TV’s Next Season?
by Lynn Spigel

For those of us who attended the Second International Television Studies Conference (ITSC) in London in 1986, the 2005 SCMS conference (held in the same building at the University of London Institute of Education) evoked an eerie wave of déjá vu. Talking with friends I met at the ITSC, I recalled how formative that gathering was for TV and cultural studies. The sense of TV ghosts lurking at the 2005 SCMS conference was palpable. Although I admit to some personal nostalgia for that “Golden Age” of TV studies, I think the earlier moment of television scholarship did its work, and now there are different things to do.

In one respect, television scholarship is changing because TV itself is so different from what it was in the past. The demise of the U.S. three-network system, the increasing commercialization of public-service/state-run systems, the rise of multichannel cable and global satellite delivery, multinational conglomerates, Internet convergence, changes in regulatory policies and ownership rules, the advent of high-definition TV, technological changes in screen design, digital video recorders, and new forms of media competition—as well as new forms of programming (e.g., reality TV) and scheduling practices (e.g., year-long seasons or multiplexing)—have all transformed the practice we call watching TV. This does not mean all of television is suddenly unrecognizable—indeed, familiarity and habit continue to be central to the TV experience—but it does mean that television’s past is recognizably distinct from its present.

In the wake of these changes, much of the literature in television studies now seems out of sync with the object it aims to describe. When teaching the seminal books and essays of television studies, I often notice that my students object to aesthetic/cultural theories that were developed to explain terrestrial broadcast systems and pre-VCR TV sets. Although classic texts such as Raymond Williams’s Television: Technology and Cultural Form still have great explanatory value, today’s television systems demand new inquiries and theories.

To be sure, television studies in the humanities has always been a hybrid, interdisciplinary venture, drawing on fields of inquiry that often were at odds with one another. As it developed in the 1970s and 1980s in the Anglophone university and publishing industry, television studies drew upon at least five critical paradigms: (1) the “mass society” critique associated with the Frankfurt School and postwar intellectuals such as Dwight MacDonald; (2) a textual tradition (to borrow John Hartley’s term) associated with literary and film theory and, by the late 1970s, with feminist theories of spectatorship; (3) a journalistic tradition associated especially with theater criticism (in the United States, this tradition formed a canon of Golden Age programming); (4) quantitative and qualitative mass communications research on audiences and content; and (5) cultural studies approaches to media and their audiences. Although
these traditions developed differently in different national contexts, they all formed a discursive field—a set of interrelated ways of speaking about TV—that continues to affect the way we frame television as an object of study. Television studies in the humanities in the 1970s through the 1990s accompanied the rise of cultural studies and the general move away from thinking about TV through top-down models of effects to thinking of television as culture. What followed were a flurry of essays, books, and anthologies that dealt with subjects ranging from institutional history to television aesthetics to genre to spectator theory to audiences and fans. People still study these subjects, and there is still important work to do in these areas. Nevertheless, the field is shifting.

So where is TV studies headed? Honestly, I am not sure, and I do not know if I am going with it. The field—like the object itself—is in a moment of uncertainty. Nonetheless, some trends or shifts seem identifiable.

Insofar as television has always been studied under several disciplinary protocols, it is not surprising that TV is now studied under umbrella terms like new media studies and visual culture studies (which—to make matters more messy—are sometimes both the same field). What is to be gained from studying TV under the rubric of new media? On one hand, it is true that media forms are merging, and to study them in isolation often overlooks not only the technological/industrial convergences but also the cultural convergences that take place among film, television, literature, music, and fine arts. On the other hand, insofar as TV has always been denigrated in universities and at best existed as a poor relation to film, it is not entirely clear that television will fare better if television and new media are linked.

Often, it seems, the term “new media” works to reinvest television in yet another set of cultural hierarchies because the term suggests something avant-garde, high-tech, revolutionary, utopian, and fundamentally “other” than ordinary TV. Today’s universities tend to value anything called new media (or sometimes just media) as a somehow more high-end field of culture, and thus worthy of study. Moreover, the political/moral debates about the Internet, the military applications of new media, and our culture’s general love affair with new technologies make government grants more available and the pursuit of new media more lucrative and prestigious for universities. Despite the fact that the new media are technologies of mass distribution, studying anything that comes over the Internet (including TV shows) has somehow become more legitimate than studying television itself.

