

**Phil 336 – Aesthetics (3 credits)**  
**Fall 2014**

September 02 – December 06, 2014

Lectures: Monday, Wednesday, and Friday, 14:35-15:25, BIRKS 205

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Office hours: Monday and Wednesday, 16:00-17:00, Leacock 940

**Course Description:**

Aesthetics, or the philosophy of art, is primarily concerned with questions concerning art and beauty. As a general introduction to philosophical aesthetics, this course will focus on the nature of art and ask "What is art?"

The course is divided into two parts. In the first, we will examine a number of key attempts to define art throughout its history: the mimetic theory, definitions focusing on aesthetic attitudes and disinterest, theories that hold that art is the result of artistic expression or the communication of feelings, and the rise of contextualist theories of art. While this is by no means an exhaustive list of the most important and influential theories of art, it does pick out certain key themes and moments that lie at the core of most other such theories.

Skepticism about the feasibility and value of defining art gained significant philosophical traction in the 1950s, and has influenced a great deal of work in aesthetics since then. The second part of the course will be devoted to exploring some of the more significant sources of skepticism about theories of art. We will begin with what the neo-Wittgensteinians read into Wittgenstein's remarks on games, and trace these arguments through to the development of "cluster" theories of art. From there, we will turn our gaze to the history of art and some of the problems that it raises for attempts to define art, from gendered and exclusive canons and conceptions of artistic genius to the (surprisingly late) origins of our concepts of "art" and "works". Finally, we will consider the problems presented by art stemming from cultures that do not share our concept of art, especially prehistoric and non-Western cultures.

**Requirements:** Students who take this course must be prepared to complete readings on time, as lectures will assume that students have read that week's texts closely. Students are expected to have their texts with them at each class, and students may be called upon at random to discuss or explain parts of the readings.

**Course materials:** There is no required textbook or coursepack for this course. All required readings, as well as additional material, will be made available through myCourses, either as PDFs or links to library and internet resources.

**Resources:** In addition to the material listed for each topic, you may find the following resources interesting and helpful.

- The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy: <http://plato.stanford.edu/>
- The Concise Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy [available as eBook through library]

**Assessment:** Your grade for the term will be based on three components:

1. Weekly reading responses (starting week 1, ending week 13; 10 total): 10%
2. One medium-length essay (~1500-2000 words): 20%
3. One long(er) essay (2500-3000 words): 30%
4. One final exam: 40%

**Weekly reading responses** should aim to pose a **substantive question** about the week's readings in roughly one paragraph. Doing so might typically involve (1) identifying the key idea in the selected text and translating it into the student's own words, (2) reflecting on an implication of that idea (e.g. if  $x$  is true, as  $y$  claims, then... what?), and (3) raising a question for the class to discuss.

Although weekly reading responses cannot be made up for any reason, students may select up to ten of the readings to respond to. Responses are due before the first class meeting of the relevant week, and will be graded on a pass/fail basis.

### **Essay submission policy:**

#### General

- The first essay is due in class on **October 06**. After 17h00 on October 27, 5% will be deducted from a late submission's mark. Each additional calendar day will incur a penalty of an additional 5%.
- The second essay is due on **November 17** at 17h00, after which point late penalties will apply.
- No excuses will be accepted, save for documented illnesses or emergencies.
- Extensions may be granted at the instructor's discretion provided they are requested **well in advance** of the due date.
- If you believe that an error was committed in the grading of your work, you may request a reassessment of your grade by providing the instructor with a written explanation detailing why you believe the grade is unfair. *Please note that, as a result of reassessment, your grade may go up or down.*

#### Rewrites

- **All completed essays may be revised any number of times** (the grade earned by the last revision will be the student's final grade on the essay) until the last day of class.
- **Rewrites are due one week after the previous version has been handed back.**

- **Incomplete essays** will incur a permanent penalty of *at least* one full letter grade. This penalty also applies to rewrites of the incomplete essay.
- **Late penalties** (5% per day) are likewise carried over to rewritten essays.
- No rewrites of either essay will be accepted after the final day of classes (Dec. 03).

**Language policy:** 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.

**Academic integrity:** 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 (see [www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/](http://www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/) for more information).

**Access:** I am committed to ensuring that our classrooms are as open and accessible as possible. If you need some form of accommodation, please do not hesitate to contact me **as soon as possible** so that we can ensure that the class environment meets your needs. You should also contact the **Office for Students with Disabilities** ([www.mcgill.ca/osd](http://www.mcgill.ca/osd)) at 514-398-6009 beforehand.

