

Television Truths

John Hartley



Television Truths

To Tina Horton, who knows how hard it is
(to watch TV) . . .

Creu Gwir fel Gwydr o FFwrnais Awen*
In These Stones Horizons Sing
Gwyneth Lewis

*Creating Truth like Glass from a Furnace of Inspiration

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Television studies, if history proves there to have been such a singular thing, has been a publishing preoccupation of mine since *Reading Television* came out while I was still in my twenties. Although life, job descriptions, and curiosity have tempted me into many another field in the interim, TV remains home territory. It has retained its fascination because “TV studies” is not really (or not yet) a discipline. The “field” in which it pitched its analytical tent is far from stable ground. Things have changed so much during the TV era that it may be argued – and this book does argue – that a paradigm shift can be observed. The way television itself is made, distributed, watched, used, and thought about has changed. Previously familiar intellectual and cultural horizons have shifted too. Returning to television studies throughout an academic career has proven far from samey; the “home” ground is always shifting under one’s feet.

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- “Television and globalisation.” In Glen Creeber (ed.) *Tele-Visions: Concepts and Methods in Television Studies*. London: BFI, 2005, 137–46.
- “Television, nation and Indigenous media.” *Television & New Media*, 5:1, 2004, 7–25.
- “‘Republic of letters’ to ‘television republic’? Citizen-readers in the era of broadcast television.” In Lynn Spigel & Jan Olsson (eds) *Television after TV: Essays on a Medium in Transition*. Durham NC & London: Duke University Press, 2004, 386–417.
- “Reality and the plebiscite.” In Kristina Riegert (ed.) *Politicotainment: Television’s take on the real*. New York: Peter Lang, 2007.
- “Live event television: From the ‘wandering booby’ to the ‘death of history’.” In Graeme Turner & Stuart Cunningham (eds) *The Australian Television Studies Book*. Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2000, 155–70.
- “Kiss me Kat: Shakespeare, *Big Brother*, and the taming of the self.” In Susan Murray & Laurie Ouellette (eds) *Reality TV: Re-making Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2004, 303–22.
- “Sync or swim? Plebiscitary sport, synchronised voting and the shift from Mars to Venus.” In David L. Andrews (ed.) *Sport: Playing With the Pleasure Principle*. *South Atlantic Quarterly*. Vol 105(2), 2006, 409–428.

- “‘Laughs and legends’ or the furniture that glows? Television *as* history,” with Joshua Green & Jean Burgess. *Australian Cultural History*. 26, 2007.
- “Is screen studies a load of old cobblers? And if so, is that good?” *Cinema Journal*, Vol 45 No 1, 2005, 101–6.

Television Truths

Argumentation of TV

Cornell Research: Children's TV Triggers Autism

A new study from Cornell University shows that television is responsible for the developed world's rising rates of autism in children. If this is true, can parents and governments have any choice but to stop children watching it?

White Dot: The international campaign against television, 2006¹

Argumentation: TV Truths

What is it about television? Watching television is still the most popular pastime ever. Since Bhutan introduced it in 1999 there is no country in the world without a television system. The onset of new ways of interacting with TV, via the internet, mobile, and non-broadcast forms of production and distribution, have not supplanted but supplemented its role and reach. TV both shows and shapes contemporary life across the economic, political, social, and cultural spectrum. It plays a prominent role in producing and distributing what counts as true for many if not most people in commercial democracies. Once established, such truths play an active role in public and private life, from legitimating actions in war, business, and the “administration of life” to steering conduct at the personal level. More routinely they supply global audiences with evidence of the factual reality (or otherwise) of our mental and physical horizons. In short, TV truths are pervasive, persuasive, and powerful.

Television's aspiration to universal accessibility has been achieved in all developed and many developing countries. Almost everyone who can watch it does so at least sometimes. And yet TV is still among the most criticized phenomena of modern life. For an extreme but familiar example of this tendency, see the quotation at the head of the chapter (above), taken from the website of an "international campaign against television," whose activists are encouraged to go round with a device called the TV-B-Gone that remotely switches off TV sets in public places.² Getting rid of television altogether from people's lives is a persistent fantasy in popular culture. It often involves the kind of scaremongering solution imagined in the quotation above: the call for state intervention to stop entire populations watching TV. Such a totalitarian intolerance to a communicative form is reminiscent of book-burning, although expressions of hatred for TV rarely attract the public opprobrium that results from attacks on the written word.

