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## **Starmakers: Dictators, Songwriters, and the Negotiation of Censorship in the Argentine Dirty War**

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*Aunque un grupo argentino haga un rock and roll, jamás va a ser igual a uno norteamericano, porque la realidad que les da origen es distinta.*  
—León Gieco

*Under authoritarian regimes language is the first system that suffers.*  
—Julio Cortázar

*El rock, música dura, cambia y se modifica, es un instinto de transformación.*  
—Luis Alberto Spinetta

Many artists throughout history have suffered censorship; others have, at times, enjoyed official state patronage and sponsorship. More curious is the case of artists that benefited from censorship; unlikely as it may seem, it can be argued that this was the case for some Argentine artists during that country's last dictatorship, from 1976-1983. Artists, and indeed,

an entire musical genre paradoxically flourished under the military repression.

Known as the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*, this period saw a military intervention on a scale not previously seen in Latin America. Kidnapping, torture and murder were carried out in such large numbers that a new verb was added to the English language to describe it: it is estimated that 30,000 people were “disappeared.” The *Proceso* was more than just a repressive regime; it was a systematic and conscious plan to implement terror and to restrict and mold public media utterly, in order to effect a radical transformation of consciousness in the populace.

One of the curious facts about this campaign was that, according to the official line, there was no censorship, merely “guidelines.” This obvious untruth was clear to musicians who received death threats from officials; less clear was exactly what *was* allowed and what would provoke unspeakable punishment. The parameters of the officially non-existent censorship could only be surmised by musicians and writers. Naturally, this linguistic aggression left many artists literally at a loss for words. There were words whose use would be punished, but it was never made known which ones. Furthermore, terms used with impunity at some times brought down ire on others. Yet as time went on, and the unspoken and mysterious “list” of proscribed vocabulary appeared to grow, musicians found themselves with an ever-decreasing pool of words for self-expression at their disposal. Because the guidelines were so vague and so inconsistent—whether due to design or to incompetence is not known—the resulting uncertainty ensured that an unofficial and unspoken interaction would be opened with the censors, as artists struggled to ascertain exactly what were the permitted terms of their storytelling. In this exchange, musicians’ trial and error led to rejection or acceptance by government interlocutors. The laborious process of writing and re-writing that resulted forced some songwriters to re-examine and refine their own work, distilling the language into a more sophisticated lyrical system of signification. The result was a general tendency in lyrics away from the direct and descriptive

literal discourse that was being appropriated by the regime, and toward a more oblique and suggestive poetic discourse, that at times was almost like code. As these artists refined their work, lyrics became more polished. Though the crackdown silenced many voices, I argue that as a result of “negotiation” with the censors, some artists became masters of lyric expression. Their lyrical works actually improved as a result of government intervention. Clearly, this phenomenon—that of censorship necessitating a greater lyrical flexibility—is not entirely without precedent. But as will be seen, the scope and the ramifications of this particular historical event make it a special case, and its outcome would determine the fate of an entire generation, as well as that of its culture.

It was not just artists that were thrust to the fore: their medium also enjoyed a huge increase in popularity. For many, Argentine rock is simply an integral part of mainstream culture; so much so, that the genre is now generally known as *rock nacional*. But it has not always enjoyed such cultural legitimacy. At first locally performed rock was seen as a poor copy of Anglo-American styles: it was “foráneo” and “cursi” (Dente 17). Nevertheless, in a very few years rock music in Argentina moved from only marginal acceptance to being considered an important expression of national culture. This shift is paradoxically due in great part to its rejection and suppression by the dictators.

As we know, the creation of meaning in any text is a complex process, requiring the interaction of the reader, and taking place within a system of societal and economic pressures and demands. Of course, any form of cultural production is read and undergoes the same process, though as scholars such as Frith, Middleton and Aparicio have shown, the highly personal and interactive nature of events involving musical texts accelerates and intensifies this process, making such events a very noticeable symbolic site for negotiating issues of the society. Salsa, for example, has become a nucleus for sociomusical strategies to deal with gender and race stereotypes, as well as the market pressures of capitalist society (Aparicio 84). However, another factor that accelerates the growth

of musical practices is the coercion of an openly repressive government. One limitation of many Anglo-American theorists of pop music is their tendency to over-privilege racial and class divisions (Hebdige, Grossberg). For many critics, the main function of rock is to distinguish one subculture from another. However, what is remarkable in Argentine rock is not the division between classes or subgroups of young people, but rather their common identity created in a dialectical relationship against a repressive third party. Peter Wicke and Anna Szemere, through their work on music under former soviet bloc regimes, have shown how those governments' vilification of rock music in fact encouraged oppressed listeners to hear the texts in a political mode, and transformed the music into a political tool. A similar phenomenon took place in Argentina, though arguably on a larger scale, since in addition to the music being repositioned as a political text, the genre's popularity and commercial success also surged, as did that of many of its artists. Beyond cultural and economic implications, however, another important consideration sets apart the Argentine rock music and its interaction with the repressive regime: the massive scope of the regime's atrocity. The project of the *Proceso* was essentially genocide. In the face of such an effort to eliminate or silence an entire segment of the population (anyone not politically right of center), the act of writing was indeed subversive, and results have been long-lasting.

