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FILM 391.01: ST: Film & the Problem of Evil

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FILM and the PROBLEM OF EVIL (FILM 391)

Spring 2018

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Tues./Thurs. 10:00-12:20

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Office hours (LA 217): Tu./Th. 12:30-1:50; Tu./Th. before 10:00 & Fridays by appointment

“Evil begins when you begin to treat people as things.”

— Granny Weatherwax, in Terry Pratchett’s *I Shall Wear Midnight* (2010)

“Nothing is easier than to denounce the evildoer; nothing is more difficult than to understand him.”

— A popular quote attributed to Fyodor Dostoyevsky

“If only it were all so simple! If only there were evil people somewhere insidiously committing evil deeds, and it were necessary only to separate them from the rest of us and destroy them. But the line dividing good and evil cuts through the heart of every human being. And who is willing to destroy a piece of his own heart?”

— Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago 1918-1956* (1973)

“We proceed on the assumption that the true and the good, and just possibly the beautiful, coincide. Where they do not, we demand an account. The urge to unite *is* and *ought* stands behind every creative endeavor. Those who seek to unite them by force usually do more harm than they set out to prevent. Those who never seek to unite them do nothing at all.”

— Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought* (2002), p. 322

As Susan Neiman has observed, the “language of good and evil is [...] the most powerful language we have: Nothing moves men and women more deeply and surely, for better and worse.” When we encounter portrayals of evil in films or literature, powerful appeals are being made to our moral sensibilities. But how should we understand and respond to such appeals? Attempting to answer this question—case by case—will be the major business of this course. In studying films and literary texts from Shakespeare to Malick, we will develop understandings of what “evil” has variously meant from the early-modern period to our own times, and we will examine how different filmic styles and techniques work to create meaningful experiences about these ideas. We will also consider the ways moving-image media sensationalize and commodify portrayals of evil, and ask how such treatments have affected the rhetoric and politics of “good vs. evil” discourse in the public sphere.

Required Texts (and suggested editions):

- Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton UP), 2015. ISBN: 978-0691168500
- William Shakespeare, *Othello*, ed. Russ McDonald (Penguin), 2001. ISBN: 0-14-071463-4
- William Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, ed. Robert S. Miola (Norton Critical), 2014. ISBN: 978-0-393-92326-1 OR Penguin edition, ed. Stephen Orgel, 2000. ISBN: 978-0143128564
- Robert Lewis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Norton Critical), 2003. ISBN: 978-0393974652
- Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (Norton Critical), 2005. ISBN: 13: 9780393926361

- Various readings posted on our course's Moodle site (those in the course schedule are required).

Films: You should make every effort to watch each of the main films we discuss. Most of these we'll watch together during class time, and others will be on reserve at the Mansfield Library. I encourage you to rent, borrow, purchase, or otherwise acquire any films that are the major focus of your essay projects. Please let me know if you run into trouble accessing a particular film you wish to study closely.

- *Othello* (directed by Welles) (1951)
- *Throne of Blood* (Kurosawa) (1957)
- *Macbeth* (Kurzel) (2015)
- *The Witch* (Eggers) (2015)
- *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Mamoulian) (1931)
- *Apocalypse Now* (Coppola) (1979)
- *Downfall* (Hirschbiegel) (2005)
- *The Werkmeister Harmonies* (Tarr) (2000)
- *Incendies* (Villeneuve) (2010)
- *The Tree of Life* (Malick) (2011) and/or *Samsara* (Fricke) (2011)

Graded Work:

Response papers -----	30
Forum posts -----	20
Presentation -----	10
Formal essay -----	10
Term paper -----	30

Attendance is a sign of your commitment to your studies. I become concerned after a student has missed more than two classes. If you miss **three** classes, I expect you to schedule a meeting with me so we can discuss your status in the class. Ordinarily (and certainly if I hear nothing from you), each absence beyond three will reduce the final grade by one-third of a letter grade.

Please arrive to class on time. While I understand that the most conscientious of us sometimes are delayed by circumstances beyond our control (and in those cases, please do come to class rather than not at all), persistent late arrivals are a distraction. You may dismiss yourself during class time for urgent reasons.

Essays: This course includes three kinds: **1) Response papers.** These are informal, one to two page (single-spaced) explorations of some aspect of a film and/or literary text we have studied. You should use these papers to help develop your thinking about the subject of "evil" as it pertains to the films and texts we are studying. You should also use these papers as a forum for generating interesting questions and topics you might pursue in either of your two formal papers. Otherwise, you have considerable freedom in how you go about these papers. **2) A short, formal essay** (of about five double-spaced pages). I will distribute prompts for this essay, but you also will have the option of devising your own topic. **3) A term paper** (of no fewer than ten double-spaced pages). It will be your responsibility to devise a topic for this paper, however, I encourage you to talk with me about your reading and research interests at any point during the semester. Your paper should engage with your chosen primary film(s) and/or text(s) and carefully selected critical/theoretical publications.

Presentation: Either in collaboration with one of your classmates or solo, you'll be called upon to give a presentation of fifteen minutes or so on a specific topic relevant to a film we are studying. Part of this work will entail introducing the class to a scholarly article or portion of a book that

bears on the topic. You have considerable freedom in how you choose to engage us with your presentation, and I encourage you to be creative. A one-page, single spaced synopsis of the content of what you presented will be due the following class meeting.

