Patriots and Protesters, Mavericks and Manipulators: Assange, Snowden and the Politics of Surveillance Cinema

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In a world dizzyingly shifted on its axis since 9/11, nothing has aided understanding of the profound twenty-first-century geopolitical slippages more than the revelations from Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks site and the actions of whistle-blower Edward Snowden. Much has been written about the pair but little has investigated their persona and pronouncements on screen. This article sets out to compare and contrast Snowden’s and Assange’s real as well as fictional cinematic portrayals, therefore. We find that their screen image conforms to notions of star celebrity but at the same time also challenges surveillance activism itself, on film as well as within wider political frames of reference. The movies about them may have deliberately foregrounded reactions towards the politics of surveillance, but that agenda has been conditioned by responses not only towards Assange and Snowden but also to the filmmakers producing these texts. We give resonance, in other words, to a wider discourse that goes beyond the cinematic in contemporary surveillance culture. There is an interlocutory discourse at play that sees cinema as not just a disruptive presence, but now more than ever as an active participant in mapping out the terrain under investigation. The challenge this presence brings to activism, we conclude, affects film’s capacity to expose and contest contemporary state surveillance.

INTRODUCTION: SURVEILLANCE BEYOND SPECTACLE

As the spirit of an age, surveillance is indeed the sign of our times.¹

As Garrett Stewart’s comment suggests, the 2010s became an emblematic surveillance era and one politically and culturally in step with much of society’s considerations and concerns about state monitoring and observation. “TV productions as well as mainstream cinema have rarely, at the level of both topic and technical execution, been more tightly in stride with...
contemporaneous social and political debate,” he asserts.\(^2\) While Stewart has been at the forefront of surveillance-culture scholarship – unveiling what he describes as the “synecdochic patterns” that link covert governmental transgressions with onscreen secrecy and scrutiny – further academic histories such as Rhodri Jeffreys-Jones’s \textit{We Know All about You} and inside-scoop journalistic accounts like Glenn Greenwald’s \textit{No Place to Hide} help demonstrate the wider proliferation of the surveillance field.\(^3\) Complementing Stewart’s work, however, first Sébastien Lefait, and then Catherine Zimmer, have focussed on “surveillance cinema” more specifically as having a pressing and increasingly vital role in the twenty-first century.\(^4\)

As coverage of the war on terror; the hunt for Osama bin Laden; the expansion of drone warfare; the emergence of terrorist groups like Islamic State (IS or ISIS), Al-Shabaab and Boko Haram; and the questionable activity of the US intelligence community has shown, Zimmer rightly sees film as a gateway to understanding these issues and making sense of the public’s confusion about a world dizzyingly shifted on its axis since September 11, 2001. And there’s been nothing more central to comprehending these profound geopolitical slippages than the revelations emerging from Julian Assange’s WikiLeaks site and the actions of whistle-blower Edward Snowden. Within these two characters lie the question and contradiction, fable and falsehood, hero and traitor binaries that have been locked into the public’s imagination since surveillance and secrecy became such a dominant part of all our lives. Assange’s and Snowden’s acquired publicity, some of it reflecting their political motives and philosophy, much more of it a supposition of their character and personality, has determined action and reaction to them. That conjecture also extends to the cinema that has been made about them – an equally if not more vitally constructed frame of reference for determining their actions, pronouncements and public personas.

This article sets out to compare and contrast Assange’s and Snowden’s cinematic profiles, then, but to compare and contrast them in a way that resonates with a wider surveillance debate, not simply as a recitation of their filmic outlines. We find that while both conform predictably to societal notions of celebrity and star performativity in ways that Mandy Merck, for example, has

\(^2\) Ibid., xv.
\(^3\) In addition to Jones and Greenwald, one might add the academic work of David Lyon matched with the journalistic exposés of Luke Harding, allied to an emerging “surveillance studies” field manifest in collections such as Sean Hier’s \textit{The Surveillance Studies Reader} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007); as well as the Torin Monahan and David Murakami Wood edited volume \textit{Surveillance Studies: A Reader} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).
expressed it, their differing character portrayals critically challenge the notion and effectiveness of surveillance/whistle-blower activism onscreen, as well as cinema’s wider capacity to influence the political discourse at large. There are limitations for surveillance activism through and beyond film in the examples of Assange and Snowden, in other words, and these boundaries pose two important questions.

First, in a society where the ‘marketplace of ideas’—an epistemology stretching from John Milton (Areopagitica) through John Stuart Mill’s On Liberty (1859) to Justices Oliver Wendell Holmes and William Douglas—is now punctuated by fakery and the contrived, can cinema not just document, but also contest, institutional narratives devoted to preserving the secretive state from a prying public gaze? Second, can the filmmaker separate their inquiry from their place within the narrative, their objectivity from the ornery tendencies of their subject? Are secrecy and pellucidity two parts of the same natural state? The cinema about Snowden and Assange lays out some of the answers to these pressing questions.

In scholarly terms, Zimmer’s surveillance construct, like Lefait’s, theoretically investigates wider film studies notions of the gaze, of voyeurism and the impact of reality television. Both seek to use such theories as a reflection of contemporary concerns, preying upon popular conceptions of what surveillance is and does. Lefait goes further, however, in asserting that surveillance movies form a testing ground for the implementation of advanced technological monitoring in real life. The increasingly advanced capacity of the watching eye, via the expansion of CCTV and more, has “sustained debates about whether vision should be trusted or not,” he contends.

