Review of Groove Tube: The Revolution As It Was Televised

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Groove Tube: The Revolution As It Was Televised

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*Groove Tube* engagingly imparts a wealth of information about television programming and the American counterculture. Concentrating on the years 1966–1971, Bodroghkozy claims to “trace how . . . entertainment television engaged with manifestations of youth rebellion and dissent” (4). She analyzes television “as an institution, a body of texts, and a group of audiences” that entered a “crisis of authority” in this period (17). “During such a crisis,” she explains, “the ruling elites . . . can only dominate using coercive means rather than consensual methods” (16). Nevertheless, in the history Bodroghkozy sketches, the networks ultimately cobbled together a “hegemonic reframing” that incorporated many aspects of the youth rebellion (17). Concentrating on *The Mod Squad* (1968–1973), *The Monkees* (1966–1968), *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour* (1967–1969), and selected episodes of crime dramas, Bodroghkozy’s detailed and well-documented readings of these programs allow her to amply demonstrate how the counterculture entered the mainstream in a flood of traditionally liberal notions about reasoned exchange of ideas and mutual tolerance. While she sometimes writes like a gifted graduate student answering an exam question about the application of Gramscian theory to 1960s television, what she has done is actually more significant: she has brought a

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sophisticated theoretical focus to bear on very original research. She relates the results of audience testing data as the shows were being developed as well as reactions of media critics in the underground press, and she attentively watched hundreds of hours of television and read production scripts. The critical distance provided by her method is valuable, but her astute use of archival evidence truly strengthens the book.

Bodroghkozy takes pains to specify that the youth rebellion under consideration was largely an undertaking of the white, male, college-enrolled middle class (9). Indeed, she repeatedly notes that men dominated not only the movement but especially the underground press. Her discussion of the “hippie chick,” a recurring feature of television’s approach to the counterculture, smartly shows how this archetypal innocent yet sexualized feminine character could be used as an intermediary between macho rebellion and male authority. For example, a 1970 episode of Marcus Welby, M.D. had the good doctor championing the hippie values of an unwed mother who insisted on setting up housekeeping with the father of her child. But, as Bodroghkozy notes, in many ways, Welby’s “hippie chick” conformed to “hegemonic notions” in her love for her child and her partner, especially since she showed great eagerness to play the role of wife and mother with or without a marriage license (90). In contrast, “the virile hippie ‘Free Man’ . . . could not be captured, contained, and turned into an image” (93). She less convincingly cites her focus on the hippie chick as a counterweight to the paucity of feminine voices in her research materials (14). While her claim that men dominated the underground press may be accurate, her decision to limit herself to that press creates a needless handicap since articulate female counterculture participants such as Alice Echols, Sara M. Evans, or Ellen Willis could cast useful light on these issues.1

The first chapter discusses the relationship between youth rebellion and the advent of television. Noting that the counterculture was part of the first generation to grow up with the tube, Bodroghkozy discusses varying “establishment” attitudes toward the machine, ranging from fear of what came to be known as “the plug-in drug” to more utopian hopes that shared viewing would strengthen family ties. Likewise, she relates the varying interpretations writers for the underground press had of the shows of their childhood, particularly Howdy Doody. Nevertheless, she is able to conclude that for counterculture youth, “television
validated their right (even their need) to rebel” (36). She goes on to discuss the counterculture’s adaptation of Marshall McLuhan’s media theory, the use of television as a visual backdrop for recreational drug use, and the small scale creation of “guerilla” videos. She concludes that, for the most part, the counterculture did not significantly engage with television as an institution. The most notable exception—the Yippies—is discussed in the third chapter. While Bodroghkozy relates much interesting research about the Yippies’ theory and practice of media manipulation, paying particular attention to their activities during the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago, she is unable to draw conclusions about whether the Yippies were successful in their attempts to use television to create revolution. This impasse also illustrates how Groove Tube could benefit from casting a wider archival web. In “Learning from Chicago,” originally published just months after the convention, Ellen Willis, a participant, reinforces Bodroghkozy’s main thesis. After noting that “like typical Americans, we got our biggest kicks from contemplating our image in the media,” Willis expresses the fear that any sympathy the widely televised “police brutality” may have won the counterculture may ultimately have served the establishment: “suppose the street-fighters were really only shock troops for the reform Democrats? Suppose the power structure isn’t preparing to crush us, only to absorb us, as usual? America—and we ought to know this by now—is not a gun but a gigantic vacuum cleaner.”