The process of negotiation with the regime is exemplified by the lyrics penned by Charly García on the paradigmatic album *Pequeñas anécdotas sobre las instituciones*. Recently, the original uncensored version of the lyrics of this *Proceso*-era album came to light, offering scholars the rare chance to compare pre- and post-censorship versions, and thus analyze the inner-workings of negotiation with a dictatorship. It is hard to call any repressive action by a military regime "positive," but in these coercion-influenced texts by this and other songwriters of the era, one can witness a level of lyricism that approaches the sublime, and that helped launch these artists to mega-stardom. I will compare "before" and "after" lyrics from the album mentioned, and examine many others, to paint a

portrait of this unlikely yet ultimately felicitous “collaboration” between regime and artists.

Prior to the *Proceso*, Argentines had enjoyed a certain freedom of speech. During the comparatively lax regime of General Juan Carlos Onganía (1966-73), though there were abuses, artists were relatively free to sing about them. Charly García described police brutality, for example, “[l]a fianza la pagó un amigo / las heridas son del oficial” (“Confesiones de invierno,” ll. 29-30), and León Gieco lamented the intransigence of military authority while praising popular resistance. “Hombres de hierro que no escuchan el grito / hombres de hierro que no escuchan el dolor / Gente que avanza se puede matar / pero los pensamientos quedarán” (“Hombres de hierro,” ll. 11-15). Pedro y Pablo’s “Marcha de la bronca” more explicitly denounced dictatorship, as did Piero: “[q]ue se vayan ellos / los que torturaron / los que te prohibieron gritar libertad!” (“Que se vayan ellos,” ll. 22-4).

Such freedom of expression was ended in 1974 by the formation of the paramilitary *Alianza Anticomunista Argentina* (AAA) that was run clandestinely by José “Brujo” (“Witchdoctor”) López Rega, the Rasputin to president Isabel Perón. The AAA or “Triple A” began persecuting intellectuals, artists and union activists in an attempt to gain control of the society (Luna 148). Personal threats to artists pressured them to reconsider their lyrics. “Hasta que la tragedia no tocaba tu puerta no sabías exactamente la dimensión de lo que estaba pasando,” explains Folk rock singer León Gieco.

En octubre de 1974 tuve una experiencia terrible, la más terrible hasta ese momento. De pronto entran tres canas que me dicen que tienen orden de detenerme. Me llevaron al Departamento de Asuntos Políticos (DAP)... Me dijeron que era un subversivo y me encerraron durante más de una semana en una celda de un metro por dos, con un colchón y una lamparita que estaba prendida las veinticuatro horas del día. A la noche se escuchaban gritos y movimiento de gente que traían y que llevaban no sé hacia donde. Con el tipo de la celda de al lado nos comunicábamos con golpes en la pared, hasta que a los dos o tres días, escuché unos forcejeos y unos ruidos y nunca más volví a comunicarme con él. En ese momento pensé que a lo mejor lo habían trasladado a algún otro

lugar, pero después me di cuenta de que seguramente lo habían matado. (Grinberg 128)

Gieco was released unharmed after two weeks, though he continued to be subjected to threats, as did many others. Many band members were routinely subject to undercover surveillance—they were eavesdropped upon or followed by plainclothesmen—as well as random arrest by the police (Personal conversation with drummer Rodolfo García of the group Almendra). Such acts of intimidation generally had the desired effect of instilling fear into the victims.



Almendra Singer Luis Alberto Spinetta arrested after a concert

Even so, the scope of the persecution of the AAA is dwarfed by the sheer ideological magnitude of the campaign that followed it, the *Proceso de Reorganización Nacional*. Unlike the random and sporadic arrests and threats of the AAA, the *Proceso* was an extremely organized and deliberate strategy, an attempt to gain control of the country through manipulation of Argentine social space at many levels.

The control of language was a fully conscious and planned part of the *Proceso* project. “We know that in order to repair so much damage we must recover the meanings of many embezzled words,” said junta member Admiral Emilio Massera in a speech in 1976 (Massera 146). As Diana Taylor puts it, “[d]uring the Dirty War, nation-ness was resemanticized. The ideal citizens were those who self-consciously controlled their... every word” (95). The junta characterized language as either “rational” or irrational and

hysterical. In another speech (of which there were many), Massera warns his audience to beware of words. They are “unfaithful,” he says. “The only safe words are our words” (Feitlowitz 19). The regime enforced this policy with a cultural “blackout” (*apagón*), which, restricted many of the media and prohibited all meeting or exchange of ideas in public spaces. Furthermore, blacklisting or more direct intimidation toward actors, filmmakers, producers, technicians and writers shut down the media and entertainment industries that were not officially prohibited. Part of the terror was its ambiguity, its randomness. One was always uncertain as to whether an act or word would provoke punishment, and whether that punishment would mean incarceration or death. “En todos mis recitales,” León Gieco recounts, “había un par de monos jóvenes que me decían ‘acordate que no podés tocar “Hombres de hierro” ni “Sólo le pido a Dios”, estamos acá para recordártelo.’ Era una presión muy grande” (Finkelstein 113). It was difficult for artists to know where they stood, because they might not really ever know for sure exactly which words were prohibited. The increasing aggression against language whittled away at artists’ resources for writing, leaving fewer and fewer words for them to convey their meaning. After the regime closed down the University of Luján, singer León Gieco put on a benefit show for the professors there, and performed “La cultura es la sonrisa” singing, “[s]ólo llora su tristeza si un ministro cierra una escuela ,” a line that provoked the ire of the generals.

