The forced disappearance of persons is a practice of State terror which turns epistemological uncertainty into a method of domination. The crime consists of a sequence of illegal violent acts against individuals - abduction, torture, imprisonment, murder - and the simultaneous systematic denial of these acts, together with the refusal to give information on the bodies' whereabouts, condition, and former destiny. In Argentina this method of State terror was imposed upon ten thousands of victims during the last Military Dictatorship (1976-83) and has brought forth the emblematic collective of the desaparecidos. The impossibility for the relatives to decide whether a person is dead or alive, and the repressive silence of the perpetrators, has a great impact on social life, still decades after the end of the dictatorship. As the psychiatrist Daniel Kersner puts it, the Argentines did not have 30.000 desaparecidos, they permanently live together with them (Kersner 1986: 73). We consider the figure of the desaparecido as a spectral (Jameson 1995: 38, Derrida 1993: 13, Gordon 2008: xiv) and uncanny (Freud 1919) reality evoking Terror in an absolute sense (Moreira 2008) and explore its haunting effects as well as the modes of counteracting it in different social narratives involving political, juridical, religious, and artistic discourses which try to confer significance or openly deal with the non-sense of this catastrophe of identity (Gatti 2008: iii). In literary texts, the triad of indeterminacy, the uncanny, and fear characterizes the fantastic mode, a way of narrating paradoxical states evoking imminent violence. We understand the fantastic as a mode of perception and representation which harshly challenges the border between the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’ (Jackson 1981: 12), and thus alters reality perception itself. Argentine literature since the end of the 19th century testifies to a long and perdurable relation between genocidal practices (D. Feierstein 2007) and uncanny, haunting, and phantasmagoric effects. The national foundational myth, Sarmiento’s Facundo, evokes from its very first phrase, “the terrible shadow of Facundo” and links political repression to the fantastic – a phenomenon we have observed throughout the narrative objects under analysis: The oral literature of the Northwestern provinces (research project Mahlke) has modeled the diabolic figure of ‘El Familiar’, a dog-like man-eating figure which is made responsible for cases of forced disappearances in the sugar plantations. In this myth, social experiences of exploitation, violent repression, and murder in the name of profit maximization, crystalize in the fantastic figure of an anthropophagical demon. The convergence of economic and political repression in the last decades of the 19th century is revived in the 1960s and 70s’ dictatorship and culminates in the ‘Noche del Apagón’ (‘night of the blackout’) when hundreds of workers were forced to disappear. Demons are present in both fictional and factual narratives. The prologue of the first truth commission report, the collection of testimonies, Nunca más (‘Never Again’, 1984) by the CoNaDep (National Committee on Disappeared Persons) refers to historical acts of state violence and mass assassination in terms of a gothic imaginary: Repression was “insanely” generalized”, its executors were “sadistic”, the tortures “infernal”, the fear “supreme” and the disappeared “a tetric and phantasmagorical category”. In novels since 1995 (research project Mandolessi) the fantastic mode occurs whenever State terrorism and disappearance is thematized and thus challenges the realist setting of the plot. On the stage (research project Pérez), the representational problem poses ontological questions: Can the figure of the disappeared ‘appear’ on stage? What status is conferred upon testimony if it is performed on stage? Stage plays can either gain credibility, perform the unresolved, or even be converted into an act of testifying itself. Our textual analyses raise the uncomfortable question of whether factual and fictional representations of the ‘disappeared’ not only denounce this method of state terror, but also take an active part in inspiring fear.
The social difficulties that emerge along with the figure of the 'disappeared' can be observed in religious family rituals of grief (research project Feierstein). As long as the corpses are not provided, no burial can take place. The concerned families struggle with the problem that mourning, in Freud's understanding of ‘Trauerarbeit’, is not possible in the face of disappearance, but highly necessary in order to heal the wound and to give sense to life again. A comparative approach to Jewish and Catholic practices confirms that grief and (infinite) mourning is the kernel (Abraham/Torok 1994) of the phantasmagoric intergenerational inheritance, which oscillates between the demand for justice (Derrida 1993) and the impossibility to let live.

The spatial dimension of terror (research project Estela Schindel) is locally reflected by more than 500 former clandestine detention centers on the Argentinean territory. Embedded in the urban structure, they provoked paradoxical, destabilizing effects: the disappeared were 'nowhere' and at the same time 'physically close'. The clues of horrible crimes like torture and murder that were committed right next door without really knowing it created an atmosphere in which extraordinary and inconceivable horror stories dislocated the perception and practices of daily life in the urban centers.

In Buenos Aires the ex-detention centers have been reclaimed by civic actors who deal with and counteract these effects through coherent narratives and practices that allow the neighbors and visitors to reintegrate the spatial presence of terror into a political and historical context. We have observed that, despite the indelible persistence of the void, these counter-narratives provide effects of social transformation through activity. In the majority of the current public trials against perpetrators (research project Rosario Figari), disappearances are treated as a homicide. The naming of the crime, its date, and those responsible initiates the transformation of the liminal, indeterminate terror to a narrative of horror which denominates, concretizes and humanizes the atrocities of the acts. While terror presents itself as inalterable, horror can be resisted and confronted (Punter 1996: 240). The juridical discourse aims to defy terror not only through the testimony of the victims, but also through the historical and political contextualization of the verdicts. The court acts like a social transformer: it exposes publicly the certainty of a horror whose principal creator and executor is man.

Bibliography

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