Chapters two, four, five, and six analyze television shows that made some attempt to portray or comment upon counter cultural concerns. Chapter two focuses on the earliest portrayals of these issues in dramatic series and news specials, but it also includes a fascinating discussion of the development of The Monkees as a program specifically designed to attract a youthful audience. (In fact, so expert is Bodroghkozy on her subject that summarizing any of the chapters risks omitting some interesting angle.) What makes this chapter particularly valuable is the way Bodroghkozy’s well-informed insights contrast with the righteously cranky responses from the media critics in the underground press. For example, she sees the almost comically inaccurate early portrayals of the drug culture as a sign of the power structure’s “anxiety and weakness in the face of a phenomenon that defied strategies of definition—and thus containment” (79). Dragnet ‘67’s premiere episode, “The Big LSD” shows such equivocation when
Sergeant Friday detained the drug-addled villain of the piece not because of criminal possession but rather because the young man was “in danger of leading an idle, immoral or dissolute life” (77). The crime drama approach to drugs is well summed-up by Bodroghkozy’s intriguing choice of stills from these programs such as the absurd (yet wryly-captioned) “acidhead costumed like a beatnik and sucking on a paint brush” (79). Likewise, Bodroghkozy makes good use of her own insight as she describes a CBS news special of 1967 called “The Hippie Temptation”: the colorful backdrop of Haight-Ashbury’s happy hippies may well have subverted any of the warnings a grim Harry Reasoner elicited from solemn doctors and psychologists he interviewed (76).

Chapter four describes the rise and fall of The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour. Bodroghkozy had access to the Smothers Brothers’ files so she is able to bring new information and original analysis to this otherwise fairly well known case of network censorship. She notes how the network managed to couch its objections to the Smothers Brothers’ anti-war guests such as Joan Baez, Pete Seeger, and Harry Belafonte as questions of “good taste” in order to depoliticize the decisions to censor and ultimately cancel the show. Nevertheless, the underground press, in its consistently fervid support of the show, “saw the state power that menaced insurgent youth mirrored in the duo’s situation” (157).

In chapter five, Bodroghkozy describes the making of Aaron Spelling’s The Mod Squad, a successful series casting a hippie chick, a Watts riot survivor, and a privileged Beverly Hills boy as cops. She provides detailed readings of selected episodes on draft dodging, a thinly disguised My Lai Massacre, and the dangers faced by an activist black priest in the ghetto. In spite of the fact that the underground press was not uniformly positive about the show, Bodroghkozy concludes that The Mod Squad provided a model “balancing act” by advocating youth movement causes within the law-and-order framework of the crime drama (197–98).

Chapter six describes many such balancing acts from the 1970–1971 season, when all three networks sought out “relevant” programming in an attempt to capture a baby boom audience. As Bodroghkozy notes, this shift was not so much a triumph of the counterculture as it was of demographics: the networks, most notably CBS, which made a much-publicized decision to cancel some of its most popular rural-themed programs, became convinced that a specifically youthful audience was more valuable to advertisers than sheer numbers of heartland viewers.
Hence, the networks effectively announced to their provincial audience, to their country-music-loving audience, to the working class, to the older folks watching whatever Ed Sullivan would show them, what the hippies had been telling them all along: you’re not where it’s at. At least some members of the counterculture, however, saw the possibility that programming about campus unrest, hippie lifestyles, draft resistance, and the like “could serve a politically progressive role” (227).

Bodroghkozy’s personal history confirms the larger story she tells. In an opening vignette, she describes her pre-teen fascination with hippies. To feed her curiosity, her suburban family visited the Yorkville district, Toronto’s answer to Haight-Ashbury. The chaos she saw frightened her, leading her to realize that the hippies of her daydreams were on television, not in the real streets. Nevertheless, she maintains, her hippie politics, “a taken-for-granted antimilitarism and support for movements for social change,” came from television (2). Why her fear never turned to loathing becomes clear in chapter seven, in which Bodroghkozy briefly discusses counterculture ideals in prime time television since 1971. Programs such as All in the Family, M*A*S*H, and Murphy Brown can be seen to have clearly and appealingly articulated antiestablishment themes when contrasted with less progressive developments such as Seinfeld’s studied avoidance of social relevance and Ellen’s struggle with network censors over the portrayal of homosexuality.

