The Only Thing Left to Design is the Foot

Words Oli Stratford

I had something funny happen a few days ago. I was watching television when I realised that, despite having just binged four hours' worth of Netflix, I couldn't tell you very much about my TV. Not the brand; not the model; not how many cables come out the back; not whether its screen is LCD, OLED, QLED or microLED; not what its stand looks like or, actually, if it has a stand; nor what size its screen is, beyond *quite* big. I do know it's black, but then most TVs are black, so I don't know if that counts as specific knowledge about my TV. And this struck me as funny, because I'd known for weeks that I was going to be writing this essay about the design of television sets, and I'd actually just come off a Zoom interview with the designer Yves Béhar, who'd said, *I had something funny happen a few days ago.*

This call was in early December 2020, when Béhar had just celebrated Thanksgiving in San Francisco with colleagues from his studio, Fuseproject. "It's a really big Thanksgiving tradition that everybody cooks at Fuseproject, because we have people from 20 different countries and everybody cooks a different speciality," he'd told me. "We have this big meal together, which of course we couldn't do this year, so we had a Zoom instead where everybody was talking about what they're thankful for. And a few people said, I'm thankful for Netflix." I can relate to that, I said. "Well, me too!" he replied. "I guess the TV has suddenly gotten a bit of renewed interest."

He's right about that. During the first flush of Covid-19 lockdowns, Netflix gained 15.8 million new subscribers, while Disney Plus has accrued more than 86 million subscribers since launching in November 2019. Although you can watch these services on phones and tablets, Netflix estimates that 70 per cent of all its streams are viewed on connected televisions. A similar breakdown is likely to apply to Disney Plus, especially when you consider that television's dominance of Netflix holds true across all of its content categories, but is particularly marked in kids and family shows. In the UK, meanwhile, the government regulator Ofcom's 'Media Nations 2020' report found that Britons watched an average of 3 hours 46 minutes of broadcast television a day during the height of the nation's first lockdown, up 32 minutes from 2019. Wider use of televisions for streaming, gaming and so forth was also significantly increased. "Covid-19 and the lockdown restrictions that came with it had a significant impact on TV viewing," observes the report. "In addition to people watching more TV on average as a result of Covid-19, more people than usual tuned in." The report attributes the majority of this rise to increased "news viewing", but it also goes some way towards acknowledging that people sat indoors with nothing to do may invariably gravitate towards the television. The report hypothesises, for instance, that a longterm increase in working from home may result in "a more permanent slight uplift in TV set viewing". That's true. Between this sentence and the previous one, I watched two episodes of *Schitt's Creek*.

Less quantifiable, however, and of less interest to Ofcom, is the suggestion that television may have also proven popular during the pandemic because it played a pastoral role, an idea first floated to me by Bodo Sperlein, former creative director of German television

brand Loewe. "Yesterday we finally had fibre internet installed, and when the guy came in to do it I asked him if he had been busy throughout the lockdown?" Sperlein told me during the UK's second lockdown in late November. "*Oh yes*, he said. *With the first lockdown people were setting up home offices and fast internet access, but now they all want TVs because they're feeling lonely.* A lot of one-person households turn the TV on as soon as they come in because it's background noise and talking. It's the psychology of human beings to want that feeling of something going on. Television gives us that, more so than something like an iPad."

Despite TV's resurgence, I'm willing to bet that I'm not the only one who couldn't tell you much about their television set, not least because I've read someone attempt and fail to do so almost as completely as I did. In late 2019 and early 2020, designers Erwan Bouroullec and Augustin Scott de Martinville led a television workshop with MA Product Design students at Lausanne's ECAL university in conjunction with the technology giant Samsung. "The goal was definitely not to produce TVs from the workshop, but to open up some doors a bit," said Camille Blin, leader of the MA Product Design course, when I spoke to him in late December. "How can we rethink the scenario of the normal TV a little bit? It was about questioning the position of this object in our daily life." Under Bouroullec and Scott de Martinville, the students developed a series of ideas for conceptual televisions and new behaviours for the typology, before publishing their research in the form of *New Horizons*, a digital zine which deserves a readership outside of the confines of the school.

