

School of Cinematic Arts
Writing for Screen and Television

CTWR 211g: The Television Writer: An Agent of Change
Core Literacy in The Arts

Mondays, 1:00 pm-5:00 pm
Prof: Barbara Nance
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Office Hours: By Appointment
Office Location: SCA 108

Television series have always influenced viewers in ways that range from their intimate relationships and notions of personal identity to the broader issues in American society and the world. As a reflection of our social history, our traditional customs, and a leader in creating current and future expectations and perceptions, television functions as an agent in shaping our lives. From early broadcasts in the 1950s through current online shows that can be seen anywhere, anytime, and on any kind of device, television has changed. And through its evolution it has changed all of us.

This course focuses on writers who created and wrote for the shows that have become milestones in story-telling from the mid-20th century to now. By reading scripts and viewing and analyzing episodes, students will gain depth in understanding how society and its messengers interface. Students will also appreciate the power of writing for this dynamic medium.

Course Objective

1. **Analysis:** Students will increase their ability to analyze television episodes, including understanding how to read scripts, examine their formal elements, and engage in research to understand the context in which an episode was written.
2. **Connectivity:** Reading and viewing examples of great television will deepen the students' appreciation of the connection between these shows and the political and social climate of the time that they were written. Students will learn to see how television is a vehicle to express, explore, and highlight a myriad societal issues – from civil rights such as race, gender and identity, to issues of war and peace, freedom, and attitude towards foreign countries and peoples.
3. **Context:** Students will gain insights into the creative process of writing for television, how it has evolved, and how the “voice” of the writer affects how a story is told. This awareness adds to the appreciation of how choices of subjects and viewpoints reflect history and culture.
4. **Engagement:** Students will become more discerning viewers and will expand their viewing choices as a result of being exposed to the array of what is available. Those who are interested in becoming screenwriters, or writing for any medium, will gain a wide context for their future creative work.

Required Reading**Articles:**

Various pieces from newspapers, magazines, and web sites. Articles will be posted on Blackboard.

Scripts:

If available, scripts screened in class will be read the previous week. They will be posted on Blackboard when possible.

Grading

Paper #1: Select one of the writer-producers from the list below. By researching that person's experience and the totality of their produced works, analyze how he or she is an "agent of change." Choose from: Norman Lear, Shonda Rhimes, David Simon, Jill Soloway, James L. Brooks

Note: If you would *really* like to write about someone not on this list, feel free to pitch the name to me, and we can discuss!

Paper #2: Write a group of scenes that could play on television in which one character attempts to change the viewpoint of another character on a current social issue. Examples might include parent-child, civilian-policeman, two soldiers on different sides, romantic relationship, etc. Critical in the execution of this paper is the *resolution* of the situation – did the character succeed in changing the viewpoint of the other character? Write in script form if possible, though narrative prose is also acceptable.

Paper #3: Watch an entire season from one of the shows listed below. Choose one or more master themes examined in class and compare and contrast the ways that this show reflects the social change/s chosen. Did the particular show mirror existing societal evolution or cause it? Is it a commentary on the state of things or does it posit/propose change? Use specific examples drawn from the writing, including quotations from scripts/episodes.

Shows to pick from:

- TRANSPARENT – Season 1
- INSECURE – Season 1
- ORANGE IS THE NEW BLACK – Season 1
- ATYPICAL – Season 1
- THE HANDMAID'S TALE – Season 1

Length all papers: minimum 5 pages. Line spacing: 1.50. Font: Times New Roman 12. (The exception is Paper #2 – if written in screenplay format, Script Length: 10 pages max; Font: Courier New 12).

All papers are to be delivered via hardcopy IN CLASS (due dates are clearly marked below in the Class Schedule section). Late assignments will result in your grade being lowered 5 numeric points for every 0-to-24 hours it is delayed, i.e., a 95 → 90 if delivered after Monday by 1 pm but before Tuesday by 1 pm; A 95 → 85 if delivered after Tuesday by 1 pm but before Wednesday by 1 pm.

It is the student's responsibility to deliver late assignments directly to professor's office.

Grading Breakdown

Midterm and **Final** exams will test knowledge of the content of shows and how they are written, as well as their social context.

