

Lynn Spigel

INSTALLING THE TELEVISION SET [1992]

(Source: Spigel, Lynn "Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948–1955," *Camera Obscura* (16:1, Winter 1998). Copyright 1998. All rights reserved. Reprinted by permission of Duke University Press.

Editor's introduction

Lynn Spigel's work on television is of particular interest for the study of everyday life. If television has become a crucial element in our everyday environment, Spigel approaches it as both an everyday material object and a signifying media that continually figures and refigures this environment. So, rather than limiting herself to the analysis of television programmes as discrete texts or focusing on the empirical study of how television is received (the two dominant forms of academic attention), she instead foregrounds television as something that both reflects and constructs social relations via both discourses and material practices. By navigating across a range of texts (television programmes, adverts for television sets, popular representations of TV in the home, and so on) she reveals how television (especially in its early years) ambiguously both threatened and supported dominant familial and gendered relations.

This ambiguity of television's role in domestic life becomes clear when it is seen as a practice that both unites and divides. For early enthusiasts, TV could bring families together in the shared practice of sitting round the TV set watching 'family favourites'. But it was also clear that the practice of watching TV was as likely to divide families as it was to unite them. In particular, age and gender differences were seen as something that TV might exacerbate rather than placate. Such differentiation might be something that has been greatly extended by even more targeted programming via satellite and cable stations.

In many respects Spigel treats TV as a material practice that encompasses (in complex and often contradictory ways) a whole variety of forms that impact on everyday life. TV for Spigel is so ubiquitous and so much part of our everyday life that it extends far beyond the actual device and the programmes it transmits.

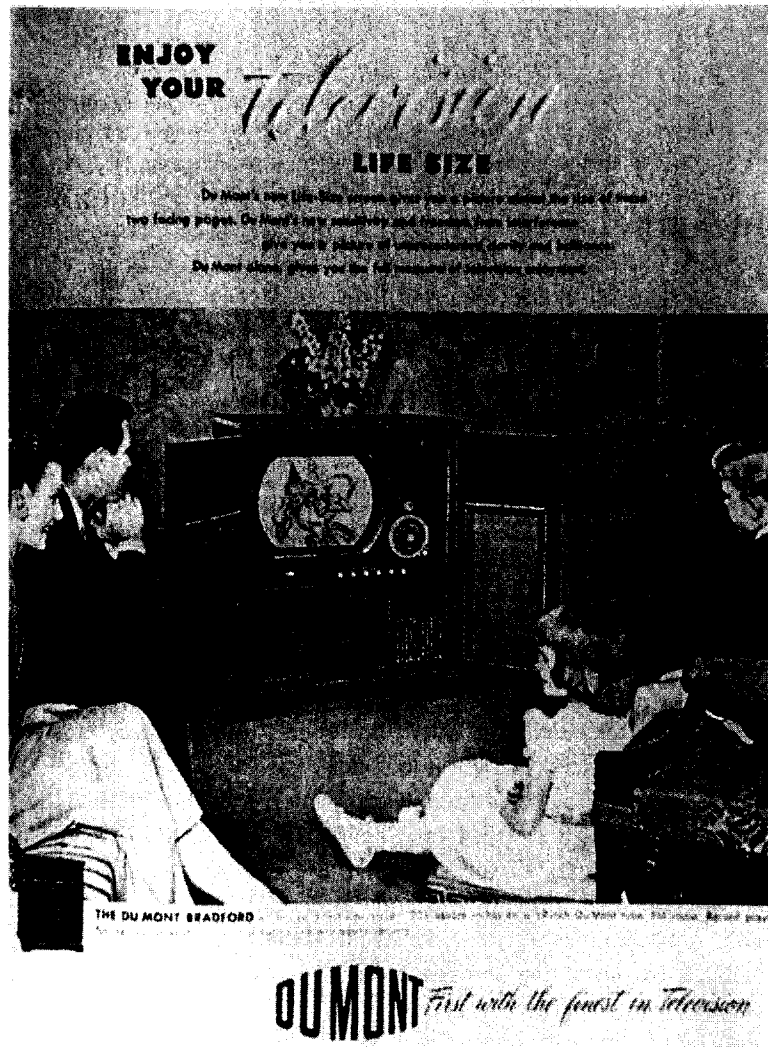


Figure 34.1 Dumont advertisement, *House Beautiful* 91 (November 1949), p. 1

THIS ESSAY BRINGS TOGETHER a variety of popular discourses on television and domestic space which were distributed from a number of institutions – including popular books and magazines, especially middle-class women’s home magazines, magazine advertisements for television which idealized a middle-class lifestyle (Figure 34.1), and early television narratives, especially family situation comedies which took the middle-class domestic interior as their principal setting.¹ In examining these discourses in connection with one another, I want to establish the ways in which representations disseminated by different media institutions converge or intersect around questions of television’s place in the home. I want to look at the meanings

attached to the new object and the modes of use or reception which the media advised. Although these discourses most certainly do not reflect directly the public's response to television in the postwar period, they do begin to reveal the intertextual context through which people (and here especially middle-class women) might have made sense of television and its place in everyday life.

