

# COMM 329: Topics in Film and TV Analysis

Spring 2020

English Department

St. John Fisher College

Dr. Scott O'Neil

**Office:** Kearney 321

**Office Hours:** Thursday 5-6pm (in Cyber) and Friday 1:30-2:30pm (in Kearney 321)

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**Class Information:** Tuesday/Thursday, 3:10 to 4:30 pm, Basil Hall 119

## **Required Texts:**

-Benshoff— *Introduction to Film and Television Analysis*

-We will also be viewing several films and television shows. Many of these are streaming on either Netflix or Disney+. Media that is not streaming will be provided for you via our course website.

## **Course Description:**

This course provides an introduction to the theoretical approaches that underlie film and television analysis. We will learn how to analyze cinematic and television texts from a variety of approaches, including but not limited to issues of production, auteurship, audience, cinematography, and political elements including the political climate at the time of production. The Benshoff text will serve as the structure for our discussions of film analysis. Our course topic will focus on the history and development of super-hero media. By analyzing the development of characters including Superman, Batman, the X-Men, and Spider-Man, we will explore the ways in which the film and television industries engage in a series of perpetual adaptations. What are the “core elements”—the unchanging aspects—of these characters? How do they change to address the different cultural expectations of both audiences and creators? These questions will guide our analyses.

## **Course Goals:**

- Develop the skills to critically interpret film and television media
- Be able to differentiate the key issues of film and television media
- Be able to utilize specialized vocabulary and methodology of film/television analysis
- Engage with issues of adaptation
- Develop the skills to both write and speak critically in an analysis of film/tv text

## **Assignments/Grading:**

- 10% -Attendance/Participation (incl Blackboard Dynamic Notes)
- 20% -4 short responses
- 15% -Midterm (take-home)
- 20% -Commentary track assignment
- 10% -Paper pitches
- 25% -Paper (full process)

### *Attendance*

So much of any discussion-based class is reliant upon your presence. Please only miss class when absolutely necessary, and communicate with me when that happens.

### *Reading and Participation/Blackboard Dynamic Notes*

The reading for each day is listed below on the syllabus next to the appropriate dates; please read, annotate, and think about the reading far enough in advance to participate on or before the participation deadlines. I would encourage you to be as specific as possible in your participation (page numbers, external links, etc). You will also keep a running “dynamic notes” thread in the discussion board throughout the semester.

### *Short Responses*

Short responses should be about one full typed page in length. Responses might expand on a class discussion; they might branch off and consider questions we did not have time to consider in class; they might consider a key image or passage that shapes your view of the work as a whole. Each response should focus on specific passages (or in some cases, one work) read for the course.

Because these responses are fairly short, you are not expected to fully develop and defend a complex thesis. This is your chance to further explore something that confused you or intrigued you about the reading in question – in a focused way. A good short response will lead to an interesting discussion in class. You will write four of these short responses over the course of the semester. There are no set due dates for these responses, however you can only submit one short response in any given week. Over the course of the semester, you must respond to at least one primary and one secondary reading.

### *Commentary Track Assignment*

You will prepare for and execute an expert commentary track for a 30-minute segment of a film of your choosing. You will identify an area of expertise (expertise can be connected to film/tv production, comic book source material, political history, or any number of areas of specialization) and then prepare to speak as an expert in that area. In addition to your commentary track video, you will also hand in a detailed outline, including specific details that you intend to discuss at certain points in the film. You may work individually or in a group of up to three people. If you choose to do a group assignment, each member of the group must have a distinct specialty area, each member must submit an individual outline, and the length of the commentary should be extended by 10 minutes for each additional group member (ie: 1 member is 30 minutes, 2 members is 40 minutes, and 3 members would be 50 minutes). Have fun with this.

### *Paper Pitches*

At about the mid-point of the semester, I will ask you to submit and then workshop two pitches for potential papers. More information on this assignment will be forthcoming.

