

University of Calgary
Department of Communication, Media and Film

COMS 401.69 - Special Topics in Communication and Media Studies (TV/HBO)
The Rise of the Prestige TV Serial
Fall 2021

Sept. 7, 2021 – Dec. 9, 2021 (excluding Sept. 30 and Nov. 7-13)
Screening (asynchronous)
Lecture (asynchronous)
Post-lecture Discussion: (synchronous): R 10:00-10:45

Lectures and Screenings will be asynchronous. The television programs will be posted on D2L by 9:30 am each Tuesday and the lecture will be posted by 9:00 am each Thursday. At 10:00 am each Thursday, there will be a synchronous discussion period on Zoom.

IMPORTANT NOTE FOR ONLINE COURSE DELIVERY

Asynchronous & Synchronous Course Components: Please read this outline carefully to see which course components will be offered synchronously (where you are expected to participate in person or online at the usual scheduled course time) and which components will be offered asynchronously (to be completed on your own time). Synchronous sessions hosted on Zoom can be accessed on D2L by clicking on the Communications tab and selecting Zoom.

Note: If you will not be able to participate in synchronous in-class or online class sessions owing to time differences or geographical location, then consult with the instructor to see if accommodation is possible or arrange to take this course in a future term.

Online Quizzes and Exams: You will be allowed a minimum window of 24 hours to access online quizzes and exams, but there may be a time limit for completing a quiz once you open it. Read the description carefully. The time specified for any timed online assessments includes 50% extra time.

Instructor:	Matthew Croombs
Office:	SS 216
Email:	matthew.croombs@ucalgary.ca
Web Page:	D2L (access via MyUofC portal)
Office Hours:	Thursdays, 14:30-16:30 on Zoom

Course Description

This course examines the lasting revolution within the history of American television that has become associated with the term “prestige television.” Beginning in late 1990s, with the rise of the HBO network, and extending into the present, prestige television designates an unprecedented level of aesthetic sophistication, as well as new modes of distribution and consumption (for example, “binge watching”). In framing the evolution of prestige television, the course begins by asking fundamental questions about the nature of the televisual medium, and traces American television’s industrial history from the broadcast era, to the multi-network era, to our contemporary “post-network” era, mediated by internet technologies. Our discussion of prestige

television, which gives unique focus to shows produced by the HBO network, will analyze aesthetic questions of style and narrative complexity, considering prestige television's intersections with and divergences from "the cinematic." We will also consider how prestige television has become a crucial platform to activate key debates in broader American culture concerning sex, class, and race, as well as the shifting identity of "American-ness." By the course's conclusion, students will be equipped with a new critical vocabulary to engage with the televisual landscape that has shaped the North American cultural imaginary.

Additional Information

The weekly schedule of topics and readings can be found at the end of this outline or on D2L.

Objectives of the Course

Following the completion of this course, students should be able to:

1. Demonstrate familiarity with the major industrial shifts that have shaped the evolution of American television.
2. Define the key formal and narrative tendencies that have shaped contemporary prestige television.
3. Reflect on television aesthetics in a theoretical way, taking into account the nature of the televisual medium.
4. Draw connections between the programs screened in class and their broader social contexts.
5. Perform critical analyses and write well-crafted arguments about visual culture.

Textbooks and Readings

All assigned readings for the course will be uploaded to D2L.

Learning Technologies and Requirements

In order to complete online (or blended) courses, University of Calgary students are required to have reliable access to the following technology:

- A computer with a supported operating system, as well as the latest security and malware updates, with current antivirus software enabled;
- Broadband internet connection, and a current and updated web browser;
- A webcam (built-in or external), and a microphone and speaker (built-in or external) or headset with microphone.

If you need access to other software programs to complete assignments, your instructor will provide relevant information and links.

If you have technical difficulties, contact IT support services. See <https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/student-campus-services-information-technologies-it.html>

Viewing Requirements Students are required to view all of the films posted on D2L prior the lecture on Thursday. If you miss one, it is your responsibility to view the film(s) on your own time.

