

Fall 2020 — PHIL 6150: History of Continental Philosophy:

‘In a minute, I’ll be free’: Hegel, Phish, and the Beautiful Failure of Aesthetic Emancipation

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Office Hours: By appt. (and, sadly, on Zoom).

Course Description:

“[W]e must maintain that art’s vocation is to unveil the truth in the form of sensuous artistic configuration [...] and so to have its end and aim in itself, in this very setting forth and unveiling. For other ends, like instruction, purification, bettering, financial gain, struggling for fame and honour, have nothing to do with the work of art as such, and do not determine its nature”, *Hegel’s Aesthetics*, 55.

“We’re living among infinite possibilities, and the prevalent philosophies of postmodernist pessimism that come out of the universities are really a major tragedy [because t]he opportunities for progress and change of a positive nature are absolutely tremendous” — Robert Anton Wilson, speaking in *Maybe Logic: The Lives and Ideas of Robert Anton Wilson* (dir. L. Baucher, 2003).

“Hopeless has exceptions”, banner flown over the Clifford Ball, Plattsburgh, NY, Aug. 16-17, 1996.

“Welcome to the dream everybody” — Trey Anastasio, introducing the final ‘Gamehenge’ set, 7/8/1994, Great Woods, MA

There may be no theory of art that lies further from current trends in both philosophical aesthetics and artistic practice than that of G.W.F. Hegel. The most influential aesthetic discourses since the 1950s — those that define what we might loosely call the ‘postmodern’ era — have in the main rejected the universal and positive accounts of human essence that defined Enlightenment modernity, as well as the progressive narratives of what humanity has accomplished and might yet achieve, replacing them with ‘critical’, or pessimistic, conceptions of world history, social institutions, and individual/collective capacity. While rightly calling our attention to enduringly repressive aspects of the contemporary world, as well as some of the historical forces from which they emerged, the hegemonic trends in academic philosophy, ‘gallery’ art, and even much popular culture have simultaneously abandoned the grand narratives of universal humanity, collective self-determination, progressive achievement, and future potential that dominated the cultural landscape from the 19th century right up through the years of civil rights and Black power, replacing them with an emphasis on subjective dissatisfaction, resistance, subversion, difference, fragmentation, refusal, contingency, insufficiency, incapacity, falsity, ephemerality, and irony. By contrast, for Hegel, art’s ‘highest vocation’ is to construct enduring, immersive, and immediately palpable

‘temples of spirit’, wherein communities gather to earnestly display, celebrate, and internalize their own collectively determined understanding of shared human essence, their power to transform about our merely given internal and external nature and our merely received historical inheritances, and thus ultimately to determine their extra-aesthetic mission. Hegel’s fundamental thesis is that art reflects our most primordial efforts to collectively determine, articulate, and actualize what it means to be free, and thus serves as the ground upon which historical and political progress has been—and therefore, once again, can be—made. It is, thus, no accident that Hegel is the primary foil for virtually all postmodern thinking, and that until recently his *Aesthetics* has been among the most derided and/or ignored aspects of his monumental philosophical system. Just as Hegel infamously said of art itself, his own aesthetic theory seems to have been firmly relegated ‘to the past’.

In this course, we will effectively ask whether the pessimistic postmodern turn in academic theory, fine art, and popular culture has been a mistake; not just by examining the enduring relevance of Hegel’s theory for grasping the fundamental human ‘need for art’, but by taking a deep dive into one of many subcultural exceptions to the hegemony of the incapacitating and fragmenting discourses of aesthetic subversion. This will thus be a somewhat heterodox seminar focused on G.W.F. Hegel’s philosophy of art, and the trajectory of perhaps the most maligned and misunderstood musical subculture of the last 40 years: the scene built around the seminal Vermont rock band Phish.

Yes, you read that right: this is a course on Hegel and Phish, and we will be taking the latter—a band which, as drummer Jonathan Fishman correctly notes, “never had anything to do with any trends at all in America”—as seriously as a source of philosophical truth regarding art as we will the former.

