

ELLEN MCCRACKEN, UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SANTA BARBARA

Semiosis and the Political Sub-Conscious in the Argentine *Telenovela*

ABSTRACT: Five years into the 1976-1983 military dictatorship in Argentina, a popular prime-time soap opera enticed viewers nightly for fourteen weeks. Set in the 1940s and featuring two popular movie stars in the main roles, the top-rated program ostensibly drew millions of viewers in the Southern Cone away from the ongoing brutalities of military rule in their countries. Lingered beneath the glamorous surface, however, was an intricate network of contestatory political signifiers that begged to be drawn forth into intertextual relations with the contemporary right-wing violence and repression. Modifying Jameson's notion of the political unconscious, this article analyzes the modes of semiosis available for viewers to activate in what might be termed the sub-conscious textual strategies of this *telenovela*. Rather than what a text refuses to allow itself to say, the political sub-conscious involves partially and imperfectly articulated social concerns teeming beneath the repressive surface of Argentine society in 1981. These attenuated signifiers in the *telenovela* managed to get past the censors of the state-run TV channel, but nonetheless offered important openings for viewers to connect them to current social issues.

In 1995 Adolfo Francisco Scilingo told an important Argentine journalist about the fate of some 2,000 *desaparecidos* during Argentina's Dirty War of 1976-1983. The former lieutenant commander in the Argentine Navy revealed the perverse practice of drugging young prisoners, herding them into military cargo planes, stripping them, and dropping them alive and unconscious into the Atlantic Ocean. After journalist Horacio Verbitsky published the story of Scilingo's revelations in *Página/12*, U.S. newscaster Mike Wallace traveled to Argentina to interview Scilingo, as well as then President Carlos Menem who admitted on the videotape with Wallace that

he had also witnessed such atrocities. Himself a dissident and prisoner during the dictatorship, Menem recounted seeing hooded prisoners led onto ships, hearing their cries as they were tortured in the hold, and then seeing them thrown into the river. "This is not something I was told about. This I have lived", President Menem says on the video. CBS, however, excised this statement in the "60 Minutes" broadcast, although *Página/12* obtained a copy of the uncut videotape and published a complete transcript on April 2, the same day the segment aired in the U.S. Menem denied the remark and called Verbitsky a "terrorist with a pen".¹

It is easy to understand why CBS producers would censor the damaging admission of the sitting Argentine president in 1995 who was then running for re-election. It is a classic example of Fredric Jameson's theory of the political unconscious, a text's strategies of containment or a limit beyond which it will not allow itself to go. Although the media jumped at the chance to tell the story of Scilingo's admission through which some of the disappeared bodies of the Dirty War were brought back in a semiotic Imaginary, the President's admission of first-hand knowledge of these crimes needed to be repressed. American corporate journalism would only allow itself to go so far in telling the truth. Mike Wallace, for example, told a reporter that Menem, in his view, did not mean that he had personally witnessed the deaths of those thrown overboard. In this way Wallace repressed the intolerable implications that a sitting Argentine president who in 1990 had granted a mass amnesty to those found guilty had confessed to having "lived these events".

In contrast, after Argentine journalist Verbitsky published Scilingo's story in his 1995 book *El vuelo*, others corroborated his stories and much media coverage followed. Chelala notes that testimony documented the complicity of military doctors who administered sedatives and then hid in the cockpit to avoid seeing the prisoners being thrown into the sea, and Catholic Navy chaplains who comforted the officers with the assurance that the prisoners underwent a Christian death because they did not suffer and it was necessary to eliminate them. In 1997 Scilingo voluntarily testified under oath before Spanish judge Baltasar Garzón about death flights in which he participated in which 30 people were thrown from the planes. He was arrested and brought to trial in Spain in January 2005 for crimes against humanity: 30 counts of murder, 98 of causing injury, 255 of terrorism, and

