

## Aesthetics and Ethics

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### Course Description

We know that art matters, but does it matter for ethics? And what role should ethical categories play in our appreciation of works of art? Our intuitions on these questions go in two different directions: on the one hand, we use moral categories in our evaluation of works of art, and we seem to believe that works of art can be morally pernicious or morally salutary. On the other hand, we also maintain that assessing a work of art requires a “disinterested” attitude, and moralizing a work of art can seem to miss the point of art itself. In this course we will read deeply in contemporary debates regarding the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in order to tackle these difficult and pressing issues. We will also analyze specific works of art—especially films—in order to ground our theoretical discussion. Some questions we will pursue are the following: Are moral concepts relevant for assessing works of art? Can morally degenerate art still be aesthetically fine? Is it ethically important to engage with difficult art? And can art and aesthetic experience help us attend and respond to the difficulties of ethical life?

The course is divided into four parts. In the first part of the course we will read and analyze key contributions to the contemporary debate regarding the relationship between aesthetic and moral values. Our guiding questions will be: how does a work’s moral orientation bear on its aesthetic merit? If a work is morally dubious, is that an aesthetic demerit? Second, we discuss whether and how art contributes to moral education, with reference to two specific concepts: imagination and “attention. In Part Three we will bring our insights from the discussion of ethicism to bear on the idea of “difficult art,” art that is painful or uncomfortable to engage. What, if anything, is wrong with easy and/or sentimental art? What, if anything, is important about attending to difficult art? While we will be looking at works of art throughout the course, in this section we will have three main case studies: Pedro Almodóvar’s *Talk to Her*, art and aesthetic criticism concerning AIDS and AIDS activism, and Alain Resnais’ Holocaust documentary *Night and Fog*.

This course is suitable for students who have not worked in either philosophy or aesthetics, and those who have already studied in these fields.

### Course Aims

The course has two pedagogical aims. First, the course will introduce students to central debates in contemporary aesthetics. The second aim of the course is to develop students’ capacities to both analyze and construct philosophical arguments, and to respond to, describe, and critique works of art. Finally students will develop their skills at analyzing and critically assessing philosophical arguments, and constructing their own. These three aims will be pursued through the course requirements: reading and class discussion, written responses to works of art, and two essay assignments.

### Course Requirements

Participation. (15% of grade).

Students are required to come to class prepared and to participate actively in class discussion. Being prepared does not mean that you will be expected to understand everything, and active participation includes not just speaking up, but actively listening and following others' contributions. The participation grade also requires each student give a short presentation on one of the assigned readings, focusing on a passage they find especially interesting. We will also visit an art gallery or museum as a class, and attendance at this will count towards students' participation grade.

No more than two absences are permitted. Every absence beyond two will lead to the final grade being docked one increment (e.g., A- to B+, C to C-).

Response to a work of art. (15% of grade).

Students will be required to hand in one short, relatively informal response to one of the works of art we study in class *or* to a work of art of their choosing.

Two essay assignments, roughly 7 pages each. (30% and 40% of grade).

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### **Schedule of Meetings and Readings**

**Note on the readings:** We will never read more than about 30 pages per meeting.

When the readings are chapters from whole books—rather than stand alone essays—I also reference the book in the syllabus.

**Note on the film screenings:** there are four films assigned for this course. On the first day of class, we will find a time that works for everyone to meet to view the film together, on the weeks when a film is assigned. Should a student be unable to attend the group screening, they will be expected to watch the film on their own and come to class prepared to discuss it.

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#### **1. First Class (no reading):**

Introduction to the problem of aesthetics and ethics in the history of Western philosophy, and to idea that this problem is pressing for us now, and not merely of historical or philosophical interest.

### **I: The Relation of Aesthetic and Moral Values**

#### **2. Introduction**

Gaut and Carroll provide two general overviews of the positions in the debate concerning the applicability of ethical and moral concepts to works of art.

~Berys Gaut. "The Long Debate"

~Noël Carroll. "Art and Ethical Criticism: An Overview of Recent Directions of Research."  
(outlines objections to ethical criticism)

#### **3. Hume**

Hume's essay is invoked by many of the theorists we will read, so it will be useful to begin by reading Hume himself. Hume introduces the idea that the standard of taste is the consensus reached by excellent critics; that character, preference, and culture play a role in determining

one's taste; that good persons cannot identify with bad characters in a work of art, and that this inability hinders the work's aesthetic success: hence moral deformity amounts to aesthetic deformity.

