Philosophers Discussing Art on YouTube

Brandon Polite
Knox College

In the summer of 2020, relatively early in the pandemic, I began recording interviews over Zoom with other philosophers working in aesthetics (mostly ASA members) about their work and posting them to YouTube. The series, called <Polite Conversations: Philosophers Discussing Art>, started off as a way to add value to my own students’ experiences in courses that were being taught remotely and largely asynchronously. But it has since become a public-facing YouTube series with over 350 subscribers and 15,000 views and counting. From the outset, I have produced the videos with two main goals in mind: first, to be used in classes as a means of humanizing philosophers whose work students have read and exploring their ideas beyond what’s included in their books or articles; and second, to showcase the amazing work on cool topics that is being done in aesthetics today. As of this publication, I’ve recorded and released over 50 episodes with over 40 guests on a variety of topics: from music, literature, film, and architecture, to memes, perfume, street art, video games, AI art, and Taylor Swift.

When I use these interviews in my own classes, which I frequently do, the responses are always positive. Students are surprised that none of my interviewees fit the stereotypical mold of what a philosopher is “supposed” to look and act like: serious, solemn, out of touch, smug, humorless, and the like. Instead, what they find is what we in aesthetics all know about each other already: that we are engaging, affable, keyed into contemporary aesthetic practices, serious thinkers without being overly self-serious, and funny as all get out!

Not only do the interviews change my students’ beliefs about what philosophers are like, they also change their conceptions of how philosophy is done. As I conceive of it, at any rate, philosophy is a generation-spanning conversation in which participants share ideas and think through them together. By giving students models of what conversations among philosophers can look like at their best (collaborative rather than combative, open rather than defensive, humble rather than arrogant), I’m inviting students to join in the conversation with us and thereby feel like they’re a genuine part of it rather than outsiders looking in on it. Making students feel included extends to the videos’ subtitles, which are carefully edited by a student worker (funded by Knox College) and myself so that they are compliant with the Americans with Disabilities Act and thus available to those who are hearing impaired or have other disabilities.

The series has also been successful beyond its pedagogical use. It has led two of my guests to begin writing a sequel to an article they co-authored in light of our discussion about it. It has led to unanticipated collaborative projects between some of my guests and myself. It has also led to me editing a book for Bloomsbury, which will be out likely in late 2024, tentatively titled Taylor Swift and the Philosophy of Re-recording: The Art of Taylor’s Versions, which will feature chapters by each of the people I interviewed as part of a <miniseries> on this myself.

In the future, I plan to broaden the series’ reach and usability by releasing it as a podcast, in addition to keeping it on YouTube. I will also create a user-friendly website with descriptions of and keywords
for each video, similar to what <Aesthetics for Birds> has generously done with the first two slates of interviews, as well as transcripts of every interview and links to further readings. I also plan to broaden the aesthetic practices considered in the series beyond the Western, Eurocentric ones that I’ve mostly covered thus far. Those interviews are in the planning stages and will be released over the coming year. If you want to be notified when those and other videos are released, then please consider subscribing to my channel by clicking the following link: 
<https://www.youtube.com/c/PhilosophersDiscussingArt?sub_confirmation=1>.

Rather than me going on for several hundred more words about my series, three of my previous interviewees have graciously agreed to write a bit about their experiences with it. Hannah Kim discusses how the recording experience contributes to the interviews’ ability to benefit different audiences. Madeline Martin-Seaver discusses how the interviews reach multiple audiences and offer opportunities for networking. And Erich Hatala Matthes highlights the series’ pedagogical value. I promise that these testimonials are unpaid and were definitely not produced under threat of blackmail!

Hannah Kim
Macalester College

I’ve had the good fortune of participating in Polite Conversations twice, first to talk about the connection between fiction and true crime, and the second time to talk about Korean aesthetics. In both appearances, I’ve had the chance to explore niche topics. This is by design: showing off new and innovative work done in aesthetics is part of Brandon’s stated intent.

