Intro

This course will explore that most misunderstood of literary forms: criticism. Through a close reading of criticism across a variety of arts we will explore the way criticism at its best moves beyond judgment to re-create the subject at hand, and to evoke the experience of encountering it. Reading raves, pans, profiles, and works that cannot be easily described as any of these, we will seek to understand how good criticism is always implicitly about more than the work it takes for its subject.

Texts

*Out of the Vinyl Depths* by Ellen Willis  
*33 1/3: Ode to Billie Joe* by Kara Murtha  
*The Art of Cruelty* by Maggie Nelson  
*An Erotic Beyond: Sade* by Octavio Paz  
*But Beautiful* by Geoff Dyer  
*The Phantom Empire* by Geoffrey O’Brien  
*Dime-Store Alchemy* by Charles Simic  
*A Reader’s Manifesto* by B.R. Myers

You will be responsible for reading all these books and the material in the course packet. You will be expected to come to class both conversant with the references in the texts and prepared to engage in discussion.

Writing

There will be three essays of 800-1200 words each: a review of a film currently in theaters; a review of a current book; and a review of a current art exhibit. Revised versions of each of these pieces will form your final portfolio to be turned in on the last day of class. In addition, you will be responsible for choosing one contemporary critic with a regular perch, following his or her work over the course of the semester, and presenting a 1000-word essay on the critic’s sensibility as revealed by this work.

Workshops

On three of our sessions, we’ll devote the class to workshopping. When you are being workshopped, it is your responsibility to distribute your piece (hard copy or electronically) to everyone else in the class a week in advance. Whenever you are
workshopping someone else’s piece, it is your responsibility to type a response letter to the piece (half-page, single spaced) and give a copy to the author.

**SCHEDULE**

Week 1: Introduction

“**Rejoice! Believe! Be Strong and Read Hard!**” Heidi Julavits
“**Reading**” and “**Writing**” by W.H. Auden

Week 2: Film Criticism

Selections from Pauline Kael, Andrew Sarris, James Agee, Otis Ferguson, and Manny Farber

Week 3: Book Criticism

Selections from Dwight Garner and Walter Kim
“**Evaluations: Quick and Expensive Comments on the Talent in the Room**” by Norman Mailer
“**J.D. Salinger’s Closed Circuit**” by Mary McCarthy

Due in class: Review of film currently in cinemas.

Week 4: Workshopping film reviews

Week 5: Art Criticism

Selections from Robert Hughes, Clement Greenberg, Sanford Schwartz, Jed Perl, David Hockney, and excerpts from the memoirs of Peggy Guggenheim and Morris Lapidus.

Week 6: Rock Criticism

**Out of the Vinyl Depths** Ellen Willis
33 1/3: *Ode to Billie Joe* by Kara Murtha
Selections from Joyce Millman

Due: Review of current book.

Week 7: Workshopping your book reviews.

Week 8: The Violence Debate (Special guest: Stephanie Zacharek)

“Fear of Movies” by Pauline Kael
*The Art of Cruelty* by Maggie Nelson
*An Erotic Beyond: Sade* by Octavio Paz
“How John Wick Restored My Faith in Violent Movies” by Stephanie Zacharek

Week 9: The Profile as Criticism

Selections from Kenneth Tynan
*But Beautiful* by Geoff Dyer
“How Homage to Duke Ellington on His Birthday” by Ralph Ellison
“How Britney Spears” by Vanessa Grigiodias

Week 10: Criticism as Re-creation

*The Phantom Empire* by Geoffrey O’Brien
*Dime-Store Alchemy* by Charles Simic
“Presliad” by Greil Marcus

Due: Review of a current art exhibit.

Week 11: Workshopping your art reviews

Week 12: Against Consensus

“Girl of the Golden West” by Joan Didion
“The Straight Story and Critical Myopia” by Howard Hampton
“Dylan in Darkest America” by Stephanie Zacharek
“Here’s to the Big One” by Pauline Kael
“Aunt Medea” by Stanley Crouch
Week 13: Pans

*A Reader’s Manifesto* by B.R. Myers
“The Truth Behind the Myth Behind the Legend” by Greil Marcus
“Discussing the Undiscussable” by Arlene Croce
Due: Your essay on the critic of your choosing.

Week 14: Raves

“Bonnie and Clyde” by Pauline Kael
Inherent Vice by Howard Hampton

Due: Your portfolio.