



Latin America in the Media

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This guide presents a view of resources concerning Latin America which are also useful for discussing the media and the role of the media in the way which we receive news. This guide includes only a small section of our resources on this subject, others may be found by searching the LARC catalog.



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Introduction

The control of information, particularly in today's increasingly digital age, is an important concern. Those of us receiving information – the audience- are at the mercy of journalists, editors, and sources as they bring us news and other programming from around the world. The broadcast media in the United States abounds with talk shows, news programs, and dramatic reenactments of current events, as well as anthropological documentaries and travel programs which purport to explain foreign cultures or conflicts to the viewer. For many viewers, these images form the basis of our knowledge about another part of the world, or even about our own society. As we are presented with seemingly eye-witness evidence of some event, the apparent "truth," it becomes even more difficult to be a critical reader of the text with which we are presented.

This guide to the lending library of the Latin American Resource Center examines a selection of videos about Latin America and directs the reader's attention to the ways in which the producers of these texts have exerted, and sometimes hidden, their points of view. We will briefly discuss the goals of the producers, the constraints on their information gathering or presentation capabilities, and their techniques. The resources presented here rely on some knowledge of history and contemporary political knowledge about Latin America to interpret the use of media in such cases. We also ask why a particular topic is considered newsworthy, or deserving of a documentary or a Hollywood film. In their critical viewing the instructor and students might ask themselves some of these general questions:

- Whose point of view is presented? Whose voice is used and does he/she purport to speak for others? Can you identify the various sides of a conflict and do you hear their voices equally?
- How is that voice presented? What methods of persuasion are used? What is the film's argument and how is it constructed? Can you identify a rhetorical style?
- How does the information presented fit into what you already know about the topic? Has it made you change your opinion on something and what was the film's intent?
- What cinemagraphic techniques are employed? How do shot selection, lighting, editing, and music affect the presentation of the information and the viewer's emotional response to it?

The first section of this guide focuses on the work of news reporters. The next section examines films including Hollywood films, documentaries, and critical examinations of the newsgathering process. Potential discussion questions pertinent to each film follow the discussion of the films.

Journalists and News Reporters

When one thinks of foreign correspondents, one might imagine the gravely-voiced Walter Cronkite-type reporting from some important world capital. What their on-location reporting and authoritarian air communicate to the reader is credibility. What we expect in such news is unbiased reporting and insight into the repercussions of an event. But how credible is a reporter who does not speak the language of the country from which he is reporting, forcing him to rely on interpreters or a severely limited number of sources? How can the reporter truly understand the repercussions of certain events if he or she is not versed in the nuances of the nation's culture? How did the news organization determine that this event was worthy of coverage in the first place?

The answer to this last question is, of course, complex. Typically in our Latin American reports we see civil and drug wars, terrorist attacks, undocumented workers crossing borders, military coups, natural and economic disasters, and the rare cultural piece, usually centered around some national holiday. Why does it take a bus crash with forty fatalities in Ecuador to get on the nightly news, while a 10 fatality crash in France might get the same coverage? Why cover a small war in a country where diarrhea kills far more people each year than the never ending battles? Why do we see images of Brazil only at Carnival time, or when the protection of the Amazon Forest is in vogue?



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One of the major ways of determining what will be reported is proximity. We might consider simple geographic proximity in choosing a story, or we might consider cultural proximity to the standard American viewing audience (diverse though it may be): thus, French crash victims, in some perverse way, might seem closer to us than the Ecuadorians; and we might not become interested in a war until an American mercenary or religious worker is killed. Journalists also consider the notoriety of those involved in an event. Thus when Sting, or another famous individual, goes to the rain forest, the reporters follow; when the president speaks, the journalists listen. The uniqueness or strangeness of an event or the people involved is also a contributing factor. This is a difficult quality to pin down, but it is what leads local newspapers to run pictures of two-headed calves and the national networks or display a potato with the likeness of the Virgin Mary. If these things occurred every day they would no longer qualify as news.

In the logistical aspects of gathering and reporting of the news, we see constraints on foreign correspondents: the journalist's familiarity with the host nation; the time he or she will be allotted for gathering the information and then for presenting the report on the program; the reporter's access to sources and locations as well as to the technology necessary for producing and sending the report. Several fictional films in the LARC collection offer insight into the world of foreign correspondence. They often focus on the victimization of journalists or on their involvement in news stories, including how they have been manipulated by their sources or vice versa, and how they have struggled to maintain their objectivity in the face of injustice.

