

# Facts, but no framework

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*Shattered Glass*, written and directed by Billy Ray; *Veronica Guerin*, directed by Joel Schumacher; screenplay by Carol Doyle and Mary Agnes Donoghue

*Shattered Glass* and *Veronica Guerin* are two films set in the 1990s about real-life journalists, but with little to say about either the period or the profession.

*Shattered Glass* concerns itself with the undoing of Stephen Glass, a young writer for the once liberal *New Republic* magazine who was discovered in 1998 to have fabricated, in part or in whole, over two dozen articles. Many critics, as well as the film's production notes, point to the obvious parallels between the Glass incident and the more recent *New York Times* episode with Jayson Blair, the reporter who was found last spring to have invented or plagiarized portions of some three dozen articles.

Glass (Hayden Christensen) comes to the Clinton-era *New Republic*—which describes itself in the film as the “in-flight magazine of Air Force One” (the presidential jet)—as its youngest writer. He is soon dominating editorial board meetings with intriguing anecdotes about hot topics—scandalous activity at the young Republicans convention, a Clinton-Lewinsky paraphernalia trade fair, and a teenage hacker with an agent and a million-dollar contract from one of his corporate victims.

After each story pitch, Glass says coyly: “I probably won't even do anything with it.” His disarming approach has the effect of throwing raw meat to a pack of wolves.

Whenever any question is raised about his work, he asks with a wide-eyed flash of panic, “Are you mad at me?” His overly solicitous and obsequious manner results in staff and editor giving him the benefit of the doubt. Meanwhile, he is also moonlighting, writing articles for *Harper's*, *George* and *Rolling Stone* magazines.

While his youth, quick mind and emotional immaturity work in his favor, Glass must work long and feverish hours to invent back-up material for his fictitious stories, including false notes in his journal and phony phone numbers for his sources; he goes so far as to create a web site, albeit a primitive one, for the nonexistent software company in his hacker story.

The journalist is a protégé of (the late) Michael Kelly (Hank Azaria). After Kelly gets fired by publisher Martin Peretz, Glass's magic world starts to unravel. A technical writer from the now-defunct-online publication *Forbes Digital Tool* begins investigating Glass's hacker story and finds that it is one

invention on top of another. Kelly's successor, the more discerning Charles Lane (Peter Sarsgaard), dismisses Glass from the magazine after the extent of his duplicity comes to light.

*Shattered Glass* is only partially successful in its attempt to reveal Glass's psychological make-up. In the movie's production notes, Azaria describes the real Kelly's impression of Glass: “[H]e is literally a pathological liar, a sociopath, that he had no other motivation than being addicted to tricking people and the thrill of doing that. And that combined with a lot of ambition and of pressure that a lot of young bright people feel today to achieve. Kelly thought Glass had kind of a con man mentality. He became addicted to the con.”

Kelly, who was an embedded reporter with US forces and died during the invasion of Iraq, apparently did not explain to Azaria how he was so taken in by the con.

Nor does the director ask the question: How was the entire management of a prestigious publication buffaloed by an imaginative, but essentially juvenile, ruse? That neither this nor any other difficult issue is probed results in the movie's extreme blandness. It is an unwitting testimony to the debased cultural and political level of the media, a fact fully accepted by the creators of *Shattered Glass*.

Sounding naive to the point of insipidness, director Billy Ray states: “This is a cautionary tale—a story about the difference between being a good reporter and being a hot one... My hope is that people who see *Shattered Glass* will look at the craft of journalism with a different perspective. The *New Republic*, like the *New York Times* is not an institution, it is a staff of people who are in charge of an institution, and those people can have good or bad judgment. Stephen Glass took advantage of their bad judgment as well as their good nature.” This trite description of both publications as well as the media in general is misleading and false.

Even the film's fleeting representation of the firing of Kelly by Peretz—a mentor of former vice-president Al Gore—demonstrates that publications such as the *New Republic* are indeed institutions embodying definite class and political ideologies. In an oblique reference to the media's role in the right-wing campaign against Clinton, the film's production notes surmise that Peretz sacked the editor because “Kelly's column in the magazine became increasingly critical of Bill Clinton.”

