



## ***My life after* (2009): Non-normative acts of mourning in the aftermath of Argentina's dictatorship (1976-1983)**

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### **Resumen:**

Esta ponencia se enfoca en la emergencia de una nueva cultura del duelo luego de la pérdida de 30 mil vidas durante la última dictadura militar en Argentina (1976-1983). En particular, propone una aproximación crítica a *Mi vida después* (2009, Lola Arias), una obra teatral en la que seis actores, nacidos durante el período dictatorial, dan cuenta de sus vidas encarnando la juventud de sus padres. Cuestionando la idea de que las experiencias traumáticas son inseparables de aquellos que las sufrieron (Talyor, 2003), la obra muestra cómo la cultura del duelo puede extenderse más allá de sus víctimas directas. Partiendo del concepto de 'postmemory' – especialmente diseñado por Marianne Hirsch para dar cuenta de las experiencias de la segunda generación de sobrevivientes – se considera en qué medida los testimonios personales documentados por la obra pueden viajar más allá del escenario para construir nuevas filiaciones en el presente. Se argumenta que las imágenes que forman parte del álbum fotográfico de la infancia al ser regresadas a escena `relampaguean en un instante de peligro` (Benjamin, 1940) y permiten ser reapropiadas como documentos públicos que confrontan los discursos de victimización y proponen narrativas no biológicas sobre la experiencia del horror. Se sugiere así que el pasado reciente dio lugar a la emergencia de nuevos afectos que pueden ser descriptos como 'queer': una nueva red que va más allá de los roles sanguíneos que caracterizan el discurso tradicional de las asociaciones de derechos humanos. Partiendo de las entrevistas realizadas con la directora y los actores de la obra, y trabajando en la intersección de las teorías sobre performance y trauma, esta ponencia sugiere que *Mi vida después* puede ser considerada como un archivo no normativo del duelo que propicia un aproximación novedosa a las complejas relaciones entre memoria, imagen, experiencia personal y vivencia política.

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Thirty thousand lives missing: this was the legacy of Argentine's last dictatorship. When democracy was restored in 1983, the network of organizations created by the victims of state terrorism assumed the form of a peculiar family. In Argentina we have the Mothers, the Grandmothers, the Relatives, the Children and the Siblings of the Disappeared. Seemingly, only those related by blood to the missing had the authority to claim for justice. As Elizabeth Jelin describes, a monopoly of power, memory and pain was established: 'Those who have suffered directly or through their immediate relatives define themselves as the bearers of pain and memory'.<sup>2</sup> But did the dictatorship only left a chain of bloodline victims on its wake? This paper argues the opposite. If the evocation of a "wounded family" as the victim of state repression was politically powerful for the human rights' movement to claim for state recognition, more recently, the language of the family has turned into a trap that encapsulates the possibilities of understanding the transmission of trauma beyond bloodline inscriptions. By looking at *My life after*, a play that was released last year in Buenos Aires, I will show how the experience of loss led to the emergence of new forms of attachments that go beyond familial settings.

Lola Arias' production presents the real stories of six young people on stage. They are all professional actors who were born during the dictatorial period. The piece is based on the personal testimonies of these actors, on their real experiences. On stage, they show the pictures of their parents, they read their letters, they wear their clothes and in some cases they enact their deaths.

I will argue that *My life after* enacts a novel dispositif for the exploration of intergenerational forms of transmission of trauma that contests familial discourses on victimhood and opens the path for imagining a new sense of being together. This analysis, far from dismissing the pain of those who have been "directly affected" by the state violence, offers a contribution to the debates that seek to enlarge the understandings of the resonances of trauma, including the emotional responses that

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<sup>2</sup> Jelin, Elizabeth "The Politics of Memory: The Human Rights Movements and the Construction of Democracy in Argentina". In *Latin American Perspectives*, Vol. 21, No 2, Social Movements and Political Change in Latin America: 1, 1994, p. 53.



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might be tangential to those who have been considered as the “real” victims.

## **The time machine**

*My life after* opens with a shower of clothes falling from the roof. The clothes land into an empty stage raising a textured mountain right in front of the audience. A woman in her early twenties falls from the roof into the pile of fabric. She picks out a pair of jeans, puts them on and walks forwards with her hands in the jean pockets. She says to the audience: ‘When I was seven, I used to get dressed up in my mum’s clothes and parade around the house like a tiny queen (...). Twenty years later I find a pair of my mum’s Lee jeans from the seventies, and they fit me just right. I put on the jeans and start to walk towards the past’.<sup>3</sup> The premise is already settled, and it is as simple as childish: to put on the parents’ clothes to enact their past lives. The pile of old clothes works as the perfect medium to step into a time-machine. From then on, childhood memories, dreams, and family gossips become vehicles to send the audience backwards and forwards, from that past to the present, and also to the future. The whole play can be conceived as an emotional journey through the sights of pain, love, intimacy, and anger involved in a generational response to the national trauma.

