

MCOM 294.02 – TELEVISION CRITICISM
SUNY Oneonta, Department of Communication & Media
Fall 2019

Class Meetings: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 1:00-1:50 PM, Fizzelle 304

Instructor: Dr. Andrew Bottomley

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Office Hours: Monday & Wednesday 11:00 AM – 12:45 PM, or by appointment

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Course Description

Every time you tell someone that they should or should not watch a television show, you are using implicit theories of television criticism. In this course, you will be encouraged to make those theories explicit and then interrogate them: How do we talk about television? What do we think television programs should do for our society? Where do our notions of “quality,” and “good” or “bad” TV, come from? What are the politics of these aesthetic judgments? What can we learn about ourselves and our culture from a television show and its critical reception?

This course is designed to introduce you to the concept of television criticism and to the practice of thinking critically about contemporary television programming. Television criticism is the analysis of the medium’s creative processes, programming strategies, stylistic contexts (genre, design, format, style), and audience viewing practices, undertaken in order to better understand television’s cultural meanings, messages, and motives. Today, in 2019, television is experiencing a new “golden age” with a dramatic rise in the number of original scripted shows on broadcast and cable, including an expansion onto the internet and streaming platforms like Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime, and Disney+. This expansion in original content has been accompanied by significant innovations in both the medium’s visual aesthetics and narrative forms. The world’s most talented writers, producers, and performers have been flocking to television to take advantage of its unique expressive capacities. Modern television audiences are also extraordinarily dedicated to their favorite programs, “binge watching” shows and engaging in impassioned online fan communities. It is important that we understand television as more than mere popular entertainment: it is a crucial reflection of our culture as well as an art form and aesthetic object that is uniting and enlivening our society.

This class will help you build the skills needed for the analysis and critique of television. Our focus will be on scripted live-action drama and comedy series from the 2010s (i.e. serialized fictional programming; we will *not* be directly addressing news and documentary, reality, talk shows, animation, sports, advertising, et al). We will spend the semester defining television criticism and examining what it means to perform critical analyses of television programs. In order to delve into this type of work, we will begin by investigating some of the historical roots of the contemporary television environment and reading about how new technologies, changing viewer practices, and a proliferation of genres and channels have transformed American television over the past quarter-century. Then, we will examine the emergence of highly complex forms of fictional serial narrative in the new millennium (scripted programs such as *The Sopranos*, *Breaking Bad*, *Arrested Development*, to name but a few), learning how to perform sustained critical analyses of these contemporary television programs and their audiences.

Course Objectives & Learning Outcomes

- Develop an understanding of the technological, economic, social, political, and cultural forces impacting the contemporary United States television industry
- Understand properties and characteristic differences among various television programming formats
- Expand knowledge of the multiple theoretical approaches and the meanings, concepts, and ideas involved in qualitative television criticism
- Acquire the basic vocabulary and concepts used to analyze television content
- Perform both individual and collaborative analytical work on the aesthetic form and storytelling modes of a variety of contemporary television texts

Required Materials

There is no required textbook for this course. All of the mandatory readings are accessible online, either on the open web or as PDF files available through the **myOneonta/Blackboard course page**. You should download the reading files and either print them out or digitally annotate them with your notes and highlighting. You then need to bring these materials to class and reference them when participating in classroom discussions and debates.

In addition to traditional text-based readings, there are various video materials that you'll need to consume on a fixed schedule. You will be asked to watch a lot of television in this class (surprise!). We will view many episodes and clips together in-class. However, there are other required viewing materials that you will have to screen on your own time. You should expect to spend between 1 and 3 hours per week watching additional programming outside class.

Whenever possible, the required viewing materials will be provided for streaming online via the Office 365 Stream app connected to your SUNY Oneonta user account. However, you must also get **Netflix and Hulu accounts** for the duration of the semester – or find a way to access each platform. Both services offer free trials, after which basic subscriptions will cost between \$6-\$9/month each (all totaling approximately \$60 for the semester, which is less than most textbooks). Hulu (and Showtime) is free with the Spotify Premium Student deal (only \$5/month). **Amazon Prime and HBO Now** memberships are optional yet strongly recommended.

You will also use the Blackboard site to receive class news, upload electronic copies of most assignments, and track your grades. Therefore, make a habit of checking it regularly.

