

Broadcast News (1987)

By Brian Scott Mednick

With the 24/7 news cycle we've become accustomed to over the last several decades, the 1980s seems like a lifetime ago with respect to how television news was both reported and consumed. "Broadcast News," released in December 1987, is a time capsule of that period, which was a simpler, less volatile era when we trusted three guys named Dan, Tom, and Peter to give us a half-hour recap of the day's pivotal events at dinnertime.

"Broadcast News," written, produced, and directed by James L. Brooks, is one the smartest films ever made about show business and the media, a savagely funny, sophisticated, and poignant story about three people who are as ambitious and determined as they are diffident and vulnerable.

Set in a fictional but unnamed Washington, D.C. news bureau, the film centers on Jane Craig (Holly Hunter), a talented young news producer married to her job. She is blunt, brainy, and brash, but also an emotional mess given to outbursts of tears when alone. Her best friend is Aaron Altman (Albert Brooks, no relation to the director), a seasoned reporter who desperately longs for Jane to be more than just his friend. He also longs to anchor the network news, but is overlooked because, while he is good at what he does, he simply lacks the charisma for the big spot. Enter Tom Grunick (William Hurt), a sportscaster who excels in the looks and charm department but is totally clueless about hard news. In this unfair world of flash over substance, Tom succeeds where Aaron doesn't.

Albert Brooks described the film as a movie about "how people who work together live together." Jane knows Tom is a dolt but she's nonetheless attracted to him. At a weekend



"Broadcast News" film poster (1987). Courtesy of 20th Century Fox.

party at the home of one of their colleagues, news breaks that Libya has just shot up a U.S. military base in Sicily. They clamor to get everyone together to produce a live special report. When the top brass decides Tom should anchor the report, Jane confronts her boss, the president of the news division. She makes the case that Aaron has interviewed Qaddafi and is way more qualified than Tom to helm the last-minute report, to which her boss sarcastically replies, "You're just absolutely right. And I'm absolutely wrong." He then follows up with, "It must be nice to always believe you know better. To always think you're the smartest person in the room." Jane's reply is devastating: "No, it's awful."

During the live report, Aaron watches from his home while getting drunk. He keeps phoning Jane to give her tidbits of information, which

she feeds to Tom through a small earpiece. Tom seamlessly blends in Jane's last-second cues as Aaron watches in amazement. "I say it here, it comes out there," he says to himself.

After the special report goes smoothly, the high of "putting on a show" is on full display, proving that news is indeed showbiz. Also, as a film of the 1980s, it's refreshing to see co-workers harmlessly show affection with innocent hugs and kisses, something that would now get you an immediate invitation to HR.

"Broadcast News" breathes an innovative take on the hackneyed love triangle. Tom and Aaron's rivalry throughout the picture culminates in Tom actually helping Aaron prep when he finally gets a shot to anchor one weekend when everyone wants off to attend the White House Correspondents' Dinner. He gives Aaron tips such as to sit on the end of his suit jacket so it looks straight on camera. When Aaron finally goes live, it is a total disaster, as he has a "historic attack of flop sweat" that is one of the broadest and funniest scenes in the film.

The same humanity that James L. Brooks brought to his previous film, "Terms of Endearment" (1983), he displays here with a screenplay that is deftly attuned to the foibles and insecurities of these characters.

He also has some unforgettable one-liners. After the news division president lets a longtime employee go, he says, "Now if there's anything I can do for you..." to which the now former employee calmly says, "Well, I certainly hope you'll die soon."

Albert Brooks is the conscience of the film, and he steals every scene he is in. It's one of the all-time great comedic performances, achingly funny and heartbreakingly sad at once. When he finally reveals his romantic feelings for Jane after the worst mess-up of his career, I dare any guy who has been rejected by a girl he is crazy about not to feel a brotherhood with Aaron. While James L. Brooks gives the best zingers to

Aaron, it's also a very serious role. When Aaron tries to convince Jane that Tom is the devil, she asks Aaron how she can trust he really isn't the devil. He replies, "Because I think we have the kind of friendship where if I were the devil, you'd be the only one I would tell!"

James L. Brooks even does a subtle, very writerly thing in giving Aaron Altman an alliterative name and having him make snarky alliterative remarks throughout the film ("Pretty peppy party, isn't it, pal?").

Albert Brooks' work is complimented by the superb acting of Hunter, in a part that was written for Debra Winger. Winger had to back out when she became pregnant, giving Hunter the role that made her a star. Casting director Juliet Taylor, who casts all of Woody Allen's films, had James L. Brooks audition dozens of actresses, almost up until the first day of filming. "I had to start shooting in three days when she came in the room the first time," he recalled, adding, "The picture would not have worked without her."

Hunter creates a character so controlling, she tells taxi drivers the exact route to take to her destination and even has to instruct Tom how to behave when he attempts to get intimate. James L. Brooks actually delayed filming for six months just to get Hurt, who was at the height of his fame here, and he shines in one of his very finest performances.

The supporting players are also a delight. Joan Cusack is a hoot as Jane's hapless but loyal assistant; the great Robert Prosky is gruff yet endearing as one of the network bigwigs; Paul Hackes, a real-life NBC newsman, shows genuine acting chops in his first film role as the buttoned-up news division boss; Lois Chiles is sexy-funny as a reporter Jane sends on a less than desirable assignment in Alaska after she asks for Jane's permission to go out with Tom; and, in one of the most surprising and genuinely hilarious big-star cameos ever, Jack Nicholson is pure joy as the network's star anchor.

Bill Conti is credited with composing the eloquent score, which sets the film's gentle comic tone. If it sounds reminiscent of Michael Gore's soaring, soulful theme for "Terms of Endearment," that isn't a coincidence – Gore is credited as providing "additional music" for the film. "Broadcast News" is slickly photographed by Michael Ballhaus and edited by Richard Marks to show the techy world of the newsroom, elegant D.C. homes, and familiar Washington landmarks in a visually appealing way that never distracts from the storytelling.

"Broadcast News" is something of an ethics lesson, but it's never preachy. When Tom tries to do a serious story on date rape, he surprises everyone with how competent his reporting is. But when he takes liberties with some questionable editing – and when Jane finds out – the film reaches the level of a modern morality tale.

Though "Broadcast News" was a hit – earning \$51 million domestically, receiving seven Oscar nominations, and making more critics' top-ten lists than any other film that year – its ending was criticized by many as tacked-on and unnecessary. I, however, feel having invested over two hours caring about these people's lives and careers, it was nice to see where they wound up years after the main story ended. (James L. Brooks actually filmed an alternate, largely ad-libbed ending, which did not do well in test screenings but can be seen in the special features of the Criterion Collection DVD.)

Upon the film's release, comparisons were made to Sidney Lumet's "Network" (1976). Not counting 1979's "The China Syndrome," in which broadcast journalism played a key role, up until 1987, "Network" was the only other major motion picture that was specifically focused on network news. The fact that both films took place in a TV news setting was where the similarities ended. "Network" is dark, cynical, and eerily prescient while "Broadcast News" is witty, introspective, and cerebral. It also offered a lot of real-world insight into the

intricacies of the news, which James L. Brooks deserves credit for, having worked as a copywriter for CBS News early in his career.

"Broadcast News" is a sumptuous entertainment – hysterically funny, moving, and thoughtful. The business of news it presents may now be a thing of the past, but the film's heart, humanity, and message are timeless. To quote Aaron, "How do ya like that? I buried the lede."

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This essay posted in January 2022. The views expressed are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Library of Congress.

"Broadcast News" was inducted into the Library of Congress National Film Registry in 2018.