Despite such infantile fantasies, the experience of watching television is widespread, well-liked, and regulated into the ordinary routines and relationships of daily life. To that extent, everyone in the audience is also both an *expert* on TV and a *critic*, not only as fans or foes of specific shows, genres, stars, or serial forms, but also because audiences know quite a lot about TV's productive apparatus, cultural forms, and supposed effects. The main lines of critique are remarkably widespread as a part of informal common sense: TV's connections to corporate and state power structures; TV's supposed moral shortcomings and behavioral effects; TV's persistent failure to entertain, inform, or educate particular taste cultures or audience demographics. Such *informal* expertise is relatively autonomous from the *formal* apparatus of knowledge. Collective wisdom about television is absorbed from personal experience, general social and mediated intercourse, commonsense knowledge, and journalistic debate. Generally it does not trickle down from the professional expertise of a branch of scholarship called "television studies." Nor, however, does it trickle up from audience experience directly, because public discussion of television is one-sidedly negative, rarely dwelling on the *positive* "effects" of the tube (for a refreshing antidote see Lumby and Fine 2006). Experts who do get to comment on television in the media are likely to be drawn from disciplines like psychology, marketing, journalism, political economy, pediatrics, criminology, or, in the case of the "Cornell research" cited above, economics. In the main, such experts have not been sympathetic witnesses, unless they're discussing the TV industry as a business. In this particular case, the Cornell economists compared data

on US children's TV watching with climatic data on rainfall: "This analysis showed that children from rainy counties watch more television. When autism rates were then compared between rainy and drier counties, the relationship between high precipitation and levels of autism was positive." The authors admitted that "there are no large data sets that track whether children who watch a lot of TV when they are young are more likely to develop autism" (Cornell University 2006). Despite this caveat the "White Dot" folks were keen to move straight to total prohibition. One definition of autism is "pathological 'self-absorption.'" Physician: heal thyself! Alternatively, try calling for a ban on rainfall.

Within the academy, the formal study of television has struggled to achieve high-prestige research status despite its popularity with students. Academics from other disciplines who harbor strong views against television are likely to have strong views against TV *studies* too, rather than collegiate respect for its exponents' expertise. Thus, the most *respectable* forms of expert knowledge about television tend to be the ones that evaluate it most *negatively*. Knowledge about television is at a low premium if it is gained via the experiential immersion of the domestic consumer, or even via research into that experience. Its prestige rises the further it is removed from the home. The economists who trawled the datasets did "urge further study by autism experts" (Cornell University 2006). They felt no need to consult TV scholars.

Is there something peculiar about *television*, or alternatively is there something odd about our ways of producing and distributing *knowledge*, that has produced this tension between a popular pastime and an expert system? *This book is a sustained reflection on the tensions produced by the problem of knowledge in and about television.*

Despite the low prestige of media studies compared with philosophy, and despite widespread skepticism about television itself as a dealer in truths, even though it is trusted by many, it is important to seek to understand, within the flux of symbols, meanings, statements, and stories circulating on TV, how TV truths are communicated, and how television achieves its much-vaunted power to command. It has fallen to media studies to undertake that task. Media studies is therefore at least part of *the philosophy of the media age*: it produces both rational and empirical knowledge about how truths are told today, from the detail of individual strategies and techniques right up to those truths that have power to command on a society-wide basis and to a global extent.

