The Devil Inside?
The Concept of Evil in Contemporary Culture

European Humanities, 3 Credit Course, Spring 2018
Major Disciplines: Communication, Film Studies, Literature

“The great epochs of our lives occur when we acquire the courage to rename our evil quality our best quality.”

Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil

“Is evil just something you are or something you do?”

Morrissey, Sister, I’m A Poet

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Description of course

We witness manifestations of evil everywhere – from ruthless harassments in schools and at work, to brutal assaults, murder, genocide and war. We see different representations of evil in pop culture, literature, politics and philosophy. How exactly is evil reflected and defined in our culture? Why are we so fascinated with this concept?

Questions such as why there is evil in the world and how evil is to be understood have always fascinated and terrified humankind. They address the most fundamental aspects of our way of life, our relations with one another, and our need to find meaning and comfort in the world. Imagine, hard as it may be, how altogether different the world would be, had it been devoid of any form of evil, and how this would probably render the entire legal system and its different forms of enforcement (police, military etc.) superfluous. Acknowledging that there is evil, however we may define it, and therefore that evil needs to be contained, is thus one of the presuppositions of any modern society.

This course examines the concept of evil through the lens of contemporary culture, exploring questions such as, is evil done for the sake of evil itself, which the notion of the psychopath in modern crime series often suggests? Does it require a specific evil intention to perform evil acts? How do we respond to evil acts which seem to be founded in a fundamental nihilistic attitude towards life in general? Would acts of terrorism fit this description, however much they may claim to be religiously and politically motivated? Are some acts of evil simply to be regarded as an unfortunate means to an end, often motivated by some higher political purpose, which, for example, seemed to be the general view in the Western world in regards to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in August 1945? We will analyze contemporary cases – film, TV series, novels, political events – and relate them to modernity’s search to reconcile reason with nature and to make sense of all the evil in the world, even when faced with the most atrocious and horrifying events of the 20th and 21st century.

Learning objectives of the course

By discussing and analyzing different philosophical approaches to and pop cultural representations of the concept of evil, the students will attain a basic understanding of the concept, how the understanding and reflection of it has changed over time, and, perhaps most important of all, which repercussions these reflections have had in relation to our current sense of ethics and morality.

The course is divided into five main modules

1. Contemporary evil in modern pop culture: Mythologizing the psychopath

Evil holds great fascination in contemporary pop culture, and especially the portrayal of the charismatic psychopath, who seems to have transcended all moral norms, thus challenging our traditional distinction between hero and villain and threatening to throw everything we hold to be dear into question, has begun to dominate current TV series, films and literature. We will discuss different examples of this, for example in TV series such as Dexter (2006-13) and Sherlock (2010- ) and movies such as The Dark Knight (2008).
2. Philosophical background, part 1: Entering a frighteningly new and modern world

During the Enlightenment philosophers such as Leibniz, Rousseau, and Kant set forth to radically think evil beyond traditional Christian concepts. The focus was to locate the possible causality between natural evil and moral evil, to render the world intelligible, and to ensure, through Leibniz’ notion of theodicy, that we live in the best of all possible worlds. But how preserve this morally upbeat version of the world when you’re suddenly exposed to a disastrous event such as the Lisbon earthquake in 1755, killing thousands of presumably innocent people? In response to this question, we will read Voltaire’s satirical Candide (1759) and discuss Kant’s philosophical reflections on how evil relates to the concept of man’s free will in a world where we can no longer be sure that God is holding our hand.

3. Archetypes of evil: Politics, nationalism, and the ‘other’

Throughout history, political ideologies and different manifestations of evil have been inextricably linked to one another. The birth of nationalism and the political desire to create the best of all possible worlds has often had catastrophic consequences for those deemed not to fit within the confines of this world. We will explore and question different ideologies of ethnic superiority and national paranoia, analyzing, among other works, Hannah Arendt’s seminal book on the banality of evil, Eichmann in Jerusalem (1963), and Leni Riefenstahl’s infamous propaganda movie, Triumph des Willens (1935).

