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## Playing in Public

Domestic Politics and Prosthetic Memory in Paula Markovitch's *El premio* (2011)

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### Abstract

Released in 2011, Paula Markovitch's semi-autobiographical film revolves around the life of seven-year-old Cecilia and her tense negotiation of the 'adult' world of public militancy in 1970s Argentina. The film destabilizes the traditional boundaries between childhood and adulthood, exposing the profound politicization of the child's domestic spaces as her parents' political choices are thrust into every aspect of her daily life. This article argues that, by affording the child a greater sense of agency within these home spaces, the director of *El premio* refuses to perpetuate the discourses of passive victimhood that are conventionally associated with the *hijo* in contemporary Argentina. Instead, Markovitch rethinks the domestic sphere as a site for political confrontation both between and within generations. By inhibiting the spectator's potential to 'prosthetically' identify with the experience of the child victim, *El premio* surfaces as a paradigmatic example of a growing trend in contemporary Argentine film which seeks to expose, explore and impede society's ongoing and pervasive gaze into the lives of the children of the disappeared.

### Key Words

Argentine cinema; post-dictatorship cinema; prosthetic memory; cultural memory; childhood; *hijo*.

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Memory may become less a process of recalling than a topological skill, the ability to locate and identify pieces of culture that identify the place of self in relation to others. The mediation of memory, in other words, is as much a creation as it is a re-creation; in a postmodern, technological culture, memory and media are intertwined beyond distinction.

José van Dijck, 'Mediated Memories' (2004: 272)

It pained him that he did not know well what politics meant and that he did not know where the universe ended.

James Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916: 18)

'Cinema', suggests Annette Kuhn, 'is peculiarly capable of enacting not only the very activity of remembering, but also ways of remembering that are commonly shared; it is therefore peculiarly capable of bringing together personal experiences and larger systems and processes of cultural memory' (2010: 303). Due to the affinity that Kuhn perceives between cinematic modes of expression and the fragmentary, imagistic and subjective processes of memory itself, she argues that the filmic text provokes in the spectator a more profound *personal* engagement with the memories presented on screen. 'Such recognition is not necessarily, nor even very importantly, of the *content* of the memory-story', she writes, 'it is rather a recognition of remembering's distinctive structure of feeling; and it is enabled by the space that the memory text gives the viewer' (303, emphasis in original). Indeed, in Paula Markovitch's semi-autobiographic film *El premio* (*The Prize*, 2011), the cinematic treatment of the seven-year-old child protagonist not only forces us to consider the *individual* act of remembering but also interrogates the spectator's *collective* position in relation to the traumatic events presented on screen; namely, for Cecilia and her mother, the politically unstable and imminently violent atmosphere of 1970s dictatorship Argentina. The increased sense of agency afforded to Cecilia as she negotiates the damaging domestic effects of her parents' militancy allows

the director both to facilitate *and* inhibit the collectivization of her ‘personal experiences’ within, as Kuhn writes, the shared ‘systems and processes of cultural memory’ (303). By focusing on the ethical and aesthetic implications of the child’s individual experience, this article will suggest that this appropriation of agency not only exposes tensions surrounding the use of the child as a figure of heightened affective – and affiliative – identification, but also, more broadly, reflects the director’s perspectives towards the position of the *hijo* against the backdrop of national, institutionally co-opted narratives of cultural memory in contemporary Argentina.

As part of a growing trend in Latin American film, *El premio* turns to the director’s semi-autobiographical seven-year-old ‘self’ for the film’s narrative impetus, recounting the story of a mother and daughter on the run after the disappearance of the child’s father. In doing so, Markovitch offers the viewer a tensely claustrophobic representation of the intrusion of public politics into the domestic sphere in dictatorship Argentina. Within the private space of their wind-beaten beach dwelling and under relentless assault from the elements, the distressing familial tension between mother and daughter reveals a much broader intergenerational friction over the transmission of cultural memory in contemporary Argentine society. Indeed, as the domestic tensions and strained relationship between Cecilia and her mother gradually come to dominate the narrative, punctuated by numerous long and often uncomfortable confrontations between the two, the exploration of the social and emotional challenges of a childhood spent in hiding effectively interrogates the complete incursion of public politics into the familial domain in 1970s Argentina. The retreat of recent dictatorship-related Argentine films, such as *El premio*, into the domestic sphere does not represent a reluctance to confront political tensions, therefore, nor signify an exclusionary focus on ‘*minor issues*’ (Levy Yeyati 2012, emphasis in original). Instead, this retreat surfaces as a more nuanced understanding of the complex relationship between the political and the domestic both in the context of 1970s militancy and in the postmemorial transmission of memory in contemporary Argentina. By obscuring traditional conceptions of the divisions between childhood and adulthood, and also the boundaries between the public and private spheres, it will be argued that the spectator’s limited identification with Cecilia reflects a desire on the director’s part to draw attention to the continued pervasiveness of the public gaze into the lives of these sons and daughters. As such, *El premio* becomes a means of diversifying contemporary perceptions of the *hijo* within recent political and societal discourses of historical memory and victimhood, signalling the persistent tensions

between recounting these individual, personal narrations of the past and the reluctance to allow such narratives to be subsumed and institutionalized within contemporary Argentina's collective public sphere.

