

# Mendax v Verax Images of Snowden and Assange in Fiction and Documentary Films

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## Abstract

*This paper deals with depictions of the whistleblower Edward Snowden and publisher/activist Julian Assange in fiction and documentary Films and aims to compare and contrast the images of the two whistleblowers in the media: one the “good patriot”, the other an “egotistical” outsider. Whereas a film like Snowden (2016) tries to locate Snowden in the tradition of American whistleblowing as a righteous critique of power and depict him as a “good” individual, films about WikiLeaks/Assange tend to focus on his problematic personality, as in The Fifth Estate (2013). Is it possible to think Snowden and Assange together, even when they appear radically different: Mendax, the (noble) “liar” and Verax, the truth teller? At the same time, whistleblowing can be read through critique of ideology as put forth by Slavoj Žižek, a critique that is perhaps only possible through the “naive” gaze of the whistleblower and can help us discern the act of whistleblowing as such from the individualistic approach often deployed by the media.*

**Keywords:** Whistleblowing, Media, Ideology, Hollywood

## Introduction

In this paper I analyze the depictions of the whistleblower Edward Snowden and journalist/publisher Julian Assange in mainstream fiction and documentary films: one of them as the “disillusioned idealist”, the other a “controversial” and “shady” outsider.

Whereas a film like *Snowden* (2016) locates Snowden in the tradition of American whistleblowing as righteous critique of power and depicts him as a “good patriot”, films about WikiLeaks/Assange tend to focus on his supposed egotistical personality, the prime example being *The Fifth Estate* (2013). It is therefore important to go against this separation and to think Snowden and Assange together, while at the same time not disavowing the antagonism at work here since their approach to whistleblowing is (seemingly) radically different: “Mendax”, Assange’s online handle (“liar” in Latin, probably from “splendide mendax”, noble liar) and “Verax”, Snowden, the “truthful” one? Instead of falling for some (mostly mainstream) narratives that tend to somewhat glorify the one and vilify the other, we should approach them in a sort of a “synthesis”, and go against this false opposition by way of fully embracing it.

I also aim to explore the individualistic approach of media narratives that promote the image of the whistleblower as a “hero”, a “truth teller”, or as a

“villain”, and thereby conform to the ruling ideology of what can be named “neoliberal individualism”. Whistleblowing as such can be read as critique of ideology if we look at its structure, the crucial moment when the whistleblower “takes (their own) ideology seriously” (Žižek) and in doing so sets in motion a chain of events that lead to uncovering the wrongdoing from within. The theoretical basis for my analysis is Slavoj Žižek’s notion of ideology and of the “engaged subject”. The article focuses predominantly on the fiction films *Snowden*, and *The Fifth Estate*, and to a lesser extent also on documentaries *Citizenfour* (2014) and *Risk* (2016) and touches briefly on social media.

## Drama!

Why Mendax/Assange v. Verax/Snowden? In the age of “drama” and “cancel culture” within the digital sphere dominated by social media where conflict and disagreement are the sine qua non of its existence, why pour oil onto fire? Why especially oppose two whistleblowers and truth tellers that are generally on the same side of critique of power, while one of them is in a probably permanent exile, and the other stuck in the limbo of the British justice system? This approach, if thought in a linear fashion, would seem to go hand in hand with individualistic ideology and the impossibility to find basis for some sort of common ground. Snowden for instance writes in his book *Permanent Record* about Assange and his attempt to help him to get out of his hideout in Hong Kong and seek asylum in Ecuador:

It’s true that Assange can be self-interested and vain, moody, and even bullying – after a sharp disagreement just a month after our first, text-based conversation, I never communicated with him again – but he also sincerely conceives of himself as a fighter in a historic battle for the public’s right to know, a battle he will do anything to win. It’s for that reason that I regard it as too reductive to interpret his assistance as merely an instance of scheming or self-promotion (Snowden 2019, 301).

In her book, the whistleblower Chelsea Manning also very briefly mentions Assange’s problematic character:

WikiLeaks was becoming a subject of great curiosity, and Assange was beginning to position himself as the figurehead, rather than a comrade among equals (...) He (Assange) had made himself synonymous with WikiLeaks, and with that visibility came a certain amount of power (...) (Manning 2022, 142).