Polite Conversations help to show just how vibrant, relevant, and downright fun contemporary aesthetics can be, and this is wonderful not only because it shows the richness of the subfield, but also because it serves as a tool that highlights new possibilities for researchers, teachers, students, and the larger public. Instructors use episodes of Polite Conversations as a part of their curriculum, and I’ve learned from people writing to me that the series reaches a non-academic audience, too. My session on fiction and true crime helped me think more about the way the fiction-nonfiction distinction affects our aesthetic engagement.

My recording experiences help me understand how the episodes manage to spark such outcomes. Brandon engineers a kind of planned spontaneity. A conversation prior to recording sets up a loose outline of the content we’ll discuss, but while recording, a genuine philosophical exchange takes place: new questions arise and we try out answers on the spot, which then leads to new extensions and questions. I appreciate this form of public philosophy because it shows philosophers at work, showcasing a particular way of having a conversation that (supposedly?) makes philosophical inquiry distinct.

Writing this helped me rediscover and articulate what I think Polite Conversations does well. I’m happy for the other guests who’ll get to experience what I described, and I look forward to future episodes.
Madeline Martin-Seaver  
University of South Florida  

I was a little hazy on the potential audience for my conversation with Brandon Polite. Who wants to watch a Zoom call between philosophers? Well, it turns out lots of people are into the idea, and not just other philosophers. My Polite Conversation helped me connect with other junior scholars, including potential colleagues. It is also one of the few examples of my work that my family can readily access and enjoy. Although I didn’t go into the conversation thinking about it as a networking opportunity or an instance of public philosophy, it turned out to be both things. These features make Brandon’s series valuable for the philosophical community.

They are also good things for aesthetics, specifically. Although aesthetics is in some ways a very accessible subdiscipline, the diversity of topics makes it difficult to summarize. Additionally, despite its accessibility, aesthetics remains underappreciated within philosophy. An outlet which lets aestheticians share their work in a thoughtful but informal way with other philosophers as well as people “outside” of philosophy demonstrates how interesting and varied work in aesthetics can be.

Finally, it is fun to talk about your research for fun. As a junior scholar, any research activity can feel high stakes and confrontational. But Brandon’s videos are friendly and collaborative. This is, I think, another useful feature for an exercise in public philosophy. Why, after all, would my parents watch a video where someone tears my ideas apart? My ideas sometimes need tearing apart, but my parents don’t need to see it! There are many ways of doing philosophy, and Brandon’s channel models a friendly one.

Erich Hatala Matthes  
Wellesley College  

Brandon Polite’s Polite Conversations YouTube series has many virtues, but here I want to just highlight one aspect of its pedagogical value. Because Brandon’s videos are most often anchored in particular articles published by the philosophers he is interviewing, they offer a prime opportunity to illustrate for students that philosophy is an in-progress conversation. In my experience, students have a disposition to treat a piece of published philosophy as an author’s final and definitive word on a topic, as opposed to a partial, incomplete contribution to the ongoing search for understanding (evidenced in part by the familiar student complaint that the author doesn’t address issue X or Y in their 20-page paper).

Brandon’s conversations crack open the impression of a container presented by a published article. By asking probing questions and introducing new cases, he offers the opportunity for the philosophers interviewed to riff on themes from their work, casting ideas in a new light, applying arguments in novel contexts, even questioning the way they may have put a notion in writing and reframing it in real-time. Through these literal conversations, the interviews help students see that the published work is itself part of a conversation—not a tablet handed down from on high, but a set of arguments and considerations developed by people just like them, who share their questions, confusions, and concerns.

Illustrating the dialogical, process-oriented nature of philosophical inquiry in this way helps students see that they too can join the conversation. Because the conversations are friendly, approachable, and fun (rather than antagonistic or overly critical), they invite students into a practice of philosophical
discussion as it should ideally exist in the discipline—a joint search for truth and understanding that is often best pursued together, and which benefits from questioning, rethinking, and reframing one’s own ideas in dialogue with others.

I now assign *Polite Conversations* interviews whenever they have been recorded for a philosopher whose work I am teaching. They are a fantastic pedagogical resource that I hope others teaching art and aesthetics will try out.