David Lyon, on the other hand, suggests alternative surveillance characteristics, ones that have mutated into an increasingly twenty-first-century format where “many people do surveillance themselves.” For Lyon, “the means of surveillance now flow freely into the hands of the general public,” and this emergent state—a true labyrinth of official, private and personal data—produces assumptions, affects behaviour, and engenders paranoia and distrust. In other words, it creates “fragmentation and uncertainty.”

But if film is meant to do anything at all, it is surely to seek sense out of this fragmentary chaos, and to tell stories of personal and public interest. The line of reasoning plotted out by Lyon, Lefait and Zimmer, however, highlights two

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8 Ibid., 30–33.
further contentions. First of all, is contemporary film – feature or documentary – equipped to challenge the state’s continuing ability to infringe on the liberty and privacy of the population – via corporate matchups with IT, social media and telecommunications companies – in the name of “security”, a word whose contemporary lacunae suggest nothing if not compliance? Second, if film does have the tools, what is its capacity to elevate responses to surveillance and secrecy on behalf of the populace beyond the level of mere reflection, if not entertainment? Shoshana Zuboff for one, in outlining the links between surveillance and capitalism, hints at the ways in which contemporary democracy has been undermined by a quarter of a century of the technological new frontier of the Internet. “During the past two decades surveillance capitalists have had a pretty free run, with hardly any interference from laws and regulations,” she contends.

If an art form such as film can and is meant to elevate its investigation to meet the provocations of mediated expression and debate, from what is it seeking redress in the surveillance age? One answer is institutional justification for state-sponsored monitoring which has tended to peddle a spate of nefarious claims promulgating counternarratives as and when it has served its purpose. Back in 2013, for example, US Secretary of State John Kerry admitted that surveillance activity was “on autopilot” and needed review. But the comment emerged even while the Obama administration Kerry represented was expanding monitoring operations via all sorts of data-mining programmes, as Snowden was to reveal. In January 2018, Congress renewed the Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act (FISA) despite President Donald Trump initially voicing scepticism. However, Trump later retreated from those remarks and signed the bill, claiming that the “new” FISA wasn’t the same law as that which may or may not have been spying on him during and after the 2016 presidential election.

It is within these rhetorical realms of government (non)action that a Hollywood subset of geopolitical military surveillance films proliferated in

the post-9/11 era, documenting the war on terror and the shadowy reconnaissance that the subsidiaries of the military intelligence community were engaged in. *The Kingdom* (2007), *Body of Lies*, *The Hurt Locker* (both 2008), *Green Zone* (2010) and *American Sniper* (2014) contributed to this generic form, further complemented by “drone strike movies” such as *Good Kill* (2014) and *Eye in the Sky* (2016).

Zimmer’s theoretical touchstone for these and other similar films is the “geopolitical aesthetic” previously cultivated by Fredric Jameson. Jameson’s account perceived the world as a political, economic and social superstructure, and cognitively mapping the “unmappable” in past movies such as *Three Days of the Condor* (1975) and *All the President’s Men* (1976) paved the way towards some sense of understanding the interconnectedness of society. These interlinkages were couched, as Jameson would have it, in conspiracy – a conspiracy of privilege and concealment of power in the era of late capitalism. As he conceives it, “the economic organization of multinational capitalism is in the conspiracy form conveyed by the shifting shapes of power.”

For Zimmer, this reading and the films above that Jameson cited have “clear heirs” in the modern crop of surveillance-induced narratives.

Stewart’s, Zimmer’s and Lefait’s work has therefore been vitally important for mapping out the surveillance tendencies of modern cinema. The emergence, however, of the Assange/Snowden coterie of movies made since 2013 (*We Steal Secrets*, *The Fifth Estate*, *Citizenfour*, *Snowden* and *Risk*), has moved the geopolitical surveillance remit on apace, not simply positioning cinema as a tool for the investigation of government secrecy and spying but privileging these films as potentially immersive surveillance culture subjects in their own right. As Terence McSweeney observes, the post-9/11 combat/war-on-terror movies seemingly reinforced their value beyond a point of mere reflection or entertainment. They appeared as active participants in the “formation in potent and affective ways” of society’s understanding of the post-9/11 wars and the technological guidance and monitoring they wrought.

Stewart acknowledges McSweeney’s point by reciting the way surveillance narratives have proliferated across television especially (24, *Homeland*, *State of Affairs*, *Madam Secretary*, *Designated Survivor*), propelling not just technological capacity as Lefait suggests, but pushing audiences into an ever greater age of anxiety. Snowden’s story, like Assange’s, moved the context of their

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narratives into a cinematic universe—Stewart’s “real world synecdoche”—offering audiences a new way of surveying the tools and consequences of surveillance. But, arguably, they were also meant to be offering a more active prospect for surveilling those that seek to surveil the people.\(^\text{16}\)

During the 2010s, the progression towards what we term “surveillance biopics” significantly repositions the protagonists, and changes the cognitive map being laid out for audiences. The outsiders and investigators of Hollywood’s 1970s conspiracy pictures—those above, as well as *The Conversation* and *The Parallax View* (both 1974)—chased secretive power brokers and hidden cabals with little road map to help them. Elements of this maverick-hero trope, as Geoff King terms it, survived in the initial crop of post-9/11 movies—characters like Matt Damon’s Roy Miller in Paul Greengrass’s *Green Zone* (2010), for instance—but the newer surveillance antagonists are offering a different kind of resolution to their forebears.\(^\text{17}\)

The Assange/Snowden pictures accelerate King’s maverick-hero idea but signal difficult questions about the role and reliability of cinema to tell the vital elements of the story. This is no better realized than in the clash of political, moral and surveillance values framed through Laura Poitras’s 2017 film *Risk*. The documentary, originally premiered in 2016 at Cannes, was slated to be a no-holds-barred observational exercise in witnessing Julian Assange and his WikiLeaks organization’s rise to prominence from 2010 onwards. Poitras’s recut 2017 version became a cautionary tale instead, of a filmmaker sucked into the politics of a narrative she was supposedly observing from a distance.

