**The Aborted Body: Photographic Rhetoric in the Film *Roma.***

The aborted body: photographic rethorics on *Roma.*

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**SUMMARY:**

This work analyzes *Roma,*by director Humberto Cuarón, through a rhetoric of the image according to Roland Barthes. It is a study on the connotation of a filmic body in the construction of meaning. It addresses the semiotics of photography in the transmission of cinematographic messages applied to the scene of the Falconazo to interpret the meaning of the reference to the Corpus Christi massacre.

**Keywords:** Photographic rhetoric. Semiotics. Connotation. Denotation. Body

**ABSTRACT:**

This work analyzes *Rome*, by the director Humberto Cuarón, is analyzed through an image rhetoric according to Roland Barthes. It is a study about the connotation of a filmic body in the construction of sense. It approaches photography semiotics to the transmission of cinematographic messages applied to the Halconazo scene in order to interpret the meaning of the reference of the Corpus Christi massacre.

**Keywords**: Photographic rethorics. Semiotics. Connotation. Dennotation. Body

"Love is... remember your first kiss" Fermín's shirt in the movie *Roma.*

**Introduction**

*Roma* was a notorious 2018 production. Among hundreds of awards there was no shortage of criticism. But it was a cinematic enunciation that resonated loud and clear. This message is a communicative act that can be studied through an **image rhetoric.** Because Cuarón's cinematographic language has elements that explain Barthes' photographic theory. In *A Message Without a Code,*hecriticizes the linguistic empire over semiotic territory. That is, the image is as much a part of the meaning as the sign. He demonstrates this through connotative processes in mere advertising photographs loaded with cultural, ideological, social, political, etc. significance. Clearly this also happens in a film proposal. So the hypothesis is proposed that the scene of the Falconazo connotes the abortion of a social body.

How is Cuarón's critical stance against the 1971 massacre formulated through photographic rhetoric? How does a film enunciate a position beyond the dialogue of its characters? How is a historical fact encoded through cinematographic fiction? The success of the film *Roma* brought into debate aspects of identity and violence in Mexico. In a capsule of the U.N.A.M. regarding the scene of the Falconazo the film is recognized "the capacity of cinema as a catalyst of collective memory and means of dissemination of history" (Ricardo, min. 3:31 – 3:37). This has not been alien to the criticism of the work, as it has been well pointed out. But rather than presenting an event, fiction is subject to the judgment of how it is depicted. Therefore, it is not a question of praising Cuarón's ability to adapt. His awards have already earned him. But the questioning of the aesthetic reconstruction of memory arises no longer as a testimony but as a sanction of a historical phenomenon. Because the director does not mean that posture with the verbal signs or dialogues of the characters but with the photographic rhetoric of the scene.

The connotation of an image rhetoric can be framed in the theories described by Roland Barthes. *A Message Without a Code* is a collection of essays on semiotics and photography. They were originally published between 1961 and 1982 in the journal *Communications.* There he describes his thesis on connotation and denotation in the image. The author proposes that the

[...] purely denotative character of photography, the perfection and fullness of its analogy and, in short, its objectivity, run the risk of being something mythical (these are traits that common sense attributes to photography): because in fact, there is a great probability (and this will be a working hypothesis) that the photographic message (at least, the press message) is also connoted(2017, p. 11).

The rhetoric of Barthes' image is not linguistic, but it does use its resources to explore semiotic processes beyond the linguistic sign. That is why he applies the concepts of denotation and connotation to visual discourse. It is true that his analyses focus on press photography. But they offer a semiotic methodology for the cinematic connotation of a message that reached a large number of receivers. It is interesting because the denotation of Cleo's interrupted pregnancy in *Rome,*connotes the significance with which the Falconazo is referenced.

**The object of study*: Rome***

The film *Roma* (Cuarón 2018a) is an urban portrait. It is a memento of a colony in Mexico City. Among all the transits, the continuity between childhood and motherhood stands out. Although *Roma* is autobiographical, Cleo's presence inaugurates the film. The press presented the narrative as "the story of Cleo, a domestic worker who keeps afloat a middle-class family in the convulsive Federal District of the beginnings of the government of Luis Echeverría" (Lima, 2019). This means that your body establishes a here and now in memory. The interruption of her pregnancy as a conflict unites the approach of a housewife from the Roma colony in Mexico of the Corpus *Christii* massacre in 71. The approach of the film is denoted in the frame of the washerwomen in the whippings, the conditions of a social class. The knot is that of a pregnancy that is interrupted. And the climax is Cleo's awareness in the sea of the final scene.

