

In Living Colour: Political Representations of American Broadcast News on Film

“In keeping with channel 40’s policy of bringing you the latest in blood and guts and in living colour – you are going to see another first: attempted suicide.”

– Christine Chubbuck, 1974

Speaking these haunting words before her tragic death, Christine Chubbuck, in one moment, both conformed to and protested against news as simulation, as political spin. Within an industry increasingly searching for ways to simulate and glorify truth within news, Christine provided the last and ultimate onscreen truth by committing suicide live on air during a WXLT-TV news broadcast in 1974. Yet, Christine also fulfilled the next step within the normalisation of graphic news content; for, in providing “another first”, she also helped TV news cross the boundary into new extreme territories of onscreen explicitness.

Just two years later, Sidney Lumet would go on to make *Network* (1976), a fictional film partly inspired by the truth of Christine’s story. In depicting and predicting a possible destructive course of action for American national news broadcasting, *Network* uses one audio-visual medium in order to politically critique another, investigating the growing trend towards items of news as acts of, and tools for, political simulation. Released 40 years later, Antonio Campos’s 2016 film, *Christine*, looks somewhat nostalgically back to the local news broadcasting scene of the 1970s, yet also details the same changing political tides of the time.

In this essay, I shall examine the political critiques of *Network* and *Christine*, focusing on the aesthetic qualities and thematic content of each. The films map an important shift in the style of TV news, each suggesting and predicting the possible birth of what would later be known as ‘fake news’. What right do these fictional films hold in uncovering truth? Does the message of their content undermine their own authority? Or is the cinema situated

within a unique position to reflect and uncover deeper truths more objectively than the formulated and inherently ideological world of network TV news broadcasts?

Within the opening frame of Sidney Lumet's *Network*, the viewer is presented with four onscreen images of TV screens simultaneously running news broadcasts. The presenters all speak within the same medium close-up shot, directly to camera. All presenters are middle-aged white men wearing ties, fitted suits, with neatly trimmed hair and a clean shave. The images speak over each other as they run, forming a mixed and confused mosaic of stations fighting for attention, yet deploying all the very same aesthetic techniques to do so. The viewer is presented with an overwhelming decision of four choices that are essentially the same; a barrage of images and sounds that command the screen, yet do so by following the same set of tightly implemented stylistic rules. These are four independent broadcasts that would normally be viewed one at a time by switching channels, yet in visual and aural montage, Lumet exposes the stylistic rubric that governs their existence, highlighting the ideology that all stations collectively follow in order to successfully absorb and engage the largest possible number of TV viewers. From the outset, the film is clearly drawing itself at odds as a medium to that of television. The writer of *Network*, Paddy Chayefsky, made no secrets about criticising television for "its crassness, its stupidity, its chasing of fads and its embracing of gimmicks... its compulsion to force everyone watching it to think the same thing at the same time; and its overall lack of artistic integrity." (Itzkoff, 2014, p.7) Chayefsky would call television a "parvenu industry, constantly conscious of its image as a cultural wasteland" (Itzkoff, 2014, p.8) These comments may be made relatively safely when looking at fictional TV programming, but *Network* depicts these traits onto a medium that presents itself as truthful and socially reliable within our world... network news. The political implication of forcing 'everyone

watching to think the same thing' within an established ideology becomes extremely convoluted when applied to media claiming to present absolute truths to mass audiences. The opening filmic technique by Lumet instantly begins to question the reliability of TV news as an audio-visual medium, questioning if and how we are able to find one absolute truth within a medium that is so competitive, standardised, and overwhelming. The images and voices of the montage begin to cancel each other out, accumulating into what is essentially a confused maze of information, a labyrinth of material in which there is no truth, only empty noise and constructed images.



