

AMCV0191G-S01:

TV on History: Representations of the American Past on Commercial Television

Monday and Wednesday, 8:30 – 9:50am, J. Walter Wilson, 402

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Office Hours: Mondays, 10:-00-11:00am, or by appointment
at Department of American Studies, 82 Waterman Street

Course Description:

This course explores commercial television's influence on our understanding of the American past and the way that this sense of history, in turn, helps audiences to form cultural and political identities. We will discuss foundational methods for critical analysis of television as we use this inquiry to examine some of the guiding themes of American Studies. This class, which has a significant viewing component, traces the evolution of history-based programming in many genres and considers the message and impact of programs such as Ken Burns' *Civil War*, *Roots*, *Colonial House*, and *Mad Men*.

Course Requirements (See detailed paper assignments on last page)

-Participation in class and on MyCourses through weekly posting to the discussion board (10%)

-Three short papers (4-6 pages each) on materials covered in class (20% each), detailed instructions will be handed out.

- Close analysis of television program **Due October 3**
- Comparison of television program with excerpt from written source (textbook, biography, etc.)
Due October 26
- Comparison of two television programs addressing either same era or same theme **Due November 14**

-One longer paper (8-10 pages) based on a previous paper, but adding both evidence and sources, along with one-page proposal and short presentation (30%) **Due December 16**

Notes:

A significant portion of this class is critical viewing of television programs. These programs (no more than two hours a week) will be made available for viewing on the MyCourses website, as well as on reserve at the Science Library. It will be your responsibility to come to each class having completed **both** the reading and the viewing homework. The viewing homework is always under **VIEW** at the head of the week and should be screened before class on Tuesday.

While having some background knowledge of the historical events referenced in course readings and screenings may be helpful, I will also make available resources for anyone who would like more information on any of the topics.

Required Texts (Available at Brown Bookstore):

Gary Edgerton and Peter C. Rollins, Eds. *Television Histories: Shaping Collective Memory in the Media Age*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2001.

Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004.

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

Additional readings (marked **CR on the syllabus) are available in the Course Reader which will be available for purchase at Allegra

Week 1: Introduction/ Making History, Making Memory

How is a history narrative created? What are the contested sites? How do individuals and groups make meaning out of history?

VIEW: *FDR* (1994), *Eleanor and Franklin* (1977), selections

- Monday, September 12:

Introductions / *Schoolhouse Rocks* (1973)

- Wednesday, September 14:

David Glassberg, "Sense of History" in *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2001, 1-22 **CR**

Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, "Chapter 1: The Presence of the Past: Popular Historymaking," 15-36 in *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*. New York: Columbia University Press: 1998. **CR**

Week 2: Critical Approaches to Television / Televisual Forms

How should we approach television as a site of analysis? Toward which aspects of television narrative should we turn a critical eye?

VIEW: Selections from different genres of television: *That 70's Show* (1998), *You Are There* (1955)

- Monday, September 19:

Jeremy Butler, "Understanding Television's Structures and Systems" in Butler, *Television: Critical Methods and Applications*. London: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002, selections, **CR**

Jason Mittell, "Telling Television Stories," in *Television and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010, 213-267

- Wednesday, September 21:

Gary Edgerton, "Television as Historian: A Different Kind of History Altogether" Edgerton and Rollins, 1-18

Steve Anderson. "History TV and Popular Memory," Edgerton and Rollins, 19-36

Week 3: Documentary History

What are the strengths and limitations of the documentary form? What kind of histories are found in documentary programming and how does this compare to other sites of history-making?

VIEW: *Civil War* (1990) *Thomas Jefferson* (1997) selections, *History Detectives* (2003)

- Monday, September 26:

Gary Edgerton, "Mediating *Thomas Jefferson*: Ken Burns as Popular Historian", Edgerton and Rollins, 169-192

David Glassberg, "Watching the *Civil War*" in *Sense of History: The Place of the Past in American Life*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press. 2001, 87-108 **CR**

- Wednesday, September 28:

Brian Taves, "The History Channel and the Challenge of Historical Programming," Edgerton and Rollins, 261-281

Week 4: Documentary History II

How can the documentary as a form be used to make interventions in mainstream understandings of the past? How have different individuals and groups critiqued documentary history?

VIEW: *Color Adjustment: Blacks in Prime Time* (1992)

- Monday, October 3: **PAPER #1 DUE**

Jason Mittell, "Representing Identity," in *Television and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 305-351

- Wednesday, October 5:

Herman Gray, "The Politics of Representation in Network Television," from Horace Newcombe, ed. *Television: The Critical View*, (6th ed.) Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000, 282-305, **CR**

Week 5: Participatory History

How are audiences affected by television programming? How does historical programming influence individual and group identity?

VIEW: *Roots* (1977), selections

- Monday, October 10: **NO CLASS FALL WEEKEND**

- Wednesday, October 12: **HAND OUT PAPER ASSIGNMENT #2**

Jason Mittell, "Viewing Television," in *Television and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010 357-381

Leslie Fishbein: "Roots: Docudrama and the Interpretation of History" in Alan Rosenthal, ed. *Why Docudrama: Fact/Fiction on Film and TV*. (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999) 271-295 **CR**

Week 6: Participatory History II

What are different ways of involving audience into historical interpretation/figuring? How does the reality television genre make history?

VIEW: *Frontier House* (2002), *Colonial House* (2004), selections

- Monday, October 17:

Susan Murray, "I Think We Need a New Name For It: The Meeting of Documentary and Reality TV," in Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2004, 40-55 **CR**

Julie Ann Taddeo and Ken Dvorak, "The PBS Historical House Series: Where Historical Reality Succumbs to Reel Reality" *Film & History: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Film and Television Studies*, Volume 37.1 (2007) 18-28 **CR**

- Wednesday, October 19:

Laurie Ouellette and James Hay, "Introduction," in *Better Living Through Reality TV*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2008. 1-31 **CR**

Week 7: Real People, Real Events

How does television represent war?

