

**War
Stories**

**The Culture
of Foreign
Correspondents**

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Introduction

REPORTING SALVADOR

*"Within the logic of capitalism
the free press is simply another market
and in its totality
every person it touches must pay for it:
for the people, freedom of the press costs twenty cents per head."*

—from the poem "Statistics Concerning Liberty"
by Salvadoran poet Roque Dalton (1987:16)

I was visiting a member of the Salvadoran Foreign Press Corps Association (SPECA) when suddenly the shout "Un muerto! Un muerto!" ("a corpse") rang out in the halls of the Camino Real Hotel.¹ The reporters spent most of their time at the Camino—writing, talking, playing, but most of all, waiting in their rented offices. They waited for interviews, press conferences, and if really lucky, a corpse. It was the fall of 1991 and the war in El Salvador was coming to an end, but the battlefield death toll remained as high as ever as both sides fought for territory and increased leverage at the negotiating table. The number of "political" killings had been steadily decreasing, however, so this corpse excited the journalists.

"Un Muerto!" The members of the corps poured into the hall, smiling and laughing, hoping this one would be news. Like disciplined firemen they jammed into the elevators, ran through the lobby, jumped into their vehicles and were off. They would not have to go far. The body had been dumped just blocks away.

The photographers took the lead, moving towards the body *en masse*, while searching for the most dramatic angle.

They began shooting immediately. Rather than anarchic competition, the photographers performed a disciplined dance they had developed and perfected during countless other encounters with the dead. They moved slowly around the body, synchronizing their movements in silence. Alonzo, a Salvadoran journalist, explained: "You look at things with the view of the press, not that of a man. To see the dead, you look at the corpse from different angles and then do interviews of the survivors. 'How did it happen? Who was killed?' This is not normal." Not normal for them, but necessary.

The young, tired looking Green Cross worker standing near the body had taken part in this performance just as often. He had already done his initial body work, measuring the man's corpse as well as his relative location to the curb and corner—a forensic archaeologist conducting a surface survey. He held a blanket, but dared not cover the body until the photographers' dance ended. He stared at the photographers with contempt while other journalists approached to interview him.

A small crowd gathered on each side of the street. They stared at the dead man, comparing his corpse with others they had witnessed first-hand or in the daily paper. I looked for some emotion in their eyes. There was none. The adults and even the children had that stone-faced stare so common among Salvadorans. Emotion, passion, allegiance are too dangerous to exhibit in public.

I too was dancing with the photographers, so as not to get in their way or in their photographs. As they continued their "soft murder" (Sontag 1977:15) of the corpse, I scribbled meaningless notes, anything to avoid looking at the dead man. "You know how it is," wrote a Vietnam correspondent Michael Herr, "you want to look and you don't want to look" (1968:18). This is a common attitude among reporters, a near-addiction to violence. Participant observation, the great lie of Anthropology, betrayed me in this regard. Unlike my research subjects, I could not get over my initial feeling of basic revulsion, disbelief, and incomprehension looking at these macabre images. It takes much more practice.

Everyone has some relationship with terror. For many it is anesthetized distance, violence via remote control, voyeurism. Others are more directly involved in the sort of violence that characterizes contemporary El Salvador, unwilling participants in a culture of unarticulable fear and terror. War correspondents have a unique relationship to terror, however, a hybrid condition that combines both voyeurism and direct participation. For these "participant observers" violence is not a matter of "values" in the moral sense of the term, but instead "value" in the economic. They need terror to realize themselves in both a professional and spiritual sense, to achieve and maintain their culture identity as "war correspondents."

"He is laid out like Jesus," I wrote in my note pad, "his arms outstretched, legs crossed at the ankles, a bullet hole in the open palm resem-

bling a nail wound." I wrote that and other senseless words; anything to keep busy, anything to keep from thinking about the cooling flesh in front of me as human, as a person who minutes before got shot while attempting to steal a woman's purse. That was, in fact, the story. The corpse was the culmination of a failed robbery attempt on a bus, an ex-combatant trying to steal food money from others who also barely had enough to eat. A vigilante foiled the thief's attempt, killing him with a shot to the head, and somehow, one through the hand. The driver stopped the bus long enough to open the door and shove the man's body out on the street before continuing his route. It is a common saying among Salvadorans that "through ten years of war, El Salvador has not stopped working."

As the formal conflict came to an end, the fundamental structures of social injustice and daily violence, which first gave rise to the war, continued without interruption. As the combatants began returning to civilian life, the violence simply became more dispersed and less organized. Therefore, this corpse represented a typical Salvadoran story. Too typical, too confused, and ultimately, too complicated for news.

"Cultural constructions of and about the body," explains Nancy Scheper-Hughes, "are useful in sustaining particular views of society and social relations" (1987:19). Dead bodies have served the metaphorical purpose of sustaining the first world view of third world society as conflicted, tortured, and perhaps, barbaric. "No body, no story" has become the foreign correspondents' most basic rule (Massing 1989:43).

Likewise, dead bodies have been a primary phenomenological and metaphorical site of political contestation. Salvadoran opposition groups and international solidarity organizations use images of corporeal violation as a means to sensitize the world to terror and violence, perhaps having the reverse affect of "making the horrible seem more ordinary" (Sontag 1977:21).

Part of the reason corpses have been an integral part of this discourse is that they have no power to speak for themselves. "When the camera is focused on those who have been literally reduced to bodies, dead bodies," writes Max Kozloff, "the photograph's exploitation is shameless. The dead are recommended as subjects because they lack any defense against the camera and because they have top political value" (1987:210). That is what brought the press running from the Camino in this case. As they sped by the barefoot kids begging for change at the corner, over the ravine-sewer *barrancas* where many Salvadorans live, past a fortified car dealership, to their destination in a middle class neighborhood, they hoped to find such a commodity, a body with "top political value," a fetish to embody the more mundane and constant violence all around them.

Yet, this body, the corpse of a Salvadoran thief-ex-soldier, would not become currency in the aforementioned battle. It lacked sufficient "political value." It would not be highlighted on a government billboard

condemning FMLIN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front) "terrorism," advertised in the "urgent action" alerts of the left, nor splashed across the front page of the world's newspapers. The messy nature of the incident would provide political capital to no one, because it would not fit easily into the two dimensional discourse of terrorism and human rights. Wrong body, wrong story. This corpse served no journalistic purpose and was soon forgotten.

As the journalists moved back toward their vehicles, they spoke of an upcoming party and made jokes at each others' expense. This was a normal scene for them. Respect for the dead is not a cultural universal, at least not during war and not for journalists. But, reporters are a community in and of themselves. They work together, play together, and often, live together. They share an integrated set of myths, rituals, and behavioral norms. They are, in short, a culture—as coherent as any in the postmodern world. This work is an ethnography about this seemingly familiar, yet oddly alien and exotic culture.

