

MONSTROSITY AND THE (RE)CREATION OF THE ARGENTINE HISTORY. AN ANALYSIS ABOUT 'LA ASOMBROSA EXCURSIÓN DE ZAMBA.

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"I don't believe in monsters, but I do believe that men are responsible for monstrous deeds".
The Eichmann show¹

Introduction

In this article, we are interested in inquiring which is the historical memory that is legitimized in an audiovisual narrative discourse for children that recreates the Argentine history. For this purpose, we have chosen the animated television series *La Asombrosa Excursión de Zamba* [Zamba's amazing trip] broadcasted in PAKAPAKA, a public and educational TV channel belonged to by the Ministry of Education in Argentina.

From the series, we will specifically analyze the episode called *La Asombrosa Excursión de Zamba en la Casa Rosada* [Zamba's amazing trip to Casa Rosada (Argentina's house of government)], where the traumatic event of the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983) thematizes.

The interest in unveiling strategies that are part of a "legitimate social memory", from a semiotic perspective, is to analyze how meanings are imposed, valuations are configured and narrative identities are constructed to relate the Argentine past.

La asombrosa excursión de Zamba in PAKAPAKA

Every discourse is part of an infinite signifying network, a network of multiple connections, not only from the synchronic, but also from the diachronic point of view. This way, following Eliseo Verón (1980), every discourse corresponds to or is significantly determined by certain grammars and production/recognition conditions.

Thus, analyzing the marks/traces of a narrative, in relation to its conditions and grammars of production implies giving clear proof of the ideological dimension of every narrative. "(...) what is ideological is the name given to the system of relations between a certain group of meanings and their social production conditions". (Verón 1980:155)

La asombrosa aventura de Zamba is broadcasted in PAKAPAKA, and it is the first tv channel for children belonged by the Ministry of Education in Argentina. This channel started its regular broadcasting on September 9th, 2010 through the Digital Terrestrial Television signal on channel 22 on UHF, and through the Arsat-1 satellite, and it is still on

1 "Dramatisation of the team hoping to televise the trial of Adolf Eichmann, an infamous nazi responsible for the deaths of millions of Jews. It focuses on Leo Hurwitz, a documentary film-maker and Milton Fruchman, a producer". At www.imdb.com/title/tt4163668/?ref=nr_sr_1acce accessed August 20, 2016.

the air. The channel, along with other channels such as Encuentro and DXTv, are part of a national policy, regarding national cultural audiovisual production².

PAKAPAKA is addressed to children between 2 and 12 years old, and it includes short tv programs, documentaries and cartoons. The channel proposal consists of a tv channel for children with content oriented towards education and entertainment. In that sense, historical-political changes that took place in Argentina between 2003 and 2015, constituted the setting from which it was possible to interpret the emergency of these new types of telling and representing the recent past. In this respect, using an audiovisual language for children, *La asombrosa excursión de Zamba* combines within its content, the historical piece with the pedagogical piece. As a consequence, the target of these discourses are, to a great extent, individuals that do not know what happened and are "learning" as Zamba lives his adventures in every trip.

The cartoon tells the Argentine history in different episodes, from Revolución de Mayo de 1810 [1810 May Revolution] through country's return to democracy in 1983. With reference to the animation's goal, the director and scriptwriter Fernando Salem states: "There was a very strong commitment to historical accuracy, even a new vision of history that is reflected on the cartoon. Each feature of the historical characters that are depicted has a historical basis". (2010)

Discursivity of traumatic events

To a certain extent, traumatic events obturate, because of their nature, the very possibility of being represented. In order to understand such impossibility, it is necessary to perceive the relationship and distance between the event and trauma. Trauma, as an effect, occurs after the event. Trauma is the wound that lasts through time, it is the emotional tremor, it is the trace that shows, until it has been overcome, an inability to take action.³

About trauma, consequence of a negative event, we are interested in approaching the social dimension, more than the individual one, since "traumatic events not only affect individuals, but they also have a deconstructive impact on social groups" (Ortega 2011:9). Therefore, its effects emerge as the destabilization of a state of things, and they become tangible in the community itself, in its institutions, and in the ties that provide it with cohesion.

Now, as Gabriela Schwab points out, beyond the set of theories that confirm the non-representability of trauma: "There are forms of violence-holocaust, genocide, torture and rape- that are considered beyond representation" (2015:61). And these are the forms that also demand to be turned into discourse, declares Schwab.

