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The Future of Journalism in *The Post* and *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*

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Many Hollywood movies have centered around journalists and journalism for decades. From films like *His Girl Friday* and *Citizen Kane* in the 1940s to *Network* and *All the President's Men* in the 1970s to *Nightcrawler* and *Spotlight* in recent years, journalism films tend to argue that the press is corrupt or failing, though they often leave the audience with the hope that journalists can return to their profession's glory days and present the truth once again. As Matthew Ehrlich writes, "films regularly have suggested that the journalist can see through lies and hypocrisy, stick up for the little guy, uncover the truth, and serve democracy—or that if those things are no longer true because the journalist and the press have lost their way, they were true once upon a time and someday could be true again" (1). For those things to be true again, however, someone needs to change the system. Two films that explore this are David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011) and Stephen Spielberg's *The Post* (2017). These two films portray journalism and its surrounding systems as patriarchally corrupt, suggesting that the only way a system corrupted by men can evolve is if it is changed by women who can break from that corruption. Spielberg and Fincher both depict independent women succeeding where their male counterparts fail, creating a shared plot motif in the two films: the female journalist is called to dismantle the unscrupulous patriarchy.

Spielberg's *The Post* introduces this motif over the course of a few important sequences. The first happens when Ben (Tom Hanks) and Kay (Meryl Streep) discuss the possibility of publishing their big story on the Pentagon Papers. Ben remarks on the photos in Kay's office and a past in which journalists and the subjects of their stories were friends. The photos in the shot act as artifacts of a bygone era that begin to awaken Kay to the needs of the future.



This is when Kay begins to evolve for the better; she decides that she's not going to protect any of her old friends. For many journalism films, the expected plot point here would be one in which

the audience learns that the paper is corrupt and cannot succeed. Instead, Spielberg suggests that Kay can, and will, save the paper from itself when the men involved succumb to entrenched corruption. The next important sequence begins after Kay decides to publish the story.

Kay stands in her dining room after deciding to publish the story that would expose the systemic failures of the U.S. Government during the Vietnam War. Her staff and advisors all disagree with her, apart from Ben. She turns to say, “This isn’t my husband’s company anymore. It’s my company.” The camera peers over the shoulder of her advisor to give the audience a clear shot of Kay in her golden robe, with a light perfectly placed behind her head to evoke angelic imagery. This is no coincidence; Spielberg knows how to manipulate light in his films. Kay is presented as the angel in a room of men in suits, which suggests that Kay is the savior of the media in this moment. As she stands against the men controlling her industry, she moves the company forward when nearly all the men before her—including her husband—have failed to do so. Spielberg proceeds to capitalize on this portrait of Kay’s bravery and power with one final sequence.



After the court hearing and the decision that the press cannot be prosecuted for publishing the Pentagon Papers, Kay walks out on the steps of the courthouse, overlooking the masses. She stands next to the men of a different paper who immediately begin to speak to the reporters on scene, bragging about their “heroic” decision to publish. Meanwhile, Kay stands silently. It is a recurring motif in the film that the women in the room do not speak while the men do, and it continues here until Spielberg decides to turn it on its head. Kay says, “I believe everything we have to say, we’ve already said.” This line gives Kay all the power she’d previously lost in the situations where men had talked over her. She walks down the stairs and into a crowd of waiting women who all look at her as if she’s a messiah. With this shot, the film seems to suggest that



Kay has become a role model for women everywhere. She descends into the masses, showing that she is simply one of them, too—minus the wealth and paper company, of course. Spielberg is suggesting that this is the future of journalism. He is showing that the days of men controlling the world are over and it’s time for evolution and change, a message that Fincher’s *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* reiterates.

In Fincher's film, the transformation of journalism is already underway, rather than just beginning. Lisbeth (Rooney Mara) and Mikael (Daniel Craig) act as two versions of journalism in the media. Together, they balance each other and work to further Fincher's vision for the future of journalism. Fincher also does a lot of work in this film to break down the trope of the charismatic reporter, something Spielberg omitted altogether. In journalism films, the protagonist is often someone who can use and work through people to reach the truth. Mikael fits that role, but Fincher clearly has something to say about its effectiveness: Mikael fails where Lisbeth succeeds. Lisbeth represents the future of journalism. She is a young woman with a keen mind who often chooses not to speak, much like Kay at the end of *The Post*. When Mikael interviews witnesses to gather information, Lisbeth checks security cameras. When Mikael attends a dinner party to question people, Lisbeth scours archival records for a paper trail.

