

Department of Philosophy
Philosophy 336 Aesthetics I Fall 2023

Instructor: Prof. David Davies

Time: TTh 16:35-17:55

Location: Rutherford Physics 115

Office: 941 Leacock Office Hours: TBA

Course outline

Whether or not, as is sometimes said, life imitates art, our lived world is certainly saturated with products of artistic activity. It might be said that our visual, acoustic, and verbal environments, and the ways in which we perceive and think about those environments, bear the signatures of the painters, authors, composers, film-makers and photographers through which our experience is inflected. No longer the plaything of the leisured class, art is for everyone, it might seem, and includes not only its more traditional manifestations in galleries, concert halls, theatres, and 'works of literature', but also the latest blockbuster film playing on Netflix, the music that surrounds us in malls or that provides the soundtrack as we Spotify our way through our daily lives, and the books that provide us with distractions on plane and train journeys.

But we might also wonder whether, in democratizing art so that it encompasses such a broad range of diversions, we have lost a sense of what distinguishes artworks from other diverting artifacts - the intuitive differences between artistic performances and sporting events, the fare provided in art galleries and the fare provided in restaurants, the music played in concert halls and the music played in elevators, the verses read in poetry classes and the verses used in adverts, etc.

Is the feeling that there are differences that need to be drawn here just a legacy of the elitism that traditionally grounded a distinction between 'high art' and 'low art'? And, if we seek to draw such differences, where might they be found? In the purposes served by artworks, in the ways that they affect us, in the kinds of values that they promote, in the kinds of appreciation that they call for, or perhaps merely in the kinds of institutionalized distinctions we happen to make in our cultural tradition? Each of these suggestions leads us almost immediately to further questions. What is it to *appreciate* an artwork, if this involves something more than merely experiencing it? Are there any distinctive kinds of values of artworks that distinguish them from other pleasant diversions from our daily lives? If artworks are just the things presented in the context of what we term art institutions, can we acknowledge art outside of our own cultural framework and tradition?

Here is a plausible principle that might govern our inquiries into such matters: Here, if not elsewhere, the truth is not 'out there', but is to be found by reflecting on how best to understand and pursue human practices. When we ask about the origin of the universe, or the origin of species, or the nature of dark matter, or the causes of various diseases, we assume that the best answers we are able to give now, or in the near future, or perhaps even at the ideal limit of human inquiry, might fail to get it right. Inquiries into all of these questions present themselves as attempts to discover what is the case independently of human inquiries and practices. But when we ask about the nature of artworks, or of artistic appreciation, or of artistic value, our

interest seems to be essentially an interest in making sense of our own practices. Artworks, artistic appreciation, and artistic value, are things that play certain roles in those practices, and our aim is to make better sense of these things by at the same time making better sense of the practices themselves. In this case, it is unclear how even our best account of what artworks are might fail to ‘get it right’.

If this general principle is correct, then we must hold our philosophical inquiries into questions about artworks - their nature, their appreciation, and their value - accountable to our practices, at least reflectively. To say that the accountability is ‘reflective’ is to say that we might decide, upon reflection, that some aspects of our artistic practice cannot be sustained, either because they turn out to be internally incoherent or because they conflict with other aspects of our practice we are unwilling to give up. But such reflection must be grounded in our overall practice, and the more general philosophical ideas we seek to clarify in reference to that practice must get much of their sense from the ways in which they can be embedded in those practices.

Our approach to the philosophy of art in this course conforms to the general principle just enunciated. We shall explore the more general questions about art voiced earlier as they arise from particular aspects - often puzzling aspects - of our actual artistic practice. This will allow us to see how different treatments of these puzzling aspects of our practice will entail different stances on the more general theoretical questions we are trying to explore. Our focus here will be on three more general theoretical questions about artworks:

1/ How can we understand the ways in which artworks seem to affect us emotionally? Are such responses just irrational, and should our engagement with art therefore be seen - as Plato saw it - as opposed to the life of reason?

2/ What kinds of things are relevant to the proper appreciation of an artwork? Does it matter how, or when, an artwork was produced, for example? Must the experience of an artwork that bears upon its appreciation be ‘authentic’ in some sense, and, if so, what implications does this have for the ways in which we ordinarily try to appreciate artworks?

3/ As will become clear in our investigations of these issues, a more fundamental question is how artworks are to be distinguished from other artifacts. This question is more fundamental because how we answer it will presumably bear upon what kind of experience is needed to appreciate an artwork. This will allow us to ask whether we can make sense of art outside our own cultural tradition, of non-traditional arts, of pornographic art, of photography as an art form, and of the often puzzling objects we encounter in exhibitions of late modern art.

Texts

The principal text for this course is *Arguing About Art* 3rd ed., edited by Alex Neill and Aaron Ridley. This is a collection of papers that focuses on the kinds of practical questions canvassed in the course description. Since nearly all of the readings for the lectures and for the assignments are in this text, all students will need to have access to a copy of the book. Additional papers - including some of my own responses to these questions - will be made available on myCourses. Students can obtain copies of the course text from *Paragraph* books (2020 McGill College Ave) in any of the following ways:

- 1) by purchasing the book in the store;
- 2) by e-mailing paragraphbooks@paragraphbooks.com, or finally
- 3) by shopping online at the new website: <http://www.paragraphbooks.com> . Course books will

be sorted on the website by their course code - here PHIL 336.

Course requirements

Students will be required to write two papers for this course: (a) a shorter paper, approximately 5 pages double-spaced in length, due by Thanksgiving (30%); and (b) a term paper, approx. 10 pages double-spaced in length, due at the end of classes (60%). All papers should be submitted electronically in Word .doc format - this facilitates putting comments on your papers using the 'comment' function in Word. The remaining 10% of the grade will be based on attendance at lectures and participation in discussion of the issues.

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).

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.

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