

2009-01-01

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### Recommended Citation

Brereton, P. (2009) Hollywood Representations of Irish Journalism: A Case Study of Veronica Guerin. *Irish Communications Review*, 11, pp. 104-14, 2009.

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# HOLLYWOOD REPRESENTATIONS OF IRISH JOURNALISM: A Case Study of Veronica Guerin

Pat Brereton

THIS PAPER EMANATES FROM an interest in how the journalist profession is represented on film. This discussion is framed, broadly, by an effort to gauge the performative nature of journalists, from 'hard-boiled' press hacks to egomaniacal TV reporters, while situating the vocation within conventional media studies, which privileges political and ethical indicators like 'the Fourth Estate' or as 'Public Watchdog'.

Most recently in the *Guardian*, Stephen Armstrong presented an overview of how journalists are portrayed on film (12 May 2008), while focusing on an ITV series *Midnight Man*, where the journalist starring James Nesbitt ends up literally on a rubbish heap looking for a story. Armstrong's opinion piece sites a long list of classics that foreground the role of the journalist, including *Superman* (1932), *His Girl Friday* (1940) (which Armstrong regards as the best) *Ace in the Hole* (1951), *All the President's Men* (1976), right up to *The Bourne Ultimatum* (2007) where a *Guardian* journalist was totally expendable in the pursuit of Jason Bourne's struggle to find his true identity. Meanwhile, Professor Brian McNair, who is currently writing a study of journalists on film, disagreed with Armstrong's overall estimation in a follow-up letter to the newspaper. McNair sites George Clooney's portrayal of Ed Murrow as near saintly in *Good Night and Good Luck* (2007) and asserts that the best journalist films which have stood the test of time are those, such as Oliver Stone's *Salvador* (1986) or Michael Winterbottom's *A Mighty Heart* (2007), which avoid stereotypes and engage with the complexity of the profession in an increasingly uncertain world.

Surprisingly within film studies there have been few academic studies of journalists on film, but in this paper I will focus on Irish journalism in particular and the iconic status of Veronica Guerin. The paper will try to uncover how the heroic/maverick journalist image is articulated and framed by two adaptations of her life, which in turn speak to recurring representations of normative journalistic practice. Guerin's representation on film certainly foregrounds several long standing media debates around the ethics of performance and deserves close attention.

Both films are based on the true story of a *Sunday Independent* journalist who was assassinated by drug dealers in 1996, a killing that has had a major impact on Ireland. (It is interesting to note than another journalist Martin O'Hagan, killed by Loyalists in the North of Ireland while working for the *Sunday World*, has achieved comparatively little celebrity status and is all but forgotten.) What was it about the Veronica Guerin story in particular that captured the imagination of Ireland and the world? At the outset one could suggest that this heroic and universal story of human sacrifice is somewhat reminiscent of a recurring trope of an Irish self-sacrificing mythos and played into stereotypical clichés for an American director to draw upon.

The narrative conforms to a ‘feel good’ Hollywood brand of individualised heroes fighting for justice. Only through strong individuals making a stand for what is transparently ‘good and right’, will change for the better take place. Such simplistic narratives usually privilege personal agency while negating the effectiveness of systemic re-organization in the fight against political and other societal problems. Re-affirming ‘screen theory’ debates from the 1970s, the Hollywood narrative structure – with its need for clearly identifiable heroes and villains and transparent progression of human agency towards the resolution of problems – is considered incapable of radical or counter-hegemonic articulation of social or political realities. Nevertheless, one wonders if this apparent structural difficulty also belies a more complex engagement in representing the journalistic performance of this tragic heroine, much less explaining the pleasure and engagement of such a storyline for an Irish audience.

### A Brief Overview of Journalists in Crime Film

In defining and framing constitutive attributes of the performance of journalism on screen, film analysis might set out to explore how representations and characterisations of particular aspects of the journalistic persona, including race, gender, class, or some specific aspect of professional practice, are represented and performed on film. The defining attributes encoded would be examined to tease out a taxonomy around what is normative or aberrant. Within journalistic representation, we could also trace which modalities of behaviour are promoted, encouraged or critiqued within filmic representations over a period of time. Furthermore, in this exploration we could call on a pre-occupation of media studies for showing how popular texts can be read as a barometer of changing ideological and consensual values and normative behaviour protocols over a period of time. The crime genre is often read as the nearest equivalent format which deals specifically with journalistic investigations alongside police investigations.

