

Introduction to Aesthetics

1. Course Overview

This course will serve as a general introduction to aesthetics. Aesthetics is concerned primarily with questions of art and beauty: for example, what is art? What makes a work of art beautiful or valuable? Is aesthetic value objective or subjective? How are fictions and other aspects of artistic works created, and what are they about? In this course, we will examine these questions in particular through the medium of film. Films are particularly interesting for several reasons: we tend to think of them, by default, as both representational and realistic. What's more, they are plausibly the products of a whole group of artists — many of whom can lay claim to having had some agency over the final product — rather than any particular individual. This focus will lead us to ask a couple of more specific questions that arise in particular with regard to film: how do realistic media represent the world? What is realism itself? And can realism be valuable?

2. 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 week's readings.

3. Prerequisites

There are no formal prerequisites for this course, but it is a surprisingly challenging subject.

4. Course Format

There will be three lectures per week, although emphasis will be placed on student participation. There will also be weekly movie viewings beginning in week 2.

5. Assessment

The final marks for this course will be determined in the following way:

- Two short essays (~1000 words each): 25% each.
- Take home final (2500–3000 words): 40%.
- Weekly quizzes: 10% (starting week 2, ending week 12; 11 total).

N.B. Quizzes may not be made up if missed for any reason. The lowest score may be dropped, however.

The final essay (40%) will be an expanded version of one of the first two, shorter essays.

Students will arrange individual meetings with the instructor in order to discuss how they intend to expand on one of their shorter essays into the final essay. Assessment of the final essay will be based primarily on the quality of that work; however, some consideration will be given to the extent to which it has improved upon the student's earlier work.

6. Attendance

Attendance is not mandatory. However, it is assumed that students are attending all lectures and viewings. Attendance is the student's responsibility, and missed materials should be obtained from the other students.

7. Late Policy for Essays

Papers are due via email at midnight before the relevant class period. Those submitting the paper more than five minutes thereafter will be regarded as late and 5% will be deducted from the essay's mark. For each additional calendar day (starting at midnight), an additional 5% will be deducted from the course grade. No excuses will be accepted, save for documented illnesses, so plan ahead.

N.B. Extensions may be granted at the discretion of the instructor IN ADVANCE of the due date. I do not check my email in the evening, let alone late at night. So again, plan ahead.

8. Electronics and Laptop Policy

Pursuant to McGill University's policy regarding electronics in the classroom, students may not use electronic devices (phones, iPads, etc.) or laptop computers during class. All electronic devices must be turned off and stored during the lecture period. Exceptions will only be made with a note from the student disabilities office. **THE RECORDING OF LECTURES IS STRICTLY FORBIDDEN** and is illegal without the consent of the instructor. Please consider these policies before enrolling for this course.

9. Course Communications

It is assumed that all students are attending all lectures and movie viewings, and therefore some essential information may be transmitted in lecture or at viewings. In particular, revisions to the reading schedule will be transmitted in class and not necessarily be made available in any other way. Students who do not attend and therefore have not prepared properly may not use non-attendance for any reason as an excuse. Information about the course and some readings and handouts may be made available on MyCourses. Students are responsible for checking each Saturday for information or updates. The principal means of contact for this course, outside of office hours and the classroom is email. All emails to the instructor must originate from McGill University accounts, and some course communications may be sent via email to McGill University accounts. Students are responsible for checking their McGill accounts.

10. Academic Integrity

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offenses under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity for more information).

L'université McGill attache une haute importance à l'honnêteté académique. Il incombe par conséquent à tous les étudiants de comprendre ce que l'on entend par tricherie, plagiat et autres infractions académiques, ainsi que les conséquences que peuvent avoir de telles actions, selon le Code de conduite de l'étudiant et des procédures disciplinaires (pour de plus amples renseignements, veuillez consulter le site www.mcgill.ca/integrity).

11. Special Notes

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

and

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.

12. Required Texts

Languages of Art, Second Edition (Goodman), *The Painted Word* (Wolfe), *On Beauty and Being Just* (Scarry)

The texts can be purchased at *Paragraphe Booksellers* on Avenue McGill College.

13. Schedule of Topics

N.B. Readings given under a particular week are the readings that apply to that week of classes. Students are expected to have completed the readings before the Monday class and to have viewed the films before the Friday class. Emphasis on this course will be placed on careful reading of the course material, and as such we may progress more slowly than this schedule of topics suggests. Please check MyCourses weekly on Fridays for changes to the assigned readings.

Week 1 (9/3 & 9/5): What is Art I?

- Catherine Elgin, "Art in the Advancement of Understanding"

Week 2 (9/9, 9/11, & 9/13): What is Art II?

- Nelson Goodman, “When is Art?”; Kendall Walton “Categories of Art”; Walter Benjamin, “Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”
- Screening: Werner Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams*

Week 3 (9/16, 9/18, & 9/20): What is Art III?

- Martin Heidegger, “On the Origin of the Work of Art” (selections); David Hume, “On the Standard of Taste”
- Screening: Malik Bendjelloul, *Searching for Sugar Man*

Week 4 (9/23, 9/25, & 9/27): Beauty and Taste I

- Elaine Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just*
- Screening: Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves*

Week 5 (9/30, 10/2, & 10/4): Beauty and Taste II

- Frank Sibley, “Aesthetic Concepts”; Peter Railton, “Aesthetic Value, Moral Value, and the Ambitions of Naturalism”
- Screening: Stanley Kubrick, *Paths of Glory*

Week 6 (10/7, 10/9, & 10/11): Beauty and Taste III

- Tom Wolfe, “The Painted Word”; *Dogma 95 Manifesto* and *Vow of Chastity*; David Davies, ‘Neo-Goodmanian’ Aesthetics and the Problem of ‘Fast Art’ (class visit from David Davies)
- Screening: Lars von Trier, *The Five Obstructions*

Week 7 (10/16 & 10/18): Fiction and Imagination I

- Kendall Walton, “Fearing Fictions”; Richard Moran, “The Expression of Feeling in Imagination”
- Screening: Terrence Malick, *The Thin Red Line*

Week 8 (10/21, 10/23, & 10/25): Fiction and Imagination II

- Tamar Szabó Gendler, “Imaginative Resistance”; Elisabeth Camp, “Perspective in Imaginative Engagement with Fiction”; Noël Carroll, “Movies, the Moral Emotions, and Sympathy”
- Screening: Andrei Tarkovsky, *Solaris*

Week 9 (10/28, 10/30, & 11/1): Depiction and Realism I

- Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (selections); Raymond Carver, “Will You Please be Quiet, Please?”; Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, chapter 1; John Kulvicki, *Images*, chapter 5
- Screening: Wim Wenders, *Paris, Texas*

Week 10 (11/4, 11/6, & 11/8): Depiction and Realism II

- Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, chapters 3, 4, and 6 (selections); John Kulvicki, *Images*, chapter 6
- Screening: Ridley Scott, *Blade Runner*

Week 11 (11/11, 11/13, & 11/15): Depiction and Realism III

- Dominic Lopes, “Pictorial Realism”; Catharine Abell, “Pictorial Realism”; John Kulvicki, “Realism as Verity”
- Screening: Mike Cahill, *Another Earth*

Week 12 (11/18, 11/20, & 11/22): The Value of Realism

- Susan Sontag, “In Plato’s Cave”; Andre Bazin, “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema”; Stanley Cavell, *The World Viewed* (selections)
- Screening: Duncan Jones, *Moon*

Week 13 (11/25, 11/27, & 11/29): Spillover Week

- Richard Wollheim “Criticism as Retrieval”
- Screening: Terrence Malik, *Tree of Life*