



Celluloid Heroes

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Filmmakers have long been fascinated by the idea of the grizzled reporter chasing a scoop. In the silent era, titles like "The Daring of Diana" and "The Final Extra" treated journalism as adventure – and it's no different in the modern age. Joe Saltzman, director of the [Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture](#), discusses the movie reporter.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: We've devoted this hour to investigative journalism, as practiced by real reporters. Obviously, most of us don't have first-hand experience in tracking down and writing up a scoop. What we do have is the movies. Filmmakers have long been fascinated with the idea of the ink-stained gumshoe.

In the silent era, movies with titles like "The Daring of Diana" and "The Final Extra" treated journalism as an adventure, and it's no different in the modern age.

Joe Saltzman is director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, or IJPC, at the University of Southern California Annenberg School for Communication. He's seen thousands of such movies, and he joins us now. Joe, welcome to On the Media.

JOE SALTZMAN: Nice to be with you.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Let's start with a noirish take from 1948. It's called "Call Northside 777."

[CLICKING SOUNDS/PHOTOS]

Finally the guy on duty gets a little bit suspicious and says, who the heck are you? And he said, I'm McNeal from *The Times*. He said, you can't look at this stuff.

[CLIP]

MAN: This is confidential information.

JIMMY STEWART AS P.J. **MCNEAL:** This is public information and I'm entitled to use it.

MAN: We've got our orders. You got a beef, you talk to the state's attorney's office.

JIMMY STEWART AS P.J. **MCNEAL:** That's a good idea. I think I will.

[END CLIP]

JOE SALTZMAN: He pulls the arrest book away from the reporter, but by then the reporter has all the information.

And it's that kind of thing throughout the film that gives you a sense of this is a reporter really doing the work of a reporter.

[CLIP] [MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

LEE J. COBB, **AS EDITOR:** Frank Wiecek is free, free because of a mother's faith, the courage of a newspaper and one reporter's refusal to accept defeat.

[MUSIC SWELLS/MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

[END CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: So, as you said at the beginning, in the '40s reporters were generally depicted as adventurers. They were basically cops with pens.

But there was another kind of investigative journalism depicted in a film from the '40s. It was called "Gentleman's Agreement", starring Gregory Peck. Basically this reporter wants to show that anti-Semitism is alive and well in America.

JOE SALTZMAN: Gregory Peck, playing a non-Jewish reporter called Philip Green. The editor wants him to find out not the Holocaust kind of hatred of the Jews, but the small anti-Semitism which he thinks is alive in America. And so, Green pretends he's a Jew.

[CLIP]

GREGORY PECK AS PHILIP GREEN: All I got to do is say it. Nobody knows me around here. I can just say it. I can live it myself for six weeks, eight weeks, nine months, no matter how long it takes.

[END CLIP]

JOE SALTZMAN: In fact, the name of the article, I believe, is I Was Jewish for Eight Weeks. He finds all kinds of this gentleman's agreement that we don't sell houses or rent houses to Jews, we don't rent them rooms in a hotel. And he sees all kinds of minor things like that, which is the true anti-Semitism in America. And it's revealed in the film.

[CLIP]

MAN: - like that, a good man, completely reliable, not given to overcharging and stringing visits out, the way some do.

GREGORY PECK AS PHILIP GREEN: You mean the way some doctors do, or do you mean the way some Jewish doctors do?

MAN: [LAUGHS] I suppose you're right. I suppose some of us do it, too.

[END CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Was this film mostly reflective of undercover journalism? Is that what the special hook was?

JOE SALTZMAN: Well ever since the beginning of film, reporters were always going undercover. They were part of a mob. They go to prison to try to find the story. They'd fake insanity to go inside an asylum and get the story.

"Shock Corridor" is one in which the man pretends he's insane so he can go in and find the killer and win a Pulitzer Prize, and ends up in the film, actually insane.

[CLIP]

PETER BRECK AS JOHNNY BARRETT: Crystal, you've got to listen to me. You've got to let me out of here, please. Call my paper, talk to 'Swanee' - he'll tell you why I'm here.

DR. **MENKIN:** Now John, don't start that again.

PETER BRECK AS JOHNNY BARRETT: Wilkes killed Sloan, I swear it. Get Wilkes. I can prove it!

DR. **MENKIN:** I thought you killed him, John.

PETER BRECK AS JOHNNY BARRETT [SCREAMING]:

Doctor, I'm not nuts! I'm here for the paper! I'm a plant!

