Andrew Saintsing: You're tuned into 90.7 FM KALX Berkeley. I'm Andrew Saintsing, and this is The Graduates, the interview talk show where we speak to UC Berkeley graduate students about their work here on campus and around the world. Today I'm joined by Lisa Jacobson from the Department of Film and Media Studies. Welcome to the show, Lisa.

Lisa Jacobson: Hi, thanks for having me.

Saintsing: It's so great to have you here. We've been trying to do this for a while, haven't we?

Jacobson: Life has intervened, but now life has slowed down to a pace where I guess we can make it happen.

Saintsing: So, you study TV. That's the focus of your study. Is that right?

Jacobson: Yeah, so I'm in the Department of Film and Media. I actually started my degree program a while ago in Rhetoric, which is used to be kind of a sibling program in Film and Media. They split officially a couple of years ago. Rhetoric tends to be very interested in the things that we put into conversation in film and media. With television or film, the kind of texts that give us either historical or theoretical grounding are kind of the object of study for rhetoric. So, that's often philosophical texts. We do a lot of kind of theory about what film or television are and what they do. It's historical readings. And for rhetoric that's kind of the be-all and end-all. But I was realizing that I want to go deeper into the actual film and television, which was my switch. I am much more interested in closely analyzing specific texts, specific films, or in this case television shows. So, I can give you an example. So, I'm writing about The Americans. That's probably the time to say that pretty much my whole dissertation is about the FX show The Americans. And so, I know this show very well, and I'm getting to know it even better every day. And, I still like it, which is a very good sign. And I have, in my first chapter of my dissertation, I have a really in-depth analysis of one particular 13-minute scene in season five where they dig a hole. And that's probably not a big spoiler for the show. When I'm looking at this episode and this kind of emblematic scene I'm going very deep into things like camera angles and editing and sound design. And I'm thinking about the very slow nuances of the performance. I'm reading it in a way that I'm going very, very zoomed in in order to then step back and say, “how is this specific scene, how is it emblematic of something that the whole episode is doing? The whole season is doing? The whole show is doing? And even further zoomed out, television is doing in that moment? And maybe even what is it tapping into in the broader culture?

Saintsing: Okay, the key difference between what you were initially… where you were initially and what you're doing now is like the starting point of the focus, maybe? You start out zoomed out and then like you say you look for examples – before that's what you were doing. But now you're like, “this one scene is everything.” And then you like sit… you extrapolate from it, and then you zoom out from it and say, “what does that mean?”

Jacobson: Yeah, I would say that the kind of intensity of focus on a television show as the actual object of my study, that's probably the big difference. And there are people who do these kinds of broader studies. You see them a lot in film and television studies where they're tracing a trend through a whole bunch of different things, a whole bunch of different shows or films. If I were doing a project like that, I probably wouldn't be talking just about The Americans. I'd be thinking about recent depictions of the Cold War in television, which is actually to some extent where I started this project a while ago and just got sucked further and further into The Americans. So, I realized it was a really fruitful object of study, at least for me. But that is also an approach that a lot of people do.

Saintsing: By fruitful object of study, does that mean you just really, really like The Americans?

Jacobson: The question of love is one that comes up a lot in film studies and other media studies. There's a whole… there are a bunch of lines of thinking about how much you should and should not love the object that you are studying. There's the question of cinephilia and now, if there is such a thing as telephilia, the love of cinema or television. And some famous theorists have said you can't love it, and you have to love it but you can't love it too much because you need to be able to step away from it. Or maybe you rekindle that love in a different way. You need some distance from it to be able to actually critically analyze it. But there has to be something in the show itself or in the film itself that gets you started in the first place because if, you know, if you just picked a show at random, maybe you could develop some kind of uh relationship with it over time, which is kind of what tv is for, but having that initial spark of interest is what, at least for me, has kept me going with this very, very deep, long-term study of The Americans.

Saintsing: Right. And then, the way you're talking about it: you said you are, you have a whole chapter on one scene where they're digging a hole. I mean I would imagine you would have to watch that scene over and over again so you could, like you mentioned, have like one viewing or multiple viewing so you're thinking about the sound. And multiple viewings you're thinking about the lighting. And multiple… So, you would have to… Maybe you wouldn't… Well, I could imagine not loving it by the end of that, but you would have to have some level of tolerance for it, right?

