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**Little Men and Angry Prophets:
Paddy Chayefsky's Mad-as-Hell Heroes**

Paddy Chayefsky had a healthy rage for the "little man," in life and in his work.

Known equally for his brilliant stories, his social commentary, and his irascible nature, he crafted superbly literate scripts for three different media over a four-decade career -- a rare achievement for any writer. Throughout, the primary focus of his work was the ordinary, everyday person in a world that was becoming more and more depersonalized.

He was "a passionate man in an increasingly passionless age [who] wore his cantankerousness and fanaticism as badges of honor," according to media reporter Tom Shales ("Playwright").

Sidney Lumet, who directed Chayefsky's most well-known film, *Network*, said he had a remarkable ability "to see the ridiculous, to see the madness" in the world, and to use it in his writing (Considine 399).

Perhaps the best description of Chayefsky's quixotic journey as a writer, however, comes from Chayefsky himself, through the self-effacing words of one of his most autobiographical characters, the lonely Bronx butcher in *Marty*: He was "a goodhearted guy" who'd been "kicked around long enough [. . .] to be a real professor of pain" (165-66).

Throughout his career, Chayefsky's audiences saw the unique blend of tenderness and frustration in his characters mirrored in their own lives. They, too, experienced the anger his heroes felt when circumstances backed them into a corner.

They saw themselves in *Marty*, who defies his friends to date a plain-looking schoolteacher he meets; in the middle-aged widower in *Middle of the Night*, who stands up to his family, and his own fears, for a second chance at love with a younger woman; and in the aging anchorman in *Network*, who has a nervous breakdown on the air and rails at his viewers to turn off their televisions and find meaning in their lives.

Chayefsky's stories were necessarily simple in the beginning, part of television's "Golden Age" in the 1950s when realistic portrayals of ordinary people put a "theatre in every living room" (Shales, "Mother"). Later, they grew in scope on the Broadway stage, evolving from small, domestic dramas into deeper, poetic tales of spirituality and faith. Finally they metamorphosized into full-blown Hollywood satires, cleverly ranting against the dehumanization of society and the hypocrisies of our institutions.

At Chayefsky's funeral in 1981, historian Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. said, "He had a rage against pomposity, a rage against stupidity, a rage against injustice [. . .]" (Considine 398). However, Schlesinger added, "For all his relish in human folly, he never abandoned hope in humanity. His satire, like that of all great satirists, sprang from love" (Mitgang).

Those closest to Chayefsky said he was, in fact, a deeply sensitive man with an unwavering empathy for the "common" person, like the working class families he knew growing up in New York City. He was also, they explained, a pugnacious workaholic with a volatile temper, particularly when his literary vision was compromised.

Biographer Shaun Considine even theorized in his 1994 book, *Mad As Hell: The Life and*

Work of Paddy Chayefsky, that there were two personalities at work in the writer's career: Sydney, the shy, intellectual son of Russian Jews who suffered bouts of depression and suicidal tendencies through much of his life; and "Paddy," the gregarious showman with the incongruous Irish nickname who craved the spotlight and angrily bulldozed ahead when Sydney held him back.

His legendary petulance undoubtedly worked to his favor when it came to his craft. Close friend and playwright Herb Gardner explained that "Nothing got him going like anger. Paddy was always best writing when he was pissed off about something" (Considine 272). Still, said Schlesinger, Chayefsky never used his gift "for purely destructive purposes" (Schlesinger ix).

"Paddy was sardonic, not cynical," Schlesinger said. "He believed [. . .] that everyone's life has some value -- if we can only clear our minds of cant and hypocrisy so that we can get on with the business, at once serious and joyous, of living" (ix-x).

In this paper, I will explore Chayefsky's poignant yet frank portrayals of the "little man" in his works -- his yearnings, his frailties, and the personal battles he must ultimately wage to find happiness. I will also discuss the major themes that run through the stories, including the fight for individuality, a hunger for love, the fear of aging, and the value of work.

I will also look at the evolution of Chayefsky's dialogue and setting, from the crackling realism of his early works to the surrealistic satire of his later films. I will also discuss various autobiographical elements he utilized in his stories, including characters or incidents which were extensions of his own life, and inspired a great deal of his "little man" motif.

To accomplish these tasks, I will focus on three of Chayefsky's most well-known works, each representing what I consider to be his most definitive piece for that specific genre. Already

referenced above, they are: the 1953 television play *Marty*; the 1956 Broadway play *Middle of the Night*; and the 1976 film *Network*, for which he won his third screenwriting Oscar -- an Academy Award record which still stands.

I will also touch on other works that were important to his development as a writer, including the television plays *Printer's Measure* and *The Mother*; the stage plays *The Tenth Man* and *Gideon*; and the film *The Hospital*, which I will use as an introduction to *Network*, largely considered to be Chayefsky's masterpiece.