Image 1: A montage of news sounds and images opens Lumet's *Network* (1976)

In similar fashion, Campos begins *Christine* by highlighting the simulated and staged manner within which TV news is constructed. A TV fades up to show Christine Chubbuck, her image and personality symbolically trapped within the caged frames of the square screen. Christine welcomes the audience back to the show, before claiming to have President Richard Nixon in studio with her. Christine turns to ask the president a question, but her reply is empty, a silent breeze of dead air. Nevertheless, Christine nods and smiles conversationally, all the while sitting in silence as she looks off-screen. The camera cuts to

a wide shot of the studio, in which Christine sits by herself, staring at an empty chair. In this shift, the ideology of the faked news interview is disrupted by the privileged position of the fictional film. The staged space captured within the TV set widens to a filmic wide shot, thus exposing the simulation of the sequence. Without this intervention by the filmic camera, the performance given by Christine would have appeared to convey a truthful interview based on the 'viewability' of her movements, reactions, and facial expressions. Tom Burns writes about the visual viewability of television news, describing its ability to appear more authentic than newspaper news. "Viewability' is easily constructed as reliability because any intervention by broadcasters is largely invisible, and because the dramatic intensity of film and video recording carries conviction and guarantees authenticity in ways in which words cannot." (Burns, 1977, p.206) During the opening scene of *Christine*, this 'intervention' by TV broadcasters is revealed to the audience by Campos's filmic camera, thus the authenticity carried by the studio's camera is exposed as constructed and untruthful; one constructed visual medium exposes the falseness of another.



Images 2 & 3: The filmic camera cuts to reveal the hidden ideological space of the TV screen in *Christine* (2016)

Using these techniques to open their films, both Lumet and Campos position TV screens as negative objects, as ideological shields that present themselves as sources of information and truth, yet are in fact highly formulated behind an aesthetic set of stylistic

rules. Both *Network* and *Christine* situate TV screens within suspect positions, yet do so behind their own ideological aims. *Network*, for the most part, is a stylistically conventional fiction film, part based on the spiralling chaos of TV news, yet also concerned with relational drama and dramatic conflicts. Much of the film depicts the love affair of Diana Christensen and Max Schumacher of TV broadcaster UBS. The pair fall out after Diana takes over Max's news show, yet reunite in one aesthetically conventional scene that sees Max invite Diana to get coffee with him. The pair are filmed within a medium close-up two shot while walking down an empty sidewalk; this establishes the emotional connection of the fictional characters. On a dramatic beat, the camera suddenly cuts into the scene, showing Max and Diana in shallow focused close-ups as they turn to each other, stating more clearly their romantic desires. Like Christine's news interview, these shots of Max and Diana suppose a fluid and truthful sequence of human interaction. Yet, the scene has been composed for dramatic purposes, the sudden shift to close-ups indicating a more serious, deep, and truthful conversation. Here, like the TV news he critiques, Lumet deploys aesthetic and spatial visual techniques that suggest natural threads of narrative for the benefit of viewing audiences. The fictional film attempts to expose TV as ideology, but in order to achieve this, places its radical agenda within an ideology of its own, thus partly undermining its own political challenges. The same issue can be found within *Christine*, which portrays a dramatic retelling of Christine Chubbuck's non-fictional life; a life of which little is known or documented. The film attempts to establish the truth behind Chubbuck's work and death, yet does so by dramatising real events, including the romantic interests of Christine, as well as her troubled relationship with her mother. Both films aim to expose the falsities within TV news production by presenting TV screens as limited visual scopes by which carefully selected and edited observations are made to construct ideological messages. In doing so, the films expose the reliability of their own

content, claiming to be more credible sources of information while concurrently formulating dramatic narratives in order to support these claims.

