

Introduction

Material Meditations

Film and television create worlds, but they are also of a world—the real world, for lack of a better term. This world is eminently, although not exclusively, material. It is made up of stuff, to which humans attach meaning. We encounter movies and television series through some kinds of stuff (projectors, monitors, speakers, and other exhibition technology) and are ourselves stuff: material objects that react to and affect other material objects. But audiovisual componentry and human bodies are not the only stuff mediating our experiences of film and television. Think of the last time you watched a movie: the chair you sat in, the home snacks or concessions you ate, the other viewers and their belongings, maybe the beer or joint you consumed to help you unwind. This book is about all those things and their unacknowledged influence on film and television spectatorship. The material culture around film and television changes how we make sense of their content, not to mention the very concepts *film* and *television*. But while scholars have spent decades studying how human identities, human bodies, and various technologies influence media reception, little attention has been paid to the material culture *around* viewers and their screens.¹

Theorists and historians of film and television have spent decades analyzing exhibition technologies and spaces—how the “apparatus” of the movie theater or the design of television sets conveys ideological cues that guide viewers’ perceptions.² More recently, some scholars have become interested in how viewers’ bodies and specific sites of media

consumption shape their encounters with film and television.³ Others analyze the infrastructures that make media distribution possible.⁴ However, scholars rarely consider the panoply of media reception, the commodities and comestibles that surround viewers, and the impact those objects have on viewers' relation to media content or one another. In *Stuff*, anthropologist Daniel Miller observes that "much of what makes us what we are exists, not through our consciousness or body, but as an exterior environment that habituates and prompts us."⁵ Material culture rarely gets credit for its epistemological significance, however, because it is "familiar and taken for granted." Its ability to disappear is evidence of how significant material culture actually is, however. As Miller explains, "Objects are important, not because they are evident and physically constrain or enable, but quite the opposite. It is often precisely because we do not *see* them. The less we are aware of them, the more powerfully they can determine our expectations."⁶ Miller's observation reveals unacknowledged material complexities within "the scene of the screen," an evocative phrase I borrow from Vivian Sobchack. In her essay of that title, Sobchack argues that "as materialities of human communication," film and television have radically reoriented human experiences of time and space, not to mention people's "bodily sense of existential 'presence.'"⁷ While media technologies have changed who we are, the scene of their intervention includes not just screens, speakers, and bodies but food, drugs, branded merchandise—even physical violence. These material forces radically alter viewers' sense of themselves, their media, and their world.

Material culture is always shot through with social politics, with messages about class, race, gender, and other social divisions. This is especially true of material media cultures, which also shape cultural memory and the terms for cultural participation. Take my early childhood introduction to television culture and class politics, *TV Guide*. The physical presence of that little digest in my friends' living rooms taught me that not everyone watched TV the same way, that it was a material culture suffused with class distinction. My family did not subscribe to *TV Guide*; instead, we had *TV Week*, the television listing supplement that came free with the Sunday *Boston Globe*. *TV Week* was a utilitarian catalog of upcoming broadcasts, published on inexpensive newsprint. *TV Guide*, by contrast, featured glossy coated paper and contained feature articles, editorial content, and reviews as well as broadcast schedules. *TV Guide* taught me about the power of conspicuous consumption: that in certain contexts, function was less important than presentation and packaging.

I was fascinated by my friends' *TV Guides*; I couldn't believe that their parents bought things to help them watch TV.⁸ I knew my friends weren't watching better shows than I was—we all followed the same series—but *TV Guide* suggested that they might belong to a better class of television viewer. It was like the difference between owning a vacuum cleaner and hiring someone to do your vacuuming for you; folks who could afford the latter had things a little easier than the rest of us (and a lot easier than folks using a dustbin and broom).

TV Guide's influence extended far beyond the social dynamics of suburban Massachusetts, thanks in no small part to its unique design. In 1948, *TV Guide* began as *The TeleVision Guide*, a small circular that covered programming for the New York City area. Walter Annenberg bought *The TeleVision Guide* in 1953, along with several similar regional weeklies. He began publishing these magazines under one title, *TV Guide*, and "putting a national wrap around them": the aforementioned articles, reviews, and recommendations, not to mention name-brand advertisements.⁹ Annenberg's first *TV Guide* was published on April 3, 1953, with a cover story about Desi Arnaz Jr., "Lucy's \$50,000,000 Baby!" At fifteen cents per issue, it sold just over 1.5 million copies at newsstands—not bad, considering that its regional editions only covered ten cities.¹⁰ Circulation tumbled that summer, but the national "Fall Preview" wrap excited consumer interest and brought circulation back to almost 1.75 million. It kept climbing.¹¹ During the 1960s, *TV Guide* "became indigenous in the American household," according to Michael Dann, a former director of programming for NBC.¹² By 1967, one in every five television households in the United States subscribed to *TV Guide* (12.5 million out of 57 million).¹³ Consequently, the national networks began timing their programming decisions around *TV Guide's* deadlines. The mechanics of print publication now set the schedule for broadcasters, suggesting that television's companion had become its master.