~David Hume. "Of the Standard of Taste"

~Michelle Mason. "Moral Prejudice and Aesthetic Deformity: Rereading Hume's 'Of the Standard of Taste.'"

#### **4. Should Ethics Matter to Aesthetics?**

Carroll responds to those who hold the morality is irrelevant to aesthetic judgment. He argues that we are naturally inclined to use moral concepts to assess narrative artworks, and that the separation of the ethical and the aesthetic is artificial.

~Noël Carroll. "Art, Narrative, and Moral Understanding."

(optional: J.C Anderson & J.T Dean. "Moderate Autonomism.")

#### **5. Is Immoral Art Bad Art? Ethicism**

Ethicism is the position that maintains that ethical features are relevant to the success of a work of art, such that the work's manifesting ethically admirable attitudes counts toward the aesthetic merit of a work of art, while ethically reprehensible attitudes count against its aesthetic merit.

~Berys Gaut. "The Ethical Criticism of Art."

~Anne Eaton. "Where Ethics and Aesthetics Meet: Titian's *Rape of Europa*."

**Scheduled Screening:** Harmony Korine. *Spring Breakers*. (2012)

#### **6. Is Immoral Art Bad Art? Immoralism.**

Immoralism holds that a work may be aesthetically valuable in virtue of, rather than in spite of, its immoral character. We continue our analysis of *Spring Breakers*, now from the opposite philosophical position.

~Matthew Kieran. "Forbidden Knowledge: The Challenge of Immoralism."

(optional: Anne Eaton. "Robust Immoralism.")

\*continued discussion of *Spring Breakers*.

## **II: Art and Moral Education**

#### **7. Can Art Make Us Good? The Question of Imagination**

We discuss, first, the idea that art and fiction can enhance our imaginative capacities for empathetic enactment, and the idea that this in turn can lead to moral knowledge and an increased ability to ethically respond to the world. Second, we consider the phenomenon of resistance to the aesthetic invitation to imagine points of view other than our own. Should we always be willing to imaginatively take on an artwork's ethical point of view, or is it important to resist such a perspective if it is immoral?

~Gregory Currie. "Realism of Character and the Value of Fiction."

~Tamar Szabó Gendler. "The Puzzle of Imaginative Resistance."

#### **8. Can Art Make Us Good? The Question of Attention**

Diamond suggests that philosophy's argumentative form makes it ill-equipped to attend to profoundly difficult features of human reality, and that by contrast art and literature can elicit the proper form of moral attention demanded by such disorienting difficulties.

~Cora Diamond. "The Difficulty of Reality and the Difficulty of Philosophy."  
\*case studies: Ted Hughes. "Six Young Men" (1957), Marguerite Duras. "Leek Soup" (1976)

### III: Difficult Art in a Difficult World

#### 9. Difficult Art: The Idea.

Difficult art is art that is challenging, uncomfortable, painful, or sickening. It can be difficult in virtue of its content, but more specifically, it is difficult in virtue of its formal, aesthetic qualities and procedures. Why would an audience seek art that seems intent on resisting or repulsing them? Is such art, and/or the experience of such art ethically valuable, and if so how and why?

~Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit. "Art and Authority." *Arts of Impoverishment*.

~Maggie Nelson "Everything is Nice," "They're Only Dolls." *The Art of Cruelty*.

#### 10. Difficult Art and Ethical Categories

Cashell argues for the applicability of moral categories to the kind of transgressive art that seems precisely to refuse those categories. Cashell offers the most sustained discussion of the relationship between ethics and difficult art, and he directly addresses the theories (autonomism, ethicism, immoralism) and theorists (Carroll, Gaut, Kieran) that we explored in Part I of this course.

~Kieran Cashell. "Introduction," "Everybody Hates a Tourist." *Aftershock: The Ethics of Contemporary Transgressive Art*.

