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 25. 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, Sunday, December 20. 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 11. 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, extra credit attendance)

**COURSE SCHEDULE**

**September 4**

Course Introduction

**September 11:**
Art and Ethics: The Long Debate.
Case Study: Rembrandt vs. Drost (Two Bathshebas)

**September 18:**
Plato, *Ion* and *Republic* (NYU CLASSES “RESOURCES”)
Horace, “The Art of Poetry” (NYU CLASSES “RESOURCES”)
Tolstoy, “What is Art?” (CD READING 1)
Gaut, “The Ethical Criticism of Art” (AE)

**September 25:**
Devereaux, “Beauty and Evil: The Case of Leni Riefenstahl’s *Triumph of the Will*” (AE)
Case Study: Riefenstahl, *Triumph of the Will*

**October 2:**
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 9:**
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 16:**
Sade, *120 Days of Sodom* (SA)
Case Study: Pasolini, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom*

**October 23:**
Discussion: Pasolini, *Salò, or the 120 Days of Sodom* and Sade, *120 Days of Sodom*
Midterm Essay Workshop
October 30:
Danto, *Playing with the Edge: The Photographic Achievement of Robert Mapplethorpe* (CD READING 3)
Danto, “The Naked Truth” (AE)
Case Study: Selected Photography of Robert Mapplethorpe and Sally Mann
**Midterm Essay Due (11pm, October 25, via email)**

November 6:
**No Class**

November 13:
Walton, “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality” (CD READING 4)
Tanner, “Morals in Fiction and Fictional Morality: A Response” (CD READING 4)
Case Study: Nabokov, *Lolita*

November 20:
Case Study: Nabokov, *Lolita* (continued)

November 27:
**No Class**.

December 4:
Case Study: Nabokov, *Lolita* (continued)

December 11:
**Oral Presentations**
**Final Essay Due via email 11pm, Sunday, December 20**
Dear Student:

Why, you might ask, don’t I allow laptop use (or the use of electronic devices in general) in my classes? I’ve decided to include an addendum to the syllabus to explain this important matter.

First, if you have your laptop open, it is almost impossible NOT to check email or briefly surf the Internet, even if you don’t mean to or have told yourself that you won’t. I have the same impulse if I have my laptop open in a meeting. The problem is that studies indicate that this kind of multitasking impairs learning; once we are on email/the web, we are no longer paying very good attention to what is happening in class. (And there is no evidence I know of that “practice” at doing this kind of multitasking is going to make you better at it!)

Now, I know that one could argue that it is your choice about whether you want to use this class time to engage actively with the material at hand, or whether you would like to multitask. You’re not bothering anyone (one could argue) as you quietly do your email or check Facebook. Here’s the problem with that theory: From what we can tell, you are actually damaging the learning environment for others, even if you’re being quiet about it. A study published in 2013 found that not only did the multitasking student in a classroom do worse on a post-class test on the material, so did the peers who could see the computer. In other words, the off-task laptop use distracted not just the laptop user but also the group of students behind the laptop user.

In addition, I have found students multitasking on laptops a bit distracting as an instructor because sometimes they are not typing at the right times; in other words, I am not saying anything noteworthy, yet they are engrossed in typing, which suggests that they are doing something other than being fully engaged in our class. And that distracts my attention.

There’s also the issue of the classroom environment. I like to foster a sense of conversation in my classroom. If you are on a laptop, I and your peers are often looking at the back of your computer screen and the top of your head, rather than all of us making eye contact with each other. Learning happens best in a classroom when everyone is actively engaged with one another in the exchange of information. This can mean looking up from your notes to listen and to talk with others, which means you may need to make strategic decisions about what to write down. Note taking is designed to support the learning and retention of material we talk about in class; note-taking itself is not learning. And speaking of what you choose to write down.

A study that came out in June—and which got a lot of buzz in the mainstream press—suggests that taking notes by hand rather than typing them on a laptop improves comprehension of the material. While students taking notes on a laptop (and only taking notes—they were not allowed to multitask) wrote down more of the material covered in class, they were often typing what the instructor said verbatim, which seems to have led to less processing of the material. The students taking notes by hand had to do more synthesizing and condensing as they wrote because they could not get everything down. As a result, they learned the material better.

I figure it is also good for all of us to break addictive patterns with email, texting, Facebook, etc. and this is a good place to start. 😊

- Chris Trogan