4. Philosophical background, part 2: How to exist in the new world beyond notions of theodicy, benevolent reason and a higher good?

The philosophers of Enlightenment found it more and more difficult to establish a harmonious correlation between reason and nature, and thus secure firm ground on which to base our sense of ethics and a clear distinction between good and evil. Towards the end of the 19th century, Nietzsche declared God dead and John Stuart Mill laconically remarked that “nearly all the things which men are hanged or imprisoned for doing to one another are nature’s everyday performances. Killing, the most criminal act recognized by human laws, nature does once to every being that lives.” The terrifying question now presenting itself was: Why not kill? How justify the conviction that killing a fellow human being is morally abhorrent and completely unacceptable if the metaphysical basis for such a justification is no longer there? In response to this, we will confront the thoughts of Nietzsche and Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, read Ágota Kristóf’s The Notebook, and discuss how to deal with the “existential experiments”, as Ian Brady phrased it, of a serial killer.
5. Evil in the age of new technologies and modern conspiracy theories

Technology has always played a great part in how evil manifests itself. From the construction of primitive weapons in ancient times to the massive explosion of new technologies in the 20th and 21st century. In the context of war, this development culminated with the use of nuclear bombs and even more advanced weapons of mass destruction, the goal presumably being not only to kill as efficiently as possible, but to do so with the least amount of emotional investment. The question of what role technology plays in human desensitization does not, however, confine itself to a war scenario but also affects our everyday lives at home. How has digital technologies and social media affected our ethical encounter with the 'other'? Has it exposed us to new forms of potential evil? We will also look at modern conspiracy theories, and how they deal with a world politically and ethically more complex than ever.

Required texts

Literature

François de Voltaire, *Candide* (1759)

Movies and TV series (excerpts to be analyzed in class)

Leni Riefenstahl, *Triumph des Willens* (1935)
*Dexter*, season 1, episode 1: “Dexter” (2006)
Christopher Nolan (dir.), *Batman: The Dark Knight* (2008)
Yoav Shamir (dir.), *Defamation* (2009)
Jesper Ganslandt (dir.), *Apan* (2009)
Danny Ledonne (dir.), *Playing Columbine: A True Story of Video Game Controversy* (2011)
*Sherlock*, season 2, episode 3: “The Reichenbach Fall” (2012)

Approach to Teaching

Each lecture will begin with a presentation of a given subject, either by me or a student. This presentation will typically lead into a class discussion. Group work and various exercises where students can elaborate upon their views and arguments based on the lecture and/or discussion in class will also form a vital element in this class. Given the variety of the subjects, lectures will include the presentation of many different forms of cultural expression, including film, visual aids, digital media etc.
Expectations of the students

I expect students to have done the reading in order to participate in an open and engaged discussion about the given subjects. Students are also encouraged to discuss works presented in class that they have not necessarily prepared for in advance. I also expect students to draw upon personal aesthetic experiences and discuss these in a reflective, analytical, and critical manner. Remember, you don’t necessarily have to agree with what your teacher is saying. It will not affect your grade negatively to contradict your teacher as long as your arguments are solid and well-reflected.

Attendance

You are expected to attend all DIS classes when scheduled. If you miss multiple classes, the Office for Academic Support and the Director of Student Affairs will be notified and they will follow-up with you to make sure that all is well. Absences will jeopardize your grade and your standing at DIS. Allowances will be made in cases of illness, but in the case of multiple absences you will need to provide a doctor’s note. Note that attendance is required and expected and is not credited as participation. In order to be eligible for a passing grade in the class, all work and exams must be submitted.