This cinematic shift—film, filmmaker and subject as an interlocking activist trinity—questions what happens when surveillance culture onscreen becomes surveillance reality transposed back into an artistic frame, functioning, to use Zimmer’s terms, not just as “reflections” of secret state culture but as a form of surveillance “practice” in its own right.\(^\text{18}\) How successfully can these onscreen practices engage with the complexities identified by Jameson without acknowledging that they are, in Jameson’s terms, part of the conspiracy?

Given the intrinsic relationship between the Assange/Snowden tranche of movies’ and Donald Trump for example—Trump’s repeated condemnation of Snowden yet praise for WikiLeaks—along with his extraordinary election

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\(^{16}\) Snowden, as Stewart, *Closed Circuits*, xiv, contends, “broke open an entire nexus of electronic surveillance.”


victory and administration’s emerging agenda, the cinematic constructions of Assange and Snowden take on ever more importance in the age of “fake news” and “alternative facts.” They are even more vital when the state accuses such films and their makers/protagonists of hawking precisely the same kind of alternative truths that political actors themselves indulge in.

We give an appreciation of the importance that this relationship bears witness to, what it represents, and how successfully it is being tackled by each of the Snowden/Assange films. Such an investigation interrogates a set of texts that cross over between feature-film dramatization and factual cinéma-vérité style, and this requires acute awareness of documentary’s sometimes self-proclaimed position as bastion of critical intent in the modern political age. But the relative merits and impact of documentary set against feature-film drama are profitably investigated by looking at the cases of Assange and Snowden more closely.

Indeed, not only do these characters test the rigour of both forms, but they also help to collapse their meaning and intent. Here are two public figures that provide an unusually acute stress test of the capabilities of factual and docu-drama genres to engage with an explicitly unfolding surveillance culture and the political discourse that surrounds that culture. Their stories are not just about surveillance, they have become surveillance lore, at once personal and universal, revelatory and scandal-ridden, meaningful and vital for the debates at large. But Assange and Snowden have also become the embodiment of all that surveillance culture has taught us to mistrust about evidence and narration. The films about them have blurred the lines of objectivity, supposition and detachment in their engagement with subjects epitomizing and even subverting the narrative being constructed around them. How and why is intrinsic to the following analysis.

WIKILEAKS

In April 2010, the WikiLeaks website came to the international media’s attention when it posted videos showing civilians – including two journalists – being killed by fire from two US Army Apache helicopters in Baghdad. The video release was given the title “Collateral Murder” by WikiLeaks and the story, relating to an incident in July 2007, came to light as the result of information provided by whistle-blower Chelsea (then Bradley) Manning. WikiLeaks then released further classified information from Manning (war logs pertaining to the conflict in Afghanistan), who was later charged under the Espionage Act and eventually sentenced in August 2013 to thirty-five years in detention.

Meanwhile, WikiLeaks founder Julian Assange was placed under investigation by the FBI and in June 2012 entered the Ecuadorian embassy in London.
seeking diplomatic immunity. Less than a year later in We Steal Secrets: The Story of WikiLeaks (2013), Alex Gibney provided a documentary account of Assange’s rise to prominence, if not notoriety. Gibney’s film also served as a curtain raiser of sorts at the Sundance Film Festival for Bill Condon’s complementary and dramatic rendering of the Assange story only a few months later in The Fifth Estate (2013) starring Benedict Cumberbatch.

Gibney’s credentials as an investigative filmmaker were well established by The Trials of Henry Kissinger (2002) and Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room (2005), while Taxi to the Dark Side (2007) won the Academy award for best documentary. Using similar investigative traits, We Steal Secrets traces the Assange story all the way back to the fledgling hacker scene in Melbourne in the early 1990s, and follows this up with Iceland’s Kaupthing bank scandal in July 2009, which put Assange firmly on the international stage for the first time.

The emphasis on Assange’s David-and-Goliath battle with powerful governmental forces is a running theme. But the “Collateral Murder” video is the most striking realization of WikiLeaks’s impact and political cinema’s provocative capacity, as Betsy McLane sees it. Central to the film’s conceit, however, is Assange’s personality, which surfaces time and again as the key theme. For example, questions arise as to the level of concern for individuals named in the war logs, but this is examined predominantly through Assange’s uncompromising attitude to legitimate operatives or civilians possibly being exposed by the leaks.