That said, there are, of course, important reasons to study new media (and sometimes to study television within this rubric). Scholars have shown how Internet culture rearticulates (and at times replicates) gender, sexual, class, and racial struggles; how it provides alternative modes of “gathering” as communities and political bodies; and how it reconstructs the politics of national borders and our sense of place. Insofar as television studies has been centrally concerned with similar issues, and insofar as television now converges with digital platforms, it seems only right that people who study television would also study the Internet and other digital devices.

Visual culture studies serves more broadly to organize media studies across traditionally separate disciplines or topics and thus to create new dialogues among
them. Recently, art historians have explored the intersections between psychedelic art, Andy Warhol, McLuhanism, the Yippies, and TV/video in the 1960s, while television historians have looked at the relation of television to postwar art and theater movements. However, apart from these specific histories, visual culture studies tend to gravitate either to very old technologies (nineteenth-century photography or visual toys up through early cinema) or to new digital media. When television is studied at all, it is usually in relation to video art and/or digital media, or as a technological apparatus (rather than as a medium consisting of individual programs).

Within visual cultural studies, W.J.T. Mitchell has called for a new kind of “medium theory” that attempts to theorize media in Marshall McLuhan’s wake (although Mitchell claims that his project differs from a general theory of media by eschewing universalizing claims). Along these lines, Mitchell calls for “hybrid disciplinary formations such as visual culture and iconology to address the widely reported phenomenon of a pictorial turn in culture” and speaks to “a media revolution that exceeds the categories of cinema, television, and the mass media.” It is too early to evaluate this project, but it is clear (at least from the talks I have heard) that Mitchell’s “medium theory” is still pretty general, lacking the thick description, context, historicity, and situatedness that have propelled much of the most significant media scholarship. Indeed, one of the great achievements of film and television research over the past thirty years has been the move away from “grand”- or even “medium”-scale abstractions (which is not the same as a move away from theory) toward questions about how film and television intersect with the textures and rhythms of everyday life (the early feminist work that situated the media in relation to women’s time and space is seminal in this respect).

There is a similar “waning of the TV object” in Echographies of Television, Bernard Stiegler’s book-length dialogue with Jacques Derrida, which is ultimately only occasionally about TV and instead a more general dialogue on theoretical issues pertaining to recording technologies, from photography to digital media, and their implications for democracy, citizenship, history, and the state. The discussion is staged and performed televisually (Derrida and Stiegler talk to each other in Derrida’s home while being recorded on camera). Although the discussion is often interesting, it lacks any engagement with work in film or television studies—in fact, ironically, the dialogue “records” this absence.

It is, of course, easy to see all these absences as affronts on “our” TV studies. Given that TV scholars were never exactly welcomed in traditional academic departments (or for that matter in the old SCS), it is easy to feel annoyed, as I am. I wish people who talk about TV would take TV more seriously, actually watch it, and read the scholarship about it.

But my point here isn’t simply to indulge a melodramatic tale of exclusions and humiliations. Rather, it is important to note that the new interest in media across the disciplines is not exactly a cross-disciplinary romance where doors fly open and graduate students with TV dissertations land jobs in art history or comparative literature departments. Despite calls for interdisciplinary mergers, disciplinary boundaries still exist and the familiar canons, mentor networks, and specialized dialogues still reassert themselves. Insofar as I am currently working on projects...
that merge television with interests in architecture and the visual arts, I am all too
aware of my own lack of knowledge in these fields. The goal, I hope, is not to master
all disciplines but to be willing to ask questions from another point of view.

Meanwhile, although it is increasingly interdisciplinary in nature, a more site-
specific project called television studies has been made visible through book series
(such as those published by Duke, Wayne State, and Oxford University Press), jour-
nals such as *TV and New Media*, new online forums such as *Flow*, and conferences
(SCMS and Console-ing Passions). Some of the most interesting work presented
in these forums is still formed out of a cultural materialist project.

