Toronto International Film Festival 2012

Interviews with John Gianvito, Minda Martin and Travis Wilkerson—co-directors of Far From Afghanistan

David Walsh
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WSWS arts editor David Walsh recently spoke to three of the five co-directors of Far From Afghanistan*—to John Gianvito and Minda Martin in Toronto and to Travis Wilkerson, by telephone, from his home in California.*

John Gianvito

John Gianvito is a director, teacher and film curator based in Boston. His 2001 feature, *The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein*, dealt with the situation in the US at the time of the first Persian Gulf war.

His *Profit Motive and the Whispering Wind*, I wrote in 2007, "consists of shots of the graves or tombs of radical opponents of the American establishment, from Native American warriors and early abolitionists to the many martyrs of labor struggles in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. … In some ways, a fascinating and intriguing 58 minutes."

Gianvito's latest documentary, *Vapor Trail (Clark)* (2010), explores the impact of the US military presence in the Philippines. He is working on a second part of that documentary.

Gianvito coordinated the making of *Far From Afghanistan*, as he explains in the following conversation, and directed its opening segment. We spoke at a coffee shop in Toronto, the morning after a successful screening of the film.

David Walsh: Can you explain how *Far From Afghanistan* came about?

John Gianvito: Throughout the period of the US war in Afghanistan I've been following it, concerned about it, engaged with it, as a citizen. And engaged with it as a filmmaker, but not so directly as to have made a film about Afghanistan. My last films have been critiques of US militarism, and I hoped it didn't take that much of a leap to make the connection between that militarism and the current wars.

I read in early 2011 a report from the Pew Research Institute that in 2010 only four percent of US media coverage made any acknowledgment of the war, and in 2011 it went down to two percent. Yet I knew that casualties on both sides had only accelerated. So, at our most intense moment, we were paying the least heed to the war—and with the tenth anniversary of the war on the horizon, I felt that I couldn't let that moment go unacknowledged.

I was deep into the editing of another very long documentary, the second part of *Vapor Trail*, when I said, I have to do something about Afghanistan. That was approximately March of 2011. I thought, to do this and have something finished by October of that year, the anniversary, it might be necessary to make some kind of collective film.

The first person I contacted was Travis Wilkerson, even though we had only physically met twice in 15 years. He's a filmmaker that I respect a great deal, and on the American film landscape, he's one of the few that I'm glad is out there. We've tried to help each other out over the years. He immediately responded positively to the project, and we began talking about who else we might bring in.

I wrote individual, personal letters to about twenty-five filmmakers. Not all at once, of course, because I didn't want to have a situation where twenty-five people said yes. I set up an arbitrary parameter that they should be US filmmakers, because I felt we had the most responsibility in relation to this situation. A couple of filmmakers who had agreed found, as October 2011 approached, that they were too busy and would be unable to deliver a film.

In any event, it came down to these five directors. I had nothing I was offering them. Could they make a film in this short period of time? Everyone worked very hard, and we had a preliminary version by the time of the anniversary, but I could already tell as we approached the deadline that it was a bit hurried and not everything was as considered as it might be. So I said, let's call this *Far From Afghanistan—the October Edition*, and keep working on it.

DW: Did everyone go off entirely on their own, so to speak? Did you know what each was making?

JG: We encouraged communication. People who wanted to would send out a cut, and would get feedback. Mostly people were open to that. When I brought in the Afghan material, initially, some of those involved felt it wouldn't work, that the documentary footage would make the experimental material look too 'arty.' I didn't feel that way.

It was complicated working with the Afghan material. Lots of times something looked interesting, and the translator would tell you what was being said, and it wasn't so interesting. Or vice versa. A long, slow process.

This group, "Afghan Voices," responded to what we were saying, to help us get a more dimensional view of what life is like there. I gave them a sense of what that might mean. I didn't know entirely what the various camera people thought about the war and occupation, because I was dealing mainly with the director of the organization, but he was certainly sympathetic in general or he wouldn't have taken this on.

I did get one message when they saw the virtually finished version, because I wanted to check with him that I could actually use their names, because there could be repercussions. It's fine, I said, if you want to be anonymous. They said, absolutely not, they were very impressed with the

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film and happy to be associated with it.

DW: What are the prospects for showing the film? What are you trying to do with it?

