Aesthetics
Philosophy 452/652
Fall 20xx (MW 2:30-3:45; EJCH 108H) ctw@unr.edu

Required texts  [available at Nevada Wolf Shop, and elsewhere]

Frank Sibley, *Approach to Aesthetics* (Oxford) [AA]
Noël Carroll, *On Criticism* (Routledge) [OC]
Arthur Danto, *The Abuse of Beauty* (Open Court) [AB]

In addition, some required readings will be either available online or on electronic reserve at the library. I may also have you look at a movie. (There will also be optional readings, some of which may be drawn, like some of the required readings, from the next group, the reserve books.)

Books on reserve  [among others, possibly]

José Luis Bermúdez and Sebastian Gardner (eds), *Art and Morality*
Malcolm Budd, *Aesthetic Appreciation of Nature*
Allen Carlson and Arnold Berleant (eds.), *Aesthetics of Natural Environments*
Ted Cohen, *Jokes*
Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*
Berys Gaut and Dominic McIver Lopes (eds.), *Routledge Companion to Aesthetics*
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, trans. Meredith
Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Aesthetics and Ethics: Essays at the Intersection*
Jerrold Levinson (ed.), *Oxford Companion to Aesthetics*
Mary Mothersill, *Beauty Restored*

Course objectives

This class will aim at a better understanding of the boundaries of the aesthetic, and we shall concentrate on five (partly interconnected) themes:

(i) The very idea of “aesthetic” concepts. Some writers think that there are aesthetic concepts, and have associated them with exercises of taste. Others have disputed that there are such concepts, or else have downplayed their importance in an area where we might have expected them to have the greatest importance—our experience of art. A notable general aesthetic concept is *beauty*; but there are more specific concepts too (e.g., elegance, flamboyance, garishness). If there are distinct aesthetic values, there are questions about how important these values are (and such questions invite broadly ethical reflection about their place in human life).

(ii) The distinctive character of criticism in the arts. There do not seem to be general principles that we appeal to when we make aesthetic judgments. What bearing does this apparent fact on the objectivity of these judgments? How do critics defend their verdicts?

(iii) Relationships between the concept of art and aesthetic concepts (and whether art is
conceptually prior to the aesthetic). Sometimes people will define an aesthetic judgment as the type of judgment we make about works of art, or about things that are treated as if they were works of art. But it is possible that we can make sense of aesthetic properties without already having the art concept. Which comes first—art or the aesthetic?

(iv) Relationships between aesthetic and moral evaluation There are two types of question I want us consider here. (a) How do moral and aesthetic evaluation differ (or not)? (b) How (if at all) do our moral evaluations affect our aesthetic ones? Is it possible, for instance, to find a movie aesthetically satisfying and yet take exception to it on moral grounds? Or can a moral objection also be an aesthetic one? (A cinematic example much considered by aestheticians is Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*, a pioneering documentary that glorifies the Nazis.) Similar questions arise concerning jokes and humor: can a morally offensive joke be excellent *as a joke*?

(v) The aesthetic appreciation of nature. Aestheticians in the twentieth century often had little to say about natural phenomena, but recently nature has been getting more attention. Do we appreciate a natural scene as if it were an artifact? If not, what does its appreciation consist in? Is appreciation of nature “merely aesthetic,” and is the aesthetic value of natural environments inferior to ethically motivated concerns about preservation of ecosystems? Does the proper appreciation of nature perhaps require a scientifically accurate understanding of nature?

Prerequisites

Two philosophy courses. No particular prerequisites, but this is an upper-division class. (An avocational interest in one of the arts is also strongly recommended.)

Silver Core Curriculum

This course satisfies Core Objective 12 [CO12] (“Ethics”).

Brief description of CO12: Students will demonstrate understanding of ethical principles in general or in application of specialized knowledge, results of research, creative expression, or design processes. Students will demonstrate an ability to recognize, articulate, and apply ethical principles in various academic, professional, social, or personal contexts.

Student learning outcomes

As a result of taking this course, students will be able to:

1. State a thesis about a problem in philosophical aesthetics, and provide evidence and philosophical argument (including replies to counter-arguments) in its defense.

2. Explain and interpret the ideas associated with aesthetic theories in contemporary philosophical literature.
3. Distinguish better and worse reasoning, and recognize relevant logical relationships and patterns of inference (in contemporary aesthetic theories).

4. Explain the concept of aesthetic value, and offer a reasoned account of how art (or other objects of aesthetic appreciation) may—or may not—have ethical value.

5. Show what is at stake in abstract debates in philosophical aesthetics, and indicate how positions in these debates has implications for the practice of moral agents and, where relevant, other areas of philosophical inquiry.

**Class format and WebCampus**

This class combines lecture and discussion. We shall also be using WebCampus. Extra textual material, and links, will be found on our WebCampus page, and your papers will be submitted here (as well as in hard-copy form in class). Paper assignments and other handouts will be posted here. If the syllabus is revised during the semester, our WebCampus page will have the most current version.

