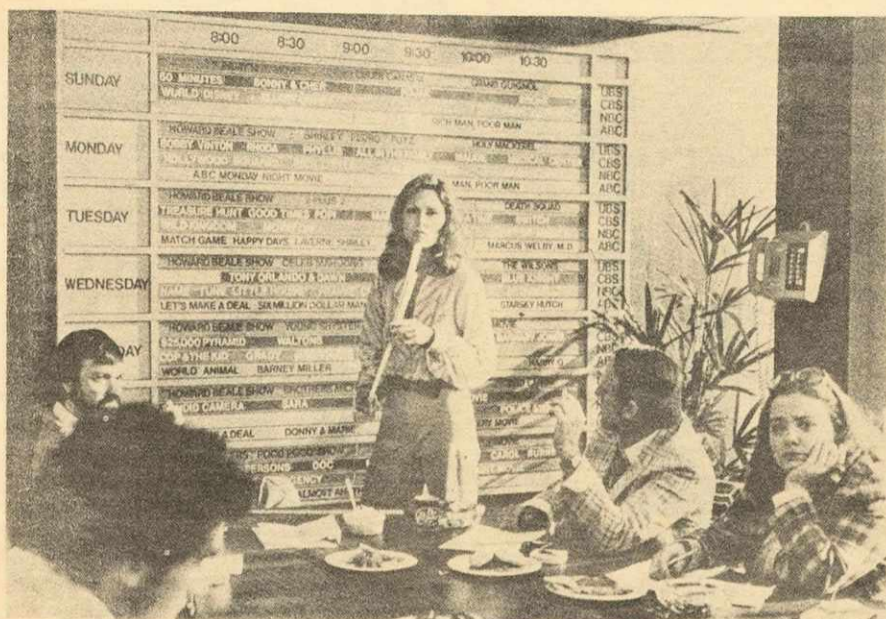


# Network - satirical realism



FAYE DUNAWAY impressive performance as executive who lusts only for power

by Jim Burke

Paddy Cheyefsky's new movie entitled, **Network** is a satire about the television industry. As we view the movie we see how this great power influences the people involved with it until it utterly corrupts them. The main protagonists seem unable to control their own destinies - caught up in an industry whose only allegiance is to the now - they scratch and claw for better individual positions at their own network, and collectively do the same with the other networks for the big prize, which all networks seek: the ratings.

The ratings are the barometer of how much power the network has, because high ratings means more people watching the network's channels. As it is in the case of the American concept of democracy, this source of power comes from the people. In the same perverted way, the number of people watching determines the ratings. Thus, we have the basis of our vicious circle.

The networks go whoring after the audiences as a politician does after votes, and they have no scruples about how they achieve their ends. If people are the source of power, then get the people. Tell them anything they want to hear, but get them. Appeal to their baser instincts and their fascination with the bizarre, but get them. And while you have them, shape them into a gadget buying, deodorant spraying, mass of malleable muck, incapable of an independent thought.

It is significant to note the source of this attack upon television. The motion picture industry has been television's arch-rival ever since TV's arrival on the scene in the early fifties. Yet, both industries appeared to have arrived at some sort of accommodation by the time the sixties rolled around. And as long as profits are the facilitating factor, this accommodation will continue, barring a sharp poke in the ribs from time to time by a maverick such as Cheyefsky.

The writer of this piece achieved an interesting blend of satire and realism. Logically, no one in his right mind would go on the air and 'tell it like it is', therefore, the character of Howard Beal had to have been going through a nervous breakdown. Of course, he was left on the air because his ratings jumped to fantastic heights. The fact that we, the audience find little difficulty in accepting this speaks in favour of the veracity of **Network's** message. We all inherently concede the fact that this is the way the system operates.

It is through Beal's television harangues that the 'hard' message is transmitted, i.e. only three percent of the population read books, and only fifteen percent read

newspapers and that most of our information is received via the television screen. His general statements cover the dangers of propaganda inherent in television and about the violence prevalent in America today.

The aspect of violence is highlighted in the scene involving the Ecumenical Liberation Army closeted with the network corporation lawyers, mutually working out the details of a television contract in which the E.L.A. will supply on a weekly basis, actual film footage of their illegal activities, which include bank robberies, kidnappings and assassinations. Great pains are taken to show the direct link with the real events which occurred recently involving the Patty Hearst melange and the fictional E.L.A. Contingent on the film footage, the network must provide about an hour per week air time in which Communist propaganda is broadcast. When the government legal machinery begins to grind slowly in to action to put a stop to these practices, the network people are not only unafraid, they are openly scornful. This suggests what many people already believe, that some multinationals are above the law since they wield the necessary power to suborn it.

The frustration and sensed helplessness of the individual breeds

gullibility and leaves him exposed to the power of TV propaganda which is emphasized in the scene showing Howard Beal, disheveled, dressed in his pajamas and a raincoat, exhorting his viewers to get up and go to the window and yell, "I'm dammed mad and I'm not going to put up with it anymore". A scanning camera shows people actually doing it, presumably all over America. For a time it even looks as if rugged individualism will win out and people will regain control of their own destinies. But lest we become complacent, this view is quickly disabused when Howard speaks out against a huge corporate deal involving the conglomerate owning the network and an Arab consortium. Howard is brought in to see Mr. Jenkins, the kingpin of the conglomerate, and in the plushly decorated, darkened boardroom he is told in no uncertain terms - as we the audience are told - just what the score is. The essence of the message being: countries or ideologies are no longer important, there are only the multinationals

and the only thing deserving of our patriotism is the healthy state of the dollar.

The madman is turned around with no problem because of the confusion in his mind. Jenkins (confused with God) is stating word-for-word what Beal dreamed the Lord said to him concerning why he was selected to carry the message.

Unfortunately, the message is too abrupt for the audience, and Beal's ratings begin to drop. When the network executives want to fire Beal, they are met with stiff opposition from their boss, Jenkins. Confronted with this dilemma, they once again display their total disregard for law or human morality; they elect to remove Howard Beal by having the E.L.A. assassinate him on the air. The picture ends on a heavily sarcastic note with a quip that Howard Beal is the only known man to have been assassinated for the crime of having low ratings. **Network** stands up as a credible piece of social criticism and is worth the price of viewing it.

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