

Review article

Trouble makers:

Laura Poitras and the problem of dissent

ALEX DANCHEV

Citizenfour. Directed by Laura Poitras. 2014.

The oath. Directed by Laura Poitras. 2010. DVD: £6.99.

My country, my country. Directed by Laura Poitras. 2006. DVD: £6.99.

Trouble in transit, got through the roadblock

We blended in with the crowd

We got computers, we're tapping phone lines

I know that ain't allowed

Talking Heads¹

Most of us can say with some justice that we were good workmen. Is it equally true to say that we were good citizens?

Marc Bloch²

All change in history, all advance, comes from the nonconformists. If there had been no trouble makers, no dissenters, we should still be living in caves.

A.J. P. Taylor³

Laura Poitras is a trouble maker. She is also a film maker. She has the unusual distinction of achieving professional recognition in both fields. As the primary contact and conduit for the whistle-blower Edward Snowden, the subject of her latest documentary, *Citizenfour* (2014), her status as trouble maker is inextricably intertwined with her status as film maker: her preoccupations or vocations have merged. For her recent work she has been garlanded with a MacArthur Fellowship, a George Polk Award for national security reporting, and a Pulitzer Prize for Public Service. In 2016 she will have an exhibition at the Whitney Museum of American Art in New York. To be more precise, 'she will create an installation of immersive environments using materials, footage and information that builds on themes she has been exploring in her film making, including NSA [National Security Agency] surveillance and post-9/11 America'.⁴ Poitras has her finger on the pulse of post-9/11 America. The Academy Award [was/is] only a matter of time. The Academy [has been bold/has missed its moment] – [she won/she should have won] for *Citizenfour*.

She had been nominated before, for *My country, my country* (2006), the best documentary yet made about the Iraq War. As if to coincide with that nomination, she received another. She was placed on a terrorist watch list by the US government. The central watch list is called the Terrorist Identities Datamart Environment (TIDE). It is kept by the National

Counterterrorism Center; the NSA, the CIA, the FBI and other members of the intelligence community can all ‘nominate’ individuals to be added to it. Evidently there are at least two subsidiary lists relating to air travel: a no-fly list, of those who are not allowed to fly into or out of the country, and a selectee list, of those who are earmarked for additional inspection and interrogation. As Poitras reveals in *Citizenfour*, there are said to be 1.2 million people on various stages of the watch list, a figure that shocked even Snowden.⁵ She herself had the privilege of being a selectee. Federal agents would stop and question her as she was entering or leaving the United States. The same thing happened in other countries. In Vienna, she relates, ‘I sort of befriended the security guy. I asked what was going on. He said: “You’re flagged. You have a threat score that is off the Richter scale. You are at 400 out of 400.” I said: “Is this a scoring system that works throughout all of Europe, or is this an American scoring system?” He said: “No, this is your government that has this and has told us to stop you.”’⁶

In the US, the questioning was aggressive. Her notes and receipts were rifled, and sometimes copied; on one occasion her equipment was confiscated. Once, when she asserted her First Amendment right not to answer questions about her work, she was told, ‘If you don’t answer our questions, we’ll find our answers on your electronics.’⁷ She gave as good as she got, taking names and recording questions (until deprived of writing materials), protesting her treatment, writing to members of Congress, and submitting Freedom of Information requests. Over time, she went to ever greater lengths to protect herself and her data, leaving her notebooks overseas with friends or in safe deposit boxes, wiping her computers and mobile phones clean, taking elaborate precautions with her digital security. Her protestations and representations came to nothing. Altogether, she says, she was detained on at least 40 occasions between 2006 and 2012, often at gun point, without explanation. Poitras is resilient

– and not given to self-dramatization – but the endless stop and search felt like a violation. She let off steam to the investigative reporter Peter Maass. ‘When did that universe begin, that people are put on a list and are never told and are stopped for six years? I have no idea why they did it. It’s the complete suspension of due process. I’ve been told nothing, I’ve been asked nothing, and I’ve done nothing. It’s like Kafka. Nobody ever tells you what the accusation is.’⁸ The arbitrary nature of the proceedings of *The Trial* (1925) corresponds eerily to the proceedings of the war on terror. ‘Someone must have been telling lies about Joseph K., for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.’⁹

With Laura P., it did not come to that. After six years, Poitras had had enough. She feared not so much for herself as for her material: her documents and her films. She took two drastic steps. She allowed her friend Glenn Greenwald to write about her case – which was a little like letting a highly-trained attack dog off the leash – and she moved to Berlin. No sooner had Greenwald’s article appeared in *Salon*, in 2012, than the airport interrogations stopped, as suddenly as they had begun.¹⁰ In Berlin, Poitras came in from the cold – a nice historical reversal. She joined a community of dissident expatriates, including Jacob Appelbaum, a ‘hactivist’ from WikiLeaks, who appears in *Citizenfour*; but she walked by herself. In Berlin, she regained her composure and her customary self-containment. ‘Let’s be honest,’ she told George Packer of the *New Yorker*, an old ally. ‘If I had darker skin, or was carrying a different passport, the cast of guilt, the shadow, would go a lot longer.’¹¹ Nevertheless, her life had changed. For Laura Poitras, security is a lived experience. Privacy is as much an instinct as a cause. She is a very private person, but she will never again be a truly private citizen. Politically and electronically, she is a marked woman, a target of the national surveillance state. Radicalization is something she understands from the inside.

