

TEXTUAL EXPOSURES: PHOTOGRAPHY IN TWENTIETH-CENTURY SPANISH AMERICAN NARRATIVE FICTION

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POLITICS OF THE IMAGE: JULIO CORTÁZAR AND TOMÁS ELOY MARTÍNEZ

Photography is not only a window into uncanny or fantastic realms, or a visual token in the social construction of memory and identity; its referential power is deeply invested in the politics of images. Photographs are crucial elements in the structures of power, dominance, and struggle that underpin modern visual culture. This chapter explores the aesthetic and political dimensions of photography in selected texts from *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (1967), *Ultimo round* (1969), and the short story “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” (1977), by Julio Cortázar, as well as Tomás Eloy Martínez’s *La novela de Perón* (1985).¹

Julio Cortázar

The enduring appeal of Julio Cortázar’s engagement with photography stems mainly from his short stories “Las babas del diablo” and “Apocalipsis de Solentiname.” Less attention has been paid to the ways the Argentine writer weaves words and photographic images in his illustrated books *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and *Ultimo round*.²

The role photography plays in these collage-like volumes can be productively assessed by examining two dominant cultural discourses at work in Cortázar's literary production: first and foremost, illustrated journalism, and second, travel writing. It is through these discourses that Cortázar reflects on the links between photographic image and power in a broad sense. I argue that in the almost-twenty-year span from "Las babas del diablo" (1959) to "Apocalipsis de Solentiname" (1977), a dialogic exchange develops between these discourses and positions, and important chapters of *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* (1967) and *Ultimo round* (1969) are a product of these creative tensions. I show how Cortázar appropriates the main traits of news media (the task of reporting, a resort to visual testimony, the urgency in responding to current world events), and I conclude by reading "Apocalipsis de Solentiname" as the end point of a literary journey where the enactment of a kind of super-reportage takes place.

The use of the journalistic medium in Cortázar's work goes beyond the exploitation of a literary motif or a principle of textual organization. Some of the hallmarks of modern journalism—such as brevity, fragmentation, simultaneity, and mosaic-like design, highlighted by media critics as diverse as Benjamin and McLuhan—both inspire and echo Cortázar's literary style.³ The very newness of news, the pressure that ever-increasing amounts of topical information exert upon consciousness as they are consumed and interpreted, as well as the ingrained tendency of modern journalism to sensationalize, parallel Cortázar's own quest for an aesthetic of heightened awareness.⁴

The imprint of journalism is at work not only as a transposition of themes and models from mass communication media to the domain of fiction, but as an ongoing struggle among media, where the demands of competing versions and distinct communicative regimes interact and seep through textual production. On the one hand, Cortázar's work consciously appropriates some of journalism's forms and topics; on the other, it is penetrated by the urgency of journalism's appeal and its specific epistemological framework.

Journalism provides a constant wealth of information that Cortázar incorporates in his writings. A well-known example of the dialogue between journalism and literature is *Libro de Manuel* (1973), constructed around a series of newspaper clippings of mostly political content, meant to guide young Manuel's future education. By including facsimiles of

actual clippings that become part of the fictional world of the characters, the book strives to lend credence to the truthfulness of extra-textual events.⁵ More importantly, Cortázar wrote the novel under the pressure of unfolding political developments. At the beginning of the book, Cortázar highlights the quality of contemporaneity that came into play while he was writing the novel. He refers to the “frecuente incorporación de noticias de la prensa, leídas a medida que el libro se iba haciendo” [frequent inclusion of news stories that were being read as the book was taking shape].⁶ External pressures such as the deadline, an essential feature of journalism, can be seen as determining the moral impulse behind the novel.⁷

This method of explicitly including current events and information in the text also appears in *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and *Ultimo round*. The cover of *Ultimo round* provides a clever paratextual case of creative appropriation, one that owes as much to Cortázar as to Julio Silva, the designer of the book. It mimics the front page of a newspaper, or a general-interest periodical such as *Reader's Digest*, and reveals the author's playful attitude and flair for irony.⁸

Cortázar includes in this book his own “diario,” a Spanish word that means both personal journal and daily newspaper. One of the first pieces, “Un día de tantos en Saignon,” is a page of Cortázar's personal journal, presenting the events of the day as they unfold, peppered with reflections, literary allusions, and information about his private life.⁹ *Rayuela* includes verbatim quotes from newspapers of the day,¹⁰ while *Prosa del observatorio*, an illustrated prose poem that explores the Baudelairean notion of cosmic correspondence, opens with a reference to a newspaper article that is used, as are others in Cortázar's work, as both background information and creative spur.

Bakhtin's notion of dialogism helps to frame the impact of journalism—specifically as a vehicle of political and cultural news—in Cortázar's work. The biographical evidence drawn from both Cortázar's letters and his literary work show how news media form for him an arena of contested meanings, thus providing a clear example of what Bakhtin calls “the life and behavior of discourse in a contradictory and multi-linguaged world.”¹¹ By blending the impact of shocking news with its testimonial aspect, journalism also connects Cortázar's aesthetic leanings with his interest, beginning in the early 1960s and exemplified by “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” in the political and historical fate of the peoples of Latin

**03 FIG 1 AND 03
FIG 2: COVERS OF
ULTIMO ROUND,
VOLS. 1 AND 2.
PHOTO COURTESY
OF SIGLO XXI
EDITORES**

JULIO CORTÁZAR

ÚLTIMO ROUND

TRABAJOS DE ESTIRAMIENTO

Galvez paleo de media cancha, la pelota da en el travieso y cae en la sopera justo cuando la señora Delator va a meter el cucharón para servir al escribano Torres que se queda con el plato hondo en la mano mirando lo hasta que diversos señorías de la acción catedral se compadecen y le sirven maldades de la casa y le da de la toja que ha llamado por teléfono para clamar que el pescadito de color se le está quedando en el fondo de la pecera y que en la familia tienen una intoxicación por exceso de cloro o algo así, de mango con la bombilla del mate soplada a fondo, flexión de agallas y cambio del agua corriente por unos litros de pura Villavicencio nacional de manojales andinos, patria chica de Galvez que expulsado por el arbitro because patito en culo controlowado adversario sale de la cancha arrodondando la culameta y se va.

COSAS OÍDAS

En el consultorio externo de la Facultad de Agronomía y Veterinaria de Buenos Aires.

Dos señoras con sendos perros enfermos:

— Yo siempre digo, uno a estos animalitos los tiene para matizar la vida.

Poco después:

— Ojalá a su perrito se lo atienda el doctor Carlitos, que le dicen aquí. A mí cuando la Diana se me enfermó de nostalgia, me la curó en seguida.

En otro banco:

— Le juro, la perra y la gatita eran como hermanas. Las viera sentaditas en la puerta de casa, usted se acuerda que tiene una veria de esas artísticas...

Last but not least:

— Yo pensaba que era el em-
pacho por la cosa de las almón-
digas, pobre ángel, pero de golpe
se me vislumbró la antena: era
que estaba en estado por la cul-
pa del pomerania de mi cuñado.

**LA PROSA CON LA QUE SE
ENGRUPE A MÁS DE CUATRO**

Since there would probably not be enough time for the Committee to consider all the draft resolutions submitted, he (the Rapporteur) intended to submit another draft resolution to the Committee recommending that it should invite the Executive Secretary of the Conference to transmit those draft resolutions and draft amendments to the competent organs of the United Nations for further consideration. (A / CONF. 32 / C. 2 / SR. 11)

**Conferencia Internacional sobre
Derechos Humanos. Teherán, 1968**

❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖ ❖

POESÍA PERMUTANTE

ANTES, DESPUÉS

como los juegos al llanto

como la sombra a la columna

el perfume dibuja el jazmín

el amante precede al amor

come la caricia e la mano

el amor sobrevive al amante

pero inevitabilmente

aunque no haya huella ni presagio

El redactor en jefe de este diario es Caballero de la Orden de Mark Twain.

Se aceptan discos de Eduardo Falú.



JULIO CORTÁZAR

ÚLTIMO ROUND

Hay que soñar, pero a condición de creer seriamente en nuestro sueño, de examinar con atención la vida real, de confrontar nuestras observaciones con nuestro sueño, de realizar escrupulosamente nuestra fantasía. (LENIN).

AVISOS CLASIFICADOS

JUGUETES

¿A la nena se le rompió la muñeca? Sin compromiso, consulte p. 248, tomo I.



AUTOS

¿Se le descarga la batería? Consulte nuestro servicio diurno y nocturno, p. 204, tomo I.

BICICLETAS

Más cosas hay en una bicicleta de las que imagina tu filosofía. Horacio. Información en p. 192, tomo II.

MOTOS

Veranee como lo que usted realmente es, o en todo caso aprenda mirando a los que ya son. Para esto de las miradas, consulte p. 192, tomo II.

.....

Convergencias

La biblioteca ideale a cui tendo è quella che gravita verso il fuori, verso i libri « apocrifi », nel senso etimologico della parola, cioè i libri « nascosti ». La letteratura è ricerca del libro nascosto lontano, che cambia il valore dei libri noti, è la tensione verso il nuovo testo apocrifo da ritrovare o da inventare.

