

Network Film Summary

Network by Sidney Lumet

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Context

Network tells the story of the future of media, a world that was once thought impossible but has become a reality with the advent of reality television. What would happen if a network exploited their employees to get better ratings? *Network* answers that question vividly as we follow the story of the network's employees.

News anchor Howard threatens to kill himself on the air, after which the network begins to exploit him and his crazy ravings. At first, news director Max seeks to exploit Howard's actions, but he later begins to realize how inundated he has become with the thrills of commercialism and the allure of money. Programming executive Diana, on the other hand, becomes completely dehumanized as she seeks to become rich and powerful within the network.

Network allowed viewers to see into the future of how things might be and allowed them to use their imaginations to experience what life might be like if television began to reflect reality. I'm sure early viewers never knew just how close the film would someday come to the truth.

Director Sidney Lumet is one of the best directors of all time. Although his works are not consistently wonderful, Lumet has definitely made a name for himself. Lumet's feature film debut was *12 Angry Men* (1957), one of the most famous films of all time, winning the Golden Bear at the Berlin Film Festival and numerous Academy Award nominations. Some of his other great films were *Long Day's Journey into Night* (1962), *Serpico* (1973), and *Murder on the Orient Express* (1974). With *Network*, Lumet once again directs a superior film.

Faye Dunaway plays the role of the driven Diana Christensen. She first made her breakthrough into the big time with her role in *Bonnie and Clyde* (1967). Although her performance in *Network* is exceptional, her career became less impressive over time.

William Holden, who plays Max Schumacher, first became a star with the film *Golden Boy* (1939). He then had one of his greatest performances as Joe Gillis in *Sunset Boulevard* (1950) and later in *Born Yesterday* (1950). He won an Oscar in *Stalag 17* (1953). In *Network*, Holden gives an excellent performance as Max.

Peter Finch, who plays Howard Beale, is best known for his role in *Network*. His battle cry, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" was repeated in high schools and businesses around the country. Finch was a protégé of Laurence Olivier, and he gained a lot of popularity through his role in *Far From the Madding Crowd* (1967).

Network received numerous Academy Award nominations, including Best Actor in a Leading Role for William Holden, Best Actor in a Supporting Role for Ned Beatty, Best Cinematography for Owen Roizman, Best Director for Sidney Lumet, Best Film Editing for Alan Heim, and Best Picture for Howard Gottfried. *Network* actually won several



Oscars: Best Actor in a Leading Role for Peter Finch (first posthumous winner in an acting category); Best Actress in a Leading Role for Faye Dunaway; Best Actress in a Supporting Role for Beatrice Straight; Best Writing, Screenplay Written Directly for the Screen for Paddy Chayefsky. With these awards, *Network* became the second film to win three awards for acting.

Summary and Analysis

Network begins as we see the news programs of different networks on several television screens and learn that the story is about anchor Howard Beale, who had one of the best ratings for a long time. However, after his wife died, Beale develop a drinking problem and began getting bad reviews. He is fired by Max Schumacher.

Max and Howard later talk in a bar, and Max comes to the conclusion that death on the screen would put Disney off the air. The next morning, we see the network putting together the show. Howard announces on the air that since he is being forced to retire, he will kill himself live in one week. No one at the network was paying attention, so only one person heard his announcement. Howard is pulled out of his chair, but the news comes back on before he is off stage and he punches one of the men. Frank says Howard is off the show and tells Max to take care of the problem. Howard will be staying with Max that night since the press will be surrounding his building.

The next day, Diana Christensen comes in to see some footage. A woman reports the news on screen while Max lets someone know that Howard left his house just a few hours earlier. Howard calls to convince Max to let him have one last chance on the air. Diana calls several people into her office and tells them that she wants to show the recording of a robbery and turn it into a TV series or Movie of the Week. However, they seem uninterested in her ideas. She reminds them that she wants angry, countercultural shows for the network.