Grading

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<td>Engaged participation</td>
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<td>Early term exam</td>
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<td>Oral presentation</td>
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Engaged participation

The course is not a lecture class, but relies heavily on class discussion, informed by an in-depth, critical reading of the assigned texts. Students will be expected to bring the text (in a paper version) and reading notes as well as questions to class. It is crucial to be able to analyze and criticize the argument put forth in the reading. Sharing a merely intuitive and personal opinion can be a useful starting-point, but is not sufficient. Students must be able to relate their points of view to an academic and research-based argument. Overall grades will depend on engaged, informed and highly active participation in class discussion. I strongly emphasize you to be critical in discussions and please do not be afraid to contradict what I am saying or present a different perspective on the topic we are discussing / analyzing.

Participation grade policy

Active class participation throughout the semester: A / A-
Occasional participation: B
Little or no participation: C
Early term exam

The test consists of questions of relatively simple facts, questions of a more complex character, and questions to be answered with a short essay. The early term exam takes place in class on TBA.

Oral presentation

The students will be asked to deliver an oral presentation on a given subject related to the content of the course. The oral presentation will be supplemented by a written page presenting the content and objective of the oral presentation. This page will be given to me on the day of the presentation. The oral presentation should not take more than 10-15 minutes. Students may very well include power points, visual aids, and film excerpts etc. that are relevant for the presentation. Please refrain from too general a presentation of the topic and focus instead on your specific perspective/analysis. What do you find interesting and compelling about the topic you are presenting? What is your critical take on this topic?

Research paper

Each student will produce a research project in form of a topic paper that reflects the theme of the course from one of a range of disciplines: history, sociology, literature, philosophy, or cultural studies. Throughout the semester, the students’ reflection process will become increasingly individualized as they find texts that fit into the research project that will be completed at the end of the semester as their topic paper. The paper is expected to be research-based, amount to max. 2000 words, and rely on a clear thesis relating to the world of pop culture. The final paper is to be turned in on TBA.

As the first preparatory stage for this paper, a 200-250 word project proposal (in prose) is due on TBA. The proposal describes the problem that will be discussed in the final paper, provides a brief literature overview, and raises the key questions guiding the research process. Furthermore, a bibliography is to be added, which includes both the assigned texts that are the starting point for the research process, as well as (minimum) additional five peer-reviewed academic articles or book chapters taken from research-based academic publications that are not part of the required or recommended course reading. Please do not hesitate to make use of the DIS library for this portion of the paper:
http://www.disabroad.org/study-abroad-students/library/

All assignments are to be handed in on the due date in a hard copy. Not meeting the requirements regarding word count, or handing in assignments late could affect the grade substantially.

Disability and Resource Statement

Any student who has a need for accommodation based on the impact of a disability should immediately contact Office of Academic Support (acadsupp@dis.dk) to coordinate this. In order to receive accommodations, students should inform the instructor of approved DIS accommodations.
Classroom Etiquette

The use of distracting devices (smartphones, iPads, laptops, etc.) is strictly prohibited during class. Failure to comply will adversely affect participation grades. Use of laptops for the purpose of note-taking requires prior consultation with the professor. Students should refrain from all other computer activities, as they prove distracting to themselves and fellow students. Mobile phones and other electronic devices should of course be turned off and stored away. In some lessons based on exercises etc. laptops may be allowed.

Academic Honesty

DIS expects that students abide by the highest standards of intellectual honesty in all academic work. DIS assumes that all students do their own work and credit all work or thought taken from others. Academic dishonesty will result in a final course grade of “F” and can result in dismissal. The students’ home universities will be notified. DIS reserves the right to request that written student assignments be turned in in electronic form for submission to plagiarism detection software. See the Academic Handbook for more information, or ask your instructor if you have questions.

Course Schedule (Subject to Change)

1. Introduction: Evil in modern thought

Where is evil encountered? How does it manifest itself, and how would you define it? General preliminary discussion on how the concept relates to the world of official politics, ethics, personal choices, responsibility, everyday life etc.


