

# AMERICAN TELEVISION and CULTURE

FILM 2153A

Western University

Department of Film Studies (2015)

Screenings: Tuesdays 12:30-3:30pm (AHB-3B04)

Lecture/Discussion: Thursdays 11:30-1:30pm (AHB-3B04)

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## COURSE DESCRIPTION

Despite its pivotal role in postwar America, television has rarely been viewed as a medium worthy of serious critical attention. Long tainted by its commercial ties and mass audience, television has only recently acquired a degree of cultural esteem through its widely acclaimed cable programming (*The Sopranos*; *Mad Men*). This course will provide an introduction to the historical development, forms, and reception of television in the U.S., paying particular attention to the social element of the medium. We will thus explore television's diverse audiences and analyze the various ways in which American culture has both shaped and been shaped by TV. In addition to a focus on key moments in the medium's history, we will examine the distinctive elements of the televisual form (flow, liveness, seriality, advertising), TV's key genres (soap, sitcom, drama, news, reality), modes of reception (fandom, distraction, time-shifting), and television's construction and conception of social difference in America (representation and narrowcasting strategies). Key topics of discussion will include: quality television and cultural hierarchies, HBO and the cable/satellite shift, teen TV, children's TV, representing "reality," the gendering of television, televisual immediacy, and the flexibility of "television" in the digital era.

**Course Objectives:** This course functions as an introduction to the field of television studies, emphasizing both close textual analysis and key critical approaches to the medium. It also provides an historical overview of television's commercial and cultural functions as well as its complex reception in America.

**Learning Outcomes:** By the end of the course, you will have a thorough grasp of the history of American television, its formal and narrative strategies, and the various critical and theoretical approaches used to examine it. Close analysis of television programming in class, on exams, and through your final series analysis project will make you a more skilled reader and critic of televisual forms and their place in contemporary media and culture.

## COURSE TEXTS

*Required:*

1. Jeremy Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications* (4<sup>th</sup> Edition)
2. Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, *Legitimizing Television*
3. *Online* coursepack of additional readings (via OWL) [OWL]

## COURSE REQUIREMENTS

- Class Attendance and Participation [10%]
- Reading Quizzes [10% total]
- Screening Journals [500 words min.] [20% total]
- Midterm Exam [20%]
- Final Paper/Series Analysis [1500 words min.] [20%]
- Final Exam [20%]

**Attendance and Participation:** You are required to attend all class meetings and screenings for the full duration. Attendance will be taken regularly. Be sure to come to class fully prepared, having read all of the weekly reading assignments, and with your course books and readings in hand. Lateness, early departures, or other disruptive behavior will adversely affect your participation grade. More than **THREE unexcused** absences will result in a zero for your final participation grade. Only documented medical emergencies—verified through your home faculty (see below)—will be considered for paper extensions or exam rescheduling. ***If you are absent for TEN or more classes (excused or unexcused) you will automatically fail both the final exam and the overall course.***

**Quizzes and Exams:** There will be two reading quizzes during the term (Week 4 and Week 11). The quizzes will be given during the Thursday lecture/discussion sessions at the beginning of class. You will have approximately 20 minutes for each quiz, and the quizzes will be based on major concepts from the course readings. The quizzes are meant to be a warm-up for the midterm and final exams. Make-up quizzes will typically only be granted in the case of documented medical emergencies. The midterm exam will cover all of the course readings, screenings, and lectures through Week 7 of the course. The final exam is comprehensive, but it will be weighted towards the material from the second half of the course. Exams will feature fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice questions, an identification section (key concepts/terms/theories), and short answer/essay questions. The short essay questions may also involve in-class analysis of screening clips.

**Paper Assignments:** Building on the close analysis of TV programs that you will be doing in class, your final paper project will require you to analyze key episodes from a recent television series. The paper will ideally combine formal and ideological analysis, attention to the function of seriality, and a discussion of issues of address and/or reception in order to make an original argument about the overall series/season.

