were furious, not because TV won, but because print lost.

The problem has been falsely seen as democracy vs. the mass media. But the mass media are democracy. The book itself was the first mechanical mass medium. What is really being asked, of course, is: can books’ monopoly of knowledge survive the challenge of the new languages? The answer is: no. What should be asked is: what can print do better than any other medium and is that worth doing?

Notes

5. From a personal communication to the author.

Chapter 33

Making Room for TV

Lynn Spigel

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Nicholas Ray’s 1955 film, Rebel without a Cause, contains a highly melodramatic moment in which family members are unable to patch together the rift among them. The teenage son, Jim, returns home after the famous sequence in which he races his car to the edge of a cliff, only to witness the death of his competitor. Jim looks at his father asleep in front of the television set, and then he lies down on a sofa. From Jim’s upside-down point of view on the sofa, the camera cuts to his shrewish mother who appears at the top of the stairwell. In a 180-degree spin, the camera flip-flops on the image of the mother, mimicking the way Jim sees her descending the stairs. This highly stylized shot jolts us out of the illusory realism of the scene, a disruption that continues as the camera reveals a television screen emitting a menacing blue static. As the camera lingers on the TV set, Jim confesses his guilt. Moments later, when his mother demands that he not go to the police, Jim begs his henpecked father to take his side. Finally, with seemingly murderous intentions, Jim chokes him. The camera pans across the TV set, its bluish static heightening the sense of family discord. With its “bad reception,” television serves as a rhetorical figure for the loss of communication between family members. In fact, as Jim’s father admits early in the scene, he was not even aware of his son’s whereabouts during this fateful night, but instead had learned of the incident through an outside authority, the television newscast.
As this classic scene illustrates, in postwar years the television set became a central figure in representations of family relationships. The introduction of the machine into the home meant that family members needed to come to terms with the presence of a communication medium that might transform older modes of family interaction. The popular media published reports and advice from social critics and social scientists who were studying the effects of television on family relationships. The media also published pictorial representations of domestic life that showed people how television might—or might not—fit into the dynamics of their own domestic lives. Most significantly, like the scene from Rebel without a Cause, the media discourses were organized around ideas of family harmony and discord.

Indeed, contradictions between unity and division were central to representations of television during the period of its installation. Television was the great family minstrel that promised to bring Mom, Dad, and the kids together; at the same time, it had to be carefully controlled so that it harmonized with the separate gender roles and social functions of individual family members. This meant that the contradiction between unity and division was not a simple binary opposition; it was not a matter of either/or but rather both at once. Television was supposed to bring the family together but still allow for social and sexual divisions in the home. In fact, the attempt to maintain a balance between these two ideals was a central tension at work in popular discourses on television and the family.

The Family United

In 1954, McCall’s magazine coined the term “togetherness.” The appearance of this term between the covers of a woman’s magazine is significant not only because it shows the importance attached to family unity during the postwar years, but also because this phrase is symptomatic of discourses aimed at the housewife. Home magazines primarily discussed family life in language organized around spatial imagery of proximity, distance, isolation, and integration. In fact, the spatial organization of the home was presented as a set of scientific laws through which family relationships could be calculated and controlled. Topics ranging from childrearing to sexuality were discussed in spatial terms, and solutions to domestic problems were overwhelmingly spatial: if you are nervous, make yourself a quiet sitting corner far away from the central living area of the home. If your children are cranky, let them play in the yard. If your husband is bored at the office, turn your garage into a workshop where he’ll recall the joys of his boyhood. It was primarily within the context of this spatial problem that television was discussed. The central question was, “Where should you put the television set?” This problem was tackled throughout the period, formulated and reformulated, solved and recast. In the process the television set became an integral part of the domestic environment depicted in the magazines.

At the simplest level, there was the question of the proper room for television. In 1949, Better Homes and Gardens asked, “Where does the receiver go?” It listed options including the living room, game room, or “some strategic spot where you can see it from the living room, dining room and kitchen.” At this point, however, the photographs of model rooms usually did not include television sets as part of the interior decor. On the few occasions when sets did appear, they were placed either in the basement or in the living room. By 1951, the television set traveled more freely through the household spaces depicted in the magazines. It appeared in the basement, living room, bedroom, kitchen, sunny room, converted garage, sitting-sleeping room, music room, and even the “TV room.” Furthermore, not only the room, but the exact location in the room, had to be considered for its possible use as a TV zone.

