Tele-ology

What the critics said about *Tele-ology*:

‘Where Hartley leads, others will follow—or so we can hope. Hartley’s *Tele-ology* represents...the prospectus for the next decade’s explorations and speculations. What finally confronts the reader is a sense of the sheer heterogeneity of television, which must be matched by the dexterity and creativity of its best critics. A medium which is never one thing for more than a few minutes requires a mode of criticism which is never one thing for more than a few pages. And few have done as many different things in a single volume as Hartley does here.’

Henry Jenkins, *Film Quarterly*

‘As a theorist of the popular, John Hartley is a rare beast—a writer whose charisma rivals his subject matter.... As a theorist of texts and audiences, John Hartley has a flair for working on and with the particulars of the text and the broader imaginary that is the public.... As a textual analyst, he is simultaneously elegant and startling.... As a theorist, Hartley is actually more like an eccentric antiques collector. His works brim with apparently unrelated gems which he displays and enthuses over, adding strange little anecdotes to underline their personal significance.... But like the truly canny collector, Hartley invariably demonstrates that he knows exactly where everything belongs and what it’s worth. His detours are designed to seduce the reader into following a larger, well-mapped route.... Above all, *Tele-ology* is a valuable map of the evolution of one of cultural studies’ most valuable, insightful and original scholars.’

Catharine Lumby, *Cultural Studies*

‘He is clearly right to insist that a deep strain in popular culture, even at its most managed, unsettles the given, over-rationalist conventions of criticism.... Hartley is happy to take the banal for what it is, for it is here above all, he believes, that there exists the irreducible pulse of popular culture at its most transgressive.’

Bill Schwarz, *Times Higher Educational Supplement*
Tele-ology

Studies in Television

John Hartley
To T.H.
(They know who they are)
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Acknowledgements

It’s a long way from Shakespeare to Kylie Minogue. My unfailing guide throughout has been Terence Hawkes of the University of Wales College of Cardiff; without his inspiring example, support and friendship not a word of this would ever have been written. I acknowledge too with pride his role as my first supervisor, first co-author and first general editor, long ago and far away... which means I suppose that even if it’s not his fault that all this got written, he certainly has to take some responsibility for the fact that it started getting published.

It’s a long way too from Cardiff to Fremantle. Along the way there have been colleagues, collaborators and co-writers whose company I have valued: I acknowledge here especially co-authors Martin Montgomery and Tom O’Regan, some of the fruits of whose labours I am glad to scrump herein; and Ien Ang, Mary-Ellen Brown, Roland Denning, David Eason, John Fiske, John Frow, Todd Gitlin, Holly Goulden, Bob Hodge, Niall Lucy, Judith Mauger, David Morley, Horace Newcomb, Beverley Poynton, Clare Richardson, Michael Schudson, Graeme Turner; I thank them all.

More credit than they know is due to students at Murdoch University and previously at the Polytechnic of Wales, as well as to students and staff at places where I have been fortunate enough to give papers, talks or ‘brownbags’, including the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Southern California, University College of Cardiff, Curtin University, Farnborough College of Art, Florida Atlantic University, the University of Illinois, the University of London School of Education, the University of Michigan, Michigan State University, the Catholic University of Nijmegen, the University of Queensland, the University of Western Sydney, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Ulster Polytechnic.

Very few words would have been written without the word-processing skills of Merrylyn Braden; her willingness to use them on my behalf is a substantial contribution to this book and I thank her sincerely.

I am indebted to the following periodicals for first publication of some of the essays appearing herein: Artlink, Australian Journal of Cultural Studies,
Acknowledgements

Australian Left Review, Critical Studies in Mass Communication, Cultural Studies, In the Picture, One-Eye, Textual Practice. The original publication of each paper is formally acknowledged at the start of each chapter. The essays are presented here in revised form, with the revisions ranging from minor editorial changes to substantial rewriting, and I thank you for reading them.

I would also like to acknowledge the following for the reproduction of television stills in chapter 11: STW Channel 9 Perth; TVW Channel 7 Perth; and McCann-Erickson Advertising Pty Ltd, Perth.
Part I

Television theory
Chapter 1

Tele-ology

Readers of this book may be familiar with the term ‘teleology’ as a theological or philosophical concept. It denotes the doctrine of final causes, as in the Day of Judgement, which (it is said) won’t happen till the end of human history, but which is nevertheless deemed to explain retrospectively all that has gone before. Teleology is cause after the event, a doctrine of knowledge with which neither science nor TV executives are very comfortable. However, whatever scientists might like to think, television executives are right to feel uncomfortable; for them the final cause is after the event, the day of judgement does determine every action they take. In deference to the poor benighted television executive, then, and taking last things first, I open Tele-ology with a quotation from the Dies irae (‘day of wrath’) of the Requiem Mass:

*Judex ergo cum sedebit* When therefore the judge takes his seat

*Quidquid latet apparebit,* Whatever is hidden will reveal itself,

*Nil inultum remanebit.* Nothing will remain unavenged.