**Screening Journals:** As preparation for your final paper assignment, you will also turn in two screening journals during the term. The first journal assignment will serve as a final paper proposal and will be based on the close analysis of a single episode from your chosen series. The second journal assignment will examine an additional episode and will present a more developed argument about the series that will then be expanded upon in your final paper. The journal assignments will not only help you hone your skills of TV analysis, but they will also provide an opportunity for helpful feedback on your project before your turn in your final paper.

***\*\*You must turn in both journal assignments and the final paper in a timely manner. If you do not turn in one of these assignments, you will automatically fail both the final exam and the overall course\*\****

**Late Work:** Course papers must be turned in complete and on time. In order to be fair to the entire class, I will not grant individual extensions on paper assignments, so be sure to budget your time accordingly. Late papers will be penalized 5% points per day late (including weekends), except in the case of *properly documented* medical emergencies or illnesses (see below).

**Laptops, Tablets, Cell Phones:** Laptops/tablets/cell phones are *not* to be used during screenings. You will need to take notes using paper and pens, so be sure to bring these materials to class. Exceptions *may* be granted in the case of students with special needs, but this will only come with official approval from the Dean's office. Laptops/tablets will be permitted during lecture, but only on a probationary basis: if the instructor is distracted two times during the semester by non-note-taking/internet laptop use, the instructor will ban ALL use of laptops/tablets for the remainder of the year. In addition, be sure to turn off cell phones and refrain from text messaging during class. This counts as disruptive behavior and will lower your final participation grade.

**Note on Screenings:** You are required to attend weekly screenings on Tuesday afternoons (attendance will be taken). Be sure to arrive to the screenings on time and to follow traditional screening etiquette (turn off cell phones, laptops, no talking, etc.). If you are ill or have a legitimate excuse, you should set up an appointment to view the episodes in the Film Studies Study Center [AHB-1G19] before Thursday's lecture. Most screenings will run between 2-2.5 hours, so be prepared. Weekly screening titles may also be changed from time to time, depending on the particular needs of the course. You should also be aware that the quality of programs will vary as many shows will be taped from the original broadcasts (with advertisements). Specific information about each screening (episode title, date, etc.) will be available on the OWL course page.

## **HELPFUL WEBSITES**

- [www.routledge.com/cw/butler](http://www.routledge.com/cw/butler) [Butler's companion website for course textbook]  
[Account name: **tvcrit** Password: **tvcrit4u** ]
- [www.epguides.com](http://www.epguides.com) [chronological guide of episodes (with descriptions) for TV shows]
- [www.televisionwithoutpity.com](http://www.televisionwithoutpity.com) [TV criticism and fan-based responses to episodes]
- [www.flowtv.org](http://www.flowtv.org) [*Flow*: media and TV criticism]

- [blog.commarts.wisc.edu](http://blog.commarts.wisc.edu) [*Antenna*: media and TV criticism]
- <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/> [*in media res*: media and TV criticism]
- [journal.transformativeworks.org](http://journal.transformativeworks.org) [*Transformative Works and Culture*: journal on fan cultures and media studies]
- <https://archiveofourown.org> [*Archive of Our Own*: source for fan-produced work]

## **COURSE SCHEDULE**

### **SECTION I: TELEVISUAL FORMS**

#### **WEEK 1—Sept. 10—COURSE INTRO**

**Screening:** *The Wire*

#### **WEEK 2—Sept. 15-17—SERIALITY and FLOW**

**Screening:** *24*; *CSI*

**Reading:** Butler, *Television*, Chapters 1&2 (pgs. 3-51)  
& Chapter 12 (pgs. 370-381)  
& Appendix 1 (Narrative Analysis) (pgs. 429-431)

