

## More than 30 Years after Malvinas: War in Film and Television

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### Introduction

When it comes to the Argentine post-dictatorship cultural production, the number of audiovisual works about the Malvinas War is not negligible at all: since 1982, there have been at least 19 documentaries and 15 fiction films. These include a compilation of short films from various directors entitled *Malvinas. 30 miradas* (2014), as well as whole series -and single episodes within series- delving into the topic and audiovisual teaching initiatives<sup>1</sup>.

The majority of these works appeared between 2003 and 2015, under a presidency which turned the examination of the dictatorship into a government policy. This restored and promoted the actions of various civil organizations which had already been working on the pursuit of justice and remembrance. The audiovisual production was a consequence of various measures for the construction of a memory closely related

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<sup>1</sup> A brief mapping identifies the following productions:

Documentaries: *Malvinas, historia de traiciones* (J. Denti, 1983), *Malvinas, alerta roja* (A. Rotondo, 1985), *Malvinas, me deben tres* (C. Giordano, A. Marino, I. Matiasich, A. Alfonso, L. Rueda, J. B. Duizeide, 1992), *Hundan el Belgrano* (F. Urieste, 1996), *Malvinas, historias de dos islas* (D. Alhadeff, 1999), *Vamos ganando* (R. Longo, 2001), *El refugio del olvido* (D. Alhadeff, 2002), *Malvinas, 20 años* (R. Lejtman, 2002), *Malvinas, la lucha continúa* (F. Cola, 2003), *Locos de la bandera* (J. Cardoso, 2005), *No tan nuestras* (R. Longo, 2005), *Estamos ganando, periodismo y censura en la guerra de Malvinas* (R. Persano y E. Ciganda, 2005), *Malvinas, tan lejos, tan cerca* (Lanata, 2007), *Malvinas, la historia que pudo ser* (Cuatro cabezas producciones/Discovery Channel, 2007), *Malvinas, 1982. La guerra desde el aire* (Argentina coproduction for History Channel, 2008), *Desobediencia debida* (V. Reale, 2008), *Huellas en el viento* (S. di Luca, 2008), *Malvinas, 25 años de silencio* (M. Angueira, 2008), *Malvinas, viajes del Bicentenario* (J. Cardoso, 2010), *Piratas, pastores, inversores* (F. J. Palma, 2010), *14 de junio, lo que nunca se perdió* (D. Circosta, 2011), *1892 1982: dos historias de Malvinas* (P. Walker, 2011), *El héroe del Monte de dos Hermanas* (R. Vila, 2011), *La forma exacta de las islas* (D. Casabé y E. Dieleke, 2012), *Combatientes* (E. Spagnolo, 2013), *Pensar Malvinas* (canal Encuentro), *Malvinas, historia de la usurpación* (canal Encuentro), *Historias debidas IV* (canal Encuentro), *Historias de un país. Argentina siglo XX* (canal Encuentro).

Fictions: *Los chicos de la guerra* (B. Kamin, 1984), *La deuda interna* (M. Pereira, 1988), *Guarisove, los olvidados* (B. Stagnaro, 1995), *El visitante* (J. Olivera, 1999), *Fuckland* (J. L. Marques, 2000), *Los días de junio* (A. Fischerman, 1985), *La deuda interna* (M. Pereira, 1988), *El visitante* (H. Olivera, 1999), *El mismo amor, la misma lluvia* (J. Campanella, 1999), *Pozo de Zorro* (M. Mirra, 1999), *Guarisove, los olvidados* (B. Stagnaro, 1995), *1982, estuvimos ahí* (2004), *Iluminados por el fuego* (T. Bauer, 2005), *Palabra por palabra* (E. Cabeza, 2007), *Cartas a Malvinas* (R. Fernández, 2009), *La campana* (2010), *Un cuento chino* (2011), *30 miradas, Malvinas* (30 short films by various directors, 2014), *El último*, an episode of *Vindica* (E. Crupnicoff, J. Laplace, M. Ardanaz, N. Parodi, 2011), *Combatientes* (J. P. Clemente y T. De Las Heras, 2013), *La asombrosa excursión de Zamba en las Islas Malvinas* (canal PakaPaka).

to other areas of the memory production of the time. Visibility was particularly high in the media around the dates of commemoration—in April, when it comes to Malvinas—, when programming in state television channels (Encuentro, INCAA TV and TV Pública) focused on paying homage through various television audiovisual productions, documentaries and fiction films about the war.

