

Elena Levine: Welcome to this Field Notes interview. I am Elena Levine, professor in the Department of Journalism, Advertising and Media Studies at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and today I'm interviewing Lynn Spigel, Professor and Frances E. Willard Chair of Screen Cultures in the Northwestern University School of Communications, Department of Radio, Television, Film. Today is Friday, March 24, 2017 and we're here in Chicago, Illinois at the Fairmont Hotel for the SCMS Conference. Professor Spigel is well known for her work in American television and cultural history, feminist media studies and the intersections of television and modern art. Her first book, "Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Post War America," initiated a scholarly turn toward cultural histories of television that placed questions of gender, space, and domesticity at the center of the field.

Her edited volumes including "Welcome to the Dream House: Popular Media and Post War Suburbs," which brought together 10 of her most influential essays have also been important influences. Her next book, "TV by Design: Modern Art and the Rise of Network Television," has brought yet another crucial intervention by demonstrating in careful detail the interwoven histories of American network TV and the world of modern art. Helping us to think about the deep connection between cultural realms often assumed to be wholly distinct. She continues to pursue her ground-breaking research on television and other media, technologies, domestic space, and everyday life in her most recent work. I'm so happy to be talking with her today about her many contributions to our field. Lynn, I'd like to start by talking about some of your earliest influences. What role did television or film play in your early life? Is there something in your childhood and adolescence that leads your path towards the scholarly direction it follows?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I mean, I think I've talked about this a number of times, but I grew up in a TV household and that my father owned a TV store and was a TV repairman. I think when I started writing my dissertation, which became "Make Room for TV," it didn't dawn on me the kind of Oedipal connection for about a year. You know? Then it was like, "Oh! Gee!"

Elena Levine: That's so interesting that it seems so logical now in retrospect but that the connection ...

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, so obviously that must have had some kind of deep relation to why I wrote that dissertation. Although when I went to graduate school, it wasn't initially to study TV.

Elena Levine: Well, let's turn to that then. So tell me about your initial decision to go to graduate school at UCLA and kind of what you were thinking you were going to study, and how your path diverged from there.

Lynn Spigel: Well, when I was an undergraduate, I was a joint Studio Art and English major. And this is in the late 70s and there weren't very many film programs, but I was

at school at SUNY Buffalo, which had this thriving media arts, video art context, so I did take film classes there and I think I got very interested in that. Then I took some time off for several years and just went to San Francisco and actually ran a gallery there and worked at this magazine called "Coevolution Quarterly," which came out of the "Whole Earth Catalog." That was this whole interesting other world. I think, like many twenty-somethings it was like just kind of ... I always wanted to be a professor, I think, from the day I got to school at Buffalo, so I continued to take film classes at Berkeley and SF State when I lived there, and just decided film was something I was really interested in. I went to UCLA thinking I would study Nazi cinema. [Laughs]

Elena Levine: Whoa!

Lynn Spigel: I really had a conversion and somehow wound up writing a TV thesis on game shows so that was the end of it.

Elena Levine: That was your Master's thesis was on game shows?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah. Yeah.

Elena Levine: Oh, okay. Interesting. What specifically were you looking at?

Lynn Spigel: Well, UCLA was really a film theory school in those days so it was kind of odd to study TV, but there was one professor who wasn't there very long who was teaching TV named Kathy Montgomery who wrote this very good book called "Target: Prime Time."

Elena Levine: I know that book.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: I love that book.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, so-

Elena Levine: I've relied on it.

Lynn Spigel: So, I kind of taught the undergrad TV class with her and so she was influential around that. I was actually working with Nick Brown who became interested in TV during this period, and he had hired me as his research assistant to go to studio audiences around town and a lot of them were game shows. Then I just started ... I worked at the UCLA archives so I started taping madly game shows off air and so they were about daytime game shows, which were on daytime in that period.

Elena Levine: Yeah. Wow. I didn't know that part of the story. That's really fascinating. How did you get from that early turn towards looking at game shows and just starting to think about TV to the dissertation project?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I mean, that's a good question because so many graduate students are just like, "What am I gonna... what's my idea? What am I gonna write about?" I think obviously there was some kind of natural evolution from writing about television. The game show thing actually used a lot of narrative theory about, kind of, reading Barthes and hermeneutics, and mixing that with Marx and questions of commodity culture, right? More than anything writing that I kind of taught myself, how to write a long project and kind of thinking about how to write about television. Then the following year in my PhD I started this... I really did start making room for TV the first year of my PhD because I first was going to write a seminar paper on how TV sets were advertised, and then I went to the library and was looking for ads.

We didn't have YouTube or digital ad archives, so I went to the old library and the stacks and I decided I'd just looked through books of magazines which were in the stacks still those days. As luck will have it, being small, I started on the lower shelves and there were the women's magazines. So it was serendipity as archival research really! Then when I looked in those, I realized, "Oh, there was this whole other world. Not just ads." It's like this whole series of debates and questions about television and women.