The biggest and brassiest rendition of this excerpt must be that of Hector Berlioz, so let it play in the background, TV-style, while I point out that for TV executives there are indeed judges who take their seats every day and night and who reveal to themselves what is hidden inside that TV screen; the audience sits in judgement over all the economic wheeling and dealing, the artistic blood, sweat, tears and compromises that have led up to this one moment. If all’s well that ends well, then everyone is blissful, but if not, nothing remains unavenged for long; shows are thrown into the abyss, executives are fired (though not literally these days), whole TV channels lose their livelihood. Teleology is not a doctrine of foregone conclusions; some shows are damned and some are saved, but no-one knows which is which until after they’re screened.

We, the public, are the final cause whose judgement determines the very survival of the TV executive and the entire world of television. In front of
such judges, it is now in fact the case that:

\[
\begin{align*}
Mors & \textit{stupebit et natura} & \text{Death and nature shall be astonished} \\
Cum & \textit{resurget creatura} & \text{When all creation rises again} \\
\textit{Judicanti responsura}. & \text{To answer to the judge.}
\end{align*}
\]

Television, the medium of popular entertainment, does nothing less than re-create the world of nature, and of death too, in both actuality and fiction, for our astonishment, for us to judge.

*Tele-ology* is a set of essays on television as a cultural, aesthetic, political, textual, industrialized medium. Its aim is not to sit in judgement over television, but to contribute to television studies (*tele-logos*), an academic discipline which does not in fact exist, and which Aristotle, who first pondered such matters, would have been hard put to classify into any of his classical branches of knowledge; in Greek, *telelogos* might mean distant-writing or distant-truth, which is an agreeable metaphor for TV if you’re already familiar with it, but not one that would conjure up to an uninitiated Athenian the image of a little black box of Japanese manufacture that lights up the corner of several billion living rooms around the world. So, for the moment, since there’s no such thing as television studies, this is a contribution to the un-discipline of tele-ology.

As befits its status it is not a standard academic study; it makes no attempt to present a comprehensive survey of all published studies of television, though a surprising number of these exist; it does not develop a linear argument about one specific topic in the field; and it does not confine itself to traditional academic styles of writing. Instead of comprehensive linearity and plain style, these essays offer polemic, rhetoric and an approach that works *on* rather than *through* contemporary critical theory, in an attempt to provoke new ways of thinking about an all too familiar cultural phenomenon.

The essays have appeared over a period of a decade in a variety of journals, books and magazines, many of which were hard to get hold of at the time, never mind later on. Their publication was dispersed over three continents and over several different types of writing—some were intended as scholarly papers, some as topical criticism, while others were addressed to specific readerships, from independent filmmakers to English teachers. However, partly because they do range across time, space and genre, they represent an approach to television that is appropriate both to the peculiarities of the medium itself and to the need for a flexible and responsive analytical apparatus by means of which some sense can be made of it. At the very least I can take comfort in the fact that the chapters that follow are like television shows that were tried out on a minority channel before getting the chance to be seen by a wider audience; re-runs yes, but
new to some readers, and for others, repackaged into what tactful TV announcers call a second chance...

It follows that the development of an argument about television in Tele-ology is not one of linear progression across a known countryside in pursuit of a predetermined quarry. The relationship between chapters might better be seen as something like that between individual floes in an icefield; they’re connected but independent. The explorer will find that it’s quite easy to jump from one to the next, but sometimes they may look very similar in appearance. A position arrived at in one paper forms the starting point for another, though sometimes the direction of progress may not be obvious. Matter that is dealt with in one context may need reiterating in another, and the same material may be put to different uses, just as a floe might rotate after one has landed on it, causing a different orientation to the landscape to be established. Needless to say, this approach does leave a fair amount of work to the reader; progress towards landmarks may be swift, or it may necessitate some agile leaps, or it may not be seen as progress at all. Certainly the book as a whole does not lead the reader by the nose towards a teleological final cause; much of what appears here was written in an exploratory, experimental mode, without the least suspicion that the final point of arrival would be somewhere in the vicinity of Kylie Minogue.

INTERVENTION ANALYSIS

While the landscape may change and the route taken might be discontinuous, it is possible to suggest that more than mere leaps of faith link the various essays in this book. As a whole, it is dedicated to what may be termed ‘intervention analysis’. That is, integral to it is the contribution its individual parts might make to the field of study that they have helped to constitute. Intervention analysis seeks not only to describe and explain existing dispositions of knowledge, but also to change them. This is an inescapable aspect of these studies because, at the time I embarked upon them in the mid-1970s, an adequate approach to television as a textual-cultural object of study was not fully developed within existing critical discourses, so it had to be constructed out of them. In particular, a textual-formal (semiotic) and socio-political (cultural) approach to television as an instance of cultural production within the context of contemporary, urban, democratic popular culture is constructed out of materials borrowed variously from linguistics, anthropology, literary theory and criticism, sociology, political theory and journalism, as well as certain metadiscourses like structuralism (and its intellectual successors), semiotics and cultural studies. Out of such rich resources what I hope is a useful and accessible theoretical model of television is constructed, in which full account is taken of its textuality, while simultaneously that textuality is seen not merely as a
formal apparatus but as grounded in a cultural context which may determine what any given text might mean.

