

**"Robbed of Truth"** screening.

Open letter from **Bob Connolly** to ADG Board.

A couple of days ago I received a notice about tonight's Ozdox screening of Robbed of Truth, and I must say the wording of this notice left me feeling distinctly queasy. I've since done some sleuthing, and the feeling is still there. There seems to be a witch-hunt under way, with a smattering of Orwellian truth control, and I hate to think so august and valuable an institution as Ozdox might be unwittingly caught up in it.

Robbed of Truth was made in response to an Australian film by Violeta Ayala and Dan Fallshaw called Stolen. This latter film details the pair's unearthing of the vestiges of an antique form of slavery existing in the Saharawi refugee camps in Algeria's Western Sahara. These camps are controlled by the Polisario Front. The Polisario is an organisation with a proud record of resistance and, understandably, a significant popular following in the West. Obviously, Stolen embarrassed and enraged the organization, because when the film came out the Polisario went to extraordinary lengths around the world to discredit Ayala and Fallshaw. It clearly perceived their film as potentially damaging to its image and cause.

Polisario's Australian representative Kamal Fadel is charismatic, popular and able, and over the years has built an impressive Australian support base. Australian delegations are conducted around the camps and come back justifiably full of sympathy for the plight of the Saharawi. Prior to Stolen's Sydney Film Festival premiere, Kamal marshaled a posse of these sympathizers, predominantly from the Left, and including significant and admirable people like Meredith Bergman and Bob Ellis. They raised a chorus of condemnation during and after the screening.

Polisario even flew out to that screening Fetim Salam, one of the Saharawi camp dwellers, who had stated in the film she was a slave. Sensationally, Fetim recanted this at the screening and - echoing the Polisario's line - accused the filmmakers of fabricating the whole story. It was a clever move to bring Fetim out, perfectly calibrated to undermine the filmmakers' case. Indeed, the Polisario's relentless, sophisticated campaign of denigration and denial was highly effective, and when the dust settled, it's fair to say Ayala and Fallshaw had come off second best.

This brings me to tonight's Ozdox film. As the title implies, Robbed of Truth is a continuation of that Polisario campaign, (and I am curious to know who funded it.) Stolen's central assertion, according to Robbed of Truth, is a fanciful invention and its directors liars, who entered the camp under false pretenses, bribed their subjects and then falsified their testimony. Fetim Salam is particularly hard on the pair, stating repeatedly and angrily that she was lied to, tricked, bribed etc.

Now I have a problem with all this, because I have read the lengthy 2008 Human Rights Watch report into the Polisario administered camps. And I'm wondering why there's no mention of that report in Robbed of Truth. After all, HRW is a prestigious, respected, independent, international organisation. Specifically, why didn't Robbed of Truth mention HRW's conclusion that a form of slavery did indeed exist among a minority of families in the Polisario controlled camps? The 2008 report also quoted camp inmates similar to Fetim Salam, who also alleged they were slaves. And what about HRW's earlier case study of the Saharawi girl who fled to Spain to escape her condition of slavery and fight it through the Spanish courts?

An even more disturbing element of the HRW report was its critique of the host nation Algeria's laissez faire attitude to Polisario's autonomous rule in the Western Sahara. The report expressed concern that the Polisario had a completely free hand in the camps, enjoying an absolutely total administrative, legal, political, social and

military hegemony over the Saharawi people under its jurisdiction. There was no counter force whatsoever to this rule by resistance movements, according to HRW. The isolation and powerlessness of the people in the face of this dominant control is complete. Dissenters or transgressors have no legal redress.

Consequently, enormous pressure can potentially be brought to bear upon people who step out of line. Or make unguarded statements to visiting foreign filmmakers, which they later come to regret. I have no evidence that Polisario pressured Fetim Salam into publicly recanting the statements she made in *Stolen*. I am just deeply skeptical, that's all. For their part, Ayala and Fallshaw are convinced she was so pressured, and that others who appeared in their film were pressured as well, and they are saddened by it. And the HRW report certainly does nothing to undermine their case.

I think that Report should at least be taken into account when evaluating the relative merits of *Stolen* and the "sequel" which sets out so relentlessly to discredit it. But I can't see that happening tonight ... not the way this evening appears to be organized. There's nothing about the HRW report in *Robbed of Truth*, and there's no mention of it in the OzDox notice either. Indeed, there's not the slightest suggestion there might actually be a counter argument to that put in *Robbed of Truth*. We're told instead that the filmmaker, Carlos Gonzalez, "alerted by Saharawi friends, travelled to the refugee camps in search of the truth." Whoever wrote that has clearly been persuaded by the Polisario campaign of denigration. Excuse me: that is not "the truth." It is "his truth."

Ayala and Fallshaw will participate tonight via Skype, and co-producer Tom Zubrycki will be there in person. I reckon they're in for a long evening. If recent history is any guide and my reading of this Ozdox notice is correct, tonight's screening and discussion, like *Robbed of Truth*, will be an orchestrated hatchet job. The notice says the session "will debate some of the thorny ethical issues involved in documentary film making" but I think the real objective is to further and finally discredit Ayala and Fallshaw and their film. For starters, Carmela Baranowska is chairing the meeting, and her name is at the top of a recent press release describing *Robbed of Truth* as "a powerful new [film] that shines a light on a dark corner of Australian documentary." So much for objectivity.

For what it's worth, after a careful assessment of the available evidence, I think there does exist a vestige of slavery in the camps. HRW says complex social relationships, like the ones it examined, have existed in this region for millennia. They evolve into subtle forms, take a long time to subside and are hard to suppress. From what I know of the organisation, I've no doubt the Polisario finds the continuation of the practice abhorrent, and is committed to eliminating it.

But in its response to the issue's public airing in *Stolen*, this entirely worthy organization appears to be in denial. HRW is too formidable an inquisitor to take on, so Polisario and its strenuous local cheer squad have decided to go after a couple of wandering doco filmmakers. To me it's a prima facie case of shoot the messengers, and while you're at it destroy their integrity, call them liars and cheats, ruin their careers. Well I for one object to this nasty little exercise in character assassination, and I do not appreciate the way Ozdox has been railroaded to its cause.

Three disclaimers: First, I went to a fine cut screening of *Stolen* and made some suggestions about its structure. I found Ayala and Fallshaw to be decent people who seemed genuinely shocked by what they had uncovered. They do not deserve this vicious campaign of personal denigration. Second, I'm a long time friend of Tom Zubrycki, and consider him a filmmaker of the utmost integrity. And third, I am an

admirer of the Polisario.

Finally, before watching Robbed of Truth, may I humbly suggest that everyone attending the session read Ayala and Fallshaw's detailed responses to the various questions their film has raised among audiences around the world. I happen to think it's a fairly impressive document.

Bob Connolly

Board member, Australian Directors Guild

11<sup>th</sup> July 2012