Under Fire (FF US 8) depicts events leading up to the 1979 overthrow of the Somoza dictatorship in Nicaragua. Two journalists are asked to propagate information that an assassinated coup leader is still alive. Photos of the 'living' guerilla and his fellow rebels, taken by one of the journalists, are used by death squads to hunt down and murder 'traitors.' Later, the same journalist captures footage of his friend, an American journalist, being summarily executed by government troops. This helps swing American sympathies and policy during the revolt. *This film presents an opportunity for classroom discussion of the ethics of wartime correspondence, and shows how the press is manipulated to formulate public opinion and sentiment. By helping the rebels film their leader, did the journalist cross the line of impartiality? In a similar situation, what would the student have done? Should individual mortality overcome professional ethics? Under what circumstances?*

A good companion piece to *Under Fire* is *Crisis in Central America: Revolution in Nicaragua* (HC NIC 3). This video presents an intense, non-fictional account of the same period as *Under Fire*, and includes actual footage of the assassination of the journalist examined in the fictional film. *How does the real situation compare to the version presented by Hollywood? Which of the two films is more effective in conveying its message to the audience? Why? Why do we tend to place greater faith in the "facts" presented in the documentary format than those represented in the Hollywood film? What if Hollywood made a movie that 'felt' like a documentary? Can you think of some examples? How did you react to them? Did their versions of history supersede the one you previously held? Has the same thing happened through the dissemination of a more obviously fictionalized account of an historical event?*

A second feature length film, *Salvador* (FF ELS 1), also offers a fictional representation of actual events. This much-acclaimed film is based on the exploits of real-life journalist Richard Boyle. Portrayed by James Woods, Boyle is represented as an anti-hero who attempts to shine light on the United States' complicity in Salvadoran repression. His search for the truth leads him through government campaigns (both Salvadoran and American) of disinformation, with their death threats and censors. *Salvador* is a gritty look at war and contains graphic language and violence. Teachers will find this film useful in introducing students to the forces involved in 'getting a story.' *What drives Boyle to risk his life in order to get information? How is that conveyed? Could these motivations have been conveyed as successfully in a non-fiction film? Teachers may want to use The Situation for comparison.*

For a non-fiction look at the methods of foreign correspondence, two films are recommended. The first, *Only the News that Fits* (SI CA 5) offers an excellent introduction to coverage of international events. Members of the global press corps, covering the Arias Peace Plan, discuss how they gather information and prune it to fit a time slot. The film examines the networks' drive to gain ratings through sensationalization and addresses the question, "What sells?" Interspersed with the correspondents'



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interviews is the genesis of a news story. A village has been raided; a crew films what remains of the village and interviews the survivors. After the story is put together, the editors in the United States give their input and remold the story. Finally, the segment is aired on national television. Because *Only the News that Fits* includes the footage which was ultimately left out after editing the television newscast, this film is excellent for discussion how the students would have edited the story. *What would their lead-in be, and why? How does the students' lead-in compare to the network's lead-in? What slant did the final story take? What was gained or lost in the aired version of the raid on the village?*

Did they Buy it? (HC NIC 16) focuses on ethical issues faced by US journalists covering the Nicaraguan presidential elections of 1990, questioning individual as well as institutional morality. During the elections, the Reagan/Bush administration made strong anti-communist speeches. This rhetoric placed pressure on the press and altered the public's perception of the threat of communism in Central America. Journalists in the film speak their minds about free press in the US. How are the different sides of the story presented?

Although it does not deal with journalism per se, *War on Nicaragua* (HC NIC 5) serves as a good follow-up to *Did they Buy it?* *War on Nicaragua* offers an expose on US operations in Nicaragua which led to the Iran-contra scandal. The anti-US government stance reflects how politics shapes news. This segment was produced as the Iran-Contra hearings began, when the public outrage at governmental subterfuge was at its peak. *Voice-over and editing demonstrate how former President Reagan and others manipulated the media. How do politicians do this? How do the film makers use similar manipulative techniques? Would such an anti-Reagan piece have been produced had the scandal not forced both media and public to question the morals and methods of the Reagan administration?*

The effects on the public of the deliberate manipulation of images in news coverage are examined in *Media War in El Salvador* (SI ELS 1). The film is set in El Salvador during the presidential elections of 1989. Two American public relations firms, the Tuesday Group and GMM&A, were contracted to create media images for the candidates of the Christian Democratic League and ARENA, the two major political parties. The film is useful to demonstrate how the public relations firms created heroes through sights and sounds. *To what sentiments do the images of each campaign play? What effect did these ads have on the electoral outcome? Teachers might also want to discuss image manipulation in US political campaigns.*

While *Media War in El Salvador* focuses on manipulation of information to create heroic myths, *Faces of the Enemy* (SI 3) shows how scapegoats and villains are created in the media (not limited to political campaigns). The latter film shows how stereotypes of the 'other' are created through a process of dehumanization, in subtle manners that can appear innocuous and go unnoticed. Both films are suitable for advanced junior high through college, although teachers may want to give younger viewers some background on the conflict in El Salvador prior to viewing *Media War*. *What examples of demonification can the students think of? How might the techniques used in news stories to create heroes be used to create villains?*

