

TV Homes: Scenes from the Family Photo Album

Lynn Spigel

Northwestern University
School of Communication
Chicago, USA
lspigel@northwestern.edu

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on my collection of over 5,000 snapshots featuring TV sets, this essay explores how people (mostly in the US) visualized their TV homes in the 1950s–1970s. It explores the use of TV as a posing place for the presentation of self and family. Rather than simply watch TV, people performed in front of the set, and turned the TV set as setting. The text considers a variety of spatial settings from empty spaces to theatrical spaces to uncanny spaces in TV homes. It suggests that vernacular photography provides new clues into the way people lived with TV and made their homes into TV ‘home theaters.’

Over the course of the past eight years, I have been collecting snapshots of people posing in front of their TV sets.⁽¹⁾

To date, I have collected roughly 5,000. I find them in thrift stores and online platforms like eBay where people buy vintage photos and share them with others. Posted on blogs and photo share sites, the snapshots are now part of memory culture around ‘old’ TV. Ironically, at a time when the old boxy TV sets have been replaced by mobile and flat screen devices, photos of vintage TVs take on new affective and economic value.

For historians, these vernacular snapshots provide new materials with which to access television’s relationship to the spaces of everyday life when it first entered homes. They present an alternate view from images of television in women’s home magazines, interior design handbooks, and advertisements for TV sets that circulated at midcentury, when television first arrived in American homes. While magazines, handbooks, and ads showed TV in rooms that spoke to prevailing white middle-class tastes, snapshots reveal a broader range of sensibilities and present a range of class, ethnic, and racial identities. While my collection is mostly comprised of US examples, TV snapshots appeared in numerous national contexts: from the Soviet Union to Sweden, Hungary, Israel, Argentina, China, and Egypt, just to name a few.

As photography scholars have shown, snapshots are not transparent windows onto the past. Rather than indexical

*documents, they are texts that people fashion and material objects that are touched and traded. They are things of sentimental value but also uncanny indications of what Roland Barthes (1981) called the ‘that has been’ – the arrested moment in time that reminds us of an ending, of aging, and of death, a fascination shared not just by Barthes but by many classic photography theorists including Walter Benjamin (1938/2006), André Bazin (1967), and Susan Sontag (1973). Feminist scholarship on family photos and snapshots has especially explored questions of gender performance, everyday life, and what Marianne Hirsch (1997) calls the ‘family gaze.’ The family gaze operates at numerous levels, including the gaze of the camera person, the gaze of the posers, and the larger ideological image-sphere (fashion magazines, films, TV shows, and other media) through which women learn how to perform as ‘to-be-looked-at objects’ and by the same token, I would add, avert the normative gazes that objectify them. Feminist critics also consider the sociological dimensions of snapshots. In her book, *Doing Family Photography*, Gillian Rose (2010) considers how women have formed friendship networks through picture-taking and by sharing their albums with family and friends.*

TV snapshots call attention to the fact that people used TV for things unintended by the television industry. While ads for television sets usually

(1) This essay is based on my book *TV Snapshots: An Archive of Everyday Life* (forthcoming, Duke University Press).

showed families circled around them and glued to programs on screen, snapshots rarely show people watching TV. Instead, the television set opens up a space and place for the presentation of self, family, and gender as people pose in front of it and engage in various forms of social interaction. The snapshots reveal how people turned the TV set into a setting for their own images of home in the increasingly mediated environment that television helped to precipitate. While media scholars have spent decades theorizing and historicizing television's production of that mediated world, the snapshots provide ways to see how ordinary people—armed with snapshot cameras—visualized their experiences with the then-new medium and its relation to the spaces of everyday life.

EMPTY SPACE

In a 1951 special issue devoted to TV, the trade journal *Interiors* (aimed at high-end designers) called television a 'Cyclops' that 'hogged' up visual attention in the home by demanding that it be placed as the focal point of décor. Using military metaphors, the journal warned, "Television attacks the American eye," and offered decorating techniques by which to camouflage the set (Allen, 1951, p. 62). Modular shelving or sleek modern cabinetry with doors that hid the TV were among the myriad solutions to the cyclops eye of the naked screen. *Interiors* expressed the era's 'highbrow' rejections of television, but even middle-class home magazines (which advertised TV sets) discussed the difficulties TV posed for home decoration and offered decorating tips for incorporating it into domestic spaces.