[. . .]

Given its ability to bring 'another world' into the home, it is not surprising that television was often figured as the ultimate expression of progress in utopian statements concerning man's ability to conquer and to domesticate space. In 1946, Thomas H. Hutchinson, an early experimenter in television programming, published a popular book designed to introduce television to the general public, *Here is Television, Your Window on the World*. In his opening pages, Hutchinson wrote, 'Today we stand poised on the threshold of a future for television that no one can begin to comprehend fully. . . . We do know, however, that the outside world can be brought into the home and thus one of mankind's long-standing ambitions has been achieved.'² And in *Radio, Television and Society*, a general readership book of 1950, Charles Siepmann explained that, 'television provides a maximum extension of the perceived environment with a minimum of effort. Television is a form of 'going places' without even the expenditure of movement, to say nothing of money. It is bringing the world to people's doorsteps.'³ Indeed, as this statement suggests, television meshed perfectly with the aesthetics of modern suburban architecture. It brought to the home a grand illusion of space while also fulfilling the 'easy living', minimal motion principles of functionalist housing design.

In fact, I would argue that the ideological harmony between utopian dreams for housing design and for technological solutions to distance created a joint leverage for television's rapid growth in the postwar period. Both of these utopias had been on the agenda well before television's arrival in the 1950s. As Leo Marx has suggested with reference to nineteenth-century literary utopias, the dream of eradicating distances was a central trope of America's early discourse on technology. Particularly in the post-Civil War years, it was machines of transport (especially the train) which became the rhetorical figure through which this dream was realized in popular discourse and literature.⁴ By the end of the nineteenth century, communication technology had supplanted transportation. It was now the telegraph, telephone, radio – and later, television – which promised to conquer space.

In the years following World War II, this technological utopia was joined by a complementary housing utopia which was for the first time mass produced. Although the 1950s witnessed the most extreme preoccupation with the merging of indoor and outdoor space, this ideal had been part of the model for interior design in the first suburban houses of the latter nineteenth century. In their widely read book of 1869, *The American Woman's Home*, Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe suggested, for example, that the thrifty Victorian housewife might fashion a 'rustic [picture] frame made of branches . . . and garnish the corners with . . . a cluster of acorns', or else copy their illustration of a large window 'ornamented with a variety of these rural economical adornings.'⁵ For the Beecher sisters the merging of indoor and outdoor worlds was a response to the Victorian cult of domesticity – its separation between private/female and public/male domains. Also concerned with bringing nature into

the home, the architects of the late 1870s began to build bay windows or else smaller windows that were grouped together in order to form a composite view for the residents.⁶ Here, the natural world was associated with the 'true woman' who was to make her home a kind of nature retreat that would counteract the signs of modernity – smokestacks, tenement buildings, crowded streets – found in the urban work centers. As the sharp gender divisions between private and public worlds became increasingly unstable at the end of the nineteenth century, the merging of outside and inside space became more important for domestic architecture, and its meaning was somewhat altered. By the early decades of the twentieth century, the nature ideal still would have been understood in terms of its association with femininity, but it also began to have the more modern meaning of an erasure between separate spheres of public and private life. The bungalow cottages built across the country began to merge inside and outside worlds with their window views and expansive porches.

The most exaggerated effort to erase spatial barriers took place in the modernist architecture movements which emerged in the 1920s in Europe. Architectural modernism, or the 'International Style' as it was also called, quickly took root on American soil, and architects working from a variety of traditions developed many of the principles of modernist design, not least of all the erasure between public and private domains. Homes ranging from Richard Neutra's classical modernist Lovell House of 1929 (a machine-like futuristic structure) to Richard Keck's almost-all-glass Crystal Palace of 1934 to Cliff May's rambling ranch-style homes of the 1940s, foregrounded the merging of indoors and outdoors with window walls, continuous living areas, and/or patio areas that appeared to extend into interior space.

Although these 'homes of tomorrow' were clearly upper-class dream-houses – too expensive or too 'unhomey' for most Americans – the public was at least to some degree familiar with architectural modernism because it was widely publicized through fairs, museum exhibitions, department stores, home magazines, and the movies.⁷ In the years following World War II the spatial aesthetics established by modernists appeared in a watered down, mass-produced version when the Levittowns across the country offered their consumers large picture windows or glass walls and continuous dining-living areas, imitating the principle of merging spaces found in the architectural ideal. That this mass-market realization of utopian dreams for housing was to find its companion in television, modernity's ultimate 'space-merging' technology, is a particularly significant historical meeting.

