“The solution, however, is not to dismantle these facilities; they should be internationalised and made available to all countries without discrimination.” (p. 231)

Such facilities, according to Booker, are necessary for communication, navigation, etc. in the contemporary world, and their internationalisation would give Australia “at least the beginnings of an international status of neutrality. ... Any nuclear fuel enrichment facilities ultimately built in Australia should also be placed under international supervision and its product made available without discrimination.”

Australia should not be deterred from reaching such a position by any arguments about the moral commitment to existing treaties. Both Whitlam and Fraser have affirmed their allegiance to the “American Alliance”. But, in reality, the alliance as a form of safeguarding Australia’s security is a dead letter.

What is far more important is that Australia in its own interest needs to free itself from one international instrument in particular – the agreement on the North West Cape Naval station entered upon by the Menzies government with “exceptional folly” in 1963. “As the agreement now stands Australia could be a hostage in a nuclear war until 1988.” (p.233)

To free Australia, Booker suggests a number of possible courses but preferably a major renegotiation to abolish the clause providing for a fixed term, and replacing it with a provision for either party to terminate the treaty as in the case of ANZUS, at one year’s notice. “If this were part of a move towards the general internationalisation of communication facilities in Australia it would strengthen our role as a key element in the creation of a zone of peace and neutrality (pp.233-234)

Booker also comments on the maintenance of a small sophisticated force for local defence in such matters, for instance, as an attack on New Guinea, but this is peripheral to his main argument which is a call for an entirely new approach to Australian foreign policy based on non-alignment and neutrality.

How relevant are the substance and conclusions of Malcolm Booker to the left and the anti-war movement?

It is, of course, true that any foreign policy expresses the interests of the dominant classes. This does not mean, however, that conflicting views among the ruling classes should not be taken into account. Foreign policy reflects domestic policy but both are subject to the influences of the mass movement. It was the mass movement of the Moratorium which changed Labor Party policy on Viet Nam, and ultimately brought it to power. The fact that Booker openly attacks so many of the sacred cows of foreign policy makes it evident that, under pressure of changing circumstances, including tactical changes by the USA, a body of opinion is emerging in the Department of Foreign Affairs which conflicts with government policy and goes beyond anything the Labor Party has so far advanced as a realistic response to the new situation.

In different circumstances from Australia, Switzerland and Sweden have shown that a policy of genuine neutrality is practicable. The non-aligned movement which includes states with very different social systems may provide a setting in which Australia also could become neutral and/or non-aligned.

It would not be easy because it involves radical changes in public thinking on a whole range of issues, and a reversal of policies which have been part of the conventional Australian outlook for generations.

As a stepping stone to liberation from the demands of bloc strategy and as at least a partial alternative to domination by the multinationals, Booker’s thesis merits serious consideration.

- W.E. GOLLAN.

For anyone interested in the brand-name differentiation game as carried on among the various ideology merchants, Network will be your cup of myth. This film about the underside of the television industry not only permits that quintessential cultural whore, Hollywood, to come on all holier-than-thou about the evils of the 21-inch screen, but enables the press lords to get in a kick or two as well - witness The Australian’s serialisation of Paddy Chayevsky’s screenplay in February.

You may think that devoting large chunks of “your nation’s newspaper” to the furtherance of film culture is merely another example of the self-sacrificing service we have come to expect and love in Uncle Rupert, but those with keener noses will smell a rat once they’ve got past the cheese.

Press interests, like those of film are fighting a dark and dirty game for media dominance - and the more mud they can sling at the small screen, the better. Some of it may stick, with the enhanced possibility that the populace can be pried, square-eyed, from the box and gently cantilevered back into dream palaces like Hoyt’s new grounded 747 in George Street, or into their new easy chairs for a
quiet evening's perusal of your daily newspaper's thoughtfully provided centre fold-out on the industrial, political, social and tex-haven potential of Guatemala, Upper Volta, etc.

The surface expose in Network - that television is a nasty, brutish and short-changing medium, driven by mindless competition for audience shares, ratings and advertising revenue, hell-bent on anything seen or obscene that can deliver these goods - sits uneasily in the butterless mouths of press and film interests. However darkly revealing their portrayal of TV, you can't help noticing the ebony hue of the pots doing the calling.

