

Article

# What Lies in the Gutter of a Traumatic Past: *Infancia clandestina* [Clandestine Childhood], Animated Comics, and the Representation of Violence

María Ghiggia

Independent Researcher, La Crosse, WI 54601, USA; ghiggia.maria@gmail.com

Received: 11 December 2017; Accepted: 1 March 2018; Published: 6 March 2018

**Abstract:** This essay focuses on the animated comics in the representation of violence in Benjamín Ávila's *Infancia clandestina* [Clandestine Childhood] (2011), a cinematic narrative of the seventies in Argentina. Drawing from animation and comic studies and adopting a formalist approach, the following analysis proposes ways in which the remediation of comics in the film underscores traumatic aspects of state terror and revolutionary violence and the problematic intergenerational transmission of memory of the 1970s–1980s militancy. Specifically, I comment on how the switch from photographic film to the animated frames draws attention to the blank space between the frames and thereby hints at the traumatic in what is left out, repressed, or silenced. While the gaps resist the forward motion of closure, paradoxically they allow for the suture of the frames/fragments in a postmemorial narrative, although not without a trace of the traumatic. Finally, extending the concept of the gutter as a liminal space, I analyze the connection between the animated scenes representing violence and the testimonial and documentary elements placed in the closing titles, a connection that asserts the autobiographical component of the film and enacts the conflictive character of intergenerational memory.

**Keywords:** comics; violence; Argentine film; children of the disappeared

---

It is a rainy night in 1975 in Argentina. A young couple and their seven-year-old child get off a bus and hastily walk back to their home on a quiet street in a city neighborhood. As the mother rushes to unlock the door, the father spots a quickly approaching car. An arm protrudes from the car and starts shooting. Having been warned by her husband, the woman pushes the child down to the sidewalk. At this moment, the live-action film abruptly switches into an animated sequence that alternates between frames of the adults shooting back at the car and close-ups of the terrified child. Eventually, the car drives away, and the shooting dies out. The last frame in the animated sequence is a still shot taken from above, with the camera circling around. It shows the child lying with his face down on the sidewalk and the parents crouching beside him. A yellow thread emerging from below the child's waist meets a red thread pouring out of the father's knee. So begins *Infancia Clandestina* [Clandestine Childhood] (2011), a film that adopts the point of view of a child named Juan to tell the story of the son of revolutionary militants in the 1970s in Argentina. In 1979, after spending four years in exile, the boy and his baby sister return to the country with their parents, who, along with other militants, launch a counteroffensive against the repressive military junta that ruled Argentina between 1976 and 1983.

The shootout described above is one of three scenes in the film in which the most violent, most traumatizing moments in Juan's story are represented through a hybrid of animation and comics. In her analysis of Spiegelman's *Maus*, Marianne Hirsch interprets the "bleeding" in Art Spiegelman's subtitle of *Maus I* ("My father bleeds history") as a metaphor for "loss" in the intergenerational

transmission of traumatic events and collective tragedies (Hirsch 2012, p. 34). As has been noted, in the last frame of the first sequence of animated comics in *Infancia clandestina* the red (blood) meeting yellow (urine) can be interpreted as “a similar metaphor” for “this [other] traumatic intergenerational legacy” in this cinematic narrative by a son of militants committed to armed struggle in the sixties and seventies in Argentina (Maguire 2017, p. 138). Taking a closer look at this last frame, one can observe that the yellow thread of urine, symbolizing fear, meets blood red *in the space between the sidewalk tiles*. Blood oozing from the father’s wound, a word etymologically associated with trauma, runs *in between the tiles*. That liminal space resembles a gutter in comics, the blank space between panels. I contend that the last frame in the opening scene of *Infancia clandestina* offers a self-reflexive commentary on its intermediality, drawing attention to the gutter and underscoring how the remediation of comics hints at the traumatic character of violence in the seventies in Argentina within intergenerational memory.<sup>1</sup>

The gutter has been theorized in comics studies in connection to trauma as the space of the Real (Ault 2000; Chute 2016), “not the actual space of non-representation” but “instead the space that *figures* some representation or narrative action left out” (Chase 2012, p. 113). Steve McCloud defines the gutter as the space in which “closure” takes place, the process by which readers fill in the gaps, imagining the transitions between two frames (McCloud 2008, p. 63). Referencing Eisenstein’s discussion of montage, Gregory Chase indicates a parallel between comics and film based on both these media’s dependence “on closure through a mechanism of non-representation (for film; the cut; for comics, the gutter) through repetition” (Chase 2012, p. 124). While McCloud does not problematize closure, other critics warn against the illusion of filling the void and highlight the persistence of a “residual trace” (Ault 2000, p. 126), a reminder of “the ever-present threat of the Real” (Chase 2012, p. 114). Likewise, while McCloud interprets closure as a forward motion, Chase points out the gutter’s resistance to it (Chase 2012, p. 115).

