

*Monday Night Mayhem: The Inside Story of ABC's Monday Night Football* (2002). Directed by Ernest R. Dickerson. Produced by Leslie Grief, Lewis Kleinberg, and Tiffany McLinn. Written by Bill Carter and Marc Gunther. Turner Network Television. 95 mins.

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Never was there a television show quite like it. Prior to the first *Monday Night Football* (*MNF*) telecast in the fall of 1970, the Big Three television networks—NBC, CBS, and ABC—had beamed only sitcoms, variety shows, and drama on prime time. But now Monday nights were different; now fans who remained unsated after a weekend of football indulgences could watch yet another game, one that was different from anything that had ever before been presented on television. The new program took the nation by storm. It soon not only outstripped the audience for NBC's and CBS's programs but also altered the Monday-night habits of millions of Americans. Restaurants closed their doors, movie attendance nosedived, hookers abandoned the streets, bowlers rescheduled their leagues, and, as husbands deployed their six packs and potato chips, wives no longer shuddered in dismay but joined in the fun.

Spectacle ruled supreme. Residents in each city hosting the *MNF* telecasts turned out en masse to see ABC's television team at work. Governors, mayors, and local businessmen threw them huge welcoming parties. At the stadium, fans often expressed more interest in the telecast than the game itself; they wondered aloud what Howard Cosell or Don Meredith had said about *that* particular play. And everyone wanted to be in on the action; female fans (frequently strippers seeking free publicity) stripped down to their bras and panties, men held up banners badgering Cosell, and celebrities (including on the face of it such unlikely pairs as Ronald Reagan and John Lennon) crowded outside the broadcast booth awaiting their turn to become part of the great national weekly holiday.

The release of *Monday Night Mayhem*, a TNT dramatic film made for television but also available on video, offers an opportunity to revisit this "happening" when it was in its salad days (in other words, from 1970 to 1984, when Cosell was still part of the show). As is familiar to those who know the literature of televised sports, the movie retells the story of how Roone Arledge, the first producer of *MNF* and head of ABC Sports, went about radically altering how television fans experienced pro football games. Arledge began with a few frequently unrecognized advantages; viewers could look forward on "blue Monday" to another respite from the oppressions of work. The games were played at night; the vast world of darkness and mystery that lurked beyond the oasis of the stadium's lights and around the homes of the viewers intensified the excitement. And while Arledge and director Chet Forte spared no expense in expanding the visual and aural coverage of the games,

their biggest innovation took place in the broadcast booth. In an age in which we expect even news shows to be governed by the requirements of entertainment, it is difficult for us today to realize what a radical departure from tradition it was when ABC decided to employ three rather than two announcers and to make Howard Cosell, Don Meredith, and Frank Gifford (the latter replaced Keith Jackson after the first season) the stars of the show rather than the men on the field.

If you are looking to *Monday Night Mayhem* for a deeper understanding of how and why the special chemistry between Cosell, Meredith, and Gifford attracted so many viewers and involved them so deeply, you will probably be disappointed. Actors Brad Beyer and Kevin Anderson utterly fail to provide convincing portraits of Meredith and Gifford; it takes a stupendous feat of imagination for one to think that the duo could become part of a team that would rivet the nation to their television sets on Monday nights. Neither does John Turturro sound or look much like Cosell. But, to Turturro's credit, he delivers his lines with an exaggerated intonation and an overly dramatic cadence that gives us some sense of how Cosell was able, by virtue of the sheer force of his will and personality, to make sports seem more important than they actually were. Neither does *Monday Night Mayhem* provide much insight into Roone Arledge; he remains in the movie as mysterious and enigmatic as he was in real life.

If, on the other hand, you are able to put behind you hopes that *Monday Night Mayhem* will recapture the special chemistry that made *MNF* such a remarkable cultural phenomena, the movie can be enjoyed for its dramatization of the behind-the-scenes conflicts. Here, Turturro is at his best in his sympathetic portrayal of Cosell's massive insecurities. According to the film version, one based on a book by Marc Gunther and Bill Carter, Cosell always thought of himself and was in fact something of an outsider.<sup>1</sup> Despite unending conflicts with his colleagues, which were brought on for the most part by himself, he unsuccessfully sought full membership into the Meredith-Gifford jock world. Even sadder was Cosell's anguished dependence on, and need for, continuous transfusions of approval from Roone Arledge.

But, as interesting as it is, none of this helps us much in understanding the larger significance of early *MNF*. What is now, I think, increasingly clear is the remarkable degree to which *MNF* embodied the major cultural developments of its time. Consider the year 1970. It was in the midst of the great cultural tumult that we frequently label the "sixties." Until *MNF* none of the cultural paroxysms of the day—the "rights revolution," the counterculture, nor the antiwar movement—had found their way into network football telecasts. But, well before the arrival of *MNF*, as historian David Zang has recently shown, a widespread critique of organized sports had gotten underway.<sup>2</sup> "What has happened to the intrinsic fun in sports?" asked the critics. Others challenged a central tenet of sports ideologues, namely the idea that sports build character. Within the range of a few years a rash of books by professional athletes and others raised these and similar issues. NBA superstar Bill Russell examined racism in the NBA (1966); Dave Meggyesey, former All-Pro lineman, denounced militarism, brutality, and inhumanity in the NFL (1970); Jim Bouton revealed the human frailties of his "heroic" New York Yankee teammates (1970); Harry Edwards published *The Revolt of the Black Athlete* (1969); and in 1971 Jack Scott summed up these varied expressions of discontent in *The Athletic Revolution*.

