To Be and Not to Be: Presence/Absence of the Disappeared in *Man Facing Southeast*

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So, without our perceiving it, or perceiving it, but without our realizing it, Buenos Aires was awash in dead people; the wake left by their bodies had a life of its own.
—Sergio Chejfec, *The Planets*

1. Introduction

In the middle 1980s, Argentina was just waking up from the nightmare of the generals' Dirty War, the period of State terror 1976–1983, during which up to 30,000 people disappeared in the dictatorship's torture chambers and secret detention centers. The public trial of the military juntas had just finished after months of gruesome testimonies by survivors and relatives of the disappeared and a number of high-ranking officers were found guilty of human rights violations and sentenced to prison terms. The bookstores reported brisk sales of the first edition of *Nunca Más* [Never Again] written by the official commission documenting the crimes committed by the dictatorship. For the first time, the public was learning in horrible detail about the military's well-planned campaign to abduct, torture, and secretly dispose of the bodies of thousands of citizens. The Mothers of Plaza de Mayo and other human rights groups, who had fought for years to bring attention to the plight of the disappeared, were now front-page news as Argentineans at last acknowledged that the unthinkable had taken place.

The ghosts of the recent past started to surface—ghosts that haunted Argentina then as much as they still haunt it today, with the collective imagination facing the unresolved (perhaps unsolvable) question of the disappeared. The physical wounds were visible and promptly treatable, but the psychological wounds persisted and were resistant to treatment. In an atmosphere of disbelief and horror, society began a long process of accepting the dual status of the disappeared as victims who were physically absent, but at the same time present in the collective imagination. The absence of the bodies impeded the normal mourning process and precluded closure, with traumatic consequences.

In facing trauma, individuals deal with the recurrence of symptoms in two fundamental ways: by acknowledging the symptoms and placing them at the center of a visible representation or by hiding them so well that inevitably our attention is directed to their absence. Psychotherapists counseling relatives of the disappeared reported, "[The victims'] simultaneous presence-absence or existence-non existence functions as a zone of psychotic ambiguity" (Kordon and Edelman 26). As Daniel Kersner points out, "We Argentineans didn't have 30,000 disappeared victims; we Argentineans coexist with 30,000 disappeared victims" (134, my emphasis).

The cities were filled with the undead dead, the victims who were overwhelmingly present precisely because of their unexplained absence. In a perfect illustration of Freud's notion of the

sinister, everything that was familiar presented itself as eerie and everything that was eerie presented itself as familiar. Argentine author Sergio Chejfec illustrates this persistence of trauma in his paradigmatic novel *Los planetas* [*The Planets*] (1999). In it, the invisible presence of a friend who disappeared still influences the protagonist's life twenty years later, not unlike the way planets invisible to the naked eye may be discerned by observing their pull on other planets' orbits. Chejfec asks what would happen if we saw an ashtray fall to the floor and break and when we went to pick it up, only a half was there, the other half having completely vanished. He concludes that since logic rejects this outcome, the object's simultaneous existence and non-existence would terrify us. This is a powerful symbol of how the dual absence/presence of the victims of State terror still haunts Argentineans today.

The psychological wounds left by the disappeared in Argentina's collective imagination posed and still pose today an existential dilemma as dramatic as that of Hamlet's contemplating death, with one critical difference. Whereas Hamlet pondered whether "to be or not to be," the Argentine victims, by their presence/absence, posit the dilemma of how "to be and simultaneously not to be."

2. State Terror and Argentine Cinema

State terror and its effects have been the direct or indirect subject of many films. Documentaries include Andrés Di Tella's *Desaparición forzada de personas* [*The Forced Disappearance of People*] (1989) and *Montoneros, una historia* [*A History of the Montoneros*] (1994); David Blaustein's *Cazadores de utopías* [*Utopia Hunters*] (1996) and *Botín de guerra*[*War Booty*] (1999); Andrés Habegger's *Historias cotidianas* [*Everyday Stories*] (2000); Pablo Osores's, Roberto Testa's and Nicolás Wainszelbaum's *Flores de septiembre* [*September Flowers*] (2003), and Albertina Carri's *Los rubios* [*The Blonds*] (2003), among others.

