

**On Political Kitsch, Events and  
Public Time in Contemporary Argentina**

**Martin Plot  
CONICET and New School for Social Research**

**Prepared for delivery at the 1998 meeting of the  
Latin American Studies Association,  
The Palmer House Hilton Hotel, Chicago, Illinois, September 24-26, 1998.**

*If, then, we understand the political in the sense of the polis, its end or raison d'être would be to establish and keep in existence a space where freedom as virtuosity can appear. This is the realm where freedom is a worldly reality, tangible in words which can be heard, in deeds which can be seen, and in events which are talked about, remembered, and turned into stories before they are finally incorporated into the great storybook of human history.<sup>1</sup>*

## I

Contemporary public life imposed new conditions of possibility for the political. These new conditions of possibility can be briefly defined as the *literalization of the visibility of public actions*:<sup>2</sup> in those societies that currently combine a relatively open and stabilized democracy with extended electronic media, the visibility of public acts has become broader than ever.

This visibility has been criticized everywhere, giving birth to popular expressions of complaint: politics is becoming a mere spectacle, image is more important than content, appearances hide the truly meaningful issues, etc. As this kind of criticism is so often taken for granted and assumed to be the definitive interpretation of "video-politics"<sup>3</sup>, political analysts tend not to recognize the lack of conceptualization the problem manifests. Notably, almost every criticism expressed in those slogans does nothing but implicitly claim an automatic privileged place in an old dichotomy: that of "(true) being and (mere) appearances"<sup>4</sup>.

Nevertheless, the irruption of visibility in its literal sense has an even more relevant political aspect: to expose the indeterminacy of visible acts. Politics and politicians are now conscious of the open-endedness of their gestures, the incomplete—because they lack consensus till it is effectively obtained—character of their acts. In contemporary democratic politics, *not to appear* is lethal<sup>5</sup> and thus politicians are *obliged* to offer their

---

<sup>1</sup> Arendt, Hannah, "What is freedom?" in *Between Past and Future*, New York, Penguin, 1993. P. 154-155

<sup>2</sup> As is extensively known, the Enlightenment's idea of publicity is deeply rooted in the modern metaphor of "visibility"—which is in itself partially a legacy of Plato's philosophy. Here, visibility was a metaphor because it alluded to the "eye of the mind" and not to the actual sight of mundane appearances. What we are pointing out here is precisely the novelty introduced by TV's literalization of that metaphor. As we seek to analyze here, these new conditions of possibility for politics, that is, its conditions of literal visibility, do not seem to be a determinant factor in the actually existing politics but a new public-political scenario. For Plato and the Enlightenment's legacies concerning vision, see Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in the Twentieth-century French Thought*, London, University of California Press, 1993.

<sup>3</sup> Sartori, Giovanni, *Comparative Constitutional Engineering*, NY, NYU Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> For a critique of this dichotomy see Arendt, Hannah, *The Life of the Mind*, Harcourt Brace, NY, 1978.

<sup>5</sup> In a more general statement, Martin Jay says: "Messages are only such, of course, if they are received, and one of the most extraordinary aspects of vision, most broadly conceived, is the experience of being the object of the look. Here the range of possibilities is exceptionally wide, extending from the paranoid's fantasy of being under constant hostile surveillance to the exhibitionist's narcissistic thrill at being the

gestures to public visibility, with no choice but to accept the uncontrolled outcome of the adventure.

In this context, political culture has basically assumed two very different—and in some ways even opposite—forms. On the one hand, politicians have become obsessed with trying to control, as much as it is possible, the way in which the public will judge their acts. By doing this, they reduce the necessary freedom and creativity of political acts—through previous calculation of the possible social interpretation given to them (Kant's<sup>6</sup> "counting of noses"). On the other hand, it is increasingly more difficult than in earlier times to avoid public discussion of unexpected phenomena. In contemporary democracies with relatively open media<sup>7</sup>, it is not only difficult but often impossible to obstruct the immediate and varying coverage of relevant political events. This impossibility is the central aspect of the both exceptional and relatively frequent re-shaping of political and cultural landscapes of contemporary democracies.

The fact is that, if we truly want to understand and/or criticize these phenomena, we will need to find new concepts capable of highlighting the specificity of the new situation<sup>8</sup>. With this in mind, we will now proceed to the main focus of this paper. First, I will argue in favor of a basic ontological *isomorphism between art and politics*. Second, I will propose the concept of *political kitsch* for the understanding of our hegemonic contemporary political culture. And third, I will analyze how immediacy of *public-political events'* media coverage in general, and *television monitoring in particular*, is a keystone of the existence of politics in contemporary democracies, giving shape to what I will call *deliberative scenes*.

## II

As art shortly before it, democratic politics is now entirely aware of its indeterminate existence. But as opposed to art, and in celebration of the old idea of power as domination and control of the outcome, politicians will try new forms of avoiding the unexpected. Thus, because art probably assumed it was obliged to offer its gestures<sup>9</sup> to open criticism

---

cynosure of all eyes. There can also be few human interactions as subtle as the dialectic of the mutual gaze, ranging from the contest for domination to lever's complementary adoration. Even *not* being the object of the look conveys a powerful message under certain circumstances, as any underling who has become an 'invisible man' will quickly attest." Jay, Martin, *Downcast Eyes. The Denigration of Vision in the Twentieth-century French Thought*, London, University of California Press, 1993. P 11 We can add that it is precisely this kind of becoming an "invisible man" what is lethal in the context of contemporary political-public visibility.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, Immanuel, *Critique of Judgement*, Oxford, Clarendon Pres, 1969.

<sup>7</sup> At this stage of the argument, I don't really think it is necessary to get into the details about the specific organization the media system should have in democratic societies. Let us say however that this concept—*relatively open media*—includes everything from the European model to the American one, touching on most of the so-called new democracies. In each case considered, it would be possible to introduce institutional changes that would influence in different ways the contemporary political culture, but here we are trying to develop an understanding that should have facts as its object.

