

“Based on the True Story of”: Political Filmmaking and Analogical Thinking

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Résumé de l'article

“*Based on the True Story of*” analyse la façon dont les études de réception contribuent à déterminer en quoi consistent le cinéma politique et les leçons qu’il donne dans le but d’assurer l’adhésion des spectateurs. Des travaux antérieurs ont montré que les cinéastes s’assurent volontiers, au moyen de cadres narratifs, de la lisibilité de leur point de vue auprès du public, tout en évitant de trop jouer la carte de l’émotion, par crainte de provoquer l’inverse de l’effet recherché. On sait également que les marques d’énonciation subjective sont appréciées en tant qu’elles donnent un peu de jeu aux pièces de ce puzzle démonstratif qu’est le film politique. L’article, après ce rappel, se concentre sur les traces écrites de la réception du docufiction *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), qui se divisent en deux types : (1) les critiques attendent du public qu’il retienne la leçon du film et la transpose, par le biais de la pensée analogique, à la vie politique actuelle; (2) les critiques déplacent les leçons à tirer du côté narratologique, comme s’il s’agissait d’abord de l’affrontement entre les bons et les méchants.

“Based on the True Story of” : Political Filmmaking and Analogical Thinking

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This essay considers how reception studies contributes to determining what constitutes effective political filmmaking and the lessons these films offer to encourage political allegiances. Scholars and philosophers over the past century have argued for multiple methods of producing and analyzing texts for successful provision of messages and lessons to better the world. Modernist aesthetics, dialectical montage, phenomenological realism, cognitive neo-formalism, semiotics, Brechtian distanciation, Althusserian interpolations of the subject : these are but a few of the approaches to analyzing meaning-making by producers and by readers and viewers of texts. Here, however, I start at a modest place, considering the making of effective “life lessons” in non-fiction media such as documentaries, docudramas, and news programs. I also will be observational, using a specific case – the 2005 U.S. film *Good Night, and Good Luck* (Clooney) – to develop theory and practice. Finally, given the critical and interpretive perspective of reception studies, my focus is on one process – analogical thinking – in creating “life lessons” (significance statements) while I note that the diversity of spectators and different historical contexts are extremely important determining factors in what lessons will be assumed to be in the text for learning.

While still tentative in my hypotheses, on the basis of other research into this question, at this point I propose four claims about non-fictional presentations :

1. Given that people avoid information that might disrupt avowed belief systems (the “selective exposure” thesis) and that, when they do encounter information on a topic, they engage in it with “selective perception” and “selective retention” (Klapper 1960;

Paletz *et al.* 1972; Stroud 2011), political **filmmakers need to provide narrative frames** to insure their preferred views are accessible for those inclined to interpret in sympathy with those preferred views while supplying those who are as yet undecided possible supporting frames. In the United States, conservative politicians have been doing this for some time with their “message for the day.” Language-theorist George Lakoff has recently been offering the Democratic Party and progressives with assistance in constructing competing liberal and progressive frames (Lakoff 2008; Lakoff & Wehling 2012). Consequently, news and commentary analysis (both “straight” and via comedy such as *The Daily Show* with Jon Stewart) have directed much focus to foregrounding the rhetorical strategies of the various participants in contemporary political life. Media watchdogs have also been fact-checking to try to counter slanted or outright false information in political messaging.

2. The use **of excessive emotional appeals can backfire** if audiences are seeking rational arguments to hold particular opinions (Paletz *et al.* 1972 : 52; see Staiger 2006 for a recent example).
3. Conspiracy narratives are more productive in terms of audience acceptance if the narratives **argue for complicated webs of power structure** and allegiances rather than if they proclaim a centralized core cause (the classic paranoid version of conspiracy) (Hofstadter 1967; Staiger 2006).
4. **Including markers of authorial subjectivity** (such as seeing the filmmaker on screen) not only permits the avoidance of false objectivity, it also provides space for the spectator to negotiate more equitably with the subject matter (Staiger 2006).

These theses are derived from non-fiction cases. What I will examine here is the related case of the docudrama. The docudrama differs from news and documentaries in that it recreates much of its visual and aural information. It is a

fact-based **representation** of real events. It may represent contemporary social issues... or it may deal with older historical events... In most cases, a docudrama is produced in the manner of realist theater or film... Unlike mainstream drama, however, the docudrama does make claims to provide a fairly accurate interpretation of real historical events. In other words, it is a nonfictional drama (Staiger & Newcomb 2004 : 737 emphasis added).

