

A camera obscura *Book*

PRIVATE SCREENINGS

*Television and the Female Consumer*

Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, editors

CLOSE ENCOUNTERS

*Film, Feminism, and Science Fiction*

Constance Penley, Elisabeth Lyon, Lynn Spigel, and  
Janet Bergstrom, editors

# Private Screenings

## Television and the Female Consumer

Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, editors

University of Minnesota Press  
Minneapolis

Copyright 1992 by the Regents of the University of Minnesota

Mary Beth Haralovich, "Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker," reprinted from *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 11 (1989), pp. 61-83, copyright Harwood Academic Publishers GmbH; George Lipsitz, "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," first appeared in *Cultural Anthropology*, 1 (November 1986), pp. 355-387, copyright American Anthropological Association.

Photographs:

Cover photo courtesy of Keith de Lellis Gallery, © Keith de Lellis.

© Emerson Radio Corp., 1953. Reprinted with the permission of Emerson Radio Corporation.

© Sparton Corp., 1953.

© Kimberly-Clark Corp., 1949. Kotex® is a registered trademark of Kimberly-Clark Corporation. Used with permission.

© Allied-Signal Inc., 1948. Reprinted with the permission of Allied-Signal Incorporated.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Published by the University of Minnesota Press  
2037 University Avenue Southeast, Minneapolis, MN 55414  
Printed in the United States of America on acid-free paper

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Private screenings : television and the female consumer / Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, editors.

p. cm.—(A Camera obscura book)

An expanded version of issue no. 16, winter 1988, of *Camera obscura*.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 0-8166-2052-0 (hc : acid-free paper).

ISBN 0-8166-2053-9 (pb : acid-free paper)

1. Television and women—United States. 2. Television viewers—United States. 3. Women in television—United States.

4. Television programs for women—United States. I. Spigel, Lynn.

II. Mann, Denise. III. Series.

HQ1233.P755 1992

302.23'45'082—dc20

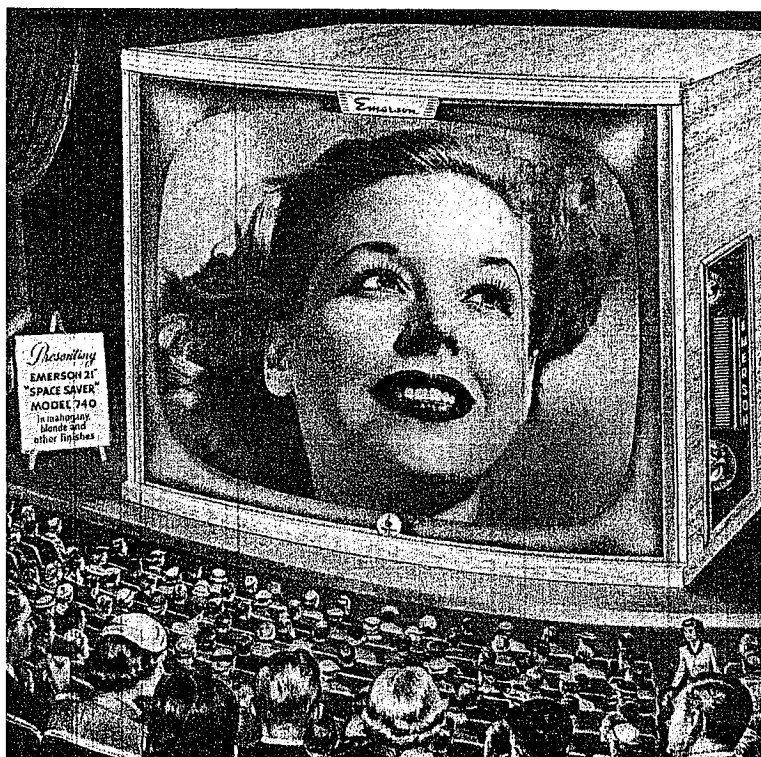
91-40919

CIP

The University of Minnesota is an  
equal-opportunity educator and employer.

## Contents

Introduction	<i>Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann</i>	vii
Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948-1955	<i>Lynn Spigel</i>	3
The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows	<i>Denise Mann</i>	41
The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class, and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs	<i>George Lipsitz</i>	71
Sit-coms and Suburbs: Positioning the 1950s Homemaker	<i>Mary Beth Haralovich</i>	111
"Is This What You Mean by Color TV?": Race, Gender, and Contested Meanings in NBC's <i>Julia</i>	<i>Aniko Bodroghkozy</i>	143
Defining Women: The Case of <i>Cagney and Lacey</i>	<i>Julie D'Acci</i>	169
<i>Kate and Allie</i> : "New Women" and the Audience's Television Archives	<i>Robert H. Deming</i>	203
All's Well That Doesn't End—Soap Opera and the Marriage Motif	<i>Sandy Flitterman-Lewis</i>	217
All that Television Allows: TV Melodrama, Postmodernism, and Consumer Culture	<i>Lynne Joyrich</i>	227
Source Guide to TV Family Comedy, Drama, and Serial Drama, 1946-1970	<i>Dan Einstein, Nina Leibman, Randall Vogt, Sarah Berry, Jillian Steinberger, and William Lafferty</i>	253
Contributors		279
Index		285



*Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p.8

## Installing the Television Set: Popular Discourses on Television and Domestic Space, 1948–1955

*Lynn Spigel*

Between the years 1948 and 1955 more than half of all American homes installed a television set and the basic mechanisms of the network oligopoly were set in motion. Historical studies have concentrated upon the latter half of this problem. That is to say, the history of television has been conceived primarily as a history of the economic, regulatory, and political struggles which gave rise to the network industry.<sup>1</sup> But television histories have only marginally attended to the social and domestic context into which television inserted itself. At most, television histories typically explain the coming of television into the home through a set of economic determinations, including manufacturer and network business strategies and the postwar climate of consumption. But these economic determinations cannot fully comprehend the process by which television came to be a domestic object and entertainment form.

