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Television, gender and space: an overview of Lynn Spigel

Sharon Sharp

Lynn Spigel, the Frances E. Willard Professor of Screen Cultures at the School of Communications at Northwestern University, is a feminist media scholar who works on television and cultural history. Over the past two decades, she has produced a body of work that has been highly influential in the fields of television studies and cultural studies, and she has long-standing interests in sf and discourses about television in relation to public and private space, gender and technology. Spigel was a co-editor of the feminist media journal *Camera Obscura* for ten years and is one of the founders of the Console-ing Passions conference, a biannual international conference on feminism, television, audio and video. She is the editor of the Console-ing Passions book series for Duke University Press.

Spigel is primarily concerned with feminist approaches to television in relation to place and urban, suburban, domestic and outer space, particularly in the postwar period. In order to provide an understanding of the cultural and historical contexts of media culture, Spigel primarily uses an interpretive method based on archival research. Indeed, her work has largely been concerned with uncovering details about the cultural contexts of television that have often challenged our thinking about the history of the medium. Much like television studies itself, Spigel's work is interdisciplinary, drawing on feminism, art history, architecture and design, geography, urban planning, cultural theory and sf studies, which has allowed her to ask questions that she might not have asked within the confines of her own field (Spigel, 'Theorizing the Bachelorette' 1211). Television studies, like sf studies, shares a history of marginalisation within the academy, and Spigel was one of the first scholars critically to examine television in relation to other 'low' or 'debased' forms of culture, such as women's magazines, dismissed by cultural hierarchies within the academy and popular criticism as undeserving of serious attention. Spigel has published three major works – *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (1992), *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media and Postwar Suburbs* (2001) and *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* (2008) – that have expanded our understanding of television history. In addition, she has

co-edited several influential anthologies: *Close Encounters: Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction* (1991), *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer* (1992), *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict* (1997), *Feminist Television Criticism: A Reader* (1997) and *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition* (2004) – that have mapped key developments in the field.

Spigel emerged as a key figure in the early 1990s with *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*, a cultural history of American television that focuses on discourses surrounding television's installation in the domestic sphere following World War II. At the time the book was published, the focus of television studies was largely confined to understanding the medium in terms of industry regulation and technology. In contrast, Spigel offered a social and cultural historical study that examined what was said about television in postwar America. In order to account for how television was understood as a new technology entering the home, Spigel used popular sources such as magazines, advertisements, newspapers, television shows and films that revealed 'a general set of rules that were formed for thinking about TV in its early period' (9). Importantly, Spigel examined sources such as *Better Homes and Garden*, *Ladies Home Journal* and *House Beautiful* that addressed women and domestic issues that had been previously ignored in histories of the medium. This technique reinserted women into the history of television in terms of their 'subjective experiences and the way those experiences might, in turn, have affected industry output and policies' (5). Throughout the book, Spigel traces the connections between television viewing and constructions of gender and family life, and the often contradictory responses to television in popular media.

In *Make Room for TV*, Spigel draws our attention to how television's growth in the 1950s was connected to the mass construction of the suburbs. As she explains, the postwar housing shortage upon which the first migration to suburbia took place created the compartmentalised, homogeneous suburban spaces designed for white nuclear families as the government created incentives for builders and sanctioned redlining practices that created white zones where property values would remain high. Spigel argues that these two spaces are more than coincident with each other. Rather, television was conceived as a major appliance designed for the new space of the suburbs and television can be seen as creating its own parallel universe to suburbia. It was represented in both utopian and dystopian terms in popular media during a period in which many people were moving into the ready-made, suburban communities and leaving their friends and families behind. As Spigel demonstrates, discourses about television in popular media

represented television as a site of ideological tension between the ideas of family unity and division. While television was popularly represented as promoting family togetherness through the family-circle motif, unifying the family around the television instead of the hearth, it was also represented as posing problems for the middle-class ideals of the period, eliciting bad behaviour in children, undermining patriarchal authority and underscoring the sexual and social division of space within the home. Moreover, Spigel examines how television was framed in magazines, advertisements and television shows in terms of the sexual division of labour and leisure in the postwar home as veterans were reintegrated into the domestic sphere and women were often contained in the home. Spigel explains how daytime television programming was developed around the industry's understanding of women as ideal viewers and tailored around activities of domestic labour (75–86). In contrast, popular media often explored the problems television posed to women, representing the negative effects of television on domestic labour, but also the new forms of labour that television would require and the ways in which the division of labour would isolate women from their families, who could enjoy the pleasures of television while women were confined to the kitchen performing domestic chores (87–98).

