

“Vestiges of a Hidden Life. A Visit to the Buenos Aires Police Museum”, *Radical History Review*, Nº 113, Spring 2012, pp. 143-154 (Número especial: “Calling the Law into Question”).

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The Buenos Aires City Police (today, Argentine Federal Police) was founded in 1880. It was a crucial year. After decades of political strife and territorial division, Buenos Aires was then acknowledged as the capital of the nation by all the main actors involved, opening the way for decades of export-led expansion and massive European immigration. The new capital needed its own police force, one that resembled the fast-growing city it was meant to protect.¹

Like other police departments in the region, it was led by a modern-oriented elite urgently concerned with the professionalization of their recruiting base and the forging of an international scientific profile. These high officials were well aware of the ideological significance of narratives about the institution. Beginning at that early date, and before the consolidation of the police as such, a remarkable number of histories of the institution were written and published. The authors were policemen themselves, members of a “historiographical elite” that over the course of a century would produce a dense body of police symbols, marks of identity and layers of tradition. Conceived as ambitious chronicles, and adorned with much detail, these manuals (or their abridged versions) were to be read by aspiring policemen at future police academies, where notions of institutional identity were first instilled.²

The most public manifestation of this historical bent (otherwise directed inward) is the Buenos Aires Police Museum (today the Argentine Federal Police Museum). It began, however, as a private initiative. Inaugurated as early as 1899 on the ground floor of the modern headquarters, and later moved to other locations, it was first conceived as a pedagogical tool for the police department itself. Much like the Scotland Yard model, and other state institutional museums that followed, it was born as a teaching museum, comprised of didactic samples taken from real cases. Indeed, it functioned as a crime museum meant for police training, insofar as it

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¹ In 1880, the old Buenos Aires Police, created in 1821, became two different institutions, with jurisdiction in the Province of Buenos Aires and the City of Buenos Aires respectively.

² Leopoldo López, *Reseña histórica de la Policía de Buenos Aires, 1778-1911*, Buenos Aires, Imprenta y Encuadernación de la Policía, 1911; Ramón Cortés Conde, *Historia de la Policía de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires*, Buenos Aires, Biblioteca Policial, 1937; Francisco Romay, *Historia de la Policía Federal Argentina* (5 vols.), Buenos Aires, Editorial Policial, 1963-1966; Adolfo Rodríguez, *Historia de la Policía Federal Argentina*, Bs As, Editorial Policial, 1975, (7 vols.); A. Rodríguez, E. Zappietro et al., *Historia de la Policía Federal Argentina a las puertas del tercer milenio. Génesis y desarrollo desde 1590 hasta la actualidad*, Buenos Aires, Editorial Policial, 1999. A new multi-volume history of the police is currently being written, for the occasion of the bicentennial of the Revolution of Independence.

displayed objects of illegality rather than technologies of order and social control. Fake keys, counterfeit money, tools used to break into houses, and a number of confiscated knives and guns made up the core collection. Just as the penitentiary museum was meant to teach criminologists about deviance through the study of real inmates, the police museum would teach new recruits the secret language of the crime scene. By doing so, it was also meant to contribute to establish a modern image for what was still a somewhat undifferentiated occupation, when being a policeman was a poorly defined task. Although crime-fighting was but a small portion of actual police work, the “police” collection dealt with a specialization that was in fact limited to a small elite acquainted with scientific and technical innovation. The overwhelming majority of barely literate agents patrolling the streets went about their business far from the complexities of detection work.

Unlike other police museums, however, this collection opened to the public early on, in 1932, as part of a public opinion campaign meant to improve “understanding” between the police and the “people”. Social acceptance of police power is (and has always been) a delicate issue, in Argentina and elsewhere. But the escalation of political repression following the 1930 military coup brought the image of the institution to a historical low point. Certainly, this image had never been flattering: the long resistance to the exercise of the police’s powers of arrest, for example, is very well documented in the popular press, as is the widespread mockery and contempt for the forces of order. 1930 was a turning point, however. The persecution unleashed against political dissidents (communists and *radicales* in particular) and the systematic practice of torture in police buildings made it to the headlines of the most massive commercial newspapers. Rampant popular *hatred* of the police became a concern for a number of chief officials, who opposed these practices in the name of long-term image of the police, and urged for measures to “reconcile” with the “people”. The opening of the museum was part of a broader bridge of communication, one that included changes in ceremonial rituals, publication policy, and police participation in the emerging commercial radio networks. The museum would keep its original didactical purpose, while attempting to build a public narrative that stressed modernity, professionalization as well as police sensitivity regarding a number of social problems.

