

Putting the TV Back in Television Studies

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TV Screens and the Mediation of Live Event Spectatorship

While the early relationship between television programming executives and live event promoters was largely marked by competition and tension, television screens have now become firmly established as a vital component to a large-scale live event experience. From concerts to sporting events, the new designs for arenas and stadiums include a constant presence of tv screens for event content and commercialism. The intertwining of screens and live spectatorship makes it difficult to distinguish between what is really being viewed and experienced and what is mediated through the screens. In particular, the popular trend in the design of new baseball stadiums emphasizes a distribution of television screens in areas where the fan is not able to view the field- and sometimes even where the field is within the line of vision. After examining the use of television screens at the new Yankee Stadium ballpark in New York City, it is evident that the relationship between screens and live event spectatorship is that of both interdependence and imbalance.

Television and live sporting events have not always had a relationship of symbiosis; in the late 1940s, baseball executives felt that while home viewers could be enticed by the television broadcast of the game into seeing a game live at a stadium, this would not necessarily be applicable to viewers in public places like bars (McCarthy 1995). Eventually, these concerns over the bar audience's desire to become live spectators were alleviated and the relationship between television and live sports is thriving. Perhaps this is most evident with a baseball team such as the New York Yankees and their new stadium.

In the older style of baseball stadiums, television screens were merely an afterthought to the interior of the infrastructure; the screens were more aligned as add-ons incorporated to appease fans who did not want to miss any of the action of the game while away from their seats. With the newer style of baseball stadiums, television screens are an ever-present technology that are integrated into the architecture of the stadium from the start. While no stadium has gone so far as to place screens in restrooms (unlike the ESPN Zone restaurant, where mini television screens are positioned above the urinals in the mens' restroom), screens are placed both where viewing of the game is obstructed and where viewing of the live game is still visible.

Opened at the start of the 2009 baseball season, Yankee Stadium in New York City is an exemplary model of the new style of sports stadiums with televisuality front and center, instead of an afterthought. The largest of the 1,400 screens, the 103 by 58-foot HD Mitsubishi Diamond Vision LED in the outfield, by far draws the spectator's eyes in through its sheer size and clarity of image. (Fermoso 2009). The other 1,399 television screens are also positioned around the concourse area; fans may be waiting in line for over 15 minutes for a \$15 steak sandwich, but they are still able to watch the television broadcast of the game on television monitors overhead. Other areas of consumerism, like the merchandise stores and restaurants, are also marked by rows of television screens playing the television broadcast. Even an establishment such as the Mohegan Sun Sports Bar, with its spectacular views overlooking center field, has televisions at the bar where the view is still within perspective.

The design of Yankee Stadium does have limitations with seating in the bleacher section in center field; due to the blueprint of the Mohegan Sun Sports Bar, two sections of the bleachers have obstructed views of the left, right and infields (depending on your seat location). The low cost of these seats (\$5 per ticket) are enticing, but the inclusion of television screens along the wall obstruction are designed

to offer a method for viewing game plays that are not blocked in the obstructed view sections of the stadium. These screens broadcast the television feed of the game, much like the other screens throughout the stadium.

Even if the argument were to be made that these screens are merely to provide the spectators with replays of the events of the baseball game, the incorporation of the screens into almost all areas of the stadium instead reveal an alternative theory. Particularly with a team such as the New York Yankees that has television viewers across the country (and even the world), the live experience of the spectator at the stadium has already been defined so heavily by the previous television broadcasts of the team that the live experience is mediated by prior television broadcast viewing experiences. The audiences are anticipating and expecting a visual spectatorship similar to that of a television viewing, and the presence of the screens are a reminder and connection to that. Television screens are essential to the live sports spectatorship experience, even if just as a reminder of the television spectator memory to the audience.

CITATIONS:

McCarthy, A. (1995). "The front row is reserved for scotch drinkers": Early television's tavern audience. *Cinema Journal* 34(4), 31-49.

Fermoso, J. (2009, March 25). Yankee Stadium's new HDTV is bigger than yours — way bigger. Retrieved August 1, 2010, from <http://www.wired.com/gadgetlab/2009/03/ny-yankees-new>