



JOUR 430: Writing the Film Review

4 Units

Spring 2021 – Tuesdays – 6-9:20 p.m.

Section: 21287R

Location: Online

Instructor: Justin Chang

Office: Online

Office Hours: By appointment

Course Description

"In many ways, the work of a critic is easy. We risk very little, yet enjoy a position over those who offer up their work and themselves to our judgment. We thrive on negative criticism, which is fun to write and to read. But the bitter truth we critics must face is that in the grand scheme of things, the average piece of junk is probably more meaningful than our criticism designating it so." — Anton Ego, *Ratatouille*

Is it, though? I love *Ratatouille* for many reasons, Anton Ego not least among them: He's one of the most memorable fictional critics the movies have given us. But he also offers some insight into the reflexive distrust with which filmmakers and other artists often view critics, and his benedictory monologue, beautifully written as it is, has never sat entirely well with me. If criticism can be an art form unto itself — and this class is predicated on the belief that it can — then surely there are examples of it that are much *more* meaningful than an average piece of junk.

The very act of criticism is itself a search for meaning, a way of comprehending the world and making sense of its artistic expression. My own interest in professional criticism began with a youthful desire to make sense of the movies I was seeing. What made them good or bad? Did their being good or bad affect my enjoyment of them? These are questions that regular moviegoers tend to ask themselves as a matter of course, whether or not they have any aspiration to become professional critics. Pursuing those questions and learning to articulate the answers thoughtfully, wittily and engagingly can be enormously satisfying.

The purpose of this course is to teach journalism students the ins and outs of criticism, to illuminate the responsibilities and pitfalls of the job. It will also serve to expose students to a broad range of cinema, including and going beyond mainstream Hollywood filmmaking, and to better understand how the movie industry works and the role, if any, that the critic plays within it. It will be a hands-on, practical course, heavy on learning by doing, a course intended to improve the writing of all students, even those not focusing on a career in criticism.

Student Learning Outcomes

1. to provide students an understanding of the elements of a film review and how to build them into an engaging, well-written piece
2. to illuminate the challenges of being a professional critic and writing about the arts, including weekly deadlines
3. to deepen appreciation of films and filmmaking through criticism
4. to improve writing skills across the board, and show how skills useful for reviewing can be used to improve all kinds of writing

The course will combine lectures, discussions, guest speakers and workshop reading of student reviews. On the writing weeks, students will be assigned the same just-released film to review and given a week in which to

complete the assignment. Each student will read their review in class, then the other students as well as the instructor will offer thoughts on what was well done and what could be improved.

Required Readings and Supplementary Materials

I Lost It at the Movies, by Pauline Kael

The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929-1968, by Andrew Sarris

Better Living Through Criticism: How to Think About Art, Pleasure, Beauty, and Truth, by A.O. Scott

Film After Film: Or, What Became of 21st Century Cinema?, by J. Hoberman

Description and Assessment of Assignments

This course will enable students to effectively shadow my work schedule as a full-time professional critic. Each week, they will be assigned to write a review of a particular film at a length of anywhere between 600 and 1,000 words. Students should not feel bound by any particular publication format; what matters is the quality of the writing and the ideas rather than any strict adherence to an outlet's house style. That said, I would discourage excessive use of first person: The work, not the writer, should be the focus of the piece.

Students will be assigned some of the same films I will be reviewing for the Los Angeles Times and, on occasion, NPR's *Fresh Air*. Each week, I will go over their reviews in class and also lead them through an analysis of my own work, describing in as much detail as possible exactly how and why I made the writing choices I did.

Grading Breakdown of Grade

Assignment	% of Grade
Weekly reviews	75%
Final paper	10%
Class participation	15%
TOTAL	100%

Grading Scale

95% to 100%: A	80% to 83%: B-	67% to 69%: D+
90% to 94%: A-	77% to 79%: C+	64% to 66%: D
87% to 89%: B+	74% to 76%: C	60% to 63%: D-
84% to 86%: B	70% to 73%: C-	0% to 59%: F

Grading Standards

Journalism

All assignments will be edited on a professional basis and you will be judged first on the accuracy, fairness and objectivity of your stories. You will then be evaluated for broadcast style, editing, production value, originality and the ability to meet deadlines.

