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A Structure of Antipathy: Constructing the Villain in Narrative Film

Introduction

Mainstream films brim with villains—major antipathetic characters like Anton Chigurh (*No Country for Old Men*, 2007), Jafar (*Aladdin*, 1992), and Voldemort (*Harry Potter*, 2001-2011)—that provoke their audiences’ moral condemnation. What are the psychological underpinnings of this response, and by what means do the films provoke it?

Cognitive film theory has not yet provided adequate answers to these questions. As Carl Plantinga has noted in *Moving Viewers* (2009), “Much more attention is generally paid to empathy and sympathy than to antipathy, indifference, and mixed feelings, as though viewers were prone to compassion and not to disdain and dislike” (101). Owing to important contributions of film theorists such as Plantinga, Noël Carroll (2010), Torben Grodal (2009), and perhaps most prominently Murray Smith’s work on the “structure of sympathy” (1995), we have a good sense of what goes into creating a sympathetic film hero. We lack a corresponding account of the villain. In the place of the construction of sympathy, we need to understand more fully the construction of antipathy; in the place of allegiance, animosity. I hope to help bridge this theoretical gap with the present article, which integrates cognitive film theory with moral psychology—a field that has traditionally focused much more on what we find immoral than on what we find praiseworthy. The article builds a “structure of antipathy,” an analytical framework that analyzes filmic villainy into guilty intentionality, consequential action, and causal responsibility. Villains, I will argue, intend and desire bad outcomes (intentionality), bring about bad outcomes (consequential action), and are causally responsible for bringing about those outcomes (causal responsibility).

Because the villains of fiction are defined, at least in part, by their perceived immorality, it seems sensible to approach them with the branch of psychology that studies what we perceive to be immoral. A moral psychological perspective on villainy promises to broaden the scope of cognitive film theory

by revealing how villains exploit the basic categories and proclivities of the human moral imagination.

Moral Psychology and the Structures of Antipathy

I do not claim to be the first to identify the rather plain connection between the sympathetic and antipathetic structures of film and moral psychology. However, film theorists who have availed themselves of moral psychological theory and empirical findings have generally done so only in limited ways, especially as concerns the antipathetic structures of film. Thus, we have seen several theorists engage with the moral psychology of disgust without assimilating more fundamental and less contentious findings (see Grodal 2009, chapter 4 for an exception). This is true, for instance, of Plantinga's *Moving Viewers*. A focused but narrow engagement with the moral psychology of disgust also characterizes work by Carroll (2010), Margrethe Vaage (2015), and Dan Flory (2016), among others.

To be fair, disgust has come to the fore of moral psychology in the last couple of decades, but that is at least partly for reasons incidental to the present inquiry and to moral psychology as such (Strohming 2014). One reason is simply that disgust is easy to study. It is a basic emotion that can be reliably elicited in controlled experiments. Also, research on so-called moral disgust gives theorists a way of evaluating competing descriptive moral frameworks that assume either moral pluralism, as in Jonathan Haidt and colleagues' Moral Foundations Theory (MFT), or moral monism, as in Kurt Gray and colleagues' Theory of Dyadic Morality (TDM). (MFT recognizes several different domains, or foundations, of moral judgment, including a "purity" foundation whose violation is supposed to provoke feelings of moral disgust (Haidt and Graham, 2007; Haidt, 2012). TDM recognizes only harm-based violations as being of moral psychological status (Schein and Gray 2018).) Disgust has therefore come to be regarded as *conceptually* central to a delineation of the domain of moral

psychology. It is something of a theoretical linchpin. But contrary to what one might expect from film theorists' focus on disgust, the role of disgust in moral judgment is still unclear. Studies more statistically powerful and theoretically circumspect than the ones that made headlines for moral disgust in the 1990s and 2000s have recently called into question whether disgust is causally efficacious, over and above coinciding harm, in eliciting disapproval (Gray and Keeney 2015; Kayyal et al. 2015; Landy and Piazza 2017). The central role of harm, by contrast, is uncontroversial.

What attributions *are* at the core of negative moral judgment? In general, the literature supports the roles of guilty intentionality, consequential (harmful) action, and causal responsibility (e.g., Bartels et al. 2015; Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe 2014; Schein and Gray 2018). *Intentionality* is the *sine qua non* of moral judgment. We judge offenders much more harshly when they appear to will their offending actions than when they perform those same actions by mistake and without foresight. The ultimate, evolutionary reason why intentionality is weighted so heavily in moral judgment is probably that intentional action can be used as a predictive index for the future behavior of the offending agent: offenders who wanted to offend can be expected to do so again; offenders who did not, cannot (Barrett et al. 2016). We also judge more harshly offending actions that bring about more offensive *consequences*, a connection that holds even if two similar and similarly motivated actions produce unequal harm by mere accident (Cushman 2008; Mazzocco, Alicke, and Davis 2004; Walster 1966). This phenomenon may be normatively problematic—is there a principled reason to think that a failed intention to do harm is not as blameworthy as a realized intention to do harm?—but it is a robust descriptive finding. Finally, we assign increased blame to actions that trace a direct causal pathway from a malicious will to offensive consequence and that therefore manifest *causal responsibility* (Alicke and Davis 1990, Pizarro, Uhlmann, and Bloom 2003, Cushman and Young 2011). The more unambiguously, immediately, and personally involved the agent is in producing suffering, the more severe our judgment. Thus, we ascribe the most blame when causal responsibility

for some offense lands squarely on an offender: when the crime is corporeal and personal, such as with rape, and when there is no way to excuse what the offender did by reference to a mental disorder, a dysfunctional childhood, or some other factor that ostensibly displaces causal responsibility to circumstances beyond the offender's control.

