

# ISSA Proceedings 2010 - Commemoration And Controversy: Negotiating Public Memory Through Counter-Memorials



Public memory continually is negotiated via competing frames of understanding such as forgetting, denial, repression, trauma, recounting and repositioning. As Stephan Feuchtwang (2006) insightfully notes, “public memory” consists of “both *result/product* as well as *process* - powers and activities of creating and erasing archives, of commemorating or denigrating or worse negating people or events, and of recording and ignoring narratives in chronicles, histories, and myths” (p. 176). Within the complexities of public discourse and argument, memorials often are established that commemorate a particular thread of memory. Such statues, monuments, and other objects are designed and located in public to communicate a set of values and an official version of the past. Yet, in response to such public memorials, art and objects often are located or circulated that challenge the dominant discourse about history and remembrance.

These “counter-memorials” - sometimes also called “antimemorials” and “counter-monuments” - function as sites of contestation, locating arguments in the public sphere that seek to discount, amend, or re-inscribe the past in alternative ways that directly challenge the idea that a single public memory is possible. In this essay I examine a variety of potential means for theorizing the rhetorical dimensions of the “counter-memorial,” and ultimately suggest a theoretical path through the works of Kenneth Burke as a significant foundation for understanding public memory debates. This essay then examines the rhetorical form of the “counter-memorial” by analyzing several key instances of the establishment of this oppositional discourse in public spaces.

## *1. Definitional and Theoretical Quandaries*

One of the challenges to understanding the rhetorical terrain of the counter-

memorial is discovering a path through the variety of literatures where this concept has been employed, including communication, critical studies, history, anthropology, and sociology. Perhaps a useful place to start is to look to a further, very different, realm where the terminology is used, the International Court of Justice in The Hague. Article 49 of the Rules of Court define a “memorial” as “a statement of the relevant facts, a statement of law, and the submissions,” essentially the affirmative case in a dispute. In these rules the term “counter-memorial” is used to designate “an admission or denial of facts stated in the memorial; any additional facts, if necessary; observations concerning the statement of law in the Memorial; a statement of law in answer thereto; and the submissions,” essentially the negative case (International Court, 1978).

These definitions from the legal realm translate well into the terrain of public memory, where a “memorial” is the “case” put forward by dominant culture in the establishment of an official version of events. Here, the physical monuments established in sacred sites – especially those taking the typical modernist, heroic, authoritarian forms – are intentional rhetorical acts designed to indoctrinate and invoke a particular version of memory that suits the dominant interests. The “counter-memorial” becomes the “case” forwarded by those who deny or disagree with the version of history implicated by the official memorial either because of its placement, its form, or its exclusion of events and participants. In its most general sense, then, the counter-memorial is a rhetorical act that seeks to challenge its readers/audience to complicate their perceptions and knowledge.

Of course, things are never quite that easy: across the various literatures where the terms counter-memorial, counter-monument, and antimonument are used there are not consistent definitions or applications, nor is theory always mobilized to ground the concepts. Yet, some similarities and common assumptions emerge. Consider some typical definitions. Describing what he refers to as a counter-monument, historian James Young (1992) states: “By formalizing its impermanence and even celebrating its changing form over time and in space, the counter-monument refutes this self-defeating premise of the traditional monument. It seeks to stimulate memory no less than the everlasting memorial, but by pointing explicitly at its own changing face, it re-marks also the inevitable – even essential – evolution of memory itself over time” (p. 295). In later works, Young (2000) uses the term counter-memorial, which he defines as “brazen, painfully self-conscious memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premises

of their being" (p. 7); they are "memorial spaces conceived to challenge the very premise of the monument" (p. 98). Prominent in these statements is the notion that memory is not static, unidimensional, or univocal. Important also is the argument that counter-memorials are conceived in ways that resist traditional memorial forms.

The ideas set forth by Young are echoed in other definitions attached to similar constructs. For example, in describing antimemorials, Ware (2004) states, "antimemorials critique the illusion that the permanence of stone somehow guarantees the permanence of the idea it commemorates. In contrast, antimemorials formalise impermanence and even celebrate their own transitory natures. Antimemorials encourage multiple readings of political and social issues, and prompt a different level of physical interactivity" (para 3). Key to most definitions of "counter-memorial" is this kind of argument about intent and form of the monument.