In this paper I look at the coming of television in the context of a history of representation. The years which witnessed television's arrival in domestic space were marked by a vast production of discourses which spoke to the relationship between television, the home and the family. The industry and its advertising campaign, popular magazines, books on interior decor, films, newspapers, and television programming itself spoke in seemingly endless ways about television's place in the home. By looking at these representations and the media institutions from which they were distributed, we can see how the idea of television and its installation in the home was circulated to the public. Furthermore, we can see that even while the industry and its advertising campaign were attempting to promote the purchase and installation of the television set, popular discourses were replete with ambivalence and hesitation.<sup>2</sup> Utopian statements which idealized the new medium as an ultimate expression of technological and social progress were met by equally dystopian discourses which warned of television's devastating effects on family relationships and the efficient functioning of the household. Indeed, television was not simply promoted; rather, it was something which had to be questioned and deliberated upon.<sup>3</sup>

For example, how would television affect romantic relations of the couple? Would it blend with interior decor? Would it cause eyestrain, cancer, or even as one orthodontist suggested in a 1953 issue of *TV Guide*, would television lead to “malocclusion—an abnormal arrangement of the teeth likely to be caused by Junior’s cradling his jaw in his hand as he watches television?”<sup>4</sup>

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, and early television narratives, especially family situation comedies which took the middle-class domestic interior as their principal setting.<sup>5</sup> 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.

The following pages deal with a specific theme central to these discourses on television and the home—namely, the theatricalization and specularization of domestic space. These representations depicted the home as a theater, and they gave instructions for ways to arrange the home as a space of exhibition. In addition, these discourses deliberated upon ways in which to organize the gaze in the home equipped with television. They suggested ways to maximize visual pleasure in television—both as a household object (as part of the aesthetics of interior decor) and as an entertainment form. Just as importantly, they dramatized television’s displeasurable effects and sought ways to manage the new medium. Finally, these discourses help to illuminate the representational conventions established in early television programming because they reveal a set of expectations about what constituted pleasurable or displeasurable narrative modes for home entertainment. Here I address these problems in the following way: First, I focus on the domestic reception context and look at the discursive refiguring of the home as a theater. Next I examine some of the representational strategies used in domestic sit-coms—in particular their theatricality. And finally, I move back to the reception context and look at the organization of the gaze in the home—especially in the light of television’s highly disruptive effect on visual pleasure in domestic space.

There are two mechanical contrivances. . . . the talking motion picture and the electric vision apparatus with telephone. Either one will enable millions of people to see and hear the same performance simultaneously, by the ‘seeing telephone’ and the telephone, or successively from kinoscopic and photographic records of it . . . . these inventions will become cheap enough to be, like the country telephone, in every home, so that one can go to the theater without leaving the sitting room. From this fact we may call both devices the home theater.

S.C. Gilfillan, “The Future Home Theater,”  
in *The Independent*, 1912<sup>6</sup>

Although the idea of home television had been suggested in the popular press by early media prophets like S.C. Gilfillan and also widely discussed in industry trade journals since the 1920s, the actual installation of a television set was still a completely new concept for most Americans in the 1940s. As late as 1939, the year when the New York World’s Fair celebrated the technological future with its “World of Tomorrow” (including RCA’s debutante ball for TV which took place in its radio tube-shaped building), Gallup polls revealed that only 13% of the public would consider purchasing a television set for their homes.<sup>7</sup> Even so, postwar Americans installed TVs at a speed far surpassing any previous home entertainment medium. In order to understand the phenomenal growth of television, historians have recently begun to consider the social conditions which made the coming of television possible. As both Douglas Gomery and Mary Beth Haralovich have argued, among the most important of these conditions was the construction of a new suburbia in the 1950s.<sup>8</sup>

The suburban housing boom entailed a massive migration from the city into remote farm lands reconstituted by mass-produced housing which offered, primarily to the young adults of the middle class, a new stake in the ideology of privacy and property rights. A severe housing crisis, caused by a decline in residential construction during the Depression that lasted through World War II, was fueled by an increasing demand for housing as marriage and birth rates rose to new heights. Often unable to secure housing in the densely populated urban areas, the middle-class homeless looked to the new pre-fabricated housing built by corporate speculators like Levitt and Sons. With the help of the Federal Housing Association and veteran mortgage loans, these young couples, for the first time in history, found it cheaper to own their own homes than to rent an apartment in the city. One of the prevailing historical descriptions of the ideology which accompanied this move to suburbia emphasizes a generalized sense of isolationism in the postwar years, both at the level of cold war xenophobia and in terms of domestic everyday experiences. From this point

of view, the home functioned as a kind of fall-out shelter from the anxieties and uncertainties of public life. According to this argument, the fifties witnessed a nostalgic return to the Victorian cult of domesticity which was predicated upon the clear division between public and private spheres.<sup>9</sup>

The problem with this kind of explanation is that it reifies the very ideology of privacy which it attempts to explain—in other words, it begins by assuming that the home was indeed a retreat and that people understood their domestic lives and social lives to be clear cut and distinct entities. I would argue that the private and public dimensions were experienced in a less distinct fashion. The ideology of privacy was not experienced simply as a retreat from the public sphere; instead it also gave people a sense of belonging to the community. By purchasing their detached suburban homes, the young couples of the middle class were given a new, and flattering, definition of themselves; in newspapers, magazines, advertisements and on the airwaves, these young couples came to be the cultural representatives of the “good life.” Furthermore, the rapid growth of family-based community organizations like the PTA suggests that these neo-suburbanites did not barricade their doors, nor did they simply “drop out.” Instead, they secured a position of meaning in the *public* sphere through their new found social identities as *private* landowners. In paradoxical terms, then, privacy was something which could be enjoyed only in the company of others. When describing the landscape of the mass-produced suburbs, a 1953 issue of *Harpers* magazine succinctly suggested the new form of social cohesion which allowed people to be alone and together at the same time. The magazine described “monotonous” tract houses “where nothing rises above two stories, and the horizon is an endless picket fence of telephone poles and television aerials.”<sup>10</sup> There was an odd sense of connection and disconnection in this new suburbia, an infinite series of separate, but identical homes, strung together like Christmas tree lights on a tract with one central switch. And that central switch was the growing communications complex through which people could keep their distance from the world but at the same time imagine that their domestic spheres were connected to a wider social fabric.

