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Haunting photographs and temporal landscapes: Remembering through traces in *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake* (Mumenthaler 2016)

ABSTRACT

*This article explores the links between memory and materiality in the Argentine film *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake*. It assumes that material memory, understood as the process of remembrance that results from the engagement with material traces of the past (objects, places, landscapes), is a recurrent trope by which contemporary documentary filmmakers criticize official discourses on memory from the Kirchners's era. In this context, it reads *La idea de un lago* as a fictional text that performs this mode by using photographs and landscape – as those traces of the past that bring it to the present – to embody the conflicting relationship that children of the disappeared hold with the traumatic absence of a parent. At the level of cultural memory, this translates into a narrative of the dictatorship that does not problematize – as non-fictional work did – but rather reinforces kirchnerist politics of memory.*

KEYWORDS

memory
materiality
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1. For a comprehensive account of the dictatorial period, see Feitlowitz (2011) and Lewis (2002).

INTRODUCTION

The past is hidden somewhere outside the realm, beyond the reach of intellect, in some material object (in the sensation which that material object will give us) of which we have no inkling. And it depends on chance whether or not we come upon this object before we ourselves must die.

(Proust [1928] 1992: 60)

In these terms Marcel Proust describes *involuntary* memory in the first volume of his novel *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–23). The words precede the well-known episode of the memory-triggering madeleine, perhaps the most cited anecdote to exemplify the links between memory and materiality: that is, how individual memory is activated through the encounter with things, objects or places. Matter is essential in this process, but Russell J.A. Kilbourn and Eleanor Ty warn us against a common misconception. For Proust, memory is immaterial: ‘the memory as such is not contained “within” the cake or its flavour; the madeleine is the precipitant or prompter of what for Proust is memory’s complete and authentic unfolding’ (2013: 6). Jan Assmann similarly asserts that ‘things do not “have” a memory of their own, but they may remind us, may trigger our memory, because they carry memories which we have invested into them’ (2010: 111).

This article explores the links between memory and materiality in the Argentine film *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake* (Mumenthaler 2016). It assumes that material memory, understood as the process of remembrance that results from the engagement with material traces of the past (objects, places, landscapes), is a recurrent trope by which contemporary documentary filmmakers criticize official discourses on memory from the Kirchners’s era. In this context, it reads *La idea de un lago* as a fictional text that performs this mode by using photographs and landscape – as those traces of the past that bring it to the present – to embody the conflicting relationship that children of the disappeared hold with the traumatic absence of a parent. At the level of cultural memory, this translates into a narrative of the dictatorship that does not problematize – as non-fictional work did – but reinforces *kirchnerist* politics of memory.

Argentina lived under the rule of a dictatorship from the *coup d’état* carried out by the military in 1976 until 1983.¹ During these seven years, the military government implemented a systematic strategy of repression in the now notorious form of enforced disappearances. With the excuse of a war against subversion, any form of dissent was repressed through political violence. Individuals – mostly those involved in leftist politics – were detained by military or police officials and taken to clandestine detention centres, where they were kept for months, tortured and forced to name names. In most cases, they were killed afterwards; their bodies were dropped into the sea from planes or buried in unmarked graves. The babies born to detainees were given to families from the military or the police or to families with links to those in political power. Human rights organizations estimate the number of the disappeared to be around thirty thousand, while they consider that around five hundred children were abducted from their parents.

The way these events are thought of and remembered has evolved throughout the democratic years. Memory, as Elizabeth Jelin states, is by definition a subjective phenomenon, both in individual and cultural terms. As such, the

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process of collective remembrance of a specific period is necessarily dynamic and subject to revision (Jelin 2002: 2). In the case of Argentina, the variety of actors engaged in negotiating the meaning of the past (the military, the political power, the victims and human rights organizations), together with the shifting sociopolitical context, has resulted in different narratives or discourses of memory. The narratives derived from power and the narratives of victims have not always gone hand in hand, and less so in the case of discourses emanating from perpetrators. Despite its complexity, most critical accounts agree in identifying three distinctive periods in the historical evolution of the memory of the dictatorship, corresponding to the development of transitional justice in the country (Amado 2009; Druliolle and Lessa 2011; Lessa 2013). A first stage, which approximately corresponds with the presidency of Raúl Alfonsín (1983–89), marks an attempt to find out the truth about the dictatorship, an effort ultimately undermined by the fragile democratic system of those years. Alfonsín's government did seek justice by prosecuting the leaders of the military juntas in 1985 but, under increasing military pressure, it ended up passing legislation – 1986's *Ley de Punto Final* (Full Stop Law) and 1987's *Ley de Obediencia Debida* (Law of Due Obedience) – that established impunity for those responsible for the disappearances.