By recovering conceptualizations about intertextual and interdiscursive relationships between memories from the perspective of semiotics and discourse analysis, we will identify some veins of meaning which run through these audiovisual works in the context of commemorative television programming. In this framework, we will be able to understand the way in which the protagonists of history are construed, dependent on the hegemonic discourse of each period of time (Angenot 2010).

This paper is based on the proposal of Courtine (1981)—among other discourse analysts—, who considers that the relationship of meanings involves discursive memories, as these relationships are bridges that tie the present with past experiences. It is in this context that the representation of the world and of the individuals living in it is developed. In this way, memories can be understood as historical devices of power/knowledge that produce what can be said and shown from the perspective of particular ideologies that permeate different parts of discourse. These memories allow us to understand the way in which the present is built by recovering that which has already been said and seen, given that the production of discourse repeats, transforms or denies discourses which have already been articulated, contributing to the semiotic construction of reality (Verón 1993).

### **Time in Memory**

The Malvinas War of 1982 was the only Argentine war in the 20th century. It took a toll of 649 deaths in the area of operations and over a thousand wounded. Moreover, as estimated by veteran organizations, it led to the suicide of some 500 soldiers—an approximation, as there is no official data— over the course of the 30 following years.

The war was a breaking point not only for foreign policy, but also for domestic policy, as it precipitated the end of the military dictatorship.

Malvinas is a proper noun which, after the conflict, became a trope, invoking the concept of war and a particular period in history. It is this traumatic experience, marked by defeat and deception, which has survived along the years as the meaning of that

word. This meaning hegemonizes and obstructs other possible ways of understanding that territory.

According to Real Academia Española, “trauma” comes from the Greek word for wound. Many of its meanings refer to a wound that persists in time.<sup>2</sup> Certain events that disrupt individual or collective experience can become incidents that inflict serious injuries. However, trauma is not the event itself, but the imprint left on the individual. From an individual point of view —although it can be coextensive with a community because certain events that affect a person are partly created from a collective experience—, trauma is the result of some sort of violence that goes beyond what is tolerable and persists after the event, especially when unresolved because it cannot be seen nor articulated. This would be the case of all those who participated in the war in one way or another, the case of the Argentine society itself. The cause is a complex range of factors which could be part of what some people call the politics of forgetting, which are also a part of memory.

As a consequence, the *process of de-Malvinification* (which took place during the first two decades after the conflict, at least) resulted in the general effacement of the event from public memory. The only exception was during anniversaries, when it appeared in the form of very stereotypical figures and focused on the victimization of the young soldiers, categorizing the event as a consequence of an irrational military adventure. The military government invoked nationalistic stereotypes in order to achieve consensus and remain in power, something which was proving hard at the time for several reasons, one of them being the serious economic crisis. The paradox is that Malvinas therefore stands in an inflection point between the dictatorship and democracy. Being a preliminary experience, it proved very uncomfortable to think about it in the post-dictatorship context.

The movie *Los chicos de la guerra*, by B. Kamín (1984), is the epitome of this form of representation. It was the first movie to deal with the topic, only two years after the conflict, in the context of the emerging democracy of Raúl Alfonsín. As such, it is an obligatory part of commemorative rituals shown in television every year. In the words of R. Guber:

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<sup>2</sup>Trauma: “1. Lasting injury produced by a mechanical agent, generally an external one. 2. Emotional shock that causes permanent damage in the unconscious.3. Feeling or impression which is negative, strong and persistent” (Real Academia Española 2001).

