

**The University of Western Ontario**  
**Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism**  
**9205A: “A Design for Life”: Aesthetico-Politics in Semiocapitalism**

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**Aarnoud Rommens, Ph.D.**

Monday 11:00-2:00

Somerville House Rm. 2348

Contact: [email]

**COURSE DESCRIPTION**

This course examines the (lack of) critical power of contemporary aesthetic philosophy in contemporary ‘semiocapitalism’ (Baudrillard, Berardi) and how to think technology’s role in disclosing this world. Does art—and by extension, aesthetic theory—still have a critical calling? Is subversion itself still possible in a culture where offensive speech seems the order of the day and the hyper-aesthetic and affective only generate more and more surplus value?

To frame the discussion, aesthetics will first be situated in its historical context. Starting with Kant and Hegel, we will examine how the aesthetic came into being as a way to think sensory experience in conjunction with the cognitive. From Kant onwards, aesthetics would become central to philosophical reflection and we will pay close attention to how theory attempts to make aesthetics politically productive.

A central premise of the course is the need for the recovery of negativity for a workable counter-aesthetics/politics to semiocapitalism. Rancière’s notion of ‘dissensus’ will prove vital in this respect. Taking Adorno and Benjamin as our guides, the course will also gauge the recent claim that affirmationism—the work by Deleuze and Guattari in particular, and Accelerationism in its ‘slipstream’—has been exhausted (cf. Noys, *Malign Velocities*). The close attention to obsolete technologies in the emerging field of media archaeology (Parikka, Huhtamo) further interrupts this breakneck speed and elicits the question: is it but a melancholy, allegorical science in the face of disaster, or is it a critical mimicry of the cyclical nature of capitalism, with its surges and slumps?

Indeed, capitalism has mutated, and so has aesthetic experience. Ngai’s highly imaginative retrofitting of Kant’s categories of the beautiful and sublime to the cute, zany and interesting, seems to suggest new subject positions and forms of activism. Since the proliferation of subjectivities (‘profiles’) is what energizes algorithmic capitalism, can we imagine a contemporary ‘poetics of the self’ (Nietzsche, Foucault) that has any critical purchase?

Perhaps we urgently need to come up with a counter-poetics to the control allegory of the ‘interface’ to explore the imaginative possibilities instead of the administration of algorithmic culture, as Galloway argues. Or perhaps we should ask ourselves whether the paradigm of semiocapital and immaterial labour is not a dead end. The ‘low’ theories of Gómez-Peña and Preciado remind us of the visceral effects of class, gender, coloniality and race—lessons in negativity by hyper-material, pharmo-porno labouring bodies.

## READINGS:

For most of the following titles, only **selections** will be required reading, and will be available through Owl or course pack. Additional readings listed in the Schedule (recommended, optional texts) will also be made available through Owl and/or course pack.

- Adorno, Theodor W. 1997. *Aesthetic Theory*. Athlone Press.
- Benjamin, Walter. 1977. *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Verso.
- Benjamin, Walter. 2008. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility." Belknap Press.
- Berardi, Franco. 2009. *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*. Semiotext.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1987. *Critique of Judgment*. Translated by Werner Pluhar. Hackett.
- Galloway, Alexander R. 2012. *The Interface Effect*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Gómez-Peña, Guillermo. 2005. *Ethno-Techno: Writings on Performance, Activism and Pedagogy*. Routledge.
- Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. 1994. *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. Penguin.
- Ngai, Sianne. 2012. *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*. Harvard UP.
- Noys, Benjamin. 2014. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. Zero Books.
- Osborne, Peter. 2013. *Anywhere or Not at All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art*. London; New York: Verso.
- Parikka, Jussi. 2012. *What Is Media Archaeology?* Polity Press.
- Preciado, Paul B. 2013. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*. The Feminist Press at CUNY.
- Rancière, Jacques. 2013. *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. Verso.

## COURSE MATERIAL

The course readings will be made available via Owl and/or course pack. The instructor will provide more detailed information during the first class.

Visuals will form an important part of the course. Given the nature of the course content, film clips, artworks, experimental websites ('gif novels', etc), weird comics, and so on will be used to illustrate some of the readings, some of which will be posted via Owl.

