

How movies translate to the workplace

By Harvey Schachter

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A lot of the fiction I have encountered about business and the workplace has a negative cast. Novelists are outsiders, jaundiced critics, and their work tends to reflect that perspective. So it was a surprise to find a recent extensive look at business narratives in novels, biographies, memoirs, films and TV found that a dominant category is positive, to the point of effusive.

This is important not just because it proves me wrong – that happens all the time – but because the narratives we carry in our head can influence us. We can emulate the heroes (or villains) of books. We can also choose our careers based on these stories. “The narratives we read and watch about business affect how we perceive, understand or respond to business,” says Sanford Borins, a professor of strategic management at the University of Toronto.

Along with his wife Beth Herst, who has a background in literature and playwriting, they found 63 texts from the past 35 years to study, focusing on three industries – IT, auto manufacturing and financial trading – since that might reveal whether the dominant narratives vary by sector, which in fact they do.

Over all, two types of narratives are the biggies, and they are opposites:

- Corporate Nirvana, in which the protagonists, along with their shareholders and other backers, benefit financially, and societal benefits accrue to employees and customers with that spreading through a multiplier effect more broadly. Books and films on Apple’s Steve Jobs and Facebook’s Mark Zuckerberg are prime examples.
- Corporate Nightmare, in which senior executives’ malfeasance bankrupts the company, destroys their careers and reputations, and sends shockwaves through the broader community, with significant collateral damage. The financial implosion a decade ago added to this genre.

Between those two black-and-white narratives are two others in which someone fights the corporate entity on behalf of the larger social good. In the Defeated Critic category, the whistleblower or external critic fails, and society continues to suffer while the company continues to profit. Michael Moore’s *Roger and Me* was very popular, boosting the filmmaker’s career, but it didn’t change General Motors so it falls into this category, along with the documentary *Who Killed the Electric Car?* In the Triumphant Critic category, the individual uses insider knowledge or external expertise to bring a socially irresponsible corporation to heel, as depicted in the docudramas *Erin Brockovich* and *The Insider*.

Those four scenarios probably resonate with you because they capture important themes and you have encountered them in narratives. The four other categories also may seem familiar: Sacrificial/Thrown Out, in which a founder is pushed out or someone's intellectual property is exploited by others; Retributive fables, in which social institutions such as the media, courts or citizen activists obtain retribution for corporate wrongdoing; Corporate Rip-Off, in which the protagonist and corporation benefit at high social cost; and, finally, Inside Job, in which corporate insiders through perverse incentives benefit themselves through actions detrimental to their firm's long-term success.

The insanely great fable dominates the literature and films we see about IT. Corporate Nirvana is also dominant in auto manufacturing, but with a cult of personality flavour over the years, be it *My Life and Work* by Henry Ford in 1922, the 1980s best seller *Iacocca* or, more recently, Ashlee Vance's book, *Elon Musk*. Financial trading is dominated by Corporate Nightmares, be it the chronicles of Enron or movies such as *Wall Street* or *Wolf of Wall Street*.

"The biggest decisions that millennials are making in their lives is who to work for – which industries. These stories influence those choices. So lots of millennials who identify with the heroes in the corporate start-up fable want to be that person," Mr. Borins says. They are fooling themselves. Whereas 90 per cent of IT stories are of the corporate nirvana variety and the remaining 10 per cent describing failures, he guesses in the real world the numbers are exactly the opposite.

Many of his students have entered the financial world after watching the movies *Wall Street* and *Wolf of Wall Street*, dreaming of enormous wealth and missing the fact that those are meant to be cautionary tales. "They figure they will be like Gordon Gekko, only smarter and not be caught," he says.

So next time you read a book or watch a film on business, consider how it may be playing with your mind. And it's more than choosing a career. We want to be the leaders we see in movies, steadfast and dominant, but real life can require a quite different flavour.

Cannonballs

Here are Sanford Borins' top-10 business movies (chronologically):

- *The Big Short* (2015): Adam McKay's depiction of the financial crisis for fun and profit, with a reminder of the human cost.
- *Margin Call* (2011): J.C. Chandor's directorial debut imagining the financial crisis as a disaster thriller.
- *Revenge of the Electric Car* (2011): Chris Paine's in-the-moment documentary about the commercialization of the electric car.
- *The Social Network* (2010): Aaron Sorkin's screenplay about the creation of Facebook from the dueling perspectives of Mark Zuckerberg and the partners who were thrown under the bus.
- *Inside Job* (2010): Charles Ferguson's Academy Award-winning documentary about the causes and culprits of the financial crisis.
- *Enron: The Smartest Guys in the Room* (2005): Alex Gibney's documentary about how the energy trading firm Enron went big and then went bust.
- *Startup.com* (2000): Jehane Noujaim's fly-on-the-wall documentary about a startup that crashed on the launch-pad.
- *Pirates of Silicon Valley* (1999): Martyn Burke's docudrama about Steve Jobs/Apple and Bill Gates/Microsoft as necessary frenemies.
- *Roger & Me* (1989): Michael Moore's career-launching documentary about a beleaguered GM's impact on its community ecosystem.
- *Wall Street* (1987): Michael Douglas's Academy Award-winning performance as a corporate raider/inside trader that inspired thousands of wannabes.