Targeting “Plan Colombia”: A Critical Analysis of Ideological and Political Visual Narratives by the Beehive Collective and the Drug Enforcement Administration Museum

Carolyn Erler
Texas Tech University

This article compares the Beehive Collective’s “Plan Colombia” to a museum exhibition representing the official U.S. position on Plan Colombia. Through a dialectical (Kellner & Share, 2007; Greene, 1988) reading of “Plan Colombia” and “Target America,” I examine how each uses visual narrative to promote a particular reading of Plan Colombia. Drawing upon the body of scholarship in art education that promotes transdisciplinary approaches to studying the visual (Bolin & Blandy, 2003; Darts, 2004, 2006; Duncum, 2001, 2004; Freedman, 2003), this article employs perspectives from the field of visual communications, which includes visual narrative, visual rhetoric, and critical media literacy. I argue that teachers can use visual narrative and rhetoric to enhance their own critical media literacy skills. Literacy in these areas can make teachers more aware of the political “deep background” of visual objects and images—an awareness they must have if they are to pass it on to students.

The Beehive Collective has been a decentralized, international network of cultural workers and image-based educators whose graphic campaigns are renowned throughout South America, Central America, and parts of the global North (Hoffman, 2003). Since its founding in 1999 by a small group of youthful anti-globalization activists, the collective has created a trilogy of large-scale graphics—“Free Trade Area of the Americas,” “Plan Colombia,” and “Mesoamerica Resiste!”—that chronicle the major economic-political shifts of our time from the standpoint of those whose voices have been silenced by the corporate media (Beehive Design Collective, 2004a). The hand-drawn graphics have been illustrated narratives based on conversations between Beehive artists and indigenous and peasant farmers, activists, and researchers in Colombia, Mexico, Ecuador, and the United States (Hoffman, 2003). The collective’s “Plan Colombia” has been the product of a one-year grassroots story-gathering project conducted in Colombia by Colombian nationals working in collaboration with Colombian American and white North American members of the Beehive Collective (Erler, 2006). Because the collective has operated in countries where involvement could bring retribution from government, military, or corporate forces, individual members refer to themselves only by the first initial of their given names, followed by “bee” (re: c. bee).

“Plan Colombia”

Since 1999, the U.S. has given some $4.5 billion to a program to fight drug trafficking and leftist guerrillas in Colombia (Center for International Policy [CIP], 2006). Under President G.W. Bush, about half of the program’s budget—
$306 million (Cooper, 2001; CIP, 2001)—went to private defense contractors such as Military Professional Resources Inc. (CIP, 2007; U.S. Department of State, 2001, 2007; Harrop, 2007). Working with the Colombian military, these private armies or “Enhanced International Peacekeeping Forces” (CIP, 2006) have undertaken the large-scale fumigation of illicit coca plants using the herbicide, glyphosate. Scientists and indigenous leaders have repeatedly warned that the spraying of chemical herbicides to destroy coca fields seriously threatens the rainforests and wildlife of the Amazon as well as the health of indigenous and small farming communities. The large quantities of glyphosate dropped from the sky have killed food crops and caused a series of health problems and water contamination (Knight, 2000), resulting in what the United Nations (2004) called, “the biggest humanitarian disaster in the Western Hemisphere.”

Colombian nationals have tried to tell the story of the program’s devastating impact on peasant farmers and indigenous peoples (Hart, 2000; Leech, 2000; Refugees International, 2004; Amnesty International, 2004). It has been this story that the Beehive Collective tells in its monumental banner, “Plan Colombia” (see Figure 1).

Methodology

I became a participatory action researcher with the collective in 2005. My perspective was informed by cross-disciplinary studies in visual culture and art education (Duncum, 2004, 2001; Desai & Chalmers, 2007; Desai, 2005; Knight, 2006; Bolin & Blandy, 2003; Tavin, 2007) focusing on tactical political usages of visual media in the public sphere (Darts, 2008, 2006, 2004). As a researcher, my role in the collective was to help develop learning tools for unpacking (Keifer-Boyd, Amburgy, & Knight, 2007) the multitude of visual symbols contained in each graphic while opening them up to interpretation. The “tools” I devised were based on my experience presenting “Plan Colombia” with other members of the collective in the context of educational events called “picture-lectures.” They emerged from one particularly persistent question: If the
Beehive Collective’s “Plan Colombia” graphic was a counter-narrative of events in Colombia (Beehive Collective 2004b), what was the dominant narrative?

