

*In criticism, I will be bold,
and as sternly, absolutely just with friend and foe.
From this purpose nothing shall turn me.*
— Edgar Allan Poe

Arts Criticism in America

TU MSTU 4863 (Advanced Seminar)

Spring 2024



Movies, music, TV, books, visual art — how do you decide which of it is any good? Importantly, where do those debates actually occur, how do various media shape these discourses, and why should it matter? Students in this course will read texts from media studies, the humanities, and journalism about the social maintenance of standards for art and culture. Beginning with an examination of 19th- and 20th-century struggles to navigate the “bloody crossroads” between art and politics, we will examine the formation and circulation of discourses about the sanctioned figure of the arts critic and ways that online media have decentralized a gatekeeping role with varying impacts on culture’s creators, consumers, and capitalists. While many suggest that the influence of arts criticism has waned in the 21st century, this course will conclude by searching for its methods within digital culture, from online product reviews to YouTube “reaction videos.”

TTh 2-3:15 p.m. • Oliphant 141

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Office hours:

3:30-4:30 p.m. Wednesdays @ Oliphant 113 or by appointment

In-person or virtual (link on Harvey)

Critics are our friends, they show us our faults.

— Benjamin Franklin

What are we doing here?

The chief objectives of this course are as follows:

- To **survey** a broad history of critical thought in America as it pertains to popular culture, and to understand its origins and evolution during the last two centuries.
- To **understand** the reasons for engaging in such criticism — both as a critic and as a reader or audience — and the ways such texts contribute to the circulation of social discourses, the maintenance of hegemonic ideologies, and the possibility for political change.
- To **critique** criticism itself, reading texts not only to evaluate their discursive aims and impacts but to formulate a detailed set of criteria for productive cultural criticism, in order to identify it and/or produce it.
- To **practice** arts criticism itself, writing and crafting our own arguments about the social merits of artistic statements and popular culture.

OK, but what are we doing *in here*?

In a nutshell: reading and talking — evaluating others' evaluations. This course is *about* texts, so we read a lot. Each class meeting will be organized around the readings for that day. Most days will begin with a review of concepts and a brief lecture situating the day's perspectives. As an advanced seminar, though, this course is designed to be highly student-led. Much of each day's class time will be organized and facilitated by that day's selected "Break It Down" leaders.

The course is evenly divided into two chief sections:

- **Theory**: First, we will spend our weeks leading up to Spring Break primarily reading, watching, and listening to arts criticism itself and theories about it. While we are primarily focused on American criticism, we will begin by exploring the intellectual history of criticism that preceded this country and influenced our own approaches. We'll spend many days evaluating and arguing about the actual texts of arts critics, from the bluster of early lit critics to the famous thumbs of Siskel & Ebert.
- **Practice**: During the second half of the course, you'll practice what we've been preaching — by going forth and critiquing actual art and culture. Each week, you will experience a different cultural art form and write a review of it. This work will be discussed in peer-review workshops each week.

This syllabus is the menu for your intellectual nourishment this term, and it constitutes a contract between you and me. After the first days of the semester, however, **Harvey will serve as the repository of all active information about the course** — readings, videos, assignments, and communication. This PDF will not be updated with any scheduling changes. **PAY ATTENTION TO ALL COURSE ANNOUNCEMENTS, in class and via email, as we go. If you have a question about the course, always check the syllabus and Harvey first. If they don't contain the answer, then you may contact me for help.**

LOGISTICS & AGREEMENTS

Grading: You can expect clear instructions and explanations on all course assignments, followed by consistent procedural support and detailed written feedback on your performance (via Harvey). I make every effort to return assignments with feedback and grades **within two weeks after submission**. I am happy to discuss feedback, but I do not entertain regrade requests.

- In this class, a **B grade** (80-89%) means that the work successfully satisfied all instructions and goals for the assignment; an **A grade** (90% and above) exceeds those expectations. A **C grade** (70-79%) is applied to work that is only satisfactory or falls below expectations; a **D grade** (60-69%) applies to unsatisfactory efforts; and a **failing grade** (below 60%) is for unacceptable work.

Course communications: Check your messages and email regularly! Urgent announcements or schedule/location changes will be communicated to you via email. Please contact me via the messaging available in Harvey. When writing to me, please remember that you are writing in a professional context. I will make every attempt to answer messages quickly, at least within 24 hours, except on Saturdays. You may address me as Professor Conner or Dr. Conner, and my preferred pronouns are he/him/his.

