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The Hidden Heart

When the film *Network* opened in 1976, *New York Times* film critic Vincent Canby wrote: “I expect that a lot of people will sniff at the film on the ground that a number of the absurdities Mr. Chayefsky and Mr. Lumet chronicle so carefully couldn't happen, which is to miss the point of what they're up to. These wickedly distorted views of the way television looks, sounds, and, indeed, is, are the satirist's cardiogram of the hidden heart, not just of television but also of the society that supports it and is, in turn, supported.” (Canby)

Next year will mark 30 years since *Network* was released. A look at broadcast journalism on the three major networks over the last three decades indicates little change on the surface from the “voice-of-god” news format, in which the news is delivered to audiences by the network anchor. Walter Cronkite retired in 1981, and now Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw, and Peter Jennings are all gone.

They have been replaced at least temporarily, but what the future will be for network news is anyone's guess. CBS, for one, has announced plans to perk up its nightly news show, in an effort to boost its lagging ratings. Speculation is rife that whatever CBS unveils will be heavy on entertainment.

Does a film made nearly 30 years ago hold clues to how CBS and other networks will reinvent their news shows, or is *Network* more of a warning of what *not* to do? Do the “absurdities” described by Vincent Canby seem so absurd in 2005? What does the film tell us about the power of television and its effect on the audience? Does the audience of 1976 bear any resemblance to the audience of 2005? And finally, can human decency exist in a world of giant corporations?

An exploration of the movie from a cultural context -- looking in particular at dialog, characters, and ideology -- will offer parallels to current trends in network news. At the same time, a look at recent events offers optimism that the hidden heart of society will not be silenced by the huge corporations.

When *Network* was released in 1976, the country was still reeling from the Vietnam War. High on acid, marijuana, and social injustice, the '60s youth protested vigorously against the U.S. presence in Vietnam -- in a way America had not seen before; that is, on television. In 1973, in the wake of the Watergate break in, President Richard Nixon became the first U.S. president to resign; again, we saw it all live on TV. Television had come into its own.

Enter Sidney Lumet and Paddy Chayefsky. *Network* is the story of UBS, a television network suffering from low ratings. Network president Frank Hackett (Robert Duvall) is a belligerent corporate bully out to please the corporate owner, Communications Corporate of America (CCA). CCA's interest is shareholders, and the film is replete with references to earnings, market share and ratings.

In a restructuring, Hackett moves the news from an independent division to a department accountable to the network. When the ratings decline for highly

respected news anchor Howard Beale (Peter Finch), Hackett has him fired, and Beale announces on the air that he will commit suicide on TV the following week. His act of desperation generates unprecedented publicity.

When veteran news division exec Max Schumacher (William Holden) protests Hackett's decisions, Hackett fires him and places the news under Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway), the vice president of programming. Christensen is new school ("She was raised on *Bugs Bunny*," Schumacher later says.). She is a young female executive in the post-*Feminine Mystique* world. She's as tough as any man, and entirely unprincipled. She will stop at nothing to make the network number one. If that means turning the news into entertainment, so be it. Christensen tells Schumacher, "Even the news needs a little showmanship. All I want out of life is a 30 share and a 20 rating."

Buoyed by the publicity about Howard Beale's mad act, Christensen puts him on the air in a redesigned network "newscast" called *Vox Populi* (voice of the people). Christensen spices up the news with an announcer, Carson-esque intro music, a live studio audience, entertainment segments, and a set that is designed to look like a church – replete with a stained glass background. Dubbing Beale "the Mad Prophet of the Airwaves," (interestingly the "prophet" is designed solely to yield profit) Christensen uses him as the show's mainstay, supported by such artifices as Sybil the Soothsayer, who predicts what will happen in the news. When one news executive protests that "this violates every

canon of respectable broadcasting,” Hackett replies: “We’re not a respectable network; we’re a whorehouse network and we have to take what we can get.”