Or as Stanger (2019) puts it succinctly in her book on whistleblowing: “Patriotic Americans may feel ambivalent about Edward Snowden, but it is hard for anyone to like Julian Assange” (186). Instead of simply

ignoring this, it is necessary to do the exact opposite of what might appear practical in this situation: rather than calling for peace and agreement, we should in a first step embrace the “drama”.

The image of Assange created by the (liberal) mainstream media over the last fifteen years has been predominantly a controversial one, thereby skewing the discourse around WikiLeaks towards one of the controversial public persona and the “real” person behind it with dubious intentions. Add to this the fact that whistleblowers in general are easily dismissed because they are seemingly caught up in a contradiction: exposing truths by way of betrayal.

## Whistleblowing and Ideology

Whistleblowing scholars mostly approach this topic through Michel Foucault’s notion of *parrhesia*, which can be translated as “frankly speaking the truth” (Vandekerckhove and Langenberg 2012, 36), and define whistleblowing then as “truth telling in the workplace” (Mansbach in Weiskopf and Tobias-Miersch 2016, 1622). Mansbach approaches whistleblowing also from the aspect of *parrhesia* as “fearless speech” which is the “disclosure of the illegal or morally wrong deeds or practices by powerful actors that result in harm to the public. This speech is fearless because, even though the wrongdoers are in a position to hurt the individual making the disclosure, he or she chooses to do it anyway” (12). He further states that “(...) though whistleblowing (...) does not have the same political effects as collective democratic action, such as voting, demonstrating, or going on strike, it nonetheless keeps liberal democracies vibrant” (12).

How then to think whistleblowing and its basic definition by most scholars as “frankly speaking the truth” in a different and perhaps more radical way? Is someone like Assange less trustworthy because he used the pseudonym Mendax and sees himself as a “noble liar”, but still a liar? Is Snowden more trustworthy if he adopts the name Verax, the “truth teller”? And how to deal with “postmodern” relativization of “Your Truth v. My Truth”, especially when this relativization most often serves to obfuscate the fact, that in many cases there is only “my Truth”?

Perhaps a basic dialectical approach to understanding the notion of truth by way of ideology critique is needed here: “The starting point of the critique of ideology has to be full acknowledgment of the fact that it is easily possible to *lie in the guise of truth*” (Žižek 1995, 6). This is why in order to approach some semblance of truth about whistleblowing and ideology today, we need to interrogate fiction and documentary films (which I also regard as being on the side of fiction) and also relies on what I would like to call a “behind the scenes” approach that depends on creating “real” content. Žižek writes that ideology is

(...) not a dreamlike illusion that we build to escape insupportable reality; in its basic dimension it is a fantasy-construction which serves as a support for our ‘reality’ itself: an ‘illusion’ which structures our

effective, real social relations and thereby masks some insupportable, real, impossible kernel (...) (Žižek 2009, 45).

Ideology as a fantasy construction supports our (perception of) reality, and this is precisely why we need to confront ideology on this level and not on the level of revealing some sort of objective reality which we presuppose as non-ideological. The only way out of ideology is therefore *through* ideology – today that would be the ideology of neoliberal individualism that serves to isolate the individual and make it responsible for the inherent failings of the capitalist system.

At the same time a crucial aspect of the functioning of ideology today is cynical distance of the subject/individual. Far from being subversive, this actually enables the functioning of ideology:

The cynical subject is quite aware of the distance between the ideological mask and the social reality, but he none the less still insists upon the mask. The formula, as proposed by Sloterdijk, would then be: ‘they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it.’ (Žižek 2009, 25).

The truth, as Žižek often points out, is “out there”, meaning not in the “content”, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves, but in our actions. This is how we can keep our cynical distance toward the system and its ideology in order to keep on going. In our age of social media (dis)content, it is therefore pertinent to look at the Form and not be seduced by the said Content. And although it seems that it is precisely the actions of whistleblowers that are questioned by governments and media, when the whistleblower is exposed the focus inevitably shifts to the “content” of the individual who then becomes a traitor, liar, eccentric, etc.

While Snowden and Manning are whistleblowers by definition, Assange is “the odd one out”, neither a whistleblower in the strict sense nor a mainstream journalist. WikiLeaks as a whistleblowing platform is therefore a creation of something new, a disturbance in and of the system of “self-correcting” western liberal democracies. Although I will be mainly focusing on Snowden and Assange/Wikileaks, a third name must be added to the list: Chelsea Manning. Whereas Assange can be made into a villain, a Snowden into a some an ambivalent hero, Manning is almost completely absent (especially from the fiction film).

