed the events surrounding López Rega during this time period, few have asked why this figure has had such cultural currency or what these discourses have to say about the dictatorship that followed.¹³ Through an analysis of both historical sources and Valenzuela's novel, this chapter posits that cultural interest in José López Rega indicates how otherworldly conspiracies, esoteric practices, dark secrets, and paranoia convey a sinister mood that materializes the atmosphere of political violence and hidden, unaccountable nature under authoritarianism during this time period. As we will see, even as the military dictatorship after 1976 attempted to pose

being. It is about how metaphors and metonymies shape our perception of reality, or more dangerously, become our reality. (149)

Craig (2005) brings a more explicitly psychoanalytic view of feminine language to bear on her analysis of the novel as metanarrative. Potvin (1997) analyzes how Valenzuela's postmodernist attention to language in the novel opens up the possibility for alternative, plurivocal narratives of Argentine history, arguing that, "By exposing the body, allowing the fluidity of language, fragmenting the self into multiple others, transforming narratology, refusing the control and unity of meaning, Valenzuela opens the gates of representation and signification" (219). Arning (2012) discusses the possibilities for social and political criticism that arise through the use of metafictional strategies. Mangin (2010) similarly focuses on the novel's attention toward the symbolic and political dimensions of violence and literature's purpose under dictatorship, noting how the novel associates political power with sexual power and problematizes the acts of reading and writing so as to question the role of representation under dictatorship. Unfortunately, even when they acknowledge the novel's resonances with the esoteric practices of López Rega as a historical figure, all treat the appearances of these practices as pure metaphor, usually a metaphor about the unconscious or the barbarism and irrationality of the period's violence. Magnarelli (1988), for instance, argues that the figure of the witch is a projection of one's inner evil which one desires to exorcise or sacrifice; Craig (2005) refers to Umbanda as black magic and witchcraft as a pre-linguistic world, both highly disputable assertions; Guest (1990) reduces the esoteric practices in the novel to one possible interpretation, arguing that "This metaphor [of el Brujo out in the Marshland], by stimulating a superstitious fear of the occult pacifies the populace" (17). By taking esotericism and its cultural role during this time period seriously, my intervention seeks to make up for this gap in the literature. One limitation of my intervention is that which has been covered much more extensively in the secondary literature, namely, the role of gender and sexuality in the novel. While there are many gendered aspects to esotericism in general and the esoteric practices that appear in the novel in particular, a more thorough investigation, which is certainly merited, is outside the scope of this project.

¹³ The notable exception is Hernán Facundo López (2017; 2018), who takes López Rega's esoteric texts seriously in order to explore the relationship between the philosophy which allowed the man to gain power and his subsequent political violence.

José López Rega as the sole sinister source of terror in order to distract or transfer attention from their own violence, both the novel and prevailing media discourses collapse the distinction between the two, emphasizing how their shared tactics of secrecy, paranoia, conspiracy, and violence are similarly sinister. Ultimately, both the attention toward López Rega's real-life esoteric practices and the sinister atmosphere throughout the novel speaks to the shadowy nature of the power of terror and the roles of fear and rumor in creating and solidifying this power, what I have described in the introduction to this dissertation as an occult necropolitics.

This chapter will begin with an examination of biography in *Cola de lagartija* and historical sources on López Rega, emphasizing the interplay between fact, fiction, and rumor, as well as the battle between journalists and biographers seeking to determine the “truth” about this controversial figure and the self-fashioning that the man and the character use to shore up their own power and relevance. As we will see, the focus on the esoteric parts of López Rega/el Brujo's biography that I have begun to lay out in this introduction demonstrate the fruitless struggle to pin down what is ultimately ineffable and indeterminable about this figure, to deconstruct the man so as to make his violence either purely banal or purely occult. In the following section, I turn to the formal structure of the novel as a whole, discussing how the appeal to the sinister and the use of metafictional techniques such as self-insertion allow Valenzuela to address challenges of mimetic representation and the role of the writer of fiction during a time of such unfathomable violence. Next, I speak to the meaning of these esoteric practices more widely in both historical sources and the novel, analyzing the role played by discussions of esotericism, secret societies, and conspiracies in Argentine culture in the 1960s and 1970s and demonstrating how these, as well as the ambivalent nature of esoteric practices, contribute to the sinister atmosphere of the novel. Afterward, I turn to a discussion of occult

necropolitics in the novel and how it speaks to the nature of banal violence under Argentine authoritarianism. Finally, I conclude with a reflection on the novel's literary and political commitments in the face of authoritarianism and the sinister.

Biografías del Brujo

In Luisa Valenzuela's *Cola de lagartija*, which was written in exile and published in 1983 at the tail end of the last Argentine military dictatorship, the whereabouts of el Brujo have been largely unknown for a number of years.¹⁴ However, despite what the general public believes, he isn't dead or in exile abroad: instead, he has founded his own kingdom in the north of Argentina and has been biding his time even as he occasionally advises the military government in the capital on subject matters requiring his unique (that is, violent or occult) expertise.¹⁵ Founded on subjugation, violence, and esoteric ritual, el Brujo's kingdom faces occasional attacks both from the military government that views his growing power as a threat and a secretive left-wing resistance that faces potential obliteration at every turn. As el Brujo writes his autobiography and conducts strange, bloody rites that are meant to perpetuate his own power and existence by allowing him to impregnate himself and birth his own son using the divine femininity of his third testicle, someone else is also writing his biography in an attempt to understand his secrets: Luisa Valenzuela.

¹⁴ The English translation by Gregory Rabassa, published the same year as the Spanish, indicates that it has been twenty years since the general public has had any knowledge of el Brujo's whereabouts, but this particular number does not appear in the original. Historically, López Rega's whereabouts were unknown when the novel was published in 1983; in 1986, he was discovered and arrested while living in Miami and extradited to Argentina. He died in prison in 1989 while awaiting trial.

¹⁵ El Brujo notes that the government recognized him they heard of his conducting "sacrificios rituales" and decided to make him "su asesor en asuntos secretos" (1983: 49).

Divided into three sections—“El uno,” “D*os,” and “¿Tres?”—the novel begins with an “Advertencia” and “La profecía” and proceeds throughout the first section with a first-person biography of his childhood and recent activities, as reported by el Brujo, interspersed with dialogues taking place about him in the capital. In the second part, Valenzuela appears as narrator, describing her process of writing the biography—in which el Brujo appears to have taken control of the narrative and reached beyond the confines of the page to engage directly with the author—and her own involvement with clandestine activities that seek to protect political dissidents from the violent regime in Buenos Aires. At the end of part two, Valenzuela resolves to quit writing as a way of silencing and killing el Brujo with her inattention. In part three, el Brujo’s first-person narration is interspersed with third-person descriptions that report on activities in his kingdom, particularly the interventions of three white-clad figures: Valenzuela and her companions who seek to undo the sorcerer’s dark powers.¹⁶ A complex metanarrative concerned with questions of history, memory, narrative authority, and both the potentials and limitations of literature as a form of political intervention, the novel also foregrounds themes of esotericism, conspiracy, secret societies, violence, and terror as methods for obtaining, keeping, and—sometimes—losing authoritarian power.

In this section, I will demonstrate how the sinister arises from the battle for authority that takes place over López Rega/el Brujo’s biography.¹⁷ Even as the Argentine press and the

¹⁶ The formal structure of the novel has been a favorite subject for critics and will be discussed more thoroughly later in this chapter.

¹⁷ Throughout this chapter, where context is not clear, I will distinguish between the novel’s character and the historical figure by referring to the former as el Brujo and the latter as López Rega, utilizing both names when I am making generalizations that can be applied to both. With the exception of Luisa Valenzuela herself, none of the historical figures that appear in the novel are referred to by their real last names; Juan Perón is called el Generalísimo or the General; Isabel Perón is called the Intruder; Evita Perón is called the Dead Woman; and López Rega is called by a variety of names, most often el Brujo.

dictatorship historically and Valenzuela and the military government in the novel investigate and emphasize the figures' esoteric backgrounds for their own ends—whether it be to dismiss him, to make him into a bogeyman, or to understand the nature of the dark forces that appear to be at work in Argentina—López Rega/el Brujo's own powers of self-fashioning and willingness to embrace the darker aspects of their biography allow them to evade legibility at every turn. As we shall see, even the efforts in both the collective imaginary and the novel to understand López Rega/el Brujo as a mere mortal have the tendency to make the man into a myth, transforming all-too-human violence into a force for evil.

The novel's version of el Brujo's (auto)biography, in which he describes his initiation into esoteric practices, his childhood attraction toward violence, and his ascent and continued aspirations to power, differs significantly from that of López Rega the historical figure. Mangin (2010) has interpreted these distinctions as due to the fact that the characterization of el Brujo in the novel “no contempla la fidelidad a un personaje histórico, sino la alegorización del poder totalitario, poder fundamentado siempre más allá de la persona que lo encarna” (211). Nevertheless, the biographies share important resonances which are worth exploring beyond allegory, perhaps most notably the tendency toward a strategic and even narcissistic self-fashioning to the point of pure invention. With López Rega's increasing importance in the Peronist movement in the early 1970s, the Argentine press became understandably interested in his background. However, many of the facts that he provided would prove false, down to his own birthday, which he claimed to be October 17, the foundational date for the Peronist movement. He further claimed to have taken music classes with Perón's first wife, Aurelia Tizón; to have been a co-founder of the Peronist movement alongside the General in the early 1940s and to have led the first Peronist strike while he worked at a textile factory; and, during his

brief career as part of the Federal Police, to have been personally requested by Evita to serve as guard for the presidential palace; only this last assertion has proved to have any grain of truth.¹⁸

As Raúl Malagón wrote in the magazine *Esto* on April 28, 1988, “Como se ve, la mentira fue uno de los más comunes hábitos de Lopecito. Su fecha de nacimiento parece una profecía: sin embargo, no hubo tal cosa, no fue más que uno de sus tantos inventos, como asimismo lo de fundador del Movimiento Nacional Justicialista” (Malagón 1988: 8).

López Rega’s fictionalization of his own biography quite transparently served to further solidify his Peronist credentials and even cast his increasing prominence and connection with the Peróns as somehow predestined. Moreover, the challenge of pinning down the truth of his life, particularly the fantastical “facts” that he used to spiritually justify his role in Argentine history, gestures toward the role played by secrecy and rumor in the constitution of the sinister. As Eduardo J. Paredes wrote in *La Opinión* in November 1975, “Con López Rega ocurre algo que mucho tiene que ver con la profesión de brujo que le adjudicaban los estribillos populares: todos creen cosas sobre él, pero nadie sabe a ciencia cierta de qué se trata y la imaginería popular se puebla de rumores” (Paredes 1975: n.p.). With López Rega’s background, actions, and whereabouts uncertain, and the anecdotes that circulated about him during his time in power often so incredible as to be nearly unbelievable, it contradictorily became possible to believe almost any rumor. As an article published in *Gente* on August 25, 1983 insisted to readers at the

¹⁸ These claims appeared in López Rega’s first exclusive interview with the press, “López Rega cuenta su vida,” published in *Así* on August 31, 1973. This last assertion was discussed extensively in the press, as it was frequently referenced by López Rega and would seem to indicate a certain amount of respect held by the First Lady towards the later Minister of Social Welfare. Despite the fact that the majority of articles after his downfall cast aspersions on this possibility, an article published in *Página/12* on April 6, 1997, produced a document which indicated that Evita had, in fact, signed a request that he join their guard in 1950. However, other sources have indicated that this request was likely a formality and that he would have had very little interaction with the presidential couple in this capacity (*Clarín*, June 10, 1989).

end of a somewhat tongue-in-cheek report on various rumors about López Rega—including that someone resembling him was recently spotted at a Spanish soccer game,¹⁹ that people believed he had been protected by “ciertos espíritus malignos,” and that he had gotten plastic surgery on his face to disguise his identity, only to later have the surgery undone—“¿Absurdo? Veá, amigo: estamos en la Argentina y corre el año 1983. Le sugiero sacar la palabra absurdo de su vocabulario.”

Many of the anecdotes about López Rega that appeared in the press both during his time in power and during the dictatorship that followed are not objectively verifiable, while others, although very strange, have nevertheless been more effectively certified as true. Some were reported and backed up by multiple credible witnesses, while others relied on only one witness, could be attributed to ulterior motives, or stray into mere rumor or sensationalism. In 1972, for instance, he was accused of being a Freemason, which one article noted could pose problems for him, as freemasonry was outlawed in Spain, where he had been living with the Peróns (*Crónica*, December 31, 1972); while belonging to secret Masonic societies was an accusation that would be leveled against various political figures, including Juan Perón, to the point of conspiracy theory, López Rega was, among possible other affiliations, later determined to be associated with the Italian Propaganda Due, the implications of which will be discussed later in this chapter. Anecdotes associated with López Rega’s time as a guard for the presidential palace included that, while Evita was suffering from uterine cancer, he claimed that the ups and downs of the First Lady’s body were reflected in his own, and offered his blood for transfusion into her

¹⁹ In another strange twist, this may have been an Argentine living in Barcelona who greatly resembled José López Rega, who was later tracked down by reporters and revealed to be named José Eusebio Nunez. According to an interview with the man, he was often mistaken for the fugitive; occasionally he would find someone staring intently at him and would pretend to be the ex-Minister as a joke (Peicovich 1984).

(Larraquy 2004). One source has reported that López Rega wanted to baptize Perón's doctors before permitting them to be near the General (Pinetta 1986). Tomás Eloy Martínez would also report hearing from other journalists that "López Rega había elaborado un plan minucioso para convertir a la Argentina en un campo de cultivo mágico, encaramándose—en la primera fase—sobre el vasto peso político y el carisma de Perón, para conseguir luego que el poder le fuera transferido." López Rega himself told Martínez and other reporters that he could perform miracles, bring back the dead, and read thoughts from afar (Martínez 1975). When Jorge Paladino, Perón's highest deputy, was ousted from the General's inner circle, one magazine speculated, "Acaso López Rega decidió emplear su arma secreta —se habla de infalibles talismanes" (*Panorama*, Nov. 9, 1971). Those who learned that López Rega had briefly spent time in the United States in July 1953 suspected that he was a CIA informant (*Página/12*, April 6, 1997). An article written about his life shortly after his death referred to esoteric ceremonies that he supposedly conducted in Madrid as "ritos satánicos" or "paganos," during one of which "murieron dos pequeños picaflores" as sacrifices (*Flash*, June 20, 1989). Another writer, who does not mention the sources that reported this anecdote, asserted that

Singulares declaraciones mencionan la certeza de que el umbandista se permitió realizar, en alguna oportunidad, sacrificios de pequeños animales en el templete donde descansaban los restos de Perón y Evita, en una de las esquinas del predio residencial. El templete había sido concebido por Lopicito, para concentrar allí 'las altas vibraciones' que lo protegieran tanto a él como a Isabel en el futuro. (Pinetta 1986: 70).

Finally, in 1982, Jorge Cesarsky—an Argentine political operator associated with the Spanish Falange—claimed that López Rega was in Spain, was a Freemason connected with both the CIA and the KGB, and was planning to assassinate Isabel Perón (Romero 1982).

Although Cesarsky is an example of a witness who was less-than-credible and some of these anecdotes cannot be traced to a reliable source, rumors such as these circulated in reputable

publications and were repeated by mainstream politicians, as *Panorama* noted in a report on the uncertainty surrounding López Rega's recent activities in February 1975:

La espesa y tumultuosa ola de rumores (no se puede dejar de consignar que incluso altos funcionarios navegaron en medio de la marea, y comentaron en voz alta presuntas 'noticias', ciertamente espectaculares) tuvo como epicentro a López Rega ya los intentos de distanciar al ministro del centro del poder. (*Panorama*, February 1, 1975, 9).

Even those that cannot be proven or are almost certainly untrue—for instance, there is no evidence to this date to suggest that López Rega was associated with the CIA or the KGB—have nevertheless entered the cultural imaginary as definitive indicators of the personality and activities of this historical figure. The rumors about his activities, whether one believed them or not, inevitably informed how he was depicted and how his actions were interpreted in the press. For instance, in a 1972 political cartoon that refers to the negotiations taking place to allow for the re-opening of the electoral process to the Peronist party and Perón's return to Argentina, López Rega is depicted using the head of General Alejandro Agustín Lanusse, president of Argentina from 1971 to 1973, as a crystal ball, while Perón and Héctor Cámpora look on (Fig. 3). In another, he is accompanied yet again by an owl as he mixes various symbols—including a swastika, a star of David, an ionic column, and a Crescent and Star—in a type of potion (Fig. 4). The latter cartoon accompanied a letter to the editor of *Nuestra Palabra*, the newspaper of the Communist Party of Argentina, where the writer commented upon López Rega's writings on imperialism, commenting, "Más me hubieren alentado las predicciones futurológicas del autor, si para elaborarlas no hubiese recurrido a la historia, sino a la bola de cristal que, según las malas lenguas, suele consultar en sus lamentablemente escasos ratos de ocio" (Silva np). While there is nothing to indicate López Rega ever possessed a crystal ball, this and other symbols that populate the rumors about him nevertheless have grown to constitute who he is in the cultural imaginary.



Figure 3. *Editorial Cartoon. Panorama, October 19, 1972.*



Figure 4. *Nuestra Palabra, circa 1973-1976. Lopez Rega, Jose, Caja 16, CEDINCI.*

This has had the effect of converting a historical figure into myth, converting a man into a symbol of the sinister. Tomás Eloy Martínez has admitted,

La impresión que me causó cuando lo vi por primera vez fue de todos modos inferior al personaje delirante y cachafaz que habían prometido las fábulas madrileñas. En vez del Rasputín megalómano y entrometido que anunciaban sus detractores, descubrí más bien a una especie de sosegado almacenero de suburbio, macizo como un toro, que carecía de escrúpulos en la relación social y de todo sentimiento del ridículo. (Martínez 1975)

This mismatch between impression and reality demonstrates both how the rumors surrounding López Rega took on a life of their own, exacerbating the terror inspired by the man so that it bordered on supernatural, and how the more banal and even ridiculous reality served to disguise the real danger of political violence that would erupt when he came into power. As Martínez further explained, “Tampoco soy el único que empezó a tomarlo en serio cuando ya era demasiado tarde y disponía de una cuota de poder que podía serle arrebatada solo entre ruinas y desgarramientos” (Martínez 1975).

In this way, the sinister nature of López Rega the historical figure is embodied in the sleight-of-hand trick that the uncertainty surrounding his biography allowed: the proliferation of esoteric rumors, whether they were true or not, served both to magnify his presence and distract from the seriousness and efficacy of his political maneuverings. According to Pinetta (1986), he began to refer to himself as the *cuco*, thereby embodying all that which was mysterious and terrifying. Elsewhere, he hinted that the circulation of strange rumors may have been the result of his deliberate interference, another form of self-fashioning that accompanied his lies about his biography in order to make him into a myth: in a 1974 interview with French television, when a journalist asked why he was so often described as a mysterious person, he indicated that these anecdotes were essentially bait: “Puse una carnada para que el enemigo se entretenga discutiendo si soy un gran astrólogo, un brujo o un mago. Mientras él se ocupó de eso, yo me ocupé de trabajar y de servir a mi Patria” (Lopez Rega 1984: 186).

While López Rega’s biography was colored by uncertainty, rumor, and outright lies during his rise to power, Marcelo Larraquy’s 2004 *López Rega: La biografía* had the benefit of decades of hindsight when it comes to untangling these threads. Born in 1916, López Rega grew up in Buenos Aires with little formal education. He became interested in spiritual questions in his

twenties and was increasingly engaged with esotericism in the 1940s and 1950s, when he was a police officer who briefly guarded the presidential residence.²⁰ During this time period, he met with José Maria Villone, director of Radio Mitre and a Freemason, with whom he discussed esoteric ideas and who introduced him to Victoria Montero, a “Madre Espiritual” from Paso de los Libres who acted as a medium and hosted esoteric ceremonies. López Rega became involved with the Fraternidad Rosacruces Antigua and made connections through Montero with Brazilian Spiritists.

In the 1960s López Rega’s activities became more explicitly political. After the publication of his book *Astrología esotérica*, which he claimed was dictated to him by a silent, interior voice which he believed to be the angel Gabriel, he took up work at the printer that had published it, Suministros Gráficos. There, he met Julio César Urien, a judge who headed the Peronist Spiritist Logia Anael. It was through the Anael Lodge that López Rega met Isabel Perón, when she briefly returned to Argentina on behalf of her husband in 1965. López Rega and Isabel connected as a result of their shared spiritual beliefs, supposedly when he told her that he had experienced a vision that he would be able to transfer Evita’s spirit into her. Isabel asked him to become her private secretary and return to Spain with her at the end of her trip, hoping that he would protect her from the evils wished upon her by her political enemies. López Rega was also supposed to serve as a liaison between the Anael Lodge and Perón, which heretofore had not been in contact with him during his exile; however, he dropped off contact with the Lodge soon after traveling to Madrid. Journalists and historians would later claim that at this time López

²⁰ Much has been made of the fact that Evita signed a document explicitly requesting López Rega to be assigned to this position, a fact which he himself lauded repeatedly during his rise. However, as has been argued by Gasparini, this position did not put him in a position to engage regularly with the presidential couple and was possibly a formality in which Evita’s existing guard asked her to put in the request to assign López Rega.

Rega purposely distanced Perón from his other political advisers to better control the flow of information that reached the General. One report noted, “Mientras tanto, rodeaba a Perón con sus cartas astrológicas, sus predicciones, sus insufribles peroratas sobre el poder de las pirámides, los faraones y los fluidos positivos y negativos que regían la vida de los grandes conductores” (*Gente*, June 28, 1984, np).

Despite the more reliable facts that writers that Larraquy have been able to extract from the many tales surrounding López Rega’s life, it is notable that the biographer nevertheless includes many of the more sensational tales mentioned above, diligently recording what others have reported about the man without always making a claim as to the veracity of these anecdotes. This is because the rumors surrounding López Rega are, in some ways, every bit as important as the more banal facts. As Alberto Amato wrote in *La Semana* when López Rega was first being extradited in 1986,

El misterio, la desinformación, lo secreto, ha formado parte esencial de la vida de López Rega. Sus orígenes, su historia, el cómo llegó a tener tanta influencia sobre el ex presidente Perón, sus ideas, su accionar, su fantástica huida de la Argentina, su vida de prófugo, su pasión por lo esotérico, por la astrología, sus predilecciones por el espiritismo, su pertenencia a sectas brasileñas como umbanda, a logias como ANAEL, su vida entera, en suma, ha estado siempre rodeada, protegida, resguardada por el misterio y el secreto y también por la duda. (Amato 1986: 6)

Like his real-life counterpart, the Brujo of *Cola de lagartija* has little interest in truth as he narrates his autobiography, which he sometimes calls a novel and other times a “diario íntimo” (1983: 51), a slippage which Mangin (2010) observes seems as if it is “para señalar que realidad y ficción son para él lo mismo” (217). His narrative of his own powers is equally marked by the unbelievable, and several of his own asides as well as comments from the character of Valenzuela lead the reader to doubt the veracity of his tales, especially those which speak to his own importance or spiritual power. His version of his life story, which is narrated in

non-linear fragments, can be pieced together as follows. His mother, an herbalist, died in childbirth and his father was absent, leaving him to be raised by a foster family on an island in the Iberá Wetlands in the north of Argentina. As a child, he had a foster sister who was born with six fingers and he learned to attribute a spiritual significance to extra body parts: both the sixth finger and his own third testicle. El Brujo also describes several episodes that seem to give way to his lifelong attraction towards violence in general and towards women in particular. In the first, the police, ostensibly looking for a guerrilla, beat and rape his foster mother while he watches from hiding in fascination. In the second, while hiding in a forest, he sees a group of men shoot another man and leave his body behind; he stays for days, observing the rotting corpse, and when villagers encounter the body they recognize it as his father due to the protective amulet of San la Muerte that he wears.²¹ El Brujo learned more about such talismans shortly after this third testicle descended when he was a preteen, when he traveled through the

²¹ San la Muerte is a folk saint of Guaraní-Christian origin popular in the Argentinean northeast. The figure derives from a blend of several traditions, including “death imagery used in such magical and esoteric practices as witchcraft and tarot” (Graziano 2006: 78). Graziano (2006) further explains,

San La Muerte was originally used as an amulet to injure or kill one's enemies. The absolute, inescapable power of death was concentrated into this tiny, skeletal figure and then released by rituals that sent out a curse. Uses of San La Muerte for black magic gradually became secondary as personified death evolved from an amulet into a saint. Of the many folk saints in northeastern Argentina, San La Muerte is regarded as the most powerful. The saint, like the amulet, can be used for cursing one's enemies, but today most devotees request the usual miracles concerning health, work, love, and family. The power of death is thereby redirected and deployed to positive ends. Despite San La Muerte's mostly positive uses, the negative associations persist in his deathly appearance, the carving of his image in human bone, and the long historical association with black arts. Most nondevotees regard San La Muerte as fearsome and diabolical, and they become uncomfortable at the mere mention of his name. Devotees, on the other hand, favorably view even the wrath that San La Muerte brings down upon their enemies. (79)

As we will see later in this chapter, the ambivalence of esoteric traditions embodied in San la Muerte, and the ways that the power over life and death can be used contradictorily to help or to harm, is critical for *Cola de lagartija*'s treatment of esotericism more broadly.

wetlands and encountered a spiritual teacher, who baptized the testicle “Estrella de la Mañana” and initiated him into esoteric, ritualistic knowledge. How the Sorcerer meets the “General” and the “Intruder”—Perón and Isabel, respectively—and becomes the most powerful man in Argentina before his exile and the circumstances leading to the coup does not form part of this biography, although he does recount his role in the return of Evita Perón’s embalmed cadaver to her husband and Perón’s death. In his exile, he has returned to the marshes of his youth, conducting rituals of violence and biding his time until he can return to power.

The novel repeatedly draws attention to el Brujo as an unreliable narrator as he pieces together this version of his history. He attributes outsized significance and hidden symbolism to nearly all of the events of his life: for instance, he presents his mother’s death in childbirth as an omen of his own future importance, minimizing her own subjectivity by reflecting, “Dicen que mi madre gritó el doble al nacer yo y después se murió para siempre: no le quedaba otra cosa por hacer en este mundo” (1983: 11). Elsewhere, when he recounts the story of how another boy, who was otherwise mute, spoke for the only time to point out his third testicle, he admits to telling several more palatable versions to Perón that instead convey an explicitly Christian meaning, in which the mute boy announces that he sees a halo or three marks of the trinity on el Brujo’s forehead. In recounting his own biography, he admits to distorting the facts in service of his own political and spiritual power: “Se lo conté muchas veces al Generalísimo [*sic*], variando éso sí algo el texto. Los milagros pueden ser elásticos” (1983: 13). The novel even goes so far as to cast into doubt whether the man growing his kingdom in exile is the original Brujo at all, or whether any of the biography we have heard is accurate or simply consists of characters that are all aspects of el Brujo’s disturbed personality. In the very first dialogue between Valenzuela and her companion Navoni, Navoni insists that the man they have been hearing about

in the marshlands “Es un pobre loco, se cree el ministro aquél de Bienestar Social ¿te acordás? hace mil años. Ese que era brujo”; he believes that the real Brujo was killed by the military during the coup and that this one is an impostor (1983: 18). Valenzuela, while she believes he may be the same man, nevertheless implicitly draws attention to the potentially fabricated nature of his story when she observes that he is named “Manuel o Daniel. Un nombre común. Pero también le dicen Gurí, Eulogio, Estrella, Seisdedos, el Serruchero, Hormiga Roja” (1983: 19), many of these names of other people from the story of his childhood that he will go on to narrate throughout the first part of the novel.²²

Moreover, Valenzuela and Navoni are always aware of the possibility that the information they receive on el Brujo might be government propaganda. Navoni cautions against taking any of the facts that are filtered back to them in the capital at face value, asserting, “empecemos a analizar la manipulación oficial a la que nos vemos sometidos respecto de la *incertidumbre* del material que llega a nuestro conocimiento” (1983: 44). That is, when what they learn about el Brujo seems entirely fantastical or unverifiable, Navoni believes that they should view this as indicative of deliberate government interference, with the goals, perhaps, of distracting the public or opposition from their own actions or spreading fear and superstition. Much like the emphasis in the press on López Rega’s esoteric accoutrements seized in 1979 with which this chapter began, we are reminded that narrative, even when based on verifiable facts such as López Rega’s well known spiritual practices and the ritual objects associated with them, cannot be trusted, especially under authoritarian governments.

²² Historically, López Rega was often called Daniel in person and in letters. According to Larraquy (2004), Isabel gave him this nickname because “sus palabras le habían hecho recordar al profeta Daniel, que con su sabiduría había logrado salvar a una mujer, casada como ella, de ser lapidada por culpa de las calumnias” (136).

There are two moments in which the biographies of López Rega the historical figure and el Brujo the character coincide. The first episode surrounds the return of Evita's embalmed corpse, a subject that we will revisit in chapter five of this dissertation. Historically, the former First Lady's body, which had been hidden by the Argentine government since the 1955 coup that overthrew her husband, was returned to Perón in Madrid in September 1971. Reportedly, López Rega was involved in key parts of the body's return, including calling on the anatomist who had embalmed the cadaver, Dr. Pedro Ara, to help certify that it did, in fact, belong to Evita.

According to reporters,

‘En el caso de que el cuerpo hubiera sido profanado y el doctor Ara no pudiera reconocerlo, yo tengo medios para saber si es o no el verdadero’, confió el secretario de Perón [López Rega] a un amigo íntimo. Y le reveló su secreto: ‘Soy una de las pocas personas que estaban a su lado cuando fue herida en un atentado cometido por un comunista en la Secretaría de Trabajo y Previsión. Yo sé cómo y dónde fue herida por el estilete’” (np, *Panorama*, September 17, 1971).

This, of course, was a fabrication, but demonstrates how López Rega placed himself in a position of intimacy with Evita while making himself central to the care and identification of her remains. Further, López Rega allegedly told Isabel that having the body in the house would help strengthen her personality so that it was more like that of the former first lady; through esoteric rituals, Eva's spirit would enter Isabel's body, where it could guide her actions and fulfill its frustrated destiny of accompanying Perón in the Argentine presidency. He reportedly placed Umbandist symbols near the body, and later insisted to his collaborators that he spoke directly with Evita's spirit, who claimed that she would be reincarnated in Isabel (Pinetta 1986). Beyond performing rituals over the corpse, he was allegedly deeply affected by its presence; he lost weight, attributing it to the amount of energy he was dedicating towards operating as a medium for Eva's spirit, and boasted that he was a “supreme being” (Larraquy 2004).

In *Cola de lagartija*, el Brujo recounts the event when he recalls how he came to possess Evita's mummified finger, toward which he has built a shrine called the "Altar del Dedo," which is a reference to the real-life Altar de la Patria, a monument which López Rega and the Peróns intended to build to house the former First Lady's remains once they were returned to Argentina.²³ While by all accounts a solemn occasion in real life, the novel's version of the cadaver's return to her husband while he was living in exile in Spain is tinged with irony and black humor. Filled with self-importance, el Brujo hosts a ceremony to mark the occasion of opening the box containing the coffin, which has been missing for 15 years; impatient to see his deceased wife, the General only waits for a few minutes before violently hammering it open. Much to the former president's disgust, his advisers, described as vulture-like sycophants, then insist that, in order to identify the body, one finger must be cut off and rehydrated for fingerprinting and later re-attached. El Brujo conducts a further ritual over the body as the finger is being removed, approvingly describing the procedure and the attitude of the surgeon as "vampiresco" (1983: 99). In an episode that deftly illustrates the international nature of fascist violence during this time period—the Peróns, living in Francoist Spain, were well-connected with the dictator and his family—the astrologer then uses his connections with the local police to

²³ The Altar de la Patria was a monument designed in 1974 that was ostensibly meant to unify the country by honoring a shared past during a time of great political division. The design called for it to be 50 meters tall, made of marble and granite, and hosting murals and other artwork. The interior was designed to have a central area in the shape of a Greek cross, with sarcophagi resting in each point and a tomb of the unknown soldier in the middle. These would be surrounded by museum and exhibit space, and the entire monument would be set within civic plaza. It was proposed that Evita's remains would be the first to be deposited there. The front of the monument would include a legend written by López Rega himself, reading, "Hermanados en la gloria, vigilamos los destinos de la patria. Que nadie utilice nuestro recuerdo para desunir a los argentinos" (Presidencia 1974: 31). After López Rega fled the country, the expenditures that he had made toward the Altar de la Patria project came under scrutiny for financial irregularities (Paredes 1975).

kidnap a woman from a cafe and cut off her finger to replace Evita's. Now in possession of the real finger, el Brujo drinks the water that it has been rehydrated in to absorb its "verdades" (1983: 100) and keeps it hidden so as to utilize its talismanic power. His worship of the finger, a phallic symbol which ultimately allows him to imitate the voice of Evita and manipulate her followers, is one of misogynistic possession in which his ability to own the dead woman is the key to appropriating her power: "Ella ya no es más ella, enterrada nuevamente en un lugar secreto. Ese cuerpo por más bello que sea y más imputrecible ha perdido toda identidad. Ella es sólo este dedo por el cual una vez fue reconocida, y este dedo es mío, ahora, ahora y siempre, mío" (1983: 104).²⁴

In both the real-life and novelized versions of this episode, López Rega/el Brujo's esoteric practices are therefore geared toward asserting his own power over and through women's bodies: Evita's, Isabel's, and the unnamed woman whose finger is stolen as substitute. The performance of esoteric ritual ascribes him an outsized importance, making him appear indispensable to the other political actors involved and the possessor of secret truths about the dead. His ability to manipulate others into following along with his spiritual beliefs and his capacity for violence give rise to the nagging worry of the sinister. However, as the black humor in the novel attests, these anecdotes also make him and those around him appear ridiculous, sullyng a somber occasion with sycophantism, manipulation, and naivete.

The second shared episode of the biographies involves Juan Perón's illness and death in summer 1974. While Perón was already elderly and rumors of his illness circulated regularly, his

²⁴ Historically, Evita's embalmed cadaver was missing part of a finger when it was returned to Juan Perón; it is not known at what stage on its journey that this mutilation occurred. In a strange turn of events that echoes this earlier desecration, in 1987 Perón's tomb was broken into and his hands were dismembered and stolen; the perpetrators remain unknown.

health began to deteriorate more significant shortly after he was again elected to the presidency of Argentina, with Isabel as his vice president. López Rega had secured a high-ranking government post, but also continued as the Perón's closest adviser and lived in the presidential residence with the couple. López Rega claimed that he has a spiritual link with the president, and could tell when he improved or worsened both because he himself would absorb his illness and become ill himself and because he could see the state of his organs (Pinetta; Larraquy). Some sources, citing Enrique Pavón Pereyra's *Los últimos días de Perón* (1981), have argued that Perón was not entirely lucid toward the end of his life and that López Rega essentially murdered the president by neglect, as he distrusted his doctors and thought spiritual interventions were more appropriate (Vicens (1983); *Flash* June 20, 1989). According to both one of the attending doctors and López Rega's son-in-law, Raúl Lastiri, when the general finally died, he apparently attempted to resuscitate him by chanting mantras and passing his hands over the body, to no avail (Larraquy (2004); Vicens (1983); Bubello (2010); *Gente*, June 28, 1984). On other occasions, López Rega had claimed that Perón had already died several years ago in Spain but that he had resuscitated him, and since then had been keeping him alive via rituals and the transmission of cosmic energies and his life force. However, he now stated that he had finally reached the point where he couldn't do any further, and declared, "Murió el faraón" (*Gente*, June 28, 1984). Vicens (1983) interprets the man's actions over Perón's body as directed not toward genuinely resuscitating Perón, but as a performance for those watching. Others, such as an article in *La Semana* published on July 16, 1980, believed that López Rega was far removed from reality and genuinely did not believe that Perón could be near death, since, "Mis poderes —dijo el entonces secretario privado del general Perón— hacen que las enfermedades del líder las

sienta también yo. Yo estoy bien, así que el general no tiene problemas” (*La Semana*, July 16, 1980, 60).

The novel’s Brujo recalls his attempt to resurrect the General—which he grandiosely refers to as “el Intento”—with a delusional displacement of his own failure and, again, a striking black humor. In an early allusion to the episode, he reflects that in some ways the General “era un poco obtuso (por eso fallé en mi último intento con él y no pude devolverlo a la vida: por su pertinaz obcecación)” (1983: 13). He therefore attempts to position his failure to bring him back to life not as in any way indicative of a lack of real spiritual power, but instead the result of the General’s own stubborn insistence on remaining dead. This demonstrates el Brujo’s narcissistic, conspiracy-like ideology as articulated by Arendt (1973) and Adorno (1994): reality is adapted to fit his belief system instead of the other way around. The attempt itself, toward which el Brujo reports, “saqué a relucir lo mejor de mis conocimientos esotéricos,” (1983: 116), is banal, terrifying, and yet darkly funny: partway through, “De golpe se le cayó la mandíbula, quedó boquiabierto de asombro y bien muerto. . . . Tuve que atarle la mandíbula inferior con un pañuelo, como a un muerto cualquiera” (1983: 116-117). In death, even a man as important as the General is just another corpse, material flesh without any of the mysticism and mythicism that el Brujo and a whole political movement have attributed to him.

Even as the General’s death presents a real challenge to el Brujo’s political power, he decides to view this as an opportunity to continue his manipulations, spreading blame to the doctors that failed to keep him alive and purporting to continue to be the dead man’s spiritual mouthpiece, insisting that “El así lo quiere, me acaba de comunicar en astral” (1983: 115). The novel’s cynicism about this episode both undermines el Brujo’s biographical and spiritual delusions and yet recognizes that they nevertheless create a narrative which serves to further his

power, describing how “La memoria colectiva también registra un intento de resurrección que nunca pudo establecerse a ciencia cierta si ocurrió realmente, pero cuya descripción redundante en beneficio de la leyenda del Brujo” (1983: 115). In this way, we see how, regardless of the truth of such events in the life of José López Rega or the novel’s Brujo, or the absurdity of the anecdotes, they still contribute to the creation of a sinister atmosphere in which his power, impact, and potential madness is feared and therefore grows exponentially greater. Moreover, el Brujo’s disdain for the truth can be viewed as a declaration of his sinister intentions, since Arendt (1973) observes that,

Before mass leaders seize the power to fit reality to their lies, their propaganda is marked by its extreme contempt for facts as such, for in their opinion fact depends entirely on the power of man who can fabricate it. . . . In other words, the method of infallible prediction, more than any other totalitarian propaganda device, betrays its ultimate goal of world conquest, since only in a world completely under his control could the totalitarian ruler possibly realize all his lies and make true all his prophecies. (350)

In this way, the willingness to manipulate their own biography that marked both the historical López Rega and the novel’s Brujo indicates a desire to create a world in which the only narrative authority that matters is their own.

As this section has demonstrated, the mysteriousness and uncertainty that underpins the biographies of both the historical López Rega and the fictionalized el Brujo indicates the impossibility of articulating a cohesive narrative that can effectively encompass the bizarre reality of the violent politics of this time period in Argentine history. As one journalist asserted in 1975 when López Rega was on the run, “Nadie podrá, en la Argentina, explicar alguna vez el caso López Rega si no tiene la suerte de dominar, al mismo tiempo, disciplinas históricas, psicoanalíticas, esotéricas o sociológicas” (Paredes 1975: n.p.). As we shall see, this means that, even as real-life historians and Valenzuela the narrator attempt to understand el Brujo through a

biography of his esoteric practices, he exceeds his bounds to become a nearly mythological figure, spiritually terrorizing a nation living under terror.

As Vicens (1983) points out in his analysis of Lopezreguismo, “En la Argentina de 1975, la realidad era una ficción prodigiosa. Chandler se hubiera sentido entre nosotros como un principiante que sólo puede aspirar a copiar lo que dicen los diarios” (132-133). As such, the strangeness of reality and the unreliability of narratives about López Rega/el Brujo’s life made it possible to believe everything and nothing, giving rise to the atmosphere of uncertainty and generalized fear that is the sinister. When he was informed that José López Rega had finally been arrested in 1986, Tomás Eloy Martínez told a reporter,

sentí que había resucitado un personaje de mi novela. Me cuesta pensar en José López Rega en otros términos. No sé, realmente, si está vivo o muerto. Es, casi, un personaje de ficción que representa un tiempo remotísimo, y que desgraciadamente le hizo mucho mal a la Argentina. . . . José López Rega es un personaje que siempre me dio miedo. Ahora que por fin sé donde está, realmente me siento más tranquilo. (*La Semana*, March 19, 1986, 10).

Under the uncertainty of the sinister, the historical figure becomes a character in the Argentine cultural memory: López Rega could have mystical powers, could be a bogeyman or a madman; he could be the source of terror or a ludicrous distraction from it. However, regardless of who is writing his biography, what he can’t be is merely human, because he has so thoroughly been transformed into myth. Even as biography should signify an attempt to get to the truth behind el Brujo/López Rega, the interplay between fact, fiction, rumor, and self-fashioning as related to discourses of esotericism both historically and in the novel demonstrate the impossibility of deconstructing this figure. Similarly, in the face of the sinister atmosphere that characterized the Argentine dictatorship, all literary representation seems to falter and struggle, as we will see in the following section.

Magical Metafictions

The metafictional self-insertion of Valenzuela as a character in part two of the novel and her in-text reflections on the challenges and purpose of writing during times of political violence are key to any interpretation of *Cola de lagartija*, a fact that, as we will see, has not escaped the notice of critics. As I have discussed in the previous section, the idea that narrative, mimetic representation, and language itself can no longer be trusted is evident in the contradictory biographies and rumors surrounding el Brujo. In this section, I will delve more explicitly into the formal structure of the text and its metafictional commentary as related to the sinister mood.

As mentioned previously, the novel begins with an “Advertencia,” which consists of a dialogue containing a metafictional discussion of the text we are about to read, dated 1981. The content of its warning provides a key for how to engage with the novel before us, according to Arning (2012), while its form, as Mangin (2010) has argued, initiates “La problematización de la frontera entre realidad y representación . . . por la transgresión del umbral que convencionalmente vincula paratexto y texto” (215). One of our interlocutors believes that the story simply cannot be written, while the other insists that it will be written whether they are involved in it or not, and that “Habría que intentar darle la palabra, a ver si logramos entender algo de todo este horror” (1983: 7). The first interlocutor warns, “Es una historia demasiado dolorosa y reciente. Incomprensible. Incontable” (1983: 7). Acknowledging this, the other asserts that all they will have to use all the literary resources available to them: “el humor negro, el sarcasmo, el grotesco” (1983: 7). While they will use blood in this dangerous endeavor, unlike the other side, they do not traffic in violence: instead, “Nuestra arma es la letra” (1983: 7). The warning indicates that the work we are about to read may actually be an utter disaster waiting to happen. The story is dangerous, impossible to tell, incomprehensible. Nevertheless, writing and

representation—and even giving the word to a monster like el Brujo—is necessary for understanding horror, as writing is the only weapon available to us to understand the past. Elsewhere in the novel, when Valenzuela considers whether she should give up writing, Navoni advises her that, “Un novelista no está en el mundo para hacer el bien sino para intentar saber y transmitir lo sabido ¿o para inventar y transmitir lo intuido?” (1983: 144). As I have argued throughout this chapter, the novel’s focus on rumor, the conspiratorial, and the esoteric allows it to follow this advice of inventing and transmitting the intuited, particularly the sinister atmosphere that impregnated the period of the Argentine dictatorship. So as to comprehend the incomprehensible, the novel therefore purports to make use of stylistic devices that go beyond realism and pure mimesis, and implement formal experimentation to get not at what actually happened, but at how it felt.

The three parts of the novel—“El uno,” “D*os,” and “¿Tres?”—correspond to Valenzuela’s differential narrative techniques as she experiments with how to tell the story of el Brujo. Magnarelli (1988) has pointed out how this three-part structure mimics the three narrators of the novel—el Brujo’s first person, Valenzuela’s first person, and an omniscient third-person—as well as “three temporal periods. The past is narrated by the omniscient narrator, the present of the narration is reported principally by Valenzuela, and the future is envisioned by the Brujo, whose discourse, in spite of its occasional incursions into his past youth, generally focuses on the prophecy and that which will be” (139). Moreover, Mangin (2010) highlights the formal importance of the page layouts, which leave large, blank spaces between sections rather than beginning them on a subsequent page, noting that as a result, “El texto se ve mutilado, horadado, vaciado por unos blancos tipográficos cuya extensión puede ir hasta un tercio o media pagina” (229). The critic reads these blanks as silences—whether due to self-censorship, the limits of

representation, or disappearance—but also “el espacio del lector, espacio de respiración en una lectura opresiva por la saturación del discurso del Brujo,” and where other voices can enter to write against him and the authoritarians like him (Mangin 2010: 230).

The first section largely gives the word to el Brujo, allowing him to narrate his own biography—although, as I have mentioned, he is occasionally interrupted by dialogues which often undermine the information we have just been told. In taking up his autobiography, el Brujo is dedicated to imposing an authoritative version of events, fashioning himself and his past into a larger-than-life myth. According to Magnarelli (1988), el Brujo’s “principal power resides in his linguistic expertise, as his language creates, makes it so; like the word of any god, his too becomes material” (136). His authoritarian narrative project is demonstrated particularly in an aside in which he discourses against doubt:

la duda va a llevar a nuestro país a la ruina. Todo aquél que dude debe ser eliminado de cuajo, no podemos permitirle un respiro. . . . Las pautas son de centralización – aparente—y cohesión, de jerarquía y eficiencia, con el aparato militar finamente calibrado al servicio de un Proyecto que solo puede ser implementado por la fuerza. . . . Y si el general en jefe duda, pues entonces derróquenlo, derrótenlo, defenéstrenlo, reemplácenlo, aniquílenlo, desaparézcanlo, dilúyanlo, háganlo puré. (Valenzuela 1983: 55-56)

In this way, even as we have seen that the actions of el Brujo and the military government are overwhelmingly surrounded by uncertainty and rumor, he demands pure obedience and the destruction of any individualist thinking through the elimination of doubt.

In contrast, Valenzuela’s narrative project is plagued by uncertainty, to the point of doubting whether or not she even has control over her own story. The second section²⁵ begins

²⁵ Craig (2005) interprets the title of this section, “D*os,” as referring to “Dios,” in which el Brujo’s “growing belief in his omnipotence indicates that his fantasies have reached god-like proportions. However, the replacement of the ‘i’ with the asterisk could equally indicate that this is a false god, a degraded version of a deity” (153). Like other critics, she also points out how it refers to the struggle between the two narratives, adding that “The asterisk could be deemed to signify some secret power in language itself which would be available to both sides” (2005: 53).

with her metafictional self-insertion which, though it starts with a first-person assertion of her narrative authority through the “Yo,” digresses into a recognition that things appear to be spinning out of control:

Yo, Luisa Valenzuela, juro por la presente intentar hacer algo, meterme en lo posible, entrar de cabeza, consciente de lo poco que se puede hacer en todo esto pero con ganas de manejar al menos un hilito y asumir la responsabilidad de la historia. No la historia de la humanidad sino esta mínima historia del brujo que se me está yendo de las manos. . . . Ya va extendiendo sus límites y espera invadirnos a todos después de haberme invadido a mí en *mi* reino, el imaginario. Porque ahora sé que él también está escribiendo una novela que se superpone a ésta de anularla. (1983: 139)

Valenzuela, who is attempting to battle el Brujo in the realm of the imaginary that she lays claim to as a writer, finds that, as a result of giving him the word in the first section of the novel, the sorcerer’s narrative authority is beginning to surpass her own. As Potvin (1997) has observed,

In the second part, Valenzuela intends to assume responsibility for the fiction by intervening directly within the narration . . . but as she gets more involved in her fiction and in the problem of representing the true reality, she realizes to what extent to name . . . supposes a process of creation, a desire to en/gender, to give existence and voice that becomes as dangerous as the masses’ or women’s silence. (215)

While she has hoped that being in charge of the narrative can give her a certain power, reflecting, “Yo he hecho hace tiempo un serio descubrimiento al cual me atengo: si no se puede ser protagonista de la historia, vale entonces la pena ser autor/a de la historia,” she nevertheless finds that her protagonist is taking charge, resulting in the fact that, “Sólo que ahora estoy viendo tambalear esta firme separación, mezclada como me encuentro con la historia que estoy elaborando” (1983: 141). El Brujo has reached out beyond the limits of the page and sent her an invitation to attend the inauguration of his pyramid, a gesture that implies his recognition of her existence and hails her as just one more character in the sorcerer’s biography, rather than its omniscient narrator. In fact, Valenzuela’s metafictional insertion undermines the idea that an

While there are many additional Christian theological references in the text, in the interest of space, I have focused in this chapter on the non-mainstream Christian elements of the esoteric.

objective, omniscient narrator is even a possibility, demonstrating “how the narrator and the Argentine people are implicated in the unfolding story. There is no innocent place from outside of the text from which to write” (Craig 2005: 153).

This narrative confusion leads Valenzuela to doubt whether her writing is doing any good, or whether she should focus exclusively on her more practical political work of getting individuals who are targeted by the government asylum in other countries. She finds this state of uncertainty to be intolerable, and yet she is forced to traffic in it on multiple levels—not only in her writing, but in her everyday life, as her friends like Navoni always run the risk of being disappeared. In an allusion to the many *desaparecidos*, she reflects, “Es un alivio verlos llegar en estos tiempos, confirmar que todavía están vivos. También es un alivio, desgraciado pero alivio, saberlos muertos. Lo intolerable es lo otro” (1983: 141). Even as *el Brujo* and the military government discourse against doubt, forcing their subjects to adhere to their authoritative version of events, their actions plague people like Valenzuela with the intolerability and irrepresentability of the unknown.

As such, Valenzuela despairs over how to write when faced with the irrepresentability of the atmosphere plaguing Argentina and the limits of narrative, which it seems cannot give form to violence and terror without the danger of being subsumed by it. In writing about *el Brujo*, “Yo trato de verlo como él se ve pero no tanto, trato de captarle el tono pero a veces él me lo trastorna, lo exaspera y lo hace sonar a invento. ¿Cómo voy a poder inventar a alguien tan despiadado? Simplemente lo narro para que no se ignore su existencia” (1983: 126). As in earlier discussions in this chapter of *el Brujo* and López Rega’s biographies and the role of the esoteric and conspiracy in Argentina during this time period, Valenzuela finds that the extent of the

man's absurdity and violence is too strange to be believed: it cannot be represented mimetically because realism seems too much like fiction. Mangin (2010) argues that this results in

un efecto contaminante entre dos regímenes de escritura que incita a leer los relatos del archivo como relatos ficcionales . . . y los relatos ficcionales como documentos históricos. Así es como el Proceso de Reorganización Nacional, monumento de racionalidad ideológica al servicio de la lucha contra el caos de la subversion, se lee como un texto delirante en el mismo nivel diegético y del mismo calibre que los que instituye el Brujo en su locura totalitaria. (222)

Similarly, Craig (2005) posits that, while the facts of torture and murder in Argentina were so terrible as to need no fictionalization to be read as a fiction, the opposite was also true: “the reality of events in Argentina at that time was such that the fiction had to be violent, bloody and implacably cruel in order to knit with the historical facts” (157).

Moreover, Valenzuela finds that writing about el Brujo—and, by extension, political violence—may actually have the effect of expanding his power:

Dicen que el brujo retomó sus andanzas porque yo empecé a escribir su biografía, desperté al perro, revolví las quietísimas transparentes aguas de las lagunas negras y del fondo emergió la podredumbre. . . . Como si la podredumbre no hubiera estado allí desde el principio, como si el perro ese y su subperro no hubieran estado removiéndose en sueños todo el tiempo, desencadenando pesadillas. (1983: 179)

El Brujo himself acknowledges that the spreading of his legend helps his power grow, since, “Cuando a uno lo toman por símbolo el tamaño de uno se vuelve inmensurable” (1983: 58).

Recalling the episode of the Umbanda ritual and spirit who warned Valenzuela against becoming contaminated by evil by becoming too close to it, we see that her interest in el Brujo is potentially dangerous; to write about evil and talk about political violence can too easily mean simply repeating the prevailing discourse, and thus spreading that evil and pain.²⁶ This is because, in

²⁶ Potvin (1997) argues that “The political connotation of part two is obvious: why dedicate all these words to a military regime that annihilates every person who talks, reads, and writes. If the words constitute weapons in the Sorcerer's arsenal, the absence of language or the refusal of a certain discourse (the biography, for instance) represents also a powerful gun for the rebellious woman writer” (217). While I agree with the critic's assessment that Valenzuela the character

Magnarelli (1988)'s words, although "Mimesis in language is no longer a possibility, the text seems to warn us . . . it is all too easy for us, like the Brujo, to be enmeshed in this discourse" (141).

