

Groove Tube: Sixties Television and the Youth Rebellion

Aniko Bodroghkozy

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For those who think that the evils of TV are more perfidious for today's children, Bodroghkozy's *Groove Tube* will surely be an eye-opener. "Depending on one's point of view, television was to be either praised or blamed for causing or assisting in the disaffected nature of many sixties youth," declares the author, an assistant professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of Alberta, who analyzes the medium's impact on the youth of America from its infancy to the Vietnam War era.

Children have worried their folks from "day one" that they were falling under the spell of this electronic "pied piper." Even an innocuous "Howdy Doody" could corrupt, what with grown-ups being drenched by seltzer bottle-bearing clowns: "Surely the lessons for the juvenile audience could only be a celebration of antisocial behavior and disrespect for adults... Parental authority, therefore, would be usurped by a fun, new gadget that required of children no discipline, no work..."

As these youngsters grew and took on new role models and new issues during the sixties, TV continued to be a driving force for information and influence. Network executives searched for a way to get young viewers to watch their programs by throwing in "relevance." Some programs were designed to appeal directly to that audience — "The Monkees," "The Mod Squad"—while others, which incorporated youth-oriented themes, such as "Marcus Welby" or "Bracken's World," were aimed at adults. Episodes depicted "hippy life" in a way that was slightly inconsistent with reality. The hippies in the show might go through adversity, but if they have been guilty of any wrongdoing it was because they were misled, either by zealots within their ranks, or older authority figures with their own agendas. In the end, however, "[T]he adult white male establishment figure had to indicate by some concrete action that he shared and supported the positions and politics of rebellious youth."

Other programs sought to jump on this relevance bandwagon ("doctors/lawyers go 'Mod Squad'"). Established shows from "Bonanza" to "Star Trek" depicted problems faced by young people.

Bodroghkozy selects several programs that tried to work both sides of the street. "The Smothers Brothers" started out as a variety program displaying the clean-cut charms of Tom and Dick as they mixed their own brand of social commentary with political satire and music. At first they were accepted, but as their content became more anti-establishment, CBS censors and management began clamping down on them and eventually canceled the program. Compare this, Bodroghkozy notes, with "Laugh In," which also made fun of the politics of the tumultuous times, yet was accepted much more readily by audiences.

Groove Tube is an academic exposition rather than entertainment, but there's still enough to appeal to the fan of TV culture.

RON KAPLAN (May / June 2001)

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