Marty and the Domestic Realism of the "Kitchen Drama"

A 30-year-old writer with minor early successes in the theatre, radio, and television, Paddy Chayefsky achieved overnight fame on May 24, 1953 when *Marty* aired live on NBC's *Philco-Goodyear Playhouse*, one of a dozen or so anthology programs which helped to define TV's Golden Age.

Because television was still in its infancy at the time, there was a "greater willingness to experiment with talent and quality writing" (Brady 30). Hungry young wordsmiths and actors converged on the networks, looking not just for jobs in the budding medium, but for an opportunity to take part in what was quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon. The primitive technology and challenging working conditions they had to endure -- such as cramped, 100-degree studios and the inability to stop if there was a mistake -- only added to the excitement and mystique.

"It was like going to California in a covered wagon," said actress Nancy Marchand, who played Marty's love interest, Clara. "We were all pioneers" (*Golden Age*).

As Chayefsky told one writer:

We were doing those shows out of old radio studios that had been rebuilt, with ceilings about nine feet high, no place to put the lights, nothing elaborate in the way of scenery. But when you were stuck with those restrictions, the writing had to be better. You had to accommodate the difficulties. (Shales, "Playwright")

Out of necessity, therefore, the characters in *Marty* are "far from glamorous," yet they have a "beauty and dignity" that the viewing audience could relate to, according to early Chayefsky biographer John M. Clum (46).

The simple story of a homely Bronx butcher who falls in love with an equally lonely schoolteacher was a sentimental hit with audiences, who were struck by its naturalistic dialogue and touching plot. They also appreciated its gentle satire, which accurately depicted the attitudes and speech patterns of New York's first- and second-generation Americans.

"Its leap into the public consciousness was perhaps best verified by the way people picked up on the sparse realism of the dialogue," said Shales ("Playwright"). For example, in an early scene between Marty and his best friend Angie in a neighborhood bar, a brief exchange is repeated several times with slight variations, to the point where it turns into a kind of poetry of the inarticulate. The lines between the two bored bachelors became a humorous catch-phrase for viewers who saw the show -- and part of the popular vernacular -- for some time afterward:

ANGIE. So what do you feel like doing tonight?

MARTY. I don't know. What do you feel like doing? (145)

Contributing to the daring innovation of portraying abject monotony in this live television scene was the single, unmoving camera shot that was used as the pair sat in the bar looking over a newspaper. "What we were trying to convey," said director Delbert Mann, "was the utter naturalness and quiet of two friends aimlessly discussing a way to fill up their Saturday night"

(Conside 55).

Later in the story, Chayefsky's urban lyricism resounds with the quiet anguish of a 36-year-old man who repeatedly calls himself "a fat little ugly man" and is resigned to the fact that he will likely "die without a son" (155). As Marty's loneliness becomes more apparent, his mother tries to convince him to go to a local ballroom that evening in order to meet a girl:

MARTY. Ma, when are you gonna give up? You gotta bachelor on your hands. I ain't never gonna get married. [. . .] Sooner or later, there comes a point in a man's life when he gotta face some facts, and one fact I gotta face is that whatever it is that women like, I ain't got it. [. . .] I just called a girl this afternoon, and I got a real brush-off, boy. I figured I was past the point of being hurt, but that hurt. Some stupid woman who I didn't even wanna call up. [. . .] I don't wanna go to the Waverly Ballroom because all that ever happened to me there was girls made me feel like I was a bug. I got feelings, you know. I had enough pain. No, thank you. (154)

After further cajoling from his mother, Marty relents and goes to the shabby little ballroom, where he comes to the rescue of Clara, a plain-looking 29-year-old schoolteacher who has just been ditched by a blind date and stands crying on a fire escape. Marty is intimately familiar with her shame and embarrassment, and soon tries to comfort her as they dance:

MARTY. [. . .] I know exactly how you feel. And I also want you to know I'm having a very good time with you now and really enjoying myself. So you see, you're not such a dog as you think you are.

THE GIRL. I'm having a very good time too.

MARTY. So there you are. So I guess I'm not such a dog as I think I am.

THE GIRL. You're a very nice guy, and I don't know why some girl hasn't grabbed you off long ago.

MARTY. I don't know either. I think I'm a very nice guy. I also think I'm a pretty smart guy in my own way. [. . .] I figure, two people get married, and they gonna live together forty, fifty years. So it's just gotta be more than whether they're good-looking or not. [. . .] (166)

This kind of intimate, slice-of-life conversation was something viewers could identify with, and quickly became a trademark for Chayefsky, who was strongly influenced by the naturalistic language of the playwrights Clifford Odets, Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams.

Friend and fellow writer Tad Mosel, who also got his start on *Philco-Goodyear*, noted that Chayefsky “tried to write the dialogue as if it had been wire-tapped . . . to envision scenes as if a camera had been focused upon the unsuspecting characters and had caught them in an untouched moment of life.” Taking literalness to this extreme, Chayefsky felt at the time, was “something that can be done in no other medium” than television (Mosel).

