

Top 10 Movie Journalists
posted by Eric Melin on April 21, 2009

The old school journalistic thriller **“State of Play”** got me thinking about the other movies in which a reporter has to dig his or her way to the bottom of some big conspiracy, no doubt bucking the direct orders of the boss, dealing with ethical compromises, and under a strict deadline. Obviously, **“Citizen Kane”** is the best known movie about a journalist, but Charles Foster Kane was more of a megalomaniac than anything. In fact, I thought it would be more fun to focus on the characters rather than the movies, so here’s my list of **Top 10 Movie Journalists**. **If you have a Top 10 list to contribute, step up! Email me at eric@scene-stealers.com**. It’s a hell of a lot of fun!

Runners up: Lois Lane/Clark Kent, William Miller (“Almost Famous”), Edward R. Murrow (“Good Night, and Good Luck.”), Lowell Bergman/Mike Wallace (“The Insider”), Sam Craig/Tess Harding (“Woman of the Year”), Ron Burgandy, Marcello (“La Dolce Vita”).

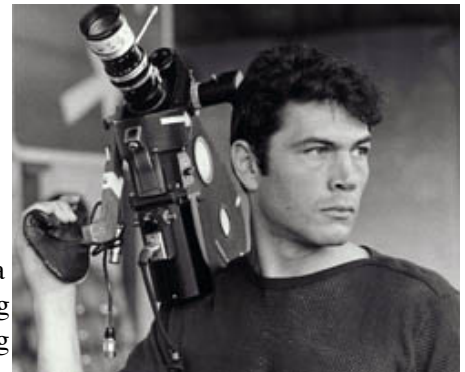
10. Truman Capote, “Capote” (2005)

Philip Seymour Hoffman rose to prominence as one of America’s greatest character actors by playing the diminutive and divisive writer who pioneered the “non-fiction novel” in 1966 when he wrote “In Cold Blood.” Hoffman won the [Best Actor Oscar](#), deservedly so, for taking on the complicated story of Truman Capote, who, despite being an openly gay New York socialite, somehow befriended many residents in the small town of Holcomb, KS after a tragic murder. He spends years investigating not only the crime, but more importantly, the ripples that it sent through the small community. Ultimately, the film is about the need for redemption in both killer and journalist (who got to know each other quite well), and it plumbs the psychological depths of a troubled genius.



9. John Cassellis, “Medium Cool” (1969)

As played by Robert Forster (“Jackie Brown”) in Haskell Wexler’s prophetic low budget movie, TV news cameraman John Cassellis starts off as a jaded jerk who’s more concerned with the opposite sex than the social discontent he captures in his footage. His priorities change to dramatic effect, embodied in one classic scene towards the end that was actually filmed during the riots at the 1968 Democratic Convention. As a Vietnam War widow fruitlessly searches the unruly crowd for her missing son, Cassellis turns his eyes from her to keep them on his prize: capturing footage of the riots. “Medium Cool” brings up complicated questions about the role of the media in dangerous situations. Although the actual plot of the film is not worth talking about, its blending of reality and fiction is unique and the footage captured during that tumultuous time is priceless.



8. Fletch, “Fletch” (1985)

Chevy Chase found the perfect showcase for his wiseass sense of humor in this loose adaptation of Gregory McDonald’s popular series of “Fletch” books, featuring undercover investigative reporter Irwin M. Fletcher. Filmed directly after Chase had cleaned up his drug problem, the movie hits a vital nerve, capturing both the independent spirit of an uncompromising journalist and letting the audience live vicariously through Fletch’s quick-witted barbs and ridiculous disguises.



Unfortunately, by the time the weak 1989 sequel “Fletch Lives” came out, Chase’s comedic skills were already starting to wane, and soon after were never to be seen again. “Fletch” took the breaking-the-rules ideal of the reporter to crazy extremes and to this day, it remains one of those movies that’s very easy to quote and really, really hard to turn off.

7. Paul Avery and Robert Graysmith, “Zodiac” (2007)

It’s the second true-crime entry on this list and it certainly won’t be the last. David Fincher’s epic tale of obsession and ruin is 154 minutes of a mounting police investigation with no resolution. Jake Gyllenhaal is Robert Graysmith, a former political cartoonist for the San Francisco Chronicle who becomes preoccupied with finding the serial killer who taunted police and terrorized the Bay Area in the early 1970s. The case takes its toll on crime reporter Paul Avery (Robert Downey Jr.) even earlier, as his alcoholism eventually takes over. By meticulously going through the details of the Zodiac killer’s investigation, Fincher puts us through the ringer, hoping against all odds, that after all this time, maybe he knows something that we don’t know. It turns out that what he knows how to do quite well is creep us the f*ck out.



“Zodiac” will stay with you a long time after the credits roll, just like it did with the real-life Graysmith, eventually shattering his life too.

6. Raoul Duke and Dr. Gonzo, “Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas” (1998)

Sure, the book is better. It almost always is. But there is something irrepressibly charming about Johnny Depp and Benicio Del Toro’s portrayal of the drug-crazed, semi-fictional alter egos of [Gonzo journalist Hunter S. Thompson](#) and his colleague and lawyer Oscar Acosta. (At least until they bottom out at the diner.) The lead actors undertook extraordinary preparations for their respective roles. Del Toro packed on



45 pounds, while Depp lived in Thompson’s basement for four months, went through the writer’s original manuscript, drove his Great Red Shark convertible, and even let Thompson shave his head. While John Cassellis became worried about putting himself in the story in “Medium Cool,” Duke and Gonzo basically just become the story in Las Vegas while Duke is supposed to be covering a desert race. But the movie (and book) have way bigger fish to fry—such as the death (or vulgarity) of the American Dream and all its excesses. What better place to illustrate that than a sun-dried den of sin like Vegas?