The second stage, mainly under the presidency of Carlos Menem (1989–99) and its aftermath, is characterized by impunity in judicial terms and a discourse of social reconciliation. *Menemist* governments 'urged society to move beyond old animosities and reconcile to promote the nation's future' (Lessa 2013: 94), a policy that was strongly rejected by human rights organizations. The third and last stage in the memory of the dictatorship includes the developments produced in the twenty-first century, marked in political terms by *kirchnerism*, and in social terms by the appearance of second-generation testimonies. The presidencies of Néstor Kirchner (2003–07) and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2007–2015) changed the framework of memory through the nullification of the impunity laws in 2004, and the subsequent reopening of trails against the military perpetrators. *Kirchnerist* administrations supported the agenda of human rights organization by changing the legal framework; they turned the memory of the disappeared – through the establishment of different public commemoration sites – into one of the symbols of their presidency. The Museum and Site of Memory ESMA – built in a former clandestine centre for detention, torture and extermination during the years of the dictatorship – was the most ambitious project. In this context, the children of the disappeared gained relevance within memory debates, sometimes reacting against the use of their parents as tools to justify certain political movements. The years in office of Mauricio Macri (2015–19), even if memory played a lesser role within his neoliberal policies, did not bring about a defining shift in memory politics nor in the legal framework.²

The dictatorship has been a central subject in Argentine filmmaking since the advent of democracy. From *La historia oficial/The Official Story* (Puenzo 1985) to *El clan/The Clan* (Trapero 2015), films have negotiated the conflicting narratives in different ways, supporting certain accounts and questioning others. Indeed, the shifts in this process have been thoroughly traced in academic writing (Amado 2009; Andermann 2012a; Aprea 2008; Sosa 2014). Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial*, the paradigmatic film of the first stage of memory politics, embodies the narrative of its time. Through the leading character's discovery that her daughter is the child of a disappeared person, it allegorizes the awakening of the Argentine nation to the terrors of the dictatorship.

2. Javier Milei's victory in the 2023 presidential election threatens to bring a regression to the politics of memory applied before the Kirchners.

3. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations from the original Spanish are mine.

While it was highly successful at the time of its release – being awarded the Oscar for Best Foreign Language Film – its choice to unveil the truth rather than to claim for justice has been controversial afterwards. David Oubiña, noting that the film chooses to retell the horrors of the dictatorship from the perspective of an upper-class woman rather than of the victims, describes it as ‘opportunistic’ and as an attempt ‘to flatter people’s good consciousness’ (2000: 35). The cinema of the 1990s, in broad terms, opposed *menemist* ideas of reconciliation at the same time as it acknowledged the turn in the status of the victim. Both fiction films like *Sur/The South* (Solanas 1988) and documentaries like *Cazadores de utopías/Hunters of Utopia* (Blaustein 1996) encapsulated the re-politicization of the victim. They vindicated the revolutionary politics that many of the victims shared through an emphasis on their status as leftist militants. Other films, like *Buenos Aires Vice Versa* (Agresti 1996), opposed a narrative of reconciliation by focusing on the consequences of the repressive aspect of dictatorial power in the society of the 1990s (Copertarti 2009).

Filmic reactions to *kirchnerist* memory politics – discussed in more detail in the last section of this article – are those of descendants that increasingly ‘examine what happened to their parents, and they add new interpretations that are far from unanimous about their parents’ political decisions’ (Amado 2009: 16).³ For Maria M. Delgado and Cecilia Sosa, during the Kirchners’s administrations ‘memory became synonymous with political good, a “happy” – or “feel good” – narrative capable of binding the nation in a culture of shared empathy and social cohesion’ (2017: 240). As this narrative of human rights became hegemonic because of its links with power, alternative accounts started to emerge, on the part of descendants, that reacted against the glorification of the political activism of the disappeared.