Like Errol Morris, but in a different voice, she is also a public intellectual.¹² She speaks of herself as a documentarian – a tribe of rootless cosmopolitans, strong on professional ethics and civic obligations – but she is prepared to embrace another identity. In 2014 an interviewer asked her what prompted her to become a dissenter. She replied:

It was a response to historical circumstances, particularly the build-up to the Iraq War and the prison at Guantánamo. I thought that there was a moral drift, that we'd look back on post-9/11 America as a dark chapter in US history. To have a prison where people are sent without charges, and then engaging in a pre-emptive war against a country that had nothing to do with 9/11 – that seemed like a frightening precedent, that we're going to attack a country because we think it might cause us harm in the future. I felt that these were dark times, that I felt compelled to say something about it, and that as a documentarian I had skills that would help me channel my impressions and thoughts.

At the very least, I would create a historical record. I don't know if my work changed anyone's opinion. The Iraq War continued for a long time. Guantánamo is still open. But I wanted to express something about a drift away from the rule of law and basic principles of democracy, to document what was happening. I thought I was choosing to make a film about the Iraq War or Guantánamo. When I finished *My country, my country*, the film on Iraq, I was shocked that

Guantánamo was still open. It was 2005 when I knew I'd take a broader look at post-9/11 America, and that it would probably occupy me for a long time.¹³

The starting point for the film on Iraq was a coruscating article by George Packer on the American occupation of that country, 'War after the war', sub-titled 'What Washington doesn't see in Iraq'.¹⁴ Packer's work is a mosaic of many tragedies, large and small, of which that experience is composed. What caught Poitras's eye was the tragedy of Captain John Prior, a rifle company commander on his first real-world deployment, as he calls it, who was put in charge of a patch of Baghdad: the rectangle of Zafaraniya, a largely Shiite slum in the south of the city, home to some 250,000 people. His mission was to improve the infrastructure of his patch, and at the same time to guarantee its security. He was also responsible for sewage disposal throughout the area occupied by his entire battalion, an area with a population of half a million people. Prior is a dedicated officer and a decent man. He hopes to make a career in the military. He wants to do something for his country and for the country he occupied: he wants to do good. He had mastered counter-insurgency. He had studied hearts and minds. He had read some history. He was a stranger to the real world. He was bewildered in Babylon. He was not trained in nation building, civil affairs, or sewage disposal.

Prior is well-intentioned. If he is not quite Pyle, the original quiet American of Graham Greene's creation, there is a certain family resemblance.¹⁵ His mission is beyond him, but he has an impregnable belief in the advertisement of American rectitude. Pyle talked self-righteously of 'clean hands'. In his own idiom Prior says much the same. He is nothing if not hard-working. By day, he chairs the local council and oversees reconstruction projects. By

night, he raids homes and searches for suspected militiamen. The raids are fruitless; they succeed only in stoking resentment. One vexatious night, Prior's translator turns to Packer and says: 'Like Vietnam.' Fifty years on, Saigon spoke eloquently to Babylon.

Packer asked Prior whether his night work threatened to undo the good accomplished by his day work. 'He didn't think so: as the sewage started to flow and the schools got fixed up, Iraqis would view Americans the way the Americans see themselves – as people trying to help.' Packer continues:

But Prior was no soft-shelled humanitarian. He called himself a foreign-policy realist. Fixing the sewer system in Zafaraniya, he believed, was an essential part of the war on terror. Terrorists depended on millions of sympathizers who believed that America was evil and Americans only wanted Middle East oil. 'But we come here and we're honest, trustworthy, we're caring, we're compassionate,' Prior said. 'We're interested in them. We're interested in fixing their lives. Not because we have to, but because we can, because we can be benevolent, because we *are* benevolent.'

Poitras took leave to doubt it. Packer's question served to crystallize her own thinking. Prior's predicament exemplified the contradictions inherent in the American project as she saw it. It was those contradictions that she set out to film.

