

Return to Third Cinema?

The Case of *Listen To Venezuela*



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We arrived in Venezuela in February 2008 on a Leverhulme Scholarship that would allow us a unique opportunity to live and work in the country for a year. We had chosen to go to Venezuela because we had for some time been closely following the revolution that had been developing there since the breakthrough election of Hugo Chávez in 1998. We wanted to see this revolution at first hand and we wanted to contribute to it in any way we could.

We were aware that the mainstream media, both press and television, in the United Kingdom and internationally, were misrepresenting the Venezuelan revolution. They focused unremittingly on the personality of Hugo Chávez, ignoring the broader issues and involvement of millions of people. Moreover, the focus on Chávez has been extremely distorted, variously describing him as a killer, dictator, populist strongman, megalomaniac, supporter of terrorism, anti-Semitic, buffoon and other sundry tropes that merely confirm racist western stereotypes of Latin American leaders.

However, people around the world started to pay more attention to what was happening in Venezuela after an attempted coup by the Venezuelan oligarchy (which was backed by the Bush administration) in April 2002. This dramatic episode drew attention to what was happening in the country and what was at stake in the conflict between the oligarchy and the

people. The attempted coup and the popular uprising which it provoked were captured on film in *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised* (Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’Brian, 2002) which had international exposure. This documentary gave an account of what may very well be the first ‘media coup’, insofar as the private television companies in Venezuela actively participated in and supported the coup.

Practical method

We were teaching film theory and practice at the Bolivarian University, which had been set up to provide university-level education for working-class people from the barrios – exactly the people whom an elite, private school system had excluded. We also taught at the Miranda Centre for Information (CIM), which was created as a space to foster dialogue, debate and analysis of the revolution for both Venezuelans and foreigners. We taught at an independent documentary school in Caracas and we taught young kids film practice in the barrios. We had intended to make a short documentary about the grassroots media scene that has flourished in Venezuela in recent years. However, our project quickly became more ambitious. We were amazed by the sheer scale of the changes taking place and the complexities that radical social change involves. It was



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not only the grassroots media that was emerging as a radical innovation, but many other areas were undergoing dramatic changes and we wanted to make a film that reflected this. The question was, how?

Working and living in Venezuela over a period of eleven months, we were able to build up relationships with many people. Our work in the university and elsewhere meant that we became part of the community. We were known not as ‘the people making a film’ but as people embedded in the life of the community. Our 9-year-old son played baseball, and prepared for and participated in a karate competition. We lived with Venezuelans, went to the parks at the weekends, we shopped in local supermarkets, we went to the cinemas and so forth. We were beneficiaries of the many forms of wealth distribution such as free food and cheap food, free Spanish classes and cultural activities and free healthcare. So our experience of the revolution was not as outside observers, and our film does not pretend to adopt the position of western journalists, i.e. an objective, balanced, neutral account of the process. We became part of the process we were making a film about and

the film itself has become part of the process because many of the Venezuelans we spoke to were all too aware that the international media were misrepresenting their revolution and they wanted the opportunity to set the record straight. The people we met and the contacts we made became part of a chain reaction of meetings, acquaintances, friends, etc. who became central to gaining access to so many of the different sectors and spaces of society.

We entered those spaces not just as film-makers but as teachers as well. This dual identity meant that we had a different relationship to Venezuelans than if we were just film-makers. Film-makers often have quite a parasitic relation to their subject(s): they take their stories, their words, their images and often give very little in return. However, as teachers we were able to offer something back to the community and contribute directly to the revolutionary process, participating in the very thing we were making a film about. One result of this was that people were more willing to open up to us and not just give standard answers to people they barely knew.

Another thing that helped was the non-professional equipment we used to make the film. We used small consumer camcorders that were easy to set up quickly to respond to fast-moving situations. The public space in Caracas is extremely lively and we often came across events, situations, marches, murals, etc. that we could use as we travelled around. They were easy to carry inconspicuously into the barrios where security was always an issue. And their small size meant that the distance between us and the people we were filming was less than with a professional crew, with its large and often intimidating equipment.

So film is the outcome of many interpersonal encounters and the better and deeper those interpersonal relations, the better and deeper a film. For example, as a result of working in the barrios, we were invited one day to film a quasi-religious traditional celebration of music and dance by young children in the local plaza. We knew the children (we had taught them) and so we spent the day with them as they prepared their costumes and then filmed them dancing in the plaza as the sun went down. Normally film-makers would miss such ‘events’ unless they were lucky to happen across them (it was

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not an event as such, it was not advertised nor would anyone outside the local area have travelled to see it). But there is only so much luck you can have in terms of being in the right place at the right time.