Spigel reveals some of the 'central tensions' about television at a time when 'spectator amusements were being transported from the public to the private sphere' (187). Television was often represented in utopian terms as a technology that could collapse space. Popular media figured television as a 'window on the world' or a 'home theater' that could allow viewers to experience culture and the world without leaving the comfort of their homes. Spigel demonstrates how this 'technological utopia' synched with a 'housing utopia' of suburban design that joined indoor and outdoor space (103). Television became a 'rhetorical figure' in the contradiction between the focus on domestic bliss in the private sphere and new forms of participation in the suburban public sphere. The space-binding properties of television were conceived to allow viewers to experience the public sphere in private as a kind of 'antiseptic electrical space' in which they could 'travel from their homes while remaining untouched by the actual social contexts to which they imaginatively ventured' (111). In other words, Spigel traces how the home as theatre took over the functions of sociability, a phenomenon that recurs throughout century and which Spigel continues to explore in her later work.

As *Make Room for TV* demonstrates, early television programming capitalised on these properties as well. Spigel shows how early television programme forms, such as dramatic anthologies and variety shows, played up the associations of watching live theatre in one's home. Later, the qualities of liveness and spontaneity were combined in the domestic family sitcom, which would

become a television programming staple, in order to soothe social transitions of families moving to the suburbs as well as fit the institutional needs of finding an inexpensive, non-controversial telefilm replacement for the expensive, live variety shows and dramatic anthologies originating from New York. In addition, Spigel examines the dystopian underside to such space-binding principles: television was also understood in terms of metaphors of pollution and contamination (113–15). While television's space-binding technology could serve as a window on the world, television was also figured as a form of surveillance, providing a window into the home where residents could be watched. Moreover, the space-binding properties of television had gendered connotations in the division of public and private spheres for women, Spigel demonstrates, as women were often faced with more confinement in the private sphere since television could substitute for public participation.

Spigel's interest in media culture in relation to postwar ideals of home and family continue in *Welcome to the Dreamhouse: Popular Media in Postwar Suburbs*, a collection of essays written over ten years. They explore 'postwar media and visual culture in the context of the period's reigning ideals about home and family life' and how divisions between public and private spheres 'helped shape the visual forms, storytelling practices and reception contexts of postwar media and consumer culture' (3). The chapter 'Portable TV: Studies in Domestic Space Travel' is a follow-up to *Make Room for TV* that examines the discourse surrounding the portable television set in relation to changing cultural ideals about family and gender and explores the cultural fascination with mobility in relation to communications technologies. Like *Make Room for TV*, Spigel's work on portable television is based on archival research. Here, she examined every issue of *Life*, *Ladies' Home Journal*, *Good Housekeeping*, *House Beautiful* and *Better Homes and Gardens* from 1956 to 1970 in order to trace the transformation of family ideals of the 1950s examined in her previous work and how those shifts 'bear important relations to changes in the way TV was marketed, represented, and conceptualized in American culture' (18). Spigel demonstrates that while early ads for television sets used the family-circle motif that figured the family at home, the new portable sets envisioned the family leaving home or watching television alone. She contends that such shifts away from the home theatre metaphor began to make way for the new metaphor of the 'mobile home' (65). It was in the context of the New Frontier ideas of the 1960s, in which 'Americans were obsessed with the possibility of satellite technologies and outer-space travel' and progress, that the portable television and its imagery of mobility were introduced (65). Moreover, the advertisements for portable television reconfigure Raymond Williams' idea of 'mobile privatization', in which telecommunica-

tions technologies provide the fantasy of being in public when isolated in the private home. Instead, advertisements for portable television inverted the terms into 'privatized mobility' as they promised consumers that portable televisions and remote control would extend private, interior space into public, exterior spaces (71). The shift in the representation of television also drew on changing ideas about gender, utilising imagery of liberation in response to the sexual revolution and the women's movement.