In June 2004 she went to Baghdad and embedded with a civil affairs unit responsible for helping Iraqi officials organize the country's first democratic elections. Courtesy of the military, she could move around relatively freely, but she was frustrated to find that the civil affairs unit was largely confined to the sanctuary of the Green Zone. Soon after she arrived, she went to film an inspection of the notorious Abu Ghraib prison. There she encountered an Iraqi doctor, Riyadh al-Adhath, who was compiling complaints (medical and procedural) from the prisoners. Dr Riyadh, a Sunni from the Adhamiya district of Baghdad, turns out to be a voluble character and a public-spirited citizen. 'This is not Vietnam,' he admonishes his US military minders, on camera, a propos the flattening of Fallujah. 'This is a new century.' Dr Riyadh is a brave man. Adhamiya is a hotbed of anti-American sentiment and insurgent activities; in his community, participation in the political process is tantamount to collaboration. Nonetheless, he is determined to stand for election to the Baghdad Provincial Council. Already an active member of the local council (where nine of his colleagues have been killed), he is not enamoured of the existing order. 'We are an occupied country with a puppet government,' he observes succinctly.

Poitras had found her subject. For the next eight months she embedded instead with Dr Riyadh, who courageously invited her to stay at his house, and to visit his clinic. *My country, my country* is a chronicle of that experience. It is an intimate film amid the carnage, piercingly human and deeply poignant. It is also an essential document of the war (and the war after the war). Like all of her films, it is a self-effacing treatment. Poitras aims for a kind of inter-subjective understanding. The documentarian and the doctor are both trouble makers, in their fashion; both risk their lives for their principles – for their practice – and so too do the doctor's wife and his six daughters. All of them know this full well. The women of the house

are no pushovers. ‘Politics are not good for you,’ Dr Riyadh’s wife tells him briskly. ‘You do more good as a doctor.’

Poitras is her own camerawoman. Her modus operandi is disarming. Typically, she holds the camera at waist height and looks down at the viewfinder, rather than hiding behind the lens. ‘The camera doesn’t have to be a barrier,’ she believes. ‘It’s a witness.’ Her films are eye-witness accounts: camera-eye witness accounts. She is intensely present, yet unobtrusive; even the filming is unobtrusive. The code (or the ethic) may owe something to the exemplary documentary filmmaker Frederick Wiseman, whose metier is the study of institutions and their inmates, and whose signature is a conscientious austerity and simplicity, as David Thomson puts it, eschewing interviews, jump-cuts, narrative or music.¹⁶ The emphasis is on scenes, fades, naturalism and actuality: in Poitras’s words, ‘people, in real time, confronting life decisions’. Unlike Wiseman, she concentrates on the inmates, but her films are also investigations of institutions of various kinds, above all, the state, the consequences of its coercive power, and its moral purpose.

The human predicament is minutely observed – she sticks close to her protagonists, as she says – but she manages to retain a space for reflection and disputation, an openness, at once ethical and intellectual. Poitras is as empathetic as she is *engagée*. She is willing to listen. There is a stillness to her camerawork whilst she does just that. She encourages us to do the same. The effort is worthwhile. Her films are full of unforced insights. In *My country, my country*, Dr Riyadh’s oldest daughter shows Poitras the images of torture and abuse from Abu Ghraib on her personal computer.¹⁷ She goes out to vote, in spite of all, and comes back singing the Iraqi national anthem. The title of the film is drawn from the opening words of

that anthem. For Poitras, as perhaps for Dr Riyadh, *My country, my country* is inescapably double-edged.

Her next film was to be about Guantánamo. Poitras had the idea of documenting the reintegration of a former inmate who had been found innocent and returned to his home country. She went to the Yemen, the home country of many inmates of Guantánamo. On her second day in the capital, Sanaa, she had another extraordinary encounter. She was introduced to a taxi-driver called Nasser al-Bahri, whose nom de guerre was Abu Jandal. Once upon a time, Abu Jandal had been Osama bin Laden's bodyguard, and his 'emir of hospitality', in Afghanistan (c.1997-2000). What is more, his brother-in-law was exactly what Poitras thought she was looking for. Salim Hamdan, Osama bin Laden's driver, had spent six years in Guantánamo, where he became both a test case and a cause célèbre, as the locus of a legal challenge to the power of the state in the matter of the military commissions (the case of Hamdan v. Rumsfeld), and the first person to be tried under the hastily assembled Military Tribunals Act (2006). Salim Hamdan was eventually convicted of providing military support to Al Qaeda, but acquitted of terrorist conspiracy. He was transferred to Yemen in 2008 and reunited with his family the following year. In 2012 his conviction was overturned on appeal. Salim Hamdan was famous, and victorious, but also religious. He had maintained a dignified silence throughout; in fact he had remonstrated with his interfering brother-in-law for talking too much.