Elena Levine: Yeah, I love that, that it really came from the source.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: Right, you know, it came from the materials leading you to the questions.

Lynn Spigel: Well, I think it's so important I always tell students you should not go to archives totally knowing what you are looking for because it will find you if you keep your eyes open, you know?

Elena Levine: Yeah. What was the kind of intellectual climate at UCLA in terms of you turning to look at things like women's magazines and talking about television? Was that something that your fellow graduate students were doing as well, or were you sort of this person doing this strange thing that nobody else was doing?

Lynn Spigel: I would say the strange thing no one else was doing. It was scary a bit because... I mean, I had a lot of support because one of my teachers, Janet Bergstrom was the editor of "Camera Obscura" and she and Connie Penley invited me to be on "Camera Obscura," so of course, that was an amazingly lucky thing for an MA student to find themselves doing, right? Through that door I got interested in, kind of, feminist theory and history but it was all Laura Mulvey "gaze" who, of course, who doesn't love Laura Mulvey? Clearly, that was really influential. You know, it was a kind of approach that was really different from looking at TV. I

just kind of started thinking about homes and architecture because as a little girl I'd go out... when I think back it's more memory reconstruction here, when I go out with my father on these kind of TV repair calls.

I do remember vividly sitting in these homes that were better than mine and they had these beautiful bay windows in Long Island and I would kind of sit there and think about their decor. So when I looked in those magazines it really kind of sparked this whole kind of memory of the *mise-en-scène* of every day life, in a way, which again, maybe at the time I was just developing those ideas. I kind of went outside of the realm of my department's offerings and started looking in the architectural library and thinking about how to kind of approach TV. It just seemed to me that approaching TV through film theory was just not going to work. At least then.

Elena Levine: Mm-hmm (affirmative), right. Well, and there weren't that many people talking about TV.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I mean, I do think the work on visuality and the gaze was really important, clearly, always, to looking at TV. The textual approach to TV, at least at that point, I mean, things have really changed now. It just seemed like kind of a dead end.

Elena Levine: Were you reading, or taking courses, or being influenced by fields like cultural history, American studies...

Lynn Spigel: Nope. [Laughs] We weren't allowed at UCLA to take classes outside our department.

Elena Levine: Wow.

Lynn Spigel: So I had no classes outside my department. It was all sort of like just going to libraries and doing... trying to read across disciplines, but I didn't even necessarily know what a sociologist would do with TV, or you know, I just was kind of doing that... I mean, there was one book that I read before I went to grad school that really had influenced my thinking, which was Sol Worth's book on ethnographic video. A really old book. You know, he was somebody who proposed giving cameras to people and you would get indigenous community... and so that was always something that kind of interested me, but you know, the links to what I was doing weren't clear.

Elena Levine: Did you think of yourself as a TV scholar by the time you were finishing up?

Lynn Spigel: Well, there *were* other people, like when I was a graduate student, the first SCMS I went to was somewhere in maybe '83 or '84. Probably '83. I was on a panel... I forget what the panel was actually about. Maybe it was about game shows or something, but Jane Feuer had sort of taken me under her wing and... I have this memory that Horace Newcomb was there although he told me he

wasn't recently, so... like a false memory. But I don't know, it was a moment... that was a moment where I realized there were other people, and of course, E. Ann Kaplan's book "Regarding TV" came out so that was important. Jan Radway's book on the romance novel, Tania Modleski's book "Loving with a Vengeance." It wasn't like I was the only person thinking about TV or popular culture.

Elena Levine: Right, yeah, that makes me think about sort of the feminist bent of a lot of that early TV scholarship of which your work is quite important as well. Can you talk a little bit about that? In what ways was feminism and questions of gender really central to that moment of burgeoning television scholarship?

Lynn Spigel: Well, clearly it was central.

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: It was real central to the development of film studies as well, so... But I think it was central in a bit different ways because, if in film studies it had to do with point of view, and object of the gaze, and questions of sadism, masochism, fetishes, right? In television it seemed to be more about every day-ness. The other influence for me besides film feminism was the kind of feminism that came out of British cultural studies. That was a class at UCLA that my dissertation advisor Nick Brown taught. He kind of, I would say, brought the kind of Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige all that stuff, in and around '82 or '83.

That was really important and a really important moment there was the... I think it was 19, maybe '86, British cultural studies, television studies that Richard Patterson and some other people put on the ITSC, I think it was called, conference in London. Anyway, Stuart Hall was there, Dave Morley was there. That's where I met Charlotte for the first time, Brunsdon. So, that was like, "Oh!" That was really the most important moment for me because I read parts of "Make Room for TV" there and I just met all these people and I realized this is where I fit in.

Elena Levine: Yeah. That's a great picture of that moment because you can see how all these forces came together at once. You know, not just for your career but for -

Lynn Spigel: So many people. Yeah.

