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On: 25 July 2012, At: 00:56

Publisher: Routledge

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Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjla20>

The Memorial de los Detenidos Desaparecidos: Fragile memory and contested meaning in Post-dictatorship Uruguay

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Version of record first published: 24 Jul 2012

To cite this article: Cara Levey (2012): The Memorial de los Detenidos Desaparecidos: Fragile memory and contested meaning in Post-dictatorship Uruguay, Journal of Latin American Cultural Studies: Travesia, 21:2, 203-219

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13569325.2012.694813>

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THE *MEMORIAL DE LOS DETENIDOS DESAPARECIDOS*: FRAGILE MEMORY AND CONTESTED MEANING IN POST-DICTATORSHIP URUGUAY

Nearly thirty years after the Uruguayan civil-military dictatorship (1973–1985) ended, the ways in which memory of this period is treated remains the subject of considerable contestation. In early 2010, controversy erupted over the filming of an advertisement for Sprite. During the shoot, the Memorial de los Detenidos Desaparecidos, conceived and constructed between 1998 and 2001 in homage to the victims of state terrorism, was covered up by the production company, rendering it camouflaged against the landscape of its location in Montevideo's Parque Vaz Ferreira. This episode demonstrates that rather than draw a line under the past, the construction and continued presence of the Memorial precipitates new debates over how memorial sites are interpreted and preserved. It provides an interesting point of departure from which to explore the fragility of memory in post-dictatorship Uruguay and the open-ended meanings of memorials, particularly within shifting judicial, political and urban contexts. Through analysis of the Memorial's aesthetics, peripheral location and the consumer-driven context it inhabits, this paper examines the Memorial's complexities and the threats to memorialisation in Uruguay, arguing that they are intimately tied to the broader struggles of state and society to address recent repression, which go beyond the dichotomies of remembering versus forgetting.

In February 2010, a media furore erupted involving the *Memorial de los Detenidos Desaparecidos*, which had been inaugurated in 2001 and was a joint initiative by the Montevideo city government and the *Madres y Familiares de Uruguayos Detenidos Desaparecidos* (MFUDD) – the organisation for relatives of Uruguayans disappeared during the civil-military dictatorship (1973–1985).¹ The controversy centred on allegations that on 23 January, during the filming of an advertisement for the soft drink Sprite (owned by the Coca Cola Corporation), the production company obscured the *Memorial* with a large green carpet and foliage, rendering it temporarily concealed, in keeping with the lush, green backdrop of the *Parque Vaz Ferreira*.

The incident provoked condemnation from a wide variety of individuals and groups: not only MFUDD, but the Uruguayan trade union *Plenario Intersindical de Trabajadores – Convención Nacional de Trabajadores* (PIT-CNT), as well as local residents and the crowds visiting the nearby beach on that hot summer's day who had witnessed the incident. In a letter of protest sent to the then mayor of Montevideo, Ricardo

Ehrlich, MFUDD stated that the *Memorial* '*fue concebido como parte de la reparación a la que nuestros familiares desaparecidos tienen derecho. Por ello, consideramos que este hecho atenta contra su dignidad y memoria*'.²

There are two related issues here: first, controversy centres on how actors interact with the *Memorial*, thus not only the multinational's use of the site '*con el fin de beneficiar una empresa*', but also the suggestion implicit in the production company's actions that the *Memorial* is an inconvenience, and should be hidden from view or treated with indifference. The act of covering up is thus viewed by its critics as an interruption of the message that the *Memorial* was intended to transmit. However, the actions of the production company also suggest that representation of the past is not self-evident nor guaranteed to resonate with broader society.

Second, the State is viewed as having failed in its perceived duty to protect and maintain the memorial site in the long-term, not least because permission for the shoot was almost certainly granted by a member of the city government. The relatives' organisation also took the opportunity to draw the mayor's attention to '*la falta de mantenimiento adecuado, ya que es usual ver el lugar sin luces y, muchas veces, en malas condiciones higiénicas*', making it explicit that the Sprite episode was not an isolated incident, but indicative of a general lack of concern for, and maintenance of, the *Memorial* since its construction.

The controversy not only points to the challenges facing memorialisation over time, but is also indicative of a general trend in which successive governments had, until very recently, eschewed investigation of the dictatorship period. Indeed, following the return to democracy in 1985, successive democratic governments (Sanguinetti, 1985–1990, 1995–2000 and Lacalle 1990–1995) attempted to draw a line under the past and impose a discourse of forgetting. This was encapsulated in the 1986 *Ley de Caducidad*, through which the State renounced its duty to investigate crimes committed by military and police officers prior to 1 March 1985, effectively granting them amnesty, and which was upheld by subsequent societal plebiscites in 1989 and 2009.³ It has been the human rights organisations and their supporters who have challenged this "official amnesia" by maintaining pressure on the authorities for judicial investigation, truth-seeking and commemoration, and these groups were instrumental in both the creation of the *Memorial* and in condemning the actions of Coca Cola, the production company and local government.

