

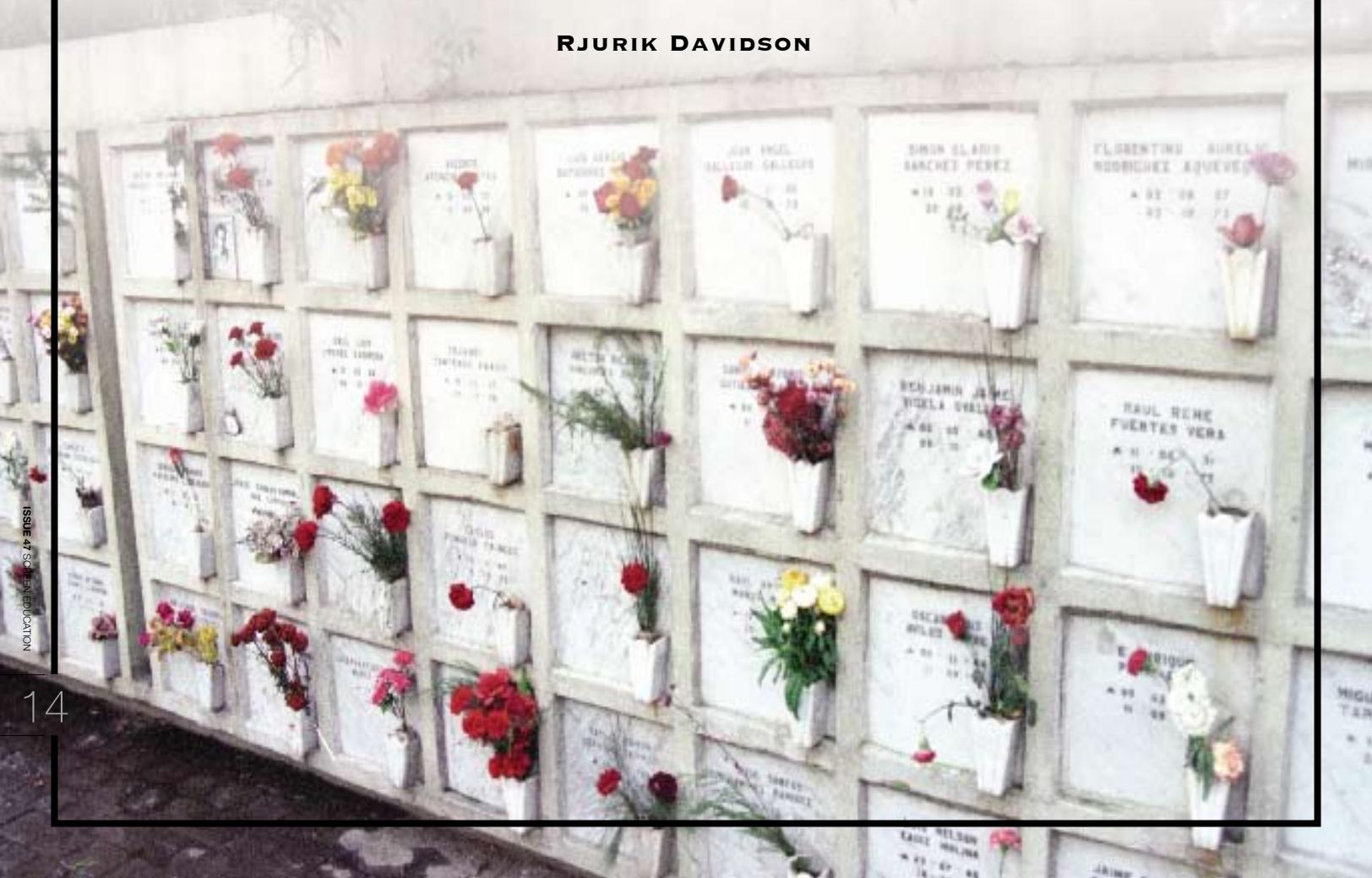
A number of clichés come to mind when considering the work of journalist and documentary maker John Pilger: conscience of the West (or specifically Australia), thorn in the side of the establishment, rogue journalist, propagandist and member of the ‘Loony Left’. Such clichés position Pilger forever at the edges of contemporary debate, which is both a reflection of reality and a problem with the clichés themselves; they see him as alternately good or bad, but in either case a fringe-dweller, destined to remain a voice in the wilderness, a voice perhaps heard, but nevertheless unusual and isolated from the ‘mainstream’. This

placement at the edges of the contemporary political discourse no doubt explains why, despite one’s political outlook, so many of his documentaries *feel* somehow, indeterminately, ‘extreme’ (perhaps the best example is his *Palestine is Still the Issue* [2002]). It’s not a matter here of inaccuracy – though many have claimed that Pilger has made factual errors – simply that Pilger is an unashamed leftist (much more coherent and consistent than someone like Michael Moore) in a Western world dominated by the triumphant Right. In other words, one’s response to his films says as much about our own society as the truth-value of his work.