Historians of film genres categorise the 1930s and 40s ‘policers’ as the classic period involving stories of police investigations, evoking a ‘law and order’ thesis, frequently designed to preserve the ideological status-quo.<sup>1</sup> The genre usually focuses on a male private detective trying to solve some enigma or other. A range of narrative devices are used to take audiences through the labyrinthine under-world of crime and deviancy, where more normative behaviour is sometimes difficult to determine. But of course this journey provides vicarious pleasures for audiences and is testament to the genre’s enduring appeal. The journalist is often situated as a key agent in such investigation, as exemplified by a growing back catalogue of Hollywood films.<sup>2</sup>

Classic narratives which explicitly foreground journalistic agency include the non-crime narrative *Citizen Kane*, which has a near-anonymous journalist who becomes a

<sup>1</sup> For example there are extensive studies of British crime drama from the benevolent representations of *Dixon of Dock Green* compared with the harsher, American influenced (*French Connection* et al) *The Sweeney*, which emanates from 1970s popular cultural norms.

<sup>2</sup> For example some other press/journalist driven Hollywood films include: *Ace in the Hole (The Big Carnival)*, 1951, Billy Wilder; *Absence of Malice*, 1981, Sydney Pollack; *Between the Lines*, 1977, Joan Michlin Silver; *Circle of Deceit*, 1988, Volker Schlöndorff; *Citizen Kane*, 1940, Orson Welles; *Cry Freedom*, 1985, Richard Attenborough; *Defence of the Realm*, 1985, David Drury; *Foreign Correspondent*, 1940, Alfred Hitchcock; *His Girl Friday*, 1940, Howard Hawks; *Hudsucker Proxy*, 1994, Joel Coen; *Salvador*, 1983, Oliver Stone; *Shock Corridor*, 1963, Samuel Fuller; *The Front Page*, 1931, Lewis Milestone; *The Killing Field*, 1984, Roland Joffe; *The Man who shot Liberty Valence*, 1962, John Ford; *The Philadelphia Story*, 1940, George Cukor; *The Quiet American*, 1956, Joseph Mankiewicz; *The Sweet Smell of Success*, 1957, Alexander MacKendrick.

conduit for the various, often conflicting stories that are told on the journey towards discovering the meaning of 'Rosebud', the last word spoken by the eccentric media mogul, who was based on the real-life press-baron William Randolph Hearst. The enigma of a man's life becomes the focus of the story and a journalistic investigation is used as a narrative device to anchor and progress the story.

Conspiracy thrillers became more dominant after the Watergate scandal in the 1970s which spawned many Hollywood films, most notably *All the President's Men* with Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman playing the two heroic investigative *Washington Post* reporters, whose work lead to the impeachment of President Nixon. This important and oft-cited journalist film uses celebrity method actors to frame the performance of journalism. Hoffman in a recent documentary spoke of how they both learned each other's lines, so that they could almost merge into one investigative journalist. Bonnie Brennen (2003) asserts how the film normalises the ideology of professional practice which privileges 'hard work' and 'sweat not melodrama', using a 'three-point confirmation of sources'. Discovering the truth and uncovering a hidden mystery echoes a wide number of well-delineated film stories from the most prevalent crime detectives to the linguistic dexterity of the judiciary and courtroom dramas. Journalism serves its rightful place as protector of the innocent and by exposing corruption in many of these stories.

A common trope that pervades much of these investigations is the price that has to be paid to secure information to solve the enigma. Often as a consequence the law-abiding investigator becomes equally corrupt and decadent, as exemplified in other genres like westerns, e.g. *The Searchers* (1956), or war films, e.g. *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Meanwhile for crime-busters or journalists like Guerin, as we discover later, their domestic and private lives often suffer greatly, on film at least, because of their single-minded drive to do their job as they see fit, rather than brook any interference from authorities.

