

# THE CRITIC AS JOURNALIST AND ESSAYIST



COM-444L-111; Fall 2015  
Tuesday/Thursday 11:00-12:15  
Lowell Thomas 225

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Office hours: Mondays, 5-6:15;  
Tuesdays 11-12:15 and 5-6:15; Wednesdays 5-6:15

**Textbook (required):** *An Introduction to Criticism: Literature/Film/Culture*, by Michael Ryan.  
Wiley-Blackwell, 2012. ISBN: 978-1-4051-8282-9

All other required readings will be distributed via iLearn or handout.

**Course description:** “Life. It’s literally all we have. But is it any good?” That’s the question that the fictional critic Forrest MacNeil asks at the beginning of every episode of the show “Review.” It’s one of the two questions that critics of culture and the products of culture (books, movies, music, television, food, art, architecture, dance, theater, video games...) set out to answer. It’s consumer-service criticism. Is it any good? Is it worth my time and my money? Good question. But critics also serve an even higher purpose. They ask the question “What does it mean?” The act of criticism isn’t just, as another fictional critic would, telling us “It stinks!” It is also beginning to wrestle with the questions of *why*. Why does a work of art or entertainment move us? Why does it work? What does it tell us about who we are as a culture? This is a real work of intellect, and it is a work of both information gathering, in the way a journalist would, and one of interpretation.

(continued)

Critics may be disappearing from daily journalism, but this course asks what is lost because of that. The course will function half as a seminar, reading and dissecting works of criticism as well as works dealing with the function and purpose of criticism. And it will function half as a workshop, in which you will be writing your own works of criticism and bringing them to class for us to read and comment on as a group, honing our prose and our critical faculties until we, too, have become arbiters of the cultural conversation.

**Course Objectives:**

1. Students should be able to critique works of criticism with original insight.
2. Students should be able to write original works of journalistic criticism in a variety of lengths and of a variety of cultural products.

**Assessments and grading:**

1. Restaurant review: 10%
2. Film review: 10%
3. Music review: 10%
4. TV review: 10%
5. Visual art review: 10%
6. Performing arts or video game review: 10%
7. Cultural consumption blog: 15%
8. Critical essay book review: 15%
9. Class participation and peer review: 10%

**How to succeed in this course:** My hope for this course is that it will run as a seminar and workshop. That means I expect you to prepare for this course the way a graduate student would: do all of your reading before class. Read more than you have to, and follow your curiosity. Talk a lot in class. Class participation and your performance during our peer review sessions count as much as most of your individual written reviews. I want you to be active, debating and arguing across the table. I also care about the quality of your prose and the depth of your insights. And you can't be afraid to bring your work to the table. If we can critique the cultural artifacts to which we turn our magnifying glasses, we can also put our own writing under the microscope. To mix a metaphor.

**Attendance:** Again. Grad seminar. Take this seriously. Be here. If you miss a day when your piece is due to be critiqued, you will receive a zero for that piece. I will only tolerate previously approved excused absences except for documented emergency situations.

**Academic honesty:** Please refer to the statement on academic integrity in the student handbook. This course will abide by the college-wide policies.

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# CULTURAL CONSUMPTION BLOG

You are required to keep a blog all semester, beginning on Sunday or Monday in week two. We meet Tuesday and Thursday. Your blog posts each week should be posted on Sunday or Monday and on Friday. You have the option to post more frequently if you choose to, but you must post at least those two.

You may set up your blog on any free commercial blogging site. I've long been a Wordpress partisan, but you can choose anything you like. If you already have a blog and would like to use that, you are welcome to. You can also set up another blog under your same username in most systems. You do need to make your blog public and use your real name on it.

