

Karal Ann Marling

NIXON IN MOSCOW: THE KITCHEN DEBATE
[1994]

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Editor's introduction

Karal Ann Marling is a historian of popular visual and material culture. Her book *As Seen on TV: The Visual Culture of Everyday Life in the 1950s* is concerned with a variety of cultural practices: fashion, domestic appliances, cooking, cars and so on. While such material is in itself characteristic of the landscape of everyday life in a culture dominated by the commodity, Marling's focus emphasises the way that national culture acts as a context which saturates this material with meaning. By looking not simply at the practices and materials 'themselves', but at the way they were mediated by television, she attends to a national medium that in the postwar years can be seen as a central arena for the everyday. TV perhaps more than any other medium brings the world into the domestic sphere as everyday culture (the *daily* bombings, the *daily* suffering, the *daily* conquests and so on). And it brings the world into the home as national culture: after all national TV networks 'unite' cultures at the level of shared iconic and narrative material.

In this extract she gives an account of the way that the signs of US affluence were used for the articulation of cold war values. Alongside the more familiar 'heroic' narratives of two superpowers, battling for supremacy in the development of nuclear weapons and space travel, lies a more domestic, a more everyday story. The American Exhibition in Moscow in 1959 promoted an image of everyday life in the USA as streamlined, ultra-modern and luxurious. It did this by displaying (as trophies of success) dishwashers, Pepsi-Cola, cookers, fridges and fully automated kitchens. The 'American way of life' (or western capitalism more generally) was portrayed as fun, clean, technologically advanced and available to all (at least ideologically if not financially). These simulations of US domestic life are both everyday (they present the environment most insistently associated with the everyday) and non-everyday (obviously unused they are also designed to transcend the dreariness of

everyday domesticity). For many Soviet commentators such a vision of life, with its emphasis on domestic gadgetry, was absurdly trivial. The image of Nikita Khrushchev and Richard Nixon meeting head to head across kitchen displays filled with the latest modern 'conveniences' distills a relationship between everyday life and national culture filled with bathos and ambiguity.

Further reading: Baxandall and Ewen 2000; Hine 1987; Silverstone 1996; Woodham 1997.

THE BATTLE BEGAN IN THE MORNING, with a sharp exchange on the subject of automatic washers in the kitchen of a typical, six-room, \$14,000 ranch house put up by a Long Island builder of subdivisions and furnished by Macy's. It resumed in the evening, in a \$250,000 RCA Whirlpool 'miracle' kitchen controlled by an electronic brain: at the push of a button, the dishwasher scurried to the dining table along an invisible track and a robot cleaner polished the floor. The combatants were two men lacking any prior association with household appliances, and the unlikely venue for their so-called Kitchen Debate was Sokolniki Park, in a leafy quarter of Moscow. But there, in July of 1959, at the height of the Cold War, the Soviet Premier and the Vice President of the United States locked horns over spin cycles, in-house intercom systems, and American domestic gadgetry in general. To Richard Nixon, the latest in kitchen consumerism stood for the basic tenets of the American way of life. Freedom. Freedom from drudgery for the housewife. And democracy, the opportunity to choose the very best model from the limitless assortment of colors, features, and prices the free market had to offer. To Nikita Khrushchev, the whole U.S. Exhibition was a display of wretched excess and bourgeois trivia. Where were the scientific displays, the American Sputniks? 'What is this?' asked the newspaper *Izvestia*. 'A national exhibit of a great country, or a branch department store?'¹

Created under the provisions of a 1958 protocol agreement on the exchange of expositions of 'science, technology and culture', the \$5 million American show had suffered from congressional parsimony. As a result, many details, including the golden geodesic dome by the visionary architect Buckminster Fuller through which Russian visitors (with hard-to-come-by one-ruble tickets) entered the grounds, were borrowed from successful American outings at international trade fairs. The Whirlpool kitchen (Figure 10.1), for example, had already appeared at a 1958 product show in Milan, while other planned attractions, like a fashion show presented as a series of vignettes from American life, had been tried out at the Brussels World's Fair of the same year. Model homes and supermarkets dramatized the benefits of mass production for the average American family. As such, they were always important Cold War propaganda devices, offering compelling, tangible evidence of the superiority of the economic system that so casually spewed forth labor-saving marvels, frozen dinners (steak and french fries), and tasteful living rooms furnished by *House Beautiful*. Although official government policy held that displays of consumer goods would inspire businesses in underdeveloped countries to produce items suitable for the vast American market and open new markets for American firms in nations still recovering from the ravages of World War II, these American showrooms also seem calculated to