More recently with the rise of so-called postmodernist texts, which have become more ironic, self-reflexive and parodic, while often displaying a breakdown of coherent identity or agency, the role of such characters have become much more problematic. See for example recent neo-noir detectives like *Memento* (2003) or the journalistic representation in *Three Kings* (1999). In the latter ostensibly anti-war film, portraying dramatic incidents with a backdrop of the first Gulf War, a minor role is afforded to a female journalist Adriana Cruz played by Nora Dunn, who is striving to attain professional recognition. Nonetheless, her suspect motivations are clearly questioned and parodied throughout the film.<sup>3</sup> For instance in one scene, when she happens upon an ecological disaster with birds coated in oil, she cries tears of emotional empathy on witnessing such a disaster. Yet she quickly concludes that such a story is 'so done' and therefore has lost any significance. Hopefully less cynically, many working journalists can find a balance between the changing fashions and fads around what are considered commercially successful news values.

More locally, actresses like Cate Blanchett and Joan Allen must learn (often using the sort of method-style acting displayed in *All the President's Men*) how to embody the real life, flesh and blood journalistic persona of Guerin. We can also trace a range of

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<sup>3</sup> Incidentally, as my cursory trawl of film history suggests, most successful journalistic representations on film tend to be male driven; female professionals on the other hand tend to be more suspect as *Three Kings* suggests and this is also implicit in ways with the representations of Veronica Guerin.

other performative indicators, which are used to represent her as a journalist. Obvious characteristics might include the use of a notebook or proficient typing skills,<sup>4</sup> or even the technique used by the actors to interview people. All of these skills are beyond normative everyday practices and all help to foreground and sometimes exaggerate how journalism is performed, while helping to illustrate what is valorised or not. Finding appropriate attributes or even visual correlatives to represent the profession becomes the actor's primary *modus operandi*. Yet presumably much of the vocational day to day work of any profession, including journalism, remains indistinguishable, being no different from other 'desk jobs'. However, as discovered when talking to prospective journalist students, many are attracted by the 'excitement' and 'fame' of the profession and are only disabused of such impressions after entering the workplace. Consequently identifying in detail how aspects of role-play are dramatically realised, while promoting a misleading affirmation of fame-journalism, is worth investigating and provide rich insights into normative (fictionalised) professional patterns.

### Journalism and Cultural Studies

Keith Windschuttle in 1998 attacked the use of cultural and media studies in teaching journalism programmes in Australia. In a special issue on 'Media Wars' in the journal *Media International Australia*, he called for a return to what he believes to be the 'Holy Trinity' of journalism education: an empirical method and 'realist' worldview; an ethical orientation to audiences and the 'public interest'; and a commitment to clear writing. (1999: 9) Like many other critics, Windschuttle is particularly concerned about the influences of poststructuralist theory on media analysis and dismisses cultural studies as a body of theory that is hopelessly relativist, denying the existence of history (which it certainly does not) and actively de-skills the students it is supposed to train.<sup>5</sup>

Graeme Turner counters however that:

journalists could acknowledge that their profession systematically produces an insider discourse, which privileges certain kinds of information, certain kinds of sources of information, and ultimately produces their fetish – *the figure of the journalist*. [italics added] More than any of the academic discourses, journalism over-invests in its occupational mythologies (2000).

Turner's exposition around the mythic figure of the journalist has important implications for the performability of such a role within film.

John Hartley continues in a similar vein, affirming that the

occupational ideology [of hard/serious journalism] is founded on violence, which is a primary theory of journalism for practitioners. Its basic thesis is

<sup>4</sup> An anecdote regarding one of our multimedia students at Dublin City University, who as part of their work placement helped to design a computer programme to present the illusion of Ms. Blanchett typing. While this SFX display of journalistic competency was not used in the end, the story signals the importance of such display as an index of professional competency. Of course many working practitioners use two fingers and have no shorthand skills, but this does not compromise their overall journalist performance. On the big screen however, finding effective indicators of performative journalism is what matters.

