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

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

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.”
TV and Postwar Gender/Family Norms. Family sitcoms are the most popular TV program. Women: consumers, wives, mothers. Men: providers, husbands, buffoons. Children: obedient, impressionable. Whose Community was on TV? American families had 3.2 children on average (1946-1964). Scientific Motherhood: EXPERTS know best - birth and parenting guided by principles of scientific management. Philip Wylie - Generation of Vipers (1942) - warned against smothering children; would lead to weak boys and "momism." You are in control, not the child. Revolt Against Scientific Motherhood. Dr. Benjamin Spock - Pocket Book of Baby & Child Care (1946). In America in the postwar period, popular television certainly reinforced the idea - and ideal - of the American, nuclear family. Television reinforced these ideas by regularly - often in situation comedy shoes - by presenting American families as consisting of a mother, father, and at least three children, in turn celebrating and inventing, in a sense, the "ideal" of the American family. The family, then, was presented as being a workable and healthy social unit that served to promote American values such as prosperity, strict gender norms, and the acceptance of American superiority. The concept of television was the work of many individuals in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, with its roots initially starting from back even in the 18th century. The first practical transmissions of moving images over a radio system used mechanical rotating perforated disks to scan a scene into a time-varying signal that could be reconstructed at a receiver back into an approximation of the original image. Development of television was interrupted by the Second World War. After the end of But afterward, television and the new, post-war vision of America contributed to the creation of the world in which we live today. In April of 1942 (when about 5,000 television sets were in operation), production of new televisions, radios and other civilian broadcasting equipment was suspended until August of 1945. But by 1947, there were about 44,000 TVs, and that number swelled to 940,000 in 1949 and 20 million in 1953. Regular broadcasts on the first network, DuMont, began in 1946, and the major networks -- NBC, CBS and ABC -- were all up and running by 1948 [source: Douglas]. Spigel, Lynn. "Make Room For TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America." University of Chicago Press. 1992. TV History. "Television History -- The First 75 Years."