

David W Fletcher, Fall 2002

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LYNN SPIGEL'S *MAKE ROOM FOR TV:
TELEVISION AND THE FAMILY IDEA IN POSTWAR AMERICA*¹

Carlo Ginzburg notwithstanding, the “seemingly inconsequential trace” in cultural studies may be just that, trivial and unimportant, and consequently, a falsification of reality. Spigel, no doubt, speaks correctly when she affirms that “the reconstruction of viewing experiences . . . is an elusive project . . . we will never be able to present a complete historical account of subjective experiences like watching television” (187). Perhaps the more important question is: Who really cares?

On a less cynical note, Spigel's work tries to project reality onto an artificial, make-believe world—the world of television, its originators, and its corporate sponsors. Spigel indeed objects to this monolithic caricature, as she states, “This book thus takes issue with the widespread assumption that television's rise as a cultural form was brought about solely by big business and its promotional campaign” (7). But her reply—“instead, this fascination was rooted in modern American culture and its long-standing obsession with communication technologies”—is no more than begging the question. Who else but TV's creators and its sponsors are responsible? Nowadays, the old question may be apropos: What influences what, television of American society? Such questions, though, imply a cumulative impact, not the immediate effect in the 1950s, and would be shaky ground on which to write a work that boldly

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claims to interpret gender roles, middle-class ideology, and modern technology of the post-WWII era.

Spigel further claims that she writes a “cultural history of American television” (1), but to do so she limits her study to a narrow choice of “popular sources.” There are many other “popular sources” that she omits. The “window” of her purview of post-WWII American culture consequently is very narrow. Spigel would have done better, in the reviewer’s opinion, to title her book: “Family TV Takes a Look at Itself, With Help from a Few of Its Friends, i.e., A Few Women’s Magazines.”