

Introduction to Art Theory 艺术理论导论

Course introduction

Course overview

- This course introduces some central topics in art theory and philosophy of art. The course is intended for students with no background in philosophy.
- During the first half of the course, we will read Cynthia Freeland's *Art Theory*/西方艺术新论 (Yilin Press, 2009). This book introduces some central problems in art theory and philosophy of art.
- The second half of the course is devoted to a monograph on art criticism. Noël Carroll's *On Criticism* (Routledge, 2008) offers an account of the nature and goals of art criticism. Studying this book, we will look in more depth at issues concerning the **interpretation** and **evaluation** of artworks. Questions regarding **meaning** and **value** are at the center of philosophical reflection on art.
- Some new material will be introduced during classes, especially in the course's first half. Therefore, reading the mandatory readings does not substitute class attendance.

Assignments

(1) Weekly assignments (7 in total). During the first part of the course, students will be asked to answer to one or two given questions each week, relative to the content of the previous week's class (all questions will be provided in Session 1) (word limit: 300 words).

(2) Midterm assignment. A short essay based on one out of five possible topics (word limit: 1500 words).

(3) Final essay. You may choose either (1) an essay based on a pre-established topic, and requiring an additional reading (normally a journal article or book chapter). Topics will be proposed by the instructor, though they may also be suggested by students (word limit: 3000 words), or (2) an essay on Carroll's *On Criticism*, in which you analyze a piece of written art criticism according to the framework he defends. More details on both options will be provided in a separate document.

Course evaluation

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

(1) Weekly assignments: 35 points. These are pass/fail, that is, no grades will be assigned. In case of failure, the assignments can be attempted as many times as one wishes, until the last day of lectures. Students need to pass all of the weekly assignments in order to complete the course.

(2) Midterm assignment: up to 25 points.

(3) Final essay: up to 40 points.

(4) Class participation: extra 5 points. These additional points are assigned to students if they attend lectures regularly and participate in class discussions.

Online students can obtain the extra 5 points for class participation by writing a 500 words summary of an article or book chapter approved by the course instructor.

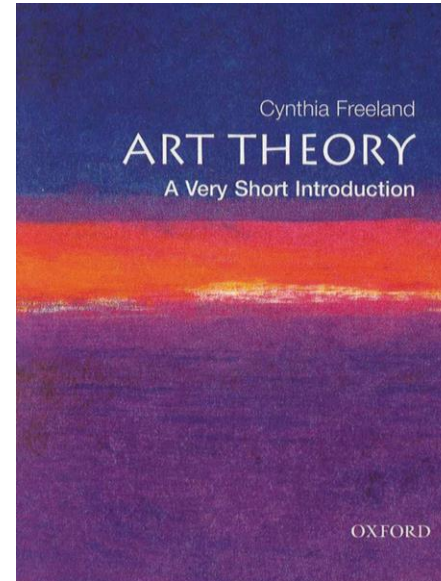
Readings

Mandatory readings:

- Cynthia Freeland, *Art Theory*/西方艺术新论, Yilin Press, 2009.
- Noël Carroll, *On Criticism*, Routledge, 2008.

Recommended readings:

- Stephen Davies, *The Philosophy of Art*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2015.



Art theory vs. philosophy of art

- We can draw a somewhat arbitrary, yet convenient distinction between art theory and philosophy of art.
- Much discourse about the arts is **theoretical**. It does not stop at particular 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 in the sense just described. They work on empirical data and formulate hypotheses that explain such data.
- Freeland's book examines art theory in this broad sense, in that it includes discussion of art sociology and neuropsychology (among other things). However, the book also touches on several issues in the **philosophy** of art (see the following slide).