It is important to note that the framework I lay out is compatible with the recognition of a role for moral disgust and other non-harm-based construals of immoral agency. The framework assumes only an *aspectual specification* of human moral judgment: that the intentionality, consequences, and causal responsibility of an immoral act are the aspects of that act that attract moral judgment. It does not assume a *content specification*, that is, a specification of the kinds of immoral act that would undergo such aspectual processing. Thus, morally disgusting acts, in Haidt and colleagues' sense, could well be analyzed in terms of guilty intentionality, consequential action, and causal responsibility. The framework does not force the adoption of either a monist or pluralist account of human moral judgment. Content-neutrality allows the framework to be sensitive to shifts in our culturally and historically variable moral landscape. It also allows the framework to be integrated with work in cognitive film theory that assumes a particular content specification of moral psychology, such as in Vaage's (2015) argument that rape elicits moral disgust and thereby places its perpetrator beyond the moral pale. I do not aim to displace such existing scholarship—indeed, the analyses to follow will draw on several of the cognitive film theorists already mentioned—but to locate it within a broader explanatory matrix.

A “structure of antipathy” built on the dimensions of guilty intentionality, consequential action, and causal responsibility finds convergent support in different domains of mainstream moral theory and discourse. As already observed, it tracks the most robust findings in moral psychology. The categories also correspond to central notions in legal theory. Starting with intentionality, the court must normally establish the *mens rea* (the intention to commit a crime) of an offender if it is to justify

punishment. Uncontroversially, the legal system also considers the measure of suffering, the harmful consequences, inflicted on victims. Murder is a very serious offense indeed, but mass murder is worse. Moreover, scholars and practitioners distinguish between attempted and actual crimes, a distinction that captures an ethic of consequence. As for causal responsibility, the law punishes “personal” crimes—crimes characterized by direct physical causation, such as murder and rape—more severely than “impersonal” crimes, such as fraudulent conversion, even though the latter category may affect a far greater number of people than the former. In addition, legal theory stresses personal responsibility with the concept of *mitigating circumstances*, that is, instances in which blame and punishment are reduced because the causal responsibility for the crime diffuses between the offender and external influences on the offender, such as the negative incentive of a threat. Finally, the same three categories of intentionality, consequential action, and causal responsibility are central to moral philosophy. The first two, intentionality and consequential action, are inscribed in the two dominant normative ethical theories of deontology and consequentialism. The third category, causal responsibility, captures the deontic distinction of personal/impersonal harms and the Doctrine of Doing and Allowing (doing a bad thing versus allowing a bad thing to happen).

As a final preliminary point, the framework makes the critical assumption that our moral judgments of fictional agents are fixed by the same intentional and incidental conditions as our moral judgments of real agents, *mutatis mutandis*. Are they?

There is little doubt that we tend to praise and denounce those kinds of behavior in narrative film and other fictions that we praise and denounce in real life. Fictions, after all, work to revise and refine our moral conceptual stock and calibrate our moral emotions (Carroll 2002, 2016). They could not do so if there were no clear moral correspondence and if both did not run, fundamentally, on our shared intuitive psychology (Bordwell 2008). Moreover, the assumption of basic correspondence between non-mediated and mediated moral cognition receives support from a broader research

literature stretching back to Heider and Simmel's classic studies on mind attribution (1944), through work on the "media equation" (Reeves and Nass 1996), which posits a general tendency to approach media through a social lens, and to modern moral psychology, which relies heavily on fictional scenarios to probe people's moral intuitions (e.g. Gray and Graham 2018). Still, the "unasserted" or "believed-not-to-be-real" status of fictional events may allow for a distanced mode of engagement whereby audiences can minimize or overlook the immorality of certain agents or actions. Some theorists see this as at least a partial explanation for why we tend to enjoy morally ambiguous protagonists, or antiheroes, despite their moral deficits (e.g., Smith 1999; Vaage 2014, 2016). This is one possible exception to the correspondence account. Yet the exception does not change the big picture, which appears to be one of systematic parity.

A Structure of Antipathy

In this section I develop the three levels of the outlined analytical framework: guilty intentionality, consequential action, and causal responsibility. I discuss what is covered at each level and give examples of the kinds of analysis supported by the framework. While each subsection emphasizes just one of the three levels of analysis, the examples may evoke the two additional levels because, in most actual scenarios of filmic immorality, they are often interconnected. For example, when Norman Bates stabs Marion Crane in *Psycho* (1960), the killer's slow, deliberate approach arguably stresses his coldblooded intentionality. The following zoom-out shot from Marion's dead yet disturbingly starey eye, on the other hand, stresses the consequences of the act.

Of course, there are far too many ways in which films can provoke audience antipathy to treat, let alone exhaust, them all here. I settle instead for the modest goal of showing that the framework can meaningfully subsume and productively systematize a variety of strategies for constructing villainy in narrative film and related audiovisual media.

Intentionality

I'll get you, my pretty—and your little dog, too!

- The Wicked Witch of the West (*The Wizard of Oz*, 1939)

Technically, having an *intention* means aiming to do something. The folk concept of *intentionality*, however, is rather more complex. Bartram Malle and Joshua Knobe (1997) have empirically documented that, according to “the folk concept of intentionality, performing an action intentionally requires the presence of five components: a desire for an outcome; beliefs about an action that leads to that outcome; an intention to perform the action; skill to perform the action; and awareness of fulfilling the intention while performing the action” (111). An action is perceived to be maximally *intentional*, and hence to be a maximally fitting target of moral judgment, if it is controllable, intended, desired, and foreseen. As these are ultimately facts about the subjectivity of the offending agent, they are not established by direct observation. They are instead posited by inference to the best explanation. The inference can be forward-looking, backward-looking, or concurrent; it can indicate guilty intentionality before, after, or concurrently with the offense.

