

Elana Levine, **Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television**, Duke University Press, 2007, 336 pages, \$22.95 (paperback).

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The measure of good criticism, one axiom offers, is that it makes you want to read, see or watch whatever the author has written about. Elana Levine's provocatively titled *Wallowing in Sex: The New Sexual Culture of 1970s American Television* is this kind of book. Many of us have already seen the "jiggle shows" of the 70s in repeat format thanks to their afterlives in syndication. Programs like *The Dating Game*, *Three's Company*, *Charlie's Angels* and *The Love Boat* continue to provide fodder for an irony-laced "Gen X" nostalgia industry that cribs the era's theme songs and fashions for its hyper-referential social logics. With *Wallowing in Sex*, Levine deepens this televisual archive by exploring the range of tawdry genres that emerged during what we might call the long 1970s (from 1968-1981)—including "smutcoms," exploitative Made-for-TV teen parables, and sexy-campy crime dramas both daytime and primetime.

As she works her way through the riveting if occasionally absurd narratives of this bawdy and lucrative programming, Levine provides gender studies and cultural studies scholars with compelling critical backstories for how shadowy urban figures like teen runaways, street pimps and rapacious lesbian inmates made their way into America's suburban living rooms. While Levine herself doesn't quite make hay of these spatial contexts in *Wallowing in Sex* (except for occasional asides about her own adolescent viewing practices in the Midwest), the book's inclusion in Lynn Spigel's series for Duke University Press, "Console-ing Passions: Television and Cultural Power," allows readers to draw their own genealogical connections within the rich field of TV studies—one that would bring Spigel's groundbreaking work on television in the postwar American suburbs into conversation with the larger historical framework of this, Levine's first monograph.

In many respects, *Wallowing in Sex* begins where Spigel's *Welcome to the Dreamhouse* leaves off by providing a discursive account of how regulatory conflicts (both legislative and industry-generated), as well as fierce competition between the "big three" broadcast networks, made strange bedfellows of exploitative capitalism and the era's emerging social movements for women's liberation and gay rights. At the heart of Levine's argument is what she calls the "individuating drive" of the '70s sexual revolution that became particularly susceptible to "market logics" in the entertainment industry and beyond. This "individuating drive" explains in part the networks' efforts to create stand-out female figures in their own small-screen star systems. The female "sex symbols" of the era, from Farrah Fawcett-Majors and others of her Angelic ilk, to brash incidental players like Charo on *The Love Boat*, could "balance the promise of women's liberation with the security of immutable sexual difference" for the era's paradoxically cautious and experimental TV executives.

The fact that many of these proto *post*-feminist sex symbols of the "women's lib" era appeared on ABC, the network that began the seventies as the Nielsen's perennial cellar dweller, gives *Wallowing in Sex* one of its historical through-lines. In Levine's study, ABC becomes both an exemplary innovator of the

era's genres (from the 90 minute made-for TV movie to its expanded, event driven two-hour format) and its most notorious market mad villain. ABC "jiggled" and jostled its way to the top of the ratings throughout the decade thanks in no small part to a key individual player in this era of network competition: Fred Silverman. In 1975, Silverman left his programming vice-presidency at CBS, the venerable "Tiffany Network," to help bring some "heat" (in Silverman's own words) to ABC as the president of its Entertainment division. ABC was the network depicted by seventies industry-watchers as an "impetuous adolescent," as the "horndog" teen to NBC's "everyman" and CBS's elder statesman, and many thought Silverman's public university, "blue-collar" *ethos* was better suited to the restless upstart.

Silverman staked ABC's reputation on programming that transposed the steamy motifs of ABC's daytime serials into prime time fare that ran the gamut from suggestive comedy, to sex-symbol driven action, to nascent "reality competition" like *Battle of the Network Stars* (broadcast biannually between 1976 and 1984). Despite what we in our media saturated, post-millennial age might consider the relative lack of competition during the 1970s when cable was still in its infancy, and "the internet" needed another 20 years to gestate, Levine makes the significant point that the rivalry between the three networks (epitomized by the televised tug-of-wars between their Dolphin-shorted stars on *Battle*) was fierce enough to radically alter how network executives would approach primetime programming from that moment on.

While Silverman's programming philosophy at ABC provides something of a frame narrative for Levine's study, she also manages to break frame to draw some crucial connections between the "classical exploitation" cinema of the 1970s and its TV counterparts. A brief section of Chapter 3, titled "To Warn and to Arouse: Made-for-TV Movies as Exploitation Pictures," offers a significant critical intervention that explores TV executives' desires to at once exploit sex, and to present an argument on behalf of the medium's desire to provide "quality fare" for discerning consumers. Such controversial TV movie events as *Born Innocent* on NBC (starring Linda Blair as a troubled teen who is ultimately gang raped by lascivious lesbians in a juvenile detention facility) challenged network execs and their PR people to create different languages of "quality" based on "social realism." They hoped that this language of quality and "social responsibility" could carve out a more dignified future for the medium, while helping to mitigate some of the criticisms generated by an increasingly active "moral majority" lashing back at the era's licentiousness. Eventually the big three networks and their self-regulatory governing bodies (namely the NAB, or National Association of Broadcasters) learned to walk a fine line between exploiting "juvie sex" for ratings, and warning parents about their youth's dangerously clumsy participation in the sexual revolution.

As Levine herself concludes, the seventies boldly demonstrates that television is a deeply contradictory medium—one capable of introducing non-normative sexual subjects into millions of homes on a nightly basis, yet prone to self-righteous fits of normative moralizing in an attempt to keep its own tenuous reputation unsullied. The true payoff of *Wallowing in Sex* comes in its brief concluding chapter, when Levine brings together the range of her archival and discursive materials to talk about what the seventies has come to mean in *our* contemporary media moment. From Augusten Burroughs' literary reminiscences about a *Donahue* episode that informed his queer sensibilities to Levine's own admission that she "re-enacted *Love Boat* departures from her basement steps," a sincere affection for the medium in that moment radiates from the book's pages. Ultimately, it is the depth of this love and the scholarly meticulousness that honors it that will seduce readers into *Wallowing in Sex*.