Percepticide and Violence Against Journalists: An Analysis of Cold War and Contemporary Methods of Silencing

On May 15th, 2017, Javier Valdez Cárdenas was shot and killed in broad daylight by unknown assailants. An award-winning and highly respected journalist, Cárdenas was known as an "essential source" for reporters covering drug trafficking and cartel violence in Mexico due to his investigative reporting on Drug Trafficking Organizations (DTOs) in the state of Sinaloa (McDonnell). His death was one of 12 confirmed murders of media workers during 2017 in Mexico, a country regarded as "one of the western hemisphere's deadliest countries for the media" by Reporters Without Borders. While many people believe that this violence targets media workers in general, I will argue that cartels target particular types of journalists, silencing some genres of media and amplifying others: these attacks create a phenomena defined as "percepticide," a manufactured inability to comprehend the violence taking place within one's community, leading to a kind of blindness where terror becomes normalized and intertwined with everyday life. The act of murdering journalists in an attempt to silence certain aspects of the media is a form of 'percepticide' designed to keep the public from receiving accurate information, shrouding crises and allowing violence to spread. In this research paper I will address the similarities and differences between Cold War and contemporary percepticide through an analysis of spectacular violence, impunity of violent actors, and the specific forms and process of terror as a method of silencing.

Attacking the "perceptual organs" of the body politic is a strategy that was implemented by many of the Latin American right-wing regimes during the Cold War, specifically targeting journalists that were investigating reports of disappearances and political violence

(Suárez-Orozco “Psychological Aspects of Terror” 492). Under Rafael Videla’s rule in Argentina, journalists were viewed “as a threat to the secrecy that was meant to surround the illegal, repressive system of disappearances, which was aimed at paralysing the nation with fear” (CONDEP 1984 Report). The Argentine dictatorship aimed to completely assimilate media organizations into the government, intending to use them as a propaganda machine to further the reach of right-wing messages while discrediting those of the “subversives.” Media was an extension of the government’s agenda, and was used to pacify the body politic by contradicting fact and claiming that reports of violence against civilians were exaggerated, misrepresented, or entirely false (CONDEP 1984 Report)).

The Argentine Dictatorship used media to promote normalcy in an increasingly absurd state of terror and panic, covering-up the atrocities committed against citizens while allowing their campaign of structural and physical violence to continue. “A veil of silence dropped over the mainstream Argentine press,” and, although “few in Argentina at the time could claim to be unaware that something was happening,” nevertheless “the print and electronic media simply did not report what was going on” (Knudson 94-95) This form of percepticide relied on controlling media and silencing political opposition while the government continued hunting down the remaining leftists and their supporters, such as “lawyers” and “psychiatrists” as well as “students, labor organizers, members of human rights groups, and other community activists” (Knudson 94). For the Argentine military, silence and terror were tools that could be exploited for political stability, and even journalists from right-wing newspapers were potential threats to the ‘proceso’ and were expelled from the country or killed (Lecture 3/01/18).

Violence against journalists was ultimately "an attempt to silence" opposing views in order to "prevent all public debate" about government activities and allow the quiet discourses of terror to seep through the population (Nunca Más). The motivation behind these attacks was to create an information deficit in which the public was left completely unaware, or too afraid to question what was going on, allowing the government to continue its activities unimpeded. However, contemporary perpetrators of violence such as cartels and gangs in Mexico rely on overtly terrifying messages meant to be publicized and openly spread through modern media. "Narcomensajes" are messages that cartels place in public spaces or scenes of violence, such as "banners hung in public places, or small signs placed over the bodies of their victims" with the deliberate intent and even expectation that their violence will be covered by the media (Kirchner par. 3). The "new" violence enacted by DTOs and gangs balances on the deafening cacophony of continuous media coverage to instill fear and perpetuate silence rather than having to silence all enemies themselves.

Whereas Argentina's form of percepticide involved silencing the media through the murder of its professionals, contemporary efforts by drug cartels in Mexico appear to be following a similar pattern with a different end goal in mind. The fundamental difference between Argentine Cold War percepticide and its modern equivalent in Mexico is that, while Videla's regime intended to silence and destroy all journalism that contradicted his agenda, violent actors in present day Mexico are not aiming to silence all media, only specific journalists that investigate their activities too closely (Booth par. 9-10). Javier Valdez Cárdenas "was a prolific chronicler of the drug wars and narco-culture in Sinaloa," and is an example of a journalist who was digging too deep into the roots of cartel connections to the government

(McDonnell). His murder served the dual purpose of silencing the individual who knew too much as well as striking fear into the larger community of investigative journalists in an attempt to perpetuate the same kind of 'veil of silence' that halted media activities under Videla's regime.

