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CAIN'S HOMECOMING: VILLAINY AND THE CINEMA

by

AARON E. N. TAYLOR

Ph.D. Program
in
Film Studies

A thesis submitted to the University of Kent
in fulfilment of the regulations required for the degree of
PhD in Film Studies

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Abstract

In the interests of broadening the debate on the relationship between aesthetics and ethics in the cinema, the thesis concentrates on the specifics of a viewer's moral relationship with filmic characters, particularly those that are designated as "immoral." By looking upon the figure of the villain throughout the history of popular American cinema, the thesis will account for the various pragmatic uses to which the character-type has been put – as a structural element, as an invitation to both textual and self-analysis and as a moral dilemma. To these ends, various traditions within structural narratology, cognitive theory, and moral philosophy are drawn upon in order to determine what a villain means to both a viewer and a work.

It is argued that the villain encourages a viewer to consider her moral responses to film in a dramatic way – mainly through "trying out" a potentially new set of values. To "vilify" a character within a film is not only to shore up one's own pre-existing moral beliefs, but is also a process by which a viewer might come to identify, evaluate, and re-evaluate both personal and intersubjective value systems. Adopting such alien and possibly alienating principles through the structures of sympathy and empathy can inspire a reconsideration of qualities that have been expelled from prevalent depictions and descriptions of the "moral" individual. While the phenomenon of "perverse allegiance" with villainous characters seems to represent a contradiction of personal integrity, such sympathetic engagement can actually increase one's capacity for empathetic imagination, promote interpersonal connectivity, and ultimately lead to more holistic conceptions of moral value.

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Is it then forbidden to *enjoy* the *evil* man as a wild landscape possessing its own bold lineaments and effects of light, if the same man appears to our eyes as a sketch and caricature and, as a blot in nature, causes us pain, when he poses as good and law-abiding? – Yes, it is forbidden: hitherto we have been permitted to seek beauty only in the *morally good* – a fact which sufficiently accounts for our having found so little of it and having had to seek about for imaginary beauties without backbone! – As surely as the wicked enjoy a hundred kinds of happiness of which the virtuous have no inkling, so too they possess a hundred kinds of beauty: and many of them have not yet been discovered.

- Friedrich Nietzsche (*Daybreak*, #468)

Sympathy?

You want some: don't come to me.

Don't try me for sympathy.

I don't feel sorry for thee:

You deserve to die."

I have no sympathy for thee.

You make me realize the who I am.

- Super Furry Animals ("No Sympathy")

On my wall hangs a Japanese carving,

The mask of an evil demon, decorated with gold lacquer.

Sympathetically I observe

The swollen veins of the forehead, indicating

What a strain it is to be evil.

- Bertolt Brecht ("The Mask of Evil")

Introduction

Enter the Dragons: The Parameters of Immorality

“And so it is, that there is a secret affinity, a hankering after, evil in the human mind, and that it takes a perverse, but a fortunate delight in mischief, since it is a never-failing source of satisfaction.”

- William Hazlitt (Hazlitt 1826, 1)

Consider if you will, one of the cinema’s first recorded narrative instances as an act of villainy. It is a familiar scene, almost archetypal now in its simplicity: the camera is fixed upon a man (Francois Clerc) intent on watering a garden from a hose. Into the frame, and unbeknownst to our hapless gardener, creeps a young boy (Benoît Duval). In his careful, surreptitious movements we recognise the larksome signs of a modern-day Harlequin – the trickster whose aim is the sowing of chaos. Stepping on the hose, he stops the flow of water, and with all the inevitable gravity of dramatic cause and effect, the dimwitted *zanni* of this plot looks down with befuddlement into the spigot. The bait has been taken and the trap is sprung: the boy releases the hose, and the gardener receives a blast of water in the face for his idiocy. As his sodden dupe staggers backward, the young imp doubles over with laughter. But our Harlequin will not go unpunished; there is no nearby Pierrot on which to hang his crime, and the gardener – nobody’s fool – executes a swift and summary revenge. He gives chase, eventually seizes the fleeing boy and furnishes his backside with a sound thrashing. The age-old drama of victimisation and revenge has just been played out for us in a single, brief take.

L’Arroseur arrosé (Louis Lumière, 1895) appears to be a model of comic simplicity, but is infinitely complex in actuality. The pleasure viewers may receive from the Lumière short is hardly straightforward; it seems strangely impartial, contradictory even. Whether viewers are aware of the fact or not, their emotional responses are the product of an impromptu *moral evaluation* of the fiction that has been played out for them. That is, the short’s comedy is contingent on two important conditions: 1) that a viewer will recognise the slight impropriety of the young protagonist’s action; and 2) that she will receive some degree of satisfaction from the “naughtiness” of this action. The first condition is based on more-or-less straightforward attitudes towards the prank – that the action is somewhat risqué, that it revolves around a marginal degree of humiliation, and that it is demonstrative of an implicit opposition between youthful rebelliousness and elderly authority. The second condition is slightly more complicated, as the precise nature of a viewer’s enjoyment is

indeterminate. Does a viewer appreciate the boy's simple but well-conceived plan? Does she ally herself with the boy's spirit of unruliness, implicitly championing the "ethics" of fun over the gardener's work ethic? Is her pleasure more cognitive in nature, located in the gratifying mechanics of expectation and payoff? Or, is she placing herself within the scenario, measuring her own childhood experiences alongside the boy's?

Of course, these complexities do not end here. In this fictional instance, narrative causality obeys the laws of physics: that every action will have an equal and opposite reaction. As viewers, it is our privilege to evaluate both. Because the short consists of two primary fictional agents, we must take into consideration the fact that a viewer may receive gratification from the actions of the boy's *antagonist* instead. It is possible for a viewer to receive some measure of satisfaction from the represented act of *retribution* rather than victimisation. Perhaps our hypothetical viewer (especially if she is a gardener) may take pleasure in the boy's punishment instead of his prank, feeling that justice has prevailed against a wanton act of hooliganism. But again, there is ambiguity here at the level of the work's intentions: are we supposed to take satisfaction in the boy's punishment (a sympathetic response), or, are we meant to find the punishment comically over-zealous instead (a critical response)? Is it possible that the film intends the actions of *both* the boy and the gardener to be regarded as humorous? The brevity of the short and the seemingly neutral rendering of the staged event make it next to impossible to reach a definitive conclusion.

If a fiction as brief and ostensibly straightforward in its representation of events as *L'Arroseur arrosé* is laden with such a degree of moral complexity, it may seem that to undertake an analysis of viewers' moral engagements with feature length narrative films is self-defeating. For even in my use of this apparently simple fiction, I have introduced several crucial questions one must consider in assessing one's response to the short. Firstly, who exactly is the villain-figure here, and how is he "nominated" as such? Why might one (and *how* could one) respond positively to *both* actions despite their oppositional status with respect to one another? Despite its pretences to objectivity, does the film itself have an intended evaluative slant? If a viewer responds perversely to this intention, is she responding incorrectly? Most importantly, why might we respond pleasurably to a representation of transgressive behaviour at all?

Daunting as these questions seem, the problems they represent are not insurmountable. And yet, very few theorists seem to be tackling the problems of illicit

pleasure in the cinema from the most obvious direction. At the risk of obviousness, I would like to examine a prominent filmic character type that has been, on the whole, inexplicably overlooked by film critics for decades. That is, there are few singular and cohesive works that take *the villain* – or the concept of villainy itself – as their focus of investigation. The villain has appeared in various guises over the decades and under various theoretical pseudonyms that seek to unmask and demystify his allure. However, there has been little progress towards devising a comprehensive theory under which we may attempt to understand the functions of villainy – either at a formal or a pragmatic level. Generally speaking, a good deal of contemporary film theory no longer accounts for the functional role of character, nor the means by which we respond morally to representations of immoral characters. My study is an effort to rectify these critical shortcomings by accounting for some important pragmatic uses to which immoral cinematic characters have been put – particularly their basic structural functions and their subsequent use-value for viewers. Ultimately, I aim to specify and evaluate the varying kinds of morally-informed responses viewers might have to heinous fictional situations instigated by villainous characters.

How to Be Bad: The Defiant Wrongdoer

From the outset, I may be forced to admit that perhaps there is no single, comprehensive means of approaching my object of study. Evil is amorphous, ever changing, adapting new guises to suit new situations. Like beauty, evil has long been in the eye of the beholder, but rather than surrender to relativity, I will attempt to make some generalizations about villainy in the interests of limiting the object of my study to a manageable scope.

What must be emphasised here is that I will *not* be using the term “villainy” in the archaic sense, as it typically connotes a character-type whose *sole* dramatic purpose is functional, suited only to narrative works that retain a residually classical melodramatic structure. For the villain is not simply a text’s obligatory figure of opposition whose presence necessitates dramatic conflict; *she is an individual whose behaviour is evaluated as being predominantly immoral by the film’s narrational strategies and/or by the viewer, and who is generally committed to the performance of actions that are in accordance with this evaluation.* At the same time, the villain still remains a fundamentally dramaturgical device, and so, I must include the caveat that the

character's immorality must be *necessary* to the film's narrative structure. As I will assert in the next two chapters, the wrongdoings of the villain must either be an integral part of the film's formal integrity (without them, the drama could not transpire), or, they must function as the principal focus of narrative investigation.

Because "immorality" can also be an extremely loaded term depending on its context and who happens to be presenting its working definition, it is in our interests to outline the constituents of immorality from the very outset. To that end, I am highly indebted to Jean Hampton's article, "The Nature of Immorality" for my conception of villainy. There have been various considerations of immorality throughout the long history of ethics, but Hampton finds that most of them agree on the following conditions: 1) that the immoral subject in question acted deliberately, 2) is blameworthy, 3) deserves censure, 4) should have acted other than s/he did, and 5) has a disposition towards immoral action (Hampton 1989, 23-24). Hampton forwards a few other possible theories that have attempted to explain immorality, and in the interests of specificity, it is worth discriminating between these and a more accurate characterization of villainy.

The first is the "ignorance explanation," according to which the wrongdoer, through a kind of naïveté, is unable to conceive of the suffering her actions are causing (ibid, 26-27). While she may regret her actions, she is not ashamed of them, as she literally "did not know what she was doing." In *The Manchurian Candidate* (John Frankheimer, 1962), for example, Laurence Harvey (Raymond Shaw), a Korean war veteran, is brainwashed into assassinating various political figures. Although the film's suspense is structured around Capt. Bennett Marco's (Frank Sinatra) efforts to deprogram him before he murders a Presidential candidate, identifying Harvey as a morally censurable villain would obviously be erroneous. Indeed, it is Harvey's ruthless mother, Mrs. Iselin (Angela Lansbury) who masterminds the assassination and is responsible for her son's mental enslavement. Of course, there are much more quotidian examples, ranging from drunkenness to negligence, incompetence to insanity. Such ignorance, however, is not a plausible explanation for those whose evil seems more deliberate. Villainy must be intentional: a purposeful act of conscious immorality.

A second theory assessed by Hampton is the "indifference explanation": the wrongdoer does not recognise, or respect, ethical imperatives. Indeed, he would not describe himself as a wrongdoer as he does not employ terms such as "virtue" and

“vice” within his vocabulary. For this reason, he is *amoral* – “indifferent to the goals dictating virtuous actions” – rather than truly immoral (ibid, 29). For example, in *Badlands* (Terence Malick, 1973), Kit Carruthers (Martin Sheen) randomly murders a number of characters, but his actions are not depicted as a wanton killing spree. Not only does Kit fail to provide the familiar emotive signals acknowledging culpability, he does not register any sort of discernible attitude towards his actions at all. His motives are never “explained” and the film’s narrational strategies do not adopt an identifiable evaluative position toward his actions either. Murder seems to “just happen,” almost accidentally and without malice. Thus, it does not seem accurate to describe a character such as Kit as a villain; again, he is more *amoral* than *immoral*. It is important to make a distinction between the two terms, as they are often mistakenly used interchangeably: the immoral individual recognises his actions as evil and performs them deliberately, while the latter holds no moral values either way. He does not conceive of the world in moral terms, nor does he hold that persons are valuable in themselves.

Hampton assesses a third possibility she describes as the “Manichean explanation” (Hampton 1989, 35).¹ According to this hypothesis, the wrongdoer is “incontinent” and a force that overcomes her better judgement is the cause of her actions. Such an explanation has had the most frequent and perhaps the most distinguished defenders throughout the history of ethics. According to this explanation, one’s true self – identified by both Plato and Aristotle as the rational principle, by St. Augustine as the soul, by Immanuel Kant as the noumenal self – fails in its struggle against the force of immoral desires. In book VII, Chapter Eight of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes vice as being unconscious of itself, as opposed to the conscious guilt of those who wrong against their better intentions. Similarly, Augustinian ethics (especially those outlined in books II and III of *On Free Choice of the Will*) maintain that sin is more a matter of weakness and moral failure than intentional transgression. Evil for Augustine is a kind of “moral disorder” – a wrong desire that emanates from an inability to correctly identify the principles that *should*

¹ It should be pointed out that I am only nominally adopting Hampton’s term. None of the philosophers I will be referencing within this section can be labeled Manicheans as such even though they have residual affinities with Manicheanism proper: Aristotle obviously predates Mani by over five hundred years; Augustine abandoned Manicheanism midway through his career; and Kant’s moral philosophy has many fundamental differences from the worldview espoused by Manicheans.

govern one's behaviour, thus making possible the Christian dictum of "Hate the sin; love the sinner." Similarly, Kant speaks of the sinner's incorrect ordering of moral priorities but hesitates at the idea of a radical evil – that is, evil for its own sake: "Man (even the most wicked) does not, under any maxim whatsoever, repudiate the moral law in the manner of a rebel (renouncing obedience to it)" (Kant 1960, 31). Rather he orders the incentives to action (*Anlagen*) incorrectly. In other words, he is not able to subordinate his desires to the Moral Law, but "makes the incentive of self-love and its inclinations the condition of obedience to the moral law; whereas on the contrary, the latter, as the supreme condition of the former, ought to have been adopted into the universal maxim of will" (ibid, 32). Evil action is adopted as a matter of self-interest, and moreover, adopted *consciously*, rather than through a weakening of protective will. However, the force of a pathological desire obscures the individual's ability to order her incentives to action correctly.

Illustrations of such "moral incontinence" are recurrent in the cinema. Probably the most hyperbolic representations of this kind occur in possession narratives such as *The Exorcist* (William Friedkin, 1973), in which the body of a young girl (Linda Blair) is taken over by an unnamed evil spirit that is intent on claiming her "immortal soul." Here, an overwhelming force corrupts an ostensibly innocent subject. There are, of course, less exaggerated occurrences, in which an individual's moral failing is the result of an unusual psychological condition that seems to "overwhelm" her abilities to make proper ethical decisions, and may even propel her to acts of transgression. In *Secret Window* (David Koepp, 2004), for example, novelist Mort Rainey (Johnny Depp) is driven insane by his wife's infidelity, and develops a paranoid condition that literally "separates" him from his rational self. By creating a psychic alter-ego, Jim Shooter (John Turturro), Rainey is able to take lethal vengeance with impunity.

I am not arguing that such "morally afflicted" characters cannot be constructed as villainous (they obviously have been, and continue to be characterized as such); like Hampton, I am suggesting that their behaviour cannot be properly (or at least simply) described as "immoral," and therefore, I would argue that their villainy must be attenuated to some degree. Like the "indifference" and ignorance explanation," the "Manichean" explanations offered by Aristotle, Augustine, Kant, and others like them must also be rejected as the basis of an accurate definition of villainy since they project evil away from the subject, making desire itself culpable. It is hardly worthwhile,

indeed absurd, to “*convict* a brute motivational force,” especially if culpability is to be a condition of truly immoral action (Hampton 1989, 36). In our *Exorcist* example, for instance, it would be as inappropriate and inaccurate to describe the possessed Regan as “villainous” (the girl herself is not morally culpable) as it would be to label the disembodied force that inhabits her as the film’s villain. Assuming evil could exist as a palpable, sentient force unto itself (ie. the Devil), then such a force would be the anthropomorphic manifestation of immorality. It would literally “be” the conceptual category of villainy itself, and thus would not possess *the capacity to make ethical choices* – a capacity that makes possible the prospect of (im)moral behaviour. If a transgressing character in a work of supernatural fiction truthfully claims that “the Devil made me do it,” one can hardly morally condemn her, just as one can hardly condemn Satan for acting according to his nature. Regardless, the belief in evil as a compulsive, external force continually haunts moral philosophy. For example, even though Kant attributes to the wrongdoer a consciousness of the immorality of her actions, he still nominates the external pathology of *desire itself* as the offending force rather than the individual. While the individual may have chosen to act inappropriately, evil still lies somewhere else *out there* – beyond the rational self. This “externalisation” of immorality will remain a crucial idea throughout my study, and I will be mounting a fuller argument against this rendering in the concluding chapter.

Hampton settles on the “defiance explanation” as a way to successfully explain immorality, and it is this characterization of villainy that I have chosen to adopt for my purposes here (ibid, 42). The defiant wrongdoer recognises the authority of moral commands as “categorical imperatives” and unlike the amoral subject, she recognises her commitment to these injunctions, *and yet, she rebels against this subjugation, preferring the authority of her own desires*. Immoral people regard the moral law as “the enemy of their self-interest” and, in a Kantian sense, fashion their desires into a maxim for action, believing such interests hold more for them than the moral law. And yet, unlike Kant, self-interest is recognised here as being a condition that arises *within* the subject. As a motivational force, desire is *a priori* to external phenomena: coveted objects are not endowed with intentional causality nor is it logical to localize desire within some transcendental force. The villain will typically pursue her *own* (in the sense that it *belongs to her*) particular ambition irrespective of the injunctions that should otherwise prevent her from doing so. Such defiance explains our anger at the

wrongdoer, not because we envy their rebellion against moral strictures, but because we hold disdain for their hubris and are threatened by their belief that their own interests are higher and better than the larger interpersonal values shared by the majority. As Hampton indicates, “their knowledge that they are violating an authority that is supposed to rule them is the knowledge which makes them culpable” (ibid).

So, representations of cinematic villainy will roughly correspond to the same stipulations by which we identify acts of immorality in real life. *Acts of villainy will be deliberate, censurable, and attributable to a blameworthy individual who ought to have acted otherwise but seems predisposed to following her own inclinations regardless of the cost.* Essentially, the villain is an individual who intentionally defies ethical principles to which we all are beholden. In this sense, then, our concept of villainy may encompass a broader array of characters than the term ordinarily implies. My discussions will frequently refer to filmic examples in which the immorality of a character’s actions is unquestionable but the character herself does not seem to adhere precisely to popular or stereotypical ideas of movie villainy. Our working definition of the villain as an intentional and defiant wrongdoer will allow for a more comprehensive understanding of the issues at stake in our engagement with the character.

Again, the term “villain” is an imperfect one – freighted with the burden of antiquated dramatic connotations – but my choice to adopt it is not simply a matter of convenience. I also do not wish to “hang a name” reductively on characters whose immorality is richly articulated, nor undermine the integrity of the term itself by fixing it upon a variety of seemingly incongruous individuals. One might argue that associating the animalistic transgressions of the brutish Bill Sikes (Robert Newton) in *Oliver Twist* (David Lean, 1948) with the desperate moral contraventions of the pitiable Alex Forrest in *Fatal Attraction* (Adrian Lyne, 1987) by describing both as “villainous” undermines the term’s cohesiveness. While my designation of certain characters as “villains” may seem controversial, I am not using this designation in the narrow, conventional sense. My counter-proposition is that the term’s descriptive properties will not be localized to a discussion of the attributes belonging to fictional individuals, but will be extended to a consideration of our *involvement* with a range of broadly “immoral” characters whose actions will vary in degrees of despicability. “Villainy” will refer to a kind of nexus – an interlocking system of various imaginative interactions with fictional instances of immorality, bringing the term beyond the realm of narrow evaluative discourse.

I must also point out that although I do not regard villainy as some abstract, external force, neither do I support the idea of evil as a kind of negative, or *lack* either – what theologians have dubbed as the doctrine of *privatio boni*. Mary Midgely, for example, argues that wickedness should not be defined as a palpable force, “but rather as a negative, as a general kind of failure to live as we are capable of living” (Midgely 1984, 7). Using selfishness as an example, she indicates that it is not reprehensible because it issues from “excessive self-love” (a positive), but because selfishness is demonstrative of indifference to others (a negative) (ibid, 200). Midgely’s argument also echoes the neo-Kantianism of Richard Hare, who argues in *The Language of Morals* (1952) that immorality can be conceived of as a lack of moral imagination, as not being able to perceive oneself as being on the receiving end of another’s actions.² But if immorality is merely a kind of lack of moral success, it often seems too *wilful* a failure. The pathologically racist titular character (Dennis Hopper) in *Paris Trout* (Stephen Gyllenhaal, 1991), for example, refuses to concede that he has done something wrong in attempting to murder two African American women even after appeals are made to his frighteningly limited empathetic faculties. Immoral individuals often seem to go out of their way to violate commonly shared ethical principles, and thus, their villainy can hardly be described as a “failure.”

One might turn to Andrew Morton’s “barrier theory of evil” for further support. “A person’s act is evil,” he claims, “when it results from a strategy or learned procedure which allows that person’s deliberations over the choice of actions not to be inhibited by the barriers against considering harming or humiliating others that ought to have been in place” (Morton 2004, 57). Evil occurs when one intentionally refuses to block impulses to act that should not have been entertained to begin with. When Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) declares, “Greed is Good” in *Wall Street* (Oliver Stone, 1987), he is proclaiming an immoralist’s manifesto. “Indifference to others” is not an occasional failing of Gekko’s; it is his *raison d’être* and the corollary of his monstrous self-love.

An even more topical example of an attempt to characterise immorality as an absence or lack is Hannah Arendt’s portrait of Adolph Eichmann, whose immorality she

² For Adam Morton, this definition of evil would only pertain to a sociopathic psychology, which “involves some deficit in the grasp of what it is to be another person” (Morton 2004, 51). The sociopath could even hypothetically hold a set of moral principles, but his fundamental lack of empathetic imagination prevents him from being able to deduce why one should be beholden to them.

famously describes as “banal”:

When I speak of the banality of evil, I do so only on the strictly factual level, pointing to a phenomenon which stared one in the face at the trial. Eichmann was not Iago and not Macbeth, and nothing would have been further from his mind than to determine with Richard III ‘to prove a villain.’ Except for an extraordinary diligence in looking out for his personal advancement, he had no motives at all. And this diligence in itself was in no way criminal; he certainly would never have murdered his superior in order to inherit his post. He *merely*, to put the matter colloquially, *never realised what he was doing* (Arendt 1963, 287).

Arendt’s account of evil is a version of *privatio boni* as it assumes that individuals who are responsible for crimes of such magnitude must have committed them unconsciously, or as a matter of course (hence “banal”), and therefore, their iniquity is a matter of lacking moral sense. But the lack to which Arendt refers should not be aligned with our “ignorance explanation”; according to Arendt, Eichmann and his collaborators were simply “following orders,” but I would argue that their adherence to “duty” (however perverted) did not prevent them from comprehending the consequences that their actions would have for their victims. Faced with the enormity of the Holocaust in all its horror – even its pale reflections in various cinematic representations – is to be suffocated, not by an imaginative vacuum, but by imagination’s monstrous weight. Attributing the systematic and industrialised eradication of millions of individuals to the mindless inanities of bureaucracy is to grossly underestimate the terrible faculties of the human imagination. Arendt’s own imagination balks at the depravities that the mind is capable of conceiving and willing to bring to realisation. The vast necropolis at Auschwitz was an engine conceived in purposeful nightmare. It was too immense, too purposeful and too efficient to be anything else. In *The Pianist* (Roman Polanski, 2002), Wladyslaw Szpilman (Adrian Brody) scoffs at the ethnic policies of the regime that marches into Warsaw in 1940 as they initially inconvenience his musical career. But as the Nazi imagination gathers diabolical momentum over the next three years, it reduces him from the status of one of the greatest living musicians in Poland to a wasted, skeletal figure who wanders in isolation through landscapes the likes of which even Bosch could not have conceived. However else one might describe this process, individuals who “did not know what they were doing” could not have brought this degradation into effect in such an obscenely methodical fashion. I would argue, then, that one is to condemn Eichmann not for gross

ignorance or a lack of moral sense, but for a deliberate *refusal to empathise* with the individuals who would become casualties of his party's genocidal policies.

The deliberateness of villainy is thus the primary reason why immorality cannot simply be described as the absence of good, or as the mere failure to uphold the moral principles that are generally regarded as virtuous. Immorality is not the ultimate domain of bureaucrats and yes-men, but of individuals who have made the conscious choice to embrace iniquity for whatever end. Such individuals are, I would wager, relatively few in number. To encounter true, unadulterated wickedness, or even to commit oneself to unequivocal immoralism, is not an everyday occurrence. One might even conceivably enjoy an entire lifetime happily without ever having to endure the cruelty of a malicious individual, suffering only from the occasional subjection to "minor" immoralities. We are much more likely to encounter wickedness at the movies.

Shadow Theatre: A Brief History of Villainy

The immorality that defines villainy may be anchored in reality, but a villain is also, by definition, a type of dramatic figure that has been in existence for centuries, changing slightly in appearance from age to age but essentially occupying the same confounding role as an agent of misrule. Representations of evil have taken on a seemingly bewildering number of forms and villainy has adopted a wide array of masks to suit various occasions; however, it is possible to map out a brief trajectory along which these changes take place. I will argue that popular constructions of villainy typically oscillate between the dictates of *psychological realism* and *homiletic allegory*.

Broadly speaking the difference between these two dramatic categories is located in their treatment of character: the realist text is interested in character *in itself*, whereas the allegorical text will *use* character in order to illustrate a particular truth-claim. In basic narratological terms, a realist narrative is a character study and its nature is inquisitive. Such texts generally ask the implicit question, "What are people like?" and are interested in uncovering the motivational impetus behind human behaviour – even immoral behaviour. Exploring villainy in the realist text is the attempt to understand an immoral psychology.

While the realist text strives for complexity in its representation of individual psychology, characters within an allegorical text are conversely marked by a high degree of artificiality. They are to be read symbolically – referring to some other

figurative level of meaning that transcends mimetic concerns with verisimilitude. Such characters do not resemble “possible persons,” but occupy a particular *role*, or position instead. The most familiar allegorical structure is the *parable*: a narrative that serves to provide ethical instruction – in the Aristotelian sense of “how one ought to live” – through illustration. To that end, the nature of allegorical narratives is *instructive* rather than inquisitive. The villain type is a figure to be rejected and reviled within this framework. His actions are indicative of moral deviance – signs of “how one ought *not* to behave” – and the bad end with which he meets is played out as an exhibition, a warning to the foolhardy. For the purposes of homiletic allegory, villains are not individuals so much as they are admonitory illustrations.

I would further argue that the villain’s oscillation between realistic and allegorical representations is historically contingent. Each type of character determination will be more or less prevalent depending on the period in which it appears. I obviously cannot cover the entire range of Western theatrical and literary history in which the villain appears, nor can I give a detailed description of the various factors involving the shift in dominant presentational modes of character, but I will give a brief historical overview of the more prominent alternations between these modes. Since the cinematic representation of villainy has its origins in theatre, it may be useful to briefly consider its heritage.³

We might trace the beginnings of the realist conception of villainy as far back as the tragedies of classical theatre. In such plays – especially those authored by Sophocles – individuals are typically the god’s playthings, echoing the theological beliefs of antiquity. A character’s moral flaws are regarded as the product of fate, and her downfall is simply a matter of inevitability. The dramatic thrust of tragedy is located in the character’s *attitude* towards her fate (usually predicted early in the drama)

³ I have chosen to privilege a dramatic rather than literary history of villainy principally because the cinematic villain is a direct descendant of theatrical melodrama. While the nineteenth century realist novel unarguably exerts a considerable influence on the melodramatic construction of character, I would argue that villainy in American cinema conforms much more closely to the *distillation of realist complexity* exercised in drama and short fiction. The realist construction of cinematic characters has more to do with the concise precision of Stephen Crane than the extensive psychological portraits of Henry James. For a more detailed discussion of drama and the short story’s influence on classical Hollywood character, see Chapter 14 of *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson 1985, 163-173).

and the actions she takes in light of the knowledge of her predestination. Heroic characters might meet their destiny, but more often, they either descend into villainy in order to prevent the sibyl's forecast from actualizing or act immorally in accordance with the prophecy despite their best intentions. Key examples include Medea's acts of infanticide, and the unintentional patricide and incest committed by Oedipus that brings ruination upon Thebes. While *Oedipus Rex* is unusual in that the central character is both hero *and* villain simultaneously, the play is typical of classical drama in its concern with the *emotional distress* of an individual who learns that he must act immorally.

Although classical tragedy had a morally pragmatic use-value (most famously described by Aristotle as *catharsis* in the *Poetics*), such narratives were generally not intended to sermonize. The dramatic representation of character would take on much more morally instructive dimensions in the Mystery cycles of the Middle Ages and the Christian morality plays of the late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries. These closely related types of theatre exemplify the characteristics that are most commonly associated with homiletic allegory, as their explicit purpose was to illustrate Christian moral teaching in a popular form. Mystery cycles often depicted events of grand cosmic significance and were overtly dualistic in structure, with the forces of good and evil vying over influence on the human soul – a struggle that had been as dramatized early as Prudentius' fourth century allegorical poem, *Psychomachia* (literally, "Battle for the Soul"). Later, the morality play would internalize the militaristic overtones of the psychomachia within a plot of intrigue, but common to the structures of both dramatic texts is the figure of the Vice: an embodiment of human avarice.

This villainous character is a stock role for the homiletic artist, and besides being a figure of moral instruction, his vivacious allegorical aggression is interestingly also a primary source of the morality play's energy and humour (he is often a trickster, or, alternatively, the butt of jokes). For although the moral intention of *Mankind* (to take one example) is to inspire loathing towards the demonic figures of Mischief and Titivillus, the outrageousness of their foibles is simultaneously a source of amusement – even pleasure.⁴ A figure of tremendous theatrical vitality, the Vice became "so entrenched on the popular stage that he outlived by many years the dramatic convention

⁴ For a fuller account of the relationship between the Vices and the audience during a performance of *Mankind*, see Chapter 8 of Richardson and Johnston's *Medieval Drama*, "Audience and Performance."

that had created him” (Spivack 1958, 57). That is, the figure of the Vice persevered long after the overtly homiletic morality play had given way to the more secularized Tudor Interludes. Keeping the Vice’s paradoxical popularity in mind will be absolutely essential for the purposes of my study.

With the advent of Elizabethan and Renaissance drama came the beginnings of character psychology as we currently understand the concept. Surviving into this age, the Vice is subjected to the emergence of a developing naturalism – a result of the Renaissance’s renewed interest in individualism and emerging subjectivity. Thus, the one-dimensionality and singular function of this character of Medieval origin becomes integrated with the multi-faceted aspect of the Elizabethan character who more and more resembles actual subjecthood. Bernard Spivack argues that the villain of Renaissance drama is a hybrid: “a transitional figure, hovering between profoundly different modes of drama, upon whom a conventional human nature has been superimposed” (Spivack 1958, 33). In other words, the role of the Elizabethan villain is “not moral, but profoundly dramaturgic” (*ibid.*, 56). While I disagree with the one-sidedness of his argument (the evaluation of textual conventions is inevitably moral, as we will see), at the very least he reminds us of the importance of acknowledging the villain’s structural role within a text.

In the post-transcendental world brought about by the Enlightenment, the dramatic presentation of character shifted once again to a predominantly allegorical mode. Given the climate of the times, one might have expected playwrights of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to have advanced the developments of the Renaissance authors into the “realistic” representation of individual subjectivity. However, rather than forward a more “scientific” or “rationalist” idea of personhood, the theatre was once again the site of homiletic scenarios, this time in the form of the melodrama. With the decline of the Church’s influence, its displaced moral authority was reconceived in more concrete and secularized terms. Peter Brooks claims that melodrama is the era’s attempt to reconstitute morality: “the outcome of the melodramatic text turns less on the triumph of virtue than on making the world morally legible, spelling out its ethical forces and imperatives in large and bold characters” (Brooks 1984, 42). Gone is the potential moral complexity of the previous era’s forays into realism, as the melodrama reintroduces Manichean values in the interest of moral clarification. As Juliet John argues, melodramatic villains are reviled because they

privilege their sense of a unique, private self above the social order. “Melodrama is an anti-intellectual genre which eschews subject-centred, psychological modes of identity. In melodrama, the villain is a threat because he is individualistic, valuing self before society” (John 2001, 49). By the twilight years of stage melodrama, the villain’s role was that of a mere whipping boy for Victorian values; a dandified figure of unacceptable excess in an age of pious conservatism.

Thus, we finally come to the emergence of the cinematic villain – born into an age whose name has become synonymous with repressive values. Emerging at the cusp of a new century with new dramatic possibilities, early filmmakers were poised to reap the benefits of another paradigm shift in the presentation of character. The new theatre of Stanislavski, Ibsen, Shaw, and Belasco collectively sounded the death knell for traditional stage melodrama (which had lapsed into decadence by this point: all expressionistic gesture without reference to an underlying moral occult). The Independent Theatre movement – founded by André Antoine’s Théâtre Libre in the 1880’s – popularized dramatic realism. Buttressed by the innovations of the realist novel (developed by Flaubert, George Eliot, and Henry James), the stock villain of the melodramatic tradition took on a much more complex and nuanced identity. In the theatre and in literature, the character’s rigid and singular identity as an inherently evil brute became determined by a complex web of biological, social and environmental determinants. One’s moral identity was no longer a straightforward assertion of one’s will; for the realist, morality was moulded by a number of *contextual* factors.

But the scenarios of early two and three-reelers did not emulate the theatrical shift back towards realism, nor did it take up the literary model of character offered by realist fiction. Indeed the villain of the nickelodeons – those notorious dens of vice – was often of the moustache twirling variety. In the cinema, villains remained highly visible in the form of a motley crew of white slavers and black hats. The narratives of the early adventure thrillers in which they appeared were often cautionary tales that simultaneously promised the lurid thrills of exotic immorality to satisfy sinners and saints alike. *Traffic in Souls* (George Loan Tucker, 1913) provides a particularly hoary example of nefarious white slavers at work. Or, the menacing of a heroine by swarthy, grizzled ne’er-do-wells was a scenario that merely functioned to prompt a frenetic last-minute rescue. D.W. Griffith’s Biograph shorts, *The Lonely Villa* (1909) and *The Lonedale Operator* (1911) are prominent examples of these one-reel scenarios.

However, as film narratives progressed in both length and technical sophistication, so too did the representation of character simultaneously evolve. Increased film length resulted in the replacement of early cinema's classical dramatis personae with more nuanced characters, and the allegory of pantomime could give way to explicitly articulated psychology and motivation. Filmmakers also gradually embraced the scientific discourses of the early twentieth century that were already influencing the novelists and playwrights mentioned above, especially the fledgling theories of naturalism and psychoanalysis. Under the popularizing of psychoanalysis, "responsibility for immoral actions is often removed from the individual, who may now be regarded as subject to unconscious motivations" (Smith 1995, 212). Similarly, naturalist theories suggested that personality is largely a product of the environment in which an individual comes to maturity. The more extreme naturalist arguments could claim that since morality is socially determined, then the doctrine of "free will" must be severely curtailed, if not discarded altogether. Behavioural science had made possible a new conception of "moral incontinence" for the modern age.

Accurate or not, the hypotheses of psychoanalysis and naturalism would impact heavily upon the representation of moral character. As Lawrence Alloway indicates in *Violent America*: "at the time that the hero acquired memories, insomnia, and compulsions, villains acquired a naturalistically phased abnormality, a primal roughness" (Alloway 1971, 25). Accordingly, the distinctness of the boundaries between morality and immorality essential to the homiletic narrative were slightly blurred. *The Public Enemy* (William Wellman, 1931) is a relevant example, as the film is interested in delineating the abject social conditions that compel Tom Powers (James Cagney) to crime as well as conducting a rudimentary psychological investigation of his violent tendencies. As the final intertitle proclaims, "'The Public Enemy' is not a man, nor is it a character – it is a problem that sooner or later, WE, the public, must solve."

These influences were briefly curtailed by the creation of the Production Code Administration (PCA) in 1934 – a committee that indirectly reasserted the influence of Manicheanism in the movies by ensuring that characters were subject to a system of "compensating moral values." The Code decreed that the development of narrative must be morally unambiguous and that any representations of wrongdoing must invariably conclude with the castigation of the wrongdoer. Because the first of the Code's "General Principles" dictated that "no picture shall be produced which will

lower the moral standards of those who see it,” the sympathetic representation of villainy was expressly forbidden, and any represented criminal behaviour also required the demonstrable representation of suitable consequences (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 361).

In narrational terms, it can be argued that “the Code’s “rhetoric of civil responsibility... comes to form a frame narrative... which attempts to impose a preferred reading on the rest of the text” (Munby 1995, 51). And yet, while the Code attempted to assert a uniform homiletic structure upon film narratives, a palpable tension existed within many films produced during this period: a tension between the PCA’s moral dictates and the relatively recent realist tendencies mentioned earlier. The richness of *film noir*’s original cycle can be attributed in part to its exploitation of this tension. Such films could frankly depict sexual perversion and violence, provided they upheld the Code’s larger moral strictures. *Double Indemnity* (Billy Wilder, 1944) remains the *locus classicus* of this tension between representations of sensational immoralism and the Code’s institutionalised system of compensating moral values.

