

POLS 4370 - 600: Aesthetics and Politics
Texas A&M University – San Antonio
Spring 2026

Time: Fridays, 10am-Noon
Location: OLC/CAB 351-B

Instructor:
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Aesthetics and Politics examines the deep and often uneasy entanglement between aesthetic forms and political life. Rather than treating art, literature, music, and architecture as reflections of political conditions, this course approaches them as active sites of political meaning, power, and resistance. We will explore how aesthetic categories like beauty, form, representation, taste, affect, and style shape political imagination and how political orders, in turn, condition what can be seen, said, heard, and felt. Drawing from foundational thinkers alongside critical and twentieth-century theorists, the course traces how aesthetic judgment becomes inseparable from questions of authority, ideology, violence, memory, and emancipation.

A central organizing theme of the course is the idea of an “aesthetics of existence”—the notion that ways of living, thinking, and relating to others can themselves be understood as aesthetic practices. In this sense, aesthetics is not confined to works of art but extends to ethical self-formation, modes of attention, political sensibilities, and the crafting of a life. Throughout the semester, we will ask how aesthetic experience can both reproduce domination and open space for critique, transformation, and freedom. Across multiple disciplines, this course engages literature, art, architecture, music, and more, not only as objects of interpretation, but as interventions into how political life is organized and how it might be lived otherwise.

Course Meetings

This course will meet every Friday from 10am to noon. The first class meeting will be held on Friday, January 23, 2026.

Virtual Office Hours

Time: Tue/Thu 11:00 am — 12:15 pm or by appointment.

[Schedule Office Hours meeting](#)

I will be holding office hours via Microsoft Teams every Tuesday and Thursday from 11:00 am to 12:15 pm). You are highly encouraged to make use of my office hours throughout the semester to discuss any ideas you have—big or small—pertaining to this course or your general course of study. If you cannot make the designated time, please do not hesitate to email me to set up an appointment. Click the link above to schedule a meeting.

Student Learning Objectives

Upon completion of this course, students will be able to:

Critical Thinking

- Analyze and evaluate how aesthetic forms (e.g. art, film, architecture, literature) shape political meaning, power, and collective identity.

- Apply theoretical frameworks from political theory, literary theory, and cultural studies to interpret the political significance of aesthetic practices.

Effective Communication

- Clearly articulate complex arguments about the relationship between aesthetics and politics in well-organized, well-supported written work that engages primary texts and visual/material sources.
- Present and defend interpretations of aesthetic and political artifacts in discussion and written analysis using appropriate academic language and evidence.

Social Responsibility

- Assess the ethical and political implications of aesthetic representation and reflect on the role of aesthetics in shaping public discourse, political persuasion, and civic life across historical and contemporary contexts.

Personal Responsibility

- Demonstrate reflective awareness of how personal experiences, values, and positionality influence interpretations of aesthetic and political phenomena.
- Develop an informed and self-critical perspective on the power of aesthetics in shaping one's own political understanding and engagement.

Grading

Your grade for this course will be based on the following: Writing Assignments (30%), Self-Assessment Assignments (10%), Critical Reflection Assignments (30%), Midterm Paper (15%), and Term Paper (15%). Submissions with vague and generic language that omit the specific issues/questions raised in the assignment prompt will get a maximum grade of 49%. No late submissions will be accepted for the Midterm or Final Papers; late work will be accepted for all other assignments for 48 hours after original deadline, with 30% being taken off for the first day and 40% for the second. No assignments will be accepted more than 48 hours late.

Grade breakdown:

30% Writing Assignments

10% Self-Assessment Assignments

30% Critical Reflection Assignments

15% Midterm Paper

15% Term Paper

Course Requirements

- **BlackBoard:** Each student will be expected to sign onto Blackboard regularly (I define this as at least once every other day). It is the student's responsibility to make sure they have regular access to a computer that can access the Internet (see me if you need assistance with this). I will use Blackboard for official class announcements so check your Blackboard regularly.
- **Readings:** All required readings for each class period must be completed in their entirety. Details and nuance matter in political thought, and the details are in the text.
- **Writing Assignments:** Posted on BlackBoard and due no later than 11:59 pm on the posted deadline. Writing assignments should be double-spaced, 12-point Times New Roman font, 1-inch margins, and no less than 750 words in length to be considered for full credit. Responses for Writing Assignments should address each topic/item in the

assignment prompt, labeled by number and in order (e.g. #1, #2, etc.). Writing Assignments will be graded in accordance with the rubric posted on BlackBoard.