The movie begins with the image of the end of the war, with young soldiers digging the graves to bury their dead (fellow soldiers with whom they shared the same trenches, nationality and generation). This image summarizes the heart of Kamín's message: dead or alive, those kids were victims of the National Reorganization Process, of a war between the armed forces and their countrymen. The British are nothing but the platform on which the Argentine drama was displayed. (2001: 88)

This can be seen, for example, in a sequence where Santiago, one of the protagonists, decides to untie a fellow soldier who had his arms and legs tied to spikes in the ground (a punishment that became a method of torture) by his officers for stealing a sheep. After doing such a thing, the soldier is taken to the chief to justify his actions while the other soldiers ascertain: “Sí, es cierto, nos están cagando de hambre, nos tratan peor que a los enemigos” [“It is true. They are starving us to death. They treat us worse than they treat the enemy”],

This type of representation was pervasive during the eighties and nineties, characterized by the predominance of the victimizing narration that has already been mentioned. This style created consensus because it worked for the Argentine society due to the reasons stated by Lorenz:

[...] it corresponded both with the image of the young built during the transition back to democracy and with the self-exculpatory view that society was trying to build [...] and this context placed the soldiers in the position of victims of their own officers and of the improvisation of the highest ranks. The analogy was built by the Argentine society, which considered itself a victim of its armed forces. The soldiers in Malvinas were other, younger victims of the dictatorship. (2011:55)

This interpretative framework tends to depoliticize and to create passive individuals who are part of a discourse infused with altruistic values linked to heroism and commitment. At the same time, it helps to erase the role played by the community before, during and after the armed conflict.

This subjective construction is not only present in audiovisual discourses about the war. To a great extent, documents and fiction in Argentina in the eighties and nineties on the topic of the dictatorship and the young represent the latter as innocent

victims, effacing the ethical and political commitment to the processes of collective action and transformation<sup>3</sup>.

In the context of this dominant representation of the armed conflict—or the dismissal of it—, Malvinas progressively became a public topic as a result of the demands articulated by certain social actors, such as the veteran or ex-combatant associations<sup>4</sup> (the difference between the terms has political implications and has been subject of conflicts among the different associations). These groups managed to have their proposals strategically picked up by the governmental discourse in this new social context, which led to state policies.

As of 2003, the topic, referred to as the “Malvinas question”, began to be reframed and became increasingly more prominent by means of different actions enforced by the government in a variety of cultural (among other) areas. With it came the proliferation of voices and views, which joined the argument about the imposition of meaning related to the war and post-war, emphasizing the use of testimonies or narrations from the protagonists' perspective. This can be perceived in different fields and discourses, such as in film and television. The changes in the narrative and articulation strategies of the audiovisual productions (documentaries or fiction) used to tell the stories about Malvinas entail a transformation in the ways of remembering and, consequently, in the ways in which we interpret the recent past. These strategies show an increasing questioning of the role of society and, particularly, of the Argentine State during the post-war period, which are recurrent topics in the discourses heard over the last decade.

The television fiction *Combatientes* (2013)<sup>5</sup>—whose title (“Combatants”) focuses on the protagonists, highlighting their active role—is a prime example of this. This fiction highlights the traumatic effects that the experience has had on the lives of a soldier and a young serviceman during the post-war period. These characters embody the failure of a social and individual project with which the survivors cannot deal,

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<sup>3</sup> Although they have different styles and epochal characteristics that differentiate them, *La república perdida 2* (Pérez, 1986) and *Montoneros, una historia* (Di Tella, 1994) are two prime examples of documentaries on the topic.

