

**With Pad and Pencil: Old Stereotypes in a New Form?**  
**A Comparison of the Image of the Journalist in the Movies from  
1930–1949 and 1990-2004**

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## **ABSTRACT**

**This thesis aims to provide an insight into the stereotypical imagery of journalists on the screen and its changes in popular culture, namely in film. Much research has been done on categorising different filmic characters and on journalist in popular culture as well as in real life, but from my knowledge no comparative approach focussing on the changes in the filmic stereotypes has been undertaken yet. Therefore my literature review covers existing research on journalists in film and the various categories scholar do put these characters in. Using qualitative content analysis, namely by watching and opposing sixteen selected movies, this study aims to give some in-depth view into the question if and how filmic stereotypes have changed over the approximately seventy years that lie between the films from the first (1930-1949) and second (1990-2004) period of analysis. In eight comparative chapters this study argues that some stereotypes have changed while others remain the same. Influential factors for these changes as found in the thesis are for example history, culture and audience expectation. The reason some stereotypes do not change is that they are deeply embedded in American myth that is even harder to change than stereotypes. The thesis concludes that most journalistic figures underwent considerable changes or even disappeared with only the crusading journalist, as a mythical heroic figure, hardly changed at all.**

## INTRODUCTION

From the early days of cinema, representations of journalists on the screen have played a significant role in shaping the attitudes and understandings of journalism in the eyes of the public. These images have created a certain mythology about the character; a popularly held idea of who journalists are and how they act. “Ever since the movies found their way into the big cinema theatres, among the gabbiest and most engaging heroes in the films have been those breezy, incorruptible, hard-drinking newspapermen who always got the story – and the girl” (Barris, 1976, cover text). Starting with the silent films and later, especially in the 1930’s, journalists appeared in leading or supporting roles as curious investigators, fighters for justice and gossip columnists. Many filmic stereotypes were established during those early days of the cinema; stereotypes that are still around today. The investigation of these popular stereotypes and the myths linked to them is significant as both play a fundamental role in the ways that real journalists are thought of in a broader social context.

Only a few people really know what the daily routine in a newspaper office or TV studio is like, yet they have formed a clear idea of what it looks like and how journalists behave. The reality is they are at risk of being prejudiced as “journalism films offer the public a vision of how a great and powerful institution operates” (Good, 1989, p.163). Certain expectations were established that have found their way in the minds of the audience as “stereotypes are simple models that lead us to have certain fixed expectations about the world and things in it” (Bromley cited in: Good, 2000, p.7). Since the beginning of motion pictures, over a hundred years ago, the film industry (predominantly the American one) found its way into cinema theatres worldwide and shaped audience views about journalism. Tens of millions from the silent era onwards have seen movies such as *Citizen Kane*, *All the President’s Men* and *The Insider* gaining their knowledge about the media industry from there. They experience media through media, often unaware that what the audience sees on the screen is what film studios, directors, producers, screen writers etc. want them to see. “Most important of all,..., have been Hollywood’s estimations of what would entice moviegoers, from the mass audiences of the golden age to the narrower niches of later years” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.171).

From the beginning images of the journalist were created that were expected to be popular with the audience, and they were re-affirmed as long as they sold. With the movies stereotypes were established that mainly focused on special character traits, habits and outer appearances - easily accepted by the majority of consumers as typical. However, in contemporary movies the green eye shades and obligatory whisky bottle are missing that identified someone without any doubt as a newspaperman, but other aspects, for example the friendly feud with the editor, remain the same. As will be explained later in the chapter *Genre, Stereotypes, Myth and Filmmaking*, stereotypes are hard to change so the underlying question is why do some change while others do not? Why is the crime buster figure, although audiences are still fascinated by crime movies and thrillers, not in existence anymore? How come that a “dinosaur” like Steve Everett in *True Crime* (1999) is a likable character? Could it be explained by the fact that he is a crusader, a hero, a man that fights the right fight? Throughout the analytical chapters the thesis discusses several factors such a history and culture in order to explain changes in the stereotypical imagery of the journalist. It shows that not only the film industry or the audience influence the content of movies but also that changes in our daily surroundings find their way into the movies. An easy example is probably the outer appearance of the reporter. Whereas in earlier movies they looked very formal, always wearing a hat, nowadays their outfits range from leather jackets to business suit. However as the chapter *Making the Headlines* shows, many narrative elements and myths from the first movies such as the hectic lifestyle have survived until today. Some contemporary films on purpose pander to nostalgia such as *The Paper* in which the main character yells “Stop the Presses!” The reason is that these are basic elements defining journalism movies as what they are.

Undoubtedly the audience plays a huge factor in the success of movies too, in their desire to pay or not pay for a movie. They influence the images on the screen with their expectations and the images on the screen influence the audience – a circle that seems to exclude any form of change in the stereotypes at all. However, as this thesis tries to show the image of the journalist on the big screen underwent considerable changes while at the same time continuing to carry important key characteristics such as the “journalist as the pursuer of truth” into the new century. The thesis with its comparative approach highlights differences in the portrayal of the journalist between now and then in his/her role as crime buster, scandalmonger, crusader, reporter

overseas, human being, sob sister and villain. As most scholars deal with this topic in a descriptive rather than analytical manner, I hope to give new insights into the topic and I seek to challenge some of the old categories.

Chapter 1 explains that the first journalistic characters in popular culture were established in novels, however, it was not long until former journalists worked as scriptwriters in the film industry. It is they who were in the beginning responsible for setting up the image of their own former profession. “Between 1928 and 1935, 70.8% of all newspaper films – 56 of 79 titles – had at least one former journalist involved in the production” (Good, 2000, p.46). The former reporters created filmic journalists as creatures of the city, reflecting the American audience’s preference for action and accomplishment rather than ideology. A reporter figure was created that was far from reality but sold well. “They embodied the myth of the self-reliant individual who pits nerves and resourcefulness against an unfair world” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p. 3). The audience was fascinated with the journalistic crusaders, sob sisters or scandalmongers, no matter how unrealistic or cheesy the stories were. “If movies just showed life, nobody would pay to see them” (Good, 1989, p.87).

Over the decades the journalist turned out to be a popular film figure as their professional curiosity served as a simple and thoroughly logical explanation for the fascination with nearly every subject. Bound by a set of ethical standards, journalists tend to be driven, passionate people who can be turned into interesting and complex characters in dangerous situations. As in real life, filmic journalists have the prerogative to ask anyone thorough questions and to investigate for the truth. In this sense, they are suitable as identification figures for the audience who might want to solve the puzzle as well.

From the beginning journalism was never portrayed as an ordinary profession in which people simply followed their daily 9am-5pm routine. “The movies have portrayed journalists both as upstanding citizens and heroes and as scruffy outsiders and villains. Either way, Hollywood has reproduced myths in which the press is always at the heart of things and always makes a difference” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 1). Altogether there have been more than 4.000 films and television programs featuring journalists, so the question is whether these myths still can be found, considering that surveys show a majority of people being deeply suspicious about the media, worrying about their power, negativism, attacks, intrusiveness and bias (see Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.2).

The Golden Age of journalism films was in the 1930's when the action of the movies focused on gangsters and crime. A wide range of reporters in those days were more reminiscent of detectives rather than newspapermen, and although they often broke the law, they got away with it. Reporters were hardly ever pictured sitting at their office desks but instead were found investigating in dodgy night clubs and dark streets, always on the hunt for the "scoop", the exclusive fame-bringing story. The plots in general were more fiction than a mirror of reality. "If a real-life reporter would grudgingly miss a meal to meet a deadline, a fictional one must sacrifice his romance or marriage rather than miss a scoop. If a real editor was businesslike and aloof a fictional one must be little short of a heartless despot" (Barris, 1976, p.15). The most famous movie, and first real public success, of these days was *The Front Page* (1931). In the movie reporter Hildy Johnson wears a green eye-shade, is a chain smoker and constantly on the phone, and has a whisky bottle hidden in his desk. He is a cynic and lonely fighter – a two sided, half positive half negative image that settled in the minds of the audience. Since the 1940's the focus has changed from newspapermen films to movies focussing on TV reporters – a change which parallels the rise of the television in popular culture. TV reporters and entertainers are the main focus since then. However, some of the stereotypes, connected with the profession of journalists, have not changed. The thesis thus discusses the question why they remain the same over all these years.

In many movies the journalist is mainly used as a figure to get the story rolling (*Message in a Bottle* (1999)), to show the power of the media (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*) or simply in the background as an anonymous figure (see Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.24) but there are also a few movies that focus exclusively and entirely on the journalistic occupation and life in the newsroom. It is the aim of this Masters thesis to focus on these movies in particular in order to make a comparative approach between the image of the journalist in the 1930's and 1940's with contemporary movies of 1990 - 2004. Based on Alex Barris' established categories of the journalist in American film the thesis examines whether the same classification can still be found in recent movies - changed or unchanged. I especially focus on the stereotypes that were created in the earliest of movies and the myths about the American journalist that walk hand in hand with them. Genre conventions play a side role as they often determine the characterization of the hero and the narrative which

eventually reflects back onto the stereotypical portrayal.

I believe that the changes in the imagery of the journalist in American film are worth studying because changes on the screen are determined by zeitgeist and changes in society and vice versa. Movies from a given period reflect the mood, beliefs and attitudes of society at that time. To examine films means to acknowledge that they cultivate legend and myth, and journalism movies in this case provide a unique insight into the profession's mythology (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.170). There is the belief that journalism plays a watchdog role in the political process (which is a main part of the journalists' self-image) but there is also the myth of being storytellers surrounding journalists. Either way the press in films is depicted as an extraordinary power. To find out why and when its portrayal changed in certain ways is a fascinating research question. Was the audience tired of the detective-reporter, how did wars affect the portrayal of the press, why are figures like Superman alias reporter Clark Kent still popular? Questions like these are probably impossible to be answered in their full extent but I hope that my thesis with its presentation of myths, stereotypes and examples of changed journalistic imagery will make its readers develop ideas of how to answer these questions by themselves.

### Organisation of Chapters

Chapter 1 gives a brief introduction to the history of the American journalist in the movies. This should be regarded as a general overview, noting that selected films from the periods of 1930-1949 and 1990-2004 are subject to further analysis in other chapters.

The Literature Review in Chapter 2 discusses literature related to the topic of journalism in film. Several books, articles and scholarly approaches are presented and critically analysed with a special focus on Alex Barris' book *Stop the Presses!* which contains the major foundation for my analytical framework.

Genre, Stereotypes, Myth and Filmmaking are the focus of Chapter 3 in order to present the main areas of research and schools of thought related to my thesis. A wide range of material was drawn from film studies, while the section about stereotypes draws predominantly on research in the psychological sector.



Chapter 4 deals with film as part of popular culture and journalists' notion that popular culture is to blame for the public's dim view of their occupation. The chapter was included as it helps to understand how movies influence their viewers' perception of reality and, vice versa, how audiences can influence the content of movies, which offers important knowledge when researching changes in filmic imagery.

The methodology section in Chapter 5 introduces the analytical part of the thesis.

Chapters 6 – 13 form the comparative part of the thesis. Mainly in pairs selected films from the respective periods of 1930-1949 and 1990-2004 are analysed within Barris' classifications and with respect to the question whether stereotypes that can be found in the older movies are still visible in the contemporary ones. When looking at other topics linked to the research question such as the women's right movement this thesis also tries to answer why and when, if applicable, changes occurred.

## **1. The Journalist in the Movies**

### *The Early Years (1900-1929)*

The image of the reporter that dominates the American consciousness was well established before the first movies were screened, which suggests that changes within and elements of the imagery are not only related to film (e.g. the green eye shade is also part of the literature). The journalist as a hero was created in a new class of novels around 1890, just a few years prior to the arrival of film. “The image of the reporter that dominates the American consciousness postdates the age of the partisan press, when, in fiction, the opinionated editor symbolized the newspaper. The year 1890 saw the publication of the first novel devoted to reporting – Kirl [sic] Munroe’s “Under Orders: the Story of a Young Reporter” (Ghiglione, 1991, p.2). Then, in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, plays on Broadway became popular and among other issues they also dealt with the journalistic trade which only a few years later was successfully introduced onto the big screen in the first silent movies. However, popular culture about the pre-film journalist appears to be either lost or forgotten and often scholars do not even acknowledge filmic imagery before *The Front Page* (1931).

Many descriptions of the history of journalism movies regard the silent era as hardly worth examining due to the small amount of useable film material. “If there was ever any great (or even reasonably entertaining) silent newspaper movie it fails to come to mind” (Barris, 1976, p.12). Scholars such as Alex Barris believe that the invention of sound was the most essential constituent for the successful development of the movies. “It is doubtful that cinema would have become the worldwide force in communications it has if sound film had never been perfected” (Barris, 1976, p.11). So whereas some scholars propose that before *The Front Page* in 1931 there has been no recognizable character image of the journalist in the movies, others such as Ness and Rainbolt regard *Horsewhipping an Editor* (1900) by F. S. Armitage (see Rainbolt, 2004, p.1) as the first movie with journalistic content. “In his indispensable annotated filmography of journalism films, Richard Ness includes descriptions of more than 290 films of at least four reels (about forty-to-fifty minutes long) in the 1909 -1929 period” (Rainbolt, 2004, p.2) which can be seen as evidence that the journalist as a

regular character on the screen was established during that time. From the fighter for a good cause, to the exploiter and investigator down to the war reporter or foreign correspondent – every conceivable role existed.

Larry Langman also found early creations of stereotypes in the Silent Era (1998, p.2). He recognizes the cliché of the newshound (an experienced, news-hungry reporter who is befriended both by police and criminals; see Langman, 1998, p.2)) in several films in 1915 and the crusader, who fights against corrupt politicians, exposes social evil and stands up for his beliefs.

The main problem when examining movies from the silent film era is the lack of relevant material. Most movies from that time are assumed to be lost, not for public display or not in a condition that allows screening. Therefore one has to rely on second hand descriptions.

### *The Golden Age (1930 – 1949)*

With the rise of the talking pictures Hollywood reached its Golden Era, which also marked the Golden Age of journalism films. An estimated 76 million movie goers attended the screenings every week in the decade between 1930 and 1939 (see Barris, 1976, p.12). According to Rainbolt during those years the journalist was one of the most portrayed characters on the screen with an estimated 500 movies dealing with this profession in the 1930's (see Rainbolt, 2004, p.10). The introduction of sound was as important as the fact that more famous actors and public favourites such as Clark Gable, James Stewart or Gregory Peck impersonated newspapermen and attracted audiences.

The Golden Age was a time when the image of the filmic journalists became very well defined which is why exemplary films from this period were chosen for this analysis. “Almost from the beginning of the talking era, the newspaperman has been a recognizable movie type, characterized by his wisecracking, his insulting manner towards his bosses, and his breezy irreverence to editors, politicians, police, advertisers, publicity seekers, and female reporters” (Barris, 1976, p.12). Many films focused on the fight against criminals rather than the portrayal of the journalist's daily routine with pad, pencil and typewriter. The journalist also worked as detective (*Adventure in Manhattan*, 1936), investigator (*The Picture Snatcher*, 1933) and

politician's aid (*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, 1939). It suggests that in early years the journalistic profession itself was not strong enough a theme to carry a motion picture alone. A few movies however portrayed the journalist's profession more closely. In 1931 *The Front Page* was released, a movie that is still considered as the archetype of journalism film. Based on the play from 1928 by Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur the film has been remade at least four times, the most famous version being *His Girl Friday* in 1940 by Billy Wilder. The original one, directed by Lewis Milestone was "a love story (or a love-hate story) between demon editor Walter Burns and star reporter Hildy Johnson. In the film, Burns does everything in his power to sabotage Hildy's wedding plans and call him back to his first love, the male world of crime reporting" (Good, 1989, p.14). This movie has given the audience the archetypal big-city reporter. "That hoodlumesque [sic!] half drunken caballero of a reporter wears his rumpled fedora inside, keeps a whiskey flask in his bottom desk drawer, wisecracks out of one side of his mouth while smoking a dangling cigarette out of the other" (Ghiglione, p.2).

The main image, established in the silent film era and strengthened by Hecht and MacArthur, portrayed the journalist as a loveable scoundrel, whose questionable methods were presented to the audience under the motto "the aim justifies the means". Filmic journalists walked a thin line between corruption and crime but the breach of ethical standards was considered as less important than to unmask the criminal forces. The 1940's, beginning with the Second World War, changed Hollywood's film industry considerably. Many war films were produced due to propaganda purposes, and so the figure of the journalist did not remain untouched either. Especially the figure of the foreign correspondent became popular. Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940) and William Wellman's *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945) may serve as examples. Nevertheless one exception has to be mentioned: *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Welles. The portrayal of media mogul Charles Foster Kane's life from idealistic publisher to larger than life tycoon was pioneering. Because of the narrative style, using flashbacks into Kane's life, as well as new stylistic and technical inventions, the movie is still very popular and subject to scholarly analysis (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.69). Although *Citizen Kane* is not subject to further detailed analysis, other movies such as *The Front Page* and *Foreign Correspondent* are, as they serve as examples for different stereotypical imagery and groupings such as the reporter overseas.

### *The Disappearance from the Scene (1950-1975)*

After World War II the image of the journalist as an idealized hero changed to a shadier figure whose actions were more dangerous than only the breach of ethical standards by his predecessors. Filmic journalists of the years after the war were mostly disillusioned and less scrupulous in their actions. In *The Big Clock* (1948) the editor of a criminal magazine commits a murder and then tries to draw the police's attention to his star reporter; in Billy Wilder's *Ace in the Hole* (1951) a sensational reporter, is "so greedy for fame, so consumed by his own ambition that he is capable of turning a tragedy into a vehicle for his own glorification. The film was so unpleasant that more than one movie critic felt constrained to point out that few newspapermen would be that ruthless ..." (Barris, 1976, p.190). On the other hand, films were made that showed a positive, nearly glorified image of the journalists such as in *Deadline* (1952). Main character Humphrey Bogart fights not only for the survival of his paper, but also against the machinations of a gangster boss.

If filmic journalists were mostly one dimensional characters in the 1930's and 1940's, either good or bad, over the years they changed into far more interesting on-screen characters on the screen, and they were not always loveable. "People also must have noticed that there were times when real-life newspapers seemed to be behaving more or less the way the movies showed them" (Barris, 1976, p.193). Public opinion about the media began going downhill and a more critical view towards the profession on and off the screen developed. Changes were also caused by the huge rise in popularity of television, which proved serious competition for the cinema. "It was a threat in two ways. First it attracted advertising dollars, as radio had done. Secondly, it competed with movies – urging people to stay at home and watch television programs rather than go out and pay for the movies – and the movie advertisers weren't too anxious to see newspapers, where they spent money advertising their films, cover television" (Barris, 1976, p.196). As a result with monumental films such as *The Robe* (1953) or *Ben Hur* (1959) and colourful musicals, film companies tried to get the audience away from the TV screens back into the movie theatres.

These changes also influenced the presentation of the journalist in the movies. TV journalists appeared on the screen and joined or even replaced the old print journalist. Some films addressed the purported power of the media in relation to the individual (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.127). Probably the best known movie here is *A Face in the*

*Crowd* (1957) by Elia Kazan, in which a naïve street singer is pushed into TV-stardom, but unable to handle the fame he turns into an inconsiderate careerist. In the 1960's and early 1970's there were hardly any American journalism films made worth mentioning. A few remakes were filmed (*The Girl from Petrovka* (1974) based on *Comrade X* (1940)); old stereotypes were revived (*The Odessa File* (1974) – “it was a throwback to the old-fashioned kind of movie reporter, ..., who gets so involved in a story that he loses sight of the fact that he's supposed to get a story rather than apprehend the bad guy” (Barris, 1976, p.205)), but none of the movies, namely *The Mark* (1961), *The Bedford Incident* (1965) and *Gaily, Gaily* (1969) proved to be very successful.

### *The New Wave (1975-1989)*

In the early 1960's weekly audience numbers in the cinemas had dropped to a new low in comparison to the beginning of sound film in the 1930's (see Bergman, 1971, p.xi). The majority of people stayed at home and watched TV. As a result over 6000 movie theatres all over the United States had to close down and several film studios such as RKO and Republic disappeared from the scene (see Emery & Emery, 1984, p.448). As American journalism movies had nearly disappeared in total from the screen, new ideas from European films were welcomed. Italian director Federico Fellini created in his masterpiece, *La dolce vita* (1960), the image of the modern journalist, who works with the rich and famous on the one hand, but is still able to be professional and always keeps a distance on the other hand. Michaelangelo Antonioni's film, *Blow-Up* (1966), portrayed a talented but aimless photographer who takes pictures of violence and pain without feeling any involvement. The movie explored the fascination of pictures as a re-creation of reality and the possibilities of manipulating the former.

The main renaissance of American journalism film took place in the 1970's. Triggered by the Watergate-Scandal in the White House, journalists Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein became national heroes and were portrayed to acclaim by Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman in *All the President's Men* (1976). This movie “has been called ‘the central myth of American journalism’” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.112) and is renowned as a memorial to investigative journalism. It shows two journalists in a David and

Goliath story who succeed in their crusade against all odds. It was a powerful moment in the journalistic filmic imagery as popular culture strongly copied reality, creating a new, less fictional type of reporter. However, also in 1976, the positive image of the journalist was shaken with the release of *Network* by Sidney Lumet. It showed for the first time the murder of a TV host on air because of sinking audience numbers. “Rather than indicting television for being merely silly, the movie branded it as capable of murder. And rather than depicting its female protagonist as a conscientious professional, it made her the epitome of cold-blooded viciousness” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.121).

*The China Syndrome* (1979) shows TV-reporter Jane Fonda discovering a nuclear scandal. But her motivation is reasonably dubious too as she is extremely ambitious, eager to make the jump from features to hard news (see Good, 1989, p.15). Movies like these seem to confirm the reproach that journalists only care about a topic if they are either personally involved or scent a good story.

Because of the Vietnam War, the Cold War and other international crises, the figure of the foreign correspondent underwent a revival. From the late 1970's until the mid 1980's there were a large amount of movies covering this topic, to name only a few: *Salvador* (1985), *Under Fire* (1983), *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *Cry Freedom* (1986). There were rapid changes, especially in the involvement of the reporter in the action. Whereas frontiers were formerly black and white, nowadays reporters overseas are more torn between their order to report the truth and their experience of the impossibility to find the truth at all. Movies such as the German *Die Fälschung* (1981) by Volker Schlöndorff show foreign correspondents who deal with doubts about their profession and the feeling that their work is only there to satisfy the readers' addiction to catastrophes and sensations.

In contrast to the above presented movies in the late 1970's, the journalist also came literally across as a superhero. With the upcoming wave of action movies, comic book heroes were discovered as a source for the big screen. In *Superman* (1978) and its three sequels, warm-hearted reporter Clark Kent has a double identity as the courageous Superman and over ten years later reporter Vicky Vale wants to disclose the identity of *Batman* (1989).

*Into the New Century (1990 – now)*

The 1990's were marked by changes both in technology and the Hollywood industry sector. One of the most significant ones "may be the videocassette distribution, the revenue from which grew to exceed box-office income in the latter half of the 1980's" (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p.473) which led to a new pattern of release. Movies were first screened in the theatres, then on video and finally sold to TV stations which meant that most people were watching more Hollywood films than ever – in their own lounge. Tinseltown became one arm of huge media conglomerates which operate both production and distribution chains in film, television, video, and often music and publishing as well. Of course these developments also resulted in changes in the content of the movies. "Hollywood has frequently been characterized as a kind of aesthetic vacuum, producing films devoid of any true national character but, by virtue of its huge home market, sucking in talent from around the world" (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p. 474). The huge success of the new Hollywood was guaranteed by the production of genre films – easy to package and even easier to sell to a mass audience. "With the economical stranglehold of Hollywood corporations and the return to classical principles of filmmaking and genres, the 'New' Hollywood looks (and functions) remarkably like the 'old' Hollywood" (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p.482).

When focusing on the image of the journalist in the 1990's it has to be noted that in some areas the filmic representation of the journalist in the movies has changed, as this thesis shows; however certain images and stereotypes were revived or remained the same: "Almost every media film has at least one major argument between the reporter and the editor or TV news director or executive producer. A newsroom, no matter what the medium, is always filled with fast-talking, bright people whose main work is to interview strangers, investigate a situation, get answers and develop a news story" (Ghiglione, 2005, p.3). In *True Crimes* (1999), Clint Eastwood embodies the old-fashioned drunken, wisecracking and womanizing reporter Steve Everett with a nose for the scoop. In *Runaway Bride* (1999) with Julia Roberts and Richard Gere in the leading roles, the screwball comedy was rediscovered. In a handful of films the ethics and practice of journalism itself were the predominant focus for example in *Hero* (1992), *The Paper* (1994), *Up Close and Personal* (1996), *Mad City* (1997), and *Shattered Glass* (2003). Most of these movies have a critical viewpoint showing journalists "as narcissistic, consumed by craft, motivated only by competition and



awards, and insensitive to the victims whose stories they are merchandising” (Steinle, 2000, p.6). But also those who own the media, and use it for their own ends, are in the focus such as in *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997) in which a media tycoon wants to take over the world. Yet, this list of movies would not be complete without mentioning one undoubtedly positive reporter figure, namely Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) in *The Pelican Brief* (1993).

This chapter has shown that the image of the journalist on the screen has a very long tradition and even though filmic journalists nearly disappeared from the movies for more than a decade the image was strong and popular enough with audiences to come back. It could also briefly be shown that multiple factors affect changes on and off screen such as economical (e.g. Depression), social (e.g. Cold War) or cultural (e.g. comic books). How these factors influence the filmic portrayal and which role audience (expectations) play is further presented in chapters 3 and 4 as well as in the analytical part of this thesis.

## **2. Literature Review**

Only a few people have, with different focuses, researched the image of journalists in the movies in depth. There are recent journal articles about ‘The American Journalist: Fiction versus Fact’ (Ghiglione), ‘Print (and Video) to Screen: Journalism in Motion Pictures of the 1990’s’ (Steinle), ‘Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film’ (Saltzman), but hardly any books have been published so far. Most of the literature is of a descriptive kind, covering certain periods of time (e.g. *The American Journalist in the Movies, 1946-1976* by William Rainbolt), focussing on a particular aspect (e.g. *The Drunken Journalist* by Howard Good) or simply compiling movies about journalists in catalogues (e.g. *The Media in the Movies – A Catalog of American Journalism Films, 1900 – 1996* by Larry Langman) and so this thesis adds a new aspect with a comparative approach.

This chapter serves to give an overview about relevant publications and filmic categories with a special focus on Alex Barris’ *Stop the Presses!* which is the main book scholars have drawn upon.

We can find multiple explanations of why the early image of the journalist is part investigating hero, part scoundrel and part wise guy. According to Loren Ghiglione in his article ‘The American Journalist: Fiction versus Fact’ this contradictory image has its roots in popular culture, especially fictional novels, starting around 1890 and taking the American reporter for its hero (1). Around forty years later, with the introduction of the sound film in the 1930’s “the character ... was an exaggerated reflection of his creators, newspapermen with ambivalent feelings about what journalism had done for them and to them” (Good, 1989, p. 9). Many journalists in fiction resemble real life people such as Walter Burns in *The Front Page* who was based on the editor of the *Chicago Tribune*, Walter Howey (see Ghiglione, 1991, p.3) and “sometimes the fictional journalist is the archetypical reporter that the newsman-turned-novelist would have liked to have been” (Ghiglione, 1991, p.3).

So whereas Ghiglione focuses in his article on fiction and fact in regards to the image of the American journalist other authors tried to categorize the different filmic characters. This did not prove easy, as the ideal newsroom protagonist in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century turned out to be a mixture out of reporter and detective. Both were considered hard-working, breaking the law when necessary, being lonely fighters,

working by their own rules as well as revelling in corruption and crime. Andrew Bergman in his book *We're in the Money – Depression America and Its Films*: “Between 1930 and 1933, a great many films appeared that concerned themselves with corrupt and racy people who lived and worked in the city” (Bergman, 1971, p. 18). The so called “shyster” films – focussing on the activities of lawyers, politicians and newspapermen – were concerned with corruption in all its dimensions. The newspapermen in particular were after the scandal, the big scoop and they lied without hesitation to get it. Bergman distinguishes between two major character types in the shyster films of 1930-1933: “the slick scandal-crazed editor or publisher and the cynical, puckish ace reporter or gossip columnist” (Bergman, 1971, p.21). However, as Bergman predominantly focuses on the “shyster film” as a whole, his two categories of journalists proved to be too broad and insufficient for this thesis.

One of the most influential directors of that time, Frank Capra, showed a special interest in newspapermen and their urban milieu. In nine major films “Capra and his writers created big-city smart-alecky journalists and their greedy bosses who would come to represent everything the public believed about the mass media” writes Joe Saltzman in his paper ‘Frank Capra and the Image of the Journalist in American Film’ (2002, p.1). Social critics believe that Capra had an important emotional and psychological effect on three generations of American audiences and therefore was a factor in creating much of what Americans thought they know about their journalists in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Many of the archetypes created in those films were reinvented in later decades and, with a little variation, turned into television news people (see Saltzman, 2002, p.1). “Capra said that his films insisted upon characters who are ‘human and do the things human beings do – or would do if they had the courage and opportunity’” (Bergman, 1971, p.137). His key writers were former newspapermen such as Robert Riskin. “The Capra - Riskin film was generally a witty contemporary play that pitted a good man – invariably a ‘little guy’ who is naïve, sincere, folksy, unaffected, unintellectual, apolitical – against evil social sources: money, politics, affectation, social status, human insensitivity. The ‘little guy’ converts the social heretics to the human truth, usually by making the film’s heroine, who embodies the false societal assumptions, fall in love with him” (Mast, 1981, p.232). One could say that Capra films consist of the same basic narratives and basic character types.

