# Images in Language, Media, and Mind

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# 9 Instant History, Image History: Lessons from the Persian Gulf War

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The year 1991 began with the world-class spectacle of the Persian Gulf War. Midway it saw the Russian coup collapse in a global blizzard of defiant imagery. Sandwiched between these events were sensational Senate hearings, televised courtroom dramas, video images of a black man beaten by Los Angeles policemen—images that later ignited a riot—and a movie that reinvented the "real" JFK. It is evident that 1991 was the year when media imagery tipped the geopolitical scales, shook the sex-role power structure, redefined urban politics, and altered the historiographic conventions of our time.

Of course, the selective process of what is communicated to whom, when, how, and with what effects has always shaped the course of private and public affairs. Until recently, however, the process remained essentially time-bound: accounts were produced and history was usually written after the fact. News was something that had already happened. Rather than witnessing history, we read about past events.

There comes a time when the accumulation of quantitative changes produces a qualitative transformation. Add heat to a pot of water and it simmers. Add speed to an account of a crisis—until it becomes not only selective and interactive, but also global and instantaneous with the event—and it becomes time-unbound with explosive consequences. Under such circumstances, the pot reaches the boiling point. The Gulf War of 1991 was such a point. In this chapter,[1] I will sketch some characteristics of instant history making, then offer a scenario and a model. I will then focus on the Gulf War, discussing what went on behind the scenes and what we might learn from it.

## Instant History Making

When asked what he thought about the French Revolution, Mao Zedong said that it was too soon to tell (Ash 1991). Usually, official history from the ruler's point of view is about the inevitable unfolding of the glorious present. As written by losers, history is tragedy crying for redemption. When these roles change, or when long-hidden facts come to light, it takes time to sort things out. But there are times when the sorting-out process itself changes. When Saudi financier Adnan Khassoghi was asked what he thought about the war in the Persian Gulf, he said it was "like going to a movie: we paid our money, we went to the theater, we laughed, we cried, the movie ended, and an hour later we had forgotten about it" (Masland 1991).

This observation marks a change that came about after centuries of build-up. Cheap parchment replaced rare papyrus; the printing press replaced the quill; the telegraph and telephone replaced the Pony Express. We went from oral to scribal to literate to audio-visual-digital-cybernetic, mass-produced culture. The last quantum leap occurred when satellites connected everything together, all around the world. The stage was set for centrally scripted, real-time, live global imagery, evoking instant reaction and feeding media events back to influence an ongoing crisis.

Historiography is a communicative activity that relates the past to the present and the future (Briesach 1989). When the means and modes of communication change, as McLuhan and others have observed, access to and control over communications change. The telling of stories, including history, changes too. The boiling point occurs when the power to create a crisis merges with the power to direct the movie about it. Participation—witness and confirmation hitherto limited to those on the scene—can now be a vicarious global experience and response that happens while the event is still in progress (or, as in the case of *JFK*, while the event seems to be happening again). Having achieved the desired outcome, the movie ends, but the images remain in memories and in archives.

New communicative technologies confer control, concentrate power, shrink time, and speed action—to the point where reporting, making, and writing history merge. McLuhan's "simultaneous happenings"—in which "the whole world's electronic participation is presumed"—will increasingly occur in crises, trials, hearings, disasters, uprisings, and wars. Yet these are situations in which deliberate speed and careful consideration are most needed. Instead, however, past, present, and future can now be packaged, witnessed, and frozen into

the memorable, moving imagery of instantaneous history—cast, scripted, directed, and produced by the winners. By triggering the rapid breakup of the Soviet Union, for instance, instant history robbed it of the transition time it needed to develop options, such as a coalition of self-governing republics (Friedman 1992). A new and real historical force came into play and gave the deliberate sorting out of things a swift kick in the pants.

