# CTCS 402—Practicum in Film/TV Criticism (Fall 2016)

**Mondays 2 p.m.-5:50 p.m. in SCA 316**

# Instructor: Howard Rosenberg

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*Office Hours: Mondays noon-2 p.m. and 5:50 p.m.-6:30 p.m. in SCA 332, by appointment only.*

**Description**: This course is a hands-on practicum designed to sharpen the critical skills of students and apply those skills to the analysis of primarily television as it relates to popular culture. In fact—the Internet, blogosphere, Facebook, YouTubesphere, Instagramsphere and Twittersphere notwithstanding—television *is* largely popular culture (at least for the moment) as well as the language and literature of this generation and previous generations. That’s true even though the delivery system—streaming via Netflix, Hulu, Amazon or whatever—may change.

The course is a practicum that stresses *doing* not *theorizing*. If you don’t know that periods come at the *ends* of sentences or know the difference between a *verb* and an herb or Serb, this is not the class for you. This is not a writing course, nor is brilliant or even graceful writing a prerequisite for enrollment. But the ability to write clearly is **critical**, asis the ability to set aside your ego for the greater purpose of communication and illumination. That is, the aim is not to show the reader how clever and smart you are—that will surface naturally—but to use your knowledge, intelligence and slashing wit to enhance the reader’s understanding and appreciation. And the goal sometimes, of course, is just to have fun.

It’s all right; it’s allowed. Criticism and fun are not antithetical.

Criticism takes many forms, whether the subject is literature, theater, food, fashion, music, art, film, the Internet, media or television; there are even auto critics (a former L.A. Times auto critic won a Pulitzer Prize), critics of critics, to say nothing of critics who critique the critics of critics. In fact, everyone with access to social media—that means the global multitudes—is a potential critic. In other words, the critical landscape has changed dramatically in the last decade or so.

But that doesn’t mean we must settle for lower standards or criticism in 140 characters or less. Some believe there are differences in writing and publishing for online media and traditional media. I don’t believe that’s true. I publish a blog—rosenbeast.com—but every time I write it I feel exactly as if I’m writing a newspaper column.

We surely have a generational divide in this class. I watch television mostly the old-fashioned way—on a traditional wide-screen set, and only occasionally on a computer. I watch movies mostly in a theater, rarely on a computer.

But criticism is still criticism. In this course, think of your audience as mainstream: bright but not necessarily sensitive to all of the nuances of the medium that you, the expert, are addressing. Your readers may know of “Mr. Robot,” but may not have seen it. For better or for worse, they may be more familiar with “Dancing with the Stars” and “Keeping Up with the Kardashians.”

You will lift a shade for them. Your role as critic is not only to serve as an entertainment guide (thumbs up, thumbs down) but to demystify television so the public can get the most out of it and demand that it perform at a high standard. In doing this, you will show that television, far from existing in a cocoon, relates closely to the wider culture, from Internet media, social media and conventional news media to contemporary political discourse. You should see television as a beacon to locate connecting threads in our culture. Identifying those connections yourself separates average or even good criticism from great criticism.

**Q & A**

*Which critics do you admire?*

# When it comes to TV, Emily Nussbaum of *New Yorker* (*acute perception and eloquence often from a female perspective),* *Los Angeles Times* critic Mary McNamara (*very smart, witty and facile*) and *Variety’s* Maureen Ryan (*a nuanced writer and out-of-the-box thinker).*

The film critic list includes Kenneth Turan of *The Los Angeles Times*, Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* and Anthony Lane and David Denby of *New Yorker* (although the latter two reveal way too much plot and are best read after you’ve seen the movies they review).

*Will students who take this course become extraordinary critics and receive many prestigious job offers that promise fame and riches?*

Yes, no question. Many of my former students now earn fabulous salaries writing for some of the world’s greatest websites and publications, and several have won Pulitzers and even Nobel Peace Prizes.

*Is that really true?*

No.

*You have been a media critic for ages and ages. Are you as much a dinosaur as you appear to be?*

Yes.