### **Domestic Politics**

At the beginning of *El premio*, as the viewer is introduced through a wide establishing shot to the bleak landscape that provides the backdrop for the majority of the film, Cecilia is seen in the distance struggling to roller-skate across the wet sand (Figure 1). The dull colours, prolonged views of the harsh coastline, and the discordant background music all reflect the child's frustration at not being able to play in her new setting. 'Acá no se puede patinar, mama' (I can't skate here, mummy), she complains repeatedly, as her disinterested mother struggles to fix a broken window in their modest, wind-beaten beach dwelling. As the film progresses, it swiftly becomes apparent that Cecilia is denied many of the usual aspects of childhood not only as a result of her new surroundings but also, more fundamentally, by the political actions of her parents: the mother's ominous references to those 'que [los] quieren encontrar' (who want to find [them]) and the disturbingly unexplained absence of her father evocatively insinuate the reasons behind the tense and nomadic lifestyle the child is experiencing. Moreover, when the child asks her mother 'qué significa pesimista' (what pessimistic means) shortly after this introductory episode – a question whose true value is not revealed until later in the film, when we see Cecilia read a letter from her disappeared father – the child inadvertently sums up the desperation of her new situation, forced into unfamiliar settings and burdened with the task of maintaining an entirely new identity.

The despondency and desolation of the child's new domestic situation is evocatively reflected in the sophisticated visual aspects of *El premio*. As Paul Julian Smith argues, the film's 'long takes, elliptical narrative and rigorous rejection of visual pleasure' (2014: 193) hauntingly reflect the frustration and boredom felt by the protagonist herself, and the recurring, drawn-out static shots of the vast open expanse of the beach paradoxically seem to accentuate the claustrophobia of the wind-beaten dwelling. The film's 'unaesthetic aesthetic' (2014: 193) is, perhaps, at its most impactful during numerous lengthy scenes in which the wind relentlessly lashes against the wooden hut or when broken windows bang repeatedly – and irritatingly – against their frames (Figure 2). The mounting sensations of malaise and persecution that these scenes foment echo the immense danger posed by the infiltration of the public world of politics into the

domestic sphere. ‘Partí de la sensación de que los exteriores invaden el interior’, explained Markovitch in an interview, shortly after the release of the film: ‘No hay resguardo posible, no hay hogar, [...] el viento y el mar llegan hasta los espacios más íntimos’ (I started with the feeling that the outside was invading the inside. There is no possible shelter, there’s no home, and the wind and the sea reach even the most private spaces) (cit. Koza 2011). Indeed, when the film’s narrative climax approaches and the child endangers the pair with the content of a school essay, the subsequent flooding of the hut and the mother’s futile attempts to combat the flow of water from the sea encapsulates the helplessness of the protagonists’ situation, emphasizing the precarious ramifications of the girl’s actions outside the familial setting.

In a similar fashion to the young protagonist of Marcelo Piñeyro’s *Kamchatka* (2002) or twelve-year-old Juan in Benjamín Ávila’s *Infancia clandestina* (*Clandestine Childhood*, 2011), the responsibility Cecilia experiences in preserving an alias outside the family home, though first presented to the child as a game, very quickly develops into a more serious matter. While references to playing appear frequently in the film’s narrative, an episode immediately preceding the girl’s first day at school anticipates the gravity and danger of the adult ‘game’ she is entering. As the mother combs Cecilia’s hair, the latter laughing and pulling comical facial expressions, both the ensuing dialogue and the severity of the mother’s tone underline the precarious nature of venturing out of the domestic setting and into the school environment:

Mother: Dale, no juego más, no juego más. ¿Estás segura de que querés ir a la escuela?

Cecilia: Sí, pero tengo sueño.

M: ¿Y qué vas a decir si te preguntan?

C (in a deep comical voice): Que mi papá vende cortinas y mi mamá es ama de casa.

(Mother: Come on, I’m not playing anymore, I’m not playing. Are you sure you want to go to school?)

Cecilia: Yes, but I’m sleepy.

M: And what are you going to say if they ask you anything?

C: That my dad sells curtains and my mum stays at home.)

