

# Shot, countershot, off-screen space: espionage and DIPBA's gaze on the Argentine Women Union

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To investigate the discursive communities and the scopic regimes involved in the so-called "repression files" implies dealing with cross-discipline approaches on Visual studies and Discourse analysis. What is there behind the presumption of "dangerousness" leading to the seizure of photographs by police forces? The knot woven out of images and control stages different visual fields in dispute: primarily, an order framed by a stark gaze cast by surveillance forces on the seized photographs. In spite of its hegemony, however, every reality comprises at least two sides: the reverse of this worldview which deems itself impartial, its visual countershot, is dominated by the bodily disposition of the actors portrayed. Finally, delving into the images archived by repressive organizations also reveals an unfathomable off-screen space, which expands beyond the recorded frames.

This work is an overview of the documentation generated by the Buenos Aires Police Intelligence Directorate (*Dirección de Inteligencia de la Policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires*, DIPBA) about the Argentine Women Union (*Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina*, UMA). The latter was created in 1947, during the City of Buenos Aires' National Women Meeting, with the leaders of the Argentine Communist Party (PCA) as its main sponsors, and comprising women with different political backgrounds: communists, anarchists, Trotskyists, *radicales*, and *peronistas*<sup>1</sup>, who organized demonstrations in favor of divorce, joint parental authority, abortion, and wage equality, against the backdrop of the fight for the national and social liberation of Argentina and Latin America. As pointed out by Adriana Valobra, "notwithstanding the PCA's strategy and communist activity in the UMA, it should be understood that the goal of a mass dynamics, by definition, led to party limits' being trespassed."<sup>2</sup> In the context of the Cold War, the detection of activities deemed "subversive" and the persecution of communists were priority tasks in the police intelligence activities.

The documentation surveyed<sup>3</sup> contains a detailed record of the political and ideological surveillance exerted on the UMA, comprising 30 files classified in folders ascribed to "Desk C", with information on people, organizations, and activities labeled as "communist" by the DIPBA, and to the "Reference Desk", with includes both material which could not be allocated to any of the other desks and material which makes reference to other folders.

Focusing on the relationships established between verbal and visual discourses, I am interested in considering the uses and appropriations of iconic

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<sup>1</sup> "While the intention of the members of the UMA was always to reach all women, regardless of party distinctions, the interests of the Communist Party began to dominate over time". María Eugenia Marengo, "Lo aparente como real: Un análisis del sujeto 'comunista' en la creación y consolidación del servicio de inteligencia de la policía de la Provincia de Buenos Aires", *Memoria Académica*, 2012, p. 164. [En línea.] Consultado el 30 de marzo de 2018. Disponible en línea: <http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/tesis/te.875/te.875.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> Adriana María Valobra, "Partidos, tradiciones y estrategias de movilización social: de la Junta de la Victoria a la Unión de Mujeres de la Argentina", *Prohistoria*, IX, 9, 2005, p. 76.

<sup>3</sup> DIPBA Files, Folder 3, File No. 39, "Photographic series".

images in the context of espionage, persecution, and raid and search activities which aim at *identifying* the opponent and *preventing* future threats. The limited number of photographs included in the reports can be classified according to three main types: 1) photographs seized which belonged to UMA women; 2) photographs taken by the DIPBA; 3) press photographs (for instance, from the *Nuestras mujeres* magazine, published by the UMA to advertise its activities and attract new members.)

I will focus on the material included in File No. 1 of the "Photographic Series" (part of File 39 in Folder 3), about two "Argentine delegates" who took part in the Women Congress held on June 5–10, 1953, in Copenhagen, Denmark, from where they traveled to the USSR, invited by the Antifascist Committee of Soviet Women. The 34-page DIPBA report was prepared upon request by the Chief of Police of the Public Order Directorate, in the first days of March, 1954<sup>4</sup>, in the period preceding the official creation of the DIPBA files, in 1956<sup>5</sup>.

It is a set of photographs seized from two women who traveled to the Copenhagen Congress, "Silvia Machado" and "Ofelia Layacona", whom the informant to the Chief of Police refers to using name and surname, or, often, as "La Machado" and "la Layacona", identified in the images with an "I" and an "X", respectively. The use of the feminine article ("la") followed by the surname could be a derogatory treatment: this is the only text mark which could be described as a *subjectivème*. If the use of the article before names or nicknames is a popular way of showing affection towards a person, widespread in different regions of Argentine, in the case of this report, it could be argued that it has a negative connotation.

