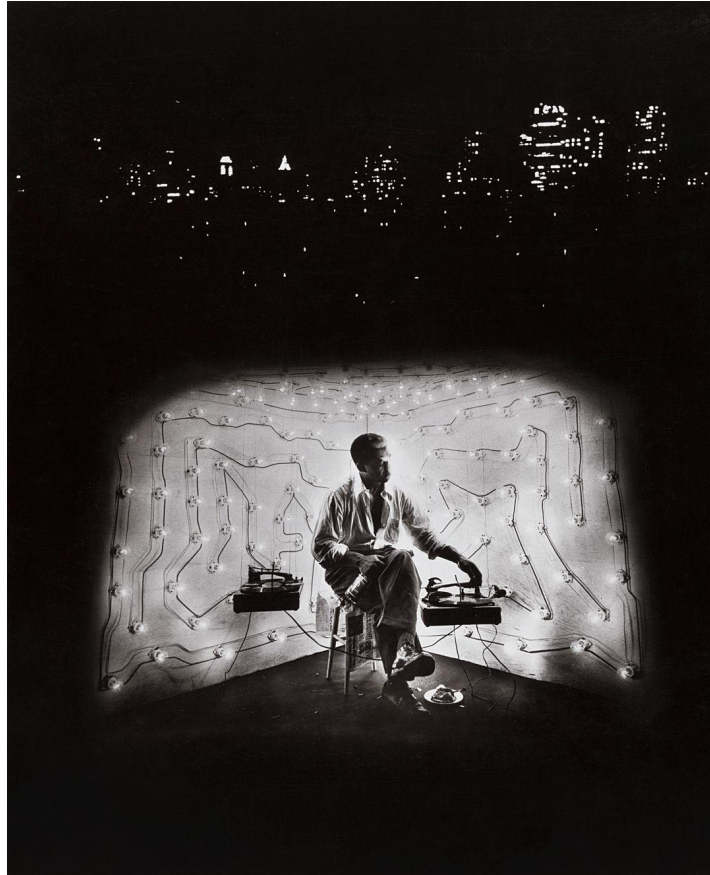


PLPT 4500: Aesthetics and Politics

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Wednesdays, 5:00-7:30, Monroe Hall 114
Office Hours by appointment



Gordon Parks, *Invisible Man Retreat*. Harlem, New York, 1952

While aesthetics are an enduring, expansive concern of political thought, the subject has gained increased attention from political theorists over the past thirty years. The study of aesthetics and politics is interdisciplinary, and covers a diverse array of topics and concepts, including the study of representation, narratives of identity, the performance of protest and citizenship, rhetoric, ideas of beauty, visions of the body politic, and political imagination, among many others. Our course will center on contemporary works, with particular attention to the role aesthetics plays in racial politics, with Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* as a focal point of our reflections. How is race constructed, and how have artists, intellectuals, and social movements contested its meanings? How does race shape “visions” of democratic community, its past and future? What is involved in imagining something otherwise?

Grading

Participation (20%)

- a. Attendance is mandatory for every session, absent unavoidable scheduling conflicts. Students with more than one unexcused absence will receive a penalty to their class participation grade. Please email me if you will not be able to attend.
- b. Each of the texts assigned deserve careful, respectful reading (I will offer some guidelines on effective reading practices on our first day). Students are expected to bring assigned readings to class.
- c. Participants in this seminar are expected to post three questions and provocations on the course's Collab forums each week, due by **noon** the day of class. Constructive engagement with other students' responses is strongly encouraged and counts toward your three posts! When coming up with your thoughts, try to connect the day's readings to the themes of other texts we have explored, and to the overarching themes which have emerged for you in the course as a whole.

