

# Dressing the body in captivity: a practice to reveal (Argentina 1976- 1983)

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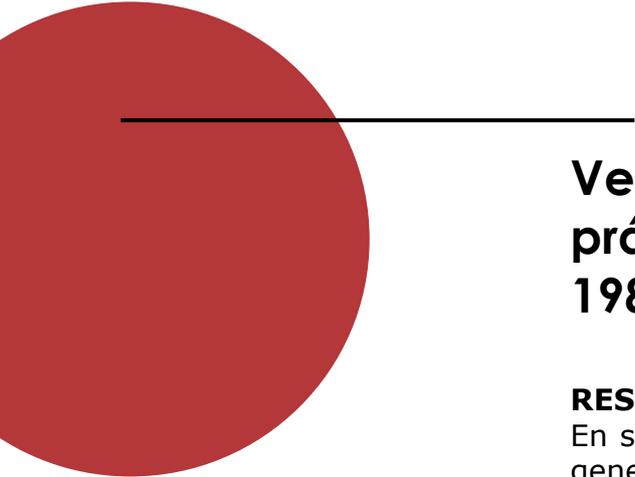
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## **Dressing The Body In Captivity: a practice to reveal (Argentina 1976-1983)**

### **ABSTRACT**

In tune with proposals that intend to continue generating knowledge about the recent past in Argentina, this work presents the process of construction of a research project that starts from a perspective that is not frequently used to analyze the experience in clandestine centers during the years of the last military dictatorship in Argentina. We believe that it can be productive to visualize the different steps taken in the formulation of the work plan and the way in which diverse theoretical and methodological decisions led to configure an object of study that comes to interrogate a vacancy area in Argentine academic research. We refer, specifically, to the use of an approach that seeks to identify and study in the narratives, stories and testimonies about the captivity in clandestine detention centers, everything related to exchanges, transformations or mutations that the detained have produced in the clothes and fabrics that covered them with the ultimate purpose of revealing what senses these actions might have in the particular context of captivity.

**Keywords:** Dressed body, Resistance, Captivity.



## Vestir El Cuerpo En Cautiverio: una práctica por revelar (Argentina 1976-1983)

### RESUMO

En sintonía con propuestas que tienen la intención de seguir generando conocimiento sobre el pasado reciente en Argentina, este trabajo presenta el proceso de construcción de un proyecto de investigación que parte de una perspectiva poco empleada para analizar la experiencia concentracionaria durante los años de la última dictadura militar en Argentina. Creemos que puede resultar productivo visibilizar los distintos pasos seguidos en la formulación del plan de trabajo y el modo en que diversas decisiones teórico-metodológicas llevaron a configurar un objeto de estudio que viene a interrogar un área de vacancia en la investigación académica argentina. Nos referimos, concretamente, al empleo de un enfoque que busca identificar y estudiar en las narraciones, relatos y testimonios sobre el cautiverio en centros clandestinos de detención, todo lo relativo a intercambios, transformaciones o mutaciones que los detenidos hayan producido en las ropas y telas que los cubrían, con la finalidad última de revelar qué sentidos pudieron tener esas acciones en el particular contexto del cautiverio.

**Palavras-chave:** Cuerpo-Vestido, Resistencia, Cautiverio.

## 1. ANALYSIS AND RESEARCH ON THE LAST ARGENTINE DICTATORSHIP

Between the years 1976 and 1983 the military dictatorship that took power in Argentina installed a political order based on terror as the way of social relation and implemented a new economic model that reconfigured the national scenario, causing a significant change in the habits of the population. The dictatorial state sought depoliticization and the weakening of social ties (NOVARO and PALERMO, 2003) through a free trade and anti-statist economic policy combined with the development of a systematic plan of repression, torture and annihilation. During those years, besides (and in relation to) the implementation of this new economic and political order, clandestine detention centers were deployed all across the country, where thousands of people were kidnapped, detained, tortured and killed by the state's armed and police forces.

The military dictatorship, although it did not generate the explicit adhesion of the citizens, managed to achieve the passivity of the majority of the population through the internalization of fear, self-censorship, paralysis and self-control. In the words of researcher Pilar Calveiro, specialist in political violence issues, recent history and memory, "the concentration camp, due to its physical proximity, for being in fact in the middle of society, 'on the other side of the wall', can only exist in the middle of a society who chooses not to see, because of its own impotence, a 'disappeared' society, who is as stunned as the kidnapped themselves" (CALVEIRO, 1998, p.147).

