

**PHIL 285H1 S: Aesthetics**


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 Winter Term 2025/ University of Toronto St. George Campus (3 credits)

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<b>Instructor:</b>	Natalie Helberg (Lecturer, Department of Philosophy)
<b>Office:</b>	JHB 524
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<b>Office hours:</b>	Thursday 1:00pm-3:00pm (or by appointment) *There will be no office hours the first week of class
<b>Class schedule:</b>	F 9:00am-12:00pm in person; location: MP 102

***Course description:*** We will consider historical philosophical approaches to aesthetics as well as more contemporary ones as we reflect on various forms of aesthetic experience, including those spurred by encounters with visual art, music, film, and text. Some of the questions we will consider include: What is aesthetics and in what respects is it more encompassing than philosophy of art? How should we understand the relationship between aesthetic claims and detachment as well as objectivity? What is the relationship between aesthetic experiences and thought/interpretation? How do technologies and power-relations impact aesthetic experience? What is the relationship between aesthetics and political possibility?

***Required texts:*** Electronic versions of our readings will be available as PDFs or via links to resources in the UofT Library or links to resources in the public domain on our Quercus page. Consult the reading schedule for a comprehensive list of our readings.

***How the course will run and expectations:***

We will meet at our scheduled times in the room that has been assigned to us. Our time in class will involve a blend of lecture, discussion, and writing (you will only write on the days we have quizzes).

Make sure that you monitor Quercus for any announcements and keep apprised of any email communications from me. If ever an emergency constrains me to cancel class, I will notify you using Quercus.

Do your very best to complete the readings for the week in advance. We have quite a few readings and some are difficult. You will be learning how to read the more linguistically challenging texts on our reading list during lectures (I will give you the frameworks you need for the texts to become intelligible to you) and while engaged in your own reading practice (you do have to grapple with the texts on your own, too, to start to unlock them).

Informal reading policy: I will be working with an informal ‘reading policy’ as I run the course. I want the class to be maximally enriching, and so I’ve loaded it up with interesting texts. I realize, though, that this can set students up to feel overwhelmed by the course and perhaps unable to rise to its challenges; it can set students up to feel as if they are up against the impossible, or even to feel like abject failures. These feelings are among the worst the contemporary university can foster. How, then, to strike a balance between the desire to teach generously—to give students everything it is possible, as an instructor, to give them—while also refraining from subjecting them to the abuses of finitude that the contemporary university is already so primed and prone to inflict (e.g., acting like dense texts can be processed instantly, or in no time at all, or even acting as if ‘time,’ that precious resource, is evenly distributed across the student body, when the truth is that some students have more than others)? How, too, to offer resistance to a post-literate culture? Many students struggle with reading itself and with attention. I believe in the value of the activity that is reading, so the solution to the problem of stressing students out with more reading than they can do *cannot* be that of having no required readings or even a scanty number of them. I view the class as partly an opportunity for students to develop the reading muscles whose atrophy our culture encourages. It is imperative, then, for students in the class to read, and not only read, but read as much as they can—to exercise those muscles, in other words, and transform their limits by pushing them. What I would like students in the class to do, then, is to use the texts on our reading list to cultivate a reading practice guided by the following principles.

1. View the reading list as a challenge to push your reading capacities beyond their own bounds. Everyone will come to the class with different capacities. The point is not to feel that you’re competing with your peers; the point is to gauge where you as an individual are and to try to use the class, and the work you do in it, to move past that particular point. If, after the course ends, you’ve done this (your own reading limits have budged and you find yourself able to productively read more than you were able to before), then you’ve succeeded.
2. Make time every week to look at the readings for the following week. If we’re looking at a particularly long reading the next week, then try to tackle it over the course of a few days, instead of all at once. Even when I’m not ‘sitting down to read,’ I enjoy keeping the things I’m reading close to me and glancing at them in the little intervals of time I’m afforded throughout the day. When I’m reading this way (intermittently glancing at a text), I find it changes the way I focus on and process the text. The smaller units of the text stand out to me more. I might only be looking at a sentence or a paragraph while I’m nibbling on some breakfast. The sentence, or the paragraph, isn’t as prone to being swallowed up into the larger ocean of text it’s a part of and I myself am more liable to remember it. Anyway: you’re not obliged to fill every second of free time you find yourself with with our readings. Here, I’m just highlighting one technique among several that you might embrace as you develop your own reading practice.