Nevertheless, even if Valenzuela's attention toward el Brujo does contribute to his growing power, she recognizes that, even without her explicit attention, he has been haunting the nightmares of Argentines all the while, and that refusing to acknowledge this fact does not help to dissipate his hold over the cultural imaginary. Moreover, she postulates that an attention toward the nature of this haunting, and an attempt to decipher the multiple esoteric meanings that el Brujo signifies, can aid in understanding the sinister atmosphere that has enveloped their country under the military dictatorship. I will discuss Valenzuela and Navoni's engagement with occult language later in this chapter; on a more formal level, the text's interest in the esoteric and commentary on the role of narrative interpretation guides the reader toward seeking out hidden meanings in the interstices of the real, through an attention to psychoanalysis, allegory, and mood. For instance, Valenzuela the character argues that, even if it is government propaganda or its factuality is uncertain, the information that they receive about el Brujo can be psychoanalyzed:

Creo que debemos tomar eso de los Esteros como una metáfora. Debemos analizar punto por punto los elementos que nos han brindado y desarticular la textualidad inscripta en el discurso paraoficial. . . . Se trata de un perfecto juego specular con un superyó represor en superficie (el gobierno) y su contracara represora bajo tierra (el brujo). Esta figura nos traba el movimiento, no ofrece ni la más mínima libertad intersticial.. [allowing the government to acquire] así un poder de manipulación sobre dicho pueblo gracias a la cara oscura de la raealidad que les es presentada, despertando el miedo supersticioso y a la vez

doubts her the utility of her engagement with authoritative discourses like the biography, I don't believe that the gesture of putting down the pen at the end of part two constitutes an absence or refusal of language, but rather a welcoming of alternative discourses and significations for language, as will become clear below. Much like the ambivalence of esoteric practices that I earlier identified throughout the novel, language, too, is ambivalent for Valenzuela, since, just like el Brujo, the Advertencia informs us that "Nuestra arma es la letra" (1983: 7).

una vaga promesa de salvación por la magia, congelándolo, de esta forma, en el dominio de lo imaginario. (1983: 44-45)

In meta-interpretive passages such as this, Valenzuela the author provides us with keys for how to interpret the novel's use of allegory and acknowledges that government repression operates not only materially, but in the intangible realm of the imaginary, and must therefore be addressed on these multiple levels. As Navoni lays out, "Nuestro deber consiste ahora en desarticular los símbolos e interpretar el discurso inconsciente del gobierno, decodificar el mensaje que nos está transmitiendo a pesar suyo" (1983: 57). Even if mimetic representation inevitably falls short, the process of interpretation can help undermine authoritarian narratives and reveal a certain kind of truth. For instance, while the Gothic landscape of the wetlands may be more fiction than reality, analysis reveals its profound significance:

¿Qué metáfora más evidente que la de los Esteros? Se lo ha ubicado al supuesto brujo en los Esteros, una zona a la vez transparente y fétida, un lugar que parece ser un paraíso cristalino y es en verdad un pantano, cuajado de plantas en descomposición, de miasmas, de flores venenosas y todo tipo de alimanas bajo una superficie que simula ser pura. ¿Pueden acaso ustedes encontrar una mejor representación que ésta del inconsciente humano? Las claridades que ocultan. . . . Lo aceptamos como un lugar real porque así somos en las zonas más tenebrosos de nuestro ser. (1983: 57)

Again, we see that what feels true exceeds and provides deeper meaning than reality itself.²⁷

Fiction supersedes biography; the esoteric supersedes the everyday; a fragmented text colored by rumor, paranoia, and conspiracy supersedes a realist depiction of the history of political violence. Furthermore, by admitting in part two that, in writing the biography in part one, she has embraced the speculative, mood, and affect—particularly by allowing her writing to be colored by "imaginaciones maléficas, insufladas seguro por el que ya sabemos" (1983: 144)—

Valenzuela the character casts doubt upon what was real and what was invented in what we have

²⁷ Guest (1990) puts succinctly in her psychoanalytic interpretation of the novel, "Valenzuela, therefore, in order to cure the mental disease of her homeland, writes a history of the junta and its 'unconscious,' the Sorcerer, revealing not the 'factual' but the psychic reality of Argentina" (3).

read of the novel thus far, while nevertheless emphasizing that her writing expresses the truth of her experiences of terror. For the purposes of this chapter, this speculation can be viewed as her own type of engagement with the esoteric, which provides her with an alternative way of knowing, since, Guest (1990) argues, in the face of the silences created by censorship, torture, and patriarchy, “Valenzuela . . . regains her voice through the imaginative reconstruction of the secret, unknowable thoughts of those in power” (10).

Still, Valenzuela the character oscillates between reaffirmation and despair regarding her writing, particularly as el Brujo increasingly wrestles with her for narrative control. She is constantly challenged by how to write when, “Esta biografía se me está saliendo de madre, el brujo cobra más y más vida propia y ya no puedo tomarlo a la ligera. Los acontecimientos nacionales son demasiado graves como para que una se ponga a describir rituales mágicos. Y menos propiciarlos” (1983: 199). It seems that there is no narrative escape: in the authoritative realm of biography, el Brujo’s power exceeds her, while an attention to the irreality of the esoteric seems absurd and unserious in comparison to the everyday violence that Argentina is facing. Why write at all when “a un paso no más, están torturando, matando, y una apenas escribiendo como única posibilidad de contraataque, que ironía, que inutilidad” (1983: 244). This feeling of despair was common among writers, especially early in the dictatorship, when, for example, the newspaper *La Opinión* reflected in an August 21, 1976, article reporting the discovery of thirty cadavers in the city of Pilar,

¿Qué decir? ¿Qué hacer? Durante poco más de cinco años . . . *La Opinión* no ha dejado de condenar todos los actos de violencia. La subversión de la izquierda rociada de asesinatos, las masacres del terrorismo de derecha, la actividad de las bandas no identificadas, ejecutoras de un mandato tampoco identificado, que nacieron con José López Rega y perviven en su misterio e impunidad hasta ahora. . . . Quizás el país ha entrado en uno de esos extraños momentos que envuelven a un territorio en un soplo de otros tiempos, como si la Edad Media retornara, con su estilo oscurantista de impotencia ante el dolor, la verdad, los derechos humanos, el conocimiento, la fe.

Faced with no answers from the military government, an awareness that terrible violence was being committed, and yet an inability to have an impact simply by reporting on and condemning the violence, it seemed that writing was an increasingly dangerous and increasingly futile gesture.

Moreover, el Brujo's grasp of occult language overwhelms Valenzuela's. While he makes strides to bring the metaphors to reality so that he can "hacer realidad los sueños o pasar con toda impunidad del dicho al hecho" (1983: 119), she herself struggles to use the esoteric to shore up her narrative power. Although Navoni proposes that she take up an esoteric weapon to help the resistance, asking her to kill off el Brujo in her biography so that "Ahí nos sacamos ese fantasma de encima y en una de esas la cosa actúa por simpatía" (1983: 206), she fears embracing this power, worried that "Algo que más bien tendría relación con la magia simpática, yo en el papel lo suprimo al brujo de un plumazo y este acto tan simple se revierte y repercute sobre Alfredo, sobre mí" (1983: 216). It is evident that, while, as I discuss later on, she can learn to decipher the occult language of terror, to write with its authority is not only beyond her, but has the potential to spread its violence.

Sinister Societies

As I have outlined above, the idea that some people believed hidden, spiritual forces to be at work or useful for influencing or predicting political life was circulating in the cultural discourses of 1970s Argentina. Even a complete skeptic of these practices would, at the very least, be attuned to the fact that believers like López Rega existed in the highest political circles. Moreover, cases like that of the Logia Anael below—which, like much of López Rega's biography outlined previously, seems almost too strange to believe—brought significant

attention to the fact that hidden forces were connected to some of the most significant political events of the decade, such as López Rega's introduction to the Peróns. As we will see throughout this section, information about secret societies manipulating political events—and conspiracy theories that were often espoused by these same societies—contributed to the atmosphere of paranoia that characterized this time period. This paranoid, conspiratorial aspect of the sinister is further evident in *Cola de lagartija*, which, as we will see, highlights the violent threat posed by hidden political forces which collude, conspire, and compete for power.

The Logia Anael was a Spiritist, Peronist secret society which operated in both Argentina and Brazil beginning in the late 1940s or early 1950s. It garnered public attention in 1972, after it was linked to an unsuccessful Peronist uprising at the Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA). Inspired by the populist ideologies of both Perón and Brazilian president Getulio Vargas, the Lodge advocated for a Latin American alliance dedicated to social justice that would stand up against both capitalist imperialism from the Anglo world and communist imperialism from the USSR.²⁸ Founded by Hector Caviglia, who claimed to be in communication with both Vargas and Perón, after Caviglia's death in 1964 it was led by Argentine judge Julio Cesar Urien.²⁹ The Lodge operated on both spiritual and political levels, altering its messaging to be more or less Spiritist based on its audience: even as they spread prophecies that predicted Perón's return and published pamphlets describing their political philosophy, they organized via the Comando Nacional de Suboficiales de las Fuerzas Armadas,

²⁸ Perón's appeal was not merely political for the Lodge; it also "Suscribía a la teoría de que Perón recibía y emitía vibraciones directas del Universo tanto a sus colaboradores directos como a las masas, a las que esclarecía y dirigía" (Larraquy 2019a: n.p.).

²⁹ In its cover story on "Espiritismo y política" published December 7, 1972, *Panorama* wrote, "Aunque recibía con agrado los mensajes de su colega brasileno, Perón nunca integró a la logia; después del suicidio de Vargas, desaparecieron para él todas las garantías de seriedad o interés. Caviglia deambuló, entonces, por Buenos Aires en busca de almas crédulas" (22).

or CONASUB, which provided them with political information and connections among the military. Urien's son was one of the officials involved in CONASUB who organized the mutiny at the ESMA; as *Panorama* wrote on December 7, 1972,

El motín habría sido dictado —a la manera de un mandato divino— por la majestuosa figura de los jefes de la logia a un grupo de jóvenes suboficiales. Más por diplomacia que por rubor, el círculo anaeliano habría borrado sus huellas espiritistas a fin de articular con mayor libertad un modelo ideológico de 'liberación.' (22)

Beyond this recently frustrated action, the article in *Panorama* argued that the Logia Anael largely had no concrete political plan and little to no connection with mainstream Peronism, as various sectors of the movement all denied being affiliated with the Lodge, although the article mentioned that “algunos reconocieron que, durante cierto periodo (alrededor de 1965), José López Rega trabajó efímera amistad con los asociados secretos” (22). Moreover, the secret society's motivations were treated with suspicion: “Las opiniones de los dirigentes peronistas recorren una gama bastante amplia: para muchos, Anael es un pequeño grupo a merced de un espiritista con buenas intenciones; para otros, Urien podría ocultar designios menos santos” (23). As this sentence alludes to, it was hard to determine people's motivations, to the point that the article observes that it could not be determined whether the leaders of the mutiny were genuine Peronists or wanted to interfere with the plans for Perón's return by provoking government backlash. Finally, with Perón's return to Argentina, it seemed that secrecy and conspiracy was no longer necessary for Peronist politics. As a quote from an unnamed Peronist argued, “ahora que está Perón aquí, se acabaron las logias y el misterio” (23).

However, as a review of the Logia Anael and subsequent historical events reveals, this was wishful thinking. In fact, as José Pablo Feinmann (1987) has argued, secrecy and conspiracy

may have been intrinsic to this phase of Peronism itself, as it was a political movement that often “se resolvía en la privacidad, transitada por el esoterismo” (70). As we will see, an examination of the Logia Anael’s philosophy reveals a pattern of conspiratorial thinking and clandestine activities that were typical not just of one secret society, but of two additional organizations that would play a significant role in 1970s Peronism—the Triple A and Propaganda Due—as well as López Rega and even Perón himself.

In his history of Argentine secret societies, Sergio Gaut vel Hartman (2010) defines the Logia Anael’s philosophy as “una bizarra asociación de astrología, rosacruzismo, ritos umbanda y fascismo que creó en 1954 el doctor Julio César Urien inspirándose para ello en la secta Thule y en las lecturas de A. Krumm-Heller (1876-1949) y Otto Rahn (1904-1939)” (132).³⁰ The Logia Anael’s own published documents involve a blend of nationalism, anti-imperialism, and anti-Semitic conspiracy theory with a belief that extra-material forces are at work affecting the course of civilization. The 1956 pamphlet “Acotaciones sobre la realidad del presente argentino,” signed by Caviglia, proposed that human civilization was in the midst of a crisis, but that the stage was set for an evolutionary moment influenced by the coming Age of Aquarius in which a more cooperative society could be born, heralded by a spiritually evolved New Man. However, it warned that secretive forces had been at work throughout history with the goal of spreading

³⁰ The origins of the Logia Anael are somewhat obscured, perhaps due to the fact that, as Axelrod (1997) has observed, secret societies have a tendency to claim older or more significant origins so as to lend legitimacy to their organization. As such, some authors like Gaut vel Hartman (2010) have neglected the role of Caviglia in founding the Lodge. This is also relevant to the fact that later documents published by the Lodge (see below) referred to a mysterious “Doctor Anael” who was the true leader of the society, which some sources (e.g., *Panorama* December 7, 1972) have argued was simply Urien himself, but may also have been referring to Caviglia, or have been an entirely fictional figure. According to Larraquy (2019a), Urien transformed the name Anael into an acronym, standing for “Avanzada Nacionalista Argentina en Liberacion.”

submission among the masses and preventing revolutions from achieving their true goals of liberation.³¹ These secretive forces involved the trifecta of typical conspiracy theories: the Jews (specifically via the funds provided by the Rothschild Bank), Freemasons, and Jesuits.³² The pamphlet stated that Argentina would be the leader of the American continent in the coming age, and alluded to the “invisible” struggle that was taking place in the country between the forces of imperialism and those for social justice. Notably, here the language of hidden or invisible forces likely refers both to cosmological or spiritual forces and clandestine actions by both the Lodge’s allies and enemy organizations or governments.

A 1964 document published by the Lodge, entitled *La razón del tercer mundo*, further elaborates upon the organization’s political program for the 1960s. It refers to two meetings of the Lodge in Brazil, which supposedly took place in 1956 and 1957; the document deliberately keeps the delegates attending those meetings secret, but implies that they were important men, stating, “Solo diremos que la integra el doctor Anael y un grupo de hombres profundamente conocedores de los problemas sociales, políticos, económicos de nuestro tiempo y de tiempo ha. Y muchos otros, que sin ser cabeza, constituyen las diferentes partes de su organismo” (5). At a

³¹ Along the lines of this conspiratorial mode of thinking, Caviglia also implies that Vargas’ suicide was faked by the British to cover up that it was actually an assassination.

³² Arendt (1973) observed that those who felt excluded from political life—as Peronists were when even the mention of Peronism was outlawed after the 1955 coup—were both likely to turn to alternative, “extraparliamentary” ways of participating in politics and “inclined to seek out the real forces of political life in those movements and influences which are hidden from view and work behind the scenes . . . beyond the formal realm of politics, operating . . . in lobbies, lodges, and the confessional” (108). She mentions specifically the Jewish, Freemason, Jesuit trifecta as common fodder for these conspiracies about the secret forces behind politics. However, as she notes, conspiracies about Jews, many of which used the Rothschild Bank as their evidentiary basis, were those which had the most staying power: “It is well known that the belief in a Jewish conspiracy that was kept together by a secret society had the greatest propaganda value for antisemitic publicity, and by far outran all traditional European superstition about ritual murder and well-poisoning” (76).

third meeting in Buenos Aires, which allegedly just occurred in 1964, Dr. Anael and seven other key members of the Lodge had resolved to publish their conclusions.³³ The document predicts that Perón will soon return to Argentina and that, in the coming struggle for liberation, “El tercer mundo se consolidar’a mediante tres vértices magnéticas: en Asia, Pekin; en África, Argelia, en America Latina: La ‘L’ inclinada . . . La unión lineal de los distintos vértices, forman una figura geométrica, que la logia llamará el Triángulo escaleno de la triple A” (6) (Fig. 5).³⁴ The “inclined L” of the American continent refers to a line connecting Lima, Buenos Aires, and Sao Paolo, which the Lodge believed would lead the American continent in the struggle and develop “El nuevo movimiento mesiánico de las masas” (27).³⁵ The role of the three magnetic vertices is evident throughout history, exemplified by the role of key spiritual figures from antiquity: “Lo que todos los grandes Iniciados de la antigüedad —Buda, Confucio, Lao-Tse, Krisna, Jesus, Mahoma—vislumbraron prematuramente, los pueblos de la triple A, están haciéndolo realidad” (27). As part of this struggle for a new world, the pamphlet reports, “Se abre en Argentina, Brasil y en America un intenso periodo de actividades ocultas” (6).

³³ This pamphlet likely circulated informally between individuals, particularly those in the Comando Nacional de Suboficiales de las Fuerzas Armadas (Larraquy 2019a). In *El tercer mundo en acción*, published the following year, the Lodge claims that the document was silenced to suppress its truth, meaning it likely faced government censorship due to its explicitly Peronist politics.

³⁴ According to Vicens (1983), a 1957 pamphlet entitled *Triángulo de la Triple A* further expounds on this theory.

³⁵ *El tercer mundo en acción* explains that points of the inclined L rest at Lima because it was the center of indigenous civilization; Argentina because it is where the Peronist movement was founded; and Brazil because of Trabalhismo and revolutionary Christianity.

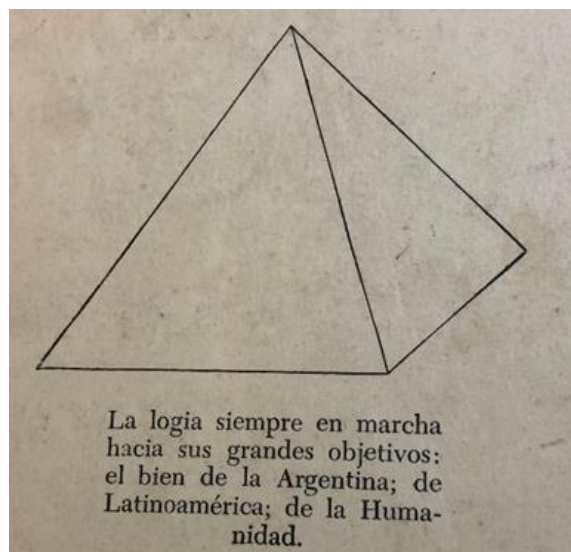


Figure 5. *Illustration of the triangle of the Triple A and text on the back cover of the 1964 pamphlet by the Logia Anael, La razón del tercer mundo. La programática anaelina: Perón-Adhemar de Barros.*

We have here another prime example of the intersection between the esoteric and the political. An elite, initiated group, privy to hidden truths about a world ruled by magnetic energies and cosmological ages as well as predestined historical forces, dedicates themselves to organizing a messianic mass movement to bring about the new world that it predicts is already on the way. It presents itself as being not only in-the-know and spiritually powerful, but also supremely well-connected with international terrestrial political forces, including third-world liberation movements in Africa and Asia and Perón himself. It also greatly exaggerates its own power: the 1964 document takes credit for having prevented the total annihilation of Peronism and Perón himself during the 1955 coup so as to protect the third magnetic vertex from falling. All political setbacks and advances can be attributed to this predestined cosmological struggle and incorporated into the Logia Anael's all-encompassing worldview. Adorno (1994)'s esoteric patterns of thought, as outlined in the introduction to this dissertation, are clearly on display here.

While the 1964 document does not delve into the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories espoused by Caviglia in 1956, a pamphlet published the following year entitled *El tercer mundo en acción* returns more explicitly to conspiratorial thinking. It accuses the media of being “al servicio de oscuros intereses” and manufacturing news “para que minorías reducidas, ocultas, mantengan y acrecienten su poderío económico” (1965: 6). These interests are explicitly imperialist, radiating from, primarily, the United States and the USSR and, through them, Britain. However, it further explains, “Más atrás, mueve una sombra, un cuerpo informe, sangre que corre . . . todo lo deforma, envilece” (1965: 7). It is unclear from context whether the implication here is explicitly anti-Semitic or even whether it refers to a terrestrial or spiritual evil influence, but the pamphlet does go on to discuss Freemasonry and Zionism as powerful forces dedicated to the exploitation of mankind.³⁶

Letters to the editor responding to the cover story on the Logia Anael published in *Panorama* on December 7, 1972 (Fig. 6) treated the subject with amusement, with one writer noting on December 21, 1972, that, while he enjoyed reading the article because he likes police novels, it was a pure fantasy, and politics was better served by being treated with the utmost realism. Yet again, the idea that the esoteric could have a real impact on the political seemed largely too strange to be believed, relegated to the realm of literature. Nevertheless, while the Lodge was unable to fulfill its prophecy of third world liberation, it did contribute, if in a roundabout way by connecting López Rega with the presidential couple, to bringing Perón back to Argentina, and its conspiracies and philosophy of the Triple A would become unexpectedly and devastatingly present in the nation’s history.

³⁶ Another favorite topic of conspiracy theorists was even broached by the document, which claimed that John F. Kennedy was assassinated by “los círculos de opresión yankis” (1965: 88).

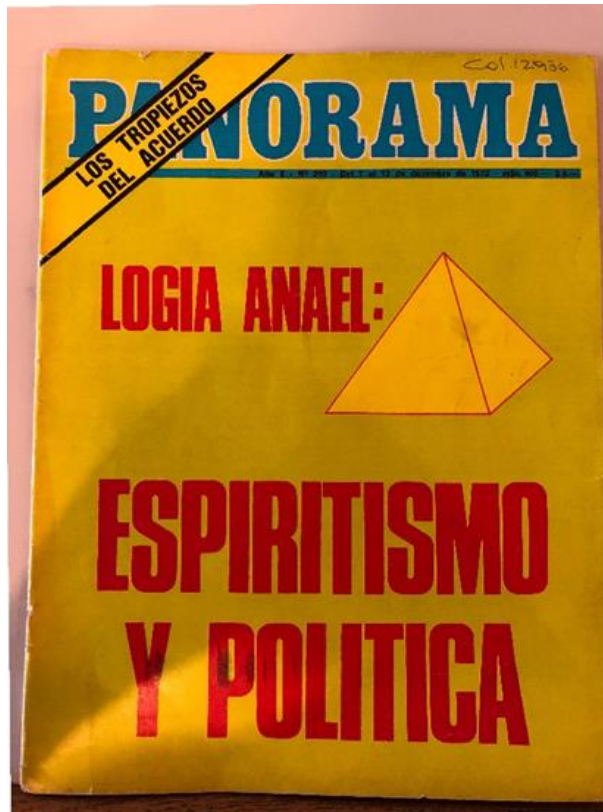


Figure 6. Cover of Panorama, December 7, 1972, featuring a story on the Logia Anael.

López Rega became involved in the Logia Anael in the mid-1960s, when the Lodge began using the printer where he worked and had published his own esoteric texts for their pamphlets. During a trip to Argentina in 1965, Isabel Perón stayed at the house of a Peronist who was also a member of the Lodge, where she met López Rega. Impressed with his spiritual thinking, she invited him to return to work with Perón in Madrid as a representative of the Lodge. Around this time, el Brujo reportedly told many people that he believed his ultimate destiny was to aid Perón, and even sent letters and a copy of his book to the exiled general (Pinetta 1986). He wrote to him about the Logia Anael on May 31, 1966:

Mi función en la LOGIA es fundamentalmente espiritual, pero soy a la vez eminentemente ejecutivo. Desde hace veinticinco años, vengo cumpliendo en el más absoluto anonimato una tarea difícil, que se entroncó con su propia labor en los albores del peronismo. . . . Durante toda mi vida, he estudiado el alma de los seres humanos, el

balance obtenido me ha llenado de un profundo dolor, pero la enorme responsabilidad, de elevar el tono vibracional de la raza humana, corresponde a quienes tienen el privilegio de conocer el PLAN DE LA DIVINIDAD. . . . Hay en nuestras filas mucha gente que UD. conoce y que ha servido a su lado. Unos vienen con toda honestidad, otros con anhelos escondidos. Pero se vigila todo y se los hace marchar rectamente. (Letter from López Rega to Perón, May 31, 1966)

López Rega's letter was accompanied by a letter from Urien himself. However, over the following years, López Rega distanced himself from the Logia Anael, which began to believe that they had been used so that he could obtain access to Perón (Larraquy 2019b). Although members of the Lodge sent reports from the CONASUB and letters to López Rega and Perón over the following years, they were essentially shut out from direct engagement with the highest circles of Peronism. The Logia Anael's most significant role in history, it seemed, would be in giving López Rega a platform through which to connect with Perón.

Nevertheless, the conspiratorial thinking evidenced in the Lodge's pamphlets, which was clearly linked to its esoteric emphasis on secrecy and hidden forces, was not so far from the theories espoused by Perón himself during this time period. In an interview with Tomás Eloy Martínez published in *Panorama* on June 30, 1970, Perón attributed the 1955 coup to "la sinarquía internacional, de la que forman parte el capitalismo, el comunismo, la masonería, el clero tradicional, apoyados por los cipayos" (Martínez 1970: 66) and opposed his nationalist ideology to "la línea anglosajona, de inspiración masónica, obediente al Rito Celeste escocés" (Martínez 1970: 67). In its August 4, 1970, article on esoteric sects, *Panorama* further defined conspiracy theories about the synarchy espoused by Perón:

La sinarquía no es otra cosa que el gobierno mundial en manos del poder oculto (anticristiano).

Disimulado en Estados Unidos bajo la denominación de *The Establishment*, posee un Instituto para la preparación de los cuadros sinárquicos: Thirteen-thirteen (Instituto de la Administración Pública), con oficinas en la calle 60 de Chicago. Propiciada por las fundaciones Ford, Rockefeller y Carnegie, habría intervenido en el encumbramiento de todos los presidentes norteamericanos de este siglo (con excepción de Harding y

Truman), según informó un artículo aparecido en la revista *Esquire* en mayo de 1962. . . . Conciliados en la sinarquía, los masones aspiran también a formar parte del gobierno mundial anticristiano. (25)

In this way, references to the synarchy sublimated the same conspiracies about imperialism, Freemasonry, occultism, and Satanism that appeared both in pamphlets by the Logia Anael and popular media depictions of esoteric practices. As Adorno (1994) has observed of esoteric patterns of thought, conspiracies about the synarchy amounted to the creation of a paranoid, comprehensive worldview that could account for any and all occurrences. In the words of González Jansen (1986),

La sinarquía fue definida como un organismo supranacional de poderes tan amplios y decisivos, que harían de él un verdadero gobierno oculto del mundo. Una suerte de mafia o masonería tan ecléctica y desacomplejada, que reuniría desaprensivamente a fuerzas tan dispares y antagónicas como son, por ejemplo, el capitalismo y el comunismo. (87)

While seemingly irrational, this mode of thinking was nevertheless attractive, with Arendt (1973) observing that

The effectiveness of this kind of propaganda demonstrates one of the chief characteristics of modern masses. They do not believe in anything visible, in the reality of their own experience; they do not trust their eyes and ears but only their imaginations, which may be caught by anything that is at once universal and consistent in itself. What convinces masses are not facts, and not even invented facts, but only the consistency of the system of which they are presumably part. (351)

Further, as Roniger and Senkman (2018) have observed in their analysis of synarchism and Peronism, “While not necessarily anti-Semitic, the suspicion of an underground network plotting in the shadows affected the imaginary of society, spilling at times and under certain circumstances into explicit anti-Semitism” (434-435). As they further argued, this rhetoric increased throughout the 1970s, while “The most dangerous outgrowth of this conception was

the one articulated by José López Rega . . . a believer in hidden forces and a proponent of extralegal action” (439).³⁷

Once López Rega was in power under the Peróns, the right-wing Peronist magazine *El Caudillo*, which he financed (González Jansen 1986), often espoused these more explicitly anti-Semitic conspiracy theories. Led by Felipe Romeo, who was known by the nickname “la Viuda Negra de Hitler” (Andersen 2000), the second issue of *El Caudillo*, published on November 23, 1973, referred to “la subversión sinárquica” (np) in an article on how political violence continued under the Peronist government, arguing that this violence was a plot by “anarco-marxistas” (np) financed by international interests.³⁸ Later issues repeatedly attacked the synarchy alongside Freemasonry and “Zionist” interests, with Jacobo Timerman, the publisher of the newspaper *La Opinion*, becoming a favorite target of anti-Semitic rhetoric.³⁹ The pages of *El Caudillo* were rife with paranoia: in addition to explicit mentions of the synarchy, they accused their enemies of

³⁷ In more mainstream publications such as *Las Bases*, López Rega presented a more palatable version of his belief in hidden forces, speaking about the threats of U.S. imperialism and USSR communism, which, he wrote, “son los entidades ejecutoras que manejan cerebros ocultos en las sombras de las altas finanzas mundiales” (López Rega 1969). While his editorials in *Las Bases* were not explicitly anti-Semitic, he did occasionally engage in Nazi apologetics (see Lopez Rega 1970).

³⁸ The same issue included an article on how a combination of psychoanalysis, drugs, and homosexuality were pushing the Argentine youth toward Marxism. A later article on psychoanalysis, published January 21, 1975, was more explicitly anti-Semitic, accusing it of “Ser aplicado sobre una mayoría de cristianos por una mayoría de judíos” (np).

³⁹ Multiple articles attacked Timerman as being in league with “la sinarquía,” calling for the government to shut down his newspaper and celebrating when its publication was briefly suspended under Isabel Perón (see May 17, 1974; June 14, 1974; August 2, 1974). The November 6, 1975, issue included an anti-Semitic caricature of Timerman. This ramping up of anti-Semitic rhetoric in the pages of *El Caudillo* and elsewhere across the nation did not go unnoticed; the organization B’Nai B’Rith noted this as a worrying trend, causing *Las Bases*, a more mainstream Peronist publication than *El Caudillo* that was nevertheless also under the influence of López Rega, to suggest that this and other accusations of growing fascism in Argentina were anachronistic and manipulated by international interests (*Las Bases*, no. 85, March 12, 1974).

plotting to assassinate them (December 7, 1973); the diplomatic corps of creating a secret society to control foreign relations and the Argentine university bureaucracy of brainwashing the youth (December 28, 1973); and the Peronist left wing of assassinating Carlos Mugica (May 17, 1974),⁴⁰ having countless agitators and spies (August 16, 1974), and receiving direct orders from foreign interests (September 6, 1974). At other moments it operated as an explicit mouthpiece for López Rega, lauding his actions, defending him from criticism, and reprinting speeches in which he alluded to his esoteric beliefs in his own importance, stating, “Hablo como hombre realizado, satisfecho de cumplir con un destino impuesto por comprensión de las leyes divinas” (February 19, 1975, np).⁴¹ Meanwhile, the magazine explicitly advocated for violence against so-called subversives, with Romeo signing off his editorials with the catchphrase, “El mejor enemigo es el enemigo muerto.”⁴² With hindsight, it would turn out that many of its conspiratorial accusations were, in fact, projections and propaganda.⁴³ The editorial staff of *El Caudillo* was directly linked

⁴⁰ Mugica was a priest who was a member of the Movimiento de Sacerdotes para el Tercer Mundo and advocated for the poor and social reform. He had some connections with left-wing Peronists among the Montoneros and was increasingly targeted by conservatives among the ecclesiastical hierarchy and the Peronist right wing leading up to his assassination on May 11, 1974.

⁴¹ See August 9, 1974; December 3, 1974; December 17, 1974; and January 29, 1975, for various celebrations and defenses of López Rega.

⁴² One editorial recommended a book by Roger Trinquier, *La guerra moderna y la lucha contra las guerrillas* (1965) (September 27, 1974). Trinquier was a French military theorist who advocated for torture and whose tactics were later taught at the School of the Americas and became foundational for the military dictatorships through Operation Condor. Another argued, “La guerrilla piensa que hay que matar a los enemigos. Nosotros también. Hay muchos cadáveres en ambos bandos, sólo la desaparición de uno puede garantizar la supervivencia del otro” (November 1, 1974, np). Yet another article, entitled “Religión o muerte,” advocated for religious intolerance, explicitly stating that “marxistas, liberales, masones y judíos” should not be allowed to comment on “temas argentinos” in the media, and called for “Matar al infiel. Al que corrompe, al que ateiza, al que blasfema” (28).

⁴³ As Vicens (1983) notes with irony, even as Peronists accused synarchy and freemasonry of causing the movement’s downfall in 1955, it would actually be those involved in the government such as as López Rega who were linked to behind-the-scenes conspiracies and Masonic lodges and would lead to Peronism’s second major failure (113).

with the Triple A, a true parastatal organization that plotted assassinations and used violence to further their political ends, and the real authors of Mugica’s assassination.⁴⁴ The cover of the November 1, 1974 issue of the magazine bore the legend, “Quien le teme a las AAA por algo sera,” implying that those who were targeted with threats, murder, and bombings had done something to deserve the violence (Fig. 7).



Figure 7. Front and back covers of *El Caudillo*, November 1, 1974.

⁴⁴ Andersen (2000) has argued, based on interviews with FBI agent Robert Scherrer and information from United States intelligence services, that other assassinations originally attributed to the Montoneros and decried in the pages of *El Caudillo* may have actually been committed by right-wing Peronists or instigated by the Argentine military or intelligence services. These include the killings of Jose Ignacio Rucci, Arturo Mor Roig, Alberto Villar, and Rodolfo Ortega Pena. The Montoneros took credit for all four assassinations; however, the latter was determined to be the Triple A. Responsibility for Rucci’s assassination remains undetermined; that for the killings of Mor Roig and Villar remains attributed to the Montoneros, although Andersen argues that they may have been instigated by López Rega or the Secretaria de Inteligencia de Estado (SIDE). Most relevant for our purposes is the uncertainty of the information that was circulating at the time and the role of *El Caudillo*’s propaganda in making conspiratorial accusations while engaged in conspiracy themselves.

The history and philosophy of the Logia Anael, Peronist ideas of the synarchy, and the anti-Semitic conspiracy theories espoused by *El Caudillo* all demonstrate how the paranoid idea that esoteric, hidden forces were at work circulated throughout political circles and media discourses in 1970s Argentina. As I have alluded to in the introduction to this dissertation, even as many of these accusations were entirely baseless, others derived from a genuine concern for the role played by the imperialistic policies of foreign players like the United States. Here we have the origins of the sinister mood, an atmosphere which would become even more prevalent through the actions of the Triple A.

The Triple A can be viewed as associated with esotericism on two major fronts. Firstly, its shared acronym with the philosophy espoused by the Logia Anael is more than coincidental: Urien would later express anger at López Rega for appropriating the name for his “organización criminal” (Larraquy 2004: 199).⁴⁵ Relatedly, various authors have interpreted the paramilitary organization as forming part of López Rega’s material efforts to make his esoteric prophecies come true. In the words of Vicens (1983), “El hombre decía tener dominio sobre la vida y la muerte de los demás y, en definitiva, llegaría a tenerlo cuando las bandas de la Triple A circularon impunemente por las calles argentinas. . . . López Rega trabajó para que su ilusión se convirtiera en realidad” (17).⁴⁶ Secondly, as a clandestine organization, it shared many of the esoteric aspects of secret societies and conspiracies that have already appeared in our discussion of Operation Condor in the introduction to this project and the Logia Anael above. From the perspective of Arendt (1973), who notes that “Conspirators have an understandable tendency to

⁴⁵ In fact, as Larraquy (2019b) noted, some members of the Lodge, including Rubén Sosa and Héctor Sampayo, would later be threatened by the Triple A.

⁴⁶ Vicens (1983) further posited that López Rega may have believed, spiritually, that the Triple A’s violence was justified so long as it led to the ultimate good.

think that the most efficient methods in politics in general are those of conspiratory societies and that if one can apply them in broad daylight and support them with a whole nation's instruments of violence, the possibilities for power accumulation become absolutely limitless" (379), the Triple A can be viewed as the attempt of those in the government such as López Rega who already believed they were facing countless synarchist conspirators to respond in-kind with a conspiracy of their own. Arendt (1973) herself makes a similar connection between the secret police of totalitarian governments and secret societies (435).

The Triple A's secrecy, use of mysterious threats, and seeming omnipresence all contributed to the sinister atmosphere that would envelope Argentine society both before and after the coup. Larraquy (2004) puts eloquently in his biography of López Rega, "El terror, vuelto un estado íntimo de la conciencia, se fue filtrando como una pesadilla a través de algunos indicios que antes parecían irrelevantes: un zumbido en la noche, un Falcón verde, un papel con tres letras —AAA—, el eco lejano de un disparo, y terminó alimentando la más brutal de las fantasías" (297). In a report on López Rega published in *Esto* on April 28, 1988, Raúl Malagón describes the organization as "una demoníaca célula terrorista" (Malagón 1988: 8). Creative language such as this—which referred to the Triple A as demonic, sinister, mysterious, etc.—is prevalent in much of the media and historical discourses surrounding the organization.

The Triple A's methods were geared explicitly toward propagating this type of discourse, seeding sinister terror throughout the population. The group was an alliance between various right-wing, nationalist sectors in Argentine politics, both Peronist and non-Peronist, drawing its membership from earlier fascist groups, the Federal Police, and the Armed forces (Vicens 1983). Its first assassination attempt, a bombing against Senator Hipolito Solari Yrigoyen, took place in November 1973, with its activities ramping up dramatically throughout 1974 and 1975; Larraquy

(2018) posits that the death of Rodolfo Ortega Peña, who was shot by the Triple A on July 31, 1974, on his way home from dinner with his wife, “abrió paso a una represión que ya no escondería prejuicios a la hora de mostrar sus cadáveres” (343). The group attacked not only leftist politicians and activists, but journalists and their associates, kidnapping their targets on the street and in their homes, sending threats via letters and phone calls, and bombing houses, offices, and media outlets. The bodies of executed victims were left in plain sight or in cars which were set on fire (Larraquy 2018). González Jansen (1986) described these methods as a “ritual del terror” (16).

As terrifyingly mysterious as their methods were, it was evident that the Triple A operated with the knowledge and impunity of Isabel Perón’s government and the Armed Forces. González Jansen (1986) has pointed out that many officials involved with the Triple A also had government positions in the police or the Ministry of Social Welfare, and argued that intelligence sectors of the armed forces knew about the Triple A’s activities and structure and “permitieron la matanza porque coincidía con sus previsiones en materia de contrainsurgencia” (16), a position echoed by Gasparini. As Heriberto Kahn reported in *La Opinión* on July 6, 1975, the Triple A openly operated out of the Ministry of Social Welfare; in April 1975, a soldier assigned to accompany ambassadors on a diplomatic visit entered the Ministry to use the telephone, saw that police and members of all three branches of the armed forces were working in there, and was informed, “Con indisimulado orgullo . . . que en ese lugar funcionaba un cuartel de las denominadas Triple A y aludió al hecho de que en el fin de semana anterior, ‘nos levantamos’ más de una docena de victimas” (np). In *López Rega, el peronismo y la Triple A*, Larraquy details several instances in which whispers among political circles circulated the information that

the Triple A was headed by López Rega and his allies; in these ways, the structure behind the paramilitary organization was an open secret for many.

Being aware of, and even approving of, the Triple A's methods did not prevent the military from using López Rega's association with the terrorist group to their advantage in the lead up to and after the 1976 coup. In addition to the many other reasons that the military had for forcing López Rega out in July 1975, with information about his involvement with the Triple A coming out in the press, the military may have wanted to "desembarazarse de quien era, en el mejor de los casos, un testigo molesto sobre un poder represivo que actuaba a las espaldas de las instituciones" (Vicens 1983: 169). As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, judicial investigations into the subject were opened in 1975 and continued under the military government even as they incorporated the former paramilitary members under their command, re-consolidating the state's monopoly on violence (Andersen 2000).

Even as the dictatorship absorbed the sinister methods, secrecy, and conspiratorial paranoia embodied by López Rega and the organizations with which he was associated, they redirected attention from their own activities by making the population believe that the origin of the sinister lied elsewhere. On the one hand, their constant focus on guerrilla groups was meant to, in the words of Andersen (2000), "fabricar una sombría amenaza terrorista omnipresente. Como si fuesen magos, los militares explotaban las expectativas de la gente presentándole lo que esperaba ver con el resultado de que creyera que lo estaba viendo" (27). On the other, I have already mentioned in the introduction to this chapter the focus on López Rega's esoteric practices which proliferated in the press under the dictatorship. Relatedly, there was yet another conspiratorial association in play which the military government would use to focus attention on

López Rega, and yet which nevertheless would demonstrate the continuity between López Rega and the junta: the Italian Masonic Lodge known as Propaganda Due (P2).

P2, headed by right-wing businessman Licio Gelli, was founded in 1966 and explicitly targeted political power in Italy. In the words of Axelrod (1997),

P2 is also grist for the mill of lovers of conspiracy theories, since it really was a conspiracy—arranged in 17 cells with extremely limited contact between each other, all information being funneled to Gelli. Indeed, the sheer scale of the operations of P2 was staggering, and it may be that Gelli was either knowingly or unknowingly a tool of the KGB. . . . The P2 scandal blew up in 1981, in a complex network of subscandals including financial chicanery, espionage, and apparently even the attempted assassination of the Pope. (193)

Others have argued that Gelli was a CIA asset associated with Operation Gladio (Gaut vel Hartman 2010). Gelli was closely associated with both Perón himself and López Rega, the latter of whom joined the P2 (Vicens 1983). Through the P2, an international network of neofascists supported the Triple A's terrorist activities (McSherry 2005). After the coup, news reports linked the P2 to the Umbanda temple that López Rega was associated with in Brazil and posited that the fugitive was being hidden by organizations which “constituyen lo que el periodismo internacional ha denominado ‘La Internacional Negra’, cuyas ramificaciones secretas se extienden por todo el mundo” (*Diario Popular*, September 8, 1976, 6). Information from propaganda organs like *Somos* used the truth of the P2 conspiracy to introduce less certain, but still sinister, doubts about who—or what—may have really been behind López Rega's actions, introducing the possibility that Lopezreguistas and Marxists shared the same goal of destroying Argentina at the service of some greater evil, perhaps coming from the USSR or Libya (Montes de Oca 1977).

However, as was the case with the Triple A itself, in reality the P2 represented a continuity, not a rupture, linking López Rega and the military junta. In 1981, a list of members of

the P2 discovered by the Italian police included not only López Rega, but also Guillermo Suárez Masón, who headed the army intelligence service Batallón de Inteligencia 601 under the military junta, as well as junta member Emilio Massera. Andersen (2000) reports that Licio Gelli quickly abandoned López Rega after his exile and instead welcomed the coup and cultivated close relationships with the new military government.⁴⁷ Yet again, the emphasis on López Rega's esoteric and conspiratorial associations alongside the political violence of the Triple A was used by the military junta to distract from their own actions even as they engaged in the same practices, disguising the continuity of the sinister atmosphere haunting Argentina with an elaborate, propagandistic sleight-of-hand trick.

Cola de lagartija's focus on esotericism allows for an exploration of this complex interplay between secret societies, conspiracies, and paranoia which gives rise to the sinister. It draws attention to the multiplicity of political actors operating clandestinely, in which alliances and enmities are constantly shifting and true power is never what it appears to be on the surface. On the one hand, we have el Brujo and his kingdom in the wetlands, which the military government is content to leave be for the time being, using the uncertainty of el Brujo's location as a bogeyman to threaten the greater population in the capital. The two forces coexist in an uneasy tension: as the government's esoteric adviser, el Brujo is a secret source of power that lurks, threateningly, out of sight, which he himself believes is where true power resides. He reflects in a passage that is worth quoting at length,

Los otros, los que se supone son mis enemigos, no pueden actuar sin mí y me consultan. Usando intermediarios, dando todo tipo de rodeos, pero igual me consultan y yo les sigo el juego: me hago el que no sé y me oculto de esa gente del gobierno, solo permito que emisarios disfrazados me encuentren, me transformo y me entrego a las metamorfosis más complejas para impedir que me encuentren permitiendo siempre que me encuentren

⁴⁷ See Bra (1985) for more information on the P2's association with López Rega and involvement in Argentina.

y alentando los resultados. Me importa manejar los hilos aunque nunca aparezca mi nombre en los periódicos. . . . La opinion pública no me interesa en lo más mínimo y prefiero que crean lo que creen: que me he vuelto invisible, que me ha tragado la tierra. Oficialmente nadie puede encontrarme, ni los gendarmes, ni la policía de mi país, a pesar de que una vez fueron mis colegas y conocen mis mañas, ni Interpol ni la CIA ni el FBI ni la KGB ni ninguna de esas siglas que fueron especialmente creadas para no encontrarme.

Soy invisible por dos razones a cual más meritoria:

—sé camuflarme bajo sus propias narices

—me he vuelto imprescindible para los que imparten las órdenes. (1983: 17)

In el Brujo's own words, the apparent efforts made by the military government and their allies to locate him are an obvious fraud and subterfuge for the purposes of manipulating public opinion, a game that he engages with in order to maintain appearances. In his view, the government cannot maintain their repression and violence without him and his methods.

On their part, while the military distrusts el Brujo and admits that they would rather assassinate him than continue their uneasy alliance, he is nevertheless protected by his terrestrial and esoteric machinations. On the one hand, they recognize that his spiritual knowledge means that “él cuenta con armas que los militares aún no hemos puesto a punto. . . . No me refiero a la inteligencia, me refiero a las armas del espíritu. No debemos olvidar que ese hombre es un vidente, que maneja las ciencias ocultas. . . . Muerto nos representaría una amenaza aún mayor que vivo” (1983: 53). Moreover, as he has hidden some important documents which, if they were to come to light, would damage the government, they instead keep him under constant surveillance, viewing him as a threat to their power. Aware of this surveillance, el Brujo is not beyond actualizing this threat: “sueño en voz alta los más refinados métodos de tortura. En voz alta porque sé que han plagado mi Castillo de micrófonos ocultos y me entretengo así insinuándoles lo que les podría ocurrir si se pasan de vivos” (1983: 50). El Brujo's own paranoia therefore matches that of the military government, as he watches them watching him, maintaining a violent status quo until he decides it is time to make a move for more power.

This violent status quo is the shared religion that holds the alliance between these two powers together. In his wetland kingdom, el Brujo imagines the violence that he unleashed via the Triple A as a ritual sacrifice, describing it as “esa otra sangre vulgar que con generosidad sin límite anduvimos haciendo derramar por ahí para aquietar a los dioses menores, los que interfieren: Correrá un río de sangre” (1983: 26). He begins to construct a pyramid dedicated to himself, relating how Aztec priests sacrificed thousands to inaugurate the Great Temple of Tenochtitlan, imagining with glee, “qué espectáculo sublime, qué belleza, toda esa sangre tiñendo las escalinatas” (1983: 121). This obsession with blood appears throughout the novel, such as when el Brujo reflects, “Lo importante es que el líquido vital no deje de correr, para siempre alimentándome, alimentándome, siempre a mí que soy el sol y con sangre resplandezco” (1983: 249). He demands violence both for its own sake and as a form of ritual sacrifice dedicated to spiritually shoring up his own power. Similarly, the military admits, “Gracias a ese hombre . . . seguimos descubriendo enemigos hasta entre los ciudadanos más irreprochables. Eso fortifica el régimen y justifica la represión que es nuestra manera de expresarnos, nuestra única razón de ser” (1983: 53). Like el Brujo, they know that the only reason for their power, based in Agamben’s state of exception, is to enact violence, and so more violence must be enacted, a new enemy must always be found, to continue justifying state power, in a feedback loop in which citizens become ritual sacrifices on the altar of power.

The importance of this occult necropolitics for shoring up power for both el Brujo and the military government becomes evident when, in el Brujo’s opinion, the latter oversteps its bounds. One day, bodies, which he refers to as “los ahogados” and are a clear reference to the desaparecidos, start appearing in his swamp. He reflects,

Estoy seguro de que me los arrojaron a propósito para decirme en forma indirecta que me habían identificado. Como si eso me importara. . . . Alcancé a ver a los ahogados con la

piel del todo terrosa y muy hinchados. Reconocí mi vieja sugerencia: súbanlos a un helicóptero y tírenlos al río, les ordené en aquel entonces cuando me preguntaron qué hacer con los que se les habían estropeado por demás durante los interrogatorios. Al río, las aclaré muy bien. Nunca a mis lagunas. (1983: 51)

Offended by this invasion of his territory, el Brujo orders the heads chopped off the bodies and sends the heads back to the government. Here, a dark, symbolic power struggle is fought via the bodies of the *desaparecidos*. Citing Agamben (2005) and Mbembe (2003), Robben (2015) has argued that under the Chilean and Argentinian dictatorships the disposal of the bodies of the *desaparecidos* in the open or in mass graves “literally embodied the relationships between territory, necropower and sovereignty for the military rulers, including sovereignty over territorial waters in which bodies were dropped” (55). From this perspective, el Brujo’s offense at the appearance of the *desaparecidos* in what he views to be his sovereign territory derives from what he perceives as a challenge upon his authority by the military government.

I have mentioned previously the other challenge to el Brujo’s authority, in the form of the political resistance dabbling in Umbanda rituals to challenge his esoteric power. It is this threat—which, it must be said, can also be interpreted as coming from yet another secret society, though in this instance their secrecy is due to political repression—which inspires el Brujo to mobilize yet another secret society to protect his power. At first, he seeks his own revenge, sending his inferiors to kidnap people in the capital to find out information about the perpetrators of the spiritual attack against him. However, his efforts are frustrated by the government’s lack of cooperation: “El gobierno central no quiere sumarse a ésta mi campana de exterminio. Alega tener que lidiar con enemigos más tangibles. Enemigos del gobierno, verdaderos enemigos del gobierno, son estos que me apuntan a mí, sabiendo que solo a través de mi persona destruirán el concepto de gobierno” (1983: 87). El Brujo views an attack on his spiritual sovereignty as threatening to the very idea of authoritarian sovereignty altogether, while the military

government is unconcerned so long as they themselves are not attacked. Seeking other alliances, in a process which clearly mirrors López Rega's real-life esoteric manipulations of Peronism for his own gain, el Brujo uses the power of Evita's finger to engage in a form of necromancy, imitating her voice in a radio message to her followers that calls upon them to defend her legacy. Having, in a way, resuscitated the long-dead woman, he claims, "Ahora sí tengo poder sobre la vida y la muerte" (1983: 113). Laying claim to this occult necropower, he directs Evita's followers, a group called the Pueblistas,⁴⁸ to attack his enemies, in an attempt to cause infighting among two resistance groups that, ideologically, should logically be on the same side opposing el Brujo and the government's repression.

The activation of the Pueblistas unleashes a wave of paranoia. For their part, the group is suspicious of a voice from the beyond, and is less easily manipulated than el Brujo anticipates, deciding to investigate and relocate a shrine to Evita rather than attacking the enemies he has directed them towards. In turn, their activities do not escape the notice of the government, which instinctively treats any coordinated activity as suspicious and possible evidence of a conspiracy. An official reports to his superiors,

Se está gestando un complot contra el gobierno. He dado órdenes de que se active la búsqueda de los elementos subversivos, los apátridas, contribuyendo así firme y enérgicamente con las pautas del Proceso de Reorganización Nacional al que estamos abocados. Debemos prevenir y reprender este que podríamos calificar de delito místico, verdadera amenaza en la depuración del Estado. . . . Creí percibir una extraña efervescencia en el pueblo. Parecían hormigas preparándose para alguna actividad sospechosa. (1983: 118-119)

⁴⁸ The name of the group and its dedication to Evita positions it as a combination of the Ejército Revolucionario del Pueblo (ERP) and the Montoneros, guerrilla groups who were decimated by the military in operations both before and after the coup. While the ERP and Montoneros were historically enemies of López Rega, *El Caudillo* and other Peronist groups allied with López Rega also repeatedly recurred to Evita as a symbol to defend their politics and activate followers.

The spiritual power of a secretive group dedicated to Evita's memory and legacy, then, is viewed as a much more material threat to the military government than the Umbandists who attacked el Brujo, perhaps because their activities have become more visible.

Equally threatening to the military government are reports in the foreign press on their own secretive activities. In a telling passage which echoes the conspiratorial projections I have outlined above, they accuse the foreign press of conspiring even as they admit that they, themselves, are conspirators:

Nuevamente la prensa extranjera está publicando infundios sobre nuestro amado país. . . . Dicen que en las últimas semanas hemos hecho desaparecer a más de 200 personas, que torturamos a bebés delante de sus padres para que los padres confiesen, que golpeamos a las embarazadas hasta hacerlas abortar. La rutina de siempre, qué noticia. Por fortuna hemos impartido órdenes para que estos diarios vendidos a la sinarquía internacional no entren al país. (1983: 126)

The information, thought it should be shocking, is actually banal—la rutina de siempre—and the military colludes to censor the news even as they accuse the synarchy of colluding to attack them. El Brujo's advice to the government feeds this paranoia, reminding them, "El enemigo que digita la opinión internacional es ubicuo, está en todas partes, también en nuestras altas casas de estudios y sobre todo bajo nuestro propio piso, en nuestros sótanos. Es un enemigo fecundo, oscuro, de sinuosos recovecos ocultos contra los que sólo yo sé lidiar" (1983: 129). Never mind that he himself is behind the activation of the Pueblistas and spreading his own propaganda; directing the military government's attention toward an occult enemy that conspires at every turn directs their focus away from his own occult machinations.

Meanwhile, with the military government distracted, el Brujo's wetland kingdom annexes the town of Capivarí and declares its independence from Argentina. The officials in the capital, mired in conspiracy and paranoia, are left unable to determine a course of action or adequately measure the threat he might represent to their power, but still acknowledge that el Brujo can help

serve their own purposes. The president points out that, with national and international attention focused on the sorcerer in the wetlands, they can get away with whatever they want, redoubling their repression against the general populace and the Pueblistas. One official, though, believes that el Brujo might actually be a foreign agent acting on behalf of Brazil, or that he could be planning a larger invasion, a much more serious challenge to their sovereignty. Responding to these accusations, however, the president warns, “No caigamos, Contraalmirante, en la misma paranoia que tratamos de implantar a nuestro alrededor” (1983: 240). In this way, we are reminded, secrecy, conspiracy, and paranoia, while something to which all groups are susceptible, are also tools that are deliberately employed to spread a sinister atmosphere in support of authoritarian power.