When Cecilia returns from school and informs her mother, whilst laughing almost uncontrollably, that ‘todos los chicos [le] creyeron’ (all the kids believed [her]), and that she even managed to dupe her teacher with her cover story, the mother’s stoic refusal to respond or share in the child’s laughter again highlights the gravity of the situation; a situation that the contemporary viewer understands implicitly even if the child, at this stage, does not. Initially, Cecilia is indeed unable to grasp the full meaning of certain historical allusions in the film, for example the military’s invocation to ‘la bandera de guerra’ (the flag of war) or the teacher’s insistence that the children include ‘el amarillo del sol’ (the yellow of the sun) in their pictures of the national flag.<sup>1</sup> However, the exponential incursion of public politics into the private setting of the beach house transforms Cecilia’s world and forces her to negotiate the conventionally safe spaces of the school environment and its playground in an increasingly shrewd and adult manner. While Henry Jenkins reminds us that the ‘dominant conception of childhood innocence presumes that children exist in a space beyond, above, outside the political’ (1998: 2), *El premio*’s portrayal of Cecilia as an integral part in the survival of her family, and the profound politicization of her childhood experience, underline the necessity in reassessing the conventionally distinct borders between adulthood and childhood. A particularly striking allusion to this dissolution of ‘safe’ spaces is to be found in an early episode in the school yard, when, after one student is caught cheating in a test, the teacher forces the students to walk in circles until the accomplice is revealed (Figure 3). The image of the children, clothed identically in white school smocks, their heads facing the ground and visibly suffering from the cold and pouring rain, is bleakly reminiscent of both the maltreatment of detainees in other cultural representations of the military’s brutality and the discipline of a prison setting, a situation heightened all the while by the growing tension of forcing the children to betray – or ‘soplar’ – their *compañeros*.

As the conventional demarcations between childhood and adulthood are undermined, the former no longer ‘representative of a category whose significance [lies], primarily, in what [it] reveals about adult life’ (James 2009: 35), the ensuing politicization of the domestic spaces that Cecilia inhabits in *El premio* calls for a parallel reconsideration of the divisions between the film’s public and private spaces. As Edward King argues, the early trajectory of post-dictatorship Argentine cinema employed ‘the figure of the “hijo” as the voice of a national conscience, an agent for the insistence on memory in the face of efforts made during the Menem era to forgive and forget’ (2013: 160). Recent dictatorship-related film has, however, looked to the child protagonist not as

a vehicle for the insistence on historical memory but as a means of exposing the complex relationship between the political and the domestic in the context of militancy, and of stressing the continued contemporary friction between collective memory and individual, personal narrations of the past. As part of this trend, Markovitch does not simply seek to nuance contemporary views on the domestic consequences of left-wing militancy in the context of 1970s Argentina, but she also attempts to endow the generational figure of the *hijo* with an independent agency against the backdrop of contemporary Argentine society: a society, as Gonzalo Aguilar writes in *Otros mundos*, that has tended to ‘intepel[ar] a estas víctimas sólo como hijos, [lo cual] no les permite otra identificación’ (interpellate these victims exclusively as children, which does not allow them any other identification) (2010: 188). The focus on domestic spaces in *El premio* does not, therefore, signify a reluctance to engage in political debate, but represents a repoliticization of historical narratives of militancy *through* the gaze of the child. Thus, while critics such as Cecilia Sosa read the works of this generation as ‘becom[ing] public document[s] that transform the domestic space into the scenario of national trauma’ (2012: 224), my analysis suggests a distinct, more politicized, reading of this domestic space. The use of such spaces in *El premio* not only forces us to reassess the contemporary consequences of such domestic incursions of left-wing militancy but also, more provocatively, exposes the continued incursion of the public gaze into the lives of these *hijos* and undermines any collective appropriation of this experience as a ‘public document’ of trauma.

An early scene of the film underlines the child’s initial incomprehension of the political gravity of her present situation. As her mother buries books in the sand, presumably literature that would have implicated the pair if discovered, Cecilia uncovers a copy of *Robin Hood* and follows her mother’s example by concealing it in a hole in the ground (Figure 4). The following exchange between mother and daughter highlights the child’s naivety:

Cecilia: Mamá, ¿puedo enterrar mi libro?

Mother: ¿Por qué?

C: Para jugar.

M (angrily): Dejá de joder, nena.

(Cecilia: Can I bury my book, mummy?

Mother: Why?

C: Just to play.

M: Stop messing around.)