In one of Beale’s ravings, he shouts at his passive TV audience to become activists. “I’m a human being, goddamn it. My life has value, and I’m not gonna take this anymore. The air is unfit to breathe, the food is unfit to eat. Things are worse than bad; they’re crazy.” He urges his audience to open their windows and shout: “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take it anymore” – which they do all across the country. Christensen watches, mesmerized. She grabs a phone: “Are they yelling in Atlanta?” she demands, and then picks up a second phone: “They’re yelling in Baton Rouge!” As she slams the phone into its cradle, she shouts: “Son of a bitch. We’ve struck the mother lode.” “Mother lode” is a term that refers to a main vein of ore, usually of gold. Christensen is saying, in essence, we’ve struck America’s vein – and it will bleed profit for the network.

As Beale raves on each show, the ratings increase and Christensen revels in her success. She has other novel ideas, and Hackett allows her to reign unchecked. The Ecumenical Liberation Army, a terrorist group, has filmed itself robbing a bank. When Christensen sees the footage, she tells network execs, “It’s terrific stuff. I think we can get a movie out of it, maybe a series.” She meets with a representative (self-described as “a bad-ass Commie nigger”) from the group and proposes the ELA film itself committing terrorist acts and the footage will be part of a series about the group. She’ll call it *The Mao Tse Tung Hour*.

Christensen doesn't care a whit about ELA politics; and if they kill people, just think of the ratings.

(Flash forward for a moment to a September 1, 2005 article about a new series being pitched to the TV networks. Titled "The Cell," the show is about Abu, Ahmed, Musab and Salar, a cell of Islamic terrorists sent to Chicago by a terrorist network resembling Al Qaeda. They've been spending the organization's money, but haven't yet blown anything up. As their murderous boss from Afghanistan arrives to set them straight, two delivery men knock on the apartment door, bearing a huge flat-screen TV. (Halbfinger, B1) The show did not get picked up by the networks, but it certainly hearkens back to *Network*. Furthermore, Christensen's attraction to live footage was prescient of the reality shows that have become so pervasive today. And just as the "Mad Prophet of the Airwaves" was cheap to produce, so are reality shows.)

Howard Beale continues to draw a huge audience, and during each show he works himself into a frenzy and falls to the floor unconscious. As the camera goes in tight on his unconscious body, the audience applauds rapturously and the music builds to a rousing crescendo. At the shareholder board meeting, Hackett proudly announces an "increase in program revenues of \$21 million due to the phenomenal success of the Howard Beale Show. I expect a positive cash flow for the entire complex of \$45 million, achievable in this fiscal year." As he speaks, the camera pans over the board, all of them white, all of them over 50, and all of them male. Certainly these old white men do not represent mainstream

America. Yet they are the ones who approve what will be viewed by mainstream America. They men are on the board for one reason: their business acumen. And they care about only one thing: profit.

(In the 2004 Canadian movie *The Corporation*, filmmaker Michael Moore speculates about why his films, which are so critical of American politics, are distributed by mainstream Hollywood studios. It's because they make money, he says. The studios don't care about his politics, as long as his films draw audiences.)

Eventually, Beale turns his tirades against the very medium that allows him to reach so many millions of people: "This tube is the most awesome goddamn force in the whole godless world. . . . When the largest company in the world controls the most awesome goddamn propaganda force in the whole godless world, who knows what shit will be peddled for truth on this network." He shouts at viewers: "You dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you even raise your children like the tube. TURN OFF YOUR TELEVISION SETS." As they watch the show, Hackett and Christenson begin to get uncomfortable. The irony is that during all his years as a network news anchor, he has never come as close to the truth as he has in his madness.

