

Affecting the Conflict

Mediations of the Colombian War in Contemporary Art and Film

Rubén Darío Yepes Muñoz

Series on the History of Art



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Cover design by Vernon Press. Image by Libia Posada, *Signos Cardinales* (detail). Installation: drawing, text, photography. Variable dimensions. 2009-2024.

Dedicated to Lilian, Héctor, Liliana, Juan Diego, and Violeta.

To all artists striving to be agents of change.

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Foreword

Ana María Reyes
Boston University

I first encountered Ruben Darío Yepes Muñoz's scholarship when asked to moderate a panel on "Art and Memory" at the Latin American Studies Association conference in 2016 and to comment on his presentation "Art of the Conflict: Contemporary Mediations of the Colombian War." I have studied and written about the works of Juan Manuel Echavarria, Doris Salcedo, Oscar Muñoz, and Beatriz González in relation to activism, memorialization, and reparations in Colombia. Therefore, I was thrilled to learn about the dissertation Yepes was advancing at the University of Rochester. Upon completion, his study was awarded the prestigious First National Prize in the category of Historic, Theoretical and Critical Text concerning Colombian Art (2017) and published in Spanish as *Afectando el conflicto: Mediaciones de la guerra colombiana en el arte y el cine contemporáneo* by Ideartes, Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá (2017). I enthusiastically read and agreed to write this foreword for the first English translation of the book.

Affecting the Conflict: Mediations of the Colombian War in Contemporary Art and Film offers a nuanced and multifaceted analysis of how art affects its viewers within the context of the Colombian armed conflict in order to create the cultural and political foundations for peacebuilding. This study is all the more urgent when considering the precarious peace process the nation is undergoing, one that is threatened by the "banality of violence" or the pervasive use of violence as a means of conflict resolution. Yepes engages key artworks produced in the early 21st century, drawing examples from public interventions, installations, performances, photography, and film to deeply explore how these contributions substantially address cultural problems in a specific socio-historical context where normative reforms have fallen short. Indeed, Colombia counts on some of the most progressive laws, including the 1991 Constitution crafted by one of the most historically diverse constitutional assemblies to date and an ambitious Transitional Justice framework designed to address the complexity of the Colombian armed conflict. However, having laws and institutions that respect human rights has not protected Colombia's inhabitants from the systematic and gross violations that continue to afflict millions and threaten the sustainability of the peace process. Decades, if not centuries, of political violence have created a culture of paralysis and indifference from urbanites who are relatively isolated from the brutality in the countryside or the plight of the internally displaced. Yet, no one has been untouched by the ubiquitous

threat of violence, let alone the complicity of those indirectly benefiting from decades of warfare. This book considers how creative works have the potential to affect their audiences by unsettling their subjectivities and fostering awareness of their political capacity for transformative justice. Yepes does not offer a facile or unrealistic explanation for how artworks operate politically. Instead, the author draws from affect, psychoanalytic, and phenomenological theories to examine the *potential* impact of artworks on the viewers who bring their socio-historical subjectivities to their aesthetic engagements.

The book discusses how the “visual regime” of the Colombian armed conflict poses two serious obstacles for Colombian artists in addressing political violence. First, the media’s saturation with sensationalized violent imagery has either desensitized urban audiences, who are largely shielded from rural warfare, or amplified fear, thus prompting people to turn away as a coping mechanism. Second, Colombian cultural producers, including filmmakers Lucas Ospina and Carlos Mayolo, coined the portmanteau, *pornomiseria*, (*Manifiesto de la porno-miseria*, 1978), to critique exploitative depictions of poverty and suffering. Consequently, artists are tasked with avoiding complicity or perpetuating the harm afflicted by mimetic representations of graphic violence and victimhood.

Yepes highlights the work of prominent artists whose works have evaded these pitfalls by *mediating* the conflict rather than representing it, following John Guillory’s conceptualization of mediation. Indeed, Juan Manuel Echavarria has consciously and expertly confronted the effects of the mass media on national audiences since the beginning of his photographic career. All of the creatives discussed in *Affecting the Armed Conflict* profoundly *move* their audiences through a wide range of artistic strategies that accrue “affective energies.” Yepes studies how the work’s affective power operates on viewers’ sensibilities and cognition to mediate their relations to the armed conflict and the victims. In the first chapter, “Sublime Affects,” Yepes explores the aesthetic sublime of Doris Salcedo’s urban interventions, Delcy Morelos’s immersive installations, and María José Arjona’s site-specific performances, all of which traffic in spatial and durational intensity. Chapter Two, “Practical Aesthetics,” turns to participatory, dialogical pieces that bring together people who have experienced the war in vastly different ways. Juan Manuel Echavarria and Ludmila Ferrari challenge the role of artists by acting as facilitators or mediators co-creating with victims and victimizers. The resultant exercises in memory-making and audience-building fostered nascent political communities. Chapter three, “Indexical Affects,” considers three photographic series by Miguel Angel Rojas, Libia Posada, and Oscar Muñoz. The affective charge, Yepes argues, derives from their “double-indexicality,” that is, the indexical character of the photograph is magnified by violence’s brutal imprint on mutilated, disfigured, and/or disappeared bodies. This virtual presence provokes feelings of both

