

# **RHETOR 198: A Traveler's Guide to Beauty: Art, Language, Computers, Love, Trying**

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Time/Place: TBD

Course Sponsor: David W. Bates

## Facilitator information:

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## Course Description:

The goal of this class is to explore the nature of beauty in our lives, our environments, and the world at large. Through the examination of art, philosophy, mathematics, computer science, and linguistics, we will discuss the vastness of meaning tied to love, beauty, morality, and culture, and determine threads of connectivity between these things. We will offer multiple perspectives on many topics, and hopefully, very hopefully, the student in this course will exit with nuanced addition to their perspective on life. This class caters to individuals with inclinations towards the cross-disciplinary, an openness to strangeness, and an appreciation for their fellow traveler. Applications are required due to limited seats. 2 units are offered in a P/NP setting.

## Pedagogical Methodology: Fun, Experience, Trying:

This class will be discussion based; there will be guided lectures with emphasis on class participation, but content will largely be explicated through open discussion. Readings/viewings/listenings will be given weekly, and short assignments will be given to support topic comprehension and application. This class will be of small size, so as to promote openness and friendship. In essence, we hope that we can become friends, as intellectual discussion between friends can often be the purest and most revelatory! There will be writing involved in the coursework, as well as a project asking for artistic creation. Depending on the backgrounds of enrolled students, the course will be adjusted to accommodate more or less technical rigor (concerning mainly mathematics, linguistics and computer science), but overall we do not wish to overwhelm students with technical material, and most (if not all) topics will be discussed from a solely conceptual (and non-technical) basis.

### Prerequisites (non-mandatory):

At least one upper division course in at least one of the following subjects:

Computer Science/Data Science, Rhetoric, Philosophy, Literature, Linguistics, Mathematics, Cognitive Science, Music, Art (of any discipline).

and/or: a background/extracurricular interest in one or more of these subjects

If these prerequisites do not apply to you, please apply anyways! Applications will NOT be scrutinized based on academic backgrounds/skills; we just want to get to know you a little.

### Grading and Point Distribution:

Assignments will be graded holistically, and by an engagement based metric. This means: if you **try**, you will get really good grades on everything. If you show up to class and participate in discussions, you will get really good grades on everything. At the end of the day, this class is only worthwhile for people who truly care about learning things and thinking about them. If this describes you, it is very likely that you will, again, get really good grades on everything. We want you to want to be here. Grades will be distributed as follows:

Attendance/discussion participation:	50%
Course Essay:	10%
Artistic Offering:	10%
Final:	20%
Weekly Assignments:	10%

### Assignments:

Other than the Course Essay, Art Project, and Final, there are two types of assignments which occur in this class:

#### **Language-Games**

Inspired by Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, language-game assignments in this class are given to allow students to apply concepts learned during each unit of the course, through the medium of language. These assignments usually take the form of short written pieces or linguistic exercises, and require a submission on BCourses or on paper. Language-games are graded by the sole metric of completion.

#### **Intangibles**

Intangible assignments include activities which do not pertain specifically to the course material, and do not entail any submissions or proof of completion. Intangibles are often abstract or humorous editions of lightheartedness. You

will be able to tell if an assignment is intangible if it does not include a prompt for submission. \*INTANGIBLE ASSIGNMENTS ARE **OPTIONAL** WITHOUT EXCEPTION\*

### \*Extra Credit Policy\*

Necessities/non-perishable food donations, community service, or activism will translate to generous extra credit in this class. This will be honor based—meaning you do not need to offer proof of these things, but don't lie about stuff like this—it's not very cool.

### Submissions:

Assignments will be submitted through the class BCourses page, other than the final exam. Art submissions can—with student permission—be published in a course journal, which will be curated throughout/after the semester. There will also be flexibility for musical performances/film screenings if applicable.

### Readings:

\*Readings and viewings will be either free online, or provided by the facilitators. A subscription to a music streaming platform may be helpful, but musical materials will hopefully be available for free somewhere online. If this is not the case, we will integrate relevant listenings into the lecture.

### Accommodations:

We are committed to accommodating students with disabilities, strenuous external circumstances, and any other challenges that may arise throughout the course of the semester. We do not want to negatively impact the mental health of our students, and are always available to discuss problems regarding assignments, attendance, or anything else related to the class. Please feel free to reach out to us if anything comes up! We are here to help.