Moving away from Central America, *El Espectador: The Press and the Drug Lords* (SI COL 2) focuses on the dangers encountered by Colombians working for Bogota's respected daily, *El Espectador*. The film follows events through the eyes of one journalist who chooses to pursue truth and take on the feared drug cartels. The newspaper office is subsequently bombed, the editor-in-chief assassinated, and the employees continually threatened. The journalist discusses how her coverage of the drug trade and constant threats on her life affected her lifestyle. By the end of the production, her sister, another journalist, has been killed in the line of duty. *Do reporters in the US face similar dangers? If the student(s) had been editor-in-chief of the paper, would they continue pursuing the story given the potential cost?*

A final cautionary film on the dangers of journalism is presented in *Fire in the Andes* (HC PER 1) in which the grisly deaths of eight Peruvian journalists are examined. The discussion focuses mostly on how these murders were exploited for political reasons. On the one hand, the government blamed the Maoist rebel group Sendero Luminoso for the death of the reporters. On the other hand, Sendero Luminoso and the general public claimed the military was responsible. *Fire in the Andes* demonstrates



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the connections between politics and the media; the crux of the film is to reveal who is responsible for the murders. While it shows the loopholes in the Sendero-as-killer scenario, it fails to present an air-tight case against the government. *What stands to be gained by proving the guilt of either side? Who does the film implicate in the murders? How is this perspective presented?*

Documentary Film-Makers

Like news broadcasts, documentaries explore real people, cultures, and situations without the always obvious construct of a fictive plot. However, the technique of documentary film-making is different from news programs. A documentary has a longer production schedule than a standard news show, and is often filmed over the course of months rather than hours. Both running length and production schedules allow for a more thorough examination of a topic. This extra time allows for obtaining interviews with hard-to-reach individuals and setting up shots that are impossible under strict time limits.

Unlike news coverage, documentaries are not non-partisan. A documentary may present all sides of a story, but frequently explores only one side of an issue, perhaps a 'hidden' side. Often, a documentary purports to be objective and is attempting to correct misconceptions disseminated by the news media. LARC has several films which can be used to bring insight to the documentary process. The discussion of these documentaries focuses on those which address indigenous peoples, history, politics, and social issues.

Indigenous Peoples and Development

Latin America is home to 57% of the world's remaining rain forests, and is involved in a heated environment-development controversy. Within this debate, the consequences of deforestation on flora and fauna of the rain forest draw substantial attention; the consequences of deforestation on human inhabitants of the rainforest do not, yet indigenous communities play a large role in the conflicts which arise and are directly affected by the controversy.

Rainforests are cleared for lumber or planting crops, including some monocrops such as coffee, or to raise cattle, frequently for export. The clearing of forest land for agricultural develop leads to conflict between indigenous peoples who rely on the forest for their subsistence and the agriculturalists. Communities and construction encroach on the traditional territory of indigenous peoples who are subsequently displaced. Several documentary films explore the human component of the environment/development debate. The films range from anthropological films to economic or biological discussions about rain forest destruction. The videos discussed below are valuable to viewers with no previous knowledge of the rain forest ecosystems and debates, but teachers may want to give some background information.

Alan Cowell's five part series *Decade of Destruction* (GE BRA 3) is an excellent way to familiarize students with the issues involved in tropical deforestation. Parts four *The Mechanics of the Forest* and five *The Storms of the Amazon* are especially useful as introductory units. Part four is a succinct description of the biological nexus of the rain forest, while part five examines the environment effects of deforestation. If students are already familiar with rain forest ecology, instructors might want to use episodes one, two, and three instead.

Episode one, *The Search for the Kidnapped*, examines the conflict between Brazilians moving into the Amazon and the indigenous tribes inhabiting the area. The story revolves around the kidnapping of a seven-year-old by the indigenous peoples. In his coverage of the event Cowell treads a fine line between accusing the indigenous people of a crime and merely explaining the crime, but he manages to deliver a fair portrayal. Teachers may be interested to note that this film arose coincidentally; Cowell entered the area to make a film about the recent settlements and the boy was kidnapped during his stay. Given this context *The Search for the Kidnapped* serves as a basis of discussion for ethics and obligations of film-makers to their host communities. *Did Cowell make the film in an effort to help the people who housed him and shared information with him? Does the film favor the recent residents or the*



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indigenous people's side of the story? How does Cowell present his case? What are the possible repercussions of this film upon both communities? If this were a news story, how might it have been different? Why?