Adopting a formalist approach to the animated comics in *Infancia clandestina*, this analysis illuminates the memory processes at work in the construction of this posttraumatic cinematic narrative. The switch from the photographic film to the animated comics calls attention to the gaps between the frames, and by doing this, it hints at the traumatic in what is left out, lost, repressed, or silenced in the violent scenes. The remediation of comics stages a resistance to the forward motion in the “jumpy” feel of the animated frames. Paradoxically, it is the stillness and the void of the gaps between the frames (the gutters) that enable the narrative in the film to move forward in attempting to suture the wounds from the past. If the animated frames can be interpreted as mediating personal, collective, and cultural memories of the violence in the 70s, the gaps between the frames resist closure and point to the traumatic as a residue or trace. This paradox resonates with Hirsch’s characterization of postmemory as “an uneasy oscillation between continuity and rupture . . . a structure of inter- and transgenerational return of traumatic knowledge and embodied experience” (Hirsch 2012, p. 6).

The incorporation of comics in *Infancia clandestina* could be seen against a background of cases of intermediality in other narratives that deal with the remembrance of collective tragedies and traumatic events. As intermedial representational technologies that combine text and images, print comics and graphic narratives have gained much popularity and recognition in recent decades, contributing to and benefitting from what W. J. T. Mitchell terms the “pictorial turn” (Heer and Worcester 2009, p. xi). Spiegelman’s *Maus* is arguably the most globally renowned example of a work that uses comics to represent historical trauma. Despite initial objections, it has become clear that, as a recipient of a Pulitzer Prize, *Maus* set the stage for the production of graphic memoirs, graphic novels, and documentary

---

<sup>1</sup> David Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin define remediation as “the formal logic by which new media refashion prior media forms” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p. 273). The term not only applies to new technologies, however, but is broadly understood as “the mediation of remediation,” a process in which “[m]edia are continually commenting on, reproducing, and replacing each other” (Bolter and Grusin 1999, p. 55).

comics.<sup>2</sup> The pictorial turn has extended its influence across national borders and cultures. As Chiara De Cesari and Ann Rigney point out, “globalized communication” allows for the circulation of “the modes and aesthetics of remembrance practiced around the globe and the discourses informing them” (De Cesari and Rigney 2014, p. 12).

The emergence of comics and graphic art as media to interrogate the traumatic past of political violence and state terror in the Southern Cone can be partly attributed to these global trends.<sup>3</sup> Jorge Catalá Carrasco, Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer attribute the suitability of comics as “mediums or technologies of memory” to their formal features which have led to “the development of a series of visual techniques that enable the rendering of memory (or memories) in distinct and often sophisticated ways” (Catalá Carrasco et al. 2017, p. 5). Besides *Infancia clandestina*, other postdictatorship works that employ comics in approaching traumatic aspects of the past are *Historietas por la identidad* [Comics for Identity]<sup>4</sup>, *Zombies en la Moneda* [Zombies in La Moneda] (2009), Roberto Santullo and Matías Bergara’s *Acto de guerra* [Act of War] (2010)<sup>5</sup>, and Carlos Trillo and Lucas Varela’s *La herencia del coronel* [The Colonel’s Legacy] (2010). Catalá Carrasco, Drinot, and Scorer point out two examples of transmediality in postdictatorship Argentina that instantiate comics “as sites of memory beyond the page” (Catalá Carrasco et al. 2017, p. 16). Both works remediate motifs, characters, and scenes from comics by Héctor G. Oesterheld, a major figure in Argentine and Latin American comics who was disappeared by the military junta in 1978.<sup>6</sup> The first is Félix Saborido’s “¿DONDE ESTA OESTERHELD?” [‘Where is Oesterheld?’], a poster that shows a crowd composed of Oesterheld’s characters with a banner denouncing the artist’s disappearance. The other work, by artist Lucila Quieto, combines scenes from Oesterheld’s comics series *Sargento Kirk* with photographs of the 1969 uprising in Córdoba.

Discussions on intermediality in postdictatorship narratives in South America concern themselves with the increasing mass-media dissemination of images of collective tragedies, the effect of that dissemination on the remembrance of these traumatic events, and more specifically a “deterritorialization” of images (Andermann 2012; King 2013). Jens Andermann focuses on “the tension between static photographic image and the moving cinematic image” in posttraumatic autobiographical and autofictional documentaries in Argentina (Andermann 2012, p. 178). Andermann sees a productive form of deterritorialization in “the cinematic chronotope” that “mobilizes and itinerates a melancholy caught up in monumental immobility” (Andermann 2012, p. 178). In his analysis of literary narratives in postdictatorship Brazil, Edward King points out the “tensions between text and image,” which reveal an uneasiness with the growing “mediation of memory” and “the blurring of the boundaries between individual and collective memory, key processes” in Hirsch’s postmemory and Alison Landsberg’s prosthetic memory (King 2013, p. 88). Hirsch invests “photographic images,” especially family photographs, with a form of “affective” or “affiliative memory” that “re-embod[ies]” the past and “address[es] the spectator’s own bodily memory”

<sup>2</sup> Other often cited graphic works are Marjane Satrapi’s *Persepolis: The Story of a Childhood* (2000–2003) and Joe Sacco’s comics journalism, including *Palestine* (1996) and *Footnotes in Gaza* (2009).

<sup>3</sup> In Argentina, a major incentive for the production of graphic narratives examining aspects that had been previously silenced was a shift in human rights discourses and memory politics after the economic and political crisis of 2001 (Fernández 2016, pp. 193–94).

<sup>4</sup> *Historietas por la identidad* is a series of comic strips by various artists based on the testimonies of siblings of individuals who were taken as infants from their biological mothers and given away by the military during the Argentine 1976–1983 dictatorship. Andy Riva, who created the animated comics for *Infancia clandestina*, collaborated in this project sponsored by the human rights organization Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo [Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo]. See (Asociación de Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and Biblioteca Nacional 2015).