Midterm Exam	20%
Final Exam	35%
<u>3 Papers @ 15% Each</u>	<u>45%</u>
	100%

Attendance Policy

Students are expected to be on time and prepared for each class. Two unexcused absences will result in your final grade being lowered by five (5) numeric points (ex: 95 to a 90). A third unexcused absence will result in your final grade being lowered another five (5) numeric point (ex: 95 to an 85). Your grade will be lowered by five numeric points for every absence after. Two unexcused late arrivals equates to one full absence. A *late arrival* is any time over 10 minutes after class has started.

In order for absence to be excused, the student must either have prior approval from the professor and/or provide documentation at the next attended class session if absence was due to illness or emergency. Examples of this are a doctor-signed note from the health center or note from an airline if a flight is cancelled. Examples of situations not excused are “I wasn’t feeling well”, “I had an extra-curricular meeting”, “my parents bought me an airline ticket to come home early.”

Please note that if you are a Writing for Screen and Television major/minor, you must receive a grade of a C or better in order to receive degree credit. If you have any questions about the minimum grade required for credit please check with your home department.

If you have an emergency and must miss class please contact your professor prior to class or contact the Writing Division at 213-740-3303.

Laptop and Cell Phone Policy

NO LAPTOPS ALLOWED! All notes are to be hand-written.

NO CELLPHONE USAGE WHATSOEVER will be tolerated. Cell phones must be turned off or silenced (no vibrate) before class begins. If I, or one of my DAs, finds you using your cell phone, e-mailing, text messaging, tweeting, web surfing, game-playing, you will be asked to leave *immediately* and you will be marked as absent (unexcused).

I’m not kidding.

CLASS SCHEDULE AND ASSIGNMENTS

Note: Class content and material are subject to change at the discretion of the professor

Week 1 – Monday, August 26, 2019**The Evolution of Television**

Why do we love TV so much?

Introduce class and instructor; review syllabus; policies; sensitive topic warning; survey

We will begin by examining the history and evolution of television from its creation to present day. Discuss what is embedded in the essence of this communications system that has led to its impact. In essence, why is television such a powerful means of communication? Why do we love it so much??!

Episodes screened and analyzed include: the most highly censored episode/s of television; documentaries on the history of television in the Sixties and the Seventies

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Orange Is The New Black* (pilot)

Article: “Television’s Wonder Women: The Evolution of the Single Female Heroine”

“Adult Swim’s Excuse For Not Hiring Women” (Polygon)

“Nasty Women of TV Comedy Have Arrived Just In Time” (Vanity Fair)

Week 2 – Monday, September 2, 2019**NO CLASS – LABOR DAY****Week 3 – Monday, September 9, 2019****Women**

After more than forty years, has anything really changed in the way women are portrayed on television?

From watching June Cleaver bake her way through the day as the iconic suburban stay-at-home 1950s mother in *Leave It To Beaver* to Mary Tyler Moore enthusiastically tossing her hat in the air as a metaphor for life as a single woman in Minneapolis (considered to be the 2nd greatest moment in 1970s television by Entertainment Weekly), the depiction of women on television has grown tremendously. But has it caught up to be representative of women in the 21st century? To what extent did these changes track the feminist movement – were the shows in advance or behind the times?

On other fronts, women’s presence in front and behind the camera has also grown. How has the rise of women as creators of television content changed the landscape of television?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *Father Knows Best*, *Mary Tyler Moore Show*, *Girls*, *Orange Is The New Black*, *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Good Girls Revolt*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Modern Family*, *Shameless*

Article: “How Has The Idea Of ‘Family’ Changed On TV Since WWII”

Week 4 – Monday, September 16, 2019**Families**

What does the word “family” mean to you? What is a family today?

From *Father Knows Best* to *Shameless*, how has the depiction of family life changed on television? What do those changes tell us about how society has evolved?

Is TV a reflection of the definition of “family” in society or has it been instrumental in redefining what a “family” is? How has TV shaped how we look at families?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *Father Knows Best*, *The Cosby Show*, *All in the Family*, *Modern Family*, *Shameless*, *The Fosters*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Atypical* (pilot)

Articles: “Able-bodied Actors” (Variety); “*Speechless* Creator” (Variety)

Week 5 – September 23, 2019**People With Disabilities**

Why do we not see more people with disabilities on television?