How we utilized this dance was also a product of our relatively long immersion in Venezuela. We cross-cut the dance with the voice-over of a defrocked American priest talking about the role of religion in Venezuela, in particular the difference between the non-institutional religion of the popular classes and the institutional Catholic Church of the middle and upper classes, which is largely hostile to Chávez and the revolution. Where the voice-over talks about the religious feeling of the masses (which is expressed largely outside the established institutions of the Catholic Church), we use images from the dance, and where the voice-over talks about the religion of the middle and upper class, we use shots of tombstones and monuments from graveyards. The grey and cold stone associated with the established religion contrasts with the lively movement and colours of the dance scene. In other words the dance scene was not used as part of a 'linear' story (e.g. about a particular community or group [the children]) but was used to build up a cross section of social relations. But it takes time to absorb the material you shoot and reconfigure it in this more dialectical way with other material, and we were fortunate to have this time. However, you need not only time, but a methodology of aesthetic construction that aims to bring out the dialectical potential in the material shot, namely the social and political relations and struggles at work in reality.

The dialectical image

The question that we were confronted with was how do you make a film adequate to a process as complex, collective and contradictory as a revolution? We felt that many of the dominant film models were problematic from the point of view of making a revolutionary film.

What mode of consumption a film encourages in the watching audience is a political question. Audiences are not only learning about a particular topic/content when they watch a film, there is also a pedagogy involved in *how* they watch and use the medium of film



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itself. We wanted our film to be watched in a different way from the dominant models, we wanted to challenge habitual ways of looking and seeing and encourage the audience to critically decode images and sounds. A revolutionary film is one that gives agency back to the audience because it opens a space to question taken-for-granted models and values. We do not know whether we succeeded in this but that was the intention.

For inspiration we looked to the traditions of radical cinema. Sergei Eisenstein's theories of revolutionary cinema came out of a context of immense social changes in the first years after the Russian revolution and the overthrow of the centuries-old Tsarist regime. In this context Eisenstein tried to develop a theory of film form that was congruent with a period of social upheaval and change. Eisenstein developed a theory of editing that stressed how editing stirs up and agitates the spectator's mind, conceiving each cut as a 'shock' or stimulus at the level of rhythm, tone, composition and juxtaposition. Eisenstein's other ambition was to bring together the sensuous/emotional impact of the image with an intellectual and conceptual dimension to expand the spectator's consciousness of social relations. This required rejecting the linear, continuity editing then becoming dominant in Hollywood.

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Eisenstein's fellow compatriot film-maker Dziga Vertov stressed the space between shots as the moment where the spectator's activity sets to work, making sense of the relationships between the cuts or in the mental 'space' between sound and image.

Inspired by left cultural practitioners, the philosopher Walter Benjamin coined the phrase 'the dialectical image' to identify a distinctive revolutionary approach to social and historical reality. The dialectical image interrupts naturalized modes of seeing and hearing, it interrupts linear conceptions of history or narrative. The dialectical image has the potential to awaken us to the disjunctures and contradictions of social life. Awareness of disjuncture at the level of film form can begin a process of questioning and decoding representations. The dialectical image tries to enable a cognitive shift in the viewer; it begins a process that starts with the film but can be applied beyond the film to social relations generally.

For example, the dialectical image can explore the gap or disjuncture between rhetoric and reality. In the opening of the film a young middle-class woman on the beach at Boca de Uchire talks about how the government of President Chávez poses a threat to the well-being and liberty of Venezuelans. As she talks about 'freedom' the image track cuts to a long shot of a line of seagulls in the sky. The shot is overexposed so that the gulls become mere black outlines against a white background before pulling out of focus. The next shot is a photograph of a person lying in a Caracas street dead from gunshot wounds. A narrator's voice begins: 'This is what freedom looked like in 1989.' The clichéd image of freedom represented by birds flying through the air (supported by the discourse on freedom by the middle-class woman) is juxtaposed with the reality of that 'freedom' (the freedom of market capitalism) for the poor majority in the years before the election of President Chávez, where violence by the police towards the poor was routine. The over-exposure of the image and the pull out of focus just before the cut to the photograph of a protester shot by the police are indicative of just how abstract bourgeois notions of freedom are.

Our film was influenced not just by the political modernism that came out of Europe

in the 1920s and 1930s, but also by the radical traditions that emerged in Latin America in the post-Second World War period during the worldwide decolonization and anti-imperialist struggles. This was another time when radical cinema flourished. Amongst the numerous manifestos produced by film-makers, the essay by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino stands out as the most systematic attempt to theorize a new revolutionary film-making practice. Their essay 'Towards A Third Cinema' developed a critique of the main versions of institutionalized cinema at that time. First Cinema was the dominant commercial cinema while Second Cinema was essentially the art cinemas for a middle-class audience that were carved out by national states as protection against Hollywood's hegemony.

