

Television Studies after TV

After some initial trepidation, I have come to love “television after TV” (as Lynn Spigel and Jan Olsson put it). I couldn’t imagine life without Tivo or Bravo. I love watching *Dexter* via Netflix. And I’m even warming to the idea of TV on iTunes. I’m now confident television will be an important part of my life after TV. What I remain concerned about, however, is the fate of “television studies after TV.” Will the field that “saved” me from an academic life writing about T.S. Eliot’s influence on Swedish modernist poetry (I was an English undergrad and have a Masters in Scandinavian Languages and Literature) survive this transition—at least in the form that I found so alluring? (Although I freely admit that what follows is rooted in my idiosyncratic anxieties about academic work, I do think there are broader issues at play for the field.)

As a graduate student trained in literary analysis, TV studies held the seductive promise of relevance. Freed from the burden of being art, television could become so much more. It was both an entry point to a culture, but also part of that culture in a way literature never seemed to be. It was a sociological phenomenon, not just a cultural epiphenomenon. Theories of mass media helped me see television as a site of ideological domination and contestation and the medium’s competitive advantages during the network and early post-network era made its cultural primacy seem self-evident. It defined mainstream culture and thus seemed profoundly (if, I admit, vaguely) consequential. As a result, so to was my job as a TV scholar.

Of course television’s transformation in the era of fragmentation and convergence is altering the medium, its role in the circuit of culture, and perhaps that culture as well. Does television serve as the kind of mainstream cultural forum it once did? Can we talk about mainstream programming anymore? Does the content of TV hold the same kind of relevance as an object of study as it did when the network had 90% audience share? Television may not be marginal, but what happens when specific television programming is no longer socially central? How will the field of TV studies respond to these changes?

The last two trips I made to Austin seem pertinent in suggesting answers to the last questions. At the first Flow conference, I participated on a panel about the role of aesthetics in TV studies where I argued against the adoption of a specific form of evaluate criticism. That my position had little impact is not surprising, especially given TV’s transformation. This strengthening textualism (what might be called the TelevisionArt turn to reference David Bordwell) is predictable when a medium loses a certain social centrality. Last year, I attended a media history conference here where several people raised other concerns—specifically about the dangers of a field driven by technophilia and a speculative futurism. (While I would never be one to question the value of historical inquiry, I also wonder whether some scholars of my generation might be drawn to historical projects by nostalgia for a time when television played a familiar and primary social role.) In our discussion, I’d like to reflect on how a notion of the mainstream and TV’s complex relationship to it has shaped our field and how the problematization of the mainstream and TV affect our work.

To have this conversation, I think we need to talk about what we mean by the mainstream. What are mainstream programs and ideologies? What conclusions do we draw (no matter how vaguely stated) from the fact that *Charlie’s Angels* drew a 40 share? And what does it mean, if anything, that a show like *Alias* drew only a 15 share, for example? To what extent have certain understandings of the field or our work as scholars rested (whether explicitly or implicitly) on a notion of television as *the* mainstream media? And what happens if we discover that it not longer is (or maybe never actually was)?