Three of the remaining chapters are of special interest to sf studies. The first, 'From Domestic Space to Outer Space: The 1960s Fantastic Family Sitcom', explores how shows such as *Bewitched* (US 1964–1972), *The Munsters* (US 1964–1966), *The Addams Family* (US 1964–1966), *My Favorite Martian* (US 1963–1966), *I Dream of Jeannie* (US 1965–1970), *My Living Doll* (US 1964–1965), *The Jetsons* (US 1962–1988) and *Lost in Space* (US 1965–1968) emerged in the 1960s in relation to the cultural shifts of the postwar period. The fantastic family sitcom was a hybrid genre that 'mixed the conventions of the suburban sitcom past with the space age imagery of President Kennedy's New Frontier' (108). Spigel demonstrates how the disillusionments that began in the 1950s over the limits of the utopian dreams of domestic bliss and consumer prosperity coupled with Kennedy's New Frontier rhetoric helped to shape this genre. Increasing consumer debt, the stock-market plunge, Sputnik and the growing critiques of the suburbs and women's containment in the home formed the social context that gave rise to this new programming form (109–12). These disillusionments, Spigel argues, 'provided the impetus for a new utopian future – one based on the rhetoric of Kennedy's New Frontier and fortified with the discourse of science and technology' (112). Moreover, the television industry turned to the 'progressive spirit of the New Frontier and its focus on space-age imagery' in both documentary and fictional forms after suffering a public-relations crisis over the quiz-show scandals and a public drubbing by FCC chairman Newton Minow, who referred to television as a 'vast wasteland' (115–16).

Spigel shows how the fantastic family sitcom parodied the narrative conventions of the suburban sitcom and provided a kind of 'supernatural discourse' on the family as they 'took up the challenge of the New Frontier' and the widespread critique of suburbia (117). The fantastic family sitcom forwarded a critique of the American family and provided a 'cultural space in which anxieties about everyday life could be addressed' by borrowing the sf tropes of 'displacements and distortions' (117). These series kept the conventions of the suburban domestic sitcom, but used some of the elements of sf to make the familial and suburban strange (122). Spigel argues that these sitcoms 'expressed tensions about the classist, racist, and sexist premises of suburban life by revolving around fantastic

situations that referred, in hyperbolic ways, to everyday practices of middle class life' (123). For example, the 'Other', or aliens among us, became 'a central narrative motif' in these shows (123). Often female, these aliens drew upon the 'woman-as-alien motif' from sf literature and film, and functioned to dramatise the situation of women trading in their potential to become happy homemakers (128). While the structure of the sitcom often diffused the conflicts through humour, Spigel argues, the fantastic family sitcom invited viewers to question the naturalness of gender roles, consumerism and suburban everyday life.

