



1819 NEWS

Allen Mendenhall: What critics miss about 'Melania'

[Allen Mendenhall](#) | 02.09.26



First lady Melania Trump arrives for the premiere of her movie "Melania" at The John F. Kennedy Memorial Center For The Performing Arts, Thursday, Jan. 29, 2026, in Washington. (AP Photo/Jose Luis Magana)

Brett Ratner's documentary "Melania" operates in a register that most contemporary critics no longer recognize: spectacle as an autonomous form. The work refuses plot, resists psychological excavation, and withholds apologies for its subject. In place of narrative disclosure, it offers something rarer: a controlled experiment in glamour as a closed semiotic circuit, a system in which signs refer only to other signs and representation becomes its own content.

The documentary's hostile reception says less about its deficiencies than about criticism's growing inability to read works organized around primarily visual syntax. "Melania" treats pageantry not as an ornament but as a justification. To fault it for lacking an arc is to confuse genre with intention, to mistake the medium for the message. What unfolds is not a portrait of a person but an inventory of codes already circulating in the American imagination.

From its opening aerial shot – the Atlantic Ocean yielding to Mar-a-Lago’s palatial sprawl as the Rolling Stones’ “Gimme Shelter” thunders on the soundtrack – the agenda is unmistakable. We are not witnessing a life being traced but a figure being reiterated: stilettos clicking across marble, the reversed angle of a perfectly arranged coiffure, sunglasses, a motorcade beneath swaying palms. The subject materializes rather than appears, emerging fully formed like Botticelli’s Venus – already a copy, a reproduction, untouched by the messy process of becoming.

This refusal of interiority, so vexing to critics hunting psychological depth or political confession, marks the film’s intelligence. Certain cultural productions achieve power precisely by staging the unattainable. Melania Trump appears as a pagan goddess, a cultic figure transposed into a late-American setting: simultaneously archaic and postmodern, embodying timelessness through obsessive attention to temporal detail.

Consider the tripartite geography: Palm Beach’s tropical luxuriance, New York’s gilded excess, Washington’s monumental gravitas. These environments are semantic zones, each indexing a different strand of American mythology.

When Melania descends Trump Tower’s staircase in a strapless white gown with black ribbon trim – the hidden seams creating what Hervé Pierre, her longtime designer, calls a “mystery” – we observe glamour’s basic mechanism. The spell dissolves the instant construction is exposed. Ratner’s camera honors this rule. We never see preparation, never glimpse the labor that precedes arrival. Perfection enters intact, denying the audience the reassuring fiction of transformation.

The semiotic density rewards close attention. Michael Jackson’s “Billie Jean” accompanies her plane’s landing; only later do we learn it’s her favorite Jackson song. The choice resonates beyond personal preference: Jackson, like his admirer, fashioned an identity through pure visual insistence, achieving

global legibility while remaining fundamentally unknowable. The Trump bobblehead perched in the cockpit functions similarly, a kitschy talisman that acknowledges and defuses the very excess the film celebrates.

Across the 20-day pre-inaugural interval, we witness a series of aesthetic rites: event planner David Monn confirming the white and gold theme of the Inauguration (that's "so you"); Melania repeatedly invoking "timelessness" as a governing value; her mother's teaching that beauty involves dedication, that minutiae matter. These gestures aren't superficial distractions but expressions of a coherent ontology in which surface and essence collapse into a single plane.

The most arresting sequences arise through juxtaposition. A memorial visit to St. Patrick's Cathedral coincides with preparations for Jimmy Carter's funeral. Framed by red poinsettias as "Amazing Grace" unfolds in a black gospel arrangement, Melania approaches the altar in a gesture combining Eastern European Catholic piety with American performative religiosity. High church, low church, and celebrity ritual converge, their theological tensions left unresolved. Outside, police lights and camera flashes translate sacrament into spectacle without irony or judgment.

A sudden cut returns us to Trump Tower, where televised images of Los Angeles wildfires consume homes of extravagant value. Permanence is shadowed by obliteration. Gold leaf and marble dissolve before fire. The sequence resists allegory. It observes.

The meeting with Aviva Siegel, a Hamas hostage wearing a shirt bearing her captive husband's face, introduces the sole moment approximating conventional documentary obligation. Even here, however, the emphasis lies not in geopolitical exposition but in the collision of aesthetic orders: unmediated grief confronting institutional polish.

What separates Melania from Donald is not a matter of personality but of category. He remains legible, conversational, and available. She occupies a register altogether different: remote, stylized, untouchable. The disparity is not incidental. Democratic authority performs accessibility; divinity depends on distance.

The film's most cutting scene arrives on Inauguration Day when the camera pans from Joe Biden's vacant senescence to Kamala Harris' irritated disarray. No editorial manipulation is required. The argument emerges through simple alignment. Beauty and its absence articulate a political claim without speech. What liberal discourse attempts to ignore – form as power – reasserts itself as the oldest force in public life.

When a uniformed serviceman performs “The Battle Hymn of the Republic” in an Elvis inflection before yielding to Presley’s own recording, American iconography consumes and renews itself: the dead King anointing the new order. The closing montage – Eleanor Roosevelt, Mamie Eisenhower, Jackie Kennedy, followed by Melania in a fashion shoot as “Sunny” plays – completes the rite. Admission to the pantheon occurs not through policy or advocacy but through pure signification. It may be the more candid route.

Viewing the film in an ordinarily empty Alabama theater, unexpectedly filled with an enthusiastic, heterogeneous crowd, suggested something professional critics routinely discount: the appetite for aspiration, for an aura unburdened by apology.

“Melania” will enrage those who insist that cinema must confess or instruct. For those willing to encounter glamour as visible grace – as perfection offered without explanation – this audacious object delivers something increasingly rare: wonder unsoftened by irony, form unburdened by moral preface, spectacle allowed to stand on its own terms.

MELANIA | Official Trailer



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