Though the child's ignorance visibly irritates the mother during this early scene, Cecilia does however progressively exert a growing sense of shrewdness and a more astute understanding of the dangers of her situation. For example, after writing the essay that could potentially ruin their cover in their new village, Cecilia then stops on her way home from school to bury her notebook in the sand: an attempt, following her mother's example, to eliminate any trace of their 'subversiveness'. Though the child later feigns incomprehension of her mistake in writing the essay, her attempt to conceal the evidence and her repeated efforts to make her unresponsive mother read the essay do, nevertheless, exhibit a growing awareness of her precarious circumstances. Furthermore, when the error is eventually revealed, her insistence that she was only forbidden to *say* these things, and not to *write* them, already demonstrates a capacity to negotiate the rules of the adult world in her own defence. The recurring metaphor of concealing evidence takes on a more sinister turn towards the end of the film as Cecilia attempts to bury her only friend in the sand during a game, knowing the consequences that may result from being associated with either her or her mother. 'Va a venir alguien y vos no vas a estar aquí', Cecilia explains: 'Dicen ¿dónde estás? ¿dónde estás? Y no vas a estar. Estarás enterradita' (Someone's going to come but you won't be here. They'll say: 'Where are you, where are you?' But you won't be here; you'll be all covered up). The discordancy of the ensuing extra-diegetic music provides an unsettling backdrop for the image of the two girls lying on the sand (Figure 5), and the spectator becomes aware – with similarities to the fate of the *desaparecidos* in mind and, particularly, the dictatorship's *vuelos de muerte* (death flights)<sup>ii</sup> – of the girl's considerable grasp of the imminent and significant dangers of her place in the adult world. As Patricia Holland writes: 'Ultimately childhood cannot be contained, and the boundaries will not hold. The relationship between childhood and adulthood is not a dichotomy but a variety of fluctuating states, constantly under negotiation' (2004: 16). Indeed, as *El premio* effectively demonstrates, Cecilia's experience and responses to her politicized surroundings reveal a complication of these traditional boundaries. It is through this increasing sense of agency that the more conventional narratives of victimhood for the *hijo* are undermined and replaced with a rehistoricized and repoliticized representation of this past that avoids seeing either the



domestic sphere or the realm of childhood as discretely demarcated spaces, free from the politics and scrutiny of the public sphere.

### **Intergenerational Tensions**

In her article on the child in post-dictatorship Argentine cinema, Irene Depetris Chauvin writes: ‘La figura de los *hijos* de los desaparecidos constituye un centro a partir del cual pueden medirse, tanto las consecuencias que la dictadura tuvo en la sociedad en general, como el impacto que los sucesivos presentes operaron sobre los discursos que refieren a ese período histórico’ (The figure of the *child* of the disappeared acts as a prism through which we can measure both the general consequences the dictatorship had on society and the impact that subsequent presents had on discourses that refer to this historical period) (2006: 100). Ultimately, through a discussion which encompasses films ranging from Luis Puenzo’s *La historia oficial* (*The Official Story* 1985) to more recent productions such as María Inés Roqué’s *Papá Iván* (2000) and Albertina Carri’s *Los rubios* (*The Blondes* 2003), Depetris Chauvin concludes in her article that ‘[e]n oposición a cines anteriores, el nuevo cine [desde 2000] no pretende – por lo menos no abiertamente – “abrir los ojos” del espectador e iluminar su entendimiento histórico, sino que más bien intenta exponer sus resultados en el ejercicio de una especie de “pesimismo crítico”’, in which ‘la mirada de dos generaciones confrontan y debaten’ (as opposed to previous films, new cinema does not pretend – or at least not openly – to “open your eyes” as a spectator or offer an enhanced historical understanding, but rather it seeks to present its findings with a type of “critical pessimism”, [in which] the viewpoints of two generations confront and oppose one another) (2006: 109-10). Verónica Garibotto discusses this ideological friction in a similar manner, drawing a parallel between the evolution of post-dictatorship cinema in Argentina and the biological development of the second generation itself, contending that the former ‘grew up as [the latter] were growing up, evolved as they were evolving, and reached adulthood – and maybe even saturation point – as they became adults’ (2012: 175).<sup>iii</sup> Interestingly, while Garibotto therefore sees the second generation in Argentina as post-dictatorship cinema’s ‘formal epitome’ (174), she does, however, suggest that the aforementioned recent focus on the child protagonist represents an anomaly within this ‘diachronic tendency’ (177): a formal decision, she argues, that symbolizes a reluctance to engage with ‘larger political causes’ (186) through a deliberate reversion to the innocence and ignorance of childhood. ‘Rather than a successful means of historical exploration’, writes Garibotto, ‘the configuration of a teenage subjectivity

can be the exact opposite: the basis for converting the 1970s into a static mandate that precludes further interpretation' (186). Refuting this perspective and, more broadly, challenging the dominant focus on restrictive notions of dependency and trauma in debates surrounding the child's experience, this discussion of *El premio* instead posits the figure of the child as means not only of challenging homogenized notions of the past, but also of exposing the past's *present* political potency. Far from a 'static mandate' that impedes a greater understanding of the past, the complexity of the child's gaze is precisely what allows for a generational recuperation of the political and, on a broader scale, for a sense of the personal that remains unaffected by the public gaze.

