Required Texts:
Erik Barnouw, *Tube of Plenty* (Oxford)
MIT Communications Forum Web site: http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/

Recommended texts (to be placed on reserve in the Reserved Book Room, Bld. 14):

1. Reference works and collections of essays

   Richard P. Adler, ed., *Understanding Television*
   Robert Allen, ed., *Channels of Discourse*
   Jane Feuer, Paul Kerr, Tise Vahimagi, ed., *MTM: “Quality Television”*
   Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, et al. eds, *Culture, Society and the Media*
   E. Ann Kaplan, ed., *Regarding Television*
   Donald Lazere, ed., *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives*
   Alex McNeil, *Total Television*
   Tania Modleski, ed., *Studies in Entertainment*
   Horace Newcomb, ed., *Encyclopedia of Television*
   John E. O’Connor, ed., *American History/American Television*

2. Critical and historical studies

   Robert Allen, *Speaking of Soap Operas*
   Christopher Anderson, *Hollywood TV*
   Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*
   Ien Ang, *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences*
   Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*
   William Boddy, *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*
   Charlotte Brunsdon and David Morley, *Everyday Television*
   Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*
   James Carey, *Communication As Culture*
   John Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*
   Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*
   Melvin Patrick Ely, *The Adventures of Amos ’N Andy: A Social History*
   John Fiske and John Hartley, *Reading Television*
   John Fiske, *Television Culture*
   Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*
   Todd Gitlin, *Inside Prime Time*
   Michele Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable*
   Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers*
   J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Fall of Network TV*
   __________, *Blacks and White TV*
   David Marc, *Demographic Vistas*
   David Marc, *Comic Visions*
   Tania Modleski, *Loving with a Vengeance*
   David Morley, *Family Television*
   Laura Mulvey, *Visual and Other Pleasures*
   Horace Newcomb, *TV: The Most Popular Art*
   Horace Newcomb and Robert S. Alley, *The Producer’s Medium*
   Patricia Palmer, *The Lively Audience: A study of children around the TV set*
   Lynn Spigel, *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America*
   Thomas Streeter, *Selling the Air*
   Robert J. Thompson, *Television's Second Golden Age: From Hill Street Blues to ER*
   John Tulloch and Henry Jenkins, *Science Fiction Audiences*
   Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*
Schedule of Classes and Topics

Tue | Thurs
---|---
Feb 7 | **Prologue:** The Continuity Principle
Thornburn and Jenkins, "Toward an Aesthetics of Transition"

I. The Wasteland Mythology
9 | Kosinsky, "A Nation of Videots"
Gerbner and Gross, "Living With Television"
Paul Klein, "The Men Who Run TV ..."
Barnouw, ch 1-2

II. Television As A Cultural Form
14 | James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication" in *Communication As Culture*
Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies*
David Thornburn, "Television As An Aesthetic Medium"

16 | Newcomb and Hirsch, "TV as a Cultural Forum" in Newcomb
Tony Bennett, "Theories of the Media, Theories of Society" in Gurevitch et. al, *Culture, Society and the Media*

III. The Broadcast Era
-- 23 | Barnouw, ch. 3-4
Anderson, “Disneyland,” in Newcomb
Spigel, “Women’s Work,” in Newcomb
Brooks and Marsh, "Introduction"

| | **First paper postponed: now due March 2** |

IV. TV Genres
28 | Barnouw, ch. 5

Mar 2 | **First paper due**
Thornburn, "Television Melodrama" in Newcomb

7 | **SPECIAL REQUIRED FORUM, WED MAR 8, 5-7 PM: TV’s New Economics**

8 | Alvey, “The Independents,” in Newcomb
Jenkins, “Star Trek Rerun ...,” in Newcomb

14 16 | Barnouw, ch. 6
Modleski, “...Daytime TV and Women’s Work”

21 | Phil Williams, “... the TV Rerun,” in Newcomb

23 | **Midterm quiz**

Spring break

Apr 4 6 | Esslin, "Aristotle and the Advertisers ..."
Thornburn, *TV Encyclopedia* entries on detectives and *The Name of the Game* . “Is TV Acting A Distinctive Art Form”

6 | **FORUM: TV News In Transition, 5-7 pm**
| **Second paper (or installment) due**

6 | Newcomb, “The TV Artistry of Norman Lear”
Reeves, “Rewriting Newhart ...”
Gomery, “... Movies Made-for-Television”
Thornburn, *Encyclopedia* entry, “Television Aesthetics”

20 | **CLASS AND FORUM (5-7 pm): Guest Speaker: David Milch, Deadwood**

Todd Gitlin, “Make It Look Messy: ... *Hill Street Blues*”

V. After the Broadcast Networks

May 2 4 | Thornburn, “The Sopranos ...”, "Web of Paradox"
Marc, “What Was Broadcasting?” in Newcomb

9 | **Third Paper Due**

11 | **Hour Test**

16 18 | Summary perspectives
Writing Requirements

1. **Weekly response** – due at the start of class every Tuesday, a succinct response to some aspect of the required reading: not a full-fledged interpretation, just a specific reaction to an element in our material you found intriguing, puzzling, illuminating, even annoying. A distillation of these responses will form a “class book” – an anthology of our ideas – to be produced and distributed to the class as a farewell memento. Students must submit at least eight responses during the term.

