

# The Unbearable Centrism of Mainstream Documentaries

August 24, 2018

*The Obamas' deal with Netflix is the culmination of a worrisome turn in contemporary documentary.*



Since the announcement in May of Former President Barack and First Lady Michelle Obama's multi-year production deal to produce narrative and documentary films and series with Netflix, there has been remarkably little conversation about it. Admittedly, there isn't any work to evaluate just yet, but the news does raise enormously important questions in and of itself.

For example, isn't it a bit hypocritical of the 44th President to be venturing into nonfiction media? As *Washington Post* media columnist Margaret Sullivan recently reminded readers, although he "once claimed that he would be the most transparent president ever," Obama was in fact "no friend to press rights." Arguing that President Trump's "aggression against reporters and sources" follows "the blueprint drawn by Obama," she cites the litany of reprehensible moves made by the latter's Justice Department that clearly set very dangerous precedents — including subpoenaing reporters' phone records, and applying legal pressure to those covering government leaks. In addition, as CNN's Jake Tapper has pointed out, the Obama White House "used the Espionage Act to go after whistleblowers who leaked to journalists...more than all previous administrations combined."

Obama's disdain for journalists was also apparent in his obvious preference for highly contrived public relations opportunities over actual news interviews. In a 2014 piece about the former President's sit-downs with Zach Galifianakis, Charles Barkley, Bill Simmons, Steve Harvey, and Jon Stewart, the *Washington Post's* Chris Cillizza quantified this disparity: "...Compare those appearances to the number of times Obama has sat down with more 'traditional' media outlets. The last time the *Washington Post* had an interview with Obama was in December 2009. The last time the *New York Times* had one was July 2013." That same year, an analysis by the *Columbia Journalism Review* found a larger, more disconcerting pattern: "An exhaustive study of every official exchange Obama had with the press corps in 2014, supplemented by a review of daily press briefings and interviews with more than a dozen current and former correspondents and White House press secretaries, reveals a White House determined to conceal its workings from the press, and by extension, the public."

On top of his dreadful track record with the fourth estate, the former President's status as the highest profile member of the Democratic Party raises further questions about any nonfiction work he and Mrs. Obama will be producing. Specifically: will it be Third Way propaganda dressed up as hard-hitting documentary?

Speaking to the issue of potential bias at a recent Paley Center for Media event, Netflix's chief content officer Ted Sarandos insisted that there would be "no political slant to [the Obamas'] programming." But that can't possibly be true: all art is political, implicitly or explicitly, whether we

like it or not. What's more, Sarandos is hardly a nonpartisan source of information here: he was a fundraiser for Obama's 2012 reelection campaign, and is the spouse of Nicole Avant, the President's Ambassador to the Bahamas from 2009 to 2011. So can we expect that the Obamas' newly formed "Higher Ground Productions" will reflect the same values and positions advanced by his Administration, or not?

Realistically speaking, we're likely to get at least some New Democrat puffery repackaged as "streaming content." As such, we shouldn't hold our collective breath for substantive critical analysis in any of these forthcoming documentaries. Indeed, the very idea that the former President would rigorously question the party lines on things like American imperialism, criminal justice, immigration, surveillance and encryption policy, and drone warfare, let alone income inequality, is laughable. If House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi asserts, "We're capitalists, and that's just the way it is," then why *wouldn't* that be the a priori starting point of an Obama-produced documentary on, say, economic issues?

That the Obamas' Netflix deal seems to have gone largely uncriticized probably has something to do with how effectively we've been conditioned for such an eventuality: this development is the logical culmination of a centrist turn that has been taking place within mainstream documentary culture over the past few years.

Now, it has long been the case, as Cinema Politica co-founder and Director of Programming Ezra Winton has observed, that "among documentaries concerned with socio-political issues and subjects, some tend toward a more populist, liberal and feel-good variety, such as *Waiting for Superman* (dir. Davis Guggenheim, 2010), while others tend to be more radical (in form and/or argument), and are inclined to challenge, implicate and confront (subjects and audiences), such as *Kanehsatake: 270 Years of Resistance* (dir. Alanis Obomsawin, 1993)." Increasingly, however, on the whole, we're seeing far more of the former than the latter. Writer Daniel Glassman puts it well in another, more recent article for the Canadian documentary magazine *Point of View*: "Documentaries now prize story arc, sentiment and sanctimony over thorough investigation and argument; it's not expected that they play any important role in the information ecosystem. Their purpose seems to be to preach to the choir: tepid left sentiments for tepid left audiences." [Full disclose: *Point of View's* editor, Marc Glassman, is one of the author's professors at Ryerson University.]

