

THE IMPACT OF JOHN PILGER'S 'UTOPIA'



In 2013, John Pilger's epic *Utopia* was released in Britain. The *London Film Review* named it "one of the five top films of 2013".

Utopia was released in Australia on 26 January 2014 - "Australia Day", the anniversary of the British invasion of Australia, the greatest appropriation of land in world history and the slaughter and dispossession of the Indigenous population.

The following describes the remarkable impact of *Utopia*.

SUMMARY

- **Utopia has had 46 screenings in UK cinemas and hundreds of screenings in Australia.**
- **Utopia had eighteen 3,4 or 5 star reviews in the UK press.**
- **Utopia was watched by almost a million television viewers in the UK.**
- **The Australian premiere was attended by 4,000 people, a record crowd for a film screening.**
- **An alternative distribution strategy defeated a "boycott" by Australia's Murdoch-dominated press. Hundreds of "people's events" were organised - screenings to audiences of up to 800 in universities and in remote Indigenous communities. No documentary film has been seen as widely across Australia's vastness.**
- **DVDs had to be shipped from the UK to satisfy the demand.**
- **The Premier of Western Australia met Indigenous leaders to discuss issues raised in the film.**
- **The film was discussed in the Prime Minister's "party room" meeting.**
- **Federal Indigenous policy officials attended Sydney screenings and sought out John Pilger.**
- **Australian of the Year, star footballer Adam Goodes, went to the national media to praise the film and call for action.**
- **SBS Australia will show Utopia nationwide on 31 May.**

Organisers of Utopia's nationwide screenings describe the impact in Indigenous communities as "electric" and, "Thanks to *Utopia* the landscape [of denial and debate] has changed..." Perth Indigenous leader Robert Eggington, wrote: "Utopia will live forever and be like a firestick in the darkness for all generations to come the more you view it, the more you see it, we are proud of you."

This was dramatically demonstrated at *Utopia's* premiere in Redfern, Sydney, where 4,000 people filled the equivalent of two football pitches to watch the film on a large screen. "I had never imagined this in my own country," said Pilger. "People journeyed thousands of miles from all over Australia. Some spoke their language for the first time at a public event in an Australian city. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians stood together in tribute when the film ended."



4000 people attended the Australian premiere of Utopia in Redfern, Sydney



Paul Dutton @IndigenousX · Feb 12

The opening of **Utopia** at the Redfern block one of the greatest gatherings of our people in recent history. pic.twitter.com/giwmnuQRlp

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Today, *Utopia* is being screened almost every day somewhere in Australia. In a community cultural centre near Kalgoorlie in the Western Desert, *Utopia* has been screened every night for two weeks. These free “people’s events” are the result of an unprecedented strategy for a major film’s release. “We knew the Australian media - dominated by the Murdoch press - would be hostile or would wilfully ignore the film,” said Pilger. “Mostly, it was the latter, and so we set out to circumvent this by going directly to the public with, with 'guerrilla' advertising - such as posters on the backs of telephone kiosks that said simply, 'BREAK THE SILENCE. SEE UTOPIA' - and by limitless public events. This succeeded beyond all expectations.” A critical point was a seminal article by Australia’s star footballer and 2014, ‘Australian of the Year’, Adam Goodes...

WHITE SILENCE OVER UTOPIA

By Adam Goodes

For the last few weeks, I’ve seen a film bring together Aboriginal people all over Australia. The buzz around *Utopia* - a documentary by John Pilger - has been unprecedented. Some 4000 people attended the open-air premiere in Redfern last month - both indigenous and non-indigenous Australians - and yet little appeared in the media about an event that the people of Redfern say was a “first”. This silence has since been broken by a couple of commentators whose aggression seemed a cover for their hostility to the truth

about Aboriginal people.

When I watched *Utopia* for the first time, I was moved to tears. Three times. This film has reminded me that the great advantages I enjoy today - as a footballer and Australian of the Year - are a direct result of the struggles and sacrifices of the Aboriginal people who came before me.



Adam Goodes: “It takes courage to tell the truth, no matter how unpopular those truths may be.” *Photo: Rohan Thomson*

Utopia honours these people, so I think the very least I can do is honour *Utopia* and the people who appeared in it and made it. It takes courage to tell the truth, no matter how unpopular those truths may be. But it also takes courage to face up to our past.

