ENGL 121, Section 06 Kim Shirkhani

Location: TBA Office hours: TTh 10:15-11:30 & by appt

TTh 11:35 a.m.-12:50 p.m. Office location: LC 003

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#### Cultural Critique: Style As Argument

“A critique is not a matter of saying that things are not right as they are. It is a matter of pointing out on what kinds of assumptions, what kinds of familiar, unchallenged, unconsidered modes of thought the practices that we accept rest.”

—Michel Foucault

“People with different values draw different inferences from the same evidence. Present them with a PhD scientist who is a member of the US National Academy of Sciences, for example, and they will disagree on whether he really is an ‘expert,’ depending on whether his view matches the dominant view of their cultural group.”

 —Dan Kahane, *Nature*

“And then one day you’ll write a sentence that says more than its words alone can say. You’ll know that it says what you mean without having said it, and you’ll know that the reader knows it too. This will sound impossible until you’ve done it once. Then you’ll see how possible it is, and how inviting. It lets the reader complete the thought. It sets an echo in motion. This is writing by implication.”

—Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing*

Course Goals

If *culture* is a term for the stories a society tells about itself, then the task of the cultural critic is to make arguments about storytelling. (Why does this particular story arise out of this particular cultural moment?) But *story* itself can be a term for cultural arguments, given that the most compelling cultural arguments are dynamic, dramatic, and performative—that is, they appeal, sentence by sentence, to the reader’s desire for stories. This semester we will spend time pondering essays that observe these axioms and thereby achieve astonishing feats of artful critique. They, and you, will be seen using elements of style not simply to react to culture but to explore, analyze, sympathize with, and question cultural reactions. We will analyze the ways these essays merge researched argument with writing craft, not to tell the reader what to think about culture but to make the most insightful interpretations the most patently irresistible.

*A note on how to read for this class: keep in mind that the readings on your syllabus have been chosen as much for their remarkable formal strategies as for their compelling subject matter. This kind of reading requires a certain critical distance compared to how we typically read. To give each assigned piece more than one go-over is a worthy goal. In cases when this is impossible, at least stay vigilant about not trying to look***through** *the writing itself, as if it were merely a window onto the writer’s point. The writing* **is** *the point.*

Texts

Verlyn Klinkenborg. *Several Short Sentences About Writing*, New York: Vintage, 2012.

*Available at The Yale Bookstore/ Barnes & Noble*

ENGL 121-06Course Packet. *Available at TYCO (or printable from our Canvas page)*

Schedule

WEEK 1

## T 1/17 Introduction to the course

UNIT ONE—“AM I THE ONLY ONE WHO’S TORN?”: PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS CRITIQUE

Th 1/19 David Foster Wallace, “This Is Water”;Mary Roach, “I, Guppy”; Ian

Frazer, “I See a Little Silhouetto of a Man, (SCARAMOUCHE,

SCARAMOUCHE, Will you do the FANDANGO?)”; Verlyn Klinkenborg, *Several Short Sentences About Writing,* pp. 1-29

WEEK 2

T 1/24 Ariel Levy, “The Lesbian Bride’s Handbook”*;* David Foster Wallace,

“Shipping Out: On the (Nearly Lethal) Comforts of a Luxury Cruise”

#### Th 1/26 [Lawrence Otis Graham](http://nymag.com/news/features/47949/), “Invisible Man”; Kyoko Mori, “Yarn”;

Klinkenborg*,* pp. 29-63

F 1/27 Non Class Day: **\**Exercise 1 Due\**** -Tell a personal anecdote to make

a cultural point

WEEK 3

T 1/31David Foster Wallace, “Consider the Lobster”; Ted Conover, “The

Way of All Flesh”

Th 2/2Lars Eighner, “On Dumpster Diving”; Zadie Smith, “You Are in

Paradise”*;* Lee Zacharias, “Buzzards”; Klinkenborg, pp. 64-100

WEEK 4

T 2/7 Brent Staples, “Black Men and Public Space”; Anne Fadiman, “The

His’er Problem”

