Contemporary Political Theory
The Politics of Aesthetics

Art and aesthetics has become an important research focus in the field of contemporary political theory and has developed in interdisciplinary forms within the discipline of Political Science between Political Theory, American politics, and International Relations, and between Political Theory and the disciplines of Philosophy, English, Cultural Studies, and others. This course will take up some of the classic work in aesthetics and politics for the purpose of trying to determine what contributions art and aesthetics can make to answering questions raised by political theorists and philosophers. We will examine a variety of aesthetic theories and examples of works of art, and our interest will be in how aesthetic theory has been used to explicate the politics of works of art. Readings will include works by Friedrich Schiller, Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Walter Benjamin, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Ranciere. Our work will be guided by our interest in how aesthetic theory can serve as the basis for interpreting and determining the politics of various art forms, including literature, poetry, painting and, in popular culture, especially film. All but one reading is available in a Dropbox folder set up for this seminar, the link for which is included below. The remaining text by Jacques Ranciere is available in paperback at Mary Jane Books, Quail Street & Western Avenue, Albany.

Learning Objectives

The goal of this course is to teach students how to carefully read and interpret texts, how to identify key concepts on which theoretical arguments are based, and how to use these arguments and concepts to develop critical analyses and understandings of politics according to various theories and philosophies of art and aesthetics. Students will be taught to think more expansively about the complex matter of what counts as politics and how the definition of politics changes for political theory as its practitioners grapple with the difficult challenges posed by the complexities of the modern world. These objectives will contribute to teaching students how to formulate concepts and arguments of their own in their written work (term papers) and in oral presentations (class participation and formal presentations).
Course Requirements

There are three requirements for this course:

1. Every student is expected to participate in class on a regular basis, posing questions, answering questions, contesting or arguing on behalf of the views of other students in the course and, certainly, challenging the views of the instructor. Since POS 603 is a “seminar” format, meaning the class is comparatively small in size and allows for discussion among the members of the class, student participation is facilitated. Class participation is valued at 25% of the final grade. In order to participate students must attend class. Attendance will be taken each class. Since this is a graduate course, students are strongly discouraged from missing class for any reason other than illness or compelling personal matters.

2. All students are required to make at least one presentation in class on the reading material assigned for the week. Presentations should be no more than 30 minutes long. This may seem like a long time for a presentation, but once student presenters read and study the assigned text and begin to prepare their presentations they will see that the time allotted is not generous. Presentations are valued at 25% of the final grade. Student presentations must accomplish three things:

   First, presentations should summarize the arguments in the reading assignment for that day.
   Second, presentations should relate the argument in the reading to class readings and discussions earlier in the semester;
   Third, presentations should pose critical questions about the reading material in relation to earlier readings and discussions and the presenter's own interests and ideas.

   Best presentations (grade of A) will include all three of the above, the purpose of which is to open and guide the discussion of the assigned reading for the day. It should be added that while the three guidelines above should be followed closely, the third guideline offers students their own opportunities to shape class the discussion of the reading for the day. In other words, making a presentation is not simply a requirement to be followed according to set of wrote instructions, but an intellectual opportunity to influence the direction of the work the class is to do for that day. Students should view class presentations as an essential part of the agonistics of the performative dimension of political theory.

3. Finally, students will write a term paper (15 pp., or more if they wish), the goal of which will be to conceptualize and analyze a problem in what the course terms “the politics of aesthetics.” Each student will submit a term paper prospectus due on Monday, March 9 (by noon), the mid-point of the semester. The prospectus should be 2-3 typewritten pages outlining the term paper project and should additionally include a working bibliography. Prospectuses will be deposited in the class Dropbox.
folder by Professor Schoolman to be shared with the class as a whole. Students should take advantage of Professor Schoolman’s office hours to discuss their ideas for a prospectus, which students should begin to think about from the first class meeting. Students are encouraged to develop a term paper topic within their own disciplinary interests in political theory, philosophy, English, and so on, as one of the main goals of our course is for students to discover if an aesthetic approach can teach them new things about questions in their disciplines not available from other approaches. Professor Schoolman will write a paper along with the class. Term papers, including Professor Schoolman’s, are due on May 13, but will be presented in class in earlier, rough draft form at the end of the semester.