Photographs are considered an "illustrative supplement," whose goal is to "broaden" the typewritten report. Photographs, thus, are valued as a means to "illustrate" the file. According to the informant, the setting of the images in which both women are portrayed "almost constantly" is "the Soviet Union and countries dominated by the Communist regime." These were seized directly from the delegate from Rosario ("Silvia Machado"), who was at the house of "a local communist activist, Arzulina Pía Righi de Sanchez," together with "copious communist propaganda" (which, besides the photographs, comprises brochures, affiliation files, literature), and from the delegate from General Arenales ("Ofelia Layacona"), after her prosecution in the town of Rojas, in the province of Buenos Aires, where she was "surprised with a group of people while preparing to have a picnic, for which they lacked proper authorization." Under that pretext, the delegates were arrested and prosecuted for violation of Article 104 of the Code of Misdemeanors, on February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1954.

These are the 15 photographs included in the report. Four are classified as portraying "unspecified places," in which we can see the women gathered in parks, in a majestic hall, and around chess games and other board games. The remaining 11 photographs were taken in a carrousel of the Gorki Central Park of Culture and Leisure; in a masquerade hosted during the school break; in the Stalin automotive factory; in the Tretiakovskaia Art Gallery; in a visit to the Institute of Obstetrics and Gynecology Scientific Research; in the Children's Books House; in the No. 201 High School for Women, "named after Zoie Kosmodemiánskaia in the report, Heroine of the Soviet Union" (referring to Zoya Kosmodemyanskaya); in a station of the Moscow

<sup>4</sup> The excerpts from the files are quoted verbatim, including several grammatical and spelling mistakes.

<sup>5</sup> The persecution of women collectives, due to a variety of reasons, dates back to one of the inaugural instances of the articulation between photography and legal control in Latin America: the Rules for the registry of *mujeres públicas* (i.e., sex workers) of the City of Mexico, sanctioned in 1865, and which "far from a mere curiosity, it represents a manifestation of the interplay between legal science, medicine, and visual technology, which will be adjusted throughout the century to give rise to the new discourse known as criminology," as pointed out by Paola Cortés-Rocca in *El tiempo de la máquina. Retratos, paisajes y otras imágenes de la nación*, Buenos Aires. Colihue, 2011, p. 62.

Metro; and in the Mikoyan confectionery factory. As indicated in the back of the photographs, these were taken by "E. Evserijin," "D. Dzheiranov," "N. Síntnikov," "A. Mijáilov," and "N. Naúmenkov"<sup>6</sup>. We could suppose that the settings for the 1954 Copenhagen Congress were not identified in detail, seeing as, by 1954, the main target of espionage was not feminism, but communism.



Estancia de las delegaciones de mujeres de los  
países de América Latina en la U.R.S.S., Moscú,  
junio de 1953.

La delegación visitó el Parque Central "Gorki"  
de Cultura y Descanso.

18. En la foto: las delegadas en el carrusell.

Foto E.Evserijin

(x) Felipe Loyacono Montó Conchita  
I Silvia Machado Rojas...

The photographs show the women in various tours and visits, smiling openly to the camera, sharing meetings, in relaxed situations, associated with leisure and outdoor entertainment, participating in cultural activities, in all cases away from the more strictly political environment linked to communist activism. In turn, the setting more related to education, labor and production appears as a space open for tours, in events organized to receive the Latin American delegates with flowers and ovations.

<sup>6</sup> None of the quoted names could be identified.

These visits were part of a tour of sorts along the main Soviet attractions, both those linked to the conquests of the political and economic (educational, scientific and industrial) system, and those which made it possible to witness everyday life in its festive and recreational facets. In all images, the Argentine women appear smiling, enjoying these exchange experiences, interacting with children, with workers, with other women, expressing interest in art, in machinery and, in sum, in all the places depicted in the photo album of their journey to Denmark and the Soviet Union.



Asistencia en la URSS de las delegaciones  
de mujeres de América Latina.  
Moscú, junio 1953.

