Chapter 1

Television in the Home and the Home on Television

Fifties TV and Lucy TV

Imagine watching *I Love Lucy* in 1951. Television was very new, not yet in every household, let alone in almost every room, so maybe you are watching at your house or apartment, or maybe at a friend's or family member's house. The characters on your screen inhabit a living room with a television set; you are watching them watching television, and television is rapidly becoming an essential part of everyday life. This is the backdrop to the cultural phenomenon of "Lucy TV," and to better understand it this chapter explores the place of television in the post–World War II home and how the home was portrayed on television, specifically on the most popular television series of the 1950s, *I Love Lucy.*

The Center of the Home

When television emerged as a mass medium in the early 1950s, American culture found a new physical and social center of the home, what media critic Marshall McLuhan called an "electronic hearth"[1] (qtd. in Marc and Thompson 55). But in contrast to the traditional center of heat, food, and family activity, the new hearth connected the home and the outside world,

Television is at the center of the home in "The Courtroom."

bringing images, sounds, stories, and people into the everyday lives of Americans. Home-decorating magazines of the late 1940s and early 1950s depicted the television set replacing the baby grand piano as the centerpiece of the ideal living room, with the piano shown as an upright off against a wall or relegated to a less-prominent room. The television was not only an object to gather around, as indicated by the title of the 1946 book *Here Is Television: Your Window to the World*; the book suggests that television erases the boundaries between the home and the world. To be sure, seeing events rather than only hearing about or reading about them created an immediacy that made the outside world more accessible. However, those images were mediated and framed by the discourses of television culture: the television program created within specific production and cultural contexts and also watched within particular

domestic, technological, and cultural frameworks. Television was not simply a "window to the world"; it was (and is) a locus of powerful cultural work that, as media theorist Stuart Hall postulated, encodes meanings, interpretations, and values that people decode within their homes and in the contexts of their beliefs and social experiences.

The Television Set

In order to understand what television meant in the 1950s, first we need to think about the television apparatus itself: the item, the picture, where it was, and how people watched it. In these days of big color screens, it is hard to imagine how small and blurry the television image was in the early 1950s. Television screens were typically ten to twelve inches wide and showed black and white, and the reception of the broadcast image was not the clear picture we have come to expect from digital cable and satellite. Viewers had to tune in the signal over the airwaves and adjust the antenna to help sharpen the signal. Moreover, the sets themselves were expensive (an average of $279 when the average price of a new house was under $10,000) and big and heavy (like a chest of drawers); some even had cooling systems and needed to be watered (Marc and Thompson 54).

Despite the small picture and uneven quality, television quickly became common in American homes; in 1950 only 9 percent of homes had television sets, but by 1955 more than 65 percent of homes had them. Several factors led to the rapid adoption of the new medium: set prices dropped from around $440 in 1948 to about $230 by 1954; the growth of suburbs, where people often lived far from their extended families; a new emphasis on an ideal of the nuclear family in the postwar period; and the idea of television watching as a family activity taking place in the suburban home. With most families having only one television set and programming offered on only three or four channels, television viewing during the "antenna age"

fostered social cohesion, or at least common cultural references and experiences. In contrast to today's cable, satellite, internet, and DVD sources of television programs, 1950s television culture was unified. In 1952, *Variety* reported that *I Love Lucy* was seen by a record twenty-nine million viewers a week (based on an average of 2.9 viewers per home in ten million homes), more than twice the average audience that sees a Hollywood movie in its domestic first run (Sanders and Gilbert 59).

A large part of television programming was "live" television, which was unprecedented in its ability to bring the audience a sense of immediacy, reality, and participation. Radio certainly could broadcast live, but listeners had to use their imaginations, their "radio eye," to quote a 1927 print ad for RCA radio tubes. By adding the visual element, television was perceived as more "real" than any other medium, in part because of the way it was integrated into everyday life (as opposed to the specialness of the filmgoing experience). Sounding a lot like Walter Benjamin exulting in the possibilities of film in his 1936 essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," many commentators in the 1950s noted the medium's unique aspects, echoing Benjamin's observation that

> the film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action. Our taverns and our metropolitan streets, our offices and furnished rooms, our railroad stations and our factories appeared to have us locked up hopelessly. Then came the film and burst this prison-world asunder by the dynamite of the tenth of a second, so that now, in the midst of its far-flung ruins and debris, we calmly and adventurously go traveling. (236)

For example, Jack Gould, the television writer for the *New York Times* in the 1950s, commented that live television "removes

from an audience's consciousness the factors of time and distance. . . . Live television . . . bridges the gap instantly and unites the individual at home with the event afar. The viewer has a chance to be at two places at once. Physically, he may be at his own hearthside but intellectually, and above all emotionally, he is at the cameraman's side" (qtd. in Boddy 80).