As the television set moved into the center of family life, other household fixtures traditionally
associated with domestic bliss had to make room for it. Typically, the magazines presented the television set as the new family hearth through which love and affection might be rekindled. In 1951, when *American Home* first displayed a television set on its cover photograph, it employed the conventionalized iconography of a model living room organized around the fireplace, but this time a television set was built into the mantelpiece. Even more radically, the television was shown to replace the fireplace altogether, as the magazines showed readers how television could function as the center of family attention. So common had this substitution become that by 1954 *House Beautiful* was presenting its readers with "another example of how the TV set is taking the place of the fireplace as the focal point around which to arrange the seating in the room." Perhaps the most extreme example of this kind of substitution is the tradition at some broadcast stations of burning Yule logs on the television screen each Christmas Eve, a practice that originated in the 1950s.

More typically, the television set took the place of the piano. In *American Home*, for instance, the appearance of the television set correlates significantly with the vanishing piano. While in 1948 the baby grand piano typically held a dominant place in model living rooms, over the years it gradually receded to the point where it was usually shown to be an upright model located in marginal areas such as basements. Meanwhile, the television set moved into the primary living spaces of model rooms where its stylish cabinets meshed with and enhanced the interior decor. The new "entertainment centers," comprised of a radio, television, and phonograph, often made the piano entirely obsolete. In 1953, *Better Homes and Gardens* suggested as much when it displayed a television set in a "built-in music corner" that "replaces the piano," now moved into the basement. In that same year, in a special issue entitled "Music and Home Entertainment," *House Beautiful* focused on radio, television, and phonographs, asking readers, "Do You Really Need a Piano?" One woman, writing to *TV World* columnist Kathi Norris, answered the question in no uncertain terms:

Dear Kathi:

Since we got our television set, we've had to change the arrangement of furniture in our living room, and we just can't keep the piano. I need new pictures, but can't afford to buy them with the expense of television, so I was wondering if I might somehow find somebody who would trade me a picture or two for a perfectly good piano.

This woman and, I suspect, others like her were beginning to think of television as a replacement for the traditional fixtures of family life.

As the magazines continued to depict the set in the center of family activity, television seemed to become a natural part of domestic space. By the early 1940s, floor plans included a space for television in the home's structural layout, and television sets were increasingly depicted as everyday, commonplace objects that any family might hope to own. Indeed, the magazines included television as a staple home fixture before most Americans could even receive a television signal, much less consider purchasing the expensive item. The media discourses did not so much reflect social reality; instead, they preceded it. The home magazines helped to construct television as a household object, one that belonged in the family space. More surprisingly, however, in the span of roughly four years, television itself became the central figure in images of the American home; it became the cultural symbol par excellence of family life.

Television, it was said, would bring the family ever closer, an expression which, in itself a spatial metaphor, was continually repeated in a wide range of popular media—not only women's magazines, but also general magazines, men's magazines, and on the airwaves. In its capacity as unifying agent, television fit well with the more general postwar hopes for a return to family values. It was seen as a kind of household cement that promised to reassemble the splintered lives of families who had been separated during the war.
It was also meant to reinforce the new suburban family unit, which had left most of its extended family and friends behind in the city.

The emergence of the term "family room" in the postwar period is a perfect example of the importance attached to organizing household spaces around ideals of family togetherness. First coined in George Nelson and Henry Wright's *Tomorrow's House: A Complete Guide for the Home-Builder* (1946), the family room encapsulated a popular ideal throughout the period. Nelson and Wright, who alternatively called the family room "the room without a name," suggested the possible social functions of this new household space:

Could the room without a name be evidence of a growing desire to provide a framework within which the members of a family will be better equipped to enjoy each other on the basis of mutual respect and affection? Might it thus indicate a deep-seated urge to reassert the validity of the family by providing a better design for living? We should very much like to think so, and if there is any truth in this assumption, our search for a name is ended—we shall simply call it the "family room."

This notion of domestic cohesion was integral to the design for living put forward in the home magazines that popularized the family room in the years to come. It was also integral to the role of the television set, which was often pictured in the family rooms of the magazines' model homes. In 1950, *Better Homes and Gardens* literally merged television with the family room, telling readers to design a new double-purpose area, the "family-television room."

But one needn't build a new room in order to bring the family together around the television set; kitchens, living rooms, and dining rooms would do just as well. What was needed was a particular attitude, a sense of closeness that permeated the room. Photographs, particularly in advertisements, graphically depicted the idea of the family circle with television viewers grouped around the television set in semicircle patterns.

