

Marymount Manhattan College

COMM 309.01

Arts and Media Reporting and Criticism

Spring 2019

M, 2:30-5:21

Professor: T. Oksman

Contact: toksman@mmm.edu

Office Hours: M, 11:00AM-
12:30PM, and by appointment

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What is the role of the professional critic in the 21st century, when everyone has the potential to find an outlet for her opinions? Is the point of cultural criticism to be evaluative, celebratory, or to start or enter into broader conversations? What are the ethics, and aesthetics, of reporting on contemporary arts, popular culture, and literature? In this course students will apply their journalistic skills to the areas of arts and media reporting and criticism, responding to a range of cultural output including theater, classical music, dance, visual arts, television, movies, and music.

Building on their individual interests, students will develop the skills necessary to write effective cultural criticism, learning to identify appropriate publishing outlets; to recognize the essential components for writing careful, valuable reviews; to understand the importance of historical, social, and political contexts for their reporting and reviewing; and to practice writing across a range of formats, about a number of genres, forms, and subgenres, and for a variety of audiences. Students will also practice locating, researching, and pitching to appropriate outlets, and they will also have the opportunity to develop and discuss an individual philosophy of writing cultural criticism.



Ellen Willis, cultural critic; music writer; essayist

REQUIRED TEXTS

All required readings will be posted on BlackBoard (indicated as BB on the schedule) or are available on the Internet (with links already on the course schedule or that I will pass along to you). There may be readings in addition to those mentioned on the syllabus, which I will post on BlackBoard or distribute in class. Please note that any reading assigned on BlackBoard must be printed out and brought to class. Students are asked not to read from electronic devices in class unless we have discussed special accommodations in advance. Please be sure to print these readings well in advance of our class sessions.

Suggested readings:

The Associated Press Stylebook. New York: Basic Books, 2011.

McLeese, Don. *The New York Times Reader: Arts and Culture*. Washington, D.C.: CQ, 2011. Print.

Strunk, William Jr. and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th edition. New York: Pearson, 1999. Print.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS and REQUIREMENTS

You will be responsible for formal and informal writing assignments over the course of the semester as well as weekly readings, workshops and in-class participation, and a presentation. All written assignments must be typed, printed, and handed in as hard copies at the beginning of class. Do not send work by email unless I ask for it; I will not read it. Late assignments will be progressively downgraded.

COURSE GRADE BREAKDOWNS

Capsule reviews (250-400 words)	45% (3 x 15% each)
Long-form piece (review, profile, or essay; 2,000 words minimum)	30%
Presentation (including one page write up)	15%
In-class participation, including workshops	10%

NUMERICAL GRADING SCALE BREAKDOWNS

A	4.00 (Excellent)
A-	3.67
B+	3.33
B	3.00 (Good)
B-	2.67
C+	2.33
C	2.00 (Average)
C-	1.67
D	1.00 (Poor)
F	0.00 (Failure)



Jenna Wortham and Wesley Morris, writers; cultural critics; hosts of “Still Processing” podcast

COURSE SCHEDULE (subject to change)

Week 1:

Monday, Jan. 28

- Introductions and syllabus review; form groups A and B; discuss capsule reviews
- In-class: What is the role of a cultural critic? (Wilde, excerpt from “The Critic as Artist”)
- In-class: How do I become one? (Matt Zoller Seitz, “Advice to Young Critics”)
- In-class reviews workshop, popular culture (music video, Beyoncé’s “Sorry,” with bell hooks piece; music, Janis Joplin, with Ellen Willis)

Week 2:

Monday, Feb. 4

Popular Music

- Read McLeese, *Arts & Culture Reader*, Intro & Chapter 1, “Keys to Quality Criticism,” pps. 1-16 (BB)
- Read this interview with Robert Christgau: <http://niemanreports.org/articles/concision-and-clarity/>
- Visit and look around: Robert Christgau’s *Consumer Guide* columns: <http://www.robertchristgau.com/xg/cg/index.php>
- Choose one of Christgau’s capsule reviews and bring it to class to present and discuss
- In-class discussion: What makes for a good review? (Description, Context, Interpretation, Evaluation, Style)
- First capsule review (popular music) workshop (group A)