A companion essay, 'Outer Space and Inner Cities: African American Responses to NASA', looks at the racial politics of the space race by examining responses to it in the black press and the space-race public-relations files of NASA and President Kennedy. It demonstrates 'how the racism of space science went hand in hand with the racism of housing, community planning, and transportation back on Earth. The various forms of racism should be seen as integral to the ways in which whites maintained and reproduced their cultural hegemony in the decades following World War II' (145). Spigel explores how whites controlled not just physical space through discriminatory FHA policies, zoning laws, urban renewal and the like but also how they dominated the imaginary spaces of the universe via the representation of the space race through the lens of the white, nuclear family. Here, Spigel uncovers details about the cultural context of television that alter common perceptions about the space race. While television and popular magazine coverage often focused on white astronauts through the representation of the white couple or suburban nuclear family, Spigel examines how NASA became the focus of criticism in the black press, who regarded it as a waste of money that should be spent on social problems on Earth. Highlighting how magazines such as *Ebony* and urban newspapers such as the *Chicago Defender*, *The Los Angeles Sentinel* and *The Amsterdam News* connected the space race to issues of travel across social space for African Americans, Spigel shows how African American responses to space travel were connected to the spatialised racism experienced at home. Although the response to space travel was not monolithic in either the dominant media or in the black press, Spigel demonstrates that the space race was largely represented as 'the final frontier for suburban family lifestyles' in mainstream magazines like *Life* and *Look*, while the black press 'exposed space science and suburbia as connected forms of institutionalized racism' (155). Moreover, Spigel shows how in addition to the critique of the space race, space travel was featured in more progressive terms in Afrofuturist work of figures such as Sun Ra, George Clinton, Octavia Butler and Samuel Delany, who used space travel as 'a source of inspiration from which to imagine a better life' (168).

Space and suburbia are also explored in the chapter 'Yesterday's Future, Tomorrow's Home'. Here, Spigel examines the idea of 'yesterday's future', or the idea of 'nostalgia, not for yesterday per se but, more specifically, for yesterday's future', in relation to architecture and popular media (382). Spigel argues that 'yesterday's future' is nostalgic for the 'future first imagined most prolifically in the 1920s and 1930s, and then expanded on and revised in the newly emerging electronic culture of cold war America' and is embodied in the 'home of tomorrow' (382). Examining discourses surrounding various homes of tomorrow from the modernist homes of the 1920s to the high-tech homes of 1990s, Spigel argues that the home of tomorrow serves as a lens through which we can 'understand our relationship to private and public spheres in a media saturated, technologically driven world' (385). The home of tomorrow, then, 'functions most typically as a deeply conservative structure that promises a version of technological progress based on nostalgic longings for privacy, property, and propriety' (385). Spigel demonstrates how homes of tomorrow combine futuristic ideals of 'liberation and escape' with 'nostalgic appeals to domestic comfort and stability' (388), and therefore promote a 'future without change' (391).

In addition, Spigel connects this idea of a future without change to Hollywood films such as *The Truman Show* (Weir US 1998), *Pleasantville* (Ross US 1998) and *The Matrix* (Wachowski brothers US/Australia 1999) that combine sf narratives, futurism and nostalgia and 'revolve around issues of electronic media culture and its relationship to our contemporary sense of home, family, and social space' (391). In a set of reversals that reframe the gender and race relations in postwar suburbia, *The Truman Show* and *Pleasantville* feature 'male liberation narratives' in which white men are figured as 'victims of suburbs, women and media culture' who simultaneously rescue us from 'the racist past' (397). On the other hand, Spigel reads *The Matrix* as a similar 'male liberator' story that positions white men as saviours of the future through the character of Neo (Keanu Reeves), who usurps power from women and people of colour. Spigel provides a critique of all three films in terms of the way in which they figure white men as victims of sexism and racism, rewriting the history of gender and race relations and ensuring that white men will be 'the central subjects of history, and that the basic paradigms of postwar patriarchy will be maintained no matter what else may happen' (401).

In her recent work, Spigel connects the science-fictional home of tomorrow to the smart home, a sentient space that anticipates the needs of inhabitants before they are aware of them. In 'Designing the Smart House: Posthuman Domesticity and Conspicuous Production' (2005), Spigel defines the smart house as 'a networked house where appliances interact with each other, adapt to

dwellers and allow residents, via the internet, to communicate with the outside world and to speak to the home while away at work or travel' (405). According to Spigel, the smart house is a result of corporate collaborations between consumer electronics manufacturers, architects, interior designers, engineers, computer scientists and the telecommunications and housing industries that are 'in the business of promoting new forms of social interaction among people and their things' (405). Spigel calls this form of social interaction 'posthuman domesticity ... a mode of domestic subjectivity based on the melding of silicon and flesh' (405). As in her previous work, Spigel is particularly interested in how the ideas circulating around the smart home intersect with cultural ideals about gender and domesticity and how the rhetoric surrounding these homes transforms notions of labour and leisure.