I Love Lucy was not live television, but it retained some of the aspects of live television. Stylistically, by inventing the system of editing footage from three cameras filming simultaneously in front of a live audience, the series' creative team tried to combine the immediacy of live television (via radio) with the narrative conventions of cinema, including continuity editing. Part of the cultural phenomenon of "Lucy TV" are the techniques of making television that mark a signpost on the way to "hyperreality," the slippage between the real and the imaginary posited by postmodern theorists like Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco, where reality and representation implode. Where does the reality of performers in front of an audience end and the artifice of cutting between different camera positions begin? Or, in a series about a married couple starring the really married Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz, where do the actors end and the fictional Lucy and Ricky Ricardo begin? The answers that the show posits are distinctly different from what research into the production and publicity contexts tells us. This is indicated perhaps most viscerally by hearing the sound of the audience laughing—and sometimes being able to hear Desi Arnaz's distinctive laugh offscreen as Lucille Ball performs Lucy's antics in scenes that do not include Ricky's presence—one of many frames that sought to make connections between "reel life" and real life.

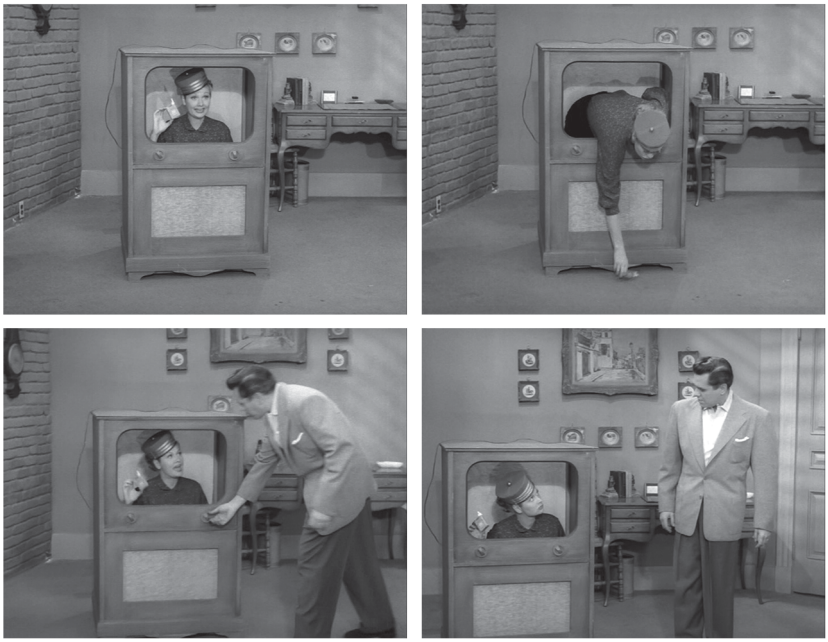
Television on Lucy TV

Advertising, magazines, and television itself made the placement, style, and attitude toward the television set a topic of

discourse.[2] It must have been profoundly strange to purchase a television set and suddenly have strange people and distant places "in" your living room. For example, in a wonderful sequence from one of the best *I Love Lucy* episodes, "Lucy Makes a TV Commercial" (May 5, 1952, which culminates in her Vitameatavegamin drunken act), Lucy physically inserts herself into the television chassis to demonstrate to Ricky that she would be great on TV. The levels of television narratives and frames are multiple: Lucille Ball, star and spokesperson for sponsor Philip Morris cigarettes, acting the part of Lucy Ricardo, acting the part of a Philip Morris spokesperson inside a television in the Ricardo living room, which is on the television in the spectator's living room. Ball calls attention to the permeability of these boundaries between home and television when Lucy leans out of the television frame to pick up the cigarettes she has dropped. When Ricky enters and tries to "turn the channel," Lucy pushes his hand away from the knob. In this scene, Ricky and Lucy enact the myth, the fantasy, of the immediacy of television and make comedy out of the intersections of home and television.