Definitions of the concept of counter-memorial also share a focus on the processes of memory: how memory is stimulated, its nature as transitory and malleable, and its relation to a collective/public meaning. The discussion of counter-memorials coincides with a wide scholarly interest in the concept of memory, especially as linked to traumatic events and sites; as Klein (2000) notes, "for some scholars interested in memory as a metahistorical category, 'trauma' is the key to authentic forms of memory, and memories shaped by trauma are the most likely to subvert totalizing varieties of historicism" (p. 138). Hence, many of the rhetorical acts that critics categorize as counter-memorials are connected with questions about how a culture should best remember its traumatic history and avoid totalizing explanations; the literature particularly has been focused on remembrance of the Holocaust and how to memorialize significant sites and acts associated with this history.

But, what, precisely, is meant by "memory" in its public sense, as related to the practices of memorializing? Certainly, zeroing in on a definition of memory is a very complex undertaking, but for the purposes of thinking about the rhetorical act that is the counter-memorial, beginning with the important distinction made by Aristotle can provide a useful launch. As Kasabova (2008) interprets Aristotle's *On Memory and Recollection* in regard to the functions of memory, he distinguishes between "the retentive and retrieving functions of memory: the former preserves an event from forgetting and erasure, while the latter recalls it

and brings it back to the present” (p. 336). Here, “memory” marks the thought and the space where it is retained in an individual; “recollection” is the intentional act that retrieves the memory and situates it in a current context (Aristotle, trans. 2006). What I find intriguing about this definition is that “recollection” is described by Aristotle as an active process, an aspect greatly clarified by considering Murphy’s (2002) further interpretation of Aristotle on this point: “It is the perception that is the object of memory, or the retention of what was known in the past. Habit, or the tendency to act in a certain manner, derives from memory in that unrecollected choice creates a potential motion of the soul in advance of recollection. Recollection, Aristotle says, is ‘actualized memory’. Since it is a kind of motion, then, from potentiality to actualization, the study of recollection examines how this motion is caused” (pp. 218-219). In sum, Aristotle proposes that memory is a potential in advance of motion, which then becomes actualized in the act of recollection. The question of how the process of recollection is stimulated – via memorials and counter-memorials – becomes the province of rhetorical action. Indeed the question of what stimulates memory, and how, is at the crux of the debate over counter-memorial practices. Following from Kasabova’s (2008) conclusion that “the notion of memory implies that we consider ourselves as agents” (p. 335), I turn to Kenneth Burke’s dramatistic theory as the foundation for a theoretical framework to define and understand the rhetorical action of counter-memorials.

## *2. Counter-memorials in a Dramatistic Frame*

Burke (1969) defines dramatism as a critical approach that “invites one to consider the matter of motives in a perspective that, being developed from the analysis of drama, treats language and thought primarily as modes of action” (p. xxii). Two aspects of Burke’s rhetorical theory are particularly useful to define and understand the concept of the counter-memorial, his theory of pentadic terms and his discussion of the four master tropes.

First, in regard to the five terms of act, agent, agency, scene, and purpose, Burke (1969) famously notes that: “They need never to be abandoned, since all statements that assign motives can be shown to arise out of them and to terminate in them. By examining them quizzically, we can range far” (p. xvi). The pentad is used to understand the processes engaged in rhetorical action, and how “acts” are explained in association with individual intents (agent), environmental and scenic forces (scene), tools and mechanisms used to achieve the act (agency),

and the reasons for the commission of the act (purpose). Through application of the pentad, the critic can discover the key causal connection between pentadic terms that explains the perspective underlying a rhetorical account; as Burke (1969) describes its employment: "We want to inquire into the purely internal relationships which the five terms bear to one another, considering their possibilities of transformation, their range of permutations and combinations - and then to see how these various resources figure in actual statements about human motives" (p. xvi). In relation to the question of counter-memorials, I argue that these rhetorical acts can be understood through three different pentadic ratios: agent-act, agency-act, and scene-act, where the "act" in each case is the act of stimulating recollection. Each of these ratios will be explained and illustrated below.

