LT312 From lyric essay to Buzzfeed listicle:  
The contemporary craft of creative non-fiction

Module: Author and Influence  
Seminar leader: Florian Duijsens  
Course times: Mondays 5pm-6:30pm, Thursdays 3:15pm-4:45pm  
Seminar room: SR1  
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Course Description: 
To apply the critical and academic skills of a liberal arts degree outside or after academia entails a change in tone and often a change in subject as well. Yet to write for the internet and its assorted outlets does not necessarily entail a dumbing down. While the likes of David Shields and John D’Agata are challenging the borders of non-fiction, writers such as Molly Lambert, Cintra Wilson, and Carl Wilson have shown that there is both a market and a place for sharp and funny essays on the likes of Taylor Swift, Dior, and Céline Dion. In this intensive writing class we will each week read contemporary writing and blogs alongside the authors and reporters who were their sharp and snarky forebears (Dorothy Parker, Joan Didion, Pauline Kael). Through case studies on polarizing issues such as the Oscars, Berghain, and Taylor Swift, we study the art of taking a critical stand. To hone our observation skills, we will look at the reportage of Michelle Tea and John Jeremiah Sullivan. We will explore the current crop of cooking blogs with guest speaker Luisa Weiss (The Wednesday Chef) and examine the roots of Jezebel, The Hairpin, and Tavi Gevenson’s Rookie, all the while working on short exercises in writing reviews, reportage, essays, short memoirs, and GIF-laden listicles, the best of which we will pitch or place on the Bard College Berlin blog, as well as other online outlets such as Asymptote and Stil in Berlin.

Requirements
Attendance & Readings  
Attendance at ALL classes is expected. More than two absences (that is, absences from two sessions of 90 minutes) in a semester will significantly affect the grade for the course.  
A class participation mark will be awarded on the basis of your engagement in class discussions. You are required to purchase one key text for this class: Wilson, Carl. Let's Talk About Love: Why Other People Have Such Bad Taste. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014. Note that this is the most recent, expanded edition. All other texts (aside from a few video or image-based ones) are included in the class readers. As this is a writing class, you will be expected to bring them to class with annotations and marginalia, highlighting any striking arguments, tonal shifts, or turns of phrase, as well as any references you find confusing or enlightening.

Writing Assignments & Final paper  
The weekly assignments should be double-spaced and sent in to me via email by 11pm the day before the next class. The inclusion of images, links, and videos is encouraged, but please ensure your work is carefully proofread for typos, misspellings, garbled constructions, and basic errors in usage and/or punctuation. For the workshops on April 16, 20, and 23, you’ll be assigned a date and will send your
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Final paper pitch – April 27, 2015
Paper abstract (200 words) – May 4, 2015
Final paper deadline – May 20, 2015

Policy on Late Submission of Papers
Essays that are up to 24 hours late will be downgraded one full grade (from B+ to C+, for example). Instructors are not obliged to accept essays that are more than 24 hours late. If I agree to accept a late essay, it must be submitted within four weeks of the deadline and cannot receive a grade higher than a C. Thereafter, the student will receive a failing grade for the assignment.

Grade Breakdown
Class participation: 30%
Assignments: 30%
Final paper: 40%

Schedule*

Class 1: January 26
What is non-fiction: is it that stack of books beside your dad’s bed or just a handy term to collect all writing that isn’t fiction? While there is no satisfactory answer to this question, it might help us to look at two definitions by the late David Foster Wallace, one of the writers haunting this syllabus. Here’s one from his introduction to *The Best American Essays 2007*:

“Writing-wise, fiction is scarier, but nonfiction is harder — because nonfiction’s based in reality, and today’s felt reality is overwhelmingly, circuit-blowingly huge and complex. Whereas fiction comes out of nothing. Actually, so wait: the truth is that both genres are scary; both feel like they’re executed on tightropes, over abysses—it’s the abysses that are different. Fiction’s abyss is silence, nada. Whereas nonfiction’s abyss is Total Noise, the seething static of every particular thing and experience, and one’s total freedom of infinite choice about what to choose to attend to and represent and connect, and how, and why, etc.”

