

Television & American Culture – FMMC / AMST 0104

Fall 2010, Professor Jason Mittell

T/Th 11:00 – 12:15, Axinn 232

Screening: Wed 7:30 – 10:25, Axinn 232

Sections: Friday, 9:05 / 10:10 / 11:15, Axinn 104

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Office Hours: Mon 1:30 – 2:30, Wed 10:30 – 11:45, or by appointment

Television might be the most powerful and important form of communication today, binding together the globe with shared knowledge and experiences, and molding our opinions and outlook on the world. This course explores American life in the last six decades through an analysis of our central medium: television. Spanning a history of television from its origins in radio to its future in digital convergence, we will consider television's role in both reflecting and constituting American society through a variety of approaches. Our topical exploration will consider the economics of the television industry, television's role within American democracy, the formal attributes of a variety of television genres, television as a site of gender and racial identity formation, television's role in everyday life, and the medium's technological and social impacts. We will consider not only why TV is what it is today, but how it might be different. Through the exploration of critical perspectives on television, the course will prepare you for further studies in media criticism as well as enable you to be a more savvy and sophisticated consumer (and potentially producer) of television in your future endeavors.

This course contains a good deal of reading, providing in-depth analysis and critical approaches to television. We will watch a number of television programs and documentaries about television each week in required evening screenings, and explore topics in more depth in Friday's discussion sections. Essay exams and quizzes will test your comprehension of the course materials and concepts, while both individual and group writing assignments will allow you to put your television analysis skills into practice.

Learning Goals:

- Gain an understanding of how television both shapes and is shaped by American culture and society
- Develop the vocabulary and skills to analyze television's industrial, formal and technological facets
- Expand your horizons to better understand and appreciate a wide range of television programs from a variety of historical contexts
- Think across disciplines and methodologies to understand television as a multifaceted phenomenon

Required Texts & Readings:

Susan Douglas, *Where the Girls Are: Growing Up Female with the Mass Media* (New York: Random House, 1994). P94.5.W652 U634 1994

Jason Mittell, *Television and American Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). PN1992.6 M58 2010

Note: If the bookstore runs out of these titles, it is your responsibility to get access to a copy for assigned readings. All titles are on reserve and easily available at online bookstores.

Other required readings will be available via Electronic Reserve (password: **3134jm**).

Weekly screenings will be required for this course, taking place Wednesday at 7:30 pm; it is up to each student to make arrangements to screen the required materials at the Davis Library if they cannot attend screening.

Course Requirements:

All of the following requirements must be completed in order to pass this course – if you do not complete the group project, final essay and exam, you will automatically fail the course:

20%	In-class Quizzes (total grade)
25%	Group Project
20%	Midterm Exam
25%	Final Essay
10%	Class Participation

Assignments:

In-class Quizzes

Throughout the semester, some class meetings will begin with a short quiz. These quizzes test your comprehension of recent readings, lectures, and screenings. You should not need to prepare for quizzes beyond attending class, screening, and doing the readings thoughtfully – if you do the course work, the quizzes will reward your regular efforts. Each quiz consists of five points and there will be nine quizzes. At the end of the semester, quizzes will be totaled with the lowest grade dropped, resulting in a 40 point score, which will convert to a 4.0 grade (e.g. a total of 33 points = 3.3, roughly a B+). Missed quizzes cannot be made up, even for excused absences.

Group Analytical Assignment

In the first two weeks, we will assign groups of 3-4 students from each discussion section. Each group will claim one network or channel to analyze throughout the semester. Groups will work together to write online analyses of the channel or network's industrial strategies, programming techniques, and online viewer engagement. Groups will also present their analyses during Friday sections throughout the semester. More details will be forthcoming.

Exam

There will be a take-home midterm short answer/essay examination, testing your ability to understand and synthesize course material, not your ability to memorize facts. Students who do the readings, attend class meetings and screenings, and think about the material should do quite well on this exam, which is due via email by the start of class on October 15.

Final Essay

The final paper in the class will be an analytic essay about a television program of your choosing, due via email on December 9. More details forthcoming.

