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"This Ain't Gringoland": The Salvadoran Civil War in U.S. Popular Film

Jonathan Herbert Grandage
The Florida State University
College of Arts and Sciences

“This ain’t gringoland;”* The Salvadoran Civil War in U.S. Popular Film

By

Jonathan Herbert Grandage

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The members of the Committee approve the thesis of Jonathan Herbert Grandage on April 2, 2007

_________________________
Robinson Herrera
Professor Directing Thesis

_________________________
Matthew Childs
Committee Member

_________________________
Max Friedman
Committee Member

The Office of Graduate Studies has verified and approved the above named committee members.
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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the portrayal of the Salvadoran Civil War in two popular U.S. films, Salvador (1986) and Romero (1989). Using a variety of sources as well as the films, this thesis is a cultural study of the images and words used by the filmmakers to render El Salvador recognizable to American audiences. The study focuses on both the ideology of the filmmakers as well as the development of historical characterizations in the films. The findings of this study demonstrate the role of individual bias in representing foreign others as well as the ways in which perpetual stereotypes of Latin America are employed in American cinema. This study, in addition to demonstrating the historicity of the films herein discussed, also situates the portrayal of historical events within the larger context of the Cold War and the Salvadoran Civil War.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

El Salvador and the Cold War

Between 1979 and 1984, roughly 40,000 Salvadorans lost their lives as a result of “political killings.”\(^1\) Americans confronted this Central American Civil War in a variety of ways. Conservatives in the Reagan administration demonized movements for national liberation, insisting that the revolutionaries in El Salvador were under unilateral direction from Moscow and represented the totality of the international communist conspiracy to threaten the sovereignty of the United States.\(^2\) According to Ronald Reagan, “We are interested of course in the Caribbean, this is why we’ve been helping [El] Salvador, because we believe that revolution has been exported to that area and with design…we continue our interest in preserving the Americas from this kind of exported revolution, this expansionist policy that is coming by way of, I think, the Soviets and the Cubans.”\(^3\) This statement was indicative of the dominant beliefs held by ultra-conservative elements within the Reagan administration: Salvadorans were incapable of indigenous revolution; they served only as agents of the Soviet Union advancing the interests of the Kremlin. Paternalist ideas negating the possibility of self-determination for Central Americans—El Salvador tellingly mislabeled by Reagan as in the Caribbean—did not arise in

\(^1\)Richard Boyle, responding to a scene of brutal violence, comments on the differences between El Salvador and the United States in *Salvador*


\(^1\)Public Papers of the Presidents, *Administration of Ronald Reagan*, 10 November 1981.
response to the 1980s, but followed from the legacy of U.S. hegemony over the Americas since the nineteenth century.

Many others who encountered the Salvadoran Civil War expressed solidarity with the people of El Salvador. Support came in the form of missionaries, relief workers, and in various forms of media. This study focuses on two popular U.S. films produced during the 1980s which protested American intervention in El Salvador and expressed solidarity for the cause of the oppressed civil society. Although similarly protesting U.S. foreign policy in the context of post-Vietnam trauma, these two films construct the Salvadoran Civil War quite differently.

In the opening scenes of Salvador (1986), the character Richard Boyle explains to the character Dr. Rock, “Why not [Central America?] [sic] No Cops, no laws. Sun. Cheap. Great Marijuana,” all sufficient reasons, he believes, to leave behind broken dreams in the states and head south. They embark from San Francisco, California through Mexico and on to Guatemala—whose own concurrent civil war remains unexplored in their uneventful trek through the country. The ex-combat journalist Boyle and his traveling companion, the rock-and-roll D.J. Dr. Rock, imagine Central America as a land of vice ripe for their exploitation: visions of lawlessness, the cheapness and availability of drugs, prostitutes, and tic-tac fuel their trip. After traveling through Guatemala, Rock notices a foreboding road sign ahead—“San Salvador 100 km”—complete with ominous vulture staring them down, “You didn’t say anything about El Salvador…They kill people here.” Thus, for all the perceived benefits of El Salvador, it remains a very foreign and dangerous land, but for these reasons attractive to the Americans.

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6 Tic-tac is a brand of commercially produced alcohol manufactured in El Salvador. Although in the film Salvador, tic-tac is associated with poor drunken bums, who wander the streets in search of the drink, advertisements for the beverage appear on the back cover of nearly every edition of the conservative newspaper, El Diario de Hoy in March of 1980. LAL – Periodicals, El Diario de Hoy, March 1980.

7 Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 144.

8 Boyle and Dr. Rock’s marathon journey to El Salvador, their constant drug use, and fascination with foreign women is reminiscent of the travels of the protagonists in Jack Kerouac’s classic beat generation novel On the Road, introduction by Ann Charters (New York: Penguin, 1991). Boyle’s often frantic, booze-fueled driving through El Salvador, in a car appropriately named the “Death Mobile,” directly evokes the use of idealized images of American mobility and Manifest Destiny—certainly, Kerouac’s protagonists conquered the expansiveness of the American
Near the Guatemala-El Salvador border, they encounter a scene of burning vehicles and people standing alongside the road, Boyle and Stone—traveling in the quintessential car of their generation, a red Ford Mustang with the letters “TV” taped to the windshield—are detained at a road block, stripped of their identification, and forced into a military jeep. Their introduction to the Salvadoran Civil War is fast, graphic, and severe, central themes in the depictions of El Salvador in the early 1980s.

Romero (1989), on the other hand, paints a very different picture of El Salvador: a land in suffering, marked by government and leftist violence whose salvation lies in the people, the poor landless peasantry, through the figure of their spiritual leader and eventual martyr for the cause of national liberation Archbishop Oscar Romero. The spiritual journey of Archbishop Romero drives the film, from passive observer to advocate of the people in opposition to the excesses of the right and inability of the junta to contain overt violence against civilians. Absent from Romero are the prostitutes, drugs, and widespread images of vice amongst the people. Romero portrays the people of El Salvador not as stereotypically prone to excess, but as a nation of poor peasants who look to a reformist spiritual leader to free them from repression. Thus, instead of vice reflecting the character of the Salvadoran people, the extreme poverty of the nation results directly from the domination of the many by the few and not from innate cultural characteristics. The heavy hand of the extreme right and the blind, if not helpless, eye of the moderates is presented as the central dilemma of El Salvador. In a particular interpretation of Liberation Theology, the path to salvation and justice in Romero lies in the non-violence of Oscar Romero amidst the extreme terror that was El Salvador in the early 1980s.⁹

The production of Salvador and Romero represent the culmination of two forms of dissent to the actions of the U.S. government in El Salvador. As visual representations, they

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⁹ According to one proponent of Liberation Theology, J. Guadalupe Carney, “The basic tenet of liberation theology is that one can only reflect under the light of the gospel on the liberation, the salvation, that Christ brought (this is, do theology), when one is involved in the praxis, the practice of the political struggle for the liberation of the oppressed in this world.” Padre J. Guadalupe Carney, To be a Revolutionary (San Francisco: Harper & Row. 1985), p. 109. It should be noted that this ideology is not accepted by all members of the Catholic Church and may take forms slightly different from the above mentioned, however, the main goal of liberation theology is to use the Church as an organ for educating the oppressed towards mobilization in order to break the chains of their oppression. Some practitioners saw this as a non-violent process, others believed armed struggle was the only path to salvation.
constitute two sources for discerning the reaction ignited by the unpopular foreign policies of the U.S. government in Latin America. Despite their outward sympathy for the peoples of El Salvador, the filmmakers conform to certain foundational stereotypes about Latin America and its people. Although unintended, the filmmakers of Salvador and Romero, in an attempt to make El Salvador recognizable to American audiences, confirm the hegemony of North Americans in rendering foreign conflicts. In demonstrating the importance of these films for the cultural history of the Cold War in Latin America, it is important to understand the context of Salvadoran history they portray. Therefore, the historiography dealt with below addresses themes relevant to the use of film as history, the Salvadoran political economy, and, most importantly for this thesis, the history of violence in El Salvador.

Film and History

Salvador and Romero serve as useful primary sources for addressing issues concerned with the representation of the Cold War in El Salvador. The images in the films convey elements of a specific history, however; they are products of individual bias and specific historical periods. It is tautology that films are subject to the biases of filmmakers. Once discarded by professional historians as of little or no historical value, film has recently gained recognition as a legitimate production of history with important bearing on affecting public perception.10 The inherent subjectivity of film does not render it irrelevant as a historical source. Rather, history as produced in films is akin to its production in scholarly work. Hayden White argues that the production of history in either form is the same, “written history is a product of processes of condensation, displacement, symbolization, and qualification exactly like those used in the production of a filmed representation. It is only the medium that differs, not the way in which messages are produced.”11 History as film and history as the written word are fundamentally

10 For examples of this approach see Tony Barta, ed., Screening the Past: Film and the Representation of History (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 1998); Natalie Zemon Davis, Slaves on Screen: Film and Historical Vision (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000); Marcia Landy, ed., The Historical Film: History and Memory in Media (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University, 2001); Donald F. Stevens, ed., Based on a True Story: Latin American History at the Movies (Wilmington, DE: Scholarly Resources, 1997). For the utility of film relative to discussing foreign relations see Robert W. Gregg, International Relations on Film (Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 1998). For recent essays that address issues beyond the use of film as a historical source and delve into the complexities of domestic production, the deployment of stereotypes, and the relationship between the government and filmmakers see the special issue of The Americas 63:2 (October 2006) on Latin American film history.

human endeavors, inherently a product of individual biases; therefore, both are apt to silence certain elements when conceiving of and producing the past, marginalizing specific perspectives and creating a partial interpretation of history.\textsuperscript{12}

Conceptualizing of film as a valuable historical source, this study argues that \textit{Salvador} and \textit{Romero} provide the means with which to discuss larger themes relevant to the history of El Salvador, the Cold War, and U.S. intervention. The presentation of historical events and themes on film creates visual references designed to resonate with a particular audience. Rendering foreign countries recognizable required the maintenance of certain stereotypical ideas about Latin America. These images provide important perspectives related to the role of internal and external actors in establishing both the means of and the ideological justifications for violence during the Salvadoran Civil War. They also present the larger role of individuals, sociopolitical groups, and the position of El Salvador’s struggle for equality during the Cold War in the Latin American narrative. Imagery on film is subject to the interpretation of an individuals’ perception and conditioned largely by the placement of and symbolism attached to objects, dominant versions ascend to form cultural norms. What \textit{Salvador} and \textit{Romero} form are two examples of the information available to Americans that effectively challenged, or reinforced, the accepted norms prescribed upon El Salvador, and to a greater degree, the morality of the U.S. foreign policy. This study demonstrates the historicity of film as a historical source and contextualizes the situations, individuals, and events portrayed within the historical situation in which the cinematic events occurred.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{12} This formulation is based on the arguments advanced in Michel-Rolph Trouillot, \textit{Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History} (Boston: Beacon, 1995). Just as archived materials reveal the bias of individuals charged with the duty of determining what is historical, historians engage in a process of selecting materials and disavowing others. Trouillot’s important work points to the necessity of viewing historical scholarship as a human endeavor, conditioned by ideology and the tendency to emphasize certain interpretations and advance a particular perspective on the past.

\textsuperscript{13} The methodological framework of the New Historicism is useful here. The films are considered important texts and visual representations which should be considered inherently tied to their own history. They are especially useful for the historicist project given that they are intended for mass consumption, thus, must conform to certain culturally determined language and visual limitations. \textit{Salvador} and \textit{Romero} as cultural texts display ways in which Latin America is constructed in order to be visually recognizable to North Americans, as well as how these constructions serve to illustrate myth and nationalism in American history. For a perspective on historicist movements in history and the growth of the New Historicism in reaction to post-modernism see, Paul Hamilton, \textit{Historicism: The New Cultural Idiom} (New York and London: Routledge, 2003).
This thesis represents the first attempt to study two landmark films understood not simply as cinematic works, but rather, as historical sources that reveal detailed information about attitudes and perceptions at work in the U.S. during the last years of the Cold War. The thesis argues not only for viewing film as a historicized document, but also for the necessity for scholars to rethink how they can incorporate films into historical methodologies. Long separated into two distinct disciplines labeled Film Studies and Latin American History, I argue that a hybrid methodology allows for a deeper comprehension of how cinema has come to affect the popular imagination. The films discussed in this thesis contain multiple images of violence informed by the historical reality of the Salvadoran State, an entity that came to see violence as an acceptable form of political discourse and social control.

Setting the Stage—The Drive towards Elite Domination

U.S. intervention “facilitated” the increased levels of violence during El Salvador’s long years of conflict (1979-1992). United States foreign policy, however, was not singularly responsible for the atrocities of the Salvadoran Civil War. The all out war on civil society by the extreme right wing required the backing of those who controlled the Salvadoran state: the military-oligarchy. Certainly, the Salvadoran opposition—namely the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front)—bore some responsibility for the violence. Five percent to be exact, whereas the United Nations Truth Commission Report on El Salvador attributed about ninety five percent of all violence during the civil war to the military, right-wing groups, and the official and unofficial security forces operating in the country. This report confirmed what many critics of U.S. policy argued throughout the civil war, that the Salvadoran right was

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16 The U.N. Truth Commission Report on El Salvador found that of about 22,000 killings during one period, the guerillas were responsible for about 1,100, or about 5%. For an alternative percentage of government versus opposition killings, see U.S. Congress, House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Comparison of U.S. Administration Testimony and Reports with the 1993 U.N. Truth Commission Report on El Salvador, 103d Cong., 1st sess., July 1993, p. v. This second report claims that government violence constituted about 85% of all violence, therefore, rebel violence amounted to about 15%.
engaged in overt terror against civil society. According to Robert White, U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador during 1980, “The Salvadoran military do not kill armed people, they kill unarmed people. They have no experience in fighting and no stomach for it.”

The process of modernization, begun in the nineteenth-century, indeed, cemented the legacy of violence that would transpire in the 1980s.

Jeane Kirkpatrick’s 1979 essay “Dictators and Double Standards,” was emblematic of those conservative elements which supported the maintenance of authoritarian governments such as the one in El Salvador, regardless of the human cost. She argued that events contemporary to the early 1980s in Latin America, such as the Sandinista Revolution, demonstrated the necessity for authoritarianism to thwart social revolution from spreading to El Salvador. Reminiscent of the paternalism imbedded in the history of the Good Neighbor Policy in the twentieth century prior to the Cold War, the ascendant ideas of those like Kirkpatrick promoted the notion that dictatorship was the best form of government for Latin Americans still incapable of democracy.

As was demonstrated most blatantly in the Caribbean and Latin America in the twentieth century, U.S. foreign policy has a legacy of supporting right-wing dictatorships in nations seen as unfit for representative government. Scholars have argued that failure to recognize the indigenous roots of revolution in Central America ignores the history of El Salvador and obscures the role of United States hegemony, especially in an economic sense, but also in ways in which cultural transfers between nations, inherent in foreign relations, and how these subtle forces serve to disseminate and effect change.

17 Robert White interviewed in Charles Kiselyak, Into the Valley of Death, MGM, 2001. This is a documentary included in the special edition DVD of Salvador.


19 For the political/diplomatic history of the legacy of supporting right wing governments as well as the ideological justifications for such policies in the U.S. see, David F. Schmitz, Thank God They’re on Our Side: The United States and Right-Wing Dictatorships, 1921-1965 (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina, 1999).

Ironically, foreign intervention lay as one of the base causes for social revolutionary movements in Central America during the second half of the twentieth century. The exploitive nature of what would become the Salvadoran state began with colonialism, assumed another name after independence, and was reinforced by neo-colonial hegemony imposed by intervention and capital from the United States: the result, a historically inequitable society in terms of access to land ownership and distribution of wealth. These socioeconomic historical factors, rather than communist intrigues in the 1920s or again in the 1980s, served to accelerate demands for change, resulting in what Walter LaFeber deemed across the region as “inevitable revolutions.”

The history of El Salvador since the middle of the nineteenth century has largely been defined by monoculture, the hacienda (large consolidated farms using seasonal labor to produce goods for the agro-export economy), political exclusion, and, if impetus arose, violence against dissentious sectors of the population by the state. Aldo Lauria-Santiago’s and Leigh Binford’s recent anthology *Landscapes of Struggle*, seeks to incorporate a historical understanding of these legacies into the period following the modernization in the nineteenth century. Understanding the nineteenth century as a critical period in the consolidation of elite ideology, this thesis argues that the solidification of military-oligarchy control persisted and characterized the nature of the Salvadoran state up until the civil war. The intention of this thesis is not to marginalize Salvadoran history prior to the colonial period or in its wake. Rather emphasis is placed on the

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21 The term *nature* is used to signify general trends, although changing over time, retain fundamental characteristics.

22 LaFeber, *Inevitable Revolutions* argues that social forces coalescing in twentieth-century Latin America combined with the role of U.S. intervention in maintaining oppressive regimes resulted in “inevitable revolutions.” In other words, conditions furnished by both Latin American and U.S. government served to create this climate in which change was unavoidable and demanded by opposition elements across civil society.


role of modernization in the late nineteenth-century, which numerous scholars have shown, plays a critical role in defining the contemporary nature of the Salvadoran political economy.\(^{25}\)

Scholars such as James Dunkerley, Robert G. Williams, and E. Bradford Burns writing on Central American in the nineteenth century focus on the critical role of world markets for coffee and indigo as stimulating the elite consolidation of indigenous lands for the agro-export economy.\(^{26}\) In order for the so-called “14 families” to form an oligarchy in El Salvador and to accomplish land consolidation—either previously indigenous or otherwise claimed—required the stamp of the Salvadoran government. During the 1870s, liberal governments embarked on a campaign designed to facilitate the elite domination of land.\(^{27}\) This process has several important legacies necessary to the understanding of the history of El Salvador during the 1980s.

First, the literal pressure of consolidating large tracts of land in a small country rendered many indigenous and mestizo poor landless or forced them into rental contracts with large landholders. Thus, the same proximity to the sea that fueled the agro-export economy in El Salvador led to the marginalization of indigenous and poor classes. Agricultural modernization and the emergence of the agro-export economy accomplished what the colonial hacienda had begun: it transformed the poor from external to internal peasants, and hence, establishing elite

\(^{25}\) For historiography that links modernization with the consolidation of the military-oligarchy in El Salvador see E. Bradford Burns, *The Poverty of Progress: Latin America in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkley: University of California, 1980); Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*, examines the rise of the notorious “14 families” in El Salvador who coalesced around positivist ideologies to justify engaging in an economy defined by monoculture and political exclusion. The tactics of the oligarchy in aligning with the military to secure this direction for the economy constitute what Dunkerley labels as political power in El Salvador; Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador* also views power as the monopoly of the oligarchy, however, that revolution came about with the rise of popular organizations in the twentieth-century. These groups maintained their resolve in the face of elite persecution culminating in the 1980s in the form of vast, unified protest to the traditional power of the military-oligarchy; Williams, *States and Social Evolution*, argues that while the agricultural conditions needed to grow coffee did aid in strengthening traditional elites, in some areas, coffee led to increased political space for small producers. These small producers came to exercise limited power in the market and served to create a small middle class which challenged the domination of the traditional power brokers. Although this was most prevalent in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, coffee, Williams argues did help to usher in a new era in the political and economic history of Central America, in particular, in helping to promote democratic reforms, culminating in institutions like popular organizations.

\(^{26}\) For example on the role of indigo before coffee came to dominate El Salvador see, Burns, *The Poverty of Progress*; Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus* and Williams, *States and Social Evolution*.

\(^{27}\) On the “14 families” see footnote 25 above. See also Dunkerley, *Power in the Isthmus*, especially chapter 1 and Williams, *States and Social Evolution*. 
economic dominance over labor and the proletarianization of the working classes.\textsuperscript{28} The resulting cultural conflict and subsequent outrage by some sectors of society is the second legacy of the drive towards oligarchic domination of lands.\textsuperscript{29} The willingness of the government to suppress calls for reform with violence constitutes the final legacy of the process referred to as modernization.\textsuperscript{30} The violence of the 1980s was predicated on government tactics during the 1880s, in which militias forced peasants off lands and in 1889 a national police force was established whose objective was to control unrest in coffee zones.\textsuperscript{31} The consolidation of lands by elites, and the possibility of challenges to this system from below, provided the impetus for the formation of the military-oligarchy structure that would dominate the Salvadoran economy and politics until the 1980s.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, scholars have shown that the military-oligarchy was firmly in control over the economy and government of El Salvador.\textsuperscript{32} With the coming decades, the emergence of worldwide depression exacerbated Salvadoran monoculture and dependence on world markets. The desolate state of the economy in depression years and the growth of popular opposition during the period set the stage for a defining moment illustrative of the impact of violence on the history of El Salvador: the Matanza of 1932.\textsuperscript{33}

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\textsuperscript{28} Historiography on Mexico is especially dense on this process. On the early nineteenth-century see, for example, Eric Van Young, \textit{The Other Rebellion: Popular Violence, Ideology, and the Mexican Struggle for Independence, 1810-1821} (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001; for the period leading up to and then through the Mexican Revolution see, for example, Alan Knight, \textit{The Mexican Revolution}, 2 volumes (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1986).

\textsuperscript{29} Burns, \textit{The Poverty of Progress} argues that elite consolidation undermined traditional ties of patronage in rural areas and that many rural caudillo leaders fought the encroachment of the state in an effort to maintain traditional society and networks of patronage in the countryside.

\textsuperscript{30} On Mexico City and the violence of modernization, including the politics of social exclusion in the modern state see Pablo Piccato, \textit{City of Suspects: Crime in Mexico City, 1900-1911} (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2001), pp. 17-72; on El Salvador see the various essays in Lauria-Santiago and Binford, eds, \textit{Landscapes of Struggle}.

\textsuperscript{31} Williams, \textit{States and Social Evolution}, p. 124.


\textsuperscript{33} The most comprehensive study of this event is Thomas P. Anderson, \textit{Matanza: El Salvador’s Communist Revolt of 1932} (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1971).
\end{flushright}
A History of Violence—Historiography

In terms of its significance, the 1932 Matanza, in which as many as 30,000 Salvadorans lost their lives at the hands of elite directed security forces, symbolized the willingness of the military-oligarchy to use violence as a means of social control. Measuring the degree of violence in one region of the world against another in order to make qualitative judgments on its historical effects and legacy on culture is not the goal of this thesis. Instead, the emphasis here is on the significance of violence in the history of El Salvador, its resonance as a cultural implication in discussing the civil war era. The scope and degree of violence in El Salvador’s history is in no way unique. However, a set of historical circumstances specific to El Salvador can illuminate the conditions that gave rise to the extreme violence during the 1980s. In particular, historiographical interpretations of El Salvador’s history of violence highlight the continuity of trends from the modernization period, culminating in the role of foreign intervention as a facilitator for state sponsored violence during the Cold War.

Violence, and its place in Salvadoran history, is a persistent theme in many of the works cited in this thesis. This does not mean that Salvadorans are somehow inherently violent. The ambiguous term violence encompasses events that occur in many spheres of human relations, the goal is to focus on violence as it relates in a boarder sense to describe elements of Salvadoran history. Namely, in agreement with historiography, as a consequence of “modernization,” as a means of demonstrating and reinforcing elite dominance, and as an ideology during the Cold War. Thus, rather than being descriptive of the culture and its people, violence in Salvadoran history symbolizes continuity: a willingness among certain sectors of the society to use violence against those demanding an adjustment in the distribution of power. A dominant theme in the historiography on violence in El Salvador is the continuity of state violence—in goals, kind, and perpetrators—generally speaking, from the nineteenth century to the present.34 The major question addressed by these works is the historical epoch, and the use of violence during these periods, in which to pinpoint the beginnings of what was to come during the 1980s. Thus, these studies look backward in an attempt to comprehend the use of violence, particularly by the right wing, by understanding the history of El Salvador.

In *When States Kill*, Cecilia Menjívar and Nestor Rodríquez distinguish between the violence of colonialism and the “modern” violence experienced during the civil war. They emphasize that the intervention by the United States, coupled with existing surveillance structures linked to Alliance for Progress era counterinsurgency techniques explains the “modernization” of violence in the 1980s, thus differentiating it from earlier periods in Salvadoran history. Although this analysis is correct in assuming that violence during the Cold War was indeed “different” than that occurring previously in Salvadoran history, their formulation ignores the inherently coercive nature of the relationship between classes in El Salvador prior to the 1960s and obscures the role of the violence of state formation.\(^\text{35}\)

In an adaptation on this view, according to Robert Holden in his article “Constructing the Limits of State Terror in Central America,” the violence of the modern period is a result of regional *caudillo* (political chief) power being “forced upward” in Salvadoran society. According to his interpretation, the surveillance capabilities of the state illustrated by the events of 1932 were intact, although informal, prior to the Matanza. Indeed, they were the product of the evolution and collaboration of caudillos on the regional scale with national elites who participated in the agro-export economy with mutual benefit. Of course, the systems of patronage established under the hacienda facilitated the power of caudillos in controlling rural labor. El Salvador’s monoculture and relationship with foreign markets, for the landed elite, necessitated a tight control over the available supply of agricultural labor. Existing systems of patronage made possible the economic gains of the agro-export elite. The relationship evolved into the clientalism that manifested into the military-oligarchy alliance of the twentieth century. Caudillos and the militias under their direction, thus, served as a method for elite control beginning in the nineteenth century. Events exemplified by but not limited to 1932 set what Holden calls the “limits of state violence.”\(^\text{36}\) The manifestation of the accepted limits of state violence, terror by the right against civil society in the 1980s, thus, follows historical precedence.

