

# Three days of the candor – a review of Truth

Journalists will surely prefer the plucky success story told by *Spotlight* (Tom McCarthy, 2015), about the Boston Globe's exposure of the Catholic Church's cover-up of priests molesting children, to the muddy failures in *Truth* (2015). James Vanderbilt's film adaptation of Mary Mapes' memoir about the firing of Dan Rather, *Truth* centers on CBS News airing unconfirmed documents about George W. Bush's questionable service in the air national guard during the Vietnam War.

*Spotlight* relates how great investigative journalism actually makes a difference in the world, giving victims a voice when the powerful seek to deny it. Conversely, *Truth* not only laments the failure of such reporting (both in methodology and social effect) to fundamentally question the debilitating effects of class privilege in a purportedly free country, it also has to turn narrative somersaults to excuse the sloppy journalism employed in the Texas national guard story, which was then used by conservatives to deflect the issue away from the disgusting ability of rich families like the Bushes to protect their sons from Vietnam while poor kids, American and Vietnamese, were dying in droves.

*Truth* is obsessed with the materiality of television newsgathering. The film revels in close-ups of various electronic gadgets to express the transformation of American culture at the hands of the digital revolution. Viewers watch a VHS tape sucked into a deck and see almost all of the characters working push-button telephones. But most importantly, the narrative revolves around the difference between early 1970s typewriters and early 2000 Dell computers running Microsoft Word. Such visualizations of the changing material circumstances of journalism serve as the film's grist for milling the loss of great investigative journalism free of

the capitalist influence of entertainment media.

The film's best scene invokes a different sort of materiality, the intertextuality of the image. Late in the proceedings, after Mary (Cate Blanchett) has just blasted the right-wing lawyers hired by CBS to expose her wrongdoing, she walks outside with her solitary lawyer. For a film that is mostly about dark, interior spaces (the CBS newsrooms, the house of the lying informant, the conference room where Mary is interrogated), the street scene comes as a breath of fresh air, not only for the characters, but the film's spectators as well.

Mary's lawyer gently ribs her for being unable to control herself at the very last minute of the hearing, needing to chide the committee for caring more about type fonts than why the Bush campaign was able to successfully smear John Kerry's actual military service in Vietnam, while Bush's hiding from the draft caused him not harm, but to be elected to the presidency a second time. Mary quotes Popeye, "I am what I am." The lawyer responds by linking Mary instead to the doddering old fool Polonius Hamlet: "I would have gone with 'to thine own self be true'," he jokes.

As Mary walks away, the editor cuts to a medium shot of the lawyer. He tells Mary, "I believe you." Another reverse angle shows that this revelation consoles Mary, who will never work in television news again. The scene evokes the ending of *Three Days of the Condor*, a very different movie about conspiracy, but also one again starring Robert Redford. In *Truth*, he plays the defrocked Dan Rather. In Sydney Pollack's 1975 paranoia film, Redford plays Joseph Turner, a worker at the CIA who unearths a murderous government plot to commandeer Middle-eastern oil fields to protect the U.S. economy. In the film's climactic scene, Joe stands on a busy Manhattan street in front of the New York Times building. Joe tells Higgins (Cliff Robertson), a deputy director he is about to expose the CIA's malfeasance. In shot-reverse shot, Higgins asks Joe how he

knows that the newspaper will run the story. The reverse angle freezes Joe in medium shot, leaving us to wonder if indeed the cover-up extends as far as "the paper of record."

Three Days of the Condor is a quintessential 1970s paranoid thriller, a series of films made in the wake of the public's almost complete loss of confidence in the integrity of major American social institutions, fueled by the questioning of the 1960s. Released eight months later, in April 1976, All the President's Men serves as the Spotlight to Three Days of the Condor's Truth. In Alan J. Pakula's film, the forces of hard-working investigative journalism triumph over Richard Nixon's diabolical political games.

However, Three Days of the Condor is also the better film; more complex in its image making. As the film ends on the freeze-frame of Redford's Joe, Salvation Army Christmas carolers sing in the background, their voices ironically distorted by the tragic events of the film, in which the CIA stands unrepentant in its political manipulation of world events.

For its part, Truth ends with Redford's Rather in a massive close-up covering the entire wide-screen image, forcibly resigning as the anchor of the CBS Evening News, book-ended by Mary sitting at home awkwardly holding in the air her television's remote control, delicately balanced between watching and turning off the image in disgust. The static endings of both Three Days of the Condor and Truth indicate the negative: Unchecked political power continues to abuse the nation uninterrupted.

But there's also something more reassuring in these films' masterful craft. For all the dismantling of the free press in the United States over the past 50 years, the bleak state of affairs in the post-Nixon moment seemed just as worrisome in 1975 as does our current situation.

As Alfred North Whitehead noted in the 1950s, almost everything we worry about in the present also obsessed Plato over two millennia ago. The Republic grappled with the problems entailed by leaders similar to Richard Nixon and George W. Bush. Whatever the decline in journalism from Woodward and Bernstein to Mapes and Rather, the cinema's ability to image today's world clearly carries on unimpeded from Three Days of the Condor to Truth.