3. Make a concerted effort to do all of the readings assigned for a given week, BUT don't think you've 'failed' (or are not meeting expectations) if you don't manage to. *Try* to tackle our mountain of texts and then observe how far you were able to go. This is a way of learning about where your limits stand now. Track how they change over time (that is, track how they change during the time of the course and after the course is over).
4. If you don't have time to get to a given text on our reading list while the course is running, consider saving it for a rainy day in the future. The course is pointing you to interesting resources. We act as if learning can transpire in 12 weeks, but often it takes far more time. Don't be afraid to let the course exceed its own bounds and spill over into your post-course life.
5. You do have to read the texts you work with to produce your written assignments carefully. If you find yourself having to make hard choices about what to read and what to save for another day, prioritize the texts you think you might want to write on.
6. Do attend lecture. If you haven't had a chance to read a given text, you can still learn about it by listening to me discourse on it while taking notes. You will want to attend lecture so that you can do well on the in-class exams: a given exam will be on material covered in lecture; see the 'Evaluation/Assignments' section of this syllabus for more information about the exams.

I will provide notes which indicate the core ideas I've discussed during a given lecture after the lecture via Quercus, as students often find them useful to have while studying the readings independently and while working on written assignments. Please also take your own notes (creating a personalized set of notes while engaged in a learning process is a special, enriching activity!). The lectures themselves will contain more detail than typed-up lecture notes can convey and you may want to capture some of it.

**Evaluation/Assignments:**

**1) Two 'In-Class Exams' worth 35% each (for 70% of the final grade in total).** These exams are like 'midterm exams.' They will test students on thinkers and ideas covered in lecture. They will consist of 4-5 questions requiring paragraph-length responses and 1 'essay-style' question requiring a roughly 2-page (single-spaced) response (students may, of course, write more than this if they wish to and have time). Students will have the entire class to write each of these exams. For the paragraph-long responses: The responses which score the highest will distinguish themselves with their accuracy, detail, and clarity of expression. For the essay-response: The responses which score the highest will distinguish themselves with their accuracy, detail, clarity of expression, insight and argumentative strength. **Dates: Feb. 7<sup>th</sup> and March 21<sup>st</sup>.**

**2) Final Exam Essay worth 30%:** This is an in-person, essay-form, final exam that will be scheduled during the exam period. The essay questions will be distributed in advance.

**Assignment Submission:** All assignments should be submitted via Quercus by 11:59pm on the day they are due.

**Extensions:** Extensions may be permitted for valid reasons (emergencies, severe illnesses, etc.). Please request an extension before the day the assignment you are requesting an extension for is due. Retroactive extensions may be possible, depending on a person's reasons for requesting them. Getting in touch with me to explain your situation and see what accommodations are possible never hurts!

**Late Policy:** Late assignments for which an extension has not been granted will be penalized (2% of the grade will be subtracted each day after the deadline until the assignment is submitted).

**Email Policy:** If you have questions that require elaborate philosophical responses or detailed explanations, please come to my office hours or schedule a meeting with me to pose them (I won't have time to write up a treatise for you by email, but I'm happy to speak with you and help you that way—I can answer questions much more efficiently using spoken language). For practical questions: First, make sure I haven't already answered the question (e.g., on the syllabus or on Quercus), then, if I haven't, feel free to reach out. You can email me to ask for extensions or to set up meetings. Email: [natalie.helberg@utoronto.ca](mailto:natalie.helberg@utoronto.ca).

**Re-marking Policy:** When a graded assignment is returned to you, please consider the feedback provided on it carefully. If, after careful consideration of this feedback, you feel that your grade is unfair, you can reach out to your TA and request a re-evaluation. In the email you send your TA, you must explain your reasons for thinking the initial grade is unfair. Your TA can then decide whether a re-evaluation is warranted. There are three possible outcomes of a re-evaluation: the grade may remain the same, the grade may be adjusted upwards, or, in cases where the TA feels they were initially too generous, the initial grade may be lowered. I will support the TA's judgement. I will only step in if there are assignments that are particularly difficult to re-assess.