## Instant History, Image History

Instant history is made when access to video-satellite-computer systems blankets the world in real-time with selected images that provoke immediate reactions, influence the outcome, and then quick-freeze it all into received history. Films of Vietnam took hours or days to reach us, after the fact. It may have been the first "living room war," but not for the first few years and not in real-time. Starting with the purported incident in the Gulf of Tonkin, it was a long, slow, duplicitous build-up. Lasting eleven years, it destroyed three countries and left behind some two million dead. "Body counts" were in headlines but did not have public witness. The tide of public reaction turned only after cameras began to record unsettling images: the casual execution of an enemy suspect, naked children fleeing napalm, thatched huts burning. When cameras turn to focus on the fallen, the war is lost, or soon will be. (Accordingly, the press was barred from Dover Air Force Base where Gulf War body bags landed. It took a freelance reporter posing as a mortician to get an estimate of the casualties.)

In contrast, chaotic perestroika, made visible by glasnost, rolled into an Eastern Europe where each successive counter-revolution took half the time of the previous one. And when the long pent-up Soviet backlash led to the attempted coup of August 1991, the plotters lost control when the magic lantern was snatched from their hands. Defiant imagery flooded their timorous stance. A tidal wave of domestic and world reaction swept them from power in seventy-two hours. Instead of victors, they became victims of instant image history.

Speed and controlled imagery give instant history its thrust—and its burden. When emphasis shifts to image, complex verbal explanations and interpretations, if any, switch into supporting and explanatory rather than alternative modes. Milburn and McGrail (1990) point out that, to reach a peaceful resolution of a conflict, we must entertain a variety of perspectives and engage in complex rather than simplistic thinking. Their experiments (and others) show that

dramatic imagery tends to inhibit both complexity and divergent perspectives. Instant history preempts alternatives.

Postman (1985) argues that pictures "have no difficulty overwhelming words and short-circuiting introspection" (103), while Grimes (1990) concludes that words can influence our memory of imagery. This means that voice-over narration can be recalled as a part of the actuality witnessed on the screen, even if it never occurred there. On the other hand, if the narration conflicts with the image, it may be ignored. Todd Gitlin (1991a) recounts his four-hour interview for "The NBC Nightly News" in which he stated that his opposition to the Gulf War did not conflict with donating blood for the troops. Yet the few seconds selected for the news only showed him donating blood, with his opposition to the war briefly noted in the voice-over. Viewers who confronted him afterward recalled only the image of his apparent support for the war. Gitlin wrote, "People who wouldn't be caught dead saying out loud that the news (to use the media's own favorite metaphor) mirrors reality, saw a media image and *assumed it not to be a construction, not a version, but the truth.*"

Images of actuality, selective as they may be, appear to be spontaneous and to reveal what really happens. They do not need logic to build their case. Staging "photo opportunities" to invoke powerful "reality" with a voice-over gloss and perhaps a sound bite is the new marketing tool for presidents, candidates, and wars. Williams (1991) observes that "spontaneity and immediacy deny time for reflection and evaluation. And if audience response quickly becomes news, this could exaggerate the effects of superficial responses to important world events" (17). Phelan (1991) concludes, "The further one gets from the reality, the more processed the information gets, and the more authority it assumes."

Instant history is a magic lantern projecting images on a blank screen in a temporal void, telescoping roles, parts, and outcome into the same act, appealing to prior beliefs and predilections, and triggering familiar responses. It blends into our repertoire of imagery. It is not easily dislodged, reinterpreted, or even attributed to one particular event. Worse still, we forget the title.

## The Scenario and a Model

The Persian Gulf War was an unprecedented motion picture experience, cramming into its first month alone the entire preserved visual images—and firepower—of World War II. But unlike GIs "flushing out

the enemy" from their hiding places, we were shown "seeing-eye" bombs zooming in on their targets followed by computer graphics tracing the ground offensive against an invisible enemy. General Schwarzkopf forbade casualty estimates, so sortie counts replaced body counts. Photographs of combat dead were censored. Sleek aircraft "sortied" over unmentionable people in unfought battles in an unseen country. The few unauthorized shots of bombs falling on civilian targets were attacked as treasonous or rationalized as "collateral damage"—a term defined by *Time* magazine as "dead or wounded civilians who should have picked a safer neighborhood." Never before were selected glimpses of actuality strung together with sound bites from photogenic crews, omniscient voice-overs from safari-clad reporters, and a parade of military experts with maps and charts at the ready, so mesmerizing, so coherent, and so contrived.

