

ROCK CONCERTS, MEMORY, AND HUMAN RIGHTS

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Introduction

This presentation is about rock concerts, political memory, and human rights in post-dictatorial Argentina. My interest is to explore the role that popular music, rock in particular, plays in the construction, transmission, and reconstruction of memories of a military dictatorship (1976-83) that eliminated political dissidents through kidnappings, torture, killings, and the disappearance of an estimated 30,000 persons. I focus here on one of the most fascinating communication experiences of the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo (mothers of disappeared people): a rock concert at a soccer stadium celebrating the 20th anniversary of their struggle, as part of their campaign to reach young people and create a forum for memory and human rights activism.

Some major questions guide my inquiry: What is the relevance of popular music in the process by which young people reconstruct their representations of a dictatorship they did not live through, their “postmemories” (Hirsch, 1999)? How do the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo capitalize on the popularity and potential for convocation of rock to develop a communication strategy to build links with the post-dictatorship generation? Can human rights rock concerts be considered *lieux de mémoire* (Nora, 1989) that codify and symbolize the dictatorship? I have only partial answers to these questions, rather see this as a first draft of a new research project. But I am convinced that we cannot understand how young Argentineans are remembering the dictatorship without incorporating popular music in the research agenda. As I will show, music “brings back” the dictatorship; it is an important communication medium, a [hi]story teller, and an information source by which young people were learning about this past.

I first provide a brief background of the political relevance of popular music. Second, I discuss the links of the Mothers with the music scene and their anniversary concert. I comment on the bands that performed, their names, their songs’ titles, and the messages their lyrics

transmit. Third, I analyze young people's opinions about music as [hi]story teller and the effectiveness of the Mothers' "rock strategy." I draw this information from interviews conducted in 1998.¹

Popular Music, Politics, and Memory

Popular music is extremely relevant for studying cultural, political, and social processes in Latin America. Music is a political tool and an influential communication medium. A few examples suffice to illustrate this.² The *Nueva Canción* movement that emerged in the turbulent 1960s and 1970s spread a wave of protest and denunciations, demanded social justice, and celebrated revolutionary struggles. Oppressive conditions, agrarian reform, calls for unity among workers and students, or celebrations of guerilla warfare were some of the issues those songs addressed. In Cuba, the *Nueva Trova* encouraged a revolutionary consciousness and spirit. In revolutionary Nicaragua, women resorted to music to promote women's liberation. Dictators have also used music, as when Trujillo manipulated the popularity of the *merengue* in the Dominican Republic to promote his vision of nationalism. And recent works look into the intertwining of music with race and nationhood in Colombia, with Puerto Rican cultural identity, or with the *zapatista* uprising, political corruption, and drug trafficking in Mexico.³

In Argentina, the *rock nacional* has always been immersed in the social reality—"rock" is popularly used to include a variety of musical currents such as hip-hop, heavy metal, rap, or punk. It emerged in the 1960s and underwent different phases during the dictatorship. At the beginning, rock concerts were one of the few public gatherings in which young people could participate without risking repression. It almost vanished during the terror's worst times—absolute censorship, musicians forced into exile, repression in concerts. It then reemerged during the Malvinas/Falkland war when, as a "vindication" of national culture, only music with lyrics in Spanish was allowed to fill the airwaves. But, while promoted by the dictatorship, political rock

became a realm of resistance and opposition and achieved the category of new social movement.⁴

But which roles is *rock nacional* playing in the transmission of society's memories of the dictatorship? If collective remembering is a dynamic process in which groups battle for the acceptance of different historical versions, where does rock stand?⁵ Is rock an actor or a spectator? How is rock accepting or challenging a political environment characterized by discourses of reconciliation that encourage "forgive and forget"?⁶ We know very little about this and what follows may help to narrow this gap in research.

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Music Scene

For over two decades, the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo developed a slew of imaginative, low to-no-cost communication strategies to challenge the dictatorship, pressure for accountability throughout the democratization process, and keep the memories of the terror alive. These tactics have ranged from writing messages on money bills to creating an open university, including street demonstrations, a bookstore, publications, and radio programs. We can say that the Mothers have become "Memory Women" by their absolute commitment to continue to appeal for justice, condemn impunity, demand punishment for the culprits and keep non-distorted historical records about the country's recent past and present.⁷

The diversity of the Mothers' communication campaigns includes solid links with the music scene. While the Mothers have always had politically committed musicians among their supporters, there was a key event that exposed their struggle to a more massive audience. It was 1987 and Sting invited them to assist to his sold-out concert at a giant stadium in Buenos Aires. While he was singing "They dance alone" (symbolizing repression throughout the Americas) he invited the Mothers to march in the stage. This was the first time that a popular musician paid

such homage to the Mothers and Sting's gesture opened a significant space in a forum of non-activist music fans.