Commonly, advertising and credits for such films and television programs include the phrase, “Based on the true story of.”

Of course, such claims to represent the real almost always produce major accusations of betrayal of that real. For every substantial docudrama or historical film, especially if debate exists about the implications of the events, scholars and commentators will point out differences between the representation and the real (see, for instance, Staiger 1996). If fidelity

is an issue for an adaptation of a story from another fictional source, fidelity is excessively at stake when reality is asserted to be the original resource. In standard cases of fiction-to-fiction adaptation, Robert Stam has urged moving away from the usual question of faithfulness, to considering an adaptation as a **reading** (critical or otherwise) of the prior text. He states : “Adaptations, then, can take an activist stance toward their source novels, inserting them into a much broader intertextual dialogism” (2000 : 64). These dialogisms are transformations involving “selection, amplification, concretization, actualization, critique, extrapolation, analogization, popularization, and reculturation” (68).

I would argue that the same critical approach should be used for reality-to-docudrama adaptation. Within progressive cultural theory is a strong line of reasoning that the motivation to study the past is to use it for the present, to activate the past for the present. Obviously, every time a filmmaker turns to a real-life event, one of the first questions is, what is the engagement, the dialogue with the past? Why has the filmmaker chosen to re-present this event? How is the filmmaker reading the past? Certainly spectators know that the filmmaker cannot re-produce the real, and spending time nit-picking errors of omission and commission only skirts the issue about what sort of interpretation of the past is being put into conversation with the present-day. Spectators expect to consider what argument or lesson is being proposed for today. The filmmaker **can** create a dialogue with history, and the filmmaker **can** call upon the audience to take lessons from the past for the present. Such a call does ask for a certain kind of thinking, best described, I believe, as “analogical”.

Analogical thinking involves finding resemblances of one or more features between two things. This is different from **allegorical** thinking in which a one-to-one mapping occurs between abstractions (such as virtue, faith, and so forth) and features of a narrative for a moral lesson : for example, Bunyan’s *The Pilgrim’s Progress* or Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. So, in a daily newspaper comic strip, “Boondocks”, the politically radical hero provides an exegesis of *Star Wars : Attack of the Clones* (Lucas 2002) as an allegory for President George W. Bush’s behavior after the events of 9/11. The protagonist explains, “The whole movie is clearly allegorical to President Bush’s true motives behind the war on terrorism [which are to expand his powers]. [Filmmaker George Lucas] even implies that Bush and Bin Laden are actually working together” (McGruder 2002). Although I appreciate the reading of *Attack of the Clones*, the interpretation provided is more accurately an analogical, not allegorical, interpretation. I emphasize this distinction because I recognize the value of the argument in Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner’s *Camera Politica* (1988 : 14-15) that metaphorical thinking – using an object to represent an abstraction (such as an eagle for freedom) – takes us away from the real. Allegorical thinking in its proper sense is an extension of this, and they reject such filmmaking practices as obfuscating the

real.¹ Analogical thinking, however, is not such an abstracting argument. Rather, it encourages applying information from the past to learn a lesson about the present.

Analogical thinking does not need to fall into historicism, in which the representation “confirms the existence of a linear progression from the past to present, and offers the possibility of an easy and unproblematic retrieval of the past from the transcendent position offered by the present” (Sekula 1986 [1983] : 153). Of course, whatever the contemporary situation is differs from the past that is being resurrected and reexamined for lesson-giving. Acknowledging those differences seems important.

Analogical thinking is a normal interpretative act. In considering the sorts of interpreting that people do, scholars distinguish between *meaning* as something “immanent to the system of the text’ while *significance* is ‘designating a relation to facts and ideas outside that system’” (Staiger 1992 : 24 emphasis in original). Much of our mental activity in reading a book or watching a film is applying aspects of that text to matters wholly outside of the narrative. Frankly, that is good, and probably one of the salient and most pleasurable reasons for reading.

