

# BOOK REVIEWS

## Christian Keathley and Robert B. Ray, *All the President's Men*

The books that comprise the BFI Film Classics series, which began in 1992 with volumes on, among others, *Double Indemnity*, *Singin' in the Rain*, *Stagecoach* and *The Wizard of Oz*, aim for a particular sweet spot in film criticism. Although the balance between production history, wider context, and detailed interpretation differs from volume to volume, each of them aims to provide a detailed engagement with a particular film – extensive enough to run to a hundred-or-so pages – that will serve the purposes both of scholars and of non-academic fans interested enough in a film to want to read something significantly longer than an article. They thus need to balance approachability with rigour, and to provide original arguments that open up, rather than shutting down, their readers' ability to delve further into the film. Christian Keathley and Robert B. Ray's volume on Alan J. Pakula's *All the President's Men* (1976) achieves this balance with adroitness and flair.

Although it includes plenty of pertinent information concerning the film's production history, gathered largely from secondary sources, the book's focus is on close reading and offering a fresh interpretation of the film; comparison with current events is studiously avoided. The book is consistently clear and always readable, with a fluent structure that finds

another route through the film than simply moving linearly from beginning to end. One advantage of this approach is that the same scenes are analysed at different places in the book, attacking them from different angles and building up a sense of the procedures incrementally, rather than having to say everything about a given scene all at once. The frame enlargements and the occasional diagram are excellently selected and reproduced. (With what I assume is deliberate irony, the authors remark that 'even the most diligent viewer would find it enormously difficult to draw a map' of the *Washington Post's* newsroom (44) before demonstrating their diligence by providing exactly that on the very next page.) The question of familiarity with the historical events that the film depicts – the investigations of Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward into the break-in at the Watergate hotel on 17th June 1972 and the corruption in the Nixon administration that the subsequent investigation uncovered – is slightly more complex, and I will return to it below.

The book efficiently covers a broad range of topics concerning the production, aesthetics, and interpretation of the film, including casting, screenwriting, mise-en-scène, performance (making an intriguing distinction between 'personification' and 'impersonation'), and cinematography. The book ends by discussing the use of split diopters, presumably as a way of connecting the film's interest in pairs to the material specifics of its production and aesthetics. Thought-provoking insights and apt descriptions occur consistently. I like, for example, the claim that when Dustin Hoffman, playing Bernstein, has to improvise 'in the midst of a heavily staged scene' when he encounters a door that sticks, the result is that '[t]he Bookkeeper's stubborn, real front door has provided the movie with a vivid summary of all the scenes of Woodward and Bernstein being turned away from one door after another' (39). These observations are also productive of further thoughts. The book's reference to the bannisters through which the Bookkeeper is seen could be extended to discuss the fact that not only do we, and Bernstein, see her through them, but she – and we – also see *him* the same way. The comparison of the newsroom to a painting by Bruegel (55) is unexpected but illuminating, and the observation that the car park where Woodward meets Deep Throat 'looks like

an abandoned *Post* newsroom' (87) is an example of that most difficult-to-achieve type of critical insight: something that seems entirely obvious, but only after it has been pointed out.



*Who's trapped?*

The book is very carefully observed, although I did notice a couple of errors. It's not true that the little girl near the front of the line 'faces the street, seeming to look across it' (19). She is in fact standing next to a woman and posing for a picture being taken by a man (presumably her father?) standing in front of her. I also cannot discern the jump-cut referred to on page 102. Page nine refers to 'Woodward' undertaking a promotional tour for *The Candidate*, which should have read 'Redford'. More substantially, I have some reservations concerning the book's deployment of the concept of the auteur. Although one fears to return to territory over which so much futile blood has been spilt, and it is certainly refreshing to see

reference to 'the French New Wave's auteur policy' (9) rather than 'Auteur Theory' ('author policy' is probably too much to hope for at this point!), the relationship between critical claims concerning intention and the specifics of the film's production history is not, in Keathley and Ray's presentation, as clear as it might have been. Certainly, the New Wave directors initiated (or, as Keathley and Ray point out, reintroduced) a model of absolute directorial control, but *critically* there is no paradox in the fact that the films that they wrote about in developing the idea of the director as author were Hollywood studio films. The book claims that *All the President's Men* 'does not fit [the] new auteurist model' of filmmaking that was emerging at the time – instead, it 'resembles a studio-era picture' (10) – but a case could be made that it fits the 'old auteurist model' perfectly. It all depends which model one is referring to: the critical model or the production model. The auteurs that the *Cahiers* critics first christened as such worked entirely within the studio system, and the claim for their ultimate aesthetic responsibility was based on watching and comparing the work to which they put their names, not delving into the archives to see who did what. Certainly, this approach can lead to critical and empirical distortions, but it is not fundamentally misguided. We are now so familiar with these distortions, and so forgetful of what it was that made such an approach appealing in the first place, that it seems to need pointing out that to say that making a film is a collaborative enterprise contradicts nothing that the original auteur critics wanted to argue.