**Required text**: None.

**Evaluation and Grading**: Students must write three critical essays or critiques—all right, they’re reviews—of approximately 850 words, typewritten and *double-spaced*. These will be based *essentially* on classroom screenings. In addition, students must write a longer “final” critique or review which—*puleeeeze*—will NOT be footnoted or written as a term or academic paper. In addition to hard copies for me, all papers **must** be posted promptly on *Blackboard*. No exceptions.

**Late Papers**: These will be marked down one letter grade for each week of lateness, with the “week late” starting at the end of each class period.

**Class Attendance**: It is mandatory! Alternative class viewing assignments will not—WILL NOT—be made without a valid excuse for an absence. In the case of illness, *only* a note from a medical doctor (not Dr. Phil or Doctor No) explaining the problem will suffice. A terrorist attack may work, but I’ll need proof. Work conflicts or conflicts with projects for other classes will not suffice. Enrolling in this class means that you commit to it fulltime!

**\*\*\*\*Now read this very carefully: *Two unexcused absences (you get one freebie) will result in a single letter-grade deduction in the final course grade. Three unexcused absences will result in a deduction of two letter grades. Four unexcused absences and the grade drops three letter grades. You can see where we are headed here.***

**Tests**: None. The three shorter critiques or reviews each count 20% of the course grade, for a total of 60%. The longer one is worth 40%. Participation in class discussion —without me not dragging it out of you—counts, too…sort of. Let’s say you are hovering between a B and B+ when the semester ends. If you’ve been mostly silent (to say nothing of comatose) in class, you’ll get a B. If you’ve blabbed a lot, you’ll get a B+.

**Your Opinion:** There areno right or wrong opinions in this class, nor superior or inferior ones. A review or critique is an exercise in subjectivity. If I disagree with you—if everyone else in the class disagrees with you—so what? Your opinion is valid!

What you think matters, so don’t be shy about resisting *herdthink* and *groupthink* and expressing *your* opinion. When I was TV critic for the *Los Angeles Times*, readers who didn’t dig my work would sometimes delight in informing me that it was outside the mainstream—that my opinion did not represent the vast majority—as if independent thinking were criminal. I didn’t give a damn, nor should you if that charge is directed at you. I urge you to go for it—go against the grain—if that’s what you believe. L.A. Times movie critic Kenneth Turan once wrote a very thoughtful, personal and introspective piece about it was like to be the only major critic to not rave about the Richard Linklater film, “Boyhood.” So…your level of success in this class will be determined not by your opinions, only by how well and intelligently you express those opinions and back them up. Thus, do not be vague. Be specific: the script *seems* over the top? No. Either it is or isn’t.

**Major No-no:** Tweeting, texting or sexting in class!!!!!! **DO NOT DO IT!!!!!**

**Academic Integrity:** USC kicks some serious ass on this topic. Academic integrity includes (1) respecting the intellectual property of others, (2) submitting all assigned work unless an instructor (that’s me) allows otherwise and (3) protecting your own academic work from misuse by others as well as submitting another’s work as your own (otherwise known as cheating). SCampus contains a Student Conduct Code in Section 11.00 and the recommended painful sanctions for violating this code are located in Appendix A. Students suspected of academic dishonesty will be referred to the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards for review.

**Plagiarism:** Think Melania Trump, swiping from Michelle Obama for her speech at the GOP convention in July. She didn’t get away with it; you won’t either. Plagiarism will not be tolerated!!! This does not mean that you cannot be influenced by the thoughts of others and distill these into a point of view or hypothesis that you share and express in your own words. That’s how the intellectual process often works. But stealing word for word—or something even fairly close to it—is absolutely forbidden!!! As you likely know, we employ a *Blackboard* program here called *turnitin* that identifies plagiarism in written assignments. In other words, we play hardball. The work you submit in this class must be yours. If you present another person’s words as your own—even if you paraphrase without attribution—you will go down in flames. That means possibly a failing grade for the course—no exceptions—and possible expulsion from the university. As a result, sadly, no more photo ops with Tommy Trogan. This is no hollow threat, kiddos. If you are confused by any of this academic integrity stuff, consult Manouchka or me or drop by the Writing Center (Taper Hall 310) or the Office of Student Judicial Affairs and Community Standards and ask some questions.