“A” stories are accurate, clear, comprehensive stories that are well written and require only minor copyediting (i.e., they would be aired or published). Video work must also be shot and edited creatively, be well paced and include good sound bites and natural sound that add flavor, color or emotion to the story.

“B” stories require more than minor editing and have a few style or spelling errors or one significant error of omission. For video, there may be minor flaws in the composition of some shots or in the editing. Good use of available sound bites is required.

“C” stories need considerable editing or rewriting and/or have many spelling, style or omission errors. Camera work and editing techniques in video stories are mediocre or unimaginative, but passable. Sound bites add little or no color - only information that could be better told in the reporter’s narration.

“D” stories require excessive rewriting, have numerous errors and should not have been submitted. Camera work is unsatisfactory or fails to show important elements.

“F” stories have failed to meet the major criteria of the assignment, are late, have numerous errors or both. Your copy should not contain any errors in spelling, style, grammar and facts. Any misspelled or mispronounced proper noun will result in an automatic “F” on that assignment. Any factual error will also result in an automatic “F” on the assignment. Accuracy is the first law of journalism. The following are some other circumstances that would warrant a grade of “F” and potential USC/Annenberg disciplinary action:

- Fabricating a story or making up quotes or information.
- Plagiarizing a script/article, part of a script/article or information from any source.
- Staging video or telling interview subjects what to say.
- Using video shot by someone else and presenting it as original work.
- Shooting video in one location and presenting it as another location.
- Using the camcorder to intentionally intimidate, provoke or incite a person or a group of people to elicit more “dramatic” video.
- Promising, paying or giving someone something in exchange for doing an interview either on or off camera.
- Missing a deadline.

Grading Timeline

Review assignments will be returned each week with detailed notes.

Assignment Submission Policy

All assignments are due on the dates specified. Late assignments must be cleared with the instructor.

Students are encouraged to submit their work for consideration to Annenberg Media or the Daily Trojan, or pitch it to mainstream media outlets. Visit <http://bit.ly/SubmitAnnenbergMedia> for more information about that submission and review process and email Daily Trojan news editors at dt.city@gmail.com for more on how to pitch your work to the campus newspaper.

Laptop Policy

All undergraduate and graduate Annenberg majors and minors are required to have a PC or Apple laptop that can be used in Annenberg classes. Please refer to the [Annenberg Digital Lounge](#) for more information. To connect to USC’s Secure Wireless network, please visit USC’s [Information Technology Services](#) website.

Add/Drop Dates for Session 001 (15 weeks: 1/15/2021 – 4/30/2021; Final Exam Period: 5/5-12/2021)

Friday, February 5: Last day to register and add classes for Session 001

Friday, February 5: Last day to drop a class without a mark of “W,” except for Monday-only classes, and receive a refund for Session 001

Tuesday, February 9: Last day to drop a Monday-only class without a mark of “W” and receive a refund for Session 001

Friday, March 5: Last day to drop a course without a mark of “W” on the transcript for Session 001. Mark of “W” will still appear on student record and STARS report and tuition charges still apply. [Please drop any course by the end of week three (or the 20 percent mark of the session) to avoid tuition charges.]

Friday, March 5: Last day to change pass/no pass to letter grade for Session 001. [All major and minor courses must be taken for a letter grade.]

Friday, April 9: Last day to drop a class with a mark of “W” for Session 001

Course Schedule: A Weekly Breakdown

Important note to students: *Be advised that this syllabus is subject to change - and probably will change - based on the progress of the class, news events, and/or guest speaker availability.*

Week 1 (January 19): Introduction

A look at the life of a working film critic and how the class will be structured to replicate that experience as much as possible.

Week 2 (January 26): Reviews We Love

Before class, please submit a piece of criticism (it doesn't have to be film criticism) that you particularly admire; we'll go over them in class. First review assignment due.

Week 3 (February 2): Covering Film Festivals

As Sundance launches a mostly virtual 2020 edition, we'll discuss what it's like covering film festivals on tight deadlines. Second review assignment due.

Week 4 (February 9): The Rules of the Game

Do you read the book it's based on beforehand? Is there a particular reviewer's checklist for genre movies? Do you ever share/exchange opinions with colleagues before writing? And other burning questions.