In an attempt to deconstruct the ideology of a standard news broadcast image, *Network* takes the images displayed within its opening shot, and explores the aesthetic techniques, politics, and ideology used to form them. Towards the opening of the film, the editing room is seen, complete with multiple TV monitors, and a range of vision and sound mixing desks. On these monitors, possible cuts and camera angles that remain hidden from the audience of presenter Howard Beale's daily broadcast are shown. In this space, *Network* provides privileged access to observe the creation of audio-visual images within an audio-visual medium. Like Dziga Vertov in exposing his own filming and editing process with the aim of disrupting ideological constructs to reveal filmic truths in *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929), so too does Lumet draw attention to this stage of production, using film as a privileged cinematic authority able to cut through the smoke and mirrors of TV production. Yet, whereas Vertov exposes the constructs of the medium he works within, Lumet does so for another, thereby declaring authentic superiority within the medium of film.

The most notable example of *Network* critiquing the content of TV images with aim of exposing truth comes in one early scene in which Diana and Max sit within a small screening room to watch footage shot by an extreme left-wing terrorist group. The darkened space simulates that of a theater or cinema as the pair sit in the audience while viewing the footage. Initially, the footage being screened is an interview given by a member of the US Communist Party discussing the political and philosophical foundation of the group's principles. The footage is displayed within the screening room in a wide shot, the tiny screen reduced in size as Max speaks on the phone, talking over the footage entirely. This tone shifts when the tape being shown cuts to show silent footage from a

guerrilla-styled hand-held camera during the filming of a live bank robbery. The robbery is carried out by the terrorist group, who filmed the act as a tool for propaganda. The raw footage is violent, black and white, and voyeuristic in a candid-camera aesthetic. Instantly, Diana begins to show more interest, giving more command and power to the space of the screen; she sits up, engages, and begins to ask interested questions. In complete contrast to the analytical interview footage, Lumet frames the bank robbery footage in close-up, focusing intensely on its content, while providing only the voices of Diana and the supplier of the footage as they discuss its substance. The scene shows two clips, one containing a political argument, the other depicting a horrific act of terrorism, yet the heads of UBS, as depicted in the framing of the footage, hold far greater interest in broadcasting the latter with hope of providing, not information on the event, but shock and entertainment value; the politically charged propaganda footage is transformed into an amusement providing performance.



Images 4 & 5: Lumet provides a greater filmic space for the violent clip than the political one while visualising the ideological intentions of Diana in *Network* (1976)

Diana goes on to describe the footage as “terrific stuff”, before later suggesting a serialised TV show with the footage, basing its premise on an extreme group of terrorists committing violent acts in public. Here, *Network* critiques TV broadcasters of favouring the ‘what’ over the ‘why’. Diana aims not to explore the uprising of terror organisations in questioning why and how they develop or might be reduced, but rather trivialises deep societal issues by

screening non-contextualised violent acts as serialised sources of TV entertainment, thus creating pure visual simulation by detaching the source of the footage from its original context. The move by Diana to obscure the clip's context is also political, a decision that is inherently rooted within media organizations due to several conflicting influences. James Curran describes a number of these possible influences on media outlets as "state censorship... corporate ownership... mass market pressures... advertising influence" as well as "dominant discourses" within which he states that "A key theme of twentieth-century Western ideology was anti-communism. It was deployed again and again against the non-communist left and was theorized into a bi-polar view of the entire world." (Curran, 2002, p.148-151) In manipulating the clips, Diana discovers the perfect opportunity to abide to a dominant discourse of the time, yet in turn, further fuels the discourse by mass communicating politically unbalanced content as 'truth'. The exposed truths of the scene are not found in the screened terrorist footage, neither the political interview, but rather within the ways they are depicted by the camera and discussed by the characters. The film provides access to the two types of footage before the editing stage, as raw visual elements; via Lumet's framing of the footage, we understand Diana's perceptions and intentions regarding both the political and spectacle prospects of each. The film's audience is witness to a supposedly truthful media outlet making a political decision taken in order to respect a particular dominant discourse. Lumet's film not only illustrates and emphasises the shooting and editing of audio-visual media as key stages in creating ideological constructs, but also allows audiences to question the media they consume by identifying footage with its original context attached, while at the same time hearing the voice of someone intending to remove and reposition that context based on popular political discussions of the time.