Forums for discussion: There will be discussion forums on Moodle for each of the films we study. How we use these forums will vary: sometimes I'll raise a question and ask everyone to post a response and other times I'll ask you to generate the questions or topics for discussion. Chiefly, I intend these forums to be places where we can extend our discussions of film and the problems of evil beyond the classroom.

Electronic devices: You may use a personal computer or other device during class time for purposes directly related to the class: namely, note taking or consulting relevant supplementary texts. Please do not use an electronic device for other purposes since doing so would be a distraction from what we're trying to accomplish together in this class.

Academic Honesty: Plagiarism is a violation of scholarly trust. According to the Provost, "Academic misconduct is subject to an academic penalty by the course instructor and/or a disciplinary sanction by the University. All students need to be familiar with the Student Conduct Code. The Code is available for review online at <http://www.umt.edu/SA/VP/SA/index.cfm/page/1321>." Violators of the Student Conduct Code will receive an "F" for the offending paper. Each essay you submit must be signed at the bottom of the last page, assuring that the work is your own, except where indicated by proper documentation. Your signature is your word that the essay is free of plagiarism.

Accessibility and Accommodation: Students with disabilities may request reasonable modifications by contacting me. The University of Montana assures equal access to instruction through collaboration between students with disabilities, instructors, and Disability Services for Students. "Reasonable" means the University permits no fundamental alterations of academic standards or retroactive modifications.

Specific goals for students of this course:

1. To learn the major theories concerning "the problem of evil."
2. To learn how films and literary texts variously represent "evil," and to gain insights into the merits and problems of these representations.
3. To become adept at performing meaningful, interesting close-readings of literary and filmic texts.
4. To work towards becoming phenomenal writers of clear, lively, eloquent prose.
5. To gain experience discussing highly controversial subjects in thoughtful ways with people who may not share your views on the material.

The following schedule is tentative. At the beginning or end of each class I will confirm the homework for the next class, which often will include additional secondary readings (accessible on Moodle). If you miss a class, please check with a classmate or myself about homework I have announced for the next class.

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| 1/23 Tues. | The problems of "evil": Geoffrey Scarre, "Evil" (Moodle); Martin Norden, Introduction to <i>The Changing Face of Evil in Film and Television</i> (Moodle) |
| 1/25 Thurs. | Charles Mathewes, "Modernity and Evil" (Moodle); Susan Neiman, "Evil Acts, Evil-Doers" (Moodle); <i>Bram Stoker's Dracula</i> (1992); <i>The Silence of the Lambs</i> (1991) |
| 1/26 Friday | response paper due (please slide under my office door by 5:00) |
| 1/30 Tues. | William Shakespeare, <i>Othello</i> ; Colin McGinn, chapter on <i>Othello</i> in <i>Shakespeare's Philosophy</i> (Moodle) |

- 2/1 Thurs.** *Othello*; Orson Welles (director), *Othello* (1951); Samuel Crowl, “Auteurs and Actors” and Ed Sikov, “Mis-en-scene” (both on Moodle)
- 2/6 Tues.** **Response paper due.** *Othello* and *Macbeth*
2/8 Thurs. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*
- 2/13 Tues.** Akira Kurosawa (dir.), *Throne of Blood* (1951)
2/15 Thurs. *Throne of Blood*; Brian Parker, “Nature and Society in Akira Kurosawa’s *Throne of Blood*” (Moodle)
- 2/20 Tues.** Justin Kurzel (dir.), *Macbeth* (2015)
2/22 Thurs. **Response paper due.** Kurzel’s *Macbeth*
- 2/27 Tues.** Robert Eggers (dir.), *The Witch* (2015); Carolyn Merchant, “Nature as Disorder: Women and Witches” (Moodle)
3/1 Thurs. Robert Lewis Stevenson, *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886)
- 3/6 Tues.** **Response paper due.** Katherine Linehan, “Sex, Secrecy, and Self-Alienation in *Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*” (pp. 204-213 in the Norton Critical Edition)
3/8 Thurs. Rouben Mamoulian (dir.), *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1931); Scott Allen Nollen, “*Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Paramount, 1931)” (pp. 163-169 in Norton Critical Edition)
- 3/13 Tues.** Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (1899)
3/15 Thurs. *Heart of Darkness*
- 3/20 Tues.** Francis Ford Coppola (dir.), *Apocalypse Now* (1979)
3/22 Thurs. **Response paper due.** *Apocalypse Now*
- Week of 3/26 Spring Break**
- 4/3 Tues.** Susan Neiman, “Homeless,” in *Evil in Modern Thought* (pp. 238-328); Oliver Hirschbiegel (dir.), *Downfall* (2004)
4/5 Thurs. *Downfall*
- 4/9 Monday** **Short formal essay due** (please slide under my office door by 5:00)
4/10 Tues. Bela Tarr (dir.), *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000)
4/12 Thurs. (Holocaust Remembrance Day); *Werckmeister Harmonies*
- 4/17 Tues.** Film to be selected by the class: please send me an e-mail with your suggestion before spring break.
4/19 Thurs. Discussion of film screened on 4/17
- 4/24 Tues.** Denis Villeneuve (dir.), *Incendies* (2010)
4/26 Thurs. *Incendies*
- 5/1 Tues.** Terrence Malick (dir.), *The Tree of Life* (2011)
5/3 Thurs. *The Tree of Life*

Term paper due: May 9 (Wednesday) by 5:00. Please slide your essay under my office door.