Unsurprisingly, narrative films can build antipathy toward a central character by focalizing the character’s guilty intentionality. Consider the case of Jafar, the villain of Disney’s animated film *Aladdin* (1992). Jafar’s villainy is primarily constructed through forward-looking cues to his maliciousness. About halfway through the film, we see Jafar and his anthropomorphized parrot, Iago, plan to get Jafar married to the good-natured sultan’s daughter, Jasmin, to secure the throne for Jafar. Once in power, Jafar would have both the sultan and Jasmin killed, presumably so that his immoral power grab could not be exposed and rectified after the fact. At this point in the film, we are already

sure that Jafar wants power more than anything, but here, in addition, we learn of the suffering he is prepared to inflict in pursuit of that selfish goal.

In spelling out his evil plan, Jafar is also spelling out his guilty intentionality. First, a plan, by definition, describes an intention. Second, Jafar's glee when the plan comes together, and his successive evil laughter, evidences his antisocial will. There is no doubt that he desires the outcome. Finally, the fact that Jafar declaims his plan in a causal, chronological sequence establishes calculated foresight. All of this works to maximize the viewer's imputation of immoral intentionality to the character and thereby to position him unmistakably as the villain. It also blocks any competing inference about Jafar's destructive agency: the viewer is assured that no grave misunderstanding or misguided belief system can explain it. Jafar is being bad because he *is* bad.

The case of Jafar also neatly exemplifies the *concurrent* construction of guilty intentionality. Especially salient here, again, is his evil laughter. Late in the film, Jafar, now a powerful wizard, forces the sultan and princess to prostrate themselves before him. Enraged by the display, Aladdin charges toward Jafar, but the powerful villain uses magic to dispense with him, sending him "to the end of the earth" to freeze to death. This action alone is strongly suggestive of immoral intentionality: Jafar quite clearly hurts Aladdin intentionally. But the scene goes further in stressing Jafar's desire and its satisfaction as an aspect of his guilty intentionality. After having banished Aladdin, Jafar, ecstatic with the suffering of the protagonist, cracks a harrowing, protracted guffaw. The scene highlights Jafar's antisocial desire by suggesting that he derives perverse pleasure from the consummation of his evil plan. It stresses, in philosopher John Searle's (1980) apposite terminology, the *intention-in-action*—the conscious and desire-driven "acting out" of Jafar's intention—and hence powerfully drives home our judgment that Jafar is essentially evil and beyond redemption (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2018).

Figure 1. (Aladdin, Buena Vista Pictures, 1992). Jafar bursts into a rapt guffaw. The display confirms the villain's antisocial desire, a component of guilty intentionality.

In contrast to the forward-looking and concurrent construction of malicious intentionality, *Aladdin* features no examples of backward-looking inferential probes, that is, of instances in which a cue to the villain's guilty intentionality provokes our moral judgment of the villain at some point after an offense has taken place. This omission is readily explicable on the present account. Disney typically employs a transparently forward-looking moral structure in their animated films. The films' mostly young audience is supposed to know who is good and who is bad, whom to root for and whom to condemn. One way to ensure that they know these things is to frontload, or prefocus (Carroll 1999), strong cues to the guilty intentionality of the villain. In *Aladdin*, this is done via the villain's admission to his own dastardly intentionality when he spells out his evil plan. In telling contrast, note the backward-looking construction of the malicious intentionality of the villain in *Zootopia* (2016), Bellwether. The main theme of *Zootopia* is the overcoming of prejudice, and that theme is reinforced by the fact that the diminutive and soft-spoken Bellwether, who at first appears to be a good character, turns out to be the film's true villain. Only at the end of the film does the viewer discover Bellwether's nasty plan because she reveals it to the two protagonists when she feels assured of her triumph. The point of this bait-and-switch, of course, is that appearances can be deceiving and that equating true villainy with a threatening appearance is itself a villainous thing to do. *Zootopia* thus subverts Disney's conventional forward-looking construction of villainy to achieve narrative-thematic consonance: we are supposed to wonder about whose villainous agency is at work in the film, and to recognize that the usual suspects are not, as it were, guilty by intuition.

Disney's villains are often psychologically unrealistic caricatures of evil. As Baumeister (1997: 64) points out, however, they are no isolated case. The villains of popular culture are often singularly bad characters made to set off our moral machinery. Thus, while we would seem to approach these

characters with the same moral intuitions that prefigure our judgments of real-life transgressors, filmic inputs to that machinery may be exaggerated to build dramatic tension and polarize the narrative's agonistic structure: Jafar jubilantly declaims his evil plan, wallows in the suffering he causes, and opposes Aladdin's prosocial agency at every narrative turn. Aladdin, by contrast, is unmistakably good, even if he evidences moral confusion.

Of course, a film need not signpost its moral landscape quite so transparently. The construction of the complexly antisocial agency of Anton Chigurh in the Coen brothers' *No Country for Old Men* (2007), for example, is far more subtle.

