

THE GOOD THE BAD AND THE BEAUTIFUL: THE ETHICS OF ART

COURSE DESCRIPTION

What, if anything, is the relationship between art and morality? Can art be *immoral*? Or is it a mistake to evaluate a work of art in such terms? Can the moral of a content of a work bear on its *aesthetic value*, that is, whether it is *good art*? What of the moral status of artists—does the (im)morality of an *artist* bear on the success of her work? Should art serve as an instrument of moral education? A force for liberation? A method of unifying people? How do the arts shape who and what is seen? And how should we think of the representation (or appropriation) of race, gender, and culture in the arts? This course will challenge students to grapple with questions of art, ethics, and the human condition alongside contemporary and historical thinkers alike—from Plato to Confucius to Tolstoy. In addition to philosophical texts, we will engage with a wide variety of art, including poetry, film, theater, painting, sketch comedy, classical music, rock and roll, and games. And maybe most importantly, we will engage with one another—this is a class in which all of us will be *doing philosophy together*, working through what we think about fundamental questions of art and ethics. The seminar will meet in the Harvard Art Museums and include a trip to the MFA, providing opportunities to see many of the course’s central artworks in person and consider questions about the ethically and politically significant work of art collection and exhibition.

INSTRUCTORS:

Prof. Quinn White, pqwhite@fas.harvard.edu

MEETING TIMES AND PLACE:

Class: Tuesday 9–11:45 am, Harvard Art Museum 006 (and Art Study Room)

Office Hours: Tuesday, 12–2 pm, Emerson Hall, 204

COURSE READINGS:

Most course readings are available on the website. In addition, four books are required:

- Matthes, Erich, *Drawing the Line: What to Do with the Work of Immoral Artists of Immoral Artists from Museums to the Movies* (available [here](#) and in the COOP)
- Rilke, Rainer Maria, *Letters to a Young Poet* (trans. Norton) (available [here](#) and in the COOP)
- Murdoch, Iris, *The Sovereignty of the Good* (available [here](#) and in the COOP)
- Tolstoy, Leo. *What is Art?* (trans. Pevear & Volohonsky) (available [here](#) and in the COOP)
- Saito, Yuriko, *The Aesthetics of Care* (available [here](#))

GRADING AND ASSESSMENT

- Attendance, participation, forum posts (10% of final grade).
 - All students are expected to have fully read the material and come prepared with questions, confusions, responses, and thoughts on it. This will be a class in which we *learn to do philosophy together*, and there is *no expectation* that students come to class having fully (or even at all!) understood the material. Some of it is really tough!! But coming with a sense of *what was confusing* is key. In class, all students are expected to engage in discussion.
 - Before each class, students will write a brief (2-4 sentences) post in canvas including
 - One clarificatory question (something that was confusing, puzzling, needs development, etc.)
 - One critical question or comment (raise a possible objection, challenge, or critical inquiry)
- Presentations (10% of final grade)
 - Students will lead seminar once over the term for 10-15 minutes; in doing so, students will make a *short* presentation (about 5 min) and provide guiding questions for class discussion. Presentations can take one of two forms: either a reconstruction of a *small part* of the week's reading, followed by questions for the class to consider and discuss; or a presentation of a work of art (that takes less than 5 minutes to view, watch, listen to, experience, play, etc.) that connects to the topics we have discussed in the course.
 - Students presenting *must meet with me* the week prior to discuss a plan for the presentation. (Note we will work on these together! They are *low pressure*.)
- Papers: (must be submitted via canvas)
 - Paper 1: Reconstruction, 500 words, due week 4, 11:59pm (15% of final grade)
 - Paper 2a: Reconstruction and Evaluation, 1250 words due end of week 7, 11:59 pm (20% of final grade)
 - Paper 2b: Rewrite of paper 2a in response to feedback and suggestions for expansion, 1500 words, Due Week 10 (20% of final grade)
 - Paper 3: Reconstruction and Evaluation OR Choose your own prompt/project, 1500 words (project requirements can be agreed on together), due end of term, 11:59 pm (25% of final grade)
- Late Policy
 - Students will have 3 free late days to use throughout the semester as they see fit. You can use these three days to turn papers in late without penalty and without having an excuse or prior approval. (For example, you could turn in Paper 1 two days late, Paper 2 on time, and Paper 3 one day late.) Unexcused late work beyond the first two days will lose $\frac{1}{3}$ grade per day (e.g., a B paper will receive a B-). Extensions beyond the three late days can be granted with *prior* approval from Prof. White.
- SAT/UNS
 - Like all freshman seminars, final grades in this class are recorded as either Satisfactory (C- or higher) or Unsatisfactory.