In the transition years between the dictatorship and democracy, some feature films alluded allegorically to the authoritarian practices of the recent past. For example, in Adolfo Aristarain's *Tiempo de revancha* [*Time for Revenge*] (1983), a worker cuts off his tongue so as not to speak, a clear allusion to the silence imposed on Argentineans during the dictatorship. Around the same time, María Luisa Bemberg's *Camila* (1984) recounted the true story of a Catholic priest and a Buenos Aires socialite executed in the 1830s for their illicit affair. However, the film was commonly interpreted as an allegory of the military's authoritarian mentality in the 1970s.

One of the first features to speak directly about the Dirty War, Luis Puenzo's Oscar-winning *La historia oficial* [*The Official Story*] (1985) tells the agonizing tale of a woman who gradually learns her adoptive daughter was taken from a disappeared couple. Later films dealt with different aspects of State terror—exile, the disappeared, the recovery of lost children—notably: Fernando Solanas's *Sur* [*South*] (1988); Héctor Olivera's *La noche de los lápices* [*Night of the Pencils*] (1988); Lita Stantic's *Un muro de silencio* [*Wall of Silence*] (Argentina-Mexico, 1993); Jeanine Meerapfel's and Alcides Chiesa's *Amigo mío* [*My Friend*] (Argentina-Germany, 1993–95); and Manane Rodríguez's *Pasos perdidos* [*Lost Steps*] (Uruguay, 2001). Of the films confronting the Argentine audience with the most painful elements of the recent past, Marco Bechis's brilliant *Garaje Olimpo* [*Olympic Garage*] (1999) touched a nerve by telling the story of a torturer who falls in love with a female prisoner in a secret detention camp. Subsequently,

Bechis has continued in the same vein with his treatment of children separated from their disappeared parents and siblings in *Figli – Hijos* [*Children*] (2002).

3. *Man Facing Southeast* and the Disappeared

On the face of it, it would seem that Subiela's *Man Facing Southeast* (1985) could hardly be included among the filmic representations of the Dirty War. However, the psychological wounds caused by the traumatic, ghostly dual nature of the disappeared as present/absent influenced the way the story is told as well as the way Argentine audiences consciously or unconsciously interpret the film.

Fredric Jameson asserts in *The Political Unconscious* that we should read all cultural artifacts as "socially symbolic acts" and that any aesthetic act (art in general) is an ideological act "with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions" (20, 79). My interpretation of the film, therefore, will view it as "an essentially allegorical act, which consists of rewriting a given text in terms of a particular interpretive master code" (Jameson 10). In this case, in a nation still haunted by its past, the image of the disappeared resurfaces endlessly as the recurring symptom of unresolved trauma. Therefore, most cultural artifacts from the period in one way or another, by allusion or omission, always refer back to that trauma.

Not surprisingly, Subiela's film does so both in its explicit references to the desaparecidos as well as in its aesthetic treatment overall. The recent past is the unsolvable contradiction that both weaves the story and lurks behind it. Cinema—as other art forms—always resorts to allegory in its attempt to represent the irrepressible symptoms of trauma when the subject cannot be spoken about directly, or when perhaps the director was unaware of those symptoms. Argentine film critic Gustavo Noriega echoes this view when he states that "Man Facing Southeast… is undoubtedly a film immersed in the substance of that nightmare, that although it relives it, from the moment of its encounter with the spectator it clearly keeps it in the past" (47).

An initial clue in this regard is that virtually all the main characters have suffered the trauma of disappearance. Rantés, the extraterrestrial (or hallucinated) patient, claims to have come from a planet sixty thousand light years away, presumably to observe the human race. This alien, a solitary man who appears out of nowhere and has no past, thanks to his enigmatic absence, draws everybody's attention at the psychiatric hospital. As Rantés goes about his days, more and more people in the community come to see him, treating him almost as a celebrity. The protagonist, psychiatrist Dr. Denis, is burdened by a sense of loss, always saturnine to the point of never cracking even the slightest smile. He seems to be—as Rantés points out—an emotionally detached, dehumanized man going through the motions of living. His house is emptily lived in and we infer that his wife and daughter fled from him. The asylum's director is so tormented by his guilty conscience regarding the painful reality where he lives, that he chooses to resort frequently to voluntary anesthesia. Denis's children, we find out, are both incommunicated: the teenager by then accustomed to not speaking with her father, the little boy to whom the mother has failed to make any mention of the father since their separation six years earlier.

