MCS 351: Topics in Television Studies:
Long-Form Narrative Television

Course Description:
In this Special Topics in Television Studies course, we will examine the changing dynamics of narrative form as it has been seen on television, and focus most directly on long-form storytelling which is endemic to serialized narratives. We will look at narrative form and learn how elements in a narrative function to tell stories and communicate culture. Using readings and screenings to demonstrate narrative characteristics, we will analyze the development of narrative on television and hypothesize what the future of television narrative will look like.

Course Rationale:
Television has always been a medium based on narrative. From its humble beginnings as “radio told in pictures,” the small screen of television has consistently demonstrated how adept it is as telling stories. Yet, the type of stories that have been told have changed dramatically in the past seventy-five years of television entertainment. Television also does not exist in a vacuum: it has been influenced (and been an influence on) other media technologies throughout its existence. From radio to film to video games to social media, television has never been the sole source of narrative information for its viewers.

This course critically examines how narrative exists in different forms on television, focusing most directly on the way it becomes serialized. Serial television entertainment supports expansive narratives and franchises. These types of stories typically resist closure and focus instead on the pleasure of the moment; yet they also embrace extended stories that span across the decades. Some television narratives have survived onscreen for decades. Today, the transmediation of media content across different technologies increases not only the aesthetic pleasures, but also the economic impetus for long-form television.

In this course, therefore, we will look at long-form narrative on (and related to) television, and note how it comments on contemporary issues in our culture. We look at the earliest days of televised narrative and explore how narrative evolves through television history. We will look at narrative theory, from the earliest Aristotelian narrative structure to today’s multi-linear narrative framework. Finally we arrive at contemporary television texts which comment upon our current cultural climate. Students will view television episodes that challenge their concepts of narrative, of media, of genre, and of the world.

Course Goals:
There are a number of goals and objectives I hope we will accomplish in this course. The first is informational: when this course is completed, everyone should have an understanding of how narrative is constructed and what its role has been in television history. The second goal is more critical: when this course is completed, everyone should be able to experience a television narrative with a keen eye and a distanced intellectual curiosity. Finally, we should all be able to identify the developments in narrative theory and genre as evidenced through television.

Assigned Readings:
Readings will be available on D2L. In addition, the following materials will be used in this class.
Books to buy (from DePaul bookstore or online):

Recommended:

DVDs to buy:
*Torchwood: Children of Earth* (BBC, 2010). (available from amazon.com or on Netflix streaming)

Additionally, students will be expected to watch most of one full series of television – list of shows to be passed out in class.

Recommended DVD:
*Heroes*, Season 1 (NBC, 2006).

Students should have access to a television or a stable Internet connection for this class. During the week of April 6-13 I will expect you to watch each day’s *Days of Our Lives*, either on television, taped, or online at Hulu.com or NBC.com.

**Grading and Assignments:**

Grades are based on 500 points.

- In-Class Responses: 100 pts (8x12.5pts)
- Paper 1: 100 pts
- Paper 2: 100 pts
- ARG Project: 100 pts
- Attendance and Participation: 100 pts

**In-Class Response**
For each class, we will screen two-three episodes of R. Kelly’s *Trapped in the Closet*. Students will be required to write a short response to this screening at the start of class which integrates at least one major concept from the readings due that day. The object of this response is to gauge the student’s ability to synthesize reading with practice. Students will be allowed to type or handwrite, and will be allowed to use their class readings as references. In-class response will take the first ten minutes or so of class. There is no reading response due on the last day.
Paper 1
Your first paper will ask you to compare two different serial narratives. On Apr 6 we will screen Tuesdays’ episode of Days of Our Lives. You will be expected to watch the next five complete episodes of the soap opera (Apr 6, Apr 7, Apr 8, Apr 11, Apr 12). You may watch them on TV, DVR them, or watch them on Hulu or NBC.com. On Apr 13 we will be screening the first episode of the five part serial Torchwood: Children of Earth. You will need to watch the other four in the series on your own. Your first paper, due on Apr 22, will be analyze the narrative strategies used in the both television series. Conduct a comparative analysis of these two programs in a 1200 word paper. Specifically, combine your own analysis of the programs with ideas about the forms, audiences, and social meanings of seriality drawn from the readings. Use your readings as well as class screenings to justify and illustrate your points. Papers should posted to the D2L dropbox, by 5pm on Friday, Apr 22. Late papers will not be accepted.

Paper 2:
For this paper you will be expected to watch at least the first 12-14 episodes (you may watch more) of the first season of a television program (list of acceptable programs to be passed out in class; you may pick one from that list or you may choose a different program with my permission). You should therefore begin work on this paper early. You should do two different things for this paper. (1) Chart the seriality and the episodic qualities of this television show. How does the narrative continue throughout the first season? What are the beats, arcs, and serial elements? (2) You should read through the Jason Mittell article “Previously On: Primetime Serials and the Mechanics of Memory” (available on D2L, or at <http://justtv.wordpress.com/2009/07/03/previously-on-primetime-serials-and-the-mechanics-of-memory/>). Analyze your television program in light of Mittell’s essay. What aspects of viewer ‘memory’ does one have to engage to watch your program? How does your program engage viewers? Paper should be 1200 words, due at 5pm on May 20 to D2L’s dropbox.

