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Masked men: hacktivism, celebrity and anonymity

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In her 1991 article 'Signs of Melodrama' Christine Gledhill provocatively claimed that the Hollywood star system descended from the stage melodrama's 'drive to realise in personal terms social and ethical forces'. The disguise is a melodramatic convention, concealing the true personality revealed in the narrative, as the melodrama reveals hidden moral truths. Approaching contemporary celebrity through this dramatic mode, this article considers the unmasking of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden in three recent films, *We Steal Secrets, The Fifth Estate* and *Citizenfour*. In true melodramatic style, the films' presentation of state violence and surveillance is rapidly displaced by moral studies of these three 'hacktivists'. Drawing on melodrama and genre studies as a methodological approach to studying these films, I trace the mask back to Alan Moore's anti-melodrama *V for Vendetta*. This article proposes celebrity studies would be well served by paying closer attention to the political efficacy of celebrity's opposite: anonymity.

Keywords: anonymity; Julian Assange; individualism; Chelsea Manning; melodrama; Edward Snowden

V for Vendetta: melodrama and the mask

'Isn't it strange,' asks the hero of *V for Vendetta*, 'how life turns into melodrama?' (Moore and Lloyd 2005, p. 31). Writer Alan Moore and illustrator David Lloyd's comic strip evocation of a fascist England withered by nuclear winter is best known for the Guy Fawkes mask worn by its protagonist, identified only as 'V'. Originally published in the Thatcherite 1980s, it has only increased in salience in the ensuing years. After the film adaptation (*V for Vendetta* 2006) concluded with a crowd wearing the V mask marching on Parliament, the Lloyd design was adopted by a loose association of Internet activists originally identified by the tag assigned to visitors to the message board 4chan – 'Anon', and soon after 'Anonymous'. '"On an anonymous forum", the site's moderator hoped, "logic will overrule vanity"' (Olson 2013, p. 28). *V for Vendett*a asserts the logic of anonymity against that of certain contemporary political narratives, those whose moral polarisation, blatant character typing and emotional intensity are reminiscent of traditional melodrama. In foregrounding this genre, the strip warns of its appeal and its pitfalls for political resistance.

Following the example of *V for Vendetta* this article will consider how melodrama structures films portraying three celebrities who have emerged from the anonymous realm of Internet activism – Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden. This invocation of the genre – now regarded as a 'mode' inflecting many genres – is not

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wholly new to celebrity studies. Hermes (2006, p. 298) has called attention to 'the repertoire of melodrama' in the moralising, sensationalism and intense stereotyping purveyed by celebrity gossip magazines. Her observation can be usefully allied to Elisabeth Anker's more recent claim that melodramatic conventions have governed post-9/11 American political discourse on both the right and the left.[1] In focusing on three political celebrities and their melodramatic characterisation in feature-length documentaries and docudrama, this article also seeks to reclaim genre studies for an analysis of celebrity's relationship to political efficacy – and political failure. So doing, it will also explore the logic of celebrity's opposite. While commentators such as Graeme Turner have acknowledged that contemporary celebrity can vary from 'a form of enfranchisement and empowerment' to 'something close to abjection' (Turner 2010, p. 13), there has been no corresponding attention to anonymity. Might the mask offer activists an empowering exit from the melodrama of celebrity?

V for Vendetta freely displays its debts to nineteenth-century stage melodrama and its sensational print coevals, the tuppenny rush and the penny dreadful. V enters the strip in a mask, a cloak and a cloud of teargas. In the tradition of melodrama's gradual revelation of moral truth, the hero who at first appears to be a villain rescues an equally traditional victim, Evey Hammond, a teenager on the verge of prostitution in order to survive. 'Everybody is special', V tells Evey, welcoming her into the genre's highly formalised *dramatis personae*. 'Everybody is a hero, a lover, a fool, a villain. Everybody' (Moore and Lloyd 2005, p. 26). V, we learn, stands for Villain and Victim, for Violence and Vindication, but also for Vaudeville and Variety in a dark narrative danced to the strains of 'Jerusalem'. Fittingly, given the etymology of the term 'melodrama', an entire chapter of the strip is set to music, a Brechtian lament entitled 'This Vicious Cabaret':

> They say that there's a broken light for every heart on Broadway.
> They say that life's a game and then they take the board away.
> They give you masks and costumes and an outline of the story.
> Then leave you all to improvise their vicious cabaret. (Moore and Lloyd 2005, p. 89)

The disguise is a melodramatic topos, concealing the true personality revealed in the narrative, as the genre reveals hidden moral realities. In the recurring enigma of its narratives, good and evil are immanent in the world, but no longer identifiable by the discredited epistemologies of religious revelation and hereditary status. Instead 'character', in the moral and psychological sense, is disclosed by physical appearance, gesture, costume, and symbolic properties. Christine Gledhill (1991) has argued that melodrama's emphasis on outward signs anticipates the physical typology of cinema's star system, much as its grounding of ethics in the person anticipates the individualist ideology of capitalism. The film star must look the part. S/he is identified with the role in the way that the liberal subject is identified with a sovereign 'self', impervious to the influences of society, economy, unconscious desire. And just as the star emerges from the ontology of melodrama, so does the celebrity culture in which s/he must operate. Where melodrama tests the moral worth of its fictional protagonists, the concentrated gaze of celebrity scrutinises the probity of public figures.

