

The Memoryscape in Buenos Aires

Representation, Memory, and Pedagogy

DANIEL FRIEDRICH
Teachers College, Columbia University

Buenos Aires's *Memoryscape*

THE CITY OF BUENOS AIRES, like any other city, has always been a participatory agent in the construction of collective memories and counter-memories. The grid of the city, the names of the streets, its monuments, the battles for spaces that graffiti and their erasures place in evidence, the ways in which the city's inhabitants live and circulate, the lines that cross the urban space, and the (hi)stories that shape the city are part of Buenos Aires's *Memoryscape*. This is a perspectival landscape of "fluid, irregular shapes" that does not look the same from every angle, and that is inflected by the "historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors" (Appadurai, 1990, p. 7).¹ All these spaces and happenings point to the ways in which the city partakes in the production and the disruption of particular collective memories of *Porteños*.

Since the mid-1990s there have been enormous efforts by different NGOs linked to Human Rights to open up memorial spaces linked to the last dictatorship (1976–1983) throughout the city. From the time of the 1976 coup, signs of resistance to the dictatorship and the national narrative being imposed onto the citizenry clandestinely appeared on the streets. The democratic opening in 1983 multiplied these occurrences, especially as the horrors of the dictatorship became known to all Argentines through the broadcasting of the trials of high-ranking generals in 1985. However, until the late 1990s the memorial spaces recognized by the State were extremely limited. The twentieth anniversary of the coup marked the beginning of a new era, one which renovated the energies put into the development of joint projects between the State and the NGOs to create spaces where individuals could share stories, remember, and learn.

The possibility for memorial spaces linked to social-historical traumas does not respond only to conditions within the Argentine context. As evidenced in the experiences taking place throughout the world, from Cambodia to Chile, from the United States to Spain, the experience of the Shoah and the efforts to memorialize it have left an indelible mark in the debates about the recent past. As Huyssen explains about the Argentine context: "Holocaust discourse functions like an international prism that helps focus the local discourse about the *desaparecidos* in

both its legal and its commemorative aspects” (2003, p. 98). Comparisons, extracted lessons, and differentiations from and within the Holocaust discourse are very much present in most reflections about memorial spaces in Argentina. As was the case with the Shoah, the question about the very possibility of re-presenting horror is central to the debates.

A first distinction could be made between the spaces that were specifically created as memorials, in more or less arbitrary locations, and those spaces that had particular functions during the military regime and that have been re-appropriated by the NGOs in order to give them a new meaning. The reason why this distinction is important is that the ideas behind why it is “worth” visiting each are different and entail different pedagogical assumptions, something that will become central in my following analysis.

The article proceeds as follows: In the first section, the Museo de la Memoria² [Museum of Memory] is presented as a site that resulted from multiple struggles for meaning and pedagogy, as a former concentration camp is turned into a living lesson. The limits of representation are explored through the tensions embedded in this project. The second section investigates the reasoning behind the Parque de la Memoria [Memory Park] as a space that attempts to position itself against unifying narratives. This investigation leads to an interrogation about the possibility of a pedagogy that is not based on aesthetic or political representation. The piece concludes by opening up the field to the potential and the limits of what is termed a “pedagogy of the encounter.”

Museo de la Memoria

There is no document of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism.

—Walter Benjamin

The Museo de la Memoria is arguably the most important project for the establishment of a memorial space in contemporary Argentina. It is located inside the former Navy’s School of Mechanical Engineering (ESMA), a thirty-six-acre estate in one of the city’s wealthiest neighborhoods, on one of the most heavily transited avenues. During the dictatorship, the ESMA functioned simultaneously as a school, where teenagers and young adults from all over the country learned the trades of the navy in a well-reputed institution, and as the largest urban concentration camp in the nation, a place where approximately five thousand people were savagely tortured and murdered while only two hundred were eventually liberated.

The city of Buenos Aires bought the land in 1904 then ceded it to the Navy in 1924 under the condition that it be used only for educational purposes. If the Navy were ever to use the land for non-pedagogical purposes, the land and everything built on it would return to the city with no possibility of reimbursement (Brodsky, 2005, p. 47). Right after the dictatorship, during Raúl Alfonsín’s administration (1983–1989), the ESMA continued to function as a school, in a country where the armed forces still retained a significant amount of political weight. That would change during Carlos Menem’s administrations (1989–1999), characterized among other things by a philosophy of modernization that considered looking at the past to be an obstacle to peace and progress. During this period, the efforts to disassemble the army’s power were coupled with legal pardons to the dictators and their accomplices and the drastic reduction of the military’s size. All of this left the ESMA in a sort of limbo. By the end of the 1990s, a project to tear down

the whole estate and build condominiums and apartments was met with resistance. Protests by the Human Rights NGOs followed, responding to what was perceived as a clear effort to erase the past and force the closing of an open wound.

In 1998, after the courts decided against the demolition of the ESMA, the first project to turn it into a museum was presented in the city's legislature. In 2000, the city initiated a lawsuit to recover the land from the Navy, citing that the Navy had violated the terms of its contract with the city by using the site for reasons other than educational purposes. Meanwhile, the school was still functioning. Two years later, the city promulgated law 961 for the creation of the Institute "Espacio para la Memoria" [Space for Memory], whose offices would be located at the ESMA. Finally, during the commemoration of the 28th anniversary of the 1976 coup, in March 24th, 2004, President Néstor Kirchner (2003–2007) formalized the full transfer of the estate to the city of Buenos Aires. This act may have marked the ending of a long process of acquiring the estate, but it also signaled the beginning of the discussions about what to do with the ESMA.

