Movies & TV

Newspapers may struggle, but newspaper movies are forever

By Mick LaSalle

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Rachel McAdams, Mark Ruffalo and Brian d'Arcy James play newspaper reporters in the November release "Spotlight," which looks at the Boston Globe's lengthy investigation into the Catholic Church sex abuse scandal.

Near the end of "Spotlight," the newspaper saga that arrives in November, we're treated to a sight we've seen in a hundred other movies, most of them in black and white. Trucks roll out of the loading dock, filled with thousands of newspapers containing an earthshaking news story. The old feeling comes: There they go. The story is out there. From this moment, from this place, the word will spread, and by tomorrow morning, everyone will know ...

The scene calls to mind the closing minutes of "Deadline — U.S.A," with Humphrey Bogart as a newspaper editor whose paper is about to go out of business. He's in the pressroom, on the telephone with a gangster who is threatening that he'd better not run a story. Bogart nods to the

pressman. Buttons are pressed, bells start ringing and the presses crank into gear. “What’s that racket?” the gangster asks.

“It’s the press, baby,” Bogart says. “And there’s nothing you can do about it. Nothing.”

The mighty press — a glorified invalid even in 1952, when Bogart made the movie, but a power to be reckoned with, nonetheless. The ending of “Deadline — U.S.A.” suggests that individual newspapers may come and go, but the press is permanent. It brings a reassuring feeling, while the trucks rolling out of “Spotlight” evoke something more complicated and wistful. The film is set in 2002, at the last possible moment in history when the most efficient mode of transmitting written information was on four tires. Starting a year or two later and continuing now and into the distant future, if filmmakers want to make movies about journalists breaking a story, they will have to figure out how to dramatize posting articles to the Internet.

Flexible and mobile

They’ll do it, too, because journalists have two qualities that have always made them useful protagonists in Hollywood movies: flexibility and social mobility. If you’re basing a movie around characters, it’s just more convenient for the screenwriter if they’re not stuck working regular hours. It’s easier if they have the flexibility to go outside and get themselves into trouble. Likewise, it helps if the character’s social range is wide, with access to rich people, poor people, businessmen, criminals, cops and politicians. Journalists can go anywhere and plausibly be with anybody. It’s about the only career in which people can have holes in their socks and yet still have met the president.

The first wave of newspaper movies and journalist heroes came in the 1930s. Before that, movie heroes were traditional and all-American. But the disillusionment brought on by Prohibition and then the Great Depression (not to mention the lingering sense of irony and despair following World War I) paved the way for something new — the street-smart survivor, living on his wits, with lots of snappy patter and a healthy cynicism for all authority.

Few female reporters

There were a few female reporters in those days — Joan Crawford in “Dance, Fools, Dance,” Loretta Young in her 1931 breakthrough, “Platinum Blonde,” and most famously Rosalind Russell in the “Front Page” remake “His Girl Friday” (1940), playing a role originally written for a man. But for the most part, if we’re talking about reporters in movies, we’re talking men. They traveled, usually, in roving packs, and they never seemed to write anything. Whenever something big happened, they’d rush to a phone, yell “Get me rewrite!” and tell some poor slob on the other end how to write the story.

Movies celebrated them as tricksters who wielded power and manipulated public opinion. Fredric March makes a circulation gimmick out of a young woman’s dying of radium poisoning in “Nothing Sacred” (1937) (actually she’s healthy), and Lee Tracy rides to the top as a columnist by reporting on women’s out-of-wedlock pregnancies in “Blessed Event” (1932). In “Love is a Racket,” Douglas Fairbanks Jr. is a columnist who covers up a murder. At a time

when people felt the system was rigged, anybody who could figure out an angle to beat that system was some kind of hero.

Function of journalism

Yet even in the depths of the Depression, there were hints that journalism should serve a more serious function. In “Five Star Final,” Edward G. Robinson plays the head of a tabloid that exploits people and ends up ruining lives. Throughout the film, he obsessively washes his hands, and finally he tells off his publisher and quits.