Part two, *The Blazing of the Trail*, examines the life of recent immigrants lured to the new frontier with promises of a better life; the fortune of a family is traced over the course of two years. This film exemplifies non-partisan discussion of critical issues presenting the new residents and indigenous opinions. *Teachers may want to compare the value of such a study to reports by journalists who have two to three day deadlines. How would the piece be refocused?*

Part three, *In the Ashes of the Forest*, looks at the political and commercial factors of deforestation. The value of this film lies in its objective verbal presentation of information played against a highly subjective visual presentation. For example, the voices of government officials discussing the financial rewards of deforestation are played with shots of trees burning. An ominous score undercuts the words, serving as a negative counterpoint. Some of the presentation may be difficult for younger high school students to follow as it involves complex socio-economics and is at times quite obtuse.

An anthropological perspective is offered in *At the Edge of Conquest: The Journey of Chief Wai-Wai* (IND BRA 8). The film-maker follows Chief Wai-wai from his home to FUNAI, the Brazilian Indian Agency. The film allows the viewer to formulate his/her own conclusions about Chief Wai-Wai's interactions with government officials. *Does the film convey a message effectively? This film was shot directly on video, and utilizes many hand-held shots. How does this affect the impact it has on the audience?*

Nomads of the Rain Forest (GE ECU 2) and *Amazonia-Minimum Critical Size of Ecosystems* (GE BRA 7) present information in a traditional educational manner. *Nomads* utilizes anthropological techniques as it records the customs of a nomadic Ecuadoran tribe. Unlike *At the Edge of Conquest*, there is no apparent message. Rather, this film is a visual record of curare processing, a poison used by people in the Amazon for hunting, and blowgun crafting. *Amazonia* is a science film about the fringe effect, an ecological phenomenon where two ecological zones are located close together. The close border between two zones can have negative effects on the stability of the environment, as seen in the Amazon. It is useful for demonstrating film-making geared for a traditional academic environment, which emphasizes information delivery. *Are static shots apropos for the subject matter, or a result of budgetary constraints? Compare the staid commentary to Cowell's dynamic prose to demonstrate how important word choice and delivery are for captivating an audience.*

History, Politics, and Social Issues

Films and videos encapsulate information. They are quick, comprehensible looks at politics, history, and current issues in a palatable format. Because they offer a compact discussion and conclusion, viewers must be wary of the agendas of the producers. The videos discussed in this section are arranged according to country and offer a variety of topics. Each video presents a different point of view and utilizes various persuasive/filmic techniques.

Teachers may want to use several tapes on the same country to present a complete picture to students while comparing the efficacy of narrative methods. While it is not necessary for students to have background in regional history or politics, it is helpful. Many of the films about Nicaragua, Guatemala, and El Salvador were produced in the 1980s during periods of civil strife. For more information on these films and time periods see the LARC Guide to Resources about Central America. The violence and political complexity in these particular films makes them suitable for advanced high school and college level students.

Two very different documentaries may be used as an introduction to Central America. *Crisis in Central America: The Yankee Years* (HC CA 4) utilizes archival footage to trace US intervention in Central America since the turn of the century. While only a broad overview of Central America is presented, the historical perspective is well-balanced. This is a good example of a compilation film which includes footage from Central American nations and the US.



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Instructors of more advanced students may wish to use the three-part series *The Houses are Full of Smoke* (HC CA 12). There is one tape each for El Salvador, Guatemala, and Nicaragua. These tapes provide a thorough look at US involvement in Central America and include interviews with a wide array of people – from national security representatives to death squad leaders. Each part demonstrates how interviews from opposing sides balance each other. Journalism teachers may want to talk about different interviewing techniques, formal, and informal, and whether or not a subject was aware s/he was being taped.

Films focusing on South America include *Uncertain Hope* (HC SA 4) which explores difficulties encountered by the emerging democracies of Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina. Questions and problems are presented without the benefit of background or cultural information on each nation, so this film should only be used in advanced classes with an eye to the following questions: *How are societal 'problems' presented? Against what images and to what end? For example, in the Brazilian segment, women are shown dancing in preparation for Carnival. A voice over tells us that 23 percent of the fertile women of Brazil have been sterilized. What does this convey at a subtextual level? What other examples of implied morality can students find? Also, this film uses advanced graphics to cut between scenes and segments. Does this distract from, or add to the presentation?*

Teachers may want to show any of the segments from the eight part *South American Journey* series as an example of ethnocentric film-making. The first part, *Tyrants will Rise from my Tomb* (HC SA 1), presents South America as a continent with a strong tradition of repressive military dictatorships. It then probes the 'national character' of the continent to demonstrate how such dictatorships are part and parcel to the people and history of South America. *What portrait does this video paint of South Americans? How does the voice over offer opinions as facts? How do voice over and visual image lead the viewer to a conclusion? All of the videos in this series are highly ethnocentric. They are easy to dissect with a critical eye, so teachers will find it ideal for middle school. An interesting exercise would be to have students who are non-conversant with South America to construct a model of continental values and characteristics based on viewing this video. Once teachers have supplemented the students' knowledge of this region, the class can create a second portrait. Compare the two to illustrate both how media creates myths and how knowledge can dispel these myths.*