The Buenos Aires Police Museum is inconspicuously located on the top two floors of a modern building in the heart of the financial district. It is managed by a small group of police historians, with well-defined notions about how to represent the institutional past and traditions. This group has contributed substantially to the construction of an established symbolic repertoire, and sees itself as the heirs of a “cultural elite” holding exclusive credentials to represent the institutional past. The current director is the editor of *Mundo Policial*, the main police magazine (founded in 1969), where dozens of historical studies combine, year after year, episodes drawn from institutional archives (the police during this or that revolution, the police during a memorable health crisis, the police and this famous case, etc.) with a celebration of professional access to certain urban traditions. Tango, old cafés, street anecdotes of the past: many expressions of *porteño* popular culture have their place in this publication.

This may be why the museum is today a landmark of official institutional memory as well as a place to look for alternative histories and “hidden” mysteries of Buenos Aires. Included in most guide-books for foreign tourists, it is also an attraction for those with a taste for the unexpected, the bizarre, even the freakish.³

To the extent that it has remained under the responsibility of members of the same elite that controls the much-developed history of the institution, the messages this museum conveys to the public are certainly legible. Although clumsily combined at times and mildly neglected (it is not a well kept museum), objects are organized in broad categories, with explanatory labels in Spanish and English. Guided tours are readily offered. The fact that the walls are covered with heavy red curtains (reducing natural light) adds a slightly surreal effect to the visiting experience

The contents of the museum have greatly changed over time, its original collection expanding into a number of other collections, featuring different narrative lines. As one walks through its twenty rooms, two overall sets of meaning emerge. The most explicit and predictable one is located on the bottom floor, and points to the celebration of the institution itself. A less explicit thread, largely identifiable in the top floor, displays the marks of an area of experience and knowledge: it points to the police as exclusive custodian of a “secret” memory of Buenos Aires, where crime is a professional field that touches on popular memory. Although this last aspect of the museum’s collection is the most potentially appealing for the general public (and explains the interest of young foreign visitors with backpacks), the linear succession of rooms makes it impossible to avoid most of the lavish display devoted to police technological achievement, memory and rituals. The material traces of illegality are displayed on the second (quite different) floor, accessible only through a small staircase off in one corner.

a) *The police as corporate identity and symbolic tradition.* Walking into the Police Museum, the visitor is greeted by a number of manekins wearing vintage uniforms, with capes, spats, tall hats with feathers, golden buttons, swords, and other accessories. The effect is reminiscent of a didactic school costume ceremony. These “policemen” stand here and there, between serious portraits and sculptures of former police chiefs, coats of arms, glass cases featuring medals, flags, photographs, typewriters, honorific decorations, hats, and helmets. There is a respect-inspiring desk in the middle of a room. In addition to the occasional work of art of a gifted agent, several roosters (ever-vigilant, serving as an institutional symbol) preside over this rather variable set of memorabilia.

In this, the “institutional” section of the museum, the gradual evolution from the most “picturesque” to the more stylized uniforms speaks of successive stages of professional modernization, even if the displays are not strictly chronological and the labelling is erratic. The medals allude to the establishment of a system of merit and

³ A recent photographic chronicle published in the virtual literary magazine *El Interpretador* conveys the puzzled, reluctant fascination of a team of young literary critics in their first contact with the museum: <http://www.elinterpretador.net/35/cronica/cronica.html>

promotion, while the severe portraits and the names of rooms enshrine a pantheon of institutional heroes. As in other police museums, one section is devoted to the display of a large collection of guns. Token objects from other prestigious metropolitan departments point to connections within an international network. Less predictably, one glass case features evidence of police “miracles”: pieces of uniforms (a twisted badge, a damaged cap) that came between their owners and flying bullets. Police culture is also made of anecdotes of past danger, a material that can turn into formal myth when introduced within the institutional symbolic repertoire.⁴

