

DIANA TAYLOR

**DISAPPEARING
acts**

**Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in
Argentina's "Dirty War"**

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A C T S

Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"

D I A N A T A Y L O R

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appear on the last printed page of this book.

For Marina and my mama, Donnie
For Alexei and Poppa Bob
For Susanita linda and El General
And, as always, for Eric

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Preface



Public spectacle is a locus and mechanism of communal identity through collective imaginings that constitute “nation” as “an imagined political community.” I focus on Argentina’s “Dirty War” (1976–83) to explore how public spectacle both builds and dismantles a sense of community and nation-ness, how it both forges and erases images of national and gender identity, how it stirs and manipulates desire, allowing a population insight into events and blinding it to the meaning of its situation, how it presents both an invitation to cross the line between actor and spectator, and a prohibition. But, in a way, this is not so much a study “about” Argentina as about how a small group of power brokers (in this case the military) engenders and controls a viewing public through the performance of national identity, traditions, and goals.

This study began when I inadvertently crossed the actor/spectator line and became suddenly caught up in the Argentine spectacle of gender and nationalism. Like an unsuspecting spectator, I stumbled onto the wrong play. It began

on a visit to Buenos Aires and it has led me to various kinds of border crossings—geographic, theoretical, political, and disciplinary. While the divides first presented themselves as both politically charged and irreconcilable—U.S./Argentina; “outsider”/“insider”; voyeur/witness; theatre/politics—I’ve come to view them as conceptual barriers that block political understanding. Good fences don’t make good neighbors in my book. Rather than see my work as a back-and-forth motion *across* borders, I’ve attempted to follow the lead of performance border artists in expanding the in-betweenness, the shared spaces of the border itself.

Disappearing Acts is an interdisciplinary work that draws on performance, feminist, Latin American, and cultural studies to analyze spectacles of gender and nation-ness in the context of the Dirty War. I’ve included public events from various arenas: military parades and soccer games, the weekly marches by the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the “Open Theatre” festival. Given the atrocity of the political context, characterized by state-organized “disappearances,” abductions, torture, and murder, the title *Disappearing Acts* may sound oddly flippant. What do cheap theatrics and magic shows have to do with human annihilation? Too much, unfortunately. The title is meant to conjure up not only the military junta’s blatant uses of theatricality to terrorize its population (the “disappearances” being the most devastating and grotesque) but to signal the interconnectedness among the various disappearances taking place simultaneously. Just as human beings disappeared, so did civil society. Discursive absences led to empty streets and to missing people, just as missing people and empty streets led to more discursive absences. What has to fall out of the picture, I ask repeatedly, for the militaristic version of a healthy social “body” to make sense? This study explores how systems of terror emanate throughout the public sphere, rippling through newspaper headlines, magazine covers, films, ads, and TV spots. Terror systems transform human bodies into surfaces, available for political inscription.

Public spectacles of terror, of course, are nothing new. From pre-Columbian human sacrifice to the Inquisition, from the witch trials in early modern Europe to the staging of “the terror” in revolutionary France to the Nazi convention in Nuremberg, power relations have been written into and onto the human body. Nor is the ideology I trace here—one that depicts the social body as infirm, feminized, and in need of “cleansing”—specifically Argentine. The idea of disease, degeneration, and deviancy associated with the feminine has long been part of the collective imaginary, and not just in the West, though that is my focus. The “other” is that which is given to be feared: the feminine, the “masses,” Jews, homosexuals, and the indigenous populations in Argentina as elsewhere. While different “others” emerge geographically and historically,

readers will find the same patterns we've come to associate with the language of conquest, colonialism, fascism, and the new Right.

This work goes against the isolationism of many U.S. studies that automatically situate theories of the body, subjectivity, and positionality within the national discourse as if this were all-inclusive and universally applicable. It expands upon the historical studies of the period that explain state formation while leaving out gender, as if this were incidental, rather than fundamental, to its formulation. It attempts to "look at" history through a performance model that, I hope, will illuminate fractures and tensions that more traditional "readings" will not recognize. It questions the economic versions of the social production of reality that fail to recognize spectacles as the product and producer of group fantasies and desires. It goes against the grain of right-wing nationalists and left-wing "independence" thinkers by challenging the ideology of nation-ness so dear to many Anglo and Latin Americans. For in spite of all the rampant nationalisms of the moment, we live in a global community shaped by international economic policies and plagued by common problems.

In using a performance model to look at political spectacles and spectatorship I engage in a search for better scripts, for better politics. Spectacles cannot be understood as separate entities; they can be understood only as they interface with spectators and with other national and international spectacles. What happened in Argentina during the Dirty War cannot be distanced as another example of atrocity happening in some other country. The crisis resulted from Argentina's entry into the global economic market; thus it is very much a product of a broader agenda, indeed "our" imaginary and "our" global economic system. It is not simply that the neofascist ideology I look at in Argentina pertains to the Western political repertoire. The United States trained Argentine military leaders in the Doctrine of National Security and taught them the methods of repression and torture needed to implement it. The Dirty War, in some concrete ways, played for and to U.S. interests, comprised of the likes of Henry Kissinger, Frank Sinatra, and Ford Motor Company. Nonetheless, the *particular* shape of the crisis—which culminated in the Dirty War with its "disappearances," concentration camps, tortures, and murders—has to do, I propose, with the specific, localized images, myths, and explanatory narratives that populations hold about themselves. Understanding spectacle, then, is dependent on a complex scene of interface: understanding *both* the local cultural specifics of national dramas *and* the way that national and international spectacles interface and produce each other. The performance model also helps spectators define their position vis-à-vis spectacles of violence. Are we complicit? Can we work to end violence, or will we go on "just looking"? My study on spectacle aspires to "academic" activism, a respected ideal in Latin America

that, in the United States, has often been deemed a contradiction in terms. My goal is to examine the politics of looking, “just looking,” dangerous seeing, and percepticide in order to make active spectators, or witnesses, of us all.

