What is cinema in the 21st century? What can it still do? This course will explore the afterlives of cinema in the digital age by turning to theorists and practitioners who have addressed the ques-tion of technology in terms of both aesthetics and politics. We will read texts from a variety of fields, including film and media theory, feminist/ queer theory, critical race theory, and post-autonomous Marxism. At the same time, we will consider the way filmmakers such as John Akomfrah, Harun Farocki, Jean-Luc Godard, and Hito Steyerl have negotiated cinema’s role and envisioned its po-tential in a global image economy.

This course provides an introduction to foundational texts in the history of modern western (primarily German) theoretical aesthetics. Starting from Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten’s emphatic appropriation the term “aesthetics” to designate the study of beauty and good taste, the course will move chronologically through major texts of aesthetic theory from the eighteenth to the twenty-first century. The course will both examine the specific problems and questions raised by the various texts and consider the texts as history, looking at the ways in which these works both respond to one another and to the political and cultural tensions of their respective eras. We will also consider the ways in which these texts cross disciplinary boundaries or indeed are already transdisciplinary, constantly moving from the comparatively narrow fields of artistic and literary criticism to fundamental issues of ethics, epistemology, politics, and psychology, and back and forth all over again, always asking ourselves the questions: What are the historical conditions of the ways in which we make and/or think about works of art, broadly conceived, and how does this, in turn, shape the world that art is said to reflect?

As a scholar and activist, Silvia Federici interprets Marxism from a feminist point of view, shifting the focus of social critique from production to reproduction. She has led struggles against privatization and the enclosure of lands and social relations with a specific focus on the commons. In Nigeria, where she taught for several years in the mid 1980s, she witnessed firsthand the destruction of communal property through the colonial intervention of the World Bank and the IMF. For her, as a result, the feminist project cannot concern itself exclusively with sexual discrimination, neglecting other political questions. This graduate seminar explores Federici’s understanding of feminism as a history of struggles embedded in other struggles, in constant dialogue with Marxism, antiracism, and environmental politics. We will assess Federici’s criticisms of Marx, Negri, Foucault, Butler, and Haraway while considering her proximity to Vandana Shiva’s theory and practice of the commons. Seminar participants are encouraged to find a way to use Federici’s work in their own research projects while exploring anew what Veronica Gago calls “feminist potential.” Keywords: Commons, enclosure, housework, affective labor, the body, ecofeminism, international feminist solidarity.

In recent years, the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements have challenged how scholars approach moral questions surrounding the works, artists or genres they select for syllabi and public exhibitions. Yet as this crucial debate around the ethics of pedagogy has grown, there has been no robust discussion about how we treat these same works in research contexts. What does it mean to feel morally conflicted about picking a novel, theorist, film or image for a class, but less so when it comes to analyzing that same material in an article or talk? As scholars, do we want our object to be “good” too much?

This is a class about what happens when good scholars study bad things, highlighting how this practice has always been a key part of critique. It is often by running up against critical thought that a media work becomes “ethical” or “unethical” in the first place. Moreover, the question of how to engage with “unethical media” motivates a whole array of critical argumentative comportments — it shows us how to canonize, how to excuse, how to elevate, how to politicize, how to aestheticize, how to love or hate — and in this way the question of ethics helps us to assume the identity of a scholar. To gain perspective on this process, our class will look at the intersection of contemporary theory and moral philosophy, along with films, photographs, graphic novels and radio dramas that try to deal morally with issues of aesthetic distance, visual violence, cancel culture, scholarly privilege, disgrace, eco-pessimism, and the ethical representation of sexuality, gender expression and race.

Theorists may include: Chinua Achebe, Elizabeth Anscome, Lauren Berlant, Judith Butler, Jacques Derrida, Georges Didi-Huberman, Immanuel Kant, José Esteban Muñoz, Sianne Ngai, Susan Sontag, Judith Jarvis Thompson and Linda Williams. Key media artists will include Anna Biller, Sophie Calle, Alfred Hitchcock, Spike Lee, Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, Jane Gillooly, Kelly Reichardt and Cindy Sherman.