**Course Paper Retention Policy:** USC says it is your responsibility to retrieve all course papers within one academic year of completion of this course? For your best-selling memoir? To show your children and grandchildren? No. You do it because they may be essential in resolving grade disputes or incompletes as well as assisting in verifying that all course requirements have been met. If you think I’ve been unfair or mistaken about your grade, in other words, you’ll have the goods on me. But after one year, it all hits the shredder.

**Students with Disabilities:** If you are requesting academic accommodations because of a disability, you must register with DisabilityServices and Programs (DSP) each semester. DSP (located in STU 301 and open 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. weekdays) can give you a letter of verification, but be sure that letter is delivered to me as early in the semester as possible. And by the way, being allergic to the instructor (me) does not count as a disability.

**Office Hours**: Drop by my sleeping bag in the park anytime.

*But seriously…*

I am available by appointment on Mondays from noon-2 p.m. and from 5:50-6-6:30 p.m. in SCA 332. (You’re thinking*: If this guy is so great, why doesn’t he have a swankier office?* My thought, exactly).

Otherwise I operate at home where I am available by phone or e-mail (but definitely *not* twitter or Facebook). I *encourage* you to contact me when you have something to discuss, i.e. when you’re confused, when you’re teed off at me etc. If anything at all is on your mind, call. I welcome your calls and emails. Don’t be a stranger, ok? But let’s do resolve our disputes rationally; violence solves nothing.

**SCHEDULE**

**AUG. 22:** *Introduction to the Role of the Critic: Nuts and Bolts.* Discuss organizing a critique or review, essential components, the blurb syndrome, what to avoid (such as giving away too much), conflicts of interest, the fallibility of critical writing and the advent of *Rotten Tomatoes, Metacritic* and other Internet sources of arts criticism, to say nothing of blogs. Discuss the earlier so-called “Golden Age of Television”—a hint: um…not always so golden—compared with the present golden age. Plus for context, we’ll talk about the world in 2016 because video—whatever the venue—does not exist in isolation.

*Screenings: PBS documentary “America in Primetime,” episode of “The Wonder Years,” George Carlin monologue, “Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television” and a scene from Barry Levinson’s film, “Avalon.”*

**AUG. 29:** *Explore Anti-heroes on Both Sides of the Atlantic. Who They Are, What We Like and Dislike about Them, and Why They Are So Ubiquitous today, and Is it Enough Already?*

*Screenings:* Tony Soprano in “The Sopranos,” Walter White in “Breaking Bad,” Jane Tennison in “Prime Suspect,” Dexter Morgan in “Dexter,” Tom Kane in “Boss,” Eddie “Fitz” Fitzgerald in “Cracker” and Rupert Pupkin in Martin Scorsese’s underappreciated “King of Comedy.”

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**Assign practice review #1**. **(Although practice reviews are not graded, failure to complete or hand one in on time results in a *½ grade deduction* on the first graded review. Failure to complete two or hand two in on time results in a *full grade deduction* on the first graded review. Failure to complete three or hand three in on time results in a *two grade* *deduction* on the first graded review. In other words, HAND THEM IN! Again, this is only practice; no grade).**

**SEPT. 5:** Labor Day; no class.

**SEPT. 12:**  *Explore Anti-heroes II*

*Screenings: TBA*

***Practice review #1 due.***

**SEPT. 19:** *The Police Procedural*

*Screenings: “Dragnet,” “Naked City,” “Hill Street Blues,” “Cop Rock.”*

**Assign practice review #2**. TBA.

**SEP. 26:** *The Police Procedural II*

*Screenings:* “Homicide: Life on the Street” and “NYPD Blue.”

***Practice review #2 due.*** Class divides into groups to comment on each other’s reviews. *Be kind!*

**OCT. 3:** *TV and Film as History.* Do filmmakers have a responsibility to get it right? Is it proper to twist or significantly alter important history in service of entertainment? When this occurs, does it usually drive me nuts? Yes. *Did Henry VIII spend more time making love than making trouble for the Pope? Did nubile dancing nymphs greet Columbus in the “new world?” Was Noah the Bible’s stand-up comic?* Loved it all. A regular hoot. Just hilarious. Only…don’t call it history.