Desert Storm was the first global crisis media orchestration that made instant history. The Soviet coup six months later was the first attempt that miscarried. Opportunities for making instant history may be few and far between, but when they come, they loosen landslides that shift the political landscape: "I came back to another country," said Gorbachev when he returned from Crimean captivity. Successful crisis management by instant history requires five strategic moves or conditions: (1) access, (2) orchestration, (3) guided witness, (4) feedback, and (5) quick-freeze. I will try to spell out these conditions and illustrate with examples from the Gulf War.

First, access to real-time global imagery provides control over what is known—and, more importantly, not known—about events leading up to and making the crisis. To keep control, it is important to isolate the event from its real history, to screen out contrasting images, to marginalize dissent, and to speed the action. But grave crises have long and involved histories. Since few people know or care about these roots, they are easily ignored. Instant history making works best if presented as a response to sudden and irrational provocation. Acting in an historical vacuum, audiences fall back on conventional response patterns cultivated by everyday news and drama, such as crime and violence. Invoking the true history of the crisis risks confounding this simple scenario.

Suppressing all dissenting voices would provoke and alienate too many and, in any case, may promote exaggerated estimates of the extent of that suppression. It is better to report opposition through sound bites and voice-overs in its most limited, trivialized, offensive,

or bizarre forms. This implies that the opposition is merely the obligatory nuisance protest to almost anything in a true democracy. But imagery that shows and tells from another perspective is dangerous, because it short-circuits reasoning in the wrong direction. Most of all, opponents speaking for themselves—without sound bites or voice-overs—and, even more importantly, controlling the cameras from their own points of view are to be avoided. Yeltsin's defiant gesture on top of a tank marked the turning point of the Russian coup. No such discord marred the Persian Gulf War scenario. Widely used protest footage showed opponents waving the Iraqi flag and engaging in other provocative action. Independent documentaries from the field were censored or suppressed, even when commissioned by and delivered to television networks. To keep control, image managers must speed the action. Usually, one burst of saturation coverage is all you have before interruptive voices and audiences missing their daily television ritual blunt the momentum and diminish public support. (According to a February 1992 issue of *Broadcasting*, advertisers even defected during the Gulf War.)

Second, instant history requires orchestrating a coherent environment of actuality, images, talk shows, slogans, and other evocative exhibitions. To combine mainstream media events, signs, and symbols into a harmonious whole, it is useful to invent language, signs, and actions that fit the scenario, to channel support, and to evoke some mystery. Code names and terms that fit the scenario, demonize the "enemy," and wrap jarring realities in euphemisms leave no alternative to the "them versus us" construction of the crisis. For example, they employ "terror weapons"; we use "surgical strikes." They unplug incubators to kill babies; we fight with "high-tech hardware" to keep casualties down. And if we fail, it's just "collateral damage."

Supporting signs and symbols should be integrated into everyday life: yellow ribbons on cars and on Kent cigarettes; a pro-war Super Bowl half-time pageant with President and Mrs. Bush on tape and Peter Jennings live giving upbeat reports on the destruction in progress. Orchestration means blending images and messages into a symphony that combines a crisis mentality with the need to keep business going as usual. Glory travels well. Gore does not deliver audiences in a receptive mood—unless it can be attributed to the enemy—and so the only appearance of burned children being carried out of a Baghdad shelter—"collateral damage"—was dismissed on

"The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour" as "heavy-handed manipulation" by Iraqi propaganda.