2. **Papers** – **three short essays** (4-7 double-spaced pages) on the topics suggested below; or a **term paper** (15-25 pages) on one of the longer projects described below. Graduate students and seniors majoring in Literature, Comparative Media Studies or Science, Technology and Society must write term papers.

Due Dates: Essays or installments of term papers are due on the dates specified above.

Revision policy: Students may revise and resubmit the first two essays to improve the grade within one week of the date on which the essays are returned. Only the grade on the revision will count toward the final grade in the course.

Short Problems

Write two or three essays totaling at least 14 double-spaced typed pages long, on three of the topics listed below. Do not choose more than one question that asks you to summarize the writings of others.

1. Read chapter four of Raymond Williams, *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Then define his idea of “flow” in television and evaluate its persuasiveness. Is American television a good test for his theory? How do technologies such as cable television, remote channel-switchers, video-recorders affect Williams’ notions concerning our experience of television? Is television the only medium in which vastly dissimilar messages jostle against one another? What assumptions about the viewer are implicit in the concept of “flow”?

2. Summarize Gerbner’s argument about the effect of television violence on viewers. Then summarize Horace Newcomb’s response “Assessing the Violence Profile . . .” [available by request]. Which perspective would you defend and why?

3. Analyze a single episode of a contemporary situation comedy, emphasizing its visual style, its treatment of character, its strategies of comedy. Speculate briefly concerning its place in the line of TV comedy.

4. Summarize Fiske and Hartley’s chapter on “Bardic Television” and discuss the possible value of this perspective for understanding American television. Be sure to give specific examples of TV programming to support your argument.

5. Examine the script of a TV series and write an essay analyzing the writer’s contribution to the episode. How much of the camera’s behavior is controlled by the script? Does the script exploit qualities that belong to particular performers or that have been established in previous episodes? How does the script adapt to the special conditions of television broadcasting? Available scripts include a range of episodes from MTM Productions, QM Productions, a few shows of the 1980s and beyond including *Seinfeld*.

6. Summarize James Carey’s “A Cultural Approach to Communication” and specify some of the ways in which this perspective applies to American television.

7. Describe and evaluate a episode from a TV crime series. What are the principal themes of the episode? What are its chief formulas for plot and characterization? Try to identify themes, techniques and structural features that have been shaped by the TV medium. Be sure to discuss the “political” assumptions – notions about order, authority, social institutions – that are embedded in the episode. Recommended reading: Fiske and Hartley’s chapter, “A Policeman’s Lot”; Todd Gitlin, “Prime Time Ideology ...” in Newcomb; Thorburn ,” ... TV Acting ...” and “TV Melodrama.”

8. Write a succinct account of the laws and regulations that helped to shape the Network Era, drawing on class discussions, Barnouw’s chronology of important dates, encyclopedia entries on networks, cable television, the FCC, the Dumont Network; and relevant material from Hilmes, *Hollywood and Broadcasting*; Anderson, *Hollywood TV*; Boddy, *Fifties Television*; Streeter, *Selling the Air*.
9. Write an analysis of two or three dramas from the era of live television, giving special emphasis to the visual aspects of each. Recommended reading: Barnouw on “the golden age” of television, Michael Kerbel, “The Golden Age of TV Drama” in Newcomb, third edition. See Prof. Thorburn for additional reading on this topic.

10. Analyze “Amos ’N Andy” as a cultural document. What range of stereotypes is exploited in the program? What attitudes toward American life and toward racial differences are assumed in the text? What does the text perceive as the material of comedy? Recommended reading: Ely, The Adventures of Amos ’N Andy; MacDonald, Blacks and White TV.

11. Discuss the evolution of a significant secondary character in a television series of the 1970s or later. Some suggestions: Radar or Hotlips on Mash; Buddy on Family; Mary Ellen on The Waltons; Gloria on All in the Family; any of the prime figures in Friends, the children on The Cosby Show, George or Elaine on Seinfeld, any recurring character in Once and Again, Tony’s mother or son or daughter in The Sopranos.

12. Commercials are often said to be television’s subtlest art form. Choose two or three families of commercials – beer commercials, for instance; telephone commercials; commercials for cars or washday products; commercials for high-tech items such as computers or web-related services – and analyze them as forms of drama, giving particular attention to the assumptions about American life inscribed in their plots and characters. See Prof. Thorburn for recommended readings on this topic.

13. Drawing on readings and on class discussions concerning television as a carrier of cultural ideologies, write an essay about the theme of technology in science fiction or in medical shows. Possible texts: Medic, Marcus Welby, The Bold Ones, Medical Center, Medical Story, St. Elsewhere, ER; Star Trek and its successors, Twilight Zone, The Prisoner, Babylon 5, The X-Files.


