

CounterPoint Films Presents

# AWAKE

—The Life of Yogananda—



## PRESS KIT

**Running Time:** 87 minutes

**Rating:** TBD

**CounterPoint Films** Tel: 323-878-2742

**Peter Rader** [fablemaker@aol.com](mailto:fablemaker@aol.com)

### Public Relations: PMK

#### NEW YORK:

**Marian Koltai-Levine**

[marian.koltai@pmkbnc.com](mailto:marian.koltai@pmkbnc.com)

Tel: 212-373-6130

**Lee Meltzer**

[Lee.Meltzer@pmkbnc.com](mailto:Lee.Meltzer@pmkbnc.com)

Tel: 212-373-6142

**Stephanie Friedman**

[Stephanie.Friedman@pmkbnc.com](mailto:Stephanie.Friedman@pmkbnc.com)

Tel: 212.373.0109

#### LOS ANGELES

**Rebecca Fisher**

[Rebecca.Fisher@pmkbnc.com](mailto:Rebecca.Fisher@pmkbnc.com)

Tel: 310-854-4897

# SYNOPSIS

**AWAKE: The Life of Yogananda** is an unconventional biography about an Indian Swami who brought yoga and meditation to the West in the 1920s. This feature documentary explores the life and teachings of Paramahansa Yogananda, who authored the spiritual classic *Autobiography of a Yogi*, which has sold millions of copies worldwide and is a go-to book for seekers, philosophers and yoga enthusiasts today. It was the only book that Steve Jobs had on his iPad, and he arranged to give away 800 copies of it to the dignitaries who attended his memorial service. It was also a point of entry into Eastern mysticism for George Harrison, Russell Simmons and countless yogis. By personalizing his own quest for enlightenment and sharing his struggles along the path, Yogananda made ancient teachings accessible to a modern audience, attracting many followers and ultimately helping millions of seekers today to turn their attention inwards, bucking the temptations of the material world in pursuit of self-realization.

Filmed over three years with the participation of 30 countries around the world, the film examines the world of yoga, modern and ancient, East and West. While archival material from the life of Yogananda (who died in 1952) creates a spine for the narrative, the film stretches the dimensions of a standard biography. Footage includes stylized interviews, metaphoric imagery and recreations, taking us from holy pilgrimages in India to Harvard's Divinity School and its cutting-edge physics labs, from the Center for Science and Spirituality at the University of Pennsylvania to the Chopra Center in Carlsbad, California.

By evoking the journey of the soul as it pushes its way through the oppression of the ego and delusion of the material world, the film creates an experiential immersion into the unseen realms. **AWAKE** is ultimately the story of mankind itself: the universal struggle of all beings to free themselves from suffering and to seek lasting happiness.



Paramahansa Yogananda in his Encinitas hermitage in 1937.  
(Photo courtesy of Self-Realization Fellowship. All Rights Reserved.)

# The Filmmakers

## PAOLA DI FLORIO (Director)

Counterpoint Films founder Paola di Florio is an Oscar-nominated filmmaker and television producer whose work has featured extraordinary individuals and the triumph of the human spirit. Di Florio's films have been distributed theatrically throughout the world and featured in broadcasts on HBO, CBS, NBC, FOX, PBS, Sundance Channel, Court TV, TLC and A&E.

*The New York Times* described her work as “extraordinary” and “poignant.” The *Los Angeles Times* found it “deeply affecting, revelatory [and] gripping.” The Hollywood Reporter declared that it “should be required viewing for all Americans.”

