Oliver Stone's Snowden: The NSA is "running a dragnet on the whole world"

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Directed by Oliver Stone; co-written by Stone and Kieran Fitzgerald

Veteran American filmmaker Oliver Stone, who has been directing since the mid-1980s, has made a movie about National Security Agency (NSA) whistleblower Edward Snowden. *Snowden* follows its titular character's evolution from his enlistment in 2004 in the US Army Reserve as a Special Forces candidate, at which time he was a "patriot" and firm supporter of the war in Iraq, to his decision in 2013 to expose the NSA's illegal efforts at universal surveillance.

Stone's film is a serious effort and done with integrity. *Snowden* opened in North America on September 16, and will have been released in some 20 countries by the end of this week. That millions will watch a work offering a generally sympathetic portrait of Snowden, an individual denounced by the US government and media as a "traitor," has considerable significance. It speaks to the immense (and growing) divide between official public opinion and the sentiments and opinions of wide layers of the population. Among young people in particular, Snowden is a highly admired figure.

The film opens in June 2013 in Hong Kong with the encounter between Snowden (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), now in hiding, documentary maker Laura Poitras (Melissa Leo) and radical journalist Glenn Greenwald (Zachary Quinto). They are soon joined by Ewen MacAskill (Tom Wilkinson) of the *Guardian*, which is planning—with some reluctance—to publish portions of Snowden's cache of secret NSA documents. Poitras is shooting video for what will become the documentary *Citizenfour* (2014).

The atmosphere inside the luxury Mira Hotel is extremely tense. Snowden has placed pillows against the door, cell phones are stored in the microwave to prevent the NSA or CIA from zeroing in on the meeting place. Snowden begins to educate the journalists and filmmaker about the pervasiveness of NSA spying. As Poitras' film recounts, in one of the first emails she received from Snowden, he had informed her "that every border you cross, every purchase you make, every call you dial, every cell phone tower you pass, friend you keep, site you visit, and subject line you type is in the hands of a system, whose reach is unlimited but whose safeguards are not."

After the Hong Kong sequence, Stone's film returns to Snowden's days in the US Army Reserve in Ft. Benning, Georgia. He is still under the influence of the Bush administration's "war on terror" propaganda. After injuries lead to his discharge from the military, he finds his way to the CIA. He comes under the tutelage of agency instructor and eventual mentor Corbin O'Brian (Rhys Ifans). O'Brian tells the recruits in their first session that if there is "another 9/11, it will be your fault."

At the heart of *Snowden* is the character's eventual enlightenment, and ours, as to the true nature of the various government spy agencies and their programs. O'Brian, for example, disabuses Snowden about the situation in the Middle East. The CIA official observes dismissively that in 20 years, "Iraq will be a hellhole no one cares about." The central conflict, he asserts, will be with China, Russia and Iran.

In the course of various postings in Geneva, Tokyo and Hawaii, during which Snowden works either for the CIA, NSA or as an independent contractor, he becomes increasingly aware of the extent to which the intelligence apparatus is violating Constitutional rights on a gigantic scale.

In Geneva, for example, a cynical, knowing colleague, Gabriel Sol (Ben Schnetzer), demonstrates for Snowden what one of the NSA's secret programs, XKeyscore, can do. The latter is essentially an enormously powerful search engine that can circumvent any privacy measures. Asked about the FISA Court [United States Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Court], which theoretically oversees government requests for surveillance warrants against foreign spies, Gabriel dismisses the court as a "big-ass rubber stamp."

One of the most chilling sequences occurs in Hawaii, at the huge underground NSA complex known as "the tunnel," whose specialty is spying on China. An army of technicians and operatives works around the clock with the most sophisticated equipment to monitor America's economic and military rivals. This is the real face of international terrorism, the US military-intelligence apparatus as it gears up for global war. As O'Brian comments at one point, the "modern battle field" is "everywhere." By this point, Snowden is capable of putting in, "You didn't tell me we were running a dragnet on the whole world."

In Hawaii, where he is living with his girlfriend, Lindsay Mills (Shailene Woodley), Snowden begins to make plans to expose the NSA's secrets before the entire world.

It is to Oliver Stone's credit that he undertook to make *Snowden*. He clearly stuck his neck out for this. The director told *Variety*, "We got turned down with a good script, a good cast and a reasonable budget at every major studio. Studio heads said 'Yes we like it. We'll talk about it. There's no problem here.' It goes

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upstairs, and a few days later nothing comes back."

