International Journal of Communication 3 (2009), Book Review 578-581 1932-8036/2009BKR0578

Lynn Spigel, **TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television**, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 402 pp., $27.50 (hardcover).

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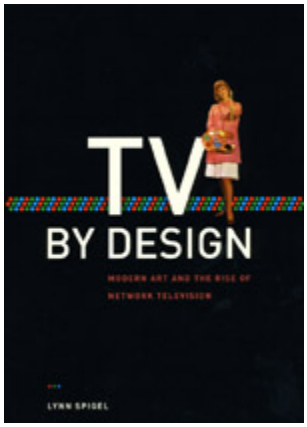

Raymond Williams's foundational text *Television* provides an annotated list of "The Forms of Television." The final "form" discussed turns out to be television itself. The medium presents a new way to look, an "experience of visual mobility . . . which is often very beautiful." However, for Williams, the experience of such aesthetic pleasure is dependent on pressing the mute button. The isolation of the visual spectacle from the noise of oppressive content elevates the new form to the highbrow status of art. Williams explains: "when in the past, I have tried to describe and explain this, I have found it significant that the only people who ever agreed with me were painters" (Williams, 2003, pp. 75-76). Williams's suggestion that television's relationship to art is dependent on the evacuation of content — on TV's analysis as mere form — is exactly the kind of entrenched approach Lynn Spigel's *TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television* seeks to complicate. In this investigation, Spigel shows that artists' relationships to television were never those of detached observation, dismissal, or appropriation — in fact, artists and broadcasters have (historically) worked together to shape the many iterations of televisual space.

Spigel recasts the accepted story that these unlikely bedfellows were joined in opposition by 1960s video art's intervention in the commercial strongholds of network television. By focusing on the postwar era (specifically, the 1940s through the 1970s), Spigel complicates a narrative that always already pits the two sides of Art and TV against one another along binary axes of high/low, avant-garde/popular, class/mass. Pushing the narrative back 20 years, Spigel presents a story that not only analyzes art-inflected content, but also emphasizes the material relationships and historical struggles between art-workers and business practices.

A first chapter, entitled "Hail! Modern Art: Postwar 'American' Painting and the Rise of Commercial TV," is a mammoth effort to set the scene of the postwar courtship between modern art and television — a courtship riddled with all the ambivalence and excitement of young love. Spigel argues that "the arts played a crucial ideological role in cold war sensibilities about national progress and citizenship" (p. 17). In a world where the threat of communism lurked just beyond U.S. borders, the ideals of rampant individualism epitomized by Abstract Expressionism (think: Pollack) were particularly attractive to a mainstream broadcast system that worked overtime to revitalize the national image of American-ness on the global stage. Television presented modern art in a quotidian form; whether it was through public-affairs programs, dramas involving art-theft, or abstract commercials, the combination of American vernacular culture with high art sensibilities reworked the public's relationship to national identity and schooled audiences in visual literacy.

Spigel introduces a number of sub-arguments in her first chapter that are developed later in the text. Not surprisingly, given Spigel's status as one of the most established scholars employing feminist critique for media studies, special attention is paid throughout *TV by Design* to the gendered nature of the highbrow/lowbrow divide in cultural production. Spigel shows that, while government programs, advertising campaigns, and popular shows sought to "establish connections between consumerism, aesthetic contemplation, and good citizenship" (p. 24), selling women images of themselves as "progressive-minded citizen-consumers" (p. 66), consumers' enthusiasm for modern art was also tempered by a robust level of suspicion. This manifested itself in TV drama plots that featured an enormous (as Spigel humorously relates) amount of art-crime plots or dangerous arty-types. Women featured in these art contexts were portrayed as especially unsavory. However, while such genres may have taken a sexist/xenophobic relationship to art, Spigel argues that "in the end the modern paintings were often the center of both visual and dramatic excitement for viewers" (p. 44). Spigel also takes up the complex relationship between female publics and the art world in her discussion of MOMA's "Television Project" (a Rockefeller-funded initiative that, beginning in 1952, explored the relationship of New York's Museum of Modern Art to television by producing programs for commercial channels, in addition to other activities, such as starting a television archive), where on the one hand, MOMA's in-house television productions sought to maximize "fem-appeal" for suburban audiences, and on the other, maintain its prestige (i.e., male) status.