Un día me tocan el portero eléctrico y [un oficial] de guantes blancos me dice que un tal general Montes quiere hablar conmigo.... Cuando entré a la oficina del general Montes, iba a sentarme pero el tipo se quedó parado, sacó una pistola, me apuntó a la cabeza, y me dijo que nunca más vuelva a cantar esa canción porque si lo hacía me iba a pegar un balazo en la cabeza. Eso fue todo. Mientras iba para la puerta, el tipo me dice “Gieco, usted a mí no me conoce y no me vio nunca...”. Cuando salí de ahí, el que me había venido a buscar a mi casa me empezó a dar consejos. Me dijo que no era conveniente que cantara “Sólo le pido a Dios” ni “La cultura es la sonrisa” y que cantar una canción de paz en tiempos de guerra era un acto de subversión. Estaba muy asustado.... La estrofa que me cuestionaban de “La cultura es la sonrisa” la saqué para siempre. (*Rebelde*)

Given such intimidation, it is not surprising that many artists began to censor themselves; the “guidelines” were so extensive, yet so vague that anything could be construed as subversive.

Clearly, responses to the linguistic aggression of the regime had to come about; the development of alternative expression was inevitable. Vocabulary was literally stolen from artists, as apparently every day new words were added to the lists of proscribed words. “Después lo hice con otra letra, [porque en la original] había palabras que el COMFER no quería,” explains León Gieco about his song “El Fantasma de Canterville.” “Por ejemplo ‘acribillado,’ ‘libertad,’ ‘legalidad.’ Reformamos la letra... Después me censuraron ‘La Francisca,’—que es la historia de una prostituta—diciendo que aquí no hay prostitución. No se puede hablar de eso....” Gieco concludes, exasperated, that “[l]a verdad es que no sé de qué hay que hablar, realmente” (Grinberg 128). As a result, artists were left literally speechless before this offensive—they censored themselves, some stopped writing altogether. “Lo que pasa,” explained Gieco to the magazine *Expreso Imaginario*, es que tengo problemas en componer material, porque te confieso que después de la censura del LP no compuse más un tema. Voy y reviso letras y me digo *esto no va a pasar*, entonces es como que tuve que castrarme y perdí un poco las ganas de componer” (“Enciclopedia del rock argentino”).

The initial response of many artists was silence. Miguel Angel Dente has called the period of 1977-78 “[u]n silencio total... un momento en el cual nadie... se atrevía a decir lo que en verdad había que decir” (86). Fear left many artists literally at a loss for words. According to Gieco, many new musicians found alternatives to the frustration or fear of dealing with censorship. “Ultimamente surgen muchos instrumentistas, pero no surgen compositores, tipos que hagan canciones” (*Rebelde*). Of the established songwriters, some, like “el flaco” Spinetta, also embraced instrumental music as a solution, but the eponymous debut album of Charly García’s new band “Serú Girán” short circuits the problem of censorship with a unique new proposal: “inventar un idioma” (Dente 86). The 1978 album literally

forges a completely new language:

Cosmigonón

gisofanía

serú girán—

seminare paralía.

Narcisolón

solidaría serú girán;

serú girán paralía.

Eiti leda luminería caracó

eiti leda luminería caracó.

Ah... lirán marino...

ah... lirán ivino.

Parastaría necesari eri desi oia!

Seminare narcisolesa desi oia!

Serilerilán...

Eiti leda luminería caracó (“Serú Girán,” complete text).

The hermetic lyrics of this first song, that give the album and the band its name, “Serú Girán,” obviously challenge interpretation. However, the invented language stands as a piquant protest to the linguistic impoverishment that musicians faced under the *Proceso*.

