NYU Gallatin School of Individualized Study
Writing about Film
WRTNG-UG 1070
Fall 2014

Christopher Bram

Class: Friday 12:30 pm-3:15 pm
194 Mercer Street, Room 303
Office hours: Thursday 4-5 pm
Friday 10 am-noon
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Description: Writing about movies is more than just issuing thumbs-up, thumbs-down judgments. In this class you will learn how to discuss a film's content, style, and meaning in ways that can interest even people who disagree with you. You will explore some of the many different ways there are to write about cinema, expanding your command of writing by reading such critics as James Agee, Pauline Kael, James Baldwin, Molly Haskell, and others. Students will write (and rewrite) five papers ranging from brief movie reviews to a final eight-to-ten page essay.

Course objectives: To sharpen your skills in writing about film, reading about film and thinking about film. You will achieve this chiefly by having the opportunity to write yourself, but also by enlarging your frame of reference with different approaches to criticism and different kinds of movies.

Text: American Movie Critics: An Anthology from the Silents Until Now edited by Philip Lopate. There will also be movies chosen and obtained by the students, with some films put on reserve at the library. Students will watch these outside of class on their own time. For the book review assignment, students will choose and obtain the book they want to discuss. These individual films and books are the student's responsibility.

Specifics: This is a writing class and the weight of the grade will depend on the five papers. Class participation is important, however, and will be added to that grade. (It will constitute 10% of your final grade.) More than two absences will reduce your grade. The breakdown on the writing assignments: First review 15%, second review 15%, third review (short piece) 10%, book review 20%, final essay 30%.

Academic integrity: Any plagiarism in a paper will result in that paper being given an F. (Plagiarism is the unattributed use of sentences and paragraphs from other sources.) For further details, check the Gallatin Bulletin or website: (http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)

All papers must be turned in on time, with a double-spaced copy given to the teacher and copies of the first draft passed out to fellow students to read. Late papers will be given a reduced grade.
Schedule (subject to change)

Week 1 (September 5)
  Introductory remarks. "What we talk about when we talk about movies." Group discussion on recent films is followed by first reading and writing assignments.

Week 2 (September 12)
  First writing assignment: A movie review 500-750 words.
  Reading assignment: Four reviews in American Movie Critics: Pauline Kael on "Funny Girl", John Simon on Last Picture Show, A.O. Scott on Passion of the Christ, Manohla Dargis on History of Violence. (15 pages.)

  The first half of the class will be spent discussing the reading assignment. In the second half we will begin to read and discuss student work.

Week 3 (September 19)
  Viewing assignment: see one of the movies that we read about last week. How does this change your take on the review?
  Two more reviews: Dargis on Cat in the Hat, Scott on Sideways. (10 pages.)

  Finish reading and discussing the student reviews. The reviews will be returned to students with comments for their second draft.

Week 4 (September 26)
  Writing assignment: Second draft of first review. (Return this to me with the copy of the first draft with my remarks.)
  Reading assignment: Further selections from AMC, emphasizing classics: Cecilia Ager, Otis Ferguson, James Agee, Vincent Canby. (20 pages.)

  Confessions of a professional film reviewer. (Your professor.)

Week 5 (October 3)
  Second writing assignment: First draft of second review, 1000 to 1500 words. We will read half of these in class.
  Reading assignment: More readings from AMC, with emphasis on longer essay-like reviews: James Baldwin, Paul Rudnick, David Denby. (27 pages.)

Week 6 (October 10)
  We read the rest of the student reviews and I return the papers for second draft.

  Third writing assignment: Everyone will see the same new movie and write 300 words about it. We will choose the film the week before depending on what has opened and looks interesting. This is a brief one-draft exercise that will help you explore brevity and compare points of view.

  We will discuss the upcoming book review assignment. You are to write about a book that deals with film: it can be history, biography, criticism or gossip. I will distribute a list of possible titles so students can think about what they will write on.

Week 7 (October 17)
  Writing assignment: Second draft of second review.
  Reading assignment: essays from AMC: "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art" by Manny Farber, and "Trash, Art, and the Movies" by Pauline Kael. (38 pages.)

  Viewing assignment: You are to watch one of the movies discussed in these essays and be able to discuss it.
Week 8 (October 24)
Fourth writing assignment: First draft of book review, 1000-1500 words. We will read half in class. (You will each read a book of your choice of 150 to 300 pages.)
Reading assignment: more essays from AMC: "The Imagination of Disaster" by Susan Sontag and "Blue Note" by Brendan Gill. (26 pages.)

Week 9 (October 31)
We read the rest of the book reviews and I return papers for next draft.
Reading assignment: another essay from AMC, "The Woman's Film" by Molly Haskell. (25 pages)
Viewing assignment: Watch a classic "woman's film" of the 1930s or 1940s of your choice.
We will discuss the final paper, an essay-length piece that can be the profile of an actor, the study of a director, the extended examination of one movie, even a personal memoir about the films in your life. (Students will discuss their topic with me in advance and must get my approval.)

Week 10 (November 7)
Writing assignment: Second draft of book review.
You will pitch your final essay in class, discussing the topic and getting feedback.
Reading assignment: Walter Kerr on Keaton, Andrew Sarris on John Wayne and Billy Wilder, Arlene Croce on Astaire and Rogers. Roger Ebert on Trouble in Paradise. (24 pages.)
Guest speaker: a film biographer.

Week 11 (November 14)
Fifth writing assignment: First draft of essay-length piece, 2000 to 3000 words. We will read all of these in class.

Week 12 (November 21)
Video party: Each student will bring in one memorable scene, something you love because it's so wonderful or because it's so terrible. We will discuss these.
I will return the corrected essays for the second draft.

(No class November 28, Thanksgiving weekend.)

Week 13 (December 5)
The second draft of the essay will be turned in. We will read these aloud.

Week 14 (December 12)
Reading assignment: “The Film Critic of Tomorrow” by Rudolf Arnheim, and “The Film Critic of Tomorrow, Today” by J. Hoberman. (16 pages.)
Concluding business.