Attendance

It is expected that you will attend all class meetings. Your attendance and participation are integral to the success of this course, as well as your own individual achievement in it. A good grade is impossible to achieve without regular attendance, since much of the assessment is based on your understanding of materials covered in the classroom. Nevertheless, stuff happens, so if you need to miss class then reach out to me – the sooner, the better. For illnesses, doctor appointments, field trips, and other non-emergencies, you must always notify me in writing beforehand (via email); do not miss class and expect that your absence will be excused retroactively. Maintaining clear communication about your (non-)attendance is key.

Attendance Policy: Attendance is not graded of itself; that is, there are no dedicated points for attendance alone. However, being in this class means being in the classroom, and attendance and participation significantly impact your Class Engagement assignment grade (see below). Acceptable attendance in this course means three (3) or fewer unexcused absences and three (3) or fewer tardies. Anything over five (5) unexcused absences and tardies is deemed excessive absence, and will greatly reduce your chances of success in this course.

Tardiness: A tardy is anything that pulls you away from active engagement in the entire class period: arriving late; departing early; leaving the classroom any time during the period without instructor permission; and displaying distracted or disruptive behavior such as talking to neighbors out of turn, using your smartphone, and sleeping. Coming to class any time after I finish taking attendance or leaving before I dismiss the class is considered tardiness.

Excused Absences: Of course, excused absences are exempt from the above policies. As per the College Handbook, religious holidays, official university activities (field trips, intercollegiate athletics, etc.), serious illness or injury, jury duty, military leave, and the like are considered legitimate excused absences. Realize that giving me an excuse does not automatically mean the absence is excused. Absences are only excused with my consent, meaning you must talk with me directly if you encounter hardships affecting your attendance. Face-to-face chats about attendance are welcome, though I request that you communicate the reason for your absence to me in writing (via email) – that way there is a searchable record of it for later reference. You will never be excused for work, including media production or schoolwork for another course.

Missed Work: If you are absent, get in touch with a trusted classmate to help you get caught up. All class materials and notes are your responsibility; lecture slides are posted to Blackboard, though you must obtain lecture notes, video clips, et al yourself. You are personally responsible for everything that happens in class, including any announcements and exam or assignment overviews presented in the classroom. Ignorance of announced examination, assignment, and/or schedule changes will not be accepted as an excuse for incomplete work in this course.

Grading

Grades in this course are calculated on a 1,000-point scale. The breakdown is as follows:

<u>Grade Letter</u>	<u>Points</u>	<u>Percentage</u>
A	930-1,000	93-100%
A-	900-929	90-92%
B+	870-899	87-89%
B	830-869	83-86%
B-	800-829	80-82%
C+	770-799	77-79%
C	730-769	73-76%
C-	700-729	70-72%
D+	670-699	67-69%
D	630-669	63-66%
D-	600-629	60-62%
E	0-599	59% and below

Your final grade in this course will be determined according to the following scale:

Assignment	Possible Points	Percentage of Final Grade
Class Engagement	150	15%
Television Journal	200	20%
Team Analysis Project	200	20%
First Exam	150	15%
Second Exam	150	15%
Final Exam	150	15%

Generally speaking, the letter grades translate as follows:

A/A-	Outstanding, thoughtful, and enthusiastic work
B+/B	Above average work, demonstrating good insight into assignment
B-/C+	Needs improvement on ideas, argument, and follow-through
C & below	Fulfills the bare minimum requirements and shows only a rudimentary understanding of the material

Assignments & Exams

Class Engagement (15%): This is a hybrid lecture-seminar course, and as such our class time requires the total attention and involvement of all participants. The course enrollment is small enough that everyone will be able to contribute frequently to class activities. Routinely throughout the semester, you will be called upon to participate in a variety of discussions and exercises that will familiarize you with key concepts and allow you to demonstrate your knowledge of the lectures, readings, and screenings. Sometimes these will be quick writing activities prompting you to reflect on the day's lesson. Frequently you will pair with your classmates to privately express your thoughts on a discussion question. Other times you will engage in extended cooperative learning exercises inviting you to work in teams to critically analyze a reading or clip. Occasionally these may be more traditional quizzes that'll assess your comprehension of key ideas and concepts from the class. Additional forms of Class Engagement include participating in whole-class discussions, asking questions, and listening attentively. Trust that I will help everyone participate, even those of you who have difficulty speaking in public. Your responsibility here is to offer regular, informed contributions to class meetings. Importantly, your Class Engagement grade is not a freebie. Ultimately, it is your academic achievement that is the basis for this grade, and thus to get credit you need to be both physically present in class and a truly **active participant** in the lesson. It is in your best interest to attend class regularly and always arrive prepared to participate constructively (do the reading, watch the screening, etc.). There is no way to make-up for missed Class Engagement.