While meaning may easily be determined by cultural contexts, it is far less easily determined by cultural analysts. However, there is one aspect of its determination which informs much of my work and which is at least easily stated: the determination of meaning is a creative act performed by readers, not by texts or contexts as such. The so-called consumers of meanings cannot be thought of as passive or as powerless. On the contrary, everyone performs creative critical work in relation to popular textual forms. This book is therefore dedicated to making the existing practices of reading and understanding television better informed, less unselfconscious and more systematic. It does not determine meanings on behalf of an incapacitated audience, but it does develop readings which are intended to intervene in the way people might want to watch television. Its perspective is that of the audience; it claims no special knowledge of technical or production processes, and does not explain television’s cultural form by reference to the industry’s point of view. Nor does it explain audience practices by reference to psychological or behavioural criteria. Since the act of reading cannot be observed directly, the practice of reading television is not susceptible to explanation by scientific means, unless one wishes to propose a modification of Werner Heisenberg’s uncertainty principle, which states that an observer can determine the position or the velocity of subatomic particles, but not both at once. Similarly, the cultural ‘scientist’ can observe people watching television or watch television, but not both at once. Audience practices and textual phenomena can be isolated and described, but what happens when they fuse together cannot be observed without changing the circumstances of fusion. This is a position tele-ology shares with contemporary theoretical physics.

Unlike theoretical physics, however, tele-ology asserts that there is a position beyond the uncertainty principle to which readers can go, equipped with critical discourse, in order to perform their own acts of creation. To understand the act of reading one must do it, and doing it is creative of new meanings. Understanding a cultural practice by doing it is intervention analysis, and understanding the cultural practice of reading television is what the analysis herein seeks to do.

The first intervention that needs to be made is to justify (i.e. construct) television as an object worthy of study as a textual-cultural phenomenon. However, using textual and cultural theory to account for a medium which is all too often ignored or undervalued by the most influential theorists, also means intervening in intellectual culture in defence of popular representations. Thus TV can be used to test textual and cultural theories just as they can be used to understand popular TV.

The defence of the popular is strategically important in certain contexts, but it has to be set within limits, too. For instance, racist and
sexist attitudes are undoubtedly ‘popular’ in one sense of the word, but they are not to be defended for that reason. Similarly, intervention analysis cannot proceed on the Popeian assumption that ‘whatever is, is right’, simply asserting that anything with a large audience is OK because _ipso facto_ it must be popular, and even if its ideology is unspeakable, its mode of address demeaning and its production values woeful, well, that’s OK too because the audience is free to negotiate with it or resist it. Such an approach is unable to conclude for itself what is worth defending and what needs to be criticized. Intervention analysis certainly needs to take popular television more or less as it finds it, without high-culture fastidiousness or right-on political squeamishness, but it needs to intervene _in_ the media, and in the production of popular knowledges _about_ them, to show where aesthetic or political critique is appropriate to popular representations; it needs to _analyse_ television in order to be clear about what is worth defending and why. The defence of the popular is not the same thing as populism, for it seeks not to follow and trade on but to shape and invigorate what Trevor Griffiths has called ‘the popular imagination’, in an enterprise which is perhaps best thought of as a dialogue with the popular.

Intervention analysis is not confined to critical or scholarly writing; it is also conducted on the margins of popular television by creative producers working with (and against) the medium itself. Hence avant-garde art and independent production are by definition outside the domain of the popular, but still they have something to offer it, both aesthetically and in the way they organize the relations between textmaker and audience (i.e. politically). However, neither radical production nor critical theory can achieve their full explanatory leverage without taking account of what is going on within the domain of popular representations. It still amazes me that many people who embark on the formal study of the media, or who make video, or who comment on television in society, are not only relatively ignorant of mainstream television, but seem to regard the whole of popular culture as something to avoid like the plague. Instead of such fear of contamination, I’d argue for an understanding that includes a thorough knowledge of popular television in its own terms, if only to be better equipped to challenge or change it.

Intervention analysis can thus be seen as a strategy for interrogating various centres, whether intellectual, aesthetic or political, from their margins, seeking to interconnect the domains on whose margins the analysis stands, but not, be it said, to propose a new centre in opposition to those observed and criticized. In other words, the resources from which a critical discourse about popular television can be created, including radical politics, critical theory, avant-garde art and independent production, are marginal to the mainstream practices of popular culture, but their value consists in their marginality—and so it is with this book.
One of the margins upon which it stands is the theoretical one between discourse and reality. The position adopted is precarious—an uneasy balancing act with one foot on a floe called reality and one on a floe called discourse, with nothing more to connect them than the muscular energy of the analyst, whose intervention is always jeopardized by the fact that the two floes are always drifting apart as well as touching. Preoccupied with keeping one’s feet together in conditions where any observer can see that sooner or later there’s going to be a nasty accident is the occupational hazard of the intervention analyst. But such an undignified stance may be instructive. Choosing to avoid the customary scholarly practice of grounding one’s theory firmly, and choosing instead to go out on a limb, is a risky enterprise. Even now I can feel my legs beginning to drift apart on the shaky grounds of this slippery metaphor. But it is worth the risk, if only for the amusement and edification of the onlooker, who will be able to tell where the ice is thin simply by watching what happens when I skate on it.