The possibility of turning forms of violence into discourse entails a visibilization of traumatic events, which allows a positioning on the social discourse topography, i.e., inside the boundaries of what is thinkable and sayable in a certain historical moment⁴. The

2 The ten chapters of the series are distributed in all public schools. Teachers in these schools can also access a set of guidelines for developing activities in the classroom.

3 It would be Sigmund Freud who would strengthen studies on trauma, and together with them, basic psychoanalysis theories. Facundo Ortega puts it like this: "The idea of trauma only achieves specificity through unconscious formulation and description, which explains Sigmund Freud's centrality and psychoanalysis for the later evolution of the idea of trauma" (2011: 4).

4 To talk about social discourse in singular, as a global unit, is to refer to "(...) not to that empirical, cacophonous and redundant whole, but to the generic systems, to the topic repertoire, to the linking rules for statements that, in a certain society, organize what is sayable, narratable, and thinkable, and they guarantee the discursive job division. Then, it is about discovering a global regulating system, whose nature is not immediately presented for observation, for production and circulation rules, nor a product 'frame'." (Angenot 2010:21-22)

place they will have in the global social discourse will be determined by a discursive hegemony that is defined as

(...) the synergy resulting from a set of unifying and regulating mechanisms that, in turn, ensure the division of the discursive job and homogenization of rhetorics, topics and doxa. These mechanisms contribute to what is said and written as acceptability degree, which stratifies legitimacy levels. (Angenot 2010:36-37)

If social discourse, as Marc Angenot (2010) states, besides possessing the monopoly of representation of the world, also presents itself as a fictional conjuration for oblivion and a reconstruction of the past in a 'subtle narrative film', the chapter called *La Asombrosa Excursión de Zamba en la Casa Rosada*⁵ allows us to operate analytically on the discursive materiality in which a traumatic event for Argentine society is depicted. At the same time, we state this discourse belongs to the recreation of a collective memory in relation to history itself, enabling an analysis that allows the identification of legitimacies, assessments and identities that account for our recent past.

The last dictatorship that begins with the coup d'état occurred on March 24th 1976 is the topic that is developed in the episode The plot is built from a Zamba's (an eight-year-old child from Formosa) trip with his schoolmates to Casa Rosada. While students walk through the hall, across Salón Blanco (where presidential sash and baton are presented) one of his schoolmates, El Niño que lo sabe todo [The child who knows everything], is kidnapped by the 1976 military junta.

La República, a statute that represents the republic and comes to life, informs Zamba that he has to travel to the past, if he wants his kidnapped friend back. Another temporality opens up in the narrative here. The past he has to travel through is none other than the last military dictatorship in Argentina (1976-1983).

That time travel before getting to 1976, means a trip through what is called the dictatorships dark ride. There, other Argentine history dictators are caricatured, tyrants such as Lieutenant General José Felix Uriburu⁶, General Pedro Pablo Ramirez⁷, Lieutenant General Eduardo Lonardi⁸ and Lieutenant General Juan Carlos Onganía⁹. Already in 1976-1983 dictatorship context, Zamba faces the military junta and demands for his disappeared friend. Various incidents happen from then on; Zamba looks for his friend, he escapes from the military junta that is chasing him, he meets significant Argentine history characters that would help him, such as Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, workers, unionists, students, etc.

Finally, Zamba meets his friend and they evidenced the power of the people. This triggers the end of the dictatorship and democracy returns to the country. Zamba and his friends come back to the present, where they are welcomed again by La República.

We shall now expose, completing this brief synopsis, the analysis of some relevant aspects of the chapter, in order to reach the goal stated at the beginning of this essay.

The traumatic past

Every time period can be interpreted from its prevailing temperaments or moods. This is what Angenot (2010) names a component of discursive hegemony, the dominant pathos.

5 <http://www.zamba.pakapaka.gob.ar/sitios/zamba/Capitulos/?anio=1976>

6 Institutional order interruption from September 6th 1930 until February 20th 1932.

7 Institutional order interruption from June 7th 1943 until March 9th 1944.

8 Institutional order interruption from September 23rd 1955 until November 13th 1955.

9 Institutional order interruption from June 29th 1966 until June 8th 1970.

How are these passions built? They can only be unveiled by the defining traits of the discourse itself.

Zamba's trip to the last military dictatorship clearly exemplifies a temporality that is built as a period of time that was "the darkest in our country". Before he begins his journey into the past, La República warns Zamba that this will be a very dangerous time of terror, that the dictatorship sowed.