**Required Readings** (Reading averages 60-100 pages per week, give or take. Students may want to print copies of readings to bring to class. Hard copies are a convenient tool for class discussions).

All readings are available in Dropbox except Ranciere’s *The Politics of Aesthetics*. The link for access to our Dropbox folder is: 

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/qs19hyu6er60qg6/AACIsBF0eKhUY3usO_anOZC-a?dl=0

1. Schiller, Friedrich. *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humankind*  
2. Whitman, 1855 “Preface” to *Leaves of Grass*  
3. Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*  
4. Emerson, “The Poet”  
5. Schoolman, “Democratic Vistas – the Path to Whitman’s Poetry”  
8. Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture”  
11. Adorno, *The Culture Industry* (selected essays, see reading assignments below for March 4)  
13. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*  
15. Schoolman, “The Reconciliation Image in Art: The Artwork in Motion, Democratic Time, Receptivity and Imitation, Aesthetic Analogs – Art & Film”  
16. Deleuze, *Cinema I*  
17. Thompson, "Language and Democracy: Meaning Making as Existing in the Work of Gertrude Stein"
Class Schedule and Reading Assignments

January 21. Course Introduction and organization.

January 28. Friedrich Schiller
Schiller, Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Humankind (all)
Presenter: Morton Schoolman

February 4. Walt Whitman
Emerson, “The Poet”
Presenter: __________________________

Whitman, 1855 “Preface” to Leaves of Grass
Presenter: __________________________

Whitman, Democratic Vistas
Presenter: __________________________

February 11. Schoolman on Whitman

Schoolman, “Democratic Vistas – the Path to Whitman’s Poetry”
Presenter: __________________________

Schoolman, “Whitman’s Discovery – Aesthetic Education through the Visual Image”
Presenter: __________________________

February 18. Ranciere
Ranciere, The Politics of Aesthetics
Presenter: __________________________

February 25. Horkheimer and Adorno
Horkheimer, “Art and Mass Culture”
Presenter: __________________________

Horkheimer, “Traditional Theory and Critical Theory”
Presenter: __________________________

Horkheimer and Adorno, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception”
Presenter: __________________________
March 4. Adorno, *The Culture Industry*
Adorno, “The Schema of Mass Culture” and “The Culture Industry Reconsidered”  
**Presenter:** __________________________
Adorno, “How to Look at Television” and “Transparencies on Film”  
**Presenter:** __________________________
Adorno, “Free Time” and “Resignation”  
**Presenter:** __________________________
Benjamin, “The Work of Art in an Era of Mass Production”  
**Presenter:** __________________________

March 11. Adorno
**Presenter:** __________________________

March 25. Adorno
**Presenter:** __________________________

April 1. Thinking with Adorno Against Adorno
Schoolman, “The Reconciliation Image in Art: Aesthetic Reason and Reflexivity, Twin Economies and Democratic Effects”  
**Presenter:** __________________________
Schoolman, “The Reconciliation Image in Art: The Artwork in Motion, Democratic Time, Receptivity and Imitation, Aesthetic Analogs – Art & Film”  
**Presenter:** __________________________

April 8. Deleuze
Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, chs. 1-6.  
**Presenter:** __________________________

April 15. Deleuze
Deleuze, *Cinema 1*, chs. 7-12.  
**Presenter:** __________________________

April 22. Thompson and Semester Summary of Seminar Investigations
Thompson, “Language and Democracy: Meaning Making as Existing in the Work of Gertrude Stein”  
**Presenter:** __________________________

April 29. Class presentations of term paper drafts (as developed to date).  
**Presenter:** __________________________
**Presenter:** __________________________
**Presenter:** __________________________
May 6. Class presentations of term paper drafts (as developed to date).

Presenter: _______________________
Presenter: _______________________
Presenter: _______________________
Presenter: _______________________