In 1959, *TV Guide* published an article painfully entitled “Fine Feminine Fingers Knit the Western Yarn,” which reported that there were twenty-eight women writing for TV Westerns that season. The tone of the piece suggests that its author (and perhaps its readers) would find the presence of these women working in the world of TV Westerns to be a curious phenomenon. Certainly, from a 2005 perspective, such a story might seem like a revelation to anyone looking for evidence of women’s participation in the making of television in the “repressive” 1950s. But, as Lynn Spigel points out in her essay about the role television images have played in helping to construct a kind of “false” history, there is a tendency to want to view the history of women as a tale of progress that begins with the “dark ages” (where everything is in black and white) and ends with more enlightened, second wave feminism-inflected times.

Thus my own curiosity lies not so much in any “discovery” that there were women television writers or that those women wrote for the masculine-coded Western genre, but rather with the way the *TV Guide* piece seems intent on simultaneously dispelling and perpetuating a number of myths and stereotypes regarding women, authorship and the relationship between the two. Beginning with the incongruous color photograph of seven of these women dressed in formal gowns, gloves and furs and perched atop wagons or horses against a backdrop of hay bales, the piece consistently vacillates between alleging that intelligent women are indeed at home on the writing range and representing them as particularly glamorous greenhorns. On the one hand, according to the writers interviewed, women have an advantage over men because they write more three dimensional characters; on the other, women have a harder time producing stories with “guts” because they are uncomfortable with violence and blunt language. What’s more, the knitting metaphor which is used to describe the women’s writing aligns them with the “crafty” or domestic nature of women’s culture, as if it were possible to create a television script out of “ordinary objects lying around the house” rather than a typewriter. In some sense, then, the article suggests a desire to “have it both ways” by acknowledging women’s presence as a creative force in the industry, yet representing them as behaving in ways that would seem to conform to a notion of ideal 1950s femininity.

While it is easy to explain this ambivalence as simply a product of its time, another recent example suggests a surprising continuity. In a 2002 *Los Angeles Times TV Times* cover story about *Life with Bonnie* (ABC 2002-2004) star Bonnie Hunt, the “creator, writer and director” of the now-defunct sitcom is pictured in a pinstriped business suit and sitting next to a barefooted toddler with a pacifier in his mouth. Hunt smiles almost shyly for the camera and props up the baby rather awkwardly, with her arm around his shoulders and her free hand holding one of his. To the left of her head reads the caption “Multiple Personalities.”

Although the phrase is undoubtedly referencing the many “hats” Hunt wore both within the diegesis of the program—she was a wife, mother and morning talk show host in...
Chicago—and in its production, what’s striking about it is its connections to a long history of media representations of powerful female TV stars who arguably had roles in the behind-the-scenes workings of their programs, such as Lucille Ball, Joan Davis, Marlo Thomas, Mary Tyler Moore, Carol Burnett, and Roseanne Barr. Such women were portrayed routinely by press accounts as “fractured” individuals who were either torn between their home and professional lives; nearly driven crazy by the myriad demands placed on them by the world of TV production; or simply consumed by their need to control every aspect of their shows.

In hindsight, this type of publicity often reads like a cautionary tale; the enormously driven and talented Joan Davis died of a heart attack in 1961 at the age of 53 and was often written about as endangering her health by trying to do too much behind the scenes of her domestic sitcom *I Married Joan* (NBC 1952-1955). At other times, such press coverage has functioned as way to explain the lackluster success of such women; Hunt, who has had two other self-written, directed and produced shows that did not make it (*The Building* (CBS 1993) and *The Bonnie Hunt Show* (CBS 1995)), is often portrayed as a “puzzling case” who, for some reason, cannot write, produce and direct her way to a large audience following on the small screen. This coverage can also function as a way to communicate a more damning message about such women as Roseanne Barr: she is a standout among women in television in that she possesses more power and responsibility than her peers, but you should know that she’s also a real bitch. In sum, then, the “multiple personality” moniker, like the description of the incongruous “fine, feminine” Western writers, functions as a sort of backhanded compliment that validates women’s contributions to television while simultaneously keeping them in their stereotyped place.

