we haven't had time to be guilty: Youth Culture in Argentina

by Silvia Dellino
translated by Michael Hochman

"WE HAVEN'T HAD TIME TO BE GUILTY" - SECUESTRO (KIDNAP)

Three years after the recuperação of democracy in Argentina, this graffiti slogan was painted on the walls of Buenos Aires by the rock group Secuestro. In synthetic and eloquent prose, graffiti conveys various key elements of 1980s youth culture in Argentina, which - despite its denunciation by age - is lived as a site of languages, images and modes of participation which cut across all social practices. In the Latin American context, graffiti not only permits an analysis of youth culture in its use and appropriation of the media and of urban consumption practices, but also as a strategic site of survival and political action within the dictators. Thus, for example, the signature - SECUESTRO - naturalizes the denunciation of repression in the public space of a Buenos Aires street by superimposing upon it the rock concert, a recognized site of youth culture during the periods of greatest political vigilance.

Latin American Youth: From Modernization to Revolt

Latin American youth were protagonists in two major historical 'moments': the attempted social modernization implicit in the development model of the 1950s, and the economic crisis of the 1970s and '80s which showed the deficiencies of this project.

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Fito Paez

Youth were important in both moments by virtue of their numbers - Argentinean youth constitute 16% of the population and, of those, 92% live in urban centers - and because they were the first ones to be raised on modern forms of socialization where education, demographic control, and the passage from rural to industrialized economies were to be the transformative strategies for economic development. Youth showed high levels of political participation when the recuperação rendered impossible the trickle-down theory of economic distribution, and unemployment - aggravated by the over-population of the urban peripheries - brought down expectations of social mobility.

At the same time, youth became a social sector particularly affected by repression. Through long years of political instability, civil governments alternated with dictatorships which legitimated themselves, on the one hand, by the call to order and authority by conservative and liberal sectors and, on the other, by the elimination of political participation. Between 1976 and 1982, young Argentinians lived the systematic violence taking place in public spaces (streets, plazas, soccer stadiums, clubs, concert halls), while other sites of socialization were withdrawn. The violence directed towards youth was a constant feature of everyday life from the end of 1960s through to the 1980s. 87% of the disappeared were between the ages of 18-30. For example, there were the armed interventions into schools and universities which resulted in violence towards students following the disappearances (95% of the disappeared between 14-25 were students), and later there was the Guerra de Malvinas.

Four different groups were at the tables. After having spent some time gestating away (wearing down the side-walk) they came there for a drink. At one table was Adonis, a black male leader of the gaullists of deportations of his friends. The passion for soccer held by Adonis’ gaullists is equated by his passion for Salas music. When Adonis and his friends stand in a corner with a tape recorder, the rumble starts right there.

Salas rhythms are the best company for intense rumbo nights and aspiring evenings. They bring about a meaningful combination of first paced beat (toxic and foreword) with the slow warping of the hips. Shoulders match the beat while arms go up and down, and the dancing patterns are taken to swing around. Salas is combined with clapping and singing and with non-stop dancing journeys through songs that all of them know; songs about love, friendship, the barrio, the street, mother, friends, and priests.

One block ahead was the community room and the mini-soccer and basketball court. The court is surrounded by the communal room, by a wall of the public school and by the main road. On the sidewalk front walls of the communal room we could read graffiti written in English. "Push Rock not because like a song such place has a special site in your life, in my barrio’s heart that loves so many things and in this surprising host that amazes us everyday. (From "Cello, Cello Rumba")"

From the corner of the final block we looked towards a large dark area on our right: the swamps, better known as the motociclistas (bicycle thieves). We could not see what was going on in the darkness: but those around us swarmed, darted, lurked, and empty land plots there existed a noiseless street world ruled by violence. Bicycle thieves, fights, gun shots, revenge and drugs are a code of violence that is known by every inhabitant of these barrios. It is the other half of the barrio night that for me, as an outsider, was veiled. In the words of Paez: "out there you are first, you sharp at your die. There is not something like a quiet night. The street, as the salas singer Willy Colón puts it, is a "desert of surprise," a mysterious and dangerous world.

