

***AIMING AT THE  
HEART: THE POLITICAL  
DIMENSION OF A  
DOCUMENTARY FILM***

***APUNTANDO AL CORAZÓN:  
LA DIMENSIÓN POLÍTICA DE UN FILME  
DOCUMENTAL***

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## ABSTRACT

This article considers the political dimension of *Apuntando al corazón* (*Aiming at the Heart*), a documentary film made by UNIMINUTO communication scholar Claudia Gordillo and Italian independent filmmaker Bruno Federico. The film critically analyzes the militarist propaganda campaigns of President Álvaro Uribe Vélez's government. This article argues that, while *Aiming* may be considered as a *counterhegemonic* intervention, what is politically salient about the film is its capacity to create articulations across social sectors. Moving from a textualization of *Apuntando* that considers it as object to a contextualization of the film that considers it as *event*, this article holds that, while the film does unveil the deceit of propaganda – and of Uribe's discourse – its political dimension lies in the ways in which it affects its audiences and primes them for political action.

**Keywords:** Colombian documentary film, documentary and politics, propaganda in Colombia, Democratic Security Policy.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo considera la dimensión política de *Apuntando al corazón*, un filme documental realizado por la docente e investigadora de UNIMINUTO Claudia Gordillo y el realizador independiente italiano Bruno Federico. El documental analiza de manera crítica la propaganda militarista del gobierno del Presidente Álvaro Uribe Vélez. Este artículo sostiene que, mientras que *Apuntando* puede ser considerado como una intervención *contra-hegemónica*, lo políticamente relevante es su capacidad de crear articulaciones entre diversos sectores sociales. Pasando de una textualización de *Apuntando* en cuanto objeto a una contextualización del filme en tanto *evento*, este artículo sostiene que, mientras que el filme devela el carácter engañoso de la propaganda –y del discurso de Uribe– su dimensión política reside en las formas en que afecta a sus audiencias y las motiva a tomar acción.

**Palabras clave:** filme documental Colombiano, documental y política, propaganda en Colombia, Política de Seguridad Democrática.

*“Pessimism of the intellect, optimism of the will”*

**Antonio Gramsci (2011)**

On July 25, 2013, I attended the opening of the documentary film *Apuntando al Corazón* (*Aiming at the Heart*) at Bogotá's *Cinemateca Distrital*, a small but traditional film venue of the Colombian capital. Being acquainted with the directors, I was able to skip the queues and enter first, which in turn allowed me to carefully observe the spectators as they entered. It was not too difficult to discern that the majority of them were university students: their youthful ages, their backpacks and scruffy clothes gave them away. Interspersed, some older adults also made their entrance and took their place. The *Cinemateca* seats only 170 spectators, but, considering that *Apuntando* is a low-budget film with little publicity, I was nevertheless surprised to see that all the seats were promptly occupied, as I was later when I learned that some fifty people were unable to enter. Evidently, there had been expectation surrounding this film, although the fact that the entrance was free surely contributed to the complete occupation of the theatre.

Having watched the film beforehand in a private screening, I knew of its political content and was eager to observe the audience's reactions. The film critically addresses the militarist propaganda campaigns run during the two government terms of former president Álvaro Uribe Vélez (2002-2010) which, like never before, persuasively rallied public support for the Colombian armed forces' offensive against the country's main guerrilla group, the Armed Revolutionary Forces of Colombia (FARC for its initials in Spanish). While some scholarly work has examined Uribe's appeal to the Colombian public, *Apuntando* is the first documentary film that addresses the role of propaganda in the strengthening of his militarist policies; this is in itself meritable in a country in which the government has sometimes associated with right-wing paramilitary groups that have frequently targeted critics of the status-quo.

The audience was clearly in favor of the film's central argument, which is delivered by means of the juxtaposition of several interview sequences and a few animated drawings, without resorting to an overarching narrating voice. It can be synthesized thus: while the propaganda campaigns designed in support of the *Plan Colombia*<sup>1</sup> were successful in creating a social consensus on the need to annihilate FARC at all costs,

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they also served the purpose of obscuring the social conflicts that underlie the armed conflict and, especially, the crimes committed against the civilian population by the Colombian army. It is a loose narrative, put together solely through editing, but discernable nevertheless.

Having watched the film beforehand, I was somewhat concerned that spectators might not pick up on some of the finer irony and criticism conveyed via editing and montage. But my apprehension was dispelled when I saw how quickly the audience at the opening reacted. Indeed, the audience's reactions made evident that the directors Claudia Gordillo and Bruno Federico's decision to develop the narrative solely through the juxtaposition of sequences was pertinent and that there was no need for a narrating voice. There was laughter, even in the moments of subtle irony. There was waving of fists. Above all, there was rage. On several occasions, the audience reacted outwardly, a few times even directing insults at the army and government officials featured in the documentary. Clearly, this audience was profoundly dissa-



Stills from  
*Apuntando al corazón*.



Stills from *Apuntando al corazón*.

tified with Uribe's government; moreover, they had come to the opening to see their opinions on the past government confirmed, at least as much as they had come to be informed.

At the end of the screening, there was space for the audience to engage in dialog with the directors. The comments and questions of those who spoke were in full support of the documentary and of its argument. Praise aside, what struck my attention was how well-informed the audience was about the violation of human rights and the alleged criminal alliances between Uribe's government and the paramilitary forces operating in Colombia. A significant amount of attention was given to what has come to be known in the country as the "false positives": the kidnapping and assassination by army members of more than 4000 civilians over a period of at least seven years, civilians who were dressed up as guerrilla combatants and presented

as dead in combat so that army officers and soldiers could obtain prizes and bonuses.

