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A Fantastic Tale of Terror: Argentina's "Disappeared" and Their Narrative Representation in Julio Cortázar's "Second Time Round"

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Terror between aesthetics and politics

It is rather uncanny that terror denominates at the same time an aesthetic effect and an act of real violence. What if they collapse, by historical coincidences, into one phenomenon? In the following, I will contextualize a historical particularity of Argentine state terror and analyze its representation in one of the first short stories to depict the "Disappeared", the social group known since the 1970s throughout the world as the "Desaparecidos". These people, who are neither declared dead nor alive, belong to a conceptual register that is beyond conventional categories of space-time and can therefore be understood as a fantastic dimension of social discourse – a dimension that could even tentatively be termed "fantastic reality" as it undermines historical and social common sense. The euphemism of disappearances was used by the military Junta to confound the real operational sequence of abduction, torture, murder, and secret disposal of the corpses, a method well known to induce the highest effect of terror among the population.

Any effort to reintegrate the "Disappeared" into realistic modes of representation is tinged with the uncanny, an effect described by Sigmund Freud in his etymological-psychoanalytical analysis of "Das Unheimliche": "an uncanny effect is often and easily produced when the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced, as when something that we have hitherto regarded as imaginary appears before us in reality, or when a symbol takes over the full functions of the thing it symbolizes, and so on."[1] This uncanny effect is the prerequi-

[1] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" (1919), in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. under the general editorship of James

[34] Edgar Allan Poe, "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), in *The Complete Tales and Poems*, New York: Vintage, 1975, 153.

site on which the following observations about state terror in Argentina build. Terror is an aesthetic and political phenomenon, which means that it is effective as anxiety increased to a high degree, and that it is actively produced by certain methods that are particularly effective in state terror.[2] Going beyond the difficulties of defining who is a terrorist and what is terrorism, I would like to approach the phenomenon of terror at precisely the intersection of aesthetics and politics.

It is no coincidence that Freud chose a fantastic tale by E.T.A Hoffmann for his analysis of the uncanny as an ambivalent form of anxiety. Literary fiction can, according to Freud, under certain circumstances produce feelings of anxiety resembling those caused by real lived occurrences:

> The situation is altered as soon as the writer pretends to move in the world of common reality. In this case he accepts as well all the conditions operating to produce uncanny feelings in real life; and everything that would have an uncanny effect in reality has it in his story.[3]

The criterion of ordinariness for the effect of the uncanny underlies most basic definitions of the fantastic: the fictive world must be represented in a manner as everyday and familiar as possible in order for the effect of the fantastical to emerge all the more emphatically.

At this point, I have to explain which theoretical models I use when referring to the fantastic. Since at least Tzvetan Todorov, there have been numerous attempts to define the term, which in the end represent an impossible classification venture, similar to attempts to define realism. Thus, I rely on components of various models that are relevant for my set of questions. One is the Two-Worlds-Model, according to which:

Strachey in collaboration with Anna Freud, London: The Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis, 1955, XXVII, 244.

[2] One of the biggest differences between state-terror and the terrorism addressed by most of the contributors to the present volume is that state-terror is executed by those in political power. This means that state terror benefits from institutions of the government which then establish terror as a legal means or even as a political goal in itself. Another important difference between state and global terrorism is that the military dictators execute state-terror in the state of impunity, knowing that they will not be punished. Thus terror is produced by power in a legal situation, but it is evident that jurisdiction has not been followed in Argentina, as we will see later on.

[3] Freud, "The Uncanny", 244.

> In a world which is indeed our world, the one we know, there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses, of a product of the imagination – and the laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality – but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us.[4]

In a critique of Todorov that accounts for cases of the fantastic which do not allow for a division into two opposed frames of explanation but from start to finish remain trapped within the everyday, Jaime Alazraki has defined such cases of the "neo-fantastic" as containing three features: a) it abandons the moment of "hesitation" which disturbs the reader due to the fact that the uncanny fact inserts itself into the everyday from the first line on; b) the exceptional is accepted because the frame is realistic, which distinguishes it from the category of the "marvelous" (for example, fairy tales); and c) the fantastic fact generates a metaphor which can only explain itself, given that in light of this metaphor every interpretation must be reconsidered at the end and, thus, this polysemy, the impossibility of an unequivocal exit, annihilates the others.[5]

Because Freud's essay on the uncanny remarkably anticipates and heuristically predates in the ways described above the definition of the fantastic that Todorov's *Introduction à la littérature fantastique* develops, I would like to cast Freud's uncanny as both an aesthetic effect and simultaneous precondition of terror. The fantastic would then constitute the field between the real and the fictive that is marked by the effect of the uncanny.