Classes will be divided between close readings of the first volume of Hegel’s *Lectures on Aesthetics* and a detailed examination of the development of Phish’s aesthetic community, including in-class and at-home listening/viewing sessions. While the volume and complexity of their work will demand students immerse in both the class presumes no familiarity with either Hegel or Phish; in fact, for those with no background in the music of Phish at all, I would *highly recommend* saving your listening for the course, in order to follow their progress with fresh ears as we draw the connection between the evolution of their work and Hegel’s account of the progressive development of art across historical time (although, it will certainly help if you go above the required listening as we move through the course). I also presume no sympathy with the course’s basic thesis; we will, throughout, consider postmodern and other accounts that may either explain or condemn movements like those surrounding Phish, as potential criticisms of Hegel’s account. The goal of this seminar is to explicate, and critically appraise Hegel’s unique and illuminating theory of art, while exploring in detail the history of an admittedly unusual, but provocative and (in my view, at least) inspiring case of community building through aesthetic practice. If nothing else, by the end of the course, students have firmly decided upon a favourite version of Tweezer.

Special requests: Due to the complexity of the music, and the occasional obscurity of recording quality in the tapes we'll be listening to, it's best to have headphones handy for each class; they will make the experience more immersive, esp. when we're listening to audience recordings. And because I'd like you to respond to the music without thinking of how you look to others when you do so, I'd like to ask everyone to invest in/create some kind of sleep mask/blindfold as well (it helps, trust me).

Note on background: While this course presumes no knowledge of Phish on behalf of students, the rationale for linking the two, in a sense, will stand out clearer if you have some musical context in which to both place and distinguish Vermont's finest export. If the territory is new to you, because Phish is popularly understood as the biggest group in the so-called 'jamband' scene, I recommend spending some time before the first class familiarizing yourself with the first generation of improvising, live rock outfits, esp. the Grateful Dead, The Allman Brothers Band, and Santana. Don't bother with studio records; live recordings of all three legally circulate broadly on Relisten.net, concert footage isn't hard to find on YouTube, and officially released concerts in high quality sound are on all streaming devices. I recommend comparing earlier, 'classic' shows by these groups (say, 1969-1974), and then ones from the late 1980s-early 1990s when Phish emerged as a national touring act (Spring 1990 is a much-loved Dead tour, e.g. and in 1992 the Allmans and Santana were at late-era high water marks; Phish opened on Santana's summer tour that year). You can also poke around into the world of jambands from Phish's generation (e.g. Widespread Panic, Spin Doctors, Blues Traveler, Aquarium rescue Unit) in their early '90s heyday.

If you're already well acquainted with Phish and/or jambands, I'd suggest doing the opposite: stop listening to them and, instead, browse your way around some of the other artists near and dear to Phish and/or influential on their grounding aesthetic: The Residents (maybe the most significant and unheralded influence on their art; I highly recommend the film *Theory of Obscurity: A Film About The Residents* (dir. Don Hardy)), Bad Brains, XTC, Claude Debussy, Duke Ellington, Frank Zappa and the Mothers of Invention, Sun Ra Akrestra, Talking Heads, Del McCoury Band, Captain Beefheart and his Magic Band, Genesis, The Wailers, Maurice Ravel, Little Feat, The Stanley Brothers, Charlie Parker, Pat Metheny Group, The Mighty Diamonds, Parliament/Funkadelic, Syd Barret, Igor Stravinsky, Jimmie Dale Gilmore, Thelonious Monk, The Velvet Underground, Dizzy Gillespie, and the Firesign Theatre.

In sum: If you've never heard Phish, save it for the first class; I've got a plan. If you're a phan, pretend you're not, and prepare yourself to hear them as if for the first time; my hope, at least, is things will quickly feel that way.

Required Texts:

Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. 1, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford).
Parke Puterbaugh, *Phish: The Biography* (Da Capo).
Walter Holland, *Phish's A Live One* (Bloomsbury).

Optional text:

G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on Aesthetics*, Vol. 2, trans. T.M. Knox (Oxford).

I'll be referring to this throughout the course, but it's quite pricey, in addition to being another 600 pages of Hegel, so it will be informing the course without being studied in detail. It does, however, offer long discussions of the major mediums of art that Hegel considers most revelatory: architecture, sculpture, music, painting, and poetry, and so anyone looking to write a paper on one or more of these media will find it useful. I didn't order it, as it's much cheaper to find online than the bookstore, if you're interested.

Additional Resources:

Hegel:

Like any reading of a thinker of complex and contested as Hegel, the one I will present in this course is in no way definitive, so it's always good to compare multiple accounts of his text. The two main Hegel journals in English are *The Owl of Minerva* (house journal of the Hegel Society of America) and *Hegel Bulletin* (house journal of the Hegel Society of Great Britain). Browsing through them can give a good sense of the vastly divergent views about the nature and import of Hegel's philosophy that exist even among specialists. Some good places to start for alternate readings of his *Aesthetics* would include:

Stephen Bungay, *Beauty and Truth: A Study of Hegel's Aesthetics* (Oxford).

