

Introduction to Art Theory

(艺术理论导论)

Dr. Matteo Ravasio



Overview

This course introduces some central debates in contemporary philosophy of art, particularly as practiced in the anglosphere.

The **first part** of this course introduces some philosophical issues raised by art criticism, a practice that is central to the functioning of the art world.

The **second part** of the course examines other central issues in the philosophy of art, such as the nature of pictorial depiction, the forms and values of art's emotional expression, and the definition of art. The course discusses primarily contemporary English-speaking authors, but also historical figures from continental Europe.

Readings

Required readings

- Noël Carroll, *On Criticism*, Routledge, 2008.
- Robert Stecker, *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art. An Introduction* (second edition), Rowman & Littlefield, 2010 (chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, and 9).
- Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2006 (chapters 4 and 6).

Recommended readings

- Cynthia Freeland, *Art Theory/西方艺术新论*, Yilin Press, 2009.
- Sam Rose, *Interpreting Art*, London: UCL Press, 2022.

Evaluation

The final grade is out of **100 points**. Points breakdown is as follows:

(1) Midterm assignment: up to 40 points.

In this assignment, you will be asked to (1) present the framework defended in Carroll's *On Criticism*, and (2) analyze a piece of written art criticism according to that framework.

(2) Short assignments: up to 30 points each.

These assignments (2 in total) will test your understanding of the course material and your ability to engage it critically.

Language

- Language of instruction is English.
- All required readings are in English. To my knowledge, no Chinese translation exists of these texts.
- Only English assignments will be accepted. Some advice regarding academic writing will be provided during the course.
- If I speak too fast, raise your hand and ask me to slow down.
- We will set up small discussion groups in which to discuss and review material at the end of each lecture. Discussion in these groups can be in Chinese.

Contact information

Office hours

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Art theory vs. philosophy of art

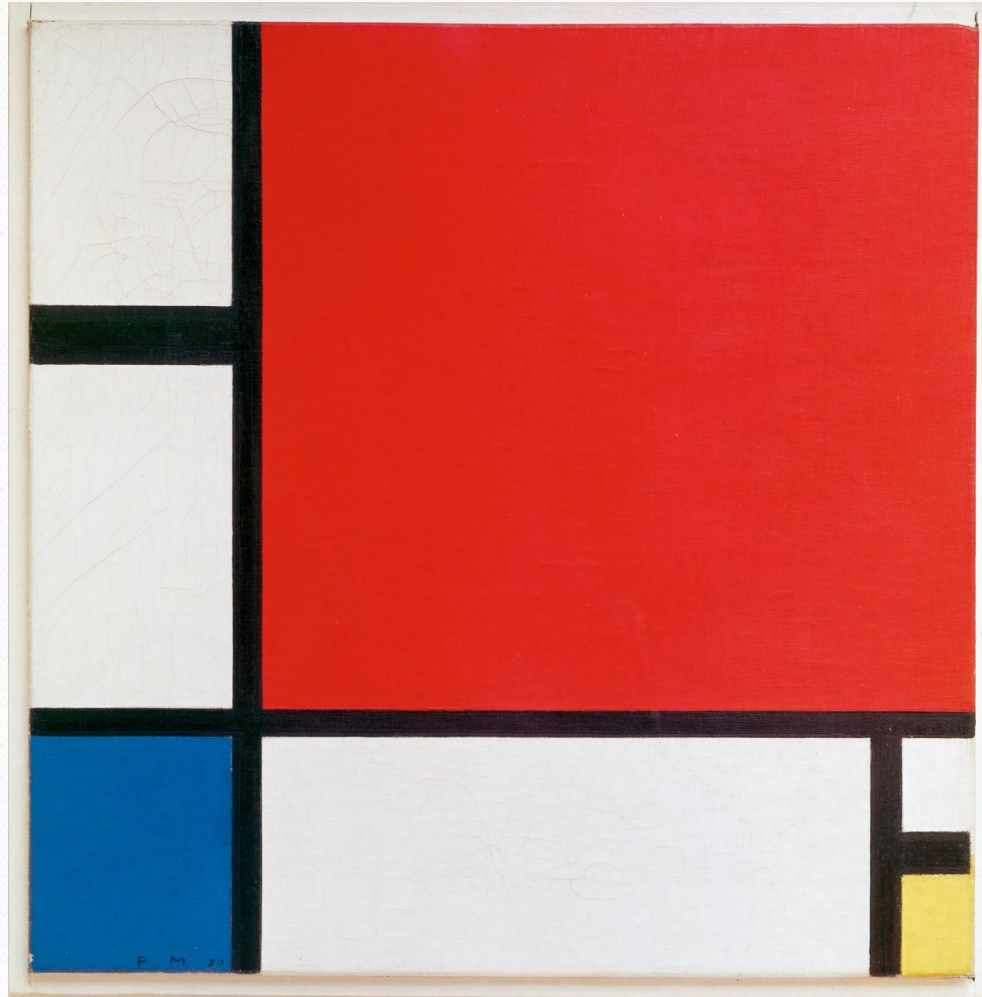
- Much discourse about the arts is **theoretical**. It does not stop at particular historical or critical details regarding this or that work, artist, movement, etc., but rather attempts to systematize this information, aiming at some level of generality.
- For instance, the **sociology** and **psychology** of art both produce theories about art. They work on empirical data and formulate hypotheses that explain such data.
- In this sense, any systematic theoretical model that explains aspects of artistic practice and appreciation may be considered **art theory**.

Art theory vs. philosophy of art

- Theoretical questions about art may investigate either the **artwork itself**, its **creation**, as well as the **appreciative practice** that characterizes it.
- **Philosophy of art** is a particular kind of theorizing about art. It deals with **conceptual** issues at some level of generality. It asks questions such as: What is art? What is the difference between arts and crafts (工艺)? Are the artist's intentions relevant to an artwork's meaning and interpretation?
- This course will be primarily concerned with the philosophy of art.

Definitions of art

- Perhaps the most obvious philosophical question to ask about art is the one concerning its definition. What is art?
- An answer that can be traced back to Greek Antiquity is that art is the skillful **imitation** of reality. The idea that art is essentially imitation was the cornerstone of philosophical reflection on art in 18th century Europe.
- However, in the very same century, the conception of art as imitation was put into question by the development of instrumental music – a portrait imitates a person's appearance, but what does a piece of instrumental music imitate?



Piet Mondrian, *Composition with Red, Blue and Yellow* (1929)



Marcel Duchamp, *In Advance of the Broken Arm* (1915)

Philosophy of art vs. aesthetics

- European aesthetics emerged in the 18th century as the study of the **beautiful** and the **sublime**. How is the judgment of beauty (e.g. “this flower is beautiful”) different from ordinary judgements (“this flower is red”)?
- **Aesthetics properties** are not confined to the beautiful and the sublime. Aesthetics also studies the ugly, the grotesque, the uncanny, the horrifying, etc.
- Aesthetic properties may be possessed by **human artifacts**, as well as by **natural objects**.
- Artworks often have **aesthetic value**, but as Duchamp’s ready-mades show, it is questionable to think that *all* art possesses aesthetic value.