Occult Terror among Banal Violence

This last point brings us to a key question for this chapter in particular and for this dissertation more broadly: what is accomplished by representing otherwise banal violence in service of authoritarian power as inflected with the esoteric and supernatural? By way of answer, I will return to the excerpt from *Cola de lagartija* which serves as epigraph to this chapter. In this passage, comprising the first conversation between Valenzuela the character and Navoni in the novel, they debate over whether el Brujo is a real threat in league with the government or simply a madman. It is Navoni who insists that the military, while “animals,” are nevertheless rational, with their violence and terror all deriving from “contingencias socioeconómicas” (1983: 18). To Navoni, the paranoia, conspiracy, and sacrificial violence which surrounds them, and that I have outlined in previous sections, are banal aspects of life under authoritarianism. For Valenzuela, on the other hand, it is clear that Argentina, which prides itself on being

extraordinarily well-read and enlightened, has nevertheless left the realm of the rational far behind. To both the character and the writer, one cannot make sense of fascism without resorting to the language of the occult.

This is because the novel's focus on esotericism helps articulate an intangible mood that permeates every aspect of life under the Argentina military junta. In a passage which is worth quoting at length, and which is central for my conceptualization of the sinister, Valenzuela reflects upon the atmosphere that defines these violent times:

Uno trata de no dejarse atrapar en la pringosa red de las supersticiones, pero estos son tiempos pegajosos, oscuros, y la superstición lo va impregnando todo con su fétido olor a estancado, a miasmas. Ideas en descomposición, los nobles preceptos pudriéndose lentamente y el olor a descomposición nos llega por oleadas, nos sofoca. Las sirenas de los patrulleros desprenden a veces esta fetidez, o la mirada turbia de soldados que mañana tarde y noche nos apuntan con sus ametralladoras. Ya ni se puede caminar por las calles de la ciudad sin que a cada rato nos aplasten contra una pared y nos palpen de armas. Nos manosean, nos pegotean al cuerpo el olor a miasmas, a plantas en descomposición. . . . La superstición nos va cercando poco a poco. La superstición tiene por nombre miedo. Un resplandor verdoso se enciende con el crepúsculo y sólo muere al morir la noche. . . . Es la luz de la podredumbre, la claridad del horror. . . . Cada tanto surge un coche misterioso con cuatro hombres dentro que se llevan a uno de nosotros, encapuchado, y nunca mas volvemos a saber de él. ¿Qué nos impide actuar o defendernos, qué nos paraliza? La superstición. La inutilidad de todo esto. El terror. El asco. El cansancio. La necesidad de creer en algo. Los sueños. Las pesadillas. (1983: 76-77)

What Valenzuela refers to as superstition in this passage, and which I have discussed as the esoteric throughout this chapter, is presented here as contributing to the creation of an overwhelming, inescapable web of fear that, through the omnipresent activities of repressive government forces, infiltrates and paralyzes the very being of the Argentine citizen: in my terminology, the sinister mood. The atmosphere of threat is suffocating on a bodily level, and the everyday violence of military patrols and searches create a terror that reaches such a nightmarish extreme as to feel supernatural. This is in productive contrast to Nederman and Goulding (1981),

who, in an analysis of Adorno (1994)'s critique of popular occultism, coin the term "the banality of the beyond" to refer to the way that

The supernatural gives itself away in the dull everydayness of its content. . . . Death holds no terror because it promises no change. The banality of the beyond reflects the banality of everyday existence in advanced industrial society, the individual reduced to pseudo-individualized characteristics through the social mediation of commodities. (330)

Instead, here, the banality of evil is made occult in a gesture of re-enchantment that permits the novel to recast the everyday violence that Argentine citizens are subject to in order to better understand its nuances. While the Argentine military government may not literally be involved in witchcraft, the extremes of their violence, like that of el Brujo and the real-life López Rega, are felt to reach supernatural proportions, so that the only way to draw attention to and articulate the sinister mood that defines Argentine life is by speaking this occult language of terror.

In the capital, Valenzuela's own experiences demonstrate the extent that the sinister cultivates paranoia and fear in those trapped in its web. While writing el Brujo's biography, Valenzuela worries about what will happen if she is searched on the street or her house is raided and the manuscript is discovered. Moreover, this threat seems to come from all sides, not just from the military government. Watching the increased persecution that comes from el Brujo's campaign of terror, Valenzuela despairs as she witnesses "tanta gente perseguida, tantas razzias. Ahora están llegando amenazas de la Triple E y existe el peligro de que retiren al embajador amigo. . . . Ya no sé que hacer" (1983: 199). The Triple E in this instance, an obvious stand-in for the Triple A, references el Brujo's belief that he is protected by three forces, his aide, whom he calls the Egret; his third testicle, called Estrella; and the Dead Woman, Evita.

Relatedly, all language seems to proliferate confusedly so that it now has multiple esoteric significations. When Valenzuela and her companion Navoni communicate on the phone, they speak in a code in which every word signifies something other than its overt meaning.

When Navoni leaves her house one night, for instance, Valenzuela watches to see if he is followed and he calls her from a nearby pay phone to hear her report; believing she has seen the shadow of someone stalking him in the night, she obliquely references this possibility, while nevertheless noting that, “con suerte, sea tan sólo la sombra de mi propio miedo” (1983: 209). As this demonstrates, while there is a genuine possibility that the government may be surveilling Navoni, it is sometimes impossible for Valenzuela to distinguish between a genuine threat and her own paranoia. When she does not hear from him for some time, she becomes lost under threat of the sinister, again describing the feeling as a web: “Tengo mis obsesiones, tengo un miedo que me arrastra. Estoy entretejida en una red de miedos, se entrecruzan por encima de mi cabeza, me encierran como una enorme telaraña de los juncuales, negra y precisa, maléficamente bella” (1983: 217). In this web, time appears to come out of joint, in which, “Como si estuviera presa, el tiempo se me hace chicloso e inasible. Tengo que empezar a medirlo con aparatos, relojes, calendario, esos elementos del dolor” (1983: 229). I will discuss the effect that the sinister has on time more thoroughly in chapter two of this dissertation; for now, suffice it to say that the very foundations upon which daily life stands for Valenzuela are undone by this atmosphere.

Elsewhere, in el Brujo’s kingdom, the sorcerer spreads the sinister via his annexation of the town of Capivarí, wherein his extreme political violence is couched always in a language of occult terror. The town lands on el Brujo’s radar when its newspaper publishes a description of the masked gala ritual with which he inaugurates his pyramid and decides to hold a parodic ceremony of their own, in which they wear monstrous masks and burn him in effigy. El Brujo decides to frighten the citizens into accepting the annexation by shutting off the water that they receive from a nearby dam, pretending as though he has caused a drought by his own magical

powers; when the water fails to shut off as he has arranged, he considers flooding the town instead. He shows not only a lack of concern, but even a certain glee, for the death and devastation that these actions could cause, calling for “Muerte, muerte y muerte . . . a lo que quiera vivir sin mi permiso” (1983: 224) and noting that expanding his territorial power doesn’t even require people to rule over, since “Puedo anexar el poblado con o sin habitantes, con o sin árboles, animales o pájaros” (1983: 193). We see here the logic of what I have termed an occult necropolitics, in which, as I have noted, the power to dictate who must die supersedes the concern for regulating life at all, since el Brujo views his territorial sovereignty as being shored up on the backs of the many dead.⁴⁹

Although his magic trick for enacting environmental devastation and mass death ultimately does not work, el Brujo nevertheless embarks upon a mission to assure his power in

⁴⁹ I would be remiss not to briefly mention the importance of the mention of trees, animals, and birds in the quote above, even though a more extensive ecocritical examination is beyond the scope of this project. This gesture toward the environmental impact of the devastation that el Brujo could wreak by manipulating the dam reminds us that state sovereignty is intimately tied up with the competition for territorial resources, whether this competition occurs between neighboring nations or among private enterprises seeking the right to profit off the exploitation of raw materials or geological features. Moreover, many of the projects dedicated to this resource extraction implicate the death of labor forces operating in dangerous and exploitative conditions, the displacement of indigenous communities and animal populations, and the destruction of natural habitats and indigenous ways of life. In twentieth-century Latin America specifically, large scale projects such as the construction and operation of hydroelectric dams have been accompanied by authoritarian state violence and the violation of human rights even under liberal democratic states. The dam featured in *Cola de lagartija*, the construction of which we are told required negotiations between three countries during which el Brujo claims he was essential, is possibly a reference to the Yacyretá Dam, which was planned in 1973 under Perón’s last government, although construction did not begin until 1983. The construction of multiple dams along the Paraná River were contentious processes, since the river forms a border between Brazil, Paraguay, and Argentina, and any hydroelectric projects would have impacts on all three countries. For more information on the legacy of the Yacyretá Dam, see *Infobae* (2017) and *La Vaca* (2007). For more information on the contentious history of dam projects during this time period, see Darnton (2014). For more information on the connection between authoritarian violence and hydroelectric projects, see Saramago (2022).

Capivarí through practices of death and violence that utilize the occult in both senses of the word. He disappears the town's mayor, who is also the publisher of its only newspaper, and takes over the media outlet as a propaganda organ specializing in esotericism. About the mayor's disappearance, he notes that in the town, "Dicen que fue desaparecido por las fuerzas del mal, imagínese. Es cierto que nuestros hombres estuvieron un poco desprolijos: dejaron olvidada una mano del alcalde en el granero donde se procedió al interrogatorio" (184).⁵⁰ In this way, the mayor's ultimate fate of torture and murder is partially hidden, allowing the populace to speculate about the extreme violence he was subject to and imagine that an evil, supernatural force must have been involved to commit such a crime. This reinforces el Brujo's ultimate goal of spreading a sinister atmosphere throughout his new territory. He celebrates this new extension of his powers of terror, imagining himself as an evil force stalking the streets of the town and using the proliferation of the sinister to broaden his power all the way to the capital:

Quiero que me vean, quiero que me huelan y quiero a la vez verlos, tocarlos, olerles ese tufo a terror que rezuma de ellos y que es acre y picante como el olor de las fieras. El olor a miedo de los otros me estimula y excita. Pueblo de Capivarí que no me teme, emprenderé un sutil tormento para poder olfatearlos en el aire. Husmearé por las noches, me pasearé por las calles solitarias y oscuras —habrá toque de queda— y de dentro de las casas me llegarán los efluvios. . . . Correrá el río de sangre que ya empezó a formarse y navegando por este río provocado por mí llegaré hasta la Capital y me pasearé de noche por las calles solitarias y oscuras. (1983: 235)

As we can see particularly through the mention of the curfew in this passage, the everyday repressive tools of authoritarianism are meant to contribute to a terror so otherworldly as to become associated with the occult forces of evil. Trapped and isolated in their homes, the citizenry will become overwhelmed by this sense of being stalked through the night and

⁵⁰ This particular phrasing has resonances with a recurring refrain of López Rega himself. An article published on July 16, 1980, in *La Semana* noted, "Esa manía de López Rega de echar culpas a las fuerzas ocultas del mal fue siempre una constante en sus reflexiones políticas" (59-60). The article quoted an anonymous Peronist leader as stating ironically, "¿Quién mejor que Lopecito para expresar una de las formas más despiadadas de las fuerzas del mal?" (61).

threatened by forces unknown, promising them violence and death and delighting in the scent of their fear. In this way, the real-life terror enacted by López Rega's Triple A and the state terrorism that followed the coup can be seen as creating a sinister atmosphere that became occult by association.

As I have discussed previously, the only way to survive and begin to understand the sinister in this instance is to learn to speak its occult language. Before Navoni disappears, he insists to Valenzuela that they must begin reading Capivari's now esoteric newspaper, *La Voz*. While it provides no real news—neither do, Navoni insists, the rest of the newspapers, as they are heavily censored—he tells her that “Trae otras cosas. Es hora de que aprendamos a leer entre líneas” (1983: 198). This act of reading between the lines can be interpreted as a way of “reading otherwise,” a strategy that Karen Elizabeth Bishop has advocated for in her analysis of dictatorship literature. For our purposes, Navoni's insistence demonstrates how an attention to the esotericism that I have examined throughout this chapter in the form of the secretive, the rumored, and the conspiratorial can provide us with a way of understanding what has been censored and repressed under authoritarian violence and the sinister.

When Valenzuela's attention turns to *La Voz*, she finds that the classified ads and articles advertising esoteric services and describing spells are full of hidden messages, much like the coded language with which she and Navoni are forced to communicate. By speaking el Brujo's occult language, they are able to begin to subvert his power. Believing that he understands the code, el Brujo begins following a recipe published in the newspaper that will transform him into a woman so that he can impregnate himself with his own son—an act that will ultimately lead to his destruction: with this manipulation, el Brujo becomes the one trapped in the agency of hidden forces that he cannot identify. Moreover, a secret message from Navoni directs Valenzuela to

another newspaper, which has just published a photo in which Navoni, recognizable to her although he is wearing a mask, himself holds up a second photo of el Brujo. The sorcerer is furious that his face has been exposed to the public, and begins searching for a traitor in his midst. The paranoia that plagues Valenzuela and her companions is here turned against el Brujo, who recognizes that the image has the power to undo the sinister atmosphere of mystery that he has carefully cultivated around his person, much as the real-life López Rega did. As the President of the military government points out, “Así el público no lo sigue creyendo invisible y omnipotente. Ahora lo sabe de carne y hueso, no más, y bastante envejecido” (1983: 241). By making el Brujo visible, the photo therefore becomes a way to dissipate the sinister atmosphere surrounding his violence by undermining some of the supernatural myths that surrounds this figure.

However, Valenzuela ultimately recognizes that the sinister goes far beyond el Brujo as an individual. She debates whether she could simply kill him off in her biography and be done with him, but, as we will see in the following section, this authoritative appropriation of language would ultimately be nothing more than wish fulfillment. El Brujo, while exemplifying the same occult necropolitics employed by the military government, is also a distraction from the wider issue at hand, as Navoni warns us:

No caigas en la trampa que nos tiende el gobierno. Es muy fácil tener al tipo ése de chivo expiatorio y hacer la vista gorda a todo lo que está ocurriendo a nuestro alrededor. Creo que los males que aquejan a nuestro pobre país dependen de elementos infinitamente más complejos que la vida o muerte de un solo hombre, por más brujo que sea. De un hombre que quizá ni siquiera existe, un hombre que es como la personificación de la histeria colectiva y sus miedos indefinidos. . . . Hacernos creer en la existencia de un enemigo descentralizado es la mejor manera de obligarnos a desplazar nuestro foco de atención. Estos militares son muy hábiles. Han digitado a la perfección esta campaña de rumores y trascendidos sobre la longevidad o resurrección o reencarnación del brujo para hundirnos en los pantanosos terrenos de la superstición y la leyenda donde no es para nada fácil hacer pie. (1983: 43-44)

As this passage demonstrates, and as I have argued throughout this chapter, the media discourse that focused on López Rega and his esoteric practices throughout the dictatorship can therefore be seen both as a method of distraction from the military junta's very same violent strategies and a way to proliferate the sinister through a focus on the occult forces that López Rega was seen to embody. The web of rumor, esoteric practices, secret societies, paranoia, and accusations of conspiracy that was woven by political actors during the 1960s and 1970s in Argentina was enough to confuse and paralyze anyone, leaving room for the dictatorship to enact their own necropolitics that seemed to be conducted by the forces of evil. It may have been absurd, but it was true; Horacio de Dios expressed as much in an analysis of López Rega's legacy in 1985,

Ahora nos reímos al releer sus libros esotéricos o los discursos o declaraciones delirantes, pero en aquél momento nos tenía temblando.

¿Era sólo miedo?

El miedo no es tonto y había motivos para tenerlo. Sólo un puñado se atrevió a hacerle frente y tuvieron que irse del país, o recibir amenazas o atentados.

En esos años nos sumergimos en el miedo, un miedo que nos quedó bajo la piel como un reflejo condicionado y que explicó muchas de las cosas que vinieron luego y que aceptamos pasivamente.

Era un loco, y un loco peligroso. (np)

A serious attention toward the sinister mood allows authors to begin to untangle this web of paralyzing terror, understand the role of the esoteric in the proliferation of authoritarian violence, and overcome challenges of representation for addressing the fear at the heart of this experience of dictatorship.

Conclusion

At the end of part two of *Cola de lagartija*, rather than continuing to engage in an authoritative and authoritarian narrative struggle with el Brujo, Valenzuela chooses to abandon the role of narrator and instead become a full protagonist in her novel, hoping that by no longer

writing the biography of el Brujo, she can effectively shut down the power that he has gained through narrative. In a ritualistic gesture at the end of the section, she ceases writing through the act of signing her name and putting down the pen, addressing her subject, “Chau, brujo, *felice morte*” (1983: 246).⁵¹ However, this gesture indicates neither the end of the story nor a rejection of the promise and project of writing or language as such, but rather a more thorough commitment to a type of literature that denies the existence of authoritative narratives and embraces the truth that arises from the unreal.⁵² If, as Guest (1990) argues, el Brujo’s authority rests in the patriarchal subjectivity as expressed through language, to the point that he believes that his metaphors can become reality, then Valenzuela’s letting go of narrative control signifies a recognition that “metaphors cannot directly mimic reality, nor can they be made real. Meaning is always deferred, never exactly present or absent but found in the ‘différance’” (16).

This includes embracing narratives of uncertainty, doubt, and rumor, a commitment that is evident in the question marks that accompany the title of the third section.⁵³ In part three, Valenzuela, accompanied by Navoni and an Umbanda priest, appear as three mysterious

⁵¹ Guest (1990) proposes that the signature at the end of part two indicates the signing of a contract, since at the beginning of part two Valenzuela makes a promise to the reader, and that the signature thus invites the reader’s own participation in the act of interpretation via the implied need for a countersignature.

⁵² Mangin (2010) reads the end of this section as a “representación ficcional de la salida al exilio,” and argues that Valenzuela the character’s concerns about her proximity to terror as related to the debates which occurred among political dissidents about whether it was more useful to remain and continue to write from within the country or to work from exile (220). This is an apt argument, although a more thorough engagement with the role of Valenzuela the author’s exile is beyond the scope of this project.

⁵³ Potvin (1997) points out how the interrogatory specifically “raises considerable doubts about the principle of the Holy Trinity recreated previously by El Brujo,” (218) undermining his authoritative religious discourse. Guest (1990), on her part, observes that there are multiple trinities throughout the novel, but “there is always one element in each ‘trinity’ which decenters, or interrupts, the other two” (58). Craig (2005) interprets the title as referring to the trinity involved in el Brujo’s reproductive rituals, in which he is simultaneously mother, father, and son, but argues that the question marks indicate the uncertainty of its success.

fugitives dressed in white who journey deep into el Brujo's kingdom, the fictional land of allegory and hidden meanings, a choice which seems to acknowledge that el Brujo cannot be engaged on the terrain of fact, only fiction, and that understanding the sinister requires going to the very heart of its esoteric terror. In the town of Capivarí, el Brujo has ordered the townspeople to sew an enormous tent of white cloth, which will cover the mirrors on the interior of his pyramid as he resides there to gestate his son. Unexpectedly, the esoteric project of sewing the tent becomes a ritual of mass solidarity in the making, in which the feminized act of sewing replaces writing with the orality of prayer:

Coser es una forma de oración. Rezar es estar uniendo con puntada invisible los trapos sueltos del Misterio. Los capivareños rezan con las manos, con el tierno vaivén de las agujas. De alguna forma se hermanan con quienes en el sur, río abajo, rezan ante el nuevo Santuario de la Muerta, en la Basílica, y piden secretamente por la paz (mientras vuelan las balas en el sur, mientras las sirenas y las razzias y las desapariciones). (1983: 269)

The dedication to the collective that emerges from this project not only unites the people of the northern wetlands with those who are persecuted throughout the rest of the country, but also is such that none of the townspeople give up the fugitives even when tortured by military agents.

This is not the first time that the residents of Capivarí have proven capable of such bravery, with Mangin (2010) highlighting that, in the parodic ritual where the townspeople burn el Brujo in effigy, “la parodia es un instrumento de resistencia colectiva cuya violencia semiótica se vuelve contra la omnipotencia del dictador” (224). Guest (1990) likewise argues that “Parody is enabling for the marginal because it undercuts the profound self-seriousness of western thought” (30). As such, Guest (1990) insists that the use of black and grotesque humor throughout the novel simultaneously subverts hierarchies and “unsettles the reader” (32), resulting in situations in which “That which is feared becomes farcical” and “laughter exorcises fear” (33), but in such a way that allows for not just distancing, but critical reflection and

affective engagement. For authors like Valenzuela, the way out through the sinister seems to be examining and utilizing its most unsettling aspects while, through strategies such as black humor and collective resistance, undermining its seemingly omniscient and omnipresent threat.

Furthermore, this collective represents a coming together of disparate characters who have heretofore formally fragmented in the novel. Mangin (2010) observes,

Aparte de las relaciones por emisarios interpuestos entre los militares y el Brujo, no se produce ninguna comunicación inmediata entre los fragmentos, y por consiguiente tampoco entre los grupos sociales, imagen de una sociedad dividida y hasta fracturada. Sin embargo, todos los actores interactúan unos con otros a distancia, revelando como en huecograbado el funcionamiento de una red de órdenes e informaciones policiales, de denuncia, espionaje, rumores que encierra la sociedad entera en un entretejido de oposiciones dicotómicas y paranoicas. (218)

In contraposition to this division engendered by the sinister and the solitary battle for narrative authority that Valenzuela had been waging throughout the novel, here multiple parties join a collective that works together to create a new history for Argentina.

Part of this collective is the old woman who once performed a cleansing ceremony for el Brujo, almost sucking all of the evil out of him. She replaces some of the white cloth that is meant to be sewn into the tent with one that she has woven herself, incorporating her own esoteric practices so as to disrupt el Brujo's authoritative attempt to guarantee his own power. In collaboration with the fugitives, who volunteer to hang up the tent blindfolded—since no other person can be allowed to view the mirrors after they have been impregnated with el Brujo's own reflection—the old woman sets a curse on el Brujo. She has woven the dead into the cloth, and he begins to be haunted by the ghosts of his victims, his past finally catching up with him: “Los reconozco, uno por uno. A aquél le hice arrancar las uñas y después le hice amputar las manos y ahora me amenaza con los muñones como si fueran puños. . . . Siento que es a mí a quien están ahora desmembrando los verdugos y soy yo quien recibe las descargas electricas” (1983: 285-

286). Through this esoteric act of conjuring, the sinister has been turned against el Brujo, and for the first time he begins to know terror, not as the violent pleasure he has experienced from inflicting it upon others, but as the paralyzing fear of being caught in the agency of an omnipresent and threatening power. In this way, it is only by fully embracing the truth embodied in the sinister mood and the power of collective, alternative narratives that *Cola de lagartija* is able to overcome its challenges of representation and authority and exorcize el Brujo from the national imaginary.

Historically, after eleven years on the run, José López Rega was finally located and arrested in the United States in 1986 and extradited to Argentina, where he would die in prison awaiting trial in 1989. James Neilson, writing for *La Semana* on March 19, 1986, reflected on the complications that the now-mythical figure's return to Argentina would pose for the post-dictatorial nation:

Es, más bien, que López Rega encarna una parte importante del pasado argentino que nadie quiere examinar de cerca. López Rega es, en cierto modo, una suerte de secreto de familia, el pariente criminal, enviciado y probablemente insano que los demás preferirían olvidar porque temen que ellos mismos hayan heredado taras semejantes. (3)

Valenzuela's attention to el Brujo in *Cola de lagartija* three years earlier had already demonstrated the necessity of examining this still-recent past closely, looking for resemblances and sympathies, dragging out the country's dark family secrets into the light. However, the novel also acknowledged the complexity of any attempt to do so, especially since, as it repeatedly warns, an overwhelming focus on el Brujo and his ultimate undoing ran the risk of allowing the many others responsible for authoritarian violence to continue to lurk, unseen, in the shadows.

In the end of the novel, el Brujo is destroyed by the miraculous birth that he has attempted to engender, when his impregnated third testicle, rather than producing his son, simply bursts. A long thread of blood trickles from the top of his pyramid in the wetlands, all the way to

the streets of the capital, where passes by Valenzuela and the Umbanda priest. However, despite their role in this undoing, their mood is anything but celebratory. Recognizing that overthrowing one tyrant does not destroy an authoritarian structure, Valenzuela can only comment ironically,

Mire, por fin se materializa el célebre río de sangre. Ahí llega. Con un poco de suerte ahora sale el presidente de la Casa de Gobierno, patina en el río de sangre, se rompe la crisma contra el cordón de la vereda y ¡oh gloria! por fin sabremos la paz. Los veinte años de paz que promete la profecía. (1983: 301-302)

However, in an equally dark commentary, the priest casts the power of the prophecy into doubt:

Lo dudo mucho. Las tiranías ya no vienen como antes. Ahora tienen piezas de repuesto. Un presidente cae y otro ya está listo para reemplazarlo. Generales no nos faltan.

Además, este hilo no puede ser el tan mentado río de sangre, porque entonces en lugar de veinte años nos tocarían apenas veinte minutitos de paz. (1983: 302)

The novel's conclusion therefore makes clear that authoritarianism and political violence are not destroyed merely by drawing our attention to one facet of it, nor even by one concentrated effort of collective action, as occurred in Capivarí. Moreover, while an attention toward the esotericism, paranoia, conspiracy, and occult necropolitics that characterized Argentina during this time period and appears throughout the novel can help us to understand the intangible atmosphere of the sinister that resists mimetic representation, we are reminded that esotericism remains ambivalent: a prophecy or access to secret knowledge is not a guarantee, and can easily be mobilized by figures such as el Brujo/López Rega who seek to shore up their own power.

Part Two

The Sinister and the Spectral:

Haunted Houses and Clandestine Detention Centers

Chapter Two

The Detention Center as Haunted House in *Crónica de una fuga* (dir. Israel Adrián Caetano, 2006)

Indiscernible whispers, disembodied screams, peeling paint, rotting beams on a decaying wraparound porch: these clichés of the haunted house are familiar to horror connoisseurs and casual viewers alike. However, in the Argentine film *Crónica de una fuga/Chronicle of an Escape* (2006), directed by Israel Adrián Caetano (1969-),¹ the haunted setting—an isolated, dilapidated mansion in the suburbs of Buenos Aires—does not signal a supernatural presence, as might be expected. Rather, *Crónica*'s haunted house hosts a decidedly human threat: it is a clandestine detention center where political prisoners are detained and tortured.

Crónica de una fuga (2006), as the title would suggest, tells the true story of an escape. The film centers around Claudio Tamburrini (1954-), a university student who was abducted by the Argentine government in 1977 under suspicion of being linked to a guerrilla group. It depicts his 121-day incarceration at the Mansión Seré (also known by the code name Atila), a clandestine detention center in a suburb of Buenos Aires. Claudio and three other men, certain that they would otherwise be killed, managed to escape the house and flee to (at least temporary) safety. Several of the men later described their experiences in testimonies against the military government in 1985. The film's plot is based on Tamburrini's recounting of the events in the

¹ Caetano was born in Uruguay and moved to Argentina at the age of 16, situating him as a member of the generation whose childhoods were affected by extreme violence and repression—although they likely do not remember many of the details—but who came of age after the end of the dictatorship. He is credited with being a major figure in the New Argentine Cinema movement, particularly due to his features *Pizza, birra, faso* (1998, co-directed with Bruno Stagnaro) and *Bolivia* (2001). For more information on New Argentine Cinema, see Andermann (2011).

testimonial novel *Pase libre: La fuga de la Mansión Seré* (2002) and the account of Guillermo Fernández, one of the other escaped prisoners.

Initial reviews of *Crónica de una fuga* identified it as a welcome break from earlier films focused around the Argentine dictatorship, dramas which critics described as overly moralistic or didactic.² In contrast, they lauded *Crónica*'s use of conventions from horror, thriller, and even crime films, which they argued lent suspense to the narrative and served to convey a sense of violence and oppression to the viewer.³ The stakes of this discussion of moralism and didacticism in Argentine post-dictatorial film are interesting, though a detailed analysis is beyond the scope of this project. What is relevant is that critics of the film have often relied on erroneous, though unfortunately oft-held assumptions about the horror genre, particularly that it is somehow amoral or apolitical, in their analyses.⁴ On the contrary, Veronica Garibotto (2018) argues that *Crónica de una fuga* is not the first film to use scenes that generate fear or terror to depict experiences

² Fabián Soborón (2011) writes, "*Crónica* es la primera película sobre la dictadura que logra escapar del didactismo y de la enseñanza moral" (np), and Alfredo Dillon (2019) concludes, "Aunque la historia pueda conmover al espectador y logre su identificación con el protagonista, la puesta en escena tiende a la suspensión de la moralidad: de esa manera, Caetano elude el sensacionalismo y la espectacularización, opciones que hubieran contribuido a naturalizar esa violencia a los ojos del espectador" (46). Schwarzböck (2007) similarly discusses horror as a genre that allows for a suspension of the normal state of morality, replaced by a morality of exception (25-35). See Risner (2018) for further discussion of critical reception of the film (137-138).

³ Brescia (2009) argues, "la cinematografía de tomas angulares y color de film noir y la banda de sonido atonal crean una atmósfera de opresión que plantea las formas de la violencia como esencial a la película" (235).

⁴ Schwarzböck (2007), for example, assumes that horror fans identify with the villain when contending that part of the film's movement away from moralism is related to attempting to tell a story in which there are neither heroes nor villains. She also argues that horror is the only genre that must be looked at from beyond the limits of morality, since its gruesome depictions are often approached with pleasure by fans (25-35). However, these assertions are not a given: both are actually subject to longstanding debate particularly among feminist film scholars, from Laura Mulvey (1975)'s field-defining work "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" to Cynthia Freeland (1996)'s "Feminist Frameworks for Horror Films." For more on the discussion of viewing horror films, pleasure, and identification, see Pinedo (1997) and Freeland (2000).

under the dictatorship, but that by the time of its release, these same images that were criticized as moralistic or oversimplifications in, for example, *La noche de los lápices* (dir. Héctor Olivera, 1986), are now conventions that convey a more recognizable emotion that reflects a social consensus (61-69). Under this view, critics who celebrate the lack of moralism or didacticism in the film as compared to other post-dictatorial representations are likely picking up on the fact that a moral condemnation of events no longer feels so urgently necessary decades later as it did only shortly after the return to democracy.

Critics also celebrated the directorial choice to have scenes of torture take place off-screen, a strategy that differed notably from the mid-2000s tendency in horror films towards including graphic, gory depictions of violence, as exemplified by so-called “torture porn” films like *Saw* (dir. James Wan, 2004), *The Devil’s Rejects* (dir. Rob Zombie, 2005), and *Hostel* (dir. Eli Roth, 2005).⁵ By allowing violence to take place off-screen and leaving the grisly details—and the fear they evoke—to the viewer’s imagination, Jonathan Risner (2018) notes that *Crónica* harkens back to more classical horror conventions, which depended largely on the suggestion of violence rather than direct depictions of it. He also argues that such a choice “signals *Crónica*’s ethical grounding” as a film that is conscious of the possible dangers of diminishing the impact of representations of violence by over-exposure (2018: 145).

Several critics have highlighted the use of other horror techniques and tropes in the film, though conclusions about their significance have varied. Risner (2018) concludes that the use of codes associated with horror “are invoked and refined to forge cinematic spaces that project characters’ mental state over being kidnapped and detained,” though he argues that ultimately the movie was only able to use horror to represent the Dirty War because its use of suggested rather

⁵ On torture porn, see Edelstein (2006); Graham-Dixon (2018); and Kerner (2015).

than represented violence “tak[es] the teeth out . . . of a genre that often forces a confrontation with uncomfortable realities” (141). Dillon (2019) analyzes the testimonial novel written by Tamburrini in comparison with the film and argues that this use of horror conventions to describe the experience of terror was already present in the source material. Schwarzböck (2007), in her critical study of the film, points to the state of exception that defines horror and makes its conventions particularly apt for representing the concentration camp and site of torture, which are notably interruptions in the normal course of everyday life. In contrast, Garibotto (2018) argues against critics who identify the use of horror tropes as a major break with earlier films depicting the dictatorship, asserting that the representations of terror are not fundamentally different in *Crónica* as compared to the earlier *La noche de los lápices* (dir. Héctor Olivera, 1986), but rather that these images have become conventional and the emotion they evoke has become more legible for Argentine audiences over the intervening decades.

Without a doubt, the Gothic horror conventions appearing in the film have captured the attention of critics since *Crónica*'s release. However, it is crucial to take this influence more fully into account to unpack the implications of *Crónica*'s haunted setting. This article therefore differs from critics such as Risner (2018) because of what he identifies that Gothic conventions do in this film. Where Risner argues that Gothic horror makes the film's depiction of the dirty war more “palatable” (2018: 148), I demonstrate that the film accurately represents the indirect and pervasive nature of Argentine state terror and the sinister mood as being distinctly Gothic in its dependence upon the strategic use of concealment and violation to convey a constant sense of being under threat. Like Garibotto (2018), I am interested in the way that these conventions, particularly those related to setting, incite feelings in its audience. However, where she focuses on the distinctions between affect and emotion and argues that representations of the dictatorship

from 1986 onward have become solidified in the cultural consciousness, I assert that a much longer history of literary and filmic conventions is at play here, creating an aesthetic and experience for the viewer that will depend greatly on their own relationship to the historical events at hand.

In this chapter, I argue that *Crónica de una fuga* activates its audiences' familiarity with literary and filmic Gothic conventions in order to make legible the sinister atmosphere that arose from the experience of political terror under the Argentine dictatorship. The film further demonstrates through its haunted setting the Gothic nature of the strategies that the Argentine military government used to impose its regime of terror, which had a lasting effect throughout national space and across the subsequent decades. An examination of the clandestine detention center as haunted house in *Crónica de una fuga* helps us understand more widely how contemporary film depicts and makes affectively legible national experiences of political terror for audiences that did not experience them directly and exposes the nature of power under dictatorial regimes.

This chapter will first examine how *Crónica de una fuga* utilizes Gothic aesthetics to portray the detention center as a haunted house, evoking the historical and cultural resonance of the Gothic transnationally and in Latin American specifically in order to convey the sinister mood. Next, it will unpack the implications of this portrayal, which demonstrate how the Argentine dictatorship used strategies such as concealment and violation so that the sinister might radiate outward through national space. Finally, it will reflect upon how *Crónica* portrays the haunted detention centers' impact on time and the role of memory in combatting the dictatorship's sinister legacy.

The Haunted Mansion

The haunted house of *Crónica de una fuga* is informed both by longstanding, transnational Gothic horror conventions and by the way these conventions have been adapted to local realities and new historical contexts. Well-known tropes, familiar to audiences from Gothic literature or horror cinema, take on a new life when fitted to attend to specific circumstances; national traumas are expressed in ways that tap into transnational communities of meaning. Use of well-known Gothic aesthetics like the haunted house allows for “la posibilidad de codificar, de narrar una historia mediante el lenguaje cinematográfico haciendo uso de fórmula conocidas que transportan significado y permiten hacer crítica social sin un carácter explícitamente instructivo ni moralizante” (Cedeño Rojas 2015: 67). This adaptive use of genre is consistent with a recent trend in Argentine cinema in which industrial filmmakers have adopted and hybridized transnational genres, making films more accessible to a global market (Shaw 2007: 71) and certain stories “culturally legible to audiences” both domestic and international (Navitski 2012: 360), while functioning as “shortcuts to tell autochthonous stories” (Alvaray 2013: 69). More than a shortcut, genre aesthetics can also be part of an essential strategy for representing difficult subject matter. For example, in *El secreto de sus ojos/The Secret in Their Eyes* (Juan José Campanella 2009), the use of hybrid genres “confronts the difficulty of how to speak about or remember the national past” (Tierney 2018: 152) of violent dictatorship.

Similarly, *Crónica de una fuga* uses the Gothic haunted house to address the incomprehensible political terror of the clandestine detention center. The film strategically evokes associations with the Freudian uncanny, trauma, settler colonialism, past violence and present uncertainty to convey and make legible the atmosphere of terror that characterized the

last Argentine dictatorship and to highlight how the dictatorship concealed human rights abuses and violated both public and private space. The violence and trauma of imprisonment, torture, disappearances, murders and other abuses haunt *Crónica*'s filmic space, reaching towards us from a past that the authoritarian state sought to erase into a present still attempting to reckon with this sinister exercise of power.

As to be expected with the Gothic, in which setting is a key convention, the story and on-screen representation of the Mansión Seré looms large throughout *Crónica de una fuga*: notably, most of its run time focuses not on the titular escape, but on the prisoners' experiences within the detention center itself. Whereas the first ten minutes detail Claudio's kidnapping and the final thirty show the escape, the imprisonment in the Mansión fills up a full hour of the film. Their experiences as political prisoners, detained under suspicion of being involved in leftist guerrilla activities, and the fear and desperation that characterized their detention, are centered; their escape is neither dramatized nor heroic, but a desperate, vulnerable act of fleeing from a source of terror.

Located at 48 Blas Parera Street, Partido de Morón, Buenos Aires Province, the Mansión Seré operated as a clandestine detention center under the Air Force from December 1976 until March 1978. One of around 700 such centers where political prisoners were held, tortured, and often ultimately killed from 1976-1983, the Mansión Seré—sometimes referred to as Quinta Seré—is described in the *Nunca Más* report as “Casa antigua de dos plantas, rodeada de parque, en las ochavas, puertas y ventanas altas, con celosías siempre cerradas. En el primer piso, cocina con luz natural, baño con bañera y varias habitaciones más. Actualmente abandonada y semiderruida” (Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas (CONADEP) 1984b: n.p.). The report further explains that Juan Seré, an immigrant who made his fortune in cattle ranching,

built the mansion in the nineteenth century in a European style. According to a chronology by Silvana Fabri (2019), the city of Buenos Aires bought the home and grounds in 1949 to use as an employee recreation site, and in 1966 it became officers' quarters for the VII Air Brigade of Morón.⁶ The military abandoned and set the building on fire after the escape in 1978, and its ruins were left looming over the neighborhood until the late 1990s. The house's history, from the European style evoking the traditional Gothic to its later state of ruin, seems, in the words of Maribel Cedeño Rojas (2015), "salida de un relato de terror gótico" (53).

As other critics and scholars have noted, the Mansión Seré of *Crónica de una fuga* is haunted.⁷ To be clear, this is not to say that ghosts walk through walls and terrify the prisoners as they are tortured. Rather, *Crónica de una fuga* utilizes a horror aesthetic common to haunted house films deriving from the Gothic tradition, evoking well-known conventions to imbue its setting with the sinister mood. Throughout the film, though the terror and fear that threatens Claudio and the other prisoners quite clearly originates with the political operators that have imprisoned them, the sinister is associated not only with these individuals, but also with the building that is the site of their captivity. The trauma of the violence hidden within its walls finds representation in the sinister materiality of the house itself.

The hauntedness of the house is conveyed via a familiar aesthetic that relies on both classic Gothic tropes, which have influenced contemporary horror, and the use of visual conventions of horror films. Our first glimpse of the Mansión comes in pieces: the car carrying the abducted Claudio arrives at a gate overgrown with foliage and enters a long drive. Various

⁶ See Fabri (2019) for a chronology and in-depth discussion of the space of the house.

⁷ In his review, Brescia (2009) refers to it as "una especie de casa Usher para nuestros tiempos" (53); Soborón (2011: n.p.) and Dillon (2019: 45) similarly refer to the house as Gothic, while Schwarzböck (2007) includes a still shot from the film of the house with the amusing caption, "¿La Mansión Seré o la casa de *Psicosis*?" (34).

close-up shots at low, skewed angles show portions of the house (Fig. 8): this Dutch Angle is common to horror films and usually indicates the presence of the abnormal by disorienting the viewer (Cedeño Rojas 2015: 52). The close-ups, which initially prevent a totalizing view of the Mansión, both reflect what a prisoner might glimpse out of the corner of a blindfold and deny the viewer the familiarity and comprehension that a typical establishing shot would otherwise allow. They also indicate a fragmentation of space that evokes both isolation and dismemberment.



Figure 8. *Shot of the front door of the Mansión Seré using a Dutch Angle. All film stills from Crónica de una fuga/Chronicle of an Escape (Caetano, 2006) unless otherwise noted.*

Finally, the car arrives up the drive and the captors lead Claudio inside. Here, we receive the first full shot of the house, though still at a low, off-center angle (Fig. 9). Though no longer in pieces, the shot is not comforting: rather, the Mansión appears imposing, and Claudio looks minuscule as it swallows him up through its dark, forbidding door. Though the sun is out, the colors are bland rather than warm: the sun exists only to go down on that house, leaving it in darkness. If its outward appearance was not enough to convince us that the house was the site of horror, we hear pained, echoing yells as Claudio is dragged through the door: Claudio's screams as he is strapped down to be tortured in the following scene. The house's imposing nature, its

exterior hauntedness, is directly keyed to the torture taking place inside. Terror occurs in a place that is outwardly terrifying.



Figure 9. *The first shot depicting the Mansión Seré in its entirety, again using a Dutch Angle. Note the dilapidated façade and washed-out colors.*

The Mansión's appearance is further notable for several reasons. Like its real-life counterpart, it has tall doors and windows and an aristocratic, European air: as Cedeño Rojas (2015) describes it, “se escenifica como una mansión antaño aristocrática que está habitada pese a que su estado es inhabitable y sus habitantes son ‘invisibles’” (55). However, that is where the resemblance largely ends (Fig. 10). Unlike the historical Mansión Seré, the film version, a multi-story house with wraparound porches and imposing columns, appears decidedly more Gothic—as Schwarzböck (2007) points out, much like the house from the Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960). In an interview, the director reveals this resemblance as purposeful, also citing John Carpenter and George Romero as influences. He also notes that Guillermo Fernández, the former prisoner who consulted on the film, had commented that the detention center had seemed like an asylum because of the nature of the psychological torture being conducted there (Schwarzböck 2007). However sinister the Mansión Seré was historically, here it is quite deliberately dialled up to extremes by evoking similar settings (the aristocratic mansion, the asylum, various dark,

mysterious, claustrophobic, and/or antiquated spaces) from Gothic convention and other horror films, allowing Caetano to rely upon a viewer's past experiences of the haunted house and its affective impact in order to establish the detention center as a locus of sinister terror.



Figure 10. *The façade of the historical Mansión Seré, in ruins, c. 1985. Courtesy of Archivo Documental de la Dirección de Derechos Humanos del Municipio de Morón.*

The Gothic aesthetic carries through to the mansion's interior as well. Initial interior scenes rarely feature wide shots of the rooms, and cuts prevent the audience from gaining a sense of the detention center's layout. Even as the camera repeatedly denies the viewer establishing shots, contributing to this feeling of fragmentation, it also frames prisoners and guards uncomfortably close. The house therefore appears internally fragmented, segmented off within itself, while conveying the anxiety that some further threat or source of terror may be lurking just out of frame. Simultaneously, these close-ups focus our attention upon the actors' emotional and bodily responses. In one instance, the camera follows the guards and torturers down the hall closely as they open doors where we can only briefly glimpse the partial forms of tied-up prisoners. The viewer is made aware of a proliferation of abused forms, each just barely in view,

suggesting but not elaborating upon the extent and nature of tortures that take place behind closed doors. Anything could be happening just off screen; the viewer, like the prisoner, is denied a comprehensive view that would allow them to make sense of their mysterious and threatening surroundings.

As Schwarzböck (2007) points out, this limited visual field, which reflects the experience of the blindfolded prisoner (who can only see partially, if at all), serves to create a sense of “lo ominoso,” a sinister threat felt by the viewer due to not only what can be seen, but also what cannot. Relatedly, more than just signaling an ethical choice about how or whether to depict torture, as Risner (2018) argues, the choice of having torture take place off-screen contributes here to evoking the sinister in a particularly Gothic way: it is what is unknown, what we cannot see, what we can detect only indirectly—through sound or its consequences upon the tortured person’s body or facial expression—that is deeply frightening. The detention center is both legible as a site of horror presented via familiar conventions—we can imagine what is going on there, even if we cannot see it—and yet remains impossible to assess or comprehend directly. This inaccessibility is, in fact, analogous to the experience of terror under dictatorship for many Argentine citizens: while most were not targeted, an indirect awareness of political repression was enough to spread the sinister mood throughout the general population.

Even as the clandestine detention center conceals the government’s activities from the public eye, the film’s use of lighting contrasts also presents it as invasive and violating. In one shot, back lighting conceals the torturers’ identities, turning them into faceless, shadowy figures in a doorway, but a subsequent shot shows them entirely exposed, crowded into a tiny bathroom to observe Claudio being tortured. They are equally threatening when concealed in darkness and exposed in light, sinister in both their shadowiness and their overwhelming visibility. In another

scene, the guards suddenly erupt with noise and throw the doors of all the prisoners' rooms open: the light itself from the hall seems to attack Claudio's exposed, defenseless body before the men come in to drag him out, violating the little private space that the prisoners have and invading their dark rooms with terror. The film's use of stark lighting that emphasizes the evidence of torture on the prisoners' bodies is also typical of the Gothic, as "Gothic horror cinema codes further accentuate bodies in pain. The lighting and use of a bleach bypass renders the prisoners' skins especially pallid. Their wounds—bruises and scrapes suffered from beatings—are set in relief by the skins' hue" (Risner 2018: 144). Though we do not see torture occur on-screen, the marks that it leaves on the human body reveal its violence indirectly. It is both what we do and do not see, what is lit and obscured, concealed and revealed, that threatens us in the haunted house.

On occasion the camera does provide more totalizing views of the setting, but even then, the shots contribute to the horror aesthetic. In one scene, after the prisoners have been dragged out of their rooms and into a hallway, then forced to pray together, the shot zooms out and down the stairs away from them, traveling as if through a maze into another part of the otherwise empty house as we continue to hear their voices praying and the guards and torturers yelling. Even as the image on screen serves to provide, finally, some establishing context as to the layout of the house and the location of the prisoners' rooms, rather than familiarizing the setting, the camera seems to be fleeing, pursued by the agonized voices of the house's occupants. Even the more quiet and distant, unused rooms of the house are haunted by the torture taking place within its walls.

A Proliferation of Hauntings

It is important to note that the Mansión is not the only house that appears in *Crónica*. Rather, the multiplicity of houses serves both to provide a contrast to the classic image of the Gothic haunted house that is the detention center and to demonstrate how state terror proliferated across the public and private spheres during this period. The film begins, in fact, with the violation of two entirely different, and more outwardly normal, houses: those of Claudio and his mother.

The very first shot of the film is that of an apparently normal, modestly sized house in the rain, which a dirty, blindfolded man identifies as belonging to a mimeographer. Interspersed with shots of Claudio defending the goal on his soccer team, the following scene depicts the house under invasion by a group of armed men dressed as civilians. They take up space comfortably on the sofa as Claudio's mother is doubled over on the floor at their feet, insisting she doesn't know where he has moved. They search through the house, allegedly looking for weapons, finding only a banner from a demonstration that they insist counts as a weapon. When Claudio's sister arrives home, the neighbors are watching anxiously as the men steal their television set: nobody attempts to warn her as she makes her way down the block, where she is dragged into the living room and threatened by the men until Claudio's mother gives up the whereabouts of her son. The scenario is repeated, with perhaps even more aggression and violence, in the following scene at Claudio's house, as the armed men break into his place, ransack it, and kidnap him upon his arrival.

These initial scenes depict two key elements of the Gothic haunted house, albeit without the accompanying aesthetic that later characterizes the detention center: invasion and violation. By entering and threatening Claudio's mother in her home, the armed men—who will later be

Claudio's guards and torturers at the Mansión Seré—mirror the way that state terror invaded and violated the domestic sphere. The men do not belong there, and yet they make themselves at home in their power to bring fear and disruption to even the most normal of settings. As in the Gothic haunted house, what was once familiar and safe has become strange and threatening through this act of invasion: a banner is not merely a banner, it is a weapon; one's son is not a good man, he is a terrorist. Without yet emphasizing the Gothic aesthetic that characterizes the terror of the Mansión Seré, the film has already begun to demonstrate the sinister power of the authoritarian state to paralyze, violate, threaten, and alter known, familiar, and safe spaces.

The other haunted house of the film is, in some ways, the Mansión Seré's antonym. On Day 118 of Claudio's imprisonment, shortly before the men decide they must escape, Guillermo, one of the prisoners, is taken away from Mansión Seré for "questioning." The guards bring him to a house and ask him if he remembers it: the implication is that it was a former hideout for Guillermo's militant comrades. They tell him to get out and knock on the door. Filthy and out-of-place in the otherwise normal, modern neighborhood, he wanders across the road, looking lost and confused in the harsh light and open space. A tracking shot circles around him, emphasizing his smallness under the big blue sky, almost as if he is floating. The effect is disorienting, both for the character and the viewer: he does not belong here, he is from another world.

When he knocks and the door is opened by a seemingly normal, clean-cut man, he is blindfolded again and dragged inside. This house, like the Mansión Seré, is not what it seems. Outside: suburban, modern, residential. Inside: a busy office full of filing cabinets, desks and maps. Despite its normal outward appearance, it is a clandestine intelligence center, another haunted house hiding in plain sight in Buenos Aires, concealing the apparatus that produces the sinister.

Whereas the terror of the *Mansión Seré* is signaled plainly by its exterior, here we have the opposite: the sinister is concealed not only by the walls themselves, but by the facade of the everyday. The power of the authoritarian state to surveil, torture, kill, and spread fear is located not only in the detention center, but also here, in the logistics center, under the guise of the normal and domestic. Even as the domestic space is invaded and violated by the state, it in turn provides the state with concealment and deniability. This nondescript house in a quiet neighborhood is just as sinister as the *Mansión Seré*, but whereas the *Mansión*'s Gothic aesthetic outwardly signals it as a source of terror, the threat of the intelligence center is in its very unremarkableness: the danger could be around any corner.

These three “normal” domestic spaces that are nevertheless made sinister without an accompanying Gothic aesthetic provide a productive contrast to the main setting of the film. The commonalities between these settings—all of them are spaces of concealment, invasion, and violation; all are disorienting, upending the supposed safety, comfort, and protection provided by the domestic space; and all are spaces of interrogation—demonstrate how they are part of a network of violence that spreads the sinister throughout Argentina. However, their everyday appearance highlights the fact that although historically the *Mansión Seré* shared many characteristics with the haunted house of the film—as we will see in the following section, which discusses the way the real-life detention center was transformed into a ghostly urban legend—the depiction of the setting as haunted is still a directorial conceit. That is, the use of Gothic conventions belonging more comfortably to the realm of fiction is a deliberate choice that is concerned less with historical accuracy than with effectively producing the right mood and affect to convey the sinister atmosphere of this era. The contrast provided by these more nondescript spaces of repression therefore demonstrates that, while they are all a part of the production of the

sinister as a technology of power, it is by literalizing aspects of the haunting that the film is able to make this mood legible.

An Urban Legend

As is demonstrated by the subtle presence of the intelligence center, the sinister is not limited to impacting only those who enter the haunted house or are directly affected by dictatorial violence. Rather, the Gothic strategies of concealment and violation allow the Argentine dictatorship to extend the reach of the sinister atmosphere far beyond the detention center's walls, affecting the entirety of national space.

This is made evident by the effect that the clandestine detention center historically had on its immediate community: although *Crónica de una fuga* initially presents its haunted house as being isolated, it is actually part of a populated neighborhood. A description from Schwarzböck (2007) indicates the role the Mansión might play within this wider geography: El interior confirma las leyendas que, en cualquier barrio, los vecinos menos favorecidos suelen alimentar sobre este tipo de casa que, tal vez solo por una cuestión de tamaño y estilo, si están habitadas, parecen abandonadas, y si están abandonadas, parecen habitadas" (50). That is, Schwarzböck (2007) points out that Mansión Seré evokes yet another cultural association with the haunted house: the spooky, abandoned building that is often the stuff of neighborhood myth.

Of course, before becoming a detention center, the historical mansion did not occupy this place in the neighborhood imaginary. Mansión Seré's relationship to its surrounding neighborhood is key for how the Argentine state implemented terror and created a sinister atmosphere. Neighbors had access to the property for recreation before the 1976 coup, but its

transformation into a detention center necessitated its being restricted from the neighbors. Fabri (2019) recounts,

Los testimonios hablan de un túpido perímetro de ligustrina, la presencia de reflectores durante la noche para impedir ver hacia el interior del sitio. Las zonas de parque estaban extremadamente descuidadas adrede, pues esto dificultaba la visión desde el exterior y contribuía, de alguna manera, a pasar un tanto más inadvertidos. Asimismo, la frondosa arboleda, en su mayoría pinos que aún circundan las calles internas en el predio, impedían la mirada de los transeúntes. (177)

But just because the location was closed-off does not mean that neighbors were blind to what was happening: one resident, interviewed in *Diario La Voz* on February 2, 1984, after the end of the dictatorship, noted that they could hear the screams of prisoners as they were brought into the house (quoted in Fabri 2019: 177). Another pushed back against those who might be inclined to claim that they didn't know what was going on in there, referring to how it was a well-known house in the neighborhood and that they would often hear the sound of gunshots (quoted in Fabri 2019: 177).

Fabri (2019) explains that these responses to what was happening in their own neighborhood were part of how the government inflicted terror upon those Argentines who were not otherwise directly subjected to military force:

La acción específica de represión y disciplinamiento de la población se solapaba con las construcciones imaginarias de ciertos sectores de la comunidad sobre lo que ocurría en el predio. Esta doble articulación alteró prácticas cotidianas de los vecinos de la zona y los obligó a evitar el tránsito por las veredas adyacentes, a hacer caso omiso a los sonidos de disparos, a la entrada y salida de vehículos de la fuerza aérea, etc. (177-178)

Neighbors took to avoiding the Mansión like the haunted house of urban legend. Even after the Air Force abandoned the Mansión and burnt it down, the memory of terror remained: “El predio abandonado fue considerado por los vecinos en la zona como un lugar fantasmal, se cargó de historias transmitidas en la oralidad.” (Fabri 2019: 181). Fabri (2019) further notes that: “muchas

de las entrevistas realizadas hacen referencia al espacio como generador de miedos, el abandono como algo que abonaba los relatos fantasmáticos” (181).