Saltzman identifies four main images in Capra films: the energetic reporter, the sarcastic sob sister, the supportive newspaper editor and the ruthless publisher. In his

separation of editor and publisher he differs from other scholars such as Bergman, the latter putting the two in one category. This is caused by Saltzman's focus on just one director, who portrays the editors as "basically good guys in the tradition of movie newspaper editors ... and they have to answer to amoral circulation-hungry publishers who only want to see the results", leaving the publishers as the bad guys, who create the moral chaos and manipulate the public belief for their own ends (Saltzman, 2002, p.3). In movies by other directors the editor could also be evil and power hungry.

In 1976 *Stop the Presses! The Newspaperman in American Films* by Alex Barris was published. The book is considered a milestone in the literature of this topic as it was the first complete study of the cinematic image of journalists. He typecast journalists in ways 'which most historians have followed' according to Saltzman (Rainbolt, 2004, p.3). Barris presents eight main categories of which I analyse seven (excluding editors and publishers which I do not further analyse as my main thesis focus is on the stereotypical presentation of journalists). The movies analyzed span from the early 1930's until the start of the 1970's when Barris finished writing his book. Although *Stop the Presses!* is a book that scholars cannot avoid when analysing journalists in the movies it has to be said that it is rather descriptive with an endless list of movies, directors and storylines with little theoretical background, if any at all. The categories listed below form the analytical framework for the analysis of the movies in my thesis. Although Barris does not explain how he developed his categories they are useful for further research and offer a basic frame to continue with as other authors did. His original typology seems to fit the great majority of movies then and now and is therefore ideal for a comparative approach. However Barris' limitations lie in the lack of theoretical background. He does not explain under which criteria he placed the different movies in the categories nor does he always satisfyingly define them as for example when describing the Reporter as a Human Being in chapter 14. In not providing theoretical material it is also impossible to critically challenge his work. Nevertheless as Barris' categories withstood the test of time and as other scholars mainly followed rather than contested his typology, it serves as a good starting point for my analysis. Once I discover stereotypes in the selected old movies, it does allow me to place them within Barris' framework and then follow up my main research question whether they survived in a new form. After that it is up to my own research to rediscover these categories or confirm/predict their disappearance.

The following paragraphs about Barris' categories should serve as a short introduction into the main analytical frame of my comparative thesis approach.

The image of the reporter as crime buster was a fairly exaggerated one that focused less on journalism than on crime. The figure resembled more a private detective than a news reporter, pushing his way through the police lines, solving crimes on his own, always getting the scoop and the girl. Movies that showed a rather realistic images failed to find a large audience, because after all a hero has to behave like one; he cannot just sit around proof-reading. Some of the movies that Barris classifies here are: *Front Page Woman* (1935), *Hi, Nellie* (1934) and *The Picture Snatcher* (1933). By the mid-1950's the crime-busting reporter was on the decline (see Barris, 1976, p.52). The old-fashioned, wise-cracking reporter was no longer a hero that audiences took too seriously (see Barris, 1976, p.52).

The second category is the reporter as scandalmonger. Today even worse than in earlier times, there is a truth throughout all media: scandal sells. In the 1930's gossip columnists were established as institutions to listen to in order to learn about famous people's affairs, problems and scandals. It did not take long until the first scripts, based only loosely on facts, were filmed under names such as *Scandal for Sale* (1932), *Night Club Scandal* (1937) or *Scandal Street* (1938). In exaggerated manner, the filmic scandalmonger befriended high society people, travelled the world to find missing prominent people and mingled with gangsters to get the 'inside' story. In many early films though, such as *It Happened One Night*, the scandal aspect vanished behind the romance. Nevertheless it appears as if scandal movies continued throughout time (e.g. *The Paper*, 1994) and the fact that scandal sells is still depicted in modern movies (2).

Hollywood has also showed its social side. The reporter as crusader exposes social evil and performs worthwhile functions in his community (see Barris, 1976, p.78). The myth that only journalists can disclose the truth and contribute to a better society is reaffirmed. It seems that this myth plays an important role in the profession's self-conception and the public's expectations of the (watchdog) role of journalism in society. Targets of the filmic crusade were often corrupt politicians, making the reporter less wise-cracking but rather serious about his mission. Movies such as *Call Northside 777* (1948), *Mr Smith Goes to Washington* (1939), *Gentlemen's Agreement* (1947) and *All the King's Men* (1949), proved it possible to make good, suspenseful

newspaper stories without the traditional stereotypes of hysterical editors, feminist sob sisters or line-crossing crime busters.

Barris' next category is headlined the reporter overseas. Already established in novels as well as journalistic adventure reports in newspapers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the foreign correspondent developed into a great American hero, whose life on the screen was even more dramatic than in real life. Foreign correspondent movies were also often combined with either comedy (survival on unknown territory) or marital drama (destruction of the marriage over the assignment). One of the most influential reporter overseas movies is Alfred Hitchcock's *Foreign Correspondent* (1940). "The movie's instant success – and the spread of the war – made the foreign correspondent a popular film hero" (Barris, 1976, p.103). Other movies include *The Story of G.I. Joe* (1945) and *Passage to Marseille* (1944). The image of the American reporter in foreign lands persisted over the years and movies such as *Young Winston* (1972) and *Under Fire* (1983) show that each decade has its own reporter overseas movies.

The movie which initially focussed on the reporter as a human being was *The Front Page*. Main characters Walter Burns and Hildy Johnson were believable, imperfect characters trying to manage private and professional life. In the 1940's scriptwriters tried even harder to show reporters at work without crime, violence or scandals involved (e.g. *On Our Merry Way* (1948)). One of the most famous ones in this category is *Citizen Kane* (1941). From the extras and supporting roles to the main characters of Jed Leland and Charles Foster Kane the film draws the picture of serious, hard-working and dedicated newspapermen. Narratives that are used to show the reporter as a human being are for example alcoholism, marital problems and the tension between work and private life. Often journalism as the chosen profession serves as a trigger to these problems. Movies such as *Merrily We Go to Hell* (1932), where reporters are shown as alcoholics destroying their own lives, fall into this category.

From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century women were an important part of popular American news journalism, covering mainly so-called soft news such as weddings in order to present the human and emotional angle of the story. "What they wrote came to be referred to as sob stories and, indubitably, the sister reporter doing such work came to be known as the sob sister" (Barris, 1976, p.139). Film producers discovered the female reporter as a head figure in the battle of the sexes, but often clichéd storylines were connected to the characters: for some reason half of the movie sob sisters started out as heiresses

(see Barris, 1976, p.141), sob sisters falling in love with the person they write about (e.g. *Meet John Doe*) and it seems as if they were only worthy of love interest attention once they showed their professionalism (*Front Page Woman* (1935)). As time changed so did the sob sister image and by the late 1950's it had basically disappeared. Although Barris does not explain why, from my general understanding of cinema history the Hollywood film industry underwent a major transformation after World War II and with regards to the sob sister image the women's rights movement evidently led, beside other reasons (3), to more women in the workforce therefore destroying the 'one female reporter amongst men' image.

Barris last category is named the newsman as villain. Whereas in the early movies the newspaperman was portrayed as a kind of folk hero, this image changed over the years and filmic journalists were subject to a less idealized, sharper, not always favourable examination (see Barris, 1976, p. 181). These negative portrayals have their fair share in the Americans love-loathe relationship with the press as they made audiences believe that newspapermen were capable of using their power and resources for their own selfish ends (see Ghiglione, 1991, p.1). Editors and publishers were mainly shown as unscrupulous people, but later also reporters were portrayed as doing anything for the big scoop. As audiences started forming a more sceptical view of what real life newspapermen were like, writers realized that villains could be far more interesting than heroes. Villains moved audiences to strong emotional reactions as well, especially when they got their fair reward at the end (see Barris, 1976, p.181). Movies in this category are *Scandal Sheet* (1931), *I am the Law* (1938) and *Laura* (1944).

As mentioned before, Barris' book is rather descriptive, but other scholars followed his style of establishing categories and then listing films under these categories which appear to be based on character rather than theme, plot or genre. One of the scholars that attempted to build on Barris is Larry Langman who wrote *The Media in the Movies – A Catalog of American Journalism Films, 1900 – 1996*. Although Langman's classification in its mixture of character and location aspects is not entirely logical and of little use for further research, as I show in the following paragraph, I still like to present his approach for various reasons. Firstly it shows that scholars still draw on Barris' categories more than three decades after his book and secondly that these categories are better thought through than those of many other

researchers. At the same time Langman's approach also shows that with an emphasis on other criteria such as location or plot completely new categories could be established.

Langman's book covers 1025 films dealing with journalism or journalistic occupations (reporters, photographers, editors, camera operators etc.). In his introduction Langman identifies the newspaper film as a proper genre (4) and connects it with others such as comedy, musicals and western. Langman follows Barris' category in the description of the sob sister and additionally counts the newshound which is from my point of view only a combination of crime buster and reporter overseas. The newshound has entrance to many inaccessible places, ..., is friendly with law officers and law breakers alike, and is not above manipulating others to get the big scoop (see Langman, 1998, p.2). He also acts as a foreign correspondent, lured by the same spirit of exoticism, adventure or political involvement that attracts the main characters of other people (see Langman, 1998, p.2). Langman also mentions the crusader, who is in his presentation an editor or a publisher, the reason being the financial means for the latter and the back up from the staff for the former. To him the crusading journalist only appears on the scene in the 1970's with *All the Presidents Men* and *Network*. Therefore the question is whether the journalists drawn as crusaders in Barris' book fall under the newshound category in Langman's? This is never clearly stated, the same film references never used. Langman gives solely B-movies as examples (*Freedom of the Press* (1928) or *Night Alarm* (1934)) making it therefore hard to believe in a category of crusaders as editors or publishers, without considering putting reporters in as well. As both scholars do not explain what criteria they used in deciding on their categories this question has to be left open. Langman also introduces an entirely new field – the rural press. “Hollywood demonstrated to the rest of the country that rural America was not immune to crime...” (Langman, 1998, p.6). Movies showed small town journalism as a destructive force in character assassination or, alternatively, the battle of newspaper editors against intolerance, prejudice and narrow-mindedness. “Newspaper films explored the wide variety of rural life, from interdependence to greed to anti-city attitudes” (Langman, 1998, p.7). The rural press as an extra category is a new interesting point of view but it does not characterize the journalist per se. It is a category built up on location instead on the function the reporter has in society. If Langman wants to categorize upon settings he consistently needs to mention the city



reporter, foreign correspondent, red light district investigator, which might eventually lead back to Barris' categories (crime buster, reporter overseas).

In order to look for more research material about the image of journalists in the movies one comes across Howard Good. His two books used in this thesis are: *The Drunken Journalist – The Biography of a Film Stereotype* and *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film*. In the first book Good focuses on the drunken reporter in connection with alcoholism on the screen (many traits culturally identified with creative writing are instability, immaturity, selfishness, and of course, excessive drinking – see Good, 2000, p.67) which proved very helpful when analysing the figure of Steve Everett in *True Crime* (1999) (5). He furthermore focuses on the presentation of women and the implications of gender stereotyping. In *Outcasts: The Image of Journalists in Contemporary Film* Good focuses on representative films from the 1960's to the 1980's. Although this time period is not focus of my thesis, the book helps to get an idea of how the professional life of journalists has been allegorized on the screen. Good analyses the symbols and contents that lie behind film titles, concentrating on filmic journalists whose loyalties put them in conflict with society (see Good, 1989, p.3). Good agrees with Ghiglione on the point that “newspaper films, and the newspaper plays from which some of the more famous films were adapted, owe their stock characters and situations to newspaper fiction” (Good, 1989, p.12). He sees changes in the image of filmic journalists over the years which are to him mainly connected with changes in real life journalism such as in the 1960's when under President Nixon the parole was ‘The press is the enemy’ (Good, 1989, p.17). In return Watergate restored some of the glamour the press had lost in previous years. In making this point Good, who mostly focuses on character, suggests with regards to my thesis question that both old stereotypes can remain (public's negative attitude towards press) while at the same time images can change (heroic reporters and introduction of investigative journalism).

‘Fact or Fiction: Hollywood Looks at the News’ by Ghiglione and Saltzman, covering both journalists in the movies and on TV, focuses on the love-hate relationship between audience and media stating that whether journalists were considered as heroes or villains depended on their acting in or not in the public interest. The filmic categories mainly follow Barris' scheme. The authors distinguish between heroes (the male reporter, the sob sister, the editor) and scoundrels (the media owner, the scandalmonger, the anonymous journalist). The last is a new

category, introduced by Saltzman. “Reporters become bit players, part of an intrusive pack of harassing journalists, many armed with lights, cameras and microphones” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.24). These characters embody the despised by the public side of journalism as they appear out of control, chasing after stars and harassing them (both in film and real life). According to Saltzman “the continual bombardment of obnoxious reporters chasing popular actors contributes to the public’s rejection of the reporter as hero as someone necessary to society” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.24). I believe that the ‘anonymous journalist’ offers a very interesting new aspect, in particular as media people nowadays seem to be part of so many movies if only in the background. They are part of daily (filmic) life not necessarily influencing the plot (famous people being surrounded by photographers, the attorney stepping out of court giving interviews, journalists on TV at dinner time in the lounge), but reflecting a media-saturated world. The problem I have with this new category lies in the word: anonymous. I cannot adopt this as a stereotypical category as there is no background, no further definition: is it good or bad, does it carry pad and pencil, what is the relation to the editor, does it make stories up for a career? Evidently this category is unsuitable for my thesis as the anonymous journalist lies in the background of the plot and does not have either information about stereotypes nor tells about changes.

An interesting point in the article is the categorizing of media owners as scoundrels. This could suggest changes in real life media as in Barris’ original categories only publishers and editors were named as villains. However as media ownership did not seem not as big an issue in the old movies as compared to today (an exception is *Citizen Kane*) I hold on to Barris’ original categories and classify the media owners in the modern movies in the appropriate categories. It appears when Barris established his categories in the early 1970’s no big worldwide media conglomerates as we know them today had been formed yet, or at least audiences were not as aware of their influence as they are today. Nowadays though, media owners can be seen as villains who try to use the media unscrupulously for their own ends (e.g. *Tomorrow Never Dies* (1997)). “Early movies showed newspaper publishers as benevolent journalists who tried to offer a good product at a fair price” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.18), but now they ignore the public duty of the press. I acknowledge that Saltzman’s classification makes a lot of sense with regards to the circumstances surrounding media businesses today (high ratings pressure, being part of a big conglomerate, soft

news to secure the viewer base, hire and fire of staff...). However in order to compare the 1930's and 1940's with contemporary movies it is necessary to stick with the same analytical frame.

An article I draw further attention to is Paul Steinle's *Print (and Video) to Screen: Journalism in Motion Pictures of the 1990s*. For his research Steinle identified 23 films that were released in the 1990's and dealt with journalistic themes or journalists in the leading roles in it. He does not categorize the journalists according to character traits in the way other scholars do, but separates them according to their storytelling function (1. key character, 2. ethics and practices of journalism in the focus, 3. characters are journalists, but it does not determine the plot, 4. journalists appearing transitional [sic] only (see Steinle, 2000, p.2)). After describing his selected movies with their contents Steinle comes to the conclusion that in the motion pictures "television journalists are more often a target for criticism and scorn than their print counterparts" (Steinle, 2000, p.13). This statement suggests that some journalists have had changes in the stereotypes over time. The finding is part of further research within the analysis of the movies from 1990 to 2004 as since the rise of the TV culture the image of the journalist in the movies with the shift of the focus from print to TV journalism has changed significantly.

The last book, and the most recently published one, I use for my thesis is Matthew C. Ehrlich's *Journalism in the Movies*. The book of 2004 does not concentrate on a single director, era or subgenre, but instead analyzes important movies from the past to the present while focussing on the relationships between movies, myths and culture. Ehrlich discusses myth itself as a vehicle for understanding both journalists and wider society. The book offers detailed background information, especially about important people (Hearst, Hecht, MacArthur, Woodward and Bernstein) as well as genres (film noir and Screwball) and argues that films have relentlessly played off the image of the journalist as someone who sees through lies, sticks up for the little guy, and serves democracy. Ehrlich also argues that journalism films are an own film genre which I disagree with as can be seen in Chapter 3. However the book proved a major resource when both analysing older movies such as *Call Northside 777* and movies between 1990 and 2005 as it goes deep into the underlying myths of American society. Focusing on films about key figures and events in journalism, *Journalism in the Movies* reflects on how movies relate not only to journalism but also American life and democracy.

In summary it could be said that Barris' findings have proven very important over the years among older as well as contemporary studies. However, new categories such as the anonymous journalist in Ghiglione and Saltzman's article hint at changes in the filmic representation of the profession that I explore further in this thesis. Unfortunately as none of the above mentioned authors explains how their categories have been established I can only assume that films have been watched and, in a quantitative approach, when enough movies showed the same kind of portrayal of the journalist a new category was developed. Or as Steinle attempted, the function of the main figure determined in which category a movie fell. Another problem is that only a few scholars researched on the image of the journalist on the screen, and it is clear that these scholars heavily cite and copy each other. For example Good's statement "In the 1890's, a new class of fiction emerged in America that took, for better or worse, the reporter for its hero" (1989, p.9) is very similar to the next one: "In the 1890's, a new class of fiction emerged in America that took the reporter for its hero" (IJPC, n.d., p.2)). New input into the topic is hard to find and definitions of the different characters such as the sob sister are more or less similar. In undertaking a comparative approach between movies from the 1930's and 40's and 1990 until 2004 I hope to add something new to the study of the image of the journalists in film. But first, when looking at such a wide span of time one has to ask if journalism movies form a genre in themselves.

(1) See The Early Years in Chapter 1.

(2) The element of scandal is focussed on in Chapter 6.

(3) Mainly changes in society led to changes in the sob sister image as can be further read in Chapter 8.

(4) The idea of the journalism film as proper genre is discussed in Chapter 3.

(5) The meaning of alcohol in journalism movies is analysed in the movie *True Crime* in Chapter 9.

### **3. Genre, Stereotypes, Myth and Filmmaking**

Most of the authors mentioned in this thesis have an opinion about whether or not journalism movies are a proper genre, but again there are no explanations, only statements and descriptions. The question though is worth closer examination as it has major implications for the way journalism films are produced and received. Genres or genre films are more easily defined and marketed, because they signal to audiences what to expect. They have relatively stable conventions about plot, characters, setting and theme. If journalism films make up such a genre, that would mean that we could identify those conventions and categorize the films and their stereotypes fairly easily, simplifying the task of identifying changes over time. If they are not, we can expect the stereotypes and myths of these films to be wide-ranging and to change more over time.

While the first movies were put into categories depending on length and topic, already in the 1910's genre terms were used increasingly to identify and differentiate. By definition all movies belong to some genre, but defining them can be an issue. "What appears to be a genre for one writer becomes a subgenre for another, and what to one is merely a technique or a style becomes to another an identifiable manner of grouping films" (Solomon, 1976, p.453). Following the definition of the *Oxford History of Film*, the term 'genre' is used "to refer to distinctions of different orders between categories of text: type of presentation (epic/lyric/dramatic), relation to reality (fiction/non-fiction), level of style (epic/novel), kind of plot (comedy/tragedy), nature of content (sentimental novel/historical novel/adventure novel), and so forth" (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p.276). 'Genres', meaning 'kind' or 'type', had been long around before movies were made for categorising and evaluating literature, then they were used to differentiate movies, and over the period of time more and more genres or subgenres (e.g. comedies in the late 1990's) developed.

Howard Good, for example, never explains why he believes the journalism genre exists but he writes: "The narrative patterns of the journalism film genre are mirrors of, and metaphors for, the relationship between the public and the press, its ruined hopes, desperate wishes, and ambiguous promises" (1989, p.2). He divides journalism films into three main plot types: 1. the war correspondent in an orphan country, 2. the

reporter destroying innocent lives while chasing the scoop, and 3. the investigative journalist who unravels conspiracies. Together, all the three subgenres represent the public's expectations of the press (see Good, 1989, p.5). I believe that these three categories alone are insufficient to differentiate the complexity of journalism films, starting with for example with Screwball comedies, which do not fit in one of the above named subgenres. Good also does not further define his character typology therefore making it little useful for a comparative approach that focuses on changes in stereotypes and myths.

Larry Langman also acknowledges proper journalism genre and presents insightful subsections in his book. He argues: "Even after settling in to its comfortable set of clichés, the genre gained distinction for its several exceptional comedies..." (Langman, 1998, p.1) or "...in *Horsewhipping an Editor*, perhaps the earliest entry in the newspaper genre..." (Langman, 1998, p.1). Langman further presents The Newspaper-Crime Drama, The Newspaper Film as Social Drama, and The Newspaper Comedy Drama in the introduction of his publication. The author regards these combinations as connections ("The newspaper film has a long and symbiotic connection to the crime drama" (Langman, 1998, p.8)), but it is not satisfactorily explained if the three listings are subgenres of the drama with focus on crime, social issues or comedy in connection with newspaper films or if they are subgenres to the newspaper film (as a distinct genre) or if they form each a new genre, made of equally important factors (newspaper film and drama). Fell many years before realized that new combinations seem to be endless as "genres also intermarry and produce offspring" for example the combinations of Western and musical or horror and comedy (Fell, 1975, p.119). It is significant that although journalism movies have been around since the earliest movies were screened, under common sense no distinct genre or sub genre has been acknowledged.

It seems as if authors writing in particular about journalists in the movies regard newspaper films as a proper genre while the majority of authors who just write about genre in general usually state Western, Musical, and Screwball Comedy as exemplary types of film genres. From my point of view the journalism film cannot be seen as a distinct genre, even with a considerable corpus of movies, because it failed to develop its own specific, recognizable set of "repeated plot motifs, recurrent image patterns, standardized narrative configurations, and predictable reception conventions" (Oxford History, 1996, p.277). For audiences, the division of films into genres offers the

comfort of a simplified decision-making. When people go to a musical they know through their own cinematic experience and common knowledge that “boy meets girl, boy dances with girl, boy gets girl” (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p.280), but going to a journalism film can mean anything from comedy (*It Happened One Night*) to drama (*Ace in the Hole*) or thriller (*The Insider*). Therefore, in order to attract audiences, journalism films are throughout advertised under a broader generic term to simplify the decision making.

Journalism films also lack two related but distinct aspects that genre films share and that are commonly called semantic and syntactic components by theorists. “We can as a whole distinguish between generic definitions which depend on a list of common traits, attitudes, characters, shots, locations, sets, and the like –thus stressing the semantic elements which make up the genre – and definitions which play up instead certain constitutive relationships between undesigned and variable placeholders – relationships which might be called the genre’s fundamental syntax” (Altman, 2000, p.179). Especially with regards to the semantic components it has to be said that the generic set for journalism movies seems not settled. Just to make a small comparison with the Western:

	Western	Journalism films
1. location	the Western frontier	newspaper office/ the streets / overseas / rural / urban
2. characters	lonely cowboy	crusader / scandalmonger / crime buster / sob sister / editor
3. sets	semi-settled wilderness earth colours events	dark streets / war battle fields / sport / prison.

As the journalist in the movies can have different characters, functions in societies and places to act in, the creation of an established set of semantic elements is nearly impossible. Furthermore, journalism movies fail on the syntactic side as well. Whereas the Western stands for the atmosphere, values and conditions of existence at the Western frontier between 1840 and 1900, where man encounters his uncivilized double (see Altman, 2000, p.183) it is difficult to find the same kind of definition, whether they be very tight as for the Western or quite loose as for the musical, for the

journalism film. These can show disclosures of conspiracies (*All the President's Men*) in politics as well as scandals in High Society (*Scandal for Sale*). Once again, there is no set time frame, and no fixed location.

But even when journalism films for the majority of scholars fail to be recognized as a proper genre under theoretical aspects they still provide certain stereotypes about its profession and professionals that are deeply anchored in the minds of the audience. Many occupations such as policemen (“corrupt”) and government officials (“narrow-minded”) suffer from negative stereotyping and so does the journalist as being pictured throughout American popular culture as hard-drinking and sarcastic (see Good, 2000, p. 8). Even if these “alcoholics” changed on the cinema screen demonstrably into “workaholics” (see Good, 2000, p.154)(1), the former stereotype still seems to be in existence. Good (2000, p.8) argues that stereotypes are resistant to change as they constitute a world with which we have grown familiar and invested emotionally.

In sociology stereotypes can be conceptualized from two complementary perspectives. From one perspective stereotypes are represented within the mind of the individual person (stereotypes as individual beliefs). From the other perspective, stereotypes are represented as part of the social fabric of a society, shared by the people within that culture (stereotypes as collective belief system) (see Stangor, p.64, 65, 68). The first approach assumes that over a certain time “people develop beliefs about the characteristics of the important social groups in their environment, and this knowledge influences their responses toward subsequently encountered individual members of those groups” (Stangor, 2000, p.65). This is mainly relevant for people encountering the press on a regular base such as politicians, film stars or sports people. If they have good experiences with journalists they are more willing to give interviews. If they have received negative publicity or have been photographed without consent then the relationship with journalists might be marked with distrust. But members of the general public can also form a personal stereotype of the press in interpreting TV news or biased articles, and consequently when they meet journalists they will react in correspondence with that pre-existent image. The second, cultural approach is broader in scope. “Cultural models consider society itself to be the basis of stored knowledge, and stereotypes as public information about social groups that is shared among the individuals within a culture” (Stangor, 2000, p.68). Consensual stereotypes represent one aspect of the entire collective knowledge of a society, which



includes customs, myths, ideas, religions, and sciences. This means that there are pre-existent stereotypes of social groups in a society, e.g. I have ideas about firemen even though I have never met one. One of the reasons for this knowledge is that in modern society most stereotypes are transmitted through mass media, namely literature, TV, movies, advertising, e-mails or stickers. "The tangible artifacts of consumable mass media thus comprise an 'information highway' for the transmission of social stereotypes" (Stangor, 2000, p.69). The truth or falseness of stereotypes apparently has very little to do with its public acceptance. "Although the historical basis for the belief that all newspapermen keep a bottle of booze in their desks has withered away the belief itself survives, preserved and sanctified by popular art" (Good, 2000, p.9). It seems that culture can be both a factor in preserving and changing stereotypes.

So the question is whether these movies reflect reality or simply picture what the audience believes and wants to see? As this is a wide field of research and without going further into media effects, active audience and other theories I want to rewrite some statements given by some authors, related to my thesis. Howard Good writes: "A feature film, Charles Marland wrote, 'must reinforce the cultural values and attitudes of its viewers if it expects to be popular' (Marland in: Good, 2000, p.3). Filmmakers don't lead public opinion; they usually follow it, or try to" (Good, 2000, p.3). "We sometimes identify very strongly with genre situations and heroes, and such films may become significant to our perception of the world" (Solomon, 1995, p.465). Or: "Such a repetition [of a successful film story] is generated by the interaction of the studios and the mass audience, and it will be sustained so long as it satisfies the needs and expectations of the audience and remains financially viable for the studios" (Schatz, 1981, p.10f.). What these statements have in common is that they point out that stereotypes are reinforced by filmmakers if they are still accepted (and maybe internalized) by the audience and financially viable for the studios. It could explain why for example the sob sister (2) in its original form is not present on the screen anymore, as feminism, sexual revolution and equality changed the perception of women in workplaces. However, figures such as the journalist as crusader (3), fighting for the weak and justice (e.g. *Superman*) never seem to be out of date and this has to do with cultural values and myths embedded in every society.

When analysing changes in the stereotypical presentation of journalists on the screen it is very helpful to have a look at myths too, as they play a great part in American

film and society. An example for the interrelationship between stereotypes and myth is the Western that shows familiar characters performing familiar actions which celebrate familiar values (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.5). Whereas stereotypes focus on the characters, myths mirror the plot and overall message of a movie. Together they define the character of the (journalism) movie while being distinctively settled in cinematic convention. Myths in film “ritualistically reaffirm what a culture holds most dear, as when the romantic couple unites in a musical and preserves the sanctity of love and marriage or when the hero vanquishes the villain in a Western and upholds law and order” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.5). Generalizing it could be said that myths link stereotypes to a wider culture, social structure and ideology.

A main school of thought that deals with myths in societies is Structuralism, also described by Roland Barthes as “a way of analyzing cultural artifacts that originates in the methods of linguistics” (Culler, 1990, p.78). Built on Genevan linguist Ferdinand de Saussure’s idea that language should be understood as a system of signs with a set of rules governing their relationships with each other, the “same semiotic approach can be used to discuss language-based media and image-based media, because in either case we find signs which carry meanings” (Bignell, 2002, p.6). So language and sign systems shape human reality. “All of our thought and experience, our very sense of our own identity, depends on the systems of signs already existing in society which give form and meaning to consciousness and reality” (Bignell, 2002, p.7).