There's no doubt that important questions about the status of truth are considered in "disciplinary" philosophy but nevertheless, as a

discipline, philosophy has gained a reputation (which may not be deserved) for cloistered abstraction and upscale taste, far removed from the cut, thrust, and mess of industrialized global sense-making in a world governed by media, PR, spin, entertainment, spectacle, celebrity, and power. Philosophy (with a capital P, as it were) is these days a minority pursuit in which technical expertise and mastery of a difficult field are both at a premium, setting practitioners apart from lay people, even though as with television itself the problems it seeks to address are embedded in everyday life and everyone is an expert in them. Meanwhile, media studies has gained a reputation (which may not be deserved either) for pursuing questions that are trivial rather than important, and even for dispensing with truth altogether while having fun on the postmodern helter-skelter: it is contaminated with the supposed attributes of its own object of study. So there's a double problem facing anyone interested in pursuing media truths: the object of study in itself, and the pursuit of knowledge about it, are *both* intellectually suspect, of low repute, easily dismissed. Like women's magazines, they are "easily put down," in Joke Hermes's grave joke. But this familiar default setting of our collective intellectual prejudice, which presumes that philosophy is high status and media studies is low (almost as an *a priori* "truth"), may be no more than the very kind of snobbery and class distinction in language that ought to be part of the object of study, not its framework of explanation. Certainly those who are interested in how truth is made to count, made "commanding" in popular culture and public life, ought to take account of the media and mechanisms through which everyone in a language-community can participate in its establishment. For everyone is an expert in truth, just as everyone is an expert in television.

Expert paradigm vs. viewing experience

A certain critical suspicion of media manipulation is always healthy, because the motives of those who exploit TV commercially and politically are not entirely pure. In fact, it sometimes seems miraculous that so much of interest, importance, and merit has resulted from a business plan that never liked viewers to come too close, and did its best to convince us all that we were exactly what it wanted us to be – passive consumers with a shameful habit.

The television business began as a standard modern industry, based on a "closed expert process." This system worked fine for engineering and manufacturing industries – cars and chemicals. In such a business

model, profitability is ensured by keeping the creative talent as far away from consumers as possible. Experts are isolated in a lab where they can do what they like (the company owns everything they come up with). Their ideas are sifted and reduced to standardized products and processes, then sent down a supply chain, which is often also controlled by the company, to waiting consumers. On the well-established model of the Hollywood “star factory,” this was the plan for monetizing television. Creative experts came up with innovative products in the form of each season’s new TV shows. These were standardized into familiar TV formats and produced by industrialized technical crews. They were disseminated through a controlled pipeline (TV networks) to the grateful but passive audience. It was the same business plan that brought you DDT and the gas-guzzler. It was how TV was imagined in the 1950s – and for quite a while thereafter.

The downside of this extreme division of labor was that consumers were excluded from contributing to the creation of the experience, except as studio audiences and occasional “vox pops” or as victims in news stories. It was your job to be a wise consumer. That model of television reduced viewers to behavioral responses. Naturally that behavior had to be professionally manipulated by marketing and regulation, increasing the gulf between TV and its audience. We could love ’em or hate ’em; we just couldn’t join ’em.

Is it the destiny of “the tube” to continue pumping out products and propaganda for Planet Landfill? Or are we now witnessing a change in the experience of TV for consumers and producers alike?

The *experience* of watching TV has always been very different from the point of view of audiences as opposed to experts. The television experience is not about the consumption of goods, but is part of culture; more simply, for each viewer, it’s a “history of me.” There’s no such thing as a universal “me,” of course. What TV means, how it feels, what it is “for,” changes depending on your own character and taste, and also on socio-cultural determinants like gender, age-group, family, class, nation, and ethnicity. But everyone in modern society spends some of their time making themselves up as they go along, learning their own identity via stories, interactions, and relationships, often in those otherwise unproductive, ungoverned, and potentially risky moments when we’re not doing much at all; just daydreaming on our own or getting up to mischief with peers. This is where TV reigns supreme. The miracle that broadcasting performed every day for over half a century was that the same restricted range of programming in each

country enabled individuated viewing experiences among so diverse a range of audience demographics. And here's why audiences are far from passive. We are not consuming a product but using the imaginative resources of story, song, sight, and sound – some of the most powerful tools known to humanity – to think about identity, relationship, and community, in real time and space, often while our annoying family is making us dream of being somewhere else entirely. Television obliges that dream. Using its semiotic and social resources, we make ourselves up as we watch, which is why so many people have a store of shows, characters, even ads, that reminds them of how, when, and where they went about that task.