## SCHEDULE

*subject to change.*

### **Week 1: Sep 11: Introduction: 'Crapstraction,' Semiocapitalist Digestion, Excremental Aisthesis, or, Art as Absolute Commodity and Other Vulgarities**

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Introduction of the main conceptual, philosophical stakes of the course through a discussion of some recent artworks (Wim Delvoye's *Cloaca* series, Eduardo Kac, Tom McCarthy, Bjarne Melgaard, Kendell Geers, Adriana Varejão, etc. etc.). Practicalities.

### **Week 2: 18 Sep: Kant: The Beautiful and the Sublime**

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Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment* (selections)

Recommended:

Deleuze, Gilles. 1985. *Kant's Critical Philosophy: The Doctrine of the Faculties*. U of Minnesota Press.

Bernstein, J. M. "Judging Life: From Beauty to Experience, from Kant to Chaim Soutine." In *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, Stanford University Press, 2006, 47-77.

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**Week 3: 25 Sep: Hegel: Lectures on Aesthetics**

Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics* (excerpts).

Recommended:

Pippin, Robert B. 2002. "What Was Abstract Art? (From the Point of View of Hegel)." *Critical Inquiry* 29 (1): 1–24.

Nancy, Jean-Luc. 2002. *Hegel: The Restlessness of The Negative*. U of Minnesota Press.

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**Week 4: 2 Oct: Benjamin: Reproducibility, Allegory, *Denkbild***

Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (selections), "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," and other texts (tbd)

Recommended

Weigel, Sigrid. 1996. *Body-and Image-Space: Re-Reading Walter Benjamin*. Routledge (especially chapters 2, 4, 7).

**October 9-13 - Fall Reading Week**

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**Week 5: 16 Oct: Adorno: Aesthetic Theory as Negative Dialectic**

Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (selections).

Recommended

Hellings, James. 2014. *Adorno and Art: Aesthetic Theory Contra Critical Theory*. Palgrave Macmillan (especially Part II).

Martin, Stewart. 2007. "The Absolute Artwork Meets the Absolute Commodity." *Radical Philosophy*, no. 146: 15–25.

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**Week 6: 23 Oct: Bifo et al.: Semicapitalism, Cognitive Capitalism, Immaterial Labour: The Soul at Work**

Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (selections).

Recommended

Berardi, Franco. 2009. *Precarious Rhapsody: Semicapitalism and the Pathologies of the Post-Alpha Generation*. Autonomedia.

Betancourt, Michael. 2013. "Automated Labor: The 'New Aesthetic' and Immaterial Physicality." CTheory. [http://ctheory.net/ctheory\\_wp/automated-labor-the-new-aesthetic-and-immaterial-physicality/](http://ctheory.net/ctheory_wp/automated-labor-the-new-aesthetic-and-immaterial-physicality/)

Dean, Jodi. 2005. "Communicative Capitalism: Circulation and the Foreclosure of Politics." *Cultural Politics* 1 (1): 51–74.

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**Week 7: 30 Oct: Rancière: The Aesthetic Regime**

Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (selections).

Dean, Jodi. 2011. "Politics without Politics." In *Reading Rancière: Critical Dissensus*, edited by Paul Bowman and Richard Stamp, 73-94. Bloomsbury.

Recommended

Ferris, David. 2009. "Politics after Aesthetics: Disagreeing with Rancière." *Parallax* 15 (3): 37–49.

Rancière, Jacques. 2009. "The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge." *Critical Inquiry* 36 (1): 1–19.

\_\_\_\_\_. 2011. "The Thinking of Dissensus: Politics and Aesthetics." In *Reading Rancière*, 1–17.

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**Week 8: 6 Nov: Ngai: Minor Affects: Cute, Zany, Interesting: Kant 2.0**

Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting*.

Recommended

Ngai, Sianne. 2016. "Theory of the Gimmick." *Critical Inquiry* 43 (2): 466–505.

Wark, McKenzie. 2017. "Our Aesthetics." *Verso Blog*. June 27.

