

# PRESS KIT

A grainy, high-contrast photograph of a woman with blonde hair speaking into several microphones. The image has a halftone or dithered texture. The title 'VENEZUELA, IN WARTIME' is overlaid on a black rectangular box in the center of the image.

## VENEZUELA, IN WARTIME

A film by Thomas Michel & Rafael Abril

Belgium / 2018  
45 minutes  
A ZIN TV production

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# TECHNICAL SHEET

- Synopsis

*Venezuela, in wartime*, portrays a type of unconventional war, dubbed the “4th generation”. In 2017, Venezuela experienced a catastrophic economic recession, accompanied by insurrectionary movements led by the opposition, both national and international. Although the major European mainstream media decontextualized these political events, leaving only one possible reading, this film proposes giving the floor to the other faction in the majority in the country: the Chavist base. The film exposes a point of view that one does not find in the western framework of the news.

Title: Venezuela, in wartime  
Director: Thomas MICHEL & Rafael ABRIL  
Editing & voiceover: Thomas MICHEL  
Production: ZIN TV

Genre: Documentary  
Duration: 45 minutes  
Support: HD 1080p  
Shooting: December 2017  
Release: May 2018

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# DIRECTORS' NOTE

Because of its abundant natural resources, especially hydrocarbons, Venezuela is a very wealthy country. For a long time, these resources were monopolized by the ruling elites of the country as well as by multinational companies. Until the election of Hugo Chávez in December 1998, more than half of the Venezuelan population lived below the poverty line. Social policies, public investment, nationalization, land reform, minimum wage, access to housing and education, right to health, retirement -the “Bolivarian revolution” promoted by Chávez - has allowed the redistribution of some of the country’s wealth to benefit the people. The revolutionary process that has been continuing now for nearly 20 years in Venezuela is generating very strong interest. Nevertheless, it is, so to speak, never depicted as an emancipatory movement; instead, the mass media have been striving, almost unanimously, to demonize it.

That is why, in this film, we chose to give the floor to the people, to the Chavist base, the majority in Venezuela, living in the poor neighbourhoods of Caracas, who have suffered the economic war for the past five years. Our objective was to present another point of view, that of the “people from below”, which we very rarely see conveyed, in order to compel the European public to question what they know or think about the political situation in Venezuela. Why, in Europe, is it so easy to believe that Venezuela is a dictatorship? Why is European mainstream media treatment of the “Bolivarian revolution” modelled on the US vision? On this aspect, the Venezuelan media situation is comparable to that of Europe; in Venezuela, the private sector largely controls the media - be it television, paper or radio.

Nevertheless, despite this monopoly, the anti-imperialist struggle of the people is not weakening. Why, while not avoiding criticism of the Chavist government, do a majority of Venezuelans not fall into the discontent sought by the economic war and continue to support Nicolas Maduro? How do people’s organizations overcome growing difficulties despite years of shortages, price inflation and the devaluation of the Bolivar? What is this economic war that destabilizes the country? Where does it come from? *Venezuela, in wartime* is a documentary made with film material collected over eight days of shooting, in reportage conditions. This film serves as a gateway to another reading of Venezuela’s political situation, and it calls for debate.

**Thomas MICHEL & Rafael ABRIL**



# CONTEXT OF THE film

- **Filming location: Caracas**

In Venezuela, in February 1992, Hugo Chávez attempted a coup against the government. Although it failed, and Chávez was sent to prison for two years, he became known to the Venezuelan people as an opponent of the neoliberal policies enforced by the government at that time. Elected democratically for the first time in 1998 (invested in February 1999), then re-elected in 2000, 2006 and 2012, Hugo Chávez led Venezuela for 14 years, until his death on March 5th, 2013. During his presidency, he began a process of profound political and social transformation of the country. Based on significant oil revenues, the government implemented a policy of redistributing this windfall; the oil industry, PDVSA, was nationalized. In 15 years, social programs significantly improved the lives of the poorest Venezuelans, who gained access to health, housing, education, food and employment. A new constitution was created. This movement of reforms and redistribution of oil revenue was called the “Bolivarian Revolution”. Chávez’s anti-imperialist policy led him to build a solid south-south diplomacy, emancipated from the West, and to promote a multipolar world, notably through the ALBA (Bolivarian alliance for the peoples of our America - Treaty of Commerce of the People). Before his death, Chávez appointed Nicolas Maduro (PSUV, the United Socialist Party of Venezuela, leftist coalition created in 2007), then foreign minister and vice president, as his successor. Maduro won the presidential election in April 2013 with 50.62 per cent of the vote against opposition leader Henrique Capriles. After the vote, important demonstrations, supported by the right-wing coalition “Table of Democratic Unity” (Mesa de la Unidad Democrática, or “MUD”), were held in Caracas to protest against the official results. Despite a recount of votes by the National Electoral Council, the result remained unchanged. The United States and the European Union contested the results.

