Course Description

The relationship between art and ethics has been a significant philosophical problem since antiquity and one that continues to engage us. While some argue that art is autonomous from ethics, others insist that ethics is a necessary component of art and of one’s aesthetic judgment of the work. This course explores the various positions that have been taken in this debate and raises several key questions: Can art be morally enlightening and, if so, how? If a work of art is morally better, does that make it better as art? Is morally deficient art to be shunned, or even censored? Do subjects of artworks have rights as to how they are represented? Do artists have duties as artists and duties as human beings, and if so, to whom? How much tension is there between the demands of art and the demands of life? These questions will be examined through the lens of painting (Rembrandt, Picasso), cinema (Riefenstahl, Truffaut, Reed, Pasolini), photography (Mapplethorpe, Mann) and literature (Nabokov) with readings drawn from Plato, Horace, Tolstoy, Wilde, Danto, as well as other contemporary philosophers and critics.

Required Materials


CD ROM (with additional readings); available from instructor

Learning Goals

- Students will become familiar with the long historical debate regarding the relationship of art to ethics in the Western intellectual tradition
- Students will clarify and understand the notions of the aesthetic and the ethical
- Students will examine the intrinsic issue of the relation of the aesthetic value of artworks to their ethical value through critically reading and writing about specific case studies in painting, cinema, photography, and literature
Requirements

Active Class/Online Contribution 25%
Midterm Essay (5 pages) 20%
Final Essay (8-10 pages) 35%
Weekly 1-2 page Assignments 15%
Oral Presentation 5%

Description of Requirements

Active Class/Online Contribution: Active, diligent participation in class and online in our NYU Classes discussion forums is absolutely necessary. The course depends on open, flowing discussion. Ideally, you should feel comfortable enough to speak out whenever an idea arises as if you are speaking to a group of friends or colleagues (which you are). Always come to class prepared, having critically read and taken notes on the reading material. Attendance is taken at the beginning of each class. Regular attendance and lively participation are absolutely necessary in this course. Missing one is understandable, but if you are absent more than once this semester, your course grade will suffer and, in extreme cases, you may even fail the course. If illness or other urgent matters require you to be absent more than once, please speak to your advisor and to the instructor immediately. (Please note that a grade of “Incomplete” can only be negotiated in advance and only in extraordinary situations related to health and family emergencies). Perpetual lateness is also basis for penalty. Every three times late will be counted as one absence (perpetually coming late to class is very disruptive to the group dynamic). In the event that you are absent, you should email a classmate (not the instructor) to find out exactly what you missed in order that you do not fall too far behind. However, I cannot stress how important it is to be on time, present, alert, and active in class – both for your sake and for that of your classmates, especially since we meet only once per week.

Midterm Essay: A five-page midterm essay will be due via email by 11pm, Sunday, October 26. The specific assignment will be made available approximately two weeks before the due date and time will be spent in class developing topics and approaches to writing the essay.

Final Essay: An eight-ten page final essay will be due via email by 11pm, Monday, December 15. Unlike the midterm essay, the final essay will be more open-ended in that it will require that students either (1) analyze a specific artistic case study (whether it is one that was discussed in class or not) in order to come to some conclusion concerning the relationship between ethics and aesthetic worth or (2) write an argumentative research paper on some aspect of the long historical debate regarding the relationship of art to ethics in the Western intellectual tradition. The final essay assignment will be made available approximately three weeks before the essay is due.

Oral Presentation: A ten-minute oral presentation on the final essay project is required by each student in class on December 12. During the oral presentation, students will be required to clearly articulate their topics, approaches, and preliminary conclusions. Students will also be encouraged to raise questions and interact with the class as much as possible.

Weekly Assignments: A 1-2 page writing assignment will be due at each class. The assignments will vary, but they will usually require that students offer a summary, analysis, and/or reaction to a particular reading or case study. These assignments will be emailed to the class one week before they are due.

Academic Honesty

As a Gallatin student you belong to an interdisciplinary community of artists and scholars who value honest and open intellectual inquiry. This relationship depends on mutual respect, responsibility, and integrity. Failure to uphold these values will be subject to severe sanction, which may include dismissal from the University. Examples of behaviors that compromise the academic integrity of the Gallatin School include plagiarism, illicit collaboration, doubling or recycling coursework, and cheating. For a full description of the academic integrity policy, see www.gallatin.nyu.edu/academics/policies/policy/integrity.html
Miscellaneous

- The use of electronic devices in the classroom (including mobile phones, tablets, and laptops) is NOT permitted.
- We will have a fifteen-minute break sometime during each class session.
- We will attempt to have at least one outside class activity (voluntary attendance)

COURSE SCHEDULE

September 5:
Case Study: Rembrandt vs. Drost (Two Bathshebas)

September 12:
Plato, Ion and Republic (CD)
Horace, “The Art of Poetry” (CD)
Tolstoy, “What is Art?” (CD)
Wilde, “On the Decay of Lying” and Preface to The Portrait of Dorian Grey (CD)
Murdoch, The Fire and The Sun: Why Plato Banished the Artists (OPTIONAL – CD)

September 19:
Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art” (AE)
Devereaux, “Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s Triumph of the Will” (AE)
Case Study: Riefenstahl, Triumph of the Will

September 26:
Hanson, “How Good Can Bad Art Be?” (AE)
Hanson, “Love and Friendship in the Balance: The Case of Jules et Jim” (EC)
Case Study: Truffaut, Jules et Jim

October 3:
Driver, “Justice, Mercy, and Friendship in The Third Man” (EC)
Knight, “The Third Man: Ethics, Aesthetics, Irony” (EC)
Wartenberg, “Moral Intelligence and the Limits of Loyalty: The Third Man as Philosophy” (EC)
Case Study: Reed, The Third Man

October 10:
Sade, 120 Days of Sodom
Case Study: Pasolini, Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom

October 17:
Pasolini (continued)
October 24:
Danto, *Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (CD)
Danto, “The Naked Truth” (AE)
Case Study: Selected Photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and Sally Mann
**Midterm Essay Due (11pm, October 26, via email)**

October 31:
Danto (continued)
Case Study: Mapplethorpe and Mann (continued)

November 7:
**No Class**

November 14:
Walton, “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality”
Tanner, “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality: A Response”
Case Study: Nabokov, *Lolita*

November 21:
Case Study: Nabokov, *Lolita* (continued)

November 28:
**No Class.**

December 5:
Case Study: Nabokov, *Lolita* (continued)

December 12:
**Oral Presentations**
**Final Essay Due via email 11pm, Monday, December 15**