

# H-Net Reviews

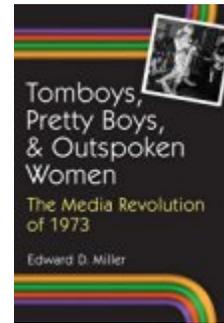
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Edward D. Miller. *Tomboys, Pretty Boys, and Outspoken Women: The Media Revolution of 1973*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2011. xii + 217 pp. \$85.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-472-11775-8; \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-472-03461-1.

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Over the past decade, historians of the 1970s have generally alternated between two foci: the upsurge in freedom of expression in society and culture or the rise of the conservative Right in response to these public proclamations of resistance in politics and economics. These contending forces struggled for power—a battle fought most visibly in the media. Edward D. Miller argues in *Tomboys, Pretty Boys, and Outspoken Women* that 1973 marked a media revolution in which the underdogs took center stage, challenging notions of normativity in regard to gender and sexuality and dismantling the mold of mainstream blockbusters by making gender and sexual identity nonfiction entertainment. Juxtaposing a variety of icons and events, Miller ultimately argues that our current obsession with reality television, melodramatic conflict, and identity politics was born in this media shift.

This postmodern analysis is one of several recent texts that helps us rethink and explore the social and cultural complexity of the so-called Me Decade. Alongside Elena Levine's *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* (2007) and Susan Douglas's *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (1995), scholars have begun to reconsider how the media became not only an indicator of change, but also a tool in which people could express and promote their own identity politics in regard to gender and sexuality. *Tomboys, Pretty Boys, and Outspoken Women* marks a small step toward exploring representations of homosexuality in the media in the 1970s—a subject in need of further examination.

Miller provides a general survey of this transformation of representation through the examination of six

subjects from 1973: John Dean and the Watergate hearings; Billie Jean King and the “Battle of the Sexes”; David Bowie as Ziggy Stardust; female DJ Alison Steele; Lance Loud’s coming out on *An American Family*; and Peter Berlin’s gay porn, *Nights in Black Leather*. According to Miller, resistance movements of the late 1960s evolved into the culture of identity politics by the early seventies, fueling public debate and, therefore, intrigue on gender and sexuality. In each of these circumstances, seemingly unadulterated expressions of non-normative gender and sexuality became their source of popularity, or in Dean’s case, public ridicule. While Miller begins, like most historical monographs on the 1970s, with the Watergate hearings as a symbol of change through the “crisis of confidence” becoming nonfiction entertainment, Bowie is by far his most thorough chapter. Like King’s performance in the “Battle of the Sexes” and Steele’s nightly radio personality, “The Nightbird,” Bowie’s stage persona Ziggy Stardust symbolized how varying audiences began to embrace the dramatization of authenticity. Robust in exhaustive details, each of these chapters reinforces Miller’s argument that lighting, camera angles, and advertising revealed and produced the theatricality of identity politics.

Despite this thought-provoking analysis, *Tomboys, Pretty Boys, and Outspoken Women* has a few major shortcomings. Through these compelling essays, Miller succeeds in demonstrating how the seventies marked a shift in the visibility and representation of homosexuals and feminists in the media, reflecting the impact of the feminist and gay rights movements on the broader national culture. However, without transitions or a conclusion, these chapters serve as completely distinct essays on spe-

cific people rather than a holistic reexamination of culture in the early 1970s. Without broader connections and analysis, these icons become special cases rather than indicative examples of an emerging media revolution.

Focusing on seven white men and women from 1973, Miller omits discussions of race despite nominally including it as part of this media revolution in identity politics. Having framed this emergence of gay men and women in the media as an empowering transition, Miller begs the question of how the media explored race as an intersection of these identities. Did the media capitalize on explorations of gender and sexuality in race-conscious entertainment during the early seventies? How were black men and women restricted from or encouraged to express their sexuality in the media? In addressing racial differences in the media's treatment of sexuality, Miller could have better identified the effects of this media revolution.

Chronologically, Miller's focus on a single year leaves him little room to discuss cause and effect. He remains silent on the roots of these important public transformations, often bashing the straight, white male hippie as an instigator of conservative reactionary political and social movements. Miller supports Andreas Killen's argument, in *1973 Nervous Breakdown: Watergate, Warhol, and the Birth of Post-sixties America* (2006), that 1973 marked the end of the hippie counterculture. However, viewing these identity-based resistance movements as an extension or wave of the New Left, as proposed by the collection of essays *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s*, edited by Peter Braunstein and Michael William Doyle (2001), reveals how people began to reshape the media to challenge oppression years before 1973. While Miller admits that the chosen year is slightly arbitrary, in arguing that 1973 was a watershed year for gay men and feminist women in expressing their non-normative sexuality, Miller also begs the question of what happened next. One can look at the media life span

of Ellen DeGeneres, for example, to see how gay rights have waned and waxed in the media over the past two decades.

Finally, historians should not expect well-cited historiography, as Miller offers minimal historical contextualization of his carefully selected subjects. While Miller alludes to Killen's *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, which explored the market-driven roots of this shift to reality-based entertainment, Miller could have also utilized Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool: Business Culture, Counterculture, and the Rise of Hip Consumerism* (1998) to help readers understand how performances of identity politics became popularized and commodified through television and film, often to the detriment of feminists and homosexuals. However, for historians grounded in the nuances of arguments by such work as Bruce Schulman's *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (2001), Killen's *1973 Nervous Breakdown*, and Edward Berkowitz's *Something Happened: A Political and Cultural Overview of the Seventies* (2006), *Tomboys, Pretty Boys, and Outspoken Women* comes as a refreshing in-depth analysis on some of the decade's most memorable characters. Using cultural and literary theory to frame cultural phenomena as textual events, Miller explores the societal and cultural transformations of the 1970s through the performance and experience of these "texts"—Miller's major in performance studies and teaching of media culture and theater and film studies at the City University of New York have equipped him well for this task. In doing so, Miller expands his audience to include gender and sexuality scholars, and media studies scholars, as well as those interested in recent American history and culture. Although the cultural victories that Miller describes might not be as clear-cut as he envisions, he successfully situates our current media—a blend of user-generated content with corporate creations—within these very public proclamations of personal politics.

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