Beyond instrumental music and nonsensical words, though, singers would have to develop a real solution to the problem of finding a way to communicate without the stolen words. It can be said that one main way of coping *was* “inventar un idioma,” though in a different way: the exchange between some musicians and censors resulted in the evolution of a new lyric language, a development that sometimes allowed musicians to bypass the language of the regime. Most commonly, songwriters simply composed their lyrics and submitted them, hoping for the best. Record labels would forward the lyrics to COMFER (the *Comité Federal de Radiofusión*), and await approval or rejection. Quite often a song was rejected and had to be removed from an album, or changes were required for its passing, as in the

example above, “El Fantasma de Canterville.” Artists were forced to write and rewrite their own music—often multiple times. Such a consistent interaction with the censors of COMFER would likely lead them to form expectations of what might or might not be allowed under the guidelines, and to act accordingly. For example, it was found that often, meaning was not policed, just word choice; as long as certain proscribed “hot” words were avoided, such as “pueblo” or “libertad,” a songwriter could avoid reformulation (Del Puente 43). In other words, with sufficient creativity, writers could express themselves with relative impunity. But as the proscribed list grew, musicians found themselves with an ever-decreasing pool of words at their disposal—as if standing on an ice floe that was being chipped away on all sides—and they had to become increasingly creative in their expression. Lyrics using direct descriptive—rational—language to comment upon “la realidad argentina” were also more heavily censored (Del Puente 44). Accordingly, it behooved songwriters to shy away from a direct denunciation such as Piero’s “[q]ue se vayan ellos / los que torturaron.”

This evolution can be clearly traced in examples from one paradigmatic album. A comparison between the first version proposed by writer Charly García and the heavily modified product that the censors finally allowed to be released brings to light the shift from direct/descriptive rational discourse toward oblique/suggestive poetic discourse. The album that came to be called *Pequeñas anécdotas sobre las instituciones*, did not turn out to be the album that the singers, Charly García and Nito Mestre had intended, because the pressure of censorship necessitated numerous changes. Producer Jorge Alvarez had informed them that “la mano viene pesada” and “hay que reemplazar temas y cambiar algunas letras” (“Enciclopedia del rock argentino”). The end result was that many revisions were made in the lyrics, with two songs being cut altogether, although they had already been recorded and mixed. Though the album was finally released at that time with the modifications, current re-releases of the original vinyl in CD format have re-added the cut songs as

bonus tracks, restoring the concept album to its original design. Furthermore, the original version of lyrics that were modified have, in the wake of the dictatorship, now been disclosed. These artifacts, along with the restored songs are a valuable primary source, allowing one to get a very clear idea of what was and was not possible for an artist in the charged political climate of the day. An examination of the songs that were cut versus those that remained, along with a comparison of the original censored lyrics with the revised version will illustrate the evolution of the new poetic discourse.

According to the artists, this pruning had deleterious effects on the quality of this production that was to be Argentina's first concept album. Charly García says that "si hubiera salido como era, ihabría sido tremendo! La idea original del disco era poner una canción para la policía, otra para el ejército, otra hablando de la familia [etc]. Era muy fuerte" (Dente 68). Though the musicians claim that the final product was not what they had intended, *Anécdotas* was very well received by the critics: the magazine *Pelo* called it "el mejor album de Sui Generis, un gran logro para el rock del sur" (Historia del rock argentino). The magazine's commentator even lauds the group—in a veiled manner—for its skill in dealing with the censors. "Quizás haya algunas canciones ausentes (a nivel letras), pero las que están le dan aún más validez a las que no pudieron revistar." It was favorably received by the public as well; selling thirty-five thousand copies, it was one of the best selling Argentine rock records of its day. The artists themselves were not quite as pleased with the result, explaining some years later that the album lost a good deal of its original meaning due to the censorship. "El show de los muertos', puesto después de 'Tango en segunda', perdió buena parte de su sentido, porque en realidad antes tenía que estar después de 'Juan Represión', el que tuvimos que dejar afuera," Mestre said in the mid-80s. This need for writing and rewriting often angered band members and sometimes led to conflict with producers. Explaining an odd little song that does not seem to fit with the rest of the album's theme, Charly García said, in an interview ten years after the album's release,

“Tango en segunda” es un tema que hicimos a último momento, para completar el disco. Lo escribí contra [producer] Jorge Alvarez. El tipo venía y nos decía que no se podía eso, que estábamos locos si pensábamos poner aquello, cosas así. Entonces yo me prendía fuego: “¿Cómo? ¿No vamos a poder decir nada? ¡Estamos censurándonos!” Por eso le puse eso de “a mí no me gusta tu cara” y lo de que “hay tres o cuatro mamarrachos con los que yo estoy mejor.” (“Enciclopedia del rock argentino”)

But according to rock commentator E. Abalos, the danger was real, and to have left the two songs in question on the album would have amounted to “un virtual suicidio en público” for the members of the band, as well as producer Jorge Alvarez and the editor, Mario Kaminsky (56). Although initially rancorous at the mutilation of his work, García later acknowledged producer Alvarez’s contribution, saying, “[a]hora si tengo que agradecerle algo, se lo agradezco, porque cuando no había nada acá, él se dio cuenta de muchas cosas.”