Moreover, not only did the Manicheanism of the Code have to contend with the representational strategies of realism, the PCA’s moralistic narrational authority also “had to compete with a range of other meanings, including precisely a rejection of moral and civic norms” (ibid). Audiences became increasingly aware of the manner in which the Code’s prohibitions essentially served to legitimate the status quo and protect the interests of the conservative majority.⁵ Thus, while the PCA was determined to demonstrate time and time again that “crime does not pay” in the gangster films of the 1930’s, Depression audiences frequently cheered on the filmic representations of their real-life folk heroes – characters that “seemed like just-folks who had also felt the pinch and improvised a life of crime” by stealing a slice of a heavily protected American pie (Clarens 1980, 120). Given the popularity of these figures, it is perhaps unsurprising that PCA Chairman, Joseph Breen blocked the production of films based on the life of charismatic criminal, John Dillinger for over a decade, arguing in a memo to MPPDA President, William Hays that “such a picture could be detrimental to the public interest” (qtd. in Clarens 1980, 121). The tuxedo-donning hood-made-good was also a familiar

⁵ Not to mention the fact that the Code’s principal business function was to maintain the major studios’ service of an undifferentiated audience in a vertically integrated market. In addition, it protected the majors’ oligopoly by preventing competition from independent companies interested in producing risqué material as a means of product differentiation.

sight in the crime films of the early 1930's and perhaps represented an idealized dream figure for the down-and-out. One might even argue that Warner Brothers' violent and savvy individualists were a short-lived breed of populist hero before Columbia began to supplant them with the naïve, but big-hearted idiot savants – the Mr. Smiths, the Mr. Deeds, the Mr. Vanderhoffs, the Mr. Baileys – that populate Frank Capra's work.

Finally, despite the Code's edicts, qualified sympathetic representations of relatively complex villains were possible due to the frequent ambiguity of its language. In particular, the Code indicates, "*sympathy with a person who sins* is not the same as sympathy with the sin or crime of which he is guilty. We may feel sorry for the plight of the murderer or even understand the circumstances which led him to his crime; we may not feel sympathy with the wrong he has done" (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 351). Again, we recognise here the Christian edict of "love the sinner; hate the sin" (the Code itself was drafted by Catholic reformist Martin Quigley and a Jesuit Priest, Father Daniel Lord): this intentional gap between subject and action allows producers to negotiate relatively sympathetic portrayals of characters who commit heinous actions. Tellingly, when attending rushes of *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935) representatives of the PCA objected to the low neckline of Elsa Lanchester's dress and a close-up of a scurrying rat, but not the compassionate, almost tender treatment of the tormented (albeit murderous) monster (Manguel 1997, 17 & 22).

The decline of the Code in the late 1950's allowed for a greater flourishing of psychological realism in the depiction of character. *Psycho* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1960) is the film often cited as being a pivotal text in the popular movement away from the homiletic tendencies of the Hays era. The film undermined any belief in the limiting of empathetic strategies to *moral* individuals "by directly implicating the viewer in an amoral universe grounded in the psychic imperatives of its protagonists" (Wells 2000, 74). *Psycho*'s promotion of alignment with an adulterous thief and psychotic murderer would have been unthinkable under the dictates of the Code even five years earlier. For roughly the next twenty years following the Code's demise, Hollywood's construction of character is generally noted for its "down-to-earth realism, its unostentatious detachment," and its depiction of individuals whose "journeys are no longer the same drive-and goal-oriented moral trajectories as they [once] were" (Elsaesser 1975, 13).

Many critics have bemoaned the short-lived reign of psychological realism in Hollywood's representation of character. By the late 1970's and the dawn of the

blockbuster era, it seemed that popular film was undergoing a movement back to Manichean values, evidenced by the phenomenal success of the new action cinema. Aggravated by the largely reactionary and generally xenophobic political climate of Reagan's America, the action spectacular reinvented the villain as a character we could safely despise without the niggling traces of moral counterbalances that might otherwise round their megalomaniacal flatness. As the crime lord, Han (Ken Shih) explains his plans to dominate the opium trade in *Enter the Dragon* (Robert Clouse, 1973), a nonplussed Williams (Jim Kelly) quips, "Man, you come right out of a comic book." His incredulous comment can be taken as an unwitting prophecy of things to come. Since the structural nature of cinema's most popular and financially lucrative narratives is oppositional (the dramatic dynamic of the action blockbuster necessitates the oppositional force of a bad guy), contemporary villains increasingly resemble the cardboard cutout Nazis of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (Steven Spielberg, 1981), or cartoonish caricatures, such as Lex Luthor (Gene Hackman) in *Superman* (Richard Donner, 1978). The tendency to represent the "pure" – or, one-dimensional – villain is even taken up by "serious" dramas, such as *Cold Mountain* (Anthony Minghella, 2003), in which one of the principal villains is the sadistic albino, Bosie (Charlie Hunnam), whose only defining attribute is the enjoyment he derives from bedevilling townspeople suspected of harbouring Confederate army deserters.

However, unlike their progenitors, it has been argued that such contemporary villains operate within a mere simulacrum of the homiletic narrative. That is, the calculus of retribution prompted by acts of villainy in these narratives often seems to be a pseudo-moralistic principle – an act of mere lip service to the conditions of a moral drama. Paisley Livingston, for example, argues that "the mainstream movie industry finds its mainstay in fictional stories that are hardly morally insightful, a central pattern of which is the 'resolution' of some crisis by means of the heroic, violent extermination of some 'evil' party who functions as a ritual scapegoat" (Livingston 2001, 283). Considering that the death of the central villain in the action film is typically the most heavily "spectacularised," Livingston's complaints are not altogether unfounded. In the age of the blockbuster, such "simulated" moralism often seems to be enacted in the interests of *affective impact* rather than instructive allegory.

I certainly do not mean to suggest that morality has disappeared from the movies. Such concerns are the province of would-be social reformers. The Manichean

simulacrum of the contemporary blockbuster should in no way be regarded as symptomatic of a widespread abandonment of ethical drama in Hollywood. Moreover, even the most stereotypical heavy in the most muscle-headed film is still subject to moral discourse. His actions must still be recognised as operating within some kind of moral sphere if they are to have any kind of affective impact. That is to say, even if the MPAA no longer considers its principal function to be the production of moralistic narratives, Hollywood films continue to rely on the same enduring moral valences of “right” and “wrong” that have been the basis of dramatic fiction for centuries. The heavy’s behaviour is still recognised as being within the wrong, even if the character is no longer intended (by administrative authorities such as the MPAA, anyway) as an allegorical figure serving morally instructive interests.

In tracing out the representational oscillation of the villain between psychological realism and homiletic allegory, I have been implicitly considering the potential *moral pragmatics* of the cinema. The villain has various “use-values” and the dual purpose of my study is to determine both what these pragmatic functions might be, and to consider the reasons why viewers might experience them as pleasurable. Therefore, it is essential at this time to stake out briefly the grounds of my investigation by specifying the kind of ethical criticism with which I will be concerned.

Giving the Devil His Due: Moral Criticism and Perverse Allegiance

In responding emotionally to the atrocious actions of a villainous character, the viewer is inescapably drawn into the realm of ethical discourse. Any imaginative interplay between the viewer and a filmic representation will be fundamentally moral by nature, especially the process popularly described as *identification*. As Adam Newton argues, “since the very fact of alterity obliges a constant interplay across the borders of self and other...a narrative *is* ethics in the sense of the mediating and authorial role each takes up towards another’s story” (Newton 1995, 48). To morally engage with a character is to adopt an *evaluative* position, and to undertake a process that requires the creative application of both our sympathetic and empathetic faculties.

This is not to confuse the fundamentally ethical nature of our imaginative interaction with fiction with *moralism* – a tendency towards self-righteous judgementalism in the evaluation of others. Such a conflation accounts for a contemporary anti-ethical impulse that “is reflected [even] in common speech in the

range of negative associations that have gathered around the word ‘morality.’ Very often when this word is used, it tends to imply a code of merely repressive, coercive, power-seeking, life denying and conventional values...” (Parker 1994, 30). Despite potential suspicion of the phrase, a cursory consideration of a film’s moral framework is nevertheless unavoidable, even when adopting reading strategies whose “objective” pretences are the most ardent. As Wayne C. Booth argues, “try as we will to avoid terms like ‘moral’ and ‘good’...we cannot avoid judging the characters we know to be morally admirable or contemptible... We may explain the villain’s behaviour by relating him to his environment, but even to explain away is to admit that something requires excuse” (Booth 1983, 131). Hence, even the most stridently “neutral” of psychological realist representations of immorality cannot avoid the placement of their subjects within a moral framework, and even the most formally preoccupied of narratives cannot be totally devoid of ethical feeling. Successful dramas treating on immorality frequently employ a dynamic tension between aesthetic effect and moral disapproval, and “this power to take and to give delight in what shocks the virtuous philosopher requires the presence, and not the suspension, of our moral attitudes” (Hyman 1984, 153).

In *Cidade de Deus* (Kátia Lund and Fernando Meirelles, 2002), for example, we are privy to a heavily stylized, formally hyperbolic representation of gang warfare in a slum on the outskirts of Buenos Aires. The film makes explicit connections between the conditions of wretched poverty and the characters’ criminality, and furthermore, presents their exploits in a visual style that associates transgressions with frenetic elation. However, there are several moments in the film in which the ramifications of criminal action are brought home with a terrible force. After capturing two eight-year old hoodlums who are committing acts of petty larceny in “his” neighbourhood, the drug lord L’il Zé (Leandro Firmino da Hora) forces the kids to decide whether they prefer to be shot in their hand or foot. The naked, abject terror of the children is emotionally devastating, and the weight of their fear – its seeming authenticity nearly exceeds the limits of fictional propriety – is heavy enough to drag a viewer’s moral appraisal of the scenario back into consideration, however distant she would prefer to remain from the text. So, the experience of narrative film inevitably recruits our moral faculties, especially if certain characters within a film are to be nominated as villainous.

But what do we mean, exactly, when we speak of a moral response to a fictional scenario? How do we respond morally to cinematic narratives? What should be

emphasised from the outset is that a moral response to film is not merely an emotional reaction, but *the evaluation of a character's behaviour in a given situation*. As Colin McGinn indicates, "one purpose of fiction is to present and reveal character in such a way as to invite moral appraisal: we are brought to enter into someone's character as it is expressed in feeling and action, and we react to this with various evaluative attitudes – affective as well as cognitive" (McGinn 1997, 3). In apprehending the actions of "Battling" Burrows (Donald Crisp) in *Broken Blossoms* (D. W. Griffith, 1919), I do not passively observe him beating his daughter, Lucy (Lillian Gish), to death as a simple matter of mental processing, nor is my inward shudder a matter of unthinking instinct. A complete response to such a scenario entails the necessary act of moral appraisal, and furthermore, such an act will prompt a concomitant emotional response. Booth comments on the inextricability of affective and evaluative engagement: "In most works of any significance," he claims, "we are made to admire or detest, to love or hate, or simply to approve or disapprove of at least one central character, and *our interest in reading from page to page*, like our judgement upon the book after consideration, *is inseparable from this emotional involvement*" (Booth 1983, 129-130 italics mine). If our involvement with fiction is to occur on any kind of emotional level, if we are to speak of characters in terms of heroes and villains, and if a text is to engage our interest at all, we must speak of narrative in moral terms.

In fact, narrative intelligibility is contingent on these terms. Both morality and emotion are essential to understanding the actions of fictional characters, not just motivationally but cognitively. Without these dimensions, one can only discuss characters in terms of brute behaviour. In Noël Carroll's words, "without mobilizing the moral emotions of the audience, narratives cannot succeed. They would appear unintelligible" (Carroll 1996, 228). Moral evaluation is necessary to a viewer's apprehension of story events: we must recognise the "wrongness" of certain actions if the narrative is to be comprehensible.

That is, we rely upon our awareness of the real-life prohibitions against child abuse in order to grasp the ramifications of Burrows' actions in *Broken Blossoms*. Otherwise, one does not simply register that "a child is being beaten"; the protracted and lethal blows he visits upon Lucy towards the film's conclusion would have no

“significance” at all.⁶ Not only is his savagery functionally necessary to the drama, but our implicit evaluation of his actions as “savage” is necessary to narrative comprehension.

However, Carroll wants to take the evaluative assessment of characters further by positing these requisite moral emotions as integral to the “proper” understanding of a work. For example: “anyone who does not find Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* repugnant would have missed Dickens’ point” (Carroll 1998, 139). Correspondingly, Frank Palmer argues (correctly) that our interest in characters cannot merely be reduced to their role in relation to narrative structure; it is necessary that we *evaluate* character behaviour in moral terms as well. At the same time, however, he privileges moral evaluation to such an extent that a narrative’s intelligibility is contingent on an “appropriate” moral response to a situation. “Someone who does not feel appalled at the goings-on in *King Lear* simply does not understand the play. Our interest in the death of Cordelia is not simply an abstract interest in the function it may have in the symbolic weave or in a narrative scheme” (Palmer 1992, 106). Why might these positions be regarded as excessive and problematic? There are two important reasons.

Firstly, insisting upon our necessarily “humane comprehension” of narrative events effectively denies the moral worth of texts whose authors intend to sympathetically represent action that is conventionally *immoral*. Such works generate an *intended perversity*, whereby the audience reads *with* the immoral grain of the text. I would also hazard to say that texts that are more or less moral by design vastly outnumber these purposefully perverse texts, and that the perverse text is more likely to be an avant-garde work of fiction than a popular one. The most notorious examples would include the more pornographic works of the Marquis de Sade (ie. *Justine*), or the films of Kenneth Anger (ie. *Scorpio Rising*). Neither Carroll nor Palmer is willing to contemplate the value of works that promote sympathetic allegiance with a perverse moral position. I will elaborate on and interrogate such obstinacy shortly, but suffice to

⁶ This reference to a real-world system of values for the purposes of narrative comprehension appears to be such an automatic cognitive link that it hardly seems worth mentioning. However, films frequently require us to suspend this reference by representing behaviour that is not comprehensible by referring to analogous real-world models. Entire genres – slapstick comedy in particular – would be rendered incomprehensible by inappropriately assessing its violence by the standards of verisimilitude.

say for the moment that an insistence on the “humane comprehension” of narrative events discounts works whose structural integrity relies upon an audience’s “*inhumane comprehension*” of events.

Secondly, and more crucially, by subjecting moral engagement with characters to the dictates of prescribed reading, such critics completely discount the possibility of reading characters *against* the moral grain. Critics like Carroll and Palmer deny the potential authority of an *unintended* perverse reading: *a second-order evaluation of character and concomitant response that disagrees with the evaluation and response suggested by a text*. Unlike intended perversity, a first-order evaluation whereby one responds with sympathy to villains who are sympathetically represented, unintended perversity is a sympathetic response (or, one that is at least *positive* to some degree) to a figure morally condemned by the text. For example, let us assume that Roman Polanski “intended” the viewer to be disgusted by the corrupt and incestuous patriarch, Noah Cross (John Huston) in *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974). At the same time, we can conceive of a hypothetical viewer that is willing to recognise *Chinatown*’s negative moral assessment of Cross, but is unwilling to share this assessment. Such a viewer might insist on the separation of political corruption and incest as distinct moral matters in spite of the film’s conflation of the two. Another viewer might locate a more significant act of villainy elsewhere, perhaps within the person of the “hero,” Jake Gittes (Jack Nicholson), whose hubris is a catalyst for disaster. A third might even be unwilling to credit Evelyn’s (Faye Dunaway) allegations against her father given her unstable personality.

Naturally, we are able to recognise a film’s insistence that we regard a character’s behaviour as immoral, *but we do not have to share this evaluation* in order to understand the narrative. Sometimes, a viewer may not have much convincing ground for dissension. I have referenced *Chinatown* deliberately as a film featuring a character whose villainy seems unequivocal. For Carroll and Palmer might argue that the dissident viewers mentioned above still have not offered any persuasive arguments as to why they should not assent to the film’s depiction of Cross as evil. After all, it is hard to argue that Cross’ acts of graft, incest, and second-degree murder are somehow not immoral. Even then, such viewers should not be persuaded that their lack of repugnance toward Cross should be regarded as “incorrect” and a failure to “understand” the narrative of *Chinatown*. One must be careful (as Carroll and Palmer

are not) in distinguishing between 1) being able to *comprehend* the narrative based on the morally informed and emotionally charged behaviour of the characters and 2) bringing *our own* moral evaluations and emotions into play. Moral comprehension is not equipped with the causality to effect moral allegiance, nor is the “success” of a work conditional on the viewer’s willingness to bring his morally-determined emotional response into an alignment with the work’s “intended” response. Why *must* one be *moved* in a particular way in order for a tragedy to be intelligible? Our hypothetical viewers might be quite *unmoved* by Cross’ transgressions and still comprehend the work. At the most, one might say that these viewers would not experience the full emotional impact of a narrative’s tragic events, but such a “cold” response does not prohibit such “insensitive” viewers from recognising or crediting the work as a tragedy.

Such a lack of outrage should not be taken as a sign of moral apathy or incapacity. In fact, *the very absence of an ethical precept’s ability to cause an emotional response* – especially a response that moralists such as Carroll and Palmer would like to deem “appropriate” – is a major factor in a perverse response to villainy, both intended and unintended. Indeed, villains often represent one of the *pleasurable* aspects of the viewing experience. Referring again to our *Chinatown* scenario, one can imagine viewers who are not only unmoved by Cross’ villainy, but obtain some kind of gratification from the character. In a sense, it would seem that these viewers are not unlike the villainous characters with whom they pleasurably engage, in that their responses seem to be deliberately rebellious violations of the “good” viewing practices valorized by moralist critics. But these viewers are not necessarily devoid of any sense of morality. While some critics might like to denounce the perverse viewer roundly, I would argue that a pleasurable moral engagement with a villainous character – whether it be intended or unintended – should not be condemned uniformly.

At the heart of my study, then, is an examination of the ethical issues at stake in what appears to be the problematic *allegiance* with characters the likes of whom we would not wish to associate with in real life. What exactly do we mean by allegiance? Roughly speaking, it is *the morally-informed emotional valence that a viewer develops in relation to a character* – a degree of attraction or aversion that arises out of the complex and intertwining systems of cognition and evaluation that comprise one’s engagement with represented individuals. In aesthetics, a good number of contemporary philosophers have attempted to define and account for this valence.

Prominent contributors to the explication of moral interactions with fiction include Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie, Berys Gaut, Peter Lamarque, Colin McGinn, Martha Nussbaum, Colin Radford, Murray Smith and Kendall Walton, and I will be invoking their work throughout my study. In addition, efforts to account for readers' sympathetic and antipathetic responses to fictional characters have been undertaken by seminal literary theorists such as Wayne C. Booth, Seymour Chatman, Wolfgang Iser and Frank Palmer. And yet, similar attempts to address the formation of a *viewer's* moral sympathies have not received comparable attention in film studies.

As I intimated earlier, film theory has not typically addressed viewers' evaluative engagement with characters in a fashion comparable to approaches taken in philosophy and literary studies. Before Murray Smith's cognitivist investigation of sympathy in *Engaging Characters*, few film theorists addressed viewers' moral assessment of filmic characters in an explicit or systematic fashion. I have chosen to adopt his coinage of the term "allegiance" nominally, as it functions as a convenient shorthand for the morally-informed emotional valence that I wish to analyse at some length. Each of the theorists cited above have provided their own explication of our moral interaction with fiction, but the designation "allegiance" is the most concise and is comprised specifically with the cinema in mind. For Smith, "allegiance denotes that level of engagement at which spectators respond sympathetically or antipathetically towards a character or group of characters" (Smith 1995, 62). What is of interest to me here are the complexities involved in formulating a sympathetic disposition towards an individual with whom one (ostensibly) ought *not* to sympathise. Therefore, my own contribution to the tradition cultivated by these cognitive theorists, aestheticians, and moral critics will be to delineate my own conditions of problematic – or "perverse" – allegiance with a fundamentally immoral character.

The five conditions of this allegiance are as follows. 1) The perverse viewer will respond sympathetically towards an immoral character because of – *and not in spite of* – their villainous nature.⁷ 2) While one's evaluation of the villain may yield some meritorious traits – especially in comparison to other character within the fiction – the

⁷ This is a crucial distinction upon which I will be expanding in the final chapter. My assertion also represents a fundamental divergence from the position forwarded by the majority of philosophers and theorists who have addressed similar issues, including Smith – that our sympathy for immoral characters occurs in spite of their wickedness.

viewer may not necessarily find those traits to be desirable. For although the vicarious pleasure of experiencing illicit traits that we might admire can form the basis of allegiance, it does not automatically follow that we secretly wish to obtain the villainous qualities to which we respond sympathetically. 3) A perverse evaluation also prompts an emotional arousal for the viewer, but specifically, one that is *pleasurable*. 4) The intensity of emotion need not be outright elation, and it will more than likely be mingled with other conflicting emotions, especially during sequences in which the villain's transgressions actually occur. 5) Simultaneously, these emotional valences are subject to the assessment of a character's actions as immoral within a narrative framework that supports evaluations of that nature.

To illustrate these conditions, let us briefly consider an unintended perverse allegiance with Eve Harrington (Anne Baxter) in the film *All About Eve* (Joseph L. Mankiewicz, 1950). Here, the perverse viewer would ally herself with the treacherous actress *because* of her conniving nature and might even sympathise with her efforts to supplant Margo Channing (Bette Davis) as *the* Queen of Broadway (condition 1). Although the viewer might admire Eve for her tenacity and deviousness, she does not necessarily wish to cultivate these traits herself (condition 2). Eve's false face as Margot's ardent admirer gradually slips away to reveal her ruthlessly ambitious nature, and as it does so, the viewer might respond to the exposition of Eve's true colours with a certain degree of relish (condition 3). This gratification is not necessarily tantamount to sharing Eve's self-satisfied triumph as she ascends to the top of her profession, and cultivating an allegiance with the treacherous *prima donna* does not prevent the viewer from feeling a twinge of sympathy for Margot as she gives up her career (condition 4). The pleasure one takes in Eve as she lies, cheats, and schemes her way to success is dependent upon one's nomination of her as a villain according to the values established both within the film and outside the text: that establishing a "friendship" under false pretences for the sole purpose of personal advancement is deplorable (condition 5).

I have described this allegiance as problematic, or "perverse," because it presents a kind of moral paradox. That is, despite the strong prohibitions against condoning behaviour one knows to be morally despicable, one is somehow still able to form a pleasurable allegiance with an immoral character. It is perhaps unsurprising that this phenomenon of narrative art has drawn protests from moralist critics throughout history, who claim that perverse allegiance reflects badly on both the work and/or the

reader/spectator in question. Such reactions are considered to be so shockingly inappropriate by some theorists that they are compelled to dismiss them as being fundamentally flawed. Writing on adolescent horror fans, psychologist Dolf Zillman insists that their “overt amusement might then be misattributed to cinematic horror, leading to the assessment that horror is amusing” (Zillman 1998, 198). I have opened up space for the prospect that a chainsaw-wielding maniac might actually be very funny indeed, and that there is nothing morally “wrong” with finding him amusing – even perhaps somewhat “attractive” in his ability to befoul the sanitised world of the teenaged protagonists. One of the main purposes of my study will be to demonstrate that viewers who ally themselves with a villain are not necessarily “bad” viewers, and that there may even be moral value in undertaking such a perverse viewing position.

In Pursuit of Immorality: Concerns and Limitations

By investigating the pleasures of villainy, I am ultimately concerned with the means by which sympathetic allegiance with an immoral character might be used towards the acquisition of self-knowledge, and specifically, how it might impact upon one’s perception of one’s own moral identity. Admittedly, the path to this knowledge is not always straightforward, and considering the diverse forms of villainy to be found in the cinema, such circuitousness is to be expected. Accordingly, my own approach will draw on a wide diversity of both critical and philosophical conceptions of character, imaginative engagement, and the moral apprehension of fiction.

Naturally, there will be some necessary limitations. Firstly, each chapter will refer to a variety of different films from different periods in the history of Hollywood cinema. I shall primarily deal with American cinema, not because the villain is most closely associated with the Hollywood film (the villain respects no national boundary), but for the purposes of simplification and because it is the cinema with which I am most familiar. Discussing the villain within a cross-cultural context would cause an already broad study to become nigh unmanageable. Again, in the interest of variety, not only will I be drawing examples from films that span nearly the entire history of American cinema, but I will be considering the villain cross-genericallly. Certain villains will be evaluated within the constraints of their respective genres, but their functionality will also be evaluated beyond their generic limitations. I shall determine what links villains from differing genres regardless of their respective generic context.

It should be obvious from the breadth of my study that this will not be a sociological approach to viewers' engagement with characters. While the insights of reception studies have made indispensable links between an audiences' context and its means of experiencing narrative film, I am more concerned with the basic grounds of character engagement. The historical and cultural context of one's viewing position naturally plays an integral part in one's experience of the cinema, but in its emphasis on context, reception studies does not often privilege the nature of the experience itself. My project focuses on the mechanics of the viewing process rather than the particulars of the situation in which the process takes place. Although my claims will be based on the premise that no two viewers will engage with a character the same way, I generally will not be considering how *specific* audiences in *particular* situations evaluate a villain.

Furthermore, while one should make a distinction between the viewing subject (the "real" individual watching the film) and the viewing position (the "hypothetical" attitude adopted in watching the film), I would argue that this "real/hypothetical" dichotomy is not an entirely accurate one.⁸ While historical materialists seek to engage in the receptive practices of "actual" viewers, it is difficult to articulate precisely the viewing processes of real spectators, especially those at a substantial historical remove. Their methodology is in some ways highly speculative. As vital as reception studies is, it can only give an approximation of what it must be "like" to be a member of a particular audience. In this sense, all viewers are "hypothetical." Describing the viewing practices of any specific audience is necessarily an act of imaginative reconstruction in which film historians compile factual evidence in order to paint a portrait of a proposed authentic cinematic experience. This materialist enterprise is actually reliant on the same imaginative principles as the theorizing of structurally based viewing positions and phenomenological descriptions of the viewing process. Rather than separate the "real" from the "hypothetical" viewer, I would like to underline the similarity which binds the two constructs together: in discussing viewers, we are necessarily talking about the *imaginative* engagement with fiction that constitutes the viewing process. I am interested in examining the person one is asked to "become" as a spectator, a subject that may drastically differ from one's real world position.

⁸ The terms "real" and "hypothetical" are borrowed from Wolfgang Iser's differentiation between readers and reading positions (Iser 1978, 27).

Additionally, because my interest in the villain is not primarily sociological, I will also not be considering the ways in which identity politics or ideology in general impact upon the representation or reception of the character type either. As much as issues of class, gender, race, and sexuality undoubtedly influence representations of villainy, they must remain beyond the limits of my study. This decision arises from a (potentially controversial) desire to consider villainy beyond the familiar province of political analysis. Murray Pomerance has noted that “two dangers” face theorists who wish to discuss cinematic representations of evil: 1) that one may be too invested in the values of a given hegemony to recognize the social conventionality of what one assumes to be a “natural” vice, and 2) that one conversely might ignore factors that contribute to the creation and reception of villainous representations that are not strictly ideological (Pomerance 2004, 10). Although I regret omitting a sustained analysis of the means by which the ideological values of a given hegemony inform the representation of villainy, I hope to provide for some of those other factors that “are not strictly ideological.”

Such an omission is doubly regrettable given the etymology of the term “villain,” which originates from the French “*vilain*”: a serf or labourer confined to the land on which he worked. As a term of abuse, the term originally had greater social or class significance than moral. And while such negative connotations reinforced class hatred at the expense of the socially disenfranchised (they articulated the noble’s disgust at the lowliness of the labourer), it is interesting to note how the term villainy now tends to be readily associated with the socially privileged, especially in the cinema. Even a brief scan of Georgette Fox’s sampling of Hollywood villains from 1930 to 1997 in her book, *Masters of Evil*, reveals that 85 of the 130 individuals noted are wealthy or in positions of social influence.⁹ As John Belton notes, “Hollywood has never attempted to glamorise bankers, industrialists, and stock speculators,” but true to the spirit of American capitalism, “their villainy is more often seen in terms of individual greed than of class oppression” (Belton 1994, 234). So, even though the term itself has its origins within the politicised discourse of socio-economic organisation, I will not be concerning myself with such discourse. That is to say, an analysis of the transformations of villainy according to the fluctuations of historical horizons and social conditions will not be of

⁹ For further details, see Georgette S. Fox, *Masters of Evil: A Viewer’s Guide to Cinematic Archvillains* (Nottingham: Borgo Press, 1999).

great concern here. Or, as Pomerance indicates, “while there is plenty of ideology around us, there is not only ideology” (Pomerance 2004, 10).

Lest I be accused of failing to adequately avoid the first of Pomerance’s aforementioned “dangers,” let it be clear that I am *not* removing my consideration of ethics from the concrete grounds of a socio-political context altogether. I do support the Marxist contention that ethics tends to universalise dominant ideologies into a binary system of moral oppositions; thus, the characteristics of those who are *Other* to particular hegemonies are denoted as “immoral” or even “evil.” Not only is morality perceived as an instrument serving the status quo, but placing morality within the sphere of absolutism (the “Moral Law”), or worse, transcendentalism (divine provenance) is simply a way of naturalizing dominant, bourgeois ideology. But at its most aggressive, Marxist theory posits that ethics is basically “reactionary” and is nought but “a means of resisting change” (Parker 1994, 31). According to this judgemental structure, “the point of ethics is to confirm hegemonic power” and thus, “no transcendence of this rigid pattern is conceivable within it. Only political change can achieve that” (ibid, 31).

On the one hand, I am absolutely sympathetic to the idea that morality should be recognised as invented regulations that serve particular social interests, and therefore adapt and change over time.¹⁰ My decision to limit my investigations to American cinema is a token of my respect for the idea that morality is largely (but *not* entirely) culturally and socially informed. On the other hand, the hardline Marxist’s critique of ethics is far too sweeping in its scope. It would be difficult to argue that moral prohibitions against murder, for example, are “reactionary” and only serve limited interests. More importantly, morality is not always the by-product of false consciousness, as ethical dictums are necessarily *a priori* to the formation of a society’s economic base.

Nonetheless, what I will be drawing from the more politically-minded social theorists is an emphasis on how villains may be “read against the grain” of the film, and more importantly, the affinities between the villain and the “Other.” Both reading against the grain and perverse allegiance represent strategies by which socially aggrieved groups may undermine the dominant ideology that positions them in opposition to itself. Indeed, the privileged position of power a villain occupies within a

¹⁰ A position first advanced by Nietzsche in *The Genealogy of Morals*.

filmic text might prove especially attractive to such viewers. My interest in the Other lies in the ways in which contemporary conceptions of morality tend to alienate – render Other – immorality from the individual subject. But like certain kinds of subject-position theory, I am also interested in proposing a strategy by which the alienated Other can be reintegrated, and will forward such a strategy in my study's final chapter.¹¹

As a final note, I should indicate that my use of the term "morality" presupposes a Western and rather homogenous view of ethics. That is, I am assuming that the viewers of the films I will be referencing recognise the implicit influence of Greco-Roman and (in turn) Judeo-Christian values on the behaviour of fictional characters, and also abide by such imperatives themselves. One does not have to consider oneself a practicing Christian by any stretch of the imagination, but one should at least be willing to accredit the still very palpable influence of Judeo-Christian ethics on the prevalent Western value system. I do not propose that American films have a homogenous moral structure, but it seems clear that the ethics that inform dramatic action in American cinema are often residually Judeo-Christian by nature (Smith 1995, 213). Admittedly, my own upbringing as a Roman Catholic has probably influenced my characterization of the films' moral structures, but I hope that my analyses will escape the limitations of a definitively Catholic viewing position.

Thus, in the interest of maintaining multiple entry points into an engagement with a villain, I have organised my study into a roughly tripartite structure. Each of the three sections will consider the villain's use-value from a particular analytical position: Chapters One and Two are concerned with the character's function within a work as a textual unit; Chapters Three and Four will consider how viewers might allot the villain an entirely different functional role than the one "preferred" by the text; and Chapters Five and Six offer various ways of understanding how the villain's role extends beyond a narratologically functional level to engage a viewer's moral imagination. In short, I hope to make explicit the means by which a structural consideration of villainy might lead one to reflect upon one's moral engagement with such characters.

Chapter One primarily will consider the textual construction of villainy. The central questions under consideration will be how and why films make use of villains.

¹¹ David Bordwell identifies subject-position theories as those that determine how the subject is determined by either ideology or the unconscious, and seek to ask, "What are the social and psychic functions of cinema?" (Bordwell 1996, 6).

What structural factors are involved in the representation of villainy? How might the character be evaluated in relation to its place within a larger narrative structure? In what sense do the film's representational strategies contribute to a viewer's evaluation of the villainous character? Since the chapter's examination of the character is structural, I will be drawing upon the early writings of Roland Barthes, as well as other structuralist critics such as Claude Bremond, A. J. Greimas and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan.

Following from these structural concerns, Chapter Two will consider the types of narrative structures that make use of villains. As both an agent in and an element of the narrative, the villain has a unique influence upon the warp and weave of a film's form. Does the representation of villainy change functionally according to the kind of film narrative in which such a character appears? What relations might she have with the hero? How might she shape the movement of the narrative itself? My analyses of the memorable villains of *The Wizard of Oz* (Victor Fleming, 1939) and *American Psycho* (Mary Harron, 2000) will explore how the characters' instrumental positions within both films contribute to their appeal. The structural narratology of the critics mentioned above will continue to play a part here, but I also draw on the more strictly filmic narratology of Seymour Chatman, as well as Murray Smith's writings on the cinematic construction of character.

Chapter Three shifts the focus from the textual operations of the film to the viewer and the viewing process itself. The potential differences of evaluation between a film's and a viewer's assessment of character will be examined here. By what means does a viewer nominate a villain? Why might her evaluation of the villainous character differ from the film's evaluation? *White Heat* (Raoul Walsh, 1949) depicts a villain who offers unique challenges to both the evaluation of character and one's subsequent formation of an allegiance with them, and my consideration of the film will highlight the particular impact these processes of engagement might have upon a viewer. Barthes will again figure prominently here, but the movement away from the limits of structuralism that occurs in his later work will correspondingly support this chapter's shift in focus from the work to the viewer.

With the groundwork established for a closer examination of the villain's engagement of viewers' moral faculties, the remaining chapters explore the moral problems that seem to be posed by perverse allegiances. Chapter Four suggests that the process whereby a viewer nominates a film's villain is actually an implicit act of self-

evaluation. What could the evaluation of the villain mean for a viewer's own value system? Does evaluation inform one's empathic feelings towards an immoral character? Most importantly, how does one come to better understand the value of particular moral precepts through empathically imagining a villain's mind-set? With reference to the cognitive theory and philosophy of Peter Goldie, Wolfgang Iser, Adam Newton and others, we will examine the workings of empathetic and sympathetic engagement with wrongdoers from various texts.

Since the gratification we obtained from emotionally and morally interacting with representations of villainy seems to compromise our integrity as moral persons, Chapter Five advances an imaginative position that permits us to enjoy their transgressions guiltlessly. How might our moral responses to filmic villains differ from our real-life responses to immoral individuals? What kind of viewing position must we adopt in order to enjoy enactments of immorality? Why might certain depictions of villainy be considered pleasurable despite their almost overwhelming evocation of evil? One possible solution to the "problems" of villainy will be suggested by considering the theatrical proclivities of a fading starlet in *Sunset Boulevard* (Billy Wilder, 1950). The notion of "simulation" discussed by Gregory Currie, Kendall Walton and Richard Moran will factor heavily here.

The ramifications of a viewer's moral engagement with a villainous character will have their most explicit articulation in Chapter Five. Here, I will be offering two further resolutions to the moral dilemma represented by the taking of pleasure in villainy – resolutions in which the potential for empathic knowledge is at its greatest. Is there positive value to be found in allying oneself with the villain? How might the viewer meet the villain's challenges to the values of the (possibly specious) good? What kind of self-knowledge might the villain ultimately allow a viewer to recognise? Because this chapter is the most overtly philosophical of the thesis, the ethical and theological writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Gustav Jung will be of great import to my discussions here. While the unholy protagonists of *Silence of the Lambs* (Jonathan Demme, 1992), *Hannibal* (Ridley Scott, 2001) and *The Night of the Hunter* (Charles Laughton, 1955) might appear to be unlikely candidates for such weighty moral matters, I hope to demonstrate that viewers potentially have much to learn from the examples set by a cannibalistic aesthete and a murderous preacher. More importantly, the "lessons" they teach are a far cry from the well-mannered "appropriate

responses” forwarded by most moralist critics. However and whatever we might learn from such conventionally moral responses, perhaps we also benefit from learning the gentle art of making enemies and discovering the value of misbehaviour.