<sup>5</sup> As we know semiotics, structuralism, deconstruction and most particularly postmodernism have all come in for ridicule as obscure, complicated and, it is often strongly implied, bogus influences on the teaching of the humanities. (Turner, 2000).

that truth is violence, reality is war, news is conflict. It's not just a theory either – it's a desire. The demand of the reading public, the need for democratic accountability and the ideal type of the journalist, all converge in a passion for conflict. If journalism is a 'profession' at all, then it is the profession of violence. Journalism's heroic figures are the combative interviewer who won't take no for an answer, the war junkie following death around the world, the adversarial investigative reporter, the crusading paper or programme. The good journalistic watchdog fights for stories that someone doesn't want told; the best stories are those that expose violence and corruption concealed within seemingly respectable institutions, from tin-pot dictatorships to children's homes. Journalism is combat (Hartley, 2000).

Hartley sets such hard (violent) journalism in opposition to what he describes as the 'smiling professions' – the service/ PR industries – which interface with the public in the name of pleasure, entertainment, attractiveness, appeal and who popularise knowledge which is routinely despised by 'serious journalists'. This dichotomy probably applies to Irish journalism also, alongside the ever-present issue of the commercialization of Hollywood and its implications for indigenous filmic output. The Veronica Guerin story polarized such academic debates between tabloid sensationalism and the appeal of crime stories to sell newspapers at one level, as against the Fourth Estate role of 'serious' journalism to explain crime in Ireland on the other.

### **Journalistic Representations of Veronica Guerin**

*When the Sky Falls* was the first filmic take on the Veronica Guerin story, with all the names changed, to avoid any direct correlation. The tag line on the video reads: '1996, a reporter uncovered the truth, now it's going to bury her'. Joan Allen plays Guerin, Patrick Bergin plays Detective Mackie and Pete Postlethwaite plays a small time criminal. The blurb on the VHS copy reads:

Dublin 1996. In a city where criminals are getting away with murder and the IRA is getting the blame, lone crime reporter Sinead Hamilton (Joan Allen) is determined to reveal what no one else has the courage to face. Aided by a veteran cop (Patrick Bergin) Hamilton uncovers a conspiracy so vast it promises to shake Ireland to its core. But when every truth is wrapped in a lie and every lead is part of a set-up, every step she takes might be her last.

This more authentic yet strangely dispassionate version, fails to connect with audiences on many counts as an effective fictional narrative. Nevertheless, it provides some sharper dialogue for any journalist debate, with a more explicit critique of the role of the '*Sunday Globe*' where the Guerin character eventually works. Much of the discursive analysis in the film is frequently delivered in a non-dramatic and low key fashion. As a consequence, this version got a poor press and did badly at the box office, while the later big budget *Veronica Guerin* became much more successful on all fronts.

Comparing the two filmic versions of the story, this latter Hollywood cinematic treatment wins hands down. While *Veronica Guerin* is certainly compromised in many ways, at least it provides a stronger sense of drama, empathy and enjoyment. Production started on March 4th on a budget of \$17 million and wrapped up early

in June 2002. The film's commercial success was registered by passing the €4.1 million mark by the end of 2003 in Ireland, higher than any other 'Irish' film.<sup>6</sup> The casting of Cate Blanchett in the title role and her proficient Irish accent and likeness are considered by many as major reasons for its success in Ireland. Earlier candidates who might have taken the role include Winona Ryder, or Jodie Foster. Star theory and the 'commutation test'<sup>7</sup> in particular can be used to gauge what Blanchett brings to the role compared with other contenders and can in turn be compared with Joan Allen's more staid and less celebrity-driven performance.

Film academic Harvey O'Brien suggests that writer Michael Sheridan was allegedly consulting with Guerin on a movie script. She specifically instructed him not to turn her life story into a glamorised tale of liberal martyrdom, but rather hoped for a story of how her journalistic crusade blew the lid on the Dublin drug trade and the high-level criminals behind it. The resulting film is *When the Sky Falls*, and it remains well meaning but poorly organised, according to O'Brien, with no sentimental overstatement. Whereas in the more 'Hollywood treatment' of *Veronica Guerin*, the 'darker and more potentially irresponsible traits of the obsessive journalist are less exposed'. The Blanchett representation had quite literally become a Hollywood martyr, while clearly concentrating on telling a 'heroic story'.<sup>8</sup>