According to Lila Pastoriza (2005), the Human Rights NGOs in charge of setting up the Institute were divided among two positions. Some wanted to use the whole estate as a museum, seeking to replicate every building as it was during the dictatorship, arguing that "where there was death, there must be pointing, remembrance, evidencing, knowledge about death, about who was murdered, why they died and who did the killing. One cannot pretend for there to be life now" (Pastoriza, 2005, p. 93, my translation). What matters the most here is that the whole ESMA should be turned into a space of memory and mourning embodied in a physical, detailed, mimetic reconstruction (Pastoriza, 2005, p. 94). Other groups, on the other hand, argued that the space ought to be used in a more "productive" way, by attaching only the building formerly used as a concentration camp "Casino de Oficiales" [Officers' Club] to the museum and the rest to other causes and functions, such as the National Memory Archive, social justice art galleries and workshops, or centers for dealing with the economic crisis. For these latter groups, mimetic reconstruction was not needed, and the "representation of the terror exercised [in the ESMA] should be shown through narratives, voices, models, panels and testimonies that set a certain distance and allow thinking and interrogating oneself" (Pastoriza, 2005, p. 94, my translation). This second proposal managed to impose itself and defined how the ESMA is being utilized nowadays.

Visiting the Specters of History

Between 2008 and 2009 I visited the ESMA three times. The Museo de la Memoria is semi-open to the public, since for each visit it is necessary to call ahead of time to make an appointment. The first time I went, I could not finish the visit as my presence in that place took a deep emotional toll. The other two visits, with a more conscious preparation on my part, lead to certain reflections and conversations with guides and other visitors. Each tour starts by having each member of the group introduce him/herself, and talk about the reason that lead them to visit the site. A telling fact here is that most people cite the need to face the past with a level of reality that cannot be achieved by books as the driving force. The differentiation between "degrees of reality" needs to be kept in mind as it plays a key role in the debates about representation.

After the introductions, the guide explains the logic behind the set-up of the space: The NGOs that currently run the Museum have decided to avoid any "representations." That is, the whole former concentration camp is basically empty, as the Navy left it when they vacated the

building. The only additions are signs with text and architectural diagrams that describe how the place used to look and how it functioned, mostly in the words of the survivors, quoted from their testimonies for the trials against the Junta in 1985. There are two reasons mentioned for not attempting to re-create the clandestine prison and torture chambers as they were. First, no representation of the horror would ever do justice to what happened in that place. Second, the narrative chosen to direct the tour is one of “resistance, and not of horror,” according to the guides. One of the central questions that needs to be addressed, then, if we are to understand the pedagogical underpinnings of the Museo de la Memoria is how is it possible for an “empty” space to be seen and experienced as “full,” that is, full of meaning? What is filling that space and how does it relate to the previous emptiness?

The intention to leave the ESMA “empty,” that is, to avoid any representation of horror, and the idea to present only what has been judicially proven are tightly intertwined. The first one responds to the contemporary question about the possibilities of (artistic) representation of deep trauma that can be traced to a tension expressed by Theodor Adorno (1983) in his now often-cited reflection, “Cultural criticism finds itself faced with the final stage of the dialectic of culture and barbarism. To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric. And this corrodes even the knowledge of why it has become impossible to write poetry today” (p. 34).

Adorno’s apparent paralysis, which led him to stop composing music, is telling of the complexity behind any attempt to produce anything as a way of “dealing” with horror. The impossibility of re-presenting trauma of this magnitude in any way speaks to the uniqueness of experience, and it attests to the need to keep that incommensurability always in mind. The Human Rights NGOs’ decision to avoid representations and focus on the void left by the disappearances of the people abducted by the State during the dictatorship is an attempt to address this tension. The idea behind this decision is that if the facts and the evidence are left to speak by themselves, no re-presentations are necessary, and the narrative presented will not respond to mere morbid curiosity. As it will become more evident as the analysis of the tour moves forward, these intentions, however, clash with the pedagogical underpinnings of a project such as the Museo de la Memoria.

The tour starts with a stroll through the exterior of some of the more emblematic buildings. As the group walks by the former school, the guide emphasizes the educational role of ESMA during the dictatorship, and the ways in which some students doubled as guards in the camp, prompting a reflection on the levels of responsibility by these young men. The doubles student/guards and school/camp are brought back several times throughout the tour. As we walked towards the “Casino de Oficiales”—the former concentration camp—we made a last stop, in which the guide held a conversation about the motives behind the dictatorship. The imposition of a neoliberal model, accomplished finally during Menem’s administration (1989–1999) was cited as the ultimate motive. As one gets physically closer to the “emptiness” of the former concentration camp, the reminders of the need to draw lessons from the past in order to be able to read the present become a main filling for that void.