It is impossible to draw a line between fiction and reality under conditions of terror, because terror lives on fiction as a category of the real. In this problem Hannah Arendt saw precisely the greatest misunderstanding on the part of observers of totalitarian states: that common

[4] Tzvetan Todorov, *The Fantastic: A Structural Approach to a Literary Genre* (1970), trans. Richard Howard, Cleveland, OH: Case Western Reserve University Press, 1973, 25.

[5] Jaime Alazraki, *En busca del unicornio: Los cuentos de Julio Cortázar. Elementos para una poética de los neofantástico*, Madrid: Editorial Gredos, 1983, 10 (my translation).

sense and natural laws could not take insane movements such as National Socialism or Stalinism seriously, because their goals contradicted common sense.[6] Neighboring states could not believe that dictatorial fiction could become reality. They were in a condition of what Todorov calls "*hésitation*", a condition that he ascribes to the "fantastic".

Alongside the banality of the reality depicted, a further criterion of the uncanny applies to the level of characters: "Many people experience the feeling in the highest degree in relation to death and dead bodies, to the return of the dead, and to spirits and ghosts."[7] The deceased in and of themselves are not uncanny, but the possibility of their return to or presence among the living is. Inversely, uncanny is also the possibility of dying in an inexplicable way in the midst of everyday life. The threshold between life and death is the site of the uncanny, which structures the fantastic within a narrative.

The "Disappeared"

An ungraspable anxiety of death as an omnipresent threat, which however was caused by neither the observation of murder nor the discovery of corpses and hence produced an especially profound uncertainty, terrorized Argentine society between 1976 and 1983. State terror methodically generated a social group that resists traditional analytic categories used by history and the social sciences: the "Disappeared". By now it seems probable – and indeed in many cases has been proven – that the many thousand "Disappeared" were all systematically disposed of or murdered by order of the state. This method, which is a faithful copy of Hitler's "night and fog" operations, was perfected during the dictatorship and resulted in 30,000 missing people or "Desaparecidos". It targeted an ever growing group of persons who were perceived as "subversive" for liberal capitalism or a Junta dedicated to "Western Christian values", although it became increasingly unclear who was actually designated by the term. Already in 1976, the militant members of the Peronist party were practically immobilized. Most of the "terrorists" had already been killed or were in prison. Thus, the "war against terrorism" became a form of state terrorism after 1976, which, in the absence of real opponents, had to

[6] See Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951/1968), new edn with added prefaces, San Diego, New York, and London: Harcourt, Inc., 1973.

[7] Freud, "The Uncanny", 242.

find or invent them. The definition of "the terrorists" was quickly adapted to the goal of aiming state terror at innocent persons as well.

One of the three highest-ranking generals of the military dictatorship, General Rafael Videla, defined in a public speech in 1978 all that could be considered a terrorist, even when such suspects do not set off bombs: "A terrorist is not just someone with a gun or a bomb but also someone who spreads ideas which are contrary to Western and Christian civilization." Furthermore, Ibérico Saint Jean, the governor of the province of Buenos Aires detailed the order of those to be killed: "First we will kill the subversives, then their collaborators, then their sympathizers, afterwards the indifferent, and finally the lukewarm."[8] Both concepts, terrorists and "Disappeared", whose referents partly coincide, are constitutive (that is, opposing) elements of a dictatorial fiction, which can be summarized in the three keywords "Nation", "Family", and the "Catholic Church". Together they comprise the homogeneous "Western values". People who stand in the way of the project to clean up the nation must disappear. That the national fiction was to be taken literally turned out to be more than true.

