

Network  
US 1977  
121 mins

Directed by **Sidney Lumet**  
Written by **Paddy Chayefsky**  
Cinematography by **Owen Roizman**  
Edited by **Alan Heim**  
Original music by **Elliot Lawrence**  
Production Design by **Philip Rosenberg**  
Produced by **Fred Caruso & Howard Gottfried**

## Cast

**Faye Dunaway** Diana Christensen; **William Holden** Max Schumacher; **Peter Finch** Howard Beale; **Robert Duvall** Frank Hackett; **Wesley Addy** Nelson Chaney; **Ned Beatty** Arthur Jensen; **Arthur Burghardt** Great Ahmed Kahn; **Bill Burrows** TV Director; **John Carpenter** George Bosch; **Jordan Charney** Harry Hunter; **Kathy Cronkite** Mary Ann Gifford; **Ed Crowley** Joe Donnelly; **Jerome Dempsey** Walter C. Amundsen; **Conchata Ferrell** Barbara Schlesinger; **Gene Gross** Milton K. Steinman; **Stanley Grover** Jack Snowden; **Cindy Grover** Caroline Schumacher; **Darryl Hickman** Bill Herron; **Mitchell Jason** Arthur Zangwill; **Paul Jenkins** TV Stage Manager; **Ken Kercheval** Merrill Grant; **Kenneth Kimmins** Associate Producer; **Lynn Klugman** TV Production Assistant; **Carolyn Krigbaum** Max's Secretary; **Zane Lasky** Audio Man; **Michael Lipton** Tommy Pellegrino; **Michael Lombard** Willie Stein; **Pirie MacDonald** Herb Thackeray; **Russ Petranto** TV Associate Director; **Bernard Pollock** Lou; **Roy Poole** Sam Haywood; **William Prince** Edward George Ruddy; **Sasha von Scherler** Helen Miggs; **Lane Smith** Robert McDonough; **Theodore Sorel** Giannini; **Beatrice Straight** Louise Schumacher; **Fred Stuthman** Mosaic Figure; **Cameron Thomas** TV Technical Director; **Marlene Warfield** Lauren Hobbs; **Lydia Wilen** Hunter's Secretary; **Lee Richardson** Narrator; **John Chancellor** Himself; **Walter Cronkite** Himself; **Andrew Duncan** Agent; **Todd Everett** Reporter; **Betty Ford** Herself; **Gerald Ford** Himself; **John Gabriel** TV anchor reporting Beale's suicide threat; **Lance Henriksen** Network lawyer at Khan's place; **Raymond Martino** Window person; **Tim Robbins** Assassin; **Howard K. Smith** Himself; **David Susskind** Himself; **Michael Tucker** Man At Desk; **Ahmed Yamani** Himself

## bigpicture

# Network



The word 'network' meant something very different in 1977. Today, when we talk about the 'network society' we mean a world in which information is distributed, access to conflicting accounts of events is taken for granted, and collective intelligence can produce Wikipedia. Then, the networks were spectacular monoliths, divvying up a sofa-bound American television audience between them. Nevertheless, *Network* still seems a prescient and prophetic account of our mass media and its highly ambivalent relationship with truth.

Those who accuse the internet of trivialising contemporary culture need only look at Diana Christensen's revamped news hour, with its resident fortune teller to see that news coverage was embracing showbusiness a good two decades before anyone looked at the news through a web browser. (Though a population shouting out of their windows is the kind of 'user engagement' many contemporary news organisations would die for).

Howard Beale's catchphrase, 'I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this any more', lives on in the popular imagination, but *Network's* legacy is neither uncomplicated nor automatically liberal. As recently as last year right-wing US Fox host Glen Beck compared himself to Beale. Perhaps a more interesting connection is the uncredited appearance of Tim Robbins in the film's closing scenes, a reminder of his own 1992 satire on political conspiracy, *Bob Roberts*.

While *Network* mocks television's capacity to trivialise the most serious of issues, it also suggests that the media ultimately envelops and neuters even its harshest critics. Beale ultimately succumbs to passively spouting the doctrine that only money matters, his catchphrase enthusiastically bleated by his live studio audiences. Likewise, the left-wing agitators hired by the network to provide live revolutionary activity for the *Mao Tse Tung Hour* are soon arguing over percentages, segments and distribution charges.