Once inside the Casino, the mood changes. What had been a quite talkative tour turns more silent and “reflective.” The focus is put on an extremely detailed description of the functioning of the camp and the extermination machine it was a part of: spaces of detention, distribution of bodies, work done inside the prison (document falsification, printing of flyers, fixing of cars and other objects stolen from the abductees’ homes, etc.), mechanisms used to get rid of the bodies, and workings of the maternity area. The narratives resonate with the works by Bauman (2000) and Agamben (1998; 2000) by proving time and again that genocides such as the one that took

place during the dictatorship (or the Holocaust, in the case of the mentioned authors) would not have been thinkable outside the rational world of modern civilization.

As our guide had mentioned, the building is practically empty, populated only by carefully distributed signs with testimonies and diagrams. In each room, the tour guide starts by explaining what the role of that space had been and then lets the group roam around the room reading the signs. Afterwards, some time is given for questions. By the time the group arrives at the room where prisoners used to sleep (“Capucha,” or “Hood”), the first anecdote is told (one that curiously was told by all guides that were assigned to the tours I participated in). The story is about detainees that would share the last cigarette they had. Different guides told other stories as well, such as a joke contest between prisoners and guards, or hands being held between former strangers. All anecdotes clearly allude to a particular understanding of *resistance*.

While the group begins the last stage of the visit, after some two and a half hours, the guide initiates a conversation about the value of visits such as these. As s/he brings back the anecdotes, they are accompanied by the commitment that prisoners had made to each other: to bear witness to the horror by telling everyone what had really happened there. This message of resistance is turned into a civics lesson: If these people, after everything they went through, managed to resist—surviving or not—then we in the present have no excuse not to. We have to remember, and use that memory for political action. Resistance is always a possibility, as long as we feed our historical consciousness.

Representations and Their Pedagogical (Im)possibilities

The play between representation, unrepresentability and pedagogy permeates the Museo de la Memoria as a project and a site. Different notions of representation, memory and responsibility intersect, overlap, and disrupt each other, opening up spaces for analysis and debate. What is the role of a Museum of Memory? Are there limits to representation? Are there limits to non-representation? What are the pedagogical principles ordering such a space?

The role of the Museo de la Memoria seems to be clear: to pass on a certain knowledge of “what really happened” as evidenced by what is “really there” in order to learn the morals of that story, and follow through with George Santayana’s clichéd prophesy: “Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it” (Santayana, 1905, p. 284). If so, then the effort by NGOs to avoid representations encounters its limitations, at least if one recognizes that, actually, those morals are never inherently there. The idea that history implies in and of itself a particular (progressive) morality is part of the pedagogical common sense usually embodied in the notion of historical consciousness. Yet it is pedagogy, or its intentions to mobilize history to particular goals, such as the production of responsible citizens, that introduces that extra ingredient that is “the lessons (to be) learned” (Friedrich, 2010).

In the case of the ESMA, this tension between the acknowledgement of the limits of representation and the pedagogical aims of the Museum becomes quite clear when one juxtaposes the distribution of that “empty” space and the narratives of the tour guides. Through anecdotes, clarification of the lessons from the past, and explanations, the tour guides make the visit more “personal,” directing the emptiness of the space towards more “productive” ends. The narrative of resistance, explicitly brought up by the tour guides as the reason for not using representations in the Museum, is full of representations in itself. The responsibility of the tour guides seems to

be to fill that void, in order to a/void the risk of that emptiness being filled by other, less *committed* narratives.

Yet the very premise of that reasoning presents two problems that form a paradox. The premise is that the empty rooms of the ESMA are actually empty spaces in the sense of not representing anything. However, as Lila Pastoriza, member of the commission in charge of the Museum, and perhaps one of the most vocal Human Rights activists, notes by quoting Stephanie Schell-Faucon, “there is something involuntarily moralizing about these sites” (Pastoriza, 2005, p. 90). Thus, the ESMA is not, nor can it ever be, empty. Here, the echoes of Berger, Berger and Kellner’s (1974) “The Homeless Mind” resonate with my argument. The authors argue that the modernization process, with its destabilization of traditional theodicies and moral certainties, brought with it a sense of “homelessness” to the subject’s mind, in terms of the individual feeling at a loss in the world. This high price embedded in modernity, argue Berger et al., has been countered by demodernizing projects and movements, that struggle for a reversal of the modernizing trends that left the subject “alienated” and “beset with the threat of meaninglessness” by regaining the sense of “home” (1974, p. 195). What is perceived to be “inherently moralizing” about sites such as the ESMA might just as well be the homeless mind attempting to find a reassuring home, a “filling” to the “empty” space and story, morals or lessons that must be found in this inherently modern site. This movement of emptying and refilling of spaces and stories produces a space that is never empty to begin with. Thus, the ESMA (re)presents horror in ways that go beyond the inclusion of pictures or dioramas of torture scenes. It is not a matter of more or less “reality” than other ways of representation, but of the relationship that the camp has to modern mentalities. The Museo de la Memoria will always (re)present the possibilities embedded in modern politics. Horacio González (2005), in a book that compiles some of the debates around the ESMA, expresses it quite clearly:

In the attempt to break classic representation through a void considered as a scripture in absence, the very void cannot escape standing as an invitation to a kind of allegorical art or even to symbolisms tainted with a range of sentimentalizations, as just as they may be, that nevertheless would not differ from the emotions that the history of art demands in itself. Therefore, the hope of fusing architectonic language, scripture in the void and a critique of imagery, even showing a complete work, does not escape the representative unity between space, time and perception. That is, it does not escape the play of representation (p. 73, my translation).

