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Book reviews

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Television studies reloaded: From history to text

Massimo Scaglioni

Two recent books constitute essential reference points in television studies, both presenting innovative research directions. The first is a collection of essays edited by Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell titled *How to Watch Television* (New York-London: New York University Press, 2013). The second, an important decade-long study by Jérôme Bourdon prepared by the Institut National de l'Audiovisuel titled *Du service public à la télé-réalité. Une histoire culturelle des télévisions européennes* (Paris: INA, 2011).

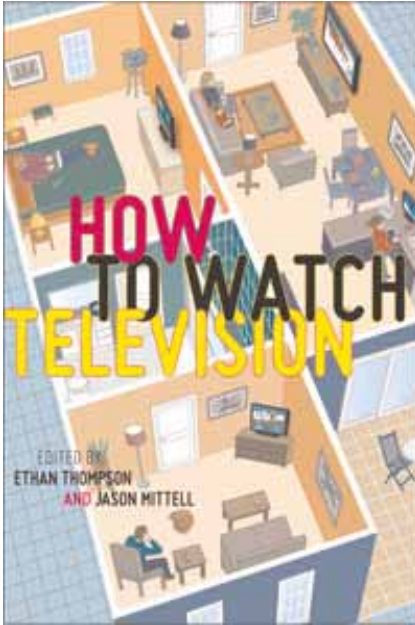
Both books start from what we might term a feeling of inadequacy. Television has been the hub of the media system for decades now and remains central from an economic, social, and cultural viewpoint; furthermore, television studies has progressively developed a field of inquiry, a theoretical framework of reference, and research methodologies. However, the medium often struggles to gain recognition as an object worthy of academic scrutiny. The reasons are various. At first glance, television seems a trite and inherently transparent object that requires no particular critical attention. Unlike other disciplinary fields, television studies has firmly favoured a plurality of approaches, more intent on carefully tracing its subject's complex, multi-faceted edges than on constructing great overarching theories – a plurality of perspectives on a complex medium. What may seem a limitation is now very much the strength of television studies.

Jérôme Bourdon's book springs from the dissatisfaction felt within European television studies about research of a historical nature. As Bourdon observes, nearly 30 years ago, the film critic Serge Daney perfectly articulated a certain elitist detachment from the small screen: 'slave to a pure present without depth, television knows nothing of itself and has not produced either its own history or its own historians' (p. 11). What still held true in the 1980s will not remain so in the decades to come. Indeed, the last 20 years have been notable for a burgeoning crop of historical studies about television. However, this attention to the medium's history has taken one fact for granted: television is essentially a medium of national

communication. Public service broadcasting history shows that the national analysis framework becomes indispensable if combined with a broader frame of reference. Television in (Western) Europe was long identified – and partly still is – with public service broadcasting. Therefore, Bourdon's work is a cultural history of European television. He shows the importance of reference to the European continent and its 'negative spectre' (the United States), painstakingly reconstructing the discourses that have accompanied the medium's genesis and development from the 1950s to the 2000s.

How to Watch Television, edited by Thompson and Mittell, tackles another substantial aspect of studies on television alongside its historical dimension: critical analysis based on a close reading of the television text. The book challenges another common assumption – that television does not need careful and critical textual analysis. For the same reasons noted by Bourdon through Daney's words, television has been studied by prioritising the context (social, cultural, economic, etc.) over the actual text. Thompson and Mittell, with a total of 40 scholars in the field, seek to turn the tables. Each chapter in the book takes inspiration from a specific text produced by U.S. (or U.K.) television during its 60-year history (particularly dramas and sitcoms, but also news, factual programming, reality shows, and other forms of entertainment). This text is then employed to illuminate an aspect of the medium that regards its aesthetic, its way of representing, its relationship with politics, its dimension as a cultural industry, its forms of consumption, and its technological development. Thus, for instance, Amanda D. Lodz 'uses' *House M.D.* (2004-2012) to describe contemporary television's narrative complexity and the importance of constructing increasingly multi-faceted characters; and Henry Jenkins appeals to *The Walking Dead* (2010-present) to illustrate the adaptation policies (and transmedia character) of a popular television franchise.

Despite having rather different objects (European television vs its U.S. counterpart) and viewpoints (a historical, diachronic approach vs analysis from text to context), the two books agree on the genre's centrality in the study of television. The theory – and the history – of the genres constitute the essential framework for any analysis of the medium. Television studies has based its approach to the question of genres on the well-cultivated terrain of film studies. The crucial reference points include, in particular, works by Tom Ryall, Stephen Neale, and Rick Altman; the concept of genre is extracted from the purely textual dimension and inserted into the cultural circuit linking production, text, and consumption. Following this line and among others, Mittell has made a key contribution to the work on television genres. Indeed, in his journal essay 'A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory', Mittell underlines genres' vital role in the television arena; textual repertoires alone are not enough to define this function. In particular, a genre can be interpreted starting from those specific textual conventions that



come into their own as much in the context of production as in that of consumption. Hence, attention needs to be drawn to both the text and the context, especially to those practices (production, distribution, promotion, publicity, consumption, fandom, etc.) that define the genre's otherwise fluid and changeable boundaries in terms of discourse. Mittell's perspective on television genres was further developed in a subsequent book dedicated to other U.S. television genres, from quiz shows to dramas, soaps, and cartoons.¹ This approach, which we can characterise as 'open' to the concept of genre, implicitly underpins the very structure of Bourdon's book and of Thompson's & Mittell's anthology.

