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Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture

By Thomas Doherty  
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305pp.

Thanks to TV Land and Pleasantville, conventional wisdom states that early television was a saccharine, repressive repository of simplistic ideals, and thus an ideal soapbox for the launching of Joseph McCarthy's ultra-reactionary diatribes. Thomas Doherty's Cold War, Cool Medium takes issue with that impression, providing a riveting revisionist history of how McCarthyism played out on television screens in the 1950s. Although Doherty, a prolific media historian and chair of Film Studies at Brandeis University, certainly agrees that fifties television and McCarthyism were bound together tightly, he seeks to correct the traditional account provided by such historians as Erik Barnouw, that the Cold War all but strangled freedom of expression on the nascent medium. In contrast to this view, Doherty argues that television in fact managed to "utter defiance and encourage resistance" in ways that historians have yet to fully recognize. Through close textual analysis of the existing televisual evidence from the period, as well as thorough research into trade papers and archival materials that fill in the gaps in that record, Doherty constructs a compelling argument. While television in the 1950s did indeed exhibit a timidity borne of corporate backing, the young medium's insatiable need for material, especially live spectacle, helped destroy as well as create Joseph McCarthy.

Throughout the book, Doherty acknowledges the now-familiar connections between early television and McCarthyism, both of which relied heavily on the power of visual spectacle to take root within American culture. But in Doherty's view, that very spectacle has misled previous historians about the true roles of both during the Cold War. Because of the television

image's iconic power, and because of the limited quantity of surviving visual materials from the period, McCarthy has been given far more credit for the anti-communist crusade than he actually deserves, and television has received far too much blame for being his handmaiden. Doherty contends that, despite the impression left by memoirs, films and television shows about the Red Scare, there was indeed a considerable backlash against the blacklist at the time, and much of this criticism was readily visible on television. As he eloquently writes, "To tune in to the television of Cold War America is to see a portrait more textured and multicolored than the monochrome shades fogging the popular imagination."

Yet Doherty is not looking through rose-colored glasses himself. Throughout the text, he highlights the many ridiculous conformities that commercialism imposed on television content and that have led so many historians to equate 1950s television with the repressive politics that McCarthy espoused. However, Doherty establishes a key distinction between the two in his opening chapter: "Dependent for sustenance on the very freedoms that McCarthyism restricted, the medium was preprogrammed for resistance." Just as television readily gave McCarthy the air time to make his fevered accusations, the medium also offered shows like America's Forum of the Air, whose format enabled a studio audience of average America citizens to grill McCarthy relentlessly, exposing the illogic in his arguments that would ultimately bring about his downfall. The bottom line for the existence of such a show was economic, not political—"television needed to fill the air time," as Doherty points out—but the impact was potentially profound.

After establishing this core argument early on, Cold War, Cool Medium artfully structures its chapters to lead the reader through the evidence and logic that supports it. For instance, Chapter 4 opens with an assessment of the absurdities wrought by "sponsor-mandated hypersensitivity," as Doherty terms it, such as General Motors' demand that the name "Ford" not

be uttered in a teleplay about the Lincoln assassination at Ford Theater. In another astounding instance, a lone woman in Connecticut complained to her union about the portrayal of a rude telephone operator in an NBC anthology drama, prompting the sponsor, ad agency and network responsible for the program to issue apologies. Such examples seemingly take us down the track of the traditional argument against 1950s television, that it was too beholden to sponsors to ever be a progressive force in society. But in the second half of this chapter, Doherty shows that the same motives responsible for such absurdities also brought considerable social progress, such as in the depiction of African-Americans. While most imagine early television as an all-white world, largely because of the particular shows from the period that have been preserved for syndication, Doherty's research into lesser-known programs and trade papers from the period illustrates that variety shows, anthology dramas and television news all brought African-American faces into living rooms across the country, meaning that television was in fact "far more integrated than public facilities or private relationships offscreen." And in Doherty's view, it was so because early television desperately needed talent in front of the camera to fill hour after hour, and it could not afford to be very picky about skin color. Additionally, the same sponsors and networks who feared offending telephone operators in Connecticut also feared offending black audiences across the country, including organizations like the NAACP.