Unlike images reproduced in decorating manuals or ads, snapshots reveal how

people arranged their TV sets in ways that strayed from the reigning ideals of the modern, minimalist, or at least tidy, well-appointed home. Snapshots show the mess of electrical plugs and cords running across walls to outlets. They also reveal TV's use as a surface for other household things (like baby bottles and hair curlers) or for the display of sentimental items (like souvenirs, greeting cards, or religious tokens).⁽²⁾ In this sense, snapshots demonstrate the heterogeneity of everyday life in the television home and the myriad ways in which people performed their own iterations of the language of design.

Most relevant for my interests here, snapshots offer clues into television's production of household spaces. Rather than 'hog' the living room, the snapshots point to TV's role in creating an empty space within the home—that is, the place in front of and around the TV. In *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre claims that while space may be perceived as an 'empty container,' in effect it "is never empty; it always embodies a meaning" (1991, p. 154). Speaking of the modern home, Lefebvre argues that rather than a private space waiting to be filled by occupants, the home is a 'complex of mobilities' connected to public infrastructures such as gas, electricity, and water, as well as radio, telephone, and television (1991, p. 93). Similarly, the fields of architecture, home building, interior design, and product design (including the design of TV sets), as well as the communication infrastructure of the postwar home, shaped the midcentury interior as a particular kind of media space before it was ever occupied.

(2) Scholars have previously discussed symbolic and expressive aspects of objects on top of the television set. See, for example, Ondina Fachel Leal (1990) and Anna McCarthy (2001).

Lefebvre's conceptualization of social space as embodied meaning is especially useful for thinking about television as an object embedded in a field of social action. The empty space around the TV set becomes an arena for the performance of what Michel de Certeau (1984) calls 'spatial practices,' including the practice of snapshot photography.

In candid shots, the space around the TV is a play space: children push toy trucks, play board games, write on blackboards, set up train tracks, twirl hula hoops, solve jigsaw puzzles. For adults, it is a place of caregiving where mothers feed children or supervise birthday parties. It is a dance floor where residents foxtrot, box step, cha-cha, and do the frug. It is a multipurpose space where women listen in on programs while ironing dresses or vacuuming rugs. The empty space in front of the set is what domestic scientists called a 'traffic area' for the flow of multiple household activities, combining family playtime with women's household labor.

Such images contradict claims about television's destruction of social interaction and its rendering of humans—especially children—into passive viewers, which circulated in both popular and academic criticism of television in the mid-1950s (and which are often repeated today). Instead, these historical snapshots reveal that television opened up a space for play and social interaction that far exceeded TV watching. In many of these photos the TV set is way in the background, a vanishing point at best. While television scholars often discuss TV's simulation of life—its aesthetics of 'liveness,' TV Snapshots display the liveliness of people who are engaged in activities other than watching programs.

Snapshots re-orient television from the dominant uses (of 'watching') and spatial practices (of 'sitting in place') promoted

by the commercial TV industry. One of the main things people do in TV snapshots is pose in front of TV sets. The posed shots suggest what Sara Ahmed (2006) calls a 'queer orientation' to objects that show things from angles and perspectives outside their dominant prescribed uses. While Ahmed relates this, for example, to a servant who might see an object from a perspective different from the main residents in the house, and while she especially relates this to sexual orientation and lesbian encounters with objects in space, I use the term in her more general meaning as a vantage point from which ordinary people pictured themselves with the new –and at the time still novel– TV set. Rather than using TV as a screen to watch, in posed shots people turn the TV set into a 'setting' for social performances of self, family, and gender.

