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Why Don’t We Look at Television?

Emily Rees Koerner

Abstract

The television set was for many decades a ubiquitous household technology. Though omnipresent and designed to be watched, it has faded into the background of domesticity. The era of streaming and portable viewing devices questions the continuing need for a television set—an opportune moment to reconsider the materiality of this object technology in domestic life. Taking television’s entry into British homes as a case study, this article asks what the act of looking at—rather than watching—television means. It explores the paradox in television’s design and function, both to be viewed and to disappear. The essay argues that its materiality became embedded in mediated debates about design and taste, while television owners appropriated the television set according to their domestic requirements and tastes—sometimes bypassing what manufacturers and designers intended.

<<Insert figure 1 about here>>

Introduction

Televisions are designed to be looked at. The technological function of a television, as embedded in its name, is to see (vision) things that are far away (tele). In the 1930s, when television was first introduced in Britain as a domestic entertainment device, television viewing was referred to as “looking in,” though this soon shifted to a language of viewing that we still use today. Currently, both broadcast television and the television set are described as under threat from extinction as younger smartphone generations favor portable screens and streaming services over a stationary television set. Yet a vast majority of us still

sit, evening after evening, staring at the box in the corner of the room (see figure 1). This historical turning point in the technology's life cycle is an opportune moment to return to the older conceptualization of *looking* at television to help us see the technology/medium in its object state afresh. What happens when we ask what it means to look at television?

This exploration takes as its starting point the realization that academic scholarship on television viewing has largely focused on what we view and how we view it. It does not—with notable exceptions—consider what we view it on.[1] According to Berker, Punie, and Hartmann, by ignoring television's materiality and simply looking at the images on screen and why they were made, "we ignore its role as a totemic object of enormous symbolic importance in the household."[2] Indeed, television, though often ignored, is one of the more complex domestic technologies. Through its outputs it is able to create and reflect cultures, while in its objective state television is invested with its own cultural value, reflected in how it is displayed and used in the home—all of which is shaped by and shapes its technological specifications. To focus on that objective-technological reality, and to uncover the symbolic importance of the television set, this essay proposes that we must first turn off the television and consider the set when it is (supposedly) not in use.

Designed to Disappear

Turning off the television set leaves us with something we do not really want to see anymore: the viewing apparatus. Hence, we have a paradox: the object technology that

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[1] Spigel, *Make Room for TV*; O'Sullivan, "Television Memories and Cultures of Viewing, 1950–1965"; Morley, "Television"; Chambers, "The Material Form of the Television Set"; Wheatley, "Television in the Ideal Home".

[2] Berker, Punie, and Hartmann, *Domestication of Media and Technology*, 29.

enables us to view should ideally not be seen. We want to watch television content, but we do not necessarily want to look at the television set when turned off.

This paradox is something manufacturers worldwide have tried to solve since television became a domestic medium in the 1930s. Television design, especially in the early decades of its domestication, was molded to fit in with the design of the home, with sets made to match different interior styles. It became, effectively, another piece of furniture, rather than a technology. Deborah Chambers explains that "the taming of this troubled yet desirable artefact was achieved, initially, by camouflaging the machine as furniture" because "manufacturers recognized that for this novel technology to be accepted into the home, the TV gadget must be hidden in a cabinet."[3] Doors were placed on cabinets, so that when the set was not in use they could be closed to hide the technology within (see figure 2). Such design decisions followed trends for nineteenth-century domestic technologies like the sewing machine, which were also seen as unsuitable for domestic display.[4]

<<Insert figure 2 about here>>

As modernist ideals around design took hold in the 1950s, various debates arose about how to frame the technical nature of television. Purveyors of modern design, like the Council of Industrial Design (CoID), debated whether television should be considered an instrument or a piece of furniture. For advocates of modernist design principles, who favored unadorned, streamlined contours over embellishment, hiding television equipment in a cabinet was considered "dishonest" because it attempted to disguise the true "self" of the object

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[3] Chambers, "Material Form," 362.