Bourdon's *Du service public à la télé-réalité* selects a perspective that, while not neglecting the textual dimension, gives a central role to context. Context is understood both as 'co-text' (the organisational principle of the television schedule, which places a programme within the 'planned flow', to use Raymond Williams' expression, that defines each broadcaster's offering) and as a genuine 'social context' (thus including the worlds of production, with its professional interest groups, and reception). The author surveys the four macro-genres that have characterised the history of European television: current affairs and news, entertainment, reality TV, and what is internationally known as 'TV fiction' (although this term has been in common use only since the 1980s in describing programmes based on narrative invention and on the construction of a 'storyworld', or a 'diegesis'). The comparative perspective is most fruitful here. As Bourdon himself notes,

'we find (as with other communication media) that many ventures presented as the fruit of brilliant individual initiatives originating in a particular place have actually yielded very similar results in several countries, sometimes at different times' (p. 14). Hence, the comparative and international perspective on the principal genres that have characterised the main European television networks' output, especially in the public service, clearly shows that many problems interpreted, tackled, and (occasionally) solved at the national level have recurred in a very similar vein in most European countries; this includes the very early circulation of entertainment models originally from the U.S., like game shows or quizzes, which most public service networks have adapted – or rather, 'copied' (in the absence of a proper international market for formats, at least until the 1980s) – ever since the 1950s. This underlies one of the book's most important themes: the 'subtle Americanisation' that progressively affected European television. It met initial resistance from public service broadcasters but then triumphed in the era of so-called 'de-regulation' and the transition from the Psb monopoly to a mixed public-private model as commercial television arrived.

Another subject that cut across the television debate was the role of news and current affairs. In this case European public service broadcasters also tried to establish a model that could prove independent of economic and political pressure. The current affairs question marked quite a clear watershed between the approaches adopted in Northern European countries and those in the South. In the north – Great Britain primarily, but also Scandinavia and Germany – independent television news coverage became a reality in various concrete forms, while for Southern Europe (Italy, Spain, and also France) the issue reflected the eternal problem paralysing public service broadcasting because of the constant pressure from the world of politics.² Against the backdrop of this painstaking analysis of the problems, themes, and discourses that have permeated 60 years of the medium's history, the fundamental question clearly emerges. In the European television arena, long identified with this complex principle – at once legal, political, and organisational – called *public service broadcasting*, the inevitable question regards the present and, above all, the future: in television markets now hallmarked by the economic primacy of advertising and by the ever-growing importance of direct subscription to pay TV, does public service broadcasting still have a role? What is more, while public service has undoubtedly done sterling work to modernise and foster cultural growth in the continent's various nations, what missions should public service television set itself for the future (keeping in mind its funding by a licence fee paid by all citizens)? Clearly, there are no easy answers. On the contrary, these are very much matters of public debate in many nations. In Italy, for example, 'reforming the RAI' is on the agenda again, while in Great Britain the Royal Charter establishing the BBC's role is up for renewal in 2016. What is certain

is that the pages of Bourdon's meticulous work can help everyone – professionals and public alike – to be better-informed participants in this important debate.

Du service public à la télé-réalité reconstructs the historical context in which television has developed; thus, it also surveys the programmes and genres that have characterised the European public service network offerings. However, the challenge in *How to Watch Television* is somehow contrarian. The perspective becomes in a sense 'inductive': can we use an in-depth analysis of a television product to illuminate different aspects of a television arena – in this case, primarily, the U.S. – in its current and, at least partly, past forms? The challenge is especially fascinating because, very curiously, television's textual dimension often seems to be forgotten, neglected like an incidental ornament. Seemingly, books can be written about television without ever referring to a programme. Television studies has emerged largely from cultural studies, at least in the English-speaking world, resulting in an emphasis on 'context over text' (p. 3). All the studies in the volume represent a reaffirmation of textual analysis and close reading, in a perspective that is not, however, self-referential and does not offer an interpretation of the text as an end in itself but rather becomes functional to the exploration of a problem that concerns the universes of production or consumption. Interpreting a series such as *Nip/Tuck* (2003-2010) the way Ben Aslinger does is useful in highlighting the importance of the frequently-neglected element of sound on television and, more generally, the relationship between television and popular music. Or, again, looking back at U.S. television history, revisiting *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) gives Christine Acham the opportunity to probe the representation of race in the specific context of the Reagan-Bush era. Similarly, themes are touched on from feminism (starting from *Grey's Anatomy* [2005-present]) and irony (*Jersey Shore* [2009-2012]) to ideology (*Star Trek* [1966-1969]). The relevance of this kind of textual analysis that aims to be 'open' both to production and consumption dynamics is particularly evident if we consider the features of contemporary television, whose 'textuality' is characterised by 'complexity', as Mittell himself has shown in his latest work.³

Together with the growth of the international circulation of televisual content (both as formats or 'readymade' products like series or films, and through traditional platforms and channels or new online services such as Netflix) and the birth of a worldwide television market,⁴ television itself has become more and more global. The challenge for television studies is to build a shared and common space for discussion where different 'national schools' can dialogue. These two books could represent an exciting starting point; both teach the importance of a rigorous analytical method that stresses the impossibility of analysing television by artificially separating text and context, as well as the need for a 'holistic' approach. And

the more nuanced that holistic approach is, the clearer it becomes that television is in no way simply a mundane domestic appliance.

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Notes

1. Mittell 2004.
2. On the Italian case, see Scaglioni 2015 and Barra & Scaglioni 2013.
3. Mittell 2015
4. Havens 2006.

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