In Memoriam:
Joseph Zalman Margolis (May 16, 1924 - June 8, 2021)

Joseph Margolis

The entries to follow are some memorial thoughts from the Julie C. Van Camp, Andrea Baldini, and Aili Bresnahan on Joseph Margolis, President of the ASA from 1988-1990 and Laura H. Carnell Chair in Philosophy at Temple University from 1991 until his death in June of this year. Additional information on his life can be found in this obituary from The Philadelphia Inquirer obituary, Jul 19, 2021, online: <https://www.inquirer.com/obituaries/joseph-margolis-philosopher-temple-professor-author-obit-20210719.html>.


Please also note that there will be a memorial panel for Margolis at the 2022 Eastern ASA meeting in Philadelphia, announced here <https://aesthetics-online.org/events/EventDetails.aspx?id=1233115&group=> and as follows:

Special Session to Commemorate the Work of Joe Margolis

The Eastern Division of the ASA meeting in Philadelphia, April 22nd, 2022, will host a panel to commemorate the work of Joe Margolis. The panelists will include Julie Van Camp (Emerita, California State University, Long Beach), Richard Shusterman (Florida Atlantic University), Espen Hammer (Temple University), and Aili Bresnahan (University of Dayton). John Carvalho (Villanova University) will serve as Chair. Joe’s many contributions to Philosophy in the Philadelphia area make a commemoration at the Eastern Division meeting especially appropriate. We look forward to hosting you there.

Joseph Margolis: the early years at Temple

Julie C. Van Camp
Professor Emerita of Philosophy, California State University, Long Beach
I arrived at Temple University’s Department of Philosophy in fall 1969, the same semester as Monroe Beardsley, who had just left Swarthmore, and one year after Joe Margolis. John Fisher, who became editor of the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* a few years later, was already there. I had always understood that it was Fisher who made the most of an infusion of state funds in the 1960s to recruit such stellar faculty as Margolis and Beardsley. My undergraduate advisor had told me that if I was serious about aesthetics, Temple was the only place to go and I have never regretted that decision.

I took two seminars with Margolis, one on epistemology and one on metaphysics. I no longer remember what we read. I do remember being terrified of him! But that turned out to be great preparation for sessions at the American Philosophical Association which featured ferocious “commentary” and supposed “discussion” for the two papers I presented at Eastern meetings in the 1970s, the typical climate before pressures (mainly from women) started to move the atmosphere to slightly more constructive and civilized dialogue. I learned to muster my courage and defend my positions, no matter the onslaught of challenges. And for that I am grateful.

Another striking memory that has stayed with me was his response to Nelson Goodman’s *Languages of Art*. Originally published in 1968, Goodman’s proposals created an unforgettable earthquake in aesthetics, and the controversies he generated linger even today. As far as I know, Margolis was first out of the gate with a serious critique of Goodman (“Numerical Identity and Reference in the Arts,” *British Journal of Aesthetics* 1970, 10: 138–46). Beardsley’s response was to assign Goodman’s book along with his own *magnum opus, Aesthetics: Problems in the Philosophy of Criticism* and W.E. Kennedy’s anthology *Art and Philosophy* for our aesthetics seminar in fall 1969. I am not aware of any journal articles by Beardsley critiquing Goodman.

Margolis’s prolific output averaged an article a week and a book a year. (I sometimes wondered if people just couldn’t keep up with everything and gave up trying to do comprehensive analysis.) He famously wrote one article in his sleep. His habit in the 70s was to dictate articles which the department secretary, Grace Stuart, would transcribe. He was surprised that he had no memory of one of her transcriptions and concluded that he had dictated it in his sleep. I don’t know the article, but that episode is so characteristic of his boundless intellectual energy that I want to believe it happened.

Margolis was a member of my dissertation committee, which was directed by Beardsley, with Fisher and Charles Dyke filling out the membership. Although I did get my proposal approved and even finished a first chapter by 1976, my despair about the collapse of the job market led me to take a leave of absence to go to law school (Georgetown). In 1981, I decided to see if I could finish the dissertation and was optimistic that I was on a roll after passing the DC Bar exam. Fisher and Dyke signed off early on but I went through endless revisions trying to reconcile the starkly different world views of Margolis and Beardsley. This was in the era before word-processing or the internet, so every request for revision involved retyping-cut-paste-xerox-mail, but my draft was finally accepted by both. Then tragedy struck with Beardsley’s debilitating stroke. My defense was in December 1981 in the Beardsley living room of the charming townhouse on Delancey Street in Center City. Almost the entire faculty and many graduate students were there and faculty went around the room with their questions. I finally received my degree in January 1982.