In February 2014, a new wave of violent demonstrations initiated by students protesting against shortages occurred; the Table of Democratic Unity (MUD) called for the overthrow of the head of state, launching an operation of destabilization in the streets called “La Salida” (the exit). This period of violence (“guarimbas”), causing the deaths of 43 people and injuring more than 800, failed to overthrow the government. The leader of “Voluntad Popular” (one of the MUD coalition parties), Leopoldo Lopez, was arrested for inciting violence and subsequently sentenced to 13 years in prison. In March 2015, the United States, Venezuela’s largest trading partner, adopted a series of economic sanctions against his neighbour. In the course of 2015, the price of an oil barrel dropped significantly, from about 150 dollars to 40 dollars.

On December 6th 2015, the opposition (MUD) won the legislative elections, taking 109 out of the 167 seats and moving to the National Assembly. The PSUV recognized his defeat. This victory marked the beginning of a long period of political and institutional paralysis. The legislative and executive bodies were strongly opposed. In October 2016, the Venezuelan Parliament approved the opening of a dismissal lawsuit against President Nicolas Maduro (although the constitution does not provide for this kind of procedure): The announced objective of the new majority was to overthrow the sitting president. In the midst of this political crisis, the country’s economic, health and security crisis worsened. Due to shortages of essential goods (food, hygiene products, currency, etc.), the social climate was tense; the right organized demonstrations in the rich neighbourhoods of Caracas, giving rise to insurrectional violence and looting. Attempts for political mediation between the Maduro government and UNASUR (Union of South American Nations), an intergovernmental organization inspired by the European Union, failed at the end of 2016.

In early 2017, against the backdrop of the serious economic crisis, a decision by the Supreme Court of Justice to arrogate the prerogatives of the National Assembly, and thereby break the political stalemate, led to an important mobilization of the opposition. This decision would be revoked in the following days. Four months of street violence and protests between pro-US and anti-Chavist factions against law enforcement authorities led to more than 125 deaths and over 1000 injuries. In the face of violence and the growing number of deaths, President Maduro announced the election of a National Constituent Assembly on May 1st, 2017. The opposition, divided and disorganized, chose to boycott the election of the new assembly and accused the regime of electoral malpractice. The UN denounced the “excessive use of force” by the Venezuelan authorities against the protesters. Of the dead, 50 were policemen. On July 30th, 2017, the National Constituent Assembly was elected. Despite an extremely tense situation and threats against voters by right-wing militias, more than 8 million citizens voted. This new assembly (composed of 364 elected representatives of municipal constituencies, 173 representatives of social groups - workers, retirees, students, peasants, handicapped, business leaders - and 8 representatives of indigenous communities) arrogates to itself legislative powers at the expense of the National Assembly. Its work is expected to last two years and lead to a new constitution (replacing the one from 1999) to be approved by referendum.

In November 2017, the United States and ambassadors from the 28 countries of the European Union approved the adoption of new economic sanctions against Venezuela; these sanctions prohibit US banks from buying Venezuela’s public debt and restrict trade, thereby inhibiting North American and European companies from trading with Venezuela. A blacklist against senior Venezuelan officials was drawn up; this list includes Nicolas Maduro and Delcy Rodriguez, president of the National Constituent Assembly.