<sup>4</sup> According to the Argentine legislation, a Malvinas ex-combatant is any official, non-commissioned officer or conscript from the Armed and Security Forces who participated in the military actions which took place in the Malvinas theatre of operations (Teatro de Operaciones Malvinas, TOM) and in the South Atlantic theatre of operations (Teatro de Operaciones del Atlántico Sur). This statute's accreditation can only be issued by the Force to which each combatant belonged and endorsed by the Ministry of Defense.

<sup>5</sup> *Combatientes* was written and directed by Jerónimo Paz Clemente and Tomás de las Heras, and was issued in April 2013 by the TV Pública.

bringing them close to death. Like many others, this fiction deals with one of the issues that have marked the individuals after the conflict, evidenced by hundreds of suicides which show the difficulties that the veterans faced when reintegrating to society during the post-war period.

This television series<sup>6</sup> tell a story that begins in 1982, before the war, introducing five young men drafted to go to Malvinas: Gustavo, Chapa, Raúl, Facundo y Carlos, who show highly heterogeneous social features and characteristics. One of them is a factory worker, another one is a thief; there is a fearful Jewish singer, a rugby player, a son from a wealthy family and, finally, a designer who dreams to become an artist. All these characters, with the exception of Gustavo, show very stereotypical features and evoke social types of the time, something which seems to be a significant weakness of the show. This may be due to the fact that a lot of the information about these (mis)adventure partners is tinted by Gustavo's perception and memory, one of the two protagonists (this being one of the narrative strategies, whose aim is revealed in the lasts episodes of the show). The letter informing them that they are subject to the draft is also received in different ways by each one of them: for some, it means an escape from the life they lead; for others, an obligation they have to accept in submission. They are sent to Malvinas, to the war front, under the command of Lieutenant Augusto López Cabral, a character whose attributes tear down the typical representations of the military leaders of the time (an innovative characteristic of social discourse which had been missing from the public media scene in previous decades). There, they share their everyday lives in a war situation marked by shortages. Finally, towards the end of the conflict, they have to fight the British hand to hand. They are all wounded and four of them die. Gustavo and Lieutenant López Cabral are taken prisoners. Once they get back, these survivors try to continue with their lives in complete loneliness. During the fifth anniversary of the landing and in the context of the military coup that took place in Holy Week of 1987 against the democratic government of president Alfonsín, Gustavo tries to contact López Cabral to see if he can help him find his fellow soldiers. Gustavo suffered from memory loss and could not remember that the other soldiers had died. Although the lieutenant refuses to help him at first, this young serviceman goes looking for Gustavo as a consequence of his insistence and ends up saving him: suicide in the

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<sup>6</sup> This television series is the first of its kind, with Malvinas as its topic and, additionally, many elements specific to cinematic language.

continent is ever present in the same way death was in Malvinas. In spite of this, life goes on for them. In this respect, the narration in *Combatientes* is encouraging.

This discourse shapes protagonists whose identity is defined, among other things, by the limit between reason and insanity. One of the formal devices used to achieve this is temporal (con)fusion as a narrative strategy. Temporal disruptions — achieved mainly by means of flashbacks recalling a selection of what happened in Malvinas during the war, focused predominantly on an internal plane— are interspersed with mental images (dreamlike images play an important role), linked to dreams and fears that allow us to access these individuals' experiences. This framework exacerbates the tension between amnesia and the need to remember in order to know what happened: only accessing the “truth” will allow for the exorcism of the past. Narrative and aesthetic methods are brought together to achieve this purpose.

In this way, the old pattern of memory loss—not being able to remember, which is what triggered Gustavo's pursuit in *Combatientes*; not wanting to remember because it proves unbearable, as is the case of the servicemen in control; and the difficulty to distinguish between true and false— are some of the elements that organize the universe of meanings offered to the spectators. These are expected to re-evaluate what we remember, why we remember it and what for, as well as what we forget, why we forget it and what for.