The second problem, paradoxical to the first one, is that the existence of the ESMA, with or without the museum, is part of what has challenged the very notion of representation in the twentieth century. The classic notion of representation requires the idea of a presence as a remembrance of an original experience and a plenitude that promises reconciliation through representation; *there was and will be presence and therefore* it can be re-presented (García, 2008). The barbaric events that inaugurated the twentieth century, marking part of its identity with blood and open wounds, and that Benjamin (2007) mentioned in the epigraph above as the other face of civilization, irrevocably ruptured this regime of representation, changing the rules of the game. Modernity and progress were until the early twentieth century inherently intertwined and encompassed by Reason, in ways that tied the imaginable to the reasonable and thus representable. The abrupt entrance of the unimaginable and unrepresentable in the real forever disrupted

the regime of truth of representation. It is not relevant whether we decide to represent or not, as the very principles of representation have been broken.

Furthermore, we need concepts relevant to a regime of experience whose center is not plenitude anymore but subtraction, not presence but *absence* as a traumatic materiality of an immemorial wound, while torn consciousness of the rupture of any definitive promise: there was and will be absence, therefore... (García, 2008, p. 20, emphasis in the original, my translation).

If this is the case, then the problem of representation (aesthetic, political, pedagogical) needs to be re-thought and re-framed. The main issue at hand with the Museo de la Memoria is not whether there are representations or not, or even whether they are sufficient or appropriate for a space dedicated to socio-historical trauma. Rather, the question is about the limitations of classic notions of representation in a time where the foundations of this notion are challenged. In other words, the ESMA is inhabited by a multiplicity of representations, yet they are re-presentations of an absence—of frameworks, of meaning, of bodies³—and therefore, ill-suited to be thought of as re-presenting a concentration camp, horror or any other concept of presence. This has little to do with the decision to avoid pictorials, but with the historical conditions that made possible both what happened in the ESMA during the dictatorship, and the memory of what happened there.

In order to reflect and act upon the pedagogical (im)possibilities of the Museo de la Memoria, it is necessary to first disrupt the links between pedagogy and representation. The transmission of knowledge implied in pedagogy usually relates to knowledge seen as representation of a presence. For instance, when history is taught, the assumption is that those narratives re-present for the students events that at some point were present and that will be presented again every time they are re-told. Paraphrasing García, *there was and will be presence, therefore...*

The Museo de la Memoria, on the other hand, operates under the possibility of a different pedagogical principle. What is re-presented in this space is a fundamental absence (of meaning, of bodies, of understanding), one that challenges the very possibilities of representation both within and outside pedagogy. Thus, the museum's pedagogical interrogation cannot start by asking what knowledge is being passed on to visitors. This questioning may begin by wondering about the effects of this absence in visitors seeking presence, or in the potential for "learning" that can be found in the absence of appropriate frameworks of interpretation. It is precisely this absence that may open up the possibility to produce what Deleuze (1994) terms as *encounters*, maybe the only pedagogical space where difference is a real possibility. That is, paradoxically, a pedagogy outside the image of thought that:

[Does] not count upon thought to ensure the relative necessity of what it thinks. Rather, [it] count[s] upon the contingency of an encounter with that which forces thought to raise up and educate the absolute necessity of an act of thought or a passion to think. The conditions of a true critique and a true creation are the same: the destruction of an image of thought which presupposes itself and the genesis of the act of thinking in thought itself. Something in the world forces us to think. This something is an object not of recognition but of a fundamental encounter... That which can only be sensed... moves the soul, 'perplexes' it—in other words, forces it to pose a problem: as though the object of encounter, the sign, were the bearer of a problem—as though it were a problem. (Deleuze, 1994, pp.139–140)

Whether or not the Museum makes good use of those possibilities is a question of a different order. Yet the reflection on the opening up of spaces that could disrupt the dominant narratives about the last dictatorship, and about modernity and progress in general, by forcing encounters with that which is outside all frameworks of reference could be seen as the starting point for a different pedagogy.

Another sphere in which the rupture between representation and absence/presence is expressed is in the sphere of contemporary art, where the aesthetic experience can also be sometimes seen as having the potential to produce encounters that “move the soul.” The Parque de la Memoria introduces different ways of dealing with some of the same problematics as the Museo de la Memoria. Yet the pedagogical assumptions underlying this project offer a different attempt to deal with memory, and therefore different effects on the narratives about the recent past. In the next section I will describe how the idea of the Parque de la Memoria emerged while analyzing how discourses about memory, representation and pedagogy are interwoven in multiple ways in this particular kind of memorial space.

Parque de la Memoria

The twentieth anniversary of the 1976 coup coincided with the re-emergence of numerous discursive practices related to the last dictatorship both inside and outside schools. The commemorations of the coup all over the country served as fertile grounds for the convergence of initiatives that would be concretized in the next decade, such as the inclusion of the period of State Terror in curricula, the *escraches*⁵ to participants in the regime, and the establishment of memorial spaces. One such initiative started to gain force in 1996, when the families of students from the Colegio Nacional Buenos Aires [Buenos Aires National High School] that were disappeared realized there was no place in the city of Buenos Aires to mourn their dead and reflect on what had happened (Tappatá de Valdez, 2003).

