

# In Debate: Television Studies in the American Academy

*Edited by Janet McCabe*

This 'In Debate', on television studies in the American academy, is part of the broader theme for this issue, which focuses on US television. It is in this spirit that *Critical Studies in Television* invited eight notable US scholars in the field of television studies to reflect on the current state of television studies as a discourse – its origins and methodologies, its value and legitimacy as a discipline – as well as think about the challenges confronting it in the future.

As more than one of our contributors observes, television studies has always been an interdisciplinary affair, a hybrid enterprise drawing on divergent critical paradigms, situated at an intersection between theory and practice. Its first scholars were practitioners drawn from radio, television and/or journalism. As it evolved, and gained an institutional base within the academy, television studies benefitted from its engagement with a range of other disciplines, from interdisciplinary socio-political theory (associated with the Frankfurt School) to text-based studies (literary and film theories), from British cultural studies and feminist inquiry to mass communications research on media content and the audience. What emerges is the idea that television studies *is* itself a site of convergence – of disciplines and approaches, of 'old' and 'new' media, of theory and practice, of text and context.

Contributors trace the journey of television studies from the margins into the mainstream, only to highlight lingering prejudice within the academy and beyond. Despite scholarly accomplishment, publishing success and burgeoning student numbers, institutional opprobrium remains and questions of value and legitimacy persist.

In this context of introspection, contributors identify that a perennial challenge for television studies is that of definition. As a field of study disciplinary parameters are far from obvious and we have yet to come to grips with television studies as a coherent brand of knowledge. Our object of study doesn't help. Television is immense – with diverse content, different formats and numerous genres. So many broadcasters, so many specialist channels and viewing is spread across multiple

platforms. Demographics vary as do viewing habits and the mercurial tastes of the audience. Industrial practices change, markets (both domestic and international) diversify and new technologies innovate. Television simply refuses to stand still, which means that conventional wisdom doesn't stay 'conventional' for long. Traditional pedagogical tools require reformulation, new theoretical approaches required. For scholars, it is a formidable, but nonetheless exhilarating task.

### **A Modest Response to the Genealogy of Television Studies in America**

*Gary R. Edgerton*

Television studies in America has always had something of a splintered personality. The earliest genus dates back roughly to the mid-1950s when primarily practitioner-scholars, who initially worked in radio and television before joining the academy, wrote the first rudimentary journal articles and books on the subject. Erik Barnouw, whose groundbreaking three-volume history of US broadcasting – *A Tower of Babel*,<sup>1</sup> *The Golden Web*,<sup>2</sup> and *The Image Empire*<sup>3</sup> – was conveniently condensed into *Tube of Plenty*<sup>4</sup> in 1975, best represents this first generation. He chronicled US television's history in a holistic manner, integrating a number of historiographic approaches, including narrative, biographical, technological, economic, socio-political and cultural. His influence on the scholarly study of television in the United States was foundational throughout his academic career at Columbia University and remains seminal today.

As a second generation of TV-focused scholars received doctorates in communication, broadcasting or radio-television-film throughout the 1960s and 1970s, television as a nascent field of study developed a mostly social scientific cast, producing public opinions surveys, organisational and industrial assessments, experimental studies on TV effects, simple content analyses and additional histories on television topics. That is why an alternative genus of humanities-based approaches to the medium had such an impact in the mid-to-late 1970s beginning with Horace Newcomb's *TV: The Most Popular Art*<sup>5</sup> along with a collection of essays edited by Douglass Cater and Richard Adler entitled, *Television as a Social Force*<sup>6</sup> that resulted from an Aspen Institute seminar on 'Communication and Society' where TV was the primary agenda. Television textual studies had finally found a footing through the early work of these literary-based scholars with Newcomb leading the way.

Having majored in English and history as an undergraduate, I initially became aware of television as an emerging field of study when I was a master's student getting up to speed in a doctoral media criticism seminar in the spring of 1978. As is the case in these kinds of courses, we surveyed all the major critical theories and applied them to a wide range of media from print to electronic. We, of course, had a required reading list and the book that caused the biggest stir by far was Newcomb's *Television: The Critical View*.<sup>7</sup> I can remember getting my hands on a copy one Thursday and reading it cover to cover by the end of that weekend. It

was eye opening to my peers and me, because accomplished critics and scholars were actually taking series such as *All in the Family* (1971–79), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (1970–77) and *The Waltons* (1972–81) seriously, while also theorising about television aesthetics and the role of the medium in culture and society. From the perspective of 2011, it is hard to recapture what an anomaly this anthology and a handful of other like-minded books were at the time and how far out on the margins television was as a legitimate area of study in most of the US academy.