Clearly, Chigurh is a nasty character. He is a hitman who kills innocent people. Yet he is also an intriguingly principled villain. Chigurh seems almost to define himself opposite the denizens of Texas with whom he interacts in the film. His foreign appearance, unplaceable accent and bizarre conduct all clash with their social conformity. From Chigurh's cold and terse pronouncements on the social world he inhabits, we learn that he experiences even the people he interacts with in entirely asocial terms, as matter in motion. He never appeals to such intentional forces as motives, wishes, and desires. In an interesting sequence, Chigurh needs treatment for a crippling gunshot wound, but he lacks the medical remedies to treat himself. To acquire them, Chigurh blows up a car in front of a pharmacy and grabs the remedies while everyone is distracted. Next come two full minutes of Chigurh skillfully treating his wound. The point of the sequence appears to be to suggest that Chigurh is completely self-sufficient. Unlike the film's protagonists, the killer does not need or want help from other people. The entire, multilayered presentation of Chigurh signals in the character a conscious rejection of human sociality and a desire to stamp it out in whichever form it takes (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2017). Chigurh raises the instrumental antisocial intentionality of the typical villain to a principled, second-order intentionality. He comes to represent antisociality as an ideal precisely because he holds it as one.

Guilty intentionality is at the core of villainy. It is, in fact, a necessary condition of villainy. We see this if we compare the narrative functions of antagonists such as Godzilla or the Frankenstein's monster of the 1931 Universal Pictures classic *Frankenstein* (Whale 1931) with the narrative functions of obviously villainous characters like Jafar or Chigurh. We may not be comfortable designating the former two as villains even though Godzilla and the monster subvert the part of the villain-antagonist in forming an agency that runs counter to the agency of the protagonist(s). (I assume here a standard distinction between the villain as a major immoral character on the one hand, and an antagonist as a character that simply opposes the agency of a sympathetic protagonist on the other hand (Abrams and Harpham 2012: 294).) This, I would argue, is because neither Godzilla nor Frankenstein's monster is driven by guilty intentionality. They do not have the capacity to pass judgment on their own agency and to adjust their agency in accordance with moral principles and beliefs. We might say, to distinguish the psychological imprint of these characters, that the audience experiences amoral *opposition* toward Godzilla (we oppose the creature's destructive agency but do not ascribe blame), but moral *antipathy* toward Jafar (we oppose Jafar's destructive agency and do ascribe blame). A character can be an antagonist without possessing guilty intentionality, but the concept of a villain implies the capacity to be immoral. That capacity, in turn, presupposes intentionality.

If guilty intentionality is indeed a necessary condition of villainy, it should not be possible to remove the *mens rea* of some particular villain without also ousting the character from the category. This experiment was performed quite literally in the popular TV series *Game of Thrones* (2011-). In the show's fourth season, the sadistic villain Gregor Clegane, also known as The Mountain due to his imposing stature, was poisoned fatally in a duel. He escaped death only by becoming the subject of a dangerous experiment. At the close of the series' seventh season, when this article was written, the audience of *Game of Thrones* does not yet know the details of the procedure. What seems clear,

however, is that the experiment transformed Clegane into a mindless abomination, one whose sole reason for action is the commanding voice of his mistress, Cersei Lannister, whom he reflexively obeys. The impression is accentuated by Clegane's rotting flesh and dead eyes, as well as by the fact that he no longer appears capable of speech. The giant is now something decidedly less than human. Precisely because Clegane has lost the capacity for intentionality, it seems wrong to continue to identify him as a villain. Clegane has been reduced to a blunt instrument for Cersei to wield against her enemies. Her villainous intentionality has overwritten his, and hence the blame for his actions accrues to her.

The structure of intentionality meaningfully systematizes diverse observations about villains in narrative film. For example, and as noted, the evil villain's conventional declamation of his or her evil plan represents an incriminating readout of the character's evil within, and the villain's evil laughter functions to amplify a particular aspect of the villain's guilty intentionality: antisocial desire. This functional account helps explain such related observations as the prevalence of evil laughter in children's entertainment. Children do not possess the sociomoral sophistication of adults, and they may need stronger cues—communicative overdetermination—to successfully identify and pass judgment on antisocial characters. Villainous laughter powerfully disambiguates the intentional causation of villains' destructive agency by showing that the villain takes pleasure in others' misfortune (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2018). Audience antipathy builds in response to such intentionalistic cues because it is in the human psychological constitution to detect and pass moral judgment on guilty intentionality.

Consequential Action

So much death.

- Théoden (*The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, 2002)

The sense in which I shall discuss the notion of antipathetic consequential action does not concern the question of whether something bad has happened at all or whether that bad outcome can be linked to a responsible agent. These appraisals typically precondition moral judgment without determining its severity (Malle, Guglielmo, and Monroe 2014). Instead, the discussion concerns how the *measure and saliency* of the negative consequences of immoral action relate to our moral judgment of those actions and of the agents performing them.

As a rule, and even when keeping intentionality constant, actions that result in more negative consequences are judged more harshly. Powerfully modulating this relationship, however, are factors pertaining to the emotional impact, or saliency, of those negative consequences. The human capacity to experience empathic concern and empathic distress means that we resonate much more to the suffering of some sentient creatures than that of others (Amit and Greene 2012; Batson 2011). This saliency can be achieved in several different ways. Situational factors, such as physical proximity and prior interactions with some agent, tend to promote empathic concern for that agent. Target-centered factors with the same effect include the perceived similarity of the agent to the judge as well as the perceived physical and emotional vulnerability of the agent. Thus, tautologically, suffering matters to us only if we care about it. Character-driven “sympathetic” films aspire to make us care, at least in response to the injury of relatable, protagonistic characters (Plantinga 2009, chapter 3). The flipside of this observation, of course, is that films may withhold narrative access to the suffering caused by an immoral character and thus temper the viewer’s indignation toward that character.