The criminal sequence "kidnap-torture-kill-dispose of" subsumed under the euphemism of "disappearance" was one of the most effective subterranean forms of collective psychological terror. Terror is understood here in the sense of executed violence and the paralyzing, extreme anxiety producing and silencing effect among the populace.[9]

The notion that people simply disappeared suggests acts of magic by those responsible. The trick to this repressive method, which was the main terrorist strategy employed by the Argentine military, consists in abducting, torturing, and killing people, without ever informing the relatives about the place of captivity, and then to remove the corpse without leaving a trace. The Atlantic Ocean and the River Plate were used as a dumpsite for many of them. Following Jean Baudril-

[8] Quoted in Eduardo Galeano, *Memoria del Fuego: El Siglo del Viento*, 11th edn, Madrid: Siglo, 2007, 282 (my translation).

[9] This very early definition of "terror" was given to the French "terreur" as early as in the fourteenth century. See Gerd van den Heuvel, "Terreur, Terroriste, Terrorisme", in *Handbuch politisch-sozialer Grundbegriffe in Frankreich 1680-1820*, vol III: *Philosophe, Philosophie; Terreur, Terroriste, Terrorisme*, eds Rolf Reichardt and Eberhard Schmitt, Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1985, 90-91.

lard, who called a murder of corpses the "perfect crime",[10] this strategy is tantamount to the calculated logical consequence – no body, no killer, no provable crime, no judgment; and finally – no corpse, no funeral, and no grief.

Their actual death apparently changes nothing about the fact that they are labeled as "Disappeared", that they are accorded the paradoxical status of being present-absent. The adherence to a category originally introduced by the military, which can be understood rhetorically as euphemism, politically as disinformation, and morally as dishonesty, reveals a perpetuation of effects of the terror beyond the end of the dictatorship and the consolidation of democracy. The impact of this redoubled deficiency of social life or, and this is of interest in this essay, its effect on storytelling, is enormous.

The "Disappeared" is, I argue, a designation that is uncanny in the Freudian sense and whose narrative representation bears fantastical traits, a phenomenon whose effect on language is described by the sociologist Gabriel Gatti: "Language recoils, and then the words that we use in order to speak about things; the procedures by which we represent them start to hedge as soon as they come into contact with these entities and their surroundings and begin to stutter because it is impossible to comfortably cope with them."[11] If a realistic representation of the "Disappeared" draws on features of the fantastic, then a fantastic narrative must conversely become realistic through the representation of the disappearance of a person.

The "Disappeared" are discursively present in family biographies, social activities, as well as in art and politics. Their impact exceeds that which is evoked by the memory of dead victims of state terror. This particular effect arises from the fact that the "Disappeared" are aesthetically uncanny figures. While they certainly embody the presence of death, the act of speaking about them by definition renders them not properly dead; they assume a space – limbo – between life and death that stands outside of the time and space of history. The "Disappeared" inhabit a space and time that are not historically conclusive, and thereby explode the structural conditions of realistic narrative. A special quality of disappearing and having disappeared is

[10] See Jean Baudrillard, *The Perfect Crime* (1995), trans. Chris Turner, London and New York: Verso, 1996.

[11] Gabriel Gatti, *El Detenido-Desaparecido: Narrativas posibles para una catástrofe de la identidad*, Montevideo: Ediciones Trilce, 2008, 12 (my translation).

conditioned by the verb's nominalization in the perfect tense in perpetuity, which defies all responsibility through the intransitive and subject-related verb form itself (one can only disappear on one's own, for external influences suggest immediately a realm of magic or crime: "let something/someone disappear" and "make one disappear", but no reference at all to alternatives of political actions). The concept of "disappearance" consolidates the executor's state of impunity. The allegation that people disappeared can only be affirmed because the cases were hardly ever investigated and brought to court. It is manifestly opposed to laws of nature and common sense, and this point is exactly why I want to associate the phenomenon of the "Disappeared" with the structure of fantastic stories. The superimposition of magical or criminal connotations onto a missing cause or responsibility in the figure of the "Disappeared" also forms the centerpiece of Julio Cortázar's fantastical short story "Second Time Round".

The fantastic as a narrative mode of terror

Cortázar's narrative fell victim to the censor of the Argentine military in 1977 because it addresses the theme of "forced disappearance". It is, however, free of characteristics of a political reportage, for neither places, nor persons, nor time are named. By including this narrative in a collection of short stories with the explicit subtitle *Fantastic Stories*,[12] the genre is clearly defined through its paratext. The question is: what happens to the definition of the fantastic when it is very clearly mimetic, and to be sure, not only with respect to the representation of the properly common sense world of bureaucracy that is depicted here, but also with respect to the irruption of inexplicable events? Does the literary fiction represent the experience of terror?

