

# The Television Image and the Image of the Television

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During our era of media convergence, television in the United States (as elsewhere) has been undergoing cultural legitimation, rising in status from its earlier typical positioning as the “boob tube” to a higher level of respectability.<sup>1</sup> For instance, television programs such as *The Sopranos* are considered to be worthwhile and artistic, and new technologies such as DVRs afford audiences newfound agency to program their viewing. The shifting cultural status of television has occurred at every level at which we can identify television, from industrial practices to textual forms to contexts and technologies of reception. One especially significant site of legitimation has been the status of the television set (*the television*) as an image machine, and by direct consequence, of formats of content made to fit its picture.

Over the last ten years, the television set has been remade in the image of the film screen, becoming considerably wider in shape and visually richer, so much that the new standard of TV picture is known by the same term Marshall McLuhan used to describe hot media like cinema: *high definition*.<sup>2</sup> The new television set has transformed from 4:3 to 16:9, from SD to HD, and from CRT to LCD, LED, or plasma. In the process, all of the cultural associations of film and television—as distinct and opposed audiovisual media, as cultural forms with differing visual and experiential status, as media of greater and lesser cultural import, as masculinized and feminized—have opened to negotiation. Such negotiation occurs in the new sets’ marketing discourses, in domestic spaces in which the new sets are experienced in the context of everyday life, and in formats of programming created to match the demand for a technologically improved and culturally upgraded form of television hardware. This paper considers each of these distinct aspects of the introduction of flat-panel televisions. All of these sites share a discursive agenda of renewing TV through the construction of the television picture as more distinguished, aesthetic, formally pleasing, and cinematic than it had been before. By legitimating the television itself, flat-panel sets articulate a fresh identity for the medium, revising its class and gender associations by emphasizing affluence and masculinity. In the process,

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<sup>1</sup> The cultural legitimation of television during the era of media convergence is described and analyzed in much greater detail in Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (New York: Routledge, 2012). This paper is adapted from sections of this book’s Chapter 6.

<sup>2</sup> Eric McLuhan and Frank Zingrone, eds., *Essential McLuhan* (New York: Basic Books, 1995), 134.

legitimation functions to reinscribe the same class and gender hierarchies that have worked historically to perpetuate television's cultural degradation.

### **Introducing the Flat-Panel Screen**

Changes in the television have not happened all at once, but they rapidly intensified in the second half of the 2000s, when a new kind of set was adopted by millions of consumers just as television producers, networks and stations, and cable and satellite providers hastened to offer content made to fit it. Flat-panel, digital, HDTV sets with their bright, colorful, and high-resolution picture, their broad shape, and often room-dominating size were not to be found in American homes at the beginning of the millennium. By the end of its first decade, these sets had become common sights not just in family rooms but in restaurants and bars, airport departure lounges, hotel rooms, supermarkets, and fitness centers. Along with other digital devices used to select content to view on them, flat-panel TVs have been essential in creating a sense of television's improvement as a technology and as a medium. This has arisen not only by positive associations with the putatively cinematic qualities of HDTV image and sound, but also by negative comparison with the old CRT sets, which the new televisions usher into obsolescence.

When they began to penetrate the American market, flat-panels had the advantage over CRT sets of coming in larger sizes and appealing in terms of design elements such as shape, volume, and line. Picture-tube sets would seldom get much bigger than 34 inches, but plasma displays could get 50 inches or larger without needing substantial space behind the screen for a tube. During the holiday season of 2003, reports described a "mania" for the new flat sets, driven in part by "the popularity of DVD players, games consoles and digital cable, all of which produce clear, sharp images that look particularly good on a big screen."<sup>3</sup> Standard rhetoric described the new flat-panels terms not just of picture quality but of size and shape, and consequently of novelty and ineffable qualities of gadget cool. CRT sets would be called "boxy," "bulky," and "hefty," while flat-panel HDTVs were "sleek," "svelte," and "thin." Flat-panels were of widescreen dimensions but only inches deep, and thus broad but not voluminous. This newly trim and chic image of the set is often as important as the image produced *by* it in establishing a renewed identity for television.