And in this we should remember – and it is here that the clichés fall apart – that his arguments during the nineties about the nature of the Indonesian occupation of East Timor and the Australian government’s complicity with it (for example, *Death of a Nation* [1994]), dismissed at the time by many commentators as leftist propaganda, are now generally accepted as historical fact. His latest offering, *The War on Democracy* (co-directed by Chris Martin), elicits the very same response whereby, even if you agree with Pilger, you feel somewhat taken aback by the very points he makes, as if such truths should not be mentioned in polite society, as if he had burped at the dinner table.

POSTCARDS FROM ‘THE EDGE’: JOHN PILGER’S THE WAR ON DEMOCRACY

RJURIK DAVIDSON



Democracy or empire?

The War on Democracy traces the ongoing conflict between the United States and the various leftist regimes that emerged and continue to emerge in Latin America. Pilger begins with the social revolution (otherwise known as the Bolivarian Revolution) occurring in Venezuela under the leadership of President Hugo Chavez, documenting the health and literacy campaigns, the emerging democratic forms, the birth of a new constitution. Pilger interviews Chavez about the process and his own biography and examines the attempts to unseat Chavez during the Washington-backed coup of 2002. Pilger's claims are simple: the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela is a democratic process, by the people, for the people, which aims to address the pressing social and economic injustices and it should be supported. He explains:

I've long regarded Latin America as the source of hopes of freedom from poverty for the poor, and the current, extraordinary rising of millions against the old order is defying all the stereotypes. For one thing, it's democratic in a way we've forgotten or abandoned in the west; for all the media concentration on Chavez, the grassroots movement of the 'invisible people' in Venezuela and elsewhere is the true 'big story'.¹

America's attempts to halt this process are, for Pilger, simply an expression of its nature as an Empire, which seeks to control people and resources, regardless of the human cost. He has argued that:

Latin America's strategic importance is often dismissed. That's because it is so important. Read Greg Grandin's recent, excellent history (I interview him in the film) in which he makes the case that Latin America has been Washington's 'workshop' for developing and honing and rewarding its imperial impulses elsewhere. For example, when the US 'retreated' from South-East Asia, where did its 'democracy builders' go to reclaim their 'vision'? Latin America. The result was the murderous assaults on Nicaragua, El Salvador and Guatemala, and the darkness of 'Operation Condor' in the southern cone. This was Ronald

RIGHT: JOHN PILGER

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Reagan's 'war on terror', which of course was a war of terror that provided basic training for those now running the Bush/Cheney 'long war' in the Middle East and elsewhere.²

The question for Pilger is therefore: democracy or empire? Pilger argues that the 'war against democracy' is one waged by the United States and one in which Australia, as an important ally, is complicit. In making this argument, Pilger provides a potted history of Central and South America, examining the recent histories of Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala and Bolivia. He interviews activists of various sorts (indigenous, priests and nuns, etc.) from those countries, as well as former members of the CIA. The picture he draws is of a pitiless and rapacious American empire prepared to accept and welcome any regime to ensure their national interests. Ultimately, what one thinks of the documentary will depend on one's politics and it is probably not very useful for this reviewer to make too much of an argument about his own opinions. Suffice to say that if Michael Moore is Pilger's 'humorous cousin' then his more serious siblings would include Tariq Ali, whose 2006 book *Pirates of the Caribbean: Axis of Hope* documents the very same ground as *The War on Democracy*, and Noam Chomsky, who has documented the US's official doctrines and international interventions in 2003's *Hegemony or Survival: America's Quest for Global Dominance*.

Populism and the populace

Leaving aside the merit of Pilger's claims for the moment, as a documentary *The War on Democracy* works most noticeably on an emotional level. It is not a comprehensive history (in fact it covers far too much territory and the result is something of a structural mess) but is rather a documentary essay, a kind of 'serious cousin' to Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9/11*. Pilger has always made documentaries which are overt (rather than covert) arguments. In *The War on Democracy* he places himself front and centre, as he does on his other documentaries. He speaks directly to the camera in a Brechtian move that at once highlights the nature of the film as his own opinion and in doing so reassures



ABOVE: VENEZUELAN PRESIDENT HUGO CHAVEZ WITH JOHN PILGER

the viewer of his earnestness. It's an admirable act, even if Pilger isn't the most charismatic of presenters, for he thus appears vulnerable and responsible before his audience. He does not hide his face away. He has a point to make, and there are no two ways about it.