Thirty years later and television studies is an assemblage of theories and methodologies, curricula and degree programmes, bodies of scholarship and associations. Television as a pedagogical and research topic was initially nurtured by members of the Broadcast Education Association back in Barnouw's day, but soon pockets of academics from the American Studies Association to the Modern Language Association, from the Society for Cinema Studies (Society for Cinema and Media Studies) to the University Film and Video Association, all addressed television from a Mulligan stew of perspectives that sometimes complemented, and other times clashed with what else was boiling in the pot. Such internecine differences are to be expected in the growth of any field and television was especially susceptible to internal disagreements and the occasional downright dismissal since its study was so interdisciplinary from the outset.

In 2011, television studies in the United States is more a loose coalition of sub-fields from many disciplines, rather than a singular discipline unto itself. There may be associational groupings who claim to be first among equals in defining the parameters of the field, but the diversity of scholarship on television as a convergent technology, a global industry, a viable art form, a social catalyst, and a complex and dynamic reflection of the people who produce and consume it simply does not fit into any one particular school of thought or academic association. There has never been a serious move to form an American Television Association or an International Television Association; and there remains only a half-dozen professional journals in the United States and United Kingdom that publish a majority of their articles on TV-related subjects (i.e., *Critical Studies in Television*, *Flow*, *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media*, *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, *Television and New Media* and *Television Quarterly*). There has been a veritable cottage industry of scholarly books on television published over the last quarter-century, indicating the rich vitality of the field. Still, television studies in America needs to outgrow its parochialism where social scientists and humanists, institutional researchers and critical-cultural scholars become aware of each other's research and actually interact in person or online on a regular basis. Television studies is too small and immature a field to close ranks. All of us can learn something useful and enrich our own scholarship by paying closer attention to those who ask research questions unlike our own and come at the subject of television from different theoretical perspectives.

That being said, there are more reasons to study television in 2011 than ever before. Despite the immense growth of the Internet over the past two decades, TV remains the principal preoccupation of most Americans and its spread around

the world continues unabated. Last year, the average American household had the television set on well over eight hours a day with the typical viewer watching in excess of four hours. There are now one billion television households globally (with only 11 per cent in the United States – the lowest proportion in half a century); and the unprecedented number of TV households no longer grasps the amount of people viewing all kinds of television content with the rapid proliferation of all sizes and shapes of conventional and mobile receivers. In 1962, there was one television set for every 20 human beings on earth; today that ratio is one to four, which again doesn't include the ever-increasing number of viewers who see their TV programming via web-related technologies. Suffice to say, those members of the academy who still believe that television is not a legitimate subject worth studying have their heads buried deep beneath the sand. Moreover, it is up to us who have embraced TV as a topic for years to adopt a more ecumenical approach to the field, reaching well beyond the comfort of our own disciplinary boundaries as a way of enlarging the scope and agenda of television studies as it stands poised to emerge as a truly transnational discipline over the next decade.

### Convergence – the Old Story

*Toby Miller*

Much of US television studies buys into individualistic fantasies of reader, audience, consumer or player autonomy – the neoliberal intellectual's wet dream of music, movies, TV and everything else converging under the sign of empowered fans. The New Right of media and cultural studies invests in Schumpeterian entrepreneurs, evolutionary economics and 'creative industries' with unparalleled zest. It's never seen an 'app' it didn't like, or a socialist idea it does. Conversely, much progressive television studies buys into the corporate fantasy of control – the political economist's arid nightmare of music, movies, TV and everything else converging under the sign of empowered firms. Then there are the effects people, who conduct endless studies into whether their students learn about politics or violence from TV.