Elena Levine: So many studies and multiple people at the same time but it was all happening together. It was really neat. From UCLA you went to UW Madison, right? As an assistant professor in the Department of Communication Arts. Was that a position that you were hired to teach TV and study TV or was it a broader-

Lynn Spigel: It was. The first year I went there it was a visiting position. It actually was... I think I went there on a job interview. When I got there they said, "Oh, well, John Fiske is your competition" so one understands one's not getting the job, right? I

wasn't done with my dissertation. Those were the days, you know, I was really lucky you could still a great job and not be done with your dissertation. They hired me as a visitor and then they kept me on. You know, the next year I got a track job there.

Elena Levine: Oh, okay, so but you and John Fisk started at the same time then?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah. Yeah.

Elena Levine: Okay. Was that ... because it had been such a film focused program was that part of a move to bring new television-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, there was always telecom, so John Fiske was actually the head of telecom and well, I don't know if he was head or what, but you know, obviously David Bordwell was always the head of the comm program, right?

Elena Levine: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Lynn Spigel: And they were very separate. But I decided I wanted to teach both because I came out of a film program. I mean, I still teach film.

Elena Levine: Right.

Lynn Spigel: I don't understand the separation between television and film. I can never understand why people in writing about TV don't know much about film, or vice versa. I mean, obviously there are people that do but I don't think they should be separate fields.

Elena Levine: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Right, and so that seems like that... and you were able to do that to sort of teach those-

Lynn Spigel: It was a little complicated.

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: As you might guess.

Elena Levine: I would guess that, yeah.

Lynn Spigel: I taught film historiography there and I continued to teach that my whole life. Then I taught science fiction film and it was never sort of one or the other.

Elena Levine: Okay, so in the 1990s the Media Center in Madison, which is where all the video tapes at the time were, had this collection on the shelf that was called the Spigel Collection.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: You know, I've just always been curious about where that came from. How you built that up. Where [crosstalk 00:16:47].

Lynn Spigel: Do you remember what was in it?

Elena Levine: Oh, yeah. It had all this great ... I mean, mainly 50s TV, but some classic stuff like "Father Knows Best," you know, "Betty, Girl Engineer" episode, but also, you know, more obscure kinds of things like this great ... I'm blanking on the name of it, but this program that was imagining a housewife in outer space and what her role would be.

Lynn Spigel: Oh, yeah.

Elena Levine: So why does-

Lynn Spigel: I mean, I guess I was always really lucky again, because UCLA had this amazing archive and I worked at the archive. So some of my collections were informed, obviously I couldn't get their programs out, but they were informed by what was there and then I would tape things because it was just the beginning of cable, right? I would tape... there was a lot of stuff on the Christian Broadcast Network. I would tape all these episodes of "Burns and Allen," and "Father Knows Best," and that stuff, because they were the place to go for old TV. The one about the woman in space, which was an episode of men in ...

Elena Levine: Yes.

Lynn Spigel: Right?

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: With Renza Hale. That's actually a Ziv program. So that was from Madison itself. A lot of this stuff, sort of cobbled together stuff I found in archives but also on early cable television that I would just tape.

Elena Levine: Yeah, people used those to teach for many years.

Lynn Spigel: Well, it's a funny thing because you see these things that are just serendipity that you used, and then they become canonized. I think the "Betty, Girl Engineer" episode is really more the fault of Horace Newcomb, right?

Elena Levine: Right, yes.

Lynn Spigel: Who in his and Paul Hirsch's great article... in "[Television as a] Cultural Forum" do an analysis of "Betty, Girl Engineer." It's weird and that's why it is different even though I feel like film and TV should be studied together. They pose different archival and analytical questions because it's not, with TV, like you have you know, a clear canonical text with an author like Hitchcock, or... That

you're going to place together in a series and it makes sense to other people. This was all just, "Oh, this program exists in this Spigel collection and we can show it in class." It sort of just becomes canonized.

Elena Levine: Right.

Lynn Spigel: Right?

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: I know a lot of future scholars would show that "Life of Luigi" episode.

Elena Levine: Oh, yes. Oh, gosh, that just came-

Lynn Spigel: Remember those tapes also came from that underground dealer in L.A. [needs clarification - 00:19:30], so ...

Elena Levine: Ah, okay. Yeah, but it was interesting that these were things that were written about somewhere, right? Like George Lipsitz wrote about "Life of Luigi"-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, some of them, right.

Elena Levine: Then the video was there and so it became this perfect teaching tool. From Madison you moved to USC and from there to Northwestern. Can you tell me about how those moves kind of shaped your identity as a scholar and a teacher?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: [crosstalk 00:19:57] your interests?