In “The Culture and Politics of State Terror and Repression in El Salvador,” Aldo Lauria-Santiago argues that in order to understand the violence of the 1980s, “cultural, historically structured aspects of the practice of state terror must be examined as part of the causes, contexts,


\(^{36}\) Holden, “Constructing the Limits of State Violence in Central America,” p. 439.
and effects of the phenomenon of state repression.”  

37 He emphasizes that in order to understand violence, local disputes need to be considered along with the broader national trends. In order to accomplish this, ethnographic research on the cultural responses and representations of violence and its images in memory and popular imagination would be necessary in order to outline the root causes of violence in El Salvador.  

38 Although not focusing on the persistence of themes in Salvadoran history, this thesis employs the methods of Lauria-Santiago in discussing the portrayal of violence in American popular film. By understanding how Americans conceived of the violence occurring in El Salvador, a picture emerges of how the filmmakers viewed this violence as a product of inherently foreign savages.

The link between these interpretations of scholars like Holden and Lauria-Santiago with the interpretations based on political economy models by the likes of Dunkerley, Williams, and Burns is that the history of El Salvador during the nineteenth century figures into understanding the violence of the 1980s. Whether during modernization, the Matanza and its aftermath, or the Cold War, the historical relationship between the state and its competing civilian classes is important to consider in deconstructing the history of violence in El Salvador. The period following the Matanza was marked by the solidification of the military-oligarchy begun during modernization. In his book *The Protection Racket State*, William Stanley demonstrates how this relationship operated like a “protection racket state” in which elites and the military exchanged the “currency of violence” to mediate power amongst them.  

39 Throughout the period between 1932 and the 1970s, Stanley shows how the military was called upon to quell demands for reform, solidifying their relationship with the oligarchy. Although recognizing the continuing inequalities in El Salvador, Stanley argues that the inability of the armed forces to defeat the guerrillas militarily diminished them in the eyes of the oligarchy. Thus, in this interpretation, the peace accords of 1992 were a result of an effective challenge to authoritarian rule, thereby altering the military-oligarchy relationship henceforth.  


40 All information in previous paragraph summarized from Stanley,* The Protection Racket State*. 
These studies on violence as well as on political economy all contribute to the understanding of the civil war in El Salvador during the 1980s. State sponsored violence in El Salvador, although differing in degree, scope, and kind since the nineteenth century appears to follow a pattern in which those in power use terror to maintain their hierarchical position.\textsuperscript{41} The above literature demonstrates that violence occurring in the 1980s was the result of historical circumstances unique to Salvadoran history. Especially as an effect of modernization and state building, state-sponsored violence essentially promoted the goals of the elite while marginalizing the participation of the masses in the economy and politics. Systems of rural control over labor and land contributed to the rise of the surveillance state in the latter half of the nineteenth century setting the stage for the coordinated Matanza of 1932. The ability to benefit through violence secured the relationship between the military and the oligarchy in the twentieth century. The capabilities of the military-oligarchy were bolstered by the intervention of the United States during the Cold War. Regardless of which moment in its history is assigned as having given impetus to the culture of violence in the 1980s, considering the history of El Salvador, the fundamentally unaltered relationship between the poor and the land, the state and the people, and the military to the oligarchy is indispensable to understanding the civil war.

This thesis employs the findings of the scholars writing on the critical period of modernization as solidifying the structures of the modern Salvadoran State. The goal of incorporating an analysis of U.S. popular film into a discussion of the history of El Salvador is to demonstrate not only the historicity of the films in question, but also to contextualize some of the themes addressed in the films within the wider historiography on El Salvador. Of particular use in this endeavor are the works that link together the power of the state to the consolidation of agriculture in the nineteenth century. Scholars such as Dunkerley, Williams, and Burns demonstrate how systems of rural control that were formed in an effort to control labor in the countryside left important legacies on the willingness of the state to engage in violence as a means of social control. Further studies by Lauria-Santiago, Stanley, and Holden show how these tactics culminated in the Matanza of 1932. These repressive structures continued to persist in hybridized forms throughout the decade of terror in the 1980s.

\textsuperscript{41} For comprehensive studies on El Salvador’s political history during this period see Dunkerley, \textit{Power in the Isthmus}, especially chapter 8; LaFeber, \textit{Inevitable Revolutions}; Montgomery, \textit{Revolution in El Salvador}, especially chapter 3.
Another critical element was the growth of popular organizations throughout the twentieth-century in El Salvador. Salvadorans did not stand by idly as the oligarchy dominated the land and their labor, but rather, made concerted efforts to oppose the power of the government through popular organization. The legacies of these efforts culminated in the emergence of the Progressive Catholic Church in the 1960s. For its role in helping to stimulate popular upheaval in the 1980s, the Progressive Church became the focus of government terror. In both Salvador and Romero this terror is exemplified by the assassinations of Rutilio Grande, Oscar Romero, three American Nuns and one lay worker, and later, Jesuits at the National University.

This thesis adds to the historiography on the Salvadoran Civil War by incorporating the role of visual imagery as a historical source. Although the films Salvador and Romero were targeted at Cold War era American audiences, they evoke historical themes relevant to scholars who study the link between violence, ideology, and state formation. Bridging the gap between Film Studies and Latin American Studies this thesis incorporates an understanding of both the history of El Salvador and the power of images to convey cultural notions of the foreign other. In taking this approach, I argue that film needs to be taken seriously by scholars who hope to understand that power is not only exercised by the state, but also through representation. The ability to represent the Salvadoran Civil War confirms the power of U.S. hegemony and leads to a particular interpretation of the climate existing in El Salvador during the 1980s. This perspective was informed more by the history of the U.S. in the Cold War and less by the history of El Salvador. This should not lead scholars to discard the films as nothing more than ethnocentric productions, outsider versions of a foreign conflict. But rather, these films need to be considered as intimately tied to the history of the U.S. in the Cold War, especially its foreign relations with Latin America. Coded representations of the foreign other in Salvador and Romero, therefore, tell us more than simply how individual bias affects film, but also how El Salvador was constructed so as to be recognizable to American audiences. Producing a good replica of El Salvador’s Civil War required the filmmakers to employ more stereotypes than they sought to correct, illustrating the power of American representation to define the moral nature of foreign conflicts.
Sources and Methodology

Images and words from *Salvador* and *Romero* constitute the primary sources for this thesis. Other sources include various newspaper articles and printed sources containing information on the films as well as other contextual data on the Salvadoran Civil War. In obtaining media sources on the Salvadoran Civil War, two libraries have been particularly useful. The University of Florida’s Latin American Collection provided microfilmed editions of several regional Latin American newspapers during the early 1980s. Tulane University’s Latin American Library also furnished access to newspaper materials, especially the Salvadoran daily *El Diario de Hoy* for 1980. By employing perspectives from Spanish language and other non-U.S. media (Canadian and Australian in particular), this thesis intends to show how the conflict was viewed outside of the United States. U.S. media is not ignored, however, it constitutes the majority of media cited. The U.S. media outlets featured, however, largely conform to a particular political ideology that was, like the non-U.S. sources, determined to be vigilant towards U.S. foreign policy.

In addition, Tulane’s Latin American collection provides numerous ephemera collections useful in the study of cultural history (of particular use here are the Robert Claxton Collection (RCC) and the Contemporary Central America Print Ephemera Collection (CCAPE)). The RCC offers various newspaper clippings from Guatemalan as well as U.S. newspapers featuring stories related to the Salvadoran Civil War and the concurrent civil war in Guatemala. The clippings prove invaluable for mining the climate in both Latin America and the U.S. regarding the situation in El Salvador. The CCAPE proves useful in providing hard to find pieces published by groups both in support of the Salvadorans as well as those that opposed leftists groups in Latin America. The ephemera contained within this collection is by no means comprehensive source material, but rather, provides windows into the leanings of the many organizations who found themselves preoccupied with the Central American Civil Wars.

The readings of these media sources, the films, and the ephemera collections are conditioned by an attention to detail on cultural significance, and in particular, the ways in which discourse (visual or printed) manifests itself in words and images of foreign others. I have intended to show the cultural meanings inscribed in American Cold War era popular cinema about Latin America. This “reading” of the printed and visual sources reveals the stereotypes employed by the filmmakers not for the purpose of discarding the films as irrelevant,
ethnocentric portrayals. Rather, the intention of this methodology is aimed at gaining a fuller understanding of the construction of Latin America for American audiences in order to determine how power is disseminated through artifacts of popular culture such as films.

Chapter Overview

The goal of this study is to demonstrate the historicity of two films, Salvador and Romero, but also seeks to address issues fundamental to the North American conception of Latin America in U.S. popular film. The core chapters, two, three and four, cover different topics related to the examination of the aforementioned films. Chapter 2 examines the ideology of the filmmakers. I argue that different antecedents drove the filmmakers of Romero than did Salvador. These two divergent attacks on U.S. intervention, however, funneled from many of the same social changes after 1960. Whereas Salvador looked to non-intervention and expressed solidarity with the leftist opposition, Romero saw non-violence as the only justifiable path towards peace. Maintaining these perspectives required the filmmakers to construct their version of the Salvadoran Civil War in particular ways, portrayals that indeed, greatly affect how they rendered El Salvador for American audiences. Most telling of the effects of personal bias on the process of cinematic representation is the portrayal of Oscar Romero as a pacifist in Romero and the gendered monopoly over heroic violence in Salvador. Just as Romero sacrificed a vital component of Archbishop Romero’s ideology in constructing him as opposed to violence, the filmmakers to Salvador silence the important role of women in the Salvadoran Civil War. These two instances of misrepresentation tell us a great deal about how the filmmakers viewed the conflict in El Salvador, but they are not the only informative characterizations in this regard.

Chapters 3 and 4 discuss the development of historical characters in the films and demonstrates how these characters inform us to the ways in which the filmmakers chose to represent the struggle. These constructions of either historical individuals or stand-ins for large groups reveal the nuanced ways in which Americans viewed the Salvadoran Civil War. Meanings attached to the symbols meant to represent El Salvador derived from a long history of Cold War with the Soviet Union. Filmmakers of the era used readily identifiable images and words to evoke historical memories tied to fears of a world in the midst of superpower confrontation. In making El Salvador for the American audience, thus, the filmmakers chose to highlight certain areas and perpetuate stereotypes of Latin America. This study begins with an
examination of the ideology of the filmmakers of *Salvador* and *Romero* in order to determine the
impetus for these two films as well as how experiences prior to El Salvador informed the
construction of the civil war (Chapter 2). Then, the study delves into the specific ways these
notions of Latin America transferred onto the screen through historical characterizations in
*Salvador* (Chapter 3) and *Romero* (Chapter 4).
Chapter 2

Insiders and Outsider: Historical Memory and the Portrayal of the Salvadoran Civil War in U.S. Popular Film

Introduction

The all out “assault on civil society,” as it was described by Americas Watch, a humanitarian organization active in the Central American Civil Wars, is central to both Salvador and Romero. However, two divergent, if not competing, versions of the same historical context begs the question of how two films made during the late 1980s could represent the situation in El Salvador differently; and if so, for what reasons? This chapter attempts to answer these questions by analyzing the ideologies of several individuals integral to the production of Salvador and Romero. Both films fit squarely within the context of post-Vietnam protest to United States foreign policy in Latin America, however, Salvador’s and Romero’s filmmakers drew upon different interpretations of these historical memories when imagining and constructing their particular version of El Salvador.

By analyzing the ideologies of the filmmakers in their own words—using newspaper articles, statements on documentaries, as well as comments and analysis from printed sources—this chapter argues that each film criticizes U.S. foreign policy in an effort to portray what they

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1 Americas Watch, El Salvador’s Decade of Terror: Human Rights Since the Assassination of Archbishop Romero (New Haven and London: Human Rights Watch Books, Yale, 1991). Here, “civil society” is defined as those elements in society not directly associated with the government, but who were targeted by both government and unofficial violence. It also indicates that violence in the Salvadoran Civil War, especially violence initiated by the state disrupted the normal functioning of society, thus, creating an un-civil climate.
saw as a misuse of power. In doing so, they also reinforce many stereotypes about Latin America and its people; myths perpetuated and inherent in the same policies they seek to denounce. Because of the inherent subjectivity of film, the filmmakers reproduce history in specific ways that illustrate how they imagined the conflict in El Salvador. Regarding Salvador and Romero as examples of critical works within the historical context from which they emerged and considering how these outsider perspectives serve to reinforce, rather than dissuade ideas about foreign places, things, and peoples, is the central goal of this chapter.

In both cases, the filmmakers impose outsider ideologies upon the conflict. These beliefs, indeed, were formed by experiences independent of El Salvador. The influence of events in Central America cannot be discounted, however, only considered as one integral inspiration for films which demonstrate the lasting impact of the 1960s on the cultural productions of the 1980s. Both films critique U.S. interventionist policies from the perspective of thirty years of Cold War, however, they both confirm U.S. hegemony over the right to display foreign conflicts in a way suitable to the American audience. American versions of the Salvadoran Civil War illustrate the uneven power of the U.S. to mimic foreign conflicts all the while remaining quite detached from the reality in the country portrayed.

This chapter begins by looking at the impetuses for Oliver Stone and Richard Boyle’s Salvador. Of particular importance for the filmmakers were memories of the conflict in Vietnam. Their memories of dead Americans and government distortion haunt Salvador through Boyle’s declarations of disaffection with and suspicion of U.S. intentions, in this, another Third World country experiencing social revolution. The portrayal of the El Salvador in the late 1970s and early 1980s in Romero is also a product of the post-1960s protest culture, however, in this

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2 John Stone, “Manifestations of Foreign Culture: Salvador,” Journal of Popular Film and Television 19 (1992), pp. 180-85; argues that “Salvador’s reliance on stereotypes of Latin culture and constructs common to Western myth generally and American myths specifically affirms the significance of those elements for future interpretations. Hence, it can be of little surprise that our popular manifestations of foreign lands and people may, ultimately, tell us more about our culture than theirs.” Ibid p. 185.

3 See footnote 13 of the introduction, p. 5, on the utility of the methodological framework of the New Historicism. In particular, these films constitute important texts and visual representations that should be considered inherently tied to their own history. They are especially useful for the historicist project given that they are intended for mass consumption, thus, must conform to certain culturally determined language and visual limitations. Salvador and Romero as cultural texts display ways in which Latin America is constructed in order to be visually recognizable to North Americans, as well as how these constructions serve to illustrate myth and nationalism in American history.

4 On the power of mimesis, especially as enforced by colonial powers on indigenous societies see Michael Taussig, Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses (New York and London: Routledge, 1993).
case the filmmakers looked to Pacifism instead of violent resistance as the solution to the problem of achieving social injustice.

Outlining an individual’s opinion through their work and their words, especially images and statements disseminated through the mass media, proves inherently problematic since ideological orientation cannot be determined with exactitude. By choosing to depict El Salvador in a particular way, the filmmakers represent the Salvadoran conflict through personal lenses informed, largely, by events outside of and occurring previously to their contact with El Salvador. Attempting to display an insider image, the films serve to reinforce many perpetual stereotypes about Latin America, all the while calling attention to what they see as misguided and immoral policies by the U.S. government in the region. The analysis that follows below, thus, contains careful consideration of public statements made by the filmmakers of Romero and Salvador in an attempt to determine the antecedents of both films as well as the underlying cultural elements inherent in the justifications for such projects.

Surveying the filmography that criticizes the role of the United States in Central American—let alone Cold War foreign policy worldwide—lies beyond the scope of this study. The two films focused on here take particular stances on issues related to the struggle in El Salvador which were conditioned by the historical memory and subjectivity of the filmmakers. Considering the ideology of these individuals is critical to understanding the history and culture of protest from which they emerged as well as determining the stereotypes and imagery about Latin America coded in Cold War era cinematic representations

Periodistas

Oliver Stone’s films have received voluminous treatment from academics, journalists, and many others interested in the study of film and history. Critics of his films have emerged on both America’s conservative right and the liberal left. Conservative critics often label Stone a

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5 Spanish for journalists.

conspiracy theorist, who criticizes a treasured past and undermines long held nationalist values by creating an unfounded fantastic version of American history. Often this is achieved by a subversion of the fleeting dominant American narrative appearing in the form of the anti-hero (Boyle, for example) whose critics on either side of the political spectrum agree is inherently subversive to any particular brand of patriotism. Academic critics of Stone’s work often point to his overt subjectivity and blatant selectivity in creating scenes and choosing content for his historical films. A recent anthology compiled by Robert Toplin summarizes the academic critique of Stone’s work: he is an irresponsible, at worst, or more likely, at best, an amateur historian.  

According to Oliver Stone, he neither strives for complete accuracy nor argues that history in any form can. In Stone’s own words, “…ultimately it is you, the student of history, who should read for yourself and discover what is true. Never base your views on one movie, one historian, one dramatist, one ideology, or one perception.”

Echoing in many ways postmodern critiques and a critical self awareness to his own subjectivity, statements such as the one quoted, have led some scholars to argue that Stone’s work is, in fact, evocative of a larger culture of suspicions, politicized memory and a belief in the relativism, contextuality, and instability of discourse.

Other studies have focused on Stone’s antecedences. These studies argue that to a certain extent, Oliver Stone’s status as a “survivor” of Vietnam has legitimized his portrayal of the conflict in Platoon (1986) and the plight of the disabled Veteran in Born on the Fourth of July (1989). Only when attacking sacred events in American history, the assassination John Kennedy in JFK for example, instead of contested (read: Vietnam), has Stone received unyielding criticism on the seditious nature of his films. The history Stone created for El Salvador is a

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7 For example, the majority of essays in Robert Brent Toplin, ed. Oliver Stone’s USA, focus on the relative accuracy of Stone’s work in light of their own fuller, more historical versions of history. These are not necessarily negative attacks, but historians especially seek to emphasize the differences between written history as more authentic (given recognized historical methodologies) and history on film as more subject to personal whims and bias (given time constraints).


metaphor for Americans abroad wrestling with the disillusionment and uncertainly of a Cold War world the U.S. helped to create. It is also that of a nation and people in struggle whose extreme violence is facilitated by the U.S. in collusion with domestic extremists.

Oliver Stone’s *Salvador* focuses on the Salvadorean Civil War as experienced by American journalist Richard Boyle.\(^{11}\) Stone, a Vietnam veteran, and Richard Boyle, a veteran correspondent of wars in both South East Asia and Central America, coauthored the script.\(^{12}\) In a speech to the National Press Club (NPC) in 1987, Stone explained the flashback effect caused by his experiences with Boyle in Central America, “When I arrived in Honduras, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Costa Rica in January of 1985, I had a flashback…I though I had returned to Vietnam, 1965, Saigon. It was hot, wet, and the American kids were 19 again in green uniforms.”\(^{13}\) The centrality of memories of Vietnam to both Boyle and Stone illustrates the resonance of the historical memory of a past war transferred into the present by exposure to the American military presence on the isthmus.\(^{14}\) At the NPC Stone related that while in Central America, he asked young Americans in uniform if they remembered Vietnam, “The fact was gentlemen they did not remember Vietnam…amnesia has set in and what’s worse is moral amnesia has set in, because the guys who run the government don’t remember Vietnam.”\(^{15}\) Stone conveys his sense that the United States was apt to revisit the mistakes of Vietnam in Central America; policymakers “forgot” the lessons many Americas felt came out of prolonged

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\(^{11}\) The Salvadorean civil war lasted from 1979-1992, the film covers specific events occurring between approximately late 1979 (or early 1980) to sometime in late 1980, after the rape and murder of three American nuns and one lay worker on 2 December 1980.

\(^{12}\) The scholarship on Stone’s films includes passing mention of Richard Boyle. Many works point out Stone’s attraction to Boyle in terms of friendship and their mutual interest in drugs and alcohol. The figure of Oliver Stone, and his subsequent successes, has largely overshadowed Richard Boyle, relegating his influence on the films as merely inspiration for Stone. For this reason, Boyle’s significance as the foundation for *Salvador* is often lost.


\(^{14}\) Although Salvador was adapted by Stone from Boyle’s journals in 1984, the film was produced and on the market before *Platoon* (1986). The success of *Platoon* in many ways obscures the importance of *Salvador*, nevertheless, illustrates that Americans were more interested in revisiting something that happened to the American nation, rather than engage in the concurrent civil wars in Central America. Critics acknowledged the importance of both films, *Platoon* received the Oscar for Best Picture in 1986, while *Salvador* was also nominated for Best Screenplay that same year.

\(^{15}\) (Stone’s emphasis) Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 252. In fact, this “moral amnesia” is played out in the film in a dialogue between Dr. Rock and an America servicewoman in El Salvador during a party at the American Embassy. The occasion for the party was the election of Ronald Reagan.
U.S. involvement in South East Asia. For conservatives, Vietnam necessitated the maintenance of authoritarian regimes in Latin America, whereas to critics of U.S. policy, the conflict in South East Asia conjured up morally based critiques of interventionist foreign policy. In many respects, Salvador protests American foreign policy not only in Central America, 1980, but in general, especially during the ideological struggles over foreign policy in the United States that emerged in the aftermath of the 1960s.

Stone’s interpretation of the role of the United States in El Salvador fuses with Boyle’s recollections of the country in his travel journals, thus, the screenplay represents a source on anti-interventionism, sympathetic to the Salvadoran people, the church, and the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front). Boyle’s character represents the “moral voice” of the film, since his personal journey from opportunistic journalist to guerrilla sympathizer drives the plot. Several other characters in this film represent specific individuals or serve as stand-in generalizations for large, often highly differentiated groups of people. These characterizations add many dimensions to the critique of the Salvadoran right and of U.S. intervention, in addition to championing the cause of the left. As much as this film is a product of a specific moment in the Cold War, it contains messages coded in the morally based, liberal politically, culture of

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16 Literature protesting Vietnam, now and then, is vast, expanding, and too numerous to list here. Two works that have the most influence on this study are Michael Herr, Dispatches, (New York: Knopf, 1977); and Tim O’Brien, The Things They Carried (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 1990). Herr, a war correspondent like Boyle, found that non-combat placed him in a position to reexamine personal ideology and feelings about the conflict, especially its human effects. O’Brien describes how memories of Vietnam factored into the way he viewed the world, post-war, and that “war fiction” represents better the reality war, since it represents not individual, but rather, the cultural experience of war. Both works demonstrate the existence of dissent vis-à-vis foreign experience as an ideology in American literature after the Vietnam War, of which Salvador and Romero are cinematic examples. For a selection of some of the most important short essays and speeches protesting the Vietnam War see, Alexander Bloom and Wini Breines, editors, “Takin’ it to the streets”: A Sixties Reader (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 203-74.

17 The most relevant essay to El Salvador on this subject by a proponent of ultra-conservative foreign policy is Jeane Kirkpatrick, “Dictators and Double Standards,” Commentary 68:5 (November 1979) pp. 34-45.

18 Jeremy Suri, Power and Protest: Global Revolution and the Rise of Détente (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2003), argues that U.S. foreign policy in Vietnam as well as other social changes worldwide coalesced into an “international language of dissent,” leading up to, following, and in the aftermath of 1968. The films covered here represent one cultural production illustrative of this culture of dissent stemming from social changes in the 1960s.


20 Chapter 3 goes into greater detail on the usage and significance of historical characters in Salvador.
dissent against interventionist foreign policies in the United States, which for Boyle and Stone, extended back to Vietnam. The film, however, evokes a ready made transcript for the conflict that existed in Cold War America; political rhetoric and terminology applied earlier to Korea and Vietnam, and most importantly for Salvadorans Nicaragua and Cuba, was evoked through words and images recognizable to American audiences.  

Essentially protesting U.S. policy and expressing solidarity with the peoples of El Salvador, the film tends to perpetuate certain stereotypes about Latin Americans. Stone’s conception on the weakness of the military, the submissiveness of Salvadoran women and the inherent volatility of Latin men, as well as the idealism of the leftist opposition reinforces the historically paternalist ideologies about Latin Americans illustrated by and manifested in U.S. policy in the region. In effect, Stone and Boyle’s linkage between masculine violence and power informs their conception of El Salvador. Therefore, just as gendered notions serve to effect the distribution and representation of power in history, Salvador perpetuates unequal hegemony, the owning of and ability to manipulate the story of El Salvador’s internal strife for the consumption of North Americans. The ways in which paternalistic ideologies are projected through the film’s historical characterizations and in the portrayal of historical events reveals a great deal about the role of individuals and culture in shaping cinema.

Stone explains that he drew upon the Soviet propaganda agitprop films of the 1930s when constructing scenes for Salvador. Using agitprop as his framework, Stone intentionally sensationalized representations of violence in the film. Although Stone felt sensationalism bolstered the shock-value of his film, critics in the United States as well as in Latin America saw these images as stereotypical and counterproductive. In fact, Stone claims that the Mexican

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21 This point is generally true for Salvador, with some important exceptions (discussed below), but the “existing transcript” is less evident in Romero which generally omits the role of the United States. See chapters 3 and 4.