The analysis of these questions is predicated on three assumptions that urgently have to be tested: first, the fantastic is a narrative mode of spreading terror; second, terror constitutes itself on the basis of the fantastic; third, the fantastic is a suitable form of representation, that is, it can best represent terror.

It is not a question of which fantastic stories can best represent which forms of terrorist violence. Rather, the problem runs in both directions: in addition to raw violence, terrorism itself requires a

[12] The short story appeared in 1977 in Cortázar's collection *Alguien que anda por ahí* (Madrid: Alfaguara) and was banned in the same year in Argentina by censor.

certain form of narrative that enables it to proliferate among the people. And secondly, the results of the criminal acts are transformed into figures of fantastic tales.

My analysis will show that the Argentine self-description of state terror does not lead in the direction of excesses committed by hot-blooded and exotic banana republic despots, but rather stands in more immediate proximity to dry bureaucratic annihilation known in Germany and best described (or better, prescribed) in Kafka's *The Trial*. Cortázar's "Second Time Round" narratologically condenses Kafka's hypotext in a textual relationship that can be described as symbiotic: narrative perspective, atmosphere, representation of space, and aesthetic construction of the uncanny are almost congruent in both texts. Death stands invisible and meaningless in the room. And yet there is an essential difference in referentiality and thus in reception: whereas Kafka describes a possible world, Cortázar imitates a real one. The leap from Kafka's foreshadowing of human destruction by bureaucratic acts of power to Cortázar's fictionalization of a horizon of experience that was real at the time of its publication takes place through a complex displacement on two levels: through an intertextual relation on the level of text and through a transgression of the border between fiction and historical documentation on the level of reference.

This categorial displacement cannot be explained by an analysis of the intertextual relationship between both texts alone. Therefore, one inevitably needs to look at both the aesthetic and political-historical effects. In *The Trial*,[13] Kafka's protagonist K. over the course of a year repeatedly encounters the fatuous low-level civil servants and executors of an unassailable power assigned to the jurisdiction of the law. He believes that he is innocent, yet this belief later becomes increasingly irrelevant, because it does not seem to be a question of innocence or guilt at all, but instead a matter of a fully arbitrary and preposterous act of bureaucracy. Neither the verdict nor the reason for his detainment are ever remotely mentioned, a circumstance which from the start can be described as uncanny. In numerous visits to the officials, he attempts to clarify the seeming misunderstanding, yet

[13] The novel *Der Process* was first published in 1925 by Verlag die Schmiede, Berlin, and translated several times into English. I use David Wyllie's translation from *Project Gutenberg*: Franz Kafka, *The Trial* (1925), trans. David Wyllie, *Project Gutenberg*, 2003: http://www.gutenberg.org/dirs/etext05/ktria11.txt (accessed 13 May 2011).

given the lack of explanations ("the main question is: Who is issuing the indictment? What office is conducting this affair? Are you officials?"), rational argument and semantic conventions ("'I see you've misunderstood me', said the supervisor who was already at the door. 'It's true that you're under arrest, but that shouldn't stop you from carrying out your job. And there shouldn't be anything to stop you carrying on with your usual life.'") contradictory reactions of low-level officials, allies, and spectators ("Across the street, the people were still there at the window, and it was only now that K. had gone up to his window that they seemed to become uneasy about quietly watching what was going on."), he finally loses the strength to resist.

Despite boldly defending his logical train of thought until the end, a lucidly arguing K. cannot defend himself against the cumulative absurdity mounting around him. Thus, the never uttered death sentence is practically executed with his compliance. Aside from both executioners and K. himself, nobody but the reader is a witness to the last breath of K. and the surviving shame. In "Second Time Round", Cortázar splices the narrative voice that in *The Trial* narrates in close proximity to K. into two separate voices:[14] at the beginning and end, one hears the lower officials in their simple office from the perspective of the first-person plural. Their fatuous character is perceptible in their colloquial speech, their homogeneous interests (drinking coffee, betting on horses, reading the newspaper) and their standardized self-description as merely executing orders within a hierarchical system. People are casually summoned into the office where they apparently perform everyday bureaucratic tasks such as filling out paperwork. Those responsible sit "up there", have no name and do not give clear instructions, except that the subpoenas should proceed without fuss.