POSING PLACE

Architectural features of the home had for many years served as backdrops for picture-taking. Since the late 19th Century, Kodak manuals and how-to books recommended families pose in front of fireplaces or windows, both of which provided theatrical backdrops that framed human subjects. Although the manuals continued to recommend these spots in the postwar period, in snapshots the television set often usurps the role of previous posing places in the home. In part, this is likely due to the fact that small postwar suburban homes were often built without fireplaces, so the TV set was the sole focus of attention. Furthermore, both the fireplace and window became metaphors for television. In the parlance of the era, television was both a 'window on the world' that brought

views of far-off places to the home as well as an 'electronic hearth,' the center for family togetherness.⁽³⁾ The fireplace is an especially interesting case given its historical association with family sentiment. As a posing place, television shares or else takes on the ritual functions previously performed at the hearth. TV sets are adorned with little Christmas trees or Easter baskets as families pose for holiday photos. Children and teens blow out birthday candles or show off confirmation dresses and graduation regalia.

In his book *Stuff*, Daniel Miller (2010) argues that rather than focus on the symbolic meanings of objects, material culture studies should instead attend to the way objects form backdrops for the performance of social relations. Drawing on Erving Goffman, Miller argues for a 'frame' analysis that explores how objects recede from view to become social settings that create an "exterior environment that habituates and prompts us" to act in certain ways (2010, p. 51). Picture-taking is critical to the ways in which objects and architectural features become frames and backdrops for family performance in the home. As television takes the place of previous domestic posing spots, it melts into the background. Rather than watch actors perform on TV, people instead use the TV set as a setting, prop, and backdrop for self-presentation.

The performance of family rituals is often rendered in camera images that display a repertoire of actions, expressions, and gestures involving the TV set. One snapshot (Figure 5) shows a 'just married' couple who place their wedding cake on top of their TV and

pose for a picture that is clearly staged for the camera. In this case, rather than an entertainment medium, the TV set is a utilitarian table with which the couple enacts the roles of bride and groom. Nevertheless, the TV set plays a crucial part in setting the scene of the photo and ensuring gendered behavior.

Poses show people performing –or pretending to perform– all sorts of daily activities in front of the set. Playing at doing something one is actually not doing creates a kind of 'magic circle' around the TV in which people understand they are mutually engaged in acts of make-believe and role-play (much as video games and alternate reality role-playing games operate today). But TV snapshots also speak to the more general fascination with the performative nature of everyday life, which took a decidedly dramaturgical turn in midcentury social theory. In 1956, Erving Goffman published the first version of what would become his seminal book, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959). More specifically addressing the performative nature of everyday life in domestic settings, sociologist Nelson Foote's article "Family Living as Play" claimed the "family home may be most aptly described as a theater" (1955, p. 297). The members of the family, he suggested, were performers in a play enacted for each other: "The husband may be an audience to the wife, or the wife to the husband, or the older child to both" (Foote, 1955, p. 299). Acknowledging the introduction of television into this family theater, Foote nevertheless argued,

by no means is this concept [of the home as a theater] to be reduced to watching television (...). The ration of time spent by family members as an audience for the performance of each other as against time spent in

(3) For TV and windows see Spigel (1992, pp. 95–132 and 168–171). For TV as hearth see, for example, Cecelia Tichi (1991, pp. 42–61).

watching commercial portrayals may signify how well the home rates as a theater in their own eyes. (Foote, 1955, p. 299)

Snapshots often literally picture people performing as entertainers in their homes. Here, the TV setting serves as a theatrical backdrop for family recitals and amateur shows. In numerous snapshots, furniture has been moved in order to set the area around the TV as one would set a stage. Posing in front of his TV set, a man plays (or pretends to play) his accordion. The photo includes an audience for the performance by way of a large mirror placed on the wall just behind him. The mirror reflects a second man (rather a floating head) who appears to be sitting on a couch watching, or at least listening to the accordion performance. In this and similar photos, the mirror functions as what Michel Foucault (1967/1997) calls a 'heterotopic' space, an 'other space' that reorients and reorders the dominant spatial arrangements in everyday life. As captured by the camera, the mirror reflects but also reconfigures social relations of domesticity in terms of spectator reactions to a performance. In some snapshots, the TV screen itself takes on the mirror's function, offering faint glimpses of spectators sitting on sofas watching people perform in front of the TV for the snapshot camera. Whether in the mirror or through the screen, reflections of spectators highlight the way a TV home can easily morph into a home theater.

