
Turn Off TV Studies!

by Toby Miller

Long before the emergence of televisual appliances and services, people engaged in the study of television by fantasizing about the transmission of image and sound across space. Richard Whittaker Hubbell made the point in 1942, when he published a book entitled *4000 Years of Television*. Television even has its own patron saint, Clare of Assisi, a teen runaway from the thirteenth century who was canonized because of her bedridden vision of a midnight mass cast upon a wall. Centuries later (in 1958), Pius XII declared this to have been the first broadcast.¹

As TV proper came close to realization, it attracted intense critical speculation. Rudolf Arnheim's 1935 "Forecast" predicted that its cosmopolitan vision might bring global peace, by showing spectators that "we are located as one among many." But television was also "a new, hard test of our wisdom." The emergent medium's easy access to knowledge would either enrich or impoverish its viewers, manufacturing an informed public, vibrant and active—or an indolent audience, domesticated and passive. Two years after Arnheim, Barrett C. Kiesling said, "It is with fear and trembling that the author approaches the controversial subject of television." Such concerns about TV have never receded.² They are the very stuff of most inquiries into this bewildering *dispositif*.

Like most domains of the human sciences, the study of television is characterized by contests over meanings and approaches, not least because its analysts "speak different languages, use different methods," and pursue "different questions."³ Broadly speaking, TV has given rise to three key concerns of academic research: (1) ownership and control (television's political economy); (2) texts (its content); and (3) audiences (its public). Within these categories lie several other divisions:

- Approaches to ownership and control vary between neoliberal endorsements of limited regulation by the state, in the interests of guaranteeing market entry for new competitors, and Marxist critiques of the bourgeois media's agenda for discussing society

- Approaches to textuality vary between *hermeneutic* endeavors, which unearth the meaning of individual programs and link them to broader social formations and problems, and *content-analytic* endeavors, which establish patterns across significant numbers of similar texts, rather than close readings of individual ones

- Approaches to audiences vary between psychological attempts to validate correlations between watching TV and social conduct and culturalist engagements with viewers' sense-making practices.

For the purposes of this article, I am most concerned with purportedly progressive work that seeks to make a difference, to further cultural politics and democracy—that is to say, work of tendency, as opposed to work that aims to divine people's secrets through psychological surveillance.

In preparing Routledge's five-volume latest hits and greatest memories of academic writing on television⁴—from which some of the reflections in this essay draw—and during my five years editing Sage's journal *Television & New Media*, I have been struck by the narrowness of humanities TV studies. The recent make-over by SCMS signals that the operative stature of cinema within the organization is compromised. But I also think that U.S. and British television studies are in danger of making the mistake that has condemned cinema studies to near irrelevancy in the public sphere of popular criticism, state and private policy, social-movement critique, and union issues. That mistake was to set up a series of *nostra* early on about what counted as knowledge and then to police the borders. This is a standard disciplinary tactic.

The particular cinema studies *données* barely need rehearsal: psychoanalysis good, psychology bad. Spectatorship fascinating, audience boring. Archive good, laboratory bad. Criticism good, ethnography bad. Author interesting, wonk dull. Textual analysis good, content analysis bad. What are the equivalent biases in contemporary U.S./U.K. TV studies? I fear that many are shared, though audiences are now deemed interesting insofar as they are populist delegates for analysts' own fandom. In general, criteria and methods have been transferred from one medium to another by those working within the humanities in the English language.

In the United States today, literally millions of people are petitioning the Federal Communications Commission about TV ownership, control, access, and content, and their impact on democracy. When I attend events run by our vibrant media-reform and media-justice movements, I see virtually no one from U.S. TV studies, and can discern no influence from U.S. TV studies in these deliberations. Am I surprised? No.