Diversity, equity, inclusion & belonging: We pursue this coursework together in order to learn more about our shared world — and our individual worlds. In doing so, we seek to acknowledge, respect, and encourage each of our diverse perspectives, as every one of these adds vital dimension to our understanding of the world. As a community, we (*students, instructors, guests*) will behave courteously and respectfully to everyone within our shared space, **respecting differing ideas as well as different levels of comprehension** and building awareness of our own positionalities, perspectives, and backgrounds, including categories of identity like race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, nationality, and religion — overall, respecting the magnificent diversity of experience that a university education affords us.

Academic integrity: The university has strict rules and severe punishments for cheating, plagiarism, and other violations of academic integrity. These will not be waived under any circumstances. Read the Academic Misconduct Policy of the College of Arts and Sciences (<https://artsandsciences.utulsa.edu/advising/academic-misconduct-policy/>), and if you have the *slightest* question about *any* of these parameters, ask me. (You don't get in trouble for *asking!*) If you weren't capable of doing the work, you wouldn't be here. Don't blow it.

Technology: Please **silence cell phones** and any alerts on your various devices. Also, give yourself a break — avoid the social media and other distractions while in class. You're here, and you or some very nice person is paying for this experience: *so focus!*

Student Access and Success: Students who have or believe they may have a disability and would like to set up accommodations should contact **Student Access** within Student Success to self-identify their needs and facilitate their rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act and related laws. Student Access provides private consultations to any student. Contact Student Access staff at studentaccess@utulsa.edu or by phone at (918) 631-2315. The application for accommodations may be obtained online at <https://sierra.accessiblelearning.com/s-UTulsa/ApplicationStudent.aspx>. Student Access staff will assist students in the implementation of approved accommodations, and students should submit requests as early as possible for full assistance. Students who qualify for accommodations should meet with the instructor privately (during office hours or by appointment) *as soon as possible* to arrange for their needs and obtain support for the class. Instructors are entitled to notice of 5 business days before the implementation of any required accommodations and all accommodations should be requested by the 12th week of classes for use in that semester, absent an extraordinary and unforeseeable circumstance. TU maintains a list of accessible features for all buildings (e.g., entrances, parking) at maps.utulsa.edu.

Know Your Title IX: Sexual misconduct is prohibited by Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 (“Title IX”) and will not be tolerated within the TU community. Sexual misconduct encompasses all forms of sex and gender-based discrimination, harassment, violence, and assault, as well as dating violence, domestic violence, interpersonal violence, stalking and sexual exploitation. For more information about your rights under Title IX, visit <https://utulsa.edu/sexual-violence-prevention-education/policies-laws/>. If you or someone you know has been harassed, assaulted, or stalked, or if you have questions about violence prevention resources available to you, please contact any of the following campus and community resources:

Title IX Coordinator 918-631-4602

Office of Violence Prevention 918-631-2324

TU Counseling and Psychological Services 918- 631-2241

Campus Security 918-631-5555

Domestic Violence Intervention Services 918-585-3163 or 918-743-5763

Tulsa Police Department 918-596-9222 or 911 (emergency situations)

ASSESSMENTS

To achieve those objectives, we will meet regularly to discuss course concepts and texts, and students will complete the following assignments throughout the term:

Discussion leadership: Break It Down — 10%

At intervals throughout the course, students will take the lead in kickstarting discussion of readings and course themes.

— 5 pairs/groups, assigned one of the days on the schedule below

Blog: Critique the Critique — 10%

Students will contribute to an ongoing blog (on Harvey), sharing cultural criticism they encounter and commenting briefly on it in line with course concepts & discussion.

— *At least two posts between Week 2 and Week 9, 5% each*

Midterm essay: '9 Evenings' — 20%

You'll read and explore online materials related to the history of an infamous avant-garde performance from the 1960s. You'll also read a noted critique of these events. Then, you will deliver a written consideration of the relationship between both.

Practice: Writing reviews — 40%

During the second half of the course, we'll experience some art events together — a movie, an exhibit, a musical performance, and a literary text — then students will write critical evaluations of each event. These will be followed up with weekly peer-review workshops and discussion.

— *4 reviews + workshops, 10% each*

Final essay: Interpretation — 20%

Students will develop an interpretive written and/or multimedia essay about a work, an event, a particular critic, a historical phenomenon, a social movement, or another topic specifically related to cultural criticism.

See Harvey for detailed assignment descriptions, instructions, and rubrics.