But picture is central to the appeal of the new television. The consumer of the new technology would instantly recognize its shape in comparison with a traditional CRT set as wider, which popular press discourses invariably have described in terms of a widescreen movie image. By the 1990s, most film viewing was occurring in the home on television screens, and now the television set was seen to be advancing closer to reproducing the experience of theatrical cinema

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<sup>3</sup>"Thin screens, fat margins," *The Economist*, December 20, 2003, 97.

exhibition, fitting well within the home theater phenomenon as analyzed by Barbara Klinger.<sup>4</sup>

Popular press discourses around the introduction of HDTV often seized on the television set's newfound ability to picture previously unrepresented imagery, such as the stitches on a baseball or the pores and lines on a face.<sup>5</sup> First-time viewers, the *New York Times* reported in 1998, describe high-definition television as "looking through a window rather than looking at a picture."<sup>6</sup> High-def was to make us behold what previously was impossible to see. Facial blemishes, wrinkles, lines, and blotches would be newly apparent, while deep-set eyes and shine on the skin would look more unappealing in HD, a challenge to makeup artists.<sup>7</sup> According to this renewal of the "hyperrealist" discourse that Lynn Spigel found to characterize the advertising of television as a new domestic technology in the 1950s, television would conquer its status as a mere medium and offer direct access to a world of vivid and detailed images with the advent of high-def pictures.<sup>8</sup>

We can locate a number of desires animating the consumer to invest considerable sums in a new television set during the era of convergence. Considering only the picture, a desire for a more cinematic image and a desire for a more lifelike or natural image together make for a collective aspiration for a new conception of television that is basically un-television-like. As a domestic appliance with its own distinct formal qualities expressing fresh cultural connotations, the flat-panel television set likewise functions in distinction to the old idea of TV, offering itself as a newly desirable commodity. To remake the television means to abandon what the medium and technology once were, to relegate the old idea of television to a backwards past from which we have progressed.

### **Selling HDTV**

While historically TV has been seen as a medium associated both with the feminine and the underclass, the discourses surrounding HDTV challenge these constructions. In such discourses, television becomes technologically sophisticated, masculinized, and both economically and aesthetically valued. Wide and flat HD screens are constructed as objects of technological sophistication and in a culture in which "technical competence is an integral part of masculine gender identity," we experience a "historical and cultural construction of technology as masculine."<sup>9</sup> The discourse of masculinized technological superiority articulated to HDTV sets precedes their widespread adoption, most clearly in the rise of home theaters in the 1990s. In pre-HD home theater technology, the massive size of the image and especially the use of

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<sup>4</sup> Barbara Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex: Cinema, New Technologies and the Home* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

<sup>5</sup> Maryanne Murray Buechner, "I Want My HDTV!" *Time*, December 16, 2002.

<sup>6</sup> Joel Brinkley, "HDTV: High Definition, High in Price." *New York Times*, August 20, 1998.

<sup>7</sup> Jeanne McDowell, "For TV Stars, High Def is Dicey," *Time*, April 12, 2004.

<sup>8</sup> Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1992), 133-135.

<sup>9</sup> Judy Wajcman, *Feminism Confronts Technology* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 22.

surround sound promised an escape from the “inferior” technology of (feminized) television. As Barbara Klinger has argued of this phenomenon, “By reproducing the big picture and big sound associated with cinema’s conditions of exhibition, home theater ‘rescues’ the family television from what promoters depict as its lack of spectacle and technological refinement.”<sup>10</sup> Along with Klinger, William Boddy recognizes the ways in which gender informs the home theater’s transcendence of mere TV. As he notes, early 1990s ads for big-screen televisions, “seek to reassure the male television consumer that he remains uncontaminated by the traditional emasculating associations of television viewing,” a discursive move that assists the broader “remasculinization of the television apparatus through fantasies of power and control.”<sup>11</sup>

For instance, the choice of content displayed on HD sets in retail spaces masculinizes the new television. HDTVs have been typically marketed as devices for displaying such “non-TV” content as feature films and video games, while sports programming is the only content created for television broadcast that is regularly highlighted in HDTV marketing. A print advertising campaign for Sharp’s Aquos line of LCD televisions circa 2007 pictures the set framing a baseball player sliding headfirst into a base, specks of dirt vividly frozen in air. Samsung partnered with Microsoft’s Xbox gaming platform as a way to showcase the “12 millisecond pixel switching speed” and ability to overcome any “motion artifacts” of its LCD TVs, as well as becoming the lead sponsor of the World Cyber Games.<sup>12</sup> Samsung brokered a marketing deal with the NFL, while Sharp partnered with Major League Baseball as its “official HDTV.”<sup>13</sup>



Dealers of consumer electronics are urged to choose content for floor models such as high-definition cable or satellite feeds of ESPN, HBO, and HDNet; Blu-Ray or HD-DVD discs; or Xbox or PlayStation 3 games; none of which offer the kinds of

<sup>10</sup> Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*, 25.