But things have already changed beyond recognition. TV is on the move. While you've been lounging on the couch, the broadcast era has passed, and a new epoch has begun. With the rise of the internet and the fall of transaction costs in electronic media, every home in affluent societies has become a potential multiplatform publisher and every consumer a potential producer. Home itself has become a place of productive capacity, not just a leisure-time refuge. The 1990s and 2000s were marked by the migration of high-tech computing power out of organizations and into the home, a process marked by the shift of corporate power from IBM (office-based mainframe) to Microsoft (personal PC). Already, technologies are migrating again; out of home, out of the office and into the car, onto the body – to mobile applications. Post-broadcast (i.e. customized) television will follow; not only migrating out of the lounge-room and into the kitchen, study, or bedroom, but out of the sphere of domestic identity altogether. The TV-computer interface also means that all sorts of online services can merge with TV content: travel, learning, government, health, science, etc. The propagation of innovation throughout society has begun. Consumption has become co-production. TV is about “creating my (or our) experience” not “consuming your products.” For today's teenagers, of whom there are over a billion worldwide, each one wanting to make their mischief and fulfill their dreams, this will be the new “history of me.”

The value of TV studies

When you get in close to the actual scholarship, intellectual hard work, audacious theorizing, painstaking investigation, attention to data and detail, the wry and knowing mastery of the material and sheer flair of delivery of some of the best work being done both on TV itself and in TV

studies, the continuing low repute of both TV and TV studies seems wrongheaded, not to say mean-spirited. Unfortunately, both TV and media studies tend to be judged on their poorest performances, not their best. It takes more than mere evidence to change habits of thought about a medium or a method, because of course those habits are relational, not scientific. They're not really personal opinions based on observation and study, but places in a hierarchy of culture where high status can only be achieved in opposition to low status. Media and methods need to be placed at one end of a value hierarchy in order to sustain culturally preferred values at the other. Popular entertainment is easily consigned to the opposite pole from truth-seeking philosophy in a print-literate, science-based intellectual universe; one that has, however, forgotten that there was no higher form of truth-telling in ancient Greece than drama, or that the most popular entertainments like the plays of Shakespeare can also achieve the status of universal art. Currently, we're habituated to a hierarchy based on thought being separated from entertainment, mind from body, science from emotion and conflict, elite universities from mass-education colleges, high-prestige research disciplines, devoted to describing things, from low-prestige teaching subjects, devoted to inspiring people.

But what goes around comes around. Like magnetic poles, value hierarchies can invert over time. Is it happening again now? There is a good reason why it should, because the status of truth has power to command at the level of individual lives and societal decisions. "We" judge people and policies by their truthfulness. It must surely follow that the more widely understood such processes are, the more "expert" everyone can become in determining the status of truths that buttonhole us on a daily basis. That is why the very real immersion of media studies in the sensational, trivial, manipulative, irrational, emotional, duplicitous, dissembling, and tendentious world of human mutual influence is especially important – it is the very context in which entire populations have to decide for themselves what counts as true. There is no need to construe the world of popular culture as a "negative pole" to which critical expertise must be *opposed*; it would be much more productive – and more "critical" – to evaluate it more highly as the locus of cultural, political, and knowledge formation for whole populations, a prime site for further democratization of knowledge, and to esteem slightly less the self-righteousness of the alienated critic or isolated expert, both of whom may be suffering from "paradigm lost," as will become more evident below.

Television Truths – The Book

In order to understand television, these problems of knowledge, repute, and intellectual hierarchy, which beset both the medium itself and the study of it, need to be made explicit. Any new work must recognize that there are epistemological imperatives that condition and even determine what we know about television, how we know it, and how we suppose it produces and circulates its own truths. This book tackles the task of understanding television truths by setting TV, and the study thereof, within the context of changes in the history of knowledge. We have to look at what TV does when it establishes the truth, but we also have to analyze the apparatus we're using to look with.