Certainly, the most striking feature of this collection is the recurrence of uniformed dummies – about forty scattered in the first rooms. They could be viewed as an extension of the taste for uniforms in police historiography. This emphasis (which is common to other police museums) confirms an awareness of the crucial ideological role of institutional clothing as a tool for distinguishing and separating policemen from common citizens, as sociologists of the police have convincingly argued. However, the recurrent display of real-size figures in ancient uniforms also reminds the viewer that the evolution of the police is, to a great extent, a progressive change of *bodies*.⁵

The bearded colonial *sereno*, with his lantern to keep the city from sinking into the chaotic dangers of the night, smiles as he walks the imaginary streets in friendly *non-chalance*. In subsequent rows, the faces of efficient-looking subjects are masked by a veil of training and corporate identity. These “policemen” are distinct not only because they have worn a succession of specific clothes, but because they have been increasingly disciplined into those uniforms.

Crowding room after room, these mannequin policemen also evoke *presence*: forever protecting society from danger, embedded in society and yet all the while distinct from society (and its disorder). Even before the police existed as such, the “future” Buenos Aires police (in the form of *serenos*, wardens, *regidores*, or *Alcaldes de Barrio*) are already visible. Tall, bright, orderly: a civilizing force as old as the city itself. The pedagogical tone - the vintage clothing that smacks of costume, the urban tableaux where the uniformed “policeman” is set (much like in history textbooks) - has a naïve quality, as if the visitor was being greeted by a succession of harmless puppets. As in school patriotic ceremonies, where characters of the past are covered with a veneer of nostalgia, the policemen of the museum convey a sense of benevolent permanence. The institutional fiction of separation from society is paired with a sense of perpetuity of contact with society: the police as a self-same, continuous subject throughout the centuries, ever present in the city.

⁴ On the role of informal anecdote in police culture see: Robert Reiner, *The Politics of the Police*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2000, cap. III.

⁵ The bibliography on this subject is extensive. For an ethnographic analysis of the disciplining of bodies in the Policía Federal Argentina, see: Mariana Sirimarco, *De civil a policía. Una etnografía del proceso de incorporación a la institución policial*, Buenos Aires, Teseo, 2009.

Present *in the city*: it is a striking feature of this narrative that the “federal” component is so weakly articulated. If one accepts the museum’s claim that its subject was born five centuries ago (that is, with Buenos Aires itself), its federal jurisdiction (acquired in 1943) will seem recent by comparison. This change in status is evoked summarily, in a flurry of small photographs of provincial police outposts, a modesty that contrasts sharply with the enlarged photographs of old Buenos Aires scattered throughout the museum, photographs whose importance seems so self-evident that no explanatory labels are deemed necessary. Institutional identity stems from a web of historical references that are intensely metropolitan.

To the extent that this collection is about memory, symbols and myths, the police department itself (its young recruits in particular) seems to be an important target audience. Civilian visitors, children and schoolteachers will walk through rows of uniforms and medals with diligent curiosity, while the display of techniques of repression and crowd control will raise another kind of question about the police.

Like every major police department that claims to be modern, it is an important part of institutional identity to glorify its own contribution to specifically professional technology – that is, generated from within the institution, as distinct from knowledge received from scientific or juridical fields. In Argentina, the most relevant figure in this regard is, by far, Juan Vucetich, whose international championing of the use of fingerprinting as a state technique of individual identification at the turn of the XXth century is quite well known. To the great regret of Federal Police historians, Vucetich’s career developed in another department, the Buenos Aires *Provincial* Police. Indeed, its own museum is mostly devoted to his achievements, leaving the Federal Police without much ground for capitalizing on this major scientific figure. Thus technological invention is displayed in the context of less spectacular improvements - most notably, officer Belaunde’s *fotocomparador*, which in the early XXth century perfected the technique for photographing bullets in order to determine their connection to specific weapons.