In common with all those who had the ground taken from under their feet by the structuralist enterprise, I was unsettled but thrilled by the discovery of the constructed nature of the real. However, it soon became clear that it is equally important to hang on to the material reality of the resulting constructions. Just as in contemporary physics subatomic particles (matter) are also waves (non-material), so in the discursive realm it is necessary to imagine reality as material (beyond discourse) and as textual (produced by discourse) at one and the same time. For instance, news is a discursive construction of the real, but its texts are themselves real and can be used to reconstruct extra-discursive reality, most obviously on spectacular or charismatic occasions, like the bombing of Tripoli to coincide with US prime-time, or the staging of media events, from elections to the America’s Cup.

Given this stance in relation to discourse and reality, the methodological implications are that in this book evidence takes the form of texts which can be recovered and scrutinized; discourse in real, material form. For instance, ‘the audience’ is accepted as evidence not in the form of individual behaviour (except where such form is itself textual, as in behaviour which is statistically reduced to the textual form of ratings), but in the form of real discursive constructions which are produced and circulated for various purposes by various agencies. The ‘text’ that constitutes the object of study for tele-ology is thus not confined to what is on the screen, but includes the discourse of television wherever it is deployed. And, as I hope will become clear from some of the essays in this book, one of the more weird and wonderful fictional creations associated with popular television is not to be found on the TV screen at all; the image of the TV audience that suffuses both the industry and the domain of public discussion about TV is a fiction.
which is just as susceptible to textual analysis—and just as real—as Pam Ewing.

**TEXTUAL INTERVENTIONS**

To read texts is also to write them. The point of departure for the essays herein is the work represented in two earlier books: *Reading Television*, which I co-wrote with John Fiske (1978), and my *Understanding News* (1982). Both books have twin aims: first, to provide an adequate (and where necessary original) theoretical and analytical framework for the studies of TV texts that they undertake; and second, to provide a teaching text for the use of readers setting out on the formal study of television for the first time. These aims inform the present volume too; television studies, in so far as such an enterprise can be given a proper name, comprises both studies of television and, simultaneously, the provision of principles, protocols and provocations for studying television in a more or less formal institutional setting.

Before *Reading Television* was published, the study of the medium had concentrated on three main problems:

1. television’s behavioural effect on individual viewers, as discerned by psychologistic observation and experimentation;
2. television’s cultural effect on the quality of life, as seen by critics trained in certain kinds of evaluative literary discrimination;
3. television’s socio-political effect as one of the mass media—owned, controlled and institutionalized along the lines of capitalist commodity production.

Each of these ‘inventions’ of television as an object of study concentrated on its effects, which were generally understood to be negative. Critical attention to television really had very little to say that was positive. Television was said to cause individuals to behave badly (never well), to have a depressing (but not uplifting) effect on the quality of cultural life, and TV’s social effect was said to enhance the power of the already powerful (but not that of its viewers), both by its economic location in their investment portfolios and its political propensity to trumpet their values in fact and fiction alike. Individually, culturally, socially, economically, politically, TV was not held in very high critical esteem.

The gap left by this history was in the region of television’s textuality. Criticism was often so thoroughlygoingly negative that it made one wonder why the critics in question bothered (and what on earth they themselves had been watching, if anything); if TV was so irredeemably awful, surely it didn’t need such obsessive denunciation. Part of the problem, clearly, was that television represented something else for such critics. The trouble with TV was not that it was so bad, but that it was so *popular*. What made
me personally interested in television as an object of study in the first place was the shocked discovery that ‘anti-TV’ opinions, which were at that time and still are quite respectable, simply couldn’t be shifted by informed argument, because they weren’t based on any such grounds. The passion and fury surrounding television’s reputation in the public domain and in everyday conversations seemed to me to be a symptom of something much more disquieting than anything on TV itself: fear of popular culture.

Studies of television always did stand on the margin between popular culture and popular democracy, because the history of television is also, in part, the history of a continuing struggle for popular representation at both the symbolic and the political level. A rather shameful component of the intellectual history of TV criticism is that it has often been used to mount attacks on democracy in the guise of critique of popular culture. While it is not often seen as politically permissible to rubbish democracy, popular culture is another matter; open season on television has allowed those who weren’t game to make clear their distaste for democracy to shoot at easier targets. As a result, a fair amount of critical distaste has found its way via schools and periodicals into the common-sense wisdom of the very people for whom popular culture is popular, permeating popular culture with guilt about its own practices, and with nostalgia for the outmoded forms so beloved of the critics.

In this context one strategy for taking account of television’s popular-democratic potential is to begin from what may be understood as the viewer’s point of view, namely the ‘message’ on the screen. However, it is also necessary to position across this very point of view an analytical lens; a systematic mode of looking which seeks to focus on problems beyond the immediate plane of personal preference or evaluation.