A leading Structuralist is Roland Barthes to whom “myth is a form of communication, a ‘language’, a system of second-order meaning” (Culler, 1990, p.35). Barthes argues that objects and practices within a society function the same way, endowed with second-order meaning by social usage. As an example the popular drinking of wine in France is stated. Wine is to Barthes not only just a drink, but a ‘totem drink’, similar to tea in Britain and it therefore creates a foundation of a collective morality (see Culler, 1990, p.34). This second-order meaning is established through the social usage which is added to pure matter, in this case the drinking of wine. To Barthes everything can be a myth, “for the universe is infinitely fertile in suggestions. Every object in the world can pass from a closed, silent existence to an oral state, open to appropriation by society, for there is no law, whether natural or not, which forbids talking about things.... Naturally, everything is not expressed at the same time: some objects become the prey of mythical speech for a while, then they disappear, others

take their place and attain the status of myth” (Barthes, 1984, p.1). Therefore myth is connected with history; it does not simply evolve from ‘the nature’ of things, but undergoes a process of development. Myth also cannot be defined either by its object or by its material, for any material can arbitrarily be endowed with meaning (such as throwing a glove to ask for a fight in former times). Photography, cinema, reporting, sport, shows, publicity, all these can serve as a support to create myth (see Barthes, 1984, p.1).

In order to understand the connection between film and myth it is essential to have a closer in-depth look at the meanings of visual signs. Although language is the primary source of human communication, the social world is full of messages that contain either visual as well as linguistic signs or visual signs exclusively. However it is important to understand that signs not only denote or label things, but also have connotations, generating from social experience. So on TV, in advertisements, films etc. signs are not only used for denotation, but also to produce connotations attached to these signs. “Barthes calls this social phenomenon, the bringing-together of signs and their connotations to shape a particular message, the making of ‘myth’” (Bignell, 2002, p.16). Myth in this sense, is not the reproduction of some traditional stories, but a way of thinking about people, products, places, etc. which are created in order to send certain messages to the receiver of the text. As an example Rolls-Royce is mentioned. The word by itself does not only denote a certain type of car, but it also has the connotation of wealth and luxury, producing the myth of upper class society. “It is as if myth were a special form of language, which takes up existing signs and makes a new sign system out of them” (Bignell, 2002, p.17). Myth, to Barthes, means using things as signs to communicate a (social and political) message about the world to the readers or viewers of the text. So referring back to de Saussure’s semiotic ideas “reading the messages in myth involves identifying the signs which it uses, and showing how they are built by means of codes into a structure which communicates particular messages and not others” (Bignell, 2002, p.21).

So for example in a movie a silent person with a tape recorder and a microphone clearly states that this character is a reporter. The person also creates the connotation of curiosity and a certain ambition to get the story. I think that at this point of identifying signs or things the association with stereotypes and the making of myth kicks in. Once we recognize a certain character, setting or plot the pre-existent knowledge about these settings let us expect matching character traits, film figures or

film endings. So Barthes' idea of second-order meaning can be transferred to the movies. A Western can be either seen purely as a piece of entertainment or with a second-order meaning as the fight between white civilization and 'savagery'. "On the one side are law and order, community, the values of a settled society. On the other, the outlaw and the savage Indian" (Nowell-Smith, 1996, p.286). According to Wright the Western is a myth of contemporary American culture, containing a conceptual analysis of society that provides a model of social action (see Wright, 1995, p.446). He believes that the story forms the myth and that the characters in it, representing social types or principles, follow a model of social action when they interact. The receivers of the myth then learn through observation how to resolve a similar situation when they are caught in it. One could ask what kind of meaning Western movies still have for our society, but Wright shows that the American West of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century still influences modern American life for example in the fashion industry. As is explored throughout this thesis, myths surrounding journalism movies can be very different. They vary from the outlaw reporter (*True Crime*), to America as a special nation (*Call Northside 777*) and individual freedom (*To Die For*). There is no unifying overall myth that says things about America but the films "underscore journalism's pre-eminence in American life even as they highlight tensions at the profession's core" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.6).

Other American myths that have been manifested in various movies are for example the American Dream in *Pretty Woman* (1990) (prostitute finds the way into the upper class by loving a millionaire; love overcomes all obstacles), "the belief in the nuclear family as the most proper and rewarding mode of social existence" (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.23) in *Fatal Attraction* (1987) (the 'other woman' has to be punished as she wants to destroy the sanctity of her lover's home) or the belief that America can overcome all dangers and enemies even from space in *Armageddon* (1998) (NASA sends nuclear weapons into space to destroy an asteroid that threatens Earth). All these beliefs / myths and values are part of the cultural mind and anchored in the minds of the individual members of a society (see Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.22). They form the invisible aspect (cultural mindset) of the American culture, while the visible part (artefacts and events) are expressions of them. Movies are only a small part of popular culture that makes myths and values visible.

But how exactly does filmmaking work as mythmaking? "In films, an image of an

object, person or landscape will have a denotative dimension. But all images are culturally charged by the connotation procedures available to cinema...” (Bignell, 2002, p.191). This means that cinema can create connotation through camera positions and angles, lightning, editing, costumes, sound and so on. The usage of those are dictated by the codes and conventions of representation which are shared by filmmakers and audience, so that the latter can actively construct meaning by referring to codes which structure mythic meanings in the world of film going. “Meaning is constructed on the basis of the spectator’s continual adjustment and testing of codes rather than simply ‘reading off’ a meaning from the text, and this suggests the active decoding of signs and the shifting process of signification...” (Bignell, 2002, p.192). There is a wide range of connotations used in the visual sector of film such as camera depth, lightning techniques, black and white colours which might signify the past or a documentary style such as in *Schindler’s List* (1993). Camera angles can demonstrate one character’s power over another whereas changes in the framing of the shot might be used to create the impression of claustrophobia. Sound is another artistic device to create connotations and meaning as it directly communicates emotion through volume, speed, choice of instruments etc. “These connotations arise not by nature but from the cultural context in which films are made and watched” (Bignell, 2002, p.193).

A movie is therefore a huge collection of the most different signs, causing the audience to take a lot in and assembling the visual, aural and graphic signs into meaningful units. “...cinema relies on the viewer’s competence at decoding the film by reference to codes, conventions and expectations cued by the film’s signs” (Bignell, 2002, p.194). But not only signs create myth, the narrative is also a fundamental factor as it plays out and encodes real issues at a symbolic level. For example in a comedy when a bang on the head causes the loss of memory, a second bang can restore it. Furthermore, the particular social context in which every film is viewed needs mentioning as industrial and commercial contexts influence the perception by the audience. The mythic meaning of film stars for example, constructed not only in films but also other media, create certain expectation about the role he or she is playing. Sometimes actors can even be synonymous for particular genres such as John Wayne for the Western, Arnold Schwarzenegger for the action film and Eddie Murphy for the comedy. “The star as sign affects the meanings constructed by the viewer of the character in the film text” (Bignell, 2002, p.198).

Coming back to where I began this chapter with, the genre, I want to refer to Thomas Schatz who in his book *Hollywood Genres* makes the point that genre can be seen as a form of social ritual, implying that these forms contribute to what might be called a contemporary American mythology (see Schatz, 1981, p.261). Genre films, much like the folktales of primitive cultures, serve to defuse threats to the social order and in doing that provide some logical guideline to that order. “In a genuine ‘national cinema’ like that developed in Hollywood, with its mass appeal and distribution, with its efforts to project an idealized cultural self-image, and with its reworking of popular stories, it seems not only reasonable but necessary that we seriously consider the status of commercial filmmaking as a form of contemporary mythmaking” (Schatz, 1981, p.261). In contrast to other scholars such as Jim Kitses who believe in the classical definition that myth has to do with the activities of gods, and therefore movies, for example the Western cannot be seen as myth, Schatz justifies his opinion with the cultural function of myth – a unique conceptual system that confronts and resolves immediate social and ideological conflicts (see Schatz, 1981, pp.261). Myth has “an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances and codifies beliefs; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency and contains practical rules for the guidance of man” (Malinowski cited in: Schatz, 1981, p.262). In this sense filmmaking is mythmaking.

A culture’s mythology represents a society reflecting itself, developing a network of stories and images to help resolving the conflicts of life. As an example serves The American Dream once again - a belief that no matter who you are or where you are from you can achieve your goals as long as you work hard and believe in yourself. “When the Western celebrates rugged individualism or the musical celebrates romantic love and marriage, the genre forms act as myths – they are among the various stories our culture tells itself to purify and justify the values and beliefs which sustain it” (Schatz, 1981, p.263) and as each movie belongs to a genre every one of them takes part in creating American mythology. Consequently, in not being a proper genre, journalism movies seem not right at the heart of things like the Western. Furthermore as there is no established genre, there are no unifying myths to affect the audience which in return would make a genre recognisable. Hand in hand with genre go plot, settings, narrative themes and stereotypes as described in the previous chapter. Therefore, one reason why Barris found so many different journalistic characters might have been that there is no established proper genre to clearly identify

the main figure such as the lonely cowboy in the Western.

As shown in Chapter 3, scholars characterized filmic journalists as scandalmongers, citizen-heroes and villains, but in either case existing myths and stereotypes are regularly reproduced in the movies showing the press at the heart of things and making a difference. To focus on changes in the stereotypical imagery of filmic journalism, with consideration of changes in myth as they link stereotypes to wider culture and ideology, forms the main analytical part of my thesis with reference to Barris' categories of filmic journalists (4). "Stereotypes are an especially useful tool in the study of popular culture, because they are direct and simple expressions of popular beliefs and values, and because they can be found in all areas of popular expression, both 'real' and 'imagined'" (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.26). Within the mentioned framework I try to explore a small part of American Popular Culture – the changes and continuities in the filmic representation of journalists.

(1) Good's findings about workaholics are also to be found in Chapter 6.

(2) Reason's why the sob sister disappeared are mentioned in Chapter 8.

(3) Myths surrounding the crusader are analysed in Chapter 9.

(4) It has to be kept in mind that focussing on myth privileges cultural factors as explanation for change in film. However other factors such as history are subject to analysis as well for example World War II in Chapter 10.

#### **4. Movies as Part of Popular Culture**

As a theoretical overview prior to the analytical part of my thesis, the following chapter is about explaining why changes in movies, and in stereotypes in particular, occur or do not occur and what meaning films have a part of popular culture.

While researching movies as part of popular culture I came across a lot of definitions about what the latter term actually means. Some scholars such as Fleming or Gans stress the commercial side of popular culture, “as something which is sold and bought” (Fleming, 2000, p.105), “provided by mass media or consumer goods industries” (Gans, 1974, p.3). Others focus on special elements (*Star Culture* by Hinerman and *Visual Culture* by Messaris) or particular artefacts (*Seeing What We've Said – The Top Ten American Box-Office Hits Taken Seriously* by Lause). However, all definitions about popular culture include that it expresses / reflects to some extent the beliefs and values of a given society. Various definitions also include that popular culture serves as something to enjoy, make sense of or identify with. This does not mean that all groups or individuals within that society approve with it but enough to make it popular.

In some ways it is hard to explicitly define popular culture as it is everywhere in modern Western societies. It is the clothes we wear (advertised, mass-produced), the malls we shop in, the TV programs we watch, and the food we eat. All this can be seen as “the visible aspects of our culture (artefacts and events) [that] are the expressions of the invisible parts (our cultural mindset)” (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.22). Examining movies to find out more about beliefs and values is useful as “film is *the* medium of modern mass culture. Not only is it consumed by the masses more than any other medium, but in no other commodity does mass culture itself provide the content to the degree it does in film. One need only think of all the product placement in movies...” (Black, 2002, p.4). So does popular culture mean that we are purely surrounded by commercialism?

Yes, the critics of popular culture say. Popular culture “is undesirable, because, unlike high culture, it is mass-produced by profit-minded entrepreneurs solely for the gratification of a paying audience” (Gans, 1974, p.19). All mass culture is identical and no more than the achievement of standardization and mass production. The culture industry, including radio and TV, no longer pretends to be art. It is just business. And despite the apparent diversity, all the cars, films, fast food chains, are



the same, because for the purpose of mechanical reproduction everything has to be stereotyped. Movies are produced with the intention to get as many people as possible in the theatres. The movie industry is a billion dollar factory which wants as little risk as possible, so now with the release of a new film promotion machineries start to ensure a box office hit. Film companies produce more and more mainstream movies, often pumping more money into the fees of popular stars, marketing, franchising and promotion than into the actual film production. It has become rare to see big studios taking a risk and financing extraordinary scripts that are not mainstream, but critical, cynical or just different in the making. “The mass media, and perhaps all of commercial popular culture, are often engaged in a guessing game, trying to figure out what people want, or rather, what they will accept, although the game is made easier by the fact that the audience must choose from a limited set of alternatives...” (Gans, 1974, p.ix). Audiences are left with less choice and they become subservient to the power of capitalism. Moviegoers also now (in contrast to the early years when topics like sex, drugs, child abuse were less covered) tend to see the real world as an extension of the movies they just have seen (*Wag the Dog* draws upon President Bill Clinton, *The China Syndrome* was released just before the Three Mile Island disaster and *The Silence of the Lambs* portrays a cannibalistic killer such as Jeffrey Dahmer) (see Black, 2002, p.22). “For in this neoaesthetic age, when experience is mediated to an unprecedented degree by technology and the mass media, it’s all too easy for people to become an-aesthetized, cut off from a sense of reality” (Black, 2002, p.28). A related point is that movies tend to support the recent status quo, undermining the audience’s ability to challenge and be critical. “The masses are by their very nature psychologically immature ...; the result is that the audience indirectly learns obedience to the social hierarchy” (Horkheimer & Adorno in: Hinerman, 2001, 194). The wide distribution of popular culture not only lowers quality through mass production but also encourages passive behaviour in the face of corporate power. Ultimately this argument by the two authors would mean that it is unlikely to see Hollywood ever reinventing the image of the journalist.

Another argument against popular culture brought up by scholars is its negative effect on high culture, which is what is “produced by known artists within a consciously aesthetic context judged according to an accepted set of rules, norms, and classics” (Real, 2001, p.168). Popular borrows and copies high culture, thus undermining its exclusive status. While rich people (the elite) pay \$1000 for a Louis Vuitton handbag,

it is also available for (normal) people at the price of \$100, made in Thailand. The difference is only visible on the second look. Another example is Shakespeare, commonly considered as classical, whose works are regularly used in popular culture, for example in the movies *Romeo and Juliet* (1996) and *O.(thello)* (2001). Popular culture therefore breaks down the old barriers of taste, class, tradition - dissolving cultural distinctions. It mixes and scrambles everything together, producing homogenized culture and makes the established traditional boundaries between mass and high culture blurry. It could explain why the journalism film with the reporter as the mediator between the worlds (especially in *It Happened One Night*) had its Golden Age in the 1930's and 1940's and was hugely popular with the audience (1). The distinction between high and popular culture became indistinguishable.

But popular culture should not be seen only as negative; a number of theorists such as Jean Baudrillard welcome the changes in society connected with it. Two arguments, amongst others, that can be brought up against the critics of popular culture are that they ignore the specificity of cultural products and that they reduce the audience to mere passive consumer of the culture industry. With reference to the first argument it has to be said that popular culture is global (e.g. music on MTV) but it can also be connected to the folk culture of a particular society. Folk culture is "expressed in face-to-face interactions within traditional or tribal cultures and created through anonymous contributions from within the group where close interaction between performer and community is the norm" (Real, 2001, p.168). Early elements of folk culture are still existent today such as slang or jokes which spread through society by word of mouth. Others are heavily engaged with commercial interests. For example burgers at Mc Donald's are different in some countries. Thailand for example has a special Thai Burger which uses ingredients that are dominant in the main food in this culture. This means that popular culture uses folk culture to be more accepted by the masses. Docker argues that "to be popular in a majority sense, ..., the overall tone and feel of commercial stations have to appeal to popular traditions that at once go back deep into the history of centuries of popular culture and are always open to the new, in technology and form" (Docker, 1991, p.26). It could be concluded from this point that journalism movies reflect deep currents.

The second argument is that the audience is more than just a passive crowd, looking for cheap entertainment. Especially on TV it has to be noted that the audience is a force with power: if they dislike a program, the ratings sink and will eventually lead

to cancellation. “Commercial broadcasting,..., [tries] to reflect people’s tastes rather than develop and train them. ... It tries to please the general public by giving them what they prefer, and if it doesn’t do so it loses listeners and so advertising revenue” (Docker, 1991, p.8, 9). Therefore the media is dependent on attracting and satisfying as wide as possible an audience with popular programmes to attract advertisers and gain financial safety. The same is true for movies, which have to be financially successful, be it either at the box office or through related sales. So on one side movies have to support the given status quo without challenging authorities and lulling the audience in security, but they also have an entertaining function, letting the people escape into their dreams. If the audience, for whatever reason, dislike a movie, film studios will very quickly change what they think is responsible. A recent example is the film *Gigli* (2003), whose main actors Jennifer Lopez and Ben Affleck had a high-profile relationship with constant presence in the tabloids. However, before the release of the movie they split up and while audience always have an interest in real-life couples on the screen (“Is that how they behave in private?”), they were not interested in “Bennifer”’s latest movie anymore, making the film a financial disaster. Now, learning from that, another film studio which had shot the film *Elektra* (2005) after that, with Ben Affleck and his then new girlfriend Jennifer Garner appearing in it, cut him completely out of the movie. The movie proved to be more successful. The example shows that the film industry is responsive to audiences and attuned to the consumer’s fickleness.

In some ways reality affects what is appearing on the screen (several movies were changed after the terror attacks of 9/11), but vice versa, fiction also reflects back into reality (former East Germany’s Secret Service were highly interested in the technical equipment of James Bond, assuming it might be used by MI6 and tried to rebuild, for example, the pen that takes pictures). The same might be valid for the survival or disappearance of filmic genres, stereotypes or technical devices.

The image of the journalist in the public eye over recent years has been one with polls showing journalists considered little more trustworthy than used car sales-men or lawyers (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.2) and journalists who do not feel themselves to be held in high public esteem (see Aldridge, 1998, p.111). Reasons for that can be seen in journalists who had to return awards because of faked stories; a general trend towards soft news which leads e.g. to dubious methods of taking pictures of celebrities; free-lancing journalists themselves who work long hours for little money and rewards; and

of course, movies (and other parts of popular culture such as literature) which show too often an image of the profession based on negative portrayals as well as stereotypes. From the very beginning journalists have followed the representation of their profession on the screen and their “notion that popular culture is to blame for the public’s dim view of their occupation is nothing new” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.3). But why blame popular culture?

Ehrlich argues that movies “can be read as a culture thinking out loud about itself” (2004, p.2), which coincides with Docker’s point of view but contrasts with Gans’ opinion that changes do not occur because things have to be stereotyped and remain the same in order to make good business. Therefore it has to be mentioned that the portrayal of the journalist in the movies in the 1930’s was mainly a positive one, and even the 1976’s *All The President’s Men* is an all time monument for the honest, investigative journalist, but starting in the early 1980’s the public perception of the media business changed dramatically. This became obvious with several negative movies such as *The Absence of Malice* (1981). But did not those movies just portray reality and a new, changed public belief and value system towards journalism? “Sensationalism and a profits-above-all philosophy metastasized through our news organs, weakening their standards and enfeebling their public spirit. The movies’ increasingly negative portrayal of the press merely reflected the cancer’s spread” (Fallows cited in: Ehrlich, 2004, p.3).

Fallows argues that movies reflect reality, and that the public takes in without a doubt what is shown on the screen (2). The press is characterized as untrustworthy and only on the hunt for the scoop no matter what, but it is also there to protect society from corporate power and fraud. Both images about journalism will possibly remain popular as long as they are not unrealistic or too exaggerated. Journalists are neither superheroes nor murderers for a story, so if film characters stay within these boundaries everything is possible. Whether the film will be successful or not also depends on the people’s personal opinion about the press (3). In the end it is the same with lots of professional stereotypes on the screen - doctors, lawyers, politicians – they all can be either good or bad. Whether these representations reflect reality or not depends a lot on our own, personal view. We will either (passively) reinforce or (actively) reject them. We might do it singly or as a big crowd, and the latter repeated a few times can make stereotypical representations disappear.

Over the last chapters I have tried to set up a theoretical base for my thesis. I started off with an overview of the journalism films that have been produced over the last hundred years. It shows that contents, characters and story lines changed noticeably, and I believe that those changes are partly connected with audience expectations and new circumstances in reality. The image of the journalist in the movies began as a mainly positive one, showing the protagonist as crusader, investigator or funny person in the Screwball Comedies. But this image changed a lot in the 1950's and then again in the early 1980's. Today the public's perception of the journalist is partly hero, partly scoundrel. Audiences still rely on the press to protect them from corporate or political power, but they also know that journalists can be ruthless, and dishonest.

I have shown that a lot of books have been written about the different types of filmic journalists. Various scholars offer different ideas on how to classify the screen reporter, whether or not the journalism film is a proper genre and how films can be categorized (see Langman). While presenting these main ideas I wanted to show that authors thought about filmic representations, but a lot more work needs to be done in particular as most authors lack theoretical frameworks of how the categories of the filmic reporter were established and under which criteria screen characters can be classified.

The reason I use Barris' categories is that they have withstood the test of time, and lots of other writers, even nowadays, still use them as major distinctions. His seven categories, which I put in a theoretical context in Chapter 3, serve as stereotypical representations that are used to portray journalists on the screen. However, these stereotypes can alter. But, as explained before, stereotypes are hard to change because they represent a world with which we have grown familiar and invested emotionally. Filmmakers tend to reinforce stereotypes, but they need to be accepted by audience and financially viable for studios. If the audience starts to reject movies, stereotypes can change. Reality changes movies and movies change reality.

I included a chapter about movies as part of popular culture because it is a wider concept that helps to understand how movies influence the audience's perception of reality and how the audience actively is able to change the content of movies. It gives background information about popular culture as being heavily influenced by commercialised machinery, and enables us to understand why film studios make decisions for and against certain storylines and characters the way they do.

Nevertheless, every society has a cultural mindset that consists of beliefs, values and

myths. This mindset distinguishes cultures from each other; however, some myths are universal. One global myth is the one of the hero. Every culture has tales about a strong hero that rescues the poor, weak, and innocent. Those myths are important for the survival of a culture and they are reinforced throughout popular culture. It could explain why for example the reporter portrayed as a hero is still a popular character. The audience needs confirmation that good always wins over evil.

The theoretical part of my thesis helps me to distinguish between different genres of movies and different stereotypical representations of journalists when watching and analysing the movies. It allows me to see the latter in a broader context of myth production and reinforcement of stereotypes in a society and with the background knowledge about popular culture my findings will be able to be connected with social reality.

(1) The narrative theme of class is particular common in Frank Capra films.

(2) This is in contrast to critical audience theories which claim that audiences participate very actively and influence the content of media.

(3) A section about stereotypes can be found in Chapter 3.

## **5. Methodology**

My main research question “Old stereotypes in a new form?” analyzes the image of the journalist in movies from 1930 – 1949 and in contemporary films from 1990 – 2004. The thesis takes a comparative approach, generally in opposing an older with a contemporary movie, in order to find out whether stereotypes associated with journalists and presented in filmic imagery have changed recognizably over the years. The medium film was chosen for its dominant position in popular culture in the respective periods. In particular I analyze the images of US journalists in mainly Hollywood movies due to the abundance of related film and research material. In order to show how journalists are portrayed in the movies, as popular cultural texts (particularly the stereotypical roles and actions they are allocated and the values associated with them), I used the following criteria to select the films.

### Time frames of selection

The analysis focuses on movies that were screened in movie theatres between 1930-1949 and 1990-2004. This limits the analysis. However, extending it to more than a hundred years of journalism films would have gone beyond the scope of an M.A. thesis. Generally a complete analysis covering the entire history of journalism movies would be desirable but it would have to happen in a different, more historically rather than comparative focussed manner than I carry out here. Of course, focussing on only two time periods also means neglecting important movies from other times. Nevertheless important films between 1949 and 1990 such as *All The President's Men* that affected later journalism films have been included in the analysis (1) and are discussed in the chapter The Journalist in the Movies.

The 1930's and 40's are widely acknowledged as the Golden Era of journalism films (2) and strong stereotypical images were established during those early days of the cinema. The importance of this time frame as a starting point for my thesis question made me choose this early key period. Prior to that, in the nearly 300 films that Ness summarizes in his overview of the Silent Era, the first lasting images of journalists were established but it was not until the early 1930's that narratives changed from plots involving journalists to storylines centring on the profession itself (see Rainbolt, 2004, p.10). The period from 1930 – 1949 can be seen as a coherent time frame as in

the years after the Second World War the figure of the journalist mainly disappeared (3) until its rebirth in 1976.

In order to find changes in the stereotypical presentation of journalists I decided to compare the earlier years with a contemporary time period, believing that the more than four decades were time enough to make changes in the stereotypical presentation appear on the surface. Another reason to focus on the 1990's until 2004 was that beside Ehrlich's book from 2004, no other academic study has been found that looks at films that recent. Both Ness' and Langman's compendium only reach to 1996 and although my most recent analysed movies date from 1999, even younger movies such as *Shattered Glass* from 2003 have been looked at in preparation of this thesis. The good availability of movies screened over the last fifteen on VHS or DVD was another criterion.

### Sample Size

The number of selected films is predominantly determined by the seven categories established in Barris' book *Stop the Presses!* As shown in my literature review, Barris' book was the first complete study of the journalist in the movies and most scholars have followed his categories. However, other researchers often only copied Barris' ideas and classifications without critically challenging them or asking whether or not categories such as The Sob Sister were still in existence. This lack in critical examination was an important factor in the choice of my thesis topic.

It could be argued that sixteen movies is an insufficient size for a sample. However I tried to find one representative movie in each category in the respective time period. A smaller sample size allowed a more in depth analysis and critical debate. I was able to focus on narratives, dialogues as well as the overall portrayal of the journalist and was able to investigate the underlying myths and stereotypical imagery used in these movies. A bigger sample would have resulted in a quantitative rather than qualitative analysis. One could argue that comparing only two movies in each category does not comprehensively cover all factors causing changes in the stereotypical image of the journalist. However in linking all analytical chapters as well as including real-life background knowledge about changes in journalism I believe that findings about changes in the filmic portrayal can be abstracted.

The choice of one movie in each of the seven categories in the respective time periods



led to a basic sample of fourteen movies. I also included a chapter comparing *The Front Page* and *The Paper*. In contrast to the rest of the thesis where I foremost focussed on the journalistic character, this chapter serves to explore whether the portrayal of the journalistic profession as a whole has changed or if the myths and stereotypes established in the early years of journalism film are still in existence.

### Criteria of selection

The most important criterion was that the main character was a journalist or somehow otherwise involved in the profession (4). In my chosen body of texts the journalistic job range offers a wide variety including reporters, newsreaders, columnists, foreign correspondents and editors. Only too often journalists appear as side figures in movies and do little to contribute to the storyline. In these films their status as journalists is not really material to the outcome of the plot or the motivation of the main characters (e.g. *Message in a Bottle* (1999)). Ultimately these films are unsuitable to draw significant statements about stereotypical imagery.

Therefore the second criterion was that aspects of the film had to focus on the journalistic work of the main figure. This could include going undercover, meeting deadlines or fighting for justice. Many of the movies analysed show a triggering situation that makes the main character prove himself or herself. These extreme situations, lead to journalists turning into (stereotypical) crusaders, villains or crime busters in order to get the story. The triggering moment causes a change in focus from daily routine and often office work to a more exciting field experience to confirm the image of the journalists as the people at the heart of things.

Only of secondary importance was the question of genre for my sample, although in the end I fortuitously achieved a good balance, including satire, drama and comedy. This helps to get a better overview of how journalists are portrayed in certain types of genres, for example the journalist as the common guy in the Screwball Comedy or the sensation mongering reporter in a satire.

Another criterion that was highly important for the selection of the movies was the name recognition of the performing actors and/or the director in order to meet the characteristic of being a popular film (as part of popular culture). The question was not whether the films addressed a large audience, but whether they were predominantly designed for it. Usually prominent actors or well known directors are

used to achieve a commercial success.

My approach in choosing specific titles was shaped by the availability of the film material, especially when looking at the older films. I was bound to use movies that were accessible in local video stores and public / university libraries. Of course old movies that are still around today have already withstood the test of time and proved themselves as being part of popular culture and with only one exception I was able to find a suitable example for all of Barris' categories. Inevitably choosing popular old movies causes biases towards films that are part of today's culture, and possibly not so much the 1930's and 40's, but choosing films that were popular then (e.g. the female reporter Torchy Blane series from 1937 to 1939, see Barris, 1976, p.146f), but not now, creates the problems of first, availability and second the endurance of stereotypes. In choosing the old movies first I could ensure to find comparable plots, characters, genres, stereotypes and narrative themes in a broad range of contemporary movies. Due to this range of different journalism movies in recent years, with only a few exceptions (4) I was able to find suitable pairs.

All the above mentioned criteria led to a selection of the following seventeen movies:

<b>Title</b>	<b>Year</b>	<b>Director</b>	<b>Genre</b>
Platinum Blonde	1931	F. Capra	Comedy
The Front Page	1931	L. Milestone	Comedy
It Happened One Night	1934	F. Capra	Comedy
Foreign Correspondent	1940	A. Hitchcock	Thriller
Meet John Doe	1941	F. Capra	Comedy / Drama
Shadow of the Thin Man	1941	W. S. Van Dyke	Comedy / Crime
Woman of the Year	1942	G. Stevens	Comedy
Call Northside 777	1948	H. Hathaway	Crime / Drama
The Pelican Brief	1993	A. J. Pakula	Thriller
I Love Trouble	1994	C. Shyer	Action / Comedy
The Paper	1994	R. Howard	Comedy / Drama

To Die For	1995	G. Van Sant	Thriller / Satire
Up Close & Personal	1996	J. Avnet	Drama/Romance
Welcome to Sarajevo	1997	M. Winterbottom	Drama / War
True Crime	1999	C. Eastwood	Crime / Thriller
Runaway Bride	1999	G. Marshall	Comedy

It has to be pointed out that my sample is likely to find continuity in the stereotypical imagery of the journalist based on the fact that contemporary films that were not comparable in genre, plot characters, narrative themes and stereotypes were left out.

