SENIOR SEMINAR 2014/2015:
AESTHETICS AND SUBJECTIVITY: HERMENEUTICS, DECONSTRUCTION, AND PSYCHOANALYSIS

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

PROFESSOR: Chris Latiolais
Philosophy Department
Kalamazoo College
Humphrey House #202
Telephone # 337-7076
Offices Hours:
- Tuesday: 10:30 – 11:30
- Wednesday: 2:00 – 3:00
- Thursday: 10:30 – 11:30
- By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:
This course continues a discussion of the significance of aesthetics for contemporary modern life initiated in the 2013 Conference titled “Art, Social Justice, and Critical Theory.” The exact focus of that conference was the question of whether artworks can literally be said to raise a claim to truth, however distinctive that form of truth may vis-à-vis ordinary and scientific truth claims. The focus of this two-term seminar shifts to the role art and aesthetics in the shaping of “modern” or, as many will have it, “post-modern” subjectivity. The guiding question of the course is what role aesthetic experience plays in identity formation, on the one hand, and how the “end-of-art” thesis – i.e. the idea that the category of “aesthetic” as opposed to “moral” and “theoretical” rationality has been sublated or “overcome” – is to be understood in regard to identity formation, on the other.

It’s a commonplace that art and aesthetics plays an important role in human life and that the distinctive form of aesthetic experience enriches our sense of the world. Such a vague and platitudinous commendation, however, does not capture the complexity and precision of the issue of aesthetic rationality as it emerges in 19th- and 20th-Century European-Continental philosophy. Beginning with Kant, Schiller, and Schelling, and continuing with renewed purpose and vigor with the subsequent German Romantic writers Schlegel, Novalis, and Schleiermacher, the aesthetic critique of modernity reaches a feverish pitch, tipping the Enlightenment project of a critique of reason (Kritik der Vernunft) into a “Post-Enlightenment” criticism of reason as such (Vernunftkritik), particularly in the ever so mischievous pen of Friedrich Nietzsche, who initiates a genealogical deconstruction of Western rationality. If at the end of the 19th Century the options were, for better or worse, Hegel – the staunch apologist of modernity – and Nietzsche – the virulent critic of modernity – the options at the close of the 20th Century were, for better or worse, Habermas – who provides a critique of communicative reason – and Foucault – who generates a genealogical deconstruction of modernity disciplinary institutions and practices. Of course, these stark options – defense or demolition of modernity as the inheritance of the Enlightenment – get played out in other fields as well, perhaps no more contentiously than in psychoanalysis, on the one hand, and art theory, on the other.

In the field of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, there emerged a pronounced and reproaching debate between, on the one continental side of the channel, Francophone psychodynamics theories of development, Lacan and company, and, on the other side, the Anglophone objects-relations psychology, namely Klein, Winnicott, and Erikson. Complexities aside, this cross-channel polarity emerged in the stark form of Winnicott’s ego psychology – committed to developing ego strength – and Lacan’s post-
structuralist psychodynamics – committed to the controlled deconstruction of the ego as a restrictive and illusory form of identity formation. In the field of art theory, there emerged an equally pronounced and reproaching debate between defenders and detractors of modern art, who called for the “end of art” or “postmodernism.” Art theorist seemed to line up along two opposing fronts: namely, those seeking to preserve the category of aesthetic rationality as different from, those complementary to, practical and theoretical rationality, and those who consider any such trifurcation of reason a hangover from Enlightenment euphoria, now so marred and macabre with the cascade of 20th-Century disasters: the world wars, the devastation of the environment, global capitalism, the displacement of peoples, mass alienation and anomie, the continuing litany of failed states, etc. etc. Sometimes this debate is framed in terms of the discrediting an “aesthetics of the beautiful” (modernity composure according to the ideals of reason) in lieu of the more radical aesthetics of the sublime (post-modernity disintegration and difference). At other times the debate is framed in terms of a critique of “cognition-only” account of truth, one that banishes the unruly energies of aesthetic experience, leading to what Bernstein refers to as “aesthetic” isolation and “mourning” – a longing for reintegration into the enterprise of the human understanding of self and world.

To manage this complex field, I want to focus on the historical context of the current debate. We read J. M. Bernstein’s The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno to set up the historical condensation of the issues. Our focus, however, will be upon Martin Seel’s hermeneutic aesthetic theory, which offers a sophisticated defense of aesthetic modernity, and upon Christoph Menke’s deconstructionist account of Adorno’s aesthetic theory, which offers a competing postmodernist account. Accordingly, we read Seel’s The Aesthetics of Appearing alongside Menke’s The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida, comparing and contrasting their apparently competing conceptions of aesthetic experience. In many respect, Seel aligns himself, with qualifications, with Habermas’s defense of communicative rationality, training it more sharply upon the importance of aesthetic experience for the rational communicative conduct of life. We read Thomas P Brockelman’s The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Postmodern, who is keenly sensitive to the issue of how contemporary aesthetic experience seems to align well with Lacan’s deconstructive critique of precisely the type of rational identity formation celebrated by Habermas.