In life, people may avert their gaze or feel pity when they encounter a dwarf, a person with Downs Syndrome, or any other evident handicap. Worse, people who don’t know better might react by teasing or abusing someone who is different. This is an area where television has led in changing the way the public sees disabled people by introducing us to organic, believable, three-dimensional characters with disabilities, humanizing them, and showing us that they are real people, too. How has television accomplished this? Is there room for more growth in this area?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *Speechless* (pilot); *Seinfeld*; *Law & Order: SVU*– “Competence”

Possible Guest speaker: TBD

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Masters of Sex* (pilot)

Articles: “After *The Mindy Project* Anal Sex Scene”

“Sex, Women, and TV” (Time)

Week 6 – September 30, 2019**Sex**

[Due: Paper#1 (15%)]

Which is it – the chicken or the egg?

Nudity and “dirty words” have not been the cause of viewers racing to watch the great cable shows on HBO and elsewhere. Viewers found great shows because of one reason – quality. But along with greater honesty about many aspects of life, sex on television also came to be represented more realistically. Some conservative commentators accuse television of “causing” promiscuity. What do you think? How much does society’s evolving acceptance of sex play a role in what we see on TV? Or, does what we see on TV advance society’s acceptance of sex? Which is it – the chicken or the egg?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *Masters of Sex*, *The Affair*, *Girls*, *The Mindy Project*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Shameless*, *Downton Abbey*

Articles: “There Are Now Two Americas” by David Simon (The Guardian)

“Modern Family Is A Class-Blind Fantasy World” (Salon)

Week 7 – October 7, 2019

Social Class

Does money make you more acceptable?

With the exception of Depression-era movies, recognizing and exploring differences in class has been avoided in film and television. It’s as if everyone from studio heads to viewers want to hold onto the illusion of America as a classless society. That makes the subject of social class as touchy as race. In fact, discussions of race are sometimes seen as a more comfortable way of dealing with class. Nevertheless, television has ventured into this difficult terrain from its inception, sometimes with unintended consequences. We love to depict the wealthy on television, and sometimes even the blue-collar and working classes. But why aren’t there any shows about homeless people? Poor people?

Episodes and excerpts screened and analyzed include: *The Honeymooners*, *The Jeffersons*, *Roseanne*, *Downton Abbey*, *Rome*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Breaking Bad* (pilot), *The Sopranos* (pilot)

Articles: “Why Have TV Audiences Fallen So Hard For Anti-Heroes”

“How A Lifetime Show Gave Us TV’s First Pure Female Antihero” (Vanity Fair)

Week 8 – October 14, 2019

MID-TERM EXAM (20%) + Anti-Heroes

1:00 pm – 2:30 pm: Mid-Term Exam

2:30 pm – 3:00 pm: Break

3:00 pm – 5:00 pm: Anti-Heroes

We all love a good bad guy. The question we should ask ourselves is -- why?

In the early decades of television, under the control of the three traditional networks, a specific type of behavior was required – a brave, responsible, do-gooder. In essence, the “hero”. In addition, this usually fell to the male lead, and he was often portrayed as the

kindly family patriarch, the diligent crime solver, the life-saving medical doctor. As tastes evolved and broadcast audiences found niches in premium cable and web series, old prototypes morphed into characters that were free to be imperfect, even bad. What does this reveal about our times? What do you think of argument that these sorts of anti-heroes should be prohibited, and that television should be forced to return to 1950s ideal that were “good for people”? How much should television dictate our morals?

And where do women and minorities live in the “anti-hero” discussion? Is society ready to root for a female or black “bad guy”?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *The Shield (pilot)*, *Weeds (pilot)*, *Breaking Bad*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Transparent (pilot)*

Articles: “The Solution to TV’s Diversity Problem?” (Vanity Fair);

“The Evolution of Sexual Orientation in TV” (FilmFad);

“The Sexual Evolution Is Coming” (Bustle)

“TV’s First Non-Binary Character” (Entertainment Weekly)

Week 9 – October 21, 2019

Sexual Orientation

Straight, gay, bisexual, transgender. How much has television helped in representing the gender and sexual revolution?