A word about “participation”: Every student is expected to have read or watched completely all assigned texts prior to class, and they are expected to be able to respond to basic questions from the instructor and fellow students about those texts and their ideas — to **arrive to each session with something relevant and productive to contribute or ask about**.

Engagement and attendance, however, are not included among the above assessments — *directly*. Your engagement with the course (inside or outside of our classroom) will be *readily* apparent in each assignment — in how properly and deeply you demonstrate a mastery of course concepts and objectives, in the originality of your thinking, and in the vibrancy of connections you make not only between texts but to the wider world. I will maintain a record of your attendance and engagement levels throughout the term; I may speak to you about these as we proceed, and you may speak to me about this at any time. Encouraging student engagement not only addresses your success in this specific course but your ultimate performance as a scholar from a university of this caliber.

Illness, emergencies, OMGs: If you fall ill or have other difficulties this semester, your health and wellbeing are your top priority. Deadline extensions are available for most assignments, if needed. Make sure you contact me as soon as you're able so we can devise a plan together. Know *I am here to support you* in this class. If you're having any trouble — from illness and family emergencies to caregiving responsibilities and the struggle for basic needs —

please reach out so that I might connect you with the multitude of assistive resources available on campus. *Life happens*: we will work through it together.

- If you are required to miss class to participate in an event related to athletics or a student organization, please let me know ASAP. No doubt you already have the dates and information about these events, so the sooner you share the easier we can make a make-up plan.

SCHEDULE OF WORK

The following schedule is subject to slight or radical changes throughout the term. Pay attention to all course announcements as we go.

No textbook is required for the course.

Readings and other media will be delivered via Harvey throughout the term.

Note: We occasionally may view video clips or listen to pop songs during class or in the context of assignments. Some of these — and even some readings — may use language and present situations that students may find objectionable. Keep in mind that we are discussing these public works in the context of critical scholarship.

Week 1: Initial understandings & scope

TUESDAY, JAN 16

- *Read*: The course syllabus and Harvey site
- *Read*: Mendelsohn, Daniel. "A Critic's Manifesto." *The New Yorker*, 2012. [PDF]

THURSDAY, JAN 18

- *Read*: Scott, A.O. "Everybody's a Critic. And That's How It Should Be." *The New York Times*, 30 Jan. 2016. [PDF]
- *Read*: Schickel, Richard. "Not everybody's a critic." *The Los Angeles Times*, 20 May 2007. [PDF]

Week 2: Culture & commentary

DUE: Critique the Critique blog opens this week — start posting!

TUESDAY, JAN 23

- *Read*: entries for "Culture" pp. 63-69 and "Popular" pp. 262-264 in *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, eds. Bennett, Grossberg and Morris (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005).

- *Read*: Judkis, Maura. "[Arts Criticism for the Millennials.](#)" The Knight Foundation, 3 Aug. 2011.
- *Revisit*: Carey, James. "A Cultural Approach to Communication" in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society* (Unwin Hyman, 1989).

THURSDAY, JAN 25

- *Read*: Conner, Thomas. "Dear Reader: A Pop Critic Responds to the Day's Mail," *ARTicles*, 7: 138-149.
- *Read*: Elkins, James. "On the Absence of Judgment in Art Criticism," in *The State of Art Criticism* (Routledge, 2008).

Week 3: Arnold v. Wilde

TUESDAY, JAN 30

[Break It Down group 1]

- *Read*: Arnold, Matthew. "The Function of Criticism at the Present Time" (Maxmillan, 1895). [PDF]
- *Skim*: Wilde, Oscar. "The Critic as Artist" (1891), <https://celt.ucc.ie/published/E800003-007/text001.html>.
- *Read*: Excerpts from Wilde's essay. [PDF]

THURSDAY, FEB 1

- *Read*: Flohr, Birgitt. "The Relation Between Creation and Criticism in the Work of Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde," (King's College, London, 1997).

