

Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television

Elana Levine

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The sexual revolution, triggered by the development of the pill in 1960, led to many changes in sexual openness by the 1970s. This openness was particularly noticeable in the popular medium of television. The author, a media critic and assistant professor of journalism and mass communication at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee, explores the interaction between the sexual revolution and the emergence and suppression of sexual content on network television in the 1970s.

As one might expect, television both led and lagged behind the vanguard of the sexual revolution. As Levine explains in this excellent book, "In the 1970s, television actively participated in the sexual revolution even as it appeared to reinforce the status quo."

Levine divides her book into six chapters: "Kiddie Porn Versus Adult Porn," "Not in My Living Room," "The Sex Threat," "Symbols of Sex," "Sex With a Laugh Track," and "From Romance to Rape." The progression of the book moves from discussion of how content was shaped through inter-network competition for viewers, the resultant suppression of content such as bra and condom advertisements and the development of innovation in the form of the movie of the week that gradually became shaped by parental fears of exploitation, to the popularity of sex-themed comedies such as *Three's Company* and the emergence of female sex symbols like Farrah Fawcett-Majors and Lynda Carter.

Of particular interest is the last chapter, which traces the shifting cultural attitudes toward rape as shown by the shift of attitude in soap operas from rape as passionate sex to rape as a violent anti-female act, as embodied by the famous Luke and Laura rape scene and their year-long unfolding storyline on *General Hospital* in October 1979.

There is much to admire in Levine's book, particularly in her understanding of how culture and commerce interact. The book gathers momentum as it proceeds, illuminating and articulating the role of television in popular culture, and would be an excellent resource for any class in media and culture. As Levine concludes, "Ideological forces limited and shaped what this forum could consider and how it could explore those issues that were represented, but the multitude of representations of, and illusions to, and discussions about sex in 1970s TV became a central site for the negotiation of just what role the sexual revolution would have in mainstream American culture from the 1970s onward."

PETER TERRY (February 8, 2007)

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