- **Self-Assessments:** Following some Writing Assignments, you will conduct a Self-Assessment review of your work. This is an opportunity to develop your writing and communication skills, and to recognize your strengths and areas for improvement. See the Self-Assessment Guidelines for detailed instructions.
- **Critical Reflection Assignments:** Critical Reflection assignments are posted at the beginning of the week and due in class on the date assigned in the syllabus.
- **Midterm Paper** (5 pages, double spaced): Midterm Paper assignment will be issued approximately two weeks before the due date. The assignment will be a literature review on a topic of your choosing and will contribute to your Term Paper.
- **Term Paper** (10 pages, double spaced): Your Term Paper submission will be a research project that is developed over the course of the semester and will include revised content from Writing Assignments, Critical Reflections, and the Midterm Paper.

Required Course Materials

Buy your books early in the semester. Students with the use of a credit/debit card can also obtain course material at on-line merchants (e.g. amazon.com, bn.com, half.com, powells.com, abe.com) or from the student bookstore. I suggest buying used, if available, for a lower priced text. Alternate editions/versions/formats are permissible for this course. *Email me if you have any questions.*

- Glowacka, Dorota and Stephen Boos, eds. *Between Ethics and Aesthetics: Crossing the Boundaries*. State University of New York Press, 2002.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*. Blackwell Publishing, 1990.
- Saito, Yuriko, Ruth Sonderegger and Ines Kleesattel eds. *Introduction to Philosophy: Aesthetic Theory and Practice*. LibreTexts, 2025. [open source]

Course Schedule and Readings

Week 1 (January 19 – 25): Course introduction and overview

- Thoroughly read the course syllabus, Self-Assessment Guideline, and the Writing Assignment grading rubric.

Week 2 (Jan 26 – Feb 1): Aesthetics and Politics

- Reading Assignments
 - *Aesthetic Theory and Practice*
 - “What is Aesthetics?”
 - “Aesthetics and Politics”
 - *Between Ethics and Aesthetics*
 - Dorota Glowacka and Stephen Boos, “Introduction”
 - Terry Eagleton, “Aesthetics and Politics”
- Critical Reflection One due Sunday, Feb 1st

Week 3 (February 2 – 8): Poetry after Auschwitz

- Reading Assignments
 - Shoshana Felman, *Writing and Madness* (excerpt)
 - Paul Celan

- “Death Fugue”
- “Breman Speech”
- “Meridian Speech”

Week 4 (February 9 – 15): Literature, Testimony, and the Making of History

- Reading Assignments
 - Theodor Adorno, “After Auschwitz,” in *Negative Dialectics*
 - Shoshana Felman, *Testimony* (excerpt)
- Writing Assignment One due Sunday, Feb 15th

Week 5 (February 16 – 22): Methodology

- Reading Assignments
 - Allen Feldman. “Violence and vision: The prosthetics and aesthetics of terror.” In *States of Violence* (Fernando Coronil and Julie Skurski, eds.). The University of Michigan Press, 2006.
 - Optional additional reading: Diana Coole. “Experiencing Discourse: Corporeal Communicators and the Embodiment of Power.” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 9(3) (2007): 413-433.
- Self-Assessment One due Sunday, Feb 22nd

Week 6 (February 23 – March 1): A Kantian Critique of Aesthetic Judgement

- Reading Assignments
 - Werner S. Pluhar, “Translator’s Introduction”, in *Critique of Judgement*, by Immanuel Kant, Hackett Publishing, 1987.
 - Optional additional reading:
 - Rodolphe Gasché, “Linking Onto Disinterestedness, or the Moral Law in Kant’s Critique of Judgment” in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics*
 - Stephen Boos, “Rethinking the Aesthetic: Kant, Schiller, and Hegel,” in *Between Ethics and Aesthetics*
- Writing Assignment Two due Sunday, March 1st

Week 7 (March 2 – 8): Other-worldly or Human, All Too Human?