### *Paper*

Successful papers will develop an argument driven by your interests and connected to the themes of the course. Where the earlier assignments are designed to get you “thinking out loud” about your ideas and reactions to this media, the paper should be a polished argument where you construct a claim, situate that claim within the scholarship on the topic, and support that claim with an analysis of one or more texts.

**SJFC ADA Policy:** In compliance with St. John Fisher College policy and applicable laws, appropriate academic accommodations are available to students with disabilities. All requests for accommodations must be supported by appropriate documentation/diagnosis and determined reasonable by St. John Fisher College. Students with documented disabilities (physical, learning, psychological) who may need academic accommodations are advised to refer to the Student Accessibility Services Website (<https://www.sjfc.edu/student-life/student-accessibility-services/>). Questions should be directed to the Coordinator of Accessibility Services in the Accessibility Services Office and Test Center, Kearney 300 (585.385.5252). Late notification will delay requested accommodations.

**Statement on Academic Integrity:** All students, regardless of level or school, are responsible for following the St. John Fisher College Academic Integrity Policy in addition to any other individual school’s or program’s academic expectations and/or professional standards. Every student is expected to demonstrate academic integrity in all academic pursuits at all times. If a student suspects that another student has violated the Academic Integrity Policy, he or she should contact the instructor for that course and provide support for that suspicion. Any finding of responsibility and associated sanctions for a violation of the Academic Integrity Policy is retained per the College records policy. All students are expected to be familiar with the details of the Academic Integrity Policy (available via <https://www.sjfc.edu/policies/academic-integrity/>).

### **Policies**

#### *Contacting Your Instructor*

I will be delighted to discuss your suggestions, ideas, and concerns about this course with you. You should feel free to drop by during my office hours. If those times are inconvenient, please e-mail me. I’m happy to make other arrangements. Please e-mail me in advance if you need to cancel an appointment.

The best way to contact me is via e-mail. However, I am not permanently attached to my computer (and I have a flip phone. Seriously). **I do not generally check my e-mail between 10 PM and 10 AM.**<sup>1</sup> Please plan your electronic communications accordingly.

### *Written Work*

All writing assignments should be typed and double spaced with one-inch margins. Please use 12-point Times New Roman font. All writing will be handed in electronically via email; **All assignments must be in .doc or .docx format, or I will not be able to open them.**

## Course Schedule

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1/14 **T:** Welcome; Course theme; How to read a visual text (demo w/ *Citizen Kane*)

1/16 **R:** *Transformers: The Animated Movie* (marketing, comics/toys/films, three films in one movie).

1/21 **T:** Read Benschhoff Chapter 1: “Introduction” (on Blackboard).

**Superman on TV:** Analysis of “Stamp Day for Superman” episode of *The Adventures of Superman* (1950s). Core notion of character. Context and close reading (1950s, 1954 and *Seduction of the Innocent*).

1/23 **R: Superman on TV:** Audience, network, and cultural lens: Analysis of “Pilot” (1994) and “Tempus Fugitive” (1995) episodes of *Lois and Clark: The New Adventures of Superman*.

1/28 **T:** Lecture on Benschhoff Chapter 2: “Concepts of Ideology.”

**Superman on TV:** Reinvention: Analysis of “Pilot” and “Tempest” episodes of *Smallville*.

1/30 **R: Superman on Film:** 1978 *Superman* film starring Christopher Reeve. Special effects. Emphasis on Clark.

2/4 **T:** Read Benschhoff Chapter 3: “Semiotics, Structuralism, and Beyond” (on Blackboard).

**Superman on Film:** 2013 *Man of Steel* film starring Henry Cavill.

2/6 **R: Batman on TV:** Adam West *Batman* episodes: “Hi Diddle Riddle/Smack in the Middle,” “The Joker Trumps an Ace/Batman Sets the Pace,” and “The Purr-fect Crime/Better Luck Next Time” (1966). Camp.

2/11 **T:** Lecture on Benschhoff Chapter 4: “Authorship and the Auteur Theory.”

