


# Beyond the *Barrío*—Ladies and Gentlemen, Let's Get Ready for . . . Graeme Turner and Horace Newcomb

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## Abstract

This is a homage to the work of Horace Newcomb and Graeme Turner.

## Keywords

Horace Newcomb, Graeme Turner, television, media studies, cultural studies, new media

It is an honor to be invited to write about two foundational figures of media studies in Graeme Turner and Horace Newcomb. Their work has invigorated me, and others both like and unlike me, for decades.

This is so for two reasons. First, the moment I see their names associated with something, whether it is an interview or a book, I want to read what they have to say. That is because they are equally scholarly and tendentious. There is always something new, invigorating, and critical on offer. As Foucault (1985, 8) put it, “There are times in life when the question of knowing if one can think differently than one thinks, and perceive differently than one sees, is absolutely necessary if one is to go on looking and reflecting at all.”

And second, I routinely return to their work, long after encountering it, to reconsider what I thought I had understood. Take their first two monographs. Horace’s *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Newcomb 1974) continues to make me ponder seemingly familiar things anew, as it did when I first read it. Endowed with his distinctive qualities as both a practitioner and an academic, and offering a provocation simply in its

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title, this book *began* TV studies, for me as many others. For its part, Graeme's *National Fictions: Literature, Film and the Construction of Australian Narrative* (Turner 1993) is a remarkable fusion of new ideas and exegetical expertise. It was *the* foundational volume of Australian cultural studies when its first edition appeared in 1986.

They are quite different books but have something powerful in common. Each one offers original research and argument, transcends the banality of the doctoral thesis or careerist ploy, and reaches out to general readers with clear, incisive prose. So part of their achievement has been to keep in mind, as it were, the undergrad reader at a second-tier school, as much as, if not more than, the authors' fellow academic stars. Yet, this was never done uncritically, as per the tedium of the average U.S. mass communications textbook.

Horace's monograph positions television drama alongside literature rather than radio or film, because its "sense of density" explores complex themes in lengthy treatments with slow build-ups and multisequenced sites of character development and interaction (Newcomb 1974, 256). He makes this claim in the context of an appeal to the central question for the humanities-based study of television at that time (and still today): whether it was worthy of textual analysis as opposed to behavioral interrogation or generic condemnation. Both Horace and Graeme put art along a continuum, rather than consigning some forms of it to the back catalog of unworthy dross and others to a transcendent pantheon. They take popular pastimes seriously.

*National Fictions* is also animated by writing for an audience beyond one's *barrio*, in terms of a student and not just a professorial readership. It acknowledges the nation as a productive, not necessarily a bad, object. This is in some contrast to much of cultural studies, which easily and frequently constructs and constricts itself with a somewhat unreflexive transnational adoration, despite its dependence on nationally based educational and publishing systems. Graeme recognized that the seemingly damned concept of the nation was usefully deployed in cultural policy, diasporic and indigenously work, alternative television, minor cinema, and globalization.

So they write well. And then there is the sheer surprise that their ideas can inspire. I will give just two of many examples.

Sometimes Horace bristles at vulgar "ists" such as myself, but when it comes to asymmetries of power, he stands up to be counted. Horace first alerted me to the fact that the United States was an early-modern exponent of anticultural imperialist, pro-nation-building sentiment. Herman Melville, for instance, opposed the U.S. literary establishment's devotion to all things English, questioning the compatibility of a Eurocentrically cringing import culture with efforts to "carry Republicanism into literature" (Newcomb 1996, 94). These arguments influenced domestic and foreign policies alike. When the first international copyright treaties were being negotiated on the European continent in the nineteenth century, the United States refused to protect foreign literary works—a belligerent stance that it would denounce today as piratical. But back then, the country was a net importer of books, seeking to develop a national literary patrimony of its own. Washington was not interested in extending protection to international works that might hinder its own printers, publishers, or authors.

Graeme avows that media studies is simultaneously and understandably more vocational than many other subjects, due to its commitment to production skills and news-and-current affairs research; more populist, given its legitimization of the everyday and success with students; and more politicized, because in some traditions, it has been influenced by leftists and feminists (Turner 2007). But this is no uncritical welcome. For instance, he queries a recent fad, creative-industries discourse, as “an industry training program” (Turner 2012) that may help perpetuate stratified labor markets in the production of culture. That kind of synoptic overview is something both men are capable of providing, in generous yet astringent ways (see, for example, Newcomb 1986, 2000; Turner 2012).

What of the newer media, as opposed to the venerable and middle-aged ones that made their names? Sometimes, Horace (2009, 117) seems to lament the passing of time:

“My” television is gone. It began to disappear (disintegrate? Dissolve? Die?) in the early 1980s, but I didn’t notice. I was too busy figuring out what had intrigued me for so long (and what became a career [job security? identity? burden?])

But he also knows that we are not at the end of the line. Not nearly (Newcomb 2014; also see Tay and Turner 2010).

Both Horace and Graeme acknowledge that emergent media have historically supplanted their predecessors as sources of authority and pleasure: literature versus oratory, film versus theater, radio versus sheet music. TV blended all of them. A warehouse of contemporary culture, it merged what had come before, and is now merging with personal computers (which were modeled on it) to do the same (Newcomb 2005, 110). Horace recognizes that “the future of television will be essentially the same as its past” via “strategies of adjustment” (Newcomb 2014).

Jinna Tay and Graeme Turner (2010, 32) have coined the terms “broadcast pessimism” and “digital optimism” to encapsulate two differing positions on the medium’s future. Proponents of broadcast pessimism argue that we are witnessing the inexorable obsolescence of traditional TV—the television of family and peer togetherness—under the impact of media digitization and mobility. Digital optimists, by contrast, welcome this shiny new epoch, because its texts and technologies give audiences unconstrained choice and control.

But as Graeme explains in a recent coauthored book, the reality remains that conventional TV is alive and well in most countries around the world, and holds a central, even dominant cultural position. It “seems designed, no matter what its platform of delivery, to generate new ways of being-together-while-apart” (Pertierra and Turner 2013, 66). As ever, television represents a space beyond the worlds of work, school, and family while offering a forum for ideas that can challenge those very institutions (Newcomb and Hirsch 1983).

No wonder I find these guys tendentious and thorough! As when I read their work for the first time in the 1980s, revisiting it *en bloc* for this wee essay confirmed their shared blend of accessibility and originality. It is a model for us all.

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