Why an Anthropologist Studied a Press Corps

Like Hortense Powdermaker (1950), the first anthropologist to do research among media professionals, I have had to convince many people (from friends to immigration officials) of the legitimacy of my research. "Is that anthropology?" asked several. As Powdermaker argued in the first chapter of *Hollywood: the Dream Factory*, "Why an Anthropologist Studied Hollywood," anthropologists bring important theoretical tools and methodological skills to the study of popular culture, mass media, and professional groups (Henry 1963:45–99). My choice to focus upon the practices and beliefs of the people who report news is representative of this anthropological emphasis. I spent over a year observing and interviewing journalists, sitting in on SPECA meetings, eating with journalists, spending time at their houses, watching sporting events, interviewing their sources, lounging in their offices, reading their work, attending press conferences, and traveling to the countryside with them. I was involved in a continual dialogue with the corps.

"Ethnography is hybrid textual activity," writes James Clifford, "it traverses genres and disciplines" (1986:26). That is certainly true here. I have borrowed theory and insight from Communications research, Journalism, Literary Criticism, Sociology, and of course, Anthropology, and hope this work may serve as a bridge between those fields. In that interest, I will avoid the standard theoretical polemic and will refer to theoretical issues only as needed to explicate the culture in question. As an interdisciplinary text, there is precious little space to be given over to the internecine quarrels that currently dominate and often paralyze the social sciences. To borrow a phrase from my journal subject, much of the

current debate is simply too "inside baseball"—that is, too self-referential—for the purposes of interdisciplinary research, ethnographic inquiry and public scholarship.

The levels of surveillance and representation involved in media ethnography are daunting. It feels odd observing those in the act of observing others, writing about their writings about others, and so on. The object of study becomes increasingly difficult to locate.

Ronald, a young U.S. reporter, joked about hiring someone to study my behavior as well. Although a Salvadoran man occasionally followed me during my research (probably dying of boredom), I don't believe Ronald ever followed through with his threat. Nevertheless, his comments demonstrate the ambivalence many of my subjects felt being studied by an anthropologist. Making jokes about kinship charts and "life among the primitives," the subject-reporters often did not know if they should feel flattered, insulted, or threatened by my panoptic presence: flattered, because finally somebody wanted to interview *them*; insulted, because they—established professionals and Pulitzer prize winners—were being subjected to scrutiny by a mere anthropologist; and finally, threatened by the self-reflection social research inevitably engenders. The interviews seemed both cathartic and painful as the journalist-subjects tried to make sense of their lives. Given the stressful conditions, I am doubly grateful every SPECA journalist agreed to participate in the study.

Discipline, Power, and Ideology

Ward Goodenough argues that a good test of an ethnography is whether it explains to the outsider how one should act in the primary scenes of a given society (1957). I hope this work lives up to that standard. I will attempt to explain why journalists behave as they do, explaining their work within the "disciplinary apparatuses" that pattern many of their actions. I have chosen that hybrid term—a merging of Michel Foucault's "discipline" with Louis Althusser's "industrial state apparatuses"—in order to avoid the theoretical limitations represented in simpler notions of power, such as repression and censorship. As Michel Foucault explains, power "doesn't simply weigh on us as a force that says no," but instead "traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as a negative instance whose function is repression" (Foucault 1984:60–61). Although there are repressive factors in reporting, the more powerful influences are disciplinary. Certain forms of knowledge are favored and certain discourses privileged.

A number of "pleasures"—pay, promotion, notoriety, identity, fantasy—compel correspondents to take part in the production of these institutionally-favored discourses. News production, therefore, is more

than a question of "censorship," a form of repression easily identified and relatively simple to resist. Whereas, regimes of censorship attempt to silence dissent (and usually fail), disciplinary regimes overwhelm, co-opt, incorporate, and transform it. Censorship is a simple, negative state—a significant silence. Discipline is an active, productive, and creative form of power, a more subtle, sophisticated, penetrant, and effective means of control than that which is implied by the term "repression."

By attaching the term "apparatuses," I seek to salvage a sense of organizational efficacy and political economy, concerns which are mostly missing or subordinated in the dispersed narratives of poststructuralism. The latter have focused almost exclusively upon the discursive "network which runs through the whole social body" (Foucault 1984:60-61), ignoring differentiated arrangements therein. Like all complex organisms, the "social body" contains nodal centers, hierarchies of control and specialization. Press power, for example, is coalesced into hierarchical regimes of production and distribution that must be carefully outlined. To ignore these is to fall prey to a sort of vulgar idealism whose generalizations obfuscate, rather than define the complexities of contemporary social power.

The following disciplinary apparatuses most heavily influenced reporting of the Salvadoran war: military press controls and targeted violence (chapters 1, 2 and 3), the hierarchical structure of the corps (chapter 4, 12 and 13), elite sources (chapters 5 and 6), reporting conventions, myths, and rituals (chapters 7, 8 and 9), the standard news narrative (chapters 10), and news organizations (throughout). While each of these is inter-related, the final has the most fundamental and immediate effect on the work of journalists.

Most U.S. media organizations are large corporations or subsidiaries thereof. As Ben Bagdikian explains in *The Media Monopoly* (1990:4):

Today fifty corporations own most of the output of daily newspapers and most of the sales and audience in magazines, broadcasting, books, and movies. The fifty men and women who head these corporations would fit in a large room. They constitute a new Private Ministry of Information and Culture.

To a significant degree, the ideological content of news texts is representative of the world view of the stockholders, executives, owners, and especially, advertisers who produce, manage and profit from news production (Herman and Chomsky 1988).² To contend otherwise is both politically naive and contrary to the basic anthropological premise that a culture's "utterances" (Malinowski 1922:24-25) or "ensemble of texts" (Geertz 1973:193-233) are interpretable components of their symbolically structured world view. If such a reading is appropriate for Balinese cock fights, Tlingit polatch, or Trobriand Kula, why not corporate news? News organizations do not function alone in a productive role, how-

ever. Sources are also extremely influential (Herman and Chomsky 1988:18-26). Foreign correspondents routinely rely upon elite authorities and powerful institutions as news sources (Sigal 1986:18, Tuchman 1978:15-38). The most important of these in El Salvador include (in declining order of importance): the U.S. Embassy, the Salvadoran government press office (SENCO), both FMLN radio stations (*Radio Venceremos* and *Radio Farabundo Martí*), The Armed Forces Press Service (COPREFA), and finally, the University of Central America (UCA). This is not to say that SPECA journalists are more sympathetic to the U.S. Embassy than the UCA. In fact, the reverse is usually true. However, the selective pressures of editors and the weight of traditional press practices prompt them to privilege the voices of U.S. and allied elites.