15. Write an essay on Rod Serling’s television work: various live TV dramas, Night Gallery, The Twilight Zone. See Prof. Thorburn for background reading on this topic.

16. Compose an entry devoted to a television series as it might appear in the mit encyclopedia of the network era. Include as much concrete basic data – network, time slot, dates, cast and selected credits, total episodes—as you can recover. Try to capture your show’s defining atmosphere and recurring themes; discuss, as relevant, distinctive stylistic or dramatic features of your series, its genre, its historical context. Maximum length: 1,000 words. Required after the 1000 words of text: a complete list of sources for your data.

You may choose any prime-time fiction series. But you must clear your choice with the instructors. Because I hope to make the best of these entries available to this and future classes, students will not be permitted to duplicate the work of others.

Term Paper Projects

Write an essay, 15-25 double-spaced typed pages, on one of the topics given below, delivering installments devoted to aspects of your subject on the dates specified above.

1. Pick a performer – not David Janssen – whose career spans the history of television and describe the evolution of his/her career. Be sure to discuss the genres of programming in which your performer has appeared and to relate her/his characterizations to the evolution of television in general. Some possibilities: Mary Tyler Moore, Elizabeth Montgomery, Robert Young, James Garner, Harry Morgan, Bill Cosby.

2. Describe several series by a single producer, production company or creative team, emphasizing their similarities in visual style, subject matter and ideology. Discuss changes or developments among your series and speculate about their historical or cultural context. Some possibilities:

Norman Lear [Tandem Prods., TAT Prods, etc.]: All in the Family, Maude, The Jeffersons, One day at a Time, Mary Hartman, Mary Hartman, Hot-L Baltimore, Fernwood 2 Night, All that Glitters, Good Times.
Garry Marshall: The Odd Couple, Happy Days, Laverne and Shirley, Mork and Mindy.
Stephen Bochco (and often David Milch): Hill Street Blues, Bay City Blues, Cap Rock, Hooperman, NYPD Blue.
Fox Channel shows: Married With Children, Malcolm in the Middle, Moesha, Buffy the Vampire Slayer, Gilmore Girls.
HBO: Six Feet Under, The Sopranos, The Wire, Deadwood

Emerging house styles or emphases among the other cable networks now producing movies and series: SHOWTIME, USA, FOX, etc.


4. Drawing on information culled from assigned reading and supplemented in class discussions, write an essay on television in America from 1948—1970. Be sure to include an account of the nature of prime-time programming in this period and to discuss the major corporate, governmental and technological influences on such programming.

5. Consult the entries on Universal Studios in the NY Times Encyclopedia of Television, entries on TV movies and other Universal series in Brooks and Marsh and Alex McNeil (Total Television); review Barnouw on “telefilms” and other relevant reading. Then write an essay on The Name of the Game and The Bold Ones, giving particular attention to the subject-matter, ideology and visual style of these series. Be sure to comment on the relation between the series’ themes and the historical context of the late 1960s.


7. Write an essay contrasting comedy series of the 1970s with those of the 1980s and 90s. Among the later shows: The Cosby Show, Cheers, Seinfeld, Mad About You, Frazier, Friends, Malcolm in the Middle.

8. Discuss the treatment of women in at least three situation comedies from different decades, giving special attention to the ways in which marriage and sexual attitudes are dramatized.


10. “All in the Family” might serve as a general title for most television comedy from 1950 through 1980. Choose two or three representative series from at least two different decades and write an essay examining their treatment of family life, giving special attention to the relations between children and parents and between husbands and wives. How are families imagined and dramatized in your texts? What implicit and explicit virtues are displayed by adults and their children in the shows you have chosen? Where is moral authority located in these families?
11. A variation on question 5 above: write an essay discussing the development of the made-for-television film, using *The Name of the Game* as a precursor example and drawing on our archive of TV movies.


13. Compare a significant contemporary series from a major network – *The West Wing*, say, or *ER* – with a cable series such as *The L Word* or *The Sopranos*. What do the differences between these programs signify about today’s television environment?

14. In recent years many TV series have made intense use of the Internet, creating web sites to provide background on characters and sometimes entire plots that are not available to TV viewers. Choose one or two such programs and discuss the cultural and aesthetic significance of their hybrid natures.

15. Write an essay about *The Sopranos* in relation to the film and TV traditions out of which it comes. Is it a gangster story? a family melodrama? How does this series exploit the medium of television?

16. Describe the recurring subject matter, ideas of character, notions of the police in the signature law-and-order shows in the years after 9/11/01. How do these crimes series compare with those broadcast in earlier eras, such as *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87) or *Naked City* (1958-63)?

17. Write an essay on *Deadwood’s* relation to the genre of the western, with particular reference to Sergio Leone and Robert Altman as well as the television western, including *Gunsmoke* (1955-75), *Cade’s County* (1971-72), and *Lonesome Dove* (1989).