

## **“A Useless Exile”: The Promise of Aesthetics (Winter 2016)**

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The modern abstraction of art and aesthetics from the contexts of their production has been read both as a necessary stratagem of their survival against reification or commodification, and as a betrayal of the ethical and political motivations that shape their development. The constant pressure to make art and aesthetics take on a kind of utility has, in turn, produced different spaces—of nothingness, of loss, of danger, even of mystery, what Blanchot calls “the empty place where impersonal affirmation emerges” (*Space of Literature* 55)—as if art and its theory were, in a sense, condemned to wander in the ruins of the sacred, in spaces of excess, profanation, and sacrifice. As Adorno puts it in his final work *Aesthetic Theory*, the artist embodies a kind of paradox, in which “the sharpest sense of reality was joined with an estrangement from reality” (9). For Benjamin, the aesthete takes on the role of an allegorist, as one who does a kind of melancholic violence to the art object, silencing it in order to project his/her own ontological significance onto its contours. In effect, the artist or aesthete is engaged in the construction of allegory; the objects of allegory are not mere clutter, mere dead things, but, in their transformation, become *undead things*—indices of that excess of life, of a decay very much in progress. As the course proceeds, we will discover that it is not merely that the metaphors of the sacred and profane have been transferred to aesthetic description, but that their concepts have instead shaped how we think about the ethical and political implications of their production, and how we narrate the “architecture” of the spaces they invoke. Art and aesthetics, in order to maintain their status as sites of resistance, of critique, of questioning, persistently turn against themselves, betraying not just the uncertainty of what art’s purpose(s) might be, but also how history itself erodes the heterogeneity of artworks. With Rancière, we will consider how how aesthetics (or, in his terms, the “distribution of the sensible”) is a necessary feature of developing an aesthetic consciousness that does not simply replicate the *status quo*. Instead, it explores the promise that despite being a product of a particular distribution of the sensible, that is, of a particular geopolitical and historical period, of a particular set of religious beliefs, the artwork is now nevertheless free of the conditions of its production, free to be art, and in this respect, makes another promise—the possibility of a community that is truly free, “that...no longer experiences art as a separate sphere of life” (*Aesthetics and Its Discontents* 35). implicates the subject in the production of an aesthetics of agency and dissent.

### **Course texts:**

*On the Origin of German Tragic Drama* (Verso) –Walter Benjamin

*The Space of Literature* (Nebraska) – Maurice Blanchot

*Visions of Excess* (Minnesota); *The Accursed Share* (Zone) (selections) – Georges Bataille

*Aesthetic Theory* (Minnesota) - Theodor Adorno

*Politics of Aesthetics* (Continuum) - Jacques Rancière

*Aesthetics and Its Discontents* (Polity) - Jacques Rancière

*Aisthesis* (Verso) --Jacques Rancière

**Distribution of Grades:**

Essay - 35%

Seminar - 35%

Response Paper - 10%

Respondent to Seminar (2) - 10% (each)

**Method of Evaluation:****Seminar Presentation (30-40 minutes) - (35%)**

The seminar presentation will consist of a broader critique, assessment, or analysis of the issues that emerge from the readings that week. You should think of the seminar as a kind of lecture in which you are attempting to teach the rest of us something about the theory, as well as exploring your own position on it. Further, you should be working toward developing useful or provocative questions that will help lead the subsequent class discussion.

**2 Respondents to the Seminar (2 X 10%) = (20%)**

The seminar presenter is not alone in teasing out useful lines of discussion; the respondent's role is to take up some of the issues or problematics raised by the presenter and work them in turn into fruitful questions that will be addressed not only to the presenter, but to the class as a whole.

*The purpose of these exercises is to encourage class discussion; in larger terms, it is also meant to prompt you to start thinking like teachers - to take up issues and make them the basis of exciting and dynamic debate and conversation.*

**Major Research Paper - (4000-5000 words) (35%)**

The research paper is to give you the opportunity to synthesize in more depth one or more aspects of the theory opened up by the course material. The topic is open, but should be determined in consultation with me. Feel free to come and consult me about anything you're puzzling over - let it be a case of "analysis terminable" rather than "interminable."

**1 Response Paper (10%)****Length: 300-500 words each**

The response paper is open: you may write a response to the any of the readings or concepts. They are meant to give you the chance to be playful and/or creative with the theory, work out a position on a text or point that haunts you like a "symptom," or work toward a thesis for your major paper. Have fun with it - or, at least, enjoy - your symptom!

**Class Schedule:****January:**

Week I: Introduction

Week II: Benjamin, *On the Origin of German Tragic Drama*, "Epistemo-Critical Prologue" (27-56)

Week III: Benjamin, *On the Origin*, "Allegory and Trauerspiel" (159-235)

Week IV: Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1-100)

**February:**

Week V: Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (101-200)

Week VI: Bataille, *Visions of Excess* (selections)

Week VII: **NO CLASS!**

Week VIII: Bataille, *The Accursed Share* (selections) (**RESPONSE DUE**)

**March:**

Week IX: Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (19-56)

Week X: Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (85-159)

Week XI: Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (209-248)

Week XII: Rancière, *Politics of Aesthetics*

**April:**

Week XIII: Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*; “The Dance of Light,” from *Aisthesis* (93-110)