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20 films on politics and the media

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BY JOSEPH PLANTA

VANCOUVER – A few weeks ago, Sean Holman, the talented and prodigious editor of [Public Eye Online](#) was [on the program](#) to discuss the year that was and the year to come in provincial politics. We got to talking movies, when I'd asked him if he'd seen *State of Play*, the fine American film based on the British miniseries of the same name. He suggested two other films: *The Candidate* and *Shattered Glass*.

This got me thinking about what films had the best depictions of politics, media, journalism and the writing process. I came up with a few, and limited myself to twenty which seemed a workable number. Twenty favourites, as it were.

Of course the list is subjective, and is in no particular order. I suspect if I ever get to watching *Dr. Strangelove*, or *The Front Page*, or *Bob Roberts*, or *Silver City*, they might be added to the list, perhaps even bumping off something already here. There's nothing on this list that was made for television, otherwise the *House of Cards* trilogy would be here, as well as the original British miniseries *State of Play*, *The Thick of It*, *The West Wing*, and of course, the *Yes, Minister/Yes, Prime Minister* tandem.

Perhaps Mr. Holman or others would like to add to or debate my choices.

State of Play is a great thriller, and I say that despite seeing the original British miniseries. Russell Crowe is believable as a hard driving journalist, delivering an idealistic and realistic portrayal with a serviceable American accent. Helen Mirren keeps her accent and almost makes us forget Bill Nighy in the original miniseries. Ben Affleck plays equal to Crowe in this picture, and is terrific as a congressman whose life is seemingly unravelling.

A few years ago, Stanley Tucci won an Emmy for playing Walter Winchell in an HBO drama on the life of the famed columnist who was feared and revered for his uncanny ability of making or breaking careers in show business and politics, simply by a mention in one of his awfully stylish columns. That film is a favourite of mine, but the best depiction of Winchell is that which Burt Lancaster provides in *Sweet Smell of Success*. Although, it's not Winchell per se, the columnist Lancaster plays, J.J. Hunsecker, is as complex as Winchell. *Sweet Smell of Success* is such a stylish film from its era of the late 1950s. It's still sharp, dynamic and some of the lines delivered in the film are immortal.

All the President's Men is such a good film on many levels. It was the first dramatisation of the Watergate scandal, and features Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman as the *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein. It won Jason Robards an Oscar for his portrayal of their editor Ben Bradlee. And it unquestionably inspired a generation of reporters and journalists. It's considered the Watergate movie, yet it's an incomplete view of the scandal that brought down Nixon, as it didn't feature, as Colby Cosh has written, "any special prosecutors, federal judges, the FBI, or the Congress of the United States."

Nothing But the Truth is a recent film, not as high profile as *State of Play*, despite some star turns from Kate Beckinsdale, Matt Dillon, and Alan Alda. Its story is similar to the Joe and Valerie Wilson/CIA leak investigation, where journalist Judith Miller went to prison for refusing to name a source. Beckinsdale plays a journalist in similar circumstances, and despite not being a dramatisation of the Wilson case, it's a fantastic drama about freedom of the press and the disclosure of sources, the court system, and the American constitution.

Network written by Paddy Chayefsky is a great film that came out the same year as *All the President's Men*. It's a wonderful view on to the media landscape as it was in the mid-1970s. It's interesting to watch now, as we see how much more of the media world is concentrated in the hands of a few large corporations, how audiences are fickle, and how saturated our media is. It's amazing to see how prescient *Network* is, despite it having some satirical elements. The magnificent performances from Peter Finch, Faye Dunaway (both Oscar winners), and William Holden are not to be missed.

Advise and Consent is perhaps the finest depiction of the United States Senate and its role in American governance. My favourite performance in this film is that of Charles Laughton, who in his last film performance plays an senator who virulently opposes the nomination of a liberal academic, Henry Fonda, to being the next secretary of state. From director Otto Preminger, it is a striking view of politics in the 1960s as it's set at the height of the Cold War, as well as distinct as it depicts sex frankly as never before. Its senate is also unique in that it features a female senator played by Betty White, and a black senator, who had Preminger had his way would have been played by the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The Candidate, one of Sean Holman's favourites, is a great movie. It shows the improbably idealistic candidacy of the scion of a prominent senator. A young Mike Barnicle plays a reporter in one scene. Robert Redford is the candidate, and we see him mature throughout the film. There were reports of a follow up to this film, and I hope they'll make it because I'd like to know what happened to McKay.

There is a remake of *All the King's Men* that starred Sean Penn and James Gandolfini, however I haven't seen it. I do like the first movie from 1949 which starred Broderick Crawford and Mercedes McCambridge, and won the best picture Oscar of that year. (Crawford and McCambridge also won Oscars.) Crawford plays a southerner who seeks the governor's office in the vein of Huey Long. The similarities are clear, and the performances are tremendous. The view onto southern politics of the era is worthwhile.

