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# Millions “Love Lucy”: Commodification and the Lucy Phenomenon

LORI LANDAY

*The ideology of mass consumer culture is central to all the levels of the Lucy phenomenon: in individual episodes that revolve around commodities, in the “good life” portrayed in the series, in Ball’s public persona as “just a housewife,” in the myriad of products tied to the series in the fifties (comic books, paper dolls, furniture, clothes), as a syndicated series, and in the nostalgic products popular today. At the core of the phenomenon is a juxtaposition of public and private embodied in both the character of Lucy and her creator, the popular public woman Lucille Ball. A textual reading of the episode “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” in the contexts of other aspects of the Lucy phenomenon (Ball’s public persona, audience knowledge of the “real” marriage of Ball and Arnaz), and other popular articulations of gender and middle-class life in the postwar era suggests how the Lucy phenomenon was framed by and broke the frames of commodification. Overall, the series offers consumption as the solution to Lucy’s dissatisfaction, an example of the consumerist-ethos that presented private solutions to public problems. However, at the same time that the phenomenon participated in the mass consumer economy, the show’s comedy played on conflicts and anxieties about consumption and domesticity.*

“You need a pretty girl in your act to advertise the sponsor’s product. She eats it, or drinks it, or waxes the floor with it, or cuts potatoes with it, or drives off in it . . . or sm it!” Lucy Ricardo’s line from the March 195 pilot episode of *I Love Lucy* underscores a key aspect of the connections between women, television, and commodification. The “pretty girl” is the woman-as-spectacle who gains the attention of the consumer and by embodying the exchange value of the sponsor’s product, creates the associations that advertise it. The line demonstrates how women in performance are valued primarily for their appearance, and makes a joke based on the audience’s knowledge that the sponsor of *I Love Lucy* was Philip Morris, the brand of cigarettes Lucy and Ricky Ricardo—or is it Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz—smoke on the show.

The blurring of the boundaries between whether it is Lucy and Ricky or Ball and Arnaz smoking Philip Morris cigarettes suggests some of the issues surrounding commodification and the Lucy phenomenon. Ultimately, commodification is about transforming reality, selfhood, and experience into quantifiable products of mass consumer culture, and situating those fetishized commodity-forms in a social context in which

people define things in terms of themselves and themselves in terms of things. "Individuality" is secured from the goods and the appearance of the goods people consume; discursive and social practices reinforce the notion that a person's character is based on the commodities consumed rather than on anything internal or intrinsic. The Lucy phenomenon is a triumph of commodification; the television series, the merchandise, and the character are all aspects of one of the most successful products television and postwar American society has ever manufactured. Today, Nick at Nite reruns, websites, fan conventions, collectibles, television specials, books, videotapes, laserdiscs, the merchandising, and the recent popular vote to put Lucy on a U.S. postage stamp commemorating the 1950s are all evidence of the contemporary Lucy phenomenon.

Since 1951, *I Love Lucy* has been one of the most enduring and influential transformations of a public persona in American culture. In the 1950s, *I Love Lucy* addressed the central ideological concerns of the postwar period within the emerging medium of television situation comedy in a show that climaxed with a performance by perhaps the most brilliant physical comedienne on film. Of course, *Lucy's* continuing success hinges on this comic genius. However, the resonance and relevance of *Lucy* is due to the way the series and the character dramatized and personified cultural conflicts about gender, marriage, and commodification caused by the legitimization crisis that emerged in postwar America and remains pertinent throughout the twentieth, and into the twenty-first centuries.

One explanation for the centrality and significance of the Lucy phenomenon is Lucy's embodiment of one of the most beloved and central kinds of cultural figures: the trickster (Landay 1998, 160–195). A trickster is a subversive, paradoxical fantasy figure who does what we cannot or dare not by moving between social spaces, roles, and categories that the culture has deemed oppositional. When faced with a situation that appears to have only two choices, the trickster is the kind of hero/ine who creates a third possibility. But the trickster's chicanery often backfires on him or her, and then the trickster becomes the dupe. Like other tricksters, Lucy Ricardo fuses the most exalted and most base aspects of human nature into an engaging character who remains true to her mixed nature. As Walter Matthau remarked in explaining the universal appeal of Lucy, "There's no dream she wouldn't reach for, and no fall she wouldn't take" (Sanders and Gilbert 1993, 368).

Because the straightforward path to satisfying her desires is barred in some way, Lucy turns to trickery to get what she wants. Because Lucy's ambitions are thwarted in part because of her status as a woman, particularly as a married woman without financial or creative autonomy, the object of her trickery is often to subvert her husband's authority through the covert tactics of "feminine wiles" available to her. Lucy is specifically

a female trickster because her attempts to circumvent the limitations of the feminine mystique of postwar domesticity oscillate between "masculine" and "feminine" social roles, spaces, and practices, and metaphors. In a rapidly changing postwar society when the gap between the ideology of polarized gender roles clashed so powerfully with the social experience of American men and women, Lucy's inability to reconcile her ambitions and her social position articulated increasing tensions about gender.

By calling attention to the power relations of the sexes in everyday domestic life, *I Love Lucy* participated in a proto-feminist current building in American culture. To be sure, Lucy's desire to escape the confines of domesticity, to be autonomous and public instead of dependent and private, were ridiculed and usually ineffectual. However, the glimmers of equality in the Ricardo marriage, combined with the audience's extra-textual knowledge of the real-life Ball and Arnaz marriage/creative partnership, posited the hope of a collaborative marriage alongside of its dramatization of the conflicts of the 1950s ideal of the companionate marriage.

Although Lucy's dissatisfaction with being a housewife was couched in layers of contradictions, and the character's incompetence was comic fodder, the series incorporated cultural contradictions and anxieties about women's participation in the public sphere. A consumer good installed in the home that brought representations of other consumer goods into the home, the postwar television was literally and metaphorically a bridge between the public and private, dissolving some of the sexual division of labor those spheres. And, although postwar ideology clung to polarized gender roles in its impetus to be "homeward bound," the number of women in the workforce in 1952 exceeded the largest female workforce during the war (May 1988). In this context, we can interpret Lucy's botched attempts at paid labor outside the home as addressing both men's and women's fears about women's increased involvement in the public sphere.

