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Broadcasting Memories:
Argentina's *Montecristo* as Cultural Memory Merchandise

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“El pasado regresa como ficción”
(Forster 54)

“Yo soy aquel que estando lejos no te olvida” (Raphael). Meant to invoke the romantic image of a banished, but persistent love, this opening line from the telenovela *Montecristo* just as easily evokes the haunting vision of persistent traces, partially erased pasts, and memories forcibly marginalized. An intriguing cultural parallel it acts as a microcosm of the broader question of how marginalized and seemingly forgotten memory narratives can be fostered from within an official, institutionalized memory frame. Predicated on defining memory production as an ever-changing battleground of social representations and individual reconstructions, this question opens up a space for the exploration of the gap that exists between recollection and all memory reproduction. Through an analysis of the groundbreaking Argentine telenovela, *Montecristo*, this article sheds light on this slippage between experience and memory. Debuting in 2006, *Montecristo* uses the generic melodramatic

style¹ and narrative tropes of the telenovela to form a linkage between past realities and society's present reactions to and representations of these realities.

Drawing on Elizabeth Jelin's theoretical approach to memory production, this article highlights two central, intertwined features of narrative memory production: 1) the physical act of remembering during which the past acquires meaning via its intersection with the present and 2) the subjective nature of every interpretation of the past, which allows for the existence of competing memories (Jelin 16). Expanding on this idea, I posit how *Montecristo* simultaneously presents the physical act of remembering in which the past acquires meaning, while also opening up space for the questioning of this past. Furthermore, how does this packaging of cultural memory interpellate the memory production of viewers? I maintain that this interpellation is carried out on-screen via specific characters' personal journeys in memory production, but also in society at large, as the telenovela provides a new socio-cultural framework through which society's collective cultural memory may be shaped. Developing an argument that brings up questions of media control and manipulation, this article creates space for a more complete discussion of the media's intentions as a relatively new structural memory frame. In this vein, I offer a secondary argument, which maintains that while *Montecristo* provides a narrative framework that largely supports the official memory politics of the time propagated by the Kirchner administration (2003-2007), the show also highlights the persistent gap between representation and recollection in three ways: 1) the identification carried out through the presentation of embodied rememberings of excessive emotions, 2) the structure of the telenovela as a unique visual medium that relies on the subjunctive voice, and 3) the show's specific insistence on its fictional nature. Together, these thematic and structural characteristics open up a narrow space for viewers to work through their own negotiated processes of remembering.

¹Through a postmodern lens, melodrama is a broad concept that is imbued with more investigative power when used in its descriptive form versus its purely generic form. As Hermann Herlinghaus affirms, "el melodrama nos interesa no tanto como tema, conjunto de tema o género, sino como *una matriz de la imaginación teatral y narrativa que ayuda a producir sentido en medio de las experiencias cotidianas...*" (23). The critic Annabel Martín also utilizes the term melodrama in its less strict form, choosing to interpret it as a language of protest that is expressed through an excess of sentiment and the power of tears (12). For the purposes of this article, I combine the concept of melodrama in its more structural-classic form with its postmodern usage as both a language and emotional descriptor. This dual definition allows for the continued acknowledgement of the historical essence of melodrama with its generic structures, while also permitting the application of this concept to postmodern texts.

Divided into three main sections, this article first explores *Montecristo* as an independent memory product through an analysis of the program's internal structure and the ways in which its fictional characters participate as actors in their own processes of remembering and memorializing. As these characters attempt to reconstruct the totality of their pasts and find meaning within their fragmented experiences, television viewers are both orally and visually exposed to the struggles inherent in recalling and representing the past. Thus, these fictional stories of memory production provide an audiovisual pathway, which can guide viewers' own process of remembering. It is through these pathways that *Montecristo* defines itself as both a piece of memory merchandise and a structure of memory merchandising. Extending the concept of *Montecristo* as a memory merchandiser—a term that takes into account the memory frames that a television program strategically adopts in order to sell a specific version of the past as truth, while also speaking to the impossibility of these frames to fully impose this truth claim on a show's spectators—this study will focus next on the ways in which this program frames memory (Atencio 44). This section explores how working from within the overarching institutionalized memory policy of the Kirchner administration (2003-2007), the program adopts three major cultural memory frames: 1) the pervasive human rights frame of truth and justice, 2) the exemplary memory frame, and 3) the present past frame. In its final section, this article brings to light how these main frames are complicated by the program's portrayal of personal emotional excess, its relationship with the "what if" of the visual subjunctive voice, and its questioning of "truth" as a concrete, universal concept.

1. Montecristo: Un amor y una venganza

Loosely based on the Alexandre Dumas' novel of the same name, *Montecristo* is a tale of revenge, corruption, and the obstacles that impede a society's search for truth and justice. The telenovela follows the life of Santiago Díaz Herrera, a rich lawyer who appears to have the perfect life; he is in love with the woman of his dreams (Laura Ledesma), has a loving family, seemingly supportive friends, and has recently been promoted. Yet, in a split-second, all of this is lost. Santiago's life changes completely when Alberto Lombardo—his best friend's father—discovers that Horacio Díaz Herrera—Santiago's father—has been investigating a case implicating him in the disappearance and illegal kidnapping of children during Argentina's recent military dictatorship (1976-1983). In order to prevent being

investigated and charged with this crime, Alberto orders the murder of Horacio, and demands that his son, Marcos Lombardo, oversee the murder of Santiago (*Montecristo*).