Aware of the limitations of these respective forms of cinema, Solanas and Getino set out to formulate the principles and aims of a different, properly revolutionary cinema, a Third Cinema. Their experiences and the conclusions they drew from the making of their own film, *Hour of the Furnaces/La hora de los hornos* (1968) was the basis for their critique. They were very aware of the power of capitalism to absorb cultural attacks, so they made a film that was indigestible to the system and one which could not be slotted into any of the categories and boxes which capitalism allows for cinema. Their film aimed to provide a sweeping account of the roots of the Argentinean crisis in this period: political, economic, social, cultural, etc. The film is grounded in the perspective of the working class and the rural peasantry, that is the neo-colonial subjects living in a country whose dominant elites are integrated into and subordinated to international capitalist structures. The film struggles to create a cinematic language capable of expressing these realities when there is no way to speak from a completely outside position, we are all connected to the system even though it is urgently necessary to break with the dominant reality. Any film, any cultural work and any revolutionary politics has to start with the materials at hand, materials and human beings that have been shaped by the dominant ideology and structures. These materials have to be 're-functioned' (as Brecht said) for radical aims, in a movement against capitalism's own dynamic of absorption and 'making safe'.

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For Solanas and Getino, film had to be integrated into the fight against capitalism. *Hour of the Furnaces* rejects a linear narrative and is instead organized into a set of thematic chapters. It rejects individual characters in favour of a collective if differentiated protagonist. It brings sound and image into a discordant relationship of irony and counterpoint and it has, and this is a distinctive trait of many radical Latin American documentaries of this period, a heightened sense of the symbolic and metaphorical possibilities of the image, the ability of the image to provide a vehicle for decoding social relations. The possibility of producing the dialectical image is heightened in a context of social struggle, where the contradictions become evident to mass consciousness through the participation of the people in fighting the system's imperatives.

Listen to Venezuela

These were the debates that we had in mind as we engaged with the problem of how to make a film about a process as complex, contradictory and collective as a revolution. The film we made is structured around a series of chapters such as politics, community, media, education, culture and elections, among others. The chapters are self-contained (making it possible to screen sections of the film within forums that have limited time) but the film as a whole builds up a collage-like account of how these different areas inform and connect with each other. The education that is provided, the media that is available, the culture that is being produced, the community's role in governing their lives, etc. are all fronts in the struggle to change society.

Because these things exist in a vibrant state of struggle, they are all in an unusual state of flux. There is a gap between the old and the new, the past and the future, where people are struggling to create a socialism for the twenty-first century, as Chávez has claimed he wants to do. The struggle for a new society is pregnant with contradictions because people are struggling to change themselves as much as the society around them. Running through all the chapters is the question of class, the class struggle, the conflict between capital and the masses, the brutalities and inequalities of the capitalist system.



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One of the key strategies of the film is to separate the voices of interviewees from their image, and instead cross their voice with a sequence of images other than the face or even the immediate environment of the speaker. Because interviewees often did not provide the visual track of the film, we needed to find other images. We were necessarily pushed into an extensive visual research project, collating and organizing images that in turn pushed us deeper into the fabric of society and its history. This of course included footage generated by our own film-making but we also collected already existing representations, such as photographs (both archive stock photos of politicians and ‘authored’ photography of ‘the people’), political cartoons, drawings, animation, television and film archive, graffiti, murals, posters and statues (which are pictures in stone). These cultural representations made by Venezuelans are a sign of the massive social changes brought about by the Bolivarian revolution. These changes require a cultural expressiveness that can match the emerging political participation and representation. Layering the film with these other ‘found’ images gives the central theme of class struggle a crucial cultural dimension: namely that the struggle is fought out in the battle of ideas, in the struggle to change perception and challenge habitual modes

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of thinking that prevent new ways of looking at the world emerging, new approaches to social problems, new modes of behaviour and interaction evolving. This ideological struggle is becoming increasingly important within the Bolivarian revolution, and is one of the most critical fronts in the battle for social change.