Week 5 (February 16): On Being Wrong

A look at some of the all-time greatest “this didn't age well” reactions — and that occasional circumstance of critics reversing/retracting their reviews publicly (been there). Fourth review assignment due.

Week 6 (February 23): Critical Clapbacks

An overview of some of the famous clapbacks in criticism and the ongoing phenomenon of artists calling out reviews of their work. Fifth review assignment due.

Week 7 (March 2): “Stick to the Movie”

Perhaps the critic's most frequent form of feedback is the reader email complaining about the injection of personal politics into reviews. Is it possible, let alone advisable, to write apolitical criticism? Sixth review assignment due.

Week 8 (March 9): Reviewing Documentaries

On the specific pleasures and challenges of writing about nonfiction cinema. Seventh review assignment due.

Week 9 (March 16): Awards Season

For the film critic, writing about awards season, one of the movie industry's sustaining (and self-congratulatory) rituals, can be a joy, a curse and a necessary evil. Eighth review assignment due.

Week 10 (March 23): WELLNESS DAY, NO CLASS**Week 11 (March 30): Guest Speaker**

Class Q&A discussion with a film journalist and/or film professional TBD. Ninth review assignment due.

Week 12 (April 6): Reviewing Animation

On the specific pleasures and challenges of writing about animation. Tenth review assignment due.

Week 13 (April 13): Broadcast Reviews

A look at the specific discipline of writing clear, concise reviews for broadcast. Eleventh review assignment due.

Week 14 (April 20): Critical Mass

Many critics belong to professional organizations that give year-end prizes; they're sometimes fun and sometimes maddening, and they raise the question of whether achieving critical consensus is possible or advisable. Twelfth review assignment due.

Week 15 (April 27): Recap

Thirteenth review assignment due.

Final Exam Week (May 11, 7-9 p.m.)

Final paper due.

Summative experience.

Additional Policies

Students are expected to attend and be attentive in every class. Frequently missed classes and assignments will be reflected in the student's overall grade.

Internships

The value of professional internships as part of the overall educational experience of our students has long been recognized by the School of Journalism. Accordingly, while internships are not required for successful completion of this course, any student enrolled in this course that undertakes and completes an approved, non-paid internship during this semester shall earn academic extra credit herein of an amount equal to 1 percent of the total available semester points for this course. To receive instructor approval, a student must request an internship letter from the Annenberg Career Development Office and bring it to the instructor to sign by the end of the third week of classes. The student must submit the signed letter to the media organization, along with the evaluation form provided by the Career Development Office. The form should be filled out by the intern supervisor and returned to the instructor at the end of the semester. No credit will be given if an evaluation form is not turned into the instructor by the last day of class. Note: The internship must be unpaid and can only be applied to one journalism or public relations class.

Statement on Academic Conduct and Support Systems**a. Academic Conduct***Plagiarism*

Plagiarism – presenting someone else's ideas as your own, either verbatim or recast in your own words – is a serious academic offense with serious consequences. Please familiarize yourself with the discussion of plagiarism in

SCampus in Part B, Section 11, “Behavior Violating University Standards” policy.usc.edu/scampus-part-b. Other forms of academic dishonesty are equally unacceptable. See additional information in *SCampus* and university policies on scientific misconduct, policy.usc.edu/scientific-misconduct.

USC School of Journalism Policy on Academic Integrity

The following is the USC Annenberg School of Journalism’s policy on academic integrity and repeated in the syllabus for every course in the school:

“Since its founding, the USC School of Journalism has maintained a commitment to the highest standards of ethical conduct and academic excellence. Any student found plagiarizing, fabricating, cheating on examinations, and/or purchasing papers or other assignments faces sanctions ranging from an ‘F’ on the assignment to dismissal from the School of Journalism. All academic integrity violations will be reported to the office of Student Judicial Affairs & Community Standards (SJACS), as per university policy, as well as journalism school administrators.”

In addition, it is assumed that the work you submit for this course is work you have produced entirely by yourself, and has not been previously produced by you for submission in another course or Learning Lab, without approval of the instructor.

b. Support Systems

Counseling and Mental Health - (213) 740-9355 – 24/7 on call

studenthealth.usc.edu/counseling

Free and confidential mental health treatment for students, including short-term psychotherapy, group counseling, stress fitness workshops, and crisis intervention.