**Attendance Policy:** Attendance is not mandatory. You will want to attend regularly so that you can do well on the in-class exams.

**Missed Test Policy:** If you have a valid reason (emergencies, severe illness, etc.) for missing an exam and have documentation, I may allow you to do a make-up exam at another time. Reach out by email to see what is possible.

**Plagiarism and Academic Dishonesty:**

Plagiarism (misrepresenting the work of others as one’s own, or failing to cite one’s sources properly) and other forms of academic dishonesty are serious offenses and will not be tolerated. Offenses of this kind run counter to the aims of education and evaluation: Skill acquisition (one becomes a better reader, writer and thinker because one does the work) and fair assessment (one’s grades should reflect one’s actual capacities; competition in the academic environment should be fair). In order to avoid inadvertent acts of plagiarism, students should familiarize themselves with the following resources: <http://www.artsci.utoronto.ca/osai> (the Code of Behaviour on Academic Matters: a complete outline of the University’s policy and expectations) and <http://academicintegrity.utoronto.ca>. Reach out to me or your TA for advice on anything you find unclear.

**Accessibility:**

Students with diverse learning styles and needs are welcome in this course. Accessibility-related concerns should be communicated to me. I will do my best to accommodate students who require accommodations. Depending on the nature of the accommodation, students requiring accommodations may also need to contact accessibility services: [www.accessibility.utoronto.ca](http://www.accessibility.utoronto.ca)

**Reading Schedule**

\*Note: Our reading schedule isn’t set in stone and we will be free to adjust it as the course progresses if we need to. Some topics may require slightly more time to cover than our reading schedule indicates, in which case we will allow them to spill over into subsequent weeks. Think of the course, of our thinking in the course, as an organism developing, rather than as a body of pre-partitioned information whose delivery is rigidly determined in advance. The metaphor of a ‘developing organism’ suggests that you can think of the course as a unified entity as well: the links between the readings will ramify as we move through them, so we will be calling back to past readings as the course progresses, refreshing and transforming them in the context of the newer readings.

<i>Weeks/Topics</i>	<i>Readings</i>
1 <i>Jan. 10/2025</i>	<p>Introduction to the class and first lecture.</p> <p>Burke, Edmund. 1756. “On Taste.” Internet Modern History Sourcebook. <a href="https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1756burke-taste.asp">https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1756burke-taste.asp</a>. (Link also on Quercus.)</p> <p>Hume, David. 1760. “Of the Standard of Taste.” Internet Modern History Sourcebook. <a href="https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1760hume-taste.asp">https://sourcebooks.fordham.edu/mod/1760hume-taste.asp</a>. (Link also on Quercus)</p>

	<p>Ross, Stephanie. 2014. "When Critics Disagree: Prospects for Realism in Aesthetics." <i>The Philosophical Quarterly</i> 64:257. 590-618.</p> <p>Students may begin the readings for Week 2 if they wish to.</p>
<p>2 Jan. 17/2025</p>	<p>Kant, Emmanuel. 2011. "Extracts from 'Analytic of Aesthetic Judgment' and 'Dialectic of Aesthetic Judgment,' Critique of Judgment." <i>The Continental Aesthetics Reader</i>. Ed. Clive Cazeaux. Routledge, 16-32. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Wicks, Robert. 1993. "Hegel's Aesthetics: An Overview." <i>The Cambridge Companion to Hegel</i>. Cambridge: Cambridge UP. 348-377. (Link to UofT Library resource on Quercus.)</p>
<p>3 Jan. 24/2025</p>	<p>Kristeva, Julia. 2024. "Beauty: The Depressive's Other Realm" and "Holbein's Dead Christ." <i>Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia</i>. New York: Columbia UP. 73-105. (Link to UofT Library resource on Quercus).</p> <p>Fisher, Mark. 2014. "London after the Rave: Burial," "Downcast Angel: Interview with Burial," "Sleevenotes for The Caretaker's Theoretically Pure Anterograde Amnesia," and "Memory Disorder: Interview with The Caretaker." <i>Ghosts of My Life</i>. Winchester: Zero Books. 89-105.</p> <p>Look at Hans Holbein the Younger's "The Dance of Death" here: <a href="https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/hans-holbeins-dance-of-death-1523-5/">https://publicdomainreview.org/collection/hans-holbeins-dance-of-death-1523-5/</a>. (Link also on Quercus.)</p>
<p>4 Jan. 31/2025</p>	<p>Benjamin, Walter. 1968. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." <i>Illuminations</i>. Schocken Books: New York. 217-252.</p> <p>Carroll, N. "The Ontology of Mass Art." <i>The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism</i> 55:2 (1997): 187-99. (Link on Quercus.)</p>
<p>5 Feb. 7/2025</p>	<p><i>1<sup>st</sup> In-Class Exam (please bring something to write with to class)</i></p>