[4] Douglas, "The Machine in the Parlor."

technology. A 1962 edition of the CoID's magazine *Design* explained this approach to television design: the "television set is essentially a refined electronic instrument and as such should not be disguised as something else."[5] The modernist designer's abiding principle was that allowing the object to be true to its form would automatically make it attractive: form follows function.

Bodies like the CoID produced articles and exhibitions to show how the right television set could fit seamlessly into the modern home. Television soon became a key part of the visualization of the technologically driven, sleek midcentury British home, with fashionable designers like Robin Day creating sets for manufacturer Pye, advertised as signaling good taste and modish aesthetic judgment. The "well-designed set" could be a thing of beauty, eliminating the need for the deceptive older cabinets by offering a means of blending in. But was this just another means to make the television set disappear?

Despite the industrial design profession's great efforts in encouraging manufacturers to design "better" television sets and television consumers to buy and arrange them tastefully in the home, the television set, when not in use, was still seen to pose a perennial domestic problem by lifestyle and design publications. Some lifestyle magazines, aimed mostly at women consumers, even anthropomorphized television sets into unattractive creatures. In 1969, popular women's magazine *Homemaker* described a switched-off set as "a cumbersome piece of furniture, that just gazes, blank-eyed into the room."[6] The magazine *Good Housekeeping* called it a "lumbering monster that not only dominates your entire

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[5] Peter E.M. Sharp, "Survey of Industry," *Design*, 157, January 1962, 36, 42. Design Council Archive, University of Brighton.

[6] Anonymous, "Compact Unit for TV and Hi-Fi Equipment," *Homemaker*, June 1969, 44.

family but all the furniture too."[7] Likewise, *Homemaker* in 1970 labeled the TV set the "one-eyed monster" that "tends to dominate your living room as it squats there on the coffee table or stand."[8] Not only would the television set refuse to disappear, but it had also gained the ability to look back.

As technological developments in cathode-ray tubes allowed manufacturers to produce smaller, more portable sets, tastemakers advocated their purchase; their smaller size made them easier to hide—in bookcases, or behind other pieces of furniture—perhaps giving up on the idea that a TV could ever look tasteful when not in use. Though not always explicit, the emphasis on small televisions being superior in the 1960s and 1970s echoes contemporary snobbery about television size. According to a recent article on etiquette in the British newspaper *Daily Mail*, you should never own a large television because "television is a downmarket medium" and owning "something that is so ginormous in order to watch something that is already pretty downmarket, is even more downmarket than the medium itself."[9] The *Guardian* joined the debate with an article titled "The Dos and Don'ts of Buying a Huge TV."[10] Apparently remnants of the nearly seven-decade-old debate persist. The act of looking at television is still central: the look of the television set (and its position in the

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[7] Anna Baranksi, "Anyone for Tennis?," *Good Housekeeping*, June 1970, 108.

[8] Anonymous, "Get Your Viewing on the Right Lines," *Homemaker*, January 1970, 35.

[9] William Hanson, "What Does Your Home Say about Your Social Class?," *MailOnline*, April 18, 2016, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/femail/article-3542287/Etiquette-expert-reveals-12-items-never-including-coasters-big-screen-TV-hot-tub.html.

[10] Stephen Moss, "The Dos and Don'ts of Buying a Huge TV," *Guardian*, April 19, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/shortcuts/2016/apr/19/dos-and-donts-of-buying-huge-tv-justin-webb.

home) is seen as a cipher for how much the householders do or do not watch TV. Manufacturers have continually responded to this issue; for example, in the 2010s Samsung released "The Frame," designed to look like art—not like a television—when the set is switched off.

