IP120-15 Beauty

24/25

Department
>Liberal Arts

Level
>Undergraduate Level 1

Module leader
>Bryan Brazeau

Credit value
>15

Module duration
>10 weeks

Assessment
>100% coursework

Study location
>University of Warwick main campus, Coventry

Description

Introductory description

The Irish poet and philosopher John O'Donohue defines beauty as "the edge of becoming...an emerging fullness, a greater sense of grace and elegance, a deeper sense of depth, and also a kind of homecoming for the enriched memory of your unfolding life." Yet, when many of us think of beauty, we might find such a definition to be dissonant, considering beauty as something that is entirely socially constructed by the patriarchy, observable in mass media, celebrity culture, concepts of glamour, consumerism, and increasingly unrealistic expectations as described in Naomi Wolf's seminal 1991 work, "The Beauty Myth" and more recently also brought to light by the #METOO movement.

Such radically different approaches to the critical issue of beauty are not unique to our historical moment or our culture; beauty has been a key issue for critical thinkers across cultures for centuries and can be approached from a wide variety of perspectives.

Definitions of beauty can range from the transcendent possibilities of awakening one's love of the true and the good as seen in Plato and Plotinus; aesthetic discussions of what makes poetry beautiful in Aristotle and Tasso; visual debates on beauty in Renaissance portraiture; Natural landscapes and the experience of sublimity as described in Kantian thought; Musical expressions of beauty by romantic composers such as Beethoven, Chopin, and Wagner; early twentieth-century futurist conceptions of the beauty of machines; the beauty of great social movements in Soviet art; postmodern deconstructions of beauty via the use of pastiche, sampling, and collage in

the works of artists such as Andy Warhol and Grandmaster Flash; and redefinitions, reclamations, and resistance to ideals of beauty by Beyoncé, Britney Spears, Rhianna, and Lady Gaga. Beauty can equally be seen as a dangerous concept that was (and is still) used to justify the horrors of colonialism, to establish oppressive normative frameworks of gender, to reinforce existing social inequality, and as a framework that enables ongoing exploitative industries such as social media, fast fashion, or pornography.

This module will not tell you what beauty is nor how to think about it. Instead, it will challenge your existing preconceptions and encourage you to develop critical thinking skills around the interdisciplinary issue of beauty through encounters with theoretical frameworks, detailed case studies, and focussed problems. The module will combine a wide variety of perspectives drawn from disciplines such as aesthetics, musicology, sociology, art history, gender studies, media and communications studies, literary studies, anthropology, poetics, and other relevant areas of study.

[Module web page](#)

Module aims

This module aims to develop your critical thinking skills; your ability to assimilate, apply, and critique complex theoretical frameworks; and your skills of expressing an original evidence-based argument (in either written or audio format).

You will benefit from taking this module as it will provide you with theoretical tools and content knowledge that you can apply to future intedisciplinary study in Liberal Arts and in modules across the university.

Through weekly groupwork and problem-based learning sessions, we will work together to explore complex questions such as:

-Is beauty an objective universal concept or is it dependent on individual subjectivities and forms of socialisation? In other words, is beauty in the "eye of the beholder," or is it an objective characteristic?

-How is beauty expressed, encountered, or experienced in different cultures, mediums, and time periods?

-Can the experience of beauty be mentally, psychologically, and/or spiritually transformative?

-What does it mean to challenge, destabilise, resist, deconstruct, or decolonise beauty?

-Are there traditions of beauty that are worth keeping, reinventing, and passing on?

-What are the social and psychological consequences of ideals of beauty?

-Can animals be beautiful or is beauty exclusively a human construct?

-What makes a human-created space—whether a city, a neighbourhood, a building, or a particular way of decorating one's home/ arranging objects—"beautiful"? How have micro and macro geographies of beauty shifted over time?

Outline syllabus

This is an indicative module outline only to give an indication of the sort of topics that may be covered. Actual sessions held may differ.

The syllabus for this module is flexible as it will depend on the expertise of the module convenor and student interests. The module will always be interdisciplinary in nature, but will feature a wide variety of case studies which may change from year to year. An indicative syllabus may include case studies such as:

—Writing the Perfect Poem: Aristotle and Tasso on Poetic Beauty

—Beyond Orientalism: Decolonising Beauty in post-1960s Egyptian Cinema

—Musical Beauty and the Romantic Sublime

—Spreadable Spectacle: Beauty, Social Media, and Mental Health

—Manufacturing Desire: The Development of the Beauty Industry from Perfume to Fast Fashion

—Capturing Laura: Petrarchism and Beauty Ideals in Renaissance Portraiture

—Beauty as a Road to God: from Dante to O'Donohue

—The Problem of Pornography: Oppression, Exploitation, or Liberation?

