



Talk to Me

Don Cheadle, Chiwetel Ejiofor, and Martin Sheen star in a film written by Michael Genet and Rick Famuyiwa and directed by Kasi Lemmons.

By Josef Woodard

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File *Talk to Me* under the subgenre of films this year with an eye on American media history, following *Zodiac* and *Resurrecting the Champ*. In all these films, the presumed wall between reportage, public action, and show biz is eroded, based on cases outside the ever-thickening plot of media vs. public interface vis-à-vis the Internet.

These films aim to tell specific stories about obsessive media personalities while also capturing slices of period and social texture, which is what gives *Talk to Me* its kick — not to mention another standout performance from Don Cheadle. At the narrative center of this story is Petey Greene (Cheadle), a hip, slick-tongued ex-con who forces his way on the air via Washington, D.C. radio station WOL during the 1960s. The station is trying to woo higher ratings and the coveted black urban audience, tired of smooth-toned, Motown-lined programming.

A self-described “cat comin’ out of hard times, USA,” Greene becomes a celebrity spokesman for the people, while barely repressing disdain for white culture. Greene’s tale is guided through the prism of history, especially the anger and unrest surrounding the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr.

This is Greene’s story; the rise and fall of an unlikely media sensation. But a strong undercurrent deals with the color scheming of media and the concessions made within the white-ruled system. His boss and ally, Dewey Hughes (Chiwetel Ejiofor), comports himself uprightly and speaks clearly. He is dressed for success in a white world, and Greene repeatedly calls him on it, while Hughes challenges his friend’s values and deems him self-destructive.

As strong as the film is, and despite the power of the acting, something about *Talk to Me* rings less true than we’d like. It may be the curse of the biopic, constrained by the flow of facts and locked into a genre-driven formula. Sentimentality sometimes waters down the relevant pungency of the story; but it’s still a story worth telling.