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Public memory and the contemporary epideictic genre: Death notices devoted to Jorge R. Videla

Summary

The article draws on contributions from the old and new rhetoric to explore the relationship between the epideictic genre and the construction of public memory. It analyzes the death notices dedicated to the former dictator and their controversial relationship with a hegemonic memory that condemns Argentina's last military dictatorship of the twentieth century. To this end, it explores what the author call rhetorical-argumentative memory, that is, the recycling and reformulation of previously used persuasive strategies in a new situation.

Key words

public memory, Jorge R. Videla, epideictic genre, Argentina

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Public memory and the contemporary epideictic genre: Death notices devoted to Jorge R. Videla

On May 17, 2013, Jorge Rafael Videla died in prison while serving a life sentence for crimes against humanity. The first president of Argentina's last military dictatorship, which lasted from 1976 to 1983. Videla used state terrorism, illegal detention and forced disappearances to combat guerrilla groups in Argentina and stamp out all opposition to his military regime. However, from the day after Videla's death, the conservative Argentine daily *La Nación* published a series of death notices from May 17 until May 24 containing tributes to the dead man and, in particular, praising his part in the illegal suppression of guerrillas.

In this paper, I show how these notices were involved in the development of the public memory of the last military dictatorship in Argentina in a controversial relationship (Amossy 2011) with the human rights policy implemented by Presidents Néstor Kirchner¹ and Cristina Fernández de Kirchner² and their version of the political violence that gripped the country during the 1970s. Building on Casey's (2004) and Vivian's (2004, 2010) ideas on the epideictic genre of public memory, I consider obituaries as a contemporary variant of the same oratory genre. In particular, I analyze how the discourses studied here deviate from the conventions of the epideictic genre, which tends to avoid controversy and is based on values or actions that everyone admits (Aristotle, *Ret I* 9, 1368; Lausberg 1998; Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca 1950, 1963; Pernot 2005). Moreover, I emphasize that these funeral notices repeat certain topics that I call the "rhetorical-argumentative memory of coups" in my research on discourses supporting military coups d'état in Argentina, (Vitale 2009, 2012, forthcoming).³

Accordingly, I will comment on those characteristics attributed to the epideictic genre and its relation to the construction of public memory and I will discuss the

1. Néstor Kirchner (1950-2010) was president of Argentina from 2003 to 2007. He came to power as head of the Victory Front, an electoral alliance which included sectors of the Justicialist Party, Radical Civic Union, the Communist Party and the Humanist Party, among others.

2. Cristina Fernández de Kirchner was elected president by the same coalition that led her husband to power the Victory Front. Her first term was from 2007 to 2011; her second term began in 2011 and is due to end in 2015.

3. During the twentieth century, the Argentine Armed Forces carried out six coups d'état: in 1930, 1943, 1955, 1962, 1966 and 1976.

notion of rhetorical-argumentative memory before examining the death notices devoted to Videla and drawing some overall conclusions.

Epidictic and public memory

As is widely known, Aristotle claims in *On Rhetoric* that the epideictic genre places the listener in the role of a spectator making value judgments. What is judged is the speaker's power of oratory although some commentators on Aristotle include the value of the thing or person praised or criticized (Ruelle 2010). Aristotle holds amplification to be the most suitable device for epideictic rhetoric (*Ret.* I 9, 1368) because this public speaking genre presents deeds admitted by the whole community. All that is needed is to give them greatness and moral justification. Consequently, epideictic is related implicitly to that which binds a community together without generating controversy since, by definition, controversies are divisive. Aristotle also makes it clear that we must consider who is to be the audience of such tributes because, as Socrates said, it is not difficult to praise the Athenians to the Athenians, but we should say what is considered honorable by each people, as if it were really true. This advice is taken up by Quintilian, who says that an orator will be more persuasive if he praises what his audience admires in his subject. In other words, epideictic discourse affirms a judgment the audience has already made before hearing the speaker (*Orat. Inst.* III, 7, 3) and, in this sense, it tends not to generate controversy.

