The Cultural Conversation  
G54.1181.001  
Fall 2011  
Tuesdays, 2:30-6:30

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This is a course in intellectual and cultural history that aims to introduce you to some of the key writers, critics, theorists, and journalists--and to some of the key cultural/intellectual/political controversies--of the 20th and early 21st centuries. Among other topics, we will explore modernism (and the reaction against it); the befuddling nature of popular culture, and how various writers in various contexts (the Weimar Republic; the 1960s) attempted to grapple with it; and the (broad) definition of “the political” as it relates to cultural criticism. Most of all, this course aims to introduce you to complex ways of thinking, which is to say to ways of struggling to understand the world that reject simple dichotomies.

BOOKS:

all available in paperback at Shakespeare&Co. on Broadway and Waverly, except as noted

Marshall Berman, All that is Solid Melts Into Air  
Siegfried Kracauer, The Mass Ornament  
Gilbert Seldes, The 7 Lively Arts  
Ellen Willis, Beginning to See the Light (OOP) (order used through the web)  
Greil Marcus, Mystery Train  
Michael Walzer, The Company of Critics  
Mike Davis, Ecology of Fear  
Jane Kramer, Whose Art is It?  
William Finnegan, Cold New World  
Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands

**A packet of readings for this course will be available at Village Copier, 20 East 13th St.
**Week 1, Sept. 6:** Introduction

**Week 2, Sept. 13:** Modernism:
Marshall Berman: *All that is Solid Melts into Air*

**Week 3, Sept. 20:** Criticisms of Mass Culture:
Walter Benjamin: “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
Siegfried Kracauer: *The Mass Ornament* [selections]
Dwight Macdonald: “Masscult and Midcult”

**ASSIGNMENT DUE: Surprise:**
“Ostalgia” Show at the New Museum (*235 Bowery, at Prince*)

**Week 4, Sept. 27:** Art after Atrocity
Theodor Adorno: “Commitment”
George Steiner: “The Hollow Miracle”
Jane Kramer: “The Politics of Memory”
Ruth Franklin: *A Thousand Darknesses* [excerpts]

Speaker: Ruth Franklin

**Week 5, Oct. 4:** New Ways of Approaching Popular Culture:
George Orwell: “Boys’ Weeklies”
Gilbert Seldes: *7 Lively Arts* [selections]

**Week 6, Oct. 11:** New Ways, cont.:
Ellen Willis, *Beginning to See the Light* [selections]

**Week 7, Oct. 18:** More New Ways:
Greil Marcus, “Introduction,” and “The Myth of Staggerlee” in *Mystery Train*
Pauline Kael, “Trash, Art and the Movies”

**Week 8, Oct. 25:** Where Does a Critic Belong?
Michael Walzer: *The Company of Critics*

**ASSIGNMENT DUE: The Frankfurt School vs. the Sixties Critics**

**Week 9, Nov. 1:** What’s Political? . . .
Orlando Patterson: “Preface,” “Introduction,” “Chapter 1” in *Freedom in the Making of Western Culture*
John Berger: “The Political Uses of Photomontage” and “The Hals Mystery”
Mike Davis, *Ecology of Fear*

**Week 10, Nov. 8.** . . And Who Decides?  
articles (packet):  
Norman Mailer, “The White Negro”  
James Baldwin, “The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy”  
Irving Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons”  
Ralph Ellison, “The World and the Jug”  
Norman Podhoretz, “My Negro Problem—and Ours”  
Darryl Lorenzo Wellington: “Fighting at Cross-Purposes: Irving Howe vs. Ralph Ellison”

**Week 11, Nov. 15:** Crises of Representation:  
Jane Kramer, *Whose Art is It?*

**Week 12, Nov. 22:** Reporting on Youth Culture (plus Race and Class):  
William Finnegan, *Cold New World*  
**ASSIGNMENT DUE: Analysis of Chosen Critic**

[Thanksgiving: Thurs. Nov 24th]

**Week 13, Nov. 29:** In Defense of the Imagination:  
Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands*  
**ASSIGNMENT DUE: Rewrites**

**Week 14, Dec. 6:** Conclusion