As I have argued elsewhere, the 'home theater' was a potent metaphor for television (Spigel, 1992). As early as the late 19th Century, futurologists predicted the advent of a televisual-like device, enthusing over the images transmitted into the home over the

ether. In 1912, the mass periodical *The Independent* announced the imminent arrival of the 'Future Home Theater' through a combination of film and disk (or 'talking pictures') sent through the telephone wires to "every home, so that one can go to the theater without leaving the sitting room" (Gilliam, 1912, p. 836). At midcentury, the home theater became both a common practice and an industrial metaphor for the TV experience. Advertisements for television sets routinely referred to TV as a 'home theater,' and programs adopted titles like *Texaco Star Theatre* and *Admiral Broadway Revue*. The industry's promotion of TV as a virtual theatrical venue encouraged viewers to conceptualize the new medium as such. The performative TV snapshots resonate with this televisual context and reinforce the theatricality of everyday life and the conception of home as stage.

PORTAL SPACE

In addition to home-staging, TV snapshots foreground TV's use as a portal object and ritual space through which people –especially women– marked journeys away from home. In numerous photos, women pose in outerwear like furs, shawls, coats, gloves, and purses that indicate leave-taking behavior. In Figures 10, 11, and 12 the cocktail dress and stole suggest an exciting nighttime date, while the presence of the weatherman on the TV screen reinforces the 'going out' scenario. The pose gesture outwards, indicating the relation between the metaphorical TV 'window on the world' and the literal living room door. Nevertheless, the framed baby picture on top of the TV ties this going-out scenario to the woman's role as mother, imbuing the TV set with ambivalent meanings and functions in images of women and home.

Such snapshots contradict the 1950s sociological studies that claimed TV helped foster women's sense of loneliness and isolation in the home.⁽⁴⁾ By the 1960s, female complaints about television crystalized, particularly in the wake of Betty Friedan's *The Feminine Mystique* (1963) that spoke to the boredom of the 'occupation housewife' role. One year after the book's publication, Friedan published a two-part essay in *TV Guide*, "Television and the Feminine Mystique" in which she lashed out at TV's image of woman as a "household drudge who spends her (...) boring days dreaming of love – and plotting revenge fantasies against her husband" (1964, p. 8). The trope of the isolated woman was a constant refrain in popular culture: women's magazines, television programs, and films often told tales of housewives trapped by their TV sets. Even the single girl was not immune: a 1959 article in *Ebony* titled "City of Single Women" presents TV as the last resort for lonely working girls who have problems getting dates. A photograph shows two bachelorettes spending a "quiet evening in front of [their] TV set" ("City of Single Women," 1959, p. 19). In other words, TV is the compensatory object for the unwed. In 1962, *Cosmopolitan* editor Helen Gurley Brown expanded on this logic in her bestselling book *Sex and the Single Girl*, advising readers to "have a TV set for quiet little evenings at home (...) but not too great a TV set or you'll never get out of your apartment" (pp. 135–136).

Perhaps in response to concerns about loneliness, boredom, sexual frustration, and isolation, advertisers marketed television sets in ads that displayed glamorously dressed couples watching TV. Often published in women's magazines, these ads portrayed women

(4) For examples of such studies see Spigel, 1992, p. 126.

in evening gowns, cocktail dresses, lavish furs. But unlike the snapshots that show women posing in front of the set, the advertisements depict television as the main visual attraction for social occasions. Furthermore, in advertising scenarios –even ones that feature women dressed for theater dates or ballroom dancing– women are often represented as housewife hostesses, welcoming guests and/or serving snacks and drinks. Conversely, TV snapshots stage, document, and memorialize the romance of social occasions outside the home. By focusing on human bodies in front of the set, rather than families watching TV screens, the snapshots show how women used TV as a material object through which to attract attention to their own glamour and to stage their social lives outside the domestic enclosure.