Pilger appeals not only to rationality, but to a common humanity as well, telling human stories, openly invoking anger. It is impossible not to be moved by the stories of those who were tortured and those whose relatives were murdered by the various US-backed juntas, dictatorships, or death squads, just as it is difficult not to be infuriated by the claims of Duane Clarridge, the former head of the CIA in Latin America in the 1980s, that national

interest and national security are the *only* determining factors in US policy, 'Like it or lump it.' Accompanying the film is a noticeably emotional soundtrack: somewhat pompous orchestral strings when Pilger enters the house of a rich Venezuelan, ominous music when the machinations of the US are mentioned, the uplifting sounds of Sam Cooke's soulful 'A Change is Gonna Come'.

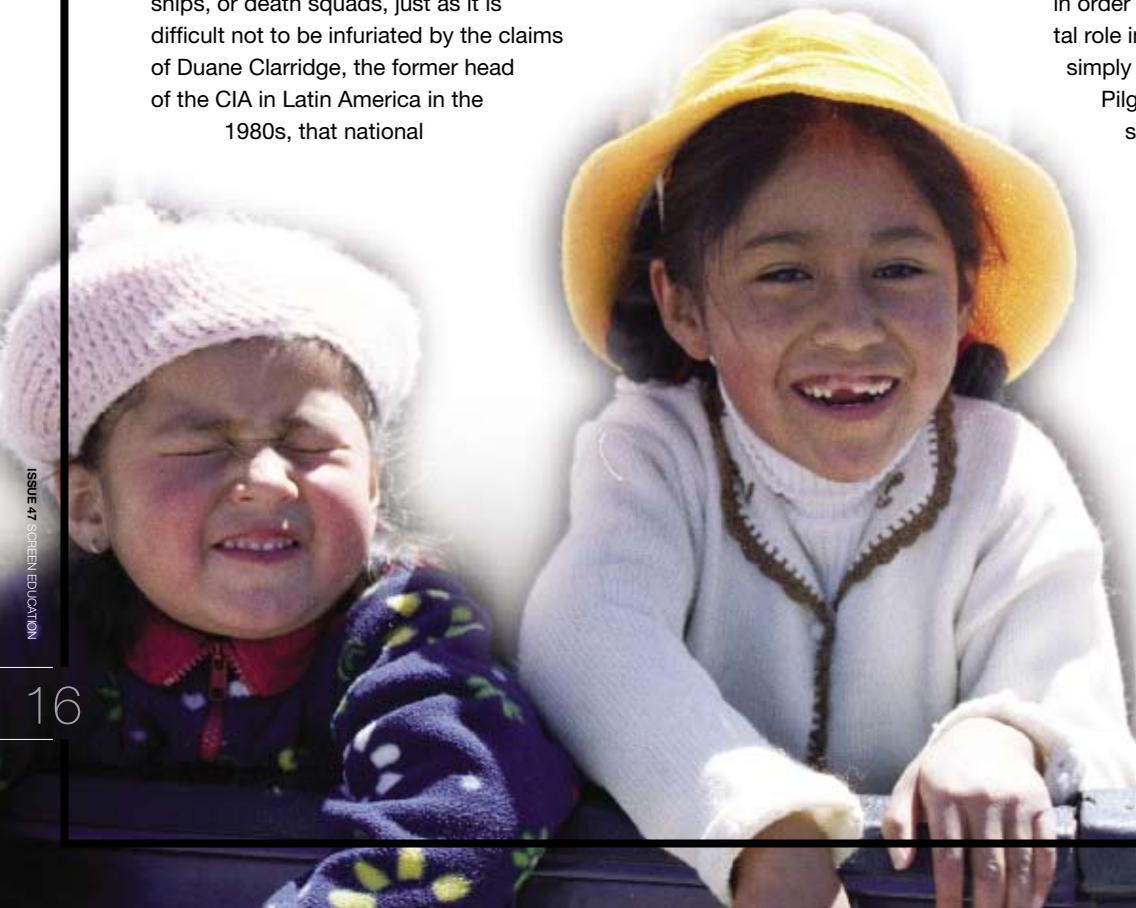
The War on Democracy has a certain simplicity of argument, brought about by