Filmmaker Mark Davis, whose “video diaries” Gibney utilizes at times, is similarly struck by Assange’s unyielding philosophy, but also records how the conspiratorial outlook that eventually served Assange well when his photograph was plastered over every newspaper on the planet emerged from an imagination that supposed the secrecy and security necessary before he was ever famous. “Julian’s always lived in this conspiratorial world,” reasons Davis in the film. The authenticity, let alone credibility, of Assange’s character is repeatedly questioned, therefore, and Gibney chooses the most potent scenes that do Assange no favours. Video of him at The Guardian after the high-profile Frontline Club press conference in London in July 2010, which unveiled the Afghan war logs component of the Manning dossier, shows Assange reveling in the attention and declaring himself “untouchable.” Davis, speaking from off camera, almost instinctively suggests that this is a

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somewhat hubristic statement and a moment later Assange self-consciously corrects himself, prophesizing that he is untouchable “for a day or two” at least.

The character construction is further ratcheted up when the allegations of sexual misconduct against Assange arise, while the judgment of WikiLeaks collaborator Daniel Domscheit-Berg also becomes more crucial as We Steal Secrets progresses. The film’s overall tone is often gauged by Domscheit-Berg’s frustration at Assange’s allegations of surveillance and disruption to WikiLeaks when, the movie asserts, no evidence is apparent. Gibney later described his failed efforts to negotiate an onscreen interview with Assange as unfortunate. But the absent interview means that judgment is always tilted towards the assessment of Domscheit-Berg, WikiLeaks coworkers like James Ball and reporter Nick Davies. And when the film records Assange being described by Manning as a “crazy white-haired Aussie,” this judgment looms over much of the picture’s second half. Here is the tale of a maverick with unshakable beliefs, but also one with few redeeming personal qualities. Significantly, Gibney does not negate the rest of the media’s focus on personality as a guide to credibility either. He relays how the New York Times was happy to publish the materials provided by WikiLeaks but then sought to distance itself from Assange as the personal and politically conspiratorial accusations made his brand name more toxic.

Tellingly, Gibney’s perspective on Assange in We Steal Secrets was not only part of a media broadside against the man during 2013, but also a characterization willed into wider cinematic consciousness. In The Fifth Estate, director Condon admittedly drew on similar source material to Gibney, most notably Domscheit-Berg’s book. But he also incorporated more sober reflections from Guardian journalists David Leigh and Luke Harding, whose publications form the backbone of the screenplay. And while the film frames Assange’s story using the July 2010 Frontline Club appearance as prologue – thus accentuating the (mis)conduct of military and intelligence agencies – Assange as the archetypal maverick specialist remains the movie’s dominant perspective as told by Domscheit-Berg (Daniel Brühl). Yet, as the backstory is slowly added, more critical assessments emerge, once more centring on Assange not simply as a campaigner for justice and transparency, but also as a self-absorbed egotist who becomes increasingly erratic and unreasonable.

This treatment builds a philosophical split in the organization over whether to publish or redact sensitive materials. But the wider political implications of Assange’s actions are scattered indeterminately, sometimes partially seen

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through a somewhat disconnected character, Sarah Shaw (Laura Linney), a US undersecretary at the State Department and her efforts to safely extract an intelligence contact and his family from Tripoli. Yet fundamental issues emerging from the WikiLeaks disclosures such as the number of civilian casualties, the existence of Special Forces death squads or the use of child prostitutes by contractors working for US defence contractor DynCorp, are hinted at but never examined.22

In the closing scene, Berg and Nick Davies (David Thewlis) of The Guardian discuss the story of men hanged centuries ago for publishing reports of debates within the British parliament. Davies notes the emergence of a modern state from this self-sacrifice, and the example is meant to provide a coda to Assange’s uncompromising position. But it is Assange’s very own public dissection that is being metaphorically held up here; ascribed the role of catalyst for such retribution, he is a tortured soul inviting tragedy and betrayal in the cause of a greater good. The scene thus reinforces the movie’s damning appraisal of his character—a complicity that the film’s narrative choices are locked into and which contributed, like Gibney’s film, to a wider media representation of Assange beyond the text.

Undoubtedly The Fifth Estate and We Steal Secrets offer revelatory visions of secrecy and surveillance culture, but they do so with a health warning. Mavericks are flawed individuals, they cry; their motivation for and realization of actions are not to be trusted. Only a few dissenting voices emerged countering this narrative, one of them the New York Times critic David Carr, who pointed out that much of the opprobrium directed towards Assange was no more than the distaste of established reporters for his fifth-estate pretentions. Indeed, to its credit, Condon’s film does offer journalistic disdain for WikiLeaks’s methods, couched as envy for its exclusives, especially in Dan Stevens’s portrayal of Guardian deputy editor Ian Katz.23

Ultimately, though, the real and Cumberbatch-impersonated Assange in the two films find themselves in similar positions, not as a result of narratives that weave a complementary tale but as a consequence of character constructions that undermine their activism and put into question their motivations. Whether by documentary or feature film, the judgment of Gibney’s and


Condon’s movies concerning accountability and exposure finally rest on the personal ethics of their protagonist and the continuing coverage of the WikiLeaks brand, not on unmasking how surveillance had been allowed to proliferate unchecked in the West, or determining how antagonists like Assange might be discredited by establishment actors in these countries.