Believed dead, Santiago is abandoned for 10 years in a Moroccan prison where he finds time to carefully plan his revenge on those who betrayed him and his family. Upon escaping, he returns to Argentina and disguises himself as the reclusive and rich Alejandro Dumas who with the help of Victoria Saenz, Ramón and Leon Rocamora seeks revenge on the Lombardo family. Nevertheless, Santiago's plan is far from foolproof. Throughout the show, it is stalled by various unforeseen events, such as Laura's marriage to Marcos, Santiago's discovery that Laura's son, Matías, is actually his child, and the eventual discovery that Laura as both the child Alberto stole and Victoria's forcibly disappeared sister (*Montecristo*).

2. *Argentina's Official Memory Policy*

Montecristo's storyline, marked by secrets, stolen identities, and the opposition between revenge and justice, is all premised on the historical gaps in memory and secret abuses associated with Argentina's recent history of state oppression. As Marcelo Camaño, one of the series' scriptwriters maintains:

Nuestra idea era esta que la traición que habían sufrido los protagonistas tenían que ver con los civiles que habían colaborado durante la última dictadura; y que la historia de amor, dentro del melodrama—que hay el triángulo amoroso entre Victoria, Laura y Santiago—desencadene sobre la historia de dos hermanas que fueron separadas por el terrorismo de estado y también que el objeto amoroso ayude para juntarles. (quoted in Sciacca 252)

A potentially controversial topic, it nevertheless matched perfectly with the global boom in memory merchandising and also the political opportunity provided by the first Kirchner administration (Atencio; Huyssen; Sueldo).

Nestor Kirchner's rise to power marked a new surge in political support for the human rights movement, which had fought for years to re-frame the past dictatorship as a time of extreme repression and violence that must not be forgotten, but rather transformed into a lesson for present and future generations (Forster 59). Under the banner of truth and justice, these activists portrayed memory as relating to the recollection of true and unalienable facts. This representation allowed these groups to use memory as evidence with which they could locate and prosecute those responsible for the human rights abuses committed under the dictatorship (Rajca 33). The Kirchner administration (2003-2007) echoed in many ways this vision of memory, while also highlighting its more practical purposes. President Néstor

Kirchner was known for supporting the work of the Madres and Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, pushing for the musealization of previous *centros clandestinos*, and approving the legal review of those directly involved in the abuses committed² (Kaiser 314). This political support marked a shift in the state's cultural memory policy. In contrast to the first decades of Argentina's democracy (1983-2003), which in large part adopted a policy of forgetting highlighted by the Ley de Punto Final and Ley de Obediencia Debida, the Kirchner administration institutionalized the human rights discourse of the time. As Susana Kaiser states, "Thus in 2006, the official memory discourse mirrored that of the Argentine human rights movement, characterized by strong alliances with official fiscal support from federal and local government" (315). This political support created an opportunity for the production of *Montecristo*, which was bolstered by the commercial success that other memory-based productions were experiencing (Huyssen 20). As such, there was a strong demand for Telefe—the show's network producer—to supply a program such as *Montecristo*.

3. Defining Memory

3.1 Cultural Memory

Discussions of memory have been marred by an excess of terms and invented categories, which in an attempt to classify and explain the processes of memory production often lead to their further complication. One only has to look to the controversial debate on the relative importance of individual and collective memory and their exclusionary versus inclusionary interpretations to begin to understand this confusion, which so often accompanies investigations anchored in theories of memory (e.g. Halbwachs, Jelin, Vezzetti). Another reason for this relative uncertainty is the interdisciplinary nature of memory studies. Drawing from fields as seemingly disparate as neuroscience, the social sciences, communication studies and the humanities, it can be challenging to settle upon terms that express all of the facets of memory and yet are also understandable to a wide audience from different

² During his time in office, Néstor Kirchner supported the transformation of the former Escuela Superior de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) in Buenos Aires and La Perla in Córdoba, both famous concentration centers, into museums that worked to commemorate the victims of these abuses, protect the memory of this devastating past, and promote human rights. Kirchner's policy of re-purposing these spaces affected approximately 60 additional spaces that were previously controlled and used by the military as centers of torture and detention. Additionally, the administration of Néstor Kirchner passed Law 26.394 in 2008, which repealed much of the internal power of the Military Justice Code and modified the Penal Code to speed up the justice process for victims of the dictatorship's abuses. (Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos)

academic disciplines. In an effort to simplify the matter, this study limits its investigation of memory studies to cultural memory and the characteristics associated with said form of memory.

