Episode Book

EPISODE #6074

The Worst Documentaries of 2026 (So Far)

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SYNOPSIS

After a day of recommending documentaries, Daniel asks for the other list: the most unnecessary, limited and critically panned documentaries and true-story films of 2026 so far. Corn, Herman and Hilbert hand out awards. Most Recycled Premise goes to Big Chicken, a sequel to a sequel about the same bird. The Infomercial Award goes to Disney Worldbuilders, over Being Gordon Ramsay and a Qatar World Cup defence. Netflix's Murdaugh Instadoc took fourteen days from court ruling to release. Mr. T calls his own documentary garbage, and its producer forgives him. Michael and Michael Jackson: The Verdict split critics and fans in opposite directions. Melania is the worst documentary of the year so far: nine percent from critics, ninety-nine from its audience, and, in Variety's words, a film about a woman walking into and out of rooms.

DANIEL'S PROMPT (Summary)



Daniel

Comedic awards episode: the most unnecessary, limited or critically panned documentaries and true-story films of 2026 so far

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Welcome to My Weird Prompts. I'm Corn. Earlier today we gave Daniel ten documentaries worth his time, and then ten true-story films worth his time. He's now sent a third request, and I'd like to read it exactly as it came in. "I could use a funny one. Worst docs of twenty twenty-six so far."



Herman

Herman Poppleberry. And the brief is specific. The most unnecessary, the most limited, and the most critically panned documentaries, or true-story films, released since January. One note before we start. This script was written by hand, offline, from a research pass done today, the seventeenth of October. Every score is from Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic as of this morning, and every quote is a real critic's words, credited by name.



Corn

Because the critics did the hard part. They watched these.



Herman

They did. I'd like to thank them. Some of them watched six episodes of Gordon Ramsay.



Hilbert

I've watched all of them.



Corn

Hilbert.



Hilbert

Hilbert Flumingtop, producer. Somebody had to check the research, and the research said "watch these". So I did. Fourteen titles, all this week. I have notes. I'll be presenting one award, because I asked to.



Herman

Oh, we're doing awards?



Hilbert

I've made envelopes.



Corn

Of course you have. Fine, awards. And one ground rule, so nobody writes in. Nothing we recommended earlier today is on this list. We are not going to tell Daniel to watch something at three o'clock and then call it garbage at eight.



Herman

Consistency. Let's start gently. The first award is for Most Recycled Premise, and there were two very strong entries.



Corn

Go.



Herman

Big Chicken: A Fast Food Conspiracy. Netflix, August. The comedian Mo Gilligan eats fried chicken for twenty-eight days to see what happens to him.



Corn

Hang on, I've seen this. A man eats fast food for a month to see what it does to his body.



Herman

You've seen Super Size Me, from two thousand and four. And very possibly Super Size Me Two, from two thousand and seventeen, in which Morgan Spurlock specifically took on the chicken industry.



Corn

So it's a sequel to a sequel, made by someone else, about the same bird.



Herman

The reviews were actually mixed, to be fair. The National gave it four out of five. But Stephen Silver, who writes a monthly documentary roundup and has clearly seen everything this year, put it this way. "This film is a shameless ripoff of the late Morgan Spurlock's" film.



Corn

That's not a review, that's a citation.



Herman

And the runner-up is grimmer. Unabomber, on Netflix in September. It's a dramatisation, Russell Crowe as the Harvard psychologist whose experiments Ted Kaczynski took part in, Shailene Woodley on the FBI side. Rotten Tomatoes, twenty-five percent from fifty-three reviews. The critics' consensus is "fine acting can't compensate for an unconvincing thesis."



Corn

How many times has this story been told?



Herman

Off the top of my head: a scripted series, Manhunt: Unabomber, in two thousand and seventeen. A Netflix documentary series, Unabomber: In His Own Words, in twenty twenty. A feature film, Ted K, in twenty twenty-one. And now this. Tim Robey in the Telegraph said it "simply recycles A Beautiful Mind and assumes, job done."



Corn

Netflix made a Unabomber documentary, and then six years later made a Unabomber drama, so it would have something to compete with.



Herman

It's the content economy. If a story has worked once, it'll be back.



Hilbert

Like Big Chicken.



Herman

Like Big Chicken. Big Chicken takes Most Recycled Premise, because at least Unabomber had Russell Crowe.



Corn

Next category.