Meanwhile, Frank is speaking to the network's Board of Directors. He is upset that the news department is losing money, and he has plans to turn that around. Max is extremely upset at this announcement and threatens to resign. That evening, Howard comes on the air for what is expected to be his last time. He speaks frankly to the American public about his life. Frank comes into the crowded lobby of his network after Max does not return his phone calls. Frank meets with Max and expresses his anger; however, Max turns on him for the earlier announcements at the meeting. Max feels that Frank is only the spokesperson for CCA, but Frank tells him that he expects his resignation the next morning. Until then, Diana will be in charge of the news division. Frank wants to speak with Howard, but he is at a press meeting downstairs. Diana watches his speech on television.

The next morning, Diana sees that Howard is on the front page of every newspaper, and she comes in asking for the ratings. Mary Ann reads off the stories of the new scripts, but Diana is impressed that with everything else going on, Howard is on the front page. Diana meets with Frank, telling him that keeping Howard on the air is the key to keeping their ratings high. She tells him that the show will be the biggest sensation of their day, and he tells her that he'll check with Legal and get back with her. Later, Frank meets with Nelson Chaney, President of the network, and the others, and convinces them that adding editorial commentary would help the news show. Max packs up his office as Howard comes in with a picture of them in their youth.



Ed Ruddy comes down to meet with Max, and he suspects that the network will be upset with Frank. Ruddy asks Max to stay on with the network, and Max agrees. At first, the newspapers and the other networks decry the new Howard Beale show, and the ratings began to drop a bit. Diana goes to see Max and tells him a story about a psychic. This woman, Cybil, could predict the future for a few moments every week. Diana tries to convince Max to let her help him make the show the highest rated news show in television. She wants to bring it up in the next day's meeting, but first she wants to work it out between them. Max tells Diana that the stuff with Howard should end the next day, and he asks why she would come up there. She plans to take over his news show, and he invites her out for dinner; she agrees.

Over dinner, Diana tells Max about her life. The only thing she is good at is her work. Max then tells her about his life and that he has heard she is involved with Frank. They go home to her place later, since his wife is in town. Max lets everyone know that this night everything will go back to normal, but Howard continues in the same way. Diana watches, smiling, as she eats her dinner. Max waits in Howard's office and tells him that he is taking Howard off the air. Howard refuses to believe that he's having a breakdown and tells Max that he is just fine. Howard tells Max he will not be taken off the air, and then he faints. Max takes Howard home with him that night.

The next morning, Howard is missing from the house. At the network, Frank is angry that Howard is missing, since ratings are higher than ever. Diana tells Max that she has taken over the news show. Ruddy had a heart attack, so Frank is now in charge; he wants Max gone by noon. Max does not want to exploit Howard, and he says he will go to the press with the network's actions. Later that evening, Howard finally shows up for his show, soaked and in a trench coat and pajamas. He asks everyone to open their windows and yell, "I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore!" All over the country, people go out on their balconies and begin screaming.

After only a month, the Howard Beale show was one of the most highly rated shows in the country. Diana went to L.A. to meet with the west coast network about new programming for the coming year. She wants Laureen Hobbs to meet with the Ecumenical Party and put it on primetime television for an hour a week. Laureen agrees and goes to meet with the Party.

Howard announces that Frank Hackett is now in charge of CCA, and he tells them that they can never know what will be presented on television. Television is not truth but rather entertainment. He tells people to go to "God, your gurus, or yourselves" to find the truth. Nothing bad ever happens on television because that is not what people want to hear. He tells them that they do everything the tube tells them to do, and they believe their lives are an illusion. Howard demands that everyone turn off their televisions, and then he falls to the ground. The crowds cheer wildly.

At the Board of Directors meeting, Frank reports that the network is doing extremely well and the investors are making a fortune. Max and Diana meet on the street, and he tells her that his wife is gone to see their pregnant daughter. Diana and Max go away for the weekend together. Max approaches his wife after a month and tells her about the



affair. He says that he is infatuated with Diana, and then he admits that he's in love with her. His wife asks him to move out and tells him that she doesn't plan to give him up easily. He tells her that he doesn't know that Diana can love him' since she grew up with the television generation. Max realizes that he and Diana will never work out for good, but he has to give it a chance anyway.

