

The Development of Television Studies

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Since the 1990s “Television Studies” has become a frequently applied term in academic settings. In departments devoted to examination of both media, it parallels “Film Studies.” In more broadly dispersed departments of “Communication Studies,” it supplements approaches to television variously described as “social science” or “quantitative” or “mass communication.” The term has become useful in identifying the work of scholars who participate in meetings of professional associations such as the recently renamed Society for Cinema and Media Studies as well as groups such as the National Communication Association (formerly the Speech Communication Association), the International Communication Association, the Broadcast Education Association, and the International Association of Media and Communication Research. These broad-based organizations have long regularly provided sites for the discussion of television and in some cases provided pages in sponsored scholarly journals for the publication of research related to the medium. In 2000, the *Journal of Television and New Media Studies*, the first scholarly journal to approximate the “television studies” designation, was launched.

Seen from these perspectives, “Television Studies” is useful primarily in an institutional sense. It can mark a division of labor inside academic departments (though not yet among them – so far as I know, no university has yet established a “Department of Television Studies”), a random occasion for gathering like-minded individuals, a journal title or keyword, or merely the main chance for attracting more funds, more students, more equipment – almost always at least an ancillary goal of terminological innovation in academic settings.

That the term could also potentially denote what some might call an “academic field,” or, more aggressively, “a discipline,” however, causes as many problems as it solves. Indeed, as Toby Miller cautions:

We need to view the screen through twin theoretical prisms. On the one hand, it can be understood as the newest component of sovereignty, a twentieth-century cultural addition to ideas of patrimony and rights that sits alongside such traditional

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topics as territory, language, history, and schooling. On the other hand, the screen is a cluster of culture industries. As such, it is subject to exactly the rent-seeking practices and exclusionary representational protocols that characterize liaisons between state and capital. We must avoid reproducing a thing called, for example, “cinema or TV studies or new media (urggh) studies,” and instead do work that studies the screen texts and contexts, regardless of its intellectual provenance. (*Politics and Culture*, Issue 1, 2002, <http://aspen.conncoll.edu/politicsandculture/arts.cfm?id=40>)

It is, of course, significant that Miller is also editor of *Television and New Media* (2002), and elsewhere, in the preface to a collection of commentary (boldly entitled *Television Studies*), on various aspects of the medium, has written:

can anyone seriously argue against seeking to understand how and why television and its audiences make meaning? Of course, people can and do object, and one aim of this book is to convince doubting siblings, peers, and hegemonies of the need for television studies. But the principal goal is to open up the field of thinking about television to students and show them how it can be analysed and changed. (BFI Publishing, 2002, p. vii)

I juxtapose these apparently varying statements not to “catch” Miller in “contradiction,” much less to make light of comments from a scholar I consider a central contributor to whatever we choose to designate under the heading in question. Rather, I cite Miller’s well-considered perspectives to indicate the troubling complexities encountered in any attempt to place this particular medium inside clearly defined boundaries. Miller’s latter phrase in the introduction to his handbook, “show them how it can be analysed and changed,” is indicative of a forceful motivation shared by many of us who have spent considerable time and effort in examining the complex phenomenon we call television. Indeed, that television needs changing is probably one of the most widely shared assumptions of the second half of the twentieth century, and certainly one that shows no signs of diminishing presence.

By contrast, the notion that television requires, or even that calls for change would somehow demand, “analysis,” is widely considered silly. As Miller’s comments indicate, the mere suggestion that television needs analysis itself requires supportive argument. “Everyone” knows how to think about, presumably how to “change” television. The sense that any change would either imply, or explicitly rely upon, *specific types* of analysis, *specific questions*, *particular bodies of knowledge*, flies in the face of our common and “commonsensical” experience of the ubiquitous appliance and its attendant “content.” And if some of these bodies of knowledge, these questions, these strategies for analysis might be contradictory, or subversive of one another, or perhaps internally incoherent, the waters are muddied more thickly.