22 Scholarship using post-colonialism as a framework have been particularly useful in outlining the complex nature of U.S. foreign relations with Latin America. In particular, these works acknowledge the unequal distribution of power stemming from U.S. hegemony, but also acknowledge the role of Latin American agency in the process of multilateral foreign relations. For example see, Gil Joseph, Catherine C. LeGrand, and Ricardo Salvatore, editors, Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations, introduction by Fernando Coronil (Durham and London: Duke University, 1998).


government (the majority of the movie was filmed in Mexico) forced him to remove roughly fifty percent of the trash and dead bodies he placed in the film, owing to the fact that the official felt this portrayed Latin America in a negative light.²⁵

What Stone saw in El Salvador during his travels with Richard Boyle in the 1980s was similar to his own experiences of militarization in Vietnam. Indeed, the tactics used in Central America stemmed from the successes in U.S. counterinsurgency in Vietnam and elsewhere.²⁶ In particular, the hubris to intervene in El Salvador directly evoked the C.I.A.’s role in overthrowing the Arbenz and Allende governments in Guatemala and Chile, respectively. Instead of directly intervening in El Salvador, however, the Reagan administration opted for proxy wars. By exaggerating scenes, especially those involving violence, Stone hoped to focus and attract American attention on El Salvador, such that the mistakes of Vietnam would not reoccur in Central America. Although certain scenes are sensationalized intentionally, much of the film is historically accurate, albeit, a compression and liberal interpretation of the chronology. The significance of some of these compressions and distortions of time, although inherent in filming, reveal the ways in which Salvador fits in the cultural history of the Cold War in Latin America. Moreover, particular scenes demonstrate how Stone conceived of the Salvadoran struggle through the lens of a particularly North American version of romantic history.²⁷ Rather than devaluing Salvador for what it does not include, asking the question of what history is in the film, whose history and in what ways it is portrayed is more productive in determining the historicity and cultural value of the film.

²⁵ This story is related by Stone in Kiselyak, Into the Valley of Death, 2001. In fact, the film was originally set to be filmed in El Salvador, however, the assassination of Stone’s government contact by the FMLN in 1985 served to push the filmmakers elsewhere. The financing, by and large, for the film was provided by Stone, a London based distribution company (The Hemdale Corporation), and the Mexican Producer Gerald Green of Pasta Producciones. A concise summary of the production costs and support see Beaver, Oliver Stone, pp. 70-71. For further examples of both tension with and cooperation between the U.S. government and filmmakers throughout Latin America see the articles in the recent issue of The Americas 63:2 (October 2006).


²⁷ Stone, “Manifestations of Foreign Culture: Salvador;,” pp. 183-4. In particular the scene meant to depict the final offensive of the FMLN in Santa Ana. Stone has the guerillas ride in on horseback, thus, inserting a classical version of the cavalry charge resembling American Westerns, into 1980s Central America.
This film is significant not only of the post-Vietnam protest to U.S. foreign policy, but also of the tradition of foreign exposure and transformation of consciousness as a major theme in American travel journalism and film. Essentially Boyle and Stone are outsiders; they project their personal experiences from Vietnam—and subsequent disillusionment with government—onto the conflict in El Salvador. The outsider perspective was ensured, and perhaps conceded, through the inherently foreign character of the American journalist. Their goal was to highlight the conflict as a further example of misguided Cold War policies. Their dissent, thus, was not only a byproduct of immediate circumstances, but part of a larger protest to American influence in the world after Vietnam. The ways in which the Salvadoran conflicts are portrayed in Salvador cannot be separated from the history from which they emerged. For all its importance, Salvador forms part of a wider corpus of films that focus on the Central American Civil Wars that were produced at roughly the same time as the Iran-Contra scandal and heightened anxiety over exported revolution in the Americas.

Taking the Option of the Poor

Although remembering the same experiences and trials of the 1960s, the filmmakers of Romero took a different angle on the crisis facing El Salvador. Their perspective was informed by the life and reverence of Oscar Romero and a belief in the salvation of El Salvador through non-violence, rather than overtly representing or critiquing the role of U.S. foreign policy. Oliver Stone’s figure and his films have perhaps overshadowed the significance of Romero. American audiences, it seems, were more willing to revisit the mistakes of Vietnam vis-à-vis Central America, rather than watch a visualization of the internal struggle and violence against the Progressive Church in El Salvador. Indeed, Romero portrays the Archbishop in a specific light, informed by pacifism and a commitment to non-violence. These two components of the filmmakers own ideology, however, contrasted with that of their protagonist.

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28 Exposure to foreign war and its effect on the consciousness is a central element of the novels of Ernest Hemingway (For Whom the Bell Tolls (1940); A Farewell to Arms (1929)). For a recent example pertaining to Latin America which evokes this tradition, see C. Peter Ripley, Conversations with Cuba (Athens: University of Georgia, 2001). For films that portray this change of consciousness as a result of exposure to war in Latin America, see Under Fire (1983) and Latino (1985). Like Salvador, Under Fire centers on an American journalist in Central America (Nicaragua, late 1970s), whereas Latino tells the story of a Latino soldier in the U.S. Special Forces, deployed to Honduras to train the contras (U.S. backed paramilitary group working to undermine the Sandinista Revolution).
In a 1989 interview Ellwood E. Kieser, Romero’s producer, stated that in his mind “Romero tells audiences the truth…I would hope that we in this film would work to change America’s misguided policy in (Latin America).”\(^{29}\) In those brief sentences Kieser encapsulates the purpose behind Romero. The film, which chronicles the life of Oscar Romero from his appointment to Archbishop in 1977 to his assassination in 1980, was made, like Salvador, in order to call attention to United States foreign policy in Latin America. This point was subverted, however, and more specifically, the film promotes a particular version of the ideology of Liberation Theology.\(^{30}\) Romero’s filmmakers felt that by portraying the turmoil faced by the church and civil society in El Salvador between 1977-1980 they could focus the conscience of the United States on the state sponsored repression of the Salvadoran people. Four individuals integral to the production of this film were: John Duigan, Director; Raul Julia, who plays Oscar Romero; John Sacret Young, Screenwriter; and Ellwood E. Kieser, Producer. Because of the “Romero-centric” nature of the film, understanding the ideology of the individuals most closely associated with its production is critical to situating the film within the larger protest movement against U.S. foreign policy.\(^{31}\)

Romero’s director, the Australian John Duigan, uses film as a medium for social criticism. Duigan’s films which illustrate this approach include: The Journey of Augert King (an examination of slavery in 19\(^{\text{th}}\) century America)\(^{32}\), Wide Sargasso Sea (a criticism of British Imperialists for their ignorance towards the native cultures of colonial Jamaica)\(^{33}\) and Lawn Dogs (a critique of conformity in post-World War II American suburbia).\(^{34}\) Kieser, the Paulist producer, chose Duigan, an agnostic, to direct the film because he was a non-Catholic. Kieser explains, “I didn’t want reverence. I wanted Romero with warts, a very human, sacred guy, who

\(^{29}\) Sydney Morning Herald, 14 December 1989.

\(^{30}\) See footnote 9 of the introduction, p. 3.

\(^{31}\) As is the case with Boyle in Salvador, the journey of Archbishop Romero represents the “moral voice” of Romero.

\(^{32}\) The Ottawa Citizen, 26 April 1996.

\(^{33}\) The Boston Globe, 14 May 1993.

\(^{34}\) Canadian Press Newswire, 25 August 1997.
slowly breaks out of shell and becomes a hero.”\textsuperscript{35} This curious fact about the religious differences between Kieser and Duigan illustrates the producers’ willingness to use an outsider to the Catholic faith when attempting an insider image of Oscar Romero.

Another ideological position united producer and director, however, this being pacifism. Indeed, Duigan’s determination to expose social injustices and to utilize the “political punch of pacifism” was evident in his portrayal of Oscar Romero as opposed to armed struggle.\textsuperscript{36} Duigan’s stance against intervention and his sympathy for Liberation Theology reveal his bias, but strengthen the historicity of the film, because they were fairly consistent with the ideologies of Oscar Romero. One critical exception to this consistency exists, concerning the justifiable use of violence, which receives fuller treatment later in the chapter.

Archbishop Oscar Romero was played by Puerto Rican actor Raul Julia. Julia stated that, “My main concern was to do justice to [Romero] when I was playing the role…I didn’t want to misrepresent him.”\textsuperscript{37} Julia revered the Archbishop and realized the importance of the role. According to the actor, “It was a very profound experience for me to be able to interpret a man like Romero who was so committed to his people…it has been the most important project I have ever done…it has been very emotional.”\textsuperscript{38} Julia’s stance towards armed struggle is unclear. Presumably, his association with the project lends to the interpretation that Julia was, in fact, a pacifist like Duigan and Young. In addition, his involvement with other humanitarian, non-violent groups suggests this as well. For example, Julia’s commitment to this project coincided with his active role in the humanitarian organization Hunger Project. The goal of this organization is to end world hunger, which Julia asserts, “isn’t just an impossible dream.”\textsuperscript{39} The methods employed by the Hunger Project mirror those used by Liberation Theologians, especially those involved in the non-violent approach advocated by the filmmakers; namely, using neither direct aid nor imposition of power to manipulate a situation, but rather seeking success through teaching awareness, “by drawing the raw image of starvation before the well fed

\textsuperscript{35} Jerusalem Post, 12 December 1989.

\textsuperscript{36} Sydney Morning Herald, 4 March 1991.

\textsuperscript{37} The Toronto Star, 9 September 1989.

\textsuperscript{38} The Boston Globe, 18 March 1994.

\textsuperscript{39} The Boston Globe, 8 March 1992.
and it is hoped simulating the equivalent of a universal conciseness.”

The role of Romero was natural for Julia, given that the Hunger Project sought, specifically, to promote awareness towards the plight of Latin Americans.

By portraying the Archbishop, Julia sought to create awareness in the American mind of the situation in El Salvador. In Julia’s words, “Americans are very ignorant about Latin America, and particularly El Salvador and what our government is doing down there.” He hoped that those who saw Romero, “will come out of the theater with more than just a lot of popcorn”; he saw it as his responsibility to use this role to make a political statement, one informed by awareness to the plight of the hungry around the world.

On Julia’s performance, those who knew Romero said, “the spirit of Romero is present.” Julia, who was once a “lapsed Catholic,” stated that the role made him “think more positively about the Church,” thus, bringing the actor from the outsider back to an insider, Catholic perspective. Shortly before his death, both Julia and Kieser traveled to El Salvador to witness the 1994 elections, no doubt hoping to see a new government arise that could help usher in a different future for its citizens.

John Sacret Young wrote the film’s screenplay. Young’s works, other than Romero, that displays his ideology most clearly are China Beach and his memoir on the personal effects of the Vietnam War, Remains: Non-Viewable. China Beach was a network drama centered on nurses who help to psychologically and physically rehabilitate veterans from the effects of the Vietnam War. The program portrays the effects of war on the solider, which Young felt Vietnam

42 USA Today, 6 September 1989.
43 USA Today, 6 September 1989.
44 The Toronto Star, 9 September 1989.
46 The Toronto Star, 9 September 1989.
demonstrated, cumulatively represent, “the madness and futility of war.” Like the director Duigan, Young wrote *Romero* to promote pacifism; he felt that violence by adversaries can never be justified. Young’s absolute pacifism stood in contrast to Archbishop Romero’s position on the justification for violence as a reaction to oppression. Young’s bias towards non-violence was evident in his portrayal of Oscar Romero as a pacifist. Despite this historical inaccuracy, depicting Romero as a pacifist aided Young, he believed, and served as a vehicle towards creating awareness in the United States about the brutal violence in El Salvador. This pacifist view was more in line with that of worldwide humanitarian organizations, and less with the armed segments of the left, including those Latin American priests like Romero who opted for resistance as a response to oppression.

The film was produced by Ellwood E. Kieser of Paulist Productions. Kieser believed that, “Christianity is a story telling religion…the best way to tell a story in 1989 is to make a movie, so that’s why I make movies.” Kieser understood the influence of mass media, by engaging Oscar Romero’s life through film, he sought to promote awareness amongst his target audience of Americans and to show what he determined to be the positive aspects of Liberation Theology. The film, which was initially planned as a made-for-TV movie, met resistance by networks in the United States. Kieser recalled, “one [network] thought it too controversial, one thought it too depressing and one said there was no love interest.” In response, Kieser added, “I guess he didn’t consider love of God a love interest.” Even though the intervention of the U.S. in El Salvador, and hence an overt critique of policy, is largely absent from the film, whomever Kieser petitioned in the U.S. to put the film on TV felt the story would not appeal to American audiences. The violence of El Salvador and the compliance of the Salvadoran government, especially on the killing of Romero, some TV producers surmised, could be seen as an outward denunciation of U.S. foreign policy. Kieser did not agree, instead he felt the film

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could attract wide support, given that it portrayed the depth of the human spirit, as he stated, “I like radical changes in human beings…here was a mouse who became a tiger.”

The unifying theme amongst these individuals was to portray the story of Archbishop Romero in order to promote a political message. Specifically, they sought to display their opposition towards America’s foreign policy in El Salvador by depicting the activities of the U.S. trained and supported death squads, in particular, their involvement in the assassinations of Father Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero. Moreover, they sought to show how Liberation Theology could empower the impoverished through education on their plight and to encourage a non-violent challenge to a socioeconomic system imposed upon civil society by an authoritarian military-oligarchy.

With a few exceptions, the content of *Romero* is historically accurate. The filmmakers placed the events of the Archbishop’s life between his inauguration and death in their historical chronology and particular attention to detail appears in certain scenes. For example, the scenes leading up to the Archbishop’s appointment contain authentic dialogue that discusses why Romero would be perfect as Archbishop. The film accurately displays the events surrounding the massacre at the Plaza Libertad; which include the facts that it occurred after his appointment as Archbishop, Father Rutilio Grande was there speaking about Liberation Theology, and landless peasants fled to the church when fired upon by the military. It correctly marks the assassination of Father Grande as one turning point in Romero’s feelings toward the role of the church. Furthermore, many of Romero’s ideas are reiterated in the film verbatim by Julia. Finally, his assassination is also portrayed as it occurred; by an unseen gunman, using a high-powered rifle while Romero celebrated mass.

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52 *Jerusalem Post*, 12 December 1989.


Some aspects of the film that do not follow history are not matters of maintaining chronology, however, but rather of willfully excluding information. For example, the film does not mention any of the four Pastoral letters Romero wrote; instead, the film focuses on Romero’s radio addresses.\(^{57}\) The exclusion of the pastoral letters was purposefully done by the filmmakers because the letters contain language stating that people have the right to retaliate violently, which was contrary to the image of pacifism they meant to promote.\(^{58}\) Indeed, the film explicitly portrays Romero as vehemently opposed to violence. In one particular scene, Romero encounters an armed priest, played by Tony Plana, who, carrying a machine gun, was presumably already involved in violent resistance. The Archbishop strongly denounces the priest, and in so doing, reinforces a belief in non-violence as the solution to conflict in El Salvador.

The historical Romero, however, did not oppose violence. Indeed, as he proclaimed in his fourth pastoral letter, Romero felt that “when a dictatorship seriously violates human rights and attacks the common good of the nation, when it becomes unbearable and closes all channels of dialogue, of understanding, of rationality-when this happens, the church speaks of the legitimate right to insurrectional violence.”\(^{59}\) The filmmakers sought, as Duigan stated, “to show the problems associated with both passive and active resistance,” but in doing so, they effectually sacrificed a vital component of Romero’s ideology and of his significance to the struggle in El Salvador.\(^{60}\) A cinematic Romero, sympathetic to resistance by the oppressed, might have, in the opinion of the filmmakers, appeared less Christ-like, undedicated and unwilling to pursue peace through passive resistance. Perhaps for the same reason, the film leaves out depictions of and commentary on the civil war that raged in El Salvador during the chronology covered in the film.

The film is a product of the filmmaker’s contemporary beliefs; therefore, it contains anachronistic elements. These include the fact that although the filmmakers were vehemently opposed to United States intervention in El Salvador, very little in the film explicitly mentions the United States. This “watering down” of the script was done, in opposition to Duigan’s

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60 *Sun Herald* (Sydney, Aust.), 22 October 1989.
wishes, “so as not to alienate the American audience and sponsors.” Instead of directly implying the role of the United States in the carnage, the filmmakers subvert the point, leaving it only intelligible to viewers who already possessed a priori knowledge of El Salvador. The subversion harms the film because it limits the impact among audiences lacking knowledge of United States foreign policy in El Salvador. Conversely, Salvador utilizes much of the existing transcript on El Salvador; instantly recognized phrases stemming from thirty years of Cold War with the Soviet Union and media expansion following World War Two. Subverting the effects of U.S. policy effectually aided in the overshadowing of Romero by Salvador. Historical characterizations play out the drama of post-Vietnam and emerging Iran-Contra scandals in many ways; they reveal the mechanics of American culture on screen, addressing the problem of how to represent foreign places so as to render them recognizable.

By and large, the filmmakers of Romero were loyal to the historical events in the years leading up to the assassination of the Archbishop, but perhaps come up short on obtaining a comprehensive impact because of the softening of the script. The filmmakers also fail to appease the target audience by representing Romero as a pacifist. The historical Romero, who advocated resistance, might have better appealed to the foundational American belief of resisting oppression by armed struggle. The notion of reacting in self-defense was a critical component of Liberation Theology for many involved in the struggle in El Salvador, and certainly, reflected Romero’s own ideology. Moreover, by portraying Romero as a pacifist, they effectually label the historical Romero’s commitment to armed struggle as misguided, a failing and a stereotypical component of the “hot-blooded Latin” mentality. The historical Romero, in the interpretation of the filmmakers, was blinded by the radical left and their insistence on armed struggle, and hence, was incapable in and of himself to the task of revolutionary change in Latin America. An underlying, yet less overt than Salvador, notion of paternalism emerges from this portrayal of Romero as a pacifist.

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62 For an argument for “no duty to retreat” as a central tenet of the American mindset, see Richard Maxwell Brown. *No Duty to Retreat: Violence and Values in American History and Society* (Norman, Ok.: Oxford University Press), 1991. This argument is certainly up for debate, and perhaps, contradicted by contemporary widespread denouncements of violence during the Second Gulf War. However, it can equally be said that U.S. intervention in Afghanistan following 11 September 2001 would confirm the formulation on self-defense as a component of the American character.
The film was unable to attract widespread appeal in the United States. This can be attributed partly to Romero’s status as an “unworthy victim” and the subsequent paltry treatment of his assassination in the American press. Despite this, what the filmmakers of *Romero* set out to do was use the events between 1977 and 1980 in El Salvador and, let them bring to the American consciousness a feeling of remorse and anger for the killing the United States government sponsored. The subverted message was designed to put a human face on the casualties in the war against “communism” in Latin America. By doing this, they vindicate Romero, for they give Americans a unique version of Liberation Theology. *Romero’s* message is intended to be educational; it forces Americans to stray from the comfortable notions of victory at any cost developed during the ideological war on communism. The story of the slain martyr of El Salvador demonstrates that the hypocrisy of the state in foreign affairs has historical precedent. *Romero* expounds on the Archbishop’s oft-quoted wishes deservedly, not only will he “rise again in the Salvadoran people,” but also in the hearts of all who heed the message of this film.

**Conclusion**

Many groups expressed solidarity with the peoples of El Salvador during the civil war. In particular, various faith-based as well as humanitarian organizations such as Amnesty International, Americas Watch, and CISPES (Committee in Solidarity with the People of El Salvador) were all active in advancing the cause of human rights throughout the 1980s. Latin American organizations such as the Central American Trade Unionists also traveled to the United States to promote the message of solidarity, their posters proclaiming slogans like: “Support the working people in Central America, Stop U.S. intervention now!” Groups in the

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64 Erdozain. *Archbishop Romero: Martyr of Salvador*, p. 75.

65 The *Times of America* reported on 27 March 1981 that the White House was receiving mail 10 to 1 in opposition to U.S. policy in El Salvador, see LAL – RCC, El Salvador Clippings, Box 4, Folder 10. The movement for peace in Central America was both important and varied, see Christian Smith, *Resisting Reagan: The U.S.-Central American Peace Movement* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1996).

66 LAL – CCAPE, Box 1, “West Coast Tour,” poster for Central American Trade Unionists showing dates of the tour October 15 – November 30th, 1983. The quoted portion appears in bold face at the bottom of the document which also includes the group’s insignia.
United States expressing solidarity with El Salvador were met with conservative protests, some groups going so far as to compel citizens to, “tell your neighbors about the terrible cost of Sandinista/Cuban/Soviet aggression in Central America.” This lumping together of the foreign-controlled-communist-forces determined to “export revolution” throughout the Western Hemisphere demonstrates one central goal of both films: they sought to make insider films, designed to break down the imagery conjured up by the language used by the Reagan Administration and conservative groups to describe these international conflicts. They sought to change the transcript on El Salvador from rhetorical essentialisms into terms which include consideration of historical events instead of relying on blanket generalizations often applied for political expedience and convenient mass media dissemination. Although products of the dissent against Reagan’s foreign policies, these films still adhere to fundamental themes in the relationship between the United States and Latin America; namely, as dependent countries who rely on the paternalism and benevolence of their neighbors to the north.

Romero and Salvador serve as samples of the various views developed by Americans looking at the situation in El Salvador during the 1980s. These views of the “south” were certainly conditioned by prior American experiences in Vietnam when the availability and pervasiveness of mass media brought war to the doorstep of a broad spectrum of the American population for the first time. For this reason, the vast influence of media, especially visual productions, the films Salvador and Romero are critical components in the production of the cultural history on the effects of U.S. policy in Central America during the last years of the Cold War.

Oliver Stone and Richard Boyle’s Salvador offers a critique of U.S. policy levied directly as a result of experiences in Vietnam. The filmmakers promote anti-interventionism, but without outwardly denouncing the violence perpetuated by the opposition parties in El Salvador. Kieser, Duigan, and Young were influenced by the same social changes emerging out of the 1960s as Boyle and Stone; however, they chose pacifism and non-violence as the preferred method towards peace. Although products of the same time period and historical processes, the films clearly diverge in their opinion as to the solution to the struggle in El Salvador. Both these positions reveal the persistence of paternalism towards the peoples of Latin America in the

67 LAL – CCAPE, Box 1, “Stop the War in Central America,” The Coalition for Jobs, Peace, and Freedom in the Americas, Massachusetts, undated pamphlet, inside page.
cultural of the United States. The pacifist Romero and the El Salvador-as-land-of-vice portrayals combine to perpetuate notions of Latin American savagery and general inability to engage in self-determination. The paternalism underlying these films, thus, perpetuates much of the foundational myths of and ideological basis for U.S. foreign policy in Latin America.

Through historical characterizations, Stone and Boyle perpetuate the notion of Latin Americans as oversexed, dependent on U.S. aid for power, and fundamentally, the country is imagined as a land of vice, ripe for American exploitation. Paternalism in Romero is much less evident, however, the Archbishop as a pacifist denies him the agency and significance he embodied as the symbol, and then martyr, for the struggle for national liberation in El Salvador. I argue that a discussion of ideology proves indispensable to historicizing films that seek to make a political statement within the historical context from which they arise. The Salvadoran Civil War was portrayed in particular ways by these individuals, as outsiders, with the express purpose of promoting either non-violence or disillusionment. The ways in which these statements, their subtexts as well as more overt representations, manifested on screen was through the portrayal of particular historical characterizations. This is the subject to which this study now turns.
CHAPTER 3

SALVADOR: CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE COLD WAR

Introduction

Films are often remembered most for their association with a name behind the project. The messengers of images and cultural signifiers—characters—can be overshadowed by the volatility of a particular director or one actor’s career rather than remembered for their underlying thematic, or more importantly with Salvador, historical significance. Characterizations portray both specific individuals and generalized versions of large, often highly differentiated, groups. Whether the depiction of an individual or a group, characterizations are inherently problematic. They often illustrate one producer’s or one writer’s bias or favoritism towards certain aspects of history, culture, or fantasy they mean to emphasize. As with the rest of the filming, writing, or artistic processes, character development affects the outcome of a work. In order for cinematic characterizations to be useful in writing the cultural history of the Cold War, it is necessary to recognize their essentially constructed nature, and that this fact alone serves as more of a guide than an impediment to the use of film as a historical source on cultural.

This chapter focuses on the historicity of characters in Salvador, not only for the purpose of determining bias and antecedent, but also to point out common underlying themes in popular media which informed people living in United States about the situation in El Salvador. The portrayal of a specific individuals such as Roberto D’Aubuisson reveals a great deal of historical information on the Salvadoran Death Squad leader, but also illustrates how the filmmakers conceived of the conflict through historical lenses informed by their own moral notions. When
viewed in tandem with more generalized characterizations of the Salvadoran right, e.g. the character of Smiling Death in Salvador, a nuanced version emerges of how the filmmakers viewed the Salvadoran Civil War in the larger context of post-Vietnam dissent to U.S. foreign policy.

Not every character from the film can receive equal treatment. The discussion will focus on those considered to be particularly illustrative examples of the individuals and groups involved in the conflict. The purpose of in-depth character analysis is to introduce themes relevant to the context of El Salvador in the Cold War as they are played out through cultural signifiers on screen. The filmmakers reproduce myths central to the U.S. conception of Latin America as well as discourse evoking specific historical debates and issues related to the Salvadoran Civil War. The discourse and symbols of Salvador, in particular, demonstrate the pervasiveness of gendered notions of power in the conception of Latin America in North American popular cinema.