Their demand was brought to the city’s legislature, who in 1998 passed law 46 establishing the construction of a monument to the victims of State Terrorism in a park where a group of sculptures would be chosen to accompany it. The monument was to contain the names of all the officially recognized *desaparecidos*, plus space for new names to be inscribed as they were recognized by the corresponding organization. The law also determined the creation of a commission that would oversee this process composed of members of the city’s executive and legislative branches, the University of Buenos Aires, and the Human Rights NGOs.



Figure 1. “Victoria”, by William Tucker.

The seventeen sculptures that would be placed in the Park were selected following two procedures: eleven of them were chosen in an international contest that looked not only at each artist’s project, but also at her/his trajectory within Human Rights causes; the other six were specifically commissioned to the artists because of their roles in local or global struggles for Human Rights. On August 30th, 2001, the first stage of the Park was inaugurated, at that time counting only with the sculpture “Victoria” [Victory], by William Tucker. Shortly thereafter, two more sculptures were added: “Monumento al escape” [Monument to escape], by Dennis Oppenheim; and an untitled work [Sin título] by Roberto Aizenberg.⁴ As of October 2009, they are joined by “30.000,” by Nicolás Guagnini. The rest of the sculptures are still under consideration pending budgetary and technical restrictions.



Figure 2. “Monumento al escape”, by Dennis Oppenheim

Before analyzing the Parque de la Memoria’s main feature, the Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado [Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism], I will briefly discuss the works currently displayed in the sculpture garden, in order to better understand how certain features of the Park deal with the relationship between memory, representation and pedagogy. While every one of these four works of art follows a different style and embodies distinct aesthetic sensibilities, none of them attempts to present a unifying narrative or homogeneous perspective on what happened during the dictatorship. They force visitors to position themselves vis-à-vis each piece in order to generate their own meanings and experiences. There is not a story that is being told, but infinite possibilities that are being opened to the active involvement of the spectator. The choice of more or less non-figurative art follows the effort of the Museo de la Memoria to avoid offering a straightforward pictorial narrative that could be turned into a morbid swamp. Furthermore, the lack of guided tours in the Parque de la Memoria⁶ steers clear of forcing particular pedagogical narratives into the path of each spectator. The project embedded in the Parque de la Memoria seems to follow Héctor Schmucler’s (2000) argument that there is no collective experiencing of memory, as memory can only be exercised individually. Recovering Deleuze’s (1994) idea, one could argue that the type of memory that the Park is attempting to facilitate can only be fostered by opening up possibilities for encounters—the individual exercise that Schmucler advocates for—not by facilitating collective narratives of recognition. However, echoing the reflections on the Museo, this does not mean that the artworks stand in a void, and

that the relationship that is established with the visitors starts from scratch. The mere fact that these sculptures and monuments are in the Parque de la Memoria, and that they are a product of particular socio-historical conditions embeds them with a multiplicity of narratives and discourses that struggle to determine the artworks' meaning.



Figure 3. “Sin Título”, by Roberto Aizenberg

William Tucker’s piece—“Victoria”—can serve as an example. The sculpture is made of cement that was poured into a mold that had been excavated on site. The block was then unearthed and hoisted the day of the inauguration as a metaphor, according to the artist, of the burying of identities by the State and the return to them in light of public consciousness. The openness of the shape, in conjunction to the name of the work, refers to the interplay between the incompleteness of the victims’ lives and the resistance of the shape that reflects the hopeful restitution of decorum and justice (Tucker as cited in Alegre, 2005, p. 56). Yet, what my argument focuses on goes beyond the particular intentions of the artists, without denying their role as narratives that attempt to assign meaning. As in the case of the “empty” rooms of the Museo de la Memoria, the sculptures are made possible by an absence (again, of meaning, of bodies, of understanding) that allows for encounters with that which is outside the available frameworks of reference. The lack of guided tours in the Park serves to emphasize this absence. Once more, that is not to say that the images presented by the sculptures are devoid of narratives; one could argue that no cultural object is. However, the point is that the pedagogical relation they establish with

the visitor is not founded on an understanding of any unifying story or moral that would lead to a more “educated” or “enlightened” individual. The transmission is not of a specific piece of knowledge but of the possibility of an aesthetic experience as a Deleuzian encounter that may or may not perplex the soul.



Figure 4. “30.000”, by Nicolás Guagnini

The Monument

The centerpiece of the Park is the Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado, unveiled in November, 2007. The MVST was designed as a cut or a wound in the landscape, a fracture that runs through an artificial hill (one that was filled with the remnants of the Jewish community center that was bombed in 1994) and that leads to the river. The design, by Baudizzone, Lestard, Varas Studio and the associated architects Claudio Ferrari and Daniel Becker, resonates with Maya Lin’s Vietnam Memorial in Washington, D.C. The MVST is composed of stone plates with all the names that have been officially recognized plus empty slots to keep adding names in the future. The plates total the symbolic number of 30,000, and next to each name is the person’s age at the time of death or disappearance and an asterisk highlighting the women that were pregnant at that time. The names are organized by year of death/disappearance.



