

IS *CITIZENFOUR* A USEFUL FILM? Jill Godmilow, 5/28/2016
<http://politicsslashletters.org/2016/06/is-citizenfour-a-useful-film/>

One early June evening in 2015 I walked out of the IFC Cinema into the roar of traffic heading up 6th Avenue in New York City. I had just seen Laura Poitras' film, *Citizenfour*, and it struck me that nothing had changed because of this film. The traffic went north and the pedestrians went up and down the sidewalks, but nothing had changed. And it should have... perhaps not immediately but soon enough.

What I had experienced in the theater was an intense 114 minutes of cloak and dagger adventure. I had been waiting, minute by minute, for the CIA or FBI or some such government agency to crash through Ed Snowden's hotel room door in Hong Kong. I was waiting for government agents to arrest him at gunpoint, and maybe his "co-conspirators" too, seize the camera and all his interviewers' computers, and then some.

Citizenfour is an extremely well made, tense drama of high stakes reporting. I felt with the rest of the audience – phew! They got out of there just in time. Stop combing your hair, Ed, and run for it. I felt so special – didn't everybody – to have been there in intimate proximity to the cloak and dagger event, with *the man*, Ed. It's a "real life international thriller" says the DVD packaging, and so it is.

But is it a useful film? My answer, only mildly useful. Certainly it offers a chance to meet the man who, there but for the grace of God, just in time, had escaped the clutches of U.S. law enforcement and some serious jail time, or maybe life imprisonment, or even the death penalty. We get to watch how the release of his documents would be orchestrated by the skillful journalist, Glenn Greenwald of the *Guardian*. But that's not the best use of our time with Ed Snowden who, it seems, was willing to share with us the import of the documents. It is the wrong film... moreover, it's the wrong film at a right, most auspicious moment. I believe that this was *the* moment to spark a national, noisy mobilization for the return of our privacy and our liberties, those guaranteed by the U.S. Constitution. This film helped to squander that moment.

This film – like all films – is a text like any other. Like reality TV, like documentaries about famous artists or musicians, like driver-ed films, like newspaper editorials, even the backs of cereal boxes... all these are texts and all texts make an argument. What is *Citizenfour's* argument, in greatly reduced, narrative form, (since the film is organized as a narrative).

Here goes, in six sentences: 1. There once was a very intelligent and modest young man who worked for the NSA – Ed Snowden. 2. One day he realized that the NSA's surveillance programs he was helping to facilitate were unconstitutional and a threat to private citizens and democratic institutions. 3. He decided to alert the world to this danger by collecting and disseminating thousands of documents that would detail the kinds of secret activities of U.S. spy agencies were perpetrating on unknowing citizens. 4. He contacted filmmaker Laura Poitras and journalist Glenn Greenwald who met secretly with Snowden in a hotel room in Hong Kong for eight days, where they planned the release of these documents and the introduction of Snowden himself to the world press as the whistle blower. 5. U.S. authorities were just about to arrest Snowden when, with the help of Human Rights people in Hong Kong and Julian Assange, he managed, get out of the hotel and to reach the airport – thus evading the clutches of the U.S. agents. 6. Thank the Lord that, for the minute, Ed is safe in Moscow because we honor and hold dear this pretty remarkable guy.

There's a particularly exciting scene in that Hong Kong hotel room: one day, while the journalists are working with Ed, his hotel phone sounds something like an alarm. Ed freezes. Everyone freezes. We freeze. After a few moments Ed decides to ignore it. But then it happens again, and then again. Is the game up? Is this the moment? Ed takes a chance – he dials the front desk. The desk reports that the hotel is testing its fire alarm system. Smiles and chuckles all around. Us too. Phew! They go back to work.

Instead of this narrative, in a film organized quite differently where both the filmmaker and Ed and Laura had active voices, what could Ed and Laura have taught us? And what could they have asked of us?

I'm in the middle of writing a book called *Useful Film*. I begin: "This is a book about how to make a film that provides unique, useful experience... where there is a fruitful transaction with the audience, not just information, not just description, not high drama, but a radical rethinking of its subject. A useful film can offer a set of profound propositions and opportunity for revelation and transformation that can only happen in the cinema... that is in useful, enduring cinema... that is, useful even in 100 years. How can we use the machine of film to make something like that?" Bunuel did it with *Land Without Bread*. Franju did it with *Blood of the Beasts*. Farocki did it more recently, in 1992, with *Videograms of a Revolution*. We can do it too.

