

Netflix's "Voyeur": A Voyeuristic Review

The "Voyeur" directed by Myles Kane and Josh Koury is a documentary film based on Gay Talese's investigative reporting about a man named Gerald Foos, who bought a motel in Denver, Colorado in 1969 to spy on the private lives of other people for decades. But as the documentary exposed deeper, more complex flaws of humanity, I realized that a journalistic reportage is more than just telling a story.

This documentary successfully depicted the wreck that is journalism, and just how fragile credibility can be for a journalist, no matter how long it took to establish it.

The movie started with the general information: Gerald Foos was a voyeur. He built a motel to satisfy his voyeuristic habits. He spied in the lives of his motel guests. He saw a lot of sex, different behaviors, and even murder. He did this by peeping down through fake ventilation grills in the third-floor attic he had built expressly for that purpose. He considered himself a researcher for doing all that. Anyone who read The New Yorker article (by Gay Talese) already knows those bits of information. The documentary followed and featured the two men, Gay Talese and Gerald Foos themselves, as they conspired to retell the story, but this time, in a book.

However, the documentary also showed us what they began to question: How much of Foos's truth was actually true? And why did he do what he did?

Gerald Foos is undoubtedly an unreliable source. In fact, half the time he was not even sure of what he's doing. I believe that he is disturbed, and I'm disappointed that the documentary didn't try to explain or delve into his psychological condition, because I'm sure it would have explored the complexity of his story as a voyeur.

Gay Talese, on the other hand, is someone both opposite and the same as the voyeur. Gay have always been controversial, and I think he's the kind of man you'll either trust or be suspicious of. In the movie, I felt how ambitious he was to get a good story and be known for it. He's a strong personality, almost natural to act in front of a camera, but the documentary was successful in portraying how faulty his character could be.

Funnily enough in this documentary, the "Voyeur" was in fact Gay Talese. Perhaps the directors were too enthusiastic on emphasizing that, since the film was more centered on him, only with Gerald Foos mostly just portrayed as a "sociopath who wants attention". And though I may agree that Foos was indeed troubled, I feel that his story lacks justification. It could have been tackled more, with its history (not just Foos' history, but voyeurism itself) and more exploration on how and why Foos developed that kind of obsession. It was explained in the first part of the film, but it lacks analysis.

I also had some doubts of Foos's veracity when it came to the controversy of Earl Ballard. Why did he think it was unimportant to mention Ballard owning the hotel afterwards in the story? Was it for the intention of protecting Ballard's identity as a fellow voyeur or just so Foos could keep the fame to himself? Or were his reasons stated in the film fabricated, a last-minute fix to his and Gay's credibility damage? If Gay had known about this, why did he still continue his book? Was Gay really "duped"?

In the end, what I have deduced in the film is this: there's always another side in every story. Gay Talese taught me, an aspiring journalist, to be careful of my sources. Gerald Foos may have been unreliable, but I have no doubt that Gay Talese remained, even if flawed, an ethical writer. Especially

when he disavowed his own book to admit a mistake. That was a bold move, a rare thing to see among journalists today. He is realistically admirable.

Foos, with what he saw as a voyeur, revealed to me that watching life in its full rawness cannot always lead to satisfaction. That not all people's intimate lives are exciting, rather, it's often destructive and unhappy.

He had always watched other people his whole life, yet now he's the one being watched. What's good about it is that the questions weren't really answered. It only left more doubts, more whys. As Gay Talese said, "the story never ends, the stories never die." The answers are left to the intuition of the audience, the new voyeurs here.