While this project has proved difficult and challenging for me in many respects, the greatest pleasure that I derived from it was feeling that I was working with a community of artists, scholars, friends, and family who made the enterprise possible. I thank Clyde Snow, the forensic anthropologist, for the photograph of Matilde’s casket, Howard M. Fraser for lending me valuable material from *Caras y caretas*, and Pablo Rouco de Urquiza, director of the Argentine school of journalism T.E.A. (Taller/Escuela/Agencia), for allowing me to view and copy materials not to be found in Argentina’s national archives. I am grateful to those who have helped, challenged, and accompanied me through these crossings. My student Owen Gottlieb taught me more than I taught him about Argentine film. Ken Wissoker, my editor at Duke University Press, has supported me throughout. I am deeply indebted to those who, through their work and in our discussions, guided me through the complexities of lived experience during the Dirty War: Diana Raznovich, Griselda Gambaro, Renee Epelbaum, Alicia Partnoy, Sylvia Molloy, Roberto Gutierrez-Varea, Guillermo Loíacono, Marta Savigliano, Marcelo Suárez-Orozco, Ana María Amar Sánchez, and Tomás Eloy Martínez. (All translations are my own unless otherwise noted.) Others have enriched my perspective through their own work in feminist, performance, and cultural studies: Doris Sommer, Sue-Ellen Case, Richard Schechner, Joseph Roach, Rebecca Schneider, Ross Chambers, Jorge Salessi, Marguerite Feitlowitz, and George Woodyard. And several of the aforementioned did all at once. I owe the deepest gratitude to all those who have been my companions on these crossings. Elizabeth Garrels accompanied me on my initial journey to Buenos Aires and sat with me through the fateful *Paso de los* and forum that got me involved in this project in the first place. My friends at Dartmouth are a constant source of support, pleasure, and enlightenment. They’re always available to read, edit, argue, and discuss the many versions of my work that I’ve given them. I can’t think of anything I’ve written that isn’t also the work of Marianne Hirsch, Susanne Zantop, Laurence Davies, Silvia Spitta, Alexis Jetter, Annelise Orleck, Agnes Lugo-Ortiz, and Diane Miliotis. I hasten to add that the weaknesses and blind spots in the text are entirely my own. The only way I know to thank them is by cooking for them and reading, editing, arguing over, and discussing whatever they put before me. And, as always, Eric, Alexei, and Marina have been with me, cheering me, teasing me, helping me get my bearings when the border crossings became disorienting and I thought I would never find my way home. I thank you all.

I Caught in the Spectacle



The Scene of the Crime

Utter darkness. Some indiscernible sounds. The sounds grow louder, more distinct. Grunts. Gasps. Rustling in the dark. The lights go up slightly. A mournful, beautiful tango comes out of nowhere. Two figures can be made out, though it's not clear either from their movements or from the noises they make whether they're struggling or having sex. What's happening? Who are they? It's a man and woman. They're in a pit full of mud. It's sex, it seems from the way she sits on his lap, clutching him. He howls, slaps her, pushes her away. He stands up, cinching his pants at the waist. She clings to him. He yells at her. A female voice answers him, but it's not her voice. Where is that coming from? He throws her into the mud, slapping her some more. Kicks her. Pulls all her clothes off her. She tries to get close to him. He grabs her face. Hits her. He screams "Bitch!" He pulls her naked body, exposing her, humiliating her. Though the female voice talks back, it's not hers. She never says a word, just whimpers and crawls back to him. He kills her. The female

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voice vows revenge. He won't get away with it. He stands defiantly, buttoning up his military jacket as he towers over her prostrate, naked, dead body.

Applause. Weary but seemingly content, Eduardo Pavlovsky, Susana Evans, and Stella Galazzi (the voice offstage) take their bows in the circular tub full of mud.

From the bleachers, I watched in stunned silence. I was disoriented. How to position myself in the face of the spectacle I had just seen? I was trapped—trapped between wanting to see, to make out what was happening in front of me, and not wanting to see once I had made it out. I tried to disbelieve: this couldn't be happening. By moments, the mournful tango and beautiful lighting swept me up to what seemed a lofty plateau of transcendent “meaning” where all this made sense. But her brutalized body brought me back. I wondered what the other members of the audience felt. Were they looking at her destruction, or through it to that lofty beyond? The prolonged applause suggested that this play had resonated with them.

Paso de dos was the hit of the Argentine 1990 season. The show had been sold out for months. What were people expecting to see, I wondered? What was I expecting? I wasn't sure, but having read Pavlovsky's earlier works and the original script for this play (*Voces* or *Voices*), I anticipated some indictment of the atrocities of the Dirty War. Eduardo Pavlovsky, a psychotherapist/playwright/actor, had long been a prominent “leftist” and confirmed enemy of the military regime. He had narrowly escaped abduction by the military in 1978 and had gone into exile in Spain until 1980. In the production, Pavlovsky played He, a monomaniacal military man who beat, stripped, raped, and finally killed She, played by Susana Evans, Pavlovsky's wife. What did this graphic representation of sexual violence against the female body say about the Dirty War? What fantasies did it convey about Argentine nation-ness? What function was it performing for the enthralled audience? And what was my role there, anyway?

The play clearly raised questions of national identity and resistance in the context of Argentina's recent tragedy. He, the male protagonist, is a torturer during the Dirty War (or *proceso*) who becomes obsessed with one of his female victims. Even before meeting her, simply hearing about her from his fellow torturers, he confesses later, “I had already created an image of you” (13).¹ “I was obsessed with the thought of possessing you . . . claiming you as a trophy, I was always thinking about your body . . . Overpowering you forcefully . . . suddenly . . . like when an animal catches its prey” (14). He needs her, he says; she is his “NECESSITY. The necessity of our bodies . . . together” (11). His dependency makes him feel vulnerable, violent, and insanely jealous. “Not being with you was like facing the void; the horror was knowing that my intensity could cease at any moment, that it depended entirely on you” (12).

She, the script tells us, becomes caught up in his search for intensity. They engage in a tortuous ceremony during which he inflicts physical pain. She endures the ordeal stoically, but then, the play suggests, he was not torturing her in order to obtain answers. He wanted her to resist, to keep silent, so that the interrogations and sessions might continue and intensify his pleasure. "I wanted to possess your body, your cavities, your smells, each part of your body that I struck; I knew the color of every one of your bruises" (28). He feels compelled to expose and control her interior, innermost parts. Now, after the *proceso* is over, he confesses in a meeting they have arranged, he still needs her—not as a source of intensity but to give him his identity: "I don't understand you. Now you could scream out my name and again you choose to keep quiet, you won't say a word. Confess, you bitch, scream out who I am, who I was . . . Because I existed! Why? Why won't you name me?" (28). Her final choice, at the end of the script, is again to keep silent: she will deny him the hero status enjoyed by the generals who are free to walk down the streets of Buenos Aires. Throughout the play he demands, he interrogates, tortures, and possesses her "entirely" (22), but she "wins." She, not he, the play wants us to believe, holds the ultimate power.

Having read the script, I had been prepared to accept that the play was "about" the torturer's perversity, a term Robert Stoller defines as "the erotic form of hatred" (4). After all, it has been well documented that the Argentine torturers routinely raped their victims. There was even a well-known case in which a victim "fell in love" with her tormentor. There is psychiatric literature that elucidates the phenomenon, known as the Stockholm syndrome.