Recommended: Susan Neiman, “Introduction”, IN Evil in Modern Thought, pp. 1-13
Plato, The Republic, book 1 (ca. 380 B.C.)

I. Contemporary evil in modern pop culture: Mythologizing the psychopath

2. ‘The Bad Guy.’ Nihilism and evil in contemporary pop culture, part 1.

Sherlock, season 2, episode 3: “The Reichenbach Fall” (2012)
Christopher Nolan (dir.), Batman: The Dark Knight (2008)
David Ayer (dir.), Suicide Squad (2016)

Dexter, season 1, episode 1: “Dexter” (2006)

Recommended:

Relevant TV series:
- Sopranos (1999-2007)
- The Wire (2002-2008)
- Happy Valley (2014-16)
- Breaking Bad (2008-13)
- Sons of Anarchy (2008-14)

Other relevant works:
- Bret Easton Ellis, American Psycho (1991)
- Rémy Belvaux et al. (dir.), Man bites Dog (1992)
- Alan Moore & Eddie Campbell, From Hell (1989-96)

4. The Devil’s spawn
Can a child commit a crime of such a heinous nature that he or she will never be able to redeem it? Can a crime, committed at an age where a clear distinction between good and evil has not yet matured in the mind of the perpetrator, be considered a pure act of evil never to be forgiven? And should the adult suffer the repercussions of the child's crimes for all eternity?

John Crowley (dir.), Boy A (2007)

Recommended:

Other relevant films:
- Richard Donner (dir.), The Omen (1976)
- Stanley Kubrick (dir.), The Shining (1980)
- Fritz Kiersch (dir.), Children of the Corn (1984)
- J.A. Bayona (dir.), The Orphanage (2007)
II. Philosophical background 1: Entering a frighteningly new and modern world

5. Theodicy and the philosophers of Enlightenment. Leibniz’ stubborn optimism, God’s all-mighty benevolence and the possible metaphysical correlation between reason and nature, moral evil and natural evil.

François de Voltaire, *Candide* (1759)

Recommended: Susan Neiman, “Voltaire’s Destinies”, IN *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 128-148
Donatien Alphonse François de Sade, *Justine, or the Misfortunes of Virtue* (1791)

6. Modern world enters. The correlation between reason and nature slowly begins to wither away, and suddenly the horrifying idea arises in Descartes’ mind that God may have turned into a potential demon.

Susan Neiman, “Divided Wisdom: Immanuel Kant”, IN *Evil in Modern Thought*, pp. 57-84

Recommended: René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641)
Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781)
Immanuel Kant, “On the Radical Evil in Human Nature”, IN *Religion within the Bounds of Bare Reason* (1793)

7. Contemporary examples of assumed links between reason and nature, moral and natural evil. Students present ideas and perspectives.

III. Archetypes of evil: Politics, nationalism and the ‘other’

8-9. Idealistic evil. The birth of nationalism and its desire to, sometimes in the most brutal manner, manifest the best of all possible worlds. How does this political desire affect concepts of ethics and the human relation to the ‘other’? While trying to answer these questions, we explore different ideologies of ethnic superiority, national paranoia and man’s search to find a home in this world.

Leni Riefenstahl (dir.), *Triumph des Willens* (1935)
Yoav Shamir (dir.), *Defamation* (2009)
10. The banality of evil and how to facilitate a genocide. Does the act of evil require a specific evil intention? And if not, are we then all to be regarded as potential murderers? How, in the aftermath of Auschwitz and the Holocaust, is the world to respond to and possibly reconcile with an evil which, in the words of Hannah Arendt, “possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension” but simply “spreads like a fungus on the surface”?


Recommended: Jean Améry, *At the Mind’s Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities* (1966)

11. Auschwitz vs. Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Does one expression of evil compare to another, and if so, how and due to what criteria decide which one is worst? Are we prone to let national concerns repress our moral acknowledgement of the evil acts we perform ourselves?


