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Is There Life After Death for the Television Movie?

DIANE WALSH

I am a child of television. Born in 1948, I remember the event that changed the furniture arrangement in my parent's living room from one that encouraged conversation to one that encouraged viewing: the arrival of the family television set and all the shows that made me laugh, cry, learn, and imagine. Through the years, a particular form of television programming rose to the top of my favorites list: the Movie-of-the-Week, often referred to as the "M.O.W."

My roller coaster relationship with this form of entertainment has been a compelling, complicated, and consuming one of over twenty years. Throughout that time, I've learned how the narrative storytelling properties of the television movie can have a strong social, emotional, and psychological impact on the American family. David Kubey, Ph.D., director of the Center for Media Studies at Rutgers University, feels the same way about all of television programming when he states that "because it is, to a great extent, culturally written, television presents us with our most prevalent concerns, our deepest dilemmas. Our most traditional views, those which are repressive and reactionary, as well as those which are subversive and emancipatory, are upheld, examined, maintained, and transformed."¹

Television has produced M.O.W.s of integrity, class, and inspiration. It has also produced movies of blatant exploitation for the sake of ratings. For the most part, this money-driven creative push-pull has succeeded in squeezing the life out of the award-winning ad-supported network television movie of old.

Will the movie-of-the-week have to evolve into some sort of interactive cutting edge audience experience to prove its worth once again? Interactive storytelling works very well in the game world, but it hasn't proven itself satisfying in television storytelling as of yet. Its time will surely come, but what about now?

Is There Any Way to Revive the ‘Golden Age’ of the M.O.W.?

To put this question in context, it’s best to look back at the television movie’s rise to prominence on the small screen.

THE RISE

Though the two-hour movie originally was fictional in content, it was at its best during the 1970s and 80s when it had a “real” storytelling purpose: social issues and human problems facing men, women, children, and families were dramatized, and avenues to deal with those problems shared with the viewers on the newscasts that followed the movies. With Watergate, the Vietnam War, civil rights, and feminism dominating the social spectrum in the 70s, “the TV audience had developed a hunger for more realistic stories, especially those based on fact. Recalled Louis Rudolph, an ABC programming vice-president at the time, “Viewers expressed guilt about watching TV. But by watching something that was true, they felt they were learning something and could justify the time they were spending.”² So the networks created a new narrative genre called the “docudrama,” which took dramatic license with a true/factual story to create a compelling two-hour movie that would appeal to a wider demographic of the viewing audience than could any non-fiction handling of the same story in a television documentary.

When the M.O.W. expanded to a group of serialized movies that became known as a “miniseries,” the form reached its “apex with the monumental event called *Roots*. An astonishing 130 million people saw all or part of *Roots* during its eight-night engagement in January 1977, far surpassing any previous prime-time entertainment telecast. The final episode earned a 51.5 rating and a 71 share [absolutely unthinkable these days with the plethora of channels from which to choose, but absolutely possible when there were three commercial choices].

“By ripping open America’s deepest and most painful scar, the legacy of slavery, *Roots* [based on Alex Hailey’s book of the same name about his heritage] bound the national consciousness into an extraordinary shared experience akin to the first man landing on the moon and the assassination of President JFK. For weeks afterward, *Roots* ranked as the number one topic of conversation from dining room tables to college classrooms to office water coolers. It prompted a reevaluation of

racial injustice and its role in American heritage, and it provoked an outpouring of social commentary.”³

Asking a prime-time audience to commit to watching *one* tough story in eight segments spread over two weeks was risky enough, but to have that story be historical, extremely violent, and often inhumane was even more of a leap of television programming faith that paid off. *Roots* was a shining example of how the movie for television could act as an agent for change capable of making a difference in the fabric of American thought.

By the 1980s, the television movie had become popular enough for the broadcast networks to each have two or three movie nights that would focus on a particular counter programming genre to win the week’s ratings race, i.e. classy star-driven movies played well on Sunday night when the whole family was home, as did high-profile docudramas, while more female-driven issue movies with identifiable TV actresses played well on Monday night opposite football. ABC, CBS, and NBC combined to make 100 movies per season, some tabloid-esque, and others that ventured into profound issues like being gay in America, the inequities of the criminal justice system, dark family secrets like domestic violence, the ravages of addiction, and the devastation of divorce on all parties concerned. It was an incredible time—a great marriage between storyteller and audience.