While President Uribe and top military officials pledged that they did not know of these actions, it has become increasingly clear that at least some high government officials were aware but did very little to stop it, and that, in any case, it was the reward system instituted under Uribe's presidency and the pressure placed on the military to produce "results" that was spurring the violation of human rights. The suggestion made in *Apuntando* is that the military propaganda designed to rally public support for the national army, creative and intelligent as it was, has been effective in diminishing governmental and military responsibility in relation to the false positives, as well as diminishing the political cost of the scandal. This suggestion rings painfully in the ears of any informed Colombian, as it did for many of the spectators present at the opening.

Why start this paper, which is about a documentary film, talking about the film's audience instead of the film itself? My purpose is to examine the political dimension of *Apuntando*, not primordially from the vantage of its filmic qualities and rhetorical strategies, but from that of what we may call its social life. In taking this approach, I hope to explore and better understand its contribution to Colombian society vis-à-vis the country's armed conflict. While the formal and rhetorical aspects of the film are indeed important to its political scope, my intention is to contrast these aspects with the analysis of the reactions that it has elicited from spectators and with the analysis of the uses to which it has been put. Importantly, this means looking at the ways in which the film has been framed in the different instances of its presentation. The consideration of the framing devices through which the film has been presented and the observation of the spectators who have engaged with it sheds light on the film's politics in such a way that compels us to take distance from an understanding of the political in documentary film that depends merely on content, or on relations of form and content. That is, this analysis is not merely, or even centrally, an aesthetic analysis of *Apuntando*, but one that takes into account the film's sociological dimension.

I emphasize that I am interested in the political *dimension* of the film, not merely in its *politics*<sup>2</sup>. In doing so, I want to separate myself from the notion that the politics of a film – or, for that matter, the politics of any cultural artifact – may be discerned simply by textualizing the object, by merely laying bare its discursive content. I wish to shift emphasis from discourse to agency, to move from what the film *says* to what it *does*. The film *enounces*, for sure, but, as with any cultural object, the complete scope of what it does in a political sense is only available through a consideration

that focuses on the diverse elements that come into relation *because* of it, not all of which are to be found *within* it. After a consideration of the film's discursive frames and of its counterhegemonic politics, I will land at an understanding of *Apuntando* considered as *event*. I propose that it is through this understanding that we may best comprehend the film's political work.

*Apuntando* begins with a series of newsreel sequences alternating between discourses alluding to peace and war pronounced by former presidents Belisario Betancur, Uribe and the current president Juan Manuel Santos, and sequences of guerrilla groups in action, civil disturbances and army operations. These lead to a sequence of simple, black and white cartoons that briefly take the viewer through the political history of Colombia since colonial times, ending with Uribe's rise to power in 2002 and his promise to wage war on the guerrillas. From then on, the narrative develops through the skillful counterpoising of declarations made in interview by high military and government officials, communication and film scholars, international journalists, the director of the army propaganda campaign and civilians commenting from different angles on the propaganda campaign and on the role of the army in recent years. Any Colombian would be surprised by the fact that directors Gordillo and Federico managed to gain access to high military officials, and by how openly and seemingly at ease the latter speak in the film about Uribe's security policy and military propaganda; indeed, part of the indignation expressed by viewers at the *Cinemateca* came in reaction to the aloofness and almost arrogant pride with which some of the government and military officials spoke.

Intercalated with these interviews are sequences of the military campaigns themselves. These were television, newspaper and bulletin board campaigns that repeatedly and pervasively presented the soldiers of the Colombian army as "heroes", the slogan being "in Colombia, heroes do exist". This slogan resonates with the equally pervasive appellative of "terrorists" concertedly used by government officials to refer to the guerrillas. Heroes and enemies, friend or foe, you're either with me or against me; this is *realpolitik* the old-school way. As is mentioned several times in the film by different interviewees, the propaganda campaigns meant a huge leap in the quality and effectiveness of governmental military propaganda strategies.

The quality of the analyses of the military campaigns and of President Uribe's security policies carried out by the intellectuals featured in the film is underscored by the intelligent editing that emphatically and sometimes even sarcastically counterpoises these analyses to the declarations of government and military officials. But the most moving



critique perhaps comes towards the end of the film, when the “false positives” scandal is brought to the fore. Amidst demonstrations claiming for justice, a teenage girl, the daughter of a “false positive” victim, declares, in an unexpectedly calm and thoughtful manner, that she is not convinced that soldiers are “heroes” and that, even though we are not supposed to be, she is indeed scared of them. The film ends on this most moving note.

In the different venues and contexts in which it has been presented, *Apuntando* has been framed as a documentary film. What does this imply? What sort of cultural object is a documentary film? *Apuntando* is a document – of what? There are in the film, of course, elements that may be considered “documental”: the declarations given by government and military officials, as those given by journalists and intellectuals: these exist, they have been registered and conserved, and they may well be used in the future. But these declarations are juxtaposed with sequences whose force is not factual but rhetorical, and affective. And the composition of these elements, the film’s editing, produces effects that are equally rhetorical and affective. Clearly, this film is very far from the distanced and uninvolved – in a word, “objective” – register of a particular “reality” that the most positivist notion of documentary, and of document, would once have argued for.