Assignments and Evaluation

Weight	Assessed Components	Due
10%	Participation	Weekly
25%	Response Paper	Oct 12
20%	Media Diary	Nov 2

10%	Quiz	Nov 23
35%	Final Assignment	Dec 7

Participation: 10%

Since this class involves both challenging programs and ideas, attendance, class participation, and completion of the readings are absolutely necessary. Lecture content will usually move beyond the week’s assigned readings, so students will need to have read the required materials by the Thursday lecture in order for the class experience to remain meaningful. Class participation grades will be evaluated based on the quality of your contributions to in-class discussions and the completion of short in-class assignments.

Reading Response Paper: 25%

Students will submit a response essay on October 12. This essay will be submitted on D2L, and can address any of the readings covered up until that date. Students should provide a cogent and brief précis of their chosen reading followed by a critical analysis. Critical analyses might include situating the reading in relation to other arguments surveyed in the course, relating the reading to a film screened in class, or following a particular strand of the reading’s argument in order to pursue it further. Ultimately, the response essay is an opportunity for students to work through their thoughts in written form, and to develop their writing skills before the major research paper.

Media Diary: 20%

For a period of two weeks, students will keep a diary of their television viewing practices. The diary will directly address a set of questions determined by the instructor, which connect to the core problems of the class. Note: this assignment is evaluated on a PASS/FAIL basis.

Quiz: 10%

On November 23 at 9:30am, students will get access to a timed quiz (30 minutes, which includes an additional 50% time) on D2L that covers the lectures and readings from the period between October 12 until November 16. Students have a 24-hour window to complete the quiz, which will have ten multiple choice questions. The quiz is open book but students may not consult each other.

Final Assignment: 35%

An assignment sheet on the final paper will be given out October 21. Length: 6-8 pages, double-spaced. Due Date: Tuesday December 7th on D2L.

***Note: Each written assignment will be accompanied by a rubric and instruction sheet on D2L**

Registrar-scheduled Final Examination: No

Note: You do not have to complete all the assignments and exams in order to receive a passing grade in this course.

Submission of Assignments

Please submit all assignments by uploading them to the designated D2L dropbox. Include your name and ID number on all assignments. Be sure to keep a copy of each submitted assignment and to submit the proper version.

Private information related to individual students is treated with the utmost regard by University of Calgary faculty. Student assignments will be accessible only by the authorized course faculty, and personal information is collected in accordance with the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy (FOIP) Act*. Please note that instructors may use audio or video recording for lesson capture, assessment of student learning, and self-assessment of teaching practices.

Policy for Late Assignments

Assignments submitted after the deadline may be penalized with the loss of 5% or a partial letter grade (e.g.: A- to B+) for each day late.

Student Accommodations

Students seeking an accommodation based on disability or medical concerns should contact Student Accessibility Services (SAS); SAS will process the request and issue letters of accommodation to instructors. For information on support services and accommodations for students with disabilities, visit www.ucalgary.ca/access/. Students who require an accommodation based on a protected ground other than disability should communicate this need in writing to their Instructor. For the full policy on Student Accommodations, see <https://www.ucalgary.ca/legal-services/university-policies-procedures/student-accommodation-policy>

Students seeking accommodation for transient illnesses (e.g., the flu) or another legitimate reason should contact their instructors. Whenever possible, students should provide supporting documentation to support their request; however, instructors may not require a medical note. For information on the use of a statutory declaration, see the *University Calendar*:

<https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/m-1.html>

Expectations for Writing

Department policy directs that all written assignments and, to a lesser extent, written exam responses be assessed at least partly on writing skills. Writing skills include not only surface correctness (grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, etc.) but also general clarity and organization and proper documentation of research sources. For further information, please refer to the *University of Calgary Calendar* section on writing across the curriculum:

<http://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/e-2.html>

Grading & Department of Communication, Media and Film Grade Scale

The following table outlines the grade scale percentage equivalents used in the Department. of Communication, Media and Film. Final grades are reported as letter grades.