That strategy was certainly one that appealed to me, as I surveyed the then field of TV studies for the first time in the mid-1970s, wanting to contribute to the development of textual theory in relation to popular media, and, at the same time, to teach or popularize the approaches on which the theory is based. In other words, to put an analytical lens over the viewer’s point of view is also to imagine a viewing position that one wouldn’t mind occupying oneself. This is a practical method for dealing with what is in fact a difficult issue: the relationship between the observer and the object of study in the human ‘sciences’. Theoretically informed observation of the cultural phenomenon of television is not the same as watching telly, and watching television for the purposes of study, teaching and publication does not tell you how other people—‘the’ people—watch it for themselves; this is the inescapable uncertainty principle of tele-ology. However, to begin from an imagined viewer’s point of view is to presume, \textit{a priori}, that what’s sauce for the goose is sauce for the gander. That is, the connection between me as watcher-theorist and the popular audience, via
the programming that we both watch, is just that, a connection, and one that makes theorists out of the popular audience just as it makes a ‘vidiot’ out of the theorist.

This perspective does bring a certain landscape into view; not one in which the observer can pronounce on the individual, aesthetic or politico-economic ‘effects’ of television, but one in which the general cultural terrain which surrounds both analyst and audience can be viewed from within (just as, say, scholars of the English language can study it from within, but without reference to its ‘effects’). Such a perspective encourages a general view of TV as playing a positive cultural role for modern societies, one that Fiske and I dubbed ‘bardic’ in Reading Television. Television performs a ‘bardic function’, rendering into symbolic form the conflicts and preoccupations of contemporary culture.

From this vantage point, which seeks to survey the terrain upon which meaning is created and circulated, in circumstances where individuals (the traditional source of meaning) are not the sole authors of the sense they make, the exploration of television can begin. As an instance of the industrialization of sense-making, television can then be used to explore larger issues, which reconnect its cultural aspects to questions of power. For example, categories such as class, nation and gender are not only socio-political but also meaningful, and TV is one of the mechanisms for producing the categories themselves, and the relationships within and between them, as meaningful (and therefore as true—‘existing in fact’) for those of us who live among such categorizations. Similarly, the erection of discursive hierarchies such as the difference in prestige between oral and literate culture, or between television and literature, is not just a cultural matter of critical opinion placing literature ‘higher’ on a discursive scale than TV, but a matter of power too, where what is at stake is more than merely the taste of individuals, but the conditions of possibility for entire media like TV.

The proposal of a theoretical, critical apparatus capable of explaining the social and textual power of television is not a one-off enterprise that is achieved at the first or any attempt. Hence the textual interventions initiated in Reading Television and Understanding News have continued in an endeavour which is represented by the following chapters. Tele-ology develops analyses in response to new ideas, and to debates within the field. In addition, television studies is now much more responsive than it used to be to television’s own institutional imperatives; technical, generic, economic or aesthetic developments within the industry, and the social relations with the various publics that TV channels create and sustain for themselves, are now capable of being folded into the mix of textual and cultural analysis that characterizes my approach to TV.
GOING WITH THE FLOE

As well as justifying and establishing television as an object of study, television studies has to establish a mode of address which is not only sensitive to its subject matter but also to the reader. Thus the essays that follow are responsive to different intellectual constituencies and to different kinds of readership, who must be addressed in order to establish the textual-cultural study of television with a critical discourse of its own. Hence an essay written for readers trained in literary studies would differ from one written for sociologists. Likewise independent producers cannot be addressed in quite the same terms as those who read scholarly journals. Having said that, however, I believe that each such constituency is or should be aware of what is being said and thought in neighbouring areas; once again my position is not squarely within any disciplinary or practical discourse but on the margins of several, seeking to illuminate each from the perspective of the others. The relations between different essays and their intended readers may differ, but what is represented does cross from essay to essay. Where TV itself is often described by the well-known concept of flow, my television criticism is connected by means of the less well-known concept of floe.

‘Flow’ is used by both Raymond Williams and network TV schedulers to conceptualize time, especially the flow of time within the medium. Floe, on the other hand, is a mixed metaphor of space, including the geopolitics of TV as an international industry, the relations between critical positions and the spaces between viewers. Part of its appeal to me is based on my own experience of TV in different geographical locations, from the British, Australian and American systems with which I am most familiar, to others I have only glimpsed in passing, from Malaysia and Singapore to Luxembourg and Castellon, wherein local peculiarities can be both recognized in their specificity and compared with each other in more general terms. When you leave home to see world television, however, you might find Neighbours dubbed into Catalan, or discover that the first programme ever broadcast on Singapore television was Hancock’s Half Hour, or that the most popular show on Indonesian TV was the Australian mini-series Return to Eden, or that news footage is the same, vernacular voice-overs notwithstanding, wherever you go. Television systems the world over are apt to bump into their neighbours, and share each other’s jokes and journalism. But you don’t have to go far to find world television. Here at home in Fremantle, I can see the news from the USSR, Vremya (‘Time’), every weekday, live and unsubtitled, beamed in by satellite and broadcast nationwide on the multicultural channel SBS, while on the three commercial TV channels I can catch the American NBC Today Show (Channel 7), the UK’s ITN World News (Channel 9) or the
American Cable News Network (Channel 10) overnight. Ditto for drama series, sports coverage, chat shows and sitcoms. Meanwhile, my children are watching the Australian version of the BBC’s Play School on the ABC, whose guest presenter today, singing about apples falling from trees, bump, bump, bump, is Annette Shun Wah, better known as producer-presenter of late-night international avant-garde TV and music on the SBS’s Eat Carpet show.