Though Fabri (2019) chooses not to dwell on this point, it is particularly significant to our conceptualization of the detention center as haunted house to note that the sinister is generated and has an impact not only textually, but historically. That is, just as the detention center was represented using a Gothic aesthetic in *Crónica*, it also became a real-life haunted house in the neighborhood imaginary. The indirect, phantasmal awareness of the traumatic events that occurred there, suspected even if unconfirmed or outright denied, haunts the residents across space and time, and is understood historically by falling back on this cultural category and the sinister mood and affect that the haunted house is able to convey.

Mandolessi (2014)’s assertion that the very existence of clandestine detention centers led to the uncanny haunting of Argentine national space as a whole and the eruption of the uncanny in Argentine culture is particularly clear here. Although she does not figure the detention center itself *as* haunted house,⁸ she ties its existence as an “open secret,” which the neighbors of the real-life Mansión Seré were both aware of and yet felt compelled to deny, to the way that the government made terror radiate outward from its torture centers to infiltrate all of its surroundings (2019: 153). The strange and terrible, concealed only partially by the state, also invades the familiar space of the nation and thus puts even the everyday citizen under its reign of terror, subjecting them to the sinister mood.

⁸ Rather, Mandolessi (2014) emphasizes the way that that the presence of clandestine detention centers converts otherwise ordinary landscapes into Gothic spaces. We can see an example of this in the way that the otherwise ordinary houses in the film become part of a network of terror through practices of violation and concealment, as highlighted elsewhere in this chapter.

Similarly, Ng (2015) reflects upon the way that the space of the haunted house is not merely one of interiority, but rather is interconnected with society as a whole. He writes, “The house is also a complex network of power that governs inclusivity and exclusivity through constant policing of its boundaries. It is largely, if not altogether, because of this network that the house transcends its function as space for habitation, to become home” (2015: 18). The “policing of boundaries” that occurred at the Mansión Seré undoubtedly contributed to the government’s manipulation of this network of power. Neighbors were simultaneously kept outside of its borders, and thus prevented from knowing directly the terrors that were concealed from view, and yet were made indirectly aware of the activities occurring within through the military’s presence in the neighborhood and the other sights and sounds that indicated something was amiss. This concealment from and violation of the neighborhood served to spread the uneasy threat of the sinister beyond the boundaries of the detention center itself, invading the community as a whole with terror. As Ng (2015) explains, “Even the slightest transgressions in terms of communal relations and organization can undo the familiar and, as a result, invest space with an unhomely quality that subsequently vexes the pursuit of dwelling” (18). Through this process, the haunting spreads outward to instill fear everywhere.

This fear generated in the populace is, of course, part of the point of state terrorism, allowing the government to both act with impunity and regulate the behavior of its citizens. As Diana Taylor argues in her ground-breaking work *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina’s “Dirty War”* (1997), this resulted in “percepticide,” a self-blinding of the general population toward the abuses occurring under the dictatorship (119-138). Even as the neighbors hear the screams and gunshots, they are made powerless to do anything about it: they see without seeing, hear without hearing, know without knowing. The detention center

becomes a Gothic secret at the heart of the neighborhood that cannot be acknowledged or addressed, a haunted house to be avoided and discussed only in whispers.

The percepticide affecting the residents living near the Mansión Seré is aptly demonstrated by the film's depiction of the daring escape from the detention center. As in earlier moments, these scenes ratchet up the Gothic horror aesthetic to illustrate this experience of terror. After the military discovers that Guillermo has been feeding them false information, the guards move he, Claudio, and two other prisoners to the top floor of the house, where they strap them to beds under harsh lighting. We are treated to some particularly eerie shots here: as we see a man coming up the shadowy stairs, dragging a blindfolded prisoner behind him, a play of light and shadow transforms both the guards and the prisoners into threatening, unknown shapes. This new room is the deepest into the house that the prisoners, and we as spectators, have ever been. It is notable that the attic setting is particularly Gothic, evoking the classic "madwoman in the attic" of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. There, they are shown their reflections in a mirror. "Este sos vos . . . ¿te reconocés? Como afuera tampoco te reconocen," they are told. The men are unrecognizable, shadows of their former selves. This room, where they are simultaneously concealed within the deepest part of the house and their fragile bodies are the most open to violation, is where the prisoners ultimately realize that they will die if they do not escape.

The night they flee, the Gothic horror aesthetic of the film reaches its peak. The camera shows a quick establishing shot of the brooding, dilapidated mansion, framed by the dark, stormy night (Fig. 11). It is both one of the most complete images of the detention centre in the whole film and such a familiar horror trope as to be cliché. Inside, Claudio and the others are keenly aware they are under threat. We see an interior shot of the door to their room, from a low angle, which then zooms slowly out until the frame includes the four naked men strapped to beds (Fig.

12). This, too, is a textbook horror image, recalling the elevator in *The Shining* (Kubrick 1980) as it is about to open and let its wave of blood wash over the hotel hallway (Fig. 13). A typical horror soundtrack, violins with scraping strings, accompanies the scene. The following shot, of the window through which they are planning to escape, captures a lightning flash, the play of light and shadow menacing the men from the outside even as their torturers are an omnipresent threat within the house. Finally, we are privy to another classic horror shot: as one of the prisoners peeks under the crack of the door to watch for the guards, we see a close-up of his bulging eyes searching in terror. The haunted house has reached its most menacing, and the mood its most tense and sinister, as the men face their imminent deaths. By dialling up the atmosphere of Gothic terror in parallel with the climax, the film directly ties the threatening aesthetic of the house to the reality of state-sponsored death, making the stakes and threatening atmosphere plainly legible for the viewer.



Figure 11. *The Mansión Seré at its most imposing the night of the escape.*



Figure 12. *Ominous shot of the door to the room where Claudio and the others are imprisoned, the night of the escape.*



Figure 13. *Elevator from The Shining (Kubrick 1980). Courtesy of the Internet Movie Database (IMDB).*

In this way, the house appears most haunted when the prisoners' very existence is most threatened. Guillermo knows that if he doesn't escape, he will die: "Ya estamos muertos, Gallego," he explains to one of the men who is too afraid to flee. "Ya está. Yo no pienso estar

acá cuando vengan a matarme. Estamos desapareciendo.” They are disappearing: the haunted house is turning its prisoners into ghosts. As discussed in the introduction to this dissertation, several scholars of spectralities studies have theorized the Argentine *desaparecidos* as specters. Avery Gordon has written at length on the subject in *Ghostly Matters* (2008), asserting that “Disappearance is a state-sponsored procedure for producing ghosts to harrowingly haunt a population into submission” (115). The liminal nature of their absence—neither dead nor alive, neither here nor there, remembered by family and friends but unacknowledged by the state apparatus—is what makes the disappeared phantasmal. In this moment of *Crónica*, the prisoners have fully recognized their own spectrality at the hands of the Argentine military government. That is, Guillermo’s words demonstrate an awareness of their position as, for the moment, *desaparecidos*: placed into a non-class of citizenry and existence by their sojourn in the detention center (itself a non-place in the Argentine nation), they have already experienced a form of social death. Escape is their only option to return to the land of the living.

As their time in the Mansión passes, the prisoners begin to resemble specters more and more. By specter, I mean not to evoke a particular vision of what a ghost may or may not look like, but rather to emphasize that the men’s visual appearance begins to become unrecognizable, marking both the evidence of their torture and their state-imposed distance from humanity. They are covered in wounds and sores, pale and filthy, blinking in the light. When they manage to exit the house and must sneak their way off the property, the viewer sees fully how thoroughly otherworldly they are: naked bodies, crouched down, crawling after one another, looking wild and animalistic in the rain. The horror, however, comes not from the abjectness of the men themselves, but from what has been done to them—the way the rain beats against their naked skin and they limp along in their bare feet, pained victims of sinister forces. It is notable that the

depiction of their bodies emphasizes the material, with the effects of torture emphasized where, earlier, visual depictions of torture were not. They are spectral not because they are in some way immaterial, but in fact the opposite: because disappearance makes its mark on all those who were disappeared, both those who remain missing and those who returned from the detention centers, as, to reiterate Gordon from the introduction of this dissertation, they carry “the traces of the state’s power to determine the meaning of life and death” (Gordon 2008: 127).

When Claudio and the other men finally exit the grounds of the Mansión Seré, the sudden contrast between their appearance and the “normal” neighborhood further emphasizes their otherworldly condition and the terror they have experienced. Four young naked men, skeletal, filthy, bleeding, dripping wet, appear from nowhere in the middle of a residential street. They have come from a concealed elsewhere, the “netherworld,” as Gordon (2008: 112) might say, of disappearance, and stand out abruptly on the plane of the everyday. A bus drives past them as though it is the most normal evening in the world. In an example *par excellence* of Taylor (1997)’s percepticide, a businessman exiting his car sees them, looks around nervously, nods in greeting, and simply leaves, choosing not to deal with these unexpected apparitions. The blatant evidence of imprisonment and torture, just like the gunshots and screams coming from the house, goes unacknowledged. The prisoners are visible, but this act of looking without seeing denies and refuses an understanding of their experience: such is the impact upon national space of the sinister mood instilled by the clandestine detention center. It is further notable how soundly this man’s actions—undoubtedly compelled by the terror imposed by his political environment—completely reject Derrida (1994)’s ethical imperative of “learning to live with ghosts” (xviii) answering their call for justice, and even Abraham and Torok (1994)’s advice to exorcise it by addressing the secret trauma it represents. Under conditions of percepticide, these apparitions are

neither to be drawn attention to nor exorcised nor avenged nor aided, but rather determinedly ignored.

Of course, though the sinister impact of the Argentine government's political terror was general throughout the population, their power was not absolute. After the men escape and must figure out their next move, Guillermo rings a bell in the neighborhood and asks a neighbor for help, claiming he was robbed. She brings him some clothes and money for a taxi and sends him along, insisting she cannot help him further. Later, she watches silently as the other men exit their hiding place when one of their fathers, alerted by Guillermo, comes to their rescue. She helped a man who she probably knew was not robbed. Did she know there was a haunted house in her neighborhood? Did she know, as the jeep with floodlights passed through the street searching, that they were hunting ghosts? A specter rang her doorbell and, rather than turning in fear, she gave him a little of what he needed. This appears to begin to answer Derrida's ethical imperative by gesturing towards the ability of citizens to act, even under conditions of extreme terror, on behalf of justice for their fellow citizens.

The *Mansión Seré*'s role as the neighborhood haunted house thereby highlights the strategic way that the Argentine government spread the sinister atmosphere outward from its clandestine detention center. Both historically and in the film, the *Mansión*'s presence at the center of a populated neighborhood from which it had been dramatically fragmented both simultaneously concealed any direct evidence of the activities happening there while allowing them to be indirectly known via rumor and suspicion. Partially concealing their terror and yet violating the neighborhood's public space, the haunted house made neighbors fear what they could not directly see or articulate, carrying on as normal while horrors occurred just next door.

Sinister Time

The haunted house's disruption of space also creates distortions in time, as it evokes an obfuscated violence at its origins even as the trauma of political terror unfolds on screen.

Crónica's version of the Mansión Seré is shabby and deteriorating. The paint is chipping, the plants are overgrown; it seems abandoned, lacking upkeep, uninhabited (or perhaps inhabited by something that does not belong to this era). If we recall that the Gothic is particularly concerned with material impresses of the past, the house's antiquated nature clearly evokes this passage of time, and the material remnants of the past that remain.

But what past has returned to haunt it? Although the film clearly evokes a Gothic aesthetic, the plot does not explicitly connect to the Mansión's former history (before its time as a detention center) as somehow influencing events, unlike in a typical Gothic setting.⁹ However, this history is worth mentioning briefly, because it does speak to the role of time, past trauma and present crises for the haunted house. Mansión Seré's origin as the expensive dwelling of a rich, immigrant cattle-raiser recalls the violence of settler colonialism and property relations that is often fodder for the traumatic origins of hauntings in postcolonial nations and is at the center of Freyre (1933)'s discussion of Brazilian plantation houses. It is perhaps no coincidence that the *picana*, an electric cattle-prod, was one of the most-used instruments of torture in Argentina during this time, thus relating this contemporary violence with the cattle-raising that is at the foundation of Argentine settler colonialism.¹⁰ In the film, the *picana* is used to torture Claudio

⁹ Cedeño Rojas (2015) interprets the state of the house as evocative of ruins, which often symbolize cultural decadence in the Gothic, and argues they function as a metaphor of the moral decay of the Argentine government and elites during the dictatorship. While a valid interpretation, I am more interested in pursuing what the ruined state of the house implies about time for the contemporary viewer.

¹⁰ Feitlowitz (1998: 13, 66) notes how the *picana* had been in use by Argentine police since the 1930s.

when he first arrives at the Mansión, though it remains unseen, and we hear only its ominous, mechanical buzzing and bursts of electricity. Though playing only an indirect role in the film, the obfuscation of violence that allows for property relations to continue in the postcolonial nation is significant for any attempt to contend with the Argentine dictatorship, which grounded its use of terror in a fervent anti-communist sentiment and implemented a neo-liberal economic policy backed by the International Monetary Fund. To portray the Mansión Seré as a Gothic haunted house, then, is to point to the continuities between the legacy of colonialism and property relations in Argentina and the dictatorship that sought to solidify the economic violence necessitated by private property with political violence.

Beyond evoking this past trauma at the heart of all settler colonial states, the film's portrayal of the Mansión Seré also highlights the relationship that the contemporary viewer has with Argentina's dictatorial past. In "To Give Memory a Place: Contemporary Holocaust Photography and the Landscape Tradition," Ulrich Baer (2000) reflects upon photographs of unoccupied landscapes that were the sites of former Nazi concentration camps. As he asserts,

In every photographic image, the viewers' here and now—their ability to draw on different explanatory contexts—is read against the photographed moment's then and there. Regardless of subject matter, photographs show a moment of the past as inalterable, as something that has been brought back against time's passage. . . . All photographs (and not only Holocaust images) signal that we have arrived after the picture has been taken, and thus too late. (Baer 2000: 428)

Sandy Flitterman-Lewis observes a similar dynamic at play in the Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog* (Alain Resnais 1955), arguing, "the film thus works by inscribing the past within the present (our present viewing shapes how we see historical events), just as it does the reverse (the present-day tracking shots evoke the memory of camps long since abandoned)" (1998: 204).

Like the photographs Baer analyzes and the images employed in *Night and Fog*, *Crónica's* deteriorated setting draws the viewers' attention to its simultaneous distance from and closeness

to us in time. The dictatorial past is, in some ways, unalterable and unreachable, and yet it reaches out to us through our act of witnessing and our knowledge of its history.

In this sense, *Mansión Seré*'s hauntedness is not only a function of its Gothic aesthetic or even of the terrible events that take place there before our eyes over the course of the film. When Claudio enters, the audience's implicit background knowledge of the Argentine dictatorship means that we know it is always already haunted, not by the house's pre-1976 history, but by the events that have yet to occur on screen and yet of which we are aware. Although we as viewers are yet to witness the originating trauma, the violence that impresses itself upon the setting and echoes across decades to reach us in our own present, the *Mansión Seré* immediately haunts us because we already know what is haunting it—whether that knowledge comes from an awareness of historical events or a familiarity with the conventions of Gothic horror. The haunted house and the sinister disrupts the logic of chronological time: we have already arrived too late.

For this reason, it is particularly notable how the film indicates the passage of time. When Claudio enters *Mansión Seré*, a subtitle marks the moment as “Day One.” Throughout the time remaining until the escape, the film marks days, but at irregular intervals. As Schwarzböck (2007) points out, this intermittency creates an ellipsis: entire weeks go missing within the detention center, both for the detainees and for the viewer. The prisoners themselves, cut off from the outside world and blindfolded most of the time, are only made aware of Christmas—when their guards insist upon toasting champagne with them—and Argentina's World Cup win, which they hear on the radio. Under isolation and torture, time becomes warped and irregular. As Fabri (2019) notes in her analysis of the space of *Mansión Seré* as a detention center, “El funcionamiento del CCD quebró la lógica cotidiana. Reconfigurado como campo de

concentración, el espacio material se vio fracturado y cerrado a la práctica del *día a día*” (172, emphasis original). The normal, everyday nature of both space and time no longer applies in the detention center, and we see this distortion reflected in its representation on film.

This alteration of time is also related to the moment of enunciation of the film’s release in 2006, and the way that the haunted house often reflects not only a buried past or originating trauma, but also current crises, requiring what María del Pilar Blanco terms a “*present-progressive* conception of haunting,” that is, one which exemplifies “how subjects conceive present and evolving spaces and localities” (2012: 6, emphasis original) while looking towards an uncertain future. In 2005, Argentina’s Supreme Court repealed the laws of Punto Final and Obediencia Debida, which had protected most of those responsible for human rights abuses during the dictatorship from being tried for crimes against humanity. The repeal marked a significant cultural moment in Argentina, the culmination of long decades of activism that fought to bring legal recourse for the victims of the dictatorship.¹¹

However, with the possibility of justice also came a continuation of the violence that characterized the dictatorship. On September 18, 2006, Jorge Julio López, a retired bricklayer who had been detained by the dictatorship in the 1970s due to his political militancy, was kidnapped. He had testified earlier that year against Miguel Etchecolatz, a former police officer, in his trial for crimes against humanity committed under the dictatorship. Etchecolatz, whose case was the first to be reopened after the repeal of Punto Final and Obediencia Debida, was convicted the following day; López is still missing, his disappearance presumed to be a warning to other victims not to testify against their torturers.¹² Another witness in a different trial, Luis

¹¹ See *Human Rights Watch* (2005) for more information on the repeal of these amnesty laws.

¹² For more information on the kidnapping and its impact in Argentina at the time, see Bell and Di Paolantonio (2012).

Gerez, was kidnapped that December and tortured for 48 hours before reappearing alive. Decades after the end of the dictatorship, survivors of repression faced disappearance and torture yet again (*El Territorio* 2006). For the contemporary audience, then, the sinister threats represented in *Crónica* are decidedly not part of a past that is gone and buried. Rather, the film dialogues with a present that continues to contend with the consequences of this past and a threat of violence that, for many, has not yet ceased. Even as it creates disruptions in our chronological expectations, the distortion of time caused by the sinister mood and the haunted detention center in *Crónica de una fuga* establishes a continuity between past and present violence, speaking directly to our contemporary attempts to attend to this haunted memory.

Haunted Memory

The film ends with the captives not yet in safety, but, at the very least, out of immediate danger, and we receive the remaining details via subtitles. Guillermo and Claudio both escape abroad and later give testimony about their experiences. El Gallego also leaves the country, never to return. The fourth prisoner, el Vasco, hides with a relative, but the government later tracks him down and kidnaps him again, before his release in 1983; he also testifies in 1985. To *Crónica's* credit, it continuously acknowledges the escape as exceptional, an exceedingly rare story for an era where the ultimate fates of the vast majority of those who entered Argentina's detention centers remain indeterminate.

The haunted house, Mansión Seré, receives a final update just as though it were also a main character. In a final shot of the house's exterior, a tree branch partially obscures our view of uniformed men moving furniture out into trucks. The shot pans until the branch obscures it entirely, disappearing the detention center, the image then transitioning into an interior shot of

the window from which the prisoners escaped. The subtitles indicate that, due to the escape, the remaining prisoners in the Mansión Seré were moved to “unidades penales” and finally released. The house was set on fire, eliminating all evidence.

Both visually and historically, the destiny of the haunted house is to be obscured, eliminated, disappeared like the bodies of the military government’s victims. For the Mansión Seré to burn at the end of the film plays into both its haunted aesthetic and a political need. On the one hand, a fire razing the haunted house to the ground is another Gothic horror convention, one which often serves to exorcize the evil and the trauma experienced there.¹³ However, the film denies this catharsis, since we never actually see the building go up in flames on screen. The military’s activities will continue elsewhere, perhaps somewhere less outwardly sinister, hiding instead in plain sight, like the other clandestine headquarters that was featured in the film.

On the other hand, the fire erases all evidence in case the escaped prisoners bring media or political attention towards the abuses and identify the detention center. The military disappears the site that bore witness to torture, eliminating the possibility that it might reveal its dark secrets. Similarly, the state’s goal in disappearing people is eliminating the evidence of its abuses and denying their very existence “to ensure that everyone knows just enough to scare normalization into a state of nervous exhaustion” (Gordon 2008: 64). Only the ruins remain, a phantasmal presence in the neighborhood continuing to mobilize the sinister as a technology of state power.

¹³ Notable examples from both literature and film include *Rebecca* (published by Daphne DuMaurier in 1938, with the film version directed by Alfred Hitchcock in 1940); *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (published by Shirley Jackson in 1962); and *The Changeling*. Dillon (2019) also points out that “Muchas narraciones góticas terminan con la destrucción de esa casa maldita,” though he does not fully discuss the implications of the use of Gothic tropes in the film (45).

However, as Gordon (2008) asserts, haunting is ambivalent, not just a potential source of power for the state. Just as representing the clandestine detention center via a Gothic horror aesthetic that draws attention to the sinister atmosphere exposes the Gothic strategies behind the military government's mechanisms of power, a thoughtful mobilization of the past and an attention to haunting can resist the repression of evidence that is so essential to the functioning of the authoritarian state in this instance.

Today, several former detention centers serve as memorial and educational sites. As Fabri (2019) discusses, in the decades following the closing of the detention center, neighbors began to reclaim the surrounding land to meet and play outdoors, “un uso que redimió, de manera rudimentaria, la utilización como territorio de terror” (182). This use reappropriated the site, though the national politics of erasure and forgetting ultimately intervened in 1984 when the ruins were demolished. But even in the face of demolition, there were initial attempts at memory-making, through graffiti marked upon the very material of the haunted house itself: “Aquí se torturó a muchos argentinos, no se olvide” (San Julián 2014, as quoted in Fabri 2019: 188). By the late 1990s and early 2000s, the relationship of both everyday Argentines and the state to the memory of the dictatorship had changed significantly, and in 1997 the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida was built nearby where the Mansión once stood and inaugurated as a site for collective memory in 2000 (Municipio de Morón 2020). An archaeological investigation and research project was conducted to identify the original foundations of the house and recreate the center from archival and oral sources (Fabri 2019: 172-173). In 2013, the Espacio Mansión Seré was built over the foundations of the building, and it was declared a national historic site in 2015 (Municipio de Morón 2020).

This active attempt to reinaugurate geographical space as a site of memory is key for challenging the sinister as a historical atmosphere and technology of state power. As Gordon (2008) points out, the specter is an unruly figure, and it can't always be managed: to encounter the phantasm, even when one is frightened or repulsed by it, is to encounter what the state has tried to repress. This is the power of the haunting, she continues, as it is "the mode by which the middle class, in particular, needs to encounter something you cannot just ignore, or understand at a distance, or 'explain away' by stripping it of all its magical power" (Gordon 2008: 131). The depiction of the detention center in *Crónica* forms part of this project of memory and confrontation with the past, drawing attention to its impact upon the lives of the dictatorship's victims. So, too, does the rebuilt Espacio Mansión Seré: by incorporating the foundations of the original building into the new Casa de la Memoria y la Vida, as well as prominently featuring historical images of the detention center at the site, the project can be seen as recognizing and embracing the spectral presence of the past so as to transform it into a more promising future. Stripped of its Gothic aesthetic and sinister atmosphere, the Espacio Mansión Seré may now serve as a witness to its violent past and a symbol of resistance to the repression that characterized state terrorism.

However, we must not forget that the haunted house often points not only to the sinister nature of a repressed past, but also the threats of an evolving present. The mid-2000s, when *Crónica* was released, saw both reopened trials against the perpetrators of human rights abuses during the dictatorship and newly inaugurated official sites of memory. As such, the film arises at a moment of profound transformation in the relationship of Argentine state power to the way it represents its dictatorial past to its citizens. In contrast to the earlier uses of haunting and sinister threats, the processes of memorialization now become a potential tool of state power that can be

mobilized to the benefit or detriment to its citizens. In its portrayal of an escape from the clandestine detention center at the very moment that state and human rights organizations were, in fact, entering what remained of these buildings to convert them into spaces of memory, “el filme de Caetano señaló la necesidad de pensar la memoria histórica mas allá de sus vínculos con el estado” (Pous 2015: 677). By using the Gothic to convey a sinister mood, the film aids the viewer in understanding both state power and the experience of terror under the dictatorship, insists upon the continuity between this past and the present moment, and highlights how state power may be obfuscated through the very same mechanisms that concealed the violations of the past.

Conclusion

By representing the Mansión Seré through a Gothic horror aesthetic, *Crónica de una fuga* is able to make apparent to the viewer the sinister nature of power and terror under the dictatorship, which relied upon strategies of concealment and violation to spread fear throughout national space, as well as the continued potential of the sinister as a tool of power in the present. Using familiar, transnational conventions makes this experience legible, while nevertheless highlighting the strangeness of space and time under a sinister atmosphere where terror lurks, detected but acknowledged, beneath the everyday. The film thereby effectively conveys an affective, national experience of terror to new generations, like that of Caetano himself, at a remove from the Argentine dictatorship. *Crónica de una fuga*'s evocation of transnational and cultural histories of Gothic hauntings are also significant for further scholarship seeking to situate recent Latin American literature and film within a broader context of these conventions and their layered meanings. While being consistent with the adaptive use of genre in Argentine

film identified by previous scholarship, this demonstrates that the Gothic is particularly suited to speak to the dark past of Argentine political terror and efforts to contend with its repressed historical memory.

Moreover, as a space of memory, the Mansión Seré now serves the insistent purpose of the revenant, that dark past which returns and demands justice. It both poses and responds to the imperative: “Aquí se torturó a muchos argentinos, no se olvide” (San Julián 2014: 3, as quoted in Fabri 2019: 188). So, too, is *Crónica de una fuga*’s representation of the detention center as haunted house able to transform the sinister from part of the apparatus of state power to a way to understand, feel, and confront Argentina’s past from within an ever-changing present.

Chapter Three

A Haunted Spectacle: Griselda Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros* (1973)

The setting of Griselda Gambaro's *Información para extranjeros* (1973) is a haunted house in the sense of both the Gothic tradition and the contemporary Halloween spectacle. That is, it displays many of the elements associated with Gothic settings—a maze of rooms containing hidden secrets, mysterious noises, and unexplained appearances and disappearances—but it also deploys them in an often self-aware, excessive, and ironic way, as might be done by a for-profit haunted attraction. It is frightening and deploys a recognizable aesthetic, as was evident in *Crónica de una fuga*, but it also constantly draws attention to itself as a form of spectacle, demonstrating a self-awareness that alternates between the deadly serious and the absurd, often within the same scene. This absurdity, however, does not fully diminish the sense of danger and the sinister atmosphere of the setting; rather, the sinister comes through in the play not so much in the form of a scream heard from off-stage as in that of a dark, ironic laugh.

In Gambaro's haunted house, we hear screams, songs, gunshots, poetry, bumps, and violence behind closed doors. We see but don't see as someone is dragged out of the audience. We hear a version of the story: they were guerrillas. They committed crimes. They were killed in a shoot-out. But in a haunted house, there is always more to the story, the mechanism that creates the sinister atmosphere concealed behind closed doors: not only what the Guide shows us, but what the Guide draws our attention away from, the truth that is hidden and yet revealed by the spectacle. It is the tension between this act of showing and hiding, seeing and looking away, building up horror and then matter-of-factly sweeping it out of sight, that demonstrates how the

sinister operates in *Información para extranjeros*. Let's move on, the Guide says. Nothing to see here.

In this chapter, I posit that approaching the setting and events of *Información para extranjeros* with an eye to not only the haunting, but specifically the haunted house as performative spectacle, helps reveal the mechanisms behind the creation of the sinister mood. As we will see, the play's violent content that unfolds before us, which is repeatedly exposed only to be immediately dismissed, disguised, and hidden from view, acts out the partial knowledge of repression that led to the generalized feeling of being under threat while simultaneously paralyzed and unable to act. Gambaro's play, which breaks down the barriers between actors and audience of more traditional theater, is meant to immerse its spectator in this threatening atmosphere and have an affective impact. However, its absurdity and experimental nature repeatedly draws attention to the spectacle as farce, simultaneously distancing us from the performance even as we are enveloped by the sinister mood. As I will argue, this tension undermines the state's use of the sinister as a technology of power, allowing the play to experiment with ways of inspiring its spectators to overcome their paralysis and affectively identify with the victims of violence.

Critical Tours of the Haunted House

Griselda Gambaro is one of Argentina's foremost writers and is well-known for depicting the terror and violence that characterized the country in the 60s, 70s, and 80s. She wrote over twenty-five theatrical works between 1963 and 1986 and has continued writing plays, essays, and narratives over the subsequent decades (Taylor 1991: 96). *Información para extranjeros* was written between 1971 and 1973 but wasn't staged or published for some years after. By the time

Gambaro finished the play, political conditions in the country had worsened significantly; according to an interview conducted by Martha Batiz Zuk (2018), she and her collaborators canceled plans to stage the show in Córdoba and she later destroyed her original manuscript so that it wouldn't be found under the dictatorship. She was able to recover a copy from her French translator after her exile in 1977, but was unwilling to stage the play in Europe “por razones de seguridad” (Batiz Zuk 2018: 18).¹ The play was first performed in its entirety in New York in 1989 (Gambaro 1992: vii). In the decades since the end of the dictatorship, the work has also been staged in Mexico, Germany, and parts of Argentina, but in many—if not all—cases it was not the complete version (Ford 2010: 22). Gambaro further explained to Batiz Zuk (2018), “Por razones que no son claras para mí misma, nunca quise que se representara en Buenos Aires, quizás porque es una obra unida a una época muy dura que no quisiera revivir, ni siquiera en teatro” (18).

Both the emotional and logistical difficulty of staging *Información para extranjeros* is significant. Certainly, this informal censorship² is emblematic of the era: at this time, the critique of government practices of violence and torture would no doubt have positioned Gambaro as a target for groups like the AAA, which terrorized the theater scene in particular from 1973-1975 with death threats and theater bombings that sent several prominent actors into exile.³ Moreover, as a play, it is both experimental in form and impactful as an experience; to put it on must require

¹ In her introduction to the English translation of the play, Marguerite Feitlowitz notes that Gambaro worried her family still in Argentina would be targeted if she allowed the play to be staged in Europe (Gambaro 1992: 5-6).

² Some critics use the phrase “self-censorship” to refer to censorship that has not been formally imposed by the state. However, many scholars, myself included, consider this term problematic, as it was undoubtedly the outward pressure of dangerous circumstances (often, as we see in the case of the AAA, implemented by actors clandestinely affiliated with the state), not some interior conflict or choice, that was at play here.

³ See for examples Encuentro Internacional sobre Teatro Latinoamericano de Hoy (1989).

not only an emotional toll from the producers, actors, crew, and even audience members,⁴ but—as will become clear—a tremendous logistical effort.

However, this is not to say that the play had no impact when it was written. As Ford (2010) points out in her treatment of the text, the manuscript circulated unofficially both within and outside of Argentina before being published in Argentina in 1987 and in English in the United States in 1992. Ford (2010) argues that, while being circulated in this informal capacity, the theater community in Buenos Aires would have read, discussed, and possibly even conducted public readings of the manuscript, meaning that the play would have formed part of the public discourse despite not being staged. For this reason—in addition to the fact that, as I have established in the introduction to this dissertation and chapter one, the period of violence and repression from the late 1960s and early 1970s can be seen as a historical precedent to the later dictatorship's violence rather than a distinct era—*Información para extranjeros* can be read as forming part of the corpus of cultural engagement with the 1976-1983 dictatorship, despite its having been written before the coup.

Since it has been rarely performed and is more often read, *Información para extranjeros*—like many works analyzed in performance studies—is something of a hybrid text for both critical analysis and the reader-spectator. While my approach, like most others, relies upon engagement with the written text, its focus on space and the experience of the spectator therein also demands some speculation about what the audience experience of a staged version

⁴ Taylor (1997) reflects about the play,

Now, several years after I began thinking about the reproduction of violence in this play, I would admit that her depictions of atrocity are violent—too violent to stage the play as it was written. Gambaro herself resists the idea of producing the play realizing perhaps that the violence of the period provoked her to respond with violence. . . . this play, that shows no actual acts of violence, [is] so threatening . . . because we can't distance ourselves from the violence. (133)

might feel like, in the absence of an actualized performance to which to refer. Like the reader who must necessarily make an imaginative leap to envision the scenes unfolding around her and the affective impact of their closeness, I will at times speculate about this formal difference and its impact upon the sinister mood.

Several scholars have turned their attention to *Información para extranjeros* over the decades since it was written. Most relevant here are those who have examined the role of space in the play as well as emphasizing key elements related to its strange and sinister tone, such as its interest in what is hidden (often what is seen, heard, or implied but unacknowledged), the unusual role of the audience, and its exaggerated theatricality.

Critics in the United States commented on such elements in the play while the 1976-1983 dictatorship was in full swing. Dick Gerdes noted in 1978 that *Información* seemed to be a “concentration” (11) of the themes present in Gambaro’s earlier works, including violence, fragmentation, exaggeration, depersonalization, and absurdity, all serving to create a “state of shock” (13) in the spectator—a shock that, as I will argue, is a form of paralysis resulting from the sinister mood. Rosalea Postma (1980) concentrated on the role of space in the play, pointing to how confinement and separation both perplex and engulf the spectator, causing them “first be shocked into feeling” (43) before also having to actively interpret the meaning of the play. Similarly, I will engage with the tension between this affective immediacy and critical distance which occurs throughout the play.

Several critics have examined *Información*’s antecedents in theatrical tradition, identifying influences from the theater of the absurd, Antonin Artaud’s theatre of cruelty, and Bertolt Brecht, as well as discussing its relationship to the Argentine grotesque or *el grotesco criollo*. The Argentine grotesque, a theatrical tradition dating from the 1920s, can be seen

through the use of, in Pottlitzer (2004)'s words, an "exaggerated, distorted kind of black comedy" (103) throughout the play. Such exaggeration is also associated with the theater of the absurd. Batiz Zuk (2018) compares the play directly with Brecht, pointing out how both playwrights attempt to create an effect of distance or alienation between the viewer and the subject, as well as how, as socially and politically committed theater, they seek to signal the responsibility of both those who commit atrocities and the spectators. Several critics have discussed elements of Artaud's theatre of cruelty in the play, particularly its use of shock and a type of theater where the audience moves and is enveloped by the action.⁵ Others, while acknowledging Artaud's influence, have also noted where Gambaro diverges with other tenets of the theatre of cruelty.⁶ Without following strictly any tradition, Gambaro's work incorporates elements of each of these, particularly as a way to experiment with space, the spectator, and the portrayal and political implications of violence, as we will see throughout this chapter.

With the end of the dictatorship and the official publication of *Información*, scholars continued to unpack its implications. Marguerite Feitlowitz, in her introduction to her 1992 English translation of the play, highlights the theatricality of Argentine politics at the time and the way that the everyday hid violence and torture, a reality that is reflected in many of Gambaro's works (Gambaro 1992). In this same vein, Ford (2010) discusses spectacle as a

⁵ Gerdes (1978) identifies "the use of the Artaudian concept of psychological cruelty and physical violence, fragmented dramatic structures, depersonalization and exaggeration of the characters" (11) and Ford (2010) argues that Gambaro, like Artaud, seeks to shock the spectator such that he or she is unable to reproduce the violent act outside of the theatrical space. Tarantuviez (2007) points out how perhaps *Información*'s greatest association with Artaud is its experimental use of space.

⁶ Postma (1980) argues that *Información* does share the Artaudian goal of shocking the spectator with acts of violence, but does not follow several other tenets of the theater of cruelty. Tarantuviez (2007) points out that, unlike Artaud, Gambaro's work remains tied to verbal language and does not permit catharsis.

political tool in the 60s and 70s that contributed to the definition of Argentine nationhood, emphasizing how Gambaro repeatedly draws attention to spectacle and its influence upon the spectator within *Información*. My discussion of the spectacle seeks to draw attention to the ways that the sinister atmosphere was deliberately created through manipulations by the state that allowed for only a partial knowledge of the violence that they enacted, demonstrating how Gambaro's self-aware spectacle draws our attention to the mechanisms behind this sinister mood.

At least two critics have analyzed elements of the uncanny and the sinister in Gambaro's work, though *Información* has surprisingly garnered less attention in their discussions than some of her other plays. Liliana Mundani (2002), studying several of Gambaro's theatrical works, discusses political violence as Freud's *unheimlich*, demonstrating how violence is both familiar and normalized in Argentina at this time and yet repressed, returning in plays like *Información* as what is strange and yet oddly familiar. Susana Tarantuviez (2007) discusses Gambaro's treatment of power and its abuse, particularly the way that it penetrates both the public and private spheres so that there is no escape. She situates *Información* as located in a transitory moment in Gambaro's work, where she shifts from plays interested in "the sinister exercise of power" towards those encouraging "the rebellion of the weak" (Tarantuviez 2007: 331). As I will argue throughout, the uncanny nature of political violence discussed by Mundani (2002) contributes, in my estimation, to the strangeness and threatening nature of the sinister, while the generalized penetration posited by Tarantuviez (2007) speaks to its presence as a generalized mood which authors like Gambaro are, nonetheless, interested in exploring ways to resist.

Finally, Diana Taylor has examined the play in several capacities that are particularly relevant for a discussion of the haunted house and the sinister: in her 1991 monograph *Theatre of*

Crisis: Drama and Politics in Latin America; in her afterword to Marguerite Feitlowitz's 1992 translation (Gambaro 1992); and in *Disappearing Acts* (1997). In all three works, Taylor discusses the theatrical nature of Argentine politics, particularly state-sponsored terrorism, during this era, pointing to how Gambaro's plays serve to draw attention to and expose this spectacle. She breaks Gambaro's work into three phases: a "theatre of crisis" in the 1960s, in which victims were under threat and yet unable to understand their situation or fight back; a "drama of disappearance" in the 1970s, in which both people and everything that used to make sense have disappeared; and a critical awareness of the crisis in the 1980s, in which victims finally become empowered to fight back. She situates *Información para extranjeros* in the second phase, noting in her afterword to Feitlowitz's translation how, within the space of the play, Gambaro "places the spectator in the very center of the collapsed and terrifying universe" (Gambaro 1992: 168). In both *Theatre of Crisis* and *Disappearing Acts*, Taylor discusses the theatrical nature of torture as a process conducted ultimately to demonstrate to the spectator, not the victim, that the torturer has power, as a way to instill fear in the population. She highlights the importance of the spectator being made to see and yet not see these acts of torture, emphasizing how *Información* asks us to "see dangerously" in order to combat the torturer's power (1991: 144, emphasis original). Taylor (1997) also points out that Gambaro calls attention to the percepticide at work in Argentina by making us see what we do not want to see as well as what we are not supposed to see, forcing the spectator to either choose to act—recognizing their own responsibility—or acknowledge their complicity. As I will argue, this emphasis on seeing what has been concealed is essential to the way the haunted house is presented in the work, in which the aesthetic and sinister mood evoked engages the spectator-reader on an affective level,

forcing us into encountering and confronting the origin of the sinister when we might otherwise be inclined to look away.

While many critics have examined space and spectacularity in *Información para extranjeros*, none have thoroughly examined the hauntedness of its setting, taking into account scholarship on the Gothic and spectrality. Some analyses have come close, such as Mundani (2002)'s discussion of the *unheimlich* in the play and other critics who have pointed to elements of the play's sinister mood and their impact upon the spectator, though without thoroughly unpacking its implications.⁷ Additionally, María Jesus Bernal Martín (2012), in her examination of violence in the play, relates its setting to that of survival horror videogames such as *Silent Hill*, and also notes that the atmosphere of the play resembles that of a psychological thriller. Unfortunately, though her analysis is spatially focused, her discussion lacks nuance and historical context, ultimately failing to address *why* there should be such a resemblance between the horror aesthetic and portrayals of violence in such different works, and what this aesthetic does in the text. My analysis will build upon this earlier scholarship in order to examine precisely how the setting of *Información para extranjeros* evokes both the Gothic haunted house and the haunted spectacle in order to create a sinister atmosphere of concealment and violation that mimics Argentine reality under state-sponsored terror and exposes the ways that authoritarian power disguises itself. Moreover, the threat posed by the sinister in this play against its reader-spectator manages both to relate to us the atmosphere of crisis, anxiety, and paralysis

⁷ In addition to Mundani (2002)'s examination of the *unheimlich*, which will be discussed in more detail later, several critics, including Gerdes (1978), Postma (1980), and Taylor (1991) highlight how *Información* causes the spectator to feel frightened and under threat from an unidentified source of terror.

that was so prevalent during the present of the text's point of enunciation, and to present a demand from this troubled past to intervene in our own present, at the point of reception.

An Unhomely Setting

The twenty distinct and non-chronological (though sometimes narratively interrelated) scenes that compose *Información para extranjeros* are meant to take place in a large house described as “una casa amplia, preferentemente de dos pisos con corredores y habitaciones vacías. . . . Los corredores están a oscuras algunos y otros crudamente iluminados, en evidente contraste” (Gambaro 1973: 69). The hallways of the house are also lined by large, mysterious vertical boxes with doors and air holes. Multiple groups of spectators travel through the house at once, each led by its own guide and experiencing the scenes in a different order, until the final scene where the groups converge. The house that forms the setting is key for the development of the overall atmosphere of the work: as Postma (1980) writes, “Although Gambaro states that the play permits other setting interpretations, it is clear that she considers the physical setting a primary instrument in the formation of the spectator's experience” (37).

Other than this relatively sparse description of the setting, much is left to the director's discretion (or the reader's imagination). In contrast to *Crónica de una fuga*'s clear visual references to the haunted house of Gothic literature and horror film, in *Información* there is little detail prescribed that might mark the house as haunted. One might imagine, as a reader, that the setting is antiquated, abandoned, dusty, or Victorian, and a director might even choose to stage the play in such a setting to deliberately evoke a Gothic aesthetic, but the written text itself does not insist upon it. Nevertheless, throughout the play, Gambaro constructs a sinister atmosphere that makes use of some of the less visually concrete elements of the Gothic haunted house.

One of the primary Gothic conventions at play here is the centering of a domestic space that is not quite right. The house is large, but empty, without the familiar furniture or evidence of dwelling that makes a house a home. The walls are bare, thereby retaining no personality and indicating a sort of abandon, except in the room where Scene 7 takes place. In this scene, the Guide attempts to direct his group's attention to paintings on the walls, but these "paintings" are nothing but vulgar graffiti that he then insists the women in the audience mustn't look at. Such graffiti, which usually appears on the exterior of buildings or in the intimate privacy of a bathroom stall, indicates a lack of upkeep and a clandestine intrusion upon a space where it does not belong.

Moreover, the presence of graffiti implies that there are unseen residents or visitors, but that they likely do not belong to the space as a home.⁸ In fact, none of the house's occupants appear to make sense in such a domestic space. The Guides and their groups are a public that repeatedly intrudes upon private scenes, from a naked man in Scene 1 to a girl who has just been tortured who is told she can go to the bathroom in front of everyone in Scene 3. But neither do the characters making up such scenes belong to the dwelling: the naked man and tortured girl are not merely going about their days in private, but have been imprisoned here. Even the characters that resemble ones belonging to a domestic space are not quite right, as in Scene 5, in which a mother and father, made up to look like dolls, pretend a doll is their baby while poorly ventriloquizing its lines. Not even the spectator feels as though they belong here: as Batiz Zuk (2018) has pointed out, the play—particularly the "explanations for foreigners" regarding Argentine reality that are provided by the Guide—highlights how international spectators are

⁸ These graffiti recall those left by prisoners in Clandestine Detention Centers such as La Perla, which archaeologists have investigated for information on the desaparecidos who were housed in the various CDCs. See Villaba (2022) for more information.

distant from the harsh truths of Argentine reality and Argentines are estranged from their own country because they don't see or understand what is going on within it. Put another way by Taylor, "The house reflects the invasive tactics of terrorism and torture. Terror deterritorializes; we are all foreigners in this house" (Gambaro 1992: 168). This sense that something is not quite right, that something more is going on in the house that we are not yet able to see, is essential to the sinister mood.

The sense of violation of what should ostensibly be a private space is also a key Gothic convention throughout the work. As I discussed in chapter two, the strangeness within the Gothic haunted house is often presented as an invasion of something exterior and dangerous into what was previously a safe, domestic interior. As Taylor (1997) explains, this "Emphasizes the corrosive and contagious nature of violence that blurs all physical, moral, and judicial frameworks. Scenes of political violence are not limited to prisons and torture chambers but are played out on public streets, in private houses, on human bodies" (127). In *Información*, it is state power, authoritarianism, and the associated violence that is reflected in these repeated violations of private space.

Even the behavior of the Guide and the language he uses throughout the play indicates that things are not what they seem in this house. Repeated slippages reveal the gap between what the Guide says and how he behaves and what he means. The majority of the time, he acts kindly, professionally, and deferentially to his public and the characters in the scenes he encounters, only to let his barely suppressed anger and violence erupt when he is pushed only slightly too far. Enraged by the vulgar graffiti he finds on the walls of the room inhabited by the wet, tortured girl, he nearly hits her before recalling that the public is watching and taunts her about her virginity, echoing lines previously spoken by her torturer. He swears and demands to know who

is the culprit when he hears a sudden scream from off-scene. He leaves a plate of food on top of two people trapped in one of the boxes in the hallways and insults them scornfully when they drop it in their hungry desperation to taste it. The familiarity and politeness of the Guide, it is clear, is all an act, beneath which are only anger and violence. This is indicative of the gaslighting and denial employed by a government which disguised its violent acts behind the language of the everyday or justifications regarding the well-being of Argentina. As Feitlowitz reflects in her introduction to the translation of *Información*, “There developed during the Dirty War an argot of dissimulation in which familiar, domestic expressions carried sinister, even deadly implications” (Gambaro 1992: 8). The normal, the familiar, the polite, the acceptable: all of these serve only to disguise the terrible truth just beneath the surface, making clear that there is a sinister threat of violence behind everything, even if we are unable to see it directly.

These examples demonstrate how, for the play’s characters, spectators, and critics, the setting of *Información*, like many haunted houses, is overwhelmingly marked by the uncanny. Mundani (2002) ties the uncanny in the play to the repressed reality of political violence in Argentina, arguing that the proliferate forms of violence are all-too-familiar and even normalized for Argentines during this era, and yet they cannot be spoken of directly. Instead, the intolerable reality can be represented only through exaggeration, masks, stereotypes, costuming, and other forms of aestheticization that make the familiar strange. However, in my estimation, the uncanny, while a contributing factor, in and of itself is insufficient to speak to the pervasive atmosphere of the sinister that Gambaro attempts to capture: it is not just a tension between the familiar and unfamiliar, but the idea that there is something beyond our reach that is invisible, but nevertheless felt, that is at play in *Información*’s setting.

As has already been established, the sinister strangeness permeating the haunted house indicates the presence of repressed secrets, which Gambaro highlights and exaggerates so as to paradoxically draw our attention to what is hidden from view.⁹ Further key elements of the setting lend themselves to this emphasis on concealment. The house, for instance, is unevenly and crudely lit so that the scenes witnessed by its visitors are on some occasions barely perceptible through the gloom and on others harshly visible.¹⁰ In Scene 1, the group enters a dark room, and the Guide has to find his lantern: its light illuminates a terrified, naked man wearing nothing but a faded loincloth who covers his genitals from view. “Perdonen. Me equivoqué de habitación,” the Guide apologizes to his group (Gambaro 1973: 74). We have glimpsed something in the dark that we were not meant to see, and the play with darkness and light emphasizes the curated nature of what is and is not supposed to be revealed. If the obvious subject of torture is hiding in one dark room, every closed door and poorly lit corner might disguise further violence.

Several other scenes and elements of the setting indicate to the audience that the house contains a multitude of hidden secrets. On a few occasions, the Guide attempts to lead his group into locked rooms, where we can only hear voices and are denied entrance. On another, we hear a death rattle as we pass by a room that the Guide decides to ignore in favor of a more promising scene. In addition to these closed doors, the boxes that line the hallway also indicate concealment of a particularly sinister type. In Scene 11, the Guide asks his group to wait as he peeks into one

⁹ Fernando de Toro (1999) reflects, “Los textos y las puestas de Gambaro siempre me han provocado una extraña sensación, el sentimiento de que algo se me oculta, de que algo está detrás pero presente en el texto, algo que está presente y ausente a la vez” (203).

¹⁰ As Hughes (2018) writes, this is also a technique for rendering the uncanny: “Classic focal points for the uncanny include ostensibly familiar spaces rendered strange and labyrinth-like due to darkness or chiaroscuro” (151).

of the boxes to see what they contain. When he opens it to reveal another man dressed in a loincloth, he smiles uncomfortably at the public and reflects, “Esto me pasa por curioso . . .” (Gambaro 1973: 96-97). Those who seek out what they are not supposed to see are punished with the unpleasant, if not worse. In yet another scene, an actor-spectator in the audience is hit and possibly killed and the Guide unceremoniously shoves him into one of the boxes.

Even that which we do manage to see is obfuscated by allowing the audience only a partial view further obscured by denial and gaslighting, as in the multiple scenes with the wet girl being tortured. Over several scenes, the Guide returns his group to the room where we see the girl in various states of anguish, only to rush them out again before the scene is completed. In Scene 7, he interrupts the girl and prevents her from explaining how she’s being tortured, assuring his audience, “Como ven, señores y señoras, aquí tampoco hay nada. Solo paredes. Y esa porquería” (Gambaro 1973: 89). Nothing to see here, time to move on. However, this attempt to conceal events is short-lived, as the audience is forced back to the scene again and again: “En una de esas, vemos la escena completa,” he remarks in Scene 8 as traffic in the hall forces them back into the room (Gambaro 1973: 91). But when we enter the scene once again and see a group of men surrounding the girl, the Guide closes the door hurriedly, saying he has made a mistake and gone into the wrong room, and ushers us off once more in the other direction. This rapid process of concealing, revealing, and concealing again, denying the evidence before our very eyes, has the effect of constantly keeping what has been hidden or repressed in the back of our minds (if just out of sight). As Marilyn Kiss (1982) points out, the act of concealment in this scene in particular conveys “a feeling that something sinister is taking place” (174). As in *Crónica de una fuga*’s choice to depict torture off-screen, in *Información para extranjeros* it is what we don’t see and yet dreadfully know must be happening that is most frightening.

Scenes like these associate every enclosed space within the house with the sinister, implying that the evidence of horrible deeds might be concealed behind any closed door. As Kiss (1982) argues, once the audience discovers that the boxes throughout the house contain bodies, they “become imbued with significance within the stage language. They always mean dead bodies and their mere presence evokes the stench of rotting cadavers” (178). The Guide allows the audience a glimpse at the house’s secrets—a sound of someone dying, a voice heard as he sheepishly hides something from view, an injured body closed up in a box—even as he closes the doors, turns out the lights, and refuses to acknowledge the evidence right in front of him as the tour moves on. Much like the camera’s use of close-ups and avoidance of establishing shots in *Crónica de una fuga*, the way that the Guide directs or diverts our attention in *Información* makes us hyper aware of what we don’t see. In fact, the multiple moments of temporarily revealed and then immediately concealed violence lead us to question why we have been permitted on this tour at all, if the haunted attraction has so much to hide—the answer to which can only be that we are actually seeing what we are meant to see, just enough direct terror to haunt us with the more indirect, yet omnipresent, sinister mood.

To this end, any attempt at making sense of the house and its secrets is repeatedly denied, leading to a constant sense of disorientation and unfamiliarity with the setting. The spectators’ tour through the house does not follow a logical path that allows them to develop a mental map of its architecture: as we saw in *Crónica de una fuga*, the setting is experienced in pieces, with the tour jumping inefficiently from floor to floor and room to room, doubling back on itself. As we have seen, even the Guide doesn’t seem to be sure where he is all of the time, occasionally knocking on locked doors and being denied entry and having to return later. Postma (1980) reflects on the confusion and disorientation lent by this experience of the haunted house: “As in a

maze, when one path is blocked, another avenue must be found. The spectator is acutely aware of the labyrinthine quality of his surroundings when the guide, supposedly familiar with the house/theatre setting, becomes disoriented” (37).

This disorientation contributes to a pervasive sense of confinement and being under threat for the spectators as we are unmoored from, though engulfed by, our surroundings and incapable of control or escape. Postma (1980) writes, “The perplexed spectator, confused by repeated comings and goings in darkened and illuminated rooms and corridors, feels threatened by his dependence on the guide and by the fact that he cannot see or comprehend the total space that encloses him” (37). The sinister arises in the haunted house again through architectural disorientation, which prevents a totalizing view that would allow the spectator to feel comfortably situated. This impossibility of either making sense of one’s situation or escape indicates how, as Tarantuviez (2007) argues,

No es posible escapar al autoritarismo encerrándose en la esfera privada, ya que esta es alcanzada por la corrupción y la violencia que acompañan al abuso del poder político, y, a su vez, la opresión que se da puertas adentro podría ser el germen de los discursos y prácticas opresores que se instauran en la esfera pública. (117)

As such, this disorientation demonstrates how the sinister mood pervades not just private and public space, but also our very beings and sense of place, confusing, alienating, and preventing us from identifying the concrete origins of state terror.