As Roland Marchand has shown with respect to advertising in the 1920s and 1930s, the family circle was a prominent pictorial strategy for the promotion of household goods. The pictures always suggested that all members of the family were present, and since they were often shot in soft-focus or contained dreamy mists, there was a romantic haze around the family unit. Sometimes artists even drew concentric circles around the family, or else an arc of light evoked the theme. According to Marchand, the visual cliché of the family circle referred back to Victorian notions about domestic havens, implying that the home was secure and stable. The advertisements suggested a democratic model of family life, one in which all members shared in consumer decisions—although, as Marchand suggests, to some extent the father remained a dominant figure in the pictorial composition. In this romanticized imagery, modern fixtures were easily assimilated into the family space:

The products of modern technology, including radios and phonographs, were comfortably accommodated within the hallowed circle. Whatever pressures and complexities modernity might bring, these images implied, the family at home would preserve an undaunted harmony and security. In an age of anxieties about family relationships and centrifugal social forces, this visual cliché was no social mirror; rather, it was a reassuring pictorial convention.

Much like the advertisements for radio and the phonograph, advertisements for television made ample use of this reassuring pictorial convention—especially in the years immediately following the war when advertisers were in the midst of their reconversion campaigns, channeling the country back from the wartime pressures of personal sacrifice and domestic upheaval to a peacetime economy based on consumerism and family values. The advertisements suggested that television would serve as a catalyst for the return to a world of domestic love and affection—a world that must have been quite different from the actual experiences of returning GIs and their
new families in the chaotic years of readjustment to civilian life.

The returning soldiers and their wives experienced an abrupt shift in social and cultural experiences. Horror stories of shell-shocked men circulated in psychiatric journals. In 1946, social workers at VA hospitals counseled some 144,000 men, half of whom were treated for neuro-psychiatric diseases. Even for those lucky enough to escape the scars of battle, popular media such as film noir showed angst-ridden, sexually unstable men, scarred psychologically and unable to relate to the familial ideals and bureaucratic realities of postwar life (the tortured male hero in Out of the Past [1946] is a classic example). The more melodramatic social problem films such as Come Back Little Sheba (1952) and A Hatful of Rain (1957) were character studies of emotionally unstable, often drug-dependent, family men. Such images, moreover, were not confined to popular fiction. Sociological studies such as William H. Whyte's The Organization Man (1956) presented chilling visions of white-collar workers who were transformed into powerless conformists as the country was taken over by nameless, faceless corporations. Even if his working life was filled with tension, the ideal man still had to be the breadwinner for a family. Moreover, should he fail to marry and procreate, his “manliness” would be called into question. According to Tyler May: “Many contemporaries feared that returning veterans would be unable to resume their positions as responsible family men. They worried that a crisis in masculinity could lead to crime, ‘perversion’ and homosexuality. Accordingly, the postwar years witnessed an increasing suspicion of single men as well as single women, as the authority of men at home and at work seemed to be threatened.” Although the image of the swinging bachelor also emerged in this period—particularly through the publication of Playboy—we might regard the “swinger” image as a kind of desperate, if confused, response to the enforcement of heterosexual family lifestyles. In other words, in a heterosexist world, the swinger image might well have provided single men with a way to deflect popular suspicions about homosexuality directed at bachelors who avoided marriage.

Meanwhile, women were given a highly constraining solution to the changing roles of gender and sexual identity. Although middle- and working-class women had been encouraged by popular media to enter traditionally male occupations during the war, they were now told to return to their homes where they could have babies and make color-coordinated meals. Marynia Farnham and Ferdinand Lundberg’s The Modern Woman: The Lost Sex (1947) gave professional, psychological status to this housewife image, claiming that the essential function of woman was that of caretaker, mother, and sexual partner. Those women who took paid employment in the outside world would defy the biological order of things and become neurotics. One postwar marriage guidebook even included a “Test of Neurotic Tendencies” on which women lost points for choosing an answer that exhibited their desire for authority at work. The domestic woman needed to save her energy for housekeeping, childrearing, and an active (monogamous) sex life with her husband. The ways in which people interpreted and applied such messages to their own lives is difficult to discern, but their constant repetition in popular media did provide a context in which women could find ample justification for their early marriages, child-centeredness, reluctance to divorce, and tendency to use higher education only as a stepping stone for marriage.

