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# PHIL 333-W1S Philosophy of Art and Beauty

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# Philosophy of Art & Beauty



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London Course (PHIL 333)

Art is the kind of thing many of us disagree about, and many of us are willing to accept that disagreement as a legitimate one that simply cannot be overcome. What appeals to you might be the opposite of what appeals to me; what you judge as tasteful or beautiful, I might judge as trivial, cliché, or ugly, even. Arguing about these matters might seem pointless. Unlike in politics and debates about morality, where we might strongly insist on a certain standpoint, with art we seem perfectly fine acknowledging the disagreement as reflective of our different tastes.

One might suggest that the reason judgments about art appear distinct from judgments about politics and morality is that with art we lack a clear standard to use in assessing our judgments. With art there just might not be a standard, and our disagreements might just remain unresolved. In politics and morality we are not necessarily in the same desperate situation since we might appeal to legal standards or the moral law (this is not to suggest there are not disagreements—it's just that we often appeal to clear standards to assess each view).

In our course we will begin by investigating the extent to which we can develop a way of assessing our aesthetic judgments, our judgments of taste. In the second part of the course we will continue with this question by



examining modernist approaches to art. Perhaps art is not meant to be assessed in an aesthetic manner and maybe concerns about the standards of beauty are the wrong ones. Addressing modernist art will force us to ask a related question about art: is there some standard we can use to assess what counts as art? If an artist takes a porcelain men's urinal and places it in an art exhibit, as Marcel Duchamp did with his 1917 work *Fountain*, should we consider that a piece of art? What about graffiti, tagging, bombing, stenciling, and other forms of street art? Could food count as art as well? What about unmusical music? Punk rock? Hardcore? Does the expansion of the category of legitimate

art signal a decline in our aesthetic culture, one that might parallel a decline in our morals? Might it be the case that where there were once clear standards of beauty, with an expansion of the category of art and an aesthetic decline, we've arrived at our current standpoint—one in which we completely lack any standards of aesthetic judgment?

These are the kinds of questions and issues we will address in our London course. Although much of our work will involve the close reading and interpretation of classic as well as new essays on these matters, we will also spend time in the museums, galleries, theatres, and streets of London soaking up as much art and as many aesthetic

experiences as possible. While Kant's *Critique of Judgment* will serve as an essential text in the course, perhaps the biggest and, arguably, the most important text of the course is the city of London itself.

**Required Texts:** All the readings will be available on Canvas as PDFs.

**Required Music:** I've created three playlists on Spotify. You should subscribe to Spotify and follow the playlists. If you are a Spotify subscriber, you can download the playlists to your phone or computer and listen to them using headphones without using your data or when you do not have wireless access. If you download the playlists to your phone (perhaps the ideal) or computer, you will be able to easily listen to them in London, and especially on the plane ride over there. Spotify can be downloaded as a smart phone app, an application on your computer, or as an application in your web browser. If you use the links below, they will open in your web browser where you can follow the playlist and then download the music to your phone or computer to play offline. Spotify offers a student discount (\$4.99 a month).

### **Playlist 1**

Title: British Punk and Hardcore (Aesthetics Course)

Link: <https://open.spotify.com/user/1229770603/playlist/0E38GJ3pVeptkwllxosvR2>

Content: This is a playlist of classic British Punk (The Clash, The Sex Pistols, Buzzcocks), early '80s British Punk (The Fall, Subhumans, The Exploited) and '80s UK hardcore (Discharge, Chaos UK, The Varukers), and Voorhees, a contemporary British hardcore band.

### **Playlist 2**

Title: American Punk and Hardcore (Aesthetics Course)

Link: <https://open.spotify.com/user/1229770603/playlist/0L4G4K5Ac6KlGtKXhCvRCi>

Content: This is a place list of early American proto-punk and glam rock (MC5 and the New York Dolls), mid- to late '70s classic punk (Ramones, Richard Hell, and Patti Smith), early '80s punk and hardcore (Bad Brains, Minor Threat, Agnostic Front), and a song from Pissed Jeans and Perfect Pussy, two contemporary punk bands.

### **Playlist 3**

Title: Led Zeppelin (Aesthetics Course)

Link: <https://open.spotify.com/user/1229770603/playlist/6RkzRCn0cKvzUakEBmdvWP>

Content: This playlist contains some classic Led Zeppelin songs, many of which you've probably heard a number of times before. The first song on the list *D'yer Mak'er* is analyzed in our final reading by Gracyk.

**Required Movies:** There are three movies you are required to watch before leaving for London.

### **Movie 1**

Title: *Style Wars*

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yB3Js2tKA5Y>

Content: *Style Wars* is a classic graffiti film that documents the rising graffiti and hip-hop scene of the late '70s and early '80s.

### **Movie 2**

Title: *Exit Through the Gift Shop*

Link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XLrGLVgPh3E>

Content: *Exit Through the Gift Shop* is a film made by the street artist Banksy, whose images are depicted above on the syllabus. It documents the emergence of street art and its commercialization. In 2010 it was nominated for an Oscar in the documentary category.

