

## **English 6311 Allegories of the Pastoral: Aesthetic Communities**

K. Valihora

Benedict Anderson opens *Imagined Communities* (1983) by noting that all communities larger than small villages with face-to-face contact, “and possibly even those,” must be imagined. What matters is the “style” of imagining. In this class we will explore a variety of different aesthetic modes, both traditional — picturesque, pastoral, gothic, the beautiful, the sublime — and more contemporary — camp, cute, kitsch, ugly, utopian. We will pay careful attention to the ethics of aesthetics, the formal means by which different aesthetic modes put demands, or not, on readers or spectators for forms of thought that might further the ends of social life. For the eighteenth century, for example, the beautiful was the aesthetic of community, that is, of a sense of shared or common tastes that undergirded a common sense of things. A shared love of beauty, the thinking went, fostered sympathy with others. The sublime, by contrast, was about the sheer power of the individual mind and imagination to overthrow communal constraints and conventions. Irony, satire, tragedy and comedy, meanwhile, are exemplary narrative modes because of the demands they make on judgment.

The class begins with classical pastoral, whose primary mode is irony, and then moves to the eighteenth century, tracking the twinned invention of aesthetics and civil society, focalized in the invention of the spectator and of impartial spectatorship, in the contest between the beautiful and sublime, and in burgeoning genres and modes, including the picturesque, the country house novel, the gothic, the interesting, the sentimental, and camp, modes we track into the present. Throughout we explore the idea of a community of taste, pace Bourdieu, through the perennial questions of class consciousness, insiders and outsiders, high and low. Theoretical and philosophical resources include Adam Smith on the tension between sympathy and impartiality; Kant and Schiller on the aesthetics of the beautiful and the foundations of ethical judgment; Hannah Arendt on the aestheticization of politics; Raymond Williams and William Empson on “structures of feeling,” Pierre Bourdieu on communities of taste as class structures, Susan Sontag on camp, and Sianne Ngai and Lauren Berlant on the affective and ethical dimensions of aesthetics.

### **Calendar of Readings**

#### **Introduction**

Peter Weir, *The Truman Show* (1998)

Susan Sontag, “Notes on Camp” (1964)

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#### **Pastoral, Satire, & The Cyclops Tradition**

Theocritus, *Idylls* (I, XI)

Virgil, *Eclogues* (I, II)

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**Burke's Sublime and Beautiful**

Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757)

Introduction on Taste, and parts 1, 2, 3, 4, 5

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**The Impartial Spectator, Sympathy, &  
Society as System: the beautiful whole**

Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, eds. D.D. Raphael and A.L. Macfie  
I.i-v (pp. 9-26) and III.i-iii (pp.109-156).

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**Class and Taste**

Pierre Bourdieu: *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (1970)

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**Class and Taste**

Bourdieu, continued.

Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" (1891)

Nancy Mitford, "The English Aristocracy" (1954)

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**The Aesthetic Community: Realism, Irony, Satire, Comedy**

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* – vols I and II

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**The Aesthetic Community: Realism, Beauty, and Picturesque**

*Pride and Prejudice*, vol. III

Uvedale Price, *An Essay on the Picturesque* chs. 1-3 (PDF)

**In Class:** slide show: Humphrey Repton's *Red Books*; Capability Brown and  
Humphrey Repton on Improvement.

Gainsborough to Constable in landscape painting.

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**Country House Fiction: Classed Community**

E.M. Forster, *Howards End*

(1910)

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**Aesthetic Community: the Beautiful**

Zaide Smith, *On Beauty* (2005)

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### **Aesthetics and Politics**

Readings on aesthetics and politics from Hannah Arendt, in *The Human Condition* (1958) and *The Life of the Mind* (1978); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (2011); Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012).

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### **Neoliberal Sublime and Tragedy**

Eleanor Catton, *Birnam Wood* (2023)

Shakespeare, *MacBeth* (1623)