If there's any doubt that what Winton calls "liberal consensus documentaries" have sucked far too much of the air out of their corner of the media landscape, consider how low the bar is currently set for documentary impact. In a recent piece for *The Ringer* about "this amazing golden era of documentary," for example, Sean Fennessey says this about the two highest grossing documentaries of the year so far: "Together, [Betsy West and Julie Cohen's *RBG* and Morgan Neville's *Won't You Be My Neighbor?*] make a pair of *political* moviegoing experiences — a history lesson about sincerity and an art project about the law — using totemic figures to make their points" (emphasis added). Not only is it worrying that two touchy-feely hagiographies — of Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg and children's television host Fred Rogers, respectively — might pass for political cinema in 2018, but their politics are obstinately centrist and middlebrow.

*RBG*, for instance, is a righteous paean to Ginsburg as a second-wave feminist icon that insists on seeing everything through rose-colored glasses. By way of example, in his review of the film for the A.V. Club, critic Ignatiy Vishnevetsky rightly notes that the reason "Ginsburg's dissenting opinions...are much better known than her majorities" is because "her judicial stance has always been that of a pragmatist, a moderate, and a middle-of-the-road Democrat." Unsurprisingly, then, *RBG*, has trouble "making a rousing appraisal of Ginsburg's moderate record as the stuff of radical sainthood." As he puts it, "centrism is still centrism, even when it's dressed up with 'Yas Queen's and fire emojis.'" Additionally, nowhere in the film do we find any critique whatsoever of

things like the aged justice's strategically high-risk choice to not retire during the Obama years, or her tone-deaf comments about Colin Kaepernick.

*Won't You Be My Neighbor?* does better by "Mister Rogers," but has its issues too. For example, in the sentimental framing of its subject as a "lifelong registered Republican" whose work consistently cut against the grain of his party's positions, the film (whether it means to or not) contributes to a dangerously wrongheaded fixation — specifically, what journalists Adam H. Johnson and Nima Shirazi have called "liberals' obsession with the phantom reasonable Republican." If anything, that's the kind of preoccupation documentary media should be more ruthlessly interrogating, not propping up.

And yet, the very same bill of goods is being sold in Peter Kunhardt's treachery new HBO documentary *John McCain: For Whom the Bell Tolls*. The film "celebrates [the Arizona senator] as a relic of a past when 'reaching across the aisle' was still possible," writes Matt Taibbi in his review for *Rolling Stone*. "[And its] extraordinary lineup of gushing interviewees — [George W.] Bush, [Henry] Kissinger, Bill Clinton, Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton, Joe Biden, John Kerry, etc. — is an implicit endorsement of this idea." *The Hollywood Reporter's* Inkoo Kang is quite right, though, when she says that the film's "nostalgia for a more reasonable sort of Republican isn't entirely earned." For one thing, as Taibbi puts it, *For Whom the Bell Tolls* and McCain's vision of bipartisanship really belongs to "the pre-Trump age when 'the middle' was still sought-after political territory, and the political class to which they all belong was not yet despised enough to make someone like Donald Trump a viable spite vote." For another, as Kang notes, "McCain's hawkish foreign-policy views...which barely get a mention, seem to assume that solutions are mainly to be found in an armory."

Appropriately enough, the centrist turn in mainstream documentaries is especially apparent when it comes to the issue of war. In his survey of the 2000-2010 decade for *Cinema Scope*, for instance, filmmaker Thom Andersen (who is best known for 2003's *Los Angeles Plays Itself*) makes a special point of noting that, during the Iraq War, the American cinema "admirably [assumed] the role [that was] inexcusably abdicated by television." *Nieman Reports'* early praise on this front was even more specific: "Iraq war documentaries [filled] a press vacuum...[offering] alternative explanations for the war in Iraq and the news coverage of it, as well as [criticism] of the administration's policies." (emphasis added). Though not all of these works found an audience, it's nonetheless worth remembering that some certainly did: Michael Moore's 2004 opus *Fahrenheit 9/11*, for example, remains the highest grossing documentary of all time, and by an incredibly wide margin.

