

*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

UCSD COMM 190 (Junior Seminar)

Summer (2) 2021



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.”

Section A00 / ID #48349
T/Th @ 2-4:50 p.m. @ online

Instructor: [Thomas Conner](#)
Email: tconner@ucsd.edu
(Subject line MUST include “COMM 190”)

Office hour: 10-11 a.m. Thursdays via [Zoom](#) or by appointment

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.

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 a junior 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](#) student leaders.

Must I attend every day of class?

Yes. Attendance is mandatory as seminar participation is central to the course. Any unexcused absences will negatively impact your participation grade.

So I can't take this class asynchronously?

No. As a discussion-based seminar, the 190 format depends on the ability for all students to be present at the same time in order to exchange ideas and debate concepts. This class is about reading and then talking about the reading. Asynchronous attendance, therefore, is not allowed.

What's expected of you?

You'll be prepared for each class. *That means reading [the assigned texts](#). That means reading the assigned texts. That means reading the assigned texts.* (Notice, repetition implies importance.)

That also means arriving to class with something to say about those texts. You are required to participate in class discussions — so chime in, speak out, pipe up. In so doing, you will be courteous to and respectful of others. (Read and review the course's "[Commitment to anti-racist pedagogy](#).") That means respecting differing ideas as well as different levels of comprehension.

You'll abide by the [technical do's and don'ts](#) of our remote-learning context.

How do I prepare for class?

Perhaps you've seen this before: *read the assigned texts*. However, there's more to this process than sweeping your eyes across the printed pages. Engage with the texts. No text is a given, an oracle, an isolated entity. You're here to extract material from the texts, material you will then consider, argue with, discuss, debate, question, and apply. So take notes and write down questions — which you then bring with you to class.

How's everything graded?

- *Participation & quizzes* — 5%
- *Break It Down* — 10%
- *Assignment 1* — 10%
- *Assignment 2* — 25%
- *Assignment 3* — 50%

Late assignments will be graded down one letter grade for every 24 hours they are late.

What the heck are Break It Down and Critique the Critique?

Cutesy names for brief assignments of in-class participation and discussion leadership. Review the separate instructions for both the [Break It Down](#) group work and the [Critique the Critique](#) "blog."

How are assignments delivered?

You'll deliver all written assignments via the course's Canvas site; delivery of multimedia components for certain assignments may vary. Follow the instructions given with each assignment, as well as any additions or amendments announced in class, to deliver your work for discussion and grading.

What exactly is participation?

Participation means on-time & regular attendance in class, asking questions during discussion, keeping up with the readings (and scoring well on occasional quizzes) and actively contributing to the ongoing conversation generated by the course. It means generally being *present* — in both the colloquial and communication-theory sense of that term. Completion of quizzes, Critique the Critique, and other tasks and assignments also factor into your participation grade.

Should I check my email every day?

Yes! Changes in assignments or the class schedule will be announced in class when possible but always delivered via email to your ucsd.edu address. ***If contacting me by email***, use appropriate email etiquette and a professional tone. Contact me by email for quick questions and scheduling only; for in-depth discussions or revision work, come to office hours. I respond to emails within 24 hours, except on Saturdays. I only respond to emails sent from your ucsd.edu account. By university policy, I am not allowed to discuss grades via email.

May I speak with you during office hours?

That's why they exist! Drop-in office hours are a time when you can come to my "office" to seek individual or group help with course material (readings, concepts, etc.) and assignments. You are encouraged to come. However, office-hour meetings generally only last about 10 minutes, so make sure you have *specific questions* that you would like help with.

What "by appointment" means: I expect you to plan your time so that you can come to my regular office hours. However, if you have a legitimate, unavoidable conflict (i.e., class or work) that coincides with my office hours, you may contact me to make an alternate time to meet. When writing to request an appointment, email me at least two days in advance and provide me with all your available times.

How bad will it suck if I turn in work that's not my own?

Mightily. Plagiarism means taking material from another source (published or unpublished) and presenting it as your own without proper citation. This is a serious academic offense. That means outright copying and/or rewriting of material, but it also means using someone else's ideas or even turning in a paper you used in another class. The University has strict rules and severe punishments for plagiarism and cheating. These will not be waived under any circumstances. If you have the slightest question about these parameters, ask me or contact the [Office of Academic Integrity](#). If you weren't capable of doing the work, you wouldn't be here. Don't blow it.