A few names, words and drawings on the walls cannot define a youth culture. However, when calls my attention is the exploratory and different character of 80’s graffiti shows from what was the graffiti pattern of a few years ago. During the 80’s a depoliticizalization of graffiti occurred. New social actors have taken over. These are informal groups of just individuals painting a spontaneous and intimate world on the walls.
with a cultural interchange based on certain publications and magazines. While the publications on the commercial circuit enjoy high circulation rates, a nascent genre or "nino" culture also emerges in this period with homemade magazines featuring poems, stories, and news of rock groups. These "nines" — often printed by mimeograph or photocopy-circulate through the entire country in parts and arresenal fairs. Through their reports, information and "fan mail," these publications — both commercial and arresenal alike — create a site for the acknowledgment and contestation of the deteriorating loved ones. Visible every Thursday at the historic site which has been the center of collective demonstrations since the Argentinian independence of 1810, this practice transformed the relationship between information and resistance in a way which was impossible for the largely clandestine political activism. Joined by the Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo to demonstrate for the kidnapped children — those born in captivity — the languages of the human rights organizations thus acquired a visible consistence. The visual element is strengthened by the images, drawings and silhouettes of the disappeared which were painted on the plaza and on the walls of all the houses in the country. This representation of an absence puts the visual on the primary plane over the simple refrain "Alive they were taken, alive we want them back" or "Appearance alive!". It is also a visual symbol of the limitations for possible political action the mothers and grandmothers walk alone in the plaza, rather than with their partners, because they hope that alone the police do not dare to arrest them.

This "visual turn" signals the design of a language of resistance which indicates the ways of acting and accessing information in the determinate public spaces where the practices of everyday life can acquire their most political potential. In this context, several cultural practices of youth — especially rock — mark the reordering of the city and the refiguration of language by addressing questions which have been expelled from public discourse.

Since the mid-1960s, the so-called "Rock Nacional Argentino" has designated a movement of convergence and participation which has joined new forms of sociability (the creation of recognizable spaces such as the show or concert) minute problems which have been expelled from public discourse. Despite the apparent homogeneity of youth culture, the different publications differ in how they resignify the traditional values of family, neighbourhood, school and work, as well as the images and language with which the media portrays youth.

While the magazines offer a space for the interchange, where values and practices of normative socialization are debated, a fundamental ritual is added in this period: the 'show' becomes a site for delinquent practice. Though this is not a homogeneous site in terms of genre or social sectors, nonetheless creates a sense of shared place to account for the dispersion of the student movement and political youth organizations. Between 1975 and 1977, the rock concert emerges to respond to a city under control, whose almost public social life has been eliminated. At this time, various sites emerge: such as theaters, cinemas, clubs and pubs — which offer a place of meeting and refuge. As Ricardo, one of the protagonists, told Pablo Vilar:

...to go to a show was a necessity. We didn't miss a single one. There was a great need to be together...to participate in something, while feeling safe."

The rock show thus emerged as one of the principal meeting places of youth in the rhythm of everyday life under the dictatorship, not only because the time of the party could not be capitalized, but also because it stood outside of the silence and false information occasioned by the dictatorships. In the face of a rearticulation of life where the social participation of individuals is reduced to the necessities of survival and consumption, this practice constructs codes, gestures and signs which define their public through interaction:

...we would go to see ourselves, marginalised by the media and confused by other generations. Our applause was also directed towards ourselves."

By producing paths of recognition, a memory is constructed that mobilizes figures of counterhegemonic legitimation.

Given the lack of confidence of young people in the institutions of the state and the family, the building of a sense of identity and language is left to the media, and in particular, to song lyrics. This code of counter-signs and double meanings indicates the formation of counter-figures, as "survivors," as Charly Garcia's song of the same name describes:

"Los Sobrevivientes" (1979)

We are blind of seeing tired of all that walking we are fed with eating in the city
We will never have roots we will never have a home and nonetheless, see, you we're from bars

(....)
I have always carried you beneath my blue scarf through the streets on Christ carried the cross.

In addition to the criticism in the lyrics, there is an intention to produce meanings for existence itself. These meanings are expressed in a fusion of symbolic practices which indicates not only a rejection of hegemonic discourse, but also the construction of meanings to keep on living. Rock evolves to construct an image of the survivor who will summon desynchrony. In 1978, Charly sang E Hil Seda:
I want to see you naked...the way they parade the bodies which have been shaved, bathed, on some highway, which has infinite barbells that won’t kill a thing. And I really want to laugh and to tell me that it is only a game or else kill me this afternoon before—

(.....)

This winter was bad, and I think that I forgot my shadow in a basement.

And your legs that keep getting longer know that they cannot turn back, the city paces on us with laughter, bellow.

