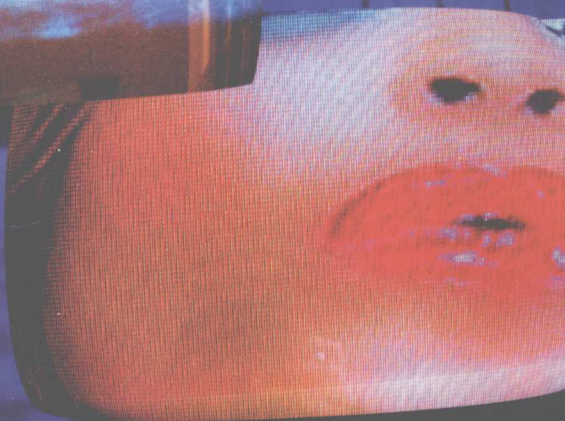
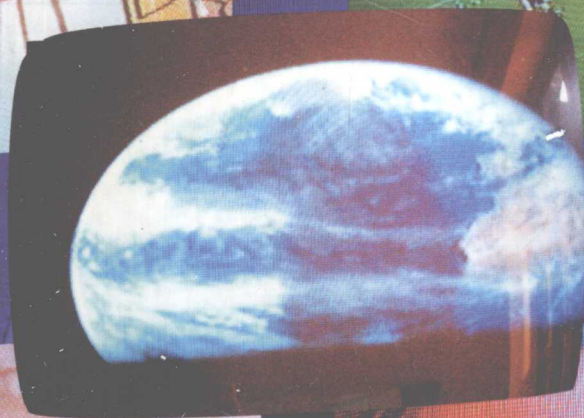
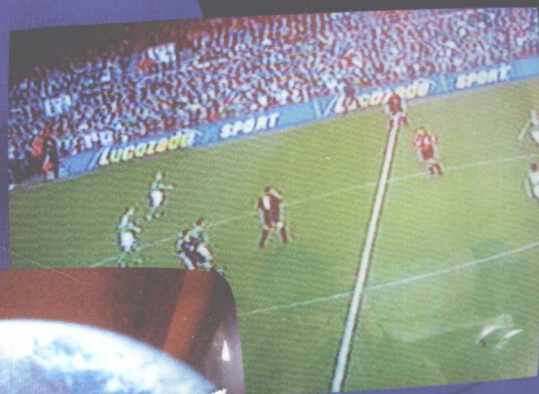
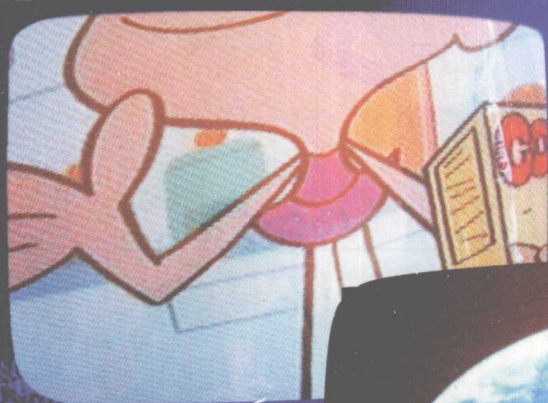


# AN INTRODUCTION TO TELEVISION STUDIES

JONATHAN BIGNELL



# **An Introduction to Television Studies**

Jonathan Bignell



First published 2004  
by Routledge  
11 New Fetter Lane, London EC4P 4EE

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada  
by Routledge  
29 West 35th Street, New York, NY 10001

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group*

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Designed and typeset in Janson and Akzidenz Grotesk by  
Keystroke, Jacaranda Lodge, Wolverhampton  
Printed and bound in Great Britain by  
TJ International Ltd, Padstow, Cornwall

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*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

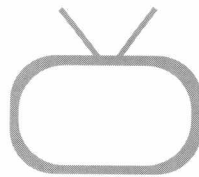
*Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data*

A catalog record for this book has been requested

ISBN 0-415-26112-0 (hbk)

ISBN 0-415-26113-9 (pbk)

# An Introduction to Television Studies



'A wonderfully ambitious and clear introduction to television studies for the undergraduate reader.'

Gill Branston, University of Cardiff, and co-author of *The Media Student's Book*

'An excellent introduction to television studies, with helpful accounts of key concepts tied to some engaging discussions of recent shows.'