By celebrating these various hellraisers, man-eaters, and all-purpose troublemakers, I certainly hope that my efforts will not be equated with the obsessions of individuals who find real-life instances of evil to be exotic and seductively enigmatic – not unlike the mania of an all-American boy for an ex-SS *kommandant*’s tales of horror in *Apt Pupil* (Bryan Singer, 1999). Re-mystifying evil is not my intent, but neither do I wish to emulate the pat, conservative conclusions drawn by many popular films: that morally abhorrent individuals are “just plain Evil” and that their seductiveness is dangerous and thus to be avoided. Such a position is exemplified by the mindlessness of films like *Kalifornia* (Dominic Sena, 1993), which resort to a kind of Gumpism – “evil is as evil does” – in order to “explain” the motivations of their heavies. To thoughtlessly aggrandise the villain or simply to dismiss him are both all too common errors. We stand to profit morally from the careful evaluation of villainous characters, from risking the dangers of a measure of sympathy for the devil.

Chapter One

Monster Making: Textuality and the Filmic Villain

LENA: *I was completely fascinated by the way your villain...*

ISOBEL: *My villain? My hero, you mean. I always think of my murderers as heroes.*
- Suspicion (Alfred Hitchcock, 1941)

It is no great exaggeration to claim that part of Hitchcock's genius can be attributed to his deft handling of the varied deviants, psychopaths and murderers that appear throughout his work. "The better the villain, the better the film," he has asserted, recognising the integral role a well-defined evildoer plays within a successful drama (qtd. in Fischhoff 1996, 45). In *Suspicion*, Isobel Sedbusk (Auriol Lee) – an elderly writer of detective potboilers – briefly acts as the director's spokesperson for the championing of the malefactor. Her election of the villain as the principal protagonist takes on an amusing resonance given the filmmaker's later predilection for choosing unwholesome individuals as the agents whose immoral imperatives propel the narrative's direction. In fact, his first bona fide masterpiece, *Shadow of a Doubt* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1943) – produced less than two years later – is structured around the relationship between a young girl and her uncle, whom she correctly suspects of being a serial killer. As an actual protagonist, then, the villain plays a key role in the construction of a filmic narrative and certainly in a viewer's enjoyment of a memorable one. At its most basic level, the figure of the villain occupies a *functional* position within a narrative and it is my purpose within this chapter to trace out this functionality by examining this character-type as a structural device.

At the same time, however, the concept of "villainy" transcends the limits of strict functionality: the term both indicates what a represented person is expected to *do* and describes the kind of individual that person *is*. A secondary objective of this chapter will therefore be to outline the means by which films textually represent villainy as a character *trait*. Descriptions of characters are necessarily accompanied by *evaluative* discourse, and so, "villainy" is a way of describing the defining attributes of particular characters. Because the term is not value-neutral, I would therefore also like to indicate the textual strategies by which a film seeks to prime the evaluation of a character as "villainous," or reinforce already existing presuppositions.

Textually speaking, villainy is triadic: it is a character function, trait, and the result of evaluative considerations. In this first section, I will consider these three

particular aspects of filmic characters: 1) their *structural features* in a film text (how do they serve a filmic narrative?); 2) their *textual indicators* (how are they described or constructed by a film?) and; 3) their *attitudinal aspects* (how do they invite particular responses from viewers?). Before we assess her morally as a “possible person,” the villain will be investigated as a particular kind of character *type* taken from a range of possible textual positions – that is, as a construction of the text with a specific purpose. Remembering that only certain kinds of films will employ villains is important. The villainous character is not a universal category or type, nor is it a necessary structural component of a text. Considering the villain’s relation to her respective narrative form is the purpose of this chapter.

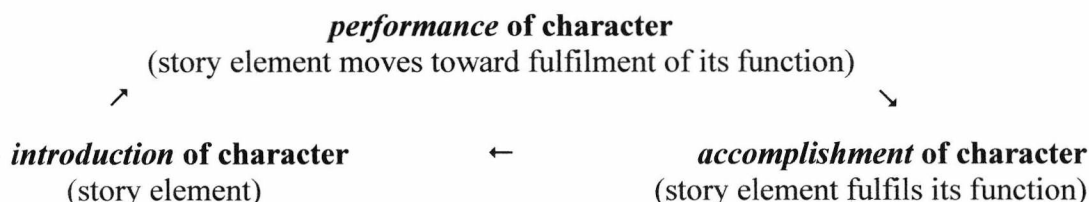
Purposeful Evil: Villainy as a Narrative Function

To begin with, I shall posit that the villain is a structural feature within particular texts. Before considering him as a subject position, a “possible person,” or even a character, it is necessary to address his narratological role in a text. All elements, or units in a text, including characters, are *functional*: they have a specific role, or meaning within the narrative and contribute to its progression. According to Roland Barthes, there are three levels of description in a narrative work: *functions*, *actions*, and *narration*. Expanding on the earlier ideas of Vladimir Propp, Barthes writes: “The essence of a function is...the seed that it sows in the narrative, planting an element that will come to fruition later - either on the same level or elsewhere, on another level” (Barthes 1966, 49). While actions and narration will certainly come into play later in the cinematic representation of villain, for the moment, I would like to concentrate on the *function* of the villain.

In naming a character, or, to be more precise, by identifying their position within the narrative, one assigns them a role and hence, a function. This function may be considered as distinct from whatever personal idiosyncrasies they may possess as characters – traits *describe* a character, function gives a character structural *purpose*. More often, however, functions and traits overlap, especially in classical Hollywood cinema. Laurie Starr’s (Peggy Cummings) tendency to shoot first and ask questions later in *Gun Crazy* (Joseph H. Lewis, 1950) is one of the particular traits that define her personality. At the same time, the structural function of this trait is to serve as the undoing of both her and her lover-cum-partner-in-crime, Bart Tare (John Dall),

especially after she hastily shoots a woman during their elaborately planned final hold-up, thus intensifying the authorities' attempts to apprehend the pair. In this sense, the introduction of a character to a narrative is never incidental; characters always carry with them bundles of semantic meaning (*semes*) that are integral to a narrative's structural totality.

In tracing out the narrative function of character in this manner, we can observe the following cyclical chain:



A character is introduced as a story element with a particular function. The element moves toward the fulfilment of its function through the actions of the character until finally achieving its desired aim. Furthermore, the performance of a character-function can generate new characters with functions of their own. To use a familiar example, Darth Vader (David Prowse) – one of the principal villains in *Star Wars* (George Lucas, 1977) – appears quite early in the film and is immediately introduced as a high ranking official (a Lord, no less) within an oppressive imperial order that the heroic Rebels are fighting to overthrow. Vader's performance as an integral story element is to oversee the construction of the Empire's planet-destroying battle station, the Death Star, and to compel a captive Princess Leia (Carrie Fisher) to divulge the whereabouts of the Rebels' secret headquarters. This villainous performance necessitates the introduction of new character-elements – particularly the hero, young Luke Skywalker (Mark Hamill), who must rescue the Princess and assist the Rebels in their assault on the Death Star.¹

One of the important things to note about a character's function is that it is not always *necessarily* fulfilled. An introduced act need not be actualised, for example, nor need it eventually attain its goal. Indeed, in order for Hollywood's general mandate for

¹ We can see how this model has similarities to one devised by Claude Bremond, in which a narrative's basic generative units (functions) are grouped together in "elementary sequences" that consist of the following textual elements: 1) the introduction of an act that must be carried out or a goal that must be achieved; 2) the actualisation of this event; and 3) the attained result (Bremond 1966, 62-63).

a “happy ending” to reach fruition, the actualisation of a villainous act must *not* attain a final result in which the ambitions of the villain are realised at the expense of the hero’s. Referring again to *Star Wars*, it is actually *functionally* necessary for Luke’s ally, Han Solo (Harrison Ford) to prevent Vader from shooting down Luke’s X-Wing during the final assault on the Death Star at the film’s climax. Naturally, if Vader’s functional efforts had succeeded, the destruction of the Death Star would have been prevented and the *Star Wars* saga would have been denied its next two instalments.

Thus, each character has a narratively functional role. Any narrative is structurally comprised of *dramatis personae* who function as narrative units generating the events of the story (as well as further character-functions) in a complex web of endeavours and resistance. A character will partly be identified or described depending on his functional *role* – how his presence and actions affect the progression of the narrative. The role of the villain is particularly complex in itself, and differs depending on the type of narrative in which she appears. I shall discuss the principal roles the villain plays and the methods by which they are played out in the next chapter.

“Are You a Good Witch, or a Bad Witch?” – Villainy as Character Trait

I mentioned earlier that character function must be differentiated from character traits (although the two are not entirely mutually exclusive). James Phelan importantly distinguishes between a character’s dimensions (or, what I have called “traits”) and her functions as relative to the text’s *progression*: “a dimension is an attribute a character may be said to possess when that character is considered in isolation from the work in which he or she appears. A function is a particular application of that attribute made by the text through its developing structure” (Phelan 1989, 9). During reception, the recognition of a character and the subsequent evaluation of her role is an ongoing process. As I indicated with my example drawn from *Gun Crazy*, in coming to evaluate a character trait, a viewer may simultaneously recognise its potentiality as a functional unit. That is, a character is introduced with particular attributes whose functional roles are always-already *latent* and are brought out during the progress of viewing or reading. Before we come to recognize the portentousness of a particular trait, it is already working towards the ultimate fulfilment of its function.

Let us turn to the filmic example of *Lolita* (Stanley Kubrick, 1961) in which we are invited to recognize one of the central characters, Humbert Humbert (James Mason),

as an intellectual and aesthete. As evidence to support this evaluative interpretation of his character, the viewer is presented with several examples: Humbert's own admission of being a man of "taste"; the frequent presentation of Humbert reading or the scene in which he gives a lecture to Lolita (Sue Lyon) on Edgar Allen Poe's poetry; his soft-spoken and grammatically flawless means of expression compared to the whingeing slang of Charlotte Haze (Shelley Winters); and the cool, measured performance of James Mason. More importantly, the functionality of these dimensions also becomes apparent. In the deployment of his epicurean sensibilities, Humbert will attempt to construct a personal system of aesthetic value in order to "explain" his obsession with his fourteen-year-old "nymphet." Throughout the film, the increasingly obsessive Humbert continually endeavours to aestheticize Lolita and his own debauchery.

Thus, we may recognise how a character's dimensions may take on specific functional roles. Unlike many structuralists, Phelan does not want to completely disassociate the humanistic trace of these character attributes from their functional role. Other contemporary critics such as Lloyd Michaels are similarly engaged in a conception of character that "involves reconciling the humanist account of character as the representation of the autonomous self with the structuralist emphasis on textuality, a process which has led me to an understanding of character not as an *empty* signifier but as a *fleeting* one" (Michaels 1998, xvi). Michaels believes that film characters exist along a continuum of presence and absence, which – like Phelan's idea of literary characters – "ultimately involves both textual construction and readerly reconstruction" (Michaels 1998, 4).² Thus, a trait is both a textual and extratextual agglomerate.

Another way of determining the differences between functions and traits is to consider the former to be primarily textual, while the latter has both textual and "reflective" capacities. In describing the nature of fictional persons, Phelan also distinguishes between the *mimetic* and *thematic* components of character. To consider a character's individual personality is to consider him mimetically, that is, as an "individual." On the other hand, to conceive of a character's function is to read that character thematically – as a "representative entity" (Phelan 1989, 13). From Phelan's

² It is not a consideration of characters as "phantoms" that I wish to develop; rather, it is the latter half of Michaels' idea, which considers "readerly reconstruction" that will become important in Chapter 3.

point of view, “villainy” would be a textual descriptor indicative of a particular narrative role and thus, to nominate a character as the villain is to consider such a component of their “personality” thematically, or as a structural element.

In *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (John Ford, 1962) for example, Liberty’s (Lee Marvin) “villainy” is in one sense an adjective that concisely describes, or gives a name to the man’s destructive, bullying, and murderous behaviour, thus summarising his general disposition. In another sense, Liberty’s villainy is narratively functional. It provides the grounds for the ethical dispute between Ransom Stoddard (James Stewart) and Tom Doniphon (John Wayne): should Liberty be apprehended by the fledgling but largely ineffectual legal system supported by Stoddard or given a taste of frontier justice from Doniphon, an aging vigilante? One might also argue that Liberty provides his two antagonists with the means to work out their differing conceptions of masculinity, honour, and authority in the context of a Wild West growing increasingly “tame” and that the narrative of *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* is primarily about this conflict. Narratively speaking, then, it is helpful to discriminate between *structural* (“thematic”) and *descriptive* (“mimetic”) narrative units in our discussions. Mimetically speaking, villainy is the evaluative adjective that describes Liberty’s behaviour, but is also a thematic narrative unit in that it serves a functional purpose within the text.

However, I have yet to indicate the precise *means* by which a film may “describe” a character. Certain filmic elements are used to demarcate a character as villainous in the same spirit as adjectives are used to describe a villain in literature, but exactly how does a film represent a character as villainous without the direct means of prose’s adjectival descriptors? How is villainy textually demarcated in film narratives?

The Devil is in the Details: The Representation of Character

The textual assignation of particular traits is what we mean by the narrative’s *representation* of character. In literary fiction, there are two basic textual indicators of character: 1) *direct definition* and 2) *indirect presentation*. In the first case, the “naming of a character’s qualities counts as direct characterization only if it proceeds from the most authoritative voice in the text” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 60). Generally, in a literary text, it is the narrator who wields the authority to directly identify a character’s dominant traits, but in a filmic text, there is generally no localised or immediately apparent authority to establish such “naming.” That is to say, there is often no literal

narrative voice in films that describes a character, and to endow the camera itself with the same authority as literary narration is a far too problematic enterprise. In J. K. Rowling's novel, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, we may rely on the authority of the omniscient narrative voice to describe unpleasant characters, such as Professor Severus Snape, whose eyes are "cold and empty and made you think of dark tunnels" (Rowling 1997, 102). In Chris Columbus' 2001 adaptation of the novel, however, we are lead towards an appropriately congruent assessment of Snape (Alan Rickman) through other, more distinctly cinematic techniques. There are no precise filmic analogues for adjectives, and thus, a film's textual indicators of character are always, in a sense, "indirect."

As Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan explains, "a presentation is indirect when rather than mentioning a trait, it displays and exemplifies it in various ways" (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 61). Indirect presentation relies on action, speech, environment, and external appearance – all of which require some degree of interpretation in their contribution toward the delineation of character (ibid, 63-67). Recognising a character as villainous requires a number of these informants to assist a viewer in reaching said conclusion. Because cinematic narration is not able to apply adjectives to a character in the same "direct" manner as prose, it must therefore always visibly *exemplify* these traits in some way. Within a Pearl White serial – *The Perils of Pauline* (Louis J. Gasnier & Donald MacKenzie, 1914), say – a deformity, a black costume, a tendency to sneer, an upturned moustache are possible informants that may help us to recognise a villain. In keeping with melodrama's appropriation of phrenology in the use of *typage*, we have the idea of the villainous, or "criminal" physiognomy, based on some kind of abnormality (a hump, a scar, a disfigurement) or excess (physical size, singularity of expression, emphasis on a particular movement or gesture).

This is not to say that the cinema represents its characters "indirectly" in exactly the same way that literature does; film has no equivalent alternative means of representation. Instead, when presented with the behaviour of a character, the external milieu in which the character's actions are performed, and the character's physical countenance, the viewer is expected to process this additive information and synthesize an appropriate evaluation of the character to whom it applies. And of course, cinematic representations of villainy are not restricted to purely physical and behavioural indicators of character; indicators of character can be derived from representations of a

character's mental activity or interiority. These inside views are most typically conveyed through their emotional manifestations (which we expect the actor playing the character to successfully convey), voice-over narration, and through various other narrational cues that will be discussed shortly. Naturally, like external indicators of character, evocations of a character's private self (with the exception of voice-overs) are also typically dependent upon a degree of interpretive activity on the viewer's part. As Seymour Chatman contends, "the film shows only features; it is up to the audience to interpret them – that is, to assign adjectival names" (Chatman 1990, 43).

There are various other rhetorical strategies that qualify as textual indicators. Like literature, filmic representations of character may additionally be reinforced by *analogy*. This is an associative strategy that, again, requires a viewer to engage certain interpretive faculties by drawing a comparative link between a name, object, environment or subject and the represented individual in the interest of evaluating the character of the individual in question. Rimmon-Kenan indicates three primary categories from which we can borrow: analogous names, analogous landscapes, and analogy between characters (ibid, 67-70). The use of analogous character names is a metonymical technique in which a name will adjectivally describe a character, evoke a character trait by association, or onomatopoeically resemble a character trait. A few appropriately cartoonish examples include Cruella DeVil (Glenn Close) from *101 Dalmatians* (Stephen Herek, 1996), comic book villains, like Otto Octavius (Alfred Molina) – a.k.a. "Dr. Octopus" – in *Spider-Man 2* (Sam Raimi, 2004) and the ubiquitous Bond heavies, such as Auric Goldfinger (Gert Fröbe). While film narratives do not tend to advance the determinism of pathetic fallacy literally, villainous characters are often presented "at home" in landscapes that "reflect" their wicked dispositions. A few notably overstated examples include the decadence of the Wheat King's (Frank Powell) estate in *A Corner in Wheat* (D. W. Griffith, 1909), the decrepit castle of the vampire (Bela Lugosi) in *Dracula* (Todd Browning, 1931) and the twisted psychic landscapes of *The Cell* (Tarsem Singh, 2000). And finally, a villain is in many ways reliant on a hero for viewer recognition and self-definition. Contrasting the villain with a hero is the most popular strategy in goal-oriented narratives and entails considerable complexities. I will explore the establishment of analogies between characters in a later section.

So, we may distinguish between physically, emotionally/psychologically and analogously based textual indicators of character. Of course, character indicators are

not simply textual, but are *transtextual* as well – they are constructed through factors located beyond the individual text itself. Both Smith and Rimmon-Kenan point out the importance of establishing character in relation to a number of these transtextual sources. Smith writes of the “co-text,” the socio-historic fabric that supports and informs a narrative, and provides it with a readerly context (Smith 1995, 194). Similarly, Rimmon-Kenan enumerates several factors that also assist in the presentation of character: “[1] the interests of the critic to the kind of character in question, [2] the thematic concern(s) of the work, [3] the genre to which it belongs, [4] the norms of the period, [and 5] the preferences of the author” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 70). If “the kind of character in question” happens to be a villain, a viewer must implicitly consider a surprisingly wide range of questions in interpreting the villain’s representation. What are the interests of the critic or viewer who interprets the villain (we can imagine a queer reading of *Nosferatu*’s Count Orlock, or a feminist reappraisal of Emma Small in *Johnny Guitar*) and how might these interests accentuate or attenuate the character’s transgressions? Is there a correlation between the thematic concern of the work (“Crime Does Not Pay” as the explicit moral of Hawks’ *Scarface*) and a character’s immoral behaviour? Are certain kinds of villainy (like Rufus Ryker’s terrorizing of the homesteaders in *Shane*) necessitated by generic circumstances (the hero’s obligation to “tame” the frontier in the Western)? How do particular socio-historical conditions (like the “compensating values” legislated by the Production Code) shape representations of villainy (such as the mild criminality of Joan and Eddie Taylor in *You Only Live Once*, for which they ultimately pay with their lives)? Could the film’s outlook on immorality (say, the buoyant sexiness of *Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill!*) be attributed to a filmmaker’s artistic preoccupations (Russ Meyer’s obvious affection for the buxom sociopaths that populate his work)?³

Regardless of whether an indicator is textual or transtextual, its ultimate purpose is to point a viewer towards a particular conception of character. In a sense, a film does not make concise, authoritative statements about characters; I have been indicating that

³ High profile actors also exert a kind of authorial attitude towards the characters they play by virtue of the expectations they bring to a text. A film in which Bruce Willis and Gary Oldman star is not likely to feature the former in the role of the villain and the latter in the role of the hero, as supported by their respective performances in *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997). The star system, then, can be thought of as an transtextual feature that limits the means by which a character can be presented.

it makes *intimations* instead. Because films rely on the audience's ability to make associative links between traits, evaluations of textual and transtextual material, and finally, interpretations of representations, character presentation/definition can never be entirely precise. There is always the chance of slippage in meaning. Although our responses may be rhetorically directed to a singular evaluation, no filmic text can generate a completely authoritative take on a character. In fact, to a certain extent, we may conceive of the filmic text as just another "reader," just another interpreter of the character. One need only turn to a central facet of adaptation studies – the theorization of filmic transliteration – to recognize the interpretive properties of cinematic representations of character. How else can one account for the drastic difference between James Whale's 1931 representation of Frankenstein's monster and Kenneth Branagh's in 1994? The deflation of the text's privileged interpretive authority will become much more important in Chapter 3, which discusses the role of the viewer. Suffice to say for now that a film's formal strategies are what *guide* a viewer's interpretation of a character and will never absolutely dictate what may or may not be said about that character.

I have demonstrated how a character is represented cinematically through the combination of textual indicators, and various transtextual sources. By virtue of his narrative role, the villain is automatically immersed in evaluative discourse. The nomination of a villain always includes the presupposition of an arbitrating process: to name a character as villain is to simultaneously pass judgement on her. Villainy is, in one sense, a *description* of a character's moral identity – a name that conveys the individual's propensity for evil. But at the same time, an *evaluation* of character's behaviour as "villainous" is taken to be synonymous for "inappropriate" or, "unacceptable," which entails an element of judgement, and not just description. How, then, does a filmic text encourage our evaluative presuppositions? Because a character cannot be represented without an accompanying narrational evaluation, I would like to specify the rhetorical means by which a film may express particular attitudes towards its characters in the interest of inviting a similar appraisal from an audience.

Hissing the Villain: Attitudinal Aspects of Character

All of the indicators of character that I have mentioned above are narrational and extra-narrational factors that comprise the cinematic presentation of character. Just as

important as these indicators, however, is the narrational *attitude* towards characters. Every film – no matter how objective it appears in the presentation of character – will employ certain *evaluative* narrational tactics in its representation of individuals. David Bordwell offers a useful starting point from which we may discuss narrational judgement. Along with narrational factors such as “information transmission, knowledgeability, self-consciousness, and communicativeness” that affect the spectatorial construction of a narrative, Bordwell includes “judgmental” factors: “When we say that a film takes pity on its characters or has contempt for its audience, we are talking, however loosely, about ways in which a film’s narration can strike attitude with respect to the fabula [story] or the perceiver” (Bordwell 1985, 61).

Although Bordwell does not describe the manner by which film narration takes on particular attitudes towards characters in detail, there are several narrational aspects we may consider: *mise-en-scène*, *moral structuration*, *narrative “voice,”* and *point-of-view*. A film’s attitude towards its characters will emerge in considering each of these devices as a system connoting particular evaluative positions. All of these systems will be considered primarily as products of a film’s overarching narrational schema, designed to prompt (but not dictate) viewers’ sympathy and antipathy toward characters. It is also important to note that although each of the above four features are textual systems in their own right, their operations are not cleanly or distinctly separated; one will reinforce the other in the interest of manifesting a particular attitude toward a character. Moreover, each of these systems is in concurrent operation with the various textual indicators of character within a work, such as physical countenance, internal views and analogy. It might even be said that the amalgam of interlocking systems that constitute attitudinal narration is an extension of the textual indicators that prompt a viewer’s nomination of a character’s particular narrative role. Let us turn our attention towards some of these textual features that constitute narrational judgement.

Firstly, let us briefly consider the influence of a film’s *mise-en-scène*. Here, the influence of the set, lighting, costuming, makeup, music, and camera angle, framing, and distance on the presentation of character cannot be emphasised enough. These are the primary means by which a film determines a character’s moral identity, as they constitute the prime focus of the viewer’s immediate attention and/or the means by which his attention is attracted and focussed. Their operations are also the most straightforward of the other narrational aspects under discussion. That is, certain

elements of the *mise-en-scène* are intended to prompt the spectator to share a concomitant assessment of a character's disposition. In structuralist terms, they are textual signals loaded with specific meanings to be "read" by the spectator according to the authority of the text. These aesthetic "prompts" have neutral semantic value in themselves; they only gain value as textual signifiers when "activated" by viewers. Assigning signification to a text's *mise-en-scène* depends on the kind of generic text in question, the context in which aspects of the *mise-en-scène* are presented, the contingent socio-cultural coding of their aesthetics, and the ability of the spectator to accurately assess the aesthetic cues the film provides.

For an example, let us turn to the representation of Hank Quinlan (Orson Welles) in *Touch of Evil* (Orson Welles, 1958) in which elements of the film's *mise-en-scène* cue the spectator to recognize him as a villain. Quinlan often appears in decrepit environments (although, to be fair, pleasant locales are mainly lacking in this film), which are associated with his own personal corruption as a crooked cop. He even meets his fate in a decaying sewage plant, facedown in the polluted waters. Although the film applies the aesthetics of *film noir* throughout, it is Quinlan who is most often shot in low-key lighting and the shadows that play across his face give him a gruesome visage. Moreover, his appearance is grotesque compared with the dashing Vargas (Charlton Heston) and he is occasionally shot from low angles to emphasize his considerable physical bulk. Music accompanying his appearances is frequently a threatening mixture of minor and diminished chords, which is a further powerful cue to associate Vargas with the titular evil. When combined with other textual and extratextual indicators, these audio-visual intimations will posit a first-order evaluation of Quinlan as a villain. Again, it is important to stress that the elements of the *mise-en-scène* function as *prompts* only and should not be considered absolutely authoritative in establishing a definitive attitudinal response to a character. These elements function in the service of inviting our negative assessment, and any ironic or subversive second-order evaluations will occur as a result of reading these elements against the grain.

Villains are unique from other characters in that they are accompanied by a very strong cachet of textual indicators that recur again and again throughout cinematic history. Such aspects of the *mise-en-scène* have changed very little in their systemic implementation throughout the decades. Typically speaking, these stylistic aspects are marked by a degree of *excess* – that is, they are often extremely obtrusive. Although

heroes are accompanied by specific textual indicators of their own, I would risk the generalization that the prompts provided by the *mise-en-scène* in their case are typically not as conspicuous as those that accompany the representation of a villain. These baroque signatory elements of the *mise-en-scène* can even be discovered in films in which the moral identities of characters are not fundamentally polarised. In a scene from *The Portrait of a Lady* (Jane Campion, 1996), for example, Gilbert Osmond (John Malkovich) appears from the shadows like a vampire, whirling a black and white parasol that seems to mesmerise the hapless Isabelle Archer (Nicole Kidman).

Naturally, films do not *always* employ such a heavily coded *mise-en-scène* in the representation of their villains. Indeed, a villain may be even more striking or disquieting by his ordinariness and the absence of any of the typical, overt audio-visual indicators that would signal a malevolent nature. In *The Terminal* (Steven Spielberg, 2004), for instance, the excessive zeal with which Frank Dixon (Stanley Tucci) attends to the security of JFK Airport is nearly overshadowed by the stark *plainness* of the character and his surroundings (the dull officiousness of his inner sanctum – the offices and control rooms where he holds court). Nonetheless, excess remains a reliable formal standard by which to indicate a character's villainy through the *mise-en-scène*. Since immorality is generally regarded culturally as intemperate behaviour that cannot be sanctioned by a conservative moral majority, overindulgence of some sort is the typical mark of the villain. "Polite" culture largely favours self-denial, restraint, and moderation in individuals, and in fact imbues these traits with moral language. As evidence, one need only consult the heading "excess" in *Roget's Thesaurus* to discover corresponding terms such as "inordinate," "animalism," and even "debauchery."

Although the audio-visual cues of the *mise-en-scène* can strongly direct an attitudinal evaluation of a character, a viewer must also consider how the character's moral identity relates to that of other characters within the narrative. Relating back to Rimmon-Kenan's analogous indicators of character, an individual's moral identity is constructed in a film through a series of comparisons with other characters. Thus, in considering a film's *moral structuration*, we examine the artificially constructed but strategic system of ethical values a film establishes through character behaviour. Schematically, a narrative typically establishes a moral range with the characters occupying specific points along the scale. Obviously, the literal assignment of a numeric value to various moral dispositions is a questionable enterprise, to say nothing

of a gross oversimplification, but the principle of dispositional comparison nonetheless retains a use-value in the evaluation of character.

Smith posits two possible narrative moral structures: *Manichean* and *graduated*. The former rigidly polarizes the behaviour of its characters, sharply dividing the sheep from the goats, while the latter “is characterized by a spectrum of moral gradations rather than a binary opposition of values. Characters are not sorted into two camps, the good and the evil, but rather occupy a range of positions between the two poles” (Smith 1995, 207). Villains and heroes are never mistaken for one another in the Manichean structure and both are necessarily dedicated to their opponent’s abolition. In the graduated structure, however, such antagonism is curtailed as virtue and vice are not absolute and a character may slide between moral positions. As applied to classical Hollywood Western, for example, we can apply the Manichean structure to the black and white moral world of *Hell’s Hinges* (Charles Swickard, 1916), in which reformed gunman Blaze Tracy (William S. Hart) protects a minister and his sister from desperados bent on running them out of town. Conversely, the ethical greys of later Westerns signal a graduated moral structure, as in *The Searchers* (John Ford, 1956), whereby the iconic cowboy hero-figure, Ethan Edwards (John Wayne), is forced to examine the racial bigotry that has long driven his system of values.

Moral structuration will be discussed at greater lengths in later chapters but at the moment, I would like to posit a third possible narrative moral structure: that of *impartiality*. On some occasions, films are not at all interested in applying a moral system to or adopting an attitudinal position towards its characters; their concentration is instead on *formal* concerns and the relation of character to textual play. Or, in other words, the language of moral categorisations is incommensurable with a text’s formal and thematic preoccupations. Most famously, *À bout de souffle* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1959) adopts a strategic moral indifference towards its two principals. One of the film’s primary concerns is to play with the conventions of the American crime film, but it does not appropriate the crime film’s corresponding evaluative preoccupation with character. Indeed, Michel’s (Jean-Paul Belmondo) motiveless murder of a policeman is represented in an extremely brief and highly fragmented sequence and is not followed by any kind of overtly-constructed textual evaluation.

It is not that the film is without a sense of ethics; rather, the moral discourse that Godard potentially introduces is of a different order than one might encounter in a

typical American gangster film (ie. Michel gets his “just desserts” and Patricia is a deceptive *femme fatale*). *À bout de souffle* is morally impartial toward its characters in a conventional sense in that it does not “care” that Michel is a thief and a murderer or that Patricia’s disloyalty is without moral motivation. Murder, theft and impulsive betrayal are actions that are drained of their usual, everyday significance and instead, have another level of signification. Or, one could say (in Phelan’s terms) that their thematic function overrides their mimetic function. As Godard’s film is ultimately about the tendencies of particular movies rather than the circumstances of actual life, these actions may have no “real” moral significance; they are merely referents to behaviour that is generic to (and hence expected in) crime films. The film’s enigmatic ending, for example (in which Patricia directly addresses the camera, asking for a translation of Michel’s dying words – “*C’est vraiment dégeulasse*” – and deliberately mimics one of Humphrey Bogart’s iconic gestures) could function as a criticism of Hollywood’s perceived obsessive moralising and insistence on the pat, tidy conclusions of many gangster films.

Whether a film’s moral structuration is Manichean, graduated, or impartial, one of the most important means by which a film adopts an attitude towards its characters is through *narrative “voice.”* Although Bordwell maintains that the character traits of a literary narrator cannot be attributed to filmic narration, and that narration should instead be understood as a system rather than a position (Bordwell 1985, 62), we may still speak of narrational *tone* towards characters. Tone may loosely be conceived of as the demeanour in which the narrational system presents its subject matter. It is not simply the inflection of the *mise-en-scène*, but the *organization* of both style and narrative form in the presentation of the story. In representing a villain, the film’s narration will adopt a particular attitude towards her, whether it be affection, criticism, or moderate neutrality and such an attitude will explicitly manifest itself in terms of formal manipulations and plot construction.

Narrationally speaking, a film will *focalise* a character in a particular way. In *Narrative Discourse*, Gérard Genette conceives of the difference between the activity of the narrator and the character in terms of *focalisation*: the narrator is the agent “who speaks,” delineating the events of the fictional world; the character is the agent “who sees,” and from whose subjectivity events are perceived. Focalisation is the term that describes the narrational strategies that are adopted in representing a particular

experience. We might say that these strategies constitute the discernible evaluative manner in which the film's narration "looks at" its characters and simultaneously represents the visual perspective of the characters as well. A character's perspective, then, can be said to occupy a place within the diegesis (a character will look at her surroundings) and a position within the narrative discourse's larger schema. In other words, her gaze can be represented visually *as part of the overall narrational strategy*. If a character is focalised, the narration will attend to the way that character experiences the world and will be structured accordingly.

For instance, *external* focalisation may define our interest in a scene by concentrating on the position of a single character within that diegetic scenario. Thus, we may witness a murderer's crime from a position of relative spatial closeness, with the shooting of the passenger in *The Great Train Robbery* (Edwin S. Porter, 1903) being a prototypical example. The robber is seen in the frame, but the camera is positioned perpendicularly to him so that the audience is looking in the same direction as he – toward the line of imperilled passengers, rather than vice-versa. Additionally, a character may also be focalised from an *internal* position, which occurs when the narration emulates a character's subjective experience of events. *Scarlet Street* (Fritz Lang, 1945) provides a good example of internal focalisation. At the film's conclusion, our anti-hero, Chris Cross (Edward G. Robinson) – now homeless and insane – is haunted by the memories of his beloved Kitty March (Joan Bennett), whom he stabs to death in a fit of jealous rage, and her lover, the caddish Johnny Prince (Dan Duryea), who is framed and executed for her murder. Chris is externally focalised as he wanders aimlessly down a street – the camera looking down upon him from an elevated position, marking him out from the bustling crowd. In the film's final moments, however, Chris is *internally* focalised, as the crowd disappears in a slow lap dissolve, indicating his total isolation, and the whispered voices of the two dead lovers that have been tormenting him are heard on the soundtrack, hissing with eerie languidness.

With regards to a villain, the combination of external and internal focalisation will concurrently ensure that the most prominent elements of the *mise-en-scène* and the structure of the montage will not only invite our imaginative engagement with the character, but will also typically direct the nature of this involvement. In *It's a Wonderful Life* (Frank Capra, 1946), for example, the miserly Mr. Potter (Lionel Barrymore) is externally and internally focalised in turn for the purposes of

encouraging our negative evaluation of his behaviour. During a run-in with Potter at his bank, Uncle Billy Bailey (Thomas Mitchell) – partner of Potter’s business rival, George Bailey – absentmindedly drops his business deposit. After Potter returns to his office and finds the deposit in his newspaper, he is externally focalised as the camera observes him looking through a peephole in his office door at Uncle Billy. Potter is then internally focalised, as we observe Uncle Billy scurrying around the bank, searching fruitlessly for the lost deposit from Potter’s point-of-view. Not only do we appreciate that Potter obviously is acting immorally by virtue of his actions, but by representing Uncle Billy’s dilemma from Potter’s visual perspective (spying clandestinely through a peephole), the negative assessment of his character that we have already formed by this point will be reinforced. In sum, this combination of external and internal focalisation can be said to represent the condemnatory attitude of the film’s narrative “voice.”

The narratological *distribution* of focalisation will also affect our attitudes toward characters. Quite frequently, in classical Hollywood cinema, focalisation is distributed between two primary sources: the hero and the villain, but it is certainly not limited to these two characters. At any moment in the narrative, any character has the capacity to be a focalisor. The fact that character-bound focalisation is mutable, that it can be delegated to a number of characters, Mieke Bal claims, may result in feelings of neutrality towards all characters – particularly when focalisation is evenly distributed (Bal 1985, 105). In Hollywood cinema, such occurrences are relatively rare, and our most thorough evaluations of characters are reserved for those through whom the diegetic events most often focalised. “On the grounds of distribution, for instance, the fact that a character focalises the first and/or the last chapter, we label it the hero(ine) of the book” (ibid, 105). However, such a model obviously should not be taken as a general rule, as a villain may just as easily focalise the beginning and ending of a film. *X-Men* (Bryan Singer, 2000), for example, begins with the childhood experiences of Magneto (Ian McKellan) at Auschwitz and ends with a scene in which he plots to escape his current incarceration in a plastic, maximum security prison.

By drawing attention to focalisation and distinguishing between its internal and external forms, I have referred in part to the final method by which a film’s narration may adopt an attitudinal position towards a character: *point of view* (POV hereafter). The term may narrowly be defined as the representation of a character’s visual perspective in which the view of the camera is aligned with a particular subject’s field

of vision. POV is distinct from a film's narrative "voice": it functions as a strategy *within* a larger narrational discourse – most often as the means by which a character is internally focalised. A film may literally share with us a murderer's visual perspective from an internally focalised position, as with the opening sequence of *Halloween* (John Carpenter, 1978), in which the camera tracks along through a house in an uninterrupted long take that emulates the point-of-view of the killer, a six-year-old Michael Myers (Will Sandin). *Perspectival alignment* is the name we can give to this narrational linkage in which we share a character's field of vision through her POV.