In his celebrated study on the rhetoric of praise in the Greco-Roman world, Pernot (1993) focuses on attempts to classify or distinguish between rhetorical genres in Thucydides, Plato, Alcidas and Isocrates. Even before Aristotle divided public speech into deliberative, judicial and epideictic discourse, in which praise (and blame) form the third species, Isocrates had attempted to introduce a symmetrical tripartite system. However, Aristotle's symmetry is more apparent than real, for the listeners – Pernot argues – do not judge whether the object of praise possesses a particular virtue or quality; rather, they are spectators who limit themselves to assessing the speaker's talent and the quality of his discourse.

In a previous article discussing the *topoi* of praise listed by the rhetorician Ménandros, Pernot (1986) claimed that praise was a social rite of celebration of all the powers that control social life. Returning to this notion in his book *Rhetoric in Antiquity*, he states that in the society of Imperial Rome the epideictic speech was a social ritual that affirmed the values of the community and cultivated consensus and loyalty to established concepts and models. In this sense, Pernot (2005) proposes that praise could also create a bogus unanimity serving to underpin the dominant ideology and stifle any opposition to it.

Lausberg (1998) notes in a similar way to Pernot (1993) that the epideictic alternatives of praise and blame are much less likely to appear together than the deliberative alternatives of advice and warning, or the judicial alternatives of accusation and defense. A solemn assembly that permits a qualified speaker to praise somebody will prevent a second speaker taking the floor to criticize that same person. Lausberg adds that unlike the deliberative and judicial genres, which attempt to change a situation in a practical manner, the epideictic orator seeks to add his stamp of approval to a presumably permanent state of affairs.

Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca in *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation* (1969) and in their article “Logique et rhétorique” (1950) also consider a communion of shared values and an absence of controversy to be a fundamental characteristic of epideictic discourse. The *Treatise* states that a speaker attempts to create through this genre a communion around certain values recognized by the audience and therefore the speaker is preferably someone who upholds traditional social values, values learned during childhood, and not new or revolutionary values that give rise to controversies and disputes.⁴ But Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca reject the notion of epideictic as a mere show - something detached from action and akin to literature - and claim that it forms an essential part of the art of persuasion. Indeed, the argumentative purpose of epideictic discourse is to increase adherence to certain values which may not be questioned when examined in isolation, but which may not necessarily prevail over other conflicting values. Precisely for this reason the epideictic genre makes us more inclined to act in a certain way. In “Logique et rhétorique,” Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca point out that the deliberative and judicial genres assumed an adversary and so a contest aimed at obtaining a decision on a controversial issue. In these cases the use of rhetoric was justified by uncertainty and lack of knowledge. Their problem is to understand the epideictic genre, which dealt with cast-iron certainties that no opponent disputed. The ancients, they argue, considered that epideictic was focused on value judgments which people supported with varying degrees of intensity. Thus, it was always important to strengthen support for these shared values and restore a communion around them. They also emphasize that even if the community was not faced with an immediate choice, it was always engaged in virtual decision-making. Therefore, they concede that the epideictic orator, by striving to defend certain values and possibly confer a higher status on them within a hierarchy of values, was attempting to forestall future opposition.

More recently, starting from his own reflections on the memory of the victims of the September 11 terrorist attack in the United States, Casey (2004) has

4. McComiskey (2002 p. 92) revisits the epideictic genre from a neo-sophistic rhetoric and takes a different approach: “Epideictic rhetoric does not always represent dominant values; in subcultural contexts, the possibility of promoting subversive values always exists”.

emphasized the importance of epideictic in the construction of what he calls public memory, a type of memory he distinguishes from individual, social and collective memory. Individual memory is idiosyncratic and personal although it is never quite separate from the other forms of memory. Social memory is shared by those who are already related, either by ties of kinship, geographical proximity or commitment to a common project. Collective memory is a plural memory of an event by people who have no prior ties but recall the same (astonishing) event, each in their own way. Public memory, as the name implies, is public and as such is subject to debate and review. It sets out to build public identities and establishes a connection between past and future time involving commemoration rituals in what Pierre Nora (1989) calls *places of memory* - public squares, monuments, tombs – together with texts promoting common shared topics, so that public memory is a continuous horizon and an encompassing presence that refers to the past in order to ensure future memory. In this sense, the epideictic genre helps preserve memories and the remembrance of the past in order to inspire present actions that can be imitated in the future.