The first section focuses on the portrayal of the Salvadoran right. This includes treatment of the characters Major Max (Roberto D’Aubuisson), Smiling Death (professionalized security forces), Death Squads (plain clothes representatives of state terror), and Colonel Figueroa (reformist military junta). Major Max, Smiling Death, and the Death Squads reveal that Stone conceived of rightist directed violence through the lens of gender and power. These killers assert dominance by threatening to castrate their male victims, thus rendering them effeminate. These characters illustrate how the filmmakers conceived of the conflict largely as a contestation amongst men, who in order to assert dominance, employed the notion of feminizing an enemy via castration. Moreover, the focus on castration as a torture method used by the right wing evokes the realities of sexual violence and mutilation that many victims faced while held in captivity. These three characters, along with Colonel Figueroa, are essentially dependent on the U.S. for their military might. Male on male violence vying for power, in the end, is meaningless if not for the power of the U.S. dollar. The portrayal of the Salvadoran right demonstrates how Oliver Stone and Richard Boyle ultimately conceived of men like D’Aubuisson as clients of the U.S., whose actions stem directly from their association with and the will of U.S. policies.

The chapter also discusses the portrayal of the Salvadoran left, roughly meant to encompass the FMLN-FDR (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Front-Democratic Revolutionary Front). This includes the characters Ramon Alvarez (head of FDR), Captain
Martí (FMLN vanguard), cameo appearances by female revolutionaries who play a marginal role on screen, and the portrayal of Oscar Romero’s assassination. For matters of clarity and because they were often targeted by the government as guerilla sympathizers, a discussion of “ordinary” Salvadorans will also be included in this section. Two key characters who portray the innocent bystanders caught in the whirlwind of violence include María (Boyle’s girlfriend), and Wilma (a prostitute and eventually Dr. Rock’s girlfriend). Alvarez and Martí, romanticized and optimizing masculine heroism, are emblematic of those individuals, whether armed or political, who committed to the struggle against the government by any means necessary. Boyle and Stone’s reaction to the U.S. is evident in the men of the left: we were supporting the wrong group, when leaders like Martí and Alvarez could have brought peace via determination and moral purpose.

The few women who represent the armed left, on the other hand, always act in the extreme. The female guerilla (referred to as Gabriel in the screenplay) is the best example of this formulation, and appropriately, she is the person to which Boyle aims his only verbal attack against the methods of the revolutionaries. María and Wilma, the innocent bystanders and the only other significant female Salvadoran characters, also act in the extreme: María, in an overly submissive stereotypical version of Latin American women, and Wilma, as the prostitute who reforms and is reformed by the presence of a strong American man in her life. Salvadoran women occupy a powerless state in the film, and indeed, Stone privileges white women—the murdered American nuns—as the only heroic females. By depicting women in this way, Stone and Boyle perpetuate myths about Latin American women as submissive, and also illustrate the persistence of paternal ideologies towards self-determination in Central America.

The assassination of Archbishop Romero plays a minor role in the film.¹ It is significant that the man who presided the Catholic Church in a time of crisis and was the symbol for many Salvadorans in the struggle for national liberation, is overshadowed by other characters in Salvador. Regardless of his minor role, Romero’s character is symbolic of the violence of El Salvador in the 1980s. His assassination in the film occurs in public, rather than in a small chapel as it did in real life, symbolizing this moment as one of great unrest, uncertainty, and impact on the conflict.

¹ Chapter 4 explores the significance of Oscar Romero and his portrayal in Romero.
The chapter also examines the portrayal of U.S. intervention and its agents and it analyzes the multifaceted role of Americans in the Salvadoran conflict. This includes the characters Richard Boyle (American journalist and protagonist), Dr. Rock (San Francisco D.J. and Boyle’s sidekick), Pauline Axelrod and John Cassidy (American journalists), Robert Kelly (U.S. Ambassador to El Salvador, 1980, Robert White), and Jack Morgan and Colonel Hyde (U.S. C.I.A. and military personal in El Salvador, respectively). Boyle, Rock, Cassidy, and Kelly represent different facets of Americans in-country who opposed the role of the U.S. Boyle and Cassidy represent the tradition of combat journalism began in Vietnam as a way to check against the tactics of the U.S. abroad. On the other hand, Morgan, Hyde, and Axelrod illustrate the complacency of some of the Americans in El Salvador to the tactics of the U.S. government. Axelrod represents the paltry coverage of El Salvador in the U.S. media and what the filmmakers saw, by-and-large, as the collusion between media interests and the U.S. government in their efforts to defeat and disavow the ghosts of Vietnam. Moreover, this female character perpetuates negative stereotypes about North American women which deem them unfit for the realm of professional journalism. Morgan and Hyde perhaps represent the most controversial Americans in El Salvador. As military advisors, they are those individuals most directly implicated in determining how and when to deploy assistance to the Salvadoran military. The blood of El Salvador, in other words, is on their hands.

Roberto D’Aubuisson and the Portrayal of the Salvadoran Right

Roberto D’Aubuisson (Major Max in Salvador) is portrayed as an enemy of the people, obsessed with uncovering and suppressing communism, especially those elements associated with the progressive Church. He harbors an extreme hatred for Archbishop Romero, as his character states, “these fucking priests (specifically liberation theologians) that are poisoning the minds of our Salvadoran youth are gonna be the first to bleed…they’re pig shit and this Romero is the biggest pig shit of all…all of these shit-faced subversives that have sold our country out to the communists will die.” This severe language conveys the reality of D’Aubuisson’s outlook

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2 Tony Plana, who plays Major Max, is a fixture in U.S. films on Central America made in the 1980s. In addition to playing Roberto D’Aubuisson in Salvador, he is a Liberation Theologian who embraces armed struggle in Romero (1989) and a U.S. Special Forces advisor, training contras in Latino (1985).

on the proper means of dealing with the opposition: namely, to exterminate them. In Salvador, D’Aubuisson orders the assassination of Archbishop Romero in an elaborate ceremony evoking the patriotism of the “Maximilio Hernandez Brigade,” and the “mano blanco.”

The scene is dramatic, only the true men step forward to accept the challenge from D’Aubuisson, “now…who will rid me of this Romero?” Assigning culpability to Roberto D’Aubuisson for the assassination is historically accurate, in fact, the United Nations Truth Commission on El Salvador, “concluded on the basis of testimony and documentary evidence that the killing (of Oscar Romero) was ordered by Roberto D’Aubuisson.”

The tactics and ideologies of individuals like D’Aubuisson demonstrate an extreme example of reactionary conservatism. Just as support networks existed for self-proclaimed Marxist or otherwise labeled leftist groups, strong conservative interests in the U.S. and Latin America persisted throughout the twentieth century and supported members of the Salvadoran military such as D’Aubuisson. The power and influence of ideas and actions of transnational groups is inseparable from conceiving of and constructing the history of the Cold War in Latin America. Given that conservative groups in the hemisphere worked together for similar goals in the 1920s and 1930s and they did in the 1980s, the question of whether the Cold War represented a break in or a continuation of U.S. policy towards Latin America becomes more complicated.

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4 One organization D’Aubuisson was associated with the Ejercito Secreto Anti-Communista, the Secret Anti-Communist Army, formed in 1980 with the stated goal of “physically eliminating the communists,” and “those members of the government who support the Marxists and the communists.” See LAL – RCC, El Salvador clippings, 1980 Jan.-June, Box 4, Folder 8, Prensa Libre 23 May 1980.

5 Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 171. Notably the reference to Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, the military dictator who oversaw the Massacre of 1932, would likely have been lost on U.S. audiences unfamiliar with Salvadoran history while “mano blanco,” a reference to the death squads collectively known as Mano Blanca, reveals an ethnocentric disregard for grammatically correct Spanish. On Martinez and the matanza see Thomas P. Anderson, Matanza: El Salvador’s Communist Revolt of 1932 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1971).

6 Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 171.


8 This notion is based on the stated goal of the edited collection, Joseph M. Gilbert, Catherine C. Legrand, and Ricardo D. Salvatore, editors, Close Encounters of Empire: Writing the Cultural History of U.S.-Latin American Relations (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1998), see especially pp. xiii-xv.

9 This assumption does not discount the distinct differences in the world following the advent of nuclear weapons. The claim here is that certain, foundational ideological justifications for intervention in Latin American persist as a
D’Aubuisson is one of the most recognized leaders of the Salvadoran death squads and the atrocities carried out in his name are well known. So much so that the United States openly opposed his perennial candidacy for president, despite supporting much of the right covertly. Ironically the U.S. outwardly favored moderate leaders such as the Christian Democrat Party leader José Napoleon Duarte. Considering clandestine U.S. support that aided death squad activity, of which D’Aubuisson and others were associated, aligning in name with Duarte secured plausible deniability for the Reagan administration. Despite the efforts of Salvadoran and international human rights groups, widespread impunity for human rights abuses in El Salvador inhibits closure and invites mimicry of the violence in the future. The untold number of killers and torturers operating in El Salvador are personified in Salvador by a character referred to in the screenplay as “Smiling Death.”

Smiling Death is ever present, representing the pervasiveness of death squad activity in the 1980s and the constant fear they embedded in the population by seemingly continual acts of violence. Smiling Death always appears polished, starched, conscience of his hair and dress, emblematic of the so-called “professionalized” members of the Salvadoran security forces steeped in U.S. counterinsurgency training. This depiction fits well with anthropologist Leslie conservative reaction in the United States mediated by at least three considerations: threat(s) of foreign powers, ideological challenges to hemisphere hegemony, or other military commitments in the Third World.

10 On the debate in the U.S. over supporting the PCD (Christian Democrat Party) as a way of bolstering the moderate sectors against the right wing see, Cynthia Arson, A Revolution Confronts the United States (Washington: Institute for Policy Studies, 1982).

11 Conservative groups Roberto D’Aubuisson was associated with benefited directly from US military aid, his position on this assistance was, however, that the intervention compromised the conservative position, especially that of his ARENA party. After traveling to Washington D.C. in May 1980, it was reported in the Guatemalan press that he felt “U.S. intervention was bad for El Salvador.” Shortly thereafter D’Aubuisson applied for but denied a visa to the United States, sometime after 3 July 1980. See LAL – RCC, El Salvador Clippings, 1980 Jan. – June, Box 4, Folder 8: La Hora, 15 May 1980, Prensa Libre 17 May 1980; and LAL - RCC, El Salvador Clippings, 1980 July – Dec., Box 4, Folder 9, Prensa Libre 3 July 1980.

12 Paul Lewis, Guerillas and Generals: The Dirty War in Argentina (Westport, CT and London: Praeger, 2002). By allowing impunity to be the rule, the governments of both El Salvador and Argentina propagate the message that crimes against humanity during times of war will not receive retribution. Thus creating a climate in which violence is normalized as a component of warfare, not something that should be punished. Also on the effects of violence and impunity for crimes on historical memory see, Greg Grandin, The Last Colonial Massacre: Latin America in the Cold War (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Shawn C. Smallman, Fear and Memory in the Brazilian Army and Society, 1889-1954 (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

13 Many individuals received prior training at the SOA in the 1960s and 70s, however, by 1980 the United States began to financing the training of Salvadoran military personal in-country, as many as 300, in tandem with efforts elsewhere in undermining governments in Central American, namely Nicaragua, and strengthening others: namely
Gill’s research on the indoctrination of certain “Americanized” values into cadets training at the School of the Americas (SOA). According to Gill, Latin American military personnel trained at the SOA were taught to fear communism and associate communists with homosexuality, naïveté, and atheism. In the broadest sense, Smiling Death represents a culmination of the agents of the right who aided in creating the “culture of fear” in El Salvador. Despite the power to kill, Stone portrays Smiling Death as an effeminate man with clear allusions to his homosexuality. The portrayal proves homophobic as Smiling Death’s same sex desire are linked to his pathological violence, and in so doing, Stone perpetuates negative stereotypes of male homosexuals.

When Smiling Death appears on screen, he is either engaged in violence, accompanying superiors like Major Max, or directing subordinates to commit violent acts. For Smiling Death, the ability to be violent is empowering. It gives him a sense of masculine power and domination over his victims. To do otherwise would compromise his masculinity in the eyes of his peers; he must kill to gain acceptance amongst those, like D’Aubuisson, who seem to kill for pleasure and out of paranoia. Violence itself is the object of desire for this character, it is, in fact, erotic, even intoxicating. Thus, Smiling Death is an interpretation of the mentality of those who committed crimes against humanity during the Salvadoran Civil War. Smiling Death invites violence in order to fulfill his infatuation with the power he enjoys. In an almost erotic way, he pursues Boyle with lust; in particular, the eroticism of killing him, moreover, enthralled with the power that enables his ability to commit crime without redress. Smiling Death is eventually killed by


\[^{14}\text{Lesley Gill,}\textit{The School of the Americas: Military Training and Political Violence in the Americas} (Durham and London: Duke University, 2004).\]

\[^{15}\text{A similar point is made by Dale T. Graden and James W. Martin. “Oliver Stone’s}\textit{ Salvador} (1986): Revolution for The Unacquainted”}\textit{ Film and History} 28:3-4 (1998), pp. 18-27.\]

invading guerilla forces during the scene depicting the final offensive of the FMLN. Like Figueroa and the junta, he is ultimately powerless against the moral superiority of the guerilla forces, in the eyes of the filmmakers, and suffers from his association with the forces of repression, both foreign and internal.

Individuals who serve as henchmen, accessories to the violence, constantly accompany Smiling Death. The ideology of these characters—who are meant to portray the extrajudicial agents not directly associated with the military or security forces—is illustrated by a phrase appearing on a tee-shirt of one such individual during a scene in which Smiling Death confronts Boyle at a bar in La Libertad: it reads, “Grab ‘em by the balls and their Hearts and Minds’ll follow.”\textsuperscript{17} This pointed phrasing directly criticizes not only the methods of the Salvadoran right, but also the campaigns of the United States over “hearts and minds” as a component of foreign policy rhetoric throughout the Cold War. The nameless death squad characters stalk the scenery in the film; they are emblematic of institutionalized violence as a means of social control developed in the late nineteenth-century with the goal of ensuring national progress by pacifying the countryside.\textsuperscript{18} Stone explains that he chose “ugly faces” to represent these characters because they were those he remembered from the Western films of his youth. Indeed, many of those cast as strongmen came directly via Central Casting in Mexico and had appeared in numerous American made Westerns, particularly the films of John Wayne.\textsuperscript{19}

Throughout \textit{Salvador} male on male violence and threats of violence are communicated by the characters through a “macho versus maricon (homosexual)” dichotomy. The theme of emasculating adversaries by threatening to dismember their sexual organs is one central component of this violence and violent language. The inclusion of this graphic material is meant to convey one element of the extreme torture methods used by government security forces.\textsuperscript{20}

\textsuperscript{17} Boyle and Stone, \textit{Salvador}, p. 205.
\textsuperscript{18} Violence as a means of social control in rural Latin America has been examined by many scholars in the edited collection by Cecilia Menjívar and Nestor Rodríquez, editors, \textit{When States Kill: Latin America, the U.S., and the Technologies of Terror} (Austin: University of Texas, 2005).
\textsuperscript{19} Stone, “Commentary Track.” Stone comments on the “ugly” faces and nostalgia about American Westerns throughout the commentary track: in remarks that best illustrate \textit{Salvador} as an “ode to Westerns,” while recalling what he calls justified criticism for the rebel offensive on horseback scene in Santa Ana—which never occurred—he states, “Hey, it’s a Western.”
\textsuperscript{20} Death Squads routinely disfigured the cadaver of their victims, often carving the initials of the group responsible for the murder on the person’s body. See LAL – RCC, El Salvador Clippings, Jan. – June 1980, Box 4, Folder 8,
The feminization of an enemy to justify their defeat is recognized as a tool used by the Spanish to justify the conquest of the Americas. The persistence of this ideology and the ways in which it manifested during the El Salvador’s Civil War is a question that might find an answer through discourse analysis of training manuals for soldiers and research on the prevalence of these notions in popular culture. What is evident about the violence committed by Smiling Death was that these methods were something engendered in the ideology of the right. Committing violent acts, including the dismemberment of adversaries, was tied to conceptions masculinity and the symbolism of a feminized enemy, and thus, a justifiably slain victim.

By including specific historical characters of the Salvadoran right and other thematic characters to represent the security forces, Boyle and Stone express their interpretation of the climate existing in El Salvador during the 1980s. This “culture of fear,” was instigated largely by forces tied to the military-oligarchy, bent on its continued domination of the political and economic life of El Salvador. The association of extreme overt acts of violence committed by the extreme right is a persistent theme in the history of the Salvadoran political economy since the nineteenth-century. Violence by the right on screen is specifically linked to the concepts of gender; inasmuch as the often-expressed method of violence involves the perceived feminization of the enemy via dismemberment, thus, linking masculinity with particular notions power and

\[\text{Atlanta Journal Constitution} \text{ 16 May 1980. See also the interviews on the documentary by Allan Francovich, \textit{The Houses are Full of Salvador}, vol. 2 El Salvador, MYSTIC FIRE 1987, 58 minutes. In this documentary, masked individuals claiming to be former members of the National Guard and other various official military and police organizations explain the torture they witnessed.}\]


\[\text{22 Studies on the concept of masculinity in Latin American have found that “being a man” involved assuming numerous roles mitigated by individual socio-cultural circumstances, not simply the ability to be violent, as often appears as the stereotype of the “hot-blooded Latino.” For example, on a barrio Santo Domingo in Mexico City see, Matthew Guttmann, \textit{The Meanings of Macho: Being a Man in Mexico City} (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1996).}\]

\[\text{23 The link between feminization and the type of eroticism some individuals associate with castration lies beyond the scope of this study, however, further research on masculinity during El Salvador’s Civil War could determine why dismemberment and the feminization of adversaries was so prominent at this time. In literature on the Salvadoran Civil War, the theme of challenging an opponent’s masculinity via dismemberment also appears. For example see Manlio Argueta, \textit{One Day of Life} (New York: Vintage, 1983), see especially pp. 29, 70. In these particular examples, the violence is justified because the victims, priests, are accused of being communists by the “authorities” who rape and murder them.}\]

violence. Violence in the films is monopolized by men, often against other males in a contestation for power.

Not every member of the Salvadoran military, associated security forces, or death squads receives unyielding criticism. One character, Colonel Figueroa is loosely representative of the reformist-military members of the junta who were anti-communist, sought to defeat the guerrillas, but also punish the abuses of the extreme right. Figueroa is indicative of the larger picture Stone and Boyle meant to convey of Salvadoran society under the leadership of the juntas following 1979. As is the case with the ability to engage in death squad violence with impunity, the military might of the Salvadoran army in Salvador is linked to a paternal conception of the relationship between the United States and El Salvador. Upon arriving in Santa Ana after their detention at the border of Guatemala-El Salvador, Boyle and Dr. Rock fall into an orgy with Figueroa and his harem of prostitutes. Yet here too allusions to same sex eroticism arise as Figueroa boasts of one female prostitute’s penchant for anal sex. Thus while Figueroa might appear as sexually promiscuous and virile, especially in the depiction of the “final offensive,” he is fundamentally a flawed character due to his questionable sexuality and his ultimate reliance on the United States for any semblance of military superiority over the guerrillas.

By having to rely on outsiders for protection and power, Figueroa, and the Salvadoran military in general, is portrayed as a dependent, feminized entity, whereas the United States is effectually, as the provider for military success, the masculine entity in the binary gender system. This conceptualization paints Latin Americans such as D’Aubuisson as simply clients of the United States, thus, incapable of acting out of localized choice, mediated by internal circumstance and history. Viewing Latin Americans associated with or in favor of U.S. policy as not merely puppets of the U.S., and rather, as agents acting within limited circumstances and multiple layers of power and interest is most beneficial to understanding the complexity of their relationship.

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25 In the screenplay, Figueroa states, “I don’t know who I can trust. Half my men are working with the ‘escuadron de muerte’, the other half are selling their weapons to the guerrillas…the junta’s got no power and the country’s going to shit…Fuck em all…Right wing [and] left-wing.” Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 150. Although this scene is cut, due to its utterance amidst an orgy in Figueroa’s office, and hence possible “X” rating if included, I believe these statements reveal the true intent of the filmmakers’ vis-à-vis the character Colonel Figueroa.

During the final offensive scene, Figueroa must literally plead for the reestablishment of American military aid to defeat the guerrillas. In this sense, Figueroa resembles the junta itself, in that its inability to contain the right allowed the proliferation of violence and the continuation of aid from the United States. Since other members of the junta are absent—a point of criticism for many on the film—the projection of Figueroa points to the dependency of the junta on the United States for external support; furthermore, its subjugation to the whims of rightist violence internally, regardless of the goals of the government.

The “final offensive” sequence in *Salvador* is essentially a manipulation of historical events—in fact, the final offensive occurred in 1981, after Reagan had already assumed the presidency and had begun an exponential increase in military aid to the Salvadoran government—however, it points to the nature of the filmmakers’ interpretation of the junta and the weakness of the Salvadoran military. In Boyle and Stone’s perspective the Salvadoran military was inept, the strength and purpose of the guerrillas would have overcome the armed forces were it not for the intervention of the Untied States. Moreover, whatever the goals of the junta in 1981, they also relied on the aid of the United States to protect their legitimacy against revolution. The junta represented a roadblock to the spread of communism for the United States and for some segments of Salvadoran society. Its apparent weakness was due not only to a formidable internal opposition, but to its inability to control the security forces unleashed by U.S. aid and the self-serving design of the Salvadoran military-oligarchy.

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27 Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 231. Figueroa is not the only one who relies on U.S. aid. Simultaneous to the final offensive scene, Ambassador Kelly argues with American military personal over whether to restore aid or not. In fact the proponents of aid historicize the gravity of the situation to the undecided Ambassador: “Do you want to go down in the history books as the man who lost El Salvador?” thus harking back to earlier queries on “Who lost China?” See Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 228.


29 This interpretation coincides with the theses advanced by some historians of the Salvadoran Civil War. For example, Mario Lungo Uclés, *El Salvador in the Eighties: Counterinsurgency and Revolution* (Philadelphia: Temple University, 1996).

In summation, several figures represent the Salvadoran right in the film. Some of these characters, like Major Max (Roberto D’Aubuisson), have historical parallels. Others, including Smiling Death and his henchmen, for example, are symbolic of larger groups present in the conflict; namely, official and unofficial individuals involved in death squad activity. The maintenance of power for the Salvadoran right relied on the ability to instill fear in the population and in many cases assumed masculine notions of violence. The persistence threat of castration in the film points not only to the historical nature of the torture methods used by the right, but also to the ways in which the filmmakers conceived of the violence in terms of a linkage between masculinity and power.

“Con Muchachos in the mountains:” The Portrayal of the Salvadoran Left

While not completely devoid of responsibility for violence during the civil war, the Salvadoran left receives far more positive treatment in the film. In broadest terms, “the Salvadoran left” constitutes the armed segments of the FMLN as well as other civilian elements either correctly or falsely lumped together with the opposition by the Salvadoran government. Detailing the history and significance of leftist opposition in El Salvador lies outside the scope of this work. However, a brief background on the FMLN, the group representing the armed left portrayed in Salvador suffices for outlining the history and culture of opposition in El Salvador.

The FMLN was formed in 1980 as a unification of several opposition groups. Within the umbrella of the FMLN were both the political and military segments of the opposition during the 1980s. The namesake of the organization Agustín Farabundo Martí had fought alongside Augusto César Sandino against U.S. Marines in Nicaragua during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Upon returning to El Salvador in 1930, Martí—who had been exposed to Marxism while at the National University—organized a communist party. Following the ouster of the reformist Arturo Araujo in 1931, Martí organized resistance in rural Western El Salvador in preparation for a popular insurrection. In January of 1932, prior to the uprising, however, government officials

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31 “With friends in the mountains,” answers a young man to Boyle on where he is off to after the American drops him off on the side of the road. Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 180.

32 For comprehensive histories on opposition in El Salvador, including the FMLN, see Richard L. Harris, Marxism, Socialism, and Democracy in Latin America (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1992); Lungo, El Salvador in the Eighties; Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador; Timothy P. Wickham-Crowley, Guerrillas and Revolution in Latin America: A Comparative Study of Insurgents and Regimes Since 1956 (Princeton: Princeton University, 1992).
uncovered the plot, and under the direction of General Maximiliano Hernández Martínez, embarked on a virtual genocide of peasants in Western El Salvador. This massacre, known as the Matanza plays a prominent role in the history of violence in El Salvador.\textsuperscript{33} 1932 had a lasting effect on Salvadoran memory, this event was symbolic to the leftist opposition in the 1980s as representative evidence of the extremes the state was willing to go to in order to quell internal dissent.\textsuperscript{34} From its inception in the 1980s to its status as the largest opposition party in contemporary El Salvador, the FMLN’s principal goal has been to oppose the power of the military-oligarchy, thus representing—in general—the desires of many Salvadorans for a more equitable society. The subject of U.S. diatribes during the 1980s that insisted its power lay in apparent backing from Moscow—a critique definitively contradicted by the end of the Cold War—the FMLN represented the culmination of societal discontent among the poor and marginalized of El Salvador: overt opposition to the government in the form of guerilla warfare was the product of the indigenous impetus for revolution born out of years of repression.