Or perhaps the text could be seen as critiquing the military's version of masculinity, predicated on the eradication of the "feminine." He, much like Klaus Theweleit's *Freikorps* soldiers, is acutely conscious of being trapped in a highly vulnerable body, a "feminized" body full of holes (*huecos*, 9). He wants a controlled, masculine body, which he tries desperately to discipline: "I want every gesture to make sense. I mean, I want every gesture to have a feeling of spontaneity. I don't want any holes" (9). Pavlovsky the psychoanalyst even has a few lines about castration anxiety to "explain" how the male killer got to be that way: As a child, a bully had beat him up; he complained to his father; his father took him back to the group, promising to hold the other boys back while his son took on the bully one-on-one; the boy, terrified, failed to take on his opponent. His "cowardice" and "weakness" transformed him into a "shit" in his father's eyes. One moment shaped his entire life. Now, shunned permanently by the father, he himself must play out those rituals of intensity one-on-one, on a safe body, the body socially constructed to not fight back, the

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woman's body. Her body is scripted to allow for his virility; her silence is given to justify his actions; she is passive, he is active, but he depends on her absolutely for his masculinity. Alone, he himself pursues the "fascist aesthetic" (Theweleit 2:197) of turning his body into a well-functioning machine: "I turn my head to the right, now to the left, now to the front again. Pause" (9).

As I watched the play, however, the political critique seemed to recede as the performance replicated and affirmed the fascination with eroticized violence. The female body was sexually exposed and violently obliterated even as the play denounced Argentina's torturers and the imminent *indulto* (the governmental pardon of those leaders of the armed forces found guilty of human rights violations in 1985). While the repetition and displacement of violence against the female body seemed to relate to the historically "real" trauma suffered by the terrorized Argentine social body, the visual frenzy provoked by her abuse seemed closer to pornography.² The woman's voice, now separate from the body, reenacted the implicit misogynist violence of the military's discourse which splits the "feminine" into the lofty, disembodied *Patria* (Motherland, literally *belonging to the Father*) and the corporeal, dispensable woman. Intensely beautiful, set to a mournful tango, this production presented the woman as a metaphor for a beleaguered Argentina. Her destruction was somehow coherent, necessary, and, yes, aesthetically pleasurable and morally redemptive. So what was the play about, I asked myself? Was it about sadomasochism? or about torture and the *indulto* (the torturer goes free at the end of the play)?

Not even the commentators could agree about *Paso de dos*, though they, like most of the women and men who watched the play the night I was there, seemed to admire the play enormously. One "reading" of the spectacle that reviewers reiterated was that *Paso de dos* was a *testimonio*, along the lines of Peter Weiss's *The Investigation*, here based on the testimonies of the victims televised during the generals' trials in 1985. As one commentator stated, the play stages Argentina's recent tragedy.³ Another claimed that it was in the horror of the production that its redemption lay: "*Paso de dos* is horrible. There lies its triumph over a horrible part of our history."⁴ Or was this a porn show intended to titillate rather than critique, thus recapitulating paradigms of domination? Her "intimidades" and "intersticios" (22), repeatedly alluded to in the script, were fully exposed female body parts. The poster advertising the production focused specifically on a nude frontal of her in the process of being strangled. Did the sex and violence—indisputably theatre's two major selling points—lure the audience into the tiny cubicle of a theatre? Was the play about quasi-fascist

violence, or did it imply that criminal politics were simply a sexual aberration? Pavlovsky, in an interview, called the play a “love story” in which both partners enjoy themselves: “I imagine them enjoying themselves like dogs in this love story.”⁵ Love or repression? Pornography or docudrama? Was she, like the female captive of the Argentine stag film *El Satario* (ca. 1907–12), just carried away by a horny devil?⁶ Was this merely one more macho fantasy of sadomasochism projected yet again onto a social (female) “body,” or a politically committed attempt to demythify the violence of Argentina’s Dirty War? And how do we decide?

Apparently, the play would have us believe, there are two stories. In the first, the female body is committed to the pursuit of erotic, deathly pleasure, which, the play tries to convince us, is hers, not just his. This, seemingly, is the world of mutual desire and consent. *Paso de dos* seems to be the theatrical equivalent to the narrative of “torture as a love story,” best exemplified in Argentina by authors Luisa Valenzuela and Marta Lynch.⁷ The woman can’t help but give herself up to the powerful, seductive military man. Pavlovsky’s “intensity” seems equivalent to Georges Bataille’s eroticism, “the assenting to life to the point of death” (11). True, it is the woman who dies, but as Bataille himself insists, that has always been the case: “I must emphasize that the female partner in eroticism” he says, is “seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer” (18). In Bataille, too, eroticism is tied into male individuation, it “is that within man which calls his being into question” (29). But the annihilation of the female simultaneously serves a collective goal, for when “the victim dies . . . the spectator shares in what [the] death reveals” (22). Again, the split: the dead female body/the redemptive image. She dies so that we (the viewers) might live. Thus, she is positioned as the *other*, the disposable, sacrificial body that marks the viewing audience as implicitly male. Much as in the military discourse that I examine in the following chapter, the *puta* dies, the *Patria* reunites a shattered population. Not only that, she likes it! The conquest is complete and empowers him beyond the actual rape. He has truly penetrated her deepest being: She now has no desire that is not merely the extension of his desire. The play depicts the fatal linkage between male identity, male violence, and male pleasure. The female body (*puta*/women) is simply the inert mass on which that violence and pleasure are acted out. At the end of the production her body is almost indistinguishable from the endlessly malleable mud of the pit. But the play reproduces the violence it sets out to reflect because the spectator’s pleasure in *Paso de dos* depends on and develops what Barbara Freedman calls the “coercive identification with a position of male antagonism toward women.”⁸ As specta-

tors we are required to participate in the misogyny in order to reap the redemptive dividend. Sadism and redemption for the price of one single ticket. The “dead,” naked body of Susana Evans lying in the mud fills the house; Galazzi’s painful voice offstage allows spectators to share in what the death reveals.

The problematic depiction of female pleasure and desire, as illustrated in the first of the play’s two tales, is even more disturbing than the above suggests. It is not only that women are cast as victims to be exterminated for male pleasure, under the misnomer of *female* pleasure. The violence and repression inflicted on women is intrinsic in the very way we are forced to be women. By “Woman” I refer simply to the embodied image of the so-called feminine (as in *Patria*), the cultural construction of gender attributes in patriarchy. By “women,” I refer to “real” flesh-and-blood, female-sexed persons—laying aside for the moment the question of whether such a category can even be imagined outside of culture and gender. Feminist scholars have long noted that women are socialized into a sex system that forces them into masochistic submissiveness and obliges them to act out obligatory sexual and gender roles. The play perpetuates the masculinist move of appropriating female desire: her only pleasure comes from participating in his desire, even if it kills her. The depiction of her desire and erotic pleasure as masochistic of course reaffirms the notion that female sexuality develops from the experience of pain, envy, frustration, and humiliation. Thus, as the play suggests, women “like” brutal treatment, enjoy it, need it, respect the hand that beats them. In fact, the acceptance and even pleasure in pain affirm their femininity.⁹ This version of feminine surrender confirms the military’s political discourse that relocates the masculinist desire for domination onto the feminized population, claiming that “she” desires to be dominated; “she” willingly offers up her subjectivity, even her life, to the superior power.