JG: There isn't much of a coherent game-plan with this yet. It's really just been finished. I still have some work to do. I sent it to five festivals, hoping that one of them might pick it. And three responded right away, Locarno, Toronto and the Viennale [Vienna International Film Festival]. Vancouver is also going to show it, the Montreal documentary festival, Sao Paolo, Buenos Aires.

I would like to get it beyond the festival circuit. If it could get some kind of distribution, or DVD distribution, or if it could be made more accessible to people, I'd be all for it. Finally, we may just stream the whole thing. But people's connections are not always so good, and I'm not sure that's the best way to show films. I don't like watching feature films on a computer screen. I believe there is an audience out there, or I wouldn't have made the film.

Minda Martin

Minda Martin is filmmaker, editor and producer, whose films often explore questions of social class in America. Her works include *AKA Kathe* (2000, "an investigative documentary into the damaged life and violent death of Kathe Vargas, a sex worker in Tucson"), a collection of shorts, *Love, Loss & Longing* (2007) and *Free Land* (2009, "Mixing found footage, historical documents, and personal interviews, [the director] traces her family's history to the forced Cherokee relocation in the 1800s").

We also spoke in Toronto, on the day following the screening of *Far From Afghanistan*.

David Walsh: Your segment deals with a drone pilot, his interaction with two soldiers in Afghanistan who have come to oppose the war and his family problems. It is a fictional piece that has the genuine ring of truth.

Minda Martin: The soldiers in my segment are veterans, they had real experiences, including with drone attacks. I did research, and there was a script. In addition, I read a description of drone pilots having a session and then having this long drive home, and they say that the most dangerous part of the job is the drive home. That was the inspiration for the structure of the piece.

They brought their own experiences, as veterans. I didn't have a lot of time and I had to finance it myself. Many people were generous with their time. They didn't charge me, in many cases. I felt the content was really important, and that people had to think about it critically instead of exoticizing the drone experience, as in Hollywood films, or even documentaries.

DW: I'm interested in the veterans and what their experiences were.

MM: We had conversations on the phone, and in person. They were fully on board and excited about the project. At first, learning that it was narrative, they were a bit distant about it, but I said, 'This is just you, playing yourselves. If you had the chance to talk to a drone pilot, what would you say?'

The story told in the film is a real story. One of the soldiers had witnessed it. He told the intelligence people, hey, this is a school, these are kids, this is nothing bad. Only to find out later that this was bombed and all those kids … this is something that's a trauma.

The more I learned about the drone activity, it was new to me and it shocked me. Then to learn that this is also being used against US citizens. People have to wake up. It's disgusting, and it's frightening. It makes me very fearful for our future. Unless people wake up and mobilize and start changing things in a radical way, I don't see things getting better.

Neither candidate in the election will say anything about the war. Either they won't talk about it, or they will say something positive about it. There's nothing critical from either candidate.

DW: The other aspect of the film that was striking was the phone call from the pilot's mother, and her own economic situation, the threat of foreclosure. Why did you decide to introduce that phone call?

MM: Because I wanted to bring in the reality around him. He's a soldier, he's just doing his job. I see it as a job. I come from a familyof veterans. My brother is an Iraq war veteran, and I don't hate him. He was stop-lossed the second time, and I won't speak for him, but he retired early because of the ongoing war.

I'm not going to make a film that demonizes him. They're doing a job, and many of them do it as well as they can. I think when my brother was there, he saw things he didn't agree with. He's a different person as a result. He's got a great family, and I love him very much. I was thinking of him while making this film.

I also wanted to show the economic situation. For a big part of the American population, class mobility has come through the military. It was for my family. My brother had a free higher education, and they were able to buy a house. I didn't go into the military and I had to take out student loans. I bought my education and my brothers bought their education in a different way.

The point was to bring humanity to the soldier and also to show that he's struggling and part of that struggle. Social security is under threat. For many older people, like my father, that's all they have. It pisses me off when I hear people saying they're taking advantage. They're really playing with fire on that. My father gets very little, it's $800 a month. It's supplemented by other things, but if he didn't have that, he would be homeless.

That's what I thought America was. That we were like a big family, that we looked after each other. And that is very American, the majority is very generous and very loving.

DW: The people at the top are not like that.

MM: No, they don't give a damn. We're not any more important to them than the people in Afghanistan. That's the connection we were trying to make in the film. We're no different from the poor Afghan farmer, we need to share solidarity with poverty everywhere in this world.

