New York University
Arthur L. Carter Journalism Institute
Syllabus JOUR-UA 204.004
MUSIC! FILM! TV! WRITING POP CULTURE
Summer 2019
Professor: Hope, Clover
T, TH 5:30PM - 8:30 PM

To contact professor: [emailTK]
20 Cooper Square, Rm 653
Phone: [347.687.0278]
Office hours: By appointment

Course Description
Writing about pop culture is a playground for radical thought, for exciting, often polarizing ideas on race, society, and how the fictional and fact-based entertainment we breathe intersects with real life. From reboots and reality TV to blockbusters and horror movies, from sitcoms and romcoms to the expansive landscape of minority-led Hollywood productions, from the latest Mitski album to Lizzo, there is no shortage of material to write about.

Learning Objectives
In this course, students will:
● Demonstrate awareness of journalism’s core ethical values
● Write clear, accurate and engaging prose in an audience-appropriate manner
● Demonstrate critical thinking, independence, and creativity appropriate to the role of journalism in a democratic society
● Sharpen their critical skills and instincts
● Learn to write within a specific beat
● Brainstorm good, pitchable ideas and story angles
● Work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diverse perspectives
● Brave the (internet) elements and learn to document pop culture, in the form of news blogs, reviews, interviews, criticism, and research
● Along the way they’ll start to develop their own voice

Course Structure
Discussion, course readings, case studies, one field outing

Assignments are due every Tuesday. (Send as a Word document attachment to [emailTK]) and will be workshopped on Thursdays. There will also be weekly assigned readings. Class participation and attendance factor into the final grade.

The required text for the course is:

An optional and recommended text is:


**Course Requirements**
The goal of this course is to pitch and develop story ideas around culture, to sharpen reporting and critical skills, and write a series of pieces: a music/movie/TV review, an essay or trend piece, and a final long-form essay, interview, or feature. Class participation, attendance, and assignment will be factored into grading. Be prepared to briefly discuss entertainment news of the week at the top of each class.

**Grades**
Your final grade will be based on your written assignments (80 percent) and class participation (20 percent). If you miss more than two classes, for whatever reason, you cannot get higher than a B in the class. This class functions as a team and to work effectively everyone must come to class prepared, hand in assignments on time, do the readings and fully participate.

Final grades will be calculated as follows:

**Assignment #1**
600 words Due Tuesday, July 16 - 15 percent
Write an essay about a piece of entertainment that did not impress you. The project must have been released in the month of June or July 2019. This can be a movie of any type (indie, blockbuster, etc.), a piece of music (song, album, concert), or a television show (an episode, series, reality TV). This must be in the form of an essay with a clear point of view about the subject. Format can range from a traditional review to a “take” to a close analysis of one aspect of the work. This assignment will help you explore your critical voice and illustrate ways in which the entertainment we view sparks natural curiosity.

**Assignment #2**
600-800 words Due Tuesday, July 23 - 20 percent
Option 1: Write a review based on a recently released movie that’s available on a streaming platform.

Option 2: Write a review or recap of a recent episode of television.
Assignment #3
Due Tuesday, July 30 - 10 percent
Compose a 150-200 word pitch for your final project: an idea for an 1,000-word longform essay, review (movie/TV/music), or trend piece. Form a rough thesis about the work or subject you plan to examine and what it means in the broad scheme. Feel free to choose a recent work of art, a classic, or something obscure.

Assignment #4
150-300 words due Tuesday, August 6 - 10 percent
Option 1 — Come up with a list of 2 subjects you would like to interview in the world of entertainment. For each subject, explain in 150 words or less what makes them a compelling subject for the moment. Include 3 sample questions you would ask.

Option 2 — Find an example of a celebrity profile that stood out to you. Write a 300-word analysis of the profile. Include notable highlights from the interview. Explain what makes it a compelling profile. Based on the content and tone of the profile, break down what steps you think the writer took (i.e. research, questions, interview approach) to arrive at the final product.

Final Assignment
1000 words Due August 13 - 25 percent

7/9/19 - Overview of cultural criticism and introduction to entertainment writing
What does it mean to cover culture in 2019? What does entertainment and culture writing entail, and what is a critic’s job? We’ll define and discuss the different types of culture writing (blogs, reviews, essays, profiles) and guidelines for each. We’ll also discuss various definitions of a critic, as well as basics of writing a news blog about a work of art and “finding the angle” in a piece of music, film, or television.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Deadline
- Reading 1: The Movie Assassin by Sarah Miller, Popula

7/11/19 - The elements of critical writing
What makes for constructive criticism? Being a critic isn’t just about noting the positive and negative aspects of a work. We find the nuance and offer sharp points of view. Often that means crafting a thesis and narrative for the narrative we’re dissecting. We’ll examine the role of
culture writing today and intersections with identity and politics. We’ll also discuss how to generate ideas and find sources of inspiration.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: The Hollywood Reporter website
- Reading 1: *Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth* by A.O. Scott (Excerpts)

**Assignment #1**

**7/16/19 - Writing about movies - Reviews, documentaries, and the rise of streaming**

Roger & Ebert used to be the most reliable source for credible film criticism, but now you can find great voices in far out places, from *The New York Times* to The AV Club to Tumblr. We’ll discuss how to watch movies for the purpose of critiquing and how to translate your views into writing. We’ll also discuss how streaming outlets like Netflix, Amazon, Hulu have changed the viewing experience and expanded the range of content available to rate and review.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Vulture
- Reading 1: *Birth of a Nation Isn’t Worth Defending* by Hilton Als, *The New Yorker*
- Reading 2: *Widows Makes Me Want to Invite Daniel Kaluuya to Rob Me* by Hunter Harris, Vulture