# INTERVIEW WITH THOMAS MICHEL

## Where did the idea of shooting “Venezuela, in wartime” come from?

In the spring of 2017, there was a lot of news about Venezuela and the media coverage of the violence there. From April to July, Rafael and I read everything we could on the subject, comparing information available in the mainstream media to information reported in smaller media or by reporters writing in the so-called “alternative” newspapers. We were frightened by the decontextualization of the events here, by the uniformity of the point of view presented, and we were destabilized by what the people, our close friends, knew about Venezuela. In the mainstream media, the causes of the political and economic crisis of the country are mostly ignored. We replaced the analysis of the political situation with the analysis of particular facts. The list of violence takes precedence over the reasons for this violence. Events are reduced to a sum of particular cases, and cut off from their origin. Well, all that we already knew ... The way the big media work, it's been a long time that we are interested in, in a critical way. But what mainly worried us was the conditioned point of view that people here have on the situation. The submission of all mainstream media to such a majority and common opinion is so strong that it is forgotten that it is just an opinion. It sets conditions of admissibility and skepticism when information comes out of the framework to which one is accustomed. People do not know what to think, and what is most written or said ends up being considered true. In other words, the interpretative framework set by the mass media creates our apprehension of reality, or rather of a certain reality ... But the adoption of a particular point of view (for example, the one held by the Venezuelan right wing) results from a choice, a choice excluding another possible point of view. And when this point of view is always the same, sanitized, it paralyzes judgment, it impoverishes information ... We wanted to give another outlook, another reading ...

## How did the production go?

The shooting was very short. We only filmed for eight days. Rafael recorded the sound and conducted the interviews, and I took the pictures. We have been in contact with Catia TV and Alba TV, two web TV channels based in Caracas and well known among the people, who have helped us set up good meetings, film safely in the neighbourhoods, and avoid wasting too much time. We would not have made the film without their support. Apart from the point of view of the people, we wanted the points of view of specialists familiar with the political situation who would be able to provide a more global analysis to understand more deeply the causes of the crisis. It's not that the people of the neighbourhoods are unable to explain the causes of what's happening; on the contrary, many of them are very aware and informed of the reasons underlying the difficulties they encounter, but to go into detail and with time to cogitate. We did four interviews of an hour each, upon which we ultimately built the film. We interviewed Pablo Sepulveda, a psychiatrist in Caracas who could explain in detail the implications of shortages in his daily work with the sick. We interviewed Marco Teruggi, a sociologist and journalist who is active in the people's organizations and has a blog on which he regularly publishes chronicles on Venezuelan political life. We interviewed Pablo Kunich, a journalist and coordinator of Alba TV, a web



TV channel covering news of social movements in Venezuela; Pablo gave us the critical point of view that we needed on the Venezuelan media, which is mostly private and favourable to foreign intervention. Eventually, we interviewed Maria Hernandez, a feminist lawyer who told us about the very important role of women in popular organizations and the functioning of the electoral system, which is not the same as it is here in Europe. Once back in Belgium, I handled the editing, which took around six months. The ZIN TV team helped me a lot and greatly supported me. It was therefore possible to make this film thanks to the help of the people here, who were generous and welcoming, and because it was done on a voluntary basis. Neither Rafael nor I (nor the ZIN TV team) were paid to make this film. It is very regrettable, but to defend another point of view on the situation requires this kind of production: a militant production..

### **Did you encounter difficulties on the ground?**

For sure, the situation is difficult there. Even if people get organized, it's complicated day to day, undeniably. Basic food products have disappeared. The struggle is visible. At the corner of a street, at the entrance of a supermarket, we see a 150 people lining up for flour. And you can see queues everywhere in the west of the city. It's not easy to understand this being from Europe, because despite the shortages, other goods are still available, but corn flour is one of the main elements of, if not essential to, Venezuelan cuisine. This shows the organization of shortages: fruits and vegetables have not disappeared from the stalls, for example ... No more toilet paper, as the Western media love to rehash, but paper towels ... And just walk to the east of Caracas, the richest part of the city, to find luxury goods, whiskey, champagne, vodka, all that is expensive. Yet these stores are always busy; people attending these shops don't hide their financial ease. When we see that, we wonder why the government is not taking more radical measures. It doesn't seem any more difficult to package flour than to produce oil ... Or to open the market to other economic actors, rather than importing food from the United States ... For example, in the face of medicines, why not nationalize the pharmaceutical industry? And then, in Caracas for only 10 days, due to

our European purchasing power, even with a minimal budget, we live very well. And as often the poorest people are the most generous, they help you. In the end, it's clear: Caracas is not a safe city, but in a few days, we realized that this is not a city that sells the mainstream media back in Europe. "Guarimbas" last spring took place in a defined area of the capital; an overwhelming majority of the city did not participate to the violence. During filming, many residents of the working-class neighbourhoods told us that during the clashes, people went about their daily business, coping, surviving, far from the conflict, because they did not see any interest, because they support Maduro.