The question might arise why TV films have been excluded from this analysis. One of the reasons is that most movie productions will eventually be shown on television as well. Furthermore in the US television movies are often short-lived and reasonably low in production costs which of course affect the quality of the film. Another factor was availability, as often TV movies are not accessible to the public until the film is published on VHS or DVD.

If I had decided to include TV films in this analysis as well there would have been further problems, because for a lot of those movies there is hardly any documentation about production or background information available. However those facts can be important for the analysis. Often the actors and directors are not well known to the wider public and would therefore not meet the criteria of name recognition.

### Research Questions

For each individual chapter that compares two movies under one of Barris' categories, I predominantly analyze the myths and stereotypes found in both movies. As mentioned before, I chose pairs with parallels in narrative or genre which might prove very helpful as the focus of the analysis is not diverted into other areas and I can solely focus on the characters. I also try to find other spanning topics relating to journalism for each chapter to focus on. Issues surrounding the stereotypical portrayal of journalists in movies include social class, the conflict between work and family, women in journalism, alcoholism and many more.

For all films I emphasize the characters' first appearance on the screen as I believe it lays the foundation as to whether the audience sympathizes or not with the main

figure. I also stress stereotypical traits that repeat themselves in both the older and newer movies. When I find differences I try to explain them and look for answers in the real-life profession of journalism, culture, historical changes and other explanatory dimensions in order to figure out why it had changed.

The reason I decided on a content analysis by drawing upon Barris' classifications rather than a generic one was that genres are about repeating things. Genres are characterized by the repetition of elements within a conventionalized formal, narrative, and thematic context. If a movie proves successful the story is later reworked in new movies until it becomes a spatial, sequential and thematic pattern of familiar actions and relationships (see Schatz, 1981, p.10). And while comparing two films within the same genre (5) is helpful in order not to be diverted into narrative themes, genre elements and the character of the main figure the question arises whether a solely generic analysis would have revealed stereotypical changes and myths in American film. Whereas a generic analysis of *Woman of the Year* and *I Love Trouble* under the definition of a couple from differing backgrounds whose initial antagonism gradually turns into romantic love (see Schatz, 1981, p.155) might not have found changes at all, the analysis following Barris shows that The Sob Sister figure is not the same anymore. Barris categories form guidelines of what to focus on when working out the changes in the image of the journalists on the screen. In contrast to that as shown in the chapter *Genre, Stereotypes, Myth and Filmmaking* there are no coherent definitions of a genre per se. For example while some scholars back the idea of a journalism film genre, others do not. With the mixture of different genres such as drama with musical and the creation of various new genres over the last twenty years such as teen horror comedies the comparison of older and newer journalism movies under the genre aspect would have been quite difficult. Especially the contemporary movies are often a mixture (see list above) and would have not been entirely congruent with the older movies.

I believe that my approach following Barris' categories made it possible to draw meaningful conclusions about changes in the image of the journalist in the movies.

(1) The introduction of investigative journalism on the screen is part of the analysis of *The Pelican Brief* in Chapter 11.

(2) A summary of important movies of the 1930's and 1940's is presented in Chapter 1.

(3) The Golden Age of journalism film is a separate paragraph in Chapter 1.

(4) I once had to neglect this criterion in *The Shadow of the Thin Man* due to the lack of available filmic material otherwise.

(5) Both movies in Chapter 7 fall under the comedy genre and have various similarities in character and plot.



## 6. Making the Headlines

### **The Front Page (1931) & The Paper (1994)**

One of the earliest and probably most influential journalism movies is *The Front Page* from 1931. This movie “is the prototype of the journalism movie genre. It was not popular culture’s first depiction of the press; many novels, plays, and silent films preceded its 1928 Broadway premiere ...[but it] established such familiar characters as the callous and cynical press corps, the conniving editor who stops at nothing for a story, and the feckless newshound wildly unsuitable for matrimony or any other conventional relationship” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.20). Over the years movies in the same style followed (1), and in the 1990’s journalism still offered enough material to make it worth a comedy such as *The Paper*. Released in 1994, this film “was very much in the crowd-pleasing vein” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.146) and Barris quote about *The Front Page* that it made “hard-boiled cynics seem human, and above all, amusing” (1976, p.14)) seems to be applicable to *The Paper* as well.

The two movies share further similarities such as the short time span in which they play and the portrayal of the main characters. As the two movies superficially appear the same in many ways, it is necessary to have a closer look in order to find out whether the portrayal of the journalistic profession as a whole has changed and if the myths, created in the early years of journalism film, are still in existence. It will be interesting what the sixty years between the two productions and changes in real-life journalism have caused.

Both films are comedies and were (co-) written by former journalists. *The Front Page* was based on a play by former newsmen Ben Hecht and Charles MacArthur. *The Paper* was written by David and Stephen Koepp (the latter a *Time* magazine editor). The involvement of insiders in the script writing presumably guarantees a certain authenticity and insight into the journalism business as “the audience lacks concrete

knowledge about it as an institution, about how exactly it operates and what life in it is like” (Good, 1989, p.8)). Movies like these therefore feed the audiences’ desire to know and let the public see behind the scenes of the news they see every day.

Although *The Front Page* as well as *The Paper* depict the journalistic profession, the movies are set in very different places. The older movie takes place in the press room of the Criminal Courts Building in Chicago. “Here, an assortment of cynical, glib, jaded newspapermen of various (fictional) Chicago papers waited for the moment when a convicted murderer was to be hanged” (Barris, 1976, p.13). *The Paper* is set in the time frame of exactly 24 hours in which New York editor Henry Hackett (Michael Keaton) has to find evidence for the innocence of two young black teenagers arrested for murder. The movie is predominantly set in the newspaper office of “The Sun”. The difference in the settings reflects changes in the media business. Reporters do not have press rooms anymore, where they hang around and wait for the sensation to happen. Modern journalists get information by faxes, mobile phones, e-mail, or they attend press conferences to get the news. The direct contact between official sources and reporters also has diminished as often press spokesmen function as mediators now. Another factor causing reporters to be less at the scene and more in their offices is the increased involvement of press agencies which cover events and then supply other media with the facts.

Still, in the movies of course, the hero cannot be shown doing boring internet research or making calls. To keep up the excitement, the ‘feckless newshound’ has to be always at the scene and ahead of the competition, but the restless lifestyle is not at all made for a good family life. Unsurprisingly ace reporter Hildy Johnson (Pat O’Brien) in *The Front Page* believes it is time to quit, settle down with fiancée Peggy and start a career in advertising (“That is one of the recurring daydreams of most newspapermen; the other is about settling down in some small town and running a weekly”, Barris, 1976, p.14). In *The Paper* the audience gets a good first impression of how far from a 9-to-5-job the life of a journalist can be. Henry is first seen at 7am, sleeping in suit and tie after only three hours of rest. He then drinks coke for breakfast, being already occupied with the job again in watching the TV news as well as reading the competition’s newspapers. Pregnant wife Martha who has just given up her job as a reporter is unhappy with the situation (“You should have told me when we have a kid I would be on my own”) and pressures him to find another, more regular job at rival paper “The Sentinel”. The new job for both Henry and Hildy

would grant more money and time to spend with the family, but both reporters are reluctant to leave when the next scoop surfaces. The tension between private life and job seems to be a key element in many films about journalism (1): Henry's hesitation to change jobs supports historian Anne Douglas' view about Hildy's character in *The Front Page* that "journalism was a carefree existence that one left only reluctantly to do something more serious and grown-up" (Douglas cited in: Ehrlich, 2004, p.21). The fact that journalism seems to be a profession that is hard to leave behind is a significant similarity between the two movies, which is likely based on fact. Often journalists stay within the occupation a lifetime, ideally working their way up from local news to say CNN anchorman (e.g. Barbara Walters, Larry King).

Both movies contain the element of the wrongly accused crime offender which is a common narrative in journalistic movies and above all found in movies with the journalist as a crusader (2). In *The Front Page* convicted murderer Earl Williams has escaped and of course, Hildy cannot let the biggest story of his career go ("The Hollywood reporter of the 1930's and 1940's cursed his calling, yet clung to it" (Good, 1989, p.13)). He informs editor Walter Burns about the exclusive story, while at the same time telling Peggy to meet him later - putting her second best. In *The Paper* Henry first messes the job interview up and steals exonerating but confidential information about the murder from the rival paper; then ignores his wife who tries to talk to him about her future. Like Hildy, Henry seems to put his partner in second place when it comes to his job. Often filmic journalists are characterized by an absolute dedication towards the job and the task to get the story on paper (3). It is the myth that the press is always at the heart of things and always makes a difference (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.1) – a myth that is probably even truer today in the media centred world. But there is a reverse: Jed Harris, producer of *The Front Page* in 1928 was said to have proposed to centre the play on one theme: "Once you get caught in the lousy newspaper business you can never get out again" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.31). In *The Paper* even though at the end, when Henry decides in favour of the family it is questionable if he will slow down. He might get a quieter job but is questionable that he will leave journalism for good.

Both movies definitely criticize journalistic work ethics. This is a very important parallel as it suggests doubts among the public about journalistic ethics were already present in the earliest of journalism movies and that questionable ethics are a recurring filmic element that audiences expect to see. However, in comedies,

generally a genre with happy end, bad things get resolved.

In *The Front Page* “significantly, the most sympathetic characters were a condemned prisoner and a prostitute” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.31). Molly Malloy snarls at the reporters who have printed lies about Earl and her (“I took him to my room because it was cold”) and then shouts “God damn your greasy souls” (“Wherever human misery is at its worst, there you will find the press in force - shouting questions and sticking microphones and cameras in the face of the victims” (Good, 1989, p.19)). When being surrounded by the story-hungry reporters who are asking about the whereabouts of Earl, frightened Molly jumps fatally out of the window. The reporters though show no mourning or any self-reflection about what they just have done. “Hildy and his colleagues are pictured as cynics to whom the life or death of a man is of far less importance than whether the life or death will be determined in time to meet a deadline” (Barris, 1976, p.14).

The same attitude runs through *The Paper*. The movie’s question is whether or not to publish a sensational story that staff suspect is false, but will nonetheless sell lots of papers. The film implies that financial pressure might cause them to act in less than journalistically ethical ways as managing editor Alicia expresses: “We taint them today; we make them look good on Saturday. Everybody’s happy”. Alicia is more concerned with the cost involved in changing the story than with her newspaper's integrity. Only when columnist McDougall says: “We run stupid headlines because we think they're funny. And I spend three weeks bitching about my car because it sells papers. But at least it's the truth. As far as I can remember we never ever, ever knowingly got a story wrong, until tonight”, she changes her mind and arranges a reprint of the morning edition. Presumably the arrested teenagers will be released due to the new evidence discovered by Henry and McDougall. In *The Front Page* Earl Williams is eventually set free when the governor grants him a pardon. Both films are ambivalent about the release of the prisoner and it seems as if Hollywood cannot cope without a happy ending.

The friendly feud between editor and reporter belongs to a journalism movie like the showdown belongs to the Western and was established in the earliest of movies. *The Front Page* shows the struggle between Burns and Hildy, who wants to leave. Walter would like to keep his ace reporter by making married life sound boring: “A home-cooked dinner every night exactly at seven and by ten in bed”. Still, Hildy is determined to leave: “A guy has to settle down some time”. In *The Paper* Henry goes



head-to-head with managing editor Alicia whom he cannot stand at all. Bernie White, senior editor to Henry, steps in: “Hey, do your job ... Don’t take a position because it’s the opposite of what she says”.

In contrast to the young reporters who try to make the right choices in terms of work and family the three senior editors – Walter, Bernie, Alicia – all have troubled personal lives. They personify the myth of journalists as professionals who are unable to have a normal functioning family life due to their busy work schedule and their prioritizing of the job (see also *True Crime*) while the younger generation including Henry symbolizes a change towards family values in balancing work and home (see also *I Love Trouble, Up Close & Personal*).

In both movies the end is family focused. Hildy reunites with Peggy (“I’m going to New York tonight. This time I’m through and I mean it”) and Walter accepts his notice. He even gives his former star reporter his personal watch as a wedding gift. But once the reporter is out of the door Walter calls the police to register his watch stolen, telling them the thief is heading to New York. The film ends with a giant question mark over “The End”. Ultimately the film leaves Hildy’s dilemma unresolved. Henry on the other hand becomes a father. He realizes that “he has put his work ahead of his wife” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.147) and it can be assumed that he will take more care of the little family now. *The Paper* is a movie “that seeks to have it both ways, to be immersed in the excitement of big-city journalism while also being ensconced in the respectability and security of marriage and family; reconciling outlaw virtues with official ones” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.147).

From my point of view, both movies very well depict the hectic journalistic life. In *The Front Page* a group of newspaper reporters idly await the execution but once the story heats up, the press room becomes a madhouse. Phones are ringing, reporters are shouting, everyone tries to be the first with the exclusive story. The formerly fun loving journalists become competitive and downright cunning the moment they smell a story. “The quirky characters in *The Paper* are believable newspaper folks – idiosyncratic and gossipy with screwed-up personal lives. They love their job and they’re hungry for wood – the tabloid jargon for blockbuster headlines” (Steinle, 2000, p.9). *The Paper* is one of the few films that manage to semi-accurately depict the media business. It captures the claustrophobic feeling in a newsroom, the harsh sense of humour and the small battles common among the news staff, the brainstorming in the morning meetings, the hours involved in doing the job right, the

ringing phones and most importantly the differences in reporters' opinions and personalities. There is for example a journalist who tries to get reimbursed for a \$600 chair, and he does not care about the life-and-death issues being debated around him. It is a romanticized message that although journalists sometimes change the world they are above all humans with flaws, too.

To summarize this chapter it has to be said that both movies are as much about the family lives, or lack thereof, of its central characters as they are about their work. But while Hildy's conflict between family life and work is unresolved, Henry clearly decides in favour of his family. "In the old days, guys would get drunk a lot, but these days, family life is a factor. They go home and spend time with spouses who also work. They want to have a life" (Koepp cited in: Ehrlich, 2004, p.146).

*The Paper* could probably be seen as the more realistic of the two movies, especially as *The Front Page* "immediately announces itself as tough and ironic; its 'Mythical Kingdom' is an outlaw world" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.36). Criticism followed the screening of the film such as: "the standards of all newspaper men are not those of the gutter"; "the movies made the reporter more nearly resemble a gangster than even a moderately well-off business and professional man" and Hollywood "created a false and degraded impression of the newspaper business in the minds of millions" (all quotes in: Ehrlich, 2004, p.38). So it is incorrect to think that a journalism film is realistic simply because it was written by a former journalist (4). "A newsroom may look real on the screen, with computer terminals and dirty coffee cups on the desks and a background chorus of frantically ringing phones, but what occurs within the setting is an allegory, a fable. Newspaper life must be stylized and simplified to conform to the expectations of the audience and the rules of the genre" (Good, 1989, p.23) which have been established in films such as *The Front Page*. To quote Barris again, "successful theatrical drama ... is an extension of life rather than a reflection of it. Had *The Front Page* been more 'accurate' it almost surely would have been less entertaining" (Barris, 1976, p.22). However, as a result, inevitably the audience is still left wondering about life in the newsroom while being fed with stereotypes and it is up to them what they believe (or not). Nevertheless the choices that the main characters face are universal such as to sacrifice a career to raise children or to forfeit a well-loved job for a higher paying one to provide for the family and thus easy to believe in.

As mentioned in the introduction *The Front Page* was a landmark film, establishing many elements that characterize journalism movies. The comparison with a much more recent movie has shown that a lot of these components are still used in contemporary movies, suggesting that the more than sixty years between the two movies did not make that much of a difference. There is still the conflict between work and private life, the competition between reporters when the scoop surfaces, the dedication to get the exclusive story first and to put everything else in second place. Journalism movies still show the hectic pace in the newsroom, the friendly feud with the editor and the dream to leave all this behind and settle for a more regular life. Although there have been changes in the stereotypical portrayal of the journalist (e.g. reporter now decides for a normal family life, team brainstorming in the morning) many continuities could be found in the contemporary movie such as the friendly feud. The similarities between the two movies are striking and suggest that, regardless changes in stereotypes, the above mentioned myths surrounding the journalistic profession remain untouched. It appears that the main character is a child of its (modern) time, but his/her mythical function as the hero/heroine who upholds the public's right to know and frees the innocent remains detached from time. It might be those myths that audience expects to see when watching a journalism movie and the two movies both undermine (reporter decides for a family life) and support (friendly feud) several stereotypes that are stuck in the minds of the audience. The old reporter might be a newer version now, who could for example be a part-time stay-at-home dad, but he is still a reporter with a worth while function in society. However, despite movies such as *The Front Page* and *The Paper* which give a deeper insight into the profession and take the audience behind the scenes, people are still left wondering and the mythic space of the newsroom (see Good, 1989, p.24) lives on.

(1) The reporter that is unsuitable for marriage is described in Chapter 13.

(2) The crusading journalist is in the focus of Chapter 9.

(3) The dedication to get the story is a main character trait of many filmic journalists. This is further explored in Chapter 9.

(4) The fact that a script was written by a journalist does not necessarily guarantee authenticity. An example is the script of *Foreign Correspondent*, analysed in Chapter 10.



## 7. The Scandal mongers

### **It Happened One Night (1934) & Runaway Bride (1999)**

The rise of the figure of the scandal mongers began in the 1930's when real-life gossip columnists such as Hedda Hopper became famous and part of American life (see Barris, 1976, p.55). But whereas the real scandal mongers reported the latest gossip and high society events the filmic version was more fiction than fact, befriending runaway heiresses, libelling innocent people, getting his paper sued, travelling worldwide to find missing prominent people, inventing phony celebrities to help build circulation, infiltrating underworld gangs to get the 'inside story', and occasionally slipping over into the crime-busting category. "Callousness and cynicism were standard traits of the movie scandal monger" (Barris, 1976, p.56). Due to the rise of infotainment and soft news, the working field of the scandal monger, these character traits are expected to remain important in the portrayal of the sensation hungry reporter.

But cynicism is only one character trait that Peter Warne (Clark Gable) in *It Happened One Night* and Ike Graham (Richard Gere) in *Runaway Bride* have in common. To compare the two movies under the above mentioned category is an opportunity to look for changes in the figure of the scandal monger against the relatively stable backdrop provided by similarities such as narrative themes, genre and the character of the main figure. While those points stay the same it is possible to identify more easily the characteristics that have changed over time.

Both fall under the comedy genre and although more than sixty years lie between them, the battle of the sexes which was first established in Screwball Comedies such as *It Happened One Night* or *Woman of the Year* (1942) is still prominent in *Runaway Bride* (1999). In both stories the reporter gets fired, for different reasons though, from their job. While Peter Warne tries to write something stylistically unconventional

(“That was a free verse, you gashouse palooka!”), Ike goes one step further. “Surprisingly, a valid breach of journalism ethics provides a major plot in the frothy *Runaway Bride*” (Steinle, 2000, p.11). Writing that Maggie Carpenter abandoned grooms at the altar seven times when in fact, she only did three times gets Ike fired. “Journalism lesson Number One: If you fabricate your facts, you get fired!”, explains his editor (and former wife). This part of the storyline shows the eternal belief if one does something bad, one has to live with the consequences and it also creates a positive image of the journalistic profession as the editor chooses correct facts over sensational stories. The storyline stresses the importance of sticking to the facts when writing for a serious newspaper and leaving the gossip and scandal to the tabloids, which mostly already have a damaged reputation. However, other films such as *Mad City* or *Shattered Glass* show that even ‘serious’ media institutions are happy to report sensational stories if it secures high rankings. It appears that positive and negative portrayals of the media in contemporary films are co-existent. However in comedies, with its general positive undertone, it seems that breeches in journalism ethics or misbehaviour cannot go unpunished and the reporters have to earn their way back into the newspaper office.

Honesty plays a major role in both movies. Considering the fact that “the beliefs, attitudes and values presented in Hollywood films tend to resonate with the dominant beliefs, attitudes and values of American society” (Jowett & Linton, 1980, p. 109)(1) it can be assumed that honesty (or maybe better: the will to tell the truth) was associated with journalism in the 1930’s. In Capra’s movie the journalist is self-assertive, direct and honest. When Peter tells wealthy runaway heiress Ellie straight away about his profession and that he will help her in exchange for a story, she accepts his company. In *Runaway Bride*, Ike on the other hand tries to avoid answering the question whether or not he is a reporter. His behaviour gives the impression that reporters are dishonest and try to exploit their subjects of interest without their knowledge. It also implies that people from big cities believe they can outsmart small town people and although everybody in town knows who Ike is, he goes around, makes friends with Maggie’s friends, even gets invited to her wedding rehearsal, one cannot be sure what his motives are. Although the movie is a comedy and should not be taken too seriously, it also shows Ike stealing the former wedding tapes from the bride’s parents. This questions the methods of how journalists get access to their material. In most movies the journalist is rewarded with information or

evidence as it carries on the storyline, implying that the police do not have a monopoly of discovering information, that journalists simply do a better job in doing so and finally, that the end justifies the means. It is the belief that “reporters ... can get away with almost anything as long as the end result is in the public interest” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.2). In *Runaway Bride* Ike uses annoyance as a tool to wear Maggie down. The fact that he follows her around every day in town (“This reporter makes my life a living hell”) shows disrespect towards other people’s wishes. Whereas Ellie willingly consents to Peter’s company, Maggie cannot get rid of Ike without consenting to an exclusive interview. The comparison between the two main characters so far shows that Ike is more cunningly, dishonest and persistent. He is also not above stealing personal items and in the beginning seems to less empathize with Maggie than Peter with Ellie, which overall makes him the more negative of the two reporters.

But back to the beginning. Reporter Warne’s first appearance on the screen is in a phone booth getting drunk, where he loudly argues with his editor. According to Howard Good drinking was quite popular among journalists in the 1930’s (see Good, 2000, p.11) and as “art codifies reality, not the other way around” (Good, 2000, p.9), the image of a journalist with a bottle of booze seems to be something that the audience was familiar with seeing. According to Good (see 1989, p.2) drinking in films functions as: a natural accompaniment of the creative occupations of writer, artist, actor, or musician; ..., a stimulus to memory, truth-telling, and poetic speech; ..., a form of protest against the modern bureaucratic order; ...; and a source of solidarity among men. These findings apply to the situation and the fact that Peter is surrounded by colleagues who offer noisy support also characterizes him as a man of the people, as someone who stands up for himself (“Shh. Quiet. This is history in the making ...There’s a man biting a dog in there.”). In this scene drinking is seen as a particular masculine activity and a way of celebrating the male bond. (2)

In contrast Ike Graham makes a completely different first impression. He stands on a busy street in New York, casually dressed while talking nervously into his mobile phone and shouting to the construction worker “When are you guys gonna stop waking me up every morning?” Although a journalist Graham does not appear to be a man of the people at all. This is further undermined in the next scene. The moving camera shows pictures in a bar of famous people; one of them portrays Ike Graham. This states the position of journalists / columnists not only as professionals but also as

(local) celebrities. The same public recognition happens in *I Love Trouble* (1994): Peter Brackett is recognised by policemen and people in public places. As a columnist he receives special treatment within the newspaper such as covering mainly cocktail parties and other high society events. In both movies the figure of the columnist seems to be quite different in terms of status, ethics and work from the reporter. While Ike Graham makes the facts up, Peter Brackett feels unashamed to plagiarize himself. They both feel untouchable. The columnists are not common anymore, but different from the ordinary crowd. Since the readers got familiar with their faces (at the top of the column or on a bus) they recognise them on the street and turn them into celebrities. As can be seen when looking at other characters in popular culture such as Carrie Bradshaw in the TV series *Sex and the City* one can assume that fictional (and real) columnists appear to have an exclusive position within a newspaper and are more famous than their colleagues. They are not in the sense reporters or journalists any more.

Another difference between the movies is the outer appearance of the reporter as well as the private life circumstances. Warne looks typical of journalists in movies of that period: he mostly wears a dark suit, complemented by a hat. Peter smokes cigarettes for relaxation (e.g. before going to bed) and drinks whisky in public when arguing with his editor on the phone. In earlier years it was fairly unacceptable to depict divorced people (Hollywood's first self-regulating code 1927: "that good taste may be emphasized: No 22. The institution of marriage" (Nowell-Smith, 1997, p.239)) in the movies, so Peter is still unmarried but committed to "traditional American values" (he respects women, marriage, and hard work) (Schatz, 1981, p.152). Underneath Peter's macho exterior, he is a sensitive guy, waiting for the right woman. He embodies the common man who "strengthened the audience's belief that eventually good people would make bad times better" (Mast, 1981, p.226). While Peter Warne in *It Happened One Night* seems to win everybody over with his charm, Ike Graham in *Runaway Bride* appears to be a lonely wolf. Ike does not smoke or get drunk (presumably due to a larger bigger conscience about our own health these days). He wears mainly casual clothes, and his mobile phone is his most important accessory. At home Ike lives alone in a nostalgic apartment with a cat called Italics and his laptop. His life appears to be his job as he is divorced, without children and mainly works from home on his computer. Ike seems more disillusioned: he is arrogant, moody and cynical as well as "exploitical and mean-hearted" (Maggie).

Another main point where the two characters differ is the attitude towards journalism ethics. Whereas Peter is the best reporter in town and honest towards Ellie, Ike does not hesitate to make up a story and breach journalistic ethics. “This is what you like—we push, we stretch—that’s what makes me good!”, he says. Like Peter Brackett in *I Love Trouble* Ike uses his position as the columnist of his paper to put himself in a superior position, thus hinting that hierarchy exists in today’s newspaper offices, while earlier movies show more equality and team spirit. However, Ike crosses the line and after being fired he decides to visit Maggie to prove that he is right (“If she runs again, you’ve got a cover story”) and to get his vindication.

A similarity in both movies is that the rural small-town atmosphere with its good-hearted people changes the smart big city reporters and social differences are overcome. Both movies therefore reinforce the myth of rural simplicity: “True American virtue and happiness are to be found by living close to nature on a farm or in a small town.... Cities are places of violence, sin and corruption.” (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.96, 97).

The overcoming of Ike’s and Ellie’s antagonism by travelling through rural, uncitified America can be seen as the central thematic issue in the narrative (3). The hero (reporter) converts the heroine (runaway heiress), who embodies the false societal assumptions, by making her fall in love with him (see Mast, 1981, p.232). In *It Happened One Night* the spoiled heiress is taught to live like common folk (Warne shows her how to dunk a donut into coffee the right way), and the cynical reporter is redeemed with love. Frank Capra clearly bases the couple’s differences in their socioeconomic status (social class, money, leisure, source of income). In overcoming these differences the film also re-creates the myth that social differences such as working and upper class can be overcome, ideological disparities can vanish and that we should trust in the traditional American belief of a classless society or at least in a society where contact between the classes can occur (see Schatz, 1981, p.152).

In *Runaway Bride* rural America changes Ike as a person; he becomes friendlier, less cynical, and even starts imagining settling down in the countryside. Changes in society over the years seem not to have an impact on the myth of rural America as a place of peace and inner freedom, while big cities are still portrayed as locations where people live anonymous, isolated, with a career but unhappy. The fact that professionally very successful Ike is willing to move to the countryside, giving up his career in New York shows the importance of rural life in American culture.



Both main characters have a love-hate relationship with their job. This seems to be a frequently occurring narrative as shown in the previous chapter *Making the Headlines*. Peter Warne on one hand loves working as a reporter and is more interested in sensation than financial gain; on the other hand “he hates the newspaper world and yearns to get out. ‘I saw an island in the Pacific once’ ... ‘Never been able to forget it’” (see Bergman, 1971, p.137). Still he is wisecracking, fighting with his editor over a story and hot for new scoops, and although Joe fires Peter the editor still believes that Warne is the best reporter in town. To get his job back Peter follows Ellie on her Odyssey from Miami to New York, where she wants to get married. Ike, in contrast to Peter, enjoys the financial amenities his job offers him, thus having a big apartment and driving an expensive silver BMW. This difference is caused first by social changes and second by popular culture. *It Happened One Night* was made shortly after the Depression and the main characters “have the easy smoothness, the quick wit of typical comedy characters but share more of the hominess and troubles of the average man’s depression world” (Casty, 1973, p. 198) whereas *Runaway Bride* was made at the time of President Clinton’s blossoming American economy, showing journalists as good earners in society. Another reason for the financial differences could be seen in the audience’s expectation. According to Charyn in classical Hollywood it was all about the looks: “American movie stars didn’t have to bother creating fashions, their very looks made a whole planet shiver with delight” (Charyn, 1989, p.20). It also has to be mentioned that Depression-era comedies were filled with reporters as they represented a “mediating class function within many of these films, allowing an acceptable crossing or blurring of class boundaries during the Depression years. Belonging neither to a traditional working class nor to an established bourgeoisie, writers in these films are often capable of greater class mobility than other characters” (Beach, 2002, p.52). But already in the 1940’s the question of social class became less important. “By the early 1940’s, romantic comedies had become more self-conscious about their own social conventions, more willing to parody ...” (Beach, 2002, p. 96)(4). In the journalism movies from 1990-2004 that I analyzed, the existence or overcoming of class issues as a narrative theme seems non-existent. Rita Barnard believes that consumer products and institutions such as movies, cars, magazines, self-service supermarkets etc. became central features of American life, thus changing patterns of consumption and social relations affected by it. A society was created that was more dependent on the ‘commodity spectacle’ than ever before

(see Barnard in: Beach, 2002, p.50). “While class discrepancies ... may have been greater during the 1930’s ... the fact of an increasingly consumerist ethos paradoxically produced interests that brought the various classes together” (Beach, 2002, p.50). Nowadays, especially TV journalists or columnists are seen as glamorous, high-income earners and thus are settled in the upper classes. Movies such as *Runaway Bride*, *Up Close & Personal* or *To Die For* depict a dream image of a wealthy or at least upper working-class life-style, while others such as *True Crime* or *The Paper* draw more upon reality. However Western societies nowadays emphasize less on class than fifty or a hundred years ago and it appears that it is less about socioeconomics but more about celebrity status. As can be seen in popular culture characters often stress both fame and the fight for justice as reasons to become a journalist rather than personal fortune, although in movies fame and fortune always seem to go hand in hand. A completely different reason for showing the BMW, the clothes, apartment and Ike’s laptop could simply be product placement which is today a common way of placing advertising into films and financing them through it.