Second, in this study I apply the "four master tropes" of metaphor, synchedoche, metonymy, and irony, to reveal the varieties of thinking about history and the symbolic power of monuments in the public space that are at play in discussions of counter-memorials. As Burke (1941) succinctly defines them: "For metaphor we could substitute perspective; for metonymy we could substitute reduction; for synecdoche we could substitute representation; for irony we could substitute dialectic." (p. 421). By applying the tropes, a critic is not concerned, as Burke says, with "their purely figurative usage, but with their role in the discovery and description of 'truth'" (p. 421). For each of the ratios revealed in relation to counter-memorials, I also discovered a corresponding tropic framing: agent-act reveals synecdochal thinking; agency-act is related to irony; and scene-act reveals metonymic conceptions. The following section expands upon and illustrates these arguments by linking them to examples from the literature on counter-memorials.

### *2.1 Agent-Act [Synecdoche]*

First, some descriptive accounts of counter-memorials emphasize the rhetor who creates the counter-memorial, variously placing emphasis upon the political stance or their personal stake in memorializing. The key focus here is on the rhetorical agent who intentionally designs a work to convey their political or personal perspective; the agent/rhetor is described as the determining force that shapes the act of remembrance. The rhetorical frame activated here is that official or dominant view of history and acts of memorializing are wrong or incomplete; hence the counter-memorial is deemed necessary to voice an alternative view of the past, or, an alternative means for understanding it.

Consequently, this is synecdochal thinking; as Kenneth Burke (1941) notes in regard to synecdoche, it is “an integral relationship, a relationship of convertibility, between the two terms” (p. 427). Further, he notes, “We might say that representation (synecdoche) stresses a *relationship or connectedness* between two sides of an equation” (p. 428). Commonly construed as a part to whole, whole to part relationship, in regard to counter-memorials, the intervention of alternative voices is deemed necessary to include a part of history that is suppressed or missing from public memory. Hence the central emphasis in these definitions is on the question of whose memory is defined as valid in the public arena.

A review of the instances in which rhetorical acts are labeled counter-memorials reveals two variations. One set of accounts emphasizes the political stance of the rhetor, and thus sees the counter-memorial as the expression of a marginalized or subaltern group. Although the link is not explicitly made in studies of counter-memorials, this definition can be profitably understood via the concept of “counterpublics”. As Hauser (2001) defines this notion, “a counterpublic sphere is, by definition, a site of resistance. Its impetus may arise from myriad causes, but its rhetorical identity is as an arena for hearing proscribed voices, expressing proscribed ideas and entertaining the alternative reality they advance to the existing order.” (p. 36). Here, counter-memorials can be understood as the expressions from counterpublics who seek to “voice oppositional needs and values not by appealing to the universality of the bourgeois public sphere but by affirming specificity of race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or some other axis of difference” (Asen & Brouwer, 2001, p. 7). These counterpublics often intervene in public discourse by bringing specific experiences of trauma into the cultural arena.

An interesting example of this agent-act ratio can be found in designations of performance artist Ralph Lemon’s rhetorical acts as “counter-memorials”. Lemon’s works combine dance and video to create commentaries about slavery and lynching, including filmic accounts of his travels to locations that are central to the experience of African Americans in the U.S, such as sites related to the 1955 lynching of Emmitt Till in Mississippi and the Edmond Pettis Bridge in Selma, Alabama. Regarding Ralph Lemon’s counter-memorials expressed through performance art, Nicolas Birns (2005) notes: “Lemon’s processes are reminiscent of the school of memory-historians led by Pierre Nora, as well as theories of

trauma and mourning developed in response to slavery and the Holocaust. These occurrences of inhumanity cannot easily be chronicled in conventional narrative leading to cathartic reparation. Artists have long struggled with the challenge of bringing history into their works, without that history being undigested or monumental. Lemon's work is a model for how art can register the burden of history without claiming a bogus historical self-importance. His work makes clear that any reckoning with the past must be both traumatic and incomplete." (p. 81). Lemon's performances are a kind of "revisiting" of history that documents his visits to sites where violence against blacks was perpetrated in order to open it up to center on his positionality as a marginalized rhetor: "he seeks to ritualize the past, not to monumentalize it" (Birns, 2005, p. 81).