The links between materiality and memory, and their implications to contemporary politics of memory, are a recurrent trope within these second-generation approaches. Yet, this emphasis on the materiality of memory is predominantly found in non-fictional works. As Gonzalo Aguilar claims, ‘in a division of labour never made explicit, in recent Argentine cinema the documentary has been assigned the task of taking charge of the historical past’ (2008: 158). Documentary – and most often, autobiographical documentary – has been the mode privileged by younger creators when addressing the dictatorship and its effects in the present. Films like *Los rubios/The Blondes* (Carri 2003), *Papá Iván/Father Iván* (Roque 2003), *Encontrando a Victor/Finding Victor* (Bruschtein 2005), *M* (Prividera 2007) or *Adiós a la memoria/Farewell to Memory* (Prividera 2020) negotiate the loss of a parent – disappeared by the military junta – and the impossibility of reconstructing the past through different material carriers of memory such as photographs, objects and archival footage. Different scholars have highlighted the role of materiality in second-generation non-fictional work (Amado 2009; Andermann 2012b), with Carri’s *Los rubios* emerging as the canonical text. The film follows the filmmaker’s quest to discover more about the identity of her parents, tortured and disappeared in 1977, and it explores the effects of this event in the life of Albertina, who was just 3 years old when they were murdered. Carri’s performative documentary, in its links with material memory, has been analysed in terms of how it questions the possibility of reconstructing the past, and thus interpreted as a rejection of the totalizing narratives of *kirchnerist* politics (Nouzeilles 2005; Sosa 2014).

However, *La idea de un lago* is one of the few films that apply this generational trend to a work of fiction. Milagros Mumenthaler (Córdoba, Argentina 1977)

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was born in Argentina, but she spent her childhood and youth in Switzerland, where her family lived in exile during the years of the dictatorship. Although a victim of the dictatorial context herself, she is not the child of a disappeared person, and therefore hers is not an autobiographical approach to the subject. Instead, *La idea de un lago* is a free adaptation of Guadalupe Gaona's poetry and photography book *Pozo de aire/Well of Air* (2009) – in which Gaona approaches the disappearance of her father – that fictionalizes this negotiation of loss. The film reframes this quest for memory through the story of Inés (Carla Crespo), a 35-year-old photographer compiling/editing a book of photographs about her life – who acts as Gaona's alter ego. The situation encourages her to look back at her past, shaped by the absence of her father, who was disappeared in the dictatorship when she was 2 years old. The film thus alternates between three different moments in Inés's life – childhood, youth and womanhood – and explores how the trauma of the dictatorship has shaped her family relationships as well as her memory of the period.

Memory, and in particular the notion of remembering through material traces of the past, features prominently in Mumenthaler's fictional work. Her short film *Amacay* (2006) is about a woman's return to a house in the Delta del Tigre, where she comes to terms with the memory of a traumatic event that took place there. *Abrir puertas y ventanas/Back to Stay* (2011), her first feature-length film, deals with the different attitudes of three young sisters towards a past shaped by the absence of their parents. The film, which takes place in the old house where the three sisters live, connects the process of mourning with the material presence of the house and the memories that remain there. *La idea de un lago* is her second and most recent feature-length film. Premiered at the Locarno Film Festival, the film was warmly received by critics in the different international film festivals where it played (San Sebastián, Busan, Mar del Plata), but it has only been released commercially in Argentina and Spain to date.

Asked about the workings of memory in the film, Mumenthaler states that 'memories are also smells, sounds, sensations' (Porto 2017: n.pag.), elements that connect us with the material world. Material memory, as in the non-fictional work that the filmmaker borrows from, emerges as a key element in the film's take on the dictatorial past. This article claims that the emphasis on material memory, when applied to a fictional and non-autobiographical narrative, works to realign the film with *kirchnerist* discourses on memory. It first analyses the role of photography in the film, revealed as both a catalyst in the creation of fictional memories and a sign of eternal absence. Through Martin Lefebvre's idea of landscape, it then explores the engagement with natural surroundings as a conflicting process, which reinforces for Inés the absence of her father at the same time as it allows for her reconnection with his memory. The final section deals with the film as an object of cultural memory. It argues that the film's narrative of the dictatorship embodies *kirchnerist* politics of memory by showing the enduring consequences of the dictatorship in the present.

