

Open letter to the BBC

To: BBC Governors and Chairmen, Executive Officers and Editorial Content Producers of RTE, ZDF, ARTE, NPS/COBO, YLETV

Caracas, October 21, 2003

Sirs
Chairmen, Executive Officers and Editorial Content Producers
BBC of London (United Kingdom)
ZDF (Germany)
RTE (Ireland)
Arte (France)
NPS/Cobo (The Netherlands)

Dear Sirs:

On April 13, 2003, the film “The Revolution will not be Televised”, also known in other countries under the alternating titles “Chavez Inside the coup” or “Chavez-the film” with different editions and versions, was broadcast for all Venezuela on channel 8, Venezolana de Televisión. At that opportunity, thousands of Venezuelans thought that the documentary did not reflect the truth of the events that happened in our country during those days. However, as it was a one-time transmission and we did not have copies to review it more thoroughly, we could not appreciate in further detail the contents and the narrative strategies used to transmit them.

In Venezuela during the last days, the former student of the BBC, Eng. Wolfgang Schalk, and the film producer, Thaelman Urgelles, have presented a series of allegations that confirm our initial impression about the inaccuracies and distortions of the film, in which this important TV station appears as a sponsor. On October 3 and October 10, 2003, during a broadcast by the national television channel Venevisión, they explained the several failures of production ethics in detail.

Further, today, October 21, 2003, a group of citizens have gathered together for a Public Film Forum, convoked by the Venezuelan web page “El Gusano de Luz” (www.elgusanodeluz.com), where we have reviewed and discussed this documentary in the presence of audiovisual specialists, other professionals of the social sciences, witnesses of the events reported by the film and general public.

The attendants at this Film Forum have been able to confirm numerous falsehoods, distortions, and biased interpretations of the events that occurred in Venezuela during the month of April 2002, which constitute a clear breach of the information and investigation ethics on the part of the producers of this documentary. Among the several manipulations that have been cleared up during this Forum, we can tell you the most evident:

- When showing the presence of presumed working classes in front of the Presidential Palace “Miraflores” on the morning of April 11, 2002, the film used images of a concentration that happened on a different day and in a different city in Venezuela,

where people appear happily singing, with children, while that day members of the government were really convoking people aggressively to “defend the Revolution”. Later, in the same film, a clearly different platform can be seen to be in place in front of Miraflores on April 11.

- In the same segment, the voice of the narrator says that “... very early, the opposition concentrated in Chuao...”, but that text is edited with images of the opposition rally hours later, in another part of the city, where effectively the rally showed a greater pugnacity than at the beginning, although at no time were armed people seen. Indeed, to show the opposition rally, the filmmakers used only closed takes and horizontal angulations to avoid showing the gigantic magnitude of the rally, close to one million people, according to the abundant available audiovisual registries.

- The film makers responsible for this film ignored the “radio and TV cadena” of President Chávez on April 11 from 2:30 to 4:30 pm, during which the President spoke for almost two hours while in the surroundings of Miraflores, 21 Venezuelans were killed and more than 150 were wounded. In your country, these “cadenas” are not usual (Chávez used them 31 times between April 8 and April 11, 2002). They consist of forcing all the open signal TV channels and all radio stations, AM as well as FM, to link to the government channel (Venezolana de Televisión, Channel 8) to broadcast the same content. In the middle of this particular “cadena”, the private TV stations decided to divide the screen in two parts in order to show, simultaneously with the image of the President, the tragic events that were happening, and then the government jammed the signal of the private stations, an action that requires complex technical preparations to be done, revealing that the government had prepared this action in advance. Do you think that this sequence of facts, essential for the understanding of what happened in Caracas that day, and otherwise relevant images from every audiovisual point of view, could be ignored in an objective and responsible report of these events? Another important TV “cadena”, broadcasted at 2:15 p.m. on April 11, was omitted. There, the highest military chiefs, lead by general-in-chief Lucas Rincón, backed President Chávez. At that moment, the colossal opposition rally was arriving the surroundings of the presidential palace.