<sup>5</sup> *Acto de guerra*, a collection of stories based on testimonies of armed struggle in Uruguay, presents a more critical outlook on revolutionary organizations than the Argentine film by addressing controversial issues such as members who acted as informants to the military and were seen as traitors.

<sup>6</sup> Héctor G. Oesterheld was a member of Montoneros, as were his four daughters, also victims of the 1976–1983 dictatorship’s brutal repression. His most famous character, “El Eternauta,” the eponymous character from the comics series of the same name, became a symbol of resistance.

(Hirsch 2012, pp. 38–39). King, on the other hand, argues for a different form of affect in the deterritorialization of images in image-texts (graphic narratives) that responds to “a desire to explore affective unbindings and reconfigurations rather than” “re-individualization” (King 2013, p. 97).

The focus of the current article is the effect of the interaction between the formal features of comics and film on the production of meaning in the remembrance of state terror and political violence in Argentina. As in Andermann’s study, the contrast between stillness and motion plays an essential role in the remediation of comics in *Infancia clandestina*. However, rather than monumentalization, the stillness in the gaps between the animated frames points to the traumatic as something that has been left out or silenced in this narrative about the recent past in Argentina. In part, it could be argued that, as a distancing device, the animated comics may engage viewers by virtue of a form of affect understood as “intensity” that differs from emotion and “affective memory” (King 2013, p. 89). Yet this film still relies on “affective memory” in its inclusion of autobiographical family photographs as “structures” of postmemory (Hirsch 2012, p. 33).

*Infancia clandestina* is the work of director Benjamín Ávila, whose mother was a disappeared member of Montoneros, a revolutionary organization that originated as the left-leaning faction of peronismo [Peronism], a political movement founded by Argentine president Juan Domingo Perón. In composing the story, the director (born 1972) drew from his childhood experience. He is between the generation of his militant mother and that of children who were too young to remember the 1970s or were born after the dictatorship. Like the characters in the film, after some years in exile in Brazil, Mexico, and Cuba, Ávila returned to Argentina with his mother and her Montonero militant partner; both were engaged in the counteroffensive against the military regime (Kairuz 2012). Juan’s birthday party, his grandmother’s secret and unexpected visit, and the child’s close and loving relationship with his parents were all part of Ávila’s experience (*Revista Cabal* 2012). Just as with the child protagonist, as the son of a guerrilla in the Argentina of 1979, Ávila had to be careful about not giving away his real identity and endangering his family and himself.

On the other hand, *Infancia clandestina* is not strictly autobiographical. Whereas Ávila was seven years old when he returned to Argentina, the child character in the film is twelve. Neither the “real” name (Juan, after Juan Domingo Perón) nor the alternate name the parents select for their child to use as part of his underground identity (Ernesto, after Ernesto “Che” Guevara) matches the director’s name. As has been pointed out, the film’s “representational regime” is fictional, “with actors playing all roles and the action firmly set in the historical past of 1979” (Thomas 2015, p. 237). The director was interested in creating a story that was not centered on himself. In an interview he states that he needed to gain distance, that “quería correr[se] del centro” [‘he wanted to step aside’], an expression that implies the displacement or decentering of the self that is enacted in the story by the child’s dual identity (Kairuz 2012). While Juan’s life with his militant family seems closer to Ávila’s own clandestine childhood, Juan’s alternate identity as Ernesto provides an outlet for the creative impulse. The coming-of-age archetype with its conventions serves as the model to invent situations and characters such as María, Ernesto’s school friend and his first love. The narrative moves between these two stories with the child struggling to keep his two worlds separate and to balance the risks of his childhood as the son of revolutionaries under the military regime with his role as a somewhat ordinary school boy who falls for a friend’s sister (María). Ávila intended this parallel story to be a way of emphasizing the domestic and ordinary despite the violence: “Because of the violence in Juan’s world, the outside world had to have the same weight just to push Juan to the side” (*Director Talk* 2013).

The presence of testimonial and documentary elements at the end of the film, however, suggests an unwillingness to relinquish the autobiographical dimension completely. Both the dedication to Ávila’s mother and the family photographs in the closing titles encourage the spectator to reconsider the story in light of the autobiographical connection. The photographs allow for the possibility of analyzing the film in terms of memory by pointing to the director’s childhood and introducing “a trace of the present-ness into the film (as they are now objects of memory examined from a present vantage point)” (Thomas 2015, p. 241). As a work in which personal, cultural, and collective memories of the

seventies' militancy intersect, the film draws attention to its representational and aesthetic choices, particularly regarding the portrayal of violence.<sup>7</sup> To this day, revolutionary violence remains one of the most controversial issues about the seventies in Argentina, and it constitutes an arena of contestation in the construction of memories of this period. The revision of political violence in the 1970s demands an examination that avoids mystification or demonization of it. While still defending the convictions and commitment to social justice of their generation, some former militants denounce the militarization of organizations such as Montoneros and the irresponsibility of their leaders, abandonment of politics in favor of violence, and refusal to accept failure.<sup>8</sup> In the case of children of former militants, stances in regard to their parents' militancy are far from monolithic, with some being more overtly critical than others.