In \textit{Salvador}, the left is portrayed sympathetically; for the filmmakers, theirs is the just war. According to Stone, “I will never be one of those people who condemn those who use any means necessary. I’ve been one of these violators myself.”\textsuperscript{35} He largely excuses the tactics of the left, Stone seems to be sympathetic to those pushed to take any means necessary for national liberation. One member of the Salvadoran left who figures prominently is a character called Ramon Alvarez. Although Alvarez may have no historical equivalent, his character appears to be an adaptation of Enrique Alvarez Córdova. The two share more than a common name. The cinematic Alvarez is ever present at the difficult task of helping relatives of the disappeared identify family members in photo albums assembled from pictures taken at “body dumps,” such as the one depicted in \textit{Salvador}, El Playón.\textsuperscript{36} Unlike the historical Alvarez, the film version is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{33} The standard work on the matanza is Anderson, \textit{Matanza}; for a literary example see Sandra Benitez, \textit{Bitter Grounds} (New York: Hyperion, 1997).
\item \textsuperscript{34} The memory of 1932 makes a passing appearance in \textit{Salvador}. During a scene depicting an American-owned cantina in La Libertad an old woman tells Boyle (in Spanish) that “there is a bad feeling in the air. It’s like 1932 [again].” Although her statements are subtitled, the significance of the date is lost on viewers lacking knowledge of Salvadoran history.
\item \textsuperscript{35} Oliver Stone, “Commentary Track,” \textit{Salvador} (1986), Special Edition MGM, 2001, DVD.
\item \textsuperscript{36} El Playón was the body dump outside of San Salvador used by the right wing as a place to leave the bodies of their victims to rot. The body dump is called by its name in \textit{Salvador}, whereas in \textit{Romero}, a body dump is featured, but not identified as El Playón.
\end{itemize}
not explicitly linked to land reform. Whereas the Salvadoran security forces assassinated the historical Alvarez, the right only arrests the cinematic version, wrongly, for the assassination of Archbishop Romero. These correlations suggest that the two could be one in the same, however, considering the scope of violence against leaders of the opposition, Ramon Alvarez in *Salvador* could be any one of numerous leftists slain by elements of the Salvadoran right. In this sense, the inclusion of this figure is representative of those civilians who aligned themselves with the left in the all out war on civil society waged by the military-oligarchy. In a scene symbolic of the resolve of the left, Alvarez addresses Smiling Death in the middle of a demonstration with the question “What about the Disappeared?” even after the threat of violence if the demonstrators did not disperse. Alvarez represents the cries from across Salvadoran society for the government to assume responsibility for controlling the violence and finding the disappeared.

The character, appropriately named Captain Martí, personifies the portrayal of the FMLN in *Salvador*. For the filmmakers, Martí is the quintessential “Cuban-trained” Marxist guerrilla, steeped in the language of proletariat revolution and in touch with the objective realities of life in El Salvador. He represents the vanguard of the FMLN and upon visiting his foco (guerilla encampment/base of operations) in the mountains Boyle is stunned with the guerrilla leaders’ commitment to the final offensive, he asks Martí “You really think you’re ready Captain? With 4,000 troops take El Salvador? I mean the Pentagon’s not gonna let that happen.” In response, Martí evokes classic Marxist doctrine; “the will of the people and the march of history cannot be changed. Even by the Norteamericanos.” However valiant their effort and just their cause, Boyle’s foreboding remark about the reaction of the Untied States conveys the reality of what would transpire during the final offensive. Stone and Boyle’s conception of the guerilla camps in the mountains reproduces many of the images central to how they conceived of the Salvadoran Civil War. The guerillas are armed with antiquated weapons, scenes of young couples kissing appear, and their trek to the mountains is accompanied by sweeping vistas of green, broken only

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37 A similar point is made by Granden and White, “Oliver Stone’s Salvador,” p. 20.
by columns of young people marching and drilling.\footnote{Those sympathetic to the FMLN demonstrated that their weapons were relics of past imperial wars: the weak were now turning the weapons of the strong against them. These images are reproduced also in literature on the Civil War, see Sandra Benitez, \textit{The Weight of All Things} (New York: Hyperion, 2000). One of the best examples detailing the reality of guerilla life in the mountains and the physical and mental transformations resulting from this experience see, Omar Cabezas, \textit{Fire From the Mountain: The Making of a Sandinista} (New York: Crown Publishers, 1985). On the idealization of the Latin American left in the United States, especially in response to the Cuban Revolution see Van Gosse, \textit{Where the Boys Are: Cold War America and the Making of the New Left} (New York: Verso, 1993).} Essentially, Stone’s version of the guerillas is romanticized and illustrates clearly his bias in favor of the moral purpose of the opposition.

Overall the portrayal of the armed left is sympathetic, however, a statement by Boyle during the scene depicting the final offensive illustrates the reluctance of the filmmakers to adopt a seamlessly positive image of the guerrillas. As a group of guerrillas overtake a position previously held by the armed forces, a Salvadoran guerrilla (a woman) shoots several captive soldiers, killing them execution style. In response, Boyle shouts to the guerrilla, “Is this your justice! You’ve become just like them.”\footnote{Boyle and Stone, \textit{Salvador}, p. 230.} In this sense, the filmmakers do not excuse the violence of the left, but rather contextualize it with a warning. Their struggle against the military-oligarchy is justified throughout the film, but here, this statement by Boyle represents the belief that violence from left will only beget further violence from the right, perpetuating the conflict.\footnote{For an alternative interpretation of Stone’s portrayal of the left see Granden and White, “Oliver Stone’s \textit{Salavdor} (1986),” p. 23.} It is significant that Boyle denounces the violence of the guerillas only when it is executed by a woman. Boyle approaches Captain Martí with admiration, albeit with reservations on his ambitions for a guerilla victory. The female revolutionary, the only Salvadoran woman in the film representing the armed resistance, on the other hand, is excluded from engaging in heroic violence in the eyes of the filmmakers. Indeed, this portrayal solidifies Boyle and Stone’s gendered conception of the link between masculinity and violence, in which, women are excluded in a binary system.

Although the guerilla who murdered the Salvadoran soldiers is a woman, female revolutionaries, both engaged in armed struggle and those who provided support for the guerrillas, do not, however, play a significant role in the film. In reality, women compromised
some 30% of those engaged in the struggle against the government.\textsuperscript{44} They played a significant role as “gendered revolutionary bridges,” who used traditional notions of femininity to help unite otherwise disparate opposition groups, all the while providing critical support for the insurgents in the countryside as well as in the cities.\textsuperscript{45} Feminism in revolutionary El Salvador was integral to the success of the struggle for national liberation, and in the post-war period has served to create ties with women on both the political right and left.\textsuperscript{46} Despite their historical importance, the main characters in the film are men, women do not occupy positions of power. These specific portrayals demonstrate the ways in which the filmmakers imagined the place and function of women in Salvadoran society as less important and less critical to the struggle against the government.

The other Salvadoran women portrayed in \textit{Salvador} are submissive, sexually promiscuous, or blindly savage. Lumped together here with the discussion of the Salvadoran left, these women served to represent the innocent people affected by the violence. Because government as well as unofficial groups targeted these bystanders and often labeled them subversives a priori, this methodological tool includes a grain of truth about how the Salvadoran right viewed civil society as inherently sympathetic to, and thus supportive of, the guerillas. The two characters representative of the innocent Salvadorans are both women, María and Wilma, but occupy very different stations in society.

María, the mother of Boyle’s child in El Salvador and apparently his long-standing love interest, is always subservient and defers to the American journalist (Boyle). Regardless of what Boyle does, María forgives him, feeding the stereotype of Latin American women as submissive. This stereotype about Latin American women and their essential difference to North American women is illustrated in an exchange between Boyle and Dr. Rock in San Francisco at the beginning of the film: “I can’t deal with yuppie women. Fuckin’ walkmans, running shoes, they’d rather go to aerobics class than fuck…Now Latin women are totally different, they’re


\textsuperscript{45} Shayne, \textit{The Revolution Question}, p. 20.

kind…like Claudia (Boyle’s Italian wife at the time), she doesn’t give a shit what I do.”

María’s sexuality and body is objectified in the film as she submits to Boyles’ sexual desires instantly, almost out of obligation to the American who suddenly appears again in her life. After Boyle’s first couple hours back in El Salvador, he has sex with María in a hammock at her house in La Libertad. Present is her young son, not Boyle’s, and eventually Dr. Rock and María’s brother Carlos appear on the scene. All the while María is naked paying no attention to the other men present; she is simply an object, part of the background of “the greatest surfing beach in the world.” Only when Carlos pulls out a camera does María run away, as if images of her body hide the fact the audience has already been shown her submissive nature. This portrayal of the submissive María perpetuates North American stereotypes about Latin Americans, especially women, as oversexed and impure. These gendered paternalistic ideologies are tied not only to popular culture, but also the culture of Central America’s foreign relations with the U.S. Notions of Central Americans as dependent and incapable of self-determination permeate the history of policy and rhetoric about the isthmus.

Women such as María, innocent victims of the violence, rely on North American’s like Boyle for protection, and by and large, Boyle’s decisions guide María’s life.

A significant percentage of the language and images devoted to describing Salvadoran women in the film labels them, essentially, as prostitutes. They are present in the opening scenes with Col. Figueroa; figure prominently as a motivation for Rock and Boyle going to El Salvador, and, paradoxically, one former prostitute in particular “reforms” Dr. Rock. Scholars have shown how dominant groups define moral standards and appropriate feminine action as that which stands in direct opposition to the activities of “lost women.” By marginalizing prostitutes from debates over the health and the future of family and nation, governments sought to define the place of women in the labor force and society. Regardless of how national discourse was used to

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47 Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 140.


50 See for example Guy, *Sex and Danger* and Bliss, *Compromised Positions*. 
oppress prostitution, the ability to redeem was never a quality bestowed upon practicing prostitutes.\footnote{Although prostitution usually carried a negative connotation, subcultures emerged amongst prostitutes which served as critiques of prescribed moral codes imposed by the state. See Guy, \textit{Sex and Danger} on Argentina; on post-WWII Japan see John Dower, \textit{Embracing Defeat: Japan in the Wake of World War II} (New York: W.W. Norton and Company/The New Press, 1999), pp. 87-162.}

In \textit{Salvador}, however, Dr. Rock’s girlfriend—Wilma from the “Panama Club” strip club—eventually reforms the wayward American. In contrast to the beginning of the film when Dr. Rock appears dirty and disheveled, at the end he emerges clean and shaven on the arm of a former Salvadoran prostitute. This woman’s ability to redeem stands in contrast to other forms of agency amongst most women in \textit{Salvador}: namely the militant FMLN woman executioner. Moreover, instead of Boyle shaping María’s life, Wilma appears to determine Rock’s ending in the film. It seems, however, that if something about El Salvador rather than Wilma has changed Dr. Rock. Ironically, the drugs, alcohol, and prostitutes in El Salvador have given him a structure to his life missing in the United States. The ability to exploit El Salvador’s culture of vice, thus, empowers Dr. Rock as the ultimate imperial tourist.

Whether depicted as submissive or promiscuous, women in \textit{Salvador} always act in the extreme. They appear largely incapable of making independent decisions and rely on the whims of their men to know how to act. María, considering Boyle’s excesses, is extremely submissive and advances a stereotype relegating women to a subordinate role. The prostitutes convey a sense of the sexuality of the Salvadoran population as a whole. The women are easy and the country in general is hypersexual; again, advancing the stereotype that Latin Americans are oversexed, in a primitive, almost animalistic way, open and willing to engage in foreign exploitation. Returning to the female executioner of the Salvadoran soldier during the final offensive, she also resorts to drastic measures, however, like Rock’s girlfriend, agency is fleeting and circumstantial. In sum, gendered power is the monopoly of men in \textit{Salvador}, women, like men, engage in excess behavior to assert power, or lack thereof, in the film. By relegating women to a subordinate position in the film, Boyle and Stone replicate gendered notions of Latin American women, and in the conception of the idealist left, make clear the persistence of paternal notions towards Latin American self-determination.

According to María, and thus meant to represent the voice of the innocent bystanders to the Salvadoran Civil War, Archbishop Romero was a significant individual: “He’s the only man
that can save El Salvador.”

The above statement would lead one to believe that Archbishop Romero played a central role in the film. This is not the case; however, the depiction of Romero’s assassination does contain critical symbolism and deliberate, liberal use of the historical record in order to push the issue of violence against the Catholic Church. Romero’s public assassination in Salvador (rather than adhering to the historical circumstances of the assassination) is symbolic of the escalation of violence that followed in its wake. After the assassin shoots Romero through the heart, the hundreds present at the mass flee the Church. The scene represents the massacre that occurred during Romero’s funeral on March 31. The thousands present at Romero’s funeral were fired upon by the armed forces, killing fifty and wounding another 350. “The massacre was prepared,” a headline in the Nicaragua Newspaper Barricada declared, illustrating the significance of the events surrounding Romero’s assassination to neighboring countries. Not only was Romero’s assassination carefully planned, so too was the massacre in the plaza, instances illustrative of the historical continuity of the willingness of the Salvadoran right to use violence against civilians.

Romero’s assassination had the effect of pushing many otherwise moderates further to the left. On March 25, eight moderate and leftist organizations in El Salvador banded together in outward opposition to the policies of the junta and the United States. The significance of Romero’s assassination, in terms of its effect on the organization of the left, was that, following March 1980, the FDR emerged as the legitimate political counterpart to the FMLN. Thus, strengthening the resolve of the moderate sectors and aligning them more closely with the revolutionary left. On the ways in which overt violence effected the resolve and growth in armed and political opposition groups, Salvadoran Defense Minister Colonel Jose Guillermo Garcia, explained, “There does exist government repression in [El Salvador] but it is only to guarantee peace…We [referring to the military, but also conservative interests as well] are victims of our own ineptitude to manage propaganda…the enemy has been brilliant.”

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52 Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 191.
54 See Stanley, The Protection Racket State, for an argument on the historical continuity of the Salvadoran state to use violence against civil society as a means of social control.
55 Granma, 26 March 1980.
picture of Romero moments after his death appeared on the front page of the Guatemalan daily *El Imparcial* on March 25. The slain Archbishop lies on his back, blood surrounding him, nuns in white clutching his hands. Romero’s death served as one impetus for the unification of popular organizations, his legacy persisted throughout the Civil War symbolizing the martyrdom of the Church who took the option of the poor.

“This ain’t gringoland:” The Portrayal of United States Intervention and its Agents

Fundamentally, Boyle and Stone conceive of U.S. intervention in El Salvador within the larger context of the Cold War and their own experiences in a world victim to the polemics of superpower confrontation. Owing to their familiarity with the war in Vietnam and the parallels they saw between South East Asia and Central America, *Salvador* is clearly a critique of U.S. policy in El Salvador in particular and also of U.S. policy during the Cold War in general. These attitudes certainly inform the portrayal of agents of U.S. intervention and, as with other characters, the symbolism of actions and statements by these individuals reveals an existing discourse on the Cold War.

Of the Americans featured, few are as critical and symbolic of the role on the United States as Richard Boyle. Boyle, as the moral voice of the film, undergoes dramatic changes vis-à-vis his experiences in El Salvador. Thus, he is the embodiment of both Stone and Boyle’s projection of the effects of exposure to war. For Boyle and Stone, Vietnam was the formative memory; the cinematic Boyles’ moral compass evolves in relation to the chaos of El Salvador, but with constant relation to the ghost of Vietnam. Dr. Rock, Boyle’s traveling companion, changes his perception of El Salvador throughout the film as well. He begins as ignorant of the culture and language, but eventually adopts El Salvador as his home. In this way, Dr. Rock and


58 Boyle explains to Dr. Rock as the two drive past by a burning body on the side of the road. Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 145.
Boyle illustrate the image of the American abroad whose consciousness changes through exposure to the realities of the “other.”

Many of the opinions formed about El Salvador in the American mind came not as an evolution like that experienced by Rock and Boyle, but in the form of media. Newspapers and journalists served as the primary organs—other than politicians—of information on foreign affairs for many Americas. The characters of journalists Pauline Axelrod and John Cassidy, thus, also play central roles in the portrayal of North Americans in Salvador. Axelrod symbolizes what Stone and Boyle see as the general ignorance of the American media to the realities of El Salvador. Her actions in the film are reflective of the effects Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman’s “Propaganda Model,” in that silencing the Salvadoran side of the story required the consent and ignorance of some segments of the media.

Stone explains that Axelrod is based upon Richard Boyle’s reflections on certain “network television correspondents” that would “do stand-ups from the roof of their hotel,” rather than engage in investigative journalism. Axelrod also demonstrates the filmmakers’ gendered conception on heroic combat journalism. In one scene Dr. Rock surreptitiously drops a tab of acid in Axelrod’s drink causing her to act like a buffoon. The inclusion of the seemingly unnecessary humiliation further consolidates the prevalent notion in the film, that the female journalist has no place in the field, for Boyle and Stone, and like other women in Salvador, is complacent with the agenda of a dominate man (in this case the figure of Ronald Reagan and neoconservative policymakers in Washington).

The filmmakers’ experiences in Vietnam had convinced them of the need for journalists, in the words of John Cassidy, to “…get close to get the truth, too close you die.” With this statement, Cassidy forebodes his own heroic death, which occurs during the final offensive, as he attempts to get a shot of an airplane attacking guerrilla positions. Cassidy’s inclusion in the film

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59 A subject that requires further research and lies beyond the scope of this study is the place of Salvador amongst literature and films that depict Americans abroad, how these individuals’ experiences shape their perceptions of the world as well as how the actions of these individuals shape ideas of the United States simultaneously.


61 Stone, “Commentary Track.”

62 This statement is absent from the screenplay but included in the film version.
is emblematic of the committed journalists of the period, such as Boyle, Raymond Bonner, and John Hoagland (to whom this character is dedicated), who risked their lives for the sake of getting “the shot” or “the story” and in doing so, contrary to the Axelrods of the world, exposed the truth about El Salvador to the American public. Cassidy’s ultimate sacrifice is a nod not only to those who responsibly covered Central America in the 1970s and 1980s, but also to those who were combat journalists in the Vietnam War. It is evident through these images of American journalists that Stone and Boyle advocate dissent and vigilance towards U.S. policy in the region, that is, if the journalists were men. Stone was conscious of the dissentious nature of the film, stating “[Salvador] was on of the few reactions to [sic] recent Reagan administration [policies].”

Official as well as clandestine representatives of the United States form another group of Americans portrayed in the film. United States Ambassador to El Salvador Thomas Kelly is a thinly veiled characterization of Robert White, President Carter’s representative in San Salvador. Ambassador White denied the filmmakers the use of his actual name in Salvador, explaining that he considered Boyle “a loose cannon” and what dominated the film was “Richard Boyle’s craziness and his response to the craziness of El Salvador…I didn’t think it was appropriate for a former U.S. Ambassador to be in that.” In light of his unwillingness to lend the use of his name to the film, White nevertheless, considered his portrayal, “sympathetic, flattering… the important thing about [Salvador] was that it portray[s] [sic] the United States backing a killing machine.” Both during his tenure as the Ambassador to El Salvador and after, White spoke out against the role of the United States in El Salvador, “Reagan didn’t understand El Salvador…we [the U.S.] spent six billion dollars enabling them [Salvadorans] to die,” and creating thousands of refugees who “had to flee.” According to White, the Reagan administration’s policies toward El Salvador are particularly “shameful because we knew who was terrorizing the campesinos…they were


64 Oliver Stone, “Commentary Track.”
legitimate political refugees, they were refugees from the violence we were sponsoring.” All this, in White’s words, “to try and defeat revolutionaries who wanted peace in 1981.”

White served most of his diplomatic career in Latin America. His post prior to receiving an “emergency reassignment,” to El Salvador, January 1980, was in Paraguay. He replaced Frank Devine, who “had been unsympathetic to the [Carter] administrations’ efforts to promote reform.” White was known for his activism in advancing Jimmy Carter’s human rights policies in the Americas. Anti-communist, but not opposed to integrating the leftist opposition into politics, White felt U.S. military aid was unnecessary. Summarizing White’s position, William Leogrande explains, “the [Salvadoran junta] was not in any immediate danger of military defeat by the guerrillas, so [White] opposed any significant increase in U.S. military aid, lest it strengthen the conservative military at the expense of the civilians.”

A particularly vivid depiction of a specific act of violence is the film’s portrayal of the rape and murder of four American churchwomen, which occurred on December 2, 1980. In the film, Ambassador Kelly is visibly shaken by the events in El Salvador. In the film, as he was in December of 1980, the Ambassador is portrayed as being present at the site where the murdered churchwomen were buried in a shallow grave. The filmmakers retain the accepted version of the events the night when the four American churchwomen were murdered and raped after returning from Managua, Nicaragua. The purpose of their trip was to pick-up other nuns at the airport who were planning to do humanitarian work in El Salvador with the Maryknoll Order. Immediately following the incident, the Archdiocese of El Salvador stated that “the Salvadoran National Guard, we feel, was involved in this crime.” In Nicaragua, Barricada reported that

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68 El Imparcial, 5 December 1980. In the documentary on the Salvadoran Civil War by Allan Francovich, The Houses are Full of Smoke a former head of the Salvadoran intelligence apparatus, Manuel Santabañez, explains that “in the case of the [murder of] the nuns, its was the direct involvement of the National Guard.” On the details of the murder of the American Churchwomen, including the trial, description of crime, and a list of those responsible see the U.N. Truth Commission Report on El Salvador under the following heading: IV. Cases and Patterns of Violence,
the murders constituted, “evidence of the savagery and power of the high hand of the Armed Forces of El Salvador.” U.S. Ambassador Robert White implicated the United States for not pursuing the perpetrators of this heinous crime, “this [the murder of the nuns] was another straightforward signal to the Salvadoran military that high officials in the Reagan administration would find excuses for such conduct, even the murder of American citizens.”

In Salvador, the nuns are run off the road and assaulted by “four Salvadoran National Guardsmen in civilian clothes.” The National Guardsmen, depicted as drunken savages, then proceed to rape and brutally murder the churchwomen. The aftermath at the scene of the crime when the bodies of the churchwomen are exhumed illustrates Stone’s belief in the significance of this event in the Salvadoran Civil War. In this scene the filmmakers summarize statements attributed to Alexander Haig about the intentions of the churchwomen. As recounted through the character of Pauline Axelrod, “rumor has it they [the nuns] ran the roadblock and there was an exchange of gunfire.” At the suggestion of this scenario, Boyle turns away from the gullible reporter and walks away, shaking his head in disgust. Boyle’s reaction is symbolic of response by many familiar with El Salvador and perhaps, personally with the murdered ecclesiastics. The suggestion that the nuns were armed and working for the FMLN does not merit a response from Boyle in the film, symbolically, he walks away, dirtied face in direct contrast to the white powdered nose of Axelrod. Boyle, the committed journalist, at this point in the film has been in the field for so long that his clothes appear like rags. Axelrod on the other hand, since she spends all her time within the protection of the hotel, appears quite fashionable, unsoiled by the experience of death in El Salvador.

Stone’s inclusion of this event serves not only to portray the brutality of the National Guard, but also to show how members of the Reagan administration explained this event as evidence of communist infiltration. In the scene, Ambassador Kelly recommends the suspension

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69 Barricada, 5 December 1980.
71 Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 208.
72 Boyle and Stone, Salvador, p. 211.
of military aid to the Salvadoran junta. Kelly’s reaction highlights the fact that this incident—because it involved Americans—finally attracted the attention of the United States. For the filmmakers, it put a face on the violence in El Salvador for the American public that the tens of thousands of dead Salvadorans had failed to do. In this way, Stone and Boyle allude to the concept of “unworthy victims” developed by Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman in their work, *Manufacturing Consent*. According to Herman and Chomsky, the casualties of the Salvadoran conflict failed to resonate in the American mind due to their marginalization in the American media. Salvadorans, as the unworthy others, had little value in the minds of the U.S. populace, whereas American nuns elicited immediate sympathy because they shared the bond of national identity with other Americans.

Ambassador Kelly, although specifically embodying Robert White, is also symbolic of those within the foreign policy bureaucracy who opposed U.S. intervention in El Salvador. The previous post of the fictionalized Robert White had been Cambodia; Boyle had known the Ambassador then, and penned, as Richard Boyle actually did, his account of the Cambodian conflict. Thus, Ambassador Kelly as the characterization of White would have experienced the conflicts in South East Asia firsthand and be sympathetic to civilians caught up in the conflict. Just as for Boyle and Stone, thus, Kelly would have been haunted by the ghosts of Vietnam and the prolonged American involvement in South East Asia.

Jack Morgan and Colonel Hyde represent the Americans in *Salvador* who, according to Stone, suffered from “moral amnesia” and apparently did not remember, or chose to disavow, Vietnam. The screenplay describes Jack Morgan as a “Yale-educated civilian.” Although without a specific historical parallel, Morgan represents an American civilian collaborating with the U.S. military attaché in El Salvador. Similarly, Colonel Hyde has no historical parallel; however, he serves as a representative of the U.S. military assigned to El Salvador. Although the exact numbers of these individuals and their role is distorted in an attempt to maintain plausible

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73 Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 211.

74 Chomsky and Herman, *Manufacturing Consent*, see especially chapter 2, provides a statistical and analytical study of the coverage of violence in El Salvador in the American media during the early 1980s.

