

Philosophy 543: Topics in Philosophy of Art

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Office Hours: Tuesday and Thursday 1:00pm-2:00pm. South College E421.

Course Overview

The philosophy of art is the branch of philosophy that is concerned with questions related to art and aesthetics. It has recently been experiencing a kind of golden age, with a great deal of exciting new work being done on a variety of different topics. This course will examine a number of philosophical questions about art, including the following.

- What is art? How should we distinguish between works of art and things that are not works of art?
- What is art for? Why does it play such an outsized role in our cultures, our thinking, and our lives?
- At first glance, it appears that some works of art (paintings, for example, and sculptures) are concrete physical objects, while other works of art (novels and musical compositions, for example) are abstract objects of some kind (a series of sentence types, in the case of a novel, and a type of sound sequence, in the case of a musical composition). Is this initial impression accurate? Do works of art in the different genres really fall under radically different ontological categories? And if so, does it follow that some works of art are created while others are discovered?
- Speaking of ontology, what exactly are movies? Are they filmstrips, repeatable filmstrip types, digital files, abstract objects of some kind, or something else?
- A movie typically tells a story. But whose story, and from what perspective? Relatedly, who, if anyone, should we think of as the narrator of a movie?
- Some things seem particularly beautiful, and others do not. But is aesthetic value a real thing? Are some things intrinsically beautiful, in a way that is independent of their being observed?
- What about artistic value? Is that a real thing, and if so, does it differ from aesthetic value?

- Works of fiction often cause deep emotional responses, even among people who know that the stories and characters contained in them are fictional. How is that possible? (“What’s Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he would weep for her?”)
- Similarly, musical works, including works that contain no lyrics or narrative themes, often cause deep emotional responses, despite being, on their surfaces anyway, not really about anything. How is that possible?
- Many people enjoy listening to music that makes them sad. But most of the same people do not enjoy being sad. Is there a puzzle in this vicinity? If so, is there a good solution to that puzzle?
- What makes a joke racist or sexist? What about works of art in other genres? What makes a movie, for example, racist or sexist (or homophobic or transphobic or...)?
- How should we respond to works of art that are racist or sexist (or homophobic or transphobic or...)?
- How should we respond to works of art whose creators turn out to be morally problematic? Can those works still be appreciated? Should they be cancelled?

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

- Characterize some of the main issues in the philosophy of art.
- Articulate and defend their own views on these main issues.
- Prepare a high-quality handout for a presentation, and give a professional, conference-style presentation.
- Respond to a presentation by someone else with a thoughtful and helpful question or comment.
- Write a proper academic term paper.
- Finally articulate answers to a number of questions about art that have bugged them for years. (And probably also become aware of some new questions that did not previously bug them...)

Course Requirements

- ❖ **Two presentations** (one presentation on a reading assignment, one presentation on a work of art; each worth 10% of final grade)
- ❖ **Nine weekly papers** (collectively worth 40% of final grade)

- ❖ **One term paper** (worth 40% of final grade)

Academic Honesty

We will follow UMass's policy on academic honesty. Please consult [this web page](#) for all the details regarding this policy.

Required Readings

- Abell, Catharine, "Art: What it Is and Why it Matters," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* **85** (2011), pp. 671-691.
- Anderson, Luvel, "Racist Humor," *Philosophy Compass* **10** (2015), pp. 501-509.
- Dodd, Julian, "Musical Works as Eternal Types," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* **40** (2000), pp. 424-440.
- Eaton, Marcia Muelder, "Art and the Aesthetic," in Peter Kivy (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 63-77.
- Friedell, David, "Why Can't I Change Bruckner's *Eighth Symphony*?" *Philosophical Studies* **177** (2020), pp. 805-824.
- Gaut, Berys, "The Philosophy of the Movies: Cinematic Narration," in Peter Kivy (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 230-253.
- Levinson, Jerrold, "Music and Negative Emotions," in Jenefer Robinson, *Music and Meaning* (Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 215-241.
- Moruzzi, Caterina, "Every Performance Is a Stage: Musical Stage Theory as a Novel Account for the Ontology of Musical Works," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **76** (2018) pp. 341-351.
- Saito, Yuriko, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007). [This is one of two books you will have to purchase for the course.]
- Sizer, Laura, "Sad Songs Say So Much: The Paradoxical Pleasures of Sad Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* **77** (2019), pp. 255-266.
- Willard, Mary Beth, *Why It's Okay to Enjoy the Work of Immoral Artists* (Routledge, 2021). [This is the other book you will have to purchase for the course.]