This point is perhaps theoretical or historical more than it is interpretational, although it does have interpretational consequences. Of more direct significance for the interpretation that the book offers is that it conceives of film narrative as a matter of causation (clear in classical narrative; obscure otherwise). We read that '[c]onventional motion picture narrative proceeds by causal links, clarifying plot information as well as character actions and goals' (27). Aside from the fact that thrillers, which are surely often nothing if not conventional, frequently *don't* clarify either 'plot information' or 'character actions', or do so only misleadingly, it is unclear what precisely is being claimed as causing what. It is not that causes must be irrelevant to the discussion – it would be perfectly reasonable

to say, for example, that the cause of Woodward and Bernstein's chastisement by editor Ben Bradlee (Jason Robards) towards the end of the film is their failure to establish that Sloane had named Haldeman to the grand jury – but rather that what is at issue can often be thought of more clearly in terms of *reasons*, rather than causes, and that there are different types of reason in play which it is important not to confuse. (This, precisely because they are so closely connected.) It is really a matter of answering quite different, albeit related, kinds of 'why' questions, such as, for example, 'Why did she do that?' Or, 'Why did they structure the script this way?'

These matters are of crucial importance for the interpretation of the film that Keathley and Ray offer, which as they rightly point out needs to come to terms with the question of how to 'make a detective story out of a case whose solution everybody knows' (8). The story of Watergate was recent history when the film was released, and it could be assumed that most of its audience would be familiar with it, even perhaps over-familiar. Keathley and Ray claim that the film deals with this challenge by enabling the viewer to 'provide the equivalent of the reporters' experience – the confusion, the impasses, the set-backs, the need to keep starting over – so that the viewer will share it' (25). This is entirely persuasive. Less so is the claim that this is achieved by using 'the processes of scripting and filming' so as to move 'from clarity to near illegibility' (31).

Certainly, Keathley and Ray make some valuable observations about the important fact that immediate clarity was not always an overriding priority for Pakula and Redford. For example, Woodward and Bernstein themselves suggested that it was confusing that the Bookkeeper (Jane Alexander) referred both to a list of fifteen names and to five names and that 'it would help if both references were to five – those who controlled the money' (32). But the change was not made. Nevertheless, the claim of 'near illegibility' is overstated. Nothing about *All the President's Men* indicates that it was designed to work for an audience totally unfamiliar with the story – as mentioned above, the challenge for the filmmakers was the opposite. Rather than a deliberate attempt to render the narrative illegible, the film's construction is better seen as an attempt to balance the audience's likely (over)familiarity

with the general thrust of its narrative with a respect for the fine details of the historical facts about the investigation. I will briefly mention two examples which seem to me not best served by the book's analysis, and one in which their analysis is helpful but runs counter to the thrust of much of the book.

First, take the analysis of Woodward's visit, early in the film, to the arraignment of the Watergate burglars. On their analysis, a script which clearly singled out the lawyer Markham is rendered obscure in the film, making it mysterious how Woodward knew which man to approach. But one could also offer a different reading, one completely in keeping with the kind of account of classical Hollywood practice that Keathley and Ray claim that the film subverts. We hear Woodward being told that he doesn't know the lawyer's name, but that he is 'some country club type'. Then we cut directly to a shot of Markham, centrally framed and well lit, with only a couple of other men, out of focus and in relative darkness, behind him. What Keathley and Ray would call the 'causal link' motivating the montage here is surely productive of clarity. What would be really confusing would be if this man turned out *not* to be Markham. The answer to how Woodward knew who to approach is surely that he made an educated guess.

Second, in a detailed and very helpful analysis of the shot construction of the scenes in the *Post* newsroom, the book admits that in places the film 'comfortably orients the viewer to the spatial relationship between the reporters' desks' (48). But it goes on to claim that the viewer is more often than not 'unsupported by any clear and consistent visual clues, mak[ing] the characters appear as if floating, unmoored' (54). This does not represent my experience of the film, in which the relationship between Woodward and Bernstein's desks, so carefully established early on (as the book acknowledges), serves most of the time to keep us just oriented enough. One particular detail I admit is potentially confusing is that in the sequence analysed on pages 49-51 Bernstein, for some reason, moves between shots to the typewriter on the desk immediately behind his own: the position of his name plate gives this away. But, crucially, the film doesn't require us to answer the question that the book poses ('Where is [Woodward's desk] now...?') at this point. One could argue that this is perfectly classical: questions of spatial relationship that would

be confusing if we looked into them too closely are not so, because nothing about the film encourages us to do so at this point.

