Chapter 7

Serious Parodies: “Children of” Inhabiting (More or Less Joyfully) the Absence

Absence, fracture, rupture. These are possible concepts to draw the logic—even, if you wish, the socio-logic—of the social universes that emerge from the catastrophe that the disappearance of a subject entails. But a socio-logic falls short of being a sociology: it lacks flesh, warmth, sweat, smell; it lets few people in. What was said earlier regarding the different ways of understanding professional work in reference to an absence-of-meaning-like phenomenon as is forced disappearance, is no doubt a way of accessing part of the social worlds of disappearance, and clearly, it goes without saying, anthropologists, psychologists, archeologists, archivists, artists, and jurists are social actors who are very much alive and very complicated. But while it is true that these are all agents who are incredibly active in this field—their work, their vocation too, is ultimately to act on that field—it is also true that they are not active full time and that they are not the sole inhabitants of that field. We are missing something, and that is the strategies of the actors most directly affected by this catastrophe.

What we are missing, yes, is to step in their (my) shoes, to get inside their (my) gut.

To do that, I will work again with two ideal types that match the two narratives that have been used throughout this book as templates for analysis—the narrative of meaning and the narrative of absence of meaning. It is in the second narrative that I situate a group with a new voice, a sometimes irreverent voice, the group of the children of. This is what I will discuss in this chapter.

G. Gatti, Surviving Forced Disappearance in Argentina and Uruguay
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Before I begin, two clarifications are in order. One involves repeating a methodological warning I made at the beginning of the book about how such ideal types should be read. Ideal types are tools for dissecting reality that are very useful for the social sciences: they contribute to make internally and externally coherent cuts based on a reality that is presented as a heterogeneous continuum. But they merely indicate scopes of action of the agents, tendencies, not agents or persons. That is what they are: ideal types, models—constructs built by selecting and exaggerating certain aspects of reality. They do not exist, nobody matches them exactly, although they guide our actions.

The second clarification goes a bit beyond these procedural considerations regarding the use and scope of the ideal types, and brings us again into the territory of adjectives. I would even say, if you will allow me, that it contradicts the first clarification. Because I am not a stranger to the field, no, neither am I neutral; which is why I cannot help but qualify these narratives and the ideal types that I have associated them with: the adjective I come up with for the first—the narrative of meaning—is “old,” for the second—the narrative of the absence of meaning—“new.” For the first, “wretched,” for the second, “hopeful”; for meaning, “predictable,” for its absence, “reflective.”

We were born in the second narrative. The catastrophe came here to stay, it cannot be overcome, it cannot be replaced. The detained-disappeared will not appear again and their absence will be a solid presence forever. Let us manage it:

—This absence, which your parents become, changes enormously. You know? It changes, you’re continuously changing how you feel with respect to that absence….It’s sort of like a light bulb that changes in intensity: stronger, dimmer, off, on again, it’s always there but it changes…
—[GG]….and which is sometimes managed in one way and sometimes it’s managed in another way, for example, sometimes we want to fill it up and other times we try to go around it. That’s my experience.
—Yes. (I21)

Renegade Monsters and Parodic Little Post-Orphans: Notes on the Restless Identities of Some “Children Of”

In Argentina, and Uruguay too, the victims have become in many respects sacred icons. But not just anyone can claim the title of victim: it is the