75 The title of Boyle’s book is *The Flower of the Dragon*.

76 Boyle and Stone, *Salvador*, p. 162.
deniability, their status as agents of the United States in El Salvador is undeniable.\textsuperscript{77} The presence of U.S. military personnel in El Salvador and the motivation for their deployment evolved largely in relation to the issue of “exported revolution,” via the Soviet-Cuban-Nicaraguan chain by 1980. In particular the question of arms traffic in the Americas figured prominently in determining U.S. intervention.

While awaiting the results in the 1980 U.S. presidential election, Boyle has an interesting exchange with Morgan over the issue of arms traffic involving the Salvadoran guerrillas. Morgan says to Boyle, “They’re [Salvadoran guerrillas] getting weapons, lots of em, through Nicaragua and they’re gonna make a move pretty soon.” Boyle retorts, “I hear they’re getting most of their weapons on the black market in Miami or off Government troops.” That was “Last year,” explains Morgan, “This year Castro’s got them organized. It’s Warsaw Bloc stuff.” Boyle shoots Morgan a skeptical look, the American Advisor warns him “You’re not going to think this is all one big joke…and in five years you’ll be seeing Cuban tanks divisions on the Rio Grande.”\textsuperscript{78} This dialogue illustrates the core issues, according to the U.S., in the debate over the scope of communist intervention in El Salvador. The “move” Morgan refers to is rumors of Sandinista agitation and possible invasion of El Salvador through the Gulf of Fonseca.\textsuperscript{79} It’s plausible that some arms did arrive in El Salvador via Cuba, Nicaragua, and various Eastern Bloc countries.\textsuperscript{80} Yet Boyle’s description on how the guerrillas obtained weapons is closer to reality than Morgan’s. Journalists such as Raymond Bonner and Beth Nelson demonstrated that the majority of arms were antiquated relics of the past, not sophisticated Soviet technology.\textsuperscript{81}

\textsuperscript{77} In Leogrande, \textit{Our Own Backyard}, the debate over these individuals is chronicled, as well as the changes in U.S. aid during the period. See especially chapters 7-12.

\textsuperscript{78} Boyle and Stone, \textit{Salvador}, p. 164.

\textsuperscript{79} Reports of Sandinista intentions to invade El Salvador through the Gulf of Fonseca persisted throughout the early 1980s. See \textit{Newsweek}, 26 January 1981, p. 53, which offers a map which illustrates the reported operations of the Sandinistas in the area, including where supposedly “Nicaraguan landings” occurred.


\textsuperscript{81} Bonner, \textit{Weakness and Deceit}; \textit{Newsweek} 16 March 1981.
did arrive to El Salvador from Eastern Europe as well as being captured from American units in Vietnam, from National Guard Units in Nicaragua, or purchased on the black market. Without open access to Cuban and Nicaragua archives to access the actual amount of arms flowing into El Salvador, it is necessary to rely on the testimony of witnesses to measure the actual number of weapons. At this point, few studies address this issue. One study, Jorge Castañeda’s *Utopia Unarmed*, however, contains interviews with high placed Cuban officials that deny providing arms to the Central American revolutionaries not because they did not want to, but rather because they were short of funds and the Soviets were unwilling to bankroll the operations.

In the absence of comprehensive information, the debate over a “white paper” published by the Department of State in February of 1981 on El Salvador provides insight into the issue of arms traffic from the U.S. perspective. Although all previous State Department reports during 1980-1981 observed that arms traffic in Central America “had been halted or drastically ceased,” at the behest of Alexander Haig, State released a white paper, titled “Communist Interference in El Salvador” on February 23, 1981 claiming that, “200 tons of arms…mostly through Cuba and Nicaragua” have been supplied to Salvadoran guerrillas during “the past year.” Furthermore, the “tanks on the Rio Grande” statement from *Salvador* is meant to convey the belief held by the Reagan administration that aggression in El Salvador would manifest into the fulfillment of the Domino Theory if not properly dealt with by the United States. The belief that unilaterally controlled “communists” in Central America acted on behalf of Soviet, Cuban, and Nicaraguan

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82 LAL – Photographs, Salvador Guerilla Weapons Photographs, 1984. This collection of photos of various small arms seized from Salvadoran guerrillas was taken by U.S. Assistant Army Attaché in the US Embassy in El Salvador, Emilo Gonzalez. Displayed are weapons from Belgium, China, Nicaragua, the US, and North Korea. Although not a representative sample, this collection points to the fact that guns and ammo arrived from many places to El Salvador. This example points to the difficulty of making exact statements on where arms from the outside had originated.


design fails to recognize the diminished role of these countries in Central America during the period.\textsuperscript{86}  

Cuban involvement in Central America was most pronounced in Nicaragua, but military assistance in the region diminished after the Sandinista Revolution in 1979.\textsuperscript{87}  Provoking the United States by overtly supporting the Salvadoran guerrillas was impractical for the Sandinistas as well as for the Cubans. With a hawkish administration in the United States, economic problems in Cuba, and a revolution that was far from consolidated in Nicaragua in 1981, the Cubans as well as the Sandinistas were not willing to risk the gains of their own revolutions at the chance of eliciting intervention from the United States.\textsuperscript{88} This is not to diminish the unknown numbers of guerrillas that trained in Cuba, or to overlook the humanitarian components of Cuban aid to both the Sandinistas and the Salvadorans, however. Both the Cubans and the Sandinistas opted for minor clandestine support, and rather, engaged the United States directly through rhetoric, denouncing its foreign policy and expressing solidarity for the Salvadoran guerrillas.\textsuperscript{89}

**Conclusion**

The figure of Oliver Stone and his prolific film production since the mid-1980s has perhaps overshadowed the historical significance of *Salvador*. By developing historically based characters, Stone replicates his version of the Salvadoran conflict, but also adheres to common conceptions and stereotypes about the region in U.S. popular culture. In order to make a film

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\textsuperscript{86} The culmination of the fear that the revolutions in Central America would eventually threaten the United States in portrayed in *Red Dawn* (1984) when a coalition of various Central American and Soviet communists invade the United States. The existence the phrase “tanks on the Rio Grande,” and movies like *Red Dawn* demonstrate the resonance of a “transcript” which, for Americans, served as the means to contextualize the Cold War.


\textsuperscript{88} Alexander Haig presented the possibility of intervention in Cuba if the situation did not improve in El Salvador, *New York Times* 5 November 1981.

like *Salvador* Stone and Boyle had to work within the existing Cold War transcripts and the prevailing images of Latin American phenomena and people.

To make Roberto D’Aubuisson come alive, Stone detailed some of the death squad leader’s most egregious crimes against humanity, the assassination of Romero for example. When explaining the methods of violence used by D’Aubuisson and his associates, the filmmakers determine that power lays in the ability to defeat a feminized enemy, hence the focus on castration. The film argues that the power of the right to engage in violence without redress is ultimately a false notion, however, as the real muscle behind the Salvadoran military is U.S. economic support. By portraying the right as dependent, the filmmakers perpetuate the notion that the U.S.’s Latin American allies are simply clients, puppets of North Americans. This negates the possibility of localized motivations and the fact that D’Aubuisson acted without the consent and out of the control of U.S. wishes on many occasions.

The sympathies of the filmmakers are with the Salvadoran opposition. Heroic in deed and purpose, the left in the film fights the people’s war, that is, if they are male. Women in the conflict are marginalized in terms of importance and are assigned stereotypical Latin American female characteristics such as submission and dependence. They are shown as either powerless women, prostitutes, or misguided revolutionaries. By perpetuating stereotypes of Salvadoran women, Boyle and Stone fail to do justice to their role in the conflict. The images of the Salvadoran left reproduce much of what characterizes the Salvadoran right: a paternal conception of the role of the U.S. in Central America.

It is no surprise that Americans receive a lot of treatment in the film. All the elements of the Cold War are present through these individuals: dissenting journalists and State Department officials, anti-communist military and government personnel, and the murdered nuns who represent the moment that violence in El Salvador finally impacts the American mind. These individuals tell us the most about how Stone felt about the conflicts in Central America and how he transferred his experiences in Vietnam onto them then they do about the internal struggle of the Salvadoran civil society. The dialogue between Boyle and Morgan spell out the central issue espoused by the Reagan administration, namely that El Salvador represented the culmination of the Domino Theory and that there would be enemy tanks on the Rio Grande if we (the Americans) did not “draw the line” in El Salvador.90

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Given the existing transcript on the Cold War ingrained in the American consciousness from thirty years of confrontation with the Soviet Union, a film like *Salvador* must adhere to images, words, and symbols in their portrayal of the Salvadoran Civil War. The employment of these cultural signifiers demonstrates both how memories of Vietnam affected portrayals of El Salvador and how persistent themes in the Cold War emerge from words and imagery on film, but that in order for these words and images to be received, however, stereotypes about the Latin American other must be employed rather than challenged.

The assassination of Archbishop Romero was indeed a watershed moment in Salvadoran history. It solidified the willingness of the right to use violence against the highest members of the opposition and spiritual leaders of the country, and also, strengthened the structural organization of the left. This significance was largely lost in the film and Romero’s public assassination, although less historically accurate than the version from the film *Romero*, does not provide the important historic context of this event, but only its immediate aftermath. However, the public murder in *Salvador* serves to clearly mark the depths of depravity to which the right would sink when it saw its power threatened.

*Salvador* was a product of a specific kind of dissent to U.S. policy informed by the filmmakers’ antecedents. Characters in the film reproduce much of the debate over the role of the U.S. in the world after Vietnam. The portrayals of Salvadorans reproduce many of the myths central to the foundation of U.S. hegemony over the region. This manifests most clearly in the portrayal of the right as dependent clients and in women as submissive objects, but also in the romanticism of the revolutionary left. What ultimately decides the fate of El Salvador in the film is the ability and might of U.S. intervention to step in and save the Salvadoran military. What is largely ignored is the role of civil society in the conflict, most importantly the centrality of the spiritual leaders such as Archbishop Oscar Romero. In 1989, a film was made that addressed the legacy of the martyrdom of Romero in the struggle for national liberation. That film, *Romero*, and its significance in the cultural history of the Salvadoran Civil War as imagined by American filmmakers is the subject of the next chapter.
CHAPTER 4

STATE AGAINST CHURCH: THE PORTRAYAL OF SOCIAL CONFLICT IN ROMERO

Introduction

Oscar Romero’s assassination in 1980 and the murder of six Jesuit priests at the National University of El Salvador in 1989 bracket a violent decade in which right wing elements used overt violence against the progressive sectors of the Salvadoran Catholic Church.¹ Under the premise of expelling communist infiltration, the right wing targeted ecclesiastics, lay workers as well as congregation members.² The growth of Liberation Theology following the reorientation of the church after Vatican II (1964) and the Medellín Conference (1968) caused some segments of the Latin American Catholic Church to align their religious beliefs with the liberation of civil society through initiatives designed to educate the poor on the roots of their exploitation and on

¹ The phrase “progressive sectors” of the Salvadoran Catholic Church is meant to delineate the segments that embraced the theology of liberation. According to Anna L. Peterson in her study on the history of progressive Catholicism in El Salvador, those who took the option of the poor comprised the Iglesia popular, or Popular Church, and constituted the majority of those sympathetic to the plight of those who suffered most acutely from government repression. Anna L. Peterson, Martyrdom and the Politics of Religion: Progressive Catholicism in El Salvador’s Civil War (Albany, NY: State University of New York, 1997)

the spiritual path towards material improvement. These reforms in the Church led to grassroots efforts in El Salvador, beginning with the establishment of *comunidades eclesiales de base* (Christian base communities or CEB’s) in the late 1960s under the direction of Father José Inocencio Alas. CEB’s became vital centers of support for civilian and guerrillas alike during the 1980s.

This chapter focuses on the portrayal of the violence committed against the Progressive Salvadoran Catholic Church in *Romero* (1989). Many of the slain clergy members became martyrs for the cause of national liberation. Two of these priests whose martyrdom is portrayed in the film are Oscar Romero and Rutilio Grande. The portrayals Archbishop Oscar Romero and the other agents of the Progressive Church, although sympathetic, tend to confirm charges from the right that outside influences were responsible for agitating the people. Specifically, muted racialized notion about indigenous peoples are perpetuated through the characterizations of the poor. They appear to flock to Romero almost unconsciously and react similarly to the guidance of the characters Fathers Rutilio Grande, Alfonso Osuña and Manuel Morantes. This characterization of the poor reacting only after the late 1970s ignores the growth of popular organizations throughout the twentieth century in El Salvador. These emotional reactions by the peasantry also stand to direct contrast to the stoic faces of the oligarchy and the military. The portrayal of right wing groups in *Romero* in many ways mirrors their depiction in *Salvador*.

This chapter also focuses on the portrayal of the Salvadoran right wing. Characterizing the right as unemotional strengthens the filmmakers’ argument against government abuses, however, has unintended consequences. The construction of elite and military figures in the film conveys mixed messages about masculinity and power. Elite characters demonstrate stoic qualities that differentiate them from the emotional peasants, confirming racialized power hierarchies on the situation from the outside. Romero’s interaction with elite and military characters demonstrates his ideological journey from complacent observer to advocate for the people. As the film progresses, Romero becomes less attached to the oligarchy and becomes

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more defiant towards the military and political figures. In the end, it is Romero’s decision to align with the poor that result in his assassination by the death squads.

Romero’s filmmakers were firm in their conviction to non-violence. This is most clearly demonstrated in the portrayal of Oscar Romero as a pacifist, but also in the centrality of the figure of Father Rutilio Grande. Grande was, like Romero, envisioned as the ideal son of the church, committed to the people and a peaceful resolution to the civil war. In line with their absolute pacifism, the filmmakers condemn both the right and the left for responsibility in perpetuating the violence. A theology of liberation based on peace, not armed insurrection, is the central ideology advanced by the filmmakers; this is the only morally justified path towards an end to the civil war. This chapter discusses the significance of this interpretation and its effects on historical characterizations in the film. Although sympathetic towards the persecuted Church and its followers, Romero frames the role of some individuals (armed priests) as agitating the situation almost as much as the right wing death squads. This results in an unintentional confirmation of charges by the right on outside interference as well as emits a construction of the Latin American peasantry as impressionable, emotional, and prone to blinding following ideology.

**To Join in the People’s Struggle?**

Beginning in the late 1970s, a war against the influence of the progressive sectors of the Catholic Church began in earnest in El Salvador. It is impossible, with one single statement, to characterize how clergy and laypeople reacted to overt state violence against the church. Many were forced to decide between resistance, joining the guerillas on the one hand, or they could remain silent and run the risk of being seen as potentially subversive by the government all the while inviting the left to view them as complacent. Besides the autobiographical nature of the film and the ways in which Oscar Romero might have dealt with these same questions, the characterization of members of the church forced to take sides in the civil war is the central question explored in Romero.

Many perspectives on this problem are advanced by characters in the film. Separating these groups into distinct viewpoints based on their response on screen to the question of joining in the people’s struggle does not imply that a lack of overlap may have occurred amongst individuals or that the scheme developed here can correctly represent the difficult choices of
people facing violent social conflict. Instead, the focus is on the construction of the Salvadoran Church in *Romero*. This construction may tell us less about individual histories than it does about the filmmakers’ position on a major question facing the Catholic Church in Latin America after Vatican II and the Medellín Conference. The central issue facing church-state relations across Latin America by the 1970s was gauging the implications of Liberation Theology on the spiritual control of the region. Moreover, the church had to acknowledge the growth of liberation theology and the implications of these grass roots efforts in theology that challenged traditional links between the church and state.

In *Romero*, the characters of Fathers Rutilio Grande, Osuña, and Morantes represent what many conservative Salvadorans considered to be wayward sons of the church. By associating themselves with the ideology of liberation theology many priests put their lives in jeopardy. These three characters appearance(s) in the film mirrors Manlio Argueta’s description of the dress of liberation theologians in the English translation of the prominent Salvadoran Civil War era novel *One Day of Life*: “the young priests… [after their arrival] religion was no longer the same. The priests arrived in work pants and we saw that, like us, they were people of flesh and blood.”

Furthermore, Argueta’s rendition of the young priests, whose dress consisted of white trousers and white shirts, peasant style hats and spotty beards, clearly differentiate them from the ceremonial adornment worn by the higher-ranking clergy members. These older, more conservative priests, representing the traditional alliances between church and state, are a group with convergent interests. Among them are two particularly conservative men, one who labels himself as “military vigor,” and the other, a portrayal of Bishop Rivera y Damas. The interaction of these higher-up clergy and the absence of the younger priests from the portrayal of scenes involving the debate over the role of the church suggest a clear separation of the different worlds these two groups inhabited.

One, the younger priests appear only as an ally of the people, committed to the armed struggle against the government. The other, the older priests, often deliberate over how the violence might effect them personally and politically. The films’ underlying goal is promote liberation theology as an acceptable strategy for the church. By portraying a clear distinction between those that worked with the poor and those priests that served the oligarchy, the

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7 For background on Rivera y Damas see Montgomery, *Revolution in El Salvador*, p. 341.
filmmakers are making a moral and political statement on the nature of the Salvadoran conflict. And perhaps more importantly, for producer Elwood Kieser and screenwriter John Sacret Young, the film serves as a message to their fellow brethren in the Church. One designed to inspire guilt in those clergy complacent amidst the violence during the Salvadoran Civil War, and simultaneously, to celebrate those who fought for the people.

Romero’s portrayal of specific characters representing the internal debate in El Salvador over liberation theology constitutes one useful source for studying social conflict in Latin America during the 1980s. In particular, this film constitutes one version of the struggle, sensitive to the goals of many of the progressive clergy, but the filmmakers were firm in their conviction that armed resistance was not the best option. This is best demonstrated in the film by the characterization of Rutilio Grande. It seems likely that the character of Father Rutilio Grande is based on a Jesuit priest by the same name who was brutally assassinated in El Salvador on 12 March 1977. The desire for change is constant for Grande, however, it is essential for him that this change come from the people alone. “I am not doing anything, the people are doing this…at last,” he explains to Romero in the beginning scenes of the film as the two witness peasants engaged in dialogue about land reform. In the next frame Romero turns to Grande and explains that for his role, “some are even calling you a subversive.” Indeed, in the first third of the film, Grande appears as the central focus. He is in the vanguard of the Progressive Church and the other young priests follow his lead. Just as he inspired reform minded priests, his actions, especially organizing the people, labeled him as a subversive to the government. Grande is elevated by the filmmakers in their version of the conflict given his commitment to non-violence.

The centrality of Grande is best demonstrated in a scene in which he and Romero rush to the countryside where a bus containing voters trying to reach the polls has reportedly been stopped by the National Guard. The leader of the Guard, whose significance will be dealt with later in the chapter, informs Grande that the bus cannot pass and its passengers will not receive

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8 John Duigan, *Romero*, 1989, VIDMARK, VHS 105 minutes. All quotes from the film are my transcriptions, therefore, no citations appear for direct quotations. The grammar and emphasis in these quotes is my own interpretation based on repeated, critical viewing of the film and I am solely responsible for errors and/or any misrepresentation.

9 Scenes involving Salvadorans on buses traveling to vote, to the city, or to inquire about land reform figure prominently in the writings of Manilo Argueta. See especially “Microbus to San Salvador,” in Rosario Santos, ed., *And We Sold the Rain: Contemporary Literature from Central America* (New York: Seven Stories Press, 1999), pp. 175-186.
his protection. He explains to Romero and Grande that the road is closed, guerillas are reported to be active in the region, and that the voters may not pass. As a measure of his power, Lt. Columa orders the Guard to shoot out the bus tires. At the pop of the machine guns and the shattering glass of the bus, Romero recoils in fear. Defiantly, Grande survey’s the situation and proclaims to the campesino voters, “Shall we walk [to the polls]?” Then, following Grande, Romero, and the other young priests, they begin down the dusty road, surrounded by fields lying fallow, seemingly burning for want of cultivation in the hot sun. The symbolism of the walk down the road not only represents a pilgrimage for Oscar Romero, who will soon become Archbishop, but also the vast, uncultivated lands speak to the nature of agriculture in El Salvador: monoculture suited for the agro-export economy that resulted in a landless peasant class while fertile lands remain under used.10 The experience at the roadblock is also one event in series that serve to educate Romero on the realities of life in El Salvador. Previous to the exposure to the brutal violence of the National Guard, Romero appears ignorant of the day-to-day struggle of the people vis-à-vis government repression.

Grande’s ability to stand up to the Guard early in the film stands in contrast to Romero’s spectator position at this time. Although a priest, Grande exhibits significant power and masculinity in challenging the men with guns. He is armed not by the false power of the machine gun, which the misguided military hides behind, but by the faith of the people in his leadership. The other young priests appeal to Grande as a potential leader as the group continues down the barren road to the polls, “[w]e need someone who knows the people…The worst would be Romero,” explains Father Morantes. Father Osuña, evoking the symbolism of the smoldering fields interjects, “Yeah, he’ll fiddle while El Salvador burns.” Thus, before his ideological reorientation, Oscar Romero, who would come to be a martyr for national liberation, is nothing more than one more priest in a long line whose allegiance is to the oligarchy at the expense of the people. Grande downplays his own significance and presumably any involvement in extralegal resistance “we’re not cowards, not heroes either, just ordinary people trying to do our jobs.” Grande’s decision to align with the poor ultimately leads to his assassination by the death squads. Before his death, in a scene following Romero’s appointment to Archbishop, Grande

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searches for Romero at an elite function; the Massacre at Plaza Libertad—28 February 1977—has just occurred and Grande was witness to the brutal killings.\textsuperscript{11} Grande arrives at the party to confront Romero who is amongst the Salvadoran elite as they welcome the new Archbishop to their society.

Rushing into the scene, Grande explains to Romero that he was “giving communion… and suddenly the National Guard arrive[d].” He then explains about the shooting, the death, the inhumanity of the situation. Grande pauses, looks around and appears for the first time to see who is at the party for Romero’s appointment: the elite. He then stares into Romero’s eyes, “[d]on’t you see what’s going on around here? Anyone who says what he thinks about land reform or wages or god or human rights, automatically he is labeled a communist. He lives in fear. They take him away. They torture, they kill him.” With this monologue, Grande foresees his own fate and in a scene shortly after this encounter with Romero, he is killed by plain clothes death squads while driving through the countryside. Killed along with Grande are an old man and a young boy. The filmmakers alter history slightly here, in fact, Grande was killed with two other people, however, and they both were young men.\textsuperscript{12} Portraying him with an old man and a boy helps to recreate the Trinity, Father, Son, Holy Ghost. Nevertheless, the filmmakers are correct in assigning the assassination of Grande as a central turning point in the evolution of the Archbishop’s ideology. After Grande’s assassination, Romero proclaimed that the church would not appear in any official function in service of the government until the murder was solved, he began to change his language and posture towards the government, and he began to embark on the campaign to align the church with the struggle of the people.\textsuperscript{13} Indeed, the film portrays Romero as he becomes progressively disillusioned about the state’s actions. In response to the split created in the Salvadoran church by Archbishop Romero’s ideological reorientation, the church was divided. According to the filmmakers’ versions of the events

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\textsuperscript{11} After the fraudulent elections of 1977, 10,000 people representing the five major opposition parties in El Salvador occupied the plaza. On the night of the 28\textsuperscript{th}, the National Guard opened fire on the people who fled to the church for protection. For a first-hand account of the massacre see Erdozaín, \textit{Archbishop Romero}, pp. 10-13. \textit{Newsweek} reporter Timothy Nater was also present at the Cathedral that day. For his photograph of bodies lying on the steps of the church and his account of the terror that day, see \textit{Newsweek} 21 May 1979, p. 47.

\textsuperscript{12} Erdozaín, \textit{Archbishop Romero}, p. 14.

\textsuperscript{13} For example see Marie Dennis, Renny Golden, and Scott Wright, \textit{Oscar Romero: Reflections on His Life and Writings} (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000), especially pp. 19-42.
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unfolding after Grande’s assassination, priests took one of two options: join in the people’s struggle or save themselves and protect their interests.

Those priests who sought to protect their own interests wore official dress, appear on screen as the whitest individuals, and, judging from their statements in the film, are the most conservative. This portrayal makes clear a class and ethnic division between the conflicting segments of the church. In a dialogue between two conservative priests, one who self identifies as “military vigor” the other, presumably a characterization of Rivera y Damas, the two comment on the benefits of appointing Romero as Archbishop. Rivera y Damas explains, “he’ll make no waves…he’s a bookworm.” The military vigor replies, “[t]he military will keep a lid on things.” As Romero tends further to the left following the assassination of Grande, Rivera y Damas begins to see the implications of these actions, “priests are getting killed, I could get killed,” he states as he shutters at the thought. This statement conveys the filmmakers sense that many clergy remained distanced from the people as it became apparent that their lives were now, too, in jeopardy.  

The new priests emerging on the scene, as they had throughout Latin America in the 1960s-70s, directly challenged the traditional patronage of the church to the state. By threatening the power of the state through peasant organizations, the Progressive Church became the focus of state repression in the early 1980s.

