MEDIA, POLITICS AND CINEMATOGRAPHY: BOB WOODWARD, CARL BERNSTEIN, DAVID FROST AND THE WATERGATE AFFAIR ON THE BIG SCREEN

Davian VLAD
Assistant Professor, PhD, University of Craiova (Romania)

Abstract

The relation between media and politics has always been complex and sometimes controversial, but one of the most important duties of the press still remains the mission to identify and report the inconsistencies, deceptions, manipulations and the illegal acts carried out by the political power. In the 1970's, two iconic moments that redefined the relation between journalists and politicians in the USA took place, both of them related to one of the most infamous scandals in which a president of the United States was involved: the Watergate Scandal. First of all, the landmark journalistic investigation conducted by The Washington Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein triggered by a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters at the Watergate office complex in Washington and the President Richard Nixon's administration's attempted cover-up of its involvement. Secondly, the series of interviews of Richard Nixon conducted by the British journalist David Frost, a journalistic endeavor that presumably led to a first admission of guilt from the former U.S. President. Therefore, this paper focuses on the extraordinary events related to what was called the Watergate Affair or the Watergate Scandal (1972), on one hand, and to the so-called Nixon Interviews (1977), on the other hand, and the way they were depicted in two remarkable movies: Alan J. Pakula's 'All the President's Men' (1976) and Ron Howard's 'Frost/Nixon' (2008).

Keywords: journalism, cinematography, politics, Watergate

1. Journalism and Cinematography. Plus Politics



Photo: http://www.dvd.net.au

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

The motion picture industry, Hollywood in particular, has a long tradition of depicting real events in a very specific way that some might consider utterly distorting. And sometimes they are right, but they must accept that there are some reasons, acceptable to a certain reasonable point, related both to the artistic views and box office interests, that lead to a slight or dramatic retouching of the facts that are reenacted so that the public find the final product interesting and entertaining. It's a reality that must be taken into consideration when analyzing the feature movies inspired by historic facts and we should relate to them considerably different than to the documentary films. That is the frame in which we should engage our opinions about such a genre that is still highly popular and we must not interchange the study items and not apply the criteria from one paradigm to another.

The movies related to factual/fictional journalistic endeavors are not as many as we might presume. Of course, several motion pictures about different other topics tangentially deal with journalistic subjects. Especially the complete fictional films, but not only them, because the movies that reflect undeniable facts can take the liberty of involving a real/fictional journalist or a true/fictional journalistic investigation in their plots. Anyway, taking into consideration solely the movies that have in the spotlight exclusively the destiny of a journalist or a certain journalistic act, we can realize that the niche is rather narrow. And when films do concentrate on journalistic themes, they frequently target only the human dimension of the journalists involved, as Matthew C. Ehrlich asserts: "It is not surprising that the movies focus so heavily on the dilemmas faced by journalist heroes or villains as opposed to a more nuanced examination of journalism as an institution. As historian Robert Rosenstone puts it, <Film insists on history as the story of individuals>, the result being that <the personal becomes a way of avoiding the often difficult or insoluble social problems pointed out by the film>. So journalism movies focus on personal relationships between reporters, editors, sources, and love interests. (…) However, the movies have managed to address the press's significance precisely through their generic, formulaic nature that focuses on the personal rather than the political. Their dualistic structure - pitting reporter versus editor, reporter versus source, reporter versus love interest – speaks to journalism's conflicts and contradictions".[1]

Starting with Howard Hawkes' classic 'His Girl Friday' (1940), starring the unforgettable Cary Grant, we can add to our list some other exceptional films about journalism, totally/partially fictional or reasonably factual, such as Alexander Mackendrick's "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957), Billy Wilder's 'The Front Page' (1974), Sidney Lumet's 'Network' (1976), Roland Joffé's 'The Killing Fields', Oliver Stone's 'Salvador' (1986), Barry Levinson's 'Good Morning, Vietnam' (1987), Michael Winterbottom's 'Welcome to Sarajevo' (1997), Barry Levinson's 'Wag the Dog' (1997), Douglas McGrath's 'Infamous' (2006) and, last

[1] Ehrlich, Matthew C., *Journalism in the Movies*, University of Illinois Press, 2004, p.178

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

but not least, the two movies we are most interested in, namely Alan J. Pakula's 'All the President's Men' (1976) and Ron Howard's 'Frost/Nixon' (2008).

