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exercised even more venal power than it did. Movies and radio had done positive work, but there was something about sitting in the living room, knowing that something almost dangerous was taking place on the screen, that others sensed it too, and that they were reacting very differently. It was almost more important to feel that tension—while all present remained silent—for as long as possible.

Television still has this power. I watch several hours of TV almost every night, almost always dramas, and find myself moved and enlightened, annoyed and disgusted, angered and delighted. In early March 2005, I turned to Sara Newcomb, who watches with me and whose judgment I trust implicitly, and said of an episode of *Boston Legal*, “That’s the best episode of television I’ve seen in years and the best script by David E. Kelly I can remember in some time.” She agreed and we began a conversation. It wasn’t simply “an episode” we talked about, or even a program or a writer-producer. It was television.

I am unconcerned with whether one writes about episodes or series, genres or schedules, industry or policy, TiVos or cable, European public-service broadcasts, or economic shifts. I am concerned that we ask questions that help explain to others why television continues to be so important. That is what I look for when I read new work. That is just about all I care about, and if I do not find those critical questions, I stop reading.

I enjoy being able to help make choices that somehow address the larger social and cultural constructs that surround us. In today’s richly shattered condition, it is very hard to conceive of a writing and teaching strategy that allows one to touch and tap all the intersecting forces that come into play in any given question related to television. It is harder still to pose the truly major questions. But that is certainly what we should do.

Notes

1. Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1974).
2. Horace Newcomb, “Television as a Cultural Forum: Implications for Research,” *Quarterly Review of Film Studies* 8, no. 3 (1983): 45–55.

The Bad Object: Television in the American Academy



by Michele Hilmes

Here is one of the main distinctions I can make about our field based on twenty-five years as an SCMS member and scholar of radio, television, film, and new media: virtually all television scholars have taken courses in film history, institutions, and aesthetics; very few film scholars have taken courses in broadcasting history, institutions, and aesthetics. Or, to put it in slightly less sweeping terms, there is an information and

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awareness deficit in the community of film scholars, especially among its senior members, with respect to radio and television. And it reflects something much larger.

This deficit is rooted in a number of factors. First, for scholars of my generation (which, I hate to say, is now the older generation), there was no television study to speak of when we were attending graduate school. I was thrilled in 1978 when, during my first semester at NYU, Robert Sklar held what I believe was the university's first seminar on television. It had to take place at his SoHo loft, not on campus, because he possessed, remarkably, an early VCR—about the size of a suitcase and twice as heavy.

A few more courses on TV were offered during my years in NYU's cinema studies department, but not many. Most of us who were interested in television studied on our own or took perplexing classes in journalism and mass communication departments, where our professors and fellow students regarded our fixation on such peculiar aspects of TV as narrative, representation, and meaning construction as frivolous, time-wasting affectations.

A few of us persisted. At the University of Texas, Horace Newcomb led in approaching television as a cultural form long before anyone else dared to. In 1984, E. Ann Kaplan came out with her seminal collection, *Regarding Television*. By the mid-1980s, my somewhat more advanced NYU classmate William Boddy, one of the authors of *Regarding Television*, was writing his influential and still-in-print *Fifties Television*; Lynn Spigel at UCLA was working on her groundbreaking *Make Room for TV*.¹

I migrated over to the brand-new Interactive Telecommunications Program at NYU, where I found a group of people who were very interested in that era's new media—cable, satellites, and text-based electronics (remember teletext?)—and not hugely invested in maintaining old distinctions. Their influence led me to think outside the two separate boxes of film and television studies; it could be that this “new media” moment in SCMS's history will do the same. But see below.

Second, film study has benefited from the presence of television as the “low other.” Film's status in the academy, steadily ascendant since the 1960s, was initially predicated on the identification of the director as the “author” of an individual film, turning film from a mass-produced object into a work of art. One could easily see that important distinction when film was compared to television, the mass-produced commodity *par excellence*. Television's bad example kept scholarly attention distracted from the fact that there are really lots of authors in film; the director is only one, and perhaps did not even become so until the first generation of film school-educated directors learned about the director's new status from their professors. That our nation's Ivy League universities, notably slow to pick up on innovative trends in scholarship that involve culture “from below,” now have a few film courses but still eschew the cultural study of television and radio speaks volumes here.² It is the nation's public land-grant universities that have led, since the 1920s, in the study of communication and of broadcasting in particular. I predict that most Ivy League students will be studying “new media” before television is ever allowed to darken the doorsteps of their institutions.

Television does present difficulties for study if one approaches it from the set of assumptions in which most film scholars have been trained. What is the object of

study: the episode, the season, the series? Who is the author, and if we cannot specify, how do we understand the process of creative expression? How should we approach the commercials and the way that television narratives are shaped by them?

