

1998

As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s

Alan Dismukes

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Dismukes, Alan (1998) "As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s," *Vulcan Historical Review*. Vol. 2, Article 14.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol2/iss1998/14>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

AS SEEN ON TV: THE VISUAL CULTURE OF EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE 1950S

By Karal Ann Marling

(Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts. c. 1994. Pp. 328.)

Karal Ann Marling's *As Seen on TV* is a fascinating look at television's development of the visual culture of America during the 1950s. Marling argues that the influence of television gave unprecedented importance to visual images, resulting in a popular culture obsessed with color, shape, and style. Marling supports her case with a wealth of evidence drawn from a variety of cultural aspects. The result is as entertaining as it is convincing.

Marling explores in rich, exhaustive detail a range of cultural phenomena. The fashions popularized by Mamie Eisenhower, the paint-by-numbers hobby craze, Disneyland, autoeroticism, and Betty Crocker's picture cookbook are presented as examples of how the visual image dominated American culture. Each phenomenon is described in terms of color, shape, style, and its presentation to the public in the visual media. Marling's writing is fast-paced and thorough, yet possesses a dry, witty style, as illustrated by the following passage describing the sex appeal of an automobile ad: "there were also the legendary Jordan ads in which the roadster became a wild horse, the parkway the prairies of the untamed West, and the New Woman in the driver's seat a girl who was—ahem—just rarin' to go." (p. 137)

Marling describes 1950s America as a nation that fell in love with new colors, shapes, and styles. As women devoured the New Look fashions popularized by the First Lady, so too did Americans pursue other new and interesting things. For example, flashy new colors like pink, lime, and turquoise became popular. "The sudden ubiquity of pink seemed to signify a culture in love with novelty, change, and visual stimulation." (p. 41) Designs and styles were changed regularly to take advantage

of Americans' newfound fondness of having the latest and best. "With the help of the ad copywriter, status and symbolism became compelling reasons for buying a new car, even though the old, black Ford out in the yard still ran like a top." (p. 136)

Marling describes the evolution of Sloanism, "the annual style change named for Alfred P. Sloan, president of General Motors." "The object of superficial changes in detail on a yearly basis, Sloan said, was 'to create demand for new value and, so to speak, create a certain amount of dissatisfaction with past models as compared with the new one.'" (p. 136) Sloanism provides an excellent example of the American public's passion for shape and style changes, as each new model year saw the addition of more functionless chrome: "'gorp' (a.k.a. superfluous embellishment) in the form of 'bombs' or 'Dagmars' (so called after the reigning late-night TV bombshell with the single name) protruding breasts that were utterly devoid of utility." (p. 141) Each year saw the evolution of ever larger fenders that by 1957 had become lethally sharp tailfins. Style, shape, and color had eclipsed utility as a sales attribute.

Marling provides endless examples of the pervasive influence of television. "The television crept into many homes disguised as a kind of electronic version of the colonial fireplace." (p. 188) Newly introduced TV dinners served on TV tray-tables demonstrated the force with which television was affecting American home life. Marling notes that even the framed view of a television picture tube became a cultural icon reproduced in such forms as the packaging for Silly Putty and TV dinners, the architecture of the Monsanto House of the Future, and even the look-in windows of ovens and front-loading washers. As Marling notes, "They all provided framed views of what was going on inside. Look! Look at that!" (p. 6).

Overall, Karal Marling's *As Seen on TV* is a convincingly rich examination of the visual images of 1950s American popular culture. Marling uses an abundance of examples to support her argument that television had an immense impact on Ameri-

can cultural tastes, particularly in regard to colors, form, and style. For those seeking to understand America in the 1950s, Marling's work is an enjoyable and enlightening read.

ALAN DISMUKES
Graduate Student