Art theory vs. philosophy of art

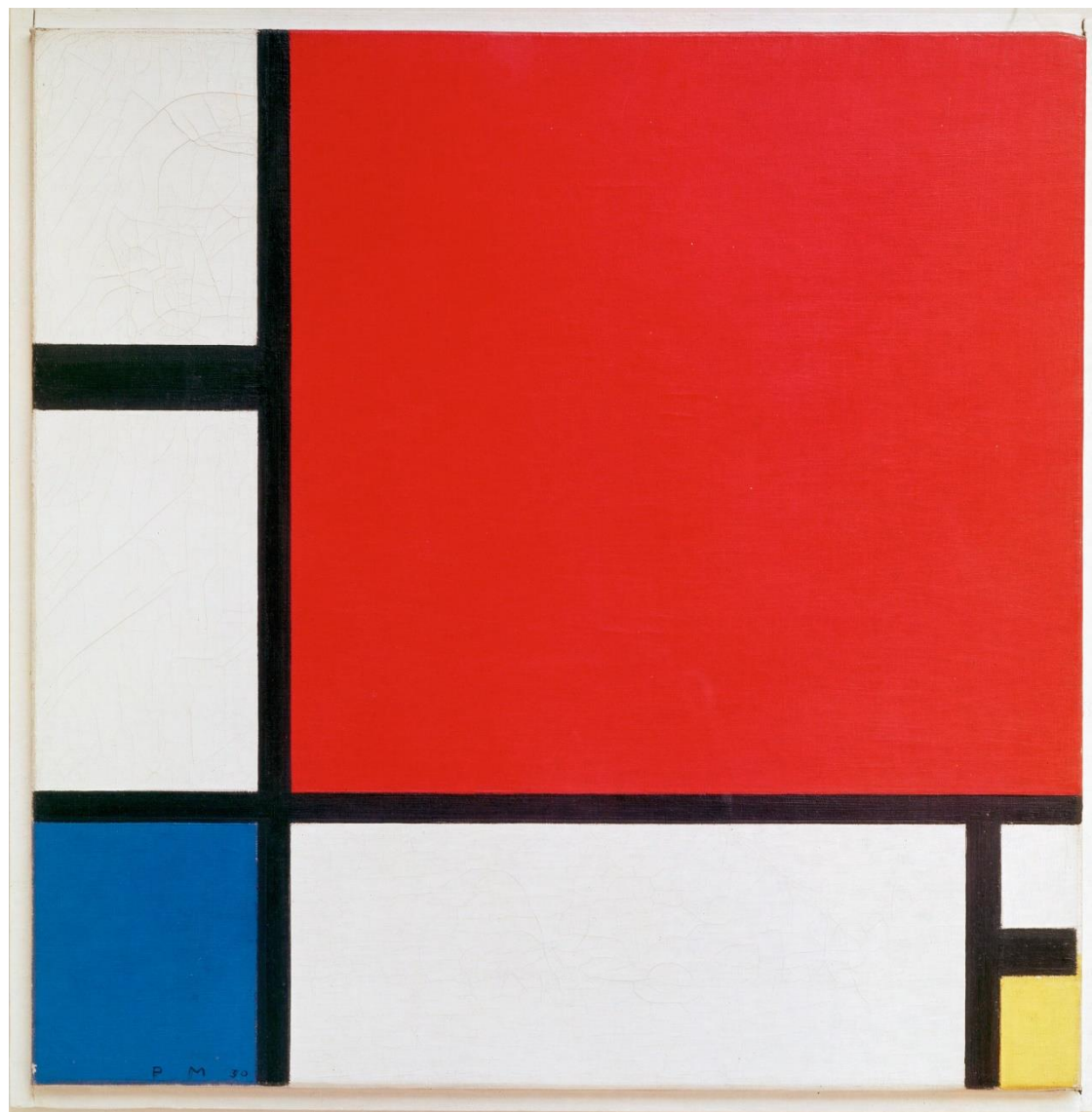
- Philosophy of art is a particular kind of theorizing about art. It deals with **conceptual issues** at some level of generality. It asks questions such as: What is art? What is the difference between arts and crafts (工艺)? Are the artist's intentions relevant to an artwork's interpretation?
- Philosophy of art is also concerned with questions of **value**, the most fundamental of which is: Why is art (intrinsically) valuable? Another important topic is that the possibility of **ethical** value in art, and its relation to **aesthetic** value – can artworks be moral or immoral? Can an artwork be more or less beautiful because it is more or less moral?
- Sometimes, the expression 'art theory' is used to mean 'theory of art', which in turn refers to an investigation of art's essence – in other words, an attempt to clarify what art fundamentally *is*, and thus a *philosophical* question about art. In contemporary English-speaking philosophy, this is often framed as the debate around the **definition of art** (see for instance <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/art-definition/>).