Appeals to the Deity and to mystery also help orchestrate instant history on behalf of "the highest values." Speaking to religious leaders, then-President Bush recounted his praying before he ordered the ground attack "as Christ ordained." Bush affirmed his belief in "the first value . . . the sanctity of life." An icon of St. Irene gained worldwide attention when congregants in a Chicago church reported that it wept "tears of grief" on the eve of the Persian Gulf War. (This "weeping icon" was finally called a hoax and a publicity stunt in the *New York Times* [McFadden 1991]).

Third, instant history requires us to "participate" in a global "simultaneous happening." Of course, being a "guided witness" to history is a compelling experience. To simplify the crisis and isolate it from distracting complexities and unwanted alternatives, the audience is offered a sense of "being there," accomplished by providing what appear to be spontaneous photo opportunities, press conferences, and briefings. Properly staged briefings are especially useful because they promise inside dope straight from the photogenic source and avoid hard questions. Reviewing "The Best of 1991 Television," *Newsweek* (6 January 1992) compared Schwarzkopf's briefing to John Wayne's farewell to the troops in *She Wore a Yellow Ribbon:* "The general embodied a nation's ideal of the perfect warrior: tough, professional, charismatic, compassionate" (80).

Fourth, translating witness into participation and supportive feedback—from polls and letters to the editor to driving with lights on and honking horns—completes the interactive cycle. Making it "like going to a movie" evokes conventionally cultivated responses. The feedback reverberates in all media, crystallizes in public (i.e., published) opinion, and hastens the desired resolution.

Finally, instant history requires quick-freeze: rapidly produced videos, CD-ROM disks, paperback books, and illustrated texts celebrate the outcome as the Happy Ending. Saturating the market—including schools—for instant nostalgia with such triumphant imagery preempts historians, fights political opposition, and resists—or at least delays—revisionists.

So much for the model scenario. Now for the main event and how it was produced and performed. We may "forget the title," but we should prepare for the sequel.

## The Main Event

"As the skies cleared . . . an American officer proclaimed 'a beautiful day for bombing'" wrote R. W. Apple, Jr. (1991) in the *New York Times.* Before the day was over, 750 bombing missions were completed. "'There is more stuff up there than I'd see in twenty lifetimes,' said an Air Force pilot." What may have been happening on the ground could only be surmised from a safe distance. John Balzar (1991) of the *Los Angeles Times* reported "relentless rumbling" as "the skyline flickers hot orange." In the first month, "the tonnage of high explosive bombs already released has exceeded the combined allied air offensive of World War II." But the military terminology that permeated the reporting was more sports than slaughter: "Our team has carried out its game beautifully," praised a military expert on NBC. "We ran our first play—it worked great," said a pilot interviewed on CBS. "We scored a touchdown," applauded another reporter (Parenti 1991). CBS reporter Jim Stewart spoke of "two days of almost picture-perfect assaults" (*New York Times,* 24 May 1991). Secretary of Defense Dick Cheney told U.S. Air Force personnel they conducted "the most successful air campaign in the history of the world" (Thompson and Fiedler 1991).

This "precision bombing" spectacular dumped the equivalent of five Hiroshima A-bombs on a small country of ancient culture. Targeted were the life-sustaining elements of water, power, transportation, and health-care facilities, even though this destruction had doubtful military value. When the bombing ended, hunger and disease began. A Harvard University study team estimated that the delayed effects of the bombing left a million children malnourished and 170,000 children under five years of age dying of hunger, cholera, and typhoid. The U.S. Census Bureau later reported that in 1991, the life expectancy of Iraqi males dropped twenty years, from sixty-six to forty-six; the life expectancy of women dropped ten years, from sixty-seven to fifty-seven (Weiner 1992). Middle East Watch reported that allied decisions to drop unguided bombs in daytime over populated areas without warning civilians of imminent attacks violated generally accepted practice and international law "both in the selection of targets and the choice of means and methods of attack" (Healy 1991).

