Patton, E. (2023). Book Review: TV Snapshots: An Archive of Everyday Life. Television & New Media, 0(0). https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764231163301

https://doi.org/10.1177/15274764231163301

Book Review
Lynn Spigel. *TV Snapshots: An Archive of Everyday Life*. Duke University Press, 2022.

Elizabeth Patton, PhD
Associate Professor
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Lynn Spigel begins *TV Snapshots* by recounting the discovery of a personal photograph from her childhood in the 1960s. In the photograph, the author is depicted as a young child posing in front of a television set, wearing a red, white and blue dress, and trying to curtsy. Fueled by curiosity about the nature of this photograph marked the beginning of a 30-year quest to find similar photographs in flea markets and thrift shops. The rise of online collecting platforms such as eBay and photo-sharing sites like Pinterest and Flickr led to a breakthrough in 2011. The widespread digitization of photographic archives allowed her to create a personal archive of over 5,000 snapshots.

This innovative and visually engaging book examines a widely spread but often overlooked historic photographic practice during the 1950s to the early 1970s: photographs of individuals in their homes posing with television sets. The book has a scrapbook quality because of the dynamic interaction between text and the considerable number of images. Even the decorative print on the book cover recalls living room wallpaper and a vintage family photo album binder. Spigel's methodological approach builds on oral history methods and the use of vernacular photography to illuminate the memories and experiences of ordinary people. This approach provides insights into past media practices to examine how TV snapshots represent what she calls an "archive of everyday life." Spigel recognizes that snapshots are not always a reliable source of information but more of a representation of the past. Thus, she examines TV snapshots as a practice that people did with their televisions beyond just watching it or what the industry intended. Spigel notes that the book is a follow-up to her influential first book, *Make Room for TV*, which looked at the early history of television within the context of postwar suburban domesticity. However, this book follows growing interest in the field of television studies to move away from TV content and the practice of watching TV as the primary focus of inquiry by examining how both amateur and professional photographers used televisions as a material backdrop to document everyday life within the context of the home.

The book begins with an examination of how television became a common subject in snapshots, how people arranged and photographed the TV set in relation to other household items and activities, and how it was portrayed in relation to family. Instead of trying to determine individual reasons why people took TV snapshots, the first chapter examines the cultural significance of TV snapshots as a representation of mid-century family life. Drawing on Michel de Certeau, Spigel persuasively argues that the empty space around a TV set in a snapshot is not insignificant, but rather an area for the performance of "spatial practices" (20). According to Spigel, TV snapshots highlight the ability of photographed objects to convey emotions and sensory connections between people and things, and their ability to affect us

emotionally. Chapter 2 further examines the “concept of home as theater” (76). She suggests that TV snapshots invert the usual relationship between viewers and TV sets by showing people performing in front of, beside, or even inside the TV set via “trick shots,” rather than watching actors perform on television. TV snapshots indicate a perspective on objects that “go against the dominant norms of experience and perception,” which Sara Ahmed refers to as a "queer orientation” (48). They use modes of performance that are culturally coded--found in various forms of media (e.g., fashion magazines, theater, etc.)--but are not simple imitations of them, but rather everyday expressions of performance in the context of taking pictures at home. For example, by creating performances in their own homes, Spigel persuasively demonstrates how African Americans were able to leverage snapshots to control their own image, which was not possible in a white-dominated television industry.

In chapters 3 and 4, Spigel examines a collection of snapshots that provide insight into gender performance and the role of TV in shaping ideas of femininity and sexuality. Spigel refers to a concept she calls "everyday glamour," which is based on the idea that women use the language of fashion to express themselves in the context of everyday life. She argues that even though social and economic factors play a role in shaping these expressions, women still have agency in how they choose to participate in the world of fashion. The chapter is richly illustrated with TV snapshots from the postwar period showing women dressed up and using the TV set as a background from which to display their glamour. However, this practice required a significant amount of “glamour labor,” including practicing poses, gathering props, and learning tricks of the camera trade. Spigel also notes that some snapshots explicitly play with or defy traditional gender roles. She provides an example of a snapshot from 1966 which features a man dressed in typical male clothes holding hands with his same-sex partner, who is wearing a negligee, sheer coverup, and carrying a black handbag. Spigel argues that this and other similar snapshots demonstrate that TV “dress-up” and everyday glamour did not always replicate traditional gender roles.