Cultural repression was also part of the state action, in order to end with the so-called subversive expressions and social indiscipline (ANSALDI, 2006). It was a concentrationary and disappearing power that dispersed

terror both within the clandestine detention centers and outside of them, in the society, which was its privileged addressee.

Investigations and historiographic reconstructions related to what happened in the spaces of clandestine detention during the last Argentine military dictatorship, have focused mainly on stories about physical violence performed on the naked-bodies of the detainees-disappeared and in the analysis of the bone remains recovered from the bodies-disappeared. The experiences in captivity of detainees and disappeared, the molestation to which they were subjected even beyond their bodies, even when it has been studied in depth, still continue to reveal spaces of emptiness to rebuild and recover today.

This work exposes the paths taken in the process of building a research project that starts from a not very widespread perspective to analyze the life in illegal and clandestine detention centers during the last Argentine dictatorship. After several theoretical-methodological decisions, it was possible to configure an object of study that interrogates a vacancy area in academic research. Together with proposals that intend to continue generating knowledge about the recent past, the approach used seeks to identify and study the narrations, stories and testimonies about captivity in clandestine detention centers, concerning exchanges, transformations or mutations that the detainees have produced on or with the clothes and fabrics that covered them to try to reveal the meanings that these actions could have in the particular context of captivity.

## **2. GARMENTS AND BODIES**

### **2.1 The fist research questions**

The text that triggered the first questions of the investigation is the story that Marta Dillon, a journalist and active feminist militant, tells in 'Aparecida' (Appeared)

(DILLON, 2015). She was 10 years old in 1976 when her mother was kidnapped, detained and disappeared.

In 2015 'Aparecida' was published, a novel where she leads the reader from the moment she is told by the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (Equipo Argentino de Antropología Forense - EAAF) about the recognition of the skeletal remains of her mother's body, detained-disappeared thirty-five years before, until she reaches the office where the materiality recovered from that body awaits. Tracing her story from the skirts, the tunics, the colored jacket (that she thought she remembered her mother was wearing the last night she saw her), the turtleneck sweater her mother wore during captivity (to which she had probably cut off the sleeves), the author shares the memories of the life spent with her mother and tries to put together part of the path she did not know about her mother's last days in captivity:

Cristina Comandé had told me about that, about the transformation of clothes while the seasons changed, from spring in October to summer, always packed out in the same tiny space, watching the leaves of the eucalyptus rock through the skylight through which the rainwater also leaked and sometimes even a cigarette that a 'good' guard dropped. Mom had cut the sleeves from a turtleneck sweater. Cristina told me the second time we met, at the bar in front of the newspaper where I used to work [...] (DILLON, 2015, p.121).

Along the book, while she displays her writing in several temporalities that adds volume to the story that is developing, Dillon manages to rebuild a biographical story interrupted by the political violence, the detention and disappearance, referring to the items of clothing that her mother used to cover her body. This is shown in the dialogue that Dillon has with Celeste, a professional member of the EAAF, as soon as she enters the building where the recovered and identified remains of her mother were waiting for her:

- Can I see the clothes?  
Celeste opened wide her watery eyes and shrugged her

shoulders a little as if she was caught doing something wrong.

- There was a bag with clothes, I was told –I insisted.

- Yes, but it was all mixed up, we didn't have time to clean it...

- Can I see it?

I couldn't care less about the cleanliness of those clothes. It was my mother, it was logical that I wanted to see her dressed instead of seeing her stripped of her own flesh. Even though the parts were separated, her clothes were her. Her long skirts, the tunics, her overalls, the beaded necklaces, the golden earrings, the colored striped vertical jacket that was an obsession for me when I realized that mom's clothes did not have to have disappeared along with her. (DILLON, 2015, p.110).

