

As Seen on TV

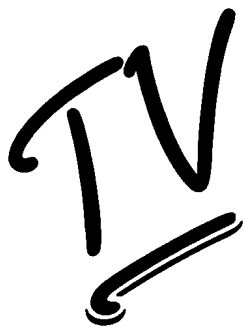
The Visual Culture
of Everyday Life
in the 1950s



KARAL ANN MARLING

Karal Ann Marling

As Seen on



*The Visual Culture
of Everyday Life
in the 1950s*

Harvard University Press · Cambridge, Massachusetts · London, England

Copyright © 1994 by the President and Fellows
of Harvard College

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Fifth printing, 1999

First Harvard University Press paperback edition, 1996

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Marling, Karal Ann.

As seen on TV : the visual culture of everyday life in
the 1950s / Karal Ann Marling.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references (p.) and index.

ISBN 0-674-04882-2 (cloth)

ISBN 0-674-04883-0 (pbk.)

1. United States—Social life and customs—1945–1970.

2. Television broadcasting—Social aspects—United States.

3. Popular culture—United States—History—20th century.

I. Title. II. Title: As seen on television.

E169.O2.M3534 1994

973.92—dc20 94-2814

Designed by Gwen Frankfeldt

As Seen on TV



Watching TV: the American family, glued to the set, in 1957.

As Seen on TV



The MIT-designed Monsanto House of the Future at Disneyland, 1957: real life inside a giant TV set.

Contents

Prologue 1

1 Mamie Eisenhower's New Look 8

2 Hyphenated Culture: Painting by Numbers in the New Age of Leisure 50

3 Disneyland, 1955: The Place That Was Also a TV Show 86

4 Autoeroticism: America's Love Affair with the Car in the Television Age 128

5 When Elvis Cut His Hair: The Meaning of Mobility 164

6 Betty Crocker's Picture Cook Book: The Aesthetics of Food in the 1950s 202

7 Nixon in Moscow: Appliances, Affluence, and Americanism 242

Afterword 284

Notes 289

Illustration Credits 319

Acknowledgments 321

Index 323

Prologue

Giant (1956) is one of the great, big-screen epics of the 1950s. It's got everything. A radiant Liz Taylor. Rock Hudson in his first major role. James Dean, teen idol, wearing blue denim jeans, in his last. Dean died in a car crash during post-production work on the film. "There were only two people in the fifties," remembers the actor Martin Sheen. "Elvis Presley, who changed the music, and James Dean, who changed our lives."¹

Giant is long, too. *Gone with the Wind*, to which Louella Parsons, for one, compared George Stevens's dynastic saga of oil, prejudice, and married life in the American West, is only thirty-seven minutes longer. And the scope is equally vast: cultivated Maryland belle Leslie Lynnton (Taylor) is wooed by raw Texas rancher Bick Benedict (Hudson) in the flapper era, but by the end of the story, as the couple sit together minding their grandchildren, the 1950s have arrived with a vengeance. The big house on Benedict's spread—a gloomy, three-story Victorian horror that Warner Brothers shipped from Hollywood to Marfa, Texas, in pieces on five railroad flatcars—has become a white-and-gold, ranch-house-moderne fantasy of sectional sofas and recumbent cocktail tables, with a picture window, a swimming pool, a patio, and a built-in barbecue out back.

In the form of Cadillacs, oil wells, private planes, mink stoles, twin beds, and dresses from Neiman-Marcus, civilization has clearly tamed

2 *As Seen on TV*

the frontier. A film critic of the 50s thought the key image in the picture was that of the glossy Elizabeth Taylor in a Cadillac convertible. She stood for the awesome power that flowed from generations of wealth and a half-million acres of real estate.² But others thought *Giant* was about new money, about diamond rings on fingers still puckered from the washtub.