Narrative films frequently display the negative consequences of villainous agency. In the very first scene of *Halloween* (1978), for example, we see Michael Myers stab his older sister repeatedly before she collapses in a pool of her own blood. Viewers may come to feel contempt and fear for Myers because they experience, and do not just hear about or infer, the suffering and death of his

victims, including his sister. Still, the film does not exactly wallow in the suffering of Myers' victims, perhaps because the horror film aims to instill fear and anxious tension more so than moral denunciation of its killer antagonist. By contrast, *12 Years a Slave* (2013), a period drama with an unequivocal moral message, continually guides the viewer's moral imagination in favor of the tormented African-American slaves and against their masters. Grueling close-ups and impassioned dialogue depict the physical and psychological consequences of total subordination.

Consider again the impressive villainy of Anton Chigurh. Chigurh's murderous rampage certainly registers at a visceral level, but the film does much to encourage a more reflective appreciation of the character's enormity and the terrible impact he has on those unfortunate enough to cross his path. In a memorable scene, he murders a folksy farmer who tries to help him and takes off in the man's car. The farmer evokes the tight-knit, trusting community he comes from, a community that is being unraveled by ruthless exploiters such as Chigurh. The scene gives visceral impact to the film's thoroughgoing theme of the erosion of social trust. Later in the film, a wounded Chigurh causes two young boys, who also come to his aid, to criminalize themselves by insisting that they take a bribe to keep silent about the encounter. He has corrupted them, as we infer from seeing the boys fight about who gets the bribe. As I suggested in the previous section, Chigurh pursues antisociality as an ultimate, and not merely instrumental, end. The suffering and corruption he leaves in his wake—the "dismal tide" in the sorrowful evocation of one afflicted character—impresses itself powerfully upon the protagonist of *No Country*, Sheriff Ed Tom Bell. Over the course of the film, Bell despairs of his traditional community, which is falling apart before his eyes. Finally, after having failed to save at least three people personally known to him as well as countless others not known to him, the sheriff quits his job, thereby symbolically retiring the old moral order. His despondence is markedly synecdochal. Rather than presenting its audience with the suffering of that whole community, something that could only be done impersonally, *No Country* transduces the

community's collective suffering into the despair of its faltering protector and on-screen representative. This focusing maneuver makes the community's suffering imaginatively resonant: we are more distressed by the suffering of a single person with whom we empathize than with a group of people with whom we do not empathize. Chigurh's evil thus makes its deep impression on the viewer through the mediation of Bell's despondency (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen 2017).

The strategy of encoding the suffering of the many in the suffering of the one (or the few) is of course not the preserve of *No Country for Old Men*. Many films and other narrative media may highlight the suffering of individuals precisely to highlight the suffering of a group or category of people to which that individual belongs (e.g., Vaage 2017). In *No Country*, that group is a community in the film's fictional universe. In a realistic, contemporary social drama like Lukas Moodyson's *Lilja 4-ever* (2002), the protagonist's synecdochal suffering is more closely identified with a group of real people—young women victimized by human traffickers and shunned by an insensitive public.

Figure 2. (No Country for Old Men, Miramax Films, 2007). Sheriff Ed Tom Bell suffers for his community.

No Country and *Lilja 4-ever* effectively inspire our sympathy for their protagonists and consequently our antipathy for the films' antagonists. One technique by which they accomplish this feat is through the inclusion of what Plantinga has termed "scenes of empathy" (1999). Scenes of empathy are scenes that feature a close shot of a character caught in the throes of strong and typically negative emotion. Such scenes promote sympathetic character engagement through psychological mirroring effects and by encouraging viewers to think through the circumstances that provoked the character's emotional episode. In *No Country*, the audience witnesses Bell's agonized conversations with his family and colleagues. Lingering close-ups of the dispirited sheriff accentuate his helplessness in the face of Chigurh's simultaneously abstractly thematic and viscerally immediate threat. In *Lilja 4-ever*, scenes

of empathy enhance the protagonist's marked emotional lows: when her mother abandons her, when her Swedish pimp beats her, and when costumers use her for sex. The scenes strengthen our empathetic bonds to the films' protagonists, inviting us to appreciate their suffering and morally oppose its cause. Foregrounding the negative consequences of malicious agency, then, is a powerful way to build audience antipathy toward offending characters.

As with the hypothetical removal of the villain's guilty intentionality, we may consider the status of a villain who did and could not realize his or her villainous intentionality in the form of harmful consequences. I want to suggest that we see this configuration in "benign" villains whose sheer incompetence make them very different from the likes of Chigurh, or even of Jafar. *Benign villains*, in my use of the term, are villains who possess guilty intentionality but lack the competence to make anything of it. Some of the best examples of this type of villain comes from the *Looney Tunes* stock of cartoon characters. Elmer Fudd, for instance, is clearly animated by guilty intentionality—he wants to kill Bugs Bunny—but it does not seem right to say that he is truly a villain. The term "antagonist," which strictly does not specify a moral semantics, is a better fit. Like Godzilla, Fudd plays an antagonistic but not a villainous role; he opposes the agency of Bugs Bunny but does not audience antipathy as a result. What bars him from the category of villain, I would argue, is Fudd's complete inability to *satisfy* his guilty intentionality: there is simply no way that Fudd will be able to get the better of Bugs Bunny. He is too incompetent, a bumbling fool. We do not feel that his antics call for a serious response.