Many other pieces of equipment are included so as to prove a more general continuity in the modern profile of this force. The “communications” room illustrates the successive stages of the department’s ability to monitor the city. One of the main pieces of this collection is a sturdy emergency telephone installed in the early 1930s at various points (this one standing for decades at the corner of Corrientes and Esmeralda streets, we are told). The vigilant gaze of the street policeman on the beat, relying on his own perception to collect information, was thus complemented by these harmless looking technologies of information, which so greatly increased the state’s capacity to accumulate information about the metropolis.⁶

Besides being a neuralgic point in the centre of town, the intersection of Corrientes and Esmeralda streets is loaded with urban cultural resonances. In his famous essay *El hombre que está solo y espera* (1934), Raúl Scalabrini Ortiz chooses that same corner as the site for his emblematic male *porteño* muses about life and existence. It

⁶ I analyze the meaning of these technological changes in my forthcoming book: *Mientras la ciudad duerme. Pistoleros, policías y periodistas en Buenos Aires, 1920-1945*, Buenos Aires, Siglo XXI editores.

is also where the anonymous policeman has watched for decades the city's order and disorder. A plaque indicates that the telephone was rescued by the neighbours, and donated to the museum "as a tribute to the policemen who provided security to the area". Thus this piece of technological control of urban space is displayed in such a way that a major chapter in the classical story of police modernization is associated with unmediated contact with local culture and community. The importance of this double quality of police expertise becomes apparent as one walks away from the institutional rooms into the "crime" sections in the upper floor.

b) *The police as archaeologists of a hidden life*

Here is quite a different museum indeed, featuring an enormous expansion of its early pedagogical collection. The contents of these rooms have been selected from a much larger sample of objects placed under police supervision. One of the little-known dimensions of urban policing is the material accumulation generated by requisitions, confiscations, and a vast array of potential evidence taken from crime scenes. Each police department generates its own system of classification of these objects. Taxonomies and patterns of interpretation are transmitted generation by generation. Police photography documents their existence and places them in broader contexts of intelligibility.

Image

"Thief's tools" displayed and photographed by the Buenos Aires City Police.
Archivo General de la Nación. Depto. Documentos Fotográficos, Argentina

The journey from the crime scene to the busy chaos of police storage rooms, and then on into the museum's collection sharply reconfigures the meaning and function of these objects. Selection and reinsertion in different (didactical) contexts is one of the key symbolic operations that underlies the very existence of *most* museums. Its conceptual development has deserved much critical attention, particularly in reference to the great nineteenth century displays of scientific material.⁷ What are "police-curators" trying to communicate to visiting audiences? Their re-organization of evidence in glass cases and labelled collections is meant to convey a few clear messages. First: that crime is a central part of what the police do – an idea that is not supported by empirical evidence, but is part of its public narrative defining itself as a modern institution; second, that police concerns and experience belong in the heart of society and its problems; and finally, that the very same police identity in evidence on the ground floor is merely an exterior shell that contains other - more elusive, yet essential - dimensions of police identity.

⁷ Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum. History, Theory, Politics*, New York, Routledge, 1995, chapter 2; Sharon MacDonal (ed.), *The Politics of Display. Museums, Science, Culture*, New York, Routledge, 1998.

The display has been conceived as a *crescendo*, from harmless petty misdemeanour to the most gruesome of crimes. None of these crowded rooms speak of criminology, dwelling neither on the causes of crime nor ways to understand its deep sources. Here, crime is a *fact of life*, intimately known by the police who detect it. The repetitive display of its vestiges suggests a resigned view of human nature, one that escapes temporality. Even when time is present, it is only as a superficial dimension, pointing to the evolution of mere *methodologies* of crime. The notion of the police as experts in this field is confirmed many times, although the selection of material goes well beyond this criterion. Occasionally, it may fulfil a didactic function, but this goal seems negligible in comparison with its potential to arouse curiosity and titillation. Although the rooms are organized according to bureaucratic categories of investigation, the policemen themselves are no longer the explicit subject, as the visitor comes into contact with objects evoking the social realities that *the police are in touch with and know about*.

Gambling. The room devoted to *Juegos Prohibidos* reunites an attractive group of objects. Their cozy combination of wood, metal and colourful details is a welcome relief from the general character of the museum. The elegant roulette tables, with their cheerful casino chips, are reminiscent of the rather decadent opulence of early twentieth century Argentina. The slot machines, dice and decks of cards (all rigged) are a clever testament to the resourcefulness with which *pequeros* exploited popular entertainment. So is the trick furniture, where information about *quiniela* (small-scale illegal gambling alongside the legal lottery) was hidden to avoid police detection (unsuccessfully in this case). In the next room (called *Robos y Hurtos*) there are stacks of counterfeit bills, machines for making them, and for making fake documents. Showing that the resourcefulness of Buenos Aires scammers knew no bounds, there is even an impressive *fake* counterfeit money machine which was sold to other, less experienced scammers in the early decades of the past century. Still other stacks of cash show how *cuenteros* filled them out with newspaper to dupe unsuspecting customers. Likewise the bronze rings which were passed off as gold before innocent buyers. The museum's collection of fake keys (from its earliest days) is also on display, along with other tools used by burglars to enter turn-of-the-twentieth-century private homes. Juxtaposed with all of this (and hanging from an invisible thread) is a large hook, the *Martín pescador*, which was used to steal clothing left hanging from balconies.

