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Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture (review)

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Bond girls by “exploiting textual fissures and gaps that contradict the logic of masculinity or patriarchy”, while, in “James Bond’s Penis”, Toby Miller argues that the old boy, especially as represented by Sean Connery, is not just a gun-toting Lothario, but a more vulnerable prototype for the “commodified male beauty” of our own time.

It is plain, then, that all human Bondage is here, and fascinating it is, too. Unfortunately, the book as a whole is a little enslaved to fashionable theories: there is nothing biographical on Fleming the man, and how he reflected, and diverged from, his creation. This matters because this enigmatic writer shared a number of his hero’s qualities, including the fascination with fast cars, the plummy belief in Britain’s imperial mission, which had taken such a bashing after the Second World War, and the Old Etonian urge to glitter and dominate. The outlook is dandified, in fact, and some readers will miss any wider consideration of the issue, or any deeper thinking on how Bond develops the world of Richard Hannay, or even Sherlock Holmes (Moriarty versus Bond; it makes emotional sense).

These issues are touched on, admittedly, but the most thorough essay on Bond’s literary roots is, ironically, old material. As one of the opening salvos of the collection, Lindner reprints Umberto Eco’s influential “Narrative Structures in Fleming”, first published in the 1960s. Here, this seminal figure shows how Book Bond is not merely a matter of style, but of narrative structure. The original stories are modern fairy tales in which the agent is the knight, the villain the dragon, and Honeychile or Pussy Galore the reward for a job well done. As Bennett and Woollacott note in “The Moments of Bond”, the films have adapted this convention; the women, for example, have gradually taken precedence over the bad guys. Nevertheless, Eco’s analysis confirms what has always fascinated this writer, the sense that a Bond escapade is a journey through a meticulously patterned maze, with the villain, in the best films, lying at its heart, like a concealed and poisonous spider.

Lindner has compiled a good, solid book, even though it is a little repetitious in places. Because all the critics come from the political left, you end up longing for a robust conservative voice, along the lines of Kingsley Amis, to celebrate unashamedly the campy panache of 007’s allure. For the joy of swank is crucial to the series’ success; Bond beguiles us with the notion that individual style is more potent than missiles and secret hideaways. With one flick of an elegantly turned cuff, evil crumbles to dust. If only the problems of Iraq and Afghanistan were so tractable.

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Thomas Doherty. *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture.*

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305 pages; \$27.95.

Exchange of Ideas

The premise for Thomas Doherty’s thoughtful and nuanced study, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, is that there is a simple, black and white myth about television’s role in 1950’s anti-Communism. According to legend, television facilitated Senator Joseph R. McCarthy’s rise to prominence, nourished the blacklisting of writers and actors, and contributed to the abortion of free speech. Only after the 188-hour spectacle of the Army-McCarthy hearings and the senator’s losing confrontation with army counsel, Joseph N. Welch, did TV turn against the Communist-hunter.

According to Doherty, who teaches American and Film Studies at Brandeis University and has authored several books on the visual media, the actuality of 1950s television was far more complex than the myth. He makes a convincing case. To begin with, TV was not a flattering format for McCarthy. He tended to come over as harsh and sharp, when, as Marshall McLuhan noted, television, the cool medium, favored more mellow personalities. The model politician as TV performer was Dwight D. Eisenhower, whose laid-back approach fit perfectly. Before the Nixon-Kennedy debates, Ike had a successful television style.

Further, we wrongly envisage early television programming as one-dimensional. The box allowed McCarthy and his ilk to make their points, but gave a proportionate amount of time to their opponents, who used the live talk shows characteristic of the era to hit at Red-bating excesses. Before the Army-McCarthy hearings, the senator had been weakened severely by such journalists as Edward R. Murrow, who attacked McCarthy on his show, *See It Now*. McCarthy’s filmed rejoinder was inferior to Murrow’s technically and intellectually. Television was not friendly to bullies. When Reed Harris, a state department official being badgered by McCarthy responded that he resented the senator’s attempt to publicly wring his neck, the brutal image stuck in the popular mind. More successful on television were figures whose anti-Communism took a subtler form. Thus, urbane Catholic Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, on, *Life Is Worth Living* (1952-1957), made a modulated case against Communism.