*Screenings:* The works of Oliver Stone and others who purport to depict history through film.

**OCT. 10:** *TV and Film as History II.*

*Screening:* TBA

**Assign graded review #1**. **TBA.**

**OCT. 17:**  *Documentaries:* *Advocacy, Historical, Crime and News Docs Through a Microscope.*

*Screenings:* “Living Dolls”/”Showbiz Moms and Dads,” “The Trials of Ted Haggard.”

***Graded review #1 due.***

**OCT. 24:** *Documentaries II*.

*Screenings:* *TBA*

**Assign graded review #2**. TBA

**OCT. 31:** *Race and Ethnicity.*

*Screenings:* “Amos “n” Andy,” “Blackish,” “Fresh off the Boat,” ”Cristela,” “Curb Your Enthusiasm,” “Dr. Ken,” “All-American Girl.”

***Graded review #2 due***

**Nov. 7:** *Race and Ethnicity II.*

*Screenings:* “House of Lies,” “Any Day Now.”

**Assign graded review #3. TBA**

**NOV. 14:**  *Satire/Parody/the best of trash.*

*Screenings:* “Sid Caesar,” “Veep,” “Louie,” “The Larry Sanders Show,” “The Simpsons,” “Community.” Canadian comedy “The Newsroom.” The incredible and incredibly awful “Noah’s Ark.”

***Graded review #3 due.***

**NOV. 21:** *Comedy and…Death!!!*

*Screenings:* “All in the Family,” “The Mary Tyler Moore Show,” “Curb Your Enthusiasm.”

**NOV. 28:**

**Assign final review**. **TBA**

**HOW FABULOUS IS HOWARD ROSENBERG? *THIS* FABULOUS…**

**Education:** B.A. in history, University of Oklahoma.

M.A. in political science, University of Minnesota.

**Work:** *Moline Dispatch*, reporter… *two years.*

*Louisville Times*, reporter/TV critic…*10 years*.

*Los Angeles Times*, TV critic… *25 years*.

*Animals Agenda* *Magazine*, columnist… *three years*.

*Broadcasting & Cable Magazine*, columnist… *two years.*

*FirstPost, British on-line magazine*, writer… *five years.*

ESPN, sports media critic… *seven years.*

UCLA, part-time instructor in English… *one year*.

Cal State Northridge, adjunct professor in critical studies… *five years*.

USC, adjunct professor in critical studies… *23 years.*

USC, part-time lecturer in journalism… *16 years*.

**Books:** --*Not So Prime Time: Chasing the Trivial on American Television*,

published by Ivan R. Dee, Chicago, 2004.

--*No Time to Think: The Menace of Media Speed and the 24-hour*

*News Cycle*, published by Continuum Books, 2008.

--*Up Yours!,* a novel published by Amazon.com , 2013 (October).

--*Killing Elvis*, a novel, TBA.

**Comic Strip:** Author of *Airwaves,* former nationally syndicated satirical strip.

**Honors:** *Pulitzer Prize* for criticism.

*Pulitzer Prize finalist* for commentary.

*L.A. Times Editorial Award* for sustained excellence.

*National Headliner Award* for commentary.

*National Headliner Award* for best national column.

*Hollywood Women’s Press Club Man of the Year Award*

*L.A. Press Club Award* for entertainment writing.

(2) *L.A. Press Club Awards* for entertainment reviews.

*Women, Men and Media Award* for columns on the Persian

Gulf War coverage.

*Genesis Award* for best magazine article on animal rights.

*Genesis commendation* for column on televised hunting

*Edward R. Murrow Award* for criticism.

*Print Journalist of the Year Award*, Society of Professional

Journalists, Los Angeles Chapter.

*Distinguished Achievement in Journalism Award*, USC

School of Journalism Alumni Association.

*Two-term board member, George Foster Peabody Awards.*

*L.A. Times Editorial Award,* best column/commentary.

*Greater Los Angeles Press Club Joseph M. Quinn Memorial Award.*

*Anti-Defamation League Torch of Liberty Award*.

*Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation Award* for outstanding

syndicated columnist.