Finally Beale's truth hits too close to home. He informs his audience that CCA, the network's parent, is being purchased by the Western World Funding Corporation. "Who the hell is the Western World Funding Corporation?" he asks. "It's a consortium of banks and insurance companies who are not buying CCA for

themselves, but as agents for somebody else. And who is the somebody else? They won't tell you. But I'll tell you. They're buying it for the Arabian Investment Corporation; they're buying it for the Arabs." (Certainly Chayefsky was prophetic about Arab ownership of U.S. businesses and properties.)

As Hackett and Dunaway watch aghast, Beale shouts, "I don't want the banks selling my country to the Arabs. I want the CCA deal stopped now." He tells viewers to telegraph the White House to halt the deal, and the willing sheep oblige. The message is clear: whoever controls the message controls the hearts and minds of the nation. Whether the message is "buy cereal" or "telegraph the White House," the audience will do as it is told. *Network* views the audience of 1976 as sheep; people who have become so mesmerized by television that they are no longer capable of thinking for themselves.

This attack on the business deal is too much for CCA board chair Mr. Jensen (Ned Beattie), whose first name we never learn. He summons Beale and Hackett to New York and, in a pivotal scene, Jensen ignores Hackett and takes Beale by the arm, ushering him into the cavernous boardroom. "I used to sell sewing machines and automobile parts, Mr. Beale. They say I can sell anything. I'd like to try to sell something to you," Jensen says amiably. He seats Beale at one end of the enormous boardroom table, and the camera pans slowly from one end of the table to the other, where Jensen stands. He closes the drapes, thus effectively cutting off any link to reality. (Is Chayefsky hinting at the complete isolation of the board, ergo the corporation, from the rest of the world?) Within

the huge boardroom, the two men appear miniscule. But as the camera goes in tight, Jensen becomes larger than life. He screams: "You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale. . . And I . . . won't. . . have it! You . . . will . . . ATONE!" His is the voice of god. He is lighted from behind so his features are obscured, yet he appears to glow.

He continues: "You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and people. There are no nations. There are no people. There is no America. There is no democracy. There is only IBM and ITT and AT&T and DuPont and Union Carbide and Exxon. Those are the nations of the world today. We no longer live in a world of nations and ideologies. We are a college of corporations, immutably determined by the bylaws of business. The world is a business, Mr. Beale. I have chosen you to preach this evangel."

When a stunned and diminished Beale meekly asks why he has been chosen, Jensen replies in a conversational tone: "Because you're on TV, dummy. Sixty million people watch you every night of the week." Stunned, Beale replies, "I have seen the face of God." Jensen retorts: "You just might be right, Mr. Beale." His point: whoever controls the TV message is god. And as board chair, Jensen controls the message. It is no coincidence that he is a salesman.

In 1976, it was the "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore" speech that captured public attention. Watching the film in 2005, it is Jensen's speech that resonates. Indeed, the world Howard Beale prophesized has come to be, with huge conglomerates now owning the media, and the Arabs

and the Chinese buying up significant portions of the U.S. economy. Chayefsky and Lumet seem like prophets, in light of today's reality.

But when Beale preaches Jensen's evangel on TV, his ratings drop. Yet Jensen is "intractable" about taking the show off the air. To the ratings-mad Hackett and Christenson, this is suicide, and they decide that their only solution is to have Beale killed – on the air, in front of an audience. The situation will be resolved, and the ratings will skyrocket. Sure enough, Howard Beale is gunned down (by a couple of members of the Ecumenical Liberation Army) in front of a live TV audience, and the camera goes in tight on his body, bullet holes and all. Four TV screens appear. As the scene of his shooting is replayed over and over, the other screens show omnipresent TV advertisements. Murder and product, the screens imply, murder and product; news as product: they're indistinguishable. The narrator says, "This is the first known instance of a man who was killed because he had lousy ratings."