Film reviews like much journalism is often dismissed by high-brow academic film criticism as disposable and frequently pandering to audience desire for neat evaluations, which assist punters in making choices over which film to attend. However, less recognition is afforded to how such analysis help shape, frame and even negotiate the multiple meanings of mass produced Hollywood, much less more art-house films. Furthermore, I would suggest that reviews frequently present the most interesting and incisive commentary on a film's nascent pleasures, while constructed within very tight time pressures. Nonetheless, such pronouncements require extensive contextualisation and unpacking of the various rhetorical and emotional journalistic conventions embedded within film reviews, in an attempt to tease out their meanings. A flavour of journalistic responses to *Veronica Guerin* includes the following:

*RTE Interactive* gives it four stars but worries about its 'Blockbuster pedigree', nevertheless the review considers it as 'an honest attempt' which tries to come to grips with 'a complex individual', while remaining dismissive of the 'over use' of Irish based jigs and reels and the film's ending, which it claims will irritate many.

The *Guardian* is much more dismissive, affirming how the film crams in every 'Oirish cliché in the book' and remains another 'self congratulatory anti-drug movie'?

*The Observer* suggests that so many students go into journalism because of 'heroic' journalists like in *All the Presidents Men*. Philip French goes on to suggest that this film should have romantic teenagers (following Cate Blanchett as a vital presence) lining up

6 What constitutes an Irish film of course remains contentious. The usual criteria used by EU research focuses on where finance for the film comes from. Consequently there are hardly any big budget Irish films. (See Flynn and Brereton, 2007).

7 The test tries to evaluate what an actor or star brings to a film by imagining the film with another actor and comparing their relative merits. (See Brereton, 2001).

8 See Harvey O'Brien's review in <http://homepage.eircom.net/~obrienh/veronica>

to get into journalism school. [Incidentally from a feminist perspective, mention is made by the critic of an odd aversion to a 'particular form of aggressive feminism that (apparently) has sprung up in Catholic countries such as Ireland and Italy'].

www.freemedia.com writes of Guerin defending the 'public's right to know'. She was murdered two days before she was due to address a conference in London on: '[D]ying to tell a story: Journalists at Risk'. The then Taoiseach, John Bruton described her death as 'an attack on democracy'.

Such reviews seek also to frame the role of journalism within contemporary society and fictional representations, like a TV crime series *Proof*, which also foregrounded the role of journalists in solving crime, remain a preoccupation of much analysis in the print media in particular.<sup>9</sup> However to fully appreciate the textual meanings of such representations of journalists, one has to appreciate the social contexts and conventions in which such representations are framed.

### Social Realist Conventions

From the poetic documentation of De Valera's 1930s Ireland, as represented in *Man of Aran*, to the recent revisionist appraisal of civil war politics in *Michael Collins* (1996) and *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* (2006), to what could be regarded as the more contemporary Americanisation of urban Irish identity in *Veronica Guerin*, Irish film has always been critiqued for its lack of historical accuracy, while at the same time questioned for its consensus-driven approach to important historical markers of Irish nationalism and identity. While indigenous culturally-sponsored Irish film is seen to have a more nuanced handle on such complex debates, the more derisory commercially-driven product is said to simply please its audience and worries less, if at all, about the comprehensiveness of its historical or factual truth telling. Dramatic narrative truth and believability is what matters in the end, rather than a coherent foregrounding of a totalising truth, or worrying excessively over historical accuracy. Witness recent Irish filmic debates regarding Sheridan's *In the Name of the Father* (1994) portrayal of the father and son serving time in the same prison – which didn't actually happen but was considered necessary to dramatise and heighten the emotional and political engagement of the film. Or for that matter, Neil Jordan's *Michael Collins* or Ken Loach's *The Wind that Shakes the Barley* and their differing heroic valorisation of a highly contested period for Irish nationalism, which had even more substantial historical errors to draw from.

