



View of the Quechee Hot Air Balloon Festival, White River Junction, VT.

The Sharper Image:

A Closer Look at HDTV

By Brian Rose

It's only been a decade since the first HDTV sets went on sale in this country. But in that relatively short period of time, a revolution in the "experience" of television has taken place. TV has quite literally shifted its focus. Not only is the once grainy, low resolution picture suddenly as clear as a window, not only is the low-fidelity sound now deep and enveloping, but in many ways the nature of watching TV itself has altered. The casual, if constantly-on, companionship and background noise

that television provided over the last fifty years is dramatically changing. Thanks to its large, glittering wide screen and its jewel-like display, HDTV is once again returning television to its prominence as the centerpiece, the electronic altar as it were, of the modern American home.

Interestingly, the changes wrought by HDTV seem to fly in the face of prevailing consumer trends during the last three decades or so of television technology. Time and again, TV audiences have demonstrated a

profound indifference to the quality of their sets' video and audio capabilities. The battle between Sony's Betamax vs. JVC's VHS was won not because the latter offered a better viewing experience (it didn't) but because it provided greater recording capacity (with corresponding lower resolution). The opportunity to improve the VHS picture via Super VHS never caught on. Stereo TV's higher fidelity, which required hookup to home stereo systems, was largely ignored. So too was the picture upgrade available through component cables on DVD players and cable boxes.

What forces helped HDTV triumph and attract millions of viewers willing to pay substantial amounts of money to suddenly re-experience a medium which had been a part of their lives for half a century? Some of the answers, I think, lie in HDTV's historical roots in previous visual technologies.

When motion pictures were first introduced in the last years of the 19th century, the public was presented with a wide variety of material, ranging from vaudeville acts to male-oriented specialties (such as boxers and showgirls) to visits to foreign locales to documentaries (both real and re-created). The triumph of fictional formats was a decade away and in this era of "the cinema of attractions" (to use historian Tom Gunning's term) lay an important notion of what type of entertainment would consistently attract audiences to new display technologies ever since—sheer spectacle. Early film viewers' delight in movement and speed and the exotic would be matched each time the industry launched a new mode of presentation, whether talking pictures (which showcased musical numbers, tapping feet, and the gunfire

of gangsters), color (the epic sweep of *Gone with the Wind* or the fantasy of *The Wizard of Oz*), wide-screen (the biblical pageantry of *The Robe*), 3-D (the flinging spears of *Bwana Devil*), or the far-flung nature documentaries shot in Imax.

When television was introduced to the American public in the late 1930s (and then re-introduced after the hiatus of World War II), it obviously couldn't match the size and power of the big screen. But it could offer something just as enticing and vivid—the quality of "live-ness." Early television celebrated its ability to take viewers to events and present programming in real time, permitting the medium to serve as a literal "window to the world." Spectacle was just as important a selling point as it had been for film, but here the notion was on electronic connected-ness to both the familiar and the foreign, from the vaudeville shenanigans of Milton Berle (who fueled the demand for home-set purchases) to the baseball diamond of Yankee Stadium to the aerial flights of Mary Martin in *Peter Pan*.

By the mid-1950s, the TV set occupied a privileged place in the American living room, leading to both furniture and domestic re-arrangements. The gradual expansion in screen size and the introduction of color (which started a whole new era of display programming to showcase the beauty of its over-saturated palette) gave the medium even greater prominence as the visual centerpiece of family life. But a curious phenomenon emerged in the decades to come—as set prices dropped and lifestyles changed, the primacy of the communal living room experience declined. Cheaper TVs meant each room could have its own device, leading not only to fractured

families but also to the increase of smaller, more portable screens, usually of lower quality. Television became a ubiquitous appliance, a countertop device as common and inexpensive as a toaster.

The introduction of HDTV starting in the late 1990s and its dramatic growth over the last few years (HD is now available in 31 percent of American homes, up seven percent alone since January 2008) helped reverse some of these “diminishing” trends and returned the medium to its central role in the electronic household. Many viewers, in fact, responding to the ever-expanding availabilities of large screen sizes and the accompanying array of surround sound speakers, abandoned the family living room altogether to install special home theaters, complete with rows of

seats and custom-designed lighting.

But unlike earlier versions of home cinemas dedicated to DVD playback in the 1990s, the HDTV viewing environment was more than just an effort to recreate a high-priced screening room. It was also a place to experience the vividness and razor-sharp clarity of HD programming, with shows that in many ways recalled the strong elements of spectacle and display that characterized both film and TV in their earliest days.