In this course, letter grades will be used for all assignments, with the exception of Media Diary which will be assessed as PASS/FAIL.

Grade Point Value	Description	Grade	Dept of CMF grade scale equivalents*	Letter grade % equivalent for calculations*
4.00	Outstanding performance	A+	96 - 100%	98.0%
4.00	Excellent performance	A	90 - 95.99%	93.0%
3.70	Approaching excellent performance	A -	85 - 89.99%	87.5%
3.30	Exceeding good performance	B+	80 - 84.99%	82.5%

3.00	Good performance	B	75 - 79.99%	77.5%
2.70	Approaching good performance	B-	70 - 74.99%	72.5%
2.30	Exceeding satisfactory performance	C+	65 - 69.99%	67.5%
2.00	Satisfactory performance	C	60 - 64.99%	62.5%
1.70	Approaching satisfactory performance	C-	55 - 59.99%	57.5%
1.30	Marginal pass. Insufficient preparation for subsequent courses in the same subject	D+	53 - 54.99%	54.0%
1.00	Minimal pass. Insufficient preparation for subsequent courses in the same subject	D	50 - 52.99%	51.5%
0.00	Failure. Did not meet course requirements.	F	0 - 49.99%	0%

* Column 4: If percentages are used to calculate final grades, then grades falling within these ranges will be translated to the corresponding letter grades. Column 5: These percentage equivalents will be used for calculating final grades unless an alternative method of final grade calculation is outlined above.

Plagiarism

Using any source whatsoever without clearly documenting it is a serious academic offense. Consequences include failure on the assignment, failure in the course and possibly suspension or expulsion from the university. These requirements apply to all assignments and sources, including those in non-traditional formats such as Web pages or visual media.

You must document not only direct quotations but also paraphrases and ideas where they appear in your text. A reference list at the end is insufficient by itself. **In-text citations must be provided, and readers must be able to tell exactly where your words and ideas end and other people's words and ideas begin.** Wording taken directly from a source must be enclosed within quotation marks (or, for long quotations, presented in the format prescribed by the documentation style you are using). Paraphrased information must not follow the original wording and sentence structure with only slight word substitutions here and there.

For information on citation and documentation styles (MLA, APA, Chicago, IEEE, etc.), visit the Student Success Centre resource links at <https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/student-success/writing-support> or the Purdue Online Writing Lab (OWL) Research and Citation Resources at https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/resources.html

If you need help with your writing or have questions about citing sources, consult your instructor or visit the Student Success Centre, Taylor Family Digital Library. To book an appointment, go to <https://ucalgary.ca/student-services/student-success/writing-support>

Instructor Intellectual Property & Copyright Legislation

Course materials created by the instructor (including lectures, course outlines, presentations and posted notes, labs, case studies, assignments, and exams) remain the intellectual property of the instructor. These materials may NOT be reproduced, redistributed, or copied without the explicit consent of the instructor. The posting of course materials to third party websites such as note-sharing sites without permission is prohibited. Sharing of extracts of these course materials with

other students enrolled in the same course section and term may be allowed under fair dealing. Check with the instructor if you have any questions about sharing materials with classmates.

To ensure they are aware of the consequences of unauthorized sharing of course materials (including instructor notes & electronic versions of textbooks), all students are required to read the *University of Calgary Policy on Acceptable Use of Material Protected by Copyright* at <https://www.ucalgary.ca/legal-services/university-policies-procedures/acceptable-use-material-protected-copyright-policy> and the requirements of the *Copyright Act* (<https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/C-42/index.html>). Students who use material protected by copy-right in violation of this policy may be disciplined under the Non-Academic Misconduct Policy.