Cultural memory is a broad term that bridges the gap between some of the more specific concepts of individual, collective, and communicative memory by accentuating the socially constructed nature of all memories (Assmann). In other words, cultural memory does not differentiate itself from collective or individual memories, but rather is an umbrella term that emphasizes memory's existence as a cultural phenomenon, which re-reads the past from the present. Additionally, cultural memory incorporates the concept of media transmission into its definition. It "implies that memories are produced and reproduced through cultural forms" (Sturken 74) and that all remembering is "an activity occurring in the present, in which the past is continuously modified and re-described even as it continues to shape the future" (Bal vii). Accepting this negotiation as inherent in any memory, including cultural memory, allows for the recognition of memory as a dynamic process that is always accompanied by passive or intentional forgetting.

3.2 *Argentina's Conflictive Cultural Memory*

After the traumatic experience of Argentina's military dictatorship, which officially reigned from 1976-1983, the fight over what was to be remembered and what must be forgotten, as well as how these crafted collective narratives were to be publicized became a central sociopolitical issue.³ For example, *Nunca más*—the report compiled by CONADEP on the institutionalization of the state terror and systematic extermination that occurred during these six years of intense repression—acted as a

³ While this article provides the dates of 1976 to 1983 as a reference to the official time during which Argentina's military maintained official control of the national—from the military coup on March 24th, 1976 until the election of Raúl Alfonsín in 1983—it is important to not use these dates as definitive bookends that mark the beginning and end of the dictatorship's national influence. The full impact of these years of official military rule can be more effectively and thoroughly analyzed by not placing the civil-military dictatorship and the nation's gradual democratic transition within a rigid time line. Using these years as bookends to understand the impact of the dictatorship is problematic due to its inability to contextualize and historicize the sociopolitical struggles and repressive tactics have come to define these six years. For example, Emilio Crenzel criticizes CONADEP's original final report *Nunca Más* for its lack of reference to the historical-political violence that pre-empted Argentina's official *golpe de estado*. In addition, certain historians such as Esteban Damián Pontoriero make a case for how a cultural of strategic defense and the threat of internal wars favor a re-consideration of most recent civil-military time-line. In the case of Pontoriero, he draws this line of influence back to the "Revolución Libertadora" of 1955, while others tie it more closely to the Onganía coup of 1966 (Vezzetti).

crucial memory frame (Vezzetti 113). Published in 1984, *Nunca más* was a reference point for Argentine society and can be considered one of the first post-dictatorial cultural products to specifically reject violence as a politically acceptable method of control, frame the disappeared as victims, and ask for justice based on the truths that it was internally constructing (CONADEP). In contrast, la Ley de Punto Final and la Ley de Obediencia Debida, passed in 1986-87 by then President Alfonsín, present a very a different picture of the past. Mandating the end of the investigation and judicial prosecution of those military officials accused of participating in this state terror, these laws essentially reframed what was to be forgotten and excluded from future debates on this period.

Only one example of the historical struggle between Argentina's various institutional memory politics, the conflict between *Nunca Más* and these laws stress how the meaning of memory is a battleground populated by sociopolitical and cultural actors and structures. As Jelin states:

The space of memory is thus an arena of political struggle that is frequently conceived in terms of a struggle “against oblivion”: remember to not repeat. These slogans, however, can be tricky. Slogans such as “memory against oblivion” or “against silence” hide an opposition between distinct and rival memories (each one with its own forgetfulness). In truth, what is at stake is an opposition of “memory against memory”. (Jelin xviii)

It is precisely this active construction of the past from the present and for the future, which concerns cultural memory studies.

4. Internal Memories: Montecristo as an Ideological Memory Product

Montecristo enters into the realm of cultural memory studies in part through its depiction of a world where the past is always intrinsically linked to the present. Whether through the concrete bleeding of past memories into the present via flashbacks or through the more elusive effects of the past as it subtly informs individual actions and identities, this *telenovela* refuses to create a barrier between the past and present that would favor total forgetting. The focus on present pasts comes to life in 1) the vivid flashbacks of the characters, which continuously interrupt and affect the present, 2) the language/rhetoric adopted by these same characters, and 3) the active and intentional forgetting proposed by the show's villains.

4.1 *Flashbacks*

Flashbacks are frequently used throughout *Montecristo* to forge links between past actions and present circumstances. In most instances, these brief memory connections link events that have occurred in previous episodes with current episodes, thus creating internal continuity for the show's sporadic viewers. However, in rare cases, they link events from current episodes with previously unaired footage. Flashbacks, in the latter case, fill in gaps in knowledge and uncover characters' hidden or previously inaccessible memories. Victoria's visit to her childhood home in Argentina is a perfect example of the latter case as it links previously unseen footage with the reconstruction of a traumatic memory.

Upon gazing on her old house, Victoria immediately recalls the moments before her parents' kidnap and forced disappearance. Shifting into an almost colorless sepia tone, the screen suddenly shrinks and the viewers are presented with a tunnel-like image bordered by darkness and blurred, faded edges. The scene begins with Victoria, portrayed as her 8-year old self, eating dinner with her nervous parents. As the flashback continues, Victoria sees a car pulling up in front of the house and observes a man walking to the front door. Suddenly, her mother rushes to her, and she is hurriedly asked to hide in a cramped closet space. From this moment on, the scene shifts. The only audible noises are the screams of her parents' struggle which Victoria hears from the closet. Similarly, all the viewers are allowed to see is a close-up image of young Victoria as she reacts to these sounds ("Capítulo 9 - Parte 1 - Montecristo").

