

Centre for Theory and Criticism 2024/25 Course Proposal

Title: Earth Aesthetics in the Information Age

Instructor: Dr. Russell Duvernoy, Philosophy Department, King's University College

Preferred Term: Fall 2024

Rationale: The seminar studies the role of aesthetic theory, aesthetic practice, and aesthetic experience in the context of two pressing urgencies: the planetary ecological crisis and the yet to be understood implications of digital technology and the age of information. The course is interdisciplinary and pluralistic in spirit and methodology, drawing on texts and approaches from canonical and contemporary theorists situated through 'western', 'eastern', and 'indigenous' orientations. Though primary emphasis is on philosophical texts, it also includes several readings from practicing artists discussing implications of their practice. It should appeal to students with interests in ecology, eco-criticism, comparative philosophy, aesthetics, philosophy of creativity, and philosophy of religion broadly construed. Its content fulfills course requirements for the CTC's Group A.

Course Description: This course is fundamentally interested in the role of aesthetic experience and practice in responding to exigencies of change and transformation. These exigencies follow the intersection of two present realities: (i) the planetary poly-crisis summarized as ecological in the most capacious sense of that word; and (ii) the yet to be understood implications of ongoing emergences in digital technology and artificial intelligence. This seminar thus studies a triangulation between the aesthetic, the ecological, and information in the technical sense of that word as it emerges in 20th century theory.

In *Poetics of Relation*, Édouard Glissant observes that the dynamic of imperial globalization through the imposition of a single market is equally a crisis of imagination and aesthetics insofar as it relies on a single abstract and disembodied standard of sensibility and value. We might equally charge information theory, depending on how this is understood, with a similar leveling of diversity into a single homogenous matrix. Is this a necessary feature of the turn to information, or can information be understood in a manner that might include diverse embodiments, affects, and experiences without reducing them? How might a poetics and aesthetics of place dialogue with the turn to information so as to complicate its more reductive forms? Glissant for example, calls for "a revived aesthetic connection with the earth" (1997, 150). Similarly, Félix Guattari observes a similar need: "we need new social and aesthetic practices, new practices of the Self in relation to the other, to the foreign, the strange" (2008: 45).

And yet, given the volatility of the polycrisis, if such earth aesthetics are to resist capture by eco-reactionary forces of what Glissant calls exclusionary "root-identity", they must reckon with the implications of the relational sciences of complexity, relational ontologies that exceed single atomisms of place, and the chaos and the turbulences of the global information age. Placed in juxtaposition, these problematics suggest a tension between celebration of the unpredictable contingencies of a potentially anarchic creativity and understandable desires for collective response to the intensifying risk of ecological collapse. When Glissant asks: "Can accident, which is the joy of poetics, be tamed through circuits?" (1997, 139) can we understand how to resist the

drive to domestication while also responding to needs for communal response to catastrophe? What role might aesthetic experience play in negotiating these dual desires? If there is a need for a revived earth aesthetics or poetics, can we understand their genesis without prefiguring a single normative or teleological outcome? As such, can we conceive a transformative poetics and aesthetics that is neither a dogmatic and unrealistic rejection of the techno-digital nor controlled by the algorithmic prediction machine?

Because such questions return to fundamental issues of the source of meaning and the ontology of the imagination and nature, we approach them through readings drawn from different cultural and cosmological lineages (see provisional reading list below). This is one way the course performs its motivating question, insofar as the information age, for better or worse, presents us with an almost bewildering juxtaposition of different life-worlds and cosmological visions. What role might aesthetic experience play in learning how to thread some coherent and emergent planetary perspective that is neither reductive and imperial/colonial nor fragmented into competing or oppositional identities vying for dominance? We will struggle with this question, seeking to make sense of Glissant's claim that ultimately "The highest point of knowledge is always a poetics" (1997, 140).

Provisional Syllabus

Reading List: This list gives an idea of course themes and narratives. It is provisional and will change in precise details.

Week 1: Introduction and Motivation of Course Themes and Problems

Félix Guattari *The Three Ecologies*
 selections from *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant

Weeks 2-5: Survey of Aesthetic Theory, Traditions, and Questions

Classical: Plato, selections
 Aristotle, *Poetics*
 Longinus, *On the Sublime*
 Eastern: Tanizaka, *In Praise of Shadows*, additional selections
 Li Zehou, *The Chinese Aesthetic Tradition*
 The *Chuang Tzu*
 Francois Julien, *This Strange Idea of the Beautiful*
 Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, selections
 Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form*, selections
 Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, selections
 John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, selections
 Merleau-Ponty's essays on Painting
 Rodolfo Kusch, selections from *Indigenous and Popular Thinking in América*
 Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*

Weeks 6-8: Information, Sensibility, and Ecology

Michel Serres, "The Origin of Language: Biology, Information Theory, Thermodynamics"
 Gregory Bateson "Form Substance and Difference"

Gilbert Simondon, “On Techno-Aesthetics”, additional selections from *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*
Norbert Wiener *Cybernetics*
Lewis Mumford *Art and Technics*
Katherine Hayles, *How we became Posthuman*
Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble, Cyborg Manifesto*
Erich Horl “A Thousand Ecologies: The Process of Cybernetization and General Ecology”
Yuk Hui, *Art and Cosmotechnics*
Additional readings TBA

Weeks 9-11: Unit Three: Attention, Ethics and Creative Diversity

Jan Zwicky, “Auden as Philosopher: How Poets Think” *Once upon a time in the West*,
Zwicky, selections from *The Experience of Meaning*
Édouard Glissant, selections from *Poetics of Relation*
Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity, entire (Glissant)
Vine Deloria, Jr., “Relativity, Relatedness, and Reality”; “Reflection and Revelation:
Knowing Land, Places, and Ourselves”
Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine*
Jason Wirth, *Mountains, Rivers, and the Great Earth: Reading Gary Snyder and Dōgen
in an Age of Ecological Crisis*
selections from *A World of Many Worlds*, edited by Marisol de la Cadena, Mario Blaser
Additional readings TBA

Let the Artists Speak!:

“The Sublime is Now” Barnett Newman
Barbara Guest, *Forces of Imagination*
Fanny Howe: “Bewilderment” and other selections from *The Wedding Dress*
Agnes Martin, selections from *Writings*, including: “The Still and Silent in Art”,
“The Untroubled Mind” and others
Selections from Mei-Mei Bersenbrugge
Additional Readings TBA

Week 12: Reflection and Closing thoughts

Readings TBA

Assignments: Students will write one significant research paper and two shorter synopses over the course of the term. The research paper will include a formal proposal process.

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