Her documentaries ([Speaking in Strings](#), [Home of the Brave](#)) feature the lives of strong, maverick women who impacted American culture. Her television work includes producing a TV series for Canal Plus entitled [Directors on Directors](#), featuring unique portraits of Hollywood auteurs – including Sydney Pollack, Arthur Penn, Robert Altman, Michael Mann, and others – which was given a special screening at the Locarno Film Festival's 50th Anniversary. Her independent films premiered at the Sundance Film Festival, garnered numerous awards and were honored by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts & Sciences, the Writer's Guild and the International Documentary Association. She has served on film juries and panels, including at the American Film Institute and has guest lectured at UCLA, USC, Berkeley, Stanford and other universities and conferences. She is also a founding partner of *Nerd Girls, Inc.*, a New Media startup dedicated to creating new role models and empowering young women to enter the fields of science and engineering.

## LISA LEEMAN (Director)

Lisa Leeman believes that strong narrative and character-driven films can change the world, one story at a time, and that the path to social change is through the heart. Lisa's groundbreaking first film, [Metamorphosis: Man into Woman](#), won the Filmmaker's Trophy at the 1990 Sundance Film Festival and garnered the top broadcast ratings on POV, PBS's documentary showcase. Roger Ebert named Leeman's [One Lucky Elephant](#) as one of the best documentaries of 2011. That film was broadcast on OWN as part of Oprah Winfrey's Documentary of the Month Club, and selected for the U.S. State Department's American Documentary Showcase.

For the last twenty five years, Lisa has directed, produced, written and edited feature and short documentaries. Other notable works include directing the feature doc [Out of Faith](#) (PBS) & producing the feature doc [Crazy Wisdom: The Life & Times of Chogyam Trungpa](#) ([Alive Mind Cinema](#)). Lisa has collaborated with many acclaimed filmmakers, including Haskell Wexler, the renowned cinematographer with whom she co-directed [Who Needs Sleep](#) (Sundance, 2006).

Lisa spent a decade editing award-winning social issue documentaries, including the acclaimed [Made in LA](#), and films for Renee Tajima-Pena; Michele Ohayon; Micha Peled; Stanley Nelson, and others. Lisa has served as a judge at the [Sundance Film Festival](#), the president of the [International Documentary Association](#), and on the boards of the IDA and the National Coalition of Independent Public Broadcasting Producers. She sits on the faculty of [USC's School of Cinematic Arts](#), and has taught master classes on documentary filmmaking in China, Portugal, Jordan, & Malawi. In addition to Sundance's Filmmakers' Trophy, honors include an Emmy nomination and the once-in-a-lifetime American Film Institute Independent Filmmaker Grant.

## PETER RADER (Producer)

Peter Rader has worked as a film and television writer/director for twenty years. His first script, [Waterworld](#), was produced by Universal in 1995. He has developed numerous projects for other studios, and industry leaders such as Steve Spielberg, Dino De Laurentiis, John Davis and Mario Kazar. He wrote and directed a remake of *Escape to Witch Mountain* for ABC/Disney. Rader attended Harvard University, where he graduated magna cum laude. He has taught writing workshops and is accomplished in a broad range of fields, including music and photography. He worked as a cinematographer on a number of award-winning documentary projects. Rader also directed episodes of the hit nonfiction TV show [Dog Whisperer](#) with Cesar Milan and authored [Mike Wallace: A Life](#), a critically acclaimed biography of the legendary CBS journalist published by St. Martin's Press. Rader was subsequently hired to adapt his book into a script for director Rob Reiner. He is currently writing a second book for Simon & Schuster.



Co-Directors Paola di Florio (right) and Lisa Leeman at the 2014 Maui Film Festival, where *AWAKE* won the Spirit in Cinema Audience Award. (Photo Credit: Sara Tekula)

## DIRECTORS' STATEMENTS

**Paola di Florio:** “You should know that I have trouble with the word God,” was one of the first things that came out of my mouth in an early meeting with Yogananda’s organization, Self Realization Fellowship. I was sitting with my husband / producer Peter Rader, and co-director, Lisa Leeman, facing a team which included senior monks who had spent the better part of four decades in the ashram, renouncing worldly desires in search for the Divine. And they were completely unfazed. More than mere relief, I became intrigued. I later realized that Yogananda’s teachings do not require an act of faith or even a belief in God. Yoga is considered a science in India. “God” is boundless, pure consciousness – “Satchitananda”, which one experiences in meditation. It is not outside oneself but within and all around us. One needs merely to be open and disciplined enough to engage in practice, using one’s own body as a living laboratory. I was fascinated with this approach. Not only was I curious to research this for myself, but I saw how brilliant and timely an ecumenical path to transcendence could be in a world where we are killing one another over dogmatic beliefs. A film like AWAKE suddenly felt urgent to me. I was interested in finding meaning at the place where science and spirituality converge.