Argentina

In 1983, a civilian government was reinstated after years of military rule. *Cry Argentina* (HC ARG 3) probes the political and economic challenges faced by the new government. It includes a good historical review as well as interviews with government sources. At times the commentary seems ethnocentric, making *Cry Argentina* useful for discussing how a correspondent's personality and culture can interfere with his or her reporting. *Teachers may want to discuss which historic episodes the film-maker chose to capitalize upon. If the student were to make an historical film, how would s/he select the periods and information to include? How would s/he present this information...through voice over, archival footage, interviews, or recreations?*

Sabemos Mirar (SI ARG 2) uses popular music to show the oppression felt by Argentine youths even after the return to civilian government. Musicians and young people speak for themselves through interviews and songs. Teachers will find the songs excellent primary sources for cultural insights; however, the video does not give background on who the performers are (whether they are popular, or up-and-coming). Both editing and filmic technique give the feel of a music video. *The first question to be asked is why did the film-makers choose music as the vehicle for expressing the hopes/fears of young people? Is a convincing case made for extraordinary repression of the youths? Of artists? Do students feel this video speaks for all Argentine youths, or just a few? Why? How does this rebellion/self-expression compare to that expressed by youth in the United States via music (i.e. MTV)? Teachers may also want to discuss the relativism of oppression/repression as experienced by the film's teenagers and their parents who survived the military regime.*



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Brazil

A military coup in 1964 overthrew civilian rule; in 1968 a coup within a coup suspended national rights. 1985 marked a return to civilian rule. During military rule, torture was institutionalized as a means of intimidation, interrogation, and repression. One tape is recommended for viewing as an exploration of Brazil's dark period, and example of how film-maker(s) handle difficult and sensitive subject matter.

The creative force behind *How Nice to See You Alive* (SI BRA 2) has given a voice to a silent, scarred league of women survivors of torture. The horror of the experience is conveyed as women speak over footage depicting their current lives; they play with their children, work in the office, and tend to their homes. The subject matter of *How Nice to See you Alive* warrants a preliminary introduction by instructors. However, the handling of the subject is never graphic, making the film appropriate for high school as well as college students. *How do the students respond to this style of presentation? Would graphic descriptions/photography of the torture make for a more powerful impact? Teachers may want to compare the film to When the Mountains Tremble (HC GUA 2) or Children's War which deals with human rights abuses in a more forceful manner.*

How Nice to see you Alive is a record of atrocities, a cautionary tale against forgetting. Classes may discuss whether this message is delivered clearly. Intercut with the interviews of the women, their family, friends, and co-workers is a narrative involving a fictional character who voices concerns not captured in the interviews themselves. *Does this device work? Classes may again want to compare these fictional interludes to the historic recreations in When the Mountains Tremble. The film raises questions about how the media deals/dealt with survivors and what ethics are involved in telling the survivor's' tale. Is documentary or narrative film-making the best way to create a collective memory? Does a film such as How Nice to See you Alive or the fictional Kiss of the Spider Woman (FF US 1) reach more people?*

Caribbean

The Department of Defense produced the official US version of the Cuban Missile Crisis in *One Week in October* (HC CUB 7). News footage and the heavy-handed morality of the Cold War combine in the presentation of this important moment in Cuban-US-Soviet relations. Teachers may want to compare this to *Grenada Revisited: Lessons for Today* (HC GRE 4), which was produced by America's Defense Monitor, an organization of former military officers. The Defense Monitor presents an assessment of the long-term effects of the invasion which is unflattering to the United States. *How is this national morality conveyed? In both productions, what motivated the producers? How is (archival) news footage used in each story? Each story operates on the premise that American lives are at stake, thus justifying urgency, How do they build around this concept? What is the moral to each tale?*

Crisis in Central America: Castro's Challenge (HC CUB 1) covers the rise of Fidel Castro since 1952. *Castro's Challenge* has a strong anti-Castro message. What on the surface appears to be a fair portrayal of the Cuban Revolution is actually subjective. Students should note how audience sentiments are manipulated through sensational use of violence, beginning with the opening shots of fallen soldiers. Students should note shot choice as well as opinion stated as fact in voice overs. It would be helpful if teachers provided a brief chronology of Cuban politics prior to the revolution (i.e. careers of Batista, Castro, and Che Guevara).

