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WHAT IS TELEVISION? BY TOBY MILLER

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Dateline: the “What is Television?” event in Portland, Oregon. This marvelous conference is under the benign and brilliant direction of **Janet Wasko**, a trusted leader in the field. On this opening morning, I’m sitting between **Dan Schiller** and **Sarah Berry**. Dan got us all moving last night with a stellar presentation on the digital depression. **I recorded a podcast with him earlier this morning about that talk and his other work. Yesterday I recorded a podcast with Graeme Turner, who’s about to speak at today’s plenary.** In addition to those addresses, you can find both podcasts on iTunes, Android, and iPhone under ‘culturalstudies,’ along with loads of other chats with TV scholars, *inter alios*.

Also on this morning’s plenary are Phil

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Oppenheim, Senior Vice President of Programming and Scheduling at Turner Broadcasting, and Bryce Zabel of Stellar Productions, a former President of the Academy of Television Arts & Sciences.

Oppenheim spoke against the new logic of cord-cutting, arguing that many US cable and broadcast networks are roaring along in both profits and ratings. He listed some failed doomsday prophecies during his time in the industry. When Ted Turner bought a large movie library, this was considered mad. It succeeded. When he colorized the library's black-and-white films, it was a public-relations and artistic fiasco. When Turner joined TimeWarner, it was said to be the end of Turner. When they merged with AOL as senior partner, the AOL element was a disaster, and the promised synergy failed. Running *Law and Order* on two networks at once was deemed mad—but succeeded. When *The Closer* premiered in 2005, it set ratings records with its pilot, yet this was said to be the end of a high point for cable original series that would then decline. Not so!

Television, especially cable, is good at adapting. For the linear stream is only one part of TV. Video content is a new umbrella at Turner, and television is far from the entirety of what it does. Cable, satellite, phone, iTunes and so on, from airplanes to homes, find television as their radial center, even as it is being transformed by its own spokes.

Graeme addressed some key issues for television studies, based on a global five-year research project he has almost concluded. You can hear about this in the podcast I mentioned above. He looks at the follies of the technological sublime and market boosterism, myths of wholesale globalization, consumer sovereignty, and the

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death of TV, notably broadcast. Historical, political, and cultural elements determine the shape of television everywhere, rather than technological change or global forces. TV has long been part of both the 'democratic furniture' and 'authoritarian furniture' of states—but does it still incarnate the nation? And if it no longer performs that service, what has taken its place?

Format sales are now regional rather than west to east. Global genres are indigenized, as per Chinese modernity announcing collectivist versions of *Betty La Fella* or *Survivor*. The state is heavily involved in content in most places, and broadcasting, which is to say free-to-air television, continues to expand rather than contract worldwide. TV is becoming more and more an entertainment medium, in keeping with domestic soft power's project to limit democratic developments as correlatives of economic liberalization. Television can be contentious in Muslim countries because it is seen as an icon of Western modernity.

Zabel is a writer/producer. He said he wasn't an academic but had taught at USC. I said, *sotto voce*, 'That *definitely* means you're not an academic.' Bad Toby.

Television has changed dramatically from his childhood of three channels, with the one selected always the choice of his father. His own family today is focused on absolute choice for all via separate technologies across the home. 'TV is just about screens right now,' whatever and wherever those screens may be. In Hollywood, the middle class is being squeezed out from production, as access is democratized for those at the bottom. Hour-long drama has been changed through 'binge television': DVRs rescue series from the need for self-contained stories, enabling a serial style without the

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loss of continuity for viewers whose schedules do not overlap with broadcast time. Now writers are pondering writing for seriality rather than stand-alone series episodes. Networks and studios can be at odds over this, with the former favoring series stand-alones for immediate impact and the latter seriality for additional sales. Then the boys were all finished for the morning.

P.S. Sarah sent me this link

http://theoatmeal.com/comics/game_of_thrones about struggles over intellectual property and access for screen audiences. A warning—it uses a taboo and misogynistic word that will probably and understandably cause offense; but the overall message is a fascinating one.

Toby Miller is a British-Australian-US interdisciplinary social scientist. He is the author and editor of over 30 books, has published essays in more than 100 journals and edited collections, and is a frequent guest commentator on television and radio programs.

His teaching and research cover the media, sports, labor, gender, race, citizenship, politics, and cultural policy, as well as the success of Hollywood overseas and the adverse effects of electronic waste. Miller's work has been translated into Chinese, Japanese, Swedish, German, Spanish and Portuguese. He has been Media Scholar in Residence at Sarai, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies in India, Becker Lecturer at the University of Iowa, a Queensland Smart Returns Fellow in Australia, Honorary Professor at the Center for Critical and Cultural Studies, University of

Queensland, CanWest Visiting Fellow at the Alberta Global Forum in Canada, and an International Research collaborator at the Centre for Cultural Research in Australia.

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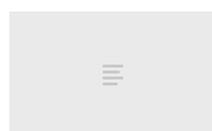
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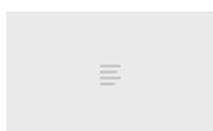
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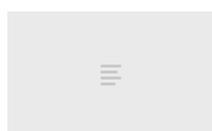
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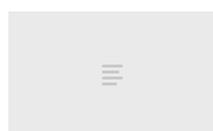
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