SENIOR SEMINAR:

Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art:
Between Phenomenology and Semiotic

Fall 2012 & Winter 2013

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Offices Hours:
• Tuesday: 10:00 – 11:00
• Thursday: 10:00 – 11:00
• By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

The Philosophy Department Senior Seminar is to support seniors in their individual research projects. The Seminar begins with the reading and discussion of a body of literature selected to establish a common knowledge base to support seniors in their exchange, discussion, critical examination, and formal presentation of individual research papers and manuscripts throughout fall and winter terms. Seniors read, discuss, and write about the seminar’s required texts from the perspective of their own research, using the conceptual resources developed in such common readings to support and deepen their own research manuscripts. The overall goal of the seminar is to establish an intensive, mutually supportive research group that gains expertise in a specific domain of contemporary philosophy pertinent to our own particular research activities. Seniors are required to read texts, write a brief précis of the arguments, and vigorously discuss the material during seminar times, both on its own terms and in light of its potential connection to his/her own research. The seminar is emphatically interactive.

The theme of this year’s Senior Seminar is aesthetic theory as it is developed by two theorists: the mid-century French phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty and the contemporary German critical theorist Martin Seel. This limitation to only two theorists does not so much limit the seminar as focus its core theme on the central issue of contemporary aesthetic theory: namely, what are the basic concepts of aesthetic theory or the philosophy of art? The choice to limit our study of aesthetic theory to only two theorists is motivated by three important concerns about contemporary aesthetics. First, a dominant trend in aesthetic theory championed by Author Danto and others calls for a “post-aesthetic” theory of art, a turn away from perception and toward language as the basic conceptual approach to understanding how artworks function, a turn that might well be deemed the “linguistic” or “semiotic” turn in aesthetics and hence a turn away from phenomenology. Second, this shift from a phenomenological to a semiotic approach to a theory of art has important repercussions for how one conceives of “aesthetics” or “art theory” as a subfield of philosophy and hence how one conceives of philosophy as such as comprising several such subfields, such as ethics and epistemology. Many contemporary philosophers are convinced that philosophy is defined by taking stock of its proximity to, and affinity with, art and its public reception. Third, the relationship between ethics and aesthetics has become a central issue, particularly for ethicists who not only criticize deontological orientations to moral theory for their narrow focus upon formal justice but also call for a more comprehensive account of human thriving as the core concept of ethical theorizing. Finally, the question of the historical nature of philosophy – more specifically, whether it admits of a clean three-fold historical periodization in terms of metaphysics (Ancient), philosophy of mind (Early Modern), and philosophy of language (Modern) – has a direct bearing upon questions of aesthetics, since an insistence upon the paradigm of the philosophy of language would suggest a semiotic instead of a
phenomenological approach to aesthetics and art theory.

Merleau-Ponty presents a quintessential phenomenological aesthetic theory, one grounded in, though significantly reconfiguring, the theory of perception he worked out in his *Phenomenology of Perception*. Author Danto and others who call for a “post-aesthetic” theory of art – i.e. a theory of art that takes abstract conceptualization rather than sensible perception as its key concept – might therefore consider Merleau-Ponty’s theory dated, inadequate, and perhaps wrong-headed, particularly in connection with abstract and “ready-made” artworks. By reading various later essays such as “The Philosopher and his Shadow,” “Cezanne’s Doubt” and “Eye and Mind,” we will examine the scope and range of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of art. While Merleau-Ponty’s earlier works, such as *Structure of Behavior* and *Phenomenology of Perception*, reflect the influence of his sustained study of Edmund Husserl’s phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty’s later works, in particular his posthumously published *Visible and Invisible* – reflect his sustained engagement with Heidegger’s hermeneutics or “fundamental ontology.”