It was during that time that I worked as vice president of television for Robert Greenwald, a producer/director, who found a way to merge his 60s social and political activism with his livelihood. He was committed to making television movies that mattered, stories that could shed light on political and social secrets [he directed the 1986 NBC movie, *Burning Bed*, the first M.O.W. to deal directly with the brutality and consequence of spousal abuse].⁴ The untold story of teen pregnancy’s impact on the teen father (*Daddy* for ABC-1987), and court-related interracial child custody racism (*A Fight for Jenny* for NBC-1986) were examples of social issues we explored during that time.⁵

Audiences couldn’t seem to get enough of the docudrama. The “golden age” had arrived.

THE FALL

All good things must always come to a not so good ending, however—and the TV movie was no different. It was destined to crash and burn, and it did. “By 1990, two thirds of network movies were made-fors. For plots, producers often turned to actual, usually sensational events. This practice reached new heights—or exploitive depths—in 1993 when ABC, CBS and NBC each aired a made for television movie based on the true story of the attempt by a teenage girl, dubbed the Long Island Lolita, to murder her adult lover’s wife. By the following year, however, the Big Three nets had begun to back away from this strategy, turning more to what some called, uplifting, feel good movies. Fox on the other hand, stayed on the crime-and-tragedy path with, among others, its O.J. Simpson docudrama.”⁶

It was the creative end for this form of entertainment. Most of the movies were ripped from the headlines and became indistinguishable from one another. The race for ratings had turned the M.O.W. into a desperate race for the most salacious “true crime” story of the week. A casualty of this fall from grace, the often well-meaning docudrama “disease-of-the-week” movies were forced to become more and more melodramatic to compete for ratings, and less and less satisfying as a result.

It was no surprise that the audience tired of the form and stopped watching. The broadcast networks succeeded in extinguishing the M.O.W, and the American public lost a valuable source of entertainment, societal insight, and audience identification in the process.

Could this have been avoided?

THE REASONS

During this same time, the television audience splintered due to the emergence of cable television and the proliferation of “niche” channels, as well as the rise of the booming videocassette home rental business. More choice spelled well-deserved doom for the M.O.W. With Nielsen ratings tumbling and profit margins falling, the broadcast networks eventually dropped their weekly original movie nights. It can be safely said that with the addition of the Internet as a more recent

small-screen destination for movie viewing, there will never again be a narrative television event able to attract a communal experience of the *Roots* magnitude. We'll have to settle for the Super Bowl.

Another big reason TV movies fell out of favor had nothing to do with the audience. It had to do with a changing business model, and the rise of corporate media vertical integration—the phenomenon of one mega-corporation allowed to own a major broadcast television network, several cable channels, a movie studio, a publishing company, etc., and the product produced by all the sub-entities. The result was the end of the small independent TV movie producer who the networks had depended on during the 70s and 80s to provide them product in return for retaining ownership of the movies they made.

Bruce Sallon, vice-president for movies at ABC during that time, felt a byproduct of the new business model was that very few independent producers were able to make a living in the television movie market after the government repealed “the financial syndication, or fin syn rule, which allowed the networks to own their own programming. Before ‘fin syn,’ networks could own very few of their own negatives, and that’s where the money is—in the later syndication, as reruns of successful television series and movies.”⁷ With the relaxation of these rules, the broadcast networks could own as much programming as they wanted. Series television is made for syndication because people will seek out their favorite show and actors repeatedly, but individual M.O.W.s are not because viewers rarely watch them more than once. Hence, with the networks having little incentive to make movies of their own, many of the previously successful independent television movie producers found themselves with no where to sell their stories.

NOTE TO NETWORKS: never close the door on someone passionate about a story they want to tell, because they *will* find a way to open it again.

ENTER: The Advertising Sponsor

A CREATIVE LIFELINE

Producers who believed in how television movies could tell personal stories of integrity did not give up on the form. For many of them, finding a single sponsor

to underwrite their network movie was the only way to get less exploitive stories on the air. At the same time, sponsors like General Foods and Campbell's Soup wanted to reach more of their target female shoppers. What better way to accomplish that than to fully sponsor a character-driven female-appeal two-hour television movie during which they would be the sole advertiser? A marriage made in creative heaven. However, this was not a new idea. Standard practice for series television during the late 1940s and 50s, it easily adapted itself to the television movie during this time.