The domestic architecture of the period was itself a discourse on this complex relationship between public and private space. Women’s home magazines, manuals on interior decor, and books on housing design all idealized the flowing, continuous spaces of California ranch-style architecture, which followed the functionalist design principles of “easy living” by eliminating walls in the central living spaces of the home.<sup>11</sup> Continuous spaces allowed residents to exert a minimum of energy by reducing the need to move from room to room. Beyond the “form follows function” aesthetic, however, this emphasis on continuous space suggested a profound preoccupation with space itself. These rambling domestic interiors

appeared not so much as private sanctions which excluded the outside world, but rather as infinite expanses which incorporated that world. The home magazines spoke constantly of the illusion of spaciousness, advising readers on ways to make the home appear as if it included the public domain. Landscape paintings and wallpaper depicting scenes of nature or a foreign city welcomed far-off spaces into the home.<sup>12</sup> Particularly emphasized were large picture windows or a wall of sliding glass doors which, as *Better Homes and Gardens* suggested in 1953, “magnifies [the] room’s effect.”<sup>13</sup>

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.”<sup>14</sup> 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.”<sup>15</sup> 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 fifties. 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.<sup>16</sup> 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."<sup>17</sup> 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.<sup>18</sup> 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.

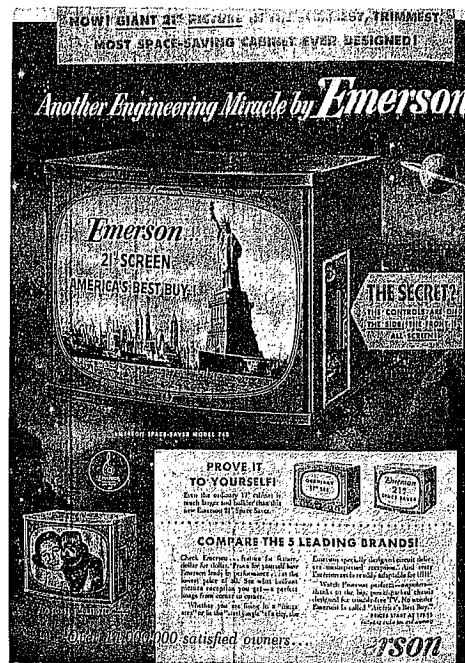
Although these "homes of tomorrow" were clearly upper-class dream-houses—too expensive or too "unhomey" for most Americans—the public

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.<sup>19</sup> 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.<sup>20</sup> The image of television as a "global village," which media critic Marshall McLuhan spoke of in the sixties, 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.<sup>21</sup> 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).<sup>22</sup>

This obsession with a view of far-away places was also registered in family sit-coms. 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



*Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (March 1953), p. 130

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 sit-com 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.



*My Little Margie* (1952); *I Love Lucy* (1955); *The Burns and Allen Show* (1951)





*Make Room for Daddy* (1954)

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.”<sup>23</sup>

*Fortune*’s analysis indeed describes what happened to spectator amusements during the early fifties. 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.”<sup>24</sup> 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.”<sup>25</sup>

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.<sup>26</sup> 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 isolation perpetuated by television, and the imaginary experiences of social integration which television programming constructed.



*Better Homes and Gardens* 29 (Nov. 1951), p. 218

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.<sup>27</sup> This problem of female spatial isolation gave way to what can be called a corrective cycle of commodity purchases. Typically here, in 1950, Hot-point advertised its dishwasher by claiming that the machine would bring the woman into the living room where she could watch television with her family.<sup>28</sup>

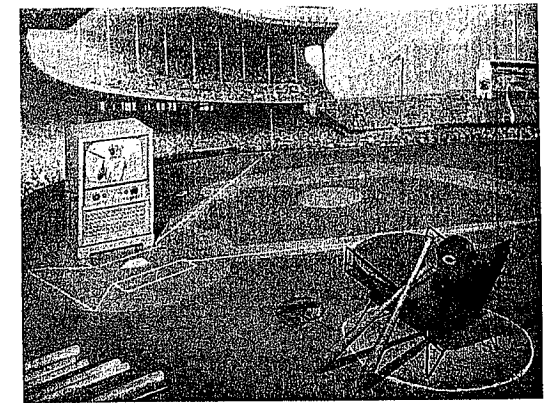


*American Home* 46 (Sept. 1951), p. 27

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.<sup>29</sup> 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.”<sup>30</sup> 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.<sup>31</sup>



*Life* 34 (April 27, 1953), p. 12

#### You Are There: Theatricality and the Illusion of Presence

It is in the context of this promise of hyper-realism that we might begin to understand the modes of representation used in many early domestic comedies. Early television drew upon a number of representational and performance traditions, incorporating principles from cinema (such as continuity editing) and radio (such as direct address), as well as vaudeville, burlesque and legitimate theater (such as theatrical scenery flats). In borrowing from and extending upon these traditions, early television was varied in style, and often family comedies mixed various modes of storytelling with musical, dance and stand-up comic-type performances.<sup>32</sup> Given the fact that we do not have a body of literature on the development of representational conventions in television (such as exists for cinema), it is obviously impossible to take on such a task in the space of this article. Here, I want to focus on television's simulation of live performance. By “simulation” I mean a reproduction of a situation through its model, and

in this sense, what I have in mind is quite different from mimesis. For more than presenting an illusion of resemblances—the spectator's imaginary sense of being placed in a scene—early television attempted to present a reproduction of the entire situation of being at the theater—the spectator's imaginary sense of being placed on the scene.