Indeed, the ideological harmony between technological utopias and housing utopias created an ideal nesting ground for television's introduction to the public in the postwar years. Women's home magazines often displayed television sets in decorative settings which created the illusion of spatial conquests. The set was typically placed in rooms with panoramic window views, or else installed next to globes and colorful maps.⁸ The image of television as a 'global village', which media critic Marshall McLuhan spoke of in the 1960s, was already suggested in the popular discourses of the postwar period.

Even the manufacturers seemed to realize the marketing potential of this new global village in a box. Advertisers for television typically used this illusion of the outside world as part of their promotional rhetoric. They placed their TV sets against scenic backgrounds suggestive of the far-off spaces which television promised to make domestic. In 1953, Arvin's advertising campaign used the Eiffel Tower and Big Ben as

backdrops for its console models.⁹ In that same year, Emerson TV went further than Europe. Its television set, with a picture of New York City on its screen, appeared among the planets (and note that the ad also included a smaller TV with a little girl and her poodle, thereby tying domestic meanings to the sci-fi imagery).¹⁰

This obsession with a view of far-away places was also registered in family sitcoms. Like the model homes in women's magazines, these TV homes incorporated an illusion of outside spaces which could be seen through large picture windows that often dominated the *mise en scène*. It was not just that these domestic interiors repeated the popular architectural ideal; they also fulfilled the expectations about television which were voiced in popular discourses of the time. That is to say, the depiction of domestic space appears to have been based in part upon those utopian predictions which promised that television would provide for its audiences a view of outside spaces. Thus, the representation of the family's private interior world was often merged with a view of public exteriors, a view which was typically a fantasy depiction of high-priced neighborhoods not readily accessible to television's less affluent audiences. Beginning with its first episode in 1950, *The Burns and Allen Show* included numerous windows and glass doors through which appeared a painted backdrop depicting George and Gracie's Beverly Hills yard. In *Make Room for Daddy*, a slightly more realistic window view of New York City dominated the *mise en scène* of the Williams's luxury penthouse. Margie Albright, the spoiled rich girl character of *My Little Margie*, was typically depicted lounging in her sprawling New York apartment — complete with a terrace view of the city skyline. In 1955, the most popular show on television, *I Love Lucy*, attempted to give the TV audience a vicarious vacation by moving its characters to Hollywood for the entire season. The Ricardo's hotel suite contained a wall of windows through which audiences were given a panoramic view of the Hollywood Hills. This travelogue motif was to become conventionalized in the sitcom form when, for example, subsequent seasons saw *Burns and Allen's* move to New York, *I Love Lucy's* and *The Honeymooners'* season-long European vacations, and *Make Room for Daddy's* visit to the Grand Canyon.

This interest in bringing an illusion of the world into the home can be seen as part of a larger historical process in which the home was designed to incorporate social space. Increasingly in the twentieth century, home appliances and other luxury items replaced community facilities. In the postwar years the community activity most under question was spectatorship. According to a 1955 *Fortune* survey, even while postwar Americans were spending a phenomenal '30 billion dollars for fun' in the prosperous postwar economy, when calculated in terms of disposable income, this figure actually reflected about a 2% decline since 1947. By far, the greatest slump was in the spectator amusements — most strikingly in movie attendance, but also in baseball, hockey, theater, and concert admissions. The *Fortune* survey concluded that American spectators had moved indoors where high fidelity sound and television promised more and better entertainment than in 'the golden age of the box-office'.¹¹

Fortune's analysis indeed describes what happened to spectator amusements during the early 1950s. But its conclusion was also typical of a wider discourse which spoke of television as part of a home entertainment center which promised to privatize and domesticate the experience of spectatorship. Moreover, as in the case of the *Fortune* survey, it was primarily the movies and the movie theater which television promised to replace. In 1948, *House Beautiful* told its readers that 'looking at a television

program is much like going to a movie'.¹² Advertisements variously referred to the 'family theater', the 'video theater', the 'chairside theater', the 'living room theater', and so forth. A 1953 Emerson ad went one step further by showing an oversized television set which appears on a movie theater stage as a full house views the enormous video screen. The caption reads, 'Now! A TV picture so clear, so sharp . . . you'll think you're at the movies.'¹³