<sup>11</sup> William Boddy, “Archaeologies of electronic vision and the gendered spectator,” *Screen* 35:2 (Summer 1994), 121, 117.

<sup>12</sup> “Samsung, Microsoft ink HDTV alliance for next-gen X-box console,” *Electronic News*, May 2, 2005, N. Beth Snyder Bulik, “Stay-at-home trend feathers Samsung nest,” *Advertising Age*, November 3, 2008, 18-19.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*; Kenneth Hein, “Attack of the no-name HDTV brands,” *Brandweek*, June 18, 2007, S30.

content most associated with the old image of the television.<sup>14</sup> The emphasis on sports is in response to a widespread belief that consumers who purchase HD sets typically see sports viewing as a key appeal of the new technology.<sup>15</sup> The logic informing the marketing of HDTVs via masculinized media forms has been rooted in research into the interests and motivations of early adopters, and the assumptions about masculinity that result. Thus, survey research from 1999 indicates that, “Innovators and early adopters of HDTV receivers will likely be younger, have higher income, be frequent moviegoers, watch sports programs, and express a keen interest in high-resolution, large screen televisions.”<sup>16</sup> Meanwhile, a number of different set manufacturers hawk their products on gaming websites. For example, the UGO “Lifestyle for Gamers” site touts that gaming on the Panasonic TH-42PX600U plasma TV will make you “feel as though you could catch that long pass from the forty yard line or get hit by Jeff Gordon’s car when it spins out on the track.”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, as Bernadette Flynn has argued, gaming platforms promise their users the experience of escaping from the confines of the domestic sphere, even as their play is by definition rooted in the space of the home and the interface of the TV screen.<sup>18</sup> The media content most often used to market HD sets not only positions these screens away from over-the-air (or cable) television and the domestic confines with which it is associated. It naturalizes the link between HDTVs and the masculinized realms of feature films (especially genres like action blockbusters), hard-core gaming, and professional spectator sports.

Associations between flat-panels and masculinity are also reinforced in the marketing of consumer electronics such as the circular advertisements bundled with Sunday newspapers. In circulars for stores like Best Buy and Target, flat-panel HDTV sets are routinely cross-promoted with other media goods such as video game consoles and titles; delivery technologies such as satellite or cable services and TiVo; and especially newly released DVDs of Hollywood films, which might effectively bring in a regular stream of customers to admire the new televisions on conspicuous display at the store entrance. The widescreen sets in the circulars are usually pictured filled with content, and this content is almost never the typical feminine, juvenile, or “low-class” TV fare of the pre-convergence era such as talk shows, comedies, cartoons, or soap operas.

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<sup>14</sup>Grant Clauser, “HDTV HANDBOOK: A Retailer’s Guide to Digital Television” *Dealerscope* (December 2007 supplement *HDTV Handbook*).

<sup>15</sup>Allison Romano, “The Pictures Are the Story” *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 24, 2008, 14-15.

<sup>16</sup> Michel Dupagne, “Exploring the characteristics of potential high-definition television adopters,” *The Journal of Media Economics* 12:1 (1999): 47.

<sup>17</sup>“HDTV Home Entertainment Guide: Products,” *UGO: Lifestyle for Gamers*, <http://www.ugo.com/programs/verizon/entertainmentguide/products.asp>, accessed March 29, 2009.

<sup>18</sup>Bernadette Flynn, “Geography of the digital hearth,” *Information, Communication & Society* 6:4 (2003): 551-576.