Grading for this assignment is holistic, meaning not every in-class writing assignment or impromptu presentation will be graded individually. Rather, I will track your contributions over the span of the semester and assess the whole of your activity at the very end. If you have a satisfactory attendance record (i.e. no more than 3 unexcused absences) and you make a meaningful contribution to every class session (e.g. active and thoughtful speaking, writing, listening), then you are guaranteed at least a "B" grade on the Class Engagement assignment. If you are excessively absent, show up to class unprepared, or do not adequately participate, then you will earn a Class Engagement grade of "C" or lower. It is up to you.

Television Journal (20%): You are required to maintain an online journal via Blackboard in which you document your observations on the television programs screened for class and trace their relation to the topics covered in the readings and lectures. Each Wednesday you will be given a prompt/question and you will have until Friday to prepare your response. Your response must be 300 words minimum (roughly one lengthy paragraph, or a half-page typed and single-spaced). These are meant to be brief, informal reflections: the primary goals being to help you consolidate your grasp of the assigned course materials and to give us fodder for in-class discussion. Nevertheless, the writing should be polished (full sentences, proper grammar, clearly organized, etc.) and the entries should display original textual analysis (i.e., you should provide a unique argument or insight; do not merely summarize a show's narrative nor recite analysis from readings/lectures). There will be 12 prompts assigned, and your 10 highest scores will be counted toward the final assignment grade (meaning the 2 lowest scores will be dropped). Thus, each one of the 10 graded entries is worth up to 20-points. Feedback will not be provided for each individual journal entry; they will be spot-checked every few weeks and given a point value based on a rubric. **Journals are due on Blackboard every Friday at 11:00 AM** (giving me some time to review them before our 1:00 PM class meeting).

Team Analysis Project (20%): For this project, you will join a team of 3-4 students to develop a critical analysis of a contemporary television series not covered elsewhere in the course. The final product of this collaboration will be a **10-12 minute multimedia presentation** delivered to the class during Week 15. However, the project will follow a scaffolded structure that involves multiple components submitted separately: (1) a proposal; (2) an annotated bibliography with a preliminary thesis; (3) viewing notes; (4) a speaking outline and slides for the final presentation; and (5) the in-class delivery of the final presentation itself. Your project must interact with the readings from the class, as well as cite at least 3 other scholarly sources from outside the class. The goal here is to foster critical thinking and to assess your understanding of the textual analysis concepts and approaches introduced over the course of the semester. A fuller explanation of the assignment will be provided mid-semester.

First and Second Exams (15% each): There will be **two take-home exams** given during the semester. The First Exam will emphasize assigned readings and viewings from Weeks 1-7 and the Second Exam will cover material from Weeks 8-11. For each test, you will be assigned an episode of television to watch at home and then you will be asked to write multiple short essays responding to prompts about the episode.

Final Exam (15%): During final exam week, there will be a **cumulative exam** covering material from across the entire semester. This will be a written exam featuring multiple essay questions. You will be given the examination questions in advance, and you will also be allowed to bring a crib sheet into the examination period containing notes for the test. Additional instructions and grading criteria will be provided at a later date.

Academic Dishonesty and Misconduct

According to SUNY Oneonta's Code of Student Conduct: "the term 'cheating' includes, but is not limited to: (1) use of any unauthorized assistance in taking quizzes, tests, or examinations; (2) dependence upon the aid of sources beyond those authorized by the instructor in writing papers, preparing reports, solving problems, or carrying out other assignments; or (3) the acquisition, without permission, of tests or other academic material belonging to a member of

the College faculty or staff. The term ‘plagiarism’ includes, but is not limited to, the use, by paraphrase or direct quotation, of the published or unpublished work of another person without full and clear acknowledgment. It also includes the unacknowledged use of materials prepared by another person or agency engaged in the selling of term papers or other academic materials.”

Academic dishonesty in this course will be addressed quickly and severely. If I find you responsible for misconduct, you will receive zero (0) points (grade letter “E”) on the assignment and potentially an “E” for the entire course, plus a report of the incident will be made to the Office of Community Standards and the Department of Communication & Media. For more information, refer to the College’s Code of Student Conduct:

<http://www.oneonta.edu/communitystandards/documents/code.pdf>

Classroom Accommodations

If you have a disability or any circumstance that may impact your ability to perform in this class, you are encouraged to speak with me privately as soon as possible. Disclosure of a disability is always voluntary. However, in order to receive official academic services such as testing accommodations, you are required to provide documentation of a disability to the Office of Accessibility Resources (607-436-2137). All students with pertinent documentation will be provided the necessary accommodations as determined by Accessibility Resources.

