

SYLLABUS
Psychological Aesthetics

Psychology 251, Fall 2014
W 2:30–3:30PM, TLC 207

INSTRUCTOR: Dr. Flip Phillips

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OFFICE HOURS: W 10:00-12:00, subject to change; also by appointment.

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CLASS URL: <http://www.skidmore.edu/~flip/classes/312a/>

DESCRIPTION: In this class we will examine the phenomena of the aesthetic experience and discuss whether or not it should seem feasible or even wise to attempt to bring scientific analysis to bear on it. Indeed, since the origins of experimental psychology there has been great interest in what makes a thing ‘beautiful’ and, at least in broad terms, there seems to be a few classes of things that are considered beautiful by consensus opinion. If we make this assumption the question arises as to what it *is* that makes these things beautiful.

Many hypotheses have been generated over the years as to these constituent parts of beauty. For example, symmetry, various ratios and relations including the oft-cited *Golden Section*, behavioral responses to color, and even biological / evolutionary / mating oriented effects have all been offered up as explanations for our percept of beauty.

Unfortunately, we have the slippery problem of defining *beauty* before we even get started. Several folks have gotten around this problem by examining *preference* instead, however this brings other possible systems into play as well. If you only had the choice of two cars and very little money on hand would you buy an ugly one for \$100 or a good looking one for \$40,000? If we take your purchase as being reflexive of your preference we run the risk of not understanding your true intentions.

These and other fun-filled questions will be addressed in this seminar. Be prepared to read and discuss a rather diverse literature, write a healthy amount, and finally perform some experimental investigation of your own.

READINGS: Various primary-source readings to be copied from the library or handed out in class. See the attached syllabus for more specific information.

ATTENDANCE: I would never force anyone to attend my classes. However, since a large part of your grade will depend on your interaction and presentations in class it will be difficult for you to get a very good grade if you don’t attend. There have been studies that have shown that a large part of the variance in students’ class grades can be accounted for by attendance. In my experience these results have replicated nicely. Ignore this at your own risk.

EXAMS: This class will have no exams.

PAPERS: You’ll have one healthy-sized paper due at some point in the second half of the semester. You’ll get more specific information about it in the upcoming weeks.

PRESENTATIONS: Here's the fun part. Each week, one or two of you will be responsible for presenting the reading for that week. Nothing formal, no overheads necessary, dress down, &c. However, I'm looking at how you'll be able to communicate the information and inspire some discussion. I want the discussions to be critical as well as informative, what is good about the positions presented? What is bad? Can you think of ways to verify / correct / replicate / overturn any of it? Think about it...

EXPERIMENT: The culmination of this class will be the performance of some sort of experiment by you or (preferably) groups of you. The actual experiment is up to your creativity, assuming that it has some basis in the subject matter for the course. As with the paper you'll get more specific details in the following weeks.

GRADING: Your grade will be determined as follows:

| | |
|--|-------|
| Paper | 33.3% |
| Experiment | 33.3% |
| Class Participation (including short reviews) | 33.4% |

If for some reason you have decided to take this class Pass / Fail the acceptable 'Passing' level of work is that of a typical 'B' for this class.

LATE WORK: Work that is presented to me late *without prior notice* will receive a 0. If something is going to be late get in touch with me. I fully reserve the right to give late work whatever penalty I feel is appropriate.

EXTRA CREDIT: There is no real way to get extra credit in this class. However, a wholly general solution for the psychological aesthetics problem will be worth a one-half letter-grade increase.

HONOR CODE: The "Skidmore Honor Code" is in your student handbook. Learn it, know it, live it. Cheating, copying, borrowing, forging, or otherwise representing something as being yours that isn't will result in *extreme* sadness on your part. Some of us professor types *plant* papers on the so-called 'information exchange' web sites. Turning one of those in would be quite embarrassing, wouldn't it? Just don't do it.

OTHER DETAILS: I *strongly* encourage you to use my e-mail to contact me since I am available electronically almost all day long. Alternately, my office phone has that new-fangled voice-mail so you can always leave a message. The web site will have current information also. I also recommend that you stop by the office as I can sometimes even be found there, well outside my posted office hours.

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Welcome to a seminar addressing some of the psychological aspects of experimental aesthetics. Why do we perceive things as being more beautiful than other things? Given that we usually *do* make these perceptions, what are the underlying processes that govern our behavior when making them?

The following is a rough outline of the subjects to be covered over the course of the seminar. After that, a preliminary list of readings that we will use. Read, digest, enjoy!

CHUNK 1: *Philosophy*

What are we talking about? Why should we care? Readings from Friedrich Kainz's *Aesthetics: The Science* on why aesthetics can be studied empirically and what it might be that we would study.

CHUNK 2: *Pre History*

The guy that started most of this was Gustav Theodor Fechner. We'll take a look at some of his stuff that has been translated and some other folk's attempts to reproduce and expand on his results.

CHUNK 3: *Biology*

Daniel Berlyne got the ball rolling with respect to the contemporary study of empirical aesthetics. He was very much convinced that aesthetic behavior was based on the same reward-system that behaviorism is based on. Now we get to take a look at it in the light of what we know now about the subject. Seems that some folks have recently taken Berlyne's ideas a little further into the realm of psychobiology. In this block of readings we'll see a few papers dedicated to beauty and the brain.

CHUNK 4: *Mathematics*

There have been several attempts to quantify aesthetic measure throughout time. We'll take a close look at some of the early models proposed by George Birkhoff, and the even earlier models based on the infamous Golden Section. Does it seem like we will be able to capture all the intricacy of beauty in a formula? We'll see...

CHUNK 5: *Cognition*

Based on some of the early mathematical models others have formed some testable hypotheses based on these models.

CHUNK 6: *Experiments*

Finally, we'll take a look at some empirical studies in a broad spectrum of artistic disciplines. Hopefully from this information you'll have some ideas for going out on your own and devising your own experiments for the class requirement.

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