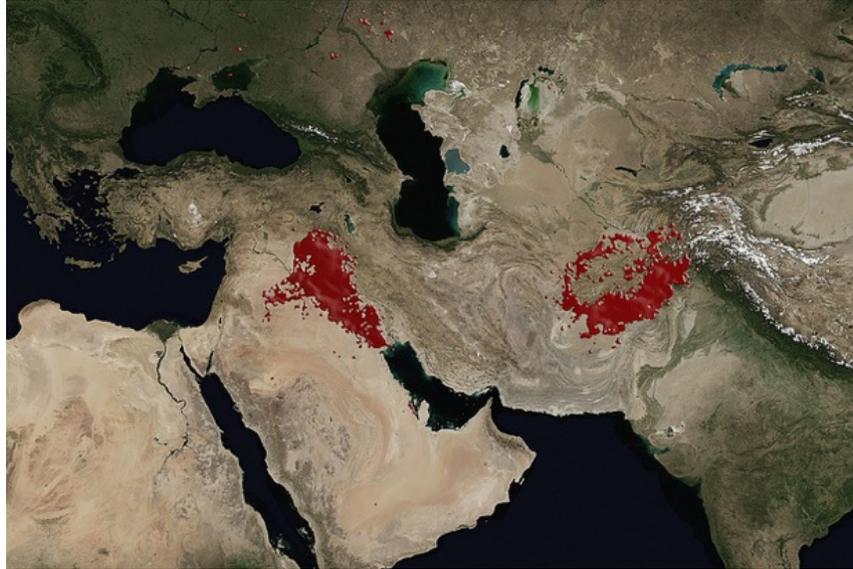


FAST COMPANY

Filmmakers Band Together To Renew Focus On U.S. War In Afghanistan, Now In Its 10th Year

By Kevin Lee

October 7, 2011



Friday, October 7th marked the 10th anniversary of the War in Afghanistan, which now surpasses the length of the official U.S. military engagement in the Vietnam War. Despite its longevity, the war has receded from daily headlines in mainstream U.S. media which tends to focus more on domestic losses, from Steve Jobs to manufacturing jobs.

But after 10 years, \$450 billion dollars, 15,000 U.S. casualties and tens of thousands of Afghan civilian deaths, and with a dramatic increase in violent incidents over the past year, the war should not be ignored.

To counter the irresolution and indifference, a band of filmmakers decided to bring the war back into the popular consciousness, with a new work, *Far From Afghanistan*. The omnibus film was organized by John Gianvito, who also self-produced the compelling 2001 feature *The Mad Songs of Fernanda Hussein*. It was produced by Steve Holmgren (*Putty Hill*), and features the work of Jon Jost (*Last Chants for a Slow Dance, Swimming in Nebraska*) Minda Martin (*Free Land*), Travis Wilkerson (*An Injury to One*), and Soon Mi Yoo (*Dangerous Supplement*).

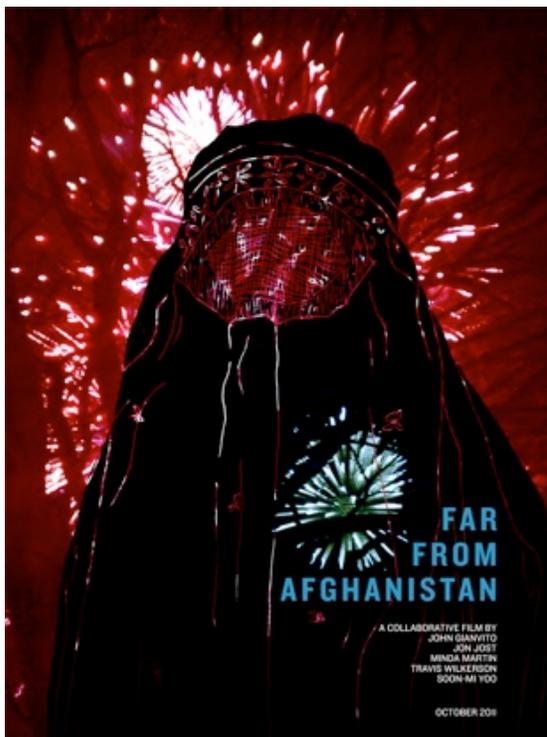
If the title sounds familiar, it was inspired by and pays tribute to another collective anti-war film, *Far from Vietnam* (1967), which brought together New Wave film