The first half of the book focuses largely on institutional practices (primarily CBS and MOMA), but one individual story does emerge — that of William Golden, art director for CBS, otherwise known as "The Tiffany Network." CBS's development of an in-house art department (as well as its bicoastal monuments of media architecture, Los Angeles's Television City and New York City's Black Rock) allowed the network to carefully direct its branding toward a "class" rather than "mass" audience by employing artists at all levels of production. Spigel argues that television art directors of the postwar consumer society became leaders in the democratization of taste, and as such a leader, Golden was a hybrid figure who managed to overcome the artist/businessman dialectic by branding himself as a skilled craftsman. Golden's solution to the ambiguities he felt toward both of the roles of artist and businessman were perfectly suited to the balancing act that CBS itself straddled. Spigel's inclusion of two uncannily similar photographs — one of Jackson Pollack posing in front of his drip painting *Number 9* (1948), the other of Golden leaning against a patterned wall of his CBS eye-logos — visually displays the convergence of these two identities. The coupling of these photos effectively dares us to guess which is kitsch and which is avant-garde.

Early on, Spigel points to the deployment of "abstract sound" in animated commercials as central to habituating the postwar public to a modern aesthetic. This attention to sound is a subtle thread Spigel maintains throughout her monograph, but it is a theme she pushes to the center of her narrative in a late chapter on the celebrated TV auteur Ernie Kovacs. Spigel points out that, while experiments with silent TV that hark back to early cinema are usually associated with the advent of video art in the 1960s, such experimentation actually started much earlier within the realm of commercial television rather than the avant-garde. Spigel seeks to wrest Kovacs' legacy from the context of avant-garde exceptionalism in order to reassert the role that mid-century debates over TV noise had in forming his aesthetic pursuits. Any Kovacs fan would be gratified by Spigel's recontextualization of his work — her arguments about the connections between concerns over television noise (canned laughter, loud commercials) and general anxieties about TV fraud fueled by quiz show scandals and false advertising accusations imbue the appeal

of Kovacs's sound experiments with a new complexity. Spigel explains that, unlike cinema, television was supposed to have a direct relationship to authentic experience, given its qualities of liveness and spontaneity, but as she clarifies: "television's realism and especially its aura of liveness and fidelity to its source are produced through the artful orchestration of sounds and images. In this sense, television's ontology rests on a fundamental contradiction between its status as document and its status as art" (p. 182). Spigel shows that Kovacs' audio-visual tricks directly played on notions of fidelity connected to the television medium. Spigel also emphasizes Kovacs's status as an industry insider who worked unflinchingly for sponsors (and was even famously fond of his generous sponsor, Dutch Master Cigars), concluding that "Kovacs was in the vanguard . . . of a new wave of aesthetic innovation that took place not in the trenches of video art underground, but rather on Madison Avenue, in Hollywood studios, and in the business offices of network executives" (p. 211). While, at times, Spigel's desire to recast the trajectory of video art might appear to re-enforce its binary relationship to television (where video art gets cast in the role of TV's haughty evil twin), this history does counter the simplistic narrative of hegemonic cooptation that would otherwise be ascribed to the history of TV silence.

A late chapter of *TV by Design* takes its name, "One Minute Movies," from a program at the 1966 New York Film Festival that screened commercials alongside experimental shorts by the likes of Tony Conrad. By highlighting the engagement of television commercial producers with the art-film world (many of these commercial directors also had careers on the "highbrow" level of the spectrum), as well as the ways in which cinematic commercials fueled the public's growing interest in cinema culture, Spigel once again complicates familiar narratives of hegemonic commercial appropriations of avant-garde and countercultural forms. Andy Warhol, the subject of Spigel's final chapter, created his own one-minute commercial in 1968 for Schrafft's restaurants. "Underground Sundae" featured a "swirling phantasmagoria of color" (p. 261), complete with the artist's signature splashed diagonally across the frame, leading Schrafft's president, Frank G. Shattuck, to remark, "We haven't just got a commercial. We've acquired a work of art" (p. 262).

