

1968: A Global Perspective

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'Cool' Aesthetics and Media Rhetoric: The Yippies, Richard Nixon, and Marshall McLuhan

Critical orthodoxy holds that the social revolutions of the 1960s were not televised. Television news media, as figures like Todd Gitlin argue, distorted and misrepresented the youth movement. In a similar vein, Lynn Spiegel argues that entertainment television turned away from the social problems of the age and instead fantasized bewitching wives and monstrous neighbors. This paper seeks to challenge the view that the relationship between the movement and television was primarily adversarial. Instead, I argue that the Yippies – guided by the media theories of Marshall McLuhan – desired to hijack conventional media venues in order to propagate their own political myths. This desire reflected by and large a top-down model of political leadership, which separated it from Gitlin's own Students for a Democratic Society, and reflected authoritarian and modernist impulses expressed in McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and *The Medium Is the Massage*. However, the Yippies were not the only ones who sought to control the media through a careful study and implementation of McLuhan's media theories. President Nixon's own election team studied McLuhan and crafted strategies which utilized these theories in in order to create and manage the newly created "silent majority." Thus, the antics of the Yippies and Richard Nixon's appearance on Rowan and Martin's *Laugh-In* operated under the same cultural logic. Both the Yippies and Nixon's advisors sought to produce a passive audience that nonetheless responded to their own political initiatives after being activated by "cool" rhetoric that was low on information.