Convinced that I would never land a tenure-track job in philosophy (which I finally did in 1990), I drifted away from the department and lost touch with almost everybody, especially once I relocated to California and now Denver. I did send update notes to Beardsley until his death in 1985, but confess that I didn’t make much effort to stay in touch with anybody else. I re-entered aesthetics and started participating in both ASA and APA meetings in the 1990s.

In 2000, I organized a session on “The Legacy of Monroe Beardsley” for the ASA Annual Meeting, with presentations by George Dickie, Richard Shusterman, Anita Silvers, and Michael Wreen. In a tangled exchange by email, it was determined that Margolis would participate from the audience, promising what he called a “carnivorous” critique. As a member of the APA Pacific program committee I was delighted to organize a session on “The Work of Joseph Margolis” in spring 2001 for the Pacific meeting in San Francisco. The papers by Göran Hermerén, Dale Jacquette, and Joanne B. Waugh were published in *Metaphilosophy* in October 2005 (36:5). It is a testament to his longevity as a scholar that a session I organized twenty years ago felt at the time like a tribute to a much-loved member of the profession in the twilight of his career!

I am both sorry and sad that I did not have much contact with him in recent decades. I’ve been delighted to learn that so many younger members of the profession have benefitted from his insight and guidance.
The “Uncanny” Life and Philosophy of Joseph Margolis: A Farewell

Andrea Baldini
Associate Professor of Aesthetics and Art Theory at the School of Arts of Nanjing University and director of the NJU Center for Sino-Italian Cultural Studies

The philosopher of art Joseph Margolis passed away on June 8th of this year. I received the news about his passing while I was riding the subway on my way to a meeting with one of my students. The sad update was mentioned in an email that a common friend sent to me. Joe, as we usually called him, was 97 years old, born on May 16, 1924. He received his PhD from Columbia in 1953, where he met—among others—the influential philosopher and art critic Arthur Danto. He started teaching at Temple University in 1968, and would never retire.

The news hit me hard: after reading the email, I missed my subway stop not once, but twice, ending up being a bit late for my meeting. My mind started running faster than the train I was on, and years of memories started rushing through my head. I couldn’t hold my tears, just as I can’t while writing these few words to remember and celebrate one of the greatest aestheticians of the 20th centuries, and a dear friend.

I met Joe in the late summer of 2008, when I started my PhD at Temple University. Margolis would later become my advisor. The deep and personal relationship that I developed with him was not unusual among his students. Many of them could tell countless stories not only of his extraordinary philosophical acumen and argumentative wit, but also of his profound kindness and authentic humanity, which made Margolis very much loved in academia. To use one of his favorite terms, he was an “uncanny” individual in the most positive sense of the world: a rare mix of intellectual prowess and heartfelt sensibility.

Margolis was one of the main reasons why I went to Temple for my PhD. In my early days as an undergraduate student in Italy, I was naturally drawn towards his work, for he had the unusual ability of writing about complex philosophical problems with the rigor typical of the so-called “analytic” tradition, while at the same time showing the historical and cultural sensibility of “continental” approaches. This hybrid nature of his philosophizing would characterize more and more of his production in his later years, developing a highly original and far-reaching pragmatist philosophy.
I was lucky enough to experience first-hand Margolis’s wide range of philosophical interests during what would have become one of the moments that I treasure the most as a student. In 2009, I translated into Italian one of his books: What, After All, Is a Work of Art? For a whole year, we had weekly meetings where we would discuss for hours his views so that I could find the best ways to render his prose into a different language. In all honesty, it turned out to be a one-of-a-kind seminar in contemporary philosophy.

Though his most famous contributions are in the field of aesthetics, it is difficult to find an area of philosophy Margolis didn’t write about. One of his most cited papers, “The Concept of Disease,” concerns the philosophy of medicine. In it, he argues that diagnosing diseases partly depends on ideological considerations. And his positions were often—If not always—far from the mainstream. Joe was never a “fashionable” philosopher: he would often defend views that would question the very assumptions of well-established philosophical fields. For instance, he was one of the very few modern champions of relativism, which he endorsed as a way to reject any form of Kantian or post-Kantian universalism in all domains of human understanding and action, from epistemology to ethics and, of course, aesthetics.