What interests me are rather the conflicting images in the media in dialectical sense: Snowden, as a traditional whistleblower, can to a certain degree be integrated into the genre of the Hollywood whistleblower film, and therefore symbolically be “rehabilitated”. Assange on the other hand, cannot be so easily integrated into the narrative structure neither of the whistleblower film nor of films about investigative journalists (these two genres intersect often), like *All the President’s Men* (1976) or *The Post* (2017). All the while on the level of physical reality, both Assange and Snowden are in a dire or at least uncomfortable position while Assange’s rehabilitation is failing most

dramatically at the symbolic level. Manning, being a trans person, a soldier who betrayed her “brothers and sisters in arms” is almost completely absent, since neither the mainstream nor the independent Hollywood narratives can not (until now) approach that subject matter – transgender, queer persons are still most main characters of this sphere if its a so called “social problem film”.

The triad Snowden/Assange/Manning stands therefore for a (1) possibility to integrate a whistleblower into a mainstream narrative and thereby in way neutralizing him (Snowden), (2) integrating the whistleblower/publisher into the narrative but clearly making a villain out of him (Assange) and (3) simply ignoring the whistleblower, not giving them any kind of platform within mainstream Hollywood and only very limited one otherwise (Manning). All three approaches in essence create the ideological notion of the whistleblower as “unwanted”, merely tolerated individual.

Finally, whistleblower films are stories about believers who take their beliefs seriously enough to decide to act. Films like *Serpico* (1973), *Silkwood* (1983) or *The Insider* (1999) and others are about whistleblowers who took their work ethic seriously and this almost or actually destroyed them/their careers (see Miletić 2021 for a more detailed discussion of the whistleblower film as a genre). Films like *The Fifth Estate* or *Risk* are even actively taking part in “deconstruction” of Assange and WikiLeaks. Journalists and others writing about what is going on “behind the scenes” are on the outside of the institution in question (government or a private company), so a “traitor” is needed in order for the wrongdoings to reach the public. The following analysis focuses therefore on the structure and mechanisms of constructing images of whistleblowers in media and the ideology that permeates them – Snowden v Assange, the “good patriot” v. the “egomaniac”.

## Snowden, The Good Patriot

Already at the beginning of his book *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Žižek hints at what can be read as the essence of ideology critique: “The ruling ideology is not meant to be taken seriously or literally. Perhaps the greatest danger for totalitarianism is people who take its ideology literally (...)” (24). One way of taking the ruling ideology seriously is “overidentify” with it:

“Russian avant-garde art of the early 1920s (Futurism, Constructivism) not only zealously endorsed industrialization, it even endeavoured to reinvent a new industrial man (...) As such, it was subversive in its very “ultraorthodoxy”, in its overidentification with the core of the official ideology” (Žižek 2004, 262).

Precisely this approach was unbearable later for the Stalinist ideology which envisioned a different subjectivity in which the “Individuals are no longer depicted as parts of the global machine, but as warm passionate people” (263). It is precisely this individualist-humanist approach that masked the

oppression and real dehumanization of individuals by the Stalinist regime.

The scene that illustrates best this kind of overidentification with ideology as critique of ideology and at the same time the crumbling of its edifice from within the subject is the “Snow White” scene in *Snowden*. When Edward Snowden, still an employee of Booz Allen Hamilton (a company under contract by the NSA), finds out from his coworker that the PRISM data mining program is spying on people, he simply asks: “Which people?” His colleague gives him a rather sarcastic answer: “The whole kingdom, Snow White”. Everyone is under surveillance, all the time. Snowden, the naive “Snow White”, is in shock. This is the precise moment of Snowden becoming a whistleblower by identifying with his ideology, the belief in the democratic system that has some boundaries and is not ready to encroach on the essential liberties of its citizens.

The conflict of cynicism v. identification is at the heart of this scene: the cynical employee keeps the system going, while the “true believer” is the one who recognizes the wrongdoings and gets into trouble. After the revelations, and this goes for most of the whistleblowing since Daniel Ellsberg in the 1970s and his “Pentagon Papers” revealing the futility of the Vietnam war (see Stanger 2019), the news of wrongdoings by government are generally greeted with cynicism, the “we already know this” stance by the public. Cynicism works as a protection from unbearable truth on one hand, and also as a sort of a carved out space for the subject to function within an ideology and within a certain sociopolitical system. And that system also functions because it allows for that space. The inner distance toward an ideology or an institution enables their functioning so that (over)identification with it has the potential to become dangerous or at least cause serious problems.