#### **WEEK 3—Sept. 22-24—TELEVISION CODES and STYLES**

**Screening:** *Mad Men*; *Hannibal*

**Reading:** Butler, Ch-3 (pgs. 55-64) & Ch-7 (pgs. 227-250)  
& Ch-8 (pgs. 253-261; 270-280) & Ch-13 (pgs. 395-402)

#### **WEEK 4—Sept. 29-Oct.1—GENDER, GENRE, and FAMILY: Domestic Sitcoms**

**Screening:** *Father Knows Best*; *I Love Lucy*; *Arrested Development*;  
& *The Big Bang Theory*

**Reading:** Butler, Ch-9 (pgs. 293-322)  
& Newman/Levine, Chapter 4  
& Spigel, “The Suburban Home Companion” [OWL]

**\*\*READING QUIZ on Thursday Oct. 1\*\***

## ***SECTION II: NETWORKS and NATIONS***

### **WEEK 5—Oct. 6-8—IMMIGRANTS and IMAGINED COMMUNITIES**

**Screening:** *The Honeymooners; The Goldbergs; Mama; Amos & Andy*

**Reading:** Lipsitz, “The Meaning of Memory” [OWL]

**\*\*SCREENING JOURNAL #1 DUE Thursday Oct. 8\*\***

### **WEEK 6—Oct. 13-15—RACE and REPRESENTATION**

**Screening:** *Color Adjustment; Chappelle’s Show; Empire*

**Reading:** Butler, Ch-13 (pgs. 410-421)  
& Gray, “The Politics of Representation in Network Television” [OWL]  
& Haggins, “In the Wake of ‘The Nigger Pixie’” [OWL]  
& Beltran, “Meaningful Diversity” [OWL]

### **WEEK 7—Oct. 20-22—MEDIATING the NEWS**

**Screening:** *NBC Nightly News; The Daily Show; Last Week with John Oliver*

**Reading:** Butler, Ch-4 (pgs. 97-121) & Ch-5 (pgs. 149-176)  
& Baym, “*The Daily Show*” [OWL]  
& RTNDA Code of Ethics [OWL]

**\*\*MIDTERM EXAM Thursday Oct. 22 In Class\*\***

### **WEEK 8—Oct. 27—CITIZENSHIP and SPECTACLE: Reality TV**

**Screening:** *The Biggest Loser; UnReal*

**Reading:** Butler, Ch-4 (pgs. 133-42)  
& Weber, “Into the Makeover Maze” [OWL]

**\*\*NO CLASS on Thursday Oct. 29\*\***

## ***SECTION III: NARROWCASTING in the POST-NETWORK ERA***

### **WEEK 9—Nov. 3-5—QUALITY and RELEVANCE**

**Screening:** *All in the Family; Hill St. Blues; Twin Peaks*

**Reading:** Newman/Levine, Ch-1 & Ch-2 (pgs. 14-29)  
& Nussbaum, “The Great Divide” [OWL]

**\*\*SCREENING JOURNAL #2 DUE on Thursday Nov. 5\*\***

**WEEK 10—Nov. 10-12—CABLE TV and HBO**

**Screening:** *The Sopranos*; *True Detective*; *Girls*

**Reading:** Newman/Levine, Ch-2 (pgs. 30-37) & Ch-3 & Ch-5  
& Nussbaum, “Difficult Women” [OWL]

**WEEK 11—Nov. 17-19—TV for KIDS: NICKELODEON**

**Screening:** *Blue’s Clues*; *Spongebob Squarepants*; *iCarly*

**Reading:** Anderson, “Watching Children Watch Television...” [OWL]  
& Banet-Weiser, “Home is Where the Brand Is” [OWL]

**\*\*READING QUIZ on Thursday Nov. 19\*\***

**SECTION IV: CONVERGENCE & TRANSMEDIA PRACTICES**

**WEEK 12—Nov. 24-26—FANDOM and TEEN TV**

**Screening:** *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*; *Bob’s Burgers*; selection of fan vids

**Readings:** Newman/Levine, Ch-7  
& Kearney, “The Changing Face of Teen Television” [OWL]  
& Coppa, “A Fannish Taxonomy of Hotness” [OWL]  
& Russo, “User-Penetrated Content” [OWL]

