



Brainwaves
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Trying TV times but they could try to soft soap us

I've never heard anything so ludicrous as this hoo-ha about party leaders having a debate on the telly before the general election. It is a foolish innovation that threatens the future of parliamentary democracy.

We already face a crisis of distrust in our representative parliamentary system. Exposing politicians to public scrutiny only plays into the hands of the anarchists. For the health of the nation, all MPs should be kept out of public view until this election business is over.

Hasn't enough damage already been done to our institutions by televising the proceedings of Parliament? This was an appalling step. History shows that while MPs could be neither seen nor heard, they enjoyed a considerable degree of public respect. People looked up to them. While we had no idea what they did, we assumed it was something important and demanding. They looked serious and worked in a palace. We thought they must be doing something worthwhile.

Then came the folly of televising Parliament, exposing their antics to the entire nation. Inevitably, people are going to ask why they pay a fortune so that windbags can shout at each other and make farmyard noises. Worse, afternoon viewers of the Parliamentary Channel frequently find a solitary MP talking to herself, oblivious to the utterly empty ranges of green leather benches opposite. Lonely as Vladimir Putin at a civil rights rally, she ploughs on reading a dirge to a vast chamber populated only by Dennis Skinner: who berates her. It's like a scene from *One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest*.

Besides, public debates are an affront to modern-day news values. Regardless of channel, the news has moved on the days when it merely chronicled recent events. It's become a show, like any other. The news isn't to be taken seriously. It's entertainment. Punters want something offbeat and amusing to watch, not "bulletins". Andrew Marr's Sunday show is a good example of the genre: he hurries through a brace of serious folk in suits to establish a hint of gravitas, and then moves quickly to a celebrity mocking the papers before getting to the key moment where he

introduces the band.

A show of seven sober and solemn people taking turns to spout speeches is anathema. One option is to break up the harangues by introducing a turn between talkers: a juggler, say, or a stripper if the Kippers are taking part. Or to attract the youth, we could include a chanson from a popular beat combo. David Cameron could end his litany of statistics to Enter Shikari's rendition of their popular tune "Anaesthetist" with its refrain "You suck the blood of the afflicted".

I'm sure Nick Clegg would be up for it, as long as a spotlight was provided.

Another feasible alternative would be to slip the leaders unobtrusively into existing programmes. I see no reason why they could not spend a month prior to the election in the *Big Brother* house, for example. Or they could feature on *Come Dine with Me* or *The Great British Bake Off*, chatting distractedly over their gateaux rather than listing fictions. On humanitarian grounds, I would excuse Ed Miliband from appearing on *Strictly Come Dancing* but the others could have a go. I'd quite like to see Clegg and Cammy performing the Paso Doble, a colourful dance based on a bullfight.

With a little imagination, these "debates" could be eased into popular soaps. The narrative could continue, but a leader could be allocated a few moments to announce a policy initiative. This could be relatively seamless. As Owen strives to salvage his relationship with Anna and his girls in *Coronation Street*, Clegg could pop up from behind the sofa and expound his views on trust and reliability. It would lighten the scene as well as providing a political input. Cameron could hop out of a bedpan to discuss the National Health Service, while *EastEnders'* Stan Carter's terminal illness continues apace.

And think how effortlessly Nigel Farage could fit into *Top Gear*, assuming injustice is done and the show continues. He could emerge, Peter Cushing style, from an inspection pit to endorse Jeremy Clarkson's casual racism, physical assaults on workmates, scorn for the mentally unstable and advocacy of death by shooting for striking workers.

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Footnotes

Guatemala is put in the picture

Neil Young describes his highlights at the recent Berlin Film Festival

What's your favourite Guatemalan movie? Those present at Berlin's 65th International Film Festival ("Berlinale") now have a ready answer to that tricky cultural poser thanks to Jayro Bustamante's *Ixcanul Volcano*. It's the Central American nation's first contender for top honours at one of Europe's "big three" cinema showcases: Berlin, Cannes, Venice. A debut feature from 37-year-old Bustamante, this atmospheric story of a Mayan family eking out a living on a coffee-plantation took the Alfred Bauer Prize. This gong is designed to honour a film "that opens new perspectives".

So while the award generated fewer international headlines than the Golden Bear for Iran's state-hounded *Jafar Panahi* (*Taxi*) or Britain's double-triumph via Charlotte Rampling and Sir Tom Courtenay (*45 Years*), it brings welcome attention to a nation which has fallen off news-radar since a 36-year civil war ended in 1996.

A wedge-shaped country bordering Mexico, Belize, Honduras and El Salvador, the Bulgaria-sized Guatemala has a Netherlands-ish population of 16 million, including Nobel Prize winner Rigoberta Menchú – whose fellow Mayans suffered murderous repression under the US-backed, right-wing governments of the 1970s and '80s.