Emergency Evacuation Procedures

If there is an emergency in Fizzelle Hall during class time, the prolonged evacuation site (ES) is the IRC Lobby. In the case of an evacuation, be sure to assist persons with disabilities, including visually impaired persons, people with hearing limitations, people using crutches/canes/walkers, or anyone else who has difficulty leaving the building on their own. Other general evacuation procedures are outlined at:

<http://www.oneonta.edu/security/documents/EmergencyEvacuationProcedures.pdf>

Course Schedule

This schedule is a guide and it is subject to change. All assigned reading and viewing materials should be completed before the class meeting listed. The TV episodes are color-coded according to the online streaming platform through which they are most readily available: **Netflix = red**; **Hulu = green**; **Office 365 or other = blue**.

Week 1: The Pilot Episode

M, August 26: Introductions

W, August 28: Television Institutions, Part 1

Read: Amanda Lotz, “Understanding Television at the Beginning of the Post-Network Era” from *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*, 2nd edition

F, August 30: Television Institutions, Part 2

Read: Jonathan Gray, "Art With Strings Attached: Creativity, Innovation, and Industry" from *Television Entertainment*

Week 2: Peak TV and the (New) Golden Age of Television

M, September 2: **No Class** – Labor Day

W, September 4: Television in a New "Golden Age," Part 1

Read: Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, "Another Golden Age?" from *Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status*

F, September 6: Television in a New "Golden Age," Part 2

Read: Matt Brennan, "The Golden Age of Television is Officially Over,"
<https://bit.ly/2xwhjTf>

Week 3: Defining the Medium: Television Form and Aesthetics

M, September 9: Medium Specificity, or TV is Not the New Film

Read: Jared Rapfogel, "Rethinking Television: A Critical Symposium on the New Age of Episodic Narrative Storytelling"

W, September 11: Modes of Production

Read: Jason Mittell, "Modes of Television Production" from *Television and American Culture*

F, September 13: Stylistic Analysis

Read: Jason Mittell, "The Elements of Television Style" from *Television and American Culture*

Watch: *Twin Peaks* "Zen, or the Skill to Catch a Killer" (S1 E3)

Week 4: Narrative and Narrative Complexity

M, September 16: Narrative Structure

Read: Jason Mittell, "The Form of Television Narrative" from *Television and American Culture*

Watch: *Jane the Virgin* "Chapter 40" (S2 E18)

W, September 18: Seriality

Read: Michael Z. Newman, "From Beats to Arcs: Toward a Poetics of Television Narrative";

Casey McCormick, "TV Finales: On-Demand Endings," <https://goo.gl/DLE39s>

F, September 20: Narrative Complexity

Read: Jason Mittell, "Complexity in Context" from *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling*

Watch: *Arrested Development* "Good Grief" (S2 E4);
The Good Wife "Hitting the Fan" (S5 E5)

Week 5: Aesthetics and Style

M, September 23: Visual Style

Read: Jeremy Butler, "Style in an Age of Media Convergence" from *Television Style*

Watch: *The Haunting of Hill House* "The Bent-Neck Lady" (S1 E5)

W, September 25: Realism and Authenticity

Read: Bambi Haggins, "*Homicide: Realism*"

Watch: *The Wire* "The Buys" (S1 E3)

F, September 27: Metacomedy

Read: Saul Austerlitz, "'30 Rock': The Meta-Sitcom for the Internet Age,"

<https://goo.gl/yyNki1>

Watch: *30 Rock* "Rosemary's Baby" (S2 E4)

Week 6: Character

M, September 30: Building Character

Read: Jeremy Butler, excerpts from "Building Narrative: Character, Actor, Star" from *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 4th edition

Watch: *Orange is the New Black* "Lesbian Request Denied" (S1 E3)

W, October 2: Character and Perspective

Read: John Fiske, "Character Reading" from *Television Culture*, 2nd edition

F, October 4: Audience Identification

Read: Greg M. Smith, "How Do We Identify with Characters?" from *What Media Classes Really Want to Discuss*

Watch: *The Affair* "1" (S1 E1)

Week 7: Genre

M, October 7: Genres as Cultural Categories

Read: Jason Mittell, "Television Genres" from *Television and American Culture*

W, October 9: Comic Book TV

Read: Trent Moore, "Comic Book TV Has Moved Far Beyond Superheroes – and That's a Good Thing," <https://goo.gl/NupYy6>

