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Hollywood and the hack

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We all know that movies and TV only ever portray journalists as scumbags who'll do anything for a story. According to 'hackademic' Rob Brown, we're wrong

STEVEN SPIELBERG'S instantly forgettable remake of HG Well's War of the Worlds only sticks in my mind because of one small scene.

A CBS news truck scrambles to the scene of a jumbo jet mercilessly plucked out of mid-air by the giant alien invaders. Crawling through the crumpled metal wreckage, still wielding her microphone, an insensitive young female newshound is excited to encounter what she assumes to be the sole survivor.

"Did you just survive that plane crash?", she coolly enquires of the hero, who replies that, actually, he'd been hiding in the basement of the house it had just destroyed.

"Dammit," she exclaims. "That would have been one helluva story."

This little clip probably won't be at hand when a group of American hackademics gather in Texas next week for the annual convention of the AEJMC (Association for Education for Journalism and Mass Communication). They will consider how Hollywood has depicted the news business down through the decades — and won't be stuck for examples. Well over a thousand movies portraying the press have been written and produced. More than 500 of these were produced in the Thirties alone, when talking pictures were still a novelty.

Contrary to what is probably a common perception, Hollywood's prodigious take on the press has not always meant films which show us as drunken, foul-mouthed deadbeats who would do absolutely anything for a story.

Purveyors of myth

Of course, there have been plenty of silver screen snoopers who were just downright shits.

Back in 1951 *The Big Carnival* (originally titled *Ace in the Hole*) featured Kirk Douglas as Chuck Tatum, who conspired to keep a miner trapped in a cave because it's providing good copy and he's screwing the poor man's wife.

In general, Hollywood has been more inclined to project journalists as idealistic crusaders than hardboiled cynics, as Matthew Ehrlich can readily attest.

A journalism professor at the University of Illinois, he found many positive portrayals when he researched his book *Journalism in the Movies*, now the seminal text in this field of study.

"I started off thinking that movies primarily are very critical of the press and derogatory and tell stories that kind of undermine the press's place in American life," he said. "But I've come around to the notion that, on the whole, they do the opposite."

Ehrlich speaks with authority on this subject, having spent about 15 years researching and writing his book. The list of titles he spooled through included such all-time classics as *The Front Page*, *His Girl Friday*, *Mr Smith Goes to Washington*, and more contemporary box office hits like *All the President's Men*, *Network*, *Broadcast News* and *The Insider*.

A unifying theme of all these films, he found, is that "journalism is important, journalism has a central place in American life and in democracy, that journalism can and should be performed well. If journalism somehow has lost its way — because of money pressures, sensationalism, television, sleaze — then one way or another it can find its way again, and journalists can do the right thing and make a difference."

Ehrlich is convinced these celluloid tales do influence how people view our profession. They serve as "purveyors of myth" and thus perform a vital purpose in these dangerous times when, in the so-called Land of the Free, journalists are being jailed for protecting their sources.

"We abandon myths of a free press and a free citizenry at our peril," he argues. "Movies offer visions in which the two cannot be separated."

Ehrlich will be on the panel in Texas alongside Joe Saltzman, who is now director of a project at the Annenberg School of Communication in southern California which is devoted entirely to studying 'The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture'. As its title suggests, the project analyses representations of journalists in many media.

Inspired by their example, we have decided to introduce this subject to the curriculum at Scotland's largest and longest established journalism school, Napier University in Edinburgh. We'll look beyond Hollywood to see how reporters, editors and publishers have been represented by popular culture in other parts of the world.

We'll be especially interested in the British examples. They don't, of course, comprise anywhere near as hefty a catalogue as Hollywood provides.

Indeed, you have to chew on your popcorn for quite a while to think of British films which have portrayed the news business in any sort of light. But they exist and are well worth examining. The best of them — for educational if not always entertainment purposes — are spotlighted in the accompanying sidebar, 'Desert Island DVDs'.

Some have slipped into the recesses of memory, such as *The Ploughman's Lunch* which was made in 1984 and features Jonathan Pryce as a deceitful political journalist who personifies the Thatcher decade before coming a cropper at the Conservatives' annual conference.

Old stereotypes

Less easy to categorise, but well worth a rent, is *Divorcing Jack*, David Caffrey's adaptation of Colin Bateman's novel. It follows a caustically irreverent Belfast columnist who meanders recklessly through the minefields of Northern Ireland politics at the height of the Troubles.

Mind you, if you're serious about assessing images of British journalists in popular culture, as we are at Napier, you soon have to shift your gaze from the big to the small screen.

Probably the most influential portrayal of British journalists in recent years was Paul Abbot's acclaimed television series *State of Play*, a political thriller which certainly broke the mould in depicting journalists in a generally likeable and progressive light.

Sadly, the editor of *The Guardian*, Alan Rusbridger, chose to perpetuate the old stereotypes when he teamed up with Ronan Bennett (partner of *The Guardian*'s deputy editor, Georgina Henry) to pen the screenplay for *Fields of Gold*, a somewhat less acclaimed drama series about a newspaper investigation into a GM crop scandal.

The main character was a world-weary, wineswilling womanizer (Phil Davis) who amused himself by berating the young female photographer (Anna Friel) for having done a degree in media studies.