**SEMIOSIS AND THE POLITICAL SUB-CONSCIOUS IN THE ARGENTINE
TELENOVELA**

286 of torture. He retracted the 1997 confession, trying to submerge the haunting memory of his crimes and previous statements within a new political unconscious just as Menem had done, and in the face of overwhelming evidence against him, began a hunger strike, claiming to be too weak to undergo trial. Nonetheless, after his taped confessions were played in court, on April 19, 2005 he was convicted and sentenced to 640 years in prison, as Goodman notes. Despite multiple strategies to repress the disappeared bodies twenty years after the dictatorship, the repressed returned semiotically in Scilingo's confessions, Argentine news accounts, and the groundbreaking 2005 trial on international human rights violations in Spain.

It is important to recognize that state terror in Argentina during the Dirty War was also grounded in visible bodies, that is, the presence of corpses in the streets of Argentina. Taylor describes the dead bodies of some of the disappeared appearing on sidewalks and in trash cans, and most dramatically, several corpses tied around the Obelisk, the national monument in the exact center of Buenos Aires, dressed in suits with their shoes tied around their necks. Many people were dragged from their homes in broad daylight to alert citizens of the fate that might await them should they transgress in some way. All of the bodies that had been tortured and killed could not be disposed of publicly and therefore were secretly burned, buried in mass graves, or thrown into the sea, causing them to remain among the disappeared. This national nightmare would surface as the bodies semiotically returned in various political and cultural representations.

Here I want to examine another example of the media's symbolic return of the missing bodies—one that occurred during the Dirty War itself. In late 1981, five years after the military coup ousted the civilian government, "Dios se lo pague" [May God Repay You], a popular nightly *telenovela* [serial drama], dominated the 7 PM time slot for four months against such dubbed U.S. programs as "Emergency", "Little House on the Prairie", "Kung Fu", and "Here's Lucy". Combining the talented performances of several prominent Argentine actors, the well-photographed nostalgic setting of Argentina during World War II, and the suspenseful technique of serialization, the program drew large audiences in Argentina, Chile and Uruguay. While the melodramatic themes of faith in God, family, and romantic love predominated in the program, several contestatory political signifiers

festered at the surface, inviting viewers to engage in intertextual semiosis with the historical events unfolding in their country. While surprisingly these messages appeared on a censored, state-run television channel under the eyes of the military government, their presence reveals the tenuous yet courageous steps that this group of cultural workers took to protest state violence and totalitarianism.

The presence of these contestatory signifiers in a popular evening TV program must be understood in the context of challenges to the dictatorship at the time. The Madres de la Plaza de Mayo had begun their somber weekly protests in April 1977, and although many important labor leaders had been arrested and disappeared, smaller unions took over the void and organized general strikes in 1979 and 1981. International human rights organizations investigated the reported tortures, murders, and disappearances in the country. By 1980 inflation had skyrocketed and the military economic plan unraveled. Dictator Videla transferred power to General Viola, Commander of the Army in March 1981. Conservatives and ultranationalists found Viola too liberal because he began talks with heads of political parties to return to civilian rule. They forced him out in December 1981, replacing him with Leopoldo Galtieri who desperately tried to shore up the dictatorship by invading the Malvinas [Falkland Islands] in April 1982, bringing his country to a bitter defeat by the British that forced the military to give up rule.

Even in the context of these popular and international pressures on the dictatorship in 1981, television on the state-controlled channel could not overtly join the protests.² Rather, the program temporally displaced the setting to the period of World War II and established a network of contestatory political signifiers for viewers to decode if they chose as they enjoyed their evening entertainment. Unlike the textual repression in which "60 Minutes" engaged, this program dared to speak, albeit subtly. Jameson centers his analysis of the political unconscious of a text on what a cultural artifact refuses to allow itself to say, the structural limits of thinking and uttering that it imposes on itself because of its creator's immersion in the ideology of the particular historical moment. I would like to refocus this model to examine what a text tries tentatively to say in a moment of grave social crisis and state repression, the contestatory ideas simmering at the surface but shielded and attenuated protectively in what might be termed the political sub-conscious. The producers of this televisual text are not unaware or unconscious

SEMIOSIS AND THE POLITICAL SUB-CONSCIOUS IN THE ARGENTINE TELENOVELA

of the dangerous signifiers that they refuse to explicitly utter, but rather struggle to express ideas that lie half in and out of the surface of textual consciousness in what we might term a sub-conscious rather than the unconscious.