The Home on Lucy TV

So far we have considered the television in the home; now let's turn to the image of the home that was represented on those televisions. When we think of 1950s TV, especially sitcoms,[3] we tend to think of an idealized domesticity. This is the world of what media historian David Marc wittily termed the "WASP-com" (*Comic Visions* 54) that was satirized in the film *Pleasantville* (1998), of the polite, white, middle-class families of shows like *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver* whose problems are always solved by the end of the half hour. The fantasies of mid-1950s sitcoms were a powerful factor in creating the ideology of postwar life, but family life wasn't really like that any more than family life is accurately portrayed on television today. A 1994



Lucy crosses the boundaries between television and the home in "Lucy Makes a TV Commercial."

study of demographics from 1950 to 1989 concluded that there was little convergence between the fictional families portrayed on television and real families (Douglas 13). Nevertheless, the portrayal suggests an ideal, and because television exploded at a time of a turn toward domesticity and family life, those ideals became very influential.

The depiction of the home and domestic life in *I Love Lucy,* like other pre-1955 television representations, presents a messier kind of domesticity, one in which patriarchal control over the home was contested by Lucy's unwillingness to submit to being a good little wife content in the home. Moreover, Ricky's ethnic identity as a Cuban American is one of the last vestiges of

the ethnic comedy so popular on radio and early television. Unlike the suburban homeowners of *Father Knows Best* and *Leave It to Beaver,* the Ricardos were apartment renters in the city who often struggled and squabbled about money. Rather than an atmosphere of plenty, *I Love Lucy*'s comedy was often rooted in scarcity—of money (albeit not for food or rent, but for middle-class commodities and status) and of attention (mostly Lucy's desire for it). Because of its locus in both the domestic and performance (or "show business") spheres, *I Love Lucy* also contrasted celebrity with "ordinary life," an opposition born out of the show's grappling with ideas about authenticity and immediacy.

To be sure, television viewers were used to seeing the home portrayed in the movies and on radio, but level of detail of domesticity and intimacy in home life and marriage depicted in *I Love Lucy* went far beyond the representation in film. Looking at the first half-dozen episodes of the first season, we see many scenes played out in the Ricardo bedroom; in the pilot, we see Ricky shaving as if the camera were the mirror. Perhaps this focus on the bedroom was acceptable because Ball and Arnaz were married in real life. Nevertheless, there is time in the weekly half-hour sitcom to show the minutiae of everyday life in a way that is beyond the narrative conventions of film. The sponsor's frame further wraps the episode in the habits of everyday life (including, in the case of *I Love Lucy,* smoking the sponsor's cigarettes), as does its place within the "flow" (to use Raymond Williams's term) of the television programming that precedes and follows it.

Television and the Home Have a Lot in Common

For example, let's look at how the relationship between domesticity and television is represented in "Mr. and Mrs. TV Show," a fourth-season episode that aired on April 11, 1955, in which

Lucy and Ricky star in a husband-and-wife show set in their home. The plot begins with Lucy trying to support Ricky's career by convincing an advertising agency executive that Ricky should be on television. Lucy assumes that they will both be on the show, because it was her idea and "It's my chance to go coast to coast." Ricky retorts, "I love this country. It's been very good to me. I wouldn't think of doing a thing like that to my fellow citizens." But when Ricky meets with the advertising executive, a comic figure who takes credit for everyone else's ideas, the only format in which he is interested is a husband-and-wife show, *Breakfast with Ricky and Lucy.* Ricky convinces Lucy it was he who insisted that the show include her and be in the husband-and-wife format. In a stylistic departure from the visual and narrative conventions of the series, Ricky begins the show within the show by directly addressing the camera, "Hello there, I didn't see you come in," as if the viewer were a guest joining him; Lucy enters in a lovely nightgown and robe set, praising the sponsor's products, again looking into the camera.[4] Fred and Ethel enter and sing a jingle about the sponsor, Phipps Department Store. The testimonials continue. But after the rehearsal, when Lucy finds out that it wasn't Ricky's idea to include her, she decides to teach Ricky a lesson during what she thinks is the rehearsal, but the show is being broadcast live. Lucy subverts the version of the show we saw earlier by saying terrible things about the department store's products and services, putting Ricky (who knows the show is live) on the spot, and then dresses up in a burlap bag with a fright wig as the makeover she had at the department store salon. Of course, the sponsor wants nothing more to do with them and Lucy ruins her chance at having a television show.