The Sprite episode reveals the contestation to which memorials are subjected throughout their lifespans, and signals that, rather than draw a line under the past and promote closure, the creation of a memorial precipitates new debates and raises questions over the meaning of the past, which, in turn, resonate with the broader struggles for memory and justice. The incident demonstrates the way in which the struggles of state and societal actors to address the past are articulated through the *Memorial*. The original intention held by the creators of a memorial (the architects, the relatives of victims, human rights groups who lobby local government) may be to pay homage to the victims of the dictatorial past. However, meaning is not guaranteed precisely because of the multiplicity of ways in which neighbours, victims, relatives, tourists, local government, and private corporations, may interact with and interpret a memorial over time.

This paper thus builds on James Young's work on Holocaust memorialisation in which he posits that 'memorials by themselves remain inert and amnesiac', thus it is necessary 'to make visible the activity of memory' in them (Young 2003: 14). In this way, Young advocates a reading of the memorial which incorporates the broader

contexts, underlying processes and role of human action; not only at the emergent stage, but also in the years after its construction.

I propose that there exists no single reading of a memorial, and that meaning is not fixed in space or time. The Sprite episode reveals not only the different meanings which can be attributed to the *Memorial* in shifting judicial and political contexts, but also raises important questions about the threats that consumerism and privatisation of urban space – characteristic of the Uruguayan dictatorship and post-dictatorship period – pose to memorialisation. The rapid changes inherent to the neoliberal city may lead to the invisibilisation (temporary or permanent), desecration or destruction of memorials, rendering them and their intended connection with past atrocity obsolete.

I use the Sprite episode as a departure point from which to explore the continuing complexities and contested, open-ended nature of the *Memorial*, and the fragility of memory processes within the context of post-dictatorship Uruguay. In the first section, I explore the memorial's form and content. Central to the analysis is the use of glass, which, I argue, alludes to the precariousness of memory and its uncertain future, a feature accentuated by the absence of any textual indication of State responsibility for the deaths of the individuals named on the *Memorial*. In the second section, I will explore the *Memorial*'s peripheral location, which could, on one hand, be considered part of a broader state policy to marginalise memory and confine it to the periphery. On the other hand, however, the choice of location endorses a link between past and present, and permits different levels of engagement with the *Memorial*. In the third and final part of this paper, I will examine the challenges facing the *Memorial*, and draw on the example of the former prison *Punta Carretas*, now a shopping centre, to reflect on the meaning ascribed to memory sites in the neoliberal city.

Together, the *Memorial*'s aesthetics and location, and its temporary concealment in early 2010 as a result of Coca Cola and the local government's actions, demonstrate that public commemoration is closely connected to the societal, judicial and political landscapes which they inhabit, and raises questions about both the fragility of memory and the types of closure memorials give to the past. The complexity and controversy of memorials serves to keep them firmly connected to the societies in which they are conceived (and, significantly continue to inhabit), particularly in the post-dictatorship period. I argue that far from rendering the *Memorial* invisible, the Sprite incident and its aftermath have had the opposite effect, casting doubt on the notions that memorials mark closure with the past, that a memorial's connection with the past may be explicit or straightforward and that consumerism and state (in)action render memorials 'amnesiac'. In this way, this study moves beyond the standard dichotomies of remembering versus forgetting, to consider the layers of meaning attributed to memorials in post-dictatorship Uruguay.

Representation and interpretation: fragile memory and the ambivalent State

In their letter to Ricardo Ehrlich condemning the events of 23 January 2010, MFDDU state that the *Memorial* '*refleja parte de la tragedia vivida de nuestro país por el Terrorismo de Estado*'. They claim that meaning is implicit in the *Memorial*, which presumably should thus act as a deterrent for certain forms of behaviour. However, Myers reminds us that

‘a block of stone may be a powerful text with many subtexts, or it may be an inert simplification of historical reality that assuages memory – it depends on the readership’ (1988: 190).

While MFDDU’s letter implies that the *Memorial* is not ‘amnesiac’ or ‘inert’, it does point to a potential ‘simplification’ of the dictatorship period. As Myers notes, the *Memorial* is open to contrasting interpretations and contradictions, and the link between the present *Memorial* and the ‘tragedia vivida’ is not a straightforward one, nor is there one specific message, particularly in shifting contexts. As Nelly Richard posits, ‘memory stirs up the static fact of the past with new unclosed meanings that put its recollections to work, causing both beginnings and endings to rewrite new hypotheses and conjunctures and thereby dismantle the explanatory closures of totalities that are too sure of themselves’ (2004: 17), thereby characterising memory processes as opening up fissures (24).