Lynn Spigel: I mean, you know, I kind of liked moving around because it was like a... you would like... In those days you'd get a job and you'd be... at USC and Madison, this sole TV scholar and obviously that's not true because Fiske was there. I'd say stop but it's kind of an interesting mistake I just made. [Laughs]

Anyway, you can really kind of set up a program just with yourself or a few other people from the start so it was kind of challenging. When I moved to USC, there weren't really TV scholars there and so you could kind of start something. When I moved to Northwestern, Mimi was there so it became a completely other graduate program for most bureaucratic reasons that are uninteresting for anyone to listen to. So I became the graduate director and kind of created this program Screen Culture. I really enjoyed creating programs and curriculum.

Elena Levine: That's something that you felt you've been able to do at these various places?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: Is that ... If you've had to sit and talk about sort of significant marks you've made on the various programs in which you've taught, would you talk about the graduate programs or what kinds of things have been significant do you think?

Lynn Spigel: I think the graduate programs were always really significant to me. I really like... I like teaching. Period. But, I kind of liked mentoring graduate students my whole career and I think at this point it's truly one of the greatest pleasures to see your students now leading programs and writing fabulous books, and it's a great thing.

Elena Levine: Great. We talked a little bit about kind of the feminist dimension of your work and the sort of feminist bent to television and film studies both. Can you talk a little bit about that kind of trajectory in your career in terms of Camera... being involved with "Camera Obscura" and from there moving on to Consoling Passions and various writing projects-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: -that were forwarding a sense of a feminist television media studies?

Lynn Spigel: Well, I kind of really enjoy editing and helping to form projects. Those were all in that kind of realm. That there was some kind of collective or... I don't know, I'm not sure if that's the right word even though they were collectives, but just some kind of intersubjective ways of thinking. Editing is really great for that. The Consoling Passions book series has been sort of... I can't believe it lasted that long. It has some really good books in it. So it's been a really nice thing to see that it helped to, it's not the only TV series out there at this point at all, but it helped to kind of establish a field and a body of literature.

Elena Levine: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Lynn Spigel: That was largely informed by feminism and then critical race studies, and then there's more... there's some international dimensions but probably not enough.

Elena Levine: Mm-hmm (affirmative). What about that moment of the kind of coming together of Consoling Passions as this collective when you were working with other scholars and getting the conference initially off the ground? Can you tell us about that?

Lynn Spigel: Well, it started just as an idea that Lauren Rabinovitz and I had and then we asked Mary Beth Haralovich and Jane Feuer if they wanted to do it, so we all kind of then formed it. I don't think we thought it would last. We had the first conference in Iowa. Lauren did it and then I did one at USC a couple years later, and then it just kept going. It's kind of been... again you don't really know when you start things where they're going to go. I haven't had personally for a long time much to do with the conference or anything to do with the conference,

because the book series kind of developed from that, but then just took on its own life. That's the kind of part of it I did most of the time.

Elena Levine: When you started the conference were there particular... What kind of a space were you trying to carve out, or how was it-

Lynn Spigel: That's the place-

Elena Levine: What was sort of seen as [crosstalk 00:24:48]?

Lynn Spigel: SCMS wouldn't allow TV in it so... and then the first year I was at Madison there was this petition going around in the field about whether or not to change the name of SCMS, which you might know about. It's kind of historic. There was a lot of reaction against allowing TV in or anything... So, when media was allowed in that was a new world, right? But it's still not TV, so... [Laughs]

Elena Levine: Yeah, I was just gonna say ... That was gonna be my next like, "It's still not TV."

Lynn Spigel: Digital media is okay, not TV.

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: And the crappiest digital media or films that came in. Even though now people think TV is brilliant 8th golden age of television, there's just something about the whole word in academia, which still has that stigma. So Consoling Passions was really there for a space for people to think about TV from a position that wasn't just the mass comm position. That it had been mostly studied through a more humanities position that was informed by film studies.

Elena Levine: Do you remember who came up with the name?

Lynn Spigel: Me.

Elena Levine: Oh, okay.

Lynn Spigel: I think I'm embarrassed. [Laughs]

Elena Levine: Say more about that. What was that-

Lynn Spigel: I think it was Lauren and me talking but I do remember it was... it's probably a goofy name isn't it? Yeah.

Elena Levine: It's a goofy name but it's here.

Lynn Spigel: It kind of worked.

Elena Levine: It's not going anywhere.

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Yeah.

Yeah, it seems so very much of that moment-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: -in some ways, but it's with us now. It's...

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I think it ... my memory is, it's the two of us talking and I said it and then we thought, "Well, should we try this out?" Other people said, "Okay."

Elena Levine: That's great. I don't think that story's been told before about how you-

Lynn Spigel: Well, ask Lauren. She might... you know, memory's a weird thing.

Elena Levine: Right.

Lynn Spigel: I know it was the two of us and I believe it was my bad idea.