<sup>8</sup> For the most appealing claim in favor of the understanding of new phenomena see Arendt, Hannah, "Understanding and politics" in *Essays in Understanding*, New York, Harcourt, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> The idea of "gestures", jointly with the notions of *action*, *act* or even *work of art*, are used here interchangeably, and this is not really a novelty, either in aesthetic or political theories. Similarly to the

earlier and more universally than politics, perhaps art theory can contribute to our understanding of current democratic political culture. But by establishing this possibility we are assuming an isomorphism between art and politics whose main inspiration should be explained in more detail.

In the last years of her life, Hannah Arendt frequently referred to the political potential expressed in Kant's aesthetic ideas. The central concept of these ideas was that an aesthetic judgment can be defined as neither entirely subjective nor entirely objective. When expressing an opinion on beauty or ugliness, one manifests a subjective judgment that seeks others' consensus. One is not merely indifferent to the intersubjective spectator's opinion; one makes a judgment that, without being the particular application of a general law, is nevertheless more than an isolated and subjective expression. Briefly, an aesthetic judgment in Kant's *Critique* is a judgment of taste ("I like it") that tries to become universal ("it is beautiful"). It is definitively not a deductive operation (i.e.: "roses are beautiful, this flower is a rose, this flower is beautiful").

What this idea shows is something that had been present in Arendt's thought for a long time: a dialogic conception of the relationship between actor and spectators in political life. Because of this, Hannah Arendt thought that Kant's notion of aesthetic judgment was not only a step in the direction of considering the contingency of human action and meaning without simply reducing it to the subjective will, but also a conceptual instrument for thinking the mundane character of political phenomena. For Arendt, what aesthetic and political judgments have in common is that neither one nor the other consists in the subordination of one particular phenomenon to a general law. The appellation to that kind of general agreement that every judgment searches for is present, in both activities, by way of a precarious universality: political and aesthetic judgments are subjective opinions that pretend to be valid within a community, they look for their universal validity within a shared and common—political and aesthetic—world.

How can this contribute to the understanding of contemporary public life? Basically, by opening the possibility of new political questions: Is it so impossible to think of the contemporary politician's obsession with the media as an example of a new kind of access to the constitution of political judgments? Can we so easily hold that media spectators are not more than passive victims of actors' manipulation? Are we sure that people have less of a political opinion regarding an incidence in contemporary life than they did during earlier times?

The action of the actor and the judgment of the spectators constitute in practice a unique phenomenon. This is so because within the common world actors and spectators share the dialogic interaction of deeds and speech which makes sense of the world. However, traditional political thought does not understand *the political* in this way and divides the study of politics in two separate spheres: the sphere of political decisions and the sphere of public opinion, those who decide and those who criticize.

My question then is if in the contemporary conditions of social communication, the

---

way Arendt talks about the action as the way for the actor to show *who* he is, Umberto Eco, for example, talks about "that 'way of forming' that constitutes a style and where it is manifested the personality of the author, the characteristics of the historical age, the cultural context and the school of the work of art." In Eco, Umberto, op.cit.. P. 103. See also "The crisis in culture" in Arendt, Hannah, *Between Past and Future*, New York, Penguin, 1993.

gap between actors and spectators—and between "fellows" within the "public" themselves—becomes more and more radical, according to some interpretations; or if, on the contrary, those conditions establish a new "place" where actors' actions and spectators' judgments are increasingly interrelated. If we admit the weakness of an idea of communication that views meanings of actions or texts as wholly defined by actors or authors, we will probably be able to control our fears and, at the same time, concentrate on a more productive critique of our own present.

Acting and judging, both without given guaranteed rules, are the central components of the form art and politics share. The genius (in Kant's aesthetics) and the actor (in Arendt's politics) on one side, and the spectators on the other, make up the dialogic relationship central to the process of the institution of aesthetic and political meanings. In this context, the tension between *judging as if with universal validity* (but without universal rules), *searching for consensus* (but without any guarantee) and the *open-ended character of any action or judgment* (but which looks for partially defined meanings) defines what I claim is the center for the understanding of contemporary public life.

### III

In his *Phenomenology of Perception*<sup>10</sup>, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, upon giving a definition for his concept of "expression", quotes Cezanne, who tells a story about his relationship with painting. All his life he had tried to paint Balzac's phrase "snow capped little white rolls". Finally, he understood that the trick was to paint little white rolls, but that to paint them "snow capped" was lethal. To paint them "snow capped" would be to include in the act of painting that which is an unavoidable part of the act of looking, an obsessive search for "effect". Merleau-Ponty's concept of *expression* alludes to the act of *putting into form*, without rules of guidance, that which is not yet existent. *Expression* then is a concept that mainly connotes two things: creativity and uniqueness.

Nevertheless, even if the expressive act in this sense is entirely subjective, it obtains validity only from its intersubjective and worldly appearance. Its meaning does not preexist that apparition, others contingently constitute it in its opened interpretation. Following this idea, kitsch becomes a political problem when supposedly political actions forget Cezanne's lesson and try to paint "snow capped" instead of just "little white rolls". Kitsch becomes a political problem when the so-called knowledge of social or public expectations—gleaned from expert advice or public opinion polls, for example—ultimately becomes a guide for action. Politics, an activity that ontologically lacks guaranteed rules for success, finally believes that it has found them in the "anticipation" of the effect of actions<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>10</sup> Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Fenomenología de la Percepción*, Barcelona, FCE, 1985.

<sup>11</sup> As Calinesco defines it, kitsch can be seen as the product of the intention to address "a well-defined audience of average consumers, apply definitive sets of rules and communicative varieties of highly predictable messages in stereotyped 'aesthetic' packages." Op.cit.. P. 249. "Stylistically," he adds, "kitsch can also be defined in terms of predictability. Kitsch is, as Harold Rosenberg puts it: a) art that has established rules; b) art that has a predictable audience, predictable effects, predictable rewards." Calinesco, Matei, *Five Faces of Modernity*, Durham, Duke University Press, 1987. P. 253.