The network's new series on the Ecumenical Party receives great ratings, but it is costing too much. The leader of the Party shoots his gun and forces everyone to do what Laureen wants. At the next affiliate's meeting, Diana is applauded for her great programming choices. Diana speaks to the crowd and convinces them that next year they will be number one. On his show, Howard talks about a company that is buying up pieces of CCA, and he claims they are Arabs. As Frank watches on the West Coast, he receives a call that there is a problem with the programming. Everyone watches as Howard tries to convince all of America to persecute the Arabs so that they do not take over everything. Frank admits that the CCA deal is true. Frank wants Howard to come off the air immediately.

Mr. Jansen has called to meet with Frank and Howard first thing the next morning. Jansen tells Howard that he has ruined everything. The Arabs have to take the money out of the United States. Jansen explains that "there is no America and there is no democracy;" there are only corporations. Jansen tells Howard that he has chosen him to preach his ideas. Howard tells the country that they all know that democracy is falling apart. The show drops in ratings as Howard tells viewers his life is worth nothing. Diana is terribly upset, and she spends several minutes yelling at Howard's agent.

Max is angry at Diana because he has become part of her scripts. He tells her that he went to see his wife today and she is in terrible depression because of him. Max tells Diana that he wants her to love him, but she tells him that she doesn't know how to do that. Then she goes to answer the phone, and Max sighs.

When Howard's ratings continue to drop, Laureen yells at Diana to find a new show. Diana tries to convince Frank that Howard should be let go. At home that night, Max prepares to move out and go back to his wife. Diana doesn't like the script, so she's canceling the show. Max tells her that he's the only link to reality; she asks him to stay, but he refuses to be destroyed by Frank.

Jensen does not want to take Howard off the air because he feels that the show was bringing an important message to the public. Diana tells him they will lose money and ratings if Howard's show stays on the air, because it is the only bad show on the network. Frank continues to tell everyone that Jensen will not change his mind. Frank says that they will simply have to kill Howard, and Diana suggests an assassination. Ruddy points out that this is a crime, and the network cannot be implicated. Diana tells Frank that they really have no choice.

As they discuss killing Howard, we see the audience entering for Howard's last show. Then the show begins. Howard comes to the stage and two men, part of the



Ecumenical Party, take out guns and kill Howard. The killers escaped. Howard's death is all over the news stations.

The narrator ends by saying, "This was the story of Howard Beale. The first man known to be killed because he had lousy ratings."



Characters

Diana Christensen, played by Faye Dunaway

Description

Diana Christensen is a self-centered woman who is completely focused on getting ahead in the television industry. As the film begins, she is in charge of programming for the network and is trying to find some shows that will help garner the public's attention. Once she sees Howard's announcement on live television, she pushes the network to take it as far as it will go.

Diana eventually begins creating many reality-television types of programs. She uses real life to inspire the programs she develops. She also begins a relationship with Max that eventually ends because she is so obsessed by her work. Diana is finally the person who decides that Howard must be murdered and who makes the plans for the hit.

Analysis

Diana seems less than human. She is so focused on her career that she has forgotten how to care about other people and their feelings. She realizes that pain and suffering sell, so she spends her time creating programs that will be marketed to that crowd.

Her greed for power and prestige lead Diana to lose any chance at a relationship with Max. He was her last link to a reality where people actually have feelings, and he leaves her. After that, she becomes almost like a machine. She decides with no emotion at all that Howard must be murdered and then makes sure it happens. She has finally become something less than human.

Max Schumacher, played by William Holden

Description

Max Schumacher is the head of the news department at the network. Max decides to let Howard Beale go after many years because of low ratings. In response, Howard tells the world that he will commit suicide on live television in a week. Max decides that Howard should not be let back on air after this announcement, but Diana convinces the network to keep him on.

