

**The Hong Kong University of Science and Technology**

**Division of Arts and Machine Creativity (AMC)**

**AMCC5410, in Fall 2025/26**

**Course code:** AMCC5410 (3 credits)  
**Course title:** Art Theory: Past and Future  
**Abbreviated title:** NA  
**Course instructor:** Dr. Vennes Cheng  
**Target students:** MA, MPhil, PhD students of AMC program  
**Class quota:** 35  
**Grading requirement:** Letter grades

**Course description:** This course is a survey of different approaches to the interpretation of art and their influence on artistic creation through time. By reviewing the traditions of art theory from its very beginning in the 15th century to the 20th century, the course guides students to think critically about the theoretical bases of different approaches, and to contemplate art in the age of AI in the 21st century. Students will learn to use the key terms and definitions of the approaches and their applications as well as the criticisms of the approaches.

**Enrolment requirement:** N.A.

**Course Intended Learning Outcomes**

On successful completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Understand the major Western art theories from antiquity to the 21st century.
2. Utilise the terminology of art theories for the interpretation and communication of art.
3. Analyse art from philosophical, historical, cultural and social perspectives.
4. Develop new ideas for a possible art theory for machine-generated art of the 21st century.

**Teaching and learning activities:**

Lecture: 39 hours

Self-study activities and assessment: 98 hours

**Total learning hours of the course: 137 hours**

**Planned Assessment & Weightings:**

Assessment	Percentage
In-class presentation and discussion	15%
Mid-term quiz	30%
Final Paper Development	15%
Final Paper	30%
Attendance	10%

**Week 1: Antiquity and Humanism**

**Week 2: Enlightenment**

**Week 3: Modernity**

**Week 4: Phenomenology and Formalism**

Week 5: Psychoanalysis  
 Week 6: Marxist theories and Frankfurt school  
 Week 7: Structuralism and Poststructuralism  
 Week 8: Postmodern theories on art / Postmodern network theory  
 Week 9: Postcolonial Theory  
 Week 10: Contemporary conditions  
 Week 11: Transhumanism/ Digital existence/ Feminism  
 Week 12: Posthuman future  
 Week 13: Theories of digital art/machine generated art

#### Weekly Course Outline

Week	Topics	Briefly outline what this topic will cover (Include reading assignments if available)	Indicate which course ILOs this topic is related to (Write CILO-1, CILO-2, etc.)
1	<b>Antiquity and Humanism</b>	Beginning with Plato's ideas about art and Aristotle's poetics, this week introduces Ancient Greek philosophical thought on art, science, and technology. We will explore how the concept of art evolved from reflecting the harmony and beauty of the universe to emphasising the role of humans as the central point of artistic engagement.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
2	<b>Enlightenment</b>	Covering briefly the age of the Academies in the 17th century and the way it led to the creation of a professional art theory, this section of the course covers the philosophical development of the Enlightenment (especially in the works of Kant) and the opening of the field of art theory into the public sphere with the creation of art criticism.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
3	<b>Modernity</b>	Starting with the philosophy of history of Hegel and the extreme importance it gave to art, this section also covers the development of art criticism in the 19th century and the beginnings of the idea of Modernity in art.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
4	<b>Phenomenology and Formalism</b>	With the development of extremely sophisticated advances in aesthetics and the theory of art, this section covers both the ideas of art of authors like Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty and the last development of a formalist art criticism continuing and concluding the ideas of Modernism in art.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.

5	<b>Psychoanalysis</b>	The influence of writers like Freud and Lacan was immense on the art theory and the art making of the early 20th century. From texts on art of Freud and Lacan to the writings of the Surrealist theorists, this section also explores other ideas related to the exploration of the human mind in art making.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
6	<b>Marxist Theories and Frankfurt School</b>	Given that they emerged at different times, both Marxist and Frankfurt School theories examine the transformation of European society through the rise of capitalism, mass production, and advances in reproduction technology. This session explores the relationship between systems, power, and ideology in art-making, and introduces related key concepts in art, such as commodification, mass culture, popular culture, and the social attribution of art.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
7	<b>Structuralism and Poststructuralism</b>	In the 1950s, the advent of new disciplines and new ways of dealing with humans also led to entirely new ideas in art theory and art making. From the concepts of Lévi-Strauss to those of authors like Foucault, Barthes, Kristeva and Derrida on art, this section opens the chapter that also saw the creation of the idea of Postmodern art.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
8	<b>Postcolonial Theories</b>	By examining how colonial histories and power dynamics shape artistic production, representation, and interpretation. They highlight how art has been used both to reinforce and to challenge colonial narratives and explore how artists from formerly colonised societies reclaim agency, assert identity, and address cultural hybridity. Postcolonial theory also encourages the decolonisation of art institutions and practices, fostering more inclusive and critical approaches to art's role in society.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
9	<b>Postmodern Theories</b>	Postmodern art theories emerged in the mid-to-late twentieth century as	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.