Because we are under threat by the disorienting space and the presence of violence around every corner, we constantly feel in danger of becoming yet another one of the terrible secrets hidden within the house. As several critics have pointed out, the initial division into groups and subsequent proximity of the audience to the action creates a feeling of fragmentation

and alienation and yet a sense of confinement, closeness, and being under threat.¹¹ On the one hand, as Batiz Zuk (2018) discusses, the fragmentation of the audience as well as the division of scenes into separate areas within the house reflects the political terror in Argentina at the time that operated by dividing the country into subversives or victims, collaborators, and bystanders. However, the position of the spectators is uncertain and unstable: Mundani (2002) highlights how the audience simultaneously comes under threat (when actors behaving as part of the public become targeted) and acts as victimizers (both when spectator-actors target others and through the act of witnessing atrocities and yet doing nothing to intervene).

Although the work's fragmentation can lead to a feeling of distance and alienation, it is thus impossible to avoid the fact that the audience, through sheer proximity, is implicated in the scenes being played out around them. As Gerdes (1978) points out, "The proximity of the actors and the audience almost literally assaults the spectators' sensitivities, preparing them for numerous scares and surprises" (12). Postma (1980) further argues that the play "aims to threaten the members of the audience through their physical proximity to those who are scolded or beaten" (43). The Guide's initial warnings also indicate to his group that their attendance is a form of consent to what they're about to experience: "Si ya pagaron, nadie puede arrepentirse. El gasto ya está hecho. Mejor gozar" (Gambaro 1973: 70). The audience is given the threatening sense that it is too late to go back now: through paying to experience the play, they are already implicated in what they are about to see.

The tenuous divisions between audience and actors, public and ostensibly private happenings further contribute to this sense of being under threat and implicated in what is

¹¹ Batiz Zuk (2018), Postma (1980), and Mundani (2002) all highlight this use of separation and confinement.

occurring all around us. The sanctity of the audience as supposedly passive witnesses to the play is violated when, on numerous occasions, actors behaving as members of the audience are directly threatened for intervening in the course of events. One, after being knocked out when opening a door, earns the chastisement of the Guide: “Si era público, ¿para qué se las dio de actor?” (Gambaro 1973: 110). The Guide cannot even protect his own audience from what is going on around them: in Scene 15, he warns the police not to bother the public, but they attack and carry off numerous people anyway. We are on our own: as Ford (2010) writes, “Given the evident incompetence of the guide, the spectators are left feeling abandoned in this play—a nightmare where each dark corner and locked room can hold a verbal or physical attack” (150). Our roles and safety are not guaranteed in Gambaro’s haunted house, just as one’s position as an innocent bystander or witness is not enough to protect one from the sinister threat of Argentine authoritarianism. In this way, I argue that the seemingly contradictory feelings inspired in the audience throughout the play—of alienation and implication—work in tandem. Whereas Brecht’s approach to theater is dedicated to breaking emotional identification and creating a critical distance, Gambaro simultaneously alienates and disturbs her spectators so that they are unable to identify with the play *as spectacle* (a point which I will elaborate upon more shortly), and yet, as we will see, insists upon an affective experience of the “ugly feeling” (Ngai 2005) of the sinister as crucial to the experience of the work. We must feel the paralysis of the sinister mood while also maintaining a critical distance if we are ever able to understand and learn to counteract this atmosphere as part of the state’s technology of power.

The Sinister Spectacle

As is made evident by the descriptions above, it is perhaps unsurprising that this play has been rarely staged in full: it is logistically challenging, to say the least. Although a production of the work is possible, it would require an incredible amount of coordination in a highly specific setting. As Postma (1980) points out, because the scenes repeat for different groups multiple times, and several scenes feature the same characters, it's doubtful that multiple groups could even witness all of the scenes as originally imagined without actors having to be in two places at once. This is to say, the setting of *Información para extranjeros* has been far more often imagined than experienced: for most readers, it is always-already distant and displaced, immaterial even in its visceral evocation of a material space, leading to distinctions between its points of enunciation and reception as well as a spectral and sinister quality to the story of the work itself. Again, the hauntings seem to proliferate: real-life torture centers, the imagined haunted house that is Argentina under the threat of authoritarianism, the setting of a play that rarely materializes and, when it does, most often materializes in exile from its origin, are all evoked in Gambaro's haunted house.

Although the world has rarely been given the opportunity to experience *Información para extranjeros* as spectacle, the play's constant insistence on drawing attention to its own theatricality is another key element in establishing the sinister mood. As previously mentioned, this self-awareness has theatrical antecedents in the absurd, Artaud, and Brecht. However, Gambaro's experimental structure might also evoke a rather non-traditional, though equally performative, theatrical experience for the contemporary reader or spectator which can be a

productive conceit through which to approach the play: that of the haunted attraction.¹² Like *Información*, in a haunted attraction, the public is usually divided into groups which then follow a path or ride—sometimes accompanied by a guide—where they witness multiple scenes of horror. Some attractions advertise varying degrees of interaction for the groups, including being touched by the actors. The improvisational nature of these scenes also resembles the level of audience participation in the play: like *Información*, though a haunted attraction has a set series of events that the audience will witness, there is room for improvisation in the order and quality of scenes, and from the guides and actors as they interact with and seek to terrify their spectators. Although the stage directions in the play note that audience members are never to be forced to participate, Gambaro too leaves open the possibility that spectators may interact with the actors and scenes unfolding directly in front of them. Moreover, much like the play, in a haunted attraction there is a choice to participate and yet a feeling of being under threat: even as the spectator knows they have paid for this form of titillation, that they have chosen this fearful experience and are certain to get through it safely, it is hard to eliminate that seed of doubt, that primal feeling of danger when faced with a masked man wielding a (chainless) chainsaw. The play even references an age limit—common at haunted attractions—although with a typically absurd qualifier: it is not meant for those under age 18, nor those under 35 or over 36, making it suitable for no one. As we saw with *Crónica de una fuga*, this blending of filmic and performative haunted house traditions allows for a layering of significance that contributes to the spectator’s experience of the sinister atmosphere in *Información para extranjeros*.

¹² Similarly, critics have alternately referred to the setting of the play as a “museo del horror” (Bernal Martin 2012: n.p.), a “maze” (Postma 1980: 37); a “macabre fun house” (Kiss 1982: 161); a “house of ghosts” (Taylor 1991: 146); and as having “una estructura carnavalesca” (Mundani 2002: 51).

Información perhaps most resembles both contemporary horror films and haunted attractions in the way that it uses spectacle—and the distraction thereof—to manipulate the emotions of its spectators. Horror films and haunted attractions are often interested in evoking extreme emotions by constantly seeking to build up to and then exceed previously experienced levels of blood, gore, and terror as they attempt to show their audiences the next big thing, the next greatest spectacle available.¹³ The play, too, is always looking toward the next big thing: the Guide repeatedly resorts to spectacle as a form of distraction, often leading his group away in search of entertainment whenever they are on the brink of witnessing a horror too directly. The Guide moves us along while the wet, tortured girl reaches slowly toward a gun; when we hear a death rattle coming from behind a closed door; and when a police chief asks a kidnapped woman to get naked, all with calls to find something more interesting to look at, more fun to experience. When scenes reach too far beyond the acceptable, there is always something new and better about to begin elsewhere, with wine, even! We are denied the full experience, and thus repeatedly made aware of what is being concealed by the spectacle. Moreover, these constant interruptions repeatedly preclude the possibility of experiencing the pleasure of the spectacle: we are caught in a tension between desiring to view the terrible secrets hidden within the house, compelled to seek out the dark truth like every good Gothic heroine, and yet compelled to look

¹³ As Bruce F. Kawin (2012) writes in his discussion of the use of spectacle versus suggestion in horror films, although often subtler ways of conveying horror can be particularly powerful, “Certainly there has been a tendency throughout the history of the horror film to increase the degree of spectacle and to make those visions of horror increasingly realistic, subject to the censorship and other expectations of the time” (7). Horror is also particularly susceptible to what’s commonly known as “sequel escalation,” defined on the pop-culture Wiki TV Tropes as “when a sequel is made to be ‘bigger and better’ than the last film, by taking one or more elements from the first film and expanding upon it” (np). This usually includes the need to increase the number of deaths and the amount of gore and violence featured. On haunted attractions, see Kerr (2015).

away from scenes of violence and abuse. Even as we wish to know exactly what is inspiring the sinister mood, it is inaccessible to us, leaving us to attempt to make sense of it via only its effects and affects.

Also like the haunted attraction, the play is characterized by an exaggerated sense of theatricality bordering upon the absurd. Costumes and make-up are highly done-up; the dialogue makes use of silly verses and rhymes; and the acting is at times deliberately bad, with stage directions indicating that in some scenes “*todos actúan burdamente, de modo infantil y exagerado*” (Gambaro 1973: 110). At such times, the Guide even draws attention to this poor quality, lamenting to his audience that the actors require significantly more rehearsals.¹⁴ As discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, the periodic black humor, absurdity, and farcicality of the work is disorienting, contradicting the more serious feeling of being under threat of

¹⁴ In regards to these moments, Ford (2010) points out that “the guide’s interventions bring into question the whole play in that spectators are viewing (and participating in) a product that does not seem to be finished or ready to be performed publicly,” thereby drawing attention to the imperfect process of setting up the spectacle (160). As highlighted above, Mundani (2002) argues that the exaggeration and absurdity throughout the play serve as a way to indirectly express the strangeness of political violence that has been repressed. Taylor has also discussed how the self-awareness of theatricality throughout the play mimics the theatrical nature of Argentine state terrorism at the time. She notes that after the 1976 coup,

The military men also relied heavily on spectacle to signal and consolidate power. They were aggressively visible, on parade, in uniform, wielding their weapons for all the world to see. The tactics they employed to disrupt and paralyze the population were also highly dramatic. Men and women were abducted in broad daylight; they ‘disappeared’ as if by magic. As in Elizabethan drama, corpses reappeared out of nowhere at strategic moments. The theatricality of terrorism endowed the national frame with a strange spectacularity. (Gambaro 1992: 162)

This is reflected in the theatricality of the play:

Society as a whole, Gambaro stresses, has been transformed into a terrifying theatrical set . . . Not only is theatre an arena for intense political confrontation, as attested by the policing of theatres, censorship of scripts, and harassment of writers and practitioners, but political violence itself is played out theatrically, on the public streets, in private homes, on human bodies. If the acts of terrorism Gambaro depicts are flagrantly theatrical . . . it is not simply that she is experimenting with a new kind of theatre, rather, she is depicting a new kind of violence, a terrorism that is itself highly theatrical. (Taylor 1991: 136)

violence, and ultimately noncathartic. The sinister mood, as that which inspires an ugly feeling, encompasses this disorientation and even humor, in which involuntary laughter and abject fear are both equally possible emotional reactions to its overwhelming nature.

The spectacle is also highlighted in the play as a way of pointing out methods of obfuscation and distraction employed by the Argentine state, all of which contribute to the production of the sinister. In *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967), Guy Debord explains how the accumulation of spectacles in culture and politics serves as a distraction from our material conditions and class positions, thus concealing the machinations of state power. As he writes in Thesis 24, “By means of the spectacle the ruling order discourses endlessly upon itself in an uninterrupted monologue of self-praise. The spectacle is the self-portrait of power in the age of power’s totalitarian rule over the conditions of existence” (19). By repeatedly drawing attention to state narratives and performances *as spectacle*, Gambaro undermines the way that the spectacle feeds into society’s passive “wish for sleep,” and reveals those machinations of power for the efforts at concealment that they are (Debord 1994: 18). As such, the play further highlights that the sinister atmosphere which pervaded the nation under Argentine state terror—like Mark Fisher’s attention toward capitalist realism—is not a natural or inevitable state of affairs, but rather the result of deliberate choices and manipulations made by prevailing powers.

In Scene 14, for instance, we see how the exaggerated spectacle serves to point out the absurdity of the state’s narrative of its own abuses through the story of “un matrimonio eme-eme, muy malo” (Gambaro 1973: 110). The couple, members of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias (FAR), are depicted as comically evil, conspiring to plant bombs willy-nilly in their efforts at “Subversión, subversión/ que todo el mundo muera/ ¡para la revolución!” (Gambaro 1973: 111). However, their attempts at rampant destruction and subversion are

heroically disrupted by the police, who declare that “¡La justicia siempre triunfa!” (Gambaro 1973: 111). The acting is so over-the-top that it puts the veracity of the entire scene in doubt: the absurdity of the whole spectacle serves only to reveal how unbelievable the governmental narrative of evil subversives actually is. Surely these cartoonish villains cannot be the source of the sinister mood that has been assaulting us since we entered the house. And when we cannot believe the scene being acted out in front of us, we are forced to wonder what truth is being concealed behind this attempt at distraction. As Taylor (1991) writes, in this way, the play actually serves to highlight what the spectacle is working at hiding: “By pointing out the theatrical illusion involved in making people ‘disappear,’ Gambaro illuminates the very real presence of deathly spaces beyond the confines of the lighted stage into which people and art itself vanish” (105). Government narratives of terrorist evildoers thus begin to appear to be spectacles meant to distract us from the state’s own roles in the production of political violence that gives rise to the sinister.

This theatricality is also frequently disrupted by interventions from the Guide providing relevant information with which to interpret the scenes, excerpts from the newspapers of the time discussing shoot-outs, kidnappings, and guerrillas. In high contrast to the exaggerated and even nonsensical scenes that purport to represent these events, the Guide’s descriptions are dry and sobering, referring to real-life events that could not feel more distant from the scenes at hand. This information resituates the spectacle of the play within the historical context within which it occurs, providing the spectator with a critical distance which allows us to assess how these historical narratives are manipulated to nefarious purposes.

One early scene is particularly emblematic. The Guide returns his group to a room that had formerly been closed and manages to enter. There is a Mother, costumed and made up to

look herself like a doll, with a baby doll in her arms, along with a Father. The Guide's "Explanation for Foreigners" tells the story of Nestor Martins, a lawyer defending unionists and political prisoners who was kidnapped on December 16, 1970. While saying goodbye to a client, he was surrounded by six men who forced him into a white Peugeot. His client, after struggling to free him, was also taken and forced into a black Chevrolet, which was reported as having come from near the parking lot of the Federal Police. "Desaparecidos," the Guide concludes (Gambaro 1973: 85). This is, of course, a description of a factual case of disappearance preceding the 1976 coup: it was reported to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights and the testimony of Martins' wife, Nora, appears in *Nunca más*.

The Mother, in addition to her own lines, ventriloquizes for the doll, who asks his father to tell him a story. He tells them about two men who met and were kidnapped because they were very bad. When asked what happened to them, he replies, "¡Nunca más se supo!" (Gambaro 1973: 86). The characters are filled with delight at the disappearance, at the two bad men who got what they deserved. The Guide decides to lead the group out of the room—not due to any protest of the material, which he has just delivered so factually through his recitation of the newspaper account, but because the acting is so bad.

The sinister in this instance is conveyed through the absolute absurdity of the scene and uncaring nature of the Guide, in contrast with the story of evident horror contained within the Explanation for Foreigners. A story of a politically motivated, state-sponsored kidnapping is transformed before our very eyes into a moralizing tale for children that justifies a crime committed in broad daylight by villainizing its victims. And not only that—the acting's bad. That is, the justification of the state's abuses is not even done with sophistication, but badly, absurdly, in direct contradiction of the facts that we have just been told, and yet it is meant to be believed:

we are under threat from a power that has the ability to redefine reality itself with little effort. The evident delight with which the final line is delivered and received by the other characters—“¡Nunca más se supo!”—and the Guide’s utter lack of interest or sympathy constitute a horror in and of themselves, to be shut behind a closed door as the group shuffles on to a new scene.

However, it is important to note that even these “Explanations for Foreigners” are not always to be trusted: rather than a purely unbiased source of “Information,” as in the title of the work, as *explanations*, they too are constructed narratives. We see this on the occasions that the Guide deviates from his dry, professional tone and veers into speculation. While detailing the story of another lawyer defending political prisoners who was kidnapped, brought to trial, and accused of crimes that occurred after his incarceration, the Guide is unable to recall the end of the story. “¿Qué le pasó después? No recuerdo. Perdido en la noche de los tiempos,” he reflects aloud (Gambaro 1973: 100). But then he deviates even further from his formerly factual narrative: “Pero no era tan inocente. Cabeza de Montoneros, el hijo de p . . . No me incumbe. Aunque cuando puede haber verdad, no sé por qué se la oculta” (Gambaro 1973: 100). Here, the source of all knowledge for us in the house is unable to provide a resolution to the events he details. Instead, the conclusion is hidden, made mysterious: the scene, as it continues to be acted out in front of us, depicts a cyclical, farcical pageant where the man is almost released, only to be further accused and brought to trial again, repeating the cycle over and over. The Guide villainizes the victim, echoing the state narrative but only managing to undermine it with his lack of knowledge, evident malice, and direct references to the concealment of the truth. In this way, the sinister proliferates even further, as we are shown that the only anchors we have in the disorienting space of the haunted spectacle—our Guide and the seemingly matter-of-fact explanations for foreigners—are also potential sources of threat, not to be trusted.

More Sinister Time

The repetitive farce conducted in the scene outlined above is also indicative of the sinister mood's impact on time within Gambaro's haunted house. The Guide situates us in a particular place and time at the beginning of the play, explaining, "La pieza responde a nuestro estilo de vida: argentino, occidental y cristiano. Estamos en 1971" (Gambaro 1973: 70). However, as we saw in *Crónica de una fuga*, the impact of past and present events as well as anxieties about the future serves to manipulate time in strange ways in *Información para extranjeros*. In addition to potentially being experienced out of order by the spectator, many scenes in *Información* also repeat themselves with variations like the cyclical trial above, creating discomfiting echoes that connect the distinct parts of the play.

For instance, immediately following the story of Néstor Martins' kidnapping in the text, the scene is reenacted, although it is not identified as such. Instead—almost in response to the Guide's request for better (or, at least, more authentic) acting—the audience itself becomes involved. As the group moves out into the hallway, several men leap out of hiding and kidnap an actor planted in the audience. Another actor posing as an audience member fights back to free him, but they are both taken. Once out of sight, the man's voice echoes over the loudspeakers, lamenting, "Dios mío, ¿por qué corrí?" (Gambaro 1973: 87). If the parallels between this scene and Nestor Martins' disappearance have not been driven home well enough, the scene repeats itself twice with other groups of audience members as they cross paths with one another, with the voice echoing out again and again. The Guide responds with indifference, never acknowledging the attack upon his own audience, continuously directing them towards another part of the house and cryptically speculating that they may find remains in the catacombs. But even as he attempts

to lead his audience into distraction with yet another spectacle, the horror that they are faced with returns: when the group enters a room and finds a large chest that the Guide opens, the voice cries out yet again. It is a bad surprise, the Guide scoffs, hiding its contents from the group and shuffling them out of the room. The implication, of course, is that the chest, like the other large containers strewn about the house, contains the disappeared body, hiding away horrors even as it draws attention to them with its mysterious presence.

The repetition of this scene of kidnapping indicates that these events are not merely tragic anomalies occurring every once in a while, but repeat events that are tied to one another, echoes like a haunting in which a specter is doomed to act out their final moments for all eternity. When the story of Martins' kidnapping is initially introduced in Scene 5, the horrible truth of the event is hidden and denied, via the exaggeration and victim-blaming of the characters, the Guide's indifference, and the distraction of the spectacle. However, this is not the end of the scene, even if it is the end of Martins' particular story: instead, what has been repressed returns over and over to be forcibly reenacted upon the audience in its need for acknowledgment and justice. As is often the case in stories of supernatural haunted houses, the current inhabitants—though they may be innocent audience members—are punished violently for the refusal to contend with past trauma or its relevance in their present circumstances. As we saw in chapter two, under the sinister mood, even time itself is disrupted and disturbed; this haunting repetition of events highlighted within the play becomes a way to address both the disorientation caused by the sinister and draw attention to the connections between seemingly disparate violence that, nevertheless, all contributes to the production of the sinister.

In addition to the cyclical nature of the events it depicts, for the contemporary reader who has the benefit of hindsight, *Información* can feel so chillingly prescient as to defy its date of

publication. As I have noted, though the play was written at a time when Argentine politics were certainly violent and turbulent, featuring instances of state-sponsored murder, kidnapping, and torture, the military coup that would initiate an organized, nationwide process of repression did not occur until 1976. The climate of terror that would characterize that dictatorship, however, was already being instituted under the authoritarian government that was in place from 1966 until 1973 and under democracy from 1973 until 1976—not to mention that Argentines would have been aware of the extreme repression occurring under Brazil’s dictatorship to the north, which began with a coup in 1964 and worsened its human rights abuses with the implementation of Institutional Act Number Five in 1968. Although Gambaro was citing very particular events in this work, as evidenced by the dates accompanying the explanations for foreigners, the types of abuses she depicts in the play not only were beginning to proliferate throughout Argentina and neighboring countries, but would repeat again and again over the subsequent years as the Argentine junta took over and instituted its campaign of terror. The first edition of the play published in 1987 even includes an amusingly prophetic typo: when describing the case of Nestor Martins, the Guide’s dialogue reports his kidnapping as occurring on “miércoles 16 de diciembre de 1979” rather than 1970 (Gambaro 1973: 84). What is notable about this error is that, although this case occurred in 1970, it very well could have happened, with little variation, in 1979, under the military junta. Like in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, which Derrida (1994) cites to illustrate the specter’s effect on time in *Specters of Marx*, in *Información para extranjeros* the time is out of joint. Or, rather, as we seen in Scene 18, time is altered: in that scene, a woman, who a footnote indicates is quoting poetry written by a Greek woman named Marina who was tortured, declares, “El tiempo está alterado, los años por venir están alterados” (Gambaro 1973: 121). Time and the future, indeed, appear to have been altered, allowing Gambaro, with her

incredible insight into the nature of authoritarian violence and its proliferation, to depict the direction of Argentine reality and the development of the sinister mood years in advance of the 1976 coup that would take state terrorism to its most extreme.

Though preceding the last Argentine dictatorship, *Información para extranjeros* is therefore still very much a text thereof.¹⁵ Like we saw with *Crónica*, the reader-spectator's implicit background knowledge of the Argentine dictatorship and the events preceding it means that Gambaro's house is, for us, already haunted by events that have yet to occur in the chronological time of the play. Even the use of certain language that has since become evocative of the dictatorship—for instance, “desaparecidos,” or the phrase “Nunca más se supo,” which recalls the 1983 “Nunca más” report detailing the government's extensive human rights violations—is enough to send shivers down the spine of the contemporary reader-spectator. Visitors from the future, from our contemporary point of reception, we are only too aware of the even darker direction events would take after the play's point of enunciation in 1971.

As reader-spectators, we thereby experience the sinister in the play partly as a function of our awareness of this historical trajectory, the past trauma that echoes out to us in the present. However, also key is the experience of terror, crisis, and anxiety that was characteristic of the text's point of enunciation. As Taylor (1991) notes, “Gambaro's plays themselves serve as evidence of the individual experience of threat and impending doom” (106). Haunted in the present-progressive sense by the violence and terror characterizing Argentine politics even

¹⁵ Mundani (2002) points out how, similarly, Gambaro's play *El campo* (1967), which depicts an Argentine concentration camp, was written significantly earlier than the clandestine detention centers were created. She discusses this as an element of the uncanny in Gambaro's work, which sees the dissolution of the limits between fiction and reality. *El campo* is clearly influenced by Nazism and Argentine right-wing sympathies with fascism, which continued throughout the aftermath of World War II, as demonstrated by the anti-Semitic rhetoric highlighted in chapter one of this dissertation.

before the dictatorship, *Información* speaks to the way that this overwhelming sense of danger undoes the chronological logic of time. Citing Maurice Blanchot's *The Writing of the Disaster* (1986), Taylor (1991) further explains that "Crisis, however, throws us into temporal abeyance; the doom, or the disaster, as Maurice Blanchot would say, had in a sense already happened" (106). In this way, the sinister also comes through in *Información* as a terrible sense of inevitability: just as there is no escape from the haunted house, there is no escaping the violence and terror haunting Argentine history. Even when the Guide declares that the function is over and the audience can leave in the final scene, the sound of police sirens in the distance reminds us that, outside, the horror continues.

Why Fear, Why Torture, Why Death?

Like *Crónica de una fuga*, *Información para extranjeros* places ethical demands on its audience, although its ending is significantly more disquieting and—perhaps due to its point of enunciation in 1973—less hopeful. The play's abrupt, anti-climactic ending—in which a prisoner, stripped nude and then playfully killed by a group of men amid singing, dancing sex workers, gets up from the table where he lies dead and begins to get dressed again as all the actors disperse—denies the resolution neatly provided by *Crónica*'s intertitles. Whereas the film, decades after the end of the dictatorship, is concerned with finding a way to make the detention center and experiences of torture legible as a way to understand and remember the past, the play leaves us stranded and confused, sitting with our experience of the sinister, unable to quite respond to what we have experienced.

In this way, Gambaro not only asks us to learn to live with ghosts, but to embrace their illegibility and the disorientation of the sinister mood. It is only through the affective experience

of this sense of threat, in all its ambiguity, uncertainty, and paralysis, that we can truly begin to understand the generalized atmosphere that was beginning to pervade Argentina at this time period. The tension between this disquieting and affectively immediate experience of the haunted house as Gothic spectacle and our growing critical awareness of the way the sinister is deliberately manipulated *as spectacle* to serve as a technology of power serves to break us of the paralysis induced by the sinister mood and stir us to action. Ultimately, *Información para extranjeros* demands a confrontation with both the producers of political violence and the sinister mood and those who, like ourselves, have been implicated in allowing this violence to continue unabated.

The play's call to intervention, its question that demands a response we cannot yet provide at its close, lies in the words spoken by a group of men in response to the young woman, Marina, in Scene 18. Marina, reciting her own poetry, declares,

Yo asediaré el "eso no me concierne"
y quebraré el sueño ajeno con fuegos de artificio
horribles, indecentes
con fusilamientos incontables caeré sobre la indiferencia

de los que pasan
hasta que empiecen a preguntar, a preguntarse

And the men continue,

¿Por qué el miedo?
¿Por qué la tortura?
¿Por qué las muertes?

¿Quién puso límites?
¿Quién dijo alguna vez: hasta aquí la sed,
hasta aquí el agua?
¿Quién dijo alguna vez: hasta aquí el aire,
hasta aquí el fuego?
¿Quién dijo alguna vez: hasta aquí el hombre,
hasta aquí, no? (Gambaro 1973: 121-122)

Marina is an insistent specter: she makes demands of and promises to us as spectators, pledging to return with violence and anguish over and over until she breaks down our indifference and spurs us into a confrontation with the order that has allowed fear, torture, death, and a limited definition of humanity that allows some to suffer at the hands of others. In the face of the sinister mood and the paralysis that it induces, she nevertheless demands that the audience overcome their indifference and refuse to allow this atmosphere of political violence to go unchallenged.

The words of Marina and the men are evoked for us in the final scene of the play through another echo, the last thing we hear, laid over the sound of sirens, as the audience shuffles toward the exit of the haunted house: “¿Quién dijo alguna vez: hasta aquí el hombre, hasta aquí, no?” (Gambaro 1973: 128). Amid all of our fear and confusion, we have no answers to the specter’s demand; only questions for the existing order that has allowed torture, fear, and death to overrun the house, a need to confront the source and nature of so much violence, a need to react—if only affectively—to break out of the paralysis induced by the sinister mood. And this need is an urgent one. As Ng (2015) writes,

A standard narrative pattern in many haunted house narratives is the protagonist’s dismissal, with rational explanations, of the slight changes around the house that eventually gives way to mounting fear and anxiety when these adjustments, in both their frequency and objects affected, escalate. By then, however, the protagonist would likely be unable to redress the situation because she is rarely capable of tracing . . . its source. (18)

If we allow the uncanny strangeness of authoritarian power’s effects in the haunted house to become familiarized, if we explain them away, then by the time the sinister mood reaches us, it may already be too late.

At the end of the play, as Gerdes (1978) reflects, “Certainly the spectator-participant comes away terrified. As the play reaches its conclusion, the spectator fears for his life, realizing fully the potential danger that exists for all persons today who find themselves in states of

distress and isolation” (15). The sinister atmosphere created within Gambaro’s haunted house engages us on an affective level, allowing us to feel, if not fully understand, the implications and dangers of the events unfolding around us. Despite our fear, however, we are unable to look away: the question—why fear, why torture, why death—demands an answer we cannot give, a troubling, disquieting thought that continues to haunt us beyond the house’s walls.

Part Three

Dangerous Bodies:

Disappearance and the Sinister Corpse

Chapter Four

The Abject Materiality of Artur Barrio's *Trouxas Ensanguentadas* (1970)

Imagine that you are taking an early morning stroll, through the city park. It is sunny and pleasant, and the day is just starting to heat up. You walk along the shore of a nearby stream—a sewer, really, the water is dirty and shallow, it flows by slowly. You glance toward its muddy shore, strewn with rocks and scraggly plants. There is something strange there. Perhaps an unexpected epicenter of animal activity grabs your attention—insects buzzing or birds flocking or even a stray dog nosing around the strange thing with interest. From far away, it could be a pile of trash. You approach, curious; perhaps your approach frightens away the insects and the birds and, with a bit of shooing, even the stray dog.

The strange thing is not trash.

It is a lumpy bundle, tied up with twine, stained red and brown with blood and muck and other mysterious fluids. It is misshapen, and from one hole in the material sprouts a filthy, hard mass of bone and flesh; suddenly, you attribute the various protrusions to twisted, broken limbs. The smell of blood and decay comes toward you on the breeze. Perhaps you recoil and retch. You see that there are more bundles, of varying sizes but equally lumpy and blood-stained, strewn along the riverbank. What should you do? Can you bring yourself to move closer to the bundle and investigate? Does it repulse you, so that you take a step back without even realizing? Can you bring yourself to climb back up the bank to the path and find someone (who?) to help?

Perhaps you consider going back to your walk and moving on as though you had not seen it; you could let someone else find it, let someone else decide what to do. For a moment, the horror, the repulsion, the unexpectedness of this discovery might make it impossible for you to

act, trapped on this spot and in this moment, paralyzed, just you encountering the bundle and the bundle encountering you.

This speculative moment of encounter might describe the experience of a passerby faced with what is commonly referred to as Artur Barrio (1945-)'s *Trouxas Ensanguentadas*, or *Bloody Bundles* (Fig. 14). This particular action utilizing the bundles took place in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, from April 19-21, 1970, as part of the *Do Corpo à Terra* exhibition.¹ The work, officially entitled *Situação...T/T1...*, was composed in parts, with each event documented by photographer César Carneiro. The first part, conducted overnight on April 19, consisted of Barrio's act of constructing the bundles by wrapping 20 kilos of cow meat and bones in fourteen cloths, tied together with bloodied rope. In the early morning of April 20, Barrio distributed the bundles along the Arruda, a stream or sewer in the municipal park where the exhibition was taking place. Carneiro documented the bundles when they were first put into place and, after 3 pm, the public's reaction, using photographs in both color and black-and-white as well as 16mm film.² In

¹ Barrio made use of the Bloody Bundles in other situations, including *Situação . . . ORHHHHHHH . . . ou . . . 5.000 . . . T.E . . . em . . . N.Y . . . City . . .* (1969), in which he brought decomposing bundles covered in blood and red paint into a gallery space for an exposition at the Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, and *DEFL ... Situação- + s + Ruas ...Abril . . .* (1970), in which he distributed 500 plastic bags of refuse throughout Rio. While this chapter focuses exclusively on *Situação.....T/T1.....* in the interest of brevity, some of my analysis could be expanded to apply to the contexts of these other situations, although the distinctions of the other settings and differences in passerby reactions would require nuanced adjustments.

² According to the description of the work, "Registers were obviously taken in the midst of this group of people, made anonymously, of course" (Lopes et. al 2007: 42). This anonymity, however, only means that spectators were unaware that the artist was present, or that the bundles were works of art at all; as demonstrated in photographs that show passersby looking directly at the camera, some spectators would have been aware that they were being watched and recorded. We can imagine that such spectators may have thought the photographer was part of the media.

the third and final part of Barrio's situation, held the following day, the artist threw sixty rolls of toilet paper into the air in a nearby part of the park.³



Figure 14. *Situação...T/T1...*, Part 2, Artur Barrio, Belo Horizonte Municipal Park, Brazil, April 20, 1970. Commonly known as the *Trouxas Ensanguentadas*, or *Bloody Bundles*. Images courtesy of the artist; documentation by César Carneiro.

Barrio's situations were created with the expectation that the artwork encompasses an immediate, immersive experience, and the existing record of the event is viewed as being an index of what occurred, rather than the artwork itself. As such, while there is documentation to go by when analyzing the moment of encounter with the bundles, the full impact of the situation is, in some ways—much like the contemporary reader's experience of Gambaro's *Informacion*

³ While this analysis focuses on the bundles themselves and largely will not address the third part of the situation, it is notable that Barrio's conclusion to the action again emphasizes the ephemeral materiality of refuse. That is, Barrio uses toilet paper, an object associated with scatological functions which is made to be thrown out, as his medium, and the act itself necessitates the object's undoing, as the rolls unwind themselves in the breeze and are left to disintegrate while littering the landscape. As we will see, this ephemeral materiality will be key for my analysis of the bundles themselves.

para extranjeros discussed in chapter three—inherently imagined, speculative, and spectral, with present-day viewers unable to fully access it. The first passerby to find the bundles and, perhaps, alert the authorities, initiating the chain of events that would unfold over the rest of the day, remains undocumented, and, as a situation, the true nature of the artwork is firmly situated in a specific time and place, so that we cannot have quite the same experience when viewing photos of the event as those who encountered the bundles themselves. Barrio claimed that around 5,000 members of the general public saw the bundles, in addition to the police and fire brigade who arrived to deal with the troubling situation (Lopes [1970a] 2008a). In her analysis of the work, Claudia Calirman (2012) notes that the park was popular with the middle and working classes, who may have encountered the scene while having a holiday visit to the park,⁴ and adds that “When the police and firemen came to examine the bundles, a police officer tripped on one of them, escalating an already tense situation. By the end of the day the bundles were all destroyed and the bones dispatched to a laboratory for analysis” (91).

This chapter contends that the Bloody Bundles acted out the re-appearance of the tortured and abused bodies of the dictatorship’s political prisoners, forcing everyday Brazilians to encounter and index of the abject evidence of the government’s human rights violations. As I have argued in the introduction to this dissertation, the sinister is produced both when the authoritarian state disappears the body of the political dissident—leaving family and loved ones paralyzed and haunted by their lack of knowledge of what occurred—and when the state strategically reappears the cadaver, terrorizing the community with a violence that is nevertheless denied and covered up. In both instances, an improper materiality and death

⁴ In Brazil, April 21 is a national holiday, O Dia do Tiradentes, commemorating the death of a revolutionary who was executed in 1792 for his participation in the separatist Minas Gerais Conspiracy.

proliferates, trapping whole nations under the unbearable, unknown threat of the sinister. Through the Bloody Bundles, Barrio mimics this experience, evoking anonymous, mutilated bodies in order to materialize the government's misdeeds and force an encounter with the abject. However, this is not to say that, by imitating the appearance of violence, the artist merely unethically contributes to the spread of the sinister. Rather, we will see that, as a result of Barrio's artistic practice focused on ephemerality and precarious materials, the bundles encourage affective identification with the "dangerous bodies" of political dissidents and other marginalized individuals. Moreover, by allowing for a range of affective reactions to the "ugly feeling" of the sinister, the bundles allow for the possibility of responses to the overwhelming horror of state torture and murder that break free from the paralysis induced by authoritarian governments.

The abject and ephemeral nature of the Bloody Bundles has attracted the attention of several critics with whom I engage productively. In *Brazilian Art Under Dictatorship: Antonio Manuel, Artur Barrio, and Cildo Meireles* (2012), Claudia Calirman analyzes Barrio's work alongside other Brazilian artists operating during the dictatorship, arguing that the ephemerality of their work was an innovative reaction both to the need to avoid government censorship and the desire to make art out of inexpensive, accessible materials that could not be easily commodified by the art market. She further notes how much of Barrio's work embraced the abject, with the goal of soliciting strong reactions from spectators and advocating for the marginal. She characterizes the bundles as "perhaps the most violent work of art publicly displayed in response to the repressive regime" and argues that "Viewers were meant to perceive these gruesome bundles as lacerated and bleeding human body parts, perhaps even the remains of people tortured by the dictatorship. The bundles' presence in public spaces violated the notion

of a detached bystander, suggesting the vulnerability of society to the repressive regime” (2012: 90). Freitas (2013) interprets the bundles, in all their abjection and precarity, as being capable of assaulting the senses and breaking the spectator out of a condition of apathy, visibilizing and forcing them to react to the presence of the Brazilian death squads. He advocates for understanding the bundles on three interrelated levels: first, their association with the violence of the dictatorship; second, their demonstration of the misery of underdevelopment in the third world; and finally, as a method of resistance toward institutionalized artistic conventions. Maroja (2014) also is interested in how the bundles visibilize what is hidden from the public eye under authoritarianism, arguing that they

reenacted a form of this dissociated knowledge and fear of state terror, and that they also functioned to transform viewers into victims and witnesses of their historical situation. In doing so, I argue that the Bloody Bundles constitute the visual, material presence for the otherwise invisible violence of Brazilian history, especially for its missing political prisoners. (23)

Finally, Backes Couto examines the Bloody Bundles as a work of horror which indicates “a irrepresentabilidade do mal, da vergonha e da culpa” (8), arguing that the encounter with horror inevitably would lead to the public questioning what kind of monster could enact such violence; the bundles thus position the authoritarian state as monstrous.

My intervention similarly relies upon an engagement with the Bundles’ abjection and ephemerality as indices of Brazil’s *detenidos* and *desaparecidos*, as well as the affective reaction that this troubling materiality inspires in the spectator and its role in overcoming the irrepresentability of monstrous violence. However, this chapter seeks to lend profundity and nuance to the theoretical conceptualization of the abject as relates to the bundles; link the situation to the broader atmosphere of the sinister; and conduct a more extensive close reading of

the extant registers of the situation, which has often been neglected in the literature in favor of a broader focus on the artistic, historical, and political context of the bundles.⁵

The Abject and Ephemeral

As critics have repeatedly asserted, the Bloody Bundles immediately evoke mutilated corpses.⁶ What appears to be the remains of several bodies subject to some unknown violence turning up in an unexpected location is, of course, deeply disturbing in any context. However, given the background of the Brazilian dictatorship, for the present-day viewer of the photographs

⁵ Most of the available documentation of this and the artist's other projects has been preserved by Barrio himself digitally, via his personal website and a Google Drive folder. As Calirman (2012) notes, the ability to study how the reception of these artworks is limited due to media censorship. While I close read available documentation of the bundles to root my analysis in the material as best as possible, I want to emphasize that the bundles *as objects* are only relevant insofar as they impact the greater *situation* of which they are a part. Because of their deliberate precarity (a quality which will be expounded upon later in this chapter), they no longer exist as objects themselves, nor could they be unproblematically considered art objects in their time. This also means they resist circulation in the art market: while a prototype of the bundles exists and is displayed in museums and galleries, Barrio has stipulated that the prototype cannot undergo maintenance or restoration, and so in time it, too, will be destroyed. For more discussion on the significance of Barrio's use of perishable materials and resistance to art as a site of the accumulation of capital, see Basualdo (2007). For a discussion of the existing prototypes and Barrio's refusal of restoration requests, see Calirman (2012: 107-108) and Freitas (2013: 166-167).

⁶ For example, Calirman (2012) writes, "Viewers were meant to perceive these gruesome bundles as lacerated and bleeding human body parts, perhaps even the remains of people tortured by the dictatorship" (90). Freitas (2013) argues, "Barrio não acrescentou mais lixo a desordem do mundo: ele criou corpos - estruturas limitadas que acusam certa intenção formativa e que, ao fazê-lo indicam a existência de uma atividade projetual de fundo" (124). He further agrees with Calirman (2012)'s characterization of the bundles as evocative of dictatorial violence: "evocando a morbidez evidente tanto da aparência como da aparição de corpos mutilados que boiam num rio, Barrio acabou interpretando, no tecido social, as práticas assassinas do terrorismo de Estado, clandestino ou encoberto" (161). Herkenhoff (2009) similarly argues that Barrio tries to "llevar al espectador a considerar la hipótesis de un cuerpo desmembrado, pero también llevarlo a indagar aun sobre los contenidos: las partes dispersas o todavía mantenidas juntas dentro de la trousse" (19) and "expone la duda entre canibalismo, bestialidad, crimen de la violencia urbana y terrorismo de Estado" (19).

of the situation it is difficult to imagine a scenario in which the mind does not immediately leap to the assumption that these are victims of state (or para-state) terror. Nevertheless, we have to imagine that, for the unassuming spectator on April 20, 1970, uncertainty and doubt would have reigned: provoking more questions than answers, the abject presence of the bundles indicates that something terrible and threatening has happened, but the what, where, when, or who remains inaccessible. As we will see, this tension between the paralysis imposed by the sinister and the extreme reaction to the abject is integral to the experience of the work.

Multiple critics have also noted the abject nature of the bundles, basing their definitions of the abject in theories expounded by Julia Kristeva and/or Georges Bataille. Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror* (1980), takes a psychoanalytic approach that describes the abject as that which disturbs the boundaries between the subject and the object and which is rejected in order to preserve the subject as a unified whole.⁷ Bataille, in “Abjection and Miserable Forms” (1934), focuses more on abjection as related to the social body: whole classes of people are marginalized and rejected by the body politic as a seeming threat to the system of authority. In both instances, even as the abject is supposedly rejected, there remains an undeniable attraction to that which has been expelled, either from the subject or from society: Mulvey-Roberts (2016)’s “dangerous body.”

In the case of the Bloody Bundles, the abject is evoked first by a disturbing materiality that troubles the boundaries and expectations of the human body. The bundles deposited by the Rio Arruda, though lumpy and misshapen, were of a distinctively human size, with bumps and protrusions that could be attributed to legs and arms twisted in impossible ways (Fig. 15). Their

⁷ As Calirman (2007) explains, “Both Freud and Kristeva consider the sublimation of the abject a key moment in the passage from nature into the symbolic order, the moment when the infant leaves the maternal body fluids to enter into paternal rule” (23).

resemblance to the human body is therefore uncanny—resembling the corpse as described by Blanchot (1982)—in the sense of being familiar, but not quite right, denying and disturbing our expectations of the human form. The twine that holds the bundles together seems to wrestle with the mass of sheets and filthy matter, barely containing something horrible that threatens to spill over: the bundles, therefore, evoke the excess and dissolution of boundaries associated with the abject. And in some cases the mass succeeds in breaking down those borders: small holes give us a glimpse into its grimy, dark interior, contrasting with large protrusions of hard bone that extend outward beyond the sheets that purport to contain them. Finally, a deep red stain appears to be either sprayed across the bundle in some act of brutal violence or soaking the sheet from within, spreading outward from the object’s mysterious contents (Fig. 16). These fluids further contrast with our expectations of the human body: Arya and Chare (2016) note in their discussion of the abject as it relates to fragmented bodies, bodily excretions are abject because they “remind us of our animality—the fact that we are decaying and that once life has been taken away our bodies will putrefy” (108). The abject precarity of the body, which is subject to decay, is thus further imitated by the bundles’ ephemerality: their contents, on the verge of falling apart, are evidently in the middle of a process of dissolution that threatens to undo them before our very eyes.



Figure 15. *Close-up of one of the bundles.*



Figure 16. *Close-up of bundles before distribution. Note the distribution of red color that mimics multiple forms of blood spatter or pooling.*

In other photographs, the bundles have been torn open, though this act of uncovering makes them no less mysterious (Fig. 17). Their interiors contrast with their exteriors, as the apparent blood stains would seem to indicate the presence of fluids and flesh. However, the mass

of bones, meat, and connective tissue is almost surprisingly dry. This, though, makes it no less troubling: whereas the discovery of a recognizable human body or its remains inside one of the bundles would at least give shape and form to the mass, allowing observers to immediately identify the bundles' contents, the jumble of bones follows no discernible pattern and provides no answers. As Arya and Chare (2016) elaborate, "Fragmenting the body renders it unstable and vulnerable, both for the viewer, who is uncertain how to read it as it subverts conventional understanding, and also because it takes on an indeterminate form with ambiguous boundaries" (114). A total rejection of boundaries, there is no order to be identified within the bundles, leaving both spectators and the governmental authorities responding to the situation in doubt as to what they had seen, a human shape that cannot be made to resemble a human order. There is no promise of resolution for the spectator of this action, only uncertainty and suspicion, a crucial aspect of the sinister mood.



Figure 17. *Interior of a bundle that has been opened.*

Calirman (2012) emphasizes the object's associations with spilled bodily fluids and contamination, in opposition to cleanliness and hygiene. Undoubtedly this is relevant to the

composition of the bundles, and contributes to the visceral reaction of the observer that causes “the repugnance, the retching that thrusts me to the side and turns me away from defilement, sewage, and muck” (Kristeva [1980]1997: 230). Unfortunately, Calirman (2012)’s focus on contamination and hygiene neglects Kristeva’s further assertions about the abject, that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” ([1980] 1997: 232).⁸ More than just embodying a threat of contagion, the filth, fluidity, and decay of the bundles evoke a disruption in bodily boundaries, a “danger to identity” from both the outside and the inside of the spectator (Kristeva [1980] 1997: 260).

While I will elaborate later on the corporeal effects that the encounter with the bundles has on the spectator, for now it is worthwhile to dwell further on the role of this abject materiality in considering the resemblance between the bundles and the human corpse. As Arya and Chare (2016) explain, “In its natural state the organic body cannot be trusted to remain intact and whole and is instead prone to secretion, excretion, breakdown, decay and ultimately death. . . . The corpse is the ultimate abject thing: the negation that is contained within the body and is its ultimate destiny” (107). The bundles, in their process of decay, thereby explicitly evoke death, the fragility of the human body, and the precarity and ephemerality of life.

Moreover, they evoke not just human susceptibility to the natural process of death and decay, but more specifically the irregular processes of violence and mutilation. That is, the bundles could only have been formed, tied together, and distributed by human hands: the accumulation of disordered body parts necessitates a violence that serves as “an index of the

⁸ Calirman (2007) argues that Barrio is interested in the moment of transformation in which the subject moves “from nature into the symbolic order” (23). However, she does not elaborate significantly on this point.

experience of extreme circumstance, when human life is disposable” (Maroja 2014: 26). In the words of Hilderman Cardona Rodas (2017) examining other imagery of bodies subject to violence, through the bundles,

La experiencia corporal de la violencia se proyecta como lenguaje en los signos visibles del cuerpo violentado, asesinado, destrozado o humillado dejando tras de sí temores, represiones, miedos y exclusiones que se encarnan en los testimonios visuales del cuerpo despojo que ha sido deshumanizado y animalizado” (106-107)

Rather than a passive object of decay, a death and undoing without an author, the mutilated corpses evoked by the bundles point to an active violence, drawing our attention to how certain bodies are *made* abject and *made* precarious. Of course, even with the evidence of the act in front of them, the spectator is nevertheless entirely unable to identify the invisible agent of this violence.

As in Bataille’s conceptualization of the abject, the bundles’ process of creation is therefore inherently linked both to authority and marginality. Mbembe (2003) explains that under necropolitics, “Sovereignty means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is disposable and who is not” (27). As states seek to define the ideal citizen, in contrast, they also define that which is not ideal and must be rejected, who is disposable. The marginalized, those deemed by the state not to matter, are those who are determined to be politically, economically, sexually, and otherwise threatening or unnecessary to the body politic: political dissidents, gays, lesbians, and trans individuals, people of color, the disabled, the unemployed, the mentally unwell, etc. Similarly, Judith Butler reflects in “Bodies that Matter” (2005),

This exclusionary matrix by which subjects are formed thus requires the simultaneous production of a domain of abject beings, those who are not yet ‘subjects,’ but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject. The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject, but whose living under the sign of the ‘unlivable’ is required to circumscribe the domain of the subject. (63)

The marginalized are therefore made abject, made to live precarious lives in uninhabitable circumstances in which they are subject to state-sponsored violence and death. The *desaparecidos* and *detenidos* of the Southern Cone, in this context, are also made abject, determined by the state to be not just disposable, but to necessitate ejection from the body politic.

The ephemeral nature of the Bloody Bundles as objects mirrors this precarious aspect of the abject. This precarity is crucial to Barrio's practice: his artistic manifesto, written in 1969 and 1970, explicitly positions his work and its inherent ephemerality in contrast to Concretism and Neo-Concretism—whose emphasis on the use of expensive industrial materials and technology he saw as inaccessible for third world artists—and its incorporation into the institutional art establishment.⁹ Using cheap, commonplace, and often repulsive materials like trash, toilet paper, and urine, he rejected art institutions and made the commodification of his works nearly impossible. Instead, his work was temporary and could only be experienced directly, “en el registro de la retina o el sensorial,” or revisited via the secondary documentation of photographs, videos, and recordings (Lopes 2009: n.p.). It thus criticized the economic conditions of artistic production in Brazil and the elitist, exclusionary nature of its institutions while affirming a vision of third world art that could “operar con el residuo económico, con el margen del margen,” in the words of critic Paulo Herkenhoff (2009: 17). Before even being placed by the Rio Arrudo, the bundles were made from materials subject to decay, though at different rates: meat, trash, paper, cloth, bone, what Freitas (2013) refers to as “resquícios da vida” (115). As Calirman (2012) argues, these materials were chosen specifically “for their cheap, vulgar, and perishable

⁹ However, both Calirman (2012) and Freitas (2013) emphasize that Barrio's approach is not necessarily a pure break with the work of Neo-Concretists, with Freitas (2013) specifying that Barrio follows some of the same lines of inquiry as artists such as Lygia Clark (1920-1988) or Hélio Oiticica (1937-1980), even as he rejected their “rigor formal no uso do espaço e da cor” (119).

qualities” (82) and were constructed with the thought that they “would eventually deteriorate by their own organic process of decomposition” (85). The bundles therefore began as precarious, already in the process of destroying themselves. Then they were exposed to the elements of nature, soaked in the river and inevitably attracting insects in the heat (Fig. 18). Even before people arrived on the scene, the bundles would have been falling apart, leaking and emitting odors. Once authorities intervened, the bundles would have moved even more rapidly toward their own undoing, as they were opened, torn apart, investigated, and sent to labs for ever more minute analysis.



Figure 18. *A bundle being soaked by the river.*

Here we have another aspect of the ephemeral that is key for how the sinister arises from the situation: the spectator’s experience is momentary and impermanent. Because the bundles are precarious, meant to decay and be taken away, they cannot be revisited. Even as the Bloody Bundles are troubling, visceral, confrontational, and, above all, dependent upon their abject materiality to demand the close engagement of the viewer, both the works and the moment of encounter by definition do not last. Though emotionally durable, the experience is fleeting. Even

for the present-day viewer, the low-quality photography and imaginative speculation that provides us with access to the event evokes the temporary and impermanent: there is a distance created in both the 1970s and today between the spectator and the bundles as object. This ephemeral yet lasting affective impact is central to Barrio's artistic practice: in the foreword to a catalog for an exhibition of his work, Molly Dougherty (2007) points out how, despite the potential risks taken on by Barrio and his collaborators in this and related projects under dictatorship, the artist "seems to have been intensely focused on his own reactions to the intense situations he created" (5).

While Barrio may have concentrated on his own affective engagement with his work, I argue that spectators of the Bloody Bundles—including both those who experienced the work *in situ* and even those whose encounters in the present day are distanced and mediated—similarly experience the sinister mood provoked by the abjection of the bundles on a bodily level, a point which I will elaborate upon below. The tension between closeness and distance, a strong reaction that is nevertheless fleeting, both imitates Blanchot (1982)'s conceptualizations of the corpse outlined in the introduction to this dissertation and is indicative of the nature of state terror that gives rise to the sinister mood. As I have discussed, the corpses and tortured bodies produced by the Brazilian state, when not outright suppressed, were at least partially concealed by media censorship and government lies that attributed deaths to other causes. This partial concealment creates a sinister atmosphere, in which a vague awareness and threat of state-sanctioned torture and murder haunts citizens' everyday lives, but cannot be directly acknowledged or, as a consequence, resisted. As in the encounter with the bundles, there is a tension created between the indistinct, disquieting, and haunting feeling of the sinister and the extremity of the violence that it alludes to. However, when what appears to be the evidence of torture and disappearance is

directly in front of you, it also cannot be ignored: as Calirman (2012) argues, the abject nature of the bundles demands engagement. And spectators appeared to respond overwhelmingly to this demand: a morbid attraction to the bundles, an undeniable desire to engage is evident in the sheer number of people who came to witness the spectacle (Fig. 19). By re-appearing the abject index of violence and making the disappeared body material, Barrio therefore forces a confrontation in which an overwhelming affective reaction to the abject—whether of fear, disgust, dissolution of the subject, or even morbid curiosity, as we are nevertheless attracted to the abject even as we are repulsed—momentarily causes the spectator to engage with and recognize the suppressed brutality of Brazil’s military regime. The sinister, spectral nature of disappearance is acted out via the bundles’ ephemerality, even as it is momentarily dispelled by forcing the public to directly face the abjection and precarity that proliferate under the authoritarian state’s necropolitics.