Herman

The Infomercial Award. A documentary that turns out to be an advertisement for its own subject. Three nominees, and I want you to guess which one is most honest about it.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

Nominee one. Being Gordon Ramsay. Netflix, February, six episodes, following Ramsay as he opens five restaurants in one tower in London. Rotten Tomatoes, fifty-eight percent. The consensus calls it, quote, "neither revelatory nor savory, this long-winded commercial."



Corn

They called it a commercial in the consensus. That's unusual.



Herman

And Ramsay's own company, Studio Ramsay, announced it as "our most ambitious, raw, and unfiltered project to date." Maddy Mussen in the Evening Standard gave it two stars and said you're left with "the slightly uneasy sense that you've just watched six hours of a man who's spread himself too thin." Nick Hilton in the Independent said "it has little to say about food, little to say about the restaurant business."



Corn

A show about a chef and five restaurants, with little to say about either.



Herman

Nominee two. Disney Worldbuilders, Disney Plus, August. A film made by Disney, about Disney's theme parks, featuring Disney's chief executive.



Corn

And who reviewed it?



Herman

Stephen Silver again, and his review starts, "Yes, it's a commercial for Disney."



Corn

At least he got it out of the way.



Herman

And Nerdist's headline was "A Fun Documentary With One Obvious Issue." Then nominee three, which is less fun. A Game of Double Standards, July, a feature-length defence of Qatar hosting the World Cup in twenty twenty-two. A week later, Al Jazeera English, the Qatari state-funded network, published a version of it as a featured documentary.



Corn

So a documentary defending Qatar went out on Qatar's own network.



Herman

Silver again. "This is, to be blunt, a bunch of one-sided nonsense," and then, quote, "either a blatant PR job on behalf of the Qatari regime, or has the exact appearance of one."



Corn

"Or has the exact appearance of one" is a lawyer's sentence. Somebody read that before it went out.



Herman

It's a very careful insult.



Corn

Winner?



Herman

Disney, because it's the only one that didn't pretend. Gordon Ramsay said raw and unfiltered and gave us six hours of reservations. Qatar called it journalism. Disney made an advert, and the critic said so in the first word.



Hilbert

I'd like it recorded that I watched Being Gordon Ramsay at one and a half speed and it still felt like six hours.



Corn

Noted. Category three, and this one is new this year.



Herman

Fastest Documentary Ever Made About Anything. The winner basically picks itself. Netflix launched a new strand this year called Instadocs. Short documentaries, around half an hour, made very quickly, about stories still in the news.



Corn

And just to be clear, we recommended one of those this afternoon, the AI one, so this is about the first one, not the format.



Herman

The first one. Instadocs: Alex Murdaugh, Unconvicted. On the thirteenth of May the South Carolina Supreme Court overturned Murdaugh's murder conviction. About two weeks later, on the twenty-ninth, Netflix had a thirty-minute documentary out about it.



Corn

Two weeks. Some people take longer to return a library book.



Herman

And Murdaugh already had a crowded shelf of documentaries. There were no professional reviews I could find. The audience gave it a five point seven on IMDb and two point eight out of five on Letterboxd.



Hilbert

This is my award.



Corn

Of course.



Hilbert

I've been a producer a long time. Two weeks to make a documentary means nobody had time to find out whether it was a good idea. I've worked on this show for years and I still haven't found out whether it's a good idea.



Herman

That's quite moving, actually.



Hilbert

It isn't. Thirty minutes, released fourteen days after the ruling. That's a press release with a soundtrack. My award goes to Netflix's Instadocs for the Murdaugh one, and I'm presenting it in an envelope I made from another envelope, which is how they made the documentary.



Corn

Category four. Herman, this is your favourite.



Herman

It's my favourite. The Subject Hates It Award. Untold: Mr. T: I Pity the Fool. Netflix, September. Forty-seven minutes, which is how long they had to cover a five-decade career.



Corn

And Mr. T watched it.



Herman

Mr. T watched it. Mr. T told the Guardian, and I want to read this word for word, "It's garbage." Then, "You build me up, then you try to punk me out." And, "If you don't know me, you're gonna think I'm some monster."



Corn

Getting a review like that from the actual subject. Most documentaries would kill for that kind of engagement.



Herman

And the producer's response. "Please give Mr T my best, and let him know I forgive him."



Corn

He forgave the subject.



Herman

The filmmaker forgave the man the film was about. That's the moment documentary went through the looking glass this year. Stephen Silver also called it "the most underwhelming entry yet" in the Untold series. So it got a bad review from a critic and a worse one from the person it was about.