While the previously mentioned *Infancia clandestina* portrays the era's violence more explicitly than comparable contemporaneous productions by realistically depicting the immediate impact on the private life of active Montonero militants, *El premio* poignantly illustrates the prolonged domestic consequences of such militancy through its overwhelmingly bleak portrayal of life as a dependent of those implicated in left-wing militancy *after* a parent has been disappeared. As Janice Breckenridge contends, while in films such as *Kamchatka* and Darío Stegmeyer's *El balancín de Iván* (*Ivan's Seesaw* 2002), '[t]he result is a sentimental account that idealizes childhood and romanticizes long-lost parents who are cast in the stereotyped roles of selfless protectors valiantly sacrificing their lives for their ideals' (2012: 104), *El premio*'s depiction of the strained relationship between mother and child surfaces as a harsh critique of the harmful effects of militancy's ideological demands and reveals an intergenerational tension which transcends the film itself. The mother's almost complete lack of sentimental engagement with her daughter, regularly ignoring what she says and providing barely any emotional support whatsoever, intensifies the child's sense of loneliness and isolation, reflected in formal techniques such as lengthy and frequent panoramic shots of Cecilia alone amid the severe, grey backdrop of the rugged coastline (Figures 6 & 7). While Emma Wilson reminds us in *Cinema's Missing Children* that 'the suffering of children appears a limit or absolute in ethical thinking' (2003: 157), here the mother's cold revelation of the death of Cecilia's cousin and the almost spiteful disclosure of the possible murder of the girl's father after a particularly heated argument point to a childhood that has been divested of the warmth and emotional protection that are conventionally considered to be its constituent elements. Shortly after this dispute between mother and daughter, Cecilia is seen waiting in line to be awarded the film's eponymous prize. During this heavily politicized scene, in which soldiers surround the child and the school fills with the sound

of the Argentine national anthem, a short exchange with her friend reveals the emotional register at play in the girl's life:

Silvia: ¿Qué te pasa?

Cecilia: Me aprietan los zapatos.

[Pause]

C: Y mi mamá dijo que mi padre puede llegar a estar muerto.

(Silvia: What's wrong with you?

Cecilia: My shoes are too tight.

[Pause]

C: And my mummy said that my dad might be dead.)

The almost stoic declaration from Cecilia of the possibility of her father's death is sharply set into relief against the scene around her, as a military lieutenant extols the virtues of 'la educación y las armas, la escuela y el ejército' (education and weapons, school and the army), the last being the very reason for her father's agonizing absence. When the camera focuses directly on the girl amidst ranks of soldiers (Figure 8) at the end of the scene, both the isolation of her situation and the increasingly politicized nature of her childhood experience are heightened. In this way, Markovitch both proposes a damning critique of this unresolved intergenerational tension and intensifies the very real private grief of losing a parent.

'If the image of the child victim places the artist, the scholar, or the historian into the space of the child witness, then it would seem to impede working through', writes Marianne Hirsch in 'Projected Memories': 'Most important, the easy identification with children, their virtually universal availability for projection, risks the blurring of important areas of difference and alterity: context, specificity, responsibility, history' (1999: 16). As I have argued, however, Markovitch's portrayal of the seven-year-old Cecilia in *El premio* convincingly complicates such conventional and reductive conceptions of the child protagonist, and represents not a refusal to engage with history but an active re-examination of homogenized perspectives towards the past. In several episodes of the film, for example, it becomes obvious that Cecilia is conscious of the fact she thinks in a manner quite differently to adults. It is precisely this distinct perspective and defiance of adult logic that, as Tzvi Tal contends, 'posibilit[an] representar a veces en

modo crítico y otras pedagógico, aspectos de la vida social que la hegemonía ideológica ha “naturalizado” y transformado en la lógica cotidiana’ (enable[s] the representation – at times critically, at other times pedagogically – of aspects of social life that ideological hegemony has ‘naturalized’ and transformed into everyday logic) (2005: 142). It is, however, when Cecilia is used to engender an estranging effect towards the adult choice of militancy that the child’s gaze is at its most critical. During a particularly distressing episode between mother and daughter towards the end of the film, the girl’s relentless and unanswered questions surrounding the reasons for her father’s disappearance expose and critique, through Cecilia’s childish – yet astute – logic, the sheer incredulity of the adult characters’ continued dedication to militancy *despite* the harmful and irreversible effects on the family unit. In this sense, therefore, Cecilia undermines Hirsch’s claims that an identification with the child protagonist impedes a sense of working through or represents a reluctance to engage with history; conversely, it is precisely this more sensitive and complex treatment of the seven-year-old’s experience which, at once, forces the viewer to reconsider the effects of militancy on the domestic sphere, and, importantly, allows the director to process this past and its consequences on the present.