This "ideology of liveness" has been noted by television critics and historians who have argued, for example, that TV's illusion of presence is rendered through the real-life appearance of the electronic image and the eternal "flow" of the television text (its sense of an ever-present, simultaneous world). Apart from this, there is very little work done on the specific representational strategies through which the simulation of live performance is accomplished.<sup>33</sup> I would like to argue that early domestic comedies both developed (and borrowed from other media) modes of representation, or what I will call "theatrical" modes of representation, which produced the simulation of live theater. These representational strategies had important connections to the expectations about television and its mode of reception which were voiced in popular discourses in the early period. Theatricality fulfilled the utopian promise that television would present an illusion so compelling that it would be identical to a live performance. This can be seen in sit-coms which were broadcast live, filmed live in front of a studio audience, or filmed in the studio without a live audience. I want now to demonstrate these points through a number of examples.

The first of these is the emblematic example of theatricality in the sit-com form, *The Burns and Allen Show*. At the level of content, this program was based on the premise of a real life couple (George Burns and Gracie Allen) who played themselves playing themselves as real-life performers who had a television show based on their lives as television stars. If this is a bit hard to follow, it should be, because the fundamental principle of this program was a *mise-en-abyme* structure, an endless stage within a stage, a bottomless pit of representation.<sup>34</sup> Gracie Allen's style of humor was also a kind of bottomless pit in which audiences were caught in an endless quagmire of meta-realities. In formal construction this program repeated the *mise-en-abyme* structure because it continually "reframed" the action in two separate, but intricately linked spaces—a stage space and a domestic space. The spatial articulations between the stage and domestic spaces created for the home audience the illusion of being at a live theatrical performance. There were a variety of ways in which this was achieved. In the most simple form, the stage space was shown as a proscenium with drawn curtains, behind which the domestic space was contained. After the initial commercial, we cut to the stage, the curtains opened, the domestic space was revealed, and the evening's story unfolded.

It wasn't simply the image of the stage on the TV screen which gave the illusion of being at the live theater—rather, it was the alternation between the stage space and the domestic space which gave a sense of "being there." Through this alternation, viewers experienced a kind of layered realism in which the stage appeared to contain the domestic space, and thus, the stage appeared spatially closer—or more real—than the domestic space.

This heightened sense of realism on the stage space was further suggested by the shifting forms of address as the program moved from the stage to the domestic space. At various intervals during the program, the diegesis of the sit-com story was frozen and the terms of address were altered. For example, in a 1952 episode<sup>35</sup> George literally walks out of his role as a character in the space of the story, moves up-stage to reveal the entire domestic setting, takes his place in front of the curtain on the right side of the stage and delivers a monologue in direct address to the camera. After the monologue, George walks back across the stage to reveal once more the domestic setting behind him. He arrives at the front porch, knocks on the door, Gracie answers, and George walks into his living room—literally returning to his place in the story.

Obviously, in this example the domestic space is rendered with a high degree of artifice; in fact there is no attempt to sustain the illusion that it is a real space at all. Instead, it is the stage space which is represented through realist conventions. The spatial and temporal unities of the stage space are kept intact, and the actions on the stage always appear to unfold in real time—that is, in the time that it takes the home audience to watch the program. Thus, the stage appears more real than the domestic space, and the home audience is given the sense of watching a live play in the theater.

This heightened sense of realism rendered through the framing of the story also served as an advertising discourse. In a number of episodes the announcer appeared on the stage at the beginning of the story, where he would relate a commercial message and then introduce the program. This stage within a stage device served to represent the idea that it was the advertiser who was responsible for the evening's entertainment. It also had the effect of marking off the sponsor's discourse from the level of story, a point which is further demonstrated in a 1952 episode of *I Love Lucy* ("Lucy Does a Commercial") in which the sponsor's product literally served as the stage of representation for the narrative. In the opening sequence we see a cartoon drawing of an oversized box of Philip Morris cigarettes. This cigarette box turns into a stage when two cartoon figures which represent the real-life stars, Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, approach the box. They peel up the cigarette box wrapper (which now looks like a curtain) to reveal a narrative space in which the lead character, Lucy

Ricardo, appears sitting on her living room sofa. The camera then zooms into this narrative space and the sit-com story begins. At the end of the story, an animation sketch representing a theater stage appears, and the two cartoon drawings of the stars draw the curtains over the narrative space of the Ricardo home. Subsequently, the real-life Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz appear in a heart shaped frame and deliver a commercial for their sponsor. Not only did this framing structure work as a graphic reminder that the story had been brought to our homes through the courtesy of the sponsor, it also served to make the advertiser's discourse appear to be in a world closer to the viewer's real life.



*I Love Lucy* (1952)

This kind of hyper-realist effect becomes clearest in *The Goldbergs*, a popular Jewish-ethnic family comedy. At the start of each episode, the central character, Molly Goldberg (but ambiguously also the star, Gertrude Berg) leaned out her window and delivered her sponsor's commercial directly into the camera. This served to give the home audience a sense of being Molly's next door neighbor, and the advertising discourse took on a life-like quality. The heightened realism of the commercial message was further constructed through the transition into the domestic space where the story unfolded. In a 1952 episode,<sup>36</sup> for example, the transition from the window frame to the domestic space served to produce an illusion of moving from a level of pure discourse to the level of story, of moving from a kind of unmediated enunciation to a narrative space where the fiction took place.