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'Destined to feature prominently on every television student's preparatory reading wish-list.'

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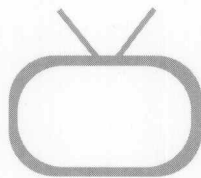
In this comprehensive textbook, Jonathan Bignell provides students with a framework for understanding the key concepts and main approaches to Television Studies, including audience research, television history and broadcasting policy, and the analytical study of individual programmes.

Features include a glossary of key terms, key terms defined in margins, suggestions for further reading at the end of each chapter, activities for use in class or as assignments, and case studies discussing advertisements such as the Guinness 'Surfer' ad, approaches to news reporting, and programmes such as *Big Brother*, *The West Wing*, *America's Most Wanted* and *The Cosby Show*.

Individual chapters address: studying television, television histories, television cultures, television texts and narratives, television and genre, television production, postmodern television, television realities, television representation, television you can't see, shaping audiences, television in everyday life.

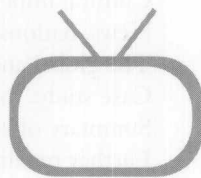
**Jonathan Bignell** is Reader in Television and Film at the University of Reading. He is the author of *Media Semiotics: An Introduction and Postmodern Media Culture*, editor of *Writing and Cinema*, and joint editor of *British Television Drama: Past, Present and Future*.

## Acknowledgements



I would like to thank my colleagues at the University of Reading and at Royal Holloway University of London who have assisted in shaping my approach to Television Studies and its teaching. It is difficult to single out individuals to thank, but the work in this book has sometimes benefited from the contributions of particular people. Some of the material on television production in Chapter 6 derives from the excellent teaching of screen drama by Gideon Koppel and Jenny Wilkes, and the exemplary courses on television producing taught by Susanna Capon and Barry Hanson. The wider community of scholars in Television Studies also deserve my thanks, not only for the work explicitly acknowledged and referenced in the text but also for the wealth of ideas that I have encountered over nearly two decades of studying and writing about television. I am grateful to the students I have worked with over the years, and occasionally material in this book derives from their research. In Chapter 6 I draw on an unpublished interview conducted by Helen Quinney for her final-year project, and the discussion of Singaporean television commercials in Chapter 7 draws on a final-year dissertation by Clara Ong. Discussions with past and present postgraduate teaching assistants about teaching Television Studies have been helpful in thinking through the presentation of material in this book, and I am particularly grateful to Christina Adamou, Simone Knox and Sara Steinke in this respect. I also thank the other postgraduate students I have worked with, including Sarah Cardwell, Neil Johnson and Andrew O'Day. Some of these people have already moved on to careers in teaching and research in Television and Film Studies, and have made important contributions of their own to the field. During the preparation of the manuscript I received invaluable feedback from four anonymous readers of draft material. I have also benefited from the expertise and enthusiasm of Christopher Cudmore, Rebecca Barden and their colleagues at Routledge. Pressures of time and other projects have weighed heavily on me during the writing of this book, and I hope that readers will not find too many errors and omissions that have escaped their and my best efforts. Finally, as always, I acknowledge the support and love of Lib Taylor, to whom the book is dedicated.

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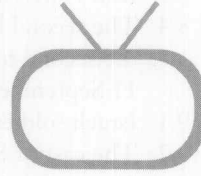
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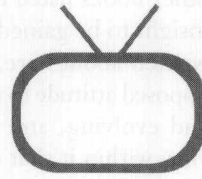
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# Introduction



## Using this book

This book is an introduction to Television Studies, aimed especially at those who are new to the study of the medium at college and university level. It describes some of the critical approaches to television that have become widely accepted in the subject. It also explains and makes use of key concepts in Television Studies that every student needs to know about. The book re-evaluates the terms and ideas that have been significant in studying television, and tests out their limits, drawing attention to the strengths and weaknesses in the ways in which television has been studied up to now. So the book draws together a collection of concepts and critical languages that are sometimes quite diverse, or even contradictory, and suggests how there are some ways of thinking about television that are more fruitful than others. Television Studies is a new, dynamic and rapidly changing field of work, as the next section explains. This makes the task of the student of television an open-ended and exciting one, and the book also aims to convey some of this energy and diversity in its organisation and layout.