SNOWDEN

By the time of their release, however, *The Fifth Estate* and *We Steal Secrets* found an even bigger surveillance story already threatening the foundations of the American and British security state apparatus in particular, albeit one with Assange in tow.\(^{24}\) In June 2013, *The Guardian* revealed the extent of US domestic surveillance of communications without warrants.\(^{25}\) Explaining how this had proliferated in the 2000s and then continued into the Obama era despite promises to the contrary, with volumes well in excess of those quoted in an earlier 2005 exposé by the *New York Times*, the source was former CIA operative and NSA contractor Edward Snowden.\(^{26}\) The released information and the events surrounding Snowden’s unveiling were then caught on camera by Laura Poitras in her award-winning *Citizenfour* (2014).

Released in the autumn of 2014, *Citizenfour* immediately attracted acclaim for capturing one of the biggest whistle-blowing stories in history. Poitras’s communications with Edward Snowden went back as far as her short film *The Program* that had appeared on the op-doc site of the *New York Times* in 2012. Snowden had been so impressed and emboldened by Poitras’s ability to relay the tale of former NSA cryptographer William Binney that he began sending her a series of encrypted messages. Hoping to find an outlet for the classified material he had acquired, he wrote under the pseudonym Citizenfour.

For a number of reasons, Snowden’s story, while still personality-driven, revealed itself in very different form and content to that of Assange. *Citizenfour*’s core action was Poitras’s encounter with her subject in Hong Kong’s Mira Hotel between 2 and 10 June 2013, helping to break the man’s identity in the media through an initial filmed interview with journalist

\(^{24}\) The film took a further $5.5 million worldwide but the total gross came nowhere near its reported $28 million production budget. “Box-Office Figures,” *Box-Office Mojo*, at [http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fifthestate.htm](http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=fifthestate.htm).


Glenn Greenwald. This core material formed the documentary’s backbone, which begins with a twenty-five-minute prologue introducing key players like Greenwald, Binney and Poitras herself.

The first intertitle sequence that launches the film reminds the viewer that this is the final part of a trilogy, and that following her first film – *My Country, My Country*, set in Iraq in 2006 – Poitras was put on a watchlist which resulted in her being “detained and interrogated at the US border dozens of times” in the following years. The very first spoken lines of Poitras’s narration quoting Snowden, “Laura; at this stage I can offer nothing more than my word,” directly inculcate the director within the broad scope of the unfolding narrative. Poitras is the one being contacted because Poitras’s reputation for investigative documentary has earned her enough stature for a whistle-blower in the governmental surveillance community to place his faith in her.

Poitras uses this delicate state of trust to draw influence from the 1970s paranoia tradition that Zimmer identifies as so pivotal to modern movie surveillance. Alternating between “oppressive external spaces” and “interior labyrinths,” as Pablo Castrillo and Pablo Echart suggest, the paranoia motif is signalled recurrently in *Citizenfour* by the yellow neon light clusters of a Hong Kong road tunnel that visually guide us towards the Mira Hotel confrontation with Snowden. This first act is complemented by a conspiratorial construct of global proportions taking in the American government’s reaction to 9/11, the Patriot Act, the exponential growth in data mining, and the wider circumstances of a contemporary whistle-blower culture that had produced not only Binney but also Thomas Drake and Chelsea Manning. And, crucially, it’s an opening that, as demonstrated above, envelops Poitras herself within the surveillance fabric.

Poitras’s tactic is thus to conjoin her story with Snowden’s. She is under surveillance and in peril precisely because of the kind of monitoring the intelligence community has instituted and Snowden is now exposing. The film’s early conceit cleverly imagines Poitras as any randomly “picked” citizen, regardless of her celebrity. And the evidence – redacted US Customs and Border Protection Logs obtained under Freedom of Information requests that appear onscreen – demonstrates how her predicament is already bound up with Snowden’s knowledge. What he is about to impart is disclosures that will blow the lid on the sort of surveillance gathering that Poitras has long been subjected to.

This early destabilizing aesthetic, which perceptibly puts the filmmaker at as much risk as the subject, is hugely effective. But the focus on personality has

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been set, and the bigger the focus, the more of a distraction it proves, as
Snowden himself says in his first minutes onscreen. “Media has a big focus
on personalities” he knowingly confides to Greenwald.

Each day is logged courtesy of an intertitled dark screen, with the date
stamped in the bottom left corner, postulating the magnitude of the events
as they unfold. Unfussy, precise and unequivocal, this documenting of time
and action becomes the embodiment of Snowden himself. Aspects both of
the material being made public and of Snowden’s persona were thus mutually
reinforcing. On film and in print his calm testimony and persuasiveness helped
to ride the wave of media coverage that followed in the wake of his unveiling.
The narrative of domestic surveillance, “big government,” and the emerging
“Deep State” conspiracy that was on the horizon, captured a varied constitu-
ency in America, from coastal liberals to red state opponents of federal
overreach. By contrast, Assange’s revelations reinforced division and partisans-
ship. They revealed administration duplicity in foreign wars and the killing of
civilians and journalists even as they promised full disclosure whatever the con-
sequences to the innocent or guilty. As Glenn Greenwald noted, WikiLeaks
introduced the added inconvenient truth that the published war logs actually
displayed the mainstream media’s acceptance and indeed promulgation of the
Pentagon narrative on the war on terror. Therefore Snowden’s revelations
and his erudite persona played to a set of mainstream US values and anxieties
in ways that Assange’s demeanour simply did not, something that proved
crucial to the public reception of, and credibility achieved by, Citizenfour.