Whether *Infancia clandestina* is approached as primarily fictional or autobiographical has consequences for how the film in general and the animated scenes have been critically received. The animated scenes in Ávila's film have been used in support of arguments that revolve around two aspects of the film. Some critics focus on the construction of the child's viewpoint and the contribution of the animated frames as a way of foregrounding the "alterity" of the child's gaze in the representation of violence (Thomas 2015; Maguire 2017). The other aspect that has been discussed extensively is the representation of the guerrilla and revolutionary organizations in Argentina and the endorsement of an image of their militancy as heroic and idealistic (Aguilar 2013; Garibotto 2015).<sup>9</sup> While these readings acknowledge to various degrees the autobiographical and documentary elements, they downplay them in favor of a view of the film as a fictional account of the seventies in which the child is a symbolic figure whose conflict symbolizes the "central conflict within the militant groups of that period, namely the tension between the pleasures of everyday life and sacrifice to a form of militant action that could result in death" (Aguilar 2013, p. 22).<sup>10</sup>

These articles that direct their attention to the representation of militancy make a much-needed contribution to the study of *Infancia clandestina* by contextualizing the discussion within memory politics and within Argentine politics of the time. Placing the film in its local historical and political contexts elucidates aspects that are presented vaguely in this historically-based film, such as the adult characters' views toward the armed struggle within guerrilla organizations.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, while recognizing the relevance of *Infancia clandestina* as a cultural artifact that contributes to local debates on the recent past and whose production benefited from the political agenda and cultural initiatives in the 2010s, it is necessary as well to consider the reception of the film in global contexts. *Infancia clandestina* was also meant to be watched by audiences outside Argentina and to represent the country in the competition for Best Foreign Film at the Academy Awards. Movie reviews in English gravitated toward the child protagonist, his emotions, and his struggle to negotiate the dangers of his life as the child of militants with his childhood as a schoolboy.<sup>12</sup>

Ávila's film has been discussed in relation to Luis Puenzo's *La historia oficial* [*The Official Story*] (1985), the Oscar-winning film in which the disappeared are represented as victims, an image that became the hegemonic memory of the 1980s with the return to democratic rule in the country and the human rights organizations' fight for justice against the crimes of the military regime. The emblematic theory of the "two demons" (the military junta and the guerrillas) put forward by the CONADEP's report *Nunca más* [Never again] further cemented the representation of the disappeared as victims by

<sup>7</sup> To prepare for their roles the adult actors consulted former Montonero members. See (Pérez Zabala 2012).

<sup>8</sup> See (Elgueta 2013).

<sup>9</sup> Gonzalo Aguilar stresses "the idyllic" in the representation of the guerrilla figure through the lens of the child (Aguilar 2013, p. 26). Victoria Garibotto discusses the "iconizing" of an "archaic" image of the militancy from the 1970s through the child's romanticizing gaze (2015).

<sup>10</sup> See (Garibotto 2015, p. 266).

<sup>11</sup> See (Aguilar 2013, pp. 23–25) for an excellent discussion of different perspectives on this topic as represented in *Infancia clandestina*, including the confrontation between Juan's mother (Charo/Cristina) and grandmother (Amalia).

<sup>12</sup> See (Young 2012; Dargisjan 2013).

characterizing the violence of the seventies as “excesses” in the confrontation between two forces.<sup>13</sup> Not until the 1990s, when discussions of the militancy of the disappeared began, did the figure of the militant emerge and gain more visibility. While this figure challenged the demonization of the revolutionary organizations, groups within human rights organizations promoted a view of the militants as heroic, idealistic youth. Discourses on militancy and heroism were also encouraged in the 2000s by the human rights policies adopted by administrations of Argentine presidents Néstor and Cristina Kirchner. Ávila’s ideological alignment with these policies has been noted in the criticism of the film.<sup>14</sup> While the director’s political sympathies may be a bias in the representation of left-wing militancy in the film, it should be observed that the reception of a work is not limited to authorial intentions. This seems important when analyzing the animated comics in *Infancia clandestina*.

Released in 2011, Ávila’s film, unlike *La historia oficial*, is not mainly concerned with the denunciation of the crimes of the military regime but with the experience and memories of children whose parents were militants. The focus of the narrative is the child; it is the child’s viewpoint the film adopts, for the most part, in relating the story.<sup>15</sup> Spectators sympathize with the child and his emotions. There are some scenes in the live-action film in which the child’s gaze may contribute to an idealized and iconized image of the militancy.<sup>16</sup> In a festive gathering of the militants before a secret operation against the military, for example, we see Juan watch the young militants. His eyes convey a certain fascination in the way he looks at the militants, including his parents. Juan’s reverie is heightened by his mother’s singing of a song that celebrates the idealism of youth. However, it is more difficult to make this case when it comes to the animated frames in which Juan appears as a witness to or a victim of acts of violence in which his parents and his uncle engage with death squads. Adopting the child’s perspective, these scenes encourage the viewer’s empathy with his distress and fear, emotions that are encoded by the cartoon drawings in the style of anime. As Sarah Thomas argues, it is in the animated scenes portraying violent events where the film most strongly encourages character-viewer identification (Thomas 2015, p. 247).