This book outlines significant strands of critical work in the field, and provides worked-through case study examples of how critical approaches can be applied to actual problems, programmes and issues. It encourages active learning by including many Activities which can form the basis of classroom discussion or written assignments. The book is organised around short chapters, suitable for use as preparatory reading for class study, or as follow-up reading to support classroom debate. Significant terms are highlighted in **bold** in the text when they are doing important work in the discussion. A definition of the highlighted term appears in the margin next to its first appearance in a chapter, and these definitions can also be found in alphabetical order in the glossary of key terms at the end of the book. In this Introduction key terms are highlighted in bold though their definitions do not appear in the margin. The terms I have highlighted in this way are those that seem to require a specific definition. Some of them are part of the critical terminology of the academic discipline of Television Studies or one of the areas of research that has fed into the field. Some of them are terms used in the television industry in Britain or the USA, to describe an aspect of how television technology works, or how programme-making and **broadcasting** are carried out. Some terms are more widely known and are part of non-professional language, but seem to me to need a precise definition so that they can be understood and used accurately by readers and students of television. For readers of this book there will be some terms they already know, some they have heard and not understood before, and some completely new vocabulary that I hope will enrich their capacity to talk and write about television.

Each chapter ends with a short list of suggested further reading. The books, essays and articles chosen are often those I have quoted from, but there are also some

other books listed that deal with the topics covered in the chapter. There is great insight to be gained from noting how other voices have expressed ideas that I have written about here, and especially so if another writer has an alternative or even opposed attitude to a subject. Like any academic subject, Television Studies is diverse and evolving, and there are strongly held and articulately presented points of view within it that differ greatly in aims, assumptions, emphases and conclusions. Approaches to Television Studies are not a set of tools, but more like a group of different languages. They do not translate neatly one into another, and each defines its world in rather different ways. The book is concerned with the most commonly studied theoretical issues in television courses. The major differences between courses of study are in their focus on one or two of the following areas:

- analytical study of television programmes as **texts**
- the television industry as an institution and its production practices and organisation
- television in contemporary culture and the **sociological** study of audiences
- television history and developments in broadcasting policy.

This book provides introductory explanation, evaluation and routes for further study in each of these areas. I aim to show why these approaches have a significant role in Television Studies, to encourage students to participate in debates within and between these approaches, and to gain an understanding of the strengths and weaknesses of particular theoretical models for studying television.

In each chapter the reader will discover references to work by others who have contributed to Television Studies, and these references can be followed up in the Select Bibliography at the end of the book. Indeed, the Select Bibliography can itself be a useful tool for looking at the range of the subject, and exploring sources for independent work. In a single volume it is impossible for me to note all of the significant ideas in the sources I have used, and readers have many opportunities to build on the brief discussions of existing research that I have included here, by reading the source texts that I have cited. Indeed, the many directions that such further work can take indicate the comparative newness and potential of Television Studies, and I hope that readers of this book will be encouraged to make their own contributions to the subject by identifying the gaps, new directions and even contradictions opened up in these pages.

## Television Studies

The academic study of television has had little interest in valuing one programme or kind of television over another. Yet in the ways people talk about television, these evaluative issues are high on the agenda. What might it mean to say that a programme (or a channel, or an evening's viewing) is 'good'? **Quality**, or 'good', television is an informal category that often separates plays and art films, **adaptations** and authored **serials** from the rest, from 'popular' television. Attaching the label 'quality' involves assigning cultural importance to programmes or kinds of television that have acquired a valued position in **culture**, rather like theatre's distinctions between serious theatre and musicals or pantomime. There is a social and cultural

framework which enables the study of some television to carry value, and the programmes or kinds of television labelled as 'quality' to carry value in a way that popular television does not. The academic subject of Television Studies has taken popular television seriously, because it is the television most people watch the most. This is despite the common criticism in the press, and sometimes in the television industry itself, that popular television is unimportant, 'just' commercial, and lacking in artistic value.

Television Studies has tried to define how the medium communicates, and this has involved distinguishing between television communication and the media of cinema or radio, for example. But it has used methodologies for describing and analysing television texts that come from disciplines including Film Studies (see Chapter 4), methods of discussing audiences and television institutions that come from sociology, and ways of describing the development of television that amount to different histories of the medium. Charlotte Brunsdon (1998b: 96) has summarised this by explaining that

much of the literature of television studies could be characterised as attempting to formulate accounts of the specificity of television, often using comparison with, on the one hand, radio (broadcast, liveness, civic address), and on the other, cinema (moving pictures, fantasy), with particular attention . . . to debate about the nature of the television text and the television audience.

