



# The affective construction of others' experience: A cross-cultural comparison of youth's responses to a film about the Uruguayan dictatorship

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## ABSTRACT

Popular culture connects us to people who have other histories and cultures. This qualitative study aims to analyze how the representation of others' suffering in films affects youths' empathy towards others different from them in terms of generation and cultural distance. We explore how empathy is expressed as semiotic processes of feelings and meanings in a contrastive cross-cultural case study. Using data collected from two college level language classrooms in two different countries (Uruguay and Chile) from two groups (one of regular university students and one of study abroad students), we contrast youths' responses to a film about violations of human rights during the Uruguayan military dictatorship (*Migas de Pan*, 2016). The film's representation of the violation of human rights experienced by young people during the dictatorship enables audiences to identify with the protagonist in spite of the temporal and cultural distance that separates them. Our findings suggest that the semiotic construction of feelings distinguishes the degree and intensity of youths' understanding of others' experiences. The conclusion discusses how personal trajectories and sociocultural identities influence the meaning making process of past experiences. Finally, we explore possible educational implications of these findings.

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## 1. Introduction

Popular culture connects us to people with other histories and cultures. How do films about Others' traumatic past contribute to our understanding of their affective and ideational meanings? Films are cultural products that mediate our access to the experiences of others and offer opportunities to share them in cognitive and affective terms. Conversations around films that represent historical events evoking a moral positioning provide opportunities to explore others' affective responses to those historical events. For example, films like *Jojo Rabbit* (2019) or *Roma* (2018) invite audiences to engage with characters who live in different times or cultures, but who they can relate to by aligning with or distancing from them.

Empathy is the capacity to share feelings with others and comprehend their experience (Keen, 2006). As an interpersonal semiotic practice, empathy involves a positioning of oneself in relation to others through the production and interpretation of meanings

that convey affective involvement and moral judgment. This capacity produces an emotional resonance by taking on the perspective of others in order to imagine what it is like to experience things through someone else's eyes. Empathy as an emotional and experiential meaning making process is intersubjective, context-dependent and culture specific.

Films address viewers as corporeal material beings and have the potential of producing emotional and physical reactions to the cinematic experience (Landsberg, 2003). Engagement with media representations of other's past through film opens up possibilities for the construction of a transnational and transgenerational collective memory. The use of films in educational contexts offers "opportunities to learn alternative perspectives that transcend national and familiar boundaries" (Kubota, 2012:39).

In this study, we researched how the representation of others' suffering in a film affects university students' understanding of alterity. We focused on the construction of meanings and feelings concerning the violation of human rights during the last Uruguayan dictatorship as represented in the film *Migas de Pan* (*Breadcrumbs*) (Rodríguez, 2016). We investigated the role of feelings and perspective taking in the construction of meanings about this traumatic past as indexes of empathy. Similarly, we looked at how cultural backgrounds influence meaning making and feelings

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about the past events and social actors depicted in the film. The goal is to explore the educational potential of film as a vehicle to afford students a connection with distant others.

## 2. Films, feelings and meanings

Our understanding of others' experience is mediated by our access to their interpretations of what they produce and mean to them. Empathy connects meanings and feelings mediated by artifacts and situations that are culturally specific. Understanding what happiness means for someone from a different culture requires situating their meanings and feelings in context. Our socio-semiotic operationalization of empathy conceptualizes it as an interpersonal meaning that connects feelings and meanings as complementary and mutually informing aspects of the same process. This embodied semiosis operates as an index of us-in-the-world (Lemke, 2015). "Feelings do not just monitor, they are the products and indexical signs of our interaction with everything around us." (Lemke, 2015: 7). The meaning of feelings is learned and displayed in situated locally and culturally specific discourses. What makes someone laugh and feel joy is the effect of an interpretation of a situation which varies culturally. For example, the Day of the Dead in Mexico exemplifies an interpretation of death that displays an embodied meaning that is culturally specific connecting the end of life with a joyful activity honoring and remembering those who are deceased. Engagement with cultural practices and artifacts such as films and conversations about them can affect the development of empathy as a meaning making process. Human beings' current actions can be influenced by long ago processes (Lemke, 2015:17). Through the mediation of semiotic processes such as seeing a film interpreted time and space are folded, thus potentially creating an interpersonal closeness between participants.

### 2.1. Films and empathy

Studies of the impact of mass media on people's perceptions of social norms and desirable behavior have shown that these artifacts and the experiences associated with making sense of them can result in social change (Paluck, 2009). However, changes in people's perception of the importance of a social issues is not directly related to the amount of exposure people have to representations of emotionally charged footage, but more to the degree of attention towards it (Paluck, Shafir & Wu, 2017). A mass media audience will extend their positive attitudes and behavior towards those who are connected to the characteristics of the fictional characters, if they see them as "friends" or members of the in-group (Trujillo & Paluck, 2011).

An empathy related cognitive feature that allows us to understand others' experiences is perspective taking. Perspective taking can have effects in producing understanding of others, as well as in motivating social actions that favor others. For example, a minor intervention of 10 min of informal conversation about a memory of personal vulnerability in connection to a social issue (analogic perspective taking) can have lasting significant effects in people's political decision making (Broockman & Kalla, 2016). Perspective taking is a powerful mechanism that allows us to imagine what it is like to see through someone else's eyes. Thus, perspective taking brings us closer to others not only emotionally, but also rationally.

Films constitute a powerful vehicle for developing perspective taking and empathy. For their visual and narrative characteristics movies allow us to travel in time and space to experience others' lives. Films are a tool for the construction and circulation of prosthetic memories (Landsberg, 1995). Film memory work operates at two levels: 1) constructing a narrative account of what happened that frames the issue through someone's eyes, and 2) designing an experience where audiences engage with these memo-

ries. Movies are multimodal narratives that provide viewers with cues on how to interpret others' experiences while simultaneously engaging viewers emotionally.

