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'Risk' Review: Julian Assange Gets An Unflattering Closeup From A Former Friend In New Edit

Laura Poitras first made a supportive documentary of Assange and Wikileaks, but then they had a falling out. The new version is dramatically new and better work.

Eric Kohn

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🐦 @erickohn



Julian Assange in "Risk"

Praxis Films

Some movies are ahead of their times, but [Laura Poitras' "Risk"](#) has grown into its moment. When the Julian Assange [documentary](#) premiered at the 2016 Cannes Film Festival in the Directors' Fortnight sidebar, it was a sturdy, one-sided salute to the Wikileaks founder, positioning him as a valiant defender of civil liberties and the freedom of information.

Unleashing government documents from a variety of anonymous sources, Assange is seen as a new-age journalist leaking news with purpose. The movie ended with the pale-skinned Australian trapped in the confines of London's Ecuadorian embassy, escaping what he claims to be trumped-up sexual harassment charges designed to take him down. Poitras' close-up access leaves us with the impression of Assange trapped in his sanctuary, hard at work, a martyr for his cause still intent on fighting on.

But a funny thing happened on the way to that revolution: Assange's image changed dramatically in the wake of the 2016 presidential election, and Poitras' relationship to her subject went with it. As her Oscar-winning Edward Snowden portrait "Citizenfour" proved, Poitras tends to favor work that exists within the news cycle rather than a few steps behind it, and returned to the editing room for another year. The new version of "Risk" is a dramatically improved, more personal work — one defined by the tantalizing contradictions embodied by Assange's legacy and Poitras' own struggle to resolve them.

Now, she has placed herself at the center of a thorny storyline that reflects her complicated feelings about Assange, the scandal that ostracized another member of his team, and a general feeling of disgust about the state of the world in 2017. Finally, "Risk" is up to the usual Laura Poitras standards: It's a movie of the moment.

[READ MORE: 'Risk': Laura Poitras Yanks Screenings For Last-Minute Edits Following New Julian Assange Developments](#)

From a purely cosmetic perspective, "Risk" has evolved into a more streamlined narrative, stretched across the last seven years. It no longer suffers from a preponderance of chapter titles that previously explored Assange's work with a mini-episodic approach, and hurtles into the present moment with an entirely new third act. Poitras' production diaries provide an intimate voiceover throughout, and she confesses to her personal involvement with multiple members of the Wikileaks team, as well as the reasons why her connection to Assange started to unravel.

The result is a searing portrait of Assange as a man pitted against his cause, an egomaniacal advocate who may or may not care about the ramifications of his work. Like much of the world, Poitras is still figuring that one out, and it's sobering to find that no amount of first-rate access gets her closer to the complete truth. We're right there with her, studying Assange as he works with his ragtag team and defends his actions, almost always with mixed results.

Once again, the movie opens in 2010, four years after Assange launched his operation, when the site is still valued by leftist causes for exposing the hypocrisies of the war in Iraq. At the time, Wikileaks has leaked some 700,000 military documents; Poitras gets remarkable access to Assange and his devout section editor Sarah Harrison as they continue their cause, haranguing Hillary Clinton's office when she's still Secretary of State and seemingly driving her lawyer bananas in a tense phone call. Sitting around the table with his team in the U.K., he forces them to rehearse explaining their identities as if prepping them for duty in a John Le Carré spy novel.

But in the new version, Poitras spices up these scenes with some new questions: Why does Assange, a man riddled with paranoia about governmental forces interfering with his cause, allow her to capture so much of his behind-the-scenes operation? It's the first hint of an image-obsessed celebrity whose own mystique may be an Achilles' Heel.

While "Citizenfour" crescendoed with one massive leak and the global fallout, "Risk" still moves forward in fits and starts, somewhat awkwardly transitioning into the media chaos surrounding rape charges leveled against Assange in Sweden. Perhaps because Poitras herself doesn't believe them, Assange never addresses those charges on camera or explains where they came from, but another member of the Wikileaks team doesn't fare so well.

In Poitras' original cut, Jacob Applebaum was the chic, fast-talking WikiLeaks senior operative who constantly stole the spotlight from Assange, and in one memorable scene put several Egyptian communications executives on the spot for censoring internet access in the midst of the Arab Spring. While Applebaum still gets his moment to shine, he faces a far worse reckoning than Assange, in the wake of multiple accusations of sexual abuse during his time at the nonprofit Tor Project. Making matters worse, Poitras also confesses to a brief romantic involvement with Applebaum, a shocking confession from the filmmaker makes it clear just how much this political survival tale has taken on a sense of personal desperation.



