Sometimes doing things well can be the cause of eventual disaster. The doleful cobbler was a case in point:

The stouter I cobble the less I earn,
For the soles ne’er crack nor the uppers turn.
The better my work the less my pay,
But work can only be done one way.

—The Cobbler’s Song (1916)¹

The better the cobbler mended people’s shoes, the less they needed him; but he could only do it well. IBM is another example. Big Blue made mainframe computers, and because it did that well, Microsoft’s PC all but destroyed the company.

People have been doing screen studies for some time now, often very well. Is this a recipe for disaster? In the new edition of Global Hollywood, Toby Miller and his colleagues ask the question this way: “Is screen studies serving phantasmatic projections of humanities critics’ narcissism?” And more simply: “What would it take for screen studies to matter more?” According to this view, several decades of screen studies has achieved self-loathing and uselessness. Miller et al. counsel that we should avoid the “reproduction of ‘screen studies’ in favour of work that studies the screen, regardless of its intellectual provenance.”²

Is the same true for television? Is there such a thing as television studies, or should we stick with interdisciplinary “work that studies television” (hereafter WTSTV)? Either way, is WTSTV the cavalry, riding into town just in the nick of time to rescue screen studies from self-loathing? Will WTSTV solve the problem of uselessness? But before we celebrate what Russian formalist Victor Shklovsky might have called “the canonisation of the junior branch,”³ we might pause and ask where the study of television came from, because it would not be wise to continue to study it if it is “a load of old cobblers”¹—people doing something well that guarantees them eventual despair.

Cinema Journal 45, No. 1, Fall 2005 101

¹The Cobbler’s Song (1916)
I first thought of television as a discipline in the 1970s. The idea came from TV itself, from a show called *University Challenge*. It was a quiz show modeled on the even more venerable U.S. *College Bowl*. For twenty-five years, beginning in 1962, *University Challenge* was hosted by Bamber Gascoigne. Gascoigne exuded posh, urbane scholarliness during a time when universities were unchallenged as finishing schools for top people and professionals. Gascoigne “came up” to Magdalene College at Cambridge in 1955 to “read” English, and he always introduced contestants on the show by saying what they “read” at university. From about 1978 on, I always hoped to hear him introduce some scion of learning as “so-and-so, University of Somewhere, reading television.” This was because I had just coauthored a book with that very title. But of course it never happened.

Sometime during *University Challenge’s* run, British universities were themselves challenged to adapt to the changing social and economic circumstances of the affluent welfare society. After the publication of the Robbins Report (1963), universities succumbed to an irreversible trend to open up to the masses. Some of the latter—I was one—learned a little about universities by watching the show: “For many of the viewers, it was their first contact with that alien beast, the student, and did much to make university more accessible to people who hadn’t been to Eton.”

Audiences persistently liked know-it-alls, whether highbrow, as featured on *University Challenge* or *Mastermind*, or the other sort, on shows such as *Double Your Money* or *Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?* It may even be said that this light-hearted entertainment softened up the general public for the “knowledge economy” by showing it as a competitive advantage.

But the influx of plebeian students could not “read” television in the way that their predecessors may have “read” Greats (classics) or PPE (politics, philosophy, and economics). The times were not propitious for so demotic a pursuit, not only because TV was widely dismissed as unworthy but also because everyone was already an expert. Knowledge of television was neither scarce nor valuable. Watching TV was in the domain of consumption, not production, and invested in the viewer a form of tacit, not explicit, knowledge acquired in domestic privacy, not public life. There was no special disciplinary method or professional expertise to be learned. As for “doing” TV, the business side involved generic marketing and business skills for which an MBA would do, while practical production crews were unionized proletarians, not artistic graduates. What was there to study?

Given such barren ground, television studies grew only indirectly as “work that studies TV”—a “problem” in disciplines like sociology and psychology. Studies were devoted to showing how TV affected other people’s behavior (the masses, women, children, and so forth). *Liking* TV was also a problem, not a proper topic for higher education. In the “old” humanities, like history, English, art, or politics, TV was largely ignored, or was a “bad object.” The point of including it in the curriculum was to teach students how to resist it, in the name of national values, “critical reading,” public culture, or a polity unsullied by mediated commercial entertainment. As a result, WTSTV was developed first and most influentially by those who pathologized, feared, or opposed TV.
Sometime during the 1970s and 1980s, TV theory did begin to grow out of an amalgam of critical humanities and behavioral social sciences. It was devoted to understanding, on one hand, values (human, aesthetic, cultural)—the domain of the critic—and, on the other hand, behaviors (psychological, social)—the terrain of the clinic. Mix in the influence of politicized “high theory” (structuralism, psychoanalysis, Marxism, postmodernism) and countercultural “new social movements” associated with identity (class, gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, age, first peoples, subcultures based on consumption), and you had the makings of television theory.