These vestiges of unlawful inventiveness are anything but threatening. They resemble an archaeology of popular cunning, recovered by specialized archaeologists from a vast cultural heritage. Their malice is charming. Their original contexts of meaning long vanished, they seem comparatively innocent to the viewer. As is the case with police equipment, the tools of crime lose their edge when covered with the veneer of nostalgia. Nostalgia, the ultimate modern feeling, entails a *desire to return*.⁸ Return where, in this case? We are not invited to long for crime itself, of course, but rather for the bygone world where it belonged, its

⁸ Peter Frietsche, "Specters of History: On Nostalgia, Exile and Modernity, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 106, Nº 5 (Dec. 2001), p. 1591.

harmlessness, the limited scope of its threat, the more optimistic society where it was born. It also evokes the community policeman, the mythical *vigilante de la esquina* of old Buenos Aires who walked the streets where these episodes occurred, and knew enough about its agents and its victims to capture this collection of trivial evidence.

In the *Toxicomanías* room, the display features more materials rescued from yet another body of requisitioned paraphernalia: powders and herbs, dried leaves, needles, knives and syringes, various old coloured glass jars. Contrary to common belief, there is nothing new about drug abuse, they seem to say. A few unspecific objects (shoes, tennis rackets, a suitcase) are there to prove that drugs can be hidden in the most inconspicuous of places (but cannot escape police detection). An *avant-goût* of the upcoming turn of the visit is offered in the shape of a very realistic wax arm being injected with an unknown substance with a syringe: vice in literal terms.

There is certainly not much here that teaches about techniques of prevention, control or repression, past or present. Removed from the original context, the material vestiges of gambling, vice or crime become fascinating because these objects have been imbued with police knowledge of the *other side* of social life. They can speak: the harmless looking keys only matter because we know they are *fake* keys; that open suitcase holds a story because it once carried a load of cocaine, as did that wine bottle or that incongruous picture on the wall; the childish cardboard box was used by *mecheras* (female shoplifters), and the curious moustache-curler belonged to a charming brand of pseudo-aristocratic thief that was common in *Belle Époque* Buenos Aires. The ordinary pliers and chisels are no longer ordinary. They were used to break the locks of a bank's safe. This transgression (one of the few that can be effectively communicated in a single scene) is illustrated with two bearded dummies busily working their way into a vintage safe deposit box: crime in literal terms.

What kind of expertise is celebrated with this exhibition? Detective work, yes. And with it, the occasional long-forgotten triumph of crime solving, one that might have made the career of this or that detective-policeman whose name might preside over one of these rooms. But also present here is that elusive form of knowledge that comes from exposure to certain hidden dimensions of life. Room after room, the display confirms a long history of intimacy with a secret language – the language of the night, the margins, the first-hand contact with the dissimulated traps of the big city, with everyday human weakness and drama. It is a kind of knowledge that connects formal police technologies of order with much broader cultural traditions.

One of these traditions can be found in tango lyrics. Illegal life of the Buenos Aires night - petty crime, prostitution, prison experience and, yes, the police – are very important tango references. So is the rich jargon of the underworld, the *lunfardo*, which the police claim to know better than their inventors. It is no coincidence that police magazines boast about their intimate familiarity with this heritage - a claim that is ambivalent at best, since so many tangos celebrate illegality and chastise the police itself. Nevertheless, *Mundo Policial* devotes many pages to celebrating this

ultimate *porteño* expression of popular culture, emphasizing whenever possible the institution's personal connections with authors and performers from this tradition, as well as the occasional agent who used street experience as an inspiration for his own contribution to the genre.⁹

At times, the museum's display of remnants of old crimes and misdemeanours resembles a gallery of much darker folk culture. Following an implicit descending moral sequence, the visitor walks from carefree gambling to petty misdemeanour, to complex property crime, and then into ever-darker recesses of human nature. The images and the themes selected to narrate the hard crimes that close the visit mix the usual display of professional access to information and material vestiges with elements of folk culture and mass sensationalism.