innovators including: Jean-Luc Godard, Agnes Varda, Chris Marker, and Alain Resnais. The rule-breaking, socially progressive legacy of those '60s filmmakers inspired not just the production but also the distribution of the Afghanistan film.

Faced with the reality that they could not miss an important marker of America's longest war, its tenth anniversary this week, the *Far from Afghanistan* team decided to bypass conventional steps to get their film seen, such as festival submissions, funding requirements, and complicated distribution deals. They wanted to start reaching people in the most timely and effective way possible--streaming online. After an intense five-month period of planning and production, Gianvito and company unveiled their work on Thursday to commemorate the anniversary of the war.

A current version of the project, *Far from Afghanistan: October Edition* is now available via Fandor, which is streaming the film for free through October 12th.

In anticipation of the project's debut, I exchanged emails with filmmaker and project initiator John Gianvito and producer Steve Holmgren to to learn more about the war, and the art and best practices of omnibus, and political filmmaking.



FC EXPERT BLOGGER, KEVIN B. LEE:

How did the idea for *Far from Afghanistan* come about? What events sparked the idea for the project itself?

JOHN GIANVITO: The project had been floating around in my mind for some time before I committed myself to it. Increasingly throughout the winter and spring of 2011, I found my conscience pricking me again and again that I should be doing something directly in my work about the war in Afghanistan (beyond that which I can think to do as a citizen).

I heard about a report by the Pew Research Institute that in 2010 only 4% of U.S. media made reference to the war and yet 2010 had been the deadliest year to that point. How often do most of us

now go about our lives with scarcely any cognizance that we are at war, unless of course one has a direct relationship to those serving? I struggle with how easy it can be to push awareness of the war and its consequent horrors out of mind. Distractions are everywhere--the cinema, for one, is replete with them.

A further catalyst was hearing Afghan activist Malalai Joya speak after which I read her autobiography *A Woman Among Warlords*. For me to sacrifice six months or a year of my time and energy and resources to attempt to aid in pushing the conversation forward about the responsibility the U.S. has to confront its actions in Afghanistan (as it ought to do in many other places in the world), was a small thing compared to the commitment made daily by individuals like Joya and so many others whose lives are literally in jeopardy because of their willingness to speak truth to power.

Six months is an extremely short time to put a feature-length production together, and you had a hard deadline with the anniversary of the war. How did you deliver the film in time?

STEVE HOLMGREN: Putting together this film from scratch in about six months was a massive challenge. It would not have been possible even a year or two ago I think, certainly not in the same way. Working with no budget and with five filmmakers who were literally traveling around the world throughout production, we relied heavily on different web technologies to keep in touch and keep things moving.

We used Vimeo to host cuts where we could provide comments, transferred final files through Dropbox rather than physically mailing drives, and had regular Skype calls to check in with different team members.

Bringing in platform producer John Bruce to envision our digital and distribution strategy was also major. He has a background in traditional film production, but works now as a top transmedia strategist. Given the importance of this subject and also the variety of non-conventional approaches, we wanted to provide the film the most professional and compelling environment we could to make sure the project stood out.

Mike Bowes and Matt Yeager from our production team have also been vital in realizing the film and coordinating with our team of filmmakers, working on our Kickstarter campaign, and implementing outreach to film and humanitarian organizations. The film has an interesting release strategy in that it will be available online for a week at no cost to viewers, both on our site and on Fandor.com. This bucks the conventional route of premiering at a prestigious festival or in theaters.

