

Returning: The Journey to the Islands in Contemporary Narratives about the Malvinas

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Owing to its character as a traumatic incident, the Malvinas War¹ remains a historic event to which discourses return time and again to explore, update and negotiate meanings. Surrounded by relentless narratives where literature is central, I choose as my focal point works that consider the journey to the Malvinas as a recurring topic of contemporary narratives. The accounts of the journey persist both in genres of a more testimonial nature (journals and chronicles), and in fictional literature and film. Through them, we can outline a series of questions about war memories. Answers—which are always hypothetical, plastic and versatile in nature—are offered up by each of the respective pieces.

The journey, associated with movement, enables a return to the past through questions about the present. A particular structure of perspective is put into play: that of the travellers who wander in order to interact with the territory that unsettles them. I am interested in the ability of the journey—linked to the movement that defines and constitutes it—to interact with time. In other words, I am interested in the journey's ability to discontinue meanings about the past that have become more or less stagnant, to give way to a new and very necessary perspective derived from the recording of experience.

In this essay, my concern is to study certain aspects of the journey in relation to memory, focusing on the link between bodies and affects, experience and writing, and past and present, as shown in the documentary *La forma exacta*

¹ "The Malvinas War is one of the most controversial and difficult chapters in Argentine history. The most important military conflict that the country participated in during the twentieth century [...]. There are different reasons for its complexity. On the one hand, it was a product of the civilian and military dictatorship which, since 1976, had been relying on State-sponsored terrorism. On the other hand, it had the support of a considerable part of society, including some who opposed the military government. At the same time, it was a demand rooted in the history of Argentine thought, as this country's sovereignty claim over the Malvinas Islands is a longstanding one" (Flachsland *et al.* 2014: 95).

*de las islas*² (The Exact Shape of the Islands) (2012) by Edgardo Dieleke and Daniel Casabé, as well as in *Fantasmas de Malvinas. Un libro de viajes* (Malvinas Ghosts: A Book of Journeys) (2008) by Federico Lorenz. Both pieces insist on building a memory made up of multiple ways of reading the war experience and of seeing the island territory located at the end of the world.

La forma exacta de las islas explores the need to get to know the Malvinas by those who write doctoral theses on the topic. The book that emerged from this research, *Islas imaginadas. La guerra de Malvinas en la literatura y el cine argentinos* (Imagined Islands: The Malvinas War in Argentine Literature and Film), was published in 2012, the same year the documentary was released. In the epilogue, we read that Julieta Vitullo (2012: 186), the author, travelled to the islands twice. The aim of the first journey was to write up the conclusions of her research in situ: "What guided the first journey was the idea of seeing with my own eyes that place I had read so much about [...]. I wanted the journey to be not only metaphorical but also physical". The second journey was to be the subject-matter of the documentary. *Fantasmas de Malvinas* also narrates the urgent desire to travel, but, this time, the craving is that of a historian who has focused on investigating the matter in a series of research projects. The book consists of travel chronicles that are largely essayistic in nature.

There seems to be a common concern in these materials. A literary critic and a historian who have investigated the matter of the Malvinas reveal the importance of accessing the islands and recording that experience. What is being narrated in this space "between" the research practice, the writing of it and the experiences of the journey? What meanings does the insular (*lo insular*) acquire? What memories of the territory are updated? What memories of war are drawn upon?

By means of unique paths which I am interested in defining, I consider that these materials—diverging from the canonical traits of the genres of documentary and

² Film directed by Daniel Casabé and Edgardo Dieleke. Script by the directors and Julieta Vitullo, with the collaboration of Ricardo Piglia.

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chronicle³—play a role in creating new ways of reading an event whose meanings are never finite. This essay is divided into two parts, one for each piece, and its aim is to assess their features and the questions they raise.

On *La forma exacta de las islas*

The Islands: "The Place Where Everything Happened"

The film *La forma exacta de las islas* is about the journey to the Malvinas, creating journeys within journeys. The film aims to grasp the way in which certain lives are scarred by a particular experience or place. Recording a variety of stories, *La forma exacta* builds multiple ways of viewing the island territory.

The movie offers both images of the islands as they stand now and accounts of the way in which they were seen by travellers and castaways who reached their harbours. It creates an archive of images and sounds: in many scenes, if we focus on listening, it is hard to differentiate the sound of the sea from that of the wind. Be that as it may, we cannot remain indifferent to those physical and perceptible records.

It could be said that the documentary alternates between two times, representing the two journeys of Julieta Vitullo, the protagonist of the film and researcher on fiction in literature and films about the Malvinas. One of the trips took place in 2006, when Julieta's desire to travel to the islands arose. The objective of this impulse to travel is to access the reality of that imagined territory that is part of the fiction she writes about and researches on. The initial proposal, "I am finally on Malvinas. I'm coming to Malvinas to finish my dissertation", was altered by an unexpected event that disrupted the proposed plan. During that week in December 2006 (generally, trips to the Malvinas are that long), Julieta met two Argentine veterans and, instead of writing the end of her thesis, began the production of a film following the travellers' footsteps.