## **The remakes**

As if it was a science-fiction film, the actors perform a remake of disparate episodes of their parent’s lives. Alternatively, they dress as motor racers, priests, guerrilla men, and bank employees to become the “doubles of risk” of their antecessors. Looking at the young team wearing these old clothes on stage, I got the feeling that a strange dislocation of time was taking place on the stage. The actors were not embodying their parents’ lives –how could they do it?, but their own ambivalent versions of them. It was not that the past was represented but rather it became enacted and twisted right in the front of the audience. And there is something that did not fit, something that always slipped away, the same as the original overall

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<sup>3</sup> All the quotations included in this article have been taken from the play *My life after* (2008), by Lola Arias. Translation: Daniel Tunnard (unpublished). Thanks to the director for permission to quote from the text.



that the father of one of the actors used to wear for racing his vintage cars and now were too short for his son's arms. Strangely enough, the re-enactment of those scenes configure new images that "flash back to interrogate the present in a moment of danger", to use Benjamin's famous words.<sup>4</sup> And in this flit, a non-normative account of the process of mourning emerges.

## What we have left

*My life after* operates through the objects that the actors inherited from their parents: family pictures, home-made videos, old tapes, letters, miniature toys, books, pictures, and also a turtle. Being on the verge of being forgotten, these minor objects become time-souvenirs. They are not only individual spoils, but also cultural treasures. Released from their original use, these 'found objects' are brought back on stage to test their resonances in the 'now-time', in *Jetztzeit*.<sup>5</sup>

Mariano shows a tiny little car which is projected in a big screen to the audience. He says: 'This is the Bugatti Type 35C that my dad gave me when I was three'.<sup>6</sup> He explains his father repaired old cars in a workshop that in 1970's was used to conceal weapons. On stage, Mariano wears his father's original overall, the same he used to race vintage cars. In 1976 his father was kidnapped during a raid conducted by the military. One of the few things that Mariano was left is a reel-to-reel recorder. 'The tape I like the most is the one where he calls my name', he says. Mariano has now a son: Moreno. His is 4 years old, just a little older than he was when his father disappeared. Moreno is also on stage. They both listen to the old tape that brings the voice of a missing father talking to his son in the 70s. In the scene, three generations are bonded together. A tape recorder allows a voice to travel across time to touch the present. It acts as the material reminder of this 'secret agreement between past generations and the present one' once suggested by Benjamin.<sup>7</sup> 'Mariano, Mariano', calls the voice from the past. Moreno, his son, just plays around.

Vanina shows a picture in which she is hugging a little boy. They both look

<sup>4</sup> Benjamin, Walter, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History". In *Illuminations*, Pimlico, London, 1968, p. 247. Author's name of the chapter/article, "Article title." In: Publisher, city, year, pages.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", p. 253.

<sup>6</sup> See *My life after* (2008), by Lola Arias. Translation: Daniel Tunnard.

<sup>7</sup> Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", p. 246.



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happy. She says: 'My brother is the one I love the most in my family. We have always been inseparable even though 5 years ago we found out we are not related by blood. My brother is the son of murdered militants and my father abducted him because my mother couldn't have children anymore'.<sup>8</sup> Vanina is dressed in a blue suit like her father used to wear when he said he was out 'to sell medicines'. In fact, he was an intelligence officer working for the military. When her brother discovered that he was born in ESMA, the former detention camp in Buenos Aires, and that his identity was falsified, he took his father to court. Vanina says on stage: 'My whole life became fiction. My mother isn't my brother's mother, my brother isn't my brother, and my dad has many faces'.<sup>9</sup> Although there is no blood connection between Vanina and her abducted brother they still think of each other as siblings.

Not all the stories presented on stage are equally dramatic. Pablo is the twin son of a couple who had no political involvement. During the dictatorship, his father worked in a bank, which was occupied by the military, and the most traumatic memory his son recalls from that time is that his father was no longer allowed to keep his beard. Pablo shows a pair of boots he inherited from his grandfather. When he puts them on, he performs a striking 'gaucho' dance as if a magical force coming from his predecessors captured him. At his turn, Blas brings Pancho, a huge turtle on stage. He inherited it from his father who used to be a priest. 'Pancho was born the same year of my dad. They are both 60 now. My dad met my mum in a church. She is an astrologist and thinks the turtle can predict the future', he says.<sup>10</sup> In the play, the turtle assumes the role of a prophet. In each performance it is inquired whether or not there will be a revolution in the country. Chips of messianic time pervade the stage. They show how the past keeps recurring once and again, and each time is 'filled by the presence of the now', as Benjamin would say, in an endlessly open indeterminacy that the audience is obliged to receive each time anew.<sup>11</sup>

Although these personal, confessional testimonies are first presented separately, eventually the show will bond these lives together. The stories become part of trembling puzzle in which each individual life resonates in the others. Together, they build an intimate and collective universe. They configure a new

<sup>8</sup> See *My life after* (2008), by Lola Arias. Translation: Daniel Tunnard.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", p. 253.



artifact that travels from the private to the public to stage an archive of vulnerability, loss, pain, and laughter in a unique generational remix. In this generational assemblage, the stories of those who, as Pablo or Blas were not ‘directly affected’ by the dictatorship, have a crucial role to play. They help to grasp to what extent the resonances of trauma can be processed in a collective way.