Max hates to see Howard treated in this manner, but he has no control over the situation. In his personal life, Max leaves his wife to move in with Diana. When he realizes that Diana has no intention of settling down and only cares about her work, he leaves to try to make things better with his wife.



Analysis

Max at first acts like everyone else. Focused on his own well-being and on money, Max wants to exploit Howard. However, after he sees how far things are going, he begins to argue with the network and accuse them of using and humiliating Howard.

Max also leaves his wife for Diana because she is younger and prettier. However, he sees Diana's selfish, shallow life, and eventually comes to his senses. He returns to his wife and tries to get his life back on the right track.

Howard Beale, played by Peter Finch

Description

Howard Beale has been a newscaster with the network for many years, but when he finds out he is being let go, he snaps. He decides that he will commit suicide on live television the next week. After making his announcement, Howard begins to talk to the audience about the meaning of life. His crazy ravings are eventually exploited in order to raise network ratings.

Analysis

Howard's whole life has been focused on his career, so when he finds out that is coming to an end, he feels he has nothing left to live for. Thus, he decides to commit public suicide. Howard seems to be clueless to the fact that he is being exploited: he is just interested in keeping his job and being popular. Once his ravings become too much, though, Howard is murdered by the network and his desire to die on air is fulfilled.

Frank Hackett, played by Robert Duvall

Description

Frank Hackett runs the network. He decides what will be aired, and he takes great pride in having high ratings. Once Diana comes up with the idea to exploit Howard and use him as a type of prophet, Frank wholeheartedly backs the project. However, when Howard begins making enemies, Frank is also the one who agrees that Howard must die.

Analysis

Frank is completely focused on money and ratings. He will do anything to make money, and he works with people like Diana who feel the same way. As the leader of the network, Frank brings up the ratings but lowers the morality of the people.



Nelson Chaney, played by Wesley Addy

Description

Nelson Chaney is the acting president of the network, but he disagrees with the new shows and tactics being used by Frank and Diana.

Analysis

Nelson cares a lot about money, but he is also a moral man. Eventually, he leaves the network so that he will not be part of the terrible things going on there.

Laureen Hobbs, played by Marlene Warfield

Description

Laureen Hobbs is a reporter and creative director who begins working with Diana. She helps to get the show starring the Great Ahmed Kahn on the air.

Analysis

Like Diana, Laureen is only worried about her career. She sacrifices everything to have a great career, and she helps plan Howard's murder.

Great Ahmed Kahn, played by Arthur Burghardt

Description

Great Ahmed Kahn was the leader of a group that Diana uses to increase ratings on her show.

Analysis

Great Ahmed Kahn is a very demanding person who is not only motivated by the money the series give him, but also the reputation he has with the world.



Themes

Pursuit of Power

Network is entirely focused on the pursuit of power. In the beginning, Howard is fired because the network wants to gain more power in the industry. Howard realizes that he will have greater power over the network if he announces his suicide attempt on live television. His move does help him to gain power over the network and keep his job although the results are not exactly what he expected.

Diana is also pursuing greater power within the network. She knows that she is smart and forward-thinking, but she seems to be lacking a team and a job that can help her promote herself in the company. She ends up using Howard's plight to move up in the company. She also uses a relationship with Max to get her where she wants to be.

According to this film, the pursuit of power seems to be inherent in all humans. Everyone wants a promotion, more money, or more publicity. The only person who ever seems to go against this pursuit is Max, but he does not realize that there is anything greater until the end of the film when he has almost lost everything. Perhaps Max becomes the only one with any sanity when he realizes that the pursuit of power wouldn't get him the things he wanted most.

Dehumanizing Power of Greed

Greed goes along with the pursuit of power. Although everyone is pursuing more power, most are pursuing it simply because they want more money - they are greedy. In *Network*, we see that a constant greedy nature will dehumanize a person until they are almost unrecognizable as being human.