In fact, these final rooms hold a very mixed set of elements, their common theme being nothing more than the notoriety of the selected cases. One thread falls squarely into the category of "famous criminals caught by the police". We see pictures of the "first band of taxi thieves" (presumably from the late 1920s, when taxi robbery soared in Buenos Aires, although this is not explained). Next to it, there is an illustrated account of the kidnapping of one Mr. Favelukes, who was captured in 1932 by a Sicilian *mafia* and released a few days later (a similar and more famous case occurred soon thereafter, but it ended with the murder of the victim, a resounding police defeat that is silenced in this display). One entire wall is devoted to the most legendary figure of Argentine criminal history, a murderer of children who was himself a child, known as *Petiso Orejudo*. His picture (well-known in folk culture) presides over two booklets attached to the wall, with the details of his murders. Similar booklets on other famous homicides are placed on contiguous walls. They offer a general account of the crime, followed by technical details of the investigation (mostly self-congratulatory), and a display of more or less shocking forensic images. Another glass case is devoted to anarchist celebrity Severino Di Giovanni, a prominent leader of the "expropriator" libertarians who flirted with the criminal world, robbing banks and counterfeiting money for the revolutionary cause. In addition to portraits and some examples of the guns he used, a large portion of this collection features newspaper headlines announcing Di Giovanni's capture by the police.

Throughout this section, police evidence has been integrated in an ensemble that relies heavily on journalistic materials and journalistic sensational effects, making both narratives almost inseparable. The pictures of the taxi thieves, for example, can hardly be considered professional police photography. The composition of images of the gang reminds one of photographs from the police blotters of popular newspapers. Following the recurrent mix of the infantile and the sordid that is one of this museum's signatures, pictures have been cut out and glued to cardboard, comprising a threatening-looking group of free-standing silhouettes.

⁹ See, for example: "Edmundo Rivero. Un cantor con vocación policial", *Mundo Policial*, 1: 6, 1970, p. 55; "Discépolo, tango y policía", *Mundo Policial*, 1: 4, p. 22; "De policías y poetas. Pagano y Ríos le robaron a los ladrones su jerga lunfarda", *Mundo Policial*, diciembre de 1987, p. 92. Several police magazines include extensive technical studies of *lunfardo*.

Stories of spectacular crime and police triumph are soon overshadowed by the gruesome turn the show takes, a disconcerting closure for any museum visit, and certainly for one that devotes so much space to rather innocuous material. The escalate of horrors is introduced by a particularly macabre feature of political culture, arising out of the dense baggage of Peronist folklore and its notorious tradition of necrophilia.¹⁰

In a Police Museum so carefully devoid of political references, Peronism appears twice, and it does so in one of its most bizarre incarnations. Although the first reference will certainly be lost on foreign visitors, it lies in a small corner devoted to “esoteric practices”. It displays the outfit worn by 1970s Peronist Minister José López Rega (a former policeman himself, responsible for the kidnapping and killing of many leftist activists, and famously fond of “the occult”) in his “mystical” rituals. A few steps away, the visitor is offered a more disturbing piece of evidence. Amongst the extensive folklore surrounding the remains of Peronist leaders, the mutilation and theft of Perón’s hands in 1987 was the object of much popular commotion, police and journalistic research – not to mention black humour. Without much explanation, the visitor finds Perón’s violated casket in a corner of these rooms otherwise filled with (more predictable) criminal evidence.

Other mutilations follow this unexpected introduction to the subject. The next room, *Criminalística*, is presided over by a glass-case featuring two life-sized, *dismembered*, representations of bodies, one male and one female. The plaster surface has been coloured to produce the most realistic effect. They belong to completely unrelated cases, and have been combined only to reinforce the shock effect. Other shelves hold mutilated wax arms and wax hands (most of them tattooed). Additional forensic pictures of dead bodies and horrific crime scenes are offered in the booklets on the walls.

One wonders about the intention behind this display of body parts and forensic pictures, especially when contrasting it with the puerile character of the initial rooms. These are not remnants from an old collection. Unlike other areas of the building, objects are housed in a room that has been recently restored. The average viewer might be reminded of the horrors of *desaparecidos*. Political victims of repression during the 1970s dictatorship are often represented and imagined as vulnerable bodies (or anonymous silhouettes) exposed to the worst conceivable violations. However, this display is meant to unleash a different set of associations altogether. These much older images belong to the timeless field of *true crime*.