## If the film “documents” anything at all, it is the subjectivity and ideas of its creators – both in the sense that it provides data and information that supports their ideas and that it is a register of their thoughts concerning State propaganda in Colombia

Indeed, there is a considerable degree of subjectivity in *Apuntando*, represented in the decisions concerning what to shoot, who to interview, how to narrate political history, how to go about montage, etc.<sup>3</sup> The subjectivities of both Gordillo, a scholar with a background in cultural studies and media studies, and Federico, an activist and filmmaker, come through in the film’s theme, formal assemblage and general tone. The “documental” sequences in the film are woven together through a specific, critical intention which, as any critique, is not present in “reality” but in the minds of its creators. Hence, one may perhaps better describe the film as being an *audiovisual essay* rather than a “documentary”. If the film “documents” anything at all, it is the subjectivity and ideas of its creators – both in the sense that it provides data and information that supports their ideas and that it is a register of their thoughts concerning state propaganda in Colombia.

In its strict formality, one could not distinguish this film from a work of fiction; this, I would argue, applies to documentary films in general. While there are sequences in *Apuntando* to which we may ascribe documental value, there is nothing *within* the sequences that tells us that the film necessarily relates to “reality”. Clearly, the “truth” effect of these sequences depends, not on the formal aspects of the medium, but on the conventions of the genre of documentary film.<sup>4</sup> As the feminist film scholar Veronica Stoeckel argues, a documentary film is the product of a series of indexations made by the filmmaker and the cultural industry, which construe “reality” as its paradigmatic referent.<sup>5</sup> In documentary films, reality is not a pre-existing, external referent; it is constructed, not merely by the work, but by the discursive frame of the genre.

To frame a film as a documentary is to adhere to an ideological device that produces reality as something that happens outside, in the “real world”. As film scholar Bill Nichols writes, a documentary film is a “discourse of the real” (1991, p.40), one that implies, as scholar Aida Vallejo notes, a “veracity pact” whereby the filmmaker proclaims reference to an external “reality”, and the general public accepts that proclamation (2007, p.11). What distinguishes a documentary film is the type of reading that the filmmakers aspire to, that the work itself requests, that the circuits through which the latter circulates validate and that the spectator agrees to carry out. The film producer offers a set of signifiers with the promise that they relate to the actual world; the spectator *expects* that promise to be fulfilled.<sup>6</sup> This is a powerful device, one that constitutes *Apuntando*’s first and most important frame and that pervasively sticks to it, thereby conditioning whatever further functions may be assigned to it and whichever uses it may be put to. As we shall see, this frame is vital to the political purchase of *Apuntando*.

We may add that *Apuntando*’s framing as a documentary is complemented by the fact that, as most politically-committed documentaries, it is presented as an “independent” film, one that is not subject to the economic or political interests of the state or of the mainstream media, the two habitual sponsors of film production in Colombia. This frame is constituted by the nature of the venues in which the film is presented: Bogota’s *Cinematheca* has a long-standing tradition of screening independent films, and, as we shall see, the academic and cultural venues in which *Apuntando* has been presented also presuppose a certain form of engagement that is aware of the independence of the work, both in terms of its production and of its

critical intentions. Spectators are not charged to view the film, which further supports its independence, insofar as the lack of a fee implies that the film is not only independent from mainstream interests, but also, from the realm of commoditized film products.

No representational ontology roots a film like *Apuntando*; however, the veracity pact frames the film's contents in such a way that gives what is said in the film, and what is said *through* the film, a valence that resonates with the "real". The question of the real that this documentary film refers to is in fact crucial to its denunciative strategy. The film presents statements by government and military officials, who present the *Héroes* campaign as a governmental triumph, counterpoising to them the critical comments of the scholars and journalists who denude the campaign's ideological function. In this strategy, we can identify the classic critical move by which an underlying "reality" – that of a fundamental social injustice – is rendered visible by the clearing of the unreal, the spectacular and the ideological – the propaganda campaigns themselves. This is politics as unconcealing, political intervention as the unearthing of deceit.

As a *discourse of the real*, *Apuntando* appeals to a "reality" that belies the discourse of military propaganda. But it can only do so because the genre of documentary film has already laid the interpretative ground on which the spectator may apprehend the film. The spectator *expects* an allusion to "reality"; the film denounces propaganda discourse as a construction of the real (therefore suggesting that reality is always a construction), thereby clearing a space in which the film's own discourse may take on the aura of the real (its suggestion of the constructed nature of the real notwithstanding). Even though the film's critical discourse is not explicit, the rhetorical effect of the process described above is that the "truth" has been revealed. This is how the genre's veracity pact aids the film's politics.

This political function is intended by Gordillo and Federico. While the film stands well on its own, it is actually one of the products of Gordillo's larger research project addressing the military propaganda and communication strategies of Uribe's two government terms.<sup>7</sup> In her work, Gordillo analyzes the propaganda campaigns produced during Uribe's governments in terms of ideology and hegemony, and biopolitics (Gramsci, Althusser and Foucault provide the backbone to her work). If one takes Gordillo's theoretical construct and extends it to the film, one may frame it as a work that seeks to reveal how the *Héroes* propaganda campaigns work to produce, to use Althusser's famous words, an "imaginary relation of individuals to the real relations in which they live."<sup>8</sup> What would be imaginary is the belief that Colombia's problems will be solved

through greater security, hence, through greater military investment and action; in turn, the "real" relations are marked by social inequality, not to mention government repression and, as the film suggests, crimes committed by the armed forces against the civil population such as the "false positives".<sup>9</sup>