HAUNTING PHOTOGRAPHS

Near the beginning of the film, we find Inés at her apartment in Buenos Aires looking at a photograph of her father, in a denim shirt and a cowboy hat, posing next to a green car. The photograph is first a projection on the wall of Inés's apartment but, in the last shot of the scene, it has taken up the whole



Figure 1: The photograph, which is first projected on the wall and then takes up the frame. *Milagros Mumenthaler* (dir.), *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake*, 2016. Argentina.

frame (Figure 1). Then, the father and the car slowly fade away from the photograph – encapsulating his disappearance from Inés’s life – as the background comes to life. The soundtrack shifts from the traffic noises of the city to the sounds of the lake, and the camera smoothly pans right to find 11-year-old Inés (Malena Moirón) in the same spot as her father when the picture was taken. The film has thus shifted from a still picture existing in Inés’s present to Inés’s childhood (when her father disappeared), to one of her memories at the lake house. This smooth transition from the present to the past is just one example of the blurring of temporalities in the film. Through fluid, almost imperceptible transitions, editing in *La idea de un lago* imbricates the past and the present to show how they are deeply connected in memory, and to stress the continuities between them. Indeed, this first temporal shift shows how a photograph, as a material trace of the past, triggers a memory: the act of looking at the picture activates in Inés the process of remembrance.

The significance of this particular photograph in the film is more problematic when one considers a later scene, also set in the lake house during Inés’s childhood. In a dreamlike sequence, Inés wakes up in the middle of the night and takes a walk in the garden. A shot from a young Inés’s point of view shows the adult members of her family having a drink around the living room table, while her father outside, looks in on them through the window. The father, who is opposite Inés, is almost a mirror image of her and is wearing exactly the same clothes he was wearing in the previously seen photograph. Furthermore, the *mise en scène* of the image – the house seen from the outside, the front window reframing the back window – imitates the point of view of another family picture, one that Inés looks at in another previous scene of the film (Figures 2 and 3). Inés’s POV shot, no doubt a product of her childhood imagination, powerfully conveys how she has created a fictional memory out of photographs. In the absence of actual memories of her father, Inés turns to photographs for fabricated memories. Photographs then not only activate memory: they shape and very often generate those memories from scratch. They trigger the construction of memories that Inés cannot possibly have in real life.

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Figure 2: A point of view shot of Inés observing the family. Milagros Mumenthaler (dir.), *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake*, 2016. Argentina.



Figure 3: The photograph that inspires the composition of the previous frame. Milagros Mumenthaler (dir.), *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake*, 2016. Argentina.

This creative process of memory can be best understood if approached through Marianne Hirsch's notion of *postmemory*, where it is envisioned as 'a structure of inter- and trans-generational transmission of traumatic knowledge and experience' (2012: 5). By the term *postmemory*, Hirsch refers to 'the relationship that the generation after those who witnessed cultural or collective trauma bears to the experiences of those who came before' (2012: 6). The notion has raised intense debate in the field of memory studies, some scholars questioning the possibility of memory being transmitted across generations, or the usefulness of the term altogether (Sarlo 2005; Behrendt 2013). In the Argentine context, in fact, the adequacy of the *postmemory* framework to account for the trauma of the disappeared has also been questioned (Sosa 2014). The children of the disappeared represent the second-generation Hirsch refers to, but they are also victims themselves: they were born during

the dictatorship and were directly affected by it. As actual witnesses, some resist the postmemory label because it conflicts with their condition as victims (Sosa 2014: 122). It is not my intention to engage in depth with these debates, whose complexity exceeds the scope of this article. Rather, I argue that post-memory as a framework, despite the controversies, can account for the way Inés's memory works in *La idea de un lago*. With a focus on the role of photography in processes of memory, Hirsch describes postmemorial connection to the past as 'not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection, and creation' (2012: 5). Photographs, in this context, constitute the raw material that is later elaborated through imaginative investment. They stimulate the creation of memories rather than the remembering of memories of what actually occurred. In the film, because of the lack of memories generated by her father's absence, Inés draws on photographs as traces of a past that she wishes to access. As Mumenthaler herself acknowledges:

the dream father is always better than any real father. A simple photograph serves to build the ideal image of a father who did not exist; a father whose absence was however present during every second of the rest of Inés's life.

(Martínez 2017: n.pag.)

The most important picture for Inés, the one that she admits to trusting the most, is the only photograph she has with her father. The spectator learns about it in an addressed-to-camera monologue. Inés recounts, as if she actually remembers it, how she went with her parents to an island in the middle of the lake. 'We reach a tiny island', she says:

There, all the questions will surface and die. I teeter on the boat's prow. My dad, a *conquistador* [conqueror] in a bathing suit, takes my hand. My mum runs for the camera. Click. This is the only photo of me and my dad alone.