[END CLIP]

JOE SALTZMAN: They would do all kinds of things like that. And they took their cue from real-life journalists like Nellie Bly, in which undercover journalism and deception was quite common. They would pretend they were somebody they weren't.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Let's skip ahead to the '70s when lots of rather paranoid films were being made about investigative reporters. Was it just a paranoid decade?

JOE SALTZMAN: Yeah, I think the Kennedy assassination and the thoughts of conspiracy did create a situation where the reporter, again, being a hero, was out to expose this conspiracy. So by 1974 you'd have something like "The Parallax View", with Warren Beatty playing reporter Joseph Frady, I believe, in which he exposes a conspiracy. And to silence him, they kill him at the end of the film and blame him for a senator's assassination that the multi-corporation political conspiracy created, actually.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Another film from the decade is "Capricorn One." What makes that one notable?

JOE SALTZMAN: Yeah, I love that film because it's a conspiracy involving space. "Capricorn One" has a reporter who finds out that the first manned mission to Mars was faked, and he's always being damned for creating the news rather than covering it.

[CLIP]

MAN: You think the way to get ahead is to come up with the scoop of the century. Woodward and Bernstein were good reporters. That's how they did it.

ELLIOTT GOULD AS ROBERT CAULFIELD: Look, when a reporter tells his assignment editor that he thinks he may be onto something that could be really big, the assignment editor's supposed to say, you got 48 hours, kids, and you better come up with something good or it's gonna be your neck. That's what he's supposed to say. I saw it in a movie.

[END CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Of course, the movie he's referring to is "All the President's Men", released in 1976 and starring Jason Robards as Ben Bradlee, also Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as "Woodstein."

[CLIP]

JASON ROBARDS AS BEN BRADLEE: Go on home. Get a nice hot bath. Rest up 15 minutes, then get your asses back in here. Nothing's riding on this except the First Amendment of the Constitution, freedom of the press and maybe the future of the country. Not that any of that matters.

[END CLIP]

BROOKE GLADSTONE: There are some notable moments of dialogue in the film, obviously, mostly shouted out by the character of Ben Bradlee in *The Washington Post* that relates to reporting.

[CLIP]

JASON ROBARDS AS BEN BRADLEE: God damn it, when is somebody going to go on the record in this story?

[END CLIP]

JOE SALTZMAN: Then he uses language I can't use on NPR [BROOKE LAUGHS] to tell them if they screw up again, they're in real trouble.

There's a wonderful sequence in "All the President's Men" where the reporters Woodward and Bernstein, played by Redford and Dustin Hoffman, are in the Library of Congress trying to get records of what materials the White House checked out.

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]

They're looking through pieces of paper. They're trying to find the story. And what the photographer does, the cameraman does, is zoom out over their heads, and to show the passage of time they keep dissolving until we get higher and higher and higher.

And I love that shot, because in a very cinematic way it shows the very difficult job most investigative reporters do, which is in libraries and public hall - of public records. And this one scene really sums up the hard work investigative reporters do that you very seldom see in the movies.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Now, the movie "The Insider" is about TV journalism, and it stars Al Pacino as Lowell Bergman, who we spoke to at the top of the show. Bergman was a reporter for "60 Minutes" in the '90s.

JOE SALTZMAN: Well, "The Insider" is a great film because it's based on real life. It's based on the real case of "60 Minutes." Lowell Bergman gets a tobacco executive to reveal what the tobacco industry knew about cigarettes being addictive and harmful and how they actually deliberately work to increase their addictiveness.

Bergman gets him to go on camera, which any journalist knows is very difficult to do, to get somebody - a whistleblower to actually appear on camera. They kill the story, and Bergman is furious.

[CLIP]

AL PACINO AS LOWELL BERGMAN: You pay me to go get guys like Wigand, to draw him out, to get him to trust us, to get him to go on television. I do. I deliver him. He sits, he talks. Is it newsworthy? Yes. Are we gonna air it? Of course not.

[END CLIP]

JOE SALTZMAN: Investigative reporters are the perfect hero in the movies because they really are surrogates for the moviegoer. They ask the questions the moviegoer wants to know about. They get the information the moviegoer wants to find out. They give you great narrative. They give you great exposition. They're the perfect movie hero, and that's why I think we've had so many films featuring investigative reporters.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Joe, thank you very much.

JOE SALTZMAN: My pleasure, it's my favorite topic.

BROOKE GLADSTONE: Joe Saltzman is director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture, a project of the Norman Lear Center at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication.

[MUSIC UP AND UNDER]