

Not finally...

Subjective views on matters journalistic

Screen test

I've been researching, teaching and writing about journalism for more than two decades. Throughout that time I've used feature films to illustrate how the journalist is represented in popular culture. From screwball classics such as *His Girl Friday* to the recent *Frost/Nixon*, movies have proven an engaging source of knowledge about how we, as members of societies in which journalism is highly valued, view the media. They present an accumulating documentary record of what journalism is, and how it is perceived. Often they speak to contemporary debates about journalism's role and status.

And debates there always are – heated and high on the public agenda, about ethics, the effects of competition on news content, changing structures of media ownership, the impact of the internet on established practices and institutions, the role of the journalist in time of war. Films about journalism are a fruitful

pathway into those debates, with the advantage for educators that they often involve names and faces familiar to a generation of students brought up on celebrity culture and showbiz gossip. Mention of Jürgen Habermas's theory of the public sphere will not always prompt excitement in the lecture theatre. Talking about Richard Gere's roguish columnist in *Runaway Bride* will at least get their attention. Want to lead a class in discussion of journalistic fraud? Check out *Shattered Glass*, with that guy from *Star Wars* (Hayden Christensen) in the lead role.

George Clooney, Angelina Jolie, Kate Winslet, Meryl Streep, Will Ferrell, Robert Redford and a host of other A-list stars have made films about journalism and journalists a significant part of their portfolio. Kevin Macdonald's forthcoming *State Of Play*, adapted from the BBC original and starring Russell Crowe, will expand the list.

As a film lover who is also a

journalism scholar, I decided to write a book on the subject of journalists on screen, the kind of book non-specialists would enjoy reading, and which would also be useful for researchers and students in the field. *Heroes & Villains* will be published next year, all being well.

I chose that title because journalists are, among the professions, uniquely vulnerable to a kind of cultural schizophrenia. They are perceived to be, and represented as, both sexy and sleazy, glamorous and grimy, rock-star cool and old school reactionary. For every *Good Night, and Good Luck*, with its heroic journalists battling against injustice and political blackmail, there is a *Natural Born Killers*, in which Robert Downey Jr's true crime TV presenter is happy to incite murder as long as he can film it. For every *Mighty Heart*, Michael Winterbottom's moving study of the events surrounding Daniel Pearl's death, there is a *Rag Tale*, populated by amoral brutes bingeing on sex, drugs and privacy violation (and that's just the women).

Part of my research was to send a questionnaire to those with a professional interest in how journalists are represented on screen: to journalists themselves, and also academics. Name your five favourite films about journalism, it

asked, and explain your choice. Nearly 100 responses had been received by the end of last year.

I was interested to see, among other things, whether journalists' responses to this survey would differ substantially from those of the academics, and the short answer is no. *All the President's Men* features regularly in journalists' top fives, not surprising given its mythical status as representing the very best that journalism can be. Academics also list it, alongside contemporary equivalents such as *Good Night, and Good Luck*, suggesting a demand for films that strive to accentuate the democratic importance of journalism and the courage of the journalist. We like it when filmmakers represent journalists positively, it seems, and that must be good news for the profession.

That said, only one respondent cited *A Mighty Heart* in their "best of", for my money one of the most heroic and noble representations of a journalist on screen made in the last decade (and Angelina Jolie's best performance).

Journalists value films like *The Front Page*, *Broadcast News* and *The Paper* for their realism and authenticity in capturing the working environment. Academics, with a nod to film studies, mention *Citizen Kane* a lot, and responses from overseas list some unfamiliar

titles I'm going to have to track down, such as the *Turkish Babam ve Oglum* (Father and Son). BJR editor Bill Hagerty and Steven Barnett at Westminster University bravely list *The Devil Wears Prada*, a film that dares to take fashion journalism seriously. And why not? As Steven observes, the shoes are to die for.

Of those films that depict journalism negatively, Billy Wilder's savage and still resonant satire, *Ace In the Hole*, is regularly cited by both

journalists and academics, as is Alexander Mackendrick's *Sweet Smell of Success*, with its monstrous columnist JJ Hunsecker. Mary McGuckian's *Rag Tale*, released to universal derision in 2004, is nowhere acknowledged as the sharp satire of British red-top journalism that it is. Take heart, Mary. Hardly anybody liked *Sweet Smell of Success* when it first came out either – and what did they know?

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