## What did you see in Caracas?

Caracas is a city of concrete, rather ugly. You can feel the oil peak of the 1980s. Buildings were erected quickly because people needed housing. The buildings were sometimes very imposing. They were part of the program, "Gran Misión Vivienda", which allocated decent housing to the population, at low cost. Also, it's a city of cars, trucks, buses, motorcycles ... Everyone gets around in a motorized way. Gasoline costs nothing or almost nothing. Why walk 500 meters when you can take a car? When one has political ecological convictions, it's kind of aching. Even if we have to put things in perspective, since Venezuela does not have the same standard of living as Europe, but still, all in all, the "oil way of life" is a real problem. The film was shot in December, four months after the end of the clashes, and the stigma of violence had virtually disappeared. Only some "anti-government" graffiti remained, mainly around the ring of Caracas. And, in the neighbourhoods, in the west, there was nothing that could be compared to the remains of the "guarimbas". This demonstrated the concentration of violence in the east of the city. In San Agustín, one of the most popular neighbourhoods of the capital, where most of the film was shot, people are in the streets talking. The neighbourhood is lively, the houses are colourful, the cars and motorcycles travel in all directions. When Hugo Chávez came into power, this district was the 19th most violent of the city's 23 districts. Today, it's the fourth least violent district, thanks to popular organizations, subsidized by the state, which invest in the streets, provide social assistance, grant food aid, through the CLAP system, making sense by offering cultural activities, sport infrastructures ... Committees of street painters renew the facades of popular places and people's houses. The west of the city is poor, the people don't have much, they struggle, but they organize themselves as best they can, they do not let themselves get cut down. It's impressive to see.





## What do you personally think of the situation?

Personally, I wanted to make this film, this “chavist” film, because I wanted that this point of view, contrasting, must exist, had to have a place here, in Belgium, in France ... I’m far from being a specialist in Latin America, and I don’t claim to be pro-Maduro. Nevertheless, I have a lot of trouble with the trend here, which I see as a kind of “democratic good-thinking” - never to take part, never to take a position. At Zin TV, we call it the “nor nor” trend. And so, because I’m resolutely against North-American imperialism, and because we have to choose, that’s what politics is about, I choose the Maduro government, supported by the majority of the population, who don’t want any US intervention. In a way, it’s the idea that if you want to be equal, sometimes you have to be “unequal”. That’s why we don’t give room to the opposition in the film, because they are already very widely represented here. From my point of view, it was necessary to make a film contrasting with this overrepresentation of the Venezuelan right wing in the mainstream media, which hides all the social progress going on there. In my opinion, it’s by giving a completely different reading of the situation that we are most in a position to be aware, as a spectator, of the way in which the mass media provides us with only one part of reality: the reality of the financial and ideological interests of their owners. And this “reality” often strives to discredit or demonize ideas from left-wing parties or socialist and communist ideas. As I said, exposing facts implies judgment. Favouring such or such a fact amounts to saying that this fact is more important than another; by doing that, we organize the reality by omission, by saying only one part ... So let’s not talk about objectivity, especially when it amounts to avoiding the expression of a certain point of view. In fact, I believe that ideology is always hidden. And because of this, it’s difficult to be aware of one’s own ideology, or of the ideology in which one is raised and which one peddles in spite of oneself. And I think the mainstream media, seemingly neutral, are deeply