Moreover, the Lucy phenomenon articulated both the fantasy of the good life central to the situation of the sitcom and the dissatisfaction bred by commodification, the very condition consumerism is supposed to quell. As a kind of postwar domestic realism, *I Love Lucy's* comic representation of everyday life placed a romantic, yet screwball comedy version of the battle of the sexes into a more intimate, private setting than any other medium—written, stage, film, or radio; the Ricardo living room was literally in the living rooms of America. The setting and props—the furniture, clothes, room layouts, cigarettes—became intertwined in a commodified fantasy and a fantasy of commodification in a new, more powerful way. Not only did a vision of the good life provide the cultural context and setting of the series, but the plots often revolved around

Lucy's insatiable desire for what she doesn't have, whether that is a role in Ricky's show or a new freezer.

What cultural work did *I Love Lucy* perform and how was and is it shaped by the cultural and social contexts in which it is created and reprised? *I Love Lucy* emerged as a central story cycle concerned with the major cultural preoccupations of the post war era: marriage, domesticity, and the attainment of a middle-class lifestyle; it did so because of the particular historical conditions, the newness of television programming and the genre of the situation comedy, Lucy's function as a trickster figure, and the extraordinary creative and business talents of Ball, Arnaz, and their collaborators.

One of the attractions of *I Love Lucy* was its blend of reality and fiction, or "real life" and "reel life," as a 1953 *Look* article called it. Self-reflexive jokes like Lucy's statement that Ricky needs a "pretty girl" in his act bisociate<sup>1</sup> inept housewife Lucy Ricardo and TV star Lucille Ball, calling attention to how she both is and is not the "pretty girl" in the various narrative frames of the *I Love Lucy* phenomenon. Interwoven are the episode, the advertisements during the episode, knowledge about the series and its stars from secondary texts, the cultural contexts that inflect the combinations of private housewife/public pretty girl and femininity/comedy with contradictions, and the ideology of the feminine mystique.

The ideology of mass consumer culture is central to all the levels of the Lucy phenomenon: in the sponsor's framing of episodes; in the self-reflexivity of the episode "Lucy Does a TV Commercial" and other episodes that revolve around commodification; in the "good life" portrayed in the series; in Ball's public persona as "just a housewife"; in the myriad of products tied to the series in the 1950s (furniture, clothes, dolls); as a syndicated series; in the Lucy collectibles popular today; and in the continuation of the Lucy phenomenon on the Internet and in fan gatherings. At the core of the phenomenon is a juxtaposition of reality and artifice, of advertising and programming. Individual episodes offer commodities including household appliances (a freezer, television set, washing machine), apparel (dresses, a fur coat), and furniture as the solution to Lucy's dissatisfaction, an example of the consumerist-ethos that presented private solutions to public problems. However, at the same time that *I Love Lucy* participated in the mass consumer economy, the series' comedy played on conflicts and anxieties about commodification, domesticity, and the culture industries.

## Making Memories

Why does *I Love Lucy* persist in its popularity today? What cultural work does it continue to perform? One function *Lucy* performs is found

within the concept of "memory as misappropriation" that George Lipsitz locates in the popularity of the early television series *I Remember Mama* (1949–56). Lipsitz argues that *Mama's* appeal might have been because it *didn't* depict the past accurately (it was set at the turn-of-the-century), and *did* represent the past as people wished it had been. One view of "memory as misappropriation" is compensatory fantasy, but Lipsitz also suggests some liberatory facets:

It enables us to see beyond our own experience, rendering the oppressions of the past as contingent and unnecessary while modeling an alternate past, one as responsive to human wishes and desires as to the accidents of history. . . . If our own personal pasts cannot be venerated as moral guides for the present, we must choose another from history or art and embrace it as our own. But such leaps cannot be fashioned purely from the imagination; the past has more informative power and more relevance to the present if we believe that it is what actually happened, because what people have done before they can do again, while what they imagine may never be realized. (1990, 80)

From this perspective, contemporary audiences' delight in *I Love Lucy* may very well be due to the series' portrayal of the 1950s. It offers contemporary audiences a misappropriated memory of the past that is a fitting vanguard of the many advancements gained by the women's movement in the past 30 years. The more Lucy's antics are recast in the past, the funnier her trickery becomes because the social conditions that necessitated her trickery have changed. Actually, some of those conditions have changed and others persist, such as Lucy's concern with her attractiveness, and her desire to be treated as an equal. Like Coyote, Brer Rabbit, the con-man, and other incarnations of the trickster, Lucy can withstand historical and cultural changes and remain a central figure in the culture's mythos.

## Making Merchandise

*I Love Lucy* reached an unprecedented level of popularity as a successful commodity in itself and excellent advertising for its sponsor. After the Ricardo and Ball-Arnaz babies were born almost simultaneously in January 1953, it spawned merchandising tie-ins that exceeded \$50 million. As Ball explains in her autobiography, "In addition to the production company, we also had a merchandising business. It was possible to furnish a house and dress a whole family with items carrying our *I Love Lucy* label" (Ball 1996, 224). Desilu, the Ball-Arnaz production company, received five percent of the gross earnings of the products the stars endorsed; beginning in October 1952, there were 2,800 retail outlets for Lucille Ball dresses, blouses, sweaters, and aprons as well as Desi Arnaz smoking jackets and

robes. There were pajamas for men and women like the ones Lucy and Ricky wore and a line of dolls. In one month in late-1952, 30,000 "Lucy" dresses, 32,000 heart-adorned aprons, and 35,000 dolls were sold. The pajamas sold out in two weeks, and the Christmas rush sold 85,000 dolls. In January 1953, the first month of selling a line of bedroom suites, \$500,000 in sales in two days were reported. As of January 1953 there were layettes and nursery furniture, Desi sport shirts and denims, Lucy lingerie and costume jewelry, and desk and chair sets ("Desilu Formula" 1953, 58; Andrews 1985, 108). There were also *I Love Lucy* albums, sheet music, coloring books, and comic books.