The same argument applies to Wile E. Coyote, also a *Looney Tunes* character. The Coyote, like Fudd, is completely powerless to realize his plans, which always involve the killing and eating of the Road Runner. He never even manages to scratch his prey. This is of course no accident: when Chuck Jones created both characters in 1948, he formulated a set of "rules of engagement" to be upheld in all cartoons to follow (Barrett 2015). The first two of these rules are revealing:

RULE 1. The Road Runner cannot harm the Coyote except by saying “Beep! Beep!” [commonly misheard—or misspoken?—as “Meep! Meep!”]

RULE 2. No outside force can harm the Coyote—only his own ineptitude or failure of various ACME products.

Notice that the rules do not specify that the coyote cannot harm the Road Runner. There is no danger of that happening, so such a rule is not needed. What Jones saw a need to specify was that *the Road Runner cannot harm the Coyote*. With a villain that incompetent—that far from being able to make good on his guilty intentionality—it is no wonder that the viewer may never consider the character’s moral standing.

I will end with an example from a live-action film. The risible housebreaker duo Harry and Marv from *Home Alone* (Columbus 1990), like Fudd and the Coyote, are so incompetent that audiences foresee their failure and therefore withhold any real moral censure. Genre expectations certainly play into this. Audiences know that they are watching a comedy, and this will do much to allay fears that the benign villains will effect anything but their own incarceration. The fact that the genre would specify as much, however, is not a competing explanation to the one proposed here. Incompetent, “benign” villains are part of what makes for the genre; they are integral to its semantic repository, employed to induce not fulmination, as with a villain proper, but farce. Precisely because the capacity to harm others is a hallmark of the villain, a villainous character that is obviously unable to do so becomes something different and comedic. We do not respond to such a character with such moral censure as would otherwise befit the character’s guilty intentionality.

Causal Responsibility

The coin don't have no say. It's just you.

- Carla Jean Moss to Anton Chigurh (*No Country for Old Men*, 2007)

Alfred Hitchcock famously said in an interview that the classic Hollywood villain is the character that “kicks the dog.” There are many ways to cause innocent canines to suffer, but one that is sure to rouse outrage is the direct and personal causation of physical abuse. Passive acts of omission, such as neglect, and causally opaque crimes that do not as clearly link up with the suffering of identifiable victims, such as fraudulent conversion, are not as strongly moralized. Another feature of Hitchcock’s hypothetical dog-kicker is implied: that the act was wholly under his control. The offender was not coerced, mind-controlled, or in some other way subject to a heteronomous power that forced his foot. Instead, the villain acted autonomously and from a place of self-determination. He is therefore fully responsible for his crime. We feel no compunction about condemning a crime and a villain like that.

This section addresses how films may construct causally autonomous villainy worthy of Hitchcock’s dog-kicker. By establishing a character as the *causal focus* of malicious action, narrative films can rouse or heighten the moral indignation of its audiences toward that character. I want to suggest that a character may constitute the causal focus of malicious action in two distinct ways. First, a villain constitutes the *dynamic causal focus* of an offense to the extent that the offense is presented as agent-centered, that is, as caused directly and physically by the agent. Second, a villain constitutes the *abstract causal focus* of an offense if the villain is at least not apparently subject to heteronomous influences that would explain the character’s offending and thus serve as an exculpatory factor.

I turn first to the notion of the villain as the *dynamic* causal focus of an offense. Films stress a villain’s blameworthiness dynamically when the character performs immoral acts in causally, visually, and/or aurally salient ways. To stay with the example of Chigurh from *No Country for Old*

Men, consider the early scene in which the hitman murders an unsuspecting police officer who has taken him in. Chigurh sneaks up on the man from behind. He throws the chain of his handcuffs over the officer's head before immediately and violently pulling back to strangle him. Chigurh then leaps back on the floor, taking the officer with him. As the two men struggle on the ground, the camera zooms in on Chigurh's face to show a grimace of intense physical exertion. His eyes are wide open and shot through with determination. His teeth are bared in a feral grin. Chigurh appears to be straining every muscle in his body. The viewer is meant to appreciate, and almost to feel, Chigurh's brute physical strength. A few seconds pass before the officer stops squirming, and Chigurh lets out an audible sigh of relief.

The scene positions Chigurh as what I term the dynamic causal focus of an immoral act, and it will serve to illustrate the concept's purport. Most importantly, the act is personal. Chigurh intervenes against the officer's agency in a direct and physical way. The agent-centered, personal causation of the act is stressed by the close-up of Chigurh's frenzied grimace, by his victim's desperate struggle, and by the sounds of the choking man's boots hopping and skirting across the floor. Our sense of the killer would have been different had he instead slipped some deadly toxin into the officer's coffee and stood by as the man would squirm and die in much the same way. We would have been less perturbed still had Chigurh called some *other* hitman to do the deed for him, even if Chigurh's intentionality and its outcome would have been relevantly similar. The "up-close," personal nature of physical assault makes a special antipathetic impression, over and above its motivating aim (Cushman, Young, and Hauser 2006; Greene et al. 2009). Why should this be so?

First, in the case of Chigurh killing the police offer, there is no question about where the causal responsibility for the crime lands, and only one causal link between the guilty intentionality of the offender and the suffering of the victim: the assault itself. The act is clearly and markedly an act of commission. Further, people judge offenders to be more responsible and blameworthy for their

actions if the actions are depicted concretely and vividly (Nichols and Knobe 2007). The explanation appears to be that vivid descriptions and imagery of offending actions provoke strong negative affect, which biases moral judgment. Finally, the personal causation of Chigurh's assault testifies to his utter derangement. Direct, physical assault indicates that the offender is capable of inflicting harm in any way imaginable: a man who would strangle someone to death would almost surely be capable of slipping a deadly toxin into someone's drink. Yet the converse does not follow. It is not obvious that someone who would slip a deadly toxin into someone's drink would also be physically and mentally capable of murder by strangulation. After watching Chigurh do just that, we know that he will stop at nothing to achieve his goals.