What lessons may be derived from a text are not assured : that is a lesson of reception studies (*Ibid.* 1992 : 196-209). Take, for instance, the case of *Good Night, and Good Luck*, the docudrama about Edward R. Murrow’s mid-1950s television broadcasts criticizing the communist red-baiting tactics of the junior Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, whose activities created the pejorative descriptive label : McCarthyism. Although several of the film critics reviewing *Good Night* point out that Murrow was slower than several print journalists to go after McCarthy, the moral and journalistic weight that Murrow brought to the escalating criticism of the Senator’s behavior peaked the crest of the wave for what thereafter became a downhill slide for McCarthy and his accusations (on the history of the original events see, in particular, Zacharek 2005; Shafer 2005; and for a recent balanced and contextual historical account Doherty 2003 : 161-88). Given that fidelity criticism of that omission in *Good Night*, however, most reviewers then proceed to draw various conclusions as to what is the *significance* of the film, engaging in analogical thinking. Looking at how these critics variably activate the film to find significance statements, lessons for the present day, gives scholars further understanding of how people engage with political docudramas and other films to take away morals from the encounter.

The Lessons of *Good Night, and Good Luck*

In the sample of reviews that I looked at for this essay, viewers of the film articulate three primary lessons, none of which conflicts with the other². One lesson is directed toward the behavior of those in governmental power : fear can be used to abrogate our civil liberties. Certainly

the film’s director and co-writer, actor George Clooney, primes (and thus frames) this lesson, repeating the point in several interviews. For instance, to Kerry Lauerman (2005) of “Salon.com”, Clooney says, “We use fear to attack civil liberties.” He states there, and also to Terry Gross (2005) in a National Public Radio (NPR) “Fresh Air” broadcast, that what is at stake is not whether McCarthy may have found spies (one person McCarthy attacked, Anna Mae Moss, likely was affiliated with domestic left-wing groups) but the importance of those accused being able to face their accusers in a proper court of law. In the Gross interview, Clooney goes further, however, than merely discussing the events of the 1950s; he specifically connects the film to the contemporaneous U.S. case of José Padilla, accused in 2002 of plotting to set off a radiological bomb in an act of terror :

Padilla, for instance, might very well be a terrorist and might have been planning a dirty bomb. That may all be true. But either you’re a prisoner of war and you get Geneva Convention rights, or you’re a criminal and you get the writ of *habeas corpus*. (*Ibid.*)

Reviewers who draw this lesson about the misuse of fear articulate it in similar terms. Mick La Salle states, “Clooney is suggesting that the fear McCarthy was trading in, the fear people have of getting blown up, is pervasive today; that the spirit of McCarthy, an authoritarianism disguised in patriotic language, lives on; and that TV news is no longer a match for it” (2005). That last point is not something the film directly represents, but the movie does include Murrow cautioning about the future via a 1958 convention speech before the Radio Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) that bookends the film that television “can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire, but it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise it is merely wires and lights in a box.”

Not surprisingly, some reviewers draw the lesson about contemporary politicians using fear to revoke civil liberties but disagree with it. Ella Taylor writes,

it’s clear [Clooney] means to draw comparisons between the climate of fear created by McCarthy and HUAC [the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee] and the Bush administration’s messing with civil rights. I’m not convinced . . . *Good Night, and Good Luck* tends to conflate past apples with present oranges (2005).

Taylor does not explain further, however. So one lesson critics take from the film is about the possible misuse of fear in the public sphere.

The second lesson reviewers derive from the film involves journalists. Again, Clooney primes the pump.

The two issues I thought... – that are represented in the film that are prescient were [sic] the responsibility of the fourth Estate [journalists] to always question authority, whoever that authority is. It is important ... to always remind ourselves that the toughest questions are the most patriotic

things to ask... (Clooney in Gross 2005).

Several reviewers assert that idea as the significance statement for *Good Night, and Good Luck*. "Its main point – ... journalists need courage to combat both government officials who try to intimidate them and corporate bosses who want them to entertain viewers" (Smith 2005). "This is a picture about a turning point in the media that also helped force a turning point in history, and a movie that asserts, by example, that contemporary news media have let us down" (Zacharek 2005). Note that this writer makes the same point as La Salle about differences in journalism between then and now. And "the free press may be the oxygen of a democratic society, but it is always clouded by particles and pollutants, from the vanity or cowardice of individual journalists to the impersonal pressures of state power and the profit motive" (Scott 2005). While each of these writers focus on lessons about journalists, they also each craft the point in an individual way. No one's lesson is quite the same.

The third lesson is directed toward television, that box of wires and lights. Here, reviewers quote Murrow : Television is "being used to distract, delude, amuse and insulate us" (Murrow from the 1958 RTNDA speech quoted in Turan 2005). Kenneth Turan states,

that is if anything truer today than it was then. . . . To hear [actor David] Strathairn [who plays Murrow in the film] read impeccably written lines like 'We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty' and 'We cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home' is to note with sadness how far from that kind of eloquence the broadcast media has come today (2005).