A month after 44 million people watched the episode "Lucy Goes to the Hospital," Ball and Arnaz signed a contract for \$8 million with Philip Morris and CBS, the largest contract ever written for a television series to date. In describing the contract, the Philip Morris president explained:

This show is the all-time phenomenon of the entertainment business. On a strictly dollars-and-cents basis, it is twice as effective as the average nighttime television show in conveying our advertising message to the public. . . . [I]t is probably one of, if not the most efficient advertising buys in the entire country. In addition, we derive many supplementary merchandising and publicity benefits from the show. As you can see, we love "Lucy." (Andrews 1985, 107-08)

Of course Philip Morris loved Lucy; what's not to love?<sup>2</sup> The phenomenon exemplified the symbolic motives of advertising. Advertising seeks to create a web of associations that allows the consumer to justify purchasing a specific consumer product in terms of abstract social goals. A hit show like *I Love Lucy* provides those associations, as articulated in a 1953 furniture ad that proclaimed "Live Like Lucy!" Frankfurt School critics Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno noted this trend: "Advertising and the culture industry merge technically as well as economically" (1944, 163). Indeed, in an era characterized by the idea of consensus, everyone seemed to agree. As *New York Times* television critic Jack Gould wrote, "'I Love Lucy' is probably the most misleading title imaginable. For once, all the statistics are in agreement: Millions love Lucy" (quoted in Andrews 1985, 109). Horkheimer and Adorno also provide a more somber interpretation of the success of popular texts like *I Love Lucy*, asserting, "The deception is not that the culture industry supplies amusement but that it ruins the fun by allowing business considerations to involve it in the ideological clichés of a culture in the process of self-liquidation" (1944, 142-43). However, there is much more to be learned about the role popular culture plays in the process of commodification. As George Lipsitz comments, many critics of popular culture "are so eager to tell us what popular culture does not do (advance the agenda of the Enlightenment) that they fail to tell us what popular culture actually does or how it



is shaped by the economic and social matrix in which it is embedded" (1990, 18).

### Making "Lucy"

At the center of the Lucy phenomenon is "Lucy," that combination of Lucille Ball and the series of screwy redheaded heroines she infused with a life of their own. The red hair is one of the most fetishized aspects of the Lucy icon, ironic since *I Love Lucy* was, of course, in black and white. Ball stopped bleaching her hair blonde and shifted to red hair in the mid-1930s when she was working in mostly B-movies at RKO; she chose the pink-orange hue, called "Tango Red," when she went to MGM in 1943 because it added to the spectacle of the Technicolor musicals Ball made between 1943 and 1946. Ball recalled, "It gave me just the right finishing touch before the cameras. Maybe I didn't look so good in person, but I wasn't worrying about that" (Doty 1990, 6; Ball 1996, 156). That the "finishing touch" on her self-commodification was purely for the camera, not for "real life," and that the artificial color of her hair was widely publicized and known, show how much artifice was a part of Ball's star persona.

That women's hair color was commodified and fetishized was certainly nothing new in the mid-1930s. By choosing red hair over blonde, Ball eschewed the well-established golddigger/dumb blonde image in favor of the unconventional, individualistic, and vibrant redhead. "Madame" Elinor Glyn, a celebrity writer and film producer, always sought opportunities to mythologize her own preferred hair color: "titian" red. *It* (1927) and *Red Hair* (1928), Glyn's movies starring Clara Bow, the most famous redhead before Ball, advanced her agenda into mass consumer culture. In 1932, famous blonde Jean Harlow shunned platinum for red and questioned gentlemen's preference for blondes in the Anita Loos-scripted *Red-Headed Woman*.

By connecting herself with unconventional redheaded comic heroines, Ball put herself in the tradition of screwball heroines, who had moved from film to radio to television, and in shifting media, had become increasingly domesticated. The resolution to the film screwball comedy of the 1930s and early-1940s was marriage (sometimes remarriage); acts one and two dealt with courtship staged as a comic, slapstick battle of the sexes. For serialized programs in the "homeward bound" postwar era, the comic terrain shifted to married life. Nevertheless, two lines from *Bringing Up Baby* (1938) articulate the principles of the screwball comedy, and then the radio and television situation comedy: "The love impulse in man frequently reveals itself in terms of conflict" and "Everything's gonna be alright." In *My Favorite Husband*, Ball's radio situation comedy, Ball played Liz Cooper, whose schemes for helping her banker husband's



career led her into funny mishaps. In radio, Ball found the fame and recognition that eluded her in film. The radio show set up much of the narrative and ideological groundwork for *I Love Lucy*: it led to comic climaxes with exaggerations of everyday life that reflected and parodied the cultural ideals of the postwar period: domesticity; polarized gender roles; material acquisition; attaining a successful, white, middle-class lifestyle. When *Husband* writers Jess Oppenheimer, Madelyn Pugh, and Bob Carroll Jr. became the writers for *I Love Lucy*, they recycled many of the radio plots, facilitating the development of Lucy Ricardo, postwar domesticity's inheritor of the legacy of screwball heroines.

Ball's red hair almost had a very different—and career ending—connotation. At one point in the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC) hearings, Ball was questioned about a 1936 registration card on which she had declared that she intended to vote for the Communist Party's candidates. At the second closed hearing in 1953, Ball was cleared of suspicion when she explained she did it only to please her grandfather and that she had little interest in politics herself. Yet somehow the news leaked out, leading to a *Los Angeles-Herald Express* headline in three-inch red letters: "LUCILLE BALL NAMED RED." That night, at the filming of the 1953–54 season premiere, Arnaz warmed up the studio audience as usual, but he gave a serious speech denouncing communism and labeling the rumors lies. The crowd cheered. He ended with, "And now, I want you to meet my favorite wife" (a play on Ball's successful 1940s radio show *My Favorite Husband*), and then he continued, "my favorite redhead—in fact, that's the only thing red about her, and even that's not legitimate—Lucille Ball!" (Brady 1994, 220; Ball 1996, 231–32; Sanders and Gilbert 1993, 81).

## Making Reality

This question of reality and artifice characterized early television in general and *I Love Lucy* in particular. The medium of television had an immediacy and sense of presence that far outstripped radio and film. Whether live or, like *I Love Lucy*, filmed "live," the discursive patterns of early television encouraged viewers to feel like they were actually present at the event or performance. In his discussion of the changes television wrought on American political and social life, historian David Halberstam summarizes, "People now expected to *see* events, not merely read about or hear them. At the same time, the line between what happened in real life and what people saw on television began to merge. . . . Nothing showed the power of this new medium to soften the edge between real life and fantasy better than the coming of Lucille Ball" (1993, 195–96).