The 1981 *telenovela* intertextually invokes important cultural predecessors. Joracy Camargo wrote the radical play *Deus lhe pague* in Brazil in 1931 which inaugurated modern Brazilian theater. The public and the press enthusiastically received the play, but authorities eventually prohibited it as subversive. A Spanish adaptation of the work played simultaneously in two Buenos Aires theaters in 1934 and 1935 and then throughout Latin America. In 1947, a movie version became the first highly successful release of the Argentine film industry and was nominated for an Oscar in the foreign film category. The famous star Zully Moreno and the director, her husband Luis César Amadori, were forced into exile in 1955 after the military coup that ousted Juan Péron.³ The decision to adapt this popular left-leaning drama for television under a repressive military dictatorship in Argentina in 1981 paid homage to these cultural predecessors and announced to the public a subtle critique and confrontation of the status quo.

Both the play and the *telenovela* center on a factory worker whose invention the owner steals from the worker's unwitting wife, and then frames the worker for the owner's own crimes. The worker returns to society after his release from prison as a beggar who eventually becomes rich after years of collecting what society discards. He argues that he is only begging for what would be his were there a fair division of wealth in society. Camargo's protagonist declares that because he was obliged to beg, he was obliged to become rich. When not begging, Camargo's character reads Marx and Upton Sinclair. His double identity as a beggar and rich man allows him to move in and out of rich and poor sectors and to advance astute criticisms of the social order from the position of an outsider who is also an insider. Camargo's play is more philosophical than the 1981 *telenovela*, although the group of beggars in the television program also advances astute social criticism. Camargo's protagonist recounts his view of the history of the world: in ancient times everything belonged to everyone, no one owned the earth or water. Now every piece of land and drop of water belong to someone. Those who appropriated things earlier in history invented such entities as Justice

and the Police to help them retain what they took. In the beginning there were no laws; after a small group divided everything among themselves, they created laws. Thus, what was a natural thing for them came to be a crime for others, with property today being protected by the police and the armed classes. Camargo's beggar-protagonist has decided to abandon the world and beg for what is rightfully his.

The Argentine *telenovela* builds upon these and other political themes in the Camargo play, focusing on a group of beggars who ask for alms outside a church, thanking those who help them with the famous rejoinder, "Dios se lo pague" [May God repay you]. One of their friends, a factory worker named Carlos Pereira, has invented the design for an industrial loom that the factory owner, Ernesto Clovis, and his lawyer, Julio Sánchez, steal from him. On the way to testify against the owner, Rodríguez, one of Pereira's friends, dies in a mysterious car accident. Clovis then bribes Pereira's lawyer and succeeds in framing Pereira for his friend's death. While he is unjustly imprisoned, Clovis and Sánchez continue to build the loom company using Pereira's invention. These fictional events begin to evoke current situations in Argentina of murders, disappearances, and the abrogation of due process.

In a soap operatic turn of events, Pereira escapes from prison, finds a buried treasure, and returns to Buenos Aires under the assumed identity of the rich Conde de la Croix. He buys a good deal of stock in Clovis Looms and becomes romantically involved with Clovis' daughter, Nora. Even from prison he has been working with his friends the beggars and Rodríguez's family to avenge the death of his friend. Now the group comes to live with him in his mansion, wearing business suits during the day as his associates but returning to the church steps at night in the clothes they feel more comfortable in, beggars' rags. After manipulating Clovis Looms' stock on the market, the Count takes control of the enterprise, leaving Ernesto Clovis virtually penniless. Pereira is still the sympathetic hero of the soap opera for he has merely gained what was rightfully his as the inventor of the loom.