To prepare for this two-term seminar, I asking that you do some background summer reading, at a minimum one key book that sets the stage for the 19th-Century contrast between Hegelian phenomenology, at one extreme, and Nietzschean genealogy, at the other. In Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche: Philosophy, Culture, and Agency (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2002), Elliot L. Jurist, who is a practicing psychoanalyst and professor of philosophy and clinical psychology at The City University of New York, works out the legacy of Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s conceptions of agency and identity in the contemporary context of clinical psychology – mapping them, respectively, on to Hans W. Loewald and Jacques Lacan. What’s fascinating about Jurist’s work in psychoanalytic theory is his apparent insistence upon the potential compatibility of Hegel’s phenomenological and Nietzsche’s genealogical accounts of how the agent is inextricably though variably ensconced within cultural. Jurist argues that the (phenomenological) building of ego strength, on the modernist side, and the (genealogical) deconstruction of the ego, on the postmodernist side, are actually the healthy ebb and flow of our ongoing participation within and extrication from contemporary culture. This finely tuned bifocal psychoanalytic account agency and identity builds a strong background for our forays into aesthetic theorizing during the academic year.

REQUIRED TEXTS:

BACKGROUND TEXTS:


READING SCHEDULE

FALL TERM:

Part One: The History of Aesthetics in 19th- and 20th-Century Philosophy:

Week One
- Wednesday:
  - Bernstein: Introduction

Week Two
- Wednesday:
  - Bernstein: “Memorial Aesthetics: Kant’s *Critique of Judgment*
  - Seel: “A Rough History of Modern Aesthetics”
  - Paper #1 Abstract due.

Week Three
- Wednesday:

Week Four
- Wednesday:
o Bernstein: “The Deconstructive Sublime: Derrida’s The Truth in Painting”

**Week Five**  
- Wednesday:  
  o Bernstein: “Constellations of Concept and Intuition: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory”  
  o Rough Draft of Paper #1 Due.

**Week Six**  
- Wednesday:  
  o Bernstein: Old Gods Ascending: Disintegration and Speculation in Aesthetic Theory”  
  o Paper #2 Abstract Due.

**Part Two: Christoph Menke’s Deconstructive Reading of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: Aesthetic Sovereignty:**

**Week Seven**  
- Wednesday:  
  o Menke: Introduction: Autonomy and Sovereignty  
  o Menke: “The Concept of Aesthetic Negativity”  
  o Menke: “Aesthetic Deferral”

**Week Eight**  
- Wednesday:  
  o Menke: “The Aesthetics of Negativity and Hermeneutics”

**Week Nine**  
- Wednesday:  
  o Menke: “On the Concept of Beauty”  
  o Final Draft of Paper #1 Due

**Week Ten**  
- Wednesday:  
  o Menke: “Aesthetic Sovereignty”  
  o Menke: “Problems in Grounding the Critique of Reason”

**Finals Week**

WINTER TERM
Week One

- Wednesday:
  - Menke: “The Aesthetic Experience of Crisis”
  - Rough Draft of Paper #2 due.

Week Two

- Wednesday:
  - Menke: “Romantic and Modern Aesthetics: The Place of Art in the ‘The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity’”

Week Three

- Wednesday:

Week Four

- Wednesday:
  - Bernstein: “The Deconstructive Sublime: Derrida’s The Truth in Painting”

Week Five

- Wednesday:
  - Bernstein: “Constellations of Concept and Intuition: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory”

Week Six

- Wednesday:
  - Bernstein: Old Gods Ascending: Disintegration and Speculation in Aesthetic Theory
  - Final Draft of Paper #2 Due.

Part Two: Christoph Menke’s Deconstructive Reading of Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: Aesthetic Sovereignty:

Week Seven

- Wednesday:
  - Brockelman: Introduction: Collage and the Postmodern
  - Brockelman: “Everything Goes: Collage and Perspectivism in Vattimo and Schwitters”

Week Eight

- Wednesday:
  - Brockelman: “The Place of Truth: Theatricality and Modernity in Krauss and Greenway”

Week Nine

- Wednesday:
  - Brockelman: “Kant and Collage: Judgment, Avante-Guardism, and the Sublime”

Week Ten

- Wednesday:
  - Closing Comments:

Finals Week