### Movie 3

Title: *Punk Britannia*

Link to Part 1: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KrX5-V8pQr8>

Link to Part 2: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FYG5M83zUn4>

Link to Part 3: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HaA0BfADpYg>

Content: A BBC documentary about the origins of British Punk Rock.

#### Course Requirements

20% Article Reviews (Pre-work)

20% Journal Reflections

10% Reading Quizzes in London

20% Kant Paper (1500 words)

10% Art Review (750 words)

10% Record Review (750 words)

10% Participation

**Article Reviews:** An article review is a short summary and analysis of an article. You should identify the main claim or thesis and provide a brief summary of the author's argument. This is not a reflection piece or critical analysis. Rather your review should be an accurate summary of the article's main ideas. They should be 250-500 words. I will eventually provide an example of an article review of Greenberg's essay "Modernist Painting." You must complete five article reviews by **June 19**. You will upload them to Canvas and I will plan on having them graded by the first day of class. They will serve as helpful reminders of the essays, and I will encourage you to revisit these reviews before we discuss the reading in class. The essays you are allowed to review are marked with an \* below.

**Journal Reflections:** You must keep a journal while we are in London that is dedicated to recording your thoughts, reflections, and ideas about the readings, art, and experiences. Before we leave for London you should record an entry on each of the playlists and movies. These should be reflective entries in which you record your aesthetic response to each—did you like it, find it interesting, why, why not, etc. You will make a number of such entries in London and I will collect the journals to assess your progress while we are abroad.

**Reading Quizzes:** We will have short reading quizzes while in London that will assess your basic comprehension of the reading and in some cases the previous lecture and discussion.

**Kant Paper:** Kant's *Critique of Judgment* will be a central text in the course—it is also the most difficult. Given its difficulty, your paper will be due two weeks after we return from London. Toward the end of our stay in London I will provide essay prompts for the paper.

**Art and Record Reviews:** You will write two reviews in London in which you will imagine that you are an art or rock critic writing for a popular magazine or newspaper about a piece of art and one Punk Rock record. You will be free to choose any piece of art that we see in London, however, your choice of Punk records will be limited. You will be required to have a draft of the reviews while in London. I will let you know when the drafts are due. We will peer-review the drafts, and then you will have the opportunity to revise them and turn them in after we arrive.

#### Record Review Options

The Damned, *Music for Pleasure* (1977)

Siouxsie and the Banshees, *Scream* (1978)

The Exploited, *Punk's Not Dead* (1981)

Subhumans, *The Day the Country Died* (1983)

Television, *Marquee Moon* (1977)

Black Flag, *Damaged* (1981)

Bad Brains, *Bad Brains* (1982)

Minor Threat, *Out of Step* (1983)

**Readings:** It is strongly suggested that you read everything before you leave for London. Besides Kant and Brecht, none of the readings are terribly long, and a number of them, at least for philosophy essays, are fairly straightforward. The two most difficult readings are Kant and Brecht, so you should really give them a reading before we leave. I imagine it will be more difficult to read these in London with all the other things we will be doing. The Brecht reading is an interesting interpretation of theatre and we will think hard about it in contrast to the theatre we see. Many of the essays you should be able to easily review them before class, if you've already read them once before arriving in London.

### Reading List (with Annotations)

#### Weeks 1 and 2

Hume, "The Standard of Taste"\*

-A classic essay on taste, objectivity in art, and its subjective nature.

Kant, *The Critique of Judgment* (selections)

-One of the most important works in aesthetics; it gives an account of beauty and aesthetic pleasure.

Cavell, "Aesthetic Judgment and a Philosophical Claim"

-A reflection on aesthetic judgment that considers the views of Hume and Kant.

#### Week 3

Greenberg, "Modernist Painting"

-Classic essay on abstract art (think Jackson Pollock or Mark Rothko)

Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch"\*

-Important clarification of the distinction between these two concepts.

Brecht, "A Short Organum for the Theatre" (selections)

-A defense of a radical conception of modern theater that criticizes Aristotelian theater and expressive theatre.

Benjamin, "What is Epic Theatre"

-a reflection and clarification of Brecht's conception of theatre.

Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction"\*

-One of the most widely read essays in the humanities and aesthetics. Does art lose its aura when it's mechanically reproduced?

#### Week 4

Danto, "The Artworld"\*

-After Duchamp and Warhol it seems like anything and possibly everything is an art work. What is art? Danto has an answer.

Riggle, "Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces"\*

-What is distinctive about street-art?

Telfer, "Food as Art"

-Can food be art? Yes? No? Hmm....

#### Week 5

Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening"\*

-Critique of much modern music, especially early jazz.

Prinz, "The Aesthetics of Punk Rock"

-Analysis of the aesthetics and ethos of punk rock.

Scruton, "The Decline of Musical Culture"\*

-Critical analysis of modern and contemporary popular music.

Gracyk, "Music's Worldly Uses, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and to Love Led Zeppelin"\*

-A defense of modern and contemporary rock music.