Television is vast; it comprises such paradigm-defying enterprises as C-Span, infomercials, and Home and Garden TV. And, let's face it, film study has benefited from being able to define itself as the study of theatrically exhibited films with certain characteristics while assigning most other films to the schlock pile or to television. Most television programs are shot on film—but they are not “film,” just as movies shown on television do not become “television.” Thus, people can claim to never watch television as they view a DVD on the tube. Likewise, you could show a television program all day long, in 35mm, on a theater screen, and it would never become a film—except overseas, where TV pilots morph into theatrical releases. Again, see below.

A final plaint: television's status as bad object has repercussions for those who study it in the academy. Although communications programs are among the largest and most popular among undergraduates, there is still considerable prejudice against the subject at higher levels in the university. This bias typically does not come from deans' offices—where the productivity of busy communications faculties is often appreciated and a certain even-handedness must apply—but from more powerful departments that teach more traditional (but, lest they forget, only slightly more venerable) subjects, such as English, history, and fine arts—which frequently resent communications departments' draw on resources and resist the legitimacy of their subject.

Film, on the other hand, is often integrated into departments of English or fine arts, and will no doubt in the short run continue to find its interests best served by distancing itself from the low others of television and mass communications. Most senior film scholars I know have little desire to incorporate television into their research or teaching. Why should they? From a career perspective, it can only hurt.

This problem also crops up in grant applications: many grants-giving institutions in the humanities do not regard television study as a proper part of their mission. Film yes, television no. Doesn't it really belong in some dreary subdivision of the social sciences? See under “communications.”

However, the study of television has benefited from several theoretical incursions into the U.S. academy in recent years, and these may continue to raise the profile of broadcast and electronic media, including film, to the benefit of our discipline as a whole. The first such incursion was feminism. Television has always been associated with the feminine, because of its position within the home and its historically greater appeal to female audiences. Part of its status as low other has to do with this association. Feminists fought hard to put television on the film studies agenda. Work on soap operas, domestic sitcoms, and female-centered drama formed a crucial part of early television studies.³ The Console-ing Passions Conference emerged from this nexus and has developed into a place to present not only feminist perspectives on television and new media but a wide variety of approaches to cultural power and the television and new media texts it creates, circulates, and opposes. When feminism gained an institutional basis in university programs of women's studies, it brought television in along with them.

The second theoretical incursion—no surprise here—was cultural studies. While cultural studies in Britain preceded the feminist incursion—allowing feminism to “crap on the table” of the Birmingham School, in Stuart Hall’s famous phrase—feminism got in first in the United States, and it has affected the course of both cultural studies and television studies in the academy. Feminist-inflected cultural studies placed an emphasis on the negotiations of cultural power along racial, ethnic, sexual, and postcolonial lines *and* on commercial popular media, in a combination that was and still is rare in other nations. This combination has gotten in the way of the smooth integration of cultural studies with film studies, at least in some quarters.

When film aspires to the status of literature or art, cultural studies, with its insistence on culture with a small “c,” often directs attention away from a focus on narrative, style, aesthetics, genre, and much of what film scholars have spent their careers building up. It does not have to be this way. Television scholarship can benefit a great deal from taking aesthetics more seriously, just as film study benefits from attention to cultural power. It is important to analyze the formal aspects of the television medium, and some of the best work on TV (and radio!) does just that. As films themselves draw more and more on conventions inspired by television, and as production boundaries increasingly blur, film and television scholarship should be drawn together, not apart.

But it is the third emerging area of study, centered on issues of globalization, that may prove decisive. There is simply no denying that the globalization of media involves not just film and the Internet but crucially and primarily television as well. The emergence of satellite television has inspired studies on the clash and hybridization of cultures—national, regional, local, and global—and on the ways that film is conveyed into formerly closed markets. Few scholars of globalization have found it productive to attempt to divide film, television, and new media into separate categories; they are so manifestly all part of the same media phenomenon.

American academics, as is true of so many areas of life, have tended to focus solely on issues of American media culture, but as the staging of this year’s SCMS conference in London recognized, isolation is fundamentally counterproductive. Much emerging work in global media studies reflects a nation-defying and non-media-specific approach. Arjun Appadurai, one of its main theorists, does not make intermedia distinctions in his analysis of global culture, and Michael Curtin’s analysis of “global media capitals” questions the very idea of national cinemas or national television as he looks at the conditions of global cultural production.⁴ In most of the world, film and television are tied together tightly in production, circulation, and reception. The impact of American media globally cannot be adequately addressed within the institutional distinctions and hierarchies prevalent in the American academy.

What would it take to integrate television study more thoroughly in the academy and to erase the current artificially constructed distinction between film and television as disciplines? Some say that the addition of new media to the mix will achieve this goal. Certainly, SCMS could have added “media” to its name at any time in the last twenty years but chose to do so only under the seductive influence of the emerging new media paradigm. I am all in favor of the study of new media—indeed, I am under

the impression that I have been studying it all my life—but when scholars seem to want to skip over television and radio and form a film/new media “high-art” alliance, many of us wax somewhat cynical.