ITALO CALVINO

Sur la rétine de la mouche
dix mille fois le sucre

JEAN COCTEAU

LA REVOLUCIÓN NO ES UN JUEGO

Joven amigo: ¿Se siente revolucionario? ¿Cree que la hora se acerca para nuestros pueblos?

En ese caso, proceda CON SERIEDAD. La revolución no es un juego. Cese de reír. NO SUEÑE. Sobre todo NO SUEÑE. Soñar no conduce a nada, sólo la reflexión y la seriedad confieren la ponderación necesaria para las acciones duraderas. Niéguese al delirio, a los ideales, a lo imposible. Nadie baja de una sierra con diez machetes locos para acabar con un ejército bien armado: no se deje engañar por informaciones tergiversadas, no le haga caso a Lenin. La revolución será fruto de estudios documentados y de una larga paciencia. SEA SERIO. MATE LOS SUEÑOS. SEA SÉRIO. MATE LOS SUEÑOS. SEA SERIO. MATE LOS SUEÑOS.

Silvia

Vaya a saber cómo hubiera podido acabar algo que ni siquiera tenía principio, que se dio en mitad y cesó sin contorno preciso, esfumándose al borde de otra niebla; en todo caso hay que empezar diciendo...

I speak for hawks. Gary Snider.



America. In view of the imprint of journalism on Cortázar's literary enterprise, the photographic medium becomes a privileged vehicle where his avant-garde aesthetics converge with the political currency of visual testimony.

The array of images included in the *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and *Ultimo round* forces the critic to question the parameters of interpretation of composite works, what W. J. T. Mitchell calls the problem of the "image/text," namely, the "heterogeneity of representational structures within the field of the visible and readable."¹² Sugano reads these illustrated books as ways of opening up closed literary and artistic generic distinctions. Dávila, following Cortázar's cue, calls them "almanaques posmodernos" [postmodern almanacs] and interprets the images and the books' layout not as mere illustrations or ornaments, but as structural features. For Perkowska, their hybridity invites the reader to question the hierarchies that set apart high and popular cultures.¹³

Cortázar's playful, informal, and anarchic approach can be seen in the use of captions that subvert the conventional links between images and the words that are supposed to contextualize them, as is the case with the piece "En vista del éxito obtenido," already addressed in chapter 1.¹⁴ Besides this case of irony as a trope in verbal/visual interactions, what we find is a collage of literary strategies and communicative registers. At the centre of this array is the revelatory power of the photographic image and its testimonial use.

Three pieces—"Vuelta al día en el Tercer Mundo," from *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos*, and "Album con fotos" and "Turismo aconsejable," from *Ultimo round*—explore the links among travel writing, social critique, the workings of memory and trauma, and the power of photography. Through these texts, I argue, Cortázar (or the narrator who employs his voice), reinterprets the role of the traveler by becoming a witness and, increasingly, a photo-reporter.

In "Vuelta al día en el Tercer Mundo,"¹⁵ Cortázar explores foreign lands not as tourist destinations, as he does in texts like "Acerca de la manera de viajar de Atenas a Cabo Sunion," a biographical reflection on travel and memory from the vantage point of a tourist. This time, traveling—both real and virtual—takes him to sites of social injustice, political struggle, and moral outrage. The piece departs drastically from the playfulness and poetic flair of previous sections of the book, informing

the reader about the gloomy nature of ongoing world events. This “trip around the day” includes two brief texts. In both, references to photography play a central role as visual signs that lend a special intensity to the news conveyed. The first text chronicles the dire situation of civilians, and children in particular, in war-torn Vietnam; the second deals with the disappearance and mutilation of children in Venezuela. They both become poignant *exposés* of realities affecting the Third World that only investigative reportage could uncover. In the text on Vietnam, the authorial voice disappears, as if the main role of the author was to select and present to the reader in the most neutral fashion the news of the moment. The text literally quotes a news article that in turn refers at length to an illustrated piece that appeared in the progressive Catholic journal *Ramparts* in January 1967. Penned by William Pepper, director of the Children’s Institute for Advanced Study and Research at Mercy College in New York, the article in *Ramparts* contains a witness report on civilian casualties and the health conditions of the South Vietnamese population since the war began in 1961, focusing mainly on the plight of children. It concludes with a collection of photographs of maimed, mutilated, and burned children. (It is not clear in “Vuelta al día en el Tercer Mundo” if Cortázar actually saw the issue of *Ramparts* and its photographs—described as “atroces” [atrocious]—or if he is only quoting the newspaper article.)

By framing the news from Vietnam as a “vuelta al día” [turn around the day], Cortázar links the text explicitly to the travelling theme of the book. This “vuelta” points, more than any other piece in the volume, to traveling as a trip to hell where the war machine is the ultimate producer of pain and death. The circumstance is even more harrowing because it affects the most defenceless of civilians. Cortázar, as both author and individual, was deeply drawn to childhood; he cherished its creative exuberance and the challenge it poses to normative reason.¹⁶ In the text, the news he chooses to quote reflects this sensitivity. Between the pages that feature the news from Vietnam and the report from Venezuela, a grainy black-and white photograph covers the two pages entirely. No reference is given as to the source of the image, though it most likely appeared in a newspaper or magazine of the day. (It does not belong to the article in *Ramparts*.) In the foreground, a Vietnamese woman—her head covered with a scarf, her face showing signs of distress and fatigue, her gaze downward—drags along a child with her left arm and is barely carrying another



03 FIG 3: VIETNAMESE WOMAN WITH CHILDREN IN A WAR ZONE. PHOTO COURTESY OF SIGLO XXI EDITORES

child, smaller and naked, in her right arm. Behind her, a Vietnamese soldier marches on, while in the background, scattered remains and ruins stand in front of burning huts.

Besides functioning as visual testimony of the ongoing war, the image can be read as an emblem of the social catastrophe and despair in which millions of human beings live in the Third World. In the face of the physical destruction of their environment and the watchful, threatening

presence of a repressive military force, the woman and her children walking towards a hopeless future are a raw symbol of victimization.¹⁷

The pairing of the texts about Vietnam and Venezuela with the photographic image, even if they do not actually belong to the same publication or cultural context, recall the conventions of illustrated journalism. As Scott remarks, “many news photos are not significant in themselves but are emblematic, or representative: they have the task of establishing a news item, authenticating it rather than depicting it.”¹⁸ In *La vuelta al día*, text and image cooperate in the construction of meaning by providing the “truth” about an event, even if it is only by analogy. Bridging time and space, but suggesting the same continuity of injustice and pain, the photograph of the Vietnamese woman anticipates the photographs of violence in Latin America that the protagonist of “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” will see projected during the uncanny slide show in his Parisian apartment. This is a prime example of the dialogic exchange through which Cortázar appropriates the conventions of illustrated journalism to highlight, in a collection of miscellaneous texts, a political issue.

Though *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and *Ultimo round* can be read as the first and second installments of the same literary project, there is a shift in aesthetic and political terms from the first to the second book.¹⁹ *La vuelta al día* explores a multiplicity of arts and media, and it features many texts that revolve around playfulness, humour, and the poetic character of artistic creation. *Ultimo round* also delves into poetry and imagination, but includes more—and more poignant—political and socially-oriented texts, as if the two years that separated the publication of these works—a time span that included Che Guevara’s death, an eye-opening trip to India, and the events of May 1968—had the effect of sharpening and hardening Cortázar’s political stance.²⁰

The topics of social violence and child abuse reappear in *Ultimo round* in a brief poem entitled “Album con fotos,”²¹ where ekphrasis transforms the actual images of poor children into those of angels.²² The text ironically plays with the assumption of safe domesticity provided by the photographic album and the editorial conventions that organize the plethora of images in magazines and almanacs around the category of “the year in pictures.” A link is implied between the “atroces fotografías” [atrocious photographs] alluded to in “Vuelta al día en el Tercer Mundo,” which illustrate the article from *Ramparts*, and the theme developed in “Album

con fotos.” Even if the actual pictures in *Ramparts* produce horror, disgust, and moral outrage, while the ones described in “Album con fotos” trigger instead the reader’s pity and compassion, both highlight the testimonial aspect of the photographic medium as irrefutable proof of human suffering. Both texts mention the ongoing war in Vietnam and the use of napalm by American forces. The reference brings to mind one of the icons of twentieth-century photography, the picture taken in 1972 by Nick Ut of children fleeing an American napalm strike.²³ However, the actual photographs from the original texts—the article in *Ramparts* and the photographic album that served as inspiration for the poem—do not accompany the pieces by Cortázar; they are only mentioned. Despite this absence, both pieces emblemize the shift in the evolution of Cortázar’s work toward the use of photojournalistic techniques to make a political and social statement.

