

DOCUMENTARY AND THE FABRICATION OF 'TRUTH'

'EYEWITNESSES'

WHAT IS AT STAKE IN THE CONTROVERSY SURROUNDING THE AWARD-WINNING DOCUMENTARY, *CHAVEZ: INSIDE THE COUP*
By Phil Gunson

“With a certain sense of paradox, one would be tempted to deduce from this portion of our cultural history that the worst enemy of information is the eyewitness.”

Jean-François Revel, from *The Useless Knowledge*

“Why are we always so hard on President Chávez?” asked the foreign editor of a European newspaper when I recently pitched him a story idea on Venezuela. “I just saw a documentary that showed how he was helping the poor, and how the oligarchy wants to overthrow him.” The documentary in question – *Chávez: Inside the Coup** – deals with events in mid-April, 2002, when Venezuelan President, Hugo Chávez was briefly ousted, only to be restored to power within 48 hours when the de facto government that replaced him collapsed. It was made by two novice documentarists from Ireland, Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Brian, who had the good fortune to witness the coup at first hand, from inside the presidential palace.

Their proximity to the President – a cashiered army lieutenant-colonel who himself once attempted to overthrow a democratically-elected government – was more than merely physical, however. The documentary, which has won a score of awards around the world, endorses a version of events that is indistinguishable from that of the Chávez regime itself: so indistinguishable, in fact, that the government has become its principal promoter and publicist. In a word, the film amounts to propaganda for one side in a highly-polarised political context. Its effect is evident, not least on foreign editors such as the one quoted above.

There are, essentially, two ways of looking at Chávez. As represented in the film, he is a democrat fighting to redistribute the country’s enormous oil wealth among the poor majority, in the face of an implacable campaign by the country’s wealthy, white elite – backed by George W. Bush – to overthrow him and hand the country back to foreign oil interests. The alternative view is that he is a fairly standard Latin American military demagogue, who openly disavows representative democracy (despite having used it to achieve power) and is now busily installing a dictatorship. By this account, his “wealth redistribution” is neither more nor less than the cynical and clientilistic purchase of a military/civilian power base, using the gigantic cash-flow provided by the state oil corporation, *Petróleos de Venezuela (PdVSA)*.

That segment of the population that broadly

subscribes to the latter view has, over the past three years, repeatedly put hundreds of thousands of people on the streets of Caracas and other cities to demand that the President either resign, or allow a referendum or fresh election to decide the issue. Polls have consistently shown that a majority would vote for a change of government. Meanwhile, dozens have been killed in political violence. Most of these deaths have gone unpunished, and human rights groups (domestic and international) have repeatedly warned that the government’s increasing stranglehold on supposedly independent institutions such as the police and courts has led to rampant impunity. Such criticism has largely been dismissed as politically inspired and/or in violation of Venezuelan sovereignty.

I have written elsewhere (www.cjr.org) about the distortions, omissions and outright untruths contained in *Chavez – Inside the Coup*. But you do not need to be an expert on contemporary Venezuelan politics to spot that the film is biased. A simple comparison of the time devoted to the pro-Chávez viewpoint in comparison with the opposition provides a strong hint. In months of research and filming prior to the coup, Bartley and O’Brian do not appear to have interviewed a single representative of the opposition, with the exception of the occasional demonstrator, usually blond and upper-middle-class. Later, they returned to Venezuela to film middle-class condominium residents planning to defend themselves against possible attack by pro-Chávez groups. But they inserted this sequence before the coup, in what looks like a blatant attempt to portray the opposition as the instigator of violence.

The power of the film is undeniable. It has the virtue of a simple, black-*et*-white storyline, uncluttered with weighty analysis of whether – for instance – Chávez’ handouts to the poor constitute a sustainable programme of wealth-creation. The ultimate villain – George W. – is an easy target, while the charismatic protagonist, Chávez, with his wildly enthusiastic supporters makes for engaging TV. It is easy to select Chávez opponents to make the opposition look bad. The same exercise could be performed the other way around, to similar effect. Moreover, the documentary embodies the seemingly unimpeachable authority of the eyewitness: however wise we might think we are to the seductive, ‘camera-never-lies’ persuasiveness of the moving image, unconsciously we are swept along by the authorial voice which informs and interprets, yet leaves us with the sense that somehow we *saw* what happened.

Whilst never explicitly mentioned in the film, the iconic Latin American coup (Pinochet’s 1973 putsch against socialist President Salvador Allende of Chile) is a constant sub-text – right from the opening sequence of the English-language version of the film, in which armoured cars roll grainily through the Caracas dusk. (They were mobilised by Chávez not the coup-plotters, a detail deliberately falsified by Bartley and O’Brian.) A



bunch of dissident generals and admirals is purposely mis-identified as the armed forces’ High Command, and it is even suggested that the opposition threatened to bomb the presidential palace, conjuring- for many viewers – images of the Hawker Hunter jets that set Santiago’s La Moneda palace on fire with Allende inside.