Christine also questions the political and personal implications of TV news footage as an act of spectacle. During one scene, Christine is notified of a fire in the local area; with the intent of conforming to the wishes of her station manager in making her reports more 'juicy', she takes the opportunity to report on the incident. After initially asking cameraperson Jean to 'find where the good angles are', Christine instead becomes more interested in the story of the victim of the fire, rather than the fire itself. Christine tells Jean that 'we have to frame up on his face, real close'. We then cut to a studio set as the footage of the victim's face is broadcast. Campos holds a medium close-up on the TV set, much the same as the shot of the set that opens the film. The displaying of Christine's report on the TV set in contrast to the scene of the fire provokes two conflicting filming possibilities. We are witnessing Christine's 'take' on the fire, that is, a personal angle in which the pain and suffering on the victim's face holds higher visual significance than the explicitness of the fire. Yet, by showing us the actual location of the fire in one scene as well as the filmed footage from it in another scene, Campos exposes Christine's footage as a personal interpretation, rather than an absolute truth. Christine's intentions are intended for good; she wants to maintain a sense of personality within her report. Yet, the report is still not entirely truthful since its foundational audio-visual ideology is one constructed for sympathy.



Images 6 & 7: The scene of the fire compared to Christine's personal interpretation of the scene in *Christine* (2016)

In suggesting how beliefs and perceptions alone can provoke and manipulate individual and social behaviours, W.I. Thomas famously states that “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences.” (Thomas, 1928, p.527) Campos highlights the personal ideology of Christine’s report, yet that in itself does not stop the empathetic emotions created by the report from being ‘true’. Herein lies the true power of audio-visual content; it may be fact to state that ideologically manipulated content is inherently untruthful, yet the anger, fear, sadness or empathy they provoke, individually and socially speaking, is certainly not. The single take close-up on the fire victim’s face is designed to help the viewer provoke true empathetic emotions. Christine does not include a shot of the fire out of choice since this shot may have broken the overall effect of the report; a shot of the fire may have been needed to inform more visual details from the event, but Campos uses its absence to suggest that, within TV news, whether intentions be good or bad, the construction and framing of images will always contain some degree of visual coding or emotional manipulation for the purposes of simulating real and definable emotional consequences.

Lumet and Campos use fictional and reconstructed stories to their advantage, deploying them as products depicting our reality, yet not promising to represent the truthfulness and consensus of our reality in the same way as TV news or a filmic documentary might. David Croteau and William Hoynes denounce this assumed promise of news to represent reality, claiming that “the notion that the news reflects the ‘consensus’ is itself ideological because news does the active work of defining the consensus. Once that consensus is defined, the claim that reporting is a mere reflection of an already existing consensus is blind to the ways such definitions work to solidify it.” (Croteau & Hoynes, 2003, p.169) The filmmakers of *Network* and *Christine* use cinema to escape these accusations, claiming to produce an ideological artistic simulation of a fictional/re-

enacted event, rather than an ideologically manufactured version of a real-world consensus. *Network* goes on to predict a chaotic world in which faked and simulated TV news transforms into live reality TV shows that proclaim to truths in the manner of preaching apostles and cheering live audiences. Howard Beale soon becomes a self-styled “angry prophet denouncing the hypocrisies of our times”, yet even he becomes a reality star, more watchable for his off-kilter personality and eccentric radical attitude than the magnitude and relevance of the words he speaks. The film struggles to find truth within the subjective personality of Beale’s character, but more important is the concept of his character, the real-world possibility of the character becoming real at the time in the 1970s and today. Lumet does not claim his depicted world to be an accurate representation of reality, thus the truthfulness of the film is not found within its content, but rather within the possibility of its content becoming truth. The changing nature of the network news landscape in the 1970s, including the onscreen death of Christine Chubbuck, represents in retrospect the possible future truthfulness of *Network*; Lumet uses real truths to construct his own, thus formulating ideological arguments based on facts, yet fabricated within a preconceived filmic simulation. Whereas *Network* predicts conceptually the possible future of broadcast news, *Christine* seeks retrospective answers from the threshold of change in TV news to explain the issues effecting the temporal present. The film constructs a case for the evolution of contemporary issues such as ‘fake news’ and the sensationalism of news, blaming the uprising of these issues, in part, on financially struggling news stations wishing to extend and expand the audience percentage share of their shows. As said by Christine’s station manager in the film, “if it bleeds, it leads”. *Network* and *Christine*, from opposing temporal directions, examine a particular historical turning point in American network news content and style, using elements of real-world truth within fictional worlds to expose the ideology of another audio-visual medium. In doing so, the films expose the