Reviews (20%)

Midterm (20%)

Research Paper (40%)

Assignments

1. *Reviews*

Students are expected to complete 750-word reviews of three assigned readings. Reviews should cover the basics of the author's argument, and then offer questions, challenges, and creative connections to at least two other readings; the latter may be from any week. Placing these reviews in conversation with current events, outside readings, and media is encouraged! Students are exempted from posting questions on Collab the week they complete their review. Reviews are **due by noon** the day a reading is to be discussed.

2. *Midterm*

For your midterms, I will ask you to write a 5-page paper reflecting on at least two of the authors or perspectives we have discussed in conversation with a current aesthetic debate, work, or event. This is an opportunity to be expansive in your engagement of media—readings of photography, music, performance, movies, and other media are encouraged. The aim of this assignment is to look in new ways at the aesthetic politics of our everyday world, shedding light both on the latter and the concepts and arguments we have studied so far.

Examples of topics include:

- The aesthetics of protests (e.g. protest signs, songs, dress, media representations)
- Contrasting imaginations of “the people” offered by movements, media, and representatives (e.g. in State of the Union addresses, the rhetoric of social movements, folk music, television commercials)
- Practices of aesthetic freedom (e.g. musical improvisation, art in public, fashion)

- Public memory and representations of the past (e.g. public discussion surrounding monuments, textbooks, the 1619 project)
- Citizenship as performance (e.g. “voting selfies,” sharing on social media, public expressions of national identity or patriotism)
- Strategies by which politicians are represented (e.g. campaign ads, styles of speech, fashion, rhetoric)

3. *Research Papers*

Your final paper will center on readings of Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man*. Using the methods of close-reading we learned over the course of the semester, you will offer an original, 8-10 page argument as to the insights Ellison’s novel offers students of the aesthetic facets of racial politics. Your paper will be graded on the basis of the quality of the reading you offer, as well as the clarity and originality with which you apply that reading to broader debates.

Readings

8/25 Introduction

- Ralph Ellison, “Prologue” to *Invisible Man*

I. Perspectives on Aesthetics and Politics

9/1 Aesthetic Politics and Its Critics

- Richard Iton, *In Search of the Black Fantastic*, ch. 1
- Martin Jay, “The Aesthetic Ideology”
- Nikolas Kompridis, “Turning and Returning: The Aesthetic Turn in Political Thought”

9/8 Aesthetics and Democratic Culture

- Walt Whitman, *Democratic Vistas*
- W.E.B. Du Bois, “Of Our Spiritual Strivings”

9/15 Aesthetics and World-Making

- Hannah Arendt, “Action”
- Nathaniel Mackey, “Other: From Noun to Verb”

9/22 Aesthetics and Peoplehood

- Adom Getachew, “A ‘Common Spectacle’ of the Race: The Visual Politics of Founding in the Age of Garveyism”
- Jason Frank, *Democratic Sublime: On Aesthetics and Popular Assembly*, Introduction and ch. 3

II. Making Race

9/29 Narratives of Identity

- Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark* (all)

10/6 Race and Vision

- Linda Alcoff, *Visible Identities: Race, Gender, and the Self*, ch.’s 7 and 8
- George Yancy, “White Embodied Gazing, the Black Body as Disgust, and the Aesthetics of Un-Suturing”

10/13 Race and Sound

- Kevin Young, *The Grey Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (selections)
- Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination*, ch. 1

Midterms due by midnight of Sunday, 10/17

III. “Invisible Citizenship”

10/20 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*

10/27 *Invisible Man* (cont’d)

IV. Aesthetics and Freedom

11/3 Beyond Vision

- Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (selections)
- Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom, 1850-1910* (Introduction, ch. 1)

11/10 Race, Sexuality, and Insurgent Freedom

- Saidiya Hartman, *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (selections)

11/17 Hartman (cont’d)

Presentation of final paper outlines on 11/17

11/24 NO CLASS

12/1 Insurgent Possibility

- Nicole Fleetwood, *Marking Time: Art in the Age of Mass Incarceration*, Intro, ch.’s 1-2, 6

Final papers due by midnight of Sunday, 12/12