79. En la foto: Las delegadas asisten  
a un baile de máscaras celebrado con motivo  
de las vacaciones escolares.

Fotografía de V. Dzheiranov

*I Silvia Machado De la Rosa Rojas.*

At this point, we can ask ourselves why these pictures were interesting for the DIPBA. No other person is identified by name in the pictures (with the exception of some of the photographers' surnames). Which factors could make these photographs, almost touristic in nature, relevant for surveillance? There are two evident answers: the setting and the subjects, that is, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, and these two feminist and communist women. What is more: two women who violated the rule against organizing picnics with no authorization, enrolled in a left-wing

ideology, activists of the Argentine Women Union, who attend the Congress in Denmark, and who, as can be seen, use the journey to get a first-hand experience of the communist regime. Taking into account the context of the country by 1954, the confiscation of photographs of these traveling feminist, communist, independent women would clearly draw the attention of the police informants.

Having said that, I am interested in the description made by one of the delegates, as it reveals some clues about the uses of the photographs not only by repressive forces, but also by activists, which is obviously seen as a *threat* by the Intelligence Directorate: "LA LAYACONA is a very active 'cell' of the Communist Party, who seems to focus her propaganda on farmers, infiltrating that sector of the national economy, particularly farmers' families, with the known goal of creating discontent and dejection in that industry, through a psychological sabotage which resorts to comparing the means at the disposal of Argentine farmers with the modern and efficient ones used by the Russian government, which they try to showcase as unparalleled, using *ad hoc* photographs, of which these cells have an abundant provision."

Thus, the report mentions the use of photographs for propaganda (included in the second folder of the "Photographic series," which is excluded from the UMA materials, as it relates to agricultural issues.) This mention is relevant to probe the scopic imaginary of the DIPBA, as it is a warning about the persuasive power of images, represented in this case by "the photographs of the sizeable machinery and implements of agriculture and also other branches of industry, which these propagandists ascribe to the USSR's economic potential."

## Gazes in dispute

In "Scopic regimes of Modernity"<sup>7</sup> revisiting the idea of "scopic regime" coined by Christian Metz against the backdrop of his reflections on the "apparatus,"<sup>8</sup> Martin Jay posits that modernity is marked by ocularcentrism. The Renaissance, the scientific revolution (with the telescope and the microscope), and the invention of the printing press cemented the "supremacy of the visual" as a non-reflective and quantitative perceptive field. There is no natural vision prior to cultural mediation: this is one of the main premises of critical approaches to the images formulated in the seventies. Any image implies work on an artifice, beginning with the camera's placement, which determines a frame and an angle: image, thus, is a recreated or reproduced appearance. As pointed out by John Berger in his classic essay: "Every image entails a way of seeing" (2013: 16).<sup>9</sup>

Following Jacqueline Rose, Jay puts forward the possibility of interpreting the scopic regime as a "contested terrain," in line with the notion of "force field" developed by Walter Benjamin to speak of the dialectics involved in every historical circumstance as regards the past/present relationship, understood as a negotiation

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<sup>7</sup> Martin Jay, "Regímenes escópicos de la Modernidad", *Campos de fuerza. Entre la historia intelectual y la crítica cultural*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2003, pp. 221-252.

<sup>8</sup> The apparatus theory was developed in the context of Film Theory in the sixties (mostly following Christian Metz) in order to challenge the way in which the reality effect works, based on a critique of the mechanisms of entertainment. According to this approach, technology (the relationship between camera, screen, project, and spectator) is never conceived neutrally. As regards the conception of Guy Debord in *The society of the spectacle*, Jay lists three major critiques aimed at this theory: first, it posits a totally hermetic control mechanism; second, it ignores the non-visual dimensions of the film experience; third, it is deeply "blind" to gender, as its view is implicitly male. See Martin Jay, "Del imperio de la mirada a la sociedad del espectáculo: Foucault y Debord", *Ojos abatidos. La denigración de la visión en el pensamiento francés del siglo XX*, Madrid, Akal, 2007, pp. 289-328.

<sup>9</sup> John Berger, *Modos de ver*, Barcelona, Gustavo Gili, 2013.

which implies clashing energies. A force field is thus contraposed both to the imposition of present constructions onto a malleable past, and to the reified continuity of history. In this line, I would like to go back to the photographs seized from the UMA women, in order to identify the presence of two competing ocular fields.

First, it is possible to see a hegemonic visual model, which posits the dominance of an absolute, unique, and static eye which watches the scene before it as the result of a mechanical recording, devoid of subjective frames. The DIPBA's cold gaze on the seized photographs creates a de-erotized and disembodied visual order, based on the worldview of an investigator who deems himself "impartial." The photograph is thus installed as a social control apparatus used to verify information on spied-upon subjects.

