SPCM 341 Evaluating Contemporary Television MIDTERM PAPER (Visual Style and Sound Design)

Dr. David Scott Diffrient
Due: Sunday, June 10

This weekend (before 5:00 p.m. Sunday), you will complete and submit (on CANVAS) a six-page critical essay that examines the formal and stylistic characteristics of the program that you selected two weeks ago (when you were asked to binge-watch the first six episodes of one of the following Netflix series: either [a] *13 Reasons Why*, [b] *Bloodline*, [c] *Mindhunter*, [d] *Narcos*, or [e] *Ozark*). Drawing upon your viewing notes, you should briefly discuss how the narrative is structured (episode-to-episode), but you should devote the bulk of your textual analysis to the various elements of mise-en-scène, cinematography, editing, and sound design that contribute to the meaning-making process. You will find information about these elements in your assigned reading (Victoria O'Donnell's "Television Style"), which you should reference in your essay.

This assignment requires additional screenings beyond your chosen program. Over the next two days (Thursday and Friday), you should watch the first/pilot episodes of the following Netflix series: *Altered Carbon*, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*, *The Get Down*, and *Sense8*. These programs, which you should use as comparative/contrasting texts when analyzing your main case study, were chosen because they foreground televisual style in distinctive, expressionistic ways. Be sure to reference those episodes, if only briefly, so as to better explain how your *own* selected program differs from or relates to them, in terms of the formal/stylistic aspects that contribute to either its "realism" or "expressionism."

Supplemental notes concerning mise-en-scene, sound design, and narrative structure have been provided on CANVAS (in the SUPPLEMENTAL FILES folder)

As the television scholar Jeremy Butler has written, a TV show's "pilot" episode (which is frequently, but not always, its *first* episode) is usually written and directed in such a way as to draw audiences into "the narrative structure of the regular run of a series." This means that, unlike a feature-length film, which typically ends with a strong sense of narrative closure, a television pilot will often conclude with a degree of "aperture," or openness, leaving its ongoing storyline and enigmas unresolved. Is this true of the first episode of your chosen TV series?

How does your chosen Netflix series *begin* (i.e., what is the *opening shot and scene* and how are the main characters introduced)? Which characters are shown first? What are they doing? Is your chosen program focalized through a single protagonist? Or is it an ensemble program featuring many characters who are each given distinct introductions?

Pay attention to the use of framing, lighting, staging, and dialogue during those early scenes. Do those early scenes of the first episode set a precedent for subsequent moments in which the characters are performing similar actions?

Think, as well, about the final scene of the first episode. How does that final scene either echo (call back to) the first scene or introduce *new information* that might provoke the audience to continue watching?

In terms of visual design, how do cinematography, framing, shot composition, and *mise-en-scène* contribute to the meaning-making process? Do the costumes/clothing, objects/props, sets, and/or lighting function thematically?

When watching (and listening to) your selected program, take note of the loudness, pitch, and timbre (or "color") of the music used to accompany the images. Be as creative as possible when describing the acoustic and instrumental properties of the music.

Is the sound mix dense or sparse, and does it modulate gently or abruptly from moment to moment? Are the melodies, harmonics, and/or rhythms significant in any way? In what ways does the music either accentuate/strengthen or undermine/weaken the visual images? Are the sounds and images complementary or contradictory? Are any of the songs and/or instrumental music that you hear in your chosen program deployed for ironic effect? Do the lyrics (if any) communicate otherwise "hidden" or "submerged" themes within the series?

Does the music in your selected program help to develop characterization and/or build suspense? Does it provide subjective access to the inner lives of characters? Is the music DIEGETIC (i.e. music whose source is found *inside* the film's story world) or NON-DIEGETIC (i.e. music coming from a source *outside* the story world)? Do the images and sounds seem equally important in terms of highlighting themes, character goals, narrative patterns, etc.? Or does one dominate the other?

You do not have to answer all (or any) of the above questions. These are only suggestions for thought.

Ultimately, you should put forth an argument about your selected program's "realism" or lack thereof, comparing it to — and contrasting it with — the aforementioned Netflix series (*Altered Carbon, A Series of Unfortunate Events, The Get Down,* and *Sense8*). Do you think that "realism" should be a criterion for ascertaining a cultural production's "value," "quality," or "worth"? Or should artworks, including television programs, not be judged by such criteria?