Perhaps no program demonstrated this more “clearly” than Discovery HD Theater’s *Sunrise Earth*, which premiered in 2004. Documentary filmmaker David Conover defied all of the rules of conventional nature series—there was no narration, no conflict, no plot, no lessons. As Conover explained,

Photo: Scott Simper



David Conover filming cormorants at Li River, Guilin, China.

“I wanted to give people a greater degree of license to explore on their own and not be walked through it.” Recognizing the illuminating qualities of HD (its crystalline detail, its heightened depth of field, its enlarged frame size, its brilliant range of colors), Conover went to remote locations and simply filmed the sunrise over the course of several hours. The results were mesmerizing, especially when combined with HDTV’s 5.1 surround-sound capabilities. Conover’s belief in “experiential TV” opened the doors to a new HD aesthetic emphasizing pictorialism and live pacing, an aesthetic surprisingly similar in form and practice to the types of travel documentaries made in the first decade of cinema.

The innovative approach of *Sunrise Earth* was typical of the HD Theater network (as it is now known), which pioneered the notion that HD technology was its own best attraction. Since its launch in June 2002, the network has specialized in the kind of visually arresting programming custom made for viewers (largely male) eager to showcase their expensive new set’s technical possibilities. Whether it was ravishing nature series such as *Planet Earth* or its numerous programs devoted to almost hypnotic celebrations of gleaming American machinery, HD Theater presented its audience with an endless bounty of high definition material that often seemed suitable for framing.

HDTV’s richly detailed images and enveloping screen size was the perfect environment as well for displaying a key staple of television’s early sense of “live-ness” and direct masculine appeal—sports. Just like the late 1940s, when high testosterone shows like wrestling, boxing, and roller derbies

blared from sets in local taverns, one of the first over-the-air HD programs was ABC’s telecast of Superbowl XXXIV in January 2000—a broadcast doubtless watched in hundreds of HD-equipped bars around the country. The intoxicating allure of HD sports, where every blade of AstroTurf and every face in the crowd was clearly visible, not only forced broadcast and cable networks to upgrade their operations (at considerable expense), but also led to a similar movement among (largely male) consumers to take the plunge for a new HD set (at considerable expense) once they had enviously viewed a high definition football game at their neighbors’.

The “wow” factor of HDTV, the sense that once you’ve watched an HD sports or nature show, you’ve simply got to buy a set, can’t be underestimated as a primary inducement in the technology’s growth. Far more than the introduction of color TV, VCRs or DVDs, HDTV’s sharp improvements to the home-viewing experience are instantly apparent to consumers in appliance showrooms. Virtually every type of programming simply looks better in HD, from morning chat fests to game shows to sitcoms, cop shows and late-night comedy, leading many HDTV viewers, like their early-adopter TV counterparts in the late 1940s and early 1950s, to watch just about anything as long as it’s in high definition.

What isn’t so clear to novice consumers of HD is the types of problems they’re likely to encounter with their high-priced purchase. Similar to a new computer, HDTV is not simply a matter of “turning-on-the-switch” and watching the magic begin. Its complicated set-up demands advanced planning and skill, which



As seen on the 'Andean Dawn At Machu Picchu' episode of Sunrise Earth South America.

may explain the not-so-surprising fact that of the 35 million homes with HDTVs, only 20 million are actually getting an HD picture. Typically a new cable or satellite HD receiver must be ordered and a special HDMI cable must be purchased to connect the box to the set. But once the installation is complete, the enhanced imagery and sound are well worth the effort.

There's no question that innovative networks like HD Theater and ESPN-HD and PBS will continue to explore and expand the potential and the power of HDTV to provide viewers with a riveting visual experience—after all, HD has become their virtual signature. But as the novelty inevitably fades, HDTV will most likely follow the course of previous new technologies and come to be taken for granted. The majority of prime-time broadcast network programming is already in HD and despite its greater clarity and richness now seems a routine part of the television landscape. Most major cable networks have also made the switch to an HD version, often with minimal upgrades (such as increased news

banners on the left and right sides of the frame on CNN-HD and FoxNews-HD) or sometimes disastrously (as in the unwatchable “stretched” versions of standard definition shows shown on TBS-HD or HGTV-TV).

Ironically, the challenges for home television in the future will come not from full wall-size screens or 3-D (both inevitable), but from the continuing flurry towards miniaturization and total portable access. In the already dawning age of always available cellphone and Ipod TV, will anyone really care to watch life-size images in dedicated media rooms, no matter how vividly detailed and lifelike they appear?

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