I had been privy to the transformational effects of this path from a practice of Hatha Yoga, which I began in my 20s. In doing asanas, I experienced my nervous system getting rebooted and my heart opening, which eventually led me to wanting to go deeper by learning how to meditate. I initially took up a Buddhist practice called Vipassana, but while working on AWAKE, I committed to daily meditation. Initially it was part of my “research,” or so I told myself. But what happened to me was nothing short of total transformation. Essentially, the beauty of yoga is that it meets you where you are. This can happen both on an individual level but also collectively, on a societal level.

When Yogananda arrived in America in 1920, newfound Quantum Physics was telling us that matter was elusive – something akin to the notion of “Maya” from the Vedic teachings of India. It seemed that modern science was finally catching up with the ancient yogis of the Indus Valley. And it couldn’t have come a moment too soon. Given the destructive potential of the Atomic age, Yogananda realized it was high time for the masses to embrace these teachings of brotherhood and understanding... how we all emerge from a common ocean of consciousness. The more I read Yogananda’s writings, the more I knew I needed to make this film. And, in doing so, the lines between science and spirituality began to blur.

**Lisa Leeman:** In 1984, a boyfriend gave me a copy of the *Autobiography of a Yogi*, saying “You’re too empirical, Lisa.... read this!” He was right - the book exploded my rational mind. I didn’t know what to make of Yogananda’s stories of yogis levitating, his guru being in two places at once, or Yogananda seeing into the future....and not in my wildest dreams would I have imagined making a film about the author!

I’d always been a seeker – in college I devoured Alan Watts and Zen classics (not knowing that the Tibetan Buddhist master Chogyam Trungpa was only 45 minutes away, in Boulder, or that decades later I’d produce [a documentary about him](#)). I took up Hatha Yoga, started meditating, and began making documentary films. One thing led to another, and I found myself in India, as dramaturg on a film about ascetic yogis. A few years later, when Paola invited me to co-direct this film with her, I was intrigued to explore more deeply how a biography of a meditation master could convey Eastern teachings in a visceral, cinematic way, reaching beyond intellect to create an experiential film – to become more than biography.



This film was challenging to make, both cinematically and personally. It forced me to grapple with some of the 'big questions' in life, which I've danced around for years. It stretched my notion of yoga (pun intended), deepened my meditation practice, taught me to see past external forms, and expanded my understanding of the nature of reality. I'm still wrestling with the fantastical stories....and I've learned to feel that's ok. As one of the monks in the film said while filming in Calcutta – *"Too often people seek 'spiritual experiences' ...when what's really important is to cultivate an experience of spirit."* I leave it to audiences to interpret what that means for them.

## Q & A with Directors Paola di Florio & Lisa Leeman

### Q: How did your film come to be?

**Paola & Lisa:** Yogananda's legacy organization, Self Realization Fellowship, had been approached for decades by people wanting to make a film about the Guru who brought Yoga to the West. For one reason or another, the time never was right. In 2008, however, an opportunity presented itself with financing through anonymous donors. Yogananda's direct disciples were passing on and it seemed the right moment to make a film. SRF decided to find a team of independent filmmakers to allow for an outside point of view and "beginner's mind" in telling the story. It was SRF's wish to make a movie for the world and not just for insiders. They did an extensive search and we were fortunate to have been selected to make the film. Of course, right after being hired, we looked at one another and realized we had a daunting task before us! Not only was it an epic story, but it would also challenge us, the filmmakers, to distill these ancient teachings in a user-friendly form for uninitiated audiences. Luckily, we didn't fully realize the extent of the responsibility, because it would have been way too intimidating.