V for Vendetta commemorates the movie culture closed down in Britain by the fascist Norsefire, whose victims include a young film actress tortured in a cell next to V's. Yet, significantly, the individualist ideology of stardom is the one inheritance of melodrama that Moore's strip rejects, using its reflexive awareness of the genre to demonstrate instead the transferability of the type, the way roles can be assumed by

anyone. In its final frames, the hero is apparently killed, only for Evey to don the mask and fight on, dispatching V to Valhalla in an explosion that immolates Downing Street. 'There's no flesh and blood in this cloak to kill', V explains. 'There's only an idea' (Moore and Lloyd 2005, p. 236).

The mask V wears was designed by Lloyd in allusion to Guy Fawkes, a leading member of the English Catholic plot to assassinate the Protestant King James and his government by blowing up the House of Lords on 5 November 1605. Yet its whiteface smile and curved moustaches bear no resemblance to the bearded Fawkes in a contemporary engraving. The mask's pallor, contrasting eyebrows and eerie grin are more reminiscent of the Joker, the arch-villain in the Batman comics whose original appearance was based on Conrad Veidt's character in the film melodrama *The Man Who Laughs* (1928).[2] But the most compelling reference is to the idea of the mask itself, particularly the masks worn by 'guys', the effigies created by children to solicit money for fireworks exploded on Bonfire Night commemorations of the discovery of Fawkes and his barrels of gunpowder in the cellars beneath Parliament. In the overture to what the strip terms Act One, V succeeds where Fawkes failed, toppling Big Ben in a blaze of fireworks. Later V blows up 'the Ear', the fascist regime's surveillance centre, forcing it to award the 'the rights of secrecy and privacy' to its subjects: 'Your movements will not be watched. Your conversations will not be listened to.'

If *V for Vendetta* foresaw 'the importance of anonymity and privacy in an era when both are rapidly eroding for citizens, and when government secrecy and systematic surveillance are on the rise', it also anticipated that era's most characteristic subversives. Acting as a decentralised, often internally dissident, 'protest ensemble' (Coleman 2013, p. 2), self-identified members of Anonymous have hacked the websites of those vigilant copyright guards the Scientologists and the Motion Picture Association of America, and pro-censorship initiatives such as the Australian government's Internet filters against pornography. (Conversely, they have also attacked child pornography sites such as 'Lolita City', releasing its usernames online.) Their successes include invading the homophobic Westboro Baptist Church's website live on air, overwhelming Conservatives4Palin with junk traffic, and disabling the software that the dictatorial Tunisian government used to spy on its citizens. Further assistance was offered to local activists in several countries throughout the Arab Spring of 2011 (Coleman 2013, p. 13). Anonymous also supported the Occupy movement against economic inequality, offering online publicity and technological support. It became an ally of the Internet disclosure organisation WikiLeaks, briefly – if provocatively – jamming website access to leading online payment systems when they refused to transmit donations for the legal fees of its founder Julian Assange. On 15 October 2011, these organisations publicly converged when Assange addressed London Occupy, including several demonstrators wearing V masks, in a visit organised by Anonymous to their St Paul's Cathedral encampment. At his final press conference before seeking asylum in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London the following year, Assange himself donned a darkened V mask, as though to signal his own incipient withdrawal from public visibility.

Two feature films on WikiLeaks were subsequently released, *We Steal Secrets* (2013) and *The Fifth Estate* (2013). Although the first film is a documentary by the maker of the documentary *Taxi to the Dark Side* (2007), on US torture in Iraq, and the second a docudrama based on the participant observations of *Guardian* journalist David Leigh and former WikiLeaks activist Daniel Domscheit-Berg, both employ the conventions of melodrama, including the literal and metaphorical use of the mask.

We Steal Secrets: the villain and the victim

We Steal Secrets opens in the dark, bridged by radio static to a shot from space of a communications satellite circling the earth. As the static sharpens into an intelligible news report, the satellite dissolves into the broadcasts it is ostensibly transmitting, of protests against the 1989 launch of an American space probe due to the environmental hazards of its plutonium-powered delivery system. A former National Aeronautics and Space Association (NASA) administrator recalls the discovery just prior to the launch of an invasive programme or 'worm' in NASA's computer system, deleting files, changing passwords, and signing itself 'WANK – WORMS AGAINST NUCLEAR KILLERS'. 'Someone is watching you', the programme proclaims. The spread of the worm to 300,000 terminals sets off an investigation tracing it to Australia, where the trail goes cold. In retrospect, the administrator observes, the hackers left a vital clue in their message: a line from an Aussie alt-rock song still quoted by 'the country's most infamous hacker'. Cut to Julian Assange today, reciting 'You talk of times of peace for all, and then prepare for war'. To the beat of the political punk group Midnight Oil, the film's opening titles roll, interspersing images of the Iraq War with the band playing and a news reporter asking 'Julian Assange – is he a hero to freedom or is he a terrorist?' A chorus of contradictory replies is heard over an animated graphic of intersecting lines that resolves into an X-ray image of its subject's skull, with writer director Alex Gibney the credited radiologist. The sequence ends with the face divided, its left features those of US Army Private Bradley (now Chelsea) Manning, its right those of Assange. Over this Janus figure is printed the title *We Steal Secrets. The Story of WikiLeaks*.