- The film insists that the President never resigned office. However, the military high command, lead by General in Chief Lucas Rincón, the main military officer and current Secretary of Domestic Affairs of Chávez, broadcasted a statement by radio and TV at 3:20 a.m. on the morning of April 12, in which he announced that “... (the) President was requested to resign office, which he agreed to”. This fact leads us to two possibilities: (1) either General Rincón stated a truth that was accepted throughout the whole country (as a matter of fact, after that information, the President surrendered peacefully at Fort Tiuna, a military base several kilometers away, without any physical threat and escorted by soldier friends and priests), or (2) that General Rincón lied, because he was an accomplice of a coup d’état (however, that seems not to be the truth, because he is still one of the main men of Chávez). This singular event, known by all Venezuelans and of undeniable importance to reconstruct what happened that day, was simply ignored by the film makers. They only edited the exit of the President from the palace and immediately thereafter the announcement of Pedro Carmona – at 04:50 a.m. of April 12- of a new government. By the way, they did not include the historic images of Chavez’ arrival at Fort Tiuna, where he was amicably welcomed by several military chiefs and two bishops.

· The so called “case of the gun shooters on the Llaguno Bridge” is more complicated. Those who are not experts in audiovisual matters cannot have perceived what Eng. Wolfgang Schalk could notice and demonstrate. As you can remember, the images of a group of President Chavez’s supporters shooting from a bridge in the direction of the place where the opposition rally was coming became famous (the journalistic team that took the images was awarded the King of Spain’s Journalism Prize for this report). The film supported by you backed up the government “propaganda version” that those people were not shooting at any rally, and for this, film makers used images from an amateur video taken from a different angle than the one used by the journalistic team that won the prize in Spain. In this second video, the bridge and the avenue underneath are completely empty, without persons or rally walking and no person shooting from the bridge. Using a “shadow analysis” procedure similar to the ancient sun dials, Mr. Schalk showed that the images of this amateur video were taken from about 1:00 to 1:30 in the afternoon, when the opposition rally was not even near that location, while the images taken by the prize-winning journalists were taken between 4:30 and 5:00 in the afternoon, when the tragic events were indeed happening. If the film makers had access to that amateur video, they could have also shown the images of the same place three hours later, when tens of people could be seen running and falling dead or injured in the same avenue, which was empty before.

· We could prove an open lie in the film. They say that the signal of the state owned TV station was cut on April 11 by the “coup mongers” and even showed the effect of a noise interrupted TV image. Regarding this act, all Venezuelans know that on the night of April 11, 2002, a military officer supporting Chávez, who was assigned to the Venezolana de Televisión, Channel 8, government’s TV station, broadcasted a black image, announcing that the TV station was surrounded by hostile persons and that a column of “coup d’état troops” was advancing towards the station. Immediately thereafter, they left the facilities peacefully. The truth is that there was no hostile multitude and that “coup d’état troops” never arrived, for the simple reason that all the army men were in their quarters, none were on the streets. The doors of Channel 8 remained open and its facilities empty for almost an hour, until a group of reporters of Globovisión news station entered the place and showed us all the studios, offices and technical centers totally deserted. It was after that, that a group of officers of the Miranda State Police (the Venezuelan state where Channel 8 is situated) arrived in order to protect the facilities and equipment.

· Certain images were presented in the film as if they had happened before April 11, 2002, when in reality they were filmed, without written consent, three months later. This is the case of a neighbors meeting held in June 2002, with the aim of preparing defensive actions in the face of the threats made by the government through its “Bolivarian Circles” (groups of aggressive militants of the government’s party who frequently attack the opposition rallies with stones, sticks and even gunshots) of attacking the housing estates of Caracas where the opposition predominates. These neighbors, almost all of the were women, received self-defense training from a voluntary instructor in order to learn to defend themselves – in June 2002- from a presumed attack by the government supporting groups. In the documentary being sponsored by you, that scene was edited and presented as if it had happened in January that year, as a part of the presumed “coup d’état” climate promoted by “rich people” against Chávez. That scene, otherwise, gives a somber atmosphere and is

preceded of a general view of the city at night and a luxurious building, as if to underscore the presumptuously subversive character of the meeting of “ladies of the high society”.