Chayefsky later builds tension in the story when Marty's mother and his friends disapprove of Clara for selfish reasons. The mother, who has been listening to her sister's tales of woe about being an old woman who is unwelcome in her son's home, becomes concerned upon meeting Clara that Marty, too, will abandon her for the new woman in his life. She attempts to steer Marty away from Clara, criticizing her plain appearance, her lack of Italian heritage, and the fact that she came to Marty's home, however briefly and innocently, the first evening they met. “These college girls, they all one step from the streets,” she insists. “Don't bring her to the house no more.” To avoid an argument, Marty tells her he “probably won't” see Clara again (177).

Angie, who exhibits an unhealthy dependence on Marty's friendship, also expresses his disapproval of Clara, telling Marty she is "a real nothing" and to "brush her" and go out with the guys that evening (181). Tempted to remain in the safe but tiresome rut he has created for himself, Marty considers Angie's entreaty momentarily. But as his pathetic bachelor friends sit around the barroom table and repeat their familiar refrain of "Wadda you figure on doing tonight?" he finally comes to his senses and angrily takes his stand against anyone who would get in his way of happiness:

MARTY. What am I, crazy or something?! I got something good! What am I hanging around with you guys for? [. . .] You don't like her. My mother don't like her. She's a dog, and I'm a fat, ugly little man. All I know is I had a good time last night. I'm gonna have a good time tonight. If we have enough good times together, I'm going down on my knees and beg that girl to marry me. [. . .] You don't like her, that's too bad! (182)

Marty's uplifting storyline and "domestic realism" was so well-received by viewers, critics, television brass, and advertisers that it set a new standard for the live drama format and was widely imitated by the other anthology shows for years afterward. The style became known, somewhat pejoratively, as the "kitchen drama" (Mann 62).

Mann, who along with *Philco-Goodyear* producer Fred Coe helped to create the new form, said Chayefsky's story "epitomizes the type of scripts for which the so-called Golden Age of Television is remembered":

Emotionally involving, they were personalized explorations of the relationships of ordinary people in a moment of crisis. They perfectly suited the small black and white screens as well as the small size and intimate nature of the audience

watching each television set. The best of these scripts reached out and touched the viewer in a unique way. (62)

Chayefsky later explained, in fact, that he had set out in *Marty* to create “the most ordinary love story in the world.”

“I didn’t want my hero to be handsome, and I didn’t want the girl to be pretty,” he said. “I wanted to write a love story the way it would literally have happened to the kind of people I know” (“Two Choices” 183).

Many who were personally acquainted with Chayefsky believed that much of the story had been inspired by experiences in his own life. “I am sure that Paddy wrote his story about himself, his family and his friends,” said Mann (60). The actor Rod Steiger, who played the title role, said, “We thought that *Marty* was based a lot on Paddy Chayefsky. Of course we didn’t go up and ask him since it was about such a lonely man and a man hungry for love” (*Golden Age*).

Chayefsky’s son Dan confirmed in Considine’s biography that indeed, the scene where Clara tells Marty how she had been rejected at the ballroom once before was taken from an incident that had occurred in Chayefsky’s own teen years, and had sent him into a deep depression. At his first high school social, Dan Chayefsky explained, three girls had inspected his father closely and loudly judged him “too short and fat” to dance with (14). In *Marty*, Clara similarly relates how a young man had passed her by as she sat waiting to dance, and said, “Forget it, ugly, you ain’t gotta chance” (165).

Chayefsky used other autobiographical elements in his television plays *Printer’s Measure* and *The Mother*, which, like *Marty*, explored the theme of “little” people forced to assert their individuality. They also touched on other recurring Chayefsky motifs, such as aging parents, elderly people in the workplace, and a creeping alienation in the modern age.

Printer's Measure, which aired on *Philco-Goodyear* in 1952, was inspired by Chayefsky's experience as a young man working in his uncle's Manhattan printing shop. It is a sober tale of man versus machine, set against the tender friendship of a 17-year-old boy and an aging Irish compositor.

The crusty old printer has a deep affection for the traditional methods of his craft, so when the shop owner installs a modern linotype machine, he complains about the intrusion and worries about losing his job.

"That's my trade, man! That's my trade!" he says when his son suggests retiring. "I'd crumble into my coffin without my trade!" (57).

Later, when the boy at the shop announces that he is quitting his job to attend school and learn how to operate the latest printing equipment, the infuriated old man slaps the boy in the face. The pair soon makes amends, however, the compositor telling his young friend that "this passion for machines" is "the great American disease" (79).

"Everybody is always inventing labor-saving devices," he explains. "What's wrong with labor? A man's work is the sweetest thing he owns. [. . .] We've gone mad, boy, with this mad chase for comfort, and it's sure we're losing the very juice of living" (79).

"The world changes, Mister Healy," the understanding boy responds. "The old things go, and each of us must make peace with the new" (79).