(Mumenthaler 2016: n.pag.)

Following this monologue, the picture is shown in the scene right afterwards. Inés, sitting at her desk in the Buenos Aires apartment, is chatting with her mother on the internet. At the same time, she is looking at some old pictures that she has digitalized for her book. The editing alternates shots of Inés, typing and reacting to what her mother says, with images of the computer screen, where the chat is taking place. As Inés mentions the old pictures, she opens the photo with her father on the computer and runs through its different details. She first zooms in on her own face, then scrolls down to her bare feet on the boat, but soon the focus shifts to her father. She blows up the picture repeatedly, starting from a medium shot of him and slowing zooming in to an extreme close-up of his eyes (Figure 4). As the zooming progresses, however, the details of the picture become blurry. When the film finally cuts back to Inés, her facial expression has changed. She seems deeply moved, her watery eyes revealing an intense emotional response to the picture. She walks out of the office, leaving the screen on with the picture on it, as if she wanted to keep the presence of the father a bit longer.

In this scene, the photograph not only triggers memories from her childhood, but also confronts Inés with the absence of her father. Re-reading Roland Barthes' traditional account of the medium and his idea of *punctum*,

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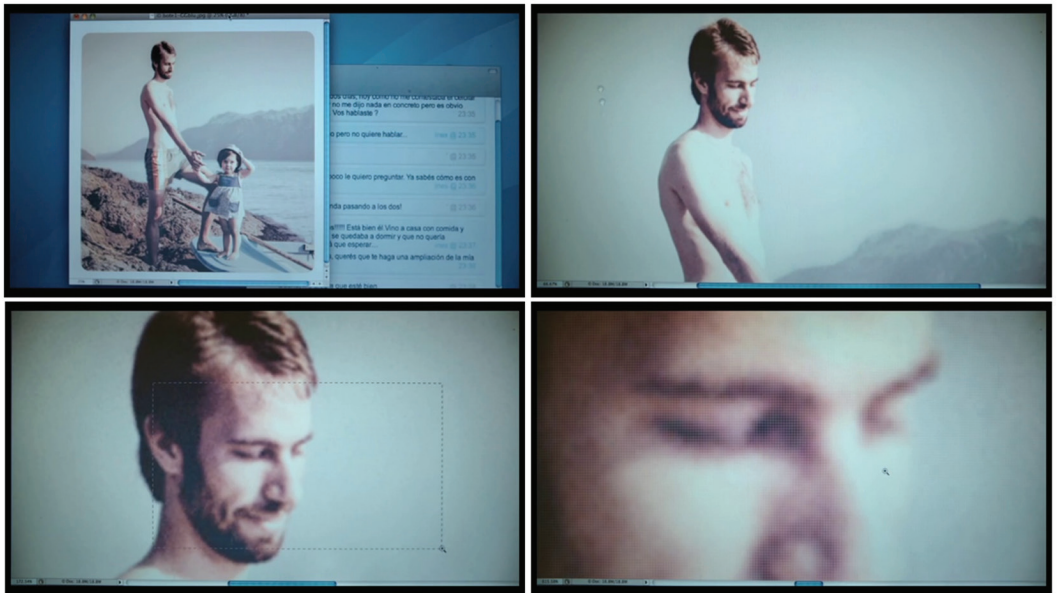


Figure 4: *The zoom-in process of the photograph of Inés with her dad. Milagros Mumenthaler (dir.), La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake, 2016. Argentina.*

Margaret Olin has confronted the commonly assumed notion of indexicality – the belief that there is a direct relationship between photography and its referent – to what she terms a *performative* indexicality. By this shift, she argues that ‘the most significant indexical power of the photograph may [...] lie not in the relation between the photograph and its subject but in the relation between the photograph and its beholder’ (Olin 2002: 114–15). That is, while we assume photographs to work as evidence, to provide information from the past, what they truly reflect are the fears, desires and expectations that we invest in them. Inés attempts to read the photo indexically as evidence, as a trace of the past that can provide answers to the questions generated by her father’s absence. She wants the picture to bring her some comfort, to relieve her somehow from the sense of loss. That is why she zooms in on her dad in the photograph, hoping it will reveal details of a past that, despite all her efforts, she is unable to access. The photograph, however, just reflects what Inés projects onto it, and conversely becomes a reminder of the father’s absence rather than a source of comfort. The protagonist has only one photo with her father, as Mumenthaler argues, ‘and although there are many things that are real (the place was there, there was a boat), in the end the photo is just a trigger of thousands of questions’ (2017: n.pag.).

