

## Communication 4770: Television Criticism

Fall 2020. Section 601. 3 Credit Hours.

Room: Zoom Meeting ID: 829 8678 8174 | Passcode: cmn4770

M 3-4:15 p.m.

**Instructor:** Dr. S.M. Walus

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**Office Hours:** M 6-7 p.m. / T & W 12 – 1:30 p.m.

Always use Panthermail outside of class to contact (allow 24 hours for a response).

### Required Texts:

All readings provided via Panthermail. You are also required to have access to a television or television-like device (because this is *television* criticism).

Also: You must use your EIU Panthermail account for all correspondence. No exceptions.

**EIU Catalogue Description:** Students will utilize a variety of theoretical lenses to critically analyze and evaluate television histories, systems and individual texts. The course includes lectures, discussions, presentations, selected viewings, intensive writing and examinations. A limit of 3 hours may be applied to a major or minor.

### Course Description:

Television remains the greatest shared cultural force for explaining the world and providing possibilities for living in that world. The average household spends 59.5 hours a week watching televisual content. From early childhood through old age viewers connect with characters who they will never meet and invest deeply into a narrative that will never end. This course takes an in-depth examination into how television keeps us watching and the complex meanings present in even the most innocuous programming.

### Course Objectives:

1. To gain a comprehensive understanding of the field of television studies and its various theoretical lenses.
2. To deconstruct the various elements of the televisual productions that circulate meaning.
3. To analyze a diverse set of television texts while considering general principles of televisual meaning making.

### How the Class Works:

This course is simple with its delivery and only requires you to attend the weekly virtual meeting using Zoom and to correspond / turn in assignments through Panthermail. That is correct, there is **no D2L site**. The Zoom discussion will provide you with an overview of the material as well as the time to discuss the weekly assignment. Show up, get involved, turn assignments in on time, and good things will happen.

Monday's discussion will pertain directly to the assignment, you will then send all completed assignments directly to my Panthermail before their due date at 11:59 a.m. on Wednesday. From here, you receive a confirmed receipt and feedback on the assignment. This direct method allows you to communicate directly with me whenever you need. You will then be sent everything you need to complete next week's assignment (when it requires external sources) in a single email each Wednesday.

This style of online course is meant to be truly interactive like a traditional in-person course. Just like the in-person courses, digest the material, ask all questions to the expert faculty, and be sure to work ahead so

that you may ask for guidance and clarification to get the most out of the assignment. In other words, show up, get involved, turn assignments in on time, and good things will happen.

Tip For Success: History shows that the students who print out the syllabus and check off that they completed every element called for that day are always successful in the course.

### Requirements:

- **Time requirements:** This class is a balance between the synchronous class meetings and your own independent research about television and video. Do not underestimate the value of either of these. This class directly informs your future career, so take the time to fully explore both elements.
- **Technical requirements: You must have an actual computer with consistent Internet access.** All online courses presuppose that as a university student you have a baseline of computer literacy as well as regular access to reasonable speed Internet on a computer. This course requires consistent and reliable access to a computer, where you have the ability to spend long amounts of time on it (viewing class time, word processing program, the ability to do a embed a picture in that word processing program) and consistent Internet access. Technology mishaps are never an excuse for not turning in work.
- **Accessibility** - Every effort has been made to make this course accessible for all students. If you have concerns that it is not, and you have a documented disability, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (OSDS). All accommodations must be approved through OSDS. Please stop by McAfee Gym, Room 1210, or call 217-581-6583 to make an appointment..

### Criteria for Evaluation and Grading Policy

**Brings (100%)** – “Brings” are microassignments where you engage with the material presented in the video course meeting and explore the concept independently. Each week in the syllabus has the “bring” listed. This must be sent to my Panthermail by 11:59 a.m. CST on Wednesday in a PDF. No late work is accepted.

The prompt for each “bring” is listed in the detailed syllabus below. Note that each “bring” has multiple components to it, so double check that you have completed the prompt before sending it. Unlike a quiz, the brings require you to be creative in researching and synthesizing information. Additionally, you will find that these “brings” directly relate to your self. I suggest working ahead by a day so that if you run into an issue, you can email for clarifications. These microassignments are your grade in this course. There are 15 “brings” throughout the course of the semester at they are worth three points each.