Therefore, the motivation for this issue of *Spectator* is to explore the notion of women’s television authorship without falling into the many hats / balancing act framework so well established by popular media coverage. Having said this, I realize that wanting to establish “author” credentials for such women can be innately problematic for media scholars. Television, like film, is a collaborative medium, and singling out individuals erases the contributions of countless others. Yet, it’s also true, as many feminist histories of women in broadcasting have pointed out, acknowledging that women scriptwriters, producers, directors, etc. have existed must be part of the equation. I would also argue, however, that this proverbial “equation” should factor in how the very concept of women’s television authorship historically has been distorted, fragmented and, at times, erased. Indeed, a number of scholars have already begun this discussion, particularly in the fields of silent film history and feminist television history and criticism (please see the Selected Bibliography below for more information). My hope is that the articles contained in this issue will build on and further that discussion by opening up new avenues of exploration and offering alternative
approaches to the study of women’s contributions to the television medium.

The first article of the collection—historian Michele Hilmes’s “Fanny Brice and the ‘Schnooks’ Strategy: Negotiating a Feminine Comic Persona on the Air”—is exemplary in this regard in that it builds on the important historical work that Hilmes has done previously about radio and connects it to issues surrounding early women’s television authorship. Specifically, Hilmes considers the genesis of stage and radio comedienne Fanny Brice’s most famous character: the precocious, wisecracking Baby Snooks. Taking issue with the representation of the little-studied Snooks character as “comically trivial” or “below the dignity” of Brice’s once-brilliant stage career, Hilmes instead suggests ways in which we might view “Schnooks” less as a “harmless” character and more as the key to Brice’s strategy for continuing to do the brilliant satire for which she was famous in the more restrictive setting of broadcast radio. In particular, claims Hilmes, Snooks, who went from being one of many Brice characters to being her “main staple” on radio in the late 1930s and 1940s, was able to say lines to her fictional “Daddy” (played by Hanley Stafford) and other adults that Brice’s more “mature” characters had been hitherto forbidden by network censors to say on the air. In this way, although “Schnooks’s” lack of respect for authority figures raised the ire of some listeners, it also provided a venue for Brice’s singular comic vision that would last until her death in 1951. Finally, according to Hilmes, Brice’s creation and development of the Snooks character and format, helped to lay the foundation for both a particular kind of TV sitcom (the child-centered domestic sitcom) and for the participation of a number of other female comedienne in early TV comedy.

The next article in the issue, Melissa Williams’s “‘I Kinda Prefer to Be a Human Being’: Roseanne Barr and Defining Working-Class Feminism and Authorship,” focuses on the critical and academic reception of another outrageous female comedian, Roseanne Barr. Although similar to Brice in terms of her willingness to cross the boundaries of “acceptable” behavior for women, Barr’s fate has not been to fade into obscurity, but rather to endure intense scrutiny as media critics and scholars attempt to “make sense” of her impact on American television comedy and culture. It is this move to “make sense” of Barr that, according to Williams, has elided or distorted her role in creating one of the most popular working-class feminist sitcom characters of the 1980s and 1990s. By looking closely at academic and liberal feminism’s understanding of and ability to deal with the issue of class and by detailing the ways in which Barr’s comedy eludes such models in her attempts to represent “real” working-class women, Williams’s piece argues for a more inclusive discussion of feminism and class within media studies and beyond.

