

Official Stories

Walt Herbert - December 12, 2010

“The Official Story” is an Argentine film about a prosperous family, the father a government official and the mother a high-minded professor of history. They are deeply fond of their five-year old adopted daughter, and the film devotes a great deal of attention to the child’s bedroom, with its profusion of toys, and to the sumptuous birthday party her parents arrange for her. She’s an engaging child, cheerful and also unusually thoughtful. She goes to her room when the birthday party gets rowdy, so as to commune with her favorite doll.

These endearing ceremonies of innocence tell a lie: they offer an portrayal of Argentina’s official story, as broadcast during a period of horrifying official cruelty. The father had obtained the child soon after she was born, during the years of “dirty war” that followed the 1976 military coup in Argentina.

The right-wing junta that seized control of the government sought to rid Argentine society of dissidents, which involved the arrest and detention of large numbers of young people. A distinctive feature of this program were “disappearances,” often achieved by “death flights” in which prisoners were taken aboard military aircraft, where they were drugged and then thrown into the sea.

Many young women were pregnant when they were detained, and gave birth before they were “disappeared,” so the government had to decide how to dispose of the resultant newborns. Some were put up for adoption by reliable supporters of the junta, who could be trusted not to reveal the circumstances of birth. So it came about that the couple in the film obtained their daughter.

The film progressively discloses the unspeakable atrocity that underwrites the scenes of affectionate family life, and shatters the official story those scenes depict, of an innocent and peaceful public order in Argentina.

Key figures of the emergent truth-telling are grandmothers, who knew their daughters had been pregnant when they vanished, and who mount a protest against the regime, asking what became of the babies.

“The Official Story” is a drama of dawning awareness, in which the adoptive mother of the little girl begins to learn the secret that the father had kept to himself, as she encounters an elderly women looking for her grandchild. Family harmony is devastated by the disorientation, rage, and self-disgust that convulse both mother and father as they struggle to confront the truth of their situation and to sort out their essential loyalties in the face of it.

What is to be done with the awareness of atrocity, committed by a government one has supported, when one’s own happy domestic life is a result? The film leaves that question unanswered.

It’s not just a question for Argentinians.

During the presidency of Bill Clinton, a flood of official documents were made public that bear on the American role in Argentina’s dirty war. The documents reveal that leaders of the junta were extremely uneasy about a meeting of Argentine Foreign Minister Admiral Guzzetti with Henry Kissinger, President Nixon’s Secretary of State, during the first days of military rule 1976.

The US ambassador in Buenos Aires had been protesting human rights abuses, and the junta feared that the Nixon White House would take measures that might threaten the regime.

But these fears proved groundless. Admiral Guzzetti was “jubilant” at the conclusion of the meeting with Kissinger, having been told to finish the job quickly, not to let it drag out.

The Argentine junta sought to keep the disappearances out of the official story, together with the provision of the newborns to trusted members of the regime. Henry Kissinger sought to keep his green light to the junta out of the official story, making certain that no minutes of the meeting were kept.

Americans may take some satisfaction in the fact that President Clinton reversed course, and let key features of the Argentine story become public.

But Americans are engaged today in a struggle over an official story of American innocence and virtue, in the face of atrocities for which no foreign state is answerable.

Khalid Sheik Mohammed proclaims himself the mastermind of the 9/11 attacks. There is good reason to believe he's telling the truth, and thus deserves punishment for the murder of more than 3000 Americans. But American officials, with White House approval, subjected him to at least one hundred and eighty-three sessions of water-boarding. Any testimony Khalid Sheik Mohammed might provide is tainted by his having been tortured, perhaps fatally tainted.

So the effort to try him is stalled, whether in a criminal court (as Attorney General Eric Holder sought to do) or in a military tribunal. Any hearing of the case will produce an official record documenting the torture. It could even result in an acquittal.

If our official story insists that American innocence cannot do wrong, no such result can be accepted, and in this spirit frenzied public protests have blocked the effort to try the case. If our official story features America as a place where official wrongs are righted, a trial is obligatory.

A self-adoring and untruthful American story now enjoys political supremacy, as in Argentina at the outset of the movie. Yet the movie also suggests an avenue through which self-respect can be regained, through the struggles that follow from insisting on the truth in the face of denial and hysterical self-defensive rage. Dramas of dawning self-awareness are messy in public life, as in family life.

In relation to the massive torture program mounted by the Bush administration, the abuse of Khalid Sheik Mohammed was a tiny and marginal incident. It was a foul and far-flung operation now excluded from the official story, and successfully blamed on a few bad apples at Abu Ghraib.

In Argentina key junta officials responsible for the atrocities have been brought to justice for their crimes. Not so in the United States, not yet. Our ceremonies of innocence still tell their lies.