The internationalization and cross-fertilization of broadcast programming is routine and unremarkable—it merely follows the pattern of publishing, fashion, recorded music and cinema. So it is with Tele-ology; readers will find references to unfamiliar shows, localities and personalities, but I think such references do more than give a local habitation and a name to more general matters. They demonstrate that in television, as in other public arts, ‘the local’ is a contradictory term; it is both vital and defunct. The same shows, formats and structures are found around the world, but what they mean can depend quite crucially on how they are scheduled into the public semiosis of a given locality. But simultaneously, although the resources available to any one household in that locality may be similar to those available in others, what is selected from the repertoire may differ crucially from one house to its next-door neighbour, or even from one member of the same household to another. Television is utilized not only according to the location of the antenna, but also according to the semiotic allegiances of the viewer, which are both local and global, just as a music fan will follow local bands and international stars, or a reader will buy local newspapers and international bestsellers, without confusion or a sense of contradiction.

What this ‘multi-consciousness’ in respect of symbolic space means for Tele-ology is that I have tried to retain the twin realities of planetary circulation and privatized sense-making in the essays that follow. Some of them are much more local in their references than others, and it’s tempting to hope that any resulting opacity for readers from elsewhere will be seen as the richness of local colour rather than the murk of confusion. But I’d probably be on safer ground, or a steadier floe, to claim that television requires a situated analysis to enable its peculiarities and its generalities to be teased out. It might also be worth adding that in the international circulation of ideas, to which Tele-ology is a contribution, readers will be much more familiar with ‘local’ references to, say, the UK or USA, presented not as local at all but as typical and binding on readers from Seoul to Santiago. One of the many advantages of living in Australia is that its ‘local’ is irreducibly unique while at the same time it is unusually open to the international flow of television and other cultural tides. So what is local for Australia is not claimed as typical for the world; its unfamiliarity is a reminder of the way things look differently depending on where you stand,
its marginality is a floe from which to survey the ceaseless currents of both
television and television theory.

TELE-OLOGY
The essays herein are gathered into five sections:

Television theory
Part I colonizes some terrain for television theory, setting up a number of
concepts, analytical procedures and theoretical preoccupations by means of
which a textual-cultural approach to television can be undertaken. It argues
that television ought to be understood not as a technology, nor even as an
aesthetic system, but much more broadly as one of the fundamental human
mechanisms for sense-making, comparable with speech itself. In order to
make this claim, it is necessary to adopt two basic theoretical tenets: first,
that communication is social not individual, and second, that it is textual
not behavioural.

That is, first, the ‘power of speech’ is not individual but social,
therefore subject to technological development and historical change in
what should be understood not as an innate personal capacity for
speaking but a global economy of sense-making. The so-called power of
speech is socialized, and therefore subject to economic exploitation,
technological expansion and, most importantly, to power relations.
Certain people and classes of people have historically taken the power of
speech much further than others, gaining power over the means of its
production and social circulation.

The second tenet is that communication depends on the production of
texts and the practice of reading in any medium whatever; it is neither based
on the self-presence of the speaking consciousness nor on face-to-face
communication. Writing and other media like TV are neither extensions of
speech nor are they, as is sometimes held, corruptions of it. On the contrary,
‘media’ are preconditions for sense-making.

It is no longer necessary to fret about television’s supposed effects on
individual behaviour, for these are marginal to its main business of
developing the social power of speech into a hi-tech industry. Individual
effects are small beer compared with the social effects of widespread belief
in them; effects which include forms of censorship, licensing, restrictive
regulation and moral policing that are reminiscent of the edicts of Star
Chamber against the new medium of printing in the sixteenth century. From
this perspective, fretting about TV’s ‘influence’ is based on the presumption
that there is something tainted or contaminating about a socio-
technological medium of communication per se, a duplicity made all the
more scandalous for being tainted with the seductiveness of pictures,
images, icons, as opposed to the worthy, even godly, medium of print. In this respect TV shares a history of being disciplined as a medium with its visual predecessors such as Hollywood, advertising, comics, right back to music hall and the illustrated ‘penny-dreadfuls’ of the Victorian age, all of which attracted the same discourses of abuse until they ceased to be popular, and were then recognized as art. Contemporary preoccupations with television’s individual, behavioural, psychological effects are, historically, a symptom of the post-medieval world’s suspicion of visual images, not an explanatory framework; even more fundamentally, they are a symptom of that mystical faith in direct, self-present, face-to-face communication as the only real, authentic kind which television and all the other media, including print and writing, challenge.

It follows from a socio-textual approach to television that the object of study is the text in its social setting—institutional, historical, political, economic and personal. The most fundamental concern that the analyst has to confront when constructing such an object of study is the question of textual power. Television and the power of dirt’ puts the view that television’s textual power derives from its marginal status at various different levels: its ‘dirty’ boundaries, the potency of rites of passage, the power of ambiguity, the excess of scandalous categories. Television’s institutional status is also marginal, ambiguous and scandalized, which suggests that the semiotic and the social, the textual and cultural, are capable of being explored in relation to one another, even if they cannot be read off from or reduced to each other. This analytical preoccupation with TV’s textual power remains a concern throughout the book, though in different manifestations. Once communication is understood as social not individual, and as textual not behavioural, it may even be possible to argue, as I do towards the end of Television and the power of dirt’, that speech itself should be understood in the same way.