The relation between journalism and cinematography started, as we can notice, when movies began to attract larger and larger audiences, that is why we can stress that from the very start of this interconnection the public was exposed to the fact that media must be vigilant and critical when dealing with politics/politicians. The journalists must act as watchdogs of the society, they must be alert and uncompromising when finding that politicians are crossing the limits of law or breaking the moral code. Although the relation between media and politics has always been complex and not seldom controversial, one of the most important duties of the press still remains the mission to identify and report the inconsistencies, deceptions, manipulations and the illegal acts carried out by the political power, a mission frequently depicted or suggested in the films, as Berrin A. Beasley emphasizes, when reviewing Barry Levinson's 'Wag the Dog': "For decades journalists have been known as watchdogs of government, meaning it's our responsibility to watch over elected and appointed officials to ensure they're acting both legally and ethically in the public's best interest. Politicians are expected to enact the laws that govern us, spend our tax dollars in responsible ways, and sometimes even engage this country in war if the nation's safety is in jeopardy. Because the average American cannot be present physically while his or her state's legislature is in session or while Congress meets, Americans rely on the press to be there to report the daily decisions these politicians make and how those decisions influence our everyday lives. In theory, each American would watch over each elected and appointed representative, but in reality, that's just not possible, so reporters watch for us. That means journalists and their coverage of political figures are crucial to the health of our democracy because history has proven time and again that if you can control people's access to information, you can control people".[2]

That is exactly what happened in 1972, when President Richard Nixon thought that by controlling the information would get away with the fact that he at least had known about a break-in at the Democratic National Committee headquarters located in an office complex named Watergate, if not he had even orchestrated the whole operation. And Watergate was going to become a political scandal of epic magnitude due to the relentless efforts of two journalists from The Washington Post, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, whose investigation led to the disclosure of a massive cover-up operation conducted by high officials from the very heart of the American government. An infamous affair that eventually led to the resignation of a president for the first and so far the last time in the history of the American democracy. And Watergate became a landmark investigation and arguably the most famous journalistic act of all times.

[2] Beasley, Berrin A., *Political Manipulation of the Media* in *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies* (edited by Howard Good), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Lanham, Maryland, 2008, pp. 35-36

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

2. Watergate. A Messy Affair Revealed

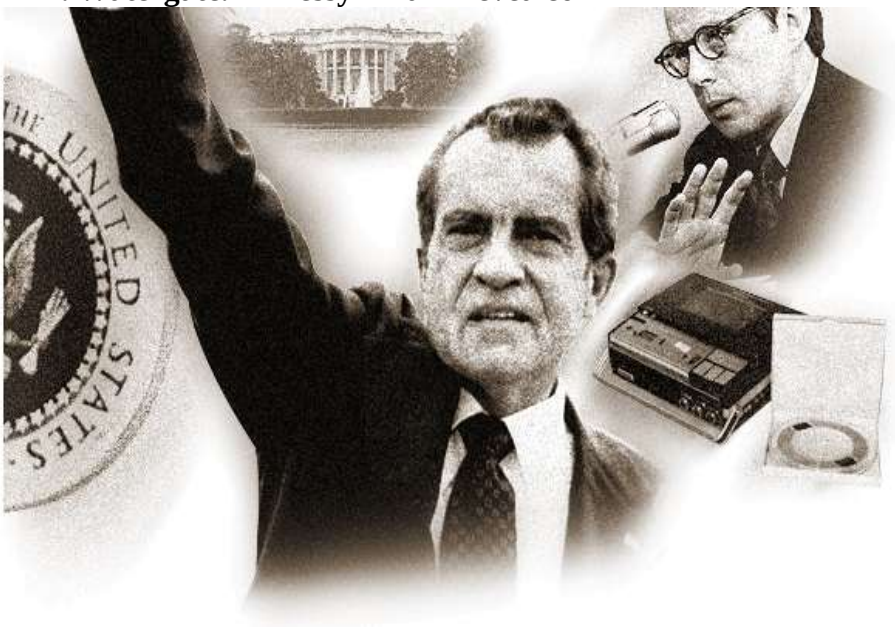


Photo: https://www.geni.com

The Watergate scandal began on the 17th of June 1972 with an incident that did not seem to have the potential to lead to the massive political earthquake that would take place not before long: five men were arrested under the charge of illegally entering into the Democratic National Committee headquarters from the Watergate complex. It's interesting that if the security guard Frank Wills had not alerted the authorities, this major scandal may never have broken out. The following inquiries unearthed facts that in the end would cause a political shake-up. Due mainly to the disclosures made after the journalistic investigation of The Washington Post reporters Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, everyone could notice that there was a connection between the five burglars and a secret fund presumably used for political bribery by the Committee for the Re-Election of the President. There were also reasonable suspicions that the break-in was part of a surveillance operation designed to keep a close eye on the political rivals of the President and the Republican Party.