A Right and a Wrong Way to View

Taming the monster that was television went beyond the material parameters of the set; it extended into the visual landscape of the domestic sphere. After all, television sets do not exist alone: when we look at the television, we are looking at a section of a room, and normally that section is filled with other objects and furnishings. When they first entered the home, television sets had to be negotiated into an existing domestic arrangement, which had not needed to make room for a technology primarily designed to be watched rather than listened to like previous domestic entertainment. For example, radio, television's forerunner, had not posed the same problem, and entries from the 1940s to the social survey Mass Observation show that a major reason for not wanting a television set was its visual nature; a boon of listening to the radio was that other activities could be done at the same time.[11]

A new mode of looking was required to facilitate the need to look, not just listen, which resulted in the creation of new furnishing and lighting options to create the ideal viewing environment.[12] Multiple articles appeared on the theme of optimal television viewing, through the ideal arrangement of the living space and the purchase of the many new products facilitating it. The importance of siting the television set correctly in relation to

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[11] Mass Observation panel on television (1949), M-OA, University of Sussex, Adam Matthew, Marlborough, Mass Observation Online, http://www.massobservation.amdigital.co.uk/Documents/Details/FileReport-3106.

[12] Rees, "Television, Gas, and Electricity".

other furnishings and fittings was emphasized at the CoID's 1957 exhibition *Design for Viewing*. The BBC even broadcast a short television show based on the exhibition, though the script is all that remains. According to this script, the presenter told viewers, "Oh yes, there is a right and a wrong way to view."[13]

Fashioning the ideal way to look was not without its challenges and often resulted in compromises and negotiations in practice. For example, the introduction of television caused a clash with a long-standing domestic technology—the fireplace. This was largely an issue of looking: the introduction of a new focal point in the room created visual competition—could you look at two focal points at once? While many chose to get rid of fireplaces in the 1960s and 1970s, especially when central heating was introduced, for others the fireplace encapsulated a symbolic and cultural resonance that they wanted to hold on to. The debate took place across various cultural forums, including exhibitions, trade fairs, and lifestyle magazines. In May 1962, the professional's magazine *Design* mocked anxieties about the rivalry between the television and the fireplace, likening it to a moral panic:

> Ever since the introduction of television, sociologists, psychologists and interior designers have been worried by the possible ill effects caused by the introduction of a new focal point into the living room. For thousands of years . . . , families have formed a tight semi-circle round the fire, symbolizing the all-important unity of family life. Nowadays, however, families do not know whether to group themselves round the fire or the television set and the result of this uncertainty can be seen in the break-up of family life and the increase in crime among young people.

[13] "Design for Viewing," television broadcast script (1957), BBC WAC, Caversham, T32/891/1.

The article then jokes about the creation of "the Foculpoynte," which combines "for the first time a 23-inch TV receiver with an electric log or coal fire." This design must "be congratulated not only for introducing a product which is, in its own right, a remarkable piece of design, but also for demonstrating how new products can solve some of the fundamental social problems of our time."[14]

The prevalence of television sets next to fireplaces in contemporary homes signals that a visual compromise won out; as theorists and historians of technology have argued, old and new technologies will always find a way to cohabit, despite the anxieties that inevitably play out as new technologies emerge.[15]

Alternative Uses

Despite the many prescriptive models that designers and tastemakers advanced about how to look at television, owners have always found ways to interpret what the television is for and how they want it to look in their homes. In some cases, there can be a willful misinterpretation of the set's use. An anecdote by Ronald Duncan in an article in *Homes and Gardens* from 1954 describes one rural resident in the southern county of Devon who expected his new set to enable a different mode of looking entirely: he wanted to use it to spy on his neighbors. The article claims that "when he eventually discovered, to his disgust, that

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[14] Anonymous, "Social Problems Solved," *Design*, May 1962, 59, Design Council Archive, University of Brighton.