The disembodied voice in *Paso de dos* seems to tell a different, no less troubled, story. The voice tells us that the play is about national identity, victimization, retribution, and the *indulto*. The military male tries to define himself through violence. Like the junta leaders, He is immune to retribution. Though a couple of junta leaders had been sentenced to jail terms in Argentina’s Trial of the Century (1985), She maintains they were proud of what they had done. Her silence, then, had been politically motivated. She wanted to deny him celebrity status. The need to deny torturers a heroic role was a hot political issue in 1990. That year, Emilio Massera, the junta leader most directly linked to the practice of abduction and torture, had been spotted in downtown Buenos Aires, though officially he was in jail. There were rumors (which became reality in December 1990, a few months after I saw the play) that President Menem was about to

pardon all the junta leaders, including Videla and Massera, who had been condemned to life imprisonment. Some people even saw the military leaders as national heroes who had come down hard on the enemy. As one commentator stated, "there's talk of monuments to these men, to their heroic war against subversion" (Feitlowitz, 60).¹⁰ "Her" refusal to name him, then, countered the pro-military aggrandizing gesture even as it expressed her unwillingness to be further exposed: "You want me to name you, don't you, to tell everything, all the details. I know that would make you feel better, proud that everyone knows you touched me. You want to be a hero, like the rest, proud once again of what they've done, proud to be walking free, defiant, always on the lookout. Heroes once again" (29). She suspects that her confession of the crimes committed against her would only serve to fuel the public's fascination with sexualized violence and would, ironically, enhance the military's heroic status.

These urgent political issues, however, never really came into focus in the production. Rather, in a cruel irony, the play transformed her pain into public pleasure and titillation. The play performs the "confession" that she attempts to refuse. And while silence, as a strategy of resistance *for women*, needs to be historicized, especially in this scenario of forced "confessions," it has generally been a sign of women's public and political invisibility. This play effectively silenced the woman while ostensibly giving her a voice. There was no desire expressed or envisioned in the performance that was not simply an extension, or an echo, of his desire. He exerted his power to speak, to initiate language; her voice, separated from her body, emanated from the distance of the bleachers. Insofar as the female voice in *Pasos*, like the mythical Echo herself, can't initiate dialogue, her only "power" comes from her refusal to speak, from her silence. But this is hardly *power*. Women have been refused *voz y voto* (voice and vote) throughout much of history. Although the play ostensibly grants her a voice and allows her a quasi-critical response to her predicament, in effect she is cast as an echo. The performance repeated the military's strategy of silencing its public. The population's responses during the *proceso*, scripted into the military performance, only served to give the appearance of open dialogue. As Francine Masiello noted, the military dictatorship attempted "to reduce the interpretative activity of the population to an echo of the official word and abolish the contesting voices of those 'others' opposed to the government" (*Nuevo Texto Crítico* 155). Under the political guise of denouncing victimization and the Dirty War, the play too stages a phony dialogue while it carries out a systematic assault on the "feminine." The female body is destroyed through violence. Her voice vanishes into a metaphor for victimization and is pushed to the outer

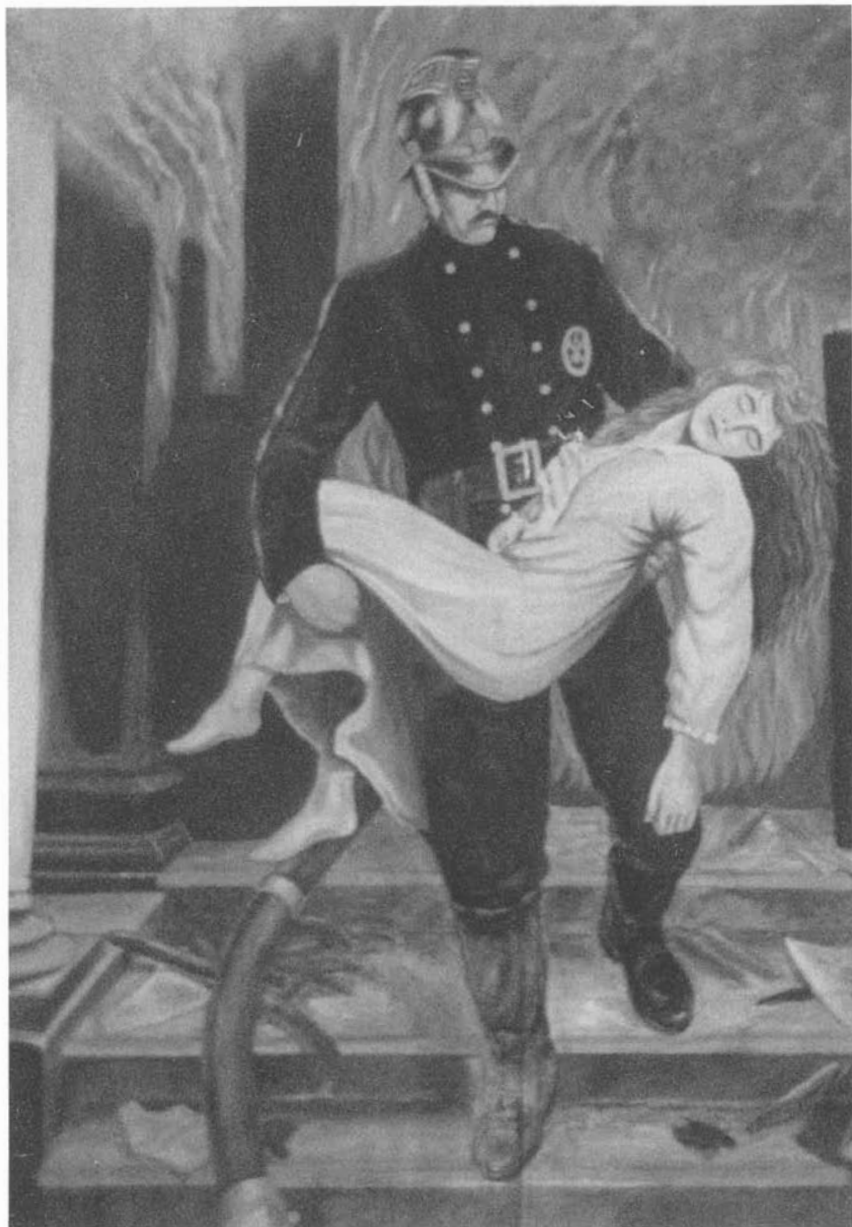


Figure 1. *Police to the Rescue*. (Tucuman Museum of Police, photo by Silvia Spitta)

limits of what, theoretically, was meant to be a collective and "open" exploration into Argentina's authoritarian past.