Edna Ferber, who wrote the novel upon which Warner Brothers loosely based *Giant*, was fascinated by the Texas *nouveaux riches*. She did her research in Texas in 1948 and 1949, when the place was awash in new oil money; for Ferber, the Lone Star State became a metaphor for the postwar United States and its material prosperity. Her description of the company town where the Chicano ranch hands and their wives shop attests to an abundance that transcends old class barriers, even as Ferber mocks the products on display. "Plate glass windows reflected, glitter for glitter, the dazzling aluminum and white enamel objects within," she writes of the show windows. "Vast refrigerators, protean washing machines, the most acquisitive of vacuum cleaners. . . . Plastic things, paper things, rayon things, Gadgets."³

The filmscript is another matter, though. Written around a TV set during the Army-McCarthy hearings, it attacks contemporary social issues implicit in but hardly central to the novel. The Mexican workers on the Benedict ranch, for example, stand for all people of color, and for the civil rights movement in the year of the Montgomery bus boycott: the movie ends with a vision of future racial integration, two Benedict heirs, one white and the other brown, sharing a single playpen (in case the point is not abundantly clear, the children are juxtaposed with a white lamb and a Black Angus calf). The American family will solve the largest national problems at the level of father and mother and children, ranch house and Cadillac. Jett Rink (Dean), the villain of the piece, is an orphan, an outsider who pines for the amenities of house and home but winds up the unhappy owner of a fancy, empty hotel.

Despite changes in emphasis, however, the rich, textural qualities of Ferber's original persist, mainly in the details—in the set decoration by Boris Levin, and the flouncy pastel dresses by Moss Mabry. And the burnished look of the film, especially in the chic interiors,

undercuts the ostensible social message. In the end, *Giant* is a house-centered family melodrama, a domestic Western which, despite the big screen, has the feel of an evening of television, interrupted by commercials for new cars and plush wall-to-wall carpeting. In the nullity of the flat, brown Texas landscape, the house assumes visual as well as symbolic importance; it is the changes in its appointments from scene to scene that create the illusion of time passing. The epic dimensions of the story, in other words, depend almost completely upon the labors of designers and dressmakers. History is pure style. A 1952 reviewer of the book accused Ferber of churning out a pot-boiler with "money-snob appeal for the masses."⁴ The movie is a celebration of *House Beautiful* interiors over exteriors, Liz Taylor's domain over Rock Hudson's, perhaps, the bright, modern home and all the artful paraphernalia that fills it over issues, 9-to-5 careers, and an inconvenient, dark, and dingy past.

In his pioneering study of Hollywood films of the 1950s, Peter Biskind argues that the pictorial emphasis on the house puts the consciousness of Taylor's Leslie at the very center of *Giant*. She is the ("Queen of Hearth,") and Mother (not Father) knows best on the Beredict ranch. It is the cinematic housewife, he says, who shapes and finally controls the man's environment and his values.⁵ But secure in their artfully contrived setting, Leslie and Bick don't seem very different by the time the 50s come to Texas: they are full domestic partners, both of them equally at ease with the postwar gadgets, the low-slung living room suites, with tail fins and togetherness.

Despite the classical man-and-wife bickering and their ultimate renunciation of the two-ton, forty-foot mobile home that literally propels the plot, Desi and Lucy (as newlyweds Nicky and Tacy Collins) seem delighted with all of the above, too, in *The Long, Long Trailer* of 1954. If *Giant* and movies like it tried to outdo TV in spectacle, sumptuousness, scale, and stereo sound, *The Long, Long Trailer* represents a (concession to the popularity of *I Love Lucy* and small-screen, middle-class, family sitcoms) MGM made the movie in June and July of 1953, when the Arnazes' weekly comedy series was on hiatus and at a time when the studio's own contract players were still forbidden to appear on television. The idea was to wean addicts away from the

4 *As Seen on TV*

black-and-white tube (which offered *free* entertainment, of course) with familiar characters enhanced by the magic of Hollywood. In the case of Desi and Lucy, the moguls toyed with the idea of 3-D but settled for Ansicolor: for the first time, ads proclaimed, America would see its favorite dizzy redhead in her true colors.⁶ And as in the Texas of *Giant*, the Western landscape through which the honeymooners drag their home on wheels pales in comparison to the trailer's colorful interior, replete with built-in sectionals and appliances, and the camera's pastel views of luxurious roadside trailer courts which are really instant, overnight suburbs, with swimming pools. If the Benedicts are upwardly mobile, beyond the wildest dreams of the audience, the Collins family is simply mobile. But in both cases, the viewer's eye is seduced by creature comforts, all shiny and new.

