



Panoptic Reality: A Review of *Citizenfour*

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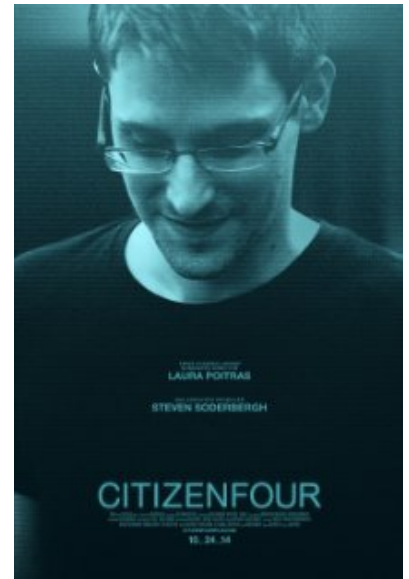


Review

Panoptic Reality: A Review of *Citizenfour*

Citizenfour is a 2014 documentary directed by Laura Poitras, produced by Praxis Films

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Movies, and perhaps more importantly documentary movies, need to be separated into good documentaries and important documentaries. *Citizenfour* would then fall squarely in this second category, and require viewing for its import rather than its simulation.

Citizenfour documents the days preceding and during the release of information gained by Edward Snowden, which exposed the depth of surveillance activities conducted by the NSA and other security agencies.

Directed by Laura Poitras and reporting by Glenn Greenwald, the film documents the process of information release, the technological capability of the spying agencies, and the person (Snowden) behind the release of this information.

The process of release has all the qualities of a spy novel, with anonymous source 'citizenfour' contacting Poitras requesting a secure method for future communication. Here she was told to think very securely, and to create unbreakable passwords - with the warning that potential intruders into the conversation had the capability (and computing power) of trying 'a trillion guesses per second'. Over the next few weeks, Poitras was sent information that described a number of covert spying operations, all with the teaser 'this I can prove'.

Throughout the film the various programmes, including PRISM, and the technology (analytic programmes such as Xkeyscore) are

described in some detail. For the technologically literate, this part of the film may have been very stimulating, but for the rest of us it was perhaps a wash of information, which was difficult to decipher and perhaps even comprehend what it all meant. Some of these parts of the film I had to watch twice (and then later Google) to fully ascertain the implications of these programmes and what this technological capability meant for private information communicated through any computer mediated communication. The bottom line of this is that 'they' (in all the shadowy connotations of a hidden 'they') are watching us. And if 'they' wish, we (and individual people, i.e. you) can be tagged for future in-depth analysis and evaluation.

Snowden, the person, is shown in *Citizenfour* in a very different light than the normal media hyperbole. Of interest here is the examination of both his motivations for whistle blowing (and the human cost of such acts), and his central desire for the information release to be about the information, *not about him*. Snowden actively attempts to focus attention on the scale and depth of the spying rather than on himself, and is portrayed as someone who was motivated by the greater good of his actions, rather than someone seeking personal recognition (something that Kim Dotcom could have perhaps learnt from).

This film and its subject matter are important. They highlight the reality of information



accessibility, the surveillance that is currently occurring, the scope and depth of this activity, and government's complicity in this activity. Jeremy Bentham described a perfect prison where those who thought they were being watched modified their behaviour accordingly. Snowden, facilitated by Poitras and Greenwald, demonstrates in *Citizenfour* that this prison has already been built, and is present every time we log on to a computer system. For those involved in social change, a risk is that the threat of observation may change behaviour. This needs to be resisted.

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