

Inhabiting disappearance: Sound memories of disappeared persons' relatives in Colombia

Habitar la desaparición: Memorias sonoras de familiares de personas desaparecidas en Colombia

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Background

Forced disappearance in Colombia -as other forms of political violence- has managed to turn the everyday life of victims into a continuous struggle with a catastrophic event: an ambiguous disruption installed into the quotidian. The impossibility of knowing the location of a loved one, and the impossibility of knowing whether he/she is alive or dead breaks the possibility of meaning, as the basic notions of place, life and even time become unclear. Consequently, the lack of answers does not only break the intimate relationship between the disappeared and their relatives, it also breaks the intimate relationship between these and a world that has turned uncanny.

However, despite the new ambiguity of the world, the relatives of the disappeared have also proved that the missing still linger. Through memory and hope, victims sustain the presence of the absent, managing to create new ways of maintaining a present relationship with them. Anthropological and psychological research has shown how photographs, clothes and other memory objects acquire a meaningful use for the relatives of disappeared persons, not only for the public vindication of their identity, but also for maintaining an affective encounter with the missing. Then, the materiality of these objects appears to acquire some of the presence of the disappeared, both, conjuring their absence and remarking it.

Aims

In order of generating further explorations on how relatives of the disappeared relate with their loved ones through memory, this article proposes a different approach from visual and material forms of remembrance. Particularly, we delve into the sound dimension of memory, recognizing sound in its epistemological quality, that is, as a fundamental mean to know and act in the everyday world through an experience, referred to contagion, exposure and evanescence. In this sense, our aim is to identify the different ways the relatives establish an intimate relationship with the disappeared through the immateriality of sound, building new and creative ways of inhabiting the everyday life of a world full of memories, but also full of unanswered questions.

Method & procedures

We performed a series of ethnographic interviews with five Colombian relatives of disappeared persons. Each interview consisted of five conversations, focused on five manifestations of sound: i) music, ii) voice, iii) bodily sounds, iv) objects and v) others. These conversations were planned, both to talk with the participants about the memories related to sound, and to discuss the act of remembering, establishing moments of listening where we used meaningful sounds referred by participants.

Then, we conducted an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis for the collected data, where we analyzed how relatives make sense of their experience of remembering through sound.

Results & discussion

The relatives suggest that the act of remembering through sound supposes, in first instance, an uncanny relationship with the presence of the disappeared. Sound appears as an uncomfortable experience as it exposes the relatives, many times

unwillingly, to the ambiguous and unspeakable state of their missing loved ones. Memory does not feel like memory, because it is not possible to draw distance from it when the disappeared is pending to return. Then, sound memories feel more as an untimely manifestation both of the disappeared and disappearance itself.

However, as it is not possible to avoid sound (contrary to visual or material stimuli), the relatives have to develop the ability of listening the ambiguous presence of the disappeared. Then, through different and very personal processes, the relatives of the disappeared manage to receive sound memories with hospitality, but not for closure; they do it within a process of facing the unavoidable presence of their loved ones inscribed in their own experience, even if they linger in an unspeakable state of disappearance.

Nevertheless, for the relatives, managing to listen to memory also supposes a special kind of commitment, one that we propose comes from another dimension of sound: Silence. As sound vanishes, silence installs the haunting character of memory as it remarks the absence of the resonant body of the missing. Then, absence becomes and distressing presence that claims action. From the lacunae of testimony that manifests in the sound memories of the disappeared, the relatives become committed with the resolution of disappearance, searching for their loved ones, and fighting for truth and justice.

Conclusion

Our research shows how relatives of disappeared persons configure modes of inhabiting their everyday life through a special relationship with memory. In detail, the analysis of sound memories has shown how the disappeared and the ones who search for them establish an intimate relationship where, despite the violent desire of eradicating the presence of human beings from the world, it is possible to work through pain in order to learn how to live in a catastrophic situation and also against it. From the uncanny encounter with the untimely presence of the disappeared, to the growing of hospitality for its spectral manifestation, and the assumption of the commitment for the resolution of silence, victims demonstrate that violence does not paralyze life, but rather it is resisted and fought through the micro-agencies performed in quotidian scenarios, where it is still possible to feel in the air the presence of the ones missing.

Keywords: everyday life, forced disappearance, haunting, quotidian, sound, spectral memories

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