The second narrative voice approximates or almost melds with the figure of María Elena, a *Doppelgänger* of K. who obediently follows the orders of the official yellow letter to appear at a particular time at a particular place, although she does not seem to know either the summoning agency or the purpose of her summons. Her emotional reaction of shame (she turns red as she enters the waiting room and ascribes this to her shyness before unfamiliar people; she turns red a

[14] I refer to the following English translation of the narrative: Julio Cortázar, "Second Time Around", trans. Gregory Rabass, *Books Abroad*, L/3 (Summer 1976), 517-52.

second time as she holds back her question to the others waiting as to why there is a second summons), of astonishment (the agency is outfitted with neither a flag nor an elevator and is located in a part of town where no one would expect to find it), and of fear correspond to Kafka's protagonists, in particular to K. His surprise, his quizzical, almost arrogant disbelief regarding his arrest which culminates in a shame that survives his death, designates the spectrum of the uncanny in the affects of the innocent victim in the face of a bureaucratic terror that Cortázar's protagonist also undergoes.

For an unknown reason, the young girl is summoned to a ministry located on a certain street in Buenos Aires for questioning. The girl, who is depicted as a very pensive and logically arguing character (like K.), knows that this summons concerns a bureaucratic matter, and so she goes, arrives at the office at the indicated time, and enters a long narrow hall filled with cigarette smoke (like all the halls K. is summoned to) where she sees a second door and a group of people waiting, an old woman, a young man, and a few others. Behind the second door is the office. She has to sit down to wait her turn, for there are many others scheduled to enter before she does. As usually happens in such instances, she begins talking with the people around her. Among them is a young man, Carlos, who quickly tells her that this is already his second time around because there is a first summons during which one must fill out papers and answer questions, and then there is a second call. As they talk about these matters, the others in succession continue to go in. These people remain in the office five or ten minutes, and then come out again. It is clear there are only two doors: the one to gain entrance to the office, and the other one leading to the stairs through the hall. After a while, the young man's turn comes. Two or three minutes go by; the door opens, but instead of the young man coming out, one of the employees appears who asks her to enter. She is taken by surprise, having been aware until then of only the one door everyone had left through. But when she enters the office – which is quite spacious, in fact, with many tables – she looks around and does not see the young man. In the meantime, the officials call her to a table where she has to fill out some lengthy forms, as is always the case in this type of office. But she continues to worry, nevertheless, for it all seems very strange to her. She thinks that perhaps there might be another door she did not notice, and that maybe they instructed him to leave through that alternate door. After all, she

remembers at that moment, he was coming for a second time around, and she for the first time. The enigma remains unresolved until the end, as the story never explains what actually happened.

The effect of horror arises at two points (the disconcertment of the character being extremely intensified by the strong focalization): when it becomes clear to the girl that the young man has disappeared, and when she herself is invited for the second time.

Rhetorical devices: metaphors of nothing

At the beginning and at the end of the story, a subservient functionary of the mysterious office, who blindly performs partial tasks in the process of the dirty war (as the historically informed reader knows), speaks about the tasks delegated to him "from above" in mere hints. The allusive metaphors produce an exclusionary discourse: only the insiders can understand the indeterminate words. It just so happens that this discourse only refers to itself and does not even need to be understood by the organs performing it. For all intents and purposes, the illusory distinction between those who know and those who do not know is irrelevant, because such knowledge is futile. It is a knowledge of the void that ultimately transforms through Carlos' traceless disappearance into a frightening knowledge of annihilation. On the declarative level of this disappearance, all metaphors transform into their literal sense.[15] The mundane is discursively represented as an indeterminate, and the indeterminate refers to nothing, or to the nothing that the act of disappearing represents, without ever actually signifying.