What struck me most about *Paso de dos*, however, was not the play's misogyny. Rather, it was my realization that this "progressive" play depicts the construction of national identity as predicated on female destruction, just as the military had done. Yet, I kept reminding myself as I sat on the bleachers, this was the *opposition*. But it became painfully evident to me that Pavlovsky's critique of the military was not antithetical to the work's misogyny. The misogyny, rather, was a fundamental bridge or slash connecting the military/anti-military discourse. In the struggle for national identity, both groups of males were fighting to define and occupy the "masculine" position while emasculating, feminizing, and marginalizing the "other." The painting reproduced in figure 1, which still hangs in the Police Museum in Tucuman, Argentina, graphically illustrates the role of the "feminine" in the conjunction between crisis and male heroism. The house/city/country is going up in uncontrollable flames. An eerie landscape of towering infernos suggests the magnitude of the devastation. While the foregrounded pillars seem to be holding strong, shards of the buildings crash down around the two figures. The littered steps hint at dangers still ahead. The dutiful officer, so straight and surefooted, keeps his eyes on the prize: the unconscious body of a beautiful young white woman with long golden hair. The brushstrokes blend the flames in the background into the waves of her hair. She was almost swallowed up by that furious devastation. She's so white, so inert, so vulnerable one wonders if she's perhaps not dead after all. But his caring eyes, fixed on her in spite of the dangers, suggest not. He can save her. His measured steps, his calm, caring manner, can see them out of the predicament. The three plaques on the wall around the painting explain the true significance of the work—it's not about "her" of course, but about the *Patria*. "Every good citizen has the obligation to sacrifice himself for the liberty of the Patria," says one plaque decorated with crossed rifles. "Whoever serves peace," says one with a trumpet horn, "serves God and the Patria." A third announces that "the promotion and enlightenment of our letters (literatures) are the keys that open the doors of abundance and bring happiness to our people." The crossed swords that decorate this third plaque make one wonder what kinds of "keys" the artist envisioned. This image of the heroic military/police officer rescuing the prostrate young woman is clearly meant to inspire steadfastness and purpose in the viewers—that is, those spared the threat of the flames, or the survivors. She embodies the communal ideals, aspirations, and hopes that "we" cling to and will work to restore. She, too, dies/linguishes so that "we" might live. Her suffering evaporates into an image

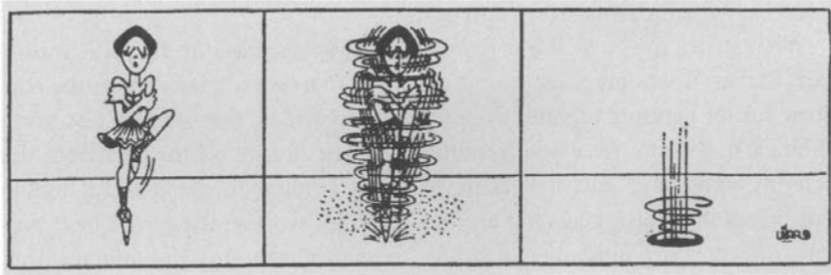


Figure 2. "Disappearing the Feminine," cartoon by Vilar.
(*La Nación*, April 23, 1976, p. A1)

of communal redemption and resolve. Is there something very different in this story of community building than in Pavlovsky's? Even if the play were intended as a critique of the macho military male by a "leftist" male intellectual, it still needed the woman's naked and abused body to express its objections and redeem its audience.

But how to explain the audience's desire to participate in a painful experience by watching this particular play? If the military forbade the public access to all sorts of "sights" and "insights," was the audience now manifesting a need to see, to regain perception, to reclaim insight? Obscenity (etymologically, a term for that which took place offstage, off-scene), after all, is the product of prohibition. Or was the play participating in the blinding of the population that the military promoted—what I will call percepticide¹⁰—by making what was so obviously visible, the woman's humiliation and destruction, seemingly invisible to the audience and resistant to a critique? Just as the "disappeared" were dragged away in full view of family, neighbors, and other observers, violence against women disappears and reappears as pure metaphor. The brutality and misogyny of the performance made me feel contaminated. Was that, perhaps, the point of this production? In the Dirty War, everyone felt contaminated—those who looked, those who looked away. Maybe this production restaged more than the violence. Maybe it intended to snare spectators (as it had snared me) in the drama of percepticide. Are we at risk if we see, or are we at risk if we don't? What did the enthusiastic applause signify? Did the catastrophe in the play produce an Aristotelian catharsis or release in the spectators? Did *Paso de dos* help us to see *differently*? Or did it recapitulate the very drama of percepticide it purportedly sought to illuminate?

Visibility/Invisibility

The invisible is not what is hidden but what is denied, that which we are not allowed to see.—Ana María Fernandez, “Violencia y conyugalidad”

Invisibility is one of the most terrifying forms of forgetting and it is against forgetfulness that our protagonist struggles.—Rodrigo Fresán, *Historia argentina*

Paso de dos tapped into a number of concerns and emotions that ran through Argentina in 1990, among them the preoccupation with national memory and forgetting, feelings of complicity and resistance, the desire to see the forbidden and the need to reimagine community. Seven years had passed since the downfall of the last military dictatorship and the end of the so-called Dirty War (1976–83); fourteen years since the first junta of the period started the country on a *proceso de reorganización nacional* (process of national reorganization, henceforth referred to as *proceso*), which it claimed would save their *Patria* from corrosion at the hands of her internal enemies or “subversives”; fourteen years since the beginning of a period of systematized terror during which thirty thousand people were abducted, tortured, and permanently “disappeared.”

The cultural climate during the Dirty War had been characterized by censorship, blacklisting, and the systematic implementation of terror. Writers, producers, filmmakers, actors, technicians had been threatened and at times killed by military forces. Interestingly, there had been no obvious break between the pre-*proceso* and *proceso* cultures: plays were staged, television programs ran their usual hours, newspapers announced the same number of films, shows, and concerts, book fairs and other cultural events proceeded, superficially at least, as before. But the content changed radically as more and more artists were gagged. The junta declared early on that this war was not only about weapons, but about “ideological penetration” and about the tensions between “culture and counterculture, in a moment in which Argentina was experiencing acute weakness in its social controls.”¹¹ Prohibitions (euphemistically called “guidelines”) against unacceptable content came down from above. Cultural content would harmonize with the *proceso*’s mission—there should be no contradictory or disturbing images, nothing against church, family, or state.¹² Divorce, abortion, adultery, wife and child and elder abuse all vanished—in representation if not in life. Images of institutional and generational conflict were to be avoided at all cost. Stories had to have happy endings.¹³ No wonder, then, that artists of all kinds started censoring and silencing themselves in order to keep their jobs. The prohibitions were so many, and the language so vague and all-inclusive, that anything could be construed as subversive. People started burning their

own books. The prohibitions, Argentine playwright Diana Raznovich said, “made fascists of us all, for we were on the lookout for anything that could be construed as ‘subversive’ in our possessions. I remember going through my books, and burning even my Jewish cookbook, for fear it might be considered subversive.”¹⁴ Argentine life became increasingly terrifying even as Argentine culture was reduced to a world of make-believe and happily-ever-afters. The writer/songwriter María Elena Walsh described herself as Alice, struggling through her misadventures in her country/kindergarten. In 1979, in one of the first journal articles published against the *proceso*, she noted the sad state of Argentine writers: “Our pencils are broken, and we all have a huge eraser encrusted in our brains” (*Desventuras*, 18).