In addition to institutional influences, there is the more inclusive question of ideology. Ideology is often defined as an explicit sociopolitical program, propaganda aimed at legitimating a clearly defined system of domination (McLellan 1986:50-63). This definition of ideology is most appropriately applied to totalitarian states such as the former U.S.S.R., where both the means of coercion and the rationalizations thereof lay on the surface. The citizens of the U.S.S.R. consciously recognized the products of PRAVDA and other state organs as propaganda. PRAVDA never claimed otherwise. The situation is considerably different in advanced capitalist-democracies, especially the U.S., where the dominant means of communication are rationalized in an obfuscatory idiom of neutrality, independence, and objectivity.

The journalistic ideal of objectivity began developing in the last century. Objective journalism did not become the dominant mode, however, until well into this century (Smith 1980:61). In addition to providing a hedge against tendentious reporting, the objective code also guided the incipient mass media in their production of news sufficiently "acceptable to all of its members and clients" (Schudson 1978:4). Objectivity was partially a marketing tool.

The positivistic pretenses of U.S. news media have created a set of irresolvable contradictions for working journalists. While the rules of objective journalism prohibit reporters from making subjective interpretations, their task demands it. A "fact," itself a cultural construct, can only be communicated through placement in a system of meaning shared by reporter and reader.

Journalists cannot resolve this contradiction between professional myth and practice, only manage it through judicious use of news frames. Frames are "persistent patterns of cognition, interpretation, and presentation, of selection, emphasis and exclusion by which symbol-handlers routinely organize discourse, whether verbal or visual" (Gitlin 1980:6-7, Goffman 1974). Mainstream journalists tend to adopt frames whose logic is drawn from the most unquestioned cultural values, myths, and

ideologies—perspectives least likely to be challenged, or perhaps even identified, by audience and journalist (Hallin 1983:22–25). News frames that contain our most deeply held cultural subjectivities will therefore appear as “natural” expositions of reality (Gitlin 1980:6), common sense portrayals rather than constructed, interpretive frameworks. In other words, the objective reality of news is formed of our most fundamental and intractable subjectivities, what Herbert Gans calls “enduring values” (1980:41–52). Taking a critical view of these values, or at least the media manipulation thereof, Michael Parenti writes, “The worst forms of tyranny—or certainly the most successful ones—are not those we rail against but those that so insinuate themselves into the imagery or our consciousness and the fabric of our lives as not to be perceived as tyranny” (1986:7).

In the North American vernacular, “ideology” is considered the antithesis of “objectivity” (McLellan 1986:50–63, Gans 1979:29–30, 183–86). The belief in objectivity has itself become an ideology, however, not in the simpler sense of the term, but as a system that both legitimates and *obfuscates* relations of domination. In claiming to be objective, media organizations shield their close affinity for and incorporation within dominant institutions and ruling class structures. Objectivity asks us to accept the world “as it is” (or how it has been constructed for us) rather than take a more active part in the creative process of discovery (Thompson 1990). The ideology of objectivity “serves to inhibit imagination” (Rachlin 1988:134). Incorporated into this network of knowledge production, we cede much of our creative social power to those with the greatest means to produce “objective” truths and the greatest interest in maintaining them (Gitlin 1980:6–7).

Because I am challenging the basic premises of positivism, however, I will never resort to the banal claim that journalists and their texts are “biased.” We all are, regardless of our stake in power. Instead, I will attempt to demonstrate how the particular biases of news are connected to structures of domination, and how they are operationalized in the practices of journalists. Todd Gitlin argues (1980:10):

I retain Gramsci's core conception: those who rule the dominant institutions secure their power in large measure *directly and indirectly*, by impressing their definitions of the situation upon those they rule and, if not usurping the whole of ideological space, still significantly limiting what is thought throughout the society. The notion of hegemony that I am working with is an active one: hegemony operating through a complex web of social activities and institutional procedures.

That is the general theory of ideology I use here. I will examine the “social activities and institutional procedures” of SPECA journalists themselves to delimit the ways in which they are, and are not, patterned by the needs of power.

An Example of Institutional Influence

During the early period of my fieldwork, I was speaking with an experienced European reporter about the issue of institutional influence.³ As another journalist entered the room and began asking me questions, my informant suddenly disappeared. Rejoining us minutes later, she was holding computer print-outs of two reports she had recently written about the same event. One report was produced for a European news institution, the other submitted to a U.S. newspaper. As the author herself pointed out, the difference between the two news articles was quite striking. They are as follows:

The U.S. Report

Leftists rebels in El Salvador have admitted that one of their units may have executed two U.S. servicemen after their helicopter was shot down last Wednesday.

An official FMLN rebel statement issued yesterday said two rebel combatants had been detained, “under the charge of suspicion of assassinating wounded prisoners of war.”

The U.S. helicopter was downed in the conflictive eastern province of San Miguel as it was flying back to its base in Honduras. One pilot was killed in the crash, but a Pentagon autopsy team concluded that the other two servicemen in the helicopter were killed execution-style afterwards.

Civilians confirmed that the two servicemen had survived the crash, although no-one actually saw the actual execution.

“The FMLN has concluded that there are sufficient elements to presume that some of the three, in the condition of wounded prisoners, could have been assassinated by one or various members of our military unit,” said the rebel statement. It also said that their investigations had determined that their initial information from units on the ground was false.

At first the guerrillas said the bodies of the Americans had been found in the helicopter. Then they said that two of the three had survived the crash but later died of wounds.

Salvadoran officials have said that if the Americans were executed the guerrillas should hand over those responsible. The call was echoed by Rep. Joe Moakley (D-Mass), the Chairman of a congressional special task force on El Salvador.

“We would expect and we would demand that the FMLN turn over to the judicial authorities those responsible, if not this lack of action will have serious consequences,” he said.

But the rebel statement made no promise to do that. “If responsibility for the crime proved, the FMLN will act with all rigor, in conformity with our normal war justice,” read the

statement. The rebels said that because of the nationality of the victims, the investigations would be carried out publicly.

The rebels also defended shooting down the helicopter which they said was flying in "attack position" in a conflicted zone. The UH1H Huey helicopter is the same model as those used by the Salvadoran army and was flying very low to evade anti-aircraft missiles.

The rebel statement did not say whether those detained were in charge of the guerrilla unit which shot down the helicopter. Western diplomats believe it unlikely the unit would have time to radio for orders. The hilly terrain also makes radio communication over any distance difficult.

A U.S. embassy spokesman in San Salvador said State Department and embassy officials are studying the rebel statement.

In the last few days the rebels have privately sounded out United Nations officials about the possibility of setting up an independent commission made up of U.S. and U.N. investigators as well as the FMLN, according to a senior rebel source. However, no public proposal has been made.

The killings have opened up a debate in Washington as to whether \$42.5 million in military aid to El Salvador, frozen by congress last October, should be released. The money was withheld in protest at the lack of progress in investigating the murders of six Jesuit priests by elite army soldiers a year ago. (the final four paragraphs concern the Jesuit murder case)

The European Report

Nestled amid the steep mountains of Northern Chalatenango province, a simple wooden cross on a small hill marks the grave of a teenage guerrilla fighter. There is no name on the grave. None of the villagers from the nearby settlement of San Jose Las Flores who buried his body two years ago knew what he was called.