Chile

Several Chilean productions offer a change from Western productions about Latin America. In particular, note the use of Chilean arts to add meaning and sentiment. *Don't Threaten Me* (HC CHI 5) was produced after the ousting of Pinochet, the former dictator of Chile. During the Pinochet regime, censorship would have precluded such a production because of its questioning of the establishment. News footage, interviews, protest songs, paintings, and poems converge into a remarkably impartial view of the strong emotions for and against the Pinochet regime. *How does the director balance the pros and cons through audio (interviews and poems) and visual arts (painting)? Why did the director use these*



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poems, paintings, and songs rather than just interviews? Is sufficient historical information provided to understand the film's topic (i.e. the rise and fall of Pinochet)?

Many people were forced to leave Chile under threat of violence during Pinochet's rule. It is not surprising that the theme of exile is so strong in Chilean film and literature. Two films examine exile, but in different ways. *Canto a la Vida* (SI CHI 3), directed by Lucía Salinas Briones, who was herself in exile, features interviews with six female exiles, including author Isabel Allende. Archival film from Chile, still photos and headlines, and stark black and white photography give visual images to the women's tales. The subjects are all high-profile figures. *Teachers may therefore want to discuss whether this film speaks for all of Chilean society, or only a small part. It is useful to compare Canto a la Vida to How Nice to see you Alive which addresses the middle class mass experience. How does the background and lighting selection (for the interviewees) differ in the two films? To what end?*

Returning to Chile (HC CHI 4) provides a different view of Chilean exile. It records the homecoming of Chileans who had been in exile for over 15 years. Because *Returning to Chile* contains a very powerful segment on the disappeared, middle school teachers may want to preview this film before showing it in class. Classes should note how protest songs set the style, content, and pace. *Why do these songs play such an important role in Chilean documentaries? What is the tone of this film, and how is it conveyed? Which socio-economic classes are covered in this film, and why? For this latter question, classes should consider which social classes could afford to flee the country, and who would be more likely targets for (Pinochet) military retribution.*

Columbia

Many of the films in the LARC collection about Colombia deal with drugs and crime. This in and of itself is evidence of a bias in American documentary film-making and news magazine shows. The works produced about this nation dwell almost exclusively on stereotypes of blood, crime, and machismo. Being aware of this bias enables the viewer of these videos to see how hyperbole is used to present a frightening image of Colombia.

Three films offer different perspectives on the Colombian-US narcotics situation. *Lines of Blood* (SI COL 3) is a comprehensive look at the US War on Drugs. This documentary lays out the US policy of drug interdiction, and efforts of the South Florida Task Force. *Classes may want to note how this filmmaker and the US political machine (as depicted in this film) present sensational statistics on drug runs and drug related crime as national motivation to begin this 'war.' Which nation's perspective is presented? How does this affect the information included?*

Unlike many other American productions on this topic, *Lines of Blood* discusses the effects of widespread poverty in Colombia on the drug trade. Peasants who struggle to stay alive are caught between US and Colombian government policies and cartel violence. *Is this subject, or the work of the Task Force, a more interesting news story? Why? How would each, if handled separately, affect the public's perception of the 'war on drugs' and Colombia?*

El Espectador: The Press and the Drug Lords (SI COL 2) examines the battle between drug cartels and the press; one side is armed with guns and explosives, the other with words, bodyguards and flak jackets. *How are the cartels presented as a threat to Colombian national security? Do the students feel the cartels are a threat to ordinary Colombians, or only those in powerful/public positions? How does the threat of the cartels compare to the threat of terrorist groups, and is this an opinion based on popular media coverage? For this final question, teachers may want to use The White Labyrinth to provide academic information on the perceived threats of guerilla and cartel activity.*

The Frontline special, *Who Profits from Drugs* (SI LA 7), deals less with Colombia and more with drugs. It is a well-made segment which translates the complexity of money laundering into the vernacular. This is an excellent example of a news show: streamlined and informative with minimal overriding politics. The 'bad guys' on the drug front are those American bankers and lawyers whose morality is defined by profit. *How does this image of the villain compare with the stereotype cartel member/drug smuggler? Does this film use any stereotypes of organized crime or Latinos? How does this affect the film's credibility?*



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Moving away from drugs to other social issues, *Recuerdos de mi Barrio* (SI COL 4) explores the spontaneous settlements on the outskirts of Cali, the third most populous city in Colombia. Still and motion picture photography set the scene while residents tell of the birth and growth of their community. A third-person voice over provides some background, but for the most part this film is told through the eyes and ears of the barrio dwellers. *Teachers may want to consider the technical aspects of the video. Why are stills used in this production? How are students persuaded that these settlements are a positive/negative addition to the community? Which perspectives were omitted from the story?*

