Welcome! Please read all the way to the end of this syllabus before you start your work.

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, both in what it says and how it says it. It may seem as if the point of criticism is to solve problems and deliver judgments that will stand for all time. But if that were the case then nothing would ever get written. Criticism involves skepticism and description and interpretation; it’s a way of avoiding received wisdom and getting at the truth underneath something. It’s a helpful human function, maybe even an essential one. It is also a kind of performance, just as much as a poem or a song or a dance. The best criticism has sound, rhythm, style.

In this course you’ll focus on the ways that criticism can go (and has for a long time gone) beyond the ordinary review or argumentative-essay model, and toward other modes: memoir; journalism; philosophy; poetry; list; blog post (or something like it); biography of or eulogy for a person, thing, place, or idea; interrogative or satirical exercise. You’ll see names and ideas come up more than once in these readings. They have internal connections. In some cases, one writer is talking to another.

You’ll be reading original, flexible and inspired writing for a general readership—i.e., as criticism goes, neither Yelp nor academic theory, but the best between those two extremes. You’ll be writing for me, of course, but why not start thinking now about publishing your work? Imagine you are writing for an audience you imagine to be smart and engaged—not the small subset of that audience with highly specialized knowledge. Consumer-advice criticism you can read on your own. Academic theory you can engage with in classes that aren’t writing classes. This is a writing class, including a few workshop days, to help you achieve some artfulness in your arguments and your prose. It’s also a seminar.

You’ll be in charge, sometimes in pairs of groups, of leading discussions on some of the syllabus 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 may also be bringing in current essays from the outside, distributing them, and talking about them.

**Written work:**
-in-class exercises and short response pieces
- 750 word essays (see topics in syllabus)
- 1 2000 word essay: a longer take on an original topic—a document, event, movement, or problem, subject to my approval. (You'll be giving me a short proposal by Sept. 29, handing in the essay in early November, and then handing 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

**Office hours:** Please make appointments to see me during my office hours—at least once per semester, preferably twice or more. This is an expectation of the class. I will share Google Doc sign-up schedules to make it easy. I can help you sort out issues in your writing. You can help me understand what kind of writer you want to be.

**Required texts to buy:**
Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty*
Teju Cole, *Known and Strange Things*
(all others in course packet—which you must buy from Unique Copy Center, 252 Greene Street—or available through online links)

**Gallatin's rules on academic integrity apply** in this class: [http://gallatin.nyu.edu/about/bulletin/undergrad/policies/integrity.html](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](mailto:bpr212@nyu.edu) email address.

***All assignments (and the essay proposal) should be sent to me as a Google doc, double-spaced, please!***

I'll go over workshop guidelines with you closer to the date.

**Sept. 8: Introduction**

**Sept. 15: Widening the Lens**
- George Orwell: “The Art of Donald McGill”
- Mary Ruefle: “On Theme”
- Mark Greif: “What Was the Hipster?”
-Guy Davenport: “The Geography of the Imagination”
-Rebecca Solnit: “Flight”

**Sept. 22: Maggie Nelson**

*The Art of Cruelty*

**DUE: Writing assignment 1.** 750 words. An important part of criticism is to look at everyday life or well-known things—postcards, hipsters, illness, “American Gothic,” shaker villages, etc. Along the same lines, explore an everyday idea, topic, event, person, or tendency, with description and analysis and interpretation. Make connections. Is there a tradition for it? How is it used or understood? What does it resemble? What is its purpose? If you like, begin it with the words “Somebody should write about….”

**Sept. 29: Critics on Criticism**

-Amiri Baraka: “Jazz and the White Critic”
-Margaret Fuller: “A Short Essay on Critics”
-Elif Batuman: "From the Critical Impulse, the Growth of Literature”
-Daniel Mendelsohn: “A Critic’s Manifesto”
  [http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-critics-manifesto](http://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/a-critics-manifesto)

**DUE:** Proposal for final 2000 word essay on an original topic—one paragraph minimum, one page maximum, emailed to me at bpr212@nyu.edu.

**Oct. 6: No regular class—but this is the reading & writing assignment:**

**Word-by-word criticism**

-Parul Seghal: “How ‘Privilege’ Became A Provocation”
-Garcia Lorca: “Theory and Play of the Duende”
-Ambrose Bierce: “G” section from *Devil’s Dictionary*
  [http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/bierce/bierce.html](http://xroads.virginia.edu/~hyper/bierce/bierce.html)
-Gustave Flaubert: “A” section from "Dictionary of Accepted Ideas"
-Roland Barthes: “African Grammar”
-Teju Cole: “In Place of Thought,” from *Known and Strange Things*

**Short response:** 250 words, inspired any or all of the texts listed above, on a single word or phrase that has a meaning other than what the dictionary would give it.

**Oct. 13: Rebecca Solnit/John Berger**

-Solnit: Chapter 1 from *River of Shadows: Eadward Muybridge and the Technological Wild West*
-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: “Why Look at Animals?”
- Berger: "The White Bird"
- Berger: "Some Notes On Song"

**Short response:** 250 words. What kind of critic is Solnit, or Berger, or both? Their subjects are varied, but from what you’ve read, do you see an overall project or a guiding concern? What are they trying to do?

**Oct. 20: Teju Cole**

*from Known and Strange Things:*

“Natives On the Boat”
“A True Picture of Black Skin”
“Touching Strangers”
“Death in the Browser Tab”
“A Reader’s War”
“The White Savior Industrial Complex”

**GUEST: Parul Sehgal**

**Oct. 27: Notes, Lists, and Annotations in Criticism**

- Maryam Monalisa Gharavi: “Transcript on a Face”
- Wayne Koestenbaum: "Privacy in the Films of Lana Turner"
- Maria Bustillos: “Inside David Foster Wallace’s Private Self-Help Library”

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

**Nov. 3: Stranger in the Village: the critic as traveler**

- James Baldwin: “Stranger in the Village”
  [https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/STRANGER%20IN%20THE%20VILLAGE.pdf](https://pantherfile.uwm.edu/gjay/www/Whiteness/STRANGER%20IN%20THE%20VILLAGE.pdf)
- Teju Cole: “Black Body”
- Ta-Nehisi Coates: “Acting French”
- John Jeremiah Sullivan: “Upon This Rock”

**GUEST: Maryam Monalisa Gharavi**

**DUE: 2000 word essay on an original topic.**

**Due dates:**

- **Group A:** essays due to me by Thurs, Nov. 3.
- **Group B:** essays due to me by Thurs, Nov. 10.

**Nov. 10:** workshop A for long essay

**Nov. 17 workshop B for long essay**

**Nov. 24:** HAPPY THANKSGIVING
Dec. 1: 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. 8: Criticism by Poets/Poetic Criticism
- June Jordan: “The Difficult Miracle of Black Poetry In America: Something Like a Sonnet for Phyllis Wheatley”
  ([http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/178504](http://www.poetryfoundation.org/article/178504))
- Anne Carson: “The Albertine Workout”
  ([http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n11/anne-carson/the-albertine-workout](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v36/n11/anne-carson/the-albertine-workout))
- Michael Robbins: “Equipment for Living”
  ([https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/70208](https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/articles/detail/70208))

Dec. 15: Last class
Zadie Smith: “Joy”

DUE: Revised 2000 word essay