

# Amid Comics and *Radionovelas*: The Changing Role of The Armed Forces in Colombia's Cultural Industry

Héctor Fernández L'Hoeste / Georgia State University, Atlanta

## Resumen

El texto analiza la evolución del desempeño de las Fuerzas Armadas colombianas en el contexto de la producción cultural nacional. En términos amplios, arguye en torno al creciente papel de la producción cultural emergente de sectores militares, la cual, pasando de historietas a radionovelas, promueve de manera sostenida una plataforma nacionalista, faceta incierta en un país como Colombia, signado por conflictos internos, una continua desigualdad social y reiterados dilemas de seguridad.

**Palabras clave:** Colombia, fuerzas armadas, nacionalismo, historietas, radionovelas, radio.

## Abstract

The article discusses the changing role of Colombia's armed forces within the national cultural industry. Overall, it contends that contemporary cultural production by the military sector, from comic books to soap operas, is playing an increasingly large role in the promotion of a nationalist agenda, a development that might involve uncertain consequences in the context of a nation like Colombia, plagued by internal conflict, sustained social disparity, and security issues.

**Keywords:** Colombia, armed forces, nationalism, comics, soap operas, radio.

"In Colombia, nationalism is viewed with uncritical eyes as something good, rather than what it stands for: fascism."

— Manuel Andrade, age 19

In June 1998, the Colombian armed forces released a comic book series titled *Hombres de Acero* (Men of Steel), illustrated by Carlos Alberto Osorio, a cartoonist and advertising executive based in the city of Medellín, in the northwestern corner of the country. The comic strip chronicled the many adventures of an elite commando squad from the Colombian armed forces and its travails fighting bands of criminals; chiefly among them, one called the "Clan de los Fantasma" (the Phantoms' Clan), which, to some extent, mimics the dynamics of subversive groups and delinquents within the country. The volume introduces the elite squad, resulting from a military initiative called B-5, and shares a first adventure with readers, in which the team successfully thwarts a robbery attempt, capturing criminals. Deeply conscious of the potential of its undertaking, the comic book's narrative describes in detailed fashion the origin and skills of the squad, suggesting a mostly inclusive portrayal of the nation, with a member from every single corner of the country. Keeping in line with Biblical connotations, the twelve members of the

group include commanding Sergeant García, a native of the *Llanos*, the eastern plains of the country, where many new oil resources have been unveiled under the watchful eye of the armed forces; Corporal Caycedo, from the Valle del Cauca, the region surrounding the city of Cali, a karate master and specialist in night operations; soldier Polo, a *costeño* (a native of the Colombian Caribbean) skilled in the use of the M-60 machine gun, a trusted staple of Colombia's military; Medellín native Jaramillo, the best parachutist in the group; Mosquera, a *chocoano* boxing champ (playing on associations between this sport and Afro-Colombian heritage); Correa, a skilled motorcyclist from Armenia, a small city at the heart of Colombia's coffee-growing region; and Bogotano Sergeant Hernández, an explosives expert trained in assault tactics, among others. Thus, unlike previous cultural initiatives, which failed to consider the importance of regional affiliation within national constructs and depicted the country from the perspective of a single location—most commonly, the cultural establishment of the capital city—*Hombres de Acero* evinces a military institution keenly aware of the relevance of the politics of representation as a tool for co-optation and ideological dissemination. In its first issue, the series includes a laudatory letter by Brigadier General Carlos Alberto Ospina Ovalle, commander of the Fourth Brigade in Medellín, detailing how support of the publication will contribute to aid programs for the families of the military killed in action and a narrative detailing how the publication emerged from programs launched in 1984, which, in the course of the following decade, amid perhaps the greatest security crisis in contemporary times in Colombia, sought to improve the institutional image of the armed forces, thanks to the dedicated guidance of an interdisciplinary team of Antioqueño professionals. The text emphasizes the "professional" nature of the effort, led by General and future presidential candidate Harold Bedoya, and Major Alberto Castillo, a military officer with previous experience in the advertising sector. In fact, in a trick proper of contemporary cultural industries, which transgress the lines between fiction and reality constantly, Castillo becomes a character within the story and plays a key role within the resolution of many conflicts, serving as father figure to the commando squad as well as offering constant advice and legitimation for their struggles. Also, following long-established strategies by the comic book industry, the publication includes testimonies from children like Carlos López (age 9) and Camilo (age 8), and even teenager Juan David Villegas (age 16), looking up to Major Castillo, a man described as "mysterious," "rugged," and "impeccable," whose "warm smile and great intelligence and will have transformed this group into something marvelous." Quite clearly, *Hombres de Acero* wasn't exactly intended as an exercise in humility. Major Castillo, on the other hand, seemed quite aware of the importance of setting an appropriate tone within a narrative designed to inspire emotional responses and

national sentiment. In spirit, modesty would have contradicted any willingness to promote pride in God and country. Nevertheless, what stands as obvious in the production values of the project is the full awareness of a target market by the editorial team: a young, mostly urban, male audience, avidly seeking role models amid a national crisis rampant with thugs and evil-doers.