*Rome* is a constant game of mirrors. Its beginning is a reflection of infinity, while Sofia and Cleo are a revival of motherhood in two social classes. Just as the sea gives Cleo the image of herself that allows her to assume that she did not want pregnancy. The film was well received. It has been said that

[...] the film has been awarded by countless international awards, and reviews have highlighted the excellent balance between semi-autobiographical film and family drama, without forgetting the social and political criticism of Mexico setentero that *Roma*  denounces, a denunciation as subtle as it is devastating. (Esterrich, 2019, p. 212).

This position that has rewarded the film is based on the cultural impact of social memory. It is not only the Falconazo, because there are more reflections of the political in society, or the gender or class conditions that oppress Cleo, the paternal absence in model failing, everything permeates the film narrative. But in that scene of the massacre these biases are manifested photographically. Therefore the meaning imprinted in the story is more express. And this is one way in which denotation and connotation can be studied in photography.

The film focuses on Mexico but has crossed borders. First because the director had to cross them back to record it. But there are interesting contradictions in a city full of movement, motionless in its space, which transits as an image through the world. It is therefore not surprising that the film also reached foreign criticism. Contrary to Esterrich's perspective, it has been said that "that strange inertia of the camera, her refusal to engage with drama, translates as the palpable way in which Cleo unravels from the pathetic role of the obedient servant ready for sacrifice"(Žižek, 2019). That means that the idea of family opposes two very different readings of the film. Is there a tribute to domestic work that saves families or a critique of the capitalist trap that makes you save the family from the oppressor and condemn your own? The theories of Roland Barthes not only serve to kill the author, but also to acyield to his criticalpositions; porque one thing is the difficulty of an artistic collectivity to denote history and influence the memory of the viewer,and another the photographic connotation, which according to Barthes, deepens the critical stance behind all the cinematographic work.

**Barthes and the rhetoric of the image**

From *Plato's Cratyle* the discussion about the analogical quality of language is present. The relationship of words with the objects theydesignate, have a dichotomy in Spanish whose origins date from the Latin language. Denotatio and *connotatio* are etymologically related to opposition denotation and connotation. Denoting and connoting are opposed in the act of notation or nomination, the way names are assigned to the world. Beristáin defines connotation as follows: "Property possessed by the signs of adding a second (or third, etc...) meaning to the *denotative* meaning that is immediately referential: that of words in dictionaries"(1984, p. 110). Semiotics such as linguistics studies that *denotative* meaning as the stable relationship between an object and the sign that a language attributes to it. Such stability is not entirely fixed. Changing the language changes the sign, and this even happens from dialectal, sociolectal or idiolectal variations – hence the famous arbitrariness of the sign according to Saussure or that the words are not analog as Plato wanted. Either way denotation occurs when more than two people call something the same way. The photograph skips the words and puts the shape of the object as a sign. That is why Barthes starts from the principle that photography is pure denotation(2017, p. 9);instead of talking about something, he shows it. But he questions that photographic messages have more levels than that of the analog relationship of reality, and that is where the processes of photographic connotation occur.

Art as an analogy of reality generates the tensions between fiction and non-fiction. That life is not stories or movies is the position of those who demand actions and not words. A child experiences this when he is told about a sweet and then cries because he does not have that sweet in his hand. But the Latin phrase acta *est fabula* (to act is to fabulate) already implies that the distance between art and reality is not as simple as going from A to B. Hjelmslev (1984) points out that "there are also semiotics whose plane of expression is a semiotics and semiotics whose plane of content is a semiotics. We will call the former connotative semiotics; the latter *metasemelotic"* (1984, 160). Then the connotation occurs when the *denotative* meaning unfolds into more meanings. The arts specialize in this. If in a painting or photograph the signifiers, the images, or in literature, the words, are arranged to modify the denotative sense of what is expressed, the *connotative* semiotics mentioned are spoken. *Metaseotics*  derive senses generated from this connotation. This occurs when such meanings have been in opposition or in tension with cultural, social or ideological structures for example.

