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Which Side of the Zipper? Journalism and American Film

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Americans do believe in journalism. To such an extent that no other film industry in the world has showed so much the character of the reporter, often as a protagonist, almost always as a witness and an inquirer.

Before going to some notable examples, I think some thoughts on the function of the journalist in the American film are necessary. All right, he is usually one whose task is to ascertain the truth and he is therefore a character representing somehow some of the national mind's pivoting values: truth, justice, etc. But this is a myth, insofar as it is the referential model from which any reflection on the press's role and value in the American society has to start. There is a huge gap, apparently, between Mickey Mouse the journalist and Billy Wilder's well known statement according to which the newspaper comes handy to wrap the fish the day after, and along that gap runs what Hollywood cinema thinks of the journalist, his typology, his different images and roles.

First of all, in the American tradition the relationship the journalist has with reality is not factual, but, as I said, mythological. In fact, the awareness of the importance of his function drives the character to so concentrate on and participate in what he is doing as to trigger a mechanism of professional excitement, tossing the news beyond the boundaries of the legend and, in case of denial, the journalist to the dust.

According to Hollywood's film rhetorics, since the Old West days the journalist has written his coverages on the frontier leaving large room to his inventiveness or to mythologizing. It was inevitable in a place and in a situation where one's sole means to tell tales about oneself, until a few years before, had been the folk song (do you remember Nat King Cole singing the protagonist's deeds in "Cat Ballou," 1965, by Elliot Silverstein?). But what would happen if we'd discover that there is no more room for celebration? The dime novels had created a legend meant for the unaware and curious eastern public, but if a crack opens in the mythological fabric of those melodramatic bards whose (much too) polished prose we find also in several daily newspapers' literary articles of those times, then, a little like John Millington Synge's playboy—who, perhaps not by chance, also comes from "the Western world"—the hero finds out the he is just a poor devil, perhaps even a fanatic, a hot-head or a friends' traitor or a more or less raving madman. This is what we see in *The Left-Handed Gun* (1958) by Arthur Penn, where, there again not by chance, the journalist is a crossing of unctuousness, excitement and naivety who is to run away horrified before the revelation of what seems to be the real nature of his one time admired hero, Billy the Kid.

To someone this dive into the Old West might sound strange, but let's not forget that one of the most representative (and most quoted, for that matter) sentences of journalism in the American film is in a western, John Ford's *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1962): "When reality becomes a legend, print the legend!" which is after all the real motto of the journalist's notion in American cinema. Luckily or not, America lives a reality which doesn't need to be encouraged, enlivened, dramatized or even made up in the reporter's interests. It is dubious that a New York or a Los Angeles journalist should make up crime news in order to keep his job, as it happens in *La primula bianca* (1947) by the Italian director Carlo Ludovico Bragaglia. At most

the problem for the newspaperman shall be to blow up a real story, to point it out with an effective campaign, like in *Nothing Sacred* (1937) by William Wellman.

And this movie allows us an interesting comparison.

The American journalist works on things, he some times emphasizes them, he points them out, manipulating a reality which is in itself undeniable; the Italian one makes things up, starting from an often insignificant event and then projecting it into a mythical and sensationalistic area originally not belonging to its shocking potential. It is not just a deontological matter. Behind the American praxis lies an idea of the world which is not the same as that of his European colleague. The American journalist is a story-teller, that is, someone capable of making attractive and important something which is not. And not because such a fact is negligible, but because the public opinion cannot receive and live it in the terms of emotion, outrage, wonder that society has the right and the duty to feel in a case like this. The cult of the news as a tale has pretty ancient roots in America, going back to an archetypal form of national journalism such as the literary articles in the XIX-century western newspapers (a name for all, Artemus Ward), which in turn led back to the tradition of story-telling as representative of an extremely mobile culture, tied on the one hand to the pioneering days and to the cattle moving trade on the other.

In short, the American cultivates the news, whereas the Italian makes it up or at least transforms its basic data. If the former is then a story-teller, the latter is not far from an adventurer, that is someone who doesn't weigh the news and uses it without double-checking, who makes it instrumental even before (or without) asking himself what is its relationship with reality, but at most with the country's political reality. As some Italian critic wrote almost thirty year ago in relation to Bellocchio's *Sbatti il mostro in prima pagina*: "The bourgeois consume

history as spectators, without drawing from it any conclusion on their own condition.” As a matter of fact, the American cinema is not short on adventurers either, but there everything is governed by a dialectics that usually goes beyond the singular fact presenting itself as a general type of journalistic way of working. Think of that glorious example, *Citizen Kane* (1941) by Orson Welles—which, as everybody knows, hints at the biography of a press tycoon, William R. Hearst—where the newspaper works as a fundamental help in launching a political campaign, handling opinions more than facts. Not by chance when an American journalist works in a morally disputable way generally it is not a matter of corruption as much as of disappointment, of distrust in politics, in society and in his own profession, like in the admirable *WUSA* (1970) by Stuart Rosenberg; or he is driven by reasons of personal revenge like Spencer Tracy in *The Murder Man* (1935) by Tim Whelan.