This jockeying for superior rights to ideologically jamming our frequencies is only the most obvious contradiction in capitalist democracy inherent in Network's theme. More important is the ideology embedded in the film itself. It is a consummate example of mystification masquerading as bourgeois social criticism; a dangerous, if fascinating, film.

At a superficial level, Network reveals the background manipulations and distortions of an industry at once so power-mad and powerful that it can substitute madmen, soothsayers, vox populi and assorted illusionists for "the news" ((readers may well ask themselves, what's new about this?) and the home movies of urban guerrilla band activities for 'entertainment', while thumbing its network nose at a whole host of governmental regulatory agencies, anti-subversion laws, etc. However, the total impact of Network in fact is to present us the inevitability - if not the desirability - of a medium so conducted, thus blunting and defusing any critical conclusions we might draw. The film does this in three important ways.

First, television is reified. The medium is substituted madmen, soothsayers, vox populi and assorted illusionists for "the news" and the home movies of urban guerrilla band activities for "entertainment", while thumbing its network nose at a whole host of governmental regulatory agencies, anti-subversion laws, etc. However, the total impact of Network in fact is to present us the inevitability - if not the desirability - of a medium so conducted, thus blunting and defusing any critical conclusions we might draw. The film does this in three important ways.

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Reification can be noted again in the key conflict in the film. Arthur Jensen is a corporate visionary who controls the corporation which controls the network. The network's star show is the news, led by anchorman-turned-prophet Howard Beale who has risen to fame by confessing to his audience that his life - and probably theirs as well - is "bullshit" and urging them to shout "I'm as mad as hell and I'm not gonna take it any more". Jensen insists that Beale preach the evangel of corporatism, that the world is a business, a vast "ecumenical holding company" in which the individual and his rage are pointless. As this end-of-the-individual message goes out, ratings plummet. The network executives despair at the decline of their leading advertising show, so they coolly arrange for Beale's assassination.

The film leads us to one of two positions: either we are aghast at the depths of human depravity; or we reluctantly understand that the laws of daily, volatile, commercial television must triumph over abstract futuristic visions of a corporate heaven. In no way are we encouraged to see the real conflict - between national, cultural capitalists and multinational, multi-variate capitalists in which television is merely a pawn.

Second, Network's critical content is superficial and misleading. The film's few "decent" characters (William Holden as an antediluvian who still believes in "love" and "standards"; Peter Finch, so old-fashioned and crazy that he believes in God) seem to be criticising television as the unacceptable face of popular culture. The argument would appear to be - what else can you expect if you chase audiences, but to be dragged down to their level.

On the other hand, the portrayal of television's ability to incorporate even outright revolutionaries seems to present a different criticism: the unacceptable face of uncontrolled commercialisation - packaged instant God, processed instant revolution.

Both positions give ammunition to the cultured elitists who despise "the masses" as uncritical voyeurs, hyped on ever-increasing doses of illusion. There is a contradictory notion here: that television both reflects and produces the crasser aspects of human nature. And Chayevsky, like other concerned liberals, obviously finds it a comforting paradox to suggest, rather than unravel. The academic woods are full of hunters stalking down this same elusive prey called "Television: Cause or Effect". By denying an historical, materialist framework for analysis, they can't even see the real area of analysis - Television: the Effect of Effects. Like other human
products, it is an effect of the relationships, norms and values, and institutions of a given society at a given historical time. In short, it is an effect of capitalism.

Thirdly, Network devalues the possibilities of radical social change. Not only is there a real contempt for people, the mass audience seen generally as gullible, insatiable sensation-seekers, but also there is a savage attack on political activists as a possible source of revolutionary leadership. Communists and “ultra-leftists” are portrayed either as crazies who scream rapid-fire jargon at 15,000 decibels or as this-gun-for-hire urban badmen who can’t resist the notion of themselves as stars of the silver screen. Both are prepared to trade their politics for a mess of footage, and Network audiences are assured that although these politicos are perhaps crazy and certainly dangerous, they are definitely not serious.

Network’s attack on television as secular religion, blindly absorbing everything, including criticism, in a mindless quest for sustenance and domination is profoundly mystifying. Television is not a science-fiction organism, bent on survival at all costs. Nor is it a media monster chewing up people, events, and causes and mechanically spitting them out devoid of humanity, significance and justice. But it is an artefact in a system which attempts to do just that. And this film is at pains to hide the existence and reality of that system from us.

-Kathe Boehringer.