The evaluation system of your micoassignments is as follows:

- 3 – A “bring” will receive 3 points if:
  - It cites applicable examples, addresses every facet of the prompt, and demonstrates a quality and thoughtful engagement with the concept.
  - Is an excellent project that contains *every requested element* stated in the parameters
  - It directly utilizes the concepts of the course, readings, and lessons in its creation.
  - It is executed with creativity and attention to detail.
- 2 – A “bring” will receive 2 points if:
  - Overall, it demonstrates some type of effort, but not a complete one. It has some rough spots mixed with the bright spots.

- It addresses most or all of the prompts in a meaningful way.
- It engages the readings and lessons and attempts to apply them, but there are some execution issues in the message, analysis, or conclusions.
- Pieces of the prompts may be missing, the examples may not match, or elements may be under-developed.
- 1 – A “bring” will receive 1 point if:
  - It is rough.
  - It demonstrates a minimal adherence to the parameters of the prompt (ex: incorrect format, missing elements) and largely ignores the concepts, readings, and lessons of the course.
  - There is no attention to detail and it makes little effort to provide relevant examples.
- 0 – A “bring” will receive 0 points if:
  - This “bring” is either totally missing or just abysmal.
  - It has every trapping of being written thoughtlessly five minutes before it was due.

As you will be submitting your bring via Panthermail via PDF by 11:59 a.m. CST on Wednesday. I will provide the numerical evaluation and if applicable, some brief feedback.

### **45 points total**

If a teacher ever told you that everyone starts at an A in a course, they lied to you. Everyone starts with a zero and has to climb their way up Point Mountain. In this course, there are only 45 points, and you have to earn them.

### **General Grading Guidelines:**

Grades will be assigned as follows:

100-90% = A            89-80% = B            79-70% = C            69-60% = D            59– 0% = F

### **Note on Graduate Student Projects**

Students in the Communication Studies M.A. program can take any course 4750 or above for graduate credit, provided the course requires work past the undergraduate level. In this course, M.A. students will be required to have 50% more to their project (ex: if a report is 10 pages for the undergraduate, it will be 15 pages for the graduate student) as well as being held to a graduate-level of research sources and analyses in evaluation.

### **Important Notice About Late Work / Due Dates / Extension Coupons :**

**Late Work:** I do not accept late work under any circumstances. Please plan ahead for any and all contingencies. All assignments are due by 11:59 a.m CST (one minute before noon) on Wednesday. If you send it after this point, I will merely reply “This is late” and not accept it. Let me reiterate, no late work is accepted in this course as it only leads to future problems.

**Extension Coupons:** That being said, life does happen sometimes. With this in mind, you are allowed two extension coupons that can be used on any “bring” for any reason without any explanation needed. This virtual coupon (I usually have these in hard-copy form, but alas, we are digital this semester) allows you an extension on your “bring” for up to 24 hours, and you still receive full points if you accomplish the assignment satisfactorily. Here is how to use the coupon:

1. You may only use two coupons per semester. This system is meant to be flexible and to simplify life for both of us in the event that you cannot complete an assignment on time. By using these coupons, you will not ask me to accept any other late work this semester regardless of your circumstance. If you ask me to accept late work after using your coupons, the previous coupons will be considered null and void and you will receive zeros on those projects.
2. These coupons can be used at any point in the semester through week three (the first 75% of the semester). This means that coupons cannot be used in the final week of the semester.
3. In order to use the virtual extension coupon, all you have to do write “I realize this assignment was late, but I am using my (first/second) extension coupon” when you send your completed late assignment to my Panthermail.

### **Academic integrity:**

Just do your own work. It is okay if your work is rough around the edges, but I want to see how you are engaging with the questions. Students are expected to maintain principles of academic integrity and conduct as defined in EIU’s Code of Conduct (<http://www.eiu.edu/judicial/studentconductcode.php>). I am interested in your concepts and your messages. I have zero tolerance policy for plagiarism. Violations will be reported to the Office of Student Standards and the consequences of academic dishonesty range from failing of the course to expulsion from the university. If I find that you have copied anything directly from sources or another student (your assignments are compared to the database) you will automatically fail the assignment as well as the course. You will then be reported to Student Standards where your academic deception will be put into your permanent file. If found guilty for a second time, you will be expelled from the university and forced to explain for everyone for the rest of your life why you do not have a college degree at your minimum wage job. Do your own work and good things will always happen.

**Students with disabilities** - If you are a student with a documented disability in need of accommodations to fully participate in this class, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services (OSDS). All accommodations must be approved through OSDS. Please stop by McAfee Gym, Room 1210, or call 217-581-6583 to make an appointment.