Moreover, there is yet another angle on this topic that is preliminary to any thorough description of the “development” of “Television Studies.” It is impor-

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tant to recognize that “Television Studies” is not the same thing as “studying television.” Even the most skeptical or hostile critic of the former may have no hesitation in supporting the latter. Indeed, the skepticism and hostility emerge precisely with attempts to extract television from other “studiable” topics and problems inside which television, while perhaps hugely significant, remains subordinate. It is with these varied approaches to “studying television,” however, that any account of the development of the potentially institutionalized and focused designation must begin.

As I have indicated elsewhere, a number of those who paid early attention to the medium speculated in broad philosophical terms about its place in society and culture (see, for example, Newcomb, 1974). One example, Lee De Forest, will suffice. Best noted for contributions to the development of television technologies, De Forest was also deeply concerned – and broadly optimistic – about the sociocultural power of the medium. Television would, he believed, contribute to the rise of a particular social formation.

A population which once more centers its interest in the home will inherit the earth, and find it good. It will be a maturer population, with hours for leisure in small homes, away from today’s crowded apartments. Into such a picture ideally adapted to the benefits and physical limitations of television, this new magic will enter and become a vital element of daily life.

This new leisure, more wisely used, welcoming the gifts, entertaining, cultural, educational, which radio and television will bestow, shall eventually produce new outlooks on life, and new and more understanding attitudes toward living. (De Forest, 1942, p. 356)

Embedded, rather remarkably, in this brief commentary, are multiple versions of possibilities and problems that continue to motivate a variety of topics related to television studies. The domestic nature of the medium, its range of offerings, its relation to time and space, its ability to affect attitudes and behaviors – all these observations lead to questions still open to exploration. And, of course, this last cluster of implied topics in De Forest’s list, television’s “effects” on behavior and attitude, quickly came to the fore in the early years of the medium’s development as the “essential” questions to be addressed. But rather than exploring them within De Forest’s optimistic frame, as “gifts,” the effects were most often framed and examined as social problems. In this context, of television “as” social problem, a first wave of major studies of television came to prominence. And it is also the case that these questions were perceived as “essential” in two ways – as crucial questions for society, and as the “essence” of the medium itself. To try to think of “television” as other than the conduit for and/or cause of these problems required effort, if not audacity. One need only search under the keywords, “Television: Social Aspects,” in library catalogs to discover large numbers of books, many of them bibliographies containing far larger numbers of essays, to survey the results of approaches to television from this perspective.

Still, it would be a mistake to suggest that these materials suggest an overly simple dichotomy between “the social sciences” and “the humanities,” with the latter providing all the sources for newer uses of “television studies.” Many examinations of television by social psychologists, sociologists, economists, political scientists, and others began early and continue to address questions and provide information, even “data,” powerfully useful for any full understanding of the medium. It is also the case, as I shall suggest later, that “television studies” best understood implies (perhaps requires) the power of blended, melded research strategies that, while reshaping some of the issues and questions underpinning earlier work, profit by returning to them from new angles. Moreover, it is helpful to remember that much work from earlier periods was conducted by scholars for whom rigid divides among “fields,” “disciplines,” “approaches,” and “methods” were less important than they may have become in harsher circumstances driven by the meager reward systems afforded by academic institutions – departmental resources, personal prestige, or narrow requirements for individual advancement and personal job security. Television, like film and radio before it, was a subject, a topic, and a source of great intellectual interest, attracting attention from many scholars from many fields as a result of a sensed obligation to acknowledge potential change of great import. The famous exchanges and collaborations between Paul Lazarsfeld and Theodor Adorno can be taken as exemplary struggles over appropriate questions and approaches without demand for final divisions, even though this is rarely the case when terms such as “administrative” and “critical” are attached to “research” as categories in conflict. And it is certainly worth recalling that Wilbur Schramm, often cited as one of the founders of social scientific media research, began his career with the study of literature. The foreword to his book, *Two Creative Traditions in English Poetry* (1939), was written by the great literary scholar Norman Foerster. And with Foerster and others, Schramm served as co-editor of *Literary Scholarship: Its Aims and Methods* (1941). It was hardly likely to be the case that all concern for expressive culture disappeared when he and his colleagues developed their work on children and television, or on the media as related to national development strategies.

