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MOVIES

# When Journalism Catches Hollywood's Eye

By **JOE NOCERA** DEC. 31, 2015

It is not every year that Hollywood produces two movies about journalism that are Oscar contenders, but 2015 appears to have been that year. First came “Truth” in October. Based on the memoir of a former “60 Minutes” producer, Mary Mapes, it purports to tell the story of her gutsy 2004 investigation into George W. Bush’s service in the National Guard when he was a young man. When it turned out that her story, which was broadcast on “60 Minutes II” months before the president’s re-election, had unwittingly relied on falsified documents, the network suits turned against her and her famous correspondent, the CBS anchor Dan Rather, costing them their jobs.

“Truth” was followed in November by “Spotlight,” which goes inside The Boston Globe’s groundbreaking investigation into the pedophile priest scandal — and the shocking fact that child-molesting clerics were being protected by the Roman Catholic Archdiocese of Boston. (And, as we now know, by dioceses all across America and much of the rest of the world.) Starring Michael Keaton as Walter V. Robinson, known as Robby, the head of The Globe’s Spotlight investigative unit, the film is the most straightforward journalism procedural since “All the President’s Men.”

Although both movies are well-made and well-acted — Cate Blanchett, in particular, has received raves for her portrayal of Ms. Mapes — journalists largely embraced “Spotlight” and condemned “Truth.” The reason is that while “Spotlight” shows reporters at their best — tackling a huge, important story while taking on Boston’s biggest sacred cow — the journalism that “Truth” views as heroic is anything but. In her eagerness to run a tough story, Ms. Mapes didn’t bother to nail down the authenticity of those documents. Nor did Mr. Rather push her to do so. And while the film’s writer and director, James Vanderbilt, nods at their errors, his underlying message seems to be that the larger truth they were trying to tell — the suggestion that Mr. Bush was given preferential treatment during his National Guard service in the early 1970s — should not have been undermined just because they were fooled by a few fake documents. Hence, I suppose, the movie’s title.

“They weren’t attacked about the substance of their story,” Mr. Vanderbilt told me recently. “They were attacked on the documents.” Which suggests that even though he wrote the screenplay for a previous film involving journalism — David Fincher’s 2007 thriller, “Zodiac” — he really doesn’t understand the difference between good reporting and bad.

“Truth” is hardly the only example of a filmmaker portraying seriously flawed journalism in a heroic light. In 2014, Michael Cuesta’s “Kill the Messenger” told the story of Gary Webb, a reporter for The San Jose Mercury News who wrote a three-part series in 1996 claiming that the country’s crack cocaine epidemic was the result of a C.I.A. conspiracy. (He claimed the agency had used hundreds of millions of dollars in illegal drug profits to finance the Nicaraguan contras.) Although Mr. Webb’s series was quickly discredited by major media outlets, including The New York Times, the film depicts the reporter as a lonely truth-seeker standing up to powerful government forces. Based on a memoir by Mr. Webb, who died in 2004, the film never acknowledges the shortcomings of his reporting, though The Mercury News eventually did.

Ever since “All the President’s Men,” Alan J. Pakula’s 1976 film about the investigation by Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein that led to Richard M. Nixon’s resignation, movies about journalists have almost invariably portrayed them in a glowing light — even as the public has come to take a more negative view of their

craft. The classic of the genre is probably “The Insider,” the 1999 film that tells the dramatic story of yet another “60 Minutes” producer, Lowell Bergman, who, with the help of his key source, Jeffrey Wigand, a former tobacco executive, helped expose Big Tobacco. Given that Mr. Bergman was played by Al Pacino, and Mr. Wigand by Russell Crowe, how could they not have been heroic?

(The outlier is Sydney Pollack’s underrated 1981 film “Absence of Malice,” in which Sally Field plays a reporter so eager for a scoop she betrays a man who has become her lover. The lover, played by Paul Newman, gets the last laugh, however, causing Ms. Field to lose her newspaper job.)

