

Behind the Front Page

In the century that coined the tag line, "No, but I saw the movie," nothing is quite real until it's been projected on a screen. Now Watergate has been given that ultimate seal of reality in the film version of **ALL THE PRESIDENT'S MEN**. Despite the deliberately cool, low-key reportorial way in which Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward wrote their book, some critics thought it gave journalists, and especially those at The Washington Post, too much credit for something that really belongs to an army of judges, prosecutors, investigators and juries. Those critics are really going to gnash their teeth as Woodward and Bernstein are apotheosized into Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman. But those who believe, as I do, that Watergate marked a crucial chapter in the shifting relationship between what we know and how we know it, and that "Woodstein" and journalism played a decisive part, will like the film even more than the book.

"All the President's Men," produced by Redford's own company, with a clean, sharp "documentary" screenplay by William Goldman, is already being hailed as the movie that kills off the "Front Page" romanticizing of the tough, crusading newspaperman. But director Alan J. Pakula has succeeded brilliantly in converting that outworn myth into a brand-new myth that conforms to our time. Myth does not mean something fictitious: Levi-Strauss and the new anthropologists have taught us that a myth is the true, hidden meaning of an event in any culture. Bernstein and Woodward may have tried their damndest to present themselves as dogfaced reporters digging out a story in the most prosaic way, but the myth—the true reality—is that they were heroes bringing villainy to light. This is why the movie gets under your skin and excites you—behind the scrabbling style of the reporters lies a world of moral meaning.

Rhythms: This world, implicit in the book, becomes explicit in the film. If you knew nothing about Watergate, reading Bernstein and Woodward would tell you a great deal. But if the film were your only source of pure information about Watergate, you wouldn't have a real grasp of what happened. The film is not a documentary or a semi-documentary, it's a powerful, intelligent work of popular art that aims to get your emotional as well as your intellectual assent. Like Costa-Gavras in "Z," Pakula drives moral and ideological meanings straight to your nervous system by the rhythms of his imagery and editing. But Pakula is subtler, less melodramatic. Redford and Hoffman really are ordinary guys doing an ordinary job. But the film shows how their tenacity, their doggedness, become under pressure much more than mere professional virtues.

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Hoffman and Redford as Bernstein and Woodward: Good Guys spotting Bad Guys

That tenacity takes on a new rhythm in the performances of Redford and Hoffman, a rhythm that doesn't romanticize the reality but choreographs it into a compelling dramatic shape. This happens immediately as Redford is assigned to the routine story of the break-in at Democratic National Headquarters. Sitting behind a mysterious defense lawyer at the arraignment, Redford strains forward, trying to see right through the guy's shoulder blades. His alert body, his lancing eyes, his tense, open mouth, express an inquisitiveness so acute that the audience laughs in delighted complicity. This is more than a hungry young reporter smelling a story—it's a Good Guy spotting a Bad Guy.

Redford, with his golden head, his casual, corduroy-clad grace, is the Wasp side of the reportorial pas de deux. The Jewish side is Hoffman, with his long hair, his Bohemian nattiness, his feverish, ferretlike drive. Trying to make a frightened bookkeeper from the Committee for the Re-election of the President talk about the secret fund for political espionage, Hoffman becomes a clownish mixture of cajolery and clumsiness, his matchbook notes spilling from his hands, his sentences screwed up with anxiety. It's as if Hoffman's very awkwardness as he tries to persuade her to talk becomes a moral rebuke to the scared woman who wants to tell the truth. And Jane Alexander's quiet despair as the bookkeeper is typical of the effective, nuanced realism that Pakula (who handled Liza Minnelli in "The Sterile Cuckoo" and Jane Fonda in "Klute") gets from his actors, notably from Jack Warden and Martin Balsam as Post editors and from Jason Robards as their boss, the tough, raspy, irreverent—and courageous—Ben Bradlee.

Pakula's Washington, as photographed brilliantly by Gordon Willis, is divided into the dark world of the Watergate conspiracy and the forces of light, whose symbolic headquarters is the vast gleaming newsroom of The Washington Post. Here Redford and Hoffman bang away at their stories amid the televised faces of Richard Nixon and his aides. Pakula is driving home the point that at the heart of Watergate was a battle between opposing forces for the public consciousness.

In this sense, the most fascinating character in the film is Woodward's mysterious government source known as Deep Throat, whom he meets in deserted garages in the dead of night. Played superbly by Hal Holbrook and photographed in a corpse-blue aura, Deep Throat is the underground man caught in the poisoned entrails of democracy. He represents the exhausted and discouraged conscience, afraid to speak out but hinting at the truth. Whoever Deep Throat really is, he acts as a link between this film and Pakula's previous movie, "The Parallax View," in which a reporter is destroyed by a vast official conspiracy he cannot penetrate. In "All the President's Men" the conspiracy is real and it is penetrated. Deep Throat implies that behind the legwork of those who track the truth is the need to move through the false daylight of official sources and risk the plunge into darkness.

—JACK KROLL