Photo: www.henry4school.fr

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

Using the information revealed by a secret source nicknamed Deep Throat, Bernstein and Woodward kept on digging and their columns revealed the frightening scale of the messy affair, unveiling even the fact that President Richard Nixon had a tape-recording system in his offices used to record the conversations in the Oval Office, his office in the Old Executive Office Building, the Cabinet Room, and Camp David, in order to use the recordings to his own benefit.

The disclosures made by The Washington Post led to resignations. Trying to ease the pressure on Richard Nixon, at first two high officials of the government, H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, stepped down. But it was not enough, as the cover-up operation clearly had failed, the pressure on the head of the government kept on mounting and the affair reached the Supreme Court. After some fiery legal battles and a resolution from the Senate Watergate Committee, based even on testimonies provided by former staff members, the Supreme Court decided that the President must hand out all the tapes to the investigators, which happened soon after. The recordings (known as the White House Tapes) revealed that Richard Nixon was deeply involved in the attempted cover-up, trying to use several federal officials in order to throw the investigators on a false track.

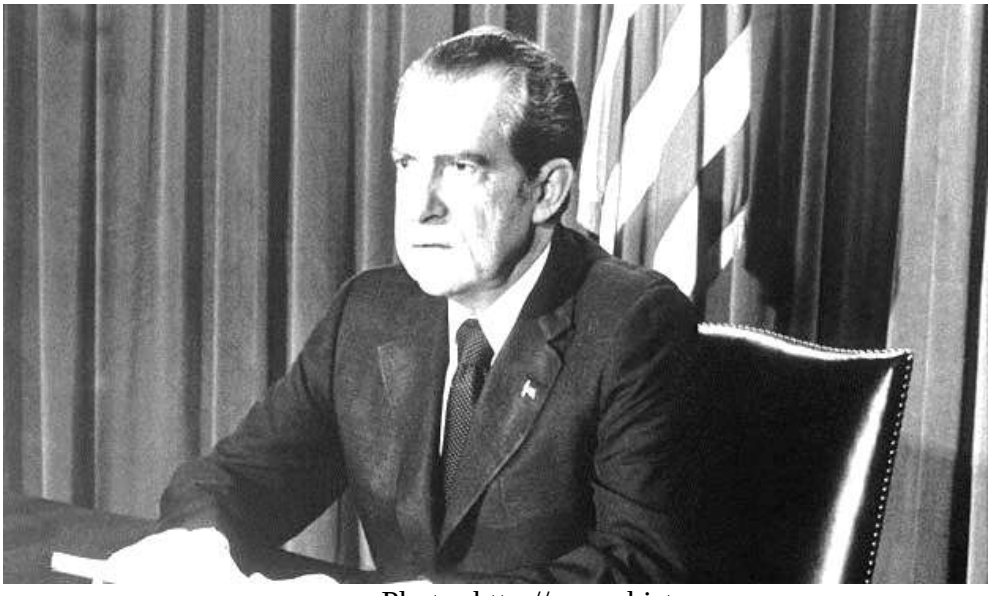


Photo: http://www.history.com

As an impeachment in the House of Representatives and a conviction in the Senate were imminent, Nixon decided to quit office on August 9, 1974, becoming the first president in the history of the United States of America to resign. And as yet the only. In his resignation speech, Richard Nixon never admitted once to have been aware of the acts that intended to cover up the

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

Watergate affair and he claimed that he was well-intentioned throughout his entire mandate: "In all the decisions I have made in my public life, I have always tried to do what was best for the Nation. Throughout the long and difficult period of Watergate, I have felt it was my duty to persevere, to make every possible effort to complete the term of office to which you elected me. In the past few days, however, it has become evident to me that I no longer have a strong enough political base in the Congress to justify continuing that effort. (…) Sometimes I have succeeded and sometimes I have failed, but always I have taken heart from what Theodore Roosevelt once said about the man in the arena, 'whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes short again and again because there is not effort without error and shortcoming, but who does actually strive to do the deed, who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions... (…) When I first took the oath of office as President 5 1/2 years ago, I made this sacred commitment, to 'consecrate my office, my energies, and all the wisdom I can summon to the cause of peace among nations'. I have done my very best in all the days since to be true to that pledge. As a result of these efforts, I am confident that the world is a safer place today, not only for the people of America but for the people of all nations. (…) As President, I must put the interest of America first. America needs a full-time President and a full-time Congress. To continue to fight through the months ahead for my personal vindication would almost totally absorb the time and attention of both the President and the Congress in a period when our entire focus should be on the great issues of peace abroad and prosperity without inflation at home. Therefore, I shall resign the Presidency effective at noon tomorrow".[3]