Spigel demonstrates how the smart home, which draws on ideas from the long tradition of speculative fiction such as Edward Bellamy's *Looking Backward, 2000-1887* (1888), foregrounds new technologies but is simultaneously nostalgic for Victorian notions of comfort and safety in a post-9/11 world. In this way these homes evoke 'yesterday's future', which Spigel previously identified in relation to the home of tomorrow and popular sf films of the 1990s. Yet unlike the homes of tomorrow, which featured a divide between the space of consumption in the suburban home and the space of production in the city, the smart home combines these spaces and reconfigures the relationship between labour and leisure. Examining how speculative smart-home designs feature media technologies that connect residents to spaces of commerce and consumption, Spigel argues that they reconfigure Raymond Williams' idea of 'mobile privatization'. Similar to the rhetoric surrounding portable technologies which invert these terms, speculative designs for smart homes promise to 'disintegrate boundaries of home, office, shop, factory, nature, restaurant, school and community' through 'active corporeal involvement' (414). Therefore smart homes are figured in marketing campaigns along the lines of the home-office model in which the home is imagined as an office connected to a global network. The completely contained home in the smart-house fantasy, Spigel suggests, does everything in private that used to be public.

Spigel draws on Thorstein Veblen's (1899) concept of bourgeois 'conspicuous consumption' to coin the term 'conspicuous production' in order to describe the conflation of labour and leisure and the new dynamic of public and private in which people want to look like they are working all the time, always plugged into a state of energised productivity (415). Spigel demonstrates that the fantasy of the smart home, which like the postwar homes of tomorrow 'promises women a technological utopia', has gendered implications, suggesting that con-

spicuous reproduction is the corollary to conspicuous production (418). Advertisements for smart homes often offer a nostalgic vision of women in caretaking roles in ‘an idealized view of multi-tasking that encourages women to juggle jobs’ (419). As a trope often imagined in sf, Spigel’s account of the rhetoric of the smart home is useful in that it demonstrates how the smart home is ‘really a kind of laboratory for figuring out the future in the context of present-day transitions – including not simply technological changes, but also changes in the sexual division of labor, new forms of global commerce, new household configurations and new consumer demographics’ (421).

Spigel’s most recent work continues to explore television within specific cultural contexts and transform accepted histories of the medium, offering an account of television’s relation to art in America between the 1940s and 1970s. In *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television*, Spigel draws our attention to television aesthetics. In particular, she examines the relationship between television and modern art during this period, a subject that has been largely ignored in histories of the medium since most historians focus on the connection between television and the performing arts (6). Through a series of case studies based on extensive archival research, Spigel ‘explores social networks and labor relations among painters, graphic designers, architects, educators, museum curators, TV producers, network executives, broadcasters and advertisers’ (8). She examines the conflicts over aesthetics and taste within those networks and ‘how television aesthetics developed in relation to various postwar movements in the arts, from abstract expressionism to popism to art cinema to video art to mid-century modern architecture’ (8). Moreover, by examining the ‘historical dialogues about television’, Spigel demonstrates that audiences did not simply absorb the television fare doled out to them but began to form ‘taste publics’ and expressed their ‘discerning palates by the types of programs and performers they chose to watch’ (15). Throughout the book, Spigel shows how some television programmes and commercials appealed to a ‘class’ rather than ‘mass audience’ through modern art.

Spigel demonstrates the importance of television in the convergence of popular entertainment and modern painting, architecture and design by examining television programming that featured modern-art-inspired characters and storylines in specific episodes. In addition, she considers displays of ‘vaudeo modernism’, or the incorporation of modernist art and design into live television variety shows (dubbed vaudeo by *Daily Variety* as they incorporated aspects of vaudeville theatre) in set designs and comedy sketches (44). The convergence of art and television is considered outside of network television as well, as Spigel examines the collaboration between museums of modern

art and commercial television, taking MoMA's interest in using television to promote art education as a case study.