Not all American involvement here has been malign, however. In 1977, George Lucas dispatched a crew to Tikal, the ancient ruined city nestled among biodiverse rain-forests. In *Star Wars*, this lush backwater became Yavin 4: the rebel-stronghold moon ("It's where all the idealists hang out, I hear" – Han Solo) whose planned obliteration by the Galactic Empire's Death Star triggers the explosive, optimistic finale.

Lucas has never been noted for his political acumen, so his selection of Guatemala was presumably made on aesthetic grounds rather than a desire to draw ironic parallels between his fantasy-universe and the shameful recent history of his imperialist fatherland.

In 1954, Guatemala suffered the first CIA-backed coup outside the Middle East, when leftist President Jacobo Árbenz Guzmán was overthrown in favour of Carlos Castillo Armas – first in

a string of dictatorial rulers.

Given the resulting turmoil and bloodshed in the "Land of Eternal Spring" (launchpad for the US's abortive assault on Cuba during the 1961 Bay of Pigs' fiasco) it's no surprise that Guatemala failed to develop any film industry.

Luis Argueta's *The Silence of Neto*, made just 21 years ago, is regarded as the first fully Guatemalan feature. And while Julio Hernández Cordón has put the country on the festival-circuit map with *Gasolina* (2008), *Marimbas From Hell* (2011) and Locarno-competing *Dust* (2012), the director hails from North Carolina.

Countries such as Guatemala must currently rely on homegrown talent like Bustamante returning home after learning the ropes overseas. "People from my generation that want to do film in Guatemala usually had to study abroad", he has said. "The first film school in Guatemala was opened only 10 years ago, so it's just starting. There are no laboratories, no cameras, or funds."

Born-and-bred Guatemalan, Bustamante studied film in Paris and Rome before making TV-commercials for Manhattan-based advertising giant Ogilvy & Mather; *Ixcanul Volcano* is a Guatemalan-French co-production, with post-production sound-mixing by Julien Cloquet. Cinematographer Luis Armando Arteaga, whose natural lighting is crucial throughout, likewise boasts numerous international credits.

This slickness doesn't detract from *Ixcanul Volcano*'s authenticity – dialogue is mainly in the Mayan language Kaqchikel (the protagonists are barely-educated illiterates who can't speak Spanish, and are thus easy prey for exploitative employers). But it does mean that the film is a long way from the undiluted glimpses of reality that one can stumble across in documentaries.

The elephant in the room is that ordinary Guatemalans (let alone downtrodden indigenous people) like their kin in so many poorer nations, simply have no way of making viewable films given the current, screamingly unequal systems of finance, exhibition and distribution which prevail across the globe. Systems which mega-bucks

festivals like the Berlinale, with their red-carpet fixation, atavistic sub-Hollywood glamour and tiresome parade of familiar names (Herzog, Wenders and Greenaway all competed this year) unthinkingly perpetuate; systems which, because of their hideous structural imbalances, can yield only a narrow and unrepresentative medium.

Which isn't to say that the Berlinale was devoid of artistic achievement. The Forum section yielded a trio of strong documentaries – all debuts – which illustrated the benefit of intimate proximity to one's chosen subject. Francesco Clerici, responsible for the wonderfully simple, daringly direct *Hand Gestures*, stumbled across his material on his Milan dootstep when he realised he lived only yards from a long-established bronze foundry. Michel K Zongo, director of Burkina Faso's *The Siren of Faso Fani*, has relatives who worked in the textile-factory which his movie so colourfully chronicles – and whose senseless closure, dictated by neoliberal International Monetary Fund and World Bank dogma, devastated his city's economy. Vladimir Tomić's sprightly *Flotel Europa* is even more autobiographical: visuals consist of video footage shot when Tomić, his brother and mother were evacuated from the Bosnian war to a floating "hotel" in Copenhagen.

If an unknown like Bustamante had elected to make a documentary instead of fiction – *Ixcanul Volcano* is true-story-based – he wouldn't have had a hope of making the main competition. Berlinale, which started in 1951, didn't have a doc up for top gongs until 2008: Errol Morris's *Standard Operating Procedure*. Only giants of the non-fiction world – such as Chile's Patricio Guzmán, whose *The Pearl Button* took Best Screenplay this year – get to bid for gold here, and the victory of Gianfranco Rosi's *Sacred GRA* at Venice in 2013 means Berlin is the only one of the "big three" never to have been won by a documentary. That non-fiction works, even those of obvious merit, are blithely relegated to second-class status is just one symptom of a supposedly global and democratic art whose priorities have been so horribly out of whack for so long that hardly anyone seems to notice or care.