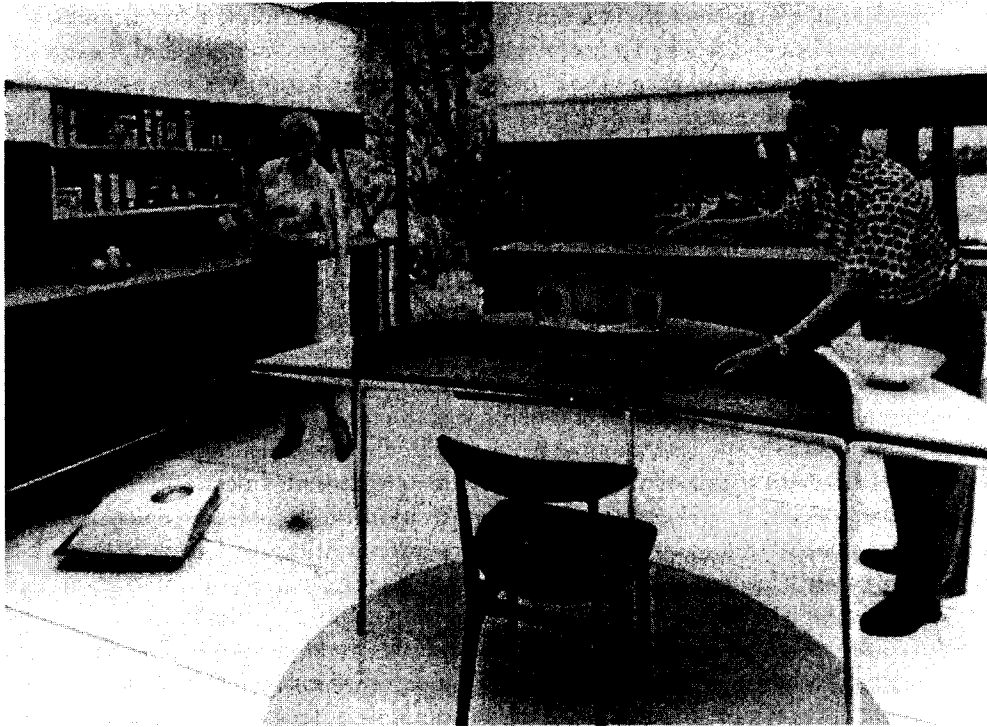


Figure 10.1 The 'Mechanical Maid' scrubbed the floor and then put itself away in the RCA Whirlpool Miracle Kitchen at Moscow, 1959

arouse envy and discontent at a basic level of appetite, haptic pleasure, and sensory overload. And the Moscow Exhibition was even more dazzling than most.²

Inside the Fuller dome, a new IBM computer programmed to answer questions about American life was overshadowed by a series of seven giant TV screens that showed in living color and material specificity what printed words on a punchcard could never capture. One twelve-minute show, by the designers Charles and Ray Eames, traced the American workday in 2,000 flashing images. A second, by Hollywood director Billy Wilder, celebrated weekend leisure. Like a Hollywood movie, the America conjured up in Moscow's multiscreen TV autobiography was pictorial – not logical or spiritual or poetic. It was a look, a dream, something tantalizing to touch kept just beyond the reach of yearning fingers. Behind the dome and the enticing pictures, a glass pavilion with a pleated, fan-shaped roof held a modular 'jungle gym' or rack of metal with inset plastic panels in which more than 5,000 pots and pans, dishes, rolling pins, and small appliances were showcased like so many precious jewels: spectators could see the items from a special viewing balcony, but they remained just out of reach.³

Ironically, the Soviets themselves may have reinforced the impression that consumer products were forbidden fruit in the USSR by refusing to allow the distribution of free Coty lipsticks and, after long lines testified to public interest, by denying Russian women access to free makeovers at Helena Rubenstein's model beauty salon. When visitors did get close enough to touch, the result was pandemonium. In the

opening days, they mistook the contents of the model supermarket for samples and nearly cleaned out the stock. They reached over the barriers and fingered the upholstery in the model home. Free glasses of Pepsi, dispensed from a kiosk between the glass pavilion and the model home, were consumed at a rate of 10,000 per hour for the forty-two-day duration of the show.⁴

There was a heart-lung machine in the dome, an art show in the pavilion, and a shed housing farm machinery adjacent to the restrooms and the exit, but the overall tenor of the U.S. Exhibition in Moscow was as effervescent as a Pepsi-Cola. The ultimate consumer frivolity, Pepsi had taken aim squarely at the housewife in the late 1940s and 50s. Pepsi was the take-home drink in the elegant new 'swirl' bottle. Less sugary, less substantial than the competition, it was the light drink, the one that guarded milady's slender, youthful image.⁵ And image – specifically, an image of stylish domesticity, of exuberance and fizz – was the basis of the Moscow show.

