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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *Good Night, and Good Luck* by George Clooney and Grant Heslov

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mented by eyewitness testimony (including that of Walter Cronkite, who covered the trial as a young reporter); expert comment by legal scholars; explanations of Jackson's views and conduct by his biographer, John Q. Barrett; audio and film excerpts from prosecution arguments; the testimony of witnesses, and the cross-examination of Göring.

It is an interesting program to watch and conveys a good deal of information. Because it avoids hyperbole and spin even on aspects of the story that tend to invite them, it manages to sound both objective and accurate and can be used as an effective teaching tool. Because it touches, even if sometimes only briefly and indirectly, on a considerable variety of subjects, it can be used with profit not only in courses dealing with the Third Reich or World War II but also in others on international history in the mid-twentieth century.

The film closes with the standard assertion that the Nuremberg trials established the principle that wayward regimes can be held accountable for their actions and that persons engaged in criminal conduct under them can be brought to international justice. It readily concedes that this expansion of international law had no deterrent effect. But it fails to analyze the actual consequences of what the trial created. International justice, it turns out, has been applied, as at Nuremberg, only to the losers in war. For that reason, the threat of it reinforces the need of rogue regimes to avoid defeat by any means, however odious. Terrorist acts, genocide, and even wars of aggression may find their justification in that assumed necessity. And those acts in turn create a plausible rationale for preemptive wars. Replacing vengeance with justice has not made the world a safer place—at least not yet.

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Good Night, and Good Luck. Dir. by George Clooney. Prod. by Grant Heslov. Warner Independent Pictures, 2005. 93 mins.

In *Good Night, and Good Luck*, director George Clooney and screenwriter Grant Heslov employ the 1954 confrontation between

CBS newsmen Edward R. Murrow (played in stoic fashion by veteran character actor David Strathairn) and Wisconsin senator Joseph McCarthy to comment on contemporary politics in the age of terror. The liberal Clooney contrasts the timidity of a corporate media that failed to challenge the George W. Bush administration's assumptions regarding weapons of mass destruction in Iraq with the courage Murrow and his producer Fred Friendly (George Clooney) displayed.

The film evokes the mood of the 1950s through ubiquitous swirling cigarette smoke, claustrophobic newsrooms (there are no exterior scenes in the film), stark black-and-white cinematography, which allows the filmmakers to show historical footage of McCarthy, and a classic jazz soundtrack featuring Dianne Reeves as a performer in the style of Billie Holiday or Ella Fitzgerald. The ambiguity and paradox of the era are also apparent in the film's conclusion. Murrow plays a key role in bringing McCarthy down, yet the reporter's role at the network is reduced by board chair William Paley (Frank Langella), who is concerned about the impact of political controversy on corporate sponsorship. This astute film eschews the simplicity of the liberal hero slaying the reactionary dragon.

Good Night, and Good Luck (Murrow's signature closing for each broadcast) begins with Murrow's speech at a 1958 network tribute. But rather than indulging in self-congratulatory heroism, Murrow delivers a jeremiad, warning the industry of television's potential to amuse and insulate the public rather than illuminate the truth. One wonders what Murrow would think of today's media empires in which a reporter from Fox News becomes a spokesperson for the White House and reality television dominates prime time.

Murrow then reminisces about his confrontation with McCarthy, which began with an investigation into the case of Milo Radulovic, who was forced out of the U.S. Air Force due to allegations about the possibly Communist politics of his father and sister. Asserting that action based on unsubstantiated charges was a danger to American democracy, Murrow denounced McCarthy in a March 9, 1954, *See It Now* broadcast. About a month later, McCarthy replied, casting aspersions on Murrow's

patriotism by asserting that he would not be intimidated by "Murrow, the *Daily Worker*, or the Communist Party." The dialogue between Strathairn as Murrow and the McCarthy footage is effective, as in reality the two men carried on their discourse via television and were not in a room together. McCarthy's public demise is then captured in documentary coverage of his exchange with Joseph Welch in televised army hearings.

The film introduces several subplots with mixed success. An amusing conversation between Murrow and Liberace (appearing via file footage) on the *Person to Person* show, which Murrow insisted that he hosted only to "pay the bills," includes a comment from the pianist that he was looking for the perfect mate and that Princess Margaret was "looking for her dream man too." The extent to which McCarthyism could destroy an individual is well documented in the suicide of the news commentator Don Hewitt (Grant Heslov), who was hounded by the right-wing columnist Jack O'Brien of the Hearst press. But the story of Joe (Robert Downey Jr.) and Shirley Wershba (Patricia Clarkson), who lose their jobs in the newsroom because they violated corporate policy regarding marriage between employees, is somewhat of a distraction. That "coming out" almost appears to be an allegorical commentary on the topic of gay marriage, detracting from the major political discourse of the film.

Murrow's message, which Clooney wants to emphasize, is best captured in the reporter's comment that "one cannot defend freedom abroad by deserting it at home." Any doubts about the film's connections with the present are dispelled in the film's closing shot. Murrow and Friendly stroll by a television monitor on which President Dwight D. Eisenhower is speaking about the necessity of maintaining such basic freedoms as habeas corpus. As the screen fades to black, the viewer is left with visions of Guantanamo Bay and detentions following 9/11. *Good Night, and Good Luck* is open to charges of presentism, but in the final analysis Clooney is a serious filmmaker seeking to use the past to illuminate the present.

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Las Vegas: An Unconventional History. Dir. by Stephen Ives. Prod. by Stephen Ives and Amanda Pollak. Insignia Films, 2005. 180 mins. (PBS Video, 1320 Braddock Place, Alexandria, VA 22314; 800-531-4727; <http://www.shoppbs.org/>)

Las Vegas, Nevada, has long been a canvas for American neuroses. This is an old habit for Americans, a well-worn attitude to the city that began when Las Vegas was exotic, delectable, delicious, tawdry, and anything else the visiting writers and filmmakers (whom the locals call "carpetbaggers") could think of to call the city. They came prepared to see the city and its people in a certain way, and in a place devoted to illusion, it is not hard to find what you came looking for.

Stephen Ives's *Las Vegas: An Unconventional History* sadly falls into that generations-old trap. There is nothing unconventional about this film. It recapitulates every cliché about the city. The film could have been made by the Travel Channel. Ives is a lesson in and of himself. He brought to the project an East Coast sensibility, which led it astray from the beginning. He and his staff had an ahistorical vision of the city in their minds from the start, and that skewed image led to one indefensible choice after another.

Unlike other episodes in the *American Experience* series, *Las Vegas* tosses aside historians in favor of faux experts who simply mirror the filmmaker's sensibility. People who do not understand Las Vegas and its complicated history serve as narrators; those who really know something get bit parts. We endure the film critic David Thomson and the architectural critic Paul Goldberger giving us history without context. Nicholas Pileggi repeats the same fictions, told him by Lefty Rosenthal, that make the movie *Casino* (1995) such a good story but such bad history. The continuity narrator, Mark Cooper, looks like a stereotype of a Las Vegas lounge lizard; he gives us his personal outsider's view, the result of visiting the city repeatedly since he was a child. The film uses Cooper, a left-wing journalist, to tell Las Vegas's history, while excising excellent historians such as Michael Green, a history professor at the Community College of Southern Nevada, and reducing the eminent Eugene Moehring, a