Once upon a time I conjured up the term *post-realist* for a certain kind of non-fiction film—a film that

strategically pops the lid on traditional documentary form. These are films that deconstruct all that cinema-as-we-know-it promises. They produce a critique of traditional cinema representational systems and structures, and through that critique, provide previously unimaginable, perhaps radicalizing experience. To make a film like this, one has to be some kind of “artist in exile.” One might have to sing a different kind of song than the documentaries on PBS or HBO – perhaps a utopian song – not one full of dogma, rather one that articulates energy and hope. That’s a good reason for a film to say, at least quietly to its audience, “we’re not dead yet... we can think for ourselves.” There are hundreds of ways to do that in the cinema. *Citizenfour* doesn’t try... doesn’t come close.

Documentary film is characterized by the inherently contradictory idea of representing, in whatever way, something about the real and tangible world we live in. Documentary says about itself that it is a document of the real world. The putative transparency of non-fiction film is still widely held, and practiced. The conceit of *documentary journalism* encourages us to tell stories, in public, that describe current events but don’t make any use of them. And we end up with mishaps of gigantic proportions when we believe cinema verité documentary is the only possible kind of film text that offers trustworthy truths. It’s not

I would argue that the documentary, as we know it, is designed primarily for educated, liberal, middle class audiences. The wealthy don’t watch documentaries. The working poor, the very poor and certainly the homeless don’t either. The middle class audience, us probably, somewhat comfortable and semi-secure in its ready-made class position, needs reassurance that its relative wealth and security does not come at the expense of those weaker than ourselves. If maybe it does, the liberal middle class wants to know about them and help those weaker ones, wherever they are, in their plight. Often we feel we accomplish this by watching a film. The *doc* (forgive my shorthand) offers opportunities for the middle class to feel informed, to learn a little about others and their difficulties, to experience a kind of momentary compassionate, courageous and caring citizenship, which may actually be in us, or maybe not. Catharsis comes too... that’s the most damaging part. We feel that we’ve done our part when we’ve done nothing other than buy a ticket. What’s actually happened - we’ve been invited into a construction of make-believe time and space with others who have been asked to tell their stories and/or perform their social roles for us. For the duration of the film, the documentary spectator is transfixed in this dream of knowing, caring and learning. We are united with Ed now. He’s our boy.

Nothing of worth comes from this exercise – only vague familiarity with something or someone outside ourselves and the meaning(s) created by the form and text of the film... often a kind of public-service announcement gussied up in time and space, with performing social actors... Ed Snowden, in this case. He doesn’t seem happy about it but he agrees to perform himself – that is, to tell the history of his extraordinary act of conscience. What he doesn’t perform is his understanding of the NSA’s warrantless surveillance goals, and how this knowledge is an absolute necessity for us.

A truly useful film is always a radical film in one way or another... sometimes softly, sometimes aggressively, but always a rewriting of personal, class and national relationships. In the U.S., a useful film could confront Art Spiegelman’s recent description of our particular social imaginaire: “*We Americans, poor fish, have a perpetually recurring case of amnesia, trying to wriggle off the hook when it comes to facing our history as a Rapacious Capitalist Empire. We prefer to think of ourselves as wide-eyed innocents with perpetually renewing hymens.*” Sad to say, our hymens have once again been renewed. We love Ed... he’s just like us. We could perform, as he did, extraordinary acts of conscience, if the occasion arises.

As Laura tells it in interviews and the like, at first Snowden didn’t feel comfortable being in a film, because as she tells it, he didn’t want “the story” to be about him. He was right to hesitate: in the end *Citizenfour* was about him and not about the threat to our democracy and to our individual privacy. Of course we admire him and are grateful for his intelligence, skills, his act of conscience... his disclosures, but I have a feeling that he could have actually helped us understand better how to resist the NSA – what actions we could and should take. It could have been an instructive film – how to understand how rotten our political discourse is, how to understand and expose the rationale for the surveillance state, how to understand the value of individual privacy and what is threatened by its loss, and much more... even how to encrypt for ourselves. The fact that most people feel they are doing “nothing wrong” and are ready to accept a national surveillance state, fail to understand the value of their own privacy. These all could have been “the story” of this film.

How could you un-work and restructure a documentary with Ed Snowden to make something useful? I stab. How about a series of titled chapters? Some structure like this might have helped to break up the adventure of it all and to break out the lessons for us all. For example, crudely:

- Chapter 1. What exactly was your work at Booz Allen Hamilton?
Chapter 2. Why did you release the documents and what were your expectations?
Chapter 3. What should we take from these documents?
Chapter 4. How best can we respond... or who am I, viewer/social actor, in the face of this?
Chapter 5. Can intrusive and paralyzing warrantless surveillance be stopped?
Chapter 6. Is the surveillance state the only or best way to protect us from world-wide terrorism or is it about something else – shutting down our resistance to the state control of our lives.
Chapter 7. Do you feel safe in Moscow?
Chapter 8. How can we help protect you?

