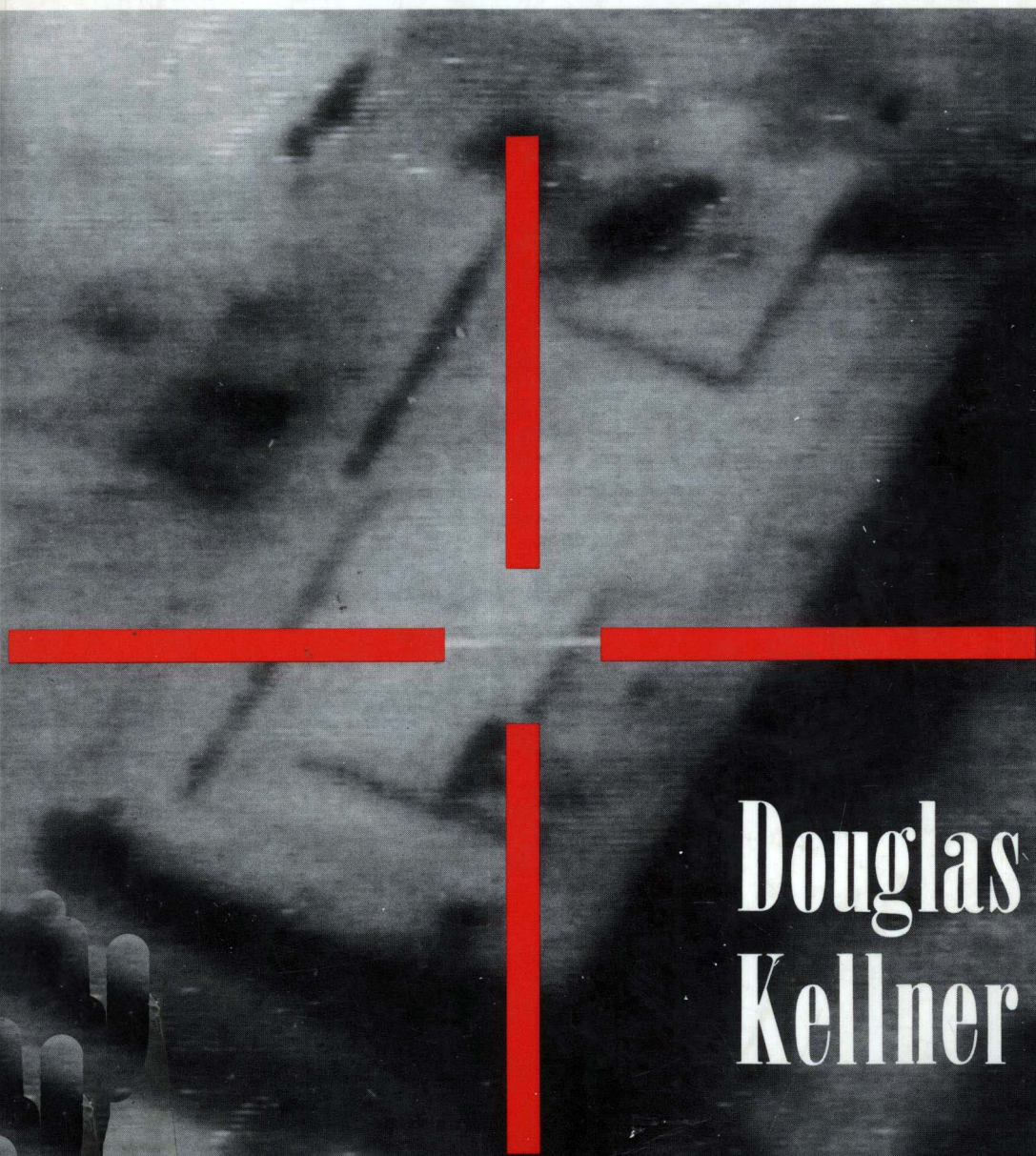


The Persian Gulf TV WAR



Douglas
Kellner

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THERE IS NO DOCUMENT of civilization which is not at the same time a document of barbarism. And just as such a document is not free of barbarism, barbarism taints also the manner in which it was transmitted from one owner to another. A historical materialist therefore dissociates himself from it as far as possible. He regards it as his task to brush history against the grain.

