

MEDIA EDUCATION FOUNDATION STUDY GUIDE

Beyond Good & Evil Children, Media & Violent Times

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NOTE TO EDUCATORS

This study guide is designed to help you and your students engage and manage the information presented in this video. Given that it can be difficult to teach visual content – and difficult for students to recall detailed information from videos after viewing them – the intention here is to give you a tool to help your students slow down and deepen their thinking about the specific issues this video addresses. With this in mind, we've structured the guide to help you stay close to the video's main line of argument as it unfolds.

Key Points provide a concise and comprehensive summary of the video. They are designed to make it easier for you and your students to recall the details of the video during class discussions, and as a reference point for students as they work on assignments.

Questions for Discussion & Writing encourage students to reflect critically on the video during class discussions, and also serve to guide their written reactions before and after these discussions. These questions can therefore be used in different ways: as guideposts for class discussion, as a framework for smaller group discussion and presentations, or as self-standing, in-class writing assignments (i.e. as prompts for “free-writing” or in-class reaction papers in which students are asked to write spontaneously and informally while the video is fresh in their mind).

Assignments encourage students to engage the video in more depth – by conducting research, working on individual and group projects, putting together presentations, and composing formal essays. These assignments are designed to challenge students to show command of the material presented in the video, to think critically and independently about this material from a number of different perspectives, and to develop and defend their own point of view on the issues at stake.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Stories about good and evil have resonated throughout the long history of religion, literature, art, and politics, and they continue to shape how we see and understand ourselves as a culture today. *Beyond Good & Evil* focuses on how one particularly intense, violent, and polarizing version of this narrative took hold and circulated in the wake of 9/11, and traces how it worked its way into the imaginative lives of children through video games, cartoons, and movies.

PRE-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. What are some popular examples of stories in which good triumphs over evil? Explain what happens in the stories. Are these stories real, fictional, or both?
2. In entertainment media, how is the struggle between good and evil frequently resolved? Give some examples.
3. What is the potential negative impact of media violence on children?
4. What are your thoughts about the depictions of U.S. military violence in both the news and entertainment? Do you believe violence should ever be glorified as heroic and patriotic? Why or why not?
5. How might black-and-white, good-and-evil rhetoric in both the news and entertainment influence children's attitudes toward war? Explain.

KEY POINTS

- Americans tend to believe that global politics are too complicated for them to understand, and frequently accept over-simplified good-and-evil rhetoric from political officials and media commentators.
- During the presidency of George W. Bush, the rhetoric of good and evil was used to pump up American patriotism and support for the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan.
- The problem with patriotism is that it can pressure people to feel like they have to stand behind what their country or government does no matter what.
- In the 1980s, the CIA helped train, fund, and support Islamic fundamentalist terrorist groups in Afghanistan. The goal of the U.S. was to undermine the Soviet Union.
- Also in the 1980s, the U.S. supplied weapons to the government of Saddam Hussein during Iraq's war against Iran.
- In 1988, Iraq used chemical weapons against its own citizens in Halabja.
- Despite these complicating realities, both the news and entertainment media play a crucial role in perpetuating the simplistic logic of good and evil.
- Children's programming encourages children to think there is an evil "other" in the world that must be exterminated.
- Oftentimes, the faces of evil characters are covered, and their voices are distorted or have foreign accents. Conversely, the image of the good guy is almost always white and male.

- Children not only learn through television shows and movies that violence is the way people solve their problems, but also through video games and toys. In addition, war is often a part of children's play.
- After September 11, there were meetings between the executive branch and the entertainment industry about how Hollywood could promote the war on terror.
- Some video games rewrite history by adding news footage and history lessons to their gameplay. Children are taught that the U.S. military uses violence solely as peacekeepers. Killing innocent civilians has become normalized and part of the entertainment.
- The army designs free online video games as a recruiting tool to target teens.
- Children are socialized to think of themselves as good. and to view those they're in conflict with as evil and less than human.
- There are many sanctions in our society and culture against killing. When we go to war, the government must convince the population to lift those sanctions by constructing the enemy as inherently evil.
- Children's perceptions of conflict and war are also shaped by how the news media frame the suffering of our own side in human terms, but not the enemy's.
- Civilian casualties are reported in the international press but rarely in the U.S. press.
- Children suffer substantially from the impacts of war by witnessing deaths, by losing loved ones, and by the psychological effects of witnessing serious violence.
- Americans do not tend to think about the effects of war on the populations we invade.
- In war, far more children than soldiers die and are wounded.
- Our children will inherit the world we create, and they will learn from the interpretive models we provide them with.