The melodramatic imagination, Peter Brooks avers, sees 'the social world as the scene of dramatic choice between heightened moral alternatives, where every gesture, however frivolous or insignificant it may seem, is charged with the conflict between light and darkness, salvation and damnation' (Brooks 1995, p. 5). The project of *We Steal Secrets* is to personify this polarity. In both this film and *The Fifth Estate* the social world is repeatedly seen from space, the outer space from which satellites transmit their signals and the cyber space that becomes equated with it in the WikiLeaks logo of an hourglass from whose dark upper globe information leaks into the light. 'The Internet is not a safe place for secrets', Alex Gibney's film warns. Within it the titular admission of their theft is made not by WikiLeaks, but by the former Director of both the US National Security Agency (NSA) and the Central Intelligence Agency, General Michael Hayden. Hayden has defended the warrantless surveillance of American telephone calls and the 'enhanced interrogation' of terrorist suspects. Yet the film ignores his biography and motives to focus instead on those of two people who became famous for their attempts to expose such practices. It is Manning and Assange who are unmasked in this melodrama.

'Julian Assange was obsessed with secrets', Gibney informs us in his voiceover narration, 'keeping his own and unlocking those of governments and corporations'. The primacy of the personal that this statement manifests is maintained in the film's introductory interview, in which Assange is asked what drives him. Suspicions of hypocrisy are immediately incited by the representation of this secretive publisher of secrets as a performer, filmed by one camera crew while being interviewed by another, a framing that will be repeated in the film. Although *We Steal Secrets* offers a cursory list of the early successes of WikiLeaks – exposing tax evasion, government corruption, the dumping of toxic waste – it is the founder of the organisation that is its subject. With the increasing coverage that flows from the organisation's 2009 revelations about the Icelandic banking scandal comes fame, a fame that will eventually prompt one commentator in the film to

compare Assange with a rock star and another with 'the new Mick Jagger'. Assange's newfound celebrity status is initially suggested to grant him power. If, in David Marshall's influential formulation, such celebrity power is always ambiguous, the film's stress on Assange's public appearances, filmed interviews and news coverage emphasise the 'greater presence and … wider scope of activity and agency' attributed to those who 'move on the public stage while the rest of us watch' (Marshall 1997, p. ix).

In contrast with Assange's increasing fame, an anonymous communication is shown emerging from the WikiLeaks dropbox in 2010. Throughout the film the messages from this source appear in white type on a black background, as featureless as they are untraceable. In brief phrases the source identifies as 'an army intelligence analyst deployed to East Baghdad' offering information that 'might actually change something'. Although the analyst is later named and pictured, no voice is ever heard. In the dramaturgy of melodrama, this mute role occupies a special place, that of the victim unable to speak his suffering. The 1800 play widely acknowledged to found the genre, Guilbert de Pixerecourt's *Coelina or The Child of Mystery*, features an old beggar, his throat mutilated by an evil squire, who cannot voice his claim to his family or his own identity as a gentleman – and yet is instinctively loved by the young woman who later discovers that he is her father. In a paradigmatic scene of revelation, the beggar dramatically describes his travails in scribbled phrases read aloud by another character, as this film's spectators read that of the intelligence analyst in the Internet communications sent to WikiLeaks:

> i just … couldnt let these things stay inside of the system
> and inside of my head
> im just weird I guess
> i … care?

Protected by WikiLeaks' untraceable submission system, this source remains anonymous, notwithstanding the furore that broke out in April 2010 when Assange and his collaborators released 'Collateral Murder', video footage taken by an American helicopter crew of their machine-gunning of a group of Baghdad civilians and Reuters journalists. In one of the several fame claims that punctuate the film, Australian political historian Robert Manne observes that this is the moment when Assange moves 'from relative obscurity into an absolutely central world figure. And he knew what he was doing. He did it deliberately. He decides to take on the American state in public.' From this point in its narrative, *We Steal Secrets* divides its double-headed title figure into the stereotypical dichotomy of melodrama. Although both take on the American state, Julian Assange becomes the villain – dominating, duplicitous, unfeeling, masculine. Bradley (soon to adopt the name Chelsea) Manning becomes the victim – vulnerable, honest, emotional, feminine. Assange seeks publicity. Manning is exposed by betrayal. They are no longer anonymous. Instead, they personify the split in the celebrity sign perceived by Marshall, its 'tension between authentic and false cultural value' (1997, p. xi).

Manning's unmasking begins when, using the screen name bradass47, he contacts cyber journalist Adrian Lamo, famed for hacking the *New York Times*, after Lamo tweets a call for donations to WikiLeaks. Again the film narrates Manning's contribution to this correspondence with phrases from his emails, intercut with interviews with a personal friend, some army colleagues and Lamo himself. Again Manning's voice is unheard as he talks in text. Aware of Lamo's bisexuality, the young technician gradually discloses his crisis of sexual identity, his access to classified information and his lonely existence on an army base in Baghdad: 'im isolated as fuck … my life is coming apart'. The professedly

indifferent Lamo soon becomes interested. After seeking advice from a former counter-intelligence agent, he offers his correspondent confidential support – 'not for publication' – and asks him to describe himself. In emails illustrated by the film's montage of yearbook photographs and American flags set to a nostalgic melody, Manning evokes his background with a queer take on the melodrama's traditional 'scene of innocence' – a pint-sized computer geek grows up in Oklahoma's Bible Belt, wins prizes in science fairs and tries to avoid getting 'beat up and called gay':

> questioned my gender for several years. orientation was easy to figure out.

'We knew right away he was gay, it was so obvious', proclaims a veteran of the unit to which Manning is sent when his suitability for the army is questioned. But the 'small' and 'effeminate' volunteer, an adept computer technician who has enlisted to pay for college, is not discharged. Instead in 2009 he finds himself in Forward Operating Base Hammer, east of Baghdad, where his task is tracking Shia groups. When he discovers the abuse of innocent Iraqi detainees, his report is returned by his superiors with the instruction to find even more to detain. As he confesses to Lamo:

> i was actively involved in something i was completely against.