Based on these previous research studies, we expected to find that youths' attitudes towards the suffering of others different from them would be impacted by films representing historical experiences of other communities. By the same token, we anticipated to find that the degree of attention and involvement in making sense of the film affected the degree of importance viewers attributed to those experiences. We conjectured that the more distance to the events being represented in films, the harder time viewers would have developing empathy for others different from them, and the narrative techniques and perspective of the films as well as the type of educational activities (i.e. analysis, discussion and reenactment) which demand they put themselves in the others' place, would influence the degrees of empathy they demonstrate.

### 2.2. Emotion discourse (interpersonal meanings and feelings)

There are different approaches to emotion discourse that explore it in psychological (e.g. Edwards, 1999; Glapka, 2019; Wetherell, 2012) or cognitive terms (e.g. Kövecses, 2000; Lakoff, 1987), as well as others that focus on cultural differences in emotional culture (Besnier, 1990; Ochs & Schieffelin, 1989). Our focus in this paper is on how emotion discourse is used to construct interpersonal positionings and evaluations that constitute interpretive communities. We focus on emotions related to meanings that serve different functions in discourse, one of them being positioning oneself in relation to others by constructing interpersonal closeness and involvement that add to a common ground in communication (Clark, 2006).

The concept of *empathy* defined in socio-semiotic terms (Achugar & Tardio, 2020) draws on emotion discourse characterized as features of interpersonal meaning-making resources in unfolding discourse and grammatical structures. Poyton (2009) raises the need to develop a grammatics which might be useful for exploring the interaction between language and the social in interpersonal terms, foregrounding the linguistic operations of power/knowledge differences, affective involvement and frequency of contact in the semiotic construction of social relations. This grammatics incorporates both social and positional components resulting from our interpersonal relationships.

From this intersubjective and socio-semiotic perspective, "both *feeling* and *meaning* as processes are distributed, situated, context-dependent, active, and culture-specific" (Lemke (2015: 1). Feelings are dependent on the same contextual factors as meanings. In other words, the process of meaning-making itself always orients in terms of affect and constructs feelings. Feelings are indexes of our experience in the world resulting from our interactions with our environments in its multiple levels. Lemke (2015) states that feelings are associated with an action directed toward their respective objects. For example, feelings emerge as responses to objects in the environment. To attack what we are angry at we interpret the meaning of the context in our environment to offer an emotional response or to avoid what makes us unhappy we need to "read" the situation and respond in culturally appropriate ways. Additionally, feelings have connotations of degree or particular evaluations (i.e. fear, panic, terror) that respond to culturally shared norms. They are explicitly or implicitly evaluative at the basic level of polarity: good or bad, desirable or undesirable in relation to situated interpretive communities. In brief, meanings and feelings together serve the function of categorization and evaluation. Meanings are made by the deployment of semiotic resources, such as language, visual depiction, gesture and movement, music, actions and feelings as such.

Bednarek (2009) explores emotion and its functions in discourse to position, evaluate and inform. She distinguishes between language about emotion (i.e. expressions that denote affect) and language as emotion (i.e. all constituents that express emotion including linguistic and non-linguistic signs). It is a distinction between language that signals affect (e.g. "Oh, shit") and language denoting affect ("I'm really happy"). Her work focuses on discourse of emotion terms that denote affect using appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005).

Appraisal theory (Martin & White, 2005) provides a detailed characterization of how 'communities of shared feelings' are constructed through interpersonal meaning making resources. This theory provides a detailed classification of resources for interpersonal meanings that lends itself for the analysis of discourse. The Appraisal system is divided into three sub-systems: ATTITUDE, GRADATION and ENGAGEMENT. Attitude is concerned with evaluations related to emotions (AFFECT), behavior (JUDGMENT) and esthetic values (APPRECIATION). Graduation describes the *force* and *focus* of the evaluations, and engagement deals with the commitment and source of the evaluation.

From this interpersonal perspective, Bednarek (2009) argues that emotion (AFFECT) can be sub-divided into overt AFFECT and covert AFFECT. The latter can be seen as an intermediate category between opinion (APPRECIATION and JUDGMENT) and emotion (AFFECT). Overt AFFECT resources directly name an Emoter's emotional response (i.e. "When the military man makes demands in the corridors, I felt a lot of anguish"), whereas covert AFFECT resources only indirectly denote such an emotional response (i.e. "The coup d'état was distressing [causing anguish]"). This distinction is very useful for our research because the corpus shows multiple examples in which it is possible to confirm Bednarek's conclusion (2009: 124): that the use of covert AFFECT can be considered less personalizing (i.e. "It was distressing to see how other people were tortured") than overt AFFECT (i.e. "Prisoners were very distressed"). In our corpus, overt AFFECT allows informants to express their feelings in a more direct way, in a personal manner. On the contrary, covert AFFECT refers to situations, environment, and scenes (i.e. "that scene in the documentary was very touching"). In this case, the discussions of a film in a classroom setting promotes dialog and allows for the expansion of ways of evaluating diverse historical events.

In this study, we expand this approach to affective discourse to the analysis of multimodal texts (images, verbal and auditory modes), in order to analyze, on the one hand, the construction of orientations to the violations of human rights in Uruguayan recent past in the film. We integrate the work of Kress and Van Leeuwen (2021) to describe how feelings and evaluations through visual resources such as composition, frames, angles, gaze and color. We focus particularly on how images offer the possibility of systematizing the interpersonal meanings that support certain social values and ideological positions (Oteiza & Pinuer, 2016).