In this regard, “Snow White”-Snowden is a typical Oliver Stone hero: a disillusioned idealist (akin to main characters in *Born on the Fourth of July* (1989) or *JFK* (1991)), a disappointed conservative, the all-American “good patriot”, who disagrees with the politics of his country, and who dares to openly question the government and its actions. “Patriotism” is deployed in the film as a common denominator in order to establish a connection between Snowden and the audiences which may not subscribe to this view or even completely regard him as a traitor, since treason and betrayal are universally regarded as unacceptable, or as Julius Caesar (supposedly) put it: “Proditionem amo, proditores non laudo,” which is commonly translated as “I love the treason but I do not praise the traitor” (Brittnacher 2015, 11). Especially on the level of foreign policy and geopolitics (fields of Snowden's activity as a spy), things tend to get brutally simplified and paradoxes abound: an enemy that commits treason is good for me/my country, but I am against treason as such since I do not want it within my ranks. The film therefore needs to establish Snowden as a relatable character in dramaturgical and politico-ideological sense as in the scene right at the beginning of the film as Snowden in his hotel room in Hong Kong tells the

filmmaker Laura Poitras (Melissa Leo) and journalist Glenn Greenwald (Zachary Quinto) his life story. The music swells (the well known trumpet sounds that in Hollywood films are commonly associated with the military) and the film cuts to a flashback of Snowden in uniform alongside other soldiers during a drill, when he enlisted in the army before working for the NSA: here is an ordinary American who went to fight for his country. He is just one of the many young people who heeded the call of patriotic duty.

The function of this simple but effective dramaturgical device of presenting Snowden as the “good patriot” underscores the fact that he is one of the good guys who can only have honorable motives for his actions. At the same time it is clear that his decision to go against the security apparatus and his country is bound to make him a traitor in the eyes of other “real” patriots, because for them it endangers the country’s safety and it is unequivocally regarded as an act of betrayal.

In other words, the notion of patriotism is caught up in a circular logic: from the perspective of the US government, Snowden might *think* that he is a true patriot, but really he can not be one, since it is not him who gets to define what “true patriotism” is because of his treason. From this perspective, a true patriot should *always* be on the side of his country (government, leadership). Therefore, if he were a true patriot, he would have to tacitly agree with his governments actions and assume the cynical attitude of his colleague in order to support the ideology and actions of his government. The “true patriot” is therefore the cynical colleague scouring the internet for potentially dangerous individuals. In keeping his ironic distance he is supporting the ruling ideology and thus anything the state deems appropriate. The “true believer” on the other hand, is the one who can become truly dangerous for the system.

The notion of patriotism itself is in any case notoriously corrupted and ideological, precisely because the logic of the notion is simple: patriot is someone who would do anything for their country *without questioning*, a true patriot is therefore a patriot with a distance, who can discern between the unwritten rules are and what is needed in a certain moment. This can be interpreted in many different ways, so how does one tell “true” from “false” patriots? The only way to resolve this is to refer to the function of patriotism (in theory), which is *unconditional* protection of the homeland (think about Samuel Johnson’s famous line “patriotism is the last refuge of the scoundrel” which was actually meant as critique of false patriotism, therefore “patriot is he whose publick conduct is regulated by one single motive, the love of his country” (Johnson 1913). The act of betrayal needs therefore to be fully assumed as such and not be “spun” into real patriotism, since we can only betray what we love. Perhaps the most well known example in this regard is Judas’s “predictable” betrayal of Jesus in the New Testament (“Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me”, Matthew 26:21). Judas had to do what he had done, that was his function in order for Jesus to fulfill his destiny. Therefore, although Jesus had

foreseen the betrayal which is “structurally” constitutive for Christianity, there is no way of arguing that Judas is actually a hero in this regard. He remains a traitor, that is his ultimate sacrifice.

The weakest point of whistleblower narratives is precisely the fixation on the individual as content, and therefore the imperative that the protagonist somehow must be “good”. This is in a way neutralizing the effect of whistleblowing and appropriating them as “true American heroes” thereby supporting the ruling ideology even when the act itself has the structure of ideology critique. This act can be read as a radical break through overidentification, but the moment the act is turned into a story, and becomes the individual-against-the-system narrative, it serves as a support for the American/liberal democratic ideology of a just society that allows for critique and self correction – if only done “properly”.