Cortázar rehearses in “Album con fotos” one of the preferred tropes in the critical literature about photography, namely, the image as a haunting visual sign. The empathetic viewer, rather than exerting control over an inert picture, ends up wounded by the image, a victim of its traumatic power, as seen in the texts explored in chapter 1. The testimonies of Susan Sontag and Roland Barthes are revealing insofar as they show how even the sophisticated, supposedly detached critic can fall prey to the raw intensity of a photograph.²⁴ The “rhetoric of the image” can persuade, or seem to persuade, the viewer in more immediate and compelling terms than any verbal construction or conceptual argumentation, since photographs appeal primarily to emotion, and the realist assumption usually associated with them lends more poignancy to the pain, despair, or destruction depicted by the image.²⁵

Despite its undertone of despair, “Album con fotos” toys with the possibility of redeeming children from poverty and neglect. The photographs—or rather, their ekphrastic counterparts—fix the children’s plight and aspire to save them, at least symbolically, from hopelessness. In contrast to this hope, “Turismo aconsejable” is set up explicitly as a chronicle of damnation.²⁶

The text draws from Cortázar’s second trip to India, in 1968 while working for the United Nations.²⁷ The importance of this trip cannot be overstated. It coincided with—and encouraged—Cortázar’s rising

consciousness as an intellectual engaged in a political and social mission. His experience of the visit was a mix of dazzle and horror, with the latter dominating the letters he wrote to friends about his stay.²⁸ Cortázar writes to his editor Francisco Porrúa that in India “hay un horror permanente que sólo pueden ignorar los que viajan por cuenta de American Express y duermen en hoteles de lujo” [there is a permanent horror that only those who travel on an American Express account and sleep in five-star hotels can ignore].²⁹ In this same letter Cortázar describes his visit to Howra Station in Calcutta, which is the subject of “Turismo aconsejable”:

Quise conocer Calcutta, y todavía no he conseguido lavarme de esa impresión. Creer que estamos en la edad moderna, después de una visión semejante, es ser hipócrita o imbécil. En la estación de ferrocarril y las plazas adyacentes (por darte un ejemplo) viven permanentemente millares de familias sentadas en el suelo, en los andenes, las calles, entre dos vías de tranvía, al borde de los charcos de agua podrida. . . . No sé de una imagen mejor del infierno que la de una familia viviendo al aire libre, entre dos vías de tranvía y rodeada de otros centenares de grupos análogos, mientras una inmensa muchedumbre camina incesantemente de un lado para otro, sin trabajo, sin dinero, mirándose unos a otros con esa insondable mirada de los indios.³⁰

[I wanted to visit Calcutta, and I am still unable to wash away that impression. To think that we live in the modern age, after such a sight, is to be a hypocrite or imbecile. In the train station and the adjacent squares, to give you an example, thousands of families live on a permanent basis, seated on the floor, the platforms, the streets, between two tramway tracks, at the edge of the puddles of rotten water. . . . I don't know a better image of hell than that of a family living in the open air, between two tracks and surrounded by hundreds of similar groups, while a huge crowd walks from here to there, without work, without money, looking at each other with that unfathomable gaze of the Indians.]

The reference to hell echoes the utter despair on display in “Las babas del diablo” and “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” with their allusions to unleashed satanic forces and the impotence of innocent victims to confront violence and suffering. “Turismo aconsejable” plays with autobiography disguised as fiction, a strategy that Cortázar favours in his writings about photography. Though we can distinguish, from a critical perspective, between biographical facts and their fictionalized dimension (and between the figure of the author, and the author as character in his work), Cortázar purposefully blends these domains, as if he expects the reader to embrace, and not resist, the convergence of the existential and the literary (as happens in the writings of Horacio Quiroga). In “Turismo aconsejable,” the literary inflection of the piece is conveyed from the outset by a narration that employs the formal second person, which addresses the reader directly and produces an effect of both closeness and distance. As for closeness, it brings the reader into the scenes described and the actions narrated as if she herself were the astonished tourist walking among the crowd. But the text also distances the reader: first, through the unusual use of this narrative device, since the reader is perfectly aware that she has not experienced first-hand what the narration tells; and second, through the use of the formal (“usted”), rather than informal (“tu”), second-person narrator. This rhetorical strategy adds a peculiar stress to the anecdote by imposing the “impossible” point of view of the reader being the witness of the events narrated.

The title—“Advice for Tourists”—serves as both an ironic gesture and an indictment. Visiting Howra Station is likely the last thing a “usual” tourist would do, which is precisely the reason a tourist should be advised to visit the place. Irony again plays out in the text when the narrator mentions that his tourist guide describes the spectacle of the crammed, poverty-stricken square of the Station as “pintoresco” [picturesque],³¹ a pseudo-romantic description with which the author slyly agrees, and which he repeats at the end of the text as a form of sarcastic closure. The piece stands in sharp contrast to the leisurely distraction usually associated with travel by Westerners to faraway places. The reader must confront the urgent and generally hidden economic and social realities of the places tourists visit. The text switches the point of view from that of a detached, well-off European traveller to that of the horrified chronicler. This is done through a discursive shift from travel writing, commodified in the Murray

tourist guide mentioned in the text, to a documentary prose that does not shy away from emotional remarks. Despite the implicit allusions to India's colonial past and its present dependence on the metropolitan flow of capital and visitors, the author chooses to focus not on issues of national or international history, but on the present human disgrace he witnesses. The text describes the inhabitants of the square, highlighting the destitution, dangers, and hopelessness of their situation: from the old trolley crossing barely a foot away from the crowd, to a poor old couple, a fateful symbol of things to come for the oblivious children that play around them.

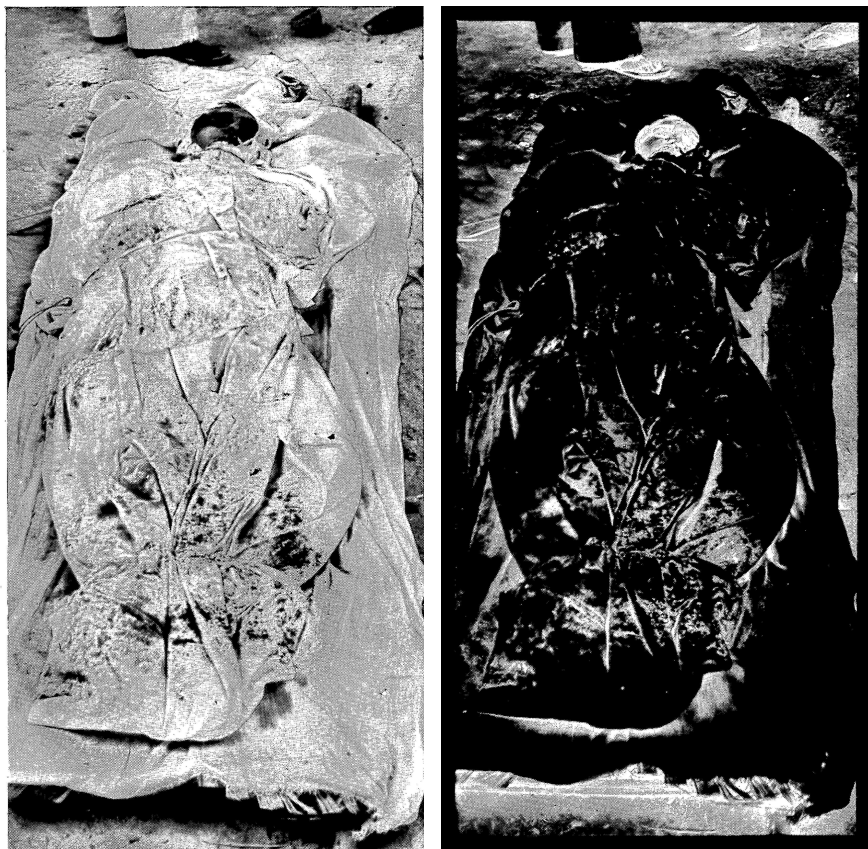
"Turismo aconsejable" dramatizes a social situation by following the model of news coverage. The text can be read as an illustrated article in a newspaper or magazine, very much as the article in *Ramparts* documents the tragedy of children in Vietnam. The photojournalistic model is apparent in the matching of text to photographs, the first-hand account, and the moral underpinnings of a "story of human interest." The photographs provide a visual support to the text, despite the fact that there is no indication that they picture Howra Station or its square (they are actually stills from the 1967 documentary film *Calcutta* by Louis Malle). As was the case with the photograph of "Vuelta al día en el Tercer Mundo," the pictures that accompany the text do not actually correspond to the events described and narrated, thus performing an emblematic role.³² There is, however, a meaningful reference in the text to the photographic medium, providing an *effet du réel* that connotes both the tourist gaze and visual reportage. The mention of "la correa de su Contaflex" (140) [the strap of his Contaflex] indicates that the protagonist is carrying a camera on his visit to the station and is ready, at least potentially, to snap some pictures. In any case, there is no mention of taking any photograph, as if something prevents the visitor from using the camera: the paralysis provoked by fear or shock, the self-consciousness of attracting attention in a potentially threatening setting, or the impropriety of an act that connotes the mastery of the image-producer in a context of utter despondency. It is meaningful that even in the absence of a photograph taken by the protagonist, the author stresses the visual quality of the experience. By the end of the piece, author and reader are symbolically merged, and visibility is rhetorically employed to provide a dramatic proof of the events "we" have witnessed. It also burdens the viewer with the moral responsibility attached to a traveller who has entered a damned social space:

el infierno es ese lugar donde las vociferaciones y los juegos y los llantos suceden como si no sucedieran, no es algo que se cumpla en el tiempo, es una recurrencia infinita, la Howra Station en Calcutta cualquier día de cualquier mes de cualquier año en que usted tenga ganas de ir a verla, es ahora mientras usted lee esto, ahora y aquí, esto que ocurre y que usted, es decir yo, hemos visto. (146)

[hell is that place where shouts and games and crying happen as if they didn't happen, it is nothing that happens in time, it is an infinite recurrence, Calcutta's Howra Station any day of any month of any year when you would have the desire to go and visit, it is now while you read this, here and now, this that happens and that you, I mean I, have seen.]