To answer this question, I researched the mainstream news press for images and articles suggesting an attitude, perspective, or set of ideas about Colombia and/or the people of Colombia. My guiding idea was Noam Chomsky’s (2000) suggestion to individuals who wish to decode and penetrate conventional wisdom on current events:

As soon as anything’s given with near unanimity, it should be a signal. Nothing is that clear in the world. (I)f it’s being given (near-unanimous justification by commentators, intellectual journals, newspapers, etc.) you should be asking yourself, Is that correct?” (p. 27)

Numerous examples of “near-unanimous justification” appeared in the U.S. press between the years 1998-2003 (Schemo, 1998; Gilman, 2000; Marquis, 2003; Soulas, 2003). Typical was McGirk’s (1999) *Time* magazine article, “Carpet of cocaine: Colombia’s jungles are teeming with rich, armed, drug-dealing rebels. Can the U.S. really beat them?” (p. 27). The dramatic heading and army recruitment-style photos of this article—combined with a heavy dose of rhetoric from Clinton’s Drug Czar, Barry McCaffrey—made the conflict in Colombia seem moral, epic, and inevitable. I found that *The Washington Times* was particularly active in promoting this view. Interestingly, the BBC and other international sources reported mostly bad news during the same time period (Shields, 2005; McDermott, 2000). Articles titled “Bush faces dead end over war on Colombia’s cocaine: There are few clues as to what anti-narcotics policy the president will follow regarding Latin America” (Wilson, 2001) and “U.S. Navarro Wolf warns about environmental disaster in Colombia” (Mexico/Columbia/US, 2003), in which a senator warned that the US was causing an “environmental holocaust” in Colombia, were common in the international press. My experience with the Beehive Collective taught me that the *Time* article expressed a particular viewpoint—a viewpoint in line with the goal of industries that shape thoughts and attitudes through advertising, public relations, and marketing. Recalling the words of White House Chief of Staff Andrew Card to the *New York Times* (Miller, 2002) in the run up to the Iraq War: “From a marketing point of view, you don’t introduce new products in August” (p. 1), I understood that public relations strategies were employed to sell wars. In a piece for *PR Watch*, Laura Miller (2002) explained:

The message is developed to resonate with the targeted audiences through the use of focus groups and other types of market research and media monitoring. The delivery of the message is tightly controlled. Relevant information flows to the media and the public through a limited number of well-trained messengers, including seemingly independent third parties. (p. 2)

Kellner & Share’s (2007) model of critical media literacy took a similar view of media as constructed for political purposes. The approach “brings an understanding of ideology, power, and domination that challenges relativist and apolitical notions of most media education” (p. 62). Building upon the work of Ang (2002) and Hall (1980), media theorist Douglas Kellner (Kellner & Share, 2007) proposed an active, dialectical process of meaning-making involving
the audience in “a cultural struggle between dominant readings, oppositional readings or negotiated meanings” (p. 62).

Visual Narrative and Counter-Visual Narrative

I examined two works of visual narrative that presented very different stories about the U.S. military involvement in Colombia. The first was “Plan Colombia” by the Beehive Collective. The second was the museum exhibition, “Target America: Opening Eyes to the Damage Drugs Cause,” which opened at the Drug Enforcement Administration Museum (DEA Museum) in 2002 and has since traveled to museums in five states.

A section of the Beehive Collective’s “Plan Colombia” banner on fabric is shown in Figure 2. Text has been added for aesthetic value and to inscribe meaning to the image. These patches have been popular among young activists, who pin or sew them on their clothing. They have been purchased at Beehive Collective events for a donation of $2.00 to $5.00. Figure 3 shows a poster that is sold in the DEA Museum gift shop. The gold badge has functioned in relation to the image as the slogan to the Beehive image. In this case, the badge has sanctioned government power while reassuring viewers of their personal safety (notice the DEA guns are not pointed at the viewer). In both instances, the narrative dimension of the visual has been didactic—didactic, because the rhetoric supports a point of view (Blair, 2004; Kress, 2006); narrative, because the function of the icon is to compact and stand in for the broader set of meanings (the whole story) and yet appear as if complete in itself.