What are the origins of these perspectives? They relate to the US history of studying the media, which begins with the discipline of speech communication, formed in the early-twentieth century US to help white, non-English-speaking migrants assimilate into the workforce. The engineering professors who founded radio stations in colleges during the 1920s needed programme content, and drew volunteers from that area after being rebuffed by literature mavens. These stations doubled as laboratories, with research undertaken into technology, content and reception. At the same time, schools of journalism were forming to produce newspaper workers. Hence the area's practical origins and its early exclusion from literature departments. Soon mass communication areas began as means of selling items to consumers and preventing workers from adopting leftist ideas.

Hence the links to TV audience effects. And as questions of spectrum allocation and censorship became politicised, analysts of ownership and control emerged. That legacy is both right-wing and left-wing political economy.

Just as the US study of television drew its history from other media and disciplines, notably radio and engineering, so its future, too, will emerge from this cross-fertilisation – part of the convergence that is not new but simply goes through various transformations. Our biggest task is deciding what television is, as I try to explain in *Television Studies: The Basics*.<sup>8</sup>

### The Landscape of Professional Criticism

*Robert Thompson*

It's been 30 years since I first joined the ranks of American scholars studying television. We were, back then, a touchy and defensive bunch; but we had good reason to be. Not only were reporters having a grand time writing their 'can-you-believe-kids-are-getting-college-credit-for-watching-*Gilligan's-Island*?' stories, but many of our own colleagues, department chairs, tenure committees and deans were profoundly unconvinced of the value of what we were doing to the grand aims of higher education.

In the late 1980s, after *60 Minutes* (1968–present) aired a story about TV studies in American colleges and universities, I received a two-page, single-spaced letter from a tenured professor at Virginia-Polytechnic Institute stating, among other things, that 'there is only one cure for the social illness television has caused: abolition. The collection and destruction of all TV sets, broadcasting facilities and tape libraries would be a long step on the road back to sanity for the world.' (That, by the way, was one of the more polite of the hundreds of letters I received after the CBS piece aired, and it was just a variation on a theme I encountered daily.) A year later my college announced the elimination of its entire television studies curriculum and the faculty that taught it – including me – on the grounds that it was not central to the mission of the school.

The discipline has come a long way since then. Resistance has not been eliminated, but challenging the legitimacy of the serious study of television has become an anachronism among most thinking people. Many conditions have changed in favour of our once marginalised field. DVDs and online sources have vastly expanded the availability of primary texts for close analysis: back in the day, we had to rely on what we'd taped off the air and on an occasional pilgrimage to what was then still known as the Museum of Broadcasting. Furthermore, the quantity and quality of programming into which one can really sink one's scholarly teeth continues to increase. A variety of university and commercial presses have launched book series focusing on TV, and online publications provide timely outlets for the distribution of research and opinion. An impressive body of scholarly work has appeared in the last few decades that identifies television studies as a serious, if still emerging, discipline. My PhD students are getting jobs, and there's

already a substantial population of people out there making a living teaching, writing and doing research about TV.

There is, however, a parallel trend that should cause us to be a little less sanguine. As the professional study of television has grown in the academy, it has been suffering in the popular press. In response to a developing institutional crisis, many daily newspapers have released their television critics, a lot of whom had years of experience and perspective, and a deep understanding of the history and traditions of the medium. What they do is different from what we do as academics, but they are an important part of the calculus of a healthy public discourse about TV, and the proliferation of bloggers doesn't fully replace the kind of work that full-time, professional critics and reporters do. The endangered state of these professionals is upsetting for many reasons, not the least of which is the impact that it has on our own profession. I, and many other academics in our field, depend upon critics and reporters to bring our interpretations and analyses to a wider general audience, even if only one sound bite at a time.

There is some good news, however. The cataclysmic changes that have occurred in the journalism industry over the past decade have opened opportunities for academics in the old-school mass media. Given the wide appeal of their subject matter, TV scholars have ever-growing possibilities for placing their op-ed pieces, feature stories, columns and public radio commentaries in venues that circulate to audiences beyond the academy. This, I think, is something that should be encouraged.