Academic Misconduct

For information on academic misconduct and its consequences, please see the *University of Calgary Calendar* at <http://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/k.html>

Research Ethics

Whenever you perform research with human participants, including surveys, interviews, or observations as part of your university studies, you are responsible for obtaining research ethics approval and for following university research ethics guidelines. In some cases, your instructors may apply for course-based research ethics approval for certain assignments, and in those cases, they must review and approve your research plans and supervise your research. For more information about your research ethics responsibilities, please see <https://arts.ucalgary.ca/research/arts-researchers/resources-researchers-and-instructors/ethics>

Deferrals of Course Work and Requests for Reappraisal

For university regulations and procedures related to deferral of term work, see <https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/g-7.html>

For information about deferrals of final examinations, see <https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/g-6.html>

For information about requesting a reappraisal of course work or of a final grade, see <https://www.ucalgary.ca/pubs/calendar/current/i.html>

Student Support Services and Resources

Please see <https://www.ucalgary.ca/registrar/registration/course-outlines> for information about student support services and resources, including Wellness and Mental Health Resources, Student Success programs and services, the Student Ombuds Office, the Student Union, and Safewalk.

For resources on D2L, Zoom, Yuja, etc., see

<https://elearn.ucalgary.ca/desire2learn/home/students>. (Find the topic menu under the icon to the left of the ELEARN banner.)

Schedule of Lecture Topics and Readings

September 7

Introduction: When TV Became Art

Screening:

True Detective, Season 1, Episode 4, “Who Goes There?”

Reading:

Emily Nussbaum, “When TV Became Art.” *The New Yorker*. 4 December 2009. <http://nymag.com/arts/all/aughts/62513/>

Recommended: Brett Mills, "What Does It Mean to Call Television Cinematic?" In *Television Aesthetics and Style*, pp. 57-66.

Deborah Jaramillo, "Rescuing Television from 'The Cinematic,'" in *Television Aesthetics and Style*, pp. 67-75.

September 14 The Broadcast Network Era

Screening: *I Love Lucy*, Season 1, Episode 8, "Men Are Messy"
I Love Lucy, Season 2, Episode 1, "Job Switching"
The Twilight Zone, Season 1, Episode 22, "The Monsters are due on Maple Street"

Reading: Raymond Williams, "The Technology and the Society," and "Programming: Distribution and Flow," in *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*, pp. 1-25, 77-120.

Lynn Spiegel, "The Domestic Economy of Television Viewing in Postwar America," *Critical Studies in Media Communication* 6. 4 (1989): pp. 337-354.

Recommended: Miranda Banks, "I Love Lucy: The Write Producer," in *How to Watch Television*, pp. 244-252.

September 21 The Multi-Channel Era

Screening: *Twin Peaks, Pilot*

Reading: Amanda Lotz, "Understanding Television at the Beginning of the Post-Network Era," in *The Television Will Be Revolutionized Second Edition*, pp. 21-52.

Dennis Lim, "Welcome to *Twin Peaks*," in *David Lynch: The Man from Another Place*, pp. 83-104.

Recommended: David Lavery, "Introduction: The Semiotics of the Cobbler: *Twin Peaks*' Interpretive Community," and Jonathan Rosenbaum, "Bad Ideas: The Art and Politics of *Twin Peaks*," in *Full of Secrets: Critical Approaches to Twin Peaks*, pp. 11-21; pp. 22-30.

September 28 *SPECIAL NOTE: LECTURE WILL BE UPLOADED BUT THURSDAY'S SYNCHRONOUS CLASS WILL BE CANCELLED FOR TRUTH AND RECONCILIATION DAY (SEPT 30)**

It's not TV: It's HBO

- Screening: *The Sopranos*
- Reading: Dana Polan, "Cable Watching: HBO, *The Sopranos*, and Discourses of Distinction," In *Cable Visions*, pp. 261-283.
- Martha P. Nochimson, "Waddaya Lookin' At?: Re-reading the Gangster Genre Through *The Sopranos*." *Film Quarterly* 56.2 (2002): pp. 2-13.
- Recommended: Deborah Jaramillo, "The family racket: AOL Time Warner, HBO, *The Sopranos*, and the construction of a quality brand." *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 26.1 (2002): pp. 59-75.