Even before the collapse of the junta in 1983, the population had begun its efforts to look at the atrocity of the past decade and leave behind the culture of make-believe. There was a hunger to see, to know. Accounts by people such as Jacobo Timerman, Carlos Gabetta, and Andrew Graham-Yooll had started to surface as early as 1980.¹⁵ When *Nunca Más: Informe de la Comisión Nacional sobre la desaparición de personas* (*Nunca Más: The Report of the Argentine National Commission on the Disappeared*) appeared in 1984, it became an instant best-seller. Copies of *Nunca Más* dotted the beaches as summer vacationers in swimwear read the dreadful testimonies. Thirteen editions of the report were published between November 1984 and May 1986. This period culminated in the very visible trial of the junta leaders in 1985 (“the Trial of the Century”). The nine leaders of the three consecutive juntas that ruled between 1976 and 1983 were tried in a civilian court for crimes against humanity. The five-month trial was televised. The *Diario del juicio*, dedicated exclusively to the trial, came out weekly. *El libro del juicio* (The book of the trial) appeared in 1985. The Asamblea Permanente por los Derechos Humanos (Permanent Assembly on Human Rights), a prominent human rights organization, put out the video *El juicio: Un documento inédito*. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo continued their marches around the plaza and began publishing their own paper, *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*, complete with its Galería de Represores (a portrait gallery of the military men involved in the repression). During this period, scholars such as Oscar Troncoso compiled and published documents pertaining to the Dirty War. In 1986, Emilio F. Mignone brought national attention to the nefarious role of the Catholic Church in the *proceso*.¹⁶

During this period, too, plays, films, and songs dealing explicitly or implicitly with the Argentine political situation began to appear. In 1981, a festival of twenty-one one-act plays by major playwrights was staged as Teatro Abierto (Open theatre), in defiance of government censorship. And even after their

theatre, the Teatro Picadero, was burnt to the ground, the playwrights and the audience refused to be silenced; the festival moved to another location and the audience, which nightly lined up for blocks to get into the theatre, made a visible show of its support. Films such as Adolfo Aristarain's *Tiempo de revancha* (1981, Time for revenge), Hector Olivera's *No habrá más penas ni olvido* (1983, Funny, dirty little war), Eliseo Subiela's *Hombre mirando al sudeste* (1985, Man facing southeast), and Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* (1985, The official story) all contributed to the population's understanding of the historical period it had gone through. Songwriters and singers such as Mercedes Sosa, María Elena Walsh, Susana Rinaldi, Eladia Blazquez, and Teresa Parodi created a sense of communal resistance during and after the dictatorship with songs such as "Porque cantamos," "Como las cigarra," and "Sólo le pido a dios." Mercedes Sosa's rendition of "Sólo le pido a dios" (I only ask God) led a collective cry against the *indulto* (general amnesty) in the massive "No to Impunity" rally in Buenos Aires in 1990: "I only ask God that I never become indifferent" to war, death, or the future. Another line stresses the importance of feeling that one has done everything humanly possible to safeguard against indifference and forgetting.

By 1990, forgetting had become official policy, much against the wishes of certain groups that had vowed never to forget. Two legacies from the Dirty War haunted the new democracy under Alfonsín. The most obvious concerned the antidemocracy pressure of the armed forces and the specter of the disappeared. Alfonsín had initiated the trend toward general amnesty and "reconciliation" in 1986 with his *punto final* policy. He set February 22, 1987, as the date for a "full stop" to new charges of human rights abuses. The Law of Due Obedience followed in June 1987, dismissing charges against all but the commanding officers who ordered the tortures and executions. The other legacy, more difficult for most Argentineans to relate directly to the Dirty War, was the enormous burden of foreign debt, mostly owed to the United States, which the military had accrued to pay for the repression. Alfonsín's government was destabilized both by the two military uprisings threatening to overthrow him and by escalating inflation that rose to an incredible 5000 percent in 1989. The economic situation created a different kind of disappearance: goods vanished from the stores. Instead of discussing Argentina's recent past, people worried about obtaining food and blamed the new democracy for threatening their livelihood. Menem, running for the presidency, accused Alfonsín of unleashing "economic terrorism" on the country.

When Menem became president in 1989, he vowed to bring the economy (and inflation) under control. He succeeded with the help of his minister of

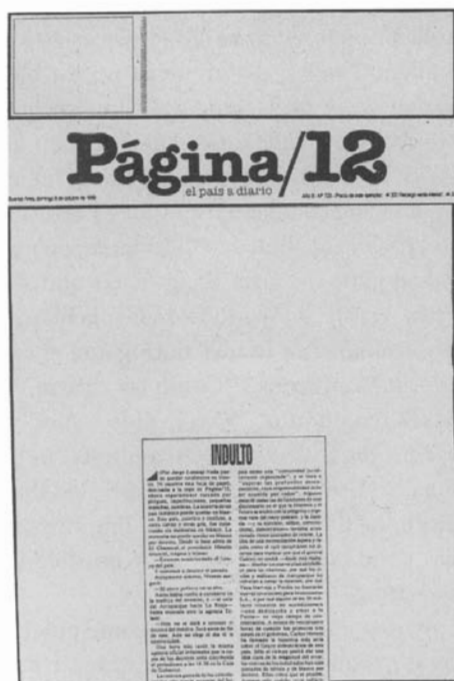
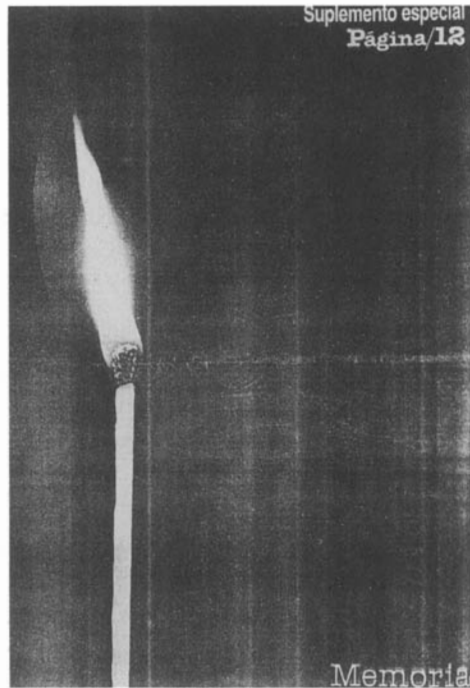