Arias, the director of the show, does not have any relatives disappeared. When the play was released her ‘illegitimate’ background raised suspicions. ‘The journalist kept on asking why I wanted to tell this story, as if only the children of the victims were the ones allowed to talk about it’, she told me during an interview conducted in 2009.<sup>12</sup> ‘I was born in 1976 [the year of the coup d’etat], and all my childhood was marked by the dictatorship, how I could not be affected?’, she said that time. It seems to me that *My life after* speaks about this ‘right’, the right of those who have been not directly touched by violence and who are not usually considered as ‘victims’. In this way, the piece calls into question the biological frameworks that establishes who enjoys the legitimacy of remembering in post dictatorial Argentina. It also stands for a politics of mourning where the experience of being affected is not limited to familial borders but open to more expanded affiliations.

### **Like fairy tales**

Marianne Hirsch crafted the idea of ‘postmemory’ to address the experiences of the second generation of survivors, those who were not direct witnesses of traumatic events.<sup>13</sup> Being herself a daughter of a Holocaust’s survivor, she argues that descendants connect so deeply with the previous generation’s remembrances that these experiences seem to constitute memories in their own right.<sup>14</sup> However, the way in which the second generations recall the past is distinct from contemporary witnesses. For the new generations the past is ‘not actually mediated by recall but by imaginative investment, projection and creation’.<sup>15</sup> That’s why for Hirsch these old stories transmitted by the family usually acquire the form of enigmatic ‘fairy tales’.

*My life after* seems to offers a magnificent example of the way in which the

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<sup>12</sup> Interview conducted with Lola Arias in December 2009 (my translation).

<sup>13</sup> Hirsch, Marianne “The Generation of Postmemory”. In *Poetics Today*, 29(1), p 2008, p 103-128.

<sup>14</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, p. 106.

<sup>15</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, p 107.



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second generations connect with the past. The affective and imaginative investment that Hirsch attributes to the structure of transmission that she calls ‘postmemory’ seems to be the force that animates the play. However, Arias’ production takes this principle to such extreme that undermines all previous settings. Let’s focus for instance in the way in which Carla, one of the actresses, introduces the dead of her father, a guerrilla activist. She says: ‘I’ve heard so many versions of how my dad died that it’s as if he died several times, or as if he never died. If my dad’s life were a film, I’d like to play his stunt double’.<sup>16</sup> The actress’ testimony seems to point out precisely to that particular moment in which the frontiers among ‘truth’ and fiction start to blur away. As if it were the rehearsal of fictional movie, the whole troupe of actors performs in situ the different versions of Carla’s father’s death in a hallucinatory series full of physical power. Death number 1: “When I’m six, my mum tell me my dad died in a car accident”, says Carla. The actors make a car form chairs, turn on the fan and the radio and when they are traveling their heads suddenly drop down. Death number 2: “When I’m 14, my grandpa says that my dad died in 1975, at the battle of Monte Chingolo, in a clash between the People’s Revolutionary Army and the military”. The actors move the car made of chairs point their fingers like guns and fall into the ground. Ironically, the daughter of the police officer is the one who finally shoots Carla’s father embodied by the son of the priest. Death number 3: ‘When I am 20, I read a letter that the party sent to my mum, saying that all those wounded at Chingolo had been taken prisoners and shot three days later’, she says. The scene finishes with the actors compressing a mass grave in Buenos Aires suburbs where Carla’s father could be buried alongside with other 50 bodies with no hands. The actress declares: ‘Two years ago I did a DNA test to find out whether my dad is buried there. I am still waiting for the results’. In fact, for the last performances, this last testimony had to change. Carla finally got the results DNA and she confirmed that her father was buried in that mass grave.

While subverting the boundaries between documentary and fiction, the private and the collective, *My life after* contests the idea of testimony as the expression of an inner and private “truth”. Rather, the possibility of giving an account of one self emerges as a ritualistic performance that can be rehearsed, repeated, iterated beyond bloodline inscriptions. There is no truth but a strange malleability of textures that

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<sup>16</sup> See *My life after* (2008), by Lola Arias. Translation: Daniel Tunnard.



highlights how different versions of the past are promoted or silenced under the demands of the ‘time of the now’.<sup>17</sup> In that movement, the past becomes the canvas of a collective dissection. Precisely, this collective artifact stages an experience of transmission that goes beyond the individual subject. It emerges as the expression of a new life that erupts and multiplies the possibilities of the bodies on stage.

