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Smearing a film about Chávez's Venezuela

Gregory Wilpert
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Oliver Stone's documentary *South of the Border* — about Venezuela and its President Hugo Chávez — was trashed in the *New York Times* in a feature story by correspondent Larry Rohter. Rohter complained the film was full of mistakes — but supporters of the film point out that he made far more errors in his brief article. Here, Gregory Wilpert, co-founder of the *Venezuelanalysis.com* Web site, responds to attack on the film and on his particular role in it.

It is truly amazing how a long-time Latin America correspondent who accuses Oliver Stone's recently released documentary *South of the Border* of "mistakes, misstatements and missing details," manages to get practically every single statement of his own wrong, misstated or lacking in detail.

This is all the more amazing, considering that the filmmakers and I spoke to Larry Rohter at length last week and provided him with the plenty of information to back up the film's points, which he chose to ignore.

Not only are there the numerous errors that Oliver Stone, Tariq Ali and Mark Weisbrot point out in their letter to the *New York Times* (having to do with presidential candidate Irene Sáez, flying over the Andes to get to La Paz, Venezuela's oil exports to the United States, etc.), but here are a few more problems that their letter did not go into.

First of all, Rohter chastises Stone for not disclosing that I—who appears for about a minute in the documentary—am married to Carol Delgado, Venezuela's consul general to New York, nor my affiliation with the mostly pro-Chávez Web site. While these

"affiliations" are correct, I question if they are actually the most relevant disclosures, given the testimony I provide in the film.

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In the documentary, I make brief comments on only two issues—on what I witnessed during the April 2002 coup attempt and on what many "analysts" of Venezuela have said about the role of Venezuela's private mass media, that it openly supports the opposition and subverts the government.

These are both issues I have written about extensively and consistently since April 2002, about six years before my wife was appointed consul in early 2008. My first articles on the coup are available online [here](#) and [here](#). I published my fullest account of the coup in April 2007 [here](#), while my wife was still a mid-level PDVSA employee. Also, my book *Changing Venezuela by Taking Power* was published in September 2007, also before we moved to New York.

So if Stone should have mentioned disclosures in the few seconds that I appear on the screen, then perhaps he should also have mentioned other relevant points.

I can just see it, a full disclosure caption that reads: "Gregory Wilpert, adjunct professor of political science at Brooklyn College, co-founder of the mostly pro-Chávez Venezuelanalysis.com, married to Venezuela's pro-Chávez Consul General, but witnessed and reported on coup-related events six years before his wife's appointment and one-and-a-half years before the founding of Venezuelanalysis.com." I think such a caption would probably have been long enough to cover my face.

Second, Rohter's article suggests that Stone should have known that one of the buildings from which demonstrators were shot at during the coup (known as "La Nacional") belonged to the pro-Chávez mayor's office.

First, while this is true, this building is not even mentioned in the documentary. Second, if Rohter was really interested in providing more detail, he should also have mentioned that nine opposition-affiliated police officers were sentenced to lengthy prison terms for having participated in the occupation of this building and for having shot at demonstrators or for having given the order to do so (further discussion of metropolitan police involvement in the coup can be found [here](#) and [here](#)).

According to evidence presented at the officers' trial, opposition-affiliated police shot at demonstrators from this building. I provided Rohter with this information and suggested to him to read about it in my articles about the coup.

Rohter also says that Stone should have mentioned the hard-line opposition versions of the coup, as described in the film X-Ray of a Lie and in the Brian Nelson book The Silence and the Scorpion. In short, Rohter is arguing that Stone should have taken this opposition version of the coup seriously, which claims (as Nelson and X-Ray of a Lie do) that the coup was not really a coup, even when it is commonly accepted both in Venezuela and around the world that it was indeed a coup.

Rohter clearly still believes the coup was not a coup also, because he never retracted his April 12, 2002, statement in the New York Times, "The armed forces did not actually take power on Thursday. It was the ousted president's supporters who appear to have been responsible for deaths that numbered barely 12, rather than hundreds or thousands, and political rights and guarantees were restored rather than suspended."

The bottom line is, even though Rohter brings up three arguments to cast doubt on the Stone documentary's version of the coup (failure to mention the hard-line opposition account, my potential bias as a witness, and government control over a building from which people were shot), he is unable to raise a single point in the Stone documentary's coup discussion that is misstated or false.

Rohter then goes on to attempt to question several other points made in the film, such as the Kirchners' role in Argentina's economic success and the privatization of Bolivia's water system. As Stone, Ali and Weisbrot argue, none of these points hold any water, let alone validity. Perhaps this is to be expected from a journalist who in 2004 wrote an article, with hardly any evidence, alleging that Brazil's President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva is an alcoholic.

I guess the one place where one can say that Rohter is correct, where Stone indeed made a "mistake or misstatement," is on the pronunciation of Chávez's name. It is pronounced CHA-vez, not sha-VEZ. Gringos should really get that right.