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The Single Take

Posted on [October 25, 2014](#)[December 2, 2014](#) by [Keith Uhlich](#)

Citizenfour and Nightcrawler

The most startling thing about Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (opened Friday, October 24th), a documentary that hums and whirrs like the droning Nine Inch Nails instrumental track that underscores several sequences, is how serene it feels. This is the film's boldest aesthetic gambit—approaching the epochal story of NSA contractor-cum-whistleblower Edward Snowden as if it were a nerve-anesthetizing ambient album. Fear (of both the other and our own) is no longer an exception, but a constant accepted by the world at large in the vague names of security and comfort. It's difficult, if not impossible, to orient your moral compass when you can barely get a reading. Poitras' movie ably captures this strangely placid sociopolitical anxiety with a clinician's touch; no surprise that Steven Soderbergh signed on as an executive producer. Yet overall I find it a patchy experience, much stronger piecemeal than on the whole.

In polite company I've maintained an "I don't know how I feel" position regarding Snowden and his actions. But I think it's important to state here that I'm generally more sympathetic since pushing back against those in power seems to me an essential part of the democratic process. This passage from James Baldwin's 1952 essay "Autobiographical Notes" rings especially true: "I love America more than any other country in the world, and, exactly for this reason, I insist on the right to criticize her perpetually." Of course, what Snowden did in releasing the numerous classified documents about the U.S. government's extensive surveillance programs goes, for many, well beyond criticism. Still, though the consequences may be far-reaching, I'm currently of the mind that his was a welcome and necessary grand gesture.

On the surface, Poitras's film eschews the flamboyant, beginning with some moody atmospherics (a vehicle moving slowly through a long, dark tunnel; ominous pillow shots of NSA facilities under construction) and a catchall précis about life post-Patriot Act. But the best section of *Citizenfour*—its lengthiest—deals with the leadup to and immediate aftermath of the documents' release, as the low-key Poitras (only heard and not seen), the chiefly cool and charismatic Snowden (who'd been communicating with the filmmaker under the virtual alias "Citizenfour") and journalist Glenn Greenwald (in full crusader mode) powwow in a close-quarters room in Hong Kong's Mira Hotel.

The cramped space takes on a life of its own: Every disruption (a fire alarm goes off repeatedly, the phone rings incessantly) is suspect. Who's listening in? Who's watching? Who's at the door, ready to kick it in? As the potential threats pile up so do the absurdities: Snowden good-naturedly scolds Greenwald for not changing his years-old, easily compromised flash drive, which forces a shared laugh between them over the possibility of discovery. And after the news of his betrayal hits the media there's a funny scene of Snowden continuously primping his hair—a humanizing nervous tic—as he prepares to go out into a world he's very directly upended.

It's undeniably fascinating to watch history unfold, but once Snowden makes his run for Moscow, the film goes (and gets) broader. I think many of my problems stem from my intense dislike of Greenwald (essentially the film's co-lead). He's rubbed me the wrong way ever since he panned Kathryn Bigelow's fascinatingly problematic *Zero Dark Thirty* sight unseen, making a spectacle of his ignorance and attempting to assassinate the character of anyone who counseled otherwise. This, coupled with the hysterical tone of much of his journalistic prose, gives me pause, even when the causes he's fighting for sync up with my own political beliefs.

He certainly makes some staggering connections between the culture of surveillance and our own legislative branch. (The POTUS gets implicated, of course, and not wrongly so.) Yet I can't help but feel that Greenwald believes (and Poitras quietly concurs) that this is the end of the discussion—even though we're dealing with a conversation that, in terms of civilized discourse, has no end. However, this also presumes that a conversation *can* be had with a monolithic entity that has the ability to sweep aside dissenters who don't speak out long and loud enough. Both Poitras and Greenwald have suffered greatly for their work; the beyond-the-pale detainment of Greenwald's partner, David Michael Miranda, is one of *Citizenfour's* particularly potent emotional moments. So as with Snowden, sympathy is woven in with my skepticism. A clean, clear pro or con—on both the movie and this ever-evolving situation—seems like an insult.

Nightcrawler

A simple pleasure to look forward to: Writer-director Dan Gilroy's *Nightcrawler* (opening October 31st) is a seedy tabloid thriller that could easily have played the mid-'80s late night cable circuit. It has plenty of throwback qualities, my favorite being a gruff-and-tumble Bill Paxton supporting performance that seems like a lost relic from the *Near Dark* era. Yet there's something ephemerally "now" about the film, a hazy quality—not quite serious, not quite satire—that cuts marrow-deep. Key to its success is Jake Gyllenhaal's bug-eyed, weasel-haired portrayal of protagonist Louis Bloom. He's a petty thief and career sociopath who, after chancing upon an accident on a Los Angeles freeway, realizes there's money to be made selling gory footage of car crashes, home invasions, and other tragedies to ratings-hungry networks. The further he works his way up this underworld ladder, the more murderously manipulative he becomes to get the story he wants.

Burlesques of our 24-hour news cycle are a dime a dozen, but Gilroy isn't being a Paddy Chayefsky-like scold. He's simply out to make a crackerjack genre piece in which the mockery emerges naturally from the smoggy, morally shallow environs. Cinematographer Robert Elswit does banner work with the widescreen framing, especially in scenes involving Bloom's near-carnal interactions with Nina (Rene Russo), the station head who takes a lustful liking to Bloom's exploitative eye. (Their libidinous exchange in front of a paused video image of a dying man is a depraved highlight.) More importantly, Gilroy and Gyllenhaal fully commit to their crazed central character's irredeemability, following him deep into hell and never once looking back toward the light. How perversely giddy it is to watch a demon thrive in his element.

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