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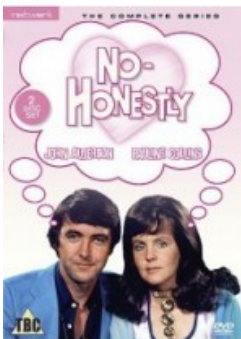
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TV FUTURISM by Toby Miller

Thursday 23 May 2013 Last updated at 17:49

Futuristic TV images are fun to look at, whether the sets are depicted in splendid isolation or with asinine human faces as accompaniment. I like to look back and think about what was once thought of as the future as well as forwards to what we imagine as [the world of tomorrow](#). Predictions are great to revisit, like an old sweater at the first chill of winter or a lost lover's rediscovered kiss. Actually, visiting the page embedded above isn't like either of those things, but not to worry.

Predicting the future, and trying to make it happen according to plan, is a core aspect of marketing, whether you are selling palm trees or TVs. And sales of the latter are on the rise. For example, [Nielsen's 2014 Advance National TV Household Universe Estimate](#) suggests 115.6 million US homes have TV sets, an increase on 2012-13's 114.2 million.

But why has Sony just announced a campaign to promote its new 4K Ultra High-Definition television when the US networks haven't made the transition in terms of equipment or programming? Who cares if [the new device](#) has '8 million individual pixels (3,840 x 2,160) compared to about 2 million (1,920 x 1,080) on your current HDTV', and is a snap at US\$6,999.99? Well, [Sony promises](#) a new download service from the Fall, and its new PlayStation will work with 4K. So [that's alright then](#).

As of May 21 2013, just 857 people had liked/promoted Sony's announcement on Facebook. I passed on the opportunity to be the first of my friends to do so. But I'm really impressed that the firm has handed over space and time to authentic Yanqui customers in its promotional video: 'I don't really understand it' and 'it's better than real life' were representative remarks from [Sony's commercial](#), which draws on "consumer" views. Right.

So come on, you 857 early adopters: help us all out and create economies of scale. Fork out the damn US\$6,999.99. Monthly terms are available! Today's ultra-HD may soon be surpassed and lead to obsolete expensive baubles taking up space, in just the way that [gigantic quadrophonic sound systems](#) used to. What, [me worry?](#)

Here's the reason behind selling something exorbitant that may never deliver what it was designed to do: *bourgeois* economic theory posits a strong correlation between early adoption of consumer technologies by the ruling class and eventual uptake by workers. The theory goes a little like this:

as the wealthy treat themselves to expensive goods, the cost of such pleasures diminishes, permitting low-income households to afford later iterations. In turn, price reduction aids the manufacturing segment of the ruling class to profit and invest in new innovations. This so-called 'virtuous cycle' relies on income *inequality*, to ensure a critical mass of wealth as new technologies are marketed, but also a certain income *equality*, to ensure a critical mass of consumption once prices fall ([Matsuyama, 2002](#)).

Of course, it's not just viewers who incur such expenses. Since the advent of basic high definition, broadcasters have had to write off and replace analog transmitters, antennae, video recorders, and so on; worry about new standards of sound and vision; and find ways of exploiting the internet. But they must do so in order to prosper.

And for leading manufacturers, this innovation resolves [a supposedly stark choice](#)—reinvention or demise through ultra-high definition.

Struggles within the *bourgeoisie* and their technical and political delegates are at a fascinating point. That means [we need to consider](#) regulatory as well as technological and textual aspects of new TVs. John McCain, chanteur extraordinaire of “Bomb, Bomb, Iran,”

recently told a Senate panel that US consumers are at the end of their tether, so to speak, with cords. He argues that the cross-subsidies that subscribers provide, which keep niche stations on cable, should end, thereby freeing them from buying tiers of channels and facilitating individual purchasing decisions. The chanteur has tabled his very own exciting [Television Consumer Freedom Act of 2013](#) to this end. [Broadcast Engineering queries](#) the draft legislation, because ‘À la carte raises all sorts of questions about where the money comes from to support smaller, more diverse channels that are specifically targeted to narrow markets’. How market fundamentalists tie themselves into knots over the dim realization that their favorite fetish requires massive public intervention to exist, operate, and thrive. Whoops!

Meanwhile, marketers continue to avow their powerlessness over audiences when challenged in the public sphere—but boast omnipotence over them in the private world. For instance, the essay that won the oleaginous “Best New Thinking Award” at the 2003 Market Research Society Conference acknowledged that successful marketing does not ‘view ... the consumer as an individual’ but ‘part of the herd’ ([Earls, 2003](#)). Thanks for sharing.

And that is how media corporations generally view us. They pretend to be our servants, or sometimes pass as bewildered witnesses struggling to comprehend our baffling promiscuity, for all the world like benign but puzzled avatars of ‘60s parents confronting the sexual revolution. Sex disarticulated from love? TV removed from cable? Father, why do these words sound so nasty?

But the truth is this: marketers like nothing better than active audiences overflowing with knowledge and discourse about programs; nothing better than diverse, articulate groups with easily-identified cultural politics and practices; nothing better than fine-grained ethnographic and focus-group work in addition to large-scale surveys that provide broad-based demographic data. Supposedly resistive social identities provide one more category for their delectation.

And the virtuous cycle always works for them. 4K will rise, like that beloved sweater and half-forgotten kiss.

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