

“Well-paid journalists have become gormless cyphers of the propaganda of war”

John Pilger discusses his “The Power of the Documentary” film festival

Richard Phillips
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Veteran investigative journalist, documentary filmmaker and author, John Pilger, is currently hosting a special film festival in Australia. Entitled *The Power of the Documentary: Breaking the Silence*, the festival is on at Riverside Theatres in the western-Sydney suburb of Parramatta and at the Museum of Contemporary Art at Circular Quay in central Sydney. It will run until December 9.

Curated by Pilger, the festival is screening 26 films, including a number of his own documentaries, several significant works by Australian filmmakers and three foundational films from the US and Britain.

Pilger, who has made 62 documentaries since 1970, is one of a handful of journalists internationally who vigorously defends WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange. On June 17, he addressed a rally in Sydney organised by the Socialist Equality Party (Australia) to demand Assange’s immediate release.

Some of the early Pilger films to be screened include: *The Quiet Mutiny*, his first documentary for British television; *The Outsiders*, which features interviews with war correspondents, such as Wilfred Burchett and Martha Gellhorn, and other individuals in 1983; and *The Last Dream: Other People’s Wars* (1988), about the history of Australian military involvement in British and American imperialist interventions.

Recent Pilger documentaries to be shown, some of which have been reviewed by the *World Socialist Web Site*, include *Palestine is Still the Issue* (2002), *Breaking the Silence: Truth and Lies in the War on Terror* (2003), *The War You Don’t See* (2010), *Utopia* (2013) and *The Coming War on China* (2016).

Other important films to be shown are Curtis Levy’s *The President vs David Hicks* (2004) and Matt Norman’s *Salute* (2009), about track athlete Peter Norman and his victimisation by Australian authorities after he supported US athletes who gave a “black power” salute during the 1968 Olympics in Mexico.

Finally, “The Power of Documentary” festival includes three classic works: Edward R. Murrow’s *Harvest of Shame* (1960), an exposure of the slave-like working conditions of farm workers in the US; Peter Watkins’ long-banned *War Game* (1965), one of the first docudramas which recreates the horrific impact of a nuclear attack on Britain; and Peter Davis’s *Hearts and Minds* (1974), the first mainstream American documentary opposing the US intervention in Vietnam to secure a theatrical release. Full details of the festival program can be accessed [here](#).

Pilger conducted the following email interview with the WSWWS last week, just before the festival began.

Richard Phillips: Can you explain why you decided to organise this festival? What do you mean by “Breaking the Silence” in the title and why is this necessary?

John Pilger: By silence I mean the exclusion of ideas that might change the way we see our world, or help us make sense of it. There are 26 films and each one pushes back a screen of propaganda—not just the propaganda of governments but of a powerful groupthink of special interests designed to distract and intimidate us and which often takes its cue from social media and is the enemy of the arts and political freedom.

A documentary is not reality TV. Political documentary is not the consensual game played by politicians and journalists called “current affairs.” Great documentaries frighten the powerful, unnerve the compliant, expose the hypocritical. Great documentaries make us think, and think again, and speak out, and even take action...

Well-paid journalists have become gormless cyphers of the propaganda of war: lies known these days as fake news and spread by the intelligence agencies. Why do we allow governments, our governments, to commit great crimes, and why do so many of us remain silent?

These are questions for those of us privileged to be allowed into people’s lives and be their voice and seek their support. It is a question for filmmakers, journalists, artists, arts administrators, editors, publishers. We can no longer claim to be innocent bystanders. Our responsibility is urgent; as Tom Paine impatiently wrote: “The time is now.”

RP: You began making documentaries in 1970 with *The Quiet Mutiny*, about the Vietnam War. Can you speak about the filmmakers that influenced you in the early years and the most important thing you learnt in that formative period?

JP: My formative period as a documentary filmmaker was as a journalist. For me, the two crafts complement each other; the most expressive journalism is often cinematic. As a young war reporter in South East Asia, I was struck by the surreal spectacle of the American invasion and its atrocious consequences. *The Quiet Mutiny* is a factual, political film that uses irony and satire bordering on black farce, together with the music of the time, much of it political.

I was influenced by many I worked with; in the beginning by my producer Charles Denton, who encouraged me to depart from the

formula of “current affairs.” When *The Quiet Mutiny* was broadcast, the then Director General of the Independent Television Authority in Britain (a pompous fellow Australian with a knighthood) called me “a dangerous subversive.” It was the highest honour I have received, and I am grateful to him.

RP: Since then you’ve made scores of documentaries. These include exposing US war crimes in Vietnam, Iraq and many other countries, the danger of nuclear war, state brutality against the working class and the poor, ongoing oppression and social mistreatment of Aborigines.