In life the young guerrilla had little in common with three North American servicemen who were killed last month after the rebels shot down their helicopter. They were enemies on opposite sides of a bitter war. But they shared a common death. They were all killed in cold blood after being captured.

When the young rebel was killed two years ago, I remember taking cover behind the wall of a church of San Jose Las Flores. One moment I was watching two adolescent guerrilla fighters sipping from Coke bottles and playing with a yo-yo. Then I remember seeing soldiers running, crouching, and shooting across the square. The crack of automatic rifle fire and the explosion of

grenades was deafening in the confined space.

The whole incident lasted about twenty minutes. As soon as the soldiers left, whooping and yelling victory cries, we ran across the square to find the body of one of the teenage guerrillas still twitching. The villagers said that he had been wounded and surrendered. The soldiers had questioned him—and then finished him off at close range in the head. The bullet had blown off the top of his skull.

I remember clearly the reaction of the then U.S. ambassador when asked about the incident. "That kind of incident cannot be condoned," he said, "but I was a soldier, I can understand — it happens in a war." In a country where tens of thousands have been killed, many of them civilians murdered by the U.S. backed military or by right wing death squads, there was no suggestion of any investigation for the execution of a prisoner.

At the beginning of January this year a U.S. army helicopter was shot down by rebel ground fire in Eastern El Salvador. The pilot died in the crash. But two other U.S. servicemen were dragged badly wounded from the wreckage by the rebels. Before the guerrillas left they finished off the two wounded Americans execution style with a bullet in the head.

The present U.S. ambassador referred to the guerrillas in this incident as "animals."

The killings made front page news internationally and provided the climate needed by President Bush to release forty-two and a half million dollars of military aid, which was frozen last October by Congress. U.S. lawmakers wanted to force the Salvadoran army to make concessions in peace talks and clean up its human rights record.

The two incidents highlight a fact of political life in El Salvador, recognized by all, that it is not worth killing Americans. Until the helicopter incident, in more than a decade of civil war the rebels have only killed six U.S. personnel. They have a deliberate policy of not targeting Americans, despite the fact that most guerrillas have a deep hatred of the U.S. government. As many have been killed by the U.S.' own allies. Extreme groups in the military, who resent U.S. interference, murdered four U.S. church workers and two government land reform advisers in the early 1980s.

In fact the rebels, because of the outcry and the policy implications in Washington have had to admit guilt in the helicopter incident. They have arrested two of their combatants and say they will hold a trial. They have clearly got the message. Up until the Gulf War El Salvador has easily seen the most

prolonged and deepest U.S. military commitment since Vietnam. However, it is a commitment for which few Americans have felt the consequences.

The first is a rather typical U.S. news report, a set of basic facts and elite source quotes strung together in a dispassionate and "balanced" narrative. The second is typically European (with the caveat that there are significant differences among various European news media). As opposed to her U.S.-bound writing, the author presents her own voice in the European report. The frame is mostly of her own making. Featuring just two quotes, both from like-minded sources, the European report is not "balanced" like its American twin. Furthermore, the reporter offers critical comment in her European article, signaling the reader that her sources' statements are disingenuous. Authorial intervention of that sort is generally considered taboo in U.S. journalism, a fact that led another European "stringer" (reporters who write for several client institutions or "strings") to complain that the American system "goes against the whole point of having a correspondent in the first place."

As for news frames, the American report validates the anger of U.S. officials and legitimates the predicted release of aid. As the European report ironically concludes: "The killings made front page news internationally and provided the climate needed by President Bush to release forty-two and a half million dollars of military aid." That critique applies frighteningly well to the author's other article. The editors of the U.S. newspaper in which her article appeared wrote an editorial supporting the administration's subsequent release of military aid.

There are, however, subversive aspects to the U.S. report. The author's clever quote of the ubiquitous "Western diplomat" makes it clear the FMLN high command was probably not involved in the killing ("Western diplomats believe it unlikely the unit would have time to radio for orders"). Likewise, her addition of information concerning the Jesuit murders calls the potential release of aid into question. In other words, underneath the objective text and the source-dominated frame, lies the author's critical voice, subsumed but not completely silenced.

The author has a very good reputation among the corps. One colleague referred to her as "the reporter of record." Indeed, her work is often exceptional. Why then did this reporter write two very different, even contradictory reports? The answer is simple: she had to. Every journalist must conform to the criteria of her clients. A system of sanctions and rewards—employment policies, prestige endowments, and monetary compensation—facilitate this disciplinary training process.

Framing the Violence

War and related political issues have dominated international coverage of

Central America (Soderland 1985). Press critics and academic analysts have faulted journalists for applying the following frames in their coverage of the Salvadoran war: successive U.S.-supported Salvadoran governments described as "moderate," ignoring "the regime's responsibility for the excesses being committed by security and paramilitary forces" (Anderson 1988a:239, Herman 1990:5-6, McCoy 1992), the FMLN represented as aggressive, extremist, "Marxist," and "out of touch" (Cockburn 1989, Hallin 1986b, McNamany 1983:207, 209-10, McCoy 1992:68), the civilian population portrayed as a mute mass of "innocent-victims-caught-in-the-cross-fire" (Anderson 1988a:247, 1990), nonviolent grassroots Salvadoran and U.S. solidarity protest movements ignored (McNamany 1983:204, Thompson 1992:28), U.S. orchestrated elections presented as free and fair (Herman and Brodhead 1984:93-152, Spence 1983, 1984), and U.S. foreign policy framed as neutral, benevolent or, on occasion, merely "mistaken" (Saunders 1991, Sumser 1987).

Near the end of the war, most of the aforementioned frames were still in use, though modified to incorporate new developments.⁴ The news image of FMLN guerrillas softened considerably with the end of the cold war and its concomitant rhetoric. Likewise, stronger criticism of the U.S. role emerged as congressional opposition increased during the final years of the war. News of El Salvador was shoved to the back pages during this period, however, as the region dropped out of the administration's public agenda.

This is not to say news audiences have acritically adopted the aforementioned news frames. As communication researchers have demonstrated in recent years, audiences have the power to "negotiate" texts, to "read" media products in discordant, sometimes subversive ways, applying their own cultural values and phenomenological experience to form new, critical conceptions of media texts (Morley 1980, Radway 1984). A major proponent of this perspective, John Fiske, believes this media-consumer dialectic may even form a threat to the "dominant classes" via its unintended encouragement of "cultural difference" (Fiske 1987:326). Fiske goes so far as to claim "the cultural economy drives the financial in a dialectic force that counters the power of capital" (1987:326).