In what follows I will offer a more nuanced and textured reading of the *Memorial*, focusing on its form and content, with a view to elucidating the open-ended nature of memorialisation in (the specific context of) post-dictatorship Uruguay. The *Memorial* comprises two adjacent walls made of high resistance glass, set on a solid cement base, surrounded by exposed rock in a clearing in the park (figures 1 and 2). The two glass walls are engraved the names of the 174 Uruguayans who were disappeared, not only from within Uruguay, but also from elsewhere in the region as part of *Plan Cóndor* (figure 3).

However, the names are the only textual feature of the *Memorial*; there is no indication of the historical context or that these are victims of state terrorism, which casts doubt on MFDDU’s assertion that the *Memorial* reflects the tragedy of state terrorism, or that the link between past and present is explicit. Aesthetically speaking, the State is absent from the *Memorial* and the *textual* is chosen in favour of the *contextual*,



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2

opening up the *Memorial* to distinct interpretations, the nature of which ultimately depends on the spectator. The *Memorial* names the individuals without engaging with the context of their collective or individual disappearances. In contrast to comparable “walls of names” such as the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC and the



FIGURE 3

Buenos Aires Monument to the Victims of State Terrorism, there are no dates to indicate the historical period in which the individuals were killed, thus the spectator is required to bridge the gap between the individuals named and the reason for their inclusion on the *Memorial*.

In this way, the *Memorial* avoids provoking uncomfortable questions as to whether the victims' absence is due to state terrorism, a "dirty war", or a civil or military dictatorship. Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz, analysing the debates surrounding the categorisation of the Vietnam War on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, assert that 'anomalous names betray ambiguity about an event's nature and uncertainty about how to react to the men who take part in it' (1991: 386). This uncertainty over how a spectator should react to both event and participants is upheld by the fragmentary arrangement of the names on the *Memorial* and limited biographical information about the Uruguayan victims, in contrast to the Buenos Aires Monument, which incorporates each victim's age at the time of their disappearance and indicates whether women were pregnant at the time. Whilst a visitor to the Buenos Aires monument is encouraged to react to the young age of many of the dictatorship's victims and the overwhelming number of pregnant women who were disappeared, as well as the number of victims from the same family (because the names are arranged alphabetically by year), the visitor's experience of the Uruguayan memorial is very different, as the names appear fragmented both aesthetically and semantically.

Whilst the permanence of the victims' disappearance is acknowledged by the inscription of their names in glass, the lack of information about their absence alludes to potential ambiguity or even ambivalence towards the victims. For the uninformed visitor, the *Memorial* poses a challenge of how to respond to the names, which are detached from both the human and historical contexts. As Michael Lazzara discusses in relation to Santiago's Pinochet-era detention centre Villa Grimaldi, now a Peace Park, without the assistance of a guide, the memorial site permits 'complacent spectatorship' (2006: 142) eschewing consideration of the victims and the past with which the site is intended to connect.

Rather than reflect a painful period in a nation's history, the memorial site could be read as a simplification of the past, a mode of representation that ensures that the past remains past by evading difficult questions. In this way, the *Memorial* could be read as part of a broader State policy to limit debate and investigation into the past, and a lack of concern for the past (which comes to the fore in the *Sprite* issue). This is reinforced by the fact that although the local government played a key role in the *Memorial*'s conception in 1998, sanctioning public space for it and convening a commission to oversee its construction, national government involvement came only once the project was well under way, and even then was merely nominal. Although this is due, in part, to the different responsibilities local and national government have for administering local public space, the absence of any reference to state terrorism or local/national government approval of the *Memorial* can be viewed as illustrative of the State's ambivalence towards investigation of the past, which simultaneously elicits an alternative reading or 'subtext' of the *Memorial*.

However, although both mention of the State and a sense of *who* the victims were remain notably absent from the *Memorial*, the inscription of the names of Uruguay's disappeared is significant in ensuring that the possible interpretations of the *Memorial* are not rendered closed or final. The names constitute an essential textual feature.

These are the names of individuals that the perpetrators of state repression, both in Uruguay and across the region, aimed to erase all trace of, and the majority have been denied justice in the post-dictatorship. The spectator may not know who the individuals are, or the reason for their absence, but their inclusion on the *Memorial* demonstrates that they are no longer present. Moreover, for most Uruguayans, particularly in the current context when judicial, political and societal discussion of the dictatorship is frequently documented in the media, supplementary explanations about the relationship between names and an event are arguably unnecessary. In contrast, the uninitiated spectator must proceed inferentially, engaging with the *Memorial* and its text. They may consider and speculate on the meaning of these names, or treat the *Memorial* with indifference, passivity or view it as an obstruction, as the Sprite episode demonstrates.