So is Tacy-Lucy, in her fashionable, wide-skirt dress and clutch coat (by Helen Rose), as she drags her intended off to the annual trailer show to inspect a lime-green and turquoise model as lavishly decked out as herself. She likes the stove with the glass picture window in the door of the oven "so you don't have to open it to look in." And when the papers are signed and the trailer loaded up with wedding presents—matching sets of pastel towels and kitchen gadgets—she lays plans for home improvements, in the form of a deep freeze and a TV set. The latter, she argues, is the telling detail that will make a rolling house into a true home, where a husband can enjoy a relaxing evening in the bosom of his family.

Nicky-Desi is the one who must cope with his bride's several domestic enthusiasms. He pilots the spiffy new Mercury convertible with the automatic top that pulls the trailer. He puts on his jeans and jacks up the rear end when a rainstorm threatens to upend the sunken living room. He waxes enthusiastic over her stabs at gourmet cooking. Only when Tacy's latest hobby—collecting rocks from tourist sites along the route—threatens to send convertible, trailer, glass-front range, and the couple's vast wardrobe plummeting into a gorge in the Rockies does Nicky make a half-hearted effort to rebel against the dollhouse domesticity that has led him to the brink of disaster. But there's something a little disingenuous about his protests. In 1953 Desilu Enterprises, the growing Arnaz TV empire, was licensing *I Love*

Lucy dolls, aprons, bedroom furniture, and outfits for men and women, including a line of “Desi Denims” for vacation and leisure wear. *I Love Lucy* kitchen flooring, with a “thrilling plastic glow,” was being advertised in the pages of *McCall's*. The same glow of color and style—the seductive blue glow of a TV set—lights up *The Long, Long Trailer*.⁷

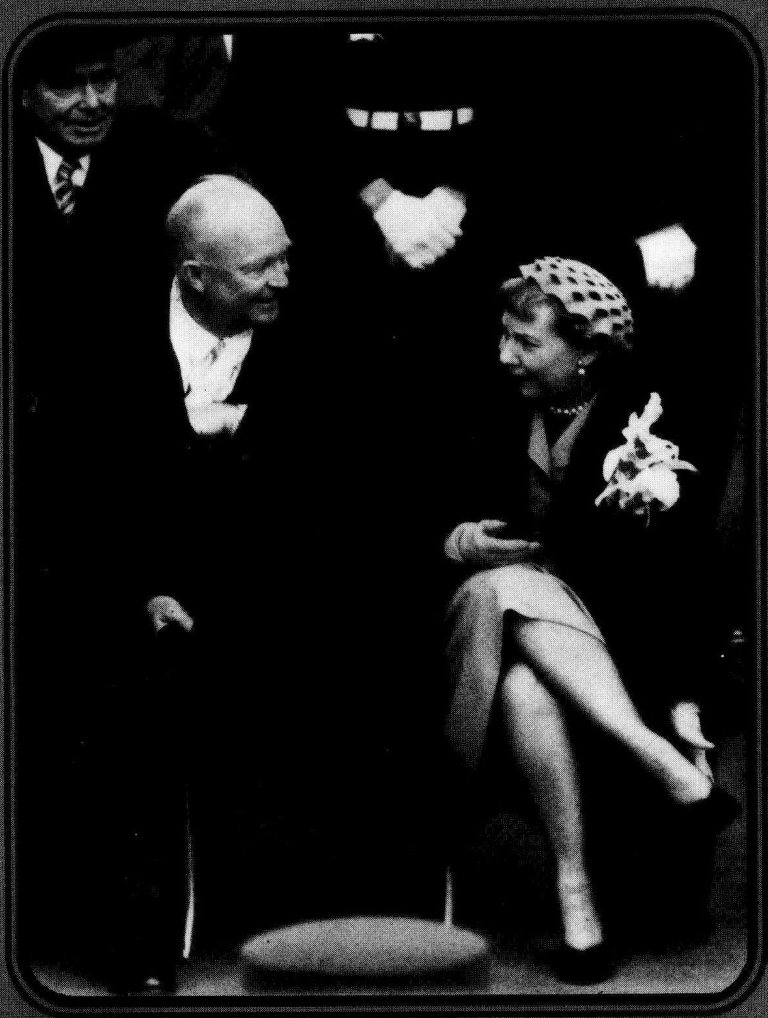
There isn't much difference, however, between the comedy exploiting the newly made celebrities of the small screen and the epic, illuminated by some of Hollywood's last and brightest superstars. Gender roles, homemaking, the myth of the West, dressing for a part: the same themes resonate through both films, just beneath the texts articulated by their divergent plots. *Giant* and *The Long, Long Trailer* are both set in densely material worlds, crowded with remarkably similar artifacts, too. Whatever the story—farce or ponderous message—the effect is a visual, visceral dazzle, an absorbing sense of pleasure in the act of perusal. Costumes. Things. Things to look at. New things. The latest things. High style. The glass door lets Lucy peep into her oven: she loves it because it lets her see inside. And (seeing is absolutely central to the meaning of the 1950s.) The only thing wrong with movies was that they weren't TV, offering a free look at the contents of other people's lives, and houses, on demand. This book is about dressing up (How do I look?), taking up a hobby (How does this look?), taking a vacation (Look at that!); it's about Cadillacs and rebel teens and cake-mix cakes and how they were adorned and why; about shiny new kitchens with pass-throughs from which the TV set could always be glimpsed and the suburbs they were created for; about parking lots and paintings and plastic crocodiles; and expositions, exhibitions, and TV shows, tailored to the visual sensibility. It's all about what people looked at in the 1950s, and what there was to see.