In this reading, *Apuntando's* function as the unveiling of ideology is closely related to the film's capacity to resist state hegemony as instantiated by the *Héroes* propaganda campaigns. The reader will remember that, for Gramsci, state power not only functions through direct and explicit action, but also, through the articulation of political, social and cultural practices and discourses, an articulation that is possible because the state monopolizes institutions such as education and communication channels such as mass media.<sup>10</sup> Such articulations become hegemonic when they permeate all or at least most aspects of life, becoming a society's "common sense"; hence, state and military propaganda are a vital part of state hegemony and, as fascism has made us painfully aware, the more pervasive it is the better it works. *Apuntando* recalls Nazi propaganda minister Goebbels's famous statement that "a lie repeated a thousand times becomes a truth". The naturalizing effect of state propaganda is directly mentioned in *Apuntando* through the voice of one of the critics of the *Héroes* campaigns, an international journalist who states that many in Colombia came to see the country's improved security represented in the fact that Colombians can once again travel to their *fincas*, even whilst admitting when asked that they themselves did not own one. The suggestion of the naturalizing effect of the *Héroes* campaigns, we may add, also has the effect of equating Uribe's governmental strategies to those of fascism.

It follows in this reading that *Apuntando* sets out to counter the state's manufacturing of truth by producing its own *reality effect*, in which government military propaganda is revealed for what it "really" is: a husk that contains at its core structural inequality and state repression, a mask that effaces the interests of a minority for whom the sort of security that Uribe sought to provide is of utmost pertinence. This is a politics of counterhegemony: the production of an alternative narrative in relation to security and propaganda, one that deconstructs the naturalizing effect of state propaganda in the hope that such an awareness may help Colombians understand the importance of resisting state structures and unjust, or misoriented, governmental policies. This is, of course, a relatively weak intervention: the audience of an independent documentary film is of a far smaller scale than that of the state-funded, prime-time televised propaganda campaigns. But no one would reasonably expect a film to change a country. As Gramsci insists, the key aspect of a hegemony, or a counterhegemony, is *articulation*, i.e., the chain of common interest that links different social actors



Stills from *Apuntando al corazón*.

around a shared goal.<sup>11</sup> How the film resonates is much more important than the extent of its direct intervention; as the reader shall see, this is the crux of my argument.

It may be that the politics of the film do not lie so neatly in its function of unveiling and in its countering of hegemony – at least, not in the sense that derives from the analysis of its contents alone. For, as the observation of the reactions from the spectators at the Cinemateca attested – as much as the reactions from spectators in other venues in which the film has been presented – they, for the most part, have not come to this film with their eyes bandaged. Quite the contrary, most of the film’s spectators seem to have had beforehand a good idea of how the government manipulates public opinion, and have clearly not swallowed whole. Here, I want to direct my analysis in a different direction, one that hinges on a key insight from the feminist theorist Eve Sedgwick, who, in her compelling book *Touching Feeling* (2003) holds that *paranoid theory* – critical theory of

the sort that the above analysis resorts to – in many instances merely states the obvious, since many of the injustices of the world are plainly in sight, and there is therefore little need for acts of revealing.

I do not mean to say that *Apuntando’s* counterhegemonic function is superfluous or irrelevant; quite the contrary, I hold that it is, albeit not on its own terms. That is, I do not think that the political scope of this film lies per se in the unveiling of the otherwise concealed, although I do think that this intention is important to the political effect that it is having, at least up to this point. Whatever theory tells us that a film such as *Apuntando* may be achieving in a political sense, the analysis of the actual practices of reception is more revealing of the film’s work. From this analysis, to which I now turn, I want to



Stills from *Apuntando al corazón*.



propose that the film's political purchase is best understood in terms of its agency. In other words, it is not as much about *what* it enounces as about *what it does* by enouncing. I will begin this final part of my paper with a brief trajectory through the acts of *enframing* through which the film has been presented thus far.

Even though *Apuntando* is a low-budget production and that the film's producers made almost no investment in advertisement, the film has enjoyed a considerable vitality since its release. Thus far, it has been presented in independent film theatres, film festivals, academic events and activist circles in Bogota, as well as in Berlin, Hamburg, Rome, New York, Buenos Aires, Morelia and Guadalajara (Mexico), Madrid and Zaragoza (Spain). The events framing the presentations range from activist film festivals (such as the Globale-Bogota Film Festival 2013) to syndical organizations (such as the Social Syndical Internationalist Solidarity Committee of Zaragoza) and activist groups (such as the Collective Action for Youth Conscientious Objection).<sup>12</sup> Several articles have been written reviewing the film, almost all of which address its critical claims from politically-committed perspectives.

It is significant that the film has circulated mainly through academic events and venues. In Bogota, the film has been featured in the Universidad Minuto de Dios (a Catholic church-owned university, to which Gordillo is affiliated), the National University (the country's largest and most important university), The Javeriana University (owned by the Jesuits), Universidad Católica (catholic), Universidad Pedagógica (state-owned) and Universidad Santo Tomás (elite and private). It has also ventured in New York's NYU, Madrid's Universidad Autónoma, Buenos Aires's Universidad San Martín and Guadalajara's Instituto Tecnológico y de Estudios Superiores de Occidente. Some of the academic events framing the presentation of the documentary were conferences and seminars in which the Colombian political situation was a subject in one way or another; others were similar academic events devoted to pedagogy and research. In a couple of cases, the film was used by professors lecturing in Latin American studies and communication/media studies programs.

The film's circulation in academic events is a direct result of the fact that, lacking funding for distribution, it has been mainly promoted by word of mouth and through digital social media.<sup>13</sup> In the majority of cases, Gordillo, being a scholar, has been the direct link with other academic institutions. The result of these circumstances – which owe a lot more to contingency than they do to planning – is that the film's audience has been preponderantly an academic one: from scholars attending conferences and seminars, to graduate and undergraduate students. Further, the

majority of events presenting the film have been directly or indirectly concerned with studying the political situation in Colombia, and in several cases this has not been without a political investment of their own.