		<p>a reaction against the ideals and assumptions of modernism. While modernist art valued originality, progress, and universal truths, postmodernism questioned the very possibility of objectivity, authenticity, and stable meaning in art.</p> <p>Postmodern art theories emphasise plurality, fragmentation, irony, and playfulness. They challenge the distinction between “high” and “low” culture, often incorporating elements from mass media, advertising, and popular culture. Appropriation, pastiche, parody, and intertextuality are common strategies, reflecting scepticism towards grand narratives and fixed identities. Postmodern theorists argue that meaning is constructed through context and interpretation, rather than being inherent in the artwork itself.</p>	
10	Contemporary Conditions	<p>Contemporary conditions -- refer to the time of after postmodernity -- are shaped by rapid technological advancement and globalisation, bringing unprecedented connectivity and access to information. However, these changes occur alongside increasing environmental degradation and persistent social inequality, creating a sense of uncertainty and disorientation. In this context, meanings have become decentralised and constantly in flux, no longer anchored to single narratives or authorities. Cultural hybridity is now the norm, as ideas and identities intersect and blend across borders. Our world is marked by multi-directional networks and deep interconnectedness, reflecting the complex, layered nature of contemporary human experience. This sees the emerging of new media, digital tools, and transnational collaborations in art and artists question traditional boundaries and embrace diverse influences, producing works that reflect fluid identities and shifting contexts</p>	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.

11	<b>Posthuman Critical Thinking</b>	What does it mean to be human? The late 20th century is an era of rapid technological advancement and ecological crisis, wherein the boundaries of the human are constantly being contested, modified, and redefined. The existing hierarchies of humanness in relation to human-animal and human-machine paradigms are being constantly questioned, and interrogated	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
12	<b>Cyborg, Digital existence, and Feminism</b>	As digital technologies increasingly blur the boundaries between bodies, identities, and virtual worlds, feminist thinkers such as Donna Haraway have embraced the cyborg as a metaphor for challenging traditional binaries, like male/female or natural/artificial. Digital existence enables new forms of self-expression and community, but it also raises questions about surveillance, representation, and control. Feminist perspectives highlight both the opportunities and risks of these technological shifts, advocating for inclusive digital spaces and critically examining how technology shapes power relations, agency, and identity in the twenty-first century.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.
13	<b>Theories of digital art/machine generated art</b>	The theory of digital art encompasses its definition as art that utilises digital technology, as well as its historical and philosophical roots in avant-garde movements. It considers distinctive characteristics such as interactivity, process, and a time-based nature, alongside its relationship to evolving media and cultural paradigms, including the “digital condition” marked by fragmentation and blurred boundaries between creator and audience. The theory also explores how digital tools facilitate new forms of expression and interaction, fundamentally shifting both the conceptualisation and experience of art.	CILO 1, 2, 3, 4.

**Student learning resources: (on next pages)**

## **Student group presentation schedule**

### **Week 1 and Week 2: no presentation**

### **Week 3: Antiquity and Humanism**

- I) Plato and Aristotle

Ross, Stephen David (ed.). (1994) *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany : State University of New York Press. (pp.7-75)

### **Week 4: Enlightenment**

- I) Immanuel Kant. *Critique of Judgement*
- II) G. W. F. Hegel. Philosophy of Fine Art

Ross, Stephen David (ed.). (1994) *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany : State University of New York Press. (pp.93 - 159)

### **Week 5: Modernity**

- I) Friedrich Nietzsche 'How the "True World" Finally Became a Fable" The History of an Error 'The Will to Power as Art'

In Kul-Want, Christopher (Ed). *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010 (pp. 60-73)

- II) Baudelaire, Painter of Modernity

[https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Baudelaire\\_Painter-of-Modern-Life\\_1863.pdf](https://www.writing.upenn.edu/library/Baudelaire_Painter-of-Modern-Life_1863.pdf)

### **Week 6: Phenomenology and Formalism**

- I) Martin Heidegger, The Original of the Work of Art (pp. 253 - 280)) Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Eye and Mind (pp. 281 - 298))

- II) Paul Ricoeur. The Problem of Double Meaning as Hermeneutic Problem and as Semantic Problem. (pp. 383 - 398)

(all in) Ross, Stephen David (ed.). (1994) *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany : State University of New York Press.