"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

LATE CITY EDITION

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, AUGUST 9, 1974

11 CENTS

NIXON RESIGNS

HE URGES A TIME OF 'HEALING'; FORD WILL TAKE OFFICE TODAY

'Sacrifice' Is Praised; Kissinger to Remain

The 37th President Is First to Quit Post

Photo: http://www.slideshare.net

[3] http://www.storyboardthat.com/storyboards/richard-cleggett/the-presidency-of-richard-nixon---nixon's-1974-resignation-speech

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

3. All the President's Men



Photo: https://www.moviefone.com

The Watergate journalistic investigation was depicted first in the book the two protagonists decided to write in order to bring to light all the details of a political situation that shook America. Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward took the decision to put down the whole story when the famous actor Robert Redford revealed his intention of purchasing the film rights. So the book that describes the way in which Bernstein and Woodward conducted the investigation called "maybe the single greatest reporting effort of all time"[4] by Gene Roberts, the former managing editor of The New York Times, was published in 1974. The name of the book comes from a rhyme about Humpty Dumpty ("All the king's horses and all the king's men / Couldn't put Humpty together again"), also used by Robert Penn Warren when he named his novel *All the King's Men*. The book reveals the events behind the columns the duo wrote for The Washington Post, giving details about some sources they used and who were not named in the articles (as an example, Hugh Sloan is for the first time revealed as source in the book). There are also described the secret meetings of Woodward with the mysterious source Deep Throat, whose real identity was not revealed until 2005: the then FBI Associate Director W. Mark Felt.

The fast-paced narration of the book is assumed also by the 1976 homonymous movie produced by Robert Redford and directed by Alan J. Pakula. The film evokes the fascinating story, recalled in the book, about the way Bob Woodward (Robert Redford) and Carl Bernstein (Dustin Hoffman) piece together the information they are able to get and how they managed to unravel the truth hidden behind the smoke screen created by the American officials. All the stages

[4] Harris, Roy J., Jr., *Pulitzer's Gold*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007, p. 233.

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

of the journalistic investigation, with all the breakthroughs and the backlashes, are artistically reenacted by a phenomenal cast under a skilled direction. Pakula uses a clinical approach in order to conduct the plot in a very detached manner, closer to the one used in the documentaries and docudramas. The story is driven calmly to the long awaited climax. After several meetings in which the mysterious source known as Deep Throat give no more than hints and suggestions, the informant decides to reveal Bob Woodward that H. R. Haldeman masterminded the Watergate break-in and cover-up and that the cover-up operation was intended not only to hide the link between the burglaries and the Committee for the Re-Election of the President, but to hide mainly the "covert operations" involving "the entire U.S. intelligence community". An extraordinary confession which comes with a warning: Woodward, Bernstein and everyone involved in this investigation are in great danger. The movie ends metaphorically with the two reporters frantically typing while Richard Nixon is taking the Oath of Office, for his second term as President of the United States, a term that he will not finish because of the words Bernstein and Woodward type at that very moment.

Speaking about authenticity and artistic views, we must stress that the story relies on the book as the book relies on the real events. Not loosely, but with a significant deal of artistic liberty. As an example, the iconic line "Follow the money" is used only in the movie, it does not appear in the book. The film focuses mostly on two reporters becoming sleuths, and not on the Watergate affair in itself, as Matthew Ehrlich observes: "*All the President's Men* is more about two reporters acting as detectives than the complex historical reality of Watergate". [5] On the other hand, Roger Ebert reproaches Pakula for concentrating more on the journalistic dimension of the story, and not on the human one, thus undermining the storytelling, a reproof that somehow comes in contradiction with Ehrilch and Rosenstone's assertions that the movies about journalism, *All the President's Men* included, are almost exclusively about personal relationships and not about the journalistic act in itself: "*All the President's Men* is truer to the craft of journalism than to the art of storytelling, and that's its problem. The movie is as accurate about the processes used by investigative reporters as we have any right to expect, and yet process finally overwhelms narrative - we're adrift in a sea of names, dates, telephone numbers, coincidences, lucky breaks, false leads, dogged footwork, denials, evasions, and sometimes even the truth. Just such thousands of details led up to Watergate and the Nixon resignation, yes, but the movie's more about the details than about their results. (…) *All the President's Men* doesn't dwell on the private lives of its characters, but it does have a nice touch with their professional lives, and especially with their relationships with editors. The Watergate story started as a local story, not a national one, and it was a continuing thorn in the side of the Post's prestigious national staff as Woodward