The first step away from direct / descriptive language is the avoidance of realistic anecdotes in favor of obviously fictional accounts. Two songs had to be omitted from the final version of *Anécdotas* because they criticize a senselessly militarized reality: “Botas locas” and “Juan Represión”. In clear, direct language, they characterize the army and military dictators as pathetic and ridiculous figures. One of the two songs, “Botas locas”, presents an allegedly autobiographical anecdote about Charly’s days as a conscripted soldier. “Yo formé parte de un ejército loco / tenía veinte años y el pelo muy corto”(ll.1-2). The speaker mounts a direct assault that begins from the very first line (“ejército loco”) and continues throughout the song as the listener is told that “ellos siempre insultan,” “las estupideces empiezan temprano” and “ellos no entendieron nada” (ll. 6-10). A distinctly antagonistic attitude is revealed in the first minute of the song when the singer resolves “si ellos son la patria, yo soy extranjero” (ll. 14). The language is direct and unobfuscated, and would not have been acceptable to the authorities. The pseudo-autobiography had been a common technique on earlier albums by Charly García, used in numerous songs. But after “Botas locas”, was removed from *Anécdotas*, the songwriter

did not attempt to use this format again until after the end of the dictatorship. In the interim, he turned more and more often to fictional characters or fictional lands.

Simply avoiding the anecdotal form may not have been enough to escape censorship, though, if the language was too traditional. Another tendency that developed in the interaction with censors was a move away from rational discourse in favor of a more oblique poetic discourse. “Las increíbles aventuras del señor Tijeras”, in the version that was ultimately allowed, is a depiction of the work of the official state censor. Rather than a descriptive anecdotal account in rational discourse, it is a somewhat surreal narration that is merely suggestive. It is a parable: Señor Tijeras is a state censor charged with removing indecency from films, and the narrator follows him throughout his day and late into the night as he works, with his “Tijeras plateadas,” mutilating a film starlet’s performance. Though not difficult to read an indictment of the hypocrisy, cruelty and mean-spiritedness of the censor, the word “censor” is never used, nor are there any other direct references to the government. Instead, the listener must use inference to get the whole picture; no one line is really objectionable. It is only when the song is taken in its entirety that the bitterly sarcastic criticism comes into focus.

The song’s first version was not so oblique. Perhaps drawing on Lorca’s “Oficina y denuncia” from *Poeta en Nueva York*, the original last verse proclaimed:

Yo *detesto* a la gente que tiene el *poder*  
de decir lo que es bueno y que es malo también,  
sólo el *pueblo*, mi amigo, es *capaz* de entender  
los *censores* de ideas temblarían de horror  
ante el *hombre libre*  
con su cuerpo al sol (ll. 32-7, emphasis mine).

In this earlier version, not only did the voice break into a direct statement of opinion, but did so using key taboo words such as “el poder,” “el pueblo” and “los censores,” apparently triggering a negative response from censors.

The revision replaces the obvious conclusion of the song with one that is more subtle: it simply describes the effect of the censorship. “La pantalla que sangra nos dice adiós,” says the narrator, but we will see the starlet again, perhaps “en 20 años en televisión, cortada y aburrida” (ll. 28-30). Even without the obvious last verse, the song can fairly easily be read as a parable with a moral. But whereas the original ending essentially guaranteed that the song would be banned by censors, in the revised version, the poetic discourse makes it ambiguous enough to be accepted.

As stated, simply avoiding the descriptive anecdotal form may not have been enough to escape censorship if the discourse was too literal. The other song that was completely removed from the album in post-production was “Juan Represión”, also a parable that, like “Señor Tijeras”, criticizes a political institution. But the characterization of Juan Represión uses direct/descriptive language to cast the authority/disciplinary figure in a ridiculous light, and recast anger and fear toward authority as scorn. Songwriter Charly García minimizes his military man, Juan, by casting him as a pathetic superhero wannabe, a doddering old senior citizen who dresses up in comic book costumes to play cops and robbers. But “pobre Juan” gets it all wrong: “...se disfrazó de bueno con un disfraz de villano / y los malos de la historia son los heroes cotidianos” (ll. 13-16). As a result, the “hombre que quiso ser sobrehumano... está tan loco el pobre que en la cárcel se encerró” (ll. 29-30). One cannot feel hate toward this sad figure, only pity that he cannot see how out of touch he is: “[p]obre Juan... qué lástima me das / todos los reprimidos seremos tus amigos / cuando tires al suelo tu disfraz” (ll. 39-44). This cleverly satirical song was already recorded and mixed, but was not allowed onto the finished album. Albeit a fictional account like “Sr. Tijeras,” the rational discourse makes the personification too transparent, and the song crosses the line from parable to caricature. It is far from a hermetic metaphorical depiction: the character’s name, identified in the song title and repeated throughout the song, clearly reveals the target of derision. Furthermore, the lyric voice clearly and directly warns Juan of the consequences of his actions: “esperas

tu muerte, justo a la madrugada / en manos de la misma sociedad” (ll. 19-22). Such a clear call for retribution at the hands of the populace would immediately bring down official condemnation upon the band.