As mentioned before, in both movies the countryside is used as a calming pole to the problems that overpowered the reporters in the big city, but it also appears to be the ideal place to settle down (Ellie and Peter return here for their honeymoon). Both Capra and Marshall stress the importance of marriage, and let audiences rediscover traditional American values such as the nuclear family (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.95). A classless society is presented in the inevitable marriage between aristocracy / big city reporter and working-class / small town handywoman at the very end of the movies. The union between Peter/Ellie and Ike/Maggie serves “to celebrate integration into the community at large, into a social environment where cultural conflicts and contradictions have been magically reconciled” (Schatz, 1981, p.155). Or as Bergman puts it: “The movies ... showed that individual initiative still bred success, ..., that we were a classless melting pot nation” (Bergman, 1971, p.167, 168). Even though scandal and the occupation as a journalist initiated the plot in both movies there are differences between Peter and Ike in terms of character, private life and how to get the story. However, they both eventually conclude that there is nothing more valuable than a piece of private happiness, thus reinforcing as in nearly all romantic comedies (see also: *I Love Trouble*, *Woman of the Year*) that “for each individual there is a single perfect partner who, once found, makes life complete and

permanent happiness possible” (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.96).

The love-hate relationship of journalists with their job is a recurring narrative in many journalism movies. Films such as *True Crime*, *The Paper* or *The Front Page* show journalists who are aware that their job ruins their private life, still they hesitate to give this exciting profession up. It is the myth of the ever busy, scoop-chasing reporter. Both movies also stress honesty when depicting journalism, although I more believe this has to do with the genre as comedies tend to be less critical and more politically correct than other movies for example satires. Peter and Ike get fired for misbehaviour and consequently have to earn their way back in their loved/loathed profession.

The fact that the two movies are so similar suggests that some modern films pander to nostalgia (another example is *True Crime*) and that especially in comedies the stereotype of the cynical reporter-turned-nice husband, even after all these years, still suits the romantic purpose. This can also be seen in *I Love Trouble* which could mean that there is a causal link between the scandalmonger character and the romantic comedy genre. Another link might be between the genre and its setting. Even though the world moved on and journalists can be well-off people now with nice city apartments, still preference is given to the rural setting as a place where love can blossom instead of the anonymous big city, which reinforces the myth of small town America.

(1) Belief, attitudes and values are part of Chapter 3.

(2) New findings concerning the stereotype of the drunken journalist can be found in Chapter 9.

(3) For a summary of the narrative structure in Capra films see Chapter 2.

(4) Changes in the portrayal of couples in romantic comedies are explained in Chapter 8.



## 8. The Sob Sister

### **Woman of the Year (1942) & I Love Trouble (1994)**

“Journalism has long been one of the few professions offering an educated woman a chance to earn her living, use her intellect and travel to far away places, but women had to fight for a chance to report many stories, especially from the battlefields” (Sebba, 1994, cover text). Until the early 1950’s women were mostly asked to cover the human angle of a story - “confined to covering ‘social’ news, ‘women’s page’ features, and the like” (Barris, 1976, p.139) - what they wrote became known as sob stories and its writers as the sob sisters. Originally the ‘sob’ meant getting the exclusive human interest scoops on murder, divorce or other sensation favourably from the widow, divorcee or crying witnesses.

Soon film writers and producers discovered that the female reporter was perfect for the big screen. “Films offered the meatiest roles for female actors and, with male reporters, they created the perfect battleground of the sexes – the underrated girl reporter challenged to prove she’s as capable as the male, and the boy reporter confident that no girl could possibly keep pace with him. The sob sister became a popular newspaper hero” (Saltzman, 2002, p.2). But in contrast to real life, where only a few women such as Nellie Bly were given a chance to cover hard news, filmic sob sisters were independent, smart and eager to do anything to get even the most demanding story. “She has to persuade the males around her that she is worthy of their respect ... and never lets her paper down” (Saltzman, 2002, p.2). “Often ... she outwisecracked, outdrank, and out-reported newsmen” (Ghiglione, 1991, p.5). But in the end, most sob sisters won the ace reporter (*Platinum Blonde*) or the man they loved (*Meet John Doe*) and thus left their successful sob sister jobs to turn to domestic life - a solution, 1930’s audiences were longing for (see Saltzman, 2002, p.2).

For the analysis of the sob sister I decided to compare *Woman of the Year* with *I Love Trouble* due to the fact that the second movie represents a revival of the Screwball

Comedy genre: “Pictures such as *I Love Trouble* (1994) pandered to nostalgia. A knock-off of the battle-of-the-sexes movies of Hollywood’s golden age, the film starred Julia Roberts and Nick Nolte ... who gradually fell in love while trading repartee that made no one forget [Spencer] Tracy and [Katherine] Hepburn” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.145), who are probably the most famous battle-of-the-sexes couple, starring eight times together in movies. Screwball comedies are marked by a certain style of behaviour (e.g. no sex before marriage) as well as narrative themes (e.g. courtship, class distinction, socioeconomic conflicts) and had their main era from the early 1930’s until the end of the 1950’s (see Schatz, 1981, p.150ff). Both analysed movies contain the characteristic battle of the sexes, full of wit and sarcasm and whereas *I Love Trouble* revived the courtship narrative, *Woman of the Year* focussed on marital problems. As mentioned in Chapter 2, Barris claims that the sob sister had disappeared by the late 1950’s, thus making this chapter focus on the question if so, why it vanished and what the significant differences between the two main characters are despite the before mentioned generic similarities.

*Woman of the Year* was one of the first Screwball Comedies showing a married couple. “In a variation of the genre where the screwball couple is already married the plot generally concerns their divorce / and or remarriage. As the Depression waned and the genre’s thematic concerns shifted from class issues to more overtly sexual and marital issues, this variation became increasingly popular” (Schatz, 1981, p.162). The film mainly concentrates on the relationship between political reporter Tess and sports writer Sam, who both work for the New York Chronicle, and problems in their marriage. In this movie it is the woman who puts her career first and only when Sam eventually leaves, Tess realizes her mistakes and a happy ending is assured. Although the mandatory issue of social class (see Beach, 2002, p.48)(1) is hinted at in the movie (Tess is part of the elite while Sam appears to be working class) the marital class-crossing is not in the focus of the movie which could indicate less societal interest in it.

*I Love Trouble*, clearly intended to evoke the old newspaper movies of the '40's and '50's, is set in Chicago. The main characters work for different newspapers thus not only participating in a battle of the sexes but also one for the best articles and headlines. Famous columnist Peter Brackett, the figurehead of the Chronicle’s advertisement “Chicago wouldn’t be Chicago without Peter Brackett – Read him

today”, takes on the battle with new-in-town Sabrina Peterson. While fighting over the big scoop, a mysterious train derailment, the attraction grows, and after finally joining forces, they discover the truth, their love for each other and that marriage is not such a bad idea after all.

In both movies, in coherence with the stereotypical imagery, the female reporter is excellent at her job, highly competitive, argumentative and in wit and intelligence an equal match for her male counterpart.

Sabrina, being new in town, just like the sob sisters, has to prove and make a name for herself. She is independent, hard-boiled and hot for the next scoop. During her coverage of the train derailment Sabrina works late at night, goes undercover, gets shot at and does not hesitate to cry in front of Peter (“This whole thing just got too much, too dangerous, I’m scared”) in order to make him believe she will drop the story. She is a modern, self-confident woman, who says: “You have zero chances of scoring here, trust me, move on” whereas Peter replies: “Where did you say you were from – Bitchville?” From the first moment the two reporters meet the sparks fly and the race is on. Despite the battle-of-the-sexes and the competition with her male counterpart, Sabrina lacks characteristics from the classical sob sister. One is the position as the only woman in the newsroom. Sabrina is only one amongst many other women working for the Chicago Globe. Therefore the special, sometimes very confidential bond, that exists between editor and sob sister, seen for example in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*, is missing. For the same reason, Sabrina is also not “one of the guys” as Gallagher in *Platinum Blonde*. The battle in *I Love Trouble* is about more circulation, better headlines and being first when it comes to a new clue. It could also be a competition between two men however; due to the genre of the movie the element of courtship is inevitable in a romantic comedy. Furthermore, as will be shown later, Sabrina is also different from the classical sob sister in terms of marriage and work commitments.

Tests, in contrast to that, is a “busy-busy syndicated pundit who marries earthy sports writer Tracy” (Barras, 1976, p.149) in *Woman of the Year*. She is the most famous reporter of her paper and gets the best, not necessarily sob, stories. However, as most sob sisters, she has to fight for her rights such as being the first female reporter allowed in the press box at a baseball game and in order to impress Sam she has to win the drinking competition (being one of the guys). Tess speaks several languages, travels the world to meet leaders such as Churchill, has her own office plus a (male)

secretary, is active in the women's right movement and gets voted 'Outstanding American Woman of the Year'. Although this may seem admirable and desirable in today's society, the 1940's had other expectations towards women. The director's narrative "undertakes a process of steadily demonizing Tess as selfish and self-centered, 'not a woman at all' as Sam says" (Girgus, 1998, p.187) when he takes care of the Greek orphan that Tess first adopted and then neglects. "At a time when Middle America ... still considered a woman's place to be in the home, a girl working in the rough-house world of male reporters might not be respected as a respectable heroine" (Barris, 1976, p.141). The movie portrays a woman who sets different priorities – an unacceptable situation in the eyes of the audience at that time. "Male screenwriters ... would make sure that by the final reel, these self-sufficient females would succumb to love, longing for what 1930's audiences were sure every woman really wanted – a man, marriage, and children" (Saltzman, 2002, p.2).

As the audiences' opinion changed over time, so did the portrayal of the female reporter on the screen and although in both movies the main character is depicted as a strong and independent woman, the final scenes and the women's position as wives are quite different. While in *Woman of the Year* the end is the same as in most other sob sister movies, *I Love Trouble* clearly stresses a modern position favouring equality in marriage.

The ending of *Woman of the Year* is controversial among critics. The final scene shows Tess unsuccessfully making breakfast for Sam. When he finds her in the kitchen she begs him to let her return to him like a dutiful wife. He states: "I don't want to be married to Tess Harding any more than I want you to be just Mrs. Sam Craig. Why can't you be Tess Harding Craig?" While Ehrlich sees a democratic solution in these words ("In such ways, screwball comedies present a mythic way of romantic and democratic possibilities. Thus the movies make women –and journalists- models for what American life could and should be" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.55)), Girgus believes that director "Stevens ultimately compromises the independence of his female characters and stars to conform to narrative conventions and social expectations" (Girgus, 1998, p.182). The film includes various critiques of Tess and is clearly judgemental about her choice of job over personal life. "Kate [Hepburn] hated the new, blatantly sexist ending in which the strong woman finally 'gets hers'. Audiences however, went wild for it" (Girgus, 1998, p. 187). This implies that social expectations in the 1940's were still that women were unable to handle

both job and household successfully and that happiness could only be gained within men's boundaries.

In *I Love Trouble* nobody expects Sabrina to give up her job. On the contrary: the final scene shows the married couple in their home and reading their different newspapers, while complimenting each other how well they wrote the big story. The movie depicts today's society's acceptance and approval of women in the workforce, who are often contributing to the family income ("a modern, two-income family earns 75 percent more (inflation-adjusted) than the one-earner family of a generation ago"; <http://www.wharton.upenn.edu>) in order to afford the various consumer products and institutions of American society (2).

So there has obviously been a change in the social positioning of the female journalist on the screen. While in earlier movies women either gave their successful sob sister jobs up to be with the man they loved (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*) or they compromised their independence to rescue their marriage (*Woman of the Year*), nowadays it seems perfectly normal to have a career in journalism and be married (*Up Close & Personal*). A state of equality seems to be established on and off the screen. Women in the newsroom are a normal sight nowadays and their work commitments include male bastions such as sport, politics and war correspondence. "Women do, more or less, have open access to any story today; ..., they enjoy the same training as men and are paid the same rate for the job; their views are listened to and taken seriously and they are just as likely to be killed or wounded as a male reporter" (Sebba, 1994, p.277).

But women had to fight for their place in the newsroom. Author Kay Mills mentions several factors for the change of the press, among them: the rise of television led to more need of staff, people became more vocal about their day-to-day concerns, Eleanor Roosevelt allowed only women to cover her White House press conferences, and lots of women went to work as they had during World War II (see Mills, 1988, p. 2-4). Women got better education and branched out from traditional female jobs. "More went into the news business lured by the chance to ask questions, to witness life's drama, to cover a murder trial, or to walk down a foreign boulevard and then to write stories that made readers feel they had been there" (Mills, 1988, p.3). In the 1990's the majority of trainee journalists were women however, they are still disadvantaged today in reaching their 'sell-by' date earlier (see Sebba, 1994, p.273). While anchormen such as Larry King (born 1933) are seen on the screen well into old



age, women especially in TV journalism are still expected to be young and pretty (“in most cases, attractiveness has helped” (Sebba, 1994, p.277)).

This objectified view is also obvious in *Woman of the Year* and *I Love Trouble*. The more than fifty years between the films did not change that at all. The important first impression both women are supposed to make on the audience is not that of a hard working journalist, but as a woman, as can be proven in the first scenes with Tess and Sabrina: in both movies their long legs are shown in a long shot first of all, before we see their faces. “At times films ... marginalize and promulgate stereotypes about African American, other minorities, or women. His [Stevens] camera at times includes gender and race by dehumanizing and objectifying women and blacks” (Girgus, 1998, p.178). The fact that the same leg display happens in the 1994 movie can be seen either as homage to the older movie and Katherine Hepburn or simply as proof that in movies women are still more displayed in their position as an ideal of beauty and sexual desirability than as a person with equally valuable skills. Another example is sob sister Anne in *Meet John Doe*. Regardless of her talent and strong will she is mainly described by her editor in terms of looks: “about five-foot-five, brown eyes, light chestnut hair, and as fine a pair of legs as ever walked into this office”.

So while it can be generalized that changes in society (3), led to changes in the filmic representation, some things as demonstrated above are still subject to change. But setting aside the focus on (female) looks, the figure of the sob sister per se has already vanished long ago. Barris claims that in 1968 “the movie sob sister had become a patently endangered species” (1976, p.156). Gone is the position as ‘one of the guys’, the assignment to exclusively ‘sob stories’ and the special bond with the editor. Gone are also the days, when a successful sob sister career only lasted until she fell in love, the wedding vows were exchanged or marital problems led to a turn towards domestic life. The sob sister’s position in the media changed from privileged (“Get me something on this guy and you can have... - A month vacation with pay”, *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town*) or outlawed (“No women in the press box, it’s a rule as old as baseball”, *Woman of the Year*) to being part of a team or even better (Sabrina becomes the figurehead of the Chicago Chronicle) and in her private life she can gain happiness without compromising her work commitments.

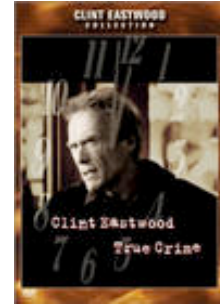
As the real-life female reporters gained respect, independence and a place in the news, the filmic version lost her right of existence and while the filmic sob sister battled

everybody from paper boy to publisher, today these battles are rarely with editors, who frequently recognise advantages in using women to report, rather than with male colleagues who feel threatened or see women treated as more privileged (see Sebba, 1994, p.9). The filmic sob sister with her strengths and weaknesses has vanished but was succeeded by a modern, closer to reality version of the female reporter. Many films today, not only romantic comedies but also crime, thriller and others, feature female reporters such as *Veronica Guerrin* (2003), *The Life of David Gale* (2003), *Mr Deeds* (2002) or *Never Been Kissed* (1999). It shows that the figure has developed various representations on the screen, indicating more diversity and is accepted and familiar by audiences to be seen. However, the influence of a love interest often still works as a catalyst for the female protagonist's work which it could be argued invalidates her professional role. It suggests that complete gender equality on the screen is still not established as can be seen in many (journalism) movies which feature beautiful main actresses in the lead roles who fall in love with a noble man.

(1) The issue of social class is mainly covered in Chapter 7.

(2) See Beach and Barnard in Chapter 7.

(3) Changes in history and society are focussed on in Chapter 10.



## 9. The Reporter as Crusader

### **Call Northside 777 (1948) & True Crime (1999)**

Films about the American newspaperman “regularly have suggested that the journalist can see through lies and hypocrisy, stick up for the little guy, uncover the truth, and serve democracy“ (Ehrlich, 2004, p.1). Journalism appears to be the pursuer of truth and in the filmic representation of the profession there is one figure that embodies these functions in particular: the reporter as crusader. In the string of so-called ‘socially aware’ or ‘message’ pictures, social evils were exposed and important issues such as political corruption, atomic war, lynching, treatment of mental patients etc. were addressed (see Barris, 1976, p.78). Just as in real life journalists often performed worthwhile tasks in their communities, and the film industry told of such stories. “Hollywood movies about newspaper life have sometimes reached their highest levels in stories about crusading newsmen” (Barris, 1976, p.78).

The journalist’s function as a crusader is one that is often present in the public eye and therefore expected by audiences when portraying a positive image of the profession. It is the belief that journalists expose injustices and save the neck of the little guy. In a way it is the fight of an individual or a group against the system and thus comes not in setting but narrative close to the Western. As in the Western, movies depicting crusading journalists, explore moral issues, deal with social conflicts and show the main character, often alone, in the fight against the bad guys (see Nowell-Smith, 1996, p.291). The study of the journalist as a crusader is worth a closer look as it reflects a very important function of the journalistic profession.

For my analysis of the above category, I decided to compare *Call Northside 777* with *True Crime*. The most important reason being that the main plot, to prove a jailed man’s innocence, is the common crusading element in both movies. While Hathaway’s movie from 1948 was based on a true story and made in a semi-documentary style (*Call Northside 777* builds upon the story of wrongly convicted

Joseph Majczek and "Chicago Times" newspapermen James P. McGuire and Jack McPhail, whose investigative reporting exposed the miscarriage of justice (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.91)), Eastwood's 1999 production was an adaptation of a novel by Andrew Klavan. Despite this very important basic difference the movies still offer many interesting points of similarity and difference.

In both movies it is not the journalist who discovers the story. Both J.P. McNeal (James Stewart) and Steve Everett (Clint Eastwood), get assigned to it. In *Call Northside 777* editor Kelley develops an interest in a newspaper ad that offers \$5000 for information about a murder eleven years ago and wants to know why. In *True Crime* Everett has to take on the execution story of Frank Beachum at short notice from his associate Michelle, who had a fatal car accident the night before.

The two journalists make completely different first impressions when introduced on the screen. J.P. McNeal, nicknamed 'Mc', is sitting in the "Chicago Times" newspaper office at his typewriter writing an article. He is formally dressed in a suit and with a hat, as most male journalists in the old movies. McNeal appears professional and focused on the job. Steve Everett on the other hand, is first seen very drunk at a local bar with Michelle. Everett gives her advice on how to write articles and then kisses her, although he could be her grandfather. "He is an alcoholic, womanizing reporter" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.147) whose marriage is falling apart. While *Call Northside 777* in its documentary style depicts a close to reality type of reporter, who is serious and adult, *True Crime* draws upon "the old, whiskey-bottle-on-hip, Capone-type reporter of 'Front Page' and other newspaper pictures of the 1929 period" (Fox promotion in: Ehrlich, 2004, p.91). Of all the contemporary movies that I analyzed this is the only one in which the main character has an alcohol problem. To me this is explained by Eastwood's (director and actor) desire to support his famous outlaw, "Dirty Harry", image. As always he swims against the current trend, in this case that "the stereotype of the drunken journalist has become less, not more, prominent over the past couples of decades. The reason is that the use of alcohol has been demythologized. Journalists continue to drink on the screen ... but their drinking is pictured as normal, unremarkable, a routine feature of nineties social life" (Good, 2000, p.152). Therefore in reverse, the connection between a journalist and alcohol in a contemporary movie is likely to be used to convey a sense of nostalgia regarding the history of the profession.

One reason for fewer drunken reporters on the screen is that the public conscience about drugs and health in general has developed towards greater care about these issues. “We did find a statistically significant decrease in the amount of both alcohol and tobacco use in films over time. This relationship implies that on average a film released in the early 1940's had 46 seconds of alcohol use while a film released in the late 1990's had approximately 10 seconds of alcohol use” (www.kidsrisk.harvard.edu). So in my opinion, the alcoholism of Steve Everett represents a personal crisis rather than a statement on the moral dissolution of the journalistic profession. Another reason to show a reporter with an alcohol problem could be that nowadays audiences might believe less readily in the honest, straight forward crusading journalist anymore. A crusader without flaws may be too good to be true. As discussed in other chapters of this thesis the portrayal of the journalistic profession tends to have a more critical view in more recent movies and the character of Steve Everett is no exception as I will show later.

While Brian Kelly, McNeal’s editor, gives his reporter a free hand how to pursue the story, Everett gets clear instructions: “I don’t want some investigator piece. All I’m looking for here is the human interest perspective”. His paper is only interested in sensational coverage, but not the truth; its attitude becomes clear in the editor’s statement “People want to read about sex organs and blood”. This refers to the development of the media to focus even more on soft journalism that provides sensationalism, celebrity and crime. “A recently released report authored by Thomas Patterson (2001) finds that soft news has increased dramatically over the past two decades in US journalism. Stories with a moderate to high level of sensationalism rose from about 25% of news stories in the early 1980s to a current tally of 40%. Stories that include a human interest element also figure heavily in contemporary reporting .... The same holds true for stories with crime or disaster as a main subject, rising from 8% of stories in 1980 to close to 15% of stories today” (Nisbet, 2001, p.1). Other movies such as *Mad City* (hostage situation), *I Love Trouble* (train derailment) or *Runaway Bride* (scandal) further strengthen the audience’s association of journalism and sensationalism. So *True Crime* draws on a critique of journalism however the storyline and the ending suggest that the individual can still be a hero if only he or she is determined enough. Other movies such as *The Insider* or *The Pelican Brief* (1) in which a single journalist takes on the system and the bad guys support this assumption.

In both movies the attitude towards the convicted ‘murderers’ is negative and nearly hostile. McNeal and Everett immediately start researching; meeting relatives, witnesses, and finally visit the convicted in prison which is another interesting point to compare. When McNeal visits Wiecek, the convicted ‘cop killer’, his appearance is not very friendly or sympathetic (“If you are guilty, she [his mother] scrubs the floors for nothing”). McNeal very openly does not believe in the prisoner’s innocence and hides behind his professionalism: “We’ll play up this mother angle and maybe a little bit police and political corruption. This thing got mass appeal to help you to get sympathy and mass support”. When Frank leaves, McNeal does not even say good-bye. Although the latter’s appearance is hostile, it makes him human. The scene shows that reporters also have prejudices and opinions and might be assigned to stories, they are not keen on. As in every job there are things one does not like to do. Also, from a narrative point of view it sets up a progression that the audience too will get sucked into sympathy as a result for the convicted and the leopard that changed its spots. When Everett visits the condemned Beachum in prison he does not show sympathy either: “You don’t know me. I’m just a guy out there with a screw loose. Frankly I don’t give a rat’s ass about Jesus Christ. I don’t care about justice in this world or the next. I don’t even care what’s right or wrong; never have. But you know what this is [pointing at his nose]? ... That’s my nose. ... And when my nose tells me something stinks, I gotta have faith in it, just like you have your faith in Jesus.” This statement characterizes a man who lost faith in anything but himself, who does not care about anything or anybody. Everett “is as reprehensible as any of the 1930’s newshounds, but like them when he smells a story, he becomes a reporter’s reporter” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.7) The film shows an instinctive journalist - for the audience a pleasurable tension between his personal morals and vocational virtue (the same tension can be observed in the filmic representation of other professional groups such as lawyers - they might be portrayed in their private lives as arrogant, chaotic or law-breakers but as long as they do a good job in court, the audience will forgive and identify with them such as in *Boston Legal*, a popular TV series). Everett then expresses his opinion that Frank is innocent and that makes the latter’s wife cry “Where were you all this time?” As in *Call Northside 777*, the movie reinforces the people’s belief in the press/media as the guardian of justice and as an institution that can rescue them from injustice. This belief is based on the watchdog role, which in importance is said to override all other functions of the media (see Curran, 2002, p.

217). It draws upon the media's independence from the government; however it is not free from corporate interests as seen in *The Insider*. "A press that is licensed, franchised or regulated is subject to political pressures when it deals with issues affecting the interests of those in power" (Kelley & Donway cited in: Curran, 2002, p.218). The media's watchdog role is celebrated throughout the century.

So inevitably in both movies the higher institutions get their say as well. In *Call Northside 777* a crisis meeting with members from the police, the District Attorney, the paper's lawyer, Kelley and McNeal is called by the publisher. Mc Neal fights for his story ("I think this whole thing stinks") and they agree that he gets more time to find Wanda, the key witness. In contrast to that Everett does not get away that easy as his bosses, sick of his alcohol problem and misbehaviour (he is the only one who smokes in the office despite the new no smoking policy), just look for a reason to fire him. Everett is an old-style journalist who does not belong in a modern newsroom anymore. In the office he looks like a relict of a time long ago with his leather jacket, the cigarettes and his "be nice, make me a coffee" attitude. Allan, his editor: "You're trying to tell me that you wanna turn a routine execution piece into some fight for justice story and what, that gives me an excuse to stand up for you when Bob ask me to transfer you to the toilet, is that it?" Steve only gets the story in exchange for his notice. Despite the many differences in the characters of McNeal and Everett their determination to find the truth, or in Everett's case to prove himself one last time, is still the same. This appears to be a stereotype that can be found in all journalism movies, old or new. Once the journalist smells blood or the "nose tells something stinks" as Everett would say, he or she doesn't let go until the truth is uncovered. Journalists might fail to rescue their paper (*Deadline*), to save themselves from humiliation (*Absence of Malice*) or to earn public respect (*Citizen Kane*), but Hollywood nearly always lets them get the story right, because there is a pressure in America to show a happy ending for the good guys, no matter in what kind of film.

The comparison between *Call Northside 777* and *True Crime* also highlights a finding about the attitude towards work. As Good notes: "Many older films included protagonists who were at least incipient workaholics" (Good, 2000, p.153). If they worked hard, they drank hard, yet they were never so involved in work that they could not enjoy spare time with activities such as jigsaw puzzles (*Call Northside 777*), writing plays (*Platinum Blonde*) or practicing coin tricks (*Mr Deeds Goes to Town*). By contrast, in the new movies, journalists often are portrayed as complete

workaholics. In *True Crime* for example when Everett picks up his daughter for a trip in the zoo he still makes professional phone calls, watches the coverage of the trial on TV and takes his beeper with him. The trip with Kate ends in a disaster when he injures her by tipping over her stroller because he was rushing through the zoo in order to make it to another interview. Other movies namely *Shattered Glass*, *Runaway Bride*, *To Die For* or *I Love Trouble* support this observation. "Their life is their work, and their work is their passion. Nineties films ... give us journalists who will do anything for a story or a shot at a celebrity. They aren't slaves of alcohol, but something worse - ambition" (Good, 2000, p.154). Good's statement supports the assumption that movies respond to social changes. Changes in journalism on and off the screen can also be observed by the number of women in the newsroom (2), the issues covered such as the trend towards infotainment or even simpler the outer appearance of journalists (e.g. hat and whisky bottle in the desk disappeared).

Both movies end with the proof of innocence of the convicted murderer due to new findings discovered by the reporter. In *Call Northside 777*, McNeal finds a photo that shows Frank and Wanda together. It proves that she knew the convict before the murder proving her testimony wrong and leading to the release of Wiecek. In *True Crime* Everett discovers a piece of jewellery belonging to the murdered cashier at the neck of the real murderer's mother. He grabs her, speeds drunk to the governor's house and the execution is stopped by the latter at the last minute.

Despite this similarity the final scenes in both movies deliver different messages. In the 1948 movie, after the Second World War, a patriotic message lies in the lines by Mc Neal: "It's a big thing when a sovereign state admits an error ... not many governments in the world would do that". The movie reproduces the myth that hard work could correct societal injustices and that "even with its glitches, the American system of justice and fair play worked, in contrast to those of 'other governments in the world'" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.93). Eastwood's movie on the other hand, shows an "outlaw type coping as an anachronism in a professional, official world" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.148). The last scene shows him alone, buying Christmas gifts for his daughter who now lives with his estranged wife. However, even if it has cost him his family, Everett knows he did the right thing and he smiles when Beachum passes by with his happy family. In the end, he emerges as a hero.