However, the spectator – informed or otherwise – is encouraged to engage with the *Memorial* in a number of ways. Naming each victim individually – rather than collectively commemorating them under the rubric of ‘disappeared detainees’ – gives some semblance of the gravity and extent of Uruguayan state repression and promotes engagement with the disappeared both individually and collectively. This feature is described by Sturken, in her work on the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, as ‘the widening circle of pain emanating from each name’ (1991: 126). The visitor is invited to engage with this pain both visually and through the sense of touch. As Oschner asserts, ‘touch provides a second connection – a connection different from the visual’ (1997: 165) which allows the uninitiated spectator to experience the individual sense or human side of loss caused by disappearance, whilst those belonging to the ‘circle of pain’ – partners, parents, siblings – re-connect with the disappeared sensually, reflecting on what this personal loss means to them.

From a distance, the names they inscribed on the *Memorial* are not visible, but once the spectator approaches, they become evident; the fragmentary arrangement means that the visitor is not guided chronologically, but is invited to make the connection between the names and consider each from a variety of angles. This is not, strictly speaking, a single wall of names but an open (both structurally and metaphorically) memorial which invites the spectator to pass between the two walls and explore the names in any order, thus every visit is different, as is every interpretation. Rather than construct uniform readings and consensus, the *Memorial* promotes distinct layers of meaning, and its relationship to the past can be viewed as functioning on different levels.

This multiplicity of meaning is evident beyond the textual, in the materials employed. The choice of glass – as opposed to stone or marble – upon which the names are inscribed is an interesting one for a number of reasons. According to Nelson Di Maggio, the glass represents ‘the fragility of life’ (2004), presumably of Uruguay’s disappeared. However, given the lack of resolve and ambivalence from sectors of state and society towards the past, as evidenced in the Sprite episode specifically, and more broadly in the post-dictatorship context, it could be interpreted as embodying the fragility of memory and justice. This is supported by the transparency of the glass walls, which mean that the *Memorial* is integrated with the landscape and from a distance particularly so, becoming less visible and prominent in the sylvan setting. In this sense, the Memorial is more readily ignored, rather than provoking reaction or confrontation. However, the transparency of the glass means that names are visible from different angles. As the spectator walks around and between the glass walls, the names are

overlaid on the landscape, with views of the park, its flora and fauna, and the bay (figure 4). In this way, the names do not disappear easily, precisely because they extend beyond the material structure of the *Memorial*. This is not an opaque, dense memorial which obscures the landscape, but one in which the *Memorial* and setting are closely intertwined, a feature which will be discussed in the following section. In this way, the glass could also be viewed as depicting openness and transparency, particularly in the current context when the past is under more thorough investigation in societal, judicial and political spheres.

Moreover, the contrast between the man-made glass and durable, natural rock (figure 2) is suggestive of the contradictions and continuing tensions, not only between state and society, but within Uruguayan society itself, over how to address the past, demonstrated by the narrow margin by which the people voted to uphold the *Ley de Caducidad* in the 2009 plebiscite. Furthermore, as Demasi and Yaffé propose, ‘the excavations in the earth’ (from which the *Memorial* emerges) can be viewed as representative of ‘the complex search for truth’ (2005: 88), an endeavour which, at the time of the *Memorial*’s construction, had only been seriously addressed by civil society through the “*Nunca más*” truth-seeking report undertaken by human rights organisation *El Servicio de Paz y Justicia* (SERPAJ) in 1989 and more recently by President Batlle (2000–2005), who set up the *Comisión para la paz* (COPAZ) in 2000 to investigate forced disappearances during the dictatorship era. The President’s action marked a break with his predecessors in the realm of memory, and he went on to declare the *Memorial* of ‘national interest’ in 2000, although it is worth noting that his administration continued to reject calls to bring the perpetrators to justice.

The meaning given to the *Memorial* by state and societal actors has thus evolved alongside broader political and judicial developments. Indeed, since the *Memorial*’s



FIGURE 4

construction, there have been a number of important and unprecedented shifts in the political and judicial spheres. The Vázquez administration (2005–2010) and that of his successor President Mujica (2010–present) have interpreted the *Ley de Caducidad* as inapplicable in a number of landmark cases, opening the way for judicial investigation. In October 2011, the Uruguayan Parliament approved a new law that effectively overturned the *Ley de Caducidad*, declaring the crimes committed during the dictatorship “crimes against humanity” and paving the way for judicial investigation.⁴ The monument’s exposed rock – an open scar in the landscape – may serve as a reminder that the search for truth as well as justice is a complex and painstaking one, still unresolved, and through which Uruguay is navigating *terra incognita*. Meanwhile, the setting of the glass walls in the dark, earthy rock is striking, as if the *Memorial* and its base were emerging from a stark, natural opening in the landscape, showing that neither the names of the disappeared nor the issue of how to address the past will fade easily, and that the *Memorial*’s complexity cannot be reduced to one single reading.

