

Lucinda Braodbent

Getting Latin American Women and Men on UK TV¹

UK TV was never the best place to find out about Latin America – though back in the 1980's when I was working in Managua on the distribution of Nicaraguan documentaries that occasionally showed up on late -night Channel 4 (stylishly untitled by Latinamericanist translators), we thought it was the beginning of an aperture for Latin American voices on our screens. In retrospect, it was a short-lived Golden Age: these days, despite the heady promises of a liberalized TV market that sold us more channels on the basis that we'd get more variety in programming, UK TV coverage of the world beyond Dover has slumped.

The paltry number of programs that show us anything at all of "Third World" countries is now dominated by travel, nature and cookery shows. Latin America makes the news reports if there's natural disaster or a visit by foreign dignitaries. So Posoltega scored a double whammy on the news agenda when it disappeared under a mudslide after Hurricane Mitch, and Clinton jetted in for a photocall with some cute orphans. I went to Posoltega as an independent freelance documentary maker and found the same orphans, still penniless and homeless, living under plastic sheeting nearly a year later. When I offered BBC and Channel 4 an expose of how Clinton's promised millions of dollars in aid had been squandered (without consulting the locals) on paying US Marines to build Bailey bridges that promptly collapsed in the next rains, I was told it wasn't a story they cared to air. Disasters have entertainment value, but the ambition to explore or interpret the world outside the UK appears to have evaporated in a sordid scrabble for ratings.

With a few honorable exceptions, the aim is to sell the viewers' eyes to the highest bidder among the advertisers. The assumption is that audiences (that's us) see TV purely as entertainment, and have no interest in obscure corners of the earth like Latin America (unless victims are being pulled from rubble or a US President is posing for the cameras).

Heaven forbid that I'd argue against TV as entertainment, I don't like watching boring programs and I don't want to make them. But surely gripping, illuminating and well-told stories could come to our screens from Latin America as well as from the Big Brother house in east London?

To illustrate my point I could tell any number of self-pitying stories of documentaries I've researched in Latin America that have never got made, falling foul of the current inward-looking, commercialized ethos of UK broadcasting. Instead I take as a brief case study one film that did get made, that was screened at Liverpool's ILAS Conference, before today, *Macho* also.

¹ Notes extracted from the presentation of my film *Macho*, at the *Latin American Women's Human Rights: The Body Matters* Conference, Middlesex University, 10 April 2001.

The history of *Macho*

Daniel Ortega was accused of sexually abusing his stepdaughter from the age of eight. His stepdaughter Zoilamérica Navarez wanted to tell her story, she'd agreed to do a film with me; I thought this had all the ingredients that would allow a story to sneak past the automatic 'no' UK broadcasters routinely give Latin American ideas. The Ortega scandal combined sex (always a plus on TV), a protagonist some Commissioning Editors had already heard of (Ortega), an attractive woman who speaks English (sub-titles are out of vogue in the new regime), and exclusive journalistic access. At first I couldn't raise any interest, but I was also in touch with a men's group in Nicaragua doing pioneering peer-group work with violent and sexually abusive men (sadly, Ortega didn't join).

The Nicaraguan Men's Group supports Zoilamérica, and not only that but they'd been invited to California to teach the New Men of San Francisco a thing or two about how to challenge and change violent men. I wrote a fresh film proposal, tailoring my film idea to the current fashion for films about masculinity and personal development, adding the participation of some American Iron Johns (English-speakers again): I was able to tick even more of the boxes required by the ever more narrow-minded gatekeepers in the TV channels.

It's a compromise that independent filmmakers make if we want to work: gauging the market and trying to find ways to slip under the wire with stories we feel are worth telling. I thought I had a good chance with *Macho*; but for months it was the same experience as trying to find a TV slot for the story of the Hurricane survivors in Posoltaga story: another humiliating pile of rejections. I tried Channel 4 first, then various BBC departments, then Channel 4 again, with only a desultory response; so I branched out then TV stations in Germany, Denmark, Holland and Belgium – I had no better luck. In the end my knights in shining armour were the wonderful women in charge of BBC's series *Correspondent*. I had to forsake the independent sector and direct the program as a BBC in-house production on a miserably low budget, but Zoilamérica was going to get her voice on screen and the Men's Group seen giving lessons to the Californians.

A last-minute hitch as *Correspondent* decided to halve the duration and the budget and told me not to go with the Nicaraguan men to San Francisco after all; but I managed to wangle a last-minute grant from a US foundation to complete the shooting and editing. With an award-winning Nicaraguan crew, *MACHO* was made, shown on BBC2, and lives on after broadcast as an educational tape, popular with men's groups academics and youth groups. Just to prove how deeply commercialism has sunk into the soul of independent filmmakers who work in TV, I'll end with an advertisement: the documentary *Macho*, 26 minutes, is available on videotape in English or Spanish from distributors in the UK (contact: gwl@womens-library.org.uk) and the USA (www.wmm.com).

Notes extracted from the presentation of my film *Macho*, at the "Latin American Women's Human Rights: The Body Matters" Conference, Middlesex University, 10 April 2001.