



WOKING'S NEW CINEMA CLUB

The Main Feature

Season 42 – Issue 16 – Screening 11 May 2023

A Private War

UK 2019

110 mins. Certificate 15

Directed by	Matthew Heineman
Written By	Arash Amel and Marie Brenner
Cinematography	Robert Richardson
Film Editing	Nick Fenton

Cast

Rosamund Pike	Marie Colvin
Jamie Dornan	Paul Conroy
Tom Hollander	Sean Ryan
Stanley Tucci	Tony Shaw
Corey Johnson	Norm Coburn
Nikki Amuka-Bird	Rita Williams



This is the story of journalist Marie Colvin. She was born in Long Island, New York in 1956, studied anthropology at Yale and worked for United Press International (UPI) before joining the Sunday Times as a foreign correspondent in 1985. Specialising in the Middle East, she also covered conflicts in Chechnya, Serbia, Sierra Leone, and Zimbabwe. She famously reported from the 1999 conflict in East Timor when, contrary to all advice, she refused to leave a compound filled with 1,500 refugees. She acted as a human shield and publicised the threat of slaughter from the government-supporting local militia.

The film covers her career at the Sunday Times between 2001 and 2012, during which time she filed award-winning reports from the frontlines in Sri Lanka, Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, and Syria. The movie was inspired by an article in Vanity Fair magazine (penned by Marie Brenner), and whilst based on a true story does include some fabrications (creating Rita Williams as a composite, concerned friend and Tony Shaw as a lover for instance). It is the debut feature of Matthew Heineman (a noted documentary maker), who preferred to describe the film as “a psychological portrait” rather than a straight biopic.

Colvin was primarily concerned with presenting the stories of those usually forgotten in conflicts arguing that “being a war correspondent is about what people are going through” and believing passionately that “journalism can make a difference,” saying at one point in the film “I see it, so you don't have to.”

She was seriously injured in 2001 while reporting on the civil war in Sri Lanka, losing the sight in her left eye. She subsequently sported a trademark eyepatch.

Colvin is completely wedded to her job, and self-medicates with copious alcohol, endless cigarettes, and casual sexual encounters until she is eventually diagnosed and treated for PTSD. She remains determined to look for new stories, arguing with her boss, Sean Ryan, about conflicts she wants to cover. She hooks

up with freelance war photographer Paul Conroy (a no-nonsense ex-military Liverpudlian, played by *Belfast's* Jamie Dornan). Colvin brazenly passes herself off as a medic to uncover a mass grave in Iraq and later reports on shocking atrocities in Gaddafi's Libya. Back in her home base in London, she begins a relationship with Tony Shaw (Stanley Tucci). To lift her spirits in the field, she wears ultra-expensive La Perla lingerie under her flak jacket, explaining, "if anyone digs my corpse from a trench, I want them to be impressed."



In February 2012 under cover of darkness, Colvin and Conroy enter the city of Homs, Syria. The district was besieged and subject to relentless shelling and sniper fire from the Bashar al-Assad government, who claimed that no civilians were in harm's way. Colvin was able to prove otherwise, posting heart-rending, unflinching reports from "the widows' basement"

and from a desperately undersupplied and bloody clinic. World-wide outrage followed.

The film is anchored by a remarkable performance by Rosamund Pike, an actress who has moved seamlessly from Bond Girl (her film debut was in 2002's *Die Another Day*) to *Gone, Girl* (2014, Best Actress Oscar nomination) by way of several medium-budget, well-regarded British films (including *An Education*, *Made in Dagenham*, and *A United Kingdom* - all shown by the Club in recent years).

While Pike's performance was widely lauded, critical reaction to the film was mixed. Variety called it "an incredibly sophisticated, psychologically immersive" film but most UK-based critics were less impressed. Kevin Maher (The Times) complained that "a fearless performance from the star Rosamund Pike is undercut, at every turn, by a risible, self-defeating screenplay" while Empire lamented that "it's a disappointingly tell-rather-than-show affair, where dialogue scenes clunk and creak as Colvin's passion and arguably self-destructive drive are repeatedly spelled out for us." The Sunday Times itself praised Pike's "ferocious, feral performance" but noted that "friends, lovers, editors all blur into the background as we hop from one war zone to the next." Sadly, audiences were even less impressed and the film failed at the box-office.

Nonetheless, it is a powerful movie with expressive, documentary-style photography and (leaving some clichéd dialogue aside) offers a searing portrait of an obsessive, driven and dedicated journalist.

For a more detailed account of Colvin's time in Syria, I would recommend seeking out the documentary *Under the Wire*, part of BBC4's Storyville series. It is mainly narrated by Paul Conroy and the translator Wael al-Omar (omitted from *A Private War*) and weaves real, harrowing footage with carefully dramatised reconstructions of events.

Eugene Smith



We thank Red Eye for subsidising the cost of printing these notes. Red Eye Print, Unit 2D, Lansbury Estate, 102 Lower Guildford Road, Knaphill, GU21 2EP Tel: 01483 772111

The 9 Best Journalists on the Cinema Screen –which films get print journalists right?