A letter detailing the serious flaws in the film (see www.vertigomagazine.co.uk), was sent to the judges of the celebrated Grierson Award. Nevertheless, last autumn the documentary won in two categories, winning the “Best International Documentary” and “Best Newcomer” awards. The judges seem to have dismissed as irrelevant the criteria normally used to judge a piece of journalism, and rated *Chávez – Inside the Coup* by the standards of drama, or perhaps more exactly, of Reality TV.

But does it matter that a coup in a Latin American nation should be treated as drama? Does the ‘truth’ (whatever that might be) have a bearing on the issue? Is the inaccuracy and the bending of facts, causality and the sequence of events excused by repetition of the mantra that this is an ‘authorial’ work?

Neither the 2002 coup nor the film itself has passed quietly into history. At home and abroad, Hugo Chávez employs the simplistic, ‘opposition-as-coup-plotters’ argument to bolster his regime. And the film has become a vital weapon in the propaganda battle. Shown so far in over 20 countries, from China to South Africa, it is actively promoted by the government worldwide.



Embassies, and the Venezuela Information Office (paid pro-Chávez lobbyists in Washington) hand out free copies and organise showings, especially in the United States. VIO staff consult directly with Kim Bartley, as their activity logs (filed under the Foreign Agent Registration Act) reveal. At least one employee of the presidential palace in Caracas is required, as part of her job description, to promote the film. Broadcasters like the BBC and Ireland’s RTE have meanwhile refused to grant the right of reply to complainants who argue that the film seriously distorts their country’s political situation. Ironically, those responsible for the film dismiss all criticism as part of a “political campaign” on behalf of the Venezuelan opposition.

There has, so far, been little or no debate about these issues, which go far beyond even the legitimate interest of 25 million Venezuelans in seeing their country accurately portrayed at home and abroad. The film-makers told me they were simply not interested in a “frame-by-frame” analysis of *Chávez – Inside the Coup* since they had moved on to other projects and felt the issues had already been fully aired. They changed their minds, however, on learning that the Columbia Journalism Review was about to publish a critique of the film, and wrote a lengthy ‘rebuttal’ of my arguments (www.cjr.org/rebuttal) Evidently, then, there are matters to be resolved.

As a foreign journalist who has covered Venezuela for the past five years, I declare an interest: I feel I am

entitled to set the ball rolling with a challenge to those – commissioning editors, producers, award juries – who have backed this documentary from the beginning and continue to promote its inexorable progress around the world. Take your critics seriously: the fact that many of them come from a different culture and maybe do not express themselves perfectly in English is no reason to dismiss them out of hand. Apply the criteria you would wish to see applied to a documentary about your own country, and see how this film measures up.

For what it is worth, my view is this: two film-makers with an undeclared political agenda set out to produce a flattering portrait of their hero, Hugo Chávez. They failed to make even a token attempt to understand the other side of the story. Their presence inside the palace on the day of the coup brought spectacular footage and hence a much wider audience than they could ever have hoped for. Broadcasters with little grasp of Venezuelan politics, but a shrewd understanding of marketing, bought into the project. For the most part, they appear to have cared little about the accuracy of the film; their principal interest was that it was good tv. Juries, who should have known better, judged the film for its dramatic qualities and failed to consider obvious breaches of balance, fairness and accuracy, which – if applied during the production process – would have blunted the drama. The result was that a piece of unethical journalism was rewarded and anyone with a different viewpoint was – implicitly or explicitly – dismissed as a liar.

As Jean-François Revel puts it, “throughout history, men have projected on distant countries their political dreams or have gone with their dreams to those countries.” Dreaming, however, is free. Messing with other people’s dreams brings with it responsibilities. Responsibilities that, in this case, appear to have been shirked by all concerned. ▀

* The Spanish version is entitled *La Revolución no Será Transmitida – The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*.

1-3. Chavez

Writer and Journalist Phil Gunson has more than 25 years experience covering Latin America, including a number of conflicts there (in the mid 1980s he lived in Honduras and covered Central America’s guerrilla wars). He has worked for the BBC’s Latin American service both in London and as a correspondent based in Miami (covering Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Based in Mexico City, he was Latin America correspondent for *The Guardian* and *The Observer* from 1995-98. He has also co-authored three books about the region, including a two-volume political dictionary, and has researched, prepared and presented two six-part series for the BBC World Service - one on the cocaine trade and the other on the fifth centenary of Columbus’ arrival in the Americas.