However, rather than halting coverage of violence, it appears that cartels and gangs in Mexico actually benefit more from the existence of a media that is utterly fixated on images of 'spectacular violence' than if they remained completely silent (Lecture 4/16/18). Gangs and cartels want coverage, and do not care that it is negative, because the media becomes a tool through which they can further perpetuate the system of fear that allows them to continue their activities with impunity and recruit more young men to serve as fodder in the pseudo-War on Drugs (Lecture 4/16/18 and *Cidade de Deus*). Contemporary violent actors engage in a twisted yet mutually beneficial relationship with the media: a vicious cycle forms in which violence is featured in headlines and gore reaches the front-page until it becomes the norm, which causes cartels to engage in even more spectacular violence to regain their coverage. Thus, violence is normalized and fear is absolute, and the media gets its revenue from terrified civilians desperate for information while violent actors gain international recognition and new methods of recruitment.

Media was used in Argentina to convince the public that the violence was made up, allowing fear to diffuse throughout the population without any direct connection proving the government was behind the disappearances. Cold War percepticide was based on silencing negative coverage and leaving the public unaware of government activities, whereas modern percepticide relies on amplifying sensationalist media while simultaneously silencing reporters that create content exposing the interconnectedness of government and cartel operation. This

delicate pillar upon which the international drug trade rests leads to a particular fear of reporters who are willing to brave the violence and produce discourses that condemn this relationship; reporters like Javier Valdez Cárdenas. Contemporary actors implement a different kind of percepticide because their violence is ultimately designed to spread discord and protect the current system that allows them to operate with impunity (Lecture 4/16/18). Rather than disassociating themselves from the violence, they actively pursue media coverage of the spectacular and horrific displays of savagery that will spread dread and fear.

International drug trading organizations have impunity within the system in which they operate because the entire basis of their activities is illegal, yet the government does not have the power or authority to stop them. Violence against journalists in particular almost never results in an actual prosecution; according to the Wilson center's article "La Impunidad Sigue," "99.75 percent of acts of aggression against the media end in impunity" (Olson par. 9). This "culture of systemic impunity" allows "organized crime groups and corrupt officials to silence their critics without fear of being prosecuted," and weakens the ability of media workers to actually do their jobs because they are either killed, maimed, or too scared to report the truth (Olson par. 9). Instead, journalists are left to cover the violence that occurs rather than the roots through which violence is born and perpetuated.

This information deficit allows for the proliferation and diffusion of terror throughout contemporary discourses surrounding cartel and gang violence. Mick Taussig describes terror as the discourse that "maintains the irregular rhythm of numbing and shock that constitutes the apparent normality of the abnormal created by a state of emergency" (Taussig "Terror as Usual" 4). "The flow of power connecting terror's talk with the use of disorder through assassination and

disappearing people" exists in the actions of the Argentine Dictatorship's hidden violence against leftists, as well as cartel violence against journalists in broad daylight (Taussig "Terror as Usual" 7). Terror and violence lead to "unexpected ruptures in consciousness" through which percepticide manifests itself in the confusion and turmoil that shape the everyday lives of civilians. When accurate information and investigative journalism are silenced by force, the public has no channel of knowledge through which they can obtain the truth, and remain enclosed in a barricade of fear and ignorance. Thus, silencing or controlling media sources, the spaces where knowledge of contemporary events is made, allows percepticide to exist and conquer the psyche of the body politic.

Argentina's dictatorship endeavored to use the press as an extension of the government's propaganda and positive coverage, while cartels utilize media as a tool to spread their own message that can be sinister and accusatory as long as it does not expose cartel secrets or impede their ability to prosper. While both wanted to use the media, cartels use fear to shape media coverage while dictatorships tried to put media into a stranglehold. Argentina, as a nation state, utilized percepticide to confuse and intimidate its own civilians, but their primary mission when combating the press was to ensure that negative coverage could not reach foreign governments. General Videla was expected to at least maintain some kind of veil of normality to convince other nationstates that they were complying fully with global political norms and human rights treaties. Drug cartels have no other goal than maintaining the status quo or expanding it to allow their activities to spread; therefore, publishing their violent acts serves as a tool that would have harmed the Argentine government in a way which cartels do not fear.

While Rafael Videla and his right-wing regime tried to forcibly take over media organizations to spread an ideological message and discredit accounts of state terrorism, cartels have no agenda and "do not care about social order or ideological dominance" (Lecture 4/16/18). Instead, cartels and gangs use modern media's insatiable drive for content as a weapon to enhance and highlight images of 'spectacular violence' that act as 'percepticide' by showing civilians horrifying depictions of brutality and savagery; these images serve many capacities by scaring investigative reporters into silence, terrorizing the public into numb acceptance, and normalizing scenes of unimaginable violence, all of which serve to define the 'new violence' and percepticide through cacophony (4/12/18).