4. The Gaze of Horror

The viewer may wonder whether all this is a strange coincidence or if Subiela has built too explicit a symbolic universe. However, a good argument for interpreting these characters as icons of the troubled past is that they do resemble some of the archetypal characters found in testimonial accounts, documentary films, and other fictional accounts about State terror. For example, in the film, the gaze reflects the paranoia of the recent past. Military surveillance (legal or illegal) was so pervasive that the political prisoners' experience being under the gaze of their captors permeated Argentine culture during and after the dictatorship. That is why so many artworks express the sense of being watched at all times, even after the dictatorship ended. This paranoia informs one of the strongest metaphors in the film. The camera lens represents the eye which replicates the repressive gaze of the State officials who spied on the population with absolute impunity.

One example is the scene in which Denis drives down the street with Rantés and Mejía, another patient. Seated in the backseat like two children, Rantés asks the doctor to slow down so that he is able to contemplate the passersby at leisure. Of course, by slowing down, the balked pedestrians are forced to turn their faces towards the car's window where Rantés is sitting, irritated that the driver's recklessness could cause an accident.

Rantés stops to look, and they look back; the surprised or angry people stare at the camera and thus at the viewer. It isn't difficult to establish a parallel between this scene and the modus operandi of the police and military agents who took away their victims semicovertly. As uniformed or plainclothes men pushed people into Ford Falcons, the abductors were often stared at by neighbors or passersby in bewilderment and fear. In Subiela's scene, the car stops before children in a schoolyard and their faces suddenly turn serious as they fix their eyes on the camera lens. It is as if the children sensed danger and didn't quite know how to respond to something very real yet frighteningly lacking explanation. Although Suriel del Castillo does not expound on the interpretation, this scene's "dense, stifling atmosphere that he manages to construct" provokes his "direct association between Rantés and the disappeared in a time of terror and clandestine repression" (2).

In another scene, the gaze creates a troubling effect on the spectator's psyche. After Rantés unexpectedly conducts a Bach suite in a public park and a huge crowd gathers to follow his moves in a Faustian frenzy, a rock barrier crashes down, leaving many people injured. Denis turns to his patient and accuses him of hypnotizing or inciting the crowd. Overwhelmed by the psychiatrist's questions, Rantés is surrounded by dozens of arguing people. In panic, the alien bellows and the crowd falls silent. Everybody freezes as if under a spell and they all turn their eyes on that eccentric man who now stares defiantly at the camera. Subiela's technique here is similar to the Argentine film *La historia oficial* [*The Official Story*] wherein Gaby Giménez, the lost daughter of a desaparecido mother and raised by another family, stares at the camera in the final scene as if confronting the viewer directly and in so doing forced many people to reflect on this horrifying historical reality. The camera confronts us with its demand for witnessing and justice.

5. Surveillance and the Camera

While the gaze expresses the psychological impact of State terror, another emblematic image that emerged from the Dirty War was that of surveillance cameras. In the 1970s, people instinctively avoided government buildings, military stations, and in fact all places where police might be present. Fear of being detained without charges was pervasive. The full terror of the security apparatus was concealed behind an official facade that appeared innocuous to the naked eye, but that failed to hide its true sinister nature. Filmmakers in the 1980s often alluded to this fear, representing the surveillance camera as a ubiquitous eye watching everything.

Man Facing Southeast is no exception. There are constant references to eyes that scrutinize and reflect the constant anxiety caused by that invisible presence of the State. The viewer feels the sensation of being under surveillance, precisely because the camera adopts that panoptic gaze. This is done not only through the perspective of the lens but also through mirrors, windows, and other reflective surfaces. At times, characters even discover their own reflections watching them. The idea of being confronted with one's own image—an image transformed and distorted by trauma—is one that resonates in many post-dictatorship works.

The notion of the "panoptic" recalls Michel Foucault's famous metaphor for modern systems of social repression. But in the Argentine context, this theoretical construct takes on a literal meaning. There was no need for a central tower where guards observed prisoners; society itself had become a panopticon, a space where surveillance was dispersed, secretive, and ultimately deadly.