Today, though, despite excellent work being done on the fringes, it's far less clear that documentaries in the main are fulfilling the same essential, radical function that they did in the early 2000s. Worse still, the tenor has changed enough such that some projects are now even carrying water for apologists of the U.S.'s most divisive conflicts. The most obvious example here would be Ken Burns and Lynn Novick's recent PBS series *The Vietnam War*, which was seen by a whopping 39 million viewers. Despite an adulatory reception from critics, it is, to be quite sure, a problematic work. In a post at Public Books, for example, College of the Holy Cross emeritus professor Jerry Lembcke points out that, among other things, "*The Vietnam War* echoes Jimmy Carter's 'mutual destruction' thesis that Vietnam and the United States were equally damaged by the conflict," and "in promoting healing instead of the search for truth," it "offers misleading comforts."

In a report for Inside Higher Ed, Colleen Flaherty enumerates further criticisms voiced during "A Fateful Misunderstanding: A Discussion of the Film Documentary *The Vietnam War*," a panel at this year's annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Evidently, participating scholars'

major point of contention was that “the documentary [includes only] two trained historians with military credentials but otherwise [relies] on witnesses — mainly U.S. veterans and their families.” In addition, as Flaherty explains, Burns and Novick’s documentary “avoids overt judgments about policy decisions that led to and prolonged the war, and instead takes what panelists described as an ‘elegiac’ and ‘conciliatory’ tone.” Among other things, the article also describes University of Chicago historian Mark Philip Bradley finding fault with the filmmakers for “glossing over...previous U.S. military involvement in Asia” and “framing...the war as a ‘tragedy’ rather than a series of ‘immeasurable and irredeemable’ mistakes.” (Fittingly, *The Vietnam War’s* cringe-worthy opening lines — “It was begun in good faith by decent people, out of fateful misunderstandings, American overconfidence and Cold War miscalculation” — have received a good drubbing, including at least one snarky comment that went viral on Twitter.)

There’s a good deal of image rehabilitation going on in Liz Garbus’s new Showtime series *The Fourth Estate* as well. A behind-the-scenes peek into the *New York Times’* coverage of the Trump Administration’s first year, the series is, as *Variety’s* Owen Gleiberman observes, keenly focused on “the nuts and bolts of [their] news process.” Given that it’s four episodes of this (for a combined total of around four-and-a-half hours), it’s hard not to get the impression that Garbus sees the “Gray Lady” as the gold standard and our best journalistic defense against the current regime. But especially after the “paper of record’s” historically disastrous and unforgivable role in the run up to the Iraq War — to say nothing of more recent blunders — perhaps what it really needs is to be knocked off its pedestal. Indeed, in a mixed-to-negative review of the series for, of all publications, the *New York Times*, Maureen Ryan opines that “not talking to higher-ups about gaps, blind spots and stumbles comes off as a missed opportunity.”

To be fair, Garbus was given astonishing access to the *Times*, and it’s generally not advisable to bite the hand that feeds you. At the same time, though, a choice of subject or way shaping a project can often betray a filmmaker’s particular biases or leanings. Because *The Fourth Estate* offers, in Ryan’s words, “almost no substantive examination” of “the things that really aggravate the paper’s critics” (i.e. “emphasis, omissions and the sheer tonnage of certain kinds of coverage”), it definitely feels like a documentary by and for “*Times* partisans” who more or less share the subjects’ “defensive mindset.”

Still, perhaps no recent documentary is quite as in the tank for the cause of centrist liberals as Greg Barker’s *The Final Year*. Coming full circle, the film follows Former President Obama, Former Secretary Of State John Kerry, Former U.N. Ambassador Samantha Power, and Former Deputy National Security Advisor Ben Rhodes as they attend to various foreign policy matters in the months before the 2016 Election. Taking notice of the film’s “promotional quality,” *Variety’s* Scott Tobias writes in his review that “the Obama team was always expert at protecting and polishing its image, and the film happily acquiesces with a highlight reel of diplomatic missions.” But by the time we get to the ending that clearly neither Barker nor the Obama White House were expecting, the limitations of not only *The Final Year’s* approach but its subjects’ ethos have become painfully obvious to the viewer. As Chuck Bowen puts it in his review for *Slant Magazine*, “the film smugly bolsters a cliché of the Democratic Party: obsessed by symbolism and decorum, it misses the sea change in plain sight, and seems terrifyingly unable and unwilling to question its direction, message, and salesmanship.”

