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### March 7, 2019: Network Message Endorses Nihilism

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Title: Network Message Endorses Nihilism

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3/7/2019—Despite impressive performances, especially by Bryan Cranston, and wonderfully effective staging, the fundamental problem with the play Network is the movie it is based on. At least as rendered, the message of the play is one of nihilism. The news star, Howard Beale, goes through several attempts to figure out what the problem is—he admits he does not know what should go in the telegrams that are going to the White House—but ends the play with the peculiar idea that the problem is belief in absolutes. No one in the play had believed in any absolutes. In fact, Beale had earlier said to the camera that we do what the tube tells us and believe nothing at all ourselves—very much akin to the Das Man section in Heidegger's Being and Time: we do what they tell us. It is a cheap and unsatisfying ending. We have to disagree. Something like religion could not be the problem because no one we see in the play is religious. The dramatic highpoint of the play is the remarkably staged “We’re mad as hell and we’re not going to take it anymore” sequence. But everyone in the theater is aware that just such a feeling of wanting to push over everything got Trump elected. The phrase now sounds like a real mistake. I believe somewhere someone connected with the play said he learned of the value of expressing anger. I doubt people in general agree with that given the way things are today. It always was a mistake to just get mad. Beale says we’ll figure out later what to do. The main thing is to get mad. Well, now we’re mad all the time so that can no longer be said. Beale experiments. It’s corporations. It’s individualism. It’s the nation-state. What comes across is the exhaustion of our elites, specifically the writer, Paddy Chayefsky. Thankfully, Beale still believes in free speech, but not in any of our other values. He criticizes people for not reading books or newspapers, but does not try to educate anyone about anything—until he has a personal interest in a Saudi takeover of the network. At that point, democracy proves very effective in stopping a merger. Chayefsky predicted the rise of infotainment, but has no alternative to offer. It’s all a lot of magic thinking. There is some secret that will make the world better. Network does not want to grapple with the hard work of self-government. It encourages us to demand answers from others—our elected officials—without any work on our part. Television makes us political consumers rather than participants. It would be nice to think that this is what the play/movie is trying to show. That we need to be participants in working out the problems of our society. But that is not the play's point. Instead, fatalistically, we are told that there is nothing much to be done. Nothing beyond not believing in absolutes.