### **Week 7: Mid-term quiz**

## **Week 8: Psychoanalysis**

- I) Sigmund Freud. 'The Relation of the Poet to Day-Dreaming' (pp.499 - 520)
- II) Carl Gustav Jung. Psychology and Literature

(all in) Ross, Stephen David (ed.). (1994) *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany : State University of New York Press.

## **Week 9: Frankfurt school and the rise of popular culture (technological reproduction)**

I) Benjamin, Walter. (1969). 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'. In Arendt, Hannah (Ed.), *Illuminations* (pp. 217-251). New York: Schocken Books.

<https://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/benjamin.pdf>

II). 'Adorno Negative Dialectics. Introduction' (pp3 - 55) [https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/adorno\\_negativedialectics.pdf](https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/adorno_negativedialectics.pdf)

## **Week 9: Structuralism and Poststructuralism**

- I) Jaques Lacan. 'The Mirror Stage as Formative of Function of the I of the Gaze as Object Petit' (pp.149 - 167)
- II) Michel Foucault. 'Las Meninas' (pp. 168 - 177)
- III) Roland Barthes. *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (pp. 195 - 204)

All in Kul-Want, Christopher (Ed). *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010

## **Week 10: Postcolonial Theory**

I) Homi K. Bhabha. *Location of Culture*.  
: Chapter 1 (Introduction) to Chapter 3 (The Other Question) pp. 1-84 ;  
: Chapter 8 (DissemiNation) pp. 139 -170;  
: Chapter 9 (The postcolonial and postmodern) pp. 171 - 191  
<https://ia601402.us.archive.org/11/items/TheLocationOfCultureBHABHA/the%20location%20of%20culture%20BHABHA.pdf>

II) Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak "Can the Subaltern Speak?"  
[https://monoskop.org/images/4/45/Spivak\\_Gayatri\\_1988\\_Can\\_the\\_Subaltern\\_Speak.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/4/45/Spivak_Gayatri_1988_Can_the_Subaltern_Speak.pdf)

## **Week 11: Postmodern theories on art / Postmodern network theory**

I) Jean -Francois Lyotard. 'Answering the Question: What is postmodernism' (pp.237 - 249)

In Kul-Want, Christopher (Ed). *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010

II) Bruno Latour, *Resassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press. 2005.

: Introduction to Part I: Learning to Feed off Controversies (pp 21-26)  
: Introduction to Part II: Why is it so Difficult to Trace the Social? (pp 159 - 162)  
: Conclusion: From Society to Collective—Can the Social Be Reassembled? (pp. 247 - 262)  
[https://pedropeixotoferreira.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/latour\\_2005\\_reassembling-the-social-an-introduction-to-actor-network-theory\\_book.pdf](https://pedropeixotoferreira.wordpress.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/01/latour_2005_reassembling-the-social-an-introduction-to-actor-network-theory_book.pdf)

#### Week 12 : Contemporary Conditions

- I) Gilles Deleuze. *Hysteria* (pp.228-236)

In Kul-Want, Christopher (Ed). *Philosophers on Art from Kant to the Postmodernists: A Critical Reader*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2010

- II) Trinh T. Minh-ha. *Woman, Native, Other* (pp.607- 620)

- III) James Clifford. *On Collecting Art and Culture* (pp. 621 - 642)

All in: Ross, Stephen David (ed.). (1994) *Art and its significance: an anthology of aesthetic theory*, Albany : State University of New York Press.

#### Week 13: Transhumanism/ Digital existence/ Feminism

- I) Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects*. Introduction (pp.1 - 46)  
[https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lfvvp7tgOFYHU2ozJawtqbQ5CP6gRSXN/view?usp=drive\\_link](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1lfvvp7tgOFYHU2ozJawtqbQ5CP6gRSXN/view?usp=drive_link)

- II) Haraway, Donna. (1985). 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s'. In *Socialist Review* (pp. 65 -107). UK: British Socialist Workers Party.  
[https://monoskop.org/images/4/4c/Haraway\\_Donna\\_1985\\_A\\_Manifesto\\_for\\_Cyborgs\\_Science\\_Technology\\_and\\_Socialist\\_Feminism\\_in\\_the\\_1980s.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/4/4c/Haraway_Donna_1985_A_Manifesto_for_Cyborgs_Science_Technology_and_Socialist_Feminism_in_the_1980s.pdf)

- III) *Posthuman Critical Theory*, Rosi Braidotti, 2017 (pp.9 - 25)  
<https://rosibraidotti.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/369.-Posthuman-Critical-Theory-1.pdf>

(Other readings are in this share point)

[5410 Readings](#)