The arguments in favor of seeing these violent animated frames as serving a purely “auratic” and “symbolic” purpose invoke a “non-indexical” quality of cartoons.<sup>17</sup> Gonzalo Aguilar argues that the symbolic representation “subsumes the trauma of violence and defeat” (Aguilar 2013, p. 24). While I agree that the film is vague on debates and ideological views of the guerrilla organizations and does not question them or address their failure, I focus on the child and the spectator’s identification with him. Viewing the film from this perspective, I propose that the shift from the live-action film to the animated frames highlights rather than suppresses the traumatic. Without spectacularizing violence, the media hybridization draws attention to violence, framing it. Rather than placing the focus on the content of the animated frames, the sudden switch in representational devices stirs in the spectator the feeling that something is left out in the spaces between the frames. It ultimately encourages the spectator to interrogate issues related to violence beyond state repression and resistance, calling to mind complexities and ethical ambiguities. In a way, these scenes underscore the gray zones of a story that draws on personal and collective memories of militancy. The remediation of comics in the film as

<sup>13</sup> CONADEP, Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas [National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons], was an Argentine organization commissioned by President Raúl Alfonsín to investigate the violation of human rights by the military regime during the 1976–1983 dictatorship.

<sup>14</sup> (Aguilar 2013, p. 19; Garibotto 2015, p. 268).

<sup>15</sup> See Thomas for a detailed discussion of focalization and exceptions to this in the adoption of the child’s gaze in the film.

<sup>16</sup> Some images in the animated scenes could be interpreted as contributing to the “iconization” of 1970s militancy as heroic and/or sacrificial; these are two famous photographs of Ernesto “Che” Guevara, the Cuban revolutionary and guerrilla leader: the iconic photograph of Che with the beret taken by Alberto Korda in 1960 and the photograph of Che’s corpse taken by Freddy Alborta in 1967. However, despite the symbolic character these images have acquired in cultural remembrance, overlapped with cartoons representing tragic events in the child’s life, they stress the consequences of violence for the lives of ordinary people, including children.

<sup>17</sup> Garibotto takes the term “auratic” from Walter Benjamin to characterize the child’s gaze in the contemplation of the militants in the film (Garibotto 2015, p. 264). For a different view on comics as “indexical,” see (Chute 2016, p. 21).

an aesthetics of remembrance points to the most traumatic aspects of this experience while it eludes any direct criticism not only of the 1970s militancy and revolutionary violence but also of the militants in their role as parents. In sum, the animated scenes highlight the complexity of personal, collective, and cultural remembrance, especially in cases of traumatic experiences.

In *Infancia clandestina*, Ávila uses multiple mediations in telling the story of his clandestine childhood: photographic or live-action film, animation in a style between motion comics or animation comics and anime (Japanese-style animation), graphic art in the form of drawings simulating photographs, and an animated segment that emulates a hand-drawn video featuring child-like drawings. These mediations represent distinct instances of graphic art and visual media that play different roles in the film. What sets apart the animated frames on which I focus here is the way the film remediates the conventions and aesthetics of comics in representing violent events in Juan's story. In all three scenes there is a sudden, unexpected shift from the photographic film to animation that occurs in the most dramatic moments and renders the child paralyzed with fear.

The first sequence of animated scenes is a shootout, as described previously, in which the boy's parents are attacked by members of a death squad. The text superimposed over the last frame provides a chronology that starts in 1974 with Perón's death and the persecution of militants by death squads<sup>18</sup>; it continues with the military coup in 1976 and the beginning of state terror and ends in 1979 with the Montoneros's return from exile to launch the Counteroffensive against the military junta. This first scene is set in 1975.

The second animated sequence is part of a nightmare that Juan has after learning that his beloved Uncle Beto has died. Juan's dream, which begins with live-action film, recreates in part what his father told him about his uncle's passing. Juan walks into a room in the house and finds his uncle sitting in a chair, smoking. They start a conversation that references a previous talk, a sort of initiation ritual in which Uncle Beto shares with his nephew his secrets on how to "deal" with girls. The photographic film shifts into animation just after they are ambushed by men in uniform and Uncle Beto pushes Juan down to protect him. What follows is a recreation of Juan's father's account of Uncle Beto's death. As Juan gazes in horror, Uncle Beto hugs a police officer and detonates a grenade as he pushes both of them into the back of his van. The scene that follows returns to the photographic film and shows Juan waking up in a state of shock with his mother trying to comfort him.

The third and last animated sequence is the most complex one, since it mixes images from different parts of the film, enacting a displacement of images that overlaps the present with the past. It appears after Juan learns from the news on television that his father has been killed. While the house where he lives with his family is raided by the death squads, Juan and his baby sister hide in the back room as his parents had instructed him. Once again, animation intervenes at the peak of the tension, in this case as the door is forced open by the death squad. At this moment, a flurry of images from previous parts of the film are remediates into animated frames and alternate with other frames that portray the death squads capturing Juan's mother and driving Juan away in a car.