Caught between the temptation to see and the wish not to attract the attention of the surrounding crowd, everything that the protagonist perceives in the square affects him with mute horror. One of the most poignant scenes is the discovery of an old woman lying on the floor. She is completely still. The narrator's first reaction is to surmise that she is sleeping (136), but later he realizes that she might be dead (140). Seeing becomes a painful experience, not only because it swamps the viewer with a pressing, proliferating, and anxious state of affairs, but also because once the complexities and ambiguities of the scene seem to be resolved, the resolution turns out to be dreadful. With regard to this sleeping or dead woman, the narrator experiences a delay in his response, as if the eye that perceives cannot fathom, in the immediacy of perception, the existential weight and implicit violence that teems behind appearances. The gap between manifest view and latent assumption is conveyed graphically by the reproduction in the book of the same photograph of a lying, shrouded body, first as a positive image, and two pages later, as a negative.

This strategy of belated awareness is typical of Cortázar. Both in "Las babas del diablo" and "Apocalipsis de Solentiname," there is an uncanny mismatch between the actual scenes captured by the camera and the images that are finally viewed by the spectator, a delayed action that critics of photography consider a crucial aspect of photography itself and which can be related, as indicated in chapter 1, to the experience of trauma.³³



03 FIG 4 AND 03 FIG 5: POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE IMAGES OF A SHROUDED BODY, FROM LOUIS MALLE'S 1967 DOCUMENTARY *CALCUTTA*. PHOTO COURTESY OF SIGLO XXI EDITORES

"Turismo aconsejable" amounts to a dark page in Cortázar's many writings about travel: his short stories and novels point to the joys and risks of real displacements, as well as to the amazement and shock of a fantastic rupture in the thread of (supposedly) normal continuity. *Rayuela* (1963) is of course the foremost example of a trip across geographical, literary, cultural, psychological, and metaphysical boundaries. From its very title, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* points to a classic work on travel literature and situates the author as a traveler across spaces, genres, and styles. *Prosa del observatorio* revolves around the idea of a hidden link

between eels travelling across the Atlantic and the heavenly journey of the stars. This volume owes its existence to the same trip Cortázar made to India in 1968. In the prologue to the book of photographs *París, ritmos de una ciudad* (1981), Cortázar recaptures the adventurous gaze of the *flâneur* who explores the city for the first time. *Los autonautas de la cosmopista* (1984)—a quirky travelogue written with his then wife, Carol Dunlop, and illustrated with his photographs—attests to Cortázar's desire to travel even in his old age. He was a tourist by calling as well as a professional traveler. Working for UNESCO, he made frequent trips across Europe, Asia, and the Americas. He took advantage of these professional commitments to explore the countries where he stayed, and he greatly cherished the freedom his work as a freelance translator afforded him.³⁴

The reinterpretation of travel writing in "Turismo aconsejable" flies in the face of the usual reasons that a tourist records her trip using photographs.³⁵ It also foreshadows the literary strategies Cortázar will employ in "Apocalipsis de Solentiname." Both texts portray a traveler on a hurried visit to a foreign land and exemplify, even if in a limited fashion, a variation of what Mary Louise Pratt calls the writing in "contact zones," defined as the "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination."³⁶ Nothing seems further from Cortázar's (personal and authorial) intentions than acting as a colonizer or imperialist agent. The link between the protagonist and the local population in each text does not involve coercion or intractable conflict, but it does showcase radical inequality, one of the features at play in "contact zones" according to Pratt.³⁷ It is true that Cortázar's position as a privileged observer stems from an asymmetrical power relationship quite independent from the writer's intentions. However, the attitude of the protagonist in each text remains ambivalent. Even if sympathetic, his condition as outsider is at the forefront of his experience. Voyeurism, even if mixed with moral outrage and compassion, can be seen as the primary motif of the visitor who ventures to Howra Station. In the case of "Apocalipsis de Solentiname," by photographing the peasants' naive landscape paintings, in itself a gesture of appropriation, Cortázar seems to rehearse, in the arena of representation, the "standard elements of the imperial trope," namely, "the mastery of the landscape, the estheticizing adjectives, the broad panorama anchored in the seer."³⁸ Even the host, the Nicaraguan poet and community

leader Ernesto Cardenal, appearing as a character in the story, interprets the act of photographing the paintings as an act of infringement, an act that imposes a sharp socio-cultural hierarchy. The protagonists in both texts know all too well that their visit will be short, concluding with a safe passage back home; the question of a more or less permanent stay or a conversion to the condition of the other is never entertained.³⁹

In “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” the slide show that suddenly transforms naive paintings infused with bucolic connotations into crude scenes of political violence also changes the regime of communication in which the pictures are embedded. Personal keepsakes are transformed into graphic testimony that a photojournalist could have produced.⁴⁰ Crucially, Cortázar exploits in “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” a form of visual reporting that was implicitly rejected in “Las babas del diablo” twenty years before. Roberto Michel, the highly conscious amateur, calls into question the truth-value of photographic reportage when he expounds in a professorial tone about the aesthetic values of photography. He takes care to distinguish the photographic act in search of a visual truth from “the lies” that reporters chase:

Entre las muchas maneras de combatir la nada, una de las mejores es sacar fotografías, actividad que debería enseñarse tempranamente a los niños pues exige disciplina, educación estética, buen ojo y dedos seguros. No se trata de estar acechando la mentira como cualquier repórter. (216)

[One of the many ways of contesting level-zero, and one of the best, is to take photographs, an activity in which one should start becoming an adept very early in life, teach it to children since it requires discipline, aesthetic education, a good eye, and steady fingers. I’m not talking about waylaying the lie like any old reporter. (117)]

Michel dismisses, almost outright, a cultural figure (the photo-reporter) and a practice (visual reportage) that will become increasingly important in Cortázar’s literature. This emergence has taken shape after Cortázar’s embrace of the political impact and the social value of the photographic image in *La Vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and especially in *Ultimo*

round.⁴¹ The divide in Cortázar's career between an epoch preoccupied mainly with literary and aesthetic concerns and another, more politically oriented period, beginning in the early 1960s with a galvanizing interest triggered by the Cuban Revolution, can be gauged by the evolution of the figure of the photographer in his work.⁴²

Cortázar's deep and long attachment to journalism as both a source of information and a textual/visual model reaches a critical point in the slide show of "Apocalipsis de Solentiname." It pits the hallucinatory experience of the protagonist against the all too real issues of social injustice and political violence.⁴³ While resorting to a fantastic or demonic intervention in everyday experience—a staple of his work—the Argentine writer also points to a dimension in which a kind of super-reportage is enacted and that reveals a deeper state of affairs, beyond the limitations of direct personal involvement. This is in line with comments by Cortázar, who considered his own text as "un cuento de los más realistas que haya podido imaginar o escribir" [one of the most realist story that I could have imagined or written] because it was based on his experience and was rendered as truthfully and clearly as possible.⁴⁴ In the lectures he gave at Berkeley in 1980, the irruption of the fantastic at the story's end becomes, in his eyes, not a departure from "reality," but rather a way to drive home its critical moments: "es un poco llevar las cosas a sus últimas consecuencias para que lo que quiero decir, que es una visión muy latinoamericana de nuestro tiempo, llegue al lector con más fuerza, de alguna manera le estalle delante de la cara y lo obligue a sentirse implicado y presente en el relato." [It's a bit like taking things to their extreme consequences; thus, what I want to say, which is a very Latin American vision of our time, will reach the reader more forcefully, in a way that it will blow in his face and will force him to feel implicated and present in the story.]⁴⁵

By including scenes that belong explicitly to different Latin American countries in a sort of "televisual" collage of social violence, the author gestures to a kind of political universality that finds its coherence in widespread oppression and violent death.

