

❖ **John Pilger - The War You Don't See [DVD] - UK, 2010. 96 minutes.**

Reviewed by Juan Francisco Salazar — University of Western Sydney

John Pilger has made over 50 films since his 1970 documentary debut "The Quiet Mutiny" where he reported the disillusion of American troops from the front line in Vietnam. Since then, he has reported on some of the most daring conflicts of our time including the aftermath of Pol Pot's regime in "Cambodia Year Zero: the Silent Death of Cambodia"; his work in "East Timor and Palestine"; and his Australian Bicentenary trilogy where he exposed the hidden realities of Aboriginal Australia: "The Secret Country" (1983), "The Last Dream" (1988) and "Welcome to Australia" (1999). Pilger has received several prestigious journalism awards as well as television documentary awards such as the 2004 Royal Television Society Best Documentary award for his film on the story of the expulsion of the Chagos Islanders in "Stealing a Nation", and the 2008 Best Documentary prize at the One World Awards for his film "The War On Democracy".

John Pilger's leitmotif can be summarized in his own words: "It is not enough for journalists to see themselves as mere messengers without understanding the hidden agendas of the message and myths that surround it." Throughout his work spanning four decades, it is clear that for him there is more to the message than just the medium. And this is certainly the case in his latest film, "The War You Don't See". As with many – if not most – of his *oeuvre*, Pilger's films ought to be compulsory viewing among high school and university students. Pilger's films are as clear and informative as they are educational and didactic. The principles of construction, function and effect in most of his TV documentary practice have a rhetorical (rather than aesthetic) function. The main modality for constructing a film is the analysis and interrogation of a taken for granted truth. Pilger performs with his carefully chosen light coloured suits and his gaze from behind his reading glasses, that his is here to persuade us to look beyond what the mainstream media – in his latest film US and British media – are telling us. And this Pilger does it efficiently.

The film is presented as a 96-minute dissertation in 12 chapters. The introduction sets out very clearly what the film will be about. Let there be no confusion. It continues by providing a light critique of the concept of "embedded journalism" as it was used during the invasion and war in Iraq. Pilger tells us once again that he notion can be taken literally. Journalist individuals and institutions that are "in bed" with military strategists, who ultimately decide on the when, what, how and why of news reporting. Pilger reminds us of the infamous and ill-reported battle of Fallujah in 2004 and the failure of the main news agencies to report what went on there. In doing so, Pilger restates over and over again the prominent and unrecognised work of independent journalists that risk their integrity and their lives to show a different perspective to that of the military-defence-journalism media apparatus.

Pilger then invites us on a trip through the invasion of Iraq and the "dodgy affair" of weapons of mass destruction, to the bombing of Afghanistan, to a comparison of how propaganda in the 21st century operates in very similar ways as in the Vietnam War, the Second World War and the Nuclear Bomb over Japan in August 1945. Through the testimonies of prominent journalists such as former CBS Dan Rather and former BBC Rageh Omaar, Pilger offers a redemption to those journalists who, unlike him, fell in the trap of deception in the coverage of the unfolding of yet another war impelled by the US following the events of September 11, 2001. Events that only in Iraq, Pilger tells us, has taken the lives of over 300 journalists.

Pilger cleverly presents a view of the US as a country that transpires war: that breathes and eats and defecates war. Unfortunately, he barely touches in one of the main topics of this war on terror: that money and money-making are at the centre of modern war. This is what has happened in Iraq for the past decade and what is happening in Libya right now. As French newspaper *Libération* recently reported, Libya's rebels promised France 35% of the country's crude oil in exchange for supporting the Transitional National Council in its fight against Muammar Gaddafi. The unfolding new Libya – as I write – is yet another example of what Pilger brings to the forefront in his film: that contemporary war is about control of global resources and that modern democracies don't leave marks in their deployment of war for this end.

Pilger's promotional impulse in "The War You Don't See" is full of truisms (i.e. the weapons of mass destruction scandal in 2003 or the ongoing military occupation of Palestine). Just like his preceding film, "The War on Democracy" – with its range of stale truisms about US foreign policy in Latin America – his new film is filled with worn-out statements that are well known to be true and Pilger does little more than repeat facts and perspectives that have been well exposed. There are scarce poetic and

expressive elements in "The War You Don't See". There is little surprise. Everything is meticulously constructed and staged. There is no suspense.