Figure 5. Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism

Upon the unveiling of the Monument, discussions were focused around two issues. On the one hand, there was the question of which names to include. The roster opens with a message carved in stone: “La nómina de este monumento comprende a las víctimas del terrorismo de estado, detenidos-desaparecidos y asesinados, y a los que murieron combatiendo por los mismos ideales de justicia y equidad” [The list of people in this monument encompasses the victims of State terrorism, detained-disappeared and murdered, and those who died fighting for the same ideals of justice and equity]. The first year under which victims are listed is 1969, seven years before the coup of 1976, yet still under a different dictatorial government, that of Gen. Onganía (1966–1970). The argument that the Human Rights NGOs have been maintaining throughout the years, and that sustains the decision to start in 1969, is that the State’s systematic plan to exterminate opposition began long before the coup. Some opposing voices have expressed concerns about the fact that the selection of the names responded to a particular logic, excluding for example the “victims from the other side,” referring to the military and security forces targeted by the guerrilla (see e.g., Anon., 2008). This argument is based in what in Argentina has been termed the “teoría de los dos demonios” [theory of the two demons], which stated that in the 1970s the country was witnessing a war between left and right with both sides committing excesses. Obviously, this view recognizes neither the asymmetry between the repressive forces of the State and the leftist groups nor the dangers of legitimating the actions of the State by calling it a war. While in academic circles this view has been widely discredited, it is still very

much present in day-to-day discussions, as evidenced by the debate about the inclusion and exclusion of particular names in the monument.

The second issue, perhaps more interesting for the reader in light of my research, is the debate about whether to include names at all. This discussion goes far beyond this specific monument and stems from a dissensus in the perception of the power of symbols. Hebe de Bonafini, leader of one of the branches of the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, the legendary NGO grouping the mothers of the disappeared, has always opposed the individualizing efforts around the “30,000.” Her group went as far as to boycott the forensic work aimed at recognizing the remains of the bodies found in anonymous graveyards (Carlson, 1996). In the case of the MVST, Mrs. de Bonafini and her association threatened to erase all the names from the stone plates (Tappatá de Valdez, 2003, p. 107, n. 15). While the argument for this particular case relates to the fact that the members resist having the names of their children linked to a monument erected by “the same people that pardoned the murderers [in the 1980s and 1990s] or that in many cases allied themselves with them” (extracted from a public letter sent by Mrs. De Bonafini to the Commission in charge of the monument, as quoted in Tappatá de Valdez, 2003, p. 107, n. 15, my translation) this is part of a broader discussion. The monument has inscribed in it slightly more than 8,000 names, as those are the ones that have been reported by families and friends of the disappeared. Yet most Human Rights NGOs defend the number 30,000 not only as an estimation of the total number of victims, but as a symbol of the carnage of the military regime. The 30,000 disappeared are brought back then as a unity that, for some, should not be disturbed. The issue is again that of representation, and the pedagogical rapport that the Monument perceptually establishes with the visitors. Should the MVST be a reflection of what has been proven by the Justice Department or should it stand for something else? What is being communicated in each case?

If the MVST is taken as a tombstone, Mrs. Bonafini’s attitude can be better understood under Hugo Achúgar’s reflection on monuments and representation:

[Both the tombstone and Parrhasius’s curtain] announce that there is something behind, but actually they are themselves the object of representation. In this sense, the monument to memory in stone is, more than the representation of something else, the thing itself. The monument is the object and the objective of representation. The monument, as a monumentalized fact, constitutes a celebration of power, of having the power to monumentalize... But at the same time, a representation is an erasure, a crossing out, a cancellation, since the monument erases, crosses out, cancels all other possible representations other than the one represented by the monument. (Achúgar, 2003, p. 206, my translation)

What the association of Mothers is opposing is the possibility of this closure, as they see it as offering the possibility of reconciliation. By setting each individual name in stone, the absence of the disappeared, of the “30,000,” is being filled by roughly 8,000 names and 22,000 blank slots, all in the role of victims of State terror as their defining quality.⁷

The work of artist Nicola López (<http://nicolalopez.com>), in her “monument” series, seems to work with this tension or ambiguity inherent to monuments. The “monuments” she presents are the contradictory ruins that erase whatever they are trying to monumentalize. They simultaneously celebrate particular achievements of “civilization” (highways, communication technologies) and cancel themselves in the impossibility of a closure of meanings. López’s monuments could be seen as commemorating what never was, the ruins of a future that was always already ruined

by its own promises. They are the graphic depictions of Benjamin's documents of civilization and barbarism as irrevocably entwined.

What both the Parque de la Memoria and the work of Nicola López have in common is the challenge to the possibility of utilizing monuments and memorial spaces for re-presenting collective memories and futures. The rejection of figurative images depicting horror—which follows the same argument as the Museo de la Memoria—is joined here with an avoidance of any cohesive, unifying narrative that could work as a consensus-building tool about what happened, why it happened and the lessons to be learned. The Parque de la Memoria stands as an affirmation of the impossibility of representation and of the power of the open. While it recognizes the dangers of leaving interpretation to each spectator/participant, the Park mobilizes contemporary art as trust in the “sensibility” and “reason” of the interpreter that gives them singular meanings without ever forgetting that it was that same “reason” that led to horror in the first place. This sort of involvement with the subjects that act as spectators/participants implies a particular set of pedagogical principles that might provide some insight into the (im)possibilities of teaching and learning about a traumatic recent past.