The trajectory from the neighbourhood to the downtown theater or club involves a journey, where the rock band - and the band of friends - enters to a critique of mass culture by taking emblems and gestures and transforming them. On the basis of selective consumption, youth gather to listen to music in one house in the neighbourhood, the privileged site for the development of youth culture. It is the everyday praxis of the neighborhood - the sense of group recognition and integration through ties of family, friendship and love - that have been used to construct the images of the dangerous youth since the time of the neighborhoods. In this regard, it is important to understand that the category of youth culture is more than just an age-based identity of consumption and leisure practices. Rather, it constitutes a fundamental convergence of social relations constructed in terms of race, class and gender, located in various sites such as the school, work and the crime of control and security.

As in these sites, it is possible to read the tension between the design of images or forms or ‘identity’ attributed to youth and the other modes of subversion in an historical moment. There is the need to recuperate the images of youth as protagonists during the Malvinas War of 1982, the public space which was opened in the nucleus could not count on the support of rock bands. Instead, a ‘Festival de Latino America Solidarity’ was organized by the rock bands in the stadium where they held many of their concerts. The anti-military discourse of the rock bands was bolstered by an explicit Pan-Americanist message or, because of its connection to other youth cultural practices, represented the principal victims of the war and completed the image of the survivor. Precedent-Papou song the following:

I'm checking out what's left after the big noise in a world with very few sounds
I stop to look at silent machines and an image stands up on the buildings of a B.A. air.
Ah, Ah! what I see now is happening in a near future, that image wears a motion and I don't know who is giving me their hand.
Today I am just another survivor and I run with an advantage over the present

Today I am just another survivor
Today I am just another survivor
Oh, Oh, Oh! this sounds better to me.
I see a bold girl who survived is there room for a new emotion?
And be born from the earth with imagination.
Today I am just another survivor
Today I am just another survivor

But the dinosaurs will disappear

With these words Charly García finishes a concert near the end of 1982, after a massive demonstration from the dying military dictatorship that was still reeling from the Malvinas disaster. This is the song’s enigmatic:

It is Saturday night and a friend is in jail [cause]
Imagine the dinosaurs
Those who are alive (cause)...
Our friends in the neighborhood might disappear.
Those who are on the radio might disappear, but the dinosaurs will disappear.

As a site for practical deliberation, the concert reproduces the multiplicity of voices and languages in the streets of Buenos Aires. As in the 1970s, these public events were the place of political and social resistance. People came to hear the music, to dance, to demonstrate, to show solidarity with the prisoners. But they also came to express their anger and their despair at the way the government was handling the crisis of the Malvinas War.

Yesterday I dreamt of the hungry, the mad, those who are gone, those who are in prison. Pito Pave, now star, responds: "Who said that all was lost, I came to offer my heart, so much blood was washed away in the river, I came to offer my heart."

To this, the audience chanted: "Sea va un acuario, sea va un acuario, la dictadura militar...it will end, it will end, the military dictatorship..."

The demand for democracy involved a revision of the modes of interpretation, of the access to information and of the denunciation of the link between knowledge and action. Thus, youth do not look upon themselves as a local subculture or as a group subordinated to the borders of the neighborhood, but as protagonists on a broad public scale; youth transcend familiar institutions (home and school) to address national cases. The "return to politics" of youth consecrates the modes of interpretation of the concert with the mobilization on the street. In 1982, Charly García sang the song ‘Superheroes’:

I am looking for directions in cookbooks.
You are mixing sugar with salt
You are getting information from home made books of metal.
You are buying the world at a boxcar.
Looking at supermarket, supermarket, you are the generation of unemployment.

In graffiti, it is possible to read the resignification of the values and pieces attributed to youth. This is the site where the environment is played out for youth between, on the one hand, increased urbanization, hopes of modernization and social dynamics, and, on the other, the image of danger portrayed by the police. This symbiosis is complicated by the "lost" youth caused by unemployment. The existence of distinct modes of socialization between street and youth - particularly in the case of urban migrants - further exacerbates the generation gap.

The use of the school and the neighborhood for the practice of graffiti superimposes the desires for visibility on the competitive nature of the game. Like all mechanisms of recognition and integration, this function both inwardly and outwardly. The school teaches youth what society thinks of them, to look at themselves, their families and their very existence as problematic. Nonetheless, the use of the school as a meeting place marks the boundaries of territorialization and differentialization of the neighborhood, highlighting the limits of the group and investing the space with the values of a local culture.