In exploring empathy, we have expanded the categories that describe the ways in which feelings are encoded since that is our area of focus. Below, in the methodology section we present a redesigned feelings system network to account for the subtleties of variation and gradation of feelings in our corpus. In addition, we consider how affect is realized in cross-cultural variable ways through indexical symbols and many levels of structure that construct affect in culturally mediated ways (Besnier, 1990). For example, terms of address, pronouns and metaphors have affective dimensions that vary across languages.

Our investigation builds on these socio-semiotic discourse analytic perspectives on emotion to better understand how affect circulates in and through discourse (Milani & Richardson, 2020) and more specifically how empathy is constructed semiotically through reconfigurations of social relations (closeness and involvement)

that contribute to understanding of others' suffering. Emotional communities (Jimeno, 2010) are constituted through the sharing of first-person narratives of suffering that enable the construction of an emotional tie among those who directly experienced it and the ones that recognize the moral relevance for the group. This process of shared appropriation of emotional and axiological meanings opens up possibilities of establishing empathy realized through socio-semiotic practices of representation and evaluation that identify with the point of view of those who suffered. In the next sections, we describe the methodology of our study and present the results of the analysis.

### 3. Methodology

#### 3.1. Design

We designed a comparative cross-cultural case study to explore how empathy is expressed as semiotic processes of feelings and meanings. By using data collected from two university level language classrooms in two different countries (Uruguay and Chile) with students with different cultural backgrounds (local and study abroad), we contrast youths' responses to a film about violations of human rights during the Uruguayan military dictatorship. The youths' individual written responses and group discussion of the film were analyzed to document how they represented the social actors and events (Halliday & Matthiessen, 2014; Van Leeuwen, 2008) and how they positioned towards them (Martin & White, 2005).

This project builds on previous work (Achugar, 2016) that investigated how youth learn about older generations' historical experience and social memory through engagement with narratives that circulate in various contexts (home, school, peer groups and popular culture). The goal of the proposed study is to better understand and document if youth can develop empathy, by appropriating others' experience of suffering using film as a mediating factor. We documented the experiences with film viewing and discussion of 14 youth between 17 and 23 years of age that represented the diversity of the community in terms of class, gender, and racial identities. The participants took part in the following activities: 1) viewing of the film, 2) writing a response to the films by positioning themselves in relation to the represented social actors' experiences, and 3) discussing the films with peers. The students performed these activities in response to the film *Migas de pan [Breadcrumbs]* (2016) in order to compare if and how social distance to the represented social actors (i.e. women, political militants) affected their empathic response to them.

The film selected as trigger for this case study is called *Migas de Pan* (Manane Rodríguez, Uruguay, 2016). This film deals with the violations of human rights of female political prisoners during the 1970's dictatorship in Uruguay and how it has impacted their lives today. This film represents women's narratives of sexual violence used as torture while being political prisoners during the dictatorship in Uruguay. The movie depicts a silenced narrative, involving images and cultural codes that are not transmitted memories in mainstream culture and could be seen as 'foreign' for youth who are distant from them in time, place, or socio-cultural identity.

The design included a purposive sampling strategy in order to select participants in terms of variation in the degree of closeness to the experiences and people represented in the film, as well as variation in the degree of personal involvement with the material (from passive observer to active critical discussant). This design allowed us to explore how youth who differ in terms of degrees of familiarity and interpersonal distance to the historical events and characters represented in the film made sense of them. Our research questions were:

How do youth respond to others' experiences of suffering?

**Table 1**  
Research design matrix.

| Research question  | Data collection                           | Data analysis  |
|--|---|--|
| How do youth orient to the represented actors' experiences?  | Written response to film                  | Discourse analysis (Halliday 2014; Martin & White, 2005)   |
| How do youth position themselves in relation to the social actors' experiences represented in the film?                                  | Group discussion                          | Discourse analysis (Halliday 2014; Martin & White, 2005)   |
| Are there differences in youths' empathy expressed through meaning making choices in different modes? If so, what are these differences? | Written response to film after discussion | Comparison of affective and self-other positioning in language choices of written responses to film and oral discussions |
| Does social distance to the social actors depicted in the film affect their empathic reaction?   | Written responses, group discussions      | Comparison of results for film   |

What affective responses do they display when representing and evaluating others' experience of suffering?

Are there differences in the affective responses across groups?

The data collected was recorded in the form of audiotapes as well as written documents produced as part of the regular course activities. This data was analyzed using qualitative multimodal discourse analysis to document the semiotic means of constructing empathy and perspective taking. Table 1 describes the research design matrix that aligns research questions, data collection and types of analyses performed in the study.

The study investigated if and how youth position toward the social actors represented in the film, as well as if there are differences across cultures in those positionings. The findings can have social impact since changes in empathy towards others could potentially influence their willingness to engage in social change practices.

### 3.2. Context of study: participants and sites

There were two sites where the study was carried out. On the one hand, the participants in Uruguay were university students enrolled in the School of Communication. They were taking a fourth semester optional course on communication practices focused on the theme of human rights. The course's goals include the development of oral and written communication skills in Spanish in academic and professional genres. It is a content and language integrated course (Achugar & Tardio, 2020) that is organized around the topic of human rights which uses novels, films as well as other types of texts to explore the field while developing meaning making resources.

Most of the students have taken history courses during high school and in university that explore the period of the most recent dictatorship in Uruguay. However, several of them mentioned that this course provided an opportunity to learn more about that historical period.

On the other hand, the group of students that participated in the study in Chile came from the United States as part of a study abroad program given by different universities. During their four-month study abroad experience between January and April 2018, they participated in an advanced level Spanish class. To practice and improve their Spanish, the students also visited different important places such as the Presidential Palace La Moneda and Museum of Memory and Human Rights, among others.

During their stay in Chile, the students took two more courses: Hispanic American Literature and History of Chile. In these courses they read and discussed different texts about diverse Latin American dictatorships. The students, to our knowledge, did not have previous experience or connections to the topic of violations of human rights in Latin America.