**WEEK 13—Dec. 1-3—NETFLIX and the WEB SERIES**

**Screening:** *Sense8*; *High Maintenance*

**Reading:** *Flow* Dossier on “The Future of Television” [OWL]  
& “Ted Sarandos, Netflix,” from *Distribution Revolution*  
& Hauser, “Smoking with Strangers” [OWL]

**WEEK 14—Dec. 8—THE FUTURE of TELEVISION?**

**Screening:** Class Choice

**\*\*FINAL PAPER/SERIES ANALYSIS DUE IN CLASS\*\***

**\*\*FINAL EXAM: See Fall Term Exam Schedule\*\***

## **POLICIES and REGULATIONS**

This instructor respects and upholds University policies and regulations pertaining to the observation of religious holidays; assistance available to the physically disabled, visually and/or hearing impaired student; plagiarism; sexual harassment; and racial or ethnic discrimination. All students are advised to become familiar with the respective University regulations and are encouraged to bring any questions or concerns to the attention of the instructor. For Film Studies Department regulations governing Term Work, Exams, Faculty Office Hours, Academic Relief (appeals, petitions, complaints), and other matters, please consult "Information for Students" on our website at [www.uwo.ca/film](http://www.uwo.ca/film)

**Plagiarism:** Plagiarism is a major academic offence. Students must write their essays in their own words. Whenever students take an idea, or a passage, from another author, they must acknowledge their debt both by using quotation marks where appropriate and by proper referencing such as footnotes or citations. In this course, citation of all material other than students' own ideas must be completed according to the guidelines established in *The MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers, 6<sup>th</sup> Edition*. For additional information on plagiarism see:

[www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_undergrad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/scholastic_discipline_undergrad.pdf)

**Plagiarism Checking:** All required papers may be subject to submission for textual similarity review to the commercial plagiarism detection software under license to the University for the detection of plagiarism. All papers submitted will be included as source documents in the reference database for the purpose of detecting plagiarism of papers subsequently submitted to the system. Use of the service is subject to the licensing agreement, currently between the University of Western Ontario and [Turnitin.com](http://www.turnitin.com). You should register immediately as a new user by going to <http://www.turnitin.com>. I will provide you with the Class ID # and password as soon as possible. Assignments not handed in to turnitin.com will receive a 0.

**Prerequisites:** Unless you have either the requisites for this course or written special permission from your Dean to enroll in it, you will be removed from this course and it will be deleted from your record. The decision may not be appealed. You will receive no adjustment to your fees in the event that you are dropped from a course for failing to have the necessary prerequisites.

**UWO Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness:** Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and or assignments must apply to their Academic Counseling Office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. *Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department.*

Please go to the following site for information on the university Policy on Accommodation for Medical Illness:

[www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/accommodation\\_medical.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/handbook/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf)

For information on the examination services provided by the Student Development Centre, please visit [www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd](http://www.sdc.uwo.ca/ssd)

**Mental Health:** Students who are in emotional/mental distress should refer to Mental Health@Western for a complete list of options about how to obtain help.

<http://www.uwo.ca/uwocom/mentalhealth/>

**Disabilities:** Please consult with me during the first three weeks of class regarding disabilities that might require special accommodations.

**Complaints:** If students have a complaint concerning a course in which they are enrolled, they must first discuss the matter with the instructor of the course. If students are still not satisfied, they should then take the complaint to Jennifer Tramble in the Film Studies Office. These regulations are in place because a failure to follow these procedures creates the potential for injustices of various kinds affecting either the instructor or the students themselves, or both parties. Concerns should not be allowed to fester but should be raised with the instructor in a timely manner, so that they can be addressed in time to make a difference to the course.