**The Student Success Center** - Students who are having difficulty achieving their academic goals are encouraged to contact the Student Success Center ([www.eiu.edu/success](http://www.eiu.edu/success)) for assistance with time management, test taking, note taking, avoiding procrastination, setting goals, and other skills to support academic achievement. The Student Success Center provides individualized consultations. To make an appointment, call 217-581-6696, or go to McAfee Gym, Room 1301.

**COVID-19 Practices & Expectations on EIU’s Campus.** The University is asking all of us to take precautions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, including wearing face coverings when we are in class together, walking around campus, in the library, or participating in office hours. EIU’s policy is intended to protect all of us on campus, as well as the community, your roommates, and loved ones at home. Additionally, students are expected to not attend class if they are ill and to consult the student health clinic if they have any COVID-19 like symptoms. EIU’s COVID-19 campus practices including face coverings, avoiding campus if sick, sanitizing surfaces, social distancing, and hand washing are based on the best available public health guidance. As a faculty member, I am responsible for ensuring students engage in practices that reduce risk. If you have a health condition that prevents you from wearing a mask, please contact Student Disability Services. If you are unable to follow EIU’s COVID-19 guidelines, you may be asked to leave class or office hours as compliance with public health guidance is essential. Accommodations for instruction and make-up work will be made for students with documented medical absences according to IGP #43 [<https://castle.eiu.edu/auditing/043.php>].

## Tentative Course Schedule

These are listed by the week, but remember, the video meeting is always Monday at 3 p.m.(CST) and the due date for that week's microassignment is due that Wednesday by 11:59 a.m. CST in my Panthermail.

**Topic:** This is the topic of conversation for that week's virtual class meeting. The topics correspond directly to navigating the major, your time at EIU, and the profession of television & video production. The virtual class meeting supplies valuable information for completing the “bring.”

**Bring:** As established earlier, these microassignments are the document you will be turning in by 11:59 a.m CST on Wednesday of that week in PDF form. Please thoroughly follow the prompt and put some thought into them. If you like them and think they are good, odds are that I will too.

## Tentative Course Schedule

### Week 1: Television: Forms and functions.

Topic: Defining television  
What makes it unique  
“Televium”

Television as medium. Television as content

Read: Vande Berg, Wenner, & Gronbeck - “The context for criticism”

Bring: After listening to the class discussion and reading the article, list 5 things that make television absolutely unique from any other screen medium (ex: videos, film, video games). Consider it to be the element of “televium”. Consider elements such as structuring, segmentation, hardware, narrative structure, business strategies, characterization, and production elements. For each item on your list, explain it in a sentence and provide an actual example of the concept.

### Week 2 – Uses & Gratifications of television

Topic: Uses & Gratifications  
The Sociopsychological Needs of the Television Audience

Read: Baran & Davis - “Ch. 7 Audience Theories: Uses and Reception”

Bring: This bring will focus on what Uses & Gratifications entails and how it can predict the success or failure of media (and television in general). The course meeting and reading will provide the foundational knowledge. In your bring you should:

1. In two sentences of clear language, explain what Uses & Gratifications entail in regard to television.
2. Explain how and why Uses & Gratifications can predict the success of a television show.
3. List one of your favorite scripted television shows and list three sociopsychological needs that it gratifies. Make absolutely sure that these are needs (and NOT functions!)
4. Looking at these three needs, explain in a few sentences how you could make a show that gratified those needs as well.

### Week 3 – No class – Labor Day

## Week 4 – Objective-driven treatment development

Topic: Objective-driven production

Treatments

Approaching television structurally

Bring: For this bring, you will start on your treatment for an original television show pilot. This semester, we will be considering narratives, genre, and characters in a structural manner. Throughout your analysis, you will draw inspiration from well-done programs, break them apart structurally, and utilize the structures of multiple programs in order to generate your own program. This bring is your first draft of a minimalist treatment. It will take some time and creativity. For this minimalist treatment of your original television pilot you should include:

1. Title (searched on IMDB to make sure it has not been taken already)
2. The three sociopsychological needs your show will gratify.
  1. For each of the needs, list a television show that expertly gratifies the need. Include a sentence explaining how it does so.
3. Format: Sub-genre of show / narrative style
  1. For each sub-genre, and the narrative style, list a television show that is a superior example of this sub-genre or narrative style. Include a sentence explaining how it does so.
4. Series logline (3-5 sentences summing up the character, the conflict (question), and setting).
  1. For the conflict and setting, list a television show for each that does this style of conflict / constructs a world in a way in which you want to. Include a sentence explaining how these shows do this.
5. For each of your three main characters, articulate the idea that s/he represents.
  1. For each character's embodied idea, list a character from a television show that expertly embodies this idea. Include a sentence explaining how s/he does so.
6. What is the main arc / conflict / question of your pilot for its first 6 episodes?