Their friendship restored, the old man makes one last stand for old-world dignity by returning to the print shop late that night and furiously demolishing the linotype with a sledgehammer. The next morning, he apologizes to the owner for his "foolish" act, tells his boss to send him a bill for the damage, and happily announces his retirement.

From Chayefsky's viewpoint, the old man's final rebellion against the Machine Age is

admirable, yet bittersweet; while he manages to find some satisfaction in leaving the craft to which he has devoted so many years of his life, he does so with only as much dignity as society will allow him.

Chayefsky later echoed this theme of older people in the workplace in 1954's *The Mother*, which also aired on *Philco-Goodyear* and was his most well-received teleplay after *Marty*. The story revolves around a recent widow who is determined to get a job for the first time in decades because she refuses to be a "burden" to her children at the age of 62. When the woman's daughter asks her to move in with her family, the mother's pride prevents her:

THE OLD LADY. Annie, you're a good daughter, but I want to keep my own home. I want to pay my own rent. I don't want to be some old lady living with her children. If I can't take care of myself, I just as soon be in the grave with your father. (198)

A former seamstress who is "not sure of" her fingers anymore, the woman finds work in a dress factory, but in typical fashion of late, she is fired on the first day because of numerous mistakes. Resigned to her fate, she reluctantly agrees to live with her daughter until she can find an apartment with "some other old woman," and begins considering the sad task of distributing her possessions among her children (221).

"Is this what it all comes to?" she asks bitterly. "An old woman parceling out the old furniture in her house?" (223)

After thinking about her plight during a long, sleepless night in her daughter's home, the widow passionately asserts her independence anew and announces that she will continue to seek work, despite the continued humiliation she surely faces.

"Work is the meaning of my life," she insists. "It's all I know what to do. I can't change

my ways at this late time” (225).

Chayefsky’s own mother, Gussie, was the inspiration for the character, having experienced the same difficulty finding work in New York’s garment factories after her husband’s death.

“When my father’s father died,” said Dan Chayefsky, “she went back to work and got fired over and over again. Eventually, she kept a job, and that is what happens in the play. All through my childhood, my father used that as an example of how not to give up” (Brozan).

“I wrote about the lower-middle-class life I came out of,” said Chayefsky (Brady 34). “This is an age of savage introspection, and television is the dramatic medium through which to expose our new insights into ourselves. The stage is too weighty, and the movies too intense, to deal with the mundane and all its obscured ramifications” (“Two Choices” 188).

Unfortunately, the live anthology series as a genre began to lose favor with audiences and advertisers, and subsequently with the networks. Viewers had become more interested in “lighter, happier” programs which presented an escape from, rather than an exploration of, their commonplace lives (Krampner 114).

Recognizing the shift as an opportunity to expand his craft, Chayefsky moved away from the intimate naturalism of the live TV drama which he had helped to mold, and began to create broader, richer stories to fit the expanse of the Broadway stage.

Middle of the Night, Middle of the Career

According to Mann, who also directed the Oscar-winning film version of *Marty* in 1954, Chayefsky was now ready to “break the pattern” of kitchen-drama realism and “do different things” (139). Where television had forced him to narrow his focus and keep the structure of his

stories simple in order to fit the 53-minute format, the theatre gave him the freedom to explore more substantive topics and deeper characterizations.

His first step in this new direction was the 1956 play *Middle of the Night*, which starred film legend Edward G. Robinson and ran for two years on Broadway. Based on an earlier teleplay that he had done for *Philco-Goodyear*, the stage adaptation went beyond what was considered suitable for television in that era and took a more forthright approach to the psychological and sexual aspects of a middle-aged businessman's romance with a younger woman. It also allowed Chayefsky to trade in the forced intimacy of the small screen for "exciting moments of theater," he said, while still retaining much of the realism that he had come to be known for ("Two Choices" 183).

In the play, a recently widowed, 53-year-old garment manufacturer named Jerry Kingsley finds himself in a mid-life crisis when he begins to feel the effects of age and loneliness, and notices that his contemporaries are either "dying, in the hospital, or retiring" (17).

He also complains that one of the partners at his Manhattan company, a 59-year-old man on the verge of a breakdown, has become "absolutely obsessed with women" and is sleeping with girls much younger than he is. "If it wasn't so sad, it would be comic," he says (18).

Adding to his discomfort is the fact that his doting sister, who has a neurotic need to take care of him, has been playing matchmaker in an attempt to find him a new wife. Much like Marty, who must beg his clinging mother to drop the subject of matrimony because he's "miserable enough as it is" (155), Jerry angrily tells his sister, "God Almighty, you can drive somebody right out of their minds! [. . .] Stop trying to marry me off!" (21).

One morning, Jerry drops by to retrieve some paperwork at the apartment of Betty Preiss, a pretty, 24-year-old secretary from his office, and finds her in an agitated state. She is

intelligent and sweet, but emotionally immature, and she confesses to her boss that her marriage has failed. He lends an understanding ear and offers some “fatherly” advice, telling her in typical Chayefsky fashion: “The only person you have to worry about hurting is yourself. You have to do what you want to do, not what other people want you to do; otherwise you and everyone else concerned will be miserable” (29).