Subsequent chapters continue this argument that television's very weaknesses could also be strengths, and these chapters progressively connect that logic to television's role in the fall of McCarthy. As Doherty illustrates, those who best understood the unique properties of television stood to gain the most, and the book's pivotal chapters on McCarthy's final months in the limelight illustrate that the senator did not understand the medium and lost greatly as a result. Edward R. Murrow's legendary See It Now takedown of McCarthy packaged together

McCarthy's own venomous and contradictory words, with the episode capped off by a stirring, poetic speech by Murrow. Conversely, McCarthy's equal-time response was an arid, stultifying lecture, which *Billboard* subsequently criticized not for its polemics but for being "poor in quality with spotty cutting and monotonous one-camera shots." Similarly, during the Army-McCarthy hearings, McCarthy's poise was famously annihilated by defense attorney Joseph Welch's legendary retort, "Have you no sense of decency, sir, at long last?" Doherty speculates that these words were carefully pre-planned and strategically timed by Welch, who knew the impact they would have on those in the gallery and, even more significantly, in living rooms across the country.

As indicated by the title of the book, Doherty also argues that McCarthy's struggles in such moments reflect Marshall McLuhan's designation of television as a "cool medium" that rewards a "low-pressure style of presentation" and "rejects the sharp personality." Accordingly, McCarthy's "hot personality melted under the glare of television." This is actually one of the more tenuous claims in the book, since Doherty's own research illustrates how historically specific cultural and industrial circumstances influenced the McCarthy mythos more so than any of the medium's essentialist qualities. While it offers up a nice title, the "cool medium" concept is not very illuminating here.

Instead, it is Doherty's creative historical research that sheds the most revealing light on 1950s television. Given the challenges of researching such an ephemeral period of television history, Doherty does an admirable job of scouring through trade papers to fill in for missing visual materials, and his archival research uncovers such fascinating tidbits as an FBI memorandum dated one week before the suicide of blacklisted actor Philip Loeb that, tragically unbeknownst to Loeb, cleared him of all suspicion. Doherty's examples also range from the

familiar, such as Nixon's Checkers speech, to the more obscure, such as TV superstar Lucille Ball's brief flirtation with the blacklist. The latter example also contains several examples of the writing style that makes Doherty's books so readable. For instance, referencing allegations that Ball had registered to vote for the Communist Party ticket in 1936, Doherty writes that "the notion of the zany redhead in cahoots with the reds conjures up a madcap sitcom scenario—imagine a teenage Lucy MacGillicuddy muscling her way into a Federal Theatre Project production of The Cradle Will Rock with calamitous results." Like Doherty's earlier books, including Teenagers and Teenpics and Pre-Code Hollywood, Cold War, Cool Medium is engagingly written, offering prose that is brimming with wit and insight.

The book is also directed toward a general readership rather than an academic one. This is certainly a plus for its readability, but the scholarly audience will be frustrated by the book's citation format, as source references are not footnoted within the body text. Instead, all sources are referenced in a "Notes" section in the appendix. This will no doubt cause a measure of frustration since the reader is never sure until checking at the back of the book if an idea is Doherty's own or taken from an outside source. More importantly, not all of the evidence appears to have a corresponding note supporting it.

At the same time, Doherty's book offers the valuable historiographic lesson that television scholars cannot lean on existing visual materials alone to formulate their assumptions about the historical legacy of the medium. One cannot separate the image on the screen from its political, cultural and economic contexts. After all, it was economic self-interest that propelled ABC to air the Army-McCarthy hearings in the 1950s—they had no other programming to offer affiliates at the time—thereby ensuring television's participation in McCarthy's destruction. It is also economic self-interest that prompts TV Land to air The Donna Reed Show rather than

America's Forum of the Air. Both shows represent a piece of television history, but only one represents it in the collective consciousness of contemporary popular culture. It is this selective memory that makes so powerful Doherty's central argument that "[d]uring the Cold War, through television, American became a more open and tolerant place." It is unfortunate that so few TV Land viewers can imagine such a place ever existed.