A similar approach to epideictic genre with regard to public memory is found in Vivian (2006, 2010). Referring to the commemoration of the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, Vivian argues that this oratory genre selects and organizes public memories in order to shape perceptions of collective values and commitments that will serve future deliberative agendas. He notes that these memories provide models for political action.

For my part, I argue that public memory is built on what I call rhetorical-argumentative memory – that is, the return and reformulation in a new context of persuasive strategies already used in the past to rally people around an issue. Among these strategies, I include topics in the sense of elements belonging to the *doxa* - elements which a particular social group considers to be obvious and beyond dispute.⁵ In fact, the death notices dedicated to Videla in 2013 repeated topics used to justify successive military coups in Argentina during the period 1930-1976.

The funeral notices devoted to Videla

The funeral notices devoted to Jorge Rafael Videla and published by *La Nación* newspaper praise the dead man and construct him – in sharp contrast to the condemnatory nature of hegemonic public discourse in Argentina - as a victim of the human rights policies implemented by the government of Nestor Kirchner and his wife, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, who began her second presidential

5. In my study (in press) of coup speeches in Argentina, I examine not only topics but also ethos and the construction of the past as dimensions of argumentative rhetoric-memories. See Vitale (forthcoming).

term in 2011. These notices thus constitute an affront to the critical public memory of state terrorism promoted chiefly by the Kirchner governments and an implicit reproach to Kirchnerism itself as a political movement.

Videla had already been sentenced to life imprisonment under President Raúl Alfonsín, the first democratically elected president to take office after the 1976-1983 military dictatorship. However, Videla was pardoned in 1989 under the neo-liberal government of Carlos Menem. The Full Stop and Due Obedience laws passed by Alfonsín under pressure from a still powerful military apparatus had halted the prosecution of other military repressors. However, on September 2, 2003, Néstor Kirchner overturned both laws, allowing these cases to be reopened. In 2007, the Supreme Court overturned the pardon granted by Menem to Videla as unconstitutional.

In 2010, Videla was sentenced to life imprisonment for shooting 33 political prisoners after a simulated escape. Shortly before his death, this sentence was unified with another for the theft and systematic concealment of babies whose mothers were in clandestine detention centers. The babies were given in illegal adoptions to military families and others associated with the regime. When he died, Videla was being tried in a federal court together with more than 20 other people accused of human rights violations in the context of Operation Condor (Dinges 2004) - an intelligence network created by six Latin American dictatorships in the 1970s to eliminate political opponents in the region.

Thus it was that one of the topoi of the epideictic genre mentioned by Pernot takes center stage in these funeral notices defending Videla: the circumstances of his death. The notices refer to “General Videla, unjustly deprived of liberty” (May 19), “His death in prison” (May 19) and “A worthy patriot who protected us and died in shameful captivity” (May 20); another notice says: “God reward him for suffering such unjust captivity” (May 19) while yet another states: “He died in unjust captivity” (May 19). The word “captivity” (Spanish “cautiverio”) is clearly negative, and indeed the first meaning given in the Royal Spanish Academy dictionary is: “Deprivation of liberty at the hands of an enemy.” The virtues of dignity and patriotism, on the other hand, are used to praise the deceased, characterizing him as a victim of injustice. This notion of injustice is clearly stated in another notice that said:

He died in unlawful imprisonment. He had been entitled to release on parole for many years but the appeal chamber had blocked his release since November 2012. For ideological reasons alone. True revenge on the symbol of the war against unpatriotic subversion. His trusted defender bids him farewell with great sadness at the lack of justice in our country. (May 20)

Videla’s defender called his sentence “true revenge,” thus condemning what the

government and most of Argentine society consider to be an act of justice. In this case, the death notice is tinged with judicial discourse and its chain of reasoning leads to the conclusion that there is lack of justice in Argentina.

Videla's defender positions himself as non-ideological, blaming Videla's enemies for being swayed by ideology. Nevertheless, he makes his assessment from an ideological position that historians call the National Security Doctrine (Garcia, 1991). This doctrine, disseminated throughout the region from the 1950's onwards by the US Army School of the Americas, inspired a series of military coups in Latin American. Under this doctrine, the largest military threat in the Third World was revolutionary war. This was understood to mean any organized initiative strong enough to challenge state policies, initiatives automatically branded as "Communist infiltration." The term "unpatriotic subversion" used by the Videla's defender, is typical of this doctrine and implicitly portrays the armed forces as defenders of the Fatherland.