Because television includes so many different programmes, channels and ways of addressing its audiences even at one point in time in a single geographical region, it has proved very difficult for critics and commentators to produce useful general insights into the medium. This is even more the case once the history of the medium and its regional variations across countries and regions of the world are considered (see Chapter 2).

Early predictions (in the 1930s for instance) of what television would be emphasised its liveness, its ability to present to a mass audience images of what was happening in the real world. Commentators remarked on television's inability to compete with cinema as entertainment and therefore expected the medium to focus on information and **actuality**. These early thoughts condition the ways in which **realism**, connection to the contemporary and the uneasiness about bringing controversial visions into the home were played out. The connection of television technology to immediacy (television as a means of relaying something that would have happened anyway) predisposes it to linear real-time progress, and the claim to report the real world (see Chapter 8). Film has been theorised in terms of space (what can be seen on the space of the screen), and this has led to theories about how individual film spectators **identify** with the usually fictional characters and **points of view** offered for spectators to see. Some of these ways of thinking from studying film have been deployed in Television Studies to explain how viewers make sense of the television medium. On the other hand, television has also been theorised in terms of time. Television consists of a **flow** of audio-visual material that, although divided up into programmes, runs on across a period of time without empty gaps in between. Brunsdon has noted that: 'Television is, for the most part, made as programmes or runs of programmes: series, serials and mini-series. However this is not necessarily how television is watched. . . . It is precisely this

possible “drifting” through an evening’s viewing that has come to seem . . . one of the unique features of television watching’ (C. Brunsdon 1998b: 105–6). Rather than anticipating and wishing for the end of an individual film **narrative**, the television viewer is usually drawn into and out of a flow of material that does not come to a decisive end.

The experience of watching television occurs in a dimension of time where little end-points (like the ends of programmes) keep occurring, but where viewers are always aware that something new is about to take the place of what they have just been watching. Television Studies has tried to address this situation by looking not only at individual programmes but also at the ways they link together. These links might be in terms of the similarities of one programme with another, where shared features of a **genre** tell us something about the persistence of some kinds of storytelling, sets of issues or ideas being explored or the **conventions** that the makers of programmes adhere to (see Chapter 5). The links might also be in the planning and organisation of a period of viewing, for example an evening’s television **schedule** on a certain channel. Planning a schedule to include variety, yet also a continuity of interest that can keep a viewer tuned to a single channel, can tell us a lot about how an idea of the viewing audience and its interests drives the organisation of television and assumptions about how television is used and enjoyed. The links between programmes in a schedule are the responsibility of the institutions that broadcast them, and looking at how television institutions work has been important to Television Studies’ understanding of the medium’s role as an industrial product (see Chapter 6), made and organised in different ways in different parts of the world.

Television has no dominant **global** form, and is always local. Even though television programmes and formats are distributed globally, its local forms are different (see Chapter 3). This can be seen immediately in the difference between **commercial television** in the USA and the British tradition, which has a strong civic, ‘**public service**’ character. In Britain there has always been a tension between taking television’s responsibility to society seriously and regarding television as entertainment for a consumer. So although television has been regarded as the medium most appropriate to the way we live now in Western societies, to the extent that television has been described as ‘**postmodern**’ (see Chapter 7), it is not all the same everywhere across the world; nor does it lack a history that has shaped its present form in each society. The contexts that the organisation of television in particular places offers to Television Studies are important because they draw attention to the fact that television does not have to take the form that it does in the places we might be familiar with. There is no necessity about the fact that in Britain, for example, there are television channels funded by advertising and **sponsorship**, and others funded by a **licence fee** that is in effect a tax on the ownership of television sets.