### **Not only the family**

Although Hirsch concedes that the structure of postmemory helps to explain in which ways the less affected participants become engaged with trauma, she also warns that postmemory risks falling back on the familiar.<sup>18</sup> In her view, the problem of this ‘structure of inter-and-trans-generational transmission’ is ‘to have one’s own stories and experiences displaced and even evacuated by those of a previous generation’.<sup>19</sup> Ultimately, Hirsch argues that this form of embodied knowledge works as the perfect strategy for the post generation ‘to assert its own victimhood alongside that of the parents’.<sup>20</sup> But is this the only way in which we can think the notion of intergenerational transmission, as a bloodline sequence of victimizing narratives? It seems to me that Arias’ piece can help us to challenge Hirsch’s idea of postmemory from a novel perspective. It can teach us how the forms of recollection of the second generations divert from the tropes of familial narratives. Precisely, *My life after* shows how generation manages to deal with its ‘overwhelming inherited memories’ in a collective way.

Although Carla’s testimony departs from the stories she inherited from her family, however, the piece – as a new object itself-- manages to go beyond this biological framework. As it becomes clear in the sequence, the ways in which the relations to the parental pasts are described, evoked, and digested are not strictly related to a regime of truth but rather to an affective and even fictional ethics and aesthetics of remembrance. Although Carla’s account seems to be displaced by those of a previous generation, within the context of the show the actors manage to build alternative strategies to recall their predecessors. In the reenactment of these scenes,

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<sup>17</sup> Benjamin, “Thesis of the Philosophy of History”, p. 255.

<sup>18</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory” p. 108.

<sup>19</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, p. 107,

<sup>20</sup> Hirsch, “The Generation of Postmemory”, p 108.





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the group is not simply representing the actress' ambivalences but exposing them in their contradictions and differences. Thereby, the final performance does not 'assert victimhood' but rather enacts how the idea of 'being affected' can be staged beyond bloodline ties. Yet, if the play manages to contest the narratives of victimizations, it is not only because of the single force of the individual stories, but rather because the collective framework in which each story relies on. Carla is not alone on the stage. There is not just an actress giving an account of a painful episode but a whole team collaborating to build her story, and being affected by its vibrations and resonances. Even more, it can be argued that it is not just the individual what is displayed on the stage but a collective force that cannot be reduced to a single body. In fact, the physical, material presence of the actors on the stage alter the rules of transmission, suggesting the creation of a new "group subjectivity", to use Manning's words, one that permits to think of another experience of transmission that goes beyond the individual subject. Yet, the new collective artifact --created by the play itself-- is the one that makes room to new, creative stories and desires to emerge. Ultimately, it opens the structure of transmission of trauma to new affiliations emerged out of the experience of mourning.

## **The kiss**

To explore this argument further I would like to focus now on a different scene: the performance of a kiss. Liza is now 30. She was almost born in a lift in Mexico City. Her father, a recognized left wing intellectual and university professor, died during the rehearsals of the piece. Although Liza thought of leaving the show she finally stayed. On stage, she explains how their parents were forced into exile in Mexico before the military coup took the power: the Argentine Anticommunist Alliance was after them. While Lisa speaks, two of the actors, Blas and Carla, assume the role of her parents. The rest of team operates a camera and the audience can follow the remade scene projected on a big screen at the back of the space. Liza gives the instructions: 'Close-up of my mum profile. In the background, my dad, out of focus with a book in his hand'. Blas says: 'We have to leave the country'. Carla: 'why?' Blas: 'Someone sent me a death threat'. Liza instructs: 'My mum blinks'. On stage and also in the big screen, Carla blinks. Blas says: 'Will you marry me?' After



an long silence, Liza gives the final instruction: ‘My parents kiss for seven and a half minutes’ Blas and Carla meet in a slow motion kiss which is extended, enlarged, subtly faked, as a part of a cheesy television soap.

While interviewing the actors in Buenos Aires they all agreed they have fun performing this scene, specially the ones in charge of the kiss. However, beyond what the team can itself acknowledge, the sequence operates as a key element to show how the transmission of trauma can break bloodline narratives. It shows how the experience of being undone by loss can help to build alternative affiliations for the future.

One of the most striking proceedings featured by the show is the collective way in which each story is performed on stage. During each section, the actors not only enact their own lives and those of their parents, but also the ones of the rest of the team. The focus could be on one actor’s personal story, but on stage we can see the entire troupe manipulating pictures, borrowing their bodies to enact the others’ remembrances, and ultimately blurring the limits between one and another. These bodies touching each other, operating through each other, eventually settle a ‘politics of touch’ where the body on stage, as Manning would say, ‘is always more than one’.<sup>21</sup> It is precisely this collective assemblage that underpins the show the one that exceeds the familial lines of transmission bringing at the foreground new generational desires. Thereby, what we come to witness are not singular stories, but a collective machine that resonates through each of the actors in an affective experience of body-to-body transmission. This trace of the collective helps to shed light to the way in which new affiliations become established on stage. Even in the case of the actors that may not have any tragic story to tell, the collective mechanism that animates the scene suggests the ways in which the experience of transmission can travel from one to another, blurring the margins between truth and fiction but also dismantling bloodline connections.

Importantly, this structure of transmission not only involves the bodies of the actors on stage, but also and fundamentally the bodies of the audience. It works as a sort of vibration that circulates on and off the stage. As Nicholas Ridout suggests, theatre can be conceived as a ‘vibratorium’, a threshold space were the affects experienced on stage can also resonate outside it, in a kind of radiation that circulates

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<sup>21</sup> Manning, Erin “The Collectivity of a Life”. In *Body & Society*, 2010, p. 123.



