

Nick Davis
Film Discussion Group
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Snowden (dir. Oliver Stone, 2016)

On Camera

Edward Snowden: Joseph Gordon-Levitt: *500 Days of Summer* (09); *Inception* (10); *Looper* (12)
Lindsay Mills: Shailene Woodley: *The Descendants* (11); *The Spectacular Now* (13)
Corbin, recruiter: Rhys Ifans: *Notting Hill* (99); *Enduring Love* (04); *Greenberg* (10)
Hank, at the CIA: Nicolas Cage: *Moonstruck* (87); *Leaving Las Vegas* (95); *Adaptation* (02)
Laura, filmmaker: Melissa Leo: *Frozen River* (08); *The Fighter* (10); *The Big Short* (15)
Glenn, journalist: Zachary Quinto: *Heroes* (TV 06-10); *Star Trek* (09, 13, 16); *Margin Call* (11)
Ewen, journalist: Tom Wilkinson: *The Full Monty* (97); *Michael Clayton* (07); *Selma* (14)
Trevor, NSA boss: Scott Eastwood: son of Clint; *The Longest Ride* (15); *Suicide Squad* (16)
Patrick, at NSA: LaKeith Stanfield: *Short Term 12* (13); *Selma* (14); *Straight Outta Compton* (15)
Gabriel, CIA/NSA: Ben Schnetzer: *The Book Thief* (13); *Pride* (14); *The Riot Club* (14); *Goat* (16)

Off Camera

Co-Writer: Kieran Fitzgerald: *The Homesman* (14), the western we saw with Hilary Swank
Cinematography: Anthony Dod Mantle: *Dogville* (03), *Slumdog Millionaire* (08), *127 Hours* (10)
Editing: Alex Marquez: Stone's *Savages* (12), *Untold History of the United States* (12-13)
Lee Percy: *Boys Don't Cry* (99), *Maria Full of Grace* (04), *Grey Gardens* (09)
Art Direction: Mark Tildesley: a major UK production designer, for Danny Boyle, Mike Leigh
Musical Score: Craig Armstrong: *Moulin Rouge!* (01); Stone's *World Trade Center* (06)

Previous features from director-cowriter Oliver Stone

Platoon (1986) – Stone's Oscar-winning, loosely autobiographical story about troops in Vietnam
Wall Street (1987) – Another parable about a young man getting disillusioned with rigged systems
JFK (1991) – Stone's paranoia about espionage and transnational corruption is in full flower here
Nixon (1995) – Maybe Stone's best and most ambitious movie, which also concerns surveillance
W. (2008) – Another example of Stone in a more muted style, addressing contemporary figures

If you liked *Snowden*, you might also enjoy...

Citizenfour (2014) – The Oscar-winning chronicle of Snowden's fateful interview in Hong Kong
The Insider (1999) – A great contemporary example of an average man turned whistleblower

Facts about *Snowden* you may appreciate...

Snowden was shot largely in Germany, with mostly European funders. This may have to do with the political delicacy of the subject in the US but more likely reflects where funds could be raised and with major tax incentives that come with filming in Germany—the world's highest. During filming, Stone's mother died, but because of the tight, faraway, under-funded shoot, Stone elected not to attend her funeral, to guarantee that the movie would be finished. Stone feels that German partners were also receptive because of the relevant history of the Stasi.

Stone met several times with the real Edward Snowden many times before he contracted to direct it, and continued consulting even after he had completed a rough cut of the movie, which he showed to Snowden in Russia. Sources, including Snowden himself, have said he got more than usual veto power over the representation, as a condition of licensing his story.

One of the two nonfiction books that is a credited source for the screenplay is *The Time of the Octopus* by Snowden's own lawyer Anatoly Kucherena. Whether or not it was quid pro quo, Stone thought buying the rights (for \$1 million!) would ease his access to Snowden himself. The other credited book was the actual source for the screenplay.

Snowden was shot entirely on digital cameras—the first time Stone has gone this route. You might consider the irony of a film that argues how pervasive, observant, and corruptible digital devices are being shot entirely on digital devices, though it's also entirely the norm now.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt reportedly donated his entire salary for this film to nonprofit groups that are researching the many ways in which technology is used to corrupt democratic processes. He met the real Snowden in preparation, and played recordings of his voice while he slept.

Laura Poitras, the director of *Citizenfour* (played by Melissa Leo in the film) did not get along well with Stone when he asked for an early meeting. Among other things, she reports that he asked her to delay the release of *Citizenfour* so that it could coincide with or follow his into theaters.