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline - 1 (800) 273-8255 – 24/7 on call

suicidepreventionlifeline.org

Free and confidential emotional support to people in suicidal crisis or emotional distress 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

Relationship and Sexual Violence Prevention and Services (RSVP) - (213) 740-9355(WELL), press “0” after hours – 24/7 on call

studenthealth.usc.edu/sexual-assault

Free and confidential therapy services, workshops, and training for situations related to gender-based harm.

Office of Equity and Diversity (OED)- (213) 740-5086 | Title IX – (213) 821-8298

equity.usc.edu, titleix.usc.edu

Information about how to get help or help someone affected by harassment or discrimination, rights of protected classes, reporting options, and additional resources for students, faculty, staff, visitors, and applicants. The university prohibits discrimination or harassment based on the following *protected characteristics*: race, color, national origin, ancestry, religion, sex, gender, gender identity, gender expression, sexual orientation, age, physical disability, medical condition, mental disability, marital status, pregnancy, veteran status, genetic information, and any other characteristic which may be specified in applicable laws and governmental regulations. The university also prohibits sexual assault, non-consensual sexual contact, sexual misconduct, intimate partner violence, stalking, malicious dissuasion, retaliation, and violation of interim measures.

Reporting Incidents of Bias or Harassment - (213) 740-5086 or (213) 821-8298

usc-advocate.symplicity.com/care_report

Avenue to report incidents of bias, hate crimes, and microaggressions to the Office of Equity and Diversity | Title IX for appropriate investigation, supportive measures, and response.

The Office of Disability Services and Programs - (213) 740-0776

dsp.usc.edu

Support and accommodations for students with disabilities. Services include assistance in providing readers/notetakers/interpreters, special accommodations for test taking needs, assistance with architectural barriers, assistive technology, and support for individual needs.

USC Campus Support and Intervention - (213) 821-4710

campussupport.usc.edu

Assists students and families in resolving complex personal, financial, and academic issues adversely affecting their success as a student.

Diversity at USC - (213) 740-2101

diversity.usc.edu

Information on events, programs and training, the Provost's Diversity and Inclusion Council, Diversity Liaisons for each academic school, chronology, participation, and various resources for students.

USC Emergency - UPC: (213) 740-4321, HSC: (323) 442-1000 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu, emergency.usc.edu

Emergency assistance and avenue to report a crime. Latest updates regarding safety, including ways in which instruction will be continued if an officially declared emergency makes travel to campus infeasible.

USC Department of Public Safety - UPC: (213) 740-6000, HSC: (323) 442-120 – 24/7 on call

dps.usc.edu

Non-emergency assistance or information.

Annenberg Student Success Fund

<https://annenberg.usc.edu/current-students/resources/additional-funding-resources>

The Annenberg Student Success Fund is a donor-funded financial aid account available to USC Annenberg undergraduate and graduate students for non-tuition expenses related to extra- and co-curricular programs and opportunities.

Breaking Bread Program [undergraduate students only]

<https://undergrad.usc.edu/faculty/bread/>

The Breaking Bread Program is designed to provide individual undergraduate students with an opportunity to meet and have scholarly discussions with faculty members outside of the normal classroom setting. Through this program, students and faculty enjoy good company and great conversation by literally “breaking bread” over a meal together and USC will pick up the tab! Your meal event can take place anywhere outside of the normal classroom setting. Your venue can be a restaurant or eatery on or off-campus.

About Your Instructor

Justin Chang is a film critic for the Los Angeles Times and for NPR's *Fresh Air*. Before joining The Times, he was chief film critic at Variety. He is the author of the book *FilmCraft: Editing* and serves as chair of the National Society of Film Critics and secretary of the Los Angeles Film Critics Association. He has served on juries at film festivals including Berlin, SXSW, Busan and Jerusalem. He has twice received National Arts & Entertainment Journalism awards for best film critic from the Los Angeles Press Club, and in 2014 he received the inaugural Roger Ebert Award from the African-American Film Critics Association.