—*Walter Benjamin*

IN THE HISTORY OF civilization there have been not a few instances when mass delusions were healed not by focused propaganda, but, in the final analysis, because scholars, with their unobtrusive yet insistent work habits, studied what lay at the root of the delusion.

—*T. W. Adorno*

[THE TASK OF critical theory] is to call things by their true names.

—*Max Horkheimer*

IT IS THE RESPONSIBILITY of intellectuals to speak the truth and expose lies.

—*Noam Chomsky*

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Introduction

DURING THE GULF WAR, the mainstream media were cheerleaders and boosters for the Bush administration and Pentagon war policy, invariably putting the government “spin” on information and events concerning the war. By all accounts, the U.S. government was extremely successful in managing public opinion and engineering consent to their Gulf war policies. As Reagan’s media manager Michael Deaver put it, “If you were to hire a public relations firm to do the media relations for an international event, it couldn’t be done any better than this is being done.” Veteran *New York Times* reporter Malcolm Browne compared the press’s role in the Gulf war to that of the Nazi propaganda agency *Kompanie*, claiming: “I’ve never seen anything that can compare to it, in the degree of surveillance and control the military has over the correspondents.”¹

In this book, I shall argue that in an attempt to manage public opinion, the Bush administration and the Pentagon produced a barrage of propaganda, disinformation, and outright lies that covered over the more unsavory aspects of the Gulf war and that legitimated U.S. policies. The mainstream media helped mobilize public support for the U.S. war policy, and after the war George Bush’s popularity surged to an all-time high. The media also promoted a euphoric celebration of the war as a great triumph for U.S. technology, leadership, and military power. Yet, in retrospect, it is not clear what positive benefits the Gulf war produced. Kuwait has been returned to its previous form of authoritarian government without significant reforms and with billions of dollars worth of damage done to the country. Iraq’s economic infrastructure has been ruined and the Iraqi death count has been estimated as high as 243,000 as a result of the war.² The Kurds and other groups seeking to overthrow Saddam Hussein were betrayed by the United States, and Iraq continues to suffer under Baath Party dictatorship. Millions of people in the region became refugees during the war and were forced to leave their jobs for uncertain futures. The ecology of the area was ravaged by the war, which threatened devastation from the oil well fires that took months to put

out, and the Persian Gulf has been heavily polluted from oil spills. The Middle East is more politically unstable than ever, and the Gulf war failed to solve its regional problems, creating new divisions and tensions.

Economically, the war cost billions of dollars; it threatened the economies of many countries and, arguably, the world economic order, which could have been thrown into chaos by an expanded conflagration and rising oil prices. The *Australian Financial Review* (March 1, 1991) reported that although it was not possible to quantify all of the environmental and human destruction, as a conservative estimate the total costs of the war range in the hundreds of billions of dollars including: \$60 billion for coalition war costs; \$60 billion for Iraqi war costs; \$255 billion for the destruction of the infrastructure in Iraq; \$100 billion for the destruction of the state infrastructure in Kuwait, with over \$150 billion additional private sector losses; \$90 billion of lost economic production in Kuwait and Iraq; \$80 billion worth of losses due to burning oil; and \$40 billion worth of debt reduction and aid to coalition allies in the region.

In retrospect, it therefore appears that the Gulf war was a disaster for the region and an immense waste of life and resources. Consequently, in the following pages, I shall attempt to show that the Gulf war was little more than a brute display of U.S. military power. Using a variety of sources, I offer a different account of the war than that which appeared in the mainstream media and attempt to expose the propaganda, disinformation, and lies with which the Gulf war was successfully sold to the public in the United States and elsewhere. I argue that the mainstream media complicity with U.S. government policies in the Gulf war has intensified the crisis of democracy in the United States, which I described in a recent book (Kellner 1990).