Snowden’s decision not to publish with WikiLeaks due to his opposition to their methods also contributes to the “good guy” image in contrast to Assange. Snowden’s radical and heroic act then can be more or less integrated into the liberal discourse of our societies. Against this, what should remain is the authentic act of Snowden’s betrayal and “his” truth. The proper film about Snowden should therefore approach “Snowden” not as a “good individual” but as the name that stands for the “truth of the engaged subject”:

(...) universal truth and partisanship, the gesture of taking sides, are not only not mutually exclusive, but condition each other: in a concrete situation, its *universal* truth can only be articulated from a thoroughly *partisan* position-truth is by definition one-sided. (Zizek 2001).

The whistleblower as the engaged subject stands therefore not for the distracting content of the “good individual” but the questioning of the Form, the ruling ideology, system, as such.

### Assange, the Liar

*The Fifth Estate* is another example of the ideological fixation on the individual, but in this case with a twist. Since Assange is closely connected to and associated with whistleblowing, it also stands to reason to regard this film as a whistleblower film. But, in a cynical twist, it is his colleague Daniel who is the actual whistleblower here, who reveals the secrets of WikiLeaks and its founder. The film tries to be somewhat “objective” at first, by showing the importance and impact of the newly established online platform WikiLeaks. As the story progresses, it proceeds to dismantle Julian Assange (Benedict Cumberbatch) with the “everyone has secrets” platitude – a false equivalence, which effectively means that none of us should even think of criticizing those in power, since all of us have our own secrets we do not want revealed. The story is told from the perspective of Assange’s former disgruntled associate Daniel Domscheit-Berg (Daniel Brühl), who also wrote the book about his time at Wikileaks on which the film is partly based on. We see Assange

through his eyes and delve into personal moments that are supposed to reveal the “truth” of the individual behind this ambitious project (the enigmatic Assange dying his hair white, suddenly leaving a dinner, wiping his greasy hands on his trousers, and generally being annoying, among other things).

The film reiterates the psychologization of Assange on Daniel’s part and elevates it to film’s message: “Only someone so obsessed with his own secrets could’ve come up with a way to reveal everyone else’s.” This faux-argument paints the whole WikiLeaks endeavor merely as Assange’s ego-trip and constructs him as an egomaniac whose secret perverted pleasure is to reveal the secrets of others.

*The Fifth Estate* therefore returns Assange’s intrusive gaze and turns the spotlight on him. The truth “behind the appearance” is what the film is also seemingly after in a cynical reversal of Assange’s motto “privacy for the weak, transparency for the powerful” and simply redefine who is meant by weak and who by powerful epitomized in the conflict Daniel (representing the “weak”) v. Assange (the “powerful”). Assange here represents the power of the egotistic and authoritarian individual that misuses a progressive cause for his own personal gain. In the film this is of course stretched very thin since his motivations are reduced to his simply wanting to know other “people’s” secrets. His ambition then renders him blind to the destiny of real people who might end up getting hurt through his revelations as agents or “assets” of the US government in Afghanistan or Iraq (which was proven false, see Melzer). Again, the narrative turns out to be a cautionary tale of not falling for “false prophets”.

This is why investigative journalists like Woodward and Bernstein in *All the President’s Men* uncovering the Watergate scandal in the 1970s can be depicted as “ordinary heroes”. The true underlying conflict shown in *The Fifth Estate* is between this kind of traditional journalism that knows its boundaries, within which newspapers can publish their pieces and get the acclaim for the “new Pentagon Papers,” once again ensuring the freedom of the press and inter-systemic critique. As Žižek writes, the “formal functioning of power” stays in place. He further makes a crucial point about WikiLeaks:

The true targets here weren’t the dirty details and the individuals responsible for them; not those in power, in other words, so much as power itself, its structure. We shouldn’t forget that power comprises not only institutions and their rules, but also legitimate (‘normal’) ways of challenging it (an independent press, NGOs, etc.), (“Good Manners”).

This is the real threat to power of the WikiLeaks project and a point that the fictional and documentary narratives are missing: its presence outside the regular functioning of power and its *formal* critique of journalism embedded within the capitalist system and its liberal- democratic framework of questioning it.