In January 2010, Private Manning returns to the US on leave, with 500,000 classified documents on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. He anonymously offers the 'war logs' he will later send to WikiLeaks to the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*. Both newspapers turn him down. While on leave, Manning later tells Lamo, he travels from Washington, DC to Boston by train, dressed as a woman. The soldier's increasing female identification is a powerful restraint on any public disclosure of his contribution to WikiLeaks. As he explains:

> i wouldn't mind going to prison for the rest of my life,
> or being executed . . .
> if it wasn't for the possibility of having pictures of me
> plastered all over the world press
> as a boy.

Confiding both his sexual and security transgressions, Manning places his trust in Lamo. In reply, the journalist submits a copy of their correspondence to federal agents and an article about it to *Wired*. In May 2010 bradass47 is identified and arrested. In August 2013, the soldier is sentenced to 35 years military imprisonment for espionage, theft and computer fraud. The film ends with former WikiLeaker Daniel Domscheit-Berg pronouncing Manning the true whistleblower, 'the courageous guy who took all the risks and now has the suffering'. In the most traditional of melodramatic proofs, suffering confirms virtue.

If Manning is this melodrama's virtuous victim, Julian Assange is its suave villain. To create this characterisation the documentary first sketches his peripatetic childhood in Australia, 'with no lasting relationships', and a rebellious adolescence among Melbourne's hacking community. Although brief acknowledgement is made of these young men's opposition to state surveillance, much more emphasis is placed on the fantasies of omnipotence said to drive them to break into the US Military Security network and 'walk around like God Almighty' until they are finally identified and arrested

two years later. The claim that Assange is 'ego driven' dominates the denouement of *We Steal Secrets*. Lamo's betrayal of bradass47 is dwarfed by the film's allegations that the WikiLeaks editor knowingly jeopardised the welfare of his indicted informant and that of coalition personnel and allied civilians by releasing the unedited entirety of many thousands of military and diplomatic communications collected by Manning. As *Guardian* journalist Nick Davies maintains in the film, 'Julian had no harm minimisation process'.

To this allegation of culpable indifference Gibney's documentary adds further evidence for Assange's egotism – his relationship to his increasing celebrity. On 25 July 2010 *The Guardian*, *The New York Times* and *Der Spiegel* publish front-page coverage of the simultaneously released WikiLeaks files from the Afghan war, detailing unacknowledged civilian casualties, the Pakistani government support for the Taliban and the operations of a secret US assassination squad. Assange is about to become, in the description of contributing filmmaker Mark Davis, 'one of the most famous guys on the planet'. In a telling scene, Davis interviews him while being made up for a TV appearance by a young woman who asks his name. Questioned about the wave of publicity poised to engulf him, Assange replies:

> Actually I would prefer that [WikiLeaks] didn't have a face. We tried to do that for a while, but the demands of so many people were so great that people started inventing faces.

Whatever Davis' intent in filming Assange in these circumstances, or the honesty of his reply, the conventional meaning of makeup comes through – that in agreeing to have his appearance altered in this way, Assange reveals both his narcissism and his falsity. His public face is a mask. Gibney cuts this scene into a montage of the TV news interviews that mark the release of the Afghan files, in which their subject is introduced over and over again by his now highly recognisable name – 'Julian Assange', 'Julian Assange', 'Julian Assange'. The montage is followed by his arrival that evening in the *Guardian* offices, where he is shown several British newspapers, all featuring spreads on the Afghan leaks with cover photos of Assange. Told that he has got his 'own banner at the top here, for three pages, in the *Times*', a relieved Assange concludes 'I'm untouchable now in this country'. The publicity that jails Bradley Manning is perceived by Assange to protect him from prosecution.

Warned that this is hubris, Assange is soon barraged by allegations of endangering Americans and allies, paranoid fears of betrayal, and the sexual assault of two Swedish women. WikiLeaks' coups in revealing civilian casualties, the torture and murder of prisoners of war, and the embarrassing contents of countless US diplomatic cables are marginalised by the film's central revelation, summarised on screen by *Guardian* reporter Nick Davies: 'There's a side to this guy which is great. And there's this hidden side, which has been so destructive.' Granted asylum in London's Ecuadorian embassy to forestall extradition for questioning in Sweden (and an Interpol arrest warrant from the US), Assange denies Gibney's request for an interview unless he pays a million dollars towards his legal fees or provides information about suspected WikiLeaks disloyalists. The director refuses, concluding that 'All Julian had left was his celebrity'.

The Fifth Estate: the villain goes viral

Written by Josh Singer and directed by biopic specialist[3] Bill Condon, but with considerable debts to the style of Gibney's documentary, *The Fifth Estate* (2013) opens with a title

montage of the history of communications – beginning with cave paintings and hieroglyphs, and ending with another satellite linked via an earth zoom[4] to the London offices of *The Guardian, Der Spiegel* in Berlin and *The New York Times*. As in the documentary, these papers' simultaneous revelations of the war crimes and civilian casualties recorded in the WikiLeaks Afghan files are quickly swept aside by the media's questions about Julian Assange. Like the cryptic signifiers that head the film, he requires interpretation. Watching his press conference online from Berlin is Internet technician Daniel Berg (played by Daniel Bruhl). A caption flashes back to his first encounter with Assange at a 2007 hackers' convention, at which the latter delivers a bravura speech on how WikiLeaks' security programme can enable whistleblowers to publish material without fear of retaliation, concluding with an Oscar Wilde aphorism adopted by Anonymous:

> Give a man a mask and he will tell you the truth.

