

Aesthetics and Phenomenology (Spring 2024)

FILMEDIA/ARTHIST 253/453, MTL 334B: Aesthetics and Phenomenology

Seminar:

Tues 1:30-4:20pm

Room: McMurtry 370

Prof. Shane Denson

Office: McMurtry 318

Office Hours: TBD

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Course Description:

This course explores central topics in aesthetics—where “aesthetics” is understood both in the narrow sense of the philosophy of art and aesthetic judgment, and in a broader sense as it relates to questions of perception, sensation, and various modes of embodied experience. We will engage with both classical and contemporary works in aesthetic theory, and special emphasis will be placed on phenomenological approaches to art and aesthetic experience across a range of media and/or mediums (including painting, sculpture, film, and digital media).

The course seeks to illuminate (theories of) the aesthetic forms and phenomena that are central to our experience of the world. We will engage with these topics through an intensive reading program; each class session will be devoted to the close reading and discussion of a canonical or contemporary work or selection of works.

Students will be responsible for presenting the readings in connection with outside materials of their own choosing (pairing the texts with artifacts, images, interfaces, artworks, etc.) that help to illuminate theoretical insights and enrich our discussion.

Please make sure you are registered for the class on Canvas. Handouts and additional course material will be posted there.

Required Textbooks:

Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology*. Second Edition. Albany: SUNY Press, 2012.

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*. Trans. James Creed Meredith. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007.

Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney, eds. *The Phenomenology Reader*. New York: Routledge, 2002.

Other texts will be made available.

Course Requirements:

1. Regular attendance and preparation for class. Irregular attendance will negatively affect your final grade. Active participation will help improve your final grade. Readings are to be completed by the date listed on the syllabus.
2. Presentation (20-30 minutes) of readings and relevant materials, followed by moderation of discussion. Your presentation should summarize readings, highlight particularly interesting or controversial aspects, and connect them to other relevant materials (texts, films, videos, artworks, etc.) and contexts, as well as formulating questions that will help focus class discussion. Your task is essentially to frame and guide our discussion of a text, and to insert that text into our larger ongoing discussion.
3. Final written project (details below).

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Grading:

Your final grade for the course will be calculated as follows:

25% Class participation and preparation

35% Presentation and Discussion of Readings

40% Final Paper

Final Assignment:

Term papers (5000 words) are to be submitted by **Saturday, June 8, 2024 (no later than 6:30pm)**. As a prerequisite for the final paper, a 1-2 page proposal will be due in class in week 6 (**May 7, 2024**); an updated proposal and outline of the project will be due in week 9 (**May 28, 2024**). In your proposal, you should outline the focus or object of your analysis, explain the specific method(s) of analysis, state your reasons for choosing this approach to the topic, and formulate a tentative thesis statement. The final paper should be written in a scholarly format, with a complete bibliography, and should consist of the following:

1. A brief introduction outlining your topic and stating – as clearly and precisely as possible – the thesis of your paper. This section should usually be no more than one paragraph long.
2. A short description of the theoretical positions to be controverted and/or artworks, films, media, and other object(s) of your analysis. Here you should provide any essential background that might be needed for the reader to understand your analysis. You should assume an educated reader, who is familiar with art history/film and media studies but perhaps has not read the books or seen the films (or other media) being discussed in your paper. If it is not relevant to your argument, do not engage in lengthy plot summaries. On the other hand, make sure that the reader has enough context (narrative or otherwise) to understand the more detailed analysis and argumentation that follows. Overall, in this section you must find the right balance, which you can do by considering whether each detail is truly relevant and informative with respect to your argument. Anthropologist and cybernetician Gregory Bateson defined information as “a difference which makes a difference,” and you can use this formula as a test for determining which details truly belong in this section. If, for example, providing a plot summary or details about production costs and box-office revenues will make a difference with respect to your thesis (i.e. if a reader needs to know these things in order to process your argument), then this is clearly relevant and belongs in this section; on the other hand, if it doesn’t make a difference to your argument, then it probably doesn’t belong here. This section should usually be no more than 2-3 paragraphs long.
3. An in-depth engagement with the texts, artworks, and media objects under consideration. Your analysis should be interpretive and argumentative in nature. For example, in analyzing a film it is not enough simply to describe what you see on screen; you need also to persuade the reader that this is important, and that it has certain implications that may not be obvious at first glance. (If something is overly obvious, then it’s probably not very informative and certainly not worth arguing.) You are not just describing things but providing a “reading” of them. Keep in mind that the analysis you provide in this section constitutes the main support for your thesis statement. Your analysis is the argumentation that you offer to back up your thesis, while the thesis statement should be seen as the logical conclusion of your argument/analysis. In other words, while you have already told the reader what your thesis statement is (in the introduction), it is through your analysis that you must now prove that your thesis is correct or plausible. Ideally, after reading the analysis in this section, the reader should see your thesis statement as the logical outcome. Keeping this in mind as the test of success, you again need to ensure that your analysis is relevant and informative with respect to your thesis statement (if it doesn’t make a difference with regard to your thesis, then it can hardly prove it). In addition, you need to make sure that your analysis/argument proves your thesis