Salim Hamdan would be a difficult subject. Abu Jandal, on the other hand, was a gift. He was garrulous in the extreme. He was a plausible liar (as Poitras clearly shows). He was a charismatic ex-jihadi who had supped with Sheikh Osama, as he called him, and claimed to

know personally all 19 of the 9/11 hijackers. He had fought in Bosnia, Somalia, Afghanistan. He had grown tired of fighting. He had been troubled by Sheikh Osama's pledge of loyalty to Mullah Omar, the Taliban leader in Afghanistan. He had been incarcerated and interrogated. He had been through a government rehabilitation programme. He was counselling young Yemenis who might sympathize with Al Qaeda. He was worried about his children, one of whom had a bone disease. He had not entirely given up hope of revolution against the evil empire: the American colossus. He was a kind of jack-in-the-box. He loved to perform; it was difficult to tell when he was performing and when he was not. He was a bad character, or at any rate an unreliable one. 'He was never who you thought he was,' as Poitras remarked. This was not at all the story she had been looking for; it was a story that made her nervous, but it was not a story she felt she could ignore. She decided to change tack. She rented an apartment in Sanaa and asked Abu Jandal to install a camera on the dashboard of his taxi, so that he could be filmed plying his trade, dissimulating with inquisitive passengers, and philosophizing, as was his wont. He readily agreed. Abu Jandal is the star of *The oath* (2010). Salim Hamdan is the ghost.

The oath is ambiguous and unsettling, as George Packer has observed. The chief protagonist has none of the conspicuous humanity of Dr Riyadh. Abu Jandal is a slippery character, a grey zone all of his own. As a documentarian, Poitras is plotless. She is suspicious of the constraints of plot, its perfidious consolations. 'Plot is so relentless. It's totally unforgiving, and it can also be simplifying. It can provide resolution where there should be none. It can provide false catharsis.' For much of this film it seems that she has lost the plot, possibly by design. Towards the end, however, a moral unfolds, or perhaps a message. Immediately after 9/11, we learn, Abu Jandal was interrogated in the Yemen by Ali Soufan, a Lebanese-American FBI special agent. At the time, Soufan was something of a rarity in the FBI – an

Arab speaker (one of eight), a student of International Relations, a subtle mind, and a sophisticated interrogator. (In the course of his interrogation of Abu Jandal, he noticed that his adversary declined some pastries, because he was diabetic; the next night, he brought him some sugarless wafers, a courtesy acknowledged by Abu Jandal.) As chief investigator of the sinking of the *USS Cole* the previous year, Soufan knew as much as anyone about Al Qaeda at that juncture. A detailed account of his interrogation of Abu Jandal was published by Lawrence Wright in 2006.¹⁸ It demonstrated beyond doubt that Soufan got Abu Jandal to talk – and not merely to talk, but to divulge actionable intelligence, the interrogator’s holy grail – without recourse to any ‘enhanced interrogation techniques’ or coercion of any kind, but rather by playing on weakness, flattery, cunning, and moral suasion. In the film Soufan underlines the point: using lawful procedures he gained vital intelligence – the kind of intelligence that torture does not yield.¹⁹ For Poitras, this was the key. ‘Maintaining those kinds of principles, you can actually get results, if the end goal is de-escalation of violence or de-radicalization.’ That is the message of *The oath*.

The third in the trilogy of her investigations of American power and purpose after 9/11 was intended to bring it home, in more ways than one. Poitras was interested in domestic surveillance and the resistance to it. Surveillance and resistance are not easy subjects for the filmmaker to engage: there is no there there.²⁰ Various strategies have been proposed to make visible the invisible. Trevor Paglen, for example, takes ultra-long-distance photographs of national security sites (facilities invisible to the naked eye, or impenetrable to the democratic gaze); some of his images of the Intelligence Community Comprehensive National Cybersecurity Initiative Data Center, an expansionist development in Utah, are incorporated in *Citizenfour*. Poitras for her part focuses on the human. ‘The historian is like the ogre of the fairy tale,’ wrote Marc Bloch. ‘Where he smells human flesh, there he finds his quarry.’²¹ As

