

**INTRODUCTION TO  
PHILOSOPHY**

PROFESSOR DUNCAN PRITCHARD

# TOPIC 4

## AESTHETICS

- ❑ Aesthetics is concerned with the nature of art and beauty, both of which are usually considered core components of a good life, a life of flourishing.
- ❑ Indeed, the beautiful (along with the good and the true) can plausibly lay claim to being inherently valuable (i.e., at least finally valuable, perhaps even intrinsically valuable).

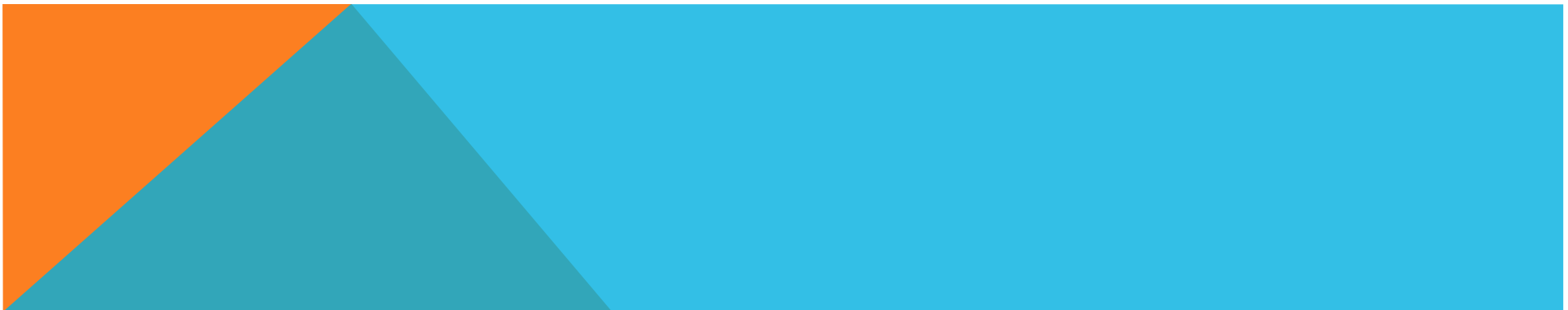


# WHAT IS ART?

- ❑ Artworks are very diverse in nature. Consider, for example, the diversity within the so-called fine arts, which include painting, sculpture, architecture, music and poetry.
- ❑ Contemporary art adds a further layer of diversity. For example, it includes works that would traditionally be thought of (perhaps for patriarchal/class reasons?) as craft rather than art (e.g., photography). There is also conceptual art, performance art, mass-produced art (e.g., Warhol-style), atonal music, and so on.



Pink Roses, Chinese Vase,  
by Samuel John Peploe



# MANIFEST VERSUS NON-MANIFEST PROPERTIES

- ❑ The manifest properties of an object are the properties that one can perceive (colour, texture, etc).
- ❑ The non-manifest properties are the properties that one cannot perceive. This includes many relational properties, such as that the painting was produced by Picasso (rather than a skilled faker).
- ❑ Traditionally, art was defined in terms of its manifest properties, but especially when it comes to contemporary art the non-manifest properties also seem relevant.



Still Life,  
by Samuel John Peploe



# FUNCTIONAL DEFINITIONS OF ART

- ❑ One way of defining art in terms of its non-manifest properties is by doing so in terms of its function.
- ❑ The function of something is a non-manifest property because you cannot normally know just by perceiving an item what its function is. In particular, you usually need to know something about the intentions of the person who made that object, or at least something about how that object is actually used.



Self-Portrait,  
by J. D. Fergusson



# FUNCTIONAL DEFINITIONS OF ART

- ❑ So one functional account of art is that it is that which is designed to provoke aesthetic experiences. (This is roughly the account offered by Monroe Beardsley (1915-1985)).
- ❑ But of course lots of things can fulfil this definition which don't seem to be art, like table-settings or haircuts.
- ❑ Moreover, some contemporary art is specifically designed to horrify, annoy, disgust etc. (It is 'anti-aesthetic').

