Toward a New Conceptualization of The Wire as a Media Object

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Abstract
This article sets out, first of all, to systematically debunk arguments that attribute to the serial The Wire a medium specificity of “television,” and second of all, to supply means for new conceptualizations of this kind of serial-drama media object. These matters are treated on the levels of technological materiality, media definitions, form, content, and production. The purpose is to lay the foundation for a more attentive and clear conceptual comprehension of what is approaching or has already begun to arrive: a time in which the initial phase of broadcasting of serial moving-image dramas are either skipped or greatly diminished in importance, and in which they exist mainly in the form of On Demand streaming, or, more interestingly, in the form of DVD or downloaded files.

Keywords: medium specificity; media conceptualization; post-television; digital media; serial drama; The Wire

What kind of media object is HBO’s The Wire (Simon, 2002–2008)? Made in the midst of great upheavals of old media specificities, it is a kind of in-between object: on the one hand it belongs to what may be the last generation of serial-drama that went through an initial television-broadcasting phase, and on the other hand, it provides a defined outline of a new and increasingly common kind of serial-drama media item. Critics and scholars seem to lack means to conceptualize the latter. This article subjects The Wire to an examination that clears the path for and provides basic means for such conceptualizations, beyond the habitual recourse to the term “television.”

Still, a work like The Wire is generally referred to, unhesitatingly, as a “television series.” It is assumed and/or explicitly asserted that The Wire belongs to the medium of television. This article scrutinizes and critiques such assumptions/assertions, and takes on The Wire, as a media object, as a conceptual problem in need of clarification. We will explore the levels of content, production, and technological materiality. The idea of “medium” as concerning moving images will be treated, including the concept of television itself and what it has meant throughout history. A formal definition of television, as a kind of telecommunication, will be given, which can serve as a means for sorting out of what is and what is not television among contemporary moving-image media.

For those unfamiliar with The Wire a quick presentation: apart from a major hit within academia, it is a narrative whole that stretches over

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five seasons, seasons that make up parts in a whole much like chapters in a novel. Each season contains 10–13, ca. hour-long, episodes, which add up to 60 episodes altogether. Previous crime reporter and non-fiction writer David Simon functioned as show-runner and head writer, and he and his collaborators created the serial through the moving-image production company HBO. The Wire was the culmination of his and the other producers’ and writers’ decades-long studies, of various sorts, of the milieu and themes depicted. The Wire is something like the dramatized presentation of a wide-ranging sociological study. Each of the five seasons adds a new segment to its investigation of the social tapestry of an American city in an era of neoliberal globalization. This article deals with the narrative and artistic content (which I have treated extensively elsewhere), however, only to the extent that it is relevant for the understanding of The Wire as a media object.

Few texts have directly addressed the question of in what sense The Wire is television/not television. Most of those texts do so in ways that are more or less conditioned by a certain perspective: the problematization of cultural value attributed to different media. Television studies, a discipline I do not myself belong to, has for a long time had the Bourdieu-inspired problematization of hierarchies of cultural value as one of its central pillars. Although I will partly deal with such issues through the treatment of the arguments of other scholars, my own concerns in this text regards other factors. This text is unconcerned with, and certainly does not take literally, HBO’s classic former slogan: “It’s Not TV. It’s HBO.” (1996–2009). Despite this being, obviously, tongue-in-cheek PR and not an ontological truth claim, there are many commentators that have pointed out how HBO programming on the level of content is not completely different from regular television. This kind of concern exemplifies the second major obscuring factor in the understanding of The Wire as a media object: the assumption that medium can be determined by whether the narrative content of a work is connectable to generic traditions—in this case within television history.

Once the concerns with “quality” and “hierarchies of cultural value” are carefully but firmly pushed to the side, there are largely two ways to approach the problem of how to conceptualize The Wire as a media object. One way is to look at it from the point of view of sociological description: if most viewers/users and scholars habitually call The Wire a television series then it is a television series. Without denying that the consideration of everyday terminological habits can be important, a second approach would be to understand this labeling as a problem that can be subjected to further exploration and critique. The common sense of the many suggests that “television series” is the most adequate term. I do not claim that this term, as applied to The Wire, is completely false on all accounts, but I do claim that it obscures more than it clarifies. This article aims to bring out and illuminate the complexity that makes up the problem, and more strongly, to systematically debunk claims that it belongs to the medium of television. This is not in order to argue that The Wire has some other medium specificity—for instance arguing that it is “cinematic” or “literary”—or to make (predictable) claims based on broad notions like “convergence” or a “post-medium condition.” While I will suggest a definition of television as a concept that can have continued relevance in the contemporary media landscape, this is, for the concerns of this article, more immediately in order to make clearer what is not television. This article will gradually “un-give” The Wire the medium specificity of television given to it by others, and by doing so set the stage for a more proper conceptual grasp of this kind of media object.

While basically digital, as we shall see, The Wire is analogously recorded. It was shot with Panavision Cameras and Lenses and captured on film stock (i.e. the literal imprint of light on a photographic celluloid surface). It was conceived as a five-season whole, and made mostly by people from outside the television industry, through a company that increasingly, as we will see, “functions [...] as a movie studio.” It’s influences and immediate intertexts are found among novels, films and the social sciences. It did not work well as scheduled television broadcasting and has found its audience through illegal file sharing and DVD, a format that the creators say the work is suited for. These are some of the basic factors that call for a critical investigation, first of all, into the rationale of conceptualizing The Wire as television.
Having taught a class on HBO serials for a few years I introduce this conceptual problem in the first lecture. Most students come to agree that *The Wire*'s assumed television identity is at least partly questionable. But there are generally some that keep claiming that it is nothing other than television. What is interesting about those claims is that they are founded not on counterarguments so much as a kind of defensive decision: they remain attached to the term because it feels right. And certainly, a large amount of *The Wire*'s audience in general has a similar inclination and keeps referring to it as television – does not this fact itself provide cultural and social backing for the validity of the term? There is nothing specifically televisual in any sense, as we will see, in the practices of watching a DVD-box set or downloaded files. So while audiences may still habitually call *The Wire* a television series, *in want of a better term*, their actual usages and reception practices say something else. And this something else needs to be conceptualized instead of theory reproducing the habitual, “horseless-carriage”-kind-of labeling (the latter term will be returned to below). If one argues that this something else is indeed to be understood as television, one needs to present convincing arguments.