VIEW: news coverage of Vietnam, Iraq wars, *MASH* (1972), *Generation Kill* or *Band of Brothers* (TBA)

- Monday, October 24:

Hal Himmelstein "Television's Social Comedies" in *Television Myth and the American Mind*, Westport: Praeger, 1994.163-195 **CR**

- Wednesday, October 26: PAPER #2 DUE

Marita Sturken, "Spectacles of Memory and Amnesia: Remembering the Persian Gulf War," in *Tangled Memories: The Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Remembering*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1997, 122-144 **CR**

Week 8: Real People, Real Events II

How does television reconfigure historical personages, places or events? As a case study, we will look at how the legend of the Old West is portrayed on television

VIEW: Selections of *Gunsmoke* (1954), *Deadwood* (2004), *Dr. Quinn, Medicine Woman* (1993)

- Monday, October 31:

Horace Newcombe. "From Old Frontier to New Frontier" in Lynn Spigel and Michael Curtin, eds., *The Revolution Wasn't Televised: Sixties Television and Social Conflict*. New York: Routledge, 1997, 287-304 **CR**

- Wednesday, November 2: HAND OUT PAPER ASSIGNMENT #3

Alison Landsberg, "Waking the Deadwood of history: Listening, Language, and the 'Aural Visceral'", *Rethinking History*, 14:4, 531 – 549 **CR**

Week 9: 'Personal History'

How are 'everyday people' of the past portrayed? How do these individual stories relate to our larger understanding of contemporary histories?

VIEW: *Freaks and Geeks* (1999), *Happy Days* (1974) *American Dreams* (2002)

- Monday, November 7:

George Lipsitz. "The Meaning of Memory: Family, Class and Ethnicity in Early Network Television Programs," in Lynn Spigel and Denise Mann, eds., *Private Screenings: Television and the Female Consumer*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992, 71-110. **CR**

- Wednesday, November 9:

Daniel Marcus, *Happy Days and Wonder Years: The Fifties and Sixties in Contemporary Cultural Politics*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2004 selections TBA

Week 10: Personal History Continued (Postmodernity and History)

Has our understanding of history changed in the virtual age? How can we discuss this new type of narrative?

VIEW: *Quantum Leap* (1992), *Mad Men* (2006)

- Monday, November 14: **PAPER #3 DUE**

Robert Hanke, "Quantum Leap: The Postmodern Challenge of Television as History" Edgerton and Rollins, 59-78

- Wednesday, November 16:

Alison Landsberg, "Introduction: Memory, Modernity, Mass Culture," and "Chapter 1: Prosthetic Memory," in *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass Culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004, **CR**

Week 11: Controversy and Commemoration

How does television address controversial events?

VIEW: *And the Band Played On* (1993), *Who Killed Vincent Chin?* (1987)

- Monday, November, 21: **HAND OUT FINAL PAPER ASSIGNMENT**

Betsy Sharkey, "And the Band Played On: Searching for Truth" in Alan Rosenthal, ed. *Why Docudrama: Fact/Fiction on Film and TV*. Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999 160-166 **CR**

Elayne Rapping, "TV Movies as History: Class, Race, and the Past," in *The Movie of the Week: Private Stories, Public Events*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 199, 118-146 **CR**

Wednesday, November 23 **TBA/Writing Workshop-Paper Consultations**

Week 12: Controversy and Commemoration II

How does television address current events? Can television spur activism?

VIEW: *Treme* (2008)

- Monday, November 28

Lynnell L. Thomas, "Roots Run Deep Here": The Construction of Black New Orleans in Post-Katrina Tourism Narratives," *American Quarterly*, Volume 61, Number 3, September 2009, pp. 749-768 **CR**

Reviews and Commentary on *Treme* (Available on MyCourses)

- Wednesday, November 30 **ONE PAGE PROPOSAL DUE**

Peter Dahlgren, "Television, Public Spheres, and Civic Cultures," in Janet Wasko, ed. *A Companion to Television*. Malden, MA: Blackwell Press, 2009. **CR**

Pamela Wilson. "Jamming Big Brother: Webcasting, Audience Intervention, and Narrative Activism." Susan Murray and Laurie Ouellette, eds. *Reality TV: Remaking Television Culture*. New York: New York University Press, 2004. 323-344 **CR**

Week 13: The Future of Television/ The Future of the Past

What sort of changes are taking place in commercial television? How will the Internet affect the future of television production and television viewing?

VIEW: *Game Change (2011), Time Travel Academy (2011)*

- Monday, December 5:

Tara McPherson, "Reload: Liveness, Mobility, and the Web" in *The Visual Culture Reader*, 2.0, editor, Nicholas Mirzoeff. New York: Routledge, 2002 **CR**

Amanda D. Lotz, "Understanding Television at the Beginning of the Post-Network Era," in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized*. New York: New York University Press, 2007. 27-48 **CR**

- Wednesday, December 7:

William Urricho, "A Medium once Known as Television," in Pelle Snikkars and Patrick Vonderau, ed., *The YouTube Reader* (London: Wallflower Press, 2009): 24-39 **CR**

Lynn Spigel, "Our TV Heritage: Television, the Archive and the Reasons for Preservation" in Janet Wasko, *A Companion to Television*. New Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2005 **CR**

Week 14: Presentations and Conclusions

- Monday, December 12
in class: final project presentations
- Wednesday, December 14
in class: final project presentations