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CINEMA JOURNAL
31, No. 4, Summer 1992

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On the Edge of Tasteslessness: CBS, the Smothers Brothers

By Steven Alan Carr

The Smothers Brothers were a popular comedy duo in the 1960s and 1970s. Their television show aired on CBS and was known for its satirical and humorous sketches.

In 1968, the Smothers Brothers were involved in a controversy with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) over their segment on the Vietnam War. The FCC accused them of violating the Fairness Doctrine, which required broadcasters to present a balanced view of controversial issues.

The Smothers Brothers defended their right to express their views and challenged the FCC's authority. This led to a legal battle that lasted several years and ultimately went to the Supreme Court.

The Smothers Brothers were eventually able to continue airing their show, but the controversy highlighted the tension between the First Amendment and the regulations imposed by the FCC.
The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour had been fraught with controversy from the start. Premiering on 5 February 1967, the show almost immediately seemed to bait CBS Standards and Practices. Tom began to complain publicly that CBS was censoring the show. A June 1967 Look piece ironically recounts one of the show's first battles: "One of the pithest pieces of satire set for the show was a sketch Tom did with Elaine May on censorship. But audiences didn't see it. It was censored." The show of seals, musical numbers, and personal appearances were all subject to censorship at the blink of the CBS eye. Luminaries ranging from Barbara Eden to Joan Baez to Pete Seeger to Dr. Benjamin Spock to Harry Belafonte were either censored in part or deleted altogether. Some were censored because of content (Eden in a sex education skit; Belafonte singing Carnaval to chromakeyed images of 1968 Chicago riots) while others were snipped where their reputation preceded them (Baez dedicating a song to her draft resister husband; Spock because his antiwar activities rendered him a "convicted felon").

During these skirmishes, CBS repeatedly asserted that the network was an invited guest into American homes, and therefore had to maintain certain standards of taste. Tom would counter that no set standards existed. The network, he argued, "deliberately harassed him" by requesting so many changes in the name of good taste.

For the popular press, the show's controversy and subsequent cancellation grew to near-cathartic proportions. Did CBS have the right to determine its own programming content? Or was Tom Smothers "the contemporary version of John Peter Zenger"? The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour became a kind of lightning rod for issues of free speech, censorship, relevancy, and taste—issues increasingly crucial for all media during the late sixties and early seventies.

The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour and its attendant controversy became what Michel Foucault calls "the intersection of discourses" in which the authors "speak, or appear to be speaking, of one and the same thing." These discourses form "a strange contest, a confrontation, a power relation, a battle among discourses and through discourses." Tom Smothers and CBS staked out the central positions within this debate, but others soon staked out theirs as well. A comedy/variety show, once part of a demure television genre, soon became the site upon which critics, editors, readers, and broadcasters all vied to be heard in a contest whose claims were taste, free speech, and centralized control.

But it was a constructed notion of taste, and especially of good taste, that became the central issue of this contest. Made to appear both natural and inflexible, taste was the benign arbiter of individual preference, or what Pierre Bourdieu calls "the practical affirmation of an inevitable difference." In order to define taste, however, CBS, broadcasters, the popular press, and a highly filtered public opinion had to articulate tastelessness. "It is no accident" writes Bourdieu, that when tastes "have to be justified, they are asserted purely negatively, by the refusal of other tastes. In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, all determination is negation; and tastes are perhaps first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance."

The stakes for such intolerance go far beyond any notion of universal propriety. As Bourdieu points out in Distinction, the systems of classification that order the venal and inviolate within elaborate, shifting hierarchies are in fact the basis for class, ethnic, and sexual struggles. These distinctions—distinctions between taste and tastelessness—reinforce the mechanisms generating difference, otherness, and privilege.

To assert one's taste ultimately is to assert one's power. "What is at stake in the struggles about the meaning of the social world," writes Bourdieu, "is power over the classificatory schemes and systems which are the basis of the representations of the groups and therefore of their mobilization and demobilization." Within the Smothers Brothers controversy, taste not only buttressed issues of control and censorship. Its counterpart, tastelessness, could define what Robert Levy called "the changing patterns of morality and the consequent vulnerability of all basic social institutions...[that] helped make The Smothers Brothers possible in the late '60s." By the same token, taste became a rallying cry against these changing patterns and vulnerabilities.

The assertion of taste had obvious political advantages. With the avowal of taste, CBS would reclaim its province as corporate arbiter of programming content. The issue of taste would allow millions of Americans to comfortably deny the realities of race and class. It would deny acknowledgment of the U.S. Government's violent political repression, both at home and abroad. And, perhaps most crucially, the issue of taste demanded that millions of Americans look toward figures like Charles Lindbergh, George Washington, or Lyndon Baines Johnson as unquestioned captains at the helm of this country's destiny.

