

Scandalous Arts in Ancient and Modern Communities

CLST 1701 • Summer 2024 • Jordan Carrick • TR 5:15-7:15

Zoom link and office hours TBD

This course will examine the many arts (including literary, visual, and musical media) that shock audiences by violating the boundaries of taste and convention. It juxtaposes modern rhetoric around “problematic” or otherwise unsavory art with the ancient Greco-Roman world’s production of, and discourse about, its own transgressive art forms. We will consider why communities feel compelled to repudiate some forms of scandalous art, while turning others into so-called classics. We will sample a variety of scandalous authors and artists, from the comic poet Aristophanes to the rappers Lil’ Kim and Cardi B, ancient satirists and modern stand-up comedians, and Nabokov’s controversial novel *Lolita*.

Content Warning: For obvious reasons, you will encounter material in this course that some may consider offensive. This will include language and images that represent explicit sexuality, obscenity, violence or blasphemy. It is essential to understand that we will be discussing openly material that is sometimes deeply controversial and disturbing. I am assuming that students who enroll in this course fully understand the nature of its subject matter.

Evaluation requirements:

- Attendance and participation in discussions: 40%
- Weekly responses on Canvas: 20%
- One “current events” report: 5%
- One progress report on final paper: 5%
- One final paper (4-6 pages double-spaced): 30%

WEEK 1: Ancient and modern anxieties

In a democracy, where people have in principle unrestricted access to nearly all forms of art, who is responsible for the effects art has on them? Who decides if art is dangerous to the well-being of the *polis*? Are there stable aesthetic and moral standards for art, or is all artistic value relative and contingent?

Tuesday, July 9

- Plato: *Republic* 2-3 (selections)
- Marjorie Heins *Not in Front of the Children: ‘Indecency’, Censorship and the Innocence of Youth*, pp. 1-14.

Thursday, July 11

- Aristophanes: *Clouds* (selections)
- Allan Bloom, *The Closing of the American Mind* pp. 61-81.
- J. D. Hunter, *Culture Wars: The Struggle to Define America* (1991) 225-49.

WEEK 2: Shock, disgust, and gore

Why does disgusting art captivate us? Can art be “good” even when it is unsettling and even nauseating? Does disgust ever serve a purpose beyond “shock value”? What appeals about “slasher films” and other excessively violent and gory media? What drives moral anxiety about the representation of violence in film and other media like videogames?

Tuesday, July 16

- Plato, *Republic* 4 (excerpt)
- Petronius, *Satyricon* (“Trimalchio’s Banquet”)
- Chuck Palahniuk, “Guts”
- Caroline Korsmeyer, *Savoring Disgust* (excerpts)

Thursday, July 18

- Seneca, *Thyestes* Act 4
- Edgar Allan Poe, “The Black Cat”
- Kubrick, *A Clockwork Orange* (in class)
- R. Dunkle, *Gladiators: Violence and Spectacle in Ancient Rome* (selections)

WEEK 3: Satire and mockery

Representing violence can become even more of a problem whenever individuals known to the audience are singled out for mockery or abuse. Such targeting is the material for satirical forms, and such forms always have an unsettled status within society. How seriously do we take this kind of comic art? Can a work be comical and still contain political commentary? Is the comic work ever truly harmful, and under what conditions?

Tuesday, July 23

- Hipponax fragments in *Greek Lyric Poetry*
- Eminem, selections
- Dave Chappelle controversy (in class)

Thursday, July 25

- Excerpts from Roman satire (Horace, Persius, Juvenal)
- Aristophanes, *Knights* (excerpt)
- Jon Stewart (in class)

WEEK 4: Sex and pornography

Perhaps the most contentious area of aesthetics in American culture is the representation of sexuality. This week we will examine the controversies that arise when literary and visual arts appear to *aestheticize* the pornographic. We will consider specifically how members of marginalized groups have used sexuality as a tool of reclamation or defiant self expression.

Tuesday, July 30

- Priapea (selections)
- Catullus (selections)
- Robert Mapplethorpe Controversy: ‘Mapplethorpe: Queer Classicism’

- *Love Lies Bleeding* (in class)
- Wendy Steiner, *The Scandal of Pleasure*, 1-59

Thursday, August 1

- Aristophanes, *Lysistrata* (excerpt)
- Lil' Kim, *Hard Core* (album)
- "'Let's Have a Sex Talk': The Eras of Sex Talk by Black Women in Hip-Hop"

WEEK 5: "Problematic" art

Can art be irresponsible? Should unsavory art be permissible? Does art need to be "moral"? Can it be immoral? Does "canceling" ever work, and should it? Though we will consider a range of examples, our discussion will be guided by the quintessentially controversial work: Nabokov's *Lolita*.

Tuesday, August 6

- Nabokov, *Lolita*
- Secondary readings TBD

Thursday, August 8

- Nabokov, *Lolita* (cont)