October 5 The Wire and Surveillance Capitalism

- Screening: *The Wire*
- Reading: Linda Williams, *On The Wire*, excerpts.
- Recommended: Jeremy Butler, "The Television Series," and "The Television Serial," in *Television: Critical Methods and Applications 4th Edition*, pp. 2011: 33-48.

October 12 *RESPONSE PAPER DUE OCT 12

Prestige Style and Masculinity

- Screening: *Mad Men*
Breaking Bad
- Reading: Jeremy Butler, "*Mad Men*: Visual Style," in *How to Watch Television*, pp. 38-46.
- Lynn Spigel, "Postfeminist nostalgia for a prefeminist future," *Screen* 54.2 (2013): pp. 270-278.
- Recommended: Amanda Lotz, "Any Men and Outlaws: The Unbearable Burden of Straight White Men," in *Cable Guys*, pp. 82-115.
- Niels Niessen, "Mad Men and Mindfulness," *Discourse* 40.3 (2018): pp. 273-307.

October 19 "Post-feminism" and Precarity

- Screening: *Sex and the City*
Girls
Fleabag

- Reading: Jane Arthurs, "*Sex and the City* and consumer culture: Remediating postfeminist drama." *Feminist Media Studies* 3.1 (2003): pp. 83-98.
- Taylor Nygaard, "Girls Just Want to be "Quality": HBO, Lena Dunham, and *Girls'* conflicting brand identity." *Feminist Media Studies* 13.2 (2013): pp. 370-374.
- Serena Daalmans, "I'm Busy Trying to Become Who I Am": Self-entitlement and the city in HBO's *Girls*." *Feminist Media Studies* 13.2 (2013): pp. 359-362.
- Orlaith Darling, "'The moment you realise someone wants your body:' neoliberalism, mindfulness and female embodiment in *Fleabag*." *Feminist Media Studies* (2020): pp. 1-16.

October 26 Complex Narrative and Puzzle Aesthetics

- Screening: *The Leftovers*
- Reading: Jason Mittell, "Narrative complexity in contemporary American television." *The Velvet Light Trap* 58.1 (2006): pp. 29-40.
- Recommended: Warren Buckland and Thomas Elsaesser, "Introduction: Puzzle Plots," and "The Mind Game Film," in *Puzzle Films: Complex Storytelling in Contemporary Cinema*, pp. 1-12; 13-41.

November 2 *MEDIA DIARY DUE NOVEMBER 2

The Streaming Era: New Platforms and Practices

- Screening: **Class Vote!**
- Reading: Mareike Jenner, "Is this TVIV? On Netflix, TVIII and binge-watching," *New media & society*, 18.2 (2016): pp. 257-273.
- Recommended: Chuck Tyron, "TV Got Better: Netflix's Original Programming Strategies and Binge Viewing." *Media Industries* 2.2 (2015): pp. 104-116.

November 9 READING WEEK – NO CLASSES HELD

November 16 Intersectionality and the Politics of Youth Culture

- Screening: *I May Destroy You*
Euphoria

Reading: TBD

November 23 Comedy at the Crossroads

Screening: *Atlanta*
Nathan for You

Reading: Lauren Berlant and Sianne Ngai, "Comedy has issues." *Critical Inquiry*, 43.2 (2017): 233-249.

Lucas Thompson, "Nathan for You and the New Sincerity aesthetic," *New Review of Film and Television Studies* 18.4 (2020): pp. 431-451.

November 30 Transnational TV

Screening: *Top of the Lake*

Reading: Michele Hilmes, "Transnational TV: What Do We Mean by 'Coproduction' Anymore?," *Media Industries Journal* 1.2 (2014): no pages.

December 7 *FINAL ASSIGNMENT DUE DEC 7

Screening: **Class vote!**