What does anyone need billions of dollars for? At that point, there's something parasitic and really dark about that.

Anything that is given to the population is demonized. 'Oh, they're just giving money to the unemployed, who are lazy …' I get so sick to my stomach when I hear people being attacked because they just need to eat. You're going to demonize someone for using food stamps, when it's all right for us to spend trillions of dollars on wars? It's not OK to feed a family, what kind of Christian are you? What kind of person, human, atheist, whatever, are you?

Ninety percent of the American population hates Congress. Everyone I know can't stand what's going in.

DW: But what the alternative is, that's far less clear to people.

MM: I even struggle with that, what do we do?

DW: Tens of millions are asking themselves that, perhaps not so articulately.

MM: The Occupy movement began to address that. It was a beginning, I thought. I went to some of the protests, but I was terrified by the militarized presence of the police. And they were all lined up, just for a peaceful protest.

This film is something of a departure. Most of my films have been about poverty, my family and growing up. It was freeing to do something different. I didn't want to be tied to making films about my own situation and my family.

The situation in the country, it's as though we were wounded and you

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just put a bandage on it—you don't clean it, you don't take a look at it and try to heal it, it's still festering. We're bleeding through the bandage, and we keep throwing things on it. It's eventually going to kill us, or we have to wake up and see what we have.

It's heart-breaking, a country as rich as Canada or America, so rich, with such resources and you can't take care of your own people? Someone's down on their luck, whether it's drug abuse, mental illness, or being handicapped, and you just throw them out on the street?

DW: Why did you dedicate the film to Bradley Manning [the US army soldier arrested in May 2010 in Iraq on suspicion of having passed classified material to WikiLeaks]?

MM: I researched Bradley Manning because I was told that he had "betrayed" the country and so on. But reading all of his chat logs. He's like … me. I would have done the same thing. He saw the truth, he saw the imagery. If I had seen that footage I would have done something as well. He really cares about America. And he thought that with all of the brainwashing, if the American people saw this, they would do something.

That he has had no due process, and that his constitutional rights have been violated, and he's been tortured … is horrifying. But despite everything, he has not given in. Somehow that human spirit continues on. You push people into a corner and they just get stronger. That's amazing and that gives me hope. That's why I felt that I could never have made this film without Bradley Manning.

Travis Wilkerson

Travis Wilkerson is a filmmaker with a number of intriguing works to his credit. His *An Injury to One*, which centers on the murder of Industrial Workers of the World (IWW) organizer Frank Little in Butte, Montana in August 1917, is a remarkable and enduring film. We spoke at the time of its screening in the 2002 Toronto film festival.

His other films include *Accelerated Underdevelopment* (1999), a tribute to the Cuban filmmaker Santiago Alvarez, *Who Killed Cock Robin?*, which played at the 2005 Sundance festival, and *Distinguished Flying Cross* (2011). He was recently honored with a complete retrospective by the Slovenska Kinoteka in Ljubljana, Slovenia.

We recently spoke by telephone.

David Walsh: How did your participation in *Far From Afghanistan* come about?

Travis Wilkerson: I was very disturbed that artists were not concerned by the war in Afghanistan, were not talking about it, that the society in general was not really engaged with this issue, when it is so profound and so important. And incredibly long, the longest war the US has fought. I felt that I would like to participate in any way that I could.

I was wondering if there was a way that my film could be driven by the situation facing women, especially since I imagined that a lot of the segments would not be. Men tend to dominate all aspects of war discourse in general.

I found myself offered an opportunity to travel up to the Pacific Northwest with a group of veterans who were involved in an anti-war movement organizing a speak-out near Ft. Lewis-McChord Air Force Base, where the issue of Iraq and Afghanistan veteran suicide was reaching an extreme level. In fact, it's gotten worse since then.

I had a camera with me, and as part of that process I encountered the two women who are in that section of the film, Ashley Hagemann and Mary Corkhill [widow and mother, respectively, of two veterans who committed suicide]. Encountering them was very extreme and very sobering, and I realized it reflected the larger things I was trying to understand … I couldn't make a film that could articulately describe what had happened to Afghanistan. I could propose such a film, but I couldn't travel there, and do those kinds of things.