Inevitably, Jerry finds himself attracted to her, and asks her to dinner -- a decision he regrets at first, fearing, despite her willingness, that he is becoming like his skirt-chasing partner. Their courtship endures, however, much to the distress of the couple’s families.

“I’m worried sick about it,” Betty’s mother complains to a friend. “[W]hat the hell does he want with a kid like her except you-know-what? Oh, God knows what she does with him” (35). Betty later defends their relationship, explaining that, “In the whole three months, he hasn’t touched me once.”

“I know what my mother thinks,” Betty says. “She thinks I walk out of this door, I head straight for a hotel somewheres. Do you know where we go? We go dancing. We go driving. We go to a restaurant, we sit and talk for five hours” (39-40).

The friend argues, however, that Jerry will be much older in a few years, and that he might not be able to satisfy her sexually. “You had a good marriage with George,” she tells Betty. “You paid the rent and you went to bed. What are you looking for?”

“Well, I’m looking for more than that,” Betty replies (40).

Later, when the couple finally attempts to consummate their relationship, Jerry is unable, and admits to being afraid of how his age may affect their future:

THE MANUFACTURER. [. . .] I knew tonight was going to happen sooner or later. I kept pushing it off. I didn’t want to touch what we had. It meant so much

to me. I had a new life with you. I didn't want to think about marriage. I'm afraid of such a marriage. I'm afraid of myself. At my age, you become afraid of things. You begin to be conscious of your fingers, that they're not as clever as they used to be. Your legs get tired from standing fifteen minutes. Your whole body resists you. I don't know what I'll be like in five years, Betty. I don't want a five-year marriage. (49)

Betty insists, however, that she's not worried about the future, preferring to make light of the fact that she's the "scandal" of her family and that everyone is saying she has a "sugar daddy" (50).

The two agree to marry, but their joy is tempered by mounting resistance from all sides. When Jerry's family confronts him about the engagement, he firmly tells them -- just as Marty was forced to do with his friends -- that it's none of their business and that he has a right to be happy:

THE MANUFACTURER. It's important to me that a young girl finds me attractive. I didn't know it was so important, but it's important. She needs me [. . .]. It's been a long time since somebody needed me. My kids are all grown up, with children of their own. I'm a man who has to give of himself. [. . .] I don't have to justify myself. I decided to get married, that's all. (65)

Later, when Betty's estranged musician husband returns to the city in an attempt to win her back, Jerry nearly convinces himself that his relationship with her is over, and faults himself for being so impulsive and "drunk with vanity."

"I feel that something is dying inside me right now," he tells his sister. "You know what it is? I want to be loved by a woman. And that want dies hard. When you give up that want, it's

a very painful thing to go through” (84).

Betty returns to Jerry, however, assuring him that her marriage is over, and that “life has meaning” when she’s with him. “That’s more than most people have,” she says (87).

“Even a few years of happiness you don’t throw away,” Jerry agrees (87).

As in *Marty*, Jerry finds the strength to stand up to anyone who would prevent his happiness -- including himself. Both stories also have happy, yet slightly ambiguous endings in that the characters involved are really just beginning to embark on their relationships. To Chayefsky’s credit as a Realist, the audience has no sure way of knowing what lies around the corner for these struggling souls; we can only speculate about their future, which, given their early circumstances, will surely present additional challenges.

Clum noted in his 1976 biography that “Chayefsky’s first heroes are little men [and women] -- nice, easygoing, working-class people who want some brightness in what seems to be a very gray life” (129).

“His subjects are the common frailties and problems of post-war urban America, and his theme is common to all his characters and situations: how does one give life meaning, or at least the illusion of meaning?” (30)

Mann, who directed the original television version of *Middle of the Night*, noted further that “the sadness and loneliness of old age” was a dominant Chayefsky theme which ran “through all of his best pieces” (51).

Following *Middle of the Night*, Chayefsky took a much more philosophical bent in his exploration of this “sadness and loneliness” with the plays *The Tenth Man* (1959) and *Gideon* (1961), both of which focused on spirituality and mysticism, particularly with regard to man’s seemingly distant relationship with God.

The Tenth Man is set in a run-down storefront synagogue where the old, mostly European congregants who attend daily prayer services are more interested in socializing than in their religious practices, and have difficulty finding ten men to make up their minyan as required in the orthodox faith.

The plot involves the niece of one of the men, a young schizophrenic woman whom they believe to be possessed by a *dybbuk*, a wandering spirit in Jewish folklore. As the men resolve to attempt an exorcism, they confront their faith -- or lack thereof -- and find redemption in the budding relationship between the ill woman and the young stranger who acts as the “tenth man” in their minyan, and who experiences a spiritual transformation of his own.