Figure 3. (No Country for Old Men, Miramax Films, 2007). Chigurh strangles the police officer. The physicality of the killer's assault is stressed both visually and aurally. The shot displays the full causal chain of the assault: (a) a powerful agent (b) physically harms (c) a suffering victim. There is no ambiguity and no vagueness.

Films may thus construct villainy by centering a character as the efficient cause of negative outcomes, that is, by showing how the character's actions directly, and with no or few intermediate causal links, produce harm. More abstractly, films may manipulate the extent to which the viewer considers an offender responsible and condemnable by highlighting, or failing to highlight, *influences on the offender him- or herself*. To the extent that films minimize such influences, I propose, they center the offending character as the *abstract* causal focus of an offense.

Psychologists and philosophers have long noted that our default psychological stance toward offenders is to consider them the autonomous authors of their own transgressions. Roy Baumeister influentially termed this moral stance, in its extreme expression, the Myth of Pure Evil (1997). Because we do not always appreciate the influences that caused some person to offend, whether such

influences had to do with genes, upbringing, or perhaps a rare medical condition, we normally ascribe blame directly to the agent as an autonomous “first cause”; in psychological jargon, we make a dispositional rather than a situational attribution. We therefore see the action as more blameworthy (Miller, Gordon, and Buddie 1999). But when we recognize the efficacy of extra-volitional influences in producing offending actions, we calm our ire. The logic of this sentiment has been most clearly described by the philosopher Thomas Nagel. As Nagel (1993) observes, when we view the agency of an individual as embedded within the total causal structure that formed the individual and framed his or her actions,

the area of genuine agency, and therefore of legitimate moral judgment, seems to shrink ... to an extensionless point. Everything seems to result from the combined influence of factors, antecedent and posterior to action, that are not within the agent’s control. Since he cannot be responsible for them, he cannot be responsible for their results. (66)

The same principle seems operative in our moral judgments of characters in narrative film. To the extent that films focalize the bad influence that made a bad character bad, we may temper our condemnation of the character because the character is not seen as being fully responsible for his or her immoral behavior. For example, the villain Darth Vader from the *Star Wars* franchise appeared to be simply and irreducibly evil in the first film of the original trilogy (1977-1983). Later installments, however, fleshed out the character’s backstory and positioned him as a tragic villain who embraced the “Dark Side” because of his horrifying past and the evil machinations of the Sith. By disclosing the character-external causes that converge in Vader’s immoral agency, *Star Wars* displaces some of the causal responsibility of Vader’s crimes to those external causes. We may raise this observation to the level of a rule: background information about offending characters may mitigate our blame by presenting competing judgmental attractors: who, or what, made them do it?

The case of Darth Vader, on this account, illustrates a kind of moral accordion effect. If we simply see a villain do something bad, we ascribe guilt to the villain according to our judgment of the intrinsic badness of the action. If we are also shown what, in turn, made the villain do the bad thing—if the causal accordion is expanded—we tend to reduce our blame accordingly. As noted, the reason for this mitigation is that the human moral mind operates with the idea of a person as a potentially self-sufficient locus of evil. We tend to assume, when we hear of some immoral act, that the act flowed directly from the agent as a *causa sui* center of agentic freedom. An expansion of the causal accordion can easily overwrite this assumption, however, and make something or someone else the abstract causal focus of the immoral act. Films can do this, for example, by showing flashbacks from the perspective of the villain that reveal damning formative encounters. Disney's animated film *The Incredibles* (2004) buys its villain, Syndrome, some limited sympathy in this way. Mr. Incredible, the film's hero, had callously rejected the young, prelapsarian villain's enthusiastic attempts to aid his heroic efforts. As a consequence, Syndrome comes to reject everything that Mr. Incredible stands for. The blame and responsibility for Syndrome's evil actions are therefore in some measure shared between the film's hero and its villain.

Of course, things are often more complex than that. We may temper our condemnation of Vader when we hear of his background, but the *Star Wars* films also do much to ensure that the character is not fully exonerated. Vader's son, Luke Skywalker, suffers much like the young Vader suffered, and he also hears the ethereal calling of the Dark Side. However, Skywalker *chooses* not to heed it. This, then, is the point at which the film inserts Skywalker's autonomy into the causal chain to prevent him from turning into a tragic villain like his father. The narrative juxtaposition of these two characters makes the point that, although bad influences certainly may corrupt people from without, the individual can ultimately overcome such influences from within through the assertion of

unconstrained Kantian Will. Philosophically naïve though this conception may be, it holds a powerful grip on the human imagination.