In this material recorded by Julieta's camera, as well as in the veterans' introduction of themselves, they first tell us

³ Current critical opinion challenges the presumption of veracity as a rule specific to these genres. New variations are reflected in order to show hybrids and markers of subjectivity that redefine and invent an event rather than mirror it. María Moreno considers the aforementioned line of inquiry of these genres and, specifically, of the chronicle, as a "writing lab".

their names, Dacio and Carlos, immediately followed by an unforgettable fact of their lives: they were born in 1963. This first trait, encoded in the year of their birth—later materialized when their names were drawn and their luck defined—marks out those young men who were 18 years old at the time of the war. These young men, showing the passing of time on their faces, went back—or should we say “returned”?—to explore the conflict area. In the words of the film: “the place where it all happened”.

Returning, the wish to go back, seems to rest on the connection between the ways of assigning meaning to experience, a connection that has never been entirely resolved. Although they outline the possibility that the journey might have beneficial effects to help them move on (“When I go back, I will continue doing my thing, but with a different perspective, I believe. I will think about helping my comrades come over here. I think it is very good for us”, says Dacio, looking into the camera), these ways involve a perception of time that is neither linear nor chronological, but rather intensive and purely emotional: “I could make the journey because I knew I was going to look at this with different eyes/with greater life-experience behind me [...]. I had thought about the war a thousand times”. On this emotional plane, reinforced by the contact with the territory, a meeting with that which is new is established: “Perhaps the only thing I found that I wasn’t expecting was the beauty”:

I don’t know. When I come back I’ll continue with my stuff/but perhaps with a new perspective and thinking about helping our comrades who want to come back.

I can tell you that I can analyze this trip because I already did it before I came. In the sense that I knew I was going to look at this with different eyes/with greater life-experience behind me.

Perhaps the only thing I found that I wasn’t expecting was the beauty. (2012)

The beauty that moves Dacio, the hills beneath the sun which he never got to see during the war, is wonderfully captured by the camera countless times during the movie. It captures footage of the beaches, the hills, the streets, the lit homes of Stanley. It captures images of roads that crisscross

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the islands, accompanied by the sound of the wind.⁴

Carlos, the other veteran, also shares the way in which the trip allows him to see things differently, to shake off a way of thinking about the islands that has remained frozen since the time of the war, in order to appreciate that life went on here as well. The perception of movement is such that, several times during the film, Carlos fantasizes with the idea of staying and settling down there.

The recording carried out by Julieta follows the travellers closely and joins them on their visits, which somehow resemble the typical journeys of veterans exploring the islands: visiting the Darwin Cemetery; finding and identifying the places where they fought, where they lost fellow soldiers or took shelter from the cold and hunger. Julieta's camera records their unsettling, winding, yet precise, search to recognize the places and pay tribute to unforgettable dead comrades with fragile wooden crosses.

Rupture

It is fragments of this film—which registers the unexpected encounter, in 2006, with the veterans and follows their footsteps—that were taken up in November 2010, when Julieta returned accompanied by the two filmmakers who directed the documentary: Daniel Casabé and Edgardo Dieleke. She returned driven by the need to go back to that territory that had marked her life beyond the writing. Well into the film, the viewer finds out that Julieta fell pregnant during the first trip, that she decided to keep the child after she returned to Buenos Aires and that her son, Eliseo, died a few hours after he was born.

This narrative, which revolves around maternity and loss, is reflected in the restrained and frugal gestures of Julieta's face, and introduces an emotional plane where the feminine is highlighted. A turning-point in fiction towards an awareness which, read in the context of war narratives,

⁴ Paola Cortés Rocca's (2012) reading pauses to concentrate on images. Critics believe *La forma exacta* steers away from a word-based representation to "offer a visual and perceptive experience of the islands", where the landscape "is not something one thinks of as decoration, but rather as geography that incorporates very different overlapping layers: that of war, love, history, national identities, friendship, eroticism, mourning". Text read during the presentation at Museo Rojas, Buenos Aires, 2012.

where the masculine figure and homosociality prevail, shifts the focus of attention and creates another possible linkage.

It would be possible to read something encoded in Julieta's pain that seems to be related to that of other mothers in its inimitable uniqueness. Linear time disappears once again. One of the images shows Julieta walking around a cemetery while the voice-over narrates how she found a book documenting a plague that ravaged the islands in the 19th century, taking mainly children's lives. The book shows a picture of a mother with her dead son in her arms.

Other images of Julieta in Darwin Cemetery are tinged by a tone governed by loss, as the camera shoots the tombstones on the field, slowly going from one cross to the other so that the viewer can read the names of those killed or notice the names of those missing.