**Batman on TV:** Focus on Animation—*Batman the Animated Series* episodes “The Cat and the Claw” and “Heart of Ice.” *Batman Beyond* episode “Rebirth: Parts 1 and 2.” *Darkwing Duck* episode “Darkly Dawns the Duck: Parts 1 and 2” (on Disney+). *The Batman* episode “The Bat in the Belfry.”

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<sup>1</sup> This is a lie, but you shouldn't really expect a response that late at night. ☺

2/13 **R: Batman on TV:** “Pilot” (Season 1, episode 1) and “Mad City: The Gentle Art of Making Enemies” (Season 3, episode 14) of *Gotham* (on Netflix Streaming).

2/18 **T:** Read Benschhoff Chapter 5: “Film and television genres” (on Blackboard).  
**Batman on Film:** *Batman* (1987) and *Batman Forever* (1995)—tone and mis-reading audience.

2/20: **R: Batman on Film:** *Batman Begins* (2005). Applying Benschhoff’s ideas to Nolan’s Batman.

2/25 **T:** Read Benschhoff Chapter 6: “Psychoanalysis (part one) Basic Concepts” (on Blackboard).  
**Spider-Man on TV:** “Spider-Man” (1977 live-action pilot) and “The Time of Revenge Has Come!” (pilot of 1978 Japanese series). Both on Youtube (linked via Blackboard).

2/27 **R: Spider-Man on TV:** Focus on Animation: Please watch the following animated Spider-Man episodes (all available on Disney+): “The Origin of the Spider-Friends” (*Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends*), “Night of the Lizard” (1994 *Spider-Man* series), “Origins” (2017 *Spider-Man* series), and “Great Power” (2012 *Ultimate Spider-Man* series)  
**Paper Pitches**

### MARCH 1-8: SPRING BREAK

3/10 **T:** Lecture on Benschhoff Chapter 7: “Psychoanalysis (part two): *Screen* and Apparatus Theory.”  
**Spider-Man on Film:** Maguire and Garfield

3/12 **R: Spider-Man on Film:** Holland  
**MIDTERM (take-home)**

3/17 **T:** Lecture on Benschhoff Chapter 8: “Feminist Approaches to Film and Television.”  
**Spider-Man on Film:** *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (on Netflix). Representation.

3/19 **R: Captain America (1990 Matt Salinger version—on Youtube, linked via Blackboard):**  
Issues of Origin. Punisher vs. Cap and war. Irony vs actual patriotism.

3/24 **T:** Lecture on Benschhoff Chapter 9: “Film, Television, and the Postmodern.”  
Hulk: Ferrigno/Bixby vs. CGI

3/26 **R: X-Men on...Video Games:** Play through of the *X-Men* arcade game and *Pryde of the X-Men* (Both on Youtube and both linked on Blackboard).

3/31 **T:** Read Benschhoff Chapter 10: “Cultural Studies and Reception” (on Blackboard).  
**X-Men on TV:** Focus on Animation: Please watch the following animated X-Men episodes (all available on Disney+): “Night of the Sentinels, Parts 1 and 2” (1992 *X-Men*), “Strategy X” (2000 *X-Men: Evolution*), “Hindsight, Parts 1-3” (2009 *Wolverine and the X-Men*), and “The X-Men Adventure” (1982 *Spider-Man and his Amazing Friends*).

4/2 **R: X-Men on Film:** *X-Men* (2000) and *X2*.

4/7 **T:** Read Benschhoff Chapter 11: “Audiences and Fandoms” (on Blackboard).

**X-Men on Film/TV:** *Generation X* made-for-television movie (on Youtube—Link on Blackboard).

**APRIL 8-12: EASTER BREAK**

4/14 **T:** Lecture on Benshoff Chapter 12: “Beyond Identity Politics: Contemporary Thinking on Nation, Race, Gender, and Sexuality.”

**X-Men on Film:** *New Mutants* and *Logan*: Merging of genres and returning to Scorsese

4/16 **R: NO CLASS: SAA**

4/21 **T: Paper workshops/Recording Time**

4/23 **R: Paper workshops/Recording Time**

**\*Last Day to hand in Short Responses\***