[5] Ehrlich, Matthew C., *Journalism in the Movies*, University of Illinois Press, 2004, p.178

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

and Bernstein kept it as their own".[6]

Maybe the critic is right and the storyline sometimes is difficult to comprehend because of the details revealed, although it does reflect the chaotic reality of a newspaper desk, but the lack of insight regarding the personal lives of the reporters is a perspective assumed by both the book and the movie. Alan J. Pakula doesn't want to divert our attention from the main plot, he wants to assure that the audience follows the leads at the same time with the characters acting on the big screen. It is a sense of authenticity that makes us overlook the flaws of the script or of the direction. It is one of the things that make *All the President's Men* a great movie. A value judgment certified by the numerous awards and honors received by the film and its selection for preservation in the United States National Film Registry for being "culturally, historically, or aesthetically significant"[7], as decided by the Library of Congress.

4. Frost/Nixon



Photo: www.youtube.com

Based on the famous *Nixon Interviews* from 1977, *Frost/Nixon* was originally a play written by the screenwriter and playwright Peter Morgan that was premiered in August 2006 at the Donmar Warehouse Theatre in London, starring Michael Sheen as David Frost and Frank Langella as Richard Nixon. Following the enthusiastic reception from public and critics alike, it was later played at the Gielgud Theatre in London's West End, also with Sheen and Langella in the leading roles. In 2007, the play crossed the Atlantic and was presented on Broadway first, then in Chicago, Madison (Ohio) and Philadelphia.

[6] http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/all-the-presidents-men-1976
[7] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/All_the_President's_Men_(film)

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

The success of the play in the United States of America made movie director Ron Howard propose turning the play into a film. Peter Morgan adapted the screenplay and at the end of 2008 the movie *Frost/Nixon*, starring the same Michael Sheen and Frank Langella, was released in both Great Britain and USA, receiving widely critical acclaim. The film describes the events taking place three years after Nixon's resounding resignation. The former president had been away from the spotlight since he left the office and one of his collaborators thought that a series of televised interviews might restore Richard Nixon's reputation, seriously affected by the Watergate scandal, and also earn him some money. The British journalist David Frost, who is presented as being in an rather unfortunate moment of his career at that moment, hosting a minor talk show in Australia, ceases the opportunity and signs a contract with the former American president, accepting Nixon's $600.000 demand. A contract as a gamble for Frost, who is risking both his money and his career. Hence a true battle of minds begins, as Frost is trying harder and harder to make Nixon publicly admit that he was aware of the taping operations and the subsequent cover-up. The first series of interviews were relatively easy for Nixon, as he avoided most controversial subjects and kept the reporter at a safe distance from his vulnerable points. That is why David Frost feels like he is losing the fight and starts a more rigorous research, helped by a heterogeneous group of collaborators led by James Reston Jr. After a string of errors and hesitations, Frost finally starts to score in the match and moves on to the controversies surrounding Watergate, trying in the light of newly discovered evidence to force his opponent confess about his probable wrongdoing.

After a bizarre telephone conversation in the dead of night with an intoxicated Nixon, David Frost ambushes his interlocutor by presenting transcripts of a compromising conversation between Richard Nixon and Charles Colson. The crucial part of the dialogue is when the British journalist confronts Richard Nixon with the fact that actually a significant part of the White House Tapes are missing: "What did Haldeman tell you during the eighteen and a half minute gap?". The former president is visibly caught off guard by Frost and subsequently becomes more and more nervous. And the interviewer is almost shocked to see his interlocutor crack and say "When the President does it, that means it's not illegal!". Nixon confesses that he voluntarily impeached himself in 1974 and he made many bad judgments regarding Watergate, admitting that he let down the American people by patronizing an unethical operation that he does not consider to be a proper cover-up, as we can notice from the answer he gave in the original interview: "I came to the edge ... Under the circumstances I would have to say that a reasonable person could call that a cover-up. I didn't think of it as a cover-up. I didn't intend it to cover-up. Let me say if I intended to cover-up, believe me I'd have done it. Do you know how I could have done it, so easily? I could have done it immediately after the election simply by giving clemency to everyone and the whole thing would have gone away. I couldn't do