**7/18/19 - Writing about television: Reviews, recaps, and reality TV + Workshop assignments**

In many ways, television has surpassed movies in content and quality, boosted by prestige TV (think *Mad Men, The Wire, Breaking Bad*) and binge watching. Reality TV has meanwhile evolved from low-budget operations to appointment viewing (*The Bachelor*). Expanding on discussions from the previous session, we’ll talk about watching movies with a critic’s eye, as well as the art of the TV recap and smart ways to cover reality TV.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Vanity Fair
- Reading 1: *The Difficult Women of Sex and the City* by Emily Nussbaum, *The New Yorker*
- Reading 2: ‘*Mad Men’ Series Finale: Where You Drink Champagne and It Tastes Just Like Coca-Cola* by Molly Lambert, Grantland

**Assignment #2**

**7/23/19: Tackling the music review in an age of really bad music reviews**
Music review writing inspires some of the most clichéd writing. We’ll discuss ways to avoid the easy music review cliché and analyze what makes a successful review, compare reviews from prominent music magazines and sites over the years, including Rolling Stone, Vibe, Village Voice, Pitchfork, and Spin. We’ll also listen to a couple songs and discuss how we might write about them.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Spin, Pitchfork
- Reading 1: Katy Perry’s Prism Is a Government Conspiracy by Mero, Noisey
- Reading 2: A Love Profane (Beyonce Lemonade Review) by Doreen St. Felix, MTV News
- Reading 3 (optional): Review of Greta Van Fleet, Anthem of the Peaceful Army by Jeremy D. Larson, Pitchfork

7/25/19: Essays and trend pieces + Workshop assignments
If you’re not analyzing a cultural work through the lens of a traditional review, you might do so in the form of an essay with a specific angle. The essay is often the meat of culture writing, allowing exploration of deeper issues around race, sex, identity, and politics through the prism of entertainment. Trend pieces also function to highlight connections between works of art and dissect their relevance. What does the work (or works) tell us about society? What does the work illuminate about ourselves and our interactions?

- Read for discussion at the top of class: The New Yorker site
- Reading 1: The Devil Finds Work by James Baldwin (Excerpts)
- Reading 2: Taylor Swift Is Not Your Friend by Dayna Evans, Gawker
- Reading 3: The Question of Cultural Appropriation by Briahna Joy Gray, Current Affairs
- Reading (optional): When Are Trans Actors Allowed to Act? By Hannah Giorgis, The Atlantic

Assignment #3

7/30/19 - Feature writing and reporting
Long-form features help put the culture we consume in context and offers deeper exploration of people, ideas, and moments in entertainment. This is where you get to flex your research, voice, and critical thought. We’ll discuss different forms of feature writing, from investigative reporting to reported essays and write-around profiles.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: The New York Times Arts and Style section online
- Reading 1: The Making and Unmaking of Iggy Azalea by Clover Hope, Jezebel
Final projects will be assigned. 1,000 words due in two weeks.

Guest Speaker TK

8/1/19 - The art of a great interview + Workshop assignments
A good interview may be dependent on the subject, but the work starts with research and preparation. Concise, targeted questions and follow-ups. There are techniques helpful to interviewing famous and/or challenging subjects. We’ll discuss the art of the Q&A and why it’s not as simple as it seems. We’ll also discuss approaches to interviewing behind-the-scenes figures like producers, filmmakers, and writers.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: Variety’s site
- Reading: In Conversation: Quincy Jones by David Marchese, Vulture

Assignment #4

8/6/19 - The fascinating and dreaded celebrity profile + Workshop assignments
The celebrity profile has become a beast of its own. The writing many times suffers from being overly fluffy or pandering, offering little insight. But the profile can be a fun social exercise and a way to view a famous figure in a new light. We’ll talk about what the best profiles achieve. We’ll also discuss the nature of access in journalism and effects of social media on how these profiles get executed.

- Read for discussion at the top of class: The Atlantic site
- Reading 1: Justin Bieber Would Like to Introduce Himself, by Caity Weaver, GQ
- Reading 2: The Tragedy of Britney Spears by Vanessa Grigoriadis, Rolling Stone
- Reading (optional): Lena Dunham Comes to Terms With Herself by Allison P. Davis, The Cut

8/8/19 - Group trip to a movie theater. (Possible options: The Lion King, Once Upon a Time in Hollywood)

8/13/19 - The business and politics of entertainment, social media, and access + Discussion of film screening
Reporting and writing about entertainment involves lots of movers and shakers with different agendas. Magazine staffs coordinate profiles and interviews with publicists, managers, agents, and photographers. Production studios and PR companies make movies and TV screeners available to critics ahead of time, sometimes with embargos. There are release schedules, marketing strategies, and promotional campaigns. Behind the coverage, there’s a layer of politics that can complicate the job of writing about entertainment. Writers must navigate this landscape with integrity. We’ll discuss all this, plus the secrets and logistics of assembling magazine covers and features.

- Reading: Chance the Rapper got MTV to remove a critical review

**8/15/19 - Criticism of your criticism + Discussion of final assignments**
Writing about entertainment and/or critiquing a piece of work means placing a value judgment on a work of art. Creators and publicists are not afraid to let writers know when they’re upset. We’ll discuss dealing with feedback in public, i.e. responding on social media, as well as talk about final assignments.

**Accommodations**
Students with disabilities that necessitate accommodations should contact and register with New York University’s Moses Center for Students with Disabilities (CSD) at 212-998-4980 or mosescsd@nyu.edu. Information about the Moses Center can be found at www.nyu.edu/csd. The Moses Center is located at 726 Broadway on the 2nd floor.

**Diversity & Inclusion**
The Institute is committed to creating an inclusive learning environment. The Institute embraces a notion of intellectual community enriched and enhanced by diversity along a number of dimensions.