Over the years, the Mothers have continued to broaden and strengthen their networks with musicians, both with local groups and international artists visiting Argentina. They have welcomed the musicians who have approached them and appreciate their solidarity and support. They assist to concerts, organize musical events, and do not hesitate to proclaim how good they feel in the company of the "*roqueros*." Moreover, the Mothers have great faith in young people, take them very seriously, and see music as an important communication tool to build connections with the younger generation.

The 20th Anniversary Concert

The concert took place in Buenos Aires, in October 1997, at the soccer stadium of Ferrocarril Oeste. The groups that participated belong to the counter-culture musical scene and most of the bands are stars of what is often labeled as *rock barrial* ("neighborhood rock") to indicate their marginal origins. We are talking of groups that are aware of the credentials their origins give them, perceive that their audience do not see them as distant stars but rather as one of them, and believe that the public identifies with those musicians who do not disappointed it. For instance, these groups may avoid co-optation by refusing to participate in free concerts organized by the government or the sponsorship of certain corporations. Most of them try to play in places where their public can afford to pay the ticket. Thus, a group may grow as a band but keep on charging the same amount for their concert tickets.⁸ Moreover, some of the performers used to live in shantytowns and continue to keep strong links with these communities, even after achieving commercial success.

We are also talking of politically committed groups that are extremely critical of the political situation. However, even when their music has a political goal, these musicians vary in their

assessment of its power to generate change. One musician may argue that it would be “naïve and prophetic” to think that if one writes a song against [torturer] Astiz people would be more politically aware (*Los Caballeros de la Quema*).⁹ Another may allege that their lyrics are straightforward denunciations, hoping that they would mobilize something inside those who listen to them (*Todos tus Muertos*).¹⁰

About the Groups’ Names, their Songs’ Titles, and their Lyrics

Several of the groups that participated have names loaded of political meaning and many of the themes performed were explicitly political. In this paper, political means references to the dictatorship and its aftermath, past and present human rights abuses, and/or issues of impunity, accountability, and memory. I should point that connotations to these issues are also present in groups that were not part of this concert, which is quite revealing of how repression is a common theme among young people—e.g., bands with names such as *Actitud Sospechosa* (“Suspicious attitude”), *Cadáveres* (“Corpses”), or *Cadena Perpetua* (“Life Term”).

So let me now comment on a few of the groups’ names, their songs’ titles, and messages conveyed by their lyrics—analyzing all the groups that participated is beyond the scope of this presentation. A word of caution is due here regarding the language of the *rock nacional*: it is street language, of a popular, combative, clandestine and marginal character, rooted in *lunfardo* (Buenos Aires’ slang, closely linked to tango), Brazilian expressions, the language of jails, and the language of drugs.¹¹ My translation, thus, can only partially capture its meaning.

Actitud Maria Marta is a hip-hop rap group with a duo of female vocalists, one of whom is daughter of a disappeared person. Most of their songs relate to the repression and address this subject in a very direct style. One of their most famous songs is “Child of a disappeared,” which calls for the public uncovering of torturers and assassins benefiting from amnesties—“I want to recognize you among the people”—and denounces society’s pretense of ignorance during the

terror—“And the idiots who only today see the truth and pretend to sell us their evil innocence;”
“I hate the guilty and the indifferent.”

This group performed the theme “Resigned state,” whose lyrics talk about the past repression and the need to remember, and are a strong indictment to society’s indifference: “It hits me all the blood that was spilled here/ but this is not a burden for you/ your eyes are dry, resigned state/ the misery next to you doesn’t bother you.” [...] “With my hate, a hate to which I am grateful.” [...] “Because I don’t forget anything.”¹²

Todos tus Muertos (“All Your Dead”). This group’s name connotes the massacre that took place in the country, may even imply that the dead belong to the whole society, that we all have to see this past as “our problem.” They performed the song “*Chupadero*,” which in the jargon of the years of terror defined a clandestine site where people were brutally tortured and usually killed. “*Chupar*,” literally “to suck,” was the verb to explain that a person had been kidnapped or disappeared, “*chupadero*” was the noun, and “*chupada/o*” the adjective implying that someone was “detained,” without any official record of her whereabouts.