The problem of TV truths is as much epistemological (how do we know, and what institutions have arisen to produce such knowledge?) as it is metaphysical (what is the nature of the object we're investigating?). Indeed, all the branches of philosophy – the study of truth – are needed to sort out what's going on in contemporary mediated sense-making. This book contributes to that endeavor by showing how knowledge has intersected with media, how “reading publics” are formed in both cases, and what needs to be done in both education and television to bring TV truths into better understanding. This is not a work of traditional philosophy (with a capital P); it is, however, interested in pursuing the classical branches of philosophy into the contemporary world of television, having something new to say about each of them in the context of contemporary realities.

A philosophy of the popular

Within that overall structure, the book seeks to show how media studies, as a *philosophy of the popular*, has something important to say not only about television but about education (what is it for and who will do it); politics (consumer-citizenship in the era of interactive multimedia); creativity (television's own evolving aesthetic); and the future (as one “regime of truth” or knowledge paradigm disperses and reforms into another).

In order to understand television in this way, the book pursues a distinctive and characteristic mode of inquiry that grounds forward thinking in a broad understanding of historical change, some of the latter very long-term, contextualizing discussion about contemporary phenomena and future change in a comprehensive argument about

why and how the paradigm has shifted. While very much concerned with evolution and change, the book is nevertheless a corrective to those futurological scenarios that work from current business data and technological developments to predict the social outcomes of technical inventions. Instead it explains the dynamics of shifts that are already under way, and shows how apparently distinct areas, for instance the media and education, or entertainment and innovation, are in fact part of the same paradigmatic shift.

Structure of the book

This chapter introduces the topic by establishing its language and discussing the mode of argumentation; it is equivalent to the branch of philosophy labeled Logic. Thereafter the book is in four parts, each one presented as the equivalent of a branch of philosophy (see table 1.1):

Part I (Is TV true?) is more about the basis of knowledge within which we make sense of television than it is a direct description of things on TV. It shows how paradigm shifts associated with modernity have affected the status of knowledge, and how both TV and contemporary thought have been shaped as a result. This part goes on to consider aspects of television across time and space, showing how TV sits among other media and modes of communication and literacy both historically and globally.

Part II (Is TV a polity?) considers the relations between television and its audiences, in the context of current notions of media citizenship and the citizen-consumer. It analyzes the narration of

Table 1.1 TV truths – a philosophy of the popular

<i>Branch of philosophy</i>	<i>Domain of truthfulness</i>	<i>Part of this book</i>
Logic/language	<i>Argument</i>	Introduction: television truths
Epistemology	<i>Knowledge</i>	I: Is TV true?
Ethics/politics	<i>Conduct/action</i>	II: Is TV a polity?
Aesthetics	<i>Beauty</i>	III: Is TV beautiful?
Metaphysics	<i>Existence</i>	IV: What can TV be?

nationhood, the historical relations between the “republic of letters” and television’s “reading public,” and contemporary civic engagement, TV-style.

Part III (Is TV beautiful?) analyzes TV content, showing how television apprehends the world of the imagination via live events, reality TV – a dramatic format that has surprising antecedents – and sports programming as you’ve never imagined it.

Part IV (What can TV be?) looks at the past and the future of both television and television studies. Television’s existence is determined contextually and historically, so there’s nothing “metaphysical” about it, in the ordinary-language sense of that term – TV has no essence, no transcendent properties; there is no “it” that can be abstracted and universalized. The only way to identify what it can be is to investigate it in context, historically. Unfortunately, TV scholarship has neglected not only the history of television but also its historiography. This section shows how TV has been memorialized in both formal and informal knowledge in one particular national context, using that example to create a template for the future study of television history. The book concludes by showing how TV studies itself can provide a new template for university education as we head into the era of self-made media and distributed truth.

Each part is also prefaced with a short introduction to orient the various chapters toward the themes of the book as a whole.