If the film does have a moral centre, it's in veteran news producer Max Schumacher, Beale's only true friend in a nest of corporate vipers, and capable of finally seeing that the generation who created popular television are no match for the generation who grew up with it. But perhaps the most chilling reminder of the nature of the small screen is the closing credits' montage of news and advertising overlapping and intermingling: a reminder of one's ultimately fatal dependence on the other.

# bigpicture

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Sessions generally start with a question. Someone who has some relevant expertise gives a very brief, informal talk. After that a discussion develops in a free and unstructured manner. It's not a lecture, and it's not a debate; it's a pub argument, but unlike any you've had before.

In case you were worried, Big Ideas isn't affiliated with any political, religious or other organisation, and we don't have any particular agenda.

Big Picture next month

## Ghost Dance



**Monday 9th August**  
**Doors 7pm / Film 7.30pm**

Is Jacques Derrida a ghost? He appears in person in Ken McMullen's strange and wonderful analysis of film, memory and the past; but then so does Robbie Coltrane. Flitting between the lives of two women in London and Paris, and featuring an episode of mobile phone eating, *Ghost Dance* expresses a peculiarly melancholy vision of Marxism.

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## Television and Democracy

*Network* is a sort of comedy, to be sure, but the point it makes is decidedly serious. While the film uses exaggeration as a means of clarification, its characterization of our television culture is fundamentally realistic. "This is not a satire," Norman Lear pointedly wrote about *Network*, "it's a documentary." And Gore Vidal once remarked: "I've heard every line from that film in real life."

The story of *Network* takes place in 1976, the bicentennial of the American Revolution. The date is no accident: *Network* is a reflection on the reality and future of American democracy. Democracy, according to the film, is under attack, and the threat does not come from somewhere outside the United States, but from the American way of life itself—a way crucially defined by TV. At a time when the world situation becomes increasingly difficult and complex, a functioning democracy is in urgent need of an alert and well-informed public. Democracy by its very nature needs citizens who are willing to learn, think, and take meaningful action on their own behalf. Television, however, undermines both civic literacy and active participation, according to *Network*. It turns its viewers into passive consumers of non-stop entertainment, and it transforms what should be an enlightened public into a helpless and confused mass that falls far short of understanding and controlling the forces that shape their lives and foreseeable future.

Howard Beale's main mission as the "mad prophet of the airwaves" is, as he sees it, to combat the debilitating tendencies of the "tube," and to inspire people to actively take charge of their lives. Paddy Chayefsky puts powerful and insightful speeches in his mouth. Beale is a sort of madman, to be sure, but there is an ancient tradition according to which mad individuals are considered mouth pieces of gods or higher powers, and their messages revelations of deeper wisdom. Chayefsky explicitly alludes to this tradition, and he reminds us that there have been other prophets and visionary leaders who were anything but ordinary stable minds. Diana remarks that Beale is "as mad as Moses," for example, and she submits: "It's just possible that [Beale] isn't insane, that he is, in fact, imbued with some special spirit." Beale can, indeed, function as an inspiring prophet because he lives on the brink. He is not weighed down by trivial concerns anymore, and he is not held back by such things as etiquette and social taboos. He is free to cut through the usual "bullshit" and to address the truly important tasks of the time.

The first aspect of television that Beale attacks is the apathy and passivity that it seems to encourage and cultivate among its habitual viewers. As television viewers people are emphatically passive to begin with. Their bodies do not move, and unlike readers or debaters they do not exert their minds when taking in information and stimuli. It is because of this effortlessness with which people can gratify their communication needs that they tend to become addicts of TV. They turn into the proverbial couch potatoes whose spirits get blunted and whose emotions dulled by an endless stream of mostly trivial images and commercial exhortations; their thorough passivity becomes a way of life. Instead of being active citizens they turn into passive consumers. They are vaguely aware that the world is in trouble, and that important things ought to be done, but they do not really know what to do, and they see no way to be meaningfully active. They escape into ever more brainless entertainment, and they remain locked in feelings of fuming frustration. Their near-catatonic inertia can only be broken, according to Beale, by making them passionately feel again, and by getting them to vigorously express their buried frustration and smoldering rage.

Jorn K. Bramann, *Educating Rita and Other Philosophical Movies*

Programme notes by Danny Birchall