I do not share Fiske's optimism. The fact that different groups interpret media texts in different ways, is not so much a sign of resistance to consumer capitalism, but instead evidence of its continued health. Consumer capitalism is a system of cultural, economic, and textual production that "proceeds by differentiation" (Janeson 1984:75), one that encourages the development of variegated "lifestyles": cultural subgroups largely defined by consumption practices (yuppies, generation "X," sports fans, heavy metal youth, etc.) (Leiss et al. 1985). These consumer cliques develop and differentiate in dialectical relation to their associated product ensembles. From very fashid following, not to mention a channel, mag-

azine, and product assemblage. Genre has joined race, gender, and class—the traditional axes of social control—as a primary mode of social distinction. While I agree there are dialectical tensions in the media-consumer relationship, I do not believe the empirical evidence warrants Fiske's far-reaching claims.

Like James Curran and Colin Sparks, I prefer "a middle path" (1991:216) (Morris 1988). Social subgroups certainly have the capacity to interpret and redefine media texts. Nevertheless, as long as people are functioning primarily as "consumers," critical or otherwise, they are still lending their support and social power to the dominant system, consumer capitalism. The "resistance-through-reading" critics (Tetzlaff 1991:10) have mistakenly posited conspicuous consumption—the ironic "I watch it, but don't believe it" mode—as a means of rebellion against a system predicated upon that very activity.⁵ As evidenced in everything from the cocky posturing of Joe Isuzu and the supercilious grin of Peter Jennings, to the looking-back-at-you bars of Beavis and Butthead, the consumer-citizen is *encouraged* to take this ironic (thus banal) "critical" stance, a paradoxical position whereby the consumer-citizen "mocks the game by playing it or plays it by mocking it" (Gitlin 1989:353). News consumers spend hours watching news of Tonya, Nancy, and O.J., and then several more providing "critical" analyses thereof. Meanwhile, they (we) have consumed the product and played the game (Tetzlaff 1991). This "mental habit of dismantling images," warns Elaine Scarry, "can lead to an ironic stance" which does little but "let us dwell in the comfort of our own 'knowingness'" (1993:69).

As consumers, citizens and critics alike, we turn to orient ourselves "in relation to the theatrical spectacle rather than the reality of events themselves" (Scarry 1993:59). Meanwhile, we are increasingly "infantilized and marginalized" from the real means of political and economic power (63). Our most fundamental human problems are mediated, trivialized, and distanced as a result. In exchange, the "ideology of freedom" has come "to mean the freedom to consume images rather than freedom to shape the reality behind the images" (Anderson 1988a:245). Granted, there are many signs of pop culture's potential. Thus far, however, there is little evidence of its political efficacy. The viewer-citizens' active imagination has not been marched with imaginative action.

While all media, both factual and fictional, "seek to reduce and fix" their audiences' interpretation of texts (Curran and Sparks 1991:222), active reinterpretations of news are particularly discouraged. Unlike other mimetic objects—art and fiction—news is promoted as a direct, objective translation of reality.⁶ Art and fiction present a much more open invitation to critical interpretation, because they make no such claim to reality, fact, or even truth.

Furthermore, the news media "transmit only not ion that most

Americans see, hear, or read" (Gans 1979:298). The audience's dominant frames of interpretation are themselves mostly drawn from this monopolized domain. This lack of "an oppositional ideological tradition" in the U.S. further inhibits news consumers' ability to critically dissect news (Curran and Sparks 1991:227, Iyengar and Kinder 1987).

Likewise, the lack of alternative knowledge about, or experience of, the world outside the U.S. makes it extremely difficult for news consumers to read "foreign" news in a critical manner. If the news does not present information concerning the actual role of U.S. operatives, weapons, and capital in Central America, for example, it is hard to believe casual readers will somehow themselves come to an accurate understanding of these issues.

Finally, it would appear the U.S. people are not doing a great deal of news "reading" anyway, in either the interpretive or literal senses of the term. In May, 1981, during the height of coverage, 40% of the respondents in a Gallup poll admitted they were "too poorly informed to hold an opinion about El Salvador" (McAnany 1983:200) (Turk 1986). In 1983, President Ronald Reagan lamented, "the great majority of Americans don't know which side we are on."⁷ Informal encounters with various news audiences have lead me to believe Reagan was correct. Upon returning to the U.S., I was often asked if the Contras are still active in El Salvador (admittedly, my own understanding of recent crises in Europe and Africa is hardly any clearer). While this structured ignorance goes well beyond news, part of the blame must be ascribed to the corporate media. The news presentation is often too superficial to give readers a clear understanding of an issue or event—critical or otherwise (Iyengar and Kinder 1987:127-29, Day 1987:306). While making claims like "All The News That's Fit To Print" and "That's the way it is," the news often fails to tell us much of anything at all.

Nevertheless, in producing cryptic texts the news media continues to fulfill an ideological role by obfuscating important realities of power. This was particularly clear in my dealings with SPBCA. I asked each reporter to explain the causes of the Salvadoran war. The following factors were cited by almost every one: plutocratic rule enforced by military means, social inequality, and U.S. intervention. Yet, aside from occasional human rights pieces dealing with isolated abuses by the military and death squads, these fundamental issues were rarely mentioned in mainstream U.S. news reports. The most fundamental causes and contexts of the war, as defined by the correspondents themselves, were mostly ignored. The dominant means of power were mystified and legitimated in the process (McCoy 1992 and Anderson 1988a).

History and Structure of the Salvadoran War

The war in El Salvador is a continuation of the process of colonialism, state-building, and feudalism that started with the Spanish con-

quest (Montgomery 1982:33, Schmidt 1983:43, Wolf 1969:3). The most brutal modern manifestation was *La Matanza* (the massacre) of 1932. That year, Farabundo Mari led coffee workers in an uprising against the wealthy landowners of proto-industrial El Salvador, a landed elite known as "The Fourteen Families" (North 1985:29-42, Anderson 1981). Using the failed uprising as an excuse, the military, under the guidance of General Maximiliano Hernandez Martinez, slaughtered as many as 30,000 peasants, most of them members of El Salvador's indigenous population (Parkman 1988). As a result, most remaining *indigenas* abandoned the cultural practices that once distinguished them from the *Ladino* majority (Chapin 1990:21-27).

In the four decades following *La Matanza*, the oligarchy-military alliance blocked any attempts at reform, often resorting to violence to control their political opposition. In that same period, El Salvador, a country the size of Massachusetts, became one of the world's largest coffee exporters.

In 1972 the military stole a presidential election from Jose Napoleon Duarte and the Christian Democratic Party (PDC). As economic injustice and repression intensified over the following seven years, a number of church, student, and union groups began to coalesce into an effective opposition movement. Hoping to avoid a revolution, a group of reformist military officers, backed by the U.S., staged a coup in 1979 and established a civilian-military junta.