Gideon, a retelling of the Old Testament story, was a highly stylized work, with ornate, poetic language (an admitted stretch for a naturalist like Chayefsky) punctuating a bitter, yet often humorous debate between the title character and God himself.

While not as well-received as his other works, *The Tenth Man* and *Gideon* were nevertheless important because they provided Chayefsky with the spiritual bridge he needed to move from the sentimental, plain-language tales of his early career to the literate, provocative, rage-fueled rants for which he would be known in his later films.

As one writer stated, it was at this time that “his anger grew at the social conditions that generated the ‘dehumanization’ he came to lament within American life” (Joyce).

The Hospital: A “Gothic Horror Story”

Chayefsky was a screenwriting veteran with six, mostly successful films and an Oscar to his credit when he launched an acerbic, satiric indictment against the medical profession -- and society in general -- in his 1971 film *The Hospital*.

A “gothic horror story” (Considine 272) which attacked “the institutions that have robbed people of their identity and their dignity” (Clum 13), the film is set in a large, understaffed hospital in a New York ghetto where emergency room patients die unattended, surgeries are performed on the wrong people, and physicians are more concerned about “zapping” female lab technicians and getting rich than treating the sick.

The plot revolves around an insane doctor named Drummond, who believes himself to be an instrument of God and sets out to avenge the hospital’s ill-treated patients. Over a two-day period, he knocks out several medical personnel with a sandbag, drugs them, and then leaves them in corridors and holding rooms where their co-workers are sure to ignore, misidentify or misdiagnose them, thus causing their deaths through “biblical retribution” (84).

Chayefsky’s main character, Dr. Herbert Bock, is the hospital’s chief of medicine. He is 53, newly separated from his wife, and suicidal due to acute depression -- what he calls “menopausal melancholy” (13).

The film begins with the death of a young resident who is mistaken for a patient, thanks in large part to Drummond’s intervention. Found unconscious in a hospital bed after a late-night dalliance with another staff member, the resident is twice given medication intended for the bed’s former occupant, whom no one seems to recall had died earlier that day. Upon learning of the randy resident’s death, Bock confronts Mrs. Christie, the director of nurses:

BOCK. [. . .] My God, the incompetence here is absolutely radiant! I mean, two separate nurses walk into a room, stick needles into a man [. . .] tourniquet the poor son of a bitch’s arm with adhesive tape [. . .] and it’s the wrong poor son of a bitch. Where do you train your nurses, Mrs. Christie -- Dachau? (277)

Finding his mounting despair and the chaos of the hospital too much to bear, Bock tries

to kill himself in his office with a syringe full of potassium, but is stopped by Drummond's 27-year-old daughter Barbara, a former hippie who lives with her "mad as a hatter" father on a mission in Mexico (52).

Somewhat in the style of the May-December romance (another common Chayefsky motif) of Jerry and Betty in *Middle of the Night*, Bock and Barbara fall in love -- he, because of a compulsion to rediscover his manhood, and she, because she has "a thing for middle-aged men" (52). And in a scene reminiscent of Jerry's confession to Betty that he worries about his ability to perform sexually, Bock too tells Barbara that he is impotent, physically as well as spiritually:

"When I say I'm impotent, I mean I've lost even my desire for work, which is a hell of a lot more primal a passion than sex," Bock says. "I've lost my *raison d'être*, my purpose, the only thing I ever truly loved" (53).

There are echoes of other Chayefsky characters in Bock's speech, as well -- particularly the old compositor in *Printer's Measure* and the aging seamstress in *The Mother*, both of whom find identity and purpose in work, and fear that they will perish without it.

Chayefsky requires Bock to be much more cynical about his profession, however, reflecting the zeitgeist of the early 1970s:

BOCK. [. . .] It's all rubbish anyway. [. . .] [W]e can practically clone people like carrots, and half the kids in this ghetto haven't even been inoculated for polio! We have assembled the most enormous medical establishment ever conceived, and people are sicker than ever! We cure nothing! (53-54)

Chayefsky called the film, for which he received his second Oscar, a "microcosm-of-society type of picture," with the hospital representing "a highly advanced, affluent, marvelously technological society that simply could not run itself" (Brady 74).

The script's "savage dialogue [and] bitter, stark diatribes [. . .] certified how far Chayefsky had come from the simple, hopeful sentiments" of *Marty* (Considine 276). It also solidified his renown as an artist who was "afflicted with and inspired by volcanic anger and a certain kind of lunacy" (Kirsch).

"It's the world that's gone nuts, not me," argued Chayefsky. "It's the world that's turned into a satire" (Campbell).

In his next film, he would expand this satiric vision into an epic masterpiece whose most lasting legacy would be the deadly precision with which it predicted the direction of television.

Network and the "Prophet of the Airwaves"

Filmmaking gave Chayefsky the opportunity to combine the human intimacies of his television plays with the breadth of topics that the stage had afforded him, and to expand on each with fervent social commentary.

