

Philosophy 543: *Topics in Philosophy of Art*

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Class Meetings: Wednesday 4:00pm-6:30pm. South College E301.

My Office Hours: Tuesday 2:00pm-3:00pm, Thursday 1:00pm-2:00pm. South College E421. (I will also be available for meetings on Zoom at those times.)

Course Overview

This course will examine a number of philosophical questions about art, including the following.

- What is art? How should we distinguish between works of art and things that are not works of art?
- What is art for? Why does it play such an outsized role in our cultures, our thinking, and our lives?
- At first glance, it appears that some works of art (paintings, for example, and sculptures) are concrete physical objects, while other works of art (novels and musical compositions, for example) are abstract objects of some kind (a series of sentence types, in the case of a novel, and a type of sound sequence, in the case of a musical composition). Is this initial impression accurate? Are works of art in the different genres instances of radically different ontological categories? And if so, does it follow that some works of art are created while others are discovered?
- Speaking of ontology, what exactly are movies? Are they filmstrips, repeatable filmstrip types, digital files, abstract objects of some kind, or something else? And are the artists who *make* movies the directors, entire teams consisting of (typically) hundreds of movie-makers, or some other group of people?
- Works of fiction often cause deep emotional responses, even among people who know that the stories and characters contained in them are fictional. How is that possible? (What is Hecuba to him, or he to Hecuba, that he would weep for her?)

- Similarly, musical works, including works that contain no lyrics or narrative themes, often cause deep emotional responses, despite being, on their surfaces anyway, not really about anything. How is that possible?
- Many people enjoy listening to music that makes them sad. But most of the same people do not enjoy being sad. Is there a puzzle in this vicinity? If so, is there a good solution to that puzzle?
- What makes a joke racist or sexist? What about works of art in other genres? What makes a movie, for example, racist or sexist (or homophobic or transphobic or...)?
- How should we respond to works of art that are racist or sexist (or homophobic or transphobic or...)?
- How should we respond to works of art whose creators turn out to be morally problematic? Can they still be appreciated? Should they be cancelled?
- Is aesthetic value a real thing? Are some things intrinsically beautiful, in a way that is independent of their being observed? What about artistic value? Is that a real thing, and if so, does it differ from aesthetic value?
- What exactly are fictions, and how (if at all) do they differ from novels and short stories?
- What about fictional characters? What exactly are they? Are they created by their authors, or are they discovered?

Learning Outcomes

After successfully completing this course, students will be able to:

- Characterize some of the main issues in The Philosophy of Art.
- Articulate and defend their own views on these main issues in The Philosophy of Art.
- Prepare a high-quality handout for a presentation, and give a professional, conference-style presentation.
- Respond to a presentation by someone else with a thoughtful and helpful question.
- Write a proper academic term paper.
- Finally have answers to a number of questions about art that have bugged them for years. (And probably also become aware of some new questions that did not previously bug them...)

Course Requirements

- ❖ **Three presentations** (two presentations on reading assignments, one presentation on some work of art; collectively worth 30% of final grade)
- ❖ **Seven weekly papers** (collectively worth 30% of final grade)
- ❖ **One term paper** (worth 40% of final grade)

Academic Honesty

We will follow UMass's policy on academic honesty. Please consult [this web page](#) for all the details regarding this policy.

Required Readings

- Abell, Catharine, "Art: What it Is and Why it Matters," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 85 (2011), pp. 671-691.
- Anderson, Luvell, "Racist Humor," *Philosophy Compass* 10 (2015), pp. 501-509.
- Dodd, Julian, "Musical Works as Eternal Types," *The British Journal of Aesthetics* 40 (2000), pp. 424-440.
- Eaton, Marcia Muelder, "Art and the Aesthetic," in Peter Kivy (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 63-77.
- Gaut, Berys, "The Philosophy of the Movies: Cinematic Narration," in Peter Kivy (ed.) *The Blackwell Guide to Aesthetics* (Blackwell, 2004), pp. 230-253.
- Levinson, Jerrold, "Music and Negative Emotions," in Jenefer Robinson, *Music and Meaning* (Cornell University Press, 1997), pp. 215-241.
- Saito, Yuriko, *Everyday Aesthetics* (Oxford University Press, 2007).
- Sizer, Laura, "Sad Songs Say So Much: The Paradoxical Pleasures of Sad Music," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 77 (2019), pp: 255-266.
- Thomasson, Amie, *Fiction and Metaphysics* (Cambridge University Press, 2008).

