

Summer Seminar on Beauty and Why It Matters

Report to the ASA Board of Trustees

The American Society for Aesthetics generously funded a three week summer seminar directed by Dominic McIver Lopes on the topic “Beauty and Why It Matters,” July 9th to 27th, 2018, at the University of British Columbia. What follows is a report on the process leading up to the seminar with an assessment of the seminar itself, including the results of a survey of seminar members.

Participant Selection

Soon after the seminar was funded, the director created a web site (beauty2018.arts.ubc.ca) containing a description of the seminar and how to apply. Applications opened on October 1st, 2017 for a deadline of January 14th, 2018. A call for proposals was posted on the ASA FaceBook page and philevents.org, and was distributed through email lists in philosophy and the main arts-related humanities disciplines.

Forty-three complete applications from eligible candidates were received by the deadline, to be adjudicated by a committee made up of the director, Professor Eileen John, and Professor Glenn Parsons. The pool included:

Junior	34	Senior	9
Female	18	Male	25
Philosophers	37	Other	6
North American	33	Other	10

In order to counteract bias, the selection committee scored the applicants according to five criteria: the proposed project’s potential significance, its fit with seminar themes, its feasibility, and its potential to contribute to the applicant’s professional development. The committee then met by phone to discuss a handful of proposals where the scores varied significantly and to finalize a list of twelve members (plus a wait list). As agreed with the ASA, the committee favoured junior and North American applicants and sought representation from a range of different types of institutions. A list of seminar members is available on the seminar web site. The twelve comprised:

Junior	10	Senior	2
Female	6	Male	6
Philosophers	11	Other	1
North American	11	Other	1

Of the philosophers, four are on faculty at doctoral-level departments while seven have teaching-intensive positions. All twelve have some familiarity with aesthetics, but some specialize mainly in art history, metaethics, epistemology, and philosophy of mind.

Seminar Preparation

Except in one respect, the seminar was closely modelled on the design of an NEH summer seminar. Whereas directors of NEH summer seminars set the seminar curriculum unilaterally, the *Beauty and Why It Matters* call for proposals merely sketched some possible themes and readings. Once the list of participants was complete, the director assigned them to interest groups (e.g. history, aesthetic value and the good life, aesthetic normativity, non-Euro aesthetics) and invited each group to propose readings. The aim was to tailor discussions to members' actual interests and areas of expertise. The downside was that the groups collectively proposed several months worth of reading! The director did his best to propose a three-week agenda—and further cuts were made at the end of the first week of meetings. A record of what was read is available on the seminar web site.

The web site also lists ancillary events. In order to give its members time for reading, writing, and informal discussions, the seminar was scheduled to meet from 9 am to 12:30 pm four days a week. Participants organized weekly reading groups on reasons and normativity and on Mary Mothersill's *Beauty Restored*. They also organized a work in progress seminar that met on ten occasions. Most of the seminar met for a lunchtime discussion of teaching strategies, tying together ideas about teaching that bubbled up throughout the seminar.

The director and his assistant, Servaas Van Der Berg, offered practical information for visitors to Vancouver, including information about housing.

Assessment

Seminar members were asked to complete an anonymous survey within two weeks of the seminar's conclusion. A summary of numerical data is provided in the Appendix, as are comments written by ten of the twelve (two wrote no comments).

Judging from the survey, the seminar appears to have met its main goals, to stimulate new aesthetics research and pedagogy, and to build a community of young scholars who will form the core of the next generation in aesthetics. It should come as no surprise that the pace left little quiet time: almost everyone attended all the optional side-events. As noted, the reading list was cut after

the first week: this was left to the discretion of the members of the seminar. Unfortunately, a heat wave built up on the south coast in the last week of the seminar, challenging the seminar room's ventilation, and attempts to relocate were unsuccessful. None of these issues impacted the seminar's success.