ideological, encouraging the resignation of the critical spirit rather than its awakening. At ZIN TV, on the contrary, we think that information is always subjective, and that the point of view should never be hidden. That's why the film is openly "chavist". Only by knowing where the journalist or the director is from can one position oneself regarding the information given. If this film can bring something, it's another, politicized look, so that the viewer questions (or re-questions) what he or she thinks and knows about Venezuela. Also, I think that if we talk so much about Venezuela in the mass media, while Belgium and France have no real economic stakes there, it's because Maduro is used as an element of domestic politics. As Hugo Chávez or Fidel Castro before ... Demonizing these political leaders serves to prevent the enunciation of social conflict, which leans more and more in favour of socialism. In France, for example, it's necessary to weaken as much as possible the left-wing party called "La France insoumise"; it's necessary to associate Jean-Luc Mélenchon with Maduro, to associate socialism with a dictatorial system ... And then it also serves to be in agreement with the United States on an easy subject, while others pose more problems. And as the well-known "experts" in the mainstream media are the least critical of the foundations of the liberal system, this kind of easy association "communism equals dictatorship" have room ... are widely publicized. It's interesting to note that the Venezuelan electoral system, which is very much criticized here, is recognized by the Carter Foundation. Carter, who wasn't a socialist president, is one of the surest in the world. This raises the question of the difference between formal democracy and real democracy ... and I think that this kind of question, in Europe, could pose a problem to our institutions if it came to find a real echo ... I think that there is indeed a humanitarian crisis in Venezuela, but I think it's organized by the United States (or rather by US multinationals) via the Venezuelan right and local militias, to obtain a regime change, a return of the liberal right to power, and to obtain a new privatization of oil. I think that the situation, in many points, is comparable to that of Chile in 1972-73 before the coup of the Pinochet-Nixon tandem against Allende. In order to monopolize copper resources, it would prevent any nationalization... And sure, they had to discourage the people to legitimize a coup. I think that in Venezuela, private companies deliberately provoke supply problems to achieve their ends, to instigate a change of power. To finish, I think that the Western media, the American and European media, in favour of the Venezuelan opposition, systematically obscure the reasons behind the economic war underway in Venezuela. Everything is far from perfect there, but nothing justifies the economic strangulation of the country and the many sanctions imposed on it by the United States and Europe.

## Do you think that the film will change something?

If this film can in any way be used to question the vacuum-sealed and falsely neutral information we are accustomed to in the mainstream media (here in Belgium or France: *La Libre*, *Le Soir*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, *Médiapart*), to spark interest in other points of view, to encourage insights into geopolitics, not just Venezuela, but in what our governments are doing ... then that would be ideal. That's the purpose of a film, to talk about what interests us, what concerns us, in order to interest others.



*This interview was conducted on June 11th, 2018, by Maxime Kouvaras, journalist at Zin TV.*



# DIRECTORS' BIOGRAPHIES



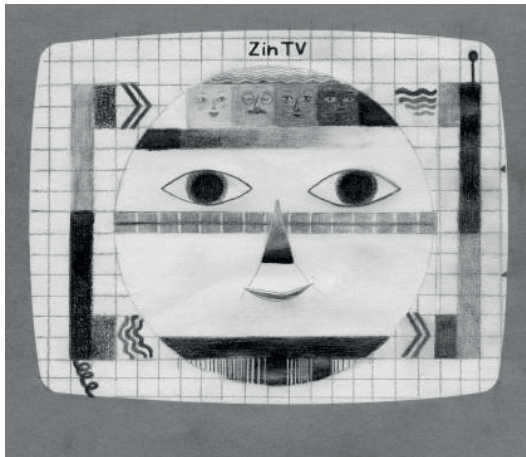
**THOMAS MICHEL**

Born in Normandy, Thomas lives in Brussels, where he studied videography and sculpture. Repelled by art schools and the dogma of so-called “contemporary art” (the art branch of capitalism), he has turned instead to engaged cinema. An Anti-productivist who is politically inspired by the anti-consumerist movement of political ecology, called “Degrowth”, Thomas works as a videographer (never for advertising, never for banks). Attached to media criticism, passionate about documentary, he is a member of ZIN TV and the Kairos newspaper. His work seeks to make connections between politics and the arts.



**RAFAEL ABRIL CUERVO**

Colombian and Belgian, Rafael studied photography at the IAD school in Brussels. He worked for one year at the film studio “Studio L'équipe”. Rafael is an activist of the Human Rights Committee “Daniel Gillard”, a solidarity group with Colombia active in Brussels. In 2011, he founded the TELEBRAILLE Internet video medium, which has broadcast since 2014. Since then, Rafael has worked freelance in the audiovisual world. He is a member of ZIN TV.