On release, the documentary’s aesthetic pretensions wrapped up in a hemi-
spheric tour across the surveillance hinterland proved to be its attractive
conceit and commercial ticket. The film grossed over $2.7 million in box-
office receipts from only a limited theatrical run and won the Academy
award and BAFTA for best documentary. Todd McCarthy in the Hollywood
Reporter labelled Citizenfour one of the “major and defining docu-
mentaries of recent times.” He and other reviewers weren’t immune to the
film’s lapses, though. McCarthy identified a somewhat detached position that
seemed more intent on process than on repercussions, while Peter Travers in
Rolling Stone praised the movie but also admitted to its “sins of omission.”
The filming of the Mira’s glass-and mirror decor intermittently shadows the
discussions and philosophical intent. Everything is shiny and smooth,
modernist and manipulating, an appearance of the world that is both the end game of civilized living and its sanitized depersonalising state. *Citizenfour*’s refracted poise gives it a potent thriller perspective, but Poitras’s political detachment—a directorial position she would later happily concede—left the implications of its damming surveillance revelations with question marks. Nevertheless, this arrangement of concerns was immersed in a similar aesthetic sensibility that Oliver Stone built on with his version of the Snowden story.

Cowritten by Stone and Kieran Fitzgerald, *Snowden* (2016)—like its Assange equivalent *The Fifth Estate*—utilizes the maverick-specialist trope for its plotting while remaining unequivocal about its protagonist’s cause. The tale is actually wedded to a fairly complicated critique of surveillance culture—contextually more so than *Citizenfour*—yet it still manages to insert what Stone calls Capraesque American ideals into its protagonist’s demeanour. Indeed, Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s portrayal of Snowden has clear echoes of Kevin Costner’s Jim Garrison in *JFK* (1991) and Charlie Sheen’s Bud Fox in *Wall Street* (1987), crusading advocates that Stone likened to the cinema of Frank Capra.³¹

Stone daringly uses Poitras’s centrepiece Hong Kong interview in *Citizenfour* as his framing device in *Snowden*, with the man’s backstory gradually filling in the movie’s skeletal frame. Snowden’s personal transition, from conventional patriot recruited to serve his country in the wake of 9/11 to sceptic and eventual whistle-blower, is traced alongside the story unfolding in Hong Kong. Key patriarchal characters—CIA deputy director Corbin O’Brian (Rhys Ifans) and cryptographer Hank Forrester (Nicholas Cage)—then serve as counterpoints to Snowden’s willing persona. Snowden’s even temperament produces results that constantly foreground broader analytical questions about the intelligence community while Stone’s fabled ability to manufacture layers of montage fill in events in ever more critical relief.

Stone uses the Mira interior in a similar fashion to Poitras, reflecting and refracting truth and lies, cause and effect, promises and betrayal, as though each aspect of the hotel’s decor was bending to the prerogatives of its ensnared patron. In the final half-hour Stone visually tailors this trademark docudrama overlay to the endgame. News footage, inserted snippets of commentary, film transposed into black-and-white photographic effect—all are enhanced by a race-against-time pursuit of Snowden as he evades the media while escaping the hotel and hunkering down in the maze of Hong Kong’s shanty-town suburbs prior to his flight to Moscow.

Ironically, critical reception of *Snowden* was mixed precisely because the fugitive schematic was seen as too restrained. A telling indicator that character had indeed become a major pillar of the culture’s surveillance discourse was Richard Brody’s *New Yorker* review which recorded dismay at the absence of a more detailed exposition of Snowden’s personality, as though that was the movie’s only critical intervention. Others reflected on a “documentary impersonation approach” that reinforced the “canonisation” of Snowden from *Citizenfour*, but didn’t fully expound on the eye-opening exposé of what the online digital world was now capable of. Brian Tallerico saw similar causal problems but did at least identify a humanized Snowden that challenged the knee-jerk assessments of other public figures, notably Donald Trump, whose condemnation of Snowden as a traitor on *Fox News* Stone pointedly includes in the film’s final stylized summation.

Stone partly reaffirmed his long-standing role as agitator of the American establishment with *Snowden*. Released two months before the 2016 presidential vote, the Trump clip even took on a prophetic foretaste of what was to come once the new White House incumbent was in charge from January 2017. But the film’s interpolative intrusions concerning Trump and American secrecy more generally rather emphasized its entertainment quotient, a thriller-ish patina that Stone’s past films had rarely felt obliged to follow.

**RISK**

Stone and Condon put their dramatic cinematic palettes to the test in competing condemnation of American hegemony and a runaway surveillance culture torn asunder by Assange’s and Snowden’s claims. In Laura Poitras’s *Risk*, however, the filmmaker not only succumbs to the maverick specialist staging so befitting feature presentations, but finds herself stranded in the nefariously all-consuming world of Julian Assange.

Taking up the story left dangling by *We Steal Secrets* some four years earlier, Poitras’s 2017 film tracks the WikiLeaks founder through the frenzied 2011–13 period when Assange emerged as a global activist superstar, before reconnecting with him as the 2016 election reached its climax. *Risk* received

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generally positive notices, but the movie’s extended gestation period and controversial production history quickly became the principal story.

Documentary’s delicate relationship with what Jeff Geiger calls “testimony and performative self-making” has been evident for several decades. The genre’s “extreme makeover,” as Paul Arthur termed it, saw the emergence of many more agitators either side of the millennium. Filmmakers such as Ross McElwee, Nick Broomfield and Michael Moore were willing to insert persona and politics into the very core of their movies’ action. But the question of the “author-as-star” was further complicated by these individuals injecting into the narratives not so much their own personality as a “constructed” one. While Poitras flirted with a similar pretence, Risk was more pronounceably about a director, auteur and activist becoming an active person of interest in the film’s whole conceit.

