Seeing in Darkness: Didion's *Salvador*, Doublespeak, and Radical Pedagogy

by

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For two decades the NCTE has publicly opposed the misuse of language for political purposes. It created a Committee on Public Doublespeak, which encouraged several important books on the subject and began a journal, the *Quarterly Review of Doublespeak*. In 1971 the NCTE passed resolutions opposing dishonest and inhumane uses of language by public officials and the mass media. In 1975 the NCTE added resolutions advocating greater attention to mass media literacy and urging that college English teachers cooperate with colleagues in journalism and speech to teach students about power and the mass media.

Few of us, I presume, would oppose these resolutions, or disagree with the implicit assumption in them that our students have difficulty reading "behind" a text or reading critically, perhaps most so when such pronouncements come from the government through the mass media. But if we desire our students to think through the implications of doublespeak for them personally and our society collectively, and if we want our students to become less passive consumers of doublespeak, the problem is how, in a literature course, let us say, we can address this complex issue.[1] The problem is not simply one of analyzing jargon or pointing out euphemisms for horrible acts, which does not demonstrate to students how doublespeak serves powerful interests - interests of business, the government, the mass media, or education.

What I would like to discuss in this essay is a text, Joan Didion's *Salvador*, that directly addresses the ties between government policy and the language used to justify such policy, and does so in a way that promotes what we nowadays call "critical thinking." Radical pedagogy, Charles Paine says in a recent article in *College English*, teaches students to be "critically aware of the status quo, one's society, and one's own consciousness as historically contingent" (558). By teaching Didion's *Salvador*, and asking for intellectual work that contextualizes the issues in it, I encourage such critical awareness within a framework that addresses the vexing problems of governmental doublespeak and the power of the mass media. A turn of the lens can focus a related issue that radical pedagogists like to address: the ways that a college or university functions like a government, and, ironically, how school

:ulum and practice often counter the wish for liberally educated
ıl thinkers.

Didion does, above all, is model a resisting mind, and this is
:hing that students not only can learn from but, by emulating her,
pply in contexts outside of the class. Unlike nearly all textbooks
ıost histories, Didion doesn't attempt to make clear the political,
ımic, or social "realities" of El Salvador. She doesn't write El
dor's story - story implying plot: beginning and end, cause and
. Didion doesn't, that is, create the expectation that a proper
nse to complex issues is to formulate problems and then find
ers, or that the world is out there ready-made to be understood and
n, both dominant beliefs from what Henry Giroux in *Education Under*
calls "the culture of positivism." Didion places her own story, her
ɔray into darkness - the terror she felt and the horror she witnessed
ıe center, and implicitly criticizes thereby the inadequacy of any
ınt, and any language, that does not do so.

n opens *Salvador* with an epigraph from *Heart of Darkness,* in which
ɔw is describing Kurtz's report for the International Society for the
ression of Savage Customs. With "burning noble words," in a
ic current of phrases," Kurtz argues that European nations, "by the
.e exercise of will," can exert in Africa "a power for good practically
unded." But, Marlow says, at the end of this "moving appeal to
altruistic sentiment," in a note written later, Kurtz had scrawled
:rminate all the brutes!"

nost obvious tie between *Salvador* and *Heart of Darkness,* as re-
:rs noted, concerns the disastrous effects of colonialism - or its
:mporary version, the United State's "strong presence" - on both
: colonized and those who do the colonizing. The heart of darkness
des the human capacity for corruption and evil and, as in Kurtz's
ɔwledgment of the horror, the human capacity to recognize how far
ıas fallen from the ideal. All Americans who spend time in El
dor, Didion says, are "marked by the place," like "survivors of a
ıon natural disaster." And many people feared, in 1982, that our
nment's "magic current of phrases" that justified our involvement
Salvador might lead towards a policy to exterminate all the brutes.
: is, however, a more subtle bond between Conrad's and Didion's
the demonstration that individual "knowing" is ambiguous and
ded, particularly when the observer, Kurtz or Didion, attempts to
ı a figurative darkness. And, furthermore, that being understood
other is unreliable, at best. When reading *Salvador* , students see
lash with our government's attitude of knowing what is best for
countries, the foreign intervention that so willingly follows, and the
government's attempts with the aid of the mass media to justify such
actions.

"We tell ourselves stories in order to live," wrote Didion in *The White Album.*
"We live entirely, especially if we are writers, by the imposition of a
narrative line upon disparate images, by the ideas with which we have
learned to freeze the shifting phantasmagoria which is our actual
experience" (11). The irony is that, a decade later when she confronts El
Salvador, Didion feels powerless to impose any narrative line, powerless
to freeze the phantasmagoria of experience long enough to establish
mastery over it. For Didion, El Salvador is a perversely difficult "text" of
multiple and indeterminate meanings. To land at the El Salvador
International Airport, she writes, "is to plunge directly into a state in
which no ground is solid, no depth of field reliable, no perception so
definite that it might not dissolve into its reverse" (13).