### Q: What was the most challenging thing about making this film?

**Paola & Lisa:** There were a lot of challenges! It's not easy to make a film about a saint. We're storytellers, and good narrative usually requires conflict, struggle, and a protagonist with human flaws. We searched for skeletons in Yogananda's 'closet,' and while we found certain provocative allegations along the way, there was nothing to back them up. As we dug deeper into his life, however, we discovered that he faced major obstacles, many of which the public was unaware.

The quintessential "fish out of water," Yogananda came to the strange land of America in 1920 to disseminate an ancient teaching that had parallels to the Einsteinian physics of the times. Indeed, these yoga meditation teachings would be seen as essential tools for human beings to survive the atomic age. Despite being recognized as a "spiritual genius," Yogananda would face severe criticism and even racism in the deep South, from those who felt threatened by him and his message. Persecution,

betrayals by students and close friends, and even financial ruin ensued. He was continuously tested. But Yogananda rose like a Phoenix through the ashes of his demise, not only to regain his own purpose in life, but to inspire others to do the same through his example. There were times, however, when Yogananda wanted to run off and be a hermit in a Himalayan cave...which is how we felt sometimes as we approached the challenge of digging through hundreds of files and reels of archival material, and studying the voluminous spiritual teachings Yogananda left behind, distilling them to something understandable (first to us, and then to an audience). At times, we downright wrestled with it. It took us quite awhile to digest and internalize these concepts, and to figure out how to convey them in a cinematic way.

We experimented with creating internal states of consciousness through cinematic metaphor, as it was of utmost importance to us that the film be experiential, not merely informational, and that we invite viewers on a journey of deeper awareness and possibility through the filmmaking

We decided to have Yogananda tell his story through his own words (rather than using a third person narrator), in an effort to create more intimacy. This meant that, in addition to using some audio recordings of Yogananda, we had the privilege of casting a brilliant, prominent Bollywood star, Anupam Kher, to read his words and essentially “act the part.” This also helped to keep alive a sense of magical realism that Yogananda created when writing *Autobiography of a Yogi*, where he recounted intimate moments of a life that is well beyond the mundane. We also created measured pacing in moments where viewers could come in and out of “cinematic meditations,” freeing them to disengage from the intellect and allowing them just to “be.”

**Q: What do you think audiences will appreciate about your film?**

**Paola & Lisa:** We hope the film will place Yogananda in the context of his times, allowing for greater understanding of the history of Yoga in America and what this practice is really all about. But most importantly, we wish for the film to meet people “where they are at” on their own individual spiritual journeys, and perhaps help plant a seed to take them even deeper. We want to inspire viewers to become AWAKE.

**Q: What type of experience do you hope the film will bring to viewers?**

**Paola & Lisa:** Yogananda frequently used the ocean as a metaphor for consciousness, a concept people who spend a lot of time in the water seem to realize intuitively. We use a lot of water imagery in the film. Yogananda compared the individual self to waves of the ocean, which take form, and then merge back with the one field that unites us all, the ocean of consciousness.

# FILM CREDITS

WRITTEN & DIRECTED BY

[PAOLA DI FLORIO](#)

&

[LISA LEEMAN](#)

PRODUCERS

[PETER RADER](#)

[PAOLA DI FLORIO](#)

[LISA LEEMAN](#)

NARRATED BY

[ANUPAM KHER](#)

FROM WRITINGS AND TALKS BY

PARAMAHANSA YOGANANDA

DIRECTOR OF PHOTOGRAPHY

[ARLENE NELSON](#)

ORIGINAL SCORE

[MICHAEL R. MOLLURA](#)