And who. Stars: Mamie Eisenhower, Elvis Presley, Betty Crocker, Richard Nixon, Grandma Moses, Ed Sullivan, Walt Disney, and Nikita Khrushchev, who wanted more than anything else to see Disneyland during his American tour of 1959. Ike wanted to take him to Levittown to show the Soviet leader how mass production could give everyone a new home just as efficiently as Detroit cranked out new

6 *As Seen on TV*

cars. In the end, both excursions were scrubbed.⁸ But had Khrushchev made it to Disneyland (to "Tomorrowland," therein) he would have seen a house—the Monsanto House of the Future—that resembled a giant TV set, or rather, four of them, protruding from a single stalk like some monstrous electronic flower.

The house was made of plastic panels, cast in sensuous, pliable curves. It was crammed with microwave ovens and pictophones and the latest in domestic gadgetry: it had an "Atoms for Living Kitchen," a vinyl floor with embedded flakes of synthetic pearl, and closed-circuit TV in every room, for looking at one's own stuff. It had regular TV sets, too, for watching *I Love Lucy* or the Wednesday night favorite, *Disneyland* (and other people's no-wax floors) in homey comfort.⁹ For the House of the Future wasn't *that* different, except in its video-syncretic shape, from the standard picture-window model in Levittowns everywhere. And the picture in the picture window was like the picture on the TV set or the view into Lucy's oven. They all provided framed views of what was going on inside. Look! Look at that! So the person sitting in the living room window watching the set was a kind of minor-league star as well as a spectator. Look at me! Look at my house and my new color TV! Life in the 1950s imitated art—as seen on TV.



Ike's 1953 inauguration was one of the first big TV events of the decade. The cameras caught every detail of Mrs. Eisenhower's costume: the mink coat, the silly hat worn over bangs, the suit with the nipped-in waist and flared hipline, the charm bracelet, and high heels that pinched.

Mamie Eisenhower's New Look

In December of 1946, according to legend, (Christian Dior) retreated to the chateau of a friend in Fontainebleau. Fifteen days later he emerged with the sketches for his première collection, his so-called Corolle Line. "We were leaving a period of war, of uniforms, of soldier-women with shoulders like boxers," he later mused. "I turned them into flowers, with soft shoulders, blooming bosoms, waists slim as vine stems, and skirts opening up like blossoms." The world press saw Dior's designs for the first time in Paris on February 12, 1947—and came away enchanted. After seven long years of wartime make-do, rationing, and stringent rules governing the amount of fabric permissible in a given garment, after seven years of skimpy, asexual suits and silence from the great French couturiers, fashion and femininity were back at last. Dior's suits were sensuous, positively luxurious—gloriously full in the skirt, and topped off with great, extravagant cartwheel hats. Nipped at the waist, rounded at the hips and bustline, sloping gracefully through the shoulder, they defined the body's every womanly, *viva la difference* contour. The silhouette was so different, so utterly novel that *Life* magazine christened it ("The New Look.")¹

The New Look. It was a phrase like "The Middle Ages" or "The Four Freedoms." It signified an entity, an institution to be reckoned with, permanent, significant. And Dior's line was all those things—