The episode begins with the usual advertisement delivered by Molly in direct address as she leans out her window. In this particular case, Molly delivers a commercial message for RCA television sets. This leads to another

*mise-en-abyme* structure when Molly introduces us to an RCA representative who appears in a filmed commercial segment which is demonstrational in nature. The RCA rep shows the home audience a series of TV monitors which all promise "true tone," and which all picture Molly leaning out of her window frame. At the end of this demonstrational narrative we cut back to Molly (live) at her window who continues the commercial with her neighborly advice. The commercial ends when Molly turns her back on the window frame (as well as the TV frame) and enters the Goldberg living room where she now takes her place in the story. This transition from commercial to story is made absolutely explicit in the program because Molly literally *turns her back* on the ad's enunciative system and *takes her position* in the tale as she walks into the living room where her daughter, Rosalie, now addresses Molly as a character in the story. In this way, Molly's turn from commercial to fiction dramatizes the separation of the ad from the program, thus giving the ad a *non-fictional* status. However, this transition from ad to story also alerts the viewer to the artifice of the domestic setting, thus making us more aware of the *fictional* status of the story itself.

The world that Molly Goldberg's window opened onto was, as in all television, an alternate view, an endlessly self-referential world as opposed to a document. The domestic spaces contained within the frame of these stages were also often represented as stage-like, as prosceniums rather than real spaces. In some ways, this had to do with technological conditions and in-studio shooting practices. On the ten and twelve inch television screen, it was typically difficult to show depth of field, and the even, high key lighting used for live and live-on-film television gave the picture a kind of flattened-out quality. In addition, because many of these sit-coms were broadcast live, or else filmed live in real time, it was impossible to shoot reverse fields. Finally, sound booms were often rooted in one place at the front of the stage, so that the principal dialogue usually took place in a frontal, proscenium position. (Note, however, that many programs did utilize off-screen sound effects and dialogue which added a more realist dimension of space.)

Aside from these technological and practical determinations, it appears that theatricality was also a preferred style for the representation of the home in early television. Contrary to the notion that these early television households presented a "mirror" of the audience's life at home, I would suggest that these early family sit-coms presented the home as a theatrical stage and thus depicted highly abstract versions of family identity. In *Burns and Allen*, for example, domestic spaces actually took on the functions of the stage space. For instance, at the end of the program, George and Gracie often did a short vaudeville routine on the stage. However, the front porch

of their house was just as typically used as the stage for their final act. In addition, windows, doorways, and passageways between rooms typically became the framing stages for performance segments. Even commercial messages were frequently integrated into the narrative space, so that the home became a stage for product display.

This theatricalization of the domestic world has been a subject of interest for film scholars—in particular, Serafina Bathrick, whose illuminating analysis of *Meet Me In St. Louis* (MGM, 1944) demonstrates the way the Hollywood musical mixed performance and storytelling conventions within the domestic setting.<sup>37</sup> Early TV domestic comedies, I would argue, imported these kind of representational strategies from the cinema, but they developed them in relation to their own broadcast context. Domestic comedies like *Burns and Allen* existed alongside variety-comedy, which had been highly popular on radio since the 1930s and was especially popular in early television. *Burns and Allen* was in many ways a transitional text because it included both elements of domestic comedy (organized around story development and continuing characters) and elements of variety-comedy (organized around vaudeville-type gags, performance, direct address, etc.). In fact, the series' first episodes, which aired in 1950, included variety ensembles that performed song and dance numbers on the stage space between acts of the sit-com story. However, by 1951–1952 these variety acts had been incorporated into the narrative/domestic space, so that now performances were clearly motivated by the story.

This mixture of variety-act performance with story elements is particularly significant when looked at in the context of the popular discourses which promised that watching television would be like going to a live theater. As others have argued, the variety-comedies, with their kinetic acts and studio audiences, produced a sense of live spontaneous action. By incorporating these elements into the diegesis, the domestic comedy was able to produce an illusion of being there—an illusion which must have been particularly compelling considering that some of the most popular programs were organized around these principles.

For example, two of the most acclaimed and highly rated comedies, *Make Room for Daddy* and *I Love Lucy*, each systematically incorporated variety-act performances into their domestic worlds. Like *Burns and Allen*, these latter two were each based upon the alternations between a stage space and a domestic space. But unlike *Burns and Allen*, both the stage and the domestic spaces were part of the story. In these cases the premises of family melodrama were seamlessly joined with the premises of variety-show entertainment through storylines which focused on the domestic lives of "show-biz" families. The male heroes (Danny Williams and Ricky Ricardo) were entertainers who regularly performed on their nightclub

stages. However, these performance segments were just as often incorporated into the domestic space where they were integrated with the story.

This sense of the home as a theater was also operative in programs which were based upon more realistic story premises. A good example is *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, a sit-com of enormous popularity which began on television in 1952. In popular magazines the Nelsons were famous for their typicality, and in many ways the program was constructed on realist codes of representation. The Nelson home was decorated with a warm family feel, and shots of their surrounding neighborhood created a sense of a real space. The stories centered around normal, real-life adventures, so that the program had a general sense of "everydayness" about it.

Even with this "overkill" of realist codes, however, the interior space of the Nelson home was often rendered in a highly theatrical fashion, particularly in the early episodes. In a 1952 episode entitled "The Chairs," the foyer in the Nelson home served as a proscenium on which the events took place in the opening scene. A round white rug which covered the center of the foyer floor functioned as a spotlight for the action. The scene, which lasted for about six minutes of screen time, contained a minimal amount of editing, and the camera moved only in order to follow the principal action or to reframe the action slightly as actors entered or exited the frame. The scene was played almost entirely in long to medium long shot. Given this high degree of stasis, the editing, camera movement, and shot distance variation which was employed tells us something about the rules of representation upon which, I would argue, many of these early sit-coms were based. There are a total of five edits in this lengthy scene. The first is a cinematic form of editing, a match cut on action which is used as Ricky Nelson opens the front door. But mixed with this form of cinematic realism is an editing style based on a theatrical conception of representation—namely, editing on the stage entrances and exits of principal actors. First we get two cut away shots as Ozzie and Harriet each enter the central space of action. Later in the scene, the camera pans to follow Ricky and David as they exit the room, after which we cut back to Ozzie.

