

## FILMSTUD 223: How to Watch TV (Winter 2020)

### Seminar:

Tues: 10:30am-1:20pm

Room: McMurtry 350

### Screening:

Thur: 6:30pm

Room: McMurtry 115

Professor: Shane Denson

Pronouns: he/him/his

Office: McMurtry 318

Office Hours: TBD

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### Course Description:

"How to watch TV" may seem like the most obvious thing in the world. Yet when we look at the historical development of television as a technological, social, and cultural form, we find that people have engaged with it in a variety of different ways. There is not, in other words, a single right way to watch TV. This is because television itself has undergone transformations on all of these levels: Technologically, changes such as those from black-and-white to color, analog to digital, standard to high-definition, and broadcast to cable to interactive all play a role in changing our relation to what "television" is. Socially, changes in television's integration in corporate and industrial structures, its mediation of political realities, and its ability to reflect and shape our interactions with one another all play a role in transforming who "we" as viewers are. And culturally, varieties of programming including live broadcasting, prerecorded content, and on-demand streaming of news, movies, sit-coms, and prestige drama series all indicate differences and distinctions in what it means to "watch" TV. In this course, we will engage with these and other aspects of television as a medium in order to rethink not only how but why we watch TV.

**Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas. Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.**

### Recommended Textbooks:

Mittell, Jason. *Television and American Culture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Thompson, Ethan, and Jason Mittell, eds. *How to Watch Television*. New York: New York University Press, 2013.

Gray, Jonathan, and Amanda D. Lotz. *Television Studies*. Boston: Polity, 2011.

Butler, Jeremy G. *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Required readings (listed in the course schedule) will be made available via Canvas.

### Course Requirements and Grading:

#### For 3 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. 10% of your grade.
2. Group presentation. 30% of your grade.
3. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 60% of your final grade.

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### For 4 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. 10% of your grade.
2. Group presentation. 25% of your grade.
3. Close reading (750-1000 words) of an episode or small set of televisual objects. Due February 18. This will count for 15% of your grade.
4. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 50% of your final grade.

### For 5 Credits:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus. 10% of your grade.
2. Group presentation. 20% of your grade.
3. Short response (750-1000 words) supporting or rebutting an argument made in one of readings. Due February 4. This will count for 15% of your grade.
4. Close reading (750-1000 words) of an episode or small set of televisual objects. Due February 18. This will count for 15% of your grade.
5. Final paper (or, with prior approval, a comparably rigorous critical media project). This assignment will count for 40% of your final grade.

### Guidelines for Final Papers/Projects:

Final papers (8-10 pages, double-spaced) are to be submitted by **March 19, 2020, 6:30 pm (electronic submission)**.

The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.
2. A short description of the object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with film and media studies but perhaps has not seen the works being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as "a difference which makes a difference," and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues of a film will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn't make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn't belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.

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3. An in-depth analysis of the media object(s) under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. In other words, it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it's probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a "reading" of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn't make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis *sufficiently*. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.
4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other films or media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about cinema, about a given genre, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be one paragraph in length.
5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA or other major style guidelines.

If, in lieu of one of a paper, you plan to produce a **critical media project** of some sort (e.g. video essay, website, or other type of project that engages critically with the themes and ideas of the course), you will need to outline your idea in writing and receive prior approval from the instructor. The project itself should be accompanied by a short written statement outlining the significance and critical potential of the project with respect to the course and the theories and approaches we have explored.

### **Writing Help:**

In addition to the Hume Center for Writing and Speaking, the Art and Art History Department also has a more local resource for student-writers. The Department's Writing Specialist, Dr. Becky Richardson, is available to our class for workshops and individual consultations over writing and presentation projects. You can bring any stage of the project in for consultation – from brainstorming around a prompt, to outlining your essay's structure, to reviewing a draft, to revising a piece of writing for a journal of undergraduate writing, such as *Manicule*. You can set these appointments up directly by emailing [beckyr@stanford.edu](mailto:beckyr@stanford.edu).

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### Students with Documented Disabilities:

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oae.stanford.edu>).