Didion's style, when she first encounters the chaos of El Salvador, enacts
her epistemology. "Immigration is negotiated," she writes, "in a thicket
of automatic weapons, but by whose authority the weapons are
brandished...is a blurred point." Didion replaces humans metonymically
by weapons, emphasizing that responsibility has disappeared. Every-
thing is topsy-turvy, ephemeral. "Documents are scrutinized upside
down," she says. Her almost exclusive use of the passive voice empha-
sizes the lack of human connection - and her fear of what she cannot
name. Again and again, she claims an inability to understand: "meaning
tends to be transmitted in code," "the place brings everything into
question," "the point was unclear," "the texture of life in such a situation
is essentially untranslatable" (30, 35, 46, 103).

One afternoon provides a departure from her frustration at trying to
understand the ineffable. Didion wanders into the "largest shopping
mall in Central America" - where El Salvadorans and foreigners buy
expensive American food and fashionable American clothing - and she
is confronted by "the kind of 'color' I knew how to interpret, the kind of
inductive irony, the detail, that was supposed to illuminate the story."
Though the perceiving and relating of such ironies, such details, have
made Didion one of our finest essayists, she realizes that she is "no
longer much interested in this kind of irony, that this was a story that
would perhaps not be illuminated at all, that this was perhaps even less
a 'story' than a true 'noche obscura'" (36). Her comment here departs
significantly from her usual method, which is to weave revealing details
into a signifying, often ironic story. By comparing dissimilar objects, by
making a metaphor, a writer creates order and establishes meaning,
even if only figuratively. In *Salvador* Didion sidesteps irony, sidesteps
the making of stories or events into metaphor.

gh life in El Salvador is not illuminated by details about the ɔing mall, Didion has learned information that does reveal, that illuminate, "a special kind of practical information that the visitor Salvador acquires immediately..." The information concerns dead s - people killed, more than likely, by government forces. "The dead ɔieces of the dead," Didion writes, "turn up in El Salvador every- e, every day" (19). Visitors see bodies lying by the side of roads, and in El Salvador that "vultures go first for the soft tissue, for the eyes, ɛposed genitalia, the open mouth" (17). Such details, Didion knows, m appear in newspaper articles and never in government reports. also don't appear are the random acts that, taken together, create ıate of fear. At the edge of a cliff used as a body dump, Didion sees ıan learning to maneuver a pickup truck forward and back, over ɔver, practicing for future use. When Didion takes a walk and opens ag to check an address, she hears up and down the street the safety es being taken off guns. Eating outside at a restaurant, she mes aware of two men training their rifles on her and her husband. l not forget the sensation," she says, "of having been in a single nt demoralized, undone, humiliated by fear..." (26). Whether from its of violence or the visible reminders of that violence, in El ıdor, "terror is the given of the place" (14).

ɔn begins with this personal testimony, with the "practical informa- she acquires immediately. She gives importance to what she rves and feels. Didion has never been interested in abstracts, ys veering "inexorably back to the specific, to the tangible," as she in an earlier essay, "Why I Write." In El Salvador, this attention s her to notice dead bodies, pickup trucks, bullet holes in church s, homeless people. And it makes her angry with other American ɔnses to the country: the advertising of American companies selling products; the official pronouncements of the government; the ılar statements that are supposed to solve the El Salvadoran lem. Only by insisting on the particular example, telling what she seen and heard, can she counter the obfuscating generalities of ical rhetoric.

ɔn has long been fascinated with language, with the power of fully chosen words set in a particular context. "I am still committed," wrote fifteen years earlier in her famous essay about the hippies in ht-Ashbury, "Slouching Towards Bethlehem," "to the idea that the y to think for one's self depends upon one's mastery of the language"). But in El Salvador, language is misused, meant to conceal and to ıse. Numbers - to describe the dead or report the percentage of ants voting - materialize, vanish, rematerialize in different form; seem merely an intention, she says, denoting only the "use" of numbers. Names "have only a situational meaning," changing as often as the context. Any reform measure that sounds both broad and anti-communist will continue to attract American aid and therefore become, in an ironic way, a solution to the government's problems, if not the country's. Often, this reform need only be another way of describing: at one time, pacification was the solution, but then it became negotiations, and then land reform. Words such as "improvement" and "perfection" come from Madison Avenue. "Language as it is now used in El Salvador," Didion writes, "is the language of advertising, of persuasion, the product being one or another of the 'soluciones' crafted in Washington or Panama or Mexico." Both Salvadorans and Americans use this language, "as if a linguistic deal had been cut" (65). And the language is therefore ungrounded, necessarily context-less. Reagan's certification in July 1982 that sufficient progress was being made in "human rights," "land reform," and "the initiation of a democratic political process" were "phrases so remote *in situ*," Didion writes, "as to render them hallucinatory" (38-39).

