

Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art

Introduction

In this lecture...

- The domain of the aesthetic comprises a wide range of experiences, involving different kinds of objects.
- The discipline of AESTHETICS studies the nature of aesthetic value (compare this with *moral* value, *financial* value, *educational* value).
- Aesthetic value is often also possessed by artworks. But artworks may be aesthetically uninteresting, and they may be interesting for reasons that are not uniquely aesthetic. Thus, art raises additional questions to those examined by aesthetics. PHILOSOPHY OF ART attempts to answer these questions.

A wide range of experiences

(1) You read a poem by Tennyson and feel moved.

I sometimes hold it half a sin
To put in words the grief I feel;
For words, like Nature, half reveal
And half conceal the Soul within.
(from A. Tennyson, *In Memoriam*)

(2) You are sitting in the shade of an old tree, and enjoy the patterns of light and shadow that its foliage projects onto the ground.

- What are some relevant differences between these two experiences?
And in what sense are they similar?



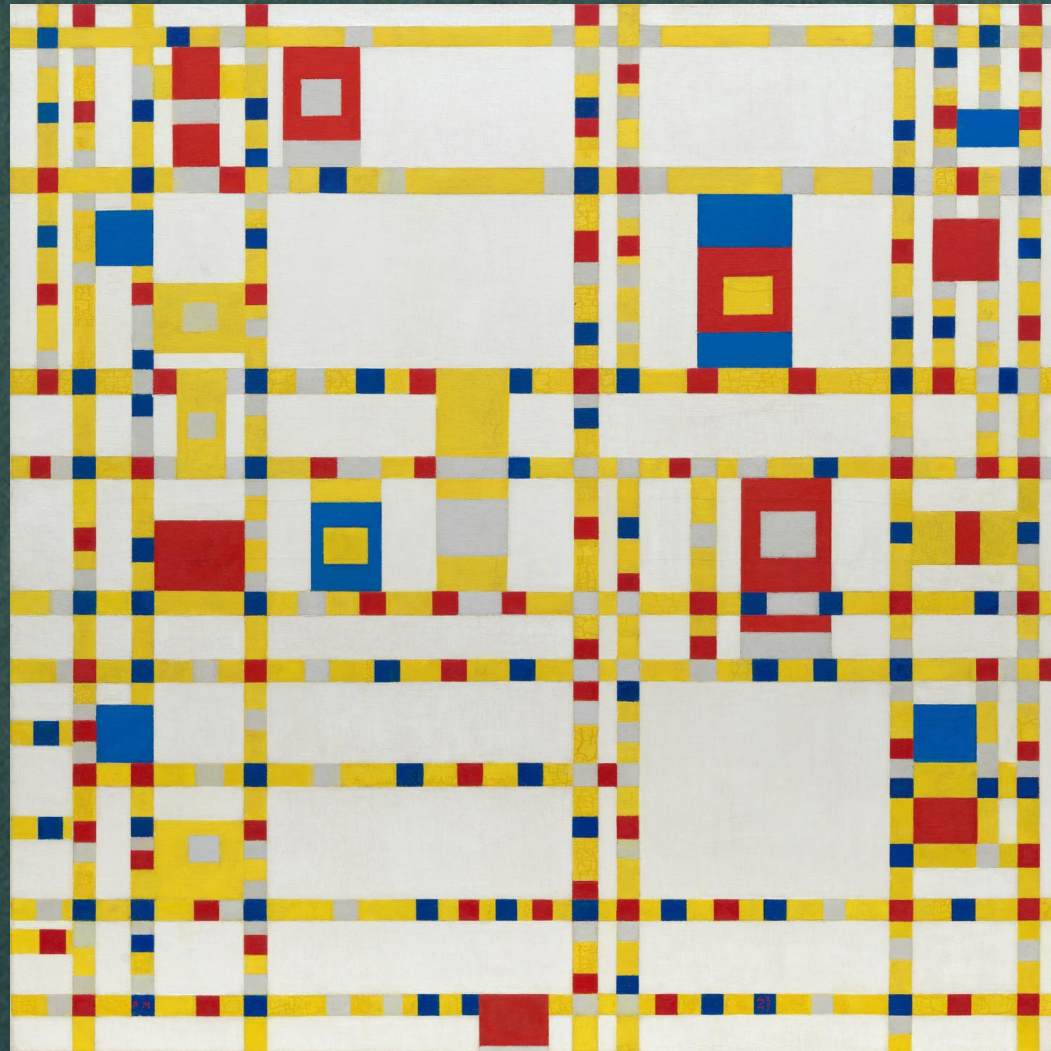
Three conceptions of aesthetics

- (1) THE ORIGINAL CONCEPTION. Aesthetics is the discipline that studies the experiences of the beautiful and the sublime, as well as the features of the objects that occasion such experiences. These object may be both natural objects and artworks.
- (2) THE AESTHETICS-AS-PHILOSOPHY-OF-ART CONCEPTION. Reflection on aesthetic matters should focus on the arts. The aesthetic appreciation of non-artistic objects should be modelled on the appreciation of art.
- (3) THE DUAL CONCEPTION. Aesthetics studies aesthetic value. This value may be found in art, but art may also be valuable *as art* for reasons other than its aesthetic value.