Elena Levine: All right, well, let's shift gears and talk a little bit about your interest in questions around architecture, and space, and the connection to modern art. That's clearly always had a place in your work. You talked about your early interest in that. Talk a little bit about how your work has developed in that direction and kind of bringing those questions more and more centrally, or maybe you don't think it is more and more central because-

Lynn Spigel: Well, it was really central to "Make Room for TV" obviously, but it was about domestic architecture, and windows, and television sets, and all of that stuff. I got really interested in the literature and architecture in every day life. Then got invited to architecture forums so that I learned more about it that way. The very first time I was with a group of architects was Beatriz Colomina had invited me to this sexuality and space conference she had, which became an anthology. That kind of opened up this whole thing. Oh, there's this whole group of architects that like her fabulous work that's interested in media. That was in the early 90s, so that field is really developed now.

Elena Levine: Okay, and when you were first starting to think about those questions, and "Make Room for TV," and then as they've developed over time, has there been... have you seen a change in that field or in the way that media studies is interested in those questions?

Lynn Spigel: Well, I think more people are interested in kind of issues of space and architecture now. You know, when I was in grad school and I wrote "Make Room for TV," my inspiration that, his name never appears in the book, is Foucault. So Foucault has been really, really important to all of my work because it's not just about... it brings together discourse, architecture, and space under a kind of umbrella and allows you to think about other spaces in alterity, and all of

these things together, and archives. So it's just an endlessly rich way of thinking, I think, that he provided. That was really important to me. With "TV by Design," that project too, in many ways, it... when you do archival work you have things on hold that you, "One day I'll look at this." Again, in graduate school I had found all of these beautiful TV title art designs that I've just been writing about.

That really inspired me to think about the kind of art practices around TV, but it didn't really fit into my earlier work. Then I thought, "You know, I really want to think more about what this art world practices were around TV because it doesn't seem right to say that TV and the world of fine art were disconnected since so many people were practicing forms of modernism in early TV through graphic design, through set design, through a whole set of things that brought modernism onto the screen." So that became the kind of core of the TV and design book. And then again, it's like hunches. I thought I needed some institutional landmarks to kind of show that it wasn't just this artist over here or that artist over here. I thought, "I'll just go to MOMA, and see if they had any interest in TV in this early period." And then I go in there and the archivist says "Oh, yeah. We have these 40 boxes and no one's ever looked at them."

Elena Levine: Yeah, that's amazing. I love how there's all these kind of moments of serendipity of the low shelf with the women's magazines.

Lynn Spigel: You have to kind of take crazy hunches in a way. If you want to find things that maybe haven't been written about before. That trip could have just wound up being useless, but I had known that they had done a TV festival in '63, so I knew that. So I thought, "Well, were they doing anything in the 50s?"

Elena Levine: Great. Some of the work of the CBS designer, William Golden, I think was his name that you write a lot about in that book. Is that something that... Did you know about that and then sought out his papers or where did that come from?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, because that was the publicity art and title art stuff. Some people in graphic design had written about him. Then I kind of wanted to know more about his specific relation to CBS and all of that. So it turned out that the Rochester Institute of Technology had his papers and they actually told me not to come because they said the boxes were just filled with pictures of his kittens giving birth and it would be a waste of my time. [Laughs] So I went there anyway! And there *were* a lot of pictures of his kittens giving birth but there were also all these things he wrote about CBS and their policies about design. There were all of his original mock ups.

Elena Levine: Wow, that's so telling of what it's like to do television history that nobody thinks it's significant.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, they're in waste bins. Right.

Elena Levine: Right. Then we're like, "No, this is a treasure! We need this!" That's great. Maybe let's talk a little more about archives and how you've made various archival discoveries over the course of your career. Are there strategies that you've used that have helped you define these rich things or where, kind of, what is your method or path to going into an archive?

Lynn Spigel: You know, I wish I could say. I don't really know. It's just those kind of things are like... you find kind of like a kernel of something and you kind of go, "Well, nobody thinks this but maybe it's there so I'll go check." Or you go to an archive and something really surprises you that you weren't looking for. But I think one method, if I could think that there are methods here, is trying to bring really disparate archives into connection with one another. So you never just go to an archive that's, say you want to know about TV in the 50s and you go to UCLA and just look at all their programs. You'll find things. But it's more interesting to think, "Well, then maybe I'll also go to MOMA or to this other completely different kind of archive and see if I can make connections that make any sense," or tell us about some kind of alternative history that you wouldn't get if you just kind of follow the path of programming or... you know what I mean?

Elena Levine: Do you think that that approach is theoretically informed by cultural studies, or by Foucault, or by... where [crosstalk 00:34:13].

Lynn Spigel: I think that's more informed by kind of archive studies, which has really flourished now. But for me, Foucault is certainly an influence there of being kind of a non-canonical thinker and not that I could ever aspire to that level, but it was an influence of ways of thinking about the archive in a non-canonical way as I said of brick and mortar buildings that have official records, right? Then later Derrida's work in all of that became really important in thinking through archives or Caroline Stephens book, *Dust*. The theories of the archive that allow you to think through what an archive does for you, and how it relates to memory.