Jacobson: That's something our students in film media often complain about. But also, in a way that I think it is very gratifying to us if they say that making them watch something over and over, they suddenly start to notice things that ruin their enjoyment even when they're watching something for the first time. I would say it's a very, it's a different kind of enjoyment. And it's actually really exciting for me to hear that my students then take the things that we've done together and apply them to things they view on their own. That it starts to creep into their own viewing habits. But yeah, I would say actually it's pretty great, and it's sustained my interest so far. But what's also kind of fun about the

experience is that, even now having seen it so many times, I can still plan to watch it again and watch for "how does a specific thing happen? Okay, how do they make this transition?" And then, I miss it because I get too involved in the scene. So, it has that continuing power to draw me in to the extent where I start to even turn off my critical faculties and just watch it as I was almost for the first time.

Saintsing: Yeah, that's really interesting. Because, I mean, like everything in TV or anything that you're looking at as art I guess is designed to work together, right? There's not… Like it would be pretty ineffective if the sound and the visuals weren't actually like you know helping put forward the narrative or the character moment or whatever. So, yeah it can be… I can imagine that it would be hard to separate that out, and I can understand how your students would not like separating it out because it could take away from that experience.

Jacobson: Well, one thing we often tell students in the department is that some of the most interesting papers start from if you notice the points at which things seem to be incongruous. That that you know something is off here, something is strange. Why? What is this decision about? Why is there a certain cut here? Or why is the sound doing something that you wouldn't expect? And really going deep into that can be the starting point for a much more interesting paper than just kind of like "what is an effective way to combine these things?"

Saintsing: Right. I get that. Yeah, it's like in biology when you look for that animal that's really weird, not really representative of everything. But it's a good place to start studying and then you can see rules that apply to other things from it.

Jacobson: Right, and it starts from a genuine question. I think that really for me the best research comes from a genuine question. Something that gets under your skin and kind of bugs you.

Saintsing: Was there a thing that stood out in the grave digging or… I said grave. I don't even know.

Jacobson: Yeah, it's just… I mean a lot of critics talk about it because it's so long, and it's slow, and one thing I was struggling with with the earlier versions of this chapter was thinking about "okay, so if it's slow, why do I care about it? Why do I like it? Why is it actually compelling? And what I realized is that (this is a spoiler from a dissertation, but) what I realized is that: although the kind of content of the scene is slow, the editing, the visual editing is actually quite fast, and it's quite dynamic. And so, you're always getting these new angles, new things to look at. And then, but actually the sound is almost working against that. The sound is very, very close to the bodies of the people doing the digging. It's a lot of heavy breathing. It's a lot of moving of dirt and clinking of shovels, and it's very repetitive. So, this is one of those scenes where those two elements kind of are in tension. And that tension ends up making this kind of off, this feeling of being a little bit

strange, a little bit off. But also, keeping you on the edge of your seat even though they're digging a hole for 13 minutes. 13 minutes with setup and ending sequence.

Saintsing: Yeah, thinking about re-watching TV shows, do you re-watch shows that you aren't closely studying?

Jacobson: Yeah, I have, and I think I've been reading from a lot of people about the phenomenon now in the pandemic. Of people coming back to kind of comfort shows, comfort food television. And I am among them, yes.

Saintsing: Yeah, what kinds of shows do you watch? Do you have like a clear like, “this is work, this is fun” cut off.

Jacobson: Well, I can tell you two things that I'm watching, re-watching for very different reasons right now. Besides the American election, I am also doing a full re-watch, I just started re-watching Community because it's back on Netflix now. And that was one that I watched in real time on a network and during when it actually aired. And that's been fun to kind of come back to that. And it's also, you know, it's episodes are 22 minutes or whatever they are. It's a delight at the end of an evening to watch, you know, one or two short episodes of Community. And, you know, I know where it's going, and I know that it has some ups and downs and some very high highs. But it's also just fun because it's familiar but clever. And the other side: one of the things I'm doing this semester is that I am coming into the class of a wonderful screenwriter and lecturer in our department, Mira Kopell, who teaches a specifically TV screenwriting class. And I get to come in as the showrunner and direct the students who are taking this class, who are, I'm sure, much, much better screenwriters. I am writing a second season, part of a second season of the Hulu show The great, about Catherine the Great. Loosely based on the life of Catherine the Great. So, I'm about to re-watch all that to make sure that I am very up on what my show as a showrunner is all about. And that's fun because it's one that I chose with Mira together, with the instructor together for a number of reasons. So, I think it's really good and really exciting. But that's one that when I go back and re-watch this, I'm going to make sure that I'm taking copious notes and I'm thinking a lot about how it's structured in a way that that, you know there may be moments in watching community where I look up and think “oh, yeah, that's actually a really interesting way to convey this,” but that's not my purpose of watching it.

Saintsing: Okay, I have separate thoughts on both of those, so we'll come back to Catherine the Great because that sounds really interesting, that you get to be a showrunner for that.

Jacobson: I'm excited.

Saintsing: Yeah, for the Community, though: I was just thinking you mentioned how you watched it in real time, and I was watching a show that I had watched when I was a kid, Malcolm in the Middle. Yeah, and so I was watching it and there were, I got to the

episodes that I really remembered watching, you know, when they were coming out. And then, all of a sudden, I was like remembering all the things around the TV show. And so, I was just thinking about: does that occur to you when you try to separate out… You're just focused on what the creators produced and you're trying to like focus in on that, but a lot of the TV experience I feel like, especially when it was like network and broadcasting tv and you had to have like appointments and schedule your viewing for it, it would be kind of built into your life and you know you would see like "oh, these TV shows come on during the school year" and other things are going on. During work or after summer or that show came on during the summer, so it like really builds into your life and can help you like come back to certain times in your life.

Jacobson: Yeah, absolutely that's a great insight. There's one thing that comes up a lot in television studies, thinking about what's different about television. Specifically, as you're saying, in the context of broadcast television, what's different about that from other media is exactly that it happens in a prolonged drawn-out way over time, and it happens kind of in parallel to our lives. And also in a domestic setting. Television is traditionally something we watch in the home, although it's also on at the dentists and various other public spaces, which the film scholar Anna McCarthy has written about. An ambient TV. That's a really interesting way to think about it, too. But largely the tradition of television is in the home, and so it's something you grow up with but that you live your life kind of around. The professor, at Berkeley actually, Abigail De Kosnik in Theater, Dance and Performance Studies (and also the head of the Center for New Media) has written about soap operas specifically as – I think what she calls – lifelong stories. And the way in which the characters on screen age and develop and live their whole lives in front of you. But they live them also in parallel to yours. So, there are always these ties of something you watch over years and years or even decades and decades. They come up with you and you live your life in in time with them and for them. And that also means the fact that broadcast television, and actually other kinds of television, now streaming television, the fact that it's a longer serial story drawn out over episodes and seasons means that it can respond to events in real time almost. It can incorporate things that are changing in the real world because, unlike a film, a single film, the film wraps when it wraps. It's done, and then, even if it's it takes, you know, a certain amount of time for it to come to theaters, there's no really changing that. And then, of course, it continues to live on well beyond that in people watching it, but there's no back-and-forth response. Television can respond to things that are happening in the world. It can respond to fans. There's a lot of examples of that. There are some theories that tie this back, this question of serial storytelling back to Charles Dickens and the French novelists and the tradition of serial novels. And Dickens killing off the character and getting all this feedback from the readers saying, "don't do that. We love little Nell." And so, it's something that can have a kind of community around it (speaking of Community). A back and forth of feedback with the real world. And that's something that actually is really interesting with The Americans, too. Because when The Americans came out in 2013… the premise is that this kind of typical American suburban couple is actually, they're actually Russian spies, KGB spies in the 1980s. And there's some great interviews

with the creators saying, “by the time we wrote this the Russians were supposed to be a throwback enemy.” This is kind of, it's supposed to be kind of nostalgic thinking about the Cold War. Wasn't that funny that we were so worried about the Russians? And then of course in the lead up to the 2016 election it became much more current. The renewal of cold war tensions, and the possibility that maybe these tensions were always there underlying everything we did to begin with, made it current in ways that they never could have foreseen. And I don't think this is because they are, you know, prescient geniuses. I think some of that is just coincidence, but it means that the show was able to respond to that in real time even though it's set in the 1980s. The relationship to Russia changed, and so the show I'm guessing changed around it.

Saintsing: Yeah, that's really cool, or not really cool.

Jacobson: Yeah I mean of course it's good for them, but I don't think they really want it. But things go down this way. I wouldn't blame uh Joe Weisberg and Joel Field for this, but it is… it does make their show a little more interesting. Although no one watched it. That's the other thing. So what you were talking about with television, growing up with it. Malcolm in the Middle, the shows that we're on kind of in your youth. The Americans for all of the fact that it was a basic cable television show, no one watched it. It's viewership numbers are, especially later season's, pretty abysmal. It was a critical darling, and not a lot of people watched it at least in real time. How these viewership numbers are tracked these days is really complicated. It certainly doesn't represent all of what's happening especially and certainly on streaming services, but also through nefarious illegal downloads and such things, probably many more people are watching it than are actually tracked. But I have to justify my dissertation, why i take this main object of study as something that not that many people have actually seen. In some ways it's an unusual case study for television because television is supposed to be this traditionally mass medium. It's the medium for the people, for better or for worse depending on who you ask. But The Americans is part of a phenomenon of what you, in industry I think, is called prestige television. It's also called quality TV or, a slightly different term, complex TV. I would put air quotes around all of these. It's niche television. It's what they call narrow casting instead of broadcasting. It's supposed to be better than the average TV as a cultural object. It’s tricky because: what is that? What does something like that say about the culture? It's certainly… these shows are also supposed to be more driven by, you know, the showrunner. By a single person or people's vision. But one thing I would say about that: (I've been thinking about what I would say about what makes television so special as a medium and also as an object of study for kind of broader cultural trends) television is inherently very, very collaborative. To make television there are so, so many people involved. And there's a lot of discussion in film studies about film being a collaborative medium, which it is. Television even more so is not just one person's vision. So many people have a hand in it that I would say that, because of that, it seems to me kind of logical that more of the broader cultural thinking would come into it. It's less one person's influences and vision. That said, some of that has changed a little bit with this kind of cult of the showrunner. Thinking about (a lot of people start with The Sopranos)

the one person in charge who has this vision. But even then, television is traditionally thought of as a writer's medium, and writers being plural. A writer's room. Less on the directors. Different shows have had different directors for most episodes, not a single director. But that has happened now. And so, it just it takes in so many different people's feedback that I think it makes the singular vision more diffused and allows for more of the culture to creep in.

Saintsing: Yeah, it's really interesting. And then, also it's not just like everybody trying to get their ideas out there. But it's also very constrained, right? Because it's like you have to deal with budget. You have to deal with time. At least when it was broadcast TV, you would have to do 22 episodes over this set, right? And, you have to be able to fill out those, so I can imagine writers would kind of maybe phone in some episodes if they just needed something. Or money…

Jacobson: To jump in for a second, the other side of that 22-episode run is actually: there's some interesting writing where Jeffrey Sconce who talks about the… actually an example from Malcolm in the Middle. They have a super interesting episode where it's kind of like the film Sliding Doors, where they have divergent paths, and they showed that it's the boys going with the mom or the dad to the bowling alley and what would happen either way. And this scholar from Northwestern, Jeffrey Sconce, talks about this as an example of television shows as their seasons go on getting to kind of playful with their own formula and doing some interesting kind of experimental things. So, having a 22-episode run, you can have a couple episodes that are just weird, that are playing out scenarios. And because television tends, traditionally sitcoms tend to reset at the end, basically you don't even really need to justify it. I mean you look at The Simpsons, which has been going on for forever, and they get… It's a playground. They get to do kind of whatever they want because they're… in that way, they are constrained by the time limits and the commercial breaks and those beats, but they also don't have an aging cast, so they don't have those problems with other television shows. They get to try things out because they've got their big orders. They can kind of play around with them.

Saintsing: Yeah, but I guess, as I said time is a constraint. But also, I mean, yeah, it's a constraint, but we're on a podcast, so podcasts are great. But, you know, like podcasts… if you just have unlimited time, it doesn't necessarily add to it. So, I guess like having the, having the constraints is good, right? It kind of like motivates you to tell a tight story. So, yeah. I don't know. Constraints maybe sounds too negative for it.

Jacobson: That's part of what makes it makes it the playground it is. They have kind of the basic building blocks, and then you can kind of mess with all of it from there. But you're also talking about the money aspect.

Saintsing: Yeah, I was thinking of like old shows. Like obviously special effects are very much better now, things like that. So, like you're saying tv is a writer's medium. They would have to really write around their inability to show things back or maybe even now if you

have a low budget, right? And then, I guess you would have to… I guess, it's a thing in TV shows, right? Maybe that you would not necessarily kill off a character or something, but there's just budget issues, and well, that's the way the story goes now.

Jacobson: Or the other way that if someone becomes a fan favorite what do you do if that character was supposed to be bumped off at some point? This is something that we may be dealing with with the second season of The Great: thinking about – I mean, of course we don't have those actual constraints. We can do whatever we want. It's a class. But, you know, there's a character who's got second billing whose status is a little threatened by the second season. So, who knows? But yeah, in terms of the financial side of things: certainly, there's the tradition of the bottle episode, which is the episode that just places all your main characters together in a room basically where you don't need new sets, you don't need other actors. And often those are the most beloved episodes because it gets all the core characters together, and you get to really explore their dynamics. And the other side of that also is that television is a mass medium traditionally. Something that I tell my students when I teach television that I think a lot of them haven't really thought about before is: traditionally in broadcast television what is being sold is viewers. The promise of viewers. Eyes on the screen during your ads basically, right? The promise of the viewer's attention. So, inherently anything that holds the viewer's attention is good TV in terms of moneymaking. Anything that gets people there to watch their screen and see your ads and hopefully buy your product is successful. And something like The Americans that was not successful in that way has to bank on being successful in other ways. It's a prestige project. It's something that creates acclaim around a network that was looking for those couple shows to show that they can make their own shows that are good. It's competing in different ways, but traditionally what it is is just trying to get people to watch things. And so, that's very different from selling a movie ticket or selling a book or even getting a gallery show. Those are very different measures of success, and that's one of the reasons why television has been maligned. That television is you know the “boob tube.” The mass medium that is just getting you to kind of sit there and turn off your brain.

Saintsing: We are running out of time for the interview. It's been a lot of fun, so unfortunately this is the end. So, is there anything you'd like to leave the audience with before we go?

Jacobson: Yeah, I'm thinking about how to say this. I highly encourage people to watch things they care about, but I also encourage people to step out of their comfort zone and seek out specifically black-led television. The 1990s was a really good moment for kind of popular black television. I think we're going through somewhat of a resurgence. I think it's probably too soon to say that, but there's a lot of really good stuff out right now that I didn't get to talk about here. I know a lot of people are watching Watchmen right now. That's, I think, it's a spectacular show. I'm actually teaching it this semester. Not exclusively black-led, but Insecure, Atlanta, lots of things I'm not thinking of right now. But there's a lot to watch and just a real proliferation of different voices in TV. One thing that I found really fun this summer was Mindy Kaling's new show Never Have I Ever.

There's just a lot going on in TV that is made possible by streaming and by non-traditional outlets that allows for different voices to come in that haven't traditionally been as represented on in American television. So, as you look for things to watch, love the things you love, and maybe also try some things you're not as sure about. And give it a few episodes because often, you know, nothing really hits its stride until let's say like five or six episodes. And I think that's what Netflix says. It's something like five or six is when people really have the staying power. So, give it a chance. Check some things out, and enjoy, but also think about it.

Saintsing: Today I've been speaking with Lisa Jacobson from the Department of Film and Media Studies. Again, thanks so much for being on the show, Lisa.

Jacobson: Thank you.

Saintsing: All right. Tune in two weeks for the next episode of The Graduates