## Twenty Years

*David Lavery*

Twenty years! In the spring of 1991, when ABC announced the cancellation of *Twin Peaks* (1990–91), I resolved to do a book on David Lynch and Mark Frost's splendid failure of a series. Seventeen publisher's rejections later, Wayne State University Press finally offered me a contract, and *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*<sup>9</sup> has remained in print ever since. I would go on to edit/co-edit, author/co-author books on such late-twentieth/early-twenty-first century US television series as *The X-Files* (1993–2002), *The Sopranos* (1999–2006) and *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (1997–2003). I would even co-edit a 'prophylactic' collection of parody reviews of non-existent books of television criticism intended to prevent the spread of unnecessary academic discourse on small screen fictions.<sup>10</sup>

Considering my contribution to the field in the first issue of this journal, Glen Creeber would suggest that my books had made it apparent that 'one methodology is probably not enough to do justice to the complex array of themes, issues, debates, contexts and concerns that are involved in a discussion of any single piece of television.' Continuing, he wrote,

The implicit critical philosophy of Lavery's edited collections on single television programmes . . . is that any text can be viewed from an almost endless number of different 'reading positions'. These positions, while clearly contestable, can still offer interesting explorations of the programmes, and continue to inform and generate wider debate. Within the pages of one book students can instantly recognise the contradictory nature of the subject. . . . We might call it 'dialogism' and 'heteroglossia' in action, but, whatever term we use to describe it, these edited books explicitly recognise the textual plurality and post-structuralist ambiguities of meaning, as well as acknowledging and exploring wider matters of a contextual and extra-textual nature.<sup>11</sup>

Precisely what I was up to.

Based on my early experience with recalcitrant publishers, I used to say that there were two major reasons for a publisher to reject a serious book on a television series or show: (1) because the subject in question was still on the air; or (2) because it wasn't. Television was either seen as a moving target, impossible to pin-down, or as instantly moribund and ephemeral, unworthy of serious consideration once it was not in the public eye. I.B.Tauris' 'Reading Contemporary Television' and 'Investigating Cult Television' series changed all that, helping to free the study of series television from the horns of that dilemma. One decade into the new century, already deep into Henry Jenkins' 'convergence culture', new dilemmas await.

If television now leaps from platform to platform, TV scholarship must, of course, continue to take leaps of faith as well. Online publishing, a natural venue, is nothing new; ten years ago Rhonda Wilcox and I established an online journal devoted to *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; 32 issues later, it has now become *Slayage: The Journal of the Whedon Studies Association*. But one day soon print small screen scholarship may seem as passé as watching television with an antennae. In my murky, analogue crystal ball I can just make out the still developing outlines of a new journal intended to meet the needs I have touched on here. Stay tuned, as the Super Narrators of an earlier TV era used to say.

### TV on the Edge of Time

Rhonda V. Wilcox

Around 15 years ago, I submitted to a well-known journal an essay on *The X-Files*' (1993–2002) Fox Mulder (David Duchovny) as a priest-figure, rejoicing in the series' finely constructed narrative, images and symbols. The submission was rejected with the comment, 'This essay is about nothing outside of itself.' For this issue of *CST*, I reviewed a 527-page volume titled *Small Screen, Big Picture: Television and Lived Religion*,<sup>12</sup> which investigates, for the most part, the characters of narrative television. Shall I triumphantly say that times have changed? Maybe yes, maybe no. Or: maybe some – but not enough.

There is probably no aesthetic creation more complicated than a television series. This very complexity leads some to doubt that TV can be art. And those

such as Milly Buonanno think of ‘the idea of [TV] authorship [as] snobbery’.<sup>13</sup> Every work of television, that complicated beast, has many authors. A genuinely good television show is a miracle of collaboration – necessarily guided by someone whose talents include the ability to join with others. How this is snobbery is hard for me to see. It is also hard for me to see why many of us must still fight so hard to convince the public and the larger scholarly world that television can have intrinsic aesthetic worth (even when not on HBO) beyond its significance as cultural barometer; that a good television show can provide those moments of transcendence that help justify life.

As someone who has loved to read as long as I can remember, I am grateful to the authors of all the books I love. This past semester, I taught Marge Piercy’s 1976 novel *Woman on the Edge of Time*,<sup>14</sup> in which the protagonist experiences a future world (utopia or madwoman’s fantasy?) wherein every person can create art – including holovisions, a sort of futuristic film/TV. As I was writing today, I thought of Piercy’s heartfelt representation of the importance of the aesthetic impulse. As bell hooks insists, that impulse can be seen all around us;<sup>15</sup> and I would remind you that television can be seen all around us, too. Difficult though it may be – subject to mockery on the one hand and accusations of snobbery on the other – we will do the world some good if we can help to show the aesthetic worth of some television.