Spigel also considers how CBS and other networks utilised modern graphic-art design in creating a corporate image, arguing that 'the rise of television as both a business and cultural form can't be understood simply through the standard accounts of sales statistics, network-affiliate contracts, ratings, program planning, business deals, and policy decisions. Instead, the rise of the TV industry must also be considered – as it was by the business culture of the time – from the point of view of visual design' (70–1). She demonstrates that the ways in which CBS art director William Golden and the artists he commissioned used modern graphic-design to create prestige for the 'Tiffany' network, showing that television was a 'medium through which design, fine art, commerce and popular entertainment all converged' (106). In addition, Spigel considers how CBS's 'Television City' in Los Angeles used modern architecture to differentiate the CBS brand. The modern design provided not only state-of-the-art production facilities that would produce prestige programming but added prestige to the Tiffany status of the network through the modern design itself.

In addition to how the networks mobilised modern art for their corporate image, *TV by Design* also considers the conflicts around taste, aesthetics and the commercial logics of television experienced by practitioners within the industry in their creative endeavours. The television careers of comedian Ernie Kovacs and pop artist Andy Warhol are singled out as case studies. In Spigel's examination of Kovacs's creative experiments with sound in the context of complaints about television's 'noise', she demonstrates how such experiments were not limited to avant-garde film, video art or music video but were part of mainstream television since the 1950s (180). Moreover, she shows how Kovacs inspired the kind of interactive audience often associated with the practices of contemporary fandom, challenging the understanding of early television viewers as passively consuming anything the new medium had to offer (202). Spigel examines Andy Warhol's lifelong engagement with television as a producer, consumer and viewer to demonstrate how he used television 'in ways that intervened in and at times reordered television's routine modes of representation' (254). She reveals not only how his pop-art style was incorporated into television shows like *Batman* (US 1966–1968) but more importantly how his television-related commercial illustrations, 'Underground Sundae' commercials, television interviews, *Factory Diaries* and cable makeover and interview shows 'used popular broadcast genres as a means of publicizing the everyday lives of people that network TV presented only as subjects of prurient display' (283).

Moreover, while 1960s television is still often considered a ‘vast wasteland’, and commercials in similar terms, in *TV by Design* Spigel examines the advent of the art-house cinema commercial within the context of the cinephilia that such cinemas and the television programming of foreign and industry films fostered. She shows how commercials were one of the spaces of television where avant-garde art flourished as television commercials began using formal techniques to appeal to increasingly educated, media-literate consumers who looked down on 1950s-style commercials. As in her previous work, Spigel examines how televisual forms were directed at female consumers, considering how the art-cinema commercial blended cutting-edge cinematic forms and ‘themes of liberation, mobility, and female pleasure (outside the home)’ (236) with mod fashion and graphics (238) to appeal to women who increasingly distanced themselves from the housewife role.

With an emphasis on often-overlooked aspects of television and its makers and publics, *TV by Design* overturns the distinctions between the spaces of art and television, showing the multiple convergences between ‘ordinary everyday entertainment forms and the more rarified experiences of looking at art’ (297). In this way, it illustrates the importance of Spigel’s work as a whole that, through turning to the archives, directs our attention to the neglected areas of television and everyday life and uncovers details about the cultural and historical contexts of television, particularly in relation to gender. Thus, Spigel’s work enriches our understanding of television in relation to the postwar past as well as in terms of its shifting contemporary forms and practices.

Spigel’s work is useful for the study of sf in terms of providing productive approaches for gender analysis. While recent feminist work has highlighted how print sf has been made by women for women (Yaszek, Attebery), sf has often been misconceived as a masculine genre in some popular and scholarly circles. Spigel’s work helps us to see sf television as similarly complex in its engagement with gender and domesticity. Uncovering the details of television and everyday life through a cultural studies informed historical approach can be productive for considering how sf television speaks to women viewers.

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