This Doctrine reappears in other funeral notices which appeal to the most important epideictic topos, the person's deeds which - as Pernot points out - provide evidence or proof of virtue. Thus, the notices state that Videla "led the internal revolutionary war against subversive and unpatriotic terrorism (May 19)." It was Videla "Who courageously assumed the defense of our country" (May 19) and "Who courageously took great responsibility and served his country at great personal risk" (May 19). He was "the brave soldier who fought to free us from the scourge of violent Marxist Leninists who had hijacked peace on our native soil" (May 23). Here, personal deeds are linked to secondary qualities derived from one of the cardinal virtues, courage, which is characteristic of wartime.

These statements restate a topic I call "the danger of social revolution" (Vitale forthcoming), which integrated the rhetorical-argumentative memory of coups in Argentina. Used to support successive coups during the period 1930-1976, it represented the armed forces as a deterrent to the Marxist threat allegedly neglected or promoted by the governments which the military had overthrown.

Another notice represents Videla as "He who offered his life for God and Country" (May 19). In this case, the writer evokes another component of the National Security Doctrine, one that identifies the military as defenders of the "Western and Christian" world against godless Marxism. In Argentina, this topic refers to what I call the "myth of the Catholic nation,"⁶ an ultra-conservative ideological construction that blurs the boundaries between earthly and heavenly power, representing the military as guardians of the Christian essence of Argentina nation. This myth, which formed part of the rhetorical-argumentative memory of

6. I took the term from historians Loris Zanatta and Roberto Di Stefano (2000), who consider the myth of the Catholic nation to be the criterion of legitimacy of a government seeking the common good according to the principles of Christian doctrine, unlike liberalism, which takes a popular mandate obtained in free elections as its criterion.

coups, was used to legitimize a succession of military coups in Argentina after 1930 (Vitale 2009).

In the hegemonic public memory of the 1970s, however, Videla's allegedly heroic deeds are crimes against humanity, an interpretation confirmed by the courts which sentenced him to life imprisonment. Hence the highly controversial nature of these death notices, which aim to construct a public memory of Argentina's recent past in direct opposition to the dominant one.

As Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) point out, the lexical choices and classifications of ordinary language always have an argumentative function. This is particularly true of the referential expressions used to refer to Videla in these death notices. In addition to those already cited above, we find: "The worthy patriot" (May 19), "A patriot" (May 20), "A dignified and courageous man" (May 20), "The person who protected us" (May 19), "Dear compatriot and friend" (May 19) and "longtime friend" (May 20). In these cases the topos of character, implicit in the virtues of patriotism, bravery and dignity, is combined with the topos of fortune, such as having friends (Pernot, 1986). "The person who protected us" is based on the topos of deeds and refers to the action of protecting the Fatherland already mentioned in other death notices, thus legitimizing the military's illegal repression as a defense or protection against those who, by implication, initiated the violence: the guerrilla organizations.

But these death notices, as I have already pointed out, are also intended as a rebuke to the Kirchner governments - and not only because of its human rights policies. Thus, one notice referring to Videla as "The former President who died in Republican poverty" (May 19), not only recasts the former dictator as a Republican ruler, but hints that, unlike the current President of Argentina, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, Videla was not corrupt. This strategy of rejecting the dominant representation of Videla as dictator is repeated in the notice that says: "The death of former President coincides with the demise of the Republic" (May 19), where a typical epideictic rhetorical figure, prosopopoeia, is used to suggest that the government of Cristina Kirchner is not Republican.

These notices share a certain interdiscursive relationship with the discourse of the political opposition, who criticize the Kirchner governments, among other things, for being corrupt, for not respecting the independence of the judiciary as they are supposed to do in a republic and for monopolizing public broadcasting and using it to their own advantage.

The same strategy is repeated in the notice that addresses Videla directly, saying: "Thank you for your commitment to the democratic community" (May 20). Addressed to a former dictator and therefore well-nigh unintelligible to anyone unacquainted with Argentine history, this phrase suggests a topic that once

characterized the rhetorical argumentative memory essential to Argentine coup speeches: that of the military overthrowing a civilian government that did not respect democracy or the Constitution in order to restore constitutional democracy as soon as possible (Vitale 2009).