While graffiti marks territory, it also marks an appropriation of meaning which breaks word and image in a style which links simultaneity and fragment, a combination which paradoxically shapes the style of the videoclip. In the final years of the dictatorship, on Argentina was being incorporated into a global media culture, graffiti reveals the appropriation of mass-media, telecommunications and urban consumption practices into the modes of survival and action of youth culture. Rock groups are even named in English (WASHED YOUTH or PUNK NOT DEAD), and jokes and political satire are invented: 'Watch out fascists, Moronoha is a leftie' or "In my experience I have posters of all of you."

"In the walls of the streets, hospitals, stations and schools, this burlesque effect of language is at once personalized the ego assumes singularitarian and public: 'the church is such a good business..."
Yee voted: wait two years and do it again

In conclusion, these final three graffiti slogans signal another aspect of modes of symbolic production in youth culture. The symbolic strategies of youth design spaces which acknowledge heterogeneity within education, social class, gender and even age, and which can name forms of control under democracy. Thus, the politics of the everyday enters onto the microspace of the neighborhood wall. These three graffiti slogans mark the difficulties experienced by the democracy in allowing for the full participation of those sectors which were mobilized to oppose its recuperation. The initial demand for institutional transparency is set back by the inability to encounter mechanisms which will enable the courts to bring those responsible for crimes of human rights abuses to justice. At the same time, the new democracies in Latin America are stuck with the economic conditions fostered by the dictatorships.

In the context of political settlement, the incorporation of youth into education and employment has not been facilitated, and youth have rejected social mobilization as an avenue to new forms of social and political organization. Thus, the tensions of everyday life between work, school and the neighborhood are translated into a rejection by youth of the authoritarianism of institutions, while nonetheless accepting the role of education in allowing social standing. Aspirations of recognition and social mobility are not reduced to individual history in relation to these new provincial origins, but rather are invested in the spaces where the everyday practices of the production and interchange of meaning take place. To analyze youth culture of the 1980s it is necessary to look at rock videos, video games and their sites of interaction in order to see how youth have organised themselves to transcend both the image of the heroised figure defined by the crisis and the authoritarian barriers to association. Perhaps the answer was insinuated in 1987 by the rock group "Los Redondos de Ricitos" ("The Little Crude of Ricitos"), who would perform in the costume of the crema color and encourage the audience to dress up and come on stage. The "redondos" came to be the most broadly disseminated counter-symbol in the cities of Argentina. The following is "Come on, bands" by Skoy Robinson and Inicio Solano:

And what's the use of sleeping under guard living clandestinely and wearing golden buttons and what's the use of being the new band and going around climbing military radar Come on, bands let's boot it come on, bands

Beatriz Ann Holzman

Through a strategic site for the debate on modernity

Although the crisis in Latin America is linked more to the debt - and thus to the contradictions of the modernization designed by business people and politicians - than to the debt over modernity suffered by intellectuals, philosophers and social scientists in Europe and the United States, the crises are intertwined and their discourses are mutually complementary. In some form the reemergence of the modernizing project in our countries is the other face of their crisis, and our "external debt" in part of their "internal debt." Just as their development is part of our dependence. Taking change of the crisis of modernity as an indispensable condition in order to conceive of a project in our countries where economic and technological modernization does not disable or supplant cultural modernity.

Located in the center of the philosophical, aesthetic and sociological reflections on the crisis of reason and modern society, the project of communication now transcends the boundaries and paradigms of our studies and research. The field of communication can no longer be merely delimited by academic denominations. Whether we like it or not, others - from other disciplines and with other concerns - now take part in it. We must accept this explosion and redesign the map of questions and the lines of engagement.

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At the same time, the economic crisis and political unrest in our countries make the temptation to regress inward stronger than ever. Nonetheless, the return to theoretical certainties, neoconservative positions and to the defense of the most legitimatized and legitimating professional ideologies is marked by a convergence of two discourses. On the one hand is the discourse of political possibility, which - while presuming itself to be based on what is happening - plays its card on the expiration of the market and its "presentation" as the only dynamic site in society. On the other hand is the discourse of technological know-how, which presumes that the motor of class struggle has broken down and that history will encounter its relativization in the events of communication; in the future, to transform society will require changing the modes of the production and circulation of information.

How should we confront this new and redoubled reduction? How can we recognize the social and perspectival depths of new communication technologies, their cross-cutting modes of presence in the everyday, from work to play and from science to politics? How can we accept them not on facts that confirm the descriptive neutrality of technological development in which social inequality and power is resolved and dis-