The pathos is also represented in the animation lightning. If the present was bright, above all when students initially walk through Casa Rosada, the past would be dark, gloomy. Light would only return when democracy comes back and is represented on Zamba's adventure by a set of ballot boxes that fly, leaving the shadows and confinement that they had been subjected to by dictators.

But not everything in the past happens in an atmosphere of fear and terror. When characters that would help Zamba (Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, unionists like Agustin Tosco, the artists, the workers, etc) come on stage, the scenery is illuminated again with rainbow colors. The demand, as a dominant emotion of the period is present.

Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, trade unionists, artists, the workers, students, etc. [they sing]: Es hora de reclamar la democracia dónde está; preguntar hasta que aparezca; preguntar sin miedo; queremos vivir en libertad y democracia; queremos sonar. [It is time to demand democracy, where is it?; Ask until it appears, ask without fear; We want to live in freedom and democracy; We want to dream]

La República

La República is present during the crucial moments in Zamba's trip: at the beginning when she comes alive and, in the end, when she welcomes him after his adventure. She is seen also in the past, when she is covered in cobwebs, lifeless.

Therefore, she is the character that represents, in various ways, two conditions of the Argentine political system, democracy and dictatorship. She is alive during democracy, but dead during dictatorship.

Additionally, La República is the one that knows. She is the one that explains and teaches Zamba what a dictatorship is before he travels to the past:

La República: Es cuando alguien toma el poder sin ser elegido por el pueblo y no respeta el derecho de las personas ni la constitución, ni nada [It is when someone takes power without being elected by the people and neither respects people's rights nor the constitution, nor nothing]

We observe from the position of La República an activation of a discursive hegemony component, the egocentrism/ethnocentrism:

Hegemony can also be approached as a pragmatic norm that defines in its center a legitimate speaker, who assumes the right to speak about "otherness", determined in relation to him/her. (...). Hegemony, then, is an "egocentrism" and an "ethnocentrism". That is to say that it begets that "I", and that "We", who takes on the "right of citizenship." (Angenot 2010:42)

La República is, consequently, the legitimate speaker authorized to tell and characterize Argentine history. She is the one that can assume the right to speak about what happened and about the main characters involved. She is the one that can judge and classify what happened in the past, the one that warned Zamba she would not be there in 1976.

The magic ballot box

It is the main object in the adventure. It is the device that fits in the characters' meaning universe and becomes important as a different object throughout the whole episode.

If democracy is presented as a fetish, i.e., what is sacred, the magic ballot box would be the object that represents it. From the significance of a ballot box, a new component of discursive hegemony is activated, the fetishes:

Configuration of social discourses is marked by the particularly identifiable presence (as a nova in the middle of a galaxy) of thematic objects represented by the two forms of sacer, of what is untouchable: fetishes and taboos (...). It is important to analyze these fetishes and taboos and their level of intangibility, because they are not only represented on social discourse, but are also essentially produced by it. (Angenot 2010:41-42)

The magic ballot box is the vehicle that allows Zamba to travel to the past to get his kidnapped friend back. It would be the vehicle that makes it easier for Zamba to travel through the dictatorships dark ride.

The magic ballot box is the object that allows Zamba to hide and slip away from the military, while they are chasing him. It would be "the only way to get back from a dictatorship", as La Republica warned him. It is the set of confiscated ballot boxes, the ones that free the country from dictatorship, when the military can no longer hide them.

In this respect, the memory that is legitimized in the configuration of this device in the narrative distinguishes two universes. The magic ballot box is the limit that separates democracy from dictatorship, the ones that respect it and appreciate it from the ones that think it is completely useless, as the military said.

Monstrosity

Finally, we get to one of the central aspects that come on stage in this cartoon.

The military junta is built as Zamba's opponent. They are the ones that kidnap his friend in the present and they take him to the period of the military process. General J. R. Videla (Army Commander), General E. E. Massera (Navy Commander) and General O. R. Agosti (Air Force Commander) are the ones that would make it difficult for Zamba to find his schoolmate El Niño que lo sabe todo.

Now, it is necessary here to consider some audiovisual details, in relation to the caricatured configuration of animated characters that represent the military junta. They are caricatured as the absolute evil, as monsters. Their physical figures, in combination with their military outfits, suggest something diabolic, phantasmagoric, vampirish, zombie and dead. This is particularly seen when Zamba travels through the past dictatorships 'dark ride'. Their red eyes represent the evil, the craziness, in consonance with their metallic voice.