Conclusion: A Pedagogy of the Encounter?

The Parque de la Memoria and the Museo de la Memoria are part of the Argentine Memoryscape, both produced by and producers of the reemergence of discursive practices about the last dictatorship since the twentieth anniversary of the 1976 coup. While both of these monuments are results of the efforts by sectors of the population to work through the memories of social-historical trauma, each one of these memorial spaces is unique, and so are the linkages between memory, representation, and pedagogy that they embody.

The tension within the pedagogical principles underpinning the Museo and the Parque can be analyzed as a way of understanding a more general discussion in the field of curriculum studies. The decision by the NGOs managing the Museo de la Memoria to avoid pictorial representations of horror responds, as I have explained above, to a multiplicity of arguments: The recognition of the impossibility of re-presenting the extreme experiences of torture and death that took place inside concentration camps such as the ESMA; a willingness to center the narratives on resistance rather than a “paralyzing horror”; and a focus only on the judicially-proven facts with an awareness of the difficulties of achieving an absolute proof. However, this intention to avoid representations clashes with the Museum's understanding of its own pedagogical purpose embodied in the figures of the tour guides. Franco and Levin (2007) express this quite clearly in their discussion about the teaching of the recent past in the classroom:

Even though it is true that working with multiple perspectives from different actors...is a necessary entry point to denaturalize stagnated versions, it is also true that one cannot (and should not) leave the decision on which are the “right” narratives to students (p. 5, my translation)

Students, or visitors, are partially entrusted with a space that avoids pictorial representations, yet a sense of responsibility towards the “right” narratives places representations back at the center of pedagogy. The anecdotes of resistance being told about the people in captivity, and especially the lessons learned from them (that is, the morals of these stories), together with the

very search for meaning and understanding of the visitors that look for a “home” for their minds, fill the “empty” space with a responsible memory. The Museum represents now the need to resist in particular ways in the present and a relationship with the recent past marked by the dominant narrative. If the graphic depictions of horror can be seen as paralyzing, so is the lack of a unifying, cohesive and consensual story that would position the subject/spectator as an agent of change in a particular direction. That paralysis is located by the NGOs that manage the Museo de la Memoria at the antipodes of pedagogy, as they see themselves as the ones responsible for mobilizing society towards progress. However, the very existence of the ESMA, both as a camp and as a museum, is a testimony of the conditions that disrupt the regime of representation that is continuously trying to fill the emptiness. And its pedagogy, as it stands on a fundamental absence of foundations, has embedded in it, beyond any intention, the possibility of facilitating encounters with the Other.

The pedagogical principles that order the Parque de la Memoria as an educational project respond to a different set of understandings, mainly about the relation between pedagogy and responsibility. Whilst the intention to avoid figurative art shares with the Museum a rejection for clear representations of experience, the Parque does not attempt to leave those spaces “empty” either. The works of art that accompany the Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado present visitors with everything but “empty” space, as they open up the possibilities for innumerable meanings and narratives, by interacting with the discourses flowing through the spaces in which they are emplaced and with the stories that visitors bring with them. The lack of guiding tours and of unifying narratives and morals to be extracted from the sculptures speaks to the recognition of the need for subjects to have individual aesthetic experiences as ways to encourage them outside of thought, to encounter that which has the potential to move their souls (Deleuze, 1994). In terms of the notion of responsibility that can be extracted from the project of the Parque, it could be argued that the managers of the space do not consider themselves to be responsible for the formation of a historical consciousness in terms of a unifying narrative of the past that would guide the actions of subjects in the present in terms of a binding sense of historical progression (Friedrich, 2010). Instead, the Parque’s responsibility is to disrupt the common sense about any type of cohesive story or collective belonging, forcing each spectator to grasp the impossibilities of her/his own history of the present.⁷

Modern pedagogy is founded on the notion of representation: The curriculum represents knowledge from different fields, students represent the potential and the future of the nation, and teachers represent the role of expertise. While a pillar of contemporary society, (political, epistemological, aesthetical) representation implies a consensus about what there is in the first place to be re-presented, about how to group things/narratives/subjects to be embodied by those representations, and about the temporal organization of history that allows for something to be present first, and re-presented later. Luis Ignacio García (2008) links political and aesthetical representation with modernity by asking:

How to understand the link, evidently non-natural, between the series electoral campaign—official banner, and the series museum—work of art? Both are tied by the same longing that has stamped on its front the seal of its modern fatality: *representation* (and the enormous theoretical-political concomitant problem of the subject—also modern—of that representation). Supposed political representation of an unfulfilled communal desire. Longed artistic representation of a collective laceration that will not scar. Both pretenses

being fulfilled in an apparently neutral space of negotiation: the Museum. (p. 19, emphasis in the original, my translation)

The Parque de la Memoria presents us with art that does not aim at representing but just at presenting particular aesthetic experiences for the visitors. Indeed, these experiences are never entirely “free” and devoid of their own representations and contradictions, since they take place within a grid of discursive practices that struggle to attribute meaning to the past and our relationship with it. However, the mere fact that the Parque exists as a pedagogical space that does not present itself as providing a unifying narrative or a set of lessons to be learned opens up the discussion about pedagogy itself and the notions of responsibility that it entails. Through works of art that do not lead to facile interpretations, and the lack of guidelines on how to work one’s own way through the space, the Parque sets itself as a project in which visitors could experience the perplexity of thinking outside of thought. These are challenges and fractures that can open up possibilities for pedagogical spaces usually excluded from schooling. In light of this argument, some questions emerge regarding the possibility of pedagogy doing away with its founding reliance on the notion of representation, as well as the potential and limitations of what could be termed a “pedagogy of the encounter.”