<sup>9</sup> In many ways *Proof*, a fictional TV series on RTE (Jan/Feb 2004 Monday 9.30) – reminiscent of *Midnight Man* and its evocation of the journalist on ITV – also provides an interesting extension of the journalistic exploration into the Dublin criminal underworld. Terry Corcoran (Finbar Lynch) is a journalist who looks like 'he sleeps in a dumpster'. When we first meet him he has cost his newspaper millions in damages and is being berated by his soon to be ex-boss for the 'trail of shite' he always leaves behind him. [A conventional Hollywood representation one might suggest of a rebel and protector of the innocent.]. Shane Hegarty in *The Irish Times* Jan 10th is however less than impressed with its 'music-video style that is more pleased with itself than it should be'. The series, he argues, 'flinches every convention of the urban thriller, but forget that these apply to the bigger, more complex cities of Britain and the US, so that when they are flung into a smaller pot they just won't fit'. *The Sunday Independent* review by Eilis O'Hanlon, titled 'Journalist Heroes? Aw, Shucks' also blames the aforementioned *All the Presidents Men* and the conscious creation of heroes. Before then in Hollywood she argues (with no textual evidence to back up to this contentious point) that they were mostly portrayed as unprincipled, drunken, lying shysters. Now we have good guys like Gabriel Byrne in *Defence of the Realm*. *Proof*, she concludes is in the 'same mould' as *Veronica Guerin*.

Generically, *When the Sky Falls* fits more neatly into the crime genre format with highly conventional and stereotypical evocations of criminals and the police. In particular Detective Mackie (Patrick Bergin) is represented as totally frustrated in his attempts to capture the criminals and blames resources being switched to protect the border with the North of Ireland. Like many Hollywood crime-busters, the detective becomes as devious and ruthless as the criminals, supporting the ethical position that the 'end justifies the means'. At one stage he complains to his superiors, in no uncertain terms, how 'if I had more manpower, rather than pissing about at the border', he could do his job and they would not 'look like fools' in the courts. In total frustration, he ends up asserting that 'if I had my way, I would put them up against the wall and shoot them'. Reminiscent of films like *The Untouchables* (1987), but lacking its ethical values, Mackie calls on his fellow officers to follow him in an attempt to capture the enemy, while citing the slogan over the police station which translates: 'let justice be done or the sky falls'.

Later Mackie helps Guerin get her story and assist in the 'fight against crime', but cursorily warns her that 'it could be dangerous'. That's okay, our intrepid journalist retorts, reminiscent of so many action adventure danger-junkies and echoes an ever-present generic convention of heroes who need excitement and danger above all else. Furthermore, at the arranged meeting with the IRA (Irish Republican Army), Guerin is informed that 'their methods may be different but their goals are the same' – namely getting crime and drugs off the streets. Earlier however it is suggested that she 'crossed the line' of an impartial journalist by becoming involved with an anti-drugs march. Later on getting her well deserved award for services to her profession, she pontificates that 'journalists should not be driven by intimidation' and that in Ireland 'we work under the most restrictive libel laws in the world', which makes it very hard for 'serious crime journalists to do their work'.

Unlike this provocative discursive analysis of journalism, *Veronica Guerin* provides numerous incidents which suggests dramatic fictional licence and produces some strange contemporary inaccuracies.

*The Tony Gregory representation:* Everyone in Ireland has knowledge of the public persona of the late Independent and anti-establishment Dublin inner city member of the Dáil. Hugh Linehan in a review for the *Irish Times* on 10/1/2004 sarcastically focuses on the 'plummy-voiced, tie-wearing Tony Gregory played by Garreth Keogh, who managed to rewrite the Constitution with a stroke of the pen while accepting the rapturous applause of the entire Oireachtas'. Such dramatic licence is only to be expected, the critic concludes in the Disney-fied versions of recent Irish history. Gregory, as back-bencher TD and political voice of Dublin's north inner-city is afforded the importance of a powerful Government establishment figure, I suppose, to explain the story for non-Irish audiences who require clear signifiers of officialdom.<sup>10</sup> Whereas in *When the Sky Falls* such obvious inaccuracies are carefully avoided, the latter film fails to endear wider audiences with its more authentic documentary feel.

*Heroic characterisation:* Many critics have problems with understanding the psychology and motivation of Guerin, both in real life as well as in these filmic representations.