Rejecting any idea that *Snowden* has been distorted to serve an agenda, Stone told *Wired* Magazine that the CIA actively consults on TV series like *Homeland* and *24* and made documented demands of the filmmakers behind *Zero Dark Thirty*—so even if *Snowden* reflects some bias in the opposite direction, this amounts to a course correction for greater tilts in the other direction.

As of September 2016, *Snowden* still has no distribution lined up in the United Kingdom, the only major market in the world where the film has not been picked up for a release.

Snowden was originally planned for a Christmas 2015 release, which was already ambitious given that it only started shooting the previous February and had so much storytelling and visual material that would be tough to edit. Having missed that deadline, the studio announced a May 2016 release. A further delay, depending whom you believe, was prompted either from a desire to avoid summer blockbuster season or because the Cannes Film Festival—which happens every May—saw an early sneak of *Snowden* and declined to host its premiere.

A third explanation for the delayed release of *Snowden* is that Stone and his partners hoped that its premiere might align with currently-mounting efforts by the ACLU, Human Rights Watch, and Amnesty International to attain a presidential pardon for Snowden. None seems forthcoming. Hillary Clinton has already intimated that, if elected, she would not be inclined to pardon him.

Broad conversation topics...

Stone's Career: *Snowden* is much more modest in its stylistic execution than past Stone movies and has not captured the culture's attention, for better or worse, in the way earlier Stone movies did. Still, if you wanted, you could see the movie as synthesizing several key threads in Stone's career: it's another allegory of a young man who enlists for military service only to grow disenchanted with American ideology and the military-industrial complex (like *Platoon* and *Born on the Fourth of July*); it attempts to make a dizzying field of corruption legible to a popular audience, while also coaching us to distrust our leaders (like *Wall Street*); it subscribes to a thesis that the US government continues to harvest massive information from its citizens (as *Nixon* did) while standing up for a principled voice who protests these actions (like *JFK*, with its heroic portrait of Jim Garrison, the lawyer disputing that Oswald acted alone). You could even allege that Stone wants to sell *Snowden* as an avatar for a generation (like *The Doors* did), while speaking to a contemporary moment (like *World Trade Center* and *W.*).

Paranoia: In the trio of *JFK* (1991), *Natural Born Killers* (1994), and *Nixon* (1995), Stone famously turned paranoia into a filmmaking style of its own, cutting among different film stocks, levels of reality and hallucination, color palettes, realistic and abstract shots, etc., all to achieve a sense of the world sunk into chaos. Only the bare minimum of this style survives in *Snowden*, which at the level of style plays as a fairly sedate biopic, even if its content is deeply unsettling. Did you expect the film itself to seem more agitated or unruly in how it was made?

War: Stone will always be most famous for his personal and artistic associations with Vietnam, which is a central context even for non-battlefield movies like *JFK*, *Nixon*, and *W.* From this perspective, it makes sense that *Snowden* starts with his ill-fated military training, and that it includes Corbin O'Brian's extended speech about computers as the contemporary battlefield. What might it mean to consider *Snowden* as a war movie? How did you react to the opening?

Women and Romance: Stone has been criticized in the past for short-changing female characters. The only example of a woman being the center of one of his films is the little-seen *Heaven and Earth* (1993), which tells the story of the Vietnam War from the perspective of a female Vietnamese peasant. Early word on *Snowden* was that the Ed-Lindsay romance might be even more prominent in the script than it is. What did you make of how the film employed this part of its plot? How did her character change or not change over the course of the story?

Cross-Film Comparisons: Two major points of difference between *Citizenfour* and *Snowden*, beyond the immense stylistic, tonal, and generic contrasts. What do you make of them?

- 1) in Stone's version, the journalists in that Hong Kong hotel room with Snowden are much more prone to disagreement and infighting about what they are up to
- 2) Snowden insists in *Citizenfour* that he did not and *could* not give even the slightest hint to any colleagues at the NSA about his plans to travel to Hong Kong, much less to disclose any aspect of their work, but *Snowden* implies that Patrick (who steps on the SIM card, so Trevor won't see it) and possibly Gabriel (who has that ambiguous conversation with Ed as he boards the elevator) either suspected, knew, and/or supported his decision.

Specific touches worth discussing...

Context: *Snowden* begins with the disclaimer, “The following movie is a dramatization of actual events that took place between 2004 and 2013.” Beyond creating leeway for some artistic license with The Facts, what does it suggest to you that the span of time covered is so broad?