Stefan Bird-Pollan and Vladimir Marchenkov, eds., *Hegel's Political Aesthetics: Art in Modern Society* (Bloomsbury).

Stephen Houlgate, ed. *Hegel and the Arts* (Northwestern).

David James, *Art, Myth and Society in Hegel's Aesthetics* (Continuum).

Jack Kaminsky, *Hegel on Art: An Interpretation of Hegel's Aesthetics* (SUNY).

William Maker, ed. *Hegel and Aesthetics* (SUNY).

Lydia Moland, *Hegel's Aesthetics: The Art of Idealism* (Oxford).

Julia Peters, *Hegel on Beauty* (Routledge).

Benjamin Rutter, *Hegel on the Modern Arts* (Cambridge).

Phish:

Phish.net is a one-stop shop for setlists, lyrics, song and tour histories, Phish family biographies and interviews, trivia, statistics, fan views and reviews, and news on the band and its scene; an essential resource for those looking to dig deeper, and the forum is a lot of fun to at least lurk.

Relisten.net has every available Phish show in mp3, usually drawn from the highest quality source that legally circulates; we will be using it a lot in this class, and you can find shows by dozens of bands that allow taping on the site as well (Phish and the Grateful Dead are at the very top of the page). Phish have officially released many

complete live shows, most notably in their ongoing *LivePhish* archival series, most of which are available on standard streaming platforms.

A philosopher from Oregon State University, Stephanie Jenkins, recently organized the first Phish Studies Conference. All of the talks were recorded, and they give a good sense of the range of multidisciplinary scholarship beginning to be done on the band and its scene. The video archive is available here:

<http://blogs.oregonstate.edu/phish2019/program/>

Texts:

Richard Gehr & Phish, *The Phish Book* (Villard). Out of print, but easy to find used, this is an oral history, largely by the band themselves, from the pivotal year of 1997.

Jesse Jarnow, *Heads: A Biography of Psychedelic America* (Da Capo). Traces the role that the music and especially tours of the Grateful Dead played in the circulation of the psychedelic drugs, and attendant ideas, that curiously accompanied many seismic cultural shifts in the post-war years, as well as the way Phish came to inherit that role; good for info on the Goddard College years.

Dean Budnick, *The Phishing Manual: A Compendium to the Music and Phish* (Hyperion). Also out of print, but easily obtainable, this is sort of an early, one-man version of Phish.net's info on the band; offers excellent, detailed show recommendations from the band's first decade.

Phan memoirs/views:

Sean Gibbon, *Run Like an Antelope: On the Road with Phish* (Thomas Dunne/St. Martin's).

Walter Holland, *a tiny space to move and breath: notes from the fall, 1997* (Mole-Banks Textwares).

Steven Hyden, "You Enjoy Myself", in *Twilight of the Gods: A Journey to the End of Classic Rock* (Dey St.).

Nathan Rabin, *You Don't Know Me But You Don't Like Me: Phish, Insane Clown Posse, and My Adventures with Two of Music's Most Maligned Subcultures* (Scribner).

Andy P. Smith and Jason Gershuny, *100 Things Phish Fans Should Know & Do Before They Die* (Triumph).

David 'ZZYZX' Steinberg, *This Has All been Wonderful: A Travel Monologue from Summer 1994, The Year Phish Became Phish* (self-published). (My favourite, for what that's worth)

Podcasts:

Analyze Phish: In which *Parks and Recreation* head writer, the late Harris Whittels, tries to convince *Comedy Band Bang*'s Scott Aukerman, and others, to like his favourite band. *Under the Scales*: Hosted by Phish's primary lyricist, Tom Marshall, this primarily offers long-form interviews with members of the band's extended family, like, say The Dude of Life.

Long May They Run: Rock music history podcast on Apple, hosted by Dean Budnick; season 1 is dedicated to Phish. Episode 1 is required listening for the course, so I'd say save this one until we hear it collectively, and then see if you want to continue the series.

Course Requirements:

Attendance and Class Participation (because Zoom classes and listening sessions will mean less class discussion than usual for a grad seminar, this will include office hour appts): 20%

Term Paper Proposal (1-2, single spaced page description of the thesis, and rough argument of your paper, with bibliography). Can be submitted by email any time, but due by Week 10: 20%

Term Paper (18-25, double-spaced pages). To be submitted by email, due date tba (it will be 1 week before the FGS grade submission date): 60%

Reading Schedule:

Tues. Sept 15th

Course Intro; Reading: *Hegel's Aesthetics*, 1-55, 69-90.

