# CTCS 402—Practicum in Film/TV Criticism (Fall 2017)

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

# Instructor: Howard Rosenberg

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T.A:Marquise Mays

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*Office Hours:*

**Description**: This course is a hands-on practicum designed to sharpen the critical skills of students and apply those skills to the analysis of television, primarily, as it relates to popular culture. In fact—the Internet, Facebook, blogosphere, Snapchatsphere, 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 etc. on a screen the size of a notepad or whatever—may change. And that is widening, with new streaming systems in the works.

The course stresses *doing* not *theorizing*. If you don’t know 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.

Fun is not an obscenity. It’s all right, it’s allowed. Criticism and fun can coexist.

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). And there are critics of critics, to say nothing of critics who critique the critics of critics. In fact, everyone—especially those with access to social media—is a potential critic. In other words, the critical landscape has changed dramatically in the last decade or so. According to the L.A Times, 36% of U.S. moviegoers consult Rotten Tomatoes—which is owned by Warner Brothers—before seeing a film. Metacritic and others are in that mix as well. They can be misleading. Rotten Tomatoes polls a slew of professional critics. But a 90% Rotten Tomatoes rating doesn’t necessarily translate to a rave review, for example. It means only that 90% of critics gave it a *favorable* review.

In any case, a changing landscape doesn’t mean we must settle for lower standards or criticism tweeted 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 and occasionally on a laptop, but never on anything smaller. I watch theatrical movies mostly in a theater or on a TV screen, occasionally on a computer. Although the traditional line separating feature films from TV is now blurring, thanks especially to Netflix.

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 not know the difference between “Mr. Robot” and Mister Rogers. Perhaps they’re still keeping up with the Kardashians and not much else.

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. Knowledge is power. Think of television as a beacon, one locating connecting threads in our culture. Identifying those connections separates average or even good criticism from great criticism. It shows that television, far from existing in a cocoon, relates intimately to the wider culture, from Internet media, social media and conventional news media to contemporary political discourse.

Consider that our President is a creature of TV—an avid viewer of TV—and so obsessed with personal ratings that his brain could be said to function as a Nielsen meter. I can promise you that when he leaves the White House—whether in disgrace or in some other fashion—he’ll still be in high demand as guest on TV news and entertainment shows. From “Saturday Night Live” to Colbert on CBS, moreover, politics has become the mother’s milk of TV satire. One could argue that the performance aspect of the political process itself—as L.A. times TV critic Lorraine Ali noted recently—is worthy of critical comment. In fact, are we more tolerant of people we dislike and distrust…when we find them entertaining?

**Q & A**

*Which critics do you read regularly?*

# When it comes to TV, Emily Nussbaum of *New Yorker* (*acute perception and eloquence often from a female perspective)* and *Los Angeles Times* critic Lorraine Ali (*very smart, witty and facile with a global perspective*).*.*

The film critic list includes the very solid Kenneth Turan and Justin Chang of *The Los Angeles Times*, the powerhouse Manohla Dargis of *The New York Times* and Anthony Lane of *New Yorker* (although he reveals way too much plot and is best read after you’ve seen the movies he reviews).

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

Yes, no question.

*Is that really true?*

No.

*You have been associated with media criticism 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 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:** A review or critique is an exercise in subjectivity. Subjectivity often reflects taste, and as New York Times film critic A. O. Scott writes in his book about criticism, taste is never static.

And your opinion is often affected by how you feel. Was the comedy unfunny or was I not in a frame of mind to laugh? Was the drama slow or tedious or was I sleepy?

Most importantly, there areno right or wrong opinions in this class, nor superior or inferior ones. As I said, a review or critique is totally subjective. 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—in anything you do, not just writing criticism.

I was criticized repeatedly. Including death threats—someone starting in New York, for example, and continuing to threaten me as he worked his way west. Someone else called me a self-hating Jew who didn’t deserve his circumcision. And here are what two guys wrote me after I slammed a sketch comedy series headed by Dana Carvey:

*“You are closed-minded; infantile; a failed creative writer; a snotty, jealous lout; a slut and a timid soul lacking in in oval male sex glands. You are the worst critic in America. For most of our adult lives, we have watched you miss the point on everything our generation has put in front of you. Anything slightly outside the mainstream probably makes you realize how fat you are getting, how little hair you have left, or how sad and disappointed you have become in life. How does it feel to know you will never again have sex with a woman under the age of 45?”*

Now that’s what I call straight line begging for a punch line.

