

Community Proposal: Dissecting Evil

Faculty members: Gaetano De Leonibus, Sarah Clovis Bishop

Students: Josie Buchwald, Ryan Cornwell, Anna Neshyba, and George Zenker

Though the notion of Evil is not unique to any one culture, to any one time, Evil is usually understood through concepts of the forbidden (taboos), opprobrium, retribution, revenge, and punishment. In the West, since the advent of Christianity, Evil has been inseparable from the idea of original sin. Characterized by personal and particular notions of fidelity (to Jesus, saints, priests and, through feudalism, to kings), Christianity is incompatible with the notion of universalism, a characteristic of modern society (industrial, technological, bureaucratic, whether capitalist or socialist) which has replaced God with other absolutes such as the State, Race, Progress. Through this secularization of the notion of Evil, “sinning” against these absolutes constitutes an evil / criminal act in modern society. In this summer collaborative, we will explore questions such as: What is the nature of evil? What constitutes an evil act? Is evil necessary? Were the necessity for absolutes to dissipate, would the concept of evil also disappear? Why are representations of evil so prevalent in the arts?

In order to address these questions, our research community—made up of two faculty members and four students—will draw upon materials and methodologies from a variety of disciplines: literature, philosophy, cultural studies, cinema and art. The professors, Gaetano DeLeonibus and Sarah Clovis Bishop, will be working together to design the newly revised Comparative Literature Senior Seminar which Gaetano will be offering for the first time in spring '17. Sarah will also be pursuing her own research on evil and the demonic in Elena Shvarts's poetry. The students, whose majors include history, art history, English, and film studies, will investigate Hannah Arendt's secular philosophy of evil; Christopher Nolan's recent *Dark Knight* Batman series; the recent infatuation with vampirism in popular culture; and the vilification of Black Power movements and Islam in contemporary American culture.

While the topics of the individual projects vary greatly, they all interrogate the nature of evil and require the researchers to think about their specific texts in larger historical, philosophical, literary and economic contexts. Sarah, Ryan, Anna, and George are focused on manifestations of evil in recent texts (late twentieth-century to contemporary): demons and angels, vampires, super-villains, and terrorists. We approach these texts with a common question in mind: in increasingly secular societies, how are the forces of good and evil defined? Josie's proposed work on Arendt deals with this question directly: is it possible to define evil objectively within a secular philosophy?

Before embarking on our individual projects, we will engage with these questions through discussion of a shared primary text, *Sweeney Todd*. Together we will read the original tale (1846-47), attend the Portland Opera's performance of Sondheim's 1979 musical, and view Tim Burton's 2007 film, considering how the mythic themes contained in all three (avarice, ambition, cannibalism) reflect particular concerns of their times. What elements of evil remain constant? What elements are transformed across time and genre? This shared work will both hone our close reading skills and provide a larger theoretical framework within which to pursue our individual projects.

Proposed Budget

Book purchases/copying charges for central texts:	\$600
Group trip to Portland to see <i>Sweeney Todd</i> at Keller Auditorium in June	
6 tickets @\$100/each	\$600
carpool between Salem and Portland (120 miles@\$.50/mile)	\$60
dinner in Portland	\$200
Total budget request:	\$1460

Gaetano DeLeonibus, individual LARC proposal

The Problem with Evil

My main goal for participation in the LARC community this summer will be to test out the initial topic of evil for the senior seminar in comparative literature, a course that Sarah Bishop, Amadou Fofana, Ortwin Knorr and I revised last summer with the help of a LARC curriculum grant, and that I will teach in spring '17.

Given the rising racial tensions in our society, including on college campuses, and the increased ethnic and cultural misunderstandings in our global context, I am developing a Senior Seminar in World Literature that fosters increased cultural competence among participants while they exercise critical reading, thinking and writing skills. What better way to reach such an understanding than through the study of a complex notion like Evil, which exists in every culture, although it is defined differently by different societies?

LARC community members will explore the topic from multidisciplinary and multicultural view points, drawing from literature, philosophy, cultural studies, cinema, and art. In order to set everybody on the same footing, and to test out a sequence of pre-writing and writing activities that I will use in the seminar to scaffold learning, we will begin with a brainstorming discussion. Each participant will articulate what evil means for her/him, what constitutes evil in the object of study, and reflect on the similarities and differences.