While most seem to refer to *The Wire* as a television series out of habit, there are scholars that more pro-actively assert that it must be understood and studied as television, *medium specifically*. Linda Williams and Jason Mittell argue, in their different ways, that *The Wire* is made up of *inherent qualities* that are specifically televisual. According to Williams, the well-known descriptions of *The Wire* as sociological or novelistic are insufficient. First we must “understand what it is in itself.”14 *The Wire* “in itself” consists according to Williams of it being a member of a tradition of televisual narrative that “have evolved from soaps through cop series” to “ever more complex narrative universes.”15 While granting that *The Wire*’s “multisited ethnographic imaginary gives it a special breadth and depth,” she claims that its “operant mode is melodrama” and defines it as “serial television melodrama.”16 That *The Wire* differs medium-wise from novels and from sociology proper (in its written academic form), as Williams argues, is hard to disagree with. But what it is about *The Wire* that in contrast to *other kinds of moving images* is specifically televisual she leaves unacknowledged, aside from claiming that it has a connection to soaps and “cop series.”

Jason Mittell does something similar but is more extensive and forceful in his assertions about *The Wire*’s medium specificity. In a criticism against the common description of *The Wire* as a “visual novel” he writes:

> For many critics, bloggers, fans, and even creator David Simon himself, *The Wire* is best understood not as a television series, but as a “visual novel.” As a television scholar, this cross-media metaphor bristles – not because I don’t like novels, but because I love television. And I believe that television at its best shouldn’t be understood simply as emulating another older and more culturally valued medium. *The Wire* is a masterpiece of television, not a novel that happens to be televised, and thus should be understood, analyzed, and celebrated on its own medium’s terms.

But while arguing that *The Wire* should be viewed “using the lens of its actual medium of television” he adds that it can be “quite rewarding” to do so by also “thinking comparatively across media,” in the sense of “illuminating what makes a particular medium distinctive and how its norms and assumptions might be rethought.”17 So what different media are relevant to involve in a comparison so as to illuminate what makes *The Wire* distinctively televisual? It would certainly be relevant to problematize usages of the term “visual novel” that fails to acknowledge the difference between the textual form of a novel and a work of moving images with sound. But this is not what Mittell does here (despite presenting a somewhat reductive thesis of how novels tend to “probe the interior lives of its characters” in ways that “television” does not or cannot do). While stating that he will consider “how the show operates televisually” what this means in relation to other kinds of moving images is never explained. The implication is that *The Wire* so self-evidently “operates televisually” that it would be redundant to distinguish its moving images from other moving images. To be fair, Mittell has claimed elsewhere that there is a clear difference between new complex serial narratives in parts of contemporary television and a new complexity found also among contemporary films.8 But if his actual arguments are boiled down, the only substantial televisually medium-specific traits found are the *serial form*
and the prolonged narrative span. But seriality is not a medium. And length is not a medium.

In a talk titled “Serial Boxes: The Cultural Value of Long-Form American Television,” which centers on *The Wire*, Mittell makes a distinction between on the one hand (pre-DVD-era) videotape recordings of series that he calls “recorded flow,” and on the other hand DVD boxes that he calls “discrete cultural objects.”9 Boxes are “removed from the time and place of their broadcast,” and they convey “their own distinct value and worth” and can generally be termed as following a “publishing model.” Mittell credits the DVD box, these new media “units,” as having provided change in “our relation to television,” and they convey “their own distinct value and worth” and can generally be termed as following a “publishing model.” Mittell credits the DVD box, these new media “units,” as having provided change in “our relation to television programs,” and with having created “new options for television storytellers.” But none of these transformations causes Mittell to ask to what extent the term “television” itself can remain unquestioned. In Mittell’s discourses, DVD boxes, or as he says, “television boxes” do not seem to have altered anything medium-wise. They only “allow viewers to engage differently with television” as they enable “a mode of reception that highlights aesthetic qualities.” But the question of whether there should be media-terminological adjustments given the centrality of the particular medium of DVD itself – which even according to Mittell himself, as we shall see, is what actually allows for what he calls a new “narrative complexity” in serials such as *The Wire* – remains unacknowledged.

**CONTENT**

But do not Williams and Mittell have a point on the level of content? Does not the content of *The Wire*, in the sense that it cannot be thought as separate from the forms of seriality and considerable narrative length, unavoidably connect it to a televisual tradition – which is to say, regardless of forms of production, artistic inspirations and intertexts, materiality of recording and storage, main forms of distribution, reception practices, etc.? This is not an unreasonable assumption. We will return to the question of the form of seriality below, but let us in this paragraph address the level of narrative and aesthetic content. In certain senses, *The Wire* as well as the other well-known HBO drama serials produced around the same time, undeniably branch into the history of television drama. Dana Polan identifies, for instance, a soap opera element in *The Sopranos*, a serial that otherwise has a central relationship with the American gangster film (from *Public Enemy*, 1931 to *Casino*, 1995).10 But soaps, this commercialized blend of narrative tropes and archetypes commonly lifted from Greek tragedy, are by far the most frequent serial moving-image narrative in the world today. So finding certain similarities regarding narrative structures in other kinds of long serial moving-image dramas – especially those famously inspired by Greek Tragedy such as *The Wire* – is perhaps more unavoidable than a revealing analysis of their contents. Basically all the moving-image references for the writers of *The Wire* – of which all came from outside the television industry: David Simon, Ed Burns, Dennis Lehane, George Pelecanos, Richard Price, etc.11 – as well as for its producers, directors, etc. are from the history of cinema, not the history of television.12 Still the television genre of the “cop-show,” with *CSI* as the prime example, played a certain role in the conscious development of *The Wire*’s aesthetic. But only negatively, as what the creators regarded as another of postmodern society’s ills that *The Wire* aimed to deconstruct from within – on the levels of aesthetic form and narrative content. But what about Linda Williams’ claims that *The Wire*’s “operant mode is melodrama” and her definition of it as “serial television melodrama”? This claim, which harmonizes with Williams’s more general theory that most American film and television is melodramatic, goes against substantiated consensus within *The Wire* scholarship. Amanda Ann Klein, for instance, has provided a detailed account of how *The Wire*’s audiovisual language and narrative constantly avoids or subverts melodrama, catharsis, and narrative closures, although it often initially seem to set up a stage for it.13 Fredric Jameson discusses *The Wire* as a cogent example of how “the melodramatic plot” has become “increasingly unsustainable.”14 Slavoj Zizek, on his part, argues that the standard comparison between *The Wire* and Dickens is directly wrong, since in Dickens there is a “series of melodramatic moments, like confrontation of good and evil or […] the secret rescuer, benefactor who intervenes in the last minute. All this miserably fails in *The Wire*.15 This paragraph has dealt with the level of content, since this level is fundamental.
for most arguments that categorize The Wire as television. But we cannot remain too much on this level without obscuring the larger points about media conceptualizations. Even if a hundred percent of The Wire’s content were rooted in soaps and cop-shows, this would still not, at least not with any necessity, make The Wire televisually medium specific. A feature film or a book can align itself extensively with the tradition of, say, soaps without therefore becoming television. Mediums can help determine content, but narrative or stylistic content does not determine medium.