Alongside its project proposals, *New Horizons* is structured around a series of interviews in which the students discuss their thoughts about televisions, as well as answering basic questions such as, *Do you guys own a TV at home?* To that particular question, eight out of the eleven students polled replied *No*, while one of the few designers who did have access to a television, Timothée Mion, revealed that his knowledge of the device was patchy at best. "I live in a shared flat and the TV is not mine," Mion wrote. "I know it's a Samsung TV with a white frame. It's probably a 42–inch but I don't know exactly which model it is[…]. The only times I use a television are to watch sports, such as football or rugby, and I usually prefer to go to the pub to do so."
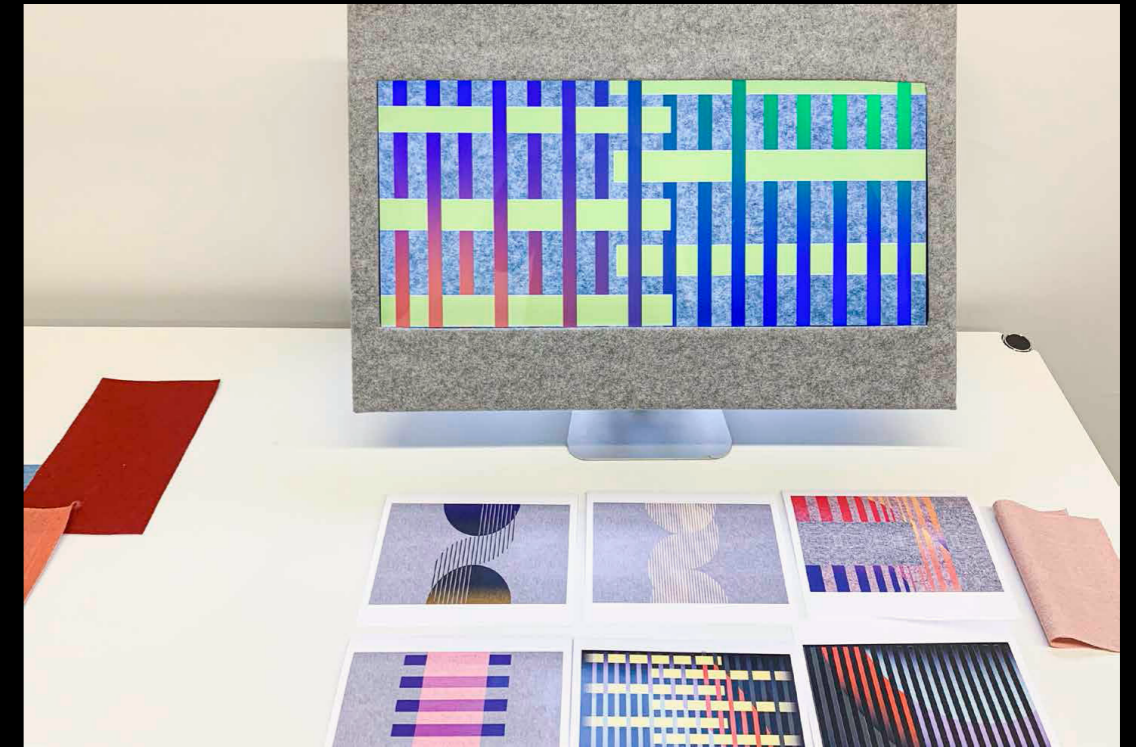
Design studies produced by MA Product Design students at ECAL as part of the school's *New Horizons* workshop in conjunction with Samsung.
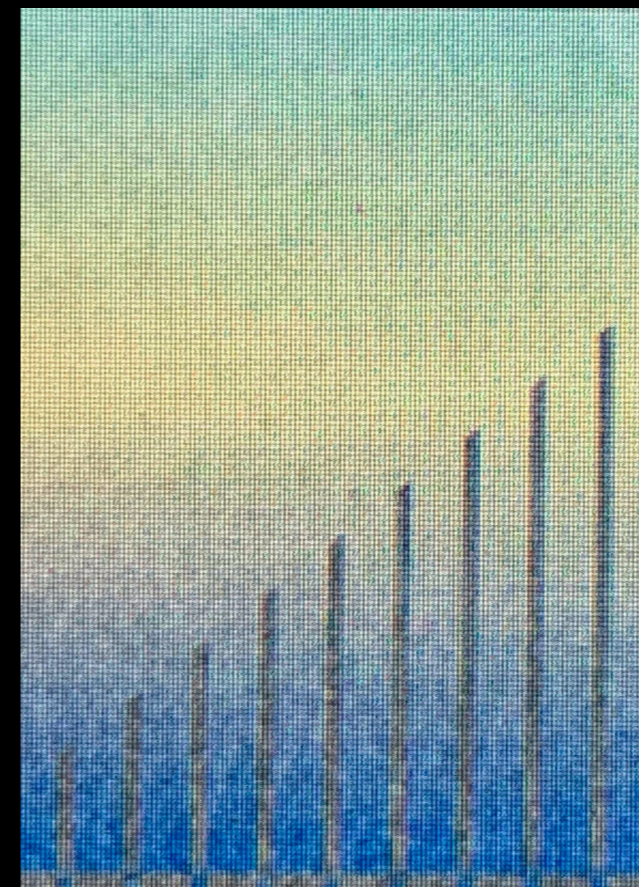
Left: the JVC Videosphere model 3240 (1970).
Above: the Sony A1 television,
designed by Tako Hirotaka (2017).
Below: the television concept designed by John
Tree and Jasper Morrison for Sony (1998).

This fogginess may just be the nature of the typology. "The role of the television is in large part to remove itself from the world in order to produce images," writes cultural historian Chris Horrocks in *The Joy of Sets* (2017), his comprehensive history of the medium. "Turned on, it sees from afar, but the viewer is also taken away from the object, transported through the glass into a place elsewhere." As a screen-based device, the TV is typically understood as an object that is intended to fade away in favour of the content it displays, and this is frequently a specific goal within the design process. Tako Hirotaka, for instance, is the head of Sony's European design centre and an astute commentator on contemporary television design. "I've worked in this field for the last 10 years and designed more than five generations of Sony TVs," he told me when we spoke in mid-December. "I've gained an insight into the history of TV and its design." I asked Hirotaka how Sony approaches creating new television sets, particularly in terms of their place as domestic objects. "I believe that the product's architectural and minimal aesthetic elements play a supporting role, whereas applications and content are the heroes," he replied. "From my perspective, TV shouldn't shout *Look at me, look at my design*. The focus of attention always needs to be inside the screen and on the experience itself."

This sounds like a practical application of the ontological stickiness that Horrocks detects between televisions and the content they display. In contrast to many types of product, where the distinction between an object and its function seems stark and clear, screens present to the user as if the two have collapsed together – there is no object, only image. "The television set's existence was predicated on the tension between its unusual quality of being both an object and a screen, an item of design to be looked at and a window to be looked through," notes Horrocks. "It disappeared as an object once it was switched on as an image." Although I disagree with this impulse to delineate between screens and objects – it seems important to acknowledge that a screen *is* a type of object performing the function it was designed for, just as much as any other piece of furniture or product design – Horrocks nevertheless describes the TV's elusive effects persuasively. Televisions don't necessarily stick in the mind as traditional objects because they're not meant to. I'm not an idiot *just* because I don't know anything about my TV.

Except, there's a long history of televisions that *do* stand out as designed objects and which I have no problem remembering. Philippe Starck's Jim Nature (1994) TV for Thomson encased its technology in a high-density wood casing that looked like something Donkey Kong knocked together; Dieter Rams's FS 80 (1964) television for Braun is *exactly* what you imagine a Dieter Rams television for Braun would be, replete with tasteful boxiness, Cold War dials, and a palette of greys and silver; Richard Sapper and Marco Zanuso's Black ST 201 TV (1969) is a semi-transparent black acrylic cube that stepped out of *2001* and into the

"TV shouldn't shout *Look at me, look at my design*. The focus needs to be on the experience itself."