That was because Poitras had first taken her film to Cannes in 2016 with a version that was met with favourable responses and an understanding that Assange, while characteristically prickly and pretentious onscreen, was nevertheless seen together with his organization in a more reinforcing and positive light. But, rather than releasing Risk after Cannes, Poitras unexpectedly took it away and recut the film. She inserted a distinctive voice-over narration similar to that which had so effectively infused Citizenfour, but this commentary more or less rewrote the first film. The “new” Risk that emerged in May 2017 was far more attentive to and critical of Assange’s self-absorbed meanderings. The accusations of sexual assault in Sweden that had trailed after him when he landed in London were now enhanced in the latest print. As David Sims observed, Poitras had in fact returned to her subject after Cannes to take up Assange’s role in the tale of the 2016 election and duly reconnected with a character becoming “even more frustratingly opaque; his jealousy of other figures like Snowden, and his inability to weather criticism, ever more apparent.” The Risk that had originally painted Assange as posturing but persuasive now saw a figure increasingly isolated and preoccupied with himself, hubristic to the point of being downright disagreeable.

But this more pointed character assessment had a strange personal determination. Poitras’s voice-over probed Assange’s motivations for letting her into his inner sanctum—a place Gibney had failed to gain access to in 2011–12—and questioned whether he even liked her. Risk remained compulsive viewing, but it was also frustrating, especially with a nearly absent ending that lacked any satisfactory summation. Poitras revealed in the film and afterwards that she had in fact been engaged in an intimate relationship with the WikiLeaks acolyte and tech consultant Jacob Applebaum, though this took place—she says in Risk’s voice-over—“briefly in 2014” after filming with Assange concluded. Nina Burleigh in Newsweek, but most especially Steven Zeitchik in his interview with Poitras in the Los Angeles Times on the eve of Risk’s release, had some nagging doubts about Poitras’s confession, however. Burleigh pointed out that Poitras had published a photo of herself from 2013 in the 2016 book Astro Noise—accompanying her installation at the Whitney Museum in New York—that was attributed to Applebaum, the timeline thus questioning whether the relationship really had started after filming concluded, let alone what that meant for Poitras’s return to documenting Assange in 2016.40

Zeitchik was thoroughly unconvinced by Poitras’s assertion that between 2013 and 2016 she suddenly uncovered a very different Assange, insisting that “his manner was new to me” when, as Zeitchik pointed out, Assange’s idiosyncratic predilections had been well documented, not least by Gibney.41 The relationship with Applebaum was complicated further by accusations of sexual assault against him in 2016 and Poitras admitted that one of the accusers was a friend.42 Meanwhile, the volte-face after Cannes emerged out of a conversation Poitras had with Assange before the premiere when he pressed her not to include any of the sexual assault allegations or some of the heavy-handed posturing that Poitras had initially left in the original print, and which she now felt required additional uncovering.

As had become apparent, Assange’s hand in Snowden’s escape from Hong Kong to Moscow in 2013 had been supplemented by his legal assistant Sarah Harrison, who accompanied Snowden and then stayed on with him for upwards of three months. In addition, WikiLeaks’s part in the Democratic National Committee email hacking controversy at a crucial time in the

2016 election was the backdrop to Poitras’s return to Assange during that fateful spring and summer. Little of this makes its mark in Risk, though, and the documentary’s sequence of events suggested such total immersion into Assange’s world, whatever the cost, that performativity belonged to both film and filmmaker in equally symbiotic measure. But it also questioned where documentary’s reasoned measure of surveillance and secrecy now lay in a fast-moving political culture that didn’t seem to mind equating personality and popularity with populism and zealotry.

CONCLUSION

Surveillance biopics of the 2010s undoubtedly augmented their personality-as-narrative-tool construction with increasingly acerbic shifts in the philosophical tone and political register of government reaction around them. We Steal Secrets and The Fifth Estate could be applauded for pushing on into the darker recesses of state subterfuge even if they were enmeshed within Assange’s complex, not to say contradictory, personality. Citizenfour and Snowden revealed surveillance activity on a scale even critics found unimaginable, despite a focus upon their subject’s unruffled, some might say detached, demeanour. The story behind the various iterations of Risk, however, seemed to take the surveillance biopic to a whole different level, potentially making the film an unwitting part of Jameson’s unmappable superstructure rather than a tool for its exposure.

Assange as cipher for all that government secrecy and surveillance culture had become in the 2010s was now so embedded within the construction of his own personality – partly built by himself, partly aided and abetted by the media reinforcing that construction – that the real Assange was surely buried far away in a different time and place. Perhaps as far away as hinted by the lower-budgeted and more obscure Australian television film Underground (2012), a movie detailing Assange’s early-life activism with an adamance for the man’s sincere antiestablishment credentials.

Mandy Merck has another perspective on this character construction, however. Hinting at the ways in which melodrama and celebrity culture have infringed on surveillance in recent political discourse, she asserts, “Where melodrama tests the moral worth of its fictional protagonists, the concentrated gaze of celebrity scrutinises the probity of public figures.”