It is necessary to say that in this context kitsch should be considered as a form and not in relationship to any particular content. It is a "way of being"<sup>12</sup> that can be embodied in almost any kind of work of art. Colloquially, kitsch is usually defined as simply bad taste, but many authors have developed a much more elaborated definition—for example, Kundera, Eco, Moles, Broch, Greenberg. Let us then extract briefly the main coincidences that point to the identification of kitsch as a form.

It is generally agreed that kitsch can be fundamentally defined as the “pre-fabrication and imposition of the effect”<sup>13</sup> during the process of art production. Because of this, kitsch is also often redundant; presenting itself as a creative act when in fact it is a planned one. This difference between an original expression and its methodological standardization will be crucial for my analysis of a “kitsch attitude” in contemporary politics: each kitsch gesture tries to imitate the originally successful expressive one in order to reduce the uncertain outcome immanent to its appearing before others.

Although the kitsch attitude looks to overcome the gap opened by the distance between an action and its meaning, this intention can never be successfully completed. The "artistic" gestures are standardized, but the indeterminacy of their meaning is unavoidable. Actually, any aesthetic gesture searches for another's judgment. In this context, we can also say, in keeping with Calinesco, that kitsch is both an imitation and a negation of art, exactly the relationship we will see that political kitsch establishes with creative political actions.

As it has been said, aesthetics and politics are the fields of study of *the common and shared world*. In that sense, what allowed Arendt to find a political theory in Kant's aesthetics was precisely the fact that what both fields share comes neither from structural imposition—both in art and politics the genius creates and the spectator judges in an indeterminate way—nor from subjective transcendental rules—neither the logical rules nor the categorical imperatives tell us how to act or make judgments in art and politics. Furthermore, what is collectively shared in art and politics is much more authentically *shared*—as opposed to already given—than if it would come from the mere development of universal logical rules or the linear imposition of determinant judgments. In art and politics, then, the *common* is, at the same time, *indeterminate*.

And how do artistic geniuses and political actors resolve the fact that they have to make their creations common without any rule guaranteeing the success of the enterprise? They don't. Or better still, some believe themselves able to resolve it, and try to anticipate the unpredictable outcome by introducing the desired "effects" of the creation into the creation itself. Kitsch, either in art or—and I pretend this to be the novelty—in politics, is precisely that form which, knowing that the meaning of an act is not inherent to it, and that *to make something common*—a gesture, an action, a work of art—requires the indeterminate interpretation of the spectators, tries to reintroduce the indeterminate as the determination that art and politics lack. In other words, the “effect” of the action now assumed to be known—thanks to those who have the “know how”—is re-introduced as a guide for the action itself. Kitsch is, from the point of view of the creator or the actor, that form of relationship with things, objects or acts, that searches obsessively for the "effect". More directly, kitsch is, then, the strategy that tries to replace the indeterminate search for

---

<sup>12</sup> Moles, Abraham, *El Kitsch. El arte de la felicidad*, Barcelona, Paidós, 1990. P. 11.

<sup>13</sup> Eco, Umberto, *op.cit.*. P. 84.

consensus with the more prudent activity of counting noses.

Nevertheless, even if the kitsch gesture has already been criticized—but also celebrated—in the artistic field, we can be sure that the possibility of identifying kitsch as a political problem is a relatively recent one. This is because what is unavoidable and necessary is the democratic recognition that truth is not immanent to artistic or political acts, an assumption that artists may have learned earlier than politicians.

A *politically kitsch culture* then, will be one which makes of its appearance—the central aspect of politics—its own caricature.<sup>14</sup> Showing oneself is an ontological and, at the same time, inapprehensible aspect of political action. *Politically kitsch culture* dissolves that aspect by trying to control it. Paradoxically, what defines politics is the overlapping of its openness to meaning with the impossibility of turning meaning into its object. Consequently, an action which no longer intends to expose itself before others, but merely to anticipate its possible desired meaning, is a politically kitsch action.<sup>15</sup>

The productivity of the concept of kitsch, as it is being used here, comes from its possibility to criticize the political present without falling into the aforementioned duality essence/appearance. The relationship currently established between politics and its visibility should neither be criticized because it *hides* a social reality essentially different from its portrayal, nor for its supposed *mirror relationship* with an alienating reality; contemporary politics should be criticized because it reduces politics to a mere *strategy of apparition*<sup>16</sup>.

The so-called "crisis of politics" probably consists in the double movement brought out by the essentialization of *the political* as a sphere and the hegemony within the sphere of a kitsch attitude. But as the political can not be entirely reduced to a sphere, because unavoidably it is always the institutive dimension of society<sup>17</sup>, the sphere conventionally defined as politics paradoxically often becomes *politically irrelevant* in the end. Accordingly, the crisis of the *sphere of politics* does not necessarily allow us to talk about a crisis of *the political* as dimension. Taking this into account, what we are talking about here should not be interpreted exactly as a criticism of *actually existent democratic politics*. What seems to be the case, on the contrary, is that actually existent democratic politics can not be *reduced* to the so-called sphere of politics. Rather, the former seems to transcend the latter, showing once more its irreducible character.

In this way we have reached the opposition that underlies my thesis: *the political* irrupts unavoidably, instituting meanings that *then* can be socially shared; while the *sphere*

---

<sup>14</sup> For an imaginative criticism of contemporary importance of the image in its relation with politics, see Debray, Régis, *El estado seductor*, Buenos Aires, Manantial, 1995.

<sup>15</sup> In the same sense, we can say that the weakening of real power founded in consensus usually leads to the assumptions of kitsch attitudes: in these circumstances, politicians normally tend to repeat old "creations" trying to recover some lost communion with the society.

<sup>16</sup> Calinesco says about art: "Uniqueness and even rarity have become anachronous qualities, which are not only out of step with the times but illustrate what an advocate of 'cultural consumption' calls 'the Law of the Inefficiency of Art'." Op.cit.. P. 247. It would not be difficult to imagine this words coming from a "political image" advisor arguing for efficiency in the political calculation of effects, that is, invoking a kitsch attitude. For the idea of "Inefficiency in Art" see Toffler, Alvin, *The Culture Consumers: A Study of Art and Affluence in America*, New York, St. Martin Press, 1964.

