

## **TELEVISION STUDIES – OCW UC3M**

### **Topic II. Introduction to Television Studies**

#### **Outline:**

This topic focuses on the study of the basic elements that define Television Studies and maps out its academic development during the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. In the first part, we will study the growth of the television reviews in the popular press and the way they contributed to, first, the development of a television canon and, gradually, a critical defense of a number of television programs. In the second part, we will explain how the state of the Humanities in the university system of the 1970s led to an interest (which appropriated the mechanisms of literary and artistic analysis) in certain elements of popular culture: first popular fiction, then cinema, and then television (and more specifically, the so-called quality television). In this second part, we will discuss the relationship between Television Studies and Film Studies in international academia.

The third part will discuss the approaches to television from the field of Social Sciences. We will address how communication theories have focused on effects. This was followed by the so-called gratifications theory, and then by the study of audiences and their decoding processes. In this section, we will highlight the relevance of British Cultural Studies and the Birmingham School (Stuart Hall), and particularly their research on television and daily life. The fourth and last part is devoted to discussing the different ways in which Television Studies have developed in American, British and Spanish academia. The two compulsory readings approach the study of television from the perspective of Cultural Studies and Literary Criticism.

#### **Specific objectives of the topic:**

- Knowledge of the main theories and methodologies for the study of television.
- Ability to apply various theories and methodologies of analysis to the production of TV work.

- Knowledge of the main processes in the development of academic research on television texts.
- Ability to conduct research in the field of Television Studies.

**Detailed content:**

- The academic study of television: an international perspective.
- The journalistic approach.
- Literary Criticism and the Humanities.
- The Social Sciences.
- Television Studies vs. Film Studies.
- Television Studies and the technological change.

**Introductory notes:**

We can consider that Television Studies is a term used to provide the characteristics of an academic discipline to the study of television, in all cases using existing methodologies. In fact, as Charlotte Brunsdon has noted, many of the contemporary leading theorists of Television Studies come from Sociology, Political Science, Literature Studies, Performing Arts and Film Studies. If we consider the fact that television did not achieve a genuine international implementation until the 1950s, we can conclude that it is a developing discipline which is characterized by both disciplinary hybridization and the debate about how to conceptualize the object of study in a changing technological and media landscape. We can add that the first expansion of television as a national medium responded to very different conditions, and that the result has been that each TV system has been developed with a specific nature, so that the theoretical and analytical tools of Television Studies have sometimes proven to be limited in their application to different television contexts. The process that led to take television as a valid object of study was very long. Previous negative images needed to be ignored or changed, and the finding of a specific and independent nature of the medium was necessary. It is useful to remember how Robert C. Hall (p. 1) recounted the different ways in which television has been defined and studied:

- Television is a changing set of technologies to capture electronic images and sounds, record and manipulate them, transmit images and sounds through space (through coaxial cable, radio waves, satellite and Internet), and display pictures and sounds which are captured, recorded and manipulated.
- Television is the combination of all images and sounds “carried” by television and produced, organized and experienced as television programming.
- Television is a set of formal, narrative, and representational structures and capacities - some of which it shares with other means, modes of representation, and art forms; some of which enable it to incorporate aspects of these other forms; and some of which mark out television as a distinctive or unique experience. For example, the quality of aural and visual “liveness” has historically been identified as one of the defining qualities of broadcast television.
- Television is a set of institutions and relationships among institutions: production companies, broadcasters, networks, state television systems, program distributors, advertisers, equipment manufacturers, government regulators, international trade and cultural agencies, the institutions of other media (cinema, publishers, radio, the internet...), universities and public advocacy groups.
- Television is the social experience associated with producing, viewing, listening, talking about, reading about, being captured by, appearing on, and being influenced and affected by television.

The development of Television Studies in the 70s is, according to Charlotte Brunsdon, the result of the work done by three main areas of analysis about television: Journalist Commentary, Literary Criticism and Social Sciences. First, we can highlight the influence of reviewers working in newspapers. Their short texts can be considered as the first assessments of programs and individual creators; they remarked positive aspects of the shows, placed programs in their social and cultural context, and helped to create the first canons of television programs. The significance of these figures is undisputed in countries such as

Britain (Philip Purser, Dennis Potter), the United States (Jack Gould and Horace Newcomb) and Spain (Enrique del Corral and Josep-Maria Baget-Herms). The habit of watching TV every day gave them an access to the TV content which was impossible to achieve by academic scholars before the arrival of VCR and DVD, and in a period in which the existence and accessibility of television archives was very limited.

