Pop Culture Criticism  
WRTNG-UG 1042  
Gallatin School  
New York University  
Spring 2015, Wednesdays, 6:20-9:00 p.m.  
40 West 4th Street, Room LC6  
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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  
Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music, Ellen Willis

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 28
Welcome/Introduction
Reading: Assorted pieces from Willa Paskin/Slate and Emily Nussbaum/The New Yorker; “What Happens When People Stop Bring Polite” and “Being Zach Morris” by Chuck Klosterman; “Getting Down to What Is Really Real” and “Peyton’s Place” by John Jeremiah Sullivan

Week 2: Feb. 4
NO CLASS

Week 3: Feb. 11
Writing About Television
In-class watching/In-class writing exercise: TBD
In-class visitor: Willa Paskin, television critic, Slate
Assignment: Write a 1500-2000 word critical essay about a television show (you can write about whatever show you wish, but try to keep it relatively contemporary). This can be personal or more objective, but be sure to use the show you pick as a springboard to talking about larger, macro issues – what does this series or episode or season indicate or reflect about our cultural moment?

Week 4: Feb. 18
GROUP A WORKSHOP (Television)

Week 5: Feb. 25
GROUP B WORKSHOP (Television)
Reading: Assorted pieces from Molly Young/New York, “Upon this Rock” and “Hey, Mickey!” by John Jeremiah Sullivan, “Chris Evans is Captain America” by Edith Zimmerman/GQ, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” by Hunter S. Thompson, “Consider the Lobster” by David Foster Wallace

Week 6: March 4
Cultural Criticism as Memoir, or Vice-Versa
How does an individual’s experience of culture reflect/subvert the universal experience? How do external cultural cues dictate how and why we consume certain cultural commodities?
In-class visitor: Molly Young, New York magazine
Assignment: Write a 2000 word first-person narrative about your experience of a cultural phenomenon.

Week 7: March 11
GROUP B WORKSHOP (Memoir)

Week 8: March 18
NO CLASS / SPRING BREAK

Week 9: March 25
GROUP A WORKSHOP (Memoir)
Reading: Out of the Vinyl Deeps by Ellen Willis; assorted film reviews from Pauline Kael, A.O. Scott, and David Denby; assorted record reviews (details TBD).
Week 10: April 1
Reviews
What does criticism look like? What does it do? How is it changing? What is the critic’s job, beyond describing what something sounds like? What’s the purpose of a record review? How is criticism different than opinion? Can it be personal? Why is it important to contextualize art? What do the best reviews do?
In-Class exercise: 6-word record and film reviews
Assignment: Write one 250-500 word review of a film and one 250-500 word review of an album, considering how we approach each form differently.

Week 11: April 8
GROUP A WORKSHOP (Reviews)

Week 12: April 15
GROUP B WORKSHOP (Reviews)

Week 13: April 22
FIELD TRIP!
UCB Faculty Show at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theater (153 E. 3rd Street)
$5

Week 14: April 29
Writing About Performance
How to translate live performance on the page: what to watch for, how to write about it.
In-Class visitor: Ben Ratliff/The New York Times
Assignment: Write a 1200-word review of the live UCB performance we saw the prior week.

Week 15: May 6: WE EAT PIZZA

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 5 p.m. on the Sunday before they are scheduled to be workshopped. THIS DEADLINE IS NON-NEGOTIABLE. This way, everyone has almost two full days to read the submissions before class meets on Tuesday. Submissions should be emailed to me (petrusich@gmail.com), and I will distribute them to our class mailing list on 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 15 (TV essay)
Sunday, March 15 (memoir)
Sunday, April 5 (reviews)
Friday, May 8  (FINAL PORTFOLIO: THREE REVISED PIECES PLUS NEW PERFORMANCE REVIEW)

**Group B deadlines:**
Sunday, February 22 (TV essay)
Sunday, March 8 (memoir)
Sunday, April 12 (reviews)
Friday, May 8  (FINAL PORTFOLIO: THREE REVISED PIECES PLUS NEW PERFORMANCE REVIEW)