TV Guide had an equally significant effect on viewers. As Dann recalls, "It was one of the great media feats in publishing history. You could almost count on so many viewers if you got a cover."¹⁴ By 1988—when I was most attentive to which of my friends' families subscribed—*TV Guide's* circulation exceeded seventeen million, making it the most profitable and popular magazine in the United States.¹⁵ During this era, *TV Guide* and weekly newspaper television inserts like *TV Week* were the presiding material manifestations of television culture and physical tokens of the industry's message of consumer plenty. Through their design and material ubiquity, *TV Week* and *TV Guide* both affirmed an ideology



FIGURE 1. Covers of the *Chicago Tribune's TV Week* and *TV Guide* for the third week of September 1978. Photo by author.

that British cultural critic Brian Winston calls “the television of abundance.”¹⁶ After all, a terrain must be sufficiently complex for it to require a *Guide*. Differences in their contents, layout, and design impute class distinctions between their readerships, however. *TV Guide's* original digest-sized format was slightly smaller than a paperback book in its height, width, depth, and weight. This resemblance bestowed cultural capital to both the journal and its subject, making the publication seem more learned than it was. Most newspaper supplements, by contrast, were $8\frac{1}{2} \times 11$ inches—about the size of a traditional newsstand magazine—but very thin and light. Some sported logos suspiciously similar to *TV Guide's*. Most used full-color covers, yet their derivative iconography, material modesty, and even their name signaled their ephemerality and disposability (figure 1).

For while *TV Guide* also printed its local television listings on newsprint, they were bookended by that full-color “national wrap” on two dozen pages of high-gloss coated paper. Although less informative than the local programming pages, these introductory materials helped

establish a veneer of quality and respectability for the magazine. Their national advertisements, for instance, reinforced *TV Guide*'s cultural authority; ads for iconic brands such as Marlboro, Oscar Mayer, and Atari bolstered the magazine's commercial prominence through a kind of eminence by association. Additionally, their polished graphics improved the overall look of the magazine. The patina of the national wrap was very important, because the black and white regional listings were visually stultifying. Their two-column layout created a graphic uniformity that local and series ads could only do so much to interrupt (figure 2). *TV Week*, by contrast, was printed entirely on newsprint, with only its front and back cover in color, although the larger pages allowed for a four-column layout and a larger font size, which made its listings more readable than those of *TV Guide* (figure 3). *TV Week* rarely contained national ad campaigns, however; its ads were typically for local businesses. A 1978 issue of the *Chicago Tribune*'s *TV Week* featured promotions for local hair-loss clinics, personal loan providers, and hardware and furniture outlets, as well as specific television shows. These ads enforce a provincial sense of identity, as befits a regional newspaper publication. By contrast, *TV Guide* physically encloses the regional in the national, offering its readers a more cosmopolitan frame for their television viewing.

In sum, *TV Guide* and *TV Week* provided their readers with materially and culturally distinct experiences of television, even as both showcased, and profited from, US television's ideology of abundance. *TV Guide* encouraged viewers to approach television as a national pastime worthy of informed engagement. Its presence in viewers' living rooms bespoke sufficient leisure time and disposable income to enrich one's television experience through consumer goods. Importantly, I refer here to the impression created by the object itself, not its intellectual contributions (which were meager). *TV Week*, on the other hand, affirmed the regional specificity and ephemerality of television. As a newspaper insert, it was fundamentally supplemental; no one bought *TV Week* per se, however much they might have used it. Its cheap materials and spartan design affirm its pragmatic goal: to convey what's on when, as accurately as possible. Other scholars have observed *TV Guide*'s significance as a "cultural mediator"; I argue that its social and industrial power were directly related to its material presentation.¹⁷ Growing up in a *TV Week* household, I envied my friends their *TV Guides*. The sleek little digest connoted an investment in entertainment that I correlated with wealth and privilege. As an adult, I realize that this correlation is less