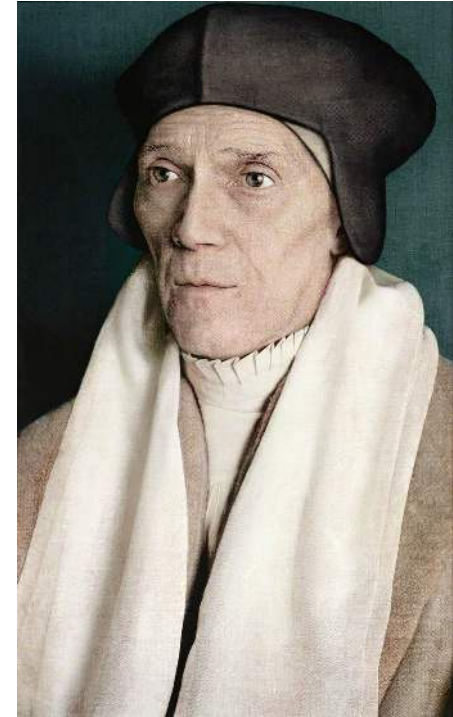


My Bed,  
by Tracey Emin

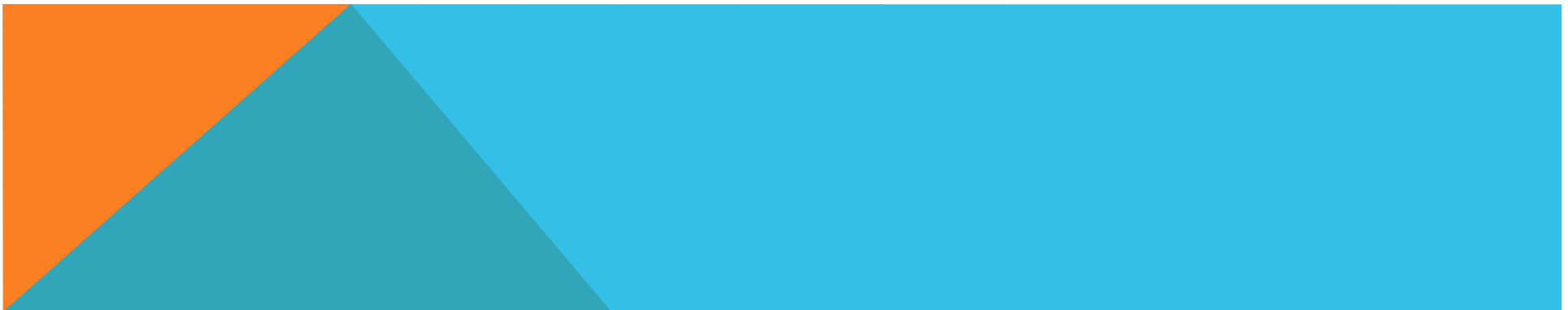


# PROCEDURAL DEFINITIONS OF ART

- ❑ Question: how does a piece of paper become money, and hence have a value that transcends the value of the paper? The answer relates to how a certain institutional practice confers that value.
- ❑ George Dickies' (1926-) institutional definition of art works along similar lines, arguing that an artefact becomes art via an institutional procedure whereby this status is conferred (roughly, a member of the art world puts forward the artefact as being worthy of appreciation).