The discursive refiguring of the site of theatrical exhibition was by no means a matter of simple substitution. While 'going to television' might replace going to the theater, this replacement ushered in a grave spatial problem, primarily stated as a woman's problem of spatial confinement in the home. The movie theater was not just a site of exhibition, it was also an arena in which the housewife was given access to social life in the public sphere. In 1951, a cartoon in *Better Homes and Gardens* stated the problem in graphic terms. On his way home, a husband imagines a night of television viewing while his kitchen-bound wife dreams of a night out at the movies (Figure 34.2).¹⁴ As this cartoon suggests, the utopian discourses which promised that television would connect the home to outside spaces were met by dystopian counterparts. For even if television offered a grand illusion of the outside world with its panoramic vistas and travelogue plots, it seems likely that women were critical of this illusionism, that they recognized the discrepancy between the everyday experience of domestic



Figure 34.2 Cartoon, *Better Homes and Gardens* 29 (November 1951), p. 218

isolation perpetuated by television, and the imaginary experiences of social integration which television programming constructed.

Beyond this separation from the public sphere there were other complications for women in their new 'family theaters'. Although television was often promoted as the great instrument of family togetherness, it was just as often depicted as a divisive force. This was especially true in the case of women, who were typically shown to be isolated from the group watching television. In 1951, *American Home* showed a continuous living and dining room in which a woman supposedly was allowed to accomplish her housework among the group watching television. However, as the graphic representation shows, the woman's table-serving chores clearly isolate her from the television crowd which is pictured in the background, as the woman stands to the extreme front-right border of the frame.¹⁵ This problem of female spatial isolation gave way to what can be called a corrective cycle of commodity purchases. Typically, in 1950, Hotpoint advertised its dishwasher by claiming that the machine would bring the woman into the living room where she could watch television with her family.¹⁶

The television advertisements in women's home magazines (as well as general audience magazines like *Life* and *Look*) also attempted to negotiate this conflict between women's domestic isolation and their integration into social life. Here, the television set itself was figured in the context of a night out on the town. Advertisements typically displayed glamorously dressed husbands and wives whose evenings of television took on, for example, the status of a theater date.¹⁷ According to the logic of such ads, television turned the home into a public meeting hall in which residents could imagine that they were involved in a social occasion.

Indeed, television – at its most ideal – promised to bring to audiences not merely an illusion of reality as in the cinema, but a sense of 'being there', a kind of *hyper-realism*. Advertisers repeatedly promised that their sets would deliver picture and sound quality so real that the illusion would come alive. In 1952, Motorola promised that its 'new dimension of realism brings action right into the living room.'¹⁸ Far exceeding the imagination of Motorola's advertising firm were the advertisers for Sparton television who produced what might be called the emblematic advertisement of this 'come to life' genre. The 1953 ad pictured a large full-color photograph of a baseball stadium. On home plate stood a Sparton TV console whose screen showed a picture of a baseball player up at bat. Out in right field (and in the foreground of the composition) stood a modern-style easy chair with baseball bats and catchers mitts placed nearby. In this way Sparton TV literally transported the living room to the baseball field.¹⁹

[. . .]

The arrangement of the perfect view in the home was constantly discussed in women's home magazines, which advised readers on ways to organize seating and ambient lighting so as to achieve a visually appealing effect for the spectator. In these discussions the television set was figured as a focal point in the home, with all points of vision intersecting at the screen. In 1951, *Good Housekeeping* advised its readers that 'television is theatre; and to succeed, theatre requires a comfortably placed audience with a clear view of the stage.'²⁰ Furniture companies like Kroehler 'TeleVue' advertised living room ensembles which were completely organized around the new TV center.

As this focal point of vision, television was often represented in terms of a spatial mathematic (or geometry) complete with charts indicating optimal formulas for visual pleasure. In 1949, *Better Homes and Gardens* suggested, 'To get a good view and avoid fatigue, sit on eye level with screen at no more than 30 degrees off to the side of screen.'²¹ Even the TV networks recognized the significance of this new science. CBS in conjunction with Rutgers University studied 102 television homes in order 'to determine the distance and angle from which people watch TV under normal conditions'.²²

This scientific management of the gaze in the home, this desire to control and to construct a perfect view, was met with a series of contradictory discourses which expressed multiple anxieties about the ability of the domestic environment to be made into a site of exhibition. The turning of the home into a theater engendered a profound crisis in vision and the positions of pleasure entailed by the organization of the gaze in domestic space. This crisis was registered on a number of levels.

Perhaps the most practical problem which television was shown to have caused was in its status as furniture. Here, television was no longer a focal point of the room; rather it was a technological eyesore, something which threatened to destabilize the unities of interior decor. Women's magazines sought ways to 'master' the machine which, at their most extreme, meant the literal camouflage of the set. In 1951, *American Home* suggested that 'television needn't change a room' so long as it was made to 'retire at your command'. Among the suggestions were hinged panels 'faced with dummy book backs so that no one would suspect, when they are closed, that this period room lives a double life with TV'.²³ In 1953, *House Beautiful* placed a TV into a cocktail table from which it 'rises for use or disappears from sight by simply pushing a button'.²⁴ These attempts to render the television set invisible are especially interesting in the light of critical and popular memory accounts which argue that the television set was a privileged figure of conspicuous consumption and class status for postwar Americans. This attempt to hide the receiver complicates those historical accounts because it suggests that visual pleasure was at odds with the display of wealth in the home.