### UC Berkeley Disability/Accommodations Statement:

UC Berkeley is committed to creating a learning environment that meets the needs of its diverse student body including students with disabilities. If you anticipate or experience any barriers to learning in this course, please feel welcome to discuss your concerns with the instructors.

If you have a disability, or think you may have a disability, you can work with the Disabled Students' Program (DSP) to request an official accommodation. The Disabled Students' Program (DSP) is the campus office responsible for authorizing disability-related academic accommodations, in cooperation with the students themselves and their instructors. You can find more information about DSP, including contact information and the application process here. If you have already been approved for accommodations through DSP or are working through the process, please schedule a meeting with course staff so we can develop an implementation plan.

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### Course Schedule:

Week One (Jan 22-26th):

#### **Introduction, Description, Meeting**

Assignments: Add two songs to class playlist

Week Two (Jan 29th - Feb 2nd):

#### **Fiction, Syntax, Swirls: Language as Art**

Readings: Denis Johnson, "Car Crash While Hitchhiking,"; Ishmael Reed, excerpt from *Mumbo Jumbo*, perusal of GoodReads "Quotes by Ishmael Reed (Author of Mumbo Jumbo)" Lucy Ellman, excerpt from *Ducks, Newburyport* ;

Listening: Dragon New Warm Mountain I Believe in You (album) by Big Thief

Assignments: Write a paragraph. Do your best to make it pretty. Think about the optimization of your syntax. Have fun. Submit on BCourses or in person. Listen to music while you do it, perhaps.

Week Three (Feb 5-9th)

**Semantics, Analysis, Logic, Linguistic Incompleteness**

Readings: Ludwig Wittgenstein, excerpt from *Philosophical Investigations* ; Cynthia Ozick, "The Shawl" ; "On the history of whether natural language is 'illogical'", Barbara H. Partee

Listenings: Berkeley (song) by Lil B

Assignments: add another song to the class playlist. Do something nice for someone. Show someone something you care about. Look at the sun non-dangerously. Go in the water or something, I don't know.

Week Four (Feb 12-16th)

**Introduction to Trying, Failing, Love; Arthur Russell**

Viewings: Wild Combination: A Portrait of Arthur Russell dir. Matt Wolf

Listenings: World Of Echo (album) by Arthur Russell ; Love Is Overtaking Me (album) by Arthur Russell ; Futura Free (song) by Frank Ocean

Assignments: Take two particles (any two particles) and quantum entangle them. Start thinking about an art project you'd like to do for the class. It can be anything you are comfortable delegating as art. Look in the mirror and say one of those things from one of those horror movies. You know, where you have to repeat it a specific amount of times.

Week Five (Feb 19-23rd)

**Temporality; Trying, Failing, Love, again (continuity, abstraction, lies, all of it)**

Viewings: Blue Velvet (1986) dir. David Lynch ; \*optional\* Frances Ha (2013) dir. Noah Baumbach / Greta Gerwig

Listenings: For the first time (album) by Black Country, New Road ; Sound of Silver (album) by LCD Soundsystem ; Black Radio (album) by Robert Glasper ; Blue Velvet (song) by Bobby Vinton (once before, and once after watching Blue Velvet

Assignments: write a convolutional neural network for image sampling metadata organizational optimization and—while you're at it—solve our species' carbon sequestration dilemma. This will be 1000% of your grade. Find something funny and share it with us. Work on your art project.

Week Six (Feb 26th - Mar 1st)

**Culture, Policy and Morality; Suffering, Immensely**

Readings: Hannah Arendt, excerpt from *The Origins of Totalitarianism* ; Noam Chomsky, excerpt from *Manufacturing Consent*

Viewings: Monty Python, *Life of Brian*

Assignments: Hopefully the sun diffracts through the clouds like glowing penumbra. Think about writing. Staunch, buttoned up petticoat academics, the like. Submit comments on BCourses: how are we doing? What do you want to talk about?

Optional Extra Credit: Read *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin. It's so very good. You have until the world ends.

## Week Seven (Mar 4-8th)

### **Technology, Feminism, Aesthetica Esoterica**

Readings: Mark Fisher, "why i want to fuck ronald reagan" ; Donna Haraway, from *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century"

Listenings: Standing on The Corner (album) by Standing on the Corner; songs (album) by Adrianne Lenker ; ...I Care Because You Do (album) by Aphex Twin; Peroxide (song) by Ecco2k

Assignments: Tell someone you love them. Write a response to the readings for this week, and submit on BCourses or in person. Plant an organism of your choice. Add another song if you please.