Listening: Background prep listening, as above.

Tues. Sept 22nd

Reading: Hegel, 91-115; 153-195.

Listening: The Space Antelope recordings and the *Bivouac Juan* tape (find them on YouTube); any random Phish you like from the Jeff Holdsworth years, 1983-May of 1985.

Tues. Sept 29th

Reading: Puterbaugh, 19-64.

Listening: *The White Tape* (some tracks are repeated from *Bivouac Juan*, so you can skip 'Divided Sky', 'Ingest', 'Run Like an Antelope', 'Aftermath', and 'Fluff's Travels'; sample tracks/sets from 10/15/1986; 10/31/1986; and 12/6/1986.

Tues, Oct. 6th

Hegel, 299-357. 378-402

Listening: Ian's McLean's Farm, 8/21/1987

Tues, Oct. 13th

No Class ('Reading' Week)

Listening: 10/31/1987; check out as much Phish from 87-89 as you like, but no Fluffhead longer than 6 minutes. Really, no full Fluffhead. Save it.

Tues, Oct. 20th

Reading: Puterbaugh, 65-84

Listening: The first 'Gamehenge' set, 3/12/1988, set II (headphones in the dark for this one, as it involves a lot of narration; I'd suggest listening before doing this week's reading); optional, Trey's senior project version of the saga, *The Man Who Stepped Into Yesterday* (YouTube it)

Tues, Oct. 27th

Reading: Hegel, 427-490, 244-279.

Listening: Phish's 'first festival', Amy's Farm, 8/2/1991. The ambitious might want to check out the second (partial) 'Gamehenge' set (10/13/1991), or something from the

summer 1991 shows with the Giant Country Horns (try 7/12/1991, available on *LivePhish, Vol. 19*).

Week 8

Puterbaugh, 84-152

Listening: 3/6/1992 (at least set II; this show opens a key tour for understanding for their aesthetic and communal development as they began to break big). There will be two central selections for this week in class, one from each of 1993 and 1994, so please don't listen to anything beyond May of 1993, so we can collectively experience the shift in their performing practice during Summer 1993. Warning: this class might go a wee bit long....

After, you might also want to try the third 'Gamehenge' set, 3/22/1993, set II.

Week 9

Holland, *Phish's A Live One* (all of it)

Listening: Phish – *A Live One* (esp. 'Slave to the Traffic Light', 'Harry Hood', 'Tweezer', and 'You Enjoy Myself'); *Long May They Run*, Ep. 1: "A Pattern Language".

Viewing: "Anatomy of a Jam – Halley's Comet, 11/22/1997" by YouTuber amarguitar: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6j6Xclma02w>

If you have time and feel like a challenge, see how much of 10/31/1994 (*LivePhish, Vol. 13*) or 10/31/1995 (*LivePhish, Vol. 14*) you can get through in one concentrated sitting.

Week 10

Reading: Hegel, *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, §553-577, available here:

<https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/hegel/works/sp/abspirit.htm>; 'Interview: Jon Fishman, 11/7/96', available here: <https://phish.net/blog/1296461420/fishman-interview.html>

Viewing: *Bittersweet Motel* (dir. Todd Phillips).

Listening: The fifth and final 'Gamehenge' set, 7/8/1994, set I.

Week 11

Reading: Hegel, 500-539, 573-593

Listening: 'Ghost' and 'Down With Disease' up through 'Jesus Just Left Chicago' from 11/17/1997 (*LivePhish, Vol. 11*); as much of 12/31/1999 at Big Cypress as you can take (unofficial video circulates on YouTube; at least check out the opening 'gag' and 'Sand').

Week 12

Puterbaugh, 159-256

Listening: The studio album *Round Room* (optional, their 'farewell' album, *Undermind*)

Viewing: *IT* (dir. Mary Wharton, available on YouTube).

Week 13

Reading: Puterbaugh, 257-272

Listening/viewing: 'Everything's Right', 7/31/2018:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=G_CidBi8S9o

'Ruby Waves', 7/14/2019 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TI6xUJ4fmDk>

Between Me and My Mind (dir. Steven Cantor). (At the start of the course, this as yet lacks a Canadian distributor for streaming, and is only available on Google Play, and thus it may have to be rented [3.99 at time of writing]; this may, however and hopefully, change during the course).