As with Grande, the characters of Father Osuña and Father Morantes represent the segments of the Salvadoran Church most closely aligned with the people’s struggle. They appear in almost every scene involving peasant protest and are the facilitators of the new ideologies spreading throughout the popular classes. In a scene depicting the occupation of a cathedral, fathers Osuña and Morantes act as the voice of the people inside as if they cannot speak for themselves. These two priests act as outside agitators in this sense, since they work as intermediaries for the guerillas. Romero approaches the scene, is notified by the National Guard that the building is being occupied, and then enters the church upon a promise by an

14 See Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador, pp. 81-100 on the development of divergent church interests. Also, see Argueta, One Day of Life where the concept of the divided church is discussed at length from the perspective of a female peasant, especially pp. 23-36.

15 This scene is perhaps symbolic of more widespread acts of protest during January 1980. The Atlanta Journal reported on 22 January 1980, that “Leftists occupied 140 churches and farms across the country (El Salvador),” in order to protest, “anti-guerrilla military sweeps.” See LAL - RCC, El Salvador clippings, 1980 Jan.-June, Box 4, Folder 8. Also see Argueta, One Day of Life, pp. 146-160 where the occupation of a church is told through the perspective of an ordinary Salvadoran.
officer to let the people inside go if they agree to release their prisoners. Romero approaches Osuña and Morantes, who speak for the people, asking them, “What do they [the people inside the church] want?” Father Osuña replies, “A new government!” This scene points to the filmmakers’ assumption that peasant organization was dependent on external guidance of some kind. Indeed, a constant theme in the portrayal of peasants in the film is their dependence and susceptibility to acting out of emotion. More specifically, darker, more indigenous people tend to follow the lead of the whiter mestizo priests such as Romero, Osuña, and Morantes.

This theme of young priests-as-protectors-and-instigators-of-the-peasantry is revisited in a scene in which Romero confronts Morantes about his decision to engage in armed struggle. Morantes asks Romero, “Are you ready to accept the way it really is [the need for armed struggle]?” Romero responds to the armed priest, “Why are you carrying a gun? A guerilla, is that what you are, a communist?” “No!” replies Morantes, “I am a priest who sees Marxists and Christians struggling to liberate the same people.” “So you’ve become like the military,” retorts Romero, “you wage class warfare.” “What else can we do,” asks Morantes, “do you think I want to live like this [by the gun]? I have no choice.” This dialogue is to illustrate one of the major issues that drive the film: the question of whether to join in the struggle or protect one’s own life. Romero here also implicates Morantes as a communist. The filmmakers conceive of the communist influence, therefore, as poisoning the peaceful movement of liberation theology. By arming the priests, the communists (the guerillas) did little more than make these wayward priests responsible, like the military, for the violence.

Romero wrestles with the decision of whether or not to join in the struggle early on, however, after Grande’s death he becomes more outspoken. Unlike in the film, the historical Romero eventually came to support armed struggle and directly blamed the government for the terror. According to Romero, the “[i]nstitutionalized violence that is provoking the people’s anger is clearly violence from the right which tries to maintain its privileges [and] maintain repression.”16 In the film, however, he denounces Father Morantes. In the same scene discussed above, Romero yells to him that his decision to engage in armed struggle against the government, “[is] not helping,” but rather that he, like the military and the death squads is misguided, “you are attacking!”

16 Oscar Romero interviewed in Allan Francovich, The Houses are Full of Smoke, vol. 2 El Salvador (Mystic Fire, 1987), VHS, 58 minutes.
For characters such as Father Morantes, the decision to join in the people’s struggle, although equally difficult, seems to be a natural one, and his involvement in the struggle is implied throughout the beginning of the film. He exhibits authority in the film and commands a firm presence. Ultimately, however, Morantes’ decision to engage in armed struggle is denounced by Romero on screen when in reality the Archbishop came to support the need for armed struggle to fight severe government repression.\textsuperscript{17} Thus, like the agents of death on the right wing, access to guns only grants false power, whereas real power comes from the people.

The filmmakers make a clear distinction between two different factions of the clergy: liberation theologians and their more conservative brethren. Those that join in the people’s struggle appear as the ultimate expression of authority for the peasantry, for whom they speak, rather than the people speaking for themselves. This portrayal engenders the notion that essentially proves the argument from the extreme right correct. Indeed, peasant action was determined by outside, in this case Liberation Theologian, influence. Although the filmmakers paint the liberation theologians in a positive light, they ultimately appear as much of an agitator as the military. The conservative priests on the other hand are concerned only with their own personal and political safety. The point is to make them appear as distanced from reality as possible and to perpetuate the notion that the conservative church acted only on behalf of and in the service of the oligarchy and the military. The juxtaposition of a liberating group of priests fighting an antiquated ossified church serves to strengthen Romero’s and Grande’s standing; they at once represents those that would fight for the people without, at least according to the film, engaging in armed resistance. Thus, they are the ultimate church heroes, both campaigners for freedom without having to abandon the Gospel’s condemnation of violence.

**The Man of the People**

If *Salvador* focuses primarily on the experience of one man, Richard Boyle, then *Romero* is equally focused on the life of Oscar Romero in the years from 1977 to 1980. The film opens with Romero experiencing the beginnings of peasant organization and witnessing violence at the hands of the National Guard. His walk with Father Rutilio Grande across the barren wasteland of smoldering fields, discussed above, was symbolic of the new position he would soon assume: Archbishop of El Salvador, a country torn apart, burning in conflict. During his speech after his

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\textsuperscript{17} On the implications of portraying Romero as a pacifist see chapter 2.
appointment, Romero lays out his ideology, which dramatically changes as the film progresses. At the ceremonial appointment Romero states, “I come from a world of books.” Further resigning himself to the prospect of inaction while in his new office, “we in the church must keep to the center in the traditional way.” Not only would Romero break from his seclusion amongst his books, but he would also alter the notion that the church works only in service of the military-oligarchy.\(^\text{18}\)

The two events that marked the beginning of Oscar Romero’s ideological evolution were the massacre at Plaza Libertad and the assassination of Father Rutilio Grande, both occurring in 1977. Indeed, in the film these two events play a critical role in changing the Archbishop’s attitude towards the poor. Following the massacre at the Plaza, Romero deliberates with the other high members of the clergy at the “Salvadorans Bishops Conference” in order to determine the language to be used in a statement condemning the event. At this point he still quibbles; he is unsure how to use the leverage of the church to criticize the government. Regarding the statement to be sent to the President, Romero cautions, “it mustn’t be incendiary.”

Following Grande’s assassination, Romero quickly changes his tone. At a second meeting of the Salvadoran Bishops, Romero comments on the need for a new direction for the church because, referring to Grande, “Priests have not been assassinated before!” In a moment of heightened anxiety, Romero ventures outside of the conference room. He finds a young woman, a character called Lucia, who is looking for Bishop Rivera y Damas. Romero asks her “what do you think I should do [now, after Grande’s assassination]?” Lucia responds, implicitly appealing to the Archbishop, “it’s so bad here, I got to have something to look forward to.” The young woman, Lucia, represents an innocent bystander targeted by the government. She is visible early in the film as someone who participates in demonstrations held by the Progressive Church. After being noticed by surveillance photographers who hover above the demonstrations, noting the faces of the people assembled at Plaza Libertad, Lucia is kidnapped from her home, raped, tortured, and killed. Her body left to rot at a garbage dump. She is but one of the thousands of innocent victims of the Salvadoran state in the 1980s. The dumping of her body

amidst garbage is reflective of the lack of respect for human dignity illustrated by the actions of the Salvadoran government in failing to address mass killings.

Shortly after Romero interacts with Lucia, he gives a speech at Grande’s funeral in which he spells out the problem of Liberation Theology: “The liberation that Father Grande preached was rooted in faith. And because it is so often misunderstood, for this, Grande died.” These statements convey the belief that individuals like Grande were morally right and they did not, as their critics claimed, seek to spread communism throughout the rural population. Also, the brutal murder of the character Lucia as well as the old man and young boy killed along with Grande illustrate, the clergy was not alone in persecution for their beliefs. The link between Liberation Theology and Marxism is dismissed by Romero at Grande’s funeral, but later in the film, as discussed above, he will come to condemn Father Morantes for his leftist views. At this point the association between Grande and Marxist is simply a misunderstanding. Romero is consistent in his reactions to the reformist priests. Whereas in the film the character of Grande is exemplified as the ideal peaceful liberation theologian, armed priests such as Morantes are less Christ-like, instigators like the right wing.

Romero’s sympathies towards the traditional elite are exemplified through the characters Rafael and Arista Zelada. After Rafael Zelada is kidnapped, presumably by an unnamed guerilla group, Romero intervenes in an attempt to have him released. He goes to Fathers Osuña and Morantes and appeals to them to put him in contact with the guerillas so that he may negotiate Zelada’s release. Through their intercession, Romero meets with guerillas late one night on the streets of San Salvador. The guerillas pick him up in the green VW bus. Masked to hide his identity, the spokesman for the group informs Romero that there is nothing he can do to release Zelada. In the scene that follows, the guerillas leave Romero near a garbage dump, forcing him to walk home so that he might “see how our people are forced to live.” As was the case with Romero’s walk across the barren fields in the countryside, this journey, too, is one of discovery for Romero. He is forced to walk past a family huddled underneath a small plastic sheet trying to avoid the rain. Garbage and dead bodies surround him. Romero appears for the first time to be aware of the extreme poverty faced by the Salvadoran people. In his walk across the barren fields after the roadblock scene Romero returns to his quarters tired, dirty, and exposed to the tactics of the National Guard. After his encounter with the guerillas and his walk through the garbage dump (a scene of violence and death elsewhere in the film) Romero returns as a
committed advocate of the people. These two walks of pilgrimage symbolize the awakening of the Archbishop to the plight of the poor. In the scenes that follow he will begin to directly confront the government.

The next day Romero ventures to the office of the President, the recently elected General Humberto (an interpretation of President Carlos Humberto Romero). He intends to ask the President to intervene and consider the exchange of political prisoners in order to secure Rafael Zelada’s release. Archbishop Romero is forced to wait an entire day for the president who never returns from his scheduled affairs, the cruel wait represents the unwillingness of the government to negotiate with its critics. Finally, a note appears from the president to Romero that states: “there are no political prisoners.” The denial of government abuses and the refusal to disclose information on political prisoners contributed to the culture of fear in El Salvador and led to the disappearance of thousands of individuals. By portraying the President as avoiding Romero—their unwillingness to negotiate will lead to Zelada’s death—the filmmakers evoke the notion of government culpability in the killing.19

The question of torture and government abuses is visited again in a scene depicting the imprisonment of Father Osuña. After learning that Osuña has been wrongfully charged with Rafael’s death, Romero hurries to the jail to negotiate his release. Lieutenant Columa (discussed below) allows Romero to speak with the imprisoned Osuña and when he emerges from the depths of the jail he shows visible signs of torture. Osuña tells Romero that he was “blindfolded” and that “they used electricity” to torture him. Romero appeals to Lt. Columa to gain his release, he explains that he cannot grant that and he was carrying out instructions in his treatment of Osuña. Romero yells, defiantly, at Lt. Columa “instructions to torture him!” Here the filmmakers imply the role of the government in ordering the military to torture suspected guerillas or their sympathizers, and moreover, the institutionalized nature of violence amongst the right in El Salvador. The extreme torture methods are audible in Romero (heard from within the depths of the jail), but invisible. Unlike Salvador which portrayed, as Stone admitted, sensationalized scenes of blood and violence, Romero largely suppresses violent acts. This harms Romero’s arguments against government abuses given that—outside of the assassinations of Romero and Grande—official culpability in the violence occurs behind closed doors.

19 On the period covered in the film see Montgomery, Revolution in El Salvador, especially pp. 127-154.
Following the scene with Osuña at the jail, Romero again confronts the President about human rights abuses. Unwilling to wait again in the reception room for the President, Romero defiantly storms past the secretary and bursts into a meeting unannounced. Romero asks the President about why he has not intervened to stop the abuses. The President replies, implicitly justifying the actions, “elements [of the church] have gone astray.” President Romero turns to the Archbishop and explains, “[t]his Grande, agitating the people. He was a communist.” With a stern expression of defiance, Romero looks into the eyes of President Humberto and states, “You are a liar.” Although priests like Morantes and Osuña are shown as having ties to the guerillas, “communists” for the filmmakers, Romero must make clear to the President that Grande was not of the communist stripe. Grande’s martyrdom is cleansed by Romero’s denial of his sympathies to the communists.

From this point forward, after confronting the President and defying his claims about Grande, Romero begins to drastically change his posture towards the elite and the government. Empowered by his witness to extreme poverty and the torture of civilian and church members, Romero is now able to challenge the most powerful man in El Salvador, whereas before, he recoiled in the face of Lt. Columa at the roadblock. Indeed, his journey from complacent to defiant towards the traditional power brokers is portrayed as a consequence of Liberation Theology. Aligning with the people augments Romero’s position in the struggle, in particular in his ability to challenge the authorities, whereas, for so long, the church acted as clients of those in power. In denouncing the methods of Father Morantes, Romero also cleanses himself of association with the armed priests and the guerillas. Indeed, for the filmmakers the guerillas and the communists are one in the same, an entity bent on agitating the people.

After his encounter with the President, the historical sequence is compressed and time quickly shifts towards Romero’s death through a montage of the Archbishop’s statements from various radio addresses. During this montage, as segments of Romero’s radio addresses play in the background, he comments on the problems facing El Salvador. Romero explains the conflict as resulting from social problems and the failure of the oligarchy to facilitate the distribution of wealth, stating, “[e]conomic injustice is the root cause of our problems” and “[t]here is no clinging to our feudal past.”20 After these statements the film quickly ends in the assassination.

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20 For similar statements by Romero see Francovich, *The Houses are Full of Smoke*. 

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The assassination of the Archbishop at the hands of a plain clothes gunman, operating on the directive of Lt. Columa. The portrayal of the assassination occurs much as it was reported to have happened in the regional media.\(^{21}\) The Archbishop is shot in the chest, falls to the ground as blood stains his white robe, nuns present at the scene run to his aid. Unlike Romero’s public assassination in \textit{Salvador}, Romero retains a greater element of historical accuracy. Also, like \textit{Salvador}, Romero holds responsible the character most closely resembling Roberto D’Aubuisson for the assassination, Lt. Columa.

Romero’s evolution from observer to protagonist in the Salvadoran struggle for national liberation drives the film. His assassination in 1980 brings to close a sympathetic portrayal of the personal struggle of Oscar Romero. The film is told from the perspective of the Archbishop who commands the peasantry into action through his example. He gains significant power over the course of the film and exercises his authority in the face of powerful men: the president and military figures. His power is tied to his ability to organize the people and his strong words to authority figures confirm his power. Also, he remains pure in purpose due to his distance from the armed segments of the church. The filmmakers’ sense is that power resides in the Progressive Church, in particular, in their peaceful struggle against the government. By igniting the power base amongst the popular sectors, Romero follows on the heels of those organizers before him; namely, the liberation theologians whose peaceful involvement with the poor is portrayed as the impetus for the people’s struggle.

\textbf{The Military}

In the film there is a constant tension between Romero and members of the military. Two characters serve as representations of the Salvadoran military: Colonel Dorio and Lieutenant Columa. In addition, unnamed death squads also appear in the film, illustrating the unofficial agents of the right who engaged in violence. Romero’s initial encounter with the military occurs at the roadblock scene in which the National Guard riddles a bus full of bullets, rendering it unusable. Here, Lt. Columa is present and displays neither reverence nor respect towards the priests; moreover, he appears empowered by his ability to engage in violence without redress. At the party for Romero’s appointment, the two military figures discuss their views about the problems currently facing Salvadoran society. According to the colonel

\(^{21}\) See footnote 56 in chapter 3.
“student, campesino organizations are everywhere...few people realize what is at stake...our whole way of life at risk.” This statement conveys the beliefs echoed by the old oligarchy figure, Francisco Galedo (discussed below) that peasant organization threatened elite-military dominance over the country. In order to quell challenges from below, Lt. Columa advocates their destruction. In a speech to an affluent crowd, he states, “don’t ever feel guilty about fighting the subversives. Those that fight them will be national heroes.” As these words are spoken, a frame with a dead women lying naked in the streets appears, young school girls stand over the body with frightened looks of confusion on their faces. Here the filmmakers align the Lieutenant with the most extreme members of the Salvadoran right wing and juxtapose the political rhetoric of the conservatives against the reality of bodies in the street.

By advocating such an extreme approach, Lt. Columa is the figure in *Romero* most closely resembling Roberto D’Aubuisson, although, unlike Salvador, no clear connection is ever made. Many things hint at that he is, in fact, a representation of D’Aubuisson, however. First, in the speech mentioned above he campaigns for political office. D’Aubuisson was also a perennial candidate for the presidency on the right-wing ARENA party ticket. Second, Lt. Columa appears as the head of the National Guard, a post held by D’Aubuisson during the early 1980s. Finally, and perhaps most revealing, is Lt. Columa’s affinity for the United States. In the same speech to the affluent crowd Columa makes a connection between the Salvadoran oligarchy and the North Americans, “We are like the pioneers of the U.S...we only want to live like the North American’s, to live as they do.” Indeed, D’Aubuisson was familiar with the U.S., he had trained at the SOA, and appealed for a visa to enter the country in 1980. This statement also reveals the collusion between positivism and the ideology of the militant right. For Columa, the progress of El Salvador was based on the removal of dissent and backwards elements, the priests and the peasantry, respectively. Moreover, Columa demonstrates his affinity with an idealized image of the American pioneers, and hence, his own version of El Salvador’s Manifest Destiny.

Portrayed as less directly antagonistic towards the church, Colonel Dorio appears to lose faith in Romero as the film progresses. Initially, in a scene at a jail following Romero’s arrest after the occupation of the Cathedral by an opposition group, the colonel appeals to Romero, “You must take care of yourself, I worry for your safety...you should [as well].” Romero responds by evoking the struggle of the people, “Yes, like any Salvadoran, I fear for my life.” Later on, the colonel again appeals to the Archbishop, much in the same way Arista Zelada does,
“I am disturbed by recent events [shows Romero flier with slogan “Be a patriot, kill a priest”]...you are aggravating the situation and losing the people...You are losing the support of the people you need to help run the country.” These statements convey a sense of difference between Columa and Dorio. One (Dorio) is more willing to engage with the Archbishop, albeit on his own terms, the other (Columa) shows his resentment for Romero by perpetuating the violence, and doing so without remorse. Colonel Dario pleads with Romero to renounce his ties to the Liberation Theologians and reassert traditional ties to the elite. After this point, the Colonel informs Romero that he can no longer protect the Archbishop, seemingly opening the door for assassination to occur and indirectly pointing to the official role in the murder.

As is the case with Salvador, unnamed figures representing the death squads appear in Romero. They are portrayed as carrying out Grande’s assassination as well as the assassination of Romero. One striking similarity between the two films is the depiction of the events leading up to Romero’s assassination. As detailed in Chapter Three, Roberto D’Aubuisson orders the assassination of the Archbishop in an elaborate ceremony evoking the patriotism of various Salvadoran death squads. In Romero, a similar ceremony takes place, however, it occurs without dialogue and instead of a man standing forward to assume the responsibility for carrying out the act, they simply draw straws. These two scenarios contrast in terms of emphasis. Whereas in Salvador, the chance to kill Romero is seen as a great opportunity to demonstrate loyalty to D’Aubuisson and the extreme right, in Romero, the man who draws the straw appears shocked, if not remorseful for what he must now do. Perhaps the exact details of how D’Aubuisson ordered Romero killed will never surface; however, these two films demonstrate the belief that the event was carefully planned and deliberate.

The portrayal of the military, thus, consists of several competing images. One, of Lt. Columa represents the ideology of the National Guard and alludes to the extremism and intransigence of Roberto D’Aubuisson. The second, the patient colonel, who appeals to Romero twice, the second time in the church, to change his allegiances and halt his rapid alienization of the oligarchy. Finally the military appears through the death squads, who appear in plain clothes and show no remorse for the killings of Romero and Grande. The military figures exercise great power in the film as represented by their access to guns and the ability to engage in terror without repercussion. Ultimately, though, access to guns is false power, whereas, real power resides in the people, especially in their organization by the Progressive Church. Most telling of
this is when Lt. Columa is introduced to the Archbishop for the first time at his appointment party. Although the two were acquainted in the earlier scene involving the roadblock and shooting of the bus tires, Lt. Columa pretends to ignore this fact. Romero can do nothing but react in shock, a questioning look on his face; he seems to ask how a man could be two things in the same day. Moreover, how a man could defy the power of the church so blatantly. This defiance points to one of the central points of the filmmakers: the military and the oligarchy acted in contrary to the best interests of the people, and for this, they were wrong. The implication from the filmmakers is that the military-oligarchy acted in defiance of God’s will. The film also shows that while factions may have existed within the Salvadoran military, ultimately they coalesced around the project of suppressing dissent.

The Oligarchy versus the People

Archbishop Romero is constantly caught between his responsibilities to the people of El Salvador and the elites’ notion that he should serve only them and their interests. The two seemingly opposed segments of the society tugging at Romero plays out through the portrayal of the Archbishop’s relationship with an affluent family: the Zeladas. In a scene at the Zelada’s kitchen after Romero has met with the guerillas to negotiate Rafael Zelada’s release from his kidnappers, a character referred to as Francisco Galedo, (Rafael’s Father) encounters the Archbishop and the grieving spouse. Arista Zelada is women of considerable power in the film. Before Galedo enters the scene she challenges Romero’s decisions, especially his recent statements about the role of the oligarchy in the violence. She begins, “I hear things…that you are only supportive to the poor…to radicals.” Romero responds, “I must minister to everyone.” In a strong and defiant tone Arista asks “even those who kidnapped Rafael?” Romero does not reply and at that moment Galedo enters the room.

As earlier in the film, Arista Zelada expects the Archbishop to support her, more specifically, all of and only the people of her class and ethnicity. Arista and her husband Rafael are present at the scene depicting Romero’s appointment as Archbishop, present him with a gift, and appeal to Romero to baptize their child when the time comes. Later on in the film, Arista asks Romero again about the prospective private baptism. When Romero explains to her that private services are no longer available and that she must come to wait amongst everyone else wishing to baptize their children, she again questions Romero’s position: “[y]ou expect me to
baptize my baby with a bunch of Indians? [long pause] You have deserted us.” This character and her interaction with Romero convey the extent of the Salvadoran’s elite exclusionism and racial notions towards Natives as perceived by the filmmakers and confirmed by Salvadoran history.22

Arista Zelada is not the only character representing the traditional elite to criticize the Archbishop. Returning to the scene in the kitchen mentioned above, after an exchange about the means to obtain Rafael’s release, Galedo becomes tired of the idea of compromise, he states, “[i]f they harm him…there will be blood.” Then turning to Romero, “You church people…you don’t understand what we do, producing, selling, bringing capital in…for this we must have law and order…these priests of yours with all their talk of human rights, organizing these people [the poor]…they are responsible for these problems, and so are you, Romero. The church is a whore! She’d spread her legs to the highest bidder.” The exchange illustrates not only the difficult position of a family dealing with a kidnapping during a time and in a country in which human rights abuses are common, but also, these statements by Galedo represent the filmmakers’ conception of the morality of the traditional oligarchy in El Salvador. Galedo’s racialized notion of the poor campesinos is that they should be kept in their place and not be enticed to challenge the power of the landed elite by wayward clergy. Galedo appears as the classic positivist, concerned with advancing the nation’s progress regardless of social cost. Moreover, he conveys a scene of disillusionment and distance from the church. By calling the church a “whore” he echoes the notion of traditional elite-church ties and the development of newer, but in his eyes similar, strategic realignment of the church, therefore questioning Romero’s and Liberation Theology’s authenticity. Here he also genders the church, feminine and dependent; moreover, that the new Church was a willing dupe to the communist influences to whom it had sworn allegiance.

The film also draws on imagery to call into question notions of elite versus peasant masculinity and power. Shortly after their encounter in the kitchen, Romero, Galedo, and Arista search a garbage dump looking for Rafael’s body. The slain Rafael Zelada is found and Galedo, making the only verbal comments of any character during this scene, turns to Romero and

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blames him, “[y]ou are a part of this!” Galedo then returns to a black limousine and drives away with Arista, who can only weep. Galedo is quite stoic in this scene, and in contrast to Arista, makes no emotional gesture at the site of the dead Rafael. This reaction stands in direct contrast to the reaction of a peasant father to the murder of his son, which is portrayed earlier in the film. If Galedo is unmoved and vengeful, the average Salvadoran is deeply emotional and physically moved at the site of a slain child. This contrasting imagery conveys muted messages about the masculinity of these men. Whereas the peasant is emotional and overcome by the incident, the old oligarch refuses to allow the incident to detract from his serious demeanor.

Although the filmmakers overtly support the plight of the poor, they do it at the expense of portraying these people as blindly emotional, and hence, more effeminate than the stoic, light skinned Galedo. Indeed, power in the film is dominated by people of lighter skin. Darker skinned characters as well as those clearly intended to appear as Natives flock to Romero and Grande and appear to act out of an unconditional acceptance of the theology of liberation. This seemingly unintentional characterization of the poor, certainly intended to show the influence of Romero, the honor of the peasantry, and the urgency of the situation in El Salvador, creates a racialized power hierarchy in the film. Thus, although perhaps unintended, darker skinned peoples as overly emotional characters perpetuates much of the underlying myths about Native peoples; constructed notions stemming from unequal power relationships in which the dominate group seeks to subordinate another by means of creating a discourse proclaiming the inferiority and lack of reason displayed by indigenous peoples.