manipulation within their own formulated plots, yet in turn, they also draw comparison with 'fictional' films to 'truthful' news reports, thus tarnishing the 'truth' value of the latter, while preserving the 'fictional' value of the former.

Another significant comparison found within both *Network* and *Christine* are the ending notes of each. Both films end with the death of their main character; the proactive provocateur demanding to be propelled into the future (Beale) and the personal humanist hoping to remain in the past (Chubbuck) are each shot and killed during live TV broadcasts, their last and most fundamental truths in death forever imprinted on the very mediums they endeavoured to challenge. In visually depicting each death onscreen, it may be argued that the films fall victim to their own brand of begrimed visual-audio ethics. These are projects that question the concept of news as simulation, yet they dramatically conclude their fall from grace narratives with the simulation of death and violence, in part buckling to the pressure of their inherent value as works of entertainment, but in many other ways proving to sustain an equally valued ideological thread – that truth within the audio-visual is inherently constructed, rather than a given. In describing both documented and re-enacted wartime newsreels, Susan Sontag claims that "New demands are made on reality in the era of cameras. The real thing may not be fearsome enough, and therefore needs to be enhanced; or reenacted more convincingly." (Sontag, 2003, p.63) Sontag describes an inherent shift created by audio-visual content in our relationship to death and violence. The real footage of Christine Chubbuck's death (during time of writing) has never been officially released, thus the enhanced re-enactment of this moment at the end of *Christine* becomes problematic in its search for truth. Sontag's described 'demands on reality' haunt the ending scene of the film; this is the core filmic moment of narrative upon which the work has depended on and promised. To turn away from Christine's moment of

death would be to misplace the political comment of the entire film; to make a film criticising the escalating simulation of violence on screen, without actively depicting any moments of on-screen violence as visual evidence or protest. Yet, in showing her violent death from a distance the film falls victim to the demands of reality, enhancing a true small screen death for the purposes of a big screen narrative, thus revealing once more an inherently constructed truth within the audio-visual work.



Images 8 & 9: The onscreen deaths of Christine Chubbuck and Howard Beale in *Christine* (2016) and *Network* (1976)

The death scenes of Howard and Christine work in many ways to help answer some of the questions posed at the start of this essay, for each scene creates or discovers 'a' truth within the social and political aspects of their individual aesthetic and narrative. The films expose themselves as ideological, yet confine in the fact that they never claim not to be, whereas the TV they depict does. In doing so, the films reflect themselves as far too conventional and far less radical than needed to reflect absolute truth. Yet, at the same time, within the scenes theorised above, the two films also depict non-conventional modes of shooting and editing as also highly vulnerable to the manipulation of visual ideology. In the end, *Network* and *Christine*, from opposing predictive and nostalgic viewpoints, do not so much hold critical views of visual ideology within TV news, but rather warn of its inherent danger to hide unnoticed within all forms of visual media, true or otherwise. The films also work to encourage self-reflection, to engage viewers to question the visual

content they digest, to witness the creation of visual ideology, and to become aware of its ever-presence and overwhelmingly strong influence on the consensus of real world perceptions, social and individual discourses, and everyday world events.

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