Cultural criticism, first, is an impulse: a desire to get the full measure of what’s before you. Then, second, it is a method: looking at what’s underneath the subject, how it connects with what else you know, questioning assumptions and received wisdom.

But it is not a form or style. It is infinitely flexible and changeable.

In this course you’ll focus on the ways that criticism can go (and has for a long time gone) beyond the classical review or argumentative-essay model, and toward other modes: memoir; journalism; philosophy; poetry; blog post (or something like it); biography of or eulogy for a person, thing, place, or idea; interrogative or satirical exercise. Our readings will include the very old and very new, on cultural, social, and political subjects.

You’ll be in charge, sometimes in pairs of groups, of leading discussions on some of the readings. (Where there is a link below for a reading to be found online, please print out the reading and bring it into class; whenever possible, mark it up with your notes and reactions. With your notes, our discussions will start.) You’ll also be bringing in current essays from the outside, distributing them, and talking about them.

*Written work:* in-class exercises; one essay about the use of criticism (750 words); one essay responding to or inspired by a syllabus reading (750 words); one longer take on an original topic—a document, event, movement, or problem, subject to my approval. (2000 words; you’ll be giving me a short proposal by Sept. 24, hand it in on Oct. 29, and then hand in a revised version, after workshopping, on the last day of class.)

Grades will be calculated as follows:
- 60 percent written work—judged by the strength of what you turn in, but also your desire to grow.
- 40 percent reading and demonstration of your reading through class participation.

In my experience I have seen a causal link between students not coming to talk to me about their work and their falling off track regarding expectations and performance. Please make appointments to see me during my office hours—definitely once per semester, preferably twice or more. I will share Google Doc sign-up schedules to make it easy.

Gallatin’s rules on academic integrity apply in this class: http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html. Plagiarism and recycling is easy to spot and does you no favors.
My goals:

1) To have you feel you know what criticism is, even if on an “I know it when I see it” basis.
2) To have you understand what a cliche is, and why avoiding or removing cliches is the critic’s number-one priority, after knowing how to use a subject and a predicate.
3) To have everyone feel a sense of equilibrium and satisfaction in knowing what tradition of criticism they might be related to, and what their own critical voices sound like.

Please use my bpr212@nyu.edu email address.
All assignments (and the essay proposal) should be sent to me as a Google doc, double-spaced, please!
Deadlines not negotiable.
I’ll go over workshop guidelines with you closer to the date.

Sept. 3: Introduction

Sept. 10: Oscar Wilde
“The Critic As Artist”
DUE: Your online annotations to “The Critic As Artist,” for purposes of class discussion

Sept. 17: Criticism About an Idea
-George Orwell: “The Art of Donald McGill”
-Mary Ruefle: “On Theme”

Sept. 24: Criticism About Criticism
-Amiri Baraka: “Jazz and the White Critic”
-Randall Jarrell: “The Age of Criticism”
-Elif Batuman: “From the Critical Impulse, the Growth of Literature” http://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/02/books/review/Batuman-t-web.html
-Daniel Mendelsohn: “A Critic’s Manifesto” http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-critics-manifesto
DUE: Proposal for final 2000 word essay on original topic—one paragraph minimum, one page maximum, emailed to me at bpr212@nyu.edu

Oct. 1: Rebecca Solnit/John Berger: Criticism And the World’s Larger Forces
-Solnit: Chapter 1 from River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West
-Solnit: “Men Explain Things To Me” http://rebeccasolnit.net/essay/men-explain-things-to-me/
- Solnit: “Diary” [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n03/rebecca-solnit/diary](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n03/rebecca-solnit/diary) (Note: This essay was later published in RS’s book *The Encyclopedia of Trouble and Spaciousness* as “Google Invades”)
- Berger: “The Moment of Cubism”
- Berger: “Why Look at Animals?”
- Berger: “The White Bird”

**Writing assignment 1**: 750 word essay on the use of cultural criticism (send this only to me—this will not be workshopped)

**Oct. 8: Poetry and Criticism**

**Writing Assignment 2**: 750 word essay responding to/inspired by a syllabus reading.

Due dates:
- Group A: essays due (emailed to me and the rest of the class) by Sunday, Oct. 11
- Group B: essays due (emailed to and the rest of the class) by Sunday, Oct. 18

**Oct. 15: workshop A for syllabus reading essay**

**Oct. 22: workshop B for syllabus reading essay**

**Oct. 29: Notes, Lists, and Annotations in Criticism**
- Wayne Koestenbaum: “Privacy in the Films of Lana Turner”

**Writing Assignment 3**: 1500-2000 word essay on an original topic.

Due dates:
- Group A: essays due (emailed to me and the rest of the class) by Thursday, Oct. 29.
- Group B: essays due (emailed to me and the rest of the class) by Thursday, Nov. 5.

**Nov. 5: workshop A for long essay**

**Nov. 12: workshop B for long essay**

**Nov. 19**: TBD [possibly no traditional class]

**Nov. 26**: HAPPY THANKSGIVING

**Dec. 3**: Critic vs. Institution
- Jane Jacobs: Introduction to *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*
- James Baldwin: “Faulkner and Desegregation”
- Otis Ferguson: “John Hammond”
  [http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/hist409/ferguson.html](http://chnm.gmu.edu/courses/hist409/ferguson.html)
- Christian Lorentzen: “Poor Rose”
  [http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n11/christian-lorentzen/poor-rose](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v35/n11/christian-lorentzen/poor-rose)

**Dec. 10: Last class**

**DUE:** Revised 1500-2000 word essay