

***Cold War, cool medium
Television, McCarthyism, and American culture***

By Thomas Doherty (New York 2003)

305 pp. ISBN 0-231-12952-1

Book Review

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Thomas Patrick Doherty is a professor of American Studies at Brandeis University. He is a cultural historian of America, with a special interest in Hollywood cinema. Doherty has authored *Teenagers and Teenpics: the Juvenilization of American Movies in the 1950s* (1988), *Projections of War: Hollywood, American Culture, and World War II* (1993), and, most recently, *Hollywood's Censor: Joseph I. Breen and the Production Code Administration* (2007).

In his 2003 book *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, Doherty analyses the relationship between 'McCarthyism' and the rise of television as a new medium from the late forties until the late fifties. The main argument of the book is that television, in her collision with the dynamics of the fifties' Cold War, ultimately led to the expanding of the boundaries of freedom. This was due to television's inherent 'coolness', by which Doherty means her open and participatory nature.

In chapter one the nascence of television and its rapid rise to a common American household item in the decade after 1946 is described. In 1950, the practice of 'blacklisting', which was up until then done in a relatively unorganized 'ad hoc' manner, was transported into the broadcasting industry by the publication of *Red Channels: The report of Communist Influence in Radio and Television*. Furthermore, Doherty defines 'McCarthyism' as something bigger than the person of Joseph McCarthy. It was not McCarthy, whose role was limited to only government, but other organs that censored television and film. Hence 'McCarthyism is more "-ism" than man'.¹

In the next chapter Doherty defines and describes the 'blacklisting' as 'the practice of refusing to hire or terminating from employment an individual whose opinions or associations are deemed politically inconvenient or commercially troublesome'.² Moreover, Doherty states that due to the propagandistic use of cinema

¹ Thomas Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture*, (2003) 13.

² Idem, 19.

during the Second World War, the American public 'looked upon the screen with more sophisticated eyes' and had become able to see through the subtexts and hidden messages of motion.³ The Second World War had made the authorities aware of the subversive influence of the media as well, and in 1947 the House Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) launched hearings into alleged communist influence in the motion picture industry. When the HUAC resumed her activities in 1951, TV had already become the dominant screen medium and a series of intense hearings of TV performers ensued.

In chapter three, two case histories of blacklisting are described, one successful and one unsuccessful. Philip Loeb, a Jewish American actor who starred in the sitcom *The Goldbergs*, was blacklisted due to his left-wing Popular Front activities in the nineteen thirties. Loeb was subsequently barred from work on TV and spent several years hustling for theatre work before finally committing suicide in 1955.

In contrast to *The Goldbergs*, which was a popular show only in urban areas, *I Love Lucy* was the 'first true coast-to-coast sensation born of television'.⁴ Because of the huge commercial interests resulting from this immense popularity, the attempt to blacklist the show's star Lucille Ball did not succeed, even though Ball had indeed been active in the Communist Party. In a clever public relations campaign backed by both the studio and advertisers, Ball portrayed herself as an innocent and naive victim of Communist propaganda in the thirties and reinforced her image as the all-American housewife. This resulted in an unprecedented public exculpation by the HUAC. With these cases, Doherty strikingly demonstrates the limits to the power that the 'McCarthyists' had and the overwhelming power of commercial interests. Ball, who had a much more dubious background with regard to Communist affiliation when compared to Loeb, escaped blacklisting while Loeb, who never had any direct Communist ties, found his downfall.

Chapter four, entitled 'Hypersensitivity', describes how the dynamics of free-market and privately owned television very early on resulted in cultural censorship. Due to the advertisement-driven nature of American television, not offending any potential viewer-buyers became a matter of life and death for television networks. According to Doherty, it is consequently hard to distinguish what censorship was because of this 'dictatorship of customers' and what was due to McCarthyism.

The next two chapters elaborate on the conflicted codependent relationship between McCarthy and newsmen and the star-making power of television. The 'coolness', that is, the visual openness of television allowed for the development of 'personalities'. McCarthy's hotheadedness was contrasted when President Eisenhower

³ Idem, 21.

⁴ Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 49.

started to develop an easy-going personality, while increasingly distancing himself from McCarthy's actions. Of course, Eisenhower was also getting knowledgeable of the use of television for political benefit and thus tried to shape his demeanor on the air accordingly. That the 'coolness' of TV did not demand such an effort in order to create stars was demonstrated by Senator Estes Kefauver's unexpected rise to stardom. Kefauver was the head of the 1951 Special Committee on Organized Crime in Interstate Commerce hearings, where members of the Mafia testified about their criminal activities. The drama of the hearings and the colorful testimonies by the equally colorful mobsters penetrated through the screens into the homes of millions of Americans and turned Kefauver into a celebrity.

