Wormwood: out on Netflix

Yet in 1975, the Rockefeller Commission on CIA activities revealed the existence of MK-ULTRA, a research project exploring the use of drugs as a mind-control technique for interrogations. One of these drugs, it emerged, was the LSD slipped into an unwitting Olson's drink at a meeting of CIA agents and scientists in the Maryland woods a week before his death. After attempting to resign his post, he was taken to New York, ostensibly for psychiatric treatment, and checked into a room on the 13th floor.

His son Eric, a **clinical psychologist**, has been trying to piece together the events of that night ever since. His eloquent testimony forms the centrepiece of *Wormwood*, the new Neflix series by one of America's foremost documentary filmmakers, Errol Morris (*The Thin Blue Line*, *The Fog of War*). In his trademark style, Morris weaves interviews with Eric and other major players in the mystery into a crisply shot dramatic recreation of events starring actors such as Pete Sarsgaard and Molly Parker.

[embedded content]

When we caught up with director and protagonist in September at the **Venice Film Festival**, the conversation turned to subjects as bitter as the absinthe-flavouring plant of the title: "fake news", Trump and the search for truth.

This seems to be a story that has been big in the States over the years…
Eric Olson: It was certainly big in '75 and it had another eruption when we exhumed my father's body in '94.

Errol Morris: I wonder whether I first really read about this in the New York Times, in the Michael Ignatieff article. It's possible. In fact, it's likely.

EO: It’s likely, but when we first met, you said you’d never heard of this whole thing. Isn’t that what you said?

EM: I think I did.

(They both laugh)

EO: Once you get into this, you feel like you’ve always known it.

Eric, what’s your feeling in seeing the job done in this way? Are you satisfied?
EO: No. I mean, yes and no.

EM: You can say no.

EO: The film follows, to a large extent, stages in the evolution of my consciousness. In 2014, I went to see Seymour Hersh [an investigative journalist who wrote the key article on the Olson case in 1975] to get some help in ending this. He goes to this “deep source”, who turns out to be essentially the only guy in Washington who actually knows a thing. Hersh told me exactly what this guy had read in the file and that was just definitive: the detail, the coincidence of it all was just devastating.

You don’t seem that happy at the end of the series. You wonder what happiness all these years have brought you…
EO: It’s not about happiness. Happiness is not on the menu. It’s not just about your father, it’s about yourself. If you lose your father in this horrible, mysterious way, you also lose a big chunk of yourself. The only way you retrieve it is by understanding what happened. There’s a line from Proust I always think about: “Some things, in order to be felt, must first be understood”.

[embedded content]

EM: Was Hamlet brought peace by finding out that Claudius killed his father?

EO: It cost him his life; it leads to such chaos. Does he reach a certain apotheosis of selfhood? He does, in a way, but you wouldn't use the word happiness for it.

In the documentary, you mention that your mother simply "didn't want to know" about her husband's death. Have you ever felt this?
EO: Yeah, absolutely, every time I learn something new. In a certain sense, the story drove itself, but you also feel you're being pulled along in some inexorable way. At each point, you're horrified once again. I never wanted to prove that my father was murdered; I simply wanted a story that made sense. Do people get murdered by governments? Of course! It's only in the United States that you'd even question this. Sometimes I wish I was born in Moscow, where it's obvious they throw people out of windows. But if you're born in 1950s America, it's not. You feel like you've been made stupid. Most of the rest of the world would shrug and say, "Why are you wasting your time on this? Of course they throw people out of windows. What's wrong with you?"

Errol, we find ourselves in a time of increasing suspicion about the role governments play in our lives. Was this something you wanted to delve into?
EM: More suspicion? We live at a time when there are horrible, horrible, nightmare-like things going on. This is not fucking paranoia: it's reality! Our government is seriously fucked, and we are fucked in America, and it's not paranoia on my part.

How do you feel about the Trump administration's "fake news" agenda?
EM: I think it's dangerous. It's a denigration of the whole idea of truth and the importance of truth. Trump is telling us that the people in the news media are deliberately trying to tell us lies, that the whole enterprise of journalism is debased and that he is the oracle of truth. I find it frightening.

It seems to be finding traction on the Internet…

EM: That's something that interests me. When you had the people in the Federalist Papers writing about the importance of the First Amendment, there was the Jeffersonian ideal that good ideas would push out bad ideas: that if you allowed everybody the freedom to express themselves, the truth would out in the end. Is that still the case with the Internet? I don't really know. My joke line is that, 200 years ago, 99.9% of human idiocy went unrecorded: now we have the Internet. If you have this tsunami of information and, at the same time, the President of the United States saying that it's all fake, it has this terrible destabilising effect. It tells you that the truth doesn't even really mean anything.

EO: You almost get nostalgic for the old lies – the Gulf of Tonkin, the pretext for the Vietnam War, weapons of mass destruction in Iraq – because there was the assumption that basically we were trying to deal in truth, but certain people lied about certain things. Now, where's the baseline? It's a reverse of the Jeffersonian ideal – the bad news drive out everything.

EM: It's a very strange time in America and maybe in the world at large.

EO: I think that's one thing that people respond to in this film: you're told something in childhood and you try to figure out what the truth is. In this particular case, it's a kind of microcosm. There's a specific room, your father goes to that room and there's got to be an answer: what happened in the room? It becomes more diffuse when a lot of other agendas are brought to bear on it.

EM: It becomes a metaphor for a much larger issue.

EO: But it's also a focal point for a determination towards something specific. In the midst of all the confusion, multiple agendas and larger issues, there's still that room.

Wormwood is a six-part series which launches on Netflix December 15th.

Interview by Anthony Baxter and Alexander Darkish

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