**MEDIUM**

Although Mittell is arguably more concerned with questions of cultural value than with mediums per se, his arguments involve a terminology—such as “its own medium’s terms,” “using the lens of its actual medium of television” and even “illuminating what makes a particular medium distinctive”—that obviously relies on a theory of medium specificity. We should therefore bracket his focus on cultural value and ask: what theory of medium specificity is implied here? There is, first of all, a certain correspondence between Mittell’s claims and what Noël Carroll describes as two stages in the efforts to legitimize a new art: first, “an initial phase in which [it] attempts to legitimate itself as art by aping the convention, forms and effects of the pre-existing arts.” But this “eventually provokes a countermovement, one predicated on a purist program. Proponents of this purist program argue that if the medium in question is to be truly regarded as an art, then it must have some range of autonomous effects, effects that are its own and that are not merely copied from pre-existing, established artforms.” But we can safely assume that we are not dealing with something close to classical or modernist ideas of purity, that is, of staying true to the particular material conditions of each “medium” statically differentiated within a system of the arts (e.g. Lessing, Greenberg, as well as many of the various classical ontologies of the cinema throughout the history of film theory). Rather than concerning an inherent essence in the materiality of given art, it is plausible to assume that Mittell’s, as well as William’s, claims rest on a conception of medium that is more variable and open, a conception that combines some sense of technological materiality (which may consist of an assemblage of various technological apparatuses or “hybrid media” as it is more popularly called) with a notion of television as a “cultural form” whose variability is mostly determined by socio-historical factors that here also seem to include narrative and stylistic traditions such as genres. This allows for an idea of a specific “television medium” that is very open and fluid. How open and fluid? At what point does the use of the term turn the idea of television into something so open that it becomes meaningless?

If “television,” as will be increasingly clear below, is an ill general fit for The Wire as a media object, is there another better term? I have already stated that The Wire does not have some other, general, medium specificity, besides television—at least not in the sense of an already established notion. But if we nonetheless examine The Wire as belonging in some sense to one general media it can be defined as a work of photographically based *moving images with sound.* Noël Carroll has tried to debunk the idea that medium specificity exists, which in his somewhat reductive understanding means that medium = essence does not exist, and has argued instead that the only useful category is “moving images.” D.N. Rodowick suggests, creatively based on Carroll’s criteria for such a general “category of artistic expression” called “moving images,” that this category itself can be regarded as a definition of a plural (nonessential) kind of medium. This is allowed by the fact that one does not have to follow Carroll in reducing (caricaturing) the concept of medium to essence or self-identity. “Moving images” can thereby be regarded as an overarching medium that connects all forms of moving images—celluloid, analogue video, DVD, etc.—while simultaneously, in contrast to Carroll’s disallowing of such distinctions, preserving their “relative distinctness” and “variable specificity.” Each relatively distinct medium, each consisting of a variable combination of elements, unite under the heading of “moving-image media.” But as such they are “related more by a logic of Wittgensteinian family resemblances than by clear and essential differences.”

In studying the material-technological factors involved in what makes up The Wire as media object, one could provide much more precise conceptualizations of each of the “variable combination of elements” that is included under the general heading of “moving images with sound.”
But such a study – which this article will clear the path for but only sketch the beginnings of – may perhaps not result in any sharper general conceptualization than moving images with sound. And if it did, that concept would have to be a new general concept that was able to crystallize all its constitutive parts in their “relative distinctness” and “variable specificity.” That is, the new general concept would have to grip The Wire as a diverse process on a semi-new mostly digital media landscape. This process includes not only the various stages of production, DVD, various other digital-compression formats circulated through illegal file sharing, but also the “preview” that was the original broadcasting, reruns, syndicated (often slightly censored) versions on other channels, and On Demand services like HBO GO. The broadcasting aspects, which are undeniably part of this, make things even more complex, but when it comes to determining the nature of the whole of The Wire as a media object it is too small a part.

**PRODUCTION**

But is not The Wire produced within the “television industry” and therefore a work of television? What is a television industry? Is there something in the production of The Wire that determines it to be television? Or does basically everything in the production rather allow that it could just as well have been released directly on DVD and called a serial film? Some scholars have claimed for years now that “it is just a matter of time before channels such as HBO become a relic of the past [while continuing as a brand], replaced with new technologies of distribution like on-demand program streaming or on-line file sharing.”18 The following hypothetical scenario is for these and other reasons not hard to imagine: The Wire made exclusively as an extensive, serialized “film” – the “66-hour movie” that its creators already regarded it to be19 – released directly on DVD in parts over some years. Direct-to-video series do indeed exist, and they are often conceived as a whole from the beginning. The British science-fiction series The Stranger (1991–1995) is an example. But we could also reference similar phenomena like the plethora of straight-to-video series that are spin-offs of more famous sources, and the huge industry of straight-to-video films (or “DVD Premiere” films) that are often released in a series of sequels. Technologically, narratively and aesthetically – or just from the plain fact of being moving images with sound – it is not hard to imagine The Wire as released directly on DVD, not least because this is close to what actually happened: few of its viewers saw the broadcasted version. If The Wire actually had something inherently televisively medium-specific built into it that should be “studied on its own terms” as Mittell argues, it would be revealed by this hypothetical scenario: the content would necessarily have had to be different somehow (like if it was a radio version or a play). That is clearly not the case. This scenario reveals rather that the content of The Wire would not, at least not with any necessity, have changed – not even for economical reasons: while it is true that HBO still gets most of its revenues from subscriptions, a fairly low-budgeted production like The Wire could still have been financed only on the basis of the DVD revenues (as early as 2004 a serial like The Sopranos could cover nearly the entire cost of production of earlier seasons from DVD sales alone; The Wire’s growing audience, in comparison, is even more exclusively a DVD audience). The particular ways that this work of moving images with sound was put together – the Panavision film cameras, the celluloid film it was captured on, the lighting, the acting, the editing, etc. – did not bring with them some medium-specific “televisality” (or to the small extent that it did only in a negative way: its neorealist-inspired aesthetics was in many regards conceived in opposition to contemporary “flashy” television aesthetics). The Wire merely happens to be made within what we still label a “television” industry with a length of narrative that has been linked to it in recent decades. But again, what is a television industry? Or rather – what is HBO?