A more convincing analysis of the use of space in the newsroom, I suggest, would not link any confusion the viewer feels in these scenes so directly to the confusion that Woodward and Bernstein feel in their investigation, but would instead explore the ways in which the film expresses the fact that the reporters are *not at all* disorientated in this space that they know so intimately. Does our disorientation as viewers not in fact help to give us a sense of their *orientation*, serving by contrast to emphasise the ways that the characters, although often experiencing 'perplexity, confusion and illegibility' (24) in their investigations are, unlike us, *at home* in the newsroom? This would mean that Keathley and Ray are right about the 'mimetic function' that they claim for the 'helter-skelter editing and camera repositioning' (54); but confusion per se isn't the object of the mimesis. This could be connected to the apparently excessively detailed nature of the expensive newsroom set. Viewers who had actually worked in that newsroom did not feel the same disorientation as the rest of us. At issue is precisely the contrast between the cinematographer Gordon Willis asking the reporters, 'How the hell do you work in this place?' (54) and the *Post* editor Leonard Downie, Jr., saying: 'At the beginning of each scene, I could tell the hour of the day and the day of the week by what was happening in the background.' (35-6). What is fascinating about the newsroom and its representation is not its 'near illegibility' but the way it negotiates between legibility and illegibility.

Such strategies are characteristic of the film as a whole; it is crucial to its wonderfully distinctive flavour that it manages somehow to be clear and obscure at the same time. Once one can follow the names (either on repeated viewing, or if one already knows the story well), it's beautifully linear. Events that could well have been split up are presented directly one after another: Bernstein is talking to the man from the phone company, then immediately he's in Miami following up the lead he's been given; Bernstein and Woodward walk away from Kay Eddy (Lindsay Crouse), Woodward deciding not to press her to try and get a list of CREEP (Committee to Re-Elect the President) employees from her ex-fiancée,

and then immediately it's the next day and she's dumping the file on top of Woodward's typewriter. Keathley and Ray do not appear to view the film this way; as we have seen, they regularly make remarks such as that 'the changes at these successive stages – adapting the book into a script, revising the script, filming and editing – often served to obscure what was originally clear', and that 'throughout *All the President's Men* [...] causal links are routinely omitted or obscured' (27). Let us look at a final example, one in which the film (very gently) manipulates the historical facts, and see whether or not it 'obscure[s] what was originally clear'. The announcement by the Democratic presidential candidate George McGovern that Thomas Eagleton was no longer to be his running mate – which the film shows other members of the *Post* staff attending to in the background of Woodward's conversations – happened on the same day as the initial conversations with Republican donor Kenneth Dahlberg and CREEP chairman Clark MacGregor, but not simultaneously with the phone calls (see Bernstein and Woodward 1974: 42-48). By combining all of these events the film creates a scene that is tense and exciting even if one can't follow all the details. That Dahlberg has conveyed a crucial piece of information is entirely clear; the juggling of phone calls combines with the McGovern announcement in the background to evoke the difficulty and delicacy of what Woodward needs to do, of how easily it could all go wrong if the distractions get the better of him or he says the wrong thing to the wrong person. When one becomes clearer about the historical events (whether, say, by reading Bernstein and Woodward's book or simply by watching the film more than once) this confusion becomes much more legible. Combining the three strands – the Dahlberg and MacGregor phone calls and the McGovern announcement – conveys information about the sequence of events and which of them were broadly (albeit not literally) simultaneous, while the *mise-en-scène* bluntly but undemonstratively conveys that the story the majority of the *Post's* staff think is currently the most important will soon be superseded by Woodward and Bernstein's investigations. (The staging quite literally relegates the McGovern story to the background.) The film's invention in this scene is remarkable both for its drama and for what repeat viewings reveal to be an elegantly economical clarity.

Nothing in the previous paragraph contradicts anything that Keathley and Ray say in their analyses of this particular scene, which do not concentrate on confusion or obscurity (15-16; 98-101). They convincingly argue, for example, that we should not 'underestimate' Redford's 'skill at appearing natural before the camera' (15), as well as pointing out how the film manipulates its soundtrack in the interests of clarity (101).<sup>1</sup> Their book's repeated insistence on the film's illegibility, however, distracts from the ways that their analysis is equally illuminating about how it achieves clarity. An alternative analysis of *All the President's Men* might concentrate on the film's efforts to be *legible* at the same time as keeping any manipulation of the facts to a minimum, as well as maintaining, all the while, the grip and the tension of a thriller. But it would be necessary for such an analysis to engage in detail with the claims put forward in this admirable book.

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#### Works cited

Bernstein, Carl and Bob Woodward. (1974) *All the President's Men*. New York: Simon & Schuster.

Keathley, Christian and Robert B. Ray. (2023) *All the President's Men*. London: Bloomsbury and British Film Institute.

<sup>1</sup> I would, however, quibble with their description of the gesture of 'raising his two forefingers to his closed eyes' as Woodward's way of 'distill[ing] his excitement' (16), which doesn't quite pinpoint the tension in the gesture and the sense it so brilliantly conveys that one wrong move could mess everything up. Yes, Woodward is excited, but he'd almost rather have had Dahlberg call back a little later – the risk is now that the conversations with *both* MacGregor and Dahlberg will be stymied.