To that end, before work begins in this course, you are required to review the university's general policies about "[Creating a community of academic integrity](#)" and then [submit your name & PID](#) verifying that you have done so and understand the basics. This must be completed by the end of Week 1; I cannot grade any assignments from students who have not submitted this verification.

Got special needs?

If you require accommodations for a physical or learning disability or medical condition, please contact me early in the quarter so we can arrange ahead of time to accommodate your classroom or assignment needs. You must also register with the Office of Students with Disabilities (OSD) and obtain a current Authorization for Accommodation (AFA) letter. This letter is required for me to approve your accommodation requests, and I must receive it in advance of when the accommodations are needed. For more information about OSD, visit: <http://disabilities.ucsd.edu/Links to an external site>.

SCHEDULE (Readings & Assignments)

The following is our schedule of readings and assignments for the summer 2021 term. The readings all will be downloadable PDFs or online links, included below. *Read all of each text unless otherwise noted.*

Each class session will be synchronous, though some may run short with additional asynchronous work assigned. You are expected to be available and present during each scheduled class.

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

T :: AUG 3 :: Overview & declarations

Read before class:

- The [syllabus](#), this schedule, & [technical logistics](#), plus check out the ongoing [Break It Down](#) and [Critique the Critique](#) assignments, plus other existing [Discussions](#) threads.
- Mendelsohn, Daniel. "[A Critic's Manifesto](#)." *The New Yorker*, 28 Aug. 2012.
- Scott, A.O. "[Everybody's a Critic. And That's How It Should Be](#)." *The New York Times*, 30 Jan. 2016.
- Schickel, Richard. "[Not everybody's a critic](#)." *The Los Angeles Times*, 20 May 2007.
- Pape, Susan and Sue Featherstone. "Writing Reviews" (Chapter 9, pp. 107-121) in *Feature Writing: A Practical Introduction* (Sage, 2006).
- *New Keywords: A Revised Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, eds. Bennett, Grossberg and Morris (Wiley-Blackwell, 2005). (**Read: entries for "Culture" pp. 63-69 and "Popular" pp. 262-264**).
- Judkis, Maura. "[Arts Criticism for the Millennials](#)." The Knight Foundation, 3 Aug. 2011.

In class:

- Overview of the course, the syllabus, assignments, and logistics
- Defining terms, discussing manifestos, and digging into the critical act

Th :: AUG 5 :: Foundational perspectives

Read before class:

- Flohr, Birgitt. "The Relation Between Creation and Criticism in the Work of Matthew Arnold and Oscar Wilde," King's College, London, 1997. [**Break It Down group 1**]
- 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).
- Singh, G. "Introduction" (pp. ix-xii) in *Ezra Pound as Critic* (St. Martin's, 1994).
- Mencken, H.L. "[Footnote on Criticism](#)" from *Prejudices, Third Series* (Knopf, 1922).

In class:

- Discuss early perspectives on arts criticism
- Break It Down group 1
- Start work on Assignment #1

Sun :: AUG 8

Due by 3 p.m.: [ASSIGNMENT #1](#)

Week 2

T :: AUG 10 :: Out with the old, in with the new

Read before class:

- Twain, Mark. "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences." 1895.
- Shaw, George Bernard. "Letter on Shakespeare" in *The Complete Works of George Bernard Shaw* (Delphi, 2014).
- Ellison, Ralph. "The Birth of Bebop." *Esquire*, June 1, 1983.
- 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 Press, 2011).
- Mendelson, Edward. "What Is the Critic's Job?" *The New York Review*, Sept. 28, 2017. **[Break It Down group 2]**
- Schwabsky, Barry. "[A Critic's Job of Work](#)." *The Nation*, March 9, 2016. **[Break It Down group 2]**

In class:

- Discuss evolution of American critical perspective from 19th into 20th century
- Break It Down group 2 + Critique the Critique

Th :: AUG 12 :: Politics

Read before class:

- Brooks, Van Wyck. "[Highbrow and Lowbrow](#)" from *Three Essays on America* (Doubleday, 1934). **[Break It Down group 3]**
- Macdonald, Dwight. "Masscult & Midcult" in *Against the American Grain* (Da Capo, 1983). **(Read only pp. 3-13 and 36-46) [Break It Down group 3]**
- Trilling, Lionel. *The Liberal Imagination* (Viking, 1950). **(Read: to the mark on p.6)**
- 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)**

In class:

- Discuss the politics of criticism
- Break It Down group 3 + Critique the Critique
- Start work on Assignment #2