It would, however, be a mistake to say that POV allows us to virtually embody the position of the looking agent. Like the character, we look at subjects and objects within a designated visual field, but we do not necessarily imagine that we must view these subjects or objects *from within* the "perspectual experience" of a diegetic agent (Currie 1995, 185). Though a villainous focalisor may temporarily command a spectator's visual orientation, the villain is in turn at the mercy of the incorporated gaze of the camera and the spectator. That is, it is tacitly understood that our subjectively-informed observation of a diegetic scenario will "colour" our perspectival alignment with a character (we may be uncomfortable during this alignment), and that this temporary alignment is still subject to the overarching attitudes of the narrative discourse (which may posit this alignment as "disturbing"). The film's *overall formal system* is what guides the attitudinal orientation of the viewer during her reading of a sequence, and not the temporary representation of a character's visual perspective. As Robert Stam suggests, a singular "centre of consciousness [a character] commands the 'point-of-view' in several senses - optical, emotional, memorial, and cognitive. But he is still subject to the higher authority of the narration, which comments on and evaluates the agent 'who sees'" (Stam 1992, 91). The discourse of a character-focalisor, even a character-narrator is still contained by the authority of narrational powers that lie beyond the diegesis, and are usually wielded by the filmmakers themselves. Bordwell also shares this claim in his belief that "personified narrators are invariably swallowed up in the overall narrational process of the film, which they do *not* produce" (Bordwell 1985, 61).⁴

⁴ These views are also supported by Edward Branigan in *Point of View in the Cinema* (Branigan 1984, 40-49).

It should be added that one's own socio-historically informed subjectivity will obviously also help prevent a so-called "immoral interpellation," in which it is assumed that frequent or extended perspectival alignment with a villain would lead to the subsequent adoption of indefensible moral values. In sharing the POV of various members of the Cameron family in *The Birth of a Nation* (D. W. Griffith, 1915), for example, it should obviously *not* be assumed that we would also come to share their worldview of white supremacy, nor be swayed by the film's explicitly racist rhetoric. I will expand on similarly "resistant" viewing strategies in Chapter 3.

So, we can see how POV attempts to bring a viewer's attitudes into alignment with the preferred evaluative position of the work. Like focalisation, POV is not only a means of representing or enframing narrative events, but is also a way of delineating and appraising character. Through visually "sharing" a character's perspective on her narrative world, we may come to adopt a subsequent evaluation of her personality depending on *how* she looks, the *object(s)* of her gaze, and her subsequent or concurrent *response* to what she views. Moreover, the critical distance that can be generated by visual alignment with a character in turn supports the evaluative potential of POV.

Let us consider the opening sequence of *Dirty Harry* (Don Siegel, 1971) as an example. Here we see the Scorpio Killer (Andy Robinson) looking through the scope of his rifle at a woman sunbathing on a rooftop across the street. We share his POV as he targets and subsequently shoots her. Even from this brief example we may draw the following conclusions: by considering how "Scorpio" looks (voyeuristically, through a rifle scope, and from a remote position), what he looks at (a semi-clad woman rendered vulnerable through her near nudity and his technologized gaze), and his response to what he views (murder accompanied by his self-admitted feelings of pleasure and power), we are able to form an evaluation of his disposition. POV is used to represent "Scorpio" as an isolated, sadistic, and perverted villain from the film's very outset. Occasionally, a villain's "perverted" POV may even be signalled by a contemporaneous "perversion" of her represented visual field. Examples of instances in which POV is used to mark off a villain's uniquely fearsome optic perspective include: the roving, underwater shark's-eye-view in *Jaws* (Steven Spielberg, 1976); the solarised tracking shots that emulate the vision of an invisible alien hunter in *Predator* (John McTiernan, 1987); and the overexposed, flickering, accelerated images that approximate a vampire's day-vision in *Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992).

While POV is a useful narrational strategy in the evaluation of a character, the term itself is extremely broad in connotative meaning. Seymour Chatman, for example, distinguishes between two categories of POV: one is associated with a narrator, and the other, with a character. "I propose *slant* to name the narrator's attitudes and other mental nuances appropriate to the report function of discourse, and *filter* to name the much wider range of mental activity experienced by characters in the story world" (Chatman 1990, 143). Applying Chatman's categories to the opening sequences of *Dirty Harry*, we might say that Scorpio is the filter through whom we experience the story world, and our subsequent evaluation of his disposition as a villain is an effect of the narrative slant. For Chatman, characters are "within" the constructed story world and "only their 'perspective' is immanent to that world" (ibid, 146). The narrator, on the other hand, can only report or comment on the story world and focalise particular characters within that world "from a post out in the discourse" (ibid).

Where then, does this place the viewer? Inside or outside the narrative discourse? Both places or neither? Chatman does not make allowances for the position of the viewer, and yet it seems that in sharing POV, she occupies a liminal and privileged perspective. A viewer is *inside* the fiction in that she is invited to share the visual perspectives of characters, while at the same time, she is *outside* in that she is able to evaluate not only what she is seeing, but the relative attitude the narration desires her to adopt. POV curiously divides the viewer. The technique seems to seek an embodied, participatory engagement with the characters, and yet, it simultaneously petitions a critical, evaluative response that necessarily distances the intended receiver from the character and the narrative events. POV places the viewer somewhere between what Chatman calls the *story-discourse* partition (ibid, 157). Rather than project the viewer "into" a character's subjectivity, POV creates a liminal viewing position instead.

Instead of understanding POV as a device that gives the viewer privileged insight into a character's interiority (in the same way that free, indirect narrative voice does in literature), or as a distinctly empathetic strategy, we may think of the POV shot as a "marker." It is "a way of underlining a shift in the structure of alignment, or merely to recall and emphasize a continuing alignment with a particular character" (Smith 1995, 161). For instance, although the narrative discourse of *Batman Returns* (Tim Burton, 1992) seeks our alignment with its titular hero (Michael Keaton), and will reinforce this alignment through frequent referrals to his POV, the discourse will also

occasionally focalise his enemy, the grotesque Penguin (Danny DeVito). An example of such internal focalisation occurs during a sequence that represents his POV as he watches his army of missile-launching penguins march on Gotham City. My point here is that a shift in the structure of visual alignment to that of the Penguin, the villain, constitutes *a threat*. His view of the assault on Gotham City is doubly intimidating: it represents a threat at the level of story and at the level of viewing since it usurps the comfortable visual relation the film normally permits the viewer to share with the hero. “POV shots, then, frequently function as a kind of emphasis, a rhetorical underlining of the narration’s delegation of the storytelling function to a character (and the concomitant development of patterns of alignment)” (ibid 163). When a POV shot encapsulates the visual perspective of a villain, a viewer is aware that the film’s narration has temporarily been “usurped” by (or, more accurately, has been delegated to) malevolence. While POV reinforces moral identity and prompts attitudinal responses to the character with whom it is aligned, it can also suggest a potentially threatening expropriation of narrational authority.

When linked to the overall use of *mise-en-scène*, moral structuration, and narrative “voice,” POV is one of the primary narrational strategies by which a film takes on a particular attitude towards a character. The attitudinal aspects of film narration are, in turn, one of the three primary textual factors involved in the cinematic construction of characters – the first two factors being representation and function. To recognise a character as villainous is to make a corresponding evaluative claim about their identity, which is in turn largely guided by aspects of a film’s narrational strategies. Villainy may also be regarded as a particular character trait that must be initiated through strategies of filmic representation. Textual indicators, analogy, and a consideration of several other transtextual concerns all inform a film’s representation of a villainous character. Finally, since all characters may be understood as narrative units with certain structural roles, villainy also has a specific narrative function. This function must be distinguished from any idiosyncratic traits the character may possess, although these two components of character are certainly interrelated.

During my brief outline of the functional component of character, I alluded to the fact that a villain’s functional role will largely depend on the kind of narrative structure in which she appears. Villains play very specific roles within narratives and their functions are different from those of other characters. While a villain is not a

character type universal to all narrative fictions, the two primary types of narrative structures in which a villain is a functional prerequisite bear investigation. In the next chapter, I will investigate these narrative structures, focussing on the functional means by which the villain is employed and how the deployment of villainy in turns affects narrative structure.

Chapter 2

Witches, Lunatics and Other Storytellers: Villainy and Narrative Structure

I loved horror movies or any kind of movie that had good villains. The Wizard of Oz is still my all-time favourite movie and, even as a child, I rooted for the Wicked Witch. To hell with Dorothy. The Witch had pretty green skin, a beautiful castle and all those wonderful winged monkeys. Dorothy just had a dull home in Kansas, dreary farmer aunt and uncle, and an ugly little dog that bothered the neighbours.

- John Waters (Waters 1996, 124)

Is there a sense in which the idea that a film “builds character” could be true? In the previous chapter, I outlined various means by which films structurally nominate their villains, and in doing so, I have implicitly posited character as the combined end result of several textual codes. If we are to accept the structuralist idea that character should be understood as a particular kind of narrative unit with a specific narrative function, then we must resign ourselves to the fact that characters are little more than bundles of *semes* that are manipulated by a text to achieve desired structural results. In this manner, characters are simply made and used by narratives. And yet, such a concession would disregard the fact that characters transcend the limits of structural functionality. For characters paradoxically both *make* and are *made by* narratives. Narrative structure may be just as compliant to the dictation of its characters as characters may be to narrative structure. As the building blocks of a text’s structure, the narrative units of character are both the raw materials for the architecture of story *and* the ultimate determinants of its form. The degree to which the villain affects the structure of a narrative will largely depend on the kind of film in which she is featured. Having established the narrational methods by which films nominate their villains in the previous chapter, we are now ready to turn to a detailed discussion of the types of films that employ villains.

We may begin by positing two main kinds of narrative structures in which the villain is used as a necessary structural feature: 1) *goal-oriented* and 2) *character-oriented*. The goal-oriented narrative is structured around the actions of protagonists as they strive to achieve a particular objective, and thus, its narrative trajectory is fuelled by the *desire* of the protagonists. In goal-centred narratives, villainy may be considered as a force of opposition and often invites *allegorical readings* due to the ostensibly simple narrative structure. Meanwhile, character-oriented narratives emphasise the psychology of their protagonists and are a meditation on the causality of their characters’ actions. These are narratives that are fuelled by the *curiosity* of the text. In

character-centred narratives, villainy itself becomes the subject of a narrative that often invites moral reflection. I would also like to suggest that the villain will affect plot, narrative voice, and enunciation differently, depending on the particular narrative structure in which he is situated. Thus, my approach to character in this chapter will be a synthesis of various narratological positions, continuing the emphasis placed on structuralist theories of character in Chapter 1.

I do not intend to apply these two categories broadly to narrative film in general. There are obviously many different kinds of cinematic narratives, and reducing them all to either goal or character-oriented structures would not account for the complexity of fictions that escape these categories. But since the villain is not a universally necessary structural device, such a dualistic categorisation is applicable for our purposes. Furthermore, these categories are not diametrically opposed. Obviously, character-oriented narratives feature protagonists with particular aims and ambitions that they seek to gratify, while goal-oriented narratives engage in a necessary and minimal degree of character psychology (if only at the level of delineating the motivation for their endeavours). However, the emphasis on objectives and causality is different in each category. Let us first consider a narrative structure that primarily accentuates character ambition and the means by which characters strive to realise these ambitions.

The Left-Handed Form of Human Endeavour: Villains in Goal-Oriented Narratives

The goal-oriented narrative is a very familiar narrative structure. It is often considered as a kind of ur-text – a blueprint for most of the kinds of storytelling evident in popular films. They are *dramatic* narratives organised around the conflict between characters in their pursuit of a particular aim. Narrative itself seems to be governed by this interdependence of character and activity, unfolding in a chronology of ambitions and endeavours. These are primarily narratives of *desire*: the story is constructed around a central object that is coveted by a protagonist, or protagonists and whose efforts to achieve the desired object drive the narrative forward. The narrative is linear in design (object is coveted → object is sought → object is attained) and is directed by cause-effect logic (character performs an action → action achieves a result → result motivates subsequent action). Thus, the story progresses, or is realized, by the performance of characters as they work towards their particular goal(s) and set off chains of narrative events in the process.

This structure is broadly recognized within film studies as the classical narrative system, extensively analysed by David Bordwell, Janet Staiger and Kristin Thompson in *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (1985). Classical narratives' most oft-cited character type is the hero – the individual who “desires something new to his/her situation,” and whose efforts to bring about this change is an externalised indication of his or her inner worth (Bordwell 1985, 16). Rather than considering these protagonists as “psychologically rounded” as they are (rather loosely) defined in Bordwell, Staiger and Thompson's work, I would posit that the object of their ambitions largely defines the protagonists' personalities. Character in the goal-oriented narrative is realized through *motivation* (why the character desires the object) and *action* (how the character strives to attain the object). Although motivation may be considered psychological to some degree, arguing that narrative recognition of a character's motivational ground for action constitutes “psychological roundedness” is a somewhat excessive claim.

The protagonist is featured as an *agent* in the goal-oriented narrative. In a certain sense, it is the agent who makes the narrative “happen”: we label the narration's attendance to her developing actions “narrative progression. A goal-oriented narrative structure adheres to the Aristotelian dictum that character is always subordinate to the action: characters are “agents” or “performers” who ensure continual narrative propulsion. In *The Poetics*, Aristotle outlines four dimensions of characterization (Aristotle 1998, 24): 1) *chestron* (a character's disposition towards nobility or baseness); 2) *harmotton* (the “appropriateness” of a trait in relation to a character's actions); 3) *homios* (characters, although idealized, must be mimetically “like” real persons); and 4) *homalon* (character traits must be “consistent” throughout the drama). Most importantly for our purposes, is the dimension of *chestron*: Aristotle's belief that a character will be cut from either one of two general moral dispositions. “Those who imitate, imitate agents; and these must be either *admirable* (*spoudaios*) or *inferior* (*phaulos*). Character almost always corresponds to just these two categories, since everyone is differentiated in character by defect or excellence” (ibid, 5 italics mine).¹ According to this dualistic schema, it is the *antagonist* who is in competition with the hero, obstructing her actions

¹ Note, however, that his categories of *spoudaios* and *phaulos* do *not* translate into the terms “good” or “bad,” but rather “noble/admirable” or “base/inferior.” This distinction will have important consequences for Friedrich Nietzsche, whose moral philosophy we will be drawing on in Chapter 6.

and frustrating her ambitions. The two agents are locked in a struggle of conflicting interests and their clash largely determines the shape of a film's story and form.

If characters are in competition for a similar goal, what distinguishes their moral identities is the *means* they employ to achieve that goal (ie. fair play vs. cheating) and their motivations for seeking their prize (ie. altruism vs. selfishness). For example, in *Mission: Impossible 2* (John Woo, 2000), both the protagonist, Ethan Hunt (Tom Cruise), and the antagonist, Sean Ambrose (Dougray Scott), have the same objective: to obtain the formula for the deadly Chimera virus. IMF, the intelligence agency for whom Ethan works, instructs him to procure the formula in order to prevent the virus' exposure to a populated area. Although as cunning and potentially deceitful as any villain in his pursuit of the Chimera virus, Ethan avoids conflict whenever possible and several characters remark on his reluctance to use force or harm other individuals. Sean, meanwhile, hopes to acquire the formula in order to sell it to a terrorist organisation. Unlike Ethan, he will "stop at nothing" to achieve his goal, and his methods include extortion, torture, and murder. As we can see by this example, the goal itself can have a functional use beyond its role in the story; a character may be defined by that which he seeks to achieve. Moreover, the method undertaken in the acquisition of a sought-for object is integral to the definition of a character's moral identity.

More important to the definition of character disposition and its concomitant narrative function, however, is the character's movements within a certain *sphere of actions*. We recall that certain structuralist critics treat character function as a purely textual feature with limited or no referential aspects. Vladimir Propp, for example, subordinates characters to spheres of actions in which they are defined according to their role in the narrative: villain, donor, helper, sought-for-person, dispatcher, hero, and false hero. Characters may only make a limited series of "moves" – they can only perform in particular ways – depending on the particular sphere of actions in which they operate. However, a character may perform several different tale roles: in the first *Mission: Impossible* (Brian DePalma, 1996), Jim Phelps (John Voight) is a dispatcher (he organises IMF missions) who is later revealed to be a villain (he orchestrates the deaths of Ethan's team-mates that occur early in the film).

A textual example of the villainous sphere of action for this chapter will be the Wicked Witch of the West (Margaret Hamilton) in *The Wizard of Oz*. Aside from being one of the most memorable cinematic villains, she is perhaps one of the most easily

identifiable, perhaps even archetypal of villainous actants. In a strictly functional sense, her antagonism seems to be pure and unadulterated. For Propp, “function is understood as an act of character, defined from the point of view of its significance for the course of the action” (Propp 1968, 21). We should remember that the villain function is not simply a character per se; rather, it is a *force* of opposition obstructing the desires of a protagonist and thus, effectively structures the events of the story and the shape of the plot. Therefore, under his model of character, the Witch’s wickedness is purely the textual means by which to foil Dorothy Gale’s (Judy Garland) return to Kansas.

Propp divides plot composition into a series of “moves.” The yoking together of several functions to form a distinct line of action constitutes a move. In the line of action begun by the villainous function, “each new act of villainy...creates a new move” (Propp 1968, 93). We can note some correlations here between these series of moves and the villain’s functional progression discussed in Chapter 1. Acts of villainy generate specific crises that must be resolved before the narrative is to advance. For example, in the last third of the film, Dorothy is captured by the Witch’s winged monkeys and imprisoned in her castle. The Witch’s act of villainy necessitates a new narrative development – the rescue of Dorothy by her three travelling companions. It is her function as antagonist that effectively shapes the better part of the narrative structure, setting up obstacles that must be circumnavigated by the heroes.

A. J. Greimas usefully identifies characters who move within these familiar spheres of action as *actants*: types of actors drawn from their specific genre (or, narrative structure). One of his principal actantial dyads is identified as “the helper vs. the opponent”: a helper “brings the help by acting in the direction of the desire or by facilitating communication,” while the opponent “creates obstacles by opposing either the realization of the desire or the communication of the object” (Greimas 1983, 83). In *Oz*, the Scarecrow (Ray Bolger), Tin Man (Jack Haley), and Lion (Burt Lahr) are in the first category: as helpers, they assist Dorothy on her journey to the Emerald City. The Witch, meanwhile, seeks to frustrate Dorothy’s desire in her pursuit of Dorothy’s ruby slippers – the means by which Dorothy is able to return to Kansas.²

² However, the desire of the opponent is always secondary in Greimas’ model; it only modifies the catalysing desire of the central actant. For Greimas, the Witch’s desires to retrieve her sister’s ruby slippers are important only insofar as they function to prevent Dorothy from returning to Kansas, which is the main thrust of the narrative.

What is important to note here is that the villain occupies an equally important functional position as the hero since neither can be considered as the narrative's exclusive subject. The Witch is just as crucial to the construction of *Oz*'s narrative as Dorothy insofar as their clashing functionalities contribute to narrative momentum. Claude Bremond also refuses to privilege the position of a singular subject, or hero. "The fact that it is possible and indeed necessary to change viewpoints from the perspective of one agent to that of another is capital for the remainder of our study. It implies the rejection, at the level of analysis, of the notions of Hero, Villain, etc., conceived as labels and attached once and for all to the characters. Each character is his own hero" (Bremond 1966, 66). A narrative structure outlined in relation to the perspective of the protagonist is eschewed in favour of a narrative structure that accommodates many differing actantial perspectives. Bremond dubs this alternative narrative structure the *amelioration process*: a system that fluctuates between focalising various potential beneficiaries of some prize who are competing to rectify an "initial state of deficiency" (ibid, 66). When an agent initiates this process with a specific goal in mind, it implies two actantial roles only: the *ally* (a character who helps) and the *adversary* (a character who opposes) – both of whom are "endowed with initiative and with [their] own interests" (ibid, 67).

In applying this amelioration process to *Oz*, we can conceive of the characters and their actantial roles in a manner that differs from traditional means of thinking about the narrative. There are no heroes and villains, only protagonists, or, to be more precise, the roles of hero and villain are interchangeable depending on the perspective of the actant. This structural relativity also squares with the villain's frequent insistence that her immorality is justified in some way. In the Witch's fictive world, Dorothy is the villain of the piece, emphasised by the utter indignation the Witch expresses with her memorable dying words: "Oh, what a world, what a world! Who would've thought a little girl like you could've destroyed my beautiful wickedness."³ The Witch "revalues" her own villainy – implicitly privileging it over Dorothy's cloying sweetness – and naturally regards her own proprietary claims to the ruby slippers as an incontestable

³ In fact, the Witch's side of the story is told in *Wicked: The Life and Times of the Wicked Witch of the West*, a novel by Gregory Maguire.

given.⁴ Just as the Witch is her own hero, Dorothy's companions are also heroes in their own right as they all have their own ambitions. From the actantial perspective of the Scarecrow, Tin Man, or Lion, Dorothy would assume the role of helper as she assists them on their quest for that triumvirate of human essence: heart, soul, and brain.

Of course, the narrational emphasis of *Oz* is not on the Witch, nor on the three other characters, but on Dorothy herself. *Oz* is still very much her story. However, what I want to draw from Bremond's emphasis on amelioration is that *within* the story, actantial roles *are* very much a matter of individual characters' perspectives. So, while the narrative discourse of *Oz* nominates Dorothy as the hero, the Witch is free to place herself within that heroic role. Amelioration is an important concept here because of its potential ramifications for a one's sympathetic allegiance. *The process calls attention to the extent to which viewers' sympathy is guided by narrational alignment and focalisation.* Bremond is implicitly raising awareness of the extent to which heroism is an assignment of the narrative discourse, the end product of a sympathetic focalisation. I will be returning to this idea repeatedly throughout my study.

To summarise, we have seen in goal-oriented narratives how a character may take on the actantial role of villain within a particular sphere of actions. In a structuralist sense, the moral character of the villain is functional in its prevention of the hero's desired course of action. However, the villain's actantial role is not secondary to the hero's but is equally crucial to the structural integrity of the narrative as the hero's, and therefore, the status of protagonist can be attributed to the former as legitimately as to the latter in a narrative's amelioration process. Most crucially, this amelioration process signals the highly significant role narrational alignment and focalisation plays in shaping viewers' sympathies, and underlines the prominence of the narrative discourse's attitudinal aspects in the construction of character.

Something Wicked: The Allegory of Villainy

As a principal feature of the structuralist project is to uncover a central, unifying and universal narrative structure, each of these critics sketches an outline of a system that they argue is present in *all* texts. While their arguments are certainly monolithic, ignoring the cultural and historical specificity of narrative structures, their narratological

⁴ This "revaluation" will be discussed at greater lengths in Chapter 6 with reference to the moral philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche.

sketches are useful insofar as they provide the prototypical goal-oriented narrative with a skeletal structure on which allegorical readings may be hung. We recall from the Introduction that the term “allegory” here is used to denote a figurative level of meaning that can be derived from the narrative’s represented events. Allegorically speaking, then, villains can be 1) *reflective*, 2) *authoritative* or, 3) *seductive*. However, I would specifically like to emphasize the fourth and most important allegorical function of villainy: that of *oppugnity* – a function I believe to have the most significant structural and moral ramifications for a text.

“Oppugnity” is a literary term that literally means “to call into question,” or “to convert,” differing slightly from its close relative, the noun “oppugnancy,” which indicates a state of antagonism or opposition. As an oppugner, the villain’s capacity to destabilize the structuring authority of a protagonist’s desire is at its greatest, *for viewers may invest the desires of the villain with a greater structuring authority than the protagonist*. That is to say, a viewer may come to believe that these ostensibly immoral desires are those that clandestinely shape the narrative’s structure, implicitly taking precedence over the values embodied by the hero. I would argue that it is a rare text that *explicitly* posits a villain’s desires as oppugnative (hence the relative paucity of purposefully perverse texts referred to in the Introduction), and therefore, establishing the villain as an oppugner is typically a matter of the second-order evaluation. Or, in other words, we might say that villainous oppugnity is usually established by reading a text against an explicit moral grain. The figure of the oppugner will therefore come to have a considerable measure of importance in my extended discussions of perverse allegiance in Chapters 5 and 6.

So, rather than establish the subject of my discussion as a figure of antinomy, I shall posit the Wicked Witch’s oppugnity in *The Wizard of Oz* as the means by which the poverty of the hero’s desire is underlined and also as an evocation of abandoned possibility. Moreover, it shall become evident that my interpretation of the Witch as an oppugner is not a symptomatic reading of the film, but a conclusion that is actually concurrent with the narration’s first-order signals that Dorothy’s values are misplaced. Deceptively straightforward in its presentation of events, *Oz* is actually a text in which the implicit values of the narrative discourse are frequently in disagreement with the values of the heroine, and I believe that this subtle moral complexity partially accounts for the film’s enduring appeal.

It must be reiterated that the traits and functions of characters within goal-oriented narratives typically have two levels of significance: mimetic and thematic respectively. This duality is in accordance with Claude Lévi-Strauss' study of cultural myths in *Structural Anthropology* (1958), in which he contends that every narrative has a double signification: a surface meaning and a deep meaning. In other words, "while the ostensible signification of the myth resides in the unfolding of events, its deep meaning [is] 'paradigmatic and achronic'" (Stam 1992, 76). The literal signification of *Oz*'s narrative is the chronology of events that take place between Dorothy's departure from and return to Kansas. However, Dorothy's journey also invites other readings, the most prominent of which is that her quest is a vehicle for knowledge and self-discovery.

For Lévi-Strauss, the narrative elements of myth are arranged into binary oppositions that correspond with the oppositions of its deep structure. Characters are arranged within these binary systems as well. The binary to which the villain belongs is one of the most elementary: the Manichean structure of "good" versus "evil" – a familiar opposition that has an expansive historical and cultural heritage as we have seen in the Introduction. A villain's allegorical role is at its most transparent in Manichean narratives, and their high degree of visibility and purity of character has *instructive* value. We can regard such an opposition as useful for the purposes of *moral education*, embodying the two dramatic category of homiletic allegory (rather than psychological realism). For example, in children's fiction – a genre that is heavily saturated with moral absolutes – the villain is clearly positioned as a model whose behaviour its target audience should *not* seek to emulate.

That a villain may have instructive value is important for our purposes here, for the fundamental allegorical signification of the goal-oriented structure is that of *self-discovery*. The narrative events are only important insofar as they have an educative impact on the protagonist and our ultimate interest in the story lies in what the character learns through her experience. Therefore, in accordance with Phelan's idea of the *thematic* component of character referenced in Chapter 1, the villain has an *allegorical* role. As a "representative entity," she is always read doubly: not only does she function as an oppositional force that must be overcome, but she may also act as a disruptive or confusing element that must be assimilated on the path to self-knowledge.

Within the binary system around which these narratives are organized, villains are essential in order for the protagonist to arrive at some new state of awareness.

Without the experience of “otherness,” of “difference,” even of “nemesis,” characters in goal-oriented narratives cannot successfully define their selves. The manifestation of this oppositional or disruptive element can be approached according to four major interpretive schemes, and these schemes constitute the allegorical functions of villainy. In *Oz*, the Wicked Witch can be regarded as: 1) a dark mirror of Dorothy’s self (*reflective*); 2) a representative of the terrors of the adult world or occulted forces of power over which Dorothy has no control in the real world, Kansas (*authoritative*) or; 3) an embodiment of vice that seeks to corrupt Dorothy’s virtue (*seductive*). It is the fourth scheme, however, that I find the most interesting: how the presence of villainy tests the merit of a character’s emerging value system. That is, the Witch’s *oppugnity* represents a particularly unruly element on Dorothy’s path to self-knowledge.

As an oppugner, a villain may function as a device that invites viewers to *question the worth* of the protagonist’s values. The very presence of the villain-as-oppugner within a text is an unvoiced question to the hero: “Is your desire meritorious?” From a narratological point-of-view, the character of the villain carries with it a tacit system of checks and balances that prevents the potential tyranny of a protagonist’s structuring desire. Or, at the very least, the villain’s own ambitions act as a structural counterbalance to those of the hero. But remarkably, these ambitions have the power *to override the sympathetic authority of the protagonist’s ambitions*. Acting as a figure of temptation, there is a close relation between villains’ seductive powers and their oppugnative powers. Though a character may reject the villain’s advances, a *viewer* may sympathise with these villainous values and through such sympathy, recognise the indigence of the “hero’s” emerging self-awareness. We remember that a film’s narrational cues will usually attempt to guide our evaluation of a character’s behaviour or experience. Interestingly, the evaluative strategies of the narration can also be at odds with a *character’s* self-evaluation. Characters (especially villains) are certainly by no means predisposed to align their self-analysis with the dominant attitudinal aspects of a film’s narration. In the spirit of such “misalignment,” I would therefore like to offer an alternative reading of *Oz*, privileging some of the film’s narrational emphases that seem to be at loggerheads with Dorothy’s own evaluation of her experiences.

In *Oz*, Dorothy’s journey is the means by which she comes to appreciate Kansas. At the end of her journey, she utters what is typically taken to be the film’s moral: “There really is no place like home.” More specifically, this declaration is Dorothy’s

summation of the new awareness that her travels have made possible: she is now able to place her self in relation to her environment. At the beginning of the film, her outspokenness, her capacity for adventure, her altogether “too-muchness” drive her away from the oppressive greyness of a constricting Kansas. Auntie Em (Clara Blandick) advises Dorothy to “find yourself a place where you won’t get into any trouble” – an “Over the Rainbow” kind of place which turns out to be Oz. Dorothy’s journey “there-and-back” introduces her to “Difference”: the crucial missing half of the binary that defines a narrative world. In other words, it is only the Technicolor of Oz that can inject the vibrancy missing in a black and white Kansas, it is only through the experience of this Difference that she may truly formulate her self. Again, the grail object on this hero-path is ultimately self-knowledge.

The Witch plays an equally important role in Dorothy’s self-definition. With her green skin, long nails, and sleek black frock contrasting Dorothy’s red apple cheeks, bow and pigtails, and sky-blue gingham dress, she is coded as Dorothy’s “other.” If Dorothy’s theme is “Over the Rainbow,” the Witch has a musical leitmotif of her own: the infamous threatening flurry of eighth notes that herald her arrival and suggest an imminent doom. It is Dorothy who names her nemesis, calling Elmira Gulch “a mean ‘ol witch,” and it is Dorothy’s rejection of Gulch that triggers her disillusionment with Kansas. What once signified “home” is now a place populated with ineffectual adults and rich bullies who menace little dogs. Indeed, Auntie Em and Uncle Henry’s (Charley Grapewin) attitude towards Dorothy’s Toto troubles is best summarized by Auntie Em’s first line of dialogue: “Don’t bother us! We’re busy!” Applying a name to that which oppresses her is a necessary act of rebellion and Dorothy’s first step in determining her own virtues in the face of adult restriction.

So, although the Witch may be conceived of as a dark reflection of Dorothy (interestingly reinforced by the Munchkin’s and Glinda’s (Billie Burke) initial uncertainty over Dorothy: “Are you a good witch, or a bad witch?”), this allegorical position is secondary to her narrative role as Dorothy’s persecutor. Corresponding with our consideration of villains as occulted forces of unattainable power, the Witch is literally the double of Elmira Gulch. As Kansas’ own mini-despot, Gulch threatens the Gales with legal retribution if Dorothy’s dog Toto is not put to sleep and turns Dorothy’s world upside down (just as effectively as the cyclone that carries her to Oz). Her tyrannous authority is mirrored by the actual despotism of the Witch in Oz.

Although Dorothy truly believes that “there’s no place like home,” it seems clear that the film actually promotes *Oz* as the more desirable of the two landscapes. In fact, *Oz* is more of a home to Dorothy than Kansas – it is only in *Oz* that she is admired, respected, and never, ever treated like a child. In Kansas, Dorothy faces only crushing bleakness and the condescension of the adults.⁵ She is nothing more than a bothersome little girl who constantly gets into trouble at home, but in *Oz*, she can truly come into her own as a brave and resourceful young woman. *Here, she is allowed an independent status that is a benign echo of the malign power and authority that her shadow, the Witch, exercises over her environment.* The Witch’s position of authority in *Oz* is one Dorothy could potentially enjoy if she chose to remain. The Munchkins actually believe Dorothy to be a Witch (albeit a good one), and celebrate her as their hero. All sense of duty aside, it is almost unfathomable that she would she want to return home rather than be a part of her friends’ new-founded meritocracy. She is an orphan of both worlds – belonging to neither (much like the titular Wizard) – but the film’s narrational strategies suggest time and again that *Oz*’s adoptive capacities are much, much richer than those of Kansas.

But Dorothy’s home-grown Puritanism will not permit her to enjoy this freedom. The film is largely about Four Characters in Search of Authentication, but while the male characters acquire self-actualisation after the Wizard publicly recognizes their respective virtues, Dorothy is, instead, domesticated. By insisting that “there’s no place like home,” she is engaged in an effective act of self-delusion, unwilling to recognise “that the Kansas farmyard [is] indeed a place not remotely like home, a place lacking in courage, sensitivity, hope, and colour, where the only singing that could be done was a lonely cry of yearning for something better” (Perkins 1990, 2). In his poem, “Little Gidding,” T. S. Eliot claims that “we shall not cease from exploration / And the end of all exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time.” However, in learning the virtues of never looking beyond her front gate, it seems that Dorothy’s explorations have effectively ceased. Upon her return to Kansas, the house comes crashing down onto the camera – an apt metaphor for the abrupt finality with which her adventures are terminated.

⁵ Salman Rushdie shares this sentiment in his critical reading of the film (1992), as does Victor Perkins (Perkins 1990, 2).

While the repressive aptitude of “home” speaks for itself, the Witch does not, at first, appear to be a figure that implicitly undervalues Dorothy’s desire to return to Kansas. Despite the promising resonance her authoritative status holds for Dorothy, she is regarded as a threat, rather than a model of possibility. “I’ll get you, my pretty,” she cackles, “and your little dog too,” which naturally terrifies Dorothy, since being “gotten” effectively equals the prevention of returning home. To a certain degree, we perversely may attribute an unintentional nobility to the Witch’s efforts to retrieve the ruby slippers, as they are the means of magical transportation back to a repressive Kansas. Dorothy continually flees the Witch because she is an oppugner who represents the promise of the social accreditation Kansas’ inhabitants will not provide. For even though both the Witch and her double, Elmira Gulch menace Dorothy in both worlds, it is their *public stature* – the sheer potency of their influence – that stands in positive relief to the utter powerlessness implicit in Dorothy’s final domestication. Although the Witch is perceived as a threat because she is an attempted “home-wrecker,” her attempts to prevent Dorothy’s homecoming should hardly be considered threatening when home is such a miserable destination. In prolonging Dorothy’s stay in Oz, the Witch actually serves to undermine our desire to see Dorothy return to Kansas. It is no accident that Dorothy’s house crushes the Wicked Witch of the East: “home,” a symbol of immovable repression flattens the potential of unruly feminine power.

The nature of her sister’s demise suggests that such power is illusory. A misdirected bucket of water causes the Witch to disintegrate, and the ease with which she is eliminated has a powerful resonance in Dorothy’s process of self-discovery. Just as Dorothy undoes the Witch’s power, she also exposes the Wizard’s (Frank Morgan) initially threatening persona as so much more empty bluff and bluster. Even after being disclosed as a fraud, the Wizard still attempts to maintain his front – evidenced by his hilarious “recovery” statement: “Pay no attention to the man behind the curtain!” The revelation of the Wizard’s charlatantry and the Witch’s pathetic vulnerability are crucial developments for Dorothy’s maturation, in that she is able to confront adult authority in Oz and recognize that the Emperors have no clothes. The hero-path in this dream-world ultimately leads to self-actualisation.

And yet, we must add the important disclaimer that there is no suggestion that she has the capacity to face down the very real threat of Elmira Gulch, the Witch’s double, in Kansas; it is only in Oz that a raised curtain, or a bucket of water can foil

authoritarianism. Sadly, Dorothy believes such pathetic *deus ex machina* is enough to strip the Witch of her awesome stature, to reduce her to a playground bully. But can a mere soaking truly diminish her so thoroughly? Wicked though the Witch may be, she is a figure whose opposition reveals the unrealised potentialities of *Oz*'s heroine. Here, the villain's oppugnity underlines the poverty of the hero's desire and evokes abandoned possibility. Just as the Witch melts – or, as Salman Rushdie claims, “‘grow[s] down’ into nothingness” (Rushdie 1992, 55) – one can imagine that under the grey skies of Kansas that end the film, Dorothy may also undergo a similar process of diminution. If what Dorothy wishes is to continue a life of perpetual submission, then there really is no place like home.

To Prove a Villain: Character-Oriented Narratives

I have demonstrated how the structure of goal-oriented narratives may be conceived of as an architectural frame for allegorical readings. For structuralists, the goal-oriented narrative is the most elementary of narrative structures and is often read as an allegory of self-discovery. The villain is a privileged component of these texts, functioning as half of the binary a character must recognize in order to define her self. In this light, three typical textual roles the villain plays are *reflective*, *authoritative*, and/or *corruptive*. Most importantly, though, they are employed as an *oppugner* – the means by which the structuring desires of the hero are tested. Their capacity for textual disruption is great here, as they may expose these desires as questionable or even meretricious. As theoretical discussion of goal-oriented narrative film has its roots in structuralism, villainy has been treated here as a feature of the text. That is, the villain's textual role – like any other character – is mainly functional. But although structuralism finds that character is only relevant in terms of its significance for the course of narrative action, we have seen how such significance also has larger psychological and moral importance.