with the historian, so with the documentarian. She began filming Julian Assange, in England; Glenn Greenwald, in Rio de Janeiro; Jacob Appelbaum, in Berlin; and a retired cryptanalyst and mathematician named William Binney, in Maryland, home of the National Security Agency. Binney had worked for the NSA man and boy. In that community he was a legendary figure; he has been described as one of the best analysts in history. He resigned as Technical Leader for Intelligence in October 2001, soon after he had concluded that the NSA was heading in an unethical direction. Binney was outraged at the NSA's failure to foil the 9/11 plot. He believed that he and his team had developed a system called ThinThread that could solve the agency's basic problem – it was overwhelmed by the amount of digital data it was collecting. ThinThread was rejected in favour of a rival approach, unwisely christened Trailblazer, built by private contractors. In 2006, Trailblazer was abandoned as a \$1.2 billion flop. Meanwhile, in the wake of 9/11, and under pressure from the White House, the directorate of the NSA sanctioned an extensive programme of warrantless domestic surveillance. The programme was developed in secret. Binney was not 'read in', but some of his people were; from the reports he received, he became convinced that it employed a bastardized version of his brainchild, stripped of privacy controls. Binney was all in favour of monitoring, code breaking, data mining, and signals intelligence – he had spent a professional lifetime trying to perfect such techniques – but he was fundamentally opposed to what he saw as illegal, unconstitutional, unaccountable, unjustifiable and indiscriminate spying on American citizens, not to mention the corruption and malfeasance that he thought had led to this debacle.

So did a copper-bottomed patriot and doyen of the secret world turn whistle-blower. William Binney is an unlikely trouble maker, but an unbeatable source. He is old enough to remember Watergate and 'Deep Throat' (later revealed to be Mark Felt), the source for Carl Bernstein

and Bob Woodward, the investigative reporters of the *Washington Post*. He alludes to this history in a cameo appearance in *Citizenfour*. The lineage of dissent is well-learned by the dissenters.

Poitras made an Op-Doc about him, *The Program* (2012), for the *New York Times*.²² Op-Docs are shorts, the filmic equivalent of op-eds. Binney explains his position, with sweet reason, making light of the risks he is taking – he mentions in passing a raid on his house, by heavily armed FBI agents, one of whom pointed a rifle at his head as he emerged from the shower. It was left to Poitras to spell out the seriousness of his situation in an accompanying article: ‘He is among a group of NSA whistle-blowers, including Thomas A. Drake, who have risked everything – their freedom, livelihoods and personal relationships – to warn Americans about the dangers of NSA domestic spying.’²³

The Program became a taster. One of its many on-line viewers was Edward Snowden, who was already familiar with Poitras’s work and something of her personal history. In January 2013 he emailed her, anonymously, using the alias Citizenfour. ‘I am a senior member of the intelligence community,’ he told her, with pardonable exaggeration. ‘This won’t be a waste of your time’. He asked for her encryption key. She gave it to him. She was hooked. So was he.

They embarked on a kind of crypto-courtship. Each wanted to establish the bona fides of the other: to find a basis of trust. Poitras was afraid of entrapment. ‘I don’t know if you are legit, crazy or trying to entrap me,’ she wrote. Snowden (still anonymous) was afraid of exposure

and arrest, or worse, before he had even begun. He was also afraid of being ignored. ‘I’m not going to ask you anything,’ he replied. ‘I’m just going to tell you things.’²⁴ He needed Poitras, in order to do what he had to do; he knew that he would have to convince her to take him seriously. He had already tried and failed with Greenwald, who had not troubled to install the necessary encryption software for them to communicate securely, despite repeated nudges from Snowden. Poitras was sound on security; tradecraft was meat and drink to her. Still she seemed suspicious. Ultimately, that was all to the good, as Snowden recalled:

We came to a point in the verification and vetting process when I discovered that Laura was more suspicious of me than I was of her, and I’m famously paranoid. The combination of her experience and her exacting focus on detail and process gave her a natural talent for security, and that’s a refreshing trait to discover in someone who is likely to come under intense scrutiny in the future, as normally one would have to work very hard to get them to take the risks seriously. With that putting me at my ease, it became easier to open up without fearing the invested trust would be mishandled, and I think it’s the only way she ever managed to get me on camera. I personally hate cameras and being recorded, but at some point in the working process, I realized I was unconsciously trusting her not to hang me even with my naturally unconsidered remarks. She’s good.²⁵

Poitras was in deep, and she knew it. ‘It clearly pulled me in in every way – emotionally, psychologically. Unlike my previous films, this was somebody I had built a dialogue with, and wanted to meet. Because I cared.’ Much to her surprise, after three months of emailing, Citizenfour informed her that he would not seek to remain anonymous once the story broke

and his treasure-trove of documents were in the pipeline to the public domain. ‘I’m not cleaning the metadata,’ he wrote. ‘I hope you will paint a target on my back and tell the world I did this on my own.’ Her immediate response was that she wanted to meet and that she wanted to film. Citizenfour was horrified. ‘It’s too dangerous, and it’s not about me – I don’t want to be the story.’ ‘Like it or not,’ she replied, ‘you’re going to be the story, so you might as well get your voice in.’ That argument carried the day. ‘After that,’ she told Packer, ‘I became a filmmaker.’