The song makes references to the torture chambers of the dictatorship and opens by pointing to its historical relevance: “Now a song that speaks of Argentine history,/ of our history, of your history.” Its chorus sings: “parody, sham, hoax, pillars of the system, which put a scheme in your mind/ jail made you harsh/ exile made you bitter.”¹³ This both blames an unfair social system based on deceit and addresses the long-term effects of the repression on those who survived it, which indirectly refers to the legacy of the terror in the whole society. At another point, the lyrics warn about the dangers of docility: “there is no salvation for a submissive people.”¹⁴ This need for people to stand by their rights is a contemporary vindication of activism in the aftermath of a campaign that brutally wiped out political opposition.

Bersuit Vergarabat.¹⁵ This group performed “The revenge of the [poor people] death,” which talks about poor people, now death, dancing in the cemetery. Their sensual dance is subject to the threat of torture because “the modified moral leagues are once again suggesting morals/ they desecrated graves to torture us/ and the *picana* (electric prod) couldn’t burn because it moves ...” This is followed by the chorus about “the swinging bottom moving back and forth,” which can refer both to the bodies/corpses or the *picana*.¹⁶

The links with the repression are very clear. We can think about the clandestine mass graves where the military dumped thousands of mutilated and tortured bodies. But there are also warnings of current threats of torture, of the use of the *picana* to suppress dissent in the name of arbitrarily imposed values. The song closes by cynically summarizing the labels society assigns people: “national hero he who kills/ saint he who doesn’t enjoy,/ macho he who doesn’t feel,/ queer he who cries,/ discreet he who doesn’t laugh,/ decent he who doesn’t dance,/ and it is good he who obeys,/ and subversive he who cannot take it.”¹⁷ We see here allusions to a totalitarian political environment, similar to the days of terror when those who did not comply with the rules of the [military] game were “subversives” to be eliminated, and torturers and assassins were praised as brave men.

There were also references to an older and broader memory in groups’ names and lyrics dealing with the indigenous peoples of the Americas and/or Latin America. For example, one of the most popular “trash-hardcore-metal” groups is the trio *A.N.I.M.A.L.*, an acronym that stands for *Acosados Nuestros Indios Murieron al Luchar* (Our Harassed Indians Died Fighting) and is a veritable lesson in alternative history in a country where those who massacred indigenous communities are national heroes. Their name is consistent with their music, whose lyrics speak about the killings and the stealing of lands to the indigenous peoples, and with their support to indigenous causes. Their song’s title was the explicit “Fuck you” (in English in the original).

The theme performed by the group *Attaque 77* was “America,” a denunciation of contemporary conditions of oppression throughout the Americas. There are mentions to spilled blood and sweat and warnings that there is a limit to how much a people can take: “What are you going to do?/ Up to which point are you going to push us?/ Patience is not eternal, you don’t fall around with the people.”¹⁸ The lack of patience is accompanied by a commitment to recuperate what was taken away from the people: “We will take all that you promised/ and never delivered/ misery oppresses, ambition corrupts/ give us back our dignity now.”¹⁹

I trust that this brief commentary on some of the performers and their songs gives an idea of the concert’s atmosphere. However, the big question is what is the connection of the public with this kind of music and what do young people think about it.

Young People’s Opinions About Music as [Hi]story-Teller

I had several conversations with young people in which there were frequent references to music as [hi]story teller, as an influential communication medium through which they were learning about the dictatorship, revealing the existence of an alternative public sphere created around concerts and recordings where this past is present.²⁰ They told me that counter-culture music focused on the issues that were currently affecting the younger generation but also on the dictatorship and its aftermath. Thus, by addressing contemporary violence—a subject with which most young people can identify—these songs help in establishing links between the present and the past, and in understanding the level of the past repression. Many interviewees highlighted the informative role that music plays in transmitting historical information and noted how they were very receptive to these messages: “Sometimes you learn through musical groups that play themes about the coup d’état and tell you what went on” (“Nelson”). “Music gets to you; you learn through it, even if it is not obvious. It stays with you” (“Pablo”).

I heard the story of a ten-year old kid who wears a “Che” T-shirt because the popular group *La Renga* sings a song that says “A flag that reads Che Guevara/ a pair or rock’n rolls/ and a joint to smoke”²¹—words undoubtedly loaded with symbolism from the 60s and 70s: the revolution, rock, dope. And it seems that the events of the dictatorship are present in many songs. A young woman, who even sang me some of the lyrics while sitting at a coffee shop, talked of songs about the Malvinas/Falklands War, the Soccer World Cup of 1978, and the Presidential Pardons to the military juntas. She commented on lyrics that talk of fear and terror during the repression being masked by the promoted euphoria around the soccer championship, or of the cruelty of a dictatorship who sent young soldiers to die fighting against Britain.²²

Young People’s Opinions About Groups Participating in the Concert

While all the groups that performed were extremely popular among the young crowd, I want to share here comments about a couple of them that illustrate some of the main arguments about popular music and memories of the dictatorship.