“Risk”

Nevertheless, Poitras’ main beef lies with Assange, whose personal brand swung from one extreme of the political spectrum to the other after Wikileaks’ involvement in the DNC email hack that many pundits blame for the Trump victory. While Poitras doesn’t offer her take on that decision, it’s clear that she’s soured on the man and his domineering personality. After her role in breaking the Snowden story, she recalls his frustration when she refuses to leak the documents from the former NSA contractor to Wikileaks (Snowden gave them to The Guardian). “I don’t tell him that I don’t trust him,” she confides in voiceover. “He’s still yelling when I hang up the phone.” Later, he asks her to stop spreading word of their falling out, and eventually decides to distance himself from the movie altogether.

Poitras laces these memories together alongside shadowy visuals to draw out the noir-like atmosphere thick with uncertainties. While “Risk” occasionally suffers from the cool, distant tone that tends to creep into Poitras’ films, and there’s a preponderance of dense scenes heavy with philosophical debate, the film unquestionably is a substantial and at times thrilling work of non-fiction storytelling from a master of the form.

The filmmaker goes to greater lengths in sketching out the other members of Assange’s staff — particularly devout right-hand woman Sarah Harrison, who seemingly never leaves his side; in this cut, she displays more anxiety about the stakes at hand once Assange begins his life on lockdown. Poitras still falls short of fleshing out key backstories, including Assange’s; we get nothing about the child he fathered in his teen years and the three other children he has reportedly conceived in different relationships, and only reference he makes to his upbringing comes up during a conversation with Lady Gaga. But that only enriches the paradox at hand. “I don’t care how I feel,” he tells the singer during a fawning interview from the Ecuadorian embassy, and for someone so keen on unleashing the truth, he sure likes to dance around it whenever it involves his own story.

And yet Poitras gets closer than anyone. In a remarkable closing scene, the pair share a drink and talk through his moral responsibility to the impact of his leaks. Assange tries to explain his approach by using the analogy of a weed-infested garden, and how little it matters in relation to the rest of the world. The point is clear: His intentions go beyond any individual country’s borders. But that answer alone doesn’t solve the question of his culpability in a disruptive action that has the potential to ruin millions of lives.

It’s an issue that dangles between them, and doesn’t look like it will vanish anytime soon. Poitras closes the movie with an audio clip added at the last minute from Attorney General Jeff Sessions, announcing intentions to prosecute Wikileaks and extradite Assange once and for all. Whatever comes out of those efforts, “Risk” goes a long way toward setting the stage for the next act.

Grade: B+

“Risk” opens nationwide on May 5 and airs on Showtime this summer.

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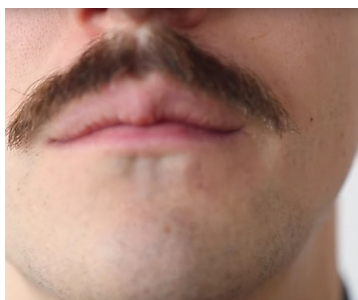
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EDIT ROOM | APRIL 28, 2017 11:15 AM

opportunistic re edit to fit the news cycle? bad look for poitras.

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JEFF | APRIL 30, 2017 5:47 PM

To be clear – Assange does not face “rape charges” in Sweden. The Swedish prosecutor wanted to interview him regarding certain allegations, which was driving the extradition in Britain, but no charges have ever been issued. Now that the US has announced publicly it seeks him, Assange’s reluctance to travel to Sweden has been justified.

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CAROL | MAY 1, 2017 6:21 PM

Laura Poitras was nothing more than a WikiLeaks groupie a few years ago, that had the great luck to meet Edward Snowden, otherwise nobody would know her name...

Since she has an Oscar, money & fame, she doesn't need Assange & WikiLeaks anymore, so she's now trying to put herself in a position where she looks more 'critical' and 'independent' than she really was during the production... She's simply an opportunistic woman, who betrayed her old friends because her new friends are more sexy.

A 'controversial' and 'twisted' portrait of Assange makes for a less boring film than the simple truth that he's simply a great and fearless journalist – everything Laura Potras is not: In the end, how much of Snowden's massive data material did we get to see published? Very, very, very little.

*Wouldn't it have been great if WikiLeaks published everything? We would have gained an amazing knowledge. It was a unique opportunity. And she fu*ked it up.*

*Poitras played it safe because The Guardian is so much more “trustworthy”. And to stay 'respectable' and get more awards and bullish*t.*

This woman is just weak & stupid.

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