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back and forth the audience.<sup>22</sup> These kind of vibrations draw a form of intimacy between actors and spectators that brings into being a new form of “fleeting community”, a new idea of a “we” that quivers in the bodily encounter with the audience.<sup>23</sup>

### **A generational platform**

Two specific elements reinforce each other contributing to design this generational mechanism that challenges bloodline narratives: the particular appealing for humour and the manipulation of technology. Despite the harsh and even dramatic content of most of the testimonies, the show never loses its playful mood. As the director herself acknowledges, this was in fact an explicit aim from start. ‘I didn’t want to make a play of people crying. I didn’t want to repeat what is already there within the human rights associations. For me, it was important that the play could have this ironic perspective of our generation’, told me Arias during the interview, decoupling her work from those pieces that come from the artistic branch of the association of the victims.<sup>24</sup> However, the sense of humour that suddenly bursts into the stage partly escapes the practices of the speaking subjects. Rather, it points out to the excess that emerges when a kiss is squeezed for ages on stage. Even when the sense of loss and bereavement for Liza’s father’s recent death remains present during the whole scene, this kiss suggests a collective intensity, a surplus of energy, or even a pantomimic ostentation of the bodies of the actors that might be linked to the premise of exchanging of roles on stage. Curiously, Benjamin also conceives an intimate relationship between pantomime and mourning. For him, pantomime is the form in which mourning takes place, a sort of choreographical and ostentatious gesture that is ultimately related to certain sensuousness of the bodies coming back from loss. As Butler reminds us of, for Benjamin ‘Comedy – or more precisely: the pure joke—is the essential inner side of mourning which from time to time, like the lining of a dress

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<sup>22</sup> Nicholas Ridout, “Welcome to the Vibratorium”, In *Senses & Society*, Volume 3, 2008, p. 222.

<sup>23</sup> Ridout, “Welcome to the Vibratorium” p. 231

<sup>24</sup> I am mainly referring here to ‘Teatro por la Identidad’ (Theatre for the Identity), a movement that joins actors, directors, choreographers, and producers that for almost a decade have been working as the ‘artistic branch’ of the organisation *Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo* (Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo). The official aim is at contributing to find the 400 children that still live with falsified identities and do not know their biological origins. One of them is Juan Cabandie, Vanina Falco’s abducted brother.



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at the hem or lapel, makes its presence felt'.<sup>25</sup> It seems to me that the performance of this kiss emerges as an alternative account of mourning, a sort of artifice that laughs in loss. And it is a laughter that mocks the on-going familialism and stages instead the uncanny pleasures of being plural in grief. That kiss becomes a singular response to trauma, one that shows the biological and familial framework in its artifice, and also in its potential undoing.

Quite literally, *My life after* replaces bloodline bonds by providing a new form of affective support. It brings new desires, a new life on stage. Moreover, when this humorous style emerges entangled within certain operations of technology that also works as a crucial feature to craft a generational platform to invest the past. The constant use of cameras, screens, the live alteration of images, and vibrant solos preformed by the actors on stage, work as the scenic sources that corrupt any traditional notion of documentary theatre. Even more, this particular use of technology belongs exclusively to the material conditions of existence of the generation of young actors, those that were not actually possible during their parent's youth. As Patricia Clough argues, 'sociality is a matter of affective transmission across bodies in a machinic assemblage with technology and technical arrangements'.<sup>26</sup> In that way, *My life after* highlights the intimate connection of affects, subjectivity, sociality and technology, proposing a new machinic assemblage of bodies from where a new sense of plurality arises.

## From pictures to theatre

Nonetheless, we have to consider a slightly different problem here. Hirsch argues that photography is 'a uniquely powerful medium for the transmission of events that remain unimaginable'.<sup>27</sup> However, it seems to me that the way in which her notion of postmemory relies on the performative regime of photography as an 'unique' medium of transference also establishes its limits, partly explaining why she ultimately attaches the idea of postmemory to the family. In contrast, here I suggest

<sup>25</sup> Butler, Judith "Afterword: After loss, what then?". In *Loss* (ed David L. Eng and David Kazanjian), Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: California University Press, 2003, 470.

<sup>26</sup> Clough, Patricia, "Afterword: The Future of Affect Studies". In *Body & Society*, p. 225.

<sup>27</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", p.108.



exploring what happens when photography becomes staged as part of a bodily encounter between the actors and the audience that takes paces in the shared space and time addressed by theatre. Could then performance become also the territory of the event, the unexpected, and ultimately an important medium for the transmission of trauma that breaks with the familial language? This is exactly the process that *My life after* allows us to explore.