Spigel contests the typical historical explanation of Warhol's career as split between the "good" Warhol and the "bad" Warhol, where his early years are set up in opposition to a later career spoiled by commercialism. For Spigel, this narrative not only dismisses his engagement with television, but also erases aspects of Warhol's queerness by favoring a stance of cool detachment most often associated with straight male artists (à la Pollack). Not only did Warhol's many forays into television productions offer up representations of a queer counterpublic not usually featured on mainstream television, his "posture of reticence" (p. 265) in televised interviews and his framing of queer sexualities and other deviant practices as uniquely mundane derailed the normal templates of media scandal by adopting a stance of insistent passivity. We once again see the thread of TV silence come up in Spigel's descriptions of Warholian reticence. In a post-*Queer Eye* era, such a disruption does, indeed, seem pretty queer. While Spigel makes many compelling points here, the most revelatory may be that "Warhol's own use of television was rooted in a queer relation to the entire apparatus of TV time" (p. 270). TV time would, of course, be straight time: Warhol loved re-runs and daytime (feminine) genres like soap operas and talk shows, and he poo-poo'd the very idea that anyone would be at home on a Saturday night to actually watch *Saturday Night Live*. Given recent attention in queer studies to notions of queer temporality, Spigel's attention to Warhol's interest in

"fringe" time makes an unexpected contribution to a field that may seem peripheral to her usual focus — her ability to touch upon this material testifies to the vast scope of this latest book.

Spigel manages to make an impressive amount of interventions into both broadcasting histories and art historical narratives; for example, while she reinserts Kovacs into broadcasting history, she makes equally compelling revisions to art history, as well as to visual culture. The opening pages of Spigel's introduction situate the text within current discourses of new media convergence, arguing that the history of television itself "is also the history of convergence between old and new media." However, while broadcasting histories generally cast radio and television in the parts of "old" and "new," respectively, Spigel performs a brilliantly unexpected move in casting painting itself as an "old" medium. This deceptively simple aside manages to recast traditional histories of communication technologies by wedging painting somewhere in between radio and television. Spigel also makes the unlikely argument that the abstract animated commercials of the 1950s were "the missing link between abstract expressionism and its successor, pop art" (pp. 64-66). It is such surprising re-categorizations that make Spigel's work so rich — and so important. To that end, her sustained engagement with the postwar era also contributes to a body of visual culture studies that too often neglects the mid-twentieth century in favor of a fetishization of nineteenth century optical experiments or the proliferation of contemporary digital cultures.

Spigel ends her expansive text by turning back to the question of video art's flight from television to the museum, and television's endeavors to, in turn, memorialize itself in the form of broadcasting museums like Los Angeles's Paley Center for Media (formerly the Museum of Television and Radio). Spigel's answer to the question of why television and video (who shared virtually the same technology) would become so isolated, appealing to vastly different publics on the highbrow/lowbrow map, seems to be that, "in order to establish its own future, video art depended upon a collective amnesia in which artists and museum curators simply had to erase the memories of their links with TV's commercial past" (p. 291). Coincidentally, a review of a new exhibit of feminist video art at the Brooklyn Museum was recently featured in *The New York Times*. Surprisingly enough, the review was entitled "SheTube: Female Voices on the Small Screen." Not only does the review describe feminist video art as "A good way to reduce overcrowding in museums" (a hint that the museum may not be such a great place for it after all), the title of the review suggests that the art world may turn out to be less amnesiac than Spigel insists. Just as MOMA experimented with television as a new, high-tech kind of gallery space during the 1950s, perhaps video art now, as it converges with new media art and new online venues for exhibition, is more willing to engage its buried relationship with the "tube." As the advent of new media convergence presents renewed struggles over autonomy and commercialism, Spigel's narrative offers us an important, and immensely riveting, reminder that the convergence of art and media is always riddled with historical-material struggle.

References

Williams, R. (2003). *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. London: Routledge.