## ZIN TV

ZIN TV is an associative WebTV based in Brussels. It brings together filmmakers, audiovisual professionals, artists and citizens involved in the construction of a common project: a model of communication of citizen participation. ZIN TV creates communication tools that open viewers to realities that are often ignored and invite them to reflection, awareness and collective action. These projects reflect concerns for the safeguarding of the human species, social gains and human rights. ZIN TV is also an audiovisual pedagogy project at the service of citizens engaged in associations. Our trainings introduce the participant to social reporting, documentary cinema and fiction. They seek to free the audiovisual language from television, institutional or commercial formats. ZIN TV is a laboratory designed as a space for the liberation of forms and cinema language. ZIN TV has in its team qualified members in the audiovisual, graphic and internet development field. Thus, we develop partnerships that allow us to evolve in a network and collaborate punctually on common projects. We have to our credit many professional experiences in Latin America but also in Africa, which allow us to enlarge our field of action as well from the point of view of training, production or dissemination.

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Venezuela  
Opinion

## Venezuela has fallen to a dictator. But we can help to restore democracy

*Reynaldo Trombetta*

Wed 23 May 2018 09:00 BST



604 758

Nicolás Maduro has brought the country to its knees. The international community must support Venezuelans trying to restore democracy



▲ 'Nicolás Maduro's is a textbook dictatorship, with assassinations, censorship of the press, and a sociopathic strategy to use the hunger of its own citizens as a tool for political control.' Photograph: Xinhua/REX/Shutterstock

The descent of Venezuela into a dictatorship has resembled the fable of the boy that cried wolf. Back in July 2000, when Hugo Chávez won his first re-election, many in the opposition, surprised by his sudden rise in popularity, claimed electoral fraud. Since then, it seems, the norm has been for the opposition to accuse the government of stealing elections, without presenting enough evidence to gain the support of the international community. This has made it difficult for many outside Venezuela to label the regime a dictatorship. Until now.

It has never been clearer that Nicolás Maduro – who cynically described this weekend's vote as “a triumph of democracy” – is a dictator. Dozens of countries throughout Europe and the Americas warned that the fraudulent presidential elections should not occur and are now refusing to recognise the results.

We are not dealing with an authoritarian government that, like Chávez's, still managed to loosely colour between the lines of democracy and the rule of law. This is a textbook dictatorship, with assassinations, torture and sexual abuse of political prisoners, violent censorship of the press, and a sociopathic strategy to use the hunger of its own citizens as a tool for political control. So, in the face of all this, what can we do to help restore democracy in Venezuela?

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Opinion

## Out of Good Options for Venezuela

By Roger F. Noriega

Mr. Noriega is a former assistant secretary of state for Western Hemisphere affairs.

May 10, 2018



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President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela, who is seeking election to a second term on May 20, at a campaign rally in Caracas last week. Carlos Garcia Rawlins/Routledge

Last week at a conference in Miami, the director for Western Hemisphere affairs at the National Security Council, Juan Cruz, took aim at the regime of President Nicolás Maduro of Venezuela.

Mr. Cruz cited part of the Venezuelan Constitution, drafted under Mr. Maduro's predecessor Hugo Chávez, that says the people "shall disown any regime, legislation or authority that violates the values, principles and democratic guarantees or encroaches upon human rights." He [was directing his comments](#) at the Venezuelan military, imploring its members to honor their commitment to the Constitution.

As when Rex Tillerson [made similar statements in February](#) as secretary of state, Mr. Cruz's critics said that it was unwise for Washington to encourage a coup d'état.

But Mr. Cruz is merely facing facts. Mr. Maduro holds his power through the systematic violation of human rights and constitutional order, which has brought on an economic and social collapse and [a refugee crisis](#) that is affecting the whole continent. A regime steeped in corruption and narco-trafficking, whose violent crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations in 2014 and 2017 left 200 dead and thousands injured, will never cede power voluntarily.

Rather than fear a coup, the international community should encourage all Venezuelans — including soldiers — to restore democracy.