Additional suggested readings: Lester Bangs, *Psychotic Reactions and Carburetor Dung* (1988) and *Mainlines, Blood Feasts, and Bad Taste* (2003); Jeff Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (2005)

Week 3:

Monday, Feb. 11

Popular Music

- Read, “The World Needs Female Rock Critics,” by Anwen Crawford, *New Yorker*, 26 May 2015: <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/the-world-needs-female-rock-critics>
- In-class: listen to excerpt from *Longform* podcast #160, 30 Sept. 2015, Jessica Hopper
- In-class: view Hopper Twitter thread: “Gals/other marginalized folks: what was your 1st brush (in music industry, journalism, scene) w/ idea that you didn’t ‘count?’” 24 August 2015, <https://twitter.com/jesshopp/status/635863142917107712>
- In-class: read and discuss Hopper’s *Pitchfork* reviews of Erykah Badu, “Phone Down,” Joni Mitchell, “The Studio

Albums,” and Rihanna, “Unapologetic”:

<http://pitchfork.com/staff/jessica-hopper/>

- First capsule review (popular music) workshop (group B)

Additional suggested readings: Jessica Hopper, *The First Collection of Criticism by a Living Female Rock Critic* (2015); Ellen Willis (edited by Nona Willis Aronowitz), *Out of the Vinyl Deeps*; “The Invisible Woman: an Interview with Björk,” *Pitchfork*, 21 Jan. 2015, <http://pitchfork.com/features/interview/9582-the-invisible-woman-a-conversation-with-bjork/>.

Week 4:

Monday, Feb. 25

Classical Music, Opera and Dance; Theater

- In-class reading and discussion: “Curtains fall on arts critics at newspapers,” Jed Gottlieb, *Columbia Journalism Review*, 6 Jan. 2017, and “Why theater criticism is the most intense kind of criticism,” Jay Gabler, *Minnesota Playlist*, 4 Feb. 2015.
- In-class: listen to “Who gets to dance in ‘Swan Lake’? The answer is changing,” from *All Things Considered*, Elizabeth Blair, 9 April 2015.
- In-class reviews workshop, dance (Los Vivancos, LIVE Aeternum Bis on YouTube; Tchaikovsky's *Swan Lake*, The Kirov Ballet on YouTube).
- In-class workshop and discussion: on writing pitches (laptops ok)
- **First capsule review due** (popular music)

Additional suggested readings: Alex Ross, *The Rest is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century* (2008); Michael Riedel, *Razzle Dazzle: The Battle for Broadway* (2015); Jack Anderson, *Choreography Observed* (1997); Ann Daly, *Critical Gestures: Writings on Dance and Culture* (2002)

Week 5:

Monday, March 4

Television

- Read McLeese, *Arts & Culture Reader*, Chapter 7, “Television,” pps. 150-70 (BB)
- Read Emily Nussbaum, “My Breaking Bad Bender,” *New York Magazine*, 1 Aug. 2011, <http://nymag.com/arts/tv/reviews/breaking-bad-nussbaum-review-2011-8/>; and Q&A with Nussbaum in *The Verge*: <http://www.theverge.com/2012/11/16/3649592/emily-nussbaum-new-yorker-interview-future-of-tv>
- In-class reviews workshop, television (first episode of *Broad City*)
- Second capsule review (classical music, opera, dance, theater, or television) workshop (group B)

Additional suggested readings: Emily Nussbaum, “2015’s Best TV: I hate top 10 lists, but O.K., fine, here’s a list,” *New Yorker*, 22 Dec. 2015; TV blog: *Mad Men: Notes from the Break-Room*, *The Guardian*, 11 Feb. 2009 - 18 May 2015, <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/series/notes-from-the-break-room>; “Why don’t women of color get to be mentally ill on TV?,” Angelica Jade Bastien, *Fusion*, 8 Sept. 2016, <http://fusion.net/story/345066/television-black-women-mental-illness/>; “White people get ‘The Wire’ all wrong: Its lessons on race and racism must be absorbed,” Paul Achter, *Salon*, 21 July 2015, http://www.salon.com/2015/07/21/white_people_get_the_wire_all_wrong_its_lessons_on_race_and_racism_must_be_absorbed/.