The on-screen chemistry of Ball and Arnaz, the combination of the familiar (screwball and situation comedy conventions, show business couples) with the innovative (a Cuban-American marriage), and Ball's superlative abilities at physical comedy all created a context for the success of *I Love Lucy*. However, most likely the cultural movement toward domesticity was the biggest factor in creating the Lucy phenomenon. The situation of *I Love Lucy* articulated the contradictions of marriage, gender, the battle of the sexes, and middle-class life: the things of concern to a majority of television buyers and television watchers. Ball attributed the series' success to how it made comedy out of everyday life:

We had a great identification with millions of people. They could identify with my problems, my zaniness, my wanting to do everything, my scheming and plotting, the way I cajoled Ricky. People identified with the Ricardos because we had the same problems they had. Desi and I weren't your ordinary Hollywood couple on TV. We lived in a brownstone apartment somewhere in Manhattan, and paying the rent, getting a new dress, getting a stale fur collar on an old cloth coat, or buying a piece of furniture were all worth a story.

People could identify with those basic things—baby-sitters, traveling, wanting to be entertained, wanting to be loved in a certain way—all the two couples on the show were constantly doing things that people all over the country were doing. We just took ordinary situations and exaggerated them. (quoted in Andrews 1985, 225–26)

Note that all the things Ball lists as ordinary problems deal with domestic, private life; episodes most often ended with temporary truces between Ricky and Lucy (articulated in lines like "Now we're even" and an embrace), but sometimes the episode ended with the reassertion of control by Ricky or another authority figure, or sometimes by simply breaking off the action at the height of comic chaos. In any case, the problem solving leads back to the core of the show: the "love" between the couple. As May summarizes, "In the postwar years, Americans found that viable alternatives to the prevailing family norm were virtually unavailable. Because of the political, ideological, and institutional developments that converged at the time, young adults were indeed homeward bound, but they were also bound to the home" (1998, 15). In the world of *I Love Lucy*, home meant the "love" that Ricky had for Lucy no matter what odd, property damaging, career jeopardizing, financially threatening thing she did. *I Love Lucy* assured viewers that with "love," everything would turn out alright. And that "love" could be yours in the form of his and her pajamas for only \$5.95.

Television brought the world into the home and the home into the world. Because American culture was engrossed in the ideas and modification of domesticity, postwar society was a fertile field in which television expanded. In her excellent study, *Make Room for TV: Televi-*

sion and the Family Ideal in Postwar America, Lynn Spigel explores the development of television as a commodity and as an institution, discussing the rhetorical strategies advertisers and programmers used to promote television as an essential part of family life in the context of increased consumer spending, which rose 60 percent in the five years after World War II. Spending on household furnishings and appliances rose a staggering 240 percent (May 1988, 165), including the televisions that were in .02 percent of homes in 1946 and in 9 percent of homes in 1950; by 1955, 65 percent of homes had televisions. When the young couples who were homeward bound created homes, they put televisions in the center of them, and when they gathered around the television in the family "togetherness" touted by television advertisements, they saw shows like *I Love Lucy* that dramatized the "good life." Perhaps, as the work of May and Spigel suggests, television was particularly influential to the postwar generation who left neighborhoods comprised of several generations for single-family detached houses in the suburbs. "Postwar Americans—particularly those being inducted into the ranks of middle-class home ownership—must, to some degree, have been aware of the theatrical, artificial nature of the family life. For people who had lived through the Depression and the hardships of World War II, the new consumer dreams must have seemed somewhat synthetic or, at least, unorthodox. Leaving ethnic and working class areas for mass-produced suburbs, these people must have been cognizant of the new roles they were asked to play in a prefabricated social setting" (Spigel 1992, 163).

The paradox of isolation within idyllic suburban communities was particularly difficult for women, and contributed to the problems of the feminine mystique. A series of magazine ads for silverware named "Community" unironically portrayed this contradiction by commodifying the desire for a sense of community; the ads featured young brides who desire "Community" to make their wedded bliss complete. On *I Love Lucy*, when Lucy and Ricky moved to the Connecticut suburbs in 1956, they found congenial new neighbors, but still missed the Mertzes so much that eventually Fred and Ethel moved into the house next door and they all took up raising chickens. Postwar consumer culture attempted to fill the need for community with the intimacy and immediacy of television and the neighbors on the other side of the "window on the world."

The families portrayed on television modeled an everyday life in which television was an integral part; this self-reflexivity characterized shows like *Lucy*, *Burns and Allen*, *The Goldbergs*, and *Ozzie and Harriet*, among others. The self-reflexivity of people on television going on television, or watching television, was a characteristic of the situation comedy in the genre-forming years of 1950–1955. In *I Love Lucy*, this tendency manifested most clearly in the many episodes in which Lucy and Ricky appeared on television, but television also figured prominently as a con-

sumer item. In "The Courtroom," the Ricardos and their neighbors Fred and Ethel Mertz end up in court over damage done to the television the Ricardos gave the Mertzes for their wedding anniversary. In self-reflexive episodes like "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," "Fred and Ricky are TV Fans," "The Million Dollar Idea," "Home Movies," and "Mr. and Mrs. TV Show," televisions and being on television are central to the plot.

Although televisions were a special consumer item, other consumer items propelled conflict and plot; in addition to presenting the Ricardo home (with many items available for purchase), the majority of Lucy's schemes concerned acquiring commodities—a freezer, fur coat, furniture, dresses, washing machines, vacuum cleaner, cars, wigs, pearls, and a twenty-five pound rare Italian cheese that Lucy passes off as a baby—enough money to buy them. Lucy's material desires get the better of her, and often lead her into more trouble than they could ever be worth. Always sparked by the unequal economic power relation between Ricky and Lucy, Lucy often ended up in a jam because she had already spent her "allowance" and Ricky wouldn't give her the money she wanted.