Sometimes circulars picture sports images framed in the televisions, for instance during football playoffs when the appeal of watching “the big game” on a new TV set can help sell the hardware. More often, the images seen in the HD sets in these marketing sites sell DVDs and console games, further reinforcing distinctions between old and new conceptions of TV, and emphasizing the function of the flat-panel set in extending the use of television to myriad un-TV-like activities such as watching films and playing on a Wii. The titles typically advertised are of the genres that best show off the technical advances of widescreen high-def and home theaters more generally—blockbusters with elaborate CGI effects and action sequences like *Iron Man 2*, which Klinger notes have been the justification for the creation of masculinized home theaters in the first place.<sup>19</sup> In the retail space as well as the advertising space, the identity of the television set as a broadcast receiver as in the network era diminishes as the medium is nudged toward fuller convergence with gaming and cinema.

### The New Television in the Home

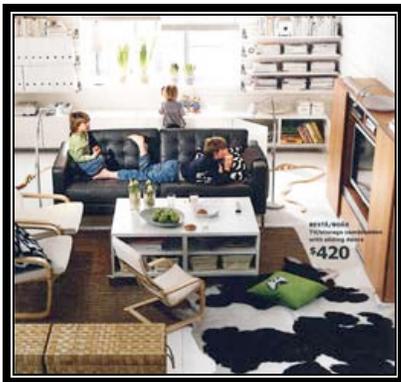
The gender and class status of HD display technology has been a major factor in the new sets’ adoption, and it has also been important in determining their place in the home. This has always been a site of gendered tension, and familiar conflicts and contradictions resurface with the emergence of these new screens. The fact that HDTVs become a problem in updating prevailing standards of “good taste” in home décor bespeaks their status as a masculine intruder into a feminine realm. Decorating makeover programs on HGTV might dramatize choices about a new flat-panel TV in a redesigned room as a conflict between a heterosexual couple over the inclusion, size, location, and significance of this hardware, treating it as a marital issue or battle of the sexes to be overcome through creative design. An image from a 2007 Sharp LCD catalog captures the gendered tensions around the introduction of the new television into the domestic sphere. A white, adult, heterosexual couple in a modern living room of tasteful straight lines and muted colors watch a baseball game on their new Sharp TV, the man’s arm around the woman holding her close as they enjoy sports together. The image at once encourages female consumers to see the new TV as a sleek design feature that promises to domesticate masculinity while also masculinizing the domestic

<sup>19</sup> Klinger, *Beyond the Multiplex*.

sphere through the integration of the new television hardware and its male-skewing content.



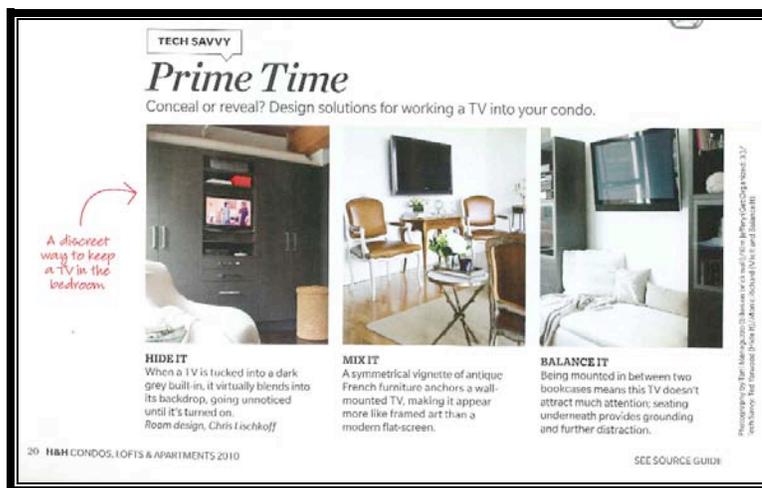
One persistent design approach of the pre-HD period banished the television from view entirely, and we still sometimes see the desire for the suppression of the television's presence. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when the sets in question were larger 4:3 CRTs, the solution of hiding a television set behind the doors of a wooden armoire was one way of negotiating the place of a large electronic appliance in a well-designed living space. But cabinetry of this sort is ill suited to concealing a wide but shallow screen, and to owners of a new flat-panel set, concealment might defeat the purpose of conspicuous or aspirational consumption. More importantly, total concealment might be undesirable if the new set is regarded as an object of visual appeal in its own right. Consumers of new televisions who seek to integrate them well into living spaces might want to make them visible but with restraint and subtlety, avoiding attracting excess attention to a large electronic appliance which could easily disrupt or overwhelm a design aesthetic. One example of a "solution" is the "Bestå" unit, whose sliding door panels conceal or reveal the set, integrating it into a larger minimalist concept of stylish cabinetry.