The different messages, one about America as a society, the other about outlaws within that society, are due to their different times of production. While earlier movies



openly dealt with morals, traditional values, democracy and the American Dream (see Capra films) over the years there has been a shift towards movies depicting single individuals within that society and their struggle to conform in it (e.g. *American History X*, *Fight Club*).

Nevertheless, I believe that the stereotype of the reporter as a crusader is probably the least changed one. In older as well as newer movies there is still the same determination to uncover the truth and expose social evil. Of course there are movies about journalists that exploit their subjects, but many “movies have shown journalists as heroes who uncover stories that others try to suppress or ignore, who do uphold the public’s right to know” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.176). The function of the crusading reporter is part of the journalists’ self-image and official mythology. It represents a positive perspective on the job. Many young trainees go into journalism to uncover machinations or discover a second Watergate. They see themselves as heroes or underdogs who fight the right fight, even if they do not always win. But they know the right people – detectives, policemen, government officials – who help them along the way. They are willing to risk private happiness (*The Paper*) but eventually, as in most Hollywood endings, they are rewarded for that and the reporter does succeed in his crusade. *True Crime* in particular resembles very much *The Front Page* in getting the job right and it is still a thin line to get it right both in private life and professionally. As in the Western the good are still hunting the bad, and the myth of the press as the guardian of justice remains reinforced by today’s movies. In the end, the crusading journalist, whether he be an outlaw or not, is still the hero – maybe imperfect, but a hero nonetheless.

(1) Chapter 11 deals with the crime buster / investigative journalist who take on the system.

(2) Facts about women in the newsroom can be found in Chapter 8.



## 10. The Reporter Overseas

### **Foreign Correspondent (1940) & Welcome to Sarajevo (1997)**

“Today’s foreign correspondents are not Joel McCrea in Alfred Hitchcock’s *Foreign Correspondent* shouting ‘Cancel my rumba lessons!’ as he dashes off to the next world crisis... Instead, Hendrick Smith, the former New York Times Moscow bureau chief suggests that their demographics ‘look like those of the members of a New York law firm’” (Hess, 1996, p.11). Stephen Hess’ statement from his book *International News and Foreign Correspondents* hints the changes in the image of the foreign correspondent both on and off the screen and because the world has changed thus popular culture remains not untouched either. The times of adventure and fun are gone, replaced by seriousness and orderly behaviour.

The heroic image of the foreign correspondent developed long before the first movies were produced. “The period between the American Civil War and the First World War was a ‘Golden Age’ for the war correspondent, because of the rise of the popular press, the increasing use of the telegraph, and the tardy introduction of organised censorship” (Knightley, 1976, p.42). The tremendous demand for news led most newspapers to send men to report directly from the front (see Knightley, 1976, p. 20). In those days the image of the foreign correspondent was a heroic one, and indeed they travelled by horse, donkey, camel or train. They carried letters of credit, gold pieces, and braces of pistols. Reporters were constantly in the line of fire, fighting in the first row among the soldiers and no one denied their physical bravery. Foreign correspondents were a power in those days that could bring empires down (e.g. Richard Harding Davis of The New York Journal helped to start the Spanish-American War; see Knightley, 1976, p.43) and their columns and books were read by the thousands.

The foreign reporter was and is among the most demanding jobs in journalism and

justly the glamorous figure found its way onto the big screen in the early 1930's. In the movies, "naturally, the foreign correspondent's life was more dramatic in time of war rather than peace" (Barris, 1976, p.96) and the more adventures the hero encountered and survived the better the story. "Actors couldn't wait to play the glamorous overseas war reporter who would save democracy, his loved one, and his country in less than a couple of hours" (IJPC, n.d., p. 9).

The spread of the Second World War in the 1940's led to a number of 'reporter overseas' movies but to Barris, Hitchcock's popular *Foreign Correspondent* is the best of them (see Barris, 1976, p.102), which is why I decided to analyse it under the above category. It has to be kept in mind that the movie was made during World War II and therefore functions both "as exciting romance and as convincing political propaganda" (Barr, 1999, p.134)). My choice of a comparative movie from today was *Welcome to Sarajevo*, which is actually a British / American co-production and not entirely American as are the other movies. However I do believe that this fact does not affect the observations in the change of the image of the overseas reporter to a big degree as the same changes already occurred in American 1980's movies. Despite good reviews from critics *Welcome to Sarajevo* was a flop at the box office, but as there have been hardly any foreign or war correspondent movies produced over the last fifteen years (the last famous ones are probably *The Killing Fields* (1984) and *Salvador* (1986) from the 1980's) and none of them was financially successful, I was glad to find at least this one to analyse. The non-existence of sufficient film material leads to the conclusion that the foreign correspondent is not a popular film figure any more, but I focus on this later. To analyse the figure of the foreign correspondent will show the change from a very glamorous image, established first in Screwball Comedies such as *Comrade X* and then in *Foreign Correspondent* (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.80 and Good, 1989, p.31) to a character that is overshadowed by doubts and human impulses. The overall message of the films also seems to have changed from pro- to anti-war messages.

*Foreign Correspondent* starts with a shot of the building of the New York Morning Globe, while inside newspaper editor Powers expresses his disappointment with the overseas coverage ("All I get out of my foreign staff is a daily guessing game. I want facts. A good honest crime reporter is what the Globe needs"). *Welcome to Sarajevo* on the other hand begins with camera shots of destroyed houses, streets and soldiers

in the fallen city of Vukovar. The movie was the first foreign film production that was filmed at original settings after the civil war in Bosnia. The semi-documentary pictures and camera shots produce a feeling of authenticity; reinforced also by the movie's pre-lines that it is based on actual events that took place in 1992 and 1993 (The film is partially based on Michael Nicholson's book *Natasha's Story*. The British TV journalist adopted a Bosnian child when covering the war.). Although Hitchcock's movie is also based on personal memories (the roots are in Vincent "Jimmy" Sheean's 1935 book *Personal History*, concerning his reporting experiences in Europe and the Far East (Ehrlich, 2004, p.80)) there is an obvious difference between the movies in terms of facts and fiction. While Johnny Jones (Joel McCrea) in *Foreign Correspondent* appears to be more of a fictional superhero, who climbs out of hotel windows and survives a plane crash, Michael Henderson (Stephen Dillane) in *Sarajevo* is shown as someone who simply does his job and has no intention to be adventurous.

Both movies introduce their main characters straight away as journalists, shown on the job. Crime reporter Johnny Jones appears first in the newspaper room where he cuts paper designs and looks quite bored. When editor Powers nevertheless approaches him the audience finds out, that Jones is unmarried, does not keep up with foreign news and has never been to Europe. In *Welcome to Sarajevo*, reporter Michael Henderson is in the focus of the camera reporting about the survivors of Vukovar. His appearance is professional and his reporting style is in a neutral, emotionless tone. Michael is casually dressed. During the movie the audience learns that he is married with two children and works for the British network ITN.

In the study *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* it has been calculated "that 85 percent of all Hollywood films made before 1960 have romance as their main plot, and 95 percent have romance either as the main plot or a secondary plot" (Wexman, 1993, p.3). Hitchcock's movie is no exception. His film "is both a thriller about the outbreak of World War II and a love story... Love helps and inspires him [Jones] towards commitment, and it is this commitment that helps him to earn love" (Barr, 1999, p.134). When reading Barris' chapter 'The Reporter Overseas' (see Barris, 1976, p. 96-116) it becomes clear that most of the old movies about foreign correspondents have a female lead actress either as the love interest or the neglected wife to come home to. A war by itself did not seem strong enough to attract audiences. "Some 40 years later, the Vietnam war would inspire another wave of foreign correspondent

films ...It was a different world, a different war, and it called forth a different kind of celluloid correspondent” (Good, 1989, p.32). Today’s filmic portrayal of foreign correspondents is often less heroic or romantic and closer to reality. “The mean age for foreign correspondents is forty three, ... two-thirds ...were parents” and one-third of foreign correspondents are women (see Hess, 1996, p.16, 23, 24). *Welcome to Sarajevo* shows similarities to these findings about journalists in foreign countries. Henderson is not in Bosnia to rescue a pretty lady or experience exciting adventures, instead “You’re here. You’re a reporter. You’re here to report” as his American colleague Flynn says. While the older movies focussed less on journalism but instead on the adventurous American abroad as an identification figure (“a whole nation holds its breath while they [the correspondents] risk their lives overseas to get the story back to the home front”; IJPC, n.d., p.9) the focus now is on the risks involved in being a reporter overseas and humanity in times of war. As in *Salvador* (rescued woman has to return to the hell she just escaped) and *The Killing Fields* (the attempt to smuggle a Cambodian out of the country fails) *Welcome to Sarajevo* puts the centre of attention onto the residents of the country at war, their personal tragedies and whether the reporters can or cannot make a difference in their lives (Michael brings Emira to England). So the filmic perspective changed from being predominantly pointed at the reporter to the journalist and the people affected by war. Inevitably the shift towards more authenticity led to the loss of romance.

Reporting from a country where one does not speak the language often represents a big challenge to foreign correspondents. Both movies hint at these obstacles. Johnny Jones needs a Dutch girl to translate a message to the police that he needs them to follow him to a windmill where he believes the kidnappers of diplomat Van Meer are hiding. Michael Henderson hires Risto Bavic who functions as driver, translator, and local guide for his team. Without him the reporters would be helpless: “Not knowing the language is not being able to read the graffiti” (Pearce in: Hess, 1996, p.79). However, in Winterbottom’s movie American journalist Flynn is learning Bosnian which supports the finding that “today’s journalists are more apt to be proficient in the language of the country to which they are posted” (Hess, 1996, p. 80).

The overall portrayal of the main character and the storyline constitute a major difference between the two movies. Shortly after Jones’ arrival in Europe he witnesses the assassination of a famous politician, ends up in a car chase and falls in love with peace activist Fisher’s daughter. Soon he discovers that Carol’s father is

involved in a Nazi spy ring and that murdered diplomat Van Meer is still alive. Heavy hearted Jones chooses to expose Carol's father ("I came 4,000 miles to get a story. I get shot at like a duck in a shooting gallery, I get pushed off buildings, I get the story, and then I've got to shut up!"). He then leaves for America, but meets on the plane with Carol and her father. The plane crashes, but not before Fisher reveals his guilt to his daughter. The accident kills him and the couple is reunited. To Good "the main character is nothing more –or less- than a smart alecky crime reporter pulled off beer mob-killings and race riots and turned loose in Europe on the eve of World War II" (Good, 1989, p.31). Indeed, Jones never questions whether he should get involved in the story nor does he encounter any ethical dilemmas during his time in Europe. His life has hardly anything to do with reporting, beside the compulsory calls to his editor, and appears to be more like the one of an adventurer. In contrast, in *Welcome to Sarajevo* the main character and his team are journalists through and through (producer Jane: "It's four days in a row I haven't had breakfast"). After a massacre of civilians, Henderson's story does not make it as the lead for the news but the separation of the Duke and the Duchess of York does. This marks the beginning of Henderson's disillusion and his personal involvement. The next day Michael visits the Ljubica Ivezic Orphanage to do a report on the children. While there Michael promises orphan girl Emira that he will get her out - half-hearted, not really meaning it. But he is determined to get the politicians' attention. His reports become passionate, dedicated and biased from now on. As the UN leaves without having helped the children, Henderson gives up and is ready to leave when he meets Nina, who arranges a children's transport. Together they take six children, one of them Emira, onto the bus. The film then shows the dangerous bus journey through the war territory to Italy. Later Henderson needs to return to Sarajevo to let Munira, Emira's mother, sign the adoption papers. In Henderson a reporter is portrayed who cannot help but act ("No, we haven't done that story...As long as the UN are here, I'm going to keep those kids on the screen"). It supports Good's finding that in contemporary movies foreign journalists are shown that "are tossed between their professional duty to report events objectively and their wakening impulse to intervene in disaster" (Good, 1989, p.33). Henderson is a reporter of our times.

Although both movies deliver a political message they are oppositional. "*Foreign Correspondent* is an entertaining mix of action, comedy, romance – and patriotism" (Good, 1989, p.32). The last scene shows Jones and Carol in a broadcasting studio in

London where he reports from the war in an Edward R. Murrow-like manner (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.80): “It's too late to do anything here now except stand in the dark and let them come... as if the lights were all out everywhere, except in America. Hello, America, hang on to your lights: they're the only lights left in the world!” The film clearly encourages American intervention in the war against Nazism and can be seen as 'flag-waving' propaganda to inspire American national pride and morale (the scene was filmed on the 5<sup>th</sup> of July 1940; less than a week later, the bombardment of London began, this time for real, see <http://www.dvdverdict.com>). *Welcome to Sarajevo* on the other hand has a clear anti-war message. The film shows historical pictures of Sarajevo in better times, for example at the Olympic Games in 1984 in contrast to moving images of destroyed houses, dead people and starving men in the prisoner of war camps. Throughout the whole movie real news footage is shown, for example of politicians such as John Major or Francois Mitterand who comment, sometimes as if in denial of the problems, about the war. The movie reproaches the politicians with human error and is a powerful reminder that being informed isn't enough; action is imperative.

One of the few similarities between the two movies is the image of the war correspondent as a heavy smoker and drinker. In *Foreign Correspondent* Jones is met in London by a colleague who immediately accompanies him into the next bar where they have a whisky. In *Welcome to Sarajevo* the journalists spend every night playing cards, drinking and smoking at the end of a busy day. In contrast to the use of alcohol in older films as a stereotypical trait of the male journalist (1) or as pandering to nostalgia (2) here drinking seems to be a coping mechanism for those facing the daily horrors of war.

Beside this similarity in the image of the reporter overseas it generally has to be said that the figure itself changed a lot. Although both movies are based on real journalistic memories, *Foreign Correspondent* clearly serves the audience's demand for glamour and adventure while *Welcome to Sarajevo* sticks closely to the facts, portraying the fight for the stories and attention. “McCrea's character wisecracked, ‘Give me an expense account, and I'll cover anything,’ and referred with typical exaggeration to his scoop as ‘the biggest story of the century’” (Good, 1989, p.32). Jones is the good American who fights the bad Nazi guys – a simple black and white scheme. “His modern counterpart is torn and often speaks of the responsibilities of journalism, growing particularly solemn about the need to be objective. But if some of

the glamour and fun have gone out of foreign correspondence, none of the danger has” (Good, 1989, p.32). Reporters still risk their lives (on and off screen) to deliver the story.

It appears, though, as if the figure of Johnny Jones is more “a variation on the oldest stereotype in newspaper films – the crime reporter” (IJPC, n.d. p.9) than a foreign correspondent. He deals with assassins, kidnapping, murder and a Nazi spy ring, and is more involved in solving the crime than reporting about it. *Welcome to Sarajevo* renounces old stereotypes about the war reporter such as to brave gunfire, go for days without sleep and hot food or outmanoeuvre censors and competitors (see Good, 1989, p.30). The film shows journalists with personalities who prove their human nature in different ways (Michael by adopting Emira, Flynn by delivering a prisoner of war’s message to his father).

The fact that barely any movies with foreign correspondents as the main characters are produced in the second sample period might be caused by different factors. “Considering the demand for foreign news and the difficulties of reporting from far-flung places, there are probably too few correspondents stationed overseas” (Hachten, 1996, p. 124). The number of reporters overseas is decreasing mainly due to financial or security reasons which lead to the perception of the foreign correspondent as a less familiar figure. The general trend from hard news to infotainment (also alluded in *Welcome to Sarajevo*; camera man Gregg: “It’s all this ‘news as entertainment’ bullocks, isn’t it?”) leads to a decrease of interest in foreign matters. “As if in confirmation of the narrow audience, when weekly newsmagazines feature foreign events on their covers, they are reputed to sell 20 percent fewer copies than they do on average” (Rosenblum cited in: Hess, 1996, p.88). However, being a foreign correspondent is still surrounded by the myth of making proper journalism in contrast to soft news although these increasingly dominate the media scene because infotainment sells better.

Additionally in the film industry, when mainstream directors produce war movies they have lately predominately turned to World War II (*Saving Private Ryan*, *Pearl Harbour*) but avoided controversial issues such as the war in Afghanistan or Iraq. With the high production costs involved film studios are less willing to take risks in audience taste (3). It might simply come down to the fact that the modern figure of the foreign correspondent is less heroic than it used to be and was inevitably overtaken in popularity by soldiers, lawyers or fire fighters who now have their time on the big



screen.

An old tradition has died. Although Hitchcock's film is not a straight foreign correspondent film it can be concluded that the fighting and outsmarting reporters of previous wars and their (often exaggerated) filmic heroic counterparts have vanished, being replaced by journalists subject to commercialism, circulation pressure and false information. It appears that stereotypes are dependent on current tastes (the reporter as an action hero) as well as on the political situation (wars not popular, so reporter as anti-hero). Thus, the new filmic foreign correspondent is a torn figure that struggles to be objective and distant and often finds itself involved in humanitarian action to ease the war victims' suffering. But although the figure has changed in many ways it is still a positive one, unaffected by egoism, pressure from the head office and greed for stardom as shown in other journalism movies. "Issues of censorship and distorting the truth in times of war are sometimes touched upon in the movies, but when bullets are flying and lives are in jeopardy, these are nuances in which American movie makers and the American moviegoers aren't much interested" (IJPC, n.d., p.9). The myth of the foreign reporter as a source of truth and humanity lives on.

(1) Alcohol linked with male reporters is a topic in *It Happened One Night* in Chapter 7.

(2) Nostalgic alcohol use is described in *True Crime* in Chapter 9.

(3) The connection between audience and film industry is part of Chapter 4.



## 11. The Reporter as Crime Buster

### **The Shadow of the Thin Man (1941) & The Pelican Brief (1993)**

From the very first day on the job, if not already in journalism school, the reporter learns to ‘get the story’. This generally means to find an interesting story or having been assigned to one, to follow it up, search for background information and then finish it off. In a way, the job of the reporter is close to the one of a detective which is probably why the combination of the two is so popular on the screen – they both, in front of the audience’s eyes have to uncover the story. “Both the journalist and the detective are curious inquirers trying to solve a mystery, whether it be a crime or a complex unknown story” (IJPC, n.d., p.5). They both bring the small jigsaw puzzle pieces of where, when, how, who and why together in order to get the big picture. “And since Hollywood ‘plots’ have a tendency to multiply ..., by the mid-1930’s movie audiences were up to their craning necks in omniscient reporters who spent about two minutes at their typewriters for every thirty they devoted to outwitting patently retarded police forces” (Barris, 1976, p.22). Ultimately a (journalistic) hero must act like a hero instead of sitting for hours at his typewriter. In that respect Hollywood only followed its successful formula to glamorize the main character to please audiences.

Before I start the comparison of an old crime buster movie with a new one I should note that this category in Barris’ book *Stop the Presses!* contains a lot of hardly known B-movies that are barely accessible today (“Over the years – and especially during the 1930s and 1940s - for every A newspaper movie there were probably half a dozen B pictures dealing with newsmen” (Barris, 1976, p.26)). After a long search for available material I found *The Shadow of the Thin Man* which is the second movie of a series that featured William Powell and Myrna Loy as married detectives. Due to the lack of material I was unable to access other crime buster films and solely had to focus on this one. It has to be kept in mind that the reporter in *The Shadow of the Thin*

*Man* is only a side figure which possibly affects the comparison with *The Pelican Brief*, the second movie I present. In the character of Gray Grantham a “sober and conservative” (Steinle, 2000, p.9) journalist is portrayed who with his specialisation in investigative journalism is probably of all characters, analyzed in this thesis, closest to the category of the crime buster. With a comparison of the two movies there is a possibility to find and present only a few changes in the portrayal of the crime buster figure as the character in the older movie is possibly not representative enough.

In earlier movies crime busting meant foremost outsmarting the police. “Newspaper films in which the leading men (or women) were up to their unremovable hats in trouble, chasing crooks, beating both the police and their own rivals to the scenes of crimes ..., have met with far more public favour” (Barris, 1976, p.22) than films which tried to put the reporter in a more realistic place. “The audience is trying to solve whatever mystery there is, and the reporter is our agent. He has the power to see things and make sense out of them. We identify with him as an ideal alter ego because he can do more than we can” (Belton in: Good, 1989, p.8f). In accordance with filmic conventions a hero must act like a hero; if viewers were interested in a real life depiction of journalism they would watch a documentary instead. “There was more glamour in the witty newsman who told his editor off, proved the stupidity of the authorities, faced up fearlessly to hoodlums, and occasionally got drunk, than in the nine-to-five humdrum existence the audience went to the movies to forget “ (Barris, 1976, p.22). Langman notes that by the 1930’s, the decade that would be called the Golden Age of newspaper film, newspaper and crime were well intertwined. But the newspaper-crime drama, as he calls it, was mainly dominated by smaller film studios or low-budget productions of bigger studios, often featuring lesser known actors in simplistic plots (see Langman, 1998, p.8), which could explain why most of the crime buster movies are next to unknown today.

In *The Shadow of the Thin Man* ambitious reporter Paul Clark (Barry Nelson) is first seen at the crime scene at a horse race. A jockey is dead, presumed murdered, and police consult celebrity detective Nick Charles (William Powell) for help with the investigation. Without police consent, Paul is conducting interviews with possible witnesses and his photographer takes pictures, carelessly contaminating the crime scene. In *The Pelican Brief* we see investigative reporter Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) in an informal talk with Supreme Court Justice Rosenberg. This introduction portrays him as a journalist who is close to people in power, while at the

same time being distant from the subjects he writes about; in this case protesters against abortion laws, marching in front of the Supreme Court. Grantham makes the impression of a neutral, sharply observing party who is too smart to get in direct confrontation with the police as Clark does.

Clark is next seen at private detective Nick Charles' place. It becomes obvious they are friends and think highly of each other ("He's a smart reporter"). The two men talk openly about the murder, showing that Nick trusts Paul's confidentiality. In *The Pelican Brief*, during the entire movie, Gray is absolutely professional, and never talks about himself. He always wears suit and tie, being neatly dressed when at work. His house is stacked with books and he owns a computer. Presumably Gray is single. Steinle describes the character as "a preppie, buttoned-down, Bob Woodward-style, investigative journalist" (2000, p.9).

Woodward and Carl Bernstein are the Washington journalists who uncovered the Watergate Scandal that led to the resignation of President Nixon. The two journalists became big-screen national heroes in Alan J. Pakula's movie *All the Presidents Men* (1976). This film is key to understanding changes in stereotypes and is often regarded as one of the few movies that depict journalistic work as it really is (Ehrlich, 2004, p.116). Nobody was insulting the editor or screamed 'Stop the Presses'. No one battled with criminals, but with corruption at the highest governmental level instead. *All the Presidents Men* depicted ambitious journalists that got doors slammed into their faces, pressured by their editor; men that did not have a private life and refused give up. Audiences were fascinated by those two larger than life heroes because – the story was real. Investigative journalists such as Bernstein and Woodward "call attention to the breakdown of social systems and the disorder within public institutions" (Ettema & Glasser, 1998, p.3). Their aim is to dismantle untruths and publicize the truth while functioning as a morally engaged voice within society. "Investigative journalism as practised by Woodward and Bernstein promoted a scientific, impartial model of newsgathering that sought verifiable truth in the public interest" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.133). Investigative journalism also means to do in-depth research about a topic, go beyond manufactured press statements, know the right people and use them as sources when needed. However, it has to be stressed that filmic investigative journalism is not a replacement of the crime busting but a completely new stream of journalism movies. Investigative journalism as presented in *The Pelican Brief* and other movies can include solving crimes but is not exclusively

focussed on it.

Crime busters in earlier movies knew how to get to the bottom of things. In *The Shadow of the Thin Man* the main source is Paul's girlfriend Polly who is the secretary of Link [sic] Stephens, one of the murder suspects. Paul wants her to give him the keys to the office to enable him to look for evidence. He uses all his charm and powers of persuasion to convince the frightened girl, ignoring that he puts her job on the line and possibly endangers her. The impression arises that Paul is determined to get the scoop no matter what. In *The Pelican Brief* on the other hand journalist Grantham has a web of sources ranging from Supreme Court justice Rosenberg to a White House custodian. "Grantham treats his sources with respect and it pays off. 'I promise I will protect you as a confidential source', he tells a lawyer" (Steinle, 2000, p.9). The latter's revelations eventually confirm the assassination plot. After meeting law student Darby Shaw whose brief disturbs certain government officials as it explains the conspiracy behind the assassination of Rosenberg, Gray tries to ensure her security and commits himself fully to her (Darby: "Everybody I told about the brief is dead.", Gray: "I am taking my chances"), which, of course, in correspondence with filmic conventions means that he will be rewarded with a good story in the end. When Paul Clark finds a black book with gambling records in Stephens' office he is caught by Whitey Barrows, another newspaperman. Paul wins the fight over the book, but is then knocked over by somebody else. When he awakes Barrows lies beside him – killed, and the journalist himself is accused of murder. The figure of Paul Clark is a secondary one whose trouble is then avenged by star detective Nick Charles. "These journalists are expendable in Hollywood because they give the hero a motive to go after the bad guys with a vengeance" (JIPC, n.d, p.7) (1). Indeed, Nick believes his friend is innocent and returns to the crime scene where he finds the murder weapon in a waste water drain. The angle of the deadly wound proves that the jockey committed suicide. Gray Grantham in *The Pelican Brief*, being the main figure beside Darby Shaw, does the research on the murder chiefly by himself. He phones around, contacts his sources, conducts interviews, but in contrast to other filmic journalists he does not break into people's houses (*True Crime*), deny his identity (*Runaway Bride*) or try to physically overwhelm his enemies (*Foreign Correspondent*). In regards to this he is not as exaggerated as most filmic journalists, but inevitably as in (nearly) all journalism movies Gray is not above trickery to get the information he needs when distracting a nurse's attention to let Darby sneak into a clinic to question a witness. To

break the rules, to lie and deceive seem to be things that stick to the image of the journalist on the screen. They are elements that audiences obviously expect to see. Even respected journalist Grantham has to be a figure with flaws, reinforcing the myth of the rule breaking, uncompromising journalistic investigator. This supports the public's love-hate relationship with journalists who are expected to protect them from authorities and institutions or are allowed to transgress (like in the Western) but cannot be trusted fully ever. "Underneath his [Grantham's] sophisticated demeanour and celebrity, he's the age-old crime reporter doing whatever he can to break the story" (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.7).

In *The Shadow of the Thin Man* the story from now on focuses on private detective Nick Charles who finds evidence for the innocence of his friend. Clark is released from custody and rings up Major Sculley, a friend of his, to get more records about 'Rainbow' Benny Loomis, another suspect. When Darby first rings Grantham in *The Pelican Brief* she asks him for a list of all major contributors to the president's last campaign. "It is established early in the film that Grantham is a respected journalist who has access to the corridors of power" (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.7). These scenes mark journalists as people who have the ability as well as the resources to access information that is confidential or at least not easy accessible to the average person. In their day to day professional life journalists meet the most different people and networks of acquaintances are established. In their function as members of the media, reporters are able to interview any person who consents to being publicized. So while journalists often contact their sources to get information, it also happens that they get approached out of the blue by people who bear secrets, feel mistreated by society, have been victimized, want to complain etc. A filmic example, based on a true story, is *The Insider* (1999) in which a whistleblower comes forward and informs CBS producer Bergman about malpractices in the American tobacco industry. Again, referring to the media's watchdog role, "the claim is made simply that the media speak for the people, and represent their views and interests in the public domain" (Curran, 2002, p.227). Watergate / *All the Presidents Men* (1976) deeply anchored the idea in the public conscience that sources like Deep Throat and the determination of only a few journalists could cause big political scandals and even bring down a president.

In *The Shadow of the Thin Man*, as in most 1930's and 40's crime movies, there is ultimately a gathering of the suspects and a review of the clues leading to the killer's

confession. Everybody including Paul arrives at Lt. Abrams office and in the end it is the Major who is found guilty of murder. He had covered up the syndicate's gambling profits, and journalist Barrows was blackmailing him. Major Sculley then grabs Nick's gun and says: "Congratulations Paul you got your scoop, but you won't be able to write it." But as in happy end movies, everything is dissolved with the overpowering of the murderer. In *The Pelican Brief* Darby and Grantham eventually have all the evidence they need and make the conspiracy public in Grantham's newspaper under the headline "'Assassination Plot exposed" by Gray Grantham and Darby Shaw'. The movie ends with a big hug between the two which shows the obvious mutual respect between them.

Due to the fact that the figure of journalist Paul Clark is only a secondary one, I do not want to draw a lot of conclusions out of this somewhat imbalanced comparison. However, I believe the most important difference that could be generalized in analysing the movies is that crime busting – or investigating - is not about outsmarting the police anymore. While in *The Shadow of the Thin Man* Lt. Abrams is made to look like an idiot and only star detective Nick Charles gets the murder mystery right, in modern movies reporters work more with the police (2) instead of against them. In times of DNA and other high technology the journalistic amateur detective appears unconvincing on the screen. As mentioned before the character of Paul Clark does not make a lot of comparable points available, but as understood from Barris' chapter "The Reporter as Crime Buster" a lot of plots in the old movies were highly fictional and exaggerated. "As can be seen from some of the newspaper films of the 1950s, the crime-busting reporter had pretty well worn out his welcome ... It was becoming clear that the old-fashioned, hat-on-the-back-of-the-head, wise-cracking reporter was no longer a hero that movie audiences could take too seriously" (Barris, 1976, p.52). As shown before (3), after the Second World War, journalism movies mainly disappeared from the scene and so did the image of the crime buster. As Barris notes: "As the 1940s gave way to the 1950s, the crime-solving reporter was becoming a pretty tiresome figure" (1976, p.45f). I think the "crime buster" portrayal of the police as incompetent has also largely disappeared, being replaced by savvy, intelligent, hardworking police in many movies (an exception might be comedies).