An examination of the *Memorial*’s form in contexts of on-going, but also shifting, impunity reveals contradiction and complexity, but also shows how memorials are subject to distinct interpretations over time. Moreover, discussion of the *Memorial*’s aesthetics raises important questions about how contested pasts are (re)presented in the present and whether a memorial could, or indeed should, close the door on the past. Form and content may guide our interaction with memorials but ultimately they require interpretation and contemplation on the part of the spectator. Maya Lin, the architect who designed the Vietnam Veterans Memorial, has described her intention to design a memorial that ‘would not tell you how to think’ about the war (Hubbard 1984: 21). Lin thus advocates a category of memorial which is not authoritative, but allows for interpretation (be this intellectual or emotive). However, I propose that all memorial sites elicit distinct responses and types of interaction, as the Sprite episode well illustrates. There are, it would seem, as many interpretations of the *Memorial* as there are of Uruguay’s recent past and the *Memorial*’s different features can be interpreted differently, depending on the context, beyond the opposing processes of remembering versus forgetting. It is thus the spectator and their understanding of the past, derived from the context/group to which they belong, that give a memorial meaning, beyond the architects’ and creators’ original intentions.

(Dis)located memory? Situating the *Memorial* symbolically

As discussed in the previous section, the *Memorial*’s aesthetics and its location are closely connected. In this section, I explore the significance of the *Memorial*’s peripheral location vis-à-vis the kinds of closure it gives to the past (if any) in order to elucidate the layers of memory attached to memorials.

The location for the *Memorial* in *Parque Vaz Ferreira* on the *Cerro* – the hill which overlooks the Uruguayan capital – may seem like an unusual choice for two reasons: firstly, its distance from the city centre and other visitor and tourist sites, and secondly, the lack of explicit association between the site and the state terrorism of the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. This raises questions about the *Memorial*’s impact and visibility, as memory is marginalised to the edges of the city. This sense of cynicism is not assuaged when we consider that this was one of two sites proposed for the project by

the local government (Demasi and Yaffé 2005: 87). The *Memorial's* construction thus converged with a governmental project to clean up and regenerate the area in the late 1990s.⁵ The more remote location could be read as reflecting the low level of priority the State has afforded to addressing the past by any means, for most of the post-dictatorship period. In this way, the location does not represent forgetting per se, but imparts a narrative of marginalisation and indifference.

However, MFUDD, who chose the location, cite an important reason for selecting the park over the other option offered by the local government – the *Rambla de Buceo*, the busy esplanade which runs southeast of the city centre. The *Cerro* is a visible and well-known local and national landmark, featured on the local Montevidean coat of arms as well as the national Uruguayan one. More specifically, the site occupies an important place in local history and memory; the neighbourhood around the *Cerro* known as *Villa del Cerro* (formerly *Villa Cosmópolis*) grew rapidly during the late nineteenth century, as the destination for a large number of immigrants from all over Europe and the Middle East. The neighbourhood became the location of meat refrigeration plants built during the early twentieth century as the Uruguayan meat-packing industry flourished. As a result, a working-class community grew rapidly around the *Cerro* (Esmoris, n.d), and during the 1950s, against the backdrop of economic downturn, the neighbourhood became the site of working class struggle and resistance. This signifies an attempt by MFUDD to draw parallels between the struggle of many of the disappeared and the working class struggle of the 1950s, as well as the continuing working class identity of the area, thus implying that the inclusion of ‘disappeared detainees’ on the *Memorial* is not altogether apolitical.

In other words, the *Memorial's* setting is not incidental but part of how spectators interpret the *Memorial*, giving a sense of identity to those names inscribed in glass. Of note here is the way in which recovering local history and “*memoria barrial*” functions as a precursor to understanding the process of memorialisation related to the *Memorial* itself. The close link between the *Memorial's* aesthetics and the landscape, and the *Memorial* and this locality which has an identity distinct from that of the rest of Montevideo (Lima 2007), thus reveals the layers of memory and meaning at play in memorialisation beyond its form and content. This notion of distinct memories and meanings at work in the *Memorial* is also encapsulated in the distinct state and societal aims in the choice of location. In this way, public commemoration marks the convergence of projects which may be societal, political, practical or ideological.

Indeed, beyond the symbolism attributed to the *Cerro*, the relatives’ organisation opted for the more distant location of *Parque Vaz Ferreira* because the *Rambla de Buceo* was a busy thoroughfare with considerable traffic (author’s interview with representatives of MFUDD, 29 April 2009). Therefore, the park was chosen for its relative tranquillity, rather than a location where people may hurriedly pass by and the *Memorial* could be ignored or treated with indifference. In contrast to the *Rambla*, the park is somewhere people have time to stop and reflect, since the park, along with the nearby beach, function as sites of leisure and offer panoramic views of the bay, visible through the *Memorial's* glass walls, as discussed above.

