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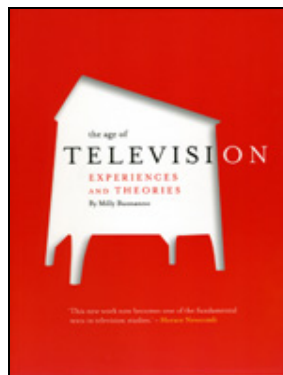
Milly Buonanno, **The Age of Television: Experiences and Theories**, Bristol, UK: Intellect Books (distributed in the USA by University of Chicago Press), Jennifer Radice (translator), (2008), 144 pp., \$40.00 (paperback).

Reviewed by

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*“Chi Viaggia ha delle Storie da Raccontare”  
 (“Those who Travel have Stories to Tell”)<sup>1</sup>*



Has Television Studies come of age? The signs are all there. First, there is a stream of excellent new work from up-and-coming scholars in many countries; many of them also active in forums like *Flow*, *Unboxing TV*, and *In Media Res*.<sup>2</sup> Second, perhaps less welcome, we can discern a seemingly irresistible surge to hyper-specialisation, where scholarship in (say) a particular genre, region, period, or theme is not seen as part of a larger field, but where such a list describes a series of different, barely interconnected fields. And third, in direct contradiction, because a mature field attracts both “lumpers” and “splitters,”<sup>3</sup> analysts and synthesisers, there is at last a possibility of conceptualizing the field as a unified whole.

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<sup>1</sup> From the book under review (pp. 101, 117).

<sup>2</sup> Flow: [flowtv.org/](http://flowtv.org/); Unboxing TV: [unboxingtv.org/provocations/index.html](http://unboxingtv.org/provocations/index.html); In Media Res: [mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/videos/](http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/videos/)

<sup>3</sup> The Wikipedia is good on these terms; see [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumpers\\_and\\_splitters](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lumpers_and_splitters); and see the entry on J. H. Hexter: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J.\\_H.\\_Hexter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/J._H._Hexter)

History tells us that the maturation of TV Studies may also signal the end of television, at least as we know it. Cinema Studies came of age only after the movies had ceased to be the most popular medium. Before that, Literary Studies<sup>4</sup> became established at universities only after the daily press had overtaken novels and book publishing ("penny dreadfuls" and pulp fiction) in popularity. There was no such thing as Radio Studies during the golden age of broadcasting. Could it be that the generative edge of popular culture is too dynamic to be reduced to a settled scientific field of knowledge? If so, the emergence of a new disciplinary domain like Television Studies would be a sure sign that television itself has been dethroned as the most popular medium. Like publishing, cinema, and radio broadcasting before it, TV will, of course, enjoy a long afterlife beyond its heyday. But the thing that brought many to study television in the first place, namely a popular reach, commercial scale, political power, and cultural significance that made The Tube a metonym of society as a whole, has passed. Perhaps the anxiety and tension occasioned by mass popularity, commercial and political risk, and cultural pervasiveness must begin to ebb away before the true nature of the beast can be grasped. Only then can we see how the cumulative efforts of many different and often conflicting experiments in scholarship might be integrated into a coherent field — one that at last seems to be separable from the problem it seeks to explain. The achievement of the necessary dispassionate distance is the moment when TV stops being seen as a metonym of, well, everything.

If scientific description can only be assured with a dead specimen, then we must welcome Milly Buonanno's *The Age of Television* (in an elegant translation by former diplomat Jennifer Radice)<sup>5</sup> with mixed feelings, for it really does demonstrate that television scholarship has come of age. In her hands, it is both a fully-elaborated international discourse about TV, and a useful tool for understanding what is going on in TV. Further, it is capable of surprising and intriguing us with unexpected directions and unforeseen findings. So mature is it that it can afford to play with its own genre, perform its own approach, and thereby demonstrate its own self-sustaining viability. Therefore — it follows — this book also marks the passing of TV's heyday.

We can tell when that moment is reached, perhaps, by the quality of writing, in the sense that it is only once your object is not threatening to overwhelm you (along with everyone else) that you can attend adequately to the narrative line and verbal elegance of your own discourse. In all of these tests — grasping the nature of the beast, integrating the field, and achieving a dispassionate but literate mode of

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<sup>4</sup> What the British used to call "English" — once the "queen of the humanities" but now dethroned in turn by media studies (see for instance, [www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=161892&sectioncode=6](http://www.timeshighereducation.co.uk/story.asp?storyCode=161892&sectioncode=6)).

<sup>5</sup> For the translator's profile, see [www.proz.com/profile/756149](http://www.proz.com/profile/756149). One infelicity that got away from her is the use of the term "aborigines" (p. 101). The preferred practice now is to capitalise the term and to refer to "Aboriginal people."

expression — Milly Buonanno carries all before her. I guess that leaves me in a Mark-Antony sort of position: I come not to bury television but to praise Milly Buonanno.

*The Age of Television* dethrones television in its very title, tipping it out of the endless present tense of scientific discourse into the contingent context of history.<sup>6</sup> And once you've dubbed something an "Age" then presumably it is over. But Buonanno rather deftly sidesteps this potential dead end by making its implications into one of her major theoretical themes, which is to join things, not to separate them. She says the "ages" of the press, radio, cinema, and television (and those of the computer and the Internet to come) are "cumulative rather than substitutive" (p. 12), and that this is the "fundamental lesson" of an evolutionary approach to communications, where each successor medium supplements, but does not supplant its predecessor, from speech, via writing, the press, and the mass media (of which TV is one), to the computer, which is even now "making big strides."