Building on the notion of the audience as underrepresented in the evaluation of feminist media texts, the next article in the issue—“The “Charmed” Audience: Gender and the Politics of Contemporary Culture” by British scholar Rebecca Feasey—examines the phenomenon of the audience for the WB Network’s series Charmed, which airs daily on the British cable and satellite channel LivingTV. According to Feasey, Charmed, which has been dubbed “Charlie’s Witches” by some feminist media critics, inspires ambivalence because of its emphasis on fashion and beauty as well as female strength. Thus, her aim in this piece was to look beyond the limits of purely textual models of analysis toward the ways audiences “author” their own meanings through their engagement with those popular texts. Through an analysis of her interviews with a small group of women about the gender politics of style, sisterhood and shopping in Charmed, Feasey works to theorize the link between scholarly considerations of Charmed as a post-feminist text and the audience’s experience of that text.

Kimberly Owczarski’s “Don’t Call Me ‘Action Woman!’ The Female Director and Quality Television” takes a more “traditional” approach to authorship in its examination of the television career of Mimi Leder, the Emmy-award winning director of China Beach (ABC 1988-1991) and ER (NBC 1994-Present), among many others. While similar studies tend to refer to Leder simply as a “female action director,” however, Owczarski’s article considers the process by which the terms “female director” and “action genre” converge around notions of “quality” television. By looking
at Leder’s made-for-television movies and several key episodes of ER as action-melodrama hybrids and then considering their critical reception, Owczarski demonstrates the ways in which a popular understanding of those genres as gendered has helped to shape Leder’s image as “author” of her work. Although Leder herself is not comfortable with the title of “action director,” then, Owczarski claims that such a designation, according to critics, associates her with a kind of “quality” product.

The final article of the issue—Ghia Godfree’s “Breaking Down Binaries: Redefining Gender and Sexuality through the Music Videos of Björk and Missy Elliott”—calls into question the director-as-author model of the predominantly masculine sphere of music video production by looking at the video work of Icelandic singer Björk Gumundsdottir and American rap and hip-hop artist Missy Elliott. Although both women are known for their highly innovative music videos, much of the critical writing about those videos centers on the authorial style of their equally famous male directors, Michel Gondry, Spike Jonze, Dave Meyers and Hype Williams. According to Godfree, such a focus on the director-as-auteur, which is perpetuated by products like Palm Pictures’ “Directors Label” DVD boxed sets, works to erase the contributions of singular performers and artists like Björk and Missy Elliott to the field of music video, and she sees her intervention in this discussion as a necessary first step in unraveling the often complex collaborations between musical artists and music video makers.

The final section of the issue contains book reviews by Janani Subramanian and Andrea Braithwaite. Subramanian considers Kim Akass and Janet McCabe’s 2004 anthology of writings about the HBO hit Sex and the City (entitled Reading Sex and the City) and Braithwaite writes about Robert S. Alley and Irby B. Brown’s Women Television Producers, 1948-2000, a follow-up to the 1983 Alley/Horace Newcomb book The Producer’s Medium. Each review helps to round out the issue by looking critically at recent attempts to historicize women in television (both “old” and “new”).

When I came up with the idea of doing a Spectator issue about women’s television authorship, I had hoped to model it on Virginia Woolf’s famous meditation on “women and
fiction,” *A Room of One’s Own*. Now, looking back at the (nearly) finished product, its “writerly” title seems especially fitting. Each of these essays and book reviews all work to broaden the exploration—and very definition, even—of television authorship in relation to gender. Just as Virginia Woolf dared her readers to imagine that Shakespeare had a sister (Judith), who was just as talented a playwright as her brother but unfortunate enough to be a writer trapped in a woman’s body, they exhort us not simply to look for women TV “authors” where they were said not to have existed, but also to dismantle the peculiar binaries of ball gowns and buckaroos or babies and business suits that have helped to render such women invisible.

**Selected Bibliography**


A SCREEN OF ONE’S OWN


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Notes

1 “Fine Feminine Fingers Knit the Western Yarn,” *TV Guide,* June 6, 1959, 12-14.
4 A prime example of this characterization of Davis as practically schizophrenic appears in John Maynard “TV’s 2-D Gal,” *Pictorial Review,* October 25, 1953, 4.
5 Kathleen Rowe offers a discussion of such coverage in *The Unruly Woman: Gender and the Genres of Laughter* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995).