The film sets up a cataclysmic clash of values, which is best revealed by the characters of Schumacher, Christensen and Hackett. Schumacher, a holdover from the early days of television, is rooted in the ideals of the news. Like his role model Edward R. Murrow, he has "the highest standard for the reporting of the news. . . his facts [are] solid, his scope thorough, his analysis on target, and his principles uncompromised. . . He [is] authoritative without being imperious." (Edwards, 7) Schumacher is as demanding of himself as he is of others. He's willing to fight for what he believes in and doesn't think twice about

standing up to the corporate powers in his fight to save the news division. He's loyal to his friends, and, above all, he believes in human decency. At the same time, he realizes he is growing old in a world that bears little resemblance to the world he has known. In an attempt to bridge the two worlds, he succumbs to Christensen's efforts to seduce him, and he falls in love with her and leaves his wife.

By contrast, Diana Christensen and Frank Hackett, the up-and-coming programming executive and the network golden boy, respectively, represent the world of the corporation where profit is the number one value. There is no room for human decency in their world. Both will do anything to get the network to number one – exploit people, kill them, whatever it takes. Christensen is obsessive, manic, a self-absorbed woman with no moral code. Hackett is a bully; loud, brash and brutal to people who report to him. Yet when he is confronted by the corporate powers, he disintegrates, wringing his hands in fear that he will become a man without a corporation. For them, there is no higher purpose than the corporation, a great irony since the corporation will have no use for them if they fail to produce a profit.

TV ratings are their reason for existing. For Christensen, in particular, there is no world outside of television. Ratings are more of a turn on to her than any lover could ever be. She explains to Shumacher: "I can't tell you how many men have told me what a lousy lay I am. I apparently have a masculine temperament. I arouse quickly, consummate prematurely, and can't wait to get

my clothes back on and get out of that bedroom. I seem to be inept at everything except my work. I'm good at my work and so I confine myself to that.”

True to her word, as she and Schumacher consummate their relationship, she chatters nonstop about the network. As she nears climax, her voice gets faster: “*The Mao Tse Tung Hour* can carry its own time slot. . . .” She climaxes and as she sinks onto Schumacher’s chest, she coos, “What’s really bugging me now is my daytime programming. NBC’s got a lock on daytime with their lousy game shows, and I’d like to bust them. I’m thinking of doing a homosexual soap opera - *The Dykes* - the heart-rending saga of a woman helplessly in love with her husband’s mistress.” Her thoughts are prescient of today. In addition to various shows featuring gay characters, such as “*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*,” Viacom (the owner of CBS) now offers Logo, a new gay cable channel. (Stanley, B1)

When Schumacher eventually leaves Christensen, who is beginning to fall apart as the Howard Beale ratings tank, he tells her, “After living with you for six months, I’m turning into one of your scripts. I’m real, Diana. You can’t switch to another station. I’m your last contact with human reality. You’re one of Howard’s humanoids. You’re television incarnate, Diana. Indifferent to suffering, insensitive to joy – all of life is reduced to the common banality: war, murder, death – it’s all the same to you as a bottle of beer. You even shatter the sensations of time and space into split seconds and instant replays. Everything you touch dies with you.”

It is worth noting that Schumacher and his wife are the only characters at film's end who have a chance at happiness. Chayefsky is saying that human decency is the only salvation; only human decency will save the world.

Television's power to corrupt, Chayefsky believes, is vast. In one of the film's most ironic scenes, UBS lawyers meet with representatives of the Ecumenical Liberation Army at ELA headquarters, an old farmhouse in the country. As the suits and the terrorists bicker angrily over the details of the contract, the group's leader, Ahmed Khan, fires a gun to get people's attention. "Man, give her the fucking overhead clause," he shouts. Then, "Let's get back to page 22, the subsidiary rights. . . ." Chayefsky's message: the prospect of being on TV – ergo celebrity -- is so seductive that it corrupts even the most radical political idealist. TV reveals the hidden heart.

