The Official Story (*La historia oficial*, 1985)

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dir. Luis Puenzo; prod. Marcelo Piñeyro; screenplay Aida Bortnik, Luis Puenzo; photography Félix Monti; music Atilio Stampone. 35mm, color, 112 mins. Historias Cinematograficas Cinemania, Progress Communications, distrib. Almi Pictures.

Courtesy of the Everett Collection

The Official Story—which has itself become *the official* film for representing Argentina's emergence from the harrowing Dirty War (1976-83)—is a premiere example of melodrama functioning to both unearth and codify a nation's history through recourse to the personal and affective spheres of the family. During the Dirty War, thousands of people were detained, tortured, murdered, or simply disappeared. The film, released only two years after the war's end, captured the national moment through melodrama. Luis Puenzo, director and co-screenwriter, wrote the screenplay in secret, and had plans to shoot his film clandestinely had the junta not ended.

The film tracks the story of a schoolteacher, Alicia (played by Norma Aleandro), who begins to suspect that her adopted daughter, Gaby (Analia Castro), is the child of a *desaparecida*, and that her own husband, Roberto (Héctor Alterio), might be complicit not just with the baby's abduction, but with the regime itself. The story meticulously tracks her transformation from steely woman with tunnel vision—unaware of the devastating events happening around her—into a softer, more receptive woman, willing to place her own family on the line to do the »right thing.« At the same time, the film eschews a black-and-white solution, aptly and hauntingly depicting—in fact, foreshadowing—just how impossible it would become for the nation to extricate itself from the trauma that, by 1985, it was just barely waking from. Through the evasion of narrative resolution, the use of dramatic irony, and the coding of settings with character and analogies of home and homeland, the film presents the personal story as the national story in a gripping, impactful way.

Though melodrama sometimes aims to resolve its narrative conflicts by the film's end—»putting things back in their place«—it also aptly engages viewers' emotions by

exploiting the wish for a return to how things »used to be,« only to elicit tears at the recognition of that impossibility (Neale). *The Official Story* opts to end at this height of pathos: It closes on an image of Gaby rocking back and forth, as if sitting on the rocking chair of time, her nuclear family left uncertain, and her own destiny unresolved. The filmmakers could not have predicted how long the country would continue to reel from the violence that had torn families apart. And yet, in this one image, overlaid with the soundtrack of a children's song introduced at the film's start by five-year old Gaby herself—»*en el país de no me acuerdo/doy dos pasitos y me pierdo*« (»in the land of I don't remember/I take two steps and I get lost«)—the destruction of the social fabric and the evisceration of collective memory are heartbreakingly made tangible, melodramatically so.

Melodrama is a medium that often nods toward irony—and the first, heavy-handed irony of the film is that Alicia is a teacher of history. The Spanish title, *La historia oficial*, maintains a dual meaning that its English translation fails to capture: *historia* means both story and history. She is a punctilious teacher who sticks to history as it is recorded in textbooks, hence the »official« of the film's title. As the film progresses, however, Alicia comes to terms with the reality of the official history unraveling around her. The newspaper clippings about the disappearances, which her students pin to the classroom's blackboard, eventually make their way into Alicia's purse: signaling a shift from her original rejection to her acceptance. Alicia, therefore, here echoes the predicament of a better-known »Alice« who follows the rabbit and enters a world that should be the stuff of fearsome fantasy—though in Alicia's case, it is not. The film, like the beloved children's story *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, thus also announces itself as political allegory. Melodrama shares with allegory the penchant for probing the surface of reality in search for a deeper meaning (Brooks). Throughout its sentimental story of a mother looking for her daughter's true origins, *La historia oficial* excels at quietly weaving together clues and codes that implicate the various entities that colluded in orchestrating the horror that befell Argentina during the military junta. Some of this ciphering surely arose out of necessity: Although the junta was removed in 1982, the reprisals against those who spoke against it, or aimed to illuminate the atrocities it perpetrated, continued for years to come.

The wish for a »re-birth of the nation« that, like the film's protagonist, eventually embraces the truth, is coded in the setting of the classroom that conjures the literary and historical figureheads who epitomize a spirit of Argentine rebellion and independence (especially Juan Moreira and Mariano Moreno). The first of the characters to embody this fighting spirit in the narrative's present tense is Ana (played by Chunchuna Villafañe), one of Alicia's childhood friends, who single-handedly stands in for those victimized by the military regime. Ana has returned to Buenos Aires from exile to speak the truth: she was detained and tortured, then released and forced to flee. In like manner, the film presents us with an array of characters who in one way or another are implicated with the military junta: the general, the businessmen, the Americans, the priest, the wives who protect their husbands and their social status.

In melodrama, the home is a central character—a space of innocence that must be protected against tyranny. In this case, the home is where we gradually see truth enter to shatter the veneer of the happy nuclear family. First, it is Ana's testimony—told in Alicia's living room when a joyous evening suddenly turns somber. She tells Alicia about how she was kidnapped and then tortured. This exchange plants the first seed of

doubt regarding Gaby's parentage (the film's making coincides with the time the truth commissions in Argentina had just been formed).

In a later scene, a magician at Gaby's birthday party performs a disappearing act and seemingly tortures a white dove as children scream in horror, thus reminding the audience of the tragedy that befell Gaby's biological parents. This is one of many scenes that incrementally introduce the cruel realities of the socio-political landscape into the heart of Alicia's home. Over the course of the film, public and private spaces eventually collapse, culminating in Roberto's unbridled explosion. The violence he has tacitly supported is made manifest in the closing scenes of the film when the placid surface of the home shatters, just as the glass does when he strikes Alicia.

If Ana's visit to Alicia's house marks the start of the unraveling of the nuclear family from within its own home—a proxy for the nation itself—then the final step toward its eventual collapse occurs when Gaby's would-be-grandmother, Sara (played by Chela Ruíz), sits in the couple's living room with her protest sign tucked next to her, and Roberto is forced to meet face-to-face with the reality of what he has been a willing accomplice in: the destruction of other people's lives, other people's families, other people's homes. Like the newspaper clippings that eventually make their way into Alicia's purse, this moment marks Alicia's resolute act of acceptance and courage as she puts her own family's future on the line in service of truth. Alicia first encountered the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo on the streets, as if by surprise, and retreated away from the protests. These scenes were shot on location in the streets of Buenos Aires: these were actual protesters. In this way, the film invests in documenting and preserving the images of those fighting for the memory of a lost generation and for the restitution of their family members. Melodrama provides the film with the affective tissue for connecting fiction to reality, and for engaging an international audience in the act of witnessing a sliver of the injustices perpetrated. The audience understands these injustices, however, not just from their exposure to this history—but also, like Alicia learns, from the heart.

References

Brooks, Peter. 1976. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

Neale, Steve. 1986. »Melodrama and Tears.« *Screen* 27 (6): 6-23.