<sup>17</sup> Lefort, Claude, "The problem of democracy", in *Democracy and Political Theory*, Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

*of politics* increasingly reduces itself to nothing but an obsessive self-conscience of its appearance, dissolving in that gesture its creative capabilities.

Certainly, a criticism of political kitsch brings us to a celebration of the exceptionality and creativity of public life. The subject of a kitsch culture is, in Abraham Moles's words, a "citizen of happiness, (and the culture of this citizen would be characterized), fundamentally, by an everyday collective mediocrity"<sup>18</sup>. But the problem is, as Moles adds, that "the ideal of absence of alienation, of direct relationship, not mediated by things and men, is a demanding and willing system, a *desire for the absolute*, a transcendence closer to the *extreme* forms of art (or to religious mysticism) than to the *immediate and comfortable* forms of kitsch."<sup>19</sup>

The matter here is that if political kitsch is obsessed with the unavoidable indeterminacy of its acts and tries to reestablish certitude by anticipating its effects, politics, in the most ideological perspectives, completely forgets its intersubjective mundane character, redemptively assuming the program of forever doing away with any alienation. In the notion explicitly sustained here, both geniuses' creations and spectators' judgments are—in art *and* in politics—neither determined by nor independent from other's acquiescence. *Political kitsch* is, on the one hand, the attitude of those political actors or spectators whose actions and judgments are *determined* by the intention to obtain other's consensus. But on the other hand, those actions that pretend to be *independent* from other's consensus, constitute precisely the kind of ideological practice generally dominant in non-democratic societies. As the ideological criticism of mass culture—and with it, we assume, of what we are calling *politically kitsch culture*—has hegemonized all that is not simply a celebration of this private happiness, it has finally become one of the obstacles for a better understanding of contemporary political forms.

In summary, we are now able to say that the contemporary conditions of possibility for politics seem to be defined by that sense of indeterminacy we have discussed. Nevertheless, the conditions of existence of politics seem to show through these kitsch acts in the way they try to reduce to nothing the gap between action and meaning. However, what should be highlighted here again is: first, that in these contemporary conditions of political visibility and indeterminacy the kitsch outcome is possible—and actual—but not necessary; and second, that kitsch is only possible under conditions that are aware of their own indeterminacy and that, at the same time, are open to public judgment.<sup>20</sup> Consequently, what appears to be happening is that the "anthropological situation"<sup>21</sup> of contemporary democratic politics is structured mainly as a constant dialogue between the unexpected irruption of political events and the political *habitus*—the kitsch—of contemporary democracies<sup>22</sup>.

---

<sup>18</sup> Moles, Abraham, op.cit.. Pp. 44 y 45. My own translation.

<sup>19</sup> Moles, Abraham, op.cit.. P. 45.

<sup>20</sup> In the same way that Moles argues about the necessary everyday conditions for kitsch in design, we are sure that some kind of democratic, or at least modern, desire for consensus is needed for the development of a politically kitsch culture. Moles, Abraham, op.cit..

<sup>21</sup> Eco, Umberto, op.cit.. P. 93.

<sup>22</sup> A more careful exploration of Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*, together with the important advantages to Merleau-Ponty's similar and earlier concept of *habituality*, is still needed. The advantages found in the latter comes precisely from a dimension of creativity and mutation that, as the former lacks, this is aware of. This possibility clearly makes *habituality* better positioned for the understanding of politics in my



## IV

My next and last concern will be, then, the second political form related to the new conditions of possibility for politics opened up in the present context. I have already described how that *literalization of visibility* and *assumption of indeterminacy* are the main novelties of contemporary democratic politics. In this context, kitsch becomes the defensive response of politics to its now evident uncertainty. Yet, contemporary societies show themselves to be unusually capable of accepting the frequent, but out of the ordinary, irruption of the political –or instituent– dimension of their existence.

This unusual capability is rooted, I will argue, in a very distinctive relationship with uncertainty. While kitsch's obsession with the effect tends to dissolve political creativity, un-planned public concern with some contemporary unexpected events recovers politics in its more creative dimension: *by putting into form*, without rules of guidance, that which is not yet existent in the common world; by giving birth to new values, new issues of concern and new ways for society to conceive of itself.

Buy way of this second topic of the research whose preliminary description is condensed here, I intend to describe and understand the form assumed by public deliberation and political action in two very important political events of recent Argentine politics—*Semana Santa* (April 1987) and the *Pacto de Olivos* (November 1993). I will accomplish this by testing a preliminary observation: these public deliberations tend to organize themselves in the form of what I will call *deliberative scenes*, a concept thought to incorporate a temporal dimension into the usually spatial way of conceiving of public life. Ultimately, this research assumes and will try to prove that contemporary public space is not just a space, but also a time. In my analysis I will use the concept of a scene, as in theatre and film, to underline the spatial and temporal character of deliberation. When in film analysis we speak of a “scene”, we usually mean a section without any break in temporal or spatial continuity. Something similar occurs in theatre, the only difference being that it is more common that the change of scene be determined only by the change of time. A *deliberative scene*, then, will be precisely that kind of *public time and space* we can refer to when an event compels a given political body to have a general debate regarding its own fate. In this last part of the paper, I will concentrate specifically on a preliminary study of the first deliberative scene to be considered in my research: *Semana Santa*.

### ***Semana Santa as a Deliberative Scene***

The cases of public deliberation around the specific events in Argentina's new democracy I am studying, contain these two central aspects: First, some kind of contingent circumstance—either an unexpected political action or another important social event that deeply affects the collective feeling; and second, an important political outcome. *Semana Santa* (April 1987) clearly meets these conditions.

This unexpected event was the beginning of a military rebellion against the trials being held to judge the crimes committed during the state terror in Argentina (1976-

---

research. See Bourdieu, Pierre, *El sentido práctico*, Madrid, Taurus, 1993 and Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, *Fenomenología de la Percepción*, op. cit.