The animated sequences in *Infancia clandestina* can be described as a hybrid between animation comics or motion comics and cell animation in the style of anime or limited animation. Motion comics is itself a hybrid that "combines formal attributes associated with comics and animation" such as still frames and panning or zooming, but, "the particular attributes remediates tend to differ on a case-by-case basis, making defining the medium's essential characteristics difficult" (Jeffries 2017, p. 203). Another feature is the expansion of individual panels into a full shot or remediation of single panels into single frames. Drew Morton points out formal affinities between motion comics and limited animation, which include the recycling of drawings, camera movements such as panning or zooming

---

<sup>18</sup> The groups attacking the militants in 1974 are identified in the film rather vaguely as "grupos parapoliciales" ['death squads']; there is no direct reference to the Alianza Anticomunista Argentina [Argentine Anticomunist Alliance], known as "Triple A," a far-right death squad created in 1973 and led by José López Rega, Minister of Social Welfare under Juan Perón until 1974 and then under Perón's wife and Vice-President, Estela Martínez de Perón, better known as Isabel Perón (1974–1976).

used to create the illusion of movement, and voiceover narration or dialogue between characters (Morton 2015, p. 351). In *Infancia clandestina*, rather than panning or zooming, animation relies more on a montage of still frames. Likewise, anime or Japanese animation features limited animation techniques, with lower cell count and plenty of still shots or images. Of particular interest to the aesthetics of the cartoons in the film is anime's emphasis on the characters' emotions as communicated through iconic facial expressions.

As I highlighted briefly above, the closing frame in the first scene in *Infancia clandestina* presents an image that condenses key points in my argument about the use of animation frames in the representation of violent scenes and its expressive potential to underscore traumatic aspects of violence in 1970s Argentina. The last frame in the dramatic shootout with blood running between the sidewalk tiles draws attention to the gutter, an element of comics that helps explain how comics and film convey motion and temporality differently: "Since comics consist entirely of static images and cinema features images that move, their respective relationships to time could hardly be more different" (Jeffries 2017, p. 18).

One concern when incorporating comics into film is how to remediate stasis as movement. The gutter, the space between the panels, is essential in understanding how time and motion are expressed spatially in comics as opposed to film in which the illusion of movement is produced with the projection of one frame after another. Bridging the temporal gaps and interpreting the relations between the panels is a process in which the comics reader plays an active role. This is what McCloud calls "closure" (McCloud 2008, p. 63). Therefore, it is incompleteness and rupture that define comics and give it a "staccato rhythm": "Comic panels fracture both time and space, offering a jagged, staccato rhythm of unconnected moments" (McCloud 2008, p. 67). In a similar way, Dru Jeffries illustrates the idea with an image he takes from David Carrier: "We construct a jumpy narrative, like a movie shown with the projector not quite in sync" (qtd. in (Jeffries 2017, p. 44)).

The animated frames representing violent events in *Infancia clandestina* draw attention to the gutter in the incorporation of comics into the film. It is the change of pace, an apparent contrast in the frame rate of the animated comics with that of the photographic film that produces an effect similar to that of a "jumpy narrative." In a regular speed film, images screened at a speed of twenty-four frames per second are perceived to be in continuous motion. This is what is known as "persistence of vision," the optical illusion by which the spectator interprets a sequence of still images as a continuous moving image. Thus, this speed renders the gaps between the frames as imperceptible. The switch from the photographic film to the animated frames emulates the incompleteness of comics; it hints at the gutter, the space between frames, which is still there but becomes invisible when each panel is remediated into a single frame in the film. By drawing attention to the gaps between the frames, the switch provokes an uneasy feeling that something has been left out in the montage. The absence/presence of the gutter in comics can be understood as "a mental negative space that is fueled with everything that isn't in the panels" (Marx 2007, p. 104).

Hillary Chute also understands the gutter in paradoxical terms, as a space between absence and presence, "both a space of stillness—a stoppage in the action, a gap—and a space of movement" (Chute 2016, p. 35). Chute's association of the gutter with stillness seems most relevant to my suggestions about the ways in which the change of pace in the violent scenes in *Infancia clandestina* makes the gutter stand out. This realization may lead to an exploration of the scenes in terms of what they hint at and what they leave out in the representation of violence. Chute goes on to propose that pace is crucial in a "work that approaches trauma, and seeks to approach histories of trauma" (Chute 2016, p. 37). According to Michael Levine, slowing down is what Spiegelman does in *Maus*. Interestingly, Levine chooses a cinematic metaphor to characterize Spiegelman's comics as a "slow-motion picture," an art between drawing and film, that sets in motion the static images at a slower pace than twenty-four frames per second, exposing the "interspaces," the gutters (Levine 2002, p. 320).

What links Chute's thoughts on the gutter even more closely to trauma, though, is the connection she proposes with the Lacanian Real: "To the extent that comics' formal proportions put into play what we might think of as the unresolvable interplay of elements of absence and presence,

we could understand the gutter space of comics to suggest a psychic order outside of the realm of symbolization—and therefore, perhaps, a kind of Lacanian Real” (Chute 2016, p. 17). In an endnote, Chute expands on this: “Alan Sheridan describes Lacan’s Real in language apposite to the gutter: ‘the ineliminable residue of all articulation, the foreclosed element, which may be approached, but never grasped’” (Chute 2016, p. 272 n. 36). Donald Ault further explores the connection between the gutter and the Lacanian Real: “What is left over, the remainder in the blank space between the panels, performs the disruptive function of the real. There is nothing in this space, but it introduces discontinuities into the spaces of representation and allows the panels to assert themselves as fragments” (Ault 2000, p. 125). For Ault, the possibility of fixing or “suturing” this rupture through the symbolic and the imaginary in the process of reading is problematized by what Lacan calls the “gaze”: “in our relation to things, in so far as this relation is constituted by way of vision, and ordered by the figures of representation, something slips, passes . . . and is always to some degree eluded in it—that is what we call the gaze” (qtd. in Ault 126).