The Hjelmslevian classification of *denotative,* *connotative* and metaseotic semiotics *serves* to contrast the tensions between denotation and connotation made by Roland Barthes. He analyzes the photographic message with linguistic functions to speak of a rhetoric of the image. *A message without code* focuses its analysis on press photography. It seems that, unlike other analog reproductions of reality, journalism does not develop a message supplementary to the content by analogy. Barthes says that "drawings, painting, cinema, theater [...] they involve two messages: a denoted message, which is the *analogy* itself, and a connoted message that is how society, to some extent, gives to read what it thinks about it"(2017, p. 9). If photography is the perfect *analogy,* the photographic direction of a film uses that resource. It is easierto believe in animage than in a word becauseit is(e)seer. But that's pure rhetoric. That is why Barthes studies the processes of connotation of the image. According to this theory in photography objects cease to be an inscription surface for significance and become signs loaded with meanings given by their relationship with the other objects in the painting. Both in the press and in cinema the infinite relationship of meanings that an object with a finite, although not necessarily scarce, number of relationships can have is limited.

In *A Message Without a Code* the discussion about the connotation of press photography does not focus on other imitative arts. However throughout the text there are several examples with paintings, drawings or films. In addition, this is because the procedures of connotation are not so obvious in journalistic images. But the methodology developed by Barthes can lead to a *connotative* analysis of cinematographic photography. He points out that

The connotation, that is, the imposition of a secondary sense to the photographic message [...] is, in short, an encoding of the photographic analogue; therefore, it is possible to unravel procedures of connotation; [...] the first three (trick, pose, objects) should be well separated from the last three (photogenicity, aestheticism, syntax)(2017, p. 12).

The methodological application and theoretical definition of these procedures will occupy the next part of the work. These six analysis procedures offer results for structuring the three different levels at which the connotation operates. It has already been pointed out that Hjelmslev calls these levels *semiotics,* *connotative* semiotics and *metaseomiotics.* In relation to the photographic message Barthes defines them as perceptual connotation, cognitive connotation and ethical-ideological connotation, which correspond to a linguistic or literal message, then as an iconic message encoded and finally as an iconic message not encoded. The correspondence of these terms is respective to the three connotative levels that will be interpreted according to the results of the analysis of the six connotation procedures.

**Methodology of connotation**

The denoted reading of the scene of the Falconazo is its relevance to the film story. It gives an account of what happens to Cleo's pregnancy. In this sense, its connotation is that of anguish in the viewer through the prefiguration of the loss of his daughter, who is stillborn. These are the first two levels of significance, that of the linguistic (Barthes) or semiotic (Hjelsmlev) message and the coded connoted message (Barthes) or connotative semiotic (Hjelsmlev). They attend to the significance of the plot. Here the social environment of student repression catalyzes the loss of Cleo's daughter. And then in the uncoded connoted message (Barthes) or metaseotic (Hjelsmev) the meanings unfold so that then Cleo's experience takes place in the construction of meaning around the Falcon. To determine this movement of significance, it is necessary to attend to the following ***Table of connotation procedures.*** Next, the *trickery,*the *pose,*the *objects,*the *photogenics,*the *aestheticism* and the syntax in the photograph of the scene are *analyzed.*