The following year, from April to July, the Colombian daily *El Tiempo* published *Hombres de Acero* as a serialized comic strip within its weekly illustrated magazine, *Los Monos* (The Funnies), giving wider exposure to the institutional image program, which, following a multi-pronged approach, included commercial recordings released by the BMG label and extensive paraphernalia sold by reputable marketing firms. In actual fact, from its very inception, the comic book *Hombres de Acero* includes lyrics of a song titled *Mi hombre es un gigante que viste de acero* (My Man Is a Giant Dressed in Steel) as well as the image of a compilation CD titled *Ritmos de Acero* (Steel Rhythms), corresponding to the third phase of the institutional image project. In all, *Hombres de Acero* represents a key moment in the relation between the military sector and the national cultural industry, as it marks a high point in the strategies of the institution to promote and popularize, more than an image, an ideological agenda, deeply rooted in love for the state. In this manner, by way of a comic, the National Army consolidates its role as an ideological apparatus, in full collaboration with key members of the private sector.

Interestingly, during the same period, from 1995 to 2009, the armed forces' radio network experienced substantial and aggressive investment, going from eleven portable transmitters to a full-blown grid headquartered in Bogotá and thirty-one radio stations allotted throughout the country. Known as Colombia Estéreo, this radio network includes varied programming, though its unquestionable object is the improvement of the military sector's established image, as well as the further legitimation of the state, "through the celebration of the culture, principles, and values of the armed forces" ([www.emisoraejercito.mil.co](http://www.emisoraejercito.mil.co)). According to the medium's Web site, general programming includes folklore (*Folclor vallenato*), testimonies from ex-guerrilla members (*Renacer*), uplifting commentary for soldiers (*Flor del Monte*, led by a homonymous female anchor), general news (*Informativo nacional*), and even soap operas (*Héroes de Guerra*). This latter genre, in particular, dramatizes the predicaments of troops across the nation, developing a series of storylines focused on the multiple challenges faced by Colombian soldiers in their assumed defense of civil order. In addition, it relies firmly on a longstanding tradition of cultural habit in Colombia, whereby generations of urban and countryside dwellers embraced radio as an ideal vehicle of news and entertainment; chiefly among them, longwinded narratives depicting the dramatic entanglements of soapy heroines and the daring endeavors of characters like *Kalimán*, *El Hombre Increíble* (The Incredible Man) and *Arandú*, *El Príncipe de la Selva* (Prince of The Jungle). In point of fact, as a cultural habit, consumption of radio content in Colombia was actively nourished by a solid relationship with the Mexican radio industry, which used to supply many of the scripts for these convoluted yarns, which were then efficiently adapted to the national context.

In recent years, as attested by growing coverage of the genre in the press, the radio soap opera or *radionovela*, as people tend

to call it in Latin America, has experienced a revival of sorts in the Colombian radio industry.<sup>1</sup> In particular, privately run radio networks, like the Cadena Radial Colombiana (CARACOL) or highbrow staple HJCK, or public radio stations, like Radiónica, have chosen to record soaps based on the lives of renowned composers, like Johann Sebastian Bach or Antonio Vivaldi, and even contemporary literary works like *Los detectives salvajes* (The Savage Detectives), by Chilean author Roberto Bolaños, respectively. According to the press, such interest for the revival of a radio genre of Cuban ancestry, greatly popular during the 1960s and 1970s, is the result of a concern for nostalgia in mass communication media, more than willing to refresh and update the experiences of national listeners. Then, in the case of military broadcasting, the *radionovela* is situated in the context of cultural recovery, alluding to a mostly countryside experience accustomed to the accomplishments and cultural consumption patterns of what once stood as the Golden Age of national radio in Colombia.