It is certainly not casual if Hollywood’s American journalist is regularly shown as a pretty rough guy, with a mediocre culture, brusque in his ways, so that his image has become a sort of popular cliché clashing with another cliché, that of the political or cultural commentator, refined in his ways and blessed with admirable elegance and aplomb. And it is very telling that usually this latter kind of journalist, eventually, shall understand that truth is on the other side, as it happens to Katharine Hepburn, teamed with Spencer Tracy, in *Woman of the Year* (1942) by George Stevens; or even shall be exposed as crooked murderer, like Clifton Webb in Otto Preminger’s *Laura* (1944).

The average American journalist derives from the model provided by Ring Lardner in his stories: he gambles, he drinks, he smokes, he loves baseball, he writes as he talks and usually he talks like a living example of the stream of consciousness. Only in Vincente Minnelli’s *Designing Woman* (1957) he is not presented as the natural Hollywood usually shows, even

though, obviously, his fashion designer wife's high-ranking and sophisticated world is far away from his sensitivity and habits.

In other words, in Hollywood cinema the American reporter often embodies the democratic values of life more than the political beliefs and the principles of behavior featured by the homo americanus. It is Clark Gable that in *It Happened One Night* (1934) by Frank Capra, shows, although he is unaware of it, the way to recognize the real values of the national life and society to a spoiled, wayward, superficial America, played in the movie by Claudette Colbert. Of course even in this case we might meet some weak point and sometimes the character may fall victim to him/her whom he's supposed to educate, like Jimmy Stewart in *The Philadelphia Story* (1940) by George Cukor, but even this plot fully respects Hollywood's rhetorical laws (a journalist marrying a rich heiress? Are you kidding?).

From this angle the journalist is complementary to another representative character of American cinema, starting at least from the 40's, the detective: not so much because both of them are after all conducting an inquiry (even though coverage and inquiry are not that far apart), as because both are the only ones representing some values in non-romance cinema. Of course there are strong differences between the two: the detective is a sort of cynical moral conscience for a decaying society, whereas the journalist—there again, some times malgré soi—is the bearer of active, solid, constructive (that is to say: democratic) values. But both have in common the observation of the social tissue and the adventure, even though with different methods, motivations, and results. Some time it is really a detecting matter: *Foreign Intrigue* (1956) by Sheldon Reynolds, modeled on another adventure-inquiry led by a journalist (and much more important in film history, for that matter), *Confidential Report* (1955) by Orson Welles, exposes

a mean political scheme where no less than four “free” countries are found guilty of coming to terms with Nazi Germany.

Although interesting, these examples are still far from the “ontological” potentialities offered by the journalistic inquiry and the reporter character. Usually the film industry (and not only in America) has stressed the action, the intriguing plot, the narrative suspense, overlooking an extremely important development factor: the journalist, insofar as he is a gaze on the world, has no identity and can mingle with the world with no obligation to give his own particulars, or at least he can give them as he pleases.

Few cases line up with this reflection, but when we meet them, then we have some memorable works, like *Gentleman's Agreement*, (1947) by Elia Kazan. Passing as a Jew in order to make a report on antisemitism, Gregory Peck faces that problem in an obviously different way than he would have without that stratagem, but he himself also lives a personality disorder. The strongly organized psycho-social structures leave some space in their fabric if the question comes from a subject who is a stranger to the system. But, in turn, the subject, who to reach his aim must give up his identity, finds out as many spaces, as many holes in his own fabric. Kazan's film case is constructed so that we can observe the problem at stake (and its consequences) from a sociopolitical point of view. But another movie, based on the same model, shows much more the psychological side of such a mechanism: *Shock Corridor* (1963) by Samuel Fuller. Pretending to be mad in order to get into an asylum where the culprit of an unsolved murder lives, Peter Breck succeeds in his task but at the cost of his mental sanity. Fuller's film is commonly recognized as a work with a strong political meaning (and this important aspect is no concern of ours here), but it is also a painful reflection on the subjective stress relaxation in the reporter, on his willingness to mingle with the world he is inquiring into,

on his continuing to stake himself far beyond his desire for success and for personal satisfaction. Of course success and satisfaction are the primary cause of his commitment and action, but, unlike more watertight and solid professions, his kind of job allows very dangerous deviations leading much further than to quite risky situations, fireline coverages, underworld shoot-outs, etc.

This, by the way, leads us to another mythological commonplace of journalism in film: the passion, the devotion, sometimes the orgasm which the protagonist feels for and with which he faces his work. The journalist in *Shock Corridor* is obsessed by his desire to win the Pulitzer Prize, but we don't need to mention the psycho-pathological example of Fuller's movie. Think of a film that is pretty calm and serene, in its own way—in spite of the obstacles met in it by Edward G. Robinson—like *Dispatch from Reuter* (1940) by William Dieterle. A typical Warner biopic of the 40's, it chooses the hagiographical mode to tell the life, the ideas, the hopes and the success of Reuter, the famous journalist and founder of the agency by the same name. But the character's strength, determination, faith are certainly not inferior to those of the *Shock Corridor*'s reporter. Actually, this is a trait running transversely all through the whole Hollywood cinema; independently, that is, from the changes that in time mark its characteristics, environments, atmospheres, etc. In very different ways from each other, Redford and Hoffman, in *All the President's Men* (1976) by Alan J. Pakula, are close relatives to Dieterle's Reuter: we see this in the ardor by which they stand for their theories, in the frenzy by which they try them, in the courage by which, along their predicament, they face the consequences of their action.