ARG Project:
Your final project will be to design an Alternate Reality Game about a television show of your choice. You should include a least five different media technologies in this ARG, as well as an outline of how they will work together. Lead me through the user experience. You may construct this project however you would like: you may write it, use a webpage to design it, create a powerpoint, or turn it in on paper. How does the game work? What specific tiers are there? How many levels? NOTE: You don’t actually have to make this ARG, just design it. You should turn in a 3-4 page paper that outlines your ARG and describes how it works as well. All project materials are due by 6pm on June 08 to the D2L Dropbox.
Day 1: Mar 30 Topic: Introduction, narrative
Reading: None
Screenings: The Wire (“The Target”); In class: 24 (“Day One: 12am – 1am”)

Day 2: April 6 Topic: Narrative linearity
Readings:
Abbott, “Defining Narrative”
Allen, “A Reader Oriented Poetics of the Soap Opera” (61-84)
Peachock: “24”
Screenings: Days of Our Lives (Apr 5); In Class: Soap (Episodes TBA), Trapped (1-3)
Recommended Reading: Shimpach: “How to Watch TV”

Day 3: April 13 Topic: Complex Narratives
Readings:
Espensen, “How to Write Television”
Hills, “Torchwood”
Mittell, “Narrative Complexity”
Screenings: Torchwood: Children of Earth (“Day One”); In Class: Hill Street Blues (Episode TBA), Trapped (4-6)
Recommended Reading: Newman, “Beats and Arcs”

Day 4: Apr 20 No class;
No Readings, No Screening, Use this time to work on your paper

Friday, Apr 22: Paper 1 due to D2L dropbox by 5pm

Day 5: Apr 27 Topic: Experimental Narration
Readings:
Bianculli, “Twin Peaks”
Booy, “Twin Peaks”
Contemporary TV Series: Williams, “Twin Peaks”
Wilcox, “Aesthetics of Cult Television”
Screenings: Twin Peaks (“Traces to Nowhere”); In Class: Arrested Development (“The One Where They Build a House”), Trapped (7-9)
Recommended Reading: Contemporary TV Series: Ndalianis, “Television and the Neo-Baroque”

Day 6: May 04 Topic: Narrative and Temporality
Reading:
Chapman, “Life on Mars”
Dancyger, “Nonlinear Editing”
Nelson, “Life on Mars”
Screenings: Life on Mars (“Pilot”); In Class: How I Met Your Mother (“Bagpipes”, Yellow Umbrella Mashup), Trapped (10-12)
Recommended Reading: Booth, “Temporal Displacement”
Day 7: May 11 Topic: Authorship and Narrative
Reading:
Abbott, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”
Pearson, “The Writer/Producer in American Television” (Cont. TV Series);
Williamson, “Buffy the Vampire Slayer”
Recommended Reading: Contemporary TV Series: Freedman, “Horror, Everyday Life, Buffy”

Day 8: May 18 Topic: Transmediation
Reading:
Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101”
Johnson, “Cult TV and the Industry”
Stafford: “Heroes”
Kirkland and Moore, The Walking Dead
Screenings: Heroes (“Genesis”); In Class: Walking Dead (“Pilot”), Trapped (16-18)
Recommended Reading: Perryman, “Doctor Who and the Convergence of Media; McCloud (Ch 1-3); Vaughn, Y the Last Man

Friday, May 20: Paper 2 due to D2L Dropbox by 5pm

Day 9: May 25 Topic: Networkization and Alternate Reality Gaming
Reading:
Dena, “More Than a URL”
Dolen: “Lost”
Contemporary TV Series: Hills, “Cult TV, Quality…”
Mittell, “Sites of Participation”
Screenings: Lost (“Through the Looking Glass”); In Class: Alias (“Time Will Tell”), Trapped (19-20)
Recommended Reading: Gray, “Conclusion” (JUST the conclusion)

Day 10: June 01 Topic: Viewer Participation
Reading:
Gray, “Chapter 5: Viewer Created Paratexts” (JUST Chapter 5)
Hills, “Doctor Who”
Robson: “Fandom”
Screenings: Dr Who (“Silence in the Library”); In class: Star Trek: DS9 (“Trials and Tribulations”), Trapped (21-22)
Recommended Reading: Hills, “Doctor Who Mafia”

Final Day: June 08 Topic: Online Seriality    NOTE CHANGE: 2:45–5:00
Lang, “The Status Is Not Quo”
Richards, “Cult TV and New Media”
NO CLASS SCREENING: In Class: The Guild, Lonelygirl15, Dr. Horrible

Wed, June 08: ARG Project due 6pm to D2L dropbox