As in this aesthetic from Ikea, the play of concealed and revealed hardware is a common theme in designs for integrating the new television into the home, carrying over some of the functions of the television armoire. TV technology is still at times constructed culturally as ugly and shameful; the concealment of the television is a denial of the extent to which leisure time is spent in a blue glow. But high-def television technology is also a reinvention of TV as modern, drool-

worthy gadgetry, as a must-have upgrade on the boxy console. This masculine ideal of the new television sits uneasily within the gendered aesthetics of an affluent family's living room, where a large-screen high-def set is most often pictured. A desire at once to hide and display the flat-panel bespeaks a tension between the excitement over television's reinvention as masculinized, legitimated HDTV and ambivalence over the incorporation of massive hardware into feminized domestic spaces. Of course, the question of where to place the television set has arisen in the more distant past as well, most notably upon the introduction of television to American homes.<sup>20</sup> The contemporary era of flat-panel HDTV adoption more explicitly intensifies the gendered negotiations between the masculinized home electronics technology and the feminized domains of taste, style, and interior design.

Home design magazines caution—in both their words and images—that however it is displayed the television should not attract excessive attention. Terms such as “discreet” and “disappear” signal that tasteful integration of the set can be achieved through design choices that minimize the TV's disruptive potential by integrating it within a particular aesthetic ensemble. A feature in *House & Home: Condos, Lofts, & Apartments* proposes ways to distract from the flat-panel TV by making it “blend into its backdrop” of a grey built-in cabinet or by wall-mounting it between bookcases and above seating (a rather non-utilitarian arrangement) to give it “grounding and further distraction.”<sup>21</sup>



Mounting on a wall or integrating into bookcases are both options that make possible hiding the TV in plain sight, emphasizing its status as aesthetic object to be looked at rather than its presence as an appliance. Making the TV blend in can be accomplished by concealing cables behind walls and cabinetry—symbolically denying the television's status as electronics—or by treating the television as “wall art.” In one episode of the HGTV program *Color Splash: Miami*, designer

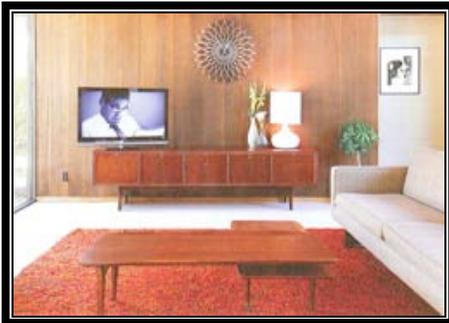
<sup>20</sup> Spigel, *Make Room for TV*.

<sup>21</sup> “Prime Time: Conceal or Reveal? Design Solutions for working a TV into your condo,” *House & Home: Condos, Lofts & Apartments* 8.2 (Fall 2010), 20.

David Bromstad frames a wall-mounted flat-panel television in thick, dark wood, explaining: “We’re putting a frame around the TV and this way it’s going to blend in and look like a piece of art. This is a great design strategy.”<sup>22</sup>



In some instances, fashionable, upscale design shows off the new television as a formal appeal in harmony with a larger modern aesthetic. An image of a mid-century modern living room in the pages of *Atomic Ranch* magazine places a Sony flat-panel with a black-and-white medium close-up of George Clooney in *Good Night and Good Luck* in a room of furnishings with straight lines and right angles. The rectilinear form of the HDTV is balanced perfectly with the lines and angles in the credenza on which the set rests, as well as the coffee tables and sofa cushions. An electrical outlet sits just below the TV but no cable connects one to the other, and the image on the screen might well have been Photoshopped in as no DVD player or cable box is visible.<sup>23</sup>



A *House Beautiful* spread of an “oh-so-sleek” elegant-modern cottage shows a pristine white living room in which a flat-panel displaying a black-and-white image of studio-era Hollywood glamour hangs above a fireplace, flanked by framed drawings. Here the television is integrated as artwork, and of course no cables allowing for the image to be powered or for a source to convey content are

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<sup>22</sup>“Old World Design Meets Modern Living and Dining” orig. aired July 31, 2010.