The research complied with ethical review process in both institutions. We obtained informed consent from all participants in the study, to protect participants privacy and ensure their anonymity we use pseudonyms.

## 4. Analysis and discussion

This section presents the intermodal analysis of semiotic practices that typify the process of human rights violations during the Uruguayan dictatorship (1973–1985),<sup>1</sup> as they are portrayed in the movie *Migas de pan* (*Breadcrumbs*). We first analyze the representation of social actors and events as depicted in the film. Then, we explore the students' reactions to this film focusing on how they reconstruct the actors and events as well as on how they orient to them in an oral discussion and in an individual written response paper. Because of space limitations, our multimodal analysis of the film focuses on one thematic thread linked to the semiotic expression of feelings of the students' responses to the film.

### 4.1. Students' responses to representations of torture in the film

In this section, we will present the analysis of students' responses to the representations of social actors and the activities associated with torture in the film.

Our analysis of the representation of social actors focuses on how the women prisoners and the military and guards were constructed by students. The participants' reading of the film influenced the way in which they constructed the characters in their messages. Both groups of students, local and study abroad, represented women mainly in their relationship of kinship or friendship: "mother", "daughter-in-law", "granddaughter", "companions in prison", or "friends".

At the same time, in both of groups of students there was a personalization through nomination of women political prisoners and their perpetrators as characters in the fictional story and in real life: Liliana Pereira (character)-Cecilia Roth and Justina Bustos (actresses), Emilio Garone (character)- Quique Fernández (actor).

Among the Uruguayan students there is mostly a representation of women in passive roles and identified through their functional and kinship roles. However, there are also examples that represent them as active agents in history in particular in their fight for redress and justice.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Starting in the late 1960s, Uruguayan society was immersed in an economic and social crisis that produced a political crisis. The government responded to the increase in social protests and strikes by limiting social liberties and curtailing the right to protest and assembly, as well as censorship. In that period, an armed guerrilla movement, Tupamaros, emerged to fight for national liberation and social justice. The government called in the Armed Forces to join the police in controlling the guerrillas. By 1972, the guerrilla had been controlled and most of its leaders were in prison. However, the political crisis heightened and the ruling president, Juan María Bordaberry, closed congress and brought in the Armed Forces to join in the government. The people's reaction to the coup d'état was a two-week general strike. A large number of the population went into exile, people lost their jobs for their political activity, and a great number of those who opposed the coup were put in jail. Uruguay's dictatorship was characterized by having the highest number of political prisoners in relation to its population.

<sup>2</sup> Notation markings in the examples are the following: Inscribe evaluation: bold and underlined // Evoke evaluation: bold and italics ATTITUDE AFFECT (i.e. **feared**: an inscribe negative AFFECT of Insecurity) JUDGMENT (i.e. **cruel treatments**: an in-



Fig. 1. Garone tortures Lilita.

Example 1 Varios años después, en su exilio en España, se entera que será abuela... **decide reconstruir** su relación con su hijo, **conocer** a su pequeña nieta y **denunciar** junto a sus compañeras los **maltratos, humillaciones y ofensas** que **sufrió** en su juventud. (Julieta)

Many years later, during her exile in Spain, she finds out that she will be a grandmother... she **decides** to **reconstruct** her relationship with her son and **get to know** her little granddaughter and **denounce** with her fellow female companions the **maltreatment, humiliation** and **offenses suffered** in her youth. (Julieta)

In example 2, we can observe this double representation of women as victims of State repression, “the maltreatment, humiliation and offenses suffered in her youth” evaluated through inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Esteem (Capacity); in contrast to the role of the women as agents, who “decide to reconstruct, know and denounce with her fellow female companions” which constructs a positive evaluation of JUDGMENT of social Esteem (Tenacity).

Among the US students, Mónica is the only woman in the film who is portrayed in a passive role by the US students, as seen in the following example.

2.

Quando el militar da órdenes en los pasillos, algunos de los personajes **más débiles** como Mónica tienen expresiones de **angustia** pero otros tienen expresiones de **tenacidad**. (Kristen)

When the military makes demands in the corridors, some of the **weaker** characters like Mónica have expressions of **anguish**, but others have expressions of **tenacity**. (Kristen)

Kristen evaluates the General by means of an evoked positive JUDGMENT of Social Esteem, Capacity (“makes demands”). The power of the Major Emilio Garone is represented intersemiotically through verbal, visual and musical couplings, as shown in the torture scenes.

This scene [Figure 1](#) focusing on torture and the state deployment of violence toward youth who oppose the dictatorship frames the representation of the events and actors. It is a transactional narrative image that enhances the audiences’ ability to understand power difference and the meaning of State terrorism through visual signs. The torturer is dressed in civilian clothes, and his cloth-

scribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Sanction of Impropriety) APPRECIATION (i.e. **impressive** scenes of **torture**: an inscribed negative APPRECIATION, High Conflictivity, negative Impact, Delegitimation GRADUATION: FOCUS (capitals) // force (lowercase underlined) Processes: bold (i.e. **denounce**) Only the most significant evaluative examples in building memories are marked. Violent actions, such as “torture”, “torment”, “violations”, “abuses”, “atrocities”, among others, will be considered as inscribed evaluations due to their axiological charge, which implies an ethically negative charge.

ing is a form of concealment of the military man responsible for torturing the prisoners whereas, nudity depicts the helplessness of the victims. The *picana* is a symbol of Garone’s power in this situation. He threatens her with electrical shocks if she does not provide him with information and with his gaze focuses on Lilita exerting more pressure. The filmmaker uses *dehumanization* as a strategy of delegitimization of torturers, specifically in this image of Major Garone.