However, I could actually propose that although we were not the victims, but the principal perpetrators, the ramifications for our society were profound. Imperialism destroys the entire world with it.

The way in which the two main threads came together is very strange. On the way home from filming one day, I was shooting images at the main bridge that leads to Ft. Lewis.

Suddenly I was surrounded by armed MPs. And they were very aggressive towards me. They made me delete the photographs, and I decided to walk back to the coffee shop where the speak-out was being organized. Before I walked a hundred yards, another group of MPs stopped me and we went through the ritual again.

I got back to the coffee shop and I used a file restoration software that I have for emergencies. The only images that came up were images I'd shot in Detroit of those burnt-up houses [due to utility shutoffs]. It seemed like the MPs had actually constructed the basic elements of the film—the two situations seemed suddenly very connected, although that would not have occurred to me had I not encountered them in that way.

The year before I had spent several weeks in Michigan, at my parents, and I drove into Detroit during the day and I was actually interested in filming things related to another project.

I ended up taking pictures in several of the houses where there had been fires because of utility shutoffs and people had died. I had accumulated those images, not knowing what I would ever use them for. They just reappeared in the context of this restoration process.

DW: Did you find out about those fires because of material we published on the WSWS?

TW: I definitely found them because of the pieces you guys had already written, yes. That's how I knew about the places in Detroit where the most horrific incidents had taken place, involving Sylvia Young, who lost three children [in a 2010 fire], and the Allen brothers [the Dexter Avenue fire, also in 2010].

I knew about the two main fires because of all the work you had done, which I think is really important actually.

DW: What was it that so struck you about the utility shutoff issue?

TW: It just seemed to me the same kind of callous savagery. Something that anyone with the most elementary human compassion would deal with differently. The system is so vicious that it can allow its own citizens, who are entirely innocent, to be destroyed, over and over again.

When I was up in Ft. Lewis, I was experiencing the same dynamic. Military officials came to the speak-out, sat in the front row and took down people's names. They didn't say anything. There were six people who spoke, all of whom had lost someone [through suicide], it was very powerful. And these military people didn't express the most elementary human compassion.

You understood that the disregard for life bound up with imperialism extends to everyone who connects with it, including the people who live under it here.

The things I saw and heard in Ft. Lewis were worse than I could have imagined, except that I had already seen them in Detroit.

I spent three weeks in a car with three veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. I experienced first-hand this thing called Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, which is not a disorder, but a perfectly human reaction. My dad was in Vietnam, he has some of that, but he went once, and he's done fine.

I was around these younger soldiers, and I realized that depending on the number of deployments they'd had, the crisis intensifies. At four deployments, veterans are generally very scarred. They get to the eight, nine level, and they destroy their lives when they come back. I don't want to be cynical about it, but I worry whether such people can ever function. What is that going to mean for the society?

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The day that we spoke to Ashley Hagemann, whose husband, a veteran, committed suicide, it was the first time she had ever spoken about it since it had happened.

DW: Her husband was in Iraq or Afghanistan?

TW: He was in both, because he did nine deployments.

DW: Nine!

TW: I can't remember whether he committed suicide after getting his orders for his ninth deployment, or whether he had just returned from his ninth deployment. He was in his early 30s.

Mary, the mother of the other soldier, was central to the whole thing. She was so full of rage. She felt that her son asked for help in so many different ways. She had another son who was in the military as well. She's from Indiana, but she came in from out of town. She and Ashley connected in a really intense way. Each woman was present during the other's interview, which had to do with the intimacy of the conversation.

DW: I think that the connection being drawn by filmmakers between the social conditions in America and the war, and this is in Minda Martin's segment too, is of great significance.

TW: Some of the social crises in America drive the need for neo-colonial wars. We've often understood that when certain contradictions arise in a given imperialist society, one of the natural ways it tends to try and solve those problems is by seeking war. But we also have the back side of it as well, that when you dedicate an immense amount of resources to fighting these wars, which are of an exceptionally complex economic character and have immense geopolitical consequences, the whole system begins to rumble and lurch, and finds itself terribly vulnerable.

Clearly, moments of imperialist war have led to crises within empires. It certainly seems that the set of crises that the wars were intended to solve have not been solved, they have only expanded and deepened. It seems that the world is even more unstable than it was when all this began [in 2001]. The level of instability is remarkable, and historically significant. The system is clearly reaching a point of severe crisis.

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