If I might be permitted to conclude by giving the director's perspective, I would say that the seminar astronomically exceeded my already high expectations. I attribute this to three factors, which I would advise anyone to keep in mind who plans a similar event. First, the topic of the seminar was fundamentally important, yet neglected, wide open for making quick progress. There could be no temptation to trudge through a canon, and the group reconnoitred many fresh and exciting lines of inquiry. Second, although one member expressed disappointment that we did not stick to the curriculum in the call for proposals, we ended up reading an exceptionally wide range of work, and we did this precisely because there were experts at the table ready to lead us through them. Some highlights for me were Abhinavagupta, Schiller, and Emerson—and they were highlights for me precisely because I am no historian. At any rate, I am convinced that fitting reading to people bumped the conversation up a level. Finally, the members of the seminar were very carefully chosen, not only for their complementary knowledge sets, but also for their collegiality and known aptitude for working as a team to explore a topic. NEH summer seminar participants routinely report that they learn more from each other than from the set texts. My head is exploding with what I learned this summer, and I now look forward to watching the cohort of 2018 lead the way in aesthetics.

Thanks are due to the seminar's members for their hard work and enthusiasm, to Servaas Van Der Berg for his astute contributions and his work behind the scenes to make things run smoothly, and to the UBC Philosophy Department staff for their cheerful support. Thanks also to the ASA for a grant of \$34,000, which made the seminar possible. Finally, to UBC for hosting and to x^wməθk^wəyəm, on whose traditional, un-ceded territory the seminar met.

Respectfully submitted,

Dominic McIver Lopes FRSC

APPENDIX
Seminar Evaluation Survey

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat Agree	Neutral	Somewhat Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean
The process for selecting readings was fair and inclusive.	9	2	1	0	0	1.33
The readings were appropriate to the themes of the seminar.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
The quantity of reading was appropriate.	5	7	0	0	0	1.58
Seminar discussions were moderated in a way that enabled me to contribute.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
My contributions to seminar discussions were taken seriously.	11	0	1	0	0	1.17
Seminar discussions were constructive; progress was made.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
I had time for reflection and writing.	4	6	0	2	0	2.00
I profited from informal discussions with other participants.	12	0	0	0	0	1.00
Unofficial events (e.g. reading groups) enhanced the seminar.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
The seminar director was open to diverse approaches and interests.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
The seminar director offered feedback, advice, and help.	12	0	0	0	0	1.00
The seminar director took efforts to ensure the seminar's success.	12	0	0	0	0	1.00
The seminar met in a comfortable and well-equipped space.	4	7	0	0	0	1.64
Campus library facilities (including on-line databases) met my needs.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
Campus facilities for culture, recreation, and dining met my expectations.	9	2	0	1	0	1.42
I would recommend this seminar to others.	11	1	0	0	0	1.08
I would attend another seminar led by the seminar director.	12	0	0	0	0	1.00
I would attend another seminar at UBC.	12	0	0	0	0	1.00

The seminar director went above and beyond. His directorship is the main reason the seminar was so good. The participants were extremely well-chosen. I learned a ton from each and am looking forward to remaining in contact with them. We gave ourselves a lot to read (especially if you participated in optional reading groups, which most of us did) but learned a lot. Vancouver is nearly the perfect place for a summer seminar—beautiful, great weather, so much to see and do. The only problem is that (for good reason!) it's a bit expensive. Finally, I want to say that seminars like this one deliver philosophically in a way that short conferences cannot. A conference simply doesn't give you the time to probe the issues in dialogue in a way a seminar does.

A fantastic experience -- I haven't learned so much in such a compressed period of time since grad school (or maybe not even then).

The seminar offered a unique opportunity for in-depth discussions on beauty. The debates and conversations we had were insightful and illuminating and genuinely shed new light on aesthetics and philosophy of art. It would be helpful to expand on these discussions and publish the outcome of the research that emerged from the seminar (e.g. in a special journal issue dedicated to 'Beauty and Why It Matters'). This would continue the debates beyond the seminar room. The way in which the seminar enabled me to think through particular questions in all their nuances was very stimulating for my own research so that I returned home with plenty new ideas on which I will continue working now. Thanks very much for making this seminar possible!