In spite of these multiple connections and relations, however, there is no need to ignore the fact that television has most often been approached from single perspectives. Such precisely focused questions, and attendant methods of analysis or argument, generally reflect deep interests directed toward specific agendas. Thus, for the social psychologist concerned with the welfare of children, any study of television must gather data of a certain sort, capable of securing a voice in the arena of public policy, or at least in the appropriate bodies of academic literature that might be cited in public debate. For the economist focused on international flows of media, however, children’s programming might be examined as a relatively inexpensive commodity best understood within the context of “public good” economic theory. Programming thus cited may be used as an

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example of why certain producing entities or nations have come to have particular influence in world markets. For the scholar of technology, the programs themselves might hold little or no interest, while processes of production and distribution could be fascinating. For the critic, whose approaches are grounded in a range of humanistic fields and who expresses interest in the history of fictional forms, the same body of programs might be “read” as versions of expressive culture, works that rely on familiar forms of narration, stories that can be placed within a very long tradition of “representation.” Many of these focused agendas have resulted from a perceived need to “fill gaps,” or to offer “new” perspectives on familiar phenomena. Thus, when humanities-based critics and scholars turned their attention to television’s fictional programming it was often with the goal of “supplementing” (or, perhaps more arrogantly, “correcting”), analyses conducted by social psychologists, economists, or technologists, and social psychologists turning to issues of large social effects may have intended to “extend” or “expand” work focused solely on television and children.

More interesting questions begin to emerge, however, when the critic suggests to the social psychologist that it is impossible to study children’s responses without some sophisticated notion of narrative theory, or when the economist is challenged by a political economist arguing that the relatively limited number of circulated forms and genres is the result of powerful interests in control of “storytelling” in all cultural and social contexts, or when a specialist in media technologies examines the roles of new media devices alter the processes and outcomes of producing works for children.

It is here, in my view, in the interstices of methodological facility and discipline or field grounded problematics that “Television Studies” begins to find its ground. But getting “here” can be mapped in a variety of configurations. In the introductory essay to *Television: The Critical View* (2000), I chart one pathway – typically, the one most influential in my own efforts – leading to current developments. In this account the first influential turn can be described as the rise of questions related to “popular culture studies,” a movement primarily grounded in varieties of “literary” analysis and determined to take seriously works considered underappreciated because of structured hierarchies involving the sociology of taste and the aims of humanistic education as molder of citizenship. In higher education settings in the United States in the late 1960s those who decided to study popular expressive culture – popular literature, comics, sport, popular music – made particular choices that would involve struggles for place within university curricula and charges of triviality in the general press. Film Studies had secured a foothold by focusing on international cinema as art, but also faced uphill battles when the field turned to American popular movies. Television was among the last topics for which legitimacy was sought.

That these events, decisions, and movements began at that particular time is telling. My argument suggests the following motivations, with specific attention to other developments in the United States.

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The choice to examine these “inferior” or “unappreciated” forms was motivated by a number of concerns. Philosophically, scholars in this movement often felt the works they wished to examine were more indicative of larger cultural preferences, expressive of a more “democratic” relationship between works and audiences than the “elite” works selected, archived, and taught as the traditional canon of humanistically valued forms of expression.

Politically, these same impulses suggested that it was important to study these works precisely because their exclusion from canonical systems also excluded their audiences, devalued large numbers of citizens, or saddled them with inferior intellectual or aesthetic judgment. (Newcomb, 2000, p. 2)

Despite the “political” motivation behind the study of popular culture, there was little overt analysis of “ideology.” The sense of “rescuing” the materials from complete dismissal was considered a form of activism, and certainly led to substantial political conflict in academic settings. But it was the development of “Cultural Studies” in Britain that began far more thorough analyses of the medium, among other “cultural” topics, with a fundamental commitment to ideology critique. This work drew heavily on a range of Marxist social and cultural theory, as well as on other “continental” philosophies. In this setting culturalists also engaged in debate with those championing stricter applications of Marxist political economy, who viewed cultural studies as, at times, myopic regarding issues of ownership and control of media industries. The cultural studies perspectives, and sometimes the attendant debates involving political economy, were quickly taken up in the United States and were a second, if not parallel influence on the development of television studies there. It should be noted here that while there was comparatively little influence flowing from the United States to Britain regarding these matters, it remained the case that British and other European scholars – and later, Asian and Latin American scholars as well – often focused on television produced in the United States as sites for analysis or theory development. Indeed, the powerful presence of US television throughout the world became a central topic of discussion in the cultural studies literatures and that content has undoubtedly had its own influence on various approaches to the medium at large.