As Fred Mertz quipped, "When it comes to money, there are two kinds of people: the earners and the spenders. Or as they are more popularly known, husbands and wives." This consumerist ethos of gender, wryly articulated by Fred Mertz (played by William Frawley) in a 1952 episode of *I Love Lucy*, gets a big laugh from the studio audience. The joke recognizes a key facet of postwar ideology, a cluster of ideals and expectations at the crossroads of mainstream representations of gender roles, marriage, domesticity, and consumerism. "People" are divided into two types, each defined by their relationship to mass consumer culture, and that division of labor is sexual. One of the ironies of the postwar era is that the ideology of separate spheres and polarized gender roles was strongest at a time of increasing permeability of the boundaries of those spheres and roles. The promise of the "good life" of home ownership and the exhortation to "Live Like Lucy" often necessitated that women get a paid job in the public sphere, which challenged the gendered separation of the "earners and the spenders."

For good reason, the postwar consumer unit was thought of as the married couple, and in Fred's joke at least, women were responsible (or in Lucy's case irresponsible) for translating the husband's income into commodities. Advertisers had long targeted women as the primary decision makers in consumption, and television, often thought of as a feminized medium, was no exception. As Mary Ann Doane contends, "the increasing appeal in the twentieth century to the woman's role as perfect consumer (of commodities as well as images) is indissociable from her positioning as a commodity and results in the blurring of the subject/object dichotomy" (1987, 13).<sup>3</sup> The comedy of *I Love Lucy* draws attention to and, simultaneously, parodies and reifies the veiling of that dichotomy.

A quick analysis of the title of the show demonstrates this conflation. "I" is nominally Ricky, but it also refers to the viewer, who individualized, loves Lucy, too. Lucy is clearly the object of the love, not the subject who loves. By watching the show, the viewer participates in the act of loving Lucy, and voyeuristically enjoys the love between Ricky and Lucy, Arnaz and Ball; the viewer also enjoys the advertising presented as entertainment (discussed below).

Love and commodification: these key facets of the Lucy phenomenon are inexorably linked in what historian Carolyn Johnston calls the "love economy":

Excluded from most forms of public power until recently, women have primarily operated in the "love economy" of motherhood, housework, and voluntarism; although millions of women have been employed, they have still exercised power only covertly in their homes through emotional and sexual influence. Such covert sexual power relies on persuasion, manipulation, giving and withholding sex; it may be exerted in the nurturing of children and in making men dependent on women for daily needs of all kinds. Sexual power may be used to acquire material possessions, to influence family decisions, and generally get one's way. Covert sexual power works only when it is unseen and undetected, like any subversiveness. (1992, ix)

The "love economy" fosters women's use of covert tactics, reinforcing woman's place in the private sphere. If husbands are the "earners" and wives are the "spenders," then the only way for women to get their hands on the money necessary to participate in mass consumer culture is through the exercise of covert sexual power, or through circumventing masculine authority, both of which were enacted comically in *I Love Lucy*.

As an influential representation of the "love economy," *I Love Lucy* made this self-perpetuating circle of domesticity and female trickery seem cute, essential, even lovable. Everything about the series—the title of the series, the production company name "Desilu," the heart that encloses the names of the stars, the *mise en scène* that creates such a desirable image of "home"—reinscribes the centrality of the couple, the irreducible place of the "love" that motivates Lucy's machinations and Ricky's forgiveness of her covert tactics. That the "love economy" is part of mass consumer culture is the central tenet of the Lucy phenomenon: a swell of popularity still growing unabated in the realms of syndicated television, the Internet, and in the commodity culture of collectibles.

## Making Money

Television in the 1950s was a consumer product for the home and, simultaneously, an advertising showroom for consumer products. Televi-

sion advertising was especially effective in pre-selling the brand recognition that resulted in "reflex buying": unplanned purchases that, according to a 1952 NBC report, accounted for one-third of all food purchases, 40 percent of drugstore sales, and half of all non-food supermarket purchases (Boddy 1990, 157). Television series producer Frederick Ziv illuminated the process: "We did material that would appeal to the broadest segment of the public. And they became the big purchasers of television sets. And as they bought television sets, the beer sponsors began to go on television. And the beer sponsors, for the most part, wanted to reach the truck and taxi driver, the average man and woman" (Boddy 1990, 72).

Substituting "cigarette" for "beer" in Ziv's statement reveals the bottom-line function of the *I Love Lucy* series: to sell Philip Morris cigarettes. Television advertising was the perfect medium for small-ticket, everyday use items like cigarettes. The marketing director for Johnson Wax Company explained, "the medium is extremely suited to low interest products because it is such an intrusive medium. Products can be injected where they are not wanted—which doesn't sound very moral but which is a fact of life with television. . . . Television is the medium which depends least on consumer cooperation to develop a rich response to symbolic stimulation" (Boddy 1990, 156).

Considering the series *I Love Lucy* as advertisements for cigarettes instead of as a text shifts the meaning we ascribe to *I Love Lucy*. In *fin de millennium* America, on the brink of what might be a post-cigarette culture, the recognition of cigarettes as an ultimate commodity—so addictive, so fetishized, so easily packaged and advertised, such revenue—can color perceptions of the Ball-Arnaz Philip Morris ads with an ironic distance akin to, but far more cynical than, the rhetorical strategies of Nick at Nite. The print ads for Philip Morris featured photographs of Ball and Arnaz smiling, with lit cigarettes in hand; the slogan reads "Smoke for Pleasure *today*—No Cigarette Hangover *tomorrow!*" This and other print ads reinforced the Philip Morris sponsorship that framed the audience's experience of watching the show.

The first episode of the series, aired on October 15, 1951, began with an announcer standing in the Ricardo living room and saying,

"Good evening and welcome. In a moment we'll look in on Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz. But before we do that, may I ask you a very personal question? The question is simply this—do you inhale? Well, I do. And chances are you do, too. And because you inhale you're better off—much better off—smoking Philip Morris and for good reason. You see, Philip Morris is the one cigarette proved definitely less irritating, definitely milder than any other leading brand. That's why when you inhale you're better off smoking Philip Morris . . . . And now Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz in *I Love Lucy*." (Halberstam 1993, 197–98)

This announcement clouds the boundaries that exist between the sponsor's product, the series, the actors, and the viewing audience. By standing in



the living room set, the announcer places himself in the fictional world of the Ricardos, greeting and welcoming the viewer as a guest visiting the Ricardo home, yet his words move out of the fictional set and into “your” living room, as he first allies himself with the viewer (“In a moment, *we’ll* look in”) and then hails the viewer directly with the attention-getting implied dialogue made familiar by radio advertising (“may I ask you a very personal question?”). The rhetorical set-up of the series, then, presents the product, the cigarette advertised with the slogan, “Smoke for Pleasure *today*—No Cigarette Hangover *tomorrow!*” as what is “real,” as the ultimate reference point that joins the viewer’s everyday experience of smoking with the world of the series.