What’s always struck me as surprising about the appeal of journalists in films is that the act of reporting rarely involves secret meetings in dark garages with unnamed sources. Which is to say, it is almost never the stuff of high drama. “It’s not very glamorous,” Mr. Bergman noted. “When Michael Mann and Eric Roth were doing ‘The Insider,’” — Mr. Mann directed the film, which he wrote with Mr. Roth — “they would ask me: ‘Do you do anything? Are you always on the phone? Do you have a gimmick, a trick that you do?’”

Alas, he didn’t. As a result, Mr. Mann and Mr. Roth resorted to dramatic license to make Mr. Bergman’s job seem more exciting — something movies about journalism invariably do.

“Mann used to say to me, ‘We’re not making a documentary,’” Mr. Bergman said. Indeed, according to Mr. Bergman, it was William Goldman’s screenplay — and not the book by Mr. Woodward and Mr. Bernstein — that first used the phrase “Follow the money,” which their source, nicknamed Deep Throat, supposedly told Mr. Woodward. That has become one of the most famous lines associated with Watergate, yet it never appears in the book Mr. Pakula’s movie is based on.

Mr. Vanderbilt’s theory — and it’s a persuasive one — is that despite journalism’s dramatic shortcomings, reporters make good central characters because they are detectives with pens. “There is something inherently interesting about someone who comes to work every day saying, ‘I’m going to get to the bottom of this,’” he said.

“I’ve always been fascinated with journalism,” he added. But in tying his movie to a book written by a journalist unable to acknowledge her error, Mr. Vanderbilt’s fascination led him astray.

In that sense, Tom McCarthy, the co-writer and director of “Spotlight,” was lucky: He didn’t have anybody’s memoir to rely on, since none of the members of the Globe’s Spotlight team had written a book about their experience. All he had were the articles, which were brought to his attention after two young producers, Nicole Rocklin and Blye Pagon Faust, read a case study published by the Columbia Journalism School. In effect, he and his co-writer, Josh Singer, had to do journalism to learn about The Globe’s Pulitzer Prize-winning journalism.

“In some ways, our process mirrored theirs,” he said. “We would walk out of an interview with one of the Globe reporters, and we would race back to the hotel and discuss it. We would get excited, and that inspired our approach to the material.” They had discovered the thrill of reporting by reporting. Mr. McCarthy’s goal was to convey the excitement of journalism he had discovered in interviewing The Globe’s journalists. It’s also why he didn’t feel the need to gild “Spotlight” with extraneous subplots and long-suffering spouses.

Mr. McCarthy and Mr. Singer even uncovered a few new facts. One in particular stands out. They learned that years earlier, The Globe had run an article suggesting that 20 priests had molested children — and that the article had been buried in the Metro section. The two men found the article and confronted Mr. Robinson about it.

“Yeah, that was me,” a chagrined Mr. Robinson said. He had just become the Metro editor, he added. “I don’t remember it at all.” Though it never actually happened during the Spotlight investigation itself, Mr. McCarthy added that scene toward the end of the film. Even in a movie depicting journalism at its most exciting, Mr. McCarthy, like all filmmakers apparently, still felt the need to spice it up a bit.

It seems inevitable that filmmakers will continue to make movies about journalists, especially if “Truth” and “Spotlight” receive Oscar nominations. And dramatic license is something journalists will have to get used to, if they’re not already. The real question is whether the movies will ever truly understand the difference between good reporting and bad, as Mr. McCarthy did and Mr. Vanderbilt

did not. Don't get your hopes up. It's the movies after all.

***Correction: December 31, 2015***

*An earlier version of this article misspelled the surname of the actress who starred with Paul Newman in "Absence of Malice" in 1981. She is Sally Field, not Fields.*

***Correction: December 31, 2015***

*An earlier version of the correction above misstated the movie title as "Absent of Malice."*

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