Because these already constituted images are themselves a comment of some kind on some aspect of Venezuelan social reality and the revolution, they often require only a little bit of work to generate some dialectical point. For example, the chapter on education focuses on the Bolivarian University, which was set up in 2003 by Presidential decree to provide a tertiary-level education to the masses who had been hitherto excluded by a private education system. Three girls are interviewed on the university campus sitting in front of a multi-coloured version of the famous and iconic image of Che Guevara. The girls are talking about how they would have had no chance of studying for a degree without the Bolivarian revolution with the image of Che as a backdrop. This is a simple example of the dialectical image. The iconic image of Che has become widely appropriated within a mass culture on everything from t-shirts to coffee mugs. In the process, the politics of revolutionary change that Che actually believed in and fought for has often become unmoored from its historical origins. In addition Che has acquired certain associations connected with the image of the guerilla fighter, a romanticization of the macho revolutionary and of violence and sacrifice that erases the political ideals behind the action (as the second part of Steven Soderberg's film *Che* (2008) largely does). Here, in the context of the Bolivarian revolution, and the Bolivarian University, that iconic image is reconnected with the practical political goals of emancipation and how that is changing the lives of those previously excluded from education and their own society.

A more complex example of the dialectical image is to be found in the chapter on 'Memory'. An important strategy of Third Cinema has been to recover the untold and erased stories of the past, keeping alive a popular memory in combat with official accounts of the past or simply the sheer amnesia promoted by consumer capitalism. Prior to the election of Hugo Chávez in 1998, Venezuela had been held up by

the West as an example of a successful capitalist society that was something of a political exception in the Latin American context because of an unbroken run of 'democratic' governments since 1958. However, the profound social and economic inequalities in Venezuela were not addressed in this period, merely contained. This containment included the activities of a formally 'democratic' but extremely violent state, that banned political parties, oppressed any signs of dissent and resistance, imprisoning, torturing, murdering and disappearing its perceived enemies. In this chapter then the film recovers some of that history, but in a dialectical way.

The chapter begins located in one of the big shopping malls in Caracas. Venezuela's oil wealth has meant that a sizable middle class has been living very well for many decades and this has spawned a western-style commercial sector of corporate brands and expensive stores. On the soundtrack, however, we hear a voice (not yet connected to a face) talking about how in the 1960s, inspired by the success of the Cuban revolution, the speaker, and other 'dreamer boys' took up a revolutionary struggle against the corrupt governments of the period. The image track displays not just consumerism, but how in Venezuela that consumerism has an explicit orientation towards North America: with 'Fifth Avenue' signs, road traffic signs and other icons of North American urban life (such as fire hydrants). But the main symbol of North America evident here is bizarrely a large replica of the Statue of Liberty. This image underpins the North American orientation of the Venezuelan middle class in counterpoint to the voice speaking of a Latin American identity. This is crucial given that, historically, Venezuela's oil economy has been largely integrated into the needs of American oil corporations. But there is also a juxtaposition within the image of the symbol of political freedom, now appearing in this temple to consumerism, that reveals how the ideals of political freedom that once animated bourgeois ideology have been reduced to the freedom to shop.

This reduction is again brought out by the contrast with the voice-over which is talking about the struggle for real substantial political freedom. However, before we even hear the voice-over, we see a series of black-and-white



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photographs of faces staring directly to camera superimposed over the scenes of the shopping mall. The black-and-white photographs evoke the past in contrast with the present time of the shopping mall. These ephemeral faces appear to be haunting the shopping mall, as indeed they might, because we later learn that they are the faces of the murdered and disappeared. This sets up a tension within the memory sequence between the amnesia of consumer capitalism and the struggle against forgetting. As the voice-over continues, the film cross-dissolves from the mall to the face of the speaker (Enrique) whose interview is located at San Carlos, formerly a military jail, where political prisoners were held. This space, now converted into a community centre and museum, contrasts with the shopping mall to which the film returns a little later, cross-dissolving from Enrique (talking about the importance of remembering what happened at San Carlos) to a window display in which

an expensive handbag is situated inside a bird cage. The irony is that this surrealist image has been created by the capitalist culture, and has unconsciously revealed another kind of prison, another kind of entrapment: the soft cage of consumerism, the prison house of status and exclusivity and the dangers of living in a continual present, without a real past or a different future.

Conclusion

This struggle to remember and reclaim the past and create a different future is now a global one. This consumer entrapment has dominated globally via neo-liberalism. Today we need to find alternatives to this model. Despite the economic crash, there is little sense of an alternative paradigm emerging in the West. What is happening in Venezuela is not of course a model that can be picked off the shelf and applied everywhere else, but it is a gigantic experiment in trying to develop an alternative to neo-liberal capitalism. Now is the time to listen to Venezuela.

Listen To Venezuela is available to buy for £10 from the film's website at: <http://www.listento-venezuela.info>. •

Contributor details

Deirdre O'Neill runs Inside Film, an organization set up with the aim of providing prisoners with the kind of education (critical, creative, theoretical and practical) that they would not normally have access to.

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