

Writing 20th Century Music and Culture

Bobst, LL146

The Gallatin School, NYU

Fall 2009

Tuesday, Thursday: 2:00-3:15

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Cultural theory has persuaded us that there are many things involved in the making of a work of art besides the author. Works of art have a kind of 'unconscious,' which is not under the control of their producers. We have come to understand that one of those producers is the reader, viewer, or listener—that the recipient of a work of art is a co-creator of it, without whom it would not exist. We have become more sensitive to the play of power and desire in cultural artifacts, to the variety of ways in which they can confirm or contest political authority. We understand, too, that this is at least as much a matter of their form as of their content. A sharper sense has emerged of how intimately works of culture belong to their specific times and places—and how this can enrich rather than diminish them. The same is true of our responses to them, which are always historically specific. Closer attention has been paid to the material contexts of such art-works, and of how so much culture and civility have had their roots in unhappiness and exploitation. We have come to recognize culture in the broader sense as an arena in which the discarded and dispossessed can explore shared meanings and affirm a common identity.

Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*

Course Description

This class is a writing course based around a theme you all know something about: 20th (and some 21st) century music and culture. Every time you listen to, dance to, talk about, or write about a piece of music you are participating in a cultural experience. The point of this class is to use these experiences and your writing to explore more deeply what it means to think and write about the intersection of music and culture.

The 20th century, in all its innovation and violence, produced forms of music and musical experience that are equally radical and challenging. This course will study ways that music reacted to, reflected, encouraged, resisted, and participated in dramatic cultural shifts, ruptures, and movements of the 20th century. We will listen to and read about the noise machines of the Italian Futurist Luigi Russolo, the early jazz of “shantytown,” the atonality of Arnold Schoenberg, and the silence of John Cage; we will discuss and debate the political power of protest and labor songs, the rebellion of 1960s rock and free jazz, the sexuality of music videos from Madonna to Poison, and the anger, artistry, and poetry of hip-hop.

Obviously this is a huge topic that we can only touch on in the few short weeks we are together. I am not trying to offer any sort of comprehensive or cohesive history of either 20th century music or culture, but I am hoping to present material that will inspire you to explore writing in new ways that both challenge and enhance your experience of thinking about music. And while we will be reading and listening, note that the first word of the course title is *writing*, and we will be concentrating throughout the class on writing issues of tone, clarity, organization, and structure—all topics that resonate deeply in an any discussion of music. Through the challenge of writing about the complex and ineffable qualities of music and culture, I hope to introduce you to ways in which your writing is a process of questioning and exploring ideas and not merely communicating what you already know or what you think some teacher wants you to say.

Evaluation and Course Requirements

The course will be graded on the following basis:

Three 4-5 page essays	30% (10% each)
One 6-8 page critical essay	25%
Informal writing	15%
Class presentation	10%
Class participation/attendance	20%

Essays: Each of our three 5-page essays will examine a piece or genre of music and relate it to a cultural issue. The actual topics for each essay will come out of class discussions, group workshops, and through consultation with me. You are required to complete all writing assignments on time and papers must be legibly typed in order to receive a grade. For each paper you will be expected to work out your own topic, to write multiple (at least two) drafts, and often to work with other students on the papers. We will devote one class per paper to workshopping your draft, so it is just as important that you bring in you draft on time as your final project. Please proofread you papers carefully for spelling errors, grammar, etc. You are allowed to re-write one paper and resubmit it for a new grade. (I wish I could allow infinite rewrites but time constraints make this impossible.)

The **final critical essay** will be on a topic of your choice approved by me, that focuses on a style or genre of music that we *have not* discussed in class. Take advantage of your own interests and resources. Your research will probably involve reading, internet searches, and listening to recordings and/or live performances. Remember that you do not need to limit your cultural discussion to the context from which the music originally comes. A piece of music means different things in different times and contexts. Bob Marley's (or George Gershwin's) music means something very different today than when he was alive.

Informal Writing: The informal writing will consist of two parts. First, you are required to write a personal reaction to **each** assigned reading (I will usually give some sort of prompt, but even if I forget you must write something). You should post this on the class Blackboard site so it can be part of our next class discussion. You should also bring this to class the next session as I may ask you to read some of it to facilitate our discussion. Secondly, in many class sessions we will have a 5 or 10 minute free write, often based on music we will listen to and/or on the assigned reading. I will give you a topic or a question to respond to, but your writing should be free and uncorrected. The point of these writings is to give you a chance to work out your own ideas, interests, and opinions, to experiment with different forms and styles of expression, and to give me a chance to see you're your interests are. Although I will give you a grade on your informal writing, I will pay no attention to grammar, spelling, organizations, etc. I will look for creative effort and thought and at whether you have done the work.