Cultural studies also blended easily with a third strain of influence in television studies – critical sociology. Here, scholars drew on the work of the Frankfurt School of sociocultural analysis, and often viewed television as the latest in a line of “culture industries” spreading false consciousness, turning masses of popular culture users into mere fodder for pernicious political control (see Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972).

Academic critics working both from this tradition and from sharper versions of cultural studies frequently critiqued what they considered to be a central weakness in the earlier “popular culture” approach, its apparent reliance on a naïve notion of “liberal pluralism” when examining many expressive forms. The arrival of “British cultural studies” required and enabled some scholars working

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within the tradition of critical sociology to sharpen their own critiques, to recognize weaknesses and gaps in their work, and to move toward a more complex perspective on television and other topics by recognizing greater textual complexity in industrially produced expressive culture.

As suggested earlier, a fourth influence in this account must be the array of film studies expanding in academic settings. “Art” films, “foreign” films, often constituted the subject matter in some earlier classes devoted to film studies, and, as with television, many analytical approaches were modifications of literary studies. “Film appreciation” classes were also popular among students (and, because they enrolled large numbers, equally popular with administrators and teachers in liberal arts literature departments), as were the offerings, relatively few in number, devoted to the technical production of films. The push to study popular American film – to study “Hollywood” – drew many of the same negative responses as those leveled at the study of television. Still, with a degree of “support” from European scholars and critics/filmmakers who praised the unrecognized “artistry” of Hollywood film and filmmakers, American film topics found their place in the academy. The entire body of film studies quickly developed subdivisions and an array of analytical approaches, methods, and theories. In some quarters and some journals, the field also developed its own specialized languages, often cited by beginning students, journalists, or “visitors” from other fields of study as unduly arcane. By the 1980s a number of film scholars were also attending to television. In some cases the turn to the newer medium enriched approaches that were already being applied. In others, film theory and analysis foundered in encounters with features fundamentally distinct from those for which they were developed.

One area in which film scholars encountered difficult problems involved actual settings and behaviors surrounding the practices of viewing the media. While “spectatorship” had become a major topic of film analysis, the domestic aspects of television viewing, combined with its role as advertising medium, repetitive or serialized narrative structures, and genres merged within the television schedule, led to serious reconsideration or revision of notions regarding actual viewer experiences. In somewhat fortuitous fashion, British cultural studies had posited the study of audiences as a major topic within the study of mass media. Drawing on the model developed by Stuart Hall, analytical strategies had developed around notions of “encoding and decoding” television “texts.” By examining the professional/institutional/production process at one pole of this model and the activities of audiences at the other, emphasis on the “actual” audience became a central component of study of television. The notion of the “active audience” became a central tenet in much of this work, often used to counter earlier studies of “media effects” and a range of “ethnographic” approaches, drawn from anthropology replaced or amplified the “survey” and “experimental” methods of social psychologists.

This focus on audience activity became a major focus of the emerging television studies arena and was also central to yet another influential stream in the

development of television studies – the development of a range of feminist approaches to media and culture. Focus on gendered distinctions has ranged from studies of production and performance involving women to theories of narrative. And the focus on active audiences has been a basic strategy for redeeming such denigrated forms as the soap opera. Television has even been defined, problematically, as a more “feminine” medium, in part because of its domestic setting and, in the US industries, its constant flow of advertising, often directed at women as primary consumers in households. Feminist theory has cut through and across almost all previous approaches to television, altering or challenging basic assumptions at every juncture.