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| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Barthes' argument** | **Argument** **theoretical** | **Photographic plot** |
| **Tweaking** | "The methodical interest of the trick is that it intervenes inside the plane of denotation, without warning; uses the particular credibility of photography, which is limited, as we have seen, to its exceptional power of denotation, to pass off as simply denoted a message that, in reality, is markedly connoted"(2017, p. 13). | "Where in the world is being re-presented? Even if there is an answer, it is certainly radically different from what one would normally offer on the question of what is being represented by such photographic *trickery,* shooting processes or photomontages." (Carrol, p. 84). | *Rome* represents with its camera a space where the purchase of a crib is canceled as a ritual of consumption as a solution to the family drama of absent fatherhood. On consumption at the secondary level, the military presence and protest chants are put in the foreground. In the mere discussion about the price to pay arises the historic cry of Long live Che Guevara! The gun in the foreground ends this communication in an emphatic synthesis of violence. Travelling have a direction: from emphasis to flow, from social catharsis to the catalysis of meaning that emanates along with Cleo's broken fountain; something happens to childhood, to youth. |
| **Pose** | "In this case, it is the pose itself that prepares the connotation meanings"(2017, p. 14). | "The flesh is the enunciating instance as a *principle of resistance/material impulse,* but also as a reference *position,*a material set that occupies a portion of the extension, from which said extension is organized (Fontanille,2018, p. 33). | The impulse of violence transfigures the poses into fast rhythms except for two slowing down characters, Fermin and Cleo. She generates the sense of scene by the position of reference to her environment; her pose as theatrical as instinctive, hands on the belly, tries to connote a reminder, that she is pregnant. But this is not taken into account and the resistance of your body is broken and emanates the significance next to the fluid of the broken source. Fermín is integrated into the speed, the posture of escape, the fear that even them as perpetrators also mark. |
| **Objects** | They function as "common inducers of associations of ideas [...], they constitute excellent elements of significance: on the one hand, they are discontinuous and complete in themselves, which is a physical property of the sign; and on the other, they refer to clear, known meanings"(2017, p. 14). | "But just as the object in general exists only for the subject as his representation, neither does every special class of representations exist except for a special determination of the subject called the faculty of knowing" (Schopenhauer p. 27). | The arrangement of the objects in the scene of the Falconazo is not random but they are willing to signal the cancellation of the subject to know. This is related to the objectification of the corpse body through violence and the presence of shoes lying in the street when Cleo and the rest flee. The body turned object cancels the subject and cancels the principle of reason of which Schopenhauer speaks, the subject of knowing, makes the bodies part of the chain of causality.  |
| **Photogenic** | "In photogenicity, the well-known message is in the image itself, 'embellished' (i.e. in general, sublimated) by lighting, printing and developing techniques"(2017, p. 15). | How to define this quality that is not in life, but in the image of life? Photogeny is this extreme poetic aspect of beings and things (Louis Delluc) this poetic quality of beings and things (León Moussinac) susceptible to being revealed exclusively by the cinematographer (Morín, 2001, p. 23). | One of the main photogenies of *Rome* is the street turned mural. Guillermo del Toro had already pointed out in a *tweet* (2019)this characteristic that occurs with travelling in the film. This mural points to the collusion of these public forces with the paramilitaries. In this way a street muralism uses the senses of criticism of the tradition of revolutionary muralism. It goes without mentioning a refractory, reflective or kaleidoscopic strategy of the shots on stage. The poster with posters in the background, the crib being bought from buyers in the background, the car in the background traffic the gun pointing at Cleo with guns killing students in the background. That infinitesimal reproduction, which is also seen in with the housewives on the rooftops during another scene, is also part of the photogenicity of *Rome.* |
| **Aestheticism** | "When photography is made painting, that is, composition or visual substance deliberately treated as a 'filling', either to signify itself as 'art', or to impose a meaning usually more subtle and more complex than would be possible with other procedures of connotation"(2017, pp. 15-6). | In this context, some frames are indicated. The first at 1:32:07 (the car going to a background demonstration), the second at 1:33:38 (the kendo's gaze towards the march), the third at 1:35:05 (the filling of the gun killing students and pointing at Cleo) and a fourth at 1:36:38 (the shrill of a desperate cry for help). | They are specific pictures of significance that could work on their own. In them, the spectacle of cinema characterizes the values inserted in the images. The axiological attribution operates in that the bourgeois family is also prey to the same as the critical march (first frame), in which the presence of the paramilitaries is objectified in their weapons (second frame), in which the death of childhood is a correlate with the death of youth (third frame), and in which the empathy of suffering is necessary (fourth frame).  |
| **Syntax** | "The connotation signifier then is no longer found at the level of any of the fragments of the sequence, but at the level (suprasegmental, linguists would say) of chaining"(2017,p. 16). | "Syntax is the fundamental part of grammar that studies the relationships that are established between words within a sentence; it also deals with the meaning to which these combinations give rise" (Munguía,2016,p. 71). | The syntactic structure of the Falconazo scene is a spiral of violence. The statement of the scene begins with the bourgeois subject (family in the vehicle) interrupted on his charity excursion by a student march, an indirect object conditioned by a circumstantial object of a martial nature, that is, the national anthem and the army of the fourth painting. The syntactic play of these grammatical cases becomes a spiral by means of camera reflections. The juxtaposition of the seventh painting, furniture-street is a mirror whose integration is aggressively broken with the adversarial conjunction of the eighth painting. From here subjects and grammatical objects are poured into the spiral of violence. There is a riding of dead students and the threatened fetus, between childbirth and strident help me. At the end of the statement, the direct object that responds to what is interrupted is childhood and youth.  |