—Tako Hirotaka

home; Philippe Charbonneaux's glorious Téléavia (1957), a furniture maker's take on a praying mantis; the Pye CS17 (1957), featuring cabinetry by Robin Day, a picture-perfect 1950s living room set; and the JVC Videosphere model 3240, an orange space helmet of a TV that was explicitly advertised under the tagline of being "more fun than most of the shows you'll see on it". These were spectacular objects, laboured over and shaped by the great and the good of 20th-century furniture and industrial design – something that has been largely alien to the field in the 2000s and 2010s. "[Those collaborations with external designers] used to be more common," agrees Michael Shadovitz, a product designer at Panasonic in Japan. "I wonder why that is?" Prior to working on televisions, Shadovitz was based in Panasonic's audio division. "But then they put me on TVs and told me to do whatever I wanted. It was interesting because I'd call friends and family to tell them the news and they'd say, *Is there anything left to design in TVs?* It's a good question, and one that you get asked a lot, because I guess one thing that happened [with those designer partnerships] is that the television lost its form." Just as with his own set, ECAL's Timothée Mion offers a refreshingly straightforward assessment of the general state

of contemporary TVs: "The television has become a large black rectangle".

The critical moment in this transformation came in the late 1990s, when the industry began to move away from the cathode-ray tube (CRT) technology whose comparative bulk had prescribed the medium's screen-in-a-box format, and instead adopted the plasma and LCD technology which helped enable commercially viable flatscreen displays. While this change broke with decades' worth of televisual forms, it actually brought about the fulfilment of the very earliest ideas around what the technology's physical form might be, something Horrocks traces back to Victorian science fiction. The téléphonoscope in Albert Robida's 1883 novel *Le Vingtième siècle*, translated by Horrocks, is "a simple crystal plate, built into the wall or placed as a mirror above any fireplace"; the varzeo of Ismar Thiusen's *The Diothas, or A Far Look Ahead* (1883) similarly appeared as a mirror, but was "in reality, a peculiar metallic screen"; while the pandioptic of James Payn's *The Fatal Curiosity, or A Hundred Years Hence* (1877) displayed "instantaneous reflections on my wall[…] of what all my friends are doing all over the world". What served as a fulfilment of Victorian fantasy, however, also went some way towards undermining the television as a product suitable for traditional object design, setting an agenda for the subsequent 20 years that has treated the form as essentially two-dimensional. While new display technologies such as OLED, QLED and microLED have emerged to offer thinner panels with sharper, brighter pictures, the fundamental design trend in the field has not changed since the late 1990s – if anything, Mion's large black rectangle has become more of a large black rectangle, thanks to panel sizes stretching and bezels diminishing as improved technology allowed the television to shed its last trappings of three dimensionality.

"The thing with TVs, and you can find this with a lot of technologies, is that it goes through waves," summarises Shadovitz. "A technology comes out, takes a form that is recognisable, then reduces into its minimal parts until the next change happens. In TVs, that change happened in the early 2000s with flats." While this reduction may be technologically impressive, it provides less obvious room for product design to manoeuvre within its constraints. A screen is an object, but also a fait accompli – the panel is what it is, *deal with it*, while the tendency towards

reduction described by Shadovitz means there's no longer even the same scope for twiddling around the edges. "There's less to do," agrees John Tree, a former senior designer for Sony, who has subsequently formed a longterm partnership with Jasper Morrison after the two worked on a family of audio-visual products for the Japanese brand in 1998. "The TV suddenly became the worst [design] job you could end up with, because there was nothing to do. The game with televisions had always been to try and make them not look as big, so you'd spend two minutes on the front and a lot of time on the back to try and create the impression that it wasn't as big as it really was. That changed." I ask whether Tree has ever been tempted to return to try his hand at the new flatscreen typology. "I would be interested," he responds, "but it seems like such a terrible job. The only thing left to design is the foot." His colleague Morrison is similarly mixed when I put the same question to him. "I would be tempted," he says. "Personally, I rather like TVs in interiors: that atmosphere of background image and sound in a very gentle way, and the flat screen and lack of bulk is very appealing. But I don't really much like flatscreen televisions as they're presented by the main brands. There's all this marketing detailing, and blue lights, and over-fancy stands."

These are not just the concerns of designers external to the television manufacturers, but hint at factors being wrestled with on a day-to-day basis by those working regularly within the industry. "I have to deal with the fact that the screen is a flat structure and that's locked, so you have to find out what else you can do," says Torsten Valeur, a master design adviser for technology brand LG, who spoke to me from his studio in Copenhagen. Alongside his role with LG, Valeur is the designer behind Bang & Olufsen's television range, a position he took over from his mentor, the industrial designer David Lewis. "I joined David's studio in 1995 and some of the things we're facing today are the same things that people have been dealing with from day one." A central issue, Valeur explains, is that many people find the flat expanse of screens alienating and dominating, particularly in a domestic space. "Even going back to the time when I was born, people were saying they didn't want this piece of alien technology in the living room; this picture tube like a Big Brother eye watching you. What do you do with that?" He's not wrong. Writing for *The American Mercury* in 1952, the novelist Calder
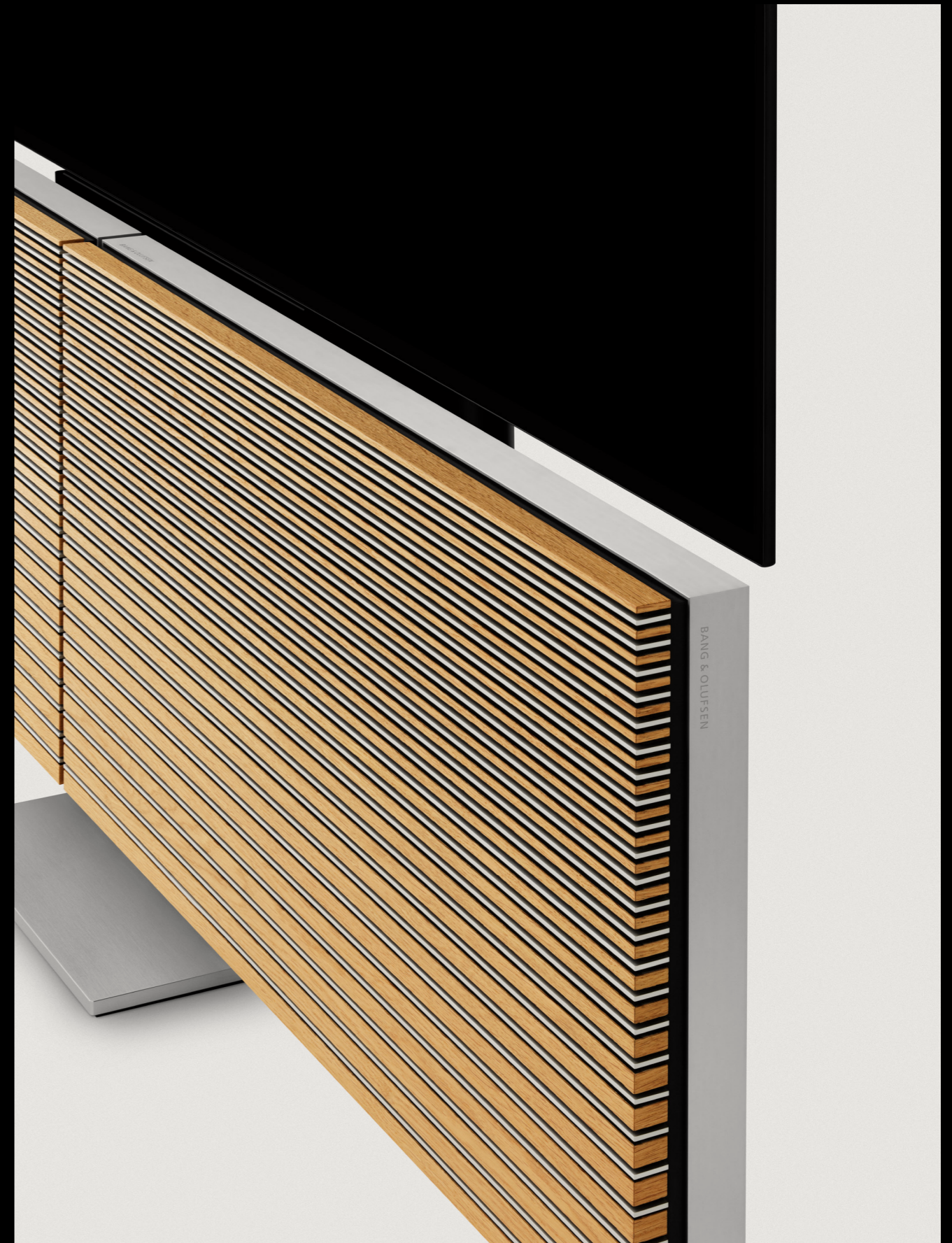
BANG & OLUFSEN