It wasn't only that the television set was made inconspicuous within domestic space, it was also made invisible to the outside world. The overwhelming majority of graphics showed the television placed in a spot where it could not be seen through the windows of the room.²⁵ This was sometimes stated in terms of a solution for lighting and the glare cast over the screen. But there was something more profoundly troubling about being caught in the act of viewing television. The attempt to render television invisible to the outside world was imbricated in a larger obsession with privacy – an obsession which was most typically registered in statements about 'problem windows'. The magazines idealized large picture windows and sliding glass doors for the view of the outside world they provided. At the same time, however, the magazines warned that these windows had to be carefully covered with curtains, venetian blinds, or outdoor shrubbery in order to avoid the 'fish bowl' effect. In these terms, the view incorporated in domestic space had to be a one-way view.

Television would seem to hold an ideal place here because it was a 'window on the world' which could never look back. Yet, the magazines treated the television set as if it were a problem window through which residents in the home could be seen. In 1951, *American Home* juxtaposed suggestions for covering 'problem' windows with a

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tip on 'how to hide a TV screen'.²⁶ Even the design of the early television consoles, with their cabinet doors which covered the TV screen, suggested the fear of being seen by television. Perhaps, this fear was best expressed in 1949 when the *Saturday Evening Post* told its readers, 'Be Good! Television's Watching.' The article continued, 'Comes now another invasion of your privacy. . . . TV's prying eye may well record such personal frailties as the errant husband dining with his secretary'.²⁷ The fear here was that the television camera might record men and women unawares – and have devastating effects upon their romantic lives.

The theme of surveillance was repeated in a highly self-reflexive episode of the early 1950s science fiction anthology, *Tales of Tomorrow*. Entitled 'The Window',²⁸ the tale begins with a standard sci-fi drama but is soon 'interrupted' when the TV camera picks up an alien image, a completely unrelated view of a window through which we see a markedly lower-class and drunken husband, his wife and another man (played by Rod Steiger). After a brief glimpse at this domestic scene, we cut back to the studio where a seemingly confused crew attempts to explain the aberrant image, finally suggesting that it is a picture of a real event occurring simultaneously in the city and possibly 'being reflected off an ionized cloud right in the middle of our wavelength, like a mirage'. As the episode continues to alternate between the studio and the domestic scene, we learn that the wife and her male friend plan to murder the husband, and we see the lovers' passionate embrace (as well as their violent fantasies). At the end of the episode, after the murder takes place, the wife stares out the window and confesses to her lover that all night she felt as if someone were watching her. As this so well suggests, the new TV eye threatens to turn back on itself, to penetrate the private window and to monitor the eroticized fantasy life of the citizen in his or her home. That this fantasy has attached to it a violent dimension, reminds us of the more sadistic side to television technology as TV now becomes an instrument of surveillance. Indeed, this fear of surveillance was symptomatic of many statements which expressed profound anxieties about television's control over human vision in the home – especially in terms of its disruptive effects on the relationship between the couple.²⁹

Television brought to the home a vision of the world which the human eye itself could never see. We might say that in popular culture there was a general obsession with the perfection of human vision through technology. This fascination of course pre-dates the period under question, with the development of machines for vision including telescopes, x-rays, photography and cinema. During the postwar period many of these devices were mass produced in the form of children's toys (including microscopes, 3-D glasses, and telescopes) and household gadgets like gas ranges with window-view ovens.

Television, the ultimate expression of this technologically improved view, was variously referred to as a 'hypnotic eye', an 'all seeing eye', a 'mind's eye', and so forth. But there was something troubling about this television eye. A 1954 documentary produced by RCA and aired on NBC suggests the problem. Entitled *The Story of Television*, this program tells the history of television through a discourse on the gaze. A voice-over narration begins the tale in the following way:

The human eye is a miraculous instrument. Perceptive, sensitive, forever tuned to the pulsating wavelengths of life. Yet the eye cannot see over a

hillside or beyond the haze of distance. To extend the range of human eyesight, man developed miraculous and sensitive instruments.

Most prominent among these instruments was the 'electronic eye' of television.