In a relation of tension with that scopic regime, we can identify – in the same file – the outline of an alternate vision which appears as an "anti-ethos"<sup>10</sup> of the gaze limited to espionage. For the DIPBA, in the mid fifties, photographs are but "illustrations," mere supplements to the reports, but, somehow, not exclusively so. The act of seizing the photographs suggests a certain caveat, by the repressive forces, about the weakness of the monocular subject (which is assumed by their own vigilance practices): the photographs are a window into a world which appears to go beyond the frame in which it is portrayed. In other words, the frame no longer has a totalizing function: the photographs also contain stories which overflow the horizon of expectations of the police gaze. Both the photographs included in the report, which as we have seen portray "happy" images of a possible, prosperous, and communist reality,<sup>11</sup> and the photographs mentioned by the spy, those the women brought from their journey to show their comrades the proof of the technical advances in the Soviet Union, are the cipher of a threat to the dominance of the gaze of the intelligence services. It could be that the album of personal pictures, of intimate mementos of a trip which combined activism, training, and pleasure is not only a laid-back snapshot, but rather reveals a dangerous combination for the invisible eye of repression: the mixture of communism and pleasure. We could even posit that there is a heterogeneous element, in the sense of that which cannot be assimilated,<sup>12</sup> in this photographic series: I refer to the depiction of the leisure of women traveling alone, dislocated from a family environment<sup>13</sup>, who, on top of affirming themselves ideologically in communist doctrines, enjoy recreational activities.

For that reason, moreover, we could put forward a second observation as regards the diversification of scopic regimes, which anticipates the transition from a logocentric paradigm to one more image-focused.<sup>14</sup> Beyond the police's bias, the women we see portrayed do not appear as victims of the ocular power, but as protagonists both before and, we can assume, behind the camera. The persuasive power of the photographic images threatens the very foundation of the surveillance

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<sup>10</sup> This notion makes reference to the reverse of the self-image as its "negative" (to use photographic terms), following the proposal of Dominique Maingueneau revisited by Alejandra Vitale and Paulina Bettendorff, who refer to the counterfigure present in "passional repression" as opposed to the "dangers of passion."

<sup>11</sup> In this regard, the title of the book published by the UMA after its delegates' trip speaks volumes: *Vimos en la Unión Soviética niños y mujeres felices. El Congreso Mundial de Mujeres* (We saw happy women and children in the Soviet Union. The International Women Congress), whose authors are Margarita Ponce and Fanny Edelman, Buenos Aires, UMA, 1953.

<sup>12</sup> Georges Bataille, "La estructura psicológica del fascismo", *La conjuración sagrada. Ensayos 1929-1939*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2003.

<sup>13</sup> The report emphasizes family ties – "(...) daughter of Luciano and Evarista Anita Berutti, no profession, she takes care of housekeeping (...), she is a protestant" –, but there no images show her next to her family.

<sup>14</sup> This hypothesis was first posited by María Ledesma.

and espionage practices in the visual economy of the DIPBA. The photographs, even those which focus on seemingly "harmless" everyday activities (such as games and field trips) establish a relationship of tension with the dominant scopic regime.



Estancia en la URSS de las delegaciones de  
mujeres de los países (de) .....  
Moscú, junio 1953.

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La delegación ha visitado la colonia de  
pioneros de la fábrica de automóviles "Stalin".  
59. En la foto: Estas pioneras ofrecen  
a las delegadas ramos de flores.

Fotografía de E. Evserijin

*I Silvia Machado*

### Closing remarks

The period in Argentine history which began in 1955, when Juan Domingo Perón was ousted by the military intervention of the so-called "Liberating Revolution," is characterized by an intensification of political persecution. Bearing in mind the hierarchical importance as regards the production of information by government surveillance, 1956 has been considered a foundational moment for the Buenos Aires province's intelligence. However, as can be seen based on the police file studied in this work, there are clear precedents in the Peronist administration, which, as pointed out by María Eugenia Marengo, "deepened the identification of the communist subject as the enemy, and aimed at enhancing 'information' as a part of the government's security policy. By the time of the 1955 coup, an anti-communist

practice and doctrine were already in place (...), in line with the influence of the "French Doctrine", which preceded the provisional government, but which would later be deepened through the military and police training and preparation of Argentina in the School of the Americas."