El Salvador

Crisis in Central America: Battle for El Salvador (HC ELS 1), unlike some of the other videos in the series, is generally non-partisan. This depiction of El Salvador's political situation since the turn of the century emphasizes the late 1970s and 1980s. The information on US government involvement in the 1980s is not examined as thoroughly as pre-80s involvement. Teachers in advanced classes may want to supplement this film with a lecture, or second film such as the documentary *The Houses are Full of Smoke* (HC CA 12). A discussion of the reasons for such omission of information could be revealing. While filled with archival footage of massacres, *Battle for El Salvador* does not sensationalize the violence. *Why did the film-makers choose this approach? What does it convey? This is useful for a discussion of the techniques and ethics of filming battles. Questions may include: How does one obtain battle footage? When does a journalist stop observing a battle and actually become involved?*

The Situation (HC ELS 6) is a worthy follow-up to deal with the personal and ethical considerations of foreign correspondents. This film was produced by free-lance reporters in El Salvador. It documents their sometimes pleasant; other times harrowing experiences covering the civil turmoil of the 1980s. While this work shows the danger sometimes involved in a 'hot' story, it also demonstrates the daily monotony of looking for news. The reporters spent months living with Salvadorian families in the small town of San Vicente, an experience which created a very different angle on news than the stories generated by the press corps stationed in San Salvador. *How does personal involvement change the news? Would students consider this an attribute or detriment for covering global stories?* Richard Boyle co-produced *the Situation*, so this video serves as an excellent companion to the aforementioned *Salvador* (FF ELS 1). Students can compare a documentary approach to a Hollywood interpretation. They may also compare the differences between network and free-lance coverage and resources (i.e. availability of interviews, politician, vs. common person point of view, credence paid the stories, level of difficulty in sending uncensored stories back to the US, etc.).

El Salvador: The Seeds of Liberty (HC ELS 4) engenders an oppressive tone similar to that of *Battle for El Salvador*. This piece focuses on the struggle of Salvadoran peasants and shows how economic oppression goes hand-in-hand with human rights abuses. Interviews with Catholic leaders are supplemented with interviews with the rural poor to describe the crimes of the Salvadoran government, including the murder of four nuns and the Archbishop, Archbishop Romero. Liberation theology – which seeks to move the Church away from supporting the oligarchy and into direct contact with the poor where priests and lay workers fight injustice – is espoused throughout this film, but is never really explained in depth. For more information on this topic, see the guide to LARC resources on Central America. More advanced classes may want to examine how this philosophy helped shape the film. Teachers can provide pre-screening material on liberation theology or the murders of the nuns and Archbishop Romero (see *Romero* FF ELS 3). *How is the oppression conveyed, given the fact this film does not employ a single shot of a violent altercation or aftermath? Whose perspective is really being presented, the peasants or the church? When discussing these questions, teachers would remember that Seeds of Liberty was produced by Maryknoll, the Catholic order of the four nuns murdered by the Salvadoran militia in 1989.*

Dateline: San Salvador (HC ELS 7) offers an anti-government perspective on the suppression of labor unions, human rights activists, and student groups, particularly focusing on the 1986 May Day demonstration. Classes may want to examine filmic techniques. Extreme close-ups of bullet-ridden corpses are shown with little or no context. *What does a close-up shot of a corpse convey, as opposed to*



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a long shot? Are these shots relevant to what is being said? To what end did the film-makers use these shots? Many of the people interviewed in this film were later arrested and tortured, or 'disappeared.' What is/was the ethical responsibility of the film-makers to those they interviewed? Is it possible the Salvadoran government used this film to identify (and eliminate) members of the 'insurgency?' What steps might a film-maker/reporter take to prevent this?

*Houses are Full of Smoke offers a good contrast to *Dateline: San Salvador*. This film contains graphic footage of corpses (instructors of younger classes should be wary), but such scenes are placed in the context of war and torture. The death and destruction alone serve as strong anti-government, anti-US statement. *Is The Houses are Full of Smoke therefore, biased? Militia, both Salvadoran and American, diplomats, Salvadoran people and representatives of the church (notably Archbishop Romero) discuss US involvement. Does this spectrum of interviews counterbalance the images and create a 'fair' examination of Salvadoran politics?**

Guatemala

A comprehensive look at US policy in Guatemala is found in *The Houses are Full of Smoke – Guatemala* (HC CA 12). This film was produced by Americans and is concerned with American interests and influence. People ranging from CIA operatives to the president of Guatemala discuss high level politics. *Whose perspective (which country, economic class, ethnic group) is offered in this film? While *Houses-Guatemala* offers an in-depth political analysis, does it omit the human (rights) element? If students/teachers did not know this was an American production, what clues in the film reveal the identity of the producer(s)?*