Thankfully, the days of repressing, even denying, one’s sexual orientation are fading into the past. As of today, voters have approved same-sex marriage in many states. And singular television episodes, bigger story arcs, and even whole shows about LGBTQ characters gather audiences and win awards. But this subject remains controversial, and it could not have been honestly and truthfully explored in the network era dominated by mass advertisers. Why is that? What about the topic provokes such discomfort? If society is moving forward and embracing these differences, why aren’t networks? Yet, on the cable side, TV shows reflect how tolerant, even accepting, our society has become toward the LGBTQ community. Is it enough? How much farther do we have to go?

Episodes include: *Will & Grace*, *Modern Family*, *Glee*, *Transparent*, *Ellen*, *Eyewitness*

Possible Guest Speaker: TBD

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *The Wire*, *Fresh Off The Boat*

Articles: “Can TV Be Fair To Muslims?” (NY Times)

“TV’s Slow Embrace of Diversity” (Washington Post)

“Why TV Is Finally Embracing Race” (Variety)

Week 10 – October 28, 2019

Race

The evolution of race and racial diversity on television: Is it representative enough? Are we done? Where do we go from here?

One of the most polarizing issues in America, the relationships between races and the anger and feelings of betrayal that racial stories call up are challenging for any medium. Until recently, television networks and producers have tended to avoid it. But the courage of creators like David Simon and Nahnatchka Khan have opened dialogues for necessary conversations to take place about race that expand beyond a show's audience and outlast its run. From what may call the first interracial kiss on *Star Trek* in 1968, how *has* race been portrayed on television? Historically versus present day? Is exploring the issue of race healing, hurting, or a net wash in the progress of civil rights? How does comedy help to soften the issue to diffuse it enough to talk about it?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *Fresh Off the Boat*, *The Wire*, *Scandal*, *All In The Family*, *Star Trek*, *The People vs. OJ Simpson*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *The Path*

Articles: "TV Shows Talk About Religion" (Variety)

"American Gods and Handmaid's Tale Are About The Same Thing" (The Verge)

Week 11 – November 4, 2019

Spirituality/Religion

[Due: Paper#2 (15%)]

Does "belief" have a place on television?

Religion is uncommon in American television. Until recently, other than Sunday morning "televangelism" shows, networks and cable outlets have been loath to broach the topic of religion/spirituality. In the scripted realm, fewer than two dozen series or pilots have featured religious persons in leading or title roles in the 50+ year history of television. Why do you think that is? Is it because of the global political volatility surrounding the topic?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *The Path*, *Handmaid's Tale*, *The Good Place*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *House of Cards*, *Veep*

Articles: "Trump's Presidency Is Already Having An Effect On Scripted TV" (Polygon);

Others (TBD)

Week 12 – November 11, 2019

Politics

Is television responsible for the growing rift in our politics or is the media just "reporting the news"?

We are in the thick of a political maelstrom, and television is the primary vehicle for its delivery. Every point of view and political affiliation can be found on the 400+ channels we have to choose from. Where sketch comedy, talk shows, and the 24-hour news cycle have embraced and explored this subject matter ad nauseum, scripted original shows have tended to treat the subject with a light touch, despite the era of advertiser sensitivity coming to an end. Still, in the scripted world, a progression is clear from idealistic shows such as *The West*

Wing to the cynicism of *House of Cards*. Is this a reflection of society? Or is society's attitude a reflection of the sensibility of the creators of these shows? How has sketch comedy and late-night talk shows contributed to the political discourse? Has it had an affect (positive or negative) on the views of the country?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *The West Wing*, *Veep*, *House of Cards*, *Saturday Night Live*, *Full Frontal with Samantha Bee*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Battlestar Galactica*, *M*A*S*H*, *Homeland*

Articles: "Nostalgic Impulse: Why *M*A*S*H* Is Still Relevant"

Week 13 – November 18, 2019

War

We live in an insular country, one where war doesn't touch most of us personally. How has (or hasn't) this affected our society?

Television news is filled with war coverage, so the entertainment side has often dealt with the harshest realities of war through allegory, especially in science fiction. When scripted series break through the fog of current events, the effects have been startling, allowing issues to be framed in a way that changes the discussion by creating alien life forms like Klingons or countries that don't exist to reveal a truth that can't be told in other ways.

