

Telling the Truth

Or not

SHATTERED GLASS: Written and directed by Billy Ray, based on an article by Buzz Bissinger. Producers, Craig Baumgarten, Adam Merims, Gaye Hirsch, Tove Christensen. Executive producers, Tom Cruise, Paula Wagner, Michael Paseornek, Tom Ortenberg. Music, Mychael Danna. Cinematography, Mandy Walker. Editor, Jeffrey Ford. Production design, François Séguin. Costumes, Renée April. Starring Hayden Christensen and Peter Sarsgaard. With Chloë Sevigny, Rosario Dawson, Melanie Lynskey, Hank Azaria and Steve Zahn. Lions Gate Films, 2003. PG-13. 103 minutes.

If I say this is a more “straight” film than ordinarily plays at the Bijou, I hope you will not think I mean “straight” as opposed to “gay” but rather “straight” as opposed to “hip.” *Shattered Glass* tells its story in a straightforward narrative manner, with nary an ironic nod. It is the formal exposé of journalist Stephen Glass, a liar of the first magnitude, who believed his own bullshit so deeply that he wrote it as truth and persuaded his editors at *The New Republic* magazine to treat it as such.

Glass (Hayden Christensen) cleverly bypassed the BS detectors of at least two righteous editors, Michael Kelly (Hank Azaria) and Chuck Lane (Peter Sarsgaard). He short-circuited the magazine’s fact-checking apparatus by making up his reporter’s notes, for one. Exactly how this troubled young man found his calling as a rogue reporter for an influential national magazine is disturbing, because the only safeguard most publications have that they are not being lied to by their reporters is what used to be called “good faith.”

Sure, there have always been hucksters and flim-flam men, but lately it seems the

pressure of deadline-driven, highly competitive, big city news machines has produced a bumper crop of lying reporters. Glass is one of the most egregious. Over the course of his several years at the magazine, he made up a number of stories.

The best thing about the way the actual editor of the real magazine handled the 1998 scandal was to deeply investigate every story Glass had written and then reveal in the next issue that Glass had partially or wholly made up more than two-thirds of his stories the magazine had published — 27 of the 41. Would-be journalists as well as editors, publishers and writers working in the field should see this cautionary tale, but the issues it raises are too important to leave to industry oversight alone.

Hollywood has long cast its glamorous sheen on print, radio and television reporting, but with 1976’s *All the President’s Men* about the Nixon-era Watergate scandal uncovered by *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein, such films became more relevant to contemporary issues. Good films such as *Broadcast News*, *The China Syndrome*, *The Insider*, *Medium Cool*, *Network*, *Primary Colors*, *Quiz Show*, *The Truman Show*, *Welcome to Sarajevo* and *Veronica Guerin* rightly depict the best and worst of mass media. Undoubtedly you can add another 10 or 20 films to this list.

We live in a mediated world. Increasingly, mass media determines what news we will learn about, while “reality” television has hopelessly blurred the lines between news and entertainment. Glass operated right in that no man’s land. He juiced up his stories so they would have more reader appeal. He invented colorful characters to add human interest. He imagined behaviors and events that did not happen. He wanted to entertain readers and please the publisher and editors he worked for. He was riding high.



STEPHEN GLASS (HAYDEN CHRISTENSEN) HAS FINALLY PUSHED HIS EDITOR, CHUCK LANE (PETER SARSGAARD), OVER THE EDGE IN THIS SCENE.

JONATHAN WENK, LIONS GATE FILMS, 2003.

Sarsgaard does a terrific job of playing the tough guy who finally heeds his inner warning systems and begins looking at this 25-year old wonderkind. Christensen is notably weasly as a superficial hot shot

who eludes every effort to pin him down. The excellent Steve Zahn plays the tenacious writer for *Forbes Digital* online magazine who first smells something rotten at TNR.

The question the film leaves with me is: Does anyone care? When the country elects liars and rewards them, who draws the lines? So far the 21st century looks just as greedy, hypocritical and self-serving as the latter part of the 20th. There’s scant pleasure to be had from learning that some of Glass’s imaginary stories played into editor Michael Kelly’s Clinton-loathing.

Shattered Glass opens Friday, Nov. 21 at the Bijou. Highest recommendations.

EW

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