In 1976 with *All the Presidents Men* investigative journalism was introduced on the big screen. It established the myth of the reporter's single-minded determination to

get the story right and the impression that journalists have no lives outside of work (as can be still seen in the figure of Gray Grantham). This movie made the reporters heroes but human heroes who were also driven by ambition and hunger for fame (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.117). In *The Pelican Brief* Grantham is clearly portrayed as an investigative reporter (Grantham: “You can’t take me off the story – there is something there. I can smell it”), but has hardly any resemblance with a crime buster at all.

We can conclude that the figure of the crime buster as it existed in the movies of the 1930s and 1940s is not in existence anymore. Today the crime buster’s way of fooling the authorities, hanging out with criminals and outsmarting the police looks rather silly and unconvincing, especially as a lot of the movies were simplistic, low budget and always followed the same narrative scheme boring the audience over the years. Another reason for the disappearance of the crime buster, I believe, was the arrival of television. Crime busting was connected with print journalists who first solved the crime and then turned it into an adventurous murder-mystery story for their readers. These stories with a hero going undercover, then portrayed sitting at his typewriter were easy to depict; a TV journalist with a camera team hanging out with criminals would have been an impossible image for audiences to believe in. An insignificant reporter sneaking into the darkest corners, tricking the smartest criminal into confession, solving the mystery before the police and then writing it down with pencil and notepad – this was the image of the crime buster. In fact it might be worth examining in the future whether or not the crime buster figure has been transferred to police detectives such as in *Lethal Weapon* or *Beverly Hills Cop*.

This filmic image remains in the earlier years of the last century, whereas investigative journalism came predominantly into the public conscience with *All the Presidents Men*. As concluded in the previous chapter changes in stereotypes are not only connected to changes in society but also to current tastes. The crime buster was a peculiar narrow figure that seemed to run out of steam after a few decades, while the investigative journalism became increasingly popular with audiences after the Watergate scandal. “Justifiably or not, Watergate restored some of the prestige and glamour the press had lost in the sixties“ (Good, 1989, p.18). Investigative journalism is more about a wider individual commitment to the truth and social justice as well as a determination to change the world. Films in general today are more critical and politically focused than in the earlier years when movies were more about romantic,



adventurous storytelling. In a narrow sense movies about investigative journalism today reinforce the liberal myths of individualism, freedom and conscience and in contrast to crime busting investigative journalism always has a message, often about the conditions within a society. Maybe this is why investigative journalism movies have already outlived crime buster movies in years: the journalistic profession as a whole can change but societal injustices as scoop material remain.

- (1) Another popular motif in contemporary film is the murdered journalist who is too inquisitive and has to die over his/her knowledge e.g. *Veronica Guerrin* (2003).
- (2) The reporter working alone in face of corrupt and controlled political and governmental systems is another popular narrative.
- (3) Why movies disappeared from the screen after WWII is part of Chapter 1.



## 12. Villains in the Media

### **Meet John Doe (1941) & To Die For (1995)**

For the first decades of talking pictures, the American newspaperman was glorified, worshipped and admired. Of course journalists had flaws too, but they got away with almost anything as long as the result was in the public interest. “They can lie, cheat, distort, bribe, betray or violate any ethical code as long as they expose some political or business corruption, solve a murder, catch a thief or save an innocent” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.2). From the beginning of newspaper movies the emphasis was almost always on crime, scandal, and other wrong doing of the type that fills the scandal papers (see Barris, 1976, p.181). The people profiting were the editors, but even more the media owners, and as in most Hollywood movies, good has to fight evil, so therefore villains were created in the newsroom. As reporters were too busy hunting the big scoop to make very good bad guys, the editors, but even more so the publishers were depicted as the anti-heroes. Already in the early 1940’s movies started getting more critical and one of the most famous portrayals of a media tycoon obsessed with wealth and political power is *Citizen Kane* (1941) which was based upon the life of publisher William Hearst. “Publishers, and now the media moguls, are rich and powerful, so movie audiences love to hate them. They are either concerned with economic power – willing to do anything to increase circulation – or they lust after political power” (IJPC, n.d, p.8). As an example for an evil publisher the movie *Meet John Doe* by Frank Capra is subject to further analysis.

Whereas in the 1930’s and 40’s editors and publishers were mostly portrayed as villains in the newspaper business, in the early 1950’s *Ace in the Hole* (1951) for the first time focussed on an unscrupulous reporter. The film “dramatized a shift in the nostalgic tradition by exposing the excesses of a roguish character type that had made likeable and predictable such traits as cynicism, deviousness, and amorality” Rainbolt, 2004, p. vii). Ghiglione and Saltzman see reasons for this development in the

introduction of the television to most American households. “Viewers, for the first time, could see, live in their homes the messy job of reporting news...They wanted the information, but they often weren’t pleased about the methods of getting that information...The public identified with the person being grilled or pursued by the journalist, and began questioning the media’s methods and techniques” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.2). In the 1950’s movies started increasingly to ask about ethical principles and the possibilities of manipulation in the media. With the rise of television the filmic newspaperman also got competition from TV journalists as the print press was not seen as the vital media force anymore (1). Barris believes that over the years “having exposed audiences to the notion that news reporters and editors could be so callous as to consider the story more important than the people involved ...it was only a step onward to the belief ...that newsmen might be capable of using the power of the press for their own personal gain or selfish purpose” (Barris, 1976, p.181). Movies such as *Network* or *The China Syndrome* showed the TV business in a hardly glamorized way (2). As an exemplary movie of the 1990’s *To Die For* by Gus Van Sant was chosen.

As the two movies have hardly anything in common, beside the fact that they fall into the same category of the newsman as villain, I decided not to compare them directly but to use them as pegs to focus on the issues of the relationships between media, politics and power as well as the connection between media, audience and fame.

The movie *Meet John Doe* starts with Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck) inventing the figure of John Doe for her column. A letter announcing his suicide on Christmas Eve in protest to man’s inhumanity to man is a major success and turns John Doe into a celebrity. When Ann produces a real John Doe, baseball player Willoughby (Gary Cooper), in order to continue the hoax, publisher D. B. Norton realizes the latter’s potential as a political figurehead. The fat, evil and self-interested publisher’s and would-be ‘vicious’ politicians’ intentions are to expand his power base by introducing a totalitarian regime. Ann sells the John Doe idea to Norton: “They’ll listen to him- and you’ll be pulling the strings”. Naïve Doe then travels the country in a political lecture tour until Norton announces his own presidential candidacy “devoted entirely to the interests of all the John Does all over the country, which practically means 90 percent of the voters”. ”In Capra’s movies ‘most of the big-city publishers are greedy, hypocritical, amoral businessmen and women, who ... spouted ‘smarmy journalistic

platitudes to dignify circulation stunts or camouflage unholy political ambitions” (Saltzman, 2002, p.3). When told that Norton is using him “to shove his way into the White House so he could put the screws on” Doe refuses to be further part of the plan. Norton then exposes him as a fraud to the angry mob. The raging publisher does not care whether he will destroy the American people’s belief and trust in John Doe; he ruthlessly destroys the movement that he first created and then corrupted. Norton shouts: “With the newspapers and radio stations that these gentlemen control, we can kill the John Doe movement deader than a doornail”. The movie ends with Doe attempting suicide, the rescue by now unemployed Ann and a handful of followers who start the John Doe movement anew.

The movie *Meet John Doe* begins with a strong cinematic opening scene which serves as a metaphor about the effects a destroyed free press has on society. A building plaque is shown: ‘The BULLETIN - A free press means a free people’. Then a pneumatic chisel blasts the words ‘free press’ into dust. A new memorial stone is installed: ‘THE NEW BULLETIN - A STREAMLINED NEWSPAPER FOR A STREAMLINED ERA’. The removal of the first statement implies that the ones who own the media are also destroying its role in a free society: to predominantly serve the public interest. Media owners are neither interested in a free press nor free people as they use the media as a tool for their own ends. “The growth of the press as a mass medium was accompanied by increased concentration of ownership, giving leading press magnates ultimate control over vast aggregate circulations” (Curran, 2002, p.63). One effect of the changes, accompanied by the rise of radio and television in the 1940’s and 1950’s, was that the rivalry between media and politics increased, however, both needed each other. Whereas politicians relied on journalists to promote themselves, their goals and achievements, journalists claimed as members of the ‘fourth estate’ to oversee the politicians on behalf of the public (see Curran, 2002, p.67). One could say that the ultimate power lies in the hand of media owners who can promote politicians who act in their favour, and publicly criticize their enemies at the same time. The dangers of a money-driven or manipulated press has been a long lasting filmic theme, ranging from early journalism films such as *Meet John Doe* to contemporary movies such as *Tomorrow Never Dies*. “The possible monopolization and manipulation of the media by unscrupulous politicians and power brokers was a legitimate fear in the 1940’s. It has continued to be so generation after generation” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.19). Since then the dimensions of power have

enlarged and in the 1997 James Bond movie the “publisher-media tycoon is no longer content to take over a country. Now media control of the world is at stake” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.20).

The movie *Meet John Doe* also criticizes Ann’s willingness to do anything to stay employed (although it is partially justified by her role as the sole supporter of her family) at whatever cost, knowingly deceiving the American public with her circulation stunt and agreeing to become a tool herself. In the bigger picture the movie condemns the strong relations between media and political power as the story draws upon deliberate journalistic fakery as a successful tool to promote fascism. “The relationship between media and politics is the hidden disease of American electoral democracy. Media companies are among the highest donors to political campaigns, while rarely covering their own role in campaign financing. Media industries make up some of the most powerful lobbying interests in the Capitol, leveraging their power as opinion-shapers and successfully advocating for legislation they barely report to the public” (McChesney, 1999, p.1). Even in reality moguls such as Rupert Murdoch have proven that they can influence electoral outcomes. The BBC writes on its website: “It is hard to over estimate the importance of Rupert Murdoch in setting the UK's political agenda. Some have gone so far as to claim that the newspaper's support for New Labour was the single biggest factor in ensuring Tony Blair's landslide victory at the last general election” (Assinder, 1999, p.1). In Capra’s movie with the usual positive outcome, the evil publisher will be defeated. “It [the movie] asserts that individuals can resist institutional abuses, that idealism can redeem cynicism, that truth can defeat falsehood” (Ehrlich, 2004, p. 64). However, betraying the public trust is one of the great sins of democracy and it is so despicable that it lingers in the memory, overwhelming any heroic deed (see Saltzman, 2002, p.10). Filmic villains seem as real today as when they were created and “their goals and tactics are familiar to everyone, and real-life parallels in modern media abound” (Saltzman, 2002, p.10). These conflicting images between the journalist in the sense of Ehrlich’s definition (stick up for the little guy, uncover the truth, serve democracy) and the villains (publishers seeking to expand their powerbase and journalists in search of fame) result in a love-hate relationship between the people and its media. “Surveys continue to show that most Americans want a free press that is always there to protect them from authority and give them a free flow of diverse information. But those same surveys also show that most Americans harbour a deep suspicion about the media, worrying

about their perceived power, their meanness and negativism, their attacks on institutions and people, their intrusiveness and callousness, their arrogance and bias” (Saltzman, 2002, p.10). Ghiglione and Saltzman believe that the images most remembered by the public may well be that of journalists as villains because they have used the precious commodity of public confidence in the press for selfish ends (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.2). Once trust is destroyed the damage is done and real-life incidents with dishonorable journalists only re-affirm the distrust of the public consciousness.

The film *To Die For* is loosely based on the real life story of Pamela Smart, who aspired to be the next Barbara Walters but settled for a media services director position in New Hampshire. Her quest for TV stardom leads to murder (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.155).

“You’re not anybody in America unless you’re on TV” - this is what Suzanne Stone (Nicole Kidman) truly believes in and it leads to a fatal self-obsession. In a flashback, Suzanne is first shown on a newspaper’s front page. The headline reads: “Little Hope’s own weather (girl) reporter is possible suspect in murder investigation”. From there in interviews with the relatives and in a self documentary by Suzanne the events are narrated backwards, which causes a negative perception about the main person, a journalist, from the very start (Suzanne’s sister-in-law: “First impression? Four letter word starts with c – cold –C.O.L.D”). The question is not whether or not Suzanne is guilty but how and why did she get into that bad situation.

The young woman’s life circles around media: she is always perfectly dressed; her wedding veil is a copy of journalist Maria Shriver’s one and meals are only served if they are the favourites of some celebrities. At the local cable station Suzanne works her way up to be the weather girl and driven by ambition, she does not hesitate to manipulate if needed (editor Grant: “I pity the person who ever says ‘no’ to you”, Suzanne: “No one ever does”). Suzanne is commercially driven and wants out of her small town life into the big city where fame and fortune are waiting for her (see also Tally in *Up Close & Personal*)(3). The myth of rural simplicity (see Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.96, 97)(4) is here used as a negative narrative. Whereas the figures in *The Scandal mongers* flee to rural America to leave the city as a place of exhaustion, violence and corruption behind, Suzanne, who has never experienced anything else than the small town, significantly called Little Hope, she is stuck in, longs for the big

city. The myth includes the belief that childhood is best spent within a rural setting, so Suzanne's drive to leave can be interpreted as her gaining independence from her parents and husband Larry. She is determined to make her own way, and if necessary unscrupulously remove obstacles. When her husband refuses to accompany her to New York to pursue her career, Suzanne lures teenager Jimmy into an affair and he eventually shoots Larry. Finally she gets all the media attention she ever wanted. But when it appears as if Suzanne would get away with the crime, Larry's parents hire a killer to get rid of her. Ironically in the end all the people in Suzanne's life get more media attention than her: Larry's and her parents are part of a TV-talk show; Jimmy, Grant and Larry's sister talk to an unseen TV reporter and teenager Lydia has been booked on Oprah. "It's really something when you think that I'm the one who's gonna be famous. Suzanne would die if she knew", she says.

The film is a bitter satire, intended to criticize a sensation-hungry culture that makes a woman achieve fame via murder and the media. Suzanne Stone stands for the average American citizen that grows up watching TV every single day (children watch about 4 hours of TV every day and see more than 20,000 commercials each year ([www.aap.org/family/tv1.htm](http://www.aap.org/family/tv1.htm)); American men watch 29 hours, women 34 hours per week (<http://www.state.sd.us>)), thus being heavily influenced, and in Suzanne's case obsessed with it. Today, nothing seems to be taboo in the media anymore: random people in talk shows enjoy their 15 minutes of fame, assassins such as John W. Hinckley Jr. who shot Ronald Reagan to impress actress Jodie Foster or the beheading of Iraqi hostages on the Internet enjoy massive media attention.

Suzanne's statement "You're not anybody in America unless you're on TV. On TV is where we learn who we really are, because what's the point in doing anything worthwhile when nobody is watching?" is not just a filmic phrase. In a study about reality TV it was found that "the most significant reason that reality TV is popular with such a wide variety of viewers is that Americans identify with the desire to be famous. Even if the fame is touched with infamy ... viewers believe that being watched by millions means that the participants are important" (Reiss & Wiltz, 2004, p.1). The message is simply that ordinary people can become so important that millions will watch them and this is what Suzanne Stone clings on to.

Today, in contrast to earlier times prominence is detached from an aristocratic social status, therefore making fame a personal possession of any worthy individual (see Gamson, 2001, p.260). "Television, with its constant flow, enormous reach, and vast

space-filling needs, has from its initial boom provided the most significant new outlet for image-creation” (Gamson, 2001, p.271)... “And it has blurred the line between appropriate and inappropriate behaviour” (Jensen, 2001, p.302). Journalists such as those portrayed in *To Die For*, *Mad City* or *Shattered Glass* are willing to do everything to gain fame as well as fortune and real-life incidents show that a number of journalists do not hesitate to lie and deceive. “In 1981 the “Washington Post” had to return a Pulitzer Prize when it was revealed that Janet Cooke had invented the young heroin addict whose life story she’d told. Then, in 1998, came a cluster of revelations. Glass departed the “New Republic” when his fictions were revealed ... Later that year, the “Boston Globe’s” star columnists, Patricia Smith and Mike Barnicle, were forced to resign when it came to light that they had fabricated characters and, in Barnicle’s case, had plagiarized as well” (Kennedy, 2003, p.1). Incidents like these stick in the public’s mind reconfirming the growing mistrust towards the media. “Last August [2004], the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 67 percent of those surveyed believed the news media “try to cover up mistakes,” whereas just 24 percent believed they “are willing to admit mistakes.”” (Kennedy, 2003, p.1) (5).

However this mistrust collides with the desire to be part of the media, to be on the screen as well, which is why talk and reality shows on TV are so popular and never run out of willing participants. This trend suggests an increasingly narcissistic society in which everybody wants to be special, sticking out from the crowd. Suzanne in *To Die For* achieves that exclusivity on a local base in being the prettiest woman, working as the weather girl and copying famous people’s lives (in a media addicted age, celebrities function as role models (see Jensen, 2001, p.302)). Her drive to be famous is rooted in the American myth of individual freedom (see Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.94). The myth means that “Americans have an innate right to personal freedom – the right to choose their own destinies, pursue their dreams, act in any way they see short of harming others or interfering with other’s freedom” (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.94). The main belief behind this myth is to do your own thing, be yourself and go for it. In journalism Oprah Winfrey can be seen as an example of this. Having suffered abuse and molestation, she was sent to a juvenile detention home at the age of 13. At age nineteen, she got her first broadcasting job in Nashville. In 1972, Oprah became the first African American to anchor at Nashville's WTVF-TV. In 1985 she made history by being the first woman to own and produce her own talk show



(see <http://www.east-buc.k12.ia.us>). Stories like that are reflected in movies. “Hollywood never stops reaffirming the old myths: In *Up Close and Personal*, a woman lies to gain entry into the glamorous TV world and is transformed into a principled newswoman in love with a principled newsman” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.134)(6). A myth is reaffirmed that many young people such as Suzanne Stone believe in: If you work hard enough, you can make it to the top.

I think the most important conclusion to draw from this chapter is that the villainous figure in journalism changed from being solely reduced to editors and publishers (exemplary are the Capra films, see Saltzman, 2002, p.3) to any kind of media figure be it the media tycoon, the news anchorman or the local weathergirl. Beside Ghiglione’s and Saltzman’s explanations for this shift, I also believe that a change in the journalist’s personal motives causes the public mistrust towards the profession. The journalist of the earlier movies is “naughty, is devious, is selfish, is arrogant, is the con artist that Malcolm charges – but we like him anyway, because he is so enjoyable in all this waywardness, and usually he succeeds in doing something beneficial for the public” (Rainbolt, 2004, p.16). Audiences forgave trickery and flaws because the journalist acted in their interests. In contrast to that, a lot of filmic journalists today seem to act mainly for themselves, for promotion, fame or other perks. The public interest ranks second.

In earlier movies journalists could be titled as amoral, getting away with things such as lying, playing tricks and outsmarting the police, but the audience forgave them. Movies dealing with journalism mythology have “broadly hinted at how much fun amoral hacks can have and be. The image that has emerged is a press that has had its failings and black eyes and yet is powerfully exciting and important...” (Ehrlich, 2004, p.6). In today’s movies though filmic journalists are drawn more as being immoral, showing behaviour that is often related to gain of personal fame and wealth. Whereas the villains in the earlier movies were after higher circulation, political power and a threat to democracy, in contemporary movies personal advantages are in the focus which leads to Ghiglione’s observation that “people love to hate the journalist” (Ghiglione, 1991, p.1).

The stereotypes of the villains in the media shifted because of increased public mistrust (any media figure portrayed in the movies would be a believable villain in the eyes of the audience as they mistrust the institution as a whole) and an obsession with

fame. It is seen as a symbol to be someone special in society. Journalism seems to contribute to alienation within society and to the shift from Gemeinschaft (=community, characterized by traditional practices and a personal sense of belonging) to Gesellschaft (=society, the more individualistic, competitive, and impersonal organization of mere society). “Whereas in Gemeinschaft people are united in spite of all separating factors, in Gesellschaft people are separated in spite of all uniting factors” (<http://ssr1.uchicago.edu>). This shift seems to cause people to live in constant tension against all others. “In order for an object (commodity) to have value in Gesellschaft, it must be possessed by one party to the exclusion of another and be desired by that other”. Fame therefore can be seen as an exclusive commodity, desired by many and achieved by only a few.

- (1) Changes in the media scene due to the rise of television are focussed on in Chapter 11.
- (2) In the 1970's the amount of movies that dealt critically with television increased, refer Chapter 1.
- (3) The myth of the big city to achieve personal freedom is also analysed in Chapter 13.
- (4) The myth of rural simplicity is particularly important in *It Happened One Night* in Chapter 7.
- (5) In the online article “News at the brink” a list of journalists who fabricated stories is published.
- (6) The American Dream is reflected in Chapter 13.



### **13. The Reporter as Human Being**

#### **Platinum Blonde (1931) & Up Close and Personal (1996)**

“One of the reasons for the success of *The Front Page* ... was that Hecht and MacArthur created believable, living, breathing central characters – not perfect heroes and unmitigated villains, but imperfect human beings with conflicting emotions and goals” (Barris, 1976, p.117). Although, especially since *All the Presidents Men*, several contemporary journalism films solely focus on the profession and not on the reporter’s personal life (see also *The Pelican Brief*), the vast majority of movies still includes it in the storyline. Undoubtedly professional life affects private life and vice versa and often these relations make the reporter who he or she is. To name only two examples: in *Runaway Bride* Ike meets Maggie and falls in love with her, because he was fired from the job first, while in *The Paper* Martha’s pregnancy leads to a change in Henry’s working attitude.

In order to prevent the filmic newspaperman from becoming a mechanically acting figure (insulting the editor, outsmarting policemen), movie makers realized that films were at their best when they featured humanized journalists. At such times “The audience were treated to the joy of discovering that newspaper people, like anyone else, could have problems, wives, children, debts, homes, hobbies, crisis, idiosyncrasies, habits, relationships, pleasures, and sorrows – not always connected with their work” (Barris, 1976, p.117). However, it has to be noted that this category is less about the journalistic side of the main figure than about the human one. Most movies showing the private side of the journalist can be put into this category which is Barris’ least clearly defined one. Particularly in older movies the image of the human being was used to depict the journalist as the tribune of the common people.

Until *The Front Page* the journalistic profession of the main figure was fairly exchangeable. Then narratives started changing in the early 1930’s from plots

involving journalists to storylines centring on the profession itself (see Rainbolt, 2004, p.10). One of the directors who knew the newspaper milieu particularly well was Frank Capra who made nine major films featuring big-city, wisecracking journalists (1). “Capra’s key writers were either former newspapermen or Broadway playwrights who knew the type intimately” (Saltzman, 2002, p.2). His film *Platinum Blonde* from 1931 will be subject to analysis.

As a comparative movie from the 1990’s I chose *Up Close & Personal* which draws loosely on the biography of troubled TV anchorwoman Jessica Savitch who rose from local TV news as a young woman to become an NBC News anchor (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.158). In a way her ambition to gain TV fame resembles the figure of Suzanne Stone in *To Die For* – unbridled ambition that leads to self-destruction. The movie though bears hardly any parallels to the real Jessica Savitch but draws mainly upon the love story between the main characters.

Both *Platinum Blonde* and *Up Close and Personal* focus for a good part of the storyline on the private life of the journalist and marriage in particular. It will be interesting to compare a couple where just one is a reporter to a couple where both people involved are journalists. This chapter concludes that the reporter as a human being has not changed that much as private life issues such as marital problems, alcoholism, affairs, doubts and romance seem to be detached from time and occur in other filmic professional portrayals as well. Due to filmic conventions movies nearly always show people in distress or changing situations in their lives that they need to master, so this category does not characterize journalists only.

*Platinum Blonde* starts with a busy news paper office: it is loud because of the typewriters, some eyeshades and braces are visible and only men are on duty. But already the next scene shows us ace reporter Stew Smith (Robert Williams) hiding with the only woman in the office, sob sister Gallagher (Loretta Young), behind a screen out of sight from editor Conroy. Stew has a hat on, smokes a pipe and tries to ignore the yelling of his boss. Conroy: “Would it be imposing too much upon you if I asked you to do a little work today?” Stew: “I can write that story without stepping out of the office.” Stew knows he is the best and quite arrogantly shows it.

Naïve, uneducated but ambitious Sally Atwater ((Michelle Pfeiffer) her name is later changed to Tally) from a small town in Nevada dreams of a career as a newsreader in *Up Close & Personal*. She is rather insecure when she first arrives in Miami and her

boss, experienced newsman, Warren Justice (Robert Redford), gives her a job as an office clerk instead. Movie director Avnet shows Tally initially as someone who is a struggler, ignored and made fun of, but still determined to make it (“I just want to be a star”). Again (2), the American myth of individual freedom, the right to pursue a dream and to go for it is reaffirmed (see Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.94)

Stew is assigned to meet high society family Schuyler whose son is involved in a breach of promise suit involving compromising letters. Stew refuses the hush money he is offered and confirms that he will publish the story nevertheless. As a result heiress Anne (Jean Harlow) unsuccessfully tries to charm him to drop the scoop. Although Stew sticks to his professional principles, he is deeply impressed by her (“She’s it”) and does not realize that sob sister Gallagher is very much in love with him. From the very beginning audiences know that the reporters belong together and that Stews’ attraction to Anne is only a detour on his way to happiness with Gallagher.

Warren is Tally’s counterpart. He makes her brew coffee, answer the phone etc. to test her will, but Tally does not give up. Warren: “I figure if you’re hungry enough to fake it [the audition tape], you might be hungry enough to make it”. When Tally gets her first chance on the screen as the weather girl, Warren, realising this is not her real domain, gives her a chance as a reporter instead (“She eats the lens”). Under his guidance she rises to an experienced live reporter.

In both movies the couples fall in love. Stew tells Anne: “I am white, male, over 21, I’ve never been to jail, I prefer Scotch to Bourbon, I hate carrots, I hate peas, I like bad coffee, I have 107 bucks in the bank and I still don’t know if your eyes are blue or violet”. They secretly marry, especially annoying Conroy when rival paper “The Tribune” has the headline first. Conroy tells Stew off and predicts that the reporter will be a bird in a golden cage. In older movies (3) “marriage represented the ultimate surrender to convention... A newspaperman was already married to his job, and gaining a divorce to remarry a ‘nice girl’ was an extreme step, one likely to be regretted as soon as taken” (Good, 1989, p.14). Indeed Anne wants to make a gentleman out of Stew, while her mother is distressed about the marriage: “A reporter of all things – a reporter!” In the 1930’s and 40’s movies with its focus on class issues the marriage of an upper-class girl with a reporter was far from desirable with their unsteady lifestyle, their drinking, swearing and little income. But as shown in the chapter *The Scandal mongers* journalists functioned also as mediators between the

classes and showed great social mobility. They lived in one class and covered the other. In the older days the filmic reporter was a metaphor for the normal everyday guy who was nonetheless sharp and willing to take on the big guys or able to shift into high society by marriage (*It Happened One Night, Mr Deeds Goes to Town*). Today the job of a journalist is financially fairly desirable and can lead to prestigious other careers such as being the First Lady (Jackie Kennedy) or even a Royal Highness (Princess Laetizia of Spain). Especially in the US, TV journalists rank among high income earners and are accepted in high society.

Although Warren moulds Tally into one of the best reporters of 9 News, she still has the feeling of only being accepted because she is his protégé. In order to break free Tally accepts a job offer in Philadelphia. “Journalism was once an overwhelmingly masculine institution, offering women only the frills and fringes of newspaper work” (Good, 1989, p.15). However, as shown in the chapter *The Sob Sister* things improved rapidly over the years and especially due to World War II and the women’s rights movement in the 1970’s, female journalists found a steady place in the newsroom. “They now are entitled to display in films the same single-minded devotion to the job as their male colleagues” (Good, 1989, p.15). Tally pursues her career in Philadelphia but without Warren she feels empty (Tally: “When we're not together...” Warren: “...Everything shuts down”). She is portrayed as a strong professional woman who nevertheless privately suffers without her man. This sad narrative, which focuses on Tally’s private life, also characterizes her as a human being first and foremost. When Warren moves to Philadelphia as well Tally’s work rapidly improves again. Eventually the couple marries, but even on their wedding night, they are busy with work, reconfirming the myth of journalists as workaholics (4). But as they both belong to the same profession they understand and inspire each other as well as accept the priority of work under certain circumstances. There are quite a few movies (e.g. *Woman of the Year, The Paper, I Love Trouble*) in which two journalists are married and usually those marriages seem to work out better than if one partner is not involved in the profession (e.g. *To Die For, True Crime*).