Figure 2. Iconic representation: Beehive Collective “Plan Colombia” patch.

Figure 3. Iconic representation: poster from DEA Museum gift shop.
The “Target America” exhibition website has opened with a towering assemblage of the post-9/11 World Trade Center wrapped in yellow “crime scene” tape. It has represented the dominant or official narrative about U.S. military involvement in Colombia (see Figure 4). Prior to 9/11, this narrative was the “War on Drugs”; after 9/11 the story merged with the “War on Terrorism” and became the “Global war on narco-terrorism” (Isacson & Vaicius, 2003). General James T. Hill of the U.S. Southern Command articulated this shift in a 2003 speech: “Narcoterrorism in Latin America is fueling radical Islamic groups” such as Hamas and Hezbollah. This was “fact, not speculation” (Adams, 2003). The official narrative on Plan Colombia was in the State Department reports prepared for Congress (CIP, 2001, 2006, 2007). This narrative was retold in the multi-media exhibition, “Target America.” The DEA Museum (2002) stated that the educational purpose of the exhibition was to “share with the American public the significant and complex relationships between terrorism and drug trafficking.”

“Plan Colombia” is an oppositional narrative (Figure 5) that has pointed out gaps, flaws, and discontinuities in the dominant narrative. International news services and Non-Governmental Organizations have been the main sources of this narrative, which focuses on the converging issues of resource competition, national security, and contemporary warfare (Hart, 2000; Leech, 2000; Chomsky, 2000). The Beehive Collective’s “Plan Colombia” graphic narrative crystallized this point of view (Erler, 2006).
Analysis

Visual Narrative Argument

Narrative theorist Walter Fisher (1987) observed that visual images convey a narrative in a short time. Narratives tell stories that have ‘logical’ resolutions, and hence function as arguments. Because pictures are so well suited to telling believable stories, they provide an excellent medium for visual argument by means of visual narrative construction (Wirth & Gamon, 1999). Visual narrative can be didactic—a story that supports a point of view. The weakness of didactic narrative is that it does not permit the complexity of dialectical moves such as the raising of objections or alternative points of view (Blair, 1996, 2004; Kress, 2006).

In visual narrative argument, plot structure appears straightforward, beginning with a problem and concluding with a solution to the problem. The action is carried forth by characters that clearly embody moral principles (Weiss, 1993). In the rhetoric of the “Target America” exhibit, the problem is narco-terrorism. Narco-terrorism is perpetrated by narco-terrorists; Osama Bin Laden, the Taliban, and Colombian insurgent groups. The cost of terrorism is rendered in terms of damage to the environment, although the image selected to convey this idea shows an oil industry worker overlooking an oil spill in the jungle. The solution to the problem lies in aggressive law enforcement (DEA agents) and the heterosexual nuclear family.

The plot structure of “Plan Colombia” by the Beehive Collective reveals a very different visual narrative argument. The “problem” is the United States, pictured as a wasp or W.A.S.P. nest. The narrative begins: “The long history of colonialism in the Americas, currently manifested in the Andean region as “Plan Colombia,” is a metaphor for the multi-faceted destructive influences of U.S. foreign policy and corporate monoculture on a global scale” (Beehive Collective, 2004b).

Visual rhetorician J. A. Blair (2004) contended that to be effective, the visual properties of a visual argument must register immediately with the audience, whether consciously or not. In the W.A.S.P. scene, two images are instantly recognizable to most viewers—the map of the United States and the bar code written across the top of the map spelling: “Plan Colonia: 500 anos de terrorismo”.

The solution to the nightmare depicted in the “Plan Colombia” graphic lies in the work of the ants. In the final scene, titled “The Nightmare Brought to Justice,” Leafcutter ants dismantle the twisted pipeline that spells out the name of the country that has suffered so much violence. Ants of resistance are busy breaking up the nightmare scenes and taking them back, piece by piece, to the earth. As the Beehive Collective (2004b) proclaimed, “Composting the nightmare, processing it through the filter of the earth, will assure that what grows back will not be just as destructive” (p. 6).