From our perspective of study, garment and body constitute an inseparable unit. Therefore, Dillon's story concerned us about the particularities of that unity in those bodies deprived of their freedom: what is the relationship that the person can establish with the garments in a context of clandestine detention?, is it possible to recognize a dressing practice when the order in which the body is inscribed and with which it relates does not prevail in the rule of law, nor the individual liberties, nor the civil or human rights?, what would be told by revealing those practices, or the absence of them, in the concentrationary experience?, could these practices result, voluntarily or involuntarily, in bonds of solidarity, expressions of resistance, gestures of survival?

## **2.2 Contributions of sociology of dressing and related investigations**

In order to address these questions, we decided to choose tools from sociology of culture and dressing, which understand dressing practices as social practices. The productivity of these approaches lies fundamentally in the understanding of the social world as a world of dressed bodies, where the action of getting dressed constitutes an act of communication and distinction; where the garment expresses the naturalization of social differences and the

establishment of a culturally legitimated taste (BOURDIEU, 1988). In this way, everyday clothes form a synthesis of social coercion (ENTWISTLE, 2002, p.14) and the image of the dressed body constitutes a symbol of the framework of the relationships in which it is involved.

The study approach was organized based on the idea that the action of dressing is a basic action of social life common to all cultures. The garment prepares the body for interactions in the social space, shaping an identity that turns the body into something "appropriate, acceptable, actually, even respectable and possibly even desirable" (ENTWISTLE, 2002, p.20). Exploring the particular characteristics assumed by dressing practices in clandestine detention centers is one of the central objectives of the investigation.

In this way, the work of the Chilean researcher Pia Montalva 'Soft tissues. Clothing and political violence in Chile. 1973-1990' ('Tejidos Blandos. Indumentaria y violencia política en Chile. 1973-1990', 2013), is an essential precedent. In this research, Montalva ponders on the political violence during the Pinochet dictatorship, approaching the material dimension of garments and bodies as a whole, as a structure that conceptualizes under the idea of body-clothing, to enable the constitution of a singular identity story (MONTALVA, 2013, pp.35-36).

The author works the body-clothing bond following four assumptions: the idea that body and clothing conform a materiality in permanent state of constitution; the notion that this body-clothing materiality is inscribed in a historical space and time whose projects at national level think the subject in different ways; the assumption that the same materiality body-clothing is the one that builds the autobiographical story that extends beyond the private sphere involving the political, historical, social and cultural; the acknowledgement that the political violence pursued by the regime through force and subtraction of public space

intervenes directly on the materiality of the affected bodies (MONTALVA, 2013). Her interpretation of the fashion, the specific garments, the ways of the clothes of the time and their signifiers contribute to the completeness of our work proposal.

Likewise, we resume the contributions of other studies that have also been developed understanding clothing as a social and cultural fact. Such as the works that have studied the dressed-body within the framework of a network of artistic experiences during the 80s in Buenos Aires which, understood as a political response of resistance and confrontation, aimed to restore the social bond that had been broken by terror through the establishment of other forms of sociability and alternative values to those proposed by the military dictatorship (LUCENA, 2013; LUCENA y LABOUREAU, 2015a y b).

In the area of gender studies, the contribution of sociologist Laura Zambrini stands out. She builds clothing as her object of study to analyze the construction of identities. In her research, she inquires about the values that are expressed in the body itself by the praxis of dressing, analyzing the relationship between the uses of garments and the construction of gender identities (ZAMBRINI, 2009; ZAMBRINI, 2010). These researches are related to our and, although they are referred to other experiences, build up a guiding and inspiring corpus of consultation and review.

### **3. THE DRESSED-BODY, IN CAPTIVITY**

Following the idea of "situated bodily practice" (ENTWISTLE, 2002, p.24), which places the body in the center of the analysis, one of the keys to prepare our work plan was the identification of practices in the relationship of the detained-disappeared with the fabrics and items of clothing that they had available during captivity, since they are considered a relevant aspect of the concentrationary

experience – and so far it wasn't researched. If we speak about a dressed-body, since it's from these practices that the subject creates an identity speech, an individual biography and a specific social story, is important to unveil another characteristic of testimony as regards the period of detention.

That is why we consider necessary to define like dressing practices those actions that detainees in clandestine centers made on the clothes they had and, in this way, contribute in the reconstruction of a biographical story that was broken by the detention and disappearance. To sum up, the research attempts to recompose the interrupted continuity by the mentioned rupture from an approach where the garments are understood as testimonial writing of what was lived during the captivity.