Before turning to the dizzying aspect of the figures of speech and their silencing, I want to scrutinize how the anxiety of one's own disappearance is turned into the only referent of the narrative. The uncanny effect and the precondition of the fantastic are created by a

[15] A study on euphemism in national-socialist diction (for the notions of "völkisch" and "Endlösung") by Sneh and Cosaka provides the ideal framework of such an analysis. Sneh and Cosaka have shown that the transition to a pure, doubtless subjectivity by way of the annihilation of the other is executed, and that the figure of the bureaucrat and not the sadist best describes the executor of this operation: "No se registra la voluntad de lograr la angustia del partenaire sino la voluntad de un pasaje directo a un sujeto pleno, es decir por fuera de toda vacilación, del goce implicado an la angustia. Para ese pasaje no es necesarion la angustia del otro, sino lisa y llanamente, su eliminación" (Perla Sneh and Juan Carlos Cosaka, *La Shoah en el siglo: Del lenguaje del exterminio al exterminio del discurso*, Buenos Aires: Xavier Bóveda, 2000, 52).

setting that is equally an ordinary, orderly, and a familiar world: an office for something or another in a part of Buenos Aires where formalities are transacted on a daily basis. The act of filling out papers in the office is preceded by the familiar period of waiting in the waiting room filled by conversation about ordinary matters with the other people waiting. It is an official site in which, as a civil servant "on the other side of the desk", one has the leisure to drink coffee and all the time in the world to chit-chat about the weather and horse racing, but has no qualms about the purpose of the system (about the decrees and the execution of orders from the boss). Solely relevant is how ("nice and easy", "without worrying", "nice and clear"), not what ("things like that") is being performed. The superficially unperturbed and offensively flaunted banality of business ("the same thing every day") is, however, burst by the objects of this action being vehemently held in uncertainty. These opaque junctures, which appear nominalized on the discursive level as "something like that", "everything", or simply as "things", indicate what is at stake in these summons and the denomination of the agency.

On other levels as well, the referent is marked in the text as uncertain or illegible: on the writ of the summons, the signature is "illegible", the name plate of the office is "dirty and with a piece of paper pasted over". The unifying element between those waiting and the functionaries is the dense cigarette smoke that fills the waiting room as well as the offices and parked cars along the street (possibly occupied by informants), and thus represents a visual-olfactory density and opacity. This motif also occurs in Kafka's *Trial* with the same function. The functionaries themselves are faceless; they have nicknames ("negro López") or simple functions ("boss"). Whenever a face appears, then it is only in uncharacteristic form and never looking directly at another: "a clerk with a sickly face was looking at a form."

The discursive composition of the event is characterized by uncertainty at precisely such junctures where it is a matter of the identities of persons, and especially where the primary function of every bureaucratic office is performed, the entry of personal data. Precisely that moment when, while filling in the blank fields of the form ("It was the usual nonsense, first and last name, sex, address"), the protagonist María-Elena is distracted by the missing entry for Carlos, who had signed in before her, is the clearest sign of the text's movement toward erasure. "Usual nonsense" is here the most inscrutable of all

metaphors of everyday life, as this "usual nonsense" of recording personal data becomes a denotation of the methodical act of making a person disappear.

Cortázar's short story is written in Argentine Spanish; it transfers the characteristic colloquial way of speaking in Buenos Aires into the written word. Whereas the passages that report the perspective of the functionaries retain the sociolect of a less educated stratum, the main part of the short story which focuses on María-Elena and represents her voice is more elevated, almost classical. The metaphors that find expression on the functionaries' side of the counter are taken from everyday parlance. I showed earlier how the way that things unfold takes on a much more significant function in the text than the things themselves. The highest aim – a frictionless course of events ("things like that had to happen without making waves") – is unflinchingly repeated in a number of metaphorical variations, and is the actual task ordered by the boss, "the boss's word". Frequent repetition reflects the repeated insistence of the boss's assignment: "he would repeat it every so often for just in case." The Spanish metaphor "sin escombros" is translated as "without making waves", which literally means "without rubbish" in the sense of without a remainder or without a trace. An essential feature of disappearance is thus already mentioned in this first passage in the form of a metaphor whose English translation remarkably denotes a further aspect of killing methods (although this was not yet officially known at the time of the translation[16]): drugged prisoners were thrown from airplanes into the ocean or Rio de la Plata. The frictionless, traceless course of ominous government business is also evoked in the metaphor "pueden proceder no más", which refers to the procedural, progression by procedure, but literally means "only proceeding forward" and leads directly into death when one orients oneself along the directed path.