WTSTV was elaborated on the ground of these values, behaviors, theory, and identities. Unfortunately, WTSTV did not posit TV as a “we” sort of system. When English forced its way into the university curriculum in the late nineteenth century, literary studies—and film studies too, later on—were founded on a positive: literature was a “good thing,” and it was okay both to like it as a consumer and to harbor ambitions toward professional practice; there was honor in both. But WTSTV was founded on a negative, like the study of deviance. TV was theorized as a “they” sort of problem: a symptom of whatever needs to be resisted or opposed in the formation of selves in modernity; among those who studied TV, liking or practicing it was greeted not with honor but horror.

In the 1950s, Nancy Mitford popularized the terms U and non-U to identify class differences in language. U people said “napkin,” while non-U people said “serviette.” This was code for class hatred on all sides—a deep well that has watered British TV comedy for decades with snobbish social climbers like Margot Leadbetter (The Good Life), Sybil Fawlty (Fawlty Towers), and Hyacinth Bouquet (Keeping Up Appearances). The distinction extended to the academic world, where it remains a force. For instance, it is U to be a film theorist or critic but non-U to be a film buff—the latter reeking of unsystematic thought and amateur enthusiasm, signifying nothing but personal consumption of dubious taste. At a banal level, it is U to study film; non-U to study TV. More weirdly, WTSTV is U if it is about values, behavior, theory, and identity; non-U if it is about television “in itself.”

Television practice was interested in neither value nor behavior. How might a bright person make a career in television? Don’t study it. If you wanted to be a producer, writer, or director, you might study accounting, English, or art, respectively. Or take a “Nike diploma” (“just do it”); plenty of the best did. Production did become part of university courses but rarely as an industry training scheme (other than in journalism schools). If taught as film, it was art. If taught as “media,” it was an extension of “critical reading,” not done as an apprenticeship to industrial discipline but as an attempt to “demystify” the workings of an “ideological apparatus” by getting students to “encode” as well as “decode.”

“Critique” arose from a combination of Frankfurt School critical philosophical and literary theory (critique of ideology). The original idea was to make a systematic study of the conditions and consequences of knowledge. But the term became a euphemism for the practice of applying negative evaluations to contemporary life. Did “critique” explain television “in itself” by making a systematic study of its conditions and consequences? Perhaps the nearest serious attempt was Birmingham’s...
Policing the Crisis. It was not about television, but in every other respect it was the “critical” full Monty. More frequent by far were “critical readings” that analyzed something on or about television with the purpose of finding it wanting (“narcissism” in Toby Miller’s terms). Such critics could get jobs as academics, but they were very unlikely to (want to) work in TV.

WTSTV was not propagated through the great “sandstone” universities where professional, business, and government elites were educated. It took them twenty-five years to let it in. It was taught by those for whom TV was a problem at best and an anathema at worst. However, it was studied by students—especially at new universities—for whom TV was the principal form of leisure entertainment and a pretty good career option. WTSTV spread like a prairie fire through the “junior branch” of higher education. This was where the beneficiaries of mass consumerism and rapidly rising post–World War II affluence were gathered: the children of white-collar suburbia and blue-collar full employment. These universities represented the penetration of tertiary education to places where it had never aspired to go—deep into the working class, among girls, even among some welfare-dependent poor, ethnic minorities, and immigrants. Such folk were not critics, not professionals, not revolutionaries. But they were consumers. They liked television, and some wanted to work in the media. Without cultural capital from family or class, they needed a general education and some certification to get there.

These same people were also citizens, and their civic education attracted the passionate interest of those who wanted to extend among all citizens various educational ideologies of the day—critical literacy (Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams), countercultural critique (Stuart Hall), identity politics (e.g., feminism), or emancipation (however construed) via education. This weird combination of citizen (resist!) and consumer (desire!) sustained WTSTV right through from Hoggart to the end of the broadcast era, to which we shall now fast-forward.

With the realignment of British politics in 1997 via New Labour, the modernizers (e.g., the Demos think tank and John Lloyd in the New Statesman) came out in force. Among the challenges they issued was this: what are universities for? It was a good question, despite the unsettling implication that the “wrong” answer might reduce public funding. It drew attention to what universities had become since the 1960s—finishing schools for the lumpen-manageriat and the comfortably complacent sons and daughters of Margot Leadbetter, Sybil Fawlty, and Hyacinth Bouquet.