This paranoia permeates the entire film, reinforcing the aesthetic form in which the psychological echoes of State terror are represented. Rantés's presence destabilizes the norm, but the true disquietude comes from the sense that nothing can escape the gaze—whether human, divine, institutional, or cinematic.

6. The Disappeared Body

One of the most chilling aspects of the Dirty War was the fate of the bodies of the disappeared. Their absence—simultaneous with their overwhelming psychological presence—becomes a point of obsession both for those who lost their loved ones and for society at large. Argentine culture in the 1980s and beyond became a vast exercise in deciphering the traces left by these missing bodies.

In the film, the "absent presence" of Rantés evokes the disappeared, not in a literal but in a symbolic sense. His lack of a past, of documentation, of a verifiable identity, echoes the erased identity of the victims. His body is not subjected to torture or destruction, but it is subjected to a different form of erasure—one tied to psychiatric medicine. In some ways, his institutionalization mirrors the clandestine detention centers. He is isolated, studied, interrogated, and ultimately punished for being incomprehensible to the system.

The film seems conscious of this echo. In a pivotal scene, Denis tries to make sense of Rantés by defining him through absence: absence of origin, absence of history, absence of purpose. But at the same time, Rantés exerts a gravitational pull on everyone around him. He is, like the disappeared, someone whose absence defines the contours of presence.

7. Music, Madness, and Resistance

Music occupies a central role in *Man Facing Southeast*, and its connection to madness becomes a recurring theme. Rantés conducts imaginary orchestras, listens intently to sounds others ignore, and speaks of music as though it were a pathway to transcendence. In a society traumatized by silencing and fear, music emerges as a metaphor for resistance—an insistence on expression.

During the dictatorship, music had been censored, banned, regulated. Certain genres and artists were targeted; even foreign records were confiscated. Subiela's film reclaims music as a space of liberation, but also as a site of contradiction. Rantés's musicality is simultaneously celebrated and pathologized. His creative impulses are seen as disorders by the psychiatric institution, echoing how dissent had been labeled subversion, madness, or danger by the military government.

When Rantés conducts Bach in the park, the collective ecstasy of the crowd becomes threatening to the authorities. Crowds were dangerous during the dictatorship; gatherings could be dispersed, arrested, or worse. Subiela inverts this dynamic: here, the authorities fear the beauty of collective joy. The ecstatic communion between conductor and crowd evokes the communal rituals of protest, the plazas filled with mothers, students, workers—bodies gathering in defiance of silence.

This scene also anticipates Rantés's fate. His expression of individuality and communal inspiration cannot be tolerated in the institutional logic of control. Ultimately, his creativity becomes a form of rebellion, and like most forms of rebellion in the film, it is met with repression.

8. The Ethics of Witnessing

One of the film's strongest intertexts with post-dictatorship Argentina is its meditation on witnessing. In a society emerging from atrocity, the idea of bearing witness—listening, seeing, acknowledging—became a central ethical imperative. Survivors, relatives, judges, journalists, and artists were confronted with the need to testify and to interpret testimony.

Denis embodies the conflicted witness. As a psychiatrist, he is trained to observe, listen, interpret. Yet he resists witnessing Rantés in any meaningful way. Instead, he seeks to categorize, diagnose, and ultimately neutralize him. Denis's inability to see Rantés as a subject parallels the blindness—or chosen blindness—many Argentineans had during the dictatorship.

Rantés continually demands that Denis confront reality: human misery, loneliness, violence, apathy. Denis continually deflects. Their interactions dramatize the national struggle over how to remember and how to face the past. Denis is a witness who refuses to witness.

The film asks: What does it mean to see? What does it mean to refuse to see? And what are the consequences of such refusal?

In the post-dictatorship context, these questions acquire unmistakable moral weight. The ethical responsibility to witness—and to be transformed by witnessing—extends beyond Denis, beyond the characters, to the film's audience itself.

9. Violence and the Institutional Body

Violence in *Man Facing Southeast* is not spectacular or graphic; instead, it is bureaucratic, medicalized, and internalized. This aligns closely with the institutional logic of the Dirty War, where violence was structured, rationalized, and hidden behind procedural façades. Torture chambers were disguised as offices; detention centers were embedded in otherwise ordinary city blocks; repression was administered with administrative language.