### **The Ethics of Prosthetics**

‘[R]ecent films have caught me unawares, reminding me at every turn of the (suffering) child as visceral, sentient, moving, present’ (2005: 340), writes Emma Wilson in an article on recent European film: ‘Contemporary films seek to open up the representation of children, strategically denying the distinct division between adults and children, provoking a seizure of emotive response, where adults suddenly *feel* like children. Regression is not the aim here; rather, politically, filmmakers address and undermine the power relations which have existed between adults and children’ (2005: 331). Indeed, as the intense domestic conflict between Cecilia and her mother comes to problematize conventional understandings of adult-child power relations, ascribing Cecilia a growing sense of agency in the film, Markovitch also frequently intensifies the girl’s perspective through numerous lengthy close-ups of her observing her surroundings or clearly failing to comprehend her mother’s actions (Figures 9 & 10). This heightened identification with the child figure is, however, as Wilson confirms, not deployed with the aim of spectatorial ‘regression’, or in order to assert an affiliative sense of victimhood for the child figure; conversely such identification in *El premio* at once provides a more nuanced generational and political critique of this past and, at the same time, exposes the

continued contemporary tensions between collective memory and discrete, individual narratives of experience in contemporary Argentina.

In an article discussing Hirsch's previously mentioned work on photography and the child witness, Susannah Radstone argues against a tendency in contemporary memory and trauma studies to 'mobilize a dialogics of witnessing to testimonies of trauma – to the overwhelming and well-nigh unrepresentable experiences of *innocent* victimhood' (2001: 61, emphasis in original). For Radstone, the ethical aesthetics of Hirsch's 'over-identificatory impulses' with the child witness negate an important possibility 'to explore further the *complex* and *multiple* identifications [such] images offer – identifications that are not excluded by an interpretative framework of testimonial witnessing and that include, but are certainly not limited to, an identification with the child' (64, emphasis in original). Thus, while Hirsch claims that '[t]he image of the child victim, moreover, facilitates an identification in which the viewer can too easily become a surrogate victim' (1999: 16), I contend, following Radstone, that the more complex and politicized treatment of Cecilia's experience, along with the refusal to present her as merely a helpless spectator of her parents' militancy, successfully denies a sense of surrogate victimhood for the viewer, and, through certain formal techniques, ultimately inhibits any straightforward, sympathetic understanding of Cecilia's domestic experience of militancy.

In *Technics and Time 3*, the French philosopher Bernard Stiegler analyses cinema's capacity to construct an experience of time and focuses specifically on the 'exteriorization of memory' through temporal objects such as cinema. For Stiegler, the temporal synchronisation of a viewer's consciousness with the on-screen actions of protagonists – whether real or fictive - leads, on the part of the audience, to the 'adopt[ion] of events as though they were happening to us as they happened to them' (2011: 10-11). Similarly, in *Prosthetic Memory*, Alison Landsberg maintains that the technologies of mass culture have led to the collectivization of individual and private memories, and argues that '[t]he resulting "prosthetic" memory has the ability to shape a person's subjectivity and politics' (2004: 2). While Stiegler offers a much broader analysis than Landsberg, both critics stress the particularity of the cinematic medium in the creation of new forms of public memory.<sup>iv</sup> Interestingly, however, while Stiegler focuses largely on the technical structures that enable the adoption of individual experience by the collective, Landsberg goes much further in her analysis of the ethical potential of the medium through the affective adoption of such memories.<sup>v</sup> She writes:

Part of the political potential of prosthetic memory is its ability to enable ethical thinking. Thinking ethically means thinking beyond the immediacy of one's own wants and desires. *Prosthetic memory teaches ethical thinking by fostering empathy*. As I described previously, the experience of empathy has more potential and is more politically useful and progressive than its cousin sympathy. Sympathy, a feeling that arises out of simple identification, often takes the form of wallowing in someone else's pain. [...] This act can be imperializing and colonizing, taking over, rather than making space for, the other person's feelings. *In the act of sympathizing, one not only reinforces the victimhood of the other but also establishes hierarchies*. (2004: 149, my emphasis)

Landsberg celebrates the 'meaningful contact' that this prosthetic identification enables with the past, 'open[ing] the door for a new relation to the past, a strategic form of remembering that has ramifications for the politics of the present' (2004: 152). As Rita de Grandis observes, previously mentioned films such as *Kamchatka* and *El balancín de Iván* present essentially passive child protagonists whose presence commands a *sympathetic* response, a process that 'renders that traumatic past simpler and more palatable for transnational and national audiences' (2011: 236). In *El premio*, however, the increased sense of selfhood attributed to Cecilia in the course of the film, and the considerable tension between mother and child in the domestic sphere, instead demands an *empathetic* process of spectatorial participation.