That process starts with understanding our very dark past, a brutal history of dispossession, theft and slaughter. For that reason, I urge the many fair-minded Australians who seek genuine prosperity and equality for my people to find the courage to open their hearts and their minds and watch *Utopia*.

There is a good reason why Pilger’s film resonates with so many of my people and is the talk of Aboriginal Australia.

Put yourself in Aboriginal shoes for a minute.

Imagine watching a film that tells the truth about the terrible injustices committed over 225 years against your people, a film that reveals how Europeans, and the governments that have run our country, have raped, killed and stolen from your people for their own benefit.

Now imagine how it feels when the people who benefited most from those rapes, those killings and that theft - the people in whose name the oppression was done - turn away in disgust when someone seeks to expose it. Frankly, as a proud Adnyamathanha man, I find the silence about Utopia in mainstream Australia disturbing and hurtful. As an Australian, I find it embarrassing. I also see an irony, for Utopia is about telling the story of this silence.

Some say the film doesn't tell the "good stories" out of Aboriginal Australia. That's the part I find most offensive.

Utopia is bursting at the seams with stories of Aboriginal people who have achieved incredible things in the face of extreme adversity. Stories of people like Arthur Murray, an Aboriginal man from Wee Waa, and his wife, Leila, who fought for several decades for the truth over the death in police custody of their son Eddie.

Their quiet, dignified determination helped spark the 1987 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, a landmark inquiry that still plagues governments today.



Arthur Murray

Even before that, Murray led a historic strike of cotton workers and forced employers to provide better wages and conditions for Aboriginal workers. How is this achievement negative?

The film also features Rosalie Kunoth-Monks, a strong Aboriginal woman who proudly speaks of truth and a long overdue treaty.

The work of Robert and Selina Eggington is also profiled in Utopia. After the suicide of their son, Robert and Selina created a healing centre in Perth called Dumbartung. Its aim is to stop the deaths and provide an outlet for the never-ending grief of so many Aboriginal families.

I reject any suggestion that by telling those stories, that by honouring these lives, Pilger has "focused on the negative". Their achievements may not fit

the mainstream idea of “success” but they inspire me and other Aboriginal people because they’re shared stories. They are our courageous, unrecognised resistance.

Nana Fejo, another strong Aboriginal woman, appears in Utopia. She tells of her forced removal as a child. It’s a heart-wrenching story and yet she speaks with a graciousness and generosity of spirit that should inspire all Australians. Like Fejo, my mother was a member of the stolen generations. My family has been touched by suicide, like the Eggingtons. My family and my people talk of truth and treaty, just like Kunoth-Monks does. My family has been denied our culture, language and kinship systems, like all the Aboriginal people who feature in Utopia. This extraordinary film tells the unpleasant truth. It should be required viewing for every Australian.

Adam Goodes is the Australian of the Year and plays AFL for the Sydney Swans

THE IMPACT OF UTOPIA SCREENINGS IN ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES

by Paddy Gibson, associate producer

The impact of Utopia at amongst Aboriginal communities and their supporters has been electric.

No other film dealing with Aboriginal rights in Australian history has been taken up with such urgency and enthusiasm at the grass-roots level, with community activists driving a ground-swell of screenings that have forced the issues raised by the film into mainstream debate.

Australian of the Year Adam Goodes, a proud Aboriginal man and star football player, described this impact in an opinion piece for the Fairfax daily newspapers:

“For the last few weeks, I’ve seen a film bring together Aboriginal people all over Australia. The buzz around Utopia - a documentary by John Pilger - has been unprecedented”

The Australian premiere of Utopia was an unprecedented event in itself. An estimated 4,000 people packed into the Block in Redfern, an urban Aboriginal housing estate and an iconic location in the struggle for Aboriginal rights, to watch the film in the open air.

Word spread fast on social media and through Aboriginal networks that Utopia was available, for free, to screen in local areas and our small team coordinating community events became inundated with requests.

These requests came from every corner of Australia - from the remote deserts of Western Australia, up to the rain forests of Northern Queensland, down to the Southern reaches of Tasmania. There were major launch events, with guest speakers to explore specific local issues in greater depth, in every capital city and most regional centres.

The significance of the film for Aboriginal people living under oppressive government policies was one of the most rewarding aspects of this process.

On first seeing the film, Utopia elder Rosalie Kunoth-Monks said:

“It’s everything we knew was happening, but didn’t know how to put it out there... We are more determined than ever to fight the fight”.