Heidegger criticizes Husserl – this dissertation advisor – for not inquiring into the worldly nature of the sense-making, cognizing, or conceptualizing subject of perception and action, and this “ontological” turn to a worldly – as opposed to transcendental – subject deepened Merleau-Ponty’s concern with the embodied, pragmatic, engaged manner in which human beings orient themselves in their everyday affairs. A key critical question regarding such later works is then whether they develop the resources to handle, in a distinctively Heideggerian fashion, the apparent semiotic or discursive dimensions of perception, in general, and aesthetic perception, in particular. Although the standard history of French philosophy insists that phenomenology was superseded post-structuralism and semiotics – e.g. Foucault, Derrida, Deleuze, Lyotard, Kristeva, etc. (all of whom were deeply influenced by Heidegger’s works) – a close reading of Merleau-Ponty’s later works casts doubt on this wholesale negative assessment. Indeed, one might well claim that such later works emphasize that perception is a form of articulation or “reading” and that aesthetic perception reflexively presents such modes of perceptions as forms of reading or, better, articulation. A central question we will raise in the course is whether the Merleau-Ponty’s aesthetics makes ample room for the idea that aesthetic objects and artworks function as signs within a co-functioning system of signs.

From his earliest works to his later ones, Merleau-Ponty consistently maintained that philosophy, like art, demands that we become sensitive to, corresponsive with, our manner of perceiving and acting in the world, where this increased sensitivity effects a palpable re-engagement with the world. For Merleau-Ponty, artworks reach deep into our background, taken-for-granted social geography, breaking apart and loosening the otherwise obdurate and sedimented correlation between familiar habitation (how we handle things) and familiar habitat (how the world shows up). He expresses this experience beautifully in his *Introduction to Phenomenology of Perception*, when he speaks about philosophical reflection – as opposed to reifying rationalist reflection – as a reawakening “wonder in the face of the world”:

(Philosophical) reflection does not withdraw from the world towards the unity of consciousness as the world’s basis; it steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice; it alone is consciousness of the world because it reveals that world as strange and paradoxical. . . . in order to see the world and grasp it as paradoxical, we must break with our familiar acceptance of it and, also, from the fact that from this break, we can learn nothing but the unmotivated upsurge of the world (PP, xiii)

The phenomenological world is not the bringing to explicit expression of a pre-existing being, but the laying down of being. Philosophy is not the reflection of a pre-existing truth, but, like art, the act of bringing truth into being. (PP, xx)

True philosophy consists in relearning to look at the world, and in this sense a historical account can give meaning to the world quite as ‘deeply’ as a philosophical treatise. We take our fate in our hands, we become responsible for our history through reflection, but equally by a decision on which we stake our life, and in both cases what is involved is a violent act which is validated in being performed (PP, xx)

His basic intuition here is that artworks loosen our familiar bonds to the world, absolving our otherwise ossified perambulations and perceptions so that we sense new entwinements of emotions and environments,
new interweaving of seeing and the seen, new vectors of mobility and landscape, and new circulations of flexible attention and emerging aspects of the world. Artworks possess a local world-disclosive power to transform our most basic bonds to the world, where that grounding transformation gives rise to different opportunities and vocabularies for making explicit, propositionally articulated validity claims. Simply put, artworks effect a sort tectonic shift, disruption, and displacement of our social geography, giving us different mappings of mobility and movement upon a terrain that now demands new clusters of claims about facts, norms, and feelings. This tectonic shifting or our familiar mundane grounding in the world is the alethic or world-disclosive dimension of human existence.

Martin Seel’s work represents, arguably, the most sophisticated contemporary aesthetic theory, one that is more or less critical of almost every contemporary “emphatic” alternative: e.g. autonomous art or “art for the sake of art” (Kant), formalism (Greenberg), deconstruction (Derrida), “post-aesthetic” theory (Danto), cultural criticism (Bourdieu), etc. Seel rejects the choice between phenomenological (perceptual) or semiological (discursive) approaches as a false dichotomy: he embraces both as necessary dimensions of theorizing about how an artwork works. Moreover, he embraces, without naively endorsing, the key figures of German aesthetic theory: namely, Baumgarten, Kant, Schiller, Hegel, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Valery, and Adorno. The Seel’s complex and nuanced account is deeply indebted to, on the one hand, Heidegger’s hermeneutic conception of human existence, developed in Being and Time (1927) and theory of the artwork, developed in The Origin of the Work of Art (1935) and, on the other hand, to Nelson Goodman’s theory of art as developed in Languages of Art (1968), Ways of Workmaking (1978), and Reconstructions in Philosophy and Other Arts and Sciences (1988). By linking Heidegger’s analysis of human existence as pre-predicative, pragmatic, and worldly with Goodman’s account of artworks as signs or symbols, Seel implicitly links Merleau-Ponty’s conception of aesthetic perception with Goodman’s semiological approach. While the deep affinities between Merleau-Ponty and Heidegger have been amply documented in the scholarship, the potential affinities between Goodman’s account of aesthetic signs to Merleau-Ponty’s work has not. By reading Merleau-Ponty and Seel together, we examine how presumably superseded conceptual alternatives provide, when adequately interpreted, a more nuanced and subtle account of art and art reception in the contemporary scene.