In particular, the pictures of the slide show belong to the photographic tradition of the photo-reporter who worked for illustrated publications through some of the most decisive conflicts of the twentieth century: the Spanish Civil War (Robert Capa), World War II (W. Eugene Smith), the Korean and Vietnam wars (David Douglas Duncan and Larry Burrows).⁴⁶

The images are modeled after the work of “concerned photographers,” to use Cornell Capa’s expression, in line with the work of photographers contemporary to Cortázar like Susan Meiselas, who documented the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua and the civil war in El Salvador in the late 1970s. Applying to the protagonist of “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” what Coleman says about Meiselas, Cortázar’s intent in the story is “not only witnessing but bearing witness to some of the major social crises of our time.”⁴⁷

The shift from an “artistic” conception of photography to a form of visual reporting that highlights political conflicts allows Cortázar to raise questions about the role of the intellectual/writer/artist in society. The conflict between “art” and “life,” explicitly thematized in “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” points to both the intellectual climate of the day and the political and moral issues that occupied Cortázar since the mid-1960s. In the story, the protagonist looks for a dialectical resolution to the conflict. Speaking to himself in his Parisian apartment in order to decide which slides to show first, as if this temporal precedence implied an axiological and moral choice, the protagonist finally chooses to begin with the slides of the paintings, asserting that “art” and “life” are ultimately the same:

era grato pensar que todo volvería a darse poco a poco, después de los cuadritos de Solentiname empezaría a pasar las cajas con las fotos cubanas, pero por qué los cuadritos primero, por qué la deformación profesional, el arte antes que la vida, y por qué no, le dijo el otro a éste en su eterno indesarmable diálogo fraterno y rencoroso, por qué no mirar primero las pinturas de Solentiname si también son la vida, si todo es lo mismo. (158)

[It was pleasant thinking that everything would be revealed to me again little by little, after the paintings from Solentiname I would go through the boxes with the Cuban photographs, but why the paintings first, why the professional deformation, art before life, and why not, the one said to the other in their eternal unresolvable fraternal and rancorous dialogue, why not look at the Solentiname paintings first since they’re life too, since it’s all the same. (124)]

The distinction between art and life, while continuing a tradition of romantic and post-romantic attempts to bridge the ontological divide of the alienated soul, remains undeveloped in the story.⁴⁸ One way to transcend the conflict between these seemingly opposite domains is to blur their boundaries, to think in terms of an undifferentiated realm that would overcome a contradictory state of affairs: to posit, as Cortázar does in the story, that “todo es lo mismo” [it’s all the same]. Nonetheless, the slide show itself is a reminder of how intractable the distinction can be. The pictures transform the peaceful, harmonious art into all-pervasive violence, shattering any synthesis and stressing, rather than overcoming, the gap between art and life. The slide show itself is a visual exercise in differentiation, deploying a series of discontinuous scenes. Not only does each slide refer, in swift succession, to distinct situations and geographical settings, but the violence featured in each slide stresses physical disintegration.

If its textual/visual model of photoreportage is straightforward, “Apocalipsis de Solentiname” remains a text riddled with ambivalence. On the one hand, as the slide show proceeds, it grows into a dark ekphrastic space through which the reader watches violence out of control. This kind of super-reportage, rendering both diegetic viewer and reader as stunned, passive spectators, can be read as a failed attempt to promote change, as an acceptance of defeat in the face of political conflict.⁴⁹ On the other hand, even if the slides present images that may well belong to the genres of photojournalism and press photography, the context of reception of the show—private and even hallucinatory—is located at the opposite end of the essentially public condition of journalism.

One way to interpret this discrepancy is to consider the screen as a haunted space, projecting the unfulfilled desire of the protagonist to become a heroic figure of photojournalism, an ideal that echoes the condition of the “hero writer” attributed by Jean Franco to some of the authors of the Latin American Boom.⁵⁰ The slide show, seen from the safe distance of Paris, may be projecting the guilt of not participating fully in the social struggle, of not standing “close enough” to the action, as Robert Capa’s famous statement about photojournalists proclaimed.⁵¹

In short, what began in “Las babas del diablo” as a suspicion of news reporting based on aesthetic grounds ends up at the core of Cortázar’s literary and political preoccupations. The shift follows a vocational path in his career—from artistically minded writer to socially concerned

chronicler and exasperated public intellectual.⁵² In “Las babas del diablo,” Roberto Michel goes out to photograph Paris while taking care to avoid the posture of the reporter. Ten years later, *La vuelta al día en ochenta mundos* and *Ultimo round* not only are organized explicitly according to a journalistic model, but also contain many references to actual news and to image/texts that can be read as reportage. Finally, in “Apocalipsis de Solentiname,” the photographs the protagonist brings home transcend the scenes of the little Nicaraguan community as they explode upon the screen in a Parisian apartment. They become, through the power of photographic images, burning news of a continent in turmoil.

Tomás Eloy Martínez

In previous chapters I have examined the ways photography is used in literary texts to explore the power and limitations of the fixed image. In this last section I show how *La novela de Perón* (1985), by Tomás Eloy Martínez, is a paradigmatic text in the way it incorporates the classic *topoi* regarding the uses of photography, especially its semiotic dimension and political impact. Throughout the novel, the Argentine author explores the nature of this visual medium as public sign, as testimony of historical truth, and as rhetorical weapon. The novel constantly probes the abiding human need to produce the “image that will stick” in the minds of individuals as well as in the collective memory. To fix a meaningful pose—one of photography’s classic roles—becomes of paramount importance in a media environment in which messages constantly vie for attention. Photography mediates in the plot of the novel between past and present, memory and perception, the contingent and the ideal. More importantly, it becomes the model for the variety of visual signs deployed in the narrative. Photographic images are awarded a privileged place in the novel’s general economy of representations.

Photographs play a paradoxical role: they are fictions within a fiction, but they purport to certify the authenticity of events. They provide a range of *effets du réel* that anchor discourse in referential illusions. At the same time, the novel’s abundant ekphrastic moments also show the power of photography to fictionalize its diegetic reality. In other words, both the

reader and the characters in the text take for granted the “analogical plenitude” of the photographs, but these same photographs shape, edit, distort, magnify, or idealize the purported reality that generates them as signs.

La novela de Perón stages a contest among communication media. It can be read as a semiotic spectacle, an arena in which competing versions of events clash and the tensions of verbal and visual representations come to the surface. In this sense, the novel is about how a political figure is socially constructed. On the level of production, circulation, and reception of representations, words and images interact in pursuit of the “truth” of the main character.

The book has mainly been interpreted as a fictionalization of historical events or as a novelistic version of twentieth-century Argentine politics.⁵³ It explores the links among historical truth, literary fiction, and journalism, falling into a category that Linda Hutcheon calls “historiographic metafiction,” in which fictional texts “foreground the productive, constructing aspects of their acts of representing.”⁵⁴ Though underpinned by biographical information, it is not a biography of Juan Perón, but a cross-section of his personal and social background, his ideas, his ascent to power, and his exile and fateful return to Argentina in 1973.⁵⁵

Published in 1985, in the aftermath of the Dirty War that plagued Argentina from 1976 to 1983, *La novela de Perón* can be read as a reflection on the immediate past. It is certainly not a commentary on the political and social plight of Argentines in those years, but it provides a useful historical background.⁵⁶ The novel avoids references to the core of Perón’s political career—his two presidential terms, from 1946 to 1955—but it constantly alludes to the military institution from which he rose to prominence and which dominated Argentine politics since the 1930s. While portraying the last days of Perón, who is unable to tame the social tensions and political struggles after his long exile, the text can be read as an indictment of sorts. Perón’s pathetic legacy—represented by the short term of office headed by the inept Isabel Martínez, Perón’s third wife, and the Machiavellian José López Rega, his personal secretary—contained the seeds of the imminent social anarchy and subsequent military junta that seized power in 1976. In this sense, *La novela de Perón* traces the long historical shadow of his leadership and the effects of his crumbling authority.

The story begins on 20 June 1973. Millions of Argentines gather for the long-awaited return of Perón from exile. The narrative skillfully

weaves together the lives of the protagonists, all converging along with the welcoming multitude at Ezeiza airport, and culminates in the murderous purge of leftist Peronist groups by police and paramilitary forces.

La novela de Perón begins and ends with references to two fixed images. The first is a billboard featuring Isabelita, under which Arcángelo Gobbi, a thug working for Perón's personal secretary, López Rega, awaits the leader's arrival. The second is a television image of the body of Juan Domingo Perón, broadcast during his wake. From the outset, billboard and television screen provide the grounds for an ironic interplay between sign and referent: the meaningless, ineffectual Isabelita acquires monumental proportions, while the larger-than-life Perón ends up trapped in a plastic box beaming a bluish light. These images signal one of the salient features of the novel: its wide range of interactions between realms of meaning and representation.

Billboard and television image express the pictorial wish to fix and preserve the semblance of the absent, while also circulating it in the public domain. There is a photographic component to both images. On the one hand, portraits on billboards, which rely on realistic codes, are drawn from carefully selected photographs.⁵⁷ On the other hand, Perón's last television image points toward photographic representation in two ways: first, he remains paralyzed in death, and second, the camera shot does not change. Both in billboard and television image, the medium magnifies, multiplies, and ends up freezing a countenance.

Bracketing the proliferation of images the novel contains, billboard and television image point toward the variety of roles played by visual artifacts. Images acquire a life of their own, brought to light by ekphrastic strategies. In this respect, the persistent life of the dead has been a constant topic in Martínez's work. He has penned essays on the "necrophiliac" aspects of Argentine culture, and his novel *Santa Evita* (1995) can be read as an extended parable on the power of the dead over the living, of the passive image over the active mind.⁵⁸ As André Bazin might have said, Evita the mummy is suggestive of photography, insofar as she is fixed in a pose for eternity.⁵⁹ As seen in chapter 1, the practice and theory of photography have always been linked to the memorializing of the dead and a mournful or melancholic outlook on life. This imaginary but poignant link to death pervades *La novela de Perón*.