Academics were demoralized about their own loss of status and reward, but were they preparing students for the kind of world and the patterns of work that would confront them after graduation? Despite energetic local efforts, the university system was still not responsive enough to the educational needs of the majority of the population. If universities were not part of an urgent modernization of business, government, and society, then what were they for?

In 2000, I went to Queensland University of Technology (QUT) in Australia to try something new. I wanted to combine symbolic with economic values in a project
of educational renewal that was designed both to grow jobs and gross domestic product and to repurpose the arts and humanities. At QUT, we looked at the economic, social, and educational forces that might influence the direction and survivability of the university.

In July 2001, I closed QUT’s Faculty of Arts and launched the world’s first Creative Industries Faculty. The arts, computers, entertainment media, and telecommunications were no longer separate industries but aspects of the same emergent phenomenon. No longer was it viable to think of infrastructure (information technology), connectivity (telecommunications), and content (media) as distinct disciplines and to separate them from “culture” and the creative and performing arts.

Furthermore, if the new economy was to be based on consumer action and not behavior, and on innovation in the services sector, there was a need to get beyond behaviorist models of the consumer and marketing models of society. Graduates needed capabilities that would enable them to act with confidence both as consumers and citizens and to create affluence, both economic and symbolic, out of their own talents and actions.

The organizational unit that houses education for the creative industries (including TV) won’t look anything like a department. It might be called a “creative educational incubator.” It must be:

1. Research led—driven by the external environment and end-user focus, not disciplinary legacy and supply-side expertise
   - Institutional renewal driven by research excellence

2. Interdisciplinary
   - Among creative disciplines, to bring together creative and performing arts, media and communication, and digital technologies, oriented to the “new economy” and commercial applications of artistic talent
   - Among many disciplines (e.g., law, business, IT, education), because no creative industry can operate without regulation, entrepreneurship, technology, and human capital (workforce and consumer)

3. International—“whatever the question, the answer is China.” Or India. There needs to be trade in educational qualifications in this era of global creative services, as well as development programs to extend capabilities to less favored regions.

4. Distributed—involving partners in
   - different levels of educational provision (schools/higher education/further education)
   - industry, and agencies to promote transition from education to economic productivity

5. Bicameral (increasingly)
   - undergraduate education for general education toward “creative consumer citizenship”
   - postgraduate training for “craft”
6. Integrated values

- theory, practice, and critique folded into innovation
- symbolic and economic values folded into educational outcomes

Television is integrated into consumer services and into what is known as the “experience” economy, touching many sectors including education, government, journalism, and sport. It is as reliant on law and regulation as it is on technology. It needs enterprise skills as much as creative talent. It thrives on consumers—but they are changing into very different animals in front of its very eyes.

Good WTSTV may be in a position to shape some of the changes that are beginning to spurt from the fissures that have opened between the broadcast era and the interactive age. It may also be able to influence educational renewal more generally. If so, we should stop doing what, like a load of old cobblers, we have been doing so well, because the intramural “invention” of television thus far has produced a field of study that is better at lambasting its object of study than improving it. That is our “university challenge.” If we get the answer right, and surely we can do better than self-loathing and uselessness, we may even help to answer the question of what universities can be for in the interactive era of consumer cocreation.

Notes

1. The cobbler was Baba Mustafa, a character in Oscar Asche’s Chu Chin Chow (music by Frederick Norton), first performed in London in 1916; hear the song sung by Peter Dawson: Songs and Arias. Memoir Classics 1996, CDMOIR 434; see also the 1934 film: imdb.com/title/tt0024978/.
4. See worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-cobl.htm, especially if you speak American English or think “cobblers” are something you cook.
5. collegebowl.com/arch/history.asp.
7. magd.cam.ac.uk/alumni/gascoign.html.
8. The 1963 Robbins Report on Higher Education precipitated a massive expansion of British universities and the establishment of the “binary system” of (research) universities and (technical) polytechnics that lasted until further reforms in the 1990s (see lse.ac.uk/resources/LSEHistory/robbins.htm).
12. demos.co.uk/: see also demos.org/ (USA).
13. We have not reached this point at QUT but may need to, even though Australia has no tradition of training creative crafts at the postgraduate level except at the specialist Australian Film Radio and TV School (AFTRS).