21L 432/CMS 915 Understanding Television **Spring 2004**
http://web.mit.edu/21l.432/www/home.html **T, Th 2:30-4, 1-150**
Prof. David Thorburn **Screenings: w, 7-9, 14E-310**

Schedule of Classes and Topics

	Tue	Thurs	
Feb	3		**Prologue**: The Continuity Principle Thorburn and Jenkins, "Toward an Aesthetics of Transition"
			I. The Wasteland Mythology
		5	Kosinski, "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
	10	12	James Carey, "A Cultural Approach to Communication" in *Communication As Culture* Roland Barthes, "The World of Wrestling" in *Mythologies* David Thorburn, "Television As An Aesthetic Medium" 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*
	--	19	**Guest Appearance**: **John Romano**, writer-producer: how we make "American Dreams" [special meeting in Bartos Theater, MIT Media Lab. class: 2:30-4pm; Forum: 5-7pm]
			III. The Broadcast Era
	24	26	Barnouw, ch. 3-4 Anderson, "Disneyland," in Newcomb Spigel, "Women's Work," in Newcomb Brooks and Marsh, "Introduction"
		26	**First paper due**
			IV. TV Genres
Mar	2	4	Barnouw, ch. 5 Thorburn, "Television Melodrama" in Newcomb
	9	11	Alvey, "The Independents," in Newcomb Jenkins, "*Star Trek* Rerun ...," in Newcomb
		11	**FORUM: Interactive Television** -- 5-7 pm Bartos Theater
	16	18	Barnouw, ch. 6 Modleski, "...Daytime TV and Women's Work" Phil Williams, "... the TV Rerun," in Newcomb
		18	**Midterm quiz**
	[Spring break]		
	30		Esslin, "Aristotle and the Advertisers …"
Apr		1	Thorburn, *TV Encyclopedia* entries on detectives and *The Name of the Game* _____, "Is TV Acting A Distinctive Art Form"
		1	**Second paper due**
		1	**FORUM: TV Audiences Today**
	6	8	Newcomb, "The TV Artistry of Norman Lear" Reeves, "Rewriting Newhart ..." Gomery, "... Movies Made-for-Television"

Apr			
	13		Gray, “The Politics of Representation ...” in Newcomb
			Byars and Meehan, “...Constructing the Working Woman,”
		15	**Guest Lecture**: A Short History of TV Regulation. **MLK Visiting Scholar Mark Lloyd**
	--	22	Thorburn, “Interpretation and Judgment ...”
			McGrath, “The Triumph of the Prime-Time Novel,” in Newcomb
	27		Todd Gitlin, “Make It Look Messy: ... *Hill Street Blues*”
		29	**V. After the Networks**
May	4	6	Thorburn, “The Sopranos ...”, "Web of Paradox"
			Marc, “What Was Broadcasting?” in Newcomb
	11	13	Summary Perspectives

Required Texts:

1. Barnouw, Erik. *Tube of Plenty: The Evolution of American Television*. 2nd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990.
2. Brooks, Tim and Earle Marsh. *The Complete Directory to Prime Time Network and Cable TV Shows*, *1946-Present.* 7th ed. New York: Ballantine Books, 1999.
3. Newcomb, Horace, ed. *Television: The Critical View.* 6th ed. Oxford University Press, 2000.
4. MIT Communications Forum website: http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/
5. Additional readings posted on course website.

Recommended Texts:

(to be placed on reserve at the Reserve Desk in the Hayden Library)

1. Reference Works and Collections of Essays

Adler, Richard P., ed. *Understanding Television.* New York: Praeger, 1981.
Allen, Robert, ed. *Channels of Discourse.* Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987.
Brown, Les, ed. *The New York Times Encyclopedia of Television.* New York: Times Books, 1977.
Feuer, Jane, Paul Kerr, and Tise Vahimagi, eds. *MTM: "Quality Television."* London: BFI Pub., 1984.
Gurevitch, Michael, Tony Bennett, et al., eds. *Culture, Society and the Media.* London: Methuen, 1982.
Kaplan, E. Ann, ed. *Regarding Television.* [Frederick, Md.]: University Publications of America, 1983.
Lazere, Donald, ed. *American Media and Mass Culture: Left Perspectives.* Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988.
McNeil, Alex. *Total Television.* New York: Penguin Books, 1996.
Modleski, Tania, ed. *Studies in Entertainment.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986.
Newcomb, Horace, ed. *Encyclopedia of Television.* Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn, 1997.
O'Connor, John E., ed. *American History/American Television.* New York: Ungar, 1983.

2. Critical and Historical Studies

Allen, Robert. *Speaking of Soap Operas*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.
Anderson, Christopher. *Hollywood TV*. Ph. D. Thesis. University of Texas at Austin, 1988.
Ang, Ien. *Living Room Wars: Rethinking Media Audiences*. New York: Routledge, 1996.
Ang, Ien. *Watching Dallas*. London: Methuen, 1985.
Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1972.
Boddy, William. *Fifties Television: The Industry and Its Critics*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
Brunsdon, Charlotte, and David Morley. *Everyday Television*. New York: Routledge, 1999.
Burke, Peter. *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*. New York: New York University Press, 1978.
Carey, James. *Communication as Culture*. Boston: Unwin Hyman, 1989.
Cawelti, John. *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.
Dayan, Daniel, and Elihu Katz. *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1992.
Ely, Melvin Patrick. *The Adventures of Amos 'n Andy: A Social History*. New York: Free Press, 1992.
Fiske, John, and John Hartley. *Reading Television*. London: Methuen, 1978.
Fiske, John. *Television Culture*. London: Methuen, 1987.
Geertz, Clifford. *The Interpretation of Cultures.* New York: Basic Books, 1973.