Week 4: Foundational perspectives: Literary origins

TUESDAY, FEB 6

[Break It Down group 2]

- *Read*: Eliot, T.S. "The Perfect Critic" (pp. 1-16) and "A Note on the American Critic" (pp. 38-44) in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (Knopf, 1921). [PDF]
- *Read*: Singh, G. "Introduction" (pp. ix-xii) in *Ezra Pound as Critic* (St. Martin's, 1994). [PDF]

THURSDAY, FEB 8

- *Read*: Mencken, H.L. "Footnote on Criticism" from *Prejudices, Third Series* (Knopf, 1922).
<https://chronicleofancientsunlight.wordpress.com/2014/01/08/footnote-on-criticism-an-essay-by-h-l-mencken/>

- *Read*: Robson, Leo. "Christopher Ricks: 'Criticism is being good at noticing things,'" *New Statesman*, 13 July 2021. [PDF]

Week 5: Out with the old, in with the new

TUESDAY, FEB 13

- *Read*: Twain, Mark. "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences." 1895. [PDF]
- *Read*: Shaw, George Bernard. "Letter on Shakespeare" in *The Complete Works of George Bernard Shaw* (Delphi, 2014). [PDF]
- *Read*: Ellison, Ralph. "The Birth of Bebop." *Esquire*, June 1, 1983. [PDF]
- *Read*: Willis, Ellen. "Janis Joplin" (pp. 125-130) in *Out of the Vinyl Deeps: Ellen Willis on Rock Music* (ed. Nona Willis Aronowitz, Univ. of Minnesota, 2011). [PDF]

THURSDAY, FEB 15

- *Read*: Mendelson, Edward. "What Is the Critic's Job?" *The New York Review*, Sept. 28, 2017. [PDF]
- Schwabsky, Barry. "A Critic's Job of Work." *The Nation*, March 9, 2016. [<https://www.thenation.com/article/archive/a-critics-job-of-work/>]

Week 6: Society, mass media, and politics

TUESDAY, FEB 20

[Break It Down group 3]

- *Read*: Brooks, Van Wyck. "Highbrow and Lowbrow" from *Three Essays on America* (Doubleday, 1934). [<https://chronicleofancientsunlight.wordpress.com/2014/12/24/highbrow-and-lowbrow-an-essay-by-van-wyck-brooks/>]
- *Read*: Macdonald, Dwight. "Masscult & Midcult" in *Against the American Grain* (Da Capo, 1983). (**Read only pp. 3-13 and 36-46**) [PDF]

THURSDAY, FEB 22

- *Read*: Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination* (Viking, 1950). (**Read: to p.6**)
- *Read*: Castronovo, Russ. "What Are the Politics of Critique? The Function of Criticism at a Different Time" in *Critique and Postcritique* (Duke Univ. Press, 2017). (**Read: at least pp. 230-235**)

Week 7: Postmodernism

TUESDAY, FEB 27

[Break It Down group 4]

- Read: Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on 'Camp'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001). [PDF]
- Read: Croce, Arlene. "Discussing the Undiscussable" (pp. 708-719) in *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in The New Yorker* (Univ. Press of Florida, 2005). [PDF]

THURSDAY, FEB 29

- **[Break It Down group 5]**
- Read: Anker, Elizabeth S. and Rita Felski. "Introduction" in *Critique and Postcritique* (Duke Univ. Press, 2017). **(Read: only pp. 1-15)** [PDF]
- Read: Farber, Manny. "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art." *Film Culture*, 27 (Winter 1962-1963). [PDF]

Week 8: At the movies!

SUNDAY, MAR 3

DUE @ 5 p.m.: Midterm essay

TUESDAY, MAR 5

- Read: Corliss, Richard. "All Thumbs Up, or, Is There a Future for Film Criticism?" (pp. 394-402) in *Awake in the Dark: The Best of Roger Ebert* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006). [PDF]
- Read: Ebert, Roger. "All Stars, or, Is There a Cure for Criticism of Film Criticism?" (pp. 403-415) in *Awake in the Dark: The Best of Roger Ebert* (Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006). [PDF]
- Read: Kael, Pauline. "Numbing the Audience" (pp. 183-193) in *Deeper Into Movies* (Bantam, 1974). [PDF]
- Read: Kael, Pauline. "Are Movies Going to Pieces?" in *The Atlantic*, Nov. 1964. [PDF]
- Watch: Siskel & Ebert reel [TBA].

THURSDAY, MAR 7

Battle of the film critics! (in class)

- Read: Kael, Pauline. Review of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Oct. 21, 1967, from *The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael* (Library of America, 2011). [PDF]
- Read: Ebert, Roger. Review of *Bonnie and Clyde*, Sept. 25, 1967. [\[https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bonnie-and-clyde-1967\]](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/bonnie-and-clyde-1967)
- Read: Kael, Pauline. Review of *Last Tango in Paris*. Oct. 28, 1972, from *The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael* (Library of America, 2011). [PDF]
- Read: Ebert, Roger. Review of *Last Tango in Paris*, Oct. 14, 1972. [\[https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/last-tango-in-paris-1972\]](https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/last-tango-in-paris-1972)
- Read: Kael, Pauline. Preview of *Nashville*. March 3, 1975, from *The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael* (Library of America, 2011). [PDF]