Significantly, construction of a permanent memorial away from the city centre points to what has been described as ‘decentralisation of memory’ (Schindel 2009), by which memorials may be situated away from busy downtown areas and traditional circuits of museums and exhibition centres, for practical or symbolic reasons. A deeper

understanding of the rationale of memorialisation in these peripheral spaces can be gained through consideration of the 1986 Harburg Monument Against Fascism located in a working class neighbourhood of Hamburg (Lupu 2003). The premise was that, in a less orthodox location, the monument constituted an intervention which would provoke a reaction in the unsuspecting visitor, be it surprise, contemplation or consternation, and thus inhibit passivity, closure and disengagement in the present towards mnemonic devices aimed at connecting with the political violence of the past. Although the Harburg memorial was located in a busy thoroughfare in the heart of the neighbourhood, the more peripheral locations, away from the city centre, arguably open monuments up to a multiplicity of meanings and different types of encounter. Encounter with peripheral memorials would be very different for a visitor who deliberately chose to visit, than for someone who came across it accidentally on their way to another destination.

However, the *Memorial*'s dislocation from downtown Montevideo raises practical concerns about maintenance and vandalism,⁶ such as the Sprite cover-up, which itself could be defined as temporary vandalism. At the same time, the incident demonstrates that the connection between the *Memorial* and the locality is not only symbolic or theoretical but also a reality; a number of the condemnations of the company's actions came from residents of *Villa del Cerro*. The *Memorial* is thus not invisible against the landscape and it is notable that it has struck a chord with wider society – beyond the human rights community and those directly affected by past violence. It is notable that this societal denunciation occurred at a juncture in which the issue of how past crimes should be addressed was the focus of public debate and condemnation, following the unsuccessful plebiscite to annul the *Ley de Caducidad* in October 2009. The condemnation of Coca Cola and the production company's actions is thus linked to the prominence of the past in the present at that particular moment, and the broader ongoing critique of amnesty for human rights violations. Moreover, a certain amount of freedom for spectators to interact with the *Memorial* (whatever the nature of this interaction) means that the *Memorial* is open to a broader range of interpretation. The peripheral location does not render the *Memorial* invisible, but offers a non-traditional, more open-ended memorial, which, rather than encourage authoritative readings, promotes outward-looking memorialisation, dependent on societal participation, which feeds into – and is impacted by – broader debates about the past.

Continuity and rupture: commemoration in a time of consumerism

Consideration of the *Memorial* thus far has shown that memorials are open to distinct interpretations over time, and explored the way in which their connection to the past may be 'threatened' by abstraction or marginalisation. The Sprite incident points to another perceived, and perhaps more significant, challenge to the endurance of mnemonic sites more generally and the interpretations therein: that posed by consumerism, to be discussed and contested in this final section.

Indeed, the threat to memorials and vestiges of the past in a context of neoliberalism, unbridled capitalism and consumerism has been the subject of considerable scholarly research. As Andreas Huyssen posits, 'there is evidence for the view that capitalist culture with its continuing frenetic paces, its television politics of

quick oblivion and its dissolution of public space in ever more channels of instant entertainment is inherently amnesiac' (1995: 7). If memorialisation is geared towards representations of the past, then the accelerated pace and disposable nature of modern life may render memorials obsolete. Huyssen alludes to the inevitability of the disjuncture between memory and memorial in contemporary society. Idelber Avelar's analysis supports this: 'growing commodification negates memory because new commodities must always replace previous commodities and send them to the dustbin of history' (1999: 2).

Moreover, there are various ways in which this obsolescence may be made manifest. First, the neoliberal city is rapidly and perpetually evolving, undergoing modernisation, destruction and (re)construction, which has considerable impact on the spaces and places therein. Referring to post-dictatorship Chile, Lazzara explores the absence of concrete vestiges of the past in the city of Santiago, where he says the 'ruins of political violence are indeed hard to map on the city's modernised, neoliberal urban space' (2006: 127). In this way, preservation of the past has been a low priority for post-dictatorship governments, and the competition for lucrative urban space means that former detention centres and torture chambers operating during dictatorial rule may be sold and remodelled in line with the needs of the neoliberal, post-dictatorial present. In fact, the free-market reforms implemented during and after the dictatorship in Uruguay can be viewed as part of this process, falling in line with the post-dictatorship government's unwillingness to address past repression.

