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Burma-watching on film

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Since the 1988 prodemocracy uprising, Myanmar has increasingly attracted the attention of documentary filmmakers. To varying degrees, they have not only recorded developments in the country, but also played an important part in informing international audiences about the dire situation in the country and the opposition movement's efforts to replace the military regime with a more democratic government.

Before 1988, when a nationwide prodemocracy uprising thrust it into the headlines, Burma was studied only by a small circle of officials and academics. With some notable exceptions, journalists and members of the public tended to pay it little attention. Since then, however, official, scholarly and popular interest in Burma has grown markedly, with a commensurate increase in the output of published works.¹

This year alone, there has been an outpouring of news, analysis and comment—of all kinds—on topical issues such as Burma's alleged nuclear weapons program, its apparent links with North Korea, the elections for a new national government, the release from house arrest of opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi and the dangers of a renewed civil war with the country's ethnic minorities.

1 Andrew Selth, *Modern Burma Studies: A View from the Edge*, Working Paper No.96 (Hong Kong: Southeast Asia Research Centre, City University of Hong Kong, 2007), www6.cityu.edu.hk/search/Data/FileUpload/289/WP96_07_ASelth.pdf [page discontinued] [now at www.cityu.edu.hk/search/Resources/Paper/WP100_08_ASelth.pdf].

Most of this output has been in written form. A vast amount of material is now posted online. Over the years, however, Burma has also attracted a growing number of documentary filmmakers. Some efforts have been better than others, but together they have increased public awareness about certain developments in Burma and helped form popular perceptions about the main actors.

Among the best documentaries on Burma are three reports made between 1966 and 1978 by the British filmmaker Adrian Cowell, which remain unsurpassed as accounts of the narcotics trade in the Golden Triangle.² But the 1988 uprising and events following the military takeover were what attracted the attention of most contemporary filmmakers.

A number have been Australian. For example, in 1995, Sophie and Lyndal Barry made a film entitled *Barefoot Student Army* about anti-regime activists on the Thailand–Burma border. The following year, John Pilger released *Inside Burma: Land of Fear*, in which he took his trademark approach to the question of human rights abuses in Burma under the generals.³

Former ABC foreign correspondent Evan Williams has made several highly regarded films, including *Burma's Secret War* (2006) and, with the DVB, *Orphans of the Storm* (2008). In June this year—again in collaboration with the DVB—he directed *Burma's Nuclear Ambitions*.⁴ Most recently, he made 'Burma's Betrayal', a report on the elections for SBS TV's *Dateline* program.⁵

Other documentaries on Burma have included *Lines of Fire* (1991) by Brian Beker, *Burma Diary* (1997) by Jeanne Hallacy, *Burma: Anatomy of Terror* (2003) by Isabel Hegner, *Don't Fence Me In* (2004) by Ruth Gumnit and *Breaking the Silence: Burma's Resistance* (2009) by Pierre Mignault and Helene Magny.

2 'Adrian Cowell: Biography', *PBS Frontline*, www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/shows/heroin/interviews/cowellbio.html.

3 John Pilger (dir.), *Inside Burma: Land of Fear* (Network First, Central Independent Television/Carlton UK), *ITV*, 14 May 1996, video.google.com/videoplay?docid=253734287578732261# [page discontinued] [now at johnpilger.com/videos/inside-burma-land-of-fear].

4 Evan Williams for the Democratic Voice of Burma (dir.), *Dispatches: Burma's Nuclear Ambitions* (Evan Williams Productions for Channel 4 'Dispatches', 2010), www.dvb.no/dvb-tv/burmas-nuclear-ambitions/10073 [page discontinued] [now at ewpl.tv/dispatches-burma%E2%80%99s-nuclear-ambitions.html?deviceclock=desktop].

5 Evan Williams (dir.), 'Burma's Betrayal', *Dateline*, [SBS TV], 31 October 2010, www.sbs.com.au/dateline/story/about/id/600861/n/Burma-s-Betrayal [page discontinued] [now at www.enhancerv.com.au/video/dateline-burma-s-betrayal/4105].

Last year, Anders Ostergaard released *Burma VJ*, a dramatised documentary about the 2007 ‘Saffron Revolution’. It highlighted the role of the ‘citizen journalists’ inside Burma who managed to send out footage of the civil unrest for further dissemination by the international news media.⁶ The film was later nominated for an Academy Award in the ‘Best Documentary Feature’ category.

With varying degrees of success, all these films aimed to reveal and explain what was happening inside Burma—for decades, one of the world’s most isolated and secretive countries. This was often done by juxtaposing the country’s physical beauty and the gentleness of its traditional culture with the brutality and ineptitude of the military regime. Most of these films are now available online.

The latest contribution to this body of work is an outstanding film by Nic Dunlop, Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern entitled *Burma Soldier*. It looks at—and, more importantly, tries to understand—not just the oppressed in Burma, but also their oppressors. Of the latter, the directors ask: ‘Who are they, and where do they come from?’ Their answers to these questions are given through the story of a disabled Burmese veteran turned peace activist.⁷

Dunlop and his team look behind the propaganda of both sides to underscore the human tragedy that is modern Burma. Using some remarkable footage, including rare film of the army on operations, they show how nearly 50 years of military rule have not only blighted the lives of Burma’s civilian population, but also deeply corrupted its armed forces. The film is well complemented by Dunlop’s still photographs.

The resulting documentary is informative, visually stimulating and in places very moving. It pulls no punches but is a nuanced and thoughtful portrayal of Burma and its complex problems. *Burma Soldier* has just been released in the UK and wider distribution is planned. It is a film that promises to swell the ranks of Burma-watchers even further.

6 Anders Ostergaard (dir.), *Burma VJ: Reporting from a Closed Country*, burmavjmovie.com/ [page discontinued] [now at www.imdb.com/title/tt1333634/].

7 Nic Dunlop, Annie Sundberg and Ricki Stern (dirs), *Burma Soldier* (HBO Enterprises, Buddhist Broadcasting Foundation, Panorama, Ireland, 2010), www.panos.co.uk/blog/?p=2799&archive=news&dateopen=1286807022 [page discontinued] [now at www.idfa.nl/en/film/e30d4114-d670-4893-ba0b-d3877d057a8/burma-soldier].

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