

REVIEW

Free Press: Underground & Alternative Publications 1965-1975. By Jean-François Bizot. New York: Universe Publishing/Rizzoli International Publications, 2006. 255p. (paper) ISBN-10: 0-7893-1496-7; ISBN-13: 978-0-7893-1496-3. Large format, a translation of the same author's *Free Press: la Contre-Culture Vue par la Presse Underground.* Paris, Actuel/Underground Press Syndicate, 2006.

Far too few books on social movement media, of which in general there is thankfully a growing number these days, give us any sense for what they looked like. In them, logorrhea reigns. However, Bizot's quite extraordinary collection of reproductions of posters and newspaper pages from the USA, Australia, Canada, France, Ireland, Britain, the Netherlands, Germany and Italy joins the select company of those such as Broude & Garrard (1994), Viénet (1992), and Zurier (1988) (1), who have taken the trouble to conserve these visual explosions from social and cultural movements. Today the technological possibility of seeing or hearing materials from bygone periods is much greater than ever before, even though to date all storage formats are sooner or later still perishable. But both for the historian fascinated by the upsurge of social movements, and for the grassroots media activist looking for ideas, good and bad alike, these collections are a treasure trove.

This collection is nearly all pictures, in color, and with the original accompanying text. (Any logorrhea is in a handful of the originals!) Bizot identifies and succinctly comments on each one of the images (pp. 226-252), and also provides a summary chronology (p. 253) and a good index (pp.254-55). For slogans and captions in other languages, though not for whole pages, translations into English are in most cases provided on or close to the relevant page. The images – photos, text, collages, cartoons, posters, fliers – are divided up into segments of varying length, which begin with a general overview, and then focus in on political activism, feminist and gay liberation, Black power, Green politics, and finally the shift into glam and punk styles toward the end of that alternative media decade.

The predominant effect for this reviewer, already older by a few years than many of the activists at that moment, is to be re-launched into the quite ferocious energy and irreverence of that period of time. It will be interesting to know whether for readers of different generations the intensity of the times blows out so strongly from these images and texts. Maybe the intensity was less than it seemed and was, rather, a vivid contrast with the vapid consumerism and late-McCarthyite political timorousness that preceded that phase (with the very sharp exception of the earlier Civil Rights movement). Nonetheless, it was a movement that caught fire internationally, and which, as these images show, embraced a heady and conflictual brew of sexual liberation, passion for political justice, various kinds of Black Power politics, the emergence of feminism and the ecology movement, and of lesbian and gay liberation movements, experimentation with all kinds of drugs, support for often distorted images of Chinese and Cuban marxism, the re-emergence of anarchism, rock music and its children, everything that young German activists used to refer to as “the Scene.”

Not surprisingly, it's a selection (the whole production of those years, globally, would fill many warehouses). *Oz*, *Actuel*, *International Times*, *Other Scenes*, *the East Village Other*, *the Berkeley Barb*, *Rat, ink*, *Los Angeles Free Press*, *Fifth Estate*, *Seed*, *Hobo-Québec*, are among those best represented here. The selection is also from industrially advanced nations, as noted, which means that a mass of work from Brazil to India, from Senegal to South Africa, from Poland to the Philippines, is inevitably absent. We would have to hope that people would be hard at work putting together digitized archives from other places, were that not financially a pipedream right now in many countries. And had possession of media like this not

been so dangerous in so many countries, so that archiving itself would have been highly risky.

It is of course tempting to quote, though words – mine at least – can't handle the likely visual impact. One image on the back cover is titled **MEDIA BURN: *The Nation's leading mental crippler***, and shows a radio set with the words "What are YOU doing to protect yourself from:" - and a clawed hand is stretching out of the set through three discs labeled Misinformation, Half-truths and Mind Rot, and about to dig into a conventionally dressed man's head. It is as bluntly confrontational as the *Other Scenes* cover here (p.41), showing deep cleavage in a woman's buttocks, with 1968's three U.S. presidential candidates' names (Humphrey, Nixon and Wallace) exiting her anus. (These styles are to a degree reminiscent of James Gillray, the noted political cartoonist of late Georgian England.)

The late David Widgery, briefly editor of *Oz*, has a 1972 column reproduced here (pp. 206-7) in which he tersely and effectively sums up the trajectory of the underground press in Britain, one which echoes similar stories elsewhere and which it behooves us to keep in mind as we leaf through the pages of this book. He wrote in it: "The truth of the matter is not that The-Leaders-Sold-Out or that-something-greatly-beautiful[*sic*]-grew-cankered, but that the underground got smashed, good and proper by exactly those forces of which it stood in defiance. It was smashed because it could not, by 1968, be laughed at or ignored or patronised any longer." As we look with justified admiration at the sometimes brilliant color and artistic flair of these excerpts, and also take pleasure in some of their craziness, let us not omit that reality.

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References

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