Probably no one paused at my reference above to ‘the books I love’. But such a reaction to the small screen is still not considered *respectable*. Of course, there is a socioeconomics of scholarship as well as any other human endeavour, and many of us feel pressure towards that respectability. But I hope new scholars will not be ashamed to say when they find beauty in television – and I’m not talking about pretty pictures. After I’d thought of the aesthetic joy in *Woman on the Edge*, I recalled that every character in Piercy’s utopia/fantasy must also give a year of public service. The aesthetic life is embedded in the social world – and no sociological assessment of art is precise without analysis of the aesthetics of the representation. Furthermore, the aesthetic successes grow from the extraordinary combination of consciously created form situated in the socioeconomic – just as Piercy’s utopia joined art and social work. The two connect. Yet socioeconomic, production, reception studies still outweigh studies that help us find that burning, gemlike moment (*pace* Pater). Let’s not be respectable. Let’s write about what we think will be lasting art. Let’s write about the television that we see on the edge of time.

### Valuing the Late Adopter

Victoria E. Johnson

Television studies in the United States academy has never been a unified field. It has always been interdisciplinary and multi-focal. However, its key works have always placed television in historic and socio-political context, as a central site

of struggle and pivot in a 'complex pattern of continuity and breaks'<sup>16</sup> between 'old' and 'new' media technologies. This scholarship attends to everyday and micro-political interrogations of the medium in relation to – and as they trouble or complicate – broader institutional or macro-political histories and concerns. Crucially, from its growing 'institutionalization' in the 1990s, US TV studies has shown a deep commitment to explicitly feminist and British cultural studies-influenced examinations of the radically uneven and, often, counterintuitive ways that media technology is imagined, standardised, distributed, received and engaged.

While television remains the central medium of everyday life in advanced Western democracies, digitalisation has, obviously, altered academic frames for thinking about TV in terms of either broadcasting or narrowcasting.<sup>17</sup> Yet, as Lynn Spigel and Jostein Gripsrud have recently argued, while 'television as we knew it is something else again',<sup>18</sup> 'digitalization in many ways could rather be described as a technological renewal that to some extent enhances the use of *already existing* possibilities' (emphasis mine).<sup>19</sup> In the United States, digitalisation also compresses and accelerates the historic and ongoing reality of selective rather than universal market cultivation and the unevenness that is structured in to communication technology institutionally, in regulatory and cultural/symbolic terms. Most recently, the 2009 transition to digital broadcast television in the US re-energised a historic set of conventions for promoting and explaining 'new' technology development rationales, laws and regulations through extant assumptions regarding geographic capital – relations that analogised a particular kind of urbanity with technological facility and associated early adoption with a wave of newly-trendy 'geek chic', allying B-DTV as synchronous with global market flows that purportedly would be requisite to surviving the contemporary economic crisis. This was contrasted to a classed, generationally and racially 'marked' demographic alliance with rurality, analogue models of cultural expression and pedagogical 'resistance' to technological, economic and cultural flow in the present.

The rhetorical appeals, presumed capital alliances and radically inequitable fallout from such transitions present questions that TV studies must re-emphasise. In the context of digitalisation, where and how does television exist and thrive, and for whom? Broadband has been promoted with the very same rhetorical appeals as broadcast radio and television, cable and satellite television, and early Internet access before it, as 'the great equalizer', opening up a world of new opportunities and access to 'every American with an Internet connection'.<sup>20</sup> Herein, however, lies the concern: while the average number of television sets per household in the US is at 2.5,<sup>21</sup> 'only 56 per cent of African-Americans have broadband at home. Less than half of Hispanics, low-income families and rural Americans have adopted broadband'<sup>22</sup> and 'the United States is presently 15th in the world in terms of overall broadband penetration'.<sup>23</sup> This is not a question of late adopters or resistant publics. It is a call to examine who has been actively excised from the national conversation in the digital-era, due to demography,

economics and geography; those who have fallen (or been pushed) off the 'digital cliff', consigned to secondary status in terms of full participation in the public realm.