El Salvadoran politics and culture, Didion suggests throughout her book, are impenetrable to an outsider lacking knowledge of the country's long and complex history. Its politics and culture are also impenetrable to anyone who wants to apply another region's solutions or ideas to it, to someone, for example, who believes that the United States military, if turned loose, could go in and "shape the place up." In El Salvador, Didion writes, "I began to see Gabriel Garcia Marquez in a new light, as a social realist" (59).

Didion wants to reveal those who deliberately "misread" El Salvador, and then misuse language, for reasons of power. As Chris Anderson shows persuasively in *Style as Argument,* Didion "unmasks the deceptions of words - with facts, with examples, with logical and grammatical analysis" (169).[2] Didion recognizes, however, and demonstrates in her writing, that texts are rhetorical constructs, without any innate claims to truth. Her style of nonfiction writing remains skeptical of all claims to knowledge and referentiality, its own included. Nevertheless, though Didion's experiences in El Salvador lead her toward relativism, she still takes a moral stand based on informed choice.

Few students can go to El Salvador, but the process that Didion models can transfer home as critical questioning, particularly if I create class exercises that extend the implications of her arguments. One such exercise is to have students find and bring for class critique a foreign policy article from a newspaper, so that we can discuss how the very form of both the newspaper and its means of production influence how the news is reported. A second exercise is for students to take an event - the

g bust of Noriega, for example, or the beginnings of the Persian Gulf sis - and see the different ways it was written about in *Business Week*, *ie*, or *Newsweek*, and *Partisan Review*, so that students see how the siness" and audience of a magazine influence its contents. A third rcise is for a group of students to research the present conditions in Salvador, to judge what has happened in the past nine years, and to ort this to the class, complete with their own interpretation of present nts as they relate to Didion's ideas in *Salvador*. When I used these ee exercises in a literature class recently, I was gratified to see how ingly students moved away from literary analysis to address such ues, and then referred back to Didion's book to make useful observa- ns about her technique and ideas. We concluded the class period - one he most invigorating of the term - by discussing why people (and ticularly students) don't vote in elections.

hough class discussion on *Salvador* begins with Didion, American eign policy, and political rhetoric, Didion's resistance to the American vernment's solutions for El Salvador can lead discussion - and a dent's thinking - toward complementary resistance about related ues closer to home: race, gender, class, ecology, sexual orientation, d so on. Didion's fashioning of her own narrative as counter to official t simplistic and manipulative claims provides a model for students to me their own resistances to such issues. That is, we stress the value personal response, personal observation, of knowing a context and a story.[3]

cognize that students will not necessarily agree with me on what is st or moral, though they will, I believe, reflect on justice and morality he context for dialogue is created. Nor, certainly, does reading a book ch as *Salvador* and raising such issues in class automatically mean at all students will be more tolerant of difference and more critical of manipulations of those trying to maintain power. (Perhaps this is pecially true when the students are, like the students I teach at St. f, generally affluent, generally conservative.) Politics may be one of two subjects not to be discussed at the dinner table, or, as was true my undergraduate education, in literature classes bent on finding hetypes or creating formalist readings of poems, but if I'm committed certain values and beliefs, I must be willing to talk about them directly.

aim is not, however, to persuade students to my beliefs, or to argue h them. The developmental theorist William Perry has sketched out seful model to help guide my role as teacher. College students, Perry rs, move through stages of development, from the belief that knowl- ge is right or wrong and that there are set answers and education is owing them, to the belief that truth is indeterminate, perhaps even arbitrary, and then to the final stage that in a relativistic world one must commit to some ethical stance.[4] As a teacher I can model how I maintain belief in a world that is relativistic, and how some of my beliefs translated into action even run counter to my immediate, particularly economic, desires. What I can show, both in the choice of texts to teach and also in the way that I teach them, is that reading literature is not just an escape from a harsh world, but an act that, at best, prompts social action to make that harsh world a better one for more people.

Notes

1 For more on this issue of power and the mass media, see James R. Bennett's article in *College English*, "National Power and Objectivity in the Classroom." Bennett devotes an entire course, which he calls "Language and Public Policy," to such issues.

2 Anderson argues persuasively that Didion has developed, more powerfully than probably any other nonfiction writer in past decades, a "grammar of radical particularity" that raises moral problems. For more on this, see his chapter in *Style as Argument*. I'm indebted, in general, to his reading of Didion.

3 These goals are similar to ones advanced by advocates of radical pedagogy, though I have used Didion's language. For a useful general introduction to the aims of radical pedagogy, see Paine's article. Paulo Freire and Ira Shor are, of course, required reading in this area.

4 There has been some criticism of Perry's model, particularly by feminists, because in his study he cited only interviews with men (though he did interview some women). I believe that Perry's distinctions are generally valid across gender lines, at least enough to substantiate my points here.

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