Figure 19. *Bystanders in Belo Horizonte Municipal Park observing the activity around the bundles.*

An Anonymous Exhumation

In resembling both the ephemeral waste matter of human life—that is, trash—and human corpses in a state of decay, the bundles implicitly compare the socially rejected with society’s refuse, the disgusting and the unhygienic with the marginalized. Their ephemerality points to the precarity of life under the dictatorships and the inherently violent nature of an economic and political system that relies upon seeing human beings as disposable. Critics such as Cardona Rodas (2017) and Roberto Monroy Alvarez and Laksmi Adyani de Mora Martínez in “The Image of Waste: Towards an Analysis of the Aesthetics of the Body, the Missing and the Body as Waste” (2015) have observed how other imagery of human corpses—for example, in Roberto Bolaño’s *2666* (2004), Fernando Brito’s photo series *Tus pasos se perdieron con el paisaje* (2010) or the Mexican *notas rojas*—has similarly associated cadavers with trash, pointing towards the dehumanization that occurs under capitalist necropolitics.¹⁰

A further aspect of dehumanization that has been neglected in the literature is evident in the fact that the bundles are composed specifically of meat: the bodies of cows. This is, of course, for practical purposes—the bundles could not have been composed of human remains for obvious reasons—but also, taken literally, relates the dehumanization that accompanied the political violence of the Brazilian dictatorship to one of Brazil’s major economic activities, cattle ranching. As I have discussed in chapter two of this dissertation, this links the necropolitical

¹⁰ Monroy and Martínez (2015) write, “La tesis de la que parte este trabajo es que en la más reciente modernidad se ha construido un discurso que confunde el tratamiento del cadáver humano con los desechos sólidos, y de esta manera el cuerpo humano ha pasado a ser un elemento que se dispone junto a la basura” (71). Similarly, Cardona Rodas (2017) reflects, Los archivos visuales de la atrocidad sobre los cuerpos permiten leer la amplia gama de prácticas y gestos de deshumanización e incluso de animalización del cuerpo enemigo, combatiente o civil (ciudadano, campesino, indígena, afro, indigente, diferente, anormal) en contextos de políticas de la muerte, tanatopolíticas, que legitiman y normalizan, Arendt (2003) diría banalizan, el mal en una cotidianidad estética de la crueldad y del horror. (106)

proliferation of death under the terrorist state with the justification behind the authoritarian governments of Brazil and Argentina—neoliberal privatization and insertion into the global economy. Beyond this economic-political dimension, the use of cow meat acts out the violence done by the state when the bodies of political dissidents are targeted and dehumanized. In his description of the act of composing the bundles, Barrio alludes to the somatic experience of manipulating the flesh: “ESFORÇO.....PRESSÃO.....DIFICULDADES.....CIRCULATÓRIAS.....8.....8..... 11-SONS.....SOM.....SOM..... 3- MANUSEIO DE CARNE EM ESTADO DE DECOMPOSIÇÃO” (Lopes [1970a] 2008a: n.p.). By enacting violence upon the animal body, he acts out the violence done upon the human by the state. Moreover, by composing the cow meat to resemble the human corpse, Barrio paradoxically moves the flesh through a circular process: uncannily humanizing the cow so as to resemble the dehumanized cadaver and draw attention to dehumanizing dictatorial violence.

An additional element of dehumanization is made evident in the anonymity of the bundles. As noted above, the disordered accumulation of matter within the bundles makes it impossible to ascribe a human order to their contents, much less a particular human identity. Unable to be recognized as human beings, the anonymity of the bundles—and the bodies of *desaparecidos* that remain unclaimed and unidentified—indicate abandonment by the social order. As Kerstin Mey (2016) points out in her discussion of the cadavers of criminals made into anatomical models, “In relation to the body social, abjection is thematised in the ‘public parade’ of the corpses of anonymously dead: the remains of former subjects who have no one to bury their bodies, are not given a place to ‘rest their souls’ and have no one to commemorate their lives and safeguard their rights in death” (154). This anonymity is central to several

dehumanizing processes associated with state violence, with Arendt (1973) observing how “The concentration camps, by making death itself anonymous (making it impossible to find out whether a prisoner is dead or alive) robbed death of its meaning as the end of a fulfilled life” (452) and Perosino (2015) arguing that mass graves “sirven para separar los cuerpos e Specialist identidades; constituyen una forma abrupta de sumergir identidades individuales en una identidad grupal y anónima” (74). In this way, the bundles can be interpreted as a sort of exhumed mass grave, with the sinister mood evoked not just because they are abject, but because they are anonymous: even their right to death, their ability to be recognized as part of the human symbolic order, has been destroyed.

The sinister, marked by the idea that not just the detenidos and desaparecidos, but also all citizens existing under the necropower of the authoritarian state, are disposable and can be ejected from the social order, proliferates in this anonymity of the dead. For this reason, assigning a name and identity to recovered remains is often viewed as essential in cases of disappearance: even when a body has been recovered, a person remains disappeared and their rights denied so long as the body cannot be identified. As Silveira Bauer (2014) reflects, “Até o momento de esclarecer o desaparecimento e encontrar o corpo da pessoa, não existem verdades, comentar dúvidas, que se estendem no tempo e contribuem para a propagação e perpetuação do terror” (91). This uncertainty and doubt, as I have argued, constitutes the sinister mood, the constant threat that cannot be dispelled and paralyzes those under it. In their dehumanization and anonymity, the bundles therefore allude to the multitude of unrecovered and/or unidentified bodies under state terror whose loss paralyzes their loved ones in time.¹¹

¹¹ This paralysis can be seen in responses to the mass grave: “The deliberate conningly of human remains in unmarked graves bewilders survivors and heightens the disorder, anxiety, and division of the citizenry. As a sophisticated technology of terror, these types of graves aim to

However, this is not to say that recuperating and identifying the bodies of the *desaparecidos* means that justice is done. As Gordon (2008) asserts, “A bag of bones tells us nothing about disappearance. A bag of bones is not justice. A bag of bones is knowledge without acknowledgment” (115). It is for this reason that exhumations of mass graves of the dictatorships with the goal of identifying the remains have often been controversial, since, as some of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo have argued, exhumations “destroy the living collective legacy of their disappeared children by transforming it into a past story of individual deaths” (Corbin 2021: 118). The anonymity of recovered remains, while on the one hand denying the right to death, on the other also opens up the potential for creating new collectivities.

In this way, while multiple critics have noted that the Bloody Bundles give form to the otherwise absent.¹² Even as the bundles function as a material index of the spectral bodies of the *desaparecidos*, temporarily allowing their reappearance, their anonymity asserts that they do not function as pure representation or replacement. Rather, the anonymity and ephemerality of the bundles, in the words of Freitas (2013), “nos fala da impossibilidade mesma de se recuperar, em certos casos, um único objeto permanente como definição da própria concepção - fenoménica - da obra” (117). Similarly, the *desaparecido* cannot be completely recovered or perfectly represented: the experience of torture and violence is inherently unrepresentable. However, by

erase the memory of violence, and at the same time consolidate regimes of fear that might last for decades” (Férrandiz and Robben 2015: 1).

¹² I have outlined this argument by Maroja (2014) above. Similarly, Backes Couto (2020) reflects,

As Trouxas representavam o irrepresentável, davam forma aos corpos desaparecidos na ditadura, aos corpos disformes descartados no lixo. . . . Eram reminiscências daquilo que perambulava o imaginário das pessoas naquele período, mas que só tomou uma forma verdadeira na imagem de Vladimir Herzog enforcado, cinco anos depois. (9)

creating an index of this experience, Giancarlo Backes Couto (2020) argues that Barrio gives form to

O horror abstrato e irrepresentável . . . como na representação clássica de um fantasma que é coberto por um pano. O que dá medo efetivamente não é o pano que se apresenta diante de nós, que advém da nossa realidade, mas sim o etéreo que ele enforma, aquilo que pertence ao além, ao que desconhecemos e não queremos ver. Do mesmo medo que Benjamin dizia que todo monumento era um monumento à barbárie, toda Trougha desvela a barbárie anterior a ela. (9)

In this way, by evoking the abject anonymity of the body of the *desaparecido*, Barrio temporarily reappears an indescribable experience of violence, pointing both to the visceral horror of what is otherwise a spectral, indeterminate crime and exposing the precarity of life under dictatorship. As we have seen in previous chapters, this focus on the experience of a sinister mood and affect helps to overcome the aesthetic and ethical challenges of attempting to depict a violence so extreme that it constantly eludes representation. Moreover, as we will see in the next section, the overwhelming, abject materiality of the Bloody Bundles, by pointing toward an author of their violence, a previous barbarity, also functions to act out the evidence of the dictatorship's crimes that the state has otherwise sought to suppress and erase.

Conjuring the Bloody Evidence

While a bag of bones is not justice, it can be evidence. As has been previously established, disguising and denying the evidence of human rights violations was a major motivator of both disappearance and other treatments of the bodies of political dissidents by authoritarian regimes. In Brazil specifically, even though there were a relatively small number of *desaparecidos*, the evidence of state-sponsored violence was hidden from public view through censorship, intimidation, terror, and the manipulation of bodies. For example, the bodies of some of the first dissidents disappeared after the 1964 coup, Alfredo Dias and Pedro Ignacio de

Araujo, “apareceram carbonizados na estrada que liga a capital paraibana a Caruaru” (Silveira Bauer 2014: 88). In another well-known case, the body of journalist Vladimir Herzog, who was killed while imprisoned in 1975, was staged to look like a suicide.

These actions gave the Brazilian state plausible deniability before other nations and human rights organizations: the practice of torture was repeatedly denied by authorities during the dictatorship, and even released political prisoners who gave testimony of their torture were not widely heard due to censorship (Silveira Bauer 2014). They also created an environment of fear and uncertainty among those who were aware of the violence, but unable or too frightened to do anything about it. Silveira Bauer (2014) argues that kidnappings, torture, murders, and disappearances were “um fator determinante para a intimidação e submissão de setores da sociedade,” implementing control through fear, and that this “contribuiu ainda para a fragmentação da sociedade, para o isolamento e estigmatização dos familiares e do entorno social das vítimas, que se sentiram desamparados e impotentes, e para o desenvolvimento do individualismo” (37, 100).

Though reports of the dictatorship’s actions were suppressed, particularly after Ato Institucional Número Cinco (AI-5) was implemented in 1968,¹³ Silveira Bauer (2014) asserts that few Brazilians would not have had some sort of contact with or awareness of a victim of torture or illegal detention. Human rights groups obtained evidence of clandestine detention centers between 1969 and 1974 and were in communication with exiled political dissidents

¹³ AI-5 suspended habeas corpus for political prisoners, made unauthorized political meetings illegal, and implemented widespread censorship, among other suspensions of basic human and civil rights.

regarding their experiences of torture.¹⁴ In addition, relatives or friends of the victims “por terem acesso a materiais produzidos por redes de denúncia e solidariedade, ‘sabiam’ o que acontecia, e faziam circular comentários e notícias” (Silveira Bauer 2014: 100). Nevertheless, 1970, when the situation took place, was an early moment in the awareness of torture and disappearance in the public consciousness: this experience had not yet been narrativized. As in Argentina, a partial awareness of the government’s activities that could not necessarily be directly confirmed or articulated but was widely suspected was a major characteristic of the sinister under the Brazilian dictatorship.

Without the bloody evidence, the terrible reality of mass repression is much easier to deny, and allows for the complacency of even those citizens that may have suspected the government’s abuses. Huggins et. al elaborate in *Violence Workers: Police Torturers and Murderers Reconstruct Brazilian Atrocities* (2002),

The personhood of the victims is obscured when their murder is disguised as an ‘elimination’ or ‘disappearance.’ A victim loses any presence at all when described as a ‘contract that is fulfilled.’ There are no bleeding, maimed, or dead people where mass murder is hygienically sanitized as ‘ethnic cleansing,’ where bombing is portrayed as a ‘clean, surgical strike’ with only ‘collateral damage.’ This euphemistic bureaucratise either eliminates victims altogether or casts them as a disease or other pollutant to be removed from the body politic. (255)

It is for this reason that the abject materiality of the Bloody Bundles is so significant. Their disturbing, unhygienic appearance and transgression of boundaries cannot be easily sanitized. In particular, the bundles contrast significantly with how Mbembe (2003) describes the evidence of massacres under necropolitics:

Lifeless bodies are quickly reduced to the status of simple skeletons. Their morphology henceforth inscribes them in the register of undifferentiated generality: simple relics of an unburied pain, empty, meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel

¹⁴ Amnesty International made Brazil a particular focus of its Campaign for the Abolition of Torture throughout the 1970s. For more information on the role of Amnesty International under the Brazilian dictatorship, see Meirelles (2021).

stupor. In the case of the Rwandan genocide—in which a number of skeletons were at least preserved in a visible state, if not exhumed—what is striking is the tension between the petrification of the bones and their strange coolness on one hand, and on the other, their stubborn will to mean, to signify something. (35)

By resembling the bleeding and maimed, rejecting generality and coolness and instead insisting upon a particularity—even in their anonymity—and a certain human warmth,¹⁵ the Bloody Bundles therefore resist this empty, meaningless pain and instead insist upon an aggressive presence that cannot be so easily denied or glossed over. By performing the reappearance of the evidence of the violence enacted upon the *desaparecidos* and *detenidos*, Barrio undermined the state's efforts at plausible deniability and the everyday citizen's ability to look away from the government's abuses. The spectator of the Bloody Bundles was made to look at an indicator of terrible violence and to wonder as to its origin.

Maroja (2014), in her interpretation of the Bloody Bundles, emphasizes this insistent visibility given to otherwise hidden violence by the artwork. As she explains,

The performative physicality of the bundles is also a form of evidence, a metonymy of the bloody violence of the dictatorship that visually linked them to bodily torture. [Barrio] thus rendered the repressive, political circumstances physically concrete. Thus, the bundles were simultaneously carriers of ideas and strategies, as well as physical presences, a factor that is vital to their denotative and connotative context. (25)

Bringing what appeared to be material evidence of state violence into view therefore worked to clarify and solidify an experience that citizens had heretofore only perceived indirectly, and “functioned to transform viewers into victims and witnesses of their historical situation” (Maroja 2014: 23). The bundles would thus serve as a disruptive shock to the daily order to which

¹⁵ Regarding his use of similar bundles on the streets of Rio de Janeiro in *DEFL ... Situação- + s + Ruas ...Abril . . . (1970)*, Barrio has stated that he conceptualizes the bundles as having a warm temperature that connects them across distances in a sort of heat map (Lopes [1970b] 2008b).

citizens had adapted, in which normality reigned but violence always bubbled beneath the surface.

The placement of the bundles contributed to this disruption of apparent normality. The bank of the Arruda within the busy park simultaneously evoked the remote areas where the government would dispose of bodies in order to avoid their being found, while also rupturing an ordered, public space that was otherwise not associated with violence, like the domestic space of the house examined in part two of this dissertation. In this way, the bundles pointed toward the act of concealment even as they drew attention within “locations where they appeared to be the result of a violent and brutal event which was ‘out of the regular order,’ disturbing or shocking to those who found them” (Venâncio Filho 2015: 93). As in Nuria Girona Fibla (2019)’s discussion of the corpse as trash in the work of Fernando Brito, which emphasizes the incongruity between cadavers and the natural landscapes that surround them,

Los cuerpos quedan como restos de una escena anterior a la que ya no tenemos acceso pero cuya violencia queda evocada, en un campo de acción ciego que de otra forma no nos sería visible.

Este fuera de campo inscribe definitivamente a estos cadáveres fuera de lugar.
(12)

Similarly, the bundles, too, are out of place in the landscape of the municipal park, and inspire inevitable questions as to what led to their appearance in that location at that time. The “unseen horrors committed” (Calirman 2012: 92) against the bodies evoked by the bundles could only have been done by what Backes Couto (2020), in his analysis of the *Trouxas Ensanguentadas* as a work of horror, terms “um monstro abominável, um ser oculto mas também sempre presente” (11). The bundles are therefore indicative of the invisible presence of an agentic killer, who, while frightening, nevertheless remains diffuse, both everywhere and nowhere, as the violent acts have taken place out of sight, leading to the threat of the sinister. By evoking pieces of

bloody evidence, “As Trouxas guardam não apenas os restos das vítimas, sua carne e sangue, mas carregam também a reminiscência da presença do monstro” (Backes Couto 2020: 12).

Suspicion for this apparent mass act of violence would logically have turned to the government-sponsored death squads, as many critics have asserted.¹⁶ As the authorities whisked the bundles away for analysis, their confusion could easily have been interpreted as a refusal to provide information to the public, and the removal of the bundles as eliminating the evidence from sight. In this sense, the bundles act out the displacement of the real evidence of governmental atrocity that was occurring all the time. The performative reappearance and then disappearance of what appeared to be the evidence of violence—which, when done by the state, enacts the sinister by spreading terror or sending a message—is here turned against the authoritarian government and used to sow suspicion of their activities.

The bundles’ ephemerality, coupled with Barrio’s documentation of the situation, further supports the potentiality of the bundles as indicators of the state’s culpability. The material precarity and brief temporality of the bundles mean they inevitably will disappear; they can only be fully experienced first-hand, for a limited time, before they decay and/or are confiscated by authorities. This reflects the way that other art of this time was equally—though less purposefully—precarious: censorship of art exhibitions after 1968 often involved confiscating works of art.¹⁷ Made to be confiscated, when the objects are taken away for analysis, the

¹⁶ Backes Couto (2020), Calirman (2012), and Freitas (2013) all comfortably base analyses on this assumption. While Herkenhoff (2009) mentions other possibilities (terrorism, urban violence, and cannibalism among them), and speculation could certainly have abounded, it is hard to imagine that state-sponsored terror wouldn’t have been one of the top suspects among the passersby; the sheer scale of violence implied by the fourteen different bundles points to a certain level of organization that would be hard to attribute to an individual killer, and guerrilla organizations were known for targeted political kidnappings, not anonymous mass murders.

¹⁷ For example, Calirman (2012) details the case of an artwork by Antonio Manuel (1947-) that depicted police violence against students, which was confiscated by authorities and disappeared

authorities act out both the censoring of art and disappearing of bodies before the public's very eyes.

However, even as what appears to be the abject evidence is erased and witnesses are left only with the ephemeral experience of what they have seen, the photographic and filmic documentation of the event creates a lasting (if partial) register of the bundles' impact, the spectacle of reappearance and disappearance, and this act of invisibilizing. Notably, many of the Brazilian government's repressive policies essentially revolved around the refusal of documentation as a way to disappear the evidence of human rights abuses: the suspension of habeas corpus, censorship, etc. Photographs and film of the situation respond to this lack of documentation by creating an archive of evidence of what occurred, allowing for an ongoing encounter even if only spectrally, across time. In particular, shots that are semi-obstructed by other people or foliage lend to the feeling that the authorities and bundles are being observed and recorded clandestinely (Fig. 20). The camera appears to be recording something we are not meant to be seeing, turning the gaze powerfully against the authorities. In this way, a trace of the bundles and the governmental monstrosity that they evoke, as well as the government's act of disappearing the evidence, is documented for posterity; the image becomes evidence of the situation in the absence of the abject materiality of the bundles themselves.

when the II National Biennial of Bahia was "ordered closed by the military regime under allegations of erotic and overtly political content" (21).



Figure 20. *A shot of authorities inspecting the bundles is taken surreptitiously from a semi-hidden position, possibly within the crowd, as evidenced by obstructions in the view at the edge of the frame.*

Corporeal Encounters

The Bloody Bundles not only materialize the apparent evidence of otherwise hidden violence, they also force the spectator to engage with them on a corporeal level, to cohabit with the dead and disappeared. As previously mentioned, the incongruity of the bundles against the bucolic landscape both disturbs and attracts the viewer. A chance encounter with the bundles would first draw the spectator in: as Venâncio Filho (2015) notes, the work “allows for and even demands proximity” (54). That is, the Bloody Bundles would attract passersby closer and capture their attention and curiosity. Once the viewer was close enough to truly take in their abject nature, the bundles would “accost and upset the daily routines of unsuspecting viewers,”

disrupting a relaxing walk in the park with an image of violence and monstrosity (Maroja 2014: 23).¹⁸

This experience would disturb the spectator's perception of the very space that surrounded them—and, by extension, their perceptions of the Brazilian nation.¹⁹ Like the Clandestine Detention Centers discussed in part two of this dissertation, awareness of the apparent remains of human corpses would lead the viewer to reevaluate their relation to the material and national landscape. An everyday, safe, public space, when intruded upon by the evidence of the violence that lurked beneath the surface of Brazilian society, would become sinister, and the spectator potentially at-risk. To reiterate Calirman (2012: 90), the appearance of the bundles in public indicated that the entirety of the social order was vulnerable. Although individuals who supported the authoritarian government may have continued to feel safe, the bundles exposed the social body more broadly as being at risk of violence and mutilation.

Moreover, outside the regulated space of the art gallery, the spectator is unprepared as to how to view or approach the bundles. Because they would not have been known to be art, the spectator would not have come prepared to observe them with a critical distance, therefore “resulting in an emotional experience produced by the unexpected confrontation” (Maroja 2014: 23). Even as the viewer may attempt to interpret and decipher what they are seeing, speculating upon its origin and possible meaning, the utter shock of the encounter at least momentarily forces

¹⁸ Both Freitas (2013) and Backes Couto (2020) also point to the bundles' ability to “assault” the spectator and force them to engage with the work as key for their impact. Freitas (2013) argues that “a sua capacidade de assalto, o modo com que interpelam nossos sentidos e juízos” (115) is the most important element of the work, while Backes Couto (2020) observes how essential the spectator's active involvement is both for Barrio's situation and for the horror genre as defined by Noël Carroll (9).

¹⁹ Venâncio Filho (2015) observes, “The object tends not to occupy much space, yet it acts upon and modifies the space that it does occupy” (54).

spectators into an immediate visceral reaction that occurs on an emotional and corporeal, rather than intellectual, level.²⁰ This immediacy, as I have alluded to previously, bypasses representation: the violence of torture is unrepresentable, and yet, as Michael Richardson argues in *Gestures of Testimony: Torture, Trauma, and Affect in Literature* (2016), literature and art strives to “chart its affective force on bodies and worlds. . . . Not so much accepting the unspeakable as expressing the affective experience of its unspeakability” (157).

These visceral impacts could take many forms. Calirman (2012) affirms, Barrio “strove to provoke visual shock and reactions of disgust and nausea in the spectator, considering even vomiting and diarrhea to be acceptable responses to his work” (87). Importantly, vision was not the only sense being provoked by the abject objects; in addition to seeing the bloody packaging, flesh, and bone, the passerby would smell the bundle’s “distinctively pungent odor,” which would have “activated viewers’ bodies” and “exacerbated the strong reactions induced by the repulsive objects” (Maroja 2014: 23, 25).²¹

²⁰ In an analysis the works of artist Catherine Bell, Barrett (2016) argues that those works “not only operate through the forces of attraction and repulsion that characterise abjection, but also articulate abjection as a more nuanced process that ambiguously positions the viewer as both a critical and distanced observer whilst at the same time evoking direct sensory, affective and empathetic engagement” (130). This contrasts somewhat with the case of the Bloody Bundles: while later reflection might provide the opportunity for critical distance, the shock and confusion of the encounter outside of the gallery space would have prioritized the bodily response at first. As Millett (2007) puts it, “The mind may discern at a distance; the bowels react in proximity” (163).

²¹ Smell, a sense that is intimately tied into human emotion and memory, no doubt would have played a significant role in the spectator’s experience of the bundles. It is also one of the first things people often mention when discussing encounters with dead bodies: their odor reaches you often before they can be seen. Brian Wallace (2007) immediately notes the role of smell in his introduction to the catalog describing the exhibition of some of Barrio’s other work at Moore College of Art and Design, describing the way the smell of coffee grounds remained on his clothes for some time after he left the exhibition. Moreover, in his description of the process of assembling the bundles for the situation, Barrio explicitly mentions “OLFATO” (Lopes [1970a] 2008a: n.p.). Significantly, though smell is famously very evocative of memory, it’s also

Some of the photographic documentation of the situation captures spectators' reactions to the bundles. While many remained at a significant distance, as in figure 19, others came close to examine the objects, including not only the authorities in figure 20, but also everyday bystanders, including children (Figs. 21-23). In each photograph, the spectators approach or sometimes bend over the bundles without getting too close, arms carefully folded or placed on their hips as if to prevent their hands from unconsciously trying to touch the bloody, threatening objects. Some of the children, perhaps braver or less concerned about hygiene than their elders, seem to toe at the bundles or poke at them with a stick to investigate, balancing their curiosity with their repulsion. If "the common desire of all objects is to be touched," the bundles as object and abject simultaneously attract and repel the hand of the spectators as they seek to maintain a protective distance from the potential threat (Venâncio Filho 2015: 71-72). However, as I have mentioned previously, there is also an attraction to the bundles, a morbid curiosity, which is activated: the photographic documentation shows that many of the public chose to be voyeurs or to defer to the authoritative presence of officials while nevertheless watching the scene unfold at a distance. Aldana Reyes, in his discussion of the corporeal effects of the gothic, argues that "Morbid curiosity is part and parcel of body gothic, as it charges our interest in forms of violence and radical alterity that are attractive precisely because they often lie outside the remit of our direct experience" (2014: 13). The spectators, for all their varying affective reactions to the abject, are nevertheless caught in the tension of desiring to uncover the truth behind the bundles, to know the violence and marginality that they allude to on an affective level, and yet feeling under threat by the sinister mood that their abjection, ephemerality, and dehumanization evokes.

ephemeral and often cannot be preserved for later spectators in the way that images and sound can.



Figure 21. *Three people examine the bundles.*



Figure 22. *A group of young boys examines the bundles; one pokes at them with a stick.*



Figure 23. *The group of young boys, standing next to the bundles, look at the camera.*

On a psychological level, this encounter with the abject can become a crisis of self-representation for the observer, for whom “a vortex of summons and repulsion places the one haunted by it literally beside himself” (Kristeva [1980] 1997: 229) in “the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva [1980] 1997: 223). The spectator is not only unable to comprehend what is before them, they are also momentarily unable to understand themselves. As a result, their own body is displaced, mirroring the corporeal displacement of the *desaparecido* whose remains are evoked by the bundles. While an index of the victim’s body has been made to reappear, to return to the familiar context, the spectator’s has been defamiliarized, and, confronted by an index of the traumatized body of the victim, momentarily become that which is traumatized.

Proximity to the bundles therefore also causes emotional and physical reactions in the spectator that mirror the symptoms of an unstable, abject body. Visceral reactions—a desire to look away or distance oneself from the bundles or feelings of revulsion, unease, nausea, or fear—materialize the precarity of a body that is in the process of being undone, no longer a

coherent, unified whole. At any moment, like the apparent corpse that has been fragmented and is decaying beside them, the spectator, too, could become the victim of mutilation and violence at the hands of some unknown, omnipresent monster.

This physical and emotional experience is embodied, Jill Bennett argues in *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (2005), by the “squirm.” She describes,

Although the squirm is a recoil, a moment of regrouping the self, it is also the condition of continued participation, the sensation that works with and against the deeper-level response, which on its own is unbearable. The squirm lets us feel the image, but also maintain a tension between self and image. . . . [It] is not a retreat but a way of negotiating the felt impact of the image—a crucial part of how the affective sign unfolds to the viewer. (Bennett 2005: 43)

That is, the experience of the abject, in which the spectator loses themselves in incomprehension and the body is simultaneously pushed and pulled into being displaced, is expressed and regulated by the physical response of squirming. It registers the abject, incorporating it into the spectator’s own corporeal experience, and yet reminds the body of its own boundaries so that the displacement does not become permanent. Violence, horror, the abject, can all be emotionally dealt with, even as they evoke physical responses that will inherently change the body through their corporeal presence. In this way, an affective response to the sinister mood, when appropriately managed, can break us out of the paralysis induced by the omnipresent threat of violence. This disquieting experience in response to the sinister can evoke affective identification or an empathic connection, which Aldana Reyes (2014) posits as a “Corporeal intelligibility premised on our shared consciousness of what pain means and what it entails, as well as an awareness of the limitations of our bodies,” which “may be powerful because readers can project, imagine or otherwise sympathise with, fictional pain” (17).

By conjuring up an index of the violence done to the *detenidos* and *desaparecidos*, the bundles therefore point to the possibilities of affective identification even under conditions of

extreme paralysis induced by the sinister atmosphere of state terror. For the present-day viewer with the benefit of critical distance, the photograph of children near the bundles on the bank of the Arrudas seen in Figure 23 is particularly illustrative of the potential lasting effects of the encounter with these objects. In the photo, five young boys are positioned on the right side of the frame, all staring with serious expressions at the camera. Their body language is closed off against the possibility of touching the bundles (hands on hips, arms folded, one drawing the collar of his shirt up to his mouth) and they are positioned several feet away from them. The asymmetry created between three Bloody Bundles on the left side of the frame and the five boys on the right seems to suggest a parallel between the two sets of bodies. The framing of the photograph suggests that they are witnessing the traumatized bodies evoked by the bundles, experiencing the abject (as demonstrated by their distance and body language) and yet the photographer's choice of positioning implies that the traumatized bodies are, potentially, their own, or at the very least inextricably linked to them via an empathic and affective connection created by the experience. However, the children are no longer looking at the bundles; they have moved beyond the initial moment of encounter and redirected their gaze to the present-day viewer, who is left to think through speculatively of the way these children may have recorded that experience as a form of sense memory. Although they may not comprehend what they have experienced, they have felt it and been made witnesses to it.

This lasting effect of the encounter is crucial to the political nature of the situation. Having corporeally experienced the squirm, identified themselves with the traumatized body, the spectators would have felt the violence, fear, complicity, and danger of their historical moment. As Herkenhoff (2009) reflects,

Las acciones evidenciadas con las Trouxas eran operaciones de enfrentamiento del miedo visceral. . . . Por eso, su potencia. Barrio deflagra una operación de sublimación del

cuerpo de las más crudas que se puedan experimentar. Mide la violencia del acto para que el pánico no paralice al sujeto. Además, el cuerpo fragmentado, el objeto ‘trouxa’, es para el observador la hipótesis de su propia aniquilación o daño. (18)

Forced into this confrontation, made aware of their own precariousness, those that encountered Artur Barrio’s *Bloody Bundles* moved forward with an affective understanding of the violence of their situation and the victims of Brazil’s repressive regime, making them capable—if not yet of political action—at least of later serving as witness to this bodily and societal trauma.

The encounter with the evidence of violence in what was presumed to be an everyday, safe space therefore forced the spectator into some form of engagement with the object: their act of encounter, in which the object inevitably had an emotional and bodily impact, meant they were inextricably involved, forcibly made witness (and possible perpetrator, accomplice, or even subsequent victim) to the bundles’ presence. Each spectator was then confronted with a choice that was inherently charged with the moment’s political context and the dictatorial regime’s role in the lives of its citizens: to investigate the bundles’ abject contents; to attract the attention of others in an attempt to garner social support in the face of violence; to defer to authority and call upon officials to address the problem; to look on as voyeur; to reject the bundles and continue on their way. The prevalence of the voyeuristic and authority-deferring choices of the spectators recorded in the photographs perhaps points to a desire to reject the position of witness. As Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub lament in their analysis of crises of witnessing after the Holocaust, “As the event of the Jewish genocide unfolded . . . most actual or potential witnesses failed one-by-one to occupy their position as a witness, and at a certain point it seemed as if there was no one left to witness what was taking place” (1992: 81). It is possible to see this same dilemma in the face of violence—to witness or not to witness—taking place in the very bodies of the spectators whose actions and choices are documented in Carneiro’s photographs.

This crisis of witnessing points to what is clearly one of the possible limitations of Barrio's Bloody Bundles and, in fact, a risk inherent in many attempts at representing violence and trauma. When confronted with the bundles, rather than occupy the role of witness, the passerby could easily have converted into what trauma studies scholars refer to as the "unethical spectator," who "is in the first instance accused of moral indifference; that is, of *turning away*, of pretending not to see and remaining silent in the face of injustice" (Oliver 2010: 121, emphasis original). The spectator of the Bloody Bundles could, of course, choose ignorance, turn away, and remain silent, tacitly approving of or at the least allowing this violence via the refusal to take responsibility for the bundle. In a similar way, the choice to bring in authority figures—government officials and police, both of which were inherently complicit with the regime—could be seen as deferring to the very authority that had caused the violence in the first place, preventing justice from ever being done. Additionally, because the bundles are not, of course, actually mutilated corpses, but rather indexes of the regime's disguised violence, some reactions to the work could be seen as potentially undermining the reality of the terror of the military government. The fiction of the bundles could be seen as a source of relief in a context in which real mutilated corpses were appearing, thereby undermining the violence that they are meant to represent. Mimicking political violence in the form of bundles of blood, cow meat, and bones could seem like little more than some kind of sick joke, provoking only relief in the spectator at the realization that they were not, in fact, human remains.

A further danger is the employment of distancing mechanisms such as objectification, voyeurism, denial, and desensitization to avoid engagement with the violent reality implied by the bundles. In "Trauma, Bodies, and Performance Art: Towards and Embodied Ethics of Seeing" (2010), Sophie Anne Oliver points out that the "spectatorship of traumatized bodies is

particularly problematic in its potential to induce objectifying and voyeuristic ways of seeing suffering,” and that we can become desensitized by repeated instances of this type of viewing (120). Further, when occupying the space of the voyeur or even, because of a power differential created between observer and victim, the space of the executioner, “the spectator is at risk of becoming complicit in the very logic of the degrading, marginalizing, dehumanizing effect of atrocity upon the body” (Oliver 2010: 121). This could, of course, serve to make the spectator aware of their complicity in injustice due to their inaction, but could, in certain circumstances, equally serve to ally the spectator with the repressive terror of the state rather than with the victim. Finally, the sense of paralysis in the moment of encounter could prove to be overwhelming, creating distance between the spectator and the traumatized body that they appear to be encountering. As Felman and Laub (1992) theorize regarding those who experienced the Holocaust, during the act of viewing such extreme trauma,

The historical imperative to bear witness could essentially *not be met during the actual occurrence*. The degree to which bearing witness was required, entailed such an outstanding measure of awareness and of comprehension of the event—of its dimensions, consequences, and above all, of its radical *otherness* to all known frames of reference—that it was beyond the limits of human ability (and willingness) to grasp, to transmit, or to imagine. (84, emphasis original)

From this point of view, for the spectator, the bloody evidence alluded to by the bundles could turn out to be incomprehensible, impossible to witness or understand, and thereby resist the transmission of any sort of signification to the viewer regarding the victims, the military government, or the spectators’ role.

However, as I have alluded to above, these limitations of representation are subsumed by the corporeal experience of the encounter with the Bloody Bundle that creates a bodily connection to the traumatized victim and situates the spectator in the role of empathic witness. These affective responses—Ngai (2005)’s “ugly feelings”—to an evoked sinister mood

transcend figurative representation. As discussed throughout this dissertation, one of the challenges of conveying and understanding extreme emotions such as terror and situations like disappearance and torture is that they defy language. Torture is, essentially, the unimaginable, Schulz (2007) reflects: “it cannot be fully conjured up” if not directly experienced (2).²² Similarly, García (2002) points to the impossibility of figurative representation when faced with the absence of the corpse of the *desaparecido*. The abject horror of the Bloody Bundles, in soliciting affective responses before intellectual ones, creates a profound bodily identification between the spectator and the implied victim of violence, giving shape on a pre-symbolic level to “the unspeakable horror of what cannot be represented or seen” (Barrett 2016: 139). The incomprehensible experience of political violence does not suddenly become entirely comprehensible, but it is conjured up, felt, and made more legible when the body of the spectator becomes an active party in the spectacle of the reappearance and disappearance of bodies under the authoritarian regime. Even while many ethical questions remain about the artwork and whether or not its call to bear witness can be answered, the Bloody Bundles ask us to sit with this affective complexity and tension while they explore the possibility for resisting state terror and the sinister mood.

²² Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain* (1987), agrees that “Though indisputably real to the sufferer, it is, unless accompanied by visible body damage or a disease label, unreal to others” (174). In contrast to this assertion, Richardson (2016) posits pain as relational: everyone has felt it, and so everyone has the possibility of transcending this air of unreality associated with the pain of others. In this way, without undermining the fact that pain and torture cannot be represented via language, a focus on mood and affect over pure representation helps us overcome these challenges.

Reappearance as Resistance

Whereas authoritarian governments utilized strategic reappearance to spread the sinister mood, inducing terror and uncertainty in order to paralyze and control the everyday citizen, the Bloody Bundles acted out the reappearance of the abject evidence of state terror to allow for affective identification on the part of the spectator and pose a direct challenge against the states' control over life and death. Bringing the sinister out into the open—even as its origins remain uncertain—robs it of its shadowy power. As Backes Couto (2020) reflects,

O horror se dá ao se tentar esconder o horror, num processo interminável, nos pontos em branco, os quais não sabemos muito bem o que aconteceu. Subvertendo essa lógica, as Trouxas interpelam justamente por serem o desvelamento momentâneo de um sistema violento que pretendia se mostrar estável através de um crescimento econômico. Os objetos de Barrio funcionam assim como a abertura de uma fresta pela qual podemos examinar as entranhas de um mecanismo roto. (11)

By lending abject materiality to the spectral *desaparecidos* and *detenidos*, Barrio both provides spectators with a bodily understanding of violence and turns their suspicion and attention against those who spread terror throughout the nation.

Simultaneously, the confusion created in authorities by the appearance of the bundles undermines the state monopoly on death and its control over violence, paradoxically resisting the necropolitical by approaching violence intimately, without permission, and creating a spectacle of black humor before the public. Millett (2007) explains that in torture,

Permission [from the state] is crucial: to indulge fancy thus, without permission, is criminal and to be punished, a merely individual act without meaning, self-indulgent, aberrant and forbidden. But with permission it is patriotism, service, laudable activity, salaried, professionalized. (166)

The documentation of Part 1 of the situation speaks to Barrio's defiance in this regard. Stepping into the role of torturer and mass murderer as he assembles the bundles, Barrio appears for all intents and purposes as a violent madman, gleefully pulling on gloves and stalking through the

camera frame as he undertakes his sinister work (Fig. 24). While the gloves create a barrier between the artist and the abject, they are also the symbol of the criminal who seeks not to leave a trace of himself. Nevertheless, he is about to leave the greatest trace of all: the inexplicable presence of his violent work, the bundles. By approximating himself to the torturer, Barrio steps into the role of the authoritarian state, acting out their violence upon the cow's body in a manner that provocatively proposes that we cannot approach or witness violence without, in some way, being complicit in it, a topic that we have already visited in chapters one and three of this dissertation.

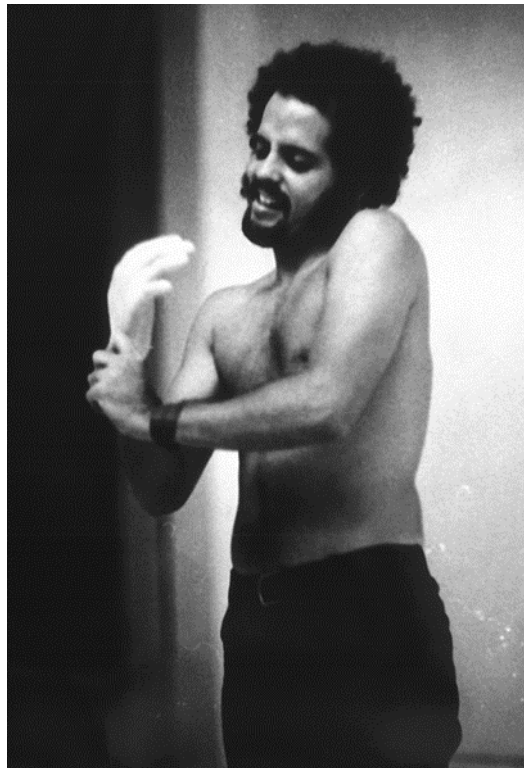


Figure 24. *In Part 1 of the situation, Barrio prepares the Bloody Bundles, taking on the role of murderer, madman, and terrorist.*

But he is taking on this role without state permission, making him not just a torturer, but a terrorist,²³ in the words of curator Tobias Ostrander (2009):

El texto que acompaña las imágenes evoca las reacciones que tuvo su propio cuerpo al realizar estas acciones y al estar en contacto con esos materiales: su temperatura corporal, las reacciones de su piel, la sudoración. La descripción enfatizaba el tiempo de preparación de la acción durante la madrugada. El emplazamiento nocturno y el tipo de las imágenes hablan del trabajo de un terrorista, los preparativos secretos antes del ataque público. (11)

In this way, Barrio, too, has a corporeal experience with the bundles, one which approximates him to the torturer, but situates him as acting explicitly against the state, out of their control.

When the bundles are appeared by the banks of the Rio Arruda, the sinister is therefore turned against the state. It is they, for once, who are unaware of where the apparent evidence of violence has come from, and who was its terrible perpetrator, the monster behind the madness. The situation therefore draws attention to a series of ironies: that of calling the police when finding a corpse which, potentially, was the result of their own violence; that of catching governmental authorities within the sinister mood, and its associated agency and power, that are usually of their own making; that of an artist, acting as torturer and terrorist, being able to make all this fuss over what ultimately were, while disgusting, utterly innocent packages, only evoking, without entirely enacting, the violence of which they are an index. Moreover, despite confiscating and testing their contents, the state is unable to hold onto or control the ephemeral impact of their appearance: not made to last, the art has already done its work, and will disintegrate in the authorities' very hands as they attempt to pin down and identify its sinister

²³ In 1970s Brazil, the word terrorist would have often been used to refer to participants in left-wing guerrilla movements, paralleling Barrio as artist with a group whose strategic use of armed conflict in the service of their ideology (in Brazil, largely consisting of bank robberies and kidnapping) positioned them at odds with the state. Military governments, as discussed elsewhere in this dissertation, often used the activities of these groups as justifications for their extreme repression, which only later would be identified as state-sponsored terrorism.

origins. By acting out the disappearance of the apparent evidence of violence, the governmental authorities play entirely into Barrio's game.

Conclusion

The Bloody Bundles act out, both for in-person spectators and those of us viewing the documentation of the situation fifty years after the fact, the affective promise of materializing the abject violence behind the sinister mood. By insisting upon the confrontational encounter, Barrio's work proposes that the sinister, as well as many of the aesthetic and ethical challenges of representing state terror, can be overcome by an affective reaction that breaks us free from the paralysis induced by the vague, spectral nature of the threat of the necropower of the military governments. Even as, for both the in-person spectator and those who can only access the work indirectly and speculatively, the experience is inherently ephemeral, the situation manages to reflect the obliqueness of the sinister while nevertheless having a profound, lasting impact, hopefully leaving spectators changed. Even as Barrio and other artists "lived and worked under a climate of self-censorship, created and maintained by a pervasive sense of the imminent threat of persecution by the regime" (Calirman 2012: 148)—that is, lived in a sinister atmosphere in which violent, authoritarian power was enacted via the disappearance and reappearance of bodies—with the Bloody Bundles, Barrio found a way to materialize the diffuse experience of terror and resist the necropower of the Brazilian state.

Chapter Five

Beautiful Corpse, Sinister Curse: Tomás Eloy Martínez's *Santa Evita* (1995)

In an elegant apartment in Madrid in 1971, former Argentine president in exile Juan Perón, his third wife, Isabel, and their private secretary, Jose López Rega, held vigil over a corpse. Upon its arrival, they had laid it out on a marble table on an upper floor. Isabel spent days cleaning the dirt from the disinterred body, washing, drying, and brushing out its hair (Pressly 2012). The cadaver's presence in the house, López Rega claimed, would help to fortify Isabel and give her the deceased's strength. The dead woman's spirit would enter into the live woman's body and work through her, with his help. He conducted rituals to aid the transference of the deceased spirit into the body of the living, making Isabel lay down head-to-head with the corpse as he passed his hands over her and intervened with the spiritual world. Jorge Paladino, an Argentine politician and Perón's personal delegate in Buenos Aires from 1968 to 1973, later claimed to have witnessed this scene, calling it a session of "magia negra" (Larraquy 2004: 175). Missing for 14 years, the body of Eva Perón had finally been returned to her husband.

As was already discussed in depth in chapter one of this dissertation, this anecdote, which has been featured in the popular press and historical works such as Larraquy (2004)'s biography of José López Rega, gestures toward the role played by esotericism in producing the sinister mood in later recollections of the time period immediately preceding the last Argentine dictatorship. However, what is of particular interest here is what this story demonstrates about the significance of Evita's corpse in fiction, rumor, and history in the decades subsequent to her death in 1952. I have argued in the introduction to this dissertation and in chapter four that the threatening strangeness of unusual encounters with the corpse contributes to the sinister mood, so

that the necropolitical control of the dictatorships over the disappearance and reappearance of bodies becomes both a technology by which the military regimes spread the sinister and yet an object of danger for them, through which possibilities for resistance might be explored. In this chapter, I propose that the ambiguous and contradictory ways that Evita's corpse is characterized in Tomás Eloy Martínez's 1995 novel *Santa Evita* demonstrates how such dangerous bodies as that of Evita and the *desaparecidos* elude both narrative and authoritarian control, turning the sinister mood against those that would seek to possess them.

The anecdote outlined above indicates that the material body played a role of utmost importance as host to not just the spirit of Evita the individual, but also her myth and power, which continued to hold an overwhelming symbolic and political currency nearly two decades after her death. In this way, as I will make clear in my analysis of *Santa Evita*, Evita as a figure does not just spectrally haunt Argentina, but, like Barrio's Bloody Bundles, evocations of her corpse also imaginatively constitute a material presence with an affective impact. Further, the idea that the corpse could be used to further Peronism's ongoing political agenda—whether through practices of “black magic” or more transparent symbolic manipulation of her legacy—has profound implications for the sinister mood, insofar as the dead body appears to be the locus of an extra-material power, and possession of and control over the cadaver, whose long disappearance only increased its significance, allows for the manipulation of this power. One of Argentina's first and most famous disappeared bodies, I argue throughout this chapter that, in this way, Evita's cadaver as literary object allows authors of many works written in the aftermath of the last dictatorship to evoke and explore the manipulations that the bodies of the 30,000 Argentine *desaparecidos* were subject to, utilizing both the similarities and distinctions between

a famed and well-preserved body and the thousands of anonymized and abandoned dead to unpack the necropolitics of state-sponsored disappearance.

Historically, when Eva Perón died of cervical cancer at age 33, Argentina entered a state of mourning during which the First Lady received a state funeral and thousands of her admirers flocked to the streets of Buenos Aires for the chance to attend the public viewing of her body. Her husband subsequently charged the Spanish anatomist Pedro Ara with preserving her corpse, and it was stored at the building of the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) until the coup that sent Juan Perón into exile in 1955. Under the power of the new military government, the corpse was removed from the CGT and secretly relocated; in 1971, the military revealed that Evita had been buried under a false name in Milan, and the body was exhumed and transferred to Juan Perón in Madrid, where the ritualistic scenes described above supposedly occurred. Evita was returned to Argentina in 1974 and buried in La Recoleta Cemetery.¹

However, in spite of the corpse's burial, stories of Evita's body have proved stubbornly difficult to lay to rest. The history and related rumors of the body's wanderings across Argentina and Europe have proved fruitful fodder for fiction, comprising the central subject of not only *Santa Evita*—which received a television mini-series adaptation in 2022—but also, among many notable examples, the 1965 short story “Esa mujer” by Rodolfo Walsh and the 2015 film *Eva no duerme*, directed by Pablo Agüero.² Stories regarding the body, like that of the seance detailed

¹ For a discussion of the history of the treatment of Evita's corpse among other strange tales of the dead in Argentine history, see Negrete (2012).

² As discussed in chapter one, Evita's corpse also played a bit part (quite literally, in the form of a severed finger) in Luisa Valenzuela's *Cola de lagartija*. Other literary texts invoking Evita's corpse include Jorge Luis Borges' “El simulacro” (1960); David Viñas' “La señora muerta” (1963); Nestor Perlongher's “El cadáver” (1980), “El cadáver de la nación” (1989), and “Evita vive (en cada hotel organizado)” (1989); and Abel Posse's *La pasión según Eva* (1994).

above, also figured prominently in the popular press,³ and concerns about the location of the corpse had serious political consequences: in 1970, the Montoneros, a Peronist guerrilla group, abducted and executed General Pedro Eugenio Aramburu (1903-1970), offering to disclose the location of his body only when that of Evita was revealed (Browne 1970).⁴

³ In an examination of mass media publications such as *Así* and *Primera Plana*, Laura Ehrlich and Sandra Gayol (2018) outline how stories surrounding Evita's death and disappeared body were ongoing narratives that were repeatedly visited in the popular press, particularly in July around the anniversary of her death. The authors argue that the disappearance of the body remained particularly present in the public consciousness throughout the nearly two decades before Evita's corpse was returned to Argentina. Narratives often treated the disappearance as an enigma, a perspective that informed biographical approaches in which Evita's life was similarly portrayed as a mystery to be investigated and uncovered by journalists. Ehrlich and Gayol (2018) also trace the proliferation of rumors and perspectives on the disappeared body through these magazines: *Así*, for instance, first proposed the idea of a replica of the body in 1957, a rumor that was exaggerated by *La Razón*, which argued that five replicas or empty coffins were circulating through Buenos Aires. *Así*, in interviews with several people in 1958, also first reported the suspicion that there was only a wax copy of Evita, not a preserved body at all. The authors conclude that "*Así* convirtió en espectáculo sus narrativas *post mortem* sobre Eva Perón, mientras que el relato sobre el derrotero del secuestro y reclamo por la restitución del cuerpo se acopló a una estructura narrativa, encuadres y formatos que la revista mantuvo y repitió para los temas más diversos" (Ehrlich and Gayol 2018: 129). Rumors about Eva Perón, particularly ones related to more macabre aspects of her life and death, have continued to circulate in otherwise reputable sources up to the present day. Dujovne Ortiz (1995)'s biography of the First Lady, for instance, reports on various rumors circulated by anti-Peronists and newspapers, sometimes presenting contradictory information without weighing in on its veracity; she also uncritically cites Walsh's fictionalized "Esa mujer" to report on Koenig's treatment of Evita's corpse. A more recent example is an article published by the BBC in 2015, entitled "The Gruesome Untold Story of Eva Perón's Lobotomy," which reported on claims by a neurosurgeon that she underwent a lobotomy, possibly as "her husband's last-ditch attempt to curb some increasingly dangerous behaviour" (Robson 2015: n.p.). These claims were based on an x-ray of Evita's skull and interviews conducted with a surgeon and nurse who knew the U.S. American surgeon who supposedly conducted the operation and are disputed. It is notable how a claim based largely on hearsay can gain traction based largely on its macabre details, and also how this rumor highlights concerns of the body as a site of control and power that are so relevant for *Santa Evita*.

⁴ Aramburu's body was eventually recovered, but was stolen by Montoneros again in 1975 after Perón returned, with the demand that Evita's body be finally returned to Argentina (Macón 2015). In her discussion of this historical episode, Dujovne Ortiz (1995) darkly links these concerns around missing bodies to what would occur a few short years later by referring to these Montoneros as "futuros cadáveres y futuros desaparecidos" (310).

It is evident that, through her actions in life and the ongoing history of her cadaver, Evita managed to hold sway over Argentina from beyond the grave, affecting the course of political events even decades after her death. Her body has been invested with a potent symbolism and power by her admirers and her detractors alike, and, as I will argue, literature and other cultural productions' constant return to the subject has had the effect of reappearing both figurations of the body and a spectral version of the woman herself in the popular imagination. As Thomas Laqueur argues in *The Work of the Dead* (2015), "Just as the dead body has always been disenchanted, it has also always been enchanted: powerful, dangerous, preserved, revered, feared, an object of ritual, a thing to be reckoned with. For the living, for at least some time, it is always more than it is" (4). We will see, throughout this chapter, that even at its most material and despite multiple attempts to reduce its seemingly supernatural power, Evita's corpse is always much more than just that, with its contradictions, tensions, and prevailing presence providing an apt way of thinking through the sinister.

Santa Evita, which sold over 10 million copies worldwide, is arguably the most impactful of the many depictions of Evita's corpse, subsuming many of other fictionalized versions and rumors about the body within its nearly five-hundred pages. The novel largely follows the efforts of Colonel Moori Koenig, the head of military intelligence after the 1955 coup, to disappear Evita's embalmed corpse amid political turmoil and mysterious happenings. Beginning with Evita's approaching death, it recounts Koenig's observations of her illness and later the anatomist Ara's treatment of the corpse. When the military overthrows Perón in 1955, the new government deems the preserved cadaver on display in the CGT a potential political problem, a

symbol around which Peronists might rally.⁵ Koenig, disguising the real corpse among three wax copies, employs a team to bury all four Evitas; however, he is prevented by a mysterious fire from interring the real woman, and is forced to hide her in a temporary location. Over the subsequent months, Koenig grows gradually obsessed with the body, moving her throughout the city as each hiding place seems to be discovered by a mysterious militant group, the Comando de la Venganza. Even when the corpse remains undiscovered, it appears to exert a sinister hold over those who interact with it, demonstrating a dark and mysterious power that threatens to consume them: in one notable example, it leads one of Koenig's subordinates, "El Loco" Arancibia, to engage in necrophilia and kill his wife. Koenig, whose own obsession is finally reported to his superiors when he urinates on the corpse in an attempt to dominate "La Yegua," is sent into temporary exile in Patagonia; meanwhile, the remaining intelligence officers succeed in transporting the corpse abroad to be buried in Milan under a pseudonym. When Koenig returns, he blackmails a subordinate to bring the body to him so that he can bury Evita in his ancestral

⁵ Historically, the new regime, particularly after General Pedro E. Aramburu assumed the presidency in November 1955, was repressive and deeply anti-Peronist, politically persecuting his former followers and banning any mention whatsoever of Perón, Peronism, or Evita. After a pro-Peronist military uprising in 1956, Aramburu extrajudicially sentenced 27 of those involved to execution by firing squad. The military government held elections, from which the Peronist party was banned, in 1958; another military coup overthrew that government in 1962 in response to electoral gains by the Peronist party, which had been again allowed to participate in elections under then-president Arturo Frondizi (1908-1995). After four more years of tenuous democracy, in which the civilian, elected government had to agree to demands from the military (including banning the Peronist party from elections), another coup in 1966 installed an additional repressive, conservative military government, which would see a succession of three dictators until 1973. Pro-Peronist factions, meanwhile, would split into left- or right-wing groups, ranging from politicians and labor leaders who brokered agreements between Argentine officials and Peron from his exile to guerrilla groups dedicated to armed insurrection. In sum, these decades saw a huge amount of social and political turmoil, in which anti-Peronist military forces and—as we saw in chapter one—pro-Peronist groups both repeatedly subverted democracy, thwarted the popular will, pushed right-wing economic policies, and increasingly violated the civil and human rights of dissenters, laying the groundwork for the overwhelming state violence that would take place between 1976 and 1983.

