

Supplement II:18

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FILM — *Talk Radio*, dir. Oliver Stone

Great films about the old mass media are *Network* (1976) by Sydney Lumet, on the inner workings of television news programs; *Videodrome* on the same topic albeit with a more both philosophical outlook and fantastical touch; *Max Headroom*, still on the same subject, with a futuristic orientation. Daily and extraordinary life at a newspaper have been shown in many good movies, most brilliantly in *All the President's Men*. *Talk Radio*, a largely overlooked early Oliver Stone film, fills that gap for radio, specifically the talk show format.

It shows the world of radio talk shows from an insider perspective, in their glory years of the 1980s (shortly prior to last height during the 1990s) - on a personal and institutional level. Before the Internet made them irrelevant... Replaced by forums, media sharing, online news, search engines etc.

On an institutional level, main contradictions are between the radio host's ideals for the show and the capitalistic logic of profits defended by his bosses. When the show is bought this dynamic becomes slightly more complicated with the addition of an outside company now owning the program, which has placed an overseer on site (who defends interests of his own).

Power dynamics, and who really holds power, are best displayed when Barry's boss - in a rare moment when he lets the mask drop and forgoes business cool - tells Barry he's just an ex salesman, a cog in the machine and to follow orders.

Many of the Web's first stars and "podcasters" were former radio hosts who had transitioned to the new media; sometimes with the effect that these moderately successful radio personalities now enjoyed immense popularity on the Internet and became some of its first celebrities. Alex Jones or Joe Rogan being probably the best known. *Infowars* and the *Joe Rogan Podcast* became better known institutions than the old radio acronyms (KG...)

In *Talk Radio*, computer technologies have not yet invaded the radio station and space, at least not obviously, except for a terminal used to display incoming calls.

The specific format of the talk show has elements or features that would be carried over to the Internet, Web era such as anonymity or pseudoanonymity. In fact the "ground rules" of the show require it. At one point however a call trace is ordered, in one exceptional case (a credible criminal act).

In terms of organization or communication patterns, talk radio corresponds to a different schema : many-to-one (i.e. callers to host), as opposed to many-to-many, although contrary to television a degree of interaction is allowed. However the host can hang up at any time, or not take calls in the first place.

On a personal level, the film shows the moral decay and destruction of the protagonist, i.e. the radio host. In a final speech he confronts his own contradictions, with the particularly hard hitting confession “I denounce the system as I embrace it” — followed afterward by physical destruction.

(*Talk Radio* is based on a play of same title, and the book ‘Talked to death: The life and murder of Alan Berg’.)

There is a metaphorical dimension to Barry’s full embrace of cynicism being followed by the ending, moral followed by biological death.

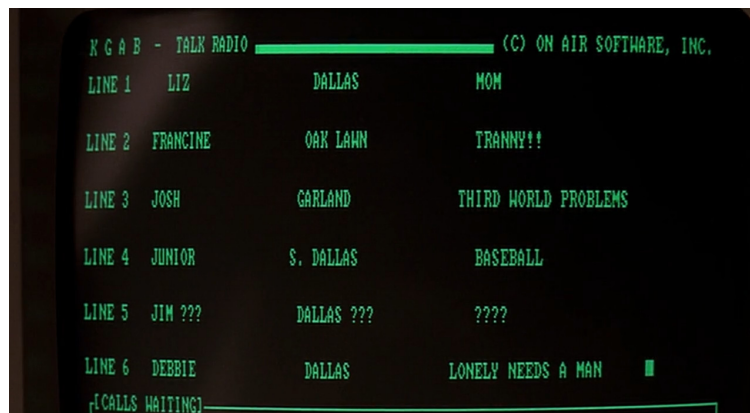
Ideologically, Barry moves in about the same space as a Joe Rogan : full legalization of drugs, a basic - sort of common sense - rejection of racism and homophobia, a distrust and critique of both “big business” and government. Probably more educated or intelligent. His progressivism, by 1980s standards, does not extend to everything (notably transgenderism).

His style is characterized by direct, undecorated discussion of various controversial societal topics, especially race, that departs from liberal wisdom...

Part of this departure from liberalism happens when a neo-nazi calls in and references underground book Turner Diaries, in the belief such a book would be unknown to the host; but surprisingly he is not only familiar with it but deconstructs it live on air (as the delusion of a ”young racist ... electrical engineer”).