The ways in which television connects with the character of the society where it is watched raise the issue of the social significance of what television represents. The questions of what is represented, in what ways and with what possible effects have been considered in Television Studies with particular attention to the representation of groups who are relatively lacking in social power (see Chapter 9). This kind of study can illuminate the active contribution of television to the ways that viewers understand and experience their social environments, as well as how television



reflects that environment to them. As well as looking at what can be seen and heard in the medium of television, how it is organised in different parts of the world and its relationship with the ways of thinking and experiencing the world in social contexts, Television Studies pays attention to the audiences of television and how they interact with the medium. This involves noting which programmes and kinds of programme are watched the most, using information that television institutions themselves collect in statistical form (see Chapter 11). But it also involves undertaking independent studies where groups of viewers are asked by Television Studies researchers about their attitudes to what they watch, and how their television viewing fits into their life experience and their sense of who they are (see Chapter 12). Research on audiences attempts to engage with how viewers make sense of television, and how it is important (or perhaps unimportant) to them. In this way Television Studies aims to break down the boundaries between the academic agendas that it has developed for specialised work on the medium and the place of watching television in the lives of non-specialist viewers for whom television can function in a range of ways among other routines and everyday experiences.

## The organisation of chapters

### Studying Television

The first chapter sketches out the topics of study and critical approaches which can be found in academic Television Studies, noting its significant emphases and exclusions. Television Studies in Britain and the USA, for example, most usually addresses **broadcast** television in the English-speaking world. One dominant strand is the detailed **textual analysis** of programmes, with a preference for popular programmes in **serial** and **series** form, concentrating on dramatic, **documentary** and news programmes. This derives from the tradition in academic work of studying content and form in detail. It also reflects the dominance of English-language programmes in the world television market. There are other kinds of television to mention, however, which stimulate thinking about what television can include: trailers, commercials and channel **idents**, for instance. Television can now be viewed on computer screens, competing with games or text, and is viewed in a different position and often in a different room from the traditional household television set. This chapter considers different understandings of what television is, and how Television Studies approaches are based on assumptions about the television text, the form of its transmission and who is watching where and when. The chapter includes a case study comparing and contrasting representations of television viewing in the 1950s and the 1990s, showing how the medium has been thought about in different ways at different times.

### Television Histories

This chapter describes and analyses the different approaches to the evolution of television from the 1930s to the 1980s in Britain, comparing and contrasting these with historical approaches to television in other countries, especially the USA. This

involves discussion of state **regulation** of television, the increasing proliferation of channels and the introduction of non-**terrestrial** satellite broadcasting systems, competition and commerce. Part of the different historical shape of television around the world comes from distinct and different understandings of the television audience, perceived as a market of consumers or as a public whose needs television should serve. The chapter aims to introduce the subject of television history, with regard to the changing social place of television in society, changes in television institutions and changing conceptions of the television audience and the nature of television viewing. The range of approaches to television history in the chapter provides different selections of landmark developments and landmark programmes, for example according to whether the focus is on technology, institutions or audience issues. The chapter explains a range of historical approaches, in order to show how television history can be written in many different ways. The case study at the end of the chapter explores one aspect of television's likely future, as new technologies allow viewers to compose their own viewing **schedules** and selections of programmes from huge databases from which viewers can download their choices, or have their personal video recorders make choices for them.

### Television Cultures

This chapter looks at the competing ways of analysing television institutions, and the significance of national and international **cultures** of television broadcasting. It explains and discusses patterns of commercial and **public service** broadcasting, and debates about whether television contributes to **media imperialism**. This leads to a discussion of television **globalisation**, comparing and contrasting ways of thinking about television as a market and an industry with political implications. Television in the developed world is still largely organised on national lines, but the increasing significance of international flows from West to East and North to South has been hotly debated. The chapter refers to inequalities in production funding and the role of imported programming in national television cultures. The focus of the chapter is on the theories which propose that television institutions both embody and transmit **ideologies** because of their ownership, and their relationships with national broadcasting cultures. The chapter finishes with a case study on the ways in which popular Brazilian drama serials, the telenovelas, have been used as an example in debates about the politics of global television.

### Television Texts and Television Narratives

This chapter evaluates the theoretical approaches that have considered television programmes as '**texts**' that can be studied in close detail to reveal how their meanings are made. The techniques for undertaking this kind of close analysis, deriving from the methodologies of **semiotics**, are explained. This includes methodologies for analysing **narrative**, the relationships between programmes across a period of television viewing, and ways of thinking about the relations between image and sound. While this way of working can be very powerful, the chapter also considers what it leaves out, such as television's institutional context and history, and the