As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s (pp. 97-98)

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Karal Ann Marling examines the importance of style, image, and social consciousness in As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s. Marling explores the fascination Americans had in style as well as bold, vivid colors. She discusses such 1950s phenomena as women's clothing, paint by numbers, Disneyland, automobiles, Elvis, Betty Crocker's Picture Cookbook, and Richard Nixon's meeting with Russian leader Nikita Khruschev. Marling describes the 1950s as a decade where visual culture reigned supreme.

Marling suggests that TV advertisements changed the way Americans viewed products as well as why they purchased. Consequently, TV directly promoted sales, even for products that were in demand, but not necessary. In the 1950s, TV replaced the door-to-door salesman. Advertisers held a captive audience with perfect products in the right color and size for everyone, conveying the importance of luxury and ease to busy mothers and housewives. But they sold much more than products. Marling argues that advertisers used TV and magazine advertisements to offer solutions to problems. In addition, they presented a glossy, perfect, picture image of how people and things should look. In a very real sense, TV models served as personal style consultants for every need, and viewers never had to leave their home to find the latest products.

Marling suggests consumers desired visually appealing items that represented success to shed the drab, war-ridden 1940s. TV became an important part of the postwar culture. Consequently, advertisers offered brightly colored packaging that appealed to consumers needs and conveyed success. Marling argues that the 1950s was a colorful and visually stimulating decade—one in which appearances really mattered.

Readers may question why Marling chose the visual culture of the 1950s for her work, since every decade had a visual culture of its own. Beneath the glitz and glamour, which were standard accoutrements on many cars, clothes, and appliances during the 1950s, Marling examines why some products appealed to consumers. For example, ready-made cake mixes and TV dinners allowed wives and mothers who worked outside the home to prepare meals quickly. Those items also provided
the illusion that women could have the best of both worlds—home and career. Sedan automobiles were "family cars" where mom, dad, and the children spent family time together. Bright, fashionable clothing conveyed success. Even if purchased on credit, the latest appliances, garments, and kitchen gadgets suggested that families knew what to purchase to keep up with, or in many cases pass, the Joneses.

Marling focuses too much time and energy on how famous people contributed to visual culture and style. Overall, As Seen on TV presented a narrow view of style from the top-down. Marling could have examined from the bottom-up how a suburban housewife, an African-American or a lower-class person perceived and reacted to an advertiser's bold, fresh new look. Were there other women who influenced fashion in the 1950s? Elvis Presley's trademark black hair and pink Cadillacs were popular icons, as were Pat Boone's white buck shoes. But what were the trademarks of Chuck Berry and Bill Haley and the Comets? Did Rosemary Clooney, The Andrews Sisters, and Marilyn Monroe contribute to the visual culture of the 1950s?

Marling provides numerous pictures of actual advertised products in the 1950s. Readers may find themselves lost in a cleverly designed maze where everyone wore the latest colors, drove the newest model car, and lived in a perfectly furnished home. However, Marling was short-sighted to suggest that TV told Americans who they were in the 1950s. Consumers made choices. In turn, advertisers made popular products available. Readers should keep in mind that TV viewers saw black and white, since television was not colorized until the 1960s. What Marling suggests, and cleverly so, is how advertisers made everything look bright, bold and fresh—desirable enough to purchase. Image was everything, and advertisers knew it.

Marling argues the 1950s was a time when Americans celebrated economic prosperity. However, the Korean War and economic recessions were part of the brightly colored decade she describes. TV influenced the visual culture, at least for those fortunate enough to afford one. Critical analysis of the 1950s might reveal a decade no quite so bold and beautifully-clad as the one Marling described.

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