**Readings**

The following is an approximate guide to the weekly reading. Changes in the schedule are possible; and some additions are likely.

Due dates are in *bold italics*.

Week 1 (8/24, 8/26)
   Introductory remarks

Week 2 (8/31, 9/2)
   *VSA 1–9/2*

Week 3 (9/9)
   Sibley, “Some Notes on Ugliness” [AA, chapter 14].
   *Paper 1–9/9*

Week 4 (9/14, 9/16)
   Sibley, “Tastes, Smells, and Aesthetics” [AA, chapter 15]
   *VSA 2–9/16*

Week 5 (9/21, 9/23)
Arnold Isenberg, “Critical Communication” (*Philosophical Review*, 1949) [online]
Kendall Walton, “Categories of Art” (*Philosophical Review*, 1970) [online]

**VSA 3–9/23**

Week 6 (9/28, 9/30)
Mary Mothersill, “Judgments, Principles, Laws: Some Definitions” (*Beauty Restored* [BR], chapter 3); “The First Thesis” (BR, chapter 4) [reserve]

**VSA 4–9/30**

Week 7 (10/5, 10/7)
“Genuine Judgments: The Second Thesis” (BR, chapter 6) [reserve]

**Paper 2–10/7**

Week 8 (10/12, 10/14)
Mothersill, “The Concept of Beauty” (BR, chapter 9) [reserve]

**VSA 5–10/14**

Week 9 (10/19, 10/21)
Review

**Exam 1–10/21**

Week 10 (10/26, 10/28)
Noël Carroll, “Criticism as Evaluation” [OC chapter 1]; “The Object of Criticism” [OC, chapter 2]

**VSA 6–10/28**

Week 11 (11/2, 11/4)

**VSA 7–11/4**

Week 12 (11/9)
Michael Tanner, “Ethics and Aesthetics are—?” [reserve]
Mary Deveraux, “Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*” [reserve]

**Paper 3–11/9**

Week 13 (11/16, 11/18)
Kendall Walton, “Fictional Morality and Morals in Fiction I” [reserve]
Berys Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art” and “Art and Ethics” [reserve]

**VSA 8–11/18**

Week 14 (11/23, 11/25)
Ronald Hepburn, “Contemporary Aesthetics and the Neglect of Natural Beauty”
Summary of course requirements

452: Three papers (1500-2000 words)—the first two, 15% each; the third, 20% [= 50% total]
Final exam—20%
In-class midterm exam—10%
Short writing assignments—10%
Presentation—5%
Class participation—5%

652: Three papers (1500-2000 words)—the first two, 10% each; the third, 15% [= 35% total]
Final exam—20%
In-class midterm exam—10%
One longer paper (3000 words)—20%
Presentation—5%
Class participation—10%

Explanation of the requirements

1. The papers will be on topics that I’ll assign approximately 7-10 days in advance. The due dates are indicated under Readings.

2. The longer paper for 652 will be on a topic that you and I will choose, and you must consult with me about the topic no later than two weeks before the due date (5 December).

3. The exams will consist of short answers and essays. The final exam is scheduled for 14 December (2:15-4:15). Although the final exam will be weighted toward the material in the second half of the semester, it will have a comprehensive component. Each exam may include extra-credit questions.
4. The short pieces of written work (marked ‘VSA’, above, for ‘very short assignment’) will involve a response to a reading we are doing that week. Expect to write half a page for each one. These will be due on Wednesday, and generally will be assigned on the immediately preceding Monday. There will be ten of these that you need to do, and each one is worth 1% of the grade (or 10% overall). They will have one of these numbers for a grade: 1, .75, or .50. In instances where a VSA is truly superior, a ‘1+’ will be recorded.

5. All students will give a brief presentation (15 minutes) to the class. You will select a problem or issue that is connected to one of our recent readings (from, say, the preceding two weeks), explain why you think the problem or issue is important, and then offer a suggestion regarding what you think should be said about it. Afterwards the class will discuss your claims.

6. I encourage class participation. Part of your grade—either 5% or 10%—depends on it, but those who participate actively and well can receive further credit (though any further credit is a purely discretionary element in the calculation of the final grade, and cannot be formalized). Please note that, because of the required participation component, it is mathematically possible for you to receive a final grade that is slightly lower than the average of the grades you receive on the individual written assignments.

7. The work of students in 652 will be held to a higher intellectual standard than that of students in 452. The same work done by an undergraduate student and a graduate student may justifiably receive different grades.

8. All pieces of written work (except exams) are to be typed, double-spaced, and in grammatical English. If spelling and grammar are very weak indeed, your grade on a paper may be lower than it would otherwise be (though I will take into account the challenges of non-native English speakers). All papers must develop and defend a clearly identifiable thesis.

9. Exams will be scored on a 100-point scale. Letter grades on papers will correspond to numbers, and all grade categories are by decile: ‘A’s are grades whose point percentages are in the 90s; ‘B’s, in the 80s; ‘C’s, in the 70s; ‘D’s, in the 60s; ‘F’, anything 59 or lower.