A more cynical version of the lesson about television, however, comes from J. Hoberman : "Murrow bested McCarthy in good measure because television trumps information in the ongoing miniseries of American public life. Thanks to television, 'it still does'" (2005).

Implications for Analogical Thinking and Textual Lessons

In considering these analogical significance statements, and reviewers making them, I would offer two observations. First, while Clooney proclaims the intent to make two lessons with the film, individually each of the reviewers articulates just one, often marking it out rhetorically as "the main point" or "this is a picture about". I suspect beyond writing for clarity, the space of a review or commentary does not promote extended reflection on multiple lessons to be drawn. Certainly critical analysis of the film subsequently may produce a more complex articulation. It is important to note, however, that the reviewers assumed that a docudrama was providing a lesson about the present day and that such intentional behavior on the part of the filmmakers was normal. No critic implied that the film broke any sort of tacit contract with the audience; on the contrary, the assumption was that people expected some moral point to the film.

Second, thinking analogically occurs not only through asserting lessons straightforwardly but also by referencing genres. Four of the eleven reviews that I examined compare the film's events to formulas, but not to any formula, rather to formulas dominant during the time period in which the docudrama is set : the 1950s. Jack Shafer (2005) equates Murrow to Gary Cooper in *High Noon* (Fred Zinneman 1952), and Stephanie Zacharek (2005) mentions the liberal westerns of Anthony Mann and Budd Boetticher. Hoberman discusses boxing and the “televised prizefight”. Michael Sragow (2005) directs his readers to the World War II film of “fellows hunkered down in a bunker”. This is where analogical thinking begins to cross into more complex configurations. Within public discourse, genres have extensive connotations, and all of these genres, especially as the reviewers reference them, call up broad narrative scenarios of heroes and villains. While we not yet to the point of allegorical thinking, the discourse begins moving in that direction.

Is allegorical thinking necessarily a problem? I believe that more work needs to be done to consider both its virtues and deficits. I am currently skeptical that calls to abstractions are unwise although I grant the necessity of grounding the abstractions into real life. Importantly, the producers of *Good Night, and Good Luck* were trying to do that. Clooney and his partners found major financing for the film from Participant Productions (now Participant Media), formed in January 2004 by Jeffrey Skoll. Skoll is a Canadian who co-founded eBay which went into public financing in 1998. He retired in 2000 and at the time of the making of *Good Night* was currently estimated as worth around \$3.5 billion (Olijnyk 2005; Hempel 2005; Wood 2006; Nestruck 2005; Goldstein 2005). Concerned from his youth in using storytelling for social activism, Skoll explains that Participant Productions' goal is “to promote social awareness on the big screen” (Hempel 2005). For financing, two bottom lines are considered : economic and social activist outcomes – although Skoll emphasizes he is not interested in “polarizing movies in the style of Michael Moore” (Skoll in Nestruck 2005; also see Goldstein 2005).

At the time of the making of *Good Night, and Good Luck*, Participant Productions had four films in release : *Good Night, and Good Luck*, *The North Country* (Caro 2005, focusing on sexual harassment and violence towards women), *Murderball* (Rubin 2005, documenting wheelchair-bound athletes), and *Syriana* (Gaghan 2005), which the company discussed as about the dangers of U.S. dependence on foreign oil. Significantly, all four films not only have political agendas, but they reaped several prestigious filmmaking awards and nominations. On the release calendar in 2005 were Rick Linklater's *Fast Food Nation* (2006) and two documentaries premiering at the 2006 Sundance Film Festival, one on global warming and the other on the impact of *Sesame Street* on developing countries.

Participant Productions/Media does not, however, rely simply on

good films to produce that elusive second bottom line. Skoll claims that one of his inspirations is “*Shindler’s List* (Spielberg 1993) which led to creation of the Shoah Foundation” (Skoll in Goldstein 2005). For each film produced, the company partners with social activist nonprofits and uses web campaigns to encourage audiences of the film to do something about the political issues raised in the movies. In 2006, at www.participate.net, *Good Night, and Good Luck* was partnered with the American Civil Liberties Union, Channel One News, Public Broadcasting Stations, “Salon.com”, and XM Satellite Radio (Participate.net accessed 10 January 2006; “Channel One” 2005). Channel One’s activities included a broadcast interview with Clooney who stressed “journalists’ responsibility to report the news with truth and integrity”; a pop quiz on “democratic rights to promote the truth”; an interactive quiz on McCarthyism and Murrow; a film lesson plan for educators and parents; and, perhaps most intriguing, the promotion of “citizen journalists” blogging about local issues on the website’s “Report It Now”. In fall 2012, “Participant Media” lists on its website its films and includes hyperlinks to “social action campaigns” for most of them (Participant.net or Participantmedia.com accessed 23 October 2012).