Chapter 4 takes a surprising turn in examining TV pinup snapshots, which mostly feature women in borderline sexually explicit poses and degrees of nudity. Spigel traces the origin of these snapshots to the pinup that was found in men's "girlie magazines" and camera clubs, which provided cover for men to view nude women. Through detailed comparison and analysis, Spigel demonstrates that although these pinups were targeted to different audiences and distributed in various settings, the genre shared similarities with snapshots that depicted women in domestic settings while posing with television sets. Spigel acknowledges the objectification of women regarding pinup photography, but also notes that feminist historians such as Joanne Meyerowitz, Maria Elena Buszek, and Megan E. Williams have presented a more nuanced view of the topic. She argues that despite criticisms, many women participated in pinups as a means of empowerment. Several images in the chapter provide examples of women posing in homemade pinups, demonstrating that the practice of pinups was part of women's everyday lives in which “gender and sex were rendered visible” (205).

The final chapter considers how digital archives provide opportunities to think about how and why certain “invisible histories of everyday life,” such as TV snapshots, become visible (223).

Spigel reflects on how TV snapshots circulate in digital networks, how they acquire value and are recirculated, remade and saved by certain archival logics, and who is forgotten in the process. She recognizes that by using online archives in her research, she was able to rearrange and reappropriate historical materials in ways that the original creators did not envision, while also highlighting what is not included in the archives considering why. For example, Spigel describes a TV snapshot of Emmett Till, who was murdered in Mississippi in 1955. The snapshot is one of the photographs that Emmett's mother, Mamie Till, shared with the media as part of her fight for justice for her son. The TV snapshot is missing from online archives. Spigel acknowledges the risk of causing further harm in discussing this photograph within the context of her research but asserts that it should be considered as part of the memory and broader history of television as it "disrupt[s] any sense of racial innocence that TV snapshots, and family snapshots as a genre, may otherwise convey" (247). As she recognizes the issues raised in discussing Emmett Till's photograph in her research, Spigal also addresses the ethical concerns around using personal snapshots for research, especially considering that the people that took the snapshots didn't originally intend that the photographs be made public. This is particularly significant because, as she claims, photography has been used as a tool of surveillance against people of color but is also historically connected to the politics of resistance against dominant visual practices.

Spigel concludes her examination of the history of TV snapshots by situating the practice within larger histories of communication technology and making a critical intervention in the fields of new media and convergence studies. She persuasively argues that TV snapshots, a combination of television and snapshot camera, represent a specific cultural practice of living with TV in the mid-century and mark the end of the broadcast era. Her examination of early TV practices challenges the notion of new media replacing old media. Instead, she asks readers to consider how "old and new media merge to form hybrid cultural practices" (256). In conclusion, Spigel offers fresh perspectives on how people lived with televisions--a new communication technology--in their homes during the postwar period. *TV Snapshots* would interest scholars of television studies, media history, American studies, photography, and cultural studies.

References

Buszek, Maria Elena. 2006. *Pin-Up Grrrls: Feminism, Sexuality, Popular Culture*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

de Certeau, Michel. 1984. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Translated by Steven Rendall. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Meyerowitz, Joanne . "Women, Cheesecake, and Borderline Material: Responses to Girlie Pictures in the Mid-Twentieth Century U.S." *Journal of Women's History* 8, no. 3 (1996): 9 – 35.

Williams, Megan E. "The 'Crisis' Cover Girl: Lena Horne, the NAACP, and Representations of African American Femininity, 1941 – 1945." *American Periodicals* 16, no. 2 (2006): 200 – 218.