Even if people found the domestic ideal seductive, the housing shortage, coupled with the baby boom, made domestic bliss an expensive and often unattainable luxury. In part, for this reason, the glorification of middle-class family life seems to have had the unplanned, paradoxical effect of sending married women into the labor force in order to obtain the money necessary to live up to the ideal. Whereas before the war single women accounted for the majority of female workers, the number of married women workers skyrocketed during the 1950s. Despite the fact that many
women worked for extra spending money, surveys showed that some women found outside employment gave them a sense of personal accomplishment and also helped them enter into social networks outside family life. At the same time, sociological studies such as Whyte's The Organization Man and David Reisman's The Lonely Crowd (1950) showed that housewives expressed doubts about their personal sacrifices, marital relationships, and everyday lives in alienating suburban neighborhoods. Although most postwar middle-class women were not ready to accept the full-blown attack on patriarchy launched in Simone de Beauvoir's The Second Sex (1949; English translation, 1952), they were not simply cultural dupes. Indeed, as the work of feminist historians such as Elaine Tyler May and Rochelle Gatlin suggests, postwar women both negotiated with and rationalized the oppressive aspects of the family ideal.

The transition from wartime to postwar life thus resulted in a set of ideological and social contradictions concerning the construction of gender and the family unit. The image of compassionate families that advertisers offered the public might well have been intended to serve the "therapeutic" function that both Roland Marchand and T. J. Jackson Lears have ascribed to advertising in general. The illustrations of domestic bliss and consumer prosperity presented a soothing alternative to the tensions of postwar life. Government building policies and veteran mortgage loans sanctioned the materialization of these advertising images by giving middle-class families a chance to buy into the "good life" of ranch-style cottages and consumer durables. Even so, both the advertising images and the homes themselves were built on the shaky foundations of social upheavals and cultural conflicts that were never completely resolved. The family circle ads, like suburbia itself, were only a temporary consumer solution to a set of complicated political, economic, and social problems.

In the case of television, these kinds of advertisements almost always showed the product in the center of the family group. While soft-focus or dreamy mists were sometimes used, the manufacturers' claims for picture clarity and good reception seem to have necessitated the use of sharp focus and high contrast, which better connoted these product attributes. The product-as-center motif not only suggested the familial qualities of the set, but also implied a mode of use: the ads suggested television be watched by a family audience.

A 1951 advertisement for Crosley's "family theatre television" is a particularly striking example. As is typical in these kinds of ads, the copy details the technical qualities of the set, but the accompanying illustration gives familial meanings to the modern technology. The picture in this case is composed as a mise-en-abyme: in the center of the page a large drawing of the outer frame of a television screen contains a sharp focus photograph of a family watching television. Family members are dispersed on sofas on three sides of a room, while a little boy, with arms stretched out in the air, sits in the middle of the room. All eyes are glued to the television set, which appears in the center lower portion of the frame, in fact barely visible to the reader. According to the logic of this composition, the central fascination for the reader is not the actual product, which is pictured only in minuscule proportions on the lower margin of the page, but rather its ability to bring the family together around it. The ad's mise-en-abyme structure suggests that the Crosley console literally contains the domestic scene, thereby promising not just a television set but an ideal reflection of the family, joined together by the new commodity.

Even families that were not welcomed into the middle-class melting pot of postwar suburbia were promised that the dream of domestic bliss would come true through the purchase of a television set. Ebony continually ran advertisements that displayed African-Americans in middle-class living rooms, enjoying an evening of television. Many of these ads were strikingly similar to those used in white consumer magazines—although often the advertisers portrayed black families
watching programs that featured black actors. Despite this iconographic substitution, the message was clearly one transmitted by a culture industry catering to the middle-class suburban ideal. Nuclear families living in single-family homes would engage in intensely private social relations through the luxury of television.

Such advertisements appeared in a general climate of postwar expectations about television’s ability to draw families closer together. In *The Age of Television* (1956), Leo Bogart summarized a wide range of audience studies on the new medium that showed numerous Americans believed television would revive domestic life. Summarizing the findings, Bogart concluded that social scientific surveys “agree completely that television has had the effect of keeping the family at home more than formerly.” One respondent from a Southern California survey boasted that his “family now stays home all the time and watches the same programs. [We] turn it on at 3 P.M. and watch until 10 P.M. We never go anywhere.” Moreover, studies indicated that people believed television strengthened family ties. A 1949 survey of an eastern city found that long-term TV owners expressed “an awareness of an enhanced family solidarity.” In a 1951 study of Atlanta families, one respondent said, “It keeps us together more,” and another commented, “It makes a closer family circle.” Some women even saw television as a cure for marital problems. One housewife claimed, “My husband is very restless; now he relaxes at home.” Another woman confided, “My husband and I get along a lot better. We don’t argue so much. It’s wonderful for couples who have been married ten years or more. . . . Before television, my husband would come in and go to bed. Now we spend some time together.”