The question for Pilger is therefore: democracy or empire? Pilger argues that the 'war against democracy' is one waged by the United States and one in which Australia, as an important ally, is complicit.

the sheer amount of ground it covers. Social and historical processes in any particular country are complex, and one wonders if Pilger would not have been better simply concentrating on the Bolivarian revolution in Venezuela. For example, he makes cursory mention of the accompanying difficulties to the process: corruption, ongoing poverty, and the problems of constructing a direct and popular democracy. Yet there is no real investigation of these phenomena. The events leading up to the 11 September 1973 coup against the Allende government in Chile are also mentioned in order to highlight America's detrimental role in Latin American affairs, yet it is simply limited to this.³ Interestingly, Pilger claims that if you examine the surveys of what people want on television and cinema:

Yes, they want escapist films and TV programs; but there's another need they express over and again. And that comes down to making sense of a world so often presented to them as an assembly line of apparently surreal, unrelated images. That's why Michael Moore has been successful ...⁴

The question, though, is whether Pilger himself doesn't fall into just such a problem by covering so much ground.



Don't mention the 's' word

There are also some noticeable omissions from Pilger's film. Firstly, he avoids too much concentration on Cuba, which surely is the primary example (regardless of what one thinks of its domestic policies) of a country which has opposed the American Empire, and is a crucially close ally of the Chavez regime. And secondly, he does not mention Colombia, where the guerrillas of the FARC (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) control close to one third of the territory and where the US has pumped millions into combating this group. To the casual observer, these may seem unremarkable omissions, but the logic behind them may be simple. Cuba, which boasts an excellent health and education system, calls itself, openly, communist and of course limits democratic freedoms in a way that Venezuela doesn't. The FARC guerrillas, on the other hand are just that – guerrillas. Pilger perhaps wants to ally himself with the 'democratic' opponents of the US 'Empire' yet avoids their possibly non-democratic allies. This is an absence in the film rather than necessarily a flaw; it is not a matter of insisting that Pilger take more of an interest in or position on these countries, simply of noting that he chooses not to do so.

A related omission, then, is that of the word 'socialism' from Pilger's description of these 'democratic' movements. He prefers to wrestle the word 'democratic' from his opponents. This is surely a tactical move, aiming to win over a broad viewership to support these processes. The only problem with this omission is that the word is hard to avoid, both in terms of the Chavez government and the Allende government in Chile in 1973, the Nicaraguan Sandinistas, and in fact most of the democratic movements to which Pilger refers. Pilger's own response in relation to Venezuela is this:

I doubt that he [Chavez] began as a socialist when he won power in 1998 – which makes his political journey all the more interesting. Clearly, he was always a reformer who paid respect to his impoverished roots. Certainly, the Venezuelan economy today is not socialist; perhaps it's on the way to becoming something

like the social economy of Britain under the reforming Attlee Labour government. He is probably what Europeans used to be proud to call themselves: a social democrat. Look, this game of labels is pretty pointless; he is an original and he inspires; so let's see where the Bolivarian project goes.⁵

In avoiding the term 'socialist', it seems that Pilger is walking a tightrope fundamentally related to 'pitching' his documentary at an audience, a pitching one feels is related to the phenomenon I noted at the beginning of this review: that Pilger's voice seems so unusual in a world where the Right is so triumphant.

I argued earlier that the fact that Pilger's documentary seems one-sided is more a reflection of our own contemporary environment than the truth-value of his claims. Indeed, this should not strike us as unusual given the dominance of the Right in our mainstream press. The marginalizing of such voices from the mainstream necessarily invokes the situation where the simple utterance of an alternative vision seems out of place. Pilger has crafted a career in such utterances, and in the opinion of this reviewer at least, we can only hope that they don't appear so unusual in the future.

Rjurik Davidson is a freelance writer and the sub-editor of Metro and Screen Education magazines. He has taught at Victoria University, RMIT and La Trobe University.

Endnotes

- ¹ 'Q & A on *The War on Democracy* with John Pilger' in *The War on Democracy Production Notes*.
- ² Pablo Navarrete, 'John Pilger: Washington's War on Democracy', <<http://www.greenleft.org.au/2007/708/36764>>, accessed 3 September 2007.
- ³ For an excellent documentary of the process in Chile in 1973, see *The Battle of Chile, Parts 1–3* (Patricio Guzmán, 1975, 1977, 1979).
- ⁴ *ibid.*
- ⁵ Navarrete, *op. cit.*