[16] If starting in 1976 death flights ordered by the military took place every Wednesday, then presumably rumors circulated very quickly among the populace and must have been known to human rights organizations. The extent and degree of such practices first came to light in 1995 with the confession of Scilingo, who opened the door of military planes and threw out prisoners. See Horacio Verbitsky, *The Flight: Confessions of an Argentine Dirty Warrior*, trans. Esther Allen, New York: The New Press, 1996.

There are two passages in the short story: one leads through the door and into the government office, while the other leads out of the waiting room and into the street. The first passage through the door and into the government office is completed with the act of personal registration and ends with the passage through the exit door into an outer world perceived as freedom. The second passage, and this is also the title of the short story, leads, as it were, through the door of the "éxito", from the outside into the room of the government office and never out again. "Éxito" is death, and all who come through the door a second time, pass through the waiting room, and go into the office, like Carlos, but never come back again. In this way, the metaphor uttered by the bald-headed man among the people waiting, "Life is a waiting room", is reduced to a horrific literality that also contains its opposite, namely that death lurks on the other end of the waiting room.

The short story opens with the remarks of one of the civil servants who discloses in the first-person plural, "We just waited for them, each one had his date and his time". Day and hour are simple coordinates of time, they are "appointments" that, in a metaphorical constriction tagged with a possessive pronoun such as this one, denote those days and hours that are determined for a person, that is, his terminus or end.

A fatal disappearance is also a disappearance of meaning, nonsense, the void. "Pavadas" ("nonsense") is the narrator's word for the kernel of all government business, namely the "trámites" that are omnipresent in Spanish, which refer to both the act of completion of formalities as well as the documents themselves. It is the occasion at which the office becomes a scene of paranoia. The "trámites" to be completed by María-Elena consist of the usual personal data. They attest to her identity and consequently her life. She fulfills the required bureaucratic act with the glance around the room in which she expects to find Carlos, realizing there is no second door through which he could have left. The meaning of the "trámites" begins to lose its symbolic function at the moment when filling in the blank spaces gets associated with the disappearance of a human being. "Trámites" means at its root "path across/through" (from the Latin, *trames*, *transmeare*). Yet where there is no door, no path leads through, the passageway is a dead end, a *cul de sac*, a path into death. Significantly, the synonym for the "transition" is metaphor itself: *meta*, *pherein*. Thus,

the "traslado" refers to the literal "trans-lation" and is, in the diction of the military dictatorship, the official designation for the murder of captives.

The obsession with "papers" ("trámites") in the logic of government bureaucracy that certify citizenship, gender, professional, and even human identity, points to their latent annihilating potential in the logic of death. Identity, human existence, is reduced to certification by paper; in the government office it becomes a death certificate.

The translation/transition and the metaphor of life into death, of presence into absence, occur temporally between the first and second time, in the repetition that gives the short story its name. In his study of the uncanny, Freud identified the "moment of the repetition of the similar" as the source of the uncanny, which can, though not with the same clarity as the motif of the *Doppelgänger*, nonetheless "subject to certain conditions and combined with certain circumstances, arouse an uncanny feeling".[17] Such circumstances of repetition recall distraught dream sequences in which it is impossible to elude the inescapable. In Cortázar's "Segunda vez", the second time, the second summons to the government office, becomes a nightmare. All of the desperate observations that María-Elena made during her first visit which were supposed to establish the normality of the passageway dissolve into nothing. Her premonitions that something just is not right here become dreadful reality (yet in a sense other than what she dared to think):

> Maria Elena got the feeling that something was bothering her, something that wasn't completely clear. Not on the form, where it was easy to go along filling in the blanks; something outside it, something that was missing or wasn't in its place. She stopped writing and took a look around, the other desks with the clerks working or talking among themselves, the dirty walls with posters and photographs, the two windows, the door she had come through, the only door in the office.[18]

Between the moment when it becomes clear to her that Carlos has disappeared and the moment it becomes clear to her that the same destiny awaits her during her second summons ("Thursday at eleven"),

[17] Freud, "The Uncanny", 249.
[18] Cortázar, "Second Time Around", 519.

another process of translation transpires: identification with Carlos. At first he was her predecessor, now he is her *Doppelgänger*, by whom she is guided into nothing. He is her harbinger of death, in the uncanny sense of the motif of the *Doppelgänger* in which Freud diagnosed a transformation of omens following the overcoming of a primitive phase of mental life: "From having been an assurance of immortality, it becomes the uncanny harbinger of death."[19]

"Second Time Around" operates structurally and linguistically with the overlapping semantic contexts of the sphere of bureaucracy and the sphere of death. Where at first glance government business is recognizable at the lowest level of its power, legible in the feather-brained, faceless paper pushers behind the counter, whose sole interests consist of drinking coffee, chit-chat, and horse races, in the next moment a space of death irrupts within the government office which transforms non-issues into voids.