Argumentative Space

In “The Rhetoric of Visual Arguments,” Blair (2004) explained that in presenting works of visual rhetoric, the presenter must be sensitive to the surrounding argumentative space of the audience; much of the argument must necessarily remain tacit or unexpressed. The original space of the “Target
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America” exhibition was the DEA Museum. When the exhibition first opened in 2002, objects collected from the World Trade Center and Pentagon after the attacks on 9/11 were on display in other sections of the museum. Given the proximity of the two exhibits, it has been assumed likely that some visitors attended both. According to Blair’s (2004) hypothesis, this interaction would influence viewer perception and interpretation of the visual rhetorical messages.

The Beehive Collective has presented its “Plan Colombia” graphic in the context of educational events it calls “picture-lectures.” These have been 1-2 hour action-learning sessions in which two or more members of the Collective co-present the graphic as a detailed narrative. A picture-lecture has been able to happen almost anywhere—a street, a classroom, a hallway, church basement, or community center, to mention a few possibilities. Members of the collective consciously have set out to use the graphic as an educational tool to fill in the gaps of the dominant narrative and expose its inaccuracies (Beehive Collective, 2004b).

The presenter, or picture-lecturer, has been central to the Beehive event. This has been the person who unpacks the meaning of the detailed graphic and relates it to the audience. The picture-lecturer has related not only to the beliefs and attitudes of its audience, but also has known the visual imagery that is meaningful to it. Perhaps because Beehive graphics are stylistically similar to comic books and graphic novels, North American enthusiasts of Beehive graphics have tended to be youthful. As Blair (2004) stated, visual arguments rely on the rhetorical astuteness of the arguer for their success. The persuasive power of “Plan Colombia” has lain in the youth and vitality of its Beehive presenters.

Narrative persuasion has sought to appeal to the viewer’s values and sense of justice (Elsbernd, 2005; Newton, 2005). Visual narratives have been constructed in ways that allow and encourage viewers to identify with the characters in the narrative. Viewers have tended to identify with characters embodying positive moral values. We have called these characters heroes. But visual narrative has also been constructed in ways that force viewers to identify with the villain. These narratives have turned the tables on viewers who wish to stand for what is good, right, and true by compelling them to view themselves from a radically different perspective. In either case, the visual narrative has been successful if viewers identify with the intended character—victim, villain, or hero—and temporarily accept the author’s version of events (Blair, 2004).

As in popular theater, characters broadly conceptualized as victims, villains, and heroes have carried the action in visual narrative (Weiss, 1993). In “Target America,” the DEA (2002) cast the 22,000 U.S. citizens who died from drug-related causes in 2002—“seven times more than those killed in all of the September 11 attacks”—as victims of narcoterrorism. The villains of the narrative were drug traffickers and terrorists. “Target America” focused on two geopolitical situations—Afghanistan and Colombia—and held two organizations—the Taliban and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia-People’s Army/FARC-EP—responsible for the phenomenon of narco-terrorism. The relationship between drugs and terrorism has been described in general terms without historical context: “Political instability, geography, money, and violence breed both terrorism and drug trafficking” (DEA Museum, 2002). The heroes

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of “Target America” have been law enforcement officers—especially DEA agents—and ordinary citizens who say no to drugs. Parents who set a good example for their children have also been said to play a key role in winning the global war against narco-terrorism.

In the “Plan Colombia” graphic, the victims are the estimated 3 million internally displaced Colombians, many of them indigenous peoples from the Amazon (Refugees International, 2004). The villains of the narrative are the voracious consumers who dwell in the global north—especially in the United States. Eyes fixated on television and computer screens, U.S. citizens have barely noticed as its government gives 98 million taxpayer dollars to the Colombian military—which holds one of the worst human rights records in the world—to “secure” a pipeline for big oil interests. Equally guilty are the multi-national corporations who exploit the country’s rich biodiversity for enormous profits while an estimated 64% of Colombians live in poverty (Refugees International, 2004). The heroes of the tale are those who continue to struggle for human dignity against all odds: the indigenous farmers who practice sustainable agricultural methods, the exploited workers who organize a union and lock hands in a road blockade. Above all are the tiny but tenacious ants of the resistance (see Figure 8), or Leafcutter ants, that work in secret to break up the nightmare and return it to the heart of the earth for regeneration.