Where *Marty* had captured "the homely poetry of the struggling class" (Zoglin) and *Middle of the Night* had achieved a romantic, "photographic Realism" (Clum 59), *Network* was a "cynical, zero tolerance assault" on a society which had made a virtual religion out of the consumer culture, with television as its godhead (Mathews).

Chayefsky insisted, however, that the film was not an attack on the television business *per se*, but on its dehumanizing tendencies (Shales, "Playwright"). TV news in particular, he said, "totally desensitizes [us to] viciousness, brutality, murder, death, so we no longer actively feel the pains of the victim or suffer for their lives or feel their grief. That is the basic problem of television. We've lost our sense of shock, our sense of humanity" (Considine 306).

Chayefsky's frustration about the erosion of individuality, which had always been evident

in his work, would never be more apparent than in his script for *Network*.

The film's setting is the struggling United Broadcasting System (UBS), an "industry joke" which is constantly overshadowed by the other three major networks (139). Its plot centers around Howard Beale, the aging, unbalanced anchor of the network's evening news program, who closes his broadcast one night by announcing that he will commit suicide live on the air in a week.

"So tune in next Tuesday," he tells his audience. "That'll give the public relations people a week to promote the show. That ought to get a hell of a rating, a fifty share easy" (125-26).

Howard's best friend, Max Schumacher, is the craggy 51-year-old President of the UBS News Division who must deal with the fallout after Beale's apparent on-air breakdown. The incident sends the network brass reeling, and news outlets all over the country pick up on the story, creating a publicity nightmare.

Max's mistress, Diana Christenson, is the 34-year-old Vice President in Charge of Programming, whose obsession with ratings leads her to create "The Mao Tse Tung Hour," a weekly series featuring the real-life exploits of a group of radical terrorists, complete with kidnappings, bombings, and assassinations.

"The American people want somebody to articulate their rage for them," she explains. "I want angry shows. I don't want conventional programming on this network. I want counterculture. I want anti-establishment" (139).

During Chayefsky's research for *Network*, he spent a great deal of time at NBC, where his writing career had begun over 20 years before. To capture the industry's jargon and accurately portray the "the obsession with ratings and the insane pressures to be number one," he observed news broadcasts, sat through programming meetings, and interviewed employees who

openly admitted that the network expected them to create “bad” television (Considine 307-08).

“*Network* wasn’t even a satire,” he later joked. “I wrote a realistic drama. The industry satirizes itself” (Brady 69).

When Howard is allowed to go back on the news the evening after his breakdown to explain that he’d been under tremendous strain since the death of his wife, he admits to a larger-than-usual audience that his announcement the night before was “an act of madness,” and that he had simply “run out of bullshit” (142).

Like the old man in *Printer’s Measure* who returns to his shop to take a sledgehammer to the machine he despises, Howard goes back on the news and thunders against the insidious modernism that he believes is poisoning his work:

“Every day, five days a week, for fifteen years, I’ve been sitting behind that desk,” he says. “The dispassionate pundit, reporting with seemly detachment the daily parade of lunacies that constitute the news . . . and . . . just once I wanted to say what I really felt” (147).

The reaction to the newsman’s live, angry sermon is a ratings bonanza, and as a result, Diana immediately expands the news program into a show centered around Howard’s tirades:

DIANA. Howard Beale got up there last night and said what every American feels -- that he’s tired of all the bullshit. He’s articulating the popular rage. [. . .] I see Howard Beale as a latter-day prophet, a magnificent messianic figure, inveighing against the hypocrisies of our times. [. . .] One show like that could pull this whole network right out of the hole. (150-51)

Noting that “even the news has to have a little showmanship,” Diana promotes Howard as a “prophet” preaching “apocalyptic doom” (159).

“Howard Beale is processed instant God,” she says, “and right now it looks like he may

just go over bigger than Mary Tyler Moore” (169).

His revised “news” format now in place, Howard’s demented harangues reach epic proportions over the next few days. And as he slips closer to the brink of insanity on the air, increasing numbers of viewers tune in to watch the spectacle, causing his ratings to soar.

In what would become the single most famous scene of Chayefsky’s career, Howard arrives late for the program one night, rain-soaked and wearing an overcoat over his pajamas. He is promptly whisked onto the air, and according to Chayefsky’s script directions, “suddenly the obsessed face of Howard Beale with unworldly fervor and red eyes, manifestly mad, fills the monitor screen” (173):

HOWARD. We all know things are bad. Worse than bad. They’re crazy. [. . .]
 We sit in the house, and slowly the world we live in gets smaller, and all we ask is, please, at least leave us alone in our own living rooms. Let me have my toaster and my teevee and my hair dryer and my steel-belted radials, and I won’t say anything, just leave us alone. Well, I’m not going to leave you alone. [. . .] All I know is first you’ve got to get mad. You’ve got to say, “I’m a human being, goddammit. My life has value.” So I want you to get up right now. I want you to get out of your chairs and go to the window. Right now. I want you to go to the window, open it, and stick your head out and yell. I want you to yell, “I’m mad as hell, and I’m not going to take this anymore!” (174)

Viewers all over the country do as Howard instructs. Watching in his Manhattan apartment, Max looks out the window and witnesses dozens of people joining in the throng, yelling out their windows into a thunderstorm. According to Chayefsky’s directions, the lightning “punctuates the gathering chorus,” and the scene resembles the “Nuremberg rally”

(176).