The film *Network* is perhaps more relevant today than ever before. It has been "more than two decades since a broadcast network sought to make wholesale renovations in the architecture of its evening newscast." (Steinberg, 7) But now, with the departure of the three network anchors, the time is ripe for change. Will the world of news envisioned by Diana Christensen come to pass? At first glance, it may seem that it will. But there is reason to be optimistic that it will not.

CBS, for instance, is determined to attract a bigger and younger audience. (Steinberg, 7) A recent article in *The New York Times Magazine Section* showcased Leslie Moonves, chairman of CBS. "Leslie Moonves programs his

network for mass tastes – and he has made CBS No. 1.” (Hirschberg, 30) His next challenge, according to *The Times*, “will be whether his people-pleasing instincts can be applied to CBS’s nightly news show,” which is currently in last place among the networks. “The problem is stark: how do you combine news with entertainment” to achieve the highest ratings? (Hirschberg, 32)

Says Moonves: “There’s a way to fix the news. Just as there was a way to fix prime time.” (Hirschberg, 32) In discussing the success of CBS shows like “C.S.I.,” “Survivor,” and “Everybody Loves Raymond,” Moonves comments, “A hit show is like lightning in a bottle.” (Hirschberg, 32) His comment has a haunting similarity to Diana Christensen’s comment: “Son of a bitch, we hit the mother lode.”

In fact, some might say that Diana Christensen’s vision has been fully realized in today’s television. “Nowadays, buff bodies parade themselves in reality shows about outlandish competitions where eating the most grotesque concoctions is the norm and dignity flies out the window. Everyone has their own reality TV show, and some have even gained fame through it (see the Simpson sisters). One wonders if Diana Christensen isn’t alive and well and exerting absolute control over the networks in general, bringing anything and everything that can garner a little bit of shock value and eventual ratings, taking over actual scripted shows with real actors.” (Vargas)

Moonves believes audiences would like the news to be more like his entertainment shows: “better stories told by attractive personalities in exciting

ways.” (Hirschberg, 34) He has watched the British show “The Big Breakfast,” in which women read the news in lingerie, as well as “Naked News.” “I saw a clip of it,” says Moonves. “It’s a woman giving the news as she’s getting undressed. And then, on the other hand, you could have two boring people behind a desk. Our newscast has to be somewhere in between.” (Hirschberg, 34) And, it has been rumored that there could be a role on the new CBS news for Jon Stewart of Comedy Central’s *The Daily Show*. After all, CBS’s corporate owner, Viacom, owns Comedy Central, as well.

At first glance, it may seem that Diana Christensen’s view of the news will prevail. But there are equally compelling reasons to believe it will not. First, there’s the internet. Second, there’s Hurricane Katrina. And third, there is the hidden heart of society.

Back in 1976, when *Network* was released, the internet was barely imaginable. Today, it provides immediate access to just about any information one could desire, and it has changed the way people – especially young people – get the news. As a result, network news is struggling to find ways to capitalize on this five million pound gorilla, as it were. It is no coincidence that Brian Williams, the first anchor to take over a network evening newscast in the 21st century, has his own web log, or blog. “While Mr. Williams is careful not to traffic in gossip or observations that might breach his journalistic objectivity on matters like the course of the war in Iraq, his dispatches for what it known as ‘The Daily Nightly’ are striking in two main respects. One is the light he periodically sheds, in real

time, on deliberations among his 'NBC Nightly News' colleagues, including their disagreements on the evolving lineup of that night's newscast. The other is the criticism he occasionally levels at himself and the program when he feels either has come up short." (Steinberg, Aug. 25, B1)

And Williams is not alone. Estimates put the number of blogs at 12 million, and, bloggers are redefining the news. They were quick to fill the internet with stories about faux newsman Jeff Gannon, the administration-paid message of Armstrong Williams, the faked memo about George Bush's military record that brought down Dan Rather, and *Newsweek's* erroneous story about the *Koran* being flushed down the toilet. The blogosphere does not suffer fools gladly, and the mainstream media have little choice but to recognize this powerful new force.