John Fisher,  
by Paul Hodgson

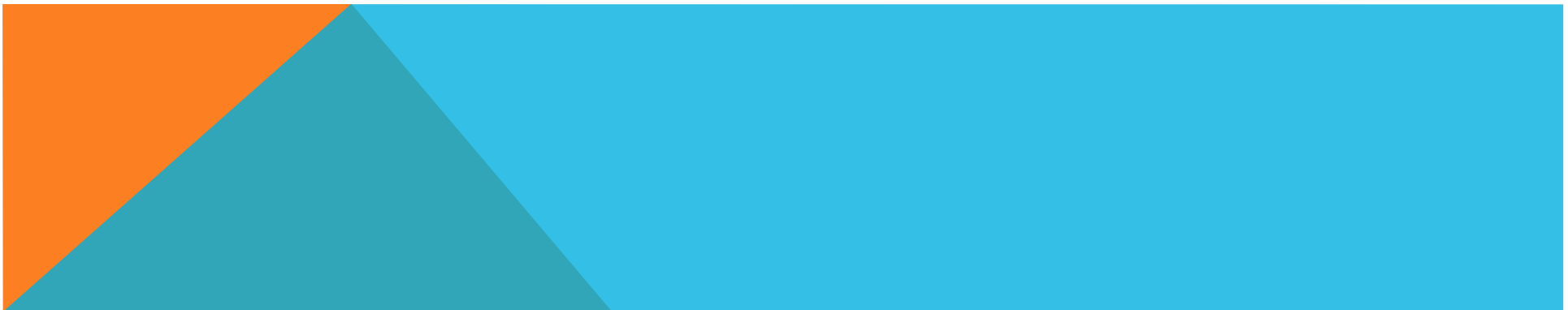


# PROCEDURAL DEFINITIONS OF ART

- ❑ One problem with this account is that it is danger of being incredibly broad. Can *anyone* self-identify as a member of the art world and thereby confer this status on an artefact? And if so, then in what sense is this at all akin to the supposed analogy with other institutional conferrings of status (I can call a piece of paper a \$100 bill as much as I like, but this doesn't make it so).
- ❑ Alternatively, if one does appeal to a formal conception of the art world (e.g., one has to have a certain formal training, or recognised standing in the field), then the account looks too restrictive.



Fountain,  
by Marcel Duchamp





# A DILEMMA FOR THE INSTITUTIONAL ACCOUNT

- ❑ Richard Wollheim (1923-2003) posed an influential dilemma for Dickies' institutional account of art (in his book, *Art and its Objects*).
- ❑ On the one hand, if the artist has good independent reasons for proposing certain artefacts as being worthy of appreciation, then we can appeal to those reasons to explain why the artefact constitutes art. On this horn of the dilemma, the institutional act of the artist is redundant.
- ❑ On the other hand, if the artist doesn't have good independent reasons for proposing certain artefacts as being worthy of appreciation, then this process seems entirely arbitrary. In particular, we lose any connection between art and *good* art.



# ANTI-ESSENTIALISM

- ❑ Perhaps the moral to be drawn from the foregoing is that it is hopeless to attempt a definition of art. In particular, perhaps it is in the very nature of art to be immune to a definition. This is *anti-essentialism*.
- ❑ One ground for anti-essentialism is the Wittgenstenian idea that many (all?) of our most important concepts are immune to definition, and are rather best understood as *family resemblance concepts* (compare: the concept of a game).
- ❑ This sort of position has been elaborated by Morris Weitz (1916-1981).



Paul Hodgson,  
working in his studio



# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- ❑ Aesthetic experience is not limited to the experience of art, since it also applies to appreciations of natural beauty (and ugliness).
- ❑ Do aesthetic experiences have a unified nature? (This is known as the *question of unification*).
- ❑ Or are there instead several types of aesthetic experience, with no general unified nature?



Hospital Auxiliare d'Armee 301,  
by Nora Neilson Gray



# AN ACCOUNT OF AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- ❑ Historically speaking, one influential account of aesthetic experience essentially accords it five features.
- ❑ They are: (i) involving, or at least dependent upon, perception; (ii) pleasurable; (iii) non-cognitive (i.e., immediate, with no rational inference involved); (iv) non-practical; and (v) valuable for its own sake.
- ❑ All five conditions are controversial.



Girl in a Red Coat,  
by Anne Redpath



# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- ❑ The first condition is controversial depending on how one understands the role of perception in aesthetic experience. According to *aesthetic formalism*, as defended for example by Clive Bell (1881-1964), aesthetic experience exclusively depends upon properties perceived via the senses.
- ❑ But this is problematic, as the very same artefact can generate very different aesthetic experiences, depending on how we approach it. (A point famously made by Arthur Danto (1924-2013)).