The dictators that Zamba has to face have no hands but claws. At the same time, they are united, as a three-headed and four-legged monster, with a belt that does not allow them to separate. Is this expressing the internal power disputes in the coup?:

General J. R. Videla: Soy el nuevo presidente y a partir de ahora se hace lo que yo digo, Bueno, lo que nosotros decimos [I'm the new president and from now on you will do what I say, well what we say]

Monstrosity represented in the military, in this animation corresponds to what Michel Foucault characterizes as the human monster:

The notion of the monster is essentially a legal notion, in a broad sense, of course, since what defines the monster is the fact that its existence and form is not only a violation of the laws of society, but also a violation of the laws of nature. Its very existence is a breach of the law at both levels. The field in which the monster appears can thus be called a juridico-biological domain. However, the monster emerges within this space as both an extreme and extremely rare phenomenon. The monster is the limit, both the point at which law is overturned and the exception that is found only in extreme cases. The monster combines the impossible and the forbidden. (2000:61)

In this sense, the dictators would be the ones that “chase and kill” people, as ‘La Republica’ states. Besides, they are the ones that want people to leave the country, the ones that ‘think differently or stop thinking’; the dictators themselves express this idea in the episode.

It is important to notice that the way these ‘dictator monsters’ get to power is never mentioned in the animation. Although it is mentioned that it was by force, it does not have an appropriate contextualization. Only a caricature announces:

General E. E. Massera: Estamos aquí porque antes había desorden [We are here because there was chaos before]

Final comments

This animation, as discursive genre, is part of what Omar Calabrese (1994) calls classic taste. Value judgements that are being unveiled in this episode and we can say in the whole series, correspond to categorizations and classifications oriented to steadily ordered approvals, i.e., what is beautiful matches the good and the euphoria, while what is ugly matches the bad and the dysphoria. This taste opposes the neo-baroque where these distinctions are altered and destabilized and they characterize most of the currently widely consumed cartoons.

The elements we have developed in this analysis and that are part of this episode account for two universes that are built, respectively. Consequently, a traumatic event, such as the last military dictatorship, is reflected and reconstructed as an opposition between the good and the evil.

The dominant pathos highlights emotions and moods related to each of the universes. On the side of the evil, dictatorship appears related to terror, fear, darkness and horror. On the side of the good, we find democracy associated to kindness, light, fight and people’s right demand.

In this legitimized memory about the recent past, the ballot box is established as the object that allows us to distinguish between the positions, in relation to it, that the different characters take in history. On the one hand, we see those who confer it with a positive value, as La República, Zamba with his schoolmates and people who help him as Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, trade unionists, workers, students, etc. On the other side, we see the ones that give it a negative value, as dictators.

In relation to the construction of the military’s identity, they are presented as the absolute evil, as monstrous and diabolic. Monstrosity, according to its greek meaning, refers to what is horrible and fascinating at the same time. It is what generates morbidity or violence. The function of monstrosity in discourse is to crystallize, somehow, the fears of society. The monster, as Jeffrey Cohen (1996) says, is a body that is “pure culture”. In this respect, narrations on monstrosity have a great ability to alter dominant meanings, and also to establish and strengthen hegemonic positions.

From what we said, a question, not a confirmation, emerges-aren't dictators dehumanized and, consequently, positioned by this discursive construct in a place outside society?

Now, monstrosity representation on animated discourse for children is usual in its narrative logic. But *La Asombrosa excursión de Zamba* specifically is not any type of cartoon. It has a pedagogical function. Its narrative is built from historical events. So, is this monstrosity construction legitimate, taking into account the conditions that the genre itself and its ideal addressee impose on it? We consider it is not.

The dictators' identity construct that unveils the social discourse is placed, taking some obvious differences, as an antithesis to Hannah Arendt theory on evil banality. Arendt thesis is that Adolf Eichmann (a Nazi hierarch that lived in Argentina, responsible for the design of the "final solution" to kill thousands of Jewish people on Second World War) is the paradigm of a person that, in spite of not being a monster (but guilty), is a type of bureaucratic administrative technician who takes a series of chain decisions whose outcome is a monstrous act.

In this respect, a discursivization, in terms of monstrosity and the logic of a fight between the good and the evil of a traumatic event such as the last dictatorship in Argentina, obturates, somehow, other possible interpreters in its vast complexity.

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