And yet, the image of brave Patriots slaying deadly Scuds was probably the most memorable scene of the Persian Gulf War movie. About 158 Patriot missiles were fired. Each missle cost $700,000. They missed eight out of ten times. When they found their targets, the resulting debris caused more destruction than the Scuds alone would

have. But all that was not in the script of instant history. The most thorough analysis of the Patriot anti-missile system was made by physicist Theodore A. Postol, a Pentagon science adviser and professor of national security policy at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He called the system "an almost total failure," even though it faced "quite primitive attacking missiles." The displays of thunder and flame seen around the world were an illusion, he said. Patriots would rush toward speeding fragments of poorly designed Iraqi Scuds that fell apart in the atmosphere as they approached their targets. The resulting fireball was mistaken as a successful interception, while in actuality the Scud warhead streaked by unscathed (Broad 1992). Johnson (1991) concluded that the Patriots were "successful mainly as psychological weapons used to fool the public." This success is shown in a survey by Morgan, Lewis, and Jhally: 81 percent of the population knew about the Patriots, while only 42 percent could identify Colin Powell.

The mighty armies that ran over Kuwait and were supposed to march on to Saudi Arabia could not be found. Poorly equipped and demoralized troops, sitting in trenches, caves, and bunkers without air cover, were napalmed to deprive those inside of oxygen and then bulldozed, burying dead and alive alike in some seventy miles of trenches. Bodies of soldiers who "suffocated in their bunkers after U.S. tanks plowed them under" were still being discovered nine months after the war (Associated Press dispatch from Nicosia, Cyprus, 5 November 1991). Defenseless convoys fleeing in panic were bombed and strafed in what pilots called a "turkey shoot." Andrew Whitley (1991) wrote:

> Nothing prepared me for the utter devastation. . . . heat-blasted wrecks piled crazily one on top of another, the U.S. Navy . . . must have used a combination of fuel-air explosives and cluster bombs against the hopelessly snarled convoy of vehicles. . . . The trail of destruction stretches a full thirty miles. . . . Within a mile-long section of the destroyed convoy, I counted more than a dozen ambulances and other vehicles bearing Red Crescent signs. (17)

The four-week Iraq massacre was more lethal than any nuclear, chemical, or biological warfare has ever been. One may question whether there really was a war. If by war we mean a conflict in which an enemy shoots back, the Persian Gulf operation was a slaughter. Official estimates ranged from 15,000 to 100,000 in direct casualties. In one report, former Navy Secretary John Lehman gave a Pentagon

estimate of 200,000 dead (Mathison 1991). Whatever the correct figure for Iraqi casualties, only 146 U.S. soldiers were killed, at least 35 of them by "friendly fire" (Hackworth 1991)—a kill ratio unprecedented in military history.

The main facts of cost, casualties, and damage were kept out of briefings and censored from reports. United States and allied reporters were rigidly controlled. Independent reporters who managed to obtain information on their own were excluded from the mainstream media. NBC first commissioned, then refused to broadcast, uncensored footage of heavy civilian casualties. Then, the night before this video was to air on the "CBS Evening News," the show's executive producer was fired and the report canceled (Bernstein and Futran 1991). The media watch group Project Censored selected this "the top censored story of 1991."

Johnson (1991) monitored CNN during the twenty-seven-hour pre-war period when Iraq proposed conditional withdrawal and Soviet and Iranian peace initiatives were advanced. His study revealed that thirty military experts, but no peace experts, were interviewed. George Bush, the most frequently shown, brushed aside peace talk. Most of the others interviewed were military advocates, including Oliver North, Robert McFarlane, Jeane Kirkpatrick, Dan Quayle, and Ronald Reagan. And CNN may have been the most open to diverse views. Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting (FAIR) found that only 1.5 percent of Gulf War news sources who appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news were against the war, and only one of 878 sources cited represented a national peace organization. Opposition to United States action was most frequently attributed to "the enemy" (Lee 1991, 31). (Note that major military contractors sponsor news programs and sit on the boards of directors of networks and other leading media, such as the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*. NBC in particular is owned by General Electric, a supplier for every weapons system used in the Gulf.)