*MNF* brought the "athletic revolution" to the attention of the entire nation. Well before the inaugural telecast of *MNF*, Howard Cosell had already championed "the revolt of the black athlete." In particular, he had defended Muhammad Ali's conversion to Islam, his assumption of a Muslim name, and his refusal to be inducted into the Army during the Vietnam War. On the Monday night telecasts, he continued not only to expound the cause of African-American athletes but to blast the entire structure of organized sports, including the reserve clause in player contracts and baseball's exemption from the antitrust laws.

Cosell and Meredith brought more than this to the television booth. In statements and gestures that doubtlessly resonated powerfully with the youth of the day, Cosell, who in some respects seemed a most unlikely heir of the fifties' beats and sixties' counterculture, openly flaunted authority figures; he took a special delight in lambasting the "pooh bahs" of sports, the NFL owners. Athletic coaches, who perhaps more than anyone else in American life embodied unbridled authority, order, and hierarchy, also received their due from Cosell. Furthermore, Cosell linked himself directly to the sixties' counterculture when, in the midst of a *MNF* game, he somberly announced the assassination of Beatle John Lennon. In a moving tribute to Lennon, Cosell intoned: "An unspeakable tragedy, it is not too much to say this [Lennon] was a creative genius for our time."

While far less confrontational than Cosell, Don Meredith brought a new permissive, irrepressible, hedonistic style to the sportscast. According to the TNT movie, when Arledge was trying to persuade Meredith to join the *MNF* crew, he asked him what he wanted. Meredith responded: "I want to have fun. That's the reason I quit football. It wasn't fun anymore." In the athletic world, Meredith, next to Joe Namath (who was repeatedly praised by both Cosell and Meredith on *MNF*) did his "own thing." He brought a fun-loving but gentle irreverence to the game. During one telecast, Meredith asserted that the crew was not only in mile-high Denver but "so am I," presumably from smoking pot.

What is perhaps less clear is how *MNF* was part of a much larger process, one that entailed a late twentieth-century merger of the counterculture with the world of consumer capitalism.<sup>3</sup> The cooption of counter cultural values and styles by corporations helps to explain how Cosell got away with simultaneously promoting, reporting, and criticizing an event packaged and merchandised by his own network. Rebel cultures could not only be employed to attract additional viewers, they could be drawn upon to sell products. In the movie, Henry Ford, Jr., a major advertiser with ABC, at first threatens to cancel his sponsorship of *MNF*, but, when he sees their soaring audience ratings and is apparently drawn to the show himself, despite its implicit criticisms of corporate America, he becomes an enthusiastic backer of the program. In *MNF* we see the beginnings of the new aesthetic of a consumer society, one that rests on a quest for frenzied ecstasies, the employment of irony, an adversarial stance toward authority, and being different. Corporate America was no longer the oppressor as it had allegedly been in the suburbs of the 1950s and 1960s but a sponsor of fun (witness *MNF*); consumption was no longer about conformity but about being different (witness again *MNF*).

Soon the rebel athlete became a staple of the national culture. In the 1970s Charley Finley, owner of the Oakland Athletics World Series championship baseball team, ordered his athletes to sprout mustaches and long hair, and Al Davis, the owner of the Oakland Raiders, encouraged the cultivation of an outlaw image by his football team. Andre Agassi,

a tennis player who failed to live up to his promise until late in his career, became an advertiser's dream. Ad agencies tied Agassi's rebel persona—his earrings, flowing hair (when younger), and bizarre clothing, when combined with his boyish charm—to immediate gratification, youthfulness, uninhibited instinct, playfulness, and liberation of the libido, all of which were conducive to consumption. By the 1990s even Muhammad Ali no longer seemed dangerous to corporate America. Ultimately, then, as *Monday Night Mayhem* helps us to understand, the sports world, the counterculture, and consumer capitalism became inseparable.



<sup>1</sup>Marc Gunther and Bill Carter, *Monday Night Mayhem: The Inside Story of ABC's Monday Night Football* (New York: Beech Tree Books, William Morrow, 1988). For further reading, see Howard Cosell, *Cosell* (New York: Pocket Books, 1974) and *I Never Played the Game* (Boston: G.K. Hall, 1986), as well as Bert Randolph Sugar, *"The Thrill of Victory": The Inside Story of ABC Sports* (New York: Hawthorne, 1978). Two books, both dated, which treat the early history of televised sports are Ron Powers, *Supertube: The Rise of Television Sports* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1984) and Benjamin G. Rader, *In Its Own Image: How Television Has Transformed Sports* (New York: Free Press, 1984).

<sup>2</sup>David W. Zang, *Sports Wars: Athletics in the Age of Aquarius* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2001).

<sup>3</sup>For more on this merger or marriage, see Benjamin G. Rader, *American Ways: A Brief History of American Cultures* (Fort Worth, Tex.: Harcourt College Publishers, 2001); Thomas Frank and Matt Weiland, eds., *Commodify Your Dissent: The Business of Culture in the New Gilded Age* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co, 1997); and David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000).