“Juan Represión” is an example of the clear language that failed to break through the censors’ monopoly on public discourse. The open reference to the army in the first song discussed, “Botas locas”, fails similarly, as it was far too direct and clear in its message, and the song was simply cut. It is astounding to note, for example, that in that song, the singers go so far as to refer vaguely to armed resistance to the government. Describing the obligatory military service, the lyric voice opines that perhaps the generals should feel a little nervous about putting guns in the hands of the masses: “porque a usar las armas / bien nos enseñaron / y creo que eso / es lo delicado / piénselo un momento señor general / porque yo que usted me sentiría muy mal” (ll. 37-42). Other songs about the regime, however, were shifted into a more suggestive poetic discourse, and therefore escaped detection. Originally, two other songs also referenced the military government, but were changed in the revision process. Slight alterations were made in both songs, the net effect of which was that in each case the focus of the song was shifted away from the military government, instead—apparently—targeting some other aspect of society. But at the same time that the lyrics were re-centered, they were made more ambiguous. Clear references were obfuscated, and direct language made more lyric. The result in both cases is a very suggestive text that still retains a subtext of repression.

One example is seen in the first song of the collection; titled “Instituciones”, it serves as the introduction to the concept album. Reference is made only obliquely to those in power; for example, as those who manipulate us. “Los magos, los acróbatas, los clowns / mueven los hilos con habilidad” (ll. 9-10). The most overt reference to the power of the military government before censorship in this fairly indirect song was still subtle: “[o]ye hijo las cosas están de este modo / dame el poder y deja que yo arregle todo / ¡no preguntes más!” (ll. 32-34). Yet the reference was

revised, and stated less directly. The alterations have the effect of subtly shifting the critique away from the government and towards society in general, apparently criticizing consumer society. “Oye hijo las cosas están de este modo / la radio en mi cuarto me lo dice todo. / ¡No preguntes más! / Tenés sábados, hembras y televisores / ¡No preguntes más!” (ll. 16-21). The revised verse seems to have shifted the critique away from a personified entity that consciously attempts to wrest political power from the people; instead, the superficiality and undue influence of commercial popular culture seem to be the target of criticism (radio, sábados, hembras, televisores / No preguntes más). This and other changes seem to have extracted all reference to the political system, and replaced them with social or personal issues. Another substitution effects the following transformation: “[p]ero es que ya me harté de esta ‘libertad’ / y no quiero más paredes que acaricien mi espalda” (ll. 28-9) becomes instead “[s]iempre el mismo terror a la soledad / me hizo esperar en vano que me dieras tu mano” (ll. 22-25). The focus has been shifted from a criticism about the lack of civil liberties to concerns about loneliness and relationships. At the same time that the issues have been redirected away from the political, the lyrics are not completely neutralized or depoliticized. The tone of the song is still one of desperation. The suggestion remains that we are being controlled, because in that environment, in which repression was a constant topic, such a reference to market manipulation metonymically calls to mind the manipulation of the state as well. The metaphor is ambiguous enough to allow multiple possible readings, with one still being a denouncement of official state control.

Another example of a shift away from the government itself as target is “Música de fondo para cualquier fiestita animada”, which was converted from a satire of government oppression into a satire of high society and the oligarchy. Whereas the original version had the president concerned about “la manera de pacificar a las bocas que pedían libertad” (ll. 33-4), the revision has an upper class gentleman suffering from “el deshonor de sus sirvientas infieles” and his “mujer neurótica” (ll. 3-5).

Along with these changes, many minor ones simply reformulate the wording so as to remove references to specific people: “un país al revés, sin jueces ni presidente” becomes “un país al revés y todo era diferente” (ll. 45-47, 19-21). It would appear that with these reformulations and replacements, the theme of the song has been quite cleverly and neatly changed from a taboo and dangerous critique of the government to a very standard critique of the bourgeoisie so common in Latin American letters. Yet, as with the previous song, in “Música de fondo”, overt political references have been excised without necessarily removing the potential for a political reading of the song. Though the song appears to have been disarmed, subtle wording creates a tone of unease, suggesting a deeper meaning. This tone is achieved by the introduction of certain references to agitation, for example “tres personas en una mesa / uno en inglés, otro hablaba en francés / y el otro hablaba en caliente” (ll. 10-12). Furthermore, the unexpected insertion of the phrase “hablar en caliente” creates a contrast with the unexciting bourgeois life described in the lyrics, and hints at something beyond an average critique of the upper class. Because of such additions, this song is also ambiguous and can therefore be interpreted perhaps at other than face value: the characters can be read merely as stand-ins for more prominent ones that would be taboo. In other words, while the words such as “presidente” were removed, the same figures are still signified by the replacements. One example in which this inference is clearly a possibility is where “el juez... con el presidente” became “el señor con el juez,” where the ambiguous “el señor” could still certainly be the president or some other official (ll. 43-44, 17-18). Whereas the original version of the song was quite transparent, and lent itself fairly easily to one obvious interpretation, the re-write is much more ambiguous and polyvalent, allowing or even suggesting multiple readings.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clearly, the possible readings of such texts are numerous, and any real examination of reception is outside the scope of this paper. Reader reception in general has, of course, been amply studied elsewhere, but for the specific case of the development of Argentine “readership” of these texts of the *Proceso* era, see Wilson 2005.