Elena Levine: Right, but of course, in some ways you were doing that early on when you opened those women's magazines-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: They were in archives that-

Lynn Spigel: Well, often you know, I feel like a lot of times people's first work is less disciplined and informed, is more ludic and playful, and the more disciplined you get the worse it gets. That's my own theory. For me, yeah, it has to be fun. And if it's no longer fun then it's just kind of a completionist task of finding a ... yeah.

Elena Levine: Yeah, is that something that you work with graduate students on? It seems like a lot of your students find sort of fascinating, unusual connections as well in their work.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I think the ones that are really good just find these amazing things like one of my students now has just been making his great discoveries of the kind of early history of microchips and femininity. Actually, it relates a little bit to Michael's work. But don't you think the hardest thing to do is to teach students how to be curious?

Elena Levine: Yes. They have it or they don't in some ways.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, so, you know you can teach them all of this information or discipline or knowledge, but if they don't have that ability to ask a compelling question and to really have the passion to try to track it down in ways that they have to devise on their own then...

Elena Levine: That makes me think about the role of the internet and how you talked about how "Make Room for TV," it was going to the library and opening the bound volumes. How has having the internet changed the path to being able to find these mutual connections? Or has it? Maybe it hasn't.

Lynn Spigel: Well, no, I mean it has and it's a really good question. I don't know that I have a total answer to that. I think we could get really mystified by the sense that it has everything and that it has all the answers we need, or that it's so fast that you just kind of... and like everybody else I've been tricked by it. Like you're always, "Wait, that's completely wrong."

Elena Levine: The fake news [[crosstalk 00:37:22](#)].

Lynn Spigel: Right. Yeah, so, but there are great things about it. It's a lot faster doing research now. It makes me a little mad though, I have to say, because I spent so much of the beginning of my career forming that Spigel archive of programs. One of the great things about teaching was students would be so amazed by all these clips that they've never seen, and now they're like, "Oh, seen it. Done that. It's on YouTube." It makes me a little mad because I put a lot of effort into it and now it's just really easy.

Elena Levine: No, it's true. Finding things that aren't easily accessible is harder. You don't have that kind of magic ability in the same way.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, it makes going to the archive a little less fun because it's... you can just get it online.

Elena Levine: Have you been led to things through online discoveries?

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, because you'll find something and then realize there's probably more and you should track down...

Elena Levine: Yeah, I don't know if off the top of your head you can think of an example of that.

Lynn Spigel: Well, some of the Ames work I was working on where, you know, the Ames office has put a lot online and a lot of their films are on DVD, but then there's a lot of stuff at the Library of Congress, which is just completely not online and you would never know if you can go through all of their papers. I recently got curious about their work in TV because nobody's worked on their work on TV, or there wasn't very much at all.

Elena Levine: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Lynn Spigel: And so, when I first went to the Library of Congress, they didn't have anything but they got a whole shipment of the Ames work on TV. So I went there and it's really amazing because it was boxes that no one had gone through and the head archivist there was really nice and let me go through it before she finished cataloging it. I don't know, those kind of... it's really colonialist but those kind of first discoveries that you touched the paper first. You're like a historical nerd. Like you and I. It's really great.

Elena Levine: No, there's always a thrill of that too.

Lynn Spigel: It's really ridiculous.

Elena Levine: The, "No one has ever looked at this before," feeling.

Lynn Spigel: I know.

Elena Levine: "I'm the first to touch it!"

So how does your more recent work on your TV snapshots project fit into this? Because that also seems to be about kind of mining untouched archives.

Lynn Spigel: Well, I was originally... I had this grant to write about the smart house thing, which I am still trying to write about, but then one of the chapters that I had proposed was about people taking pictures of themselves and though I've kind of just followed that track, but... again, it was I had this image of myself as a little girl when I was writing "Make Room for TV" and the image was a snapshot of my curtsying in front of my TV set. At that time I wondered, I really was hoping to find more like it. It seemed like a great last chapter, but I couldn't find any. Maybe around 2011, I was in a thrift store and I noticed some and they were being sold for pretty much money, like \$10. I thought, "Oh, I guess there was a vintage market for these now." I decided to go onto Ebay and yeah, that's the case where the Internet's been really important because Ebay has millions

of them. I've collected about 5,000 now. There are also online blogs, and share sites, and curators who curate these things, which makes it really interesting because there's all this kind of popular memory around these photographs online. Yeah, that's a case where the question of the digital archive for TV history is really quite interesting and poses a lot of questions that writing about I find challenging.

Elena Levine: It seems like the project is a way to talk about the kind of lived everyday experience of TV. It seems kind of in a different way than you were able to in "Make Room for TV," because there you're going through the magazines and the programming to be able to talk about that.

