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Independent Lens: Our Disappeared/Nuestros Desaparecidos

Created by: [Juan Mandelbaum](#)

Regular airtime: Mondays, 10pm ET (PBS)

Cast: Juan Mandelbaum, Mercedes Depino, Alejandra Dixon, José Pablo

Feinmann, Ruth Weisz

US release date: 21 September 2009

By [Cynthia Fuchs](#)

PopMatters Film and TV Editor

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Terrible Time

"Terror consists not only of killing those who have to die," says writer and historian José Pablo Feinmann, "but also of killing innocent people, so that everyone is fearful." In Argentina during the 1970s, everyone was fearful. The effect was calculated but also chaotic, following Juan Perón's death in 1974 and the collapse of the fragile collation of left- and right-wing Perónists. Flying back to Buenos Aires some 30 years later, Juan Mandelbaum asserts, "I've come home to look into a terrible time in our country's past."

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This idea of "looking into" a painful history permeates Mandelbaum's documentary, *Our Disappeared/Nuestros Desaparecidos*, which airs 21 September as part of PBS' *Independent Lens*. His investigation is sparked by the memory of an ex-girlfriend, Patricia Dixon, one of an estimated 30,000 Argentine citizens disappeared during the Dirty War. "Learning about her story," he says, "would be the beginning of my journey." Mandelbaum remembers his own experiences as a college student and believer in Perón's promise, that the former president's return from exile would bring "a revolution that would transform Argentina." Over footage of young marchers with placards held high, he observes, "We were young and passionate. Nothing could stop us."

But that enthusiasm was soon dashed, when a right-wing coup initiated a policy of kidnapping, torturing, and killing anyone who represented even

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the potential of opposition. Indeed, Mandelbaum lays out the regime's dreadful logic, repeating the language of one junta supporter: "First, we will kill all the subversives, then we kill the collaborators, then we kill their sympathizers, then those who remained indifferent, and finally, we will kill the timid."

The methods of murder generated their own sort of terror, as Mandelbaum recounts. If his return to Argentina first seems picturesque, viewed from his plane window, it is soon brutally reframed in the film by his revelation that thousands of victims were "drugged, loaded onto planes, then dropped alive into the Rio de la Plata." This seems the likely end for Patricia, who was taken in 1977, the year Mandelbaum left for the United States. The film opens and closes with shots of muddy water waves, at once a metaphorical and literal evocation of this undocumented history.

Mandelbaum's decision to leave was motivated in part by his familial history. His parents left Europe to evade the Nazis, he says, and instilled in him an abiding pacifism. Unlike Patricia, he says, "I never signed up for anything. I was a bit of a skeptic and a loner and I was uncomfortable with the glorification of violence." Instead, as the film illustrates, he resisted by leaving. Though he reveals late in the film that the United States "had secretly given its blessing to the slaughter" (Henry Kissinger appears in an interview, saying, "I have high regard for the president and I found it a very interesting meeting... He is doing what is best for his country"), Mandelbaum does not dig into this appalling political history. Instead, he focuses on the personal aspects, his grief over his loss, as this might represent his nation's.

Just so, following a walk through Buenos Aires' Memory Park, showing thousands of victims' photos, Mandelbaum visits Patricia's sister Alejandra, who quotes St. Augustine: "The dead are not invisible beings, they are not absent." The film takes up this idea through a series of interviews with relatives of other people who were disappeared, including Mercedes Depino, a member of the Montoneros guerrilla movement, and Juan Manuel Weisz, son of Marcelo and Susana, both detained at Olimpo secret detention center and then murdered. When Weisz and Mandelbaum tour the facility, their guide is survivor Susana Caride, who—remarkably—remembers Manuel's parents. The essential process of detention "was tremendously perverse," she says, "But they were the leaders of perversion, stealing babies, torturing pregnant women, torturing women with babies in their bellies."

Not all accounts are direct. Reinforcing Mandelbaum's own sense of tragedy, a reenactment shows what might have happened to Patricia, a blurred female figure led through abstract corridors. "Blindfolded and beaten," he says, "amidst screams and insults, knowing and not knowing what would come next... Electric currents went through her naked body." This made-up memory is followed by the culmination of Mandelbaum's "journey," a series of lap dissolves and slow-motion shots of him climbing stairs, accompanied by a disturbing soundtrack (piercing strings, harsh percussion), all intimating that he might be feeling what she might have felt. Heavy-handed and awkward, the sequence reminds you how difficult it is to represent that which is undocumented and officially repressed. Still, this documentary and others, along with ongoing endeavors like [Project Disappeared](#), insist that this history, so daunting and horrific, be recovered.

RATING: 1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

— 21 September 2009

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COMMENTS

Hello Cynthia, thank you for your thoughtful review of my film. A small clarification. The St. Augustine quote says that the dead are invisible beings, not absent. That is what I have felt throughout the process of making this film.

Comment by Juan Mandelbaum from Watertown, MA — September 21, 2009 @ 9:02 pm

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Juan, me emociono mucho tu film.

Que cruel que puede ser el ser humano , que feo las cosas que la influencia del odio nos puede llegar hacer...

yo vivi esa epoca , tenia 18 años .

me acuerdo que mi vieja me lavo sin querer la libreta de enrollamienro o DNI junto con una camisa o pantalon.

vos nos sabes el drama que fue eso , no se podia andar sin documentos en esa epoca . Al fin la puede sacar de nuevo, pero hasta que eso paso sufrimos un monton...

nunca me meti en cosas raras como deciamos en esa epoca. Todavia estaba joven y no habia madurado del todo . Nuestra generacion la vio pasar , los que tenian 25 para arriba eran los que pagaban el pato.

bueno te felicito por tu trabajo , segui asi .
hay mucho para hacer en este tema ...

saludos

eduardo

Comment by eduardo martino from san carlos ca usa — September 22, 2009 @ 6:10 pm

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