Regarding the famous “mad as hell” monologue -- which has remained in the popular lexicon and seems to define Chayefsky himself as much as it defines his work -- Considine said it “came from the writer’s marrow” (309).

“The speech wrote itself because that was Beale’s battle cry for the people,” Chayefsky said (Considine 310). “I never thought it would catch on like it did. But the plain truth is, the people are mad as hell. That’s for sure” (Shales, “Prophetic”).

In a similar scene on a subsequent evening, Howard blasts his own medium, telling his viewers that television is in “the boredom-killing business” and will “tell you anything you want to hear” (183).

In a “red-eyed rage of prophecy,” according to Chayefsky’s directions, Howard screams, “In God’s name, you people are the real thing! We’re the illusions,” and tells his viewers to turn off their televisions, before fainting in what would become his trademark swoon (184).

Meanwhile, Max becomes increasingly disturbed by Diana’s blatant exploitation of Howard, who is in obvious need of psychological help, and fights the network to take him off the air. Fired for his mutiny, Max breaks off his May-December affair with Diana, telling her:

MAX. [. . .] You are television incarnate, Diana, indifferent to suffering, insensitive to joy. All of life is reduced to the common rubble of banality. War, murder, death are all the same to you as bottles of beer. The daily business of life is a corrupt comedy. [. . .] You are madness, Diana, virulent madness, and everything you touch dies with you. [. . .] (216)

Later, when the novelty of Howard’s role as the “mad prophet of the airwaves” finally wears off and his popularity sinks, Diana and the vice president of the network decide that they

must remove him from the air.

The result is Howard's assassination on live television -- "the first known instance of a man being killed because he had lousy ratings" (222).

"The point of *Network* is that the networks will do anything for a rating," said Chayefsky (Brady 67). He later added, however, that his inference at the end of the film that "a corporation will even kill as a normal, everyday executive decision" was intended to be sardonic (Considine 327).

According to Shales, "People who were sick to death of complaining about television found themselves invigorated and re-energized after Chayefsky's marvelous and hilarious connotation. If it was preposterous, it was also recognizably passionate. It was breathless with indignation" ("Prophetic").

As for autobiographical elements in the production, Howard Gottfried, Chayefsky's business partner, called the newsman's memorable speeches "little passionate weather reports on the prevailing winds of Paddy's life," noting that he had "dug into the deepest recesses of his own being" to create the role. "You couldn't write characters like that without being part of them," he said (Considine 306, 309).

Indeed, Chayefsky revealed that Diana and Max were also based on his own mixed feelings -- as a humanist who happens to make his living in the entertainment industry -- about the issues addressed in the film. "She represents television, he represents humanity," he said. "[It's] the core of the picture" (Considine 307).

Many writers have stated in the years since *Network* was released that Chayefsky's prescience regarding TV's direction was remarkably insightful, and in some cases frighteningly accurate. Angry talk-shows, "infotainment," on-air psychics, tabloid reporting, real-life crime

programs, corporations buying up the networks -- all were part of Chayefsky's vision, and all have come to pass.

"A generation ago, Paddy Chayefsky's *Network* looked like an outrageous farce," said the author Michael Chrichton. "Today, when Geraldo Rivera bares his buttocks, when the *New York Times* misquotes Barbie, the doll, and NBC fakes news footage of Chevy trucks, *Network* looks like a documentary" (Brazaitis).

As another writer put it, the real "prophet of the airwaves" in the film was Chayefsky himself (Bianculli).

Fade to Black

Throughout Chayefsky's career, said Considine, he "defied cinematic standards by writing literate scripts loading with dazzling, provocative dialogue, delivered by unlikely heroes intent on leveling the icons and sacred institutions of our time" (xi).

From a butcher's cheerless bachelorhood to a widower's mid-life angst; from a disgruntled doctor's revolt against the system to a network newsman's martyrdom -- Chayefsky's "little men" could be relied upon to "rail eloquently at their distinctively personal sense of entrapment" (Joyce).

At Chayefsky's funeral, playwright Herb Gardner described the writer as "an inspired and inspiring man, who showed us ourselves when we were afraid to look" (Mitgang).

"At bottom," said Schlesinger, "he was a profoundly serious man who despised hypocrisy, injustice and humanity's addiction to inhumanity" (Schlesinger vii).

"A writer is what he writes," said Chayefsky, "and I would like to be remembered as a good writer" (Brady 83).

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