The book is a veritable album of ekphrastic moments. Few Latin American novels contain so many explicit allusions to photography, from mere snapshots to doctored images, from postcards to family albums to posters. This wealth of references highlights the variety and force of the interactions between human beings and photographic signs. In this verbal fabric teeming with photographic allusions, the author constantly exploits ekphrastic hope. Isabel, whom Perón says “tenía la virtud de ver sólo la superficie de las personas” (12) [had the virtue of seeing only the surface of people (4)], kills time looking at a picture magazine while on the plane that brings the Peróns back to Argentina. In Madrid, some weeks before, while the tension of the imminent trip is building, Perón takes a melancholic stroll around his house and, on the balcony, fancies himself in front of a cheering crowd waving “photographs and placards” from the Plaza de Mayo (6). Photographs of the first Peronist regime adorn the dining room of the home (93). Cámpora, elected president as Perón’s deputy, pays a visit to the leader in Madrid. He looks at the photographs and thinks, with nostalgia, that “todo era más claro en aquel pasado” (98) [everything was clearer in those days (93)], as if glimpsing the turmoil that the failure of Perón’s upcoming regime will bring about. As the plot unfolds, photography chronicles both achievements and failures. Examples abound: the young Perón receives a photographic album the day he graduates from the military academy, as a token of triumph after harsh training. On his way to the desolate fields of Patagonia, where his father had decided to move and make a living, Perón looks in awe at the photographs of the failed expedition to the South Pole by Scott, thinking that one day Argentines will accomplish the feat. Photography plays a crucial role in the capture of General Lonardi, who was caught spying on the Chilean army in 1938. Lonardi, who would head the military coup to unseat Perón in 1955, was then a newly appointed military attaché at the Argentine embassy, replacing Perón. Zamora, the journalist who is covering Perón’s life for a special issue of the magazine *Horizonte*, learns the details of the case from the embittered widow of Lonardi. Chapter 12 opens with the journalist visiting the woman: “Zamora la ha imaginado como ya no es. Ha esperado encontrarse con el rostro frágil e imperial que asomaba en las fotografías de 1955” (225) [Zamora had imagined her as she no longer is. He had anticipated the same fragile, imperious features of the 1955 photographs (221)]. According to the widow, who shares with Zamora her notes

and diaries, Perón left the plot ready to unfold, only to see it explode in Lonardi's hands when Lonardi was discovered in flagrante, photographing secret documents, by the Chilean intelligence service.

The day Perón is scheduled to return from Madrid, some of his relatives, mostly elders who have not seen him for decades, have been invited to welcome him at the airport. Their comments have been included in the special issue of *Horizonte*, entitled “La vida entera de Perón / El Hombre / El Líder / Documentos y relatos de cien testigos” (69) [Perón: His Entire Life / Documents and Photos of One Hundred Witnesses (63)]. Bored and frustrated, they pass the time reading the magazine, discovering their own stories in its pages. Sometimes cheerily, but most often with awe, nostalgia, or disgust, they look at their personal photographs displayed in a public medium. Powerless to control the images already printed in the magazine, they are also powerless in the hallways of the airport. Mistreated by the security personnel who anxiously await Perón's arrival, the relatives board a bus that takes them away, to the outskirts of the airport. During the short trip, Benita, wife of one of Perón's cousins, discovers a photograph of herself as a teenager on a torn page of the magazine lying on the floor of the bus. For this group of ailing, unwilling, unsuspected witnesses of Perón's life, photography is almost all that is left of life. It emblemizes a graphic register of decadence, a visible inscription of the tragic flow of time. This impression is reinforced by the sheer indifference with which the “distinguished guests” are treated—first by the staff of the magazine, then by the police forces—as if they have already vanished and been forgotten, very much like old images in a discarded publication.

Another classic *topos* of photographic representation—the iconic sign that serves as substitute for the living, the vicarious presence of an absence that Hans Belting situates at the heart of all images⁶⁰—is exploited by the dubious sorcery of López Rega (nicknamed “el brujo” [the sorcerer]) and José Cresto, Isabelita's godfather. For these characters, plainly convinced of the powers of magic and espousing a hodgepodge of spiritualist beliefs and superstitions, photography is a medium in the esoteric sense, a channel that eerily communicates the disparate worlds of bodies and spirits. Photographs are galleries of ghosts waiting to become incarnate. Cresto, the pathetic counselor of Isabelita, is also the director of the Escuela Científica Basilio, a spiritual centre where candles illuminated “las fotos

de los espíritus que hacían penitencia en la casa” (27) [the photographs of spirits that were doing penance in the house (18)].

López Rega employs photographs as a means of magical influence and possession. He used to court luck by printing postcards of Perón and Isabelita that he would send all over the world (129). When he arrives in Madrid in 1966, he spares no effort to gain influence over the gullible Isabelita. After settling in Spain’s capital, he engages in a quest to eliminate the obscure Cresto. Both he and the spiritual counselor vie for Perón’s favors, embarking on a contest of sorcerers’ tricks. López Rega manages to set a trap into which Cresto finally falls, by cunningly employing a photograph that pits the lame godfather against the General. López Rega learns that Perón hated a man called Marcelino Canosa, a peasant with whom his widowed mother had an affair. The secretary manages to get a photograph where Canosa and Perón’s mother pose together and retouches the image in such a way that the features of the man resemble those of Cresto. Then he puts the doctored image in Perón’s hands, suggesting, as the narrator puts it, that Cresto “había tomado posesión del espíritu de Canosa” (139) [had taken possession of Canosa’s spirit (133)]. After this successful case of “magic antipathy,” Perón conflates the two men and gets rid of Cresto.

References to spiritual possession and soul transfusion point to a worldview espoused by López Rega that is satirized by the narrator. They are also a symbol of political power. The novel shows López Rega surrounding himself with images in his quest to snatch the essence of his victims (253). This is manifest in his delirious project of soul grafting, from *Evita*’s mummy to Isabel’s body in the attic of the house in Madrid. The eternally frozen corpse of Perón’s second wife—very much as a photograph—is a visual sign at the mercy of whoever wants to endow it with words, fantasies, or “spiritual” power.

Many more references to photography can be found.⁶¹ This wealth of allusions emphasizes—to use the title of David Freedberg’s book—the power of images. Freedberg embarks on a criticism based not on concepts from art history, but from the responses of people to images as determined by psychology, cognition, and culture in order to understand the complexity of the links between individuals and groups, and visual signs. Images are created, circulate in society, and produce a sphere of influence of their own. One of the privileged arenas in which images assert their power is the realm of ritual.⁶²

The ritual use of photography in *La novela de Perón* takes the form of uncanny doubles, monumentalized icons, and idealized effigies. The billboard under which Arcangelo Gobbi stands guard—a sign that is being built as the plot unfolds—has a primarily scenographic function. It sets the political stage and establishes, in the best (or worst) tradition of personality cults, the figures of authority. The billboard can be seen as a portrait's last stage of magnification. If, as John Barnicoat points out, “an element of fantasy is introduced at the sight of a perfectly normal image that has become giant,”⁶³ billboards convey a sense of unreality, making a myth out of the features of a public figure.⁶⁴ Isabel's portrait emblemizes the power of secular deities, a charged zone where the attention of the crowd converges. In Gobbi's case, the image also connotes protection and familiarity. During his childhood as an orphan, he was obsessed with Isabelita's visage, which he confused in dreams with the Virgin Mary's. Gobbi is both sheltering and being sheltered by the image of his patron saint, whom he faithfully serves as soldier (his first name is, conspicuously, Arcángelo). From his vantage point, Gobbi looks at a photograph of Perón on a stage that the narrator explicitly calls an “altar” (17). Later in the day, when the *montoneros* attack the box from which Perón is expected to speak to the masses, the narrator endows the billboard with religious powers. Thus, “la foto jubilosa de Isabel” (288) [Isabel's jubilant photograph] will pour “el diluvio de su protección” (288) [the flood of her protection (285)] on Arcángelo.⁶⁵

I have noted the ritual use of photographs in Jose Cresto's spiritual institution. By striving to invoke and appease souls through magical practices that capitalize on contemporary technology, photography links popular faith—esoteric and premodern—with the material changes introduced by modernization.⁶⁶ As I mentioned in chapter 1, the rhetoric of magic has accompanied perceptions of photography since its origins.

Besides trying to transform Isabelita into a new Eva Perón, López Rega also engages in a practice of soul snatching, at play as he rewrites Perón's memoirs, adding, dropping, and “correcting” experiences the General never actually lived.⁶⁷ Before he met Perón in Madrid, López Rega learned his books by heart (129), and after becoming his secretary, his increasing familiarity and immediacy pushes him to fuse his voice with that of his master. His schemes are graphically exposed in one of the last passages of the novel. In a press conference broadcast on television just after Perón's

arrival, the Argentine leader appears on screen, but the viewers notice something strange, as if his lips were out of sync with the voice they hear. The audience notices that Perón speaks, but following López Rega's whispering words. Insofar as a living subject speaks in place of a lifeless effigy, ventriloquism becomes a master metaphor in this and other scenes. This strategy is present not only among the characters (Perón ventriloquizing Prussian military strategists, the group of *montoneros* adopting the voice of Che Guevara and other revolutionary heroes) but in the author, the master ventriloquist who endows his characters—whether imagined or based on real-life individuals—with a voice.