Given that the broadcast era, dominated by commercial network free-to-air TV, is coming to an end, how does television make sense of its own history, its own future, and how do other cultural sites and institutions attempt to grasp the essence of television? As digital media platforms mature (spread further, more cheaply), what changes in television will be caused by self-made content, social networking, interactive TV, mobile and non-broadcast platforms, and new business plans based on the long tail rather than the mass market? Are there lessons from previous “new” media such as print? Does the rolling transformation of television suggest a new model for the propagation of innovation, change, and creative capabilities throughout society? I argue that television going forward needs to be understood via the creativity and imagination of its viewers as a complex adaptive system, rather than via a rigid institutional system controlled by industrial expertise. Upon this “truth” will depend TV’s continued existence.

From popular culture to creative industries

The book as a whole tracks an overall logic or argument toward a new paradigm for understanding television, for television research and scholarship, and for the future of the medium itself. In this respect it mirrors a trajectory in my own thinking about television, which has evolved from a “popular culture” to a “creative industries” perspective, the latter being most evident in chapter 12 below, although it suffuses the book. That change has partly been provoked by technological and cultural changes in the way TV is produced, disseminated, and used. Lately the “active audience” tradition has been boosted in a quite spectacular way by the advent of interactive formats, consumer-generated content, and user-led innovation. For me, these developments are welcome because they allow for some long-standing problems of cultural communication to be addressed more directly, most importantly that of a continuing structural tension in the relations between “addresser” and “addressee” in popular culture, between professional/managerial expertise and control on the one side and consumer/network creativity and activism on the other.

The division of labor between producers and consumers that we’ve inherited from the modern industrial era had become so strong that it was hard to see “mass” media like TV as two-way communication at all, so much did the circulation of meaning belong to firms and the experts they employed, so little to people at large. So it is a definite step forward in the public understanding of media when non-professional audiences, consumers, citizens, members of the public (call them what you will) are at last recognized as being so active that they – or rather “you” – have been collectively honored as the *Time Magazine* “person of the year 2006.” The *expert paradigm* has a competitor at last. *Time’s* managing editor, Richard Stengel, praised the idea “that individuals are changing the nature of the information age, that the creators and consumers of user-generated content are transforming art and politics, that they are the engaged citizens of a new digital democracy” (*Time*, December 25, 2006: 4).³ However, old habits die hard. While declaring upfront that “the ‘great man’ theory of history . . . took a serious beating this year” from “community and collaboration on a scale never seen before” (p. 24), *Time* illustrated this thesis by featuring not the anonymous millions of “you” but a series of well-chosen “greats” who had achieved international prominence online, including a seven-page profile of Chad Hurley and Steve Chen, co-founders of YouTube (pp. 46–52).

The tension between the expert paradigm and consumer activism is evident in such coverage. It is a sign of longer-term changes, where the point of view of the consumer – the perspective of culture rather than industry – is no longer confined to “making sense” of ready-made entertainments prepared by experts. Audiences always have exceeded what commercial media required of them, but with the advent of user-generated content it is easier to discern how audience practices connect with creative, critical, or communicative efforts in a cultural context. It is only now that broadcasting is no longer the only available model of “mass” communication that we can begin to see more clearly some of the problems incurred when expertise takes over a communication system in which the whole population is in principle a participant. Expertise leads too easily to exclusion, control, manipulation, reduction of interactions to the profit motive or to ideological ends, and the production of disengaged passivity or resentment among those excluded, who are also the large majority of the population.

One practical consequence of this change is that television studies has to change too, from its original provenance as critique – an uneasy amalgam of political and literary criticism and behaviorism mixed with emancipation – toward something that is itself more active. Now, television takes its place as one of the creative industries and television studies needs to go there too. Expertise doesn’t need to be overthrown, however; it needs to be widely distributed. Everyone in consumer societies is now complicit in what used to be arcane mysteries, from how to perform the self in public to telling stories, true or tall, using digital technologies. Conversely, where telling the truth used to be an individual speech act, now it’s a media performance. Either way, more and more non-professionals know how to do it for themselves. Crucially, they also know how to communicate the results to the same “mass audience” (or reading public) that corporate media had originally manufactured for their own purposes. So TV studies needs to play an active part too, in uplifting the level of communicative ambition and entrepreneurial achievement among the general population, whether for commercial, community, or personal gain, using digital media and networks. Furthermore, the line between expertise and consumption is now so fuzzy that consumers play a strong role in innovation. TV scholarship needs to become more alert to the productive potential of the consumer paradigm, in which context it needs to encourage active creative production as well as reflective critique.