ADDITIONAL REQUIREMENTS

- You should expect to disagree with things we read, your peers, and me. These disagreements may be vigorous but must always be reasoned and respectful.
- No laptops or electronics will be permitted in class unless a student has some exceptional need; in that case, just let me know.

SCHEDULE AND READINGS

UNIT I. THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL: ETHICS AND AESTHETICS

September 6: Do immoral artists ruin art?

Matthes, Intro & Chapter 1 (pp. 1–40)

Optional: Anderson, “Racist Humor” (pp. 501–9)

September 13: What should we *do* in response to immoral artists?

Matthes Ch. 2 (pp. 41–75)

Optional: Ross, *Wagnerism*, Ch. 6, 14 (pp. 230–77)

September 20: Engaging with objectionable art and artists?

*Class Activity: Watch *Hamilton* (we’ll watch it together as a class at **TBD time and date**)

Montiero, “Race-Conscious Casting and the Erasure of the Black Past in Lin-Manuel Miranda’s *Hamilton*” (pp. 89 – 98)

Matthes, Ch. 3 (pp. 75–115)

September 27: Fakes and Forgeries

Irvin, Forgery and the Corruption of Aesthetic Understanding (pp. 283–303)

Watch *Made You Look* (90 min)

Optional: Lopez, *The Man Who Made Vermeers* (pp. 1–50)

Paper 1 Due, Friday, 11:59 pm

UNIT II. ART AND THE ARTIST IN SOCIETY

October 4: Art, Emotion and Unity

Tolstoy, *What is Art?*, §§4, 5, 8, 10, 15, 16, 18 (61 pages)

October 11: Art as Soulcraft

Plato, *Republic*, selections (pp. 56–65, 576c1–383c6)

Selections from Confucius, *The Analects* & Mozi, “A Condemnation of Musical Performances” (3 pages)

Rousseau, “Letter to D’Alembert on the establishment of a theater in Geneva”, (pp. 92–138)

October 18: Public Art

Nguyen, “Monuments as Commitments” (pp. 971–994)

Riggle, “Street Art: The Transfiguration of the Commonplaces” (pp. 243–257)

Paper 2a Due, Friday, 11:59 pm

October 25: Art for the Artist

Rilke, *Letters to a Young Poet* (pp. 1–58)

November 1: Caring Relationships

Saito, *The Aesthetics of Care*, Ch. 1 and 2

(Prof. Yuriko Saito of RISD will be joining us this week!)

(Recommended: start next week's reading early; it's a bit long)

UNIT III. WHAT IS IT TO SEE? TO BE SEEN?

November 8: Seeing, Loving

Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (101 pages)

Paper 2b (rewrite) Due, Friday, 11:59

November 15: Representation & Appropriation

Appiah, “Whose Culture is it Anyway?” (pp. 115–135)

Eaton and Gaskell, “Do Subaltern Artifacts Belong in Museums” (pp. 235–267)

Artworld Roundtable: Is Cultural Appropriation Ever Okay?

Hartcollis, “Who Should Own Photos of Slaves? The Descendants, not Harvard, a Lawsuit Says”

Schutz, *Open Casket* (painting on Canvas)

*Field Trip this week to Boston MFA, **TBD TIME AND DATE**

UNIT IV. GAMES

November 22: What is a Game? Why Play Them?

Suits, *The Grasshopper*, (pp. 1–43, 151–80)

November 29: Games as agential art

Play *Hanabi* or *The Crew: The Quest for Planet Nine*

Nguyen, *Games: Agency as Art*, Ch. 1, 5, 8, 10 (pp. 1–26, 101–20, 167–89, 216–24)

(Optional: come to board game night, **tbd time and date!**)

Paper 3 (or project) TBD the last day allowed