Meanwhile, public memorial sites may be viewed as an inconvenience and obstruction for private business opportunities and ventures: memorials may be destroyed, desecrated, remodelled or temporarily obscured. However, even when the architectural structure of a memorial or monument remains intact, the fissures and contested interpretations of the memorial may fail to strike resonance within society. Indeed, Henri Lefebvre coined the term 'abstract space' to describe that produced by capitalism and neocapitalism, which 'asphyxiates whatever is conceived within it... [and] destroys the historical conditions that gave rise to it, its own (internal) differences' (1991: 53). Lefebvre thus understands abstract space as a homogenous one in which diverse contradictions are obscured. Building on this, Marc Augé argues that in the age of supermodernity and globalisation, the term 'non-place' can be used to describe a space 'which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity' (Augé 1995: 79). These non-places range from airports and shopping centres to casinos and train stations, as well as motorways and intersections. This reading suggests that, in the neoliberal context, memorials or sites of memory, rather than promote the past in the present, may relegate it firmly to the past.

A case in point, which aids our understanding of sites of memory and consumerism in the Uruguayan post-dictatorship specifically, is *Punta Carretas*, the state prison where political prisoners were detained and tortured during the dictatorship. In the post-dictatorship it was sold to private investors in 1989 and converted into a shopping centre, which opened in 1994. According to Augé's definition, then, *Punta Carretas* Shopping Centre could be categorised as a 'non-place'. It is a modern shopping mall, featuring a multiplex cinema, a McDonald's fast food outlet and an upmarket hotel owned by the Sheraton chain. Furthermore, Hugo Achugar has pointed out that *Punta Carretas*'s transformation should be seen within the specific context of Uruguay's integration into the regional trading bloc Mercosur in 1991, which marked the logic of

the market supplanting the logic of remembering (Achugar 2004). However, interestingly, this is not strictly speaking indicative of remembering versus forgetting, but the installation of an alternative narrative of the past in the site's new function. This vision promoted the country's exceptionality as a refuge from the economic instability plaguing its neighbours and depicted the years of the dictatorship as a hiatus in long-term democratic stability.

In this way, to return to Augé, the conversion did not mark a complete rupture with the past or render the former prison a place devoid of historical or relational meaning. Zimmer, who critiques Augé's work through his analysis of Fogwill's novel *La experiencia sensible*, questions whether the contradictions of 'savage capitalism' can ever be masked successfully (2006: 153). There may be no plaque to mark *Punta Carretas*'s former function, but many of the original features remain: a decree signed in 1990 between the municipal and national authorities ensured that as much of the building's structure as possible would be preserved, including the cellblocks, the main entrance door and much of the façade. For the individuals who were detained and tortured there, or for the families of the disappeared, as well as residents in the busy neighbourhood where the former prison was a well-known landmark, the contradictions are perhaps more evident. For example, the 1996 documentary *Tupamaros* follows two former members of the revolutionary organisation on a visit to the site as they express disbelief at the function and form of the remodelled shopping centre: '*parece europeo ... es otro mundo*'.⁷ At the same time, the pair note the similarity between architectural features of the shopping centre and the former prison, particularly the main entrance and central atrium. Even this modern shopping centre holds historical significance and remains in collective and individual memory; its status as a mall since 1994 does not signal a total break with the past, either aesthetically or semantically. As Susana Draper concludes, here the past is 'preserved but modified' (2009: 133). The case of *Punta Carretas* points not only to the '*cárcer de palimpsesto*' (Achugar 2004: 228) of sites of memory and the layers of meaning attached, but also to their endurance against obsolescence.

Consideration of *Punta Carretas* shows that although capitalism and consumerism bring a number of challenges for memorialisation, amnesia is not an inherent or inevitable aspect of the urban change ushered in by consumerism and neoliberalism. Lazzara upholds this assertion, suggesting that even when built environments are modified (albeit temporarily we might add), there will always be something unsettling about these places (2006: 130) and it is impossible to eradicate all traces of the past. I would add that this is particularly true in Uruguay specifically, and the Southern Cone more generally, where discussion of the past occupies a prominent place in the present. This explains why symbolic or imagined traces of the past remain, even in instances when a monument is destroyed, vandalised, or given a completely different function. There is, it would seem, a place for memory in consumer-driven contexts, particularly when there is a lack of finality surrounding the past. As Bachelard asserts, this is because our imagination resides in spaces and places, which transcend (and reverberate beyond) their physical properties (185). Mnemonic devices emerge in unlikely places, not only intended or self-evident memorials. To return to the Sprite episode, in which the *Memorial* temporarily became part of the neoliberal, globalised space, when the monument and its complexity were hidden from view, the incident actually fuelled debates about responsibility for and treatment of the *Memorial*, heightening its visibility.

Huyssen argues that, actually, in the age of consumption and neoliberalism etc., the amnesia of such ‘planned obsolescence’ has almost the reverse effect: it ‘generates its own opposite: the new museal culture as a reaction formation’ (1995: 254).