Each of you is responsible for one **in-class presentation**. For this you have several options. You can give a presentation on a recording of your choice, on a live performance that you attend, or on a genre of music that you have a particular interest or expertise in. While you will, of course, describe, and hopefully play or demonstrate the music itself; the primary focus of your presentation should be *cultural analysis*. Your presentation should be about 10 minutes long and should include a couple minutes of class discussion. On the day you present you must give me a printed abstract (summary) or outline of what you are going to talk about.

It is my firm belief that writing is not, as is often thought, a purely solitary pursuit, but is a form of communication that involves interaction and feedback. In other words, learning to write well

is a social experience. In this course, therefore, class participation and attendance is very important. I expect you to be responsible about keeping up on assignments and about participating in group activities. If you will miss more than three classes *you must come talk to me* or your grade will be lowered.

Course Outline

Part One: Music and Meaning: What is music?

- Week One: 9/8, 9/10 Introductions
- Week Two: 9/15, 9/17 Defining music in the 20th century:
Read: Cage, Hanslick
- Week Three: 9/22, 9/24 Listening to and writing about music
Read: Lipsitz (“Don’t Cry for Me...”), Babbitt
- Week Four: 9/29, 10/1 Music and 20th century culture: concepts and approaches
Read: Ennis, Frith, Dettmar
(10/1) Essay number one draft due

Part Two: Music, Gender, and Race

- Week Five: 10/6, 10/8 Gender issues in popular music; reading music video I
Read: McClary, Hulsether
(10/8) Essay number one due
- Week Six: 10/13, 10/15 Heavy metal and gender; reading music videos II
Read: Walser
- Week Seven: 10/20, 22 Jazz: race and gender
Read: Marsalis/Hancock, Heble
- Week Eight: 10/27, 10/29 Jazz and race
Read; Baraka, Mailer
(10/29) Essay number two draft due

Part Three: Music and Literature

- Week Nine: 11/3, [11/5 no class] “Sonny’s Blues”
(11/3) Essay number two due

Week Ten: 11/10, 11/12 “The Dead”

Part Four: Music, Rebellion, and War

Week Eleven: 11/17, 11/19 Music and political revolutions
Reading: Russolo, Lipsitz (“But is it Political”)
(11/19) Essay number three draft due

Week Twelve: 11/24 Viewing: Film TBA
(11/24) Essay number three due

Week Thirteen: 12/1, 12/3 Music and War
Reading: TBA

Week Fourteen: 12/8, 12/10 Youth Rebellion
Reading: Faulkner
(12/10) Critical Essay draft due

Week Fifteen: 12/15 Digital revolution and the future
Reading: DJ Spooky
Critical Essay Due (12/16)

Required Readings:

Most of the readings are contained in the course packet available for purchase at Unique Copy. The two short stories we are reading, James Joyce’s “The Dead” and James Baldwin’s “Sonny’s Blues” are not in the packet. You can purchase these two works, which are found in many collections of short stories, any edition is fine. I may occasionally distribute readings in class.

Reading Packet:

Milton Babbitt	“Who Cares if You Listen?”
Amiri Baraka	“Miles Davis: ‘One of the Great Mother fuckers’”
John Cage	“The Future of Music: Credo”
Kevin Dettmar	“The Brief Life and Protracted Death of Rock & Roll”
Philip H. Ennis	“The Organization of Popular Musics”
Anne Shaw Faulkner	“Does Jazz Put the Sin in Syncopation?”

Simon Frith	“What is Bad Music?”
Edward Hanslick	“The Aesthetics of Feeling”
Ajay Heble	“Nice Work if You Can Get It: Women in Jazz”
George Lipsitz:	“But is it Political? Self-activity and the State”
	“Don’t Cry for Me, Ike and Tina”
Hulsether, Mark D.	“Like a Sermon: Popular Religion in Madonna Videos.”
Susan McClary	“Living to Tell: Madonna’s Resurrection of the Fleshly”
Norman Mailer	“The White Negro”
Paul D. Miller (DJ Spooky)	from <i>Rhythm Science</i>
Marsalis/Hancock	“Soul, Craft, and Cultural Hierarchy”
Luigi Russolo	The Art of Noises
Robert Walser	“Forging Masculinity” from <i>Running with the Devil</i>