I heard many opinions about *Actitud María Marta*, ranging from appreciation of their directness in conveying their political message to criticisms of the vulgarity of their language, including that they are too strong, even violent. Some comments praised the quality of their music and noted how the group turns concerts into forums to discuss human rights concerns:

The songs are very strong. If you listen to them you will hear anything. In their album’s cover there is a photo of the military junta members with feces in between. They criticize the military. It’s not humor, it’s strong, hard [...]. They do good songs and good music. [...] In their concerts, they usually speak about the issues before singing, kind of vulgar but it is true. (“Marcelo”)

Other opinions, even sympathetic to the group, claimed that it is full of hate and anger—emotions that some feel are rooted in the fact that one singer is a direct victim of the repression—and that the musicians manage to convey those feelings to their audience:

It's very strong music, quite violent. I heard them and it caught my attention because there is hate, anger in it. You listen to them and you fill yourself with rage, you want to go out and kill. Who knows! I think it is understandable. ("Analía")

Todos tus Muertos is another group recognized for its commitment to denounce in shocking style the dictatorship's crimes. I was told of the explicit and appalling images of the group's music videos and their value as information tools: "Their videos are very impressive. They show such things as when [the military] tortured and killed people. They show people on their knees being executed with a gunshot. These videos are something, but it's ok, they inform" ("Pablo"). These dramatizations of the repression seem to be very powerful but do not circulate widely. Apparently, the videos are mainly shown very late at night in cable channels. Moreover, the credibility of the group seems to be reinforced by the fact that its members were from a shantytown, which implies that violence is not alien to them and their knowledge is based on their experiences: "The musicians of *Todos tus Muertos* came from a shantytown. They started playing there. That's where they lived and their music allowed them to cross over, to leave that. So they must know a lot" ("Pablo").

These comments illustrate an appreciation of musicians as organic intellectuals, which I perceived in several of the young people with whom I talked. The authority of the message seems to be based on the credentials that their origins and experiences grant to their authors and performers—e.g., being born in shantytowns or having disappeared relatives.

Young People's Opinions About the Mothers' "Rock Strategy"

So, how do young people assess the Mothers' use of music to build bridges with the younger generation? I found different appraisals on their concerts' efficacy—something that applies to all the events of what is called "Samaritan rock"²³ to define a global trend of concerts to benefit humanitarian causes. Some were quite skeptical and considered that, even when people listen to what the Mothers have to say, they go mainly for the music:

I don't know if everybody participates. I don't know if they all adhere to the cause. It seems that [people] go for the music rather than to support the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo. I believe that the convocation has a relative value. ("Analía")

But other opinions implied that people who go to human rights concerts support the cause. Furthermore, these events might act as memory activators, which some young people thought was important in a society where people are encouraged not to think about that past and are constantly being distracted by superficialities:

I think that the majority adheres to the concerts' goals. Besides, I believe that [concerts] are organized so people won't forget about those things. Although people don't care that much, everything is done so people won't think. There are the fashions, taking care of your body, clothes and all that. ("Silvia")

Along the same lines, I heard comments suggesting that some young people felt that they had been denied information about this historical period. Therefore the relevance of these events in filling this gap of ignorance:

People in power are not very interested in young people knowing what happened and making this past part of their own history. This is why I approve of those musical groups that speak [about what happened]. ("Alicia")

Concluding Remarks

As this overview suggests, popular music, rock in particular, is a key communication tool in keeping political memories alive, and concerts such as the Mothers' one enlarge the human rights public sphere and become a *lieu de mémoire* of the dictatorship. Let me summarize the main points illustrating this.

Browsing through the various groups that constitute the music counter-culture in Argentina is quite revealing of how the past terror is embodied in the post-dictatorship cultural production as evinced by the bands' names, songs' titles, and lyrics, their performances to benefit causes to which they adhere, and/or their public statements. This indicates the existence of a post-

dictatorial rock that keeps the spirit of resistance it showed during the terror, a *rock nacional* that manages to be political, activist, and anti-system.

Several musicians are deeply committed to keeping alive political memory and are taking care that it is transmitted to the younger generations through a medium they can relate to. Many songs seem to take very seriously their role of writing memory, often contextualizing the events of the dictatorship through connections with previous historical periods and/or the current political situation. These artists' popularity allows them to be the bearers of messages that have the potential to be listened and well received. They bring back the past in a language that does not need translation to be understood by young people. This is not about "talking heads" lecturing from a position of authority but about performers and their public establishing a dialog through music, about an audience that reproduces these messages by singing along in concerts or buying and playing these recordings.