Figure 3. "Indulto." (*Página 12*, October 8, 1989)

economy, Domingo Cavallo, who imposed strict neoliberal policies and dismantled Argentina's state-run businesses and industries, though the measures created their own brand of economic misery.¹⁷ But Menem further contributed to erasing the memory of political terrorism by forgiving even those few who had been indicted under Alfonsín. Following the third military attempt to overthrow the constitutional government on December 3, 1990, Menem granted a presidential pardon to six senior officers accused of torturing and murdering hundreds and thousands of individuals, including Jorge Rafael Videla and Emilio E. Massera, two of the junta leaders most directly responsible for the atrocities of the Dirty War. Menem justified his actions by stating that "Argentina lived through a dirty war, but the war is over. The pardons will definitely close a sad and black stage of Argentine history."¹⁸ *Página 12*, a leftist daily newspaper, ran a blank front page, with an admonition against the *indulto*, warning the country about the consequences of not coming to terms with its past (see figure 3). A special supplement to *Página 12*, dedicated to the recent past, was titled simply *Memory*. The front page showed nothing but a match burning in the dark (see figure 4).

Figure 4. "Memory." (*Página 12*, Special Supplement. 1994)



On a Thursday afternoon in 1990, as I stood in the Plaza de Mayo witnessing the moving spectacle of the Madres who still continue their weekly demonstrations around the plaza, I wondered: Were these women right? Was closure impossible? Or were the indifferent passersby right—it was over, these women were relics of the past? I asked myself if these public spectacles against forgetting were little more than a public display of the failure of spectacle itself. For in spite of the reports, the films, the songs, the public demonstrations, and the televised trial of the generals, it looked as if the criminals had gotten away with murder. As Menem's term as president proceeded, it became increasingly apparent that Argentina was embarked on a trajectory of what James Petras and Steve Vieux call electoral neoauthoritarianism. The "democracy" functioned within the same authoritarian institutional framework set up by the military and pursued many of the same political policies (5). In 1992, Menem warned students and other protesters that the danger of violent politics was not over and threatened that the "exaggerated use of liberty" could lead to a new wave of "subversion" and "another contingent of the Plaza de Mayo demanding their children."¹⁹ In 1994, Menem was expelled from the Permanent Assembly on

Human Rights when he praised the armed forces' fight against "subversion" during the Dirty War.²⁰ In 1995, after the first military officer directly associated with the atrocities broke ranks and explained how he and others threw the live but drugged, naked bodies of the "disappeared" into the sea, Menem continued to advocate for silence and forgetting.²¹ Let's not "rub salt in old wounds," Menem urged. The new efforts in nation-building under Menem were based not just on commonality and shared experience, but on communal forgetting. As Ernest Renan observed more than a century ago, "the essence of a nation is that all individuals have many things in common, and also that they have forgotten many things."²²

Crossing the Line

I see only from one point, but in my existence I am looked at from all sides.—Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*

While *Paso de dos* was a work against forgetting, it was also a play that restaged a scenario that has reappeared throughout Argentine culture since its inception. It depicted the construction of national identity as predicated on female destruction. The struggle for national identity was waged between two kinds of men (conqueror/indígena; liberal/federalists; military/antimilitary), who fought to define and occupy the "masculine" position while emasculating and feminizing the "other." Women have no space in this contest, except perhaps as the contested space itself. The battle in Argentina between the so-called nationalists and progressives during the twentieth century has been staged on and around the female body—be it the metaphorical *Patria*, Evita's wandering corpse, the nude body onstage, or the scantily clad body of the endless number of women who, during the Dirty War, appeared on the covers of national magazines that announced ever escalating acts of horror. Week after week, month after month, and year after year, Argentina's national tragedy was written on the exposed flesh of these feminine bodies. *Paso de dos* did not tell two stories—one about erotic intensity, the other about criminal/national politics—but one tale about a brutal battle for national identity and power between men, which was waged on the body of Woman. Only by controlling She, as Pavlovsky's play makes clear, can He define himself, either as the military man or as the progressive Argentine intellectual. Violence against women, it seems, can miraculously do all at once. It provides pleasure and identity for the male sacrificer-torturer. It thrills the spectator. The image of the bleeding *Patria* once more unites and uplifts the population and, besides, the "bitch" (as the play

calls her) is dead. Her life is sacrificed in the interest of communal "meaning." "Cultural norms are reconfirmed or secured," as Elisabeth Bronfen has noted, over Woman/women's dead bodies (181).

During the production of *Paso de dos*, I witnessed how a woman was violently eliminated from the public sphere and transferred to the metaphorical realm of redemptive womanhood. This theatrical "disappearing act" all too clearly illustrated the mechanics of nation-building that I had previously associated with the Dirty War. She was one more in a series of sacrificial women (both "good" and "bad") circling through the Argentine public sphere whose function was to stabilize a patriarchal version of nationhood and manhood, with all its attending values and boundaries.

And I didn't like it. Clearly, I was not the intended spectator nor a welcome critic. My intervention at two subsequent meetings—the first on August 6, 1990, at a public forum on Authority and Authoritarianism in which Griselda Gambaro and Laura Yusem were invited speakers, and a couple of weeks later in a private interview with Pavlovsky—proved explosive. The Authority and Authoritarianism forum was designed to question the authoritarian structures still in place in Argentina and their effect on artists. In her presentation, Yusem, a well-known director who directed Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona furiosa*, among other important plays, was arguing that an artist could be conscious of authoritarian structures and undo them. She, an avowed "leftist" like Pavlovsky, cited *Paso de dos* as an illustration of this dismantling. When I suggested to Yusem that the performance reproduced rather than dismantled the military's authoritarian discourse, she immediately ordered me to be silent. I tried to explain my concern over the eroticized representation of violence by contrasting it to theatrical representations of violence that enable us to recognize brutality as brutality, not as pleasure. I used Griselda Gambaro's work as an example of an Argentinean playwright who very effectively represents a violent situation without eroticizing it. Someone from the audience called me a fascist for trying to restrict or censor what could or could not be shown. Yusem refused to speak to me, except to point out that I wasn't Argentinean, hadn't lived in Argentina during the Dirty War, hadn't experienced torture and therefore knew nothing about it and should keep quiet. Not only that, but the play reflected a true incident. She dismissed me as a "Yanqui feminist."