In January of 1980 the junta collapsed when most of the civilian members resigned in protest of the army's continued repression. By March, another junta had been formed which included Duarte. The new junta began to push reform programs, including land redistribution and nationalization of financial institutions. These reforms were met with a wave of military and paramilitary terror, including a number of political assassinations. The oligarchy clearly and brutally demonstrated their unwillingness to tolerate even minor challenges to their extreme privilege. The most publicized assassination was that of Monsignor Oscar Arnulfo Romero, whose murder was linked to Major Roberto D'Aubuisson, founder of the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA) (Montgomery 1982:212).

In November of 1980 five rebel factions formed an umbrella organization called the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN). Also in that year, the Salvadoran military and closely affiliated death squads further intensified their murderous activities. Victims in 1980 included six opposition political leaders, three U.S. nuns, a U.S. church worker, and thousands of lesser-known civilians.

In 1981 the FMLN launched their first of many "final" offensives. Failing to ignite a popular insurrection, they instituted a long term plan which sustained the movement for another decade despite large deficits in armaments and troops (10,000 guerrillas vs. 56,000 Salvadoran sol-

diers). U.S. aid escalated as Ronald Reagan vowed to block the development of "hostile, communist colonies" in the Americas (Reagan in Gettleman et al 1986:14). Death squad activity continued apace. Their victims in 1981 included a government land reform official, two U.S. representatives of the AFL-CIO, and thousands more Salvadoran civilians (North 1985:Appendix I, xv).

In 1982, ARENA gained control of the National Assembly and suspended land reform. The war continued, and by 1984 Duarte won the presidency in an election boycotted by the left. The U.S. increased military aid to El Salvador and initial talks between the FMLN and Duarte government failed. By this time, 50,000 Salvadorans had been killed, the majority of them noncombatants murdered by the military and death squads. Almost one million Salvadorans fled the country, one fifth of the nation's total population. Duarte was largely a figurehead, unable or unwilling to reign in the military (McClintock 1985).

In 1988, following a period of slow and punctuated improvement in the Army's human rights record and the return of exiled opposition leaders Ruben Zamora and Guillermo Ungo, the situation regressed. ARENA gained majority control of the National Assembly and the number of political killings increased dramatically. In response to the Army's renewed terror campaign against unionists, church workers, and members of the *popular organizations* (grass-roots opposition movements), the FMLN assassinated eight mayors. The executions and a highly effective governmental propaganda campaign eroded the FMLN's popular support.

Nineteen-eighty-nine brought several turning points in the war. First, the FMLN proposed to join the electoral process, which the government rejected. Nevertheless, both sides began formal negotiations to end the war. In March of that year, Alfredo Christiani, a member of the oligarchy hand-picked by D'Aubuisson, was elected president. He promised to negotiate with the FMLN and curb death squad activity. On October 19 a bomb exploded in the home of Ruben Zamora, who escaped unharmed. In response, the FMLN attacked the military high command ten days later. The next day, October 30, a large bomb destroyed the headquarters of FENASTRAS (National Federation of Salvadoran Workers). Ten unionists were killed and thirty-three others were wounded.

Those events lead to the most important moment of 1989, the November FMLN offensive. The guerrillas took the battle to the streets of several major cities, including San Salvador. The nationwide offensive took most U.S. correspondents by surprise. Many had been signaling the rebels' presumed weakness and imminent collapse in their reports leading up to the "November surprise."

Three thousand three hundred Salvadorans were killed in the first thirteen days of the offensive, many of them civilians killed in the government's air campaign. It is not until the fighting reached the affluent

neighborhood of *Escalon*, however, that the government agreed to a temporary cease fire to evacuate the wounded.

The offensive failed to incite a popular rebellion, either due to lack of popular support for the FMLN, the military's superior fire power, or a combination thereof. Many SPECA journalists believe the FMLN offensive would have succeeded were it not for the government's successful use of air power against the guerrillas and their supporters. The guerrillas were gaining territory at an astonishing pace before the air force began its fairly indiscriminate bombing and strafing of FMLN-occupied neighborhoods.

On the fifth day of the offensive, six Jesuit priests, their cook and her daughter were executed by the Salvadoran military. The Jesuit massacre renewed debate in Congress over U.S. aid policy, leading to its eventual suspension. The offensive demonstrated the FMLN's inability to spark a popular insurrection and take power through military means. Yet, the offensive also showed the rebels could not be defeated militarily. Tired of the stalemate, the Salvadoran government began to negotiate in earnest. On New Years Day, 1992, the final peace accords were signed and the eleven year old war came to an end.

When I first visited San Salvador in June of 1990, the situation was still far from settled. In the two year period between the November 1989 offensive and the final cease fire, thousands more died in order for their respective sides to gain advantage in the negotiation process. My research took place during this final stage of the war and the initial phase of "peace."

Much more important than the events, personalities, and organizations in the preceding chronology, however, are the social structures underlying them. The most fundamental social reality in El Salvador is the economic and cultural gulf separating the oligarchy and the majority of Salvadorans (Alegria 1986). In a primarily agricultural country, only 5.6% of the farmers owned ten hectares (just under twenty-five acres) or more arable land in 1971, an amount "generally taken as the minimum amount of land required to support an average peasant family" (Jung 1987:67). Ray Bonner explains (1984:16-17):

In the late 1970's the wealthiest 5 percent of the country's families cornered 38 percent of the national income; the poorest 40 percent fought over 7.5 percent. It was the most unequal distribution of income in all Latin America. As recently as 1983 only 6 percent of the population earned more than \$240 a month. A market basket of basic needs cost \$344 per month.

In the 1970s, the decade preceding the war, over 70% of the rural population was considered malnourished (Chapin 1990:7). According to Salvadoran government statistics, 60% of Salvadorans still live in poverty, 33% in extreme poverty.

In the impoverished barrios of San Salvador, especially those in the

steep ravines or *barrancas* that run throughout the city, hundreds of thousands live in make-shift shacks of tin, scrap wood, and other scavenged materials. In a rare and moving exposition, a U.S. correspondent wrote of one dump-site squatters colony:

This is a site of retching foulness where cows, children and vultures stand side by side, wrenching survival from a mountain of rotting animal corpses and human waste. Where flowering trees once sheltered flocks of fabulously colored birds that drank from clear, flowing rivers, a seemingly endless stream of trucks now disgorges cargoes of poisonous trash.

No trees grow here. Streams are clogged with garbage and the eroded silt of barren, chemical-ridden soil. In this circle, shrouded by smoke from perpetual fire, humans also are not spared: fifty-year-old men look seventy; teenagers are physically the size of six-year-olds; a cut on the arm can lead to amputation.

The correspondent received a great deal of flak for having submitted this report. His editor called it an "angry editorial" and cut out the most graphic passages.

In the wealthy areas of the city, such as the *Escalon*, fortress-houses of the rich overlook the squalor of the ravines below. A U.S.-style shopping center rises above one of these slums along Calle Escalon. While the oligarchy shop for luxury furniture items, high priced art, compact discs, surf boards, and imported food from the Middle East and Europe, the slum dwellers below wash their clothes and cook their food in bacterial waters.