Previous page: the Bang & Olufsen Harmony,
designed by Torsten Valeur.
Above and right: Erwan and Ronan Bouroullec,
and the first-generation Serif television.
Below: the Valeuer Designers studio
in Copenhagen.

Willingham reported a friend telling him that "to look at the tube of lights and shadows almost invariably brings to mind such things as death, tuberculosis, cats howling on the back fence, incest, dishes in the sink, etc[…] to look at it for any length of time, even in the company of others, causes sexual impotence, shortens the life span, makes the hair and teeth fall out, and encourages early psychosis in otherwise normal people." Television was, Willingham's friend assured him, "much worse" than "drinking in solitude or taking morphine while shut up in a closet", which may be true, but that's hardly television's fault.

Its manifestation through incest and tuberculosis aside, the sense of televisual unease that Willingham describes is something that all designers in the field are acutely aware of. "You've got this issue," Valeur summarises, "of who on earth wants a big, black piece of glass in the living room? You only accept it because it gives you something: a live picture." In his own work for Bang & Olufsen, Valeur has produced a number of televisions that artfully break up the screen with elements including sound bars and speakers, executed in materials such as wood and milled aluminium. "It's all about finding what else we can do to make it mentally disappear when it's off," says Valeur, which is something you hear again and again from those working in and around the television industry. "We want the best of both worlds," explains Carole Baijings, a designer who began a project with Samsung on televisions in 2011. "You want a big screen because it's more comfortable to look at [and better for your eyes], but when it's turned off you don't want to have to look at a black screen all day. When the flat screens arrived they were seen as a luxury to show off, but we're now in a different time."

Flatscreens were initially billed as a development that could liberate domestic spaces from the constraints imposed by the physicality of cathode-ray televisions. In comparison to the heft of CRT sets like the 34in-screen Sony WEGA Trinitron (2005) – which measured 44in wide, roughly 30in deep, and weighed 86kg – flatscreen technology was supposed to usher in an era of more discrete devices that could blend neatly into the home. While the experiment succeeded in cutting down on the space a television occupies, it did little about the wider issue of obtrusiveness. "It's a void," says Yves Béhar, who has worked with Samsung across its product ranges for the past 11 years. "People have more eclectic tastes and want their domestic

environments to reflect who they are. A big, black screen that is off for 22 hours a day does not just take up a giant piece of real estate, but is also a eyesore that a lot of people, myself included, have a hard time reconciling themselves with." When I put this observation to Bodo Sperlein, he laughs in recognition. "When I joined Loewe, I said to the teams there that if they were really telling me that a massive 60in sheet of black glass on the wall is not obtrusive, then I don't know what is. It's so obvious. Even if someone has paid £20,000 for a black sheet of glass, it's not telling me that or speaking about luxury. It's just telling me: *God, that's a big sheet of glass on the wall.*"

That's the problem in a nutshell, but solving it is more challenging. If a black screen is alienating, what do you do with a domestic product that insists upon resolving itself into a bare screen? "It's something we discuss quite often," admits Sony's Hirotaka. "A TV is switched off for more than 50 per cent of the time, so we frequently talk about what is its place and physical presence during that time?" And yet television sales might lead you to think that this is purely academic – a grievance for designers rather than consumers. According to a January 2020 report from the Consumer Technology Association, TVs remain "the flagship technology in many U.S. homes", with manufacturers expecting to ship 40.8m units to the US market in 2020, driving $23.4bn in revenue. Much of this revenue is generated by a handful of major players. According to the most recent data from industry researcher Omdia, 59.8 per cent of global revenue from television manufacture is controlled by three companies: Sony with 10.1 per cent; LG, 16.6 per cent; and the industry leader Samsung with 33.1 per cent, a position it has held since taking over from Sony as the world's largest television manufacturer in 2006. "The TV is still a big part of the living room for most people, so we need to design it carefully," explains Hirotaka, and even some of the ECAL students – those inveterate TV sceptics – seem attuned to this. "I have a plan to buy an 85-inch TV after I will move to a bigger apartment," writes one of the students, Zhang Jingxiang, reasoning that a "[big] size and high-quality TV is essential for a contemporary family."