In addition to the announcer, *I Love Lucy* used animated openings to the series to break down the barriers between the advertising, the diegesis (the fictional world created within the narrative), and the world of the viewing family. The now-familiar satin heart inscribed with “I Love Lucy” and the four stars’ names did not appear until 1957, when CBS started to rerun the series and Philip Morris was no longer its sponsor. The heart motif was present from the beginning, but in animated form. The first opening shows the Philip Morris cigarette pack, zooms in on the pack and then to the cigarettes, cuts to the Philip Morris boy dressed in his bellhop uniform, and zooms in on the pack he is holding. Then an animated Lucy, holding her purse (apparently she goes nowhere without it), saunters up to the pack, and spins it around so that it reveals Desi (or Ricky?) in an elevator car. They ride up to the roof of their apartment building and we see a billboard that first reads “Philip Morris presents,” then “Lucille Ball and Desi Arnaz,” and then a heart drawn around the title, “I Love Lucy.” The two stick figures run in front of the billboard, and the show begins. These animated figures also introduced commercials and provided a closing frame at the end of the episode leading to Ball and Arnaz in a heart-shaped frame plugging Philip Morris cigarettes once more.

Every week’s episode featured a different opening animated by Gene Hazelton and the Hanna-Barbera unit at MGM,<sup>4</sup> similar to *The Simpsons*’ weekly family run to the couch in front of the television set. Lynn Spigel describes the opening of “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” as a particularly good example of how “the sponsor’s product literally served as the stage of representation of the narrative” (1992, 168). In this animated opening, the cigarette pack turns into a stage as the two cartoon figures approach it. The cigarette wrapper, which has changed into a curtain, lifts to show Lucy sitting in the Ricardo living room. By blending these different diegetic spaces, the framing device functions to both highlight and dim the boundaries between real life and reel life.

The self-reflexivity does not stop there. The content of the episode “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” that opens with the cigarette pack uncov-



ering Lucy in her living room adds to and complicates the fusion of reality and artifice, and raises questions about the series' portrayal of commodification. "Lucy Does a TV Commercial" plays on the same principle expressed in Lucy's line about Ricky needing a "pretty girl" to advertise the sponsor's product; as usual, Lucy wants to be on television, and Ricky, as usual, wants a wife who just wants to be a wife, but he's got this screwy redhead . . . and this time he comes home and there she is in the television set! Lucy has taken out the TV and, dressed as the Philip Morris boy in a bellhop hat, and holding a pack of Philip Morris cigarettes, mimics the opening of the shows (figure 1a). "Presenting the Lucy Ricardo show!" she exclaims, but not before dropping the pack of cigarettes. She leans out of the television frame to pick them up (figure 1b), and the first principle of *I Love Lucy* is dramatized. Lucy exceeds the boundaries of whatever structure momentarily contains her; she will cajole, impersonate, use "feminine wiles," team up with other women, lie, or steal to get to the goal whose straightforward attainment has been blocked—often but not always—by Ricky. When she reaches out of the television frame, it seems spontaneous, yet the gag has been clearly set up. As always, Ball's physical comedy and timing are brilliant. She pauses long enough for us to get it before completing the gag.

Ricky then enters the frame and there is a power struggle as Lucy tries to continue proving that Ricky should hire her to do the sponsor's commercial for his television show (figure 1c). Ricky picks up the television's electrical plug and, with the logic of the absurd that propels comedy, shocks Lucy when he plugs it in (figure 1d), rapidly ending her presentation. Lucy gets the last laugh, or maybe is only the butt of the last laugh, depending on the viewer's interpretation of the ambiguous image of Lucy bringing out the dismantled, chaotic guts of the television set she took apart in order to put herself in the console.

This scene offers viewers a parody of television sponsorship. If part of the cultural work of early television was being an advertisement for the spread of television, then this scene advertises advertising. Lucy, the ordinary person who, although untrained and of questionable talent, desires strongly to be in the act, is positioned where the viewer is. Of course Lucy can climb inside the television set in her living room; she's in yours, isn't she? The paradox of this works, as Spigel notes, in two directions that seem antithetical: "On the one hand, self-reflexivity provided viewers with critical distance from everyday life; the ability to laugh at the stagy artifice of domesticity. On the other hand, it encouraged viewers to feel closer to the scene of action, as if they had an intimate connection to the scene" (1992, 165). Similarly, the *mise-en-abyme* of living rooms and Lucys and televisions makes television sponsorship seem both domestic and individualized. Television and commodification are equated, and the advertising is part of the entertainment. As a 1960