Lynn Spigel: Those are like these idealized mass market images of television and expert dialogues on them from women's columns, but the snapshots are obviously... this is where the Sol Worth thing I talked about earlier, they're everyday people taking photographs of themselves and there are pictures of people posing in front of their TV set but there are also just kind of shots where TV is in the frame and gives you a kind of mise-en-scène of ordinary life with TV. So I don't think they're better documents than the mass market magazines, they're just kind of different clues and they are made by people with their own cameras and they follow conventions of snapshot photography. They're not like indexical windows onto a world right there. They're highly conventionalized. People always look happy.

But nevertheless, they do kind of... One of the things that I really follow is rather than the kind of mass market images of people sitting around a TV set in a family circle like you'd see in the ads. Most of the time in these photographs people are posing in front of the set and they're the main attraction, not the TV, right? They also show you kind of how people set up their rooms for TV, how TV becomes a kind of backdrop for social life in the home and not the main focus of attention. So that really interested me because it shows us how people live with TV and it also shows us how there's never just kind of one media technology. It's companion technologies of the 50s snapshot Kodak camera and the television set together that create this kind of new mediatized space of the home that people can kind of self-represent through. You know what I mean? It shows us this whole network of technologies and objects and people that create this kind of media space of post-war domestic life.

Elena Levine: Right.

Lynn Spigel: It's the lived in-ness, or liveliness of television versus the live-ness on screen.

Elena Levine: Oh, I like that. That's good.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah.

Elena Levine: Yeah, and it's like you say. I think it offers this different dimension of the story that you've been able to tell in other ways.

Lynn Spigel: I mean, the other thing about it that I found fascinating, but it's very difficult for me is the fact that one of the things that these photographs have revealed is this huge kind of African American archive. There are many Black families posing with their TVs. There's a lot of different ethnicities posing with their TVs but it's mostly Black and White. That's been really challenging because as opposed to doing a history of civil rights on TV which is challenging, of course, but this is the intimate spaces of everyday life and as a white woman I just don't have access to those intimate memories. So, some of it comes from talking with colleagues who did live in Black families, and some of it's been really reading a lot of literature on African American snapshot photography and the history of African American homes. That's been really interesting, but I think it does provide a different perspective since the mass magazine stuff and most of what we know about the visual history of TV is so much about White-ness. Even if it's limited as to what I could say, I feel like I've been able to kind of think through a whole other dimension that way.

Elena Levine: Yeah, absolutely. That's not a picture of everyday life that you get from the mainstream sources.

Lynn Spigel: Not at all.

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: They are also really international in scope. Why is that like a universal thing people do with their TV sets in Japan, in Sweden, in Israel, in South America? It's just amazing.

Elena Levine: Yeah. You mentioned the smart home project in there as well. Is that... because that sort of becomes... is a little more contemporary in terms of the period that it looks at compared to most of your other work, is that... What kinds of challenges have you faced because of that? Obviously things keep changing and our homes keep getting smarter.

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I started writing about that really in "Welcome to the Dream House," the last chapter with digital homes. That's like 2000. So now it has become a history. And I'm kind of thinking of it more that way. In some ways, it just poses these questions to me about the limits of what I know about digital technologies, and digital architecture, and all of that. Thinking through the kind of ways in which we've been promised this kind of Internet of things since at least the 1990s. It really starts around 1985 where you get this idea that homes are going to be, not just automatic like push buttons, but this kind of wired or wireless home idea. Kind of thinking through how people have predicted this future for decades now and it's always the same discourse. It's always the same home

they're predicting but it never seems to actually materialize, which is interesting.

Elena Levine: Does it speak in certain ways to changing ideas, not only about domesticity, but about gender in various respects? In the ways it gets imagined over time?

Lynn Spigel: Oh, yeah, I mean a lot of that project is about gender and kind of the ways in which these technologies seem to take over traditionally female roles in the home. You know, the whole dream that you'll have push button stoves that do all this, but that Jetsons thing continues through all of this discourse. A lot of it is about that or the ways in which so many of the ads for digital homes are about what I've called conspicuous reproduction, like women mothering children, but men working the technology. There are some things that are very similar to the whole history of the electrification of the home since the turn of the century that a lot of people have written about. There is clearly that aspect of it. More and more I'm kind of interested in this whole world of object-oriented ontology and feminist object oriented... I still feel like the human is really always there, but the Internet of things in this whole fantasy of objects orchestrating our everyday lives for us makes that literature interesting to me.

Elena Levine: Right, so when you say that the humans always ... Is that something that-

Lynn Spigel: Other people disagree with me, but I don't... I mean, I don't feel like, at least... I find the whole question of how the objects think, the Ian Bogost thought, all that. I find that really interesting because it's ludic and playful, and really kind of meant in that way. I never kind of... I like Latour better. I like the idea of actor network theories where you can imagine people not having full agency but interacting with objects in ways that create these kind of networks of agency between people and their things. That's kind of the smart home idea. This Internet of things where it's post human, but not without some kind of human footprint still.