Germany where only he will have access to her, but later discovers that he has been duped with a copy.

Martínez himself appears as character and narrator throughout *Santa Evita*, recounting the experiences, interviews, and archival documents that form the basis of his novel, as well as his struggles to write and understand his subject amid a developing obsession of his own. Like our discussion of *Cola de lagartija* in chapter one, this metafictional approach lends itself to frequent ruminations on the challenges of writing under conditions of extreme violence, in which even itself seems untrustworthy. From the novel's point of enunciation in the 1990s, the aftermath and consequences of the last dictatorship were still keenly felt, particularly for Martínez, who, as a journalist with decades of experience covering Argentine politics, was subject to violent threats from the Triple A in the 1970s and was exiled from 1975 to 1983. As such, the novel often reads like an attempt by Martínez to make sense of the origins of the violence and disappearances that would crescendo under the last military dictatorship, and the way that the doubt, uncertainty, and rumor around discourses of Evita's corpse speaks to an ongoing crisis of representation amid a battle for truth and narrative authority under authoritarianism. The postmodernist aspects of the novel and these questions of representation and authority, which have been a favorite subject of critics and, as we saw in chapter one, are relevant for our focus on the sinister mood, will be treated later in this chapter.

Another central focus of this chapter will be the ways that Evita's corpse is depicted as, due to a crucial series of contradictions and tensions, giving rise to the ineffable sinister mood. We will see that, as discussed in the introduction to this dissertation and chapter four, the cadaver, and the violence done to it, resists any attempt at direct representation. Instead, the novel recurs to genre convention—including, as we will see, the Gothic and the monstrous—in

order to approach the multitude of ugly feelings inspired not just by Evita's corpse, but by all that it indexes in the post-dictatorial Argentine imaginary. As I will demonstrate, these Gothic characteristics⁶—such as claustrophobic settings, secrecy, the occult, paranoia, and, most notably for this chapter, the treatment of Evita's corpse as a dangerous, monstrous body that returns to haunt even as the authorities attempt to repress it—like the uses of the esoteric and the Gothic haunted house in part two of this dissertation, allow Martínez to utilize the sinister mood as a way to effectively evoke the omnipresent but diffuse threats of violence that pervaded Argentina during these decades of political turmoil, while also speaking to how dangerous bodies like that of Evita and, later, the *desaparecidos* turned this threat against the very people who sought to control them.

Scholars have, of course, taken an interest in the role of the corpse in Santa Evita, often tying its symbolism to gendered violence, objectification and fetishization, and the national social body, all elements that will be relevant to my analysis throughout this chapter. My intervention utilizes the existing literature as a jumping-off point for examining the materiality of the corpse as it appears throughout *Santa Evita*, uniting previous scholarly attention toward violence, objectification, and narrative, political, and historical authority in order to comment on

⁶ Several critics have noted the Gothic influence in *Santa Evita*: Carlos Fuentes, in a review of the text, refers to it as an “Alucinante novela gótica” and “impresionante cuento de terror,” gesturing broadly to “la afición de los militares argentinos por las sectas, los criptogramas y las ciencias ocultas, culminando con el reino del ‘Brujo’ López Rega, eminencia gris de la siguiente señora Perón, Isabelita” (1996: n.p.). Essentially, he argues, in telling this story using Gothic elements, Martínez demonstrates the strangeness of Argentine reality, which has exceeded fiction entirely. As Armando Enrique Cerpa (2015) further argues, it is the Gothic mode in this novel that allows Martínez to represent “individuals who are repressed and excluded by authoritarian regimes” as well as “attempts to recuperate and unveil forbidden memories and seemingly buried periods of time, characterized mainly by the dissemination of terror” (ii). Further, for Cerpa the Gothic is central to Martínez's postmodern “intento de cruzar el límite de la ficción, recombinando sus elementos para producir algo siniestro que apele directamente a la otredad y a lo diferente” (2015: 84).

the ways and reasons that the Southern Cone dictatorships emphasized the manipulation of bodies as central to their strategies for control and power via state terror and the sinister.

I argue that, with its contradictory descriptions of Evita's cadaver—simultaneously abject and sublime, monstrous and saintly, cursed and supernaturally powerful—the novel is a profound exploration of the human body's importance, transformations, and power under authoritarianism, and the irrepresentability of the violence done to those bodies by the necropolitical state.

Dangerous bodies for successive Argentine governments, both Evita's corpse and the bodies of political dissidents appear, in the minds of officials like Moori Koenig, as simultaneously sub-human and subject to authoritarian control and yet impossibly powerful threats to the regime.

However, even as they mobilize the sinister via their clandestine attempts to disappear the corpse, its insistent materiality proves stubbornly capable of resistance: in denying appropriate rituals for burial and mourning, the authoritarian government, too, is forced to cohabit with its dead. *Santa Evita*, in its depiction of the disappeared corpse, therefore demonstrates how the sinister, characterized by government secrecy, omnipresence, surveillance, and violent control over bodies in life and death, can be turned against the state, and how the re-appearance of the disappeared body can become a threat that cannot be contained by state power.

A Dangerous Body

Abducted in the night by a shadowy military group; disappeared for decades, her location unknown even to her own mother; subject to bodily mutilation that would leave traces of her experiences marked upon her very skin; buried under a false name and hidden from her community: the parallels between the fate of Evita's corpse and those of the bodies of 30,000 people under the last Argentine dictatorship are immediately striking. As I have posited in the

introduction to this chapter, the depiction of Evita's disappeared, wandering corpse throughout *Santa Evita* can be read as evoking and providing a way of thinking through the materiality, absence, presence, and power of the later *desaparecidos*.

However, as we will see throughout this section, it is also essential that we not elide the many relevant distinctions between the former first lady and the latter group. Apart from the decades that separate them, there are several key differences between these bodies, most notably that we are discussing, on the one hand, a single body versus a mass of people; a legally dead individual, versus a category of citizens that could not be considered either alive or dead; and perhaps the most famous cadaver in Argentine history, versus corpses that, when recovered at all, often were made to be anonymous and unknown. Nevertheless, the scholarship has often conflated these two categories, finding it nearly impossible to discuss the depictions of Evita's corpse throughout the text without also recognizing the strong parallels with those other disappeared bodies of Argentine history.⁷ Despite their differences, it appears that there is something fundamental shared by Eva Perón's cadaver and the *desaparecidos* that invites, if not demands, comparison.

⁷ For example, Karen Elizabeth Bishop (2020) argues that throughout the novel Evita's corpse becomes a "remaindered embodiment," or "a dynamic and ethically charged metonym for what has been absented or left out of Argentine history, most pointedly the dictatorship's disappeared" (36). Jason Cortés (2008) similarly posits that her body "prefigura las futuras desapariciones que tendrían lugar durante la 'guerra sucia'" (346). Cerpa (2015) reads it as "Representando a los otros cadáveres desaparecidos, sigue siendo el primer cadáver obliterado por la represión golpista, arrojado fuera de la circulación pública" (131). Still others, including Zuffi (1999), Lavery (2007), and Cortés Rocca and Kohan (1998), similarly read the corpse as the embodiment of an Argentine body politic that gestures toward the later disappeared. Dujovne Ortiz (1995), addressing the disappearance of the corpse in her biography of Evita, is more explicit in her comparison:

Torturar a un cadáver femenino con aspecto de santo era un ensayo general. Entre 1976 y 1983, los militares torturaron a mujeres vivas, de preferencia embarazadas porque así se parecían más aún a la Virgen. La tortura es una adoración invertida, una misa negra. No sucede en el terreno de lo humano ni puede aspirar a ser humanamente perdonada. (315)

In my estimation, while throughout this chapter I will emphasize when distinctions are relevant to the argument at hand, this comparison remains productive due to the fact that both categories present the corpse as a key site of struggle for the authoritarian Argentine state. In depicting this struggle over one of the most famous Argentine bodies, *Santa Evita* also speaks to attempts to exercise power over the national body as a whole. Treated as “dangerous bodies,” both Evita’s corpse and the bodies of the *desaparecidos* were viewed as threats to the integrity of the nation and the authoritarian state at its head, which had to be disciplined to ensure the power of the state over its people. As such, and as we have discussed previously in this section regarding the state’s exercise of both biopower and necropower, both Evita and the *desaparecidos* are united in the fact that they were denied their social rights to death.⁸

As we have discussed previously, disappearance involved not only material, but also social and psychological, violence. As Chad Redwing (2007) articulates regarding the similar context of disappearance under the Chilean dictatorship, “Ripped from a meaningful geography, the docility and submission of the body now became the regime’s obsession. . . . The national and the human body were dismembered under military rule” (59-60). Agnese Codebò (2018) also evokes dismemberment in her analysis of *Santa Evita*, positing the corpse as a *Sparagmos*, a dismembered sacrifice relating to Dionysian myth: every Argentine gets to possess their own piece of her. As such, her mutilated corpse further allegorizes the division in the national social body: as Susana Rosano (2013) argues, in hiding the embalmed corpse, “el régimen parece

⁸ Sàez Tajafuerce (2019) poses as much when arguing that, in contrast to Martin Heidegger’s assertion in *Being and Time* (1927) that

a nadie le puede ser robada su propia muerte, la intervención del Estado moderno en el cuerpo de Eva Perón pone de manifiesto que ese puede ser, en efecto, el caso. La colonización del cuerpo de Eva Perón es la operación mediante la cual política y muerte consagran su relación en tanto que poder negar la propia muerte, en el sentido de arrebatlarla. (3-4)

consolidar la idea de que la desaparición física del cuerpo de Eva podía producir el desmembramiento del cuerpo social” (201). That is, it was hoped that hiding Evita’s cadaver would prevent the consolidation of the Peronist majority around her symbol, allowing the anti-Peronists to dominate the working classes in the social conflicts of the 1950s and beyond. Even in a novel about her corpse, Evita’s body is never just about her: rather, as I will demonstrate throughout this section, depictions of Evita’s cadaver in the novel demonstrate authoritarian experimentation in how to rob bodies of their power by controlling the appearance (and disappearance) of death.

However, as we will also see, the word experimentation here is key, as the attempts to control the corpse are largely imperfect, if not outright failures, throughout *Santa Evita*. In “The Political Investment of the Body,” Foucault (2005) describes power over the body as a “microphysics,” in which “power is exercised rather than possessed” (101): that is, not merely an imposition of control by a dominant group over the bodies of another group, but an ongoing contest and struggle. He argues for a historical process by which the body became subject to discipline and regulation by the state, in which “Discipline produces subjected and practised bodies, ‘docile’ bodies. . . . In short, it dissociates power from the body” (Foucault 2005: 104). Whereas the bodies that Foucault (2005) concerns himself with here are alive, the authoritarian regimes studied in this dissertation, acknowledging the power that the corpse can possess, are particularly concerned with disciplining the dead as a way to extend that control over the living. But this microphysics leaves room for error: if the body, alive or dead, is a site of struggle, then resistance, as opposed to docility, always remains possible.

In this way, throughout *Santa Evita* the corpse becomes a locus of the sinister, as authoritarian forces strive to control Evita and impose a disciplined docility upon the populace

through the possession and disappearance of her corpse. However, the contradictory ways that the body is depicted throughout the novel speak to its ongoing resistance and refusal to be subject to the authoritarian state's power. Even as the military government's use of secrecy and disappearance imbue the text with a sinister atmosphere, the enigmatic power of the cadaver turns the sinister back against every authority that seeks to possess it.

This section will lay out the contradictory depictions of Evita's cadaver that speak to her positionality as a dangerous body and site where the sinister is both enacted and contested. Like Barrio's Bloody Bundles discussed in the previous chapter, Evita's body is at times depicted as abject, sub-human, and even monstrous, worthy of derision, disgust, and outright ejection from the social body. However, at other moments it is sublime, super-human, saintly, and supernatural, worthy of worship. Rather than a discrete object, the cadaver is instead shown to exist within a network of relations that define, and are in turn defined by, its materiality: put simply, whether the body is frightening or beautiful, monstrous or saintly, threat or hope, depends largely upon an individual's or group's relationship to it and its power. Similarly, Plotnik (2004) observes, "Los mitos sobre Eva Perón, tanto los de la leyenda blanca como los de la leyenda negra, manifiestan una ansiedad localizada en su cuerpo como sitio de alteridad y se expresan en las proyecciones de los que unos temen y otros glorifican" (18). For the military and the elites, Evita's corpse is an abject threat that must be expelled from the social body; for the *descamisado*, it is a relic promising protection and a better world; for both, it has a power that cannot be contained by the state's appeal to the sinister.

Ailing Body and Suffering Martyr

The contradictory descriptions of Evita's body in *Santa Evita* begin even before her death: her illness and the act of dying appear simultaneously as a prolonged process of painful, abject decay and a type of sublime martyrdom. Her masculine observers in particular see her illness—uterine cancer—as rooted in the destruction of her feminine beauty. Dr. Pedro Ara, who will later be her embalmer, notes that shortly before her death “Su piel traslúcida empezaba a cubrirse de escamas,” converting her formerly appealing figure into a source of revulsion (Martínez 1995: 35). Similarly, Moori Koenig, tasked with surveilling the ailing Evita for the intelligence service, takes detailed notes on her body's condition, down to the number of grams in blood she loses from her uterus per day. He reflects on how it is “Imposible discernir cuándo se trata de la enfermedad y cuándo de la menstruación,” emphasizing abject fluids associated both with feminine reproduction and death (Martínez 1995: 21). In his observations, he further breaks her body down into its component parts: a series of biopsies, hemorrhages, cancers, and ultimately a hysterectomy. Highlighting a repulsive materiality, these notes invade and dismember the ill feminine body and, in doing so, provide power over Evita's death to Koenig himself and the military agents to whom he reports: “El poder es sólo un tejido de datos,” he reflects (Martínez 1995: 20).

Depictions of Evita's illness in the novel that emphasize this breakdown and process of decay undermine the commonly accepted—though, as Perosino (2015) notes, still cultural contingent—idea of the living body as somehow an integral object, as opposed to the dead body as that which disintegrates. Even the attempts at life-saving treatment for her illness work only to make Evita more abject, as she is “vacuada y raspada” (Martínez 1995: 81) by two surgeries to mitigate the cancer, causing her to lose 21 kilos. If, as Perosino (2015) points out, “El cuerpo

puede pensarse como un sistema de límites siempre expuestos a ser quebrados, tanto vivo como muerto. En ningún estadio es completamente íntegro y ningún estadio define intrínsecamente su integridad. El cuerpo es proceso” (72), then here the reader is treated to an unsettling vision of what terminal illness reveals: that the living body is just as abject, just as liable to cross boundaries and fall apart, as the corpse. Living what Judith Butler (2005) terms “precarious life,” the human body—even that possessed by powerful, larger-than-life figures like Evita—is always subject to threat of illness, disintegration, violence, death. Whatever her body and image were before, Cortés Rocca and Kohan (1998) point out in their analysis of images of Evita in life and death, now it is shown to be “carne vulnerable a la enfermedad, el sufrimiento y la Muerte. . . . La dicotomía entre cuerpo y mente o entre carne y espíritu es una oposición que la enfermedad barre al erigir al sujeto como pura corporalidad, un cuerpo que además no le pertenece” (52). The slow destruction of Evita’s body in the novel is thus also a loss of control and agency, an assertion of abject materiality and a consequent reduction in her power that her enemies treat with revulsion.⁹ From the very first moment, the abject, ill body—while not yet sinister—incarnates the threat of death.

⁹ Historically, both those who supposedly loved and hated Evita were alleged to feel fear and revulsion in the face of her illness. Her biographer, Alicia Dujovne Ortiz (1995), argues that, even as many ideas about her ailing body circulated as rumors, there may have been some truth to them. Discussing the unpleasant odors associated with Evita’s illness, she writes,

Los antiperonistas viscerales han fantaseado tanto con la repugnancia que a Perón le inspiraba la enfermedad de su mujer, que autores como Marysa Navarro han decidido rechazar esas versiones como meras leyendas. En realidad, en su fase terminal el cáncer de útero desprende un olor tan característico que un médico sagaz detecta la enfermedad en el momento de entrar a lo de su paciente” (Dujovne Ortiz 1995: 281-282).

She further describes tales in which the General objectified and rejected his ill wife, referring to her as “eso” and refusing to see her: “Lavado y planchado hasta su último recoveco, Perón era incapaz de controlar sus nervios ante la carne maltrecha” (Dujovne Ortiz 1995: 282).

As Cortés Rocca and Kohan (1998) further point out, historically even Evita's allies at this point were faced with the question of "*qué hacer con un cuerpo que se deshace,*" an image and body that could no longer be used in the same way in carefully calculated support for the Peronist political project (47, emphasis original).¹⁰ An ill body became a body out of control:

La enfermedad de Eva adopta así ciertos estereotipos propios de la representación del cáncer: la concepción de la enfermedad como batalla que el sujeto libra contra un cuerpo que se ha rebelado a su voluntad y la disociación entre cuerpo y voluntad —o personalidad— como instancias autónomas. (Cortés Rocca and Kohan 1998: 49)

The novel, therefore, demonstrates how the rebellious, ill body that neither Perón, Evita herself, and their allies nor their enemies could control can only be rejected, hidden from view, so that its abject vulnerability need not be contended with. In a similar manner, decades later leftists would be configured in speeches by the military junta as a "cancer" that had to be cut out of the Argentine social body, lest they contaminate the healthy tissue: the answer about what to do with a rebellious body coming undone would be made violently clear.¹¹ The distinction, however, is that Evita's illness was literal, not metaphor; her body was made abject for those around her by cancer and death, threatening them with the awareness of their own mortality, whereas the bodies of the desaparecidos were cast as cancerous and dangerous by a state which sought to justify its own necropolitics.

¹⁰ See Cortés Rocca and Kohan (1998) for a more in-depth analysis of the way an iconography of Evita was purposefully and cleverly utilized during her life to support Peronist propaganda. In brief, they argue that "Las imágenes de Eva Perón son el correlato visual de una ideología particular que se manifiesta en forma de prácticas y de enunciaciones, pero que también se inscribe en los cuerpos de acuerdo con una figuración histórica de lo corporal" (Cortés Rocca and Kohan 1998: 32).

¹¹ Robben (2015) notes how both the Chilean and Argentine dictatorships shared a rhetoric in which Marxism, "subversion," and guerrilla movements were framed as a cancer or disease that had to be cut out of the social body (54-55).

Historically, Perón's administration kept many of the details of Evita's illness, and any sign of weakness in her body, out of the public eye before her death.¹² However, on the contrary, the novel presents the reactions of the Argentine elite as marked by a disgust toward what they viewed as the extraordinarily public nature of her dying:

El espectáculo suntuoso de su muerte era un agravio al pudor argentino. Las élites intelectuales la imaginaban muriéndose con los mismos gestos con que, tal vez, amaba. Entregaba el aliento, desaparecía en otro cuerpo, cruzaba los límites, amando más muerta que nadie, muriendo a todo amor, desalmada pero rindiendo el alma, paciéndose su placer en el campo de la muerte. (Martínez 1995: 239)

Dying spectacularly, transgressing common decency, disappearing into another body that is not quite her own, even experiencing a certain erotic pleasure in dying: the melodrama of this imagined death speaks both to Kristeva ([1980] 1997)'s conceptualization of the abject as that which crosses boundaries between the subject and the object and, by extension, the Argentine elite's rejection of Evita for crossing class boundaries and thereby threatening the social order.¹³ In their eyes, Evita does not even have the decency to die quietly, out of sight; they are forced, imaginatively, at least, to watch her body succumb to its boundless existence.

However, it is important to note that this particular instance of elite disgust responds to an imaginary that, while certainly carnal in the erotic sense, nevertheless lacks a certain visceral materiality compared to other descriptions of Evita's death in the novel. Here, her illness is

¹² Dujovne Ortiz (1995), for instance, reports the rumor that, in order to allow Evita to attend Perón's 1952 inauguration without showing signs of her illness, she was given a higher-than-usual dose of morphine and a contraption was constructed to be worn under her clothing that will help support her while standing.

¹³ Evita was unpopular amongst the Argentine elite not only because of her advocacy of a Peronist mass politics that focused on the impoverished working classes, but also because she was a social outsider--born from an illegitimate marriage in the provinces, poorly educated, with an "unsavory" past as a working actress—who nevertheless made her way to a position of enormous power. In the words of Lloyd Hughes Davies (2000), "The disease of Evita's body becomes the disease of the body politic: the one is invaded by cancer cells, the other by the wild hordes attracted by her. Eva's disease is corporeal, an insult to the senses" (418).

gesture, breath, pleasure, not pain, blood, surgery, organs. There is an attraction in this transgression of limits that attributes a powerful ephemerality to Evita's body, undermining the revulsion conveyed by other descriptions of illness in the novel.

Similarly, the *descamisados*, not privy to intimate information about Evita's condition except through rumor, view her illness as less repulsive and more tragically sublime. Martínez details how the *descamisados* attempted to intercede with the heavens on her behalf, offering their lives in exchange for hers, embroidering prayers, and undertaking pilgrimages with the hope that she might recover (1995: 83-86). While her pain and suffering are widely rumored, the bodily impact of Evita's illness is largely hidden from the public eye, replaced instead with a romanticized image of her martyrdom, in which, as her death nears, "el cuerpo estaba de nuevo limpio, a solas consigo mismo, en una beatitud sin tiempo y sin lugar" (Martínez 1995: 11) and "no tenía cuerpo sino respiraciones, deseos, placeres inocentes" (Martínez 1995: 16).¹⁴ This image of the dying body as essentially immaterial contrasts dramatically with the painful materiality of her illness as observed by those such as Ara and Koenig, who are in closer proximity to the body in the novel. As Cecilia Macón (2015) reflects in her analysis of the conversion of Evita's image in the popular consciousness to a symbol for the Montoneros, "As with all saints, her suffering body is an essential source for her magic but, paradoxically, its dematerialization is necessary to fulfil her holy objectives of embracing the poor, children and women" (9).¹⁵ In the novel, then, Evita's contradictory abject materiality and transcendent

¹⁴ Beatriz Sarlo (2003), in her analysis of the cult of Evita, similarly observes a sublime beauty in her real-life illness, noting, "El cáncer desmaterializó el cuerpo de Eva . . . A medida que se desmaterializa, su belleza acrónica se ajusta a cánones futuros, sin perder la irradiación (el aura) que la vuelve magnética en el presente" (104).

¹⁵ Sarlo (2003) similarly reflects, "Cuando la muerte iba aproximándose, en el cuerpo de Eva se acentuaron los rasgos de un pathos que evoca lo sublime del sacrificio ya no solo político como lo fue el 'renunciamiento', sino físico" (108-109). She argues that as her material body decays

spirituality throughout her illness lays the foundation for her post-mortem power, promising to inspire both fear and love, revulsion and admiration, affects that would continue to pose her body as a site of struggle through which opposing forces in Argentine society would attempt to define their political power.

Embalming and the Art of Death

After her death, this ambivalence is reified rather than resolved due to the unusual treatment of Evita's corpse, leading, as we will see, to the positioning of the cadaver as a locus of the sinister. I established in the introduction to this section and in chapter four that disruptions to commonly accepted mourning rituals trouble our relationship with the dead. When a corpse is not properly laid to rest and the symbolic work of grieving cannot be done, the living remain haunted by an inappropriate materiality. In the case of Eva Perón, while we may be dealing with an individual who has legally been declared dead and openly mourned at a state funeral—in significant contrast with the circumstances for the *desaparecidos*—the act of embalming for the purposes of the corpse's ongoing display and the lack of burial nevertheless disrupts these death rituals in a similar way as state-sponsored disappearance. While her biological and legal death is acknowledged, her social death¹⁶ is continually deferred, both historically and fictionally, due to the corpse's initial preservation and later disappearance. As I will demonstrate, the novel's

“El cuerpo político debe susistir” (Sarlo 2003: 109). While her mission (and body) thereby became a holy one for the Montoneros in Macón (2015)'s configuration, it is also always a political one.

¹⁶ Laqueur (2015) points out the distinction between biological death and social death: it is social death and the rituals we create surrounding and supporting it that determine how we treat the corpse.

treatment of the embalming process and its effects highlights the horrors inherent in what amounts to a violent objectification of the human body for political purposes.

Preserving the corpse—particularly as it is configured in this novel—essentially transforms it into an aesthetic object. Gone are the abject elements of the human body, of illness, of death and decay; we are left, instead, with the passive illusion of life, the corpse’s otherwise inevitable, natural deterioration perpetually deferred. While embalming has been standard practice in the U.S. since the early 20th century,¹⁷ and, joining Evita, there is a significant list of other political and cultural figures from around the globe whose bodies have been preserved, it remains much less common in the rest of the world, including Argentina. Historians of the practice such as Kevin O’Neill (1999) point out that the act of embalming requires a certain professionalization of death, allowing for control over the body’s decay but also removing the rituals surrounding the corpse from the familial or domestic spheres and instead inserting them into the capitalist marketplace. As such, embalming converts the cadaver into an aesthetic object that must be made beautiful and no longer subject to natural death processes, distancing the living from the abject realities of life, illness, and death, no longer reflecting back to us the image of our own precarity but instead becoming a universalized symbol that does not have to reach out and affect us on a more material level.

However, from a more nuanced perspective than O’Neill (1999)’s assertions, in these instances we are nevertheless disturbed and materially affected—perhaps not by death, which has been aestheticized, but still by the perception of the uncanny that results from corpse’s

¹⁷ Embalming was popularized as a common funerary practice in the United States after the Civil War due to the more frequent need to transport corpses over long distances and to keep bodies preserved for longer while more dispersed family members traveled for the burial (O’Neill 1999).

similarity to the human body while lacking its characteristic activity and animation. Similarly, Blanchot (1982) reflects on the fundamental inadequacy of these death rituals in distancing us from the corpse, asserting that, “No matter how calmly the corpse has been laid out upon its bed for final viewing, it is also everywhere in the room, all over the house. At every instant it can be elsewhere than where it is. It is where we are apart from it, where there is nothing; it is an invading presence, an obscure and vain abundance” (259).

In the novel, the embalming process is similarly an aestheticizing process that washes away the abject elements of illness from Evita’s body, returning to her a cleanliness and ethereal beauty that even exceeds that she held in life, yet, as we will see later, ultimately resulting in the uncanny appearance of life in death and a power that extends beyond the corpse itself. Dr. Ara’s anatomical preservation work is repeatedly framed as a battle against the abject and an attempt to halt the inevitable process of decay. The scientist is so obsessed with recreating the appearance of life in death that he laments that he did not know Evita well while she was alive, which forces him to rely upon photos as a reference when attempting to reverse the deterioration her body has suffered. His work, then, requires him to use one type of aesthetic object—the photographic image, a fact that reminds us of Blanchot (1982)’s musing about the parallels between the corpse and the image—to create a second, the “estatua de belleza suprema” into which Ara eventually proclaims he has transformed Evita’s body (Martínez 1995: 34). Ara’s work is so successful at aestheticizing the corpse that it is actually confused multiple times as being a literal object, a wax replica or statue instead of a once-living creature itself.

Overlaid with such aesthetic representations, the corpse is emptied of the abject but human materiality of illness and death. Even as decay threatens the corpse with its rapid advancement shortly after Evita’s death, Dr. Ara gets to work warding it off:

Aún se mantenía caliente y flexible, pero los pies viraban al azul y la nariz se le derrumbaba como un animal cansado. Ara advirtió que, si no actuaba de inmediato, la muerte lo vencería. La muerte avanzaba con su danza de huesos y, dondequiera hacía pie, sembraba un nido. Ara la sacaba de aquí la muerte destellaba por allá, tan rápido que sus dedos no alcanzaban a contenerla. (Martínez 1995: 35)

Ara's efforts, then, are framed as banishing death itself from the corpse, an ongoing battle for control over the organic matter before him. The abject fluids of the cadaver are replaced with "una luz líquida, inmune a las humedades, a las tormentas, y a las desolaciones del hielo y del calor," an otherworldly substance promising preservation rather than decay (Martínez 1995: 29). As a result, rather than ever-changing or in the process of deteriorating, the body enters an otherworldly stasis, about which the Coronel reflects, "Así como la ve ahora va a quedar para siempre. . . . Nada le afecta: el agua, la cal viva, los años, los terremotos. Nada" (Martínez 1995: 218-219). With death vanquished, Evita's corpse becomes less material and more spectral, existing beyond the earthly confines of time and space rather than a natural part of it, which attributes to it an immortality that contrasts notably with the abject effects of her illness and death.¹⁸

Vezetti (1997) argues that this process of aestheticization ultimately interrupts the work of mourning for Evita, transforming her into an omnipresence. He writes, "La renegación de la muerte por el embalsamamiento quedaba reforzada por esa 'presencia' que no terminaba de completar su tránsito al espacio material y simbólico de los muertos," with the result that "el cadáver se transmutaba en una presencia viva casi real. El resto mortal se convertí así en sostén material de un fantasma de negación de la muerte" (7). While the desaparecidos are not

¹⁸ At play here is the simultaneous enchantment and disenchantment of the corpse as posited by Laqueur (2015). Even as Ara, in his memoir, goes to painstaking efforts to emphasize the scientific aspects of his work, the novel draws attention to the ways that the act of embalming removes the body from his natural course of decay and thus transforms it into the unnatural or even supernatural. As Davies (2000) points out, "Her embalmed body invokes not the marvels of science but more the possibilities of magic" (418).

aestheticized, their disappearance similarly disrupts mourning, sanitizes the abject violence that they were subject to, and ultimately negates death, converting them into a haunting presence as well.

A further contrast with the desaparecidos that nevertheless reveals points in common is that the aestheticization of Evita's corpse is inherently gendered. Death makes Evita more beautiful than ever before: as the make-up artist on her two final films comments to Martínez, before she was ordinary, but in death she was "Una diosa" (Martínez 1995: 12).¹⁹ As Begonya Sàez Tajafuerce (2019) reflects in an analysis of the film *Eva no duerme*, the embalming amounts to "la negación de la muerte mediante una intervención material obrada por un Estado moderno sobre el cuerpo de una mujer" (11). Viviana Plotnik (2004), citing Elisabeth Bronfen's key intervention into aesthetics of death and the feminine, *Over Her Dead Body* (1992), similarly argues that the literary and historical interest in Evita's corpse has to do with a desire to suppress the destabilizing threat inherent in the feminine body and in its association with the abject.²⁰ She writes,

La estetización del duelo en rituales funerarios se relaciona con la ansiedad respecto a la disolución corporal después de la muerte. Aunque su propósito es esconder la muerte, siempre articula la mortalidad. Así, la negación siempre afirma lo que intenta ocultar. De manera similar, el cuerpo embalsamado es una imagen estable que desplaza y reemplaza

¹⁹ As Blanchot (1982) reflects about the corpse,

Yes, it is he, the dear living person, but all the same it is more than he. He is more beautiful, more imposing; he is already monumental and so absolutely himself that it is as if he were *doubled* by himself, joined to his solemn impersonality by resemblance and by the image. This magnified being, imposing and proud, which impresses the living as the appearance of the original never perceived until now. (257-258)

I shall return to the subject of this magnified being and the conceptualization of Evita as a goddess or saint later in this section.

²⁰ Lavery (2007) similarly argues,

As long as the female body is healthy and its bodily boundaries remain contained, then all threat to the social order is curbed. However, Eva's bodily boundaries constantly threaten to overspill, with disastrous consequences. . . . Eva's enemies see both her cancerous body and corpse as metonyms for the monstrous and the abject. (235)

la mortalidad y el deterioro. Una imagen, que paradójicamente es el cuerpo, reemplaza al cuerpo desestabilizador. Por eso, el cuerpo embalsamado es un fetiche y un doble de sí mismo. (Plotnik 2004: 20)

Suppressing and containing the abject through the embalmed corpse, then, creates a stabilized image, an object to be looked at from what was once a subject, which can be more easily manipulated for political ends. Nevertheless—as we shall see momentarily—this object still insistently continues to unbearably point towards death.

Notably, in the novel Dr. Ara's task leads him to begin objectifying Evita even while she is still alive. In the days before her death, when he has already been tasked with the preservation of her almost-corpse, he states, "Necesito ver el cuerpo," referring to Evita as an anonymous body rather than a still-living being or subject (Martínez 1995: 34). Ara further centers himself as creator of the embalmed body as aesthetic object:

Miro el cuerpo desnudo, sumiso, el paciente cuerpo que desde hace tres años sigue incorrupto gracias a mis cuidados. Soy, aunque Eva no quiera, su Miguel Ángel, su hacedor, el responsable de su vida eterna. Ella es ahora —¿por qué callarlo?— yo. Siento la tentación de inscribirle, sobre el corazón, mi nombre: Pedro Ara. (Martínez 1995: 189)²¹

The male gaze is self-evident here: viewed by Ara, the naked woman becomes submissive and patient, with no agency of her own, able only to accept what is done to her by the man who has become the artistic master of her immortality. She is his reflection, his medium, the material out

²¹ Martínez occasionally cites directly from his journalistic sources in the novel, but makes no distinction between his real and fictional sources. In the chapter discussing Ara's work, he refers explicitly to the anatomist's autobiographical writing on the subject, *El caso Eva Perón: Apuntes para la historia* (1974). However, although some of the quotations he includes are actual abbreviated versions of that text, this particular quote does not seem to appear in the memoir or the selections from Ara's diary that follow in its appendix. Still, Martínez's fictionalization of the embalmer's writing responds to a certain narcissism that is evident throughout Ara's writings, in which the doctor focuses overwhelmingly on setting the record straight regarding his involvement with the cadaver, imposing his version of events over those that he deems to be politically motivated or otherwise inaccurate, and ignores any possible protagonism for the deceased in the process.

of which he makes art. Moreover, the act of writing, of signing his name, appears as a violent act of possession to be etched upon the body itself.

Similarly, Martínez reflects upon the similarities between the embalmer and the biographer, reflecting upon how “los dos tratan de inmovilizar una vida o un cuerpo en la pose con que debe recordarlos la eternidad” (1995: 189). Both, with an egotistical cruelty, attempt to control the ways that a subject is remembered, to fix it into a singular meaning so that it can be owned.²² A life becomes meaningful not as subject, but as object; as Martínez posits, Ara “reconstruye el cuerpo de Evita solo para poder narrar cómo lo ha hecho” (1995: 189).²³

Of course, according to the novel, this is explicitly not what Evita wanted. Perón claims his motive for preserving the corpse to be his desire that “el pueblo la siga viendo tan viva como ahora,” but this attempt to preserve the semblance of life in death is in outright violation with Evita’s own last wishes (Martínez 1995: 34).²⁴ As Koenig writes in his notes about her,

El último deseo de la Difunta fue que ningún hombre tocara su cuerpo indefenso y desnudo, que ningún hombre hablara de su cuerpo, que nadie en el mundo viera la eternidad de su delgadez y de su decadencia. El primero en violar ese deseo fue el

²² Lavery (2007) points out the particularly gendered connotations of this aspect of the novel, arguing that embalming expresses an “obsessive desire to immobilize Eva, to fix her in place” in order to limit and control the possibility for alternative narratives in Argentina about Evita and Peronism more generally, and women more specifically” (236).

²³ Bronfen (1992) similarly observes how narrative comes into play in her discussion of anatomical models: “The texts the anatomist will produce as a result of this experience of death signify both the corpse and his inscription of it. They will be about her dead body but also about his signature, his gaze, his masculinity, and his survival” (12). Cortés (2008) discusses this subject in-depth in his analysis of the novel, asserting “una conexión morbosa entre la necrofilia y la escritura, la cual se produce en función a la violencia desplegada sobre el cuerpo textual” (329-330).

²⁴ This desire for Evita to be seen as interminably healthy, beautiful, and alive is also reflected in Ara (1974)’s real-life satisfaction with the quality of his embalming work, such as when he reports in his memoir, “Ricardo Finochietto me ha comunicado que vio el cadáver y que le pareció enormemente bien, con mucha diferencia a favor del estado actual, porque él recuerda muy bien la expresión de la difunta en el día de la muerte” (285). Here, embalming is again posited as an outright negation of death: the painful, human reality of Evita’s final days is erased and replaced with something more palatable.

dictador, que la hizo embalsamar y la exhibió descaradamente a las masas durante dos semanas. (Martínez 1995: 167-168)

In total opposition of Evita's desire for safety, privacy, and quiet in the afterlife, in the novel such objectification strips her of agency and autonomy so that her corpse could serve an ideological purpose. The objectification is, of course, gendered, as the cadaver is subject to repeated acts of violence and violation. Sexualized descriptions of the body abound, mentioning the appearance of her nipples or that her skin became more youthful after embalming, like that of a twenty-year-old. Numerous characters, including Ara, are subject to accusations of necrophilia. Attitudes toward the corpse often evoke sexual violence, such as when Moori Koenig considers marking the clitoris as a way to identify the body, and, when he ultimately decides to inscribe a star upon her ear, the act is still configured in terms of sexual penetration in which "se abría un espacio virgen" (Martínez 1995: 161).²⁵

The ultimate goal of embalming in the novel is to solidify the corpse into an aesthetic object that can be controlled and used for ideological purposes: as Eva's biographer notes, "La rebelde indomable por fin se había convertido en una cosa. La habían usado como mujer desde su adolescencia. Al verla enferma o muerta, la habían llamado eso. Ahora era una muñeca que se podía inflar con los sueños, un cadáver objeto" (Dujovne Ortiz 1995: 296). Similar to the motivations behind hiding Evita's illness from the public, banishing death from the cadaver is meant to maintain her image and larger-than-life stature in the eyes of the Peronist masses. The

²⁵ Multiple critics have analyzed the gendered objectification that is evident throughout depictions of the cadaver in the novel. Zuffi (1999) posits that embalming converts Evita's body into an object of patriarchal conquest. Similarly, Schlickers (2005), citing concepts laid out in Bronfen (1992), argues that embalming Evita's body allows her masculine viewers to suppress and dominate the psychological threats of death and feminine sexuality by subjecting her to both the possibility of possession and the perpetual male gaze. She further highlights that "Evita, una vez muerta, se vuelve un objeto deseado, un fetiche, incluso para los militares que la odian y desprecian" (Schlickers 2005: 117).

threat of the abject is subjugated, and the corpse becomes, rather than a symbol of human precarity, a symbol of Peronist and Argentine longevity.

Although, as we shall discuss in more depth later on, this potent symbol would pose an enormous problem for anti-Peronists such as Moori Koenig and the other military men who would interact with the embalmed woman after the coup, they, too—as we have seen—objectified the corpse. Even as they attempted to rid the cadaver of its aesthetic and ideological power, objectifying it allowed them too to distance themselves from the abject power of death as well as to dehumanize Evita, one of their most hated enemies. They express their revulsion by referring to the body without using her name—calling her “Eso,” “Esa mujer,” or even “La yegua”—treating it violently or sexually objectifying it, and even, in one instance, urinating on it.

While, as I have alluded to above, the bodies of the desaparecidos were not aestheticized, particularly in such a gendered way, the dehumanization and desire for control over the body that is inherent to this process is reminiscent of the desires of the necropolitical, authoritarian state to exercise its power on and over the body. Their violent, dehumanizing treatment of Evita’s body therefore evokes later military treatment of the bodies of the desaparecidos, as told by Raúl García (2000):

Desde la perspectiva del represor, en cada una de estas instancias había que atacar el cuerpo del enemigo. Recurriendo a una violencia aplicada tanto física como psicológicamente, consiguieron despersonalizar a la víctima convirtiéndola en una ‘cosa’ biológica, un cuerpo reducido prácticamente a puros reflejos neuromotores. (173)

The novel, in highlighting the objectification of such a famous corpse, also points toward how easily dehumanized the masses of anonymous disappeared were in Argentina.

Moreover, in discussing these acts, the novel highlights how the sinister mood arises from dehumanizing threats against the body. Martínez notes at key moments throughout the

profound sadness and inhumanity resulting from the conversion of the body into a political battleground manipulated by forces beyond the individual's control. In a moving passage attributed to a conversation between Evita and her mother while she is on her deathbed, Evita reports her nagging worry that, after her death, her corpse will be exposed beyond her control:

A veces sueño que estoy muerta y que me llevan desnuda a la Plaza de Mayo. Me ponen sobre un banco y todos hacen fila para tocarme. Por más que grito y grito, nadie me viene a rescatar. No vayas a dejar que eso me pase, vieja. No vayas a dejarme. (Martínez 1995: 53)

Here, the body's nudity, vulnerability, and exposure stands in for the nightmarish lack of agency suffered by Evita after her death as well as a fear of sexual violence as an instrument of objectification. Later, upon seeing the embalmed cadaver, her mother would feel the urge to "salvar a su hija y alejarla del fórmol, de las resinas y de todas las otras maldades de la eternidad," but would be unable to do anything to put an end to the objectification of her corpse or its utilization as a political weapon (Martínez 1995: 63). This utter helplessness in the face of the dehumanizing nature of patriarchal state power is darkly frightening. For all of her own power, Evita is precarious and vulnerable in the face of death and the forces that seek to shore up their own position through the dehumanization of her body.

In another example, Ara informs a mass of Peronist protesters of his quality embalming work, reporting, "Ella quedó muy bien. Tiene todas las vísceras. Está perfecta, como dormida. Parece que estuviera viva," only to receive the response from someone in the crowd, "¿Qué necesidad había de atormentarla así?" (Martínez 1995: 201). The appearance of life in death, an objectified immortality, is here framed by those who loved Evita the most—the working-class masses—as a form of torture. In this way, the act of embalming itself becomes sinister, even before the body is disappeared. Even when the abject truth of death is displaced, we are still treated with an uncanny likeness of a woman—both human and yet inhuman—that is just as

troubling because we have closely witnessed the violent process of objectification. As Nora Domínguez (2010) argues in her analysis of images of Evita and her embalmed corpse,

Visto desde su carácter pétreo, el rostro del cadaver ya no puede comunicar. No habla, no mira, no sufre. Es decir, pierde los signos de su humanidad, no puede expresar una interioridad. Su rostro ya no es ‘espejo’ o ‘reflejo’ del alma. A partir de estas acciones sobre el cuerpo y de los avatares del proceso histórico-político, su presencia o su ocultamiento solo pueden caber en un cuento de terror. (133)

The robbery of Evita’s subjectivity through this dehumanizing process becomes even more terrifying than the abject decay of the corpse.

However, the body does struggle to fight back as the abject periodically reasserts itself.

Notably, in the novel Ara claims that

Durante dos años y medio, el cuerpo que yo dejaba lozano por la noche se despertaba marchito en las mañanas. Advertí que para devolverle la belleza había que enderezarle las entrañas. . . . Ya no hace falta que lo siga manipulando. He descubierto un fijador que lo mantiene clavado en su ser, de una vez para siempre. (Martínez 1995: 38)

The corpse, it seems, *wants* to come apart, stubbornly undoing all his work as the natural tendency toward death and decay carries on insistently.²⁶ As Lavery (2007) points out, those who would possess Evita are constantly frustrated by the abject’s refusal to be contained. Even as Ara seeks the perfect balance of embalming chemicals to maintain the body in its stabilized object

²⁶ Interestingly, we see here a conflict in imaginaries about the authenticity of the corpse that assert a sort of Ship of Theseus paradox. That is, maintaining the aesthetic form of the corpse actually requires vacating and replacing the original biological material. As Alexei Yurchak (2015) points out in his analysis of the treatment of Vladimir Lenin’s embalmed corpse, bodies that remain dynamic need constant maintenance: “This means that the work on the body can never cease; the body cannot be allowed simply to lie there in an embalmed state. It must be continuously examined, fixed, resculpted, and reemalmed” (117-118). Similarly, Lenin’s image, he argues, also requires constant maintenance and reshaping to adjust to the passage of time and changing political environs, and the dead body functions as the central node that holds this vast and contradictory network of images together, becoming “the embodiment of something that was different from and bigger than Lenin the man” (Yurchak 2015: 126). Although historically the methods of embalming were certainly different, in *Santa Evita* we see, similarly, the relevance of a focus on form over biology, a dynamic body and image that requires constant maintenance, and an interest in representation that nevertheless relies upon the authenticity of the corpse for its validity.

position, the fluids themselves seem to become somehow abject, and are repeatedly presented as mysterious liquids that threaten to transgress the bounds of the corpse and its death to affect the living. Koenig, for instance, when first taking possession of the corpse, asks himself, “¿Qué se le mueve adentro? ¿Ríos de gas, de mercurio, de hielo seco? Tal vez el embalsamador tenga razón y el cuerpo se evapore en el traslado” (Martínez 1995: 144). In their attempt to fix the corpse into place and keep abject at bay, the embalming chemicals still seem unstable, not powerful enough to combat death in its entirety. They remain as stand-ins for the blood and viscera that they have replaced; when Koenig marks the corpse with a scar that only he can identify, “En vez de sangre, brotó un hilo de resina amarilla que se evaporó al instante” (Martínez 1995: 161).

In this way, the novel repeatedly emphasizes that the embalming process simultaneously objectifies Evita’s corpse in a sinister attempt at bodily control and yet nevertheless manages to make it even more powerfully threatening than before. Kerstin Mey (2016) reflects regarding an exhibition of Gunther von Hagen’s anatomical models,

The actual visual encounter of von Hagen’s bodies works to initially mute such kind of [abject] reaction, as the special preservation of the cadavers heightens their object character and thus their supposed otherness that assures the subject. Only at second glance, and supported by the sensationalising publicity surrounding the public display of the dead, does the uncanny loom, the vaguely familiar and yet disturbingly strange and threatening of the cadaver. (147)

Similarly, even as the novel repeatedly emphasizes the preservation of Evita’s corpse as an act of objectification, the simultaneous attention toward its attendant, sinister horror has a potential affective impact for the reader, who is faced with the dark, threatening horrors of the violence done to the cadaver.

Monstrous Corpse

It is in this context that Evita's corpse takes on a monstrous quality throughout the novel, becoming not just a victim of both those who objectify her via embalming and rob her body, but also a dangerous body that maintains its contradictions and turns the sinister against the military officials that seek to possess her. As mentioned above, she is viewed by the Argentine elites that would overthrow Perón in 1955 as embodying the abject even before her death. Martínez's assertion that "Los argentinos que se creían depositarios de la civilización veían en Evita una resurrección de la barbarie" positions Evita on the far side of that omnipresent division in Argentine culture established in Domingo Sarmiento's *Facundo* in 1845, and indicates that her presence on the national scene is viewed as transgressing acceptable boundaries and threatening to undo the social order (Martínez 1995: 82). In this way, she became for the elites a representative of all that was monstrous and marginal—"los indios, los negros candomberos, los crotos, los malevos, los cafishios de Artl, los gauchos cimarrones, las putas tísticas"—that "ya habían sido exterminados o confinados a sus sótanos de tiniebla" (Martínez 1995: 82). Particularly notable is Martínez's inclusion of a quote from the essayist Ezequiel Martínez Estrada where she is described as "una sublimación de lo torpe, ruin, abyecto, infame, vengativo, ofidico, y el pueblo la ve como una encarnación de los dioses infernales" (quoted in Martínez 1995: 83).

Similar to and incorporating elements of the abject, the monster is a creature that provokes revulsion and is associated with that which crosses and exceeds boundaries or does not fit into agreed cultural and social categories. Additionally, owing to the Latin root of the word, "monstrum," or "to show," monsters also can be interpreted as that which reveals or makes something visible. Stephen Asma, in *On Monsters: An Unnatural History of Our Worst Fears*

(2009), notes the origins of the term “monster” as a pejorative used against human beings with deformed physical features. The cultural concept of the monster, then, is deeply rooted in a negative reaction to any visible distortion outside of the socially accepted norm of the human body, a distortion that includes not just physical disability, but illness and proximity to death. Such bodies are rejected not just for existing, but for exceeding or transgressing the norm and having the audacity to make themselves visible, in all their marginality.

For this reason, beyond their abject materiality, monsters can also be representatives of the Other—in all its gendered, racial, and colonial connotations—and therefore destabilizing forces that threaten the accepted order (whether social, cultural, epistemological, religious, or political). As Timothy Beal (2002) explains, “Monsters are in the world but not of the world. They are paradoxical personifications of otherness within sameness. That is, they are threatening figures of anomaly within the well-established and accepted order of things” (4). As such, even as Eva Perón was—and still is—widely perceived as embodying the Caucasian ideal of feminine beauty, the elite imaginary nevertheless positions her as monstrous, a powerful and threatening Other embodying the worst aspects of the nation, both rejected and deeply feared by representatives of the Argentine social order.²⁷

From this perspective, Evita’s cadaver thus seems to materially take on the monstrosity that she was supposed, by the elites, to have embodied in life.²⁸ Perhaps most monstrous to her

²⁷ In some ways, the depiction of the living Evita as monstrous echoes the portrayal of Marie-Antoinette by the Jacobins as a political moral monster, which Foucault argues in *The Abnormal* (2003) situated her as “not part of the social body,” “greedy for the blood of the people,” and “scandalous, debauched” (97).

²⁸ There is a seductive eroticism to Evita’s monstrosity in the novel that is undoubtedly associated with patriarchal reactions to her femininity and power in traditionally masculine spheres; for discussion of Evita’s corpse as vampire and further discussion of such Gothic elements in the novel, see Cerpa (2015).

detractors is its continued activity and animation: again defying acceptable boundaries, the corpse refuses the quiet passivity of death. It stuns Moori Koenig with its apparent change in size, appearing both larger than life and yet evidently shrinking: “De lejos, sobre la losa de cristal, el cadáver parecía inmenso. Pero los baños de formol habían contraído los huesos y los tejidos. Sólo la cabeza seguía como siempre: hermosa y perversa” (Martínez 1995: 194). Similarly, Arancibia is particularly affected by the impression that the corpse is breathing, and attentively observes the body looking for minor changes, wondering aloud, ““Quién sabe si esta mujer sigue viva”” (Marínez 1995: 307). Koenig, insisting that she is dead, admits, “La Difunta está intacta, como una persona viva. Pero no está viva. No puede respirar” (Martínez 1995: 252). Like something alive, but not alive, still but somehow changing, growing and shrinking, the corpse refuses categorization as inert and passive, insistently defying our expectations for the dead. The Gothic parallels with Frankenstein’s monster are unavoidable here: through the process of embalming—which, as we have seen, was meant to objectify the corpse—it seems Dr. Ara, positioned as the mad scientist obsessed with his creation, has achieved the opposite effect, threatening the new Argentine military government by bringing the dead to life.²⁹ Evita’s detractors, then, cast Evita as a monstrous body which spreads its own version of the sinister mood, a depiction that Martínez literalizes through the animated corpse.

Notably, however, even as Arancibia insists upon the corpse’s animation, Pedro Ara denies any material evidence of this post-mortem power. Explaining that the military officer had asked him to take a look at the corpse because ““Me dijo que el cuerpo cambiaba de posición cuando lo dejaban solo y que ustedes no sabían por qué,”” he recollects, ““Hice un examen

²⁹ Both Fuentes (1996) and Cerpa (2015) discuss Ara’s characterization in the novel as Frankenstein-esque.

escrupuloso del cadáver. Tiene pequeñas hendiduras. . . . Pero, en lo esencial, no ha cambiado desde que me lo quitaron” (Martínez 1995: 329). The body’s uncanny activities seem so material and familiar—movement, breathing, changing size, the appearance of life in death—and yet do not belong to the corpse and leave no trace for the scientist.

This lack of physical evidence in the face of such apparently material changes in the corpse gestures toward a relationship between the material and the spectral throughout the novel that has heretofore gone unmentioned in the scholarly literature. The visceral, monstrous corpse—whether uncanny aesthetic object or site of dangerous alterity—is a locus of haunting, material and yet immaterial, exceeding the bounds of its physical form in a way that denies any attempts to pin down its power. This is because the corpse is always simultaneously disenchanted and enchanted, biological, social, and spiritual. As Ortega Caicedo (2005) points out, “La constante transformación del cuerpo de Eva que la novela trabaja, insiste en la materialidad del cuerpo como algo construido y como resultado de ciertas prácticas de resonancias políticas culturales” (179). The novel’s oscillation between seemingly contradictory depictions of the corpse as material and immaterial actually gestures towards their unity. We shall see more to this effect shortly when we discuss further the saintly supernatural powers associated with the corpse.