The American home and the new iconographic center of that house, the kitchen, made up the core of the display, reinforced by the offerings of almost 800 manufacturers of sewing machines (a very popular demonstration), hi-fi sets, convenience foods, and lounge chairs. There were twenty-two cars, representing the latest 1959 models from all Detroit's leading automakers. There was a circular movie theater developed by Walt Disney. Under a cluster of plastic parasols planted in the park outside the buildings, the rituals of American family life, from the wedding and the honeymoon to the backyard barbecue and the country club dance, were enacted four times daily by fashion models in typical American outfits; in another outdoor enclosure were photographs and miniatures of typical American buildings, including churches, schools, and shopping centers. The Moscow Exhibition was 'an American Showcase', concluded one business journal.⁶ It was also a shopping center on a grand, international scale. And what was for sale was nothing less than 'the American way of life'.

The items on display in Moscow – the houses, the groceries, the fancy cars, the pretty clothes – came from the everyday experience of individual Americans. They weren't abstractions or constructs. They were somebody's, everybody's, definition of the good life in the affluent 1950s. As such, they were the decade's most powerful icons, the things everybody thought about first when that lifestyle came under attack. A bizarre example of such 'contested' symbolism comes from a famous *Life* picture-essay on a Miami couple who spent their two-week honeymoon in a bomb shelter in August of 1959, less than a month after the Kitchen Debate in Moscow. Lured underground by a publicity-hungry builder, Mr. and Mrs. Minison did not go unprepared: their 'wedding gifts' included an impressive array of canned goods, brand-name cereals, cigarettes, and assorted doodads spread out on the lawn around them for the benefit of *Life*'s photographer.⁷

[...]

Nixon's meeting with Khrushchev in Sokolniki Park should have been a bland ceremonial affair; the Vice President had come to Moscow to do the same honors Comrade Kozlov had performed so amiably at the New York Coliseum. And Ike [President Eisenhower] pointedly reminded his second-in-command that he had no authority to negotiate with the Russians. What turned the encounter from a formality into an attention-grabbing debate was the Captive Nations Resolution. Passed by a Republican Congress every session since 1953, the legislation required the President to proclaim a

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week of prayer for people living under Communist tyranny. The document for 1959 was issued by the White House just as Nixon boarded his flight, and the coincidence enraged Khrushchev. With millions of Americans praying for the overthrow of his government, along came the U.S. Vice President, trying to stir up discontent with his TV sets and automatic washers! From their first meeting at the Kremlin, in which the Soviet leader used language that shocked the translators, it was clear that this was going to be no ordinary morning at the fair.⁸

Things began innocently enough in the Glass Pavilion, just before noon. The art show sparked no fireworks; Nixon adroitly guided the Premier past the greedy generals and downstairs, into the display of consumer products. For days the Soviet press had sniped at this particular portion of the exhibition, calling it unrepresentative of the life of the average American, and a 'traditional Moscow fair' had suddenly opened to sell comparable items, rarely seen in Russian stores. As the party passed RCA's mock television studio, an engineer called out an invitation. Would Khrushchev and Nixon like to see themselves on the new color monitors and try out a system for recording and replaying programs? With the tape rolling, a truculent Khrushchev resumed discussion of the Captive Nations issue, throwing his arms around a nearby worker and asking whether the man looked like a slave. Nixon tried to divert his attention to the TV sets. Khrushchev dismissed them with a flick of the wrist: 'In another seven years we will be on the same level as America. When we catch you up, in passing you by, we will wave to you,' he blustered, wiggling his fingers at the camera once more. How about color television? Nixon replied. The Soviets were ahead in rockets, but wasn't the United States in the lead in *this* technology? 'Nyet!' his adversary shot back, conceding nothing.⁹