Standing in the auditorium in front of two hundred people, I suddenly felt trapped in the spectacle of nation-building and dangerous border crossings. I was the observer who had suddenly become the object of scrutiny. I had, unwittingly to be sure, become part of the drama of identity and identification. The fact that my "identity" and alliances as a Canadian/Mexican woman living

and working in the United States were not easily reducible to “Yankee” was beside the point. There I was, suddenly “American,” from a prestigious academic institution, speaking against authoritarianism but weighing in with a different kind of authority. The positioning itself had a history, re-affirming the old hierarchies and tensions between the “first” and the “third”-worlders, one which I was powerless at that moment to challenge or complicate. As the foreigner, I marked the outside, highlighting the boundary between “them” (Argentineans) and the not-one-of-them (the other *against* whom nationality is always implicitly set up). And though I marked the border, I was by no means out of the picture.

But, I would have said if I’d had the presence of mind, dialogues and alliances are constantly being established between people with significant “differences” to achieve similar ends. Now that we’re talking about the Dirty War, we have only to think of the military, economic, and ideological ties between the Argentine junta and the Reagan administration. *And don’t forget*, I might have insisted, that national identity is not the only basis for identification and mutual recognition—as the abductions and disappearances of Argentineans by Argentineans made clear. Women, for example, can align across national boundaries to demand that women’s rights be treated as internationally recognized human rights. *Furthermore*, the theatre expert in me could have added, isn’t there more than a little irony in a director telling an audience member that she can’t understand the show because she hadn’t lived through the experience? The whole point of theatre is that one doesn’t have to go mad to identify with Lear and blind to empathize with Oedipus.

But, as Brecht would have put it, “this is what she was thinking, but could not say” (*Caucasian Chalk Circle* p. 82). In part, it was because (I admit it) I was stunned. But I also vaguely perceived that the explosive confrontation was also about something else. My remarks, which I had intended as *constative*, in J. L. Austin’s definition of it as a “statement” conveying my concern regarding the representation of violence, were heard as performative. My words, which did not in themselves qualify as a “speech act,” had nonetheless done something—they had provoked, interfered, intervened. That “Yankee” was not so much about my identity as about my audacity in carrying through an imperialist gesture in a specific historical context—the aftermath of the Dirty War—in which many Argentineans were keenly sensitive to the whiffs of international condemnation or disdain.

This day at the forum intensified my interest in the politics of looking. As a theatre and performance studies person, I’ve always known that my passion for looking is an occupational hazard. But now I wondered if looking always con-

stitutes an intervention. Is an equal, reciprocal exchange possible across borders, between entities that have historically been set up as unequal: "center"/"periphery," "First" World/"Third" World, "developed"/"developing" countries? And if not, what then? We can't *not* look, because spectacles work internationally. Everything crosses borders, from people to capital, from markets to armaments to e-mail. Fantasies, too, are exported and imported; staging techniques travel; speech acts echo each other; performances have histories or, as Joseph Roach would put it, genealogies.²³ The neo-Nazis in the U.S. today who advocate white supremacy belong to the same world as the neo-Nazis in Argentina with their black shirts and both groups mimic Hitler's performance. The totalitarian spectacle of the Dirty War arose from our shared cultural repertoire. It was yet another repetition, or iteration, another example of the twice-behaved behavior that Richard Schechner and Jacques Derrida associate with the performative.²⁴ Through what act of negation, of self-blinding, can we maintain that what happens in another country has nothing to do with us?

Standing there, I felt there was no outside, no unseen see-er who could watch from a position safely outside the frame. As in the Lacanian field of the "gaze," that scopic register that situates us and within whose confines we look at each other, we were all looking. We were looking, moreover, within a specific specular economy that was historically and culturally determined.²⁵ Maybe I had just stepped into that position of the bad woman whose symbolic removal allowed for the reaffirmation of communal norms and values. Object and observer, at that moment I certainly felt my seeing to be alienating and oppositional, though I had aspired for a relationship of reciprocity.

I had to make a decision: keep quiet and forget the incident, or try to understand the scenario and my role in it. This was shaky ground. I wasn't standing on some geographic or moral *terra firma* outside the scenario; I was right there, playing to and into this web of looks. The seeing both objectified me and pushed me forward. I, the outsider, had seen, and I had been seen seeing because I had spoken. So now I was caught *in* the drama where I was cast as outsider. But *seeing* also goes beyond us/them boundaries; it establishes a connection, an identification, and at times even a responsibility that one may not want to assume. When I sat down, Renee Epelbaum, one of the founding Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo squeezed my hand. After the hubbub wore down and people had started to leave, Griselda Gambaro tried to reconcile Laura Yusem and me—"My friends, dear friends, please don't fight," she said, holding us both. The conciliatory approach did not work. Laura Yusem would not speak to me again. Her silence was a mechanism to deny my vision.

Pavlovsky, having heard about the exchange, met me at his office with icy

formality and a stack of newspaper reviews of his play in which he had underlined references to the woman's victory. She wins! he kept reminding me. She likes it! Look, the papers themselves say so! He too insisted that the play is historically "true." It reflected reality. A *montonera* woman had actually fallen in love with her torturer, they reminded me. What about the 29,999 cases in which that wasn't true, I asked? Is this a "true" representation of a torturer/victim relationship? And why, out of 30,000 stories, do you choose to represent that one? Isn't that already suspect? Moreover, there was a metaphoric transformation going on that allowed the spectators to see She as the embodiment of a violated Argentina. The fallacy of sexualizing political relations of power is that the parallel simply doesn't work. The sexualizing of political relations obfuscates not only the mechanisms of power, but it obscures too the politicizing of sexual relations.

Pavlovsky insisted that the play was politically urgent insofar as it addressed the imminent *indulto*. However, he added, he doesn't write political pamphlets for the theatre; a work of art has its own laws and logic that don't necessarily constitute political statements. (There is a difference, he reminded me, between fiction and reality.) And besides, how could this play be misogynist? After all, She "wins."

Paso de dos, like the military's representation of its project, wanted everyone to participate in the fantasy of reciprocal desire. It reproduces and eroticizes the annihilation of women under the guise of historical veracity, political urgency, and aesthetic necessity. The problem is that the discourse of nation-building enacted in *Paso de dos* transcends even extreme political differences. While Pavlovsky is obviously antimilitary he cannot help but repeat their discourse. The authoritarian structures activated in his play blurred the distinction between "left" and "right" and went far deeper than any such political pronouncements.²⁶ The notions of masculinity that he reenacted result in the splitting of the feminine, a move that historically has proven fatal to women. Women get killed because of these fantasies in which the male's search for identity, empowerment, and intensity are born out of her splitting and annihilation.

The problem with this play, I realized in talking with Pavlovsky, was not (or not only) that it was violent, not even necessarily that it represented violence against women. Given the social environment in which women live it would be bizarre if theatre did not deal with violence directed at them. But it reaffirmed the continuity of a misogynist version of Argentine nationhood as well as the gendered structure of representation itself—onstage and off. This spectacle of brutalization perpetuated the traditional power relation: the male agent (author or actor) exposes himself to his (male) audience. The woman's body