Diana is the main character that we see become dehumanized during the course of the movie. At the beginning of the film, she seems driven, but she also seems to have a heart - at least for a few minutes. However, when Diana sees how the show ratings have gone up since Howard's threat to kill himself, she decides that the network should take advantage of his state of mind to increase their ratings.

Diana becomes increasingly corrupt throughout the course of the film until eventually she seems to have lost all capability to feel. Max sees this loss of humanity in her actions and attitude, and he decides to return home to his wife. However, before he leaves, he tells Diana that he was her last true connection to the part of her that is truly human.



Loyalty to Values

Loyalty to values is a type of theme in the film. It's only a "type of theme" because every character is actually losing their values; however, we see the theme coming through as they destroy their own lives and hopes of happiness by deserting their former values. The only person who finally returns to their values is Max, but it takes him the entire movie to figure out how to find his way back to where he needed to be.

When the film begins, Howard Beale, a good, successful man, decides that he wants to commit suicide on live television because he is being let go after many years. Although his distress is understandable, Howard loses touch with all values as he goes on television and announces his news.

Max at first believes that exploiting Howard's behavior is good for business, and he agrees to continue with the plan for another day or two. Max also leaves his wife to move in with Diana. However, eventually Max realizes how far he has strayed from his values, and when he can no longer respect himself, he quits his job and returns to his wife.

Diana loses all touch with any values she might have had. Diana is in the business to make money, but she wants to do it in a professional manner. However, once she gets involved in the reality television shows, she loses all touch with reality. Her whole life becomes a scheming, secretive existence trying to get the highest ratings for the network and the most money for herself. Diana becomes less than human when she loses touch with her values.

Thus, in a roundabout way, this film encourages viewers to stay loyal to their values and shows the devastation that can be caused by going too far in another direction.

Style and Cinematography

Before the days of reality television, *Network* seemed surreal and impossible; however, in today's world the possibility of such an event happening does not seem nearly as unbelievable. Though such a thing had never been seen, the film comes across as completely believable.

The newsroom atmosphere is clearly and realistically portrayed in the film. The sets are very good, and they help viewers to feel as if they, too, are part of the network. Viewers see the difficulty involved in running a network, and at first feel sympathy for a network that has to deal with Howard Beale's crazy statements. However, as individuals and the network as a whole begin to exploit the distressed man, we become more and more separated from the network, feeling sympathy only for Howard and for his viewers at home who have no idea how their actions are affecting many lives.

The actors and actresses do a wonderful job of bringing the gritty, real-world newsroom to life. Faye Dunaway, who plays Diana Christensen, brings a harsh realistic mindset to the film. Her willingness to do anything it takes to bring up ratings, even when that means murdering Howard, is shocking and appalling. Viewers come to like Peter Finch's character, Howard Beale, and at the time of release, people around the country, especially teenagers in school, could be heard saying, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" William Holden, who plays Max Schumacher, brings a certain amount of sanity to the film. Even when everyone is going crazy about ratings, he pulls the viewers, if not the characters, back to reality.



Motifs

Television Airings

The television airings help to tell the story proposed by *Network*. From the first airing to the last we see the story of Howard Beale - the first man known to be murdered for bad ratings - come full circle.

In the first television airing, Howard announces that since he is being let go by the network, he will be killing himself in one week's time. Howard is terribly depressed about the state of his life, and he goes on a tirade about how terrible life is and how sick of it he is. From that point, we see the story as it unfolds. Diana begins to take over the news broadcasts, starts a new show around Howard's "prophetic" speeches, and exploits everyone possible.

Finally, we see the last television airing. Howard made a statement a few days prior that made a lot of trouble for the network and powerful people around the world. Frank and Diana have decided that Howard must go, and they have him murdered on live television in the middle of his show. We come full circle in the story from one television show about death to another television show with a death.