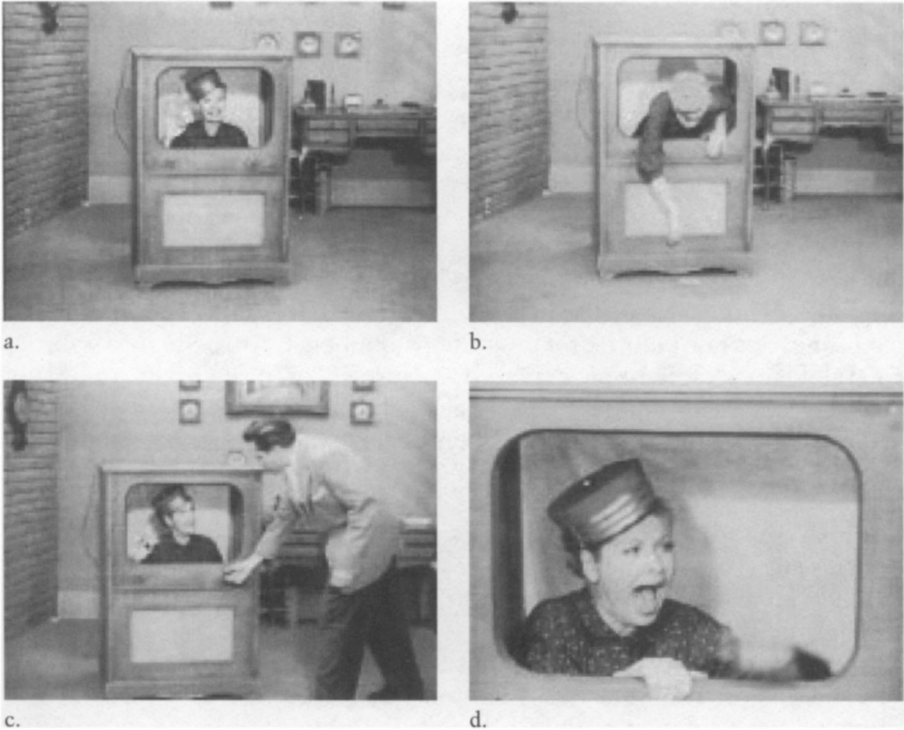


Figure 1: Frame enlargements from “Lucy Does a TV Commercial.” Lucy calls attention to and then breaks the television and commodity frames. a. Lucy inserts herself into the television frame, b. but immediately exceeds it. c. Ricky stands outside the frame, as if the puppet master in a puppet show. d. Lucy’s “television” appearance comes to an abrupt end when Ricky plugs in the television and shocks her.

NBC audience research report concluded: “The viewer watches commercials in the same way that he watches programs—in fact he looks for the same things in commercials that he seeks in programming. He does *not* think of commercials as something different and apart from programs” (Boddy 1990, 156). The comic intrusion of Lucy Ricardo in Ricky’s TV set, in his living room, and in the viewer’s TV set and living room dramatizes the commonality between commercial and program. Commodification emerges as the one constant in all the different discursive and diegetic realms.

The scene from “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” also dramatizes Spiegel’s point about American families making “room for TV.” The lines between domestic and theatrical space, between everyday life and artifice, are easily crossed in the Ricardo living room, just as they can be crossed to replace the hearth with the box. The self-conscious recognition that



Figure 2: Frame enlargements from "Lucy does a TV Commercial." Ball parodies advertising and television "magic" with her performance. a. Lucy presents herself in the familiar pose of the advertising pitch, b. but her reaction contradicts her line, "It's so tasty, too." c. Ball's performance of Lucy getting drunk as she rehearses the commercial is the comic climax of the episode. d. Ball's wink expresses the tricky intertwinings of layers of reality, artifice, narrative, and advertising.

gendered middle-class life is performance, that the standards and values emulated by the "homeward bound" postwar couples necessitated a theater of the domestic, is facilitated by the oscillation between reality and fantasy. The *I Love Lucy* bedroom suites, pajamas, clothes, aprons, baby bottle bags are the props both the stars and the audience need to make the dramatization real.

In the second half of "Lucy Does a TV Commercial," Lucy does a television commercial, but this time she will be on "real" rather than "pretend" television. Although Ricky had already hired a "pretty girl" for the commercial, Lucy answers the phone when the girl calls and, instead of passing on the message about the time and place of the live broadcast, tells her she's not needed and shows up in her place. This is the set up for the famous Vitameatavegamin sequence, in which Lucy gets hilariously

(and inadvertently) drunk on the tonic that is actually 23 percent alcohol. Rehearsing for the commercial entails drinking spoonful after spoonful of the stuff. The line between the “reality” of the awful taste of the tonic and the scripted reaction of pleasure plays on audience knowledge that advertising is, at best, hyperbole, and at worst, lies (figures 2a and 2b). And whatever else is in Vitameatavegamin, the audience knows it’s the alcohol that makes this snake oil do its “magic.”

Moreover, the connection to tonic swindles is particularly interesting in terms of “the feminine mystique,” which provides the context for Lucy’s frustrations with domesticity and femininity (figure 2c). “Hello friends. I’m your Vitameatavegamin Girl. Are you tired, run down, listless? Do you poop out at parties? Are you unpopular? The answer to all your problems is in this little bottle.” Like the Rolling Stones’ “Mother’s Little Helper,” the only solution Vitameatavegamin provides is to mask the fatigue and dissatisfaction of domestic containment with a drug. Furthermore, Lucy parodies how advertising stimulates demand for the commodities proliferating in mass consumer culture, how television advertising intrudes, asking if you can be asked a “personal question” (figure 2d). In the conclusion of the episode, the product, which has caused Lucy to become drunk, leads Lucy to disrupt Ricky’s act. She sings and dances along drunkenly, tries to kiss him, embarrassing him as once again she participates in the realm of performance to which she was barred, the public sphere of “show business” she continually crashes.

Of course, the pleasure in this episode, as in all *I Love Lucy* episodes, is the comic climax that showcases Ball’s genius at physical comedy to which the show builds. All else is set-up—albeit ideologically revealing set-up—and, as critic Patricia Mellencamp argues, “if Lucy’s plots for ambition and fame *narratively* failed . . . *performatively* they succeeded” (1986, 88). We want and need Lucy to “fail” so that Ball can triumph.<sup>5</sup> The secondary texts, such as the many magazine and newspaper stories about Ball, contributed to “Lucy’s” embodiment of the contradictions of post-war femininity and commodification. For example, the first in *Cosmopolitan* magazine’s series of cover stories on “America’s Top Saleswomen” quotes Ball as saying, “I’m just a typical housewife at heart” (Morehead 1953, 19). The conflation of “typical housewife” and “top saleswoman” is emblematic of the way that Lucy and early television obfuscated the lines between fiction and reality, between program and commercial, through commodification. As a trickster in the story cycle of *I Love Lucy*, Lucy called attention to the boundaries of gender roles, of appropriate and inappropriate middle-class behavior. The points at which her escape attempts from domesticity fail disclose the blocks to women’s emancipation, and provide a map of the contested terrain on which the battle of the sexes took place in the postwar era. Through the comic bisociation of reality and artifice, of typicality and stardom, of prescriptive definitions of

femininity and human ambition, *I Love Lucy* shaped and refracted the context in which American culture redefined ideals of gender in the women's liberation movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

## Lucy Today

*I Love Lucy* not only persists but also reigns in what the cable television channel Nickelodeon calls "TV land." More than other modes of syndicated reruns, Nick at Nite's self-reflexive programming of "classic TV" offers collective memories of American life—misappropriated images of how family life never really was—that we see depicted again and again. Likewise parodic features like the "Why We Watch" spots of the early-1990s with Dr. Will Miller offered up "academic" readings of the television texts that both mock and confirm the idea that television shows are powerful articulations of cultural fears and fantasies. Nick at Nite's recent addition of "retrommercials" also documents the history of commodification at the same time that it perpetuates the blurring of programming and advertising.