La Mitrailleuse,  
by C. R. W. Nevinson



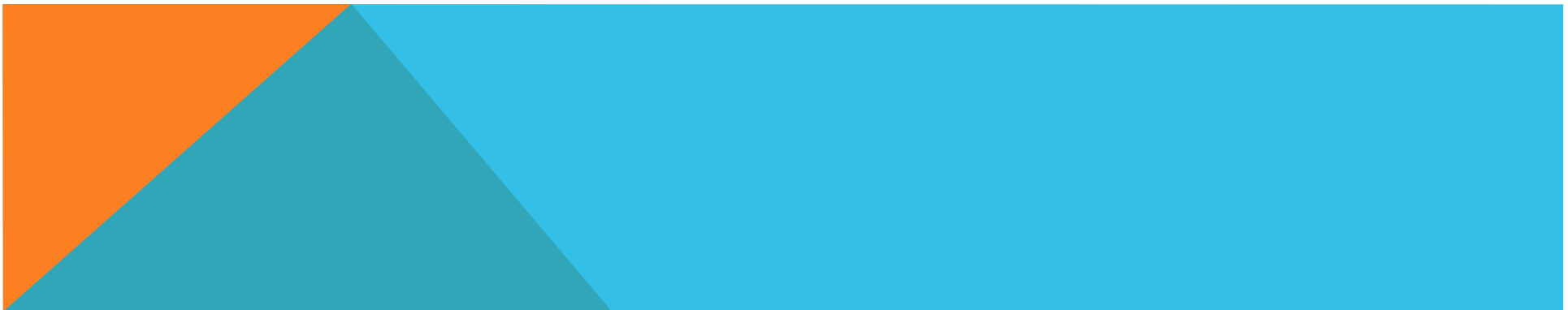


# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- ❑ The second condition is controversial because aesthetic experience is not confined to the appreciation of the beautiful, but can also apply to the ugly (and to the challenging, the disgusting, the disturbing etc).
- ❑ Could one argue that even these aesthetic experiences are in a sense pleasurable (as when, for example, one gets a thrill from watching a horror film)?
- ❑ But what about aesthetic experiences which are essentially detached (or is this not possible)?



Mr. Wyndham Lewis as a Tyro,  
by John Wyndham Lewis

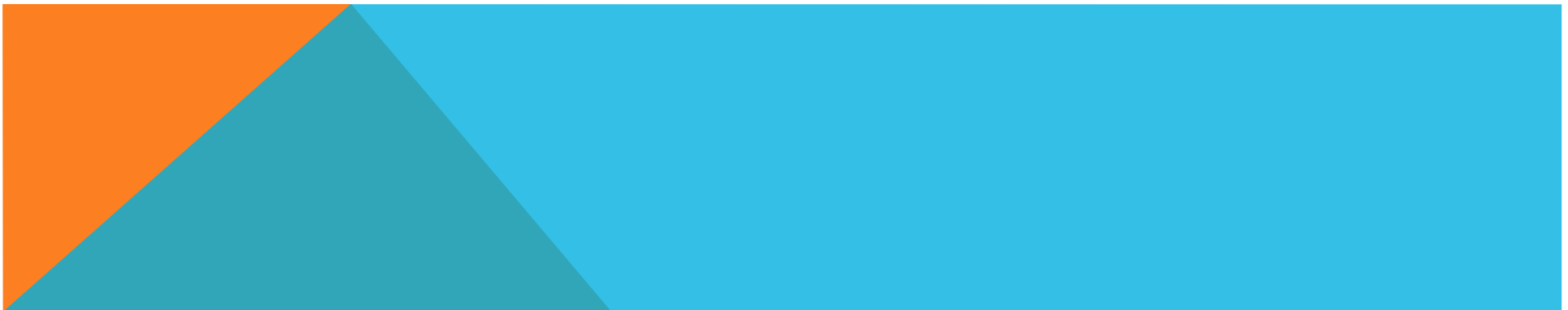


# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- ❑ The third condition is controversial because of the point made earlier regarding aesthetic formalism—*viz.*, that an aesthetic experience often involves a lot more than just an immediate perception of an artefact.
- ❑ But perhaps we can accommodate this point by saying that although background knowledge might be relevant to the kind of aesthetic experience that one has, the aesthetic experience itself is immediate and thus involves no ratiocination.