Chapter seven's purpose in the book's narrative, besides the description of J. Edgar Hoover's saint-like TV persona and his speaking out against McCarthyism, is not entirely clear. Doherty explains that due to methods developed in the quest for domestic Nazi spies before and during the Second World War, the FBI was well-suited for the investigation of domestic subversion during the Cold War. The chapter then continues with a topic unrelated to the FBI's place during the dawn of the Cold War. The rise of the public promotion of religion as an alternative for and antithesis to Communism is described, from Eisenhower's 'common God' enunciation and the adding of the 'under God' phrase to the Pledge of Allegiance in 1954, to the beginning of religious programming on TV.

The next chapter, 'Edward R. Murrow slays the dragon of Joseph McCarthy', on the other hand, is a striking account of a case-in-point for the book's argument. Murrow had gained fame as a radio-host and successfully crossed over to TV as the host of CBS's *See It Now*. He performed the first network TV assault on Senator McCarthy on his show's March 9, 1954 episode, dubbed 'Good Tuesday' by the trade press. Doherty points out how Murrow had carefully and strategically, yet indirectly attacked McCarthy in a handful of *See It Now* episodes before giving the final blow on the Good Tuesday episode. Exploiting the full potential of the 'cool medium' with his clever use of words and images, Murrow was able to take down the 'dragon' McCarthy. For the first time, television set the agenda and triggered a turning point in history.

The next three chapters trace the end of McCarthyism and the television blacklist. Doherty puts the Army-McCarthy hearings as a 'media milestone' as it was the first in the line of 'nationwide transmission of constitutional crisis (...) televised political spectacle (...) great scandals and power struggles of the next decades', like Watergate, Iran-Contra, the Clinton impeachment and so on.⁵ The TV broadcast of the Army-McCarthy hearings showcased the heated and bombastic McCarthy against the calm army attorney Joseph N. Welch. Here Doherty for the first time alludes to the source of

⁵ Doherty, *Cold War, Cool Medium*, 189.

the title of his book: 'A decade before Marshall McLuhan coined the terms, the Army-McCarthy hearings showed how a hot personality melted under the glare of television while a cool one never broke a sweat.'⁶

The title of the book's concluding chapter, 'Exhuming McCarthyism', is derived from the title of one of rock group REM's hit songs. Doherty sums his main argument up by pointing out that McCarthy was 'the first superstar undone by television'.⁷ The rise of the medium and the fall of McCarthy(ism) intersected at a pivotal moment. Therefore, it is 'no wonder' that the medium has preserved and enhanced the memory of McCarthyism in the form of numerous documentaries, TV movies and specials. The book ends by updating Benjamin Franklin's famous adage *litera scripta manet* into *televisio scripta manet*.

At first sight, Thomas Doherty's *Cold War, Cool Medium: Television, McCarthyism, and American Culture* is not a well-structured book. The order of the chapters are neither determined by chronology nor by theme. They are rather a medley of subjects that Doherty relates to 'McCarthyism' in order to support his argument. For some of the chapters it is not even clear whether they relate to the book's subjects at all. Examples are the aforementioned seventh chapter and the tenth chapter, which unsuccessfully attempts to connect TV's 'coolness' in the fifties regarding homosexuality, construed by Doherty on the basis of first transsexual celebrity Christine Jorgensen and openly homosexual singer Liberace, to McCarthyism. The book has, besides its definition of McCarthyism, no real theoretical framework. Even the McLuhanesque origin of the term 'cool medium' is not clarified or expanded upon besides a handful of sentences throughout the whole book that indirectly refer to McLuhan. Furthermore, Doherty's sources are limited to mainly newspaper and magazine articles of the era. The book, perhaps because of the abovementioned reasons, does not really come across as a monograph but rather an extended editorial piece. Despite these anomalies with respect to the common demands of a 'scientific' monograph, *Cold War, Cool Medium* is neither illegible nor unconvincing. Doherty's accessible writing style causes the reader to clasp the book in the hands until he has finished it. The main argument as well as other opinions and views expressed are cogent, making Doherty's book an intriguing read for those interested in the fields of both Media and Cold War studies.

⁶ Idem, 190.

⁷ Idem, 260.