The other sense of theatrical representation in this scene stems from the absence of point-of-view editing between characters. Much as in the live theater, the action and dialogue in this scene is played to the audience; a pattern typical of many scenes in early situation comedies. But it wasn't just that these kinds of scenes imitated the theater; they were not simply documents of the performance. Instead, I would suggest that there were camera practices and editing rules for television which proceeded on theatrical assumptions about representation. For example, although this scene

in *Ozzie and Harriet* is played almost entirely at a wide camera distance, towards the end of the scene, Ozzie Nelson engages in a long telephone conversation in which the camera first zooms into a close-up and then cuts to an extreme close-up of his facial expressions. Through what logic, if any, do these shots appear?

These close-ups are symptomatic of a more general shot rhetoric of early television. Often the scenes in these sit-coms were shot and edited on principles of distance (close-up, medium shot, long shot) or angle variation. In these kinds of scenes the action is less motivated by story elements (such as character psychology, or even unity of time and space) than it is by the viewer's relationship to the performance of the action. It is the viewer's sight—his/her ability to see an action performed—which becomes the central interest in the scene. In this case, the camera movement and editing are motivated by Ozzie Nelson's facial expression—his face registers exasperation with the party on the other end of the telephone. Ozzie's "be-



The rug works as a spotlight for the action as Ricky and David play football in the Nelson foyer. (*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, 1952)



Ozzie performs his "gag" in a close-up (*The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet*, 1952)

fuddledness" was a recurring gag on the program, so that this moment would have been particularly meaningful for the viewer who would have understood that Ozzie now was going to "do his gag." Camera movement and editing, then, were often motivated by performance details. While the camera's wide view narrativizes a story played out on the central stage/foyer of the house, the close-ups of Ozzie's face give us another kind of performance—here what can be called, "mugging for the camera."

This kind of "theatrical" representational strategy was used in the cinema—in particular, film comedies featuring well-known comedians relied heavily on "mugging" close-ups. Television sit-coms developed these kinds of passages with particular force, and within their specific broadcast context. The diegetic universe—in shows ranging from *Burns and Allen* to *Ozzie and Harriet*—was often interrupted by scenes that seemed to be of another order. Here, shooting and editing on distance and angle of view gave sit-coms a sense of immediacy, of "unmediated" action, of performance aimed directly at the spectator at home. Put another way, the action appeared to be less mediated by characters (less based on secondary identification) and more directly addressed to the viewer (or more based on primary identification with the camera).<sup>38</sup>

The surrounding trade and popular discourses on television style help to illuminate the significance which these representational practices held for producers, critics and audiences at the time. According to these discourses, it was not just that television in the home had to approximate the live theater—instead, TV was ideally intended to perfect the experience of watching a live performance. Television was meant to give the home audience not just a view, but rather, a *perfect view*.

This perfect vision was typically discussed in terms of television's ability to depict action at optimum distances and to provide ideal angles of sight. Television was better than the theater because it could give people both a wide view of the action and a sense of intimacy through the close-up—and all within the space of one's private living room theater. Both industry trade journals and the popular press repeatedly debated upon the shot distances through which certain kinds of action were best portrayed. For example, in 1949 *House Beautiful* compared the televised concert to its performance in the concert hall claiming that "Television not only embodies [the concert performance] it . . . adds a dimension not offered to the concert goer." This dimension was the specialized view which could be had in the home—the "close-up" which permitted "the spectator to look at the orchestra and the conductor from every angle, to peer into the faces of the musicians, to note their physical characteristics, and to watch the play of emotion on their patently exposed faces."<sup>39</sup> In 1950, a critic for the same magazine thought it better to present the action in the televised concert from a wider distance, stating that, "all musical talent on TV had

to be made to look better," by for example, "the elimination of the close-up of the players sweating."<sup>40</sup>

We might recall here that early discourses on the cinema likewise idealized the notion of a perfect view. But again, this ideal had specific meanings within the context of broadcasting and home reception. The perfect view in the cinema was intended to evoke a state of forgetfulness—to make the spectator feel somehow absent from the space of reception and thus more fully immersed in the fantasmatic illusion of presence rendered by the scene itself. But in the discourses on television, the perfect view was meant to produce a different kind of spectatorial fantasy. Implicit in these discourses was the notion that the television text should address its spectator as an audience member—as someone present on the scene of action. Scenes like the one in *Ozzie and Harriet* helped to create the illusion of "being there" because they acknowledged the viewer's presence—they seemed to say, "We know you are watching . . . you out there in television land!" When the camera moved to a wider angle to show Lucy ride on a trick bicycle, or alternatively when it moved in to show one of her numerous mug shots, the text appeared to acknowledge the spectator's presence because its change in perspective was motivated by the audience's point of view, rather than the point of view of the characters or enunciative agency.

Thus, to recapitulate my earlier remarks, the spectator of domestic comedy was not simply placed in the scene of a story—but also at many points in the text the spectator was placed on the scene of action, addressed as part of an audience watching a play. (And the studio audiences and/or laugh tracks used in the domestic comedies added to the sense of "being there"). This illusion of presence was part and parcel of the surrounding discourses on television, discourses which promised that TV would give its audience a sense of connection to the outside world. In this way the private activity of watching television was made pleasurable precisely because one could remain alone in the living room, but at the same time sustain an illusion of being in the company of others.