But if the black rectangles sell, is there sufficient motivation for companies to investigate overhauling the design of the format? In December, I got in touch over email with Kyunghoon Kim, Samsung's senior

vice president and the design lead for its visual display division. *A number of designers have suggested that they feel the design of televisions has been very driven by technology since the arrival of flat screens*, I wrote. *Do you think this is a fair assessment of the situation?* "I can understand where that's coming from," Kim wrote back. "This does not only affect TVs but also other products that have continued evolving based on the innovation in technology. However, with the advancement of technology, there are already so many products that meet consumers' expectation in the market." This is crucial. While televisions sell in big numbers, profit margins are tight, competition is fierce, and pricing highly sensitive to fluctuations in the market. "It's a cost issue: most of the mass market are squeezed incredibly, so they have almost no earnings on televisions," explains Valeur, who adds that this business model has stark repercussions for the role of design within the sector. "You really can't afford to do more than the basics. If you do something that adds to the cost, you might lose most of the market share. A lot of [companies] are not earning money with televisions and it's hard to convince big producers that they should take a risk with some of their major lines when they're facing the issue that if they are £500 or £1k higher than a competitor, they suddenly lose access to that market." John Tree recalls the same phenomenon from his period working with Sony. "Electronics is such a different field to furniture, because the quantities are so high that companies' futures depend on something succeeding," he says. "So designers are forced into these knife-edge positions where they won't let you do anything really. I did a TV where the front was painted silver, and just that extra cost of painting something had to be justified so much. It's soul-destroying. So many of the ideas that people would come up with were beautiful, amazing designs, but they'd just get put in the bin."

It's an issue that Erwan Bouroullec, who together with his brother Ronan has worked with Samsung on television design since 2012, quickly became aware of when he started in the industry. "We felt a natural attraction to the TV, but usually when we engage with a company we're nearly assured to succeed with the project," Bouroullec said when I spoke to him in December. "Samsung was very different." The cause of this gap, Bouroullec explained, is found in the differences between the world of high-end furniture and object design, and that

of consumer electronics. "What was certain was that you need to bring some clear value with the design," he said. "We don't exactly value this in the same way in furniture, but as soon as you step into electronics you see that people are looking carefully at what they're buying and what they're getting. It's an area that's hardcore with pricing, function and technology." As evidence of this, Bouroullec points to the environments in which TVs are actually retailed. "Something which should never be forgotten is that televisions are sold in supermarkets. Those are hardcore environments – you could take a chair from us for Vitra or Hay and put it in a supermarket next to another chair. Would we survive? I'm not sure."

Nevertheless, Samsung has taken pains to form a long-standing relationship with the Bouroullecs, as it has with Yves Béhar – talented designers with big reputations forged outside of the field of televisions. This level of external design expertise would hardly be necessary if the company were solely following the business-as-usual approach described by Valeur, but Samsung has, in fact, placed the televisions that have resulted from these designer collaborations front and centre in its product portfolio, billing their outcomes as a new category: Lifestyle TVs. "As a TV designer, making a difference is the most difficult part," said Kim when I asked him about this move. "In a growing market, there are endless possibilities to improve on product design. However, in a mature and low-growth market, many believe offering competitive prices is the only road to growth, which puts a lot of pressure on product designers to create more innovative designs that will truly make a difference." Samsung's turn towards more explicitly design-orientated televisions, he says, is a way of "breaking through the limits of the saturated traditional TV market" and "expanding the TV market in a new direction", by relying upon practitioners "from other fields who provide new perspectives in helping us understand a variety of consumers' lifestyles". Here, Béhar is worth listening to, a figure who stands out in the design world for the depth and duration of his engagement with the technology sector. "What is interesting to me is that usually the big shifts we see in industry are technology-led, meaning that you go from the [cathode ray] tube to LEDs, OLEDs and other technologies," he says. "What there is on the part of Samsung, by contrast, is a strategic desire to change and transform itself using the tools of design."

Using design as a differentiator is nothing new to TVs. Horrocks notes that as televisions proliferated in the 1950s, for instance, "product design was critical in establishing aesthetic differences between the many brands on offer". The difference between this phenomenon and today's market, however, is that design is no longer purely being used to persuade

"Most of the time, people don't realise that the TV breaks some very basic rules of objects." —Erwan Bouroullec

a customer to buy one brand's products over those of its competitors, but rather to buy them in favour of foregoing a television altogether. "The biggest question, from what I understand, is that we've reached the point where everybody who wants a TV has a TV," says ECAL's Camille Blin. "If you want it to remain as it is, then there's not much of a job for the designer anymore. It exists, it's already there." Similarly, while technologies continue to accelerate, their rapid progress has so dramatically outstripped programming as to make little meaningful difference to everyday viewing. "OK, we can get 8K or 16K [resolution], but broadcasting will never catch up anyway," says Valeur. "[That technology side] is maybe not so interesting any more." In other words, barring a radical shakeup of the typology, the battle lines have been drawn. "There aren't many types of object that I haven't designed in my life," adds Bouroullec, "but the TV is the only case I can think of where people already have a point of view on whether they would buy it or not. TV defines people: some people want it, some people don't." What this means for television brands, if they wish to maintain sales figures, is that they need to find ways to persuade non-TV people that they may, actually, be TV people after all.

The first entry within Samsung's lifestyle category was Bouroullec's Serif (2015-), a design that its creator acknowledges is a "total negation of what we could find in the field". Rather than a flat panel, the Serif recasts its display within a defined body – a sculptural I-beam form that provides mass at the screen's top and bottom by flaring out to form two shelves. It is,

to my eye, the most beautiful mass-market television produced in decades. "Most of the time, people don't realise that the TV breaks some very basic rules of objects," explains Bouroullec. "One of the things that modern screens do is to somehow suggest there is no gravity – you don't find anything else in this world that is just a sheet of paper standing alone. When we brought volume to [Serif], we instantly gave a body to the TV that makes it much more visually acceptable as regards its surroundings." Trapped on the horns of Horrocks's dilemma between screens and objects, Bouroullec resolved this tension by emphasising and reimagining the device's body. The panel's frame does not distract from the content it displays, but does ensure it retains a tangible presence within an interior. "Many people are very oppressed by the TV," says Bouroullec, "and a big part of the expertise we gave Samsung was to create a device that will be welcoming to people in the home." In this respect Bouroullec seems to have succeeded, at least if judging by the fact that a surprising number of the people I interviewed for this essay admitted to owning a Serif. "Just having that frame around it makes it much more palatable than a blank screen," said John Tree of his attraction to the design. "It's still a black screen staring at me, but it has more of a feeling of being something." Jasper Morrison, meanwhile, praised the design for eschewing the tropes of flatscreen television. "The genius of Erwan was to remove all that and replace it with something so sculptural and removed from the normal appearance of a TV."