- The documentary was broadcast again by the BBC2, on October. In said broadcast, a detail was added: in the scene of the Neighbors Association, a title, that was not shown in any other previous version of the video: June 26, 2002. As this addition corresponds to the documented denounce that Mr. Wolfgang Schalk presented before you in a letter dated on July 2003, it is evident that the versions of the film are being corrected in order to try to remedy the severe faults to information ethics that are being denounced by us. Regarding this point, we wish to say that these corrections only confirm the authenticity of our exposures and do not in any way diminish the responsibility of the directors, the producers and your TV Corporation in the misrepresentation of the historic truth of the events happened in Venezuela. We have enough copies of the videos broadcasted in different countries and by the BBC in the past, to confirm said statements.

- This manipulation of mistaken images, dates and hours is presented throughout the entire film. For example, the film producers were devious in selecting the images of popular support to Chávez, when they used film clips taken in February 2000, when the support was undeniable, enthusiastic and massive. These film clips, which can be easily proven to be from the year 2000, are presented as being evidence of the current following of Chávez. It could not be different, because the film makers could not use current takes of the government supporting rallies, as these are now much reduced and unenthusiastic, attended for the most part by people who are paid to attend. This purposeful manipulation of times and events is aggravated by the claim of temporal exactness observed throughout the film, marked by subtitles indicating dates and even precise hours. The film makers falsely tell its viewers: “this is an accurate narration, with its clearly indicated days and hours.”

- The distortion of times is particularly atrocious in the sequences corresponding to April 11, 12, and 13. There, the movie changes irresponsibly the hours of the events, in order to build a report subordinated to its communicational project, which is no other than to sell the thesis of an “oligarch coup d’état, supported by the United States”. For example, it situates the statement of a group of generals and admirals at 3 pm of April 11, while this really happened at 6:21 pm, through the international channel CNN. The documentary talks about channel 8 going out of the air a little after 3 pm, while this happened (voluntarily, as we have already informed you) towards 10 pm. And neither did they show the “cadena” on 2:15 pm April 11 where the Venezuelan Military High command said that they were backing President Chavez, exactly the contrary of the story told in the film.

- There are many others of these manipulations, the enumeration of which would be very vast. However, the most severe cannot be obviated: the construction of a parallel edition of images and sounds of the inauguration speech of Pedro Carmona (who took over the transition presidency for a few hours, after Chávez’s exit) and images of police repression very close to the presidential palace, against alleged Chávez supporters protesting against the coup. The film tells us unequivocally: “while Carmona pronounced his inauguration speech, two blocks away the police was hitting and shooting against the people...” (there is even “voice over” of Carmona on the

images of repression). You should know that this is completely false. On April 12, Caracas was normal; the only street demonstrations were made by some exalted opposition members in front of the Embassy of Cuba and in front of the houses of two or three leaders of Chávez government. It is truth that small government supporting groups posted themselves in the vicinity of the presidential palace on the afternoon of April 12, without disturbing the peace; however, their meaningful reaction started in the night of April 12 and the dawn of April 13, when they went out to the streets on the morning of that day. The scenes shown by the film of policemen dispersing demonstrators certainly happened on the morning of April 13. This disarrangement of times can not be considered to be an innocent film mistake, as it leads to totally erroneous conclusions regarding what happened in Venezuela those days.

- The movie presents the Venezuelan crisis as a confrontation between a white and corrupt privileged minority, and a black or mixed-blood, poor, healthy and happy majority, defended by President Chávez. This simplified scheme, which otherwise corresponds to the political and diplomatic speech of the government in all international forums, constitutes a shameful misrepresentation of the history, the sociology and the political present condition of Venezuela. In favor of the brevity, we will not abound with the details of a complex situation, requiring a more extensive intellectual development. Be, however, assured that, if the film makers of this movie had taken the trouble to investigate a little on this reality, the results of their film would have been very different to those that were presented. However, it is evident that they were not interested in deepening this topic, but in producing a biased, superficial and, to a great extent, untruthful document, with the propagandistic target that the Venezuelan government had given to it. On the other hand, there do not appear any European (Spaniards, Italians, Portuguese), Arabs, Asians and Latin American immigrants, who came to Venezuela and were integrated therein, in the most diverse productive sectors: industry, commerce, arts, etc.

