ART AND SUBVERSION: THREE TRADITIONS OF AESTHETIC THEORY
PHIL 336: Aesthetics
Winter 2011

Instructors: Anna Ezekiel and Shiloh Whitney

Time and place:
Three 50-minute lectures per week.
Leacock 15
MWF 09:35 – 10:25

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COURSE DESCRIPTION

An introduction to the history of aesthetic theory, investigating central questions of aesthetics such as the nature of aesthetic judgment, the perception of aesthetic objects, and the nature of art objects. The course surveys the approaches to these themes found in three traditions of aesthetics: German, French, and English. Questions to be considered in this class include: Is there a unique aesthetic experience on the basis of which we may identify and define art? What is genius, and does it play a role in the production of art? Does the creation or contemplation of art offer special knowledge? Is the creation or contemplation of art important to the development of morals or freedom? Is it possible to understand artworks in isolation from their social and political context? How is art implicated in regimes of social control, and how can art be invoked to subvert these regimes? Can the enjoyment or creation of art be politically disinterested? How are practices of art theory and appreciation implicated in the exclusion of women? Could artistic expression be a source of power for women?

The first part of the course will survey major developments in German aesthetics during the height of German work on aesthetic theory in the late 18th and 19th centuries. Themes to be investigated include the nature of aesthetic judgment, the definition of the beautiful and the sublime, the role of art in the attainment of freedom and knowledge, the artist as genius, and the role of art in understanding and interpreting the world. We will also examine feminist critiques of traditional aesthetic theory, which argue that some of these themes have worked to exclude women from the creation and appreciation of art.
The second part of the course investigates 20th century French aesthetics, highlighting the themes of embodiment and expression in this tradition’s understanding of artistic creation and appreciation. The section begins with Merleau-Ponty’s account of the painter’s perception, which provides a model of art as an event in which the body and the world come to be in relation to each other, and moves on through an examination of Foucault’s treatment of art as a mobilization of regimes of power, to theories that present art as enabling both social control and subversion. Questions treated in this section include: how does the embodied experience of art support forms of social control? Does the experience of art and of the creative process offer special critical or subversive powers? Is the experience of art inflected with sexual difference? How is this inflection mobilized, both in the use of art as social control, and its subversive uses? What role do affects such as horror and desire play in the creation and appreciation of art? And how can we understand the phenomenon of expression in a manner that accounts for the dynamics of power and subversion in the embodied experience of artistic creation and appreciation?

The third part of the course begins by considering Hume’s essay on the standard of taste, and then moves to Bullough’s pivotal 1912 essay on “psychical distance,” examining the shift from theories of aesthetic properties to those of the aesthetic attitude. If there is a special attitude operating in the perception of the art object, can we define art in terms of this unique disposition? If there is a disposition proper to the creation or appreciation of art, is it a personal or an impersonal attitude? The last part of this section considers theories of art as practice, as family resemblance, and as institution, and examines the need for an account of expression as part of a theory of art.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

**Outcomes regarding content**
By the end of this course, students will:
1. Be familiar with central questions that have preoccupied the three traditions of aesthetic theory covered in this course (German, French, and English).
2. Be able to identify some differences of approach to these questions between these three traditions.
3. Understand differences in the responses to these questions *within* these three traditions.
4. Be able to identify some important criticisms attending some of these theories of aesthetics.
5. Appreciate the importance for aesthetic theory of the socio-political context of artworks and art practices.
6. Recognize some of the ways in which traditional aesthetic theory has excluded women and contributed to the oppression of women.

**Outcomes regarding skills**
By the end of this course, students will:
1. Have improved their ability to read and analyze philosophical texts.
2. Have made improvements in their ability to write clear, well-structured, persuasive accounts of philosophical ideas.
3. Have developed the ability to ask clear, concise, relevant, and insightful questions about texts and theories.

COURSE CONTENT

5th January Introduction, overview

Section 1: German aesthetics
7th January Kant: Aesthetic judgment

10th January Kant: The sublime

12th January Kant: Genius

14th January Hegel: The work of art
Required reading: Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics (1820s), Chapter III, Part I “The Work of Art as Made and as Sensuous” (pp. 27–46)

17th January Hegel: The end of art
Required reading: Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics (1820s), Chapter III, Part II “The End of Art” (pp. 46–61)

19th January Hegel: The arts
Required reading: Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics (1820s), Chapter V “Division of the Subject” (pp. 76–97)

21st January Novalis: Art as salvation
Required reading: Excerpts from Philosophical Writings (on WebCT), “Monologue,” and excerpts from The Novices of Saïs