- *Read:* Ebert, Roger. Review of *Nashville*, Jan. 1, 1975.
[<https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/nashville-1975>]

Week 9: Pop music

TUESDAY, MAR 12

- *Read:* Williams, Paul. "How Rock Communicates" (pp. 75-80) in *The Penguin Book of Rock and Roll Writing* (ed. Clinton Heylin, Viking, 1992). [PDF]
- *Read:* Frith, Simon. "Writing About Popular Music" (pp. 502-526) in *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019). [PDF]
- *Read:* Jones, Steve and Kevin Featherly. "Re-Viewing Rock Writing: Narratives of Popular Music Criticism" (pp. 19-40) in *Pop Music and the Press* (ed. Steve Jones, Temple Univ. Press, 2002). [PDF]
- *Read:* Roka, Les. "A Day in the Life of American Music Criticism: The 'Sgt. Pepper' Debate of 1967-69." *Journalism History*, vol. 30, no. 1, 2004, pp. 20-30. [PDF]

THURSDAY, MAR 14

- *Peruse:* Robert Christgau's *Consumer Guide* site,
<https://www.robertchristgau.com/cg.php>
- *Read:* Selections TBA

Week 10: SPRING BREAK

Week 11: PRACTICE - Movies

TUESDAY, MAR 26

- *Read:* Pape, Susan and Sue Featherstone. "Writing Reviews" (Chapter 9, pp. 107-121) in *Feature Writing: A Practical Introduction* (Sage, 2006). [PDF]

CLASSTIME: Review-writing workshop

THURSDAY, MAR 28

CLASSTIME: Watching a film (student choice!)

SUNDAY, MAR 31

DUE @ 5 p.m.: Criticism #1 (Movie)

Week 12: PRACTICE - Art

TUESDAY, APR 2

CLASSTIME: Peer-review & discussion workshop

THURSDAY, APR 4

CLASSTIME: Visiting a TU gallery

SUNDAY, APR 7

DUE @ 5 p.m.: Criticism #2 (Art)

Week 13: PRACTICE - Music

TUESDAY, APR 9

CLASSTIME: Peer-review & discussion workshop

THURSDAY, APR 11

CLASSTIME: In-class performance by TBA

SUNDAY, APR 14

DUE @ 5 p.m.: Criticism #3 (Music)

Week 14: PRACTICE – Student choice!

TUESDAY, APR 16

CLASSTIME: Peer-review & discussion workshop

THURSDAY, APR 18

CLASSTIME: Student choice (TBA)

SUNDAY, APR 21

DUE @ 5 p.m.: Criticism #4 (Student choice)

Week 15: The future & the end

TUESDAY, APR 23

- *Read*: Ventura, Anya. "Slow Criticism: Art in the Age of Post-Judgement," *Temporary Art Review*, Feb. 15, 2016.
[<https://temporaryartreview.com/slow-criticism-art-in-the-age-of-post-judgement/>]
- *Read*: Allington, Daniel. "'Power to the reader' or 'degradation of literary taste'?" Professional critics and Amazon customers as reviewers of *The Inheritance of Loss*," *Language and Literature*, vol. 25, no. 3, 2016, pp. 254–278. (**Read at least through p. 260**) [PDF]

- *Read:* Walsh, Melanie and Maria Antoniak. "The Goodreads 'Classics': A Computational Study of Readers, Amazon, and Crowdsourced Amateur Criticism," *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, vol. 4, 2021, pp. 243-287. (**Read at least through p. 259**) [PDF]

THURSDAY, APR 25

- *Read:* Dingle, Christopher and Dominic McHugh. "Stop the Press? The Changing Media of Music Criticism" (pp. 695-706) in *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019). [PDF]
- Bernstein, Jonathan. "How YouTube Reaction Videos Are Changing the Way We Listen," *Rolling Stone*, Aug. 24, 2020.
[\[https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/youtube-reaction-videos-interviews-in-the-air-tonight-lost-in-vegas-1046225/\]](https://www.rollingstone.com/music/music-features/youtube-reaction-videos-interviews-in-the-air-tonight-lost-in-vegas-1046225/)

Finals week

MONDAY, APR 29 @ 5 p.m.

DUE: Final essay

FRIDAY, MAY 3 @ 1-3:25 p.m.

Final discussion/workshop