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
*Out of the Vinyl Deeps*, Ellen Willis
*The Song Machine*, John Seabrook

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

General Policies:

**Attendance:** You may miss up to two classes without direct penalty, but you remain singularly responsible for making up any work completed/assigned in class or any important information regarding assignments, etc. that may have been relayed that day. Any more than two absences for reasons other than illness, family emergency, or religious observance will have a direct and detrimental impact on your grade.

**Academic Integrity:** 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 ([http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html](http://gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/integrity.html)).
**Devices:** I am sympathetic to the utility of smartphones, tablets, laptops, and the like, but given the nature of our seminar and the kind of work we’ll be reading and parsing, let’s choose to truly be in this room together for a few hours every week. This means that when class begins, your phones should be silenced and your computers put away. You will also need to print out any assignments or papers needed for class ahead of time.

**Grading:** 60% of your grade will be based on the strength and competence of your writing assignments (15% per essay); the remaining 40% of your grade will be based on in-class participation, preparedness, and workshop discussions (per the workshop guidelines below), with 20% for the quality of your peer responses and 20% for attendance and discussion. Please note: just showing up is not enough to earn you a desirable participation grade. Writing workshops are contingent on constructive, thoughtful discussion.

**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.

**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.

**Schedule:**

**Week 1: January 26**
**Welcome/Introduction**
**Reading:** Assorted pieces from Margaret Lyons/Vulture; assorted pieces from Emily Nussbaum/The New Yorker; “Getting Down to What Is Really Real” and “Peyton’s Place” by John Jeremiah Sullivan, from *Pulphead*

**Week 2: Feb. 2**
**Writing About Television**
**In-class visitor:** Margaret Lyons, television critic, Vulture
**Assignment:** Write a 1500-2000 word critical essay about a television show (you can write about whatever show you wish, but I encourage you to pick something that’s presently on the air). 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 3: Feb. 9**
**NO CLASS / Instead, I'm inviting you all to WORD Bookstore in Brooklyn (126 Franklin Street), where I'll be in conversation with the writer and essayist Kent Russell, (a bit later in the semester, we'll be reading his essay “American Juggalo,” on attending the Gathering of the Juggalos). EVENT BEGINS AT 7 P.M.**

**Week 4: Feb. 16**
**GROUP A WORKSHOP (Television)**
Week 5: Feb. 23
GROUP B WORKSHOP (Television)
Reading: *Out of the Vinyl Deeps* by Ellen Willis; assorted film reviews from Pauline Kael, A.O. Scott, and Anthony Lane; assorted record reviews (details TBD).

Week 6: March 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
In-class visitor: Ryan Dombal, senior editor, Pitchfork
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 7: March 8
GROUP B WORKSHOP (Reviews)

Week 8: March 15
NO CLASS / SPRING BREAK

Week 9: March 22
GROUP A WORKSHOP (Reviews)
Reading: “Upon this Rock” and “Hey, Mickey!” by John Jeremiah Sullivan, “American Juggalo” by Kent Russell, “The Kentucky Derby is Decadent and Depraved” by Hunter S. Thompson, “Consider the Lobster” by David Foster Wallace; “Our Band Should Not Be Your Life,” by Amos Barshad

Week 10: March 29
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: Amos Barshad, Grantland/The Fader
Assignment: Write a 2000 word first-person narrative about your experience of a cultural phenomenon.

Week 11: April 5
GROUP A WORKSHOP (Memoir)

Week 12: April 12
GROUP B WORKSHOP (Memoir)
Reading: John Seabrook’s *The Song Machine*

Week 13: April 19
Writing the Zeitgeist
In-class visitor: John Seabrook, staff writer, *The New Yorker*

Reading: Assorted performance reviews (I’d like to keep these current, so will email you links to readings the prior week)

Week 14: April 26
Writing About Performance
How to translate live performance on the page: what to watch for, how to write about it.

In-Class visitor: Jon Caramanica/*The New York Times* (*to be confirmed*)
Assignment: Write a 1200-word review of a live performance

Week 15: May 3: WE EAT PIZZA