<sup>23</sup>Michelle Gringeri-Brown, “Like a Virgin: Homeowners new to MCM find a meeting of the minds in a pristine Eichler,” *Atomic Ranch* (Fall 2010), 14-23.

visible.<sup>24</sup> To integrate the television as an object worthy of looking at rather than as an appliance to be concealed from view reorients our understanding of TV and aestheticizes the hardware itself.

Many of the solutions that the commercial sphere has generated to resolve the gendered debate about fitting the flat panel set into the home ultimately help to maintain the masculinist associations that flat-panel HDTVs accrue as sophisticated technologies. In fact, such solutions often depend upon a technological fix, one that shifts the feminized puzzle of interior design into the masculinized realms of construction and gadgetry. Thus, when the décor compromise is to mount the flat screen to the wall, there often ensues a discussion of the careful mounting technique one must follow (stud finders, support brackets, etc.). In instances of new home construction or remodels, contractors engage in elaborate problem-solving processes to create built-in spaces for the TV, speakers, and components.<sup>25</sup> Sometimes “gadget” solutions are sought to resolve the conflict, such as lift technologies that raise and lower the TV into a cabinet, reversible media centers that feature the TV on one side and bookcases on the other, and panels of various kinds that can be remotely triggered to lower over the TV when it is mounted to a wall. While each of these solutions addresses aesthetic concerns, they do so by way of a technological wizardry designed to amuse and amaze those who value the flat screen for *its* technological prowess. Such devices thereby mollify feminized aesthetic worries while also enhancing the masculinized pleasures to be found in clever gizmos.

### **Content in High-Def**

For flat-panel sets to be adopted widely, media industries would have to offer content in high-definition. The switch to HD signals had been long anticipated, the promising future of television in numerous writings in the scholarly, trade, and popular press. The most typical framing of this switch was as an improvement not just of the television picture but of television itself as a medium. In the roll out of this new format of content transmission we see parallel discourses to those of the retailing and domestic spheres. The way in which high-definition has been introduced to the public affirms a new concept of legitimated television at the expense of an old idea of a more degraded version of the medium rooted in the past.

Just as the retailing of flat-panel sets has appealed first of all to the male early adopter, many of the earliest forms of HD content were masculinized in comparison with the abiding feminized identity of television. Movies were among the earliest available forms of high-definition programming on upscale cable outlets such as HDNet and HBO. The order in which programming genres went HD signals their cultural valuation. Prime time programming was available

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<sup>24</sup>Lisa Cregan, “Modern & Easy: Spiffing Up a 1950s Birmingham Cottage from so-so to oh-so-sleek,” *House Beautiful* (October 2010), 122-131.

<sup>25</sup> See, for example, “A TV complicates the mantelpiece: Tips on trim details and new design tools from a big project,” *Tauton’s Fine Homebuilding* 186 (2007), 86-91.

in HD several years before daytime programming, dramas preceded sitcoms, and network came before local content. High-definition repeats of *The West Wing* could be seen on Bravo HD+ at a time when network and cable alike were rapidly moving to high-def, but little in the way of network daytime programming or local news had yet switched.<sup>26</sup> When local stations eventually adopted HD broadcasts for their news programs, they sold the upgrade aggressively as a branding strategy for attracting affluent viewers with high-def sets seeking content to best show off the image capabilities of the new technology.

As with the sale of HD sets, the rollout of HD programming was often linked with sports. Among the earliest network HD broadcasts was ABC's venerable *Monday Night Football*, whose first season of regularly scheduled HD sports broadcasts began in 1999.<sup>27</sup> In the early 2000s, well before HD sets had gone mainstream, network sports divisions broadcast games in various college and major leagues in HD.<sup>28</sup> Since 2006, NBC has aired all Olympic events in HD.<sup>29</sup> ESPN debuted its service in 2003 and as the decade progressed multiple new ESPN channels were introduced, broadcasting more than 1,100 events in HD in 2008 alone.<sup>30</sup>

Aside from sports, the other main genre of programming to go HD early was the scripted prime time drama appealing to affluent demographics—shows such as *The Sopranos* and *The West Wing*.<sup>31</sup> By the spring of 2004, much of the networks' original prime time programming was in high-def, including all of ABC's and CBS's comedies and dramas and all of NBC's dramas.<sup>32</sup> At this point in the mainstreaming of TV in high-def, the availability of network content to justify the acquisition of a new set was significant to both the media and consumer electronics industries, as viewers with new sets would seek out HD content.<sup>33</sup> Cable and satellite providers adding HD channels to their offerings could sell these subscription upgrades as an added charge to customers. The channels programming in HD would thus be eager to reach this early adopter audience and to encourage the further saturation of HD in the market for television sets.