As in the case of comics, the rapid development of the military radio network highlights the maturing nature of the Colombian armed forces as parts of the communicative process between the nation and the state. It reveals what I would argue is a relatively recent process in the country: the awareness of the key role of the military sector as a cultural actor—rather than political, social, or economic—within the civil conflict. In plain terms, this late emphasis on military media, heavily centered on the promotion of a "professional" image, reflects a transition in Colombia's military evolution, whereby increased professionalization—that is to say, the development of an institution in which individuals can advance a lengthy career regardless of political affiliation or changes in government; a well-trained, standing army—is viewed as an indelible sign of institutional maturity. Theoretically speaking, advocates of this agenda equate it with detachment from political circumstances, an aspect especially welcome in Latin American latitudes. From this viewpoint, taking into account that the current Colombian president served as Secretary of Defense during the Álvaro Uribe administration, growth in the media apparatus of military institutions, a constant in places like the U.S., where armed forces radio stations habitually partake in programming by well established media brands, like National Public Radio (NPR), can be construed as symptomatic of democratic development in the relationship between the executive branch of government and the military sector.

In large part, this shift has resulted from qualified foreign advice. Given its usual reliance on popular culture devices, the U.S. military appears to be involved in these efforts. In terms of *Hombres de Acero*, the U.S. Army Civil Affairs and Psychological Operations based in Fort Bragg, North Carolina played a helpful role, according to sources in Medellín's Fourth Brigade. In terms of the radio network, given the relevance of technology, it is also likely that international advisers may have played a part, though the highly distinctive character of programming reflects local talent. Deep knowledge of military policies and equipment, and sensible sharing of information—so as not to reveal sensitive data—are, for the most part, signs of careful consideration on part of the staff. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the Colombian military has effectively appropriated the necessary know-how to run a cultural apparatus in a successful fashion, be

it through graphic narratives (comics or video) or audio content, through the airwaves or via Internet. As a consequence, it has developed strategies that are far more operative and refined than the time-honored carrot-and-stick approach. This experience delineates a military body that, while excelling in traditional areas—Colombian elite units, like the *Agrupación de Fuerzas Especiales Antiterroristas Urbanas* (AFEUR), are among the most highly trained ones in the subcontinent, thanks to US and, most likely, European and Israeli participation—is expanding into less traditional domains, which confer higher visibility within national society. In this sense, Colombia's armed forces begin to replicate the cultural dynamics of military institutions in Europe and the U.S., whose role and participation is shared by way of modern-day toys (GI Joe, Lego, etc.) or motion pictures (*Act of Valor*, *Battle of LA*, *Battle: LA*, etc.). This evolution in the attitude of military institutions, increasingly aware of the importance of the cultural dimension of their identity, marks a new stage in the promotion of nationalist values within the Colombian context. Emulating the experience from previous years by the advertising sector, which, to this day, has figured as the most accomplished ideological state apparatus in the country (i.e., among many others, the “*Colombia es pasión*” and “The Only Risk Is Wanting to Stay” campaigns), elements of the Colombian armed forces have solidified their positions as key architects of nationalism within the structure of the state. All the same, in a country such as Colombia, besieged by armed conflict and security issues, this progression suggests an indeterminate path, which should be carefully watched and analyzed by civil society.

Though *Hombres de Acero* was eventually discontinued, it remains, to this day, one of the most recollected episodes of institutional promotion in the history of Colombia's cultural industry. Distribuidoras Unidas, the company in charge of merchandise distribution during the three years of production of the comic book, with twelve issues and related gear, including hats, bags, and backpacks, certainly signals it as an important factor within military circles. In addition, the country has assimilated the reiterated presence and relevance of a military radio network as a consequence of the civil conflict and accelerated technological proficiency within the ranks of the armed forces. In fact, many Colombian music artists tend to visit the facilities of the radio network, as they are keenly aware of the chain's appeal to a prospective countryside audience. In a market of this nature, unaccustomed to a critical view of the relationship between the construct of nation and the reality of the state, to be seen with or to allude to the role of soldiers as champions of national identity can signify a boost in sales, a fact keenly evident in the career of singers like Juanes or Carlos Vives, who occasionally hint at the hardships of soldiers in their lyrics. This latter aspect is heavily promoted by Colombia Estéreo on its Web site, with imagery related to the corresponding artists' visits, and is consistently interpreted as a validation of the close relationship between the Colombian Army and the general population.<sup>2</sup> Thus, this up-to-date disclosure of cultural enactment by the military proposes uncritical romantization of the conflict as an alleged defense of a benign order, relying heavily on the appeal of popular culture constructs within the younger population. Furthermore, what it does best is to consolidate the establishment and recognition of a form of government as a dominant, hegemonic brand of

violence, correspondingly supported by coercion and the will to impose an order. In other words, following Walter Benjamin, for a government to be effective it must portray itself as capable of violent action (Benjamin, 1991: 44). The ruse resides in the ways it embraces this theory. Hence, if it manages to accomplish this portrayal by way of cultural practices, in a fashion far more subtle than concretely apparent measures of martial action, its law-preserving ways, i.e., the forms of violence pertaining to the right to power, may be construed as substantially more legitimate, evincing hypothetical intimacy with political consensus. After all, glorification of violence is a well-known constant in the daily lives of most Colombians, if not by acute awareness to the country's habitual predicaments, surely by way of exposure to Hollywood and its paramount influence on mainstream culture, extensive to video games (*Call of Duty*, *Grand Theft Auto*, etc.) and television. And, to the extent that the Colombian population partakes in the consumption and celebration of these cultural goods, there will appear to be the semblance of political consensus.