cultural complicity and political responsibility. Yepes turns to film in chapter 4, “Cinematic Fictions,” and chapter 5, “Cinematic Powers,” as the medium most imperiled of falling into representational traps that aggravate sensationalized or Manichean war rhetorics. The six films directed by Ciro Guerra, Óscar Campo, Carlos Gaviria, Alejandro Landes, William Vega, and César Acevedo refuse to represent the war overtly but rather “intimate affectively” through a sense of impending danger as well as violence’s inscription on the bodies and minds of the characters. Spectators are invited to intensely experience the characters’ lives suspensefully, painfully, and tragically.

Drawing from affect theorists, mainly Baruch Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari, Yepes discusses how these aesthetic encounters potentially transform subjectivity and, ultimately, behavior. They make spectators aware of their political agency, hence fostering a process of ethical becoming. Differing from formalist interpretations, Yepes convincingly shows how the artworks’ political expediency requires engagement with historically situated audiences whose knowledge and experiences of the armed conflict condition their reception. Indeed, Oscar Ocampo’s psychological thriller, *Yo Soy Otro*, serves as an allegory for this very dynamic (chapter 4).

The affective power of these artworks fosters new relationships between spectators and victims of the armed conflict and thus propels viewers towards accountability and a sense of “ethical care.” In this process, Yepes argues powerful affective strategies *move* distant subjects closer together in what Jill Bennet terms an “empathic experience.” However, Yepes does not overburden the concept of empathy by suggesting a collapse of subjectivities but rather an aspirational rapprochement between those who have endured the war personally and those who have experienced it from afar. While true empathy is an impossibility, diminishing this irresolvable gap is worthwhile and necessary for solidarity and engendering political emotions.

The works studied here do not operate in isolation but rather join forces with social movements, activists, and victim organizations in ushering significant change. Indeed, the past decades have witnessed the emergence of victim organizations in Colombia as powerful political actors. According to a key official of the Victims Unit, the creation of the most comprehensive reparations program in the world (Colombia’s Law 1448 of 2011) was in no small part due to victim activism. The same can be said about the success of the 2016 Peace Accords. The solidarity among victims of public, paramilitary, and insurgent forces has delegitimized violence as a political or economic tool. When victims acted in unison to challenge the moral authority of all justifications for war, they successfully pressured the State and the FARC-EP to the negotiating table in Havana. These two milestones for Transitional Justice in Colombia are symptomatic of a major cultural shift in the country. Cultural producers,

including visual artists and filmmakers, have played a significant role in making visible the pain and suffering obscured by failed strategic, economic, and political rationalizations for warfare. No doubt, they have helped construct the cultural and political conditions for not only transitional but also transformative justice to take place. *Affecting the Armed Conflict* joins these efforts by theorizing how sustainable peace can only be achieved if we invest in the difficult and multilayered cultural work necessary to combat the current regimes of violence.

Ana María Reyes
Boston University
December 13, 2024

Preface

This book is based on my PhD dissertation research at the University of Rochester. Upon finishing my PhD and with the aim of making my work available to a Colombian and Latin American readership, I translated the manuscript into Spanish and published it as *Afectando el conflicto. Mediaciones de la guerra colombiana en el arte y cine contemporáneo* (2018). The interest that my work has received in academic congresses and from colleagues in the US convinced me of the pertinence of publishing an English version. Responding to comments on the Spanish version, recent changes in the context of the Colombian armed conflict, and new developments regarding some of the artworks I address, this revised English edition presents several changes. I have clarified the concept of mediation, which is key to my main argument, and made changes to other theoretical passages, also for the purpose of clarity. I have also reworked, or reframed, some of the concepts that I utilize in the analysis of the artworks. There have been changes in some of the artworks and new exhibitions of them that are relevant to my argument and that I have incorporated into the analysis. I have also updated some of the statistics regarding the Colombian armed conflict and its victims. Additionally, I have reconsidered the idea that the armed conflict is finally coming to an end. While it may have seemed like that around the time I finished the dissertation (when the government and the FARC guerrilla had just signed the most significant peace treaty in the country's history), the political violence that has developed since then has trumped my optimism. Finally, I have included a section on the broader cultural, historical, and theoretical implications of the analysis developed throughout the book.