Again, the masked man in this film will prove to be Assange, as watched by the fascinated Berg, the real-life author of one of the two memoirs on which it is based (Domscheit-Berg 2011, Leigh and Harding 2011) and from whose perspective the film is narrated. The enigma of Assange's identity and motives is intensified by the fictional qualities of the biopic, the key attraction of which is impersonation. In this case it is a highly touted impersonation (in appearance, gesture, accent and intonation) by Benedict Cumberbatch, famed for his portrayal of another near-autistic savant, Sherlock Holmes, as well as the computer pioneer Alan Turing. The film maintains the enigmatic quality of 'Assange' by initially withholding his image and then filming him from behind while a news report references 'piercing the veil' of state secrecy. As in Gibney's documentary, state secrets are equated with and then largely displaced by those of individual biography and psychology. Moreover, the film's chief representative of the American state is a conscientious woman diplomat (Laura Linney) desperate to protect an anti-Gaddafi Libyan from the exposure created by WikiLeaks' publication of US diplomatic cables (a fictional storyline created to support the film's indictment of Assange for failing to redact information about identifiable individuals before publication). The cables' embarrassing revelations of American diplomacy in action are rapidly superseded by the egotism, dishonesty and instrumentality attributed to Julian Assange.

Assange and Berg are initially compared in the film with the 'young Woodward and Bernstein', but theirs is no Watergate-style collaboration. If Cumberbatch is the modern Sherlock Holmes, Bruhl's Daniel Berg is at first his Watson – assistant, interlocutor, 'son' (with the same name, Assange tells him, as his own 19-year-old son) – then the victim of his deceptions and, finally, his opponent. In place of Manning, briefly mentioned as a '22-year-old private with a history of mental illness', Berg becomes the virtuous victim in this film, but the appearance of the actual individuals on which its characters are modelled presents a problem. Assange is fair and smooth skinned (matching melodrama's enduring characterisation of oppressed virtue as pale and feminine) and Berg is dark and bearded in the tradition of its swarthy villains. So aware is the film of this real-life deviation from its generic coding that it provides Assange with increasingly dubious explanations of his hair colour, and a final claim by Berg that he dyes it (piercing the veil of secrecy reveals that Assange has … dark roots).

In focusing so tightly on its villain, rather than the titular 'fifth estate' of citizen journalism, the film reverses the strategy of Anonymous's masked multitude.[5] Where the latter don the V mask as a group to prevent reprisals against individuals, Josh Singer's script and Condon's direction emphasise Assange's efforts to multiply himself. In a key

scene set after the successful exposure of a Swiss bank's tax evasions in 2008, Berg proposes that he and Assange celebrate with two of their online allies via Skype. Failing to dissuade him, Assange finally confesses that the two are in reality his aliases. When the shocked Berg asks how many volunteers WikiLeaks actually has, Assange assures him that there are hundreds, citing the evidence of the many leaks the organisation had received by that date. Berg stares into his laptop screen and the film cuts to what he sees, Assange and only Assange. A surreal pullback discloses rows of identical Assanges eerily smiling from their computer terminals. (In Gibney's documentary a similar effect is achieved when the V masks of Anonymous demonstrators are later replaced by the Assange masks worn by protestors against his extradition to Sweden.)

This fantasy of Assange's viral replication is ramified by Cumberbatch's uncanny doubling of his character; it also illustrates the film's explanation of how WikiLeaks is able to preserve the anonymity of its whistleblowers. To encrypt the information that arrives in its dropbox, the site surrounds it with a multitude of bogus messages. Encryption of the real message is effected by multiplication of the false ones. But where the anonymous source becomes camouflaged by this plethora of messages, the singular Assange proliferates into an overwhelming presence in the film, comically turning up anywhere Berg happens to be, including his Berlin bedroom at night (watching Assange throw shapes on a dance floor, an admiring woman remarks 'He's everywhere at the same time'). As the impact of WikiLeaks' revelations intensifies, Assange's constant presence becomes equated with the constant visibility of his very willing celebrity. His disillusioned apprentice will eventually resign, complaining to the sorcerer: 'There's just you and your ego'.

The day before filming on *The Fifth Estate* began, Benedict Cumberbatch received a 10-page email from Assange urging him not to make the film. 'He characterised himself as a political refugee', Cumberbatch later explained, 'with Manning awaiting trial, and other supporters of WikiLeaks who have been detained or might be awaiting detention, and the organisation itself – all of that being under threat if I took part in this film.' Promising that the film would not politically damage him, Cumberbatch defended the individualist perspective informing its melodrama and intensified by celebrity culture: 'Your life', he replied to Assange, 'your private life, your persona, is fatefully intertwined with your mission – it cannot not be now' (quoted in Aitkenhead 2013, p. 39).