A brief review of sample production by Colombia Stereo might prove handy. Broadcast a few years ago, the soap “*Detrás del cartel*” (Behind the Cartel) serves as a suitable example of current production values, neatly positioned in the time slot assigned to the “*Héroes de guerra*” (War Heroes) daily hour. Following the conventional arrangement, multiple soaps are broadcast along this schedule, each one concluding in a period of weeks. In the military case, with a medium reliant on old, proven recipes, established radio formulae play a most valuable service thanks to productions such as “*Detrás del cartel*,” which narrates the clash between government forces and people dedicated to the illegal trade of gasoline. However, despite its embracement of age-old methods, in this particular instance, the *radionovela* proposes a novelty, since the title does not hint from the start at the customary topic of the drug trade (even though the main villain of the story is described as *narcotraficante* [trafficker])—a circumstance that could be appropriated for triumphalist readings of criminal protagonism, a not uncommon event in Colombia—but rather focuses on a subject matter more familiar to the majority of listeners of the military network, usually made up of inhabitants from remote locations within national boundaries, unaccustomed to the adequate availability of energy resources. “*Detrás*” contains the usual cast of heroes and villains and, while its structure isn't particular complex, it does exemplify the customary binary order of most military portrayals, habitually predisposed in favor of the state and the established order. All installments of the *radionovela* start with the same script, listing the rugged circumstances of the conflict, alluding to the noble spirit of its protagonists, while in the background we hear an approaching helicopter, machine-gun fire, resolute orders, the pace of boots under drills, deluging rain, and climaxing explosions:

*En medio del combate, en el fragor de la guerra, en las más extremas condiciones, en los puntos más aislados de nuestra geografía, cada día, hora tras hora, los soldados del Ejército Nacional entregan su vida para protegernos, héroes de carne y hueso, historias reales, episodios que han marcado vidas y que permanecen en la memoria. Éstos son los héroes de guerra, a través de las emisoras del Ejército Nacional, porque Dios concede la victoria a la constancia: héroes de guerra. (Detrás, 2008)*

Amid combat, in the clamor of war, under the most extreme circumstances, in the most isolated corners of our geography, every day, time after time, the soldiers of the National Army give their lives to protect us, heroes of flesh and bone, real accounts, episodes that have marked lives and remain unforgotten. These are the heroes of war, [broadcast] by the radio stations of the National Army, because God rewards perseverance with victory: heroes of war.

The reverberating title of the program, “*Héroes de guerra*,” further intensifies the understanding of members of the armed forces as genuine martyrs of the current civil conflict, since, as the words at the beginning of the series proudly proclaim, “*entregan su vida para protegernos*” (they give their lives to protect us). In this case, it is important to note that, from the very introduction, with a deferential chorus, the riffs of an electric guitar, and to the beat of obstinate drumming, as a way to validate its message, the radio broadcast opens boasting of its content as “*historias reales, episodios que han marcado vidas y que permanecen en la memoria*” (real stories, episodes that have marked lives and remain unforgotten), disclosing its awareness of a leading role in the manufacture of a national memory. At the same time, it claims, “*Dios concede la victoria a la constancia*” (God rewards perseverance with victory), coalescing a particular notion of the state with divine intervention. The combination of martyrdom and godly generosity is not fortuitous. In other words, the language of the series suggests a strong bond between key institutions of the rural setting—the armed forces and the church—ratifying a construction that vitalizes an undeniable orthodoxy. To further exacerbate the situation, as a measure of narrative authentication, the series habitually reiterates that, though the narrated events are real, the names and locations have been changed out of respect (rather than as a measure of protection) for the identity of those involved. That is to say, the single mitigating factor of representation is that names have been changed out of concern for the social outcomes that bad behavior might bring about for the characters of the story. Playing to class prejudice, based on the hypothetical prestige of a surname or the infamy brought about by a family member in jail, the military account tangentially condones social consequences for wrongdoings. In this way, it supports and sanctions the present class order, unruffled by its inequities. Also, despite its allusion to a theoretical respect for identity, “*Héroes de guerra*” dares to share with us somebody else’s intimacies, at the risk of arousing irritating empathies. Quite clearly, part of the appeal to the audience is a certain degree of morbid interest. Thus, the stage is set for the enactment of an account in which the forces of the state will clearly play by the side of religious affection and in defense of righteous values like homeland and lawful order. In short, the ingredients play well to nationalist expectations.