A democratic social order, as conceived in classical democratic theory, requires a separation of powers so that no one institution or social group dominates the society and polity. Thus, the U.S. Constitution divided the political system into the executive, legislative, and the judicial branches to create a balance of powers between the major political institutions. Yet democracy also requires an informed electorate. In order for a free people to govern themselves, they must be adequately informed and able to participate in public debate, elections, and political activity. The Bill of Rights therefore guaranteed freedom of the press to ensure that the press would be free from state domination and so that it could criticize the government and promote vigorous debate on issues of public concern.³

Consequently, the press was to provide a check against excessive power. A free press is vital to democratic society, and proponents of democracy often claim that freedom of the press is one of the features

that defines the superiority of democratic societies over competing social systems. The concept of a free press in the United States was also extended to the broadcast media, which were assigned a whole series of responsibilities necessary to the furtherance of democracy in the Federal Communications Act of 1934 and subsequent legislation and court decisions (Kellner 1990). Accordingly, the democratic functions of the press and then the broadcast media are to provide information, ideas, and debate concerning issues of public significance in order to promote a democratic public sphere. It is my view that because democracy requires a separation of power, checks and balances, and an informed electorate, democracy in the United States is now in profound crisis and its very survival is threatened.⁴

No doubt many articles and books will be written analyzing in depth the reasons and ways in which the United States orchestrated and pursued the Gulf war. There will be scholarly studies that will reveal the background and hidden history of the precrisis machinations between the United States, Kuwait, and Iraq, as well as studies of the crisis in the Gulf and of the Gulf war itself.⁵ Initially, however, most of the books published on the topic merely reproduced the Bush administration's propaganda line.⁶ My book, by contrast, analyzes the role of the mainstream media, especially television, in transmitting, promoting, and legitimizing U.S. Gulf war policy and actions. Accordingly, I shall provide an analysis and critique of how the media represented the crisis in the Gulf and then the Gulf war. The version of the war presented on television and the corporate media will be systematically compared with alternative media sources in order to reveal the distortions, disinformation, and outright lies presented in the mainstream media, especially television.⁷

Alternative media sources utilized include the *Nation*, *In These Times*, the *Village Voice*, the *Progressive*, *Z Magazine*, the *New Yorker*, the *National Catholic Reporter*, and other investigative journals. I have also drawn on the British, Canadian, Irish, French, German, and other countries' media sources in order to deploy a wide range of positions against the version of the Gulf war presented by the mainstream media in the United States. Yet during and especially after the war there was also critical coverage in the U.S. mainstream media. The Gulf war was controversial, and some critical discourse was present in the mainstream—particularly after the war, when more complex perceptions of the event began to emerge. Although the mainstream media were overwhelmingly supportive of the Bush administration war policy during the war, occasional critical voices and information appeared that can be used to put in question the official version of the war by the U.S. government and military.

In addition, I systematically monitored various computer data bases for alternative information, including the "bulletin boards," or "conferences," in the PeaceNet information service. PeaceNet has more than 650 conferences where members enter data from various sources and from different parts of the world. The Persian Gulf conferences were an especially rich source of information, though, like any information source, they had to be utilized selectively and critically.⁸ I also extensively used various computer data bases such as Dialog and Lexis/Nexis. The latter provides transcripts of ABC News programming and the Public Broadcasting System's (PBS) "The MacNeil/Lehrer News Hour." Thus computer data bases have proven to be a useful source for access to both print material and to transcripts of television broadcasting.

Above all, however, I have critically interrogated the version of the Gulf war presented on U.S. television. Previously, written texts were the crucial sources of historical knowledge, but I would suggest that television now provides indispensable sources for critical historical research. In a sense, television now writes the first draft of history that was previously the province of the press. It is widely acknowledged that television is now a full news cycle ahead of the press, and this was certainly evident during the Persian Gulf TV war. As soon as the television networks received information from the wire services, their correspondents, or other sources, they immediately broadcast the information—or misinformation, as was often the case.