Here is where the notion of power becomes very important and the idea that, in every relationship mediated by power, the body occupies a privileged place: there is no power that is not physical, that doesn't have the body as a target (FOUCAULT, 2005, p.31). Therefore, a relevant aspect of our work is related to the possibility of recognizing the body as an own and inalienable space, where the detainees-disappeared in clandestine centers were able to develop dressing practices, intervening, socializing and telling about the clothes they wore. Then, the body is assumed in a double dimension: as a surface penetrated by power, on which the last military dictatorship deployed discipline and standardization techniques, but, at the same time, as the means through which the detainees-disappeared could have deployed strategies of resistance and survival.

This is how we get to the general hypothesis that guides the investigation. It presumes that, in a space where freedoms have been suppressed and the violence impacts on the materiality of the dressed-body, the subjects detainees-disappeared discover and develop

actions on and from the garments that covers their bodies as strategies of survival and resistance against the repressive and annihilator power that surrounds them. As Montalva affirms, "when political violence nullifies the rules of social coexistence and the horror takes over the ordinary, the material traces of its exercise are inevitably embedded in that dressed-undressed body" (MONTALVA, 2013, p.24). Which are the marks that remain when the body is disappeared and only the form of its absence persists, what the actions say about those clothes that the subjects in a situation of captivity carried and transformed, these are central questions that we aim to reveal in our research.

## **4. PROGRESS IN THE DELIMITATION**

### **4.1 Analysis of the study corpus**

So far, we have been able to advance in the construction of a corpus of analysis elaborated from primary sources (interviews to survivors and life stories, selected testimonies from the Oral Archive of Open Memory) and secondary sources (bibliography and documentary-testimonial films related and referred to the particular historical period; ongoing investigations on former clandestine detention centers; reports and investigations such as "Nunca Más" (Never Again) report made by the CONADEP (National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons); newspaper, magazines and publications of the time found in *La Nación*, *La Opinión*, *La Prensa*, *Convicción*, *Sur*, *Noticias*, *El Descamisado*, *El Caudillo*, *Avanzada Socialista*, *Nueva Hora*, *Somos*, *Gente*, *Para Ti*, *Humor*, *Crisis*, *Fierro*, *Primera Plana*, *La Maga*).

Also, on the basis of conducting the first interviews with survivors and relatives of detainees-disappeared, as well as the survey of available researches, we have defined a particular type of dressing practice that shares a series of

common characteristics and build up the study object that we privilege in this investigation: they develop in spaces where the subject has been deprived of his freedom; they are voluntary acts of the bodies-detainees determined by the spatial context where they are being subjected to physical violence; they are actions that aim to keep a kind of discipline which provides dignity to the dressed-body detained-disappeared, violated and tortured.

To inquire in the meanings that the subjects themselves confer to their actions on the clothes (or the dressing practices) in captivity we start from the perspective of Daniel Bertaux on the narrative form acquired by the discursive production in the life story. The author postulates the possibility of studying a fragment of social and historical reality external to the subject based on the singularity of his biographical story, and the configuration of social relations in their historical development (reproduction and transformation dynamics)" (BERTAUX, 2005, p.11).

In this way, the proposed methodological tools aim to address the stories about the practices of those dressed-bodies as representations that constitute modes of signification, that is to say, they stand out for their material base, for its sign quality (DERRIDA, 1998; ARFUCH, 2008). Those narrative forms are the ones that inscribe different textualities which must be analyzed. It's important to consider them, not as the surface of a deep essence, hidden or true, but paying attention to the meaning and the ways in which they come to be constituted as narratives loaded with meaning (RICOEUR, 1996; ARFUCH, 2002a). We try to apply different perspectives of textual analysis, discursive and narrative, in order to articulate a multidisciplinary approach that allows address the testimonies without ignoring its complex insertion in plots of meaning in permanent reconfiguration (DERRIDA, 1998; ARFUCH, 2002a y b).

