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Mitt

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Mitt. Directed by Greg Whiteley.

Netflix Original, 2014.

Reviewed by Hunter Phillips

I ndependent of political ideology, the 2012 election signified the apex of the “Mormon Moment,” a period during which The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints occupied a greater space in the public consciousness than perhaps ever before. This moment was defined largely by Republican candidate Mitt Romney, arguably the most well-known Mormon to those outside the Church. His ascendance to the presidential nomination was a historic moment for the Church and its members, for whom national relevance represents a major shift in their self-awareness. Despite his own ubiquity during the election cycle, Romney remains an enigma to the average American. However, his inscrutable nature never appears to be a plea for privacy—the man has spent most of his adult life in the public sphere. Rather, at face value, he appears to simply be a respectable figure, a competent, seasoned politician and family man without any exceptional flaws or attributes. In the world of politics where tabloid drama and Hollywood flair are increasingly expected, Mitt Romney is sometimes seen as, in a word, boring.

This is the dilemma Greg Whiteley—an alum of the Brigham Young University film department and director of *New York Doll*—faced when collecting footage gathered from 2006 to 2012 to create the documentary *Mitt*, which premiered at the Sundance Film Festival in January 2014. Whiteley had a responsibility not only to accurately portray Mitt Romney as a man and politician but also to bring out his humanity in the process. The documentary takes on the challenge of making an audience care about someone who does not necessarily matter much to their future. *Mitt* is a film focused on introducing Americans to the private side of a man who, chances are, will not have such a momentous

public life once again. History indicates that, with a few notable exceptions (such as Al Gore), the losers of presidential elections fade into footnote-dom. Whiteley takes this struggle on, and he seems to have played some part in Romney's recent political resurgence. While the film condenses six years of political history into a ninety-minute package, the result is actually perfunctory in its politics. The film is most enlightening in its moments of private contemplation.

Consider *Mitt*'s tagline: "Whatever side you're on, see another side." The film positions itself as a revealing documentary into the inner life of Mitt Romney, particularly targeted at those who may have vilified him during the election. I contend that the public perception of Romney was not usually one filled with vitriol. He was mainly seen as an upstanding figure, and conversations drifted more toward his politics than his personal life—and if the personal ever came up, the questions were whether there was more to him than the steely public persona. As such, Whiteley's incredible level of access to Romney over the course of both the 2008 and 2012 elections presents an opportunity to reveal a great deal about Romney, a level of intimacy rarely granted by a presidential candidate. It is surprising, then, that *Mitt* holds so much back from the viewer, seeming to cut away just as something interesting, something multidimensional, is about to happen.

The film shies away from discussions of partisan topics—it is decidedly neutral in its politics. The only moments at which Romney appears to have an opinion are in brief mentions of American small business owners. During moments of frustration, such as after the disappointing second debate of the 2012 election, Romney and his family gather backstage and discuss the aftermath. The atmosphere is uncomfortable, and it seems to be a moment when Whiteley would have been asked to turn his camera off. The footage continues on, but even in the pressure of the moment, it is difficult to perceive what Romney is feeling. He mentions some numbers, asks for more statistics and shakes it off with a resigned private shrug. This and other scenes may indeed be accurately representing what happened on the campaign trail, but it makes for a documentary that is purely document, with few new windows into the subject's personality.

If the film is disappointing in its treatment of Romney the politician, it can perhaps be attributed to the filmmaker's constraint in taking a political stance. This is, after all, not a political hit-piece. It is a film released after the fact, when the politics matter far less than the private

moments. *Mitt* succeeds more often in these moments than when it attempts to serve as a historical record of the election process. One of the opening scenes is a family vacation from the period before the 2008 election. Romney plays with his children and grandchildren, tobogganing down a hill and throwing snowballs at each other. Romney is asked about a pair of old, duct-taped gloves he wears, despite having been given a new pair the year before. “Aw, these still work great,” he responds, a remark that could surely be spun into a story about frugality in a campaign situation. Here, though, it reads as complete sincerity. This single shot involving Romney’s gloves is a microcosm of the film’s more worthwhile goal—to reveal him not as a political machine but as a man with his own ideas and inner life.

Such moments magnify the fortune that Whiteley had in receiving this sort of access to the Romney family. Throughout the film, it is clear that he is an embedded presence in this family’s lives, most clearly in a moment when some of the many grandkids wave to the camera and say, “Hi, Greg!” This indicates not that Whiteley is a patsy, simply in the back pocket of the Romney campaign, but rather that he is a highly specialized home movie director, quietly observing life as it happens. His *verité* style is not overly concerned with composition—in fact, many shots are obscured by a plant or piece of furniture—but his camera lingers in the right moments, such as in family prayers and moments of contemplation. It quickly becomes clear that Whiteley’s primary motive is to make an apolitical film about politics. In that respect, he mostly succeeds, even if the film puts up a facade as a political document.

Mitt succeeds as a representation of a man on the cusp of something monumental and moves the audience’s perspective away from that magnitude and into a smaller, more private point of view. Remarkably, that private view may have helped Romney’s public prospects. Whiteley also approaches Romney from a familiar, Mormon perspective. Idiosyncratic aspects of Romney’s personality make more sense after a life in the LDS community. Those who championed Romney solely because of his religious convictions will leave unabated. The film, while never indicating that Romney’s inherent decency is a result of his Mormonism, also does not ask viewers to *not* make that connection. The aspects of family life that general audiences may be warmed by are deeply familiar to anyone who has attended a sacrament meeting or family home evening. The rituals and traditions on display, while never identified by name, are plainly there. As such, *Mitt* functions as a kind of home movie

about the classically traditional Mormon family. As the Church itself works to expand the characterization of its members, the film still functions well as an ideal of that representation. Even if it is innocuous as a political statement, *Mitt* is an engaging film that offers multiple insights to non-Mormons and even offers new readings to those in the fold.

Hunter Phillips is studying writing and directing in the Media Arts program at Brigham Young University. His academic interests primarily focus on television, interactive media, gender, and American cultural history.