The villains Clovis and Sánchez continue to fight to regain control of the factory, still using the violent methods they had previously employed to steal the invention, murder Rodríguez, and frame Pereira. They hire paid killers to eliminate members of Pereira's group and use their close ties to the Police Commissioner to escape prosecution for these crimes. The intertex-

**SEMIOSIS AND THE POLITICAL SUB-CONSCIOUS IN THE ARGENTINE
TELENOVELA**

tual relation to the abductions by paramilitary groups and military personnel dressed as civilians in Argentina during the Dirty War lies subtly beneath the televisual surface. Clovis and Sánchez denounce the Count as Carlos Pereira whose false conviction for the murder of his friend stills stands. Pereira must leave town until his friends can prove his innocence and sets out with Nora Clovis in her father's car to Brazil where they plan to marry. Suddenly, in a devastating visual spectacle, a bomb explodes in Clovis' car, planted by the wife of Rodríguez to avenge the death of her husband. The *telenovela* attacks violence on all sides by showing how the misguided vigilante justice of the worker's wife backfires against her friends and supporters. Although Pereira has told the beggars "Nuestra lucha no es violenta... Destruiremos a Clovis sin sangre, sin usar sus armas" [Our fight is not violent... We will destroy Clovis without blood, without using his weapons], he himself becomes the victim of the violence he preached against. He "disappears" from the *telenovela* for several weeks, reminding viewers of the thousands of Argentines who had disappeared in recent years under state and vigilante violence. The ties of the villains to paid assassins and to the police suggest that the authorities directly abet vigilante terrorism in Argentina. The *telenovela* offers viewers a temporary psychological reprieve from the inevitable consequences of such violence by strongly hinting for several weeks that Pereira miraculously escaped the explosion alive. But the strong messages against political violence continue throughout the program.

At the same time that they enjoyed the opulent images of the developing love affair between Pereira disguised as the Count and the rich factory owner's daughter, viewers were invited to see parallels between their own worsening economic conditions under the dictatorship and the communal action of the congenial group of beggars who help and are helped by the hero Pereira. In an important narrative tributary, two resistance fighters from occupied France arrive in Argentina and teach the group techniques they used to fight Fascism. They invert the common soap operatic love affair, for example, as they separately flirt with the villain Sánchez and his wife so that the group can gain information. The resistance fighters and Pereira's friends remain loyal to him in his absence and skillfully work together in numerous group actions to secure the defeat of Sánchez. The nostalgic World War II setting has allowed the soap opera to develop a subtle parallel between the

necessity of group action against Fascism in the 1940s and the need for communal work against the current military dictatorship in Argentina.

Similarly, the intertextuality announced in the title and reprise of the famous social protest play and successful film places the soap opera in a dialogic relationship with its cultural predecessors, nuancing the melodramatic conventions. A strong intertextuality with the contemporary social text of Argentina under the dictatorship and state violence informs narrative events such as Pereira's false imprisonment and disappearance, the murder of innocent friends of the accused, the car-bombing of the hero, vigilante killings and the sense of impunity and entitlement by the perpetrators. Viewers were also invited to engage in intertextuality with other overtly political films in which the actor who played Pereira had appeared, especially the 1974 "Rebellion in Patagonia" and the 1981 "Time for Revenge".

Among the film's underlying political and moral messages are the urging of group action against oppression, non-violence, the re-distribution of wealth, the have-nots living for a time like the rich and learning to be self-sufficient, and the righting of injustices such as the factory owner's stealing of Pereira's invention. While the program does not preach or shout these messages, they struggle to enter consciousness on the surface of the attractive televisual text.