U.S. television studies takes it as something of a given that the mainstream media are not responsible for—well, anything. This position is a virtual *nostrum* in some research into, for instance, fans of TV drama or sport, who are thought to construct connections with celebrities and actants in ways that mimic friendship, make sense of human interaction, and ignite cultural politics. This critique commonly attacks opponents of television for failing to allot the people's machine its due as a populist apparatus that subverts patriarchy, capitalism, and other forms of oppression. Commercial TV is held to have progressive effects, because its programs are decoded by viewers in keeping with their own social situations. All this is supposedly evident to scholars from their perusal of audience conventions, Web pages, discussion groups, quizzes, and rankings, or by watching television with their children. Very droll. But can fans be said to resist labor exploitation, patriarchy, racism, and U.S. neo-imperialism, or in some specifiable way make a difference to politics beyond their own selves, when they interpret texts unusually, dress up in public as men from outer space, or chat about their romantic frustrations? And why have such practices become so popular in the First World at a moment when media policy fetishizes consumption, deregulation, and governing at a distance?

The strand of U.S. TV studies that I am questioning emerged from venerable U.K.-based critiques of cultural pessimism, political economy, and current affairs-oriented broadcasting. These critiques originated in reactions against a

heavily regulated, duopolistic broadcasting system—1970s Britain—in which the BBC represented a high-culture snobbery that many leftists associated with an oppressive class structure. Hence, the desire for a playful, commercial, noncitizen address as a counter. Change the angle a few degrees to the United States. When these accounts of TV made their Atlantic crossing, there was no public-broadcasting behemoth in need of critique—more a squibby amoeba. And there were lots of not-very-leftist professors and students seemingly aching to hear that U.S. audiences learning about parts of the world that their country bombs, invades, owns, misrepresents, or otherwise exploits were less important, and less political, than those audiences’ interpretations of actually existing local soap operas, wrestling bouts, or science-fiction series. In the United Kingdom, where deregulation has opened up the TV landscape to more commercial endeavors, as per the United States, the original critique of documentary seriousness looks tired—and when added to new forms of academic and government codification of media studies, it has helped depoliticize much research there, as well.⁵

So I think it is time to turn off U.S./U.K. humanities-style TV studies, to look instead at the *study* of television—what animates those it engages across the world. Television is an alembic for understanding society, so we need a compelling interdisciplinarity to comprehend it. Guidance comes from three questions I keep hearing from undergraduates:

- “Will this get me a job in the media?”
- “Is television bad for you?”
- “How do we get that show back on?”

These queries have direct links to the relationships between text and audience, as understood through ethnography and political economy. The respective answers are:

- “If you know who owns and regulates the media, you’ll know where and how to apply.”
- “The answer depends on who is asking the question and why.”
- “If you know how audiences are defined and counted, and how genre functions, you’ll be able to lobby for retention of your favorite programs.”

A new critical TV studies must draw on the fullest-possible array of influences available, transcending “TV studies” in favor of “the study of TV.”

Notes

1. Richard Whittaker Hubbell, *4000 Years of Television: The Story of Seeing at a Distance* (New York: Putnam’s, 1942); St. Clare Patron Saint of Television (1998), a toy; and T. Craughwell, “St. Clare: TV’s Patron,” *Catholic Exchange*, 2004.
2. Rudolf Arnheim, *Film as Art* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), 160–63; Barrett C. Kiesling, *Talking Pictures: How They Are Made, How to Appreciate Them* (Richmond, Va.: Johnson Publishing, 1937), 278; and Dominique Wolton, *Éloge du grand public: Une théorie critique de la télévision* (Paris: Flammarion, 1990).
3. John Hartley, *Uses of Television* (London: Routledge, 1999), 18.
4. Toby Miller, *Television Studies: Critical Concepts in Media and Cultural Studies*, 5 vols. (London: Routledge, 2003).

5. When a group of TV studies scholars did intervene in policy matters, it was in support of video-game industrialists in a law case against a commercial ordinance that required manufacturers to advise parents that their products were risky for young people. "Brief *Amici Curiae* of Thirty-Three Media Scholars in Interactive Digital Software Association, et al. v. St. Louis County, et al." *Particip@tions: International Journal of Audience Research* 1, no. 1; available at www.participations.org; see Stephen Kline. "Media Effects: Redux or Reductive?" *Particip@tions: International Journal of Audience Research* 1, no. 1; available at www.participations.org.