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The profound prescience of a 1970s masterpiece

A new mass media has come of age over the past couple of decades, and it has proven so powerfully addictive that it is changing people's habits, attitudes and assumptions. Concerned critics are asking what this ubiquitous source of stimulation is doing to our brains — and what hidden forces are controlling the content we consume.

Social media? Sure. But 50 years ago, the medium that fit that description was television. And the most alarming, clear-eyed, merciless critique of its impact on both the people who consume it and those who create it is the now-classic 1976 movie "Network."

Written by Paddy Chayefsky and directed by Sidney Lumet, the film paints a caustic picture of an industry that will do literally anything for higher ratings, and thus higher profits. Peering into a taste-free future awash in infotainment, the film essentially invented the concept of reality television. It also introduced us to the first nightly newscaster who rants and raves, tasked with channeling his audience's grievances rather than presenting the facts.

He would not be the last.

"When I show 'Network' to my students, there's little shock factor for them," said Ross Melnick, professor of film and media studies at UC Santa Barbara and Interim

Dick Wolf Director of the Carsey-Wolf Center. “What they see is a world they already know.”

“It’s a remarkably prescient film, and I think it’s only going to feel more prescient as time goes on,” added Jason Ludwig, an assistant professor in the department who studies, among other things, the history of film and technology. “It was released in the year of the Bicentennial, and it’s one of the films that took stock of the nation at that moment.

“We’re now 50 years on from that, but the questions it asks about the American project, and particularly the role of mass media, feel as relevant as ever.”

Ludwig will introduce the film when it is screened at 2 p.m. Saturday, April 4 at the Carsey-Wolf Center. Admission is free, but reservations are recommended.

As suggested by the fact that three of its cast members won Academy Awards — Faye Dunaway as an amoral programmer, Peter Finch as an emotionally fragile news anchor, and Beatrice Straight as the long-suffering wife of straight-arrow news executive William Holden — “Network” is very much an ensemble piece. But its most vivid character is Howard Beale, played by Finch, a news anchor of the Walter Cronkite mode who stops playing by the rules when he is informed he is about to be fired for low ratings.

Beale’s live broadcasts turn increasingly angry and unhinged, culminating in the film’s most famous monologue, in which he tells his audience “I’m as mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore.” Holden wants him off the air, but Dunaway and her corporate allies disagree, noting his ratings have shot up as people tune in to see what this unleashed orator will say next.

Chayefsky was chronicling “the decline of the concept of news as a public good, and the rise of the idea that it’s just another facet of entertainment,” said Melnick. To the brilliant screenwriter, that shift represented something bigger and sadder: The fact that some of our most fundamental values were being devalued because the profit motive had become so dominant.

“The film is dark and pessimistic,” Melnick said. “That is, in part, because it was written by a highly frustrated World War II veteran. Chayevsky was deeply in love with the nation he grew up with, but by the 1970s he had seen it fail to live up to its

promise, and to his ideals.

“The film seems to argue that everything was now for sale — including the sanctity of the truth. The change in television news was a part of that shift.”

In the five decades since, this trend has only intensified as television has largely given way to streaming and algorithm-directed social media platforms. To get noticed today, Ludwig noted, you face much more competition than Howard Beale ever did, so you have to be even more outrageous.

“Today we have a loud, conspiratorial media landscape where, in a sense, everyone is Howard Beale,” he said. “They’re all proclaiming something or proselytizing for something. Sometimes the goal is to sell supplements. Sometimes it’s to sell wars.”

“Network” is a notably talky film. Chayefsky, who won an Oscar for the screenplay, gives nearly every character at least one big aria-like speech, the greatest of which is corporate honcho Ned Beatty’s screed that the world is now ruled not by nations, but by corporations. Somehow, all this soliloquizing doesn’t slow things down any more than it does in “Hamlet.”

That can be traced to the lyricism of the writing, the excellence of the acting and the subtle mastery of Lumet’s direction.

“The casting is pitch perfect,” said Melnick. “With many films, you may wonder who else might have succeeded in certain roles. With ‘Network,’ it’s impossible to envision other actors. This film really nails every element, from the cinematography to the impeccable writing to the acting. Lumet’s direction isn’t showy, but it pours you right into every scene, sometimes uncomfortably so.”

“In Lumet’s memoir ‘Making Movies,’ he said in this film, part of what he was trying to do was to ‘corrupt the camera,’” added Ludwig. “Some of the lighting was meant to mimic the network television the film was satirizing.” Early scenes tend to use natural light. As the characters lose their humanity, the lighting becomes brighter and brighter, mimicking a TV show.

Unlike many social-commentary-heavy films, “Network” isn’t political in a left/right sense. Its most amusing subplot concerns a band of Communist revolutionaries who become highly versed in television economics when they are offered an hour of prime time for “The Mao-Tse Tung Hour.”

“There are no heroes in this film,” Melnick noted. Writing in the shadow of the Vietnam War and Watergate scandal, Chayefsky portrays pretty much everyone as on the take — or at least prone to being easily corrupted.

Five decades on, “Network” has lost none of its bite.

“It rocks you to your core,” Melnick added. “It really nailed who we are, and who we would become.”

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