1983). The immediate outcome of the rebellion can be briefly summarized as the passage of the *Obediencia Debida* law, the first electoral defeat of Alfonsín's Government in parliamentary elections, and the massive support of the collective self-consciousness for democracy, along with the appearance of a new, dangerous, social and political actor, the *Carapintadas*.

Other important aspects of the event that can be mentioned here are: First, television (still in hands of the state) played an important role in monitoring the events and in calling for demonstrations in defense of democracy. And second, this case is important for my broader research as I can evaluate it in a temporal comparative perspective with more recent cases that draw my attention.

In my approach to the public appearance of unexpected events and the ensuing deliberation opened up by what I call deliberative scenes, I am working with both primary and secondary sources. The two primary sources are: 1) the TV coverage of the four days of military rebellion, political reaction and massive demonstrations supporting democracy, and 2) the newspaper accounts of the same events, the moments leading up to them, and their public-political (cultural, symbolic and institutional) outcome. The secondary sources are the available scholarly bibliography on the event.

Briefly, if I sustain in my approach that political and cultural outcomes of unexpected events are not determined before the process takes place, I must analyze how the events were interpreted by contemporaries, the only way to understand what political meaning they assumed in their time.

In his prestigious history of Argentina, which goes from the sixteenth century to the exact year that Semana Santa took place, David Rock briefly describes what apparently was not only the scholar's but also the public's sensation at that moment. While new prosecutions followed after the *Punto Final* Law failed in its goal of reducing the number of trials against the military, "on April 16 in Córdoba a military officer due in court on charges of human rights violations became a fugitive from justice and took refuge with a local regiment of paratroopers. Troops in Córdoba staged a brief mutiny. At the Campo de Mayo garrison in Buenos Aires, Lieutenant Colonel Aldo Rico rallied a hundred officers in a second rebellion. Loyal troops quickly surrounded the rebels, but Rico, a decorated veteran of the Falklands invasion, refused to surrender, and the loyalists appeared reluctant to attack. As massive civilian protests erupted, Alfonsín visited the rebel stronghold and convinced the rebels to lay down their arms. Upon returning to the Casa Rosada, Alfonsín addressed a cheering crowd, estimated at 400,000, and assured them that 'the house is in order. There will be no blood in Argentina.' [...] But subsequent events appeared to contradict first impressions of Alfonsín's victory."<sup>23</sup>

There is no doubt that Rock's book must be considered a scholarly treatment of the case, but the lack of temporal distance from the facts and the "first impression" character of its account will allow me to establish a conceptual bridge between the analysis of the more extensive secondary sources and my work with the primary ones.

The event has been included systematically in general studies of recent Argentine history. It is of unquestionable political relevance and is usually mentioned as a crucial component of the chain of events which structures the different circulating narratives of

---

<sup>23</sup> David Rock, *Argentina 1516-1987. From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987. P. 402

Argentina's transition to democracy. The scope of this paper, however, obliges me to focus my analysis exclusively on those perspectives that consider the case specifically, rather than include the role played by the event in the more general narratives of Argentine transition to democracy as well.

Two important non-journalistic works<sup>24</sup> have been published about Argentina's *carapintada* military rebellions of the late eighties. The first one, available only in Spanish, is called *Los levantamientos carapintada, 1987-1991*, by Marcelo Fabián Sain<sup>25</sup>, an Argentine political analyst. The second, called *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, by Deborah L. Norden<sup>26</sup>, is more recent. In both works Semana Santa is considered the first in a longer sequence of events, a perspective that is not always a fruitful one. On the one hand, this operation often allows the analysts to notice how the particularities of the events have meaning in relationship to later possibilities. But, on the other hand, this inscription of the event in a succession, more often than not forces the confusion of *possibility* and *necessity*. Of course the Semana Santa uprising was *possible* during the years from the Argentine transition to democracy's human rights trials, but this does not deny contingency in the actions that began the rebellion. Of course a relative victory of physical force over the public will was also possible in a context of struggle between old practices and the foundational character of the new democracy, but this does not mean that there was not a high degree of indeterminacy in the on going events either. Let us now look briefly at what we can glean from these works and at where they fail in achieving an understanding of how the interpretation of the situation by the public and the actors—and their consequent actions—was finally decisive for Semana Santa's outcome.

The importance of Sain's book comes from his account of military self-perception before, during and after Semana Santa. Within the framework of the analysis of a given situation and its participants, his study focuses on: "a) The behavior, perspectives and approach sustained and developed by the three central actors that occupied the scenario's center during the uprisings: that is, the *carapintada* sector, the chiefs of the Army and the government. b) All the relationships and/or alliances established between the actors."<sup>27</sup>

Sain's work is quite thorough in this aspect, especially because he implicitly resists reducing actors' will to taken for granted given interests. By analyzing the particular perception the middle ranking military had during the transition—mainly involving their conception of having fought a "fair" war against terrorism when they were very young and the fact that the high ranking levels of the army were now passively accepting the prosecution of their subordinates—Sain is able to introduce some complexity into his analysis.

Semana Santa began with Maj. Ernesto Barreiro's refusal to appear in court and continued with the active support of a small group of lieutenants and colonels. This support was expressed by quartering in Campo de Mayo, close to Buenos Aires. Interestingly enough, a few hours later Barreiro's quarter itself was again under the loyal

---

<sup>24</sup> There are various journalistic books, unavailable in New York, that remain to be reviewed.

<sup>25</sup> Sain, Marcelo Fabián, *Los levantamientos carapintadas, 1987-1991*, Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1994.

<sup>26</sup> Norden, Deborah L., *Military Rebellion in Argentina. Between Coups and Consolidation*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996.

<sup>27</sup> Saín, Marcelo F., op. Cit. P. 79

command, but the events at Campo de Mayo began to reveal a dangerous threat to the new democracy. With this display, the situation developed from a veiled resistance to the ongoing trials into the constitution of an armed group pressing the constitutional authorities for a “political decision”<sup>28</sup> to stop the prosecutions through an amnesty. But the actual goal of the rebels can only be seen if we understand the dimension of meaning involved in the struggle.