The laborious process of writing and re-writing exemplified on *Anécdotas* is representative of the wider challenge that all musicians faced during the *Proceso*, which forced songwriters to re-examine and refine their own work, distilling it into a more sophisticated lyrical form that allowed them to do without the language that had been tainted by the military regime. The so-called guidelines, with their unknown parameters, that were placed upon artists, ensured that an unofficial and unspoken dialogue would be opened with the regime's censors as artists negotiated the permitted terms of their storytelling. It can be said that in this dialogue, government interlocutors in COMFER perversely served as mentors, in that their rejection or acceptance taught musicians how to navigate censorship.

That artists acquired “communicative skills” from their “mentors” is very clear in a later song by Charly García. “Canción de Alicia en el país” is a more mature expression, written several years and three albums after his first attempt to “inventar un idioma” in “Serú Girán.” His band of the same name had meanwhile become the most popular and best-selling Argentine band of all time—often called “los Beatles criollos,” or “the Argentine Beatles” (Vila, “Dictatorship,” 134). The well-known song “Canción de Alicia en el país” was “tomado como himno” and “coreado por jóvenes” in concerts that achieved attendance of up to sixty thousand fans (Dente 69).

A brief examination of the lyrics of that song will help illustrate how much one artist changed his expression as a result of negotiation with the regime: “Alicia” was “inspirada en la obra de Lewis Carroll, [y] equipara solapadamente a la Argentina con algún lugar imaginario” (Dente 68). The title “Canción de Alicia en el país” is a play on Lewis Carroll’s fiction—rendered in Spanish as *Alicia en el país de las maravillas*—though the truncation to “Alicia en el país” at first leaves ambiguity as to exactly what land or country is being referenced. In the song, a lyric voice addresses Alicia directly, informing her that her dream has ended, and that she is back in hard-knock reality now; though oddly, the nightmarish place she has come back to is more oneiric and surreal than any dreamscape.

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## “Canción de Alicia en el país” by Serú Girán (Charly García)

Quién sabe Alicia éste país  
no estuvo hecho porque sí.  
Te vas a ir, vas a salir  
pero te quedas,  
¿dónde más vas a ir? 5  
Y es que aquí, sabes  
el trabalenguas trabalenguas  
el asesino te asesina  
y es mucho para ti.  
Se acabó ese juego que te hacía feliz. 10

No cuentes lo que viste en los jardines,  
el sueño acabó.  
Ya no hay morsas ni tortugas  
Un río de cabezas aplastadas  
por el mismo pie 15  
juegan cricket bajo la luna  
Estamos en la tierra de nadie, pero es mía  
Los inocentes son los culpables, dice su señoría,  
el Rey de espadas.

No cuentes lo que hay detrás de aquel espejo, 20  
no tendrás poder  
ni abogados, ni testigos.  
Enciende los candiles que los brujos  
piensan en volver  
a nublarnos el camino. 25  
Estamos en la tierra de todos, en la vida.  
Sobre el pasado y sobre el futuro,  
ruinas sobre ruinas,

querida Alicia.

Se acabó ese juego que te hacía feliz.

30

(*Bicicleta*, complete text).

Though expressed in a very subtle and indirect way, the lyrics nevertheless suggest a series of complex ideas. First, the scene of the action is located geographically and conceptually—indicating the “país.” Second, a tacit comparison is made between Argentina and other countries, as well as between present-day Argentina and its past, characterizing the nation’s here and now as a place with a reality so hard that it approximates the unreal. Finally, a list of abuses of the regime is given.

Although intertextuality between the song and the well-known fiction by Carroll establishes the place of the action as imaginary, as mentioned, the omission of “de las maravillas” then casts doubt on the title’s referent. A strong suggestion of the theme of exile in the first few lines then calls up Argentina as the possible scene: “[t]e vas a ir, vas a salir / pero te quedas / ¿dónde más vas a ir?” (ll. 3-5). The trope of “leaving” localizes this unknown land, tying the narration to the local scene, where during the *Proceso*, “irse” was a common topic of conversation and even of songs; an earlier Serú Girán song complains, “[s]e está yendo todo el mundo” (“Autos, jets, aviones, barcos,” ll. 2). In addition, it is later explained that “[e]stamos en la tierra de nadie (pero es mía),” the first person singular and plural further associating “el país” with the speaker’s home country of Argentina (ll. 17).

The reference to leaving or staying (“¿dónde más vas a ir?”) also introduces the theme of outside/inside, opening the way for a comparison of this place to others. This is certainly not a Wonderland, but rather a land of hard reality, where “el trabalenguas traba lenguas,” and “el asesino te asesina” (ll. 7-8). It is perhaps not the place one would choose to be: “[s]e acabó ese juego que te hacía feliz” (ll. 10). Argentina’s past is also evoked, and juxtaposed with the current state of affairs: “[e]l sueño acabó; ya no

hay morsas ni tortugas” (ll. 12-13). As Miguel Dente explains, the song “hace mención a un brujo (López Rega), una tortuga (Illía) y una morsa (Onganía) en correlato con los sobrenombres reales de dichas personalidades políticas” (Dente 68). The recent former minister of culture López Rega, as well as former presidents Illía and Onganía, were heavily caricatured in the media. But the days of teasing politicians are over—“El sueño acabó.” There is no mention of the present junta; instead, a gruesome image stands in as a representation of the regime: “[u]n río de cabezas aplastadas por el mismo pie” (ll. 14-15). Other places or times, though far from perfect, still seem relatively bucolic compared to this reality, which is so cruel that it approximates the unreal.