Truth wars

Part II shows how the production and representation of truth on popular television and in the press is not a matter of philosophical definitions of truth, but a practical requirement in an industry which is attending to other things, like survival, profitability, audience maximization, entertainment, deadlines and competition. Meanwhile, this industry is turning out truth by the ton, wholesale warehouses of words, images, imaginings and sound effects whose effect is to establish in a pragmatic way what counts as true for whole communities. Without having to distinguish in the abstract between truth and falsehood, truth and propaganda, truth and fiction, the news media construct the concrete world into stories, which are narratives whose form is already written by the genre-expectations of the medium and by the professional practices of journalists and producers.
Forgetting their scolding grandmothers, for whom ‘telling stories’ is synonymous with ‘telling lies’, the manufacturers of the nightly narrative render the immediacy of unpredictable incidents into circadian semio-rhythms, whose familiar components of sight, sound, story and sentiment, cemented by endless talk, continuously invent ‘us’, our community, nation, alliance, species, as intelligible and as different from ‘them’. Thus truth on television is textual, a coherence reached by quotation and memory, but it’s also adversarial, being what’s inside ‘our’ boundary as opposed to what’s outside. Telling news stories becomes a matter of fitting unknown facts to known narratives, making the truth of the news result (like the *quod erat demonstrandum* of a theorem) from the strategies of inclusion and exclusion by which home is distinguished from foreign.

Unfortunately this strategy makes ‘foreigners’—beyond the pale not only of ‘home’ but of truth itself—of all those within a given community who don’t fit the ‘we’ pronoun in the narrative. So if the story happens to be told from a white, professional, male, conservative, first-world point of view, which does sometimes happen, then those whose point of view is organized around different subjectivities are automatically exiled from the community whose news story this is. For such instant outsiders, the news is not true but racist, sexist, biased and propagandist. But for those who occupy or endorse the speaking position of the news narrative, the story is familiar (it creates our family). It is not only common sense, or sense-making understood as common-to-all, it is *true*; it has power to command others. The occupants of different speaking positions are thus, inevitably, outside of truth (untrustworthy), and if they’re not liars, then they are at least seen as incapable of self-representation. The ‘we’ speaking position of news narrative thence reckons itself empowered to speak on behalf of (to colonize) those others in the name of truth, providing interpretation and explanation, usually in the form of ‘helpful’ voice-overs which literally silence other voices.

These are truth wars, and they have both winners and losers. Current champion is an image of democracy that simultaneously represents freedom of speech (‘both’ sides of a story) and leadership, participation and government, as well as covering the variety and plurality of public affairs and human interest. This nationalization of pluralist democracy takes the form of multiple voices and faces speaking for about fifteen seconds each in a dialogue which illustrates the truth of the reporters’ narratives, set into a choreographed sequence of familiar genres (domestic politics-economy, foreign affairs, disasters, sport and weather) which are linked into audio-visual if not logical coherence by the measured rhythm of alternation between studio anchor, talking heads, graphics and actuality. These are the weapons of truth wars, which certainly make losers of all who cannot wield them.
Paedocracy

Part III concentrates on viewing practices, though once again it is hard to avoid the conclusion that the only real audience for popular television is the fictionalized image of it that can be found in various texts and discourses. The practice of watching television is real enough, but what anyone actually does in this context hardly counts; how we watch television does not determine how television works either textually or institutionally. In any case, although watching TV is easy to do, it is very difficult (in my view impossible) to observe or describe in objective or neutral terms, so no-one really knows what happens. It is only in texts and discourses that you will find identified, unified or explained the myriad unseen goings-on that are collectively lumped together as ‘the audience’. The TV industry, for instance, works towards and addresses an image of the audience which I’ve called ‘paedocratic’, that is, governed by childlike qualities. However, the TV industry is not alone in this; critical and regulatory discourses, including much of what passes as objective academic or scientific research, also paedocratize the audience, setting it up as an ‘other’ which is in need of protection from its own innocence, vulnerability and unbridled urges.

Since the publication of the papers in which I first introduced the concept of the paedocratic audience (‘Out of bounds’ and ‘Invisible fictions’), I’ve begun to realize that the term covers up a struggle, a battle of wills, as it were. Television networks, government regulators and critical institutions all construct TV as a paedocratic regime, but as often as not they only do this as a prelude to some form of coup in which they try to snatch power away from the wild, undomesticated and irresponsible audience they’ve imagined, in order to govern it (for its own good, of course). In other words, there’s a struggle between what are presumed to be paedocratic audience practices on the one hand (governed by childlike qualities), and pedagogic discourses on the other (government over childish tendencies). Pedagogic interventions range from attempts to guide, channel and inform viewers (usually found inside TV and the press in the guise of promos, reviews and features) to those which seek to control, scold and chastise them (often encountered in schools, so there are few viewers who escape this battle for their imagination).