**Office Hours:** I will be available to answer questions, clarify concepts/assignments, and assist you with your coursework during my weekly office hours (posted above). If you have an occasional conflict, feel free to email me and we can set up an alternative time to meet. I will also be available via email M-F from 9-5 and will do my best to respond to your email within two days.

## **GRADING CRITERIA**

### **A+ (90-100):**

**Argument:** Clear development of a specific, challenging and original thesis. The writer has taken significant risks successfully; in the resulting piece, distinctive ideas and content have discovered their necessary distinctive form. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response. Ability not only to expound subject but to see it around—subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc.

**Presentation, structure:** Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. Almost no typographical errors.

**Language Skills:** Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses). Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, and few errors.

**Research/scholarship:** Evidence of effective, extensive and independent research, with proper documentation of sources. Quotations used appropriately and purposively.



### **A (80 to 89):**

**Argument:** The writer has taken risks and most of them succeed. Clear development of a specific and challenging thesis, with proper paragraphs. Detailed reference to appropriate texts, with evidence of individual response. Ability not only to expound subject but to see it around—subtleties and ambiguities, qualifications and concessions, relations to other subjects, etc.

**Presentation, structure:** Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. Almost no typographical errors.

**Language Skills:** Sentence structure correct, with full range of sentence types (compound, complex, and compound-complex), with full range of punctuation (including semicolons, colons, dashes, parentheses). Graceful style, neither pompous nor breezy, and few errors.

**Research/scholarship:** Evidence of effective and independent research, with proper documentation of sources. Quotations used appropriately and purposively.

### **B (70 to 79):**

**Argument:** Clear development of a specific thesis, with proper paragraphs. Adequately detailed reference to texts. Ability to expound reasonably sophisticated ideas with clarity.

**Presentation/structure:** Quotations well integrated into text. Proper paragraphs. A few typographical errors.

**Language Skills:** Sentence structure correct, with reasonable range of sentence types and full range of punctuation. Style not too wordy, with errors relatively few and minor.

**Research Scholarship:** Evidence of adequate research, with proper documentation of sources.

### **C (60 to 69):**

**Argument:** Reasonably clear development of a thesis, with proper paragraphs. Basic ability to expound ideas, whose development might be rather thin. Effort to support points with references to the text. Tendency to replace analysis with descriptive retelling of plot.

**Presentation/structure:** Presentation showing lapses in tidiness and/or proofreading. Poor use of paragraphs.

**Language Skills:** Sentence structure correct, but perhaps overly simple, with tendency to avoid punctuation besides period and comma. Errors relatively few, but occasionally serious, with evident misunderstanding of some point of elementary grammar (comma splices, fragments, semicolon errors, subject-verb disagreements, poorly integrated quotations)

**Research/Scholarship:** reasonable effort at documentation, but rather thin.

### **D (50 to 59):**

**Argument:** Difficulty with paragraphing or consecutive thought. Ideas inchoate but clouded by weak expression. Overgeneralization with inadequate support, or examples that run to lengthy paraphrase, with little or no analysis.

**Presentation/Structure:** Very poor to non-existent use of paragraphs. Inadequate and inaccurate documentation. Multiple typographical errors.

**Language Skills:** Errors of grammar or diction frequent enough to interfere with understanding.

**Research/Scholarship:** Little serious effort to research the topic.

**F (49 and below):**

**Argument:** Ideas too simple for level of course. Argument completely incoherent. Erroneous content showing little or no understanding of subject.

**Presentation/Structure:** Very sloppy proof-reading. Documentation virtually non-existent.

**Language Skills:** writing frequently ungrammatical.

**Research/Scholarship:** Non-existent. Content largely “borrowed” from sources with no individual distillation, but no apparent attempt to deceive.

**0 (Report to Department)**

Plagiarism with intent to deceive