## Schedule of Readings

### Part I: Some attempts to define art

*Week 1 (September 3, 5)*

#### **Introduction & mimetic theories of art**

Is art just imitation of the natural world? To what extent should art concern itself with realistic depiction?

- Plato – The Republic X: 595a-607c
- Cynthia Freeland – But Is It Art? – excerpt (p. 31-5)

*Week 2 (September 8, 10, 12)*

#### **Aesthetic theories and disinterest**

Does art call for a special kind of consideration, a special way of looking/seeing?

- Immanuel Kant – Critique of Judgement: “Analytic of the Beautiful,” §1–6, §10–11, §17–22; “Deduction of Pure Aesthetic Judgments,” §32–37
- Jerome Stolnitz – *“The Aesthetic Attitude” in the rise of modern aesthetics*
- Jerome Stolnitz – *“The Aesthetic Attitude” in the rise of modern aesthetics: again*

*Week 3 (September 15, 17, 19)*

#### **Aesthetic theories and disinterest – continued**

Does art call for a special kind of consideration, a special way of looking/seeing?

- Christine Battersby – *Situating the Aesthetic: a Feminist Defense*
- Marcia Muelder Eaton – *Kantian and Contextual Beauty*

*Week 4 (September 22, 24, 26)*

#### **Expression theories & emotion**

Is it the emotions or ideas communicated in art that make it art?

- Leo Tolstoy – What Is Art? – Chapter 4: excerpts
- R.G. Collingwood – Principles of Art – Chapter 6: *Art Proper: as Expression*

*Week 5 (September 29, October 1, 3)*

#### **Early sources of skepticism** (Precognition of Part II)

Are artworld phenomena too diverse for a single definition?

- Ludwig Wittgenstein – Philosophical Investigations, §65-71 (p. 31-34)
- Morris Weitz – *The Role of Theory in Aesthetics*
- Maurice Mandelbaum – *Family Resemblances and Generalizations Concerning the Arts*

## Part II: Skepticism about definitions of art

*Week 6 (October 6, 8, 10)*

**Institutional theories** (Time-travelling back to Part I)

Is art just whatever the artworld decides it is?

- **Essay 1 due (October 6)**
- Arthur Danto – *The Artworld*
- George Dickie – *The Art Circle*
- Barbara Savedoff – *The Art Object*

*Week 7 (October 15, 17)*

**Cluster theories of art**

Perhaps the best we can do is identify some jointly sufficient conditions for art.

- Berys Gaut – *The Cluster Account of Art*
- Ellen Dissanayake – What is Art For?, 34-42, 58-73

*Week 8 (October 20, 22, 24)*

**Feminist critiques of the art-historical canon**

Where have all the women gone?

- Peg Zeglin Brand – *Glaring Omissions in Traditional Theories of Art*
- Linda Nochlin – *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?*

*Week 9 (October 27, 29, 31)*

**Later skepticism**

Do we need to say any more than that art = belonging to one of the arts?

- Dominic McIver Lopes – *Nobody Needs a Theory of Art*
- Class cancelled (October 29)
- Class cancelled (October 31)

*Week 10 (November 3, 5, 7)*

**Origins of our concept of 'art'**

Where does our talk about artworks come from, anyway? How much do we share in common with our predecessors?

- Larry Shiner – The Invention of Art – Ch. 1, 6, 10

Week 11 (November 10, 12, 14)

**Origins of our concept of 'art' – continued**

Where does our talk about artworks come from, anyway? How much do we share in common with our predecessors?

- Lydia Goehr – The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works: An Essay in the Philosophy of Music – Ch. 4, 7

Week 12 (November 17, 19, 21)

**First art**

When was the first art? Why should it count as 'art'?

- **Essay 2 due (November 17)**
- Stephen Davies – *First Art and Art's Definition*
- Johan de Smedt and Helen De Cruz – *A Cognitive Approach to the Earliest Art*

Week 13 (November 24, 26, 28)

**Art in non-western societies**

Do other societies share our concept of 'art'?

- Stephen Davies – *Non-Western Art and Art's Definition*
- Dennis Dutton – *"But They Don't Have Our Concept of Art"*

Week 14 (December 1, 3)

**Bonus classes**

- TBA
- TBA

**Final Exam TBA**