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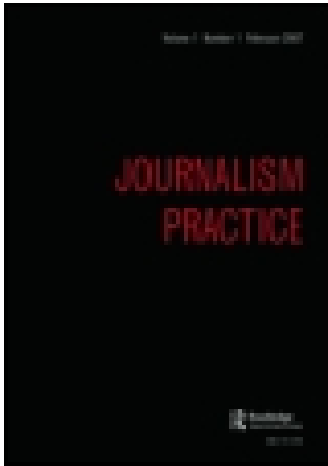
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FILM REVIEW

GONE GIRL AND THE MEDIATIZATION OF CRIME

Brian McNair

Gone Girl (David Fincher, 2014) will not be remembered for its representation of journalists, although both lead characters are, as the narrative opens in 2012, magazine writers made redundant in the wake of the 2008 global financial crisis. To this extent they personify the “death of journalism” narrative of recent years in the United States, but we never see them in a newsroom or doing journalistic work. The marriage of Nick and Amy Dunne (Ben Affleck and Rosamund Pike) is cast as a victim of, among other things, the downturn in the US economy which accompanied the credit crunch. But this is not the subject of *Gone Girl*, so much as a context for the marital dysfunctionality at the heart of its plot.

I’ve chosen it for this issue’s column, nonetheless, because Fincher’s film (and the Gillian Flynn best-selling novel on which it is based) are very focused on the role of contemporary news culture in the mediatization and celebrification of crime. In this sense *Gone Girl* joins the ranks of that sub-genre of journalism movie which casts a critical eye on the macro-social impact of an industry that feeds on human misery and transforms it into popular entertainment.

Other films in this category include Billy Wilder’s *Ace in the Hole* (1951), a little-seen but now recognized classic which, in its account of a cynical and amoral journalist willing to turn a routine accident in the New Mexico desert into a newspaper-selling drama, anticipates and has continuing relevance to the way our news media operate more than 70 years later. Kirk Douglas’ Chuck Tatum character, contemptuous of the local Albuquerque newspaper which has employed him after he has been fired by the big papers back east, stumbles onto a man stuck in a cave in the desert. Leo Minosa is trapped, but easily rescuable. Instead, Chuck sees in Leo the means of his return to the journalistic A-list, and proceeds to manufacture a human-interest crisis. As the American media, and then the American crowd, assembles to watch the “drama” unfold, Tatum’s pseudo-event turns to real tragedy.

Ace in the Hole was released on DVD for the first time only a few years ago, and is highly recommended for students of journalism in our own time. The script is packed with lines written for Chuck in 1951 which just as neatly sum up tabloid news values in 2014. To his editor in Albuquerque: “I can do big news and little news, and if there’s no news I’ll go out and bite a dog.”

On human interest, to his assistant trainee Herbie:

One man’s better than 84. Didn’t they teach you that at journalism school? Human interest. You pick up the paper and read about 84 men, or 284, or a million men like in a Chinese famine. You read it but it doesn’t stay with you. One man’s different. You wanna read all about it. That’s human interest.

Chuck Tatum would get a job on any twenty-first-century tabloid, so well does he articulate the idea that news is not some objective account of reality, but a construction

designed to achieve many goals other than the normatively preferred journalistic aim of conveying truth.

In the intervening 70 years, films with a similar theme have included Costa Gavras' *Mad City* (1997), about a hostage crisis in a public library which, thanks largely to the news-hungry media, spins out of control. Stephen Frears' *Accidental Hero* (1992) is a wonderful, if again too rarely seen, story of how the news media turn a real tragedy—a civilian plane crash—into a schmaltzy narrative of human heroism and sentimentality which is as nauseating as it is faked.

In these films, as in *Gone Girl*, employees of the news media loom large in the plot; and, in their collective capacity, as a key causal factor in the unfolding narrative. These media do not report reality; they ARE reality.

The disappearance of Amy Elliot—Amazing Amy, as she has been represented in her parents' successful children's books—becomes a media event, as much as a personal tragedy for those left behind. One cannot but see echoes in the cases of Madeleine McCann and other recent unexplained disappearances of scenes such as that in which Amy's parents organize vigils, distribute t-shirts, and set up websites for their missing daughter, colluding with a story-hungry, 24-hour media in turning themselves into the story. Only Nick Dunne, who quickly becomes the lead suspect in Amy's disappearance, resists this mediatization, which does him no good at all in the public estimation.

At a media conference called to publicize Amy's disappearance, he briefly and politely smiles at the camera. The image of a smiling Nick is frozen, and turned by the media into evidence of his guilt. Presenter Ellen Abbott, a self-declared tabloid TV vigilante who tries people like Nick live on air, gleefully asserts his guilt on the basis of this and other circumstantial evidence which, when presented in a certain way, can be made to look very persuasive indeed.

In real life the McCanns were treated similarly, "caught" smiling to crowds in Portugal, or choosing to be photographed on fitness runs around Praia De Luz in the days following their daughter's disappearance. Would innocent parents behave in such a way, asked the media at the time? To this day, internet trolls cite such images as evidence of the parents' complicity in a crime.

While one of *Gone Girl's* TV presenters leads the campaign against Nick, another—Sharon Schieber (Sela Ward)—allows him primetime media space to present his preferred image of himself as a loving, if flawed husband heartbroken by Amy's disappearance. For this performance he is made up, voice coached, rehearsed, by a lawyer modelled on the kind of media-savvy counsel who in the real world of celebrity crime gets an O.J. Simpson or an Oscar Pistorius off the hook. For him (played by Tyler Perry), guilt and innocence are as much about public perception as the objective facts of a case. And public perception is about media, and recognizing how to manage and manipulate journalists. Perry's character doesn't know, and doesn't really care, about the truth of Amy's disappearance. His main concern for much of the story is how Nick will be *perceived*. This is the nature of mediatized crime in the twenty-first century, might be the core message of *Gone Girl*. Get used to it.

Fincher's film is not as critical of this rather disturbing truth as Wilder's was in 1951, and one might say that there are no completely innocent players in this drama. Everyone courts media attention, plays the media game, uses the media for their own ends. This kind of media power, he suggests, has expanded beyond the point where critique has any

point. It is an environmental element of social reality, to be factored into events and how we manage them. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em.

With *Gone Girl*, Fincher delivers a compellingly well-told complement to his two previous films with strong journalistic themes—*Zodiac* (2007), and his adaptation of Stieg Larsson's *Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). Like those, *Gone Girl* is a film which functions both as sophisticated popular entertainment for the mainstream cinema market, and as a narrative about the role of journalism in our modern, mediated lives.

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