Thus, several of the frames through which the film has been presented are in themselves antagonistic of the Colombian state, of governmental use of propaganda, and of the military, when not openly activist. The activist group Collective Action for Conscientious Objection, for instance, presented the film in preparation for a public demonstration against mandatory conscription, held in Bogota a few weeks after the film's release. The 2013 Globale-Bogotá Film Festival's theme was "Critical and Emancipatory Practices". At Universidad Santo Tomás, for all the conservatism of this elite school, *Apuntando* was presented as part of a film cycle called *Conflict, Memory and Resistance*. Even in international contexts, the film has rarely been framed in a neutral manner. In Buenos Aires's Universidad San Martín, it was part of a series of conferences called *Protest in Colombia and the Peace Process: Tensions of the Neoliberal Project in Latin America*.<sup>14</sup> And in Zaragoza, Spain, the film was presented by the Committee of Internationalist Social Solidarity, whose very name says all that we need to mention here about their social commitment.

These discursive frames complement what I have called above, following Vallejo, the veracity pact of documentary film, not a posteriori, but by way of *anticipation*: in their own manner, and in the terms proper to their contexts, they already enounce or suggest what the film can therefore only focus, explicate and expand. The suggestion that such discursive frames convey – in synthesis, that the film will critically address an issue pertaining to contemporary social reality in Colombia – constellates with the frame of the genre – by which spectators concede that the film will refer to actual events – in such a way that what I have called above the film's "reality effect" – its work as unconcealing – can hardly come as a surprise. I would argue that the institutions, film festivals, academics and activist groups that have chosen to show the film have not sought in it enlightenment or revelation as much as they have sought confirmation, focus, complement, supplement, or a different perspective on the discourses that they already upheld.

In this context, it is difficult to imagine that the film's argument concerning the importance of the role of propaganda in Colombia's contemporary political context would come as a big surprise. While many of the details that the film presents concerning Uribe's Democratic Security Policy and the *Héroes* military propaganda campaigns were probably unknown to its spectators, plausibly, they merely served to reinforce what they did know, or at least



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suspect, about the relation between the propaganda campaigns, the human rights violations and the concealment of social injustice under Uribe's government. After all, by the time the film was released, scandals such as the "false positives" had already been covered by the media, and it is no secret to anyone at least sparsely informed that propaganda is fundamental to contemporary politics (Goebbels and his offspring teach us this). Colombians at a sufficient distance from the crimes of the military, and from the suffering produced by the irregular conflict, are in a position in which they are likely to be aware of the ideological role of state propaganda; those who have been directly affected by military crimes and by the conflict do not need a film, or any other cultural work, to mediate their awareness of state crime, repression and inaction. No reality effect is more powerful than lived reality.

The lack of surprise in the reception of the film's critical discourse is confirmed by the questions and comments raised by attendees in the cases where there has been a space for them to converse with the directors (I focus here on Colombian attendees and audiences, as it is on them that the film

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*Apuntando al corazón*.



Stills from *Apuntando al corazón*.

may have the most immediate political effects).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, participants seem to have been more concerned with finding out how the directors were able to access top military officials, and have them talk about military and propaganda strategy as openly as they do in the film, than about the ideological functioning of the *Héroes* propaganda campaigns. Their relative disinterest in the film's work as unconcealing, their level of engagement with recent Colombian political affairs, the provenance of not few of them from activist or left wing intellectual circles and, in general, the quickness with which audiences have caught on to the film's critique of military propaganda all suggest that the film's discursive content – we may say, the purported "hidden reality" unconcealed by the film – has not come as a great surprise to them, indeed, not nearly as much as the fact that military and government officials talk openly in the film.

Nevertheless, observation of the reactions of *Apuntando's* audiences in the different instances of its presentation suggests that the film is not devoid of political relevance. As was evident to me in the film's opening, spectators have been reflexively invested in *Apuntando's* critical argument, and they have engaged with it affectively. A strong critical and emotional reaction has been the constant throughout the different presentations of the film, at least in Colombia.<sup>16</sup> But, if the film merely states a "truth" that its audiences are more or less aware of and of which the institutions and events that frame it already convey a sense,

then why has it produced such reactions? I consider that, as I state above, the engagement that *Apuntando* has elicited from its audiences has to do more with it does than with what it says.

That is, I consider that *Apuntando's* political effect has to do with a certain form of agency: the film not only gives shape to a critical discourse; it *constitutes* an event in which a group of people find themselves collectively engaged with that discourse. Just as *speech acts*, as famously described by John L. Austin (1975), may be characterized as that which we *do* when we use language to assert things ("I promise to do so and so" is, first and foremost, to make a promise), we may say that a documentary film that elicits strong critical engagement, even when it merely asserts what is already known, is accomplishing things that would perhaps not occur if what it asserts were voiced by other means and in other contexts. In this sense, it seems to me that the only thing that differentiates the agency of a speaker and that of a film such as *Apuntando* is that, while a speaker *performs*, a film (or, for that matter, any visual work) *occurs*.

