

Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard DVD

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✓ Editor's Rating: ●●●●○

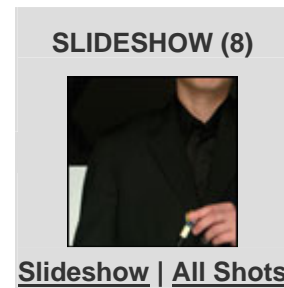
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By Robert Heron

It's an unfortunate fact that new TVs are factory-adjusted to produce imagery that stands out on a store shelf rather than to provide accurate and faithful video reproduction. If you want to watch movies with the color and detail envisioned by the director, your TV needs some TLC. The Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard DVD (\$29.95 list) demystifies the process of improving a TV's picture quality by providing an easy-to-follow plan. Having an attractive host guide you through the process will be considered a bonus by some.

To be fair, the Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard can't replace a professionally trained video calibrator who can optimize the video quality of all sources and inputs, not just the path from the DVD player to the screen. But hiring a video calibrator is pretty expensive. The ISF (Imaging Science Foundation) recommends a \$250 to \$275 price for calibrating a single input/resolution on most HDTVs. Calibrating additional resolutions/inputs can bring the total cost into the \$400 to \$500 range. The Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard is simpler and a lot cheaper.



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The Monster/ISF DVD immediately impressed me with a main menu that makes it easy to access any of the disc's ten chapters or play the entire disc start to finish. The classic A/V calibration disc "[Digital Video Essentials](#)" provides a more comprehensive set of tools, but it buries them behind the most bewildering maze of menus I've ever encountered on a DVD. Monster/ISF's cleverly worded chapter titles—for example, "Am I too fat?" (aspect ratio) and "How bright are your whites?" (contrast)—make its calibration DVD much more inviting. Narrating the video is entertainer [Jenna Drey](#), and she begins by describing how to find a TV's menu system and what settings to look for once there. Video beginners need not fear.

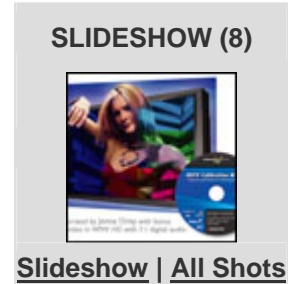
At the core of the Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard DVD are five chapters devoted to optimizing a TV's brightness, contrast, color, sharpness, and aspect ratio. The clips are identical to the configuration videos included with Microsoft's Windows XP Media Center Edition 2005, basically a set of staged scenes containing obvious visual clues and narrated guidance to assist you when adjusting a particular picture control. In addition to the DVD version of the wizard, the disc contains the same content encoded in Windows Media Video HD (WMV HD) format, at 720p resolution and a 12-Mbps bit rate—very high-quality video that requires a moderately powerful PC for smooth playback.

I compared the Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard DVD with the [Lucasfilm THX Optimizer](#), which is included with many DVD movies. Both tools assist in performing a similar task, but there are some notable differences. To assess the THX Optimizer, I used the traditional version that was included with a *Raiders of the Lost Ark* DVD I had in the library. Some recent DVD movies provide an updated version of the Optimizer that includes a more advanced video setup tool. Also, the Optimizer is customized for the signal levels of the movie with which it is bundled.

Therefore, a THX Optimizer from one movie can result in adjustments that differ slightly from the version included with another movie

Get the Picture

The two most important image-related adjustments for any TV are brightness (black level) and contrast (white level/peak brightness). Interestingly, the Monster/ISF DVD and the THX Optimizer led us to similar menu settings on several different TVs, including plasma displays, rear-projection TVs, and LCD TVs. Both tools are simple to use, but the narrated instruction provided by Monster/ISF DVD makes it almost foolproof. When I switched to a PC source and reran the setup using the WMV HD version of the Monster/ISF tool, the dramatically improved detail made precise contrast adjustments much easier. It turned out that the comparatively lower resolution on DVD video made it more of a challenge to spot the loss of bright detail that occurs when contrast levels are set too high. For one plasma display in the lab, the contrast setting I arrived at using the DVD video was six levels higher than the one I got with the WMV HD version. Once the correction was made, the settings were similar to those achieved with the THX Optimizer.



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Properly adjusting color (saturation) and tint (hue) on a TV is arguably the most difficult task for any do-it-yourself calibrator. The THX Optimizer provides a test pattern that's unnecessarily difficult to use for this task, and it requires a blue color filter that has to be specially ordered from the THX Web site. The Monster/ISF DVD states that most TV manufacturers set tint properly at the factory (true in my experience). Color is adjusted while viewing a scene of a trio of actors. One actor is made up to appear pale, another has a more neutral tone, and the third is overdone, with too much rouge. The trio makes an effective scene to verify that color saturation is set high enough without introducing unnatural effects.

The remaining chapters on the Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration DVD cover sharpness and aspect ratio checks that, again, are easier to use than those provided by the THX Optimizer. But neither tool provides as good a sharpness test pattern as the one in "Digital Video Essentials." (If only it were easier to find it on the DVD.) Out of the box, most televisions default to a sharpness setting that adds white outlines to the edges of objects in a picture. These edge "enhancements" are not part of the original video signal and should be eliminated or minimized as much as possible for accurate video reproduction. Sharpness artifacts are easy to spot with the right scene or test pattern, and I feel that the Monster/ISF DVD made visualizing that problem unnecessarily difficult.

The Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard earns high marks for being the easiest-to-use tool of its kind. The inclusion of the WMV HD version of the video on the same disc is a definite bonus; the additional detail makes fine-tuning a TV much easier. But the usefulness of WMV HD content is limited to home theater PCs. Also, video calibration DVDs such as the Monster/ISF disc do nothing for the images produced by cable and satellite set-top boxes or most other external video sources. For those, you would need a professionally trained video calibrator.

Regardless, if arcane test patterns have you avoiding the menus on your TV, the Monster/ISF HDTV Calibration Wizard is a friendly guide toward better-looking DVD movies.

Sub-ratings:

Image Quality: ●●●●○

Value: ●●●○

Usability: ●●●●●

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