This struggle seems endemic to a system in which TV has a life of its own, whatever the audience is or wants, and that life is conducted inside a textual realm, surrounded by neighbouring discursive domains, some of which are friendly, some less so. In such a world, the community under discussion—the TV audience—is not and cannot be present to or speak for itself, but nevertheless, perversely, it remains sovereign, in the sense that individually and collectively the audience can exercise ‘capital’ power over what it watches—the power of life and death (i.e. on and off),
if not power over the way that the life of TV-land is conducted. TV-land operates from day to day as an institution, relatively autonomous from the audience, but inexplicable without its absent presence; similarly, the audience that is called into being by the world-historical forces of television remains relatively autonomous from that institution at the level of sense-making practices.

The will to control audiences is historically no match for the audience’s will to watch. But I do think regulatory, pedagogic, censorious discourses of criticism and control have had a depressing effect, not only on TV texts but on the ambitions of audiences, who endlessly settle for less than they want because the only freely available frameworks for making sense of what they’re doing make it seem trivial, scandalous, habit-forming, narco-tizing, boring, ideologically unsound, hegemonic and, well, bad. It’s the critical chorus that needs to be restrained for a while, rather than the audience. The audience doesn’t have much to go on if it ever does decide to look around for guidance on how to do its job better. An important job for those who take a scholarly or critical interest in television and its audiences is thus to take a hard look at their own practices and presumptions, some of which I criticize in ‘The real world of audiences’ and in ‘Out of bounds’. It is also salutory, and it may be suggestive, to share with others one’s own personal formation as a practising TV viewer, which I do in ‘Regimes of pleasure’.

The creation of the audience as a paedocratic ‘other’ often says more about the critic than it does about the audience. However, I would argue just as strongly that audiences, precisely because they are a creation of the institutions that address them, should not be left as they are found. In my view, telling the public that TV is an idiot-box or boob-tube is not calculated to inspire a rich variety of viewing practices, of different kinds and quality from the careful to the carefree. However, to show how TV texts and discourses construct not only the world but also places in it that from time to time everyone might want to call ‘me’ is also to alert viewers to what they can achieve in the act of watching television. Viewers cannot be made to behave themselves; that’s not what TV is for. But they can understand how TV behaves, including their own part in it. That’s what tele-ology, finally, is for.

Photopoetics

Part IV takes up this rallying cry by arguing in favour of certain traditions of creative imagination in popular culture both historically and in specific cultural contexts. ‘The politics of photopoetry’ crosses the frontier between popular and high culture, showing how certain visual artists, from Humphrey Jennings to Troy Kennedy Martin, are doing no less than Shakespeare did, while conversely Shakespeare has been reduced to an
ideological blunt instrument with which the popular media themselves belabour their unsuspecting readers, to the detriment of all concerned.

Meanwhile, over on commercial television in neglected backwaters of the cultural landscape, things are afoot which definitely require explanation. ‘Continuous pleasures in marginal places’ looks at TV continuity—the TV genre that isn’t there—in the context of some communities which are, historically, not sure if they’re there either. One such is Western Australia, and another is the community of tele-ologists. Luckily for Western Australia, there is some evidence (in ‘A state of excitement’) that indeed something is there, even if it isn’t the America’s Cup. The euphoricization of democracy is one of television’s contemporary photopoetic creations, and you saw it first, or rather felt it, on Channel 9. As for the worldwide community of tele-ologists, there’s still some doubt about their existence. Watch this space.

The art of television

The final part of the book is devoted to a series of essays which narrow the critical focus, hopefully to increase the intensity of illumination, to television in Australia; what it’s for (‘Local television’), how it got there (‘Quoting not science but sideboards’) and what’s going on (‘Two cheers for paedocracy’). This last chapter shows how traditional ways of understanding both cultural politics (‘The 18th Brumaire of Kylie Minogue’) and art (‘Getting the picture?’) simply don’t apply to what is going on in the electronic media. Kylie Minogue, Elle Macpherson, Joan Sutherland, Madonna, Mel Gibson and Jane Rutter (all but one of whom are Australian, though all are global figures) are, through their bodily images, caught up in various ways in the politics of electronic aesthetics, storming the Bastille of popular consciousness while falling victim to the ancien régime of cultural prejudice. The way that these performers, simulacra of contemporary art, are handled by journalists and commentators, is explored in ‘Two cheers for paedocracy’, showing (I think conclusively) that cultural journalism is in much greater need of critique and improvement than the culture it purports to explain.

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Since personal computers became cheap enough even for academics, the potential for creativity of small screens in the home has begun to be recognized. It’s no longer so easy to presume a division of labour between critical movers and shakers on one side, and awed, passive audiences on the other; creative criticism and watching TV turn out to be one and the same thing. Where culture, meaning and power are concerned, structures (e.g. discourses) and artefacts (e.g. texts) are simpler than their individual
end-products, whether semiotic or social, just as a skeleton is simpler than the body that depends on it. And just as a living, breathing body and its actions depend on but are not caused by the underlying skeleton, so TV texts and audiences cannot be accounted for as effects of the structures that determine them. However, when people decide it’s time to exercise their bodies, or to use them creatively, they strive to understand the general framework, the skeleton and all the attached bits and pieces, so as to make the best use of what they’ve got within the limits of the structure. Just as bodies can be made to do remarkable things by such means, increasing personal pleasure as well as functional performance, so it is with the study of textual-cultural structures like television. To understand TV better is to anatomize it, but to do that can help to improve its performance and the pleasure of its audiences.
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