

Philippines: How to make a damning documentary about a world-class liar

Thursday 14 October 2021, by [GREENFIELD Lauren](#), [WILKINSON Alissa](#) (Date first published: 14 November 2019).

***The Kingmaker* director Lauren Greenfield talks about her revealing Imelda Marcos documentary.**

Lauren Greenfield has built a career partly on chronicling excess. In films like *The Queen of Versailles* (2012) and *Generation Wealth* (2018), the documentarian explores the fabulous, over-the-top wealth concentrated among tiny numbers of people, providing a window into extravagance that seems to teeter on the edge of the tragic — all this money, and for what?

So it's fitting that her new film *The Kingmaker* looks at one of the most famously extravagant women in recent history: Imelda Marcos, former first lady of the Philippines. When Marcos and her husband, dictator Ferdinand Marcos, were driven into exile in the United States in 1986, [Imelda left behind a stash of more than 1,000 pairs of shoes](#). And that might be the only thing a lot of people know about her.

But there's much more to Imelda Marcos — and that's what Greenfield dives into in *The Kingmaker*. Marcos is interviewed throughout, and at first we just get her side of the story. But then Greenfield slowly fills in what's missing and challenges any outright fabrications by talking to people who remember the reign of terror that was the kleptocratic Marcos regime, and draws a line between that regime and the more recent rise of the [murderous authoritarian Rodrigo Duterte](#).

I spoke with Greenfield in New York about whether Imelda Marcos believes her own lies and how to undercut an unreliable narrator in a documentary. Our conversation has been edited and condensed.

Alissa Wilkinson | Imelda Marcos, it turns out, is the unreliable narrator of your documentary. Did you expect that going in?

Lauren Greenfield | Frankly, I was just so excited to be able to talk to her. I didn't really have an expectation for what she would say.

I thought she was surprisingly candid in the first interview, so it seemed more like she believed her own story, rather than telling untruths. It took me like a little while to realize that what she said was just not true. She first told me about how great her marriage was, and I really didn't know otherwise. But then, I learned about the affairs. I learned about other things that were obviously untrue [such as the state of the Marcos marriage, the way the Marcoses accumulated their wealth, and the living conditions in the Philippines under Marcos's imposition of martial law]. When it got to the really egregious things, then it became really clear.

I realized she had a strategic narrative that was part of redeeming the name of Marcos and part of coming back to power.

Alissa Wilkinson | Do you now think those are deliberate lies that she's plotted out? Or have they

changed over time?

Lauren Greenfield | No, I think they've evolved over time. A lot of the things she says are just lines that she repeats. She would repeat the same thing to me two or three times. And then, when I would do research, I would see also her repeating it in other places. But then, she'll come out with something totally unexpected, and I think this is why she's so interesting to talk to.

Andy Bautista, who's the former head of the PCGG [the Philippines' [Presidential Commission on Good Government](#)], says, "She comes out with these spontaneous admissions." So, she'll say [in the film], "I had my money in 170 banks." He didn't know that, and he spent years going after her ill-gotten wealth.

She is unguarded in some respects, mostly because she doesn't think anything she did was wrong. So why not say it?

Alissa Wilkinson | In some ways, the movie feels like a psychological portrait more than anything else — a portrait of a wealthy, delusional person, and she's certainly not the only one. But do you have a sense of who's enabled her delusions or her lies? Who's helped her craft that narrative? Are her children part of that?

Lauren Greenfield | I think she's somebody that nobody says "no" to.

I'm sure there were probably times that people on our staff thought a film about her was not a good idea. But *she* wanted to do it. And she's unstoppable.

The children definitely are complicit in the narrative of, "Everything was good during the Marcos regime and there's nothing to say sorry for." In an interview with [Marcos's son, the politician and vice presidential candidate] Bongbong [Marcos] before the election, a reporter said, "Are you going to say sorry for martial law?" Which is what people wanted. And Bongbong said, "If I hurt anybody, I would say sorry, but what do we have to say sorry for? Should we say sorry for the road? Should we say sorry for the infrastructure? Should we say sorry for the highways that were built?" And so in way, it's very Trumpian, like leaning into the story. Nothing was wrong. Never saying sorry.

Alissa Wilkinson | It's not as if the people of the Philippines are responsible for any of what happened during the Marcos regime, but you do talk to some Filipinos who seem to have adopted the Marcos family's narrative, which papers over or outright denies what really went on.

Lauren Greenfield | Yeah. There's that, as well as the young electorate who didn't know and were not taught [the history of the Marcos regime] in schools. I think the Marcoses have taken advantage of that and also fueled this narrative on social media to a very vulnerable population.

The new government also never did what a country like Germany did after [World War II], where it made sure to inculcate history in the young people. They were forgiving, and a lot of people remained in government who played both sides of the coin. And the judiciary has vulnerabilities to corruption — there are hundreds of cases against Marcos, but if there were convictions, they didn't stick. Nobody ever did jail time.

Alissa Wilkinson | The houses in which we see Mrs. Marcos during your interviews with her are pretty incredible and they seem carefully arranged — all of those possessions and pictures and artwork and so on. Did she decorate them herself?

Lauren Greenfield | There are three houses and a palace in the film. Those photographs that are out in the garden of the family home and start falling over — a lot of those photographs have been

reproduced and are also in the other properties. So in her Manila apartment, all the same pictures are there. And this, I don't really even understand: In one property, you'll see a priceless work of art, but in another property, you'll see a replica.