Citizenfour: the sacrificial hero

Laura Poitras's *Citizenfour* (2014) is the final film to be examined here, one whose real-time documentation of an anonymous hacktivist emerging into self-chosen media exposure makes it a fitting conclusion to this study. Opening in autumn 2014 and awarded a 2015 Academy Award for Best Documentary, it is the third in Poitras' post-9/11 trilogy, following two feature-length documentaries on the consequences of American occupation and detention, *My Country, My Country* (2006) and *The Oath* (2010). 'Citizenfour' is the handle originally employed by Edward Snowden, the NSA contractor who contacted Poitras to disclose the US intelligence services' surveillance programmes. Assuming secret and unprecedented powers, co-opting the world's biggest communications corporations, they engage in a massive programme of interception, tapping 'Internet servers, satellites, underwater fiber-optic cables, local and foreign telephone systems, and personal computers' (Greenwald 2014, p. 92). Although Snowden considered publishing these revelations with WikiLeaks before Assange took refuge in the Ecuadorian embassy, and although Assange and his associates arranged his asylum in Russia, the American became

hailed as the anti-Assange. In a typical comparison, biographer Harding (2014, p. 221) stresses that 'Snowden was nothing like Assange. He was shy, allergic to cameras, and reluctant to become the focus of media attention. He never sought celebrity.'

Snowden sought out Poitras because he was aware of her engagement in a project about whistleblowing. She had already made a short film about William Binney, a former NSA Technical Director who had left the Agency in protest at its illegal activities. She had also filmed Assange, American WikiLeaks activist Jacob Appelbaum and journalist Glenn Greenwald, who had moved from his practice as a civil liberties lawyer to write about Internet surveillance for *The Guardian* and other media outlets. As Snowden explains in one of his initial emails:

> You asked why I chose you. I didn't. You chose yourself.

Poitras, in her turn, chose Snowden, reorganising her film to cast him as its central figure in a particularly melodramatic role: that of the sacrificial hero. In the series of emails with which the film opens, 'Citizenfour' warns her that the US security services have devised 'the greatest weapon for oppression in the history of man' and that to expose it without implicating others will require his identification:

> My personal desire is that you paint the target on my back … nailing me to the cross.

These messages are bracketed by a device reminiscent of the openings of *We Steal Secrets* and *The Fifth Estate*. In place of the cryptic signifiers of radio static and hieroglyphs, *Citizenfour* begins with an enigmatic series of illuminated dashes, eventually revealed as lights in a motorway tunnel. They conclude the preface to the film's central section, spanning Citizenfour's first communication with Poitras in December 2012 to his initial meeting with her and Greenwald on 3 June 2013, their first discovery of his name, appearance, age and occupation. Before he is unmasked, the burden of Snowden's warning has been disclosed. The film's attention now turns from the message to the messenger, as he is filmed over eight days briefing Poitras, Greenwald and *Guardian* defence correspondent Ewan MacAskill at the place to which the tunnel takes us, the Mira Hotel in Hong Kong.

Citizenfour has been publicised and reviewed as a spy thriller, in which a fugitive intelligence agent races against time to communicate a fateful message before being captured or killed by his former employers. The echoes of the *Bourne* series (2002, 2004, 2007) are particular resonant, and long before Poitras' film opened Edward Snowden was being compared with Robert Ludlum's rogue CIA assassin.[6] His real-life disclosures amplify the fictional surveillance of the third film in the series, *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007), which 'outlines the American national-security state, including its capacity to intercept telephone messages, hack into bank accounts, and electronically track suspects' (Dodds 2011, p. 100).

Williams (1998, p. 74) has identified the motifs of the chase and just-in-time rescue in generic film melodrama from *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1903) onwards, but the most melodramatic feature of Poitras' documentary is its detailed revelation of the moral character of its protagonist in the central section of the film. This opens with the date, 3 June 2013, and then a brief image of Poitras setting up her equipment, reflected together with Greenwald in a mirror in Snowden's hotel room. The shot that follows is the first of their interviewee, a pale and bespectacled 29-year-old in a white shirt. The film's interrogation of his motivation and feeling, as well as the intimate confines of the room, dictate close shots

and on occasion miked heartbeats. Acknowledging the media's 'big focus on personality', Snowden declares his wish that it should not become 'a distraction' from his revelations. 'I'm not the story', he insists, 'but anything I can do to help get this out …' When Greenwald asks why he is 'doing something that could put you in prison', he issues a clearly considered reply:

> I am more willing to risk imprisonment or any other negative outcome personally, than I am willing to risk the curtailment of my intellectual freedom and that of those around me, whom I care for equally as I do for myself.

A fade to black yields to the date of the following day, on which senior *Guardian* reporter Ewen MacAskill joins Greenwald in questioning Snowden. Perched on his hotel bed in the small room, Snowden is explaining how every digital, radio and analogue communication that the NSA has sensors to detect is 'automatically ingested' and retrospectively searched when MacAskill points out that he does not know anything about *him*. He obliges with his employment at private intelligence consultants Booz Allen Hamilton and his upbringing in a military family,[7] and then observes that they are not aware of his choice to make these disclosures: 'I don't think I'll be able to keep the family ties'. Although the film then returns to his description of the surveillance programmes operated by the NSA and the British Government Communications Headquarters (GCHQ),[8] Citizenfour's willingness to risk liberty, family and perhaps his life for his political convictions becomes the central theme. His suspenseful expose of the security state rests upon another generic foundation, the melodramatic vindication of a sacrificial hero.

Snowden's apprehension of these risks becomes clear on 5 June, when he tenses as room service rings and the fire alarm goes off. The interruptions prove routine, but he uses them to explain how security services can remotely access hotel telephones as well as the passwords he enters on his laptop. Jokingly donning his 'mantle of secrecy', he drapes his head and arms with a tablecloth to type a password to another data-mining programme, while teasing Greenwald about his failure to take similar precautions. The scene suggests an attractively self-deprecating individual, while at the same time showing how that individual must re-mask himself to carry out his revelations, an alternation between personal disguise and disclosure that structures the entire film. Later this same day Citizenfour's revelations begin to go public, as *The Guardian* releases the first of Greenwald's stories and the journalist appears on CNN with the Hong Kong skyline behind him to announce the NSA's collection of the 'phone records of every single customer' of the US business network Verizon.

