

Commercials Spoil Movies on AMC

Once-great cable channel frustrates viewers with advertising. **By Richard G. Carter**

There was a time when a pair of basic cable television channels were an oasis for millions of movie fans who yearned for commercial-free films — many in crisp black-and-white — from Hollywood's golden age. Indeed, we grooved on the splendid vintage fare offered by American Movie Classics and Turner Classic Movies.

But that was then and this is now.

TCM continues to reign supreme and is delightful. But AMC — which I discovered in the Midwest in 1983 shortly after going gaga over cable's many viewing options — is dead as a dodo. This onetime champion of unfettered flicks began its decline three years ago by ignominiously prostituting itself via interminable commercial breaks, wholesale butchering of content and silly self-promotion which make its fare utterly unwatchable.

Unfortunately, this kind of thing seems par for the course these days. As is so often true in today's society, our entertainment choices are over-

hyped, badly marketed and steadily going downhill. Quality and good taste have given way to crass commercialism and bad taste. And you and I are the victims.

Before proceeding, be assured that this is about cable television — the only kind worth watching if quality movies are your cup of tea. I'm not dealing with the loony-tunes manner in which big-screen films always have been shown on broadcast TV. The main networks — ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox — remain dinosaurs in this regard.

Of course, premium cable is the only place to go for movies that are uncut regardless of content, as well as devoid of advertising. As a lover of golden oldies, I've found that Cinemax and Showtime lead the way — albeit in a limited fashion compared to pre-2001 AMC and always and forever grand TCM. But the premiums cost viewers extra money.

From a cultural standpoint, AMC, on basic cable, was especially important to generations of young people. By virtue

of the dumbing-down of commercial TV, many never had an opportunity to see unexpurgated versions of hundreds of truly wonderful movies from Hollywood's gone, but not forgotten, golden age. Make no mistake about it, what passes for most of today's film fare is a bad joke on a nation of moviegoers. And the chopped-up slop showing up on most basic cable and broadcast outlets looks even worse.

To millions of mature Americans, AMC was extra special. As a three- and four-times-a-week neighborhood moviegoer in my youth, I longed for a return to those thrilling days of yesteryear. For example, as knowledgeable, fellow film aficionados will attest, more good movies were released in 1949 alone than the entire decade of the 1990s!

Thus, we jumped for joy when cable emerged. AMC offered us uninterrupted versions of 1949 films such as "Alias Nick Beal," "All the King's Men," "Battleground," "Champion," "Cross Cross," "D.O.A.," "Edward, My Son," "The Fountainhead," "The Heiress," "Home of the Brave," "Knock on Any Door," "A Letter to Three Wives," "On the Town," "Pinky," "Samson and Delilah," "She Wore a Yellow Ribbon," "Task Force," "The Third Man," "Twelve O'Clock High," "White Heat" and many others. But no more.

Around mid-2001, AMC pulled the plug on its integrity by introducing seemingly interminable three-and-one-half-minute breaks — touted as "intermissions" — midway through its movies. I couldn't believe my eyes. Cringing as fine vintage films were turned into gobbledygook, I was reminded of what Karl Malden told Slim Pickens in 1961's haunting

revenge Western "One-Eyed Jacks." Said he: "Looks like you're a day late and a dollar short."

That's exactly what AMC was telling countless film lovers who prefer the good old stuff — and our numbers are legion. The free-flowing movie experience that has long entertained and transfixed us, and made us laugh and cry, was gone with the wind. But the worst was yet to come as the single, mid-film break was replaced by annoying product commercials that kept coming and coming and coming.

Watching a movie on AMC had become indistinguishable from the so-called vast wasteland of commercial broadcast television. This was not why I'd welcomed cable TV with open arms. It's not what I had been paying my ever increasing cable bill to see. I was incredulous. I was disgusted. I was appalled. I tuned out AMC.

Yet, eternal optimist that I am, I'd go back occasionally to see if sanity had returned and AMC's national audience of some 69-million households were seeing commercial-free films. But as we like to say in New York, fuhgedaboutit!

What's behind AMC's sellout of its core viewing audience? Simple. Its young, bottom-line, number-crunching bean-counters put advertising revenue head-and-shoulders above the concept that made the channel great back in the day: Commercial-free movies. These same wet-behind-the-ears suits also ruled the roost at then co-owned Bravo — which already had fouled its air by introducing ads to the many fine foreign and "art" films it once presented without interruption. Ugh!

Equally egregious, AMC didn't confine its intelligence-insulting

advertising to feature films. Uh-uh. This former bastion of the silver screen further thumbed its nose at viewers by inserting commercials into the fabled 20-minute “Little Rascals” short subjects of the good old days. You remember “The Little Rascals” — featuring the white Alfalfa and the black Buckwheat. What could be next, I wondered. Ruining legendary Three Stooges shorts with commercials? Ugh, again!

The old movies shown on AMC — long and short — were not lovingly created to accommodate breaks. That’s the tack of mostly mindless made-for-TV movies. Thus, the channel creates disruptions where none belong, which is a violation of the trust serious film fans expect. By becoming just like TV’s tired old broadcast outlets — local and national — AMC has outlived its usefulness.

Furthermore, while claiming to be advertiser-supported, AMC also is subscriber-supported. This means selling commercial time is like whipped-cream topping for a cable network already raking in the dough through monthly subscription payments of viewers like you and me. Perhaps it doesn’t care that basic cable’s TCM, which remains true to its commercial-free calling, skunks AMC six ways from Sunday.

And commercial pollution isn’t this channel’s only sin, albeit the most serious. Owing to its orbit in the basic cable firmament, AMC always shied away from films with suggestive sex, off-color language and ultra-violence. That was OK with me and countless others, because this wasn’t a staple of films we grew up on and loved. I was always more interested in a believable,

compelling story than gratuitous flesh and over-the-top flash.

Yet, in recent years, AMC and Bravo made a big show of touting repeated airings of “The Godfather” (1972) and “The Godfather Part II” (1974). However, meat-ax cuts insulted the millions who recall the original versions. For example, remember James Caan’s comment in “The Godfather” as he described what Al Pacino would have in his hands when emerging from a restaurant men’s room prior to shooting a crooked cop? What he said on AMC and Bravo is not the word you heard in the theatrical movie.

So how can AMC — an outfit which touts itself as a leader in film preservation — hypocritically desecrate old movies by riddling them with commercials and artless cuts? And why should mature Americans who dote on the great films of 1945-60 — arguably Hollywood’s best era — put up with this sacrilege?

Bottom line: Thinking of AMC these days, I think of Humphrey Bogart’s words in “The Caine Mutiny” (1954): “Your best is nothing more than a maximum of inefficiency.”

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