The Frame (2017-) by Béhar and Fuseproject exhibits a markedly different approach. It is no less revisionist than the Serif, but reliant upon an interrogation of screen technology rather than form-making. Béhar's primary aim with the Frame was to tackle the issue of the black screen, reasoning that if a TV spends the bulk of its time off, then the display of programming should no longer be considered its primary function. To deal with this, Fuseproject encased the panel within a body that mimics the appearance of a picture frame. When on, the television functions as normal; when off, the panel displays artworks sourced from museums and galleries from all around the world, including the V&A, Prado and Hermitage. A built-in light sensor adjusts the brightness of the display to ensure that the digital image is indistinguishable from a physical picture in a frame, while a motion sensor tries to limit additional energy consumption by

only switching the screen on when someone is around. "Screens are going to continue to get thinner and bigger and brighter, but that's not really what people care about," says Béhar. "What people care about is how these screens integrate in their lives and homes." The physical tolerance afforded by the Frame's bezel, Béhar explains, allowed for a thicker, more affordable panel, freeing up time and money to develop the Frame's light sensor and art collection. "The big *Aha!* moment wasn't saying, *Let's put art on the TV*, but to say that we should make the TV subservient to the artist and have it serve the artist and artworks," he says. "We could have it disappear and be camouflaged, by having the art hide its other function as a television." The cleanness of Frame's presentation is what enables this illusion, but it almost does the design something of a disservice insofar as its slickness masks the more radical dimension of Béhar's approach. By clouding the primacy of programming to television, particularly in the context of a design world that valorises legibility of function, Béhar has done more than most to engage with the hybrid nature of the contemporary TV. "We forget that some of these conventions can be challenged and that things don't have to remain the way they are," he says. "The cultural status quo of an object is only there because we all agree it is what it is, and nobody is challenging it."

Although the Frame and Serif are polar opposites in their design approach, each grapples with the same inconvenient truth: while the ways in which we use televisions and screens have evolved rapidly and in multiple directions, the design of the objects themselves has remained static. The first of these changes is one of content. Traditionally, "television" described both the object and the medium that it enabled. A television played television or, to differentiate linguistically, what the cultural critic Raymond Williams termed television "flow": the preprogrammed sequence of adverts and programming that make up broadcast television as a medium. Today, television flow is in sharp decline, particularly among younger generations – since 2014, YouTube has reached more 18-34-year-olds than any cable network, for instance. To combat this, television sets have opened themselves up beyond their namesake platform and embraced different mediums in a bid to remain relevant: streaming, gaming, photography and other app-based content. "What we are seeing here is a real change in the viewing habits of Millennials," argued the analyst Craig Moffett in an appearance on

C-Span's series *The Communicators*. "They are simply watching TV in a very different way than my generation watched TV." More precisely, younger generations are watching televisions, but not necessarily television.

As the TV has diversified in the content it displays, however, it has pushed itself into direct competition with the other screens that dominate contemporary homes, be they smartphones, tablets or laptops, which may be additionally bolstered by projectors – perhaps a neater fulfilment of Victorian novelist James Payn's vision of television as "wall-pictures" than even a flatscreen. These devices provide more flexible, portable outlets for many types of content, not all of which naturally lend themselves to television (in an effort to accommodate vertical smartphone content, for instance, Samsung launched a rotating set, the Sero, in 2019, and this functionality has also been built into some models of the Frame), as well as affording more intuitive, direct control through touchscreens and keyboards. It is a battle in which the television is holding its own for now, at least if Netflix and Disney Plus's figures are anything to go by, but one where the tide is likely to turn in future generations. "My son doesn't have a television, he has a projector," says John Tree. "My daughter has a projector in her flat [too]. Television isn't something that's in their mind, so I don't know if the TV is going to die as a thing." Certainly many of the ECAL students provide a bleak prognosis for the device's survival, at least unless the television undergoes a Scrooge-like epiphany and mends its ways. "The TV means for me a very high-tech and cheap product but with limited use," writes Hugo Paternostre, one of the students interviewed in the *New Horizons* zine. To Paternostre, television is "discredited by all mobile devices – laptops and smartphones – that allow you to watch anything from anywhere," and "has somehow lost its exclusivity over content". Nor were Paternostre's comments unusual among his fellow students. "The TV as a product has become very insignificant for me," says Benjamin Bichsel. "I almost exclusively use other devices and watch things on streaming platforms." Those in the industry may not be quite so pessimistic about the state of the television, but all seem to acknowledge that the television is on the cusp of generational change. "We are entering a new era for the end user, [where contents can be watched in different ways]," says Hirotaka. "There's lots of content available and lots of different uses, so the

Above: the bezel of the Frame television by Fuseproject for Samsung.
Above right: Daniel Rybakken's Vitrine concept for Panasonic and Vitra.
Right: the Bild 9 television by Bodo Sperlein for Loewe.

"Screens are going to continue to get thinner and bigger, but that's not really what people care about." —Yves Béhar

television needs to develop to blend-in and reflect our lifestyle."