5. J.J. Hunsecker, “The Sweet Smell of Success” (1957)

Frankly, this character should be way higher on this list. I put him here because I’ve mainly been sticking with investigative reporters and Burt Lancaster’s unforgettable J.J. Hunsecker is nothing more than a gossip columnist. He’s an all-powerful son of a bitch, and he’s based on actual

New York columnist Walter Winchell. There’s a certain amount of investigative reporting to what he does, I suppose—if you count bribes, planting drugs, and spreading false rumors as journalism. Hunsecker verbally abuses just about everybody in the movie, including the usually likeable Tony Curtis, whose squirrely press agent is one big moral compromise after another too. Let’s just say his fans in 1957 weren’t appreciative of his work here. “Sweet

Smell of Success” is a nasty film, and it flopped big time in theatrical release. These days it is mostly revered by critics and film fanatics alike. New York magazine’s David Denby called it “the most acrid, and the best” of all New York movies because it captured, “better than any film I know the atmosphere of Times Square and big-city journalism”.



4. Stephen Glass, “Shattered Glass” (2003)

Written and directed by Billy Ray (who co-wrote the screenplay for “State of Play”), this true story features a villain more devious than even J.J. Hunsecker. Well, more devious, I guess, because he kept spinning tall tales and people actually believed him (mostly because they wanted to).

Hayden Christensen (Anakin Skywalker) proves he can act (or at least play a majorly neurotic douchebag) in his role as Stephen Glass, a writer for *The New Republic* who committed multiple acts of fraud when he falsified 27 articles for the political magazine. It is something of a revelation to watch Christensen’s child-like take on someone who wants acceptance so bad that he’s willing to concoct all sorts of elaborate lies to support his entertaining stories. He makes Glass seem charming and sadly sympathetic, even as he uses fake stories to become successful and well-liked. It’s a tricky tightrope that Christensen walks in this [fascinating and underrated movie](#).



3. “Hildy” Johnson, “His Girl Friday” (1940)

Rosalind Russell plays Hildy, the star reporter for *The Morning Post*, opposite Cary Grant as her editor and ex-husband, in this lightning-fast, witty screwball comedy directed by Howard Hawks. She’s about to go marry a boring insurance man, so the still-smitten Grant appeals to her reporter instincts by dangling a big scoop in front of her. Of course, she takes the bait and the strangest back-together courtship in movies is off to the races. Russell defined the style of the hard-boiled female in this movie—itsself a remake of “The Front Page” from 1931—with her rapid-fire dialogue delivery and precision comic timing. She and Grant are so good together, they make it look easy. It’s not. Just ask Jennifer Jason Leigh, who tried to channel the spirit of Russell in the 1994 Coen brothers film "[The Hudsucker Proxy](#)." Not so easy.



2. Chuck Tatum, “Ace in the Hole” (1951)

Well, we’re almost done, so its time to bring a little bad attitude back to this list. Like Alexander Mackendrick’s “Sweet Smell of Success,” ex-newspaper man Billy Wilder’s personal noir comedy/drama was a complete failure in its day but (with some help from a new Criterion DVD) is also now considered a classic. According to Criterion, “Ace in the Hole” (which was released under the name “The Big Carnival” at the last minute by the studio) is “one of the most scathing indictments of

American culture ever produced by a Hollywood filmmaker.” Kirk Douglas plays Chuck Tatum, a big city reporter that used to be on top and is willing to do just about anything to get back. He stumbles upon a man trapped in a cave in the New Mexico desert and decides to make sure the man stays there, while he milks the building media circus for all its got. It’s a dark and cynical movie that spotlights people’s fascination at tragic news and predates a lot of the media manipulation that happens today, and Wilder’s writing is laser sharp. The spot-on Douglas emanates ruthless ambition and amorality and just completely owns this movie. He’s got a lot of time to, since Wilder placed him in almost every shot.



1. Woodward and Bernstein, “All the President’s Men” (1976)

Was there ever really a doubt where this would be on the list? Alan J. Pakula’s adaptation of Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein’s explosive Pulitzer Prize-winning bestseller is a gripping yarn (especially since we all know the outcome) about the two dedicated *Washington Post* reporters who brought down President Nixon and forever changed the American landscape. The book was too weighty to condense its entire timeline, so William Goldman’s efficient screenplay only covers the seven months between the Watergate break-in and Nixon’s inauguration, somehow managing to condense a case with over 40 major players down for

maximum suspense. Dustin Hoffman and Robert Redford play Woodward and Bernstein, who themselves originally turned their series of articles in the Post into a book, switching the focus from the actual newspaper stories to the drama of the reporters’ own situations. Producer Redford saw the potential from the beginning and snapped up the rights immediately. The movie changed some facts and even left out the crucial role of newspaper editors completely, but it also perfectly captures a moment in American history when people lost faith in their government and unravels a Washington power structure that most could have never dreamed was so labyrinthine. Hoffman and Redford, who researched their roles for months, used their chops and stature to glamorize—of all people—the journalist. Pakula’s film changed the public’s perception of reporters and portrayed their pursuit of the truth, no matter what its revelation may bring, as a noble thing.



P.S. This movie was beaten in the Best Picture category by “Rocky.”