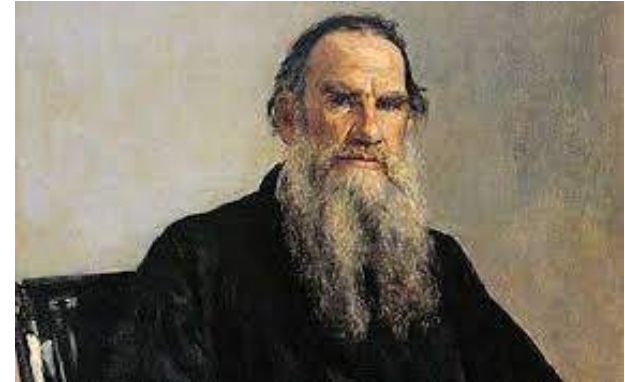


View From the Mound,  
by William Crozier



# AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE

- ❑ The fifth condition is controversial for similar reasons, in that just as we might think that some aesthetic experiences are grounded in practical or moral desires, so one might think that the value of at least some aesthetic experiences can be instrumental rather than final/intrinsic.
- ❑ But perhaps the way to resolve this issue is to say that while we might value aesthetic experience in instrumental ways, the fact remains that in order to be an aesthetic experience we should nonetheless value it for its own sake. (But even so, can one not remained aesthetically detached?)



Leo Tolstoy



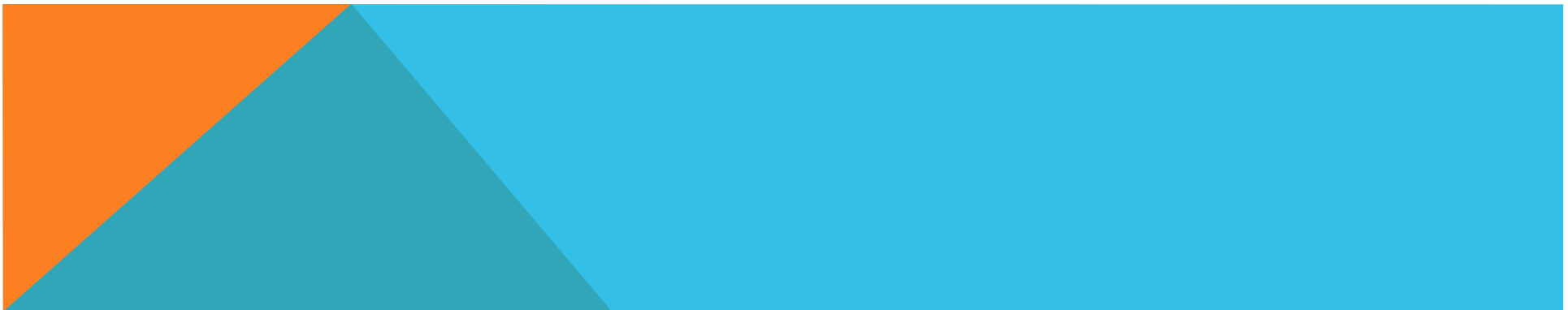


# AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

- ❑ What is the relationship between aesthetic judgements and aesthetic experiences? In particular, can one have one without the other?
- ❑ It does very much seem so. An aesthetic judgement can be dispassionate, for example, in which case there might not be any corresponding aesthetic experience.
- ❑ Aesthetic judgements can also be negative, while on some views of aesthetic experience the latter is essentially pleasurable (and hence positive).



Buster Keaton,  
(still from Steamboat Bill, Jr. 1928)



# AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

- ❑ Aesthetic judgements also seem to involve far more by way cognition. One might need to know a great deal about fine art, for example, in order to form some kinds of aesthetic judgement.
- ❑ Relatedly, aesthetic judgements can be much richer in content than the corresponding aesthetic experiences. The latter might just involve an appreciation of an artwork's beauty, while the former could incorporate a detailed account of why it is beautiful.



Donne Tahitiane Sdraiate,  
by Paul Gauguin



# AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

- ❑ Are there any objective standards for aesthetic judgements? Initially, one would think not. Suppose I think that a painting is beautiful and you think that it is ugly. Would we feel that there ought to be an objective fact of the matter regarding which of us is right (as, e.g., there is in science)?
- ❑ And yet we do sometimes argue about aesthetics, and indeed we also treat some people as having special expertise in this field, which suggests that there is at least some kind of objectivity that is applicable to this domain.