Of course the “interest” of avoiding going to prison was one of the goals of this rebellion, but, most importantly, the majors, lieutenants and colonels were struggling to give a different meaning to their past actions. The other supposedly less political claims were: to stop the media “attacks on the army” and to recognize the fairness of the so-called “dirty war.” It is clear that the essence of their claims exactly overlapped with the nature of the new regime. What the rebels were struggling for was the public meaning that was being given to their past actions, and in an open society this is the uncontrollable result of free speech in the media and autonomous investigation of factual truth<sup>29</sup> in the courts; and is clearly not in the hands of the executive branch of government. This is precisely what made *Semana Santa* so important for everyone in Argentina.

But confusion about democratic boundaries for executive actions was not the exclusive property of the rebels. Since the beginning of the new democracy Alfonsín’s government had been trying to find the way to restrict the prosecutions to a small number of military chiefs. This reduction was sought through the introduction of the obedience principle, which would consider all the officials below a certain level of responsibility innocent from any charge by definition. The matter is that even earlier on—since the last years of the dictatorship—public opinion was decisively against any limitation of judicial action in the prosecution of human rights violations. Because of this, Alfonsín’s government was obliged to try to pass the obedience principle in a way that would not take his popular support out—though a justice sentence—in high degree gained thanks to his clear condemnatory judgement on the state terror. But, to put it briefly, that sentence never arrived. In all the cases until 1987, not only those responsible for giving the orders, but also those who carried them out, were found guilty.

In trying to deal with this conjuncture, Alfonsín’s policy on the human rights trials became dangerously ambiguous.<sup>30</sup> Publicly, the government was a clear guarantor of the democratic autonomy of justice and a frequent critic of the repressive past. But within the military quarters, it was constantly promising a rapid “solution” for those who followed orders during the dictatorship—and who were now almost all in service. This ambiguity apparently disappeared in the first reaction to the rebellion, when Alfonsín spoke before the Congressional Assembly to assure them that no negotiation with military rebels was conceivable in a democratic government, only to later be publicly interpreted as the successful military enforcement of the claimed “political solution” to the prosecution’s problem.<sup>31</sup>

Another aspect in which Sain’s approach is successful in helping to understand the

---

<sup>28</sup> See Rico’s document quoted in *Los levantamientos carapintadas*, op. Cit. P. 85

<sup>29</sup> For the importance of factual truth for democratic political action see Hannah Arendt, “Truth and Politics” in *Between Past and Future*, New York, Penguin, 1993.

<sup>30</sup> *Los Levantamientos Carapintadas*, op. Cit. P. 91

<sup>31</sup> *Los Levantamientos Carapintadas*, op. Cit. P. 92

struggle over meaning that was Semana Santa—but which he never defines in this way—is the professional crisis involving the military in the new democracy. The army, accustomed to being politically active during the last fifty years, was now not only judicially prosecuted, but also totally absent from the public scene. This situation was the main reason for both active and passive intervention in the rebellion. Briefly said, the rebellion was actively generated by the rebels, but it grew up into a huge political problem because of the refusal of the forces “loyal” to the government to act against them. The main reason for considering the rebellion successful for both rebels and loyal forces was, then, because of the army’s sudden recovery of political relevance.<sup>32</sup>

Nevertheless, there are other aspects of Sain’s book that show more obscurity than clarity. In his comparative evaluation of the effectiveness of Alfonsín and Menem’s policies, Sain totally isolates the relationship between the latter’s success in his military policy, from his public positions regarding the state terror, where he openly employed the term the militaries pretended history to name it: anti-subversive war. Both presidents conceded to military wishes—Alfonsín’s Punto Final and Obediencia Debida laws, and Menem’s pardons—but only Menem went so far as to celebrate the dirty war. In the struggle for the past’s interpretation, Menem was a military ally, not an enemy, and therein lie the roots of his “success” in controlling the army.

By contrast, Norden’s work is actually characterized by this kind of misunderstanding and does not merely falls sporadically in them, as in Sain’s case. The first surprising aspect of Norden’s *Military Rebellion in Argentina* is the use of her own sources. In some cases she avoids giving references altogether while making very strange affirmations<sup>33</sup>, and in others, she gives misinformation regarding to the development of the human rights movement—which she analyzes.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, it is possible to say that the entire decisive aspect of public judgement and struggle for meaning escaped her analysis. During the military rebellion that took place in the years of Argentina’s new democracy’s foundation, she finds only players with interest and no institution of meaning involved. And when there is some consideration of the meaning of an actor’s action, it is in regard only to the military.<sup>35</sup>

In keeping with this last observation this last observation is the frequent incomplete analysis done in the book where political or public judgements are involved. Speaking in general terms about the “star” character of the commandos participation in the Malvinas-Falkland War—which I assume is in reference to the military world and not to a public opinion more inclined to condemn the complete military inefficiency of the time—she entirely omits Alfonsín’s misstep in his intent to validate that judgement before the final demonstration at the Plaza de Mayo. While announcing the end of the rebellion, after four days of restless public participation in the streets in defense of the challenged democracy, Alfonsín presented the rebels as “Malvinas’ heroes”: it would seem then that

---

<sup>32</sup> *Los Levantamientos Carapintadas*, op. Cit. P. 106-115 and 137

<sup>33</sup> For example, she says “Alfonsín even denounced the internationally famous Madres de Plaza de Mayo as ‘antinational,’ probably due as much to their harsh criticism as to their speculated connections to international communism.” All this without a reference to where and when this was said. Deborah L. Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, op. Cit. P.81.