Another fixed image on television is employed to establish a ritual scene. In a tiny home in a shantytown called, ironically, Villa Insuperable, the neighbours ("comadres," or close friends) have placed a television set on top of some boxes and a blanket as a makeshift altar (they do this after hearing that the weavers of Pergamino decided to hold a wake over a poster of Perón in the local union). Neighbours stop by to pay their respects to the General. At Perón's funeral, the camera shot captures his visage, as if it were a photographic portrait, before he and the image on the screen fade away completely. The novel ends when a poor woman climbs on top of the improvised altar and embraces the television set. She implores the General to rise from the dead, in an uncanny blend of sentimentality, popular faith, and technological imagery. In this context, it is remarkable that television is employed in the scene as ersatz photography. While photography is commonly described as "slicing" time or "freezing" an instant, the television image seems to be performing the opposite, as time flows uninterrupted. However, the stress on the passage lies not on motion but on the permanence of the fixed image (doubly fixed, since it depicts a dead body). The passage shows the ambivalence between television's flow and photography's fixity, resolved ultimately by a fade-out. In this regard, *La novela de Perón* can be read as a gesture towards the vanishing empire of the photographic image, insofar as the novel mourns not only a historical figure but a historical age in the emerging regime of television, where the fleeting nature of video images, harnessed by corporate or government channels of communication, becomes the new authoritative norm.⁶⁸

One could also speculate about the shift from billboard to television—from a painted sign in the public space to the electronic proliferation of information; from monumental and scenographic imagery to the neatly

boxed, bounded, and increasingly private consumption of images—as an indicator of a historical shift in the way public figures are represented. Nonetheless, this divide is not so clear-cut in the novel, insofar as the billboard of Isabelita has a deep personal meaning to Arcángelo Gobbi. At the same time, television, though essentially a domestic appliance, functions in the scene not primarily in a private context but as a gathering site, a locus of public assembly.

Besides its ritual functions, photography plays a major role in the search for the truth about the figure of Perón. The novel shows how words and images compete on a semiotic level to pin down his character and history. The struggle is deployed in two main stages: first, the memories fashioned by the General with the insidious help of López Rega, and second, Zamora's journalistic quest to get to the bottom of Perón's life.

Photography, as an artifact that strives to overcome forgetfulness, to master time, and to control history, is very much present in Perón's old age. Sensing the proximity of death, he tries to channel his energies into writing his memoirs, and López Rega constantly triggers Perón's recollections with the help of photographs. Ironically, these pictures feature events the General attended but does not always recall (172). In this respect, photography participates in a series of narrative folds that exploit the fuzzy limits between literary writing, journalistic research, and historical knowledge.

While Cortázar used a fantastic version of a visual reportage to frame historical events in "Apocalipsis de Solentiname," Martínez abides strictly by realist codes in his portrayal of journalism. The best example of the conjunction between factual information and novelistic fiction is provided by the appearance of Tomás Eloy Martínez as a character in his own novel. The very day of Perón's arrival, Zamora interviews Martínez. Zamora, a colleague of Martínez in the story, can be interpreted also as an alter ego of the author, as both are engaged in writing Perón's story. In the chapter entitled "Primera persona," the character Tomás Eloy Martínez decides to speak his mind. Even though his words pretend to be a confession, they really mask and deflect his own motivations regarding his pursuit of the truth. Nonetheless, his first move is straightforward: he shows Zamora some snapshots as a confirmation of the truthfulness of his account (256). The referential illusion is stressed grammatically by the use of the imperative mood—"Vea estas fotografías" (259) [Take a long look at these snapshots (256)]—as well as by the sharp, brief ekphrasis: "Somos Perón

y yo, un día de primavera, en Madrid, conversando” (259) [Perón and me, one spring day in Madrid, chatting (256)]. Before becoming a novelist, Tomás Eloy Martínez worked as a journalist for the weekly *Primera Plana* in Buenos Aires. He was engaged in journalism from then on, contributing regularly to newspapers such as *La Nación* in Argentina and *El País* in Spain. In fact, *La novela de Perón* was first published as a newspaper serial between August 1984 and June 1985 in *El periodista de Buenos Aires*, an independent periodical.⁶⁹ Chapters were published weekly, and the serialization was illustrated with photographs and political cartoons. Most of the photographs feature scenes from the lives of Perón and other Argentine public figures. Martínez got the pictures himself from public archives in the cities of Comodoro Rivadavia and Camarones, in the province of Chubut, and from Benita Escudero, wife of a cousin of Perón and included as a character in chapter 3 (“Las fotos de los testigos”).⁷⁰

As is common practice in print journalism, the author had no input into the text that introduced the serialized novel, the graphic material, or its layout. *El periodista de Buenos Aires* debuted in 1984, in the aftermath of the military regime and the reestablishment of democratic rule in Argentina under the elected president Raúl Alfonsín. The periodical, which was critical of the military dictatorship, had popular appeal and benefited from the newly acquired freedom of the press. Publication of the novel in serial form suggests an implicit authorial intention. Martínez’s portrait of one of Argentina’s foremost historical figures echoes one of the nation’s foundational texts, *Facundo* by Domingo Sarmiento, which was also published in serial form, in 1845 in Santiago de Chile.⁷¹ Despite their many differences, both texts aim to inscribe in the national imaginary an unofficial version of a political leader through literary fiction. Both texts, by merging biography and history, also intend to provide a critical assessment of the political practices and institutions of their age through the portrait of a “caudillo” or strong man, a figure who has dominated the political culture of Argentina, and Latin America in general, since its independence.⁷²

Martínez interviewed Perón in March 1970 for *Panorama*, another Argentine weekly. Notes taken during their encounters were eventually published in a book entitled *Las memorias del General* (1996) and incorporated in *La novela de Perón* as Peron’s (fictitious) memoirs. As a character in the novel, Martínez recalls that interview and reflects on his mixed



03 FIG 6: JUAN DOMINGO PERÓN (LEFT) AND TOMÁS ELOY MARTÍNEZ IN MADRID. COURTESY OF FUNDACIÓN TOMÁS ELOY MARTÍNEZ.

feelings about Perón's persona. Though Perón is the momentous incarnation of twenty years of Argentine history, he appears to Martínez mostly as a skillful political actor, an expert in the art of manipulation, and also as a mere mortal. Even in this context, photography functions as a weapon, a critical wedge, since it provides proof against a dubious claim. This is the case with a picture that Martínez has in his possession, in which Perón appears with a triumphant smile, on the footrest of the car of General Uriburu during the *coup d'état* in 1930, a compromising document that Perón, as well as López Rega, strives to deny or reinterpret.

The possibility of representing "what it is" and of capturing the truth of a given scene has been a central concern in the theory of photography. From the realism of the photographic image espoused by theorists such as Bazin and (early) Barthes to the extreme fictionality of photography practiced by postmodern photographers such as Joan Fontcuberta and

Cindy Sherman, photography has been inextricably implicated in the debate about the truthfulness of representations. The link between a narrative that mixes fact and fiction, and the constant allusions in the plot to photography as a primary source of information is meant as a strategy for establishing verisimilitude. Those references also highlight our abiding need to seek and find evidence in visual signs, even if they are illusory constructions.⁷³

In the novel, journalism provides the most meaningful context for the interactions between word and image. The special issue of the illustrated magazine *Horizonte* epitomizes the collaborative tensions between the two. Zamora assembles a collage meant to show Perón's entire life. Mirroring the novel in which it is embedded, the magazine presents the psychological, familial, and social background that may serve to explain Perón's behavior, ideas, and political career.⁷⁴ Zamora distrusts the whole project, which was imposed on him by the editor of the magazine. What his boss calls the "truth about Perón" seems to Zamora nothing more than a flashy title and a ploy to lure readers. Zamora, less an enterprising reporter than a man caught between his moral scruples and the cogs of a news organization, manages to assemble a story, but one that he finally disavows. He sometimes looks like a victim of circumstances, doubtful of his own skills and the trade he has chosen, an attitude underscored by the fact that he misses the chance to witness firsthand the bloody events at Ezeiza on the day Perón returns to Argentina. Humiliated, he learns about the debacle later in the day, as it is reported on television (350).

The issue of *Horizonte* is a narrative construction in a competing arena of narrative constructions. Perón's "entire life"—which we and the characters of the novel cannot but read in bits and pieces—is a compilation of verbal and visual sources. Perón's memoirs have a similarly fragmented structure. Both the magazine and the memoirs try to recapture the complexity and uncertainty of the past, but they do so from contrasting perspectives. While the totalizing effort of the biographical scrutiny in *Horizonte* is targeted to a mass audience, Perón and López Rega are busy fashioning in the intimate space of their retreat a version whose virtual audience is none other than "History." Whereas the witnesses who were interviewed for the issue complain about the distortions and half-truths they find in the magazine, López Rega is eager to sculpt a heroic, monolithic portrait in the wishful belief that it will outlast the revisions

of historical writing. López Rega, disillusioned with Perón's recollections and his seemingly unconcerned attitude, strives to magnify and glorify his portrait through editing, reinterpretation, and outright distortion of the material. Perón says, in a gesture meant to stress his authoritarianism, that men, with their "senseless passion for truth," will ultimately adopt his version of affairs. This attitude has to do with his elusive ideological stance and his adept embracing of contradictory political positions, a strategy situated at the very core of Peronism.

