

**DePaul University**  
**School for New Learning**

**AI 295 Shades of Gray: Morality and Ethics in Film**

**Location:** Loop Campus  
**Dates:** Winter Quarter, Thursdays, 6/21 – 8/23  
**Hours:** 6:00-9:00 P.M. (times *may* vary to accommodate screenings)  
**Quarter Hours:** 4

**Instructor:** Gary Fox  
**Telephone:** 312-362-5952  
**E Mail:** kellox@ameritech.net

**Competencies Offered:**

- A-1-A - Can interpret works of art and relate them to one's own experience.
- A-1-D - Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.
- A-3-C - Can examine a social issue from an ethical perspective.
- A-4 - Can analyze a problem using two different ethical systems.

**Course Description:** In the early days of movies, people flocked to the theater to see the good guys (white hats) triumph over the bad guys (black hats). As the art of cinema evolved, the characters and the ethical issues they faced became more challenging and complex. Through in-class screenings, intensive class discussion and related readings, this course will examine films whose themes strongly concern the depiction of ethical and moral choice. We will discuss the ways in which the filmmakers create meaningful ethical dilemmas; how the characters' choices are portrayed; and how these portrayals may influence our own formulation of value systems and ethical choices.

**Instructor Bio:**

In addition to teaching film and public speaking courses at SNL, Gary Fox has been an adjunct faculty member for the last 20 years at Columbia College Chicago. He currently teaches film history, film & television aesthetics and public speaking classes. He has also taught at the Center for New Television, The Chicago Academy for the Arts, and in the Des Moines Public Schools' "Talented and Gifted" program. Gary also has experience behind the camera--as a film/video director and producer--and in front of the camera—as a stage and film actor. He received his B.F.A. in Speech Communication and Theatre Arts from Drake University and an M.A. from DePaul's *School for New Learning*.

**The Learning Experience/Expected Outcomes:** Through in-class screenings, class discussion and writing assignments, students will: 1)develop a vocabulary and understanding of basic ethical theories 2)explore the ways in which selected films depict various ethical dilemmas 3)examine how the characters' choices are portrayed; and how these portrayals may influence our own formulation of value systems and ethical choices.

**Required Textbook:** Rosenstand, Nina. *The Moral of the Story: An Introduction to Ethics*, 5<sup>th</sup> Ed. Hightstown, NJ: McGraw-Hill, 2003.

- *Recommended:* Rachels, James. *The Elements of Moral Philosophy*, 4<sup>th</sup> Ed., New York: McGraw-Hill 2003.

**Learning Activities:** Students will be asked to:

- Complete all assigned readings and attend all in-class screenings
- Participate in all large and small group discussions
- \* Complete a midterm exam
- \* Write a final paper
- Make a brief class presentation of your final paper
- Keep a notebook.

\* The midterm essay and final paper both require interpretive and analytical competence.

**Course Assessment** will be based on the following:

- **Midterm Exam:** Combination of objective and essay questions. 30%
- **Final Paper:** 35%
- **Journal or Notebook:** A three-ring binder with sections for 1) lecture & discussion notes 2) responses to films, and 3) vocabulary and questions. 10%
- **Class Participation:** You are expected to regularly contribute to (and occasionally lead) discussions on topics and films discussed in class. 15%
- **Quizzes:** Short objective questions based on text reading assignments. 10%

**Competences:**

**A-1-A: Can interpret works of art and relate them to one's own experience.**

In your course notebook, you are to describe a personal situation that reflects the ethical theory discussed in class. You will then examine the narrative films from class (and their character depictions) in order to interpret the moral dilemmas and messages. Drawing on these explorations, you will write an essay that describes how these messages relate to your own lived experience.