This Total Noise includes everything, from AP news reports to recipes and text messages, so we should narrow our focus to ‘creative non-fiction’, which sounds like it’d be both more fun and more rewarding. Here’s one of Mr. Wallace’s syllabi on the topic:

“English 183D is a workshop course in *creative nonfiction*, which term denotes a broad category of prose works such as personal essays and memoirs, profiles, nature and travel writing, narrative essays, observational or descriptive essays, general-interest technical writing, argumentative or idea-based essays, general-interest criticism, literary journalism, and so on. The term’s constituent words suggest a conceptual axis on which these sorts of prose works lie. As nonfiction, the works are connected to actual states of affairs in the world, are “true” to some reliable extent. If, for example, a certain event is alleged to have occurred, it must really have occurred; if a proposition is asserted, the reader expects some proof of (or argument for) its accuracy. At the same time, the adjective *creative* signifies that some goal(s) other than sheer
truthfulness motivates the writer and informs her work. This creative goal, broadly stated, may be to interest readers, or to instruct them, or to entertain them, to move or persuade, to edify, to redeem, to amuse, to get readers to look more closely at or think more deeply about something that’s worth their attention. . . or some combination(s) of these. Creative also suggests that this kind of nonfiction tends to bear traces of its own artificing; the essay’s author usually wants us to see and understand her as the text’s maker. This does not, however, mean that an essayist's main goal is simply to “share” or “express herself” or whatever feel-good term you might have got taught in high school. In the grown-up world, creative nonfiction is not expressive writing but rather communicative writing. And an axiom of communicative writing is that the reader does not automatically care about you (the writer), nor does she find you fascinating as a person, nor does she feel a deep natural interest in the same things that interest you. The reader, in fact, will feel about you, your subject, and your essay only what your written words themselves induce her to feel. An advantage of the workshop format is that it will allow you to hear what twelve reasonably intelligent adults have been induced to think and feel about each essay you write for the course.”

NON-FICTION, TASTE, AND, YES, CÉLINE DION

Class 2: January 29
One is always told to ‘write what you know’, but does that mean you should also ‘write about what you know you like’? As Pierre Bourdieu famously found, our tastes are deeply entwined with our identities, and thus also rooted in class, ethnicity, and gender. How, then, can a writer be objective and herself at the same time, let alone ‘cool’? Does it depend on who we are writing for?

Reading:

Assignment: Write about a guilty pleasure (300 words max).

Class 3: February 2
Looking at our likes and dislikes more closely (or askant), we might find them rooted in historical developments of co-optation and appropriation that run counter to our expectation. It becomes clear that aesthetic or critical judgment is often more complicated than generalist disses such as ‘kitschy’ or ‘sell-out’ (or, for that matter, hype-y screams of ‘revolutionary’) would suggest.

Reading:

Recommended additional reading:

Assignment: Write about a popular pop-cultural artifact (band, TV show, movie, actor, etc.) you detest (300 words max).

Class 4: February 5
All this relativization does not necessarily mean, however, that writers should always play nice. Some of the very best (and bitchiest) writers package their harshest criticism in eminently quotable writing. Can great writing transcend snobbery and judginess?

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Reading:
- Parker, Dorothy. “Reading and Writing: Re-enter Miss Hurst, Followed by Mr. Tarkington.” The New Yorker, January 28, 1928.

Recommended additional reading:

Class 5: February 9
We have been warned of the dangers of writing that edges too far into irony as becoming irrelevant to reality, but are we also in danger of going too far the other way, becoming too sensitive? Daily outrages on Twitter and Facebook could certainly suggest something like that, but is that something new? In a recent interview with VICE (of course), professionally controversial author and screenwriter Bret Easton Ellis (*American Psycho, The Canyons*) called the Millennials out for being ‘Generation Wuss’:

“It’s very difficult for them to take criticism, and because of that a lot of the content produced is kind of shitty. And when someone is criticized for their content, they seem to collapse, or the person criticizing them is called a hater, a contrarian, a troll. In a way it’s down to the generation that raised them, who cocooned them in praise—four stars for showing up, you know? But eventually everyone has to hit the dark side of life; someone doesn’t like you, someone doesn’t like your work, someone doesn’t love you back... people die. What we have is a generation who are super-confident and super-positive about things, but when the least bit of darkness enters their lives, they’re paralyzed.”

What separates critics from trolls? How to navigate the divide between snark and outrage? How to ward off the deep claws of irony and the dangers of sincerity? And can we even extrapolate this struggle to a generation or a point in time?

Reading:

Assignment: Write about your generation or era, responding to at least one of these texts (300 words max).