A more transnational approach to media study in general can only further our overall understanding. In most nations, film and television do not stand as far apart as they do in the United States. First, in many nations with state-subsidized television and film industries, television networks are major film producers, such as Channel 4 in Britain, Canal Plus in France, and ARD in Germany. This is increasingly true in the United States as well, despite the lack of state subsidies. Films are shown in theaters and aired on television; they are television as much as film.

Second, in the world’s eyes, American film and television are part of the same whole. Both produce the “Americanization” effect that has played out in national policy arenas since the 1920s, and although film holds the same “high” place in cultural production in many countries as it does in film study in the United States (compared once again to the low other of television), American film and American television jointly represent the bad object of national cultural policies, recently joined by the American-dominated Internet. American media are often conceptualized as a whole, their commonalities far more prominent than their differences.

Television, new media, and film will become part of an integrated, seamless whole in the academy—as they increasingly are in real life—only when scholars educate themselves about all aspects of their fields. Film programs should require courses in broadcasting history, industry, genre, aesthetics, and even policy. Those of you who are comfortably ensconced in film programs where television has no place in the overall curriculum or indeed in the institution should not just sit back but work to change this. Insist that television studies courses be added—not to make television scholars happy but because the continued exclusion of television from full integration enforces atavistic cultural hierarchies, distorts our perspectives not only on how culture is experienced but on how it is produced, and fundamentally misrepresents the role of American media in the world.⁵ These issues also affect the centrality and importance of the study of film as a part of the media whole, not as an always-marginalized adjunct of literature or the fine arts. We will attain more power in the academic establishment as a unified front of media scholars than we will divided into film, television, performance, and new media specialists who are parceled out among English, communications, journalism, and fine arts departments.

That those institutions known around the world as the leading universities in the United States—Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Stanford, Berkeley—fail to include even small interdisciplinary programs, much less departments, on the study of media, America’s second leading export product—the voices and images heard around the world, the ones that so often play leading roles in world politics, history, religion, conflict, and cultural exchange—is mind-boggling. What do these universities think is more important? A few film courses, or courses in which film is integrated into art or visual culture studies, are not sufficient to enable students to understand the media world they live in, or to appreciate the role that America’s media play around the globe. To implicitly condone the view that the media on which the vast

majority of the world's population spends its time—and attention and interest and emulation and sometimes hatred—are undeserving of notice is to perpetuate a vast inequality at the heart of America's so-called democratic cultural project.

We can do better. We have to do better. Shutting Al Jazeera out of American air space is not the answer. How will any of us understand how and why such global channels emerged and what they have to say without sufficient grounding in broadcasting history, culture, aesthetics, policy, and impact? It's a gaping hole in our knowledge supply. We need to actively encourage, not merely tolerate, the full inclusion of the study of broadcasting and new media in our professional organizations, our universities, our classrooms, and our research. We cannot maintain the indefensible power-laden separations that exist in media studies today. And change must begin at home.

Notes

1. See, among others, Horace Newcomb, ed., *Television: The Critical View* (Oxford: 1976); E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television* (Frederick, Md.: University Publications of America, 1983); William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990); and Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992). For a compelling history of the emergence of television studies in the academy, see Derek Kompare, *Rerun Nation* (New York: Routledge, 2005).
2. There are some exceptions. Dartmouth College has for a number of years had a media studies program that included courses in television. Brown also includes television studies in its curriculum, though minimally. The Annenberg School of Communication at the University of Pennsylvania has never distinguished itself in the critical/cultural study of television, hewing much more closely to the social science paradigm. Film there is housed in a separate department and seems to avoid use of the word *television* in any of its self-descriptors.
3. See the work of Tania Modleski, Mary Beth Haralovich, Jane Feuer, Julie D'Acci, and Lauren Rabinovitz, among others. Such studies also predominated in British television studies, from scholars such as Christine Geraghty, Charlotte Brunson, and Angela McRobbie.
4. Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), and Michael Curtin, "Media Capital: Towards the Study of Spatial Flows," *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 6, no. 2 (2003): 203–29.
5. That there are class, race, and gender issues at the heart of the exclusion of television from the academy should be pointed out more often. Television is the medium of the working class; lower-income and lower-educational-attainment families spend more hours watching TV than do other groups. African Americans and other minorities spend more time watching TV than whites. Women have always watched more than men. Though both television and film production are dominated by white men, television (and radio) has always involved female producers, writers, and stars more than film, and women have often had more control over the texts of their creation (from Lucille Ball to Oprah Winfrey). The same is true for racial and ethnic minorities. The films especially beloved by many film scholars—"serious" films, independent films, distinctively authored films—remain the cultural province of primarily white, highly educated, high-income audiences.

Contributors

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