In the contemporary era, percepticide can be committed through the over-exposure to images of spectacular violence and stories of mass murders that dominate tabloids and headlines. Social media platforms attempt to fill the gap that was created by the "weakening of government and traditional media in their ability to keep communities informed of the violence" (Choudhury 7). But even mediums such as Twitter and Facebook show that for civilians and civic journalists, "chronic exposure to violence as a consequence of urban warfare in Mexico" has led to "signs of desensitization in their social media postings" (7-8 Choudhury). The study further comments that there have been effects on "civic media" that originally "enabled Mexicans to create citizen alert networks" and "reach collective action" where the state and media fail them, but even these channels are being weakened by this era of "prolonged crises" (Choudhury 9). This desensitization is the modern equivalent of percepticide because as violence becomes intertwined with everyday life, it weaves itself into the fabric of society and is allowed to perpetuate due to a

weakened state and media that can only report the symptoms of violence rather than cutting out its roots.

Contemporary percepticide is enabled by the utter inability of the state to defend its people from violent actors. In October of 2017, Reuters reported that Mexico was "on course to register the highest homicide tally since modern records began" (Torres par. 2). Roberto Ferdman's 2014 article in Quartz found that 98% of all murders in Mexico in 2013 went unsolved (Ferdamn par. 3). In a state of absolute impunity for perpetrators of violence, citizens have no choice but to continue existing in constant fear knowing that their government is unable to protect them. The body politic faces increasing rates of violence and decreasing rates of government reliability as well as a media machine that does not even have to work to sensationalize the unbelievable images of brutality in a country where, on average, 69 people are murdered every day (Torres par. 5). This situation allows for percepticide to fester, as the perceptual organs of the body politic are under constant assault that leads to desensitization after 12 long and bloody years of the failed War on Drugs (Seijas).

As described in *The Land of Open Graves* by Jason de León, an anthropologist who discusses discourses of violence facing border-crossers in territory ruled by cartels and gangs, "disturbing images lost their edge" (León 1). He describes his battle with "sensory overload so as to not lose sight of the big picture or the brutal details" of the violence he saw; this is the power of modern percepticide. Where Cold War percepticide focused on directly attacking media sources to spread disinformation, contemporary actors utilize the opposite: sensory overload. The explosive and continuous "new violence," where investigative reporters are killed with impunity and cartels and gangs care only about maintaining the status quo, destroys the ability of the

Mexican people to comprehend the violence around them. The result is a constant, pulsing fear that penetrates the hearts and psyches of Mexican citizens as they go about their everyday lives, and images of brutality and savagery become normalized in a dull understanding that this is the way life is and will be.

The greatest difference between Cold War and contemporary percepticide is the way through which truth is silenced and removed from discourses of violence. Both strategies rely upon altering the media to spread their messages to the body politic, but want different kinds of coverage. Whereas Argentina's dictatorship aimed to manufacture silence through assimilating media into its mechanism of terror, contemporary actors rely on the proliferation of information through the 24/7 news cycle, sensationalist press, and social media platforms to do this work for them. Violence against journalists was a key strategy for Rafael Videla's regime to ensure that silence was absolute and terror could diffuse through the Argentine public. DTOs and gangs in modern Mexico are only aiming to silence those who are too close to important information that could be harmful if discovered or might force the notoriously uninvolved Mexican government to act. Percepticide still exists today, but rather than attacking the preceptory organs of the public through silence, cartels use the cacophony and brutality of the "new" violence to spread discourses of terror.

The most important information we can perceive from cartel and gang violence against journalists in an attempt to silence them is that DTOs still have reasons to be afraid. This matters because investigative journalism in Mexico and courage in the face of unimaginable violence are clearly more important now than ever. Contemporary percepticide can only exist so long as violence goes unchecked and unreported, which means that the bravery of journalists like Javier

Valdez Cárdenas must be commended and honored. Just as the the veil of silence perpetuated by percepticide in Argentina crumbled when the dictatorship fell, so too can the efforts of courageous journalists in Mexico bring about changes that could shake the foundations of cartel and gang operations to their core. Perceptide only lasts as long as terror remains absolute; we can create a truthful narrative that cuts through the noise of the “new” violence and reaches the Mexican people by supporting investigative journalists, ensuring that channels and sources of vital knowledge are never truly silenced.

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