Journalism is regarded as a privileged space for the production of meaning, but the novel is also highly critical of the profession. Faced with the pretentious story in *Horizonte*, the witnesses oppose their own intimate memories, and the group of *montoneros* put forward their own "antimemoirs." Nun Antezana, the guerrilla cell leader, who pinpoints the ideological distortions of the publication, considers the too human portrait of Perón "porquerías mercenarias" (69) [commercial crap (63)], a pack of lies about the patriarch and leader. Even Zamora sees the project as "la glorificación cloacal del periodismo argentino" (39) [the apotheosis of Argentinean cesspool journalism (32)]. The widow of Lonardi, after reading old reports from *Horizonte* about her husband's espionage in Chile, complains to Zamora, "¿Así, con esta clase de harapos, escriben la historia ustedes: los periodistas?" (234) [Is this the kind of drivel you newspapermen pass off as history? (231)] Finally, Martínez, himself a journalist in the novel, declares that "el periodismo es una profesión maldita" (260) [the profession of journalism is fiendish (257)]. The remark, as do so many other passages, drips with dark humor. After all, it was precisely because of his trade that the author was forced to flee Argentina in 1975, threatened by the Triple A paramilitary group run by none other than López Rega. It must be added that, thanks to his journalism contacts, the author managed to escape and earn a living abroad.⁷⁵

The proliferation of points of view, each in search of the "truth," finds a symbol in the figure of the fly. The insect evokes a super-vision with its hundreds of eyes, but its elusive pattern of flight also points toward the difficulty of "securing the truth." There is no better emblem than the fly to connote expiration and decomposition (even more so in a novel dealing with personal and social decadence). If the eyes of the fly embody a multitude of perspectives, flies themselves are figures of unbounded, bothersome multiplication. In chapter 10, entitled "Los ojos de la mosca" [The

Fly's Eye], disconnected events are linked by the sudden appearance of a fly in each scene. In one passage, Zamora is driving his car to Buenos Aires from Ezeiza and passes some groups of faithful Peronistas marching to the airport. He notices a fly on the side mirror, and he says to himself that

Bajo la mosca, en el espejo del Renault, cabe la entera postal del peronismo: las vinchas, los blue-jeans de ruedo acampanado, las remeras cantando que Perón Vuelve y Vence. (192)

[The entire postcard of Peronism fits on the mirror underneath the fly; the headbands, bell-bottom jeans, T-shirts singing "Perón Comes Back and Conquers." (188)]

Again, Martínez uses photography as a metaphor to capture the traits typical of a given situation. The postcard of Peronism that Zamora reads in the mirror points less to the movement's historical roots in the 1940s than to the galvanizing power of the old leader to breathe life into a political movement in Argentina in the early 1970s. The scene can also be read as an allegorical snapshot of an individual trying to make sense of the entanglements of history. Only a rear-facing mirror allows Zamora—traveling away from the day's historical event—to see a future ambiguously modeled on past conquests.

If the fly—with its fragmentary, proliferating vision—is living proof of the impossibility of reaching "the truth," perhaps another image, carefully composed, could substitute for the unmanageable multiplication of perspectives. That is the role of the "portrait" of Perón in his memoirs. In the writing process, López Rega advises Perón: "Sea más histórico, mi General, ¿Lo ve?, ponga un poco de mármol en el retrato." (107) [Be more historic, General. Do you know what I mean? Try to make the image look a little more like marble. (102)] The "stuff" of which Perón's portrait is made functions as a metaphor of majesty and firmness, but also connotes fixity and coldness. To add marble to the portrait also points towards the tridimensional nature of sculpture and architecture, and more specifically, to national monuments and funerary statues.⁷⁶ Also, in his interview with Zamora, the character Martínez describes Perón in terms of a raw material—"Es un hombre de mercurio" (259) [He is a man of mercury

(257)]—implying a lack of substance and feelings in Perón, as well as malleability and elusiveness (mercury is also a poisonous substance).⁷⁷ In the same passage, the visual arts provide yet another metaphor: Perón, according to Martínez, “carece de dibujo” [has no contours], an ironic statement from the author of a novel devoted to painting, profiling, or x-raying Argentina’s foremost leader.⁷⁸

The reference to portraiture in the quotation above is particularly meaningful. As a written portrait, the thrust of the novel is to produce and assemble a set of images that would encode the life of the General. In the variety of interactions in which they are engaged, words and images collaborate with and compete against each other. Ekphrastic strategies pit the visual against the verbal, as in the passage where Martínez uses a photograph as a piece of evidence contradicting a statement by Perón. In other cases, they point towards the same goal: words can be used to describe a destiny, while images can be made to sketch it.

One of the basic assumptions of the novel is that the truth about a character is found in visual artifacts that picture—or try to picture—his or her essence.⁷⁹ There is no better example of this use of imagery than the poster of Perón included in *Horizonte*. This is also the best example of the fictionalization of a fiction that is turned on its head and thereby stands as undisputed truth.

Nun Antezana, on his way to the command centre, picks up a copy of the magazine at a newsstand. Again the whole title is mentioned—“Perón: His Entire Life / Documents and Photos of One Hundred Witnesses”—reinforcing the magnificent, almost epic achievement of Argentine journalism in the wake of Perón’s return. At this point we learn that the issue contains “un poster gigante del susodicho, sonriente como un águila guerrera” (68) [a giant poster of the aforementioned, smiling like a warrior eagle (62)].⁸⁰ It is ironic that Antezana, the leader of the guerrilla cell, is the character presenting the reader with the poster: Perón’s smile and majestic gesture can be read as a bad omen. In light of the upcoming massacre of leftist groups at Ezeiza, Perón’s pose is indeed sarcastic.

The poster is both portable and imposing, combining features of the conventional standard-size photograph and the public billboard. While its mention in the plot can be read as a narrative fold, opening up the possibility of new storylines, the poster itself is literally folded into the magazine. Presumably stapled at the very centre of the verbal/visual artifact in

which it is embedded, this single image aspires to synthesize the life and myth of Perón in one graphic stroke, much as the readers of the magazine will consider the poster as a visual summary of the verbal description of events, memories, and anecdotes. The poster is a gift or supplement that happens to function as the ultimate emblem of its subject.

The mention of an eagle endows the image with mythical power and, as already noted, references a powerful symbol of national culture. It enhances the scope of Perón's stature, as if the description was a matter of course or a widely accepted assessment, and not an individual opinion. The "águila guerrera" also points to the tradition of war posters dating from the World War I,⁸¹ as well as to the symbols and iconography of twentieth-century authoritarian regimes.⁸² The reference to the gigantic size of the poster reinforces the impression of a larger-than-life personality. The large-format reproduction resonates with the banners and spectacular images placed in the streets in preparation for the president's arrival. Moreover, it is probable that the very poster included in the magazine is the one that the weavers of Pergamino hang and venerate when Perón dies (though no explicit link is made in the text). The image of the warrior eagle also parallels the fact that Perón, in the present of the diegesis, is flying on his way to Argentina. In light of the events and the profile of the aging Perón, the poster of a victorious effigy transpires both irony and sadness.

In conclusion, the ekphrastic strategies used in the novel endow the photographic image with a prominent role in the production of meaning and the struggles in the politics of representation. Even though words and images are mutually implicated in the representation of the world and are both prone to distortion and manipulation, images tend to function as "the last word" on a person or event. They are like seals of permanence, lending consistency to the fleetingness of events and personal decay as well as providing an anchor for the unbounded proliferation of representations. Michel Frizot refers to the evidentiary power of photographs as "the authenticity of a typological model."⁸³ Both in the fictitious space of the novel and in the general economy of representations of our visual culture, photographic images serve as visual epigrams through which a person's essence is fixed, emblemized, and remembered.⁸⁴

A final point can be made about the pertinence of not including actual photographic images in the book. The authorial and editorial decision to exclude pictures of the protagonists—especially the widely photographed

Perón and Evita—enhances rather than weakens the fictional impact of the work (as opposed to its testimonial and reportorial dimensions). While constantly creating in the reader the illusion of looking—and looking at people looking—at visual signs charged with meaning, the text forces the reader to fill in the spaces and picture by herself the array of photographic allusions. As this section has shown, this ekphrastic strategy is not incidental, but a fundamental aspect of the novel. The frequency, density, and scope of the descriptions of photographic images foreground the increasing importance of the interactions among heterogeneous means of representation. Beyond the formalist commonplace that holds that literary texts always allude to other literary texts, *La novela de Perón* points to an emerging visual culture and media environment that traditional literary studies have overlooked, as W. J. T. Mitchell points out.⁸⁵ By setting a stage on which word and image constantly cooperate, compete, and contradict, the novel exemplifies how—in an historical age where the mechanically reproduced image has pervaded all aspects of culture—the construction of historical figures, the unfolding of political struggles, and the mediation between personal experience and social context are inextricably bound to the realm of visual communication.