Despite the nakedness and concealment of women’s faces, the level of interpersonal commitment and involvement is higher with the victims than with the torturers. From an evaluative analysis perspective, women are evaluated through an inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Esteem of Capacity, as victims. On the other hand, torturers are evaluated with an inscribed positive JUDGMENT of Social Esteem of Positive Capacity, due to their high power to impose their will on the others. At the same time, torturers are evaluated by means of an inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Sanction of Impropriety because of their psychological dissociation. For example, the engagement ring is a symbol of Garone’s daily life outside the torture center.

The same military officer provokes negative feelings in his victims, as it is shown in Example 2. On the one hand, Kristen evaluates Mónica through an inscribed covert AFFECT of Unhappiness (“anguish”), and an inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Esteem, Capacity (“weaker”). On the other hand, the same US student contrasts Mónica’s attitude to that of other tortured women, who are evaluated by means of an inscribed JUDGMENT of Social Esteem, Tenacity (“tenacity”).

However, it is interesting to note that one Uruguayan student (Patricia) and the US students have a tendency to represent women mainly in active roles through their collective action. The prisoners come together to create a strong and close community and friendships. They support each other and together they survive in prison by means of different ways. For example, prisoners learn German, make the symbol of peace with their hands and create hand puppet shows. In addition, most of them have pictures of their family that they treasure. In prison, these shared activities afford the expression of solidarity verbally and visually.

#### 4.2. Students’ affective responses to representations of solidarity among tortured women

In this section, we will present the analysis of students’ responses to the activities associated with the solidarity of the tortured women in the film. As shown [Fig. 2](#), there is a change in the location moving from the torture center, which is dark and dirty, to the jail premises, where an atmosphere of light is noticed and in which the prisoners are always dressed and share among them-



Fig. 2. Prisoners sharing.

selves calling each other by their names. Their prison guards and Major Garone call them by number (e.g. Liliana is 715).

As noted in various other narrative scenes, the prisoners engage in different types of activities (work on the farm, shadow puppets, singing, language learning, reading, weaving) and they endure their difficult situation of captivity by establishing closeness and friendships among themselves. In the midst of this total surveillance environment, doors and windows become conceptual images that symbolize greater freedom offering access to the courtyard or to other landscape sites.

The level of interpersonal commitment and affective involvement is higher with prisoners than with their guards. From an evaluative analysis perspective, the prisoners are appraised by means of different positive AFFECTS, instantiated visually and verbally, while the guards are evaluated through an inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Esteem of Capacity. The prisoners deploy strategies to continue united such as ignoring or mocking the vigilance of the women who serve Major Garone and other military men. These actions construct two different groups where the audience is invited to identify with the women and distance themselves from the guards/military officers who perform all the negative value actions.

Solidarity is also audibly instantiated, whether through silence or shouting. On the one hand, silence is a symbol of not giving away information and non-compliance to the orders of torturers. Such is the case of the generalized refusal of the prisoners to wrap a gift as Major Garone ordered them. On the other hand, the cries of prisoners greeting Margarita a new prisoner when she enters the penal facility symbolize solidarity with her, who was separated from the group as a sign of punishment. The visual narrative shows the impersonalization of the prisoner identified with 892 in her back. However, the image is unpacked by identifying the Goal of the process of "punishing", through her name explicitly shouted by her jail mates, saying: "Good night, Margarita". In their comments about the film the students evaluate different kinds of solidarity like the ones described above, as it can be seen in the following example.

Example 3 Los presos piensan en sus familias y ese hecho les ayuda mucho. La solidaridad es muy importante en la cárcel para vivir. (Jacob)

Prisoners think of their families and that fact helps them a lot. Solidarity is very important in prison to live. (Jacob)

Jacob evaluates solidarity by means of an inscribed positive APPRECIATION ("important"), graduated by Force, Intensification ("very"). This fact is linked to the experience of prisoners represented in the film who fight against dehumanization by forming a community full that enables them to live through the extreme situation.

Example 4 Se percibe mucho apoyo entre las compañeras de pabellón se dan ánimos entre ellas no se dejan caer. (Julieta)

A lot of support is perceived among the pavilion comrades, they encourage each other and they do not let themselves fall. (Julieta)

Julieta, a Uruguayan student, foregrounds the female prisoners' identity and through covert AFFECT ("support", "encourage each other", "they do not let themselves fall") that evoke feelings of solidarity among the women. These affective feelings are also intensified through graduation ("a lot of") and repetition.

The representation of solidarity in the film constructs an interpersonal demand on the audience through affective involvement and commitment to prisoners rather than with their guards. The prisoners are evaluated by means of different actions that evoke positive AFFECT ("tenderness", "embrace"), while the guards' actions evoke evaluations of negative JUDGMENT of Social Sanction, Integrity ("repress", "punish", "threaten"). In this context, the prisoners look for subterfuges to continue united by ignoring or mocking the vigilance of the women who serve Major Garone and other military men. These type of negative evaluations of torture and torturers in the film are picked up by all students, who delegitimize torture and praise solidarity.

#### 4.3. Comparison of students' affective responses to the film

In this section, we will contrast the two groups of students' responses to the representations of social actors and the activities associated with torture and solidarity in the film. In line with the research questions raised in the introduction, we analyze how empathy is expressed as semiotic processes of feelings and meanings related to torture and torturers.