—Natural Beauty? Crafting and Representing Landscapes

—Build Back Beautiful: Urban Debates on Rebuilding after the Great Fire of London and the Great Chicago Fire

—Kitsch and the "Cult of Ugliness:" Postmodern Approaches to Beauty

—The Beauty of "Progress:" Representing Social Movements

—Remixing Beauty from Britney to Beyoncé

—Absence as Beauty: Iconoclasm and Revolution

—Beauty and the Beast: The Acculturation of Beauty Standards Among Children

—Maybe She's Born With It?: Biological Approaches to Beauty

Learning outcomes

By the end of the module, students should be able to:

- Articulate their own definition of beauty and why it is an important critical issue
- Examine a case study related to the issue of beauty from an interdisciplinary perspective
- Critically analyse themes of beauty across cultures, disciplines, and time periods
- Demonstrate an improvement in their ability to express and structure an evidence-based argument

Indicative reading list

As the case studies will change from year to year, this list is indicative only:

Umberto Eco, "A History of Beauty"

Armina Srinivasan, "The Right To Sex"

Aristotle, "Poetics" (trans. Zerba and Gorman)

Kant, "Critique of Aesthetic Judgment"

Plato, "Republic:" Book X

Plotinus, "Enneads" VI.1

Dante, "Vita Nuova" (trans. Musa)

Naomi Wolf, "The Beauty Myth"

John O'Donohue, "Beauty: The Invisible Embrace"

Maxine Leeds Craig, "Ain't I A Beauty Queen?: Black Women, Beauty, and the Politics of Race"

Viola Shafik, "Popular Egyptian Cinema: Gender, Class, Nation"

Robert Bruegman, "Art Deco Chicago: Designing Modern America"

David Davis, "From Icons to Idols: Documents on the Image Debate in Reformation England"

Miranda Eve Stanyon, "Resounding the Sublime: Music in English and German Literature and Aesthetic Theory"

Debroah Gimlin, "Body Work: Beauty and Self-Image in American Culture"

Charu Uppal, "Over Time and Beyond Disney—Visualizing Princesses through a Comparative Study in India, Fiji, and
Sweden," Social Sciences 8(4) (2019):105. https://doi.org/10.3390/socsci8040105

Rebecca Sullivan and Alan McKee, "Pornography: Structures, Agency, and Performance."

Reina Lewis, "Gendering Orientalism: Race, Femininity, and Representation."

Kieth Christiansen and Stefan Weppelmann, eds., "The Renaissance Portrait from Donatello to Bellini"

Kiene Brillenburg Wurth, "Musically Sublime: Indeterminacy, Infinity, Irresolvability"

Leslie Higgins, "The Modernist Cult of Ugliness: Aesthetic and Gender Politics"

Research element

Students will conduct independent secondary (and possibly primary) research both for the initial essay draft and for their final essay/podcast project.

Interdisciplinary

All modules in Liberal Arts are interdisciplinary/transdisciplinary by definition. This module is no exception. It features theories and ideas from a wide range of disciplines.

International

The module will employ case studies from around the world. As students will have input into which case studies they would like to explore, the module will embody the best principles of representative curriculum design. Moreover, depending on the students and module convenor, multilingual approaches to the case studies, to groupwork, and to research elements will be strongly encouraged.

Subject specific skills

As a first-year core module, students who take this module will gain skills such as critical thinking, writing skills such as argument structure, learn to navigate interdisciplinary approaches, hone their reading skills (with regard to complex theory), gain independent research skills, etc...

These skills will be foundational for their future modules in Liberal Arts which will build on them.

Transferable skills

All skills gained in a Liberal Arts module are transferrable by definition.

Like all Liberal Arts modules, students on this module will learn time managment, project management (by working in weekly groups), critical thinking, and gain greater confidence in their own ability to express and structure evidence-based arguments.

In terms of personal development, this module will encourage students to think critically about their own preconceptions and to consider beauty from a complex and multifaceted perspective.

Study

Study time

Type	Required
Lectures	10 sessions of 30 minutes (3%)
Seminars	10 sessions of 2 hours (13%)
Private study	35 hours (23%)
Assessment	90 hours (60%)
Total	150 hours

Private study description

Approximately three and a half hours per week (on average) will be dedicated to readings, tasks between seminars, groupwork, and preparation.

Costs

No further costs have been identified for this module.

Assessment

You do not need to pass all assessment components to pass the module.

Assessment group A1

	Weighting	Study time
Creative Project	15%	10 hours

Students will be expected to submit a creative project that reflects on the material discussed during the term. The format of the submission can be textual, visual, audio, or audiovisual. 300 words, 3 minutes, or agreed equivalent.

	Weighting	Study time
First Essay Draft	35%	25 hours

This assessment requires students to submit a first draft of a brief research essay that responds to one of a list of set questions.

Students will receive feedback on this essay draft and then have the option of either learning from the feedback to address a different topic, or rewriting and expanding the essay for the final chronological assessment (2,000-word essay).

	Weighting	Study time
Critical Research Essay	50%	55 hours

This will be the main assessment component of the module. Students will have the choice of responding to a set research question or determining their own. They will be permitted to expand on the original topic in the earlier essay draft in light of feedback, or to learn from the feedback and produce their own final essay. In either case, this assessment will require deep and focussed critical engagement with a problem, case study, and/or theoretical framework emerging from the readings.

Feedback on assessment

Feedback will be provided on Tabula.

Availability

Courses

This module is Core option list B for:

- Year 1 of UVCA-LA99 Undergraduate Liberal Arts