In Darwin, a pre-view of the screening was shown to about 25 local Aboriginal elders to seek support for a launch event. The organiser of this event reported:

“There was lots of crying, especially about the repeat of the Stolen Generations with child removals today. Everyone stood up to applaud the film. One man who had been stolen as a child said that the film was more important than the apology [by prime minister Kevin Rudd in 2008]”.

One young Aboriginal activist from the NSW North Coast, who co-ordinates a program for Indigenous law students said:

“This film is such inspiring work. We have to keep spreading that wvagay (fire). My Nan was so excited yesterday after seeing this, saying she can feel momentum in our struggle building again”.

Discussion about Utopia had a strong presence on social media, particularly on twitter, which is very popular amongst young Aboriginal activists. A popular twitter account @IndigenousX, which has a different Aboriginal host every week, was given over to Aboriginal people featured in Utopia for a number of weeks through the period of the film’s release, in order for them to share their perspectives more deeply.

The film has also already started to be used as a tool by Aboriginal rights groups taking the message out more broadly in Australian society. A number of screenings have been organised with trade unions for example, including a booked-out screening at the NSW Trades and Labor Council Hall in February. This message from the president of a local branch of the National Tertiary Education Union provides a good example of the enthusiasm this has generated.

Huge numbers attending community screenings forced the hand of independent cinema’s weighing up whether to show such a controversial film. And the passion with which thousands of people have taken up a renewed push for Aboriginal rights after seeing Utopia has helped to break the great Australian silence.

PERSONAL TESTIMONIES OF THE IMPACT OF UTOPIA IN AUSTRALIA

From Robert & Selina Eggington, Aboriginal Elders, Perth:

John

We just got back to Dumbartung from the event at Murdoch University and already our email systems have received messages from the young Nyoongah people who were there. We thought 4,000 people at Redfern was something, but Perth erupted into an incredible empowerment I have never witnessed before.

The Police minister came to me crying saying she is going to set up a meeting as soon as she can with Dumbartung words defy the impact of Utopia on Perth tonight I am never lost for words but to see so many people shedding tears and also responding as you would expect them to regarding some of the films humorous points. You can never know John how tonight was so full of emotion where the elders vowed to fight on and never give up.

Tonight was a miracle nothing less, I need to somehow try to really let you know John of how this has affected everyone... it is nothing less than an absolute truth of justice and it could have never been expressed any different.

It made our people extremely happy to now know they have finally been given a boost and evident truth to continue our struggle.

I am so very, very happy, that Utopia has done what it has.

From Michele Harris, who organised special events in Melbourne, each drawing up to 800 people:

Hi John

It was a wonderful success and I was exhausted. It was great to have so many people sharing their feelings and ideas afterwards, and the phone calls have kept coming. I did a radio interview a few hours before and responded, when asked what I most hoped would come out of the screening, that people would be encouraged to talk and shared ideas.

John, in the last six weeks the landscape has changed, the conversations are different and interest is growing in areas that I would never have expected in such a short time frame.

Our audience was about one-third Aboriginal. We had representatives from the courts, the police and just so many Aboriginal health and welfare organisations and a much broader range of supporters than we would normally attract.

POLITICAL IMPACT

Utopia was discussed robustly in the Australian government's party meeting. Officials warned government representatives in the Northern Territory to prepare to defend policies "in the wake of this Pilger film". Senior officials responsible for drafting indigenous policy attended screenings in Sydney and Melbourne. The West Australian state government sent the police minister to a screening; the State Premier convened meetings with Indigenous leaders on issues raised in the film, such as youth suicide.

UK MEDIA REVIEWS OF UTOPIA - A SELECTION

theguardian

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Series: Last night's TV

Utopia (John Pilger) – TV review

Nearly two decades after *The Secret Country*, John Pilger is still angry about the treatment of Indigenous Australians. After you watch his film, you'll understand why

John Crace

The Guardian, Friday 20 December 2013



Utopia ... 'I guess Australia isn't ready to confront some parts of its history.'

Utopia named in Top 5 films of 2013

London Film Review **Dec 28, 2013**

Pilger stands apart from the crowd as a documentarian ... when it comes to experience and gravitas, he's second to none

Cine Vue ★★★★★ **Nov 18, 2013**

This powerful film by John Pilger looks at the awful truth behind white Australia's dysfunctional relationship with Indigenous Australians

The Guardian ★★★★★ Nov 18, 2013

Pilger's powerful film has the unmistakable ring of truth.