The song also presents a description of the country under the junta, detailing a list of abuses of the regime. “El país” is the locus of massive abuses (“el asesino te asesina,” “un río de cabezas aplastadas”), but where those responsible are not punished, but rather enjoy the life of the oligarchy: “juegan cricket bajo la luna” (ll. 16). Victims have no recourse to justice—“no tendrás poder, ni abogados, ni testigos”—but instead are perversely cast, in the Newspeak of the media, as the victimizers and as criminals: “los inocentes son los culpables / dice su Señoría, el Rey de Espadas” (ll. 21-22, 18-19).

The highly distilled lyrical language of “Alicia” becomes particularly evident when compared to an earlier song on the same topic. “La marcha de la bronca”, written ten years earlier by Miguel Cantilo of Pedro y Pablo, is from the pre-*Proceso* period, without a doubt from a time before such literal language had been made taboo by the military regime. For example, in clear direct/descriptive language, the speaker complains that “está prohibido todo,” and that the police “entran a correr a los artistas,” whereas in “Alicia” of course there are no such direct references. The same abuses of the government are criticized in both songs, though in a very different discourse. Just as in “Alicia”, the singer in “Marcha” explains that the regime can torture and kill without penalty, since officials hide their misdeeds with obfuscation and hypocrisy. But whereas it is merely

indirectly suggested in the later song (“un río de cabezas aplastadas por el mismo pie” and “los inocentes son los culpables”), the pre-*Proceso* direct discourse states clearly that “los que mandan... matan con descaro / pero nunca nada queda claro” because “a plena luz del día / sacan a pasear su hipocresía” (ll. 23-4, 5-6). The highly charged vitriolic lyrics of “Marcha” conclude “i[n]o puedo ver / tanto desastre organizado / sin responder con voz ronca! / imi bronca!” (ll. 40-43). The unmistakable ire stands in clear contrast to the subtle—and nearly sublimated—poetic discourse of “Alicia.” The speaker quietly characterizes the havoc wrought upon Argentina in this way: “estamos en la tierra de todos... / ruina sobre ruina / querida Alicia” (ll. 26-28).

As artists such as Charly García were forced to refine their writing into increasingly sophisticated lyrical systems of signification, they were not only more successful in meeting the strictures of the *Proceso*’s so-called guidelines, but found greater and greater popular and critical success. As has been stated, Charly García’s band Serú Girán became the most popular group in Argentine rock history, and “Canción de Alicia en el país” was sung with impunity before entire soccer stadiums full of fans. Such numbers could not fail to attract the attention of the regime. Nor had the musicians’ ability to continue writing gone unnoticed. When the generals saw that artists could not be silenced, various attempts were made later to co-opt them instead. As Miguel Dente recounts:

El general Viola, atento a la magnitud de las convocatorias de este nuevo movimiento de música popular, invita a la casa de gobierno a García y Spinetta, entre otros, con la intención de formar la “Subsecretaría de la Juventud.” (69)

Musicians, for their part, were beginning to enjoy a newfound empowerment, and those invited by General Viola felt safe enough to decline his offer. In fact Charly García wrote a humorous song about the experience, poking fun at the military leader. “Charly da nombre a esa famosa reunión: ‘Encuentro con el diablo’” (Dente 69). In “Encuentro,” the speaker recounts the visit with mock humility and feigned self-deprecation:

Nunca pensé encontrarme con el diablo  
 en su oficina de tan buen humor  
 pidiéndome que diga lo que pienso  
 qué pienso yo de nuestra situación  
 Yo sólo soy un pedazo de tierra  
 ¡No me confunda señor, por favor! (ll, 13-16, 9-10).

It is astounding to think that rock's "new language"—and the resulting popular acclaim—had put musicians in such a position as to be able to negotiate with the generals on their own terms. Fittingly, the same oblique lyrical language that had garnered for musicians a position of strength was the discourse used to ridicule the generals' feeble attempts at co-optation.

This irreverent attitude continues in other songs as well, as musicians, apparently emboldened by impunity, satirize even censorship itself. When the phrase "no tenía huevos para la oficina" is restricted,

En la canción "Peperina" el grupo decide dejar el "hue\_ \_ \_" y agregar un sonido de "ibeep!"... para evidenciar la presión que ejerce dicha censura y devolverla con el efecto bumerán sobre los militares de turno. (Dente 68)

Such playfully insolent and fearless expression forms a strong contrast with the silence five years earlier from artists who had been left speechless by the *Proceso's* linguistic intimidation. Although Argentines did learn to self-police, it is clear that the regime's appropriation of language could not be complete. This specific example from Argentina's history shows us that censorship, no matter how extreme, is always already doomed to failure. The control of words cannot ever completely bring about a control of the human mind. Such an attempt can only lead to more tenacious and clever forms of disobedience—and sometimes, stardom.

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