About Presentations

Each of your presentations on a reading assignment should be about 10 minutes long, and should feature a 1-page handout. You are not expected to summarize the reading.

Instead, you should select one main point or argument from the reading (ideally this will be one of the two or three most important things in the reading), and present your own response to that point or argument. (You will have to coordinate with whoever else is presenting on the same day to avoid overlap with respect to the content of your presentations.) After your presentation you will conduct a 5-10-minute Q&A session.

For your presentation on a work of art, you will choose some interesting work of art that you would like to share with the class. (Depending on the genre, we will find some way to facilitate the sharing. If all else fails, we can always fall back on having you give a description of the work.) You will use this work to illustrate some idea, point, question, or argument, and your presentation should be about 10 minutes long. After your presentation you will conduct a 5-10-minute Q&A session.

Our schedule for presentations will be worked out on the first day of class.

About Weekly Papers

For each day when there is a reading assignment and you are not giving a presentation (there will be seven days like that), you will be required to turn in a weekly paper on that day's reading assignment. A weekly paper is a 2- or 3-page paper in which you (i) summarize the main content of the reading assignment, (ii) raise some substantive question or questions about that content, and (iii) articulate your own solution to the main philosophical problem addressed in the reading.

Your lowest weekly paper grade will be dropped, and the remaining six grades will be averaged to determine your overall weekly paper grade.

Weekly papers are due at noon on the day of a given reading assignment, and must be submitted using Turnitin on Moodle. Late papers will be penalized 10 points (out of 100) per day. Extensions may be granted, but only to students who email me ahead of time.

About Term Papers

Your term paper must be on an approved topic, and should be approximately 3,000-5,000 words (which is around 8-12 pages) long. It must be submitted using Turnitin on Moodle. Late papers will be penalized at the rate of one letter grade per day, but extensions are available to those who email me ahead of time.

A Word About Discussions

Philosophical discussions (whether in class, after a talk, or in informal settings) can vary along a number of different dimensions. One of these is a spectrum that ranges from (a) a competitive, zero-sum game that involves scoring points and trying to appear smart, on one end, to (b) a cooperative and fun activity aimed at collectively discovering and solving interesting philosophical problems, on the other end. In general, the closer a discussion is to the cooperative end of this spectrum, the better it will be – better because it produces better philosophy, and better also because it is more enjoyable for everyone involved.

Here are some rules designed to keep us on the right end of this spectrum.

1. Don't be mean.
2. Never interrupt. If you have a great point, it will still be a great point when it is your turn to speak.
3. Don't bogart the discussion. Some people are more shy than you. Many of them have excellent things to say. It pays to listen.
4. Think in terms of abstract ideas that, once expressed, are on their own, rather than ideas that belong to a particular person.
5. Think of your job as trying to develop those ideas, making them clearer, stronger, better.
6. Try to build on points that have been made by others, whenever possible.
7. Try to make connections between the point currently under consideration and previous points.
8. Every once in a while during the discussion, someone should offer a big-picture comment (even if it is just a question). "So it seems to me that we were discussing X and Y. Did we ever come to any conclusion about whether Y is consistent with X?"
9. If you notice someone breaking one of the first two rules, speak up right away, even if – *especially if* – you are not the victim.

Schedule

Date	Reading Assignment/Topic	Presenters
Jan 26	Course intro; what is art?	

- Feb 2 Abell, "Art: What it Is and Why it Matters"
- 9 Dodd, "Musical Works as Eternal Types"
- 16 Eaton, "Art and the Aesthetic"
- 23 Levinson, "Music and Negative Emotions;" Sizer, "Sad Songs Say So Much"
- Mar 2 Anderson, "Racist Humor;" Gaut, "The Philosophy of the Movies: Cinematic Narration"
- 9 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Introduction and Chapter I
- 16 *No class (Spring Break)*
- 23 Saito, *Everyday Aesthetics*, Chapter II
- 30 Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, Introduction, Foreword to Part One, Chapters 1-2
- Apr 6 Thomasson, *Fiction and Metaphysics*, Chapters 3-5
- 13 *No class (Pacific APA)*
- 20 *No class (Monday schedule)*
- Apr 27 Presentations on works of art
- May 4 Presentations on works of art
- May 8 **Term papers due at 5PM**