## Week 5 – Narrative Structures

Topic: Macro structural considerations

Enigma / delay / resolution

Status quo / disruption / complications / resolution

The 4 C's

Cause and effect

Binary oppositions

Read: Kozloff “Narrative Theory and Television”

Bring: Find a pilot that you wish you could have written / directed / produced. You will break apart the A-story (the main arc of the episode) in the following manner:

- The Enigma/delay/resolution
  - Enigma (question asked) / Status quo
  - Disruption (what set things into action?)
  - Complications (what multiple actions resulted from this disruption?)
  - The resolution (the punctuation mark [?/.] on which we end)

Additionally, for this same episode you will identify the 4 C's of narrative for this A-story. Specifically these are:

- Conflict

- Character
- Causality (instances of cause and effect throughout the episode)
- Coherence (an element previewed that pays off later)

### **Week 6 – Narrative Structures (A/B/C stories, advanced storytelling)**

Topic: A/B/C Stories

Segmenting at the episode level

Applying narrative structures to A/B/C

Centralizing locations

Disruption and interruption on structural level

Bring: Watch an episode of a well-written television show. Ideally this would be the type of show that could inform your own treatment. Make sure that you select this episode from what you consider to be the best season of the show. You will be watching how the A/B/C stories work together. Specifically watch for how they are structured, how they interrupt each other, how the show uses coherence between them, and the use of centralizing locations to have these stories overlap. While watching, you will create a timeline for the A/B/C stories. Analog (drawn) or digitally (a program) works for the construction. Give each story a color code and when that story is on the screen, mark it on the timeline for the corresponding number of minutes. For each box, include a few words about what happens in that scene (ex: Jeremy finds documents, confronts Tim). demonstrating the A/B/C overlaps and the amount of screen time

- Note: These will overlap on a well-written show in a centralizing location. This setting will launch stories for the episode as well as giving characters a vehicle in which to interact (ex: the C comes in to help the A work through a piece of evidence, or provide advice about a relationship)

### **Week 7 – Narrative Structures (delay / equilibrium – Scene level)**

Topic: Equilibrium / disequilibrium

The delay (disruption, complications)

Coherence / causality focus

Binary oppositions

Read: Fiske - "Narrative"

Bring: This week is all about the delay in the form of equilibrium / disequilibrium. These represent the never-ending series of "things are fine / but then something makes them not" exchanges in television narratives. Watch an episode of a well-written television show. Ideally this would be the type of show that could inform your own treatment. Make sure that you select this episode from what you consider to be well-written and engaging. For this bring you will:

- Create three columns. One for the A-story, one for the B-story, one for the C-story. Explain what each of the stories entails in a sentence.
- Underneath each column, you will painstakingly go through the episode (with a lot of pausing) and list out every moment of equilibrium and then the corresponding moment of disequilibrium. Do this in bullet point form. There will be one to two E/D shifts per minute of screen time. Some are small, some are large.
- Any time the show cuts to a different story or commercial break (as signified by the black screen for a few frames), be sure to mark this in your E/D column by writing "interruption."

**Week 8 – Narrative Development (episode / scene level)**

Topic: Narrative structures.

Bring: This week will provide you with time in order to look at the narrative structures of well-written programs. By looking at these shows structurally, you can take these structures and convert a combination of them in to your own treatment. Specifically, this week you should work through the following structures for your own treatment:

1. Work through the enigma/delay/resolution and 4 C's of your episode (use the parameters of Week 5).
2. Create a timeline for your A/B/C stories (use the parameters of Week 6). Additionally, make sure to balance the time for each story in a manner consistent with your genre and use elements such as a centralizing location and interruption to drive the narrative forward.
3. For the A/B/C stories you mapped out above, work through each moment of equilibrium / disequilibrium for the episode (use the parameters of Week 7).

When you complete this, you will have the foundation for a fantastic episode.