**\**Essay 1 Draft Due\*- Personal Experience as Critique Essay***

Th 2/9 Workshop #1; Klinkenborg, pp. 100-26

WEEK 5

T 2/14 Henry Louis Gates, “In the Kitchen”; Soleil Ho, “Teach Me How to

Speak”

W 2/15 Non Class Day:  **\**Essay 1 Final Due\*- Personal Experience as***

***Critique Essay***

UNIT TWO—“WE MUST, AT SOME LEVEL, NEED THIS TO BE TRUE”: THE CULTURAL OBJECT AND THE IDEA OF EMPLOTMENT

Th 2/16 Adam Gopnik, “The Information”; Susan Sontag, “Against

Interpretation”

WEEK 6

T 2/21 Joan Didion, “Good Citizens”*;* David Foster Wallace, “How Tracy

Austen Broke My Heart”*;* Klinkenborg, pp. 126-60

Th 2/23 Scott Russell Sanders, “Under the Influence”*;* Louis Menand, “Name

That Tone” & “Notable Quotables”

F 2/24 Non Class Day: ***\*Exercise 2 Due\*- Problem statement for a***

***researched argument on a cultural object***

WEEK 7

T 2/28Joan Didion, “I Can’t Get that Monster out of My Mind” & “The White

Album”; David Wolman, “The Aftershocks”

Th 3/2 Eula Biss, “Time and Distance Overcome”; Anne Fadiman, “Night Owl”;

Klinkenborg, pp.160-69

F 3/3 Non Class Day: ***Essay 2 Draft due- Researched Cultural Critique. Put in English Dept. drop box by 3 p.m.***

WEEK 8

T 3/7 Workshop #2; Klinkenborg, pp.169-end

 Draft meetings

UNIT THREE- “A STORY WE ALREADY KNOW”: DEPLOYING AND COUNTERING CULTURAL NARRATIVES

Th 3/9 Joel Achenbach, “Why Do Many Reasonable People Doubt Science?”;

Eula Biss, “Sentimental Medicine”

WEEKS 9-10

T 3/14-Th 3/23 No Class / SPRING BREAK

WEEK 11

T 3/28 David Sedaris, “This Old House”; Joan Didion, “The Getty”; David

Foster Wallace, “The Weasel, Twelve Monkeys and the Shrub”

**\**Essay 2 Final due in class\*- Researched Cultural Critique***

Th 3/30 Adam Gopnik, “Dog Story: How Did the Dog Become Our Master?”; Kim Brooks, The Day I Left My Son in the Car”

F 3/31 Non Class Day: ***\*Exercise 3 due\*-Problem statement based on a***

***cultural narrative. Upload to Canvas by 3p.m.***

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WEEK 12

T 4/4 Malcolm Gladwell, “Black Like Them”*;* Louis Menand, “Alone

# Together”

W 4/5 Non Class Day: ***\*Exercise 4 Due\*- Research précis. Upload to***

***Canvas by 3 p.m.***

Th 4/6 Roxane Gay, “The Illusion of Safety/The Safety of Illusion”; Ariel

Levy, “Lift and Separate”

WEEK 13

## T 4/11 Jack Hitt, “A Confederacy of Sauces”; Kelefa Sanneh,

## “Discriminating Tastes”

W 4/12 Non Class Day ***\*Exercise 5 due\*-*** Personal anecdote to make a

cultural point. ***Upload to Canvas by 3p.m.***

Th 4/13 Louis Menand, “Gross Points”; Joan Didion, “Marrying Absurd”

WEEK 14

## T 4/18 Eric Schlosser, “Why The Fries Taste Good”*;* Dana Goodyear,

## “Raw Deal”*;* Amy Harmon, “A Race to Save the Orange by Altering

## Its DNA”

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Th 4/19 Elizabeth Kolbert, “The Big Kill”