A number of these factors came together in several works in the mid-1980s, most notably in the work of John Fiske. That analysis began in collaboration with John Hartley, *Reading Television* (1978), a significant study grounded in literary theory and semiotics, but pushing those approaches to the study of television in exciting new ways. By 1987 Fiske had articulated an overarching approach in *Television Culture*, a work that began to develop ideas considered radical, even in cultural studies circles. The most prominent concept, one developed further in later studies, suggested that the ability – indeed, the power and authority – of viewers could perhaps match or even override that of television “texts,” and by implication the ideological authority in which those texts were grounded. In some instances Fiske suggested that viewers could perhaps subvert messages and, by creating meanings of their own, create a type of ideological response to dominant ideology. Fiske was soundly taken to task by those who found such a view far too “populist,” too naïve. (See, for example, McGuigan, 1992 and 1996.) In my own view, however, Fiske never lost sight of the applied power afforded by access to production, control of discursive systems, and political policies. Rather, his work reminds us that the results of such power is always uneven in its effectivity, couched in multiple and varying contexts, and significant to individuals and groups in very different ways. The debates sparked by this body of work continue.

The account presented thus far suggests only one version of the development of television studies. In it, various emphases, on television programs, industries, audiences, remain, in varying degree, discreet. Or, better put, they remain fundamental starting points for applied work. Similar starting points are also found in another survey of the development of television studies constructed by Charlotte Brunsdon:

Television studies emerges in the 1970s and 1980s from three major bodies of commentary on television: journalism, literary/dramatic criticism and the social sciences. The first, and most familiar, was daily and weekly journalism . . . The second body of commentary is also organized through ideas of authorship, but here it is the writer or dramatist who forms the legitimation for the attention to television. Critical method here is extrapolated from traditional literary and dramatic criticism, and television attracts serious critical attention as a “home theatre” . . .

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Both of these bodies of commentary are mainly concerned to address what was shown on the screen, and thus conceive of television mainly as a text within the arts humanities academic traditions. Other early attention to television draws, in different ways, on the social sciences to address the production, circulation and function of television in contemporary society. Here, research has tended not to address the television text as such, but instead to conceptualise television either through notions of its social *function* and *effects*, or within a governing question of *cui bono?* (whose good is served?). Thus television, along with other of the mass media, is conceptualised within frameworks principally concerned with the maintenance of social order; the reproduction of the status quo, the relationship between the state, media ownership and citizenship, the constitution of the public sphere.

. . . Methodologies here have been greatly contested, particularly in the extent to which Marxist frameworks, or those associated with the critical sociology of the Frankfurt School have been employed. These debates have been given further impetus in recent years by research undertaken under the loose definition of cultural studies. The privileged texts, if attention has been directed at texts, have been news and current affairs, and particularly special events such as elections, industrial disputes and wars. It is this body of work which is least represented in “television studies”, which, as an emergent discipline, tends towards the textualisation of its object of study. (Brunsdon, 1997, pp. 1647–9)

Brunsdon goes on to discuss, as I have above, the move toward audience studies and the overarching influence of feminist approaches to the medium. She then concludes:

Television studies in the 1990s, then, is characterised by work in four main areas. The most formative for the emergent discipline have been the work on the definition and interpretation of the television text and the new media ethnographies of viewing which emphasise both the contexts and the social relations of viewing. However, there is a considerable history of “production studies” which trace the complex interplay of factors involved in getting programmes on screen . . . Increasingly significant also is the fourth area, that of television history . . . This history of television is a rapidly expanding field, creating a retrospective history for the discipline, but also documenting the period of nationally regulated terrestrial broadcasting – the “television” of “television studies” – which is now coming to an end.