**Week 9 – Semiotics – Message & Meaning**

Topic: Semiotics on television

Message and meaning

*Mise en scene* focus

Read: Seiter “Semiotics, structuralism, and television”

Bring: Watch two episodes of television shows from two very different genres that are rich with meaning. Specifically, you will be on the look out for two shows with amazing *mise en scene* element (staging, costuming, set dressing, and anything else physically present before the cameras roll). Both should inform/inspire your television pilot in some manner. You will be watching for message and meaning, thus you will create two columns (message [the element that appears on the screen] and meaning [what that element communicates]) to list out 10 symbolic elements per show (20 in total). Really pay attention to staging, location, set-dressing, props, costuming, styling, and all the elements that make it worth filming.

**Week 10 – The Codes of Television / myth**

Topic: Levels of semiotics on television

Technical and production elements

Read: Fiske “Codes of Television”

Bring: Watch two episodes of television shows from two very different genres that are rich with meaning. Specifically, you will be on the look out for two shows with amazing technical and production elements (camera movements, visual composition, cuts, post-production techniques). Both should inform/inspire your television pilot in some manner. You will be watching for message and meaning, thus you will create two columns (message [the element that appears on the screen] and meaning [what that element communicates]) to list out 10 symbolic elements per show (20 in total). Really pay attention to visual composition, framing, camera movements, focal shifts, when they cut from show to shot, and post-production techniques such as color grading or audio sweetening.

**Week 11 – Visualization / asking the question visually / genres**



Topic: Structuring a scene

Visualizing

Asking the question visually, aurally

Bring: This week you will be watching two opening scenes from two very different genres that provide exposition of the setting as they introduce us to the televisual world. These should be two opening scenes that you wish you had shot and from which you may draw some inspiration for your own work. For each scene, work through:

- What is the narrative function of this opening scene?
- How did it accomplish this visually? Aurally?
- What is the first thing we see?
- What is the first thing we hear (sound / music)?
- What is the first bit of dialogue / v.o.?
- How does it visualize exposition (showing us the setting?)

### **Week 12 – Semiotic & generic treatment development**

Topic: Unpacking a genre and visualization.

Bring: Using the structures you have analyzed over the previous three weeks, you will be structuring your own television pilot using these structures as inspirational pieces. Specifically you will:

1. List out 10 mise en scene elements that will define your show (use the parameters of Week 9).  
When in doubt, consult your genre for a roadmap.
2. List out 10 technical and production elements that will define your show (use the parameters of Week 10). When in doubt, consult your genre for a roadmap.
3. Structure the opening scene of your episode (use the parameters of Week 11).

### **Week 13 – Characters & Characterization**

Topic: Characters and Characterization

Embodying an idea

Motivations

Signifying practices

Read: Butler Ch. 3 “Building narrative : Character actor, star”

Bring: This week you will be examining an exceptional character from a television show that ran for at least five seasons. As characters are ultimately dynamic, you will watch the pilot / first episode and watch the Season 5 premiere. You will create two columns (one for the pilot and one for the Season 5 premiere) and work through:

- What idea that the character embodies.
- The character's motivation
- Five character traits (extension of the mise en scene)
- Five performance traits

### **Week 14 – Character reading / characters in arcs**

Topic: Character functions in a narrative

Reading character

Read: Fiske Ch. 9 “Character Reading”

Bring: This week you will be focusing on the narrative function of characters within the course of the episode. Character binaries drive a show forward for endless episodes (if characters embody opposite ideas in various manners, conflict is an inevitability even if the situations is a mundane one). You will watch a show with great ensemble cast. For each of the three main characters you will:

- Articulate two ideas that the character embodies.
- Demonstrate how each of these is in binary opposition to one of the other two main characters.
- Articulate their two narrative functions.

### **Week 15 – Character Development**

Topic: Developing characters structurally.

Bring: This week you will be developing the characters for your treatment using the structures you have analyzed from the previous two weeks. For each of your three main characters, you will work through:

- Articulate two ideas that the character embodies.
- Demonstrate how each of these is in binary opposition to one of the other two main characters.
- Articulate their two narrative functions.
- The character's motivation
- Five character traits (extension of the mise en scene)
- Five performance traits

### **Final**

12/17 (Thurs) 2:45-4:45

Note: As it is finals week, your bring is due before class by 2:44 p.m. in my Panthermail.

Topic: Discussing the complete draft of your treatment.

Bring: This week, you will be combining and refining all of your hard work from throughout the semester. Specifically you will combine the following revisions into a single document:

- Your revised bring from Week 4 (the foundational elements of your treatment).
- Your revised bring from Week 8 (the narrative structures of your pilot).
- Your revised bring from Week 12 (the semiotic and generic considerations of your pilot).
- Your revised bring from Week 15 (the character structures of your pilot).