<p>6 <i>Feb. 14/2025</i></p>	<p>Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. 2004. "Eye and Mind." <i>Merleau-Ponty: Basic Writings</i>. London; New York: Routledge. 290-324. (Link to UofT Library Resource on Quercus.)</p> <p>Prinz, Jesse J. 2010. "When is Film Art?" <i>Revue internationale de philosophie</i> Vol.64 (254 (4)): 473-485. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Coleman, Felicity. 2011. <i>Deleuze and Cinema: The Film Concepts</i>. Oxford: Bloomsbury. Precise selections TBA. (Link to UofT Library Resource on Quercus.)</p> <p>At home, if possible, watch <i>Phantasm</i> (Don Coscarelli, 1979).</p>
<p>7 <i>Feb. 21/2025</i></p>	<p><b>Reading Week</b></p>
<p>8 <i>Feb. 28/2025</i></p>	<p>Gadamer, Hans Georg. 2007. "Aesthetics and Hermeneutics." <i>The Gadamer Reader</i>. Evanston: Northwestern UP. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Foucault, Michel. 1998. "What is an Author?" <i>Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology</i>. New York: New Press. 187-204. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Foucault, Michel. 1977. "Preface to Transgression." <i>Language, Counter-Memory, Practice</i>. New York: Cornell UP. 29-52. (PDF on Quercus.)</p>
<p>9 <i>March 7/2025</i></p> <p><i>March 10/2025</i></p>	<p>Derrida, Jacques. 1992. "The Law of Genre." <i>Acts of Literature</i>. London; New York: Routledge. 221-253. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Scott, Gail. 2010. <i>The Obituary: A Novel</i>. Toronto: Coach House. (Link to UofT Library resource on Quercus.)</p> <p><b>Drop date for the course.</b></p>
<p>10 <i>March 14/2025</i></p>	<p>Bourdieu, Pierre. 2022. Selections from <i>The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field</i>. Stanford: Stanford UP. Precise selections TBA. (Link to UofT Library Resource on Quercus.)</p>

	<p>Bersianik, Louky. 2013. "Aristotle's Lantern." <i>Theory, A Sunday</i>. New York: Belladonna Collaborative. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Robertson, Lisa. 2009. <i>Magenta Soul Whip</i>. Toronto: Coach House. (Link to UofT Library Resource on Quercus.)</p> <p>Bernstein, Charles. 2011. "Creative Wreading and Aesthetic Judgment." <i>Attack of the Difficult Poems</i>. 43-48. Chicago: U of Chicago P. (PDF on Quercus.)</p>
<p>11 March 21/2025</p>	<p>2<sup>nd</sup> In-Class Exam (please bring something to write with to class)</p>
<p>12 March 28/2025</p>	<p>Rancière, Jacques. 2013. <i>The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible</i>. London: Zed Books. (Link to UofT Library Resource on Quercus.)</p>
<p>13 April 4/2025</p>	<p>Last day of class.</p> <p>Rancière, Jacques. 2009. "Lyotard and the Aesthetics of the Sublime: A Counter-reading of Kant." <i>Aesthetics and Its Discontents</i>. Cambridge; Malden: Polity. 88-106. (PDF on Quercus.)</p> <p>Rancière, Jacques. 2007. "Are Some Things Unrepresentable?" <i>The Future of the Image</i>. London; Brooklyn: Verso. 109-38.</p>
<p>14 April 9-30<sup>th</sup>/2025</p>	<p>Exam Period</p> <p>Final Essay due during the exam period; precise deadline TBA (submit using Quercus by 11:59pm)</p>
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