If Ed can't answer all these questions, it would be interesting to hear him try, though I think he could answer them quite well. Why else would he have taken the risks he took?

Or suppose Ed performed a demonstration about exactly how the surveillance works. Ed, show us how a man or a woman, perhaps a journalist, who one day does a Wiki search for some information, then orders vitamins on-line, downloads an article from *The Nation*, calls some colleagues, calls his wife or her husband, books an airline ticket, sends a text or two to arrange a meeting with a government worker who has some information to share and who doesn't trust the protections the government is supposed to offer whistle-blowers. Why shouldn't they – witness the treatment of Thomas Drake, or of Chelsea Manning. How is this person tracked by his metadata? How is he or she soon arrested? How is the man or woman put on a no-fly list? How is his/her passport revoked? How do they end up in jail, awaiting charges on felony counts? How does this work and what will it take to resist it? And what if it was a college student, doing some research on-line in a library, texting some friends, then riding her bike to a 350.org demonstration, or to a union picket line, or to defend a Planned Parenthood clinic or to join a Black Lives Matter rally? Ed – make it real for us. Bring it down home.

Once, sometime in the 70's, the FBI was looking for some members of the Weather Underground, the radicalized, militant faction, an offshoot of SDS. Though they were underground, the Weather men and women, masked, had been interviewed in a film, *Underground*, by Emile De Antonio. Back then, almost all self-distributing independent filmmakers kept their rental prints at a company in New Jersey called Franklin Lakes who sent them out to universities and libraries. De Antonio did and I did too. I, and every other filmmaker with prints at Franklin Lakes, got a call one day from the FBI. "What did I know about the filmmaker De Antonio? Did I know where the Weathermen were hiding? Had I ever met one of them?" "No" to all of the above. We all laughed at the inanity of the calls and the Weathermen stayed underground for years. Today, the FBI wouldn't be calling up an assortment of lefty filmmakers seeking their whereabouts. They would be tracking every move they made, digitally, and every move of ours.

We need a recipe for thinking about this gargantuan dilemma – about what we should be doing to save our freedoms and our democracy. Each of us needs to understand that it is everybody's problem. Instead we are enthralled by *Citizenfour's* intimate offerings, seduced by the adventure of it all... this thoroughly enjoyable film. Yes, Laura sticks her camera in the tent but she never really enters it... so neither can we. She is content with peeking and so we're out here peeking too. The opportunity is wasted but somehow we are satisfied. We have met Ed and we know Ed is a great guy and that now he is safe. We are gratified. We feel like we participated. We feel we did participate, in a way, through the experience of the film. We are grateful for the film.

Snowden, not the film, certainly made it a tense year for President Obama, who was momentarily embarrassed by the Snowden revelations. But soon enough the brouhaha dissipated and we went back to our comfortable lives with a serious dose of learned helplessness... only vaguely and yet permanently anxious. This journalistic filmmaking thing needs to stop so these moments aren't wasted. I'm reminded of Erroll Morris' 2003 film, *The Fog of War*. It's not the same kind of journalism Laura produced but it took advantage of the moment when maybe we were ready to start dealing with that terrible crime, the Vietnam War. Twenty-eight years after it ended, Morris' *The Fog of War* rehabilitated Robert McNamara, the major architect of that 10-year destructive and self-destructive military escapade, which killed 58,000 U.S. military and more than two million Vietnamese, Laotians and Cambodians. *The Fog of War* fogged us up pretty badly. Right moment maybe, absolutely the wrong film.

Perhaps a useful achievement of *Citizenfour* is to make it impossible for us to believe, as our government and the major media proclaim over and over, that Ed Snowden was anti-American or, at worst, a Russian or Chinese spy or some such. The film encourages us to feel, through our intimate encounter, that he's a modest, endearing, grounded and courageous, patriotic American dissenter. His was an act of conscience, right? He is not a fame-seeking narcissist, right? Yes, right, but these are the wrong questions. That our friend Ed is neither a spy nor a fame-seeking narcissist the film nails down, but we could have figured that out for ourselves. Nor is Chelsea Manning. Nor Julian Assange. Nor was Daniel Ellsberg. Nor are other whistle blowers, but then they aren't holed up in a Hong Kong hotel room without a passport while the CIA closes in.