Works of visual narrative seek to create and recruit true believers to a particular ideological position or activist cause. I believe the goal of a Beehive curriculum based on the “Plan Colombia” graphic should be to clarify this process rather than adopt a defensive stance against it. Aristotle’s (350 B.C.E./1991) On Rhetoric identified the art of rhetoric with knowledge of modes of persuasion. Some questions to ask in the process of becoming knowledgeable of these modes are: What is the argument? Does it make sense? What are the gaps in the argument? Who is trying to recruit me? What for? Is it a worthy cause? Who will benefit? Who will lose? What are the basic principles of this cause? Do I agree with its principles? What do I believe in? What am I passionate about?

An example of a recruitment image is the “Target America” logo (Figure 6), which depicts a gigantic evil-doer dumping drugs on a diminutive crowd of people whose
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hands are raised to the sky. Absent from the scene is the hero who would stop the narco-terrorist’s assault. The poster is a promotional tool for the “Target America” traveling exhibition, which draws audiences from schools, churches, and community centers (DEA Museum, 2002). The message of the exhibition is that you can be an effective hero in the global war against narco-terrorism by saying no to drugs, being a responsible parent, and enforcing the law.

“Plan Colombia” is a recruitment poster of a different kind. Because most North American viewers are unaware of the crisis in Colombia, their initial reaction may be one of skepticism. The Beehive Collective counters viewer disbelief by explaining that its graphics are based on the testimonials of living witnesses to the events in Colombia. Convincing viewers to suspend disbelief would be easier if the Beehive had collected video or audio documentation of these testimonials (unfortunately, they did not). Persuading non-activist viewers to accept the basic premise of “Plan Colombia” is a complex task because it demands one to engage in critical self-distancing and reappraisal. Specifically, the graphic asks citizens of the United States to see themselves as fat, self-absorbed slugs (Figure 7). The Beehive hopes that those who can accept this point of view will want to quickly distance themselves from it by embracing the role of the Leafcutter ant—the activist hero (Figure 8). Making this two-part leap of identification is critical to becoming a worker in the anti-globalization, pro-environment, pro-human/indigenous rights movement.

Multiple Perspectives, Differing Lines of Sight

In societies where every aspect of public and private life has been permeated by the influence of visual media, it is important to acknowledge that at times there appears to be no “outside” to the spectacular environment. Young people who have been politically disengaged because they recognize the insincerity of political actors can be re-engaged by a pedagogy of visual narrative that acknowledges the fakery of spectacle without rejecting it completely or turning it into a celebration of surfaces. The Beehive Collective wishes to engage viewers in a dialogue about the relationship of fact to fakery, taking the position that misinformation shapes public opinion and manufactures consent for status quo policies that are not in the people’s best interest.

The “learning tool” I designed for helping viewers to read “Plan Colombia” resembles a map of a theater. The theater represents the world: no one exists outside it. What one sees, hears, understands, and remembers depends on where one is located in the theater. Projected on the screen is an endless stream of political dramas featuring villains, victims, and heroes. Every person in the theater occupies a position and plays an active role. There are no “outside,” “in-between,” or “suspended” ideological spaces, (except in the

Figure 7. North American larvae.
imaginary), which would defeat the purpose of confronting viewers with the reality and inevitability of personal engagement in the political world. There are dangers, of course, as no ideological position is objectively “true” or “complete.” However, my own perspective is that subjects/viewers must accept danger as an unavoidable part of living in a dangerous world. By the same token, my own perspective is that safety, detachment, and neutrality are illusions of the privileged.

In my proposed theater-as-world, all narratives—including narratives of non-violent resistance—can be structured in an infinite number of ways. In a manner similar to Jerome Bruner’s (1986, 1990) conceptualization of narrative, play, and possible worlds, students may ask themselves: What characters are omitted from this narrative? If an omitted character were to suddenly appear in this scene, what might it say? Could that alter the course of the narrative? Could I be the omitted character who suddenly appears? If I were in that role, what would I say or do? What roles could I play? What role do I play now? Engaging students in informed creative inquiry-based dialogue can help them develop a view of themselves as players in a world of many narratives, many realities, and possible choices.