¹⁰ Since the passing of Eva Perón, in 1952, funerals, death rituals and dead bodies (Evita’s in particular) have carried a complex set of symbolical meaning in Peronist political tradition. The subject has inspired many works of fiction. See, among others: Rodolfo Walsh, “Esa mujer”, en: *Los oficios terrestres*, Buenos Aires, La Flor, 1965; Rodolfo Fogwill, “La cola” (1974), *Cuentos completos*, Buenos Aires, Alfaguara, 2009; Tomás Eloy Martínez, *Santa Evita*, Buenos Aires, Planeta, 1995. In recent years, the changing meanings of Evita’s remains have attracted much academic critical attention. See: Martín Kohan y Paola Cortés Rocca, *Imágenes de vida, relatos de muerte. Eva Perón: cuerpo y política*, Rosario, Beatriz Viterbo, 2000.

Of course, gruesome exhibitions have a very long tradition: the biologically distorted, the devious and the monstrous were common in nineteenth century museums, where scientific and profane curiosity overlapped. But changes in sensibility and a long process of cultural awareness have long made them unacceptable. The Buenos Aires Provincial Police Museum – more clearly devoted to teaching about police technical resources - has long eliminated the display of this kind of evidence on grounds of tastefulness, thematic coherence and respect for the viewer and victims. Not so in these rooms, however.

The gruesome extravaganza that closes the tour might be a testimony to the place of criminal investigators in the singular cultural elite of this institution. Indeed, one strand of police aficionado writing is comprised of chronicles of notorious cases as remembered by retired heads of divisions such as *Criminalística* or *Robos y Hurtos*. “This is not writing novels, this is living them”, says José E. Urricelqui, a prestigious police investigator whose name has been given to one of these rooms. His long experience is, in fact, incompatible with the fantasies of detective fiction, he says, although he demonstrates plenty of familiarity with this brand of literature in order to underline police intellectual authority on the subject. Unlike writers who never leave the comfort of their chairs (or the common consumer of crime news who depends on the mediation of journalists), *he* knows that crime is as banal as life itself.¹¹ Banality only vanishes when the objects of crime are seen through the lens of police superior knowledge, as exposed in this museum. With paternalistic condescension, it will guide the uninitiated visitor through the grey maze of real life.

The persuasive potential of this type of expertise plays an important role in institutional image. In a society where the police are the object of much fear and contempt, the few policemen who survive advantageously in popular memory are linked to the resolution of famous cases – homicides, great robberies, the rare serial killer, etc. They often developed their careers in the sections dealing with complex crime, with their aura of clever detection, technical *savoir-faire*, and tough realism.

Furthermore, the whole “crime” section of the museum speaks of the peculiar place of this institution within the police department. Its many idiosyncrasies stem from the relative autonomy and endurance of its leadership, a conclusion that seems inescapable when comparing this collection with other cultural products born within this group: books of personal memoirs, magazines filled with anecdotes about street patrolling, radio and film scripts about long-forgotten (or invented) cases, *lunfardo* dictionaries, etc. Their claim to a particular familiarity with a distinctly urban popular culture goes far beyond the instrumental needs of social control. They carry the legitimacy of street knowledge, conceived as unmediated contact with the dark and hidden dimension of society, placing the figure of the policeman in a succession of narratives of triumph against the darkest forces.

This conception of police *ethos* accounts for the museum’s progression from predictably institutional models of masculinity – the evolution of uniforms, weapons and bodily postures – to the more implicit display of a rough kind of police/male

¹¹ Evaristo Urricelqui, *Careo*, Buenos Aires, Yala, 1977, p. 69.

knowledge. It is within this less formalized brand of institutional culture that the singular co-existence of narrative levels may be explained. Professional languages and objects are not at odds with those coming from other repertoires (tango, folk political mythology, sensational journalism). They all claim a place in the cultural baggage and traditions of the institution. The mixed set of objects displayed on the walls and glass cases of this museum seem to speak about the complex nature police identity and authority. They are intended to teach about formalized myths, about institutional power and technological expertise. And also, about those realities of life only a few are prepared to see.