HBO is a multiplatform media producer. Its business plan currently concerns the brand itself spanning multiple forms of distribution.20 However, HBO at this point still gets most of its revenues from being a multiplex broadcasting service. But with a crucial twist: it is financed by customers paying for subscriptions (either directly or as part of a “premium cable” package) and not, like most commercial television, through advertising. Instead of “delivering people to advertisers,” HBO delivers programs to paying customers.21 There are no commercial breaks in or in between the programs. The programs therefore do not have
to be tailored to “appease merchandisers seeking inoffensive material appealing to the greatest common denominator of viewers,” and this is one of the basic conditions that allow for a certain amount of experimentation and risk-taking with the content (although, it should be pointed out, without going to far with testing the norms, tastes, self-images and worldviews of its mostly white, liberal, middle-class subscribers). But there has also been a series of important decisions made mostly in the 1990s on the level of general conducts of production.22 A concrete example are the bigger budgets allowed by producing only a select few original programs and by cutting the standard amount of episodes produced for a season down to half. As Tony Kelso notes,

HBO frequently establishes considerably larger production budgets than its commercial counterparts. It can devote such enormous resources, in part, because it neither produces many original shows […] nor, most of the time, creates as many programs per season […] ‘The reality is’ states Nick Davatzes, former President and CEO of A&E Television Networks, that HBO functions less as a network than as ‘a movie studio almost.’”23

Another important decision was to offer a protected environment for “creative talents.” All in all, HBO provided possibilities for artistic experimentation and innovation not offered anywhere else in the (American) television industry at the time.24 Those hired to create programs were given permission to develop their visions with minimal interference. This came to attract a lot of creative talent from other areas than television, or that in previous experiences with television had been frustrated with its creative limitations.

Irreducible to simple PR from HBOs marketing branch, this resulted in aesthetic and narrative ideals, manifest in at least some of its drama programs, which organically linked up with the history of films and novels more than other television programs. With budgets honing in on big cinema productions – with technological factors like large widescreens weighing in – they were now also allowed to construct visuals with a “cinematic” attention to detail. And as John Kraniauskas writes: “The Wire’s dependency on HBO’s fortune can be conceived as providing one of the material conditions for its freedom – which takes the form of time, the time for Simon and Burns to pursue its realist compositional logic.”25 Since what matters economically for HBO is the amount of subscriptions sold instead of ratings for each individual program, individual programs can be given time to find their audience. HBO is fairly unconcerned with details of viewing habits of a given subscriber, what is important is that each subscriber appreciates something in their production enough to renew the subscription. This means: experiments can be conducted since HBO will reap the same profit fairly regardless of the success or failure of an individual program. Network serials have to catch on with audiences immediately. HBO can instead allow a serial to develop its points gradually, and to find its audience over time (as in The Wire’s slowly developed narrative) and for individual episodes to have less autonomy (a tendency peaking with The Wire’s five-season whole). Not having any commercials also frees up the pacing of the narrative in the sense that no cliffhangers or “hooks” are needed to keep viewers in their seats during commercial breaks. Narratives could therefore even come to include sections where it seems like “nothing happens.”26 These are some of the conditions that allowed a project like The Wire, so angry, overtly political (even Marxist in its analysis) and not very commercially immediate in its slow and expansive narrative development, to come about.

The point of the last paragraph is not to slide back to a focus on content. The point is to regard The Wire as conditioned by a certain production structure. This structure does not involve enough specifically televisual parameters to warrant the habitual labeling of The Wire. But in disconnecting The Wire from its naturalized attachment to the term television series, there are central factors that remain to be dealt with – first, the form of seriality.

SERIALITY

The terms “serial/series” is tied to television only by recent habit. First of all, we should mention the rich tradition of radio serials. Second of all, two of the 19th century literary writers most commonly referenced in discussions of The Wire, Dickens and Balzac, first published many of their novels in serial form for magazines. While common at the time to initially publish novels in a series of
installments, reading them in their subsequent book form should not necessarily therefore be understood as “a new mode of magazine reading.” Third of all, aside from the various serial direct-to-video film productions, film serials have been projected on cinema screens since the silent era. Fantômas (Feuillade, 1913–1914) is a famous example.

Jason Mittell is quite aware that seriality was not invented with television, as evident from this passage from his talk on DVD boxes:

It’s even possible to consider [The Wire] along the lines of other classics of long-form storytelling. The concept that a television series could be of sort with a great novel would have been ludicrous 20 years ago in large part because of the ephemerality of television. But historically, many serialized formats have gained in cultural value when bundled, boxed, and bound. So 19th century fiction like Tolstoy and Dickens gain popularity through serialization but grows in cultural validity through assembly in published novel form. Similarly the silent serials of French filmmaker Louis Feuillade, is rediscovered in the 1940s, not as extended serials but rather as compiled long-formed films, programmed at the Cinémathèque Française and hailed by a generation of cinephiles as works of art.

We should first of all point out that when it comes to cultural value/gaining popularity, these arguments should be reversed if they are to really apply to The Wire: it was hailed as great art long before the whole unit was out, and it gained its popularity as a unit (at least in the form of seasons). But let us proceed to make a different point: Mittell makes these, as he calls them, “cross-media comparisons” not only to underline how the cultural value of serial works increase by being assembled into a unity. He also makes them in order to argue that they entail the risk of obscuring media specificity: the “cross-media comparisons” between The Wire and the novel, Mittell says, “may come at the cost of disowning its televisuality.” I can concede that Mittell has a certain point – and would have had more of a point if he was concerned with a critique of conflating text and moving images with sounds – that there are risks with “cross-media comparisons” between novels and television. But in what sense would a comparison with Louis Feuillade’s cinema serials “come at the cost of disowning [The Wire’s] televisuality”? The key question that Mittell fails to ask is: what is the difference between television medium specificity and other kinds of moving images? What is so specifically “televisual” about The Wire compared to Louis Feuillade’s serials that they are (implicitly) categorized as belonging to two different mediums – The Wire as specifically belonging to television and Louis Feuillade’s serials as specifically belonging to the cinema?