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<sup>10</sup> It is somewhat ironic in many 'pro-Irish' dramas on the Northern Irish Troubles that authentic 70s costuming of Irish 'victims' with their colourful shirts and flared trousers further serve to stereotype their 'lower class' and sartorial inelegance, compared with the more conventional and classically suited police class who are not locked inside a style time-warp.

For some she remains enigmatic, playing off the well trodden Christian myth of martyrdom. Some even wonder if there is some evidence almost of a 'death instinct' as part of a fatal flaw in her character. Was she naive or simply wilful in taking on the crime bosses in Ireland? Many critics affirm that her fictional character seemed to lack emotional depth, remaining a cipher, rather than a fully rounded agent of change. In particular her screen husband and family are poorly sketched out and there is no counterbalancing back-story line to offset the universal narrative of individual sacrifice and justice.

*Representations of other journalists:* There is a very negative representation of what is sometimes pejoratively described as 'hack journalism'. In both versions, Guerin is critiqued for not having the proper tools or skills to perform the lofty vocational role of a journalist. Yet she appears relatively well balanced with the requisite transferable skills for the profession; including passion, an inquiring mind and great tenacity among others, while at the same time foregrounding her logical business acumen, acquired through her earlier bookkeeping training.

Unlike *Citizen Kane*, which uses various memories and recreations by former friends and family, and even still acknowledges that these cannot explain the enigma of a life's work, such a conventional narrative structure can hardly hope to provide fresh insights into Guerin's motivation or rationale. What is omitted or ignored because of economies of time and conventional logics of classic narrative exposition, results in a filmic structure which is incapable of providing a more nuanced character and motivational study. The conventional Hollywood narrative trajectory simply requires representational obstacles to help question the motivation and actions of the hero. While her family does not adequately supply such conflict, other journalists serve this narrative function and become even more denigrated as a result.

What defines a good journalist remains problematic and often buried within the relentless drive of the story. The *Observer* review cites how in the film there is contempt for the majority of her fellow journalists who steered clear of potentially dangerous controversy while viewing her as a 'grandstanding outsider'. Some of the begrudging journalistic hacks appear to spend all of their time in the pub, somewhat reminiscent of a long tradition of Irish extras in several classic Irish films, including *The Quiet Man* and *Ryan's Daughter*. A female hack quips that she should spend some of her insurance money to do a course in 'proper journalism'. Such savage backbiting is also echoed in *When the Sky Falls*, when another journalist on a crime scene suggests to another hack that her employers would probably give her a bigger photograph with her copy than the well-known criminal, Martin Cahill ('The General'), who had just been murdered. Such begrudgery might perversely be regarded as endorsing a pervasive anti-intellectualism and an explicit criticism of non-celebrity journalists, since such sentiments are strongly criticised by the film. These representations help articulate a range of regressive stereotypes concerning the role and function of journalism, as reflected by the Australian 'media wars' cited above.

A journalist who worked with Independent Newspapers at the time suggests that such demonisation of other journalists fitted into a general movement against established journalistic practice and against those who represented the older and less overtly performative craft with its core values of objectivity, impartiality, comment free copy etc. This impression is picked up by the Emily O'Reilly biography and its articulation of the newspaper's culpability in her death. O'Reilly (a well known Irish journalist and more recently Ombudsman) incidentally did some extra scripting for one of the films as well

as writing a book on Guerin's life.<sup>11</sup> O'Reilly focuses on Vincent Browne, the *Irish Times* columnist who wrote at the time: 'the killing of Veronica Guerin, outrageous, abominable and tragic though it may be in personal terms, in no way compromises the freedom of the press in holding institutions of power accountable'. Browne stressed that the 'investigation of crime was tangential to the main role of the press. The police, the courts and the prison system are in place to look after the abuse of power on the part of crime bosses. Journalism's business meanwhile is to hold these institutions accountable for the way they cope with the crime bosses and the crime phenomenon' (O'Reilly, 1999: 47). This article was written two days after her death and caused a public furore. Soon after Browne 'apologised for his suggestion that her death may not have been directly linked to her work', but he did not withdraw his comments however, according to O'Reilly, about the 'proper role of journalism' (O'Reilly, 1999: 48).