### The Domestic Gaze

While early television programming attempted to fulfill the utopian promise of bringing the world into the home, popular discourses continually deliberated upon the degree to which this new way of seeing could be enjoyed within the domestic context. In some cases, the home was figured as a kind of "ideal theater" where visual pleasures achieved new heights. In fact, the perfect view in television was not only discussed in terms of representational strategies in programming, but also in the context of the home reception environment. In his book, *The Future of Television*, Orrin

E. Dunlap, Jr. wrote in 1947 that television was "Utopia for the Audience." Appraising an early NBC drama, he claimed, "The view was perfect—no latecomers to disturb the continuity; no heads or bonnets to dodge. . . . In television every seat is in the front row."<sup>41</sup>

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."<sup>42</sup> Furniture companies like Kroehler "Tele-Vue" 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."<sup>43</sup> 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."<sup>44</sup>

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."<sup>45</sup> 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. . . ."<sup>46</sup> 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.<sup>47</sup> 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.” As discussed earlier, 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 tip on “how to hide a TV screen.”<sup>48</sup> 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. . . .”<sup>49</sup> 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 fifties science fiction anthology, *Tales of Tomorrow*. Entitled “The Window,”<sup>50</sup> 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.<sup>51</sup>

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.”<sup>52</sup>

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.



Bruce's son hushes his father as television takes center stage in the home (*Fireside Theatre*, 1954)

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.<sup>53</sup> 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."<sup>54</sup> 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 displeasurable 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.<sup>55</sup> 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.<sup>56</sup> 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.<sup>57</sup> 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.<sup>58</sup> 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.



*Ladies' Home Journal* 66 (May 1949), p. 30

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.<sup>59</sup>

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.



*I Love Lucy* (1954)

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.

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.<sup>60</sup> 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. For the standard three volume text written along these lines see Erik Barnouw, *A History of Broadcasting in the United States*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford, 1966–70).
2. In fact, even while television manufacturers advertised heavily in women's home magazines and the general slicks like *Life*, the magazines did not simply promote television—rather, as this essay shows, they also spoke of the problems which television brought to the home. This should remind us that the ideological content of consumer magazines is not entirely determined by the sales effort. Rather, women's magazines had, since the nineteenth century, been a site for "women's discourses"—albeit in a mass-produced form. The ad man had to place his consumer messages in this site in order to appeal to potential female consumers. In this sense, I would argue, we need to give the sales effort a less deterministic role and to remember that while magazines and advertisers might work in mutual relations of support, they are relatively autonomous institutions whose strategies might sometimes be at odds. For more on this see my forthcoming dissertation for UCLA, "Installing the Television Set: The Social Construction of Television's Place in the Home and the Family, 1948–55."

3. The media's ambivalent response to technology pre-dates television. In particular, the innovation of household communication technologies like the radio have been greeted by the popular press with skepticism. See, for example, Catherine Covert, "We May Hear Too Much: American Sensibility and the Response to Radio, 1919-1924," in *Mass Media Between the Wars: Perceptions of Cultural Tension, 1918-1941*, ed. Catherine L. Covert and John D. Stevens (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1984), pp. 199-220. Certainly, then, television's introduction in the early period is part of an entire historical context of technological innovation, and it bears continuity with other technologies in this regard. A comparative study which looks at television with respect to other media might better reveal historical differences between them. My work, which explores the case of television and postwar domestic ideals, is, I think, a necessary first step in answering these larger questions.
4. *TV Guide* 1 (June 5-11, 1953), p. 1.
5. This article is based on the research for my dissertation (see above). 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.
6. S.C. Gilfillan, "The Future Home Theater," *The Independent* 73 (October 17, 1912), p. 886.
7. Warren J. Susman, *Culture as History: The Transformation of American Society in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Pantheon, 1984), p. 218.
8. Douglas Gomery, "The Coming of Television and the 'Lost' Motion Picture Audience," *Journal of Film and Video* 38 (Summer 1985), pp. 5-11; and Mary Beth Haralovich, "The Suburban Family Sit-com and Consumer Product Design: Middle-Class Consumption in the 1950s," forthcoming in *Quarterly Review of Film Studies*.
9. See, for example, Douglas T. Miller and Marion Nowak, *The Fifties: The Way We Really Were* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), especially Chapter 13; and Clifford E. Clark's recent book, *The American Family Home, 1800-1960* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1986). Clark writes, "Almost without thinking middle-class suburbanites took the protected-home vision of the nineteenth-century reformers and turned it into their central pre-occupation" (p. 236). Clark does acknowledge that the new suburbanites were often involved in community activities, but he maintains that the haven model for the home persisted at the ideological level. My argument, on the other hand, insists that the ideology of suburbanization was not merely a return to a nineteenth-century ideal, but rather it included within it the terms of the contradiction between community involvement and domestic seclusion.
10. Harry Henderson, "The Mass-Produced Suburbs," *Harpers* 207 (November 1953), p. 26.
11. For popular books on architecture and interior decor see, for example, *Sunset Homes for Western Living* (San Francisco: Lane Publishing Co., 1946); Robert Woods Kennedy, *The House and the Art of Its Design* (Huntington, NY: Robert E. Krieger Publishing Company, 1953); Cliff May, *Western Ranch Houses* (Menlo Park, CA: Lane Book Co., 1958); Katherine Murrow Ford and Thomas H. Chrichton, *The American House Today* (New York: Reinhold Publishing Co., 1951).
12. Mural wallpaper was especially used in the homes of the wealthy as exhibited in the exclusive client-built homes of *Architectural Digest*. See, for example, vols. 12 (June 1948), pp. 47, 90; 14 (circa 1955), p. 23.
13. *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (December 1953), p. 71.
14. Thomas H. Hutchinson, *Here is Television, Your Window on the World* (1946; New York: Hastings House, 1948), p. ix.
15. Charles Siepmann, *Radio, Television and Society* (New York: Oxford, 1950), p. 340.
16. Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (New York: Oxford, 1964), see especially p. 193.
17. Catherine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home* (New York: J.B. Ford and Company, 1869), pp. 91, 96.
18. Gwendolyn Wright discusses this in *Building the Dream: A Social History of Housing in America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), p. 107.
19. 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).
20. 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.