Production Design: Whether or not it’s accurate, the mirrored walls and ceilings in the Mira Hotel suggest a space where everything is a reflection of everything else, and it’s hard to gauge depth or direction... not a bad visual symbol for the bewildering world the journalists are entering.

Music: Different passages of *Snowden*’s score are so different you wouldn’t even assume they are from the movie, all the way from swelling, sentimental strings to the kind of electronic, ambient music or full-out techno more familiar from spy movies like *The Bourne Supremacy*. It’s rare enough for a movie to alternate between such huge ends of the spectrum, rather than opting for one. Even more curiously, the movie sometimes uses this music counter-intuitively. (For a film as skeptical as *Snowden* is of military involvement, it’s surprising to hear soaring violins over the early shots of Snowden’s troops training in the golden fields... unless this score is meant to signal his early idealism about service, and not the movie’s attitude about it.)

Cinematography: During the scenes of military training, the camera sometimes makes subtle movements—for example, seeming to watch the soldiers from the top of a tree, and shifting to get a better view. This is the kind of thing cameras do in thrillers or horror films to suggest the visual perspective of someone, usually a villain, we haven’t met yet. What does it mean for *Snowden* to act *as if* there is an invisible spectator, even when there isn’t—and even in nature?

Editing: During Snowden’s rigorous interviews as part of his CIA training, the film cuts back and forth between several questions and the corresponding results on his lie-detector test. The last question we hear is “Do you think the US is the greatest country on Earth?” and we hear him answer that he does. The film avoids cutting back to the test. I wonder what the readout was?

Class: Snowden reveals in his final CIA interview with Corbin O’Brian that he never finished high school because money pressures in his family required him to work. Does anything else in the movie—story, visuals, anything?—remind you of his modest, even poor class background?

Dialogue: In that same interview, we learn about Snowden’s initial political conservatism and his enthusiasm for Paul Ryan’s favorite author, Ayn Rand. When O’Brian mentions this, he quotes Rand: “One man can stop the motor of the world.” Certainly this line foreshadows the figure Snowden will eventually become—but what does it suggest that O’Brian also knows it?

Production Design: Geek-Mate.com, where Ed and Lindsay initially meet, is not a real website. What did it suggest to you that someone so sensitive to the vulnerability of online data, and so introverted and even antisocial by nature, is nonetheless risking a web-based dating service?

Lighting and Production Design: When Corbin administers the first “test” to his new hackers, to see how quickly they can build a hometown surveillance system, he stands in front of a wall of computer monitors—but the images broadcast on the screens are also projected onto his face. In other words, the “data” seems to be coming from two places at once, which is impossible.

Editing: After Lindsay reveals her awareness that Ed has been snooping on her website (which tells its own story about contemporary dating rituals!), the film cuts quickly to black-and-white still photos of Ed. We assume these are the photos Lindsay is taking during the scene... but then, why are they in black and white? The film then cuts to a shot of the White House, and then to the scene of the antiwar protests. Have we just entered a larger sphere of surveillance?

Music and Production Design: As Ed gets to know Harry Forrester, the Nicolas Cage character, the older man shares his thoughts about “Military Industrial Happiness Management”: not just the idea that military-developed technologies, now sold for profit, have permeated every aspect of our lives but that people’s daily realities and emotional lives (remember that dating website) are now so dependent on devices that we’d rather be spied on through them than give them up. The score drops out completely while Cage delivers this speech—a sign that Stone really wants us to hear it. At the same time, to the extent that the techno-heavy score often *symbolizes* the constant presence of electronics in our lives, the sudden absence of that score is an almost idealistic gesture to the fantasy that we can still have honest heart-to-hearts away from intrusive devices. (Note, too, the prominent picture of JFK on the wall of Nicolas Cage’s office, suggesting something about his character but also harking back to Stone’s own career.)

Costumes: Corbin O’Brian, the CIA director often wears extremely tight black-leather strap-on gloves, both to work and on his hunting expeditions—the kind of gloves we see less often in outdoor winter scenes than in murder tales where someone is trying not to leave fingerprints.

Production Design: The CIA offices where Ed initially works have a strongly blue, green, and white color palette. Is this an ironic contrast of Earth’s “natural” palette to the totally robotic life of high-end tech, or subtly symbolize the wholly global reach of the CIA’s listening?