An example of this process occurred in 1994 while I worked as vice president of television for Gross-Weston Productions.⁸ We optioned the rights to an inspirational true story that touched us deeply, but we had a difficult time finding a network buyer because it dealt with children with HIV. Frustrated with the shortsightedness of the buyers, we sought sponsorship from the prestigious Hallmark Hall of Fame television movie franchise, known for telling character-driven female-appeal stories to sell their greeting cards. They made a deal with us immediately. The result was *A Place for Annie*, the ABC Emmy-nominated movie I produced that focused on two very different women—a nurse (played by Cissy Spacek) who took in an abandoned baby with the HIV virus, and the child's birth mother (Mary Louise Parker) dying of AIDS from a dirty drug needle—who fought each other for the love and life of the child, only to discover a deep respect and love for one another when the child was discovered to be free of the virus.

Selfishness and ignorance were at the core of this emotionally powerful story that shed light on a new definition of family, the perils of drug addiction, hopes and fears about children with AIDS, and the fragility of life.⁹ Though the networks saw it as an “issue” movie with limited appeal, Hallmark Hall of Fame saw it as an unusual love story that could touch people's hearts and teach them something about their own intolerance.

Unfortunately, without a sponsor like Hallmark Hall of Fame, it would be very difficult to get *Annie* made for broadcast television today for all the same reasons it almost didn't get made in 1994. But, a second chance for the M.O.W. may be in the works. Ironically, the same cable television channels that helped bury the TV movie years ago might now become its saviors.

A NEW BEGINNING?

Ad-supported basic cable has been making a run at more serious programming in the last few years. Lifetime, the cable channel for women, has become a beam of light for viewers hungry for intelligent movies for television. Its “Red Carpet Lifetime Original Movie Event” has shown an increase in ratings by successfully dovetailing current social issues with political ones. Imagine that—what a concept!

An example of this rejuvenated programming approach was the 2005 original movie on sex slavery: *Human Trafficking*—the highest-rated original movie on ad-supported basic cable. Lifetime supported lobbying in Congress for changes. “With this film, America takes a giant step toward getting educated,” said Rep. Chris Smith (R-N.J.), a frequent sponsor of legislation against violence toward women.

“Once, executives in ad-supported television feared that any incursion into the political world risked alienating viewers. But now, many cable networks have decided that political causes—and the stars who gravitate to them—can draw viewers.”¹⁰ Due to the broader-based audience these intelligent movies can attract, they often serve as the public catalyst for change that pushes social agencies and government into needed action...and the cable networks reap the rewards and the reputation of being more ‘caring’ than their broadcast siblings.

“Executives at the cable networks embracing advocacy see themselves in a win-win-win situation. Ratings are robust, viewers are responsive, and advertisers seem eager to position themselves next to good causes. The cable networks push their causes on their websites, often urging viewers to follow their interests with letter-writing campaigns to Congress.”¹¹ This type of synergy between the cable channels and the independent producers mirrors the synergy between the broadcast networks and independent producers that produced the classy, integrity-driven television movies discussed earlier. The creative fires of that new synergy need to be constantly stoked in order for it to succeed.

Can the 'lifetime' movie become a trend that crosses over to broadcast television?

KEEP THE WINDS OF CHANGE BLOWING

As an associate professor in the writing for film and television program at the University of the Arts in Philadelphia, it is my charge to encourage students to read, observe, create stories, and then write, write, and rewrite. When it comes to television, they often talk about not wanting to fight the ratings wars with the cable and broadcast buyers when it comes to their ideas. I would like to tell them that ratings shouldn't be the deciding factor when it comes to which movies get produced and which ones don't, but they also have to understand that television is a business, and the media monoliths that drive that business exist to make profits.

I do tell them, however, that the bottom line for a television writer is the ability to take advantage of the creative winds of change when they happen—and that “change” is in our collective societal wind right now, so let it be a guide for creative choices. When people are doing their best to survive natural disasters, the loss of a job, or the absence of a child fighting in Iraq, they will often seek out a television set to watch a narrative story that shows them they are not alone in their plight. It's our job as storytellers to give them that experience, and make it a satisfying one.

So, I ask the question again:

Is there life after death for the television movie?

The answer is twofold: first and foremost, it is in the hands of the broadcast networks and cable channels to maintain a standard of excellence when it comes to their original movies, and to not cheapen the subject matter or the docudrama in the ratings race. And second, it is in the collective hands of the viewers. The more they show their support for quality storytelling that educates *and* entertains, the higher the ratings will go, and the more television movies of integrity will be made.

Unfortunately, RATINGS = LIFE in the world of television.

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