The Observer ★★★★★ Nov 18, 2013

This powerful documentary from John Pilger and Alan Lowery highlights the plight of indigenous Aussies.

Total Film ★★★★★ Nov 17, 2013

As impassioned and partisan as you'd expect from Pilger, a committed cage-rattler, it's confrontational, eye-opening and saddening viewing.

The Metro ★★★★★ Nov 17, 2013

In Utopia the veteran campaigning journalist John Pilger returns to his native Australia to investigate the plight of the Aboriginal people.

The Times ★★★★★ Nov 16, 2013

A shocking and important piece of investigative journalism

The Express ★★★★★ Nov 15, 2013

John Pilger's documentary reveals 'shocking poverty' of Australia's indigenous communities

The Independent ★★★ Nov 14, 2013

Pilger confronts the politicians

Financial Times ★★★ Nov 13, 2013

In his revealing new documentary 'Utopia', distinguished journalist John Pilger paints a bleak picture of life for the aboriginal people of his native Australia

The Irish Times ★★★ Nov 12, 2013

If you want to see corruption in the raw, track down Utopia

Evening Standard ★★★ Nov 11, 2013

"I urge you to see this - impossible not to become impassioned by. Very very impressive" - Mark Kermode

BBC Radio 5 live: Mark Kermode & Simon Mayo Film Show Nov 10, 2013

John Pilger on breaking the great silence of Australia's past

The Irish Times Nov 8, 2013

Utopia

Thank heavens for [John Pilger](#). For five decades the Australian journalist has been working hard at revealing the secret – and sometimes all too public – outrages that result from the corporatisation of western democracy. If he gets up some people's noses, then that's as it should be.

John Pilger: Australia's silent apartheid
New Internationalist **Nov 8, 2013**

Australia's dirtiest secret: John Pilger's new film shines a light on the treatment of Australia's Aboriginals
TNT Magazine **Nov 8, 2013**

Veteran Australian journalist John Pilger offers a bloodboiling assessment of his homeland's relationship with its indigenous people.
Time Out ★★★★★ **Nov 6, 2013**

Pilger made Utopia to make Australians sit up and listen. It's no-nonsense, provocative, powerful and sickening stuff.
The List ★★★★★ **Nov 6, 2013**

The outrages he uncovers should shame a nation.
Empire ★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

John Pilger returns to his homeland Australia to uncover the story of a country that suffers from an appalling social and economic apartheid.
Camden Review **Nov 5, 2013**

Utopia is an impassioned, superbly put together polemic fuelled by Pilger's considerable ire. You are virtually guaranteed to be appalled by the movie's contents...
Total: Spec ★★★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

Pilger's voice is a calm yet impassioned one and it deserves to be heard in this extraordinary film.
Frost Magazine **Nov 5, 2013**

This is a staggering, furious, essential film. It will dishearten you, yet it must be seen.

heyuguys.co.uk **Nov 5, 2013**

A persistent documentary maker who has a firm grasp on what is relevant... Utopia is one of the most necessary documentaries I have seen in some time.

Broken Shark **Nov 5, 2013**

It's your duty to watch this documentary.

Interestment **Nov 5, 2013**

Utopia has a powerful message to share and deserves to be seen in every Australian school.

Filmoria ★★★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

This is an important film on a topic too rarely addressed.

Eye for Film ★★★★★½ **Nov 5, 2013**

Utopia is a fascinating, thought-provoking documentary.

Flickering Myth **Nov 5, 2013**

Utopia is a film which should be seen by as many people as possible.

Britflicks ★★★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

Utopia is an eye-opening and memorable documentary that's definitely worth seeking out.

ViewLondon ★★★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

This well-paced and immersive documentary is well worth watching

Filmuforia ★★★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

John Pilger's deeply moving and shocking documentary about one of Australia's best kept secrets.

The London Film Review ★★★★★ **Nov 5, 2013**

UTOPIA is both a personal journey and universal story of power and resistance.

The Hollywood News **Nov 5, 2013**

Pilger's energy makes everything hit home hard.

entertainment.ie ★★★★★½ **Nov 4, 2013**

A convincingly powerful spark of an all-too-infrequently discussed issue

Front Row Review ★★★★★½ **Nov 1, 2013**

John Pilger's latest documentary repeatedly examines the disjuncture between the utopian fantasy of white Australia and the dystopian fantasy on which it is built

Sight and Sound **Nov 1, 2013**

Veteran documentary filmmaker John Pilger's latest, Utopia, is a hard-hitting investigation into modern Australia's commitment to its indigenous communities.

