

State of Play Study Notes



Directed by: Kevin MacDonald

Country/year: USA/UK/France, 2009

Certificate: 12

Running time: 127 mins

Suitable for: KS3, GCSE English, Citizenship, Media/Film Studies

Keywords: thriller, adaptation, conspiracy theory, politics, the media, surveillance

Synopsis:

An adaptation of the acclaimed 2003 British mini-series of the same name, *State of Play* is the first wholly fictional film from British documentary filmmaker Kevin MacDonald (*Touching the Void*, *One Day in September*, *The Last King of Scotland*).

The film is transported from the original setting of London and the Houses of Parliament to Washington DC's newsrooms and the corridors of Congress. Senator Stephen Collins is on the verge of confronting the country's questionable ethics on going to war when his assistant and lover is murdered. A scandal is about to emerge and he needs the help of old friend Cal McCaffrey (Russell Crowe) to keep the focus on the hunt for the murderer and away from his secret relationship with his assistant. McCaffrey is in the middle of investigating an apparently unrelated murder, but soon some worrying connections emerge that could implicate his powerful friend.

Introductory note

State of Play asks some interesting moral and ethical questions surrounding the role of the press and the power of politics, whilst satisfying as a tense conspiracy thriller and intriguing murder mystery. This film and its accompanying study notes can be used in lessons such as Media and Film Studies, English, Journalism and Politics.

Before viewing

Adapting a Story

It is a huge and often controversial task translating an original source (a book, a play, or in this case a mini-series) into a two-hour film. The transition of format from small to big screen forces inevitable compromises and invites comparison between the two.

1. The original mini-series 'State of Play' took place in London, but the film takes place in Washington. Why do you think the director made this decision? Remember also that the original was a critical and audience success.
2. What other films do you know of that have been 'transported' to a different city or country than the setting of the source material?
3. Look at Kevin MacDonald's filmography. Why do you think he may have chosen this as his first purely fictional big-screen movie?

After viewing

Star Studies

Looking at the casting of a film (and the filmography of the actors involved) can be a useful route when exploring a film in terms of genre and target audience

4. Brad Pitt and Edward Norton (memorable co-stars in Fight Club) were set to star in State of Play but after 'schedule clashes' and 'creative differences', Russell Crowe and Ben Affleck stepped in. One of the criticisms of the film is that Crowe and Affleck have unconvincing chemistry when together on screen. Do you think the film would have been better with Pitt and Norton? Would the target audience have been different? Who might you have cast instead?
5. The role of Cameron Lynne was played by Bill Nighy (Love Actually, Shaun of the Dead) in the original but by Helen Mirren in the film. What benefits do you think there may have been in casting Mirren in the role? Consider gender issues, Mirren's filmography and the film's target audience.

Politics

State of Play taps into contemporary political issues such as corruption, the role of the media and the ethics of going to war. But the world has changed even in the few years between the two versions of this story.

6. In the original, Collins risks his political career by speaking out against the greed of oil companies. This changes in the film; Collins speaks out against the immorality of war in the Middle-East. Think about when both versions of the story were made: Why has the political focus shifted?
7. How are the two sides of the American political system represented?

Generation Gap

Several professional attitudes towards investigative journalism emerge during the film, with McAffrey representing an old-fashioned, practical approach, Lynne as the hard-edged editor and Della Frye as the modern, technologically aware journalist.

8. What issues do these three journalists come into conflict over?
9. What words and adjectives might you use to describe these characters' individual approaches to journalism?
10. Do any of these characters 'draw the line' at certain points, or experience any moral or ethical quandaries?

Sub-Genre: Journalistic Thrillers

A sub-genre is a 'genre within a genre' – for example, 'stalk and slash' horror; 'slapstick' comedy; 'black' comedy; 'conspiracy' thriller; 'science-fiction' fantasy. There is a long line of conspiracy thrillers which revolve around the world of journalism and reporting.

11. Does State of Play adhere to the generic conventions of 'journalistic' thrillers?
 12. What conventions of the conspiracy thriller does State of Play feature?
 13. What character archetypes are featured in the film?
 14. Watch the trailers for the following 'journalistic' thrillers, then answer the questions below:
 - The Parallax View (1974)
 - All the President's Men (1976)
 - The Pelican Brief (1993)
 - The Insider (Michael Mann, 1999)
 - Shattered Glass (Billy Ray, 2003)
- a) What generic conventions do these trailers all share?
 - b) How do they compare to the trailer for State of Play?
 - c) What characteristics do all the protagonists seem to have and what narrative conventions seem to be present? (You may notice, incidentally, that the first three films listed below are all directed by the late Alan J. Pakula)

Suggested Activities

Adapt the Story

- Pick an original source that you know very well such as a TV series/serial/mini-series, a play, a novel or a film to adapt and then create a trailer or a treatment based on your proposed adaptation. Then...
- ...Write a production log or a proposal to a production company explaining what changes and alterations you would have to make to create an adaptation suitable for the big screen in terms of length and content
- EXTENSION: Adapt your source to suit a different or wider audience. For example, how might you make an adaptation of a cult graphic novel appeal to mainstream audiences? Or a film version of *Desperate Housewives* to appeal to a male audience?

Write an Exclusive

- Write as one of the journalists in the film
- Write a tabloid version and/or a broadsheet version. A tabloid version might focus on the seedier, more violent aspects whereas a broadsheet report may locate the story in relation to wider socio-political issues
- Write from a conservative and/or a liberal perspective