

“Using Silverblatt’s Keys to Media Analysis on the Movie *Good Night, and Good Luck*”

Examining the movie *Good Night, and Good Luck* using Art Silverblatt’s keys to media analysis makes for a particularly interesting study. Because Silverblatt’s book is about gaining media literacy and the movie itself is a study in the ways media can be co-opted by powerful interests, together they can help us understand how the media works even better than either of them could alone. The movie also chronicles one man’s struggle against political and financial control of the media and his fight for justice. It thus provides an example of a media icon seeking to raise the media literacy of his viewers and culture, an example which was relevant here in the U.S. when the movie was released in 2005. Focusing on Silverblatt’s media analysis keys of the importance of the media communicator and historical context, this author will seek to demonstrate that the movie *Good Night, and Good Luck* can be used to help viewers understand the power dynamics underlying the news media, the need for media literacy, and connections between the historical situation portrayed in the movie and more recent situations in the U.S.

Good Night, and Good Luck is based on the true story of television reporter Edward R. Murrow standing up against Wisconsin Senator Joseph McCarthy during the 1950’s. At that time, Americans were very concerned about the threat of Communism. Sen. McCarthy used this fear to attack people he saw as threatening to the American government or to himself and his position. He portrayed anyone who was against him or critical of the government as communist sympathizers. In one of Murrow’s broadcasts in the film, he criticizes McCarthy for this, saying,

“[A]nyone who doesn’t share his hysterical disregard for decency and human dignity and the rights guaranteed by the Constitution, must be either a Communist or a fellow traveler.”

McCarthy particularly focused on the entertainment industry and media.

Murrow and his CBS producer, Fred Friendly, became increasingly disgusted by McCarthy’s tactics and the effect they had on good Americans’ lives. They decided to challenge him on their program. They continued to do so even as their advertisers left the show and their supervisors and co-workers pressured them to stop. Finally, they were successful in exposing McCarthy’s task as a political witch-hunt and in helping turn public opinion against him. Yet Murrow went still further and tried to open Americans’ eyes to how this type of thing was one of the dangers of television. After receiving an award for his work, at the end of the movie, Murrow says, “This instrument 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.”

This supports Silverblatt’s argument about how the affective nature of television can keep us from thinking critically about it. He writes,

Because of the affective nature of visual and aural media, it may seem more natural (and considerably easier) to simply ‘experience’ a song or film rather than undertake the arduous task of conceptualizing, articulating, and analyzing your emotional responses.... (7)

These affective responses, however, are exactly what can make television so influential over its viewers. The McCarthy political witch-hunts, as shown in *Good Night, and Good Luck*, were a good example of how television can be exploited to play on people’s fears for someone’s political gain. This risk makes it important to understand the influence television has on viewers, and to understand how people may be using that influence. Murrow attempted to do this himself

in the 1950's. Today, Silverblatt has taken that work to a much higher level with his work on media literacy. His keys give people tools to do that effectively.

Two of Silverblatt's main keys concern process and historical context. He breaks the process key down into several main areas of creating a media presentation that can help the audience to analyze it, including focusing on the media communicator. He recommends learning the communicator's identity, values, and intentions. When we apply these keys of the media communicator and the historical context to the film *Good Night, and Good Luck*, Silverblatt's recommendations can help the audience better understand the power dynamics behind the creation of media presentations, the need for media literacy, and the film's messages.

The media communicator behind a presentation is incredibly important. We can see this in Murrow's role in shaping his newscasts, the importance of his producer's support, and the pressure from their supervisors not to alienate advertisers in *Good Night, and Good Luck*. As Silverblatt notes, however, "[I]n mass communications, the media communicator is... largely unknown to the audience." (27) They are the one making the decisions about what to present and how to present it, however. So it is incredibly important to identify them, Silverblatt argues, if the audience is to understand the true purpose behind a presentation. (27)