Again, this is an extremely well made film and a courageous filmmaking accomplishment, but not a particularly useful one. Most documentaries aren't. Realism is a dead deal. It's a problem of documentary's "let-the-pictures-do-the-talking-and-that-is-enough" attitude. Ed was a radical poet in a hotel room. Sure – have your meetings, record every inch of it, put it in the archive, get Ed's documents to the *Washington Post* and *The Guardian*, introduce the whistleblower to the world, as Ed wanted it. But don't show us what you were able to record, at which hour, and which day, and where exactly. Save that for the trial, if there ever is one. Let the poet speak. Give him his space. Give him the time he needs.

Now Ed Snowden is safe, at least for the moment. He lives in Moscow with his partner, in domesticity... no longer alone. In a long shot through the windows of his new house, we watch them preparing an evening meal. We are relieved and now the film can end because some kind of resolution has been achieved. We rest peacefully, even though the NSA is still collecting metadata from all our actions on the internet – our searches, our purchases, our banking, our texts, our email, what we might write there... everything we do on-line, with our computers, with our smart phones, tablets, and all the new gizmos we're bound to buy and use to communicate.

We watched the drama, the documenting of what took place in that hotel room then and there, but nothing about the here and now of our lives in the age of warrantless mass surveillance. We watch the film, breathe deeply, head up 6th Avenue, and soon we go to bed. Over breakfast we think "wasn't that an interesting film?" Or, as one commentator mused, "This isn't about me, is it? Are we supposed to be buttoning up everything?" That's a legitimate question and one that the film doesn't really address but it's only a fraction of the most important question. The elephant in the room has to do with the condition of our democracy – is it still one?

I think it's the wrong film *and* the wrong audience. We have been trained to receive revelations about our helplessness helplessly. It's media for us – an educated middle class. It offers to serve as our delegate on political matters. We outsource the labor of critical thinking to the media, for the time and freedom it affords us. And we keep it "in office" through the inaction films like these teach us. That is damaging because they ignore us, say we're not really here. It's pixels and we're pixels – not social actors. But here we are. We're here. We're listening.

On June 2nd, 2015, President Obama signed into law the USA Freedom Act, which ended the NSA's bulk collection of American phone data, forcing the agency to return to the courts to access data involving terrorist suspects from communication companies like Google, Verizon, Facebook, and all the rest. Obama's action was probably not in response to the film *Citizenfour* but in response to Snowden's damning documents and the international stir it created, leading to the discovery that Angela Merkel's cell phone had been tapped by the NSA, among others.

Once Snowden has escaped, the last twenty minutes of the film are devoted to a lot of journalistic reportage. We watch Glenn Greenwald at a Brazilian Senate hearing, explaining that the NSA surveillance programs have more to do with economic spying on other countries than protecting us from terrorist acts, which the U.S. government insists every day. He lays out exactly how metadata can be used to learn everything about our lives – who and how and how many times we are in contact with whom, where and when. He speaks of the pressure to suppress publishing about the surveillance programs in foreign countries.

We gaze at an underground cable intercept site on the coast of England, and another somewhere in the British Isles, and another in Germany – where foreign data is intercepted and collected.

We are at an EU Parliament hearing where the journalist and hacker Jacob Appelbaum explains that when we lose privacy, we lose agency in our lives, and thus we lose our freedom. Also there is Ladar Levinson, who authored the encrypted webmail service called Lavabit, which Snowden used to communicate with Laura Poitras. Levinson explains why he had to destroy the entire service so that the NSA couldn't get access to theirs and others' communications.

We meet William Binney – the once top NSA specialist, who quit his job when he found out that the government was going to use a program he had authored to start spying on all U.S. citizens. We hear Binney address a hearing at the German Parliament in Bonn. He explains that the U.S. surveillance systems, and others, are a major threat to democracies all around the world.

Later, the journalist Jeremy Scahill of *The Intercept* questions Binney how to protect whistleblowers and other sources. Binney advises him to meet his sources in underground parking lots, where Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein met with their secret informant, Deep Throat, their primary source for the Watergate story. Binney says there is no other way to protect sources anymore.

Lastly, we watch Glenn (I guess in Moscow) update Ed on latest developments. They don't speak but use notes written on scraps of paper to communicate information, as for sure the room is bugged. Yes, Glenn spells out for Ed, it's POTUS (the President of the U.S.) who signs each order for a drone assassination. And yes, there are 1.2 million people of the government watchlist. The film's last image – the paper notes being ripped into tiny little pieces, then taken away, presumably, to be burned.

All useful information. Now, what are we to do?

PS – If you can get your hands on the *Citizenfour* DVD, on disc 2, among the extras there's a discussion at the New School with Laura, Glen and Ed (on Skype) and there, Ed speaks about what kind of free encryption is available for our phones and computers.