In the film, the psychiatric hospital is both a refuge and a prison. Its walls echo the walls of the clandestine centers. The treatments inflicted on Rantés—electroshock, confinement, forced medication—are forms of violence disguised as clinical necessity. Although different in scale from State terror, they are parallel in structure. Both rely on dehumanization, secrecy, and the authority to define who is sane, who is dangerous, who must be contained.

The final electroshock sequence is the clearest invocation of this parallel. Denis, who initially wanted to understand Rantés, capitulates to the logic of the institution. In so doing, he participates in erasing the Other. This moment resonates eerily with the testimonies of medical professionals during the dictatorship who facilitated or ignored torture, who signed false death certificates, or who collaborated with repressors.

Subiela is not equating psychiatric treatment with political torture, but he is drawing attention to the mechanisms by which institutions normalize violence. In both domains, the body becomes the site upon which power inscribes itself.

10. Presence/Absence and the Figure of the Alien

Rantés's ambiguous identity—alien, hallucination, patient, prophet—functions as the central metaphor through which the film explores presence and absence. His existence defies verification. He appears suddenly, has no documents, no past, no origin. Yet his presence exerts undeniable force. This tension reflects precisely the unresolved status of the disappeared.

In post-dictatorship Argentina, the disappeared persist in a liminal space: neither fully present nor fully absent, neither dead nor alive. Their memory haunts the living, shaping politics, ethics, and culture. Rantés embodies this liminality. He is an outsider whose strangeness makes visible

the emptiness within the so-called normal order. His very being exposes the fragility of the structures meant to contain him.

Subiela's decision to frame him as an extraterrestrial is not merely whimsical. The alien figure allows the film to negotiate trauma indirectly, sidestepping explicit political representation while still invoking the affective logic of disappearance. The alien becomes a cipher for the unassimilable, the inexplicable, the vanished.

As with the disappeared, Rantés's disappearance at the end is doubly traumatic. It is both expected and shocking. His absence is not just physical; it destabilizes the world he briefly transformed. Denis is left in the position of countless relatives of the disappeared: holding the memory of someone whose existence cannot be proven yet cannot be denied.

11. The Ending: Failure of Recognition

The conclusion of *Man Facing Southeast* is one of the most resonant moments in Argentine cinema of the period. Following the electroshock treatments, Rantés disappears from the hospital. No body is found, no explanation is given. Denis searches for him, but the institution provides only silence. The ambiguity of this ending is central: the viewer is given no closure, no resolution, no confirmation of Rantés's identity or fate.

This mirrors the structure of unresolved trauma in the national narrative. The absence of the disappeared's bodies means the absence of narrative closure. The film's refusal to provide a clear answer becomes an ethical stance: it resists the temptation to sanitize loss by wrapping it in a definitive ending.

Denis's failure of recognition is complete. He has failed to see Rantés while he was present, and he fails again to understand the meaning of his absence. The psychiatrist, who should be the figure of insight, becomes the figure of blindness. His final gesture—standing alone, bewildered, in the same spaces once transformed by Rantés—emphasizes the cost of refusing to witness.

The closing shot, lingering on emptiness, evokes the countless empty chairs at Argentine tables, the empty dwellings, the empty spaces left by the disappeared. In doing so, the film articulates a cinematic grammar of absence that resonates far beyond its narrative frame.

12. Conclusion

Although *Man Facing Southeast* does not explicitly depict the clandestine centers, the torture, or the disappearances of the Dirty War, it is thoroughly permeated by their psychic residue. Its themes—surveillance, institutional power, the gaze, the ethics of witnessing, the presence/absence of bodies—reflect the structure of trauma left by State terrorism. The film's ambiguity is not a limitation but a strategy. It creates a space where unspeakable realities can be approached obliquely.

Subiela's film exemplifies how Argentine cinema of the 1980s grappled with the tension between remembering and forgetting, between acknowledging horror and retreating into metaphor. By

constructing Rantés as an absent presence, the film mirrors the national experience of living with the disappeared—those who "are" and yet "are not," whose non-being continues to shape the being of the living.

Ultimately, *Man Facing Southeast* is not a film about aliens or madness. It is a film about human responsibility in the aftermath of devastation. It challenges viewers to recognize the traces of trauma that persist, often in disguised or allegorical forms, and to confront the ethical imperative of witnessing.