Instead of a notion of performance, I resort to a notion of the event. Here, I take my cue from Heidegger's notion of art as event, which I consider can be broadened to encompass any cultural work – art or otherwise – that produces a distinct relationality. I define the event as a complex emergence in space and time that brings into relation diverse elements: the materiality of the object or objects put forward, the discursive content of those objects, the affects and sensations they elicit, the discourses that frame the latter, as well as the discourses and frames that the spectator/participant relates to the above elements.<sup>17</sup> I see the event as an eruption, an emergence, one that brings into relation disparate elements whereby a suspension of the relationality that configures the habitual world is put into place.<sup>18</sup>

*Apuntando* is such an event. The film acts as a catalyst, bringing together individuals who share a common critical outlook on Colombian social and political reality. Further, it has given academic, social and political institutions and programs a focus point on which their own agendas have concentrated and through which those who are brought together under these agendas *tune in* on the critical tone of their own discourses. In the various instances of its presentation, *Apuntando* has brought together individuals who might have otherwise had a limited sense of others who share similar apprehensions in relation to Uribe's "democratic security" policies and the actions of the military. To be in an audience that harbors a common feeling of dissatisfaction, to feel that one is part of a critical collective, to find one's frustration and anger echoed in the frustration and anger of others, to feel that there are others like oneself

who would be prepared to counter state discourse and propaganda; this is an empowering experience, no matter how spatially and temporally fixed it may be.

In the Colombian context, this experience takes on a specific significance. Colombia has a sad history of violence against political activists, including violence against intellectuals and cultural producers. Not few activists have been threatened, silence or murdered. Intellectuals have had to go into exile. During Uribe's government, paramilitary forces, whose association with the government is starting to come to light, frequently targeted activists and social leaders. Government forces themselves have sometimes pursued activists, or have been complicit with illegal forces targeting social leaders.<sup>19</sup> In this context, becoming aware that one may publicly articulate a critical discourse such as that conveyed by Gordillo and Federico through their work, and that one may get away with it, takes on an important valance: it signals that conditions for the exercise of dissent are changing. And to feel oneself as part of a critical collective is to realize that, despite the history of political violence, fear may no longer be enough to contain dissent. Such is the agency of *Apuntando* as an event.

The film's event character is further aided by the *affective tuning* it produces. Here, I follow Sylvan Tomkins, who sees affects as complex embodied states of the psyche that entwine endogenous, exogenous, perceptual, proprioceptive and conceptual/interpretative elements.<sup>20</sup> As "complex, free-floating phenomena", affects may attach to "things, people, ideas, sensations, relations activities, institutions, and any number of things, including other affects" (cited in Sedwick, 2003, p.19). In Tomkins's view, their purpose is to amplify and co-assemble with drives, in order to spur us into physical or cognitive action. Hence, affects are central to political agency: reflexive, critical engagement with a given social or political circumstance is not enough to spur us into action; in order to have sufficient motivation, we must also be affectively engaged – even if this engagement is the result of critical reflection.

I propose that *Apuntando* is, not in the least, an *affective event*, one which conditions its spectators as they engage with the documentary's discursive content. As Walter Benjamin was already aware, our response to a film screened in a theatre is marked by the collectivity of such an experience; in this sense, a film is a work of a fundamentally different sort in comparison to more traditional art forms.<sup>21</sup> That group behavior is contagious is, of course, no secret; it is indeed something that I observed in *Apuntando's* opening presentation, where the audience's initial silence gradually turned into outbursts of critical laughter and, at times, rage. As I have mentioned (and as has been the case in other

screenings of the film), one could sense a general feeling of discomfort, frustration and even anger in the audience. The discursive frames, the film's implicit critical discourse and the collective, embodied experience of the spectator produce an *affective tuning*, which further adds to the feeling of being part of a political collective – even if a transient one.

There is in fact a performative aspect of the event that *Apuntando* installs. In the film's opening presentation, and in subsequent screenings, the film directors have been present to answer questions and converse with the audience. In these instances, the academic ritual of Q&A becomes a space in which the directors do not merely add to the film's discourse and expand relevant information, but one in which they also contribute to the film's political purchase *qua event*: their very presence, their directness and openness in answering compromising questions and their politically-motivated comments contribute to a sense of dissent being possible and of the formation of a critical collective. Indeed, the question concerning the potential risks that the directors assume by directly criticizing the military and the government has come up more than once. The directness and the political commitment with which the directors have answered these questions – especially Federico, who, I must say, is quite the activist – has left audiences with an evident sense of critical confidence and enthusiasm.

In *Apuntando*, there is a sequence filmed in a military base in which an army general assembles a group of troops and addresses them. The general speaks of the transformation that the army has helped to produce in Colombia since 2002 (the beginning of Uribe's government), of the heroic valor of the soldiers who have been sacrificed in the conflict, of the debilitating blows that the FARC "terrorists" have suffered at the hands of the army, and of the government aim of assuring security so as to foster foreign investment (Uribe's entire governmental discourse in a nutshell!) Although it is not mentioned in the film (a fact that one may justly see as an unwarranted omission), this assembly was in fact staged for the directors.<sup>22</sup> Anything like this would have been unheard of in Colombia just a few years ago.

Such a staging, of course, came as a surprise for Gordillo and Federico. As was surprising for them, and for those who heard the story in the Q&A sessions, to discover that the military officials they had interviewed were willing to sign releases for their statements, even after watching the film and becoming aware of its critical content. Certainly, the reactions of military and government officials to the film have been perplexing. The fact that the state-owned television channel Señal Colombia is interested in broadcasting the film is conspicuous in this respect. As is the case

of a review article published in the Association of Retired Officials of the Armed Forces webpage, which is unexpectedly inoffensive: while it does state that the film is critical of the army, it does very little to counter this, merely hinting, by echoing the voice of the creator of the *Héroes* propaganda campaign, who in the film says that "the anti-heroes are those who ignore or question their soldiers."<sup>23</sup>

Such unexpected benevolence seems to be borne out of a concerted decision to be open to dissent. It speaks of a governmental awareness of the extent of its hegemony, and of how it may benefit from the situation: by allowing for criticism – indeed, by facilitating it – the government and the armed forces come across as truly democratic institutions. It must have crossed through someone's mind that the *Héroes* propaganda campaigns and, in general, the efforts to improve the government and the military's public image, have been pervasive and consistent enough as to remain unscathed by a small-budget documentary film with a relatively narrow audience. Although we are still to see when and how it will be broadcast on national television, we can be certain that such broadcasting will not be powerful enough as to counter the pervasiveness of governmental propaganda. If anything, the government adds to its public image through the purported neutrality of its television channel and through its apparent openness to critique.