On 6 June Snowden reads his partner Lindsay Mills' email reporting her questioning by the American authorities at their home in Hawaii. As *The Guardian* and *The Washington Post* publish further revelations about the US suborning of user data from Google, Facebook and YouTube, among others, he allows Poitras to film him in a self-contained 12-minute interview for eventual online release. In this interview he discloses his identity, high-security classification, concerns about government surveillance and intentions in revealing it. On the following day Snowden decides that the film should be streamed as soon as possible. Greenwald is impressed by his defiance, but worries about the consequences. 'I didn't try to hide the footprint', Snowden insists. 'I intended to come forward.'

On Sunday 9 June, the film within the film is posted on the *Guardian* website, becoming the most viewed story in the paper's history (Harding 2014, p. 152). By Monday, the final day of *Citizenfour*'s central section, a giant screen image of Snowden

looms over a Hong Kong shopping street. Inside his hotel room, the ashen-faced whistle-blower resembles 'a figure in some obscure ritual, being readied for sacrifice' (Parker 2014). After a call from the *Wall Street Journal* reveals that his location has been discovered, a Chinese solicitor suddenly arrives to arrange his last minute departure from the Mira, and Citizenfour disappears.

If the narrative at the film's central core is the melodramatic unmasking of its hero, its final section restates the necessity of its opposite. As the public absorbs Snowden's revelations, politicians from Brazilia to Brussels debate the 'consequences of eliminating privacy'. Security officers arrive at *The Guardian* to destroy suspect hard discs. Returning from a visit to Poitras in Germany, Greenwald's partner David Miranda is questioned for 10 hours at Heathrow airport. Granted asylum in Russia, Snowden eventually renews online contact with the filmmaker, who warns him of a possible set-up. After he is joined by Lindsay Mills in July, the two are seen making dinner together in their Moscow apartment, filmed by Poitras through their kitchen window in mute demonstration of their own continuing vulnerability to surveillance. When it is revealed that the NSA has bugged Angela Merkel's mobile, William Binney declares that to avoid interception now 'The way you have to do it is like Deep Throat did in the Nixon years, meet in the basement of a parking garage – physically'. And thus the film ends, with Glenn Greenwald meeting Edward Snowden physically at an unidentified location in Russia. Writing on scraps of paper, Greenwald scribbles information identifying potential new whistleblowers and hands them over to a clearly impressed Snowden. We glimpse a diagrammed chain of command rising to the president, but neither the substance of this story nor its sources can be spoken. The film ends with the two men tearing the scraps into smaller and smaller pieces and carefully clearing them away.

New Yorker writer George Packer has complained that viewers must take this final scene at face value. Snowden's enthusiastic reaction is made to stand surety for the importance of the unseen revelations that Greenwald shows him. Packer's complaint is that by the time of the film's release the chain linking Obama to what he infers are drone attacks is old news. My own complaint is that this scene relies literally on the value of Snowden's face, the signifier of the individual as the guarantor of truth and virtue. The issue is not old news but old genre, the melodrama in which these three narratives of heroes, villains and victims are filmed. Asked by Greenwald about his ethical influences in an exchange that does not appear in *Citizenfour*, Snowden mentioned, 'with a hint of embarrassment', video games – whose lesson he said, is 'that just one person, even the most powerless, can confront great injustice' (Greenwald 2014, pp. 221–222). Poitras has echoed his claim, describing her film as an illustration of 'how one person can change history' (Newfakh 2014). The multitude of activists – including Assange himself, whose role is cut back to a brief description of WikiLeaks' assistance in arranging Snowden's asylum – is pushed to the edge of the story. The Hong Kong network that sheltered him for several days is scarcely acknowledged. Yet, as the film's final scene demonstrates, each successive confrontation with the security state emerges from that anonymous plurality.

Poitras has said that when her mysterious informant first told her that he intended to identify himself she urged him to be filmed. Echoing Cumberbatch's letter to Assange, she recalls saying: 'Like it or not, you're going to be the story. So you might as well get your voice in' (Parker 2014). In eventually agreeing, Snowden could count on the persuasive effect of his professional expertise and his appeal for the public to be consulted about their mass surveillance. But this directly contradicted his own anticipation of the media's desire 'to personalise every story',[9] with the inevitable swerve of attention from

institutional malfeasance to the leaker's motivation. Long before *Citizenfour*'s release, Snowden's *Guardian* interview provoked the, by then, familiar diagnoses of 'fame-seeking narcissism' from commentators on CBS news, in the *Washington Post* and in Packer's own *New Yorker* (Greenwald 2014, pp. 221–222). If Snowden has since had more success than Manning and Assange at fending off what Greenwald (2014, p. 31) calls 'the two most favoured lines of whistleblower demonisation – "he's unstable" and "he's naïve"', he has nevertheless joined them, and several other whistleblowers prosecuted by the Obama administration for espionage (see Rottman 2014), in confinement – not to a military prison in Kansas or the apartment which houses the Ecuadorian embassy in London, but to a country whose own human rights record is far from exemplary and at whose mercy he remains.[10]