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sufficiently. This is a question of the scope of your thesis, and of your ability to prove it through your interpretive analysis. Have you claimed too much in your thesis? Not enough? Ideally, there should be a perfect match between what you claim in your thesis and what your analysis actually demonstrates. When writing this section, you may find that you have to adjust your thesis (and re-write your introduction accordingly) or look for stronger arguments to support it. This should be the longest section of your paper.

4. A brief conclusion. Try not to be too mechanical in summarizing and repeating what you've written, but do make sure that the conclusion demonstrates the paper's overall relevance and coherence. For example, you might return to a detail mentioned in the introduction and use it to highlight the significance of your argument: maybe the detail seemed rather unimportant before but has a very different meaning in the light of your analysis or interpretation. Foregrounding the transformative effect of your argument (i.e. the fact that it makes us see things differently) is a good way to demonstrate the overall importance of your paper, and the device of returning in the end to something mentioned at the beginning is an effective way of giving your paper closure. Obviously, though, it is not the only way to approach the conclusion. You might also demonstrate the relevance of your argument by opening up the scope even farther and considering the questions that your thesis raises for other areas of inquiry. Does your analysis suggest alternative readings for other theoretical texts and/or other media objects? Does it suggest the need to re-think various assumptions about media, about a given medium, or about some other aspect of media inquiry? However you decide to approach it, the point of the conclusion, generally speaking, is to take a step back from arguing for your thesis (you are supposed to be finished doing that by now) and to reflect, on a quasi meta-level, about the overall significance of your argument/thesis. This section should normally be only one or two paragraphs in length.
5. A full list of works cited, according to MLA (or other established) style.

Students with Documented Disabilities:

Students who may need an academic accommodation based on the impact of a disability must initiate the request with the Office of Accessible Education (OAE). Professional staff will evaluate the request with required documentation, recommend reasonable accommodations, and prepare an Accommodation Letter for faculty dated in the current quarter in which the request is being made. Students should contact the OAE as soon as possible since timely notice is needed to coordinate accommodations. The OAE is located at 563 Salvatierra Walk (phone: 723-1066, URL: <http://oe.stanford.edu>).

Course Schedule:

04.02. Aesthetics and Phenomenology between Art, Technology, Embodiment, and Sensation

Don Ihde, *Experimental Phenomenology* – Part One: Chapters 1-9.

Suggested further reading:

Dermot Moran, "Introduction" to *Introduction to Phenomenology*.

Don Ihde, *Technology and the Lifeworld*.

04.09. Kant's Aesthetics and the Bifurcation of Art and Technology

Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgement* – Preface, Introduction, and First Section of Part One ("Analytic of the Beautiful" and "Analytic of the Sublime").

Suggested further reading:

Stefan Käufer and Anthony Chemero, "Kant and Wundt: Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Background." Chapter 1 in *Phenomenology: An Introduction*.

Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Introduction." In: Steven M. Cahn and Aaron Meskin, *Aesthetics: A Comprehensive Anthology*.

Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics." <<http://susanbuckmorss.info/text/aesthetics-and-anaesthetics-part-i/>>.

Jacques Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*.

04.16. **Husserl: "To the things themselves!"**

Edmund Husserl, "The Basic Approach of Phenomenology" and "The Noetic and Noematic Structure of Consciousness." In: *The Essential Husserl: Basic Writings in Transcendental Phenomenology*. Ed. Donn Welton.

Donn Welton, "The Development of Husserl's Phenomenology." In: *The Essential Husserl*.

Suggested further reading:

Stephan Käufer and Anthony Chemero, "Edmund Husserl and Transcendental Phenomenology." Chapter 2 in *Phenomenology: An Introduction*.

Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Chapters 2-5.

Edmund Husserl, *Ideas*.

Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*.

04.23. **Forms of Embodiment in Existential Phenomenology**

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Body as Object and Mechanistic Physiology" and "The Primacy of Perception and its Philosophical Consequences." In: *The Phenomenology Reader*. Ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney.

Charles Johnson, "A Phenomenology of the Black Body."

Gayle Salamon, "The Sexual Schema: Transposition and Transgender in *Phenomenology of Perception*." Chapter 2 in *Assuming a Body: Transgender and Rhetorics of Materiality*.