### Course Schedule:

#### Week 1

##### 01.07. **Television and Television Studies**

READINGS: Jason Mittell, "Why Television?" (Introduction to *Television and American Culture*);

Ethan Thompson and Jason Mittell, "An Owner's Manual for Television" (Introduction to *How to Watch Television*);

E. Ann Kaplan, Introduction to *Regarding Television: Critical Approaches—An Anthology* (Los Angeles: The American Film Institute, 1983);

Jane Feuer, "The Concept of Live Television: Ontology as Ideology" (in *Regarding Television*)

#### Week 2

##### 01.14. **History, Domesticity, Family, and Gender**

READINGS: Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1992), Introduction and chapters 2 and 5;

Elana Levine, "Grey's Anatomy: Feminism" (in *How to Watch Television*)

#### Week 3

##### 01.21. **Televisual Flow**

READINGS: Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form* [1974] (New York: Routledge, 2003), chapters 1, 3, 4, and 5;

Ethan Thompson, "Onion News Network: Flow" (in *How to Watch Television*)

#### Week 4

##### 01.28. **Meaning, Interpretation, Representation, Identification**

READINGS: Stuart Hall, "Encoding/Decoding";

Susan J. Douglas, "Jersey Shore: Ironic Viewing" (in *How to Watch Television*);

Quinn Miller, "The Dick Van Dyke Show: Queer Meanings" (in *How to Watch Television*);

Kristen J. Warner, "In the Time of Plastic Representation" (*Film Quarterly* 71.2, Winter 2017)

#### Week 5

##### 02.04. **Seriality**

READINGS: Umberto Eco, "Innovation & Repetition: Between Modern & Postmodern Aesthetics" (*Daedalus*, Fall 1985/Fall 2005);

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Roger Hagedorn, "Technology and Economic Exploitation: The Serial as a Form of Narrative Presentation" (*Wide Angle* 10.4, 1988: 4-12);

Michael Z. Newman, "From Beats to Arcs: Towards a Poetics of Television Narrative" (*The Velvet Light Trap* 58, Fall 2006: 16-28);

Robyn Warhol, "Binge-Watching: How Netflix Original Programs Are Changing Serial Form" (in Kathleen Lock, ed., *Serial Narratives*, special issue of *Literatur in Wissenschaft und Unterricht* XLVII, 1/2, 2014, 145-158)

### Week 6

#### 02.11. TV as Cultural Forum

READINGS: Horace Newcomb and Paul M. Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum" (*Quarterly Review of Film Studies*, Summer 1983);

Heather Hendershot, "Parks and Recreation: The Cultural Forum" (in *How to Watch Television*);

Jeffrey P. Jones, "Fox & Friends: Political Talk" (in *How to Watch Television*);

James Poniewozik, "The Real Donald Trump Is a Character on TV" (*The New York Times*, September 6, 2019: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/06/opinion/sunday/trump-reality-tv.html>)

### Week 7

#### 02.18. Narrative Complexity

READINGS: Jason Mittell, *Complex TV: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York: New York University Press, 2015), Introduction and Chapter 1;

Amanda D. Lotz, "House: Narrative Complexity" (in *How to Watch Television*);

Sean O'Sullivan, "The Sopranos: Episodic Storytelling" (in *How to Watch Television*)

### Week 8

#### 02.25. Political Economies of Television

READINGS: Dallas W. Smythe, "On the Audience Commodity and Its Work";

Sandy Flitterman, "The Real Soap Operas: TV Commercials" (in E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television*);

Neta Alexander, "Catered to Your Future Self: Netflix's 'Predictive Personalization' and the Mathematization of Taste" (in *The Netflix Effect: Technology and Entertainment in the 21st Century*, edited by Kevin McDonald and Daniel Smith-Rowsey, New York: Bloomsbury, 2016, 81-97);

Michael Z. Newman, "Free TV: File Sharing and the Value of Television" (*Television & New Media* 13.6, 2012, 463-479);

Kevin Sandler, "Modern Family: Product Placement" (in *How to Watch TV*)

### Week 9

#### 03.03. Media Events

READINGS: Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, "Defining Media Events: High Holidays of Mass Communication" (Chapter 1 of *Media Events*, Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992);

Lorenz Engell, "Apollo TV: The Copernican Turn of the Gaze" (*World Picture* 7, 2012);

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Elihu Katz and Tamar Liebes, "'No More Peace!' How Disaster, Terror and War Have Upstaged Media Events" (*International Journal of Communication* 1, 2007, 157-166);

Julia Sonnevend, "The Lasting Charm of *Media Events*" (*Media, Culture & Society* 40.1, 2018: 122-126)

## Week 10

### 03.10. Televisual Aberrations

READINGS: Josephine Reed, "Nam June Paik: The Artist Who Invented Video Art" (*NEA Arts Online*; images and audio: <https://www.arts.gov/photos/nam-june-paik-artist-who-invented-video-art>);

Shane Denson, "Faith in Technology: Televangelism and the Mediation of Immediate Experience" (*Phenomenology & Practice* 5, 2011, 93-119);

Jeffrey Sconce, "Tim and Eric's *Awesome Show, Great Job!*: Metacomedy" (in *How to Watch Television*)

## Finals Week

### 03.19. Final Paper/Project Due by 6:30pm!