Sound: As Ed learns from his CIA colleague about the full extent of NSA surveillance, we hear a bell tolling. The sound is mixed as if it’s a natural echo from some church outside, not as an abstract sound element, but it’s hard not to think symbolically about for whom the bell tolls!

Costume and Editing: Lindsay sleeps naked in her bed—a sign, maybe, of just how unperturbed she is about surveillance or of a phase in her relationship with Ed that is more relaxed or sexual than it later becomes. As the scene leads to a sexual moment during the only three hours he’ll be home, he begins to fear they are being spied on by Lindsay’s computer. Nothing in the film guarantees whether this is or isn’t happening. It’s a rare case of mental projection in the film. (We also cut straight from this scene to Obama pledging that data mining “is not who we are”).

Costumes: In the scene where Ed and Lindsay fight about whether she “has anything to hide,” from Ed or from possible spies (an unexpected moment where he’s positioned as more *like* the government than unlike it), she is wearing red, white, and blue winter gear: proudly patriotic, even though we’ve known her as a liberal dissident. Ed dresses in extremely muted greens, greys, and burgundies, almost as if he’s trying not to be noticed, or to divulge anything.

Production Design: Unlike Ed’s Hong Kong hotel suite as we see it in *Citizenfour*, the one in *Snowden* includes a bathroom and shower stall with glass walls and open blinds. The visual motifs of spying and surveillance have pervaded even this most pronouncedly secret space!

Cinematography: As Ed starts to see more reports and computer screens that disclose the greater and greater scale of government malpractice, the camera often pans from the screen or the paper to his face. Rather than a static shot of a man reading, we get a *dynamic* shot, as if watching the invisible information actually lift off the page and land on his reacting face. This is a good trick for keeping the movie lively, but also underscores the import of what he learns.

Gender: In the film's version of events, though *Citizenfour* does not suggest as much, Ed is even more forthcoming with Laura Poitras in private after the frequently –squabbling Glenn and Ewen have left their suite, and after she has set her camera down. This may be another moment where the film allows an ideal fantasy of person-to-person confidence, free of the pervasive influence of media. Why do you think it casts her as his special confidant?

Acting: At the end of the scene where Ed goes hunting for turkey or pheasants with Corbin, Gordon-Levitt makes an unexpected choice to smile broadly over the carcass of the bird he has shot. Up till then, I felt we had been cued to see this whole scene—including the *enormous* rifle that Corbin has brought just to shoot birds—as a turning point in Ed recognizing his boss as untrustworthy and too violent. Because of Gordon-Levitt's choice in this close-up, though, we recall that Ed took some pride in some of the same violent skills he shares with Corbin.

Production Design: Even though *Snowden* is fundamentally about the surveillance of information and “dry” data, the film keeps signaling a kind of sexual thrill that people and agencies take in how they surveil each other. The first drone footage that Ed watches is of an Arab woman removing her hijab in private. The sex scene with Lindsay is a turning point in the plot, as is the fact that she has photos on her computer of exercising with her stripper pole. (By contrast, the actual class she teaches is filmed much less suggestively than the spied-on photos.) Even Ed, when he enters the office at the NSA for the first time, is prone to a range of security cameras that produce images of his internal organs and even a hologram of his naked body, including penis size. No matter how “cold” and technical, spying is always made voyeuristic.

Casting: Trevor, Ed's blond boss at the NSA, is played by Scott Eastwood, the son of famous libertarian Republican Clint Eastwood. The fact that he personifies in this film a willingness to perpetuate espionage—whereas famously public Bernie supporter and regretful Nader supporter Gordon-Levitt appears as Snowden—yields a kind of symbiosis of actors and roles.

Intertextual Allusions: During Lindsay's birthday party, where Ed has his epileptic seizure and the drone crashes onto the lawn, the film's color palette shifts to a very lurid turquoise, green, and orange scheme. This is highly reminiscent of the overall look of Stone's *Natural Born Killers*, an outrageously violent film that also presaged the rise of “reality TV” as we now know it and drew links among epilepsy, mental illness, and the heavy health toll of *being* a criminal or of spying too aggressively *on* criminals. Soon after, Ed has a conversation with Corbin O'Brian—whose image is blown-up on a *huge*, wall-sized screen as he talks to Ed, who is positively dwarfed by this enormous close-up of his possibly boss. This shot is a carbon copy of a famous one of Jim Carrey and Ed Harris in *The Truman Show*, another early Hollywood movie about how constant surveillance had become a form of entertainment.