MATERIALITY

Mittell argues that the DVD box is television made more available – the box adding only better conditions for an increase in cultural value and for more interactive freedom for the viewer. Television is the unalterable norm and DVD the extension. As regarding The Wire this should be turned around. It is not the boxes, as Mittell says, that are “removed from the time and place of their broadcast.” It is rather their broadcast, functioning like a preview, that was “removed” from the temporarilty and spatiality of a DVD-attuned work and its storage on DVDs or various kinds of digital files. It is the televised transmission that should be regarded as the media extension. Let us compare with Fantômas. Is Fantômas on DVD cinema made more available? A full answer to this question would lead us astray, to other questions that must be answered first such as what is entailed with the term “cinema.” But Fantômas on DVD is undoubtedly, media technologically as well as historically, a digital version of the “original” form of analog projection of celluloid reels (with the category of original form I mean only material type and not a specific print; I am thereby bracketing the fact that there may exist more than one “original” celluloid version, or that it may be completely lost, and the general fact that all prints are gradually decaying over the years). The digital version entails important differences in kind from its previous main life as projected celluloid film. The images do not have the same kind of texture and the nature of their materiality and movement is basically different (although, as a so-called “born-analogue” digital version it may be argued to carry its analogue history with it). In contrast, The Wire on DVD is not a version of an original. Although shot on film its post-production immediately means digitalization: the shots were first subjected to an Editor’s cut then to
a Director’s cut and then to a Producer’s cut, which from the first step means that they are transferred into digital formats. As an aesthetic choice, however, it was shot and kept in a 4:3 format and not only broadcasted in standard definition (SDTV), but actually also released on DVD in standard definition. The images in the broadcasted transmission therefore do not constitute an original to which the DVD is a copy-version.

The main lives of many serial dramas are increasingly lived in the form of various file-sharing formats or as DVD/Blu-ray. An important condition is that previously broadcasted television series started to be released as DVDs in the first place. Popularized by the success of The Sopranos on DVD companies discovered that it was more than economically feasible to release series as DVD boxes. In the times of VHS this had been too expensive and unpractical which meant that audiences could only see a given serial either when it was broadcasted or on a VHS home recorded version. In general, productions are “increasingly dispersed across multi-platform strategies that no longer take the individual broadcast program as the primary site of importance.”

New platforms such as DVD are increasingly seldom an extension of broadcasting, a second life, and increasingly often the core of a series.

Still, much remains to be dealt with regarding the conception of DVD boxes as “television in new forms” or “a new mode of television viewing.” The medium changes, but television is somehow still the message. This presupposition allows Mittell to make claims on televus medium specificity when actually talking about DVD. His notion of “narrative complexity” is a recognized contribution to the studying of a new mode of attention-craving American serials. Relevant to pick up here are the “transformations in the media industries, technologies, and audience behaviors” that according to Mittell allowed “narrative complexity” to arise.

Central are new technologies like DVD that made it possible for audiences to pay close attention and for instance go back for repeated viewings. DVD has in this way impacted how productions are made and narratives composed. So if there is any medium specificity involved as a cause of what Mittell calls narrative complexity, it is the specificity of new technologies like DVD and not televus transmission. Besides triggering a new kind of complexity of content, DVD has caused changes in finance, production, and reception. Max Dawson notes how the:

impact of the DVD on the U.S. television industry is unmistakable: by the early 2000s the revenues generated by DVD sales and rentals had begun to alter the way television programs were financed, produced, and promoted, with studios coming to rely on the booming aftermarket for complete-season DVD box sets to offset spiraling production costs and contracting network licensing fees. DVD inspired new ways of watching television as well, as viewers discovered the distinctive pleasures to be had from watching an entire season of a program on their own timetables and without commercial interruptions.

Furthermore, most creators of “complex” serials, it is reasonable to conclude, prefer that they are watched on DVD. The Wire’s creator, head writer and show-runner David Simon at least has such a preference as revealed in a DVD commentary where he laments the lack of ability in television audiences to notice the subtleties of the symbolic aspects of the visuals in a scene. His conclusion: “it’s a show that really suits DVDs.” And indeed, it was through this format – if including the various digitally compressed formats of illegal file sharing – that The Wire found its audience. Also Linda Williams first viewed most of The Wire on what she calls “bootlegs.”

In an article on The Wire, Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle write:

We literally know of no one, and we both know many people who have seen the show in its entirety, who watched it on television when broadcast [...]. Single episodes have zero autonomy and the show is much better suited to being watched intensely over several days rather than an hour a week for several months.

This may seem anecdotal, but it resonates accurately not only with my own experience but also with available empirical data. Ash Sharma, the editor of the journal Dark Matter, which released a theme issue on The Wire in 2009, makes a similar point:

The vast majority of viewers watch the show on either time-displaced recordings, downloads and/or commercial DVDs. It is this ‘post-television’ networked media environment that The Wire has been able to utilize and exploit [...] The series on DVD is viewed more akin to a fictional novel; something which suits very well the ambitious and
complex structure of The Wire. [—] At best, the first screening of the series on HBO in the US (2002-8) is like a ‘pre-history’ to the post-television Wire [...]

In many ways, this could go for many of the other new serials celebrated for their “ambitious and complex structure.” But Sharma makes an important qualification: “A key claim is that The Wire demands one to view the total 66 hours [...] to fully appreciate the expansive reality presented. [This] marks it out as special and different to other recent [...] series.” It is a whole, with each season as a kind of sub-whole, which must be consumed with attention, preferably over a reasonably short time-span. This seems to be an important reason for The Wire’s failure to connect with audiences in the form of television broadcasting over many years where one has to wait between a week and a couple of years for a new episode.

However, these points made by Sharma as well as Toscano & Kinkle are still fairly unique when it comes to scholarly writings on The Wire. They also mention this only in passing among other kinds of arguments, and therefore do not explore this issue any further than what is quoted in the paragraphs above. (As a special case I should mention an article in which its two authors acknowledge that The Wire is a post-television media object while simultaneously claiming that it is nothing other than television.)

The habitual labeling of The Wire as television extends, in revealing ways, into the understanding of the details of technologies of production. In otherwise fine articles on The Wire, Patrick Jagoda and John Kraniauskas respectively talk about the camera as a television camera. Jagoda at one point refers to The Wire’s “televisual camera,” and Kraniauskas addresses what he labels its “TV camera-eye” and its “TV camera-consciousness.” Further down, however, the latter discusses the slow and spread out narrative as a reason for why the serial attracted “so few viewers on television” while it “is a growing success on DVD and ‘on demand’ platforms.” But we know that The Wire was shot with film cameras. And there is nothing in the post-production, the broadcasting, or any of the other distribution formats, which somehow changes this fact. It is therefore safe to say that no “television camera” is involved here on any level.