Buonanno's overall vision (and not just of television, one hazards) is "connective rather than substitutive" (p. 22). She makes a kind of moral economy of coexistence out of an approach where "town squares and clubs, generalism and specialism, commonality and separateness, dissemination and dialogue can and must be truly destined to exist side by side in the worlds of television that we now inhabit" (p. 26). In other words, she's a lumper, not a splitter; ecumenical, not sectarian.

This makes her a trustworthy guide to the field, because she wants to put different approaches together and to navigate among them, not to choose between them. And it is clear that she's read the field; she knows what she is talking about. This makes the book as a whole very useful for teaching purposes. Having said that, she does have her favourites: she likes Joshua Meyrowitz (for his sense of place), John Ellis (for turning modernist screen theory towards TV), Raymond Williams (for the idea of modern mobility if not for flow), Alfred Schutz (for his multiple realities), Norbert Elias (for awareness of death), and Scheherazade (for narrative theory). And she likes to fall in step with trusted colleagues as she traverses the theoretical uplands, guided, for example, by the Johns — Corner, Ellis, and Tomlinson — among others.

I don't know how many people actually read academic books these days, even among book reviewers, because of the prevailing urge to "raid" not read; to analyse, not synthesise, to mine a paper for information or to sample an argument for a citation. I mention this because *The Age of Television* is worth reading sequentially, as Horace Newcomb observes in his foreword:

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<sup>6</sup> See [flowtv.org/?p=310](http://flowtv.org/?p=310) for more (of my thoughts) on TV as history.

. . . the book becomes a map. For a while the surroundings seem familiar. . . We begin to see new angles . . . The subtlety of these steps requires of us a kind of modesty in our movements, a sense that what may lie ahead is already prepared by the turns we have just taken. (p. 7)

In other words, this book has a plot! It looks harmlessly generic, in the sense that it offers a succession of chapters on sociologically warranted topics: history; theory; close ethnographic reading of TV texts; digital culture; narrative; media imperialism; international flows; serial TV. But actually there's something else going on, as the book meditates on time (history), space (domestic and global), and back to time (fear of death). It is not quite a matter of me having to issue "spoiler" warnings at this point, but you really ought to read it to understand how Buonanno gets from the opening banal historical fact — "BBC television was transmitted for the first time in November 1936" (p. 11) — to the closing postponement of death, which is "exorcised" from everyday life by unending (serial) drama (pp. 131-132).

The book unfixes landmarks as it goes. Elsewhere, Buonanno (2005) has drawn attention to a distinction she ascribes to Walter Benjamin, between stories told by sailors (here conceptualised as "travelling narratives") and stories told by peasants (i.e., narratives of autochthonous origin). It is clear that Buonanno herself has "nomadic propensities" (p. 107) and likes the transitions and displacements of traveller's tales — the foreign in the local — and that therefore she wants her book to end up in a place quite far removed from where it starts.<sup>7</sup> For along the way she has quietly inserted very large claims on behalf of television. In her hands, the multiple experience of TV escapism is the contemporary means by which we use narrative to "satisfy, with the breathtaking resources of the imagination, the ancient and profound human yearning to achieve the 'Great Flight' — not from life but from death" (p. 132).

I must say I am very sympathetic to this approach, for without ever denying the need for science — on the contrary, she relies on the "mediological literature" (p. 43) — Buonanno returns TV studies to the humanities. To do this, she rounds up different national scholarly traditions: the theory chapter is "British"; the close ethnographic reading (of Mother Teresa) is "Italian" (though oddly silent on Umberto Eco); the critique of technological utopianism is "American"; the chapter critiquing media imperialism is suitably international. It is only after she has paid her respects in this way that Buonanno can provide the twist in the plot that brings us not to scientific authority but, disconcertingly, face to face with our own death. In other words, she returns TV from social problem (present tense) to storytelling (history). And this is where I came in, as Buonanno herself rather backhandedly notes:

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<sup>7</sup> It is customary for reviewers to offer criticism as well as praise, so I will say that the book doesn't know Australia, China, or Asia more generally. More selfishly, I will point out that analytical mobility is a theme in my own work: see for example, Hartley, 1992, 2002.

It is not by chance that some commentators have in the past put forward the idea of 'television as our own culture's bard' . . . other authors, using less appealing and captivating but more persuasive language, have defined television as the 'central storytelling system' of the present day. (p. 72)<sup>8</sup>

*The Age of Television* is ultimately a human rather than a scientific treatise. It is interested in thought and experience, not in establishing the analytical adequacy of a given disciplinary procedure or rhetoric. So Buonanno can — in language that is not only "appealing and captivating" but also "persuasive" — end on a thought-provoking meditation on serial television as our own culture's Scheherazade. This is the theorised experience of the book's title: the mediating function of endlessly unfolding narrative in which "real" worlds are those to which we pay attention, and experience is made possible — and multiple — by emancipating human selves from space and time.

In the end, the uncomfortable question posed by this book is not whether TV Studies has come of age, or even whether TV has had its day, but whether, using the vast resources of mediated and rapidly digitised storytelling, our evolving culture can ever come of age. Only time will tell.

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<sup>8</sup> "Some commentators" are John Fiske and me in *Reading Television* (1978); "other authors" are Horace Newcomb. Buonanno consigns the bardic function to "the past," but I am still writing about it. See Hartley, 2009.