These same lines of influence are again reconfigured in John Corner’s overview text, *Critical Ideas in Television Studies* (1999); Corner begins with a distinction between “Television as Research Object,” (p. 6) and “Television and Criticism” (p. 7). As in other accounts he identifies the former with “anxiety about [television’s] influence,” focused on matters such as “a distortion of politics,” or “the displacement of culture.” With either concern the focus of “research” has been “the individual viewer.” This approach, he suggests, misses two important aspects of the medium. First, he points out that television is itself “culturally constitutive, directly involved in the circulation of the meanings and values out

of which a popular sense of politics and culture is made and which also then provides the interpretative resources for viewing” and, secondly, “that all of the television which we watch will bring about some modification in our knowledge and experience, however minor and temporary” (p. 6). Criticism, on the other hand, has a different set of concerns: “I take a defining feature of critical activity to be an engagement with the signficatory organization of television programmes themselves, with the use of images and language, generic conventions, narrative patterns, and modes of address to be found there” (p. 7). The questions emerging from such matters foreground “the critic’s own interpretive resources as a specialist in the medium and does not work with a notion either of ‘data’ or of ‘method’ in the manner conventional in the social sciences . . .” (p. 7). But “this does not stop the critic making inferences about the social relationships and configurations of value within which television’s texts are placed . . . Television criticism has most often wanted to go beyond the textually descriptive and evaluative and to use its observations here as a route to a broader or deeper cultural diagnosis, either of the past or the present” (pp. 7–8).

Corner, like others, cites the influence of “European social thought,” the Frankfurt School, and various strands of Marxism. But he also adds a key notion, the development of “postmodernist thinking” and its influence on the study of television.

Not surprisingly, television, with those features of space-time manipulation, social displacement, and scopic appeal . . . has often been regarded as an agency of post-modern culture, despite its origins as a modernist cultural technology. It has been seen as the representational hub of a new pattern of knowledge and feeling and of new kinds of political organization, self-consciousness, and identity. (p. 8)

John Hartley (1999) quite succinctly sums up many of the sequence of issues addressed in these other accounts by clustering studies of television under four headings: television as mass society, television as text, television as audience, and television as pedagogy.

The problem faced by any scholar or student planning to study television is that all these questions, attendant “methods” or “approaches,” all the lines of thought, bodies of information generated, remain in play. No single focus has replaced another. Despite scholarly arguments over epistemology or legitimacy of purpose, each can explain certain aspects of the medium, lead to identification and definition of new problems, overlap with other results. This is the stew of issues stirred by television. And while it would be a mistake to argue that there is no clear “progression,” “refinement,” or “development” of stronger and clearer approaches, it does remain the case that most studies of television (rather than “television studies”) continue to deal with the medium and construct their questions from relatively discreet points of view. It is also the case that any developments in the field we might call television studies have been greatly complicated by changes and developments surrounding “television” itself. New

technologies, alteration in policy arenas, varying business models, innovations in narrative strategies, revival of older strategies – these and other changes have made television something of a moving target. In turn, the changes have sharpened awareness of the fact that many “approaches,” even “theories” of television were put forward in other contexts, very specific historical conditions and social formations. The degree to which questions framed and approaches developed in those contexts remain useful is a matter of some concern.

What these interactions suggest is that we can best understand television not as an entity – economic, technological, social, psychological, or cultural – but as a site, the point at which numerous questions and approaches intersect and inflect one another. For this reason television should also be thought of as “television,” somehow “marked” to remind us that no single definition or set of terms can gather or control the power and significance of this entity. Indeed, in this tendency to confound singly focused approaches, television has also become the site at which various theories and methods, not to say larger systemic constructions such as “the social sciences” or “the humanities” or “critical theory,” have been forced to recognize shortcomings and attempt conversation, if not always conjunction, with others.

At this point, we can say that television studies is a conflicted field of study in need of one or more controlling or guiding metaphors. Such terms should somehow acknowledge the “site-like” qualities of television, recognizing it as one of the most powerful such points of conjunction in human history. Yet any such recognition must not ignore knowledge generated by more specifically focused queries.

In this context, Corner’s use of the term “hub” is useful. If “television” is at the center of structuring spokes, holding things together in order to roll on, we could perhaps account for intersecting influences by speculating about what might happen if a particular spoke were removed. Or we might explore the role of one spoke, acknowledging that its force and significance might be limited.

