

Department of Philosophy
Philosophy 436B Aesthetics II Winter 2020

Instructor: Prof. David Davies
Office: 941 Leacock
Office Hours: Th 13:30-15:00 or by appointment
Course Time: TR 16:05-17:25
Room:

Topic for 2019-20: When art is *not* ‘for art’s sake’

Course description

Modernist thinking about art has inherited from Kant’s more general theory of the aesthetic an idea of the artwork as something that is meant to be appreciated ‘for its own sake’. Where it is clear that the makers of something we view as an artwork were primarily concerned to produce an artifact that could perform some non-artistic function, this is usually viewed as peripheral at best to a properly artistic interest in that artifact and to its status as art. The idea that an artwork should be, in some sense, ‘for art’s sake’ provides a framing assumption in terms of which to understand a number of phenomena in recent philosophical writing on the arts. First, it has been argued that, where, as with some drawings by Schiele, an artifact is produced with the primary intention that it serve a pornographic interest, it cannot also be an artwork. Intending such an interest, it is claimed, is incompatible with intending a properly artistic interest in that artifact, an interest in it ‘for its own sake’. Second, a modernist problematic has shaped much of the discussion about ‘primitive’ or ‘tribal’ art. The latter’s artistic status is taken to turn upon whether it was created with the intention that it be appreciated ‘for its own sake’. Third, we lack a systematic treatment of how, where an artifact with a non-artistic primary intended function is rightly treated as an artwork, its fulfilment of this function bears upon its artistic appreciation and its artistic value.

In this course, we shall take the issue of art that is not primarily ‘for art’s sake’ as our focus in exploring more general questions about the nature of artworks and of artistic appreciation. We shall begin by surveying some examples of potentially artistic artifacts not produced with the primary intention that they serve an artistic interest in the modernist sense. The primary intended function of these artifacts may be religious, or political, or pornographic, or ritualistic. We ask, under what conditions are such artifacts artworks? One answer is that an artifact’s intended function is irrelevant to its status and appreciation as an artwork: all that counts are the artifact’s manifest properties. On an alternative approach, the arthood of an artifact is a matter of its having acquired a place in an ‘artworld’. A third, more promising, approach focuses on how the maker of an artifact intends that it be regarded by receivers. Artifacts with non-artistic primary intended functions are artworks, on this view, as long as the artist also intended that they be regarded in the way that artworks are or have been regarded.

After critically assessing these approaches, we shall explore another take on the idea that what is distinctive of artworks is the particular way in which their makers intend that they be regarded. We begin with the idea, central to much of the writing in the ‘art for art’s sake’ tradition, that

artworks are properly appreciated through the adoption of an ‘aesthetic attitude’. After surveying problems with this view as traditionally understood, we take up the idea that the ‘aesthetic attitude’ is rightly viewed as a particular kind of regard for which artworks call, rather than a more general kind of attitude that can be adopted to artifacts and non-artifacts alike. We seek to identify certain distinctive features of the kind of regard for which artworks call, features grounded in the way in which they make their contents accessible to receivers. This yields an alternative response to our initial question about the artistic status of artifacts produced with a non-artistic primary intended function. Such artifacts will be artworks just in case their makers intend that they articulate their contents in a way that requires that receivers explore them with the kind of regard called for by artworks. This allows us to reexamine the artistic status of the artifacts that we considered at the beginning of the course, and to explore a number of other related issues.

Required Texts

A course-pack of readings for this course can be purchased at the McGill Bookstore. Additional readings will be made available on MyCourses.

Course Requirements

- i/ A short paper on an assigned topic (approx. 6 pages typed double-spaced), due February 27th, worth 40% of total grade.
- ii/ A term paper (approx. 12 pages typed double spaced) on a topic of the student’s choice, due April 9th, worth 60% of total grade.

In the event of extraordinary circumstances beyond the University’s control, the content and/or evaluation scheme in this course is subject to change.

In accord with McGill University’s Charter of Students’ Rights, students in this course have the right to submit in English or in French any written work that is to be graded.

McGill University values academic integrity. Therefore, all students must understand the meaning and consequences of cheating, plagiarism and other academic offences under the Code of Student Conduct and Disciplinary Procedures (see www.mcgill.ca/integrity/ for more information).