Hilbert

I pity the fool who greenlit forty-seven minutes.



Herman

Hilbert, that was very good.



Hilbert

I've had it ready for a week.



Corn

Category five. Critics Versus Everyone, which needs explaining.



Herman

This is for films where the critics and the audiences didn't watch the same thing. The big one is Michael, the Michael Jackson biopic, in April, Antoine Fuqua directing, Jaafar Jackson as his uncle. Rotten Tomatoes, thirty-eight percent from over three hundred reviews. The audience score is ninety-seven. And it's reported to be closing in on a billion dollars at the box office.



Corn

So the critics said no and the entire planet bought a ticket anyway.



Herman

Christy Lemire called it "a hokey, corny, safe, clichéd, sanitized look at Michael Jackson."



Corn

That's five adjectives. She was building something.



Herman

She was laying bricks. The consensus says it "mostly plays like a 'greatest hits' album," which, to be fair, is what a lot of the audience wanted. But here's what makes the category. Five and a half weeks later, Netflix released Michael Jackson: The Verdict, a three-part series about the two thousand and five trial. And the numbers flip. The critics were fine with it, eighty-three percent. The audience score is eight.



Corn

Eight.



Herman

Eight percent. One reviewer, Carlo van Remortel at What's on Netflix, gave it one and a half out of five and said, "Watching it often feels like sitting through a summary of documentaries." And, "It's opportunistically weak. Very weak."



Corn

So the same fanbase loved the biopic and despised the documentary. And the critics did exactly the opposite.



Herman

Which makes the joint winner the music industry itself, for releasing both in the same spring. One for each audience, in the hope that one of them would like it.



Corn

That's a portfolio strategy.



Herman

It is. It's a hedge fund for one family's legacy.



Corn

Category six, and it's the main event. The one the whole internet already knew was coming.



Herman

Worst Documentary of the Year So Far, and there's no contest. Melania. Amazon MGM Studios, in cinemas the thirtieth of January, directed by Brett Ratner. A documentary about the First Lady.



Corn

The numbers, please.



Herman

Rotten Tomatoes, nine percent from sixty-four reviews. Metacritic, five out of a hundred from eighteen critics, which Metacritic labels, in its own words, "Overwhelming Dislike." Amazon reportedly paid forty million dollars for the rights and spent another thirty-five million marketing it. It opened to about seven million.



Corn

Seventy-five million in, seven million out on the first weekend.



Herman

And here's the bit that makes it actually interesting, rather than just bad. The audience score, the Popcornmeter, is ninety-nine percent from more than two and a half thousand ratings.



Corn

Ninety-nine.



Herman

The widest gap I've ever seen. Ninety points between the critics and the audience. The people who went to see it really wanted to see it, and they loved it. The critics, who are required to see things, did not.



Corn

So what did the critics actually say? Not their opinion of her, their opinion of the film.



Herman

That's the right way to do it, and that's what the critics were careful about too. The consensus is "Presented with great pomp and circumstance but little insight." Peter Travers called it "a near-two-hour infomercial disguised as a documentary." Joy Press in Vanity Fair said it "plays like a mockumentary." And my favourite, from Daniel D'Addario in Variety. "Melania is primarily a film about a woman walking into and out of rooms."



Corn

That is the most precise review of anything this year.



Herman

It's a structural critique. He isn't saying she's bad. He's saying nothing happens. She walks in, and then she walks out.



Hilbert

I timed the rooms.



Corn

You didn't.



Hilbert

I did. I won't give the number because I don't trust my stopwatch, which I bought from Avraham Pinto and which he says has been in his window since nineteen ninety-seven. But a lot of rooms. Quite a lot of corridors too. I'd say it's the most thoroughly documented set of doorways in American history.



Herman

And Amy Nicholson in the LA Times called it a "vapid, airless, mindless time-waster." Which is three hyphenated adjectives and a noun.



Corn

That's a different construction from Christy Lemire's.



Herman

Each critic has their own masonry.



Corn

So what's the honest takeaway from Melania? Because I don't want this to just be us piling on.



Herman

The honest takeaway is that it's a case study in what happens when a documentary is commissioned for the subject's audience, not for a general one. It did exactly what its audience wanted, and nothing anyone else was looking for. That's not unique to it. It's the same thing Being Gordon Ramsay and Disney Worldbuilders do, on a much larger budget and with a much more famous subject.



Corn

It's the most expensive example of the year's most common problem.