\****Essay 3 Draft due in class\****

WEEK 15

T 4/25 Workshop #3

Th 4/27 Course Conclusion

Th 5/4 Non Class Day: \****Essay 3 Final Due.\* Put in English Dept. drop***

***box by 3 p.m.***

Course Requirements

1. **Participation, Attendance, and Punctuality**: Good participation means fully engaging with the course—reading carefully, digging into the texts at hand, offering constructive feedback on the work of your peers, and contributing to class discussion in a fashion both generous and economical. Attendance at every session is crucial, for which reason unexcused absence will negatively affect your final grade.

2. **Essays, Drafts, and Revisions**: You will write three essays, each of which will be written in stages, including a *complete* draft version (to receive my comments but no grade) and a revised final version (to receive a grade). Essay deadlines are listed on the schedule above.

3. **Workshops**: At least once during the semester, your writing (along with that of a few of your classmates) will be the focus of a workshop period. You will be assigned to a group at the beginning of the semester. Non-presenting students will prepare for these sessions by reading their classmates’ work in advance and preparing a typed report for each of the workshopped writers based on a worksheet I’ll distribute.

Deadlines & Extension Policy

Deadlines for all assignments are firm. In cases of unexcused absence, late *final* papers will be docked 1/3 of a grade for each calendar day beyond the deadline. **Extensions on final papers will be granted only in cases of extreme need and should be requested during an office visit or via e-mail.** This policy is not meant to be punitive but rather is a practical tool for keeping the class running. As for extensions on drafts, getting one does not automatically spell an extension on the final—i.e., you might have fewer days between the draft and final deadlines. Also, complete drafts (**not outlines or notes**) are due on draft deadlines; if a draft is not submitted on deadline without legitimate excuse, the final paper grade will be docked by a full letter grade (A- becomes B-, e.g.).

Grading

Essay 1 (5-7 pages) 20%

Essay 2 (7-10 pages) 25%

Essay 3 (10-12 pages) 30%

Exercises 20%

Workshop reviews & participation 5%

Formatting Work

All essays—drafts and revisions—must be in college-level-presentable shape: typed in a 12-point font, double-spaced, stapled, and free of typographical errors. Give each essay a title, which should be centered at the top of page one. Using the header/footer function, number each page in the upper right-hand corner, with your last name typed in before the page number. At the end of each essay, both draft and final versions, (1) give the word count, (2) acknowledge any help you received on the paper, and, (3) if you used sources, identify the style you used for documentation. All sources, including electronic citations, should be properly documented according to a major style guide (MLA, APA, Chicago, e.g.). At the end of **each draft** **only**, please also include two or three questions you have for me/notes on what you most want help with for the revision. These specs do not apply to workshop peer reviews, though the same must be typed.

The “Non-Fictionality” Requirement and Academic Honesty

All the writing you do in this course must be non-fiction (true, verifiable). In addition, all of the work you submit should be your own, in conception as well as execution. You are encouraged to discuss your essays with your peers and to receive editorial comments, but you are not to accept final phrasing or significant conceptual help from anyone. Keep track of all your sources (whether books, conversations, websites, or anything else), as you will have to cite each one in the form of endnotes or a Works Cited list. If you are ever unsure of the difference between legitimate reliance on a source and plagiarism, please feel free to run it by me. Plagiarism is grounds for failure, of the assignment and/or possibly of the class. Yale’s statements on academic honesty can be found here:

<http://yalecollege.yale.edu/content/academic-honesty>.

Additional help

Yale College Writing Center is a valuable resource. The Bass Writing Tutors, located in all the residential colleges, are especially useful for students who need or would like long-term, regular, one-on-one help. For shorter term or last-minute help, Writing Partners (Yale College or graduate school students who are exceptionally talented tutors) offer drop-in service five nights a week. You can make an appointment for either kind of tutoring at <http://www.yale.edu/bass/tutoring/partners/>