21. *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 48; *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (December 1953), p. 21.
  22. *Better Homes and Gardens* 33 (March 1953), p. 130.
  23. *Fortune* editors, "\$30. Billion for Fun," reprinted in *Mass Leisure*, ed. Eric Larrabee and Rolf Meyersohn (1955; Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1958), pp. 162-168.
  24. *House Beautiful* 90 (November 1948), p. 230.
  25. *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 8.
  26. *Better Homes and Gardens* 29 (November 1951), p. 218.
  27. *American Home* 46 (September 1951), p. 27.
  28. *House Beautiful* 92 (December 1950), p. 77.
  29. 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 (December 9, 1950), p. 58.
  30. *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (October 1952), p. 215. For other examples see, *Life* 34 (October 26, 1953), p. 53; *Life* 35 (October 5, 1953), p. 87; *House Beautiful* 91 (November 1949), p. 77.
  31. *Life* 34 (April 27, 1953), p. 12.
  32. Early television borrowed this mixed style from popular radio shows of the forties like *The Aldrich Family* which also blended conventions of live vaudeville performance (such as the studio audience and the variety act) with classical storytelling conventions (such as temporal and spatial continuities).
  33. For an interesting discussion of the aesthetics and ideology of "liveness" in contemporary TV programming see Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology," in *Regarding Television*, ed. E. Ann Kaplan (Los Angeles: University Publications of America, Inc., 1983), pp. 12-22.
  34. In fact, in the 1956-7 season, the *mise-en-abyme* became literal when George's magic TV was incorporated into the story. George replayed the story on his magic TV and commented upon the narrative events.
  35. This episode, for which I have no title, was broadcast live on June 23, 1952.
  36. The episode, for which I have no title, deals with a spat between Uncle David and his brother.
  37. Serafina Kent Bathrick, *The True Woman and the Family Film: The Industrial Production of Memory*, diss.; University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1981.
  38. The fact that many of the early domestic comedies featured characters who were named for real-life stars (like George and Gracie, Lucy, or the entire Nelson family) and whose roles as characters often directly corresponded to real-life events in the lives of the stars, added to this sense of immediacy.
- Patricia Mellencamp discusses this conflation of fiction and reality with respect to *I Love Lucy* in her article, "Situation Comedy, Feminism, and Freud: Discourses of Gracie and Lucy," in *Studies in Entertainment: Critical Approaches to Mass Culture*, ed. Tania Modleski (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986), see especially pp. 87-88.
  39. Samuel Chotzinoff, "The Future of Music on Television," *House Beautiful* 91 (August 1949), p. 113.
  40. Henry W. Simon, "The Charm of Music Seen," *House Beautiful* 92 (August 1950), p. 97.
  41. Orrin E. Dunlap, Jr., *The Future of Television* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1947), p. 87.
  42. "Where Shall We Put the Television Set?" *Good Housekeeping* 133 (August 1951), p. 107.
  43. 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.
  44. Cited in "With an Eye . . . On the Viewer," *Televiser* 7 (April 1950), p. 16.
  45. "Now You See It . . . Now You Don't," *American Home* 46 (September 1951), p. 49.
  46. *House Beautiful* 95 (December 1953), p. 145.
  47. 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.
  48. *American Home* 45 (January 1951), p. 89.
  49. Robert M. Yoder, "Be Good! Television's Watching," *Saturday Evening Post* 221 (May 14, 1949), p. 29.
  50. Circa 1951-1953.
  51. 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. 109-119.
  52. Bob Taylor, "What is TV Doing to MEN?" *TV Guide* 1 (June 26-July 2, 1953), p. 15.
  53. 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.

54. W.W. Ward, "Is It Time to Buy Television?" *House Beautiful* 90 (October 1948), p. 172.
55. *House Beautiful* 97 (May 1955), p. 131.
56. *Better Homes and Gardens* 31 (October 1953), p. 151.
57. *Esquire* 38 (July 1952), p. 87.
58. *Ladies' Home Journal* 66 (May 1949), p. 30.
59. *Better Homes and Gardens* 30 (February 1952), p. 154.
60. Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 (Spring 1980), p. 27.



*House Beautiful* 91 (Nov. 1949), p.1.



*The Martha Raye Show*

## The Spectacularization of Everyday Life: Recycling Hollywood Stars and Fans in Early Television Variety Shows

*Denise Mann*

Many advertisements took their place alongside other mass diversions—the amusement park, the slick-paper romance, the movies. None demanded to be taken literally or even all that seriously; yet all promised intense “real life” to their clientele, and all implicitly defined “real life” as something outside the individual’s everyday experience.

Jackson Lears<sup>1</sup>

At the turn of the century in America, the burgeoning field of mass amusement institutionalized the promise that “real life” was just around the corner. Hollywood, with its charged overpresence of stars, glitter and glamor, went on to institutionalize the idea that “real life” was to be found in the movie theater. Studio publicity departments singled out female fans, in particular, for their devoted attention to Hollywood stars and product tie-ins through fan magazines and mass circulation magazines.<sup>2</sup>

### Hollywood Stars and Female Fans

The privileged relationship between the motion picture industry and the female fan at the turn of the century has been charted in several social histories as well as in theoretical studies such as Miriam Hansen’s recent analysis of the Valentino case and its relationship to female viewer habits.<sup>3</sup> Little attention has been given to the transformation that takes place in this impassioned relationship some thirty years later once Hollywood stars and stories are received in the mundane circumstances of women’s everyday lives—the domestic setting of television. The transfer of Hollywood stars to the home via television during the transitional period from 1946 to 1956 shifts the viewing context not just from a public, community event to a private, isolated experience, but also restructures the spectator’s fantasy engagement with the movies. This change constitutes a radical transformation in the social imaginary that had previously bound Hollywood