<https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/3291-our-aesthetics>

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**Week 9: 13 Nov: Galloway: Interface as Control Allegory and the Call for an Aestheticopolitics of Networks**

Deleuze, Gilles. 1992. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." *October* 59: 3–7.

Galloway, *The Interface Effect*.

Recommended

Chapter 4, "Allegories of Control," in Galloway, 2006. *Gaming: Essays on Algorithmic Culture*, U of Minnesota Press.

Jagoda, Patrick. 2016. "Introduction: Network Aesthetics" and "Coda," In *Network Aesthetics*, 1–37; 220-28. University of Chicago Press.

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**Week 10: 20 Nov: Anti-Accelerationist Aesthetics: Pedagogies of the Negative**

Noys, *Malign Velocities* (selections).

Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* (selection).

Shaviro, Steven. 2013. "Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption." *E-flux*. <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60070/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/>

Recommended

Deleuze, Gilles, and Félix Guattari. 2014. "The Civilized Capitalist Machine." In *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, edited by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian, 147–62. Urbanomic.

Williams, Alex, and Nick Srnicek. 2014. "#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics." In *The Accelerationist Reader*, 347–62.

Note: For recent revisions of Deleuze + Guattari as nihilist, crypto-capitalist philosophers of joyous, accelerationist affirmation of the coming apocalypse, see:

Culp, Andrew. 2016. *Dark Deleuze*. University of Minnesota Press.

Kaufman, Eleanor. 2012. *Deleuze, The Dark Precursor: Dialectic, Structure, Being*. Johns Hopkins University Press.

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### **Week 11: 27 Nov: Media Archaeology: Allegory and the Anthropocene**

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Hertz, Garnet, and Jussi Parikka. 2012. "Zombie Media: Circuit Bending Media Archaeology into an Art Method." *Leonardo* 45 (5): 424–30.

Parikka, Jussi. 2012. *What Is Media Archaeology?* Polity Press (selections).

#### Recommended

Elsaesser, Thomas. 2011. "Freud and the Technical Media: The Enduring Magic of the Wunderblock." In *Media Archaeology: Approaches, Applications, and Implications*, edited by Erkki Huhtamo and Jussi Parikka, 95–115. University of California Press.

Parikka, Jussi. 2017. "Planetary Goodbyes: Post-History and Future Memories of an Ecological Past." In *Memory in Motion: Archives, Technology and the Social*, edited by Ina Blom, Eivind Røssaak, and Trond Lundemo, 129–51. Amsterdam University Press.

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### **Week 12: 4 Dec: 'Low Theory' and Hyper-Materiality: The Insistence of the Queer/Colonial/Pharmo-Porno Body Politic**

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Preciado, *Testo Junkie*.

Gómez-Peña, *Ethno-Techno* (selections).

#### Recommended

Halberstam, Judith. 2011. *The Queer Art of Failure*. Duke UP. (especially "Introduction: Low Theory").

Preciado, Beatriz. 2012. "Architecture as a Practice of Biopolitical Disobedience." *Log*, no. 25: 121–34.

Thornton, Niamh. 2008. "Body, Nation, and Identity: Guillermo Gómez-Peña's Performances on the Web." In *Latin American Cyberculture and Cyberliterature*, edited by Claire Taylor and Thea Pitman, 111–22. Liverpool University Press.

### **Friday, December 8 - Classes end**

#### **COURSE ASSIGNMENTS**

- Short paper: 20% (2 x 10%)
- Presentation: 30%
- Final essay (5000-9000 words): 50%

**Note:** Depending on class size, additional in-class presentations may be assigned.

#### **ASSIGNMENTS**

All written assignments should follow either Chicago or MLA style. All text must be in 12-point type, double spaced, Times New Roman and on numbered pages.

#### **Readings and Participation**

Students are expected to come prepared with questions and critiques after a close reading of the assigned material. Thoughtful participation in class discussion is vital.

### **Presentation (30%)**

The presentation/discussion (15-25 minutes) reflects a critical/creative thinking through/interpretation (not just a review) of a selected reading. The point is to lead the class and articulate questions which will lead to in-depth discussion. You are expected to hand in a summary (2-3 pages) with discussion questions one week after the presentation, so you can incorporate feedback (if necessary).