The plot reinforces the image of television as a domestic medium, but it also exposes the portrayal of home life on television as staged and inauthentic. Lucy and Ricky's "real" way of being at home is imperfect, comfortable, and often filled more with bickering than politeness. In this way, the episode makes

comedy out of the clash between the idealized television text and the "reality" of Lucy and Ricky that we have come to know over the years of the series (this episode was in the fourth season). Instead of their usual comfortable-looking pajamas (available for sale as just one of the many Desilu commodities), Ricky and Lucy wear fancy nightclothes, are overly polite, and eat a fancy breakfast in the dining room when we know they usually eat breakfast in the kitchen. Like other episodes that focus on advertising and television, including the famous Vitameatavegamin act in "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," this episode reveals that television is an advertisement for the sponsor. Every time Lucy and Ricky light up a Philip Morris cigarette, they are advertising the sponsor and depicting cigarette smoking as a natural part of the good life. It is cultural hegemony in action.

Thinking about *I Love Lucy* as an advertisement for Philip Morris instead of entertainment shifts the way we interpret the series, and popular culture in general. The entire narrative strategy of early television blurred the boundaries between the sponsor's product, the fictional diegetic world of the show, the actors, and the audience. By doing what "Mr. and Mrs. TV Show" exaggerates and satirizes, *I Love Lucy* and other television series incorporated the sponsor's commodities seamlessly, and in many ways, cigarettes are the ultimate commodity—addictive, fetishized, available in neat little packages, branded, and profitable.[5] By exaggerating the television personalities plugging the sponsor's products, the episode obfuscates how the characters and the actors participate in advertising.

Moreover, "Mr. and Mrs. TV Show" is a good example of how a television text is contradictory. On the one hand, the episode makes fun of sponsorship, advertising, and television, exposing the television text as a thin veneer to con the audience. However, the episode also portrays television as transparent. There is no special set or lighting for the show within the show, or wardrobe, or makeup, or writers. Unlike the show within the show, the narrative and visual style of the series,

reinforced by continuity editing and other elements of classical Hollywood style, maintain the diegesis as "real." When the characters smoke they do not need to refer blatantly to "Philip Morris" because the sponsor's introduction to the episodes, the animated openings, and pattern of the stars' role in print and television advertisements have already, subtly, made those connections.

On yet another level, the episode plays self-reflexively with reality. In the fictional world, the adman is only interested in Ricky if his wife is a part of the deal, but in real life, as anyone who read any of the hundreds of newspaper and magazine stories that had circulated by the fourth season of the series certainly knew, it was Ball whom the network and advertising agency wanted, and she refused to star in a show without her husband. So, the lie Ricky tells Lucy is the true story of their portrayers, but reversed. This extratextual knowledge from one of the aspects of the Lucy phenomenon gives the audience member another way of interpreting the episode, creating an even greater intimacy with the stars by being "in" on the joke.

Back to the Home?

I Love Lucy represented television in a contradictory manner, and it depicted the home similarly. The series is set primarily in the Ricardo apartment, with many episodes also having scenes set at Ricky's club and the Mertzes' apartment; when Lucy, Ricky, Fred, and Ethel "go" to Hollywood, their hotel suite becomes the major locale, and when they all move to Connecticut in the sixth and final season of the half-hour format, it is their suburban home at the center. Throughout the series, the home is the site of the characters' relationships, especially between Ricky and Lucy, but also between Lucy and Ethel, between the two couples, and less often, between Ricky and Fred. It is Lucy's responsibility as wife to keep the house clean, cook and serve the meals, and maintain a pleasant and comforting atmosphere to

which Ricky returns. Despite her trickiness and attempts to escape the confines of the home and the role of housewife, Lucy is presented as capable in maintaining the home. However, when it comes to finances, Lucy routinely overspends the household budget and the allowance she receives from Ricky. Her desires for something more extend to the home as well as her career, and she is interested in upgrading their furniture and other domestic possessions, often measuring her home against external standards. In all these ways, *I Love Lucy* depicted the home according to hegemonic domestic ideology, as a site primarily of labor for women and leisure for men.

