

Aesthetics: Perception, Subjectivity, Embodiment

Spring 2012

Introductory Note

This course focuses on four modern approaches to **aesthetic experience** and issues in the **philosophy of art**. It is not an encyclopedic introduction to theories of art and beauty. It's not **encyclopedic** because we won't attempt to cover all the major philosophical approaches and the critical responses to them. Nor is this an historical **introduction** to aesthetics. If you're interested in a comprehensive chronology of the field, there are lots of good anthologies available and I'm happy to make recommendations.

Our emphasis is on Kant, Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, and Deleuze. Each one has made substantial contributions to theories of art and aesthetic experience that have been extraordinarily influential.

Our general task is to formulate a modest understanding of these four philosophers and to find ways of **using** their theories to open up new ways of thinking about and engaging with the world. So we'll be involved in both theory and practice and, in particular, the extent to which these theories apply to contemporary phenomena.

The format of our work in this course is the **seminar**. The word "seminar" comes from the Latin *seminarium*, which means "seed plot". It's a place for planting seeds—in our case these "seeds" are **ideas** which, if properly nourished, will grow into fruitful **concepts**.

So how do we go about sowing, gathering, and cultivating ideas?

The obvious sources are the ideas of others, so it makes sense to conduct a bit of research on philosophers who have thought seriously about perception, aesthetic objects, and the general workings of the mind.

But, of course, we're not looking to simply take the ideas of others. We need to **do** things with those ideas and the concepts that grow out of them. To understand how that works, we have to ask a fundamental question. "What are concepts?"

Concepts are tools for thinking—they focus your attention on a particular range of phenomena, bring them out into the open where they can be examined, connected with other concepts and phenomena, and fashioned into more complex systems of thought, experimentation, and creative expression.

There's no point in simply reproducing the thinking of others. What we really want is to develop our own way of understanding our aesthetic experience and the experiences of others, while forging new ideas, concepts, and insights. In that sense, this seminar will also be a **creative workshop** or studio for constructing models that give us a way of engaging with art from both practical and theoretical perspectives.

The expertise, enthusiasm, and experience each one of us brings to this collaborative effort will determine how much we get out of it.

Timothy Quigley, 27 Aug 09