Deadpan,  
by Steve McQueen

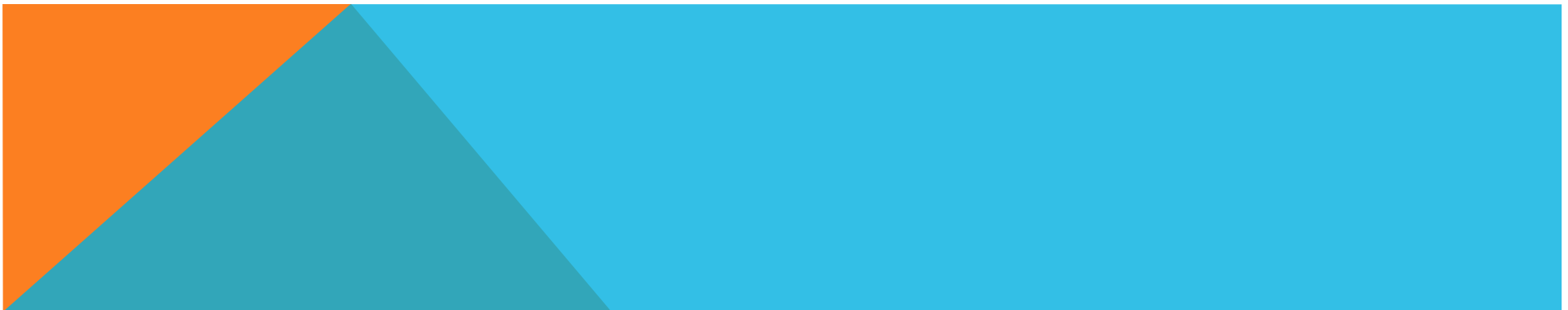


# AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

- ❑ According to David Hume (1711-1776), in his famous essay 'Of the Standard of Taste' (1757), we could potentially factor out the locally distorting influences which lead to aesthetic disagreement so that a convergence starts to appear in our aesthetic judgements.
- ❑ In particular, a suitably trained critic, or at least a group of critics, could converge on an aesthetic judgement which would be the appropriate one to draw.
- ❑ But is this at all plausible?