As the examples mentioned above indicate, photographs have an ambivalent role in the film. As the source of information that replace Inés’s lack of real memories, they act as a catalyst for her imagined, built-up memories of the past. However, they also come up as frustrating her desire to access the past: when approached as evidence of the existence of her father, they fail to provide the answers that she needs. As traces of the past, then, they both help her fill the void left by the absence of her father – by prompting the creation of fictional memories – and deepen that void – by failing to provide a real

presence. This way, absence resonates in the present through them; Inés's past is seen to have a lasting effect in her present.

TEMPORAL LANDSCAPES

When, in the first transition from the past to the present, the father and the car vanish from the photograph, the image remains immobile on the lake before Inés appears in the frame. For several seconds, the action of the film is paralyzed while the sounds and the material presence of the lake are foregrounded. This use of *temps mort* (dead time), a 'strategy for directing the spectator's attention toward the exterior space rather than toward the action taking place within it' (Lefebvre 2006: 33), is an example of the emphasis on landscape that permeates the film. Landscape, in Martin Lefebvre's use of the term, is understood as a way of seeing, a gaze 'by which what was once in the margin has now come to take its place at the centre' (2006: 27). From this perspective, a film engages with the notion of landscape when it invites spectators to focus – either intentionally or unintentionally – on the material elements that are regularly placed in the background. The surroundings of the family house in Mumenthaler's film – the lake, the forest and the small island – are not only a setting for the story. Rather, in the way they are foregrounded by means of the *mise en scène*, they emerge as the landscape described by Lefebvre.

In the words of Giuliana Minghelli, 'far from being simple background or a merely supportive element for mood, landscape becomes independently resonant with meaning like an unspoken word' (2013: 7). Echoing her approach to landscape in Italian neo-realist film, we can read landscape in *La idea de un lago* as meaningful to its portrayal of material memory. Minghelli states that, in neorealism, landscapes represent what narrative cannot: '[h]istory and memory, suppressed in the narrative of the present, find an inscription in the dense materiality of the neorealist landscape' (2013: 3). Similarly, in *La idea de un lago* the memory of the absent father is inscribed in the landscape of the lake. Even if memories have a prominent role in the film, they are also somehow suppressed from Inés's mind because she does not have any personal memories of her father. This void, created by absence, is negotiated through a sensorial engagement with landscape, where memories can be inscribed and take on a form of existence. Unlike photography, the film does not portray the workings of landscape as material memory in the adult Inés. Instead, landscape activates in Inés, already as a child, a connection with the memory of her absent father. This link, however, translates into both absence and presence; it unsettles and comforts Inés at the same time.

Landscape features most prominently in two scenes of the film. In the first one, set at dusk, Inés and other children are playing hide-and-seek in the forest. Carrying torches, they hide among the trees, wait until dark and then start playing. Inés hides with Tomás, her brother, and they remain together throughout the whole game. The first part of the scene is built upon brief shots of the different children playing, with the game functioning as the focus of the narrative. As the game develops, however, the focus shifts to the forest itself. The darkness of the forest surrounds Inés and Tomás, and turns the game into an unsettling experience. This move takes place partly through framing and *mise en scène* – through long, static shots of the trees and the torch lights – but mostly through soundtrack, where the natural sounds of the forest (insects, the wind through the trees) take over the joyful voices of the children. As the image darkens and the soundtrack takes over, the

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spectator is engaged in a certain mode of visual disorientation that reflects Inés's state of restlessness.

Echoes of the dictatorship resonate in the children's game. The game evokes – in particular, by means of the beams of light in the darkness and the attempt to find someone that is missing that these beams evoke – the disappearance of the father. In this context, the way in which the sequence unfolds – the forest evolving from setting to foregrounded landscape – conveys a shift in Inés's emotional engagement with her surroundings, and therefore, with the memory of her father. When the landscape is foregrounded, the sensorial element of the scene becomes more prominent, and Inés becomes emotionally connected to the forest. In this moment of remembrance through the landscape, the child is confronted with the most troubling aspects of the memory of her dad; that is, his disappearance in violent circumstances. Even if she might not be fully aware of the details at her early age, the growing uneasiness that she seems to feel, as conveyed by the soundtrack, hints at the links between the game and her father's disappearance. The forest, in the emptiness and darkness it acquires throughout the scene, echoes the absence of her father.