The next stop was the Pepsi-Cola booth, where the emerging theme of competition was taken up again. Originally the State Department had suggested a nose-to-nose clash between Coca-Cola and Pepsi at the Moscow Exhibition to illustrate the free enterprise system at work, but Coke had declined to participate. Instead, Pepsi presented two versions of its product, one imported from the United States and the other made with Moscow water and, through Ambassador Llewellyn Thompson, begged the Vice President to nudge Khrushchev toward the kiosk. The company's new advertising slogan was 'Be Sociable, Have a Pepsi!' What better ad than a picture of America's foremost adversary (and the scourge of Coca-Cola, which the Party in Europe equated with capitalist decadence) acting sociable over a Pepsi made in the USSR? 'Don't worry,' Nixon is said to have told Pepsi's CEO. 'I'll bring him by.' It wasn't hard to arrange, as things turned out: the contest suited Khrushchev's bellicose mood to a tee. He expressed a predictable disdain for American Pepsi, but the Russian version, he growled, was 'very refreshing'. And he drank seven bottles for the company photographers before the clutch of journalists and officials tromped off toward the exit, just beyond the model home.¹⁰

Richard Nixon would later insist that the Kitchen Debate was all an accident, that the domestic setting, sure to rivet the attention of his American audience, had not been chosen for political effect. But it is worth noting that William Safire, a future Nixon speechwriter, was doing public relations for Macy's and the model house in Moscow and that photographer Elliot Erwitt was ready to shoot the exchange, moment by moment.¹¹ Erwitt recalls that Khrushchev was in high dudgeon by the time the entourage reached the viewing aisle that ran down the center of the

bifurcated 'Splitnik', as the Russians dubbed the three-bedroom house. He was spewing earthy profanities in all directions and Nixon, sensing an opportunity, was grandstanding for the press, citing facts and figures about home building. Suddenly, the Vice President pulled up short at the kitchen area and leaned over the railing in front of an automatic washer (Figure 10.2). 'I want to show you this kitchen,' he said. 'It is like those of our houses in California.' 'We have such things,' Khrushchev shot back. But anyone can afford a \$14,000 house in the United States, Nixon continued — any steelworker, for instance: 'This house costs about \$100 a month to buy on a contract running twenty-five to thirty years.' The house won't be standing then, the Premier scoffed. In America, builders want to sell everybody new houses every few years: 'We build firmly. We build for our children and grandchildren.'

'You Americans think that the Russian people will be astonished to see these things,' he cried, in sheer frustration, gesturing toward the washer. 'We hope to show our diversity and our right to choose,' Nixon retorted, on a note of triumph. 'We do not want our decisions made at the top by one government official that all houses should be the same. . . . [And] is it not far better to be talking about washing machines than machines of war, like rockets? Isn't this the kind of competition you want? . . . Let the people choose the kind of house, . . . the kind of ideas they want. We have many different manufacturers and many different kinds of washing machines, so that the housewives may have a choice.' 'Let's thank the housewife for letting us use her