In an interview with *Deadline Hollywood*, Stone noted that it was difficult these days to make a film that was "critical of America." Instead, he went on, "we've got bin Laden films [i.e., *Zero Dark Thirty*]. I think that's the way it's going. Everything, military. Everything, CIA. Look at *Homeland*. Look at *24*. Look at all the Tom Clancy stuff. … I want to tell you how hard it was to get this movie made."

Stone reportedly traveled to Russia and met with Snowden nine times. Gordon-Levitt (whose grandfather, film director Michael Gordon, was blacklisted in the 1950s) also visited Moscow and spoke with Snowden for several hours. In *Snowden*, in fact, the actor has gone beyond mere externals. Gordon-Levitt has grasped something essential about Snowden's principled character and the depth of his convictions. In addition, Ifans is especially sinister and Woodley, Schnetzer, Timothy Olyphant (as a CIA operative) and Scott Eastwood (as a mid-level NSA martinet) are also fine.

A strength of the film is that it eschews a phony "impartiality" and tells its story from Snowden's standpoint. Quite rightly, it takes as its premise that his point of view—and growing horror—is shared by millions and millions of Americans and others around the globe.

Snowden continues to face the collective and potentially murderous hostility of the American state and its hangers-on. The film provides him with something of a voice. In that sense, it is high praise to suggest that *Snowden* deserves the vile and stupid attacks in the *National Review* ("Home-Grown Sedition") and *Slate* ("The Leaky Myths of *Snowden* "). As the WSWS noted last week, every member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence signed a letter September 15 to President Barack Obama urging him not to pardon Snowden, claiming that he had "caused tremendous damage to national security." Hillary Clinton makes the same argument.

In relation to Obama, the movie makes clear that the 2008 election had no impact whatsoever on the NSA spying juggernaut. Snowden comments in one scene, "I thought things would get better with [Obama]." Luke Harding, in *The Snowden Files: The Inside Story of the World's Most Wanted Man* (one of the two books on which the film bases itself), cites Snowden's comment that "shortly after assuming power, he [Obama] closed the door on investigating systemic violations of law, deepened and expanded several abusive programmes, and refused to spend the political capital to end the kind of human rights violations we see in Guantanamo, where men still sit without charge."

Stone, to his credit, told *Deadline Hollywood*, "Whatever they say, Obama has killed a lot of civilians and a lot of innocent people. And they consider him reasonable. He's launched more drones than Mr. Bush. He's become the chief murderer." The filmmaker continued, "I am concerned [that] … there's no anti-war party. There's no anti-war voice. Democrats and Republicans are pro-war."

Stone has also taken considerable pains to make comprehensible, through visual aids and other means, the character and octopus-like reach of the nefarious NSA programs.

It should not come as a surprise, however, that *Snowden* has genuine limitations. One of the questions, and it is a large one, that the film never seriously attempts to answer is: why are they doing all this? Why are the NSA, CIA and the US government as a whole (and other intelligence agencies around the world) involved in programs of total surveillance? Why do they want to know the opinions and habits of every man, woman and child on earth?

The unconvincing half-suggestion that this almost limitless spying is merely an overzealous response to the events of September 11, 2001 (see O'Brian's comment above) is unworthy of serious consideration. First of all, the vast surveillance began decades ago. In fact, the 9/11 attacks merely provided the occasion to put in place plans that had been prepared well in advance (and which also depended on the development of certain technologies). The very universality of the spying speaks to something systemic, to the profound fear felt by every ruling elite for its population at a time of profound economic and social crisis.

There are other, related issues. The Snowden-Mills romance is simply overdone and given too much weight in *Snowden*. No doubt Stone was trying both to humanize his subject in the eyes of the public and to show how much Snowden was prepared to sacrifice when he decided to turn against the intelligence community. Speaking of the future whistleblower at that crucial moment, the director noted, "Remember, at that point in time, he was giving her up, too. Let's say you fall for this woman, and she's 10 years in your life. … They're going to have kids. He makes this decision and couldn't even tell her." Whatever the director's intentions, the relationship too often gets in the way of more intriguing and telling matters.

That being said, Stone, co-scenarist Kieran Fitzgerald and the performers have brought to the screen, with some care and commitment, critical elements of Snowden's story. Contained in this drama are some of the great issues of the day: above all, the danger of dictatorship and war.

And as for Snowden himself, Stone put it rather well to an interviewer: "For a 29-year-old boy to do what he did is pretty remarkable. I never could have done that. I don't think you could have at that age."

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