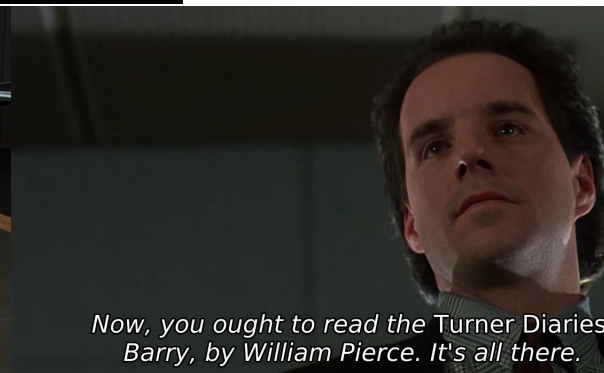
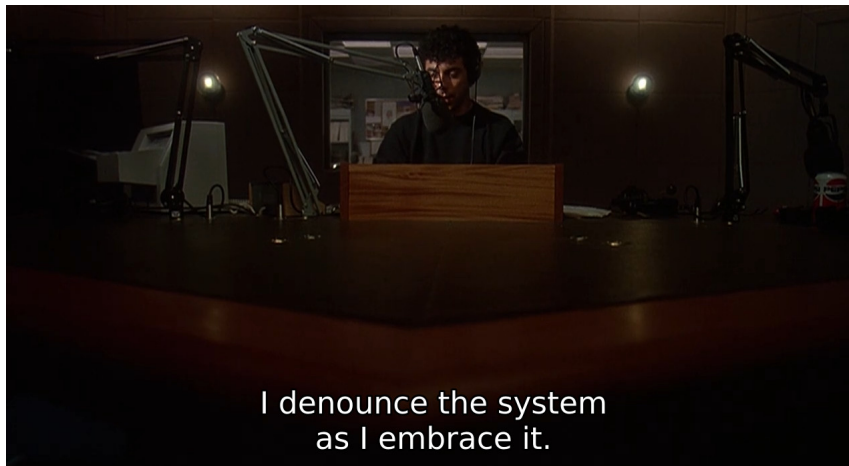
The appeal of Barry is that he purports to represent the average man — hence the weight given to virtues of frank and uncensored talk, on which his reputation and show rests — while also being clearly not it.

A striking and tragic scene occurs when Barry’s ex-wife calls and confesses enduring love for him. After some hesitation, and momentary struggle, a clear transition happens when his media personality takes over and he crushes her just like the rest of callers - as if in spite of himself. Telling her the crude, barely allegorical story of a dog who wanted to hold two bones but lost both...



Barry's power is drawn from the fact he has become the voice, face and personality of the radio program making him difficult to replace. When the new owners tell him the show won't be going national (as retaliation for his behavior, presumably) he uses his time on the air to mock corporations by using against them their own vocabulary and critique of government : inefficient and prone to bureaucracy...

During Barry's argument in favor of drugs legalization, his comparative statistics on deaths from tobacco might have displeased his (ad-reliant) bosses.



Tape recorders of bygone radio days may have been replaced by hard drives, but Barry's "*I denounce the system as I embrace it*" admission continues to be the fundament of today's capitalist mass media.

Talk Radio had started on an optimistic note, with a pleasant metaphor of radio being like a neighborhood where people can still talk to each other. (It should be noted that similar metaphors have been used to describe various parts of the Internet or Web, but especially forums.)

"Talk radio... it's the last neighborhood in town.

People don't talk to each other anymore."

[2m]

However by the end of the program a deep pessimism is expressed, as to the liberation potential of new technologies. A critique announcing the Web, and later social media : incredible technology is being made but used for miserable purposes, in Barry's analysis :

"Next month, millions of people are
going to be listening to this show,
and you'll have nothing to talk about!

Marvelous technology is at our disposal.

Instead of reaching up to new heights,
we're gonna see how far down we can go."

[1h30m]

The case of a radio station on the verge of going national is a clever choice in *Talk Radio* as it served to magnify the conflicts and oppositions, happening on many levels, of media under capitalism : the creators' wish to retain integrity and honesty - although Barry by the end seems to be giving up partly because so overwhelmed - and the investors' concerns with money, including advertisers (which Barry at one point must read out loud), and profit potential.

Freedom of speech, here explored in all its extremes and limits, is a central theme but it's unclear what exactly the moral of this story is supposed to be - if it has any.

Barry being survived by the empty headed rock groupie, however, is certainly a very dark ending. For, the implication appears to be that Barry would be replaced by much worse.

In Barry something still resisted, whereas his young successor represents pure nihilism.