Week 3

T :: AUG 17 :: Postmodernism

Read before class:

- Sontag, Susan. "Against Interpretation" and "Notes on 'Camp'" in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (Picador, 2001). **(Read at least "Against Interpretation"!)**
- Croce, Arlene. "Discussing the Undiscussable" (pp. 708-719) in *Writing in the Dark, Dancing in The New Yorker* (Univ. Press of Florida, 2005). **[Break It Down group 4]**
- *Now optional:* Anker, Elizabeth S. and Rita Felski. "Introduction" in *Critique and Postcritique* (Duke Univ. Press, 2017). **(Read: only pp. 1-15)**
- *Now optional:* Farber, Manny. "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art." *Film Culture*, 27 (Winter 1962-1963).

In class:

- Discussing new and resistant perspectives on arts criticism
- Break It Down group 4 + Critique the Critique

Th :: AUG 19 ::

NO CLASS

Due before classtime: [ASSIGNMENT #2](#)

Sun :: AUG 22

Due by 3 p.m.: [Final project thoughts](#)

Week 4

T :: AUG 24 :: Film

Read before class:

- 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). **[Break It Down group 5]**
- 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 above [Break It Down group 5]**
- Kael, Pauline. "Numbing the Audience" (pp. 183-193) in *Deeper Into Movies* (Bantam, 1974).
- Kael, Pauline. "Are Movies Going to Pieces?" in *The Atlantic*, Nov. 1964.

Critique the Critique fest!

- Kael, Pauline. Review of *Bonnie and Clyde*. Oct. 21, 1967, from *The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael* (Library of America, 2011).
- Ebert, Roger. [Review of Bonnie and Clyde](#), Sept. 25, 1967.
- 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).
- Ebert, Roger. [Review of Last Tango in Paris](#), Oct. 14, 1972.
- Kael, Pauline. Preview of *Nashville*. March 3, 1975, from *The Age of Movies: Selected Writings of Pauline Kael* (Library of America, 2011).
- Ebert, Roger. [Review of Nashville](#), Jan. 1, 1975.

In class:

- Discuss history of American film criticism

- Critique the Critique fest: comparing/contrasting Ebert & Kael reviews
- Watch some Siskel & Ebert
- Break It Down group 5 + Critique the Critique

Th :: AUG 26 :: Music

Read before class:

- Williams, Paul. "How Rock Communicates" (pp. 75-80) in *The Penguin Book of Rock and Roll Writing* (ed. Clinton Heylin, Viking, 1992).
- Frith, Simon. "Writing About Popular Music" (pp. 502-526) in *The Cambridge History of Music Criticism* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 2019).
- 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). **[Break It Down group 6]**
- 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.

In class:

- Discuss history of American pop-music criticism
- Break It Down group 5 + Critique the Critique

Week 5

T :: AUG 31 :: Music

To prepare for our in-class guest:

- Peruse [this online explainer](#) about the background of singer R. Kelly's career and criminal accusations and/or peruse Jim DeRogatis' timeline about Kelly
- DeRogatis, Jim. "It's Just Music" (pp. 225-237) in *Soulless: The Case Against R. Kelly* (Abrams, 2019).
- DeRogatis, Jim. "Do No Harm? The Doctor Who May Have Enabled R. Kelly." *The New Yorker*, Aug. 24, 2021.
- Peruse [Jim's website](#), as well
- Lester Bangs, selections from *Mainlines, Blood Feasts and Bad Taste: A Lester Bangs Reader* (Anchor, 2002). ... *Optional extra*: [this excerpt](#) from DeRogatis' biography of Bangs, *Let It Blurt: The Life and Times of Lester Bangs*

In class:

- **Special guest!** — [Jim DeRogatis](#) will join our session to discuss music criticism & his reporting of the R. Kelly trial

Th :: SEP 2 :: The future & the end

Read before class:

- Ventura, Anya. "[Slow Criticism: Art in the Age of Post-Judgement](#)," *Temporary Art Review*, Feb. 15, 2016.
- 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)**

- *Now optional:* 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)**
- 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).
- Bernstein, Jonathan. "[How YouTube Reaction Videos Are Changing the Way We Listen](#)," *Rolling Stone*, Aug. 24, 2020.

In class:

- Reconsider our criteria for criticism & discuss where these play out in contemporary discourse
- Overview of the course discussions & final-project workshopping

Fri :: SEP 3

***Due by 5 p.m.:* [ASSIGNMENT #3](#)**