Occasionally *Dave* is played on cable, and it's great to watch time and again. Kevin Kline turns in a great performance, arguably underrated, as an ordinary guy who because of his uncanny physical similarities to the president of the United States, is hired to take on some public duties as the real president would rather fool around with a mistress. Dave walks out of buildings and into waiting cars for the president, waving at crowds and completing other superficial tasks until the real president is taken ill. Rather than invoke the 23rd amendment, the chief of staff played by Frank Langella decides to continue with Dave as the president, blocking the ascension of vice president Ben Kingsley. It's a comedy, but it's a delight and a view on the presidency from perhaps a different angle.

A Face in the Crowd starring Andy Griffith as a drifter who captivates radio audiences thanks to Patricia Neal's promotion is a fantastic meditation on fame and how it's achieved. It's universal in its depiction despite being set in the southern United States prior to television. It's a great film from director Elia Kazan.

84 Charing Cross Road is a favourite of mine, because of wonderful and understated performances from Anne Bancroft, Anthony Hopkins, and Judi Dench. Bancroft is a fast-talking New York writer who strikes up a letter-writing correspondence with Hopkins, a low-key if not dour English bookseller. It's based on the true story of Helene Hanff, who orders books from this used book shop in England, and whose correspondence lasts some twenty-years. Bancroft is wonderful, and this film is a poignant valentine to book collecting.

Sean Connery gives a great and underrated performance as a sought after but reclusive novelist (think Salinger) in ***Finding Forrester***. He befriends a black high school student, a gifted and aspiring writer (Rob Brown). F. Murray Abraham stands out as a bastard of a school principal who accuses the young student of plagiarism. It's a fine appreciation of writing and the creative process, and how for some it can yield fantastic results at the outset and then paralyse completely. This is also a film where I realised, long before *True Blood*, that Anna Paquin was hot.

The Front stars Woody Allen and Zero Mostel. It's a comedy/drama about the blacklist in the 1950s, when communist sympathisers were prevented from working in show business. Michael Murphy plays a recently blacklisted television comedy writer, who gets Allen, a diner's cashier, to front for him, submitting his work to the network. Mostel is fantastic.

Adaptation is a great movie about writing, and the relationship it has with movie writing. It stars Nicolas Cage, Meryl Streep, and Oscar-winner Chris Cooper.

Frost/Nixon features the latest depiction of Richard Nixon, arguably the most fascinating of US presidents. It's a good movie as it dramatises the legendary interviews Nixon gave to British television presenter David Frost after Watergate. Frost became widely regarded a serious journalist after these interviews, and there are great performances in this film from Frank Langella as Nixon, and Michael Sheen as Frost. As someone who interviews people on this website, *Frost/Nixon* is instructive in the art of the interview. The portrayal of Nixon is almost a caricature, and because of this it's perhaps not the best portrayal of Nixon. Anthony Hopkins in the Oliver Stone film *Nixon* is perhaps more layered, though the film isn't as strong as it could be.

Stranger than Fiction is a charming film starring Will Ferrell, Dustin Hoffman, Emma Thompson and Queen Latifah. It describes the writing process, and Ferrell's unwilling part as the protagonist in Thompson's novel. It defies explanation here, but it's a good movie. Maggie Gyllenhaal is attractively charming.

The Gathering Storm is the best depiction of Churchill I've seen. I enjoyed the recent follow up starring Brendan Gleeson in *Into the Storm*, but features the incomparable Albert Finney and Vanessa Redgrave as Winston and Clementine Churchill. Churchill, despite his idiosyncrasies, moods and mercurial disposition is depicted as a hero, charming, and sympathetic as he sees the threat of Hitler as more dire than his contemporaries, Chamberlain and Stanley Baldwin (played by a great Derek Jacobi). I haven't seen Richard Burton's Churchill, or Simon Ward's in *Young Winston*, but of recent Churchill depictions (ones on DVD at least), this is not to be missed.

Broadcast News starring Holly Hunter, William Hurt, and the wonderful Albert Brooks, is a great view on the world of television news in the 1980s. James L. Brooks manages to bring a love story into

the newsroom, and makes it delightful. Jack Nicholson as a network news anchor is also great to watch.

Citizen Kane is considered the greatest film ever made, and visually it is matchless. The portrayal of newspaper baron turned politician Charles Foster Kane by director and co-writer Orson Welles is very nearly magical. Ken Whyte, the publisher and editor of *Maclean's*, who wrote a magnificent biography of William Randolph Hearst's early years, [told me](#) the idea that Hearst is Kane is inaccurate. Whether you agree with Whyte or not, on its own, *Citizen Kane* is tremendous in its story, and in the performances, not only from Welles, but Joseph Cotten as well.

In the Loop is a witty, timely comedy set on both sides of the Atlantic. It's vulgar, but then again so is politics. Based on characters from the great British comedy, *the Thick of It*, it stars Peter Capaldi as the hard driving director of communications to a British prime minister, who has to deal with the loose lips of a hapless junior cabinet minister, played by Tom Hollander. The minister has told an interviewer that war is 'unforeseeable,' and so officials on both sides of the Atlantic scramble with the press fallout. A war is inevitable, despite no one really wanting to go. Actually, it's more complicated than that. See it to see what happens. James Gandolfini plays an American general thrown into the fray. It's just a great film.

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