One of the first episodes, "Men Are Messy" (December 3, 1951), exemplifies the series' representation of the home. Lucy has just finished cleaning up the Ricardo living room when Ricky comes in and, in about two minutes, strews clothes, banana peels, newspaper, and papers everywhere, moving the plants and knickknacks Lucy had so carefully placed. When pressed, Ricky explains, "A man's home is a his castle, and this is my castle." In order to teach him a lesson (a common impulse in the series), when Lucy knows their home will be photographed for what she thinks is a musician's magazine and only seen by people who know Ricky, Lucy dresses like a hillbilly in overalls and transforms the apartment into "Tobacco Road" with clothes hanging on a line, trash cans, tires, and even live chickens. (*Tobacco Road* was a 1941 John Ford film that relied on stereotypes of hillbillies as crude, lazy, and filthy.) Unfortunately, Lucy doesn't realize that the photographer is from the popular mainstream magazine *Look,* not from the musician's magazine. The article is flattering to Ricky, with pictures of him at the club, but despite the photographer's promise not to use any of the Tobacco Road pictures in the articles, Lucy is on the cover in her hillbilly getup, looking very different from the glamorous, well-groomed image Lucy likes to portray. This is only one of a multitude of performances that Lucy enacts as the opposite of the good, companionate wife who helps her

husband's career and provides a sanctuary for him in the home, and her comeuppance is that she is publicly humiliated as the opposite of a good wife and woman.

In addition to the battle of the sexes at the center of the conflict between Lucy and Ricky (and of course Fred and Ethel take their gender-mate's side), this episode highlights two other recurring themes of the series: the desire for fame and the rejection of feminine beauty for comic effect. One of the big differences between Lucy and Ricky is that he is a celebrity, and indeed his celebrity status becomes a central preoccupation of the series, especially in the Hollywood story arc when Ricky is cast in a movie as the "new Valentino." The fascination with celebrity is interesting because throughout their professional

Lucy suffers for violating the domestic ideal in "Men Are Messy."

lives, Ball was the bigger star; as we'll see in the next chapter, although television producers were eager to star her in a television series, they needed to be convinced that husband Desi Arnaz should be costar. It is almost as if the fictional life of the couple was an inversion of their actual relative status, and enabled them to play out a fantasy of more conventional gender roles.

The use of a mockup of a *Look* magazine cover also points to how *I Love Lucy* incorporated commodities other than the sponsor's cigarettes in its diegesis, or narrative world. *Look* magazine, like *Life,* and other mainstream national magazines, often featured Ball, Arnaz, and the show on its cover and in its pages, offering the audience an important source of extratextual information about Ball and Arnaz's marriage, children, home life, past careers, and behind-the-scenes knowledge of the making of the show. The Desilu publicity machine was effective and far-reaching, making sure that there was considerable print media coverage of the show and its stars and controlling the stories that emerged about them. When we think of a series that depends on magazine publicity to enhance its popularity prominently featuring magazine coverage in its fictional world (and several episodes revolved around Lucy inadvertently making Ricky look bad in front of reporters, or on television like in "Mr. and Mrs. TV Show"), we can see the series contributing to the importance of the secondary texts in the *I Love Lucy* phenomenon. This was especially true in the 1953 synchronized births of both Lucy and Ricky's fictional baby and Ball and Arnaz's real-life son (discussed in chapter 5).

In "Men Are Messy," Ball transgresses the lines that demarcate ideals of femininity by deliberately looking ugly, acting in an uncouth manner, and showing off a messy home. This episode is a good example of how the character Lucy functions as a trickster figure. As we will see in chapter 4, Lucy's trickery, like that of all trickster figures, often backfires, making her the dupe. Like many screwball heroines of 1930s film comedies,

Lucy uses disguise, costume, makeup, language, and mannerisms to perform cross-class, cross-race, and cross-gender impersonations that call attention to the boundaries between those socially constructed categories.

As a trickster, Lucy transforms the home from a site of women's labor into a performance space in which gender, ethnicity, class, region, and other aspects of identity are fluid. But the comic possibilities of the Ricardo home are layered on top of the conventional domestic space, and although the *Look* article does not use the photographs of the messy apartment, Lucy pays for transgressing the domestic ideal with public humiliation. Although there are some aspects of domestic ideology that *I Love Lucy* provides an opening to question, the importance of the home and television's place in it were not among them. With its popularity, *I Love Lucy* became a powerful force for the central role television played in postwar American culture, both shaping and reflecting the television in the home and the home on television.