Elena Levine: Right, yeah. I'm with you.

Lynn Spigel: You know, I know it's often meant as almost a joke, but...

Elena Levine: Yeah, but it's tricky to understand the agency if you will of the non-human without abandoning the role of the human, which is hard to abandon I think, especially if you've been a cultural historian.

Lynn Spigel: I don't know what it does for feminism even.

Elena Levine: Yeah. Wow. We could go on. Well, how about maybe we could go a little bit ... back up, big picture now and think more about sort of how you see the fields of film and television studies having kind of evolved over time. Are there particular significant shifts, or changes, or developments that you've seen over your career or in your view of the fields more generally?

Lynn Spigel: Sure, I think when I started graduate school it seemed like the big debates were about the gaze and the objectification of women on screen and film narrative. Those things haven't gone away but they're not the only focus, or the avant-garde. All these things are still with us, which I think TV studies had its real heyday at a certain point. I'm not sure where it is now. I'm gonna let you think, but...

Elena Levine: I could tell you what I think but I think we should have what you-

Lynn Spigel: I know it's about me. Sorry.

Elena Levine: I have to keep resisting. This is stuff to not-

Lynn Spigel: I don't know that it's something I just think on my own, you know what I mean?

Elena Levine: Yeah.

Lynn Spigel: It's one of those things... it is a thing you have to think through with other people in a way because there is a lot of work on TV, but I'm just not sure my students are getting jobs if they're TV scholars.

Elena Levine: Do you think identifying as a television scholar, or is it the work itself, or is it the kind of how one identifies or packages oneself that is the-

Lynn Spigel: Well, in TV now, production studies or convergence studies are maybe places that are more thriving than TV history itself. One of my students... We can't measure our field by jobs but, she did get a job and she wrote on kind of the history of the exotic in 50s TV. It was really a great project. There's stuff to do and I'm not trying to say that it's a dead end, but it doesn't seem like it's that thriving moment it was.

Elena Levine: Right.

Lynn Spigel: Again, maybe for younger people it's a different story?

Elena Levine: It's interesting, even as culturally and in the world of academia as television has become more culturally legitimated and respected in lots of ways it doesn't necessarily seem like there's the academic... the job world out there to-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, and I don't... I never just ... even though I guess I'm known as a TV scholar I never just thought of myself that way. Like I said, I feel like it's much, like the interdisciplinary-ness of film and TV and other disciplines seems to be the point and for me TV is always kind of a muse that I'll get into another question about, but I'm not sure it helps to just be so focused on one object.

Elena Levine: Probably not on the academic job market, it's not-

Lynn Spigel: Or just, yeah, I mean ... I don't know, but then some people they do that and they do great work.

Elena Levine: Right. Do you see sort of dominant patterns or tendencies in the field in general, or through graduate students, or just in your experiences with reviewing work in the field, things going in certain direction?

Lynn Spigel: Well, clearly. I don't know if you ... I think you'll agree with me. It feels like digital media is clearly the place where things are thriving at this point. Again, I guess my point was I don't think it's like the object that should make something thrive, I think it's the questions so, I think there are lots of interesting questions now about gender, and race, and for internationalism that make objects speak in new ways. That's kind of what I was getting at. I'm not so sure I'm media specific in what I find interesting.

Elena Levine: Okay.

Lynn Spigel: Or where I think the future lies. It's kind of like developing new ways to think through these kind of more political questions really.

Elena Levine: Do you see that tendency for people who are interested in film specifically as much or ...

Lynn Spigel: See, I appreciate a lot of different scholarship. I think a person like Bordwell who could give us this rich unbelievable history of film narrative. Priceless, right? It's not that I'm putting down people that do that. It's just that I think that not everyone can do that and you have to sort of... I never tell my students to just do what I do, or just be a clone of what I do. I'd much rather them ask these kind of searching questions and find what they really want to do. I don't think that the broader field is helped by just the media specificity thing, even if several people have contributed amazing things to our knowledge about that. See what I mean?

Elena Levine: Yes, absolutely, and that asking... Well, also, that's how a field grows and how individual scholars grow, is by asking those new questions and I mean your own story is a story of that and hopefully-

Lynn Spigel: Yeah, I mean, I do think programs are different and some programs do try to turn out students who are just asking that one question that their advisor's asking. Yeah.

Elena Levine: Okay. Maybe let's do one more sort of thinking back question to kind of wrap things up. When you think back to your childhood and going out to TV repair jobs and things like that, and just thinking about watching TV, are there moments that speak to you as particularly significant? You talked about sort of seeing the homes and thinking about the content as well. What you were watching that might have been-

Lynn Spigel: I do love TV.

Elena Levine: I'm glad we got that in.