### **30 Years, 30 Viewpoints about Malvinas**

The movie *Malvinas. 30 miradas. Los cortos de nuestras islas*, a more recent work released in 2014, is made up of 30 short films created by Argentine and other Latin American filmmakers. This piece is a proposal that seeks to contribute to the construction of audiovisual memory, drawing upon multiple aesthetic, narrative and thematic perspectives. It was made by Centro de Producción e Investigación Audiovisual (CePIA), part of the Ministry of Culture, together with Consejo Asesor de la Televisión Digital Terrestre, in cooperation with the National University of Tres de Febrero. This film is part of the commemorative programming of INCAA TV channel and it has been displayed in other places with a more limited access.

These 30 short films make up a mosaic where different representations of Malvinas are outlined and overlapped. Many of these narratives are characterized by a parodic style, perhaps because humor —and the distance it creates— is one of the best ways to address fetishes and taboos (Angenot 2010), in an attempt to escape from

nationalistic or victimizing discourses. In this case, we will concentrate on the short film *Entrevista*, by Sergio Bellotti. As its title indicates, this work shows a meeting between a journalist from an opinion-settling magazine of the time and a general who was part of the dictatorship. The following is a fragment of it:

Periodista: Para ir cerrando general ¿no quiere decir un mensaje a los familiares de los soldados muertos en esta guerra?

General: En todos estos años en los que hemos luchado contra el enemigo interno hemos sido orgullosamente responsables de la tortura, la muerte y desaparición de decenas de miles de argentinos... (Se escuchan balas de fondo) en su gran mayoría jóvenes, incluyendo mujeres embarazadas, casi adolescentes. En comparación, ¿qué son 600 soldados? Incluso algunos de nuestros oficiales los han maltratado y les han hecho pasar hambre, pero siempre hay causas superiores, superiores!

Periodista: ¡Gracias por su testimonio general!

General: No, por favor, usted se lo merece, y salude de mi parte a su editor.

Periodista: ¿Quiere agregar algo más?

General: Mire, si usted quiere un detalle más completo va a tener que esperar un tiempo, unos veinte o treinta años, pero vaya tranquila, su editor va a entender...Veinte, treinta años ...

(Risas) Veinte, treinta años...

(Se escucha como banda musical la Marcha de Malvinas)

[Interviewer: To conclude, General, do you want to give a message to the families of those soldiers who died at war?

General: Throughout the years we spent fighting against our internal enemy, we have been proud culprits of the torture, death and disappearance of thousands of Argentines (Bullets can be heard in the background), mainly young ones, including pregnant women who were almost teenagers. In comparison, what do 600 soldiers mean? Even some of our own officers have mistreated them and starved them, but there is always a greater cause, a greater cause!

Interviewer: Thank you for your testimony, General!

General: No at all, you deserve it. Say hi to your editor for me

Interviewer: Do you want to add anything else?



General: Look, if you want further details, you're gonna have to wait, some twenty or thirty years, but don't worry about it. Your editor will understand.

Twenty or thirty years...

(Laughter) Twenty, thirty years...

(March of Malvinas is heard)]

As it can be seen, the interview highlights the connivance of certain parts of the press during the dictatorship, the lack of recorded testimonies which can be used as proof of “truth” and the arrogance of power.

However, this short film's effect lies on intertextuality. What is said is introduced literally, but from a perspective offered by distance, achieved not only through the passing of time (those necessary 30 years before we can access the details of the events, as the character himself envisaged it), but also as a consequence of the change in the hegemonic discourse. The latter allows for the development of a knowing addressee who shares the values that are being challenged and is capable of recognizing the utterer's stance. At the same time, this addressee recovers the ideological world to which those characters belonged and perceives their attitudes through signs that tend to ridicule or tone down the seriousness of those who embody these values: the journalist steps on excrement on her way in, she makes comfortable questions and does not realize that there is no cassette in the machine; the photographer takes pointless pictures; the serviceman himself seems to overact, and confidently affirms to be a “proud culprit” of the torture, disappearance and death of Argentine citizens, but is obsessed with unimportant details. In this way, we recover utterances which were supposedly delivered in that past by familiar characters, whose literalism states in a straight-forward and brutal manner the logic that organized the actions of certain individuals during that period of our history.