Most people related to the war through TV images and discourse, receiving their concept of the Persian Gulf region and the war from the mainstream media, especially television. Because few people in the audience had direct knowledge of the region and its conflicts, television was of key importance in producing the public's views of the war, just as it is of fundamental importance in producing an individual's view of the world. But above all the Gulf war was a TV war in that it was largely through television that people lived through the drama of the war and received their images and beliefs about it. For the most part, much of what appeared in the newspapers reproduced more or less what had been reported the previous day on television. Thus TV by and large maintained the initiative in reporting the war and in directly transmitting primary news through military briefings, press conferences, reports from the front, and direct transmission of TV perspectives on the events of the war as they were happening.

Yet some newspapers provided context and views frequently ignored in television and engaged in some investigative reporting that put in question official views.⁹ The TV networks, by contrast, tended merely to reproduce what they were told or shown by the U.S. government and military. In addition, newspapers presented more critical opinion pieces,

letters to the editor, cartoons, and other material critical of the official version of the war.

Many academic scholars and antiwar activists have questioned whether one can learn anything significant from television, arguing that it is intrinsically superficial and unreliable as a source of historical evidence. In some ways, this charge is true, and I shall be sharply critical of the television version of the war in this book. But in another sense, television provides a new source of direct, immediate, and important visual evidence of how the war was played out in military press briefings and live reports from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Israel, and other parts of the world affected by the war. Many speeches and press conferences by political and military leaders, pool footage from the front, and TV interviews with participants also provide primary documentary evidence. Some TV material was transcribed into print sources, but the TV version of the war contains much material that never found its way into print. Video recorders make it possible to tape TV coverage of political events and to cite it in scholarly works. TV archives contain videocassettes of much TV news, and texts of TV news often are available from the networks, transcription services, or computer data bases.

Thus scholars are now forced to view television as an important source of historical knowledge. Yet TV is admittedly superficial and in its lust for instant information is often a source of disinformation, easily manipulated by officials with specific agendas to promote. The challenge to critical media analysis is to decode the manifest political pronouncements and media discourses to attempt to analyze the political content behind the masks of disinformation and propaganda. This requires analysis of: (1) the version of the Gulf war presented on television and the mainstream media contrasted with more reliable accounts; (2) the political maneuvers and struggles behind the scene; (3) the disinformation and lies concerning official policies and the events of the crisis and war; and (4) the effects of the war, some of which were visible in the mainstream media and some of which were hidden.

In this book, I concentrate on how the mainstream media in the United States presented the Gulf war, though I am also interested in "what really happened" and thus draw on a variety of sources to put in question the mainstream account of the war. Accordingly, I analyze some of the political, economic, and military interests and agendas at play in the Gulf crisis and war and attempt to discern the political decisions and interests behind the various official pronouncements, briefings, leaks, disinformation, and events. I also draw on a wide range of alternative media sources. One cannot be certain that alternative sources and views are always correct, but direct contradictions between the official U.S. version and other versions at least raise some questions for thought,

discussion, and further inquiry. In any case, one should always distinguish between the manifest media content and the political interests and agendas behind it. The media are often used to advance specific policy positions and agendas; through decoding media texts, critical analysis attempts to discern which interests and agendas are at play in specific official pronouncements, leaks, policies, or actions. Sometimes the media serve as a smokescreen or cover to divert attention from what is really happening or what actual interests and policies are in play. On other occasions, the media attempt to mobilize consent to certain policies through rhetoric and argumentation. In an era of media management of political discourse and imagery, the ruling political forces have strategies for manipulating the media and in an era of instant information, the media, especially television when it is in the crisis mode, tend to transmit directly what their sources tell them, without much skepticism or analysis.

Critical analysis of the television version of the war also is important because people's images of contemporary politics and history are shaped by television—and particularly during the Gulf war, with the whole world watching and following the events of the day, television directly constituted the viewers' conception of the war. Because television coverage played a key role in producing the public image of the war and, arguably, mobilizing support for Bush administration policies, analysis of how television presented the war is an important part of historical analysis of the Gulf war that was primarily a media propaganda war. In this work I analyze a series of propaganda campaigns orchestrated by the state and the military and the ways that these campaigns used television to promote popular support for the war. By "propaganda" I mean discourse that is aimed at mobilizing public opinion to support specific policies.¹⁰ As Harold Lasswell put it:

[P]ropaganda is one of the most powerful instrumentalities in the modern world. It has arisen to its present eminence in response to a complex of changed circumstances which have altered the nature of society. Small, primitive tribes can weld their heterogeneous members into a fighting whole by the beat of the tom-tom and the tempestuous rhythm of the dance. It is in orgies of physical exuberance that young men are brought to the boiling of war, and that old and young, men and women, are caught in the suction of tribal purpose.