The juxtaposition within this flashback of people and actions that Victoria personally heard and saw with those moments—such as the car pulling up in-front of the house—that she could not possibly have personally witnessed highlights the constructed nature of all memories. Victoria's memory of this traumatic moment has been shaped by the stories others have told her and her investigation as an adult of the typical circumstances in which people were disappeared. Thus, her present context colors her past just as her past influences her present. This mutual influence is visually represented as this scene both begins and ends with a split-screen of this flashback juxtaposed with a close-up image of the present day Victoria.

4.2 *Active and Passive Forgetting*

The blending of present and past, which muddles the objective veracity of flashbacks, is further complicated by the relationship between memory and forgetting.

Memory is always accompanied by some degree of forgetting due to the impossibility of total recall. On an individual level, one can view this degree of forgetting as controlled by the collective frameworks and individual experiences that inform what meaning is associated with each memory and what is kept hidden (Jelin 24). Looking at the collective level, forgetting is often tantamount to the institutional elimination of certain marginalized discourses in favor of the remembering of the constructed hegemonic or counterhegemonic past⁴ (Rajca 57). On both of these levels, the active or passive act of remembering can also be interpreted as the active or passive act of forgetting.

Montecristo incorporates both forms of forgetting into its storyline, illustrating the passive and unconscious form through the unstable memories of Leticia Lombardo and the active and intentional form through the concrete plans made by the show's villains—Lisandro, Alberto and Marcos. Leticia's temporary lapses in memory stem directly from the traumatic experiences of her past. In particular, it is her discovery of her husband Alberto's cooperation with the military dictatorship and his later involvement in the Horacio's and Santiago's assassination that leads to her traumatic break and eventual realization that, as she states, "tengo miedo de mis recuerdos" ("Capítulo 14 – Parte 1- Montecristo"). As one of the characters whose past most concretely and visibly infiltrates her present, Leticia is also a metaphor for the difficulty of working through past traumas. As Jelin states, "for the individual subject, the imprints of trauma play a central role in determining what the person can or cannot remember, silence, forget or work through" (2). Throughout the telenovela, Leticia meets with therapists and undergoes hypnosis in order to recuperate her memories and be able to survive with the knowledge of them. However, the process is not easy and is never completed—a fact that is marked by the re-erasure of her memories in the final episode of the show ("Capítulo 144").

This passive erasure contrasts with the active forgetting enforced by the melodramatic villains of the story—Alberto, Lisandro and Marcos. All are implicated in various crimes: Alberto in the illegal kidnapping of babies in the clandestine

⁴ While this investigation does not oppose the use of the term collective memory as a way of thinking through the weight and/or affect of political, social and cultural frames in their Halbwachsian sense, it does begin to question the structuring effects of any singular memory frame. This article is thus premised on the basic notion that while pop culture frames are of extreme importance due to their ability to raise new issues, reactivate old concerns and re-structure debates, they are not all-powerful nor should they be thought of as definitive in the structuring of memories. They are, rather, one factor in the complex battleground of collective frames, personal experiences and inter and intra-generationally transmitted memories.

maternity centers, the continued genetic testing on unborn fetuses and the murder of Horacio, Lisandro in the torture of hundreds during the military dictatorship, as well as numerous murders, and Marcos in the attempted assassination of Santiago and the kidnap and rape of Laura. In an attempt to cover up these past actions and protect themselves from future prosecution, all vocally support the separation of the past and the present. As Alberto states, “el pasado ya pasó” (“Capítulo 10 – Parte 1 - Montecristo”). This barrier is part of a systemic plan of erasure similar to that used by the military dictatorship after the return to democracy in 1983; it supports silence. Jelin describes how this active forgetting operated under the Argentine military dictatorship: “erasures and voids can also be the result of explicit policies furthering forgetting and silence, promoted by actors who seek to hide and destroy evidence and traces of the past in order to impede their retrieval in the future” (18). Despite their best attempts to construct a barrier via hiding and destroying past evidence, it remains clear that in the case of all three of these characters, this destruction merely strengthens the haunting effect of the past and its infiltration into the present (Huysen 19). Lisandro is haunted by the murders he has committed, as made evident by the stroke he suffers when receiving a letter from the supposedly deceased Horacio. Similarly, Marcos is mentally bombarded by images of Santiago being shot during his time locked in the Díaz Herrera family tomb.