This perspective offers up the not insignificant question of why – having trailed anonymity as his moniker – in contradistinction to Assange,

Snowden would seek the pressure and perusal of the public? Merck suggests that while anonymity offers its own type of celebrity “brand,” it is the very “potency of recognition” that is too forceful and beguiling to resist if one is to gain traction exposing a world as murky as that of intelligence and surveillance. Quoting Poitras’s own reasoning to Snowden, Merck sees inevitability in the subject becoming the story, so you should “get your voice in front of that condition while you still control the means of (dis)information.”

The problem might be, though, as Merck’s conclusion problematically contends, that “the mask of celebrity” is a good one for a culture where we’re all potentially famous, but it makes anonymity on any level unachievable for surveillance activists. Additionally, where does it leave the value of their actual documents and the revelations that result if the narrative of celebrity dictates so much? The whistle-blowers become the story but surveillance as a political weapon continues to affect us all.

But there is even more to the duality of anonymity/celebrity than the subjects of these movies. Poitras’s efforts with Risk suggest a practitioner as participant increasingly unable to know where her impressionism of Assange stops and the verifiable facts of WikiLeaks’s revelations must take over. She had been reluctant enough in the past to assign agency to her movies, suggesting in 2014, “I think films are a way to communicate something to the world, not tools to drive change.” But now Poitras was cloaked in a mythology she was unsure whether she was duped into believing or which she was complicit in assembling in the first place.

Meanwhile, Edward Snowden’s more personable demeanour tacked away from these controversies associated with prickly “celebrity status.” While his story is lent more heroic Hollywood pretensions, Citizenfour’s opening and Snowden’s ending nevertheless mount a tabula rasa of post-9/11, war-on-terror rationalizations that are insistent about the need for whistle-blower revelations in the face of a defensive and accusatory state response.

Snowden could thus be played as one of Geoff King’s “maverick specialists” precisely because there was little in his media profile that conflicted with the heroic American archetype. Indeed, Kimberley Brownlee is keen to associate Snowden in political-science terms with John Rawls’s concept of civil disobedience and the moral imperative to expose the threats to personal privacy. Snowden was, argues Brownlee, “morally justified [and] properly sensitive to the responsibility of public officials about the programmes they oversee.”

44 Merck, 281.
Assange’s complexities, by contrast, associated him with a brand—WikiLeaks—that started to be more easily overwritten with the suffixes “agitator” and “traitor.” That contrast was problematic even before Assange’s intervention in the latter stages of the 2016 presidential election and publication of compromising emails that questioned Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton’s judgment and integrity, and reputedly aided Trump. For Juan Domingo Sánchez Estop this all revealed Assange’s contradictory relationship with the dialectics of contemporary power relations. “Unfortunately, for the people looking for the secret of power in the power of secrets, this something is no definite thing,” he suggests:

Assange and Wikileaks assume there is a truth of power beneath the secrets they uncover. But in the end, those who believe that power is based on secret conspiracies compete in ingenuity and optimism with those who believe that power is legitimate, moral, or legal. Both sides ultimately share the same problem: they think that power in a class society could be fair and lawful, were it not manipulated by evil conspirators, and that simply uncovering and defeating the conspiracy would restore an order based on legality and rights. For Assange, this idealistic imperative to expose led him into a moral morass during and after the election and his status as outcast became ever more apparent. Despite Assange’s denials, Luke Harding reports that a 6 January 2017 joint-authored report from the FBI, the CIA and the NSA all pointed the finger at WikiLeaks as a courier, at the very least, of information from Russian online hackers who had obtained material out of the Democratic National Committee computer servers and who chose to share it with WikiLeaks “because of its self-proclaimed reputation for authenticity.”

Raffi Katchadourian’s later 2017 New Yorker portrait of Assange couched the dilemma unveiled by Sánchez Estop in terms that made his authenticity nothing so much as a double-edged sword. Assange saw himself travelling along a path mapped out by mythology scholar Joseph Campbell, a journey of departure, initiation (this being the accusations in Sweden) and return. But this heroic odyssey was being interrupted and recast by “dark forces” in the corridors of power that were redefining him not as the interlocutor of

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truth and authenticity but as, to use Joe Biden’s phrase, a “high-tech terrorist.”

*We Steal Secrets, The Fifth Estate, Citizenfour* and *Snowden* represent noteworthy developments in politically inquisitive cinema, but their impact has been qualified by the enhanced presence of personality acting as polemics. Implicitly, these movies judge the patriot–traitor binary first, and then assemble the evidence around this conceit later. They thus leave open the gaps for institutional and media deconstruction of said personalities, painting them as lone crusaders, righteously or otherwise battling the prevailing wisdom of state authority. This focus then conceals rather than reveals important questions about the contemporary global surveillance community.

With *Risk*, the surveillance politics are always beyond the screen, forever pushing out into the wider vicinity. The personal psychologies of Assange and Snowden are steeped in government mendacity, yet this final film of the quintet looks through the lens of Jameson’s cognitive superstructures, and treats the filmmaker’s own ensnaring within the surveillance panopticon as a route to credibly destabilizing it on film. But this interlocutory discourse signals that cinema is not just a tool for charting surveillance culture, not just a disruptive presence in breaking up conspiratorial silence, but now more than ever an active participant in mapping out the terrain under investigation. Film and filmmakers are no longer surveying so much as they are becoming an integrative part of the topography of secrecy and surveillance itself. What that signals for cinema’s investigative reach is a troublesome quandary.

**AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY**


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