Like many monsters, Evita’s corpse is also configured by the military government as a potential weapon,³⁰ a powerful existential threat to their authority that, as we will see, would be echoed in characterizations of political dissidents after 1976. It is for this reason that it is deemed

³⁰ A common trope of the science fiction monster movie genre is that of the scientist, government, or corporation that seeks to possess the monster in order to study it, use its powers to its own advantage, or otherwise profit from it. See, for example, *King Kong* (Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack 1933), *Godzilla* (Honda Ishirō 1954), *Aliens* (James Cameron 1986), and *The Shape of Water* (Guillermo del Toro 2017).

so important for them to control it: to keep the weapon out of the wrong hands. They fear that Evita's admirers, "los cabecillas," will use her body as a rallying cry against the government that has deposed her husband. A general insists to Koenig that, if the Peronist masses take possession of her, "La van a poner en la proa de un barco lleno de flores y bajar con ella por el río Paraná para sublevar a los pueblos de las orillas" (Martínez 1995: 27). In the same meeting, the vice president further reflects, "Cada vez que en este país hay un cadáver de por medio, la historia se vuelve loca" (Martínez 1995: 28). Evita's cadaver, in this instance, is thus configured as having the power to provoke the Argentine proletariat and make national history deranged, unpredictable; in other words, out of the strict control of military authoritarians and elites that prefer to guide its direction. Its monstrosity is explicitly related to the power it might give to those other marginalized elements of Argentine society, a power to destabilize established hierarchies and categories.³¹

On a more material level, the body itself is also configured as potentially dangerous to those who interact with it. The embalmer at first attempts to use the volatile nature of the chemicals that were used to preserve the corpse as a way to keep Koenig from seeing the body, claiming that "Es peligrosa verla. Las sustancias del cuerpo no se han calmado. Son tóxicas, irrespirables" (Martínez 1995: 30). Koenig, despite his insistence on seeing Evita regardless,

³¹ Macón (2015) argues that Peronism generally was characterized by the opposition "as a monstrosity, a word that not only describes the difficulty of depicting it but also a sense of abjection" tied to the perception of populist political movements as irrational, emotional, and excessive (2). Similarly, Rosano (2013), in her analysis of representations of Evita in the Argentine cultural imaginary, describes anti-Peronist writings depicting Evita "a partir del paradigma de lo monstruoso (lo anómalo, lo anormal)" (54). Bishop (2020)'s interpretation of the marginalized elements that find embodiment in Evita's corpse goes beyond just Peronism to encompass all of Argentine history: "The scores of corpses that buttress and bear out the nation's history are here condensed and displaced into a single angry body animated by everything that did not take place or might have differently" (170).

still speculates that said chemicals may be potential dangers: “Vaya a saber qué ocultos poderes tienen esos químicos. Tal vez al contacto con el agua entren en efervescencia, y la mujer aparezca flotando, más vigorosa que nunca” (Martínez 1995: 30). The corpse’s potential dark and unseen powers, though here attributed to a scientific origin, nevertheless present both a material and ideological threat: first, that they may sicken those that come into contact with the cadaver, and second, that they might transform the body into an even more potent symbol and, thus, ideological threat to the nation. Moreover, the ideological threat is characterized quite explicitly in terms of illness by the vice president, who tells Koenig, “Muerta . . . esa mujer es todavía más peligrosa que cuando estaba viva. El tirano lo sabía y por eso la dejó aquí, para que nos enferme a todos” (Martínez 1995: 28). As Cortés (2008) points out, Evita’s illness, her femininity, and even death itself are all treated as some sort of potential contagion that could infect those who interact with the body and spread outward, affecting everything around it. The monstrous corpse of the former First Lady, symbolically potent and materially dangerous, potentially poses both a material and metaphorical threat of illness to both the individual and national body.

The idea of the monstrous body as potentially a source of contagion has clear parallels in the rhetoric of the military junta after 1976. As Marguerite Feitlowitz describes in *Lexicon of Terror* ([1998] 2011), metaphors of health and illness were utilized extensively to justify the elimination of political dissidents, whose threat to the nation was likened to a sickness and whose detention and disappearance was posed as a surgery or cure (38-39).³² Similarly, in *Disappearing Acts* (1997) Diana Taylor discusses how “Combining militarized and medicalized language, the

³² Other medical metaphors included references to torture chambers as “operating theaters” and torture as “intensive therapy” or “treatment” (Feitlowitz [1998] 2011: 66, 68).

armed forces exerted authority over the enemy/disease. Medical terminology allowed them to target not only the ‘disease’ but the entire population” (96-97).

Monstrous in her illness, her resistance to objectification, and her threat to the Argentine social order, Evita’s dangerous body is depicted throughout the novel as a threat to the authoritarian state multiple times over. For this reason, the military government mobilizes its clandestine forces to keep the corpse under control, hiding it—sometimes in plain sight—in order to extend that control over the rest of the populace. As Foucault (2003) argues, “The monster is the fundamental figure around which bodies of power and domains of knowledge are disturbed and reorganized” (62). By making and remaking monsters, he continues, the state seeks to understand and make intelligible the abnormal criminal that exists at the limit of the law. The novel’s depiction of a monstrous corpse demonstrates how Evita, the Peronist masses, and, later, the *desaparecidos* would therefore all be made into political monsters so that they could be understood and controlled by the state and responded to, not via criminal law, which Foucault (2003) posits is unable to encompass the abnormal, but rather by “either violence, [or] the will for pure and simple suppression” (56).

However, even as Beal (2002) points out that “The politically and religiously conservative function of the monstrous is to encourage one to pull back from the edge” (195), the novel shows reactions to the corpse to be often contradictory. Instead, since we are just as attracted as we are repulsed by the abject, “our desire for the monstrous other often undermines this purpose” (Beal 2002: 196). Even as we may be tempted to reject and fear the monster, we also may find in it recognition or identification. In the following section I will discuss how, while still a dangerous body for the military government, the cadaver’s saintly and supernatural powers nevertheless provide hope for those who desire a new, radically Other, order.

The Saintly Relic

I have heretofore addressed multiple categories to which Evita's dangerous body belongs throughout *Santa Evita*, tracing a path from her abject illness and martyrdom to her embalmed cadaver as uncanny object and the monstrosity of the corpse's ongoing activity and Otherness. As we have seen, these are interrelated categories that, while sometimes giving rise to seemingly contradictory depictions throughout the novel, nevertheless consistently point towards a central struggle over the corpse as various parties seek to understand, resist, vanquish, or obtain power over death. In this final sub-section, I will further address the spectral and supernatural as it emerges from the materiality of the corpse by turning toward the other side of the monstrous in Beal (2002)'s formulation: the sacred.

The novel repeatedly describes Evita's body in otherworldly terms and ascribes it a supernatural power that toes the line between the saintly and the monstrous. Multiple characters describe the body as emitting a strange blue glow: "no de un azul que pueda explicarse con palabras sino transparente, de neón, un azul que no era de este mundo" (Martínez 1995: 326). Even as Dr. Ara attempts to ascribe this glow to a material origin, insisting that the glow was not "una luz sino el mapa de la enfermedad llamada cancer," his scientific explanation is undermined because "no atinó a explicar qué clase de fuerza mantenía esa imagen en el aire" (Martínez 1995: 326). This strange glow that defies explanation is clearly associated with the corpse's sinister power, as it is observed immediately after seemingly driving El Loco to an obsession that causes him to murder his pregnant wife. Interestingly, it is also explicitly associated with and emergent from the material—unlike the specter, it does not haunt without the corpse's presence—and yet seems to indicate a power that extends beyond the body itself.

Strange and otherworldly, it is frightening and yet somehow beautiful, beyond language's representative capabilities or science's realm of understanding.

Other descriptions of the cadaver's otherworldliness are more explicit about their associations with the sacred by positioning the preserved body as saintly relic. As Laqueur (2015) notes, the corpse's meaning is historically contingent—it is not always abject or rejected, but sometimes a “locus of holiness” (96). Ara, upon finishing his preservation work, declares, “El cadáver de Eva Perón es ya absoluta y definitivamente incorruptible,” his word choice evoking the post-mortem sign of holiness associated with Catholic saints (Martínez 1995: 36). Moreover, visitors who viewed the corpse at the CGT were profoundly affected by the experience as though they were pilgrims viewing holy remains: Martínez describes how “Los visitantes, que llegaban preparados para observar una maravilla científica, se retiraban convencidos de que en verdad les habían mostrado un acto de magia” (1995: 30) particularly because of the way the body was suspended “para dar la impresión de que levitaba en un éxtasis perpetuo” (1995: 31). This ecstasy—a mystical experience most associated with female saints such as Teresa de Ávila—creates an affective experience for the corpse's viewers, who would fall to their knees and leave the room dazed, impacted on a profound spiritual level by what they had witnessed. The association of saintliness with the corpse contributes to shaping an imaginary of the cadaver even for those who were unable to visit it, with the novel explaining, “Aunque nadie podía ver el cadáver, la gente lo imaginaba yaciendo allí, en el sigilo de una capilla, y acudía los domingos a rezar el rosario y a llevarle flores” (1995: 23).

These reactions to the corpse further reinforce the saintly associations that reportedly preceded Evita's death in the novel. Martínez discusses petitions to the Vatican by the Argentine populace to have Evita canonized even before her death, to which the Vatican responded,

“Cualquier católico sabe que para ser santo hay que estar muerto” (1995: 77). Though death (and an associated corpse) are emphasized as a requirement for sainthood, this does not stop individuals such as Evita’s hairdresser’s cousins from ascribing miracles to her in life: after the Cabildo Abierto in which Evita is forced to renounce the position of Vice President, they insist that they saw ““la aureola luminosa alrededor del pelo”” and that Evita ““se fue elevando en el aire y la aureola se le notó clarísima”” (Martínez 1995: 141). In a moment that marks her utter defeat and imminent death, when Evita in the novel has, in fact, just been informed of her cancer diagnosis, the crowd ascribes to her body not the abject materiality that we have seen previously, but saintly miracles.

In fact, part of the power of the corpse is attributed by the military to its sacred possibilities, at least in the popular imaginary. As the vice president explains, “Los ignorantes la veneran como a una santa. Creen que puede resucitar el día menos pensado y convertir a la Argentina en una dictadura de mendigos” (Martínez 1995: 28). As discussed previously, embalming the corpse negated the appearance of death, thereby introducing the possibility that Evita could transcend or defy death at any moment, which “la puso al borde de un despertar inusitado y de vitalidad sobrehumana” (Cortés Rocca and Kohan 1998: 68). The saintly otherworldliness of the preserved body thereby includes the superhuman possibility of resurrection, which is part of its danger for some sectors of Argentine society and its attraction for others.

These depictions of Evita’s body as saintly relic, rather than contradicting the monstrosity outlined in the previous section, are in fact the other side of the same coin.³³ As Beal (2002)

³³ I differ here from critics such as Claudia Soria (2005), who asserts that Evita’s saintliness requires a purification that distances her from her materiality and instead creates a homogeneous spiritual body that can be subsumed under existing patriarchal categories. As I have argued,

argues, in some instances, rather than being demonized, “the monster is deified as a revelation of sacred otherness. . . . Here the monster is an envoy of the divine or the sacred as radically other than ‘our’ established order of things” (6). Where for those who defend the status quo Evita’s corpse is a sinister threat, for the impoverished it is a sacred promise of better things to come, the possibility for working miracles, and the distinction between these two is easily elided.³⁴ What unites these two perspectives on Evita’s corpse is its potential destabilizing power that threatens to overturn the established order.

To possess a saintly relic is to possess the spiritual power that emerges from its materiality, and it is not just the military government that strove to hold on to what remained of the holy corpse. Evita’s hairdresser, for example, reports to Martínez in the novel that he set up a series of manikins resembling the woman in his shop: “De todas las cabezas colgaba un relicario transparente dentro del cual había otras hebras de pelo rubio. ‘Son las que le corté al peinarla por última vez, cuando ya estaba muerta’ dijo el peluquero. ‘Siempre llevo un rizo igual a ese entre las tapas de mi reloj’” (1995: 99). One of her deepest admirers, the hairdresser attributes a spiritual significance to his possession of these remnants of the corpse, but nevertheless uses it to reaffirm his own power by emphasizing his role in shaping that iconic part of her image, reflecting, “‘Al fin de cuentas, Evita fue un producto mío. Yo la hice’” (Martínez 1995: 98).

Evita’s power in the novel is always emergent from the complex materiality of her corpse, and her saintly powers are often dark, avenging, and erotic—anything but pure and immaterial. As Hugo Vezetti (1997) writes, “Pero en el nudo de representaciones de ese cuerpo elegido, la mística de la santidad se transforma fácilmente en una cualidad profundamente demoniaca que superpone el erotismo con la locura y el crimen” (7)

³⁴ By making this distinction, I do not mean to deny the possibility of both views being held at once—in fact, the opposite, as we see the military agents in the novel repeatedly struggle with contradictory affects inspired by the corpse. Even for those who view Evita as a saint, there may be an element of terror in the face of her power. As Codebò (2018) observes, “Según Freud, la veneración se basa sobre una fundamental contradicción entre el temor y la adoración” (82).

Even here, when the affective response to the corpse is reverence, possession and ownership as a means to claim power are at the forefront.

The corpse's dispersal as saintly relic means there is a piece of Evita that can belong to everybody: she is materially and ideologically dismembered and spread to the winds, and her power is bestowed upon the many people who strive to possess her and her image. Martínez reflects explicitly on the role of this struggle in the construction of the myth of Evita, listing a selection of the more than one hundred items that she used or touched that he considers fetish objects treated with religious reverence: an embalmed canary, signed copies of her memoir, a white robe displayed in a house called the "Museum of the Shroud" (1995: 235). Her embalmed body is but one more object on a lengthy list as her power expands to encompass anything she interacted with. Even the writer Rodolfo Walsh carries a photo of her in his wallet "como amuleto" (Martínez 1995: 369).

However, in contrast to the control and maltreatment that characterizes many individuals' attempts to own a piece of Evita, Walsh rejects the objectification that might otherwise accompany the possession of this image, which he obtained from Colonel Moori Koenig. When Martínez asks Walsh why he didn't publish the photo, he explains, "“Esa mujer no es mía,”” the opposite of the phrase with which the Colonel insistently ends Walsh's 1965 short story (Martínez 1995: 370). To publish Evita, to represent her as his own, would have been to unjustly attempt to possess her. From this perspective, while having Evita's image or even a relic-object related to her is not necessarily an act of objectification, it is to attempt to own her power and pin down an affective spiritual experience that cannot belong to the individual. Similarly, the destabilizing power of the corpse cannot be controlled by placing it firmly into the categories of monster or saint, object or relic, matter or spirit; it cannot be owned. As Siddique and Raphael

(2016) reflect on the role of the body in transnational horror cinema, “These excessive bodies remain ever unruly, ever resistant to being assigned static meaning. They instead jostle between forms, ever unstable, ever evading fixed and stable meanings” (5). For the authorities who seek to possess Evita, then, the sinister mood arises in the unruliness and disquiet inspired by the corpse that threatens them with its refusal to resolve its contradictions and fit cleanly into the category they have chosen for it.

The often-incoherent reactions of representatives of the military government in the novel—most notably Moori Koenig—speak to their inability to reconcile these contradictory affective responses to the corpse by possessing it. This is because, in Beal’s words, “Whether demonized or deified or something in between, monsters bring on a limit experience that is akin in many respects to religious experience” (Martínez 1995: 195). Koenig’s obsession over the cadaver, in which he expresses both a profound hatred and violence toward Evita and yet grows convinced he cannot live without possessing her, greatly resembles Beal (2002)’s description of the horror of the religious experience as “an encounter with mysterious otherness that elicits a vertigo-like combination of both fear and desire, repulsion and attraction” (7).³⁵ Toward the end of his life, Koenig—no longer able to access the corpse itself—must satisfy his obsession by drunkenly contemplating photos of the cadaver instead, desperately wishing that the icon of the saint could stand in and continue to provide the spiritual experience of the relic he has lost.

³⁵ Cerpa (2015) has similarly identified these contradictory feelings experienced by characters like Koenig in the novel as the Gothic sublime.

Disappearing Death

Whether monstrous or saintly, it is evident that, in any configuration, the body in the novel is a problem: too dangerous to allow to remain accessible to the public, and yet impossible to destroy, Evita's corpse poses an undue threat to the military government's power. In 1955, as in 1976, the body is a site of political struggle wherein the marginal and the dissonant must be wholly ejected from the new social fabric, which means making the body of the unruly dissident disappear. The authoritarian government's response to the cadaver's threatening materiality in *Santa Evita* is therefore to disappear that dangerous body from public space and, by extension, the popular consciousness. Historically, when Evita's body was disappeared, so, too, were the monuments to Peronism, and even mentioning her name or singing Peronist political songs was banned. Similarly, Koenig, when being charged with the assignment, is ordered, "Desaparézcala. . . . Acábela. Conviértala en una muerta como cualquier otra" (Martínez 1995: 28). Physically disappearing the body is explicitly tied to erasing her personhood, her unique identity, the foundations of Peronism itself. Where embalming the corpse was a way of defying death and preserving Evita's memory, here the new government is concerned with eliminating it from view so as to erase the woman's very existence, to make her powerless among the anonymous multitude of the dead.

This, of course, would not prove to be a simple task. Interestingly, it is Evita's stubborn humanity—or, rather, her Christianity—that first makes disappearing the corpse such a challenge for the military government. The new president won't allow her corpse to be burned or otherwise more permanently disposed of, insisting that "Todo cuerpo cristiano debe ser enterrado en un cementerio cristiano" even as other officials like Koenig believe "Lo mejor . . . sería cubrirla con cemento fresco y fondearla en un lugar secreto del río" (Martínez 1995: 29). The irony here is

obvious: while burning the body would be considered unchristian, the violent mutilation and objectification that the corpse is subjected to throughout the novel is somehow deemed acceptable. Moreover, this speculation about other ways to rid themselves of the body clearly evokes for the reader the fact that such an undignified grave would be deemed acceptable two decades later for the desaparecidos. While many of those later corpses were no less Christian than Evita, the estimation of what kind of treatment was deemed acceptable against the dead—against those bodies viewed as monstrous—had evidently shifted dramatically.

One possible explanation for this difference comes from Chávez-Rivera (2012), who proposes that “El entierro cristiano implica reinsertarla dentro de las nociones de la religiosidad cristiana y aprehender simbólicamente el cuerpo para reincorporarlo a su decursar tradicional. Enterrarla cristianamente permite al gobierno reafirmarse como fiel custodio de los valores y las tradiciones de la sociedad” (10). From this perspective, a Christian burial is meant to diminish the power of the corpse by reinserting it into the funereal rituals meant to minimize our cohabitation with the dead. On the contrary, the purpose of both disappearance and reappearance under the later dictatorial regime, as we have seen throughout this dissertation, was to appropriate the power of the corpse for the military government’s own purposes, to force Argentines to cohabit with the dead as a method for spreading the sinister and haunting them into submission.

There is another key difference here between Evita and the desaparecidos that provides an explanation of the relative ease with which those later bodies were disposed of in comparison. Echoing Koenig in his obvious evocation of later methods of eliminating the cadavers of the desaparecidos, one of his subordinates, Galarza, questions why they cannot simply throw the body from a plane into the river or put her in a common grave. “Nadie está preguntando por

ella. Y si alguien pregunta, no tenemos por qué contestar,” he asserts (Martínez 1995: 184). The first part of the assertion is evidently untrue; many people then and over the subsequent decades were deeply invested in the location of Evita’s body, as would the relatives of the desaparecidos be constantly seeking out the locations of their loved ones. However, the second statement articulates a key point: refusing information about the location of the bodies, controlling knowledge, invests the authoritarian government with ultimate power, as I have discussed elsewhere.

In response to Galarza, another of Koenig’s subordinates, Arancibia, speculates that it is simply too late to eliminate Evita’s body in such a way, as it has been so deeply invested with meaning via its preservation: “Ahora es un cuerpo demasiado grande, más grande que el país. Está demasiado lleno de cosas” (Martínez 1995: 185). Unlike the desaparecidos, who the government would later deem marginal enough to make vanish, the materiality of Evita’s body is deemed too symbolically significant, too powerful. Instead, their tactic is to make the body anonymous, to attempt to dissociate this symbolic significance from the corpse so that “Lo mejor es enterrarlo . . . con otro nombre, en otro lugar, hasta que desaparezca” (Martínez 1995: 185). In this configuration, to bury Evita under another name is to rob the corpse of its symbolic meaning and monstrosity by resituating it within the funereal rituals that had been disrupted by the embalming process—to put her back where she belongs, to end the cohabitation with the dead that has so threatened and affected those who interact with her. What remains similar with the later treatment of the desaparecidos is the emphasis on anonymity as a factor of disappearance: even when remains are recovered, if a body cannot be reliably identified, they are divorced from

the symbolic and social meaning associated with the individual person.³⁶ A grave may even exist—as is the case for one of Evita’s copies in the novel, which, in a clear parallel with the desaparecidos, is buried in a cemetery under NN—but it cannot be meaningfully visited, the individual cannot be mourned or remembered and so is effectively eliminated from their role in our social world.³⁷

Koenig’s attempts to disappear Evita’s corpse bring to the forefront questions of visibility, identification, and space. Clímaco (2015) observes this interplay of visibility and invisibility: while the average corpse is meant to become invisible over time (through burial or decomposition), embalming makes Evita’s cadaver hypervisible, while its disappearance makes it hidden. The military hopes that, if the body cannot be viewed or identified, if it is hidden somewhere indeterminate, then it cannot exercise its affective power on viewers or its social power as a member of the dead; its monstrosity and saintliness, its abjection and sublimity, in short its sinister power, cannot challenge hierarchies by making itself known. For this reason, when the body is still stored at the CGT, the location is quickly declared a military zone, transforming it into a non-place like the later Clandestine Detention Centers.

However, where the body will ultimately end up is given a nearly spiritual significance: while a non-place for those not in-the-know about Evita’s final whereabouts, for the military government place is paramount. The location must remain known, visible, controllable for

³⁶ As I have discussed in chapter four and Perosino (2015) notes, anonymity can dehumanize the dead: “La carencia de relación entre los cuerpos muertos con una historia particular habilita el trato cosificante y objetivante” (77).

³⁷ In addition to the use of NN to refer to the corpse, Chávez-Rivera (2012) notes other actions in the novel that are clear predecessors of disappearance under the dictatorship, including the clandestine nature of the attempts to hide or bury the body and the division of labor between individuals so that each person involved had plausible deniability and limited knowledge of the whole picture of disappearance.

officials like Koenig, so that it may stay safe in their hands and out of the grasp of the unseen forces that “Lo harían desaparecer en nuestras propias narices” (Martínez 1995: 40). The only thing worse than Evita’s body continuing to persist after death is for it to be taken up as a weapon of the opposition. As such, Koenig must call on forces beyond his own in seeking to hide it, performing an esoteric ritual over a map of Buenos Aires using cryptic symbols to help determine where to bury the body and its copies. When his team goes to hide the corpse, a layering of strange coincidences, conspiracies, and fate seems to intervene, secret symbols marking the dark side of Argentine history.³⁸ First, a mysterious fire—which Koenig can find no record of in newspapers the next day—prevents him from accessing his chosen hiding place. He is unable to find a suitable replacement, even after consulting Evita’s Zodiac sign, looking for signs from stars in the night sky, and consulting an acquaintance who “Era un maestro en logias, en conspiraciones. Llevaba en un cuaderno el inventario de todas las sociedades secretas” (Martínez 1995: 215). Destiny is not on Koenig’s side, and the space of the city rises up to thwart him at every turn, seeming to condemn the act of disappearance that he is undertaking and turn the sinister against him. As Chávez-Rivera (2012) observes, for Koenig “La ciudad se convierte en un gran cementerio que puede ocultar el cadáver del contrincante político en cualquier resquicio. . . . La muerte se cierne sobre la vida y continuamente la contamina” (13).

This mobilization of the sinister mood against the military officials via a cursed reappearance will be discussed in the following section. However, first I will briefly skip ahead in the narrative to address the success—and failures—that follow the military government when

³⁸ In recounting these aspects of the story, Martínez directs a narrative aside toward the reader, noting, “Siempre me ha sorprendido la afición de los militares argentinos por las sectas, los criptogramas y las ciencias ocultas” (1995: 180). The discussion about these subjects in chapter one of this dissertation is relevant here.

Evita's corpse is finally buried in Milan and out of their hands. After dedicating nearly 400 pages to the cadaver's overwhelming materiality, the novel treats us to a description of what is left behind for the military government in the body's absence: "El polvillo bermejo de los ladrillos invadió el despacho del nuevo jefe y tardó días en asentarse. La lenta lluvia de polvo, tenue y acre, les recordó que Ella se había marchado al fin, y que tal vez fuera para siempre" (Martínez 1995: 400). The spectral trace that is left behind serves as an ephemeral reminder, outlining the shape of the empty space where the corpse once was, but now is only an absence. Similarly, Martínez's discussion in the novel of his friendship with Rodolfo Walsh and the author's short story "Esa mujer" emphasizes this absence that is, nevertheless, constantly outlined to the point of taking on a sort of spectral shape in the air. Martínez reflects upon how Walsh's short story about the corpse never refers to Evita directly. Instead, "Se la merodea, se la alude, se la invoca y sin embargo nadie la pronuncia. La palabra no dicha era en ese momento la descripción perfecta del cuerpo que había desaparecido" (Martínez 1995: 363).

In "la palabra no dicha," we have an articulation of the sinister, something that is constantly alluded to, felt, but impossible to identify directly out of fear and danger, and yet that absent word becomes paramount, a weight that threatens to overwhelm in its spectral materiality. It can neither be pinned down nor proven, never directly observed; instead we must "look otherwise," as Bishop (2020) advocates, in order to ascertain its shape. Those who are not privy to the final location of Evita's body—including Koenig, who buries a copy and, when he goes to ascertain its validity, cannot relocate it, finding all traces have been washed away—are left only with speculation and uncertainty: in short, with the sinister and with literature.

Necrophilic Narrations

Like *Cola de lagartija*, discussed in chapter one of this dissertation, *Santa Evita* is a metafictional novel that inserts its author as both narrator and character reflecting on their own process of writing. As I have alluded to in early moments of this chapter, it is also a novel that is concerned with how to represent the unrepresentable and what kind of role can be played by narrative under a sinister national atmosphere that seems to defy legibility. In particular, Martínez is unsure how to depict the strange tale of Evita's corpse, alongside its heavy resonances with the many other corpses haunting the Argentine national imaginary in the postdictatorship period. Similar to Valenzuela's tactics in the earlier novel, in this section I argue that Martínez's use of postmodern metafictional strategies allow him to embrace rumor, doubt, and contradiction, focusing not on nailing down what Evita's corpse was via representation, but rather highlighting how its tensions both speak to and resist the sinister nature of Argentine state power during this time period.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the parallels that Martínez makes between the work of the embalmer and that of the biographer. This passage explicitly poses the act of narrativization as one of control and possession. Similarly, throughout the novel Martínez as narrator struggles with how to represent the corpse without imitating the violent objectification of figures such as Ara and Koenig. In fact, he admits, his subject is, in many ways, inaccessible to him, as "En esta novela poblada por personajes reales, los únicos a los que no conocí fueron Evita y el Coronel" (Martínez 1995: 66). Several scholars compare the biographical efforts of the narrator-character Martínez with the other male characters' obsessions in possessing Evita to dictatorial attempts to control narratives around memory and history during this time period. Cortés (2008), for instance, discusses the parallels between authoritarian violence, literary authority, and authorial

violence in the text, proposing that ultimately the novel “formula una indagación en torno al valor ético de su escritura pues evidencia un reconocimiento por parte de la figura autorial de su propia violencia y complicidad con el mito de Eva Perón” (330). The danger that this investigation might turn into an obsession similar to Koenig’s is very real, with Martínez warned by a friend in one instance that his interest in dead women and attempting to resurrect the past is nearly necrophilic.³⁹

Nevertheless, Martínez feels insistently compelled to tell the story of the corpse, one which, he recounts, was bequeathed to him by unnamed military officials who called his apartment late at night shortly after the end of the dictatorship. It is the *how* of the telling which is the challenge: after listening to their story, Martínez is full of resentment toward their narrative authority, reflecting, “No quería repetir la historia que me habían contado. Yo no era uno de ellos” (1995: 473). Martínez, then, struggles with how to describe the violence done to Evita’s body without merely reproducing it, how to narrate without simply falling back on his own authority, how to discuss the fetish without further fetishizing it.

The novel’s answer lies in its focus on rumor, conflicting narratives, and, of course, the sinister mood. Martínez, after a dream of Evita as a butterfly with one wing flapping forward and the other backward, keeping her in a contradictory and tense stasis, decides, “No iba a contar a Evita como maleficio ni como mito. Iba a contarla tal como la había soñado: como una mariposa” (1995: 92). The ambivalent depictions of the corpse—abject and beautiful, monster and saint, many things at once—are therefore a way of keeping these contradictions present without resolving them. Similarly, as Cortés (2008) argues, the novel incorporates rumor and

³⁹ Cortés (2008) observes, “La fetichización del cadáver de Eva Perón por parte de la figura autorial hace patente una conexión morbosa entre la necrofilia y la escritura, la cual se produce en función la violencia desplegada sobre el cuerpo textual” (329-330).

conflicting narratives, rather than what is commonly accepted as historical fact, in order to resist the authoritarian impulse to control narratives about the past, and choosing instead to democratize memory. Davies (2000) reads the novel, which repeatedly prioritizes untrustworthy historical sources, rumors, and speculation, as emphasizing “the inaccessibility of the past” (416) and the postmodern acknowledgment that we have access “not to an unmediated reality but to other artistic representations of it” (422). In fact, some of these artistic representations in turn come to define what we perceive of as reality: in an interview about the novel, Martínez noted that several elements appearing in *Santa Evita* which were entirely fictional later ended up uncritically cited in historical or journalistic sources because their authors assumed that they were true facts based in interviews he had conducted, and that after the publication of the novel several sources came to Martínez affirming the truth of elements—such as the wax copies of the body—which he had invented (Neyret 2002).

Rather than attempt to pin down the “true” Evita, the “real” version of her biography, the history of her errant corpse, or other historical grand narratives, in this novel Martínez therefore chooses to instead construct the national past from the margins, as Zuffi (1999) observes. Argentine national identity, as represented by Evita’s corpse, is shown to be not unified under the patriarchal military government’s control, but “un lugar de disputa y contradicción asentado sobre el mito y la mentira” (López Badano 2010: 131). Further, Evita’s body becomes, in Bishop (2020)’s terms, a “remaindered embodiment,” or “a dynamic and ethically charged metonym for what has been absented or left out of Argentine history, most pointedly the dictatorship’s disappeared” (36). Resisting all attempts to narrativize her via representation and resolve her contradictions, Evita’s cadaver instead becomes a threatening excess that promises to bring to the fore historical narratives and memories that have been otherwise repressed. Instead, as I will

detail in the following section, the novel features the sinister mood as a way to thematize the corpse's overwhelming, threatening power, which is turned against the military officials that wished to possess her.

Cursed Reappearance as Resistance

As I have indicated elsewhere, the military government's burial and disappearance of Evita's corpse is ultimately cast as being unsuccessful in *Santa Evita*. This is because—as was the case with the cadaver's stubborn materiality that refused to be contained before its burial in Milan—Evita is insistent in her reappearance, in turning the sinister threat of her monstrous corpse back against those officials that seek to minimize her. Even as Walsh's story never mentions her by name, it is presented in the novel as inaugurating a veritable explosion of stories and rumors about the corpse in literature and the popular press. Martínez reflects, “A fines de los años sesenta, el misterio del cuerpo perdido era una idea fija en la Argentina. Mientras no apareciera, toda especulación parecía legítima” (1995: 364). From this perspective, the space left behind when the military government finally laid the cadaver to rest in 1955 actually made room for a proliferation of possibilities, reflected by the many intersecting narratives of the novel. As Dujovne Ortiz (1995) observes, “No habían comprendido que cada palabra, cada nombre, cada edificio ausente se transformaba en una presencia terrible (en el sentido en que la presencia de Dios puede ser terrible)” (308). Similarly, Bishop (2020) has argued that absence takes on a weight and a form here, as “Martínez uses Evita's unburied body as a narrative mode of disappearance such that what cannot be represented—that absent signifier—takes up form in the novel and helps to shape it” (190). If Evita was nowhere, she could be anywhere and everywhere, haunting Argentine military officials and elites at every turn.

Evita's unceasing (re)appearance in literature and the press at this time meant that, even as her corpse's location was unknown and the material evidence of her existence was hidden, her image and representation—encompassing both her life and death—was relentlessly present.⁴⁰ In the words of Gerald Martin (2012) “Evita is the first of 30,000 to be disappeared. She returns constantly, hallucinatorily, a ghost, a witch, the incarnation of the country's longings and nightmares, to haunt the very soldiers and politicians who wish to be rid of her” (470). The novel contributes to this simultaneously spectral and yet material presence through its own proliferations, allowing the different configurations and copies of Evita to abound. Each time Martínez's novel and other works of media conjure the abject body, they therefore can be seen to reappear the cadaver's visceral yet ephemeral materiality in death,⁴¹ to the point of making the narrator himself question, “¿Cómo has podido, Evita, morir tanto?” (Martínez 1995: 364).⁴² As

⁴⁰ As Rosano (2013) argues, Evita's death and the travels of the corpse became key reinforcements of her image in the social imaginary. She posits that this emphasis on the cadaver in such narratives acts as a “repetición fantasmática del trabajo de duelo aún pendiente en la sociedad argentina después de la dictadura” (Rosano 2013: 55). Plotnik (2004) also observes that Evita is killed and reborn, her body disappeared and reappeared, incessantly due to the many literary revisitations of this subject.

⁴¹ In his review of the novel, Martin (2012) points to this contradictory materiality: “*Santa Evita* . . . is so elemental, so material, so physical, yet so mysterious, so ghostly and so hallucinatory that the reader could never go deep enough, could never penetrate to its core” (471). Similarly, Cerpa (2015) notes that Evita becomes a ghost that haunts the Argentine literary imaginary but, despite the immaterial nature of both the specter and the imaginary, the narrative repeatedly relies on the corpse in order to create an image of the haunting.

⁴² Evita's many deaths and resurrections are explicitly tied to her saintliness elsewhere in the novel:

Evita había pasado por varias muertes en los últimos dieciseis meses, y a todas esas muertes había sobrevivido: al embalsamamiento, a los secuestros, al cine donde había sido una muñeca, al amor y a las injurias del Coronel, a los insensatos delirios de Arancibia en el altillo de Saavedra. Pensó que Ella moría casi a diario, como Cristo en el sacrificio de las misas. (Martínez 1995: 402)

Related to the multiplicity of versions of Evita that appear and reappear in the novel, scholars like Lavery (2007) and Romo (2017) have discussed how the corpse loses stable meaning as a referent throughout, calling into question the authenticity and uniqueness of the “original.” The

such, in a Gothic gesture, what the military government has attempted to repress returns in the cultural imaginary, turning the power of the abject dead—the sinister—back against the repressor.

Santa Evita thereby further configures the monstrous body as capable of turning the sinister, often in the form of a curse, against those around it. The corpse particularly seems to act out when being moved, as Martínez claims in the novel that the soldiers or civil guards accompanying the corpse allegedly died in freakish accidents in two separate instances. By way of explanation, he affirms that “Las almas tienen su propia fuerza de gravedad. . . . Cuando alguien rompe los cristales de su lentitud, se desorientan, y desarrollan una voluntad de maleficio que no pueden controlar” (1995: 72). This, perhaps, speaks to Blanchot (1982)’s assertion that “It seems inappropriate to transport the [dead] body from one place to another. The deceased cleaves jealously to his place, joining it profoundly” (256). The curse, then, is how the dead express their agency, registering their displeasures and attachments and making their desires known.

Moori Koenig and his subordinates who are tasked with disappearing the body all suffer terribly from the association. The Colonel, who initially positions himself in contradiction to the corpse, insistent on ritual and order in opposition to errancy and chaos, a dominating, ordering, authoritarian force, ultimately falls under its spell, becoming obsessed, paranoid, and irrational and losing all the prestige and power he had gained within military circles. Formerly a master of conspiracy due his position in the secret service and his diligent record-keeping, Evita’s seeming

proliferation of Evitas further transforms the corpse into a symbol of excess “que aunque vaciado ha sido rellenado de múltiples sentidos” (Ortega Caicedo 2005: 177).

proliferation overwhelms his ability to manage reality, and he develops the tormenting “sensación de que la realidad se iba y él no podía seguirla” (Martínez 1995: 355).

Koenig is the character who is most plagued by the sinister throughout the novel, perhaps because his role as spy makes him most susceptible to paranoia and least tolerant of uncertainty. First, he is deeply concerned by the wax copies of the body, which, foretelling the switcheroo that would result in his burying a copy instead of the real corpse, threaten to dupe him and resist his control from the very beginning. Later, after he has already lost the corpse, he becomes increasingly haunted by proliferations of Evita’s image, including when he encounters a gathering where photos of her on altars and balconies “Todas esgrimían una sonrisa que se esforzaba por ser benévola pero que botaba de costado, artera, amenazante” (Martínez 1995: 459). Evita’s apocryphal promise—“Volveré y seré millones”—here becomes a sinister threat to appear again and again in one million different ways, tormenting those who had a hand in her corpse’s disappearance.

As Koenig attempts to hide Evita, he also becomes the target of a shadowy organization called the Comando de la Venganza, which seems to pursue him at every turn. Just as he is preparing to conduct the operation in which he plans to bury her, the Comando’s operatives send him a photo of the corpse along with an order: “Déjenla donde está. Déjenla en paz” (Martínez 1995: 188). The photo is particularly significant here, not only because it indicates that the Comando has had unforeseen access to the corpse—thus demonstrating that they operate right under the Colonel’s nose—but also because the image operates as evidence, proof of the existence of the one who is about to be disappeared. Similar to the importance placed upon images of Evita in the novel, in the absence of the bodies of the desaparecidos, family members would rely on the images of their loved ones as indices of those that had been taken from them.

Moreover, although the Comando de la Venganza's only demand is that Evita be left in peace, their ability to locate the body wherever it is hidden seems to lend them untold powers. As they follow the corpse around Buenos Aires, leaving candles and flowers wherever it rests, they also call in anonymous threats to Koenig's house and finally set off a bomb that injures his daughter. The organization becomes an insistent, shadowy threat that feeds Koenig's paranoia and wears away at the government's apparent invulnerability, the mirror image of the sinister threat of paramilitary groups such as the Triple A as discussed in chapter one of this dissertation.

The seemingly supernatural connection between the mysterious guerrilla group and the corpse therefore turns Koenig and the authoritarian states' powers of observation, of spying and conspiring behind the scenes, back against them, becoming part of Evita's curse. The "enemy" appears all-knowing and all-powerful in Koenig's mind: "Ahora sabía que el enemigo no lo perseguía. Era peor que eso. El enemigo adivinaba cuál iba a ser su próximo destino, y se le adelantaba" (Martínez 1995: 220). Whereas the state mobilizes the sinister against the marginalized via its power over death and Evita's dead body, the Comando de la Venganza turns this shadowy power back upon the military by playing at its own game of espionage. As Gordon (2008) notes in the case of later state-sponsored disappearances, the armed forces made their enemies into ghosts but, as a result, descended into paranoia and began to see ghosts everywhere. With Koenig no longer in control over the body or privy to information on its whereabouts, Evita's absence similarly becomes like an infinite, haunting presence, in which he "Suponía que la Difunta estaba aún dando vueltas por el mundo, en manso de algún poder oculto" (Martínez 1995: 456). Unable to disappear death, he becomes like the living dead, as his friend reports to Martínez: "'Ya nadie pensaba en él como un ser vivo', me dijo Cifuentes. 'Moori, al final, dejó de ser el Coronel: era su enfermedad, sus vicios, sus tormentos'" (Martínez 1995: 457). In short,

cursed for his treatment of Evita's body, he himself becomes the abject monster, the Other that he could not repress.

In one of the final violent registers of the novel, Galarza, Koenig's subordinate, gets into an accident when attempting to disappear the body and is disfigured by "treinta y tres puntos en la cara. Un punto por cada año de vida de Evita: era la maldición, clavada" (Martínez 1995: 355). While he and two of his men are injured, the corpse "para variar, estaba ilesa: sin una llaga, impasible entre los velos almidonados de la mortaja" (Martínez 1995: 395). In all these instances, the corpse's curse makes the bodies of her repressors monstrous, while she is seemingly supernaturally protected and incorruptible. The monstrous bodies and actions of the military agents are made to reflect the inner monstrosity of their patriarchal violence, literalizing their complicity in state's utilization of the sinister, while she becomes ever-more-saintly.

After this last incident, the military seems to take the curse to heart, going so far as to conduct rituals meant to help them evade the corpse's power. For example,

Para esquivar las tentaciones de la imaginación, el nuevo jefe nunca se quedaba a solas con el cadáver. . . . Metódico, prolijo, Corominas perfumaba el despacho con lavanda de Atkinsons para anular el tenaz perfume del cuerpo escondido, y conjuraba la claridad azul que parecía fluir del ataúd con un reflector de quinientos vatios. (Martínez 1995: 395)

By diminishing the material manifestations of the corpse's power—the bewitching beauty of its proximity, its strange smell, its supernatural glow—the new official in charge of the operation attempts to reduce its wretched power. Still, the curse nearly grasps hold of Galarza when he accompanies it to be buried in Milan: he feels the body calling him from the cargo hold of the ship transporting them and cries genuinely when it is finally buried. Although the military

government has finally succeeded in putting Evita below ground and even exiling her from the country, her corpse's affective impact nevertheless continues to haunt them.

The curse is so compelling that it threatens to reach across space and time to even overtake Martínez himself. In the novel, Koenig's wife (whom the narrator Martínez reports interviewing as he conducts research for the novel many years after Evita is buried) even warns him, "La culpa la tuvo Evita. . . . Toda la gente que anduvo con el cadáver acabó mal. . . . Si va a contar esa historia, debería tener cuidado" (Martínez 1995: 70). Another informant similarly cautions Martínez, "*Si usted va a contar la historia, tenga cuidado. Cuando empiece a contarla, no va a tener salvación,*" and signs the information he passes on to the author-narrator with the name of the archaeologist who dug up King Tut, evoking the curse of another well-known corpse (1995: 91, emphasis original).⁴³ Martínez is initially stubbornly insistent that he will remain unaffected by the corpse's power, contending, "No iba a dejar que las supersticiones me arredraran. No iba a contar a Evita como maleficio ni como mito" (1995: 92). However, here Evita flexes her power yet again; regardless of Martínez's narrative desires or ideas about how to represent the dead, he finds, as outlined above, that he struggles to pin down his subject. He recalls, "En una larga y descartada versión de esta misma novela conté la historia de los hombres que habían condenado a Evita a una errancia sin término. Escribí algunas escenas aterradoras, de las que no sabía salir" (1995: 73). Using this approach, the story overwhelms and terrifies him.

⁴³ The legend of this curse arises from the fact that several people associated with the archaeological team that opened the tomb of the Egyptian Pharaoh Tutankhamen unexpectedly died or experienced bad luck over the subsequent years, events that were presented as being a punishment for disturbing the dead. Other references to Egyptian mummies and beliefs in the afterlife appear elsewhere in the novel, such as when "El Loco" Arancibia is intensely studying a section of the Book of the Dead while engaging in necrophilia with the corpse. According to the novel, the section of the book that he is reading recounts a practice in which Egyptian embalmers had sex with the bodies of young women on the off chance that they were still alive and the act would wake them up.

As Schlickers (2005) points out, “El narrador se pierde varias veces en el mar de documentos acumulados” (121). I assert that this demonstrates how, in the absence of the body, Martínez initially attempts to accumulate other types of evidence, but finds that the text is unable to fill in the epistemological gap created by disappearance. Instead, he, too, feels cursed while working on the novel, experiencing at times a strange vertigo that won’t cease until he stops writing and at other moments weather that prevents him from traveling and makes him return to writing again. At one point, his family is unable to find his phone number to inform him that his mother has died: “‘Fue como si estuvieras dentro del cerco de un maleficio,’” his brother says to him when they finally manage to contact him (1995: 90).

Martínez’s self-described struggles in researching and writing the novel demonstrate how he himself is plagued by the sinister power of the corpse’s curse. However, in order to determine the origin of the sinister at this moment and identify why it appears that Evita has cursed him, one must recall the author’s moment of enunciation. Late in the novel, as I have alluded to above, he recalls the event that spurs him to start writing the narrative: a late-night phone call in 1989 from a group of military men that fills him with fear. He recalls, “Hacia sólo seis años que los militares se habían retirado del poder. . . . Tenían la costumbre de llamar por teléfono en medio de la noche para asegurarse de que las víctimas estaban en sus casas” (Martínez 1995: 468). As he prepares to meet the group, who has offered to tell him the story of what happened to Evita’s body, he admits, “Me sentí desnudo, vulnerable, como la noche antes de mi exilio. Tuve miedo, pero la humillación del miedo me liberó. Pensé que si tenía miedo estaba aceptando que los verdugos eran invencibles. No lo eran, me dije” (Martínez 1995: 469). This anecdote reminds us that Martínez is writing the novel in an explicitly post-dictatorial moment, in which he had spent years in exile away from Argentina as a result of censorship and violent threats against

himself and his family from right-wing military actors. Even as Evita's corpse differs from those of the desaparecidos in many ways, his search for the story of the body often feels like an attempt to recuperate all the lost bodies, to shine a light into all the dark spaces of Argentina's past and overcome the sinister. His fear at this moment speaks to the fact that "Me pareció que el pasado en persona venía a buscarme, arbitrario, implacable" (Martínez 1995: 470). The reappearance of the story of this corpse in his life is a Gothic return of the repressed, a demand that he recount, mourn, and struggle with the violence and death that have haunted him, and Argentina, throughout the prior decades.

As such, the sinister curse following Martínez in his attempts to research and write the novel does not appear to originate with Evita herself, but with the aftermath of dictatorship and disappearance that remains unmourned and unremembered. The writing of the novel, which necessitates experiencing and understanding the sinister, becomes, for him, a way to resist the military's necropower. Despite his terror, Martínez deliberately rejects the military men's attempts to take control of the narrative of Evita's body. Instead of allowing the meanings behind Evita's corpse to become pinned down via the act of representation, the novel therefore proliferates a series of contradictory materialities and the affects they inspire, allowing Evita to reappear again and again: as abject, as object, as monster, as saint, as absence, as spectral curse, as visceral presence. As Sàez Tajafuerce (2019) argues, the life and death of Evita "desata esa pasión violenta que excede e interrumpe el orden imaginario y el orden simbólico, el orden discursivo, por tanto, y deja a la vista lo real del cuerpo que no es de orden discursivo sino radicalmente material" (11). Martínez's focus on "sus márgenes, su oscuridad, lo que había en Evita de indecible" (1995: 74)—the word unsaid, the space left behind where there was once the overwhelming materiality of the body—is what allows him to resist and draw attention to the

operation of the sinister even as he is plagued by it. Rather than allowing the military's version of events to become authoritative, the novel rejects the former officials' attempts at narrative (and bodily) control by allowing for the monstrous, abject corpse's fundamental instability to run rampant. In its insistent, cursed reappearance, Evita's dangerous body therefore turns the sinister against those who would purport to operate it, becoming a threat against the existing social order that cannot be contained,

Conclusion

Santa Evita's contradictory depictions of Evita's corpse—beautiful and repulsive, saintly and monstrous, sublime and abject—speak to the many tensions inherent in Eva Perón's legacy seventy years after her death. However, more than just addressing the complicated truth about her life and memory, the novel's insistence upon the unresolvability of these contradictions allows for an exploration of the limits of representation and the need to find new ways of narrating the past, particularly stories about violence, disappearance, and death. The portrayal of Evita's cadaver as a “dangerous body” echoes the dictatorship's treatment of its perceived enemies as both sub-human—bodies to be controlled via disappearance in order to maintain the authoritarian state's power over life and death—and an impossibly powerful existential threat to the nation. The novel's treatment of the corpse, and the way it was dehumanized, made precarious, disappeared, and yet attributed a symbolic power so strong that it exceeded the material, helps us to think through both the victimization and the ongoing strength of the desaparecidos as symbols to rally around in the struggle for human rights. Moreover, Martínez's use of metafictional strategies, including the potential that rumor, doubt, uncertainty, and the marginal have for conveying truths about the past, demonstrate that sitting with contradictions

and the limits of representation are crucial for the post-dictatorial moment, in which nations and writers struggle to move beyond the repressive narratives of authoritarianism. Ultimately, by turning the sinister mood against the military authorities and insistently reappearing that which they have sought to repress, the novel shows that the transgressive power of “dangerous bodies” like that of Evita and the desaparecidos has the potential to overcome the state’s necropower and its own instrumentalization of the sinister mood.

Conclusion

The poster for the 2019 Guatemalan film *La Llorona*, written and directed by Jayro Bustamante, features an indigenous Ixil Maya woman, wearing a traditional *tzute*. Blue, semi-sheer, embroidered fabric veils her face, obscuring her features and giving her a ghostly silhouette. The English tagline below the image threateningly asserts, “The past will haunt you.”

So much of history, the poster reminds me, is a horror story.

The state-sponsored violence that ran rampant throughout twentieth-century Argentina and Brazil and which has been the focus of this dissertation was, unfortunately, not confined to these two countries, nor even the Southern Cone. Chile; Uruguay; Colombia; Guatemala; the Dominican Republic; and Mexico, among many other Latin American nations, all suffered extreme political violence, with deaths and disappearances numbering in the hundreds of thousands across the continent. *La Llorona* addresses the contemporary legacy of 36 years of civil war in Guatemala, which saw the systemic massacre of approximately 200,000 people, mostly indigenous peasants, at the hands of right-wing government forces. In the film, an iteration of the folk horror figure of *la Llorona* haunts the military general who massacred her family in the 1980s, holding one of the perpetrators of crimes against humanity in Guatemala to supernatural justice after the legal system has failed. The first Guatemalan movie nominated for a Golden Globe in the Best in Foreign Language category, *La Llorona* is yet another example of the way that horror, haunting, and mood has been utilized to address the narratively challenging subject of state terror, to much critical interest.

Over the past decade, Latin American horror literature and film like *La Llorona* has flourished. Often traditionally viewed as a marginal, non-literary genre, authors such as Mariana Enríquez and Samantha Schweblin have received worldwide acclaim for stories using horror and

the Gothic to comment on harsh and strange Latin American realities, including explicitly political topics such as femicides; the everyday horrors of neoliberalism and late capitalism; and the aftermaths of the twentieth-century dictatorships, whose impacts continue to resonate well into the twenty-first century. This recent explosion of horror literature and film in the region, and its well-deserved accolades, means that the time is ripe for a critical reevaluation of the role of the horror genre in Latin American culture. This dissertation posits that these more recent texts are but the latest in a much longer legacy, in which cultural works have experimented with horror as a method of making seemingly unrepresentable violence more legible for readers and viewers via the creative use of familiar convention, as well as mood and affect.

In organizing this dissertation around conventions from the horror genre—the esoteric and secret societies; the haunted house; and the corpse—I have sought to focus our attention on the ways that authors, filmmakers, and artists have long used horror with the purpose of commenting on very real terror at the hands of the necropower of authoritarian states. The ongoing relevance of this subject, and related critical approaches such as spectrality and the Gothic that this dissertation has brought to bear on its analyses of horror convention, promise to continue to bear fruit for studies of how political violence makes its way into the cultural imaginary—and, in turn, how that imaginary influences our perspectives on history and the past.

I have proposed that these horror conventions, far from being mere plot devices or allegories, work to make legible an experience of political violence that is intangible and inexplicable by gesturing toward a pervasive and threatening atmosphere, in which everyday people are trapped in an unknown agency, paralyzed with terror: the sinister. Each of the works that I have examined in this project draw our attention to the sinister as a quintessential facet of the Argentine and Brazilian dictatorships, embodying the sinister mood, inspiring its affect in the

reader or viewer, and yet also experimenting with how to make this experience with the unrepresentable legible and to resist its power. The texts that I have examined span the decades from 1970 to 2006, marking several distinct moments in the cultural imaginary of dictatorship, from an early awareness of atrocities to the immediate, reeling aftermath of the transition to democracy, to the first moments of justice and accountability for the perpetrators. A focus on the sinister allows us to connect these disparate moments in time, examining how the affective experience and understanding of this mood changes based on both the point of enunciation of the text and its point of reception. Further, the sinister provides a way to contend with the ethical dilemmas of how to portray and address situations of extreme violence, with the aim of—in addition to not reproducing it further—staging cultural interventions into the political realities that have resulted in precarity and mass death for too many across Latin America and the globe.

It is my hope that this dissertation will contribute to a critical understanding of how cultural works have employed the sinister mood and horror not only in Argentina and Brazil, but also the many other countries of Latin America which saw dictatorship and political violence throughout the late twentieth century, and open the door for future work on the horror genre, mood, and state terror. Sadly, in 2023, although justice and accountability processes have made progress throughout the region, these subjects are not a thing of the past, particularly in places like Mexico, Colombia, and Brazil where violence from drug cartels, the military, the police, and rejuvenated authoritarian movements continue to spread terror. As I conclude this project in July 2023, scrolling through my Twitter feed reveals the recovery of dozens of bodies in a single day, victims of cartel violence, in Mexico by a collective of women looking for their relatives; increasing kidnappings in Colombia amid ongoing peace negotiations with insurgent groups; concerns about corruption in Guatemala, where a court attempted to unconstitutionally bar the

Semilla political party from participating in a presidential runoff election; and continued fallout from the discovery in Brazil of evidence that officials in former president Jair Bolsonaro's administration plotted a coup to prevent the ascension of Lula da Silva to the presidency. Much like the authors and artists that I have featured throughout his project, often while writing this dissertation I have myself questioned the ability of literature and culture to make change when faced with such extreme violence, authoritarianism, and exploitation. Nevertheless, we keep producing culture, trying to make sense of our worlds and affect change in the only ways we know. The sinister mood, often expressed through the aesthetics of the horror genre, helps us to understand and connect these seemingly disparate experiences, proposing a shared affective understanding of pain and precarity that has the potential to break us out of our isolation and paralysis in order to form new collectivities for a better world.

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