Related to this definition of the counter-memorial that emphasizes the expression of a rhetor's perspective, a variant attaches this term to rhetorical acts that emanate from a more specifically personal, rather than an explicitly counterpublic, sense of agency. Within the literature about counter-memorials a good example of this personally-motivated agent-act ratio is found in Angela Failler's (2009) analysis of Eisha Marjara's film *Desperately Seeking Helen* as a "counter-memorial": "Interweaving an account of her mother and sister's deaths on Flight 182 with the story of her family's immigration to Quebec from [the] Punjab in the 1970s and a current-day quest for her Bollywood idol Helen, Marjara posits a different relationship of the present to the past; that is, one less anxious to establish so-called historical truth in order to bring about a sense of closure. The film complicates the temporality and politics of remembering by attending to the inconclusive and fragmentary natures of memory, loss, and diasporic subjectivity. In doing so, it challenges official interpretations of the Air India disaster and serves as an example of how working through personal memory can be a means of both psychical and cultural regeneration" (p. 151). Here, Fallier points to the interweaving of the personal with the political; one is not divorced from the other, but this definition of counter-memorial definitely foregrounds the individualized nature of memory in light of the trauma of loss and the question of remembrance.

## 2.2 Agency-Act [Irony]

Within the literature about counter-memorials, many invocations of the term place primary importance on form - specifically artistic and architectural elements - in regard to what is the appropriate mechanism for remembrance. I

see this as an agency-act ratio, where the emphasis in explaining the concept centers on the question of the nature of memorials and their ability to invoke specific kinds of recollections for audiences. In this sense, the key feature that defines the counter-memorial is the agency used to express memory, which is not necessarily related to the rhetor's association with a counterpublic. Indeed, many of the rhetorical acts defined as counter-memorials in this sense are "official" installations that are fully validated by the state, often the product of public competitions to select an artist to create a particular commemoration. But those viewed as counter-memorials differ in important formal ways from traditional means of memorializing; as historian James Young describes this kind of remembrance, it is "art that questions the premise of the monument, and doubts whether the monument could provide stable, eternal answers to memory" (Gordon and Goldberg, 1998, para 6).

This rhetorical move is related to the impulse characteristic of post-structural analysis, wherein the counter-monuments can be understood as a discursive move that interrupts and subverts the dominant "code" of monuments. In relation to media representations of memory and trauma, for example, Allen Meek (2010) describes this post-structural view using the theories of Roland Barthes, in which the preferred political gesture is "one that disrupts the signifying force of the image with the violence employed by the state" (p. 109). For Barthes, the *studium*, the everyday detachment associated with consumption of images, had to be interrupted by the *punctum*, "the contingent detail that provoked deeper forms of memory" (Meek, 2010, p. 122; Barthes, trans. 1981). Hence the *punctum* as a stimulation for recollection could only be activated "once the image was released from cultural discourses of technique, art realism, etc. that encased the photograph within cultural codes and conventions of meaning." (p. 123). Echoes of this post-structuralist faith in the power of signs to interrupt and stimulate new perspectives underscore much of the descriptive literature about counter-memorials.

This conception of history as a narrative that requires destabilization and doubt invokes the ironic frame. About irony as a master trope, Burke (1941) notes: "But insofar as terms are thus encouraged to participate in an orderly parliamentary development, the dialectic of this participation produces (in the observer who considers the whole from the standpoint of the participation of all of the terms rather than from the standpoint of any one participant) a 'resultant certainty' of a



different quality, necessarily ironic, since it requires that all the sub-certainties be considered as neither true nor false, but *contributory*" (p. 433). Scholars familiar with Burke's dramatism also will note a relationship to what he calls "perspective by incongruity," the rhetorical act that, in taking concepts from their habitual contexts and inserting them into others reveals "unsuspected connectives" and exemplifies "relationships between objects which our customary rational vocabulary has ignored" (Burke, 1984, pp. 89-90).