At this point, under the ticket of “*Hoy presentamos...*” (Today we present...) the soap’s name is introduced. While most listeners would relate it immediately to the trafficking of drugs, it turns out—almost disappointingly so—the story is focused on the illegal smuggling of gasoline, a lesser dilemma routinely faced by Colombian armed contingents, which patrol the nation’s highways and encounter tanker semis with gallons of uncertain origin. The accompanying summary for previous

episodes clarifies that earlier storylines have centered on clashes with members of the FARC guerrillas, but the beginning account, which supposedly took place years before, is set in a town called Belencito, with an economy based on the emerald trade. (The name is not unlike the actual Belencito, located in the department of Boyacá, by the emerald trading region and close to where Indumil, the industrial branch of the Colombian military, has facilities.) The story begins with complaints by Juan, an ambitious 19-year-old who dislikes the arduous work at the local emerald mine. His father, Don Isidro, toeing the line of conventional wisdom, suggests patience and hard work are the best ways to a better life, but Juan isn’t one to settle down easily. Thus, from its very start, the story preaches the benefits of conformism, of not rocking the boat and pursuing more abbreviated channels to a better life, with zeal akin to erstwhile spirits in less turbulent times. From this viewpoint, the object of the account is to enhance the virtues of patience before current generations, so influenced by access to easy money under the wings of drug cartels. As it becomes plain, from the way it sanctions class outcomes to its endorsement of a righteous path, the military narrative is bent on its support of the established social order, perhaps one of the most inequitable ones of the Americas. The exemplary disposition of the account is evident from the beginning, but it’s unlikely young Juan will follow parental advice. He acknowledges that the motivation behind his aspirations is resentment, as he sees others doing well with less grueling work. In response, echoing an almost mediaeval spirit, Don Isidro reminds him of the importance of the honor of his family, an unblemished heritage, for what little they have achieved has been through hard work and dedication. Mechanisms of this sort, which appeal to a more virtuous construct of family and nation, are everyday fodder within the radio network’s programming. And though they might appear passé to urban audiences, in a rural context, where things have not changed as swiftly as in cities, they strike a cord with listeners.

A great deal of the communicative framework of the official broadcasting apparatus is grounded on conventional forms, largely supported through a skillful use of scripts. In narrative terms, the soap opera offers mostly straightforward plots, conveniently adaptable to the development of moralizing schemes. These are, by and large, stories of people who, for one reason or another, have taken a wrong step in life. Happily, the plotline seems to imply, the government’s armed forces always come to the rescue. In this sense, “*Detrás*” is quite representative of the programming available in “*Héroes de guerra*”. Like many other Colombians of his generation, Juan is a young lad, desperate to live a better, more comfortable life. Also, like many fellow members of his generation, used to consuming information at a greater pace than their elders—a fact Colombia Estéreo seems to overlook in spite of its technological prowess, with Internet streaming reaching far beyond regular frequencies—he has grown tired of waiting for a better future. Sadly for Juan, he spends most of his time working next to his dad. The trigger device for much of the action is, most unmistakably, the critique of the envy experienced by the youngster when he sees others do better. Unlike his father, Juan is greedy and quarrelsome; he spends most of his leisure time at the neighborhood dive, playing pool and drinking until late. It is there that, thanks to his friend Rodrigo, he befriends a

fellow called Andrés Manrique, a local hoodlum better known as “Superman,” who arrives to town to recruit new members for his organization. One can’t help but think that, had Juan not given into resentment through his actions, he could have simply avoided meeting people of this kind. Having joined Manrique, Juan begins his ways as a felon, stealing gas from a nearby oil pipeline by cutting a hole in the tube and collecting fuel from the spill. The general staging of the story is quite effective, for it reproduces well the conditions of many corners of the country associated with the new oil boom experienced in Colombia in the last twenty years, thanks to steady investment by Ecopetrol, the national oil company, in collaboration with many foreign multinationals. Thus, the fact that infringement of the law is tied closely to a production linked to a national resource—as opposed to illegal drugs, which are not viewed in a positive light in terms of government patrimony—points at a more intimate reading of the military soap opera as a tool for cultural coercion.