For Hirsch, photography not only allows to see but also to *touch* the past. 'Family photos bridge separation and facilitate identification and affiliation' becoming 'screens' –'spaces of projection and approximation and protection'-- that are even capable of resembling 'specters reanimating their dead subjects with indexical and iconic force', she argues.<sup>28</sup> It seems to me that *My life after* also *touches* the past, but in a quite different way. Not as a screen suddenly captured by specters, but as a time machine that entangles different temporalities proposing a new relationality of the bodies on stage. The piece enacts a politics of touch that queers material evidence to establish a new idea of being together. As Manning argues, 'to touch is to share. This sharing takes place as a trace, a detour (...) To touch is to open us to a story we have not yet heard, to an unworked work, a narrative without a beginning and an end'.<sup>29</sup> Through the re-enactment of familial episodes of the past, the piece settles a notion of touch as a form of sharing. The past emerges not as an inert object but rather as a new resource that has also the capacity to rewrite and shape the present. Yet, the piece touches the past while staging a social tie emerged in *Jetztzeit*. Not only it touches the past but shows how the past can touch us in the present. It illustrates to what extent the acts of touching and being touched often seem to happen out of time and puts us out of place. Let's explore this argument further.

To some extent, Arias' piece departs from pictures. As the director accounts, 'the whole process of building the show started by looking at these pictures together with the actors and thinking of the enigmas that everyone has about around one's own childhood. These enigmas become stuck to these images'. However, and despite the pictures serve as an initial moment of exploration, *My life after* produces a collective dispositif in which those childhood images are mobilized and subverted. The pictures are put into action, contrasted, displaced, and researched in their moments of

<sup>28</sup> Hirsch, "The Generation of Postmemory", p. 116.

<sup>29</sup> Manning, Erin., *Politics of Touch*, p. 13.



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awkwardness in a collective theatrical forum. We can see for instance, bubbles in Vanina's male relatives' moustaches denouncing their 'policemen attitude', or a big red arrow highlighting a pack of cigarettes next to Liza's 8-month pregnant mother; minor interventions that far from 'resurrecting' the past bring light to a generational examination of it.

From the rehearsal period, the director attempted to put this generational machine in action. As Arias accounts, 'During the first rehearsals, the actors just sit down and listen to the story of the other. But I also wanted to make the six stories participate of each other. I wanted them to feel that these stories were also theirs. I wanted all helping to tell the story of the others and making them happen. I will place the picture, I will manipulate the camera, I will be your copilot so as you can re-enact the scene that you need', she says.<sup>30</sup> Thereby, the images that were part of individual family albums become animated with new life. They become part of a new generational creation, a singular response to trauma that ultimately stages a way of being in the world-together in a 'willed present', as Manning would say.<sup>31</sup> Thereby, these scenes not only allow us to touch the past, but also, and more importantly, to feel it in its distortions, presenting a new sense of generational support emerged through a collective assemblage produced in real time on stage. In this sense, *My life after* intervenes in photography as a medium, corrupting the technique as a pre-established form. Pictures work as a medium of transference for this affective contact across time still anchored in the present. They show the extent to which we cannot master what the past will turn out to do to us. Hence, the episodes that finally reach the stage seem to flash up from an abjected closet, as if the unconscious of photography were enacted in the present time to reveal the long-term secrecies and oscillating textures embodied by the childhood images.<sup>32</sup> In doing so, *My life after* stages not a traditional family album but rather a new affective artifact that shows the ambivalence and fragilities of memory and the way in which they become appropriated in a new generational inscription.

<sup>30</sup> Interview conducted with Lola Arias in December 2009. My translation.

<sup>31</sup> Manning, Erin, *Politics of Touch* p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> In his book, Ridout draws on the idea of performance as the backstage of theatre to relate it to the specific situation of the face-to-face encounter. See Nicholas Ridout *Stage Fright, Animals and other Theatrical Problems*, Cambridge University Press, 2006.



## A document of national trauma

Even during the dictatorship pictures have been important visual resources for survivors and activist to claim for recognition. As the pioneer trajectory of the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo illustrates showing the pictures of their missing children was a way to give a name to their loss. On the other hand, diverse groups of artists and activists have crafted the shadowy figure of the silhouette to portrait the magnitude of the horror. As Ana Longoni suggests, silhouettes and pictures have been part of differential visual strategies. While the silhouettes have worked as a way of transference for activists occupying the place of the missing, pictures have been claimed from those directly affected in the seek to individualise and personalise their loss.<sup>33</sup> *My life after* changes brings the family album on stage to propose a collective dismantling of their individual authority. Moreover, it also evokes the silhouettes using the actual bodies as a screening to project the images of the missing. To some extent, the piece draws from this double visual repertoire, combing both strategies to illustrate a new platform of generational memory.

The way in which the piece draws from pictures also troubles traditional acts of witnessing and the kind of visual evidence that these images can provide. In the context of the show, pictures are forced to share the power of evidence with fictional sections such as the dreams that the actors have in relation to their fathers, or their fantasies around the actors' own deaths. Thus, pictures become the vehicle for intertextual references that combine collective generational investments with a broader cultural repertoire. Instead of relying on the static authority of a picture held within some individual hands, *My life after* proposes a collective encounter with the traces of the past in front of an audience that bears witness in real time. Located in the new theatrical context, those pictures, which were part of innocent childhood albums, could experience an ominous turn.