In the very end of the film, the “real” mainstream journalism is being reinforced as the sole vehicle of criticism, while WikiLeaks/Assange stand for

“extremism” which, again, can only stem from a problematic individual who acts solely for obscure and selfish reasons. If the so called neoliberal individualism is the order of the day, then its logic must also revolve around that notion and is not able to transcend that horizon.

*Snowden* is based on the idea that the individual has the power to challenge the system, while *The Fifth Estate* draws the line which should not be crossed when it comes to privacy as a “universal” good because, again, “everyone has secrets.” The film also draws the line between individual action within certain limits, and “bad” individualism which it designates as narcissism. *The Fifth Estate* thereby reveals its obvious ideological stance: the (neoliberal) ideology of individualism which revolves around the individual. However, there is a crucial difference between this ideology and others (religion, National Socialism, Stalinism, etc.): the individual is at the same time the “sublime object of ideology” and the potential enemy: it can be a “crazy”, excessive and idiosyncratic individual like Jeff Bezos, Elon Musk or Steve Jobs, and as such completely within the (capitalist) system, and even crucial for the functioning of that system and an “ideal” to aspire to; someone who truly questions the very structure of that system is excluded and all the “crazy” individualism is suddenly designated as wrong and dangerous.

Assange writes in his book *When Google met WikiLeaks* during his time of hiding in England after he left Sweden: “(...) I became an immovable asset under siege: We could no longer choose our battles. Fronts opened up on all sides. I had to learn to think like a general. We were at war.” (13). This statement should be taken quite literally as it simply turned out to be true. At that same time, the media narratives painted a different picture and often depicted Assange as paranoid. The truth is that he was *not paranoid enough*. *The Fifth Estate* does show him as an individual at war with everyone: nevertheless, perhaps he was not “at war” enough. In some way, Assange and WikiLeaks were not “crazy” enough. Their insisting on democracy, transparency, and revealing secrets of the powerful, even though it is a noble cause, perhaps reveals the dimension of WikiLeaks which is less important when understood as “objective” truth and not as questioning of the formal functioning of power and the media discourse. The real radical potential of WikiLeaks is therefore not the fixation on the content, but the form, the very existence of such a platform outside of the commercialized sphere of the internet dominated by Google, Amazon or Facebook and as an alternative to mainstream media.

## The Irreducible Gap

Where is Manning in all this? She remains the truly invisible one, the one who cannot be depicted as a whistleblower in a similar way as Snowden, one of the reasons being her transgender identity combined with the notion of betrayal. It is still unimaginable for a trans person to become a protagonist in a Hollywood or independent film that is supposed to reach wider

audiences. The change of sex could be part of the character arc, perhaps a parallel to the change that private Manning experienced ethically and decided to blow the whistle. At the same time, this could also be read in a conservative and more nefarious way: of course she is a traitor because she also “betrayed” her original biological sex. The progressive-liberal media and Hollywood industry could nonetheless have jumped at the opportunity to exploit the progressive aspects of the story – but they did not. The real person behind the name “Manning” seems to be too problematic (or traumatic) and without potential for being a common denominator like the “good guy” Snowden or the “narcissist” Assange. The transgender aspect would have been hard to ignore and not easy to handle properly, thereby the potential of connecting to general audiences would have been rather limited and the film itself, ironically, would have been too risky in commercial sense.

Žižek proposes an approach to dissolve this deadlock between the “real” person and their persona, the signifier/name that is left for us as he gives the example of Karl Marx and his racists outbursts against his political opponent (the leading social democrat) Ferdinand Lasalle: “Instead of reading such statements as proof of the Eurocentric bias of Marx’s theory, we should simply dismiss them as fundamentally *irrelevant* (emphasis in original); their only positive significance is that they prevent us from indulging in any kind of hagiography of Marx, since they clearly reveal the irreducible gap between Marx as a person and his theory which, precisely provides the tools for an analysis and a criticism of such racists outbursts.” (Žižek 2004, 12). Here the importance of the “irreducible gap” needs to be stressed, since this gap is inherent to every subject/individual be they a whistleblower, filmmaker, artist, as well as a lawyer, judge or a plumber. The radical approach here would be to ask: even when certain things are true, how does that fit in the edifice of the ruling ideology? In other words: even if Assange truly were “vain, moody, and even bullying” as Snowden describes him in his book, this does not excuse atrocities done by the US government or others as well as the overall imperialistic and capitalist politics permeated by neoliberal ideology of the government being the “problem and not the solution”, as Ronald Reagan once famously quipped.