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

that because I said clemency was wrong. But now we come down to the key point and let me answer it in my own way. How do I feel about the American people. Whether I should have resigned earlier. Or what I should say to them now. Well, that forces me to rationalize now and give you a carefully prepared, cropped statement. I didn't expect this question, frankly, though so I'm not going to give you that, but I could tell you this. (…) Yup, I let the American people down, and I have to carry that burden with me for the rest of my life. My political life is over. I will never again have an opportunity to serve in any official position. Maybe I can give a little advice from time to time".[8]

That is the climax of the movie, and Ron Howard builds the intensity and the tension with great skill, making the audience look at the confrontation as if it was not a reenactment but the actual interview taking place before their own eyes. This was mostly possible because of the remarkable performances of the two leading actors, as critic Roger Ebert emphasizes: "Frank Langella and Michael Sheen do not attempt to mimic their characters, but to embody them. There's the usual settling-in period, common to all biopics about people we're familiar with, when we're comparing the real with the performance. Then that fades out and we become absorbed into the drama. Howard uses authentic locations (Nixon's house at San Clemente, Frost's original hotel suite), and there are period details, but the film really comes down to these two compelling intense performances, these two men with such deep needs entirely outside the subjects of the interviews. All we know about the real Frost and the real Nixon is almost beside the point. It all comes down to those two men in that room while the cameras are rolling".[9]

But not all the reviews were eulogistic. For example, the authenticity of the depiction was again a topic of debate for some critics who accused Peter Morgan and Ron Howard of distorting the reality. Elisabeth Drew thinks that there is more than that to be blamed, in her opinion there is also a matter of illegitimacy that makes the movie completely dishonest: "It's because of the enormously historical importance of that period that the film raises serious questions of its legitimacy. The film's plot is a contrivance; its telling is so riddled with departures from what actually happened as to be fundamentally dishonest; and its climactic moment is purely and simply a lie. Literary license in the name of drama or entertainment is one thing; the issue comes down to what one is taking license with, and the degree of license being taken".[10]

But the artistic liberty and the dramatic license are not to be blamed as long as they don't change the facts beyond recognition in a biopic. Apart from the obvious flaws and inaccuracies of the movie, Morgan and Howard try to stick as closer as possible to authenticity and the essential parts of the story are not modified. They don't sacrifice factualness, they just make some artistic twists

[8] https://www.awesomestories.com/asset/view/Richard-Nixon-Apologizes-for-Watergate
[9] http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/frostnixon-2008
[10] http://www.huffingtonpost.com/elizabeth-drew/ifrostnixoni-a-dishonorab_b_150948.html

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)

that can do no harm to authenticity, but can definitely add value to the artistic approach. And they manage to give a plausible closure to a major story that marked both politics and journalism. A performance for which the public (and the critics, why not) must feel grateful, and not offended.

References

Beasley, Berrin A., *Political Manipulation of the Media* in *Journalism Ethics Goes to the Movies* (edited by Howard Good), Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, Lanham, Maryland, 2008.

Bernstein, Carl, Woodward, Bob, *All the President's Men*, Simon & Schuster, 1974.

Ehrlich, Matthew C., Saltzman, Joe, *Heroes and Scoundrels: The Image of the Journalist in Popular Culture*, University of Illinois Press, 2015.

Ehrlich, Matthew C., *Journalism in the Movies*, University of Illinois Press, 2004.

Harris, Roy J., Jr., *Pulitzer's Gold*, Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2007.

Kutler, Stanley I., *The Wars of Watergate: The Last Crisis of Richard Nixon*, W. W. Norton & Company, 1990.

Mallon, Thomas, *Watergate*, Pantheon, 2012.

Sites:

www.awesomestories.com
www.dvd.net.au
www.geni.com
www.henry4school.fr
www.history.com
www.huffingtonpost.com
www.imdb.com
www.moviefone.com
www.nixonlibrary.gov
www.rogerebert.com
www.slideshare.net
www.storyboardthat.com
www.youtube.com
www.wikipedia.org

BDD-V3102 © 2017 Sitech
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.77 (2026-11-18 10:53:15 UTC)