Perhaps spurred on by the Frame and Serif, many other designers and brands have begun to explore that challenge. "Our Lifestyle TV portfolio has certainly influenced the market," says Kim, who adds that this impact has nonetheless been a slow burn. "In terms of consumer's response, the initial sales figures were not matching up to our expectation because TVs have a longer lifespan than other products and are not replaced frequently. However, over time, our sales have increased, delivering a 100 per cent increase year-over-year." While the Frame now sells in large numbers – "it has become one of the most successful television products out there and I continue to watch its success like a proud father," says Béhar – the Serif has not achieved the same level of commercial success. It has, however, become something of a cult object, as well as an undeniable darling of the industry. "The first generation of Serif was very special in the field but never had any advertisement," says Bouroullec. "[Samsung] tried to go into furniture or fashion shops with it, but it remained quite low-selling even if the sales were incredibly stable." Kim acknowledges that the company is "still considering how to effectively promote these new lifestyle products to consumers in the early stages", but when Samsung announced that it was to discontinue the Serif after three years on the market, it sparked a rush to purchase the last available units. "They were selling for more than ever before in Korea," says Bouroullec, with this boom ensuring that a second, reengineered generation of the television was authorised and launched in 2019. "It was a great surprise, but we had the chance to bring down the price and bring it closer to the market, and it's now having its own life," he says. "It took a little bit of time, but I believe there is a lot in that thing [furniture manufacturer] Giulio Cappellini used to say about how he never made best-sellers, he made long-sellers. The Frame is selling in greater numbers than Serif, but this whole field of lifestyle, Serif included, has started to become very successful."

One of the earliest experiments in the field outside of Samsung came through Bodo Sperlein's 2016-2018 tenure at Loewe, where his Bild 9 and Bild X sets ploughed similar terrain to Bouroullec in their efforts to re-embody the television set. The Bild 9 and X are elegant televisions, casting their flat panels within delicately wrought, three-dimensional metal frames

that create volume without mass through the tracery of their structures. "It was quite sad out there in terms of television design, particularly given that the television was [historically] such an important product in the house," says Sperlein. "I looked into line sculptures whereby you can use line to create three-dimensionality, because I thought it could be interesting to draw that out of the two-dimensionality of the screen." Sperlein's designs broke many of the rules of conventional TVs, but still achieved impressive sales figures within their targeted luxury market. "My products had a turnover of €155m in one and a half years, which was 60 per cent of Loewe's overall turnover," he says. "It's a funny business, the TV business, because people always think it's very tight margins and that people are not willing to spend a lot of money, but I disagree."

Design, Sperlein argues, is both what can sell products within a crowded marketplace, and also what secures the tech required to produce new televisions. Within the industry, particular technologies are often the purview of specific companies. All QLED technology is produced and exclusively used by Samsung, while all OLED panels are manufactured by LG, which then sells this technology to other brands. Even a giant like Sony depends upon LG's OLED panels. "Televisions look pretty much the same because they all use the same components," says Sperlein. "LG produces all the OLED panels for all the manufacturers, who then put a speaker bar on and that's about as exciting as it gets. In the past, Loewe would have produced the actual panels and in designing those you probably added a little bit more to the product." The result of this shift in the landscape, Sperlein notes, is that smaller companies are now dependent upon pitching to the bigger manufacturers to obtain access to whatever new technologies they may wish to use. "Loewe wasn't a big player, so you can imagine the fights we had," he says. "But LG was supportive because they believed in the strength of the design, although if we hadn't had a strong idea they wouldn't have given us [access to their technology]. The added value was really my design, because the panels were all LG."

Even proprietary technologies are finding use for design, however. In 2019, Panasonic attended Milan's Salone del Mobile trade show to display its Vitrine concept, a television developed by the lighting designer Daniel Rybakken in conjunction with Michael Shadovitz and his team. Vitrine is built around a transparent OLED

panel, housed at a slight angle within a wooden frame that is thick enough to accommodate ornaments at its base. "It solves the problem of the black screen because when it's off it's transparent," says Rybakken, who adds that the OLED screen displays in one direction only. Sat in front of the device, it functions as a normal television; seen from behind, however, it remains entirely see-through, even when on. "It opens up different ways of using it, because it doesn't have a clear front or back," says Rybakken. "You can place it more freely as opposed to against a wall, because a big problem with the TV is that it dictates how people decorate the living room. The arrangement of the TV facing the sofa is not as social as other arrangements, and then when they're turned off it's just a black hole, sucking energy out of the room."

Vitrine is a fascinating concept, and one that is now being developed into a commercial product, although the current cost of its OLED panel, which remains a nascent technology, means it will remain out of reach for most. In its investigation of screen technology, Vitrine treads a similar path to Béhar's Frame, but its focus on the television as a physical presence within interior space tallies more with Bouroullec and Sperlein's work – something reinforced by the fact that the furniture brand Vitra partnered with Panasonic on the project. "The first conversation we had with Eckart Maise [Vitra's chief design officer] was whether we could do something about the black hole, because he said that when a television is off it takes away from all the things Vitra have tried so hard to create," says Shadovitz, who acknowledges that the decision to involve a furniture brand helped shape the project. "The way we use the TV today is not as central as it used to be, so the gravity of the TV is just too strong [as it stands]. If you have a decent-sized TV, everything in the room circulates around that." Indeed, one of the enduring oddities and disappointments of contemporary design, for instance, is the relative lack of practitioners whose work extends across furniture and product design to also cover consumer electronics and white goods, forms which are themselves domestic objects and play a key role in interiors. "It's always surprising to me that TVs and home appliances like vacuum cleaners or washing machines belong to a very separate world," notes Bouroullec. "I question why that is, because we share the [aim] of trying to make the best with what we're given. But the language [of those products] is very strange and

it's difficult to find a match with what I'd like to have myself."

When I put it to Rybakken that the Vitrine is unusual in its consideration of the television as an interior element, he is unequivocal in his response. "It's a big problem in the technology sector and you wonder why didn't this happen 15 years ago," he says. "Just imagine the improvement if more industries

"TV companies have problems selling TVs basically. The industry is in crisis and it needs to rethink itself a little."

—Daniel Rybakken

started using interior designers, like the Bouroullecs with the Serif. The problem with a lot of TV companies is that there's the engineering department and then there's the design department. It's not fluid [between the two] as in Apple or other companies." When I suggest that projects such as Frame, Serif or Vitrine suggest that this may be changing, his response is stark. "TV companies have problems selling TVs basically," he says. "They added technologies, they dropped the price, but they still couldn't find a way to make money. So the people at Samsung had the idea to make it into a lifestyle object to reach out to new people. The industry is in crisis and it needs to rethink itself a little."