Herman

That's a much better summary than mine.



Corn

Last category. Hilbert, you said you had one more.



Hilbert

Not an award. A coincidence. Yesterday, the sixteenth of October, two films about American medical scandals came out on the same day.



Herman

Oh, this is good.



Hilbert

The first is Trust Me, I'm a Doctor. A true-story drama, Kal Penn as the doctor caught up in the death of Anna Nicole Smith, Linda Hamilton co-starring. Twenty-three percent on Rotten Tomatoes, from only thirteen reviews, so it may move. William Bibbiani at TheWrap called it "too generic a production, and too misguided in its approach." Brent Simon at the AV Club gave it a D. And one reviewer, Brett Arnold, wrote a review of exactly one sentence.



Corn

Which was?



Hilbert

"Not every story deserves to be told!" With an exclamation mark. One sentence. I'd like to work with Brett Arnold.



Herman

And the other film from the same day?



Hilbert

You Can See Everything. Nathan Fielder and Lance Oppenheim, Elizabeth Holmes in the weeks before she went to prison. Metacritic ninety-nine. Rotten Tomatoes ninety-nine. Same day, same subject area, more or less. A medical scandal, a famous patient or a famous fraud. One of them got twenty-three, and one of them got ninety-nine.



Corn

So the lesson is that the subject was never the problem.



Hilbert

The lesson is that one film was made by people who wondered whether it should exist, and the other was made by Nathan Fielder, who wonders whether anything should exist. He does it professionally.



Herman

He's very good at wondering.



Corn

Honourable mentions, quickly, because there are some good ones that didn't get a category.



Herman

Hulk Hogan: Real American, Netflix, April. Forty-three percent. Daniel Fienberg in the Hollywood Reporter called it a "gap-filled piece of memorializing, corporate-backed hagiography."



Corn

Hagiography is doing a lot of work this year.



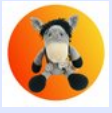
Herman

Hagiography is the word of the year in documentary criticism. It came up for Michael too. Then The Plastic Detox, Netflix, March, six couples cutting plastic out of their lives for ninety days. Most reviews were mixed, the Guardian gave it four stars, so it's not panned. But Stephen Silver called it "the year's worst documentary" that "doesn't feature the involvement of Melania Trump or Brett Ratner."



Corn

That's a very specific category.



Herman

Silver has effectively created a separate tier, "worst documentary excluding Melania." Which, honestly, is the sensible way to run a ranking this year. One film gets a category of its own and everyone else competes underneath it.



Corn

And the CNN one about the Salisbury poisonings?



Herman

The Salisbury Poisonings: A Spy Next Door, July. Silver's review: "Kind of boring, honestly." It also has the same title as the BBC drama about the same attack from twenty twenty.



Corn

They couldn't even come up with a new name.



Herman

They added "A Spy Next Door" to the end. That's the new name.



Corn

So, the winners, in order.



Herman

Most Recycled Premise, Big Chicken, for being a sequel to a sequel about the same bird. The Infomercial Award, Disney Worldbuilders, for honesty. Fastest Documentary, Hilbert's award, the Murdaugh Instadoc, fourteen days from ruling to release. The Subject Hates It Award, Mr. T, with a special mention for the producer who forgave him. Critics Versus Everyone, a joint award to Michael and Michael Jackson: The Verdict, for losing in opposite directions. And Worst Documentary of the Year So Far, Melania, nine percent, five on Metacritic, and a film about a woman walking into and out of rooms.



Corn

And the misconception I'd like people to leave with is that bad documentaries are usually badly made. Most of these are well shot. Several have big budgets. The problem with nearly every one on this list is the same. Who it was made for. Gordon Ramsay's company, Disney's marketing department, a Qatari network, a fanbase, a news cycle. A documentary made for the subject isn't a documentary. It's a mirror.



Herman

That's the episode, really.



Hilbert

And Brett Arnold's review, which applies to all fourteen.



Corn

"Not every story deserves to be told."



Hilbert

With the exclamation mark.



Herman

Two and a half months of twenty twenty-six still to go, which is plenty of time for something worse. If one turns up, we'll do the full-year edition.



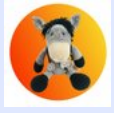
Corn

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, who watched fourteen of these so we didn't have to.



Hilbert

I'd like that recorded as well.



Herman

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you enjoyed it, a review on Spotify helps people find the show. A real one, ideally. Not a hagiography.



Corn

See you next time.