

Dispatches From the War: Epidemics Are Staged on Television

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Network: the last great film about The News

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When a new epidemic is launched and promoted, despite the lack of good science and good evidence, it is jacked up on television screens. Images begin to flow:

An emergency medical vehicle on a street. EMT personnel, in hazmat suits, load a man strapped down to a stretcher, into the van. On another street, a man collapses on the sidewalk. We see a quarantined man sitting inside a huge plastic bubble on a third street. Cut to an airport lobby. Soldiers are patrolling the space among the crowds. Cut to a lab. Close-up of vials of liquid. Camera pulls back. Techs in light green scrubs are placing the vials into slots of a table-top machine. Auditorium—a man on a platform, wearing a doctor's white coat, is pointing a wand at a large screen, on which a chart is displayed, for the audience. Back to the street. People are wearing face masks.

These images wash over the television viewer. Meanwhile, the anchor is imparting his prepared meaning: "The government today issued a ban on all travel into and out of the city...hundreds of plane flights have been cancelled. Scientists are rushing to develop a vaccine..."

The television audience has an IMPRESSION of knowing something. They're in the flow, the flow of the news...they're in the images...

–**Network**, the 1976 film written by Paddy Chayefsky, reveals what media kings would do if they unchained their basic instincts and galloped all the way into the madness of slash-and-burn Roman Circus.

The audience is jaded beyond recall. It needs new shocks to the system every day. The adrenaline must flow. The line between reporting the news and inventing it? Erase it. Celebrate the erasure. Watch ratings soar.

Why pretend anymore? Why spend countless hours preparing and broadcasting synthetic artificial news, as if it were real? Does the audience care about such niceties? The audience just wants action.

The film proceeds from these premises.

Arthur Jensen, head of the corporation that owns the Network, speaks to unhinged Network newsman, Howard Beale, who has revealed, on-air, a piece of the real planetary power structure in a few moments of sanity: "You have meddled with the primal forces of nature, Mr. Beale, and I won't have it!! Is that clear?!... You are an old man who thinks in terms of nations and peoples. There are no nations. There are no peoples. There are no Russians. There are no Arabs. There are no third worlds. There is no West. There is only one holistic system of systems, one vast and immane, interwoven, interacting, multivariate, multinational dominion of dollars. Petro-dollars, electro-dollars, multi-dollars, reichmarks, rins, rubles, pounds, and shekels. It is the international system of currency which determines the totality of life on this planet. That is the natural order of things today. That is the atomic and subatomic and galactic structure of things today! And YOU have meddled with the primal forces of nature,

and YOU WILL ATONE!”

Head of programming for the Network, Diana Christensen, shifts the whole news department over to the entertainment division.

Thus emerge new shows with soaring ratings: Howard Beale, [Religious] Prophet of the Air Waves; The Mao Tse-Tung Hour, in which a guerrilla group films itself carrying out armed bank robberies; and Sybil the Soothsayer, a Tarot reader.

Diana becomes the network's new executive star.

There is no longer even a pretense of a need for news anchors to appear authoritative, objective, or rational.

Diana Christensen is unstoppable. She sees, with burning clarity, that audiences are bored to the point of exhaustion; they now require, as at the end of the Roman Empire, extreme entertainment. They want more violence, more insanity, out in the open. On television.

In promoting her kind of news division, she tells network executives:

“Look, we've got a bunch of hobgoblin radicals called the Ecumenical Liberation Army who go around taking home movies of themselves robbing banks. Maybe they'll take movies of themselves kidnapping heiresses, hijacking 747's, bombing bridges, assassinating ambassadors. We'd open each week's segment with that authentic footage, hire a couple of writers to write some story behind that footage, and we've got ourselves a series...

“Did you see the overnights on the Network News? It has an 8 in New York and a 9 in L.A. and a 27 share in both cities. Last night, Howard Beale went on the air [as a newscaster] and yelled ‘BULLSHIT’ for two minutes, and I can tell you right now that tonight’s show will get a 30 share at least. I think we’ve lucked into something...

“I see Howard Beale as a latter-day prophet, a magnificent messianic figure, inveighing against the hypocrisies of our times, a strip Savonarola, Monday through Friday. I tell you, Frank, that could just go through the roof...Do you want to figure out the revenues of a strip show that sells for a hundred thousand bucks a minute? One show like that could pull this whole network right out of the hole! Now, Frank, it’s being handed to us on a plate; let’s not blow it!”

Television in the “real world” isn’t all the way there yet, but it’s close.

In Network, Diana Christensen personifies the news. She is the electric, thrill-seeking, non-stop force that is terrified of silence.

She lives and feeds on adrenaline. So does the viewing public. Nothing else ultimately matters. Ratings are the top line and the bottom line. The individual and his thoughts are completely irrelevant.

Howard Beale, over the cliff, a news man screaming on-air

about the insanity of the news, is perfectly acceptable, because the audience is simply responding to Beale's inchoate outrage and their own. Nothing deeper is explored. What could have resulted in a true popular rebellion is short-circuited. Beale becomes a crazy loon, a novelty item. Yet one more distraction.

