

Philosophy 621 Seminar in Metaphysics Winter 2023

Instructor: David Davies

Location: Leacock 927

Time: Monday, 11:35-14:25

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Topic for 2022-23: Abstract Objects and the Ontology of Multiple Artworks

What kind of thing is a film? What kind of thing is a photograph? What kind of thing is a musical work? What kind of thing is a novel? Philosophers who have pondered such matters have generally been moved by the following sorts of considerations. To appreciate an artwork or cultural artifact requires at least an experiential engagement of some kind with an instance of that work or artifact, whereby some or all of the properties bearing upon its appreciation are made manifest to the receiver. In the case of a painting, what is required is an experiential encounter with a particular physical object, which is located at any given time in a particular gallery or museum, and this makes it plausible to identify the work itself with that object. Similar considerations apply to a work of carved sculpture. In the case of a film, a photograph, a musical work or a literary work, or a work of cast sculpture, however, there seem to be many different locations where, at a given time, we might experientially encounter the work or artifact in the manner necessary for its appreciation. You may be watching *Citizen Kane*, or looking at a photograph by Diane Arbus, in Los Angeles at the same moment that I am watching the same cinematic work or viewing the same photographic work in London. In this respect, films and photographs seem to resemble musical and literary works. Appreciating a musical work requires hearing it performed, and appreciating a literary work requires reading it, but people in different locations can have the necessary experiential encounter with a given musical or literary work at the same time.

It is natural to distinguish, here, between ‘singular’ and ‘multiple’ art forms. The former are art forms where a work can, as a matter of necessity, have only one instance. Painting and carved sculpture are generally viewed as singular art forms in this sense. Some kinds of photographic processes also seem to result in singular works or artefacts - for example, the processes that produce daguerreotypes and Polaroids. But photography and film of the more standard kinds are multiple art forms whose works admit of more than one instance, as are classical music, narrative and dramatic literature, silk-screening (excluding monoprints), and cast sculpture. Films, photographs, literary works and works of music, then must be the kinds of things that can have multiple instances, and such things are most naturally thought of as types or kinds.

Multiple art forms and the works within them present a number of well-known philosophical challenges. First, we may ask how multiple art works are brought into being or ‘initiated’ by artists. There are significant differences in this respect between films and photographs, musical works, and literary works. Second, if artworks in multiple art forms are ‘types’ and their instances are ‘tokens’ of those types, what is the ontological status of such ‘types’ and how are they individuated? On the generally accepted conception of such matters, types are abstract rather than concrete entities - they do not have spatial locations and it is questionable whether they can enter into causal relationships with things that do. This raises questions about our epistemic access to and ability to refer to types if we take knowledge and reference to require some kind of causal engagement with the entity known or referred to. A further

problem arises if we accept a particular account of the metaphysics of types, according to which types have a number of features that fit uneasily with our intuitions about films and photographs, for example. Some philosophers maintain that types cannot be brought into or go out of existence. So, if photographs are multiple art works and multiple artworks are types, it seems that Cartier-Bresson did not create his works but only discovered them. Furthermore, it can be argued, types, as abstract entities individuated by reference to their associated properties, are modally and temporally inflexible - which is to say that they could not have constitutive properties other than the ones that they actually possess and that those properties cannot change over time. But it might be thought that both singular and multiple art works could have differed in certain of their constitutive properties and still have been the same works. Faced with these kinds of implications of identifying multiple art works with types, some have argued that, to do justice to multiple art works, we need to be open to revisions in our traditional metaphysical categories. This fits with a more general claim that traditional ontological categories fail to do justice to various kinds of cultural entities, such as fictional objects, or art objects such as statues that we encounter in singular art forms.

In this seminar, we shall explore these issues, using as a framework an advanced draft of a contracted monograph on these issues that should be forthcoming in the next 12 to 18 months. All the chapters of the monograph, including the Bibliography, will be put on myCourses. We shall begin by identifying nine things that have been proposed as explananda for an ontological account of multiple artworks. We shall then consider how these explananda should be understood, what weight they should be accorded, and how they might best be accounted for. The primary material discussed in the monograph will be available either on myCourses or in e-formats through the McGill Library. We shall raise questions about the standard understanding of the singular-multiple distinction - as a matter of how many 'instances' a work can have - and examine both the most developed versions of the 'abstract object' theory of multiple artworks and various materialist and idealist alternatives to this view advanced in the literature, including the view that I defend in the monograph. In assessing these debates, we shall also draw upon relevant work in mainstream metaphysics.

Readings

Apart from the draft chapters from my monograph, supplementary readings for this course will be made available on myCourses. Readings will also be taken from two books of which e-copies are accessible through the McGill Library, via the catalogue: Julian Dodd's *Works of Music* (Oxford: OUP, 2007), and the collection *Art and Abstract Objects* (Oxford: OUP, 2013) edited by Christy Mag Uidhir. Finally, a number of the views discussed in the monograph are presented in journal articles e-versions of which are again available through the McGill Library.

Course requirements

Students are expected to have read the assigned texts prior to the seminar, and to come to the seminar with questions they would like to be addressed in the discussion. The principal requirement for the course is a research paper (around 15 pages typed double-spaced for undergraduates; around 20-25 pages, ditto, for graduate students) to be written on a topic selected by the student and approved by me. Papers are due at the end of classes, although extensions may be granted upon request. This paper will count for 80% of the total grade. The remaining 20% of the grade will be given for participation in the seminar, which will include being responsible for raising questions in discussions (undergraduates) or giving a

short presentation on material (graduate students).

Students should note that this class will run as a three-hour seminar. There will be a short break in the middle of each seminar.

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).