For example, Frederick, a US student, negatively evaluates the actions performed by the Uruguayan dictatorship, as shown in the following example:<sup>3</sup>

Example 5 Las escenas en la película son muy gráficas y ellas muestran las atrocidades que ocurrieron en la vida real de esa gente. (Frederick)

<sup>3</sup> Notation markings in the examples are the following: Inscribed evaluation: bold and underlined // Evoke evaluation: bold and italics ATTITUDE AFFECT (i.e. fear: an inscribed negative AFFECT of Insecurity) JUDGMENT (i.e. cruel treatments: an inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Sanction of Impropriety) APPRECIATION (i.e. impressive scenes of torture: an inscribed negative APPRECIATION, High Conflictivity, negative Impact, Delegitimation GRADUATION: FOCUS (capitals) // force (lowercase underlined) Processes: bold (i.e. denounce) Only the most significant evaluative examples in building memories are marked. Violent actions, such as "torture", "torment", "violations", "abuses", "atrocities", among others, will be considered as inscribed evaluations due to their axiological charge, which implies an ethically negative charge.

The scenes in this movie are very **graphic**, and show the **atrocities** that happened in the real life of these people. (Frederick)

The student evaluates the torture scenes through inscribed negative APPRECIATION (“the scenes in the movie are very graphic”), which is graduated through Force (“very”), in order to intensify the emotional meaning and harshness of the images that reflect the cruelty of the Uruguayan government during the dictatorship period. These *deviant* actions (van Leeuwen, 2008) are evaluated through an inscribed negative JUDGMENT of Social Sanction of Impropriety (“atrocities”).

A similar ideological position is stated by the US student Jacob, who discursively constructs his delegitimation of the human rights violation, as illustrated in the following example.

6.

La audiencia tiene que saber lo que han soportado los prisioneros. No sólo hay un **dolor** físico sino también un **sufrimiento** emocional. (Jacob)

The audience has to know what the prisoners have gone through. Not only is there physical **pain** but also emotional **suffering**. (Jacob)

Jacob expresses his evaluation of the prisoners' situation by means of an inscribed negative covert AFFECT of Unhappiness (“not only is there physical pain but also emotional suffering”).

As it can be seen in Examples 7 and 8, the Uruguayan students, Ana and Julia, also highlight the affective impact of the torture scenes, by means of an inscribed, negative APPRECIATION (“violent”), which is graduated by Force, Intensification (“pretty”), and through inscribed negative covert AFFECTS of Unhappiness (“disturbing”, “impacted”).

7.

La primera escena tiene escenas **violentas** y es **bastante perturbadora** [...] Me **rechocaron** pero pasó **de verdad**. Hay gente que lo vivió **de verdad**. (Ana)

The first scene has **violent** images, and it is pretty **disturbing** [...] They really **impacted** me, but it **really** happened. There were people that **really** lived that”. (Ana)

8.

Hoy en día quizá es **mejor** que un testimonio...las imágenes. El realismo llevado a la pantalla para **hacerlo llegar**. (Julia)

Nowadays images are **probably better** than a testimony. Realism taken to the screen to **make it reach everyone**. (Julia)

However, a unique perspective that emerges in their response is that they point out that it is the depiction of violence that provides verisimilitude to the film. This fact is evaluated by means of GRADUATION, Force, Intensification (“really happened”, “really lived that”, “better”). The Uruguayan students' affective evaluations focus on scenes and situations (covert affect).

Seeing those abuses in the film generates diverse feelings in the US students, as it can be seen in the following examples.

9.

**Lloré** porque fue muy **trágico** el contraste entre las cosas **horribles** de la cárcel y la ironía de los hijos, **demasiado** jóvenes para saber qué estaba pasando. (Ivor)

I **wept** because of the **tragic** contrast between the **horrible** things in prison and the irony of the children, who are **too** young to know what was happening. (Ivor)

10.

Para mí fue muy, muy, muy **triste** ver a la madre en cárcel y sentir lo **difícil** que sería para los niños construir una imagen de madre prisionera aunque fueran inocente. (Thomas)

For me it was very, very, very **sad** to see the mother in jail and to feel how **difficult** it would be for children to build an image of a prisoner mother even if they were innocent. (Thomas)

Both students express different inscribed negative AFFECT (“wept”, “sad”), graduated by Force, Intensification, Repetition

(“very”) and also they evaluate by means of inscribed negative APPRECIATIONS (“horrible”, “difficult”). Their evaluations personalize affect expressing feelings in more direct ways (overt affect).

There are also variations between students from different regions in the ways in which they explain the relevance of the film to understand others' experiences. For example, some of the US students emphasize the relevance of the film to understand the dictatorship more deeply, as seen in the following examples.

11.

En Estados Unidos En EEUU hablamos de Afganistán, Corea, Europa, lugares **más** lejanos pero no de América. Hablamos de la **tortura** como un tema **ambiguo**. En cambio, acá, en América, hablamos de la **tortura** de manera muy **distinta**. Estas escenas muestran **claramente** la parte **más horrible** de la **tortura**. (Kristen)

In the United States we speak of Afghanistan, Korea, Europe, more distant places but not of America. We talk about **torture** as an **ambiguous** issue. However, here in Latin America, we talk about **torture** in a very **different** way. These scenes **clearly** show the **most horrible** part of the **torture**. (Kristen)

12.

*Migas de Pan* es un **llamado a la acción**. La humanidad no puede olvidar u ocultar los abusos de los derechos humanos. Con una cinematografía **hermosa** y **clara**, el director dibuja los resultados tangibles e intangibles del **sufrimiento** y ofrece esperanza a las víctimas. Los personajes **amigables** y **fuertes** representan a todos los que luchan por revelar los **abusos** de los derechos humanos. (Grace)

*Migas de Pan* is a **call to action**. Humanity cannot forget or hide the abuses of human rights. With **beautiful** and **clear** cinematography, the director draws a picture of the tangible and intangible results of **suffering** and offers **hope** to the victims. The **friendly** and **strong** characters represent everyone who is fighting to reveal the **abuses** of human rights. (Grace)

Grace evaluates the film through a combination of an evoke positive APPRECIATION (“call to action”), and inscribed positive APPRECIATIONS (“beautiful”, “clear”) linked to different inscribed positive (“hope”) and negative (“suffering”) covert AFFECTS, as well as related to different kinds of JUDGMENT: Social Esteem, Capacity (“friendly”, “strong”) and Social Sanction, negative Integrity (“abuses”). In brief, the USA student highlights the qualities of the acting and cinematography for preserving memories and attempting to avoid new atrocities.