There is a risk that, in this moment, television studies might privilege industrial victors (e.g. Comcast and resulting transformations in television delivery and applications, post-merger); might emphasise early adopter niche practices and demographics; and might focus on the kinds of texts that are best-suited to multi-platform distribution and engagement across television, social network sites and handheld media. Digitalisation privileges particular TV texts and audiences in ways that potentially skew scholarly analysis toward those who are already most cultivated and rewarded by media industries' and markets' attention. Significantly, while 'traditional' or 'residual' media like over-the-air television are re-imagined, in this context, as having 'no purpose', their same spectrum is simultaneously claimed as 'beachfront property' 'occupied' by a 'small and shrinking segment of the population' rather than fully dedicated to the service of particular economies and 'advance[ment of] other goals'.<sup>24</sup>

Mary Desjardins recently posed a question regarding the senior citizen TV audience in the US that should be revisited, more broadly, at this juncture: 'what is media studies missing in not paying much attention to'<sup>25</sup> particular geographies and their audiences? 'Do we comply with media industries who also ignore these audiences? . . . What if we were to consider that the largest voting block in this country is seemingly the most understudied audiences?'<sup>26</sup> In keeping with its 'roots' and to emphasise its vitality and relevance going forward, US TV scholarship must reconsider the ongoing *instability* of 'privileged' texts and viewers, energising its attention to what Lisa Parks has identified as the 'enormous variations and disparities'<sup>27</sup> that remain to be described and analysed regarding questions of engagement and who 'counts' in the digital media environment. At what point is it acceptable to disregard any percentage of the US population as 'obsolete', in either wired reality *or* scholarly inquiry? It is imperative, in the context of digitalisation, to (re)consider the long-term power of those historically imagined to be too few and too marginal to 'count'.

### **'Ambiguous Provenance': Television Studies as a Discipline**

*Michele Hilmes*

In going through the files of applicants for our PhD programme in media and cultural studies this year, one reference letter shocked me. An English professor at a well-respected liberal arts college stated that this was the only letter of recommendation she would, reluctantly, be writing this year, as she refused to help add further to the ranks of frustrated, unemployed PhDs in the humanities. Coming on the heels of the widely-circulated YouTube video<sup>28</sup> comically making the same point, I mentally protested: but there *are* jobs! They're just no longer in English, or history, or in other traditional fields like French or classics. The jobs exist where

the students are: in media studies. And the students are there because this is the literature and the language of their times.

The irony that strikes me as I regard the state of media studies in the United States in 2011 is that, even as more and more courses are offered in television, film, sound studies and new media, even as more excellent scholarly books are published, more high quality venues such as this journal disseminate original research, and more newly-minted PhD's emerge and, yes, find employment, we still lack definition as a coherent field of study, particularly in the humanities. This was brought home by the release in 2010 of the National Research Council rankings, where what it calls 'Film Studies' was once again categorised as an 'emerging discipline' of 'ambiguous provenance' that could not be ranked – same as the last ranking, done 15 years ago! How long can a discipline emerge without coming into being – especially when media studies<sup>29</sup> is often one of the largest undergraduate majors on campus? Why, in so many colleges and universities, are those of us who teach and study the history and critical interpretation of film, television and other media scattered across such a range of departmental homes that it is no wonder the NRC can't find us? Where is our field, exactly?

Krin Gabbard noted in an article<sup>30</sup> in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* in 2006 that film's bid for academic respect and inclusion in the 1960s, based on the romantic assertion of the cinema *auteur* as the appropriate object of study, in some ways undercut its emergence as a discipline since so much of what film and television do and mean in our culture simply cannot fit within that paradigm. Television, in particular, was consigned to the realm of the 'bad object'<sup>31</sup> and left out of the humanities fold. Today the notion of the 'digital humanities' has taken hold across the academic spectrum, and progressive deans and faculty in literature and arts departments are sometimes surprised to discover that there exist among them people who have been studying the digital within the humanities for over a decade, tucked away with other 'ambiguous' subjects like television in departments that sometimes are more closely associated with the social sciences or with 'applied' fields like journalism.

What does this bode for the future of television studies? In a nutshell, we need a higher profile as a key component in the study of the arts, literature and humanities that should be included in every undergraduate programme of education across the nation and others as well. And I assert 'television' here as absolutely crucial to any attempt to do this, as it occupies the essential middle ground uniting all the visual, aural, fictional, factual and in general textual elements of both film and electronic/digital media. It is the culture box, the site of the most creative and innovative expressive practices to emerge in the twentieth century and on into the twenty-first, and the one with the widest and most varied audience.