I don't know who does her interior decoration but it's very distinctive, and I definitely wanted to have that as part of her portrait in the interviews. Then, I tried to contrast that with the credible truth-tellers and keep their interviews very raw and unfiltered and unmediated. They're just these credible voices, no makeup, no artifice. Hers is a world of artifice.

Alissa Wilkinson | I feel like a lot of documentaries bend over backward to make sure the viewer knows that the subject is raw and authentic. In a way, this movie is just the opposite. She's certainly an authentic version of herself but that self is constructed from artifice. How do you interview a person like that?

Lauren Greenfield | First of all, I did want to also show her humanity, and I think you're drawn into her humanity at the beginning of the film. But I tried to have the interviews themselves function as *cinéma vérité*. It's not just about what she's saying, but it's also about the maids coming to help her or about a look or a gesture.

Alissa Wilkinson | Like when she knocks over those frames and breaks the glass in them, and the man nearby just starts cleaning them up while she keeps talking without missing a beat.

Lauren Greenfield | That's really what I consider a *vérité* moment. Or in the interview where she starts moving a gold sheep or asking about makeup — in that interview setting, there are still telling, apparently unrehearsed moments.

But the truth is, she's so charismatic and so convincing that when I experimented with people looking at the footage, if she would tell you a story, you would believe it. And so that really led to the structure of the film, in which truth-tellers and real footage is sometimes layered right on top of the lie, so the audience knows.

Alissa Wilkinson | Which can be tricky, I think. I was [talking with Errol Morris about his Steve Bannon film](#) recently, in which he tried to do the same thing but feels as if some people miss the irony entirely.

Lauren Greenfield | I haven't seen that film. But I definitely felt like there is a criticism, which I think is legitimate in this era of disinformation, of giving airtime to somebody who's spreading this misinformation.

So in this case, I felt that we needed to hear the narrative that she was trying to spin. Then, when we deconstructed it, we needed to understand why she was doing it and to debunk it. All of those things were important.

That was the idea, but it wasn't easy. That was why I had to go out and find other voices. She is so charismatic, and a lot of people are coming to [see the film] with no knowledge of her. And even if they do have knowledge of her, it's not necessarily knowledge that's going to give you the tools to have context for what she's saying.

Alissa Wilkinson | Right, like many Americans may not remember anything other than her infamous shoe collection.

Lauren Greenfield | And even so many young Filipinos who have seen this movie have been saying, "Thank you. My parents fled Marcos, but I didn't know why." Andy Bautista has been saying that he

thinks the shoes are a distraction. And in a way, I think that's a powerful idea, because she's so harmless if all she is is a vain, rich woman with shoes. It's a way to distract. It reminds me of when she says early on in the film something about women being underestimated and that it's useful.

Alissa Wilkinson | Has Imelda Marcos seen the movie?

Lauren Greenfield | She hasn't.

Alissa Wilkinson | Do you think she will?

Lauren Greenfield | We haven't showed it in the Philippines yet. I think she will when we show it in the Philippines.

Alissa Wilkinson | What do you suppose she'll think of it?

Lauren Greenfield | It's so hard to know. She might like a lot of her scenes, and the "kingmaker" title. But I don't think she'll like the other voices we brought in, because [the Marcoses] have spent a lot of time and money drowning out the other voices. They're trying to sell a narrative and they're not going to like anything that goes against it. They probably won't like me giving time to their opposition.

Alissa Wilkinson | Your movies are about wealthy people, albeit vastly different ones. Is there something that ties them together?

Lauren Greenfield | I do think this movie is a big departure for me. I've looked at wealth, but this movie looks at the connection between money and power. Money goes a long way in politics in the Philippines. Money also goes a long way in fueling a propaganda campaign on social media.

But the other thing I think that overlaps with [my 2018 documentary] *Generation Wealth* is Imelda's psychology. It's why I included some of her backstory at the start of the film; I don't think she was always the Imelda like we know her to be now. I think she became that person.

In *Generation Wealth*, everybody's drive [toward extravagance] comes from a trauma, often from childhood. With Imelda, her story is that she became an orphan, was traumatized, becomes a beauty pageant queen, then falls into the arms of Marcos, who can give her love. She's ambitious and he can give her a better life, get her to Manila and start the drive toward being important and rich. He was already a Congressman and already had aspirations to higher office. Then I think when he betrays her, that's when she becomes insatiable in terms of material things. And I think that the material things are not for their own safety.

I don't think she cares that much about the shoes or the clothes or even like the jewelry. I think it's about what it gives her, how she gets to be this queenly figure that people love.

So ultimately, I do think she's looking for love, but it's a kind of adulation-style love. It's just a symptom of something deeper, which is kind of human and vulnerable. But I didn't want to let her off the hook for any of the consequences of the regime.

Alissa Wilkinson | It's hard to know where the line is between acknowledging that someone like her is a hurt person and also holding the powerful responsible.

Lauren Greenfield | When I started it, I thought there was a possibility this movie would be a redemption story. But the opposite ended up happening. Because she ends up repeating her actions in helping Duterte get put into power, it reveals how much agency she had the first time.

Historically, I think some have thought, “Maybe she was just the wife of Marcos. Maybe he was really the corrupt one.” I think he was the one who taught her. But I think after the revolution, she was very powerful. But more recently, it was Marcos money that got Duterte to power — and 30,000 people have been killed in the last two years. There’s blood on their hands.

Alissa Wilkinson
Lauren Greenfield

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