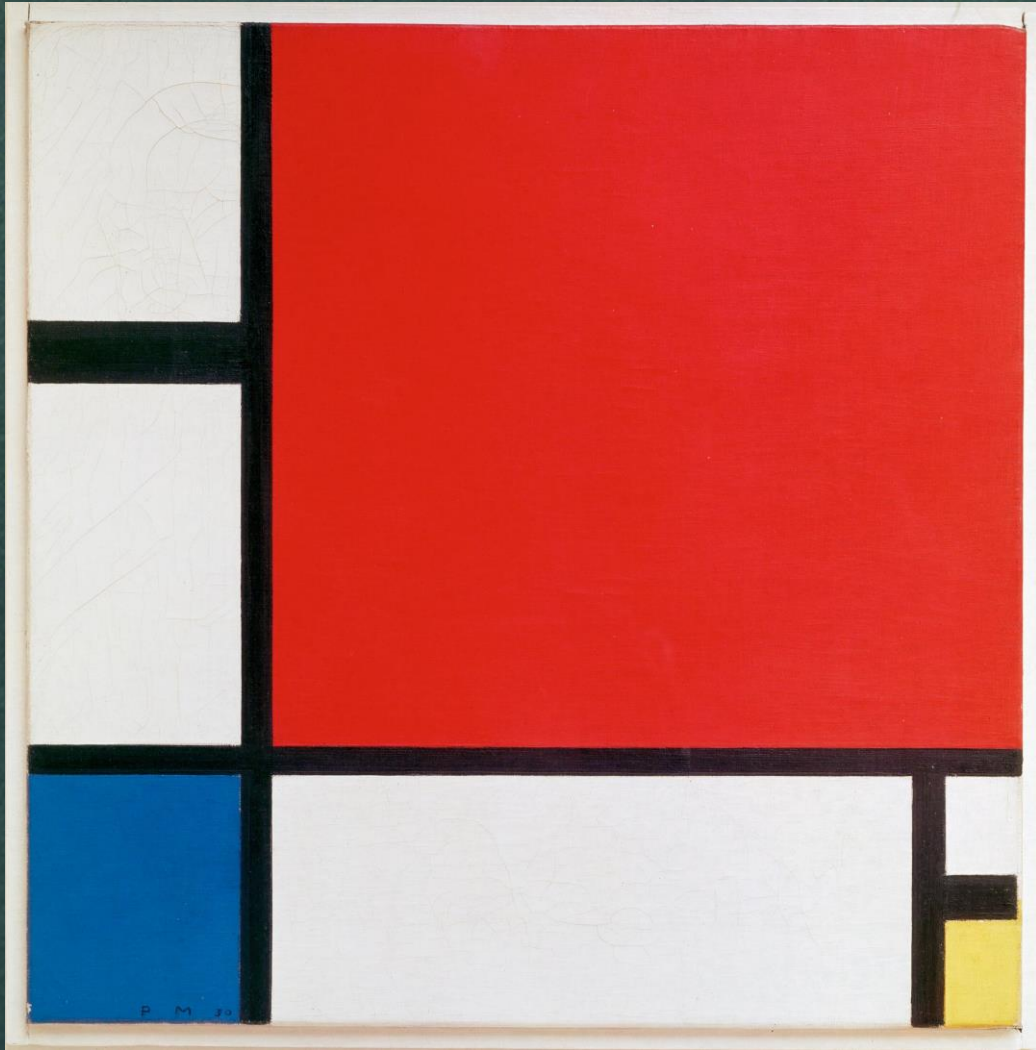
Two distinct domains

- The disciplines of aesthetics and philosophy of art are distinct, but also related in an important way.
- Many artworks possess aesthetic value, and some of the features they possess as artworks are relevant to our assessment of their aesthetic properties.

