Required texts


Course objectives

We shall examine some conceptual perplexities that arise in reflection on our experience of the arts—issues in philosophical aesthetics. Since the issues we will be dealing with can seem exceptionally abstract when they are considered in isolation from that experience, this course will also have as one of its foci the history of avant-garde visual art from the late nineteenth century to about 1970 (so-called “Modern Art”). In the readings that appear below I have paired chapters of Hughes’ book, which is a very readable account (by an art critic) of some of the leading themes of Modern Art, with selections that are either written by philosophers or by writers who are of interest to philosophers. For the most part, we will first look at what Hughes says about a particular set of developments in Modern Art, in order to get clearer about what the developments were (including what the protagonists in the story—the artists—thought they were), and then we will take up philosophical issues that tend to become more pressing or noticeable in the light of these artistic achievements. Although Hughes’ book is about visual art and it will naturally supply us with many examples to think about, this course is meant to be an introduction to the philosophy of the arts. We want to have an understanding of the various art forms and how they are interrelated, and modernism in the visual arts can help us acquire that understanding.

Examples of the types of questions to be considered this semester: Does the artist have knowledge of a subject matter? Is art (ever) morally dangerous? What is “taste,” and is it merely a matter of personal liking? Is there an aesthetic emotion, and what does a person need to do in order to appreciate a work of art? How does the concept of art apply to (e.g.) artifacts of non-European cultures or to items made without an explicit art-making intention? Do photographic pictures change our understanding of painted pictures (or other art objects that are made “by hand”)? What is the test of time, and why is it important? Can art be political and remain aesthetically satisfying? To what extent must an artist be a practitioner of a craft? (And, for that matter, what exactly is “craft”?) What is meant when we call an object beautiful? Is psychological distance needed for aesthetic appreciation? Does art have an irrational origin? What are some of the relations between art and religion (or magic), or between art and amusement? What is expression, and do artworks express anything? Is sincerity or personality expressively important? How is it possible for something to be an artwork when something that looks exactly like it is not?

By the end of the course you can expect to have some answers to these questions, not final or complete answers, but ones that you can thoughtfully hold. In other words, you will have an elementary grasp of aesthetic theory. And you should also have some grasp of important developments in twentieth-century art. Yet there is one thing this course will not do for you. Aesthetic theory will not enable you to pass judgment on the significance of individual paintings (films, musical compositions, etc.). Theory can never take the place of criticism, and when you judge a work, you are a critic, whether or not you accept the label. However, since we will be looking at numerous works this semester (albeit in reproduction typically), it is reasonable to expect that you shall concurrently grow as a critic.
Prerequisites

None. This is an introductory philosophy class. But a substantial amount of reading (and thinking) is involved, and students should be prepared to make a real commitment.

Silver Core Curriculum

This course satisfies Core Objective 7 [CO7] in the Silver Core (“Artistic Composition, Interpretation, & Expression”). A brief description of the learning objective associated with CO7 is this: “Students will apply techniques of critical analysis to study and interpret works of art, dance, music, and theater in the context of culture, society, and individual identity.”

Student learning outcomes

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

1. Show their familiarity with art-historical developments in the 20th century, primarily in the visual arts.
2. Analyze some fundamental issues and problems in philosophical aesthetics at a basic level.
3. Distinguish better and worse reasons and arguments (in texts concerned with topics in aesthetics).
4. Show how philosophical concerns are relevant to an understanding of the arts.

Class format and WebCampus

The class will have a large-lecture format. Additionally, we shall be using WebCampus. Extra material, and links, will be found on our WebCampus page, and papers will be submitted here (as well as in hard-copy form in class). The syllabus may be revised during the semester; our WebCampus page will have the most current version.

Schedule

The schedule is a reasonably precise guide to action, but it is still only an approximate guide. I may begin a segment a day early or end a day later, for example. Consequently, it is important that you read the material for a given day at least one class-meeting day prior to the day indicated, and I strongly recommend that you read the philosophical material at least twice, once before and once after the relevant lecture. There may be additions or deletions to the readings (or other adjustments to them). Regular class attendance is important for more than one reason, but one reason is that announcements regarding the schedule will be made in class. Please note that our attention to many of the readings will be fairly selective. Consequently, another reason your attendance is important is that you will not be in a good position to know which bits of the reading we shall emphasize unless you are in class.

A few days are marked as “[extra time].” These are days I have inserted to allow us to catch up, if we are behind, or for anything we need to do, or cover. We shall meet on these days.
8/25: Introductory remarks
8/27: Plato: From Republic (NR 466-487)
8/29: Plato (cont’d)

9/1: No class
9/3: Plato (cont’d)
9/5: David Hume: “Of the Standard of Taste” (NR 254-269)

9/8: Hume (cont’d)
Paper 1

9/10: Hughes, chap 1: “The Mechanical Paradise”
9/12: H, chap 1 (cont’d)

9/15: H, chap 1 (cont’d)
9/17: Clive Bell: “The Aesthetic Hypothesis” (NR 98-110)
9/19: Bell (cont’d)

9/22: André Bazin: “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” [on reserve]
9/24: Hughes, chap 2: “The Faces of Power”
9/26: H, chap 2 (cont’d)

9/29: Hughes, chap 2 (cont’d)
10/1: [extra time]
10/3: Exam 1

10/6: R. G. Collingwood: From The Principles of Art (NR 119-134; 143-153)
10/8: Collingwood (cont’d)
10/10: Hughes, chap 3: “The Landscape of Pleasure”

