The eighteenth century is a moment when the problem of happiness takes on a new philosophical heft, and achieves new cultural prominence. The period witnesses the production of over fifty treatises on the subject (in France alone), with the question of happiness emerging as a central preoccupation of the novel, but also as a guiding concern for philosophers and political theorists. In recent academic scholarship, the eighteenth-century relationship to happiness has been receiving increased critical attention. The Revolutionary turn from “plaisir” to “bonheur” has been linked to the rise of French republican nationalism, while the sentimental promotion of happiness as a feeling, rather than a way of living, has been seen as crucial to both the politics and the fiction of the era.

In this course we will be interested on the one hand in art as a place where “the new happiness” is presented as an ideal and practice. We will investigate the depiction of happiness not only in the literature of the period, but in the visual arts—where images of happiness circulate and take on substance. On the other, we will look at the extent to which happiness becomes, during the eighteenth century, a problem not only of ethics but of aesthetics. In other words, we will explore the function of happiness not just as it is represented, but as it generates techniques of representation. Our readings will range across works of fiction and aesthetics, and will include: Diderot’s Salons (selections), Graffigny’s Lettres d’une Périvienne, Kant’s Critique of Judgement, Lessing’s Laocoon, Prévost’s Manon Lescaut, Rousseau’s Les Rêveries du promeneur solitaire, and De Staël’s De la littérature, among other texts.

The course will be taught in French, but is open to students from other departments. Students who are not doctoral candidates in French may elect to do some or all of the coursework in English. Please contact Natania Meeker at nmeeker@usc.edu for more information.