This faculty seminar follows a Beauty in Studies course cluster taught in the Fall of 2015 namely, The Ethics of Image, Aesthetics in Africa, Europe and the Caribbean, Gender, Sexuality and Race in Classical Music and Into the Wild Into the Wild: Untamed Nature in German-Speaking Culture.

Enhancing the Humanities at Bowdoin • Faculty Seminar • Director: Dr. Hanétha Vété-Congolo

Open to the public free of charge.

This faculty seminar follows a Beauty in Studies course cluster taught in the Fall of 2015 namely, The Ethics of Image, Aesthetics in Africa, Europe and the Caribbean, Gender, Sexuality and Race in Classical Music and Into the Wild Into the Wild: Untamed Nature in German-Speaking Culture.

As a property we assign, individually or collectively, to objects, material and immaterial, we perceive as pleasant or that arouse pleasurable feelings about us and as translating our complex of values and judgment, Beauty is outstandingly critical and unavoidable in our human lives. Whether conceptually or materially, it responds to our human instinct of survival as, every day, it is the primary lens—and implicitly through loathsomeness, its antithesis—through which we position ourselves in life, culturally, politically, symbolically, socially, ethnically. Although there are as many systems of values as there are human beings or societies in the world one tends to deem their sense of beauty as exclusive and objective. Such a positioning implies a moral outlook on what is “good” or “bad,” “right” or “wrong”.

Raising the issue about the concept and material rendition and means of representation of beauty is relevant in this twenty-first century when, through fast and consumerist communication systems—the media, the internet, Facebook, twitter—, we are inundated with explicit and implicit images and discourses about ourselves and the Other, when we interface with the seeming reduction of historical, geographical, ethnic and cultural distances and frontiers, when the local, the regional and the global densely conflate, and when we have to judge, choose, make decisions and position ourselves vis-à-vis the said images, discourses, local, regional and global. It is all the more so relevant that the new media means make more apparent some of the contemporary plagues—wars, genocides, terrorism, ecological calamities, economical disasters, gender bigotry, racial relegation, social exclusion, religious prejudices—that themselves drastically call on and astutely mobilize our system of values and judgment.

Thus, for the same reasons, is equally critical the question of ethics. Even while in its early stages, this century may be the one exacerbating the most, the beauty/ethics paradigm and the fact that we are fundamentally axiological beings.

In these two panels, prominent scholars on the issue of beauty and ethics will explore from a multidisciplinary approach, the multifaceted interactions between the two senses in various contexts, cultures and eras to revitalize scholarly investigations on the topic and place them at the core of the set of important intellectual, cultural and political considerations of our times.
PANEL I
2:10 p.m.–3:40 p.m.

Depicting the Loathsome

2:10 p.m.–2:30 p.m.
Conditional Beauty: Harriet Cany Peale’s Her Mistress’s Clothes
Dana E. Byrd (Assistant Professor of Art History, Bowdoin College)
The legacy of American slavery is such that when most twenty-first century viewers engage Harriet Cany Peale’s 1849 painting, Her Mistress’s Clothes (oil on tin, 10 1/8” x 8 ¼”, Private Collection) we are troubled by its apparent strangeness—either we recoil in horror at the control exhibited by the young slave mistress whose hand arrests the throat of the young slave girl or we might delight over the display of intimacy between two young women of similar ages engaged in a grooming ritual. Through an examination of the concept of beauty, this paper endeavors to articulate how antebellum viewers might have understood this painting. Harriet Cany Peale presents beauty here as being conditional, and embedded within concepts of racial stereotype and social convention. Yet, Peale was working in a painting tradition that paid homage to local visual culture, French literature and even eighteenth century Italian print culture. This paper investigates the myriad sources for this painting while examining manifestations of beauty as presented through Peale’s painting in order to restore questions of aesthetics to forefront of academic practice.

2:30 p.m.–2:50 p.m.
Kara Walker and the Seductions of Beauty
Lydia Moland (Associate Professor of Philosophy, Colby College)
The 1940 film classic Gone With the Wind makes abundant use of beauty as part of its seduction of its audience’s ethical sensibilities: in scene after scene, we are asked to mourn the beautiful, vanished civilization of the American South and to ignore the massive human rights violations that made it possible. Contemporary artist Kara Walker’s 2000 work Insurrection! (Our Tools Were Rudimentary, Yet We Pressed On) is, among other things, a challenge to this seduction. Walker’s silhouettes provoke viewers to uncover the horror behind beauty’s manipulative potential and to see themselves as implicated in the injustices that this film in particular tempts us to discount. Walker’s work inspires us to ask: how can beauty seduce us into ethical compliance; how, by contrast, might art jar us into better ethical awareness? What are the ethical dangers of beauty, and can art retain its requisite indeterminateness while still convicting us of our collective wrongs?