And they would be right in thinking so. As I write above, no one would expect a film to change a country. As I also write above, the key aspect in Gramsci's understanding of hegemony is the articulation it produces. For sure, the Colombian government, at this day and age, has constructed an articulation sufficiently strong as to resist the relatively weak jabs of a documentary film; if anything, this articulation may perhaps be strengthened by allowing the film to be and even by promoting it, for such actions speak between the lines of democratic openness.

Articulation is equally important for a counterhegemonic politics. However, the analysis of the event character of the film and of the processes of affective tuning it produces requests that we push further the Gramscian notion of articulation, beyond ideological practice and discourse. *Apuntando* does not contribute to a counterhegemonic articulation merely because it unveils the functioning and the shortcomings of military and government propaganda. Rather, in every one of its instances, it is *the event of an articulation*, insofar as it relates those who come into contact with it through a common sense that, in contemporary Colombia, resistance is possible, as well as through a sense of being part of a collective spirit of resistance. Importantly, it articulates its spectators around a common affective modality, a feeling of dissatisfaction entwined with a



sense that, finally, something may perhaps be done about the extra-legality of state power, which may perhaps even prompt them into thinking that they themselves may do something to counter government hegemony.

To be sure, an articulation based on a common affective modality can only be transient. But it is the power of affects to motivate action; one would hope that, at least for some, this motivation lasts long enough for them to take the baton. An articulation based on an affective modality must be constantly produced; to have been part of the event of *Apuntando* is, potentially, to have been primed for the production of other political events. In showing that such events are possible, and in prompting other Colombians to pursue their politics with collective confidence is, ultimately, where *Apuntando's* political dimension is to be found. The politics of this paper lie in framing that dimension.

## NOTES:

**1** *Plan Colombia* is generic name of the US-backed program to militarily aimed at curtailing drug smuggling, defeating FARC, as well as the operational branch of Uribe's Democratic Security Policy

**2** As I conceive it, the *political* is one of several dimensions of cultural artifacts. Other dimensions may be characterized as the technological, the economic, the aesthetic and the social. While, in a general sense, the politics of a cultural object may be regressive or transformative, in this paper, I will reserve the term "politics" to refer exclusively to the transformative potential of cultural objects.

**3** As film scholar AidaVallejo states, even in its most "purist" and observational instances, a documentary film presents a minimum of subjectivity represented in the decision-making process that constitutes shooting and editing. See: Aida Vallejo, "La estética (ir)realista. Paradojas de la representación documental", *Revista Digital de Cine Documentário*, n. 02 (Caminas: Universidade Estadual de Campinas, 07/2007). Available at: [http://www.doc.ubi.pt/02/aida\\_vallejo.pdf](http://www.doc.ubi.pt/02/aida_vallejo.pdf) Accessed October 22 2013.

**4** After all, a documentary film, as the positivist notion of document, is a formal and ideological device outlined in a time when the then newly invented medium of film was establishing itself as a means for the mimetic registering of the visual world and when the emerging social sciences were embracing positivism as their epistemological tenure.

**5** See: Veronica Stoehrel, *Cine sobre gente, gente sobre cine: entre el documental televisivo y el académico* (Halmstad, Halmstad University Press, 2003).

**6** After all, as Stoehrel points out, the spectator is she or he who both presences and *spectates*. See Stoehrel, *Cine sobre gente*.

**7** This work is currently under review for publication. I am grateful to Gordillo for allowing me access to the manuscript.

**8** *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an Investigation)* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970),

p. 32. Available at Marxists.org: <http://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>

**9** I will not develop in this paper the known critique of ideology, according to which this concept presupposes a notion of a "more real" reality veiled by ideology. But I will state that I do not consider, as some authors do, that this problem in the concept should lead us to discard it: one may think of ideology being one type of discourse – that of the dominant class – the unveiling of which leaves us, not before the "real relations", but before a more politically productive representation of those relations. But what is important here is how it resonates with the notion of the "real" in documentary film: just as the latter, ideology has its own "reality effect". For an interesting consideration of the concept of ideology from a post-structural and a post-Marxist perspective, see Yuezhi Zhao, "The "end of Ideology" Again? The Concept of Ideology in the Era of Post-Modern Theory", *Canadian Journal of Sociology*, 18(1) (1993).

**10** See: Antonio Gramsci, "The State and Civil Society", *Selections From the Prison Notebooks* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971).

**11** For a thorough consideration of the notion of articulation in relation to Gramsci's concept of hegemony, see: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy- Towards a Radical Democratic Politics* (London: Verso, 2001).

**12** In Spanish, respectively: *Acción Social Sindical Internacionalistas-Comité de Solidaridad Internacionalista*, *Acción Colectiva Para la Objeción Colectiva de Jóvenes Objetores y Objektoras de Conciencia*.