Do you make choices in your everyday life, which might qualify as being ‘evil’? In this class we will discuss questions of personal responsibility. How balance every day, relative pragmatism with the demands of absolute idealism?

IV. Philosophical background 2: How to exist in the new world beyond notions of theodicy, benevolent reason and a higher good?

14. How live in a world where the distinction between good and evil has lost its metaphysical and religious footing? Why continue being good? How do we move beyond Nietzsche’s frustrated remark that “God is necessary, thus he must exist but he does not exist thus one can no longer live”?

Søren Kierkegaard, “Is There Such a Thing as a Teleological Suspension of the Ethical?” IN Fear and Trembling (1843), pp. 129-134

Recommended: Søren Kierkegaard, The Concept of Anxiety (1844)
Friedrich Nietzsche, Beyond Good and Evil (1887)
Georges Bataille, “Preface to Madame Edwarda” (1956)

15. Contemporary responses 1: Ágota Kristóf and the cold, cruelty of ethics. Young and restless in a world at war and no God in sight. Does this book confront us with a concept of evil, which, like Nietzsche’s dream of the super human, transcends all former moral categories? In a world gone mad, does the simple desire to survive necessitate an extreme manifestation of evil which defies the notion of evil itself, replacing “sentimentality” with “a cold and cruel passion” (Zizek)?

Ágota Kristóf, The Notebook (1986)


16. Contemporary responses 1a: How are Ágota Kristóf’s literary reflections on evil affected when transferred from writing to film? How do we respond to this change when encountering these reflections not in the form of words but in the form of recognizable images, sounds and palpable human expressions and gestures?

János Szász (dir.), The Notebook (2013)

Recommended: Lindsay Anderson (dir.), If... (1968)
Stanley Kubrick (dir.), Clockwork Orange (1971)
Mike Leigh (dir.), Naked (1993)
17. Contemporary responses 2: Family man. When ordinary crises lead to the worst consequences of all.

Jesper Ganslandt (dir.), Apan (2009)

Recommended: Cristi Puiu, Aurora (2010)

18. Contemporary responses 3: Serial killers in the postmodern era and the deadly need to internalize the world and make it mine. How live in a world that is without an ought, and how respond to the question: Why not kill, when the obstacle not to refers to a presumably empty moral assumption?


V. Evil in the age of new technologies and modern conspiracy theories

19. Case study 9/11. Modern conspiracy theories and the search for personified, demonized evil behind a world apparently devoid of sense. Could this be regarded as a reactionary attempt to reinstate Leibniz’ notion of theodicy in a world that has proven politically and ethically more complex than ever?


Susan Neiman, “Terror: After September 11”, IN Evil in Modern Thought, pp. 281-288

20. General discussion based on previous lessons. Examples of ethical grey zones today? What role does culture play in the definition of evil? European perspectives versus American. Do we still think in terms of an absolute metaphysical evil beyond cultural and historical determinations?
21. Playing the game while entering the mind of a school shooter. The ethics of computer games and players as moral beings. Can we ethically defend creating and playing a game such as *Super Columbine Massacre RPG*?

Danny Ledonne (dir.), *Playing Columbine: A True Story of Video Game Controversy* (2011)

22. Digital evil. Real life and death on the internet. How have digital technologies and social media affected our ethical encounter with the ‘other'? Has it exposed us to new forms of potential evil?

Judy Bachrach, “U Want Me 2 Kill Him?” (2005)
Lauren Collins, “Friend Game: Behind the Online Hoax That Led to a Girl’s Suicide” (2008)
Louis C.K. on Conan (2013), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltf1c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5HbYScltf1c)

23. What have we learned? Are we able to reflect on what evil is today? How it manifests itself, and what it requires of human reason to understand and come to terms with the existence of evil? Can we forgive evil?


Recommended: Michal Ben-Naftali, “An Interview With Professor Jacques Derrida” (1998), [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwDZ6jrDgdg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dwDZ6jrDgdg)