The actions of journalists like Stephen Glass and Jayson

Blair, while grossly inappropriate, are hardly unknown within the media. The pressure to produce sensationalist articles by juicing up a story at whatever price is a commonplace occurrence. Though Glass and Blair invented or plagiarized stories, neither one set out deliberately to malign anyone or advance some hidden political agenda.

The same cannot be said about the majority of prestigious hacks who write for leading publications in the US, including the *New Republic* and the *New York Times*, whose writings have more pernicious and far-reaching consequences. Both publications, for example, have supported and encouraged—with whatever qualifications—the Bush administration’s illegal invasion and occupation of Iraq, already responsible for the deaths of tens of thousands. Where is the film exposing that scandal?

Far more serious than the sins of Glass and Blair against the basic rules of journalism is the corporate stranglehold over the major print and broadcast outlets. Increasingly, the media serves as the unabashed promoter of the undemocratic thrust of the government and corporations. Ignoring this context condemns *Shattered Glass* to be a sterile biopic.

*Veronica Guerin* recounts two years in the fevered life of the Irish journalist of the same name, leading up to her assassination in 1996. Guerin’s articles in the *Sunday Independent* focused on the growing heroin problem in Dublin.

Guerin (Cate Blanchett) is relentless in her pursuit of the drug lords, making her way through the bowels of the Irish capital, seemingly unaffected by gunshot wounds, severe beatings and threats against her husband and young son.

She is portrayed, rather unconvincingly, as a being from the realm of the superhuman or the super-reckless. The film’s production notes begin by breathlessly observing: “In the mid-1990s, Dublin was nothing short of a war zone, with a few powerful drug lords battling for control. Their most fearsome opponent was not the police but the courageous journalist Veronica Guerin.”

She is the Lone Ranger apparently, single-handedly marching through a “war zone” and taking on the drug mafia! Scenes depicting Guerin stomping over bodies of drug-addicted teenagers, stalking dangerous killers in an in-your-face manner or threatening her enemies when she is entirely vulnerable to retaliation, border on the ridiculous.

*Veronica Guerin* is the product of the collaborative effort of director Joel Schumacher (responsible for the misanthropic *Falling Down* and the morbid *8MM*, among other discreditable works) and producer Jerry Bruckheimer—the reigning king of empty Hollywood blockbusters.

By all accounts, the real-life Guerin was a courageous woman. Even if the film’s catalogue of her life’s activities were accurate, there is a palpably unhealthy element brought to the equation by the Schumacher/Bruckheimer team.

Though possessed of certain technical abilities—the film has an “art-house” look—Schumacher seems to relish any

opportunity to represent what he sees as the underbelly of humanity. The Guerin story in the director’s hands comes perilously close to nothing more than an opportunity to degrade audiences with scenes of toddlers trying to inject themselves with discarded needles, pushers-cum-snitches hanging out in brothels with dehumanized hookers, and mafia thugs mutilating their former cronies. As one reviewer puts it: “The movie seems as confident as its heroine only when it slips underground to the brothels and strip clubs. Seediness and violence are what really turn the movie on.”

The film’s script consists of a series of variations on the same theme, beginning and ending with the Guerin murder sequence. The finale shows the journalist’s bullet-riddled corpse in close-up, from the side and most gratuitously from the air. There is an element of morbid fascination, rather than sympathy, contained in these lingering shots, resembling tabloid crime-scene photography. This is followed by a predictable funeral scene during which an intertitle awards Guerin immortal status in the anti-drug crusade.

Sloppy and conformist portrayals abound. Blanchett’s Guerin bends everyone to her will—the police are helpful, the newspaper’s management her biggest cheerleader. Even the drug kingpin’s key operative gets seduced by her charms at the risk of meeting a bloody end.

“The drug war is global and any story with a hero or heroine is universal,” declares Schumacher in the film’s production information. For the director, the issue of drugs is more a demonized (or romanticized) thing-in-itself than a major social problem. His film makes no attempt to connect the business of drugs—blithely passing over the inhuman co-optation of young people into the drug underworld—with poverty and unemployment in Ireland. *Veronica Guerin* is too caught up in having its heroine vogue her way through minefields and human debris than in illuminating anything meaningful about Guerin’s accomplishments, whatever they really might be.



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