Opting for relativism was not a provocative gesture for Margolis. It was, in his view, a philosophical move to accommodate the complexity of our cultural world. Perhaps many are not aware that, as an undergraduate, Margolis studied English literature. This exposure to literary studies profoundly informed his philosophical views. By witnessing firsthand and from within the informality and pluralism of literary interpretations, Margolis never settled for a principled theory of interpretation, favoring what he defined as a “radical” one, which refuses any form of absolute foundation and conceptualizes our interpretative activities as savoir-faire rather than science.

A signature feature of his theory of interpretation is the rejection of intentionalism. In some of his most notable contributions to the philosophy of language and the theory of linguistic meaning, Margolis attacked Grice’s widely accepted account of an utterance’s meaning as determined by the utterer’s intention. Margolis’s contention was that such a model abstracts “from the fullest use of language.” His rejection of intentionalism in artistic interpretation follows similar lines: it emphasizes the difficulties of referring in some privileged sense to an author’s intentions as the final authority in deciding among competing interpretations. On his relativistic model, competing interpretations need not be mutually exclusive. For Margolis, the possibility of an artwork’s plurality of meaning(s) must be taken as a sign of the constructivist nature of the world of human culture. The cultural world is, in effect, created by our very interpretative activity.

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His theory of interpretation, in connection with his constructivism, has significant repercussions at the level of artistic ontology. In Margolis’s views, artworks are culturally emergent entities. In general, the formula is as follows: artworks are better understood as “careers” of interpretations historically situated in a particular cultural context. In this sense, the ontology of an artwork is never fixed, but always in flux—a precipitate of social interactions—and yet “determinable.”

The far-reaching goal of Margolis’s aesthetics immediately appears when considering that his ontology of art functions as a model for his theory of the self. Humans are, for Margolis, just like artworks: culturally emergent entities, “second-natured” creatures whose identity depends on their very self-interpretative activities. It is therefore not surprising that, for Margolis, aesthetics occupies a key role among the philosophical disciplines. In effect, what we do when we create art is a metaphor and even a metonym for what we do when creating ourselves as persons.

By constantly emphasizing the existential meaning of theorizing, Margolis’s philosophy is a profound form of humanism. He never understood or treated philosophy as a mere academic game to show off one’s wits, or simply a job. In the presence of Margolis, as well as in his writings, I always felt something that reminded me of the original spirit of Western philosophy as it emerged in Ancient Greece: doing philosophy is, ultimately, thinking about how we should live our lives.

I’m not sure whether his philosophy helped Margolis figure everything out about his own life, which like many lives had its share of hardship. He fought in World War II, where he also lost a twin brother. And his second wife, whom he loved very much, passed away not long ago. But he found ways to cope with his own tragedies and traumas, showing some form of inner peace that follows from fully implementing the maxim “know thyself.”
Still, Margolis certainly knew how to live a good life, and that is perhaps the greatest lesson that he taught me. Of the many persons I have met in my life, he was one of the very few that seemed to enjoy a deep sense of happiness in his life. And I cannot but thank Margolis for sharing some of his wisdom with me.

In a moment of sadness, where also the world is facing an epochal challenge due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I treasure the moments we had: the happiness that we shared during the dozen years we knew each other personally. I will never forget our “philosophical” meals, where we would discuss our work while enjoying food and drink. In that informal setting, I learned many important lessons not just about philosophy, but about life - insights that are guiding my life decisions while bringing some light even in the darkest hours. Farewell, my dear friend Joe.

1 This essay originally appeared as a blog post at <https://aestheticsforbirds.com/2021/07/16/the-uncanny-life-and-philosophy-of-joseph-margolis-a-farewell/>. It has been edited by Alex King.


9 Joseph Margolis, Toward a Metaphysics of Culture (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

A few inadequate words in remembrance of
Joseph Margolis

Aili Bresnahan
Associate Professor, Philosophy, University of Dayton and US Fulbright Scholar, Centre for Dance Research, University of Roehampton

Joseph Margolis was a philosopher with a world-historical outlook, something that he attributed to surviving multiple world wars and changes in culture. He read widely in analytic, continental, and classical pragmatist philosophy as well as literature and work in other disciplines. He embraced a pluralist view of the interpretation of culture and its artifacts; one in which false claims can be made but that allows for many different true interpretations that can change over time with concomitant changes in history and culture. He received his PhD in Philosophy in 1953 from Columbia University on the GI Bill after service in WWII, where Arthur C. Danto and Marx W. Wartofsky were fellow students (Danto also there after WWII service). At the time, Susanne K. Langer was a member of the faculty.