I think the reading-selection process--in which various topic-based groups proposed (way too many) readings and then the Director made the overall reading list--ended up skewing the topics we discussed. We ended up spending about a week more on aesthetic reasons/normativity than I'd expected going in. And some of the readings in that section--Levinson on intrinsic value, Ribeiro on aesthetic luck, Kubala on obligations--were not particularly useful, especially in comparison to the texts that were mentioned in the original proposal. (See <https://beauty2018.arts.ubc.ca/>, which mentions Wolterstorff, Eaton, Functional Beauty, etc.) I think these would have been deeper readings and, more importantly, they would have expanded the conversation in useful directions--directions I'd expected we'd go when I applied for the Seminar.

That said, I want to emphasize what an extraordinary job Dom did running the seminar. I have never seen someone in that kind of position participate so selflessly in the discussion. Even when he knew far more than others on a given topic (e.g. because he'd just written a book on it), Dom allowed the discussion to proceed democratically. He set a tone that was supportive and thoughtful and engaged, and that continued throughout the three weeks. Dom also went far out of his way, both before and during the seminar, to make sure we were well-supported in terms of logistics, outside research/discussion opportunities, and social activities. Dom's leadership of the seminar was really a model of how this should be done. I'm very grateful to him.

An extraordinary seminar that improved my capacity to work in the field immensely, that seems to have potentially changed the shape of the field, and gone a long way towards creating a community of scholars for aesthetics, especially among the younger generation.

The only worry arose, I think, from the slightly haphazard way in which the unofficial extra reading groups (formed by the attendees) scheduled themselves, which is entirely not in the hands of the seminar leader. Basically, after the formation of the Works in Progress Group and two other reading groups, and their slightly haphazard scheduling by seminar participants, made it very difficult to complete the reading on time. Many participants ended up reading late into the night. I'm not sure what the solution is, but an attempt in the future to make the extra reading groups a little more centrally planned, with an eye towards building in reading time, might help.

Otherwise: perfect, and life changing, and field-changing.

This was in my opinion, a nearly unqualified success: I think it would be hard to improve on the quality of the discussion, and I found the experience enormously helpful both for my own research and for my pedagogy. My one suggestion would be for future directors to be a bit more firm in limiting the amount of reading for the main seminar: it was difficult to keep up with the main seminar agenda until we collectively reduced the amount of reading midway through. Some guidelines upfront during the agenda-setting would have been helpful!

The participants originally suggested too much reading, so the adjustment of cutting some of the readings was quite valuable. It would have been a bit nicer to start later in the morning and/or the afternoon. It might have also been helpful to spend some time at the end of each week trying to recap some of the major themes that had come up. Perhaps someone could have been assigned to do this for each week or different sections of each week. This suggestion reflects the fact that at some point, the pace of the seminar made it feel a bit difficult to keep all of the material straight in one's head. So moments for re-capping, in addition to the last day, would have been helpful.

Dom was a fantastic director. He created a dynamic that was egalitarian, dynamic, and productive.

Overall, it was an experience unlike any other I have had in philosophy. I am so grateful to have been able to participate.

I believe that this was a particularly productive seminar for a variety of reasons, the primary among them are the seriousness, commitment, openness and democratic spirit of the director, and the seriousness, commitment, deep engagement and great collegiality of the participants. The discussions were marked by a genial, sympathetic and collaborative spirit: in contrast to the majority of discussions in our field, the discussions in the seminar were not at the least belligerent but deeply collegial. There was a sense that everyone was there to figure out important questions TOGETHER. Due to this atmosphere, and to the preparedness and seriousness of all the participants, the discussions remained consistently focused and constrictive. If I'd change anything, it would be the number of readings. We may have done better with approximately 4 readings less (and a better ventilated seminar room...). Both the reading groups and the work in progress workshop were equally productive and helpful. Needless to say, UBC's great campus, and Vancouver's cultural and natural resources not only contributed to the happiness of each participant, but also offered great additional resources for bonding and socializing. This may well have contributed to the collegiality of the discussions.

The readings were time-consuming, but that was our collective fault – we were a bit too ambitious at the outset. But we adjusted as was appropriate, and all in all, I can without reservation or exaggeration say that this was one of the most rewarding philosophical experiences of my life. Certainly the most rewarding since I have been employed as faculty. Everything was great, and seminar director (and participants) did a fantastic job making it an inclusive and productive three weeks.

This was a wonderful experience. Thank you so much to all who helped to organize it!