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Book Review: 'Mad as Hell' by Dave Itzkoff

Walter Cronkite dismissed the 1976 satire "Network" but complained that his daughter's part had been cut.

By Edward Kosner

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SAVE PRINT TEXT

It's been more than 37 years since "Network" was released, but the movie is still great to watch. The scarily sexy Faye Dunaway, dog-eared William Holden and manic Robert Duvall do star turns as TV executives unhinged by the thirst for ratings. Still, the film belongs to Peter Finch as the possessed anchorman bellowing, "I'm mad as hell and I'm not going to take this anymore"—a *cri de coeur* instantly enshrined in American popular culture.

"Network" was masterminded by Paddy Chayefsky, the morose, roly-poly playwright and screenwriter who had won Oscars for "Marty" (1955) and "The Hospital" (1971), gritty urban dramas of frustration and loss. The film grossed more than \$80 million in today's dollars and won four Oscars but was beaten out for the 1976 best-picture prize by "Rocky" in a year when Hollywood also turned out "Taxi Driver," "All the President's Men," "Marathon Man" and "Carrie."

MAD AS HELL

By Dave Itzkoff

Times Books, 287 pages, \$27



Even so, is "Network" so compellingly prophetic that it merits a book chronicling its creation? Dave Itzkoff, a reporter for the New York Times, and his publishers seem to think so. "Network," writes Mr. Itzkoff, "provided a road map for the unraveling of the monolithic broadcasting companies, the diminishment of their once-mighty news operations, and a path to a fragmented and unrecognizable media environment that the industry would follow, almost to the letter, over the next forty years."

His book, "Mad as Hell," turns out to be a reasonably diverting account—almost shot-by-shot—of the making of the movie, padded out with the inevitable behind-the-scenes intrigue, the critical response and a stab at assessing the film's enduring significance, such as it is.

Chayefsky was a showbiz pro who sought inspiration in his own pervasive paranoia and was never disappointed. In many ways, "Network" was his signature work—a fever dream of television news.

Finch plays Howard Beale, an old-school anchor who molts into a raving Jeremiah after being fired for losing his audience. Ms. Dunaway's demented programming exec, Diana Christensen, resurrects him and makes him the centerpiece of a nightly news carnival featuring a fortuneteller and other bizarre infotainers. The show becomes a runaway hit, but Beale falls under the sway of an even more sinister figure: the head of the conglomerate that owns the network, who is secretly selling the company to oil-rich Arabs. After an indoctrination in the genius of unfettered capitalism, Beale begins to shill for this new world order, and his audience starts shrinking again. Mr. Duvall's Frank Hackett, the twitchy network vice president, and Christensen resolve this crisis by having their anchorman assassinated on camera—thus confirming the old TV joke that networks will kill for ratings.

The film was tautly directed by Sidney Lumet, who subordinated his own ego to Chayefsky's even bigger one. Free to play auteur, the playwright slathered on the satire with a trowel. Christensen sidelines Holden's Murrow-esque news director, Max Schumacher, while having an affair with him, leading to one of the funniest movie sex scenes ever. Writhing atop the stupefied Schumacher, Christensen babbles on about her TV career, hardly pausing to enjoy herself. At another point, the black revolutionaries starring in another Christensen hit, "The Mao Tse Tung Hour," haggle with network lawyers over arcane contract points. Ultimately, one of the radicals is enlisted to gun down Beale on the air.

The offstage shenanigans, as Mr. Itzkoff tells it, were equally surreal, especially Dunaway's diva fit over whether a fleeting glimpse of her nipple might be visible in a few frames of her romp with Holden.

"Network" was a hit with most of the critics as well as the audience and Oscar voters. The TV establishment was predictably infuriated. Though his daughter, an actress, had a small role in the film, Walter Cronkite issued increasingly dismissive comments, calling it "a rather amusing little entertainment." Worse, "they cut my daughter's part down to almost nothing." In the midst of the storm, Chayefsky wrote craven letters to Cronkite and his NBC counterpart, John Chancellor. "Please know," he told Chancellor, "I never dreamed television people would be angry about the film"—showing that the screenwriter was either disingenuous or delusional.

For all its success, "Network" was in many respects a bad-luck project for the people who made it. Early in 1977, Finch was booked for the first time in a decade on the "Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson, who led the audience in chanting, "I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take this anymore." The following morning, Finch, 60, dropped dead in the lobby of the Beverly Hills Hotel. Lumet's next movie, "Equus," had a mixed reception and was followed by the flop "The Wiz." Faye Dunaway's career went into a decadelong eclipse. Holden died in 1981 on a bender in the Santa Monica flat he kept for his drinking bouts. That same year Chayefsky died of cancer in New York. He was 58.

Many of the changes in network news that Chayefsky prophesied were less audience-driven than the result of government action. The Federal Communications Commission rescinded its Fairness Doctrine in 1987, and rules restricting cross-ownership and media concentration were eased, opening the way for today's cable-news circus and talk-radio ranters. And the Internet has further fragmented the tight little world of news into an ever-expanding galaxy of search engines, gossipy news sites, blogs, tweets and YouTube videos, a cacophony of confusion.

But even Chayefsky could not foresee the ultimate irony. "There is nothing valuable about a journalist . . . getting up and comicalizing the news," he once pontificated. "To make a gag out of the news is disreputable and extremely destructive." Which will surely come as news to today's journalistic establishment in thrall to the nightly mockery of Jon Stewart and Stephen Colbert.

—Mr. Kosner wrote "It's News to Me," a memoir of his career as editor of Newsweek, New York, Esquire and the New York Daily News.

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