Guatemala: Roads of Silence (HC GUA 6) is the antithesis to *Houses* as it was produced by Indigenous Guatemalans and focuses exclusively on the human cost of governmental policy. The political manipulations discussed in *Houses* resulted in a government policy of genocide against indigenous peoples. Survivors were uprooted from their homes and forced into a nomadic existence, hence the name of the film. Teachers may want to discuss how this film offers an indigenous perspective. *In what ways do the concerns expressed in *Roads of Silence* differ from those in *The Houses are Full of Smoke*? In what ways are they similar? How are traditional songs used? *Roads of Silence* is also an example of 'guerrilla' film-making; it lacks sleek technical production and feels incomplete, as though it were made on the run (in several instances, it was). The crew accompanied the indigenous even as they fled in front of troops. What production problems were faced by the crew? Is the technique distracting, or does it contribute to a feeling of urgency?*

When the Mountains Tremble (HC GUA 2) delivers a forceful and deliberate statement about the persecution of indigenous peoples by the Guatemalan government. This film employs a range of agitational propaganda tropes including historical reconstruction. An interview with renowned indigenous/human rights activist Rigoberta Menchu is interwoven throughout the film. Drawings produced by Guatemalan children convey the horror of persecution. *Taken as a whole, do students feel this film argues its case successfully? Which segments and techniques do students believe worked the best? The video ends with a panel discussion about the purpose and efficacy of the film, with the film's director and producer on hand to comment on style and content. Teachers may want to pause the video for the above questions before viewing this panel. Do students believe the end critique was correct? How do they feel about the film-maker's defense?*

Nicaragua

Two recommended films for Nicaragua were discussed in the section on journalism. Please see this section for a more complete review of resources on Nicaragua. Please also see the LARC guide to resources on Central America for more information.

Panama

LARC has resources for a comparative study of press coverage of the US invasion of Panama in 1989. The American press is represented by *Frontline: The Noriega Connection* (HC PAN 4) which



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dissects Noriega's connections to drug trafficking and justifies US military intervention. In contrast, the Academy Award winning documentary *Panama Deception* (HC PAN 5) offers an alternative viewpoint through discussions of political motivations for the invasion. The film also explores the large number of civilian casualties and, through critical viewing techniques, demonstrates how the human toll was obscured in the American media. Although extremely one sided, the filmmakers state clearly why this is the case; the film is an attempt to discredit popular media coverage of the event. *When is such subjective film-making acceptable? When is it necessary? Of the two films, which is more credible? Why? Does either attempt to offer a second point of view?*

In addition to these films, LARC has a two-part video of Panamanian television broadcast during the US invasion. *Noticias de Noriega* (HC PAN 2) is unedited footage, and is in Spanish with no subtitles. For those with some basic Spanish, or a translator, this offers an excellent contrast to the invasion as portrayed in the US (supplemental newspaper clippings are useful). Even without Spanish, the focus of footage is worth contrasting to that shot by the US press corps which accompanied US troops. *What is the Panamanian take on the invasion? Did this come across in any American broadcast? Why or why not?*

Peru

US policy in Peru is the topic of *Washington/Peru: We Ain't Winning* (SI US 3). This video of Congressional debates and interviews with politicians shows how policy shifts occurred with current events. Problems with current policy are discussed and potential solutions are proposed. Classes may want to examine if and when the media should offer answers to problems it has elucidated. The film *The People of the Shining Path* (HC PER 2) is an excellent resource as it is a propaganda film produced by Sendero Luminoso for audiences outside of Peru. *Is this evident in the film itself? Is it important to know the background of film makers to evaluate and understand a film's agenda?*

People of the Shining Path attempts to generate sympathy for the oppressed peasants of Peru. In sympathizing with the peasants the viewer sympathizes with Sendero Luminoso, portrayed as a liberator of the masses. *Is this ploy successful? Students can view this film with no prior knowledge of Sendero and generate a list of Sendero qualities and goals as set forth in the film. It is interesting to compare the student's list to qualities, goals, and death tolls attributed to Sendero by the Peruvian/American government. Why are the two sets so different? Which one is right? How is the viewer manipulated in the film (i.e. what values does it play to)?*

Conclusion

Through the deconstruction of films, by gaining a greater awareness of filmmakers' techniques and goals and their own reactions to such techniques, students can become better readers of the news and other propaganda. All films are made with different goals and have different approaches. Some films purport to offer insight into cultural understanding, others seek to enlighten audiences about history, others wish to shed light on a current conflict or problematic situation, and still others deliver information, either politicized or impartially. Each film or video manipulates sound, image, and content in its mission to 'educate' and shape the opinions of the viewer. Only by constantly questioning the goals and methods of the filmmaker/reporter, and the reliability of information presented can the viewer learn and make an informed judgment about a topic.

Basic questions help the viewer maintain awareness of these possible issues. Who produced the film? Why did they produce it? What images are shown, and what information is presented? To what end? When was the film made? How does it fit in historically? Where is the focus of the film? How is the case argued?

Further LARC resources which might be of interest can be found on our online catalog or by searching one of the other guides available on the LARC website.