Moreover, juxtaposing Merleau-Ponty and Seel in this fashion allows us to comparatively assess the liabilities and assets of both positions, perhaps using one to supplement the other. For instance, Merleau-Ponty offers a far-reaching analysis of the essential synaesthetic nature of perception, while Seel only accords it two pages, and Seel does not even mention the role of the body in aesthetic perception, while this is the main focus of Merleau-Ponty’s work. Moreover, Seel underscores the hermeneutic and semiotic dimensions of artistic perception, while such terms are not even mentioned by Merleau-Ponty, and Merleau-Ponty may well collapse Seel’s important distinctions among mere, atmospheric, and imaginative appearing. Finally, while Seel connects aesthetics to ethics, neither he nor Merleau-Ponty explicitly discuss the role of art in social justice movements, which will be an abiding issue for our seminar.

REQUIRED TEXTS:


2) Seel, Martin:
   a) Books:
   b) Articles:


EVALUATION:

Seniors will be evaluated on the basis of seminar participation (30%), 2 Senior Individual Research papers (50%), and conference presentations (20%). Late assignments will result in grade reductions, and seniors are required to submit their research papers for conference presentations. Absences without medical documentation will count against participation. Seniors who present papers at conferences and submit their papers for either essay competitions or undergraduate journal publication may receive honors in the seminar. Honors in the major requires 2 our of the three following conditions:

1. 3.5 GPA in philosophy courses ("+" and "—" factored in).
2. Honors on the SIP.
3. Honors in Senior Seminar.

READING SCHEDULE

FALL TERM:

Part One: Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception: Perception as the Latent Aesthetic:

Week One:
- “Phenomenology and Painting: “Cezanne’s Doubt”
- Structures and Painting: “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”
- Ontology and Painting: “Eye and Mind”

Week Two:
- “Cezanne’s Doubt”
- Forrest Williams: “Cezanne, Phenomenology, and Merleau-Ponty”
- Alphonse de Waelhens: “Merleau-Ponty: Philosopher of Painting”

Week Three:
- “Indirect Language and the Voices of Silence”
- Michael B. Smith: “Merleau-Ponty’s Aesthetics”

Week Four:
- “Eye and Mind”
- Mikel Dufrene: “Eye and Mind”
- Jacques Taminiaux: “The Thinker and the Painter”

Week Five:
- Veronique M. Foti: “The Dimension of Color”
- Jean-Francois Lyotard: excerpts from Discours, figure
- Jean-Francois Lyotard: Philosophy and Painting in the Age of Their Experimentation: Contribution to an idea of Postmodernity”

Week Six:
Seel’s Heideggerian Aesthetic: Perception as Latent Semiology

Week Seven:
• A Rough History of Modern Aesthetics
  o Eight Short Stories
  o Aesthetics as Part of Philosophy

Week Eight:
• Aesthetics of Appearing:
  o What is Appearing
  o Being-so and Appearing
  o Appearing and Semblance

Week Nine:
• Aesthetics of Appearing
  o Appearing and Imagination
  o Situations of Appearing
  o Constellations of Art

Week Ten:
• Flickering and Resonating: Borderline Experience Outside and Inside Art:
  • Thirteen Statements on the Picture

WINTER TERM:

Philosophy and Aesthetics: Seel’s Holistic Ethical Theory:

Week One:
• “The Career of Aesthetics in German Thinking,” in: A. O’Hear (Hg.), German Philosophy since Kant, Cambridge 1999, 399-412.

Week Two:

Week Three:

Week Four:

Week Five:
• Student Presentations
Week Six:
  • Student Presentations

Week Seven:
  • Student Presentations

Week Eight:
  • TBA

Week Nine:
  • TBA

Week Ten:
  • TBA