At this point, the documentary establishes a strong connection in which the individual experience of loss, the uniqueness of each life which Derrida speaks about, is related to others. The plague in the 19th century and the Malvinas War seem to outline a common background where death is featured solely as an interruption of lives that had their entire future ahead of them.

In this cancellation of the future, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are called upon through metonymy and as a result of the echo produced by the intensity of the images in the film. As stated by Nora Domínguez (2007: 283), the Mothers barge into the public arena and displace "the representation of a unique mother with one singular son [...]" in order to show that the greatest accomplishment of motherhood is reaching out to the group of sons with one embrace or motherly voice, when the place of the mother becomes plural".

A quotation from the writer Carlos Gamerro—part of the theatre version of the novel *Las islas*—gives the documentary its name and, at the same time, acts as an encapsulation of the recorded experience outlined by the movie, focused on the figure of rupture: "Does anyone know how many days the war lasted? Nobody? It isn't true there were survivors. There are two bites torn out of the hearts of every one of us."

Based on the experience of rupture, of something that breaks/cracks and cannot return to its former shape, but rather mutates, acquiring new contours, the movie

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constructs—with its combination of accounts and experiences—meanings that, time and again, go beyond the personal sphere.

Released 30 years after the Malvinas War, *La forma exacta* gives an account of multiple possible perspectives, this time through images captured by those who were children during the war: the directors and Julieta herself.

On *Fantasmas de Malvinas. Un libro de viajes*

Writing, Travelling and Memory

The book *Fantasmas de Malvinas* is a chronicle that narrates the journey of a historian who travelled to the islands. A disturbing question is posed on the first page: “Can we return to somewhere we have never been before?” Even though it is the first one, the trip is conceptualized as a return and, from page one, invokes a temporality that is not subject to linear chronology, but is connected to that which comes back as a ghost, that which cannot be overridden by memory.

The chronicles open and close with chapters entitled “Luggage”. They are entries, similar to those one finds in a personal diary, about the aim of the trip. The first chapter lists a series of elements to be used when recording the experience in writing, as well as garments that will be useful on the trip:

I have a blank notebook [...], a tentative schedule and a list of questions I have accumulated over the years [...]. I am taking a considerable number of warm garments that are easy to put on and take off because the weather in the Malvinas, like that in the provinces down south, changes all the time. (Lorenz 2008: 27-29)

The comparison between the weather or the landscape on the islands and Patagonia (the province of Tierra del Fuego, mainly) is a consistent characteristic of the text, creating a sense of proximity and even familiarity between the islands and the closest parts of the continent.

Regarding the writing, there is an initial scene that is recalled: that of the child writing letters to the soldiers during the war. This scene,⁵ almost elliptically developed—“I who

⁵ The narration of this initial writing scene and our interest in

wrote them letters every day" (Lorenz 2008: 31)—acts as the beginning of the writing persistence that continued and is now present in the practice of the historian. At the same time, it encodes and encapsulates some central issues: the role of schools during the months of the war (where thousands of letters from the children to the soldiers were written) and the markers of the generation to which the writer belongs.

The journey, as an experience that allows for the encounter with the other and the foreign, results in multiple ways of seeing and looking. The chronicles constitute a chorus of perceptions about the landscapes and the meetings with the islanders and veterans visiting the islands. The chronicles incorporate other voices. Those of the veterans have a central place. They are sometimes mentioned directly ("I don't know what force brought me here, and which now that it brings me here, won't let me go back"), as well as being introduced by the chronicler ("They want to keep promises, close wounds, settle debts and spend a night in their old place. Time stopped for them when the war marked them forever, even though they went on living" [87]).

The chronicle records the marks left by war, written on the lives and memories of the subjects as well as on the materials that are still spread around the islands as footprints of the battles. Examples of this are the parts of a Pucará plane and multiple other objects:

The islanders dragged it from the place where it crashed in 1982 to the place where it is now. However, more than a vexation, it looked as if someone had delicately arranged it for the purpose of studying it: the wings were spread out, the fuselage was broken [...], the tail was resting on a side, the wounds left by the shots could be seen in different parts of the structure.
(85)

Scattered all over the floor there are remnants

reading it as a beginning is related to Sylvia Molloy's study of autobiography in Spanish America. Critics concentrate on a central episode in the lives of the autobiographers they study: the encounter between the self and the book, which highlights the importance which the act of reading itself acquires. This central position can be observed in Lorenz's chronicle of his journey, transferred to the act of writing.

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that represent the life of those men in the pits: wood, blankets, ponchos, rusty irons and telephone cables. (88)

The objects that can be found all over the island, which the chronicler records and photographs, are also footprints or fragments of memory.⁶ They are outdoors, worn and preserved at the same time by the cold weather of the islands.⁷ They are there, questioning those who find them and are capable of reading them.

