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Damsels in Distress, Bozos in Heat

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Television

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THE television landscape is a universe of opposites. The Travel network (get up and go someplace!) is the opposite of HSN (sit on your couch and buy stuff!). Syfy (fantastical things that haven't happened yet) is the opposite of History (moderately interesting things that have already happened). The Golf Channel (sedentary activity watched by sedentary old duffers) is the opposite of Nick Jr. (frenetic activity watched by frenetic young children).

But one pair is more striking, more revelatory, than all the rest: Spike versus Lifetime. Guys versus Gals. XY versus XX. And with each channel offering new fare this month — Spike introduced the gross-out comedy “Blue Mountain State”; Lifetime fired up a new season of “Project Runway” — it seems a good time to compare and contrast these two cable franchises. What do their programs tell us about the sexes? What deep-seated yearnings drive the male of the species? What hopes and fears motivate the female? Is one smarter than the other, and if so, by how much?

Spike, part of [MTV Networks](#), used to call itself “the first network for men.” Lifetime, owned by the A&E Networks, once used the tag “television for women.” Neither is quite so blatant now, but spend a few minutes with either one's original programming (as opposed to the avalanche of repurposed shows from other sources that both use to fill air time), and there's no mistaking which viewers are being trolled for. Back in 2005 Spike even shoved out [Albie Hecht](#) as president because he had attracted too many female viewers. Or so the news was played at the time.

No, there's no getting around it: Spike (average prime-time viewership: 1.05 million, according to the Nielsen Company) is Guy Land; Lifetime (1.1 million) is Gal Land. And here is what can be learned by studying them.

IN GAL LAND CRIME IS THE DOMINANT FEATURE OF LIFE. IN GUY LAND THE ONLY CRIME IS STUPIDITY.

Lifetime is big on original movies (it recently started a separate, movies-only channel), but a large proportion of those films work one basic plotline: a woman (sometimes with spouse and/or children) is in danger; is she intrepid enough to save herself? Description of “The Accidental Witness”: “A murderer goes after a female attorney when he thinks that she has witnessed one of his killings.” And “Break-In”: “What begins as a leisurely romantic honeymoon in a tropical paradise quickly turns into a tension-filled crisis as intruders break in during the middle of the night and take the honeymooners hostage.” You get the idea: In Gal Land you are never, ever safe.

You are never, ever safe in Guy Land either, but only because you're not very bright. We learn this from one of Spike's original shows, “1,000 Ways to Die,” which was introduced in spring 2008 and is still around. The title says it all: Each episode features dramatizations of real-life fatalities that were odd almost beyond imagining. A man driving drunk leans out the window to vomit just as the car is passing a mailbox;

head and mailbox collide; head ends up on the ground. A drunk man in Honolulu tries to join in one of those twirling torch dances staged for tourists; he catches fire and burns to death as people applaud, thinking it's part of the show.

IN GAL LAND THINGS WEIGH MORE THAN THEY DO IN GUY LAND.

By "things" here we mean, basically, "women." Spike's shows are full of women who could easily be in Playboy and probably have been: gorgeous in that hourglass way, hair full and perfect. On Lifetime there is "Sherri," a sitcom introduced last fall starring Sherri Shepherd, who is what is generally called full-figured. There is also "Drop Dead Diva," in which a thin model who dies young gets sent back to earth but is placed in the body of a large-ish woman played by Brooke Elliott.

Plump women are almost never seen on Spike, and hotties are almost never seen on Lifetime. It's a tough call as to which is the more cynical ploy: brazenly playing to a female audience that probably could stand to lose a few pounds or shamelessly playing to a male audience that likes to fantasize about women more gorgeous than actually exist in real life.

But if women weigh more on Lifetime, so do their brains. The title character in "Sherri," for instance, is smart, and the show is witty enough that it could play in network prime time. The women on Spike are roughly as bright as the ones in "Jersey Shore," and the shows are often written for men whose sense of humor never made it out of junior high.

IN GAL LAND CLOTHES ARE MADE TO BE PUT ON. IN GUY LAND THEY'RE MADE TO BE TAKEN OFF.

When "Project Runway" moved to Lifetime from Bravo last year, it was a tacit admission: Once the novelty of this reality show had worn off, and it was down to the hard-core fans, it was a women's show. Why? Because "Project Runway," in which fledgling designers compete to please a panel of judges, isn't really about the designers or the judges. It's about the garments. And heterosexual men, as has been well documented, aren't generally smart enough to dress themselves. It is women who thrive on the intricacies of wardrobe and thus are going to care about which designer's gown is the most hideous and unwearable. Spike, on the other hand, used to have a show called "Stripperella," and removing clothes is never far from anyone's mind on the network. The second episode of "Blue Mountain State," a comedy about a college football team, featured a plotline in which the star running back, who had been given a promise ring by his girlfriend, loses it in a strip club. (Where exactly he lost it is beyond printable, as is much of what is on the show.)

If the point needed further elaboration, which it probably doesn't, the online games section of [Lifetime's Web site](#) offers one game called Fashion Solitaire and another called Hostile Makeover: A Fashion Murder Mystery Game. In contrast [Spike's site](#) has Babe Hunt, in which you hunt for the differences in two almost identical pictures of nearly naked women.

AND THEN THERE'S THE APPROACH TO EDUCATION.

This month Lifetime offered a new movie called "The Pregnancy Pact," an earnest film inspired by a spate of pregnancies among high school girls in Gloucester, Mass., in 2008. The movie, which stars [Thora Birch](#), takes a forthright look at serious issues like peer pressure, the lack of opportunities for young people and the role schools should play in providing sex education and birth control. It is a commendable effort to educate about and generate discussion of a subject with far-reaching implications for teenagers and society as a whole.

The Spike version of this semi-public-service programming is a show called "Manswers." It too seeks to educate about and generate discussion of certain subjects, but those subjects have no far-reaching implications for anyone. Each episode answers (in a voice-over that is screamed like a used-car commercial) a half-dozen or so questions that probably didn't need asking. These, for instance:

What is the biggest strip club — strippers again! — in the world? (Answer: Some joint in Las Vegas.)

How many nonalcoholic beers (which have a smidgen of alcohol in them) would you have to drink to get legally drunk? (About 40.)

Is a rayon, lambskin or cotton cloth best for drying a car? The research on this one was done by three buxom women in halter tops — one top made out of each material — who rubbed their breasts over a wet car, then wrung out the halter tops to see how much water they had absorbed. Winner: Cotton.

CONCLUSIONS

We can, from these observations, construct the perfect day as imagined by a gal and by a guy.

In the gal's perfect day she is kidnapped on the way back from putting the kids on the school bus but vanquishes the kidnapers in time to go for a fattening lunch with her single-mom pals, at which they lament their lack of dates before donning designer gowns to go to a school board meeting where they successfully address all major educational problems.

In the guy's perfect day he awakes and, still sleepy, sticks his hand down a running garbage disposal trying to retrieve the bottle opener he has dropped in it; an ambulance crew made up entirely of strippers rushes him to the Hospital for Advanced Trauma Care and Stripping, where naked but highly trained female surgeons sew his hand back on, then take him home and wash his entire house as well as his car with their breasts while answering questions like: Does being spanked make a woman want to have sex?

So, clearly, members of one sex are living in a sad, unrealistic fantasy world, trying in vain to compensate for the drabness of their day-to-day lives. Members of the other are living a rich life of the imagination, at peace with their self-image and excited by what the future might hold. Which is which goes without saying.