Conclusion

Overshadowed by Salvador, Romero did not make the same impact on U.S. audiences as Stone’s film. This was, perhaps, a consequence of the time period in which the film was released. By 1989, the Salvadoran Civil War was in stalemate, an end to the violence nowhere in sight. Romero ends abruptly with the assassination of the archbishop, suggesting an end of sorts to the story. March 1980, however, was not the end of the conflict, but rather the beginning of a different chapter in the civil war. Romero’s assassination marked the beginning of widespread political-military organization on the left, manifesting in the formation of the FMLN. These later structural developments as well as the earlier preponderance of popular organizations are absent
from the film, suggesting an undue spontaneity to the growth of popular resistance in the early
1980s.  

Implied in *Romero*’s version of the Salvadoran conflict is the idea that external forces
drove the peasants to challenge an unjust system, otherwise they lay dormant much like the
film’s natural scenery. In order for change to occur, mestizo individuals such as Romero,
Grande, Osuña, and Morantes needed to cultivate popular resistance. The emotional reactions of
the peasantry to these younger priests connotes dependence and suggest that, in fact, charges
from the government on Marxist infiltration were indeed correct; moreover, that because of
communist infiltration within the church, extreme government retaliation is justified. Certainly,
this was not the intention of the filmmakers, who meant to promote Liberation Theology, praise
the martyrdom of Romero and Grande, and condemn the complacent members of the clergy for
their, at best, inaction, or, at worst, collusion with the military-oligarchy.

Whiter, mestizo figures wield the greatest power in the film. The portrayal of an existing
pigmentocracy largely reflects the racially-based distribution of power in Salvadoran history and
society, however, mimicking reality has unintended consequences for the filmmakers. Thus, just
as Stone sought to mimic the nature of sexual violence committed by the tortures of the right in
*Salvador*, the filmmakers of *Romero* use the existence of racial hierarchies to illustrate the
distribution of power in society. In the face of violence, characters like Romero may defy the
military, whereas the Native or peasant can only follow by example. Figures such as Arista
Zelada and Harold Gould challenge Romero’s power, but are unsuccessful in obtaining a reversal
in the Archbishop’s ideology. Military figures, also individuals exhibiting false power (hiding
behind their guns), interact with Romero in different ways, but on their own terms. Some, like
the death squads and Lt. Columa engage in violence and defy Romero, others, such as Colonel
Dorio seem to regret the position in which they find themselves. Thus, although many characters
exert power and influence, none are more initially docile, and then, overly emotional and
reactionary than the peasantry. Ironically, the peasantry, the campesinos, indeed, provides the
priests with the power of the justified struggle, but past that, appear to lose agency to mestizo
intervention.

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23 For a edited collection which seeks to reexamine Salvadoran history, pre- and post- civil war see Aldo Lauria-
Santiago and Leigh Binford, editors, *Landscapes of Struggle: Politics, Society, and Community in El Salvador*
The value of deconstructing and historicizing the portrayal of historical characterizations in *Romero* is that it illustrates different views of the conflict. A view that is conditioned by the filmmakers’ personal experiences and interpretation of the conflict based on a variety of available sources. If *Salvador* tells us about how two Vietnam veterans saw American foreign policy during the Reagan Administration, then *Romero* tells us how some members of the Catholic Church viewed the place of priests in the people’s struggle in El Salvador (within the context of post-Vatican II reforms). But these films tell us more than simply the subjectivity of two sets of individuals. By engaging in symbols readily recognizable in the Cold War atmosphere in the United States, *Salvador’s* creators worked within an existing transcript that perpetuates certain North American values that appeal to the target audience. *Romero* is not as successful in this endeavor and falls short of condemning the role of the United States; therefore, limiting the film’s appeal amongst the target audience, an ostensibly progressive element interested in Latin American subjects.

Oscar Romero as a pacifist not only alters history, but fails to demonstrate the link between violence and proper retaliation: self-defense. Just as *Salvador* perpetuates certain North American notions about the Salvadoran people, so too, does *Romero*. These two films diverge in which assumptions underlie their notions of the conflict, however. The value of these films for historians and for writing the cultural history of U.S.-Latin American relations is coded in the representations of historical characters on screen. Intended to inform American viewers about conflicts outside of their borders, these films tend to tell us more about the hegemony of the United States over discourse and representation, then about concrete ways to solve the problems facing this hemisphere vis-à-vis American power. Thus, in order to best understand this power, especially in reference to Latin America, we must consider how symbols are used to evoke underlying cultural notions of the “other.”

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24 Films assert power by mimicking the “other.” In this case, the “other” is defined as that which a dominate group defines its own identity in contrast to. On the power of othering and how the dominate representation confirms the hegemony of the maker of the image over the represented see Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York and London: Routledge); pp. 1-100.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Introduction

Violence during the Salvadoran Civil War did not occur in a historical vacuum, the particularly violent nature of the 1980s did not result simply because the U.S. funded the increase in right wing terror. The central importance of Salvador and Romero is that they raise questions about the particular violence that exploded in the 1980s. They engage the viewer and force one to make decisions about the moral dilemma of El Salvador. Audiences were confronted with some recognizable symbols from the Cold War. In other instances, the filmmakers alter or subvert history as in the case of silencing the participation of women in the Salvadoran resistance in Salvador and in the portrayal of Oscar Romero as a pacifist in Romero. As productions of history, it is inherent that ideological bias effects the representations. What the filmmakers chose to emphasize, manipulate, or delete proves valuable not only in determining historicity, but also, demonstrates how Latin America was rendered recognizable to American audiences. Although these films are representative of the culture of dissent against Reagan’s Cold War policies in El Salvador, they perpetuate certain stereotypes about Latin America and its people. Despite their flaws, Salvador and Romero constitute important pieces of cultural history that demonstrate the diverse ways in which Americans reacted to the Reagan administration.

This thesis represents the first profound study of two landmark films understood not simply as cinematic works, but rather as historical sources that reveal detailed information about the attitudes and perceptions at work in the U.S. during the Cold War. The thesis argues not only
for viewing films as a historicized document, but also for the necessity for scholars to rethink how they can incorporate films into their studies. Until recently bifurcated into the distinct disciplines of Film Studies and Latin American History, a hybrid understanding of these fields allows for a deeper comprehension of how cinema has come to shape the popular imagination. The films herein discussed contain multiple images of violence informed by a historical reality that came to see the use of violence as an acceptable form of political discourse.

A Culture of Violence

By expressing views on the conflict informed by dissent towards U.S. policy, the films critique not only U.S. intervention in El Salvador but also the mentalities and ideologies that maintained these policies. The cooperation of conservative groups in both countries was necessary to perpetuate and fund violence during El Salvador’s Civil War. Multinational conservative interests exported a different kind of ideology in the hemisphere throughout the twentieth century, one based on national progress constructed through the elimination of thousands of dead communists. By the 1980s many of these right wing individuals and groups were disposed from their home countries and operating out of the United States and Guatemala, and in particular, South Florida and Guatemala City. According to Robert White, “The right wing is a group of extremely rich people, most of whom live in Miami and Guatemala City…They fund these killings [in El Salvador] through direct payments to the death squads.”¹ White’s statement illustrates the necessity of further research on the transnational networks that funded violence in Latin America in the 1980s. What is at stake is not a question of American influence over impressionable Latin Americas through institutions such as the SOA, but rather, the transculturation of particular notions of acceptable violence in the hemisphere.²


² Transculturation is defined by Fernando Ortiz through the following analogy: “the result of every union of cultures is similar to that of the reproductive process between individuals: the offspring always has something of both parents but is always different from both of them.” See Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar, Translated by Harriet de Onís, Introduction by Bronislaw Malinowski, Prologue by Herminio Portell Vilá, New Introduction by Fernando Coronil (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1995), p. 103. I argue that violence in the Salvadoran Civil War was the result of transculturation between U.S. counterinsurgency and anti-communism, melded with Salvadoran right wing nationalism and racism, to create a hybrid form of state-sponsored terror justified by the conservative discourse in both El Salvador (by individuals like Roberto D’Aubuisson) and the in United States (by ultra-conservative members of the Reagan Administration).
By aiding right wing groups and the Salvadoran military, the U.S. facilitated the increased levels of violence, particularly in terms of the technological ability of the Salvadoran army. The effects of U.S. military tactics left lasting reminders on the landscape and people of Vietnam; El Salvador faced a similar result. According to Jose Gutierrez, a former aircraft mechanic for the Salvadoran Air Force, “The pilots would just drop bombs on any village inhabited by FMLN guerillas and civilians alike. They just bombed an area and 90% of the victims would be civilians. The Air Force practiced massive bombings which should be considered horrendous war crimes against the people…pilots and mechanics had such [sic] contempt for the guerillas and the civilian population. They had the belief that all of them needed to be eliminated.”

The second component necessary to increase violence to the levels experienced in El Salvador, thus, also required the concerted effort from within. Anti-communist groups on the Salvadoran right-wing associated honor and the advancement of society based upon the marginalization of the poor and the extermination of leftist groups, both armed and peaceful popular organizations were categorically defined as agitators.

Both Salvador and Romero capture the nature of political violence in El Salvador during the early 1980s. Salvador personifies violence through the figures of Major Max (Roberto D’Aubuisson), Smiling Death (National Guard), and plain clothes death squads. These agents of the right engage in perpetual violence in contestations with other men for power. Indeed, they often threatened to castrate their adversaries so as to render them effeminate. The portrayal of the right captures much of the aura of violence surrounding the civil war. Stone’s employment of agitprop style violence was based on reality, in fact, more reflective of the methods of the Salvadoran right-wing than the Reagan administration ever admitted.

Romero also portrays the brutalities of the right through the assassinations of Rutilio Grande and Oscar Romero. The murders of these two influential clergymen demonstrated the willingness of the Salvadoran state to use violence against the church and against all elements of civil society. Other violence in the film is subverted. The torture of Father Osuña occurs in the depths of a military prison, audible, but unseen. The murder of Lucia is more revealing, since we are shown an image of her body as it was left to rot at a garbage dump. Her brutal torture and rape is implied, but unlike Stone, the filmmakers of Romero avoided engaging in graphic representations of this type of violence. The ways in which the films present violence clearly

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3 LAL – CCAPE, Box 8, Revista Farabundo Martí (Australian Edition), number 5, 29 November 1983.
demonstrates the methods of the filmmakers in critiquing those responsible for the civil war. Whereas *Salvador* directly implicated the Salvadoran right as well as the U.S., *Romero* blames a few domestic extremists and marginalizes the role of the U.S. foreign policy. *Salvador* also portrays the direct impact of the Salvadoran Civil War on Americans by portraying the murder and rape of the Maryknoll Nuns. By directly engaging nationalist sympathies, Stone sought to bring El Salvador to America in a way thousands of dead peasants and numerous priests had failed to do. By under representing the role of the U.S. as well as the Americans killed in El Salvador, *Romero* fails to have the impact of *Salvador*.

**Gendered Images**

Despite expressing dissent towards U.S. policies and supporting the cause of Salvadoran civil society, the films perpetuate paternal notions about Latin America. These constructions portrayed leftist leaders as idealistic, female revolutionaries as misguided, Salvadoran women as subservient to North Americans, and the peasantry as pawns in the hands of outsider agitators. Certainly unintended in some cases, these portrayals served the interests of the filmmakers by rendering El Salvador recognizable to American audiences.

The figure of Captain Marti in *Salvador* reproduces much of the mystique surrounding the Latin American guerilla. He retains the tell-tale feature of the violent revolutionary across his face: the Marlon Brando as Pancho Villa style mustache. Although *Salvador* is sympathetic to the goals of Marti and his band of guerillas, Boyle reminds the guerilla leader that the U.S. will not allow for their victory. The line was drawn in El Salvador. The last thing the Reagan administration wanted was another Cuba or another Nicaragua in the hemisphere. Heroic, but idealistic in his purpose, the figure of Captain Marti is the ultimate revolutionary for Stone. Indeed, heroism is monopolized by men in Stone’s version of El Salvador. Female revolutionaries, on the other hand, are marginalized from engaging in heroic deeds and are silenced in espousing revolutionary rhetoric. This not only ignores the centrality of women in the Salvadoran struggle for national liberation, but also confirms the gendered power hierarchies operating in Stone’s conception of honor in battle. Stone marginalizes the female revolutionary and largely allows the figures of María and Wilma to tell the story of Salvadoran women.

Whereas María is the docile Latin American woman, Wilma is the symbol of sexuality for the nation as a whole. María allows Boyle to dictate her life and remains by the side of the
American despite his destructive nature. María’s body is also objectified in the film. Her naked body against the backdrop of the beach at La Libertad demonstrates the underlying virtues of El Salvador for Boyle and Stone. The tropical scenery and the friendly natives draw them to this place of beauty. Despite the extreme violence, the willingness of the prostitute Wilma to embrace Dr. Rock convinces the American to stay in El Salvador. He appears quite happy with his decision to stay; something about El Salvador has redeemed Dr. Rock, indeed, through Wilma, salvation in reached. This salvation is ultimately flawed, however, since the vehicle towards this end is a former Salvadoran prostitute. The portrayal of women in Salvador renders Latin American women as stereotypically willing to engage in exploitation vis-à-vis American men; the irrepressible urge to cater to imperialist tourism.

The People’s Church

The leftist opposition in Romero is separated by the filmmakers into two groups. The first group, men like Archbishop Romero and Rutilio Grande are the ideal practitioners of Liberation Theology. They align their beliefs with the people in the struggle against the government, but do so through non-violence and in opposition to the tactics of the armed left. This portrayal, especially concerning Oscar Romero, reveals the filmmaker’s ideology most clearly. Romero as opposed to armed struggle fails to do justice to the Archbishop who came to support the insurrectional right of the people to challenge extreme government abuses. Priests who chose the path of armed resistance are condemned for their actions in the film. The character of Father Morantes is denounced by Romero not only for his decision to take up arms, but also for his Marxist leanings. Morantes and Father Osuña, however, are portrayed as the principle organizers of the people in the film and also often speak on behalf of the guerillas. By portraying these two priests as closely aligned with the Marxists, the filmmakers’, unintentionally perhaps, prove the argument of the right wing true. Indeed, outside agitators, the communist priests, were leading the impressionable people into a war with the government. The peasantry in Romero, in need of guidance, looked to both priests like Romero, as they should have according to the filmmakers, but they were also wrongly courted by the armed priests.

Romero presents El Salvador as experiencing peasant protest only as a result of these new ideas in the church. This portrayal ignores the role of popular organizations in Salvadoran history and constructs the peasantry as blindly following the reformist priests without offering
historical context on the movement of Liberation Theology within the church. This conception conceives of El Salvador as a land of impressionable indigenous peasants in need of guidance from mestizo leaders such as Romero, Grande, Morantes and Osuña. The peasantry’s ethnicity plays a critical role in this characterization. Whereas mestizo characters monopolize valor and agency in the film, the peasantry appears largely as dark skinned people without self-determination, only capable of heeding the call of the priests. The notion perpetuated by this version of El Salvador is that the lighter skinned priests, men of reason and civilization, lead the indigenous natives, who need the outside stimulus, into conflict with the government.

Romero promotes a particular version of Liberation Theology, a peaceful version, which excludes the participation of armed priests, communist sympathizers, and certainly, the conservative members of the clergy who serve the military-oligarchy. Indeed, one central goal of Romero was to show the distance between the traditional sectors of the church and those who chose the path of the people. The more conservative priests, representing the traditional ties between the church and the oligarchy, are distanced from the people and appear most physically different from them. They are the whitest individuals on screen and largely practice the art of self-protection in the face of the violence. Their safety is accomplished by remaining tied to the military and far away from the poor. The reformist members of the clergy, on the other hand, put their lives in danger by choosing to align with the people. Romero and Grande pay the ultimate price for this decision as they are assassinated by the death squads.

Well-Intentioned Meddlers

Both Romero and Salvador essentially offer outsider versions of the conflict. The outsider perspective is perhaps conceded by Stone through the character of the foreign journalist as protagonist, whereas the Romero aims at an insider image of the Church. The American journalist Boyle carries with him the baggage of Vietnam into the struggle in El Salvador. He literally encounters the ghosts of American involvement in South East Asia through his interactions with the U.S. army stationed in El Salvador. It is in moments of interaction with these characters that Boyle engages in long statements evoking the familiar Cold War era themes of arms traffic, revolutionaries, and the specter of directed Soviet intervention in the Americans by Cuban-Nicaraguan proxies. The characters of Dr. Rock and Richard Boyle confirm the hegemony of the United States in El Salvador. They are able to exploit the country despite the
violence facing civil society. Latin America plays a familiar role in Salvador; an oversexed land to the south ripe and ready for American exploitation.

Romero’s outsider perspective is a result of misrepresenting Oscar Romero as a pacifist. This representation denies Romero the centrality he played as the martyr for national liberation, who, like the guerillas, was committed to liberating the people by engaging in their struggle. Romero as committed to armed struggle betrayed what the filmmakers considered as the appropriate path towards peace and the acceptable role of the church in the civil war. The belief in a theology of liberation premised on non-violence is essentially imposed from the outside on the character of Oscar Romero. The filmmakers pass moral judgment on the Archbishop for speaking of the insurrectional right of the people. In the eyes of the Paulist filmmakers and their agnostic director, Romero was a misguided dupe of Marxist influence.

One element missing from both films is a concerted effort to contextualize the 1980s within the broader scope of Salvadoran history. In presenting language linking El Salvador to Vietnam, Salvador provides some context on recent U.S. history. The ghost of Vietnam finds its way into El Salvador, but neither the memory of the 1932 Matanza nor the fraudulent elections in the 1970s make an appearance. In Romero, peasant organization and dissent against the government is portrayed as a direct result of the reformist church emerging on the scene. Without outside influence from the reformist priests, the peasantry lays dormant awaiting agitation. And with the emergence of new ideologies, the peasantry reacts quickly and without reference to the historical causes of popular upheaval. Both films, therefore, portray an undue spontaneity to the civil unrest of the 1980s, and given general ignorance in the U.S. towards Latin American issues, fail to contextualize the Salvadoran Civil War within the context of social revolutionary movements in the twentieth century throughout the region. What is further evident in these portrayals is that peasant organization ostensibly necessitated outside agitation of some kind. In the case of Salvador, these agitators were the guerillas, in Romero, the reformist priests similarly associated with Marxism.

**Legacies of Intervention**

The Salvadoran Civil War left important legacies that have affected the entire hemisphere. The violence forced the displacement of hundreds of thousands of refugees as people fled to neighboring countries and far north to the United States, especially California.
U.S. policy responded negatively to these displaced people and failed to properly label them as political refugees. The violent militarization of Salvadoran society coupled with displacement created a social environment in El Salvador ripe for continued violence.

In the United States the memory of U.S. involvement in El Salvador rarely receives mention. In popular culture, one example should suffice to outline the place of the Salvadoran Civil War in U.S. historical memory. The 2003 film *El Coronado* portrays a fictional Latin American country in the midst of social revolution. The country portrayed is clearly El Salvador, given the image shown of the country on a map in the beginning of the film. The plot revolves around an American couple. The husband works for the U.S. government abroad; however, the wife has no knowledge of his activities. As a civil war heats up, the husband must return to the country of El Coronado to aid guerillas in overthrowing a corrupt government. The wife follows her husband to El Coronado without his knowledge and the film unfolds as the two cross the country in search of each other. Against the backdrop of the separated American couple, a guerilla army fights the corrupt government with the help of the U.S., a strange change of roles indeed. The guerillas are ultimately triumphant and the film portrays unrealistic scenes of their military might.⁴

In *El Coronado*, not only does the U.S. support the guerillas, but they do so against a corrupt government. This turns the legacy of U.S. intervention in Latin America on its head. Instead of supporting corrupt, brutal governments as the improperly named Good Neighbor Policy had in Nicaragua, Cuba, and El Salvador, the U.S. aligns with guerilla forces to secure their victory. Thus, the story of Central American Revolutions becomes fodder for portraying the good will of the U.S. government abroad. Essential facts about the U.S. are reversed in order to make the Americans out to be the ultimate benefactor of democratic movements in the underdeveloped world. History has been re-inscribed with a narrative favorable to U.S. interests.

El Salvador’s Civil War is also remembered by policymakers in the current Bush Administration in ways favorable to the image of U.S. foreign policy. In particular, El Salvador is fashioned as an example where elections brought an end to civil conflict. During the 2004 Presidential Campaigns, Dick Cheney, in a televised debate, echoed the belief that the U.S. had helped to end the Salvadoran Civil War through elections, “And today El Salvador is...a lot

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⁴ The exaggerated power includes a hollowed out volcano as the guerilla base of operations as well as the guerillas being equipped with dozens of tanks, helicopters, and other symbols of military might.
better because we [the U.S.] held free elections.” Elections are not, however, a panacea for civil war. This has been demonstrated by recent events in Iraq just as it was for Salvadorans during their civil war. Just as is the case with *El Coronado*, Americans construct their own version of the Salvadoran Civil War and remember the events of the 1980s as further evidence of the morality of U.S. policy. For Cheney, the successes in El Salvador after 1992 justified the actions of the U.S. in Iraq in 2004. Indeed, this line of reasoning illustrates the selectivity of historical memory and the political uses of the past for the current neoconservative administration. These self-serving versions of history confirm, according to John Patrick Diggins, that neoconservatives “rel[y] on a history in which they won the Cold War.” Thus, the end of the Salvadoran Civil War served only as another example of the U.S. triumph over the Soviet Union in the Cold War, the cost in terms of lives and displaced refugees is marginalized for the sake of advancing political rhetoric in the U.S.

The 1992 peace accords and associated elections in El Salvador did help to bring about some changes in civil society. Most importantly, perhaps, they mandated the incorporation of the FMLN into the political and military apparatuses of the new state. Furthermore, the military was now supposed to remain subservient to civil society. Whether or not El Salvador will remain at peace under these changes, however, remains unknown. The films *Salvador* and *Romero* serve as reminders of the Salvadoran Civil War as seen by American filmmakers. They also advance interpretations of this history that stand in direct contrast to the uses of the Salvadoran Civil War for neoconservatives. The arguments in the films against U.S. aggression should be remembered as critical elements of the cultural of dissent against the Reagan Administration as well as perspectives informed by the role of the U.S. in the world as a global power. The films should also serve as a reminder of how superpower confrontation affects the Third World; the legacies of the Salvadoran Civil War attest to this. Moreover, they show that outsider ideology often has the power to portray foreign conflicts as they see fit and that mimicking the foreign “other” confirms the uneven power of U.S. hegemony in the hemisphere. As productions of culture, films go a long way towards outlining the visual symbols used to identify foreign countries. In the context of the Cold War, the films *Salvador* and *Romero* show

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5 Cheney quoted in the *New Internationalist* (Canada), December 2005, p. 18.

that, regardless of intention, making the foreign “other” recognizable requires maintaining stereotypes instead of breaking them.

**Conclusion**

This study attempts to show that the ability to represent foreign wars confirms the power of American cinema to dominate visual history. The filmmakers of both Romero and Salvador reinforce perpetual stereotypes about Latin America, not necessarily out of intention, but out of the necessity of rendering El Salvador recognizable to American audiences. Mimicry of foreign cultures often requires the maintenance of symbols of the “other,” in this case, the impressionable “savages” of El Salvador. By understanding the significance of these portrayals, this study demonstrates the ways in which the Vietnam War effected the perception of U.S. foreign policy in El Salvador during the early 1980s. Whereas Salvador argues against U.S. intervention and champions the cause of the left, Romero saw pacifism as the only solution to the civil war. Both films, thus, tell us more about the history of the U.S. through the lens of a foreign war than they do about the historical context of the violent 1980s in Central America.

This thesis, perhaps, presents more questions than it proposes to answers. Some themes discussed offer avenues for further probing of the histories of El Salvador and of U.S. foreign relations in the Cold War. In terms of El Salvador, further study into the representations of violence in local forms—newspapers, cultural notions, and film—in different historical periods would demonstrate the resonance of ideologies and images through time in an effort to understand the cultural context of violence. Furthermore, research on El Salvador's Civil War in the order of Greg Grandin’s study on Guatemala would show on the micro level the role of state formation, modernization, and the Cold War on cultural legacies of violence, especially in areas and amongst groups where government repression was most acute. On the United States and the Cold War, the transculturation of terror vis-à-vis SOA training and U.S military agents imbedded in Central America highlights the importance of understanding the hybrid forms of violence that occurred in El Salvador. Finally, to get at the base of violence during the Cold War, the transnational support networks that fought for both the right and left, and the ideological and material cultural transfer between these groups, needs to be considered. By

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understanding the solidarity engendered in the multinational support that existed for El Salvador as well as understanding the justifications by right wing groups for the violence, scholars will produce a fuller understandings of the cultural history at the end of the Cold War in Latin America.
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BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Jonathan Herbert Grandage was born in Hudson, Ohio in 1983. He graduated from The Florida State University in 2005 with a B.A. in History. He has worked as a Graduate Assistant for the Department of History and for the Guadalajara Census Project. His interest in Latin American history was sparked by travels throughout the region. How about something about your surfing? Current research on tourism and the environment in Central America?