I always printed criticism that lacerated me, believing readers deserved the last word. The point is: 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, or if I agree or not, 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, 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, 2016. 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 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 noon-2 p.m. and 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 *not* Twitter, Instagram 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. 20:** *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 2018 because video—whatever the venue—does not exist in isolation.

*Screenings: Clip from Barry Levinson film, “Avalon,” Episode of Sacha Baron Cohen’s “Who Is America?” series, some of Amazon’s Emmy nominated new “The Wonderful Mrs. Maisel” and the Oscar-winning 2015 film “Spotlight.’*

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**Discussion assignment (ungraded!!!) for Aug. 27. Don’t panic. You’re not in a screenwriting class. But critics who write about scripts should have the ability to think (as much as possible) as a screenwriter. With this in mind, I’m asking you to consider how you would approach, in general terms, a widely covered news event (that I will identify) as a movie for the small or large screen. In other words, what would you want to see as a critic (and viewer)? What message or point of view? What format—flashbacks, chronological etc.? What actors (this is the fun part) would you cast? To assist you, I’ll provide a complete overview of the news event and a list of figures I think should be in the movie. Again, this is for discussion only!!! Nothing to hand in!!!**

**AUG. 27:** *Class discussion of the above assignment. Explore Anti-heroes on both sides of the Atlantic: who they are, what we like and dislike about them, why they are so ubiquitous, and maybe, just maybe, enuf already.*

*Screenings:* *Tony Soprano of “The Sopranos,” Walter White of “Breaking Bad” Dexter Morgan of “Dexter” and others.*

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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. In other words, HAND THEM IN! Again, this is only practice; no grade).**

**SEPT. 3:** Labor Day; no class.

**SEPT. 10:**  *Explore Anti-heroes II*

*Screenings: Rupert Pupkin of Martin Scorsese’s “King of Comedy.”*

***Guest: Los Angeles Times TV critic Lorraine Ali.***

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

**SEPT. 17:** *The Police Procedural*

*Screenings: “Dragnet,” “Hill Street Blues,” “Homicide: Life on the Street” and “Cop Rock,” a procedural set to music.*

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

**SEP. 24:** *The Police Procedural II*

*Screenings: Amazon’s “Bosch.”*

Peer critiques. Class divides into groups to comment on each other’s practice reviews. *Be kind!*

***Guest: Casting director Erica Bream.***

***Practice review #2 due.***

**OCT. 1:** *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 really spend more time making love than making trouble for the Pope? Did nubile dancing nymphs really greet Columbus in the “new world?” Was Noah really 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. 8:** *TV and Film as History II.*

*Screening:* TBA

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

**OCT. 15:**  *The Totally Original: What You Haven’t Seen Before…Or Not.*

*Screenings: HBO’s “Animals” and others.*

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

**Assign graded review #2. TBA.**

**OCT. 22:** *Documentaries:* *Advocacy, Historical, Crime and News Docs Through a Microscope.*

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

**OCT. 29:** *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. 5:** *Race and Ethnicity II.*

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

**Assign graded review #3. TBA**

**NOV. 12:**  *Satire/Parody.*

*Screenings:* *“Saturday Night Live” and other TV slams of politics and Donald Trump, a famous Sid Caesar sketch, “Veep,” “The Larry Sanders Show,” “The Simpsons,” “Community” and Canadian comedy “The Newsroom.”*

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

**NOV. 19:** *Comedy and…Death!!!*

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

**NOV. 26:** *Last class meeting.*

**Assign final review**. **TBA. I’m going to leave this pretty much up to you…but we’ll talk about it.**

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

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

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

**Work:** *White Bear Press,* editor…*two years*.

*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… *27 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.

--*Heaventown, a novel,* in progress.

**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.