Both students, examples 11 and 12, highlight the importance of the film as a multimodal artifact of great educational value for a clearer and closer understanding of the particular meaning of torture when considered in the context of dictatorships in Latin America. They express their evaluations by means of inscribed APPRECIATIONS (“important”, “different”), graduated by Force, Intensification (“very”, “clearly”). They also foreground the difference between the social meanings of violations of human rights when looked at from the perspective of Latin American social actors who were the victims of those events. Taking on this perspective opens up new ways of understanding the problem.

On the other hand, the Uruguayan students explained the movie's relevance through evaluations of the film through appreciations assessing the qualities of the acting, cinematography and script in relation to new ways of seeing the issue.

13.

La obra nos trae una **nueva** mirada de la dictadura, la memoria construida por la mujer. Como madres, abuelas, novias porque la **sufrieron** como **perseguidas, secuestradas, torturadas** como **víctimas**. (Ana)

The work brings us a **new** look at the dictatorship, the memory constructed by women. As mothers, grandmothers, girlfriends,

because they **suffered** it as **persecuted, kidnapped, tortured** as **victims**. (Ana)

The perspective of women is positively evaluated for showing a different point of view. This evaluation is expressed through an inscribed positive APPRECIATION (“new”). The evaluations of inscribed, covert AFFECTS are encoded in wording choices that are charged with emotive meanings such as insecurity, dissatisfaction and unhappiness (“suffered”, “persecuted”, “kidnapped”, “victims”). Simultaneously, there are inscribed positive JUDGMENTS of women’s capacity and the veracity of the memories constructed in the film.

14.

¿Cómo afecta nuestro futuro situaciones como esta dictadura? ¿Cómo se refleja en el futuro cuando las vivimos en **carne propia**? Cuando el haber sido presa política nos deja **marcas incluso en la piel**. (Ana).

How does it affect our future situations like this dictatorship? How is it reflected in the future when we actually lived it in **our own flesh**? When having been a political prisoner leaves us **scars even in our skin**. (Ana)

In example 14, we can observe how affective evaluations of the experience depicted on the film focalize the events through a first person perspective (“our own flesh”, “scars even in our skin”). The depiction of the physical traces of these traumatic events produces an affective reaction to them. There is also a positioning that equates the writer (student) with the social actor protagonist of the events (political prisoners).

In these examples, we observe a saturated prosody in which different kinds of *deviant actions* predominate (van Leeuwen, 2008): “victims”, “torture”, “rape”, “abuse”, “violence”. The evaluation of the experience is depicted in affective terms relating their suffering to their political prisoner condition. Likewise, there is an evaluation of the film that focuses on its effect on the audience (reaction) that turns the past into present. Here we can also observe the use of graduation to increase the degree of force of these evaluations (“a more vivid present than ever”) which is a resource used to increase the intensity of the feelings.

In examples 15 and 16, we can observe how there is a positioning of the Uruguayan students in relation to others’ experience and a personal engagement with others’ point of view.

15.

Entonces a través de la película accedemos a **otra forma** de percibir el pasado desde la perspectiva **femenina** pero además desde una militante... le cuestionan por qué **no se dedicó** a su casa a su hijo y a su marido. (Julieta)

Then through this film we access a **different form** of perceiving the past from a **female** standpoint in the sense that as she was a member of a political party ...she is criticized for **not dedicating her life** to being at home with her child and husband. (Julieta)

16.

Esta clase de film histórico principalmente sobre el pasado reciente del Uruguay... es **necesario** y **vale la pena** ver para **conocer** los **angustiosos** sucesos que se vivieron traerlos a la memoria, reflexionar sobre ellos y avanzar en un camino donde no se vuelva a repetir un momento igual. (Patricia)

This type of historical film mainly about the recent past in Uruguay... it is **necessary** and is **worth** seeing in order to know about the **anguishing** events that were lived, to bring them back to memory, to ponder over them and move forward to a road where such a similar moment cannot be repeated. (Patricia)

Julieta shows the importance of a different perspective on the recent past. For her part, Patricia evaluates the film by means of an inscribed, positive APPRECIATION (“necessary”) to highlight the importance of this multimodal device in the preservation of mem-

ory through a different approach to affective themes displayed by the victims themselves.

The film is identified as a trigger that links personal experience and past experience to new ways of understanding and interpreting reality (“the female perspective”). There is an impersonal reference to the effects of the movie on society and the audience (“we access”) that constructs a community that shares an experience. The indirect evaluation emerges through the implicit alignment of the student with the film’s questioning of gender stereotypes. The identification of this theme enables the students to connect the represented experience of social actors from a distant past meaning to audiences in the present.

When students expressed their overall evaluation of the film significance, the emotional orientation was deployed to position themselves in relation to debates about the relevance and meaning of the past in the present. In example 16, Ana shows how the film operates as a vehicle to connect with others’ history of suffering in affective and cognitive terms.

17.

Una obra de arte que nos deja las emociones **atragantadas**, la **piel de gallina**. **Cruda** pero **real** y **aún viva**, para recordarnos que quedan **cosas para sacar del cajón**. (Ana)

A work of art that leaves us **choking** emotions, **goose bumps**, a masterpiece that may be **too real** but it is **still alive**, which reminds us that there are things **to get out of the drawer** yet. (Ana)

The explicit emotional orientation and interpersonal positioning in the evaluation of the film generates closeness between the students and the experience of those represented in the film. This emotive positioning, expressed through an evoked, covert negative AFFECT (“choking emotions, goose bumps”) connects the students with the political importance of the film and calls the audience to action (“get things out of the drawer yet”), expression equivalent to that of Grace (the US student), who says: “a call to action” (see Example 12). There is a link between the present and future: learning from concrete experience to apply to life.