Next, we will work on reading like a writer by engaging with theoretical texts that analyze sociological, cultural, and philosophical notions of evil. We will begin with a close reading of Jeffrey Alexander's "A Cultural Sociology of Evil," the 4th chapter of his *Meanings of Social Life: A Cultural Sociology* (2003). In his analysis of how culture works in society, Alexander explains how all attempts by societies to instill notions of the "socially good and right" are only possible by conceptualizing its social evil opposites (110). He also discusses how, in their pursuit of the good, societies systematically crystallize and elaborate the notion of evil. Finally, after discussing the "intellectual roots of the displacement of evil" (philosophical and religious) as well as its displacement in contemporary social science, Alexander concludes with the "transgression and the affirmation of evil and good" (113-15).

This close reading will be followed by a short written assignment reflecting on how Alexander's analysis relates to the individual participant's topics. This exercise will provide participants with an opportunity to engage critically with a theoretical framework and its application to their own project. Participants will be encouraged, through a set of discussion questions, to identify, evaluate and question the assumptions behind each other's analysis. The goal is to continue to hone our ability to distinguish our personal positions from those of other writers and readers, acknowledge differences and complexities behind something, like notions of evil, that might seem universal. These scaffolding activities will continue, with the participants using the same approach to critically assess the scholarship related to their particular projects, so that in their final writing they reach an Advanced level of scholarly inquiry demonstrated by a consistent ability to place concepts, evidence, practices, perspectives, and/or conclusions within a broader context.

Sarah Clovis Bishop, individual LARC proposal

“Evil and the Demonic in Elena Shvarts’s Poetry”

I have two goals for my participation in the LARC community this summer: first, to help develop the newly revised senior seminar in comparative literature with Gaetano DeLeonibus; second, to pursue my research on the poetry of Elena Shvarts, a central figure in late and post-Soviet Russian culture.

Last summer, with the help of a LARC curriculum grant, Gaetano, Amadou Fofana, Ortwin Knorr, and I redesigned the comparative literature senior seminar on the humanities seminar model. We aimed to create a more collaborative and truly comparative course which will bring together students from a variety of literature programs to study texts connected by a central theme. We thought particularly carefully about the type of writing and research assignments that we could scaffold throughout the course so that students would be equipped to write strong independent seminar papers by the end of the semester. The course, approved by Academic Programs this past fall, will be taught for the first time in spring '17 by Gaetano; the initial topic is evil. This summer Gaetano and I, along with our LARC student collaborators, will explore various theoretical and literary texts on evil. We will also test out and refine the writing and research assignments we have planned for the senior seminar.

These pedagogical goals reflect my faculty role in the collaborative, but I will also take on a student role, conducting my own research on evil and the demonic in Elena Shvarts’s poetry. Underpinned by Christian faith, but also informed by Jewish and Buddhist beliefs, her verse tackles evil in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. Demons and angels inhabit many of Shvarts’s poems, but they are not clearly identified as “evil” and “good.” They both torment and assuage the poet, constantly changing form, appearing in different guises. At the same time, however, the poet often struggles with a force of absolute evil, sometimes, but not always, identified as Satan. I plan to investigate the relationship between this absolute force and the more changeable actors in her poetry. What is the nature of the interplay between the poet, her demonic/angelic creations, and absolute evil? How does Shvarts’s conception of evil fit into the Russian literary tradition, so rich in demonic imagery?

I have written extensively about Shvarts in the past, but I have tended to approach her poetry formally. I have also focused on her “ventriloquized” literary cycles—collections of poems attributed to fictional lyric personae around whom whole worlds are created. While keeping those cycles in mind, this summer I will focus on Shvarts’s independent lyric poems. How does the lyric persona approach evil and the demonic in these poems? Does this approach change over time?

My research will be greatly enriched by the work of my LARC collaborators. Our projects all examine the shifting nature of evil, yet they draw on very different texts and approaches. I look forward to delving into theoretical frameworks outside my expertise (Foucault, Arendt) as well as sharing my skills in close literary analysis.

Josie Buchwald, individual LARC proposal

“Objective Evil in a Godless World”

The calamities of the early 20th century stripped Europeans of their moral foundations based within the Enlightenment and Christian tradition, encouraging the rise of existentialism and thus the dismantling of what were once seen as ethical absolutes, like good and evil. Hannah Arendt, one of the most remarkable thinkers of this time, deviated from existentialism’s fundamental claim of relativity in her book *The Rise of Totalitarianism* when she proclaimed totalitarianism as an “objective evil.” The identification of an absolute evil by an existentialist lead me to wonder how else Arendt, in a philosophical niche founded on the concept of universal relativity, wrestles with evil? Furthermore, can her secular and political comprehension of evil provide a new lens for addressing the human rights abuse, corruption, and indifference that plagues our unprecedentedly godless 20th and 21st century? I will use Arendt’s *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, *On Violence*, *The Human Condition*, and *Men in Dark Times* to guide me in exploring my questions. By focusing on the ways she identifies evil, its socio-political forms, catalysts, and antithesis: objective good, I can investigate the mind of a wildly transformative philosopher.