The relevance of literary and artistic criticism must be remarked, and for this we can go back to Charlotte Brunsdon's works about the three major trends which marked the development of Television Studies. It is important to emphasize the presence of popular culture in American academia. The use of analytical tools from literary and artistic criticism attracted these pioneering academics to texts which had not previously been appreciated, due to the rigid structures of cultural hierarchy. During the 70s, Film Studies had managed to enter academia and be legitimized through their interest in literary adaptations (this allowed them to be located within the confines of Comparative Literature) and the analysis of art-house foreign films. But the adoption of television as an object of study in similar terms was not easy. Although during the early 60s an international television festival circuit had been established, its importance was not as significant as that of the film festivals, and there was not a significant circuit of circulation of international television. The television equals of Akira Kurosawa (Japan), Roberto Rossellini (Italy), Ingmar Bergman (Sweden) and Satyajit Ray (India), the greatest film *auteurs* of the period, did not have either the support of film journals or the international distributors who could enable them to reach new audiences.

However, American and European Departments of Humanities used film lectures in order to attract students in the context of a permanent crisis. While the alleged masculinity of academia was not favorable to the development of research on television (seen as a feminine medium), this period was critical for establishing the basis for the assessment of television. In 1978, John Fiske and John Hartley published the seminal work *Reading Television*, a book that was influenced by structural semiotics. In it, the analysis of codes was the starting point to investigate the role of television in the creation of ideological-based

meanings. This path was followed by others who chose to focus on the most distinguishing aspects of television language, such as John Thornton Caldwell in his book *Televisuality* (1995).

Social Sciences, as indicated by Charlotte Brunsdon, are the third major body of television commentary that marked the development of Television Studies. The interest in the television text itself is replaced by its production, circulation and function in contemporary society. Social Sciences have been influenced by Critical Sociology and Political Economy, and have thus been concerned with the role of television in the maintenance of social order, the relationship between the state, the ownership of the media and citizens, and the constitution of the public sphere. The crucial importance of Cultural Studies and its adoption of television as a privileged object of study must also be remarked. Although Cultural Studies were first dependent on Critical Theory, they developed an interdisciplinary approach to the creation and construction of meaning through practices, beliefs and institutions. At its core foundation, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (created in 1964), television soon occupied a space of interest with the application of Gramsci's theories about cultural hegemony in Stuart Hall's "Encoding and Decoding in the Television Discourse" (1973). The creation of a specific group for the study of television at the Center was the starting point for David Morley and Charlotte Brunsdon to carry out a long and complex study of the program *Natiowide* between 1975 and 1979. The first part used textual analysis and a second part focused on reception (both studies were published in the Television Series Monographs of the British Film Institute).

We can find different ways to conceptualize Television Studies, as the case of Glen Creeber in the book *Tele-visions: An Introduction to Studying Television* (2004, p. 6), which established four main analytical trends:

- Textual Analysis. It derives from Literary and Cultural Studies. It is defined by their tendency to analyze television programs themselves, focusing particularly on the form, content and representation (ie, television construction of class, race and gender). On the methodological

level, it can take critical tools from semiotics, gender theory, narrative theory, ideological analysis, discourse analysis, feminism, postmodernism ... It is qualitative in its approach to the program but can take quantitative methodologies as content analysis.

- Audience Studies and Reception Studies. It derives from Sociology. They seek verifiable evidence. They examine the extra-textual dimensions that help the audience to produce meaning. Audience research tends to focus on audience response, while reception studies analyze the way in which the programs are marketed, distributed and discussed. Both tend to use tools from ethnography, anthropology and ethnomethodology, particularly when they use questionnaires, interviews, focus groups, participant observation ... In the field of Audience Studies and Reception Studies we can locate the development of the effects theories, the uses and gratifications theories, Public Opinion and Fandom Studies.
- Institutional Analysis. It derives from Policy Research and Mass Communication, it adopts a more political or socio-economic approach to television. It tends to address issues of industry, institution, public policy and regulation. It also tends to focus on the analysis of government legislation and the political nature of the media industries. Political and cultural theories are an important part of its overall consideration of the role of television in the production of public and private spheres.
- Historical analysis. It originates in Historical Studies and focuses on the historical development of television. Therefore, its research is based on newspaper and periodicals libraries and archives, the viewing of old programs and the analysis of the physical files preserved by the public and private channels. Interviews with professionals, public officials and viewers are also research tools. This type of analysis, therefore, uses the three previous approaches to generate and build knowledge: it may include historical analysis of audiences and modes of receptions, its social and political context and detailed textual analysis of programs.