

Syllabus: PHIL 271 (01) – Aesthetics

Time / Location: MWF 2:30 – 3:20 ?? / PHYSIC 127

Instructor: William Buschert <will.buschert@usask.ca>

Office / Phone: ARTS 623 / 966-6955

Office Hours: T 1:00 – 2:00 or by appointment

Course Web Site: <http://homepage.usask.ca/~wjb289/PHIL271/>

Texts: Eric Dayton, ed., *Art and Interpretation: An Anthology of Readings in Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art* (Broadview Press, 1998)

Cynthia Freeland, *But is it art?* (Oxford University Press, 2001)

Additional readings and some materials used in class (e.g., slides and PowerPoint presentations) will be made available on the course web site.

Course Description

Everyone (or, surely, very nearly everyone) has certain experiences—listening to music, reading poetry, looking at pictures, hiking along the prairie—that have (or seem to have) a distinctive, valuable character. Such experiences can involve immediate, powerful emotions and sometimes also have (or seem to have) a commanding cognitive or contemplative aspect. When people talk about these experiences they may use a special vocabulary to describe them, using words like “beautiful,” “moving,” “awesome” and the like. For many of us, such experiences are among the most important components of our well-being. For us, a world without such experiences would be almost unimaginably poorer and possibly uninhabitable. Some have gone so far as to say that a person who lacks a capacity for such experiences cannot be a fully developed human being.

When Baumgarten first (re-)introduced the word “aesthetics” into the philosophical lexicon in the 18th century, he hoped to inaugurate a new general science of sensory experience. Although things did not develop quite as Baumgarten had hoped, the ‘reception’ side of aesthetics—that is, questions about sensation, perception, and emotional response—are still among the main concerns of aestheticians. (By which I mean philosophers who study aesthetics, as opposed to the aestheticians who do manicures, makeup or haircuts.) In this course we will pay a good bit of attention, with Hume, Kant, and Dewey especially, to the idea of ‘aesthetic experience’.

Our other main focus, however, will be on the ‘production’ side of aesthetics, that is, the (normative) philosophy of art. These days aesthetics is often understood to be the poor cousin of the philosophical family—most departments offer only one or two courses in the area, some none at all; comparatively few academic philosophers specialize in the area full-time. Yet philosophers have offered important and often highly influential views about what art is and how it ought to be made from Plato’s day down to the present. In fact, philosophers have said and written so much about art that it is difficult to choose what to include in an overview course such as this one.

Accordingly, in this course we will investigate a relatively small but fairly representative set of views in aesthetic theory and the philosophy of art. These views, I think, can be circumscribed by one overall question that will be our main point of reference: How does art *work*? Answering this

question will involve looking into other questions, such as: What makes an object qualify as a work of art? What is (or ought to be) the relation between form and content in a successful work of art? What is (or ought to be) the relation between a work of art and the culture and society in which it arises? Do the artist's intentions matter in understanding or evaluating a work of art, or are they fundamentally irrelevant? Why, after all do we *value* art? What do artworks *do* for us?

We will fairly frequently make reference to specific artworks in class and I hope to draw on students' knowledge and experience in discussing artworks that exemplify (or fail to exemplify) philosophers' theories. That said, this is not a course in art history or literary criticism. If you encounter in the texts or the lectures an artwork that you are not familiar with, I encourage you to look it up (online, say, or in an appropriate encyclopaedia). No specific knowledge of art, music or literature is assumed, however. Though (if only for the reasons outlined above) some enthusiasm for art, music or literature really couldn't hurt.

Assignments and Evaluation

Your grade in the course will be based on three pieces of work:

1) *Assignment #1*

A relatively short (5-7 pages) essay assignment, in the nature of a take-home exam, dealing with topics connected with the historical aesthetic theories presented in the first four weeks of class. Students will be given a choice of several assigned topics, handed out in advance. Some of these topics will be more or less expository and others more interpretive in nature.

Date: Wednesday, October 5, 2011
Weight: 30%

2) *Assignment #2*

A somewhat longer (10-12 pages) essay assignment, more in the nature of a term paper, in which students will be asked to address one or more general issues raised in the course.

Due Date: Wednesday, November 23, 2011
Weight: 40%

Both assignments are to be in the form of argumentative essays. By which I mean that a thesis—one or more specific claims supported with reasons—should be advanced and defended in your paper. Properly referenced secondary sources (i.e., readings outside of the assigned texts) are permissible and, depending on your choice of topic, possibly advisable, but are not required. Standard scholarly apparatus (explanatory footnotes, references, etc.) should be included as necessary, however.

Further information on the assignments will be made available in class. Due dates for the assignments may be amended as the term progresses.

3) *Final Exam*

A three-hour exam, covering the entire course.

Date: TBA
Weight: 30%

Obviously, these three grades add up to 100%. You should not conclude from this, however, that other things, such as attendance and participation in class, do not matter. Some material discussed in class will supply details not covered in the readings and class notes, details that you may find helpful when writing the exam and/or the essay assignments. Moreover, active participation in class can't help but improve your understanding of the material and my impression of you as a student.

Policy on Late Assignments

Assignments are to be handed in in class on the day that they are due. If, for whatever reason, you cannot hand in your assignment at that time, an assignment found in my mailbox in the Philosophy Department office (ARTS 619) by 3:00 PM the next day will be deemed to have arrived on time. Thereafter it will be deemed late. Late assignments will not be accepted and will be assigned a grade of 0. Exceptions to these rules will be considered only in cases of serious personal distress (e.g., illness) that are supported with appropriate documentation (e.g., a doctor's note).

Writing Assistance

In philosophy it is important to say what you mean clearly and, above all, *precisely*. For help in doing this, I encourage you to make use of the University Learning Centre located in the Murray Library. The center provides one-on-one writing assistance, as well as offering occasional writing workshops.

<http://www.usask.ca/ulc/>

Within the Help Centre, the Department of Philosophy offers an essay tutoring service specifically for students in philosophy courses:

<http://www.usask.ca/philosophy/helpcentre/>

As well, a modest collection of advice about academic writing can be found on the course web site.

Academic Honesty and Plagiarism

Academic dishonesty includes cheating or any form of deceptive conduct by which an individual or group of individuals uses unauthorized aids or assistance or methods in the completion of academic work. Plagiarism is a specific form of academic misconduct which includes any occasion on which you present someone else's thinking, writing or data as your own. Whether or not it is done intentionally, such conduct is a form of dishonesty in so far as it ends up either deceiving me and/or conferring an unfair advantage over other students. So don't do it.

If that's not enough to dissuade you, be advised also that I do indeed follow up on cases of suspected dishonesty and/or plagiarism. All such cases will be referred to the Dean of Arts and Science and may subsequently be investigated by the Student Academic Affairs Committee.

The U of S University Council has adopted a comprehensive policy on academic dishonesty:

http://www.usask.ca/university_secretary/honesty/academic_misconduct.php

I suggest that you read this, paying special attention to the list of available penalties.

Students with Disabilities

If you require any special accommodations due to a disability, please let me know as early as possible in the term so that we can make appropriate arrangements.