2:50 p.m.–3:10 p.m.
Cinematic Beauty at the Age of Genocide
Alexandre Dauge-Roth (Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies, Bates College)
The Day God Walked Away by the Belgian filmmaker Philippe Van Leeuw (2009) is a unique feature film that focuses on Jacqueline’s survival several months in forests during the genocide against the Tutsi in Rwanda. After her Belgian employers flee the country, Jacqueline (played by Ruth Nirere) hides for several days in their attic before risking her way back home in the outskirt of Kigali. When she finally makes it home, she discovers that her two children have been killed since they are Tutsi. With nowhere to go, Jacqueline flees deep in the forest where the major part of the film takes place with practically no dialogues or human interactions. Very quickly, her fight of survival is radically redefined by basic needs and priorities as she needs to find food and shelter in the forest. Having cut all ties with humans after what she witnessed in the “civilized world,” she regresses to an elementary and primitive stage as she needs to define a form of social survival while hiding in a “nature” that is both hospitable, nurturing and beautiful, but can also be indifferent and cruel. To compensate the quasi absence of dialogue and human sociability in the film, the scenario creates a fascinating interaction between Jacqueline’s internal and mental geography and the topography and elements of the wilderness in which she seeks refuge and attempts to define modes of survival. What I will explore, in addition to Van Leeuw’s deliberate refusal to shoot graphic images to bear witness to the genocide of 1994, is the rhetoric and ideological role of his “esthetization” of nature and reliance on close-up to establish a connection between the survivor’s experience of desocialization and the viewers experience and role in the redefinition of the social link between survivors of genocide and others who have not faced the traumatic aftermath of genocidal violence. What duty to remember and ethical response can be envisioned in the “esthetic beauty” that characterizes the photography of so many scenes in The Day God Walked Away. If God walked away but some Beauty remains to bear witness to His departure, what values and principles define then the possibility of Beauty at the age of genocide.
Panel II  
4:00 p.m.–5:30 p.m.  

**Choices of/in Beauty: Bringing up the Question of Ethics**

4:00 p.m.–4:20 p.m.  

**Should we Manipulate Standards of Beauty?**

**Sarah Conly** (Associate Professor of Philosophy, Bowdoin College)  
As it is well known, our standards of human beauty have often been destructive. They have reflected race and class prejudices, and have more generally held up standards that deviated so far from the natural as to be harmful to women’s self-esteem, when they could not meet the standards, or to their bodies, when they actually succeed. The question is what we should do about this. This conflict between what is natural and what is beautiful is something perhaps internal to the very idea of beauty. After all, we never seem to notice what is common as beautiful—we pick out what is unusual. We appreciate the unusually colorful sunset, not the average sunset; the rose, not the dandelion. To designate something beautiful is to contrast it with the norm. Given this, it looks as if human standards of beauty will always be something difficult or impossible for the majority of humans to live up to—if they did, it would no longer be seen as beautiful. Is there a way to avoid the harm that standards of beauty do to self-esteem? Should we manipulate standards of beauty to try to make them somehow “healthy”? Or would this be the worst kind of mind-control?

4:20 p.m.–4:40 p.m.  

**African Arts in Tensions: A Reading of some Historical Challenges**

**Jean Godefroy Bidima** (Yvonne Arnoult Chair in Francophone Studies, Tulane University)  
Arts are at the same time a product of social imagination and a task of a Subject rooted in a Community. In a painting or a sculpture one could find tensions; internal tensions with the problem of styles, periods and symbolisms, external tensions between the producer and his or her society, religions, markets and powers. Our evaluation of some African arts will deal with their relationships with **Identity** (of the Subject or the community), **Alterity** (what is the meaning of otherness in an African arts) and **Institutions**. These three steps will show - through some examples—that African arts are at the crossing between “I” and “we”, the Singular and the Universal, the Individual and the Community, the present and the future. With their own ethos, these arts demonstrate the link between social History and personal stories. Furthermore, these arts are suggesting social ethics and not mere moral obligations. **Ethics** is here, as would say Ricoeur, the way a society defines its “options”, whereas **morals** deals with imperatives. African arts, somehow, are promoting what one could call an “alloptic ethics”. This ethics which “turns around the Other” takes in to account the fact that the real Beauty is the promotion of Compassion, understanding and mutual respect in a world inhabited by cynicism, cunning and manipulation.

4:40 p.m.–5:00 p.m.  

**Moral Values and Aesthetic Values: Some Philosophical Issues**

**Lawrence Simon** (Associate Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies, Bowdoin College)  
Our views on beauty (aesthetic values) are similar to our views of moral right and wrong, good and bad (moral values) in that they provide normative guidance and structure to our judgments about others and which behaviors we choose—whether consciously or unconsciously. This being the case, it raises several critical questions. I will look at two: one having to do with normative theory and the other with meta-theory. First, should one normative structure trump the other? Shouldn’t the moral attitude take precedence? Judgments made and behaviors taken on the basis of mainly aesthetic normativity might lead to act in a way that is not, ultimately, as justified as those based on moral normativity. Giving someone preference based on aesthetic value (beauty) might equate to giving someone preference on the basis of race or ethnicity, that is, based on a morally irrelevant category. Secondly, comparing the two normative systems, the aesthetic and the moral, raises questions about the degree to which the associated values operate in the world such that we observe/discover them and our value judgments can be right or wrong, accurate or distorted, or whether on the other hand, these values are merely subjective and reflect our subjective preferences. In other words, the second question considered is, to what degree should we understand our moral and aesthetic values to be subjective or objective or a combination of the two.
Panelists:

Jean-Godefroy Bidima earned a Ph.D at Université Paris I Panthéon-Sorbonne (philosophy Department) and a Diplôme d’Études Approfondies (DEA) in Aesthetics and Sciences of Arts (Plastic Arts Department-Université Paris I- Panthéon-Sorbonne). A former Visiting Associate Professor at Bayreuth University (Germany) and Directeur de Programme at the Collège International of Philosophie (Paris), he is since 2004 Full-Professor and Yvonne Arnoul Chairholder in French at Tulane University (New Orleans-USA). Research includes continental philosophy, literatures and arts of the Francophone world, African philosophies, juridical anthropology and medical ethics. Publications include numerous articles and five books: Théorie critique et modernité négo-africaine: De l’Ecole de Francfort à la «Docta spee africana» (1993); La philosophie négro-africaine (1995); L’art négo-africain (1997); and La parole: Une juridiction de la parole (1997), Philosophie africaines: Traversées des Expériences (Editor), Special Issue, Rue Descartes, no 36, Collège International de Philosophie de Paris, Presses Universitaires de France, (2002). His co-edited book with Lavou Zoungbo Victorieux, Réalités et représentations de la violence dans les postcolonies, is forthcoming (Presses de l’Université de Perpignan, France). He is a 2011/2012 laureate of Eurias (European institutes of Advanced Studies) and 2011/2012 Fellow of IEA (Institut d’Études Avancées, Nantes France).


Sarah Conly is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Bowdoin College. Her new book, One Child: Do We Have a Right to More? is to be published by Oxford University Press in November, 2015. She argues that regulating the number of children per family is ethically acceptable because, if population growth is sufficiently dangerous, it is fair to impose restrictions on how many children one can give birth to. She will also have work appearing in the next issue of Ethics, and in the following anthologies: one for Routledge (on well-being), one for Oxford University Press (on food ethics) and one for a second Routledge anthology (on libertarianism.) Her book, Against Autonomy: Justifying Coercive Paternalism, was published in 2013 (Cambridge University Press.) Other recent work includes articles in the Journal of Medical Ethics and in Public Health Ethics.

Alex Douге-Roth is Associate Professor of French and Francophone Studies at Bates College. He has published numerous articles on the representation of the genocide against the Tutsi in literature, testimony, films, and documentaries. He published Writing and Filming the Genocide of the Tutsi in Rwanda: Dismembering and Remembering Traumatic History in 2010 with Lexington Books in the series “After the Empire: The Francophone World and Postcolonial France.” His work in French and Francophone studies examines testimonial literature as a genre and analyzes social belonging through historical, political, and medical readings of the body. He has explored representations of AIDS in Sub-Saharan Africa through the works of Kously Lamiko and Fanta Regina Nacro, graft and transplant as prominent metaphors for the migrant and the host in the works of Malika Mokeddem and Jean-Luc Nancy. He has published essays on Hervé Guibert, François Bon, Georges Perec, and Claude Simon. His current book project is entitled Who Speaks Behind the Archive? Documenting and Filming National Reconciliation in Rwanda. He has created “Friends of Tubeho,” a non-profit organization that funds educational scholarships for orphans of the genocide in Rwanda.

Lydia Moland is Associate Professor of Philosophy at Colby College. Her research interests involve connecting the history of philosophy, especially Hegel, with contemporary philosophy. In 2011 she published Hegel on Political Identity: Patriotism, Nationality, Cosmopolitanism (Northwestern University Press). Recently, she has been researching why the term “humor” was thought to have serious philosophical significance during Hegel’s generation and how that significance impacts our understanding of Hegel’s aesthetics. She is the 2015 recipient of a Faculty Research Visit Grant from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in support of research at the Freie Universität Berlin. Among her publications are, “Philosophy of History” (Hegel: Key Concepts), “And Why Not?” Hegel, Comedy, and the End of Art” (Verifiche), and “A Hegelian Approach to Global Poverty” (Hegel and Global Justice).

Lawrence Simon is Associate Professor of Philosophy and Environmental Studies at Bowdoin. His interests range from the philosophy of the social sciences and the philosophy of history to normative ethics, metaethics, political philosophy, and environmental ethics. His publications include articles on Vico and Marx on historical development and on moral relativism, on the problems of rationality and other cultures, on methodological issues in economic dependency theory and development theory, on the value of nature and encyclopedia articles on Marx, philosophy and rationality and cultural relativism. He edited and introduced a volume of Marx’s writings, Karl Marx: Selected Writings (Hackett). His present research interests include questions of justice with regard to climate change, the precautionary principle and how to think about decisions of future risk as moral decisions, and issues concerning moral realism.

Sponsored by the Andrew Mellon Foundation.

More information: Hanétha Vété-Congolo
mvete@bowdoin.edu
bowdoin.edu/humanities/beauty/index.shtml