Episodes and excerpts screened: *M*A*S*H*, *Battlestar Galactica*, *Generation Kill*

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *The Office (British version)*, *The Office (American version)*

Articles: "America's Exports Too Diverse For Overseas?" (Hollywood Reporter)

Week 14 – November 25, 2019

International Television

How does American "creative colonialism" collide with the global perspective?

Today, television is a global medium. American shows are broadcast all around the world, often at the same time that U.S. audiences are watching them for the first time. We also import product from other countries that become massive hits – shows like *The Killing*, *Homeland*, *The Office*, and *Shameless*. Sometimes, foreign shows are aired "as is" (i.e., direct from the foreign market). Other times, the format is changed to fit the American appetite.

We'll discuss why some shows are successful in this endeavor (*The Office*) and some aren't (*Gracepoint*, the U.S. version of *Broadchurch*). Why do we do this? Why don't networks feel that American audiences will accept a "foreign" show?

Assignments To Read For Next Class:

Scripts: *Man In The High Castle*, *The Walking Dead*

Articles: "Social Split Between TV and Movie Dystopias" (NYTimes); Others (TBD)

Week 15 – December 2, 2019**Dystopian Apocalypse/Future of Television****[Paper#3 (15%) Due]**

Futuristic shows are often bleak and depressing. Why are we so attracted to that as an audience? What does that say about us as a society?

1:00 pm – 3:00 pm Dystopian Apocalypse

Post-apocalyptic dystopian worlds are a common and oft-titled arena explored in feature film blockbusters. But the box-office draw of those sorts of explosions and special effects don't play the same on television. Nevertheless, a bleak view of the future does pervade some shows. Think about how the survivors in *The Walking Dead*, for example, are different from movie characters. What makes it such a hit show? How does it influence viewers?

Episodes and excerpts screened: *The Walking Dead*, *Man In The High Castle*, *Colony*

3:00 pm – 3:30 pm BREAK**3:30 pm – 5:00 pm Future of Television**

Discussion of ideas culled from the various sources we've watched and read all term. These lead to an overview of the ways television as a medium, and specific shows have an impact on individuals and the broader society. By emphasizing shows that express the artistic visions of their creators, we'll also underscore the impact an artist can have.

In addition, the delivery systems of television are rapidly changing. Digital streaming services like Netflix, Amazon, and Hulu make entire seasons of shows available at once. How does that change, or does it change, a show's content?

Monday, December 16, 2019**Final Exam (35%)**

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems

Academic Conduct

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in *SCampus* in Part B, Section 11, "Behavior Violating University Standards" <https://policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b/>. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, <http://policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct>.

Support Systems

Student Counseling Services (SCS) - (213) 740-7711 – 24/7 on call

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/counseling/>

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1-800-273-8255

Provides free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. <http://www.suicidepreventionlifeline.org>

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-4900 - 24/7 on call

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm. <https://engemannshc.usc.edu/rsvp/>

Sexual Assault Resource Center

For more information about how to get help or help a survivor, rights, reporting options, and additional resources, visit the website: <http://sarc.usc.edu/>

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)/Title IX Compliance – (213) 740-5086

Works with faculty, staff, visitors, applicants, and students around issues of protected class. <https://equity.usc.edu/>

Bias Assessment Response and Support

Incidents of bias, hate crimes and microaggressions need to be reported allowing for appropriate investigation and response. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/bias-assessment-response-support/>

The Office of Disability Services and Programs

Provides certification for students with disabilities and helps arrange relevant accommodations. <http://dsp.usc.edu>

Student Support and Advocacy – (213) 821-4710

Assists students and families in resolving complex issues adversely affecting their success as a student EX: personal, financial, and academic. <https://studentaffairs.usc.edu/ssa/>

Diversity at USC

Information on events, programs and training, the Diversity Task Force (including representatives for each school), chronology, participation, and various resources for students. <https://diversity.usc.edu/>

USC Emergency Information

Provides safety and other updates, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible, <http://emergency.usc.edu>

USC Department of Public Safety – 213-740-4321 (UPC) and 323-442-1000 (HSC) for 24-hour emergency assistance or to report a crime.

Provides overall safety to USC community. <http://dps.usc.edu>

**PLEASE NOTE:
FOOD AND DRINKS (OTHER THAN WATER) ARE NOT PERMITTED IN
ANY INSTRUCTIONAL SPACES IN THE CINEMATIC ARTS COMPLEX**