In this case, the reaction took place principally in the media and online. We could argue that in the age of mass media museal culture is not confined to architectural or physical spaces, but also encompasses virtual spaces. Condemnation of Coca Cola and the production company’s actions by citizens in blogs and other social media thus generated debate and ‘fissures through which to escape from market specifications’ (Richard 2004: 160). This is not to condone the actions of the production company, but the act of obscuring the *Memorial* constituted a key moment in which the controversy of memory was projected into public space, leading to heightened conscience of the past. Indeed, the treatment of memorials in consumer-driven contexts bestows them with another layer of meaning whilst revealing that the struggles for meaning articulated in memorials are not as simple as state versus society, but must incorporate market forces – whose goals and conduct may converge or diverge with those of state and society.

Towards the future: memory in the making

Consideration of the *Memorial* reveals contested landscapes of memory and justice through which the struggles to address the past are articulated. Memorials can be understood as dialogic spaces to which different actors attach different meanings, not just the will to forget or to remember, and continue to do so long after a memorial’s creation. Thus for those who condemned the actions of Coca Cola, production company and local government, the *Memorial* provides a ‘symbolic reparation to victims that post-dictatorship government policies had tried to condemn to oblivion’ and a clear connection between past and present (Demasi and Yaffé 2005: 87). In this way, the *Memorial* addresses the injustice suffered by the victims and their families, by providing a place for visitation and reflection where the absence of Uruguay’s disappeared is recognised aesthetically, spatially and symbolically. In this sense, the temporary concealment of the *Memorial* by the production company constitutes a threat to reparation through the symbolic re-disappearance of the disappeared, which highlights the continuing contestation over how the past is addressed and the fragility of memory and justice. However, as this paper has shown, this is not the only interpretation of the *Memorial* or its short-lived invisibilisation. Memorials may be “threatened” by abstraction, marginalisation and consumerism or peripheral locations, but discussion of these threats suggests that rather than render memorials either invisible or homogenous, interpretations of the past are heterogeneous, complex and evolving. Public *commemoration* does not establish a public *memory*, but results in public and private memories’ convergence, contraction and evolution, allowing for the inclusion and complexity of different interpretations which evolve over time.

To return to the issue of how we “read” the *Memorial* in post-dictatorship Uruguay: can it be understood as a fragile, peripheral memorial which induces forgetting, or rather an evocative, mnemonic device which connects both aesthetically and symbolically with the landscape in which it was constructed and guarantees remembrance? Such a dichotomy is seldom useful, as this paper has shown: the Sprite

episode undoubtedly points to a perceived vulnerability of memorials in consumer-driven contexts and in shifting terrains of memory and justice, but the societal denunciations, and recent developments in the judicial and political spheres, pose a significant challenge to sectors of state and society who wish to marginalise memory and promote closure of the past in post-dictatorship Uruguay. Memorials are thus not static in nature, and the debates and controversy surrounding them are crucial in giving them meaning. As Dylan Trigg asserts, the memorial itself is not inevitably memorable, but it is 'the events which contextually surround that monument which, in turn, animate the monument' (2006: 60). Only time will tell how the *Memorial* fares in the long run, but for now, the past is 'not even past' (Faulkner 1951).

Notes

- 1 During the civil-military dictatorship approximately as many as 200 Uruguayans were forcibly disappeared, whilst thousands were subjected to torture and illegal detention. Meanwhile, by the end of the dictatorship, Uruguay had the highest per-capita prison population in the world and between 300,000 and 400,000 of Uruguay's three million inhabitants had been forced into exile (Weschler 1990: 85).
- 2 A copy of the letter to Ricardo Ehrlich from MFUDD, dated 1 Feb 2010, is available online at <http://familiaresdedesaparecidos.blogspot.com/>.
- 3 The *Ley de Caducidad* was narrowly upheld in the October 2009 plebiscite though 47.98% had voted for it to be repealed. This result is indicative of a society which remained just as divided as it had been in the first referendum in 1989. In that instance, 55.95% voted for the law to be upheld and 41.3% against.
- 4 Text of Law 18,831 is available here: http://archivo.presidencia.gub.uy/sci/leyes/2011/10/cons_min_400.pdf.
- 5 The *Intendencia de Montevideo* published 'Montevideo: Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial 1998–2004' in which the *Parque Vaz Ferreira* was identified as one of a number of areas which had fallen into disrepair and needed significant regeneration.
- 6 Several years after the *Memorial* was completed, the glass was broken in an act of anonymous vandalism, which resulted in a guard being employed to "police" the *Memorial*. See Nelson Di Maggio (2004) for more details.
- 7 The documentary *Tupamaros* (Germany/Switzerland) was written and directed by Heidi Specogna and Rainer Hoffmann. The documentary focuses on a number of ex-members of the MLN *Tupamaros*, interviewing them about their experiences of 1970s state terrorism, and the 1972 escape of political prisoners from *Punta Carretas*.

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