In the Great Society it is no longer possible to fuse the waywardness of individuals in the furnace of the war dance; a new and subtler instrument must weld thousands and even millions of human beings into one amalgamated mass of hate and will and hope. A new flame must burn out the canker of dissent and temper the steel of bellicose enthusiasm. The name of this new hammer and anvil of social solidarity is propaganda. Talk must take the place of drill; print must supplant the dance. War dances live in literature and at

the fringes of the modern earth; war propaganda breaches and fumes in the capitals and provinces of the world. (1971, pp. 220–221)

We shall see that during the Gulf war it was the tribal drum of television that turned the population into often frenzied supporters of the U.S. military intervention in the Middle East. “Propaganda,” as I am using the term, is thus a particular mode of persuasive discourse that mobilizes ideas, images, arguments, rhetoric, and sometimes disinformation and lies to induce people to agree with specific policies and actions. In particular, propaganda attempts to overcome divisions of opinion and to persuade people that policies they might have opposed, such as war, are right, good, and just. Propaganda produces enemies, sanctifies and hallows one’s own leaders and policies, and produces a simple-minded dichotomous vision that is one-sided, limited, and distorted.

In the following chapters, I am concerned to uncover *how* television presented the war by analyzing the dominant images, frames, and messages transmitted and the ways in which the TV audience bought into the Bush administration/mainstream media version of the war. My study combines critical media analysis with cultural criticism of the forms and conventions through which the text of the Gulf war was produced and presented to the public. I thus draw on the resources of critical social theory, cultural studies, and media criticism to debunk the version of the Gulf war presented on television and to situate the Gulf war within the broader context of U.S. society and culture.

Acknowledgments

Beginning in August 1990, I videotaped and analyzed the television and print media coverage of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, the U.S. military intervention in the region, and the ensuing crisis in the Gulf. I had hundreds of hours of videotape of the TV coverage of the crisis and a large manuscript analyzing the mainstream coverage by the time that the war actually began. During the war I videotaped and analyzed at least sixteen hours of television a day. Since then I have reviewed my own tapes of the crisis and war as well as tapes received from friends and colleagues. I have also systematically studied mainstream print coverage of the war, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *Business Week*, *U.S. News and World Report*, and many other U.S. and foreign newspapers and journals. As mentioned earlier, I have drawn extensively on computer data bases and am indebted to the University of Texas for grants covering data base and photocopying expenses. Finally, I have engaged in many teach-ins, lectures, confer-

ences, and debates on the Gulf war and discussed the issue with friends and colleagues from many disciplines and perspectives.

For providing research assistance for this book I am grateful to a large number of students and colleagues who contributed material and to a group of students who carefully checked my analysis of the television presentation of the war against my videotapes. For Canadian media sources I am grateful to Valerie Scatamburlo and Jim Winter; for Irish sources, my thanks to Ronan Lynch; for British sources, I am indebted to PeaceNet, Les Levidow, and Taisto Hunanan; and for U.S. media sources I am especially grateful to David Armstrong, Michael Burton, and Beth Macom for sharing their extensive files and tape collections. Thanks to the University Research Institute at the University of Texas for a grant that enabled me to search various data bases for material. Thanks to Brian Koenigsdorf for help in getting me set-up with PeaceNet; to Sarina Satya for helping me with Dialog searches; to Paul Rascoe for setting me up with Lexis/Nexis; and to Keith Hay-Roe for general computer guidance and help with frequent computer quandaries and emergencies. For critical comments on the manuscript that helped with the revision, I would like to thank Robert Antonio, David Armstrong, Oded Balaban, Steven Best, Stephen Bronner, Noam Chomsky, Harry Cleaver, Michael Emery, Scott Henson, Richard Keeble, John Lawrence, Les Levidow, Tom Philpott, Ellen Sharp, and Steve Reece. For superlative copyediting and editorial suggestions that were extremely useful in revising the manuscript I am indebted to Jeanne Remington and Michelle Asakawa.