POST-VIEWING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION & WRITING

1. Why do you think that so many Americans believe that global politics and foreign policy are too complicated for them to understand? According to the film, how does this factor into the power elite's use of good-and-evil rhetoric?
2. How did President George W. Bush and his administration use the rhetoric of good and evil to promote both nationalism and the war on terror?
3. What are the pros and cons of a nationalistic citizenry?
4. How has the American government supported the very same extremist groups they now battle in the war on terror? How is this relevant to the film's overall analysis of the effects of good-and-evil rhetoric on kids?
5. How do both the news and entertainment media perpetuate the simplistic logic of good and evil?

6. According to the video, what values and messages are sent to children through children's programming? How does the media frame how children think about conflict and war?
7. Do you believe the army should target teens for recruitment through free online video games? Why or why not?
8. Why do you think the U.S. press focuses far less on civilian casualties than the international press does? What are some of the potential effects of this difference on public perceptions of war?
9. What are some of the main ways children suffer from the impact of war?
10. Why do you think Americans tend to think so little about the effects of war on the populations we invade? How does this make you feel?

ASSIGNMENTS

1. The belief that "good triumphs over evil" has resonated deeply throughout religious, cultural, and political history. Write a research paper about an example of this kind of good-versus-evil narrative from before 2001. You may choose any story from anytime in history from anywhere in the world. Simply be sure to explain who the major characters are, and how this central theme plays out narratively.
2. Research American foreign policy in the 1980s. Write a paper about America's involvement with the countries and extremist groups now targeted by the U.S. in the war on terror. Compare and contrast what you find with the information presented in the film.
3. Over the course of one week, watch television shows and movies aimed at young children. Write up lists of the messages, values, and attitudes you think each program endorses. Pay specific attention to the portrayal of heroes and villains. And try to make connections between your own findings and the analysis provided in the film.
4. Research the correlation between toy weapons and actual weapons throughout American history. How is playing with a toy gun in the 1950s similar to the high-tech video game play of today? How is it different? What other forms of children's play – today and in the past – are similar to forms of war? And what effects do you think these styles of play might have on kids? Do you think these effects have changed over time?
5. Write a research paper about the meetings between the government and Hollywood after 9/11. Who attended these meetings? What were they about? What movies did these meetings influence? Be sure to watch at least one of these movies, and, in your paper, relate the content of the movie(s) to the main points of *Beyond Good and Evil*.
6. Play a war video game. If you can't get your hands on a controller, watch a friend play or look up videos on the Internet. What is the game like? How does it portray heroes and villains? What connections can you draw between this game and the media examples discussed in the film? Be prepared to share your experience with the class.

7. In 1930s Germany, Nazi youth were raised on war games. Research these games, and compare them to the war games currently played by American kids. According to historians, what sort of effect did war games have on young Germans? Do you see any parallels with the influence of war games on kids today? What are your thoughts on this?
8. Throughout American history, the government has found new ways to recruit its citizens to join the military. Research current military recruitment tactics, including video games, and compare and contrast these tactics with those employed in the past, going all the way back to the Revolutionary War. As you present your findings, be sure to draw connections with the major points made in *Beyond Good & Evil*.
9. Over the course of one week, watch a corporate-owned network news broadcast. Document the foreign policy issues reported. What images were used to support the story? Who were the sponsors of the particular news show you were watching? What did you learn about the policy? How many points of view were presented in the stories? Which points of view, or voices, were not reported? Did you agree or disagree with the report? Then research how the same foreign policy issues were reported by an independent or international media source, and write about the similarities and differences – and why you think their coverage was different. Can you relate your findings to any of the major points made in *Beyond Good & Evil*?
10. In 2006, Clint Eastwood directed two war movies, both centered on World War II's Battle for Iwo Jima – *Flags of Our Fathers* from the American viewpoint, and *Letters From Iwo Jima* from the Japanese viewpoint. Watch these films, write a paper on their use of historical perspective, and compare them to the analysis of good and evil provided in *Beyond Good and Evil*.