Most students show closeness and personal affective connection to the past that is being represented linking the present and future of the country with theirs. All the students who participated in the study constructed an affective evaluation of the significance and consequences of the film.

The students showed a tendency to evaluate social actors (e.g. female political prisoners, military officers, militants) and events (e.g. dictatorship period, violation of human rights, exile) in similar proportions through affective and judgment attitudes.

Both groups of participants demonstrated empathy through their orientation to others’ experiences expressed in attitudes of affect and judgment as well as through their positioning in relation to others (social actors from a different time) taking their perspective. These feelings of emotional resonance translated in some cases into concern for others wellbeing, and a willingness to engage in social justice actions in the present.

## 5. Conclusions

This analysis shows how the representation of others’ suffering in films affects youths’ concern with the past experiences of others. Understanding the meanings of Latin American dictatorships violations of human rights requires semiotic work that involves decoding and encoding representations in addition to constructing positions in relation to issues, actors, and events over which there are still contested memories and meanings. By participating in a community affected by the events and engaging with specific cultural products, such as a film, students have opportunities to respond to and use certain discourses to make meaning of controversial topics of the recent past.



In these educational processes of memory transmission, it is necessary not only to focus on how language is used to construct particular meanings of the dictatorship and social actors' roles in it, but also to explain how certain interpretations of the past are legitimized or delegitimized through cultural products and practices. The process of socialization of the US study abroad students and Uruguayan students who participated in this study through involvement in activities within cultural and pedagogic contexts mediated by the film followed different paths. In addition, the study abroad students were using an L2 to construct the affective meanings which according to previous studies "in the process of second language socialization learners may internalize new emotion concepts and scripts" (Pavlenko, 2002:71). We found that both US study abroad and Uruguayan local students engaged with language, content and dispositions in meaningful oral and written productions that provided valuable learning opportunities to expand their understanding of the dictatorship in affective and cognitive terms. However, there was some variation across participants in the types of affect selected. US students used more personalized affect (overt affect) while Uruguayan youth selected more covert affect choices.

The participants also adopted different positions of alignment or misalignment as spectators of the film. An interesting difference between the local and study abroad cases is that they selected different historical actors in their accounts. All the US students mention José María Bordaberry (the civilian president responsible with the military for the coup d'état), while the Uruguayan students did not name him. Uruguayan students referred to the event, such as "el golpe de Estado del año 1973" [the coup d'état in the year 1973] or "la dictadura cívico-militar de 1973–1985" [the civilian-military dictatorship from 1973 to 1985], avoiding the representation of particular social actors.

As we mentioned at the beginning of the paper, based on previous studies we expected to find that the more distance students had to the events being represented in films, the harder it would be for viewers to demonstrate empathy for those different from them. In this case however, we found that US students more distant in cultural, historical, and geographical terms from the actors and events represented in the film than Uruguayan students constructed personal affect more explicitly.

In addition, the findings further problematize reductionistic associations between nationality and social distance, as observed in the positioning that study abroad students established in relation to L2 cultural symbols. For example, Jacob said: "*The Chilean government changed a place of entertainment into a nightmare. That place was our beloved National Stadium*". Based on formal knowledge of Latin American dictatorships, the aforementioned student showed his identification with the community, the recognition of cultural symbols and an affective reaction shared with some members of the local group ("a nightmare"). At the same time, he legitimates the National Stadium through inscribed positive AFFECT ("our beloved").

The multiplicity of meaning constructed by these diverse groups of American and Uruguay students produced different readings and interpretations of the film. These interpretations were embedded within affective evaluations adding a particular empathetic sense according to his/her ideological positionings.

The appropriation and learning of these narratives of the past involved a positioning expressed via affective evaluations and perspective taking decisions which afforded new readings of the past for all the youth involved in the project. These discursive practices transformed their interpretation of the past that integrated new points of view such as those of women (for local participants) or that of Latin Americans (for study abroad students).

The students in both study abroad and local learning contexts demonstrated a disposition towards understanding and feeling other's suffering that revealed their empathy and critical point

of view of the experience of others in relation to their own present. Their evaluations of *Migas de pan* showed a relation to the participants and the events that went beyond a response to the cinematographic resources that construct a point of view in the film. The film together with the group discussion and writing tasks promoted the critical engagement with other's suffering. These activities offered students the potential to develop an axiological awareness according to their respective backgrounds through incorporating different voices and providing opportunities to reflect on the moral value of the characters' actions.

Through these educational activities, students had to recognize and orient toward different emotional communities (Jimeno, 2010), in addition to processing and reacting to the film's construction of the past. The students' production shows how affect circulates in and through discourse (Milani & Richardson, 2020) revealing an embodied form of learning that integrates emotion, cognition and social action.

The above mentioned multimodal devices in combination with other films, songs, and diverse texts allowed the students who participated in this project a deeper understanding of local struggles for social justice and human rights from a new perspective brought by the vision of female activist prisoners. In conclusion, the use of film as a mediating artifact has valuable implications in education about human rights, through human rights, and for human rights because it provides a real context for meaning-making and emotional sense-making of the past, present and future. This use of film as a prosthetic memory (Landsberg, 2003) device helped students transcend national location and historical distance to better understand others' experiences.

This study opens up new questions that invite is to continue research in the role of empathy in the teaching and learning of human rights in the context of global language education. Future studies should incorporate other data sources such as interviews to have more information about students in depth understanding and expand the pool of participants to those who have different views.

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