Broadly speaking, this is a salient point for mainstream documentary culture to consider, as it’s very far from clear that the centrist turn is making inroads with audiences. For example, in an article from June about *RBG* and *Won’t You Be My Neighbor?* as “surprise hits,” the *New York Times* included an important caveat from IndieWire’s Tom Brueggemann. Putting things into perspective, he noted that their box offices performances, at that point, paled in comparison to the films of odious conservative commentator Dinesh D’Souza: 2012’s *2016: Obama’s America* (\$33.4

million), 2014's *America: Imagine the World Without Her* (\$14.4 million), and 2016's *Hillary's America: The Secret History of the Democratic Party* (\$13 million). As of this article's writing, however, both *RBG* and *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* have outgrossed *Hillary's America*. *RBG*, though, is still trailing behind *America*, and both still have quite a bit of work to do before they catch up to 2016.

But, of course, documentaries don't just exist on the center-to-far-right spectrum. Though they may get overshadowed by this more narrow range of work, there are what Winton calls "radically-committed documentaries" being made both within and without the mainstream. His aforementioned nonprofit Cinema Politica, for example, "supports and screens alternative, independent, and radical political film and video" through its "network of community and campus locals." They offer a curated, subscription-based streaming service that greatly expands the audience for such work as well.

The work of Laura Poitras is also about as radically-committed as you can get: even before her jaw-dropping 2014 Edward Snowden documentary *CITIZENFOUR*, she found herself unjustly placed on the Department of Homeland Security's watchlist for 2006's *My Country, My Country*, a revealing look inside U.S.-occupied Iraq. Moreover, her "filmmaker-driven documentary unit" Field of Vision, which "commissions and creates" short works, has quickly distinguished itself as one of our most thrilling and vital platforms for documentary filmmaking. In addition, Ava DuVernay's Oscar-nominated *13th* and Brett Story's critically acclaimed *The Prison in Twelve Landscapes*, both released in 2016, are examinations of the prison-industrial complex that come from filmmakers who publicly self-identify as prison abolitionists. [Full disclosure: Story is another of the author's professors at Ryerson University.]

There's even more on the horizon. Among others, *Did You Wonder Who Fired the Gun?*, an essay film about white supremacy from Travis Wilkerson (who is best known for 2002's *An Injury to One*), will bow in theaters this fall. Like all of his work, the much-buzzed-about new film is made "in the tradition of the 'Third Cinema,' wedding politics to form in an indivisible manner." Robert Greene's *Bisbee '17*, a timely look at the Bisbee Deportation of 1917 and the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW)'s role in the event, will have a national release before the year's end as well. The magazine *Jacobin* is also involved in the production of a new documentary about socialism in America, which has apparently had impressive access to Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, the Democratic Socialists of America member who won a startling victory in the Democratic primary in New York's 14th congressional district.

That said, resolutely leftist films do often face an uphill battle against mainstream documentary's centrist turn. For one thing, "radically-committed documentaries" don't usually have the resources for promotion and advertising that many "liberal-consensus documentaries" do. Netflix, for example, spent \$2 billion on marketing in 2018, so it's likely that Obama productions in the offing will get a proportionally larger push than anything coming from the margins. For another, as this article has endeavored to point out, radical perspectives have become more the exception than the rule in mainstream documentary, with liberal centrism dominating political discourse in films and series. This state of affairs makes it appreciably harder for alternative voices and stories to be heard by those who need to hear them.

But American audiences, like the American electorate, can and must reject the ideas we're getting inundated with in favor of more revolutionary ones. The Obamas' impending Netflix documentaries will probably tell us what we want to hear in an effort to make us feel good, but what our times call for instead is something else entirely: an activist-minded cinema devoted not to the Democratic establishment but to the people.

\*Daniel Clarkson Fisher is a Toronto-based writer whose work has appeared in AlterNet, *New Politics*, PopMatters, *Bright Lights Film Journal*, Nonfics, *Tricycle*, Religion Dispatches, and *Diabolique*. He is a student in the MFA in Documentary Media program at Ryerson University, and member of IWW Educational Workers Industrial Union 620.