**Week 6:
Monday, March 11**

Television

- Read “The Unbearable Darkness of Prestige Television,” Elizabeth Alsop, *The Atlantic*, 8 July 2015, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2015/07/true-detective-game-of-thrones-bleak-television/397577/>; and “Why TV Needs ‘Weak’ Female Characters,” Elizabeth Alsop, *The Atlantic*, 4 Dec. 2016, <https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2016/12/why-tv-needs-weak-female-characters/509192/>
- Read “The sum and the parts: In defense of TV recaps,” Matt Zoller Seitz, *Vulture.com*, 12 April 2012, <http://www.vulture.com/2012/04/matt-zoller-seitz-in-defense-of-tv-recaps.html>.
- Second capsule review (classical music, opera, dance, theater, or television) workshop (group A)

Additional suggested readings: Matt Zoller Seitz, “There has never been a better time for TV criticism,” *Vulture.com*, 20 August 2013, <http://www.vulture.com/2013/08/there-has-been-no-better-time-for-tv-criticism.html>; Alan Sepinwall, *The Revolution was Televised: the Cops, Crooks, Slingers, and Slayers Who Changed TV Drama* (2013); Saul Austerlitz, *Sitcom: A History in 24 Episodes from I Love Lucy to Community* (2014).

**Week 7:
Monday, March 18**

Film

- Read McLeese, *Arts & Culture Reader*, Chapter 6, “Film,” pps. 116-149 (BB)
- In-class reviews workshop: Michel Gondry, “Interior Design,” from *Tokyo!*
- In-class, read and compare: Scott Tobias, “*Tokyo!*,” *A.V. Club*, 5 March 2009; Stephen Holden, “The Heart of a City

Dissected by Foreigners,” *New York Times*, 5 March 2009; Mark Jenkins, “Getting to know Tokyo, One story at a time,” *NPR*, 5 March 2009; and Roger Ebert, “*Tokyo!*”, rogerebert.com, 11 March 2009.

● **Second capsule review due** (classical music, opera, dance, theater, or television)

Additional suggested readings: Mark Harris, “The Day the Movies Died,” *GQ.com*, 10 Feb. 2011; Jason Zinoman, *Shock Value: How a Few Eccentric Outsiders Gave Us Nightmares, Conquered Hollywood, and Invented Modern Horror* (2011); Roger Ebert, *Awake in the Dark: the Best of Roger Ebert* (2008).

Week 8:
Monday, March 25

Film

- Readings TBD (A.O. Scott and Pauline Kael)
- In-class: listen to and discuss A.O. Scott interview, *HuffPost Live Audio*.
- Third capsule review (film) workshop (group A)

Additional suggested readings: Pauline Kael, edited by Sanford Schwartz, *The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael* (2011); A.O. Scott, *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* (2017).

Week 9:
Monday, April 1

Visual Arts

- Additional readings TBD (on Kara Walker? On photography?)
- In-class reviews workshop (visual art: photography, TBD)
- Third capsule review (film) workshop (group B)

Additional suggested readings: John Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (2008); Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1991); Errol Morris, *Believing is Seeing: Observations on the Mysteries of Photography* (2014); Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (2001)

Week 10:
Monday, April 8

Profiles, Trend and Enterprise Pieces

- Read Mike Mariani, “Promethea Unbound,” *The Atavist Magazine*, 27 Oct. 2017, <https://magazine.atavist.com/promethea-unbound-child-genius-montana>
- In-class reading: James Bennett, “Against ‘Long-form’ Journalism,” 12 Dec. 2013, *The Atlantic*: <http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2013/12/against-long-form-journalism/282256/>

- Begin discussing longform piece and presentations; sign up for meetings next week
- **Third capsule review due** (film)

Additional suggested readings: Chuck Klosterman, *Sex, Drugs, and Cocoa Puffs: A Low Culture Manifesto* (2004); Joan Didion, *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (2008); Mark Greif, *Against Everything* (2016); Wesley Morris, “Jordan Peele’s X-Ray Vision,” *New York Times Magazine*, 20 Dec. 2017;

Week 11:
Monday, April 22

- Individual meetings, no class (bring draft of long-form piece and ideas for presentation)