The position and status of both Cecilia and her mother within the community of San Clemente del Tuyú further complicate any such spectatorial participation. As outsiders to this community, coming from the city of Buenos Aires, the pair stands out in specific ways among the people of the village. Markovitch often chooses to highlight this visually, for example when Cecilia finds herself among school friends, contrasting the girl with her peers either by the position of the camera or by the colours of her clothing (Figure 11). Indeed, it is precisely this refusal to allow for a simple identification with the figure of Cecilia that eschews any perspective which may reinforce a notion of victimhood or, indeed, establish a sense of spectatorial hierarchy. The viewer experiences a heightened sensitivity for the child protagonist yet also, at the same time, understands both the difficult position that the mother is in (something the child does not) and the danger of their conspicuous presence in the village community. There is, therefore, a

move towards comprehending the complexity and extent of this intergenerational tension, which precludes any straightforwardly traumatic interpretation of Cecilia's experience.

'The experience of empathy [as opposed to sympathy], by contrast, is not purely emotional but also contains a cognitive component', concludes Landsberg: 'It is characterized by feeling for, while feeling different from, the object' (2004: 149). While, at times, the immense fear and sheer incomprehension are quite clearly evident in Cecilia's face, particularly during the film's aforementioned numerous and prolonged close-ups (Figures 9 & 10), Markovitch frequently underscores this affective distance between the adult spectator and the child protagonist. Most notably, this is achieved through the recurring extreme wide shots of the child alone amidst the harsh background of the windswept coast; scenes that, although punctuated with close-ups of the girl's face, deny any lasting or substantial sense of identification (Figures 6 & 7). In the final sequence of the film, the only scene in which Cecilia *authentically* cries, not as a result of a childish argument or because she wants to get her own way, the chilling sound of her sobs is heightened by the static position of the camera and the lack of movement in the frame. Even as the scene cuts to black and the credits start to roll, the intense sobbing can still be heard; subsequently, as the dedication to her parents is presented on screen, the spectator is reminded of the intensely personal nature of the child's expression of pain. However, despite ostensibly tending towards a sympathetic identification, Markovitch uses this final scene to assert a conclusive formal and aesthetic distance between spectator and protagonist, focusing the camera on Cecilia, rendered almost invisible by the blowing sand, and denying the spectator any direct view of the girl's face (Figure 12). With her face still occluded from the viewer's gaze in the final shot of the film (Figure 13), the usual interpretive codes for the child protagonist therefore remain out of reach for the spectator and any final meaning or resolution of Cecilia's fate is unattainable. While we may, to an extent, identify 'prosthetically' with Cecilia's history, the sudden ending and the unsure nature of her future reveal a conclusive limit on the spectator's potential for affective identification.

'Once childhood is superseded by adult stocks of knowledge, those adult filters can never be removed to get back to earlier states', writes Owain Jones: 'Adult constructions and memories of what it is/was to be a child are inevitably processed through *adulthood*' (2001: 177). While the frequent confrontations between Cecilia and her mother give a sense of uncomfortable voyeurism, with the spectator functioning almost as an intruder in the claustrophobic atmosphere of the beach dwelling and in these very intimate domestic

moments between mother and child, it is when the camera focuses on the girl alone, playing a or reading a book, where these distancing techniques between the adult spectator and child protagonist employed by Markovitch are at their most effective (Figure 14). In these recurring scenes, any approximation to the girl's thoughts is not only rendered difficult by the film's formal choices, but is actively avoided. Indeed, by refusing to offer the spectator the opportunity simply to adopt Cecilia's perspective, and instead emphasizing both an affective *and* cognitive understanding of her situation, *El premio* at once denies any spectatorial appropriation of victimhood *and* offers an effective and repoliticized engagement with historical memories of militancy. The Argentine critic Beatriz Sarlo has criticized the postmemorial generation for a reluctance to understand the political specificities of the parents' generation and, in direct reference to *Los rubios*, for an impulse to 'postergar la dimensión más específicamente política de la historia, para recuperar y privilegiar una dimensión más ligada con lo humano' (withhold the specifically political dimension from the story, in order to recover and privilege aspects related more to the human side of things) (2005: 147). However, *El premio*'s presentation of the complete incursion of public politics into the domestic sphere, and the refusal to present Cecilia as the inert vehicle for a surrogate victimhood, thus places the film not simply in the realm of the director's subjective memory but also firmly in dialogue with the politics of historical representation.

### **Conclusion: Spectacular Childhoods**

In one of *El premio*'s recurring scenes, in which Cecilia plays alone with a chessboard (Figure 15), the resonances with the director's intentions are evident: in the distinctly adult 'game' of Cecilia's life, in which the next move is a closely guarded secret, any straightforward, sympathetic identification with the girl's position is formally and aesthetically evaded. Indeed, while Cecilia negotiates the public spaces of the school, its playground and the vast expanses of the beach, her preliminary ignorance of the gravity of her situation is swiftly replaced by a growing shrewdness towards the implications of her parents' political actions. In doing so, *El premio* thus presents a child protagonist who problematizes the broader conventional proscription of agency within the realm of childhood. As Cecilia offers an effective generational critique of the politicization of her experiences through her parents' dedication to militancy, her increasing capacity to negotiate such incursions of the public sphere effectively underscores that 'children should no longer be seen waiting, unproblematically, in the wings of adulthood' (James



2009: 37). By refusing to revert to the figure of the child as a vehicle for instigating a sympathetic identification on the part of the spectator, *El premio* thus complicates any consequential affiliative or collective position, and exposes, through its uncomfortable voyeurism, a sense of the continued societal gaze into the lives of these children of the disappeared.