<sup>34</sup> While discussing the Madres de Plaza de Mayo, she forgets the crucial breaking into different organizations in 1986. Deborah L. Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, op. Cit. P.89

<sup>35</sup> Deborah L. Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, op. Cit. P. 104/5

the gap between public judgement and military self-perception was apparently not only the root of Alfonsín's mistake but also of Norden's analysis.<sup>36</sup>

In short, Norden's reduction of the military rebellion to a mere portrait of interests and behavior—as opposed to meaning and action—reduces the events to the simple confirmation of a *necessary* reaction against Alfonsín's military policies.<sup>37</sup> In the book the events unfold as expected, the consequences of causes rooted in the past. What disappears from this analysis is precisely the texture of the complete experience of Argentine transition to democracy. Alfonsín's lack of control of the whole process through his “military policies” is not a “mistake”. It is an example of the tendency during those years towards a much more complete democracy, which implies some lack of control for the executive branch. Without any conflict between the rule of law and the instituted power struggling to limit it, there is no consolidation of democracy.

A more detailed analysis of this deliberative scene could be introduced here, but due to limits on space and time, I am obliged to elaborate on this “work in progress” at a later date. Although the sources I used for this paper represent a wide diversity of perspectives, from human rights analysts to more traditional political historians and analysts,<sup>38</sup> I would like to conclude by quoting Emilio Mignone—lawyer, human rights activist, father of one of the disappeared and essayist—who clearly expresses the kind of self-interrogation any actor experiences before the indeterminacy of an event like this, and which should be the foundation of a research like mine as well, focusing on the relationship between meaning and action always present where human indeterminacy and freedom is at stake. In one of his books, Mignone says: “Given the latter events [Semana Santa], there is no doubt about the fact that the rebel's surrender was the product of a compromise: to pass an obedience law that eliminates any criminal responsibility for those who acted under orders, that is, the majority of the military. [...] We may ask ourselves if the president had any another choice. I think the answer is yes. To paralyze the country in defense of the democratic institutions, with the [already clear] support of the political

---

<sup>36</sup> Deborah L. Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, op. Cit. P. 115/7

<sup>37</sup> Actually, the whole book ignores the social centrality of the deliberation that developed around the last dictatorship's human rights violations. Deborah L. Norden, *Military Rebellion in Argentina*, op. Cit. P. 125 Other authors reviewed reduce the event in the same way, describing it as if merely reporting pre-existing data. For all of these approaches there is a direct relationship between force and pre-determined behavior. See for example Carlos Acuña and Catalina Smulovitz, “Militares en la transición democrática argentina: del gobierno a la subordinación constitucional” in *Juicios, Castigos y Memorias*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 1995. P. 19-101

<sup>38</sup> Acuña, Carlos; González Bombal, Inés; Jelín, Elizabeth; Przeworski, Adam; *Juicio, castigos y memorias: derechos humanos y justicia en la política Argentina*, Buenos Aires, Nueva Visión, 1995; McGuire, James W., “Political Parties and Democracy in Argentina” in Mainwaring, Scott and Scully, Timothy R. Eds., *Building Democratic Institutions*, Standford, Standford University Press, 1995; Mignone, Emilio F., *Derechos humanos y sociedad. El caso argentino*. Buenos Aires, Ediciones del pensamiento nacional, 1991; Norden, Deborah L., *Military Rebellion in Argentina. Between Coups and Consolidation*, Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press, 1996; Rock, David, *Argentina 1516-1987. From Spanish Colonization to Alfonsín*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1987; Sain, Marcelo Fabián, *Los levantamientos carapintadas, 1987-1991*, Buenos Aires, Centro Editor de América Latina, 1994; San Martino de Dromi, María Laura, *Argentina Contemporánea. De Perón a Menem*, Buenos Aires, Ediciones Ciudad Argentina, 1996; Sancinetti, Marcelo A., *Derechos humanos en la Argentina postdictatorial*, Buenos Aires, Lerner Editores Asociados, 1988.

parties and the social, corporate and labor institutions. Trusting in the people. My judgement is that the circumstances allowed for just this and during those days I proposed it.”<sup>39</sup>

### **Television monitoring of political events**

But why is this possibility of open visibility and indeterminacy self-conscience is favored in the present? Generally, because of media’s contemporary coverage of events, but particularly because of TV’s open characteristic of being there to monitor the unexpected. In Zettl’s words, “the live televised event and the event itself exist in the same present. This is impossible with film (for example). ...the filmic event is largely medium dependent, while television in its essence (live) is largely event dependent. While film can reflect upon our world or pretend to be current, it is totally deterministic; the end of the story is fixed as soon as the reel is put on the projector. Live television, on the other hand, lives off the instantaneousness and uncertainty of the moment very much the way we do in actual life.”<sup>40</sup>

It is true that these kinds of arguments have been criticized for their supposedly naive assumption that to cover an event is to show it as it “really” is, but this criticism is characterized precisely by the ideological assumption that is the object of its criticism. “Zettl’s phenomenology of television –Feuer argues— echoes Andre Bazin’s ‘realist’ ontology of cinema without admitting, as Bazin does, that ‘realism’ is based on artifice. To equate ‘live’ television with ‘real life’ is to ignore all those *determinations standing between the ‘event’ and our perception of it.*”<sup>41</sup> What we should add here is that, on the one hand, it is possible to say the same about *any* kind of perceptual relationship with an “event” –perception is always given *in context.*<sup>42</sup> But, on the other, the argument is most deeply mistaken in saying that there is distance between an “event” and the perception of it. It is clear that an event is, politically speaking, *nothing but* the intersubjective perception of it.

For my purposes, I will assume, in agreement with Stanley Cavell, that monitoring is the main ontological characteristic of television. This monitoring is directly related to the irruption of unexpected events in the sense that to monitor a happening is precisely to be alerted to the unpredictable outcome of it. Differently from narrative media, the televised sequence is, in Cavell’s words, “replaced by [the] switching, which means that the move from one image to another is motivated not, as on film, by requirements of meaning, but by requirements of opportunity and anticipation –as if the meaning is dictated by the event itself.” And in this context, Cavell defines his idea of monitoring as

---

<sup>39</sup> Emilio Mignone, *Derechos humanos y sociedad*, op. Cit. P. 163

<sup>40</sup> Zettl, Herbert, “The Rare Case of Television Aesthetics,” *Journal of the University Film Association* Vol. 30 No. 2 (Spring 1978) quoted in Feuer, Jane, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” P. 13 Italics are mine.