In examining the cacophony of discourses on taste and other issues, this essay scrutinizes the Smothers Brothers debate as it took place in the popular press. The importance of the press in this debate remains crucial. First, the press functioned as a kind of conduit for various voices. Critics could criticize the show, CBS officials could state official positions, Tom and Dick could give interviews, and readers could send in their letters.

Second, the popular press established its own voice within these debates. By both publicizing and editorializing on the Smothers Brothers controversy, the press doubly staked out its position. First, by choosing to publicize the controversy, it implicitly emphasized how the actions of CBS would threaten free speech for all media. Then, by providing a forum for discussion on the issue, the popular press could underline its own role, however exaggerated, as a traditional haven from censorship.

Third, the popular press was itself caught within the shifting political and social norms that seemed to define the late sixties and early seventies. Standing alone, the Smothers Brothers controversy explained little about these shifts. That the popular press chose to tell the story of this controversy says as much about how this press perceived itself as both vanguard and protector of civil liberties,
Cinema Journal 41, No. 4, Summer 1992

The problems of censorship and the battle for control over the content of television programs have been a common theme in American television history. The early years of television were marked by a lack of regulatory control, with networks and individual stations allowing a wide range of content. However, as the industry grew and became more commercially driven, the need for regulation became more apparent. In the 1950s, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) began to impose regulations on the content of television programming. This led to the creation of the Voluntary Rating System, which allowed networks to place ratings on their programs to indicate their suitability for different age groups. This system was later replaced by the current system of ratings, which are enforced by the FCC.

Television stations were required to comply with the ratings system, and those that did not risk losing their license. This led to a significant increase in the amount of programming that was considered appropriate for all audiences. However, this approach was not without its problems. Many networks argued that the ratings system was too lenient, and that it failed to adequately protect children from harmful programming. In response, the FCC began to investigate the issue and, in 1973, the Federal Communications Commission issued a set of regulations that required networks to air programming that was specifically designed for children.

These regulations were met with mixed reactions. Some networks welcomed the opportunity to create programming for children, while others saw it as a financial burden. Ultimately, the regulations led to the creation of a variety of children's programming, including educational shows, cartoons, and educational programming. The regulations also led to the creation of a number of organizations that advocate for children's rights on television, including the National Association of Broadcasters and the Children's Television Board.

In the 1990s, the issue of television content continued to be debated. The rise of cable and satellite television in the 1980s and 1990s led to the creation of a number of new channels that aired programming that was not available on traditional broadcast television. This led to concerns about the potential for these new channels to broadcast programming that was inappropriate for children. In response, the FCC began to investigate the issue and, in 1996, the Federal Communications Commission issued a set of regulations that required cable and satellite operators to remove programming that was inappropriate for children.

These regulations were met with mixed reactions. Some operators welcomed the opportunity to remove programming that was inappropriate for children, while others saw it as a financial burden. Ultimately, the regulations led to a significant increase in the amount of programming that was considered appropriate for all audiences. However, the effectiveness of these regulations has been questioned, and the issue of television content continues to be a source of debate among policymakers and the public.
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The show, "Work in Progress," directed by John Claibone, is being performed at the New York City Opera. The show features a variety of talented actors, including Jill Clayburgh, who plays the lead role of a struggling actress.

The production is set in the early 1970s, a time when women were just beginning to gain more freedom and opportunities in the arts. The show explores themes of love,isexuality, and identity, and has received critical acclaim for its performances and direction.

In an interview with the New York Times, Claibone said, "I think it's important for audiences to see a show like this, to understand that there are people who are just like them, who are struggling and working to make ends meet." The show has been praised for its realistic portrayal of the struggles faced by women in the entertainment industry.

Overall, "Work in Progress" is a thought-provoking and engaging production that offers a glimpse into the lives of women during a transformative period in history. It is not to be missed by anyone interested in the arts or interested in the struggles faced by women in the entertainment industry.

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The show is being held at the New York City Opera, located at 115 East 74th Street. Tickets are available online or at the box office. For more information, visit the New York City Opera's website.
The image contains a page with text written in Chinese. The text appears to be a page from a publication or a book, possibly discussing topics related to cinema or film theory. However, without proper translation, the content is not comprehensible. The page number is 14, and it seems to be part of a larger text, possibly an article or a chapter. The layout includes paragraphs of text with some formatting, such as italics and bold text. The page is oriented in portrait mode, and there is no visible table or diagram on this page.
Despite the intense heat and drought the show promised to be a lively one.

Brothers showed house a week earlier.

Opposite is the shows program.

Newspaper clipping (dated: 14 Nov 1992)

On Friday, a April 9, 1992 the show on the north side of the showground was well under way as the crowds gathered to watch the events.

The show on the north side of the showground was well under way as the crowds gathered to watch the events.

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The show on the north side of the showground was well under way as the crowds gathered to watch the events.
By Tara J. Eck

The Look Back in E.T.