Since the waning of the structuralist influence in literary studies, character has been conceived of in a very different way. Fernando Ferrara posits a model of character which contrasts completely with Propp's: “In fiction, the *character* is used as the structuring element: the objects and the events of fiction exist – in one way or another – because of the character and, in fact, it is only in relation to it that they possess those qualities of coherence and plausibility which make them meaningful and

comprehensible" (Ferrara 1974, 252 italics mine). In Ferrara's model, *narrative events are dependent on the moral character of protagonists* and the story is shaped by the personalities of the characters who inhabit it. Narrative is no longer something that happens to characters; "character" is something that brings the narrative into being. It is to these "character-oriented" narrative structures that we now turn our attention.

Drawing on the example of the oft-referenced classical model, the *desire* of the central protagonist does not fuel the progression of the character-oriented narrative. Instead, it is, in a sense the *curiosity* of the text – its apparent desire to explore an individual's character – that propels the story, and therefore, our interest in the narrative lies in what it reveals about particular protagonists. The object of a protagonist's desire is not of primary interest, nor do we focus upon the means she employs to achieve it. Or, more precisely, a coveted object and the process of acquisition are emptied of signification *in themselves* and the newfound ways in which they "mean" are as signifiers of character. Narrative emphasis is thus not on plot development itself, but on the characters that shape the plot's structure. Here, the pleasures of suspense ("What will happen next?") are eschewed for the pleasures of analysis ("What leads someone to behave in this manner?"). One might even say that the differences between the two narrative structures is a matter of their temporal emphases: by privileging suspense, the goal-oriented narrative is concerned with a character's future, while the character-oriented narrative speculates about the influence of an individual's past.⁶

Fictional, or represented people, then, are not merely functional *agents*, but more-or-less rounded *characters*. Ferrara's model is hardly new. His argument – that a narrative is important only insofar as it reveals, or explores elements of individual characters – is actually an attempt to revive a turn-of-the-century model of character associated with novelist Henry James, which James established in works such as *The Portrait of a Lady* and *The Ambassadors*. James' attitude towards the relationship between plot and character is most concisely summarised by his oft-quoted rhetorical aphorism, "What is character but the determination of incident? What is incident but the illustration of character" (James 1948, 13)? Turning to Jane Campion's adaptation of *The Portrait of a Lady* for an illustration, we find that the narrative emphasis is not so much on the fate of Isabelle Archer ("Will she leave Gilbert Osmond? Will she marry

⁶ I am indebted to Murray Smith for this observation.

Caspar Goodwood?”) as it is on investigating the motivations behind her actions (“Why does she refuse Lord Warburton’s marriage proposal? What prompts her elusive smile at the end of the film?”).

Because represented people in character-oriented narratives resemble the liberal humanist idea of the individual more than they resemble purely functional agents, it becomes difficult to represent their moral character along simple, dualistic lines. Simply put, psychology complicates the Manichean polarity of the goal-oriented narrative. As I remarked earlier, ethical dualism has a functional purpose in goal-oriented narratives: if two characters seek the same objective and only one may gain the prize, a text’s narrational strategies will favour the outcome of one agent over the other. If the attitudinal aspects of the narration favour an agent, he is dubbed the hero – the “good guy” – while his opponent must be allotted the position of villain. Manicheanism here is strictly a matter of structural necessity. Goal-oriented narratives are necessarily oppositional by nature and the good/evil dyad represents the most fundamental of its structural binaries.

By contrast, a strict dualistic division of personal morality is not ostensibly favoured in character-oriented narratives. Many of these often employ the graduated moral structure I referred to in Chapter 1. Realism is the dictum that motivates the promulgation of this structure, as a wider range of moral dispositions is generally considered to be “more true to life.” There is, of course, nothing *inherently* “realistic” about this structure. The graduated moral structure as it is currently employed most likely develops from the early twentieth century realist novel and its propensity for the “rounded character,” as theorized by James, and later by E. M. Forster in *Aspects of the Novel* (1927). According to Forster’s conception of “flat” and “round” characters, the former has very few traits (directed or teleological) while the latter has a variety, some which may even be conflicting or contradictory (agglomerate).

Under Forster’s idea of character, the villain at first seems to be an example of a flat character. However, a villain’s potential for “roundness” may lie in the degree to which she may be developed as an *alloy* – a term employed by Murray Smith. “The graduated structure...tends to generate characters through the combination of culturally negative with culturally positive traits, producing what we might call an ‘alloy,’ in the sense that morally ‘base’ and ‘precious’ qualities are combined in the name of a ‘stronger’ representation, where strength is measured in terms of verisimilitude” (Smith

1995, 209). Generally speaking, the most memorable villains – those that satisfy the criteria of a “strong representation” – are also the most “complex.” Although their “base” qualities are dominant, they may possess other culturally positive traits that offset or complicate a reading of them as purely “evil.” Certainly, in literature, the profundity attributed to the villains of Shakespeare or Dostoevsky may derive from their status as carefully crafted alloys. And although the alloy is associated with the realist novel, its presence in Shakespearean drama suggests that such a “balanced” presentation of character is much older. We should recall that one of Aristotle’s four dimensions of character is *homios* – that characters should mimetically resemble actual persons, in all their individual complexities.

Some theorists have posited that the more “rounded” a character is – the more contradictory traits she possesses, the more inconsistent her behaviour, the more impenetrable her motivations – the less a text is able to clearly and unilaterally nominate her as the embodiment of a singular moral position. Smith, for example, finds that “the more complex a character’s interiority, the less she can function as a personalized emblem of a clear moral state” (Smith 1995, 214). In character-oriented texts, there may be an interesting struggle occurring at the level of narrational presentation and character presentation. Certain textual indicators and attitudinal aspects may seek to slot a character into a particular moral position only to run into conflict with other textual and transtextual elements. The textual compounding of character attributes – especially if they are conflicting – can work contrary to the efforts of other elements in a film’s narration that try to represent the character along simple, dualistic lines. To put it simply, the rounded character cannot easily be subjected to “either/or” positioning by virtue of the complexity of her attributes.

For example, the actual performance of the actor playing the character may vastly contribute to the resistance of simplistic attitudinal evaluation. The intonation of voice during the delivery of a line, the idiosyncratic mannerisms of the character, the charisma and/or persona of the star playing the role – all of these factors may conflict with a singular narrational evaluation of character. It is not uncommon to hear an actor complain that his or her multifaceted performance was sabotaged (read: oversimplified) by a director’s choice of narrational tactics. Gary Oldman, for example, protested virulently over director Rod Lurie’s erasure of nuance from Oldman’s portrayal of a bitter, discontented Republican, Shelly Runion, in *The Contender* (Rod Lurie, 2000).

Sequences depicting Runion in a sympathetic light – his visit to the dying father of his political rival, for example – were apparently left on the cutting room floor (Greydanus 2000, 3) and his scenes were often punctuated by strongly directive music. At the same time, however, Oldman's performance carries its own rhetorical value as an element of the film's narrative discourse, insofar that his acting is visible in the film and is intended to direct us toward a particular evaluation of his character. So, like our *Oz* example (in which we located conflicting evaluative interests between narration and character), *The Contender* may be thought of as a film whose narration offers a complex – even contradictory – perspective on certain characters.

Is villainy impossible in a character-oriented narrative structure comprised of intricate alloys? Certainly not, as can be attested by Oldman's grievance. For although theorists such as Smith suggest that a polarised moral structure can be troubled by the inclusion of an alloy, I would argue that the organisational force of Manichean duality may override the alloy's moral subtleties. In the end, a film will still invite a spectator to place characters within the polarity of "good" and "bad." Shelly Runion may not be indicted as "evil" for following his own convictions, and yet, it is these conservative political beliefs that *The Contender* clearly does not wish to support. For better or for worse, Runion, as the embodiment of these values must act as the villain of the piece. Thus, while a character-oriented narrative may attempt to avoid the Manicheanism of the goal-oriented narrative, its moral categorisations are difficult to escape completely. "Good" and "bad" are enormously strong cultural categories and are not easily discarded. These categories are *a priori* to the work. A viewer who invests in these categories brings them to a text – even to character-oriented narratives, which are not as fundamentally reliant on binaries as the goal oriented structure. No matter how complex the character, she is still often forced into the role of either hero or villain.

I am certainly not suggesting that virtuous protagonists must necessarily dominate the character-oriented narrative. Although the categories of good and evil may still apply within this structure, it is not impossible for a film to feature a "villainous" hero, or, for that matter, a "heroic" villain. I am speaking of character-oriented narratives that feature a kind of villain as the central protagonist. Such a character is familiar as the *anti-hero*.

How might one identify the anti-hero? At first glance, there often seems to be a fine line distinguishing between the moral character of the hero and villain in certain

texts. In the tradition of the vigilante, for example, from *Death Wish* (Michael Winner, 1974) to *The Punisher* (Michael Winsleigh, 2004), the nominal hero's behaviour is typically as ruthless as that of his adversaries, upon whom he visits brutal retribution. As Dolf Zillman comments with some dismay: "Fighting for a cause that has some merit, usually the sole criterion for their hero status, apparently grants them a license to kill without restraint, even to enjoy it in sadistic fashion" (Zillman 1998, 180). Clearly, the mere undertaking of morally dubious actions in the pursuit of a personal goal is too clumsy a way to identify an anti-hero. Although Zillman tacitly suggests that a syllogism exists between actions and character, it is of utmost importance to recognise that on the contrary, a character need not behave "heroically" to be considered a "hero." The anti-hero acquires his title not because he is a protagonist who exhibits morally questionable behaviour in the pursuit of a morally questionable goal, but because *his actions call into question our familiar conceptual category of heroism*. The anti-hero short-circuits the automatic assumption that virtue is a precondition of the character occupying the central position of protagonist. In other words, the anti-hero empties the category of "hero" of any signification besides that which is purely narrational. The hero simply becomes the character whose perspective is privileged by the narration and whose actions we are predominantly invited to follow, even though we may find their behaviour to be morally questionable. The unheroic usurpation of the hero's actantial position can even lead to the creation of a new undecidable, or paradoxical figure.

In a goal-oriented narrative, the villain has the functional position of oppugner, testing the merits of the hero's structuring desire. The anti-hero has no such opposing figure. From a functional point of view, the text assumes that considerations of merit are unimportant. Either the anti-hero's desires *incontestably* and *automatically* structure the narrative – as in Porter's (Mel Gibson) efforts to reacquire his stolen goods from other criminals who have robbed him in turn in *Payback* (Brian Helgeland, 1999) – or, they are only relevant insofar as they provide insight to his wickedness – as in the cruel seduction-as-practical joke that is visited upon a blind administrative assistant (Stacy Edwards) by a misogynistic junior executive (Aaron Eckhart) in *In the Company of Men* (Neil LaBute, 1997). Regardless of the degree of the character's complexity, the anti-hero is always-already predisposed to wickedness, or at least is marked by some kind of fundamental moral weakness. She rarely requires a textual "other" by which her wickedness or moral turpitude is defined, drawing instead on our already existing

cultural distinctions between “right” and “wrong” for recognition. Mary Bristol’s (Gene Tierney) actantial function in *Night and the City* (Jules Dassin, 1950) is to act as the good angel for Harry Fabian (Richard Widmark), but the various scams, betrayals, and acts of thievery committed by this con artist anti-hero are recognised as reprehensible in themselves without reference to Bristol’s virtue for context.

Despite the frequent lack of a virtuous nemesis, the character-oriented narrative featuring an anti-hero may ostensibly resemble that of a goal-oriented narrative featuring a “heroic” protagonist. Figures of opposition then become either: 1) figures of *law/order/establishment* who lack “virtue” despite their roles as representatives of justice, as in *Bonnie and Clyde* (Arthur Penn, 1967) or, 2) *other villains*, as in *Per un pugno di dollari* (Sergio Leone, 1964). Although the plot structure superficially retains the same dramatic tensions and oppositions, the difference in the character-oriented narrative is an explicit emphasis on value-testing. These films inherently invite questions concerning the spectator’s placement of allegiance in ways that the classical goal-oriented narrative only attempts indirectly (through the oppugner, for example). Both *Night and the City* and *Bonnie and Clyde* offer superb examples of moral testing as they offer criminal protagonists who frequently appeal to viewers’ moral sympathies throughout the narrative. Harry Fabian lies, cheats and steals his way through London in an effort to “become a somebody,” and the Barrows cheerfully rob banks as an act of insurrection during the blackest period of the Depression.

Moreover, the classical narrative structure’s insistence on establishing the propriety of its protagonist’s desire is largely absent in the case of the *goal-oriented* anti-hero. Such texts implicitly acknowledge the debased nature of these desires from the outset and move on. Captain Jack Sparrow (Johnny Depp) never once makes excuses for his duplicitous ways in *Pirates of the Caribbean* (Gore Verbinski, 2003) and indeed, the narration presents him as a comical rogue unapologetically (“Cheater!” the straight-laced Will Turner (Orlando Bloom) complains as Jack pulls a musket on him in the middle of their duel, to which Jack matter-of-factly replies: “Pirate”). However, questions of propriety haunt the anti-hero in the character-oriented narrative. When the villain takes centre stage in these narratives, the film will engage in the moral and/or psychological exposition of his “wickedness.” Because cause-effect logic is not as important, and there is not such a concentration on suspense, there is more of a focus on *why* characters behave the way they do. Character studies, then are *psychologically*

based narratives – explorations of the *inner world* of the protagonist and how this interiority affects what she does in the *outer world*. The anti-hero of the goal-oriented film conducts her nefarious affairs in a summary fashion, but the character-oriented film is interested in exposing the skull beneath the skin.

In my evaluation of character-oriented narratives so far, I have argued that this structure is dependent on the attributes of characters for its shape. Fictional people in this model are characters, rather than simply agents, and the narrational focus is on the motivations behind their actions, rather than on the actions themselves. Because characters in this narrative structure are alloys, it is tempting to argue that the complexity of their “personality” categorically jams a dualistic moral structure. However, because Manichean duality is a powerful *a priori* cultural construction, such a dualism is often unavoidably established from the outset. Moreover, spectators are often still guided by the film’s narrational strategies to weigh the “positive” and “negative” traits of a character and come to a conclusion regarding the character’s morality. And yet, it does not follow that all characters in the textual role of protagonist must automatically assume “heroic” qualities; the anti-hero is a character in the traditional actantial position of “hero” who, contrary to expectations, possesses predominantly “villainous” character traits, thus overturning the assumption that a “hero” must assume analogous personal qualities. Again, anti-heroes alter the traditional category of the hero by eroding the hero’s associations with virtue and transforming the category to a *purely narrational* position. A textual “other” rarely tests the merits of the anti-hero’s desires; instead, these desires are automatically assumed to be sufficient for the purposes of the narrative’s structure, or else, the “baseness” of these desires is the principal subject of the film’s narrational focus.

I would now like to argue that the exploration of these desires in the character-oriented narrative of the anti-hero often shape the very structure of the film in which they are conducted. Form and narrative discourse in these “inner world” expositions on evil frequently take on surprising appearances. It is towards this cinematic character study of the anti-hero that I now wish to direct my attention. I would like to posit *American Psycho* as a prototypical film whose examination of its morally complex anti-hero is reinforced by an analogous structural dynamism.

Ways to Make a Killing: Alignment, Irony and the Anti-Hero

To begin with, I would like to suggest that anti-hero character studies are generally quite baroque in style. Their lack of emphasis on dramatic oppositions, their eschewal of relentless teleology and cause-effect logic, and their structural dependence on character attributes tends to lead to a “looser” narrative structure encouraging formal play, a tendency to experiment with narrative voice, and similar experiments with time/space relations. They also possess a greater self-awareness of the ways in which narrative discourse manipulates the viewer. Finally, and most importantly, if the principal character’s morals are “skewed,” these films often recreate a similar “skewing” of the way that character sensuously experiences the world. As the anti-hero is typically the principal filter for the narrative discourse, viewers concomitantly experience the fictional world as if strangers in a strange land as well. I would like to develop these claims more fully here.

Structurally, the perpetual forward thrust of linear teleology and the logic of cause and effect are not as fundamental to character-oriented narratives as they are to goal-oriented narratives. Of course, such linearity may continue to operate structurally. However, means and ends are not given prominence, but instead, emphasis lies with the individuals who activate these structural components. As a result, an emphasis on chronology, causality, and plot-driven action can be eschewed in favour of an adherence to alternative structural logics. It is not uncommon to observe relaxations in a film’s pacing, episodic or repetitious (rather than continuous) plot structures, anti-Aristotelian chronologies, the inclusion of seemingly unmotivated action, deliberate loose ends and the lack of concrete resolution, or a formal adherence to the shape of the central character’s internal imperatives. In essence, the character-oriented narrative will not be organised in predictable ways; its structural idiosyncrasies can be as suitably unique as the possible persons that steer its course. I would further wager that the more “atypical” a character’s moral orientation is, the more unusual the narrative presentation will be.

While they appear post-classical in design, these apparently baroque narrative structures in anti-heroic, character-oriented films can be found throughout the history of American cinema. We might refer to *The Whispering Chorus* (Cecil B. DeMille, 1918), in which a luckless gambler who exchanges identities with a dead man is subsequently convicted for his own murder. John Tramble’s (Raymond Hatton) rising inner turmoil and degradation is mirrored by a plot that becomes increasingly Byzantine and

fantastically contrived. In *The Killers* (Robert Siodmak, 1946), the central protagonist Ole Andersen (Burt Lancaster) passively allows himself to be gunned down in the dark before the narrative proper can even begin, and most of the circumstances leading up to his murder are related in eleven incomplete and unrelated flashbacks. *Point Blank* (John Boorman, 1967) features a revenge-seeking Walker (Lee Marvin), whose motives are only revealed gradually through brief flashbacks that become increasingly detailed as the story progresses, and whose quest is inexplicably disrupted at the film's open-ended conclusion. *Raging Bull* (Martin Scorsese, 1980) is an extended flashback, but makes sudden leaps forward through time – sometimes across several years – to present a number of the brutish Jake La Motta's (Robert De Niro) more notable boxing matches. Deliberately repetitious, the film continually alternates between scenes of “professional” and domestic violence, which are punctuated by a number of muted, dramatically “static” tableaux that serve as understated portraits of La Motta's psychological unrest. A number of contemporary anti-heroic revenger's tragedies also offer comparably “eccentric” narrative structures: *Lost Highway*'s (David Lynch, 1997) veritable Möbius strip of a plot; *The Limey*'s (Steven Soderbergh, 1999) crystalline view of the single-minded pursuit of retribution; the vertiginous lurching of time as the wounded protagonists of *21 Grams* (Alejandro González Iñárritu, 2003) morally disintegrate.

American Psycho is in keeping with this tradition. The film centres on the working and recreational habits of Patrick Bateman (Christian Bale) – a successful young day trader who also happens to be a serial killer. Presented as a pitch-black social satire of the hyper-materialistic Wall Street aristocracy in the late 1980's, *American Psycho*'s narrative structure is an ironic reflection of its protagonist's delirious ennui. Its story is a cyclical compilation of episodes, essentially little more than a series of scenes that alternate between restaurants and murders. With the monotonous repetition of the narrative structure, we can find an allegorical correlative in Patrick's obsessive compulsion to kill serially and to scrawl endless sketches of his victims. As a subject who lives his life as a slave to capital, Patrick is viciously satirized – his repetitive and largely invisible labour is complemented only by the acquisition and consumption of goods and he is transformed from “individual” to “subject” in the process. A casualty of late capitalism, he is capable of only emotional highs and lows, experiments in sadism and murder to provide stimulus and break up monotony, and subjects individuals to his whims even as he is “subjected” by his

lifestyle. Victims become his acquisitions, commodities for his (sometimes literal) consumption and forms from which all subjective value is drained. Thus, as Patrick disavows his victims' authentic materiality, murder (as a condition) comes to stand for life under late capitalism.

Not only is the narrative structure of the anti-heroic character study often baroque in its design, but so too is its narrative discourse. Frequently, the narrational strategies of these films undermine the familiar methods by which viewers are usually aligned with characters in order to learn about them. In *American Psycho*, the nature of the central character's "evil" is the principal focus of the film, but interestingly, the film's narrative discourse is not interested in sympathy; instead, exclusive *epistemic alignment* is carefully crafted as the principal mode through which the film *critiques* the cultural milieu that seems to nurture his homicidal disposition. As in many other anti-heroic character studies, the strange manipulations of traditional epistemic alignment support *American Psycho*'s critical approach to its subject matter.

The term "epistemic alignment" refers to the structural means whereby the film seeks its audience's imaginative participation and attempts to situate a viewer in proximity to its narrative agents. Such participation is sought to establish a virtual connection between character and viewer, whereby the latter is invited to involve herself in the experiences of the former *as they unfold*. "Involvement" is conceived in the broadest sense here, and can include a wide range of responses to the fiction: emotional vicariousness, dispassionate critique, unabashed voyeurism, etc. Epistemic alignment does not make any demands on the viewer beyond visually and aurally attending to the fictional experiences of characters. Simply put, it is the formal system in which the sensuous experience of viewers and characters is placed in concordance.⁷

The most basic way to foster such alignment is through *focalisation* – through concentrating on the actions or organizing the narrative around the experiences of a single agent. Recall that when a character is focalised, the narration will concentrate on her external behaviour and – more importantly for the character-oriented narrative – her interior perspective. Like Chatman's distinction between character filters and

⁷ Epistemic alignment should be distinguished from the strategy of perspectival alignment discussed in Chapter 1. Perspectival alignment is restricted to the representation of a character's field of vision, while epistemic alignment refers more broadly to the representation of a character's personal experience as a whole.

narrational slants and Smith's separation of "spatio-temporal attachment" and "subjective access" (Smith 1995, 142-143), we should also remember that external and internal focalisation should not be conjoined under the umbrella term "point of view." As discussed in Chapter 1, they are distinct narrational strategies with their own respective techniques. In *American Psycho*, for example, spatio-temporal attachment and subjective access is almost entirely limited to the anti-hero and character filter, Patrick, but this alignment is structured in accordance with the filmmakers' highly *critical* narrational slant. It is also worth noting that a film's narration will necessarily limit representations of minor characters' interiorities and instances in which they are externally focalised for extended periods of time.

So, the narrative discourse's limitations on external and internal focalisation will produce a particular kind of alignment. In this case, *American Psycho* plays off a familiar model of classical alignment: that of limited interior access and singular attachment. One of the most well-recognized examples of a film that employs this model is *The Maltese Falcon* (John Huston, 1941). Almost everything we know and/or experience in the narrative is limited to what the central protagonist – Sam Spade (Humphrey Bogart), the private investigator – knows and experiences. Also, because the film is a mystery, its narration does not reveal Spade's inner processes of deduction lest the viewer solve the crime(s) too early.

But continual epistemic alignment is also a narrative strategy typically used to foster allegiance with a central protagonist. In the case of *The Maltese Falcon*, it is not simply that we are limited to what Spade knows and experiences due to the film's generic status as a detective thriller; we are also invited to ally ourselves with his weary and cynical worldview. We might say, therefore, that epistemic alignment may be employed to forward a corresponding *epistemic identification*, which "is to imagine believing what [a character] believes" (Gaut 1999, 205). Epistemic identification may be conceived of as coming to share some (but not all) of the same beliefs, morals, and ethical values as a character. It is the fostering of a congruent *weltanschauung* ("worldview") between a fictive and viewing subject. If the film revolves around the experiences of a singular character, acting as the cinematic equivalent of a first person narrator – as in the case of *The Maltese Falcon* – such a temporary congruency is all the more easily established. This prompting of an extended act of empathetic imagining may even be forwarded in the interests of securing our sympathies with a character.

With regards to *American Psycho*, we are in Patrick's presence for nearly the entire duration of the film, and he initially exhibits all the signs of a conventional, sympathetic character with whom we might epistemically identify: he is self-assured, charming, and apparently conscientious (as demonstrated by his reprimand to a fellow crony for making a casually racist remark). Moreover, the film employs several of the structural devices typically employed to promote epistemic identification: the continual screen presence of a protagonist; the organisation of narrative action around said character; and the use of voiceover narration. However, because this is an anti-heroic character study, these classical devices are not used in traditional ways; their effects deviate drastically from epistemic identification in favour of moral critique instead.

For example, one of the most self-conscious elements of narrative discourse – voiceover narration – is employed to subversive ends. “A narrative, like every discourse, is necessarily addressed to someone and always contains below the surface an appeal to the receiver” (Genette 1980, 259), and these voice-overs emphasise the spectator's position as a receiver, as a *narratee*. Gerald Prince delineates the position and functions of the narratee as distinct from those of the actual or the implied reader as the narratee is the subject position to whom the narrative discourse is immediately directed. Whether they are present in or absent from the narrative, a narratee will act as a relay, or mediator between the author and reader, and also assists in the characterization of the narrator. Indeed, the relationship that a narrator establishes with a narratee can reveal much about the former's personality (ibid, 199-200). So, like any film in which voiceover narration is directed toward an absent narratee, the same implicit questions apply to *American Psycho*: for whom is Patrick narrating and why?

As the extradiegetic narratee makes no sign of appearing, and Patrick never identifies the person to whom his narrational declarations are directed, we might begin to suspect that Patrick is addressing *us*, perhaps in order to draw our sympathy. Certainly, the use of a transparent narratee can promote a substantial amount of intimacy between viewers and the diegetic narrator. As this film is narrated from the perspective of a highly disturbed individual, it is not surprising that the psycho should try to “explain himself” from the outset.

Although it would be foolish to suggest that a fictional character literally “controls” the narrative and is able to directly “speak to” a viewer of whose presence he is aware, Patrick's continual “confessions” to his extradiegetic narratee almost seem to

extend (impossibly) *outside* the constraints of his position as a fictional, homodiegetic narrator. Gérard Genette discusses *authorial metalepsis*, an effect by which the author pretends literally to cause the events about which he writes in moments of direct address to the narratee. Such metalepses seem to occur much more readily in film, as there often appears to be a direct correlation between what the narrator says and what can correspondingly be represented on screen. In *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), for example, the narrator (Edward Burns) confesses to becoming “a slave to the Ikea nesting instinct,” as the Swedish designer furniture he describes instantly materialises in his apartment. These metalepses are potentially unsettling structural features. “The most troubling thing about metalepsis indeed lies in this unacceptable and insistent hypothesis, that the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic, and that the narrator and his narratees – you and I – perhaps belong to some narrative” (Genette 1980, 248). Are we rendered “fictional” in some sense during our engagement with a fiction? Is the narratee “seen” in some way by the narrator? In *American Psycho*, Patrick is a homodiegetic narrator who certainly seems to “see” us. His voiceovers recall those from other well-known anti-heroic character studies whose narration is filtered through unusual subjectivities. Precedents include Michael O’Hara’s (Orson Welles) guided tour through his “bright and guilty world” in *The Lady from Shanghai* (Orson Welles, 1947), or the psychotic narration taken from Travis Bickle’s (Robert DeNiro) diary, intoned aloud for *Taxi Driver*’s (Martin Scorsese, 1976) audience – for the “pure” and “sucking scum” alike.

But if Patrick’s voiceovers are attempts to draw us into epistemic identification, will they be able to garner our sympathy for him? It becomes increasingly apparent throughout the narrative that Patrick’s desire for control is absolute and megalomaniacal. A typical example occurs during a restaurant scene in which he issues gastronomic ultimatums to his mistress, Courtney (Samantha Mathis), despite her medicated obliviousness (“I think you’ll love it,” he finishes smugly as she slips into a Xanax-induced stupor). When many similar examples begin to compound, we recognize that perpetual epistemic alignment is not being used in the service of epistemic identification; instead, it is a narrational strategy that echoes Patrick’s attempted dominance over everyone he encounters within the fiction (in much the same way that a villainous POV represents an “usurpation” of narrational authority, as discussed in Chapter 1). As Prince maintains, it is not just characters who are caught up

in relations of power, but such struggles can also be played out between the narrator and the narratee as the former may try to dominate the latter (Prince 1973, 200). The domination that Patrick strives to achieve over his narratee is an example of this narrational power dynamic at work.

This uncanny “vision” is even more sinister in *American Psycho* when compounded with the realization that for Patrick, murder and torture are the ultimate assertions of his desire for control. We come to realize that his voiceovers are not so much petitions for our sympathy as they are attempts to draw us into a kind of virtual complicity with him, and thus establish his mastery over us through an enforced and perverted confessional relationship. Instead of being drawn into empathy or sympathy for the anti-hero by Patrick’s narrative discourse, we are *morally* situated by the filmmakers’ *metanarrative discourse* (or, “narrative slant”) in order to read Patrick, or more precisely, Patrick’s social milieu, critically.

In addition to a “perverse” narrative structure and discourse, the anti-heroic character study may frequently fail to provide reliable “*inside views*” to the central protagonist’s subjectivity. Representing “inside views” can include methods ranging from allowing privileged access into a character’s thoughts, to restricting or withholding the interiority or subjective states of others. Wayne C. Booth stresses the importance of “inside views”, as they “can build sympathy even for the most vicious character. When properly used, this effect can be of immeasurable value in forcing us to see the human worth of a character whose actions, objectively considered, we would deplore” (Booth 1983, 378). *The Woodsman* (Nicole Kassell, 2004), for example, limits its inside views to the central protagonist, Walter (Kevin Bacon) – a convicted paedophile who is attempting to start a new life following his release from prison. Throughout the film, a penitent Walter is tormented by memories of his victims, which are made manifest recurrently in a succinctly evocative image: the fleeting glimpse of a young girl holding a bright red utility ball. These brief shots provide windows to an intensely private hell, and in so doing, they serve as supplications that cannot be ignored. Such are the intensity of these “inside views” that we will either recoil from Walter in horror, or, we will begin to open ourselves to the possibility of pity and compassion for an individual in pain, however monstrous his past actions.

Our feelings of sympathy, however, will be tempered by the credibility of the narration’s subjective access. On the one hand, the narrator is traditionally held

responsible for “telling the truth” about the fiction in question. But can we always trust the narrator? And what do we do with a narrative in which the narrator seems to be fundamentally deluded and is unclear as to what is real and what is not? Can we still approach characters with the same moral certainty when events are narrated through an unreliable filter? Anti-heroic character studies do not always have a vested interest in providing trustworthy representations of a villain’s interiority. Indeed, subjective access can demonstrate how an anti-hero’s principles might be terribly misguided, or reveal their worldview to be fundamentally flawed.

How reliable, then, are the “inside views” we are permitted to glimpse of Patrick? Though we have access to Patrick’s thoughts via his voiceovers, they tell us very little about him. Other characters, especially his friends and associates, are not privileged with voiceovers – a necessary structural limitation which assists the epistemic alignment of the viewer with Patrick alone. But it is not simply that our exclusive alignment with Patrick precludes subjective access to other characters; the interiorities of these caricatured socialites are one dimensional and easily decipherable because they are perpetually externalised (indeed, they simply are what they own). Complimenting this conception of secondary characters is Patrick’s belief that *nothing is to be learned through the revelation of his interiority*. He “confesses” that his “identity is an abstraction,” that “[he] simply [is] not there” as he peels exfoliating gel from his face like a mask of flesh, and even claims that “greed and disgust are [his] only two identifiable emotions.” This psychotic narrator will not even permit himself one of the most fundamental human attributes: that of an identity.

However, it becomes readily apparent that we cannot trust what Patrick tells us about himself. We cannot give credence to his inner monologues because they are often at odds with his external circumstances. Patrick tells us, for example that “[he] feel[s] on the verge of frenzy” as he receives a facial massage and relaxes on a tanning bed. The voiceovers seem to be performed as an attempt to mystify his motivations, both to the viewer and to himself. In his attempts to fashion himself into a self-proclaimed “abstraction,” Patrick short-circuits the obvious causal connections between his murderous and materialist obsessions.

As voiceover narration proves to be a device used to defeat allegiance with Patrick, so too is the structuration of looks in the film as well. Neither POV nor reaction shots invite us to ally ourselves with him. POV shots are often employed to foster

epistemic identification, which may prompt feelings of sympathy for the character (Gaut 1999, 209), but there are hardly any shots evoking Patrick's POV (this is not a serial killer film that invites viewers to "see what a killer sees" in a traditional sense).⁸ When POV is employed in *American Psycho*, it tends to be followed by a reaction shot that attempts to hinder sympathetic engagement or affective identification. In one rare POV shot, Patrick eyes up a business card belonging to a rival colleague, Paul Allen (Jared Leto), and the reaction shot shows Patrick breaking out in a sweat as he observes Allen's card is more tasteful than his (although the two cards appear to be nearly identical). We obviously read Patrick's disproportionate reaction to the situation as comical ("Oh my God, it even has a watermark," he gasps in voice over) and are invited to laugh at his expense. Given that Patrick's internally-felt loss of status prompts an even more drastic act of overcompensation later (he buries the hatchet with Allen, quite literally, by axing him in the face), it seems highly unlikely that POV is being forwarded towards sympathetic ends.

So, clearly these kinds of perceptual "inside views" do not encourage an allegiance with our psycho. While POV may traditionally help to prompt sympathy for moral characters in classical narratives, the anti-heroic character study frequently employs this structure of looking to a much different end. Extreme examples such as *Lolita* and *Happiness* (Todd Solondz, 1998) should serve as cogent points of reference, as both represent a discomfiting, paedophilic gaze. *Lolita's* depraved aesthete and *Happiness's* perverted suburban patriarch rarely display anything else but lust toward the pre-adolescent objects of their gaze. Their POV differs dramatically from Walter's equally predatory visual perspective in *The Woodsman*. The tracking shot that emulates his field of vision as he stalks a young girl is followed by a reaction shot that is a wrenching admixture of exhilaration, trepidation, and self-loathing.

Does the film imply any other way that Patrick deserves our sympathy in a way that is comparable to *The Woodsman's* representation of its protagonist? Booth states that in order "to gain moral sympathy, in addition to the generalized sympathy of warmth that inside views can provide, an author must in some way give us evidence of a character's capacity of admirable choice" (Booth 1983, 418). Does Patrick have this

⁸ *Peeping Tom* (Michael Powell, 1965) is probably the prototype for thrillers that maintain extended perspectival alignment with a killer in order to foster epistemic identification and empathetic imagination.

capacity? Towards the film's end, he demonstrates remorse over his actions, evidenced by the hysterical phone call he makes to his lawyer in which he confesses his crimes. He even visibly blanches when he admits to trying to eat one of his victim's brains.

This "noble" declaration of guilt may also be another moment of self-deception on Patrick's part, since – to complicate matters even further – the film adopts the curious strategy of undermining the very actuality of Patrick's murders. Murray Smith raises an interesting provision in the establishment of allegiance with a fictional character: "Allegiance pertains to the moral evaluation of characters by the spectator...[It] depends on the spectator having what she takes to be *reliable access* to the character's state of mind, on understanding the context of the characters actions, and having morally evaluated the character on the basis of this knowledge" (Smith 1995, 84 *italics mine*). Interestingly, *American Psycho* problematises our sense of having reliable access to Patrick's mind as we become aware of the possibility that his homicidal behaviour has only been a figment of his imagination.

For example, Patrick becomes "invincible" during one fantastic sequence in which he murders an old woman, two police officers, a security guard, and a janitor. The sequence is both highly improbable and borders on the absurd: the police car "magically" explodes when hit by one of Patrick's shots, and he briefly looks at the handgun in befuddlement. Of course, no one witnesses the murders committed in the middle of the street. Additionally, when Patrick returns to the (apparent) scene of his crimes at Paul Allen's apartment, he finds that the penthouse has been refurbished and is being shown to potential tenants (suggesting either an elitist cover-up of the murder, or that Patrick has fantasised all of the scenes that have taken place there). In fact, his "victims" may not even be dead, as Patrick's lawyer is positive he had lunch with Paul Allen in London *after* Patrick apparently murders him. The film weaves a tapestry of uncertainties and confusions in which communication is impossible, names and identities are interchangeable and material reality is in a state of flux. To make matters worse, Patrick moves within a social world that does not permit confession or allow remorse, and thus, the "confessional" register of his voice-over is rendered irrelevant from the outset. He eventually becomes a pill-popping, nervous wreck, completely bewildered that his crimes are not detected or acknowledged.

By the film's end, Patrick is utterly mystified (perhaps even victimized) by the very socio-economic system that he labours to perpetuate. Rather than sharing this

confusion, however, we are in the privileged position of being able to recognise the cause of this malady. When Patrick tells us that he has gained “no catharsis, no self-knowledge” from his actions and believes that his “confession has meant nothing,” we realize that Patrick is utterly ignorant of the circumstances which corrode his humanity. There is moral criticism at play here, but it is not levelled at Patrick as a homicidal maniac *per se*, *but rather at the social fabric from which his actions and subsequent ignorance are cut*. While his sound and fury have come to signify nothing to himself, we recognize him as another subject blinded by the neon flash of materialism’s surfaces.

Despite the traditional predisposition to sympathise with the individual occupying the actantial position of protagonist with whom we are aligned, an alliance with the anti-hero is not a foregone conclusion. This manipulation of “classical” patterns of alignment is part of the anti-heroic character study’s generally idiosyncratic form. I have suggested that there is a link between the subversion of traditional narrative structures, narrational strategies and inside views in these films and the “abnormal” subjectivities of the villainous characters they represent. In other words, *if a villain’s moral perception of the world is represented as being fundamentally flawed (in that it ought not to be respected), then a character-oriented film may adopt a formal structure that illustrates this view and, in some moralistic cases, caution us from adopting a similar outlook*. In fact, *critical distance* maintained between protagonists and viewers frequently marks the anti-heroic character study.