Suggested further reading:

Stephan Käufer and Anthony Chemero, "Maurice Merleau-Ponty: The Body and Perception." Chapter 5 in *Phenomenology: An Introduction*.

Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Chapter 12.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Sense and Non-Sense*.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*.

The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader: Philosophy and Painting. Ed. Galen A. Johnson.

04.30. **Heidegger/Sartre: Technology, Image, World**

Martin Heidegger, "The Worldhood of the World." (Excerpt from *Being and Time*). In: *The Phenomenology Reader*. Ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imaginary* – Part I: The Certain, Part IV: The Imaginary Life, and Conclusion

Suggested further reading:

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Stephan Käufer and Anthony Chemero, "Martin Heidegger and Existential Phenomenology." Chapter 3 in *Phenomenology: An Introduction*.

Dermot Moran, *Introduction to Phenomenology*. Chapters 6-7.

Martin Heidegger, "Building Dwelling Thinking." In: *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Martin Heidegger, "The Thing." In: *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology." In: *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*.

Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*.

Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art." In: *Poetry, Language, Thought*.

Michael E. Zimmerman, *Heidegger's Confrontation with Modernity: Technology, Politics, and Art*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Imagination*.

Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*

05.07. **Feminist and Queer Phenomenologies (Research Proposals Due!)**

Iris Marion Young, "Lived Body vs. Gender: Reflections on Social Structure." In: *On Female Body Experience: Throwing Like a Girl and Other Essays*.

Iris Marion Young, "Gender as Seriality."

Sarah Ahmed, "Orientations: Toward a Queer Phenomenology." *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 12.4 (2006): 543-574.

Suggested further reading:

Simone de Beauvoir, "Destiny" and "Woman's Situation and Character." In: *The Phenomenology Reader*. Ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney.

Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*.

Toril Moi, *What is a Woman and Other Essays*.

Debra B. Bergoffen, *The Philosophy of Simone de Beauvoir: Gendered Phenomenologies, Erotic Generosities*.

Elizabeth Grosz, *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*.

Sarah Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*.

Jack Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*.

Shane Denson, "The New Seriality."

05.14. **Sylvia Wynter: Technology, Art, and the Future of the Human**

Sylvia Wynter, "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes towards a Deciphering Practice"

Sylvia Wynter and Katherine McKittrick, "Unparalleled Catastrophe for Our Species? Or, to Give Humanness a Different Future: Conversations." In: Katherine McKittrick, ed. *Sylvia Wynter: On Being Human as Praxis*.

Suggested further reading:

Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*.

Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle*.

Katherine McKittrick, *Dear Science and Other Stories*.

Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics*.

05.21. **Temporal Experience and Its Technological Mediation**

Edmund Husserl, "The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness." In: *The Phenomenology Reader*. Ed. Dermot Moran and Timothy Mooney.

Bernard Stiegler, "Introduction," "Cinematic Time," and "Cinematic Consciousness." In: *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*.

Suggested further reading:

Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of Internal Time-Consciousness*.

Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*.

Mark B. N. Hansen, "'Realtime Synthesis' and the *Différance* of the Body: Technocultural Studies in the Wake of Deconstruction." *Culture Machine* 6 (2004):

<<https://www.culturemachine.net/index.php/cm/article/view/9/8>>

Shane Denson, "Re-Focusing Cinematic Double Vision: Seriality, Mediality, and Mediation in Postnatural Perspective." In: *Postnaturalism: Frankenstein, Film, and the Anthropotechnical Interface*.

Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images*.

05.28. **Media Phenomenologies and New Aesthetics (Revised Proposal Due!)**

Vivian Sobchack, "The Scene of the Screen: Envisioning Photographic, Cinematic, and Electronic 'Presence.'" In: *Carnal Thoughts*.

Vivian Sobchack, "What My Fingers Knew: The Cinesthetic Subject, or Vision in the Flesh." In: *Carnal Thoughts*.

Shane Denson, "From Sublime Awe to Abject Cringe: On the Embodied Processing of AI Art." *Journal of Visual Culture* 22.2 (2023): 146-175.

Suggested further reading:

Vivian Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*.

Vivian Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts: Embodiment and Moving Image Culture*.

Shane Denson, *Discorrelated Images*.

Shane Denson, *Post-Cinematic Bodies*.

06.04. **Depth Effects: From Early Photography to Computer Vision**

Brooke Belisle, *Depth Effects* – pages 1-114.

Suggested further reading:

Alexander Galloway, *Uncomputable*.

James Hodge, *Sensations of History: Animation and New Media Art*.

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Deborah Levitt, *The Animatic Apparatus*.

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06.08. Final Papers Due! (by 6:30pm)