Applying this key to *Good Night, and Good Luck*, we can learn more about the film's intentions and why it portrays Murrow's story as it does. One of the film's executive producers is Jeff Skoll, a multi-billionaire who was the first president of eBay. He established the Skoll Foundation to help promote and support social entrepreneurs and now also owns a production company named Participant Productions. According to the TED site, which is "devoted to Ideas Worth Spreading" and hosted him as a speaker, Jeff Skoll says his media company is "a 'pro-social media company,' making features and documentaries that address social and political

issues and drive real change.” (“Speakers”) Other films his company has helped fund have actively promoted certain views and changes, or presented stories that add a sympathetic, human dimension to charged political issues. They include *An Inconvenient Truth* with former U.S. Senator and presidential candidate Al Gore; *The Kite Runner*; *The Visitor*; *The Cove*; *Food, Inc.*; *North Country*; and *Oceans*. (“Speakers”)

After learning this background on one of the movie’s executive producers, viewers can assume that the movie *Good Night, and Good Luck* was not simply produced for entertainment. Instead, the political and social messages in the film are likely an important part of its reason for being. By researching the goals and perspectives of other media communicators involved in its production, the audience can learn even more. George Clooney directed the film. In an interview on *Spike*, he explains why this particular story was important to tell at the time. He says,

I started revisiting it [Murrow’s ‘wires and lights speech’, which he had learned about as a child from his father who was a newscaster] a few years ago, when things seemed to be going a little haywire, and I stopped hearing dissenting voices in the one place where there should be always dissenting voices, which is in the... news media, especially the broadcast media. I was concerned... I thought there were some similarities and some things to talk about -- the erosion of civil liberties by the use of fear -- and I thought that there were things that were worth keeping in the historical context, sort of like *The Crucible* did with McCarthyism...

Clooney also says that he wanted the film to encourage debate about these issues, rather than simply portray one view as right and the other as wrong. Knowing this, the audience can understand why he made some of the choices he did in creating the movie. For example, we can assume this is why he ended the movie with Murrow’s speech on the larger issue of the role of television in society, rather than with the resolution of the conflict between him and McCarthy.

As Clooney mentions about the story within the film, historical context is important in analyzing a media presentation, and indeed it is one of Art Silverblatt’s keys. Silverblatt notes that, “A media presentation can add to our understanding of historical events.” (67) This movie

certainly does, by educating a new generation about the McCarthy scandal. Providing first person perspectives on it, especially on the human costs to the people persecuted by McCarthy and those afraid of him, helps the viewer better understand what happened. It also helps demonstrate the need for media literacy, because it shows what can happen when the media is exploited for personal or political gain.

In understanding the message of *Good Night, and Good Luck*, however, the viewer must also look beyond the historical context within the movie. The historical context of when it was made and released is also important. This is another way that Silverblatt's historical context key can be used. Although he says that, "A media presentation can serve as a barometer of current attitudes towards historical events," it can also show us how historical events can inform our understanding of current ones. (69) As Clooney said in the interview, the film spoke to relevant issues then in American society. It was meant to help Americans reflect on the situation by remembering the lessons of the past.

In the years just before this movie was produced, a media dynamic like the one in the movie was happening in the U.S. There was great social and political pressure not to criticize the government's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan because they were seen as revenge for the 9/11 attacks. George Bush said in one of his speeches, "You're either with us or against us in the fight on terror." ("You're") Anyone who criticized his actions was portrayed as being against the U.S. and very unpatriotic, similarly to anyone who criticized McCarthy during his trials. Thus, creating this movie when they did could also serve as a warning to contemporary Americans.

In conclusion, the movie *Good Night, and Good Luck* uses the historical example of Murrow's challenge to McCarthy to show the audience the power dynamics behind media productions and the need for media literacy. It thus supports Silverblatt's overall argument in his

book and perhaps even helped inspire it. Finally, using Silverblatt's keys of the media communicator and historical context, viewers can gain a deeper understanding of the movie and appreciate its purpose at the time it was produced. They clearly demonstrate that the movie intended to comment on and shape a prevalent situation in the U.S. at the time it was made, one that the movie director found uncomfortable and dangerous.

Works Cited

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