As would be expected, robbery leads to an eventual clash with the forces of the state, in which the criminals lose most of their loot: ten barrels of gas and twenty million pesos in cash. At this point, however, it becomes increasingly evident how the evolution of the plot substantiates official viewpoints with didacticisms, proper of instructive agendas and paternalist postures. For instance, the exchange between a commanding general of the Colombian armed forces and Lieutenant Uribe, a champion of official prosperity, explains in detail how robbing from the oil pipeline involves an offense to the national economy and, consequently, to the interests of all members of the nation, paying scant attention to the arbitrary nature of patrimony. That is to say, when it comes to the defense of resources, the oil industry is portrayed as an asset, regardless of the extent of benefit trickling down to the general population. Along the same lines, a subsequent conversation between Uribe and his subordinate, Sergeant Duarte, reiterates in more colorful language the terrible significance of robbery attempts to the oil infrastructure, construed as part of a national legacy regardless of proprietorship. In this way, the role of the armed forces as defenders of the interest of the state—and by extension, of some private enterprises—is posited in terms of an exchange between thugs and benefactors. Once again, echoing Benjamin’s assertion on the state’s monopoly on violence, we must conclude that anyone who dares to meddle with properties of the state must be dealt with in a resolute and decisive manner (Benjamin, 1991). Thus, Juan’s story serves as an ideal excuse for the notion that concern for officialdom must trump any other form of value.

Subsequently, the plot evolves in a diligent manner. After two years at Superman’s service, poor Juan meets his progenitor in the town of La Cruz, by the northern province of Guajira, close to the actual location where they plan to bomb an oil pipeline. At this instant, Juan realizes that, shortly after his departure, his father found a sizeable emerald, as he had predicted all of his life. The high value of the stone allowed Don Isidro to establish a business and trade jewelry, thanks to which he was able to improve his financial standing considerably. Ironically, during most of these past two years, Juan has been roughing it with a group of criminals, while he could have been enjoying his family’s fortune in a more pleasant environment. This sour twist of luck seems to remind listeners that perhaps they’re better off holding on to

some longstanding aspirations than rushing to bypass established channels of social ascent. So, when it comes to vowing for conformism, the story completes its arc. People, it turns out, are better off waiting for a stroke of luck than assuming full control of their fortunes. Anguished by guilt, Juan dutifully confesses his wrongdoings to his parent. The meeting, however, serves as prelude to the gang’s clash with the military, which are rapidly approaching town, actively following the trail of Superman’s henchmen. As a result, the town is soon covered in flames. Quite regrettably, Don Isidro stands among the casualties. Juan, repentant of his criminal ways, turns himself in and contributes to the capture of his former accomplices, denouncing each and every one of the establishments involved in the fraudulent scheme, i.e., in the sale of illicitly acquired gasoline. Towards the end, in the anticipated balance of responsibilities, the narrator informs the audience of Juan’s fate in jail, where he’s serving a sentence for a number of years, seeking to purge his sins before society.

For the most part, as a tool for communication, “*Héroes de guerra*” is limited to a few conventional schemes, typical of the *radionovela*, with dramatic highlights in which family affiliation, the pride of a job well done, and the importance of tactical discipline play a transcendent role, firmly rooted in the chain of command. As a matter of fact, several of the episodes for the series contain messages by General Mario Montoya Uribe, commanding officer of the National Army in late 2007, rejoicing at the fact that the current year was the *año del fortalecimiento de la disciplina militar* (the year of the reinforcement of military discipline), interpreted as *el hecho de saber mandar y saber obedecer* (the fact of knowing how to command and knowing how to obey) by the martial leader. In this way, he validates the notion of a linear understanding among his subordinates, according to which the scrupulous following of orders takes place judiciously accompanied by an outlying set of priorities, emanating from the government’s apparatus, rather than personal observations or individualized analysis, more liable to critical assessment. In addition, in terms of the delineation of a social order, the series makes ample use of Manichaeism, framing its characters in a systematic way as good or evil, opposite poles without sensible alternatives. Lieutenant Uribe, given his commonality with then president Álvaro Uribe Vélez and then first commander of the army, General Montoya Uribe, plays the role of redeeming hero and main character of the series, together with his trustworthy sidekick, Sergeant Duarte, just like many other dynamic duos. Superman and Juan, the pair of villains leading the illegal gas trade, are instead described in an undifferentiated fashion as *narcotraficantes* (drug dealers), *terroristas* (terrorists), *guerrilleros* (guerrilla), and *delincuentes* (delinquents), with a language that equalizes their flaws, paying scarce attention to the sizeable differences in their circumstances. In sum, there is very little psychological development in this plot, echoing the style of a tradition of dated storylines, proper of times prior to the problematization of the psyche: Superman is bad from beginning to end, and Juan, despite his belated regret, repents too late to affect the predictable turn of events. In contrast, Uribe and Duarte are virtuous, immaculate defenders of the established order; they’re exempt from imperfections and, to render things pathetic, any hint of self-criticism. Such a scheme might prove effective for radio broadcasts—and in terms of the

