



Ignacio Agüero. *Agustín's Newspaper*. Brooklyn: Icarus Films, 2009. DVD. 80 minutes. \$398.00.

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El Mercurio and the “Disappeared”

In the 1970s, the countries in the southern cone of South America (Argentina, Uruguay, and Chile) were under right-wing dictatorships. This DVD, *Agustín's Newspaper*, explores the role of *El Mercurio*, Chile's premier conservative newspaper, in U.S. intervention in one of those dictatorships, chronicling the dictator's ensuing rise to power and the regime's subsequent disinformation campaigns. In addition to substantiating the newspaper's participation in covering up human rights abuses perpetrated by the government, the film details how the newspaper's editor, Agustín Edwards Eastman, contributed to bringing the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) into the plot to overthrow Salvador Allende, Chile's democratically elected president.

“*El Mercurio Lies*” is the title of the DVD's first section, and it states exactly what the journalism students who created the documentary set out to prove. The film is the product of a workshop at the Universidad de Chile, with funding from the Chilean government's Consejo Nacional de La Cultura y Las Artes (National Board for Culture and the Arts). Claudia Lagos is shown meeting with students, reviewing tapes and making phone calls in an attempt to arrange interviews. Edwards Eastman does not ever grant interviews, forcing the students to recycle one television interview near the end of the documentary, but several of the newspaper's staff members were interviewed, though many of them were unaware that a documentary was being filmed. The segment title “*El Mercurio Lies*” is taken from student protests of the late 1960s, when *El Mercurio* (the oldest Spanish language daily newspaper) claimed that it had “documentary evi-

dence” to prove that there were Communists among the protestors; in doing so, it deliberately failed to distinguish between Socialists and Communists, as the former deputy editor of the paper, Arturo Fontaine, admits in the documentary. This is the first of several disinformation campaigns carried out by the paper from 1967 to the mid-1980s.

The next segment, “Foreign Help Is On the Way” (a sardonic use of a *Mercurio* headline) explains how Edwards Eastman traveled to Washington DC almost immediately after an Allende campaign speech that criticized and specifically named his family as one of those in Chile's ruling oligarchy. (The Allende speech is documented with archival footage, as are many events in the film, including protests, arrests, and detentions.) Edwards Eastman's presence in New York is documented through photographs. As far as his encouraging CIA participation in Allende's downfall, John Dinges, who was a *Washington Post* correspondent in Chile at the time, refers the viewer to declassified documents that detail the editor's meetings with government and CIA officials, and the agreement that the U.S. government would transfer money to *El Mercurio*. Although names have been redacted, as Dinges admits, photographs show that Edwards Eastman met with President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and CIA officials. Subsequently, *El Mercurio* received about two million dollars from the U.S. government to stay solvent. Fontaine, one of only two former newspaper employees who consented to participate in the documentary, does not admit that he knew the money had been transferred, but does say that

he always wondered how the newspaper stayed afloat when advertising revenues were down.

Other segments of the DVD focus on specific disinformation campaigns that the *El Mercurio* ran. One of these involved the “119,” a list of people who had “disappeared” (detained and tortured and/or killed) at the hands of the government. Agents from Chile’s DINA (Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional, the country’s national intelligence directorate) were instructed to render corpses in neighboring Argentina unrecognizable and plant Chilean identifications on them. The hope was that the families of those who had disappeared would accept their deaths and stop inquiring about their relatives. What is missing here, for those unfamiliar with South American politics, is an explanation of what this operation, known as “Operation Colombo,” was exactly, and what Argentina was going through at the time that allowed for such occurrences. Since the witnesses are identified to the viewer with English-only captions, one can assume that this DVD was meant for international distribution, but there is no attempt to explain the details of these “disappearances” or these operations. There are the usual blame games between newspaper employees and government officials with regard to how that list came to be, and furthermore, how it came to be published in an Argentine journal created specifically for the publication (and “substantiation”) of those deaths. In one rather intense moment, Alvaro Puga, a political adviser to Augusto Pinochet from 1973 to 1978, states that killing six hundred to eight hundred Communists was a “biological need” of the military, if it was to “keep the country on an even keel.” However, Puga denies all responsibility for the distribution of the list of 119.

Another disinformation campaign involved a woman whose body washed up on a beach. *El Mercurio* reported the story as a “crime of passion”; in reality, the woman’s body had been one of those thrown into the ocean by the government that did not sink. Her detention and torture by the government is substantiated by a member of the family, who was able to speak with another woman who had met her at Villa Grimaldi, the dictatorship’s most infamous detention and torture center, and was later released. The reporter of the original story admits that there were things that did not make sense about the crime at the time, and says that she apologized to the

family for writing that report. Again, it may not be readily apparent to someone unfamiliar with the specific tactics employed by the Pinochet regime for the disposal of the disappeared prisoners; captions fill the viewer in at the end of the segment. The final disinformation campaign involved the detention of two men falsely identified by the paper as having been present at a Communist rally.

Curiously, only one reporter cites censure and government orders as justification for participating in the disinformation campaigns. Frankly, one would expect more. The journalism students state at the beginning that they made the documentary because the newspaper has never been held publicly accountable for what it had done. While Edwards Eastman was indicted on several counts of libel and defamation in the case of the two men who were falsely identified, the newspaper never published any of this news. Furthermore, it did not publish any story on the execution of Communist Party leaders until 2007, many years after the fact. The DVD ends with the statement that in June 2008, the Association of Journalists made a public apology to the families of the disappeared and tortured for their part in the disinformation campaigns. *El Mercurio*, as the documentary notes, “has remained silent.”

The primary means of substantiating the newspaper’s participation is film of the actual headlines, some of which is over-repeated for dramatic effect. However, substantiating the equivocation and the cover-ups involves U.S. documentation (cited by Dinges, but not actually shown in the DVD) and testimony from witnesses and reporters.

One human rights leader points out subtly in the DVD that what he considers even more important than *El Mercurio*’s participation in government disinformation campaigns is how Edwards Eastman and his newspaper helped bring about the “death of democracy” in Chile. While the students do not overlook the editor’s meetings with the CIA and the transfer of funds entirely, the DVD would have been even stronger if that point had been explored further. As it is, this documentary film is a useful investigation of the different elements involved in a dictator’s rise to power, and a strong indictment of the newspaper and its editor.

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