Philosophy of art vs. aesthetics

- **Aesthetics** is the discipline that studies the nature of aesthetic properties and aesthetic experience. Traditionally, Western aesthetics mainly investigated **beauty**. People's capacity to appreciate beauty is **taste** (品味), another central topic in Western aesthetics.
- **Philosophy of art** investigates the nature of art and its appreciation.
- Both natural and human-made objects may possess aesthetic properties, and both may occasion aesthetic experiences. Aesthetics thus examines both natural objects and human-made ones. In contrast, art is by definition a human activity. Therefore, the philosophy of art engages exclusively with human-made objects.
- However, not all human-made objects or activities that possess aesthetic properties are artworks. For instance, a person's signature may be balanced, dynamic, and stylish, but it is still not an artwork.
- 'Aesthetics' is often used to refer to *both* aesthetics and 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?
- Other solutions to the question of art's essence have been explored. It has been proposed that all art has to do with the expression of emotion, or that it all provides some kind of peculiar “aesthetic” experience. However, both these definitions seem to fail to include some of the objects that we regard as art.



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

Form and content

- Artworks normally have a **content**, that is, something they represent, or something they are *about*.
- Artworks also possess a **form**, that is, a particular configuration, composition, or structure.
- An important task for the philosophy of art is that of clarifying the relationship between these two aspects of artworks.
- An influential Western approach to art emphasizes form at the expense of content. This view is called **formalism**. According to formalists, the artwork's origin, function, and represented content are irrelevant to its appreciation. What matters is the artwork's appearance, its form.



Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Landscape with the Fall of Icarus* (1590-95)

“[...] the narrative center of the painting—the fallen Icarus—is placed off to the side, where he goes almost unremarked; whereas everyday “background” details hold centerstage. Narrative structure and compositional conventions pull in opposite directions in a way that sets up a dynamic formal tension in the painting and in our perception of it. [...]

But to appreciate this formal structure it is necessary to attend to the representational content of *The Fall of Icarus*.”

(Carroll 1999, 123)

Art institutions

- Artworks neither grow on trees nor fall from the sky. They are the products of **human activity**. Human activities are normally not constituted by the actions of an isolated individual. It is made by the actions of many individuals, who interact with each other in more or less codified ways.
- The activities that surround the production and appreciation of art are no exception. The production, display, appreciation, sale, etc. of artworks normally involves numerous more or less formalized **institutions** (museums, art markets, art galleries, art magazines, art history departments at universities, etc.).
- The role of institutions in artistic practices raises a host of philosophically interesting questions. Is there any art that does not belong in institutionalized settings? What are the duties of museum curators and gallery owners with respect to the artworks they display? To what extent do institutions *determine* what is art and what is not?



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

Art and power

- If **institutions** and various forms of **power** have a significant impact on the production and appreciation of art, it makes sense to ask whether art can become entangled in power dynamics.
- Can art bear the signs of various forms of **oppression**? Can art itself be an instrument of oppression? Feminist art historians and philosophers answers positively to these questions. They have explored the ways in which artworks may embody attitudes or suggest responses that are damaging to women.
- In Western art history, female artists are decidedly outnumbered by male artists. Feminists scholars have investigated the **institutional obstacles** to the success of female artists.



Judith Leyster, *Boy playing the Flute* (ca. 1630)

Art, knowledge, and interpretation

- We use stories to educate children, songs to inspire patriotic or religious feelings, poems to reflect about life and its meaning. These examples show that art is related to our understanding of the world and of ourselves.
- But can artworks convey valuable knowledge about the world, and do they do so in ways that are peculiar to art? Can they educate our moral sensibility?
- What an artwork can teach us will depend on the artwork's meaning, which in turn is discovered through a process of **interpretation**. This is one of the most debated issues in the philosophy of art. Is the artist's **intention** relevant to the interpretation of an artwork? Or should we confine ourselves to an examination of the artwork itself?
- Carroll discusses intentions at length in his book on art criticism. This is because his account of criticism assumes that the artist's intentions are crucial in determining an artwork's meaning and value.