

REVIEWS

Reviewed by Cameron Bailey

Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media

Directed and produced by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick. With Noam Chomsky, William F. Buckley, Robert Faurisson, Michel Foucault, Edward S. Herman and Bill Moyers. A Necessary Illusions/National Film Board production.

■ When right-wing freak-a-zoid William F. Buckley threatened to smash Noam Chomsky "in the goddamn face," he said as much about the force of Chomsky's ideas as he did about his

own instability. That the whole thing happened in front of TV cameras is even better, because, as Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick's *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media* so beautifully illustrates, Chomsky's life is led largely in and against various forms of media. Buckley wasn't the first to highlight the inherent conflict.

Linguist, political activist and suspiciously prolific MIT professor, Avram Noam Chomsky gets more and more indispensable each year. He's one of a tiny number of American intellectuals who continue to express left-democratic, common language critiques of big media and the ongoing war crimes of the American government.

Manufacturing Consent stands as an impressive exploration of Chomsky's

ideas. Not only is it detailed, comprehensive and full of wit, but it's made in a style that fits its subject better than his own clothes.

Using cheap tools like an old RCMP surplus 16mm camera, Achbar and Wintonick follow Chomsky across several years of speaking engagements and interviews, supplementing that footage with their own interviews, a ton of well-selected archival footage, and smart bits of cinematic business that reflect back on Chomsky's ideas in playful and pointed style.

As he maps out the relationship of sports fandom to jingoism, for instance, his image and words flash onto a giant football stadium videoscreen. A *New York Times* flack's mention of that paper's ad-to-editorial ratio gets illustrated by a quick live-animated sequence

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that lays out an entire *Times* on a gymnasium floor.

This film sets itself huge tasks—outlining Chomsky's thought in an entertaining though appropriately sophisticated fashion, offering something of the man's biography, and itself serving to dismantle the cool facade of popular media. It's a film of ideas, a biography and an activist film all in one, so its vast scope should come as no surprise.

Actually the biography is only a brief part of the film's two-part, three-hour length, which has to be a decision arrived at by Chomsky and the filmmakers. We get glimpses of his family life—his father wrote a book on Hebrew grammar, his uncle ran an unsuccessful newsstand—but almost no psychologizing, no revealing interviews with neglected children of workaholic dad.

Achbar and Wintonick favour an articulation of Chomsky's "liberation socialism," starting from his notion that "propaganda is to democracy what violence is to a totalitarian regime." Corporate media, particularly "agenda-setting" media like the *Times* and the major networks are the conduits of propaganda.

Manufacturing Consent's real success lies in constructing Chomsky within the film as a discursive rather than a psychological subject, and in embedding him within media, however uncomfortably. The professor is rarely presented "clean"—his image shows up on a giant video wall in a suburban mall, he's shown reading a teleprompter, being interviewed, constantly hooked up to some microphone in some different part of the world.

He is forever mediated, which prevents us from looking on his words as gospel. Decentring his own authority is,

of course, a part of Chomsky's strategy, but the film could do more in this area. While there are ample broadsides of his work from frothing reactionaries and media insiders—will anyone who sits down to watch this film really take what William F. Buckley has to say seriously?—critiques from intellectuals on the left, those who question the originality of his ideas, for example, are missing.

Chomsky has been continually, if not loudly criticized for adapting, popularizing and benefiting from others' ideas. Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault, as well as lesser-known writers, do find echoes in Chomsky's work. But even if Chomsky is the left's Carl Sagan, that's no reason for undue sniping. It's important to know, for instance, that the "experts" who show up on ABC's *Nightline* are "92 percent white, 89 percent male, and 80 percent from the professional/managerial class." Chomsky didn't compile that information—a group called Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting did—but he gets it out there.

One of his most significant ideas, something I wish the film had devoted even more time to, concerns the time limits of most broadcast media and the role that plays in limiting ideas. A TV current affairs program with no more than 12 minutes between commercials not only limits how much can be said, but also what can be said. Networks call this the necessary demands of concision, but Chomsky goes further. "The beauty of concision," he notes, "is that you can only repeat conventional thoughts." In other words, you can articulate commonly held ideas in a much shorter time than you can ideas that go against the grain. Unconventional ideas expressed concisely—that the U.S. government is one of the world's most successful ter-

rorist organizations, for example—inevitably make the speaker sound like a crackpot.

Near the end of *Manufacturing Consent* there's a sequence dedicated to alternative media that's central to both the film and its context. It's a reminder that Achbar and Wintonick's film comes out of these networks of grassroots publications and community broadcasting, and not educational hagiography. Despite its length and scope, this still feels like a homemade film, put together out of desire and sweat and political need, not to fill a PBS time slot. In the end, this may be the film's greatest success.

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Reviewed by Maurie Alioff

Requiem pour un beau sans-coeur

Written and directed by Robert Morin, produced by Lorraine Dufour and Nicole Robert, with Gildor Roy, Jean-Guy Bouchard, Klimbo and Sabrina Boudot. A Lux Films/Coop Vidéo de Montréal production, with the participation of SOGIC and Super Ecran.

■ Robert Morin's *Requiem pour un beau sans-coeur* (*Requiem for a Heartless Bastard*) tracks the last days of a gangster who obsesses everyone crossing his twisted path. Régis Savoie