The research this book presents was possible thanks to a Fulbright/Colombian Ministry of Culture Scholarship (2012), a Grant for Research on Colombian Artists from the Colombian Ministry of Culture (2014), and a Mellon/ACLS Dissertation Completion Fellowship (2016). I am indebted to these organizations and to the University of Rochester for their invaluable support.

I am also indebted to a number of wonderful and generous individuals. Several persons at the University of Rochester made key contributions to the completion of this work. I want to express my enormous gratitude to Paul Duro, whose teaching, advice, and support have been pivotal not only for this project but also for my development as a scholar. The conversations with Paul were particularly productive for the formulation of the project's conceptual frame. Robert Doran's advice and support contributed greatly to the project's philosophical sections, particularly in relation to the sublime. Jason Middleton's

input and teaching were crucial for the chapters focusing on film and for my understanding of cinematic affect. I am deeply grateful for Janet Berlo's forthright comments on my work, and for her encouraging collegial and moral support. The animated conversations with my colleagues Patrick Sullivan and Daniel Singleton in our film theory reading group contributed innumerable insights and thoughts on cinema theory and history. My colleagues Berin Golonu and S. Alana Wolf gave me valuable comments on sections of the project. I am also indebted to my dear friend Gail Goers, who revised substantial portions of the dissertation on which this book is based.

This work also benefited from the ideas, opinions, resources, and orientation of a number of artists, filmmakers, curators, gallery administrators, librarians, and film producers. The conversations and written exchanges with Delcy Morelos, María José Arjona, Juan Manuel Echavarría, Ludmila Ferrari, Libia Posada, Oscar Campo, and César Acevedo were crucial for the sections on their work. The curators and administrators of the art galleries Alexander and Bonin, White Cube, Marian Goodman, Arte Dos Gráfico, and Galería Sextante generously provided me with images and archival material. The film producers Burning Blue, Black Velvet, Ciudad Lunar, and Contravía Films kindly contributed copies and images of several of the films addressed in Chapters Four and Five. The librarians at Luis Ángel Arango Library, Javeriana University Art Documentation Center, and Los Andes University Art Library helped me locate valuable documents. Finally, I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer of this new manuscript, who provided an exemplary review replete with rigorous critiques and valuable suggestions.

Introduction

1.

I encountered Doris Salcedo's *Noviembre 6 y 7* by chance in 2002. It was one of the most impressive artworks I have ever seen. I stood on the sidewalk in awe as I observed the haphazard cascade of wooden chairs that slowly descended along the façade of Colombia's Palacio de Justicia. Despite occurring in Bogotá's bustling Plaza de Bolívar, the piece had a powerful effect on me. It was both mesmerizing and unsettling to see the chairs suspended in awkward positions, forming a dense cluster of wooden legs, stretchers, armrests, spindles, and seats. The work's architectural backdrop cued me to recall the infamous event that was being memorialized on that day, the tragic 1985 guerrilla siege of the Palacio, in which over one hundred people died. I do not know how long I stood observing the piece, but I remember the lingering aura of its unsettling effect.

Witnessing *Noviembre 6 y 7* compelled me to delve deeper into the history of the internal armed conflict that had for decades been one of the main causes of the country's crippling violence. One thing I quickly realized was that the information on the siege, and on the conflict in general, was scarce. Colombian society knew little about the events that took place, about the fate of those who disappeared, about the reasons that compelled the M-19 guerrilla group to take the building and the reasons that led the army to destroy it, about the state's hasty investigation and subsequent silence. It also became clear to me that our understanding of the causes and history of the conflict was insufficient. In this context, I saw in *Noviembre 6 y 7* a powerful example of the capacity of art to engage the country's citizens with the history of the conflict. Thus, my serendipitous encounter with Salcedo's work inspired me to study the political visual art of my home country, particularly the art related to the conflict. This study is the result of my commitment to that project; moreover, it is a contribution to our understanding of the social and political role that contemporary visual culture has played in relation to the conflict.

The study of this role has never been more urgent than now, as the country's protracted internal conflict seems to be reaching its final stages and the task of securing peace hangs dauntingly on the horizon. Although the October 2016 peace treaty signed by the government and the FARC guerrillas may mark the beginning of the end, Colombian society has only recently started to face the tasks of constructing the historical memory of the conflict, elucidating its complex fifty-three-year-long history, morally and materially repairing its more than seven million victims, and dealing with the social trauma produced

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