In this paper I attempted to show how the overarching concept of "dangerousness" which permeated the surveillance routine over the 20<sup>th</sup> century covers all dimensions of the so-called "communist element," bringing under the influence of espionage the images which were seemingly less political (in a strict sense) of the UMA. The corporal presence of women displaced from family and household, and also from political and work-related settings, somehow affects the universe of expectations of the police gaze, which simultaneously prepares reports according to which the women are in expectable positions (such as household chores) and includes photographs which show them in other coordinates of existence (even though it is not possible to retrieve information about the setting of the whole series, as the verbal and visual files are not a comprehensive review of all espionage actions, while the subjects and objects of vigilance do not encompass all the social actors of the period at hand).

Moreover, from a different perspective, we can interpret the file not as the sacralization of a set of documents, but as an opening to the profanation of what can be said (if we revisit a proposal by Agamben<sup>15</sup>) and as a repository from which to write the non-written and historically-marginalized narratives. From the point of view of the rules of enunciation which make statements possible, just as Michel Foucault interprets the archive in his *Archeology of knowledge* as "the law of what can be said"<sup>16</sup>, documents are not simple records of the past: rather, they make it possible to investigate from the present the rules which define the discursive practices of a given community against the backdrop of the discussions of the right to memory, truth, justice, and reparation for the victims of authoritarian governments.

As pointed out by Dora Barrancos, towards the end of the Peronist period, "the UMA had not only failed to disappear, it had strengthened and developed a significant number of activities in various place in the country. (...) Their meetings were often disguised as leisure and recreational activities, such as picnics. The UMA adherents –just as the adherents of other pro-communist groups– were always under the gaze of security agencies, so they were forced to conceal their political activity under activities of this type, a precaution which did not guarantee they were not spied upon"<sup>17</sup> (2010: 237-238).

In the relationship between discourses and photographs, intelligence agents constructed a self-image marked by a search for objectivity and transparency in their reports, resorting to the standardized and aseptic language of the ethos of intelligence conceived as a "doctrine."<sup>18</sup> The written text is limited to work as a mere anchor of the images, which are intervened with marks ("I", "X") to identify the subject spied upon on the portrayed bodies: the verbal reference stem from a referential vision of language, reinforced by biographical, numerical, dated and localized details, which aim at presenting the photographs as proof of the facts. The dissolution of the subject of enunciation amplifies the contrast between this impersonal search for impartiality and the iconic images which look back at the camera.

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<sup>15</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum. Sobre el método*, Buenos Aires, Adriana Hidalgo, 2009.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Foucault, *Arqueología del saber*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI, 2004.

<sup>17</sup> Dora Barrancos, *Mujeres en la sociedad argentina. Una historia de cinco siglos*, Buenos Aires, Sudamericana, 2010.

<sup>18</sup> María Alejandra Vitale, "Vigiladores y espías. Imagen de sí, memoria y experticia en el Archivo de la DIPBA," *Vigilar la sociedad. Estudios discursivos sobre inteligencia policial bonaerense*, Buenos Aires, Biblos, 2016.

The photographic portrait is provided as a trace of the real, which includes the women in an international collective. The photograph appears as a guarantee of existence (a "this has been", the phenomenological intuition of photography pointed out by Barthes<sup>19</sup>), which in this case refers to the ideology of the people under surveillance. At this point we can ask ourselves why the intelligence agent chose to take a series of pictures, when, for evidence purposes, a couple of images showing the delegates in the Women Congress and the Soviet Union would have been sufficient. Though it is clear that accumulation reinforces the proof, a possible answer may lie in the fascination with indexicality: the photographic registry shows adherence to the referent; it is necessarily linked with the singular, the unique, with the distinctive footprint of time. Against the obsession with rationalizing and systematizing the observations of espionage, the contingent instant reveals a fascination with the free and indeterminate moment the photographs portray.

What is archived in the report? The UMA delegates' journey? Their visits to parks, their meetings, their day trips? Their expressions while having fun in a carousel? Their interest in chess or in the Soviet Union's school and scientific system? Or may the preservation refer to the photographs themselves as objects loaded with meaning, in a context in which the visual gradually gains ground among the discourses of an increasingly media-dominated society? Photography, as a document and as an historical event, reveals its capability of making the contingent readable. This is possibly one of the reasons why it reverberates somehow through the photographic series under analysis.

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<sup>19</sup> Roland Barthes, *La cámara lúcida. Notas sobre la fotografía*, Buenos Aires, Paidós, 2006.