Class Participation & Attendance:

You are expected to attend all class meetings on time, having done the readings, thought about the material, and prepared the necessary assignments. Attendance will be taken regularly. Students who miss a class should find out what they missed from their classmates and make-up the necessary material. Your class participation grade will be lowered one full mark (e.g. A– becomes B–) for each **unexcused discussion section absence in excess of one**. If you know that you will be absent from section, please contact Professor Mittell as soon as possible to make necessary arrangements and

avoid penalties. If necessary, you may attend a different Friday section with no penalties. The class participation component of your grade will reward students who actively participate in class, meet with the professor outside of class, excel in weekly section activities, or otherwise demonstrate their engagement with the material. Likewise, this grade will be used to downgrade students who are clearly disengaged with the class or fail to uphold their end of the course policies.

Grades:

You will be graded based on the following scale, using a 4.0 scale on all assignments:

A (4.0) indicates truly excelling on assignments, demonstrating mastery of the material and significantly surpassing the expectations of the assignment.

B (3.0) indicates above-average work, clearly achieving the course goals and completing all assignments in a strong fashion.

C (2.0) indicates satisfactorily meeting the course requirements in an adequate fashion.

D (1.0) indicates not achieving course goals and not adequately meeting expectations.

F (0.0) indicates dramatically failing to meet course goals and course expectations.

Submitting Work:

Late papers are highly discouraged, as they throw off schedules for both student and professor. If you must hand in any assignment later than the deadline, please contact the professor **in advance** as soon as the situation becomes apparent. If a paper is not turned in on time without advance approval from Professor Mittell or a Dean's excuse, the paper will be penalized by one mark (e.g. an A- becomes a B+) for each day of lateness.

All papers should be submitted via email as an attached .doc, .odt or .rtf file format document – Professor Mittell will reply via email within 24 hours when a paper has been received. If you have not received such a notification, you should email him to ensure that the paper was in fact received. Please do **NOT** slip papers under the door to Professor Mittell's office.

Cutting You Some Slack:

College is one of the few situations in life where the expectations are clearly laid out and the consequences for meeting or missing those expectations is transparent. The grading system and workload has been designed to be as fair and straightforward as possible, allowing students to choose how to prioritize the class versus other obligations or interests. However, there may be times that things become challenging and you want to ask for some leniency. **One time per semester**, students may request to be cut some slack, resulting in a more flexible attitude toward grading or other policies. Simply write on an assignment, or send an email describing the request, with the phrase "please cut me some slack" - Professor Mittell will adjust his expectations accordingly. Slack cannot be requested after a grade has been given.

Academic Dishonesty:

All work you submit must be your own and you may not inappropriately assist other students in their work beyond the confines of a particular assignment, in keeping with the Middlebury College Honor Code. All papers and exams must include the statement of the Honor Code along with the student's name (as a digital signature) in order to be graded. **There is a no-tolerance policy for academic misconduct in this course!** The minimum penalty for academic misconduct will be a failing grade (F)

for the course – further academic and disciplinary penalties may be assessed. The definitions of plagiarism and cheating used in this course are consistent with the material in the College Handbook, Chapter V.

Course Policies:

Any student with a disability or who otherwise needs accommodation or assistance should make arrangements with Professor Mittell as soon as possible. If you know that you will have conflicts due to athletics or other college activities, you must notify Professor Mittell in advance and arrange to make up missed work – athletic absences are not excused and it is the student's responsibility to make all arrangements.

Email is Professor Mittell's preferred mode of communication (besides face-to-face conversation!), generally checking regularly during the work week – if you email him asking for a response and do not receive one within one working day (M-F), assume that your email may not have been received. Office voicemails will typically be answered less promptly. Please do **not** call Professor Mittell at home.

Printing & Computer Use Policy:

Writing assignments for this course are either based on the course website, or should be submitted via email, with no printing required. Many readings are online – students are welcome to print or not print at their choosing, with the understanding that students should take notes on readings either via digital annotation or separate notebook or word processing file. You should bring readings to class each day, either via paper or on a laptop screen. Feel free to use laptops throughout all class meetings except during screenings, where the light from the screen can disrupt the viewing experience. If you are on your laptop, you are expected to engage with course materials, not free-range surfing the web, checking email, Facebook, etc.

Daily Schedule

September 7 – Studying TV?