Peter Preston edited the Guardian from 1975 to 1995. The extracts below are from an article he wrote in the paper in 2016 (2 years before his death).

1 | Bob Woodward - *All the President's Men*, 1976 – Robert Redford



Clean cut, boyishly charming, the man who looked down Deep Throat and made history. He's foul mouthed...but he's an angelic straight arrow too. "If you're gonna do it, do it right. If

you're gonna hype it, hype it with the facts." He gets the big story and goes on to get more of them for the Washington Post for the next 35 years.

2 | Veronica Guerin - *Veronica Guerin*, 2003 – Cate Blanchett

Dublin's Guerin is a brave female investigative journalist who followed a perilous path to assassination. She's a driven reporter, teeth dug deep into a story she feels must be told. It's heroism in a way, but almost suicidally daring.

3 | Jeff Jefferson - *The Day the Earth Caught Fire*, 1961 - Arthur Christiansen

"World Saved" says one waiting headline; "World Doomed" says another.

4 | Marty Baron - *Spotlight*, 2015 – Liev Schreiber

Marty's the new editor at the Globe. It's he who spots a case of Catholic priests abusing boys. It's he who tells the Spotlight investigators to go for the big picture of abuse rather than settle for a few individual exposures. Schreiber plays Marty cool, calm and distant.



5 | Chuck Tatum - *Ace in the Hole*, 1951 – Kirk Douglas

"Human interest," Tatum says. "You pick up the paper, you read about 84 men or 284 or a million men, like in a Chinese famine. You read it, but it doesn't stay with you. One man's

different, you want to know all about him. That's human interest". A bravura turn from Douglas, brute physical force in an ethical vacuum.

6 | Walter Burns - *The Front Page*, 1974 – Walter Matthau

Grizzled Chicago editor wants to keep love-struck ace reporter (Jack Lemmon) and wallows in farcical efforts to save an



amiable dolt from death row. There's no better ending than the watch he gives Lemmon as a parting wedding gift, and the phone call to the next station down the line saying Jack's stolen it.

7 | JJ Hunsecker - *The Sweet Smell of Success*, 1957 – Burt Lancaster

JJ isn't a reporter or editor: he's a syndicated gossip slug, destroying reputations, marriages, and careers as he sits at his favourite Manhattan club table while acolytes pay court and feed stories. "Match me, Sidney," he says to a fawning Tony Curtis. "What is this thing called integrity?"

8 | Lois Lane - *Superman* - Various

Born on an artist's pad in 1938 as the star reporter on the Daily Planet. She's feisty and fearless – and a delectable damsel in distress when the man of steel comes zooming to the rescue. She's an early pre-feminist icon for women in journalism and what they can become. Lois once won a Pulitzer prize for investigation. Think how many more she might have netted if she'd twigged just a tad faster that Clark Kent was Superman.

9 | Elliot Carver - *Tomorrow Never Dies*, 1997 – Jonathan Pryce

Who needs Citizen Kane flailing away when you can have Jonathan Pryce hamming it up as a non-Oz Citizen Rupert [Murdoch] bent on starting a nuclear world war so his is the only media empire left? "Good morning, my golden retrievers. What kind of havoc shall the Carver Media Group create in the world today?"

Eugene Smith

Comments and reactions to: **Pickpocket**

No of reaction slips received = 20

Average score = 4.20

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	1	2	5	2	5	4	1	~	~	~

Two most depressing monotone films

Clever. Good acting by the lead. But too slow for me.

Not a very nice character but an OK film

Tedious. Flat. Uninvolving.

How the other half loves ...

Fascinating portrait of an anti-hero

Comments and reactions to: **Shadows in Paradise**

No of reaction slips received = 19

Average score = 5.00

Score	0	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
	~	~	1	3	4	2	5	4	~	~	~

Dear Finland, thanks for the mobile phones, paper and joining NATO. But please – no more disjointed, awkwardly quirky films!

Life is grim for some. Sometimes there are happy endings.

Couldn't decide if it was meant to be a comedy or not.

Did they live happily ever after?

Two very depressing films

Position	Film	Average score
1	Belfast	7.96
2	The Duke	7.75
3	Seven Chances	7.61
4	Elvis	7.59
5	Mandela and de Klerk	7.47
6	After Love	7.36
7	The Perfect Candidate	7.16
8	The Band Wagon	6.91
9	Flee	6.79
10	Day for Night	6.57
11	Midnight Cowboy	6.22
12=	The Mole Agent	6.00
12=	Son of Saul	6.00
14	Guardians of the Galaxy	5.53
15	Shadows in Paradise	5.00
16	Pickpocket	4.20
17	L'Eclisse	3.00

Forthcoming attraction: 25 May 2023 – **Dream Horse**



Twenty years ago, one woman convinced her neighbours to buy, rear and train a thoroughbred racehorse, Dream Alliance. Now their unlikely story is relived in a feelgood film.