### ***Risk and Citizenfour***

Many crucial scenes in the documentary *Risk* by Laura Poitras, that covers the period of the sex assault allegations against Assange and ends with his asylum seeking at the Ecuadorian embassy, depict Assange as being utterly and needlessly paranoid. The fixation again is on the individual and its content however, the film being a documentary now reaches another level of “authenticity”. One telling scene in this regard shows him in conversation with the lawyer Renata Avila in the woods, and Assange appears as extremely and unnecessary paranoid, as he interrupts the conversation multiple times in order to check if

someone is following them. The film cuts finally to a “empty” shot of trees and birds chirping.

This documentary approach of showing us the “behind the scenes” and thereby suggesting authenticity creates an even stronger image of the “weird” Assange, perhaps even delusional, thinking that he is so important, that “they” must be after him. In contrast to *The Fifth Estate*, the very fact that we are watching a documentary can be misunderstood as the ultimate proof that Assange is a highly problematic individual (with scenes that also suggest sexism). While we assume manipulation by Hollywood fiction films and also in a cynical manner can say that “we know” what Hollywood is doing, here we have a supposedly “direct” approach, we can bear witness to the individual Assange himself.

Here again Žižek’s approach to critique of ideology is crucial: facts play a crucial role in an ideological edifice, this is why lying in the guise of truth is possible. Even if some or all facts about someone might be true, that does not mean, that the stance of the (observer) is non-ideological. *Risk* similar to *The Fifth Estate* and other films takes a plunge into the content that fills the “empty” subject and on a basic level distracts us from thinking about the form. The form here being: the war crimes, the limitless power of governments and corporations that fade in comparison to the mythic Individual, the “infinite wealth of inner content” (Žižek 2009, 246) of an individual turned into media content that can be exploited.

In *Risk*, Poitras even points out her personal involvement with one of the activists. It is clear that when people work together disagreements, frictions, conflicts inevitably arise. Within that sphere it does matter how participants in a certain project relate to each other. Nonetheless, elevating this to the level of “content” is precisely what goes hand in hand with the development of media within individualist ideology. On the one hand, the ruling neoliberal system and its cynical ideology can readily be “unmasked” since that act of unmasking per se does not hurt it; the trick of those in power who were exposed by WikiLeaks was to turn the spotlight on them, in a gesture of relativization and finally the participants themselves fell into the same trap.

We have wholesale accepted this discourse and with it the belief, that we are *all* on the same plane, similar to capitalists or Big Tech billionaires who like to be perceived as “good” and “hardworking” people.

Assange as “content” in *Risk*, albeit within different narrative context, again serves as a ruse (a “juicy piece of meat, carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind”, as McLuhan (2004, 8) provocatively put it), a distraction from the analysis of the form, the truly precarious position of Assange and WikiLeaks as well as the general state of journalism today.

The mainstream and independent media equally fell into the individualist trap with Assange and the consequences of that are severe: when the accusations of rape were leaked to the press, the public opinion

that was already skewed against Assange finally felt vindicated and the faith of the WikiLeaks editor was sealed. Melzer (2022) nonetheless notices a slight shift in reporting on Assange's ongoing case:

In contrast to the gleeful malice which permeated media commentary following Assange's arrest in April 2019, journalists now started to express genuine concern about the implications of this case for press freedom and the rule of law (310).

But he also states that "(...) what is happening in the British, American, and Australian mainstream media is simply too little, too late." (311).

When we look at the form therefore, we can see the vilification and erasure of "Assange", the symbolic death of WikiLeaks, either complete non-presence in the media or reporting that is "(...) tame and lame, obediently journaling the daily events in court (...)" (Melzer, 311). We are witnessing a character that got his comeuppance and is excluded from the media discourse, while Snowden and Manning can at least make appearances in the realm of social media, themselves also increasingly become "content" instead of names that stand for the questioning the powers that be.

The documentary on Snowden, *Citizenfour*, also by Poitras and made before *Risk*, has a similar approach and can also be read as the complementary piece to *Snowden*. The filmmaker has an exclusive insight into the process of whistleblowing as it was going on. This approach, although in itself not as problematic, can also very well be integrated into the workings of the media which already got us hooked on expecting the "real thing" from them. We also get to see the real Snowden and can be assured that he is "real" in the sense of honest, and in all likelihood *really* a good and honest guy, again, unlike Assange. In this way, the documentary relies similarly to the fiction film on the individual as content, and their act of whistleblowing that can be integrated into the tradition of whistleblowing in America.