Your second documentary was shot in West Yorkshire and was entitled *Conversations with a Working Man* and broadcast on British television. It’s difficult to imagine anything with a title like that being screened on the celebrity obsessed television networks today.

JP: I agree. But as with almost every film I have made, I had my struggles. The executive producer decreed that my use of “the people” was unacceptable because it was a “Marxist term.” He refused to allow me to use “working class”; if you listen carefully, you will hear me say “working heritage.” This nonsense made not a blind bit of difference; the viewers understood and a record audience watched the film.

RP: Why do you think there are so few of these sorts of exposures today? Is it because of financial and distribution problems, or a question of self-censorship and/or lack of political perspective?

JP: It is all those things. I would put lack of political perspective at the top, alongside an enthusiasm to join the system of elite power. Many on the BBC *believe* that once they join that institution they rise to a Nirvana of purest impartiality and objectivity when, in truth, they have become part of the most refined propaganda system on earth.

RP: The festival is showing Edward R. Murrow’s *Harvest of Shame*, Peter Watkins’ *The War Game* and *Hearts and Minds* by Peter Davis. Could you speak briefly about their importance?

JP: Each of these films is truth-telling in its highest form, especially *The War Game*. No film-maker has matched Peter Watkins’ astonishing achievement in recreating a town in England devastated by nuclear war. He did it all with official documents, which was why his film was banned by the BBC for 23 years.

Unknown to the British people, their governments were *planning* precisely that which Watkins reconstructed in *The War Game*. His film was profoundly threatening because it would possibly change the minds of millions of Britons towards Cold War policies, even war itself.

I’ve read the declassified documents of Harold Wilson’s cabinet secretary, Sir Burke Trend; the government was horrified by Watkins’ film because it was true. I admire him enormously for the same reasons I admire Julian Assange.

Harvest of Shame was a very different film, yet its bracing journalism was also committed to the truth. The regression today means none of these films would be made.

RP: You’ve also selected some films by Mark Davis, Curtis Levy and other Australian documentarians. Do you see any parallels between *The President vs David Hicks*, which follows the courageous fight waged by David’s father Terry to secure his son’s freedom from Guantanamo Bay prison and the situation facing Julian Assange?

JP: Yes, they are similar; Terry Hicks is a supporter of Julian. For their moral courage, both Terry and Julian are the best kind of Australians.

RP: You’ve coined the phrase “Vichy journalism” to describe journalists who have joined the campaign of slander, lies and frame-ups against Assange and WikiLeaks. Why has this occurred and what

are the consequences for Assange and investigative journalism? What is the current situation facing Assange?

JP: Most “mainstream” journalism has been integrated into corporate and so-called national security systems that rule the West, especially in the United States and Britain. When I was working in what was known as “Fleet Street,” the press was conservative but there were spaces for different, dissenting work, and a certain range of views. This was even encouraged. Today the spaces have closed, and the best journalists write online, or in foreign publications, or in a new *samizdat*, or not at all.

WikiLeaks and Julian Assange are the counter to this oppression, and, of course, he is subjected to a smear campaign. The greater his impact and symbolism the more vicious the campaign against him.

The *Guardian*’s sordid role as a platform for the scuttlebutt of spooks is shocking. Those involved are no different, morally, from those who collaborated under the Vichy government in France during the Second World War.

Julian’s situation is serious. The person contracted to bring his food to the Ecuadorean embassy has been told she is no long wanted. This does not mean he will go hungry, but it demonstrates the depth of his struggle. That said, he is a very strong character with an abiding moral purpose and a dark sense of humour. He needs, as Martha Gellhorn wrote about those who stand up to rapacious power, “the alliance of us all ... the support of decency.”

RP: Can you speak about your last documentary *The Coming War on China* and what prompted you to make it? What will be the consequences of such a war? Can you comment on Australia’s involvement in these preparations and the mounting anti-China hysteria in the Australian media?

JP: China is surrounded by more than 400 American military bases that reach from Australia, through the Pacific to Asia and across Eurasia. A State Department official described it as “actually a noose.” Low-draught US warships probe the waters of southern China and US drones overfly Chinese territory. This has been a fact, mostly unreported, for many years and was inverted during the Obama presidency to propaganda, the falsehood, that China was threatening the US, Asia, the Pacific.

As expected, Australian politicians, “experts” and journalists have echoed this. It has become a chorus. The Chinese—like the Russians—are becoming the enemy of Australia, which in reality has no enemies, apart from its own forces of institutionalised paranoia. I grew up during the first Cold War and it is all familiar: perhaps worse in its inventions and deceptions.

RP: Finally, what’s your advice to young people who want to become documentary filmmakers and investigative journalists today?

JP: My advice is always follow your star. By that I mean: never abandon your commitment and idealism and keep in mind that journalists and film-makers are truly credible as the agents of people, never of power.



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