In *Infancia clandestina*, the switch from live-action film into the animated frames causes a disruption, intensified by the fact that it occurs *in media res*, at the highest peak of the dramatic tension in all three violent scenes, as I pointed out earlier. The second and third animated sequences contain discontinuities, expressed as the displacement of images that appear in other parts of the film. The last animated scene is probably the most complex and fragmentary. As mentioned before, the scene remediates, in the form of animation, some frames in the photographic film that appear earlier in the narrative, emulating the way flashbacks work. However, by suggesting that the change of pace or the “jumpiness” in these scenes might provoke in the viewer a feeling that something is missing, I do not point so much at these discontinuities within the sequences of animated frames. This feeling that something is lost could rather be interpreted as hinting at traumatic effects of the violence of the seventies in Argentina that cannot be accounted for because of the loss of life, the repressed, the forgotten, and the silenced. In pointing to the traumatic, the gutters alert us to its traces.

Just as in these violent scenes in which the representational medium underscores the gutter as a liminal or marginal space, the concept of the gutter can be used as an extended metaphor for the way *Infancia clandestina* is structured. In the organization of the film, the violent scenes fall into marginal spaces in the sense that, although they are not non-diegetic, they do not add much to the development of the narrative. This marginality, highlighted by the shift from the live-action film into animation, may be understood as an attempt on the part of the director to create a story that does not emphasize violence and horror as did earlier representations of state terror in the seventies. Violence is pushed to the side. In this sense, the violent scenes in themselves can be seen as gutters. Likewise, there are other elements in the film whose liminality is defined by their extradiegetic condition. As mentioned before, at the conclusion of the narrative, there is a dedication to the director’s mother, Sara Zermoglio, who was disappeared in 1979. Immediately after this frame, a collection of Ávila’s family photographs is screened alongside the closing titles. Echoing some scenes in the film that show Juan’s family engaged in very “ordinary” and domestic situations despite the constant tension and fears of being found and captured by the military regime, these photographs portray Ávila’s mother and Ávila himself as a child in similar scenarios. A few of the photographs show children playing at home and on the beach. One photograph features a birthday party, a memory that the director recreated in the story together with other autobiographical details. Photographs of Ávila’s mother carrying a child (his youngest brother) bear a strong resemblance to frames in the film that show the actress playing Juan’s mother carrying Juan’s baby sister.

The family photographs, along with the dedication and other paratexts such as interviews with the director and movie reviews, underline the autobiographical connection. Even though the narrative is set entirely in 1979 and includes no framing device or adult character that links the present with the past, the paratexts create the possibility of interpreting the film in relation to postmemory (Thomas 2015, pp. 239–40). For Hirsch, photographs play a fundamental role in linking present and past, life and death, first- and second-generation memory: “Photographs in their enduring ‘umbilical’

connection to life are precisely the medium connecting first- and second-generation remembrance, memory and postmemory . . . They affirm the past's existence and, in their flat two-dimensionality, they signal its unbridgeable distance" (Hirsch 2011, p. 23). Hirsch takes the image of the "umbilical cord" from Roland Barthes and his observations in *Camera Lucida* on photography as connected to life and death: "The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. . . . A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium, a skin I share with anyone who has been photographed" (Barthes [1980] 1981, pp. 80–81). The image of the "umbilical cord" and Hirsch's comment on its association with "life giving" and "maternity" (Hirsch 2011, p. 20) seem most appropriate and poignant when applied to Ávila's family photographs, particularly the photograph that portrays his mother pregnant with his youngest brother. Although Juan has a baby sister in the story, the abduction that occurs after the military ambushes the house at the end of the film coincides with the director's youngest brother's story.<sup>19</sup>

The inclusion of the dedication and the photographs in the closing titles makes a strong enough case for an interpretation of the film as autobiographical and as a work of memory. However, the film itself performs these connections in its aesthetic choices and its intermediality. It is important to notice that these photographs are placed against what appears as a cartoon wall; they are framed by an aesthetic of cartoons, which links them with the diegetic animated scenes representing violent, traumatizing events in Juan's story, including the forced disappearance of Juan's mother along with the baby. This is a concrete way in which the film can be said to stage the concept of postmemory, connecting Juan's story, based on Ávila's clandestine childhood, to Ávila's mother's story.

To re-evoked the closing frame in the first scene of the film, the connection between the photographs and the animated scenes representing violent events finds a metaphor in the image of the father's red blood meeting the child's yellow urine. As stated before, what underscores the traumatic character of the transmission of intergenerational memory of state terror and revolutionary violence is not just the bleeding, as in Spiegelman's tale of his father's survival, but rather the image of the blood running between the sidewalk tiles that resembles the gutter of comics. Both the photographs and the violent scenes can be seen to occupy a marginal space within the structure of the film. In this sense, they can both be understood as "gutters" in which the blood runs. As Thomas suggests, these photographs illustrate Barthes's *punctum* (Thomas 2015, p. 241). They are both reminders of life but, above all, of death and loss. In a similar way, the "jumpy" rhythm suggested by the pace in the screening of the animated comics insinuates that something is lost, left out in that representation. Rather than representing trauma, these scenes hint at the traumatic character of violence in this story that blends personal, collective, and cultural memories, by the son of a member of a guerrilla organization.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declares no conflict of interest.