[15] Edgerton, *The Shock of the Old*.

the television wasn't going to further the principal Devonian sport of 'knowing one's neighbors' business,' he carried it out into his barn, where it now rusts with his harrows."[16]

One common negotiation—no longer possible in the flat-screen age—was the secondary use of the television set as a shelf. Archival photographs of 1960s and 1970s living rooms show that the television frequently became part of the decor thanks to its use as a shelf, making it an extension of the mantelpiece for storing trinkets and objects.[17] Some photographs show the television set with plants, lights, and other objects, such as Christmas cards, on top. Others illustrate the variety of activities taking place in front of the television that did not involve viewing. Ondina Fachel Leal conducted sociological research on this topic in Brazil in the 1990s, finding that the television set as a personalized space was common there too.[18] In addition, television historian Lynn Spigel has argued that the gap created in front of the television set became a performative space for family life to play out, as shown in figure 3, where a mother and her sons are playing a game in front of the turned-off set.[19]

Judy Attfield demonstrates how householders sought to reclaim the parlor (the formal room which had become mostly obsolete by the mid-twentieth century) by using smaller spaces where they could display the trinkets and meaningful objects that were previously on

[16] Ronald Duncan, "The Impact of Television on the Country Community," *Homes and Gardens*, August 1954, 16.

[17] The photographs are from the Geffrye Museum's "Documenting Homes" collection, as well as the author's family collection.

[18] Leal, "Popular Taste and Erudite Repertoire."

[19] Lynn Spigel, "TV Snapshots: An Archive of Everyday Life" (unpublished conference paper, SCMS, Chicago, 2017).

show in the parlor.[20] Despite developments in central heating and the competing focal point of the television set, the fireplace is another example of householders retaining a traditional part of the home. The alignment of the "modern" home with middle-class taste meant that the rising tensions between the traditional and the modern were, in part, about class identification. Design historian Penny Sparke has explored how the working and lower middle classes "looked to a modern lifestyle but were more reluctant than the middle class proper to abandon the more decorative, expressive aspects of the material culture with which they surrounded themselves."[21]

When the set was turned off, there was much to look at—the need to look at the television screen created a new visual frontier in the home, which householders could use and adapt as they pleased. Indeed, for some television owners, the set was not so much an unwelcome intruder as an additional member of the household.

<<Insert figure 3 about here>>

Conclusion

In asking what it means to look at—rather than to watch—television, an array of questions emerge. This essay has only touched on a subset of these by exploring the paradox of an object technology that is designed to be looked at when in use but is ideally meant to disappear when not in use. Taking a historical view within the context of midcentury Britain, it illustrates how manufacturers and tastemakers, through the set's design and its relationality to domestic space, tried to make television blend in. However, the lived reality of television's

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[20] Attfield, *Bringing Modernity Home*, 64.

[21] Sparke, "Studying the Modern Home," 415–16.

place within the home often looked quite different: householders negotiated how to display their television, creating new uses for the object technology beyond its intended primary function. These observations invite possible new avenues for research: Who is doing the looking? Whose gaze is seen to matter? Who facilitates the look of the television home? What can we say about what it means to "use" a technology like television? And how does Britain's relationship to looking at TV compare to those of other nations? The act of looking at the TV as a technology-not-in-use is a particularly rich topic for historians of technology.

Bio/Acknowledgments

Emily Rees Koerner is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Science Museum, London, working on the project "Museums and Industry: Long Histories of Collaboration," as well as a freelance researcher and consultant. Her doctoral research was on the domestication of the television set in midcentury Britain, and more recent research is on gender and engineering, focusing on women's transnational collaboration for gender equality in engineering and applied science in the 1960s and 1970s. The author would like to thank Rachel Hill for commissioning this article and masterminding this section and the reviewer and editor for their comments. This article is based on research funded by the Midlands4Cities Doctoral Training Partnership/Arts and Humanities Research Council.

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Captions

FIG. 1. The television introduced competition with the fireplace as a focal point in sitting rooms, demonstrated by this family watching television in America ca. 1958. *Source*: Evert F. Baumgartner, National Archives and Records Administration (image in the public domain).

FIG. 2. Manufacturers disguised early television sets as furniture to make the novel technology accepted in the home. *Source*: Dynatron Ether Sovereign at the Early Television Museum (Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike).

FIG. 3. Many activities took place in front of the television that did not involve viewing, like this family playing in front of their TV in Middlesex, United Kingdom, ca. 1962. Author's photograph.