To keep alive the tradition of critical thinking I dedicate this book to the group of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School who strived to preserve the traditions of critical social theory and cultural critique during similarly dark periods of contemporary history: Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, T. W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Erich Fromm, Leo Lowenthal, Jürgen Habermas, and others associated with the tradition.¹¹

Notes

1. The Deaver quote is cited in *The Fund for Free Expression*, February 27, 1991, p. 1, and the Browne quote is cited in the *Village Voice*, February 5, 1991. In this book, I shall provide references in the bibliography for the sources that I draw on more than once, or that were important in shaping my interpretations. Sources that merely reference quotes or facts will be given in the text or notes.

2. Greenpeace estimated in a press release that as of December 1991, the war and its aftermath had caused between 177,500 and 243,000 Iraqi deaths, including third-country nationals resident in Iraq who may have also been killed. Casualty figures are highly controversial, however, and I shall discuss the various estimates in section 10.2. For some accounts of the devastation wrought by the

Gulf war, see the articles by Hooglund and Hiltermann in *Middle East Report*, July/August 1991; Cainkar in Bennis and Moushabeck 1991; *Middle East Watch* 1991b; and Clark et al. 1992.

3. I should note that this model of democracy is a normative one that can be used as a standard against which one can measure the extent to which social orders are or are not democratic. Although I am producing this model of democracy from the constitutional order proposed in the French and American revolutions, to a large extent popular sovereignty was rarely realized in the United States (see Kellner 1990, pp. 173–174). In this book I shall argue that the growing concentration of corporate power whereby transnational corporations control the state, media, and other institutions of society threatens the separation and balance of powers necessary to a democratic social order, thus undermining democracy at the expense of capitalist hegemony. I am engaging in the strategy of “immanent critique” where I take the existing norms and constitutional framework as standards to criticize deviations from these norms and framework; on the development of immanent critique by the Frankfurt school, see Kellner 1984 and 1989.

4. I am using the term “crisis” here in the medical sense in which “it refers to the phase of an illness in which it is decided whether or not the organism’s self-healing powers are sufficient for recovery” (Habermas 1975, p. 1). A crisis is a disruption of a state of affairs that threatens to produce a decisive and catastrophic change in the existing institutional order. A “crisis of capitalism” in Karl Marx’s theory describes a situation in which the survival of capitalism is threatened, and a “crisis of democracy” describes a state of affairs in which the survival of democracy is in jeopardy.

5. Not enough is known of the complex relations between Iraq, Kuwait, and the United States to write a definitive analysis of the prehistory of the war. Valuable material, however, is found in Salinger and Laurent 1991, Emery 1991, the articles by Murray Waas in the *Village Voice*, Frank 1991, and Yousif in Bresheeth and Yuval-Davis 1991.

6. Pro-Bush administration books on the Gulf war began appearing immediately. Friedman (1991) focuses primarily on the military aspects of the Gulf war and is full of disinformation. For instance, he claimed that Iraq was offered “a series of last-minute, face-saving offers” that it “rejected” (p. 147), a claim for which there is no evidence whatsoever. He accepts at face value the U.S. military claims about the Iraqi baby-milk factory being a chemical warfare factory and the civilian shelter being a bunker, lies that I shall expose in the course of this book. Friedman claimed that much of the damage visible in Iraq was due to “Iraq’s own spent antiaircraft projectiles falling back to earth” (p. 143), another piece of disinformation. Friedman asserted: “The dismal performance of the Iraqi national air-defense system soon led Saddam to retire its chief by killing him” (p. 162); this piece of disinformation was refuted a short while later by the appearance of the chief in Baghdad. Friedman also privileged the theory that Iraqi planes that went to Iran were defectors (pp. 162ff.), a theory that was also discredited later. The book, published by the Naval Institute Press, is full of propaganda for the indispensability of naval forces in the Gulf war and future