I first encountered Arendt in my 20th century European thought course, where we read authors from Heidegger to Fanon in the context of the 20th century intellectual crisis. Not only did I learn how to read dense theory, I also gained a foundational knowledge regarding the climate Arendt was writing in and her political beliefs. Perhaps the most interesting thing I discovered was that often when I discussed Arendt’s anomalous identification of an objective evil, people’s first reaction was to discredit her, asserting that her condemnation of totalitarianism was led by personal hatred for the Nazis who forced her to flee Germany. In actuality, her argument is supplemented with astute evidence and personal insights only someone so affected by the phenomenon could contribute. It is misconceptions like this that make studying Arendt more important and necessary, and LARC grants me the perfect opportunity to carry out my passion and study this phenomenal woman.

Compared to other thinkers of the time Arendt specifically and uniquely speaks to this LARC proposal. As an existentialist political philosopher she identifies evil in a world without absolutes, and by reading more of her works I hope to gain a broader understanding of how she creates objectivity in this foundationless framework. Furthermore, she speaks to the question of what constitutes evil and the nature of evil from a secular perspective. By studying a 20th century political theorist I aim to expand the concept of evil by linking it to contemporary socio-political events. This grant will help me not only explore my academic curiosity with intellectual history, but also solidify my vocational interest in civil rights. Arendt speaks directly to the evils that constitute human rights abuses rampant in the 20th century that we see bleeding into the 21st, not only condemning the gross violations but providing a glimpse into the ways to counteract such evils.

Ryan Cornwell, individual LARC proposal

“Abnormal and Evil: Narrative and Necessity in Nolan’s *Dark Knight* Trilogy”

I plan to pursue an in depth analysis of Christopher Nolan’s recent *Dark Knight* Batman films, in relation to their place as an example of modern capitalist cinema that interact with notions of power, policing, and of course, evil. I will analyze whether the film series affirms capitalist ideals of normal and abnormal as a mirroring structure of good and evil, criticizes or ruptures these notions, or if in fact it is a film series that does both at the same time. The Nolan series has attained resounding commercial success, so its place as an example of western, capitalistic, mainstream filmmaking is not in question. What is in question is how the film thematically examines the very dynamics that make it possible. All three films navigate dynamics of social order as urban chaos ensues from the influx of a “bad guy.” The police and Batman are then presented as the “good side” in opposition. However, as the series develops, this dynamic is complicated, if not problematized, possibly illuminating or even criticizing systems of domination in western capitalist society that rely on the presentation of evil as dangerous. This is where I’d like to center my analysis. Initially, I am drawn to the possible paradoxical nature of a film series that may simultaneously criticize or expose how conceptions of good/evil operate in western capitalist society to justify surveillance and policing power, while utilizing the narrative structure that enables the simple binary of good/evil to operate in western capitalist discourse. This paradox could render the film just another example of cinema that reaffirms conceptions of power and overly simplistic binaries of good and evil, but it could also provide a site of rupture of overly neat conceptions of normality on a widespread, popular scale.

In my analysis of the film series I plan to incorporate cultural theory, as well as an investigation of genre and narrative. I will draw on Michel Foucault’s ideas on power, which he sees as a productive technology of normalization that creates binaries of good/evil and polices them in relation to modern capitalist structures, informally, through internalized notions of good/evil at an individual level. His ideas on western, capitalist social order will serve as a foundation for my analysis of how the film navigates these dynamics. I also hope to incorporate an analysis of the superhero genre and its use of good and evil as narrative structure. To do so, I plan to research Batman’s comic book history to better understand the narrative and thematic history that the films emerge from.

This comes out of my study at Willamette as a Film Studies and English double major, and a particular interest in the writings of Michel Foucault. I recently took Professor Duvall’s course on Foucault and Critical History, and would be very much interested in incorporating Foucault’s work on power and the modern prison system into my study of evil in narrative, and contemporary popular cinema. I am also in the process of utilizing Foucault’s work for my English thesis. Overall I am trying to obtain some sort of expertise with his work over the course of my undergraduate study, and this project would allow me to continue that trend. I plan to pursue academic study in these disciplines in graduate school, and this research opportunity would be a useful experience to take with me in that pursuit.

Anna Neshyba, individual LARC proposal

“That Bites: Sexual Morality and the Vampire Motif in Pop Culture, Literature, and Film”

From Beowulf's dragon to Voldemort's dementors, sinister beasts have permeated creative mediums of all genres. Early Christianity gave evil an especially poignant outlet in the form of demons, devils and sins and consequently, the light-versus-dark duality started appearing in Medieval artwork. People still crave this harsh dichotomy that developed within the Christian world, and recently a new creature of darkness has claimed increasing attention: the vampire. The research I propose will explore this main question: how has vampirism in literature and film affected youth culture and more specifically, how has it been used to speak on evil, particularly on sexual morality and sin, in the first three novels of Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*?