Week 12:
Monday, April 29

- **Presentations** (bring one-page write up to hand in)

Week 13:
Monday, May 6

- Books; graphic novels; other publication questions
- Readings TBD
 - View *Fresh Air* reviews in class; podcast and interview discussion
 - Discussion of publication types, developing a plan; having a philosophy of reviewing
 - Can you love the art but not the artist? Discussion
 - In-class workshop: Long-form piece (everyone to bring draft)
 - Participation self-evaluation write-up

Additional suggested readings: Ben Schwartz, ed., *The Best American Comics Criticism* (2010); Harold Bloom, *How to Read and Why* (2000); Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992); Francine Prose, *Reading Like a Writer* (2006).

Week 14:
Monday, May 13

- **Long-form piece due** (write cover letters in class)
- Read around and wrap up

Additional readings (recommended publications to check out):

Best criticism

www.rogerebert.com
 www.salon.com/ent/index.html
 www.guardian.co.uk/reviews/
 www.observer.co.uk/review/
 www.culturekiosque.com/nouveau/rh1nouv.htm
 newyorker.com/THE_CRITICS/
 www.iht.com/

References

All Music Guide: <http://www.allmusic.com/>
 Internet Movie Database: <http://www.imdb.com/>
 Album of the Year (music site aggregator): <http://www.albumoftheyear.org/>
 The House Next Door (film criticism sites aggregator): <http://www.slantmagazine.com/house>
 Metacritic (compiles critic scores for TV, film, music, games): <http://www.metacritic.com/>

Culture Sites/Blogs

The New York Times
 The Pop History Dig
 The New Yorker (Subscription, but with some exceptions)
 The Guardian (US Edition)
 NPR-Pop Culture
 A.V. Club (The Onion)
 Hypebot.com
 Salon.com
 Slate
 Slant
 The Comics Journal
 The Los Angeles Review of Books
 Public Books
 The Atlantic
 The Huffington Post (Entertainment)
 Wired Magazine (The Underwire)
 The Verge
 Photo.Tutsplus.com
 Rolling Stone
 Pitchfork
 Blurt
 Stereogum
 The Source
 AllHipHop.com
 VibeMagazine
 JAZZIZ
 JazzTimes
 Downbeat
 Classical-Music.com

Gramophone
Chamber Music Magazine
SymphonyOnline
New York Review of Books
The Millions
Open Letters Monthly
MoMA
MASSMoCA
New American Paintings
Smithsonian

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Capsule Reviews

General Instructions

Over the course of the semester, you will be writing three capsule reviews. These reviews should be 250-400 words, not including a title. You should type your review in Times New Roman, 12-point font, double spaced. *Please include the final word count somewhere on the page.*

In these reviews, you should pay attention to the four essential elements of reviewing that Don McLeese describes as “keys to quality criticism”: description, context, interpretation, and evaluation. Consider that you are writing your review for a general audience, that is, for people who have not necessarily seen/heard/read/experienced whatever it is that you’re writing about. In addition, these capsule reviews are meant to help you find a voice for your reviewing. So you should feel free to make them sound as conversational or formal as you think you need to be in order to best make your point.

Workshops

Each student will have her or his review workshopped at least once before the final capsule review is due. For the days that you are being workshopped, be sure to bring 15 printed copies of your review to class.

Dates, Deadlines, and Selecting Materials

You will make your own selections of what to review for each of these capsule reviews, but they should fit into one of the genres/mediums assigned for that date.

First Capsule Review, Popular Music

Monday, February 4	Group A Workshop
Monday, February 11	Group B Workshop
Monday, February 25	First Capsule Review due (for everyone)

Second Capsule Review, Classical Music, Opera, Dance, Theater, or Television

Monday, March 4	Group B Workshop
Monday, March 11	Group A Workshop
Monday, March 18	Second Capsule Review due (for everyone)

Third Capsule Review, Film

Monday, March 25	Group A Workshop
Monday, April 1	Group B Workshop
Monday, April 8	Third Capsule Review due (for everyone)

When turning in reviews, please include earlier drafts with my/your notes on them. Please note that there are no revision options for these reviews; please see me before they are due if you would like to go over yours one-on-one.