

Again on Alex Gibney's *We Steal Secrets*

Richard Philips
22 August 2013

We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks, Alex Gibney's feature-length character assassination documentary against Julian Assange grossed just over \$160,000 following its Australian release in early July. It was withdrawn from cinemas a few weeks later. By contrast, when *Fahrenheit 9/11*, Michael Moore's feature on the US-led invasion of Iraq and the so-called "war on terror" was released in Australia in 2004, it took over \$5 million in a couple of weeks, a local record for a documentary, and over \$220 million internationally.

The low Australian ticket sales for *We Steal Secrets* came despite the determined efforts of mainstream media film writers, who praised the movie, ignoring or trivialising the serious political dangers facing Assange, while insisting that it was an "even-handed" work.

Evan Williams, in the *Australian*, for example, described it as a "beautifully crafted and finely nuanced" film, and one "never blinded by prejudice or preconception." Margaret Pomeranz from ABC-TV's high-rating "At the Movies" declared that Gibney's film was a "must-see" documentary, "revealing in its critique of Assange, his carelessness, his double standards and his narcissism." The *Sydney Morning Herald's* Ed Gibb said the movie revealed Assange as "anything but a freedom-fighting hero of transparency, but rather an unpredictable, occasionally naive egomaniac guilty of hypocrisy."

None of these commentators referred to the US government's dirty tricks operation against WikiLeaks and its efforts to frame up Assange on espionage charges, or to the ongoing grand jury investigation.

ABC Radio National's principal film critic, Jason di Rosso declared: "I don't want to trivialise the story of Julian Assange by dwelling on his hair, but this is a film program and appearances, we know, signify something. How many different haircuts do you remember Assange having?"

According to di Rosso, this was an important question, and connected to the fact that Assange "had spent his childhood growing up in different places, never really laying down roots ..." The different haircuts were "a sign of vanity, which I have no problem with, but it's also a way of making sure people don't forget you're there."

Di Rosso ~~Stephen~~ ~~Scrashed~~ described Assange as "a loner whose self-belief borders on narcissism, and has a paranoid flipside ... Assange's ego—which has a big dose of martyr complex—has gotten in the way of a noble, if flawed project."

Journalistic laziness is no doubt a factor in these reviews but, when critics hail Gibney's disinformation documentary, other social and political processes are at work. After all, the film-maker's feature purports to be a documentary, not a work of fiction.

The almost universal praise for *We Steal Secrets* is another sign that "liberal" journalists and commentators, with only a few exceptions, have abandoned Assange and are falling into line behind the escalating attacks on basic democratic rights. While this rightward turn is part of an international process, the sharp shift is particularly marked in Australia, where Assange previously enjoyed significant backing from local journalists.

Popular support for the WikiLeaks founder, in fact, was so widespread that senior editors and news directors of Australia's mainstream media—print, radio and television—were compelled to issue an open letter in November 2010, criticising then Labor Prime Minister Julia Gillard for claiming that the publication of secret US diplomatic cables by WikiLeaks was "illegal." The signatories pledged themselves to "strongly resist any attempts to make the publication of these or similar documents illegal."

In late 2011, WikiLeaks was awarded the Walkley prize for "Outstanding Contributions to Journalism." WikiLeaks and Julian Assange, the Walkley Trustees declared, had taken "a brave, determined and independent stand for freedom of speech and transparency that has empowered people all over the world."

Following two more years of the US-led character assassination campaign against Assange, these sentiments are now entirely absent from the Australian mainstream media. Likewise, the national press has provided minimal coverage of the Bradley Manning case, the unprecedented revelations by Edward Snowden about the illegal global spying operations of the US government, and the Obama

administration's escalating police-state measures.

In contrast to the media hype surrounding *We Steal Secrets*, many viewers of the documentary—in Australia, Britain and elsewhere—have condemned the film and those critics who have praised it.

“Sorry, Ed[itor], but your review is so uncritical it's scary,” one cinemagoer wrote last month to the *Sydney Morning Herald*. Anyone watching the film, the correspondent declared, should watch ABC-TV's “Four Corners” documentary “Sex, Lies and Julian Assange” and read the *World Socialist Web Site* film review and the WikiLeaks' annotated transcript of the documentary.

Another letter pointed out that Gibney's film was one of several television and print media attacks on WikiLeaks during the past year. “People should know by now not to trust the information provided on Assange through most mainstream channels ... One has to read between the lines and see this piece of so-called investigative journalism as US propaganda.”

Gibney has also been confronted with angry audiences at some Q&A sessions following screenings in Britain, where the film was released last month. One person was so outraged that he emailed London cinema managers, pointing out that *We Steal Secrets* was a “deeply dishonest film containing a staggering number of distortions and omissions.”

The email urged the managers to read the WSWS review and the WikiLeaks annotated transcript. He also suggested that *We Steal Secrets* screenings should be accompanied by a video of a Q&A session with Gibney at London's Frontline Club, where the director was forced by those in attendance “to concede some of the omissions, lies and distortions” in his film.

“I would like to ask what you are doing to make your patrons aware that this is a highly partisan work, and cannot be viewed as objective or as a work of integrity ... I am sure you would not show [the anti-Semitic] *Jud Süß* or *Triumph of the Will* without placing them in their proper contexts.

“By failing to do so in this case you would, however inadvertently, be in effect serving the interests of those who stifle free debate and press freedom and defend war crimes and torture,” the email said.

These and similar letters are indicators of the political gulf between those who run the multi-billion dollar US entertainment and media corporations and their hired guns, and millions of ordinary people, who are becoming increasingly concerned about the assault on democratic rights and the war crimes and other illegalities being carried out by their governments.

Gibney, who was hired by Universal Pictures to direct the documentary, is continuing his public attacks on Assange. In

mid-July he told the *Big Issue* that the WikiLeaks founder was someone who “loves spy stories” but “suddenly realised he could write one in real life and he would be the main character ...

“Yes, he's in a very small room [in the Ecuadorian embassy] but he can still hold a press conference with 250 journalists on phone hook-up listening to him go on and on. Even better, Assange has got a balcony from which he can make Evita-like speeches to assembled multitudes.”

We Steal Secrets is just the first of several American productions on whistleblowers. Gibney and producer Marc Shmuger, a former chairman of Universal Pictures and creative advertising chief for Columbia Pictures, are about to start work on a dramatic feature about Bradley Manning.

Another movie on WikiLeaks, *The Fifth Estate*, is soon to be premiered at the Toronto Film Festival. Directed by Bill Condon, it is based on books by Daniel Domscheit-Berg and British journalists David Leigh and Luke Harding, all of whom have publicly attacked Assange.

Zero Dark Thirty scriptwriter Mark Boal and financier Megan Ellison have optioned the rights to a *New York Times Magazine* article by Bill Keller, which they plan to turn into a film. Keller's article is yet another hatchet job against Assange. As is now well known, Boal and *Zero Dark Thirty* director Kathryn Bigelow met with CIA and Defense Department officials during production of their movie, allowing their script to be vetted and changed by intelligence officers.

Gibney's *We Steal Secrets* is a warning that Hollywood's backing for the bogus “war on terror” is being expanded to include disinformation attacks on whistleblowers. In 2001, the CIA appointed its own film industry liaison officer. His or her role, according to the spy agency, was to provide “advice and guidance” to authors, screenwriters, directors and producers. Such figures and their military equivalents are now playing an increasingly prominent role in the American film industry.



To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact