Pop Culture Criticism
WRTNG-UG 1042
Gallatin School
New York University
Spring 2013, Wednesdays, 6:20-9:00 p.m.
Room 303, 194 Mercer
Instructor: Amanda Petrusich
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Office Hours (by appointment only): Wednesdays 5-6 p.m., Room 505, 1 Washington Place

Course Description: In an era where criticism has been democratized and art is often judged exclusively by the amount of chatter it incites, the role of the professional critic is changing (and fast – these days, even reviews are subject to reviews). In this advanced writing workshop, we’ll explore the best, most effective ways for writers to engage critically with pop culture. Should critical writing be personal or objective? Is it more important to contextualize or describe? Given the overwhelming deluge of options facing media consumers, is the critic’s job merely to direct the conversation? Students will submit four original pieces of criticism for workshop.

Required Books:
Pulphead, John Jeremiah Sullivan
Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs, Chuck Klosterman
Slouching Towards Bethlehem, Joan Didion
Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music, Ellen Willis
The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael, Pauline Kael

Readings will routinely be supplemented with in-class handouts and emailed links.

Grading
-- 60% of your grade will be based on the strength of your writing assignments
-- 40% of your grade will be based on in-class participation, preparedness, and workshop discussions (per the workshop guidelines below). Please note: just showing up is not enough to earn you a desirable participation grade. Writing workshops are contingent on constructive, thoughtful discussion.

Attendance
Because our course only meets once a week, attendance is mandatory and paramount. Again, workshops only work when everyone is participating and engaged. If you have to miss a class – especially a workshop day – you must email me in advance at petrusich@gmail.com. Illnesses (please don’t drag yourself to class if you’re sick) and emergencies are excused absences. All unexcused absences will adversely affect your participation grade, as will arriving to class late, leaving early, or not completing the assigned readings. We’ll take a short break halfway through each session, when you can use the bathroom, get a drink, etc.
Plagiarism
As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. Please consult the Gallatin Bulletin or Gallatin website [www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html] for a full description of the academic integrity policy.

Workshop Guidelines

As a member of this workshop, you’re responsible for 4 pieces of original critical writing, submitted on time per the workshop schedule. (If you want to bring something significantly longer or shorter than what’s specified, speak with me beforehand.) You’re also responsible for thoughtfully – and thoroughly – reading and responding to your classmates’ work each week, and coming to class prepared to discuss it analytically and enthusiastically. Your work as a reader will be as closely evaluated as your work as a writer. The writing workshop provides a home for a lively, conversational exchange of ideas and support between artists. It should be challenging, fun, and, on occasion, exhilarating.

Before class, please print and read all the submissions and jot down a few notes. Try to focus your thoughts on a larger theme or idea (ie. What is this piece really about? How does it work?) and avoid – whenever possible – a laundry list of micro-criticisms. When you’re finished reading, consider the entire draft with a diagnostic eye: What’s the one big thing the writer should concentrate on for his or her second draft? In general, don’t worry about line-editing extensively (that’s my job), and be sure to address the piece on its own terms, always being mindful of authorial intent.

Remember that praise – for a particularly stirring image or scene, for an innovative structure, for a sound or song well-rendered – can be as useful as criticism, although in this course, we’re generally reading with an eye towards revision. All feedback should be focused on how to make the piece succeed. If you found an approach or a style unsuccessful, I want to know why and how to make it work. If you found something fantastic, I want to know why and how to harness that magic. Be candid but be careful.

I’ve found it tends to work best when the person whose work is being discussed absorbs the conversation without participating in it too heavily – this is not a hard and fast rule, but it helps to keep the workshop from feeling like a debate. (The author will always have time to ask questions once everyone has offered their comments.) For those participating in the discussion, I encourage you to listen closely and carefully to your colleagues’ critiques – this includes taking notes – and to reference their advice as you give your own. A good workshop operates like an engaging conversation, with organic digressions, movement, and occasional cross-talk.
Schedule:

Week 1, January 29: Introduction
In Class Reading: Excerpt from Turn Around, Bright Eyes, Rob Sheffield (2013)
In Class Exercise: Joe Brainard’s “I Remember”
Discussion: How can personal narratives shape a critical discussion of culture?

Week 2, February 5: Personal Essay
Guest: Rob Sheffield, author (Love Is A Mixtape; Talking to Girls About Duran Duran; Turn Around, Bright Eyes), Rolling Stone contributor
Assignment: Write a 1000 word first-person narrative about your experience of a cultural phenomenon.

Week 3: February 12: GROUP A WORKSHOP (personal essay)

Week 4: February 19: GROUP B WORKSHOP (personal essay)

Week 5: February 26: Reviews
Reading: All of Ch. One, “The World Class Critic,” from Ellen Willis on Rock Music; “Religious Pulp, or the Incredible Hulk,” and “Out There and In Here” from The Age of Movies by Pauline Kael; assorted reviews from Pitchfork/The Dissolve
Guest: Mark Richardson, editor-in-chief of Pitchfork.com
Assignment: Write two short reviews (around 300-400 words each) – one about an album, and one about a film (you can review whatever you’d like, but please choose relatively recent releases – each from within the last five years).

Week 6: March 5: GROUP B WORKSHOP (reviews)

Week 7: March 12: GROUP A WORKSHOP (reviews)

Week 8: SPRING BREAK

Week 9: March 26: Profiles
Reading: “Michael,” “The Final Comeback of Axl Rose,” and “The Last Wailer” from Pulphead by John Jeremiah Sullivan; “Frank Sinatra Has A Cold” by Gay Talese (from Esquire); “The Tragedy of Britney Spears” by Vanessa Grigoriadis (from Rolling Stone)
Guest: Will Hermes, author (Love Goes Into Buildings On Fire)
Assignment: Write a 1000-2000 word profile of a prominent cultural figure – with or without an interview

Week 10: April 2: GROUP A WORKSHOP (profiles)

Week 11: April 9: GROUP B WORKSHOP (profiles)
Week 12: April 16: Critical Essay

**Reading:** *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs*, Chuck Klosterman; “Getting Down to What Is Really Real” by John Jeremiah Sullivan, assorted *New York* magazine and *The Paris Review* pieces

**Visitor:** Adam Wilson, television critic, *The Paris Review*, author of *Flatscreen*

**Assignment:** Write a 1000-2000 word critical essay about a reality TV phenomenon – a series, an episode, a figure, a trend.

Week 13: April 23: GROUP B WORKSHOP

Week 14: April 30: GROUP A WORKSHOP

Week 15: May 7: Final Portfolios Due

**Workshop Logistics**
Successful writers and critics MUST be able to hit a deadline. Magazines, newspapers, and even websites and blogs operate on very strict publication schedules, and this workshop is no different. **Writing assignments are due at 10 p.m. on the Sunday before they are scheduled to be workshopped.** THIS DEADLINE IS NON-NEGOTIABLE. This way, everyone has 2 full days to read the submissions before class meets on Wednesday. Submissions should be emailed to me (petrusich@gmail.com), and I will distribute them to our class mailing list late Sunday night. Please read over the syllabus and the deadlines below and note when assignments are due, and schedule your semester accordingly. You might want to get a head start of some of these pieces now.

So that we have time to address everyone’s work, the class will be divided into two groups, A and B. They will workshop on alternate weeks. We will loosely plan on spending 15-20 minutes discussing each submission. **Please note your writing deadlines below.**

**Group A deadlines:**
Sunday, February 9 (personal essay)
Sunday, March 9 (reviews)
Sunday, March 30 (profile)
Sunday, April 21 (critical essay)

**Group B deadlines:**
Sunday, February 16 (personal essay)
Sunday, March 2 (reviews)
Sunday, April 6 (profile)
Sunday, April 28 (critical essay)