[VIVEK MADDALA](#)

EDITED BY

[PETER RADER](#)

[KEN SCHNEIDER](#)

[PAOLA DI FLORIO](#)

[LISA LEEMAN](#)

CONSULTING PRODUCERS

[MICHAEL SCHULTZ](#)

GLORIA SCHULTZ

PRODUCTION COORDINATOR

[CC CHAINEY](#)

ASSOCIATE PRODUCER

[SARAH ROSE BERGMAN](#)

CONSULTING EDITOR

[YANA GORSKAYA](#)

ADDITIONAL EDITING

[ANNE STEIN](#)

[VICTOR LIVINGSTON](#)



[LAURA KRANING](#)

ASSOCIATE EDITORS

[CHRIS YOGI](#)

[CHRIS CLOYD](#)

[EDWARD OSEI-GYIMAH](#)

ADDITIONAL CINEMATOGRAPHY

[PETER RADER](#)

16MM B & W PHOTOGRAPHY

[JANIE GEISER](#)

ADDITIONAL CAMERA

[JOJO PENNEBAKER](#)

[DINO PARKS](#)

[PAOLA DI FLORIO](#)

[LISA LEEMAN](#)

[SARAH ROSE BERGMAN](#)

[TOMMY FRIEDMAN](#)

[DAPHNE QIN WU](#)

[DEEPA PATHAK](#)

K. JANARDHAN

[AIMEE GALICIA TORRES](#)

## **INTERVIEWS IN ORDER OF APPEARANCE:**

[RAVI SHANKAR](#), Musician

[KRISHNA DAS](#), Devotional Singer & Recording Artist

[GEORGE HARRISON](#), Musician

[HITENDRA WADHWA](#), Professor, Columbia Business School

[MAS VIDAL](#), Dancing Shiva Yoga, Founder

[BIKRAM CHOUDHURY](#), Founder, Bikram Yoga

LI MIAO TSENG, Devotee

[FRANCIS CLOONEY](#), Jesuit Priest & Professor, Harvard Divinity School

[VARUN SONI](#), Dean of Religious Life, University of Southern California

BROTHER VISHWANANDA, Monk, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)

DEEPAK CHOPRA, MD, Author, Holistic Health Pioneer  
ANANDA MEHROTRA, Founder, Sattva Yoga  
SANDY GRAY, Devotee  
SRI DAYA MATA, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#) President (1955-2010)  
BRAHMACHARI MARTIN, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)  
PHILIP GOLDBERG, Author, "American Veda"  
MAISHA MOSES, Devotee  
ARIEL RUBEN, Devotee  
BANU DAVE, Devotee  
DR. ANITA GOEL, Harvard Physicist & Physician, CEO Nanobiosym  
BROTHER CHIDANANDA, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)  
SISTER PREMAMAYEE, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)  
GEORGES BILLARD-MADRIÈRES, Devotee  
RUSSELL SIMMONS, Author, Hip Hop Entrepreneur  
FELICIA TOMASKO, Editor, LA Yoga Magazine  
STEFANIE SYMAN, Journalist, Author: "The Subtle Body"  
DR. ANDREW NEWBERG, Neurotheology Pioneer, Thomas Jefferson  
University, Author: "How God Changes Your Brain"  
BROTHER JAYANANDA, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)  
ROBERT LOVE, Author, "The Great Oom"  
HERB JEFFRIES, Performer and Lay Disciple  
BROTHER ANANDAMOY, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)  
SISTER PARVATI, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#)  
LEO COCKS, Former Monastic Disciple  
C. RICHARD WRIGHT, Yogananda's Secretary  
SRI MRINALINI MATA, [Self-Realization Fellowship](#) President  
ROBERT OPPENHEIMER, Physicist, "Father of the Atomic Bomb"  
MARC BENIOFF, Silicon Valley CEO  
SWAMI KRIYANANDA, Disciple, Founder, [Ananda Sangha](#)