Let's focus for instance on a specific image projected on the big screen on stage. It was taken in 1978 at the height of the dictatorial period. A smiling middle-age woman baths a new-born baby in front of the little girl who slightly out of place just stares at the scene. Vanina says: 'This is me, aged 4, looking at my mother

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<sup>33</sup> See Longoni, Ana "Fotos y Siluetas: dos estrategias en la representacion de los desaparecidos" (forthcoming).



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bathing my brother. In this photo I look happy but confused, and I really can't understand where my brother came from, as I never saw my mother pregnant'. The seemingly innocent picture not only acts as a reminder that at the aged of 4 Vanina was an actual witness of the weird situation of a new brother brought home without explanations, but also it provides visual evidence of the possible criminal act in which the family was involved. Like a fleeting Benjaminian flash, the picture appears at a moment of danger revealing secrecies that were not known at the moment it was taken. But it does not 'disappear irretrievable'.<sup>34</sup> Placed in a stage thirty years later, it reconfigures the encounter with the past showing its potentiality to become always anew. Projected on a big screen, the image also amplifies its resonances: it becomes a public document that disturbs the putative innocent setting, transforming the familial space into a poignant scenario of the national trauma. In that way, the picture links the intimate with the public, proposing a backwards connection between the hidden net of complicities and silences which pervaded Falco's home, and the violent national context from where that baby was ultimately abducted. Furthermore, it offers visual evidence of Vanina's father's capacity to inhabit different worlds reconfiguring the actress relation with her own childhood while posing new demands towards the present.

Within the operation of theatre, a single photo could be conceived as a document in which evidence is at the time hidden and reveled. One picture can show, as Benjamin would say, the extent to which 'nothing is lost for history'.<sup>35</sup> Ironically, the image of that baby, who 33 years later is pursuing his appropriator in court, reveals to what extent the past in not fixed, given or inert but capable of becoming always anew. In fact, as Elizabeth Grosz would say, the new staging of the bathing scene confirms that 'it is the present that writes the past', it shows how the past is always potential to be 'otherwise'.<sup>36</sup> It can even be argued that the picture of a baby being bathed during the dictatorial period carries with itself an image of the past that is looking for redemption. And this redemption becomes enacted each time in which *My life after* is performed on stage, as if each performance were a repetitive but still distinctive episode of a progressive chain of *Judgment Days*.

<sup>34</sup> Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", p. 255.

<sup>35</sup> Benjamin, "Thesis on the Philosophy of History", p. 246.

<sup>36</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, "Histories of a Feminist Future". In *Signs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2000, p. 1020.





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Within the technology of memory proposed by the show, the seemingly blameless image becomes the ‘material object connected to lost past that they serve as the site of dense and often unprocessed feelings’.<sup>37</sup> Projected in time, this picture diverts in uncanny reverberations. Thereby, the picture not only provides witness to the secrecies and uncertainties that pervaded Vanina’s home but also serves as touchstone for the relationship between a father and his daughter. In the public context of theatre, the image opposes way in which Vanina risked her own intelligibility –leaving her family to join her girlfriend—in strong contrast with the double life of the father who still today denies his criminal actions.

Yet, *My life after* does not deal with static and isolated images but rather with the ‘entire situation’ that involves the reexamination and reenactment of these images within a communal environment. This new theatrical situation not only includes the physical presence of the actors trembling on stage and confessing their own ambivalences in relation to those images, but also the breaths, sighs, occasional giggling and weeping of the spectators. In fact, the audience not only bears witness to the unforeseen flits of the past, but also it becomes affected in its resonances and queries. Ultimately, while putting the pictures into flesh, *My life after* opens the structure of transmission not only to the ones who are on stage but also to the audience. It provides a sharp piercing in those points of memory that cross on both sides of the stage subverting the static family album while creating a new fleeting space of sharing. The show stages an archive of awkward feelings capable of interrogating not only the past but also the future. In doing so, the piece draws a new community where traumatic memories can pass from the individual to the collective, building new affiliations in common.

As a result, the theatrical operation performed by *My life after* can help to detach the structure of postmemory from the tropes of the family. While the touch of photography circulates in one direction, the show allows touching the past but also being touched by it in a dynamic circuit that vibrates back and forth within the audience multiplying its effects in an endless chain that has no master. To put it in Manning’s words, that touch, that sensing of the bodies in movement produces a ‘new

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<sup>37</sup> Cvetkovich, Ann “Drawing the Archive in Alison Bechdel’s *Fun Home*”. In *Women’s Studies Quarterly*: 1 & 2, Spring/Summer, 2008, p 118.



relationality’, impossible to find during the isolated contemplation of a picture.<sup>38</sup> The affective language of theatre --which the same as Hirsch accounts for the language of the family, relies on the idioms of sights, the body, and the nonverbal and non-cognitive acts of transfer<sup>39</sup>— can provide a novel mechanism to operate the transmission of trauma beyond biological ties. As Arias’s piece comes to portrait, the bodies of the actors enacting contradictory stories on stage show to what extent ‘the past always gives rise to multiple stories, histories undertaken from different perspectives of the present’.<sup>40</sup> And these differential accounts of the past can also build new affiliations for the present. *My life after* puts in circulation all this multiplicity without trying to exhaust it. In doing, so it also brings on stage, what Grosz calls, other ‘conceivable futures’.<sup>41</sup>

Towards the end of the piece, the actors are compelled to imagine their own deaths under the threat of a plastic gun carried by Moreno, Mariano’s 4-year-old son. The surreal, politically inconvenient and colorful options contribute to fan ‘the spark of hope in the past’ envisaged by Benjamin, extending its spangles not only to the second generation of survivors but also to those who are open to receive them from their seats.