Rather than invite sympathy for the anti-hero, the form of such films often encourages an *ironic* relationship between characters and viewers. As the anti-hero drains the position of hero of traditional noble or meritorious qualities, what remains is a character who is occasionally deplorable, but more often, simply pathetic. Within this ironic mode, the anti-hero is either constrained by larger forces – social, environmental, genetic – or his ignoble actions are determined by factors beyond his control.⁹ At the most drastic, the consciousness of the anti-hero is limited or even deluded, and his perception of the circumstances in which he moves is illusory or disastrously erroneous. It might be said, then, that the ironic mode is sympathetic to a conception of villainy as

⁹ My use of the term “irony” here is contiguous with Northrop Frye’s: “If inferior in power or intelligence to ourselves, so that we have the sense of looking down on a scene of bondage, frustration, or absurdity, the hero belongs to the ironic mode. This is still true when the reader feels that he is or might be in the same situation, as the situation is being judged by the norms of greater freedom” (Frye 1957, 34).

being *externally determined* – it is hardly coincidental that this mode appears historically at the same moment as naturalist discourses – and that it principally favors the “ignorance” model of immorality. In concordance with this mild ignorance, the audience is endowed with a greater knowledge of the significance of events than the anti-hero, or is lead by the baroque stylization of the film’s form to evaluate circumstances differently from this character. Rarely are we asked to sympathize with their condition (except during brief, isolated moments); more often, we are invited to critique their actions, or, at the very least, defer from compassionate engagement.

Perhaps the most obvious instances of ironic representations of the anti-hero can be found in film noir – a tradition characterized by detachment, distance and failure. Several critics have made similar observations. J. P. Telotte argues that these features punctuate the narrative voice in noir, that they are signs of a lack of adequate terms in which we can represent a modern, broken world and the failure of an adequate means of communication within it (Telotte 1989, 5). Douglas Pye finds that the noir narrator’s first-person account of “experience recollected... inevitably removes us from the events themselves” (Pye 1992, 99). And Foster Hirsch believes that the implied viewer’s relationship with characters in noir is intended to be fundamentally ironic, or “detached” (Hirsch 1980, 170). Examples are abundant, but one could hardly look for a more perfect case study than the heist film, *The Killing* (Stanley Kubrick, 1950) for evidence.

Here, Johnny Clay’s (Sterling Hayden) ingeniously wrought caper self-destructs with the same methodical precision with which it was conceived. Innocuous, random elements such as a dropped horseshoe, a faulty suitcase, and a dog without a leash play major roles in the heist’s breakdown. The intricacy of the cause-effect relations that determine the course of this unravelling suggest the particularly malicious hand of fate, or some other malign force. None of the two-time losers are able to make off with the goods and are all victims of a paradoxically conspiratorial version of chance. Without fail, student audiences laugh at the film’s *coup de grace*, in which Clay’s ill-gotten gains are dispersed to the four winds in a flurry of unmarked bills. Such a response supports the hulking Maurice Oboukhoff’s (Kola Kwariani) theory about “the gangster and the artist [being] the same in the eyes of the masses. They are admired and hero-worshiped but there is always present the underlying wish to see them destroyed at the peak of their growth.” If there is not an outright wish to see the noir anti-hero fail, then there is at least a reluctance to ally ourselves with him wholeheartedly and engagement with the

character is nearly always ironic. The inevitably doomed and defeatist character seems to actively eschew the potential for a sympathetic alliance. “Johnny, you’ve got to run,” Fay (Coleen Gray) exclaims as the authorities close in on them. His reply is summative of many noir anti-heroes’ final outlook: “Ah, what’s the difference?”

At some level, then, the anti-hero is nearly always blind, or lacking in important knowledge to some degree, which in turn prompts the ironic distance with which we experience their struggles. I have indicated that *American Psycho* focuses on one such “myopic” character, and that the truth to which Patrick remains blind is at the heart of the film’s critical enterprise. The filmmakers clearly want viewers to understand that Patrick’s murderous impulses and mania for control are a result of his continual emasculations and ultimate powerlessness. Instead of circling about Patrick’s professed “slippery” subjectivity, his psychosis is explicitly linked to the undermining of his idealized masculinity that he experiences in the world of high-capitalism: from the colleagues who will not acknowledge his taste, to the *maitre d’* at Dorsia who laughs hysterically at his request for Friday night reservations. His mania is directed towards the “objects” of his contempt in an attempt to punish them and reassert his own thwarted sense of mastery. The film invites us to consider capitalism as inherently perverse and ultimately dehumanising with Patrick as the worryingly logical (albeit extreme) result of consumerist subjugation. In an isolated moment of (off-screen) self-recognition, our psycho scrawls “DIE YUPPIE SCUM” in blood on a wall in Allen’s apartment. Unfortunately for Patrick, this single, revelatory instance does not extend past its moment of bloody graffiti. He remains blind to its deeper implications, but for the viewer, the writing is literally on the wall, scrawled in gore by an unwitting hierophant.

We have seen how the textual position of the villain in character-oriented narratives differs from goal-oriented narratives. In the former, the moral character of the represented individual is the subject of the narrative’s investigation and simultaneously directs the structure of the narrative and narration, as well as the film’s instances of subjective access. In the latter, the villain is important only insofar as she affects and/or modifies the structuring desire of a central protagonist. If the villain in the goal-oriented narrative is often read as something other than herself, she does not carry a similar surplus of meaning in the character-oriented narrative but is instead scrutinized by a “curious” text that typically promotes an ironic viewing position. Moreover, while the villain’s textual role may be that of an oppugner, testing the merits

of a protagonist's desire in one kind of narrative structure, the villain may also appear in the guise of the anti-hero – a character-function that severs the “heroic” actant's traditional association with virtue. Finally, the narrational role of the villain in goal-oriented narratives is principally actantial and both influences and limits the types of possible movements of other characters in the narrative, while the actions of the villain in the character-oriented narrative are probed much more carefully for underlying motivations. In such an instance, a film's narrational strategies are potentially revelatory and are employed in order to investigate a villain's “wicked” disposition. The anti-heroic texts in which these investigations occur tend to subvert familiar narrational and structural conventions of classical style and frequently approach the protagonist from an ironic mode.

Thus far, I have discussed the villain as a functional feature of a cinematic text. That is, I have considered this character-type largely as a structural product of a film's narrational strategies whilst delineating the potential ways such a construct affects both story and form. In emphasising the villain's textuality, I have deliberately overlooked an essential component of the character's existence. The role of the viewer has been entirely ignored. Concepts such as a villain's structural “nomination,” and the narration's “invitation” to evaluate a villain in a particular way have been used deliberately. While a text may nominate a character as villainous and invite spectators to evaluate a character in a negative fashion, a viewer is always free to resist such structural positioning. In the next chapter, I would like to consider the viewer's role in the construction of villainy – how the audience may potentially reject the attitudinal evaluations of a film's narration and how a viewer is able to actively engage in their own process of monster-making.

Chapter 3

Curtains Parting on a Mirror Darkly: Nomination and the Viewing Process

"I made The Wild Bunch, which was the beginning of the splattering of blood and everything else. But there was a moral behind it. The moral was that, by golly, bad guys got it. That was it."

- Ernest Borgnine (Leith 2001, 21)

Pike Bishop (William Holden) and his compatriots are cut down in a hailstorm of bullets in the bloody montage that ends *The Wild Bunch* (Sam Peckinpah, 1969), but not before they almost completely slaughter an entire regiment of the Mexican revolutionary army. Their general, Mapache (Emilio Fernández) is depicted as a vulgar tyrant who executes one of the outlaws' compatriots (Jaime Sánchez), even after the Bunch commits a caper for him in order to ensure their friend's release. Frontier justice is swiftly meted out by Pike, who summarily blows the general away, despite being completely surrounded by revolutionary troops. In the infamous firefight that follows, the Bunch makes sure that as many "bad guys get it" (with the aid of a heisted machinegun) before they themselves are riddled with lead.

But who exactly are the "bad guys" here? The Mexicans, or the members of Borgnine's own unruly band? A degree of uncertainty surrounds the subject of his prescribed "moral" since the individuals who comprise his group of desperados are hardly model citizens. The film stresses the incompatibility of the group's old-fashioned violence within an increasingly modernised America. As the men steal, whore, and murder their way through southern California in 1914, it becomes apparent that the values of the frontier that they allegorise are being superseded by the civility of the modern world. While the film is occasionally described as an elegy for the Fordist and Hawksian western, I believe the mythic grandeur and nobility these directors strove to instil within the genre are inverted, even distorted, to the point of disfigurement in Peckinpah's film. If *The Wild Bunch* is an elegy, it is most certainly a critical one, delivered at the funeral of men whose worldview is constricted by mania and hints at the genocidal. Both the men and the myths of America's Wild West are taken to pieces in the film's apocalyptic denouement, and their extinction does not clear the ground for a new, pastoral ruralism, but is merely a prelude to the more efficient barbarism of the twentieth century. What is clear is that these men have no place within the new, "civilized" mythology that America seeks to write for itself, and yet, the sins of these fathers continue to haunt this mythology's inscription throughout history.

Identifying just who “the bad guys” are is an obvious prerequisite to determining a film’s “moral.” But as I have indicated by referring to *The Wild Bunch*, the nomination of villainy is not as straightforward a process as one might assume. In chapters 1 and 2, I have considered the relationship between filmic narrative structure and the villain’s function. Specifically, I have discussed the processes by which a film “nominates” a character as villainous and the subsequent role this character plays – both within the narrative, and the influence the role has on narrativity itself (particularly on the narrative discourse of the anti-heroic character-oriented film). While a text may nominate a character as villainous and invite spectators to evaluate a character in a negative fashion, a viewer remains free to resist structural positioning. Borgnine may imply that Dutch is one of the nominal heroes who ensures that “the bad guys get it,” but my own feeling is that he would certainly be out of place in a company of the usual cinematic angels. Indeed, in *The Wild Bunch*, it is almost as if Borgnine is channelling the bestial spirit of Sgt. Fatso, who he played to thuggish perfection in *From Here to Eternity* (Fred Zinnemann, 1953).

The lack of coherence between my view and Borgnine’s view is a crucial incompatibility as it implies that a *creative* breakdown occurs between the acts of transmission and reception. Paul Smith indicates a reason for this breakdown:

There is a distinction to be made between the subject-position prescribed by a text and the actual human agent who engages with that text and thus with the subject-position it offers. Clearly, any given text is not empowered to *force* the reader to adhere to the discursive position it offers...[W]hat always stands between the text’s potential and preferred effect and an actualized effect is a reader who has a history of his/her own (Smith 1988, 34).

To put it concisely, our subjectivity can potentially interfere with the evaluative authority of formal structure. I would like to explore the possibilities open to the viewer beyond the discursive position offered by a filmic text. Therefore, in the following pages, I will consider *the viewer’s role* in the construction of villainy.

There will be two areas under consideration: 1) how a spectator comes to recognise the moral position a film expects them to take in relation to a character as a *mock viewer*; and 2) how a viewer is able to actively engage in her own structuring process of villainous nomination through *interpretive indeterminacy*. To illustrate these areas, I will predominantly be drawing on a film whose villain I find to be particularly “unstable.” This instability does not just refer to his lack of mental soundness, but to the

contrast between my evaluation of his character and the film's narrational attitudes towards him. My analysis of *White Heat* will focus on the representation of a sociopath that indirectly allows for an indeterminate evaluative response towards him. This lack of evaluative certainty is indicative of an important imprecision that often underlines viewers' moral assessment of characters.

My reference to *The Wild Bunch* has served to introduce the obvious but important fact that audience and authorial interpretations of a work may differ drastically. Even more radically, a work's own representation of character should not be considered entirely authoritative. As Murray Smith indicates, "a narrative text can attempt to regiment the viewer's experience, it can encourage the activation of certain schemata over others, but it cannot 'position' the spectator" (Smith 1995, 171). Does this lack of narrational power include an inability to "position" a viewer in relation to a character? More specifically, if a viewer does not apprehend a character as "evil" despite a film's textual nominations, can the character still be evaluated as such?

Seeds of Rebellion: Attitudinal Evaluation and the Viewer

In the previous chapters, I have repeatedly claimed that structural "positioning" is not unilateral and that a viewer's interpretation of a character's moral identity may be "asynchronous" with the film's moral nomination. Again, this lack of synchronicity implies a viewer whose engagement with a character is active and constructive, rather than passive and receptive. But before establishing one's own position in the process of nominating characters, one must *recognise* and circumvent potential *narrational dictation*: a narrative discourse that assertively directs the viewer toward the formation of a particular attitude toward a character. However, viewers are not obliged to accept such attitudinal direction. The potential opposition of the viewer to such dictation gravitates around three areas of uncertainty and complexity: 1) the actantial instability of the oppugner; 2) the contradictions of the alloy; and 3) the recognition and rejection of implied spectatorship. I have discussed the narrational functions of the oppugner and the alloy in the previous chapter, but the recognition of implied spectatorship warrants further explanation here.

A key concept in considering a viewer's circumvention of narrational dictation is the implied or "*mock*" viewer. This concept emerges from literary narratology in which it shares a family relation to the "mock reader" – a concept established by Wayne C.

Booth and Walker Gibson. Booth opines that one's own beliefs must be subordinated to the text and coincide with the author's if one is to enjoy a work. "The author creates, in short, an image of himself and another image of his reader; he makes his reader, as he makes his second self, and the most successful reading is one in which the created selves, author and reader, can find complete agreement" (Booth 1983, 138). To appease critics who may oppose Booth's privileging of authorial intentionality, we may instead speak of the text's structural appeals to a "created" viewing position: the narratee. We recall that one of the structural anomalies of the anti-heroic character study can involve an idiosyncratic relationship between the film's central character and the narratee.

Gibson conceives of the narratee as a "mock reader," a subject whose personality may be entirely different from that of the actual reader. "Subject to the degree of our literary sensibility, we are recreated by language. We assume, for the sake of the experience, that set of attitudes and qualities which the language asks us to assume, and, if we cannot assume them, we throw the book away" (Gibson 1950, 266). During this "recreation," the "assumption" of a potentially alien value system represents an ethical testing ground for one's moral response to a fiction. A narrative's "moral quality" is evaluated on the basis of the corresponding values that the mock reader personally holds. Moreover, for Gibson, actually differentiating between a "good" and "bad" narrative work will depend on this factor. "A bad book...is a book in whose mock reader we discover a person we refuse to become, a mask we refuse to put on, a role we will not play" (ibid, 267). The moral outrage that *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, 1994) garnered from many critics exemplifies the rejection of the viewing position the film asked them to assume. Usually, a large factor in these critics' objection is the glibness demonstrated by the hitmen, Jules (Samuel L. Jackson) and Vincent (John Travolta), after their accidental shooting of a young man. The sight of two gore-spattered gangsters cleaning up after their mess and complaining about being on "brain detail" was obviously not a source of humour for such viewers. Many criticized the film's various narrational cues that invite one to assume an amoral attitude towards murder by responding inappropriately (ie. laughing) to scenes of violence.¹

Under Gibson's consideration of the mock reader, *Pulp Fiction* must be a "bad" film for the viewers who cannot play the role the film asks of them. However

¹ For a sample of moral outrage see Henry A. Giroux's article, "*Pulp Fiction* and the Culture of Violence" (1995).

meritorious other features of the film may be, its moral outrages make it the equivalent of the book that “must be thrown away.” I will not comment here on the potentially problematic evaluative link between morality and aesthetics, but I will object to an argument that equates a failure to adopt an intended mock viewership with a “bad” work. Although Gibson’s work is valuable for identifying the imaginative responsibilities of the narratee, his assessment lacks a necessary degree of specificity. What he does not consider is that our refusal to play a role is occasionally the *desired* effect of a novel’s narrative discourse. Naturally, this rejection does not mean the book is “bad”; again, *American Psycho* has been used as one such example involving a narratee’s resistance to the “attitudes and qualities” espoused by an abhorrent narrator. A simple rejection of his narrative discourse without recognising the larger narrational strategies at work would unsurprisingly lead to a moral denouncement of the work.

In viewing *American Psycho*, it is necessary to identify and distinguish between these two different kinds of narrational addresses *during* the process of viewing. However, other films may adopt a manipulative narrational strategy in which we do not reject the role of mock viewer until *after* a primary or instinctual response, or until the film has ended. Indeed, “one of our most common reading experiences is, in fact to become a ‘mock reader’ whom we *cannot* respect, that the beliefs which we were temporarily manipulated into accepting cannot be defended in the light of day” (Booth 1983, 139). The attitudinal evaluation of characters by the film’s narration may be purposefully deceptive, coaxing an amiable response from the viewer, only to reveal how misplaced the viewer’s judgement has been. Moreover, through such revelations, the viewer’s instinctive evaluative powers may be indicted.

Cabaret (Bob Fosse, 1972) offers some telling examples. The film demonstrates the effectiveness of Nazi propaganda in the popular indoctrination of the citizens of Weimar Germany. More importantly, however, it demonstrates the potential ease by which such a task is accomplished through the complicated manipulation of a viewer’s pleasurable response to musical spectacle. In effect, the enjoyment of the film’s musical numbers gradually becomes a tool used to immerse us within a deplorable political ideology. A viewer may enjoy the rousing anthem, “Tomorrow Belongs to Me,” exquisitely performed by a blond, handsome young man, until the camera pans down to reveal the swastika armband of the Hitler Youth. The MC’s (Joel Grey) love song to a gorilla, “If You Could See Her,” is hilarious, until the last line: “But if you could see her

through my eyes...she wouldn't look Jewish at all." *Cabaret*'s most chilling moment, however, occurs during the final shot, in which the camera pans away from the stage where Sally (Liza Minnelli) has performed the climactic "Life is a Cabaret." At the end of the number, the camera pans to a mirror that reflects an audience comprised of Nazi officials. If one considers that musical spectacles are deliberately played to viewers and the look of the camera is aligned with our point of view, then the mirror is reflecting "us." The camera metaphorically establishes our complicity within the gradual implementation of Nazi ideology. Although we reject our momentary identification immediately once the camera reveals the true nature of the subject to whom we have responded positively, the damage has already been done. *Cabaret* demonstrates the efficiency by which a film may coax a desired evaluative response and warns of the dangers of settling into the position of narratee uncritically.

Recognition of the appropriate kind of mock viewer the film intends us to be is crucial to the subsequent rejection of this position. Successful recognition is by no means automatic, as the potentiality of "misreading" indicates. As Booth elucidates,

the problem for the reader is thus really that of discovering which values are in abeyance and which are genuinely...at work. To pass judgement where the author intends neutrality is to misread. But to be neutral or objective where the author requires commitment is equally to misread...(Booth 1983, 144).

While the successful recognition of an appropriate mock viewership skirts dangerously close to a monologic interpretation of a film's "intended" meaning, correctly identifying this "appropriate" position is absolutely necessary if one is to formulate an evaluative response to character that purposefully differs from the text's evaluation. Stanley Kubrick probably had such "misreadings" in mind when he pulled *A Clockwork Orange* (Stanley Kubrick, 1971) from distribution in the UK following a brief string of copycat rapes and murders during its initial release. The invitation of a sympathetic response to the "ultra-violent" Alex is not intended to be an endorsement of his values, but rather a criticism of the inhumane deprogramming imposed on him (it renders him completely docile – helpless to even defend himself against violence).²

² Of course, one may have an opposite "perverse" response by relishing Alex's helpless predicament. However, this hardly constitutes the kind of "misreading" performed in November 1973 by the British viewers convicted of raping a Dutch tourist while singing "Singing in the Rain."

Recognising the mock viewer a film intends one to be is not a wholesale acceptance of the film's preferred evaluation of character, but rather, is the first crucial step in staking out one's own evaluative position. Before rejecting a film's evaluation of a character, a viewer must first successfully identify the specific attitude the narration invites her to have towards her. Too often, transgressive works run afoul of censors due to their misunderstanding of the kind of narratee a work requires its viewers to become. Reviewing the more venomous responses from moralist critics to such controversial works as *A Clockwork Orange*, *Natural Born Killers*, and *Crash* (David Cronenberg, 1996), one finds a precise survey of such misapprehension. None of these films are (in Buñuel's famous phrase) "a passionate call to murder," yet all received sustained demonising in the conservative press and from various legislative bodies due to the erroneous view that the films' narration supported the central characters' decidedly homicidal values. Critics would do well to distinguish between "being subject to experiences which are themselves bad in some respect and experiencing things in a way which is bad in some respect" before condemning such works (Kieran 2004, 65).

Sometimes, becoming a "mock viewer" entails being drawn into the moral universe of a villainous character. Viewers are free to reject this position, but it is important for responsible viewers to accurately *recognise* the nature of the position they are rejecting. Moreover, while Booth is correct in pointing out that works frequently *ask* us to become a mock viewer "whom we cannot respect," viewers may also adopt "uninvited" villainous viewing positions of their own accord. Viewers do not simply accept the textual nomination of character as hero or villain passively, and frequently may even resist the narration's attitudinal positioning. I would now like to begin describing how a viewer might characterise and evaluate a character's moral orientation independently of the film's attitudinal positioning.

When Mama's Boys Go Bad: Villainous Nomination and Ethical Fissures

This act of characterising and evaluating a represented individual in moral terms is what we might call the *nomination* of a character as hero or villain. A vital component of the nominative process is the participation in the gradual appearance of this character – an appearance that has more to do with reconstruction than revelation. As we engage in the act of vilification, a text instructs us to assemble the fictional construct of evil, and yet, the finished product is often surprisingly porous. As in acts of

translation, certain peculiarities get “lost” along the way, but what could be more “peculiar” in the nomination of villainy than “losing” the very substance integral to its status? I have deliberately selected *White Heat*’s Cody Jarrett (James Cagney) as a gangster whose villainy virtually disappears into the gap between representation and reception. In the following analysis of the film, I will demonstrate how the “translation” of character is subject to interpretive indeterminacy. Rather than arguing that villainy vanishes into a relativist void, our nomination of villainy often allows for a substantial degree of authorial improvisation in its reconstruction. Villains perform outrageous acts and are presented outrageously, but our own interpretive nominations do not always reach the heart of such outrageousness; sometimes, we can only circle its perimeter.

I have remarked that evaluative “positioning” is a problematic concept. We cannot speak of a film’s narrational address in dictatorial terms, for “positioning” suggests an inherent passivity in character-viewer relations. A unilateral acceptance of a film’s ability to determine viewer response discounts the very active means by which a viewer engages in *all* facets of film reception, including the representation of character. Even “reception” seems a poor word to describe the manner in which viewers *interact* with film. Viewers do not experience a film in a trance-like state of receptive inertia; instead, they *activate* film. They are addressed and invited by filmic structure not to respond to, but to create the fiction in which they participate. In a similar manner, characters do not unfold or reveal themselves to an audience. They do not “play to” a viewer who watches as their interiority is gradually exposed in a form of psychological striptease; the viewer *builds* them during the viewing process.

In a sense, viewers take part in the authoring of characters along with the writers who script them and the actors who perform them. Authoring a character is essentially a matter of *synthesis* – a reconstruction that is performed by the viewer in the same manner by which he “assembles” a narrative from narrational material. Narration for Bordwell is a three-tiered system involving form, style, and spectator; the first two components prompt the third to “construct” the narrative, resulting in the apprehension and comprehension of the narrative. “In the fiction film, narration is the process whereby the film’s [form] and style interact in the course of cueing and channelling the spectator’s construction of the [story]” (Bordwell 1985, 52). Analogously, what must be emphasised is that the onus is on the *spectator* to synthesise an idea of character – the agents who are both within and part of the story – based on formal and stylistic signals.

We might recognise here that this idea of character synthesis is in agreement with several other theories of character. Recall, for instance, the claims of James Phelan and Lloyd Michaels referenced in Chapter 1: that the latent functional roles of a character's traits are only identified by a reader during the reading process and that our experience of characters involves a substantial degree of reconstruction on the viewer's part. A viewer's constructive synthesis is also commensurable with the "open" theory of character introduced by Tzvetan Todorov in *The Poetics of Prose* (1971) and advanced by Roland Barthes. In this "open" approach, readers virtually reassemble an idea of character implied within a work's narrative discourse. For Barthes,

the character is a product of combination: the combination is relatively stable (denoted by the recurrence of semes) and more or less complex (involving more or less contradictory figures); this complexity determines the character's 'personality,' which is just as much a combination as the odour of a dish or the bouquet of a wine. The proper name acts as a magnetic field for the semes... (Barthes 1974, 67).



Our interaction with a fictional person is constituted by the identification, attachment, and combination of various qualities ("semes") attributed to an individual whom we observe on screen. These qualities collectively cohere into an idea of "character." Certain critics even believe that the pleasure one receives from sympathetic engagement must be isolated from the enterprise of reading characters critically, that is, of "thinking of characters as sets of predicates grouped under proper names" (Culler 1981, 5).

Character synthesis therefore involves "compiling" a list of relevant traits that *describe* the agent. This compilation is achieved by attending to the following textual indicators: 1) observing the character's actions and reactions; 2) listening to dialogue; 3) evaluating body language and physiognomy; 4) studying their interrelations with other characters; and 5) processing the narration's attitudinal evaluation. Each of these tasks includes their own particular and complex cognitive and interpretive requirements, the specifics of which are unfortunately beyond the limits of my study. Suffice to say that a viewer will be engaged in any or all of these tasks throughout the viewing experience in the interest of synthesising character. Character reconstruction is not utterly textually based either; we recall that other transtextual informants assist the viewer in compiling a list of relevant traits. As discussed in Chapter 1, these informants all rely on a viewer's *a priori* knowledge of the cinema, including genre, star persona and authorial attitudes.

As we begin to assemble the various traits that will comprise the character of Cody Jarrett in *White Heat*, all of these various informants come into play. A particular portrait of Cody may be composed from viewing the opening sequence alone.³ For example, we may deduce that he is a man of action, evidenced by his jump from the tunnel onto a moving train (*action*), and that he has a no-nonsense attitude toward his “business” – an inference drawn from the “Shaddup!” that silences his bickering cronies (*reaction*). His ruthlessness is derived from the methodical pragmatism of his murders: “You’ve a got a good memory for names – too good,” Cody tells the terrified conductor before he plugs him (*dialogue*). We may note that the commanding violence of his movements seems at odds with his smallness of stature and that a leer seems out of place on his overgrown baby’s face (*body language and physiognomy*). All other characters are cowed into submission by his presence, which suggests a domineering personality (*interrelation with characters*). His dominance is further reinforced by the camera’s pan across the interior of the car and its passengers, which only stops when it reaches Cody and subtly tracks in towards him (*narrational evaluation*).

Other transtextual informants also assist in compiling a list of potential character traits for Cody. *White Heat*’s generic status as a gangster film obviously necessitates the presence of characters who exhibit an amplified degree of ruthlessness, and James Cagney’s previous incarnations as various hoods and lowlifes assist us in identifying Cody as one of these types. Moreover, the complexity he brings to those roles fosters an expectation that Cody will be another tormented and charismatic addition to Cagney’s pantheon of riffraff. Finally, director Raoul Walsh may not communicate a consistent attitude towards the immoral characters in his films, but critic Manny Farber claims that when Walsh’s characters “are at their most genuine, [they] are unreclaimable, terrifying loners, perhaps past their peak and going nowhere” (Clarens 1980, 226). As *White Heat* progresses, we will come to appreciate just how relevant his assessment is to a persuasive reconstruction of Cody’s character.

³ It is worth noting that our first impressions of a character can be quite strong and may subsequently colour all of our later evaluations – much like the “primacy effect” mobilised by a film’s establishing shots that set out “intrinsic norms against which later developments are measured” (Bordwell 1985, 38). And yet, this initial construction is more likely to be temporary and will probably be supplanted by another as new information is introduced. Such “fluidity” of character construction will take on greater importance, as I shall indicate later.

Synthesis is thus the first step in the act of nomination: the compiling of a list of traits that we develop into an idea of character. To complete the nominative process, however, the viewer's task is to find the right combination of traits to provide a summation of a character. This summation is the equivalent of *moral nomination*: concluding which side of the moral pale the character may be located after compiling a particular list of trait-names.

Within the controlled environment of *White Heat*'s fictional world, there are a number of factors underpinning Cody's villainous nomination. Several characters describe Cody as "inhuman," an evaluation that is supported by the film's reluctance to represent actions that might act as moral counterbalances to his bestial behaviour. Witness the callousness with which he gives a defenceless Parker (Paul Guilfoyle) "a little air" while the latter is locked in the trunk of a car: Cody fires a few rounds through the trunk while casually munching on a chicken leg. We might consider his filial dedication to Ma Jarrett (Margaret Wycherly) as an exception to his frequent iniquities, but Evans (John Archer) – a section chief in the Treasury Department – considers Cody's relationship to her unnatural, describing it as "a fierce, psychopathic devotion."

Cody's criminality also seems to be quite motiveless, unless one considers it to be a product of hereditary dementia; we are told that both his brother and father "died kicking and screaming in the nuthouse." His phantom migraines, coupled with his tendency to refer to himself in the third person and talk aloud to his dead Ma, imply that he is indeed "crazy like his old man." The occasional formal flourish may also suggest that Cody is an inhuman maniac, such as the vampire-like shadow he casts on the wall whilst ascending the staircase in pursuit of his treacherous wife, Verna (Virginia Mayo).

If we have not yet assembled a compilation of traits that sufficiently describe Cody as villainous, we need only contrast these traits with those describing the square-jawed do-gooder, Hank Fallon (Edmond O'Brien) – the Treasury Department's undercover agent and Cody's comparative double. Should any doubt linger as to Cody's villainous status, we might hearken to the final lines of the film in which Evans and Hank deliver a condemnatory eulogy for Cody. The Law gets the last word, and ensures it is a cautionary one. "Cody Jarrett," Chief Evans exclaims vaguely, by way of summation. "He finally got to the top of the world," qualifies Hank, "and it blew right up in his face." The parable of Cody Jarrett is yet another variation on the familiar theme of "Crime Does Not Pay."

And yet, in spite of all of this overwhelming evidence, we may not necessarily nominate Cody as villainous. Each one of the factors listed earlier as evidence of Cody's villainous nature has the potential to be re-interpreted, complicated, or challenged, for behind every represented action lies a potential host of unseen and therefore hypothetical motivations. I would like to argue that villainy can occasionally "escape" through gaps – or ethical fissures, if you will – left in the process of nomination. To understand the importance of these gaps, let us further investigate the idea of an "open" character synthesis.

Meditating on the motivations of (relatively) complex characters involves *speculative* activity on the part of the viewer – activity that "opens" up our capacity to interpret characters in various ways and lessens the chance of a singular, authoritarian nomination. In compiling a list of traits that we develop into an idea of character, we are engaged in what Barthes calls a "metonymic skid." Because conclusively "naming" characters is a difficult and imprecise enterprise, we instead find a "synonymic complex whose common nucleus we sense even while the discourse is leading us towards other possibilities, toward other related signifieds: thus, reading is absorbed in a kind of metonymic skid, each synonym adding to its neighbour some new trait, some new departure" (Barthes 1974, 92). We remember that nomination relies on the viewer to find the right combination of trait-names to provide a summation of a character. But settling on a combination – the final signified of character – becomes difficult when we regard character as a continuum, a process. The appearance of a seemingly contradictory trait sets another trait in motion – either supplanting it or temporarily suppressing it until an eventual reconciliation between the two. For example, Cody's tenderness for Ma Jarrett will either overrule an earlier evaluation of Cody as vicious, or his viciousness may eventually be recognised as being born of that same sensitivity.

By combining traits, we are engaged in a *dialectical process* in which the synthesis of two distinct qualities leads to a new trait that supersedes the original two properties. The combination of one quality with another will result in an entirely new predicate – one which will in turn be affected by the appearance of yet another. In this way, we "skid" from one trait to another without resting on a single attribute that stands as a definitive summation of character. Villainy is not always a destination at which one can conclusively arrive. To a large extent, this instability is coherent with certain philosophers' belief in the "fragility" of character in real life. Peter Goldie, for

example, believes that our own character traits are less “robust” than we believe. Very few attributes of one’s personality are stable and consistent across all given situations, and our own self-image as well as other’s idea of our character is in a constant state of flux (Goldie 2004, 55-69)

Even if synthesis was a reliable means by which to nominate a villain, such an authorial act is still not as straightforward as it seems due to the *interpretive indeterminacy* at play when evaluating filmic characters’ behaviour. Interpretive indeterminacy is the amorphous and “writerly” evaluation of character. During the viewing process, a viewer must continually reconcile the textual nomination of character with the appearance of new, and/or potentially disruptive traits. When a trait is overtly indicated within the text, this “textual label may confirm the one reached in the [viewer’s] process of generalization, but it may also be at variance with it, creating tension whose effects vary from one narrative to another” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 38). The “tension” created between Cody’s potentially attractive traits and his “generalization” as villainous is especially relevant here. Certain kinds of characters are conducive to interpretive indeterminacy – particularly the alloy and the anti-hero – and their admixture of commendable and reprehensible qualities allow for a viewer’s highly participatory and creative engagement. While the narrative discourse of the text may wish to direct our evaluation of Cody by suggesting that certain traits should be regarded as “immoral,” or by representing his immoral acts more frequently than his moral ones, we may choose to interpret these traits differently as we learn new and potentially conflicting information about his character.

Rimmon-Kenan theorises the means by which we amalgamate traits – even contradictory ones – into a stable idea of character through the principles of “repetition, similarity, contrast, and implication” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 39). What is interesting about this amalgamation is its potentiality for writerly *improvisation* in the reconstruction of a fictive person. “When, in the process of reconstruction, the reader reaches a point when he cannot integrate an element within a constructed category, the implication would seem to be either that the generalization established so far has been mistaken (a mistake which the text may have encouraged), or that the character has changed” (ibid, 38-39). But, there is a third possibility. The difficulty in definitively nominating Cody is not that one’s “generalization” regarding his character is erroneous, nor that his character has somehow “developed,” that is, escaped the moral abyss of the

Manichean villain; rather, his reconstruction is a profoundly indeterminate, “open” enterprise. The act of reconstructing a character from its textual indicators may emphasise inconsistencies (“gaps”) between a text’s attitudinal evaluation and a viewer’s. When integrating elements of character (during the viewing process) within a constructed category (the persona on screen), no act of interpretation will completely match the blueprint mapped out by the text.

A villain like Cody presents a difficult challenge to the process of nomination. In evaluating such a character’s behaviour (nominating the character as “villain”), we add to her name a group of unpleasant predicates that will accumulatively determine her moral identity. But *which* predicates exactly? *How many* are necessary? *Must* they agree with the text? What if they do not? What if they differ *from viewer to viewer*? Attempts to name the predicates that best describe an alloy or antihero – even certain kinds of villains – are never precise. Of course, certain viewers will share nominations that are similar in character, but each viewer will still choose their own descriptions of the character’s traits. We recall, too, from Chapter 1 that our nomination of a character can be subject to “moral modulation” (the accentuation or attenuation of their transgressive behaviour) depending on our critical priorities. While viewers can and do arrive at similar conclusions in nominating characters, the interpretive particulars of every evaluation are personal by nature. Generalisations and approximations therefore become unavoidable “evils.” As Barthes explains, “to read is to struggle to name, to subject the sentences of a text to a semantic transformation. This transformation is erratic; it consists of hesitating among several names: if we are told that Sarrasine had ‘*one of those strong wills that no know obstacle*,’ what are we to read? *will, energy, obstinacy, stubbornness, etc.*?” (Barthes 1974, 92). Substituting “Jarrett” for “Sarrasine” results in the same indeterminacy.

There are several more factors that contribute to this indeterminacy. To begin with, films do not always have the direct evaluative signposts provided by a narrator’s words (ie. the actual descriptor, “strong will”). We remember too from Chapter 1 that a film’s textual indicators make *intimations* rather than authoritative statements about characters, which is why there is always a possibility of slippage in their precise definition. In addition, we recall that a film’s representation of character is more or less “indirect” compared to the omniscient narration of literature, and because of this relative obliqueness we must synthesize the information a text provides about a character – a

necessarily *interpretive* enterprise. Finally, the relative opacity of character subjectivity in cinema can inhibit evaluation. Barring such devices as voiceover narration that explicitly enunciate the inner voice of a character, evaluating a character's interiority or mental content is always necessarily an act of interpretation, and an imprecise act at that. Subjective opacity is crucial to the indeterminacy of nomination, and may undermine even the most explicit elements of narrational evaluation.



Figure 1. 1



Figure 1.2



Figure 1. 3



Figure 1. 4

For example, Hank's dedication to his job is represented as unwavering, and yet, in my own evaluation of Hank, I located several moments of what I took to be moral uncertainty. During the scene in which Hank helps Cody to recover from a migraine attack, the two hide behind a bench in the workroom as Hank rubs the stricken Cody's forehead and voices his childhood admiration for him. This incident may be taken as evidence of the undercover agent's ingratiation into Cody's gang, but after Cody recovers, a curious sequence of actions occurs. As Cody leaves, he pats the back of Hank's neck and strokes his face rather tenderly. When Hank is alone, he looks around (**Figure 1.1**), smiles faintly (**Figure 1.2**), but then, he looks down briefly (**Figure 1.3**), and when he raises his head back up towards the right of the screen, his expression is somewhat ambiguous (**Figure 1.4**). How are we to interpret the ambiguity of Hank's personal response to Cody's display of affection? Movement (1) is made to ensure that no one has seen the exchange between him and Cody, but also to ensure that he has privacy to adequately consider what has taken place. The smile in movement (2) seems to be a self-congratulatory, but it is cut short by movement (3). In looking at the ground briefly,

is Hank going through a moment of doubt – a perverse twinge of conscience for his ambitions to betray the man who has just taken him into his confidence? His facial expression as he raises his head in movement (4) could thus be interpreted as a lack of confidence and a momentary loss of faith in the rightness of his actions. Yet, without direct access to Hank's thoughts, my evaluation is only speculative. Certainly, other conflicting evaluations are conceivable as well. Locating and identifying the traits that could stand as comprehensive descriptors is an inevitably inconclusive task.