And yet it was not quite as simple as that, as Poitras herself clearly recognized. The Snowden case, or rather the Poitras case, is the paradigm case of the participant-observer. Like it or not, she had become an actor in her own drama. Indeed, she was in some sense the moving force – the director – without any idea of the identity or proclivity of her pseudonymous leading man. This gave rise to a number of urgent questions, practical and ethical. Unlike Michael Moore, for example, Poitras never filmed herself conducting interviews or interacting with others; that would violate the code of the documentarian. When she filmed Snowden she would have need of an accomplice. Happily, Snowden himself was of the same mind. He urged her to find a collaborator to publish the documents and explicate their meaning, not a simple task. His preferred choice for this key role was Greenwald – an inspired choice, as it turned out, despite the technical hiccoughs.

The rest of the story reads like *le Carré* crossed with Kafka, as the *New York Times* put it. Snowden transited from Hawaii to Hong Kong, with four laptops and little else, apart from nearly two million highly classified documents, a world record. Poitras recruited Greenwald. Greenwald enlisted the *Guardian*. (He was then a *Guardian* columnist, semi-detached.)

Shadowed by Ewen MacAskill, the paper's respected Washington correspondent, they decamped to Hong Kong. En route they browsed in the cache of documents that Citizenfour had entrusted to Poitras. Among them was an impassioned self-declaration, written specially for them. It concluded as follows:

Many will malign me for failing to engage in national relativism, to look away from [my] society's problems toward distant, external evils for which we hold neither authority nor responsibility, but citizenship carries with it a duty to first police one's own government before seeking to correct others. Here, now, at home, we suffer a government that only grudgingly allows limited oversight, and refuses accountability when crimes are committed. ... When officials at the highest levels of power, to specifically include the Vice President [Dick Cheney], are found on investigation to have personally directed such a criminal enterprise, what should happen? If you believe that investigation should be stopped, its results classified above-top-secret in a special 'Exceptionally Controlled Information' compartment called STLW (STELLARWIND), any future investigations ruled out on the principle that holding those who abuse power to account is against the national interest, that we must 'look forward, not backward' [as President Obama said], and rather than closing the illegal program you would expand it with even more authorities, you will be welcome in the halls of America's power, for that is what came to be, and I am releasing the documents that prove it.

I understand that I will be made to suffer for my actions, and that the return of this information to the public marks my end. I will be satisfied if the federation of secret law, unequal pardon, and irresistible executive powers that rule the world that I love are revealed for even an instant. If you seek to help, join the open source community and fight to keep the spirit of the press alive and the internet free. I have been to the darkest corners of government, and what they fear is light.

Edward Joseph Snowden²⁶

Characteristically, Snowden gave them precise instructions for their rendezvous: a conference room on the third floor of the Mira Hotel, by a plastic alligator; he would be carrying a Rubik's Cube (unsolved). They were to have an exchange about the hotel food, and then to follow him. After a certain stutter – they were too early, he was too young – they arrived in his room. Without further ado, Poitras proceeded to set up her camera. In a matter of minutes she was ready. 'I'm going to begin filming now,' she announced quietly, and so it began.

She filmed for some 20 hours, over eight days. This is the core of *Citizenfour*: the encounter with Snowden in hiding; making and breaking the story in the same breathless moment. In short order Greenwald produced a series of incendiary articles, and Poitras produced a trailer, 'NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden', a video on the *Guardian* website.²⁷ It is this extraordinary set-up – people, in real time, confronting life decisions, with a vengeance – that makes the full-length film so compelling: at once thriller and fable; a chamber piece (a bedchamber piece) and a political event of tremendous significance; a model of *cinéma vérité* and in its own peculiar way almost an ideal speech situation. *Citizenfour* is riveting. So is

Edward Snowden. He sits on the bed, tense but collected. He speaks in sentences, sometimes in paragraphs. He is cogent, principled, realistic, modest. There are flashes of wit, self-knowledge, even self-irony. The modus operandi is as understated as ever. Poitras's empathy does not fail her: it matches Snowden's integrity.²⁸

She was surely right to intuit that he was genuine, in every sense, notwithstanding persistent attempts to demonize, psychologize, or trivialize, fitting him for the standard repertoire of stock characters for which dissenters are always fitted: traitor, narcissist, 'useful idiot'.²⁹ Motivations are often tangled, as Dostoevsky observes in *Crime and punishment*: 'Sometimes actions are performed very skilfully, most cleverly, but the aims of the actions and their origin, are confused, and depend on various morbid influences.'³⁰ That may be true of Snowden, as of others, but there is no sign of it. 'If there was a Zen prize for whistleblowers, Snowden would win without trying,' as Andrew O'Hagen has remarked: 'he checks and labels everything, he thinks out the moral, he cross-references and relates the material to possible future outcomes. Most of all: he let his name come out for the sake of veracity and to put a human face to the leaks, then he aimed to disappear and say little and profit nowhere, letting the story be bigger than him.'³¹ Like Daniel Ellsberg, one of his exemplars, he depended on the *moral* proposition. 'Americans must look past options, briefings, pros and cons, to see what is being done in their name, and to refuse to be accomplices,' Ellsberg argued, Snowden-like, in 1971. 'They must recognize, and force the Congress and President to act upon, the *moral* proposition that the US must stop killing people in Indochina'.³²