The same examination of situational determination versus autonomous free will as features in *Star Wars* also appears in more recent imaginative blockbusters such as those in the *Harry Potter* (2001-2011) and *Lord of the Rings* (2001-2003) franchises. For example, *Harry Potter* affirms the evil of the films' main villain, Voldemort, precisely because Voldemort succumbs to bad influences where Harry Potter does not. As with Darth Vader, Voldemort's villainy is made evident by the suggestion that he had a choice about what he would become and for whom he would fight. That Voldemort chose his own path is established by the narrative contrapositioning of Potter, who, despite being subjected to many of the same influences as Voldemort, walks a different path. When Potter arrives at the Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, he, like the rest of the new students, is to be placed into one of the School's four Houses. The decision as to where to place Potter is left to the enchanted Sorting Hat. The Hat has Potter pegged for Slytherin, the House of the films' villains, to which the young boy has a natural affinity. Potter, however, closes his eyes in determination and speaks firmly against his fate in a focused effort to sway the Hat: "Not Slytherin! Not Slytherin!" Later we learn that it was only through his force of will at the ceremony that Potter secured his place in Gryffindor (and escaped the corrupting influences of Slytherin). Voldemort, in contrast to Potter, always acts in accordance with his natural inclinations. For that he emerges as the very embodiment of the selfish and callous Slytherin mindset. Thus, even in expanding the causal accordion to show a number of negative formative influences on Voldemort, *Harry Potter* insists that the villain is ultimately responsible for his own fall because he chose to act on those influences and not against them. Voldemort remains the abstract causal focus of his own villainy, but the character's disturbing backstory still functions to ensure that he does not become a caricature.

The character of Chigurh once again illustrates a rather subtle treatment of the explanatory concepts I have outlined, in this case that of abstract causal responsibility. Toward the end of *No Country*, Chigurh enters the home of Carla Jean Moss, the wife of the main character Llewellyn Moss, to kill her. At this point, Llewellyn, who was in possession of a satchel that Chigurh was after, is dead, and Chigurh has nothing to gain from the death of Carla Jean. The audience, however, knows Chigurh's intent because he had threatened a defiant Llewellyn with killing his wife at an earlier point in the film. When Carla Jean finds Chigurh sitting in wait, she is not surprised to see him, yet she pleads with him to spare her. Coldly, Chigurh replies that he gave his word to her husband. He then presents a coin and tells her to "call it" for her life—that, he says, "is the best I can do." Throughout the film, Chigurh has insisted on describing and explaining human agency in terms of blind mechanical causation, and he affirms that asocial stance by leaving Carla Jean's fate up to an indifferent coin. Carla Jean, however, refuses to call it. She insists on the killer's prerogative to spare her and therefore also on his moral responsibility: "The coin don't have no say. It's just you." From the social outlook of Carla Jean, a Kantian psychological humanist, Chigurh's aim to kill her is a product of his autonomous will—his intentionality—and therefore a proper target of moral condemnation. Chigurh's view is very different. After all, he *promised* to kill her. In the warped vocabulary of someone who denies the human reality of intentional causation, Chigurh did not promise, but *foresaw* the death of Carla Jean from his knowledge of some set of initial conditions at point A whose lawful interactions determine the outcome downstream at point B. The killer is a radical Spinozist and a true psychological behaviorist. He and Carla Jean effectively negotiate whether to locate the killer as the abstract causal focus of his own villainy. Their dialogue issues an emotionally charged meta-commentary on the relation of causal responsibility to moral responsibility. What happens to moral responsibility when you expand the causal accordion of intentional action all

the way? Chigurh's self-assured answer is that it evaporates completely. Carla Jean fails to convince him otherwise.

I will finally exemplify the type of character that maxes out as both the dynamic and the abstract causal focus of their own villainy. Consider the villains of the controversial rape-revenge films, and in particular of *I Spit on Your Grave* (1978). The film's three main villains, Johnny, Stanley, and Andy, rape the protagonist, Jennifer, in a truly harrowing scene that positions the men as both the dynamic and abstract causal foci of their actions. The dynamic causal focus of the crime is established positively through the *mise-en-scène*, through the showing of physical attack and abuse, the sense of the men's violent exertion, the victim's writhing and screaming. The abstract causal focus of the crime, on the other hand, is established negatively, by contracting the causal accordion to show only the evil men doing the evil thing. We see that they cause evil, but we are never shown or told what caused them to cause evil. This plot omission invites the viewer to ascribe unmitigated blame. To be sure, even if we had learned of the rapists' backstories, horrible though they must have been to produce such monsters, we would still hold them responsible. But we would probably reserve some censure for their abusive parents, or to whichever other influences made them what they are. Perhaps, had we learned that the rapists had sustained head trauma that caused a loss of empathy and self-control, we would even allow much of ire toward them, if not our physical revulsion, to dissipate.

Such mitigation is not the aim of *I Spit on Your Grave*. The film positions its villains as truly, irreducibly, and irredeemably evil. And that is likely because a sense of moral clarity allows the audience to take all the more pleasure in the protagonist's bloody revenge (e.g., Zillmann and Bryant 1975). Roger Ebert, in his contemptuous review of *I Spit on Your Grave*, charged that the film did not even attempt to develop or nuance its characters (1980). But that appears to be precisely the point. By locating its villains as the autonomous causal foci of their immoral actions—as well as by

revealing their guilty intentionality and the suffering they inflict on their victim—*I Spit on Your Grave* invites its audience to relish its villains' gruesome *contrapasso* with a clean conscience.

Figure 4. Three aspects of villainy. The film analyst may find it useful to consider each aspect in isolation before integrating them in a synthesizing account of the construction of villainy in a film.

Conclusion

An alliance between cognitive film theory and moral psychology can illuminate how narrative films construct villainy. I have proposed an integrative analytical framework to that effect. The framework analyzes villainy into guilty intentionality, consequential action, and causal responsibility, aspects of moral agency that reliably condition moral judgment. Of course, categorization and systematization of the aspects of villainy will only get you so far. It cannot replace a discerning sensitivity to individual films and characters. I hope it is clear that my approach does not aim to forestall such sensitivity. The ambition, rather, is to guide it.

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