I mentioned at the beginning that the chronicles create a non-linear temporality. This means that they build a memory that, far from linear in form, is designed in tiers: "To me, the islands are *successive layers* of locations, places and memories" (my emphasis).

Those Who Stayed

A tone of mourning is present throughout the chronicle. This tone and its meaning are strengthened when visits are made to the places where the dead are buried. The visit to Darwin Cemetery, where the bodies of the fallen Argentine soldiers lie, is the first stop on the historian's trip to the island.

There is something desolate about Darwin. It might be the wind. [...] There is a cross at each grave, white and glistening due to the rain. At their feet, some of the black plaques display a name, others simply state "Argentine soldier known only to God". There are paths

⁶ In *Fantasmas de Malvinas*, there are no pictures of the journey. These can be found in other books by the author, as well as in *Pensar Malvinas*.

⁷ These objects that are still part of the landscape, probably preserved by the cold weather, invoke the documentary *Nostalgia de la luz* (Nostalgia for Light) by Patricio Guzmán, who took advantage of the Atacama Desert's lack of humidity (which keeps everything unaffected) to search for and read history's footprints: "What *Nostalgia* [...] seems to be highlighting is how there are many pasts within the past. When the connection (between land and sky) is achieved, when the pasts of galaxy time intersect with cave paintings, the signs of nomadic populations and indigenous peoples, the history of nineteenth-century miners, and the history of the prisoners and missing persons of the dictatorship, the documentary turns the desert into a place of revelations" (Boero & Vaggione 2014: 125).

between the crosses, and the grey and black gravel crunches under our feet, as if it was necessary to assert every step. (Lorenz 2008: 35)

The graves of the unknown soldiers are part of a pending debt, waiting for memory to be repaired by history. In his study *Epitafios. El derecho a la muerte escrita* (Epitaphs: The Right to a Written Death), Luis Gusmán (2005: 18) highlights the way in which funerary writing in ancient Greece was regulated by strict legislation that took two rights into account: the right to a written death—knowing who the dead are and where their grave is—and the right to tears as an expression where the threshold prayers act out the sorrow of the bereaved. This is still a pending matter in the politics of memory.

A different chapter states that the cenotaph that commemorates the dead is located in the city of Buenos Aires, in Retiro, across from the Torre gifted by the British community in 1910. Inaugurated in 1990, it includes twenty-five black plaques with the names of fallen soldiers. To Lorenz (2008: 176), the pressures caused by this war are all over this monument, where the only thing that matters is the fact that these men died for their country:⁸

on the monument, it doesn't matter if the dead were officers who cared about their men or evil beings who meted out the same punishment to their subordinates as they did to the missing [*chupados*] in detention centres. It doesn't matter if the young men who are being commemorated were proud of sacrificing their lives or if they did so cursing.

As we mentioned, Lorenz's book closes with a chapter entitled "Luggage". This takes us to the last scene, in the

⁸ As we have said, the Malvinas War is a complex episode in recent Argentine history. In her book, Julieta Vitullo (2012: 12), the protagonist of *La forma exacta de las islas*, states the following: "The fact that it was initially supported by the majority of society while the regime behind it was going through its greatest legitimacy crisis, together with the fact that the defeat led to victory (because it opened the path towards the return to democracy), turns this word into something of a blind spot in national history."

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Immigration room at the airport, where the travellers have to let go of some objects they will not be able to take with them. A plane made up by the intangible is introduced: memory is that which we carry, that which we take with us:

Acting as memory smugglers, those who return take with them objects that bring us closer to the islands, which are remote even when we are standing on them.

The land of positions and of the cemetery.

Small loafs of peat.

Rocks in the hills.

Sand on the beaches.

Shards, large or small, oxidized and coarse. Outsoles of combat boots, waterbottles.

The ladies in Customs are polite but categorical:

—Nothing that can be used to recall the war can leave these islands. [...] It's funny: in that case, we shouldn't be allowed out either. (Lorenz 2008: 18)

To conclude, it is important to highlight that both of the materials addressed reveal the view of those who were children during the Argentine dictatorship. These children were two, three and four years old in the case of Vitullo and the directors of the documentary; and one of them was of school age: Lorenz was finishing primary school when the war took place and he remembers writing letters to the soldiers.

In this sense, both pieces of work show the need of this generation to investigate what happened on the Malvinas through the language of literature, film and history, as well as emotionally, in their relationship to what they show and tell us. Maybe that is the reason behind the journey. The writer Ricardo Piglia (2005: 114) considers that "the journey is a way of creating the experience, in order to write about it later". Both *La forma exacta de las islas* and *Fantasmas* support writing from experience, a type of writing that dives into the complexity of history, producing multiple ways to interpret an event about which we need to keep on thinking.

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