Watch: *The Defenders* "The H Word" (S1 E1)

F, October 11: Melodrama and Affect

Read: Michael Kackman, "Quality Television, Melodrama, and Cultural Complexity,"

<https://goo.gl/xpytSX>;

Matt Zoller Seitz, "How Comedy Usurped Drama as the TV Genre of Our Time,"

<https://goo.gl/xv9NzY>

Watch: *Friday Night Lights* "It's Different for Girls" (S1 E10)

Week 8: Genre and Intertextuality

M, October 14: **No Class** – Columbus Day

W, October 16: First Exam Review

F, October 18: Intertextuality

Read: Bernadette Casey et al, "Intertextuality" from *Television Studies: The Key Concepts*, 2nd edition

Watch: *UnREAL* "Return" (S1 E1)

Week 9: Sound

M, October 21: Sound Style

Read: Rick Altman, "Television/Sound"

Watch: *Mr. Robot* "eps1.0_hellofriend.mov" (S1 E1)

Due: First Exam (Take-Home)

W, October 23: Popular Music

Read: Ben Aslinger, "Nip/Tuck: Popular Music"

Watch: *Russian Doll* "Nothing in This World is Easy" (S1 E1)

F, October 25: Theme Songs & Intro Sequences

Listen: *Song Exploder* Podcast, "Episode 7: House of Cards," <https://goo.gl/9WucGk>

Week 10: Identity and Representation

M, October 28: Representing Race and Ethnicity

Read: Christine Acham, "The *Cosby Show*: Representing Race";

Brennan Williams and Gazelle Emami, "How to Make it as a Black Sitcom: Be Careful How You Talk About Race," <https://goo.gl/eEgkjo>

W, October 30: Representing Gender

Read: Elana Levine, "Grey's Anatomy: Feminism";

Anne Helen Peterson, "The Radical Feminist Aesthetic of 'The Handmaid's Tale'," <https://goo.gl/XAqZa7>

Watch: *The Handmaid's Tale* "Offred" (S1 E1)

F, November 1: Representing Sexual Orientation

Read: Alfred L. Martin, Jr., "Pose(r): Ryan Murphy, Trans and Queer of Color Labor, and the Politics of Representation," <https://bit.ly/2OQ0587>

Watch: *Pose* "Pilot" (S1 E1)

Week 11: Identity and Representation

M, November 4: Second Exam Review and Team Analysis Project Introduction

W, November 6: Representing Class

Read: James Poniewozik, "The 2017 Class Divide, as Dissected by a New 'One Day at a Time'," <https://nyti.ms/2KOZTWS>

Watch: *One Day at a Time* "This is It" (S1 E1)

F, November 8: Representing the Nation

Read: Dan Pfeiffer, "In the Loop: A Presidential Advisor Explains Why 'Veep' is Our Greatest Political Show," <https://goo.gl/KvZG81>

Watch: *Veep* "Debate" (S3 E8)

Due: Team Analysis Project Proposal

Week 12: Team Analysis Project

M, November 11: Approaches to Textual Analysis, Part 1

Read: Jeremy Butler, "Textual Analysis" from *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 4th edition

W, November 13: Approaches to Textual Analysis, Part 2

Due: Second Exam (Take-Home)

F, November 15: Team Analysis Project Workshop

Week 13: Interrogating "Quality TV"

M, November 18: Identifying Quality

Read: Kathryn VanArendonk, "13 Signs You're Watching a 'Prestige' TV Show,"
<https://goo.gl/AakxMo>

Watch: *Chernobyl* "1:23:45" (S1 E1)

Due: Team Analysis Project Annotated Bibliography

W, November 20: Quality and Authorship

Read: Michael Z. Newman and Elana Levine, "The Showrunner as *Auteur*" from
Legitimizing Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status

F, November 22: Channels and Brands

Read: Chuck Tryon, "TV Got Better: Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and Binge Viewing"

Week 14: A Very Special Holiday Episode

M, November 25: Instructor Consultations for Team Analysis Project **(By Appointment)**

Due: Team Analysis Project Viewing Notes

W, November 27: **No Class** – Thanksgiving

F, November 29: **No Class** – Thanksgiving

Week 15: Team Analysis Project Presentations

M, December 2: Presentation Day 1

W, December 4: Presentation Day 2

F, December 6: Presentation Day 3

Week 16: The Series Finale

M, December 9: Final Exam Review

Final Exam

M, December 16, 11:00 AM – 1:30 PM (regular classroom location: Fitzelle 304)