

## **Another Green World: Lifestyle Television and Environmental Citizenship**

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Green business has shifted from a movement to a market.

—State of Green Business 2008 report

When it comes to saving the planet, there's more than one kind of green.

—Annabelle Gurwitch, *Wa\$ted*

Meet the new boss

Same as the old boss

—The Who, "Won't Get Fooled Again"

There is a certain irony about the greening of television over the past year. As the Sundance Channel's *Big Ideas for A Small Planet* showcases entrepreneurial initiatives in response to climate change, or the hosts of Planet Green's *Wa\$ted* explain the necessity of recycling to sceptical families, the dumping of actual TV sets and other consumer electronics in landfills around the globe has been pinpointed by the Basel Action Network as among the most serious environmental problems in the world today. The idea that television is itself an environmental hazard, whether as e-waste in an African landfill or in energy-guzzling giant plasma displays, has needless to say been conspicuously absent from green lifestyle programming. The energy efficiency promoted by TV does not, it seems, extend to turning off the TV itself—except in one episode of *Wa\$ted* when a couple are urged not to leave the TV on all day for their bored dog to watch while they are at work.

Rather than television's latest exercise in mind control, I'm inclined to see its recent green makeover as a typically opportunistic move by media executives who know a new market niche when they see one. The emergence of a global discourse on sustainability, and the rapid expansion of a green economy in response to it, have also generated new business opportunities. Sustainability has become a new, ethical form of competitive advantage, triggering new forms of entrepreneurship seeking to capitalize it. These developments have not been lost on television, as networks continue to seek new ways to ensure the relevance of their brand in an increasingly crowded marketplace. For all its rhetoric of "saving the planet," green lifestyle TV remains committed to reshaping individual conduct in accordance with the interests of green business, and to delivering its target market: the new green citizen-consumer.

The references to shaping conduct and citizenship here invoke the concept of governmentality which has figured so prominently in recent work on television. The project of green lifestyle TV can be defined along similar lines, as the production of an environmental citizenship. Whereas earlier forms of lifestyle television worked on remodeling the self in discrete areas of everyday life (home decorating, fashion, diet, cleaning, the garden), however, the new environmental citizenship significantly extends this project, encompassing the totality of everyday conduct and monitoring previously unregulated micro-practices, from taking a shower in the morning (4 minutes is enough) to turning off the (CFL) lights at night. Lifestyle television's green programming correspondingly extends across the spectrum of existing formats, comprising green renovation and real-estate shows, green fashion, green food, and green celebrities.

Who would dare find fault with all this? Finally, it might seem, television is making itself useful, teaching a progressive social agenda rather than the finer points of wine pairing. It is only when we consider the green entrepreneurs, designers, and their products who monopolize green airtime that a nagging anxiety sets in. Far from entailing a break with the neoliberal consumer culture championed by earlier forms of lifestyle television, green lifestyle programming represents its most advanced phase: the emergence of green consumption. What the new eco-capitalism essentially promises is consumption without guilt, the fantasy of a consumption without waste. Waste in all its forms—energy, water, garbage, and most important of all, money—is *the* central fixation of green lifestyle television, but its elimination only initiates a further cycle of consumption in the form of energy-efficient appliances, blown-in wall insulation, solar panels, recycled building materials, hybrid vehicles, composting systems, and eco-furniture, not to mention the expert services of those who design and install them. These products and services do not come cheap, and often seem available only to affluent green entrepreneurs themselves. Green lifestyle TV presents us, in fact, with what Jean Baudrillard might have called a new system of green objects—not a critique of neoliberal political economy and its culture of consumption, but a recycled, eco-friendly version of it.

Aside from the conceptual emptiness of the “green” signifier itself, something has clearly been going on in lifestyle television. What that is, and whether green programming represents a progressive new direction for television, or simply business as usual, remains a matter for discussion. Media studies has to date had little to say on the subject, and while this may in part be because of the speed with which the transformation itself has taken place, it also suggests some blind spots which the field

urgently need to address. Green lifestyle programming suggests that existing approaches to lifestyle television, which until now has focused primarily on sociological questions of connoisseurship and bourgeois taste, are in need of revision. What is equally clear is that the discussion of the relation of media studies to environmental issues is no longer—if it ever was—just a matter of waste disposal.