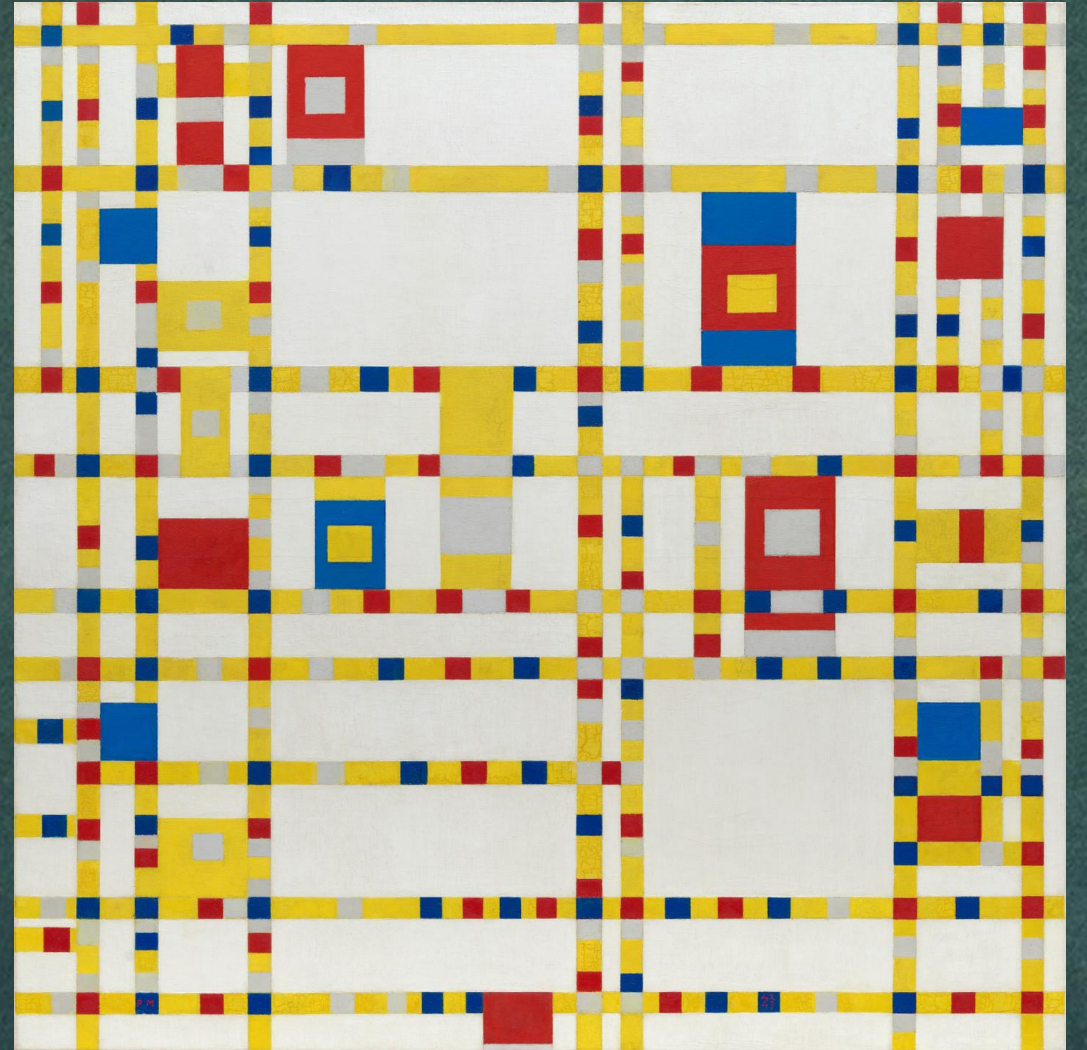
EXAMPLE: The aesthetic properties of an artwork may depend on its comparison to other works in a similar style.



Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43)



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



Piet Mondrian, *Broadway Boogie Woogie* (1942-43)

The subjectivity of the aesthetic

- It is commonplace to observe that the domain of the aesthetic is a very SUBJECTIVE one. Individual differences in taste are often significant. DIACHRONIC changes (i.e., changes over time) are even more impressive.

“There is no art that exhausts so many forms and as quickly as does music. Modulations, cadential progressions, intervallic and harmonic progressions wear out in fifty, even thirty years such that the intellectually stimulating composer can no longer employ them and will be constantly pressured to invent new, purely musical features.”

E. Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful* (1864), chapter 4

"The same Homer who pleased people at Athens and Rome two thousand years ago is still admired today in Paris and in London. All the changes of climate, government, religion, and language haven't been able to obscure his glory. Authority or prejudice may create a temporary fashion in favour of a bad poet or orator, but his reputation won't ever be LASTING or GENERAL. When his compositions are examined by POSTERITY or by FOREIGNERS, the enchantment disappears and his faults appear in their true colours. It is different with a real genius: the longer his works endure and the more widely they are spread, the more sincere is the admiration that he meets with."

D. Hume, *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757)

The boundaries of the aesthetic

IMAGINE you had a friend who really disliked raw tomato. Can you convince them that it tastes good? Imagine now your friend also disliked jazz music. Would it be different to convince them it is good music?



A possible distinction: the BEAUTIFUL vs. the PLEASURABLE. This could help us define the nature of the aesthetic.

The Philosophy of Art

- Some artworks are material objects (paintings, sculptures, buildings). Other artworks are not so easily considered material objects. A novel or poem can be printed on paper, but it is not identical to a piece of printed paper.
- Some artworks are valuable for their aesthetic properties – they are beautiful, balanced, refined, or dynamic. Other artworks do not possess aesthetic properties worthy of mention.
- Some artworks are mainly appreciated through the senses. Others function by engaging our cognition.
- How can we DEFINE art, so as to capture the wide array of things we call artworks?



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



Kenneth Noland, *Gift* (1961-62)



Andy Warhol, *Brillo Boxes* (1964)