Young girls growing up in the *barranca* hope to land servants' jobs in middle class homes or wealthy estates. They are paid less than \$50 a month, with only one weekend off. Many members of the oligarchy (or "garchs" as the journalists call them) brag about how roughly they treat their *chicas* (maid-girls). The local elite get angry when foreign residents attempt to pay their servants more, fearing this will "spoil" them.

The antagonisms engendered by this system of privilege and inequality have fueled the latest Salvadoran war, as well as the violence that preceded it and followed. Throughout, the United States has consistently backed the privileged classes and the closely allied Salvadoran military, blaming external forces for fomenting disorder (Gettleman et al. 1986:7-39). Successive U.S. administrations have accused Cuba and the Soviet Union of exporting communism to the region, a convenient means of legitimating U.S. counter-insurgency campaigns (Klare and Kornbluh 1988). In the 1980s the United States continued its tradition of using Central America "as a stage on which to act out a fantasy role of international toughness and resolution" (Sundaram 1991:160), pouring \$4 billion of aid into El Salvador during the 1980s, most of it going directly towards the recruitment and training for the Salvadoran military.

itary, the rest supporting counter-insurgency through the United States Agency for International Development (AID) and related programs (Fried 1987).

A Structural History of SPECA

When the war began, only a handful of stringers from Europe, Latin America, and the United States were reporting El Salvador. Journalists flocked to the country soon thereafter, however, when President Ronald Reagan proclaimed "America's economy and well being are at stake" in the war (Reagan in Gettleman et al 1986:11-14, Heertsgard 1988: 109-115, Herman and Chomsky 32-33, 107-109). The permanently stationed press corps increased to over 200 journalists. The presence of "parachuters" (journalists who fly in for short periods to cover major events and crises) swelled their ranks to include more than 700 reporters during the 1982, 1984, and 1989 elections, and once again during the FMLN November offensive of 1989 (Massing 1982:49, 1989).

Long before the war was over, however, the administration's public discourse shifted to other parts of the world, and the media began to abandon El Salvador. The *New York Times* in 1985 published 360 news reports and editorials, 239 fewer than 1984. The decline was even more dramatic in the following years. There were fewer stories written during the next three years, 1986-1988 (121, 134, and 107 respectively), than in 1985 alone (see chapter 10). What one journalist referred to as "the third generation of Salvador journalists" came to the country during this period of declining interest. This change-over caused a major disjuncture in corps consciousness. Those who witnessed the overt public terror of the early 1980s were replaced by newcomers who would experience a period of more discreet and carefully targeted violence. Greater restrictions were placed on press movement during the latter period, further removing the correspondents from the worst effects of the war. One of the few to have reported the entire war, stated: "They don't know what it was like."

The Offensive of 1989 provided a "book-end," in the words of one reporter, to both the war and the news coverage thereof. Recognizing the war might soon be over, the press corps began its rapid withdrawal from the region. Like most other third world nations, El Salvador is now rarely covered at all. Even the landmark presidential elections of 1994 received scant news attention.

The withdrawal has not been a completely uniform process. The corps underwent qualitative as well as quantitative changes as it became smaller. News organizations began to rely much more heavily on stringers for daily coverage of El Salvador as the major news agenda, and many staff correspondents shifted to Eastern Europe, Russia, and the Middle East. Into the vacuum swept a number of new SPECA stringers joining those already in San Salvador, forming a not bridge bet n occasional staff

visits (Horton 1978:v). I arrived seven months after the 1989 offensive and witnessed most of this transition. The transformation of the corps has still not reached its final destination, however, which will involve an almost complete replacement of international journalists by Salvadoran stringers, responsible for covering the same sort of "earthquake-and-bus-plunge" stories (Maslow and Arana 1981:52) which dominated prewar coverage.

At the mid-point of my research there were eighty members of SPECA (forty-eight men, thirty-two women): thirteen U.S. and British staff correspondents (sometimes called the "A Team"), twelve U.S. and British stringers filing reports solely or primarily to U.S. institutions, seven U.S. photographers employed by U.S. and European photo agencies, thirty-four Salvadorans working for U.S. and other international media, and fourteen other journalists, mainly Latin Americans and Europeans, writing for international media (I will call this residual group "internationals").

I have emphasized those journalists who work for the U.S. press thus far, and will continue to do so. There are three reasons for this. First, the largest bloc represented in the foreign press corps is comprised of journalists working for U.S. news institutions. Most SPECA Salvadorans, for example, are employed by U.S. organs. Second, the U.S. news media has an inordinate influence both within the corps and internationally (Betran and Fox de Cardona 1980, Rota and Rota 1987). Three of the last four SPECA Presidents were U.S. citizens. Finally, I and most of my readers are residents of the U.S. and, therefore, most directly effected by "American" media. Nevertheless, the voices and practices of journalists who do not work for U.S. media will play an important role in this ethnography as well, providing a rich comparative sample and much of the critical commentary.⁸

The Salvador Reporters

It is the story—a sense of narrative place and time—that separates ethnography from other forms of sociological exposition. This story will occasionally involve outrageous examples of press misconduct, but will more often illustrate the honest attempts of earnest and intelligent journalists whose work is influenced by a mass of traditions, rules, and institutions whose purposes are often antithetical to their own. People like Joe, a young Texas expatriate who loves to play war; Paul, a giant with the strength to focus through tears; Harold, "an old curmudgeon" whose truthful fictions have long graced the front pages; Pedro, a Salvadoran photographer who lost his hand, but not his camera; Katherine, a prize-winning journalist who cannot be bothered with the little details or big truths; George, the romantic; Shawn, who refuses to let a little thing like shrapnel get in his way; Maria, the Italian humanist; and Alonzo, who sees the soul in the corpse. Those and other journalists breath life into this ethnogr y, as do thd ntral characters of the war itself: guerrillas,

politicians, and soldiers, not to mention the ever-deafening discourse of "Western diplomats" (U.S. embassy officials).

Finally, this ethnography is a story about a place where some 80,000 people have been murdered in the last twelve years while a million more have been displaced from their homes and families. It is a place which so fascinates and horrifies these reporters that many have lingered long beyond "the story." It is a space within which they have developed their identities as *Salvador* reporters.

For many Americans, the very word *Salvador* invokes a nebulous sense of terror. They may not know who fought the war, what it was fought for, nor the extent to which their own tax dollars fueled the conflagration, but they are usually aware something horrific and bloody has happened there. "Salvador," the sloppy and jingoistic shorthand for El Salvador has become synonymous with death squads, guerrillas, and counter-insurgency, just as "Nam" became shorthand for the terrors of that war.