**A-1-D: Can analyze writers' or artists' representations of human experience.**

In an essay, the student will choose one or more films from the class list and identify the relevant ethical theory (or theories) portrayed in the narrative. Then, you are to analyze the film's depiction of the ethical dilemma(s) faced by the character(s). Questions to consider include:

- What was the theme of this film? What were the filmmakers trying to tell us? Were they successful? Justify your answer.
- Was there a moral to the story? What, if anything, did you learn from this movie?
- Select an action performed by one of the characters in the film and explain why the character took that action. What motivated him or her? What did this motivation have to do with the theme of the film? What were the consequences of the characters' actions?

**A-3-C & A-4:** In classroom “mini-case” discussions and in essays, you will explore how one (or two) distinct ethical theories address a moral issue portrayed in one of the films that you have selected for study. You are to write a final essay (either 5-6 pages for one, 8-10 pages for two) that analyzes a class film from either one or two ethical perspectives covered in the course. In each instance, here are some questions you should consider addressing:

- What are the main characteristics of the ethical system(s) covered in class?
- What is the film’s primary social issue or problem? How many underlying ethical/moral principles are depicted ?
- What important values or virtues of the ethical system(s) are emphasized in the film (e.g. compassion, justice, altruism, etc.)?
- What is the relative emphasis given to the concerns of the main character(s)? To the needs of the minor characters and the community depicted in the film?
- Is the morality/ethics of a character’s actions based on its consequences or on duties or rights that are independent of the consequences?
- What rewards or sanctions would impact those characters who comply with (or refuse to) the stated principles, rules, or prohibitions?

Written assignments will be evaluated on the basis of the following:

- **Content:** Detailed and insightful discussion of the chosen topic, using relevant examples and support from course readings, class discussion, personal experience, and (where appropriate) outside research.
- **Organization:** Clear thesis statement, logical development of main points, and well-structured paragraphs.
- **Stylistics:** Logical sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation; careful proofreading; appropriate documentation of outside sources.

**Attendance:** All students are expected to attend all class meetings and be prompt. Two tardies equals one absence. Two absences may result in a lower grade. Students are expected to stay to the end of the class. If you know you cannot attend, please advise the instructor as soon as possible.

**Reading / Viewing Requirements:** In addition to assigned readings, weekly screenings may include the following: *Paths of Glory*, *The Conversation*, *Crimes and Misdemeanors*, *Do the Right Thing*, *True Confessions*, *Unforgiven*, and *The Player*.

Other choices for films to explore independently include: *Salvador*, *Dr. Strangelove*, *The Maltese Falcon*, *Serpico*, *Save the Tiger*, *Wall Street*, *Sophie’s Choice*.

**\*Topics and Time Framework:**

Week 1

Introduction to ethics and morality.

Discussion of basic ethical issues, theory and vocabulary. Read chapters 1&2 in text.

Mini-case class discussions.

Assign Ch. 4

Week 2 Ethical egoism vs. altruism

Screen: "*Casablanca*."

Assign Ch. 3"

Weeks 3-4 Ethical relativism

Screen "*Do the Right Thing*,"

Assign Ch. 5

Week 5

Introduce Utilitarianism.

Screening *Extreme Measures*

Week 6

**Midterm examination.**

Week 7

Introduce Kant (Deontology), Ch. 6

Screen: *Justice*

Week 8

Screen "*Crimes and Misdemeanors*."

Weeks 9-10

Virtue Theory. Read p. 507-537

**Vincentian Mission Statement:** This course and its assessment tools are designed to actively incorporate the four cornerstones of a high quality learning relationship here at DePaul University - **Empathy:** students are actively involved in the discussion of moral choices; **Clarity:** approaches to film study are clearly designed and described; **Integrity:** course work leads to discussion of ethical decisions in life as reflected in the arts, and **Flexibility:** students are encouraged to adapt class to the demands of their professional and academic objectives.

**Class Policies:**

- You are responsible for notifying the instructor prior to any planned absence in order to get your assignments, and as soon as possible after any unplanned absence.
- Instructor will not fax or email missed assignments or handouts to you. Be sure to ask for them in advance or arrange to get copies from a fellow student.

- **All cell phones must be turned off. All pagers must be turned off or in vibrate mode.**