About the Author

Daniel Friedrich is an Assistant Professor in the Dept. of Curriculum and Teaching at Teachers College, Columbia University, and a former primary school teacher in his native Argentina. His book *The Limits of Democratic Education as a Curricular Problem* will be available in 2012.

Notes

1. I am borrowing from Appadurai the suffix –scape, although this author does not talk of a *Memoryscape*.
2. The Museum of Memory [*Museo de la Memoria*] is alternatively called the Space for Memory and the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights [*Espacio para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos*].
The notion of the absence of bodies reflects the particularity of the Argentine context, in which the *disappeared* became the emblem of the dictatorial times.
3. The “escraches” were performances/complaints/protests carried on by the organization grouping the children of the disappeared, H.I.J.O.S., in which they would denounce the location of participants in the dictatorial regime by spontaneously parading in front of their houses. Their goal was to raise awareness of impunity by showing people who their neighbors were.
4. I am not sure whether the work is untitled or whether its title is “Untitled.”
5. The Parque de la Memoria has a trailer that functions as an information center, where two people usually work providing curious visitors with booklets, information about the participating NGOs and some background on the works of art. However, they rarely approach the spectators that do not come to them.
6. In a similar sense, the efforts to identify the forensic remains of the disappeared are seen by Mrs. Bonafini’s group as fixing the identity of the “30,000” as mere remains.
7. This is not to say, of course, that this is accomplished in every individual, in every visit. What takes place in each experience of the Parque de la Memoria has to do as much with the way in which the space was thought and planned, the assumptions embedded in it, and what it presents to spectators, as with what the subjects bring with them to the visit and the multiplicity of discourses circulating in that particular contingency.

References

- Achugar, H. (2003). El lugar de la memoria, a propósito de monumentos. (Motivos y paréntesis). In E. Jelin & V. Langland (Eds.), *Monumentos, memoriales y marcas territoriales*. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores.
- Adorno, T. W. (1983). *Prisms*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Agamben, G. (1998). *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (1st ed.). Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Agamben, G. (2000). *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. New York: Zone Books.
- Alegre, G. (Ed.). (2005). *Proyecto Parque de la Memoria*. Buenos Aires: Comisión Pro Monumento a las Víctimas del Terrorismo de Estado.
- Appadurai, A. (1990). Disjuncture and difference in the global cultural economy. *Public culture*, 2(2), 1.
- Bauman, Z. (2000). *Modernity and the Holocaust*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (2007). Theses on the Philosophy of History. *Illuminations*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Berger, P. L., Berger, B., & Kellner, H. (1974). *The homeless mind: Modernization and consciousness*. New York: Vintage Books.
- Brodsky, M. (Ed.). (2005). *Memoria en construcción. El debate sobre la ESMA*. Buenos Aires: La Marca.
- Carlson, E. S. (1996). *I remember Julia: Voices of the disappeared*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Deleuze, G. (1994). *Difference and repetition*. (P. Patton, Trans.). NY: Columbia University Press.
- Franco, M., & Levin, F. (2007). La historia reciente en la escuela. Nuevas preguntas y algunas respuestas. *Revista Novedades Educativas*, (202). Retrieved from <http://www.riehr.com.ar/archivos/Educacion/Novedades%20Educativas%20La%20historia%20reciente%20en%20la%20escuela.pdf>
- Friedrich, D. (2010). Historical consciousness as a pedagogical device in the production of the responsible citizen. *Discourse: Studies of Cultural Politics of Education*, 31(5), 649-664.
- García, L. I. (2008). El legado como exterminio. La paradoja de representar los hitos que pusieron en crisis la categoría moderna de representación. *Ramona*, (78)18-23.
- González, H. (2005). Las sombras del edificio: construcción y anticonstrucción. In M. Brodsky (Ed.), *Memoria en construcción. El debate sobre la ESMA*. Buenos Aires: La Marca.
- Huysen, A. (2003). Memory Sites in an Expanded Field: The Memory Park in Buenos Aires. *Present pasts: urban palimpsests and the politics of memory*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- La Justicia admitió el dictamen que declara delito de lesa humanidad el crimen de Larrabure. (2008, August 22). *La Nación*. Retrieved from http://www.lanacion.com.ar/nota.asp?nota_id=1042318
- Pastoriza, L. (2005). La memoria como política pública: los ejes de la discusión. In M. Brodsky (Ed.), *Memoria en construcción. El debate sobre la ESMA*. Buenos Aires: La Marca.
- Santayana, G. (1905). *The life of reason: Introduction, and reason in common sense*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons.
- Schmucler, H. (2000). Las exigencias de la memoria. *Punto de Vista*, 23(68), 5-9.

Tappatá de Valdez, P. (2003). El Parque de la Memoria en Buenos Aires. In E. Jelin & V. Langland (Eds.), *Monumentos, memoriales y marcas territoriales*. Madrid: Siglo XXI de España Editores.