### The Hollywood Ending

Closure and endings are considered to have important ideological effects for audiences by promoting and reaffirming the status quo. The hegemonic 'Law and Order' thesis, as characterised in much crime drama is certainly affirmed through the voice-over in *Veronica Guerin* by the sympathetic police officer Chris Mulligan, played by Don Wycherley. The ending serves to legitimate her death/martyrdom with the evil criminals finally captured and brought to book, which is reminiscent of classic moralistic 1930s and 40s gangster films. Her death, the voice-over affirms, caused national outrage and led to a government crackdown on organised crime that netted more than 150 arrests. This valorisation of her heroic influence on the Irish body politic and the textual citing of the large number of journalists killed elsewhere in the world draws on the twin Hollywood emotions of deep empathy and universal justice, which is all but avoided in *When the Sky Falls*.

At a formal aesthetic (if apolitical) level, one is struck by the musical soundtrack's ability to increase the emotional excess of the final shooting of our heroine, an outcome that has already been presented at the start of *Veronica Guerin*, designed for narrative exegesis and also to produce a more operatic expression of mythic resonance. From an Irish filmic perspective, Jim Sheridan comes to mind through his mastery of such excess, with *In the Name of the Father* (1993) or *In America* (2003) among others. In this Hollywood treatment the emotional effect is reinforced by an unseen boy singing the potent Irish ballad *The Fields of Athenry* as well as the hypnotic voice of Sinéad O'Connor, while the audience is visually treated to a birds-eye view looking down on the Naas road near Dublin, as her body lies in a painterly repose with her eyes wide open, taking on our fears of mortality. Her body is symmetrically positioned in her sporty red car through an open sun-roof, connotating at one level her brash fame-driven style of tabloid journalism, framed by other less distinguished vehicles, with their occupants providing witness to such a tragic and violent death. Whereas in *When the Sky Falls*, the recreation of her death is less dramatic, both aurally and visually, exemplified by her car, sans sunroof; hence the similar birds-eye view lacks the former's cinematic potency.

<sup>11</sup> O'Reilly's opening salvo in her study is a quote from Guerin's editor in the *Sunday Independent* Aengus Fanning: '[M]ost Newspapers might see journalism as a higher calling and the market may be incidental. I think we live or die by the market'. Guerin began her career in journalism relatively late in life in 1990 with the *Sunday Business Post*. In 1993 she moved to the *Sunday Tribune* and the following year to the *Sunday Independent*.

In conclusion, the fictional Guerin remains a generic rebel outside the law and is somewhat reminiscent of the iconic tragic heroines in feminist films like *Thelma and Louise* (1991); her speeding offences necessitated her final court appearance. Her mother, played by Brenda Flicker, asks a priest at the start of *Veronica Guerin* to pray that she would lose her licence. Ironically her minor miracle as she emotes in being let off such offences by the judge leads to her murder. In the long pantheon of Irish martyrs there are so few female examples; consequently gender remains a unique feature of this tale. Finally her dramatic killing legitimates an acceptable form of [Irish] voyeurism, reminiscent of the ur-American spectacle around the murder of JFK for instance, projecting a dramatic fictionalised national simulacrum for the violent world we live in. Hollywood treatment helps to frame this tragic Irish story in both universal and mythic terms. In Ireland where martyrdom and death have been celebrated as part of a religious, political and historical ritual, such a Hollywood film helps to reinvigorate an Irish mythos using global characteristics of criminality and the striving of contemporary public watchdogs to 'do the right thing'. *Veronica Guerin* most especially provides a potent journalistic mythos of heroic sacrifice, which emanates through a noble line of Irish martyrs. But whether we know any more about the real life story of the Irish journalist remains highly questionable.

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## [Select Journalist Filmography]

- A Mighty Heart* (2007) Michael Winterbottom
- All the President's Men* (1976) Alan J Pakula
- Citizen Kane* (1941) Orson Welles
- Defence of the Realm* (1985) David Drury
- Three Kings* (1999) David O Russell
- Veronica Guerin* (2003) Joel Schumacher
- When the Sky Falls* (1999) John McKenzie