SCREENING 9/8:

Homicide: Life on the Street, “Subway” (1997) and
Anatomy of a Homicide (1997) – PN1992.77.H589 v6 2005D

September 9 – Introducing the Television Industry

READINGS: Mittell, *Television & American Culture* (TVAC), Introduction and Ch 1
SECTION 9/10: What is Television and Why Should We Study It?

September 14 – Television Industry: Programming

READINGS: Anderson, “Creating the 21st Century Television Network” (eRes)
Aslinger, “Creating a Network for Queer Audiences” (eRes)
Steinberg, “[Why Mad Men Has So Little to do with Advertising](#)” (online)

SCREENING 9/15:

I Love Lucy, “Lucy Does a TV Commercial” (1952) – PN1992.77.I253 v1 2005D
30 Rock, “Jack-Tor” (2006) – PN1992.77.T55987 v.1 2007D
Frontline: The Merchants of Cool (2001) – HQ799.2.M35 M425 2005D

September 16 – Television Industry: Advertising

READINGS: Mittell, TVAC, Ch. 2
McAllister, “TV Advertising as Textual & Economic Systems” (eRes)
Nussbaum, “[What Tina Fey Would Do for a SoyJoy](#)” (online)

SECTIONS 9/17: Television & Consumer Culture

September 21 – Television Industry: Ratings and Reality

READINGS: Jenkins, “Buying Into *American Idol*” (eRes)
Magder, “Television 2.0” (eRes)
Ouellette, “[Do Good TV](#)” (online)

SCREENING 9/22:

30 Days, “Minimum Wage” (2005) – PN1992.77.T5598 2006D
Paper Tiger Reads Paper Tiger (2007) – HE8700.72 .C2 P175 2007D

September 23 – Media Regulation and Public Television

READINGS: Mittell, TVAC, Ch. 3
Ouellette, “Reinventing PBS” (eRes)

SECTIONS 9/24: Unpacking Reality Television

September 28 – Television News

READINGS: Mittell, TVAC, Ch. 4
Baym, “*The Daily Show*” (eRes)
Schudson, “News and Democratic Society” (eRes)

SCREENING 9/29:

Outfoxed (2004) – PN4738.O98 2004D
Buying the War (2007) – DS79.76.B85 2007D

September 30 – In-class screening: *The West Wing*, “A Proportional Response” - MCTR 7880D

READINGS: Parry-Giles & Parry-Giles, “*West Wing's* Prime-Time Presidentiality” (eRes)
Pompper, “White House Stories that Journalism Cannot Tell” (eRes)

SECTIONS 10/1: **No Sections**

October 5 – Television and Electoral Politics

READINGS: McChesney, "Journalism: Looking Backward" (eRes)
 Freedman, "Thirty-Second Democracy" (eRes)
 Jenkins, "Why Mitt Romney Won't Debate a Snowman" (eRes)

SCREENING 10/6:

Dragnet, "The Big Cast" (1952) – PN1992.77 .D724 2003D v.3
Hill Street Blues, "Hill Street Station" (1981) – PN1992.77.H455 v.1 2005D
The Wire, "The Target" (2002) – PN1992.77.W53 v.1 2004D

October 7 – Television & Modes of Production

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 5
 Gitlin, "*Hill Street Blues*: Make It Look Messy" (eRes)

SECTIONS 10/8: Group Presentations: Industrial Analysis

October 12 – Television Narrative

READINGS: Newman, "From Beats to Arcs" (eRes)
 O'Sullivan, "Broken on Purpose" (eRes)

SCREENING 10/13:

The Sopranos, "College" (1999) - MCTR 6937D
Veronica Mars, "Pilot" (2004) – PN1992.77.V465 v.1 2005D
Breaking Bad, "Pilot" (2008) - PN1992.77 .B743 v.1 2010B

October 14 – Television Genres

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 6
 Mittell, "Policing Genres" (eRes)

SECTIONS 10/15: The Crime Show

WRITE: Turn in take-home midterm exam via email – due by 4:30 pm, 10/15

October 19 – No Class – Fall Break

SCREENING 10/20:

Father Knows Best, "Betty, Girl Engineer" (1956) – PN1992.77.F38447 v.2 2008D
Bewitched, "Be It Ever So Mortgaged" (1964) – PN1992.77.B48 v1 2005D
Murphy Brown, "Respect" (1988) – PN1992.77.M855 2005D
South Park, "Cartoon Wars, parts 1 & 2" – PN1992.77 .S68 v. 10 2007D

October 21 – Television's Cultural Roles

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 7
 Newcomb & Hirsch, "Television as a Cultural Forum" (eRes)

SECTIONS 10/22: Television & Consensus Culture

October 26 – Representing Identity

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 8
 Gray, "Politics of Representation" (eRes)

SCREENING 10/27:

All in the Family, "Sammy's Visit" (1972) – 7424D
Color Adjustment (1991) – PN1992.8.A34 C54 2004D
The Office, "Diversity Day" (2004) - PN1992.77 .O3434 v. 1 2005D

October 28 – Racial & Gender Representation

READINGS: Douglas, Intro – Ch. 5 (3-121)
 SECTIONS 10/29: Debating Identity

November 2 – Television and Gender: 1950s – 1970s

READINGS: Douglas, Ch. 6 – 10 (99-244)

SCREENING 11/3:

Mary Tyler Moore Show, “Love is All Around” (1970) – MCTR 7266D

Charlie’s Angels, “Angels in Chains” (1976) – PN1992.77.C46455 2003D

Soap, “Episode #9” (1977) - PN1992.77.S626 v.1 2003D

Seinfeld, “The Outing” (1993) – PN1992.77.S4285 v.4 2005D

November 4 – Television, Gender & Sexuality: 1980s to the present – QUIZ #8

READINGS: Douglas, Ch. 11 – Epilogue (245-307)

Becker, “Gay-Themed Television” (eRes)

SECTIONS 11/5: Group Presentations: Program Analyses

November 9 – Television Viewers: Effects or Influences?

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 9

Parks, “Brave New Buffy” (eRes)

SCREENING 11/10:

Buffy the Vampire Slayer, “Earshot” (1999) – 8147D

Trekkies (1999) – 5683D

November 11 – Television Fan Cultures

READINGS: Coppa, “[Women, Star Trek and Early Development of Fannish Vidding](#)” (online)

Pearson, “Fandom in the Digital Era”

SECTIONS 11/12: The Role of Viewers

November 16 – Children's Television and Media Education

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 10

Anderson, “Watching Children Watch Television” (eRes)

McAllister & Giglio, “Commodity Flow of Children's Television” (eRes)

SCREENING 11/17:

Sesame Street, “Sales Pitch Film” (1969) – PN1992.77 S43 v.1 2006D

Pokémon, “Pokémon, I Choose You!” (1998) – 7268D

The Simpsons, “Itchy & Scratchy & Marge” (1990) – MCTR 7247D

Consuming Kids (2008) – HF5415.32.C68 2008D

November 18 – Television as Technology

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Ch. 11

Spigel, “Installing the Television Set” (eRes)

SECTIONS 11/19: Group Presentations: Viewer Analyses

November 23 – New Media & Technological Convergence

READINGS: Lotz, “Television Outside the Box,” (eRes)

Kompare, “Publishing Flow” (eRes)

November 24-26 – No Class or Screening, Thanksgiving

November 30 – Transforming Television

READINGS: Quail, "[The Myth of Online TV](#)" (online)

Newman, "[P2PTV](#)" (online)

Leaver, "Watching *Battlestar Galactica* in Australia" (eRes)

Burgess and Green, "YouTube and the Mainstream Media" (eRes)

SCREENING 12/1:

Max Headroom, "Blipverts" (1987) - PN1992.77.M395 A1 2010D

Nobody's Watching (2005) – reserve

Dr. Horrible's Singalong Blog (2008) – M1500.W46 D7 2008D

December 2 – Globalization and American Television

READINGS: Mittell, *TVAC*, Conclusion

Beeden & de Bruin, "*The Office*: Articulations of National Identity" (eRes)

Iwabuchi, "How Japanese is *Pokémon*?" (eRes)

SECTIONS 12/3: Oral Histories of Television

FINAL ESSAY: Must be submitted via email by 12/9 at noon