

Lynn Spigel—For Un-boxing TV panel

We are all interested in the future, for that is where you and I are going to spend the rest of our lives.

Criswell, from *Plan 9 From Outer Space*

Over the past four weeks I have participated in four different gatherings devoted to the “future of television.” The first, in Los Angeles, involved a group of industry people attempting to figure out what the “stuff” produced by “just anybody” for sites like MySpace and YouTube would mean for Hollywood producers and the art/economy of television in general. The second took place at the American Studies Association where I participated in a graduate student-run panel loosely organized around the future of technology and media, with the students interested in the new opportunities presented by technological change, but also with job prospects in the field of new media. The third took place at the Peabody Institute where Horace Newcomb was devising a press release meant to inform industry people about what journalists and scholars thought the future of TV might bring. And the fourth took place at the 25th anniversary gala for Paper Tiger TV, where the old generation reminisced about video activism and a new generation of “tigers” presented a documentary on the history of the collective.

These four sites of TV futurism were all in some way bound up in the narcissism of self-preservation. In other words, when asking about TV’s future we are also always asking about our own futures. How will “we” (the industry, the critic, the scholar, the activist) perpetuate ourselves in the vast unknown landscapes of media change? Are we necessary at all? Who needs to watch *Desperate Housewives* when you have “Britney boy” on

YouTube? Who needs a TV critic when you have blogs and chatrooms? (In fact, many TV newspaper critics are now losing their jobs). Who needs Paper Tiger when you have the much more instantaneous activism offered on moveon.org? The “viral” age spawns a series of panics among the old broadcast generation who are no longer so certain of their roles, uses, and functions.

For the panel gathered here, these questions ultimately turn onto the functions of TV scholarship as it too tries to perpetuate itself (through whatever mutations) in the new media environment. Many older generation TV scholars are late adapters to the new modes of knowledge and entertainment production in the digital world. In this context it isn't clear what books or journals are good for (since they are such *slow* media) or if they will actually survive in the economic/political crunch felt by university presses.

This new media environment takes shape at the same time when the old academic environment and its university press have become way more corporate and also way more dependent on the media (as a mode of publicity and sales) for their own survival. With the rise of online shops like Amazon.com, the status of books both as objects and modes of pleasure/inquiry shifts. On Amazon, any particular book is now entered into a discursive “series” with others like it—and its meaning and value is formed through “hits” and completely arbitrary five star reviews (people who bought *Television: The Critical View* also bought *Film Art*—or people who bought *The Buffy Reader* also bought *The Sopranos*, the complete collector's DVD). (Looking at the Amazon page for my own forthcoming book called *TV By Design* I noticed that it's paired with ads for home study

courses on interior design—ironically--a field my high school guidance counselor suggested I would be ideally suited for.)

Certainly, the connections between the industry, marketing, and scholarship are not born of the digital age. TV and film scholarship, as Peter Decherny, Dana Polan, Julie D'Acci and others have shown-- have always been dependent on Hollywood, Wall Street, and now the global economy. But the industry-university interface is more visible now. It's not easy to maintain the illusion of modernist detachment from commerce when we too are so obviously just another form of TV paraphernalia tied into the networks of exchange and appropriation through which television circulates and transpires.

That said, I am not suggesting a retreat to a position of detachment from an administered technological society (in the way say that the 1950s/60s intellectual critique of TV did). As numerous scholars and critics suggest, there are also benefits to be found in the breakdown of the old print culture for scholarship and critique. The rise of the scholarly forums, blogs, chat rooms, etc. provides more instantaneous platforms for discussion than the old slow media forms. And these digital forums also disrupt—or at least disorder-- encrusted academic rules of seniority as the authority to speak is now not necessarily tied to rank or privilege at the physical site of the university or field conference, with their local parochialisms and tribal routines. Yet, I do suspect that the “scholar as blogger” is not without its own system of power and privilege—not just because the Net is still unevenly available to differently situated publics but also because blog-scholarship is still

depends on the physical world's uneven distributions of educational resources and cultural capital.

I admit, after my four-week tour of the future, I am a bit tired of it. Writing about TV's future has now become a TV Studies genre of its own, and its format is fairly predictable. Yet, apart from my current state of TV future fatigue syndrome, I would say it is still an exciting moment to think about television because the medium is responding to and helping to precipitate so many changes in everyday life, national/global culture, and politics more broadly. So, there are many interesting and useful things to write about these days. Even if I don't necessarily want to imagine future agendas for TV Studies or even an evolutionary model (I always think the best scholarship doesn't follow a projected path or ordained procedure), I'm looking forward to thinking about how we can do TV/media studies, with whom, and where.