In truth, trouble makers like Laura Poitras and Edward Snowden have done the state some service. Dissenters are model citizens. As A. J. P. Taylor and J. M. Coetzee remind us, they

are traduced at the time, and vindicated by posterity.³³ ‘After all,’ another great dissenter has written, ‘we have gotten used to regarding as *valor* only valor in war (or the kind that’s needed for flying in outer space), the kind that jingle-jangles with medals. We have forgotten another concept of valor – *civil valor*. And that’s all our society needs, just that, just that, just that! That’s all we need and that’s exactly what we haven’t got.’³⁴

- ¹ Talking Heads, 'Life during wartime', on the album *Fear of music* (1979).
- ² Marc Bloch, *Strange defeat* [1948], trans. Gerard Hopkins (New York: Norton, 1999), p. 173.
- ³ A. J. P. Taylor, *The trouble makers* (London: Hamilton, 1957), p. 14.
- ⁴ Whitney Museum of American Art, <http://whitney.org/Exhibitions/LauraPoitras>, accessed 10 Jan. 2015.
- ⁵ Further information on the watch list has since been divulged by *The Intercept*, drawing on more leaked documents. Jeremy Scahill and Ryan Devereaux, 'Barack Obama's secret terrorist-tracking system, by the numbers', *The Intercept*, 8 May 2014, <https://firstlook.org/theintercept/2014/08/05/watch-commander/>, accessed 20 Jan. 2015. On the efficacy of such procedures, see Mattathias Schwartz, 'The whole haystack', *New Yorker*, 26 Jan. 2015.
- ⁶ Peter Maass, 'How Laura Poitras helped Snowden spill his secrets', *New York Times*, 13 Aug. 2013.
- ⁷ Laura Poitras, 'The program', *New York Times*, 22 Aug. 2012.
- ⁸ Maass, 'Laura Poitras'. Maass speculates that her selectee status may relate to unfounded accusations about her prior knowledge of an attack on US soldiers while filming in Baghdad in 2004, or to money she sent to the subject of her film, suspected (groundlessly) of insurgent activities, when his family fled the civil war in 2006.
- ⁹ Franz Kafka, *The trial* [1925], trans. Willa and Edwin Muir, in *The collected novels of Franz Kafka* (London: Penguin, 1988), p. 9. The celebrated opening sentence. See Alex Danchev, *On art and war and terror* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), ch. 8.
- ¹⁰ Glenn Greenwald, 'US filmmaker repeatedly detained at border', *Salon.com*, 8 April 2012.
- ¹¹ George Packer, 'The holder of secrets', *New Yorker*, 20 Oct. 2014. Unless otherwise indicated, subsequent quotations from Poitras come from her conversation in this profile.
- ¹² On Morris, see Alex Danchev, 'Thoughtlessness: Rumsfeld in Washington', *International Affairs* 90: 5, Sep. 2014, pp. 1181-1190.
- ¹³ Conor Friedersdorf, 'What the war on terror actually looks like: Laura Poitras on *Citizenfour*', *The Atlantic* (Oct. 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/10/what-the-war-on-terror-actually-looks-like-laura-poitras-on-em-citizenfour-em/381749/>, accessed 10 Jan. 2015.
- ¹⁴ George Packer, 'War after the war', *New Yorker*, 24 Nov. 2003, subsequently woven into a profound study of America in Iraq, *The assassins' gate* (London: Faber, 2006), ch. 7.
- ¹⁵ Graham Greene, *The quiet American* [1955] (London: Vintage, 2004). Packer weighs the parallel in *The assassins' gate*, p. 89.
- ¹⁶ David Thomson, 'Frederick Wiseman', *A biographical dictionary of film* (London: Deutsch, 1994), pp. 817-18, a scintillating and sceptical assessment. Wiseman's first and most controversial film is *Titicut Follies* (1967), on the Bridgewater State Hospital for the criminally insane. His latest is *National Gallery* (2014).
- ¹⁷ On the images and their currency, see Alex Danchev, 'Bad apples, dead souls: understanding Abu Ghraib', *International Affairs* 84:6, Nov. 2008, pp. 1271-80.
- ¹⁸ Lawrence Wright, 'The Agent', *New Yorker*, 10 July 2006, a slice of his celebrated study of Al Qaeda and the road to 9/11, *The looming tower* (London: Penguin, 2007), ch. 20. Poitras makes reference to Wright's account in her interview with Friedersdorf, 'Poitras on *Citizenfour*'.
- ¹⁹ For more on this issue, see Danchev, *On art and war and terror*, ch. 8.
- ²⁰ Cf. Frank Möller and Rune S. Andersen, 'Engaging the limits of visibility: photography, security and surveillance', *Security Dialogue* 44:3, June 2013, pp. 203-21, focusing on Simon Norfolk and Trevor Paglen.
- ²¹ Marc Bloch, *Apologie pour l'histoire, ou métier d'historien* (Paris: Colin, 1949), p. 4.
- ²² Laura Poitras, *The Program* (2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/video/2012/08/22/opinion/10000001733041/the-program.html>, accessed 16 Jan. 2015.
- ²³ Poitras, 'The program'. The group consists of Binney, Drake, J. Kirk Wiebe and Edward Loomis: 'the NSA four'. Jane Mayer, 'The secret sharer', *New Yorker*, 23 May 2011, sub-titled 'Is Thomas Drake an enemy of the state?', is a penetrating analysis of his case, which sheds light on all of them, Binney included – and on the punitive response of the Obama administration to whistle-blowers.
- ²⁴ The story is told in the well-informed instant history by Luke Harding, *The Snowden files* (London: Faber, 2014); and in the first person by Glenn Greenwald, *No place to hide: Edward Snowden, the NSA and the surveillance state* (London: Penguin, 2014), ch. 1 and 2. Greenwald has his faults, and his detractors, but his book is an invaluable account of the Snowden affair by one of the main actors. Supplemented by his website (glenngreenwald.net), it is also a source-book of documents. For judicious critiques of his sometimes simplistic position on the issues, see David Cole, 'No place to hide by Glenn Greenwald, on the NSA's sweeping efforts to know it all', *Washington Post*, 12 May 2014; and George Packer, 'Intoxicating conviction', *Prospect* (June 2014), pp. 48-52.