Mittell’s own description of what caused narrative complexity, as we saw, is exactly what speaks against televisual specificity. It is the specificity of DVD, and not television, that was one of the important causes behind what he calls narrative complexity. What allows for this terminological slippage, where the specificity of DVD turns into the specificity of television, is the above stated notion that the DVD box is nothing more than an extension of television, an example of television in new forms. This leads us finally to the questions of to what areas and how far it is reasonable to let the term television branch and where and when limits must be drawn.

The DVD box cannot with any necessity be regarded as extended television. It entails another logic of transmission and storage, and makes up a very different assemblage of material technology and viewer/user positions. Certainly, we should acknowledge that neither emergent nor more established forms of media are static or finalized. The concept of television is unstable and variable. But this does not mean that it lacks any (however fluid) boundaries within the realm of moving images. If it did the term would lack meaning. The term television can reinvent itself – and it certainly has reinvented itself several times throughout its history (more on this below). But if the changes – regarding material and technological aspects as well as cultural/social practices – that the reinvented concept aims to grip are substantial, there may be no reasonable or practical reason for the expanded use of the term. We may say that a media object like a given DVD box includes broadcasted television as one aspect of its genealogy, or even argue that it to some extent remediates television as one of its aspects (in the sense that the contents of a medium is always other media). But this is not to say that the DVD box necessarily is or should be called television. To believe that it necessarily should, is to fall prey to the famous “horseless carriage syndrome” (mentioned above), a term Marshall McLuhan used to refer to an early “phase” in which a new medium is misapprehended as being an old medium merely “amplified or modified by some new feature” as if the motorcar was merely “an addition to the horse.”

I do not reference McLuhan’s point here, in order to move things toward some kind of technological determinism. Not only is “television” irreducible to a given material technology, technology
itself is shaped and determined as part of larger social assemblages. But this must certainly not be confused with an understanding of technology and its social functions as determined by the willy-nilly of lazy labeling habits, which during times of bewildering technological changes often follow a horseless-carriage logic. For the term “television” to have continued (non-mystifying) meaning in the new media landscape, it needs first of all to be formally defined.

**TELEVISION IS TELECOMMUNICATION**

It is fairly recognized that television’s ongoing convergence with digital media makes up a complex web of changes/ruptures and/or old-media continuity that has yet to be fully understood. What new structures continue to warrant the term television? I claim that the contemporary media landscape includes instances, of different kinds, where the term television is clearly warranted, arguably warranted, and clearly not warranted. This claim is based on an idea of television that is inclusive and open for variation on the levels of material technology while clearly defined on a formal level. The term television is clearly warranted, I argue, when there is a transmission of moving images – analogue, electronic, or digital – across a significant spatial divide. This is nowhere as clear as in the case of traditional broadcasting. The internet makes the notion of spatial distance more complex. But there are several new phenomena where there occurs some kind of transmission of moving images across a significant spatial divide. This is not the place to chart the vast array of such phenomena, but online streaming of live material must be mentioned as the most obvious new such form. But it is arguably possible to also include YouTube as well as On Demand services like HBO GO, Hulu, and Netflix in which the material is not downloaded but streamed – the Amazon service in which the material is downloaded but accessible only for 24h straddles this boundary. (This means that a “new” kind of media object like the drama series *House of Cards* (2013), which is produced by the On Demand service Netflix and made available as a whole at once without passing any broadcasting schedules, does not go beyond an initial televisual phase so much as change the nature of this phase from broadcasting to On Demand streaming.) In these latter cases, while to a large extent controlled by the user, there is still a certain aspect of a transmitting instance that distributes – tele-vises – the material from devices that are in some sense distinct from the viewer/user’s spatial location. The warranting of the term television in these examples, on this media-terminologically difficult terrain, varies from the clearly warranted to the arguably or somewhat warranted. But to the extent that it is warranted, the important common denominator is telecommunication. The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines telecommunication as

Communication over long distances, esp. by electrical means such as by telegraphy, telephony, or broadcasting; (usu. in pl.) the branch of technology concerned with this. Also concr., a means or channel of such communication.

The root “tele-” is given the following definition: repr. Greek τηλε-, combining form of τηλε-a far, far off [...] mostly denoting or connected with special appliances or methods for operating over long distances [...] denoting actions or impressions produced at a distance from the exciting cause, independently of the normal means of communication.

Television itself, finally, is defined accordingly:

A system for reproducing an actual or recorded scene at a distance on a screen by radio transmission, usu. with appropriate sounds; the vision of distant objects obtained thus. The term normally refers to a system of general transmission over the air, but it also includes systems of restricted transmission to subscribers by wire, such as cable television [...]

The label tele-vision, I argue, is warranted when moving images are tele-communicated. As with the telephone or the telegraph, telecommunication involves information that is in some sense transmitted across a significant spatial divide. There is no such divide whatsoever between the point of transmission (player) and point of receiver (screen) when watching a DVD or a downloaded file at home. There is nothing “tele” about *The Wire* on DVD or download.

What about the “TV” set? In some discourses we find the implication that the TV apparatus itself constitutes a central aspect of what makes moving images television. But if we rent a film on DVD we will likely watch it on our “TV” screens.
(of whatever kind, from the old analogue cathode ray tubes to the latest, increasingly computer-like, digital flat screens). This does not turn the film into a television program. What matters, I claim, is whether there is a tele-transmission involved. The apparatus itself makes it television only to the extent that it functions as a receiver of moving images transmitted from an outside location (if it is broadcasted a film can thereby be said to be televised). In this sense, the laptop, the mobile phone, or any other screen, can function as television just as well as any traditional “TV.”

Above we have tried to sketch the beginnings of a map of *The Wire* as a somewhat heterogeneous media object. A more detailed map could certainly be made, that would also more properly situate those details within a larger context of processes of media transformations: what is entailed, regarding both hardware and software, in its passages from analogue recording to the various levels of digital postproduction? In what sense is there a final “original” master copy? What is its format and on what kind of hard disc is it stored? What are the technical, formal (and even aesthetic) differences between the commercial DVD and the variety of file sharing formats? Etc. In addition to the notion of digital moving-image artifacts as “platform indifferent,” based on how most moving images just like the other artistic media has been subsumed by digital code in general, such mappings and creations of new concepts would reveal them as also heterogeneous and variably distinct. New and more fine-tuned conceptualizations could be made in order to grasp what in reality, everything put together, is the exact, albeit multiple and fluid, identity of one and the same *work* – e.g. *The Wire* as a media object. “Moving images with sound,” however, can certainly still function to label the *general* medium, at least in wait of a better label.