Pilger leaves nothing to the imagination of the viewer. Everything has been pre-digested for the viewer by Pilger the teacher-performer. The film is as much an expose of journalism's complicity in promoting and legitimising war, as it is about Pilger himself as an independent investigative journalist in a quest to both make the truth surface from the rotten sewers of institutions such as Fox in the US and to showcase how, unlike some of his most prominent colleagues in the US and Britain, he never fell into the traps of the public relations (read propaganda) campaigns leading to the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the ongoing military occupation of Palestine through the 2000s.

Perhaps the only exception is the scene of a street massacre of nine civilians by US forces in Baghdad in 2007. A cockpit video shot by Reuters reporters from an US Apache helicopter and released by WikiLeaks in 2010 shows not only the atrocities committed by US soldiers as "daily occurrences", but also the colloquial language used by the perpetrators that comes to legitimise and consecrate these unsanctioned actions. Pilger intercuts this footage with the testimony of Ethan McCord, the first US soldier to arrive at the scene only to find two children massacred inside a car. In many ways this scene acts as a climax of the film and engages the audience not through the rational discourse of journalists but in an affective way from someone speaking from experience.

The scene is also a cue to bring to prominence the work of WikiLeaks since 2008. Pilger embeds WikiLeaks into his film as a strategy to give it currency. Through extended interviews with Julian Assange (contained also as a bonus on the DVD of the film), Pilger seems to uplift the role of the whistleblower in investigative journalism. Whistleblowers are intrinsic to investigative journalism. Even in such occasions when they can be prosecuted in the United States, publishers and reporters are protected by the First Amendment in the US Constitution. What transpires from Pilger's conversation with Assange is that this is not the case with WikiLeaks and journalists must not take this for granted. In "The War You Don't See", Barack Obama is presented as a warmonger who has failed to capitalize on his motto of change for 'America', by signing the biggest-ever war budget in US history (over 700 billion dollars). On the contrary, Pilger presents the view of the attacks on WikiLeaks and its founder, Julian Assange, as "a response to an information revolution that threatens old power orders, in politics and journalism"... as a reaction "of a rapacious system exposed as never before." WikiLeaks is portrayed as fresh blood for the already moribund mainstream television and print journalism that Pilger attempts to discredit once and for all. Yet, once again, Pilger does not go deep enough to question how both mainstream and independent media (for example *The Guardian*) have actually profited hugely from the WikiLeaks disclosures.

In "The War You Don't See" Pilger swims on the surface. He rarely goes deep enough, into uncharted waters where others dare to go. He rarely posits the most evident question that emerges from his critical eye: the end of journalism as we know it. He hints at it in an innocuous way when he criticises his colleagues and his profession as being mere public relations campaigners for the apparatuses of power in their own countries. But this has been said for the past decade in more assertive and meaningful ways. He also hints at it by entertaining the view that WikiLeaks is a landmark of investigative journalism, which like him, poses a threat to government and military information systems and soft infrastructures.

"The War You Don't See" ought to be compulsory viewing as an introduction to understanding the role of big media in colluding with power in the promotion and legitimisation of war. Don't expect to learn too much on your own from this film. More likely, be prepared to be taught by John Pilger the teacher, in his usual efficient and well-proven documentary film mode of address.

About the Reviewer

Dr. Juan Francisco Salazar is a Senior Lecturer in communication and media studies at the School of Communication Arts, University of Western Sydney, Australia. As a media practitioner he has produced several documentaries and experimental short films, and collaborated with a wide range of community media/arts organisations and artists including several local councils, creative studios and community development organizations in Sydney, Mexico, the UK and Chile. He is an international coordinator of the OURMedia Network since 2004 and was convener of the OURMedia 6th International Conference in Sydney, 2007. He has been a visiting research fellow at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex (2008) and a visiting teaching fellow at the School of Communication, Universidad de las Américas, Mexico (2006).

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