**4.- Conclusions:**

That not everything said is all that is meant, and therein lies the importance of a rhetoric of the image. The meaning also does not end in the mouth-eye relationship, because the body possesses multiple organs. These not only help bodily functioning but also the perception and production of meaning. Therefore through Cleo's body the procedures of connotation in *Rome*arestrained. Because

[...] depending on the reciprocal places they occupy, the enunciations vary and no longer form the same scientific object, no doubt, because addressing other bodies (which is, properly, speaking) always implies secretly deciding what we do with those bodies (approaching them, avoiding them): in speech there is a hidden touch (Barthes,2017, p. 363).

That contact leads from the denoted body to the connoted body. Because the film depicts female suffering in the process of an interrupted pregnancy. But the sequence shot of the Falconazo connotes the abortive act of a social body. There the flows are broken and the consciousness will take the whole film to assimilate what happens, to flow again. Such immobilization is a form of oppression that Cleo embodies in both its intimate and social dimensions.

In *Rome* the denotation of the interrupted pregnancy leads to the connotation of a social abortion. How to move from a cumulus or set of signs to a continuity of signs to speak of the scene as a significant set? That is, a journey that speaks of the significance of the scene through a body structure. First it must be clarified that the scene transcends the anecdotal of film diégesis and refers to Mexican culture. There is the resonance of the

[...] book *The Labyrinth of Solitude:*the abandonment of the cruel andirresponsible father, the stoic suffering of the wife, the helplessness of the children, are facts that go beyond a social imbalance. They refer to the trauma of the Conquest of Mexico and the very birth of Mexico as a mestizo country, illegitimate son of Hernán Cortés and Malinche (Krauze, 2018,para. 1).

For Cleo this formula is violent but does not transform her. Through the *trickery* of photography, its *poses,*its *objects,*its *photogenicity,*its *aestheticism* and its *syntax* are in active semiosis with culture. The urban framing and photogenicity of black and white set in motion the processes of connotation. As well as objects such as guns directing the sense of postures. Significant relationships are also generated between spiral syntax and aesthetic paintings. The complementarity of the procedures of connotation does not present the images as an aspiration of beauty. Rather they are beautiful for meaning in keeping with the culture where they are broadcast.

In short, the connotation procedures offer keys to the photographic connotation of the Falconazo scene. The trick works together with the photogenics to create an illusion of indoor/outdoor cancellation. The filmic reality is suddenly supplanted by a historical reality, present in the viewer who recognizes his collective past. Through the windows you can see the march, inside the furniture store the songs are heard. Because "in the total picture they constitute discontinuous or, rather, *erratic* features [... for] they do not fill all the lexy, their reading does not exhaust it" (Barthes,2017, p. 100). The chaos of repression is a social error, which in turn produces noise in Cleo's life. But the discontinuity of signs finds a semiotic entanglement in the connotation. Thus the *syntax describes* the spiral of concentric violence towards a definition of chaos in Cleo's life, the death of her daughter. And this is connoted by the objects present in the scene that accumulate to point to a liquid object, the broken source. That's why Cleo's pose, the terminated pregnancy, is the connotative emanation of the Falcon scene.

It is true that Cleo does not abort voluntarily, but it is also true that in the end she recognizes that she did not want her to be born either. Between a PRI triumph that populates the streets with both posters and neoliberalism, between a patriarchal and bellicose love and a subordinate class, Cleo does not have many expectations. In this strong social oppression there is an inscription space that is where what happens to Cleo interprets the environment in which she runs. That is why the connotation is inscribed in the body that links motherhood and childhood. *Roma* is a "loving film appreciation of a marginal subject [...] that we never got to know much [... that...] she remains on the sidelines, even when she is in the center [...]: it is almost impossible to find Cleo, because the familiar embrace makes her disappear" (Esterrich,2019,p. 216). The impossibility of family in Cleo's account is a critique of the nuclear figure of the bourgeoisie, of its failures. Its denotation of an interrupted pregnancy connotes an aborted body. On the ideological level of connotation, the mother nation is so corrupt that it cannot give birth, it cannot give life. It is interesting how the acting work of Yalitzia Aparicio unites the memory of its director with the experience of a woman. Their presence argues that not all abortions are intentional, that many abortions occur due to deficiencies, that the psychological process is longer than pregnancy, and that in order not to put all that together in one word to call it termination of pregnancy is not a useless euphemism but an infinitesimal reflection of historical conditions.