- Abounding with the preceding point, it is important to emphasize the diverse, plural and multitudinous condition of those who in Venezuela democratically oppose President Chávez, which is completely ignored by the makers of this movie. If this were a question of a real research documentary – as prestigious TV chains like BBC, ZDF, RTE, Arte y NPS should demand – the film should show the amplitude and variety of this opposing sector, constituted, among others by the most important writers, artists, scientists, thinkers, jurists and professionals of the country, as well as millions of men and women of the working class, poor people who believed in Chávez and have been disappointed by his appalling government. However, film makers Kim Bartley and Donnacha O’ Briain preferred to reduce the Venezuelan opposition to the false image of a group of rich women, worried about their privileges. They preferred to omit the gigantic opposition rallies, the magnitude of which has astonished the world since last year. If they had included them, they would have shown the ethnic and social diversity present during these demonstrations, with a predominance of mixed-blood people and poor people. You should also know that those presumed “rich ladies” are Venezuelan women who have fought for three years a beautiful and brave democratic battle in the streets of Venezuela, along with middle class and working class women, even though they have been several times attacked and humiliated by the mercenary bands of the government and the very armed forces. Because the political problem of Venezuela does not consist of the class or racial confrontation, as the government disseminates and shows in this documentary, but the

confrontation between the democratic aspiration of the majority and the dictatorial project which the government is trying to impose on us.

· In order to secure their thesis of a military coup d'état on April 11, the commentator voice of the documentary refers to some military tanks "surrounding the presidential palace of Miraflores as a pressure step for the president to resign office"; simultaneously, the image shows them briefly, parked inside the presidential palace. In the version presented by NPS in the Netherlands they are shown longer, in the proper introduction of the film, while they advance on the highway, an image that was omitted in the Venezuelan version. We shall inform you that in reality the presence of these armored cars on the streets was due to an order given by President Chávez to his military chiefs in order to apply the so called "Ávila Plan", a military operation consisting in the military forces acting to repress thousands of civilians that were on the streets at that time of the day. This fact is documented by a record of internal radio circuit of the army and was publicly acknowledged by Chávez in the days after April 13, 2002. Chavez's order was disobeyed by most of the generals and troop commanders, to avoid a terrifying massacre as a consequence of the attack of armored troops against unarmed civilians and they ordered the tank column to return to the military base. Most of them stopped and went back to the barracks, but a group of 4 tanks went on to the presidential palace supporting the President; there, the doors were opened and they were parked there as fire power supporting Chávez. By the way, this disobedience of the generals – outraged in view of the mass murder that happened earlier that day in the surroundings of the presidential palace – was the cause of the authority crisis that – hours later – lead to the resignation of Chávez and his peaceful surrender to the military chiefs, a complex problem that the government and the documentary simplify as a classical Latin American "coup d'état". You will understand the coarse inversion in the narration of the facts that this means. The film makers, simply narrated the facts totally back to front of how they actually happened, omitting such crucial – and newsy – facts as the long record of the radial communications between Chávez and several of his generals in a moment of extremely serious tension and national security crisis.

· We have chosen only the most relevant aspects of the audiovisual manipulation present in this documentary. There are many more, the enumeration of which could be presented to you in a personal session with the aforementioned denouncing people. We only will quote two, whose evident falsehood cannot remain unanswered. At the end of the documentary, some titles refer – as a usual formula in this kind of films - to the immediate destiny of some of the protagonists. Thus, the film says that "Pedro Carmona fled to Colombia and a little later appeared in Miami..." The truth is that Mr. Carmona was arrested on the same April 13 and he was interpellated some days later by the Venezuelan Congress. Later, he was detained in his house for several days and then, he took refuge in the Embassy of Colombia, a country which conceded him diplomatic asylum, which was accepted by the Venezuelan government, when conceding the respective safe-conduct; in May, Carmona traveled to Colombia, where he pursues his profession at the view of everybody, and only in August he traveled for some days to Miami to offer a conference in a university of that city. It is then clear that Carmona did neither "flee" to Colombia as a delinquent, nor did he "appear" a little later in Miami, as if he were an Osama Bin Laden whose whereabouts no one knows. These explanations do not pretend to defend the acts of Doctor Carmona in April 2002, whose acts will be judged by history. We are only moved by the purpose

of revealing before you the biased and tendentious character of a film enjoying your support for the production is kept for its international projection.