The hegemonic public memory constructed in Argentina after the country's definitive return to democracy in 1983 has condemned such discourses and their underlying ideology. It is true that the death notice is a minor genre. However, these epideictics, published in one of Argentina's most important newspapers in 2013, are proof that this ideology, although completely residual (Williams 1977), is still alive among in some sectors of Argentine society.

Finally, I wish to draw attention to the speech act of gratitude to Videla in the above statement. This is no isolated occurrence: in fact, these death notices contain a remarkably large number of thanks. Thus we find: "Thank you for defending the homeland" (May 19) "Thanks for our nation" (May 20) , "Thank you for defending the homeland from unpatriotic subversion" (May 19) "Thank you for defending us from subversion " (May 20) , "Juan and Bernardo Leucke will be eternally grateful for the victory in the fight against subversion" (May 23), "Thanking you for protecting our lives " (May 19), "Thank you, Lieutenant General " (May 19) " Thank you Mr. former President Videla" (May 20). It is important to point out that any reference to Videla as "General" or "Lieutenant General" ignores the fact that he was stripped of his military rank when tried in 1985 during President Alfonsín's government.

Austin (1962) classifies the verb "thank", which explicitly signals its corresponding speech act, within a group of verbs he calls behabitives. These relate to attitudes and social behavior (Lecture XII) and include the verbs "praise" and "reprove," the basic speech acts of the epideictic genre. Notably, however, Austin also links "thank" to what he calls verdictive speech acts because thanking can imply a verdict about the value or character of someone or something (1962). In this connection, Searle (1969) considered that the act of thanking assumes that the listener or recipient performed an act in the past that benefited the speaker.

So, it can be assumed that all those who thank Videla have benefited from his past actions. But one notice goes further than the others in saying: "Thank you for the way you protected us from subversive terrorism." I say it goes further than the others because it refers to the "way" in which Videla protected "us" from what the terminology of National Security Doctrine describes as "subversive terrorism." This "way" can only refer to a doxic knowledge, shared by everybody in Argentina, that not only the guerrillas but anyone who opposed the military dictatorship first was "disappeared" into a clandestine detention center and then

drugged and thrown into the sea from a so-called “death flight.”⁷

Conclusions

I would like to emphasize that by praising the dead man, the death notices announcing the passing of Jorge Rafael Videla disrupt the harmony that is the norm in this epideictic genre. They are highly controversial not because they are aggressive but because they are radically irreconcilable (Amossy 2011) with the hegemonic view in Argentina of Videla and State Terrorism. By opposing the hegemonic public memory which condemns the dictatorship’s acts of repression, they acquire the controversial nature of the deliberative genre. These death notices are clearly political in that in any other section of *La Nación* or of any other Argentine newspaper for that matter, such discourses would be considered as incitements to criminal acts. Only the marginal nature of this newspaper genre and its pragmatic rule, respect for the dead, make it possible to publish death notices praising the actions of Videla in the 1970s and to revive topics that once formed part of Argentina’s rhetorical-argumentative memory of coups.

Quintilian reminds us (*Orat. Inst.* III, 7, 4) that epideictic discourse praises what orators in the deliberative genre advise and Pernot (1993) argues that the role of epideictic discourse is exhortative and ideological. But the death notices commented on in this article transcend what Perelman, in his texts on justice, calls reasonable – in other words, they overstep the bounds of consensus in Argentine society and became embroiled in what Perelman calls the unreasonable, that which is unacceptable and exceeds the threshold of tolerance imposed by a respect for pluralism (Amossy 2012). There are very real disagreements in Argentina about the politics of memory with regard to the 1970s as well as the trials of military repressors reopened under the Kirchner governments. However, since the return to democracy in 1983 there has been a consensus that limits such dissent. With respect to human rights crimes, including forced disappearances, torture, murders and military coups, this consensus is crystallized in a formula that breaks with the past and is in full force in Argentine society: NEVER AGAIN.

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7. “Death flights” were used by the last military dictatorship, which ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983, to kill illegal detainees; the victims were thrown alive from military aircraft into the River Plate and the Atlantic Ocean. See Verbitsky (1996).

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