Another example is *Platinum Blonde*. “When a journalist wearied of his rough-and-tumble life, he might talk of going into another line of work and starting a family, but something deep inside him continued to resist a change in his career and allegiances” (Good, 1989, p.14). Stew and Anne’s marriage is doomed from the beginning as each assumes the other is the one whose lifestyle must change. Eventually Stew is forced to

take over Anne's lifestyle, forget about his freedom; he even agrees to wear garters, something he hates to do and which exposes him to the mockery of his fellow reporters. Stew is a street smart, cynical wisecracking reporter and proud of his \$75 a week salary. He cannot connect with Anne's high society friends and parties ("I'm going nuts in this house") but endures in conversations with the butler instead. When he finally throws a party for his friends he rediscovers how much he missed them and the fun they used to have. Of course he sees Gallagher again who truly inspires him. She is his muse, and when Anne finds them, Stew leaves her ("No more Anne Schuyler's husband"). The final scene shows Stew and Gallagher in a small apartment, talking about a play Stew wants to write, very happy, and kissing at the end. The audience gets final satisfaction seeing them happily together. Reporters understand each other better.

However this understanding proves fatal in *Up Close & Personal*. Warren, inspired by Tally's love for journalism, decides to make an investigative story about political tumults in Panama. When calling Tally from Panama, he says: "God, I'm having fun". It is the last time they talk. When Tally is said goodbye by colleagues in Philadelphia, a report from Panama on the evening news confirms Warren has been fatally shot. "In modern journalism films, equality of the sexes means that male and female journalists are equally trapped in the cold lonely straits of their professional identities" (Good, 1989, p.16). Although Tally professionally reached her goal now it comes with a huge personal sacrifice.

Both movies, but especially *Platinum Blonde* reaffirm the myth of romantic love. "For each individual there is a single perfect partner who, once found, makes life complete and permanent happiness possible" (Nachbar & Lause, 1992, p.96). Stew and Gallagher are the perfect match. The ace reporter rather lives with his sob sister a simple life than being trapped in a golden cage. And whereas Gallagher is Stew's muse, Tally and Warren inspire each other. The latter paves Tally's way to journalistic stardom, while Warren himself rediscovers investigative journalism through her. "*Up Close and Personal* shows its principals making each other better and stronger people as well as journalists" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.173).

A main difference between the two movies is the attitude towards marriage. In earlier times the marital status was seen as the worst fate that could be possibly imagined by the boys in the press room (see Good, 1989, p.14), however due to generic conventions the films mainly end in marriage. But *The Front Page* with its open end

for the first time really hit the problem: the dispute between the commitment to work as well as to the family. Today though it appears quite normal and even desirable to be married, as the journalistic partners understand and inspire each other (5). In *The Front Page* editor Walter Burns was modelled after MacArthur's former city editor Walter Howey from the "Chicago Examiner". "Howey discouraged matrimony among his staff, cutting the salaries of those who sullied their affection for the paper with affection for their wives" (Good, 1989, p.14). Today, "when handled properly, experts say, workplace romances can actually benefit companies. Once employees get past the initial ditzy, infatuation stage of being unable to concentrate on anything except their new love, an office romance has been found to raise worker morale, stimulate performance, enhance creativity and boost productivity" (Loftus, 1995, p.1). Especially in journalism where workers spend way more than the normal 40 hours a week in the office it seems likely they will fall in love with a colleague and this is reflected in the already mentioned movies. Whether they work for the same (*Woman of the Year*) or rival media (*I Love Trouble*) – (especially, but not only in comedies) they are family oriented professionals.

Otherwise it is hard to find changes in the image of the reporter as a human being in comparing those two movies. Warren is as arrogant as Stew when he has to find a new job in Philadelphia, knowing he is the best and unwilling to give up his principles (Warren to Tally: "He [the editor] wants us to tell the viewers what he thinks they wanna hear"). Furthermore both movies portray a bad journalist in order to make the main figure look better. Bengie contrasts with Stew in taking hush money from the Schuyler family and filling his pockets out of a casket of expensive cigars (Stew: "There are no gentlemen at The Tribune"). In *Up Close & Personal* Marcia McGrath is the bad counterpart to Tally. Marcia is a tough as nails anchor girl, who is pushed out of her position by the rising career of Tally. McGrath treats Tally pretty bad in the film knowing she will eventually get fired because she is getting too old. So even though Stew (arrogance) and Tally (ambition) have negative character traits the contrasting worse journalistic figure in each movie shows the audience how bad they could be but are not in order to sympathize with them. Despite Stew's arrogance and Tally's ambition they are also vulnerable in their search for love and professional success. It shows that stereotypical imagery is not always straight but also depends on genre and narrative conventions.

Finally, when looking at the other chapters I analysed, I would like to note that the



issues surrounding the portrayal of the reporter as a human being as outlined in Barris' definition probably have not changed much at all. There are certain character traits that have been depicted then and now, such as alcoholism (*The Sisters* (1938) and *True Crime* (1999)), young ambitious women succumbing love (*Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and *I Love Trouble* (1994)) or marital problems (*Woman of the Year* (1941) and *The Paper* (1994)). As a whole they characterize the journalist as a human being. However it has to be noted that in most movies people are characterized as human beings with problems, and so for example alcoholism is not something stereotypical for filmic journalists only. "No one who has spent any time in the newspaper world would seriously claim that drinking is unknown there...But the incidence of alcoholism is probably no higher in that profession than in a good many others" (Good, 1989, p.135).

Also the romantic narrative of love as another topic is not fixed upon journalism films only but again it is a running topic then and now as part of a successful genre. And marital problems in journalism movies are predominantly connected to the restless lifestyle, meaning that too much time is spent in the newsroom instead at home. This is a cliché that mainly draws upon reality itself and is therefore found in almost all journalism movies.

- (1) More information about Capra and his narratives can be found in Chapter 2.
- (2) The myth of individual freedom is also explored in *To Die For* in Chapter 12.
- (3) Journalism and marriage are central topics in *The Front Page* and Chapter 8.
- (4) See also weddings and work in Chapter 8.
- (5) A married journalist couple is also portrayed in *The Paper* in Chapter 6.

## CONCLUSION

With the present M.A. thesis I have tried to critically analyse the different images of journalists on the screen under the focus whether or not stereotypes about the journalist survived in a new form, basing my research upon Barris' categories of the filmic journalist. While examining the selected movies I came to believe that there is no unequivocal answer because it became apparent that some of the stereotypes changed considerably while others did not or even disappeared. Depictions of journalists in contemporary movies are very complex and so it is that some films are highly critical of the existing press, while at the same time still reproducing the same myths and stereotypes found in the older films. In *True Crime* the figure of Steve Everett is clearly drawn upon the old, whisky-bottle-on-hip, detective-type reporter of Hollywood's Golden Era. It is an obvious nostalgic homage to a simpler time when the upright and incorruptible reporter was an undisputed hero. Other movies also pandered to nostalgia such as *I Love Trouble* which revives the Screwball Comedy in the tradition of the Hepburn / Tracy duo or *Up Close and Personal* in which Tally Atwater's TV career reinforces the myth of individual freedom. Even myths such as the one of the hard drinking journalist that are no longer widespread in reality still hold a significant place within journalism mythology (*True Crime*). "The belief itself survives, preserved and sanctified by popular art" (Good, 2000, p.9).

It has to be kept in mind that the following conclusions are influenced by my personal movie viewing experience and perception. The small sample of movies also makes me formulate my findings carefully. However, I believe that within my thesis question I could work out some changes about the stereotypical portrayal of the American journalist over the years which stick out and can be generalized.

As expected, within Barris' categorical frame, some stereotypical depictions of filmic journalists have changed considerably; for example the reporter overseas. My analysis showed that the foreign correspondent due to changes in real life developed from a more action hero kind of figure to a character aware of objectivity and responsibilities as well as being doubtful about the reasons for war. While older movies might look silly today with the action hero reporter, they had a clear pro war propaganda message. But over the last decades, as polls show, the majority of people condemned unjustified wars such as that in Iraq. One could argue that the doubtful foreign

correspondent is a metaphor for the common man and through the filmic presentation he is given a voice. The formerly very glamorous image was overtaken by movies that showed the harsh reality of war and the trauma reporters suffer. In doing so, modern foreign correspondent movies not only question the morality of journalism but of war itself and the more realistic pictures often let the viewers suffer, too.

Whereas the reporter overseas underwent major changes, the sob sister disappeared completely from the big screen. In the movies of the 1930's and 1940's strong, self-confident women were shown who proved themselves in a man's world. They had an exclusive status, often being really close to the editor or the ace reporter and not being afraid of the battle of the sexes. However, in the end the sob sisters usually gave up or compromised their jobs to be together with the man they loved. Being both successful in the workplace and at home was impossible in the eyes of the audience. Again, due to changes in society, notably the women's rights movement, today women are as common a sight as men in the newsroom. In the movies female journalists are portrayed as equally competitive, engaged and witty. They can keep up with the competitive pace (*I Love Trouble*), sometimes even make better careers than their partners (*Up Close & Personal*) or are as unscrupulous as any man (*To Die For*). Modern female reporters do not resemble sob sisters anymore yet a new category for them still has to be named.

The second journalistic figure that did not survive in a new form is the crime buster. The formerly very popular mixture of reporter and detective was already extinct in the late 1950's. The crime buster resembled a private investigator with pad and pencil that outsmarted the police and solved the mystery, but audiences soon got tired of the figure. However, the figure was succeeded by the investigative journalist who has a reoccurring screen presence since 1976. *All the Presidents Men* defined a new journalistic figure which had no personal life and focussed only on the story as still could be found in for example *The Pelican Brief*.

I also gained evidence from a number of chapters about changes in filmic topics that were presented in movies about journalists, but gained fewer insights into the portrayal of the journalistic figure. The comparison of *It Happened One Night* and *Runaway Bride* proves that scandal still sells. However when watching more movies I concluded that *It Happened One Night* as well as many other movies from that time period dealt foremost with one important topic: the overcoming of class differences in America. The journalist was used as a metaphor for the common working-class man

who nevertheless has the sharpness and will to take on the bad guys or shift classes by marriage. In the movies of the 1990's these class issues are non-existent. Scandal mongers love and hate their job at the same time, often despising what they have to write about, but put up with breaking ethical codes. One could say that the modern scandal monger is more aggressive to get the story, more willing to neglect other peoples' wishes, more money-driven and that these character traits lead to a loss of romance. However due to generic convention, both the character of Peter in *It Happened One Night* and Ike in *Runaway Bride* fall in love with the heroine, change to the better and the romantic end is a happy one.

The films in the category 'The Reporter as a Human Being' were hard to compare as Barris' explanation of what exactly a human being defines is quite vague. Nevertheless I was able to find changes in a topic that both movies dealt with: marriage. Getting married was considered as one of the worst fates possible for a reporter in the 1930's and 40's. While today it is desirable to have a family. Especially when the partner is a journalist as well this union can prove very inspiring and successful. I could not clearly verify whether or not the journalist as a human being had changed because the problems, strengths, doubts and weaknesses that make reporters human seemed to be the same, detached from time.

'Villains in the Media' included changes as well. The main difference between older and newer movies is that the villainous figure changed from being solely a publisher or editor to basically any media figure. This shift, believed in by audiences supports the observation of a generally more negative image of the press but even more the television than it used to be. There was also a change in the personal motivation of the villain. Although the aim of gaining political power and pushing circulation remained the same in older as well as newer movies, the search for fame by individual media figures became a comprehensive topic in contemporary movies (*Up Close & Personal*, *Mad City*, *To Die For*, *Shattered Glass*), adding credibility to the public's misconception that individual journalists are bad people who irresponsibly destroy lives.

I believe the stereotype and myth that survived in its purest form is the reporter as crusader. The crusader embodies journalism as the pursuer of truth. As the comparison between *Call Northside 777* and *True Crime* showed this figure has not notably changed at all. The crusader still stands on the side of the people, exposes social evil and Hollywood usually rewards that dedication with a successful crusade

and a great story. Even if they sometimes pander to nostalgia the fact that movies with crusading journalists are still successful (e.g. *The Insider* (1999)) proves that audiences, regardless of their normal suspicions about the press believe in the good guys defeating the bad guys or the system. In contemporary as well as in so many movies of the past the crusader emerges as a hero.

Summarizing my findings with a view back to the portrayal of the entire profession in the chapter 'Making the Headlines' it has to be said that many narrative elements and myths from the first journalism movies survived until today. I found the same tension between work and family life, the busy, crowded newsroom, the determination to get the scoop before anybody else, the weird characters in the office and the friendly feud with the editor. It led to the conclusion that these are basic elements defining journalism movies which are expected and familiar to the audience. Movies like these two demonstrate the quintessence of journalism films. They show what journalism is all about and what role, to serve the public good, it plays in society. The fact that *The Paper* revives the myths, one of the characters even shouts "Stop the presses!" shows that they are still accepted by the public. Maybe one could say that stereotypes can change on the surface, but they are linked with myths that are deeply embedded into society and hard to change – coming from the past, living on in the present and move on into the future. As predicted in earlier chapters, stereotypes are subject to change, but it takes a long time.

Beginning in the Golden Era of journalism films Hollywood established a basic image of the journalist as a reporter who wore his hat in- and outside the office, had a bottle of booze hidden in his desk, cursed his editor, outsmarted the police, exposed corrupt officials and was a loveable scoundrel. (Filmic) journalists had a life that could be both exciting and glamorous as well as dangerous and distasteful (see Rainbolt, 2004, p.459). Most film studios drew upon this image for decades as it was safe, predictable and easy, in other words, commercially safe. However over the years the image of the journalist changed and films as *Citizen Kane*, *Ace in the Hole*, *Network* and *The Absence of Malice* signalled new perspectives upon the profession. Nevertheless many studios continued to perpetuate a nostalgic image especially the one of the hero / crusader for example in *All the President's Men* or *True Crime*. The search for the truth is the main narrative in these movies, a leitmotiv that audiences never get tired of. Or as Ehrlich puts it: "Hollywood does not make a habit of delivering bad news. It

tells upbeat stories because audiences pay to see them” (2004, p.157). Even though satires such as *To Die For* condemn the press for its exploitation and sensationalistic greed, the majority of movies maintain the view that the press serves a vital function in society especially in comedies and films with the heroic or crusading element of helping the innocent. In these movies the old journalistic myths prevail and reaffirm journalism at the heart of things and defending the little guy.

The introductory question of why changes in the image of the journalist have taken place I have tried to answer different chapters in this thesis. I hope it has become clear that there are several factors involved. To start with we have changes in history. Notably wars and the women’s rights movement had a major impact on the characters of the reporter overseas and the sob sister. Changes in society from a pro- to an anti-war message resulted in the development from a patriotic to a doubtful character. The women’s rights movement led from a sob sister solely working amongst men and succumbing to love and domestic life to an equally witty, competitive and engaged modern female reporter who is only one amongst many other women in the newsroom. Then we have changes in journalism itself as could be seen in the chapters *The Scandalmongers* and *Villains in the Media*. The growing focus on tabloid TV and journalism, faked stories by real-life journalists and the image of reporters as a sensation-hungry mob resulted in Hollywood producing movies about money-driven, egoistic and fame-greedy journalists who did not care about anyone but themselves. Both the media and the individual were subject to criticism in these movies. But not only the profession or Hollywood but also the audience itself influenced the image of the journalist on the screen as I have tried to show in the chapter *The Crime Buster*. The figure was one of the most popular ones in the 1930’s and 40’s but due to the fact that most productions were B movies that always followed the same narrative audience numbers dropped, making the films financially unsuccessful and therefore forcing the film industry to invent new stories or genres such as the hugely popular film musical in the 1950’s.

It is impossible to say which one of these factors has the most influence. I believe, as mentioned in the introduction that audiences influence the images on the screen and vice versa. This circle seems on the first look to exclude any form of changes in the stereotype at all. However, after studying this topic through my thesis I now believe that this circle resembles more of a whirlpool. Once one throws new things into the water, they eventually will get caught up in the spiral. So in movies new art,

impressions, styles etc. get included which will result in changes both in the audiences' expectations and the imagery on the screen. It can be a slower process such as the women's rights movement or a landmark film such as *All the President's Men* but inevitably new elements get caught up in the spiral.

I believe that with today's wide variety of movies with journalistic characters it is difficult to make clear statements about filmic trends. While satirical movies openly criticize the media, comedies draw upon old conventions while being not judgemental at all. The movies say big corporations run the media and control much of people's lives; TV can be idiotic; our culture is being cheapened and coarsened and the tenets of liberal individualism are increasingly under siege. But still there are heroism and romance as individuals make the right choices, change things for the better and fall in love, and still the excitement of American mass-mediated culture provides fodder for popular storytelling (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.162).

Nevertheless, what all these movies have in common is their suggestion that journalism is not for normal people, but it is a very special profession instead. Coherent with the American outlaw mythology ('A man's gotta do what a man's gotta do', 'There are 'moral' and 'immoral' wars'; see Nachbar & Lause, p.1992, p.98) journalism movies romanticize the individualist: the wanderer, the improviser, the person who can move easily between different realms and social classes and who is free of traditional bonds (see Ehrlich, 2004, p.173). The journalist can embody all these things. But at the same time, being an outsider in society can also ruin the way to respectability, a career and a comfortable middle-class life. The movies show journalism as a two edged sword: for every depiction of the profession as decent and family-oriented (*The Paper*), there is another portrayal as a dead-end existence that the journalist tries to escape (*The Front Page*). "Although professional ambition sometimes is rewarded (*Up Close and Personal*), clawing to the top on the backs of others is ruthlessly punished (*To Die For*)" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.173), a basic theme that changes little.

I hope to have proven with this thesis that most journalistic film figures from the 1930's and 1940's, classified in seven categories by Alex Barris, underwent considerable changes or even disappeared. Considering that most scholars followed Barris' classification my suggested findings have unavoidable consequences. Other researches need to rethink these categories in their historical framework and ask themselves whether or not contemporary movie figures really mirror the old

characters. Is the crime buster still a crime buster or resembles more an investigative journalist? Phrases such as “Sadly, the woman journalist as leading player fell onto hard times by the 1940’s, a setback that continued for the next several decades” by Larry Langman (1998, p.4) under the headline ‘The Sob Sister’ require better specification such as what is meant by “the next several decades”? Langman also fails to mention whether or not the sob sister had a revival and if she disappeared from the screen how can modern female journalists be described and could they be put into a new category? Ghiglione and Saltzman also following Barris ‘Sob Sister’ category even see it in existence on television today. “Murphy Brown (1988- 1998) was the sob sister updated into a strong, yet vulnerable TV on-air journalist” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.11). But what does this “intelligent, highly paid professional woman mocking the importance of fathers by bearing a child alone and calling it another life-style choice” (Ghiglione & Saltzman, 2005, p.11) really have in common with say sob sister Gallagher in *Platinum Blonde*? Where are the (printed) sob stories, the battle of the sexes, the special bond with editor and ace reporter as well as the succumbing to love, children and domestic happiness? I believe that when scholars copy Barris’ categories they need to critically challenge them more, taking into account that his book was written nearly thirty years ago. It is not enough to just use his categories as headlines for some chapters, classify random old movies in them and then leave open where about these filmic figures are in contemporary films as some scholars do. As seen with Good’s book *The Drunken Journalist – The Biography of a Film Stereotype*, journalistic stereotypes in movies for example the foreign correspondent could be far more researched in detail in order to be able to make clearer statements about the figure and its changes. A lot of work still has to be done.

There is this famous phrase that films resemble mirror images of reality. This cannot be denied but the aim of this thesis was not to make a comparison between film and reality. The aim was to make a reliable comparison between the image of the journalist in the 1930’s and 1940’s and contemporary films between 1990 and 2004. Future research questions could be raised about what effects the filmic images of journalists have on the perception of journalists in real life or whether or not certain filmic stereotypes are identical with assumptions of the public with regards to the journalistic profession. Another interesting aspect for future research could be the trend in journalism movies to include real life media persons. In doing so they



comment on the events in the movie and therefore connect real life TV shows with fictional stories in the movies. One example is the appearance of Jay Leno and Larry King in *Mad City*. The borders between film and fiction get blurry.

Over all these years, journalism movies, whether appearing in the 1930's or the 1990's, have demonstrated their right of existence on the big screen, dealing with print or television, romance, film noir, conspiracies or combinations thereof. "Conflict between home and work, cynicism and idealism, objectivity and subjectivity, public interest and institutional interest, and public interest and private interest were present in *The Front Page* and have persisted in the films that followed" (Ehrlich, 2004, p.172). And so I believe that we can expect to see many more journalists in future movies. Topics are there enough: new wars, journalists as victims of political systems, terror attacks in New York, internet crimes, governmental conspiracies...

Whether positive or negative images of the media will prevail cannot be predicted. However, with the film *15 Minutes* (2001) by John Herzfeld the portrayal of journalism already reached a new dimension. The movie depicts two teenagers that have the idea to sell authentic, documented crimes to unscrupulous media agents. In doing so TV journalists are placed on the same level with criminals - both are working in a zone free of moral, where the only goal is profit through human greed for sensationalism. Whether or not this film will be a one-off exception only time will tell.

## **Appendix of all seen and/or analysed movies**

### **Hero (1992), S. Frears**

Bernie LaPlante (Dustin Hoffman), a small-time crook, rescues 54 passengers from a crashed plane. One of the survivors is Gale Gayley (Geena Davis), a glamorous news reporter, who wants to find the mysterious man who simply disappeared into the dark. But not Bernie, who is in jail, but John Bubber (Andy Garcia) claims the reward of \$1 million money and is turned into a celebrity.

### **Call Northside 777 (1948), H. Hathaway**

An eyewitness to a cop killing sends a man, Frank Wiecek, to jail for 99 years. Eleven years later the convict's mother, Tellie, offers \$5.000 to anyone proving her son is not guilty. A newspaperman (James Stewart), supported by his editor, looks into the case and becomes obsessed with gathering information which he is convinced will exonerate the convicted man.

### **Citizen Kane (1941), O. Welles**

Charles Foster Kane (Orson Welles), a rich young man, decides to build a newspaper empire and in doing so he sacrifices his professed high ideals for yellow journalism. His political ambitions are ruined when his liaison with a young singer becomes public. Having alienated his friends and lost a good part of his fortune, Kane spends his last years alone in the enormous art-filled palace he has had created in Florida.

### **Foreign Correspondent (1940), A. Hitchcock**

Johnny Jones (Joel McCrea), an American crime reporter is dispatched by his publisher to put a fresh spin on the events emerging in Europe. His nose for a good story promptly leads him to fascist movements and Nazi Germany's designs on European conquest. Jones walks into the middle of an assassination, uncovers a spy ring, and falls in love with a politician's daughter.

### **His Girl Friday (1940), H. Hawks**

The film is Howard Hawk's remake of the "The Front Page". It is the story of newspaper editor Walter Burns (Cary Grant) and his now female star reporter and ex-wife, Hildy Johnston. She (Rosalind Russell) wants to retire to the country with her soon to be husband. But when a prison break captures the imagination of the cutthroat reporters, Hildy sets aside marital bliss for one last time behind the typewriter.

### **I Love Trouble (1994), C. Shyer**

Peter Brackett (Nick Nolte) and Sabrina Peterson (Julia Roberts) are two competing Chicago

newspaper reporters who join forces to unravel the mystery behind a train derailment while at the same time they try to outsmart each other in order to be first with the big scoop.

### **It Happened One Night (1934), F. Capra**

Socialite Ellie Andrews (Claudette Colbert) flees her wealthy father and heads for New York to marry a rich playboy against her father's will. The whereabouts of the heiress become the stuff of national headlines, so when recently fired reporter Peter Warne (Clark Gable) recognizes her, he decides to stick close so he can write the story. Of course the couple falls in love.

### **Mad City (1997), Costa-Gavras**

Barely educated museum guard Sam Bailey (John Travolta) is laid off from his job. To get it back he ends up holding his former boss and a group of schoolchildren hostage. Former television-network journalist Max Brackett makes a grab at the limelight again by pushing and controlling press coverage of the story until desperate Sam kills himself.

### **Meet John Doe (1941), F. Capra**

Columnist Ann Mitchell (Barbara Stanwyck) is fired and prints a phony letter in her final column about a man who is going to commit suicide on Christmas Eve to protest the misery and corruption afflicting the county. A man, needing money, agrees to impersonate the nonexistent John Doe (Gary Cooper) and a political movement begins. Then the powerful publishing magnate, D. B. Norton (Edward Arnold) discovers John Doe for his own political ambitions.

### **Mr Deeds Goes to Town (1936), F. Capra (844)**

It is the story of a small town man (Gary Cooper) who inherits a fortune and then decides to give it away to the poor. He is charged with being insane and is forced to prove his sanity in court. He also falls in love with a seemingly innocent girl (Jean Arthur) who is actually a reporter writing stories about him.

### **Mr Smith Goes to Washington (1939), F. Capra**

Jefferson Smith (James Stewart) is appointed senator because evil politicians need someone who will not stand in the way of a million dollar project. When Smith gets to Washington, he discovers the corrupt bill which leads to a dramatic confrontation in the Senate. But with the help of his secretary Clarissa (Jean Arthur) and journalist Diz Moore (Thomas Mitchell) things take a happy turn.

### **Platinum Blonde (1931) F. Capra**

A hard-nosed reporter Stew (Robert Williams) finds himself drawn towards —and eventually married to—a wealthy platinum blonde (Jean Harlow). She is determined to "civilize" him and train him to

function in society. But waiting stoically in the wings is his down-to-earth reporter buddy Gallagher (Loretta Young), who embodies the grounded, street-smart qualities that he clearly seeks in a woman.

### **Runaway Bride (1999), G. Marshall**

Big-city reporter Ike Graham (Richard Gere) writes a partially fabricated story about small-town handywoman Maggie Carpenter (Julia Roberts) who has the habit of fleeing from the altar in a recurring state of premarital panic. After being fired over his article he decides to research on the scene to get his vindication (and in the end also his future wife).

### **Snow Falling on Cedars (1999), S. Hicks**

In a small town in Washington young Kazuo Miyamoto (Rick Yune) is on trial for the murder of a local fisherman. Covering the trial is reporter Ishmael Chambers (Ethan Hawke), whose father had been a respected newspaperman locally for many years. Attempting to objectively cover Kazuo's trial, Ishmael finds himself troubled by a conflict of interests: he has a history with Kazuo's wife, Hatsue.

### **The Front Page (1931), L. Milestone**

Hildy Johnson (Pat O'Brien) is an ace tabloid reporter for "The Post" who dreams of getting married and going straight with fiancée Peggy. However, his boss, wily editor Walter Burns (Adolphe Menjou) is desperate to keep Hildy on staff to cover an upcoming execution. Who will win in the end?

### **The Insider (1999), M. Mann**

The movie is based on a true story about a CBS 60 Minutes-episode in 1994 on malpractices in the tobacco industry that was not aired because CBS parent company Westinghouse objected. In the focus are the fired whistleblower Jeff Wigand (Russell Crowe) and 60 minutes producer Lowell Bergman (Al Pacino) who wants to see the show on TV.

### **The Paper (1994), R. Howard**

The movie depicts a 24-hour period in the life of a tabloid. In the focus is hard-working metro editor Henry Hackett (Michael Keaton) who thinks of going to a loftier job at a rival paper while his highly pregnant wife is facing a deadline of her own. The story of today is a racial shooting and Henry has only a few hours left to find evidence for the innocence of the two arrested young black teenagers.

### **The Pelican Brief (1993), A.J. Pakula**

Law student Darby Shaws' (Julia Roberts) life is endangered when she discovers evidence of a conspiracy behind the killings of two Supreme Court justices. She prepares a brief that winds up in the hands of government officials, and soon anyone who knows about it gets killed. Darby then enlists the help of investigative reporter Gray Grantham (Denzel Washington) and the two become fugitives.

### **The Shadow of the Thin Man (1941), W. S. Van Dyke**

A jockey has just been murdered and it appears to be tied in with a gambling syndicate. Private detective Nick Charles (William Powell) avoids getting involved but when another murder occurs at a wrestling match and a reporter (Barry Nelson) who is a friend of his is fingered for the job, Nick saunters into action. A third murder occurs and a trap is set for the killer.

### **To Die For (1995), G. Van Sant**

Nicole Kidman portrays Suzanne Stone, a devious, calculating, self-centred woman who manipulates Larry Maretto into marrying her, quickly tires of him when he tries to stand in her way of her greatest ambition in life, which is to be the next Barbara Walters, and soon convinces her teenage lover to kill him for her.

### **True Crime (1999), C. Eastwood**

Alcoholic and womanizing journalist, Steve Everett (Clint Eastwood) is given the coverage of the upcoming execution of murderer Frank Beachum. While following up the story he gets convinced that the accused is innocent and Everett does anything to find out the truth, much against the will of his boss.

### **Up Close & Personal (1996), J. Avnet**

Sally Atwater (Michelle Pfeiffer) goes to Miami to be the new weather girl. Her debut is disastrous but her boss, experienced newsman, Warren Justice (Robert Redford), takes her under his wing, making her an on air reporter. As Justice moulds Sally into one of the country's most sought after journalists, the pair fall in love, only to have their relationship threatened by the very success they have created.

### **Welcome to Sarajevo (1997), M. Winterbottom**

The semi-documentary film focuses on British correspondent of war Michael Henderson (Stephen Dillane), who decides to cover the orphans' situation due to the Bosnia war. Through successive matters, he tries to show and sensitize the public opinion about this ignored war. Meanwhile, he gets emotionally involved with Emira, a young Bosnian girl, who he eventually adopts and takes to England.

### **Woman of the Year (1942), G. Stevens**

The dramatic comedy plays off the unlikely match of polar opposites: sports reporter Sam Craig (Spencer Tracy) and political commentator Tess Harding (Katherine Hepburn). Balancing her career with marital bliss turns out to be a complicated challenge for the worldly Tess, whose down-to-earth husband struggles to support her ambition while keeping their marriage from falling apart.

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