Instead of providing full, accurate reports and documentaries, network "docudramas," shot in sync sound on location and in Hollywood studios, took audiences to the movies during the Persian Gulf War. Realistic shots of training, tanks maneuvering in the sand, simulated trench warfare, and scripted scenes of camp life and the "home front" alternated with promos for *Die Hard 2* and *Terminator 2*. Spectacular explosions lit distant horizons, hurled vehicles, and blasted bodies in both movies. As for the docudramas, happy endings showed jubilant faces, while voice-overs spoke of "an outpouring of joy not

seen since World War II." The real documentary footage of the conflict is locked in Pentagon vaults.

What was represented as a clean, swift, surgical strike to punish aggression, get rid of Saddam, and secure cheap oil, petrodollars, peace, jobs, and democracy became, in fact, a human and ecological disaster of, in the words of the United Nations inspection team, "cataclysmic proportions," achieving few, if any, of its purported aims. Amos (1991), who covered the Gulf War for National Public Radio, scoffed at the adage that truth is the first casualty of war. "In this war," she wrote, "truth was more than a casualty. Truth was hit over the head, dragged into a closet, and held hostage to the public relations needs of the United States Military" (61).

How did this happen? The saturation, manipulation, and fabrications that make up the instant history experience provide only part of the answer. A large part comes from the orchestration that drowns out the historical context, isolating the crisis from a balanced and meaningful perspective. That absence of perspective throws the spectator-witness back upon conventional conceptions of how things work in the world. And in our culture, many of these conceptions stem from the cult of violence.

## The Cult of Violence

Violence has many faces. Wholesale mass executions have become increasingly technical, scientific, and deadly.[2] But they have become no more precise, killing an ever-increasing percentage of civilians, far outnumbering military casualties. The German terror-bombing of Guernica provoked worldwide outrage and Picasso's anti-war mural. By the end of World War II, thousands of air raids, the calculated destruction of Dresden, the fire-bombing of Tokyo, and the pulverizing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki numbed our senses—all for little, if any, military advantage. This trend toward increasingly skewed kill ratios culminated in the Persian Gulf War. The political bombing of civilians is no longer thought of as barbaric. Instead, we view it as potentially embarrassing information to be sanitized by euphemisms.

Retail violence is not far behind. The United States is the undisputed homicide capital of the world. We also lead industrialized countries in jailing and executing people.[3] Our streets, our schools, and our homes have become places of fear and brutality, widely publicized and profitably dramatized. The number of killings that occurred in the workplace in the 1980s was double that of the previous decade (Bayles

1991). And yet, the cult of violence is neither simply a reflection of these trends nor just a stimulus for them. It is more like a charged environment affecting many aspects of social relations, control, and power.

The facts of violence are both celebrated and concealed in the cult of violence that surrounds us. Never was a culture so filled with full-color images of violence as ours is now. Of course, there is blood in fairy tales, gore in mythology, murder in Shakespeare, lurid crimes in tabloids, and battles and wars in textbooks. Such representations of violence are legitimate cultural expressions, even necessary to balance tragic consequences against deadly compulsions. But the historically defined, individually crafted, and selectively used symbolic violence of heroism, cruelty, or authentic tragedy has been replaced by violence with happy endings produced on the dramatic assembly line.