The second reason for hope is Hurricane Katrina, which promises to be a watershed moment, for lack of a better term, for broadcast journalists. After years of post-9-11 journalistic lethargy, Katrina was a wake-up call to journalists to ask the probing questions, demand answers, and challenge the bullshit. It's almost as if Howard Beale's words resonated with them: "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore." After years of not asking the tough questions, the media finally got mad. Reporting from New Orleans, the news anchors became disenchanted with the atrocities they saw – right here in America. During a September 1 interview with Louisiana Senator Mary Landrieu, CNN anchor Anderson Cooper "snapped when she began thanking federal officials for their recovery efforts. 'Excuse me, Senator, for the last four days, I've been seeing

dead bodies in the streets. . . And to listen to politicians thanking each other and complimenting each other, you know, I got to tell you, there are a lot of people here who are very upset, and very angry, and very frustrated. . . because literally there was a body on the streets of this town yesterday being eaten by rats.”

(Jensen, B1)

Further, columnist Frank Rich noted that President Bush accepted responsibility for Katrina “only after America’s highest-rated TV news anchor, Brian Williams, started talking about Katrina the way Walter Cronkite once did about Vietnam.” (Rich, 12)

The third reason to be optimistic is the hidden heart. In 1976, Vincent Canby wrote that *Network* was a “cardiogram of the hidden heart, not just of television but also of the society that supports it and is, in turn, supported.”

It would seem that the hidden heart will not be silenced by television and corporate America; it is beating louder all the time. An October 2, 2005 search of the term “media literacy” on Google yielded 1,480,000 results. Thanks to the nation’s academic institutions, media watchdog groups, and the internet, Americans are far more savvy than they were in 1976 about the power of television to shape the nation’s thinking.

Further proof: In response to the *New York Times* article about Leslie Moonves, readers wrote in to express their outrage. “It was singularly depressing to read about CBS (the once proud network of Edward R. Murrow) contributing to

more dumbing down. Naked news, indeed!” “After a week of viewing wrenching (and often outstanding) television news coverage of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, I find that Moonves’ comments present both an absurd and alarming view of what he sees as the future of the ‘CBS Evening News.’ Broadcast news is not, and never was, intended to be entertainment.” (Letters, *New York Times Magazine Section*, Sept. 18, 2005)

In his weekly *60 Minutes* commentary, on September 25, 2005, Andy Rooney paid tribute to Peter Jennings. A memorial service held for Jennings earlier in the week packed the 2,800 seat Carnegie Hall. “News people are a close-knit group,” Rooney said, and proceeded to show footage of just about every major person in the news today – who attended the memorial. “If NBC really wanted to pay tribute to Peter Jennings,” Rooney said, “it would offer one hour of commercial free news each night, and call it the Peter Jennings News Hour.”

And finally, media giant Viacom has decided that bigger may not be better – or at least not more profitable, and it has announced that in 2006 the company will split into two entities, one to focus on broadcast TV and the other on cable. It’s a small step, but at least it’s a step away from huge. Could Viacom’s move be a sign that corporations can become too big and too far removed from the mainstream? Will other corporations follow? We’ll see.

In September 2005, “Good Night and Good Luck,” a movie about Edward R. Murrow, was released. It ends with a speech about television that Murrow

delivered in 1958. “To those who say people wouldn’t look; they wouldn’t be interested; they’re too complacent, indifferent and insulated, I can only reply: there is, in one reporter’s opinion, considerable evidence against that contention. But even if they are right, what have they go to lose?

“Because if they are right, and this instrument is good for nothing but to entertain, amuse and insulate, then the tube is flickering now and we will soon see that the whole struggle is lost. This instrument can teach, it can illuminate; yes, and it can even inspire. But it can do so only to the extent that humans are determined to use it to those ends. Otherwise, it is merely wires and lights in a box.” (Carr, 26)

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