

Good Night, and Good Luck

david strathairn
patricia clarkson
george clooney
jeff daniels
robert downey jr.
frank langella

we will not walk in fear of one another

**good night,
and good luck.**



Here are a few useful terms that that you may find helpful:

- HUAC – House of Un American Activities Committee.
- McCarthy witch trials/McCarthy period – refers to the manner and time in which McCarthy was permitted to conduct his investigations.
- Functional approach – way of considering genre films from a perspective that draws on the social, political and cultural context of the time of production.

Now that you've watched the film, some of its key themes can be discussed:

- The importance of an independent media
- Government relationships with the media
- The role of the individual as a defender of civil liberties/freedoms

Can you think of others?

The film raises issues through telling the story of Ed Murrow and his colleagues. His story provides an interesting backdrop for discussing these points.

COLD WAR AND GOOD NIGHT, AND GOOD LUCK

The film is set during a period that sees the US ideologically opposed to Communist countries like the former USSR and China; this opposition was backed up with a mutual nuclear threat. The fear surrounding this threat in the US was extreme, and any behaviour or activity that was deemed to be threatening to the state was taken very seriously. This resulted in a climate of extreme paranoia - being branded as a communist or communist sympathiser was one of the worst possible things that could happen. It could result in individuals being ostracised, jobs being lost and it affected people from all walks of life.

The cultural impact of this paranoia can be explored through film genre theory. Considering genre from a functional approach we can consider some of the films made at the time. What is the functional approach? This means that examining a film's genre is not just about ticking off the elements that are likely to occur in a particular genre. For example, in westerns we might expect to see horses, a saloon, rifles, etc. The functional approach takes genre beyond this 'checklist' approach. It asks us to position films within the social and political context in which they were made. Filmmakers are part of the times in which they live, and influenced by them; functional theory examines how the ideas/concerns of their contemporary world appear in their work. So when considering films from this point of view genre isn't just about a range of items that signify a particular type of film, the film text also deals with, for example, the anxieties of the time.

For our purposes this deep fear of communism and the issues of who to trust and 'identification' of communists can be pointed to in a number of films made during this period, for example *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Siegel, 1956). The film looks at a sci-fi alien invasion; however, the aliens look just like everybody else. The same issue was raised with the paranoia about communism: how did you identify them? The extreme fear surrounding 'the enemy within' gave rise to slogans such as 'red under the bed', highlighting the personal and widespread perception of this fear. It is this climate that the events in *Good Night, and Good Luck* were a part of, and it is important to remember that this was a very real fear at the time.

During the Second World War Hollywood had produced films that were deliberately a part of the war effort, keeping the troops entertained at home and overseas with studios co-operating to provide entertainment involving some of their biggest stars. The McCarthy 'witch trial' looked for communists and communist sympathisers in all walks of life, and Hollywood was no exception. Hollywood produced some films under the direction of the government that were directly anti-communist, for example, *Big Jim McLain* (Ludwig, 1952). However, the main issue as far as McCarthy was concerned was those films that contained messages that were sympathetic to communism in some way.

Hollywood was also home to some oppositional voices. Remember, being against HUAC and McCarthy's approach was not the same as being a communist but to be seen as un-cooperative was to be 'unamerican' and meant that you were often branded a communist and were under extreme pressure to name others. A group of actors and other people that worked in the film industry, writers, directors and so on, were black-listed and spoke out against this treatment, becoming some of the most high profile voices against McCarthy. This was a risky business and could mean an end to your career.

AUDIENCE

The context for receiving news was very different than it is now. This is mostly because of the changes in technology and how this has affected the ways that news can be produced and distributed, e.g. cable, satellite, digital, national and local channels. At the time of *Good Night, and Good Luck* television had become a widespread medium in the US, although its way of delivering news was very different than that which we experience now. Think about the ways in which stories are presented to us, for example, images, news clips, graphics, correspondents in conversation with the studio, etc. How does this contrast with the approach taken by Murrow in the film? Would you watch a programme delivered in this way?

In the period of Ed Murrow there was not such a wide choice of television viewing and news and media was far less entertainment led than it is today; audience numbers were also very much larger for single broadcasts than they are now. This also helps to contextualise the power of the individual journalists like Murrow (especially when news was broadcast live), as well as the power of the networks. In addition this may also help us to understand the character of Murrow who considers it a responsibility to take the action he does; his allegiances are to the audience and to the truth, despite the potentially catastrophic risks to his career.



POINTS FOR DISCUSSION:

- Think about how the film develops a picture of Ed Murrow. What kind of character is he? How is this conveyed to us?
- Does the use of contemporary footage of McCarthy add anything to the film? How effective do you think this is?
- Why do you think the director George Clooney wanted to make this film?
- Does the film raise issues that still have relevance today? If so, what?
- 'The only thing that counts is the right to know, to speak, to think – that, and the sanctity of the courts. Otherwise it's not America.'

'We must not confuse dissent with disloyalty.'

Ed Murrow

Considering the above quotes from Murrow, can you understand his course of action?

What do you think of this representation of the journalist? Can you imagine a similar story working with a contemporary journalist? Do we feel the same about journalists now?

- You may wish to research some of these issues further: Use the internet to help you.

Author: Alice Crystal

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