Roz Kaveney, in her article “Dark Fantasy and Paranormal Romance,” discusses how the genre of Paranormal Romance is used as a platform for authors to express their views on sexual morality (Kaveney 220). However, I would argue that this idea could be extended to a larger scope of genres concerning vampires. This project will explore the presence of vampires in pop culture, mainly in youth fiction and cinematic arts, focusing on *The Vampire Chronicles*. Subsequently, it will look at how these modern developments reflect Christian iconography (devils, sins, etc...), and how they deviate. What is the 'new' evil? If our expectation of evil changes, will our idea of good also change? When do artists shun the established light-versus-dark duality, and what do they accomplish in doing so?

New waves of expression capture audiences everyday; some we can support, and some we can hardly comprehend, like the recent attacks in Paris. It is therefore becoming increasingly important that we understand what kinds of evils we absorb, and what those representations say about primary world issues. By examining sexual morality in pop culture, we begin to gauge what messages are being actively and widely spread through our culture; and furthermore, we can observe which messages are lacking representation. With this in mind, and considering the fact that billions of vampire novels dealing with sexual issues have been sold in the last 20 years alone, analyzing vampires and their role in the world-wide discussion may ultimately aid our understanding of the current state of sexual morality. Moreover, Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles* is both a staple of the genre and an exceptionally popular series, providing an informative narrative in this research.

As an Art History major studying the influence of current and historical art, I am particularly interested in the combination of arts and advocacy. Artists have for centuries used the light-vs-dark, good-vs-evil dichotomy to frame their personal and culture views on the issues important in their lifetime. Sexual morality is currently one of these issues, from slut shaming culture to the recent supreme court decision on marriage rights. By studying modern representations of evil, and comparing them to Medieval representations, I will educate myself on how art, in the past and the present, is used to inflict material affects on the real world.

George Zenker, individual LARC proposal

“Sinful Satire: Race, Religion, and Politics in the Creation of Evil”



This *New Yorker* cover, “The Politics of Fear,” speaks to mainstream United States (US) morals. The magazine published this image during the 2008 presidential campaign. Liberal pundits decried this depiction of the Obamas as racist. However, the magazine defended itself by stating that the cover exposes the absurdity of those who use popular rhetoric to vilify the Obamas. Most of those who responded to this cover, whether with antagonism or support, agreed that the intent of the illustration is to disturb the viewer with a juxtaposition of the Obama caricatures and the Oval Office. If the artist is satirizing negative conceptions of the Obamas, why did he choose these caricatures? Every nuance of the Obamas’ characterization is rooted in a transnational reality of racial, religious, and political tension. The illustrator ties Michelle Obama to international Black Nationalism and Power movements. The caricature of Barack Obama speaks to stereotypes of Muslims and decolonization in the Islamic world.

This image is a starting place for research about blackness and Islam in mainstream US discourse. What can cultural studies reveal about the goal of those who represent Black Power and Muslims as evil in the media? Stuart Hall argues that representation is an active process in which journalists and politicians create images that serve cultural functions. This central research question will help me identify the role that "evil" plays in a cultural context to set morals for a dominant group.

In addition to cultural studies monographs, I’ll use sources from academics such as Sohail Daulatzai and Richard M. Merelman who focus on popular representations of Islam and blackness in the West. I’ll read scholar Edward Said for his work on Western conceptions of Middle Eastern identity. For primary sources, I’ll analyze texts within this issue of *The New Yorker* and pieces that responded to the image. Furthermore, I’ll compare this illustration with other cartoons and writings that negatively depicted blackness and Islam during the 2008 presidential campaign. To understand the historical context of this image, I’ll analyze speeches

and writings of Black Nationalists and Muslim activists because these people endeavored to present blackness and Islam as good rather than evil.

This research contributes to the collective's goal of understanding how conceptions of evil function in religious and national realms. The professors' expertise would nuance my project as my transnational, cultural analysis of race, religion, and politics would add important variety to the collaborative.

From courses such as Slave Narratives, Peoples and Cultures of Africa, The Transatlantic Slave Trade, and Transnational History, I developed skills in transnational analysis, ethnic studies, and cultural history. In the summer of 2015 I received a Carson Grant to study and write about racial violence and social memory in the US. These experiences prepare me to contribute to this collective. The skills that I'll gain from this research will help my goal to become a professor who examines cultural connections between Africa and the Americas.