Typically also, television was considered a remedy for problem children. During the 1950s, juvenile delinquency emerged as a central topic of public debate. Women’s magazines and child psychologists such as Dr. Benjamin Spock, whose *Baby and Childcare* had sold a million copies by 1951, gave an endless stream of advice to mothers on ways to prevent their children from becoming antisocial and emotionally impaired. Not only was childrearing literature big business, but the state had taken a special interest in the topic of disturbed youth, using agencies such as the Continuing Committee on the Prevention and Control of Delinquency and the Children’s Bureau to monitor juvenile crimes. Against this backdrop, audience research showed that parents believed television would keep their children off the streets. A mother from the Southern California survey claimed, “Our boy was always watching television, so we got him a set just to keep him home.” A mother from the Atlanta study stated, “We are closer together. We find our entertainment at home. Donna and her boyfriend sit here instead of going out now.” Such sentiments were popularized in a *Better Homes and Gardens* survey in which parents repeatedly mentioned television’s ability to unify the family. One parent even suggested a new reason for keeping up with the Joneses. She said, “It [television] keeps the children home. Not that we have had that problem too much, but we could see it coming because nearly everyone had a set before we weakened.”

**NOTES**

2. In some cases, the television set was actually placed in the fireplace. Here, the objects were made to share the same system of meaning so that the familial values traditionally attributed to the fireplace were now also attributed to the television set. See, for example, House Beautiful, May 1954, p. 72. . . .
4. Television sets were often adorned with objects that connoted intellectual pursuits and high art, values traditionally associated with the piano. See, for example, Ladies' Home Journal, April 1951, p. 132. . . .


8. While the home magazines recommended substituting the television set for the piano, other evidence suggests that piano ownership might still have been significant for postwar families. Sales figures for the entire market show that the sale of pianos actually rose from 136,332 in 1940 to 172,531 in 1950, and by 1960 sales had increased to 198,200. Although these sales statistics alone cannot tell us how significant this rise was for the domestic market per se, they do caution us against assuming that the piano was actually phased out during the postwar years. See Statistical Reference Index, Music USA: 1982 Review of the Music Industry and Amateur Music Participation/American Music Conference, Report A2731 (Bethesda, MD: Congressional Information Service, 1983), p. 4. Also note that the National Piano Manufacturers Association saw radio as largely responsible for a 300 percent increase in sales during the late 1930s. The Association claimed, "Millions of listeners, who otherwise might never have attained an appreciation of music, are manifesting an interest in musical culture and endeavoring to become participants themselves." Cited in Davis, "Response to Innovation," p. 138.


16. As Maureen Honey shows in her study of women's wartime magazine fiction, the Office of War Information gave suggestions to the magazine editors on ways in which to encourage married middle-class women to work. Honey, however, shows that magazines suggested wartime work for women was temporary, to be discarded when the GIs returned. Still, as Honey also shows, many women did not want to leave their jobs when men returned home. See Creating Rosie the Riveter: Class, Gender and Propaganda During WWII (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1984). . . .


19. Although feminine ideals and attitudes toward sexuality had changed considerably since the nineteenth century, the ideal woman of the 1950s shared a common problem with her Victorian ancestors—she was placed in the impossible position of taking on several incompatible roles at the same time. The efficient housewife was somehow supposed to transform herself into an erotic plaything for her husband at night. Even mothering was presented in terms of divided consciousness. . . .

20. In the early 1950s, the median marriage age ranged between twenty and twenty-one; the average family started having children in the beginning of the second year of marriage and had three to four children. For birthrates, see Rochelle Gatlin, American Women Since 1945 (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1987), pp. 51, 55, 61. . . .


22. A 1955 survey showed that while most women worked for financial reasons, 21 percent worked to fulfill "a need for accomplishment" or to keep busy and meet people; even the women who worked for economic purposes cited the benefits of companionship and a sense of independence. A 1958 survey showed that almost two-thirds of married women cited their jobs as their chief source of feeling "important" or "useful," while only one-third mentioned housekeeping. See Gatlin, American Women Since 1945, p. 33. . . .

23. Marchand, Advertising the American Dream, pp. 335-59. . . .
Radio gave newsmongers back their voices; television restored their faces. Indeed, the television newscast seems to resemble that most ancient of methods for communicating news: a person telling other people what has happened. But this resemblance, as with much of what we see when we first examine this most powerful of news media, can be misleading.

A method for transforming moving pictures into and out of electronic signals, using a rotating...