PHIL 475 – Topics in Contemporary European Philosophy  
Tues & Thurs 4:05-5:25  
LEA 109

Dr. Erica Harris (erica.harris@mail.mcgill.ca)  
Office hours: LEA 923, Thurs 3:00-4:00 p.m. (or by appointment)

Course topic and objectives

Topic Fall 2017: Merleau-Ponty and his critics

Merleau-Ponty is a household name amongst phenomenologists. He rose to popularity in post-war France alongside such thinkers as Jean-Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, and Jacques Lacan, but neither identified with existentialism nor structuralism. He devoted himself, instead, to the pursuit of pure phenomenology with his own unique focus: embodied subjectivity and perception. Although Merleau-Ponty’s life was short – he died of a heart attack while reading Descartes at the age of fifty-three – his work continues to be influential even beyond the limits of strict phenomenology. Today, he is studied in cognitive science, psychology, cultural studies, and the performing arts as well as philosophy departments. In this course, students who already have some familiarity with phenomenology will deepen their understanding of this influential thinker by considering his relationship with those who, in his lifetime or shortly after his death, reacted to and departed from his work.

Course readings and discussions will revolve around the theme of imagination and artwork – themes central to Merleau-Ponty throughout his career and especially at the end of his life. The big question we will consider in this course is: what is the relationship between imagination and perception? In different words: to what extent is perception interwoven with irreality and how much can we learn about perception by studying the products of imagination?

In the first half of the course, students will be introduced to Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of embodied perception in his most seminal work, *Phenomenology of Perception (PhP)*, and his radio lecture series, *The World of Perception*. *PhP* lays the groundwork for Merleau-Ponty’s life-long interrogation of painting and imagination, which he develops in his two best-known essays on art, “Cézanne’s Doubt” and *Eye and Mind*, both of which we will read together. In the second half of the semester, students will read the works of other phenomenologists who departed from Merleau-Ponty’s account of the imaginary: Sartre, Barthes, Deleuze, and Guattari. Written course work and class discussions will attempt to identify the key disagreements between these thinkers and propose ways to overcome them.

Pre-requisites

PHIL 375 or equivalent

Evaluation

Students in this course will be evaluated in terms of class participation, a small presentation, and two written assignments.

*Participation (15%)*
Students are expected to attend class regularly and to participate in discussion by asking questions and raising problems.

Discussion questions (15%)

Each student will be assigned the task of leading a 5-10 minute discussion session during the course of the semester. Their job will consist in preparing one short philosophical question based on the week’s assigned reading, presenting it in class, and leading a group discussion. Students will be graded on the quality of their question, the style of presentation, and the success of the group discussion.

There will be one mini-presentation per class starting on week 4 of term.

Students will sign up for their mini-presentation in the first two sessions of the term. Anyone who does not sign up will be assigned a presentation date by the instructor.

Guidelines for preparing a discussion question:

- Discussion questions should be related directly to the reading assigned for the day of the presentation. Questions ought to be philosophical and critical (i.e. they ought to be motivated by a philosophical problem rather than simply a desire for clarification). Questions should be approximately 150 words in length and should be uploaded via the assignment function to myCourses on the day of the mini presentation.

Written work

Midterm paper (30%): 5 pages, double-spaced, times new roman font (12 pt).
Due Date: Thurs. Oct 26 IN CLASS

In the midterm paper, students are expected to consider the question: according to Merleau-Ponty in “Cézanne’s Doubt” in what way does the painting resemble the world that we see with our eyes? The goal of this paper is, first and foremost, exegetical.

Final paper (40%): 10-12 pages, double spaced, times new roman font (12 pt).
Due date: December 5 IN CLASS

The final paper should be an argumentative paper that addresses the question that frames the course: what is the relationship between perception and imagination? In this assignment, students are asked to compare Merleau-Ponty’s view on the subject with that of one other thinker we discussed in class. What do you think is the heart of the disagreement between the philosophers you have chosen? Do you see any way for them to overcome their differences?

Students are encouraged to meet with the course instructor to discuss their thesis statements and the structures of their essays before they begin writing.

Late policy
Late papers will be penalized by a half-grade per day that the paper is late. In the event of an emergency, students may contact the instructor and obtain permission to submit their papers late as long as they can provide a doctor’s note or other official written excuse.

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 (for more information see: www.mcgill.ca/students/srr/honest/).

In accordance with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit all written work in English or in French.

The course instructor reserves the right to use Google or other web-based text-matching search engines to detect plagiarism in suspected cases.

**Required reading**

Required readings for this course will be available in a course pack. Students may purchase the course pack from the McGill bookstore at the beginning of term.

Course pack readings include selections from the following texts:


Students are welcome to buy full copies of texts and/or read texts in the original French. Students requiring a list of French titles should contact the instructor at the beginning of the semester. Any student who chooses to read a version of the text other than the one assigned must identify the excerpts that correspond to the required reading him/herself.

**N.B. Students are strongly discouraged from using the older English translation of the Phenomenology of Perception (Trans. Colin Smith).**

**Suggested reading**


Class/reading schedule

Week 1
Sept 5: Introduction
Sept 7: Introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology
Reading: The World of Perception 37-46

Week 2
Sept 12: Introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology
Reading: The World of Perception 47-56
Sept 14: Introduction to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology
Reading: The World of Perception 57-66

Week 3
Reading: Phenomenology of Perception 100-126 (French: 114-144)
Sept 19: The spatiality of the body (1)
Sept 21: The spatiality of the body (2)

Week 4
Reading: Phenomenology of Perception 126-155 (French: 145-172)
Sept 26: The spatiality of the body (3)
Sept 28: The spatiality of the body (4)
Week 5
Reading: “Cézanne’s Doubt” 59-75
Oct 3: Cézanne’s doubt (1)
Oct 5: Cézanne’s doubt (2)

Week 6
Reading: Husserl, Phantasy, Image-Consciousness, Memory 17-30
Oct 10: Perception, phantasy, image
Oct 12: Two apprehensions

Week 7
Reading: Sartre, The imaginary 3-24, 50-54
Oct 17: The intentional structure of the image
Oct 19: The image family

Week 8
Reading: Sartre, The imaginary 179-194
Oct 24: What is consciousness that imagines?
Oct 26: Imagination and the work of art

MIDTERM PAPER DUE OCT 26 AT 11:59 PM

Week 9
Reading: Eye and mind, 121-130
Oct 31: Eye and mind (1)
Nov 2: Eye and mind (2)

Week 10
Reading: Eye and mind, 130-139
Nov 7: Eye and mind (3)
Nov 9: Eye and mind (4)

Week 11
Reading: Barthes, Camera Lucida 3-23
Nov 14: Phenomenology of photography (1)
Nov 16: Phenomenology of photography (2)

Week 12
Reading: Barthes Camera Lucida 25-60
Nov 21: Studium and punctum (1)
Nov 23: Studium and punctum (2)

Week 13
Reading: Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, affect, and concept” 163-189
Nov 28: Percept, affect
Nov 30: Critique of MP (Flesh)

Week 14
Reading: Deleuze and Guattari, “Percept, affect, and concept” 189-199

Dec 5: Music and thought

Final paper due Dec. 5 at 11:59 p.m.