Doherty's point, in short, is that early television was more multifaceted than supposed and that, rather than hurting the quality of public debate, it encouraged the exchange of ideas. It helped the burgeoning civil rights movement, partly by unmasking injustices, and by exposing to the camera lens racial stereotypes that could not stand visual scrutiny. For example, *Amos 'n' Andy*, a popular comic radio show with exaggerated black characters, folded on TV. At the same time, shows attacking Communism, such as *I Led Three Lives*, were often complex, presenting Communists as well-read, prepared to listen to their opponents, as opposed to members of the House Committee on Un-American Activities, often shown browbeating witnesses.

Doherty points out, too, that the blacklist issue was more complex than has been suggested. Insidious as the practice was in blighting careers, it was never fully effective or efficiently implemented. Some performers, who took the smears head-on, won. The most famous examples were Lucille Ball and Desi Arnez, who were too popular and powerful as media personalities to be reached by the blacklists. Liberace, too, survived and prospered in an era when anti-Communism blended easily into slurs on homosexuals (weren't they all effete intellectuals?) and an excessively low neckline might consign a female show host to oblivion as fast as having voted Red in her youth.

The ultimate conclusion to be reached is perhaps not a cheering one for the present time. The progress of television has not shown an optimistic Darwinian-style evolution from crude beginnings to a sophisticated, mature product. Rather, early TV may have nourished more worthwhile debate, perhaps because it had to rely so heavily on live shows featuring journalists and other public figures that had not yet made lifelong careers of surviving on the box, with its slavish adherence to ratings, official network stances, and sponsor demands. Is it possible that today only a show like Bill Moyers' *Now on PBS* echoes the solid intellectual fiber of the early shows?

In the end, the exposure of McCarthy's personality and message to the scrutiny of the camera and his TV critics went a long way towards destroying him. The right thing happened. But the disquieting issue we are left with is what happens when a medium so all-pervasive in its cultural power fails to ask the right questions? When, for example, TV reporters only repeat official press releases without critical analysis, does the medium still contribute to the public good or has it become simply a propaganda tool, in thrall to a specific point of view? This might be the subject for a companion study to *Cold War, Cool Medium*.

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Richard Dyer
***The Matter of Images:
Essays on Representations.***
Second edition.

Routledge, 2003.
183 pages; \$75.00.

The Invisible Visible

Back in the days when music hall was the staple diet of British entertainment, most artists had a tag line, which neatly summed up the nature of their act; there were slogans such as "He Of The Funny Ways", or "Always Applauded". If Richard Dyer ever trod the boards, he could be accurately summed up by the name of one of his previous books, *Now You See It*, a study of gay-identified, non-commercial films first published in the 1980s. For much of his writing, both there and here, has all the drama of the conjurer pulling the proverbial rabbit out of the hat. It makes the invisible visible; it drags something previously obscure into the full glare of the spotlight. Dyer does this, moreover, with such clarity and vigour that it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that he is compulsory reading for anyone interested in gay issues, in the nature and function of stardom, and in the host of knotted questions surrounding what the late Edward Said called the "Other".

The Matter of Images is a collection of essays that investigate the wide range of this otherness. A revised version of a book first published ten years ago, its new material is a logical extension of the reprinted work on gay and lesbian sexualities, and, above all, on race. This area is whiteness itself, a state so central and so apparently unquestioned that, for Dyer, it has an "everything-and-nothing quality", and therefore can be made visible only by a very particular conjuring trick. In the fresh articles on serial killers, the stardom of Lilian Gish, and the structure and images of *The Birth of a Nation*, he mutates the rabbit, turns it into something alien and strange. In his hands, whiteness is not assumed blandly to be a "dominant ideology", but is seen, rather, as a conglomeration of contradictions and anxieties, held together by little more than obstinate self-delusion and smoke and mirrors.

This is most clearly seen in the two essays featuring Gish. Here, Dyer breaks down Griffith's most famous star into her component parts: he shows how the essence of film itself, the manipulation of light, is used to create a morally exemplary saint, whose reserve, purity and wisdom are embodiments (rather spooky ones, it should be said) of the white ideal. Yet, as the *Birth of a*