Margolis saw the world, including artworks, human selves and our place in it, as something necessarily requiring interpretation and re-interpretation, imagination, creativity, and what he called “cultural agency.” His faith in human persons (which he would always point out is not reducible to homo sapiens) included the ability to find what he would call faute de mieux solutions to intractable problems—what
he called a “second-best philosophy” for lack of our recourse, as fallible, culture-situated human beings, to either perfect knowledge or understanding. This was part of his relativist stance and humanist ethics.

It was Margolis’ embracing of fallibilism—the idea of a human-constructed but real world that could only be known with imperfect human capabilities—that gave me the courage to think of myself as a nascent philosopher even at the beginning of my graduate studies in philosophy, and not to despair of my inability to master every area of it. I was Margolis’ research assistant and advisee at Temple University from 2008-2012. I was an “older” student, having already completed a Juris Doctor degree and having practiced law for a couple of years before seeking my doctorate in philosophy. By that time, I had also stayed home full-time with children for the 7 years it took for them to both be in school full-time. I worried, aloud, that my brain wasn’t the same as it had once been due to the stresses of parenting, a crumbling marriage, and lack of adequate sleep.

“Well, you know, Aili,” Margolis said (in his 80s at the time), “I’m about 50% of what I once was myself. The only difference between me and everyone else is that I’m aware of how little time I have left.” The “little time” he had in fact extended longer than typical for university professors—he went on to live, work, write, and teach until age 97, telling his colleagues at Temple that he planned to teach “just one more year” and retire at 98.

One of my tasks as his research assistant was to record his seminar lectures on a small, portable tape-recorder, the tapes from which would then go, unedited, to his typist to prepare as draft chapters for a new book. There was always a new book in progress. In his seminars, one could watch Margolis in the process of composing new material out loud, based on some preparation but often using student questions as improvisational prompts to develop new ideas. After each seminar, I would follow him into his office like a puppy (uninvited but never turned away) and pepper him with ideas and questions. My questions were often both relentless and confused, and there were times that he had to use examples from dance or from literature or make an illustrative drawing for me on paper to help me to understand. He would then give me drafts of his work-in-progress to read and to discuss in the same way, as well as suggestions for others’ articles and books that could help me fill in the gaps in my education. No questions were off-limits and his answers to these, and to my follow-up questions, were thorough and candid.

Those few hours after each seminar were precious to me, it colored my graduate school experience in the golden and sometimes too-bright light of his brilliant and art-sensitive mind, and I am not alone among Margolis’ students to have experienced his dedicated patience, time, and attention. If I went to him for feedback on a submitted paper, he could usually pick it out quickly out of a huge, seemingly unmanageable stack of other papers and materials on his always untidy and over-flowing desk. High praise was a comment that my work was “not unintelligent” with his customary eye-twinkle and impish grin. Sometimes he would say that a paper contained “too much purple prose” or “lacked the courage of its convictions” or, worse, that it contained a philosophical misunderstanding. And then he would take the time to explain.

Now that I’m a philosophy professor myself, with a full teaching load as he had, I wonder where he found the energy to be so present for me and for so many other students over the years. Why he never made me feel rushed, never made me feel unwelcome, was sometimes flirtatious but never made me feel leered at or harassed or exploited, and never made me feel as if my ideas weren’t valuable, even if underdeveloped. I wonder at how he was able to achieve a warm and co-conspiratorial attitude with students like me, often saying “come over to the Dark Side” when we liked a view of his that was particularly unpopular or radical, flashing his always-mischievous smile. In this way, Margolis was wise and large enough to have a sense of humor about himself and his reputation as a polemic, even though he took his work extremely seriously.

In sum, the hole that the death of Joseph Margolis leaves in the fabric of the world of all those who knew him is a large one, even comforted as we might be by the reflection that he had a long, rich, well-lived life full of interesting work, reading, writing, and conversations that lasted in its richness up until he took his last breath. I try now, in honor of his gift to me, to read widely and to treat my students the way he treated me—as proto-philosopher and colleague, and as someone whose earnest best efforts are worthy of time, care, and respect. I think his work as a philosopher is good, better than he was perhaps given credit for in his lifetime and that perhaps future generations will appreciate more in time. But it is the memory of the way that he lived as a reader, a writer, a teacher, and as a mentor in philosophy that I cherish most—he showed me, and demonstrated, one possibility for a beautiful, rich, and enduring human life.