HOLMGREN: ...At this stage we couldn't be more excited to share it with the world and see what responses come in and the dialogue that comes out of this heightened moment of awareness surrounding the unfortunate 10-year anniversary of the start of the war.

What is the plan for release following the online event?

HOLMGREN: *Far From Afghanistan* as a feature-length film will be completed in 2012. *Far From Afghanistan: The October Edition* is an event that features limited

online streaming from the forthcoming film, and aligns the project with other events occurring on and around the October 6, 2011 10-year anniversary of the war. It's our way to help generate a vital dialogue that needs to occur in order for people to clarify the issues, and move collectively toward greater responsibility and resolution.

While it is true that most film projects proceed along a path of festival play on route to distribution, with little or no exposure beforehand, we believe that it is more important to help spur conversations around the anniversary of the beginning of the Afghanistan War. Traditional distribution cycles can take many months and sometimes years. *Far From Afghanistan* as a project has greater goals, beyond successfully navigating distribution channels.

Editors Pacho Velez and Rob Todd have been working on an introductory segment which will accompany the other in-process segments for the weeklong premiere. It is a progressive and somewhat vulnerable position to have the first exposure to the film be put out there in this manner. But one that is important as we feel compelled to respond to a decade of war that has been largely ignored.

...Are there works of the past 10 years that you would applaud in addressing the conflict in Afghanistan, or the post-9/11 "War on Terror" at large?

GIANVITO: I actually haven't seen too many, although I am sure there are important works that have been made. Directly pertaining to Afghanistan certainly I have seen a number of the Brave New World shorts, I have admired works such as Laura Poitras' *The Oath* (actually I approached Laura about contributing an episode but she herself was in production this summer and unable to participate), have been intrigued by excerpts I've seen from *To Hell and Back Again*, have not seen *Restrepo* or *Armadillo* yet, and would especially like to see John Pilger's recent documentary *The War You Didn't See*.

But really, as long as horror shows such as this war persist, there can't be enough efforts made in all sorts of ways toward raising consciousness. I think Neil Young's *Living With War* album had more bite and more heart in it than many other expressions I've encountered.

Political filmmaking can be most challenging in terms of engaging an audience; today's highly polarized political climate makes such across-the-lines appeal even harder. For each artist, how did the role of a perceived audience come into play in devising their work?

HOLMGREN: The segments will contain a lot of variety in structure and approach. It is going to be very interesting to see how audiences react, to be honest. I have a great deal of trust and respect for the filmmaking and political convictions of John and the team he has put together, and have hopes that this project will be an

example that there are politically engaged artists posing questions in hopes to spur awareness about our actions.

We are hoping to reach a general audience and have the project be accessible to everyone. This includes both fans of these filmmakers, human rights and activist/antiwar organizations, and also everyday citizens here and abroad concerned about the future of Afghanistan.

For his segment of *Far from Afghanistan*, Jon Jost wrote in the description that "it seems like still another wall to beat my head against," conveying the frustration that socially purposeful artists experience when trying to effect change. To co-opt some military terminology, how would you define success for this filmmaking "mission"? What would it look like?

GIANVITO: A good, tough question. My initial response is to say that breaking out of one's own silence and finding some expression, some way to articulate one's thoughts and feelings about such matters is in itself a small "success." Everything invites us to look the other way. I think all those engaged with this project, filmmakers, technicians, performers, producers, all have sought to do the best they can with the means possible. Beyond that, the hope is that this collective voice is heard and received in the spirit intended. What the recipient of the film does with that "information" is for he or she to work out for themselves.

The author of this post, Kevin B. Lee, is editor of the Keyframe blog at Fandor, consulting producer of Ebert Presents At The Movies, and programming executive at dGenerate Films.

Image: Casualty map of Afghanistan by Flickr user Max Braun