The "fly on the wall" style of filming, letting the images speak for themselves, showing ostensibly "unimportant" details enhance the immediacy of the situation – what is deceiving is precisely this sort of the "realistic" approach. The scene where Snowden prepares to finally leave the hotel room he has been hiding in, is in this sense telling; we see him almost calmly packing his things, washing his face, doing his hair, while listening to the news about him and occasionally taking a glimpse of the TV. The film juxtaposes the mainstream media as they are beginning to create a narrative around Snowden, to the behind the scenes approach of the authentic documentary filmmaker. The tension and suspense are created precisely by showing the little things of everyday life in a way imbued with new meaning, again a stark contrast between the mundane situation in the hotel and the danger Snowden is actually in, which is for him as for us at that moment rather abstract.

The function of illusion (or fiction) in a documentary is on the opposite side of the illusion of fiction film: whereas in fiction films illusion can reach certain truths by way of identifying with the illusion, not trying to be "realer than real", in documentaries there is the danger of the opposite – by insisting too much on the real, we fall into an illusion of actually watching reality unfold, forgetting that we are also in a film by way of a realistic, minimalist approach that suggest no intervention by the filmmaker. In the case of *Risk* we therefore again encounter the "good, ordinary guy" Snowden, we can spend some time with him and get to know him even better, and perhaps be persuaded that he truly can not be a traitor.

In this case it is crucial not to criticize the documentaristic approach as being still "too manipulative", or as manipulative as fiction, and therefore put into question the documentary approach as such. The more productive way of critique would be to ask if a documentary (or social media for that matter) tries to be "too real" by feigning an approach that suggest authenticity, again delivering us the wealth of content that we can enjoy as spectators.

## Conclusion

What makes whistleblowing and whistleblower narratives pertinent today is precisely the point of view of the "engaged subject", their truth the others do not (want to) see, and not simply an uncovering of an "objective truth". This is also why the aspect of secrecy is ultimately not of importance. What should come to the fore is the act of whistleblowing as such. In the age of "surplus content", where revealing something hidden (be it behind the scenes footage or deleted scenes from a film to reality shows, or endless podcasts on most obscure conspiracies on YouTube) is the order of the day, the idea of "lifting the veil" on something or someone becomes almost meaningless; when the focus still remains on the content, then we are missing the point. Again, the strength of WikiLeaks was/is the questioning of the very form of how we criticize powers that be. In order to distract from the form, our gaze is directed to the content: the ambivalence of the whistleblower as such, are they traitor or not, their experiences, in the case of Snowden; Assange's supposed idiosyncrasies and narcissism as sole motivator of his actions.

Whistleblower films at best can show moments of the basic structure of ideology critique: only the naive "Snow White"-gaze is capable of truly confronting ideology by taking it seriously. However, when that very act is told through the eyes of the Hollywood industry, it can become a narrative about individual courage, and being able to make change happen and thus conform to the individualistic ideology, securing the status quo. The focus shifts from the deed itself to the fixation on the individual and their "success", however ambivalent.

Whistleblowers, from the former NY Cop Frank Serpico to Snowden can thus be somehow (and still with great difficulty) integrated into mainstream narratives; Assange can only be integrated as a villain,

and Manning not at all or only on the margins. This shows the clear and obvious limits of such narratives even when they are not made in Hollywood. In documentary films and their “behind the scenes” approach, the fixation on the individual remains and gets an additional dimension of “realness” – instead of heavy make up and overacting we get the exact opposite, which has the tendency to trick us even more.

This approach also supports the individualistic solutions of a “bourgeois” way of raising awareness about privacy, urging citizens to protect themselves, to treat their privacy as their private property are insufficient and misleading. And a sort of a “new wave” of independent journalism that has been emerging for some time is also questionable. Journalists can make themselves completely independent from editorial meddling and intervention by creating their own channels on YouTube, Rumble, Substack, etc. There is a new found freedom within the digital sphere dominated by Big Tech, and again it is the question of Form v Content – journalists can write important and well crafted articles, only within the increasingly fragmented digital sphere and where the journalists as “entrepreneurs” are competing with each other.

As for whistleblowers, in order to function as such, they need to remain in the shadows, unknown and out of reach, unprotected and facing the same challenge time and again: Mendax or Verax?

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## Filmography

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