As further proof of this inconclusiveness, we need only compare widely varying evaluations of Cody's character. Lincoln Kirstein, founder of the New York City Ballet, writes about Cagney that, "no one expresses more clearly in terms of pictorial action the delights of violence, the overtones of a semiconscious sadism, the tendency toward destruction, toward anarchy, which is the base of American sex appeal" (Clarens 1980, 65). For Kirstein, Jarrett is an attractive figure, a villain whose mania has an animalistic charisma. In *White Heat*, there is ample evidence to support his evaluation. I have mentioned Cody's callousness, even glibness towards death, and have also commented on his short, sturdy frame that has an almost superhuman durability. During the film's final sequence, he shrugs off the three bullets that Hank pumps into him. That Cody perseveres despite overwhelming odds supports Kirstein's admiration for him as a romantic (anti)hero. For all his beefcake forthrightness, Edmond O'Brien, who plays the ostensible hero, has zero charisma when compared with the smouldering menace of his co-star. Here, Cagney's "semiconscious sadism" is allowed to claw its way into the fully conscious world: as Cody throttles Verna, he grins with a savage delight.

How might we reconcile this evaluation of an alluring villainy with Lucy Fischer's analysis? She believes Cody to be caught within a mimetic double bind: he is prohibited from imitating his "potent" Ma, while at the same time, he is "feminised" by his hysteria (Fischer 1993, 82). That is, he suffers from not being able to fully identify with his mother's authority (tellingly, one of the film's advertising taglines queried: "Does he run the gang? Or does his mother?"), and because Cody can neither have, nor be Ma Jarrett, he is forced into a perpetual infantilism. The headaches, which he staged for Ma's attention during his youth, have now become crippling psychosomatic – the psychic extremities of arrested development. Cody cuddles up in Ma's lap following the first migraine attack and continues to play the dutiful little boy throughout the rest of the film. During his celebrated mess-hall meltdown sequence, in which he is given

news of Ma's death, he sobs, "I gotta' get outta' here," repeatedly like a homesick child. Following his spectacular breakdown, he even seems to recognise his childlike regression and rejects it: "Nobody feeds Cody Jarrett," he rages, spitting out a mouthful of spoon-fed soup, "What am I, a kid?"

Reconciling these differing evaluations of Cody seems difficult – after all, a mama's boy hardly exemplifies "the base of American sex appeal." Moreover, neither Kirstein nor Fischer's description gels completely with a nomination of Cody as a villainous character. An overgrown baby is not particularly evil and describing Cody's particular brand of immorality as attractive disrupts an evaluation of such behaviour as being altogether and thoroughly "bad." Why, then, are the two evaluations so different? Why is there a reluctance to identify the character as being out-and-out villainous? Cody's behaviour is often demonstrably monstrous, but his villainy is not a foregone conclusion, largely due to the ambiguities of interpretive indeterminacy that are buttressed by his relative complexity as an antihero.

It may be that *White Heat* is a work that actively promotes the indeterminate synthesis of character. Of course, a work can be deliberately ambivalent, indifferent, or impartial toward its characters (recall my reference to *À bout de souffle* in Chapter 1), and therefore its narrational strategies encourage indeterminacy. At the same time, however, identifying its narrative discourse as purposefully ambiguous yields too much ground to directorial intentionality. Instead, interpretive indeterminacy is made possible by a viewer's ability to destabilise the narrational evaluation of a character: *to identify, isolate and reinterpret moments in which textual nomination appears ambiguous and/or contradictory*. Such activity is not limited to morally impartial films; even works whose narrative moral structure is starkly Manichean contain moments that certain viewers can construe as morally ambiguous, and such moments can be used to resist the currents of narrational dictation. My analysis of *The Wizard of Oz*'s Wicked Witch in Chapter 2 is an example of how such indeterminacy can be put to work in revaluating a character whose villainy seems ostensibly straightforward.

While multiple textual and transtextual factors encourage Cody's villainous nomination, viewers may seize upon moments that contradict this nomination. Recall, once again, the scene in which Cody attempts to throttle Verna. The scene is significant because it exemplifies the uncertainty with which we respond to an "attractive" villain's violence. Are we satisfied with Cody's righteous vindictiveness at Verna's treachery?

Or, rather, are we appalled at the glee with which he executes his vengeance? The answer to the question hinges on which way we direct our desires with respect to Cody's fate. On the one hand, *White Heat* establishes Cody's behaviour as warranting punishment (in which case, Cody is the villain, Hank is the hero), but on the other, we may find ourselves allying with him in his flight from the law (in which case, their roles are reversed). In simpler terms, although Hank's efforts to apprehend Cody seem to have the textual support of the narration, a viewer may hope that Cody perpetually remains one step ahead of the law. Choosing the character in which one wishes to invest plays a large part in nominating the heroes and villains. This choice functions in much the same way as Bremond's amelioration process, in which every protagonist is her own hero and may be focalised accordingly. Again, such a choice depends on seizing upon apparent contradictions or ambiguities located in the narration's presentation of character.

Films do not always give us sufficient or reliable clues as to which character should be respected, and *White Heat* is a case in point. If, for example, we are intended to sympathise with Hank, why does the film create moments of suspense involving Cody's potential capture or death? Contrarily, if our allegiance is with Cody, why does the film prompt feelings of tension when Hank's cover identity as "Vic Pardo" is threatened? In the first case scenario, Hank is the "hero," yet Parker's attempted murder of Cody is underscored with threatening music. Hank comes to a pragmatic rescue, but the music suggests that the viewers should not wish Cody to be harmed. While moments such as these might suggest a kind of narrational impartiality – that the narrative discourse is "playing it both ways" – there are too many moments in which the narrational "colouring" of Cody has been overwhelmingly negative. It is more accurate, instead, to claim that we have identified a moment of contradiction during our own process of nomination. The indeterminate identity of *White Heat*'s central protagonists is a destabilisation wrought by dissenting viewers who depart from the narration's predominantly negative evaluation of Cody by privileging moments of ambiguity within the narrative discourse.

In the process of compiling character traits and forming our allegiances, a great many contradictions and ambiguities in a seemingly straightforward text can be identified. Parker's murder attempt in *White Heat* is not an isolated incident of this indeterminacy. In one of the extended sequences that "spectacularise" police procedure,

the film cross-cuts between the Treasury cars trailing the crook's truck and agents triangulating the gang's position with the help of their trusty "oscillator." On the one hand, such a sequence might suggest that we are intended to marvel at the Treasury Department's crime-fighting resources, but on the other, one might feel that these sequences create feelings of suspense, whereby we fear the gang's capture. Bo Creel (Ian MacDonald) is also a pivotal character in these respects. Bo is an ex-con who was originally put away by Hank, but has now been hired to drive the truck during the gang's final heist. Suspense is created over whether or not Bo will recognise Hank, but the locus of that suspense cannot be specified. If Hank is the hero, Bo is naturally a threat and we hope that Bo will not spot him, as "Vic's" cover would be blown, thus preventing Cody's capture and likely leading to Hank's death. If Cody is the hero, however, we look forward to Bo's inevitable discovery of the traitor in the gang's midst.

Working against the grain, a viewer may find that both Hank and Cody hesitate at the indistinct border that separates heroism and villainy. They even comment indirectly on the ironies involved in their interchangeable roles. "College degree, loveable personality, and I spend most of my time in prison," jokes Hank, and Cody remarks on the phonetic closeness between "Fallon" and "felon" when he discovers Hank's true identity: "How do you like that? A copper named *Fallon*," he exclaims. Perhaps the nominal indecision we experience with *White Heat* can be attributed to a use of "melodramatic identification," which, according to Bordwell, favours multiplicity and is situational. By "shuttling us from person to person, we 'identify' less with a single character than with a presentation of the emerging situation as a whole" (Bordwell 1985, 70). Such an idea seems unlikely, however, as Bordwell does not indicate what "situational identification" might actually be like. It seems difficult to conceive of a system of identification that is not anthropomorphically based. Given that characters are obviously very much a part of any "emerging situation as a whole," it is more likely that we will evaluate the significance a situation has for them, rather than the means by which their situation is "presented." Moreover, melodrama structurally relies on moral polarities, regardless of the subtleties of its gradations. While our identification may ostensibly be shuttled from character to character depending on various situations in the narrative, moral nomination requires the viewer to qualify a character's behaviour as "right" or "wrong." However, we cannot undertake such moral qualification if our sympathies lie with the individual whom we should condemn.

Lest we take the nominal confusions we experience in *White Heat* to be a moral aberration, I must indicate that the apparent contradictions that we isolate in its sympathetic structure are not unique to the film by any means. It is not unheard of for the narration of certain classical Hollywood films to *actively prompt* sympathetic responses towards diametrically opposed characters. Alfred Hitchcock's trademark, for example, is to evoke temporary and contradictory allegiance with both heroes and villains. He often plays "identification techniques *against* the natural gravitation of [a viewer's] sympathetic concern" (Wood 1989, 223). Famous examples include the sharing of Norman's panic in *Psycho* as the car which holds his victim's body temporarily fails to sink into swamp, or, the twinge of sympathy one might feel for the dastardly Alexander Sebastian (Claude Rains) as Devlin (Cary Grant) and Alicia (Ingrid Bergman), the film's "heroes," leave him to face certain death at the hands of his fellow Nazi agents at the end of *Notorious* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1946). Hitchcock does not hold a monopoly on such moments either. Sympathy is even extended to the clear-cut villains of *The Maltese Falcon*, exemplified by the remarkable moment in which the hapless gungel, Wilmer (Elisha Cook Jr.) awakens to the leering faces of the individuals who plan on turning him over to the police. In fact, our hero, Sam Spade, is one of these leering faces presented in the quick succession of close-ups that emulate Wilmer's frantic glances from person to person. Sympathy is possible in these cases because it is *fleeting* and reliant on *incidental identification*; it rarely extends longer than the instance in which it is provoked. Epistemic alignment is not given the opportunity to develop into full-blown epistemic identification. While we may develop an idea of what it might be like for the villains in these situations, and even feel a modicum of pity for them, it is unlikely that we will fully ally ourselves with them on the basis of these feelings.

And yet, it is possible that one's potential sympathy for Cody in *White Heat* may be more than merely situational. The frequency with which one might sympathise with this character begs a larger question: is a consistently sympathetic response towards a character who we have evaluated as a villain possible? I would argue that sympathy presupposes allegiance with a character, *but it does not seem logical to have such an amiable response to a character whose behaviour we deplore or condemn*. Dolf Zillman summarises the relationship between sympathy and nomination in even more succinct terms by claiming that "liking defines protagonists, disliking antagonists. Character development thus is considered a function of moral evaluation" (Zillman

2000, 54). If allegiance with a character plays a primary role in determining the character's moral identity, a hero is a "liked" character – one whose traits we have assessed positively. Under such a formula, villainy is eradicated following a consistently positive identification and evaluation of their traits.⁴ It seems unlikely that Cody, or any such character is to be perceived as totally villainous if they invariably attract our sympathies. Does sympathy therefore require that we merely measure a character's good traits against her bad traits? Again, we arrive at the same indecisions inherent in the evaluation of character traits. How many does it take? At what point do their transgressions become unacceptable? Can laudable behaviour "cancel out" atrocious behaviour? None of these are easily resolvable dilemmas.

For Zillman, "the moral sanction or condemnation of the behaviour of characters fosters not only favourable or unfavourable dispositions toward them but also specific moral expectations that yield pleasure when confirmed and displeasure when disconfirmed" (Zillman 1998, 201). A villain, in his terms, is simply a disliked character whose occasional triumphs we deplore and whose eventual castigation we anticipate and relish. But this presupposes a rather unsteady connection between morality and sympathy. While it is true that a positive moral evaluation promotes sympathetic engagement, by no means does it *necessitate* such an amiable response to a character. For example, we may dislike Hank even though he does not engage in immoral behaviour. His "villainy" would be determined by our lack of sympathy rather than any explicitly iniquitous action he might undertake. In fact, Hank's straight-laced, "He-Man T-Man" heroics (Fischer 1993, 79) may inspire the viewer's irritation or scorn *because* he plays incessantly by the book. Such a response would not be unusual; in his review of the film, Hal Erickson claims "that the audience invariably cheers the despicable lunatic Cody Jarrett while hissing and booing the 'heroic' underground operative" (Erickson 2004, 1-2). Perversely, Hank's virtue might be the very thing that draws a viewer's antipathetic response, and thus, may inspire a villainous nomination.

⁴ Daniel Haybron makes a similar claim in arguing for the "consistency view" of evil, that "to be evil is to be disposed to be neither moved nor motivated (positively) by the good to a morally significant extent" (Haybron 2002, 70). Although I take issue with his claim that a "disposition" for immorality is a robust character trait, there is something to the idea that by describing someone as immoral, we position ourselves towards that person in a very singular way – strictly antipathetically.

Or rather, his moral forthrightness fails to engage due to the near unfailing assuredness with which he adheres to his principles. His actions almost never come across as anything more than a plodding adherence to duty.⁵

Conversely, Cody is an *attractive* character due to the zest with which he attends to his “work.” Although we may have assessed Cody as a ruthless character, we have also noted earlier that he is an energetic and rather charismatic man of action. Energy, charisma and purposefulness are all traits that are culturally valued by Western audiences, and will ensure a viewer’s interest in or fascination with a character (interest and fascination being integral components of attraction), but it is crucial to note that these traits are *non-moral* by nature. That is to say, *certain traits can be considered attractive independently of the ends they serve*. Pleasurable engagement with a villain may entail a degree of *seduction* in these regards, for a viewer’s attraction to a villain’s vivacious qualities may outweigh her disapproval of the character’s immoral actions. Or, a viewer’s attraction to non-moral traits can contribute to her willingness to “overlook” a character’s villainy in the interests of sympathetic allegiance.

We may come to a clearer understanding of how sympathy and nomination interrelate by way of analogy. Cody relates the story of the Trojan Horse to his gang as an allegory for their final heist, in which he plans to smuggle his gang into a refinery whilst hiding in a gas truck. To extend his metaphor to the relationship between sympathy and nomination, we might say that villains are *not* Trojan Horses – they are not attractive vessels in which a concealed malignance yearns for a sympathetic dupe. If a character consistently engages a viewer’s sympathy, the viewer is not likely to nominate such a character as “villainous” since such nomination entails a negative moral evaluation of her collective traits (“I find the behaviour of this character to be deplorable”). But at the same time, a viewer’s affection for a character is not necessarily contingent on moral approbation either, as we have seen with both Cody and

⁵ Of course, Hank’s confident incorruptibility would also be dictated by the principles of the Production Code: “Law and justice must not by the treatment they receive from criminals be made to seem wrong or ridiculous” (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 356). Since the Code’s loss of authority in the mid-1950’s, “sting” narratives have been able to explore the potential for sympathy between an undercover agent and his quarry. Notable contemporary examples include the connection between Tim Roth’s undercover cop and Harvey Keitel’s gangster in *Reservoir Dogs* (Quentin Tarantino, 1991) and the quasi-filial relationship FBI agent Joe Pistone (Johnny Depp) has with mobster, Lefty Ruggeiro (Al Pacino) in *Donnie Brasco* (Mike Newell, 1997).

Hank. Since moral behaviour may occasionally prompt an *antipathetic* response, it seems that we must discount sympathy as a reliable component of nomination, just as we must disregard “attraction” to a character’s culturally esteemed traits as well. Sympathy and negative moral evaluation are incompatible responses to an assessment of character. As with attraction, they cannot work in tandem towards a mutually desired achievement of villainous nomination.

It seems we are no closer to a conclusive nomination of Cody, for “villain” is a title that appears to be somewhat out of reach. Who, then, gets to “name” Cody? The “authorities” make an attempt at the end film’s end, and for Hank and Chief Evans, their eulogy is a perfectly satisfactory sermon. And yet, we must recognise that the very heart of nomination’s indeterminacy lies in this homily, in its potential lack of authority. Hank’s own choice of words unconsciously sabotages his evaluation: by confirming that Cody has indeed made it “to the top of the world,” he unwittingly aggrandises Cody’s “villainy.” What exactly has Cody achieved by his immolation at the film’s end? “Made it, Ma!” he cries before firing into the Hortonsphere, but it seems ludicrous that apocalyptic self-destruction is the pinnacle of his ambitions. Yet the fiery holocaust that ends the film is also a glorious moment, an emblem of Cody’s “uncontainable” nature.

I have argued that characters are porous constructs due to the nature of the reconstructive process by which viewers synthesize a collection of traits into the idea of an individual. As a result, moral nomination – the evaluation and subsequent identification of an individual’s moral character – is an indeterminate project. The compilation and assessment of relative traits are subject to interpretive indeterminacy, and thus, a substantial degree of variation. Additionally, while morality itself seems to play a large role in the nomination of a character, it does not always determine our sympathy for a character. In a similar fashion, we may identify particular traits belonging to a character that are attractive, but this attraction can be formed for non-moral reasons. Thus, the evaluative description of traits is characterised by unavoidable imprecision, so much so that “villainy” occasionally escapes through ethical fissures. If character is to be understood as a set of predicates, then “even though the connotation may be clear, the nomination of its signified is uncertain, approximative, unstable,” and so, Cody’s villainy “is only a *departure*, an avenue of meaning” (Barthes 1974, 191). To the moralists who describe him as demonic, the flames of the film’s closing shot are nothing less than the punitive fires of hell reclaiming their own spawn. But to viewers

who recognise nomination as an ultimately deciduous, indeterminate process, these are fires whose white heat sears away the residue of a definitively (im)moral identity.

These conclusions are, of course, provisional, and unanswered questions still remain. Do villains in particular inspire indeterminacy? Is it easier to nominate a hero? If “villains” can occasionally be described in any number of ways without settling on a definitive evaluation, does their iniquity cease to exist? The answers to these questions may be located by examining the relationship between nomination and self-evaluation. In the next chapter, I would like to suggest that nomination is not simply an activity directed at a character in the interests of moral identification, but an inquiry into one’s own values.

Chapter 4

Learning from Lawlessness: Empathy, Sympathy and Moral Pragmatics

DORIS: You're a strange man...and a very evil one.

JOE: And you're a sweet child...and you want me to be wicked to you.

DORIS: Now what are you talking about?

JOE: Because you're wicked, really wicked.

DORIS: What are you talking so crazy for, Mr. Morse?

JOE: Because you squirm for me to do something wicked to you. Make a pass for you, bowl you over, sweep you up...take the childishness out of you and give you money and sin. That's real wickedness.

DORIS: What are you trying to make me think, Mr. Morse? What are you trying to make me think about myself – and you?

- *Force of Evil* (Abraham Polonsky, 1948)

Despite the functional necessity of nominating a villain in certain films, we have seen how interpretive indeterminacy can undermine the straightforward evaluation of a character. Like most comic book heavies, villains seem perpetually to elude the authorities, and in the cinema, this authority is the cage of a restrictive name. Dr. Jonas Miller (Cary Elwes), for example, is *Twister*'s (Jan de Bont, 1996) nominal villain only if you accept that driving a black minivan, being a scientific opportunist, and not “respecting” tornados like Bill Harding (Bill Paxton), the film's hero does, are evidence of a villainous nature. Jonas is unfortunately slotted into a villainous actantial role based on such flimsy data and is summarily rendered into tornado-fodder as recompense for being a charlatan and a corporate sell-out rather than a clever and “authentic” scientist, like Bill. If villainy is not always an identity a film can assign in an obvious way through function, description and evaluation, how might we come to recognise it? During the indeterminate process of synthesizing a character, how does one arrive at an assessment of a fictional individual as villainous? Since these wily individuals are often able to resist our evaluative straitjackets, we must reassess the aims of our endeavours.

A viewer's act of nomination is not simply the identification of textual evidence that attests to an immoral individual's culpability; rather, it is a matter of putting her own moral principles into play. Nomination has a pragmatism that transcends textual necessity. It is obvious that we need villains, but not in the same way that a superhero needs an archenemy to justify his undertakings. Instead, the villain can play a vital role in the determination of one's own personal ethics – she may serve as an ally in the process of devising and/or revisiting one's values. That is, a viewer will engage with villainous characters *in order to concretise or revise pre-existing moral principles*.

In this light, character engagement can be regarded as a method of enquiry into one's understanding of one's self – specifically, the moral aspects that both govern and are components of one's being in the world. Therefore, for the remainder of my study, we will consider how the evaluation of character can be *inwardly* directed toward the value system held by the viewer herself. We recall from the Introduction that the nature of our moral interaction with fictional characters has been an area of contention for a good many theorists and philosophers over the last few decades. My contribution to this debate will be to indicate how one's engagement with a cinematic villain is inevitably an implicit project of self-evaluation. The purpose of the present chapter, then, is to describe what this project entails. What I shall argue is that the nomination of a villain is actually an aspect of the exploration of one's own moral identity. This exploration requires an empathetic undertaking, and so, I shall clarify the terms of our endearment: how we might come to imaginatively engage with a villain, and what might transpire during that time. From there, I shall consider the benefits of this engagement – what pragmatic interest there might be in empathizing and sympathizing with a villain for the purposes of moral clarification. Because the prospect of a potentially positive response to immoral characters has drawn the ire of numerous moralists and ethicists, I will also demonstrate why imaginative engagement with a villain does not necessarily reflect badly on our moral integrity. We will then be in a better position to appreciate our sympathetic feelings for – or “perverse allegiance” with – villains, and can begin to fully address the intriguing moral paradox it represents.

The Educations of a Pointed Finger: Nomination as Self-Evaluation

Villains excite our moral as well as morbid curiosity. Paul Ricouer argues that fiction causes us to “suspend our attention to the real” and in such a state of “non-engagement,” the audience tries “new ideas, new values, new ways of being-in-the-world” (Ricouer 1991, 128). Seen in this light, our interaction with villainous characters is a way of experiencing the ethically foreign, or unfamiliar. Iris Murdoch shares this argument as well, stating that fiction is essentially “anti-egoistic” – that our imaginative engagement with fictive situations and subjects is based on difference or departure from the everyday (Murdoch 1991, 34). The experience of difference that a text offers can be constructive, ideally resulting in a new understanding of the world. My advocacy of moral criticism is not altogether at odds with a mimetic critical

orientation that validates a work of art for its fidelity in representing a *known* world. A fiction will always address the familiar in some way, if only as a point of departure, and an audience will always bring to a fiction an *a priori* set of beliefs and assumptions about the world, as well as a system of values which governs their understanding. Our interaction with fiction, however, is not a matter of one-way reflectionism, but is reciprocal in nature; our own experiences will inform the meanings a film will have for us, just as the film works upon our understanding of those experiences. To put it rather prosaically, cinema may fundamentally transform our worldview.



Figure 2.0



Figure 2.1

What is the nature of this transformation and how might it be enacted? In order to answer these questions, we must come to an understanding of the nature of our moral relation to cinematic fictions. As I synthesize an idea of the possible people with whom I am engaged – as I reassemble human potential from an evolving horizon of emotions, actions, beliefs, desires – I am also shaping my own sense of self: how I feel, what I value, who I am. Brought within the unfolding of some human drama, I am called to account for *my* place in relation to this emergence. It is no small thing, for example, to be in the extraordinary presence of Regina Giddens (Bette Davis) in *The*

Little Foxes (William Wyler, 1941), watching her silently refuse to help her dying husband, Horace (Herbert Marshall), as he struggles to crawl up the stairs to find the medication that can save him. The shift in composition here from the crystalline deep focus employed throughout most of the film to the tight medium close-up on Regina calls for a shift in my own understanding of the situation (**Figures 2.0** and **2.1**). That the camera lingers upon the hateful little agonies that contort Regina's porcelain face, rather than on Horace, who dies out of focus behind her, is testimony to the demands of the fiction. It acts as a kind of summons, perhaps. This unassuming scene of passive murder makes a claim upon my attention and my respect; it insists that I give a reckoning of my relative position as participant. Why is my attention drawn towards Regina first and foremost, above and beyond the plight of her dying husband?

I have been claiming that narrative cinema is *inherently participatory*. It implies both a “Said” (revolving around intent, meaning, allegory) and a “Saying” (which entails relation, self-exposure and performance). This “Saying” – the act of relation – requires both *commitment* and a degree of *responsibility* from participants. What we are concerned with here are, in Adam Newton’s terms, “the ethical consequences of narrating a story and fictionalising person, and the reciprocal claims binding teller, listener, witness, and reader in that process” (Newton 1995, 11). Narrative, in these terms, can be understood “as relationship and human connectivity” (ibid, 7). It is our *answerability* to a film’s intersubjective dynamics, irrespective of its moralizing intentions, with which we must initially contend. Before we are to apperceive the homiletic import of a villain in a goal-oriented film, before we wind our way to the dark centre of a devil’s heart in a character-oriented film, we are to understand that our very decision to attend to the terms of a fiction is to accept the claim it places upon us. There is a sense that we are, in some ways, beholden to the characters within a drama. If our relationship is to be something more than a fleeting source of “entertainment” (however one might define that term), if we are to be moved by them, *changed* by them, we must realize that our own role within the “Saying” to which we both bear witness and help shape is more than a little like a moral obligation unto itself.

“One faces a text as one might face a person,” Newton asserts, “having to confront the claims raised by that very immediacy, an immediacy of contact, not of meaning” (ibid, 11). In the virtual presence of some other, the bald reality of their situation is prior to what larger truth it might signify. What is it that, say, Mildred Pierce (Joan Crawford) asks of me in the film that bears her name? Or, to put the matter more accurately, what is my relation to her situation – her continual self-sacrifice in the service of her monstrously thankless and ultimately murderous daughter, Veda (Ann Blyth)? She relates her story to Inspector Peterson (Moroni Olsen), “confessing” to a crime actually committed by Veda, and behind this relation is the inherent plea that any act of narration implies. To be presented with a narrative is to be beseeched. We will either take up the mantle of listener – which entails an acquiescence of sorts, a giving of oneself to some other’s need – or, we will turn away altogether. The decision to bear witness is, perhaps, a moral one.

Narrative is “meant first to be *confronted*: an audience stands before...its characters’ brute separateness – not to contemplate them as ‘examples’ but to

acknowledge them as being, standing, and suffering apart” (ibid, 66).¹ Before any process of synthesis, prior to any act of evaluation, we are faced with the stark presence of a possible person who demands acknowledgement. The experience of cinematic fictions is, at its root, an experience of an other, a “not-I” from whom I am fundamentally separated and yet towards whom I must struggle. This struggle is the primary condition of any drama. A narrative will bring us within the presence of some other and my attendance to the details of her situation represents an effort to refine my sensitivity to the difference that divides us. Paradoxically, to relate a story is to draw the listener into proximity with individuals that are irreducibly distant, but whose features begin to emerge in sharper relief as we experience the tale. In *Cool Hand Luke* (Stuart Rosenberg, 1967), the Captain (Strother Martin) is confronted with the stunned faces of the prisoners who have witnessed him savagely beat an inmate, Luke (Paul Newman), following a relatively minor insubordination. To save face for his momentary loss of control, he must contextualize the violence – he must formulate a story that will render the stark reality of his brutality intelligible to the shocked witnesses. His eyes dart across the astonished inmates, and there is a brief, but notable hitch in his breathing. “What we’ve got here,” he suddenly declares, “is failure to communicate. Some men you just can’t reach.” The savagery the men have witnessed is re-related, and in his act of narration, the Captain attempts to minimise his otherness, to make his actions appear in some way *understandable*. “I don’t like it any more than you men,” he intones, imploring the prisoner’s assent. Whether or not the men will be swayed by his efforts to establish kinship – whether or not they will “buy his story,” so to speak – is a separate matter. Our decision to acknowledge a villain’s circumstances, resolutely confronting their alien separateness without recoiling in repugnance, is the most basic of resolutions we can make with respect to a narrative in which they appear.

And yet, while I agree with Newton that granting this acknowledgement is a crucial moral decision, I do not see how the moral evaluation of a narrative’s exemplariness misses the point. Perhaps our very decision to confront the other’s frightening separateness is the most important one that can be made in our experience of

¹ Newton is borrowing here from Stanley Cavell’s idea that fiction allegorizes our state of separateness from other individuals. In a way, we may be as “helpless” before the circumstances of fictional characters, as we are from truly engaging in an other’s experience. For Newton, however, fiction “invents” the means to seemingly “traverse” that separateness (Newton 1995, 43-45).

a film, but I do not see how this decision supersedes our interest in what a character's situation might mean *for us*. For while our acknowledgement of the other's situation is a measure of respect in itself, it will inevitably be followed by evaluative consideration, no matter how superficial. It is not so much that characters must be "contemplated as examples" (as is the object of homiletic allegory), but that we might come to understand what relevance their situation has for aspects of our own. We need not regard the bad end to which Cora Smith (Lana Turner) and Frank Chambers (John Garfield) come after murdering Cora's husband in *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (Tay Garnett, 1946) as an admonishment to those that entertain similar desires. Nor is our acknowledgement of their circumstances a necessary preface to an inevitable condemnation of their actions. However, our "confrontation" with the lovers and their crime of passion is not simply an accreditation of their separateness from us. It is not enough to "acknowledge them as being, standing, and suffering apart"; if we are to recognize this suffering – to grant the couple a modicum of respect, or love – we must understand what suffering is like for them, and what significance their experience has for us.

To put the matter even more succinctly, our decision to empathically engage with an immoral character can be of great import and is not always made easily, but the matter does not rest there. Empathetic imagination always entails a consideration of the consequence an other's experience might have for *my* life. In Martha Nussbaum's words, "the moral activity of the reader... involves not only a friendly participation in the adventures of the concrete characters, but also an attempt to see the [fiction] as a paradigm of something that might happen in his or her own life" (Nussbaum 1990, 166). To take up the other's position is to establish certain connections across our separateness, *to begin to think of their subjectivity as something that is not separate from my own sense of self*. The extension of empathetic feeling towards a villain is the first step towards a moral reconciliation of sorts, and I will describe this conciliatory process much more extensively in the final chapter.

In considering "acknowledgement" as a moral decision, what I have been attempting to establish is the ethics of empathic feeling. Although the thrust of my study revolves around the formation of evaluative attitudes towards instances of villainy – whether sympathetic or antipathetic – I believe it to be important to determine how empathy functions in relation to those attitudes. It is not my intent to offer a complete cognitivist account of our empathetic capacities and how they are put to use in our

experience of a film. However, I would like to advance a few modest ideas regarding the role that our “confrontation” with villains might have for moral understanding. Given that nomination is an indirect form of self-evaluation, the decision to imagine how a situation might be for a character can be conducive to a vivid consideration of our own circumstances. Let us consider the details of this kind of imaginative engagement.

Empathy is an emotional process whereby one “feels with” another individual. More precisely, *it is a cognitive undertaking in which an individual will attempt to reach an accurate recognition and understanding of another’s state of mind.* At its most thorough, this recognition and understanding will not only extend towards the subject’s emotions, but to a limited extent, her desires, beliefs and values as well. For our purposes here, we are to understand empathetic imagination as the assumption of another’s perspective of her particular circumstances, and in this respect, it is quite similar to the experience of epistemic identification discussed in Chapter 2. Several cognitive theorists describe this process as a kind of simulation whereby one *centrally imagines* a scenario as it would be perceived by another individual. That is, the situation that the empathiser imaginatively projects herself into will be informed by the feelings, thoughts, aspirations and principles held by an individual within that situation. I will experience the situation as it is shaped and felt by the subjectivity of the other. We may distinguish this relation to an event from the *acentral imagining* of a scenario, in which my position is a peripheral one. I remain at a remove from the situation, experiencing events neutrally from no identifiable subjective perspective but that which belongs to me.² As a way of further distinguishing between the two forms of imagining, we might compare them with internal and external focalisation: central imagination is akin to the narration’s attempts to render the subjective experience of a character, while acentral imagination places us in close proximity to the other whom we are observing.

² For more extensive discussions on the differences between central and acentral imagining, see Richard Wollheim’s *The Thread of Life* (Wollheim 1984, 75-75), Murray Smith’s “Imagining From the Inside” (Smith 1997, 415-416) and Peter Goldie’s *The Emotions* (Goldie 2000, 196). Other relevant writings include Kendall Walton’s distinction between imagining from the inside versus the outside (Walton 1990, 28-35), Noël Carroll’s view on our assimilation of another’s situation (Carroll 1990, 95), and Gregory Currie’s differentiation between primary and secondary simulation (Currie 1995, 152-155). An interesting summary of empirical research that studies central imagining’s effect on text processing and narrative comprehension can be found in Amy Coplan’s “Empathic Engagement with Narrative Fictions” (Coplan 2004, 141-143).

While watching Jeff (William Bendix) pound Ed Beaumont's (Alan Ladd) pretty face into jelly in *The Glass Key* (Stuart Heisler, 1942), for example, I may disinterestedly observe the beating from a more or less objective (or acentral) viewpoint. This position may be adopted in spite of (or, due to a failure of) the narrational cues that encourage me to imagine the pain Nick is experiencing: the orchestral stings that correspond with Jeff's blows; the adoption of Nick's perspectival POV, the fade to black that accompanies Nick's descent into oblivion. Even more perverse, though, might be a decision to centrally imagine the scene from Jeff's perspective. In doing so, we acknowledge his gleeful expression, understand how for him his assertion of power is a source of pleasure, and may experience an attenuated frisson of delight ourselves. Perhaps we might even "misuse" the narrational cues as well, in order to bolster our empathy with Jeff: the diegetic music underscores the satisfaction of knuckles pulping helpless flesh ("Take THAT!"); the shot of Jeff looming towards the camera becomes a fantasy of empowerment (we could imagine ourselves as an object of the other's fear); the fade-out is no longer an analogy for the onset of unconsciousness, but is instead the visual correlative of Jeff's dwindling aggression. Of course, this response would be somewhat counter-intuitive, but it is not, I think, impossible.³

So, empathy is an imaginative act of position-taking from within the drama, rather than the peripheral and neutral observance of a situation. It must also be distinguished from *emotional contagion* – the unconscious and largely automatic mirroring of another's emotional behaviour. The key differences are that the empathiser understands the context of the other's emotion, and remains aware that she is undergoing a similar emotion. *Empathy is a conscious process that is deliberately enacted*, and in empathically engaging with another, *we still retain a sense of the separateness of our own emotions from that of the other*. Following the opening credits of *The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Michael Curtiz, 1938), for example, we may be surprised to find ourselves smiling with the same smug satisfaction as Prince John (Claude Rains) before we are even aware of the source of his mirth. This possible emotional response is an example of emotional contagion and not empathy. It is an instinctive physiological response to a demonstration of another's happiness (a

³ Given the number of grins observed on the faces of student viewers during this sequence on the two occasions I have screened *The Glass Key*, I think that some version of this empathetic response is not entirely unlikely either.

testimony to Rains' considerable flair for exuding a sense of oily bemusement). Unlike empathy, emotional contagion is more or less involuntary and precedes both understanding and evaluation.⁴ We have, in a sense, "caught" John's merriment and do not distinguish his emotion from our own. As Amy Coplan indicates, during true instances of empathy, "the presence of self-other differentiation" is always maintained, and my respect for the other's uniqueness will be preserved (Coplan 2004, 144).

A final key point about empathy that is worth mentioning here can be attributed to Peter Goldie. Empathy does not just involve myself and the other individual whose mind-set I imagine, but should be conceptualized as a triadic process that incorporates the imagination of the empathiser, the mind-set of the subject, and the object or situation that the subject perceives. Or, as Goldie puts it, central imagining "will involve determining what is the object of the person's emotions and the way he is feeling towards that object, as well as determining what are the thoughts which he has about it" (Goldie 2000, 185). As the subject's emotion is directed towards some external object or situation, the empathiser must first accurately recognise what this object/situation entails. As I watch David Mann (Dennis Weaver) nervously check his rear-view mirror in *Duel* (Steven Spielberg, 1971), I will understand that he is beginning to suspect that the ominous transport truck behind is trying to run him off the road (and not, say, playing a friendly game of chicken). Secondly, the empathiser must understand how the object/situation might cause the subject to feel a particular way. I accept that David's belief in the unseen trucker's murderous intentions are reason to cause him considerable anxiety (the truck is, after all, enormous, and David is stuck behind the wheel of a wretched little Plymouth Valiant). Finally, the empathiser must also understand how those feelings might cause the subject to perceive the object/situation in a certain fashion. I can imagine that David's mounting fear might result in any or all of the following sensations, perceptions, and thoughts: that every passing second is felt to be interminable; that the truck is seen as a relentless juggernaut driven by a sadistic demon; that his mind is desperately casting about for a means to escape from his pursuer unscathed.