The second scene in which landscape becomes central is the one that closes the film. It takes place on the small island where the picture of Inés and her father was taken. Twenty-year-old Inés takes a small rowing boat from the lake house and sails to the island. As in the case of the forest, this is also a place in which Inés projects the absence of her father, because the photograph provides her with material evidence that they were there once together. Still, the engagement with landscape in this scene is completely different. Inés is no longer a child. She has consciously decided to go to the island, because she wants to reconnect with a place linked to her father. The long takes of nature feature a landscape which feels beautiful and peaceful. The sun shines, the trees are greener than ever in the film and the light reflects on the clear blue water. The soundtrack is dominated by fluid sounds of water reaching the shore, the aggressive sounds of insects or wind being absent this time. She is in harmony with the island. There is a sense of belonging, of communion between the place and the self. Somehow, she has reconnected with her absent father as she was hoping to do. The closing images of the scene – and the film – epitomize this encounter: the car that belonged to her father, now functioning as an embodiment of his presence, is still there, adrift in the lake (see Figure 5).

Landscape emerges in the film as a trace of the past in which Inés – both as child and young woman – projects the memory of her father. For Mumenthaler, 'there is something in nature that influences Inés when she is little, and that allows her to have the thoughts and the imaginary that links her to her disappeared and absent father in a very particular way' (2017: n.pag.). How nature links Inés to her father is, as with the photographs, shaped by two conflicting impulses. On the one hand, in the hide-and-seek scene, the sensorial engagement with landscape connects Inés with the traumatic disappearance of her father. Instead of bringing her closer to him, the moment turns into a reminder of his absence. However, in the island by the lake scene, Inés does seem to experience a clearer sense of relief from the absence of her father in her relationship with the landscape. The piercing absence, which is shown to run through Inés in the three different temporalities we see in the film, momentarily gives way to a symbolic presence. In going back to the place where the picture was taken, Inés seems to find some comfort to her loss.



Figure 5: The last shot of the film. Milagros Mumenthaler (dir.), *La idea de un lago/The Idea of a Lake*, 2016. Argentina.

THE PAST IN THE PRESENT

As mediators of memory, photography and landscape paradoxically highlight and help to erase the absence of a disappeared. Material memory, presented as a conflicted means of facing a past event, is shown to highlight the enduring relevance of the past in the present. This emphasis on the persistence of the past at the level of individual/material memory is transferred to the film as an object of cultural memory. Fictions, and films in particular, 'possess the potential to generate and mould images of the past which will be retained by whole generations' (Erl 2010: 389). As media of cultural memory, fiction films generate narratives that re-enact a certain event in a particular way. *La idea de un lago*, as a film about a character coming to terms with her father's disappearance during the dictatorship, puts forward a specific discourse on the period in dialogue with other existing narratives of cultural memory. The film constructs a narrative on the dictatorship that, in its fictional recreation of an individual's engagement with material traces of the past, negotiates the ambivalence of *kirchnerist* politics of memory and ultimately supports them.

If its fictional dimension is disregarded, Mumenthaler's emphasis on the individual, the personal and on Inés's subjectivity, can be interpreted as a reaction to the politicization of the individual experience in the *kirchnerist* era. Despite the Kirchners's vindication of the memory of the dictatorship as a central element to their politics, the close ties between human rights organizations and the state have been perceived as an excessive politicization of trauma. Their politics of memory have been criticized because of their suppression of the individual experiences of loss in favour of a public sense of collective victimhood (Maguire 2017: 22). According to Geoffrey Maguire, this has triggered a response from artists from the second or postmemorial generation. He argues that 'only by elaborating their narratives in the realm of the familial, these children may lay a personal claim on a past that has been publicly co-opted and politicized' (2017: 12).

This way, a focus on the individual experience and the familial realm might be interpreted as a strategy to depoliticize the experience of the victim. In the case of *La idea de un lago*, the film deals with the issue of memory at the

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individual level, through the character of Inés and her subjective engagement with photographs and landscape. The figure of the disappeared, as a victim, is not portrayed as a political subject but as a father. The film chooses to remain within the familial sphere all the way through, while the political background is only hinted at through brief references. In this sense, the film seems to operate under a similar logic to that of other movies of the second generation, from Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* (2003) to Nicolás Prividera's *M*. Through a focus on the intimate, they all foreground 'the fragility of memory, and the gaps and holes that permeate all representations of the past' (Nouzeilles 2005: 271). In *La idea de un lago*, however, even if the figure of the *hijo/hija* (the sons and daughters of the disappeared) is depoliticized in the character of Inés, this does not equate to a reaction against *kirchnerism* in general, or a rejection of politics altogether. While *Los rubios* or *M* are 'hesitant about [cinema's] ability to transform the spectator into an effective actor in the political arena' (Page 2005: 39), Mumenthaler does believe in the political agency of filmmaking:

