In the News


When a film has been praised for its "perfect verisimilitude", "authentic" performances and qualities of satire as much as Broadcast News has, it seems reasonable to assume that it comes up with a pretty stinging critique of media institutions and news broadcasting.

Broadcast News certainly does toy with the ethics of news journalism, and gives a predictable swipe at the power house moguls who produce news as entertainment rather than as the "absolute pursuit of truth" director James Brooks knows it really should be. But the power of media networks and corporate system exists as a backdrop to the small "family" team struggling to maintain standards against the adversity of big biz. More in the vein of sitcom or soap opera (Brooks cut his teeth on TV's Lou Grant, after all), it's a community of individuals who care for each other that proves so seductive.

The film's major preoccupation, though, is with three haphazardly connected characters, and while this allows a certain level of commentary on individual systems of morality and codes of behaviour, the invitation of the film lies in its delicate balancing of the moral with the instabilities of sexual identities and the contradictions of desire.

Jane Craig (Holly Hunter) is the dynamic and uncompromising news producer, embodying creative excellence and risking all for the "true" material from which she makes a kind of poetry. It's a common journalistic stereotype demanding a nervous acting style and, in this case, because she's a woman, teamed with neuroses over her ability to attract men without threatening them. This makes it both more interesting and funnier. Aaron Altman (Albert Brooks), the investigative journalist, writes first rate copy but has made one crack too many for the good of his career. They are "likes"; committed and clever, but irascible and socially inept. (He has a problem with women, too, and worse — he sweats.) The humour of the film turns their flaws into strengths, though, as they score the best lines, look the most like us and ruffle up the feathers of the media systems.

Tom Grunick (William Hurt) exists as a disruption to this complementarity. He is the presenter sent to news from the sports department — dumb but immaculate. While Aaron and Jane stand for journalistic rigour and depth, he stands for the facade; their knowledge is opposed to his style; their commitment his ambition; their substance his flash. All would be clear-cut except the film sets up its lesson by giving Jane the task of choosing between the two of them. For now Aaron and Tom are opposed over their desire of her. It is what sense each makes of her that indicates their diverse approaches to the medium of TV news. For Aaron, Jane stands for their shared belief in
the absolute possibility of transparently representing the “real” and the “truth”. For Tom, she’s enviable in her performance, one that he translates into an engulfing sexuality (“I’ve been wondering what it would be like to be inside all that energy.”)

Put this way it sounds as if the film “places” the female character according to what the male characters want of her. On one level it does only it’s redeemed by the diversity of these wants and her centrality to the narrative. Each occupies a different arena according to what they offer Jane — she desires Tom, while Aaron is a friend and partner at work. Jane’s dilemma is therefore not simply a choice of men, but of self-definition. She is playing out a drama of feminine identity; how to reconcile the sexual and the social. On another level, because Tom is set up as a problematic object of Jane’s desire (he stands for everything she despises), he becomes the mysterious “other” who must, somehow, be dealt with by the film. We do not only follow Aaron’s yearning look at Jane: it is relayed through her to Tom. He becomes the centre of visual fascination and object of investigation.

Tom’s success is offered as a token of television’s superficiality and decadence and, charted against Aaron’s demise, despite the latter’s greater knowledge and skill. As a comment on news production values, though, it cannot escape this structure of desire or the production values of the film. Tom becomes the centre of desire not only for Jane, but for us, too. In a film where there’s glaring absence of designer attics and warehouses, sci-fi streets and couture fashions, the presence of William Hurt as Tom fills the gap of spectacle, providing aquiline contours, squared shoulders and a smooth back to his jacket. We glimpse all the outfits and see him put it all together. He’s a living doll — clothed meticulously, he’s an identikit fantasy.

As Jane becomes enthralled, Aaron solidifies in his suspicion. And the power of his dislike of Tom is itself enjoyable enough to take us with him — almost. It is he who breaks the pattern of universal acclaim of Tom and eventually reveals to Jane his unethical work practices and emotional duplicity. Through Aaron, the message the film purveys, that stars are taking over the news to the detriment of “truth”, is voiced. And Tom is the evil he identifies. But even this cannot dent the spellbinding effect of Hurt on screen. As soon as Tom gives his splay-footed waddle or tries to eat a boiled egg, he breaks that spell, but framed as a news anchor or dressed in a tuxedo, once more, and each time, he takes the film over.

The film relies for its effect as social commentary in the belief that knowledge on its own will change people. It’s a kind of sub-text to what the characters say, but also of the way the narrative “shows up” the media and its values. Tell it like it is and we’ll understand. But here the star is more enticing than the “truth” about him or her. And that knowledge cannot dispel the persistent memory of Jane’s desire, however the object of it is devalued. Instead, we are left with a grief produced by the endurability of her desire and the impossibility of its finding an object.

GILLIAN SWANSON teaches in Humanities at Griffith University in Brisbane.

Rosa By Any Other Name


In 1898, Rosa Luxemburg entered into a marriage of convenience in order to obtain a German passport. Through a process of selection and omission, von Trotta completes this process of “naturalisation”. In doing so, she sacrifices much of the cultural complexity of Luxemburg’s development in favour of a too-beautiful cinematic equilibrium.

As in other of von Trotta’s films, Rosa Luxemburg brings together the broadly socio-political with the intimately psychological. Connections and contradictions are made within and between Luxemburg’s private and public characters. Believing in the “spontaneity of the masses”, yet arguing that the dialectic “takes time”, enduring long periods of imprisonment and yet dismissing her lover on the instant for infidelity, Rosa was an able and powerful theoretician and activist of international socialism who longed to have children and a committed relationship. She was a pacifist in every sense of the word, from her empathy with the natural world to her belief in bloodless revolution.

She cultivated a garden in the midst of her imprisonment and friendships in the midst of political differences. The film pays ample tribute to Rosa’s clarity, integrity and bravery, and imitates these qualities in its own form — which makes all the more jarring some of its significant absences. One is her twenty-year political comradeship and literary correspondence with Lenin, which survived their later disagreements over the relevance or otherwise of armed struggle. Another is her Jewish origins and their influence on her life.

Born Rosa Luksenberg into a profoundly and orthodox religious Jewish family, she modified her name to distance herself from family disapproval. Indeed, her death in 1919 at the hands of the far-right