⁴ For more details on emotional contagion see Goldie's detailed discussion of this phenomenon in *The Emotions* (Goldie 2004, 189-194), Smith's comparison of emotional simulation and affective mimicry (Smith 1995, 96-106), and Coplan's differentiation between emotional contagion and true empathy (Coplan 2004, 144-145).

This triadic conception of empathy is compatible, I think, with my idea of character synthesis. In both cases, we are engaged in speculative activity that requires us to continually contemplate which details might be relevant to an understanding of the character and her situation. And just as our evaluation of a character is always in flux, becoming richer in nuance as new situations occur, so too does our understanding and experience of a character's mind-set evolve as her situation changes. Our acknowledgement of the other's experience of being in the world is subject to the array of details and complexities that arise from the drama's particulars and the character's unique participation within them. Just as some individuals are difficult to "peg," so too might our efforts to grant them the fullest extent of our acknowledgement require the most finely attuned of empathetic feelings. Quite simply, the more ambiguous the alloy is in moral character, the more our empathic feelings toward them will call for our imagination's ingenuity. After all, empathy is not merely a matter of "feeling the same way" as another character; the manner in which we centrally imagine their circumstances must be in accordance with what we feel to be an accurate assessment of their situation in all its emotional intricacy. I believe this is why empathetic investigation is *not* prior to a consideration of the other's personality; the two are inextricably linked and ever-changing.

In *The Big Red One* (Samuel Fuller, 1980), for example, we are privy to four episodes that are focalized through the experience of Sgt. Schroeder (Siegfried Rauch)—a devout Nazi officer who frequently "shadows" the film's protagonists (four young Privates in the 1st Infantry Division, and their nameless Sergeant). Not only must we contend with the evolution of Schroeder's personality across these episodes in our efforts to nominate him as a villain, the character of our empathic feelings for him must also alter as each new situation arises. During the first episode, Schroeder's zealous belief in the principles of the Nazi party are evident in his brutal machine gunning of a soldier in his own division: he executes the disenchanted grunt for voicing his scorn for Hitler as well as Schroeder's own vehement adherence to the Fuhrer's cause. In this case, our inclination to nominate Schroeder as a merciless killer might correspond with a centrally imagined view of the episode that takes on his mind-set. We could, I suppose, conceive of what it might be like for Schroeder to feel utterly assured in the Truth and superiority of his beliefs, to the extent that a critical dissenter deserves nought but death for his lack of respect.

With each ensuing episode, however, one's attitudes towards Schroeder and one's understanding of his mind-set may change. As the Sergeant remains fully committed to a cause that is clearly lost, we may come to see him less as a villain (an intentional wrongdoer), and more of a deeply deluded individual. During the next-to-last episode in which he is featured, he shoots a German Contessa (Christa Lang) who has provided him with her hospitality, but who also despises Hitler ("That perverted Austrian peasant"). The war is clearly lost for the Germans at this point, and the Contessa's mockery of the Third Reich is bitter truth that Schroeder obviously cannot bring himself to acknowledge (she also reveals that her husband, whom Schroeder believed to be a hero of the Reich, reviled Hitler as well). As the Contessa's laughter pierces the armour of Schroeder's convictions, we might observe his shattered expression and centrally imagine the agony of one whose faith has been torn asunder. We might come to see how the feelings that accompany a killing might be a terrible recognition that one's exertion of power is no longer a mark of assuredness, but is a sign of defeat instead. "Soldiers do not murder the enemy," Schroeder had righteously declared earlier, "we kill them." One could acknowledge how it is for him now – how he might feel in recognising the hopelessness of his sense of obligation: the horror of succumbing to the terrible desire to obliterate the other, whose laughter releases one from duty but exposes the yawning chasm that lies beneath.

So, my own understanding of empathy is that it is inevitably a comparative process, and is inherently *relational* by nature. Roughly speaking, it is the recognition and understanding of another's state of mind in relation to yours within the relevant context. We can distinguish this relational process from sympathy, in that the latter entails the subsequent evaluation of the subject's mind-set – the extent to which I am in accordance with this mind-set, deeming its appropriateness to the object perceived. When the vampiric Max Schreck (Willem Dafoe) torments F. W. Murnau (John Malkovich) in *Shadow of the Vampire* (E. Elias Merhige, 2000) by threatening to feed on the filmmaker's crew, our understanding of the delight he takes in Murnau's anxiety does not occur from our own evaluation of the director as a narcissistic maniac; our thoughts on the deservedness of the pain Schreck inflicts is immaterial. Rather, our emotion will only be empathic if we can imagine how this scene might be enjoyable for the sadistic vampire himself. As Eva M. Dadlez explains, "the point is to imagine the character's situation *as it seems to the character*, to attend imaginatively to those

aspects of it that the character's beliefs and desires render salient" (Dadlez 1997, 183, *my italics*). But this does not mean that the empathiser's own mind-set is abandoned or kept in complete abeyance during her imaginative attendance upon the other's situation; it actively informs upon her imagination of the other's experience.

What is crucial to note, in other words, is that *empathy cannot involve an attenuation of our own beliefs, desires and sympathies, because these largely impact upon what we can imagine of the other*. In many ways, our presumptions about the beliefs of the other are drawn from generalizations we have made about people based on our own lived experience. Therefore, it is true that "any empathetic emotion can bear some relation to what one believes of oneself and one's own beliefs, thoughts, and desires" (Dadlez 1990, 184), and that my ability to centrally imagine another's situation is always contingent upon my understanding of my own position in relation to the world. In journeying towards the other, I never really stray too far from home.

Cognitively speaking, then, what is it that occurs exactly during an instance of empathetic, central imagination? A fruitful way of thinking about empathy's mechanics can be adopted from Wolfgang Iser's phenomenological approach to the cognitive activity undertaken during the reading process. For Iser, every literary work is open to multiple readings and is effectively "changed" each time it is read. More importantly, though, every text will work changes upon its reading subject as well.

The manner in which the reader experiences the text will reflect his own disposition, and in this respect the literary text acts as a kind of mirror; but at the same time, the reality which this process helps to create is one that will be *different* from our own... Thus we have the apparently paradoxical situation in which the reader is forced to reveal aspects of himself in order to experience a reality which is different from his own (Iser 1996, 79).

The claim here is that by giving up the familiar and engaging in the experiences the text offers, the reader will (ideally) come to understand hitherto unrecognised aspects of her self. For spectators, the act of viewing is a dialectical process in which "we bring to the fore an element of our own being of which we are not directly conscious" (*ibid*, 81).⁵

⁵ In this respect, we can see how empathy could be important to goal-oriented films whose allegorical structures are similarly concerned with self-discovery via an exposure to "difference" (like Dorothy in *Oz*). Character and viewer are engaged in reciprocal procedures of dynamic introspection prompted by their "confrontation" with otherness.

Engagement with characters is, in part, a cleansing ritual – the invocation and subsequent regeneration of the habitual. Partaking in the unfamiliar requires a kind of temporary “submerging” of one’s own personality. During a highly absorbing film, the normal epistemic foreground/ background relationships are reversed: the world of the text is brought to the fore, while one’s awareness of the actual environmental conditions of reception tend to recede to the back of one’s consciousness. In this way, a viewer will become receptive to a film’s appeals for imaginative renewal.

During the viewing process, there is a “division” within the viewer, in which one’s own subjectivity recedes into the background and the “alien” thoughts of textual subjectivity come to the foreground – not unlike the epistemic “reversals” of fictional immersion. Like Iser, I am not arguing that a fictive subjectivity will eclipse the reader’s; our own thoughts lurk in “virtuality,” informing our reading of the text. In Gregory Currie’s similar terms, one’s “mental ‘set’ remains constant; role-taking does not, and probably could not, involve temporarily trading in your whole personality for another” (Currie 1997, 72). The phenomenology of character engagement entails the successful negotiation between actual and textual personas. Again, centrally imagining a fictional scenario is always *relational*, or, as Iser describes it, “the alien ‘me’ and the real, virtual ‘me’” will always inform one another: “indeed, we can only make someone else’s thoughts into an absorbing theme for ourselves, provided the virtual background of our own personality can adapt to it” (Iser 1996, 81). We have already discussed the results of “mismatched” alien and virtual thoughts. Like Gibson and Booth’s concept of the mutinous “mock viewer,” successful imaginative engagement with a character may be impeded by our “virtual” personality’s refusal to “adapt” to the demands of a challenging “alien” personality. Villains are a particular challenge, as their immorality – their potentially alienating ethical persona – tends to inhibit the empathic devices that are typically activated with greater ease in our engagement with the morally familiar and approbatory.⁶

Dangerous Liaisons is an interesting example of a text that does not encourage allegiance with said estimable characters. As an anti-heroic character study, the most

⁶ It is worth noting in passing Martin L. Hoffman’s postulation regarding the role familiarity plays in empathy. His conjecture is that our empathetic imagination is more likely to be extended towards others whom we perceive to be like us (whose culture and living conditions are similar to our own) and with whom we regularly interact (Hoffman 2000, 62).

immediate subjectivities that one might adopt belong to the sadistic Vicomte de Valmont (John Malkovich) and Marquise de Merteuil (Glenn Close). While their games of sexual conquest are quite cruel in character and may repel a viewer's willingness to entertain an empathetic relationship with the libertines, other members of the *gentilité* prove to be even less attractive (and often hypocritical). Mme Rosemonde (Mildred Natwick) is a senile relic and whited sepulchre, and her niece, Cécile (Uma Thurman), a naïve adolescent. The prudish Mme. de Volanges (Swoosie Kurtz) criticizes Valmont's "loose" morality, but her moral authority is circumscribed by her former erotic dalliances with him. Mme. Tourvel (Michelle Pfeiffer) – the pious and devoted wife whom Valmont seeks to corrupt – may appear to be the most attractive subjectivity to virtually "adopt," but the zealotry with which she attends to this piety proves to be her undoing. The film leaves little room for a middle ground in matters of love and offers even fewer opportunities to nominate morally stalwart characters with whom we might comfortably engage. In the absence of any morally ideal subject, the viewer must consider "adopting" the "alien" identities of the libertines, regardless of how repugnant the sharing of their skins might be.

There are various means by which the exchange of "alien" and "virtual" personalities may take place: presenting extended periods of epistemic alignment, frequent singular focalisation, but usually, it is during moments of villainous *self-declaration* that the exchange is at its most self-conscious. In theatrical melodrama, the heroes and villains must at some point "declare themselves." That is, "the villain...at some point always bursts forth in a statement of his evil nature and intentions," while the heroine declares "her continued identification with purity, despite contrary appearances" (Brooks 1976, 37). When the character's moral identity and concurrent motivations seem to be at their plainest (whether they have explicitly nominated themselves, or we have arrived at a particular conclusion regarding their character), it is then that one is most likely to decide whether or not that character merits the full extent of one's empathetic imagination. In this sense, self-declaration (or a viewer's nomination, for that matter) presents a kind of *empathetic threshold* of sorts. One either takes up the invitation, or one recoils in disgust.

Cinematic melodramas perpetuate this strategy of self-declaration, although not always in such a literal fashion. Turning again to *Dangerous Liaisons*, the characters seem to open themselves up for empathetic engagement by either occasionally playing

to the camera, or by enacting diegetically motivated scenes of self-declaration. During Merteuil's moment of disclosure, for example, she conceives of her motivations in terms of gender warfare: "I always knew I was born to dominate your sex and avenge my own," she explains to Valmont, and thus, she imagines herself a "virtuoso of deceit" in a contest in which the only principle is "win or die." This disclosure may attract a viewer's sympathies for the Marquise, even a reconsideration of her games of sexual intrigue. A viewer may begin to understand the stakes involved in these "games" – that they are anything but exercises in petty cruelty. In coming to this understanding, a viewer is in a better position to feel what it might be like for a woman who is ruthlessly attempting to assert herself in the inequitable arena of sexual politics in the only way available to her. It is along these feminist lines that a viewer may come to understand why "cruelty has a noble ring to it" for Merteuil.⁷

Valmont, on the other hand, prefers the theatricality of sex to its politics and eschews explanations for dramatics. Accordingly, his "self-declarations" are performed as if to an audience. In his occasional glances at the camera, Valmont breaks down the fourth wall of the screen as if to implicitly beseech our approval of his machinations.⁸ Following a dissolve into the shot that finds him seated on a chaise in Mme. de Rosemonde's lounge and pretending to read, there is a disconcerting moment in which we realise that Valmont briefly seems to be looking at us. Locking eyes with the villain amounts to the disruption of our clinical (or, acentral) curiosity in their behaviour. Our empathy is prompted here by the direct address of the narrative discourse, which asks us to consider the unfolding scene as a scenario that is in part staged for our edification. "Being" John Malkovich here entails an education in the attraction of cruelty.

Naturally, a timid viewer might not relish the prospect of any "lesson" that involves centrally imagining a villain's situation, and would probably attempt to avoid the direct address of this gaze. The reticence with which a viewer may potentially approach empathetic imagination betrays fear – not just an emulation of, say, Tourvel's

⁷ I will offer a much fuller account of this kind of sympathetic "revaluation" in the final chapter of my study.

⁸ William Rothman believes that when a villain looks into the camera, "this gesture is...akin to the camera's suggestions that the act of viewing is villainous. Meeting the camera's gaze, he reveals his knowledge of our viewing; this look by which he unmask himself denies our innocence" (Rothman 1988, 75-76).

panic over seduction, but the fear of recognition. That is, a reluctance to empathetically engage with either Valmont or Merteuil may spring from an unwillingness to recognise one's own capacity for perversity. Cinematic villainy may be used as a kind of ethical barometer by which a viewer shores up her own "virtuosity," but empathetic imagining will be kept at a remove by refusing to engage with an alien persona, by casting the villain *as an other that is irreconcilably separated from one's own sense of self*. This reluctance to engage empathetically with a villain represents a denial of the *reflective* capacities of such characters. For any interpretation of *Dangerous Liaisons* – or any film that requires morally based imaginative engagement for that matter – necessitates a certain degree of concomitant self-analysis.

Gregory Currie articulates this problem of personality that can cause such moral distress whilst empathising with a villain:

We frequently take on the part of people in fiction whom we would not like or take the part of in real life. The desires we seem to have concerning fictional things can be very unlike the desires we have concerning real life – so dissimilar, indeed, that it is hard to see how such disparate desires could exist within any reasonably integrated human mental economy. Why the disparity? And what does it say about our integrity as persons (Currie 1997, 65)?

A reluctance to empathise with a villain is not just indicative of a viewer's disinclination toward self-analysis, but it speaks of an unwillingness to undergo the moral "disintegration" of which Currie speaks. It is an opposition to a text's moral contract, in which one must agree to become a certain kind of person in order to accept the terms of the fiction. In other words, empathetic reluctance indicates a hesitancy in "substituting" one's own thoughts for those of a fictional subject during the viewing process.

Even if we do centrally imagine a villain's mind-set, a significant question remains as to whether we are invited to try on these perspectives, only to retrospectively *deny* our association with them. A violent subsequent rejection of a villainous imaginative engagement may be one's knee-jerk reaction after an extended immersion within a perverted psyche. It seems quite untenable to suggest that a character such as Pinkie Brown (Richard Attenborough) in *Brighton Rock* (John Boulting, 1947) is anything more than an unrepentant young thug. To the moralist, the villain is nought but a figure of iniquity whose example one is well advised to admonish and reject after briefly "adopting" their subjectivity. And yet, the instant dismissal of villainy per se is undertaken at the expense of a radical, *transformational* relationship with the character.

Even a vicious heavy like Pinkie may hold fascinating contradictions with which one must contend. *Brighton Rock*, for example, is a work that requires us to grapple with the paradox of imagining what it might be like to be a staunch Catholic who cannot abide smoking or drinking and yet murders with shocking impunity.

A character's unrepentant callousness, then, presents a challenge to villainous nomination and demands much of our empathetic imagination. Her obstinate lack of contrition impels a serious consideration into the "wrongness" of her actions, for the case of the aggressively and obstinately impenitent villain can be unsettling enough to instil a momentary doubt in the "rightness" of the precepts she has violated. Merteuil's unapologetic sexual ruthlessness, for example, both makes her social position possible and implicitly indicts the factitious moral politics of the Janus-faced *ancien regime*. Moreover, her wickedness transcends Valmont's petty cruelty, which is a product of ennui and seems to serve no purpose other than that of conquest. So, if high society's justice at the film's conclusion seems to lack poetry, such perverse disappointment at Merteuil's social ostracism is a symptom of a villainous infection – an invasion of the viewer's value system, the ultimate purpose of which is the imbalance of unreflective decorum and specious conceptions of the good.

In sum, because the process of nomination is highly indeterminate, viewers can only designate a character as villainous through the concomitant assessment of their own values. That is, viewers must bring their own values into play in nominating villains, and at the same time, these fictive subjects become test cases against which the viewers' moral principles are measured through a relational form of empathetic imagination. The purpose of adopting this alien subjectivity is not just to acknowledge the situation of the other with sensitivity and respect, but also to heighten our interpretive powers. In centrally imagining a character's situation, we consider them *intersubjectively* as a subject whose experience is contiguous with our own. In turn, we may potentially formulate a hitherto unrecognised or undetermined aspect of our moral identities. Attempts at empathically relating to the villain can establish her on either of two distinct poles along an evaluative continuum: 1) that of the other, the "not-me" by which a viewer shores up her own "virtuosity;" and 2) a dark mirror in which a viewer may glimpse the reflection of his own perversity. For in achieving empathy with the villain, a viewer may find his own moral scheme unintentionally thrown temporarily awry. It is possible that the interpretive indeterminacy of the villain may be extended

(not unlike a virus) unto the viewer herself. The act of nomination can lead toward the pollution of a viewer's own moral values, and so, we will now attempt to more fully understand this development of a vital heart of darkness.

A Second Look: The Case for Clarificationism

What seems clear thus far from my discussion of empathy and its potential role in self-evaluation is that centrally imagining a filmic scenario from an other's perspective (especially a villainous one) can be conducive to the re-examination of one's own principles. I will outline *how* a film makes these re-examinations possible, and *what* it is that we might learn from immoral characters, morally speaking. Is there anything at all to be gained from empathising with a villain, or feeling apparently perverse gratification from her actions? Let us return to the moral criticism that was referenced in the Introduction for some answers.

Noël Carroll and his fellow ethicist, Berys Gaut, are two prominent theorists that are interested in describing the use-value of our moral engagement with fiction: what audiences learn from fiction, morally speaking, and how they acquire this knowledge. Such interests are of crucial importance to understanding a viewer's relation to and use of narrative films, and my own evaluations are conducted for this purpose as well. Where I part company with these two theorists, however, is in their characterization of this use-value. Carroll and Gaut both argue for the morally *instructive* nature of imaginative engagement, but I do not believe film to be educational in the same way that these theorists define "instruction." Instead, I would like to suggest that films have the potential to *clarify* moral precepts for viewers and that part of that clarification may involve the *revision* of principles a viewer holds. The villain's instructional capacity lies in her potential to *problematise* seemingly straightforward moral precepts.

My position differs substantially in character from the prescriptivist belief in the *directive* nature of moral knowledge one gleans from fiction. Berys Gaut's claim, for example, is that "identification with a character may teach an audience about correct emotional responses" – responses that are strictly intended and morally justifiable (Gaut 1999, 216). His assumption about the moral knowledge that fiction provides is that it is both *practical* and *propositional*. Allegiance with a villain, then, is to be avoided because it prevents us from learning how to bring the "correct" emotional response to a situation. If, for example, we ally ourselves with Harry Lime (Orson Wells) rather than

Holly Martins (Joseph Cotten) in *The Third Man* (Carol Reed, 1949), we will neither learn that the exploitation of sick children is wrong nor how to bring our pity to bear upon victimised individuals whom we have never met. These assumptions can both be challenged. For a viewer already comes to *The Third Man* with the (propositional) knowledge that exploitation is to be regarded as immoral and is also already equipped with the (practical) knowledge of how to respond sympathetically to strangers. As I argued in the Introduction (in accordance with Carroll's initial comments on narrative intelligibility), the fiction would be incomprehensible without the viewer already holding these faculties in place.

Therefore, the moral knowledge that fiction provides is neither practical (knowing how) nor propositional (knowing that), but is instead, *empathic*. *A film's moral use-value is to be located in its ability to illustrate what it might be like to occupy a particular subject position – a knowledge that invites us to either reinforce or revise the moral values we already hold.* In Frank Palmer's terms, narrative fiction "contributes to our moral understanding through acquainting us (or even re-acquainting us) with things we could not know by description alone, and in a way that does not violate the 'autonomy' of art by regarding it in purely instrumental terms" (Palmer 1992, 215). In a sense, by morally engaging with a character, we come to "live out" the ethical challenges that character introduces. As McGinn indicates, fiction often "serves to crystallize some common human experience, giving it an imaginative spin...Stories can sharpen and clarify moral questions, encouraging a dialectic between the reader's own experience and the trials of the characters he or she is reading about" (McGinn 1997, 174). Thus, the moral pragmatics of engaging with the characters in a film like *The Third Man* is a matter of imagining what it might be like to conceive of human beings as mere "dots" whose value is strictly fiscal (as Lime does) or, in imagining what it might be like to discover that your friend is a monster (as Martens does).⁹

In the simplest of terms, film can serve as a moral toolkit. That is, rather than offering solutions to moral problems in themselves, films provide opportunities for the viewer to increase her empathetic capacities and/or clarify her own system of values.

⁹ One might also consider Michael Tanner's application of the Acquaintance Principle to the evaluation of fictional characters. Like a work of art, description alone would not be sufficient to evaluate a morally extra-ordinary individual. One would need to experience her situation firsthand, especially if one desired to adopt her example as a model for one's own general rules of conduct (Tanner 2003, 30).

Because fictional situations involving villains rarely have perfect real-life analogues, a villain's instructive role may lie in how she either widens one's empathic range, or crystallises the immorality (or morality in some cases) of an otherwise ethically "murky" real-life scenario. The crucial point here is that villain happens to be a fictional individual *who pushes one's empathetic capabilities to their limits*, and in so doing, *she tests a viewer's relation to the values that the viewer has already established*.

Villains often challenge viewers to reconsider their own moral norms, and for some, this is the villain's most frightening quality. Heroes are typically mired in a moral status quo and do not often achieve the terrifying, occasionally Nietzschean grandeur of their nemeses, and thus, I would argue that villains are usually better case studies through which to re-evaluate one's own moral beliefs. The good guy rarely challenges; his most typical function is to affirm – even the so-called rebellious or reformist types. When *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* (Frank Capra, 1939), he shakes up the moral hegemony of American politics, but he does not challenge the values of the Senate itself, merely those senators who are abusing their positions of power. "Jefferson Smith is a common man who comes to reinvigorate the system not overthrow it: the foundation is solid and good; the men charged with preserving the structure are weak and corrupt" (Doherty 1999, 341). The methods of a hero who restructures an outmoded moral order will seem morally questionable to the existing status quo, but in fact, the hero's values will represent a *higher* moral authority. Above all, the conventional hero never challenges an ethical system through immoral means. Conversely, "morally questionable" characters are just that: opponents who aggressively test the values of the viewing subject.

Thus, taking up the challenging mind-set of the villain through centrally imagining their situation can be an education of sorts. The position that characterises the moral knowledge a film provides as empathic can be identified as *clarificationism*. This is *the concretisation of abstract moral principles through illustration*. Rather than bringing to bear a new set of moral beliefs learned from the cinema to an analogous real-life situation, morally instructive works *legitimize* our antecedent moral beliefs. Carroll also advances this position, claiming that film builds upon moral tenets that are already held by viewers. "Narrative artworks promote such understanding," he claims by providing occasions for clarifying our emotions, or, as Aristotle might say, for learning to bring the right emotion to bear upon an appropriate object with suitable

intensity" (Carroll 1996, 230). A work's pragmatic value lies in its call for the viewer to augment their empathic understanding by applying their evaluative powers (albeit "properly" for Carroll) to the moral dimensions of a dramatic scenario. In this model, fiction provides a means of ethical-testing whereby the villain's actions ideally serve as exemplars for viewers to assess the personal moral principles to which they subscribe.

While I admit to an affinity with this model, I cannot wholeheartedly support Carroll's particular use of clarificationism. When coupled with his insistence that there are "proper" and "improper" emotional responses to fictions, this narrowness explains why for him an ethical flaw can be regarded as an aesthetic flaw. If a work's moral function is to promote the clarity of moral understanding, then its formal structure *must* be organized to support this function. Carroll's self-proclaimed "moderate moralism" is a version of *ethicism*: a theory suggesting that a work's moral flaws are also aesthetic ones if the work *misrepresents* affairs, attitudes and values that are held to be "true." The "bad" work of art will pervert, or obscure our understanding of important intersubjective principles to which we are beholden. Using the apparent "celebration" of murder in *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, 1994) as an example, Carroll argues that "narratives that pervert and confuse moral understanding by connecting moral principles, concepts, and emotions to dubious particulars...fare badly on the clarificationist model, since they obfuscate rather than clarify" (Carroll 1998, 150). Since for Carroll, the film seems to champion its two mass murdering protagonists Mickey (Woody Harrelson) and Mallory Knox (Juliette Lewis) and formally presents their exploits as both an elaborate music video and a manic exercise in channel-surfing, it inhibits viewers from forming a morally lucid evaluative position towards its subjects.

There is a potential confusion here between *a viewer's* inappropriate moral reading (the viewer, and not necessarily the film, champions the values of the murderous couple) and *deliberate* obfuscation (the film denies easy causal linkage between murder and the saturation of mediated violence). Carroll implies that it is the film itself, rather than the viewer, that is somehow immoral: the film's narrational strategies prevent viewers from adopting the "proper" evaluative attitude toward the characters (condemnation). His criticism has parallels with critics who attempt to establish causal links between the viewing of fictional violence and the committal of actual violence: *Natural Born Killers* turns us into "kill crazy" spectators rather than duly appalled viewers who respect the sanctity of human life.

And yet, Carroll overlooks the complexity with which the film addresses its subject. The film's treatment of violence as spectacle is deeply *satirical*: it calls attention to and parodies the excesses of screen violence that Carroll perceives as a threat to viewers' moral sense. *Natural Born Killers* further complicates a "commonsensical" moral attitude towards its characters by situating their violence within an intertwining network of sexual abuse, psychological trauma and celebrity culture. In order to unequivocally condemn Mickey and Mallory, one must disentangle their use of violence from its function within the film's larger social critique, thereby missing the film's point entirely. The film argues that the acts of murder committed by these killers are not isolated instances of immorality, but are instead symptomatic of a culture that is instinctively and intrinsically violent.

What *Natural Born Killers* offers in the interest of moral clarificationism is a troubling of the moralist's outright condemnation of mediated violence, an opportunity to empathize with individuals who are themselves troubled, and perhaps even a re-evaluation of one's own moral certainties in regards to murder. The fact that the film is not concerned with moral answer-giving accounts for its richness and complexity, rather than a structural defect. I would like to amend Carroll's model of clarificationism by arguing that occasionally, films whose moral arguments are somewhat murky, or difficult to identify do not necessarily "obfuscate" our moral principles; their importance to the clarificationist is paradoxically in the way they might *problematise or complicate simplistic moral preconceptions*. We are rarely completely resolute in the principles that we hold; our value systems and moral opinions "are not, usually, firm or clearly demarcated as we would like, but have a vague and shifting quality" (Hamilton 2003, 50). The value of apparently immoralist art, then, is to demonstrate the potential ambiguity of what we take to be moral surety, and/or how an unyielding set of principles can prevent us from adequately responding to morally complex situations.

At their most radical, the moral clarification that these troubling films encourage may take the form of wholesale *revision*. Even Carroll admits to this possible response: "In the course of engaging with a given narrative we may need to reorganize the hierarchical orderings of our moral categories and premises, or to reinterpret those categories and premises in the light of new paradigm instances and hard cases, or to reclassify barely acknowledged phenomena afresh" (ibid, 142). Like Christopher Hamilton, I do not believe that the clarification that a work provides "must be friendly

to morality” because a particularly powerful work of immoralist fiction may prompt one to reinterpret a previously respected conventional value (Hamilton 2003, 29). In no way am I advocating the *abandonment* of virtue; rather, I believe that our empathetic and sympathetic engagement with villains can be particularly conducive in prompting moral reorganization, reinterpretation, and reclassification. Fundamentally, the character-type is one who challenges, questions, even destabilises ethical principles that seem clear-cut to the clean-cut hero, and perhaps to the viewer by extension.

At the very least, representations of villainy might shed some light on the value systems of certain individuals that might otherwise remain unthinkable. Mary Midgley argues “that it *is* possible to understand alien customs,” and furthermore, “that if I do succeed in understanding them, I shall do something better than giving up judging them” (Midgley 1981, 73). Although her arguments arise from the debate over the appropriateness of morally judging alien cultural practices, one might extend them to the praxis of villainy – the moral alien whose motives seem inscrutable. For if the “truth” of our moral affairs, attitudes and values are more variable than most would like to believe, then “one of the things art is particularly good at is enabling us to engage with and understand different ways of conceiving of such matters” (Kieran 2004, 62). Hence, the value of an “immoral” work is to bring us to a *credible* understanding of individuals who do “feel differently” about moral matters.

More importantly, understanding morally unfamiliar actions will not always lead to a favourable judgement, but engagement with a villain may promote a “truer” judgement of immorality – one that is much more considered than outright rejection and instinctive horror. These often-instinctive affective responses can be powerful barriers to understanding the values of others as well as those questionable values that we ourselves might hold. But our empathetic imagination is ethically significant because it “can provide new insights into the experience and motivation of others, and can thus lead us to a new awareness of or alteration in our existing normative judgements” (Dadlez 1990, 191). Moreover, it is *valuable* to entertain the truthfulness of a morally alien proposition in order to explore “alternative” conceptions of morality that may be morally defective, yet might also be “rendered close to us in ways we find to be intelligible” (Kieran 2004, 71). My contention here is that *we are “unfinished” as moral beings*. We see ourselves as either inherently good, or are unable to reconcile ourselves to our immoral impulses. Opening oneself to the *possibility* of sympathetic

allegiance with a character who one typically and summarily would condemn can mean arriving at a more complete awareness of our own moral identity.

What might the nature of such awareness be like? I would suggest that it is the experience of a kind of *moral "connectedness," or holism*. This "holistic" experience is probably best described by way of an illustrative analogy. In arguing for the realistic and morally valuable depiction of character, Gregory Currie forwards "simplicity" as a necessary condition of such a depiction. Here, complexity as a sign of moral veracity is eschewed in favour of an immediate and vibrant connection that can be drawn between the idealized moral situations of cinema and those of real life.

One of the values of realist fiction is the opportunity it gives us to engage in a systematic sampling of the character's life, conveniently revealed to us at critical junctures by the narration. By living that life...in imagination, we may learn something new about *how to see our own lives as connected wholes capable of being structured in a planned way* (ibid, 170, my italics).

In the case of the "realist's" villain, it is not that we are presented with evidence of how *not* to structure our own life; such Aristotlean pragmatism is the realm of allegorical fiction. Rather, their example allows us to regard our own life in a particular way. In fact, the most important conjecture of my study is *that the villain may allow a viewer to "see" her life "as a connected whole" – in particular, as a complete moral being*. *Blade Runner* (Ridley Scott, 1982), for example, offers glimpses from the brief and furious life of an android who "has done questionable things" in the interests of extending his extremely limited lifespan. Forming an allegiance with Roy Batty (Rutger Hauer) means imagining what it might be like to fully embrace a state of living in death, to "burn brightly" at every possible moment. The scenes chosen from Roy's life are among his last, and they are chosen for the lucidity with which they illustrate his guiding moral principle: to reconcile one's self to who one is, to one's own propensity for violence, even if it means living somewhere "beyond good and evil." What we strive towards, then, is the holistic self-knowledge that such empathy can provide.¹⁰

I would argue that the pleasure, or gratification that one derives from representations of villainy can be related to the subsequent experience of arriving at a truer, more mature understanding of the values one holds through allegiance with an immoral character. Naturally, I am not discounting the more instinctive and prevalent

¹⁰ I will be expanding upon this assertion much more extensively in Chapter 6.

pleasures involved in engaging with villains – those that derive from the animosity we might feel towards them and our desire to see them punished. Indeed, it is likely that the majority of popular film narratives in which a villain appears – especially within the allegorical tradition – are structured to encourage such basic, hedonic emotions. One might even claim that a benefit of narratives featuring villainous characters is that we can evaluate these figures with impunity, as there are no real-life ramifications of condemning or negatively assessing their behaviour. Nominating Katherine Parker (Sigourney Weaver) as “the Boss from Hell” in *Working Girl* (Mike Nichols, 1988) is a much more viable option than enduring the hellfire that would likely ensue after telling your own boss that you believe she’s the devil.

As intensely satisfying as these judgemental feelings can be, I am more interested in a kind of moral engagement that appreciates the potential value of villainy, rather than encourages an outright rejection of immorality. For not only is the judgementalist tendency often close-minded, but it can also tend towards hypocrisy. In his essay on the pleasures of hating, William Hazlitt rhetorically asks the question, “Does the love of virtue denote any wish to discover or amend our own faults?” – to which he responds with a resounding “no,” claiming that such an alleged love “atones for an obstinate adherence to our own vices by the most virulent intolerance to human frailties” (Hazlitt 1826, 3). In this spirit, then, I endeavour to understand a kind of moral engagement with characters that does not tend to incline toward self-righteous moralism and judgementalist tendencies. As Stuart Fischhoff argues, villains should be regarded as something more than simply “mere devices to impel heroism”; otherwise, “audiences leave the theatre hating more and understanding less about the world in which they live” (Fischhoff 1996, 51 & 52).

So, in sum, it is neither helpful nor correct to suggest that a work’s moral errors are also necessarily structural ones. While films can be morally instructive and their aesthetics evaluated accordingly, the pragmatic knowledge they provide is empathic, rather than prescriptive (practical and propositional) and obtained in the larger interests of moral clarification. Therefore, it would be erroneous to criticize the promotion of allegiance with a villainous character as *necessarily* aesthetically flawed. Moreover, such an allegiance can be formed in the interests of arriving at a truer (more complex) understanding of a moral precept, and/or clarifying a viewer’s perspective on her own moral identity. Alex Neill holds that empathy (and by extension, empathetic responses

to film characters) is vital to an audience's emotional and moral development. "In coming to see things as others see them and to feel as they do we gain a broader perspective on the world, an increased awareness and understanding of the possible modes of response to the world" (Neill 1996, 192). The benefits of being acquainted with evil are such that one may not only discover new powers of toleration, but may also open oneself up to new means of apprehending our lived experience. Centrally imagining the villain's experience offers us a second look at things, and in these regards, they can enhance our moral perception – the "fine development of our human capabilities to see and feel and judge; [the] ability to miss less, to be responsible to more" (Nussbaum 1990, 164).

"Evil, Be Thou My Good": Pleasurable Transgressions

The imaginative role-playing that fiction requires is predicated in part upon our natural curiosity towards the profoundly seductive other. Indeed, just as fiction allows us the opportunity to condemn immoral characters with impunity, so too can it offer the opportunity for "safe" exercises in empathy. Certainly, *successful* empathetic imagining can clarify our own moral principles, heighten one's tolerance for a wider spectrum of real world individuals, and may even help us to recognize our own capacity for immorality. At the very least, the success of certain fictions is predicated on one's willingness to "try on" alien values. Our "adoption" of a villainous perspective is occasionally a necessary and perhaps important exercise in empathic imagination.

So much for arguing for the merits of empathic relations with the villain. But what of sympathy? We remember that sympathy is to be understood as "feeling for" a character. The term refers to the extent to which one positively evaluates another's mind-set, agreeing that it is appropriate to the object or situation at hand. In the Introduction, I established the possibility of a viewer's sympathetic feelings for an immoral character – an emotional valence to which we will refer (following Murray Smith) as "perverse allegiance." By sympathising with a villain, it is said, I will do more than centrally imagine her situation; I will find myself feeling positively towards her to some degree. This feeling entails all sorts of complications that are not relevant to the more "innocent" act of role-taking. For the moral paradox that it presents – that one can still ally oneself with an immoral individual in spite of the prohibitions against feeling for the intentional wrongdoer – is not a problem that is simply remedied. In this

last section, then, I will clear the grounds for the comprehensive examination of our sympathy for the devil, which will take up the remaining chapters of this study. We shall see how perverse allegiance does not necessarily reflect badly upon the sympathizer and that feeling for a villain may serve morally estimable purposes.

Perverse allegiance is undoubtedly a potential source of pleasure for many viewers. One may derive a certain degree of gratification from sympathising with characters one correspondingly evaluates (whether simultaneously or subsequently) as immoral. But why consciously choose evil? That is, why might one find satisfaction in embracing a principle that is dedicated to undermining those life-affirming values generally held to be worthy of respect and, indeed, love? Most forays into this discomforting paradox tend to speak of perverse allegiance in negative terms, as if the respective critics cannot bear to conceive of aesthetically derived pleasure that is not morally laudable by nature. Disapproval of such pleasure typically manifests itself in three critical arguments. The morally-perverse pleasure the villain excites is regarded as: 1) approval of the villain's values (*complicity*); 2) being derived from the licensed enactment of one's secretly harboured desires (*wish-fulfilment*); or 3) an illogical and/or mechanical reaction to various textual and emotive cues (*moral incoherence*). Before we address a solution to the apparent "problems" of taking pleasure in villainy, we must specify briefly the nature of each form