The film demonstrates the difference between Mikael's and Lisbeth's approaches when Lisbeth uses intimidation and torture tactics to take back control of her life from the agent of the corrupt patriarchal state that abuses her, both financially and physically. She ties up the social worker who acts as her "guardian," and she uses a variety of threats to get him to do what she wants. In this sequence, the mise-en-scene calls up another famous trope: the femme fatale. Lisbeth's costume design includes the black mask across the eyes, which is often used in older films to signify an evil or scandalous woman. Fincher subverts that trope by making the femme fatale the hero here. The shot is from a low angle, giving Lisbeth power over this abusive man. Fincher uses this subversion to underscore the theme of systemic evolution in his film. Lisbeth uses her reclaimed power to fight for justice, something women don't often do in older films (*His Girl Friday*, *Network*, and so on). Fincher pushes this further in later sequences.



A key episode on the road to solving the crime that Mikael and Lisbeth are both investigating shows the two pursuing leads in very different ways. Fincher makes a point of intercutting two sequences: one in which Mikael talks to an old Nazi to gain information and another showing Lisbeth's subtler, less social approach using card catalogues, old files, and computer searches. Fincher does some clever camera and editing work in these intercut sequences to juxtapose the research styles of the two journalists and suggest which he thinks is better. In this long shot,



Lisbeth stands in the background. The shot uses a shallow focus so that the audience can see her but not the archivist in the foreground. Fincher does this to keep the audience's focus on Lisbeth. Her position on screen is representative of every aspect of her character;

she's even framed as though she is keeping herself isolated and boxed in. Yet, her success isn't determined by her closeness to others, nor does it rely on how they perceive her. She simply doesn't need others; she is entirely outside the corrupt system. This is contrasted with the intercut sequence featuring Mikael's discussion with the old Nazi. Mikael sits very close to the man and Fincher uses shot-reverse shots as they talk, showing that Mikael relies on social interaction and the perceptions of others. Mikael's style is up close and personal, both socially and physically. The juxtaposed sequences help the audience understand just how different these two journalistic styles are. The climactic sequence that follows capitalizes on this difference and shows which style Fincher believes to be more effective.

Mikael is soon imprisoned by Martin, the killer they've been trying to catch. Here, Fincher strongly implies that Mikael's journalistic style is obsolete. Because of how close Mikael must get to others for his information, he is easily betrayed by the corrupt men in the same system, resulting in his failure. In this case, it would result in death as well, if not for Lisbeth, who saves the day because her style allows her to distance herself from others and see things relatively objectively. Fincher does a visual call-back to the femme fatale shot—this time without the mask. The shot is low angle again, giving Lisbeth the visual power. She also has a gun, which gives her phallic and physical power over the men in the sequence. She squats over Mikael, who is too injured to chase after Martin, leaving her to finish the job. The way Lisbeth asks, "May I kill him?" reminds us of her intellectual and emotional detachment. In these ways, Fincher shows how Lisbeth triumphs. She takes the power from Martin and succeeds where Mikael fails, thanks to the new and improved journalistic style that allows her to be objective, as the press are meant to be.



Both films feature women with progressive values that result in their journalistic success over the corrupt men surrounding them. In these recent films, the media is no longer the image of truth and hope that it used to be. It is filled with corrupt men who are incapable of dismantling the system from within, requiring women to be agents of change—women who see patriarchal corruption for what it is because they exist outside of its domain. With the help of these women, journalism is moving out of its dark ages and beginning to make traction on screen as righteous again—although

perhaps with less sentiment and idealism. When two filmmakers like Spielberg and Fincher begin to create a trend, it's a fair assumption that the industry as a whole will follow. As Ehrlich says, although those optimistic ideas about the role of journalism—to “see through lies and hypocrisy, stick up for the little guy, uncover the truth, and serve democracy”—may seem outdated or dead, there is hope that they can return, at least in films that have badass, empowered women to light the way. ☺

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