The priorities of the networks in establishing their most prestigious programming as the first HD offerings speaks to the cultural valuation of the HD-ready audience. When Scripps Networks launched HGTV-HD and Food Network-HD in 2006, it was greeted as a gesture opening up high-def programming to new audiences,

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<sup>26</sup> Alison Romano and Ken Kerschbaumer, "Brighter, Clearer, Wider," *Broadcasting & Cable*, January 26, 2004, 14-20.

<sup>27</sup> "ABC's NFL Monday Night Football" Game On Sept. 13th to Make Television History: Start of First Season of Weekly HDTV Sportscasts," *Business Wire*, September 10, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Ken Kerschbaumer, "Where to go for HD," *Broadcasting & Cable*, May 6, 2002, 58.

<sup>29</sup> Glen Dickson, "NBC Climbs the High-Def Mountain," *Broadcasting & Cable*, February 6, 2006, 7-8.

<sup>30</sup> Allison Romano, "The Pictures are the Story," *Broadcasting & Cable*, November 24, 2008, 14.

<sup>31</sup> James Hibberd, "Survivor Sharpens Up With HD" *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 3, 2008.

<sup>32</sup> George Winslow, "Look Sharp: channels big and small make the move to high-def," *Broadcasting & Cable*, May 3, 2004.

<sup>33</sup> Daisy Whitney, "Local Stations High on HD" *Television Week*, April 16, 2007, 28.

taking aim at the “male-pattern viewing” afflicting the new format. Confirming the logic guiding its adoption, *Broadcasting & Cable* announced, “High-Def Isn’t Just for Guys.”<sup>34</sup> The 70% female audience for HGTV might be just as likely as the male audience for sporting events to value the new HD sets, but as aesthetic objects to improve their home décor. By the end of the century’s first decade, HD content offered by cable and satellite providers was substantial and enormously varied, no longer appealing centrally to the masculine and upscale early adopter.

Formats of programming shot on film, such as prime time dramas and movies, would find an easier path to HD availability in part because of technical factors that make conversion of film images to high definition more feasible than standard-definition video images. Beginning in 2006 and 2007 genres shot on video such as news and game shows began to follow the lead of sports and prime time scripted programs. The conversion to HD for local news ventures and shows shot “live” to tape such as *Jeopardy!* and *Oprah* required often massive upgrades in all kinds of technology and equipment.<sup>35</sup> Everything from cameras and sets to graphics generators and editing suites needed to be replaced at considerable expense. Local newsroom staffs needed hours of training on new equipment.<sup>36</sup> Sports, movies, and prime time programming in HD had given some audiences an experience of a new format of television picture, and viewers using the new sets were seeking out HD content. Local television stations were eager to satisfy this preference, and to avoid being passed over for HD programming. By March 2007, at least three dozen stations were broadcasting local news and programming other than sports in high-def, though mainly in major markets.<sup>37</sup>

Forms of programming that occupy lower levels of the cultural hierarchy would be later to move to high definition, and when they did, the move was typically framed as a form of newfound distinction. Reality TV, the most culturally degraded programming of the 2000s, was unsurprisingly slower than any other format of popular TV to be shot and aired in HD. *American Idol* and *Dancing With the Stars*, both reliable Nielsen ratings hits, began in standard definition and awaited substantial ratings success before converting to HD. *Survivor*, a perennial hit since 2000, did not air in high-definition until 2008.<sup>38</sup> When it did, the conversion was hailed as a long-due improvement, making possible a finer appreciation of the natural beauty and splendor of the show’s exotic locations. Reality TV appeals to producers and networks as inexpensive programming which can be made in quantity, and its inartistic reputation as pandering, hyper-commercialized trash would not help the case of reality show producers eager to follow scripted shows into high-def. When the showbiz infotainment stalwart *Entertainment Tonight* began its HD era in 2008, it made the transition into an

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<sup>34</sup> Joel Brown, “High-Def Isn’t Just For Guys,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 10, 2006.