## The sofa

In *Precarious Life* Butler suggests that grief has the capacity to un-do the subject enabling new attachments and configurations. Curiously, in one of *My life after*’s last scenes, the entire troupe of actors lays together on a big sofa. Vanina, the daughter of the intelligence officer, sits in the middle. In her hands, she has the records of the trial that her abducted brother initiated against her father. ‘The trial has been going on for 5 years and it still hasn’t finished’, she says.<sup>42</sup> The troupe examines the files listing the different pieces of evidence: forgery of ID, forgery of birth certificate, DNA analysis, police file, Vanina’s parents’ statements and that of her abducted brother. ‘I wanted to make a statement but the law says that a child can’t

<sup>38</sup> Manning, *The Politics of Touch*, p. 13.

<sup>39</sup> Hirsch, 2008, p. 112.

<sup>40</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, “Histories of a Feminist Future”. In *Signs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2000, p. 1020.

<sup>41</sup> Grosz, Elizabeth, “Histories of a Feminist Future”. In *Signs*, Vol. 25, No. 4, 2000, p. 1020.

<sup>42</sup> See *My life after* (2008), by Lola Arias. Translation: Daniel Tunnard.



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make any statement against their own parents', she says. Nonetheless, the legal situation changed after the release of the play. In December 2009, a judge allowed Vanina to present her testimony against her father.<sup>43</sup> Ironically, the theatrical piece was used as legal evidence.

Beyond the compelling content of the scene, what it captured me the most was the disposition of the bodies on stage, the choregraphical configuration of the actors sitting together on the same couch. They were all very close to each other, as shielding an unattended 'victim' of the dictatorship, the daughter of a perpetrator. In a very uncanny way the whole scene reminded me of a family picture. It had the recognizable atmosphere of a family posing in an ordinary living room for the camera's shot. However, this 'picture' does not correspond to any traditional family album. With no blood connecting each other, the youthful team of actors enacts a spectral community emerged from loss, the community of those who partake in and debate a common destiny. In that way, the last scene displaces the monopoly of suffering championed by the associations of the victims, helping to conceive a broader idea of being inflicted. In doing so, *My life after* challenges the traditional forms of kinship governed by the linkage of blood supported by the familial normativity staging a new way of being together. In fact, the disposition of the bodies on stage can also be read as the material corporeality of a post-kinship structure of an inter-generational and inter-corporeal transmission of trauma.

Arias' production starts with clothes and so does it finish. Only that this time the pieces of old fabric are not only laying in a messy pile, but also gently covering or 'dressing' a row of empty chairs that occupies the foreground of the space. Presumably, the chairs evoke the bodies of those who are absent. However, the clothes that now dress them have been animated by new life. Amazingly enough, Judith Butler follows Benjamin's account of loss to suggest that 'mourning emerges as the lining of the dress, where the dress is, as it were laughing'.<sup>44</sup> It seems to me that *My life after* also highlights this encounter, the sensuousness of an encounter between the artifact and the flesh, between laughter and loss through an old pair of jeans that

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<sup>43</sup> The judicial decision that was taken in December 23<sup>rd</sup> 2009 not only was important for Vanina's case it also allowed other children of perpetrators to present their cases against their parents. See <http://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/soy/1-1283-2010-03-21.html>

<sup>44</sup> See Judith Butler, 'Afterword: After loss, what then?' in *Loss* (ed David L. Eng and David Kazanjian), 2003, Berkely, Los Angeles, London: California University Press (pp. 467-473). 470



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comes as a gift of the past. Moreover, it is an encounter that has been produced collectively and beyond melancholia, just by executing the possibility of being singular in plural, a praxis of co-appearance together on stage.

In that way, *My life after* proposes not only a dynamic vehicle for addressing trauma but also to transform it. It provides a space for exploration of traumatic remembrances in a shared space and time. In doing so, it recalls the idea of a public forum which bears witness to unexpected affects emerged in the aftermath of trauma. Importantly, this experiential choreography does not operate through the structures of language but through the affective vibrations of these bodies being plural on and off the stage. In this way, the piece decouples the very notion of memory from a singularly bounded human body, staging how the past can be touched from a generational co-enactment of affects. Ultimately, the piece suggests that the ones who have been affected by the dictatorship are not only the familial victims but also those who behold the touch of the past and assume it in their own bodies.

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