In this RCA documentary, the discourse on the gaze was used to promote the purchase and installation of the TV set. However, even in this industry promo, there is something disturbing about the 'electronic eye' of television. For here, television inserts itself precisely at the point of a failure in human vision, a failure which is linked to the sexual relations of the couple. Accompanying this sound track is a visual narrative which represents a young couple. A woman frolics on the hillside and we cut to an extreme close-up of a man's face, a close-up which depicts a set of eyes that appear to be searching for the woman. But the couple are never able to see one another because their meeting is blocked by an alternate, and more technologically perfect view. We are shown instead the 'electronic eye' of a TV control tower which promises to see better than the eyes of the young lovers. Thus, the authority of human vision, and the power dynamics attached to the romantic exchange of looks between the couple, is somehow undermined in this technology of vision.

This failure in the authority of human vision was typically related to the man's position of power in domestic space. In 1953, *TV Guide* asked, 'What ever happened to men? Once upon a time (Before TV) a girl thought of her boyfriend or husband as her prince charming. Now having watched the antics of Ozzie Nelson and Chester A. Riley, she thinks of her man as a prime idiot.' Several paragraphs later the article relates this figure of the ineffectual male to an inability to control vision, or rather television, in the home. As the article suggests, 'Men have only a tiny voice in what programs the set is tuned to.'³⁰

In a 1954 episode of *Fireside Theatre*, a filmed anthology drama, this problem is demonstrated in narrative terms. Entitled 'The Grass is Greener', the episode revolves around the purchase of a television set, a purchase which the father in the family, Bruce, adamantly opposes. Going against Bruce's wishes, the wife, Irene, makes use of the local retailer's credit plan and has a television set installed in her home. When Bruce returns home for the evening, he finds himself oddly displaced by the new center of interest. Upon entering the kitchen door, he hears music and gun shots emanating from the den. Curious about the sound source, he enters the den where he sees Irene and the children watching a TV western. Standing in the den doorway, he is literally off-center in the frame, outside the family group clustered around the TV set. When he attempts to get his family's attention, his status as outsider is further suggested. Bruce's son hushes his father with a dismissive 'Shh', after which the family resumes its fascination with the television program. Bruce then motions to Irene who finally – with a look of condescension – exits the room to join her husband in the kitchen where the couple argue over the set's installation. In her attempt to convince Bruce to keep the TV, Irene suggests that the children and even she herself will stray from the family home if he refuses to allow them the pleasure of watching TV. Television thus threatens to undermine the masculine position of power in the home to the extent that the father is disenfranchised from his family whose gaze is fastened onto an alternate, and more seductive, authority.

This crisis in vision was also registered in terms of female positions of pleasure in television. In fact, for women, pleasure in viewing television appears to have been a

'structured absence'. These representations almost never show a woman watching television by herself. Typically, the woman lounges on a sofa, perhaps reading a book, while the television remains turned off in the room.³¹ Two points emerge. First, for women the continuum, visual pleasure – displeasure, was associated with interior decor and not with viewing television. In 1948, *House Beautiful* made this clear when it claimed, 'Most men want only an adequate screen. But women alone with the thing in the house all day, have to eye it as a piece of furniture.'³² Second, while these discussions of television were often directed at women, the continuum, visual pleasure – displeasure, was not associated with her gaze at the set, but rather with her status as representation, as something to be looked at by the gaze of another.

On one level here, television was depicted as a threat to the visual appeal of the female body in domestic space. Specifically, there was something visually displeasable about the sight of a woman operating the technology of the receiver. In 1955, Sparton Television proclaimed that 'the sight of a woman tuning a TV set with dials near the floor' was 'most unattractive'. The Sparton TV, with its tuning knob located at the top of the set, promised to maintain the visual appeal of the woman.³³ As this ad indicates, the graphic representation of the female body viewing television had to be carefully controlled; it had to be made appealing to the eye of the observer.

Beyond this specific case, there was a distinct set of aesthetic conventions formed in these years for male and female viewing postures. A 1953 advertisement for CBS-Columbia Television illustrates this well. Three alternative viewing postures are taken up by family members. A little boy stretches out on the floor, a father slumps in his easy chair, and the lower portion of a mother's outstretched body is gracefully lifted in a sleek modern chair with a seat which tilts upward.³⁴ Here as elsewhere, masculine viewing is characterized by a slovenly body posture. Conversely, feminine viewing posture takes on a certain visual appeal even as the female body passively reclines.