## References

- Aguilar, Gonzalo. 2013. *Infancia clandestina* or the Will of Faith. *Journal of Romance Studies* 13: 17–31. [CrossRef]
- Andermann, Jens. 2012. Expanded Fields: Postdictatorship and the Landscape. *Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies* 21: 165–87. [CrossRef]
- Asociación de Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo, and Biblioteca Nacional. 2015. *Historietas por la identidad*. Edited by Judith Gociol. Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires: Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo. (In Argentina)
- Ault, Donald. 2000. 'Cutting Up' Again Part II: Lacan on Barks on Lacan. In *Analytical and Theoretical Approaches to Comics*. Edited by Anne Magnussen and Hans-Christian Christiansen. Copenhagen: Museum Tusulanum Press, pp. 123–39.

---

<sup>19</sup> Ávila's youngest brother was one of the babies kidnapped by the military and given to another family. His biological identity was revealed in 1984 thanks to Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo and their efforts to identify through DNA tests individuals who were taken from their mothers by the military during the 1976–1983 dictatorship.

- Barthes, Roland. 1981. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang. First published 1980.
- Bolter, Jay David, and Richard Grusin. 1999. *Remediation: Understanding New Media*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Catalá Carrasco, Jorge L., Paulo Drinot, and James Scorer, eds. 2017. *Comics and Memory in Latin America*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Chase, Gregory. 2012. 'In the Gutter': Comix Theory. *Studies in Comics* 3: 107–28.
- Chute, Hillary L. 2016. *Disaster Drawn: Visual Witness, Comics, and Documentary Form*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Dargisjan, Manohla. 2013. Raised by Political Activists in a Dictatorship's Shadow. Available online: <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/11/movies/clandestine-childhood-directed-by-benjamin-avila.html> (accessed on 7 October 2017).
- De Cesari, Chiara, and Ann Rigney. 2014. *Transnational Memory: Circulation, Articulation, Scales*. Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter.
- Director Talk. 2013. Clandestine Childhood/Benjamin Ávila. Available online: <http://earthwize.org/wordpress/directortalk/2013/02/08/clandestine-childhoodbenjamin-avila/> (accessed on 7 October 2017).
- Elgueta, Gloria y Claudia Marchant, ed. 2013. *Historia reciente y violencia política. Lucha Armada en la Argentina, la revista*. Santiago: Tiempo Robado.
- Fernández, Laura Cristina. 2016. La historieta como relato de un trauma social en América Latina: Los casos *Historietas por la Identidad* (Argentina) y *Acto de Guerra* (Uruguay). *Miguel Hernández Communication Journal* 7: 191–215. [CrossRef]
- Garibotto, Verónica Inés. 2015. Private Narratives and Infant Views: Iconizing 1970s Militancy in Contemporary Argentine Cinema. *Hispanic Research Journal* 16: 257–72. [CrossRef]
- Heer, Jeet, and Kent Worcester, eds. 2009. *A Comics Studies Reader*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2011. Mourning and Postmemory. In *Graphic Subjects: Critical Essays on Autobiography and Graphic Novels*. Edited by Michael A. Chaney. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, pp. 17–44.
- Hirsch, Marianne. 2012. *The Generation of Postmemory: Writing and Visual Culture after the Holocaust*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Infancia Clandestina [Clandestine Childhood]*. 2011. Directed by Benjamín Ávila. Buenos Aires: Historias Cinematográficas and Habitación 1520 Producciones.
- Jeffries, Dru. 2017. *Comic Book Film Style: Cinema at 24 Panels per Second*. Austin: University of Texas Press.
- Kairuz, Mariano. 2012. Esto es lo Que Creo. Available online: <https://www.pagina12.com.ar/diario/suplementos/radar/subnotas/8231-1802-2012-09-16.html> (accessed on 7 September 2017).
- King, Edward. 2013. Ekprhastic Anxiety and the Technological Mediation of Memory in Post-dictatorship Narratives from Brazil. *Journal of Romance Studies* 13: 88–98. [CrossRef]
- Levine, Michael G. 2002. Necessary Stains: Spiegelman's MAUS and the Bleeding of History. *American Imago* 59: 317–41. [CrossRef]
- Maguire, Geoffrey. 2017. *The Politics of Postmemory: Violence and Victimhood in Contemporary Argentine Culture*. Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- Marx, Christy. 2007. *Writing for Animation, Comics, and Games*. Amsterdam and Boston: Focal Press.
- McCloud, Scott. 2008. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers.
- Morton, Drew. 2015. The Unfortunates: Towards a History and Definition of the Motion Comic. *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 6: 347–66. [CrossRef]
- Pérez Zabala, Victoria. 2012. La Doble Vida de Juan. Available online: <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1508554-la-doble-vida-de-juan> (accessed on 10 October 2017).
- Revista Cabal. 2012. Entrevista a Benjamín Ávila, director de "Infancia clandestina". Available online: <http://www.revistacabal.coop/actualidad/entrevista-benjamin-avila-director-de-infancia-clandestina> (accessed on 7 September 2017).
- Thomas, Sarah. 2015. Rupture and Reparation: Postmemory, the Child Seer and Graphic Violence in *Infancia clandestina* (Benjamín Ávila, 2012). *Studies in Spanish and Latin American Cinemas* 12: 235–54. [CrossRef]
- Young, Neil. 2012. Clandestine Childhood: Cannes Review. Available online: <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/clandestine-childhood-cannes-review-327182> (accessed on 7 October 2017).