Class 6: February 12
And how to write about things that go against good taste, that are excessively dramatic or loud or schmaltzy? And why is it that it’s often culture enjoyed by, or aimed at, women that’s called out for being melodramatic, cheap, hysterical?

Reading:
- Wilson, Carl. Celine Dion’s Let’s Talk About Love: A Journey to the End of Taste. Bloomsbury

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- Leslie Jamison, "Short Term Feelings: What Hurts About "Short Term 12."

Assignment: Oscar coverage due on the 24th (500 words max)

Class 10: February 26
We discuss our (written) responses to the actual event. Did the best films win?
Reading:
- Watch the Oscars and however much of the red-carpet pre-show you can bear.

THE MUSIC

Class 11: March 2
We finish our journey with Céline for now, turning to the contemporary puzzle that is Taylor Swift, arguably 2014’s most ‘popular’ artist in the US. Can one be popular and still good or cool? More importantly, can T-Swizzle?
Reading:
- Moody, Rick. “And I tried to understand the Taylor Swift phenomenon this morning, but I do not understand.” The Rumpus, January 15, 2013.

Assignment: Write about a successful but controversial pop-cultural figure (300 words max)

Class 12: March 5
In this split session we depart from a state of the art of online music writing to focus on one particular complaint that can easily be extrapolated to the internet at large: Music writing has “now mostly been reduced to a game of simply reacting to The Thing That Everyone Is Talking About”. Time then to discuss the state of the internet at large in terms of voice. Who decides what The Thing is? What’s more, how do we write (or even think) about The Thing in language that isn’t clichéd or cut and pasted?

Reading:

REPORTAGE

Class 13: March 9
In a change of pace from the movie/laptop screen and your headphones, our next topic will take us outside (thank goodness winter is almost over). Reportage is a craft akin to anthropology in which
one’s lived experience mixes with one’s research, and an eye for detail is crucial. We read three masters of the craft—Michelle Tea, John Jeremiah Sullivan, and John D’Agata—each of whom takes very different approach to writing about places and people, and the fact that they were there to witness these events. Since they’re writing to more (and different) people than were present in these places at these times, it is important to note who they are writing to here. What do they (feel) have to explain, in what frame of reference do they place it, and who are they trying to convince of what?

**Reading:**

**Class 14: March 12**

As we have seen in the previous session, you write differently for people already aware of the phenomenon you’re describing, and not only that, it also completely depends on whether the reader is thought to have any interest (or benefit) in seeking out the phenomenon for themselves. This separates commercial travel writing from things like anthropological research, but there are many shades in between. To better understand how Berlin has been portrayed in media reports, we will look at various recentish pieces on Berghain, the techno club in many ways as synonymous with the city as Frau Merkel, the Memorial to the Murdered Jews of Europe, and Currywurst. How does the club relate to the city, and how does the writer relate to the club, and does it matter whether the club cares it’s being written about?

**Reading:**

**Additional reading:**

**Assignment:** Go someplace and write about it for an audience unfamiliar with it (300 words max).

**Spring Break**

**I CAN HAZ INTERNET**

**Class 15: March 23**

A look at the economy behind our clicks and a meditation on how those clicks shape online ‘content’. Cats are the only topic that can really challenge porn in online omnipresence, but why cats? And how do companies capitalize (‘cattitalize’) on this worldwide love of cats?

**Reading:**

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**Recommended additional reading:**

**Class 16: March 26**

As we’ve seen, the listicle is a ‘disruptive’ ‘innovation’ that has fueled BuzzFeed’s success, yet the list as a form of creative non-fiction has been with us since Sumerian times, and even today it can be used to actually disrupt stalemated conversations and innovate the way we think (and talk) about the world.

**Reading:**
- Ortberg, Mallory on art: http://the-toast.net/category/artwork/ [not included in the reader]

**Assignment:** Write a listicle comprising at least 10 items (use of images or videos is allowed).

**Class 17: March 30**

With the relative success of #readwomen2014, many have noted that the internet has enabled the recent mainstreaming of certain feminist critiques. We saw some of Ortberg’s modern classics in that field last week, and this week will delve a little deeper into her work, and that of others who have ‘changed the conversation’ about gender in online discussions.