## Week Eight (Mar 11-15th)

### **Cold cold water with lots of sediment: vectors and radiance**

Readings: Nick Land, "Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest: A Polemical Introduction to the Configuration of Philosophy and Modernity"

Listenings: Finally Rich (Deluxe Version) (album) by Chief Keef ; Scary Monsters and Nice Sprites (song) by Skrillex ; Verklärte Nacht, 5 Orchestral Pieces & Piano Works (album) by Arnold Schoenberg

Assignments: Figure everything out, right now. We'll start thinking about the class essay, for which you may take one or more topics/sources from the course and, using your big smart brain, write an essay which introduces a novel idea or connection between these ideas. The essay is due at the end of the semester. Sit outside for a while. It's good for you.

## Week Nine (Mar 18-22nd)

### **Acceleration, flux, spark, shock or: Because the Internet**

Readings: Alvin Toffler, excerpt from *Future Shock* ; Ray Kurzweil, excerpt from *The Age of Spiritual Machines*; 0(rphan)d(rift>), excerpt from *Cyberpositive*

Listenings: Faceshopping (song) by SOPHIE ; ATLiens (album) by Outkast ;

Assignments: Write about what the internet (good or bad) means to you. Think about the first time you logged onto a computer. Submit on BCourses or in person.

Week Ten (Mar 25-29th)

**Continuous Reality, with elements of surprise**

excerpt from *Simulation and Simulacrum* by Jean Baudrillard ; "notes on cronenberg's eXistenZ", Mark Fisher

Listenings: A Seat at the Table (album) by Solange ; Atrocity Exhibition (album) by Danny Brown ; Hubris (album) by Oren Ambarchi

Assignments: be the change you wish to see in the world. Art project. Be reminded that we are always available to chat about random whims, thoughts, queries, things, objects. Call, text, show up unannounced.

Week Eleven (Apr 1-5th)

**Analogy, Creativity, Yoneda, Cognitive Models (the abstract underrecognized art of keeping my composure)**

Readings: "Introduction to Category Theory and the Yoneda Lemma" by Shu-Nan Justin Chang (optional: Bartosz Milewski youtube lectures); "Machine Creativity in the Face of Certain Death" by Carmichael Schlusse

Viewings: "Analogy as the Core of Cognition" (youtube) Douglas Hofstadter, Stanford University

Listenings: Hold Your Horse Is (album) by Hella ; TNT (album) by Tortoise ; Amplifier Worship (album) by Boris

Assignments: Take a word of your choice and deconstruct it through analogical analysis. In order to understand `x_word`, what words/things must you already know?) Submit on BCourses or in person. **Important:** You may not use `while`, `for`, or list comprehensions in your implementation. Use recursion.

Week Twelve (Apr 8-12th)

**Identifying My Own Insecurities In Some Kind of Fucked Up Game-like Schema: Latex, Dimensions**

Readings: "Fragmented But Rational", and "Context Probabilism", Seth Yalcin ; "On Being Alone", Elizabeth Bishop

Listenings: You decide! It's your turn to assign us music.

Assignments: Donate something somewhere, add a song, or two or three.

### Week Thirteen (Apr 15-19th)

#### **Absolution; poetry, everything is the most beautiful thing in the world**

Readings: "Avenue A", Frank O'Hara ; "why i love you more than anything", Whitman Thorsen ; "In Prison", Elizabeth Bishop ; "The Photomancer", Geoffrey Brock ; "the fear of being loved", Sisyphus 55 (youtube) "Words For Love", Ted Berrigan

Listenings: Space Heavy (album) by King Krule ; Yankee Hotel Foxtrot (album) by Wilco ; Hope (song) by Blood Orange (with [quite] strong encouragement to listen to composite album)

Assignments: Love your friends for they are the best reason. Write a poem; share if you want but write it because you're so beautiful.

### Week Fourteen (Apr 22-26th)

#### **The True State Of All Things**

Readings: "This is Water", David Foster Wallace ; "And Leaving in a Great Smoky Fury", Frank O'Hara

Listenings: Farewell Transmission (song) by Songs: Ohia ; Microphones in 2020 (song) by the Microphones (Phil Elverum)

Assignments: Make sure your assignments, your essay, and your art project are submitted before the grade deadline. Celebrate birthdays, keep in touch, we love you.