**13** See, for instance, the film's Facebook webpage, at <https://www.facebook.com/apuntandoalcorazon?fref=ts>. Accessed November 12 2013.

**14** See the university's information journal webpage, *Noticias UNSAM*, Comienza el Círculo de Estudio sobre el proceso de paz y protesta social en Colombia, October 15 2013, at: <http://noticias.unsam.edu.ar/2013/10/15/comienza-el-circulo-de-estudio-proceso-de-paz-y-protesta-social-en-colombia-contradicciones-en-el-modelo-neoliberal-en-america-latina/> . Accessed November 12 2013.

**15** I am grateful to Gordillo and Federico for recording the conversations they have had with the audiences of their film, and for letting me access these recordings.

**16** Although I also have information, via my interviews with the directors and reports given to them by some of the organizers of screenings and presentations in venues abroad, that such reactions were also elicited in those cases, although with a different valence: in general, foreign audiences were disappointed by learning that Colombian governments have allied with paramilitary forces and committed crimes against civilians.

**17** It is only fair that I offer a brief commentary on Heidegger's concept of art as event (*Ereignis* – I cannot comment here on the problems of translating this term as "event"). *Event* is a difficult yet fundamental concept in Heidegger. It appears formulated in his *Contributions to Philosophy*, and becomes a pivotal theme in his later writing. In the essay titled "Be-ing (Enowning)", Heidegger states the following: "Be-ing is a possibility, what is never extant and yet through e-vent is always what grants and refuses



in not-granting" (p. 335). Through the event, being not only constitutes an opening, but also, refuses disclosure and withdraws into mere presence and objectivity. According to Heidegger, this refusal is the "proper" way for being to be. Being is always wrapped in a shell of non-being (objectivity, instrumentality), which must be *nihilated* for being to be: "the richer the "nothing", the simpler the being" ("The Nothing", *Contributions*, p. 173). Being is never fully disclosed, but always in the process of happening; hence, we may say that, for Heidegger, the event is the happening of the disclosure of being.

Art is one of the ways in which being is disclosed. In the lecture "What Are Poets For?" (*Contributions*), Heidegger uptakes the concept of the event in relation to art. Art is an event because it frees being from its productive "validation" – be it in relation to trade, capital, power, or to cultural values such as those of ethics and aesthetics. These things are *nihilated* in true art in order for being to be. Even though he does not write directly about art as event in his famous essay *The Origin of the Work of Art*, the concept is clearly at work in it. In this essay, the philosopher asserts that the artwork is not a given fact, but rather, an opening of a world that is always in the process of becoming; this is what is implied in the use of the participle in the term *enframing* (*Gestell*), as the way in "which the work occurs when it sets itself up and sets itself forth" (*Origin*, p. 64). The work's thrust forward is a form of displacement: "To submit to this displacement means: to transform our accustomed ties to world and to earth and henceforth to restrain all usual doing and prizing, knowing and looking, in order to stay within the truth that is happening in the work" (p.64). Art suspends the habitual relations that constitute the world of common experience in order to install a new relationality that configures a new world.

I bracket the ontology of Heidegger's understanding of the event, and place the emphasis instead on the relationality (*enframing*) that the artwork produces. In this view, an artwork (or any cultural work) may place habitual relations in suspension without necessarily "disclosing being" – that is, without operating the radical *nihilation* of all forms of validation.

See: Martin Heidegger, *Contributions to Philosophy (From Enowning)* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); "The Origin of the Work of Art", *Poetry, Language and Thought* (New York: Harper and Row, 1971).

**18** This is merely a working concept, not in any way a theory of the event. As I say in the previous note, I am merely bracketing Heidegger's ontology of being. I am not replacing or denying it.

**19** The Colombian state has recently produced a thorough investigation of the history of the conflict, which exhaustively documents the crimes of all the warring factions, including those of state armed forces. See: Grupo de Memoria Histórica. *Basta ya! Colombia, memorias de guerra y dignidad* (Bogota: Centro Nacional de Memoria Histórica, 2013).

**20** That is, I follow Tomkins indirectly, via Sedgwick's compelling reading of his work on affects in chapter 3 of *Touching Feeling*.

**21** See Benjamin's *The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical reproducibility*, second version, especially section XV (*The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (Cambridge: Belknap press, 2008).

**22** Federico approached the general with the purpose of interviewing him, but was greatly surprised when, testing his luck, the general complied to his request of permission to film a soldier assembly: not only were they allowed, but the assembly was produced for him! Of course, the ensuing discourse that the general delivers cannot be taken as an example of what a typical addressing of the troops may be. One is tempted to think that, in a brilliant strategic move, the general has succeeded in coopting the documentary as a space of visibility – that is, as yet another space for military and governmental propaganda.

**23** In fact, the article in the army veterans webpage is merely a republishing of an article that appeared in several critical online journals and websites. Nevertheless, it is merely presented as being of "interest to their community", without any sort of critical framing. See: a) ACORE, "*Manejo de la imagen del ejército genera debate en medios de prensa*" ("Army Image Management Generates Debate in the Press"), August 2013. Available at: <http://www.acore.org.co/index.php/noticias/item/300-manejo-de-la-imagen-del-ejercito-genera-debate-en-medios-de-prensa>. Accessed September 30 2013; b) Jairo Marcos, "*La publicidad maquilla la imagen del ejército colombiano*" ("Advertisement Cosmetizes the Image of the Colombian Army"), Hemisferiozero, August 4 2013: <http://hemisferiozero.com/2013/08/04/la-publicidad-maquilla-la-imagen-del-ejercito-colombiano/>. Accessed September 30 2013.

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