Dog and Wolf ★★★ Nov 1, 2013

One of the most extraordinary films about Australia.

The Economic Voice Nov 1, 2013

Latest update March 20th, 2014 7:25 PM



THE LONDON FILM REVIEW

Mainstream, Art-house and Independent Cinema

Top 25 Films of 2013

Filed Under:

Dec 28, 2013 The London Film Review Articles , Top Tens 8

5: Utopia

Utopia

Rating: ★★★★★☆4/5

In John Pilger's deeply moving and shocking documentary about one of Australia's best-kept secrets, we are introduced to Utopia – the region of northern Australia that is home to the world's oldest human inhabitants. The aboriginal people who reside here have had their land – and their livelihoods – stolen from right under their noses. John Pilger takes us on a journey that will sadden, anger and frustrate you; a journey that addresses one of the biggest violations of human rights today.

AUSTRALIAN MEDIA REVIEWS OF UTOPIA

It was more than two decades ago when I saw John Pilger's 1986 documentary 'The Secret Country' for the first time. I was a 17-year-old Aboriginal male suffering the indignity of public housing Australia. My identity came with a sense of collective oppression that turned my indignity into both resistance and motivation.

Such feelings of resistance became an empowering experience that led to a pursuit of justice identified through education. Now, almost 30 years later, I find myself part of the middle class. I own my house. My children have all attended private schools and it is easy to believe that things are improving.

I have John Pilger and his latest documentary 'Utopia', which premieres in Australia today, to remind me that it hasn't.

The Conversation Jan 16, 2014

Truth-out

<http://truth-out.org/news/item/21358-record-4000-attend-open-air-premiere-of-utopia-in-australia>

The Tracker magazine

<http://tracker.org.au/2014/03/on-the-record-on-the-spiritual-high-road/>

<http://tracker.org.au/2014/01/utopia-the-inside-story/>

<http://tracker.org.au/2014/01/utopia-an-aboriginal-perspective/>

The Guardian Australia

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jan/08/john-pilger-utopia-is-one-of-the-most-urgent-films-i-have-made>

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/mar/03/adam-goodes-decries-muted-response-to-john-pilger-film-utopia>

<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/27/australia-day-indigenous-people-are-told-to-get-over-it-its-impossible>

Sydney Morning Herald

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/hostility-to-john-pilgers-film-a-denial-of-nations-brutal-past-20140302-33ttx.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/pilgers-message-to-white-australia-cannot-be-dismissed-20140302-33ton.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/national/outside-pressure-key-to-better-life-for-aborigines-says-pilger-20140119-312tq.html>

<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/movies/john-pilgers-damning-new-film-about-indigenous-australia-20131231-303tf.html#ixzz2pBZZYwbL>

ABC Radio Triple 6 Canberra

<https://docs.google.com/file/d/0B4mtT3ToQbD1dThiT2VLWDdJME0/edit?pli=1>

Green Left Weekly

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/55680>

<https://www.greenleft.org.au/node/55606>

Time Out Sydney

<http://www.au.timeout.com/sydney/film/events/37916/utopia-free-screening>

SBS News

<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/02/14/veiled-apartheid-ntelders>

<http://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/2014/01/20/pilger-says-utopia-long-overdue>

Grapevine - RRR

<http://ondemand.rrr.org.au/grid/20140203101615>

RN Breakfast

<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/breakfast/john-pilger-discusses-new-film-utopia/5204550>

Perth Indy Media

<http://perthindymedia.org/2014/01/27/we-speak-with-paddy-gibson-associate-producer-of-utopia/>

Radio Adelaide

<https://radio.adelaide.edu.au/john-pilgers-utopia-aboriginal-australias-suppressed-past-and-rapacious-present/>

Radio New Zealand

<http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/sunday/audio/2587519/john-pilger-on-utopia>

The Project (Channel 10 - Australia)

<http://tenplay.com.au/channel-ten/the-project/extra/season-5/john-pilger>

(approx. 2:26 mins into the video)

Apart from public events, *Utopia* had a cinema distribution in all states of Australia and is being distributed in schools and colleges. On 31 May, it will be broadcast nationally on the SBS Australia Network. *Utopia* has helped to bring back to public debate the critical issue of a Treaty between those Australians who own this vast land and those who took it from them by force and coercion.



END