- Reading Assignments
 - Terry Eagleton. “The death of desire: Arthur Schopenhauer.” In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.
 - Terry Eagleton. “True illusions: Friedrich Nietzsche.” In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.
- Critical Reflection Two due Sunday, Mar 8th
- Begin work on Midterm Assignment

Week 8 (March 9 – 15): NO CLASSES: SPRING BREAK

- No assignments due

Week 9 (March 16 – 22): The Significance of Cultural Objects

- Reading assignments

- Walter Benjamin. "The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction." In *Illuminations* (Hannah Arendt, ed.). Schocken Books, 1969
- Hannah Arendt. "Crisis in culture: Its social and political significance." In *Between Past and Future*
- Optional additional reading: Terry Eagleton, "The Marxist rabi: Walter Benjamin," in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.
- Work on Midterm Paper

Week 10 (March 24 – 30): Midterm Paper

- Reading Assignments
 - Theodor Adorno. "Art, Society, Aesthetics." In *Aesthetic Theory* (Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, eds.). Continuum, 2002.
 - Terry Eagleton. "Art after Auschwitz: Theodor Adorno," in *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*.
- Midterm Paper due Sunday, March 30th

Week 11 (March 30 – April 5): DIY, the Punk Aesthetic, and the Art of Self-Creation

- No class meeting
- Listening assignments
 - *Propagandhi*, "I Refuse to Be a Man;" *Strike Anywhere*, "Infrared;" *Limp Wrist*, "Fake Fags;" *The Casualties*, "Proud to be Punk." *Reagan Youth*, "Degenerated;" *The Casualties*, "No Solution No Control;" *Descendents*, "Suburban Home;" *Bouncing Souls*, "True Believers."
- Reading Assignments
 - Jeremiah Day. "'The crisis in culture': Jeremiah Day on Fugazi and Hannah Arendt." *Kunstlicht* (2012).
 - *Punk Productions*
 - "Let's Make a Scene" [New York Scene & English Scene]
 - "Punk Versus the Commodity" [DIY Fashion]
 - Optional additional material
 - *Another State of Mind* (dir. Adam Small & Peter Stuart). [Social Distortion/Youth Brigade documentary]
- Self-Assessment Two due Sunday, April 5th

Week 12 (April 6 – 12): The Built Environment

- Reading Assignments
 - Saree Makdisi. "The architecture of erasure." *Critical Inquiry* 36(3) (2010): 519-559.
- Critical Reflection Three due Sunday, Apr 12th

Week 13 (April 13 – 19): An Aesthetics of Existence

- Reading Assignments
 - Marli Huijter. "The aesthetics of existence in the work of Michel Foucault." *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 25(2) (1999): 61-85.
 - Andrew Thacker. "Foucault's aesthetics of existence." *Radical Philosophy* 63 (1993): 13-21.

Week 14 (April 20 – 26): The Art of Living

— Reading Assignments

- Jane Bennett. “‘How is It, Then, That We Still Remain Barbarians?’: Foucault, Schiller, and the Aestheticization of Ethics.” *Political Theory* 24 (4) (1996): 653-672.
- Timothy O’Leary. “Foucault, Politics and the Autonomy of the Aesthetic.” *International Journal of Philosophical Studies* 4 (2) (1996): 273-291.
- Optional additional reading:
 - Jakub Franěk. “Philosophical parrhesia as aesthetics of existence.” *Continental Philosophy Review* 39 (2006): 113–134.
 - Daniel Smith. “Foucault on ethics and subjectivity: ‘Care of the Self and ‘Aesthetics of Existence’.” *Foucault Studies* 19 (2015): 135-150.

— Writing Assignment Three due Sunday, Apr 19th**Week 15 (April 27 – May 3)**

— Work on Term Paper

— Writing Assignment Four due Sunday, May 3rd**Week 16 (May 4 – 10): Finals Week**

— Work on Term Paper.

TERM PAPER IS DUE NO LATER THAN MAY 9th @ 11:59 PM