If Leonor Benedetto, the glamorous star who plays the daughter of the rich factory owner, functions as a visual icon par excellence of the melodramatic code of the *telenovela*, Federico Luppi, who plays Pereira and the Count, works as a contestatory visual signifier whose iconic presence subtly combines layers of his previous filmic performances. The newspaper *La Prensa* noted that he had recently returned to Argentina to act after an "involuntary absence"; he made no films between the 1976 coup d'état and his 1981 releases. Just as "Dios se lo pague" began its run on Argentine television, Luppi's new film "Time for Revenge" about a worker's attempt to sue his company was released. Luppi has noted that he lived almost his entire life under dictatorships in Argentina, voting for the first time in 1983 when he was nearly 50. "Everything I lived with the military was impoverishment, persecution, anguish, diminishment, acculturation, death, disorder, theft, and impunity. So the Argentine citizen Federico, wouldn't call a military man even to clean his bathroom".⁴ Luppi's appearance in the film represents one of the text's strongest contestatory signifiers. Not just a

SEMIOSIS AND THE POLITICAL SUB-CONSCIOUS IN THE ARGENTINE TELENOVELA

handsome star, his character represents the return from adversity and injustice, and the wise leader who urges non-violence and protects his friends.

Occasionally, stark verbal utterances stand out against the melodramatic code, engaging in double signification and resonating with the contemporary violence viewers know pervades their society. "If Marta talks, they'll kill her", Luppi warns. Later, we see Marta in body casts and traction in the hospital, having been beaten up by the factory owner's cohorts. The association of speaking with bodily harm, and the hospital with the prison, invite viewers to engage in contestatory signification. Even more audaciously in another scene, the *telenovela* strongly alludes to the dictatorship's violence. As the factory owner and his lawyer plot further crimes to cover up their previous ones, they remind each other: "People are disappearing every day from the streets of Buenos Aires; there is no reason to fear that we'll be blamed for eliminating our enemies this way". With scores of mothers and grandmothers demonstrating weekly for the return of their disappeared children, this stark verbal utterance in "Dios se lo pague" could hardly have gone unnoticed.

Simmering at the surface of the enticing love story with glamorous, big box-office stars, the attractive nostalgic setting of the 1940s, the haunting music of Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 5 in E minor, the suspenseful serialization and the intrigue, are textual strategies that attempt to give voice to the political sub-conscious. Following Bakhtin, Jameson classifies these kinds of strategies as stage two of the political unconscious in which marginalized and oppositional voices engage in strategic ideological confrontation. Within these dialogic texts, "two opposing discourses fight it out within the general unity of a shared code" (84). The contestatory elements of "Dios se lo pague" might be understood as the *parole* that both employs and confronts the *langue* of the melodramatic *telenovela* genre. In this case they involve such tropes as parallels, intertextuality, underlying political messages, the film star as signifier, and striking, doubly signifying utterances. While this list makes them seem to be strong and numerous textual elements, the temporal length involved in the 66 one-hour episodes spanning 14 weeks dispersed these textual strategies that in fact comprised only a small number of televisual moments.