In this respect, the narrative is supported by a widely-held view in Argentina nowadays, which equates the victims of State-sponsored terrorism with the soldiers. At the same time —and this is the innovative feature—, the fragment quoted above introduces another dimension to this construction of memory, which is the minimization or cancellation of human attributes: “we have been proud culprits of the torture, death and disappearance of thousands of Argentines... In comparison, *what are 600 soldiers?*”

Beyond the struggle about the designations of the subjects and the semantic field that each one of them enables for the interpretation of events (together with the

performative consequences this entails), the general's question undermines an identity: what are 600 soldiers? The question, addressed at the journalist (a character that symbolizes and shapes public opinion), is really aimed at society in general, 30 years later, by means of metonymy: what are 600 soldiers? (*¿qué son 600 soldados?*). The interrogative pronoun “qué” (what) opens a statement about people in an objectifying manner. This statement could be reworded as follows: what *thing* are 600 soldiers? (*¿qué cosa son 600 soldados?*). Or, more accurately, given that the statement is about fatalities: what are 600 dead soldiers? (*¿qué cosa son 600 soldados muertos?*). A designation that elides human traits is revealed. This enables an understanding of what happened both during and after the dictatorship from a different perspective. The objectification and the emphasis on the low number of victims (“only” 600) when compared to the other ones mentioned in this narration —these victims are paralleled here and in numerous other discourses with the young victims of the dictatorship— demean their existence as a group. The narrative highlights the controversial issues of certain post-war discourses about Malvinas. Are the deaths of these soldiers important?

### **What Lives Matter? What Lives Can Be Remembered?**

The emphasis on present subjective records by means of the audiovisual production that has been taking place since 2003 is an attempt to answer these questions, heard in public places, by means of a policy to restore the human status to the Malvinas soldiers. An example of this rearrangement can be found in President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner's speech during the commemoration ceremony for the 30th anniversary of the war.<sup>7</sup>

Today, before coming here, I read a phrase from one of the (thousands) of young men who fought in the islands and then became a journalist. He might be around here, Edgardo Esteban. And he was saying [...] that the greatest defeat in a war, or in this war at least, is the truth [...] I also demand justice for those who have not yet been identified, (which is why last Friday) I sent a letter to the head of the International Red Cross so that he takes the necessary measures and intercedes with the United Kingdom to identify those men, Argentine and even British ones, who have not yet been identified, because everyone deserves to have their name

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<sup>7</sup> Public speech given by C. Fernández de Kirchner on April 2, 2012. Commemoration ceremony for the 30th anniversary of the beginning of the Malvinas War in Usuahia, Tierra del Fuego, Malvinas Islands and Islas del Atlántico Sur, in Argentina.

written on their tombstone, and every mother has an inalienable right [...] to bury their dead, get a plaque with their name on it and cry in front of it.

Justice, truth and memory permeate an address that, decades before, would have been unspeakable in that context. This speech, as many others in different fields, recognizes the existence of lives whose disappearance is worth honoring through mourning, which is nothing but an exercise of memory, “because if the end of a life produces no pain, it is not a life, it does not qualify as such and it has no value. It does not constitute something that deserves a burial, but rather that which is impossible to bury“ (Butler 2006:61). The recognition of these lives' value, as well as of the value of their deaths, records them in history and gives them a place there.

In this framework, then, the numerous audiovisual productions which have brought back the Malvinas War time and again to each one of the presents throughout these three decades could be understood as some sort of collective obituary, honoring the dead and acknowledging the survivors. In the words of J. Butler (2006: 61), this obituary is “a nation-building action”, carrying the marks of the ways in which the past has been remembered in each particular social and historical period.

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