**Reading:**

**Recommended reading:**

**WE TELL OURSELVES STORIES IN ORDER TO LIVE**

**Class 18: April 2**

We’ve written about other people’s work, about other places, and studied style, but what of that other popular iteration of the essay, the *personal* essay or the *memoir?* Are our memories reliable enough to use in our writing, and are other people’s? Can memories provide a key to a moment or era?

**Reading:**

**Assignment:** Write about a memory (yours or someone else’s) (300 words maximum).

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Easter Monday

Class 19: April 9
The quest from Class 18 continues…

Reading:

SPORTS?

Class 20: April 13
Didn’t see this coming? After a series of ‘girly’ topics, here are two remarkable essays on the male-dominated field of sports, each of which tackles its media representation and physical dimension in very different ways.

Reading:

WORKSHOPS

Class 21: April 16
In these classes we will ‘workshop’ student writing, each class reading and discussing the writing of four or five classmates. A workshop is an exercise in editing as well as in being edited—as challenging as it is ultimately rewarding. All students are expected to make detailed, respectful, critical notes on each piece of writing, handing them to their authors at the end of each session.

Workshop Group 1
Assignment: Write/expand a piece (600 words max) for discussion in your assigned workshop session, and send them to the entire class no later than 10pm, April 13 (Group 1), April 17 (Group 2), and April 20 (Group 3).

Class 22: April 20
Workshop Group 2

Class 23: April 23
Workshop Group 3

Class 24: April 27
At this point, we’ve gotten a clear picture of the essay, a form that can include EVERYTHING. Yet some work well and some don’t. Perhaps that is because, as the Swiss writer Robert Walser says, a good essay is “a quarry, a landslide, a raging fire that may be splendid to look at but is also very sad.” Or maybe it should be something else, as Leslie Jamison says:

“I often think of the subject of an essay as something like a courtyard full of questions—questions about grief, or longing, or memory, or empathy. Writing means walking a furious

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labyrinthine path in order to peer at them from every possible direction. Every mode of inquiry—history, memoir, criticism—is a doorway that opens onto this courtyard from a different angle. Each glance offers some gift: the pages of a medical acting script, or the humming heart of an fMRI scanner; the grainy resolution of old photographs or the tiny time-machines of old text messages. You can gaze down on the past from the obstructed aerial view of retrospection, or you can gaze up from a hospital table, the folds of a paper gown crinkling underneath the goose bumps on your arms. That’s the thrill of pushing the personal essay beyond itself: the electricity created between erudition and flesh is something fierce. You can move from the rigors of scientific inquiry to the pale vulnerability of an IV piercing a vein. You can travel that distance in a sentence—if curiosity demands it, if the sentiment can hold it.

When you’re lying on a hospital gurney, it can feel like there is nothing else in the world—nothing but your fear, or your chill, or the promise of anesthesia, or the shadows of the surgeons who are about to cut you open. It can feel that way—and that feeling is a truth, but what it believes isn’t true at all: because you’re not the only thing in the world—the only person who has ever hurt, the only person who has ever worn a paper gown. In truth, there is a whole world beyond you, in that moment and always—a whole world of other hurting bodies, of surgeons and their training; there’s a whole world of hearts, heart anatomies and heart myths, hearts transplanted and broken. There is so much outside the false cloister of private experience; and when you write, you do the work of connecting that terrible privacy to everything beyond it.”

As we gear up for the final papers, we will discuss everybody’s ideas for final papers in the form of two-line pitches presented to the entire class. Support comes from Alexander Chee, Cheryl Strayed, and Bernard Cooper, three writers who have spun non-fiction into gold-star ‘landslides’ and ‘courtyards,’ facing the raw materials of life and somehow coming away wiser.

Reading:

Assignment: Pitch 2000-word essay to the group in two lines or less

Class 25: April 30
We return to a piece of reportage from Class 13, encounter the lyric essay, and face DFW’s twin abysSES.

Reading:

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Class 26: May 4
Send in a 200-word abstract of your final paper. While you are working on those final essays (or starting to, really), we get a glimpse of a possible future as we talk to a successful blogger: Luisa Weiss, aka The Wednesday Chef. She will curate the readings and will answer your (parents’) most burning question: Can you really make money writing on the internet?
Reading:
TBA

Class 27: May 11
Catching up with Céline: In this final class we look back on Céline Dion and on Carl Wilson’s book, discuss if his approach was effective, and see how the two assigned readings elaborate/critique his method.
Reading:

Final paper due: May 20

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