10/13: H, chap 3 (cont’d)
10/15: H, chap 3 (cont’d)
10/17: Immanuel Kant: From “The Analytic of the Beautiful” (NR 269-276; 280-287)
Paper 2

10/20: Edward Bullough: “Psychical Distance” (NR 297-311)
10/22: Hughes, chap 5: “The Threshold of Liberty”
10/24: H, chap 5 (cont’d)

10/27: H, chap 5 (cont’d)
10/29: Plato: Ion (NR 7-17)
10/31: No class

11/3: Sigmund Freud: “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming” [NR 46-53]
11/5: [extra time]
11/7 Exam 2

Summary of course requirements

1. Three graded papers (3-5 pp.)
   #1: Due 8 Sept. Weight: 10%
   #2: Due 17 Oct. Weight: 10%
   #3: Due 3 Dec. Weight: 20%


3. A final exam. Part of this exam will deal with the material we cover in class after Exam 2, and will be analogous to the Exam 1 & Exam 2 in structure. But this exam will also have a comprehensive component. Date: 12 December (12:30-2:30pm). Weight: 30%.

Comments on the course requirements:

(i) The papers will be on topics that I'll assign approximately 7-10 days in advance. Because none of these papers is very long, you will have ample time in which to do them, if you plan your studies wisely. Please do not ask for paper assignments in advance. Also, be sure that you have copies, or are able to provide them, of any work you submit.

(ii) The exams have a mixed format. There will be multiple-choice questions, picture identifications (from Hughes), short answers, and essays. Because I re-use multiple-choice questions from year to year, I regret to announce that copies of the exams themselves will not be available for you to keep.

(iii) All pieces of written work (except exams) are to be typed, double-spaced, paginated, and in grammatical English (if spelling and grammar are very weak indeed, your grade on a paper will be lower
than it would otherwise be). You should keep a copy of each piece on hand throughout the semester. I recommend that you save your papers for this class electronically. Please do not send any written work as e-mail attachments: please deliver a hard copy of the text by the due date in order not to incur late penalties.

(iv) Your contributions to the class are strongly encouraged. I heartily welcome your participation in class discussions, and students who participate actively and well will be eligible for bonus points when final grades are calculated [see (ix)]. I realize that in a class of our size it may not be possible for everyone to participate, or for me to respond to (or even notice) every hand that is raised. But there are other ways to contribute. For example, you can submit responses to the readings or lectures via e-mail, and if they justify the attention of the class I will mention them at the next class meeting.

(v) There may be extra credit questions on any or all exams. These are meant to give a few additional points to students who have adequately satisfied the basic course requirements, and are not substitutes for any portion of those requirements. Typically they will concern material that was only available in class. Please do not propose any extra-credit projects yourself.

(vi) Grade categories are by decile: A (all kinds) = 90+, B = 80-89, etc.

(vii) We will have plus (+) and minus (-) final 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+

(viii) Bonus points may be added to students who participate actively and well. This is a purely discretionary element in the calculation of the final grade, and cannot be formalized.

Grading assistants

Ms. Denise Lackamp and Mr. Christopher Kloth will be assisting me this semester. They will grade your work; I shall be in regular consultation with them throughout the semester.

Supplemental Instruction

Supplemental Instruction (SI) is a free peer-led academic study session. SI has been successful in helping students to earn better grades, to develop a deeper understanding of course content, and to learn more effective ways of studying. More information about schedules for sessions will be given after the first class session. Our SI tutor this semester is Ms. Holly Scala, whose e-mail address is hscala5190@yahoo.com.

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. I check my e-mail regularly in the day during the week; please do not expect a response in the evening or on weekends. My office is in Cain Hall, in the Department of Philosophy, where I also have a mailbox (108). Ms. Lackamp can be reached via e-mail at dlackamp@unr.edu, and Mr. Kloth at
You can also arrange to meet with them outside class, at a mutually convenient time. Please see us immediately after class if you have questions, or need assistance.

E-mail is not necessarily the most congenial medium for extended philosophical discussion. If you are responding to the course material, I will of course note that you do so, and try to give you a brief response in turn. But if you have queries that are best treated in person, I will suggest that we talk about them in class, after class, or in my office.

My office hours will be Mondays and Wednesdays, 9–10am, and by appointment. For all queries about grades, you should approach Ms. Lackamp or Mr. Kloth first, since they will always be in a better position than I am to comment on your work and the way in which a grade was determined.

**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. (Weekends and University holidays are excluded from calculations.)

2. Exams. These can be rescheduled only at my discretion. 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).

**Class attendance requirement**

If you are registered for credit, class attendance is **required**. You are allowed to miss up to three class meetings without penalty. If you miss four 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 will be counted as absent for that day.

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.
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.

Regular class attendance is expected. If you are unable to attend the class reliably, you should not be registered for this class; and except in extraordinary circumstances, you should plan to attend for the entire class meeting. If attendance for the class as a whole is spotty, the likelihood of extra-credit questions on the exam will diminish. Students whose attendance is poor should not expect or request special consideration on grades for any reason.

Classroom behavior

The classroom must be quiet. Impolite chattering is highly inappropriate. A student who is cited for talking in class may be ineligible for any extra credit, including extra credit earned prior to the episode. A student who is cited a second time will be eligible for point deductions on his or her final grade.

Also, there should be no texting or computer activity (except for note-taking) while you are in class.

Statement on academic dishonesty

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 University of Nevada, Reno 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.