The violence we see on the screen and read about in our press bears little relationship either in volume or in type, especially in its consequences, to violence in real life (Surette 1992). Yet much of it looks realistic, and growing up with it helps us project it onto the real world. This sleight-of-hand robs us of the tragic sense of life necessary for compassion. "To be hip," writes Gitlin (1991b), "is to be inured, and more—to require a steadily increasing boost in the size of the dose required" (247). Our children are born into a symbolic environment of six to eight violent episodes per prime-time hour alone—four times as many in presumably humorous children's programs—and an average of at least two entertaining murders a night. These dominant images of mayhem and crime misrepresent the actual nature, demography, and patterns of victimization of real-life violence. Contrary to the hype that promoted them, most uses of cable, video, and other new technologies make the dominant patterns penetrate even more deeply into everyday life. No historical, aesthetic, or even commercial rationalization can justify drenching every home with images of expertly choreographed brutality.

Movies cash in on the cult and increase the dosage. Escalation of the cinematic body count seems to be one way to get attention from a public punch-drunk on video mayhem. *The Godfather* produced twelve corpses, *Godfather II* put away eighteen, and *Godfather III* killed no less than fifty-three. In 1988, the daredevil cop in the original *Die Hard* saved the day with a modest eighteen dead. Two years later, *Die Hard 2* achieved a body count of 264. The decade's record goes to the 1990 children's movie, tie-in marketing sensation, and glorification of martial arts *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Released as the Gulf War build-up

began, it is the most violent film that has ever been marketed to children, with 133 acts of mayhem per hour. *Turtles II: Secrets of the Ooze* followed the success of the Ninjas—and of the Gulf War—through another nonstop, kick-in-the-teeth opera.

The October 14, 1991, international edition of *Variety* featured 123 pages of ads for new movies, with pictures of shooting, killing, or corpses on every other page and a verbal appeal to violence, on the average, on every page. Leading the verbal procession were *kill, murder, death, deadly,* and *dead* (thirty-three times) and *terror, fatal, lethal,* and *dangerous* (twelve times). Bringing up the rear were *rage, frenzy, revenge, guncrazy, kickboxer, maniac, warrior, invader, hawk, battle, war, shoot, fight, slaughter,* and *blood.*

*Terminator 2* was the top-grossing film in the United States in 1991. Its star, Arnold Schwarzenegger, has been named "the most violent actor" by the National Coalition on Television Violence: ten of his movies averaged 109 often graphic and gruesome violent acts per hour. He was also appointed head of President Bush's Council on Physical Fitness and Sports.

Growing up in a violence-laden culture breeds aggressiveness in some and desensitization, insecurity, mistrust, and anger in most (Gerbner 1988). These are highly exploitable sentiments. They set up a scenario of violence and victimization in which some take on the role of violent perpetrators. Most, however, assume the role and psychology of victims. And as victims, they demand protection, condoning, if not welcoming, violent solutions to domestic and world problems—the Gulf War a case in point—where punitive and vindictive action against dark forces in a mean world is made to look appealing, especially when presented as quick, decisive, and enhancing our sense of control and security.

The cult of violence is the ritual demonstration and celebration of brute power—and its projection into sex, family, job, politics, and war. An overkill of violent imagery helps to instill the military attitude toward killing and to mobilize support for it. Bombarding viewers with violent images—without illuminating the real costs of violence and war—is, in the last analysis, an act of intimidation and terror. It was indispensable to the triumph of instant history in the Persian Gulf, and it is a preview of things to come.

Within weeks of the victory, Time Warner, in record time, collected and compressed enough imagery to fill five hundred floppy disks onto a single CD-ROM history of Desert Storm, which was speedily distributed to stores and school libraries. (Such a task ordi-

narily takes several months.) Published soon afterward was *CNN: War in the Gulf*, advertised as the "authoritative chronicle of the world's first 'real-time television war.'" Pentagon-aided victory parades and an ABC-TV docudrama "Heroes of Desert Storm"—with a thirty-second introduction by President Bush—rounded out the triumphant quick-freeze stage of instant history. And in a fitting and perceptive tribute, *Time* magazine named CNN owner Ted Turner its Man of the Year "for influencing the dynamic of events and turning viewers in 150 countries into instant witnesses of history." (Time Warner is also a one-fifth owner of the Turner Broadcasting System.)