<sup>41</sup> Feuer, Jane, “The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology,” in E. A. Kaplan ed., *Regarding Television*, American Film Institute, Los Angeles, 1983. P. 13

<sup>42</sup> The novelty of this perception context has been summarized by Samuel Weber: “The televisual spectator can see things from places --and hence, from perspectives and points of view (and it is not trivial that these are often more than one)-- where his or her body is not (and often never can be) situated.” Weber, Samuel, *Mass Mediauras: Form, Technics, Media*, Stanford University Press, 1996. P. 116

the expectation of the possibility of being "called upon by certain eventualities."<sup>43</sup> To be called up by certain eventualities is, in my perspective, a necessary condition for the understanding of politics *as* creation. But public events are not always un-planned. Sometimes public events are planned precisely for the contrary—to celebrate the reproduction of society, not to open up the possibility for the institution of the novelty. These kind of media events are those studied by Katz Dayan and "have given shape to a new narrative genre that employs the unique potential of the electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs. These are events that hang a halo over the television set and transform the viewing experience. ...Audiences recognize them as an invitation—even a command—to stop their daily routines and join in a holiday experience."<sup>44</sup>

But between Dayan's *media events* and our *unexpected and monitored irruption of the political* there exist not only differences, but also similarities. The differences come from the fact that media events are pre-planned. These events are ceremonies, that is, happenings that *do have* a script. But the similarities are even more important for our argumentation than the differences: "These ceremonial *electrify very large audiences*. They are characterized by a *norm of viewing* in which people tell each other that it is mandatory to view, that they must put all aside. The unanimity of the networks in presenting the same event underlines the worth, even the obligation, of viewing. They cause viewers to *celebrate* the event by gathering before the television set in groups, rather than alone."<sup>45</sup> By showing the difference between media events and my idea of unexpected irruption of the political we can see their shared form. "Consider —Dayan says— the live broadcasting of an event which is not *pre-planned*. The leakage is a great *news* event, but not one of the great *ceremonial* events that interest us. Thus, we are interested here in the Kennedy funeral—a great ceremonial event—and not the Kennedy assassination—a great news event. Great news events speak of accidents, of disruption; great ceremonial events celebrate order and restoration. In short, great news events are another genre of broadcasting, neighbor to our own, that will help to set the boundaries of media events."<sup>46</sup>

Obviously, the idea of media events helps me to set my own boundaries here. Accordingly, we can see that the most clear difference between both media events and unexpected monitored events on the one hand, and broadcasted "programs" on the other, is that the former "are, by definition, not routine. In fact, they are *interruptions* of routine; they intervene in the normal flow of broadcasting and our lives. Television events propose exceptional things to think about, to witness, and to do. In the most characteristic events, the interruption is *monopolistic*, in that all channels switch away from their regularly scheduled programming in order to turn to the great event, perhaps leaving a handful of independent stations outside the consensus. (...) "Moreover, the happening is *live*. The events are transmitted as they occur, in real time."<sup>47</sup>

---

<sup>43</sup> Cavell, Stanley, "The Fact of Television", *Deaedralus*, vol. III, no. 4, 1992. In *Video Culture*. Pgs. 210-211

<sup>44</sup> Dayan, Katz, *Media Events*, Pgs. 1-2

<sup>45</sup> Dayan, Katz, *op.cit.*. Pgs 8-9

<sup>46</sup> Dayan, Katz, *op.cit.*. P. 9

<sup>47</sup> Dayan, Katz, *op.cit.*. P. 5



Does all this mean that in TV only the exceptional counts? Of course not. A great contribution to the description of the regular—as opposite to the exceptional—dimension of television has been made by Raymond Williams is his now classic concept of "flow"<sup>48</sup>. William's point was that TV's ontology is what actually can be thought of as the opposite of what we have already described. In every communication system previous to broadcasting, their essential aspect was that of being discrete unit: a book, a pamphlet, a movie, a play, etc. The novelty of TV is precisely that its product is not a unit—as the exceptional broadcasting of an event could be seen—but a sequence. However, when we add that some early systems have had a plural nature, we will be able to show that, paradoxically, the definition of flow fits with our own. The difference now exposed between TV and earlier systems is the same one that may exist between the relationship to an object and the relationship to an open-ended miscellaneous process. In the former, people relate to a book, a newspaper or go to the theater to see a scripted performance; all of them already determined products. But in the miscellaneous experience invoked by TV flow, people relate to a sort of *festival* or *parade*, where the central experience is that of *having a look at what is actually going on out there*.

But we should not forget that the exception becomes meaningful in its relationship with its other—everyday life. The monitoring of what is going on always deals both with the exceptional and the regular. In this way, the ideas of *monitoring events* and *flow* are not contradictory but complementary. What Williams' concept helps to highlight are the conditions of possibility for the appearance of unexpected events, showing that it is the exceptional within the flow, in conjunction with the flow in itself, which can be defined as TV's monitoring relationship with public-political events.

In conclusion, this dialogic relationship between continuity and discontinuity, between the flow and the event, clearly overlaps with our distinction between political kitsch and deliberative scenes. We can now see why, within the contemporary conditions characterized by the literalization of the visibility of public life, indeterminacy appears to be the omnipresent ontological dimension of politics. Taking into account both –visibility and indeterminacy— the politically kitsch attitude tries to avoid the risk of creation by becoming predictable, by repeating old formulas already shown to be successful in the political arena. Nevertheless, the outcome of this movement is already unpredictable in itself and in fact becomes nothing but a self-proscription of being truly political. In this context, current public life, now open to real time monitoring, transforms the unexpected event into one of those *simultaneous common spaces and times* that create guiding political rules born-to-be-incessantly-violated<sup>49</sup> which make political kitsch a fact –but, of course, a non-necessary one.

---

<sup>48</sup> Williams, Raymond, *Television. Technology and Cultural Form*, London, Wesleyan University Press, 1992.

<sup>49</sup> In analogy with Kant's artistic genius as creator of non pre-existent artistic rules. *Critique of Judgment*, # 46-48, op. cit.