Gitlin, Todd. *Inside Prime Time*. Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 2000.
Hilmes, Michele. *Hollywood and Broadcasting: From Radio to Cable*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1990.
Jenkins, Henry. *Textual Poachers*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
MacDonald, J. Fred. *Blacks and White TV*. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983.
MacDonald, J. Fred. *One Nation Under Television: The Rise and Fall of Network TV*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1990.
Marc, David. *Comic Visions*. Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997.
Marc, David. *Demographic Vistas*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996.
Modleski, Tania. *Loving with a Vengeance*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
Morley, David. *Family Television.* London: Comedia, 1986.
Mulvey, Laura. *Visual and Other Pleasures*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989.
Newcomb, Horace. *TV: The Most Popular Art*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1974.
Newcomb, Horace, and Robert S. Alley. *The Producer's Medium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1983.
Palmer, Patricia. *The Lively Audience: A Study of Children around the TV Set*. Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1986.
Spigel, Lynn. *Make Room for TV: Television and the Family Ideal in Postwar America.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.
Streeter, Thomas. *Selling the Air*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
Thompson, Robert J. *Television's Second Golden Age: From* Hill Street Blues *to* ER. New York: Continuum, 1996.
Tulloch, John, and Henry Jenkins. *Science Fiction Audiences*. New York: Routledge, 1995.
Williams, Raymond. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. New York: Schocken Books, 1975.

Writing Requirements

Students may fulfill these requirements by choosing **one** of the options listed below. Graduate students and seniors majoring in Literature, Comparative Media Studies or Science, Technology and Society must choose **option three**. Each option requires that papers be submitted on the dates specified above.

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.

Option 1: A Course Journal

Keep a journal summarizing the leading arguments and ideas in each week's class. Illustrate general notions with concrete examples drawn from class discussions, your readings, your own experience of television. Submit installments of your journal as typed papers due on the dates listed above.

Option 2: 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 an 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*.

14. Compare British versus American forms of television, centering on a single genre: crime series, science fiction, situation comedy. See Prof. Thorburn for tapes of British series.

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

Option 3: Term Paper
Write an essay, 15-20 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:

Lorimar: *The Waltons, Eight Is Enough, Skag, Knots Landing, Dallas, Falcon Crest.*

Mark VII Productions (Jack Webb): *Dragnet, Adam 12, Emergency*.

Aaron Spelling: *The Mod Squad, The Rookies, SWAT, Starsky and Hutch, Charlie's Angels, Fantasy Island, The LoveBoat, Vegas, Beverly Hills 90210*.

QM Productions: *The Untouchables, The Invaders, The Fugitive, The FBI, Cannon, Barnaby Jones, The Streets of San Francisco, Most Wanted, Dan August.*

MTM Productions: *The Mary Tyler Moore Show, Rhoda, Phyllis, The Paul Sand Show, The Tony Randall Show, Lou Grant, WKRP, The White Shadow, Hill Street Blues, Bay City Blues, St. Elsewhere*.

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*.

Edward Zwick and Marshall Herskovitz: *Thirty Something, My So-Called Life, Once and Again*.

David E. Kelley: *LA Law, Picket Fences, Alley McBeal, The Practice*, *Boston Public*.

Stephen Bochco (and often David Milch): *Hill Street Blues, Bay City Blues, Cop Rock, Hooperman, NYPD Blue*.

Fox Channel shows: *Married With Children, Malcolm in the Middle, Moesha, Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Gilmore Girls.*

Wolf Films: *Law and Order, Law and Order SVU, Law and Order Criminal Intent, Dragnet* (2003 version).

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

3. Discuss the treatment of blacks on American television from the 1950s to the present, drawing material from Barnouw, MacDonald, Ely, encyclopedia entries. Be sure to consult entries on: *Amos 'N Andy, Nat King Cole, I Spy, Julia, The Jeffersons, Good Times, Roots, Cutter, Tenafly, East side-West Side, Good Times*, Bill Cosby's shows, *Moesha, Martin*. Available on tape: *The Jeffersons; Baby, I'm Back, Amos 'Andy, I Spy, The Jack Benny Show, The Autobiography of Jane Pittman, Roots, King*, other relevant programs.

4. Drawing on information culled from assigned reading and supplemented in class discussions, write an essay on television in America from 1948—1960. 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 Univesal Studios in the *NY Times Encyclopedia of Televsion*, 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.

6. Describe the development of situation comedy from its radio days through television of the 1970s (and beyond if you choose). Consult encyclopedia entries on Desilu Studios, *I Love Lucy, Amos 'N Andy*, Jackie Gleason, *The Goldbergs*, and relevant later series including *The Dick Van Dyke Sow, The Andy Griffith Show, That Girl, The Brady Bunch, All in the Family, The Mary Tyler Moore Show, MASH*, various Garry Marshall shows.

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.

9. Discuss the role of children in at least three series from different decades. What kinds of problems do the children in your shows typically confront? Possible choices: *Father Knows Best, Leave It to Beaver, The Brady Bunch, The Partridge Family, One Day at a Time, Family, James at 15, Roseanne, Married With Children, Malcolm in the Middle, The Gilmore Girls.*

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.

12. Write an essay abut the treatment of historical events in TV movies and mini-series. Some possibilities: *Roots, Holocaust, The Awakening Land, Kill Me If You Can* (Alan Alda playhing a famous death-row murdere), *King, I Will Fight No More Forever, Kent State, The Missiles of October, Band of Brothers*

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?