Terror between bureaucratic fiction and the reality of death

The logics of both frames of reference – bureaucracy and death – are seemingly opposed and hence fulfill Todorov's criterion of the fantastic, which arises out of the collision between two irreconcilable explanatory frames. While it is not accurate to talk about a head-on collision in the short story, one may refer to a latency of the sphere of death that is manifest as a short-circuit of metaphors on the discursive level of the characters: if the void – annihilation – is the latent meaning of the government office and all its procedures, then every banal metaphor of a passage that becomes a passageway into nothing (of which the short story is full) – *trámite*, *traslado*, *sala de espera*, *éxito* – refers back to its literal meaning, or (in Freud's terms), its augur is reversed. The formalities at the government office do not serve the representation of living existence, but that of death, the transfer from one site to another becomes murder "sin escombros", killing time in the waiting room manifests its predetermined reality and the door leading out means the *exitus*.

Freud's uncanny is superior to Todorov's fantastic as an analytic model insofar as the moments of semantic transformation that are inherent to every metaphor can be understood as a superimposition of an ambivalence, whereas the fantastic strongly operates with figures

[19] Freud, "The Uncanny", 237.

of opposition. It is the dramatic irony at the origin of the German concept of *das Unheimliche* (namely, that it is closely intertwined with its opposite) which constitutes the fantastic within this simultaneously realistic short story. With Freud it is even possible to encounter the problem of mimesis that every theory of the fantastic has to deal with sooner or later: what happens when the frame of this story itself remains unresolved within the story and has a correspondence in the extra-literary world? How do fictive *terreur* and real terror relate to one another? Does the story participate parasitically, does it bolster the effect of anxiety even more, or does it remain contained in its fictive world? Cortázar's short story operates with entirely classical techniques of fantastic literature. The problem that a person disappears in the middle of a banal world of bureaucratic regimentation – this is the fantastic effect – is first made plausible by a realistic, yet unspecific figuration of precisely this bureaucratic world. The story mimetically constructs out of necessity a fictive world that is subservient to the laws of necessity and probability, in order to then call them into question through an inexplicable event, which in this case can first be resolved for both the Argentine censor and readership of 1977 by recourse to the historical reality.

How does it get resolved, if one wants to stick with Todorov? For the purely uncanny, the experience of disappearance remains in reality inexplicable and in contradiction to the laws of nature, but was this indeed the real life experience of about 30,000 people? With Freud, the uncanny passageway between bureaucratic fiction and reality of death can be defined by a symbolic overlap where metaphor becomes the path to death. The official writs in the everyday world of bureaucracy go hand in hand with the fiction of government office in Cortázar's short story in the concept of the "trámites". It is significant that Cortázar did not separate his new style of fantastic telling of historical facts from his other, purely fictional texts. In "Segunda vez", Cortázar opened up new spaces for the intersection of reality and fiction in the fantastic and its function as a representation of real historical events while he lived in European exile. He had mentioned the new direction of his understanding of literature earlier, "while in times past literature represented somehow holidays that the reader allowed himself in his daily reality, today in Latin America it has become a direct way of exploring what happens to us and asking ourselves about

the reasons why it happens to us".[20] Fear and terror can indeed be induced by the text, because it contains the ambivalence of the metaphor of death. This is, however, qualitatively different from the fear in reality, and hence fundamentally opposed to the agents of state terror, because it results in knowledge and exposes rather than conceals the abyss between sign and meaning. The real occurrence of the impossible is not the disappearance of human beings, but that one refers to disappearance when one means killing.

[20] Julio Cortázar, *Argentina: Años de alambradas culturales*, Barcelona: Muchnik, 1984, 114 (my translation).