THE HISTORY OF TELEVISUAL MEDIUM SPECIFICITY

We have so far worked through several levels – content, the notion of medium, production, technological materiality, etc. – in order to first of all systematically debunk the claim that *The Wire* has a televisual identity and second of to set the stage for new kinds of conceptualizations. One level remains to be dealt with: the history of notions of televisual medium specificity. This is a long and varied history, both in the sense of how television has been conceived, theorized, and practiced. The definition of television as tele-communication I gave above is based on 19th century discourses that pre-date its actual invention. These discourses envisioned a medium that equaled a visual telephone. That is, *simultaneous* – even individual, two-way – point-to-point connection of vision (like the telephone does with sound). But what we came to know as television, after it was actually invented, quickly “mutated into the very storage medium that it was defined in opposition to – as if the telephone were to transform into the answering machine.”

The problem of pinning down the “hybrid media” of television is not new. Technological transformation, heterogeneity and general difficulties and disagreements regarding its definition have been around since the beginning. This is interestingly widened if we take into account how it was originally envisioned in the more or less forgotten 19th century discourses. But even if television fairly quickly came to transmit more and more non-live (stored) moving images, it was still about transmitting images across significant spatial divides – central places in space transmitting images to many other places. And what came to dominate the 20th century notions of television was still its ability to be “live.” The following two interrelated ideas/phenomena are the central defining characteristics of what came to be known as television during the last century:

1. “Liveness”
2. The mass medium par excellence

These ideas are based on a medium concerned with scheduled transmissions watched at a particular time along with many others. But “liveness” is more or less independent on whether the images are directly transmitted live – the transmission of, say, a seasons finale of Dallas in the 1980s was an event of liveness, but without the images, of course, being transmitted live literally. Liveness is instead based on various rhetorical/discursive/aesthetical structures, and importantly also on the “here and now” of the scheduled images themselves itself – i.e. the here and now of the broadcasted images as they appear simultaneously on a given time on a vast number of screens. John Ellis writes: “The aesthetics of broadcast television rely on a sense of
liveness, not in the sense that the programs are literally live, but in the deeper sense that the activity of television broadcasting itself proceeds in the present moment and addresses the present moment.”46 The liveness aspect connects with it being a medium of mass communication in the sense that the shared time of broadcasting itself creates a sense of a “live” event, which means that what is transmitted can just as well be a tape.

These essential traits, these pillars of televisual medium specificity during the vast majority of its history, are partly vanishing at the same pace as television morphs into an archival digital medium calibrated to interacting “users.”47 The reason for explicating these 19th and 20th century discourses and functions is to show that none of Mittell’s assertions on The Wire’s televisual specificity connect with any of them. His assertions hang in the air not only in relation to the present but also in relation to the history of notions of televisual medium specificity.

CONCLUSION

This article has aimed, firstly, to debunk arguments that attribute to The Wire a medium specificity of television, and, secondly, to provide means for new kinds of media conceptualizations. With demystification in mind, this has involved explorations that span the levels of content, form, production, media definitions, and technological materiality. This treatment also points forward, or rather, points to what has already begun to arrive: a time in which serial moving-image drama no longer passes through an initial phase of broadcasting or at least in which the importance of this phase is greatly diminished. More implicitly, this article has also concerned the question of what it means for scholars to relate to media labels that are habitually used in this rapidly changing media landscape: should they reproduce the habitual terminology or subject them to further exploration and critique, possibly followed by the construction of new, more attentive, clear and forward-looking, concepts? This article has taken the latter route.