10. We will have plus (+) and minus (-) grades in this course, and they will be used for the upper and lower 2.5% in a grade category. For example, 80.0 to 82.4 is B-; 87.5 to 89.9, B+. Note that no A+ exists for final grades at UNR, and a failing grade has no plus or minus option.

**Contact information**

My office phone number and e-mail address are on p. 1, top right-hand corner. I have voice mail in my office, and I check e-mail regularly during the day on MWF, but only irregularly at night and over the weekend. My office is in Cain Hall, in the Philosophy Department, where I also have a mailbox (108A).
E-mail is not necessarily a congenial medium for extended philosophical discussion. If you are responding to course material, I will try to give you a brief response in turn. But if your queries are best treated in person, I will suggest that we talk about them in class, or outside class.

My office hours will be MWF 12-1, and by appointment.

Policy on attendance

If you are registered for credit, class attendance is required. You are allowed to miss up to two class meetings without penalty. If you miss three classes, your final grade will be lowered by 3%; for each additional missed class your final grade will be lowered by 1.5%. The only exceptions to this policy are the same as those that govern the rescheduling of exams. If you miss more than five minutes of a class meeting, you may be counted as absent for that day (and please be sure to see me after class if you miss the taking of the attendance).

Informal auditors are welcome, provided that they are diligent about doing the reading. If you are registered for the class, you should be registered for credit.

Please note that, because of the attendance policy, it is mathematically possible for a person to receive a final grade that is lower than any grade the person has received on the assignments.

Policy on late and rescheduled work

1. Papers: These will be penalized at the rate of one fractional grade for every 3 days (or portion thereof) that they are late. Papers will be collected at the beginning of class, and papers that are turned in on the due date but after the collection time may be treated as if they had been turned in the following business day (i.e., with a penalty of one fractional grade). Weekends and university holidays will not be counted in the calculation of penalties. (For possible exemptions from late penalties, see #2 next.)

2. Exams. These can be rescheduled only at my discretion, and any rescheduled work needs to be completed in a timely manner. If I agree to a rescheduling, there may or may not be a penalty, depending on whether you have an appropriate excuse. Only two sorts of excuse automatically count as appropriate: (i) a medical emergency, and (ii) the death of a near relative. Both sorts of excuse require written documentation, and I need to be notified as soon as possible about the problem. (Please do not wait until the next class meeting.) Other extenuating circumstances may conceivably arise (e.g., certain University-related activities), but these have to be evaluated on a case-by-case basis. I need to know about other potentially extenuating circumstances as far in advance as possible, and they too require written documentation.

If I agree to a rescheduling with a penalty, the exam will carry a penalty of 20% (i.e., the equivalent of two letter grades), and you will moreover not be eligible for any extra credit points that may be connected to it. The content and structure of any rescheduled exam, whether or not
the exam carries a penalty, may differ from those of the original.

There will be no early scheduling of exams (including the final exam).

3. Very short assignments. A one-time penalty of 50% if turned in after the due date.

4. Presentations. No make-ups for unexcused absences if you miss on your presentation day. (It is your responsibility to remember, and to make plans for, your presentation day.)

If you do not have an appropriate excuse, a rescheduled exam will carry a penalty of 20% (i.e., the equivalent of two letter grades), and you will moreover not be eligible for any extra credit points that may be connected to the exercise. Whether excused or not, the content and structure of a rescheduled exam may differ from those of the original. There will be no early scheduling of the final exam for any reason.

**Statement on cheating and plagiarism**

Cheating, plagiarism or otherwise obtaining grades under false pretenses constitute academic dishonesty according to the code of this university. Academic dishonesty will not be tolerated and penalties can include canceling a student's enrollment without a grade, giving an F for the course or for the assignment. For more details, see the UNR General Catalog.

*Plagiarism* is a serious academic offense. It consists in the presentation of another person’s ideas or work as if they were your own, or in allowing your own ideas or work to be so used by someone else. Whenever you make use of another’s person’s ideas in your writing you need to cite the source, either in the body of the text or in a footnote. If you are in doubt, it is always best to cite. Cutting and pasting from Internet sources (whether professional articles or posted student papers) when you are writing a paper is most definitely plagiarism. Do not write a paper for another person, and do not allow another person to write a paper for you.

**Statement on disability services**

Any student with a disability needing academic adjustments or accommodations is requested to speak with the Disability Resource Center (Thompson Building, Suite 101) as soon as possible to arrange for appropriate accommodations.

**Statement on audio and video recording**

Surreptitious or covert video-taping of class or unauthorized audio recording of class is prohibited by law and by Board of Regents policy. This class may be videotaped or audio recorded only with the written permission of the instructor. In order to accommodate students with disabilities, some students may be given permission to record class lectures and discussions. Therefore, students should understand that their comments during class may be recorded.