²⁵ 'Q & A: Edward Snowden speaks to Peter Maass', *New York Times*, 13 Aug. 2013.

²⁶ Reproduced in Greenwald, *No place to hide*, pp. 31-32.

²⁷ Laura Poitras, 'NSA whistleblower Edward Snowden', 9 June 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/world/video/2013/jun/09/nsa-whistleblower-edward-snowden-interview-video>, accessed 15 Jan. 2015. Greenwald's opening salvo focussed on dragnet surveillance calculated to outrage the American public: 'NSA collecting phone records of millions of Verizon customers daily', *Guardian*, 6 June 2013. They were also concerned to make the point that GCHQ is some respects even more invasive, as *Citizenfour* underlines. See, e.g., Ewen MacAskill *et al.*, 'Mastering the internet: how GCHQ set out to spy on the world wide web', *Guardian*, 21 June 2013.

²⁸ David Bromwich suggests something similar in 'The question of Edward Snowden', *New York Review of Books*, 4 Dec. 2014.

²⁹ See, e.g., Jeffrey Toobin, 'Edward Snowden is no hero', *New Yorker*, 10 June 2013; Nigel Inkster, 'The Snowden revelations: myths and misapprehensions', *Survival* 56:1, Feb.-March 2014, 51-60; and Loch K. Johnson (ed.), 'An *INS* special forum: implications of the Snowden leaks', *Intelligence and National Security* 29:6, 2014, pp. 793-810, in particular the contribution of Rose McDermott (pp. 802-04).

³⁰ Fyodor Dostoevsky, *Crime and punishment* [1866], trans. Jessie Coulson (Oxford: World's Classics, 1998), p. 217. Snowden read this book in Moscow, his next way station after Hong Kong.

³¹ Andrew O'Hagen, 'Text-Inspectors', *London Review of Books*, 25 Sep. 2014.

³² Daniel Ellsberg, 'Laos: what Nixon is up to' (1971), reprinted in his *Papers on the war* (1972), and quoted in his memoir *Secrets* (New York: Penguin, 2003), p. 355, another book on Snowden's Moscow reading list. The admiration is mutual. See the conversation between them, 'Daniel Ellsberg: Snowden kept his oath better than anyone in the NSA', *The Atlantic* (July 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2014/07/daniel-ellsberg-snowden-kept-his-oath-better-than-anyone-in-the-nsa/375031>, accessed 15 Jan. 2015.

³³ Taylor, *Trouble makers*, p. 16; J. M. Coetzee to Chelsea Manning, 2 Dec. 2014, *Guardian*, 17 Dec. 2014.

³⁴ Alexander Solzhenitsyn, trans. Thomas P. Whitney, *The gulag archipelago* (London: Harvill, 1974), parts I-II, pp. 461-62.