Across that industry, a tentative consensus as to one potential route by which the television might adapt itself to meet this challenge has, however, begun to emerge. If personal devices excel at facilitating individual engagement with content, then it may make sense for the television to carve out space for itself by prioritising social engagement. "The television screen brings back something that is more about sharing and being together," says Bouroullec. "I much prefer my kids to watch TV than to be stuck in a phone or tablet because behind the TV is this idea of watching things together. Even if you're alone, the presence of what you're watching is somehow a little communal." This

idea of community, even in absentia, is picked up by Sony's Hirotaka as an enduring virtue of the typology, particularly in the context of coronavirus. "During the Covid pandemic, people are watching more online/on-demand content than ever," he says, "and the TV is an important part of people's lives. It's a key piece for getting the family together, or meeting a friend, or even connecting people around the world remotely. The television could be a window to the world, or at least that's my optimistic future for it."

Whether or how this sense of communality will affect the physical form of televisions remains to be seen, but a number of designers see it as providing a rationale for the typology's ongoing relevance. "Before Covid, there was a time when we thought it was the end for TVs," says Baijings. "But we've now all seen the important role they play in bringing people together, whether that's through gaming or watching movies and sports with friends and family." The Frame, she argues, is particularly well adapted to playing this role. "It's the perfect thing in the sense that it's normally just a picture frame hanging there, but if everyone's around, it's your TV." I think similar cases could be made for Sperlein, Rybakken or the Bouroullecs' sets as integrated elements of an interior – televisions intended to complement rather than dominate a social space. "If you monitor the time I spend in front of the television than with the iPad in my hand, it definitely goes to the iPad," says Valeur. "But we've come to start to value the time in front of the TV as something else, because suddenly it seems social. For so many years people were trying to hide the television because it was associated with laziness and so on, but it's different today because if you're killing time, then you're doing that with your phone. So suddenly television can be a sign of something else: you value a movie, or you value social time. It might even be a symbol of being a family. Something has changed here."

Part of this change, I suspect, is owed to a wider shift in the way in which TV is perceived. "Traditionally, television was seen, culturally speaking, as a low-brow object," says Béhar, and you need only look to the nicknames it accrued over the course of the 20th century to see his point: "idiot box" and "boob tube" chief among them. "Television's greatest minute-by-minute appeal is that it engages without demanding," wrote the novelist David Foster Wallace in his 1990 essay 'E Unibus Pluram: television and U.S. fiction'.

"One can rest while undergoing stimulation." Thirty years on, this analysis strikes me as still basically correct, although it's worth noting that it was written before major changes in the style of content now available through televisions. Within the form's home turf, content has seen shows such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007) and *The Wire* (2002-08) raise standards for televisual drama and narrative, opening the floodgates to a raft of programmes that have broken down the stereotype of television as a country cousin to the more urbane cinema. Meanwhile, streaming has meant that a number of more traditionally high-brow mediums, such as art-house cinema, opera and theatre – which television has historically been deemed inferior to and less social than – now exist relatively comfortably through the platform by means of simultaneous release schedules, live broadcasts, and pre-recorded performances. The TV has become catholic to the extent that WarnerMedia's decision to launch its 2021 movies simultaneously in theatres and on HBO Max, although prompted by the pandemic, was not a real surprise: it's the direction the wind has been blowing in for some time. Foster Wallace may have been right when he concluded that many TV programmes qualify as "Special Treats" that one can "receive without giving [attention to]", but for a number of years televisions have been opening themselves up to the type of content that might support the more social uses which Baijings and Valeur imagine. "Television is the way it is simply because people tend to be extremely similar in their vulgar and prurient and dumb interests and wildly different in their refined and aesthetic and noble interests," wrote Foster Wallace. Now, some of those more refined interests seem to be working their way onto television.

Indeed, long before the pandemic, in 2013, Ofcom's then director of research James Thickett made an interesting claim about changes in the way television was being consumed. "Our research shows that increasingly families are gathering in the living room to watch TV just as they were in the 1950s," said Thickett, arguing that people were "increasingly reverting to having just one TV in their household", as opposed to the multi-set households that had previously dominated. This does not necessarily mean that the television is resurgent, however. "Unlike the 1950s family[...] they are also doing their own thing," continued Thickett. "They are tweeting

about a TV show, surfing the net or watching different content altogether on a tablet." It is a curious change – both a reassertion of the television as a central element of family life and a decentralisation of its monopolistic one-time influence; a change in culture that has seen the television become both more *and* less important to daily life, and which has begun to blur Foster Wallace's notion of dumb versus noble interests. Television can become social in its capacity to act as a conduit for event television, live performance and sport, all while dragging you through the filth of scrolling through Twitter or watching cat videos on YouTube.

The rise of flatscreens had attempted to reduce the television to a bare screen, sparking what Horrocks terms "the gradual withdrawal of the television from its role as a three-dimensional object in a setting, and existential emergence in the context of its increasing two-dimensionality". Now, however, I wonder if we may see efforts on the part of some television designers to reverse this trend and attempt to recapture the importance of the typology to the settings in which it finds itself. This change may take the form of re-embodiment, as with Bouroullec and Sperlein, reassessment of function, à la Béhar and Rybakken, or something more modest still. Hirotaka's A1 television (2017) for Sony, for instance, is a flat OLED display propped up on a strut such that the overall design forms a lambda that sits in place like an easel – what the company calls its "One Slate" concept. It is in some senses a traditional screen, but one executed with a care that elevates it, and which grants it a physical presence. "One Slate is a very pure sculptural expression," Hirotaka explains. "We're always looking for an opportunity to introduce a new form factor, that is unique and original in terms of its identity. TVs need to be evolved as TVs, or to become something different, something new. There's still lots of potential there." Even within the black rectangles, there may still be space for design to make a difference.

"Back in the day I guess the TV replaced the role of the fireplace in the living room and you gathered as a family in front of it to share a moment together," says ECAL's Blin. "Nowadays maybe it's something very different. Maybe it's just an element in the space, like a chair – you use it, it's there. Why not try to explore the potential of this element in the home in a different way?" This is the question facing the television industry – a format that has spent the past 20 years resolving itself into a screen is now being squeezed by other forms of screen. Suddenly, it has some scope and motivation to change course. "[Personal devices] have made everything more dynamic and changed the TV's role completely," says Shadovitz. "It's gone from the centre of the universe to something that could be more of a question mark, which is what is creating all these different approaches to how it could sit in the living room. I don't know whether it's a renaissance, but it's certainly an interesting time to be a television designer." END