

Christ College Alumni Reading Groups
Chicago, Minneapolis/St. Paul, Indianapolis, St. Louis, Denver
Spring 2004

Art and Ethics

Do the humanities humanize? George Steiner posed the question thirty years ago, and liberal arts colleges have debated it ever since. Although Steiner dearly wishes that the giants of Western culture—Plato, Gauss, Mozart—might be seen to justify and redeem the same “species which devised and carried out Auschwitz” (*Errata*), he is nonetheless doubtful that great art and literature really make a moral difference.

As the inhuman tenor of this century comes to condition our feelings, the terrible impotence of literature and the arts stands somewhat naked. It is not, as Auden bitterly observed, that “poems make nothing happen.” It is that we now know of the neutrality of the arts and of their performance in the company of barbarism, of the enigmatic capacity of human beings to appreciate music, art, poetry, profoundly in the evening, indeed to perform such music or write verse, and then proceed to bestiality the next morning. . . . great musical performances, art exhibitions, drama-festivals, architecture have not only co-existed with political madness, they have adorned and celebrated it. Personally, I cannot shake off the intuition that minds and sensibilities shaped by aesthetics, by their identification with fictions, by their enchantment with the past (and enchantment which defines a humanistic pedagogy and culture), may be inhibited from any active, concrete involvement in the anguish and demands of the present. (Edinburgh lectures)

Is Steiner right? Can art and literature be ethically neutral? Do the humanities conspire to woo us away from political action? If we argue otherwise (and CC alums ought to take such questions seriously, if only to justify their years spent around seminar tables in Mueller Hall), we must be prepared to not only defend, but also define art’s ethical character.

This spring we will attempt to do both, by reading and discussing texts in a range of aesthetic disciplines: photography, fiction, music, and sculpture. From Diane Arbus to Nabokov, and from Wagner to the debate over a 9/11 memorial, the examples we will consider ask us to revisit assumptions that undergird humanities-based education.

Few of us would argue (out loud) that exposure to “bad” art produces bad behavior. That bad art is dangerous (presumably to a public unschooled in independent, critical thinking) seems to be the assumption of those who condemn or censor books, performances, and exhibits that test the boundaries of what can or should be represented in art. How much more readily do we wish to claim the salutary effects of “good” art, wanting with Steiner to believe that immersion in the classics refines and cultivates goodness within us! In fact, both assertions contain an element of truth—and both oversimplify the relationship between art and ethics.¹

¹ I’m purposely leaving the term “bad” art undefined. On one end of the spectrum, “bad” describes art that is poorly executed, amateurish, or banal; on the other, it indicates the noxious, exploitive, or obscene. “Good” art seems to be

If we argue that art has ethical potential, we need to determine where, exactly, that potential lies, in the artwork's content or form—or in some complex alchemy of the two? Surely, the ethical thrust of art is not reducible to its plot or subject matter. If this were the case, then books, paintings, photographs, films and operas must be seen as nothing more than moral allegories, fables whose ideas and characters we seek merely to emulate or condemn.² Further, we need to decide whether or not all art shares a capacity for ethical critique. What about non-representational art? A Pollock canvas? A Beethoven symphony? Finally, we must consider how our own historical context colors our interpretation of art that was created years or even centuries ago.

Indeed, the intersection between art and society is always dynamic, often determining how the “politics” of an artist's work are construed. Can art be said to be ethical if it does not motivate ethical action? When art is co-opted by a social group toward some specific political end (e.g., Wagner by the Third Reich), is it tainted by that agenda? Should we take into account the artist's own political views when judging his or her work? Can you love a work of art by someone whose politics you revile? What special moral or ethical considerations obtain in the case of public art, such as war photographs or memorials? *Are* there limits to what can or should be represented in art?

Texts

- January:** Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*
Diane Arbus article (this will be mailed to you before the first meeting)
- February:** Vladimir Nabokov, *Lolita*
- March:** Daniel Barenboim and Edward W. Said, *Parallels and Paradoxes*
Richard Wagner, “Judaism in Music” (Available on several web sites,
including the Wagner library's.)
Music by Wagner (listen to anything by Wagner before March meeting)
- April:** Kimmelman and Menand articles (to be distributed)

Optional

Diane Arbus: Revelations. (This is the catalogue for the current SFMOMA retrospective on her work, available through the museum's website or Amazon.com. At \$50, it's expensive, but may be worth the investment if you want to see some actual photographs.)

a less ambiguous term, in that most people expect a correspondence between art of high quality (a “masterpiece” or “classic”) and that which is moral engaged or, at the very least, in good taste. Since taste varies, however, I wonder how neatly the criteria for “good” art line up?

² Thanks to Lee Mitchell, Princeton Professor of English, for this construction.