My own preference for metaphor would be that “television” is a “switchboard” through which streams of information, power, and control flow unevenly. Struggles for control of the switchboard occur at many sub-points. In the “creative communities” the struggles might be over the control of textual content, style, or even budgets. At the corporate level they are most likely focused on budgets, but even the dullest accountant employed in a media industry recognizes that it is impossible to predict the next “hit,” and must therefore adapt a calculus allowing for failures. And these failures cannot be fully explained by research departments or demographers any more than they can by critics, political economists, or cultural historians.

The impossibility of fully analyzing, much less synthesizing such fluid activities should be clear. The task becomes one of recognizing the interplay and, when possible, mapping the lines of force and influence most pertinent to any case at hand. Some studies stand out as exemplary in this difficult process. In the early 1980s the collection of essays by Jane Feuer and colleagues, *MTM: Quality*

Television (1984), admirably linked certain shifts in the US television industry and various aspects of US sociology and culture to examine what seemed to be fundamental stylistic alterations in programming. They never lost sight of the connections of those newer programs to examples from previous periods in the brief history of the medium, but still made a convincing case for a set of intersecting influences shaping the changes they outlined. A cluster of important historical studies by William Boddy (1990), Lynn Spigel (1992), Christopher Anderson (1994), and Michael Curtin (1996) brought new sophistication to topics ranging from television as the site of policy struggles, to television's role in a new domestic context, to television's intersectional struggles with the film industry, to the role of network policies, government actions, and documentary production.

Studies of specific television programs have also been richly contextualized by scholars exploring a range of influences and affectivities of the medium. Julie D'Acci's *Defining Women: Television and the Case of Cagney and Lacey* (1994) is an outstanding work linking analyses of television industrial practices, production practices, texts, and audience responses. Jostein Gripsrud's *The "Dynasty" Years: Hollywood Television and Critical Media Studies* (1995) examines the ways in which a single American television program, thrown into the lake of another society and culture, sends ripples reaching to parliaments and political activist groups. John Thornton Caldwell's *Televisuality: Style, Crisis, and Authority in American Television* (1995) adds the layer of "redefining" television in light of specific developments in technologies and industrial history; Ron Lembo's *Thinking Through Television* (2000) explores audience relationships with television from a sociological perspective, incorporating a version of ethnographic study with a sophisticated sense of textual nuances and programming strategies; and Anna McCarthy's *Ambient Television* (2001) explodes the general conception that television is solely or primarily a domestic device by studying a range of sites in which the medium can be embedded.

Finally, in Hartley's *Uses of Television* (1999), I find what is, for me, the most challenging and from its own perspective explanatory treatment of television to date. Among other taxonomical gambits Hartley lumps the history of television studies into two large, crude clumps – The Desire School and The Fear School (p. 135), placing most of the work concerned with televisions presumed "effects" in the latter, most of the work treating television as an expressive form in the former. But the clustering is secondary to his own perspective that television primarily serves a "pedagogical" function in contemporary culture, spreading forms of broad knowledge and information into corners that might otherwise have missed such perceptions, or challenging received notions with purposeful provocations. In short, without focusing precisely on particular program "texts," or on specific analyses of overarching "ideology," on specific industrial formations or practices, or on details of audience response and activity, he returns to fundamental philosophical questions: What is television? How has it functioned? Why is it even important, or at least, why and how is it more important than the refrigerator?

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I do not suggest here that Hartley, or the other works cited above, “explain” television in any total sense better than many earlier studies. Indeed, I am arguing that “television” is inexplicable. But it is no longer necessary for those who study television to remain bound by their own particular languages and strategies. Rather, it is necessary that they acknowledge one another more explicitly, incorporating those other strategies, topics, areas, and problems they find most pertinent, most forceful in modifying their own conclusions. In one sense, “television studies,” as an intellectual accomplishment in itself, should best exercise a form of modesty. But the modifications should also lead toward a keen precision that might allow television studies to achieve a stronger voice in matters of policy, industrial practice, and viewer education. In both the modesty and the precision we can acknowledge that with regard to television from the mid-twentieth century to present day, this set of intersecting forces, practices, and influences has demanded attention and concern – and that at every turn of events it has refracted, prism-like, every light we bring toward its illumination. In the play of these bent, blended, and colored shadows we find the best repository for better questions.

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