object of an ideological platform—but it fails to sponsor a more detailed view of the conflict. Hence, given its encouragement of a mindset supportive of rivalries in Colombia, which seldom dwells deeper into the understanding of opposing points of view, the military radio apparatus hardly does a favor to its listeners in terms of the promotion of a more critical way of thinking. An entirely different matter would be if, for example, the plot questioned the origin of social difference and proposed solutions of a constructive nature, rather than a single-minded emphasis on a belligerent disposition.

As a dramatic resort, narration relies heavily on references to Hummer vehicles and Hercules cargo aircraft, awarding a modern tinge to maneuvers by state forces, while at the same time glorifying the use of this machinery as a trait of contemporary reality in Colombia. Meticulous attention to equipment is a staple of successful narratives by the military, often fixated with technical gadgetry and statistical minutiae. In fact, in the case of *Hombres de Acero*, the first issue pays careful attention to the equipment in the hands of the commando squad, incorporating detailed descriptions of their especially modified Sikorsky Black Hawk helicopter (also known by its military specification: UH-60L), with missile launchers, rotating mini-guns, and an external storage weapon system; six powerful, all-terrain motorcycles; three especially conditioned High Mobility Multipurpose Wheeled Vehicles (aka Humvees); and a fully equipped, satellite-linked communications center. In truth, for a reality such as Colombia's, so short of money and solutions, greater community-gathered intelligence and humanitarian deployment would go much farther than elaborate machines of war. Nevertheless, the mention of Humvees and Hercules bears an ultimate purpose: to familiarize the general population with these vehicles as vessels of progress and benefactors. In this way, their existence is equated with the "caring" presence of the state, fully capable in its role as arbiter of violence. In an analogous fashion, while the efforts of outlaws seem to emerge from risky improvisation—venturing for a walk of day and a half without proper hydration, for example, as evidenced in their venture into the Guajira peninsula—maneuvers by armed personnel always result from careful planning and training. Unlike the gas smugglers, the troops move at night and compliment repeatedly the sociocultural context of the Guajira peninsula, one of the few locations with an extensive desert habitat in Colombia and ultimate setting for the story's persecution, in a masterly effort of integration for national geography. As a matter of fact, it is only thanks to the dialogue between Uribe and Duarte that many of the underprivileged listeners of the military radio network, who have never abandoned their surroundings given economic limitations, happen to hear about the extreme temperatures in this region of the country bordering Venezuela, so alien to cosmopolitan interests, even today—except for the coal project at Cerrejón. In this sense, "*Héroes de guerra*" takes us back to an old narrative practice: the role of radio as unifying instrument of the nation, sponsoring a common imaginary along many decades. By way of the saga, the story allows listeners to imagine the arid landscape and thus integrate it into a mental map of the country, expanding their repertoire for Colombian identity. Thus, as Monsiváis would claim, people listen to radio to learn how to be Colombian.

In the end, the success of the radio soap opera serves as justification for government investment in military

communications infrastructure. In a country with topography as rugged as Colombia's, though it might prove difficult to attest to the technical effectiveness of the media facilities, there are ways to demonstrate the communicational validity of its efforts. On March 31, 2008, the military radio network aired statements by a guerrilla fighter called Freddy, an ex-member of the FARC's mid-Magdalena contingent, who sought refuge through the national government's reinsertion program. In his statements, the ex-guerrilla fighter highlighted the importance of military radio and the role of "*Héroes de guerra*," in particular, as preponderant factors in his decision process.<sup>3</sup> At the end of his statements, endorsing the advertisements played during the radionovela, which mention the social action programs by the national government asking people to reveal the identities of anyone affiliated with subversive or paramilitary groups, Freddy makes a call to his ex-associates—using their *noms de guerre* (Sandra, Fabián, etc.)—inviting them to come across military lines. Events of this nature can only contribute to a heightened profile of the military communications apparatus and greater credence of the effectiveness of a media approach of nationalist proclivity.