If Scilingo's 1997 testimony before a Spanish judge about the estimated 30,000 disappeared people in Argentina during the Dirty War in a sense returned the bodies to the Argentine public through a semiotic Imaginary, in what way did the 1981 "Dios se lo pague" engage in a similar process? Scilingo helped to close the narrative and to semiotically bring the bodies of the disappeared back by presenting details about the 180 to 200 death flights in 1977 and 1978 in which thousands were dumped alive in the ocean, about the "asados" or 'roastings' in which thousands more were cremated, and about the military's illegal adoption of the children of the prisoners born in captivity so that they could raise them as conservatives. In 1981, "Dios se lo pague" could only do this for one fictional body—that of the glamorous star Federico Luppi whose character Pereira disappeared after the car bombing. Undercutting the romantic conventions of the soap opera with stark realism, the disappeared hero does not return to the woman he loves to produce a safe, satisfying closed ending for viewers. Breaking with the convention of the happy ending, the new narrative equilibrium brings the separation of the lovers and Pereira's ostensible exile. The few glimpses that the viewer and one loyal friend have of him in the final episodes reveal a maimed, disfigured man whose entire body has been burned. The romantic conventions of the television soap opera cannot allow a passionate reunion of the beautiful heroine and this "monster", as he is called; this "beast" cannot be magically transformed to please his "beauty", and a close-up shot of the two kissing now might disarm viewers. So, both despite the soap operatic conventions and because of them, viewers come to grips with the permanent effects of violence and government sanctioned terrorism; the hero for whom they have developed great respect and affection cannot be reunited with the heroine. Although the villains are ultimately punished, the final shots leave viewers with the unromantic, realistic effects of the violence they have witnessed: The badly scarred Pereira and one of his loyal friends trudge off into the night to continue their efforts to survive as the have-nots in Argentine society, or perhaps to leave in exile. Where Scilingo's testimony verbally returns the bodies of the drowned, the burned, and the adopted, "Dios se lo pague" visually returns the disappeared body in its grotesque, damaged state.

The tropes outlined here constitute the political sub-conscious of "Dios se lo pague", not what the soap opera refuses to say, but what it tries tentatively to utter in a moment of grave social crisis and state repression. The

SEMIOSIS AND THE POLITICAL SUB-CONSCIOUS IN THE ARGENTINE TELENOVELA

contestatory ideas fester at the surface of the televisual text like wounds on the social body, but remain shielded and attenuated protectively at the same time that they are uttered. Their residual presence twenty years after the dictatorship ended gives testimony to the courage of all who worked to produce this striking mass cultural text.

NOTES

1. See Johnson for Menem's statement and Wallace's justification for eliminating it.
2. Diana Taylor has studied the performances of Teatro Abierto in 1981 in which a number of blacklisted artists produced contestatory plays. After one week of these performances on the stage of Teatro Picadero, which volunteered its space, the theater was burned down in the middle of the night.
3. See "Zully Moreno, una diva entre divas", Dec. 27, 1999, www.pagina12.com. and "El adiós a una ex diva del cine", Dec. 27, 1999, www.lagaceta.com.
4. "A veces pecho de realismo; entrevista a Federico Luppi". *Revista*, Núm 20, <http://www.tercersector.org.ar/revista/20/luppi.htm>.

REFERENCES

- Camargo, Joracy. 1967. *Deus lhe pague*. Ed. R. Magalhaes Júnior. Rio de Janeiro: Edições de Ouro.
- Chelala, César. 2005. "A Groundbreaking Sentence in Spain." *Global Policy Forum*, Apr. 30.
- Goodman, Al. 2005. "640 Years for Argentine in Spain," *CNN.com*, Apr. 19.
- Jameson, Fredric. 1981. *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca NY: Cornell Univ. Press.
- Johnson, Jenny. 1995. "A Matter of Interpretation." *Columbia Journalism Review*: Nov/Dec. <http://archives.cjr.org/year/95/6/argentina.asp>.
- Taylor, Diana. 1997. *Disappearing Acts: Spectacles of Gender and Nationalism in Argentina's "Dirty War"*. Durham NC: Duke Univ. Press.
- Verbitsky, Horacio. 1995. *El vuelo*, Buenos Aires: Planeta.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Ellen McCracken is Professor of Spanish at the University of California, Santa Barbara, specializing in Latin American and U.S. Latino literature. Her publications include: *Decoding Women's Magazines: From Mademoiselle to Ms.* (London: Macmillan and New York: St. Martin's, 1992); *New Latina Narrative: The Feminine Space of Postmodern Ethnicity* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1999); and the edited volume *Fray Angélico Chávez: Poet, Priest, and Artist* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2000).