This latent gravity rose to the surface as the United States drew closer to entering World War II. In journalism films, as elsewhere, Hollywood’s celebration of individual innovation gave way to a sense of collective urgency. Orson Welles’ “Citizen Kane” (1941), loosely based on the life of William Randolph Hearst, presented the ultimate master of journalistic manipulation, not as a hero, but as a sad failure with an empty life and a house full of meaningless possessions. Frank Capra’s “Meet John Doe” (1941) starts off as a lighthearted story about a publicity stunt — Barbara Stanwyck is a columnist who enlists a homeless man to start a populist movement — but the movie turns serious and almost tragic before the finish.

The impact of the war on journalism movies becomes explicit in Alfred Hitchcock’s “Foreign Correspondent” (1940), in which it takes an American police reporter (Joel McCrea), working in London, to uncover a nest of German spies on the eve of World War II. Ten years earlier, reporters were self-interested wise guys. Now they were capable of saving the world.

The two classic journalism films of the 1950s go back to the notion of the journalist as trickster, but by now the consequences are grave. In “Ace in the Hole” (1951), Kirk Douglas plays a reporter hoping to ride a mining disaster all the way to the big time. To do it, he persuades rescue workers to pursue a strategy that will take longer and is bound to fail. And in “Sweet Smell of Success” (1957), columnist Walter Winchell — the prototype for at least three positive portrayals in the 1930s — is caricatured as J.J. Hunsecker, a heartless and perverse monster played by Burt Lancaster.

Newspaper pinnacle

“All the President’s Men” (1976) marks the pinnacle for newspaper journalism as depicted onscreen. The work of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, which led to the fall of President Richard Nixon, looks wonderfully glamorous and interesting. There’s danger, but nobody gets hurt. There’s intrigue. There is drama — the long, unbroken take of Woodward working the phones makes it seem as though amazing discoveries happen every day.

Moreover, Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman, who play Woodward and Bernstein, look great doing their jobs. They wear jackets and ties. The may keep the top button of their shirt open, but that just makes them rakish, loose enough to find an angle that others might miss. And they’re surrounded by genteel elders — led by Jason Robards Jr. as Ben Bradlee — who guide them and warn them but, in the end, offer their support. Any young person who saw “All the President’s Men” in 1976 could easily come away wanting to write for a newspaper.

Current paranoia

Those were the good old days, before the Janet Cooke, Stephen Glass and Jayson Blair fabricated-story scandals, before the Internet, and before a pervading sense entered the culture that government is too big to take on. Today, watching "All the President's Men," the thought crosses the mind as it never did in 1976, that Woodward and Bernstein were lucky not to end up washing up on the banks of the Potomac.

The new movie "Truth" reflects the current paranoia. Agree with the premise or not, "Truth" suggests that Dan Rather and his producer Mary Mapes reported a true story about George W. Bush's National Guard service. But their careers were destroyed because they couldn't quite prove it.

Career inspiration

Of course, it remains possible that some of the recent movies revolving around the Internet, such as "The Fifth Estate," may inspire some careers in Internet journalism, just as it's possible that television news retains some of the power and allure that it had when "Broadcast News" was made almost 30 years ago. But it's a safe bet that "Spotlight" won't send people rushing to take journalism classes. True, like "All the President's Men," it deals with a successful investigation against steep odds — the Boston Globe's exposé of Catholic priests molesting children — but everybody but the top editor looks dead broke. They dress like they sleep in their clothes, and they work around the clock. Even when they achieve success, they're plagued by doubt and wonder if they should have done more, and sooner.

That's quite a journey for reporters in 80 years, from the 1930s depictions of lovable cynics with the world on a string to today's earnest do-gooders who can never feel satisfied. But the change doesn't feel like a pure Hollywood invention. It feels grounded in an American reality in which everybody is a little less fun and a little more noble.

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