This agency-act perspective is prominently forwarded by historian James Young in his studies of Holocaust monuments in Germany. In describing the emergence of counter-memorials in recent decades, Young notes: "But once the monument has been used as the Nazis or Stalin did, it becomes a very suspicious form in the eyes of a generation that would like to commemorate the victims of totalitarianism, and are handed the forms of totalitarianism to do it. For young German artists and architects in particular, there is an essential contradiction here. So they have begun to turn to forms which they believe challenge the idea of monumentality, and have arrived at something I'd call the "counter-monumental," or the "counter-memorial" - the monument that disappears instead of standing for all time; that is built into the ground instead of above it; and that returns the burden of memory to those who come looking for it" (Gordon & Goldberg, 1998, para 2-3).

The "disappearing monument" in Harburg, a neighborhood of Hamburg, Germany is a prominent example of this agency-act ratio and ironic perspective in discussions of counter-memorials. In 1983 Jochen Gerz and Esther Shalev-Gerz submitted the winning design in a competition held by the local council for a monument against fascism. The Harburg monument was a four-sided steel column, twelve meters high, built to be lowered over time into the ground and eventually disappearing from view. The outside of the column was coated with lead where visitors were invited to write on the surface. By 1993 the monument completely disappeared underground, with only a small portion visible through a window on a staircase. In essence, this kind of counter-memorial seeks to challenge traditional forms of expression and invoke new meanings via rejection and inversion.

### 2.3 Scene-Act [Metonymy]

Still other uses of the concept of counter-memorial examine the site as of primary importance in the consideration of the process of memory. This places the causal emphasis on the scene as the force that determines the dimensions of rhetorical

acts, creating the scene-act ratio. In regard to counter-memorials, much of the literature that seeks to define these acts focuses upon how the act of memorializing interacts with the historical location, particularly when the site is considered sacred to the culture or is associated with trauma and tragedy.

This investiture of special meaning in sites of trauma has been described by anthropologist Lynn Meskell (2002) as “negative heritage,” the significance that resides in the materiality of certain sites such as European concentration camps or the World Trade Center ruins in New York. She argues that this kind of negative heritage location functions as “a conflictual site that becomes the repository of negative memory in the collective imaginary. As a site of memory, negative heritage occupies a dual role: it can be mobilized for positive didactic purposes (e.g. Auschwitz, Hiroshima, District Six) or alternatively be erased if such places cannot be culturally rehabilitated and thus resist incorporation into the national imaginary (e.g. Nazi and Soviet statues and architecture)” (p. 558). Such negative heritage sites also can incite counter-memorials that challenge the authority of the official memorials installed or invoke formal accommodations that recognize the importance of the site for instigating public memory processes.

This conception of history and memory invokes metonymic frames. The disputes over memorials, counter-memorials, and the proper means to remembrance all circulate around the idea of the memorial as a “reduction” of an abstract or complex historical construct into a single form. As Burke (1941) notes, “the basic ‘strategy’ in metonymy is this: to convey some incorporeal or intangible state in terms of the corporeal or tangible” (p. 424). The monument, as metonymy, is placed in the location as a condensation of the meaning of the site; in this sense, counter-memorials either emerge as alternative interpretations placed on that same site to dispute the sanctioned memorial or seek to distill the meaning of the site into the memorial via alternative forms of expression. In both cases, the rhetorical act of recollection is governed by the scene as the determinant factor.

Two analyses from the literature about counter-memorials illustrate the first construction of this scene-act ratio, where the site invokes an alternative installation to the sanctioned memorial. First, Ware (2004) describes a set of Australian memorials: “A striking example of a counter-memorial is ‘Another View Walking Trail’ by Megan Evans and Ray Thomas. In 1989, they strategically placed Indigenous symbols and markers alongside traditional government-built memorials in the Melbourne CBD [central business district], highlighting another

version of the history of colonisation and subverting the traditional memorials' meaning. For example, underneath the statue of Captain Matthew Flinders, the artists buried a cross-shaped glass box of bones and ribbons. The cross symbolised local Indigenous beliefs about spiritual connections to the Southern Cross constellation" (para 9).