## Anatomy of a Triumphant Image

How did this model of success play out on the home front? Once the saturation bombing started and the tide of saturation coverage rose, most respondents to a Times Mirror poll were swept up in the flow. The response itself became news and sped the rush of events. Half of the respondents, most of whom wanted more diverse views before, now said they heard too much opposition. As the operation entered its second week, instant history found its true believers. Nearly eight out of ten people believed that the censors were not hiding bad news; 57 percent wanted increased military control over reporting. In a British poll, 82 percent agreed that the sorties were "precise strikes against strategic targets with minimum civilian casualties" (Times Mirror Center for People and the Press 1991). Pan's survey (1993) of audience reactions a month after the war also found that most respondents felt satisfied with the coverage; most agreed that the media "provided realistic accounts of the war," rejected the criticism that many important stories were missed, and yet agreed with the need for military censorship.

This triumph of orchestrated imagery can be gauged from the differences between responses of light and heavy television viewers of otherwise comparable groups. The Morgan, Lewis, and Jhally survey shows that three-quarters of heavy viewers (76 percent), as compared to less than half of light viewers (47 percent), "strongly supported" President Bush's decision to use military force against Iraq. Pan's study (1993) found that

> heavy TV news viewers were more satisfied with media war coverage, appraised the quality of war coverage more highly, and were less likely to criticize the media. . . . They were also more willing to accept the practice of stringent military controls over media access to information.

Two months after the war, the public rated the media coverage, military censorship, and general information about the war even higher. The Times Mirror (1991) percentage of those rating the military as "very favorable" rose 42 points, from 18 to an unprecedented 60 percent. Desert Storm commander Norman Schwarzkopf's 51 percent was the highest "very favorable" score in over 150 Times Mirror surveys, instantly fueling speculation about his political future.

Global immediacy gave us instant history. Instant history is simultaneous, global, living, telling, showing, and reacting in brief and intensive bursts. Image-driven and violence-laden, compelling as it is contrived, instant history robs us of reflection time, critical distance, political space, and access to alternatives. The horrors of a Holocaust can now be managed with glorious efficiency. The Gulf War is fading to a few flickering images: Scuds streaking through the sky and Patriots rising to intercept them—or so we thought; bombs falling down factory smokestacks with deadly accuracy—or so, too, we thought. But that was no movie. Its consequences will linger in the real world for a long time to come. This is not an isolated problem that can be addressed by focusing on media violence or crisis coverage alone. It is an integral part of a global cultural condition that increasingly poisons our symbolic environment.

## Notes

1. A different version is in press as chapter 20 in *Triumph of the Image: The Media's War in the Persian Gulf, A Global Perspective* (1992). A brief summary was presented as the first Wayne Danielson Award Lecture for Distinguished Contributions to Communication Scholarship at the University of Texas in Austin, 13 November 1991.

2. Wars in the twentieth century have killed ninety-nine million people (before the Gulf War), twelve times as many as in the nineteenth century and twenty-two times as many as in the eighteenth century. Other hostilities, not counting internal state terrorism, resulted in an estimated 1,000 or more deaths per year (World Priorities 1986).

3. According to a National Center for Health Statistics study published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* and reported in the *New York Times* (Rosenthal 1990), the rate of killings in the United States is 21.9 per 100,000 men aged 15 through 24. To compare, the rate for Austria is 0.3, for England 1.2, and for Scotland 5.0, highest after the United States. And according to Congressional hearings reported in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* (Miller 1990), between 1985 and 1989, the number of homicides nationwide increased 22 percent. Furthermore, the rate of incarceration in the United States is 407 per 100,000 citizens. This compares to 36 in the Netherlands, 86 in West

Germany, and 100 in England. And while the prison population in the United States doubled in the 1980s, the crime rate rose only 1.8 percent, suggesting that the "need to incarcerate" is out of proportion with the actual crime rate, that it is a political response to culturally generated insecurity and demand for repression.

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