There was a first period, when a type of cinema that narrated historical events was necessary to open our eyes. After twelve years of kirchnerism, though, of policies that promoted human rights, there is something that has already been installed, and now we can narrate the dictatorship from another place.

(2017: n.pag.)

This other place, less focused on the events than on their effect on the personal level, is not devoid of ideology. A framework to acknowledge the political impulse of the film, the ambivalence inherent to its discourse, is provided by Hirsch's reflections on postmemory. Postmemorial work, she argues, 'strives to *reactivate* and *reembody* more distant social/national and archival/cultural memorial structures by reinvesting them with resonant individual and familial forms of mediation and aesthetic expression' (2012: 33, original emphasis). The focus on the familial and the personal, in her view, is not interpreted as a way of depoliticizing the victim, but as a strategy to empower the cultural memory of an event. This way, 'less directly affected participants can become engaged in the generation of postmemory, which can thus persist even after all participants and even their familial descendants are gone' (Hirsch 2012: 33). That is, by re-embodying historical events through individual, familial approaches, a film also rehumanizes the memory of that event, making it available to wider audiences. In the light of this, the focus on the individual experience in *La idea de un lago* can be read as an attempt to reactivate the memory of the dictatorial past by showing its enduring consequences in present-day Argentina. The story of Inés advocates for the need to keep a cultural memory of the event alive.

In this sense, the film aligns itself with two fundamental aspects of *kirchnerist* politics of memory; namely, the belief in the power of individual testimony and the need to keep memory alive in the present. Beatriz Sarlo (2005) has written extensively on the intricacies of relying on individual testimony to forge a collective remembrance of the past. Accepting the relevance of testimony in judicial frameworks, she reacts against the overuse of individual testimonies in the public realm and questions its value to reconstruct the past faithfully. In this context, she characterizes Carri's *Los rubios* as a film that undermines the validity of certain testimonies – those of the people that met Carri's parents – through self-reflective documentary techniques. In contrast,

La idea de un lago relies on the power of an individual testimony – made available through its fictionalization – to bear witness to the legacies of the dictatorship in the present. The film explores the suffering of its central character through her engagement with material traces of the past, but it never questions the value of an individual story to stand for a collective trauma. Instead, it draws on Ines's example to contend that the memory of the dictatorship is still alive and under construction – the discourse on 'memoria viva' that underpins Kirchner's policies of building public memorials such as The Museum and Site of Memory ESMA or the Remembrance Park (Vezzetti 2009).

Mumenthaler's choice to remain at the level of individual memory, through the foregrounding of remembering through material traces, can be thus read in two different ways. When its belief in the power of individual testimony is disregarded, it can be interpreted as a reaction against the homogenizing effect of a narrative centred on the glorification of politics and activism. If approached, however, from the point of view of postmemory, the film can be seen as an attempt to rehumanize the trauma of the dictatorship, and thus emerges as a reminder of the need to keep the memory of the dictatorial past alive. As an object of cultural memory, the film re-politicizes the trauma of the disappeared by showing its lasting effect in the present.

In its use of photography and landscape as material traces of the past, *La idea de un lago* can be said to endow kirchnerist politics of memory by showing the enduring consequences of the dictatorship in the present. Through the inclusion of photographs as prompters of fabricated memories, Mumenthaler acknowledges the constructed nature of the past, but this does not equate to a total rejection of the possibility of representing it. Instead, from the awareness that the past is always subject to reinterpretation, the film puts forward a specific version of the dictatorial period, in dialogue with the existing narratives of it, that emphasizes the endurance of the trauma of the dictatorship for the children of the disappeared. *La idea de un lago* denies spectators a coherent narrative of the past, engaging them, instead, in a process of reinterpretation that highlights the need to see the past as informing and shaping the present moment. History, for Mumenthaler, retains a relevance for the society we live in nowadays. The notion that the past is in permanent dialogue with the present, as articulated through material memory, is what shapes its approach to the memory of the dictatorship.

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