About Presentations

Your presentation on a reading assignment should be about 10 minutes long, and should feature a 1-page handout. You are not expected to summarize the reading. Instead, you should select one main point or argument from the reading (ideally this will be one of the two or three most important things in the reading), and present your own response to that point or argument. After your presentation you will conduct a 10-minute Q&A.

For your presentation on a work of art, you will choose some interesting work of art that you would like to share with the class. (Depending on the genre, we will find some way to facilitate the sharing. If all else fails, we can always fall back on having you give a description of the work.) You will use this work to illustrate some idea, point, question, or argument, and your presentation should be about 10 minutes long. After your presentation you will conduct a 10-minute Q&A.

Our schedule for presentations will be worked out on the first day of class.

About Weekly Papers

For each day when there is a reading assignment and you are not giving a presentation (there will be nine days like that), you will be required to turn in a weekly paper on that day's reading assignment(s). A weekly paper is a 2- or 3-page paper in which you (i) summarize the main content of the reading assignment, (ii) raise some substantive question or questions about that content, and (iii) articulate your own solution to the main philosophical problem addressed in the reading. (On days when there are two articles assigned (there are three days like that), you must do all of (i)-(iii) for each one of those articles, and those weekly papers should be 3-5 pages long.) Your lowest weekly paper grade will be automatically dropped, and the remaining eight grades will be averaged to determine your overall weekly paper grade. Weekly papers are due at noon on the day of a given reading assignment, and must be submitted as PDFs through the class website on Canvas. Late papers will be penalized 10 points (out of 100) per day. Extensions may be granted, but only to students who email me ahead of time.

About Term Papers

Your term paper must be on a topic approved by me, and should be approximately 3,000-5,000 words (which is around 8-12 pages). It must be submitted as a PDF through the class website on Canvas. Late papers will be penalized 10 points (out of 100) per day, but extensions are available to those who email me ahead of time.

Schedule

Date	Reading Assignment/Topic	Presenter(s)
Sep	4 Course intro; what is art?	
	11 Abell, "Art: What it Is and Why it Matters"	
	18 Dodd, "Musical Works as Eternal Types"	Kashish
	25 Moruzzi, "Every Performance Is a Stage" Friedell, "Why Can't I Change Bruckner's <i>Eighth Symphony</i> ?"	Michael
Oct	2 Eaton, "Art and the Aesthetic"	Anya
	9 Levinson, "Music and Negative Emotions" Sizer, "Sad Songs Say So Much"	Ashly Vish
	16 Gaut, "The Philosophy of the Movies: Cinematic Narration" Anderson, "Racist Humor"	Silvia Betty
	23 Saito, <i>Everyday Aesthetics</i> , Introduction and Chapter I	
	30 Saito, <i>Everyday Aesthetics</i> , Chapter II	
Nov	6 Willard, <i>Why It's Okay</i> , Chapters One-Three	Elijah
	13 Willard, <i>Why It's Okay</i> , Chapters Four-Six	Kam Ho
	20 Presentations on works of art	Michael, Anya, Silvia, Elijah, Ashly
	27 <i>No class</i> (Thanksgiving break)	
Dec	4 Presentations on works of art	Betty, Kashish, Kam Ho, Vish
	13 Term papers due at 5PM	