4.3 Rhetorical Remembering: A Tale of Truth and Justice

The intrinsic bond between past and present also influences the language adopted by the characters, which is strikingly similar to that used by Argentina’s human rights movement. For example, *Montecristo* consistently introduces and discusses memories within the specific human rights frames of truth and justice. As opposed to the humanities interpretation of these terms, which often focuses on the deconstruction of the concepts of truth and justice, these terms are adopted by the international and national human rights community in an anti-relativist manner, focusing on how they can be used as political banners under which to rally and fight against the human rights abuses carried out during the dictatorship (Avelar 34). One storyline that relies heavily on the latter approach to the concepts of truth and justice is Laura’s prolonged search for her hidden identity and biological parents. The telenovela first introduces this theme when Helena, Laura’s supposed aunt, informs her that they are not actually related. After hearing this news, Laura demands her right to the truth by bombarding Lisandro—her supposed uncle—with questions. She yells,

“Yo tengo que saber la verdad, Lisandro. Yo quiero saber la verdad y vos tenés la obligación de decírmela!” (“Capítulo 34 – Parte 1 - Montecristo”). A cry that repeats itself in various episodes, truth is often referenced within *Montecristo* as a singular, definitive human right. In the end, when the Lisandro’s crimes are revealed, including his complicity with the crimes committed during the military dictatorship, it is his wife, Helena, who is there to affirm the strength of justice and the power the past holds over the present. As she states: “Gracias al cielo, las cosas ya no son como eran. Gracias al cielo esta gente ya no es más tu gente. Creías que me habías destruido para siempre, pero no es así. Y eso no es gracias al cielo. Eso es gracias a mí. Todo lo que creíste destruido, enterrado, desaparecido hoy te va y delante de tus narices y te va a dar el último cachetazo en tu último suspiro” (“Capítulo 144 - Montecristo”). This quote is a perfect example of the way that *Montecristo* incorporated the three main components of the human rights movement—the demand for justice, call for truth and the importance of memory—into its plot.

Looking beyond the characters’ dialogue, another key way in which *Montecristo* aligned itself with the prominent human rights discourse of the mid-2000s was the participation of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo in the writing and production of the show. The Abuelas agreed to this collaboration in large part because of the overlap between the telenovela’s emphasis on memory and identity and their own mission and dedication to the continued search for information about their grandchildren, who were disappeared during the military dictatorship. Through this collaboration, the telenovela benefitted from the knowledge and experience of the Abuelas, and in turn, the Abuelas benefitted from the incorporation of their organization into the main plot of the show. Martín Sueldo argues for the importance of *Montecristo* for the Abuelas because it provided a new outlet for them to transmit their message and consequently reach a wider, younger generation. As he writes, “entre la búsqueda de las Abuelas y las nuevas generaciones... El pasado y presente se intersecan...conlleva un propósito bastante práctico: instalar en las nuevas generaciones la idea de que las Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo todavía están buscando cientos de bebés y niños” (Sueldo 189). The broadcast of *Montecristo* did, in fact, have a positive effect on the number of consultations that the Abuelas received every month and played an important role in the recuperation of grandchild #85, Marcos Suárez Vedoya⁵ (Landau 60). These

⁵ During the broadcast of *Montecristo*, the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo informed the public that they had found grandchild number 85—Marcos Suárez Vedoya. Marcos had approached the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo with questions about his past, particularly looking

positive effects point to the educational impact of *Montecristo*. As a result of its mass broadcast, the telenovela was able to introduce the concepts of truth, justice, and memory—as framed by the human rights movement—to a large viewing audience, while also teaching said audience about the resources available to those unsure of their own relationship to the nation’s past oppression.

5. *Montecristo as a Memory Merchandiser*

The concept of framing the past in a usable way is in-line with the definition of ‘exemplary memories’ provided by Todorov (Sciacca 277). Exemplary memories are packaged in a certain way so that they can be converted into models for the future, which in some cases can then be incorporated into cultural products in an attempt to reinforce dominant memory narratives of the time (Jelin 35). These exemplary memories coupled with the genre’s structural characteristics have traditionally defined telenovelas as modern products that work to support the dominant sociopolitical order.

As a medium, telenovelas are a relatively effective form of memory merchandising. Due to the repetition of archetypical plots, themes and characters, they are often associated with a Maravallian vision of repetition, where repetition is in itself interpreted as a propagandistic method utilized in cultural products to enforce the hegemonic social order (Maravall 182). Another possible effect of this repetition can be the blurring of the boundaries between one’s real life experiences and the experiences one views on television. Martín-Barbero speaks about this confusion when he affirms that “autor, lector y personajes intercambian constantemente sus posiciones...y dicho intercambio es una confusión entre relato y vida que conecta en tal modo al espectador con la trama que éste acaba alimentándola con su propia vida” (30). A potential danger often assumed to accompany this blurring of reality and fiction is that telenovela viewers will too easily adopt the show as a key structural memory frame and thus also accept the memory messages intentionally produced by it. As Daniel Barredo-Ibáñez and Martin Oller-Alonso articulate this fear, “we could say that a TV series is not only a place of entertainment, but a source of information

for information about his father. He first sat down for an interview with the Abuelas in September of 2005, and later underwent a DNA test in the Banco Nacional de Datos Genéticos of Hospital Durand on June 22, 2006. This same day, Marcos sat down to watch the television and saw a photo of himself as a child being held by the actress Viviana Saccone who portrayed Victoria in *Montecristo*. This incorporation of the real photos of disappeared grandchildren was a strategy adopted by the Abuelas to communicate to the show’s large audience made up of now adult grandchildren and their relatives. (Gorenstein; Landau 60)

in which the plots, dramas and human conflicts suffered by its fictional characters come to rise in some cases to a category of credibility very similar to that reality holds” (Barredo-Ibáñez and Oller-Alonso 132). While this fear of the over-blending of reality and fiction is predicated on the assumption that television viewers are passive recipients—an interpretation that has been largely disproven—it remains highly relevant to this article’s investigation due to its reference to the bias of all cultural products and its assurance that they do indeed act as structural memory frames. An assurance that is affirmed by Rajca when he states that, “the recognition of the ability of cultural production to not only represent the past but also influence the interpretation of historical events for viewers or readers and contribute to the shared social discourse about ‘historical trauma’ is an important contribution to the study of cultural memory” (35).

