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Hollywood Gives the Press a Bad Name

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PEOPLE may not be keen on consuming the fruits of journalism - ratings, circulation and polling numbers make that plain - but put them in a darkened movie house and the craft suddenly becomes riveting.

Journalists play a role in a surprising number of movies that are rounding out the year and may well be around at Oscar time. "Good Night, and Good Luck" and "Capote" take journalists as their chief preoccupations, but the news media also get critical roles in "King Kong," "Munich" and "The Constant Gardener."

Reporters are historically tossed into scripts, as a Greek chorus as articulate and attractive as a flock of cawing seagulls, or as sleazy bystanders who take people down as a matter of general practice. Hollywood renders many professions as cartoons - pity the lawyers, if you can - but part of the reason that the news media are held in such low esteem is that they are cast as such. The editor in "Batman" who is constantly doing anything he can to sell newspapers is not seen as a cartoon by the public; he is seen as a proxy.

Has the public been taught, movie by movie, to loathe and suspect the press? Maybe not, but the movies in which the press is seen as holding business and government to account - how the press likes to think of itself - are far outnumbered by the films in which the news media come off as entirely unaccountable.

"Good Night" is the exception, offering a heroic if historically fuzzy film in which a group of dedicated newsmen and women take on a sitting United States senator at great personal risk, and both they and the nation come away the better for it. Too bad the movie's makers had to go back 50 years for an example.

"King Kong" offers a more typical scenario. The poor gorilla is chained to a stage for the entertainment of others and photographers shower him with flashbulbs until he goes ballistic, flattens New York and then tumbles to his death. And, oh yeah, the journalists are there to climb atop the carcass for some more pictures. Not much has changed in public perception of the craft since the original "King Kong" was made back in 1933. In "Capote," the journalist sells out his subject, while in "Munich" a frantic electronic press in pursuit of

the story tips off the terrorists.

JOURNALISTS are rarely important enough in movies to serve as true villains; the most common movie credit is that of the "Obnoxious Reporter."

And the business in general seems to be playing to type. Myriad plagiarism scandals, most notably one involving The New York Times and Jayson Blair and CBS's failure to verify a memo related to President Bush's National Guard service, conjure their own images of journalistic malfeasance.

There were the travails of Judith Miller, the former reporter for The Times, and now even Bob Woodward of The [Washington Post](#) - whose work with Carl Bernstein provided grist for "All the President's Men," a journalistic paean - is starring in a far less praiseworthy role.

When Hollywood is really scraping around for a hero, it will sometimes turn to the news media. "The Pelican Brief," "Three Days of the Condor" and "The Insider" all showed journalists as the saviors of last resort. But more often, journalists are the handmaidens to evil: Danny DeVito as a sleazy reporter blackmailing left and right in "L.A. Confidential," Sally Field, a malpracticing scribe who trashes the reputation of the character played by Paul Newman in "Absence of Malice," or the witless careerists of "Broadcast News" or "To Die For." Dustin Hoffman, playing an ambitious reporter in "Mad City" put it rather succinctly, "I don't want to cross the line, I just want to move it a little bit."

When Hollywood has a role requiring greasy self-interest, it knows it can insert a fast-talking

guy with a notebook and soup stains on his tie.

"Even the seminal film about journalists - 'The Front Page,' in 1931 - was in retrospect a portrait of male journalists behaving badly, taunting a woman to jump out of a window, making up a story, lying, cheating, creating news stories out of whole cloth," Joseph Saltzman, a professor and director of the Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture at the University of Southern California, said in an e-mail message.

"The anger and lack of confidence most Americans have in the news media today is partly based on real-life examples they have seen and heard," he added. "But much of the image of the journalist as a money-grubbing, selfish, arrogant scoundrel is based on images from movies and television."

Even "Capote," a film about Truman Capote, a writer who extended the reach of American journalism, has, at its core, a man who chose self-interest over the interest of his subject.

Jack Shafer, the news media critic at Slate, said the motif of journalist as con, seminally rendered by Janet Malcolm in The New Yorker magazine when she said what journalists do was morally indefensible, could be overlaid on any profession. "I have news for Ms. Malcolm," he said. "She could say the same thing about my plumber or my auto mechanic. Yes, we can be weasels, but there is a lot of that to go around."

The news media end up as a stand-in for venality in part because that is a popular motif for the people who actually make movies. "To get a movie made in Hollywood, you have to come up with something that resonates with

Tom Cruise or Tom Hanks and one of the conversations they have in common is how despicable the press is," said Edward Jay Epstein, author of "The Big Picture." Mr. Saltzman agreed, saying: "The constant images of a news media whose entire existence is based on harassing innocent people and popular celebrities has an effect much like a drop of water constantly hitting the public's head. It creates the impression that journalists are at best unnecessary."

Funny thing, that impression. "When you have been victimized, you either call a newspaper or a lawyer, yet both professions are subject to vilification in movies," said Edward Wasserman, a journalism professor at Washington and Lee University.

"Look, the public doesn't care or know about what Bob Woodward did or did not tell Len Downie," he added, referring to the editor of The Washington Post. "There is great ambivalence toward the press because they have developed a mistrust over time based on any number of things, including movies."

Tony Angellotti, a publicist who has worked in Hollywood for more than two decades, said that it was silly to blame the entertainment industry for the news media's image problems.

"Movie makers generally reflect the times that they live in," he said. "They do not set out to create polemics."

Robert Thompson, a professor of news media and popular culture at Syracuse University, said the two worlds - the press depicted in the movies and the real press - were beginning to merge.

"Journalism is a lot more front and center in people's lives," he said. "There are now three networks devoted to cable news, where there used to be just three networks, period. And journalism stories are becoming so action-packed: the Jayson Blair story, the [Dan Rather](#) memo story. This is very high drama with some very tragic figures. Some of those stories almost surpass the movies."