### **Sunday or Monday:**

What I read/watched/listened to/saw/etc. this week. This is a post where you list—and you really don't have to do more than that unless you want to—what you consumed the previous week. What TV did you watch? (YouTube counts! It's part of the culture. Obviously so do Netflix, Hulu, Amazon Prime...) See any movies? Go back and listen to that song that was big when you were in middle school? Did you eat a meal that made you feel something (don't list every bowl of oatmeal...) This doesn't have to be comprehensive, but I want you to think about the culture you consumed and how it made you feel. How it affected you. If putting this list together spurs you to some thoughts, feel free to include them. But you can list much of this as just bullet points.

### **Friday:**

At the end of the week, I want you to post something more reflective. Pick something from the week—it can be cherry-picked from your Sunday/Monday list—and write a post of a couple hundred words in which you analyze how it made you feel. Did that single from middle school bring back happy memories, or did you suddenly see that you had terrible taste when you were 12? Did you see an artwork that made you appreciate the color yellow in a new way? Did an episode of "Fear the Walking Dead" shed light on the human condition for you?

In these posts, you should think about developing your voice as a writer and a critic. You're analyzing the culture, but in that process, you will probably also reveal something about yourself.

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# TENTATIVE COURSE CALENDAR

Do all reading before class. All dates are subject to change. I will keep an updated version of this calendar on the course's iLearn site.

**Remember that blog posts, while not specifically listed here, are always due on Sundays or Mondays, and on Fridays, beginning on Monday, September 7.**

Tuesday, September 1	Introduction to the class
Thursday, September 3	Read Nieman Reports "Critical Condition" issue before class.
Tuesday, September 8	Formalism and structuralism: Read Ryan Chs. 1 and 2.
Thursday, September 10	Film: Read Ryan Ch. 10 and articles TBA (iLearn).
Tuesday, September 15	Film criticism continued.
Thursday, September 17	NO CLASS: Excellence in Journalism Conference ***Movie review due on iLearn***
Tuesday, September 22	Historical and political approaches to criticism. Read Ryan Chs. 3 and 5.
Thursday, September 24	Music criticism: Read articles TBA (iLearn).
Tuesday, September 29	Music criticism continued.
Thursday, October 1	Movie review workshop in class. Read assigned student work. ***Music review due on iLearn***

Tuesday, October 6	The art of the hatchet job, the pan, and the funny bad review. Readings TBA (iLearn)
Thursday, October 8	NO CLASS: American Journalism Historians Association
Tuesday, October 13	Television criticism. Readings TBA (iLearn)
Thursday, October 15	Music review workshop in class. Read assigned student work. ****Restaurant review due****
Tuesday, October 20	Psychoanalytical, post-structural and deconstructionist approaches to criticism. Read Ryan Chs. 4 and 6.
Thursday, October 22	Visual arts. Readings TBA (iLearn)
Tuesday, October 27	Gender, ethnic and post-colonial criticism. Read Ryan. Chs. 7 and 8.
Thursday, October 29	Restaurant review workshop in class. Read assigned student work. ****TV review due****
Tuesday, November 3	Performing arts. Readings TBA (iLearn).
Thursday, November 5	Cultural criticism. Read Ryan Ch. 11 and Final summary. (Optional: read Ch. 9 on scientific approaches).
Tuesday, November 10	Cultural criticism continued.
Thursday, November 12	TV review workshop in class. Read assigned student work. ****Visual arts review due****
Tuesday, November 17	Guest speaker/book discussion/TBA
Thursday, November 19	Guest speaker/book discussion/TBA

Tuesday, November 24	NO CLASS: MODIFIED CLASS SCHEDULE
Thursday, November 26	NO CLASS: THANKSGIVING!
Tuesday, December 1	Guest speaker/book discussion/TBA
Thursday, December 3	Visual arts review workshop in class. Read assigned student work. ****Performing arts or video game review due****
Tuesday, December 8	Guest speaker/book discussion/TBA
Thursday, December 10	Performing arts or video game review workshop in class. Read assigned student work.
TBA (Finals week)	****Book review/cultural criticism essay due****