## 4.2 The first cases

As we pointed out, this research tries to reveal what these practices that linked the subjects with the clothes in a situation of captivity have to say, what the techniques and skills developed in relation to dressing can tell, if we take into special consideration the space that those dressed-bodies detainees-disappeared inhabit. Walking this path of the analysis is essential to achieve an interpretation of these initiatives as testimonial means that remain even after the disappearance of the bodies, making even more complex the historical account of the political violence pursued by the last military dictatorship. Thinking about the actions, reflecting on the garments, reconstructing the bond of the detained-disappeared body with those fabrics that surrounded it, pretends to refer no longer to the abuse of which it was object but to the resistance of which it could also might been the subject.

Montalva argues that "the clothing articulates the insertion and belonging of the body to a specific historical space and time" (MONTALVA, 2013, p.24) and the body or clothing practice and the norm that regulates it, make up that materiality body-clothing from which comes out a biography that is possible to rebuild. Therefore, the stories and documents speaking about the practices and actions that the detained bodies performed on the clothes they wore in the detention centers are a key source for our research.

In this way, we have identified two cases that interact with the research questions that were outlined and express with forcefulness the importance of collecting and revealing these practices.

The first case is the one of Martha María Brea, kidnaped, detained and disappeared since March, 31st, 1977. During the trial for the crimes committed in the clandestine detention center known as El Vesuvio, Ana María Di Salvo, who met Brea when she was detained-missing during 73 days in that clandestine detention center, testified

at the May 2010 hearing with a scarf that Brea wove with her fingers during captivity, after she told her she felt cold in the neck.

The second case is the one of Laura Estela Carlotto, detained and disappeared since November, 26th, 1977. Alcira Elizabeth Ríos, detained-disappeared in La Cacha together with Laura, admitted to believe that her captivity mate had survived until, in a picture of a body with a disfigured face, she identified the bra that she had given to Laura when they both believed that they were releasing her. A first approach to these testimonies allows us to observe, on the one hand, the creation of bonds of sociability and cooperation; on the other hand, the evidence of a fact that proves the story. In this way, the actions and practices of the detained-bodies on their dressed-bodies in the context of illegality, as territories for resistance and the exercise of survival, offer the possibility to explore different ways of sociability created from, or around, these practices and the social links that they made possible.

## 5. NEW QUESTIONS AND FINAL COMMENTS

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As it usually happens in research processes, which are never closed or definitive, when trying to delimitate the corpus of analysis other concerns appeared, other interests that must be addresses in the short term. If the practice of dressing expresses a different kind of story in the case of political detainees, what happens outside of detention, in the areas of daily militancy?, would it be possible to recognize camouflage clothing practices in the militants of that time? If it was, would they have been designed following the official communiqué and/or the hegemonic canons expressed in the fashion magazines of the time? And, finally, could some of these practices be preserved during captivity?

These kinds of questions place our look in other areas of the triad body-garment-society. One of them is referred

to the hegemonic ways of visibility, socialization, reproduction; and other refers to the representations of masculine and feminine in the period that is being study. Taking this into consideration would allow to provide more details for the exploration of emotional and cooperation ties that could have been generated among the detainees-disappeared in the context of clandestine detention.

While we finish writing this text, in the ESMA<sup>1</sup> Memory Site Museum of Buenos Aires an exhibition called "The World Cup at the ESMA" is being opened. For the first time, objects made by the detainees-disappeared in that detention center, while Argentina was hosting the World Cup 1978, are going to be shown. A black leather document holder with secret pocket, sets of Spanish cards drawn by hand, among other objects, are part of this exhibition that presents new materials in which the traces of life in captivity can be read, as well as the traces of an experience that tried, in spite of everything, to outline a devastated everyday life.

These are the complex pieces that create a social memory that is yet a territory in dispute, since is there where naturalized visions about the political and cultural history of the recent past are redefined. We expect that the interest on the dressing practices of the detainees in clandestine centers, that in their testimonial singularity they express themselves in the absence of the disappeared bodies, allows to contribute to the reconstruction of the biographical story broken by violence and disappearance in Argentina.

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<sup>1</sup> ESMA (Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada) was the Navy School of Mechanics, an educational facility of the Argentine Navy that was used as a clandestine detention center during the last military dictatorship in Argentina. In 2004, the government recovered the property and created a memorial museum named ESMA Memory Site Museum (Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA). Several institutions are now located in the building, including the National Memorial Archive, the Malvinas War Museum and the Cultural Center of Memory Haroldo Conti, among others.

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