Snowden's stated reasons for identifying himself were a refusal of guilt for whistle-blowing, protecting his colleagues from suspicion and his assumption that the NSA's technological capacities would ensure his eventual detection (see Harding 2014, p. 147). An alternative strategy was retrospectively mooted by *Washington Post* journalist, and co-author of *All the President's Men* (1976), Bob Woodward: Snowden should have brought his information to Woodward and had his anonymity preserved as a legally protected journalistic source, becoming in effect the latest Deep Throat. Setting aside the consideration that Manning attempted precisely that and was turned away, and that Woodward has long functioned as an apologist for the DC establishment, the proposal returns me to the two kinds of political power that alternate in these three films – masked and unmasked. Woodward's Watergate informant, who identified himself in 2005 as former FBI second in command Mark Felt, was himself a melodramatic figure, rendezvousing with the journalist late at night in underground car parks, but he succeeded in disclosing the Nixon administration's wiretapping of its political opponents without becoming the object of moral, psychological or forensic scrutiny. Instead, the focus of public attention was – as he, Woodward and Bernstein directed it – on Nixon's 'dirty tricks'.

Assange, Manning and Snowden's exposures of Nixon's successors suggest that every attempt to extend technological control offers ample opportunities for its subversion. A more worrying question is whether the public, or indeed celebrity studies, can contemplate the agency of the unidentified citizenry among whom Snowden originally numbered himself (Who were citizens one, two and three?[11]). In our current fascination with the potency of recognition, whether celebrated or abject, we forget the multitude empowered by anonymity: whistleblowers, activists, opponents of commercial interests and government regimes, indeed anyone in actual or potential conflict with the law, a population in which the US NSA and their allies in Britain's GCHQ include us all. There are then those who seek the ludic pleasures of virtual subjectivity, altering not only their names, but their sex, age, origins and appearance in gaming, chatrooms, social networks, and so forth.

The interactive culture that produces today's instant celebrity also promotes the agency and expressiveness of the subject who refuses identification, assumes an alias or identifies under a collective rather than individual aegis like Anonymous, 'the quintessential anti-brand brand' as Coleman (2014, p. 16) has dubbed it. This also requires sacrifice, but not that of the heroic individual faced with exile or prison. What is sacrificed, she argues, is individualism itself, the self-promotion that melodrama and its cultural heirs effectively underwrite. Unencumbered by this public self, the anonymous continue to make history, deploying 'the power of the mask as a

potential force to unmask corruption, hypocrisy, and state and corporate secrecy' (Coleman 2013, p. 20).

What does this say to celebrity studies? After all, scholars in the field have not been slow to point out the individualist modelling of subjectivity that has ushered the phenomenon to its media centrality. Nor have they ignored the 'ordinariness' of those who now receive public attention. Moreover, the diegetic and extra-diegetic charge of 'fame-seeking' levelled at the whistleblowers in these films underlines the media's own stake in celebrity's motivating power, as well as its pervasiveness as a narrative of both self-aggrandisement and social achievement. But much as we may claim that we are all celebrities now, what these films cannot help but demonstrate is the emergence of a political resistance whose anonymity necessarily matches that of the secret state it opposes. Perhaps the ubiquity of contemporary celebrity is itself a disguise, masking the increasingly unnamed exercise of political power.

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Notes

1. Note Elisabeth Anker's observation in *Orgies of Feeling* that, at its post-revolutionary origin, melodrama 'performed a spectacle-laden *unmasking* of class privilege and absolutist power that had, until that point, structured social relations' (2014, p. 69; emphasis added).
2. Based on Victor Hugo's novel of the same name, *The Man Who Laughs* (1928) is a romantic melodrama with horror overtones in the *Phantom of the Opera* (1925) mode. Alan Moore himself would contribute to the Batman series with his graphic novel for DC Comics, *Batman: the Killing Joke* (Moore and Bolland 1998). Its 1988 publication date corresponds to the period in which Moore was also writing *V for Vendetta* for DC Comics.
3. As well as the final two *Twilight* films (2011, 2012), Condon directed the 1998 film about horror director James Whale, *Gods and Monsters* (1998) and *Kinsey* (2004).
4. The 'earth zoom' is created by animating satellite photographs from different altitudes into a single shot.
5. This concept can be traced back to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. I use it in the sense advanced by Antonio Negri (undated) in 'Approximations: Towards an Ontological Definition of the Multitude': 'unrepresentable singularities rather than individual proprietors'. As the slogan goes, 'Anonymous is not unanimous'.
6. 'The Jason Bourne-like aspects of his story – the cinematic international manhunt for the hero who says he only wants the truth to be known – alone are enthralling' (Andrews *et al.* 2014).
7. Snowden's grandfather was a rear admiral in the US Coastguard and many of his close relatives have served in the US military or the government.
8. Unhindered by the constitutional protection of US citizens from unlawful search and seizure, Britain's 'GCHQ has probably the most invasive network intercept programme anywhere in the world', Snowden declares in *Citizenfour*.
9. This includes Poitras, whose previous two documentaries are character studies: *My Country, My Country* follows a Sunni doctor who attempts to run for public office in the aftermath of the American invasion of Iraq. *The Oath* is filmed inside the Yemeni taxi of a former Bin Laden bodyguard as he talks to his passengers.
10. Snowden faces three charges under the US Espionage Act, for which he would be tried by a judge without a jury and which could result in jail for 30 years or more. There is no 'public interest' defence. American pressure has prevented 21 European countries from offering him asylum (see MacAskill 2015).
11. In an interview with the online news service *Democracy Now!*, Laura Poitras says that she asked Snowden this question in Moscow and he replied 'Well, I'm not the first person who's going to come forward and reveal information that the public should know, and I won't be the last' (*Democracy Now!* 2014).

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