Perhaps the main difference is that the U.S. audience was made to feel as if "we" were directly participating in the Vietnam war, or more recently, "Operation Desert Storm." The news media invited the American audience to view those wars through the eyes of United States soldiers. Not so in the case of El Salvador. The U.S. provided training, weapons, and most of the strategy, but practically none of the flesh. As a result, U.S. viewers might have been moved to pity the Salvadorans' tragic situation, but they were never invited to empathize with "our boys." Of course, the war was still represented through American experience, with American characters and symbols. However, the nature of the experience was much different, much more distant. "We" were invited to watch this war as cold voyeurs rather than invested participants.

Both Oliver Stone's semi-fictional film *Salvador* and Joan Didion's nonfiction text by the same name (Didion 1983) illustrate this sense of ambivalence. The main characters in each—Didion herself in the book and "real" reporter "Richard Boyle" in Stone's film—represent the contradictions of geographic proximity and social distance. Although both characters express outrage at the acts of the U.S. government and great sympathy for the Salvadoran masses, one gets the sense neither finds a group of direct participants with whom they can truly empathize. Conversely, the Vietnam correspondents, even those who were critical of the U.S. effort, tended to use American grunts as their empathetic vehicle when writing about the horrors of that war.

Didion leaves the country "without looking back," sitting alone and frightened on a passenger jet, surrounded by American missionaries, people much like herself whom she loathes nonetheless (Didion 1983:106-107). What could be more "American"? Boyle finds himself back in the United States as well, equally frightened and alone after attempting, and failing, to help just (Salvador) his lover) escape the

war. Both Didion and Boyle remain orphaned, no one to share their experience or to assuage their lingering feelings of guilt, anger, and impotence in the face of atrocities caused, in large part, by their own government.

The *Salvador* ethos provides a collective sense of identity to the corps. It is one of their "favorite clichés," to borrow a phrase from Pierre Bourdieu, something to be "slipped into, like a theatrical costume, to awaken, by the evocative power of bodily mimesis, a universe of ready-made feelings and experiences" (1984:474). Just as "I've been to Nam" imbues the speaker with an aura of greatness, having survived hell, the reporters throw around symbols of "Salvadorness," mutually reaffirming their unique status as war correspondents. They know that "Central America stands a better chance...of getting you killed" than any other part of the world (Lord 1984:14). They let everyone else know that as well. "We aren't just covering the weekly Junior League meeting in Des Moines," says Joe, a hyperkinetic young man who wears his "war photographer" identity like a name tag. They are the least domesticated of journalists—wild men in a wild situation, having a great time. In the words of Marla, another young North American reporter: "There is an attitude among a good amount of men that this war is their personal form of entertainment."

So, if you are a parachuter or other outsider, you say *Chalatenango* when referring to the rebel province. If you are a *Salvador* reporter you say *Chalate*, casually, as if you spend weeks there soaking up the *onda* (catcheslang for "the situation") or *coyuntura* (moment) for your eventual book; a book that will be the final word on war, reporting, and humanity. Like Conrad's Marlow, you will one day give your readers a glimpse into the very *Heart of Darkness*, the most recent sighting thereof having been *Chalate*. Your job with the *Minneapolis Tribune* is just a side-gig to pay the bills while laying the foundation for your eventual masterpiece.

Some SPECA reporters draw upon the lore of Vietnam in order to construct their *Salvador* identity. They quote lines from Herr's *Dispatches* (1968) and the fictional forms he inspired, including *Apocalypse Now*. They exhibit a keen sense of nostalgia for Vietnam—a war they never experienced—drawing constant comparisons between the two conflicts, only half of which truly apply. Herr describes this journalistic predilection for mythical wars and reconstructed pasts (1968:225):

[A]ll you ever talked about anyway was the war, and they could come to seem like two very different wars after a while. Because who but another correspondent could talk the kind of mythical war that you wanted to hear described?

The *Salvador* reporters had El Salvador, but would have preferred Vietnam.

Like most of the reporters in Herr's book, the majority of *Salvador*

reporters rarely went near the actual battle sights. If they did, perhaps more would have developed the sense of sadness, moral outrage, and ambivalence presented in Herr's work. Instead, this type of reporter, the *war correspondent*, is like the accountant who rides a Harley. He projects a renegade identity to himself and the world in a desperate attempt to live up to the American myth of the independent man. Instead of simply accepting the routines and his status as a paid professional, always at the beck and call of his employer, the *Salvador* reporter casts the image of a maverick investigator, poised to uncover the hidden truths of corruption and conspiracy.

In reality, most war correspondents are no more independent or free from discipline and censure than their domestic colleagues. Therefore, I will challenge the view that news is reported by independent, tenacious, and objective journalists who function as watchdogs against the abuses of power. To presage the punch-line to this study, I have concluded that reporters play a relatively small role in the creative process of discovery, analysis, and representation involved in news production. Instead, they are mainly conduits for a system of institutions, authoritative sources, practices, and ideologies that frame the events and issues well before they, the mythical watchdogs, have a chance to do anything resembling independent analysis or representation.

Daniel Hallin argues that the "ideology of the journalist" is, among other things, "myth" (1986:23). He explains: "It is, in short, a 'myth'—but in a particular sense of that word. Far from being a mere lie or illusion, it is a deeply held system of consciousness that profoundly affects both the structure of the news organization and the day-to-day practice of journalism." The "Salvador" identity is a social manifestation of the myth to which Hallin refers, a claim to independence and neutrality, a wondrous creation that imbues the rather mundane practice of objective journalism with a sense of adventure, poetry, and romance.

Journalists are not the first North Americans to bring these notions to El Salvador. Before the war, thousands of *gringo* surfers came to pay homage to El Salvador's famed Pacific surf. They too found El Salvador an excellent medium for their foreign fantasies. The war correspondents came seeking more than mere adventure, however. They sought truth. Yet, like the weekend warriors who preceded them, most SPECA journalists barely skimmed El Salvador's surface. Their institutions, professional conventions, and other disciplinary structures encouraged them to produce surface texts, to describe violence, politics, and society as if such things are caused by the same seemingly random forces as earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes. We, the news audience, are caught up in this whirlwind adventure as well; placed *magically* *vents* flash by in rapid succession, an unintelligible pastiche of terror whose effect is to unsettle rather than enlighten.

Eric Wolf argues the goal of anthropology should be "the creation of an image of [humanity] that is adequate to the experience of our time" (1964:94). Surely, the goal of journalists should be similar—to provide an adequate definition of events, the context in which they take place, their underlying causes, and most importantly, our connection to them—to engender what sociologist C. Wright Mills calls "The Sociological Imagination," a sense of knowledge and interconnectedness linking individuals to the larger world in which they live (1959). Unfortunately, the international news system is currently inadequate to the task. In the following pages, I will demonstrate a few reasons why this is so. My purpose is not to create a paralyzing sense of outrage or despair, however, but to suggest positive alternatives, many of which already exist, if only in the cracks and margins of the current system.