Cleodegaria Gutierrez is a heroine because she beats the hysteria of phallic absence unlike her patron. Before the abandonment of her partner Sofia punishes her children, she gets even with the entrance of her house, and although she goes ahead, it can very well be questioned that if it were not for Cleo her children would end up dead at sea. Cleo's offspring are also dead, as far as the film puts it. But the sea reveals this as a decision and not as an accident, unlike Sofia, although it is a decision that Cleo becomes aware of until the end of the film. In *Roma: Another Word for Love,*it is noted that the film "ends as it begins, with its protagonist playing her main role in the care of the house: she cleans" (Harrison,2019). This set of anagrams is interesting for the connotation of the Falconazo scene. Because the fact that the film begins and ends with water and planes, with transits, seems like the perenniality of the character, which does not change. But that is the important thing about the character, the resistance to oppression, to the social flow that led her to Sofia's position as a mother, but marginal as an indigenous woman. Cleo rejects the absence of the father who is lost when he goes on a trip between a military march to return with another wife, as well as the paternity of Fermín that is lost in a martial fiction. The ineffectiveness of the clinical gaze of the state in the abortive process has an error that bears the name of the protagonist, whose effort in her humble work gives her the physical condition to perform a simple yoga posture that the paramilitary training of the falcons does not give them in their simulation of masculinity.

How does the receiver move from urban memory to social memory? How does the message of the Roma colony transit the Halconazo, of a family and its servant to the student massacres in Mexico? Negative reviews of the film coincide in a bourgeois accusation. Cuarón has been attacked for profiting from marginalization and idealizing oppressed characters. Žižek comments that "can she really be reduced to the ultimate love object of a well-to-do upper-middle-class family, accepted (almost) as part of the family only to be exploited, physically and emotionally?" (2019). However, the director himself is aware of these problems, so he puts them on stage, in discussion. Žižek wants to take the position of principal and writes a different ending to Cleo where he reads Marx and becomes class conscious to join the student marches. It is true that the employer-servant relationship questions that a female emancipation without class emancipation will continue to reproduce patriarchal schemes. But Cleo's individual awareness is already part of the semiotic process of emancipation. For Žižek, Cleo is an incomplete character, because she lacks class and military consciousness for the party, for Cuarón cleo's suffering is completely militant because it represents her historical time.

The tragedy denoted in *Rome* is the loss of Cleo's motherhood. The well-known tragedy is the prevalence of military-national fiction in the bands of wars but that the national anthem sung by the youth is silenced. The pregnant body of the maid enunciates the denotation of an interrupted pregnancy at the semiotic level of the filmic statement. This connotes a social body aborted in the student repression of Corpus *Christi* at the level of connotative semiotics. The author says in an interview: "What interested me most was also that impact, that moment where there is going to be a birth with that fantasy of modernity and progress in Mexico, and violence always gets in between" (Cuarón, 2018b, min. 18:34-18:54). And the ideological connotation or the metaselotic level of meaning reveals the photographic message of the film: a denunciation of the abortive gaze of the state towards its youth and the incidence in the maternity-childhood continuity, but also the failure of the bourgeois family. The sea not only reveals to Cleo her decision, it also reveals to the family her image, they exist without being a nuclear model and the model of the single mother working as a family without a father was already a reality since the previous century. This is done against the background of a wedding plan, because even if it fails, that same bourgeois dream continues. The boy's anecdote about students throwing balloons with water that killed them points to the motherhood-childhood continuity from the beginning of the film. The response to the father who rejects his offspring is a brood that rejects the father. The story is connoted with Cleo's body and her terminated pregnancy; when they return home, the books of the absent father remain, that is, after the social abortion the memory of the student movement remains in the pages of the survivors, critics and memories: the textual body of that conscious childhood that was aborted.

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