UNCANNY SPACE

TV had a dual relation to human poses. It served as a backdrop or frame for performance, but it also transmitted ethereal ‘live’ TV performances into the home. In the 1950s, broadcasters and TV critics especially valued television’s ‘liveness’ –not just TV’s technical capacity for live transmission, but also the aesthetic construction of intimacy, immediacy, and simultaneity that makes viewers feel as if they are transported to public events unfolding in real-time. TV set manufacturers advertised liveness as a phenomenological feature of the TV experience by, for example, showing television performers popping out of the TV set or residents in the home giving televised dogs biscuits right through the screen. In its ideal form, TV would give audiences a feeling of ‘being there’ on the scene, or what media theorists now refer to as ‘tele-presence.’

In snapshots, the tele-present places and performers on the TV screen often seem to merge with the material space of the home and the residents in it. Here, TV’s liveness is coupled with the liveliness and lived-in-ness of domestic life depicted in snapshots. The significance of this merger rests in the virtual, and often uncanny, dimensions of tele-presence. TV is not alive, but its ability to turn on makes it ‘lifelike.’ The previously discussed snapshot of the weather forecast is a case in point, as the space of the picture transmitted on screen literally appears to dissolve into the living room. The weatherman even forms a relationship with the woman, ambiguously posing on screen but also posing along with her for the snapshot camera. In other cases, TV appears as a kind of extra face in the snapshot, especially in photos where people seem to embrace the set. These ‘touching photographs,’ to borrow a term from Margaret Olin (2012), give the television set a kind of quasi-human status, provoking TV’s uncanny doublings of human and nonhumans and its ontological confusions of space.


Along these lines, numerous snapshots are trick shots. In the simplest versions, people paste pictures of themselves on the TV screen, but others go so far as to empty out their TV chassis and pose –as if performing– inside their television sets. These vernacular trick shots self-reflexively play with the same ontological questions and uncanny aspects of ‘live’ TV: they evoke the uncanniness of ‘tele-presence’ by turning the resident’s body into an image that appears to be transmitted on screen (Figures 13 and 14). Other snapshots feature toddlers walking into the screen’s ghostly abyss, an image reminiscent of Steven Spielberg’s ‘Poltergeist’ (1982)

in which a little girl is sucked into her TV set by angry household ghosts. Long before Spielberg’s ghost story, snapshots presented the figure of a child –or alternatively a pet– who appears to have an innocent curiosity about what is real vs. televised space (Figure 15). These poltergeist snapshots hark back to nineteenth-century practices of spirit photography, which as Tom Gunning (2010) argues, tended to “collapse and dissolve conventional space and undo familiar orientations” (2010, p. 128) much in the way I am suggesting that the TV snapshots merged tele-presence with material spaces and re-oriented normative (spectator) relations to TV.

In his “Little Screens” series, photographer Lee Friedlander captures this uncanny, even creepy, aspect of TV. In Nashville, 1963 he fills the screen with a woman’s face (Figure 18). The woman’s eyes stare outward, reversing the normal order of TV spectatorship by appearing to ‘watch’ the room. Likewise, the TV acquires lifelike qualities as it ‘poses’ for the picture and returns the gaze at the camera (and at the viewer). While produced through highly aestheticized optical tricks, Friedlander’s photograph captures the more quotidian sensibilities in TV snapshots, especially when TV sets reflect or transmit human forms.

TV Snapshots reveal spatial practices in domestic environments that go beyond the sedentary act of spectatorship. Today, these snapshots function as what Ann Cvetkovich (2003) calls an ‘archive of feelings’ providing a sense of intimate, unspoken, and ephemeral encounters with the past. As vernacular images, they indicate the ordinary affects of television, often evoking the lived-in spaces and social life of the home, sometimes gesturing to the uncanny doublings of lived space

and TV's ethereal transmissions. But in all cases, the photos return to us as memory spaces of a time once lived. Now, at a moment when television has morphed into digital and mobile platforms, these snapshots speak to the 'that has been' of an older mode of TV and everyday life when television was still a thing in the living room.

I will end by sharing my own TV photo that was the inspiration for in this essay and the larger archive I've obsessively amassed. The picture tells an ordinary story, but one that seems to have been repeated time and time again. It is now a memory space, a text full of the affective sensibilities that childhood photos have for their poser. But as just one of many, it also indicates a history shared by myriad people in their first TV homes. 

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