Actually, these scenes are very useful for giving today's journalism students a glimpse of the sort of misogynistic dinosaurs they mercifully might only encounter one day in the Museum of Media History. That's what is great about using movies as a teaching tool. They not only sprinkle a little stardust on the syllabus, but are a surefire way of engaging the attention of undergrads as they nurse their hangovers or (which is more usually the case today) recover from a shift in the local call centre.

Of course, the average newsroom is nothing like the melodramatic story factories you see on the silver screen. And you'll rarely work alongside anyone who looks like Robert Redford or Cate Blanchett.

Journalism is generally unglamorous and anything but action-packed.

But screening movie clips is a marvellous way to get seminar discussions rolling about everything from media ethics to safety in war zones.

That is why media-related movies are currently being screened at campuses across the UK. But we have to study representations of journalism on film in a sustained and structured way, as they're doing in the US.

It would also be beneficial if Britain's burgeoning band of journalism scholars would start taking this aspect of journalism studies seriously as a field of research. And when we do so, we shouldn't just restrict our inquiries to serious film and TV dramas but extend it to sitcoms such as *Drop the Dead Donkey* and even the way local rags have been portrayed in soap operas.

There's an MA dissertation, if not a full-blown PhD, to be done about the *Weatherfield Gazette's* recurring role in *Coronation Street*. The same goes for *The Archers* and *EastEnders*. What do they read in Walford?

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Rob Brown's picks

DESERT ISLAND DVDS

All the President's Men (1976) has to top the list. Still worth showing to today's journalist students, if only to inform them that Woodward and Bernstein is not a music hall act. They're the *Washington Post* sleuths who drummed Richard Nixon out of the White House and inspired a whole generation of wannabe Robert Redfords and Dustin Hoffmans. The Watergate drama has gained renewed topicality in recent months since the identity of secret source Deep Throat was revealed.

The Front Page (1931) also vies for front position. Set in Chicago in the Roaring Twenties, this is about a jaded newshound desperate to get out of "the racket" until he notches up another nice scoop. It inspired no less than three remakes, the best of which is a gender-switched version, *His*

Girl Friday (1951), in which editor Walter Burns (Cary Grant) is scolded by his ex-wife, who is giving up the reporting game to get remarried and lead a normal life. "A journalist? Now what does that mean? Peeking through keyholes, chasing after fire engines, waking people up in the middle of the night... stealing pictures of old ladies?"

Deadline USA (1952) must also be high on the list, if only for having Humphrey Bogart yelling lines like "Break open that front page". Bogart plays Ed Hutcherson, the managing editor of a newspaper about to be sold, who is struggling to keep his marriage alive as he endeavours to nail a nasty crime boss. "What's that racket?" the mobster screams down the phone. "It's the press, baby, the press," the hero responds. "And there's nothing you can do about it. Nothing."

The Paper (1994) This is the only contemporary movie which comes close to replicating such newsroom melodrama as Deadline USA. It plots a day in the life of a big city newspaper. Michael Keaton plays a principled newshound who literally comes to blows with his cold female editor (Glenn Close), while his wife, also a reporter, is home alone coping with the final stages of pregnancy and newsroom withdrawal symptoms.

Live From Baghdad (2002) Keaton crossed over from print to broadcast when he teamed up with Helena Bonham-Carter to make this celluloid celebration of CNN's role in the first Gulf War. It deservedly bombed at the box office but is worth a rent for the fantastic special effects at the end when the bombs start to rain down on Iraqi capital. Peter Arnett leaps around his hotel room as he describes the pyrotechnics to a global audience, reminding us that when the shit hits the fan, nothing beats the thrill of reporting live on TV.

Salvador (1986) This movie was made in Mexico on a shoestring budget by Oliver Stone, but it wowed the Academy with its slick portrayal of a gonzo-style warzone junkie (James Woods) who brushes up against the death squads in El Salvador. He ends up realising that the real victims of such CIA-sponsored thuggery are the locals who can't fly in and out in a flak jacket.

Under Fire (1983) This also concerns the dangers of reporting from Central America in the Reagan era — this time from Nicaragua. Nick Nolte is just too clean-shaven and he takes the journalism of attachment a lot further than even Martin Bell would advocate. But the unwelcome consequences of his commitment provide a stark lesson worth relating to wannabe white-suited war corrs.

Defence of the Realm (1985) This is probably the best of the British films.

Gabriel Byrne plays a London newspaper reporter who starts out covering what appears a routine political scandal and ends up on a dangerous path of discovery. He discards sage advice from an older colleague (Denholm Elliot) and ends up on a lethal collision with the most sinister elements of our secret state.

Veronica Guerin (2003) This is even more chilling — because it's a true story, tragically. Cate Blanchett is convincing as the Dublin crime reporter who was shot dead by Dublin drug barons. It should also be acknowledged that Joan Allen turned in an equally credible performance in a earlier made-for-TV movie about the same grim subject entitled When the Sky Falls.

Complicity (2002) We must squeeze in a mention for this adaptation of Iain Banks' novel about a young, cocaine-snorting Scottish newspaper reporter who becomes a prime suspect after a series of gruesome executions. Not a great film and certainly not for the squeamish, but nostalgic for those of us who worked at The Scotsman's old, oak-panelled offices at North Bridge in Edinburgh, which served as the location. It's now an upmarket hotel and restaurant.

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