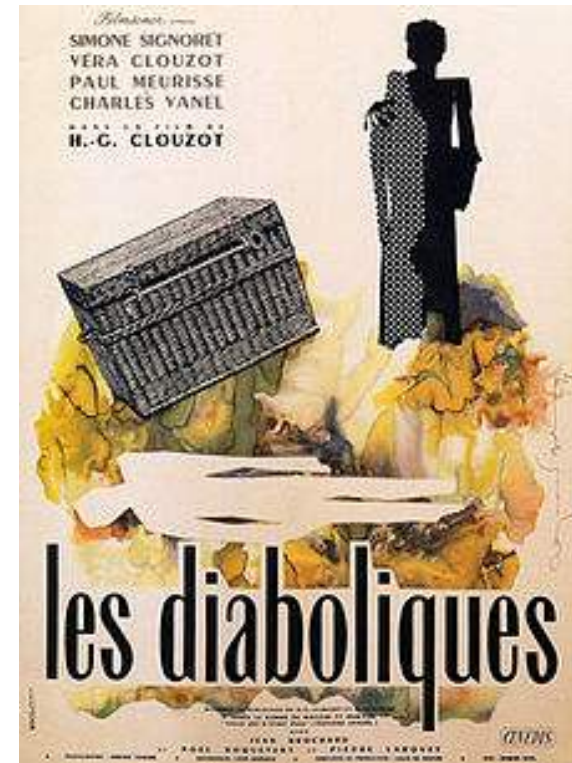


Untitled No. 66,  
by Cindy Sherman



# AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

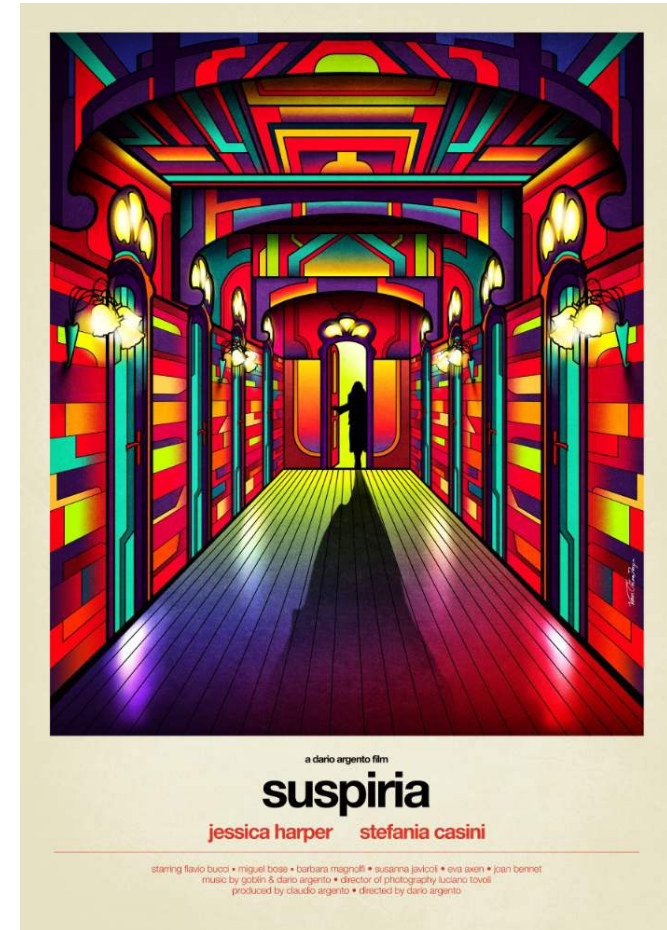
- ❑ A related issue here is how aesthetic judgements are related to the basic, non-aesthetic, properties of the object being judged. Does a certain set of non-aesthetic properties (shape, texture, colour etc) determine an appropriate aesthetic judgement (i.e., in one who is suitably aesthetically refined and observant)?
- ❑ Hume seems to think that this might be possible. (Kant, in contrast, didn't).





# AESTHETIC JUDGEMENTS

- ❑ One reason to think that the non-aesthetic properties of an object cannot determine an appropriate aesthetic judgement by themselves is that an object's relational properties also seem to be at least sometimes relevant to aesthetic judgement.
- ❑ For example, consider two physically identical paintings, one which was produced by the artist, the other which is a copy (perhaps not even by a human hand, but by a machine). Would our aesthetic judgement of them be the same?



# AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

- ❑ There seems to be a close relationship between aesthetic judgement and aesthetic experience at least to the extent that one's aesthetic judgements must be rooted in one's own aesthetic experiences and not the aesthetic experiences of others (this is known as the *acquaintance principle*).
- ❑ In particular, wouldn't there be something very odd about grounding one's aesthetic judgements in someone else's aesthetic testimony? (E.g., I claim to love the novels of Patricia Highsmith, although I haven't read any of them but have only heard the testimony of others about their quality).



# AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

- ❑ And yet, if there can be aesthetic experts, then wouldn't it be better to form my aesthetic judgements based on their aesthetic testimony rather than on my own aesthetic experiences?
- ❑ One explanation of what is going on here is that there are certain domains where taking first-person responsibility for one's judgements seems particularly important. For example, while there might well be political or ethical experts, ultimately one needs to take personal ownership of one's own ethical and political opinions.





# AESTHETIC TESTIMONY

- ❑ A related thought is that certain domains are more compatible with second-hand knowledge than others.
- ❑ There is, for example, nothing lacking about me as a person if I choose to trust the experts about a scientific domain like climate change rather than becoming an expert myself (life is short, after all).
- ❑ But there is something lacking about me as a person if I'm willing to simply trust the experts about a domain like ethics or aesthetics, rather than working out what my own stance should be. (Though note that this is compatible with my view nonetheless being informed by expert testimony).