This need to maintain the 'to-be-looked at' status of the woman's body within the home might be better understood in the context of a second problem which television was shown to bring to women – namely, competition for male attention. Magazines, advertisements and television programming often depicted the figure of a man who was so fascinated with the screen image of a woman that his real life mate remained thoroughly neglected by his gaze. Thus, in terms of this exchange of looks, the television set became the 'other woman'. Even if the screen image was not literally another woman, the man's visual fascination evoked the structural relations of female competition for male attention, a point well illustrated by a cartoon in a 1952 issue of the fashionable men's magazine, *Esquire*, which depicted a newly wed couple in their honeymoon suite. The groom, transfixed by the sight of wrestling on TV, completely ignores his wife.³⁵ This sexual scenario was also taken up by Kotex, a feminine hygiene company with an obvious stake in female sexuality. The 1949 ad shows a woman who, by using the sanitary napkin, is able to distract her man from his TV baseball game.³⁶ Perhaps, the ultimate expression of female competition with television came in a 1953 episode of *I Love Lucy* entitled, 'Ricky and Fred are TV Fans'. Lucy and her best friend, Ethel Mertz, are entirely stranded by their husbands as the men watch the fights on the living room console. In a desperate attempt to attract their husbands' attention, Lucy and Ethel stand in front of the TV set, blocking the men's view of the screen. Ricky and Fred Mertz become so enraged that they begin to make violent gestures, upon which Lucy and Ethel retreat into the kitchen. Having lost their husbands to television,

the women decide to go to a drugstore/soda shop. However, once in the drugstore they are unable to get service because the proprietor is likewise entranced by the TV boxing match.

But in what way could this sexual/visual competition appeal to women? A 1952 Motorola ad provides some possible answers. The graphic shows a man lounging on a chair and watching a bathing beauty on the TV screen. His wife, dressed in apron, stands in the foreground holding a shovel, and the caption reads, 'Let's go, Mr. Dreamer, that television set won't help you shovel the walk.' Television's negative effect on household chores was linked to the male's visual fascination in the televised image of another woman. This relationship drawn between the gaze and household chores only seems to underline TV's negative appeal for women; but another aspect of this ad suggests a less 'masochistic' inscription of the female consumer. The large window view and the landscape painting hung over the set suggest the illusion of the outside world and the incorporation of that world into the home. In this sense, the ad suggests that the threat of sexuality/infidelity in the outside world can be contained in the home through its representation on television. Even while the husband neglects his wife and household chores to gaze at the screen woman, the housewife is in control of his sexuality insofar as his visual pleasure is circumscribed by domestic space. The housewife's gaze in the foreground and cited commentary further illustrate this position of control.³⁷

This competition for male attention between women and television also bears an interesting relationship to the construction of the female image in domestic comedies. Typically the representation of the female body was de-feminized and/or de-eroticized. The programs usually featured heroines who were either non-threatening matronly types like Molly Goldberg, middle-aged, perfect housewife types like Harriet Nelson, or else zany women like Lucy Ricardo who frequently appeared clown-like, and even grotesque.

Popular media of the postwar years illuminate some of the central tensions expressed by the mass culture at a time when spectator amusements were being transported from the public to the private sphere. At least at the level of representation, the installation of the television set was by no means a simple purchase of a pleasure machine. These popular discourses remind us that television's utopian promise was fraught with doubt. Even more importantly, they begin to reveal the complicated processes through which conventions of viewing television in the home environment and conventions of television's representational styles were formed in the early period.

Magazines, advertisements and television programming helped to establish rules for ways in which to achieve pleasure and to avoid displeasure caused by the new TV object/medium. In so doing they constructed a subject position – or a series of subject positions – for family members in the home equipped with television. Certainly, the ways in which the public took up these positions is another question. How women and men achieved pleasure from and avoided the discomforts of television is, it seems to me, an on-going and complicated historiographical problem. The popular media examined here allow us to begin to understand the attitudes and assumptions which informed the reception of television in the early period. In addition, they illustrate the aesthetic ideals of middle-class architecture and interior design into which television was placed.

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As historian Carlo Ginzburg has argued, 'Reality is opaque; but there are certain points – clues, signs – which allow us to decipher it.' It is the seemingly inconsequential trace, Ginzburg claims, through which the most significant patterns of past experiences might be sought.³⁸ These discourses which spoke of the placement of a chair, or the design of a television set in a room, begin to suggest the details of everyday existence into which television inserted itself. They give us a clue into a history of spectators in the home – a history which is only beginning to be written.