- The second final title says: “the dissident generals were expelled from the army and most of them traveled abroad”. This is another uncertain statement; none of these generals traveled abroad and nowadays all of them live in Venezuela. As a matter of fact, several of them peacefully occupied the well known Altamira Square on October 22, 2002 and remain there. Others remain in the national public life, after having been absolved of the accusation of coup d'état by the Supreme Court of Justice. This information is so important that it should be included in any acceptably objective report on the events of April 2002 in Venezuela, don't you think so? Neither are we motivated by the interest in defending the conduct of these generals, but by the interest to indicate the incorrectness of the film.

- Did you know that the Venezuelan government reproduced ten thousand VHS copies of the film, which are given as presents at Venezuelan consulates and embassies all over the world to whoever wants them ...?

- Did you know that Mister Andrés Izarra, the main witness of the film against the private TV media, is now an high ranked officer principal inn the Embassy of Venezuela in the USA; and that the private TV station where he kept a managing position kept him there for several years, regardless of being the son of Commander William Izarra, a conspirator mate of Hugo Chávez during more than 10 years in the heart of the Venezuelan Armed Forces and current Ideology Director of the government party?

Due to all the aforementioned facts, we feel disappointed that a film with such an evident intention of governmental propaganda is endorsed as a author's work by serious organizations with a solid tradition in documentaries, as yours. “The Revolution will not be Televised”, or whatever it might be called in different territories, is being presented in TV channels, film and TV festivals and in academic forums as a author's film, as an objective journalistic research film, while it is really a very good plotted and accomplished propaganda operation, supported logistically by the Venezuelan government, with the aim of misleading unprepared spectators of countries who do not know the totality of the referred events.

For you, this film might be only one of the hundreds emissions that you offer each year to your millions of spectators. However, for us, who day in day out work to give our country the peace and democratic coexistence back and to reconstruct a well-being path for all, which Chávez puts every day farther away, the documentary has constituted an authentic motive of indignation, because it constitutes the main weapon of the Venezuelan government to disseminate internationally a biased, manipulated and lying version of what happens here. It is for this reason that we address we address your TV station, the sponsorship and moral endorsement of which is one of the main letters of credibility where this propaganda operation lies on, with such urgency, to request you:

1. To open a prompt investigation on the allegations that we are here presenting, in the presence of the producers of this film and of representatives of those who are making this request. For this reason, we enclose diverse written and audiovisual

evidences, among them a copy of the Film Forum that gathers us together, which has been edited in order to have a reasonable extension of the presentation. We have the totality of the material recorded during the Forum, which can be sent to you upon request.

2. In the case that your investigation throws similar results than those here denounced, that you emit a public clarification acknowledging these deviations to ethics, the biased and propagandistic character of the documentary and that you apologize to the spectators of the whole world that have been abused in their good faith. There are very diverse and recent precedents of these corrections of media before similar situations, like the cases of Jason Blair in the New York Times and James Furlong in Sky News in England. You must remember that in the Furlong case, it was a team of documentary producers the BBC that investigated and revealed the audiovisual fraud, after which they published the story in The Guardian.

3. Finally, we request a right of reply, in the form of an emission – in schedule, length and replay equivalent to those of the debated film - showing the point of view of the democratic opposition sectors of Venezuela about the events that happened in our country during the year 2002 and on the general situation of the country.

We expect our fair claim and respectful request to be listened by you with the responsibility and ethical sense that for many years has lent prestige to that television corporation.

El Gusano de Luz

Please send your reply to this letter to the following address:

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