There are of course many books on TV. What makes this one unique is its attention to *longue-durée* historical processes, its broad focus on the context of knowledge within which television culture and scholarship both move, and its analysis of the imaginative content and cultural uses of television. It represents a new take on television from a writer who is steeped in that field. Given the evolutionary perspective, it would be surprising if the argument of the book neglected changes that press upon the medium, including further extrusions from the broadcast tube itself. But the real quarry of the investigation pursued in this book is not “the future of television” so much as “the future of knowledge” in a democratized, monetized, and globalized world where the “modern” paradigm of representation is giving way to a distributed and networked system in which some “eternal verities” have turned out to be far from robust.

Notes

- 1 See www.whitedot.org/issue/iss_front.asp.
- 2 See www.tv-b-gone.com.
- 3 See www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1569514,00.html.

Part I

Is TV True? Epistemology of TV

This part explores the ground of knowledge within which both television as a cultural form and TV studies as a critical discourse need to be understood. First off, chapter 2 sets the historical context by showing how meanings have been organized into significant paradigmatic clusters over successive epochs (pre-modern or medieval, modern, and contemporary or global). This chapter is the conceptual engine of the book as a whole. It has three main aims:

- first to identify how the causation or source of meaning has been located on a successive link of the “value chain” in each of these epochs:

producer/author/originator → *commodity/text/document* → *consumer/reader/user*;

- second to show how each link generates characteristic meanings in different cultural contexts, producing a characteristic *knowledge paradigm* for each period; and
- third that these knowledge paradigms are *mutually incompatible*, analytically if not in practice. In other words, the meanings of one paradigm cannot be analyzed by means of the values of another.

It is in relation to the third point that trouble stirs in intellectual work. Modern scholarship has developed into a very strong knowledge paradigm, organized around the foundational scientific insight (dating from around the sixteenth century but not fully ascendant until the nineteenth) that the source of meaning is not divine but can be observed within the properties of things themselves. Most scholars now

subscribe to this view, including me. The trouble is that you can't "read" contemporary *global* meanings directly via the *modern* paradigm without a sort of parallax error (meaning that your results are determined by the position from which you observe, not by the actual properties of the object of study) because, in contemporary consumer culture, the source of meaning can no longer be presumed to be located within objects, documents, or texts in themselves. In a market environment such things – from movies to clothing – don't have any meaning until they're used. The source of meaning is the consumer, user, or reader. The lesson here is that it is difficult to "read" such phenomena in their own terms if you approach them with a "modern" analytical toolkit. That is why scientists tend to be hostile to contemporary mediated culture: it locates the source of meaning in the "wrong" paradigm of knowledge from their point of view.

Here's where television comes in. Although as a technological medium it dates from the modern era and requires a good deal of science to produce and distribute, as a cultural form it is firmly within the contemporary paradigm, at the mercy of consumers and audiences for its meanings and values. It is important therefore to understand how it fits into knowledge paradigms and historic shifts. Equally important to recognize is how the *study* of television has been shaped by the same historical process, but that for the most part formal knowledge and scholarship still occupy a different position on the value chain from that of their object of study. There is a mismatch (a parallax view) between television, as a meaning-generating cultural system, and the means of studying it, modern empirical-observational science. Chapter 2 provides a template for the study of television as part of long-term shifts in the value chain of meaning.

One reason why there is a lag between entertainment culture and media scholarship is that the two operate at different *frequencies*. Like chapter 2, chapter 3 sets the study of television in a longer timeframe and larger context, this time related to the frequency of different forms of communication. Once again it transpires that popular culture and academic writing are related to each other rather than existing in chalk/cheese opposition. Where in chapter 2 the relationship was between paradigms, here it is a matter of where to tune in along a range of communicative frequencies. Popular culture and media tend to operate at higher frequency than does academic writing. Journalism for instance is "uttered" faster, with closer intervals between successive utterances, than is the case for scholarship. However, this difference is not an opposition but