

SNOWDEN – Film at CONCA VERDE on 27.02.17

Talk by **Joel ORMSBY**

Have you ever imagined you live in a world where the government are watching your every movement? You are about to watch a film which discusses the reality of this idea.

The film is based on the real story of Edward Snowden who went from obscurity to being a globally known figure overnight, and will go down in history as one of America's most famous whistle-blowers. A 'whistle-blower' is someone who tells people in authority or the public about dishonest or illegal practices about a government or company. Edward was a 29-year-old former technical assistant for the CIA and former contractor for the USA government. Whilst working for them he copied and later leaked highly classified information from within the NSA (the National Security Agency for electronic espionage). This info revealed massive covert global surveillance operations ran by the American government in cooperation with many European governments. The leaked info caused a worldwide scandal with many countries reacting furiously over the alleged US spying activities.

Cast and Crew

The film was directed by Academy Award®-winning director Oliver Stone, who produced *Platoon*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Wall Street* and *JFK*. The film was written by Stone himself and Kieran Fitzgerald, based on the books *The Snowden Files* by Luke Harding and *Time of the Octopus* by Anatoly Kucherena.

The film stars Joseph Gordon Levitt who started in American TV comedies such as *Roseanne* and *3rd Rock from the Sun*. His movie appearances include *Inception*, *Lincoln* and *the Dark Night Rises*. Snowden's girlfriend is played by Shailene Woodley, she is an American and also started off in the OC and was nominated for an Academy Award for her role in *The Descendants*. Zachary Quinto aka (also known as) the new Spock, plays the Lawyer who helps Snowden release the political information. This movie also has small roles for the British actors Tom Wilkinson and Rhys Ifans /riːs ɪˈvænz/.

The Story and Background

Edward Snowden starts the story in the US army but joins the intelligence service after an accident. At first, the CIA are unwilling to use Snowden but then he reveals a very useful talent for hacking and starts work for them. From the beginning, Snowden is unsure about the ethics of his work and projects, but his skills are in demand so he transfers to the NSA (National Security Agency). He also meets his girlfriend online but his work commitments cause problems for his relationship, and he also develops health problems.

This story is set a few years ago in 2013, a time when international terrorism was on the rise and Egypt was in conflict. President Barack Obama was in his second term in office and had the political support to do what he wanted. The ideology of the war on terror was still being discussed, and so America felt it necessary to increase security. Then Snowden entered the story and changed it forever.

The Ideas

There is a popular internet meme saying that the classic book "1984" by George Orwell has now moved to the non-fiction shelf in the library. That is to say that the idea of the Big Brother State is now reality, not fantasy. This movie explores the opposition between the ideas of freedom and security: this can be illustrated by the quote "Americans don't want freedom, they want security." This was a line from a top

official of the NSA who was trying to justify the illegal surveillance of billions of internet users across the world.

It could be argued that security is still a big issue for the American people and government, Donald Trump has made the elimination of terrorism one of his big campaigns. Some people would argue that Governments like to exaggerate terrorism so that they have an excuse to cut freedom and keep people in fear. In this movie the NSA get information about everyone to help create "security". However, it is not clear if this information is used only for security or also for commercial purposes. You may be happy to know that according to a Wikipedia article on global internet surveillance, Italy is classified as almost free of internet spying – you may be happy to hear!

Another theme of this movie is the war on terrorism. The idea of the war on terrorism started after the World Trade Centre attacks in 2001 and the idea of the war on terrorism has come back since the rise of ISIS and the attacks in France. This movie shows another stage of the war on terrorism when Snowden works for the military in the control room of military drones which are programmed to attack targets in the Middle East.

This movie also has a love story in the centre of it, the relationship between Snowden and his girlfriend Lindsay Mills. However, their relationship always has difficulties caused by Snowden's work commitments. For him it is very difficult to have an honest relationship because he is sworn to secrecy about what he does at work. Not only that, but Snowden also has the familiar problems of work and travel affecting his relationship.

Critical Response

Snowden received mixed reviews from critics, although Gordon-Levitt's performance garnered critical praise. On review aggregator website Rotten Tomatoes, the film has an approval rating of 61%, based on 224 reviews, with an average score of 6.2/10. The site's critical consensus reads, "**Snowden** boasts a thrilling fact-based tale and a solid lead performance from Joseph Gordon-Levitt, even if director Oliver Stone saps the story of some of its impact by playing it safe." On Metacritic, the film has a score of 58 out of 100, based on 43 critics, indicating "mixed or average reviews". Audiences polled by CinemaScore gave the film an average "A" grade, on an A+ to F scale.

Richard Roeper gave the film three out of four stars, saying, "**Snowden** works best when it's just Edward and the three journalists in that hotel room, sweating it out, or when we see the pattern of events that led him to commit acts that exposed the shocking practices of our own government but also quite possibly created serious security breaches."

Trivia

To make sure the screenplay was not hacked or leaked, Oliver Stone wrote the script on a single computer with no Internet connection.

Oliver Stone visited the real Edward Snowden after filming finished and showed him a work-in-progress cut of the film.

Joseph Gordon-Levitt pledged to donate his entire salary from the film to "help facilitate the conversation" about the relationship between technology and democracy.

Oliver Stone visited Julian Assange in April 2013 in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London and praised his work for WikiLeaks, but Assange does not appear in the film **Snowden** (2016) as a character or as himself. In real life Assange was heavily involved in helping Edward Snowden to escape from Hong Kong. The only WikiLeaks member appearing in this feature is Sarah Harrison, who travelled with

Snowden from Hong Kong to Moscow and supported him there. She can be seen in archive footage near the end.

The character Corbin O'Brian, played by Rhys Ifans /riːs ɒ'vænz/, is a reference to George Orwell's famous novel "1984", first published in 1948, where a similar character named O'Brien is an important part of the story. O'Brien is a high-ranking agent of the 'Thought Police' in Orwell's novel, while Corbin O'Brian is a high-ranking member of the NSA. Edward Snowden gets access to the global surveillance figures and discovers that the US surveillance program is being used against US citizens more rather against terrorist targets.

To sum up, I hope you will enjoy some good performances and an interesting discussion of contemporary ideas. The first part of the movie sets the scene and ideas very well, and the end of the movie contains a fascinating discussion of the issues of internet surveillance. The ideas of government control and internet surveillance are very important in the modern world and it is good to hear them being discussed on the big screen.

To this day, Edward Snowden is considered a hero by some and a traitor by others. Currently he is a fugitive and faces espionage charges over his actions, he is currently living in Russia after he was granted temporary asylum.

The sponsors

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The film show

This is the 7th film in English and there will be another 11. The next original language film will be ELVIS AND NIXON about the meeting of the controversial president and the king of rock 'n' roll.

Enjoy the film!