24th January Critical interlude I: Women, art, and morals

26th January Schopenhauer: The World as Will and Representation
Required reading: Excerpts from *The World as Will and Representation* (1818 [1844]), Volume I, Books 1 and 2

28th January
Schopenhauer: Art as knowledge and release from suffering
Required reading: Excerpts from *The World as Will and Representation* (1818 [1844]), Volume I, Book 3
Recommended reading: Janaway, *Schopenhauer: A Very Short Introduction* (2002), chapter 6 (pp. 70–87)

31st January
Critical interlude II: Aesthetic enjoyment as disinterested

2nd February
Nietzsche: Art as consolation
Required reading: *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), ss. 1–7, 25 only
Suggested reading: *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), ss. 8–15

4th February
Critical interlude III: The artist as genius

**Section 2: French aesthetics**

**Embodiment**

7th February
Merleau-Ponty: Painting as perception (“Eye and Mind”/1961)

9th February
Continue Merleau-Ponty

**FIRST PAPER DUE** (electronically, by midnight)

11th February
Continue Merleau-Ponty

14th February
Foucault: Art as subjection (“The Body of the Condemned” and “Docile Bodies” /1975)

16th February
Continue Foucault (“Las Meninas”/1966)

18th February
Continue Foucault

**Expression**

28th February

2nd March
Continue Bataille (“The Lugubrious Game” / 1927-39)

4th March
Kristeva: Abjection and art as *jouissance* (“Approaching Abjection” and “Filth and Defilement” / 1980)

7th March
Continue Kristeva (“Giotto’s Joy” /1987)

9th March
Continue Kristeva

11th March
Cixous: Art as liberation (“The Laugh of the Medusa”/1975)

**Section 3: English aesthetics**
14th March  Hume: Art as a matter of taste ("Of the Standard of Taste" / 1757)
16th March  Bullough: Art as a matter of ‘psychical distance’, and the turn to aesthetic attitude theories ("Psychical Distance’ as a Factor in Art and an Aesthetic Principle"/1912).
18th March  Woolf: Art as androgynous ("A Room of One’s Own"/1929)
21st March  Continue Bullough and Woolf

SECOND PAPER DUE (in class)

23rd March  Dickie: Critique of aesthetic attitude ("All Aesthetic Attitude Theories Fail" / 1964)

25th March  Weitz: Art as practice ("The Role of Theory in Aesthetics" / 1956)

28th March  Dickie: Art as institution
Required reading: "Defining Art" (1969)

30th March  Cohen: Critique of institutional theory of art
Required reading: “The Possibility of Art” (1973)

1st April  Dewey: Art and experience
Required reading: Art as Experience (1934), Chapter 1 “The Live Creature,” and excerpts from Chapter 2 “The Live Creature and ‘Ethereal Things’”

4th April  Dewey: Art as an experience
Required reading: Art as Experience (1934), Chapter 3 “Having an Experience”

6th April  Dewey: Art as expression
Required reading: Art as Experience (1934), Chapter 4 “The Act of Expression”

8th April  Langer: Art as significant form
Required reading: Feeling and Form (1953), Chapter 3 “The Symbol of Feeling,”

COURSE MATERIALS

Required readings


Hegel, G. W. F. Excerpts from Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics ([1820s] 1835) (on 3 hour reserve at the library).


Required readings will be included in a course pack, posted on WebCT, or made available at the library.

Suggested readings


Nietzsche, Friedrich. The Birth of Tragedy (1873), ss. 8–24.


ASSIGNMENTS AND EVALUATION

This course will be evaluated by two 900 word papers, each worth 30% of the total grade for the course, a final exam, worth 30% of the total grade for the course, and 10% for participation. The participation grade will include attendance (4%), and discussion questions and responses posted on WebCT (6%).

(30%) Assignment 1: The first paper will be due at midnight on Wednesday, February 9, and must be submitted by e-mail.

(30%) Assignment 2: The second paper will be due in class on Monday, March 21. Late papers will be penalized at a rate of a third of a letter grade (5%) per day or part thereof. A copy of a medical certificate or death certificate will be required in order to obtain an extension.
(30%) **Final Exam:** Take home exam, due date TBA

(6%) **Discussion questions/responses:** Each student must submit 6 questions AND 6 responses to other students’ questions over the course of the term. Each question/response is worth 0.5% of the course grade. Only one question and/or one response per week per student will count towards the grade (i.e., you must post on at least 6 separate weeks, and are therefore advised to begin submitting questions and responses in the early weeks of the term).

(4%) **Attendance:** A sign-up sheet will be at the front of the class during the first 10 minutes of each lecture.

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures ([www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/)).

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.