Following Andreas Huyssen’s line of thought, *Montecristo* can be interpreted as a biased form of memory merchandising. Echoing Marshall McLuhan, Huyssen maintains that one must consider how the structure of new media shape the messages they transmit (McLuhan 103). As he states, “We do know that the media do not transport public memory innocently. They shape it in their very structure and form” (Huyssen 20). In addition to the previously discussed ideals of truth and justice and the strong connection between past and present fostered within the program, *Montecristo* carefully shapes public memory through its portrayal of the disappeared as unassailable, but silent heroes; a portrayal, which in many ways mimics the idealized vision of the disappeared often incorporated into human rights discourse. This vision comes through most clearly during the scenes in which Victoria discusses her disappeared parents. “Ellos fueron alegres y nos enseñaron de esa libertad. Sus vidas valieron la pena. Dejaron una huella y siempre van a estar con su aliento y el consejo de esa verdad y esa justicia que conocieron, por la que lucharon, y por la que murieron” (“Capítulo 144 - Montecristo”). Via language similar to this, the disappeared are appropriated by the human rights rhetoric of truth, justice and memory. As Rajca states about this common framing, “the ‘disappeared’ do not speak, they are made to speak through the counter-hegemonic discourse of ‘resistance’ to the dictatorship, representing their ‘subjugated experience’ (which is impossible to know or represent) as a mythic anti-dictatorial symbol” (65). This portrayal of the disappeared as fighters embedded in a war for truth and justice often erases the specific characteristics that humanize and differentiate them as individuals within this overarching term “the disappeared.”

6. *Montecristo's Fissures in Memory*

While the uniform depiction of the disappeared, which in itself erases complexity, may be interpreted as a central component of *Montecristo's* compliance with the Kirchner administration's policy on cultural memory, it nevertheless would be a grave error to assume that this discourse is uniformly adopted by the show or accepted by the show's viewers. Astrid Erll argues that the memory-making effect of media representations "lies not in the unity, coherence, and ideological unambiguousness of the images they convey, but instead in the fact that they serve as cues for the discussion of those images, thus centering a cultural memory on certain medial representations and sets of questions connected with them" (396). Despite the fact that *Montecristo* clearly merchandises memory in accordance with the Kirchner administration's memory production strategies, I maintain that focusing our analysis on the show's purely dominant characteristics ignores the potential of this telenovela to operate as a piece of memory merchandise in the full extent of this term. Telenovelas are a form of memory merchandise, which often "promote one set of messages among the many that are transmitted in a given novela or miniseries" (Atencio 44). However, the presence of these secondary messages insures that telenovelas, such as *Montecristo*, can open up negotiated spaces for the inclusion of marginalized or previously forgotten memory narratives, as opposed to "imposing a single meaning or interpretation" (Atencio 44).

6.1 *The Fault Line in Production and Consumption*

One of the main theories that supports moving beyond the derivative interpretation of *Montecristo* as a purely hegemonic force, is Stuart Hall's seminal study on decoding and encoding. Hall elaborates on the interpretative space that permanently exists between production and consumption through his identification of three hypothetical positions from which spectators construct television decodings: 1) dominant-hegemonic position, 2) negotiated position and 3) globally contrary position (171-172). All three of these positions represent simplified, but useful ways to categorize the diversity inherent in audience usage of television messages. In addition, these three positions present the spectrum of audience relationships to and utilizations of television within the cultural studies power narrative. This spectrum allows space for audience members (1) to accept a message as given within the dominant code of reference—a dominant-hegemonic position, (2) to accept part of the hegemonic code, while rejecting aspects of this code on the more direct,

situational level—a negotiated position or (3) to fully reject this hegemonic code and repurpose the message, forcing it into an alternative framework—a globally contrary position (Hall 173). All three positions, as well as the countless intermediate positions that lie between them represent the possible ways in which viewers of *Montecristo* can decode, not only the program itself, but also the institutionalized memory frame it purports. Due to this fact, *Montecristo* inherently contains a liminal space that prohibits its internal memory frames from controlling all memory production. Furthermore, this unavoidable rupture between encoding and perfect decoding does not break the chain of memory transmission, but rather mirrors the fissure that exists between all past experiences and representations of said experiences. As Jelin states, “the possibility that those who are on the receiving end will reinterpret and re-signify whatever is being conveyed has to be left open. It will never be a process of simple repetition or memorizing” (96). The space in which viewers carry out this reinterpretation and re-signification of memory discourse sold by *Montecristo* is opened in part due to the structural characteristics of the telenovela as a visually-driven, serial melodrama.