Indeed, while Hirsch contends that '[t]he adult viewer sees the child victim through the eyes of his of her own child self' (1999: 15), this article has shown this issue of spectatorial regression in *El premio* to be more complex and problematic. Though the intimate portrayal of Cecilia's suffering may fuel any affective attachment the adult witness holds for the child's on-screen situation, the delicate balance between the director's desires to promote, on the one hand, an affiliative understanding of the child's situation and yet, on the other, to avoid an assertion of victimhood or sympathy for the child's distress, reveals a conclusive limit to the identificatory process at play in the film. By avoiding what Susan Honeyman labels in *Elusive Childhood* 'the perceptual blind spot' in understanding childhood, that is, the romanticized attitude which sees children 'as not having agency or consequence, [...] as helpless, [...] innocent, [...] too ignorant to represent themselves' (2005: 2), *El premio* thus becomes an important example of the recent trend in contemporary Argentine cinema. The film presents the protagonist's childhood as 'a site of political confrontation' (Garibotto 2012: 175) and both repoliticizes contemporary attitudes towards the era and problematizes the position of the *hijo* in contemporary Argentine society.

Thus, while recent Argentine documentaries such as María Inés Roque's *Papá Iván*, Natalia Bruschtein's *Encontrando a Víctor* (*Finding Victor* 2005) and Nicolás Prividera's *M* (2008) focus almost exclusively on the facts and dates surrounding their parents' disappearance, here the overwhelming emphasis on Cecilia's experience points to a generational appropriation of subjectivity; an attempt, on the director's part, to escape passivity or insignificance in relation this past, and exert her prerogative to negotiate memories of a history which are both fragmentary and violent, yet remain deeply influential in relation to the contemporary political and cultural concerns of an entire implicated generation. In rethinking childhood in this way, against its dominant treatment as solely the traumatic site for later adult anxieties over identity and memory, and by acknowledging the irreversible incursion of public politics into the domestic space of the home, this accent on the agency of the childhood experience thus also allows Markovitch to undermine the contemporary societal emphasis on a hereditary sense of

victimhood. While the film often technically foregrounds Cecilia's perspective, emphasizing the child as the protagonist of the story and fuelling any affective attachment the viewer may generate with her heightened sensorial experience of the violence and repression of the era, there does, however, remain a conclusive limit to our understanding of the very personal and private experiences presented on screen. Through her semi-autobiographical child protagonist, Markovitch stakes out an independent position in the present, acknowledging the true political and affective weight of this past yet refusing to be confined by it; as a member, that is, of a distinct and independent generation, and, ultimately, as an individual and discrete part of any such reductive attempt at collectivity.

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<sup>i</sup> The sun, officially known as the Sol de Mayo, distinguishes the dictatorship's 'bandera de guerra' from the Montoneros' flag, 'El Belgrano', named after Manuel Belgrano, the designer of the flag in 1812. Since 1985, the former has been the official flag of Argentina.

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<sup>ii</sup> Routinely practised during the Dirty War in Argentina, the *vuelos de muerte* were a strategic form of disappearing the bodies of militants. Detainees were drugged, stripped, placed into aeroplanes, then dropped, mid-flight and in darkness, into the Río de la Plata. Bodies were often found washed up on the banks of the Río, as in the infamous case of the two French nuns, Alice Domon and Léonie Duquet. See Feld (2012) for a detailed study.

<sup>iii</sup> Garibotto also draws a parallel on the level of content: from the children and teenagers appearing in *La historia oficial* and Héctor Olivera's *La noche de los lápices* (*Night of the Pencils* 1986) during the immediate aftermath of the democratic transition; through the young adult documentary makers in the 1990s; then culminating in recent explorations of this past from an adult perspective through films such as *Los rubios* and Nicolás Prividera's *M* (2007).

<sup>iv</sup> In particular, Stiegler goes beyond the experience of mass-media and distinguishes cinema as merely a 'distinctive shift in the history [that] partakes in the [...] "exteriorization of memory" from primitive tools through writing to analogue and digital recording' (Roberts 2006: 60).

<sup>v</sup> Both Landsberg and Hirsch draw on Kaja Silverman's discussion of 'heteropathic' identification and 'idiopathic' identification (1996): the former as an understanding of the other's position *as* other, in which the 'subject identifies at a distance from his or her proprioceptive self'; the latter as a complete, unmediated identification with the other, instigating an 'absorption of another self by one's own' (1996: 23).