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Víctor Vich (2015)

**Poéticas del duelo: Ensayos sobre arte, memoria  
y violencia política en el Perú**

Lima: IEP, 314 páginas.

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Victor Vich's *Poéticas del duelo* contributes to a growing body of literature addressing cultural production in post-conflict Peru, and constitutes an important reference for scholars of cultural and memory studies, sociology of culture, art history, as well as for artists, activists and citizens eager to understand the political potential of art in societies troubled by their repressive and violent past. The book is concerned with the centrality of culture and the role of artists in making decades of internal conflict intelligible. It insistently questions how cultural symbols process and mediate the past, as well as how contemporary Peruvian society relates to these symbols in a context, as the author suggests, without any consensus on how to remember violence and the complex conditions for its emergence and development.

Although the reestablishment of democracy after the fall of the dictatorship created conditions for coming to terms with the past, in addition to Alberto Fujimori's imprisonment and the important work of the Commission for Truth and Reconciliation [Comisión de la

Verdad y Reconciliación – CVR], among other factors, Vich claims that there are still irreconcilable positions with regard to this complex history, its causes and sequels for society. The author states that the response to CVR's final report revealed a stark political polarization and lack of will to foster the fundamental changes, spaces for dialogue, and critical positions within institutions, branches of power, and elite circles – impunity as well as the reproduction of the mechanisms of exclusion that were at the root of Peru's internal conflict could otherwise be prevented. Yet, many of the most revealing and chocking conclusions of the report find a more productive assimilation and synthesis in a multitude of cultural objects and practices. In fact, as Vich shows, those instances of enunciation, excluded from public discourse or that resisted symbolization within the hegemonic culture, had already been expressed and gained meaning through artistic manifestations from the beginning of the conflict. The post-dictatorial and post-conflict conjuncture has brought them to light, in part due to the work of scholars

and cultural critics of which Vich's book is an example.

Vich situates his discussion in contemporary critical theory and visual studies, proposing that we leave behind traditional ways of seeing and narrating the past to visualize the political content and transformative potential of the cultural objects he chooses to analyze. Relying mainly on textual analysis and a form of critical discourse indistinctly borrowed from contemporary thinkers such as Derrida, Žižek, Badiou, Rancière, and Butler, Vich's central contention is that the work that cultural collectives and independent artists have been creating can be understood as transformative cultural artifacts that impact society by "opening meaningful spaces of citizenship awareness and political memory" (12).

It is in the cultural sphere that he sees a fertile soil for the transformation of Peru. For Vich, artists have been making fundamental contributions to society by representing the legacy of violence and reinvigorating the debate around these issues in the public sphere. The book has a pedagogical urge, and is mainly directed to those who resist critical assessment of the country's past. However, his attempt to make the book accessible to a general audience restricts its conceptual development, which only emerges with consistency and clarity in the book's final chapter, where the notion of poetics of mourning is belatedly presented as a conceptual tool that illuminates post-conflict cultural production.

The book is organized as a series of essays following a semi-chronological progression that allows for the accumulation of details, which can help the reader understand the historical and political context of the works discussed. Yet, the book fails to provide this information in a systematic manner. The author thus relies in citing the work of anthropologist Carlos Ivan Degregori, as well as excerpts from CVR's report, to provide the reader with contextual clues when the exegesis requires it. In chapter 1, Vich discusses the changing meanings of "Flor de Retama", a Huayno or Andean folk song that tells a story of a massacre during a student demonstration perpetrated by the state in Huanta, Ayacucho. The song was banned by Fujimori's regime after it became a foundational symbol for Shining Path. Vich shows how the song has recovered its legitimate political meaning as a protest song that reveals repressed historical injustices. Using Agambé's notions of the ethics of testimony, in chapter 2, Vich analyses the work of Edilberto Jiménez, who developed a series of retables depicting massacres and scenes of sexual violence based on his own experiences and on the compilation of verbal testimonies in rural Ayacucho.

Chapter 3 is about the relationship between art, landscape, and memory. It discusses a collective land art intervention led by Ricardo Wiese, which clandestinely marked the site where a group of missing university students was found – military officers had dumped them in a common grave during the dictatorship. Photography is the topic of chapter 4, which discusses a

work by Gladys Alvarado that revisits the ruins of the Fronton penitentiary to bring back the memory of a massacre caused by the unjustified use of force by the state's repressive apparatus.

Chapter 5 analyses CVR's influential exhibition Yuyanapaq, which accompanied its final report and attempted to deconstruct hegemonic representations of the conflict. Graphic political humor as critical commentary towards the actors and developments of the conflict is the topic of chapter 6. Chapter 7 discusses three acclaimed films that address the legacies of violence. Chapter 8 analyses the articulation of performativity and political protest as an effective way to intervene in the public space and try and hold those in power accountable for corruption and crime. Chapter 9 looks at how contemporary plastic manifestations engage with the complexities of the conflict, interrupting hegemonic narratives and revealing the forces that underlie systemic violence, from armed actors to neoliberalism.

Chapter 10 and 11 deconstruct post-conflict artistic objects and practices and their re-appropriation of the gallery and the public space as a loci for critical interpellation and memory construction. These discussions set the stage for the last chapter, in which the author, borrowing mainly from LaCapra and Butler, tries to articulate an interpretative framework for art in post-conflict Peru based on the concept of "poetics of mourning". Vich shows the extent to which representations

are symbolic, opening a vital space that can contribute to the reconfiguration of citizens' common imaginary about the violent past and the nation in a post-conflict context.

Thus, the book maps out a constellation of cultural production developed in response to decades of violence, reasserting the agency of artists as critical interlocutors in society. The book opens up important questions and calls for further investigation and methodological approaches that, beyond the limits of textual exegesis, can illuminate the complex processes, tensions and antagonisms that shape artistic creation within transitioning societies. As spaces for political participation, scarce in the current global political climate, the cultural sphere offers an important space for critique and action, as Vich's book shows. It is vital, therefore, to continue to make these manifestations visible, as they call for political and civic engagement.