6.2 *Visual Possibility: The Image’s Subjunctive Voice*

Similar to many television genres, the telenovela has a fixed beginning and an undetermined end. What makes the telenovela unique in this sense, however, is the each program’s long run, which essentially allows for its final episodes to be written many months after the airing of its pilot episode. The simultaneous consumption and production of these products, thus opens them up to audience input, while also imbuing each program and each episode with what Zelizer terms a “subjunctive voice” (163). The subjunctive voice of a visual image is best described as the “what if” of that image. This hypothetical stems from the ability of visual works to freeze a sequence of events midstream, thus creating a space for viewer conjecture and discussion of what will happen in the next few frames. In the case of the telenovela, the strongest “what if” moments come at the end of every episode. As the screen freezes on a specific scene or expression, the audience is left to invent their own interpretations of how the next episode will resolve today’s predicament. Thus, the freeze in telenovelas is highly functional, as it invites viewers to attend to an actor’s reaction and imagine his or her thoughts or impenetrable emotions that the audience cannot possibly decipher with enough accuracy to know what the character will say or do next (Baym 156). These imaginings and the discussions around them are only

loosely guided by the show's narrative and thus defy, in many ways, the dominant master narrative imposed on viewers. As Zelizer states "The subjunctive creates a space of possibility, hope and liminality through which spectators might relate to images" (163).

The online forums where viewers discuss their reactions to the show and their suppositions on how the telenovela will develop act as a tangible example of this space of possibility and imagination. On the site *Telenovela World*, one poster specifically writes about the future of the show and what he/she hopes will occur. "So it seems that Sarita did make a mistake putting those papers in the wrong hands... I just hope she doesn't pay for it with her life.... I also like Victoria and Inaqui—I hope that he sticks around. He seems passionate, and if he's not destined for Victoria, maybe him and Erika will hit it off!" ("Episode 3..."). Comments such as these emphasize the discursive space that is formed when viewers question plot decisions and ponder potential future plots.

For the contributors to forums such as *Telenovela World*, the draw of telenovelas is not only the entertainment that stems from watching the television drama unfold, but also the communities that develop outside of the show in which the intertextual reading and narrating of telenovelas takes center stage. As Martín-Barbero states, "en los sectores populares, la telenovela se disfruta mucho más contándola que viéndola porque es en lo que se cuenta donde se produce la confusión entre relato y vida" (76). The discussion of yesterday's plans intertwines and mixes with the retelling of yesterday's telenovela episode, creating a hybrid version of one's own life that both influences and is influenced by the meaning of the telenovela plot. While this hybridization might appear to support the adoption of the official memory frame explicitly portrayed via the character's processes of remembering, this sharing actually reiterates viewers' roles as both consumers of this discourse and producers of their own diverse and at times marginalized memory discourses (333).

The telenovela's generic structure and its subjunctive voice, which together foster external discursive spaces in which the fissure between experience and memory production may be explored, are complemented by certain aspects of the program's internal content that similarly highlight this slippage between recollection and reproduction. Two of these internal components are 1) the excessive emotions associated with the character's memory production processes and 2) the show's purposeful disassociation from historical events and singular, universal truth claims.

6.3 *Emotional Excess: Living on the Edge*

Over-the-top emotions are part of the tried-and-true telenovela package. In the context of a telenovela, emotional excess can thus be defined as an “endogenous phenomenon” that is itself engendered from within the melodramatic acceptance of “extreme states of being” (Brooks 12). While this emotional excess can destabilize the dominant narrative by breaking through the borders and/or limits of acceptability, in the case of telenovelas this internal excess can be more productively viewed as existing in the borderland between the interior and exterior, challenging the system while not necessarily producing “social unacceptability” (Calabrese 65). The system minimizes the threat of excess by accepting and normalizing that profusion of sentiments. Nevertheless, this standardization cannot ever totally eradicate the potential rebellion of excess. In her study of melodrama’s use in Franco Spain, Annabel Martín, highlights the ever existing, but subtle subversive quality of melodrama. As she states, melodrama can never be perfectly complicit with a hegemonic system. “Su poder de crisis reside en su capacidad para generar una *plusvalía*, un exceso a nivel narrativo y simbólico, capaz de fracturar el mismo imaginario político que ayuda a tejer tan bien” (Martín 17). Specifically, it is the audience’s consumption of these disproportionate emotions that creates the possibility for the audience’s later production of similarly effusive sentiments.

In the case of *Montecristo*, the use of excessive emotions is a stylistic quality that is present in every episode. One specific example of this hyper-emotionality is Laura’s reaction to hearing that Santiago has been murdered. Upon receiving Marcos’s call about Santiago’s death, Laura has a complete mental breakdown. Her first reaction is to shake and cry uncontrollably for various minutes before finally becoming almost numb to the pain. In this final stage, the audience sees Laura standing in the kitchen with an empty expression and smeared mascara all over her face. In what feels like slow motion, she picks up a knife and calmly slits her own wrists, as the camera zooms in on the first drops of blood leaving her body (“Capítulo 1 - Parte 2 - Montecristo”). Resonating with many of the show’s viewers, this passionately charged reaction was a major topic of conversation on the show’s online forums. As one post states, “Laura’s emotional breakdown upon learning about Santiago was both heartbreaking and eerie at the same time. For that short moment, it was like she just disconnected and felt nothing. Yet you know that she feels everything with the pain that losing Santiago brings...great but sad scene” (“Wow what an AWESOME first episode!”). Another poster responds in suit saying that this

moment was the most memorable part of this first episode. “But I do remember Laura’s reaction to it all...it seemed so real and it was totally enveloping and just drew you into her world of pain” (Camelia). The visceral identification that occurs via the audience’s consumption and re-production of these excessive emotions introduces the possibility to question the truth claims that are essential to *Montecristo*’s ability to sell its specific memory discourse as correct and authentic.