TV scholarship spans a diverse set of subjects. Since the 1990s, critical geogra-
phy, national and globalization studies, and ethnographic methods have informed
what is now a growing body of TV/media scholarship on nationhood, mobility, global
flows, satellites, and diaspora.10 Scholars are also writing in new ways about televisi-
on, education, citizenship, and cultural policy.11 In increasingly interdisciplinary
ways, scholars continue to consider television—as well as computers, cell phones,
and other everyday media—in relation to the social place, use, and meanings of
media in domestic and public contexts.12 Recent industry studies offer new insights
into contemporary TV/media production practices,13 and there is a continuing and
large body of work on gender, feminism, postfeminism, girls, and/or sexual differ-
ence/queer theory.14

There is also a sustained interest in fans and audiences15 and a welcome
reinvestment in underexplored issues of television genre, narrative, aesthetics,
and program forms/schedules.16 So too, television historians are rethinking the
“discursive series” into which television might be placed so that TV history may
be explored in relation to historical events and cultural practices that previously
seemed separate or distinct.17 Finally, there is a good deal of speculation about the
future (or end) of television and television scholarship—both in casual conversation
and in the literature.18

Paradoxically, the recent interest in the future of television also has a history.
Looking back on the history of TV scholarship, we see that television has seemed
perpetually on the verge of transformation. In 1986, when Phillip Drummand and
Richardson Paterson published papers from the First International Television
Studies Conference (held in 1984), they titled their book *Television in Transition*.19
A final chapter on “the future” (exploring topics ranging from educational TV and
UHF to video to convergence) is somewhat of a convention of the TV book. This
“future chapter” runs through such classic texts as Erik Barnouw’s *Tube of Plenty*
(1975, 1990), Raymond Williams’s *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* (1974),
and John Ellis’s *Visible Fictions* (1982). It is also found in less well known studies
on television written over the past fifty years.20

Indeed, even as television promises to deliver a “live,” instantaneous sense of
the present, the future—as a mental construct—has been consistently necessary
to the secondary (critical) elaboration of the sociopolitical import and meaning
of television in culture. In this respect, this In Focus section of Cinema Journal
is a symptom of the television scholar’s endless projection of her/himself into the
speculative realm of what media will be. Meanwhile, television’s “present” (its sheer
density and dissonance of material) is harder to see, even when—or perhaps be-
cause—you can now record it, edit it, and maybe even watch it later on your PC.

Notes


7. See, for example, Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader*; 2d ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002); Lauren Rabinovitz and Abraham Geil, eds., *Memory Bytes: History,*


17. John Caughie’s *British Television Drama* explores television within a larger history of postwar British theater movements; Steven Classen’s *Watching Jim Crow* studies television within the oral history of the black leaders and citizens engaged in the famous legal battle against TV station WLBT (in Jackson, Mississippi) during the civil rights era; Jeffrey
When Paramount Studios announced that the president of Fox Broadcasting, Gail Berman, was taking over the creative reins at Paramount's film studios, the news was greeted cynically across Hollywood as a coup by television wannabes, more evidence of stifling interference by conglomerates, or as a supreme corporate miscalculation about how the cultures of television production and film production fundamentally differ. In responding to the question “Can a creature of television run a film studio,” no less a source than Variety editor Peter Bart publicly educated “Gail” in patronizing terms by recalling Brandon Tartikoff's TV takeover thirteen years earlier:

Make modestly budgeted versions of TV shows such as The Addams Family. Use TV talent to shoot quickies like All I Want for Christmas. Most important, don’t get caught up in the chase for big stars and glitzy projects. . . . Television and film are both entertainment, but they’re profoundly different. . . . He lasted only 15 months in his new job.¹

While Bart delivered his cautionary tale, spurred by anxieties about declining creative quality, other film-to-TV crossovers, such as superproducer Jerry Bruckheimer (maker of the hit series CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, Without a Trace, and Cold


18. See, for example, Ellis, Seeing Things; John Corner, “Television 2000,” in Critical Ideas in Television Studies (London: Oxford, 1999), 120–28. Paddy Scannell and Elihu Katz are currently preparing a conference/project on the idea that television has come to an end. We shall see. The title of my own recent coedited collection, Television after TV, suggests something less final, as does my introduction to that collection, which elaborates in more detail on some of the issues I have raised here. See Lynn Spigel, “Introduction,” in Spigel and Olsson, eds., Television after TV, 1–34.


Welcome to the Viral Future of Cinema (Televison)

by John T. Caldwell

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