In the end, one could wonder what is bound to happen with a popular genre like the *radionovela* when it falls in hands of communicative opportunism. Within the armed forces, old and new media—radio, comics, or Internet—represent disconcerting opportunities in terms of communication. Specials like "*Secuestrados pero no olvidados*" (Kidnapped but Not Forgotten), a program initially aired on July 3, 2008 by the army's radio network and focused on victims of kidnapping, speak volumes about the lack of official barriers when it comes to making better use of government resources.<sup>4</sup> The National Army, at times in the hands of graduates of the nefarious School of Americas (nowadays called the Western Hemisphere Institute for Security Cooperation, or WHINSEC, for short), would be better off imposing limits to practices of this nature. Though it might seem convenient that communicational links between victims and family are explored by way of the private sector—as in the case of the renowned radio program "*Las voces del secuestro*" (The Voices of Kidnapping), by journalist Herbin Hoyos Medina—another altogether different experience is that such affective spaces are transgressed in an expedient fashion by structures of the state, in turn fueling a rather upstart vision of national sentiment, according to which these Others, despite sharing national affiliation, are construed as agents of shame and cruelty, while paying barely any attention to widespread social injustice. If national identity is, by definition, the contested field of power in Colombia, it is imperative that there is a problematization of the articulation of pertinent subjectivities, especially if the tightfisted framework of the Colombian state manages to shelter them. In the case of the *radionovela*, this text is just a furtive glimpse into this evolving relationship, yet to be defined by public and private media.

In Colombia, regular surveys and polls attest to the military's positive standing in terms of public image, never mind recurrent scandals associating armed forces personnel with paramilitary squads or drug cartels, and denouncing its repressive methods among the general public. A 2009 poll by Gallup ratified the armed forces' high degree of popularity among Colombians, held in high esteem by 82% of those surveyed, men and women above the age of 18. Thus, one can conclude that, in terms of the cultural industry, the shift in approach of the military has been

most effective. Regardless of our degree of identification with its policies, it is imperative to admit that, as cultural actor, in the course of the last thirty years, Colombia's armed forces have engaged a successful streak of strategies, promoting a changing perception of its efforts in a highly effective manner. In light of its efforts as member of the cultural industry, this is no longer the institution that burned the Palace of Justice to the ground,

annihilating an entire Supreme Court, while the rest of country stood in awe of its recklessness. Rather, it is a cultural performer deeply aware of the potential of its actions as an embodiment of nationality, thanks to its updated relationship with contemporary media and long-established cultural practices, much in the manner of martial institutions in more economically advantaged corners of the world. In this context, it can authoritatively claim ownership of a "professional" status.

## Endnotes

- 1 There are many articles to this respect, for example, "*Con humor, y con 'chismes' de grandes compositores desempolvan la radionovela*" (With humor, and 'gossip' of great composers they dust off the radio soap opera) by Carlos Restrepo, published on July 16, 2008 in the Culture and Entertainment section of *El Tiempo*, as well as "*Radionovela sobrevive a través del humor*" (Radio soaps survives through humor) published on July 10, 2008 in *Cambio*. Since 1999, as attested by an editorial article in *El Tiempo* on October 26, 2008, titled "*Resucitan las radionovelas*" (Resurrection of soaps) and authored by Alfredo Dehquiz Meja, there has been an active return of the radio genre.
- 2 Juanes, in particular, appears repeatedly on the National Army's Web site, so advantageous appropriation of the singer's good will by the military institution is quite evident. Additional info is available at links like <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=200607> and, within the National Army's coverage in English, <http://www.ejercito.mil.co/index.php?idcategoria=212963>.
- 3 For additional information, see the note <http://www.emisoraejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=3549>, which contains an audio link with the statements by the ex-guerrilla member.
- 4 This program was circulated through a series of Internet messages on June 27, 2009, indicating growing government awareness of the great media potential of computer networks.

## Works Cited

- Atkins, Mark, dir. *Battle of Los Angeles*. Global Asylum, 2011. DVD.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Para una crítica de la violencia, y otros ensayos: Iluminaciones 4*. Madrid: Taurus Humanidades, 1991.
- Call of Duty*. 2003-2011. Activision/Aspyr Media.
- Caruso, D. J., dir. *Battle: LA*. Columbia Pictures, 2011. Film.
- "Detrás del cartel." *Héroes de guerra*. Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 2008. MP3.
- Grand Theft Auto*. 1997-2011. Rockstar Games.
- Hombres de Acero*. Bogotá, Colombia: Ejército Nacional de Colombia, 1998-2000.
- "Las voces del secuestro." Caracol. Radio. In <<http://www.lasvocesdelsecuestro.com/>>.
- McCoy, Mike and Scott Waugh. *Act of Valor*. Bandito Brothers, 2012. Film.
- "Misión y visión." *Emisora del Ejército de Colombia*. In <<http://www.emisoraejercito.mil.co/?idcategoria=171>>. March 4, 2008.
- "Secuestrados pero no olvidados." Ejército Nacional de Colombia. Colombia Estéreo. July 3, 2008. Radio.