Notes

1. See for instance, Ron Simon and Brian Rose, “Mixed-up Confusion: Coming to Terms with the Television Experience in the Twenty-First Century,” Journal of Popular Film & Television 1 (2010): 52–53.
2. This does not mean that I am unaffected by such theoretical paradigms: during the course of writing this article I have at times, when claiming that The Wire is not television, felt the urge to add: “… not that there’s anything wrong with that!” (referencing the famous Seinfeld episode).
3. Such arguments are found in many of the contributions to the anthology It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television era, ed. Marc Leverette et al. (New York: Routledge, 2008).
4. Linda Williams, “Ethnographic Imaginary: The Genesis and Genius of The Wire,” Critical Inquiry 38, no. 1 (2011): 210.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 219 note 19, 213.
7. Jason Mittell, “All in the Game: The Wire, Serial Storytelling and Procedural Logic,” in Third person: Authoring and Exploring Vast Narratives, ed. Pat Harrigan and Noah Wardrip-Fruin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009), 429–438, emphasis mine.
8. Jason Mittell, “Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television,” The Velvet Light Trap 58, no. 1 (2006): 29–40.
9. Jason Mittell, “Serial Boxes: The Cultural Value of Long-Form American Television,” presentation given at the “Serial Forms” conference in Zürich, June 2009.
10. Dana Polan, The Sopranos (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2009), 42–44.
11. Complicating matters somewhat is that Simon had helped with the work on the series Homicide: Life on the Streets (NBC, 1993–1999) that was based on his ethnographical reportage book with the same title, and that Simon and Ed Burns had previously done the mini-series The Corner (2000) for HBO, which was adapted from another ethnographic reportage book by Simon co-authored with Burns.
12. See for instance David Simon DVD commentary Season 3, Episode 3.
13. Amanda Ann Klein, “‘The Dickensian Aspect’: Melodrama, Viewer Engagement, and the Socially Conscious Text,” The Wire: Urban Decay and American Television, ed. Tiffany Potter and C.W. Marshall (New York/London: Continuum, 2009), 177–189.
14. Fredric Jameson, “Realism and Utopia in The Wire,” Criticism 52, no. 3–4 (2010): 367–368.
15. Slavoj Žižek, “The Wire or the Clash of Civilisations in one Country,” talk given at Birkbeck, University of London, 24 February 2012.
16. Noël Carroll, Theorizing the Moving Image (Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 3.
17. D.N. Rodowick, The Virtual Life of Film (Cambridge Mass./London: Harvard University Press, 2007), 38–41, 86. This discussion, it may be important to add, is part of Rodowick’s larger errand in this book to begin to map the nuances of dislocated continuities and yet-to-be-fully-conceptualized micro
ruptures within the juncture of past and future of “cinema” in an era of digital capture and synthesis.
18. Epstein et al. quoted in Tony Kelso, “And Now No Word From Our Sponsor,” in It’s Not TV: Watching HBO in the Post-Television Era, 59.
19. David Simon: “[W]e’re looking at this thing as a 66-hour movie”, “Behind The Wire: David Simon on Where the Show Goes Next,” interview by Meghan O’Rourke, Slate Magazine, December 1, 2006.
20. Tony Kelso, “And Now No Word From Our Sponsor,” 58–60.
21. I am here referencing Richard Serra’s short film “Television delivers people” (1973), which was a comment on commercial broadcast television in America at the time. One of the problems for media companies based on advertising in the complex new media landscape is how it can find new ways to, so to speak, keep the delivery of people to advertisers. While, less famously, not free from certain product placements, the delivery of people to advertisements is not a central issue for HBO.
22. For a more expansive economical and industrial history of HBO, see Gary R. Edgerton, “Introduction: A Brief History of HBO,” The Essential HBO: Reader, ed. Gary R. Edgerton and Jeffrey P. Jones (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2009), 1–20; Leverette et al., “Introduction,” in It’s Not TV, 2–7.
23. Kelso, “And Now No Word From Our Sponsor,” 52, emphasis mine.
24. This has changed in certain respects since the so-called “HBO-effect” took root during the 2000s. While for instance Showtime, who is also subscription based, has spend many years consciously trying to “catch up” with HBO, at least one important difference remains: HBO has for various reasons a much bigger financial base – not least also since it is part of Time Warner Inc., see Kelso, 54.
25. John Kraniauskas, “Elasticity of Demand: Reflections on The Wire,” Radical Philosophy 154 (2009): 33.
26. John Kraniauskas, “Elasticity of Demand,” 29.
27. For more on these different versions as well as the technological aspects of the production in general, see director and co-producer Joe Chappelle’s specifications in Nick Griffin, “Inside HBO’s The Wire,” Creative COW Magazine: The Magazine for Media Professionals in Film, Broadcast & Production (2007).
28. James Bennett and Tom Brown, “Introduction: Past the Boundaries of ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Media: Film and Television After DVD,” in Film and Television After DVD, ed. Bennett and Brown (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008), 6.
29. Mittell, “Narrative Complexity,” 31.
30. Ibid., 30.
31. Max Dawson, “Television Between Analog and Digital,” Journal of Popular Film & Television 1 (2010): 99, note 3.
32. David Simon discusses this issue with one of the co-producers Karen L. Thorson in the DVD commentary for Season 3, Episode 2.
33. Linda Williams, “Ethnographic Imaginary,” 208.
34. Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, “Baltimore as World and Representation: Cognitive Mapping and Capitalism in The Wire,” Dossier (2009), emphasis mine. http://dossierjournal.com/read/theory/baltimore-as-world-and-representation-cognitive-mapping-and-capitalism-in-the-wire/ (last visit January 2013)
35. HBO does not disclose any DVD sales figures. But it is an easily deducible fact that DVD sales and file-sharing vastly outnumber its broadcast ratings. The Wire lies, for instance, steadily on Amazon’s DVD sales top-40 list.
36. Ash Sharma, “Editorial: ‘All the Pieces Matter’ – Introductory Notes on The Wire,” Dark Matter 4 (2009): 4, emphasis mine. http://www.darkmatter101.org/site/2011/04/29/editorial-all-the-pieces-matter-introductory-notes-on-the-wire/ (last visit January 2013).
37. Jørgen Bruhn and Anne Gjelsvik, “‘It’s not Television, It’s DVD’: New and Old Ways of Representing the World in The Wire,” in Film in the Post-Media Age, ed. Ágnes Pethő (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2012), 329–342. Instead of concuring with the claim in the title of this in many other regards very interesting text, the two authors are explicit in stating that they regard The Wire to be television. While acknowledging that The Wire suits the “DVD format” watching The Wire on DVD is described as “watching television on DVD” (346, 353). Their main discussions does not deal with the problem of how to define or differentiate between media but with how the narrative content of The Wire “draws on heritage from cinema and literature” which “enables the series to transform the TV-tradition” (344, 347).
38. Patrick Jagoda, “Wired,” Critical Inquiry 38, no. 1 (2011): 194.
39. John Kraniauskas, “Elasticity of Demand,” 25–29, 31.
40. Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man [1964] (Cambridge Mass.,/London, The MIT Press, 1994), 292, 173.
41. Oxford English Dictionary [online] (Oxford University Press, 2000-).
42. This implication may even be found in some of the studies that investigate the new digital screens in the contemporary media landscape (computers, mobile units, etc.). See for instance, P. David Marshall, “Screens: Television’s Dispersed Broadcast,” in Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era, ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (New York: Routledge, 2009), 41–50. 
43. See the work of William Uricchio for a discussion of these pre-figuring discourses, for instance, “Television, Film, and the Struggle for Media Identity,” in Film History, An International Journal 10, no. 2 (1998), 118-127; “The Future of the Medium
Once Known as Television,” in *The YouTube Reader*, ed. Pelle Snickars and Patrick Vonderau (Stockholm: National Library of Sweden, 2009), 31–35.

44. William Uricchio, “The Trouble With Television,” *Screening the Past: An International Electronic Journal of Visual Media and History* 4 (1998) http://www.latrobe.edu.au/screeningthepast/firstrelease/fir998/WUfr4b.htm (last visit January 2013).

45. Some initial questions in the air around in the early days of its invention: was the medium going to be a visual extension of radio? Emulate film? Be a visual telephone? etc. Adding to this we have things like disparate broadcast traditions (a commercial medium or state financed); how television from the beginning remediated radio, film, etc. (a sort of immediate media convergence); the arrival of cable/satellite/digital television; the arrival of the remote control and electronic video recorders; the increasing ubiquity of the medium in all its forms throughout public areas (in waiting rooms, etc.); competing academic definitions of the medium; the myriad of commercial discourses on the social function of television, etc.

46. “Defining the Medium,” in *Tele-Visions: An Introduction to Studying Television*, ed. Glen Creeber (London: BFI, 2006), 19.

47. But, of course, there are programs that still can be rightly called television programs precisely for the reasons that are found in the 20th century discourses. On the continued importance of broadcast television, see for instance Toby Miller, “Approach with Caution and Proceed with Care. Campaigning for the US Presidency ‘After’ TV,” *Television Studies After TV: Understanding Television in the Post-Broadcast Era*, ed. Graeme Turner and Jinna Tay (New York, NY: Routledge, 2009), 75–82.