

University of Guelph
PHIL 3050 Philosophy of Art (Winter 2011)
Instructor: Don Dedrick Rm. 329 MacKinnon Bldg.
TA: Chris Wood,
Office hours: Tuesday 2:30-4 & Wed. 10-11.
Phone: 824-4120 ext. 53203 e-mail: ddedrick@uoguelph.ca

Course Objectives & Description

We will look at contemporary and traditional philosophical views about art, including some of the influential philosophical views of Plato, Aristotle, Kant, Hume, Nietzsche, Tolstoy, Collingwood, Danto, Dickie, Appiah, and others. We will address the question “What is art?” specifically, and in terms of many often contemporary examples (drawn from painting, music, film, literature, drama, etc.) that seem to push the boundaries of our (intuitive) ideas about what art is and is not. Andy Warhol, famously, produced facsimiles of commercial packing cases, and they are considered to be canonical works in the history of western art. There are also, as we shall see, many more radical examples. One way to think about this course: a set of strategies (contemporary, and traditional, and philosophical) for thinking about things that get called—and not called—“art.” No specific knowledge of art, broadly understood, is expected.

Texts

But is it Art? Cynthia Freeland—an essay in the philosophy of art
Art, Yasmina Reza (translated by Christopher Hampton)—a play (not required)
Music, Nicholas Cook—an introduction to contemporary musicology
Other articles available from the D2L website for the course (or sent to students via e-mail).

Course Evaluation

*Quiz/assignments done in class, or with a class component. There will be 8 of these and the best 5 will count (each for 4% = 20% total). Quizzes will take various forms, depending on the material, but they are intended to be done in groups. No quiz is mandatory, please **do not** ask for a replacement quiz if you are away or ill.

*Midterm test & Take home short essay-style assignment (25% each = 50%)

*Final Exam (30%)

Academic Misconduct, Late Assignments, Student Obligations

Late work is not accepted without acceptable documentation.

Please see the 7 statements that pertain to your obligations as a student, on the homepage for the course.

Readings/Topics

(M) *Music*, Nicholas Cook.

(BIA) *But is it Art?*, Cynthia Freeland

Week 1 : Introduction to the course.

Week 2 : Art as imitation. Is the purpose of art to imitate reality? With very different emphases the two great philosophical heavyweights, Plato and Aristotle focus on imitation. For these two philosophers, tragic theatre was the ultimate art form, so we shall watch some of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (Greek Tragedy is crucial to F. Nietzsche's views about art as well) Readings: (BIA) pp 31-35. Readings from Plato & Aristotle can be obtained from the Web CT website for this course.

Week 3 : Taste, beauty. We read articles by the philosophers David Hume and Immanuel Kant, two of the all-time greats. Hume argued for a theory of taste, grounded in our human constitution; Kant (who responds to Hume on many occasions in his philosophical writings) argues for an objective conception of beauty. Both beauty and taste are difficult notions to

defend today—snobby, elitist—but these two authors have been especially influential. Readings (BIA) Chapter 1; articles by Hume and Kant, available from website.

Week 4: We will continue topics from the last week, and look at a view of art that derives in many respects from Kant. This view is often called “formalism” and it has versions in different art forms (most notably visual arts and literary arts). Readings: (BIA) Chapter 2; Article by C. Bell & Excerpt from R. Fry, available from website.

Week 5: Art as expression. We look at two fairly important theories, that of the writer, Tolstoy, and the philosopher, R.G. Collingwood. We also look at Nietzsche’s interesting (and related) ideas about the Apollonian and the Dionysian in art. Readings: BIA ch. 6, articles by Nietzsche, Collingwood, and Tolstoy. [Featured musical work: R. Wagner, the hero of Nietzsche’s Birth of Tragedy]

Week 6 (Feb. 15) : Midterm 1 ½ hr. + video.

Week 7: We take up with genius again this week, looking at the Cult of Beethoven and its implications for the ontology of music, feminist critiques of genius and gender, and a few other things to boot. Readings: (M) Chapters 1 & 7; (BIA) Chapter 5; Article by Korsmeyer, available from the website; brief excerpt from the incredible (!) German novel, *The Loser*. The Canadian pianist Glen Gould is a key figure in this novel, so we listen to some of Gould’s revolutionary playing as well, and we watch a few scenes from *32 short films about Glen Gould*.

Week 8 : To what extent is it that art is a cultural construct? Do non-western peoples have radically different ideas about art? Note that formalism would provide a potentially “universal language” that could cross all boundaries of culture. But: is formalism itself a cultural construct that misrepresents the ways art might be understood within a different culture? Readings: BIA Ch 5 & 6, articles by Jegede, Appiah, and Dutton.

Week 9 : Theories as to the nature of art might be essentialist, as with formalism, or contextualist, as with many of the views discussed in Week 6 and 7. This class is devoted to a view that *seems* to be a strong contextualism: that of the institutional theory of art (expressed crudely in the series of quotations that begins Korsmeyer’s article from week 6: “if it’s in an art gallery, it’s art.”). George Dickie was the first to articulate the Institutional theory, claiming Danto as his inspiration. We look at these two important contemporary philosophers of art.

Week 10 : Art and kitsch; art and pornography. If art is nothing but a matter of taste, and taste is subjective, there can be no principled distinction between art and kitsch, whatever kitsch is. On the other hand, if the institutional theory is correct, there is a distinction. Collingwood and Kant’s ideas come into play here (and some think Tolstoy’s definition of art is better as a definition of kitsch!). Similarly, artists have at times struggled to distinguish their work from pornography and, it must be said, the history of visual art and literature are replete with descriptions of sex and sexuality. We address these issues in this week’s class. Reading TBA.

Week 11: Art and evolution. In an important new book the recently deceased philosopher Dennis Dutton argues that a theory of art can be grounded in our evolutionary history. We have certain tastes as a consequence of our evolved psychological mental/brain structures, and these can help to explain why we (many) like the sort of things we do and dislike other things. (Why for instance, has [serial composition](#) never caught on in music?) Readings: Dutton, Pinker.

Week 12: (April 5) Summary, exam prep, Take home assignment is due.