

## Network

By Joanna E. Rapf

Sidney Lumet's "New York Times" obituary headlined him as a director of "conscience," and from his first movie, "Twelve Angry Men" (1957) to his last, "Before the Devil Knows You're Dead" (2007), he explored deeply flawed characters wrestling with moral choices. Sometimes he seemed to specialize in angry men, like Al Pacino's character, Sonny, in "Dog Day Afternoon" (1975) stirring up a crowd with his evocation of "Attica, Attica!" or like Peter Finch's Howard Beale yelling, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take it anymore," an outcry that has since become part of American vernacular, in "Network"'s exploration of the amorality stemming from ambition and greed in the television industry.

"Network" is generally seen as Lumet's greatest commercial success, and it won four Oscars: 1) for original screenplay by Paddy Chayefsky, 2) best actress, Faye Dunaway, 3) best actor, Peter Finch, and 4) best supporting actress, Beatrice Straight. The movie was also nominated for best picture, and Lumet for best director, William Holden for actor, Ned Beatty for supporting actor, Alan Heim for editing, and Owen Roisman for cinematography. However, it had a hard time getting made, not just because of its inflammatory content, but also because Chayefsky's script had so many long speeches in it. But as a director, Lumet says he loves long speeches and he knows how to make them visually interesting, such as when Ned Beatty, as the cynical head of the world's largest corporation tries to win over TV anchorman, Howard Beale, to his way of thinking about global economics. We see a long, shiny wooden table, a low line of green lights, a dark room, and the illuminated face of Beatty as he intones his belief that there is no democracy, no America, only large corporations such as IBM, Dupont, and Exxon. Lumet's camera focuses on Beatty's face against the darkness and follows him as he slowly walks towards Beale who is sitting alone at one end of the table. There is an occasional cut to Beale's face in stunned non-reaction, but the



*Ratings-hungry programming executive Faye Dunaway watches her news anchor fall apart on the air. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

long speech is intact. "The world is a business, Mr. Beale," and Beale has been chosen to articulate this doctrine to the masses. "Why me?" he asks. The answer is simple: "Because you are on television, dummy."

Lumet has always said that the material of his movie (and he calls them "movies" and not films) "must involve me personally on some level." He asks, "What is the movie about?" and he is not talking about plot. "What is it about emotionally?" "What does the movie mean to me?" (Lumet 10). For "Network," he put it this way: "The machines are winning. Or, to borrow from the NRA: TV doesn't corrupt people; people corrupt people" (Lumet 14). The powerful indoctrination scene described above, with Beatty exclaiming, "You have meddled with the primary forces of nature, Mr. Beale," shows just how extreme the corrupt forces of *people* will go.

Screenwriter Paddy Chayefsky and Lumet knew each other from their TV days--in fact, one of Lumet's earliest successes in TV was a Chayefsky adaptation. They both knew television well and had the same reservations about it: that it is reluctant to deal with meaningful material, focusing too exclusively on the bottom line. In an interview with David Sterritt, Lumet called TV "the perfect excuse for the lack of personal responsibility." This, he says, is "what our picture is all about," and why Chayefsky saw the medium as an ideal vehicle for looking at the flaws of American life. Lumet once described his collaborator as, "the sane man yelling in an insane world" and

"Network" is his rant." (Rapf 71).

Chayefsky was the producer on the movie, and he brought the script to the director. Its tidy three-act structure even refers to itself when, in what Lumet calls a "marvelously written and acted scene," embattled TV producer Max Schumacher (William Holden) tells his wife (Beatrice Straight) about his affair with co-worker Diana Christensen (Faye Dunaway). "Is this the middle of Act II, where the scorned wife kicks the husband out? Will it have the happy ending with him returning contrite?" Yes, it will, and he implies that Diana, in many ways, is the surrogate screenwriter, shaping the individual stories, the individual acts. She is the manipulator, the one in control, right to the very end. Cold and unfeeling, she uses the people around her to boost ratings and her career. When Max turns on Diana at the end and describes her as "madness incarnate," he also expresses what may well be Lumet's feelings about living in a corrupt, mechanized, media world.

In discussing his collaboration with Chayefsky, Lumet has stressed how all during production a movie is constantly being rewritten. For him, a director is writing as he shoots the picture, although he disparages the auteur theory as "nonsense." Making movies, he says again and again in interviews, is a collaborative process and he values all his collaborators, from the screenwriters to the grips. He obviously worked closely with Chayefsky on "Network," including him on the set and during the rushes. In his book, "Making Movies," Lumet writes of him with great affection:

He was a man who cared passionately about his work and about Israel. When we were casting, I suggested Vanessa Redgrave. He said he didn't want her. I said, "She's the best actress in the English-speaking world!" He said, "She's a PLO supporter." I said, "Paddy, that's blacklisting!" He said, "Not when a Jew does it to a Gentile" (42).

But the tables could also be reversed in the wonderful give-and-take the two men shared in doing the movie. In the scene discussed above in the middle of Act II, when Max tells his wife he's in love with someone else, Chayefsky started to make a critical comment. Lumet writes in "Making Movies" that he held up his hand and said, "Paddy, please, I know

more about divorce than you do" (Lumet 43). Lumet had been divorced several times.

Stylistically, the director and his cinematographer, Owen Roisman, made the look of the movie reflect its content. It is about corruption in the television industry, so they "corrupted the camera." The movie starts with an almost naturalistic look but as it progresses, the camera set-ups become more formal, more rigid, and the lighting becomes more and more artificial. Finally, the next-to-last scene is lit like a commercial. The camera set-ups are static and framed like still pictures. Lumet says, "The camera also had become a victim of television" (Lumet 85).

"Network" may still be the most scathing indictment of television ever made. It begins in the dark and gives us a nightmare world where the daily business of life becomes a surreal comedy. In a 2003 interview Lumet once commented that "Network" is not satire, but "reportage. The only thing that hasn't happened in that movie is that we haven't shot anybody on the air. . . . But, you know, you get these reality series going a little bit further and it's going to happen" (Rapf 186). Chayefsky was "always prescient." When the writer died of cancer in 1981, Lumet reflected: "When I look around at some of the absurdities of our lives, at the grotesque times we live through, I constantly wonder what Paddy might have done with them. He would've had too much to write about. I miss him every day" (Lumet 43).

#### Works Cited

Lumet, Sidney. "Making Movies." New York: Vintage Books, 1996.

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