This also suggests that we need to carefully scrutinize the apparent apathy of young people toward this past or think twice before labeling them as apolitical. Exploring the counter culture music scene may provide some answers to several questions—e.g., do young Argentines care about the traumatic events that devastated their parents' generation? Do they see this past as part of their own history? If they do, how do they approach it? Which particular issues are relevant for them? Which languages do they have to speak about it?

The Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo are well aware of the value of music to reach young people. This is why they organize these concerts. Judging from what I heard, these events seem to open significant spaces for the discussion of this past. At least, they put it on the agenda and help to build bridges between human rights activists and those who might have gone exclusively for the music. Even if segments of the public do not identify with the Mothers, they would listen to what artists they admire have to say. And we can only speculate on the inter-generational

dialogues prompted by the concert. What happens when someone learns there something related to the dictatorship and then goes home and asks questions to her elders?

As stated in my introduction, I see this presentation as a starting point to formulate new questions. Let me conclude by stressing the importance of including popular music in the research agenda of memory studies, in particular when our “research subjects” are young people. As Pierre Nora (1989) suggests that to look at the past, to write history, we need to broaden our angle of vision and explore all that codifies and represents it (a square, a coffee shop, a funeral, a generation), we need to look at music to understand the role of the media in the construction, transmission, and reconstruction of memories. And we must study this in nations around the globe that are undergoing similar processes. We need quantitative, qualitative, and comparative research to gather the empirical data required to develop theory regarding the relevance of popular music in the memory construction process with respect to violent and traumatic pasts.

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¹ As part of a larger research project (Kaiser, 2000), I interviewed 63 young people from Buenos Aires who were born during the dictatorship. Most of them belong to a wide spectrum of the middle classes, were not directly affected by the repression, and were not political activists.

² See Tumas-Serna, 1992; Pacini Hernández, 1991; Seitz, 1991. For projects of music as radical media in Europe see Downing, 2001.

³ See Flores, 2000; Wade, 2000; Wald, 2001.

⁴ Di Marco, 1997; Vila, 1985.

⁵ For theoretical concepts on collective memories see, among others, Fentress & Wickham, 1992; Halbwachs, 1992; Nora, 1989.

⁶ In spite of a truth commission and trials to the military juntas, civilian governments legalized impunity through amnesties and pardons. At the time of the concert, not a single torturer or assassin was in prison.

⁷ See Kaiser, 1993

⁸ *La Renga* is one of the groups that set standards of no co-optation. See Casciero, 1998a; rock.com.ar.

⁹ Casciero, 1998b.

¹⁰ Casciero & Salomone, 1998.

¹¹ Bustos, 1997:59-60

¹² Me pega toda la sangre que aquí fué derramada/ Pero a vos no te pesa absolutamente nada/ Tus ojos están secos, estado resignado /Ya no te molesta la miseria a tu lado. [...] Con mi odio, odio que agradezco. [...] Porque yo no olvido nada.

¹³ Parodia, farsa, burlas, pilares del sistema/ que en tu mente pusieron un esquema/ la cárcel te endureció /el exilio te amargó.

¹⁴ No hay salvación para el pueblo sumiso.

¹⁵ I ignore the roots/meaning of this name.

¹⁶ Con esta danza nos van a torturar/ Las ligas de moral modificadas/ comenzaron nuevamente a sugerir morales, / allanaron bóvedas para picarnos/ y la picana no podía picar, por que mueve.../ La cola pa'ca balanceando./ La cola pa'ya, que se mueve./ La cola pa'ca balanceando./ La cola pa'ya.

¹⁷ Prócer el que mata, santo el que no goza, / macho el que no siente, marica el que llora,/ discreto el que no se rie,/ decente el que no baila,/ y es bueno el que obedece,/ y subversivo el que no se la banca.

¹⁸ Qué es lo que van a hacer? Adónde van a llegar?/ La paciencia no es eterna, con el pueblo no se juega.

¹⁹ Tomaremos todo lo que prometieron/ Y que jamás cumplieron/ La miseria oprime, la ambición corrompe/ Devuélvannos ya nuestra dignidad.

²⁰ Interviewees cited in this paper and their age at the time of the interviews (May-August 1998): "Alicia" 19 years, "Analía" 20, "Marcelo," 21, "Nelson," 15, "Nora," 18, "Pablo," 16, and "Silvia," 20 years.

²¹ Una bandera que diga Che Guevara, un par the rocanroles y un porro para fumar.

²² These are two songs by Miguel Calamaro. The young woman is "Nora."

²³ Di Marco, 1997:37