While Groove Tube tells a well-documented story of crisis and change in network television, it also opens an exciting range of questions for scholars who follow in its footsteps. The number of shows touching on the counterculture forms an enormous topic that Bodroghkozy was clearly forced to limit. In fact, in her acknowledgments, she mentions having made a “painful decision” to omit a chapter comparing the rock music industry to network television (x). Indeed, the question of how network television dealt with rock music seems crucial. For example, The Ed Sullivan Show, famous for its carefully controlled broadcasts of Elvis, the Beatles, the Stones, etc., ended its twenty-three-year run at the close of the five-year period Bodroghkozy examines, yet Bodroghkozy does not mention it. Likewise, although a few of the programs Bodroghkozy discusses were among the most-watched programs in their respective seasons, Bodroghkozy does not pay any focused attention to the Nielsen ratings, assuming that a program had no relevance unless it explicitly set out to engage the
counterculture. For that matter, she could not reasonably deal with every show that did attempt to connect to the counterculture: The Johnny Cash Show (1969–1971), a Nielsen success, comes to mind, and more so than the Smothers Brothers, it could be read as a show that bridged bedrock America with rock culture; Cash himself was a representative of hippiedom’s supposed arch-enemy, the redneck South; his in-laws, the revered Carter family, appeared with him as representatives of not only country music history but also of the more recent, hippie-friendly folk revival. Ur-rockabilly Carl Perkins was another cast member. Bob Dylan may have been the most famous counterculture guest, but the show also presented Pete Seeger, one of the guest stars that gave the Smothers Brothers such trouble with their network bosses. The story of Cash’s success could prove just as interesting as the Smothers’ failure.

Bodroghkozy’s training is in communications but her study will be a valuable starting point for other disciplinary and methodological approaches to interrogating the power relations that shape a cultural text. Studies of comedy, the dominant television genre of the period, will be interested in exploring how programs such as Bewitched (1964–1972) or The Beverly Hillbillies (1962–1971) incorporated or responded to counterculture issues. (In her appendix, “A Groove Tube Selective Chronology of the Years 1966 to 1971,” Bodroghkozy herself lists a 1967 episode of The Beverly Hillbillies in which Jethro is suspected of draft evasion.) Studies of television genres have already approached the counterculture. In 1989’s Comic Visions, David Marc discussed the depoliticization of hippies such as Serena, the fellow witch and cousin of Samantha Stevens, heroine of Bewitched, yet he also noted the strain inherent to valorizing the straight lifestyle demanded by Darrin Stevens, a most awkward patriarch, who could barely enforce the “values of the American celebration but who was now faced with an absurd supernatural circumstance (the sixties?) that prevented him from ruling the roost with impunity.” Marc’s brief discussion of Green Acres (1965–1971) is equally suggestive: he sees Oliver Douglas, the Harvard-educated lawyer, as a dropout and wonders whether the surreal situations found throughout the era’s sitcoms can somehow be linked with “the spread of recreational drug use” (130). While Allison Graham’s Framing the South: Hollywood, Television, and Race during the Civil Rights Struggle was published too recently for Bodroghkozy to use, it provides a persuasive and imagina-
tive reading of The Andy Griffith Show (1960–1968, and Nielsen’s top-rated show in the 1967–1968 season) as a rehabilitation of the overweight, racist Southern sheriffs epitomized by Birmingham’s Bull Connor and satirized regularly by hip comedians. Likewise, Bodroghkozy’s discussion of baby boom children’s programming is so interesting that it makes me wonder how children’s programming of the 1960s approached the counterculture. If, as television broadcaster Jeff Greenfield claims, Howdy Doody’s “Clarabelle was the first yippie” (35), what was at stake in Captain Kangaroo or the hours of Saturday morning cartoons that I dimly remember from my childhood? Were we exposed to the first yuppie while slurping cereal? In other words, studies that put Bodroghkozy’s questions to texts less overtly “about” the counterculture may still yield valuable insight about the ways “entertainment television . . . engaged with manifestations of youth rebellion and dissent” (4), and Groove Tube should inspire enough interest that these questions will continue to be asked and new methods of answering them will be developed.

NOTES

2. Willis, Beginning to See the Light, 135.
4. According to journalist Frye Gaillard, Cash “genuinely believed that there was something more basic about the country than its polarized factions, and the symbol of that conviction became his network television show on ABC.” Frye Gaillard, Watermelon Wine: The Spirit of Country Music (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1978), 63.
5. David Marc, Comic Visions: Television Comedy and American Culture (Winchester, Mass.: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 141. While Bodroghkozy does make some reference to Comic Visions, she leans heavily on the fact that until the 1971 premiere of All in the Family, sitcoms used indirection rather than direct confrontation to engage with the counterculture (228).