Second, anthropologists Simpson and de Alwis (2008) describe counter-memorials established in Sri Lanka following the tsunami: "The most infamous one, near the site where a train carrying over 1500 people was swept off the track, is now locally referred to as the 'Fernandopulle Memorial' after the minister who oversaw its construction. However, a collective representing those who perished in this train has erected a counter-memorial next to the Fernandopulle Memorial, on a site where around 300 bodies lie in a mass grave, declaring that the deaths were due not merely to the tsunami but also to 'those in authority neglecting their responsibility'" (p. 10). In this instance, the official black granite monument's triangular shape is echoed in the whitewashed, flimsy, hand-lettered counter-memorial erected nearby. This kind of counter-memorial is motivated by the site and disputes about what should be the proper memory associated with it.

The alternative iteration of the scene-act ratio and the metonymic frame describes rhetorical acts of counter-memorializing that are rooted in the sacredness or the negative heritage of the scene, such that the scene is regarded as the determinant factor in the design and instillation of the memorial. Unlike the first instance of scene-act expression where a counter-memorial is placed by local or indigenous rhetors in opposition to a sanctioned memorial, this second instance of scene-act counter-memorials exists free of the links to a counterpublic or a pre-existing official memorialization. A prominent and often-cited example of this type of scenic counter-memorial is the Aschrott-Brunnen monument in Kassel, Germany. The counter-memorial was designed by artist Horst Hoheisel to be installed on the original site of the Aschrott-Brunnen fountain that was a gift to the city in 1908 from Sigmund Aschrott, a Jewish businessman, but subsequently was torn down by Nazi forces in 1939, with only the sandstone base remaining. The effort to restore the fountain or establish some kind of monument on the site was initiated in 1984 by the Society for the Rescue of Historical Monuments. Hoheisel proposed recreating the original fountain as a hollow concrete shell, then burying it upside down in the exact location of the original fountain and covering it with glass which visitors could walk across and where they could hear water dripping

below. About his design, Hoheisel stated, “the only way I know to make this loss visible is through a perceptibly empty space, representing the space once occupied. Instead of continuously searching for yet another explanation or interpretation of that which has been lost, I prefer facing the loss as a vanished form” (“Aschrott-Brunnen,” 2010, para 8). The rhetorical act of the counter-memorial thus was determined by the original site, yet rendered in a way that complicated the invocation of memory in public space.

### *3. Conclusion: Commensurate Frames and Public Memory*

The concept of “counter-memorial” is complex and varied in its applications across the scholarly literature, yet lacks a consistent definition. In this essay I have suggested that this rhetorical act can best be understood dramatically, as a rhetorical action that is as differently motivated within three different rhetorical frames. While it is not possible to have a single definition of “counter-memorial” what this analysis suggests is that the varieties of applications share a common emphasis, with the focus on the act of recollection as the central bond. As Burke (1969) notes about the pentadic terms, “certain formal interrelationships prevail among these terms, by reason of their role as attributes of a common ground or substance. Their participation in a common ground makes for transformability” (p. xix). Indeed, I do not mean to suggest that the distinctions I have made among the agent-act, agency-act, and scene-act frames are rigid boundaries, but rather they demarcate useful points of clarification that reveal the motivations underlying various rhetorical acts of counter-memorializing. Perhaps the overarching pentadic term that unites inquiry into the rhetorical dimensions of counter-memorials is that of purpose – we are fascinated by a mystical sense of how memory can be marshaled for the purposes at play in the present; “memorials” and counter-memorials ultimately dispute each other across these grounds.

The tropic understandings of counter-memorial also merge into a constellation of possibilities for understanding how we, as scholars and critics, seek to come to terms with rhetorical actions that are intended to intervene in our processes of recollection and shape the retention of particular memories. As Burke (1941) notes, “It is an evanescent moment that we shall deal with – for not only does the dividing line between the figurative and literal usages shift, but also the four tropes shade into one another. Give a man but one of them, tell him to exploit its possibilities, and if he is thorough in doing so, he will come upon the other three”

(p. 421). In the case of counter-memorials, the tropes of synecdoche, irony, and metonymy all shade into the dominant trope of metaphor, as each variation of the act of memory seeks to offer a perspective, framing for its audience a unique, reductive, or problematic view of history.

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