Topics in the History of the Production of Knowledge:  
Aesthetics and Cognitive Science

Instructors: Gabrielle Starr (Associate Professor, English) and Edward Vessel (Postdoctoral Fellow, CNS)*

Intended audience: Ph.D. students from departments in Literature, Philosophy, the Institute for Fine Arts, Psychology, and Neural Science.

Aesthetics is a discipline of the Enlightenment, emerging in Germany and Britain as natural philosophy introduces new methods of empirical inquiry and re-engages central questions of epistemology. What pleasures are properly those of art and the imagination? What features of human subjectivity make us desire fictions, paintings, or music? What role do aesthetic pleasures play in the human mental economy? The Enlightenment discipline of aesthetics, as we encounter it in Baumgarten, Burke, and Kant, involves dialogues about the human mind and the ways that we measure mental experience. In that way, early Aesthetics was an early version of a cognitive discipline.

The past thirty years have redefined what it means to be a cognitive discipline. The engagement of cognitive science with aesthetic questions offers a significant test case for thinking about the disciplines, about collaboration, and about method. This course is designed to explore some of those questions, as well as to pursue significant problems and questions about the disciplines of aesthetic inquiry.

The first part of the course (four weeks) focuses on fundamental readings in Enlightenment Aesthetics, by Baumgarten, Burke, and Kant. The second part (four weeks) establishes the key concerns of cognitive science and cognitive approaches to the mind. The final section of the course (six weeks) examines individual case studies in cognitive aesthetics (by Zeki, Martindale, Cavanagh, Tramo, the instructors, and others). Students in the course will be asked to give critical presentations on issues that matter from their home disciplines, and will choose a final project, in collaboration with a student from another discipline, which will involve a traditional essay, or the development of experimental protocols for pursuing aesthetic questions.