Notes

- 1 This article is based on the research for my dissertation for UCLA, 'Installing the Television Set: The Social Construction of Television's Place in the Home and the Family, 1948–55'. Three leading home magazines (*House Beautiful*, *Better Homes and Gardens* and *American Home*) and one leading women's service magazine which foregrounded home economics (*Ladies' Home Journal*) were examined in entirety for the years under consideration. All of these magazines presented idealized (upper) middle-class depictions of domestic space, and were addressed to a female-housewife, middle-class reader. According to audience research studies conducted at the time, the magazines all attracted a largely female, middle-class readership. See for example, Alfred Politz Research, Inc., *The Audiences of Nine Magazines* (N.p.: Cowles Magazines, Inc., 1955). In addition to examining these publications, I used sampling techniques to analyze leading general magazines, men's magazines, and a leading women's magazine, *Good Housekeeping* (which was directed at a less affluent class). The print advertisements were found in these magazines. Finally, the paper is based upon a large number of programs from the early period including almost all episodes from *Burns and Allen*, *I Love Lucy*, and *The Honeymooners* as well as numerous episodes from *Ozzie and Harriet*, *The Goldbergs*, *Make Room For Daddy*, and *I Married Joan*. I refer to these programs as sit-coms, although it should be noted that at the time the sit-com form for television was not yet fully conventionalized.
- 2 Thomas H. Hutchinson, *Here is Television, Your Window on the World* (1946; New York: Hastings House, 1948), p. ix.
- 3 Charles Siepmann, *Radio, Television and Society* (New York: Oxford, 1950), p. 340.
- 4 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford, 1964), see especially p. 193.
- 5 Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869), pp. 91, 96.
- 6 Gwendolyn Wright discusses this in *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 107.
- 7 For an interesting discussion of how modern architecture was popularized through the cinema see Donald Albrecht, *Designing Dreams: Modern Architecture in the Movies* (New York: Harper & Row, 1986).
- 8 See, for example, 'Home Without Compromises', *American Home* 47 (January 1952), p. 34; *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (September 1955), p. 59; *Good Housekeeping* 133 (September 1951), p. 106.
- 9 *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 48; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (December 1953), p. 21.
- 10 *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (March 1953), p. 130.
- 11 *Fortune* editors, '530. Billion for Fun', reprinted in *Mass Leisure*, ed. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyersohn (1955; Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), pp. 162–8.
- 12 *House Beautiful* 90 (November 1948), p. 230.
- 13 *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 8.
- 14 *Better Homes and Gardens* 29 (November 1951), p. 218.
- 15 *American Home* 46 (September 1951), p. 27.
- 16 *House Beautiful* 92 (December 1950), p. 77.
- 17 See, for example, *Ladies' Home Journal* 67 (May 1950), p. 6; *American Home* 46 (October 1951), p. 8; *House Beautiful* 97 (November 1955), p. 126; *Colliers* 126 (9 December 1950), p. 58.

- 18 *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (October 1952), p. 215. For other examples see, *Life* 34 (26 October 1953), p. 53; *Life* 35 (5 October 1953), p. 87; *House Beautiful* 91 (November 1949), p. 77.
- 19 *Life* 34 (27 April 1953), p. 12.
- 20 'Where Shall We Put the Television Set?' *Good Housekeeping* 133 (August 1951), p. 107.
- 21 Walter Adams and E.A. Hunferford, Jr., 'Television: Buying and Installing It is Fun; These Ideas Will Help', *Better Homes and Gardens* 28 (September 1949), p. 38.
- 22 Cited in 'With an Eye . . . On the Viewer', *Televiser* 7 (April 1950), p. 16.
- 23 'Now You See It . . . Now You Don't' *American Home* 46 (September 1951), p. 49.
- 24 *House Beautiful* 95 (December 1953), p. 145.
- 25 See, for example, *House Beautiful* 91 (October 1949), p. 167; *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (March 1952), p. 68; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (December 1953), p. 71.
- 26 *American Home* 45 (January 1951), p. 89.
- 27 Robert M. Yoder, 'Be Good! Television's Watching', *Saturday Evening Post* 221 (14 May 1949), p. 29.
- 28 Circa 1951-53.
- 29 We might also imagine that television's previous use as a surveillance medium in World War II and the early plans to monitor factory workers with television sets, helped to create this fear of being seen by TV. For an interesting discussion of these early surveillance uses, and the way in which this was discussed in the popular and industry press, see Jeanne Allen, 'The Social Matrix of Television: Invention in the United States', in *Regarding Television*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, Inc., 1983), pp. 109-19.
- 30 Bob Taylor, 'What is TV Doing to MEN?' *TV Guide* 1 (26 June-2 July 1953), p. 15.
- 31 See, for example, *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (September 1955), p. 59; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (April 1953), p. 263; *Popular Science* 164 (February 1954), p. 211; *Ladies' Home Journal* (May 1953), p. 11.
- 32 W.W. Ward, 'Is It Time to Buy Television?' *House Beautiful* 90 (October 1948), p. 172.
- 33 *House Beautiful* 97 (May 1955), p. 131.
- 34 *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 151.
- 35 *Esquire* 38 (July 1952), p. 87.
- 36 *Ladies' Home Journal* 66 (May 1949), p. 30.
- 37 *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (February 1952), p. 154.
- 38 Carlo Ginzburg, 'Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method', *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980), p. 27.

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