

Philosophy 636
Seminar Aesthetics
Professor Eric Lewis

Topic: Black Aesthetics

Monday, 10:35-12:25

Leacock 927

Note: Seminars are open only to graduate students and final year Philosophy Majors, Honours and Joint Honours students, except by written permission of the Department. Please speak to the instructor if you wish to register for this course and you do not satisfy the above conditions.

In this seminar we will survey the field of black aesthetics. In particular we will examine those features of black aesthetics that have been viewed as distinctive of it, and how they differ from those features seen as characteristics of western (white) aesthetics. What features (including highly contextual and contingent features) do black arts have which suggest a distinctive aesthetics? What issues have black aestheticists focused on, and why? How does black aesthetics position itself w.r.t. issues and problematics seen as important to white western aesthetics? Two ways to approach these issues is to ask both what is “black” about black aesthetics, and conversely, what is “aesthetic” in black aesthetics. However, we will concern ourselves less centrally on demarcating the domain of black aesthetics (although the issue will come up, and come up in various ways) than studying paradigmatic examples of black aesthetics, and revealing the issues central to such a study, and associated theories developed, including disagreements internal to the field. The primary texts we will focus on are:

Black is Beautiful: A Philosophy of Black Aesthetics—Paul C. Taylor

Abstractionist Aesthetics—Phillip Brian Harper

Intents and Purposes: Philosophy and the Aesthetics of Improvisation—Eric Lewis

Art on My Mind: Visual Politics—bell hooks

Jazz and the Philosophy of Art—Lee B. Brown, David Goldblatt, Theodore Gracyk

Black Aesthetics finds its roots in the 19th century (if not earlier), and we will look at some foundational (and still influential) texts in this tradition. I will distribute a reading list of texts that it would be helpful to read, although I will not expect anyone to read them all (they will move from W.E.B. DuBois through Angela Davis, and many Black Arts Movement figures).

Black is Beautiful is a work that considers a number of issues the author argues are important to the field of black aesthetics and distinguish it from western aesthetics. It is written by a philosopher comfortable with analytic aesthetics, but also with other traditions of thinking about art. *Abstractionist Aesthetics* is written from a more continental perspective, drawing heavily upon assorted literary theories and

visual art theorizing. It argues for the importance of abstraction in black art, against the history and theory that foregrounds black representational and realist art. *Art on My Mind* (and other essays to be distributed) by bell hooks is an important and insightful collection of studies into the politics of representation and abstraction (among other issues) within the context of a black aesthetics deeply informed by critical race theory and feminist theory. *Intents and Purposes* is my attempt to show how aspects of black aesthetics, when applied to music, problematize certain central questions in the philosophy of music from an analytic perspective, and suggest novel solutions to, and new ways of considering, them. We will look at *Jazz and the Philosophy of Art* primarily as a foil, critiquing the positions the book argues for from a black aesthetic perspective.

Depending on enrollment, each student will be expected to lead the discussion one or two weeks, and present a write-up of the discussion afterwards. Otherwise you will be expected to produce a term-paper, developed in consultation with me, and hand in weekly discussion questions.

Grading schema

Term Paper: 60%

Discussion leadership and write-up: 20%

Weekly discussion questions: 20%

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