We should not wonder if more than once in the American cinema the image of the journalist is showed as being prey to alcohol: from *Merrily We Go to Hell* (1932) by Dorothy Arzner to *Come Fill the Cup* (1951) by Gordon Douglas, such a strong professional strain, such

an obsessive desire for success may well, some times, come out badly in a disastrous, dramatic, pitiful way, and it may well lead to the physical and mental breakdown of someone who has embodied and lived up to the Great American Myth. Besides, as we said, alcohol is a regular complement of the rough man; thus, the journalist, so in touch with harsh reality, cannot but use alcohol as well. Only, it works somehow like a zipper closing together what permits a complete and detailed image of it and what shows its failure, its end. One extra glass, a brief delay of the camera on the bar counter and on the protagonist's eyes and we understand right away "on which side of the zipper" our hero is or is going to be.

But it is not fair to talk always from a male point of view. After all there is no film tradition as rich in women journalists as the American one. But just because of such a large number, the woman journalist, skilful and expert as she may be, is presented as following different standards from her male colleague. It is not by chance, I mean to say, if Jean Arthur in *Mr. Deeds Goes to Town* (1936) and Barbara Stanwyck in *Meet John Doe* (1941), both by Frank Capra, are part of the not long line of Hollywood's press professionals sold to the power. This way Capra did not mean to simply expose the complicity often existing between journalism and the big Capital, but first of all to show that in a sexist society the woman (journalist or anything else) gets along as well as she can, perhaps in a morally disputable way, except that she may then convert and redeem herself by way of a humanity and a sensitivity certainly less usual than those man has. And even when it is not the director's intention to show through this mask the discomforts of a socially endemic situation, we cannot but read *Front Page's* second version, *His Girl Friday* (1940) by Howard Hawks, in a different key from this: Rosalind Russell is in no way inferior to her male colleagues (actually she is better than them), but on the other hand her uncertainty between two opposite patterns of life—the capable and dynamic professional and the

family mother—shows without any doubt that there again this is the rub: woman's place and role in the world of labor as alternative to those elaborated through centuries by a society that has always barred her out. Actually, it is of some interest to see how the original comedy by Hecht and MacArthur, rewritten by the former along with Lederer, keeps basically the same structure in Hawks's version, with the only (but significant) addition of a wedding cut off by Rosalind Russell and the editor-in-chief Cary Grant, evidently doomed to play the ex-husband role, from *The Awful Truth* (1937) by Leo McCarey to the already mentioned *The Philadelphia Story*. There is no way: when the woman adopts any made-for-man model, this immediately acquires some touches leading back to the role she usually, traditionally plays in the social organization. This is what goes on in a movie like *Front Page Woman* (1935) by Michael Curtiz, a forerunner of the already mentioned *Woman of the Year*, where a woman journalist is in competition with her fiancé—who works for another newspaper—proving herself able enough to overcome and beat him, but with the little scandal of her being part of the weak sex, that is to say as a pleasant exception to a rule that only later would crumble, sometimes in serious films like *The Electric Horseman* (1979) by Sydney Pollack, but too often in movies undeserving of attention like *I Love Trouble* (1994) by Charles Shyer.

Strange enough, another minor movie like *Teacher's Pet* (1957) by George Seaton is a perfect example of the deontological problem related to the contrast between sexes. A Pulitzer Prize winner's daughter and a famous reporter fight over the notion of their profession as well as about their being a man and a woman, the latter by embodying and supporting the principles of a correct, ethical journalism, well aware of its role and mission, the former those of a pragmatic, effective, indisputably shrewd profession. Just like the man and the woman, these two

antithetical notions shall understand that they are complementary and necessary to each other, essential parts of a whole in which can be identified the realized ideal of their profession.

Had the press room of the three *Front Page* versions known it in advance, or Kirk Douglas in that prophetic Billy Wilder film, *Ace in the Hole* (1951), the strongest j'accuse launched against journalism, but also against an idea of news and information that was rapidly approaching our age and turning into an epistemic datum more than just a sign of the times, then, who knows, probably things would have not been changed. But at least we would have tried in time to take steps against such an impending threat whose price we are still paying at the present, especially in Italy, which in its turn seems to have become the zipper between an old, remote, edenic notion of press and an intrusive and screaming arrogance paradoxically coming from those who should be denouncing and stigmatizing such a behavior. Some people, in various times, cried out at the suggestive power of violent films: shouldn't we do it also before a less showy but much more persuasive violence? If so great is film's influence on the social tissue, on its habits, on its very civilized lifestyle, then why shouldn't we turn to the cinema in order to re-establish—in journalism as well as elsewhere—something essential to recovering the memory of ourselves as a civilization?