Additionally, the emotive identification that occurs between characters and audience members has the potential to prevent the total abstraction of past events (Forster 64). For example, while the rhetoric of *Montecristo*, as previously explored, specifically supports a vision of the disappeared as a homogenous idealized group, the sentiment behind the language used to describe these disappearances breaks with this homogeneity. Here we return to the previously explored scene where Laura and Victoria bury the ashes of their disappeared parents. In this scene, it is clear that Victoria adopts the dominant rhetoric of the Madres and Abuelas when describing her parents as idealistic citizens who worked towards a cause that would insure freedom for all. However, the intense emotions felt by both sisters in this moment act as a conduit through which audience members can represent their own memories and thoughts on these situations—thus slipping their own memories into the cracks formed by this hyperbolic affect. These excessive emotions are most intensely communicated during the silences of the scene. Silence reigns as both characters slowly walk towards the tomb of the Díaz Herrera family, where these ashes will be placed. Later as they enter the tomb, the camera zooms in for a close-up on the sad, but determined faces of both Laura and Victoria as they take in this intense moment. Finally, the scene shifts to a close-up of their two hands intertwined over the ashes of their parents (“Capítulo 144 - Montecristo”). Forster describes how impassioned scenes such as these highlight the existing space between experience and memory by simultaneously bringing viewers closer to the on-screen characters emotional turmoil, while also affirming the difference that continues to exist between their present past and each viewers’ unique memory production processes. There is “algo en las imágenes que impide la mitificación” (Forster 64). While watching, “Recorremos con emoción y temor nuestra biografía, dejamos que la nostalgia se apodere de nuestra reflexión; pero también percibimos lo anacrónico de la situación, sentimos el abismo que se abre entre nosotros y lo que estamos viendo y escuchando; la lejanía y la proximidad se cruzan y conmueven nuestra conciencia” (Forster 64). The moving past experiences of these characters resonant with viewers, creating a degree of

identification and empathy that situates them both inside and outside the telenovela and its form of memory merchandising.

6.4 *Breaking Away from the Truth*

This degree of separation that occurs between viewers and the actual content of the show is also carried out through the show's refusal to concretely associate itself with a specific historical event. Before the opening credits of each episode, viewers are shown a black screen with a line of white letters, stating, "los hechos y personajes de este programa son ficticios, cualquier semejanza con la realidad es pura coincidencia" (*Montecristo*). This disclaimer problematizes the truth of all supposed facts and statements made within the show, and also effectively warns viewers to not overly-associate the show with the nation's previous military dictatorship. Thus, this line acts as a departure from the concept of truth, which frames the majority of the memory production processes within the show. A statement that is crucial to understanding what could be considered a partial failure of *Montecristo* as a form of memory merchandising, it re-frames the entire debate about the show from the moment of its appearance at the beginning of each episode. Nevertheless, this same statement could contradictorily be read as yet another aspect that makes *Montecristo* a particularly well-suited vehicle for fostering marginalized memory discourses due to the fact that its appearance puts the language of truth so abundantly used within the telenovela in question. In this sense, the opening statement introduces a productive degree of ambiguity, cautiously placing the show between the often-at-odds humanities and human rights discourses on truth and justice. This subtle framing may foster audience discussion as it asks viewers to unpack the concepts of truth and justice and discuss the appropriateness of any action couched within its parameters.

7. *Conclusion*

Acting as the first step in a larger project, this article begins to address many questions on the potential of mass media as a relatively new structural memory frame. By analyzing how *Montecristo* simultaneously presents the physical act of remembering in which the past acquires meaning, while also opening up space to question this meaning, one can begin to grasp the complexity of *Montecristo* as a structural memory frame that simultaneously supports and questions Argentina's institutionalized memory policy. Primarily, this program disseminates the official narrative through the depiction of on-screen characters' processes of memory production and the specific

frames that guided these journeys, including the truth and justice frame, present pasts frame, and exemplary memory frames. However, the selling of this singular vision of the past is inherently disrupted by the unique structure of the telenovela, which insures that no one dominant decoding is possible, and allows emotional excess and the subjunctive “what if” to stand out (Hall; Zelizer 163). Together, these factors highlight the potential for *Montecristo* to function as a rather contradictory piece of popular culture. Instead of insisting on the objectivity of all memories, the show rhetorically supports the vision of one inalienable past, while it structurally emphasizes the liminal space and controversial slippages between past experience and how these pasts are reconstructed and remembered in prime time.

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