### **Short Paper (2 x 10%)**

The short papers (6-8 pages; double spaced) critically engage with two readings of your choice but that differ from the material for your presentation. You cannot write on readings already discussed in a previous session. The papers should be handed in, in person, on the following dates:

- **Due Dates:** October 30 and November 13.

### **Final Research Paper (50%)**

The length can vary between 5000 to 9000 words; 6-7000 including bibliography is the ideal (and is in fact the average for submissions to peer-reviewed academic journals). Citations should follow either Chicago or MLA style guidelines (author-date, or note style: the point is to be consistent). All text must be in 12-point type, double spaced, Times New Roman and on numbered pages.

Use at least 2 of the readings addressed in class, the rest should reflect your own reading and research. The subject matter must touch on aesthetics and politics.

Contact the instructor with your ideas for the final paper beforehand. Topics can be discussed, and if necessary, students can send abstracts for the final essay to the instructor via email.

- **Due Date:** 15 December. Hand in a hard copy as well as an electronic version.

## **COURSE POLICIES**

### **Late/Missed Assignments:**

Students seeking academic accommodation on medical grounds for any missed tests, exams, participation components and/or assignments worth 10% or more of their final grade must apply to the Academic Counselling office of their home Faculty and provide documentation. Academic accommodation cannot be granted by the instructor or department.

See: [http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/accommodation\\_medical.pdf](http://uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/accommodation_medical.pdf)

For student medical appeal form, see

[http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/medicalform.pdf)

*In case medical/compassionate accommodation does not apply, a penalty of 2% per day will be deducted for late submissions (unless you've made arrangements with the instructor in person before the deadline).*

### **Statement on Academic Offences**

Scholastic offences are taken seriously and students are directed to read the appropriate policy, specifically, the definition of what constitutes a Scholastic Offence, at the following Web site: [http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic\\_policies/appeals/scholastic\\_discipline\\_grad.pdf](http://www.uwo.ca/univsec/pdf/academic_policies/appeals/scholastic_discipline_grad.pdf)

### **SCHOLASTIC OFFENCES DEFINITION**

Members of the University Community accept a commitment to maintain and uphold the purposes of the University and, in particular, its standards of scholarship. It follows, therefore, that acts of a nature that prejudice the academic standards of the University are offences subject to discipline. Any form of academic dishonesty that undermines the evaluation process, also undermines the integrity of the University's degrees. The University will take all appropriate measures to promote academic integrity and deal appropriately with scholastic offences.

Scholastic Offences include, but are not limited to, the following examples:

- Plagiarism - the "act or an instance of copying or stealing another's words or ideas and attributing them as one's own." (Excerpted from Black's Law Dictionary, West Group, 1999, 7th ed., p. 1170). This concept applies with equal force to all academic work, including theses, assignments or projects of any kind, comprehensive examinations, laboratory reports, diagrams, and computer projects. Detailed information is available from instructors, Graduate Chairs, or the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies. Students also may consult style manuals held in the University's libraries. See
- <http://www.lib.uwo.ca/services/styleguides.html>
- Cheating on an examination or falsifying material subject to academic evaluation.
- Submitting false or fraudulent research, assignments or credentials; or falsifying records, transcripts or other academic documents.
- Submitting a false medical or other such certificate under false pretences.
- Improperly obtaining, through theft, bribery, collusion or otherwise, an examination paper prior to the date and time for writing such an examination.
- Unauthorized possession of an examination paper, however obtained, prior to the date and time for writing such an examination, unless the student reports the matter to the instructor, the relevant program, or the Registrar as soon as possible after receiving the paper in question.
- Impersonating a candidate at an examination or availing oneself of the results of such an impersonation.
- Intentionally interfering in any way with any person's scholastic work.
- Submitting for credit in any course or program of study, without the knowledge and *written* approval of the instructor to whom it is submitted, any academic work for which credit previously has been obtained or is being sought in another course or program of study in the University or elsewhere.
- Aiding or abetting any such offence.

Evidence of wrongdoing may result in criminal prosecution in addition to any proceedings within the University.