Nostalgia and the collector's desire to acquire and own parts of a cultural phenomenon make for a brisk market in Lucy collectibles: memorabilia from Ball's various series, photographs, and the tie-in items. *TV Guide* covers featuring Ball continue to increase in value, and the most valuable *TV Guide* of all, Vol. 1, No. 1, has the Ball-Arnaz baby on its cover.<sup>6</sup> A plethora of Lucy merchandise produced today includes greeting cards, videotapes, magnets, t-shirts, posters, ceramic teapots, salt and pepper shakers, and bookends. The Viacom Store in Chicago contains an impressive range of items from the aforementioned stuff to fashionable and pricey clothing items like smoking jackets, aprons, leather jackets, negligees, shirts, and dresses. If it can be thought of, someone somewhere has put Lucy on it, and someone else has bought it. Participation through purchasing, the internal logic of commodity capitalism, prevails in the Lucy merchandising marketplace today as it did in the 1950s: if you "love" it, you want to own it.

Lucy also has found a home in the newest cultural medium: the Internet. In the past year, Lucy websites have proliferated. There are episode guides, scanned pictures of private Lucy collections, biographies, sources for videotapes, links to pages that sell Lucy merchandise, homages, a fanclub site, lists of Arnaz's recordings, the original animated *I Love Lucy* opening, and a site for the Lucy-Desi museum.<sup>7</sup> The web seems to have given new life to a growing fan club, whose third annual convention occurred in July 1998. Amid the collectibles, merchandising, public appearances of cast and crew members, and trivia, there was a special session on *My Favorite Husband*, which celebrates its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in

1998 by recreating two of the radio segments with a Lucy impressionist and some of the original cast members. All ticket proceeds went to the Elizabeth Glaser Pediatric AIDS Foundation. The fourth annual convention is scheduled for July 1999.

Could there be a new market opening up for re-creations of aspects of the Lucy phenomenon? There have been rumors that husband and wife Tea Leoni and David Duchovny are interested in doing a new *I Love Lucy* series (and many suggestions on-line that they leave *Lucy* alone). Universal Studios Hollywood has created "A Tribute to Lucy," a walk-through tourist attraction with footage, memorabilia, a game, and re-creations of the *I Love Lucy* set.<sup>8</sup> Will there soon be virtual reality programs so you "really" can live like Lucy? I imagine that into whatever new realms popular culture and commodification take us, Lucy will be there, and for constantly shifting reasons, millions will continue to love Lucy in their hearts, and with their pocketbooks.

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## Notes

1. "Bisociation," or the clash between two distinct associative contexts or planes of discourse, is the term coined by Arthur Koestler to describe the sudden jolt involved in the creation and interpretation of a joke (see Landay 1998, 24–6).
2. In 1954, Philip Morris gave up half the sponsorship of the increasingly expensive show to Proctor & Gamble. In 1955, Philip Morris relinquished the sponsorship of *I Love Lucy* because cigarette sales had fallen despite the show's success. Mark Crispin Miller argues that *Lucy* failed to be a profitable



advertisement for Philip Morris because the show was "too exciting to complement the ads" (1986, 191). However, the relationship between the show's popularity and the sponsor's product sales—and advertising and television in general—is more complicated. At the end of 1954, *Lucy* had slipped from its top-rated spot to third and then sixth place, but by mid-1955, the Hollywood episodes brought the series back to first place. More importantly for Philip Morris's decision to back out, there was a "cancer scare" that lowered sales, and even Philip Morris's direct appeal to viewers to buy more cigarettes to support the series was ineffective. *Variety* suggested that the Desilu-Philip Morris split was due to "conflict" and "difference of opinion." General Foods picked up Philip Morris's half sponsorship, acting on the industry belief that a family-oriented, domestic show would be more cost-effective for a company that made home-based products (Sanders and Gilbert 1993, 99–102).

3. See Joyrich (1998) for a discussion of this point.
4. The openings are available on the *I Love Lucy* laser disc from Criterion Television Classics, Voyager Catalog # CTC1000L, and on the world wide web, The Toon Tracker Animated Lucy Page (<http://members.tripod.com/~mrstoon/lucy.htm>).
5. Critic Alexander Doty also discusses this paradox, but in his view, the "tensions between [television character] 'Lucy Ricardo' and [composite film image] 'Lucille Ball' in Ball's televisual star image often threaten to disrupt the series' sitcom characterizations and narrative development" (1990, 4). See also Andrea Press's ethnographic viewer reception study that argues that "the social class of female viewers makes a difference in the way the character of Lucy is perceived. While middle-class women move out of the diegetic space in describing Lucy as a character, working-class women rarely do this" (1991, 134). The ironic, self-reflexive rhetorical contexts provided today by Nickelodeon, merchandising, and nostalgia encourage the current generation of viewers to revel in the unreality appreciated by the middle-class viewers in Press's study and disliked by the working-class viewers. The commodification of Lucy positions viewers as middle-class, and thus continues the hegemonic function implicit in its original broadcast. Commodification makes us all middle class.
6. It's hard to think of a better symbol of television's role in the commodification of postwar life than the most famous product of the Baby Boom, Desi Arnaz Jr., on the cover of the first *TV Guide*, an important source of extra-textual knowledge about television schedules and programming.
7. For books about Ball and Arnaz: do a search for *I Love Lucy* and find the hundreds of pages that come up.
8. See <http://www.universalstudios.com/unicity/attractions/lucy.html>.



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