Competition

Competition is often idolized in the United States. A person's competitive drive can determine their worth in the eyes of many people. *Network* is all about competition. Competition is what causes Howard to lose his job in the first place and then go on to announce his impending suicide and finally get his own show.

Frank focuses on the competition of other networks. Ratings are everything, and the network must come out on top. We watch this competition and the terrible things that it brings out in people and in the industry. Frank is willing to do anything to beat the other networks, and finally he even resorts to murder so they can ensure their ratings.

Diana is also focused on internal competition in the network. She is willing to do whatever it takes to beat others out of their jobs. She becomes obsessed with work and puts on many outlandish reality shows that are dangerous and edgy. Her involvement in competition helps us see the theme of the dehumanizing power of greed.

Romantic Complications

Since when is romance not an issue in film? Almost every film has some sort of romantic complication, and *Network* is no exception to this rule. However, the romantic complication is a bit unusual. As Diana starts to take over everything at the network, Max ends up falling for her.

Max leaves his wife to move in with Diana. After several months, however, Max realizes his mistake. He sees that Diana is totally focused on competition and money and has little to give to anyone besides herself. Max eventually goes back to his wife to try to patch things up with someone who loves him.

These romantic complications help us see how people like Diana can lose all links to reality, essentially becoming machines that only go after money. If it wasn't for Max's involvement, we might not be able to see the differences between Diana and Max's wife. The romantic complications help reveal the themes of the film.

Symbols

Window

The window at the top of the wall in Howard's new show is a beautiful cathedral window. It symbolizes the hope that Howard is supposed to be giving his viewers. Claiming to be a prophet, Howard begins working on his show in order to help others live better lives.

The window is also ironic, reminding us of many church windows. We see that Howard is giving what he considers to be prophetic statements and is gaining a following, but in the end, his whole new career is based on deceit. Diana and the others are simply using Howard to get better ratings.

When Howard finally starts causing problems for the network, Frank and Diana decide that he should be murdered. As Howard is killed by some radical people from another show, we see the pristine cathedral window above him as if he is in a church dying for his God. In some ways he is dying for his god: the network was the greatest thing in his life, and his death will lead to better ratings for the network.

Televisions

Throughout the film, televisions symbolize the commercialism of the network and their greater impact on the world. The network is entirely focused on money, and they are trying to get the highest ratings no matter what the cost. We watch Howard's first speech about his suicide from the television monitors in the recording studio.

When Howard later tells people to go to their windows and scream, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!" we see the scene from the television screens in people's homes. As we watch, people get up from in front of their television sets and head to the windows, screaming out into the night. We then see the impact the network is having on people around the country.

The televisions symbolize commercialism and its impact on the culture. We watch as people begin following Howard simply because he is the most outrageous and entertaining news anchor on television. The impact has gone out of control, and the commercialism is costing people like Howard their lives for the sake of ratings.

Microphone

The microphone is equivalent to power. Whoever is holding the microphone is the person with the most power to speak and be heard. Howard makes outrageous statements about killing himself on live television, but he is heard simply because he is holding the microphone at the time.

In addition, Frank dominates the board meetings because he can access the microphone on stage. He is able to tell people just what they want to hear, without ever telling the truth about the manipulation and underhanded doings of the network. He is in charge of the meetings and no one else has any say in the matter.

We learn that those people who can easily be heard generally have the most power over the masses. The entire country listens to Howard because he is on television. They listen to and believe the news they hear simply because those people have the microphones. As we see the power of microphones to make people heard whatever their message, we are reminded to take everything we hear with a grain of salt.



Essay Questions

Why is Howard fired?

What does Howard tell the world that he will do the next week?

What is Diana's role with the network?

Why is Howard left on the air instead of being sent in for treatment?

Why does Max lose his job?

What is Howard's new role with the network when he gets his own show?

Describe the relationship between Max and Diana.

What is Howard's most famous line?

Why does the network decide that Howard must come off the air?

How does the network manage to get Howard off the air?