Skoll, however, is only one of a recent set of young billionaires moving into film production – something scholars need to watch. Quest mogul Philip F. Anschutz, “a Christian Republican”, is behind Walden Media that produced *The Chronicles of Narnia* (Adamson 2005), an out-and-out Christian allegory based on C. S. Lewis’ books (James 2005; Wood 2006) as well as *Ray* (Hackford 2004) and the Matt McConaughey thriller, *Sahara* (Eisner 2005). Walden Media claims its goal is to become a trusted family brand. Others with political aspirations are Bob Yari, a real-estate developer, who backed *Crash* (Haggis 2004) and *Thumb-sucker* (Mills 2005), and Jim Stern, part owner of the Chicago Bulls, who financed *Hotel Rwanda* (George 2004). What does distinguish Skoll are the explicit action campaigns associated with Participant Media projects and the on-going follow up via the Internet.

Whether the social media, Internet, and partnerships with social activist groups are solutions to encouraging political behavior (not just political beliefs and feelings) and to improving the political demoralization of the past several years in the United States (and elsewhere) remains to be seen. Still, Participant Media seems to have started off well, and the reviewers and, hopefully, the audience are not missing (or interpreting too differently) most of what the filmmakers claimed were the projected significant lessons of its films. Who would have thought several years ago that I would be positively quoting George Clooney in an academic essay about political filmmaking, analogical thinking, and lesson giving. However, I give him the final word :

I am completely optimistic, but [the Murrow story] is a cautionary tale of all of our history, all of it, as we know, and you and I have heard this a thou-

sand times, but it's true, we're doomed to repeat it if we don't constantly and diligently go back and sort of recalibrate and start over and go, 'Let's get back to the basics again' (Clooney quoted in Lauerman 2005).

Notes

1. I am less inclined as Ryan and Kellner do to describe only representations that "placate social tensions and avoid dealing with social inequities" as "ideological". My view is that all representations are semiotic and ideological.
2. I did a Lexis-Nexis search for the film and pulled out interviews and reviews by major English-language newspapers, broadcasters, and internet columnists. All reviews with any significance statements are cited in the text.

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Abstract

"Based on the True Story of" considers how reception studies contributes to determining what constitutes effective political filmmaking and the lessons these films offer to encourage political allegiances. Prior work has indicated that filmmakers need to provide narrative frames to insure their preferred views are accessible to audiences, that excessive emotional appeals can backfire, that conspiracy narratives are more accepted if the narratives argue for complicated webs of power structure, and that markers of authorial subjectivity provide space for spectators to negotiate the material. Here analogical thinking – finding resemblances of one or more features between events in the text and the historical past – is studied for docudramas. Using the reception of *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), the essay argues two further hypotheses that also involve analogical thinking : (1) reviewers expect audiences to seek lessons and explicitly engage with a film's assumed message about contemporary politics, and (2) reviewers often reposition the lessons into other generic narrative

formula which have heroes and villains.

Résumé

“*Based on the True Story of*” analyse la façon dont les études de réception contribuent à déterminer en quoi consistent le cinéma politique et les leçons qu’il donne dans le but d’assurer l’adhésion des spectateurs. Des travaux antérieurs ont montré que les cinéastes s’assurent volontiers, au moyen de cadres narratifs, de la lisibilité de leur point de vue auprès du public, tout en évitant de trop jouer la carte de l’émotion, par crainte de provoquer l’inverse de l’effet recherché. On sait également que les marques d’énonciation subjective sont appréciées en tant qu’elles donnent un peu de jeu aux pièces de ce puzzle démonstratif qu’est le film politique. L’article, après ce rappel, se concentre sur les traces écrites de la réception du docufiction *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005), qui se divisent en deux types : (1) les critiques attendent du public qu’il retienne la leçon du film et la transpose, par le biais de la pensée analogique, à la vie politique actuelle; (2) les critiques déplacent les leçons à tirer du côté narratologique, comme s’il s’agissait d’abord de l’affrontement entre les bons et les méchants.

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