Have you ever gone to a four-star/thumbs-up film and fallen asleep? Were you shocked when *Once* won the Tony for Best Musical? Do you secretly think that *Breaking Bad* is a lot more poignant than *Hamlet*? Do you wonder why novels about love and family by men are Great Novels and novels about love and family by women are chick lit? Could your grandma paint some of that stuff in the Museum of Modern Art? *Culture Vulture* is a course in reading, writing, and thinking about the art of criticism. Students will be introduced to some of the best and most important cultural critics and to some of the key critical debates of the last decades. What makes something “high” or “low” culture? Is “taste” just a matter of opinion? How much does the race of an author matter? Why can we scream at a concert but talk in whispers in a museum? Now that the Internet has made everyone a critic, do the “official” critics matter? We’ll take advantage of our location in New York City and inhale culture—art, film, theatre, books, TV—and then learn to write about it, both as arts reporters and as cultural critics.

This is a course in reading and writing criticism—and a course in thinking about culture, in all its many meanings. Our culture, the culture we live in—and perhaps our particular subculture or subcultures—informs our readings of “culture.” Each week we will consider broad cultural debates, focus in on a particular cultural genre, and of course consume culture and write about it. Students are expected to attend as many performances of all kinds as possible, to read, to watch TV, to visit museums.

Readings will be handed out in class or posted on NYU Classes. In addition, you should keep up with culture on your own: New York City offers endless possibilities, ranging from ridiculously expensive to absolutely free. You can find extensive listings in *The New York Times*: [http://www.nytimes.com/events](http://www.nytimes.com/events) (just click around to find the particular events that interest
you). The full list appears in Friday’s paper. The Public Theatre’s famous Shakespeare in the Park series begins later this month: 
http://www.publictheater.org/Tickets/?SiteTheme=Shakespeare. It’s free, but you have to stand in line for hours for tickets. The FringeNYC Theatre Festival—more than 50 small shows at some 15 or 20 theatres, at $18 each—begins in early August:
http://www.fringenyc.org/index.php/component/content/article/7-featured/179-how-to-fringenyc. And of course there’s Broadway theatre (with “student rush” ticket prices), lots of movies, major art museums and small (free) galleries … or you can always listen to music and watch TV. And don’t forget to read books!

I assume you already have your own favorite cultural commentators; please be ready to share. In the meantime, I want everyone to keep up with the critics of The New York Times. You should be reading the Times every day. I also find Slate pretty interesting: http://www.slate.com/articles/arts.html. And you might check out New York Magazine’s weekly Vulture section: http://www.vulture.com/.

The work: Student participation in this seminar is key: you are expected to attend all sessions, to complete all the reading, and to participate actively in discussion. Each student will write three reviews during the six-week semester, two short pieces and one longer critical essay. In addition, you will each—working in groups—take responsibility for one class presentation on a particular art form (if you’re a film buff, for instance, you’ll choose film). Your job isn’t to give us a list of movies or TV shows, but to provide classmates with an overview of the key critical issues in your field. We’ll talk more about this in class.

SYLLABUS

Week 1: Is everyone a critic? What is taste? Who decides?

Day 1: Introduction to the course. In-class writing assignment.


Week 2: Looking/seeing: painting and photography. “We only see what we look at.” First student reviews due.

Day 3: We only see what we look at. Read: John Berger, Ways of Seeing, and Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (in What We See folder on NYU Classes). Student presentation #1: Art.

Week 3: Manifestos and debates. High and low art.


Day 6: Student presentation #2: Film. Read: A selection of classic film reviews and essays, everything in the two Film folders, one in the larger folder Critical Essays and one in the larger folder Reviews. Discussion: How is a review different from a critical essay? More sharing of student work.

Week 4: The role of the critic. Second student reviews due.


Week 5: The Personal and the Political


Student presentation #3: Theatre. Read: Everything in both Theatre folders, the one inside the Critical Essays folder and the one inside Reviews. More sharing of student work.


Student presentation #4: Television. Read: Everything in both TV folders, the one
inside the *Critical Essays* folder and the one inside *Reviews*.

Week 6: Becoming a critic. Longer student essays due.

Day 11: **Review #3 due.** Sharing of student work.
**Student presentation #5: Music.** Read: Everything in both *Music* folders, the one inside the *Critical Essays* folder and the one inside *Reviews*.

Day 12: Sharing of student work. Celebration!