When, in a brief interlude of clarity, he begins telling his audience about the takeover of society by mega-corporations and mega-money, his show droops. Ratings collapse. Diana is no longer interested in him; she wants to sack him.

However, Arthur Jensen, the head of the corporation that owns the television network, wants to keep Beale on the air, as a messenger of the "galactic truth" about the beneficial integration of all human activity under the rubric of global money and global power. He converts Beale to his cause.

Diana sees only one way out of this ratings disaster: kill Beale; on-air; during his show. And so it is done.

Network also shows us the audience becoming actor, player, participant. The audience is jumping out of its skin to be recognized, courted, and adored as a mighty rolling force embodying no particular meaning.

Audience wants to be a star. Audience wants to BE news; audience wants its actions to be shown on television. That establishes its legitimacy. Nothing else is necessary.

Diana knows it, and she is more than willing to accommodate this frantic desire, if only her bosses will let her go all the way.

The best film ever made about television's war on the population, Network stages only a few minutes of on-air television.

The rest of the film is dialogue and monologue about television. Thus you could say that, in this case, word defeats image. Which was scriptwriter Paddy Chayefsky's intent.

Even when showing what happens on the TV screen, Network bursts forth with lines like these, from newsman Howard Beale, at the end of his rope, on-camera, speaking to his in-studio audience and millions of people in their homes:

"So, you listen to me. Listen to me! Television is not the truth. Television's a god-damned amusement park. Television is a circus, a carnival, a traveling troupe of acrobats, storytellers, dancers, singers, jugglers, sideshow freaks, lion tamers, and football players. We're in the boredom-killing business... We deal in illusions, man. None of it is true! But you people sit there day after day, night after night, all ages, colors, creeds. We're all you know. You're beginning to believe the illusions we're spinning here. You're beginning to think that the tube is reality and that your own lives are unreal. You do whatever the tube tells you. You dress like the tube, you eat like the tube, you raise your children like the tube. You even think like the tube. This is mass madness. You maniacs. In God's name, you people are the real thing. We are the illusion."

It is Beale's language and the passion with which he delivers it that constitutes his dangerous weapon. Therefore, the Network transforms him into a cheap religious figure, whose audience slathers him with absurd adoration.

Television's enemy is the word. Its currency is image.

Beale occasionally breaks through the image and defiles it. He cracks the egg. He stops the picture-flow. He brings back the sound and rhythm of spoken poetry. That is his true transgression against the medium that employs him.

The modern matrix has everything to do with how knowledge is

acquired.

Television, in the main, does not attempt to impart knowledge. It strives to give the viewer the impression that he knows something. There is a difference.

The impression of knowing is a feeling, a conviction, a belief the viewer holds, after he has watched moving images on a screen and listened to a narrator. THIS is what the viewer prefers. He wants no part of knowledge.

A basic premise of modern age is: "everything is (connected to) everything." This fits quite well with the experience of watching video flow.

Example: we see angry crowds on the street of a foreign city. Then young people on their cell phones sitting in an outdoor café. Then the marble lobby of a government building where men in suits are walking, standing in groups talking to each other. Then at night, rockets exploding in the sky. Then armored vehicles moving through a gate into the city. Then clouds of smoke on another street and people running, chased by police.

A flow of consecutive images. The sequence, obviously, has been assembled by a news editor, but most of the viewing audience isn't aware of that. They're watching the "interconnected" images and listening to a news anchor tell a story that colors (infects) every image: "This is revolution for democracy, created by the technology of cell phones..."

Viewers thus believe something. Television has imparted a sensation to them.

Therefore: a short circuit occurs in the mind.

When you export this pattern out to a whole society, you are talking about a dominant method through which "knowledge" is groped and held close.

“Did you see that fantastic video about the Iraq War? It showed that Saddam actually had bioweapons.”

“Really? How did they show that?”

“Well, I don’t remember. But watch it. You’ll see.”

And that’s another feature of the modern acquisition of “knowledge”: amnesia about details.

The viewer can’t recall key features of what he saw. Or if he can, he can’t describe them, because he was inside them, busy building up his impression of knowing something.

Narrative-visual-television story strips out and discards conceptual analysis. To the extent it exists, it’s wrapped around and inside the image and the narration.

Paddy Chayefsky made his pen a sword, because he was writing a movie about television, against television. He was pitting Word against Image.

When a technology (television) turns into a method of perception, reality is turned inside out. People watch TV through TV eyes.

Mind control is no longer something merely imposed from the outside. It is a matrix of a self-feeding, self-demanding loop.

Willing Devotees of the Image WANT images, food stamps of the programmed society.

The triumph of Network is that it makes its words win over pictures, IN a picture, IN a film.

A pandemic, the false pandemic I’ve been rejecting in many articles, is delivered through video flow and narration. Stacked and cut images.

There is no challenge to the flow in any basic way, through the intrusion of actual knowledge, because that would shut down the parade of images and nullify the reasons for broadcasting them in the first place.

The old theater adage, "the show must go on," when adapted for television, becomes, "the flow must go on." Once its course is set, there can be no turning back.

The television audience, imprisoned in homes, rides the river...