**Beehive Collective as Pedagogical Tool: Picture Lectures as Praxis**

The Beehive Collective has delivered picture-lectures in a variety of school settings. Schools that host them tend to be small, non-public, and experimental
such as the Grassroots Freedom School in Tallahassee, Florida. However, the Benjamin Franklin High School (public charter) in New Orleans and NOVA High School (public alternative) in Seattle both hosted the Beehive Collective in 2003 (Beehive Collective, 2007). Obviously these have been exceptions. For educators who cannot imagine the Beehive Collective being welcomed to their school, the question may be how—or whether—to bring politically charged works such as “Plan Colombia” into the classroom. As I have argued in this paper, a comparison of “Plan Colombia” to “Target America” affords multiple levels of viewing. At a basic level, comparison involves recognizing differences linked to subject position and point of view. In the process of comparing, viewers learn basic facts about the conflict in Colombia (if not known before). At another level of viewing, a search for what “Plan Colombia” and “Target America” have in common may reveal both to be works of visual narrative. In visual narrative, certain parts of a story are left out while other parts are accentuated.

Teachers are free to find their own ways to teach “Plan Colombia.” In my own experience with middle school students, I found “Plan Colombia” useful for introducing the notion of history as a construction, a negotiation—even a war zone. If a teacher could accomplish this and nothing else it would be a success, for many public schools still teach the same version of American history that was taught 50 years ago (Kincheloe, 2001, 2004).

While college students and other adults can benefit from a comparison of “Plan Colombia” to “Target America,” secondary school students can use their own textbooks as points of comparison. History textbooks are full of visual materials that have the potential to speak louder than words, and for many students probably do. An example of how to get students to think critically about the images in their textbooks would be to ask students to find a picture of Spanish explorers or conquistadors in their history textbook and bring it to class. The picture might look like the cover of an educational film from Discovery Education (2005), showing a white man gazing through a telescope from the deck of a ship (Figure 9). The teacher can ask students: Who is in the picture? What is he holding in his hands? What is he looking at? Who is not in the picture? Why is no one in the picture but this man? How does the film’s title relate to the cover image? The teacher could then ask the students to compare this image to the image of a Spanish explorer or conquistador in the “Plan Colombia” graphic (Figure 10). How are the two pictures similar? How are they different? What is the creature in the Beehive image? Why did the artists choose a wasp? What is it holding in its hands? Why did the artists draw skull-and-crossbones on the blanket? What does this mean?

When presenting “Plan Colombia” to middle school students, teachers must explain that the graphic attempts to show history from the point of view of modern-day indigenous Americans. This should raise questions about

Figure 9. Explorer image, Discovery Education.
the images the student brings: does it also show history from a particular perspective? Whose point of view does it represent? Who decides what is printed in textbooks and what is left out? The teacher can ask students to imagine themselves on the other side of the discoverer’s telescope and create a picture of what the scene looks like from her/his point of view. The range of pictures generated by such a question could become the basis of more questions, discussions, and exploratory projects.

In closing, I mention that a large part of my research study on the Beehive Collective has involved analyzing and interpreting viewer comments about “Plan Colombia” and “Target America.” The data, which was outside the scope of this article, focused on the ways viewers identify with different character types (Erler, 2006). One conclusion of my study was that identification, or the momentary opportunity to see events from another point of view, was a critical function of visual narrative. Even more than words on a page—which can be very powerful—pictures enable flights of re-embodied consciousness. Without such flights it would be impossible to feel empathy or solidarity with others, to join with people all over the world in proclaiming, “another world is possible.”

Visual narrative offers but a momentary opportunity—roughly equivalent to Barthes’ (1981) “punctum”—to see differently and possibly to BE differently. Of course, nothing can force viewers to risk seeing differently. But if the “puncture” is deep, what began as a brief opportunity might open onto something more sustained—a passion for justice ignited, a given worldview reframed, a rigid mind angered ajar.

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