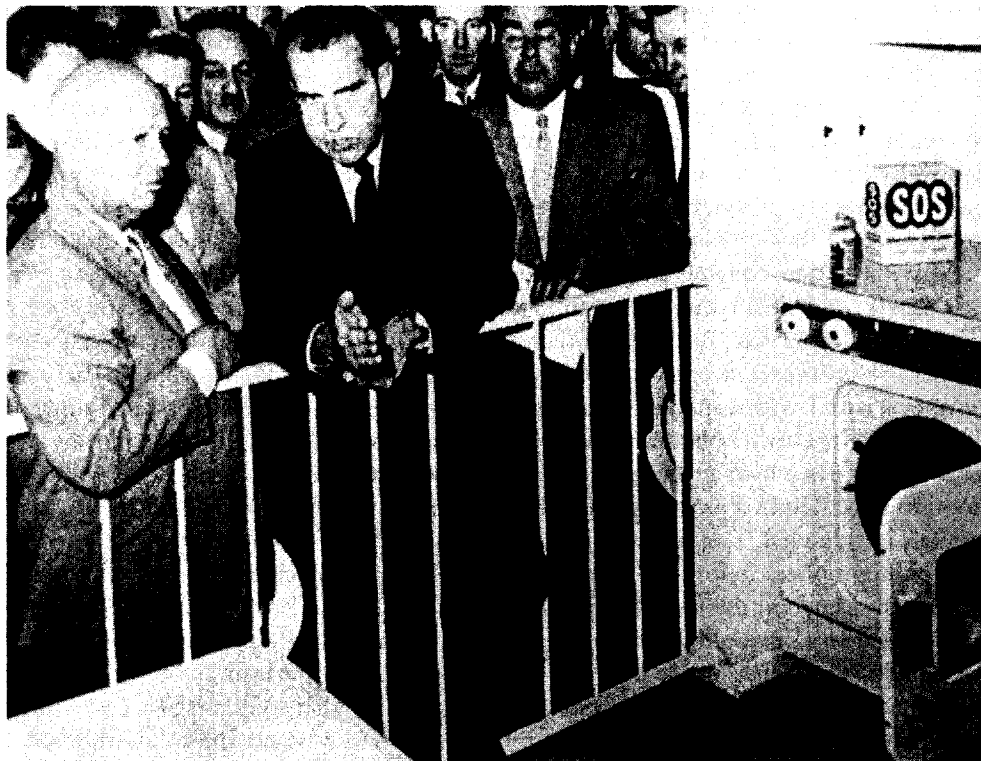


Figure 10.2 The famous Kitchen Debate, over an automatic washer: Khrushchev and Nixon, Moscow, 1959, Associated Press

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kitchen for our argument,' Khrushchev countered, bowing to the American guide, and shot out the door, ending the second phase of the confrontation.¹²

That evening, at the formal opening of the American Exhibition, Nixon took Khrushchev on another tour of the premises, and led him straight into a second kitchen, a futuristic display of household robots in the Glass Pavilion. 'In America, these are designed to make things easier for our women,' he noted sanctimoniously. 'Ha! These are mere gadgets!' huffed Khrushchev: 'Don't you have a machine that puts food into the mouth and pushes it down?' A product demonstrator pushed a button, sending a dishwasher careening toward him like some creature out of science fiction. 'This is not a rational approach. These are gadgets we will never adopt!' Khrushchev bellowed. Oblivious to his scorn, the uniformed guide in her pastel shirtwaist turned on a closed-circuit TV system designed to monitor activities in every corner of the house. Khrushchev's mood brightened visibly. 'This is probably always out of order,' he told Nixon, laughing. 'Da,' chortled the Vice President. And the Kitchen Debate ended on a note of bogus good humor with both sides in apparent agreement over the silliness of household gadgets.¹³

Notes

- 1 Stephen J. Whitfield, *The Culture of the Cold War* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 73; 'Made in U.S.A.' — in Red Capital', *U.S. News and World Report*, Aug. 3, 1959, 38. Gereon Zimmerman and Bob Lerner, 'What the Russians Will See', *Look*, July 21, 1959, 52–54. *Izvestia* quoted in 'Ivan' Takes a Look at American Life', *U.S. News and World Report*, Aug. 10, 1959, 42.
- 2 'U.S. and U.S.S.R. Agree to Exchange Exhibitions in 1959', *Department of State Bulletin*, Jan. 26, 1958, 132–134. 'Architecture: Umbrella Man', *Newsweek*, July 13, 1959, 84. See, e.g., note on 1955 trade fairs in Paris and Milan, *Industrial Design*, Aug. 1955, 72–77. Arthur J. Pulos, *The American Design Adventure* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1990), 242–247.
- 3 'The Vice President in Russia: A Barnstorming Masterpiece', *Life*, Aug. 10, 1959, 34.
- 4 Milward W. Martin, *Twelve Full Ounces* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1962), 109.
- 5 Alvin Toffler, 'Coca-Cola vs. Pepsi-Cola: The Competition That Refreshes', *Fortune*, May 1961, 127.
- 6 'Made in U.S.A.' — in Red Capital', 39.
- 7 'Their Sheltered Honeymoon', *Life*, Aug. 10, 1959, 51.
- 8 Stephen E. Ambrose, *Nixon: The Education of a Politician* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 520–521. Richard M. Nixon, *Six Crises* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1962), 252.
- 9 For transcripts of the debate, see 'Better to See Once', *Time*, Aug. 3, 1959, 12–14; 'Encounter', *Newsweek*, Aug. 3, 1959, 15–17; 'The Two Worlds: A Day-Long Debate', *New York Times*, July 25, 1959.
- 10 Herbert S. Parmet, *Richard Nixon and His America* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1990), 398–399. Martin, *Twelve Full Ounces*, 109–110.
- 11 J. C. Louis and Harvey Z. Yazijian, *The Cola Wars* (New York: Everest House, 1980), 93.
- 12 There is no complete sound recording of this portion of the event, and wording varies from account to account. My reconstruction depends on a variety of published stories; see note 9.
- 13 'That Famous Debate in Close-Up Pictures', *Life*, Aug. 3, 1959, 28.