

Philosophy 636
Seminar Aesthetics
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Social Aesthetics/Afrological Aesthetics and Improvisational Arts

The notion of a ‘social aesthetics’ can be seen both as a broadening of the traditional subject of aesthetics (i.e. individual beliefs about art-objects, the cognitive and perceptual processes behind them, concepts such as “beauty” and “sublime” and the ontology of art objects that results from such attitudes) and, emphatically, as a critique of it. A social aesthetics is less concerned with demarcating a class of aesthetically valuable objects than it is with explaining how and why a given set of objects or experiences—those associated with, say, Beethoven or Bird, Brancusi or Beuys, Beach Boys or Blackalicious—is judged to be valuable, or has its value contested, by some social group or other, or is taken to be the entangled locus of social-and-aesthetic experience. By rejecting what is often seen as a Kantian view of the functionlessness of art (regardless of the accuracy or precise nature of such a Kantian commitment), a social aesthetics argues for, and investigates the details of, the many ways in which our interactions with art participate in or serve an array of political orientations, social and cultural processes: from signaling our membership of and commitment to particular social identities (Marxist, African-American, queer etc.) or culturally imagined communities (death metal, punk, psytrance etc.), to reifying, contesting or modeling alternatives to existing social formations. These concerns have led social aesthetics to focus on the aesthetic orientations of entities larger than the individual: to examine, for example, the diverse ways in which institutions or elite social groups may codify their power and prestige through certain aesthetic commitments or aesthetically informed practices; but equally, the manner in which social groups, collective projects or individual artists can develop or promote aesthetic practices that are intended to counteract prevailing cultural norms, or dominant social or political discourses, or that may become a locus for enacting alternative social relations. Improvisational arts have been seen as an ideal subject for exploring and developing a social aesthetics since the very act of improvisation, particularly collective improvisation, is seen as a social act, involving, among other things, the real-time negotiation of intentions, desires, identities and values.

What I dub ‘Afrological aesthetics’, a unified, if diverse, set of practices and conceptual commitments drawn from the art-practices and associated theoretical paradigms of African diasporic communities (with all the hybridity inherent in such communities) will be examined via a series of case studies drawn from precisely historically situated musical practices. There is a rich literature concerning the social involvements of such musical practices, and an emerging literature concerning the social aesthetics that can best make sense of these practices and their social momentum. We will see how an Afrological aesthetics both problematizes certain commonly held assumptions in European derived philosophies of music, and often suggests novel solutions to problems such a tradition has grappled with. Some of the traditional philosophical questions in the philosophy of music, and aesthetics more generally, that we will address include: What constitutes originality in a music work?; How important are intentions, both of performers and auditors, in establishing whether or not an

improvisation or musical work has been performed?; What constitutes improvisational agency?; What aesthetically relevant roles do musical genres play?; What model of the relationship of a highly improvised performance of a work to the work itself can best capture the discourses surrounding improvisation?

Readings will be distributed in class, but will include two forthcoming books the first a collection of essays entitled *Improvisation and Social Aesthetics*, the second entitled *Intents and Purposes: Towards an Afrological Aesthetics of Improvisation*. Students should be prepared to read widely outside of philosophical literature narrowly conceived, and to become familiar with a variety of musical genres. Research in this field is particularly appropriate for the application of practice based research methods, and so we will spend some time discussing both what these may be, and how they can be incorporated into your individual seminar research projects. Collaborative projects will be both possible and encouraged. Precise grading schema to be determined.