

Department of Philosophy
Philosophy 436B Aesthetics II Winter 2014

Instructor: Prof. David Davies

Time: TTh 16:30-18:00

Location:

Topic for 2013/14: Issues in the Philosophy of Film and Photography

Course description

This course examines a number of philosophical issues concerning film and photography and their relation to other arts such as painting, literature, and theatre. The aim is to deepen our understanding not only of photographic and cinematic art, but also of more general themes in the philosophy of art - themes such as representation, interpretation, appreciation, and emotional response - through an exploration of the manner in which these themes present themselves in the study of film and photography. Screenings of films related to issues addressed in the lectures will be integrated into the course. At least four such screenings will be scheduled in the early evening after class, followed by opportunities to discuss the film screened, and students will be required either to attend these screenings or to make independent arrangements to view the relevant material.

Our studies will focus on four questions:

- (1) In virtue of what features can photography and film be considered legitimate artistic media, and in what ways do the photographic and cinematic work differ from works in the other arts? An initial concern is the apparently mechanical means whereby photographic images are produced, as contrasted with the intentionally-guided manipulations productive of works of fine art. Some have concluded, on such grounds, that standard artistic values, such as expression and artistic representation, are impossible in the photographic medium. We shall critically assess the answers that classical film theorists such as Arnheim and Bazin have offered to these concerns. A further issue is that of film *authorship*: if there are cinematic artworks, who are the artists responsible for these works? We examine various answers to this question, and assess their implications for the interpretation and appreciation of film art.
- (2) What sorts of cognitive capacities are exercised in watching and appreciating a cinematic work? Cinematic narratives are often thought to engage and move receivers more forcefully than other kinds of narratives, and this has led many to believe that film experience involves some kind of *illusion* on the part of viewers, and some to maintain that the illusory nature of film prevents the viewer from responding critically to what is portrayed. It is the latter claim that is often attributed to "Ciné-Brechtians" such as Jean-Luc Godard. We examine various formulations of the 'illusion' thesis. We also consider how viewers make sense of cinematic narratives, and how they could be powerfully moved by such narratives if they were *not* subject to some kind of illusion.
- (3) Can film serve as a philosophical medium and, if so, how? We look at some recent debates over this question, and the more general question as to the cognitive values served by cinema.
- (4) When does an artwork that involves the use of photography count as a work of *photographic art*, and how does the use of digital technology bear upon this question?

Required Texts

Rudolph Arnheim, *Film as Art* (Berkeley: U. of California Press) (Available in Paragraph Bookstore)

A course-pack of readings. (Available at McGill Bookstore)

Additional readings will be available on reserve in the Library.

Requirements

Students will be required to write four short reports on films screened during the course and a term paper on a topic agreed in consultation with the instructor, due at the end of classes. Final grades will be based on the reports (40%), and the term paper (60%).

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).