#### 11. Easy Art: Sentimentality. The Case of AIDS

Sentimental art, sometimes set in opposition to difficult art, is often seen to facilitate easy, uncritical, and excessive emotion in the spectator. For this reason, it is regarded as conservative and/or ideologically complicit. We will consider these criticisms with reference to Jonathan Demme's 1993 *Philadelphia*, the first mainstream Hollywood film to address AIDS. We will reconsider these theories when we analyze Resnais' *Night and Fog*.

~Carl Plantinga. "Notes on Spectator Emotion and Ideological Film Criticism."

~Anthony Seville. "Sentimentality."

(optional: Robert Corber. "Nationalizing the Gay Body: AIDS and Sentimental Pedagogy in *Philadelphia*")

**Scheduled screening:** Jonathan Demme. *Philadelphia*. (1993)

#### 12. Easy Art: Conservative Form. The Case of AIDS

Is it possible for a work of art to be politically conservative, not because of a conservative subject matter, but because of its formal, aesthetic properties? Continuing our discussion of sentimentality, we will read some theorists on Steven Spielberg's *Schindler's List*, and see if some of those insights can help us analyze *Philadelphia*. Again, these discussions will be important for our later discussion of *Night and Fog*.

~Miriam Hansen. "*Schindler's List* Is Not *Shoah*."

~Gertrud Koch. "Mimesis and *Bilderverbot*."

(optional: Village Voice discussion on *Schindler's List*: "Myth, Movie, and Memory.")

\*continued discussion of *Philadelphia*.

#### 13. Difficult Art: The Case of AIDS.

We analyze artistic representations of AIDS and art's role in AIDS activism, and the place and relevance of moral concepts in this analysis. We will pay special attention to the possibility that by moralized representations of AIDS might eclipse its status as a political phenomenon.

~Douglas Crimp. "De-Moralizing Representations of AIDS." *Melancholia and Moralism: Essays on AIDS and Queer Politics*.

~Judith Butler. "Melancholy Gender/Refused Identification." *The Psychic Life of Power*.

\*case studies: Kia LaBeija, David Wojnarowicz.

\*clip from *How to Survive a Plague*

**\*Scheduled Screening:** Todd Haynes. *Safe*. (1995)

#### **14. Difficult Art: A Work: Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*.**

We analyze Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*, and its critical reception, using the critical tools we have developed in the course thus far. The ethical status of the protagonist of this film has been intensely debated. Our work in the course thus far will provide us with the critical tools necessary to analyze and intervene in this philosophical debate.

~Anne Eaton. "Almodóvar's Immoralism"

~Robert Pippin. "Devils and Angels in Almodóvar's *Talk to Her*."

**\*Scheduled Screening:** Pedro Almodóvar. *Talk to Her*. (2002)

#### **15. Difficult Art: A Work: Pedro Almodóvar's *Talk to Her* continued.**

~George Wilson. "Rapport, Rupture, and Rape: Reflections on *Talk to Her*."

~Cynthia Freeland. "Nothing Is Simple."

#### **16. Difficult Reality: Giving Horrific History Aesthetic Form**

Throughout the course we have been considering the relevance of ethical categories for understanding and evaluating fictional art, though often art that deals with "real life" issues. The relevance of ethical categories for *documentary* poses new theoretical and ethical challenges. Can there be morally good or bad ways of showing the real world? Are there some moral atrocities that simply cannot be represented? What is the right way for a documentary to present the relationship between past and present? Here again, our readings and discussion from sessions 9-12 will be relevant.

~Serge Daney. "The Tracking Shot in *Kapo*"

~Emma Wilson. "Material Remains: *Night and Fog*"

**\*Scheduled screening:** Alain Resnais. *Night and Fog*. (1955)

#### **16. Difficult Reality, continued.**

~Griselda Pollock. "Death in the Image: The Responsibility of Aesthetics in *Night and Fog* and *Kapo*."

\*continued discussion of *Night and Fog*; clips from *Kapo* and *Shoah*.

#### **18. Difficult Art in Chicago**

We will take a trip to the Art Institute of Chicago. Works from the permanent collection to be discussed include: Robert Gober *Untitled* (1989), Cindy Sherman *Untitled Film Stills* (1981).

## 19. Conclusion (no assigned readings)