Yet television still carries an aura of disreputability in the academy, and I believe will continue to do so until television scholars take the initiative in linking their discipline to concerns that go beyond our field and connect with larger academic areas of concern. Crucially, we need to assert the fundamental unity of sound and screen media as a field of study, while still embracing our connections

to our colleagues in communications, journalism, visual culture, history and literature, anthropology and sociology. Journals like *Critical Studies in Television* have a large role to play, in encouraging work that sees 'the big picture' of television's place in global culture, as well as more specific research. And our undergraduate students are our best friends, swelling our ranks and eagerly pushing for more courses that address the most relevant concerns and familiar activities in their lives. Dare we hope that by the next time the NRC surveys the field, cinema and media studies will finally be recognised as a discipline? Time, demand and the spreading ubiquity of digital media are on our side.

### Television Studies?

*Amanda D. Lotz*

Perhaps the most provocative thing I can say about television studies in 2011 from the vantage point of US academia is that it is an entity that had better demarcate its identity or risk lapsing into oblivion. Among those who I'd classify as my intellectual cohort, there is now an entity distinguishable as television studies, however, its distinction is consistent with that Justice Potter Stewart offered of obscenity: 'I know it when I see it'. It exists, but its parameters remain far from certain.

Many outside the field might reasonably suspect that television studies is the term that classifies studies of television, but they'd largely be wrong. There are many, many studies of television that I would not classify as television studies. And perhaps more provocatively, some studies that don't study television at all that might be reasonably classified as television studies nonetheless. Although there may be handwringing about the future of television and meaningful conversations about what is television in this age of rapid technological change, I don't find these changes nearly as threatening to television studies as the continued lack of clarity surrounding what it is, or what distinguishes 'television studies' from any study that takes an aspect of television as its object of analysis.

For me, television studies is more defined by approach than object of study. I conceive of television studies as a sub-specialty of media studies with antecedents in the humanities fields of literature, history, and film studies, social sciences such as communication and sociology, and perhaps especially, British cultural studies (itself a heavily interdisciplinary pursuit). Television research exemplary of television studies goes beyond an examination of television that might be done by a practitioner of film or literary criticism or a simple application of the tools of social science to television. *Television studies* approaches its object of study in a manner that understands it as embedded in a contingent industrial and historical context and to have a particular relationship with its audience that many *studies of television* fail to address.

I acknowledge that I have somewhat twisted the call to assess the state of current television research to comment on an entity, television studies, not explicitly even

called into existence by a journal that defines itself not as television studies, but as a venue for critical studies of television. Despite the concern expressed here, I'm not wholly convinced that there needs to be a television studies, at least called as such, and to be clear, it does considerably trouble me that this entity that I find foremost defined by its approach is tethered to a term with such medium specificity. Admittedly, work taking such an approach can be found examining several other types of media – radio, forms of 'new media', sometimes film – and I often feel greater intellectual kinship with such research than I find with others who study television, but do so with no acknowledgment of its particularities as an industrial and cultural form. On the other hand, distinguishing television studies may be made worthwhile by the fact that alternatives, media studies or cultural studies, are too broad in most academic situations for defining the parameters of much more specific work.

### Notes

- 1 Erik Barnouw, *A Tower of Babel*, Oxford University Press, 1966; reprinted in 1977.
- 2 Erik Barnouw, *The Golden Web: A History of Broadcasting in the United States, 1933–1953*, Oxford University Press, 1968; reprinted in 1972; republished by Replica Books, 2002.
- 3 Erik Barnouw, *The Image Empire: A History of Broadcasting in the United States: Volume 3 From 1953*, Oxford University Press, 1970
- 4 Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty: the Evolution of American Television*, Oxford University Press, 1975; revised in 1982; 1990.
- 5 Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art*, Anchor, 1974.
- 6 Douglass Cater and Richard Adler, *Television as a Social Force: New Approaches to TV Criticism*, Praeger, 1975
- 7 Horace Newcomb, *Television: The Critical View*, Oxford University Press, 1976
- 8 Toby Miller, *Television Studies: The Basics*, Routledge, 2009.
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