<sup>35</sup> Glen Dickson, “What’s High-Def, Alex?” *Broadcasting & Cable*, August 21, 2006.

<sup>36</sup> Whitney, “Local Stations.”

<sup>37</sup> Paige Albiniak, “Local News in HD Gains Momentum,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, March 19, 2007.

<sup>38</sup> Hibberd, “Survivor Sharpens Up.”

opportunity to refine its image as a site of “Hollywood events.” A newly built set came with its own red carpet and multiple large plasma monitors, two of them 103 inches. Segments shot on location in Europe and Africa showed off a picture “literally jumping off the screen.”<sup>39</sup> Many daytime soap operas were also making the switch at this time, and as with other forms of devalued programming, the coming of high definition was taken to promise a kind of aesthetic redemption. *General Hospital*, which began to air in HD in 2009, aimed for a “filmic, prime-time look” which the lower lighting of HD cameras makes possible. Like other “live” shows, *General Hospital* used the transition as an opportunity to update its sets and inaugurate a new visual appeal, which the president of daytime for Disney-ABC, Brian Frons, hailed for its newfound realism.<sup>40</sup> Even if realistic or cinematic imagery would not be the selling point, a newly HD show could still offer itself as improved, as was the case with *The Price Is Right*, which updated its sets upon converting to HD in 2008 to make its visuals brighter and more extravagantly colorful to suit the capabilities of the new hardware.



In many of the less culturally valued programs to go HD, among them daytime talk shows like *Live with Regis and Kelly* and soft news programs like *Today* and *Entertainment Tonight*, as well as in some more serious current affairs shows like CNN’s *Situation Room with Wolf Blitzer* and masculinized fare such as *SportsCenter*, one feature of the upgrade stands out for its special rhetorical power. A standard element in the *mise en scène* of television shows remade for HD is often multiple and very large flat-panel screens. For example, *The Early Show*, CBS’s weekday morning news program, moved to HD in 2008 with a new set featuring dozens of LCD and Plasma displays, including two 103-inch plasma sets often seen behind the anchors as the show’s main backdrop.<sup>41</sup> The screens within the screen serve multiple functions, including the integration of different forms of imagery into the frame. But as a feature of a newly updated aesthetic, perhaps their most profound significance is to establish the ideal image of the television as large, flat, bright, vivid, and 16:9; as cinematic and culturally distinguished; and as markedly different from the outmoded conception of a bulky, boxy, boob tube. At once these representations promote their own high

<sup>39</sup> Paige Albiniak, “Hooray for Hollywood in HD,” *Broadcasting & Cable*, September 8, 2008.

<sup>40</sup> Glen Dickson, “High Definition for ‘Hospital,’” *Broadcasting & Cable*, April 6, 2009, 3, 6.

<sup>41</sup> “CBS Relaunches ‘Early Show’ With New HD Set,” *Broadcast Engineering*, January 14, 2008.

definition and the audience's acquisition of new hardware to better appreciate the HD image. In the instance of shows of lesser status like *E.T.* they also signify a striving for legitimacy. By privileging the new conception of television, the old TV, along with its modes of representation and experience, becomes the bad object left behind by technological and cultural progress. The routine imagery of the new TV on television signals that the transition to high definition is significant not merely as a change in picture resolution, but more importantly in television's place in the popular imagination. Thus the form and meaning of the new, improved TV becomes the content of the programming made over to suit it.

In its importance for gaming and especially cinema, and in its hyperreal promise of overcoming the mere mediation of reality, the new television stands in contrast to the old one. The new TV is a powerful magnet for consumer attention and desire, an object of beauty and fascination in its own right, and the means by which images of distinction are conveyed into the home. With its widescreen, high-def picture, television is understood to become a more fully visual medium, no longer impoverished by comparison to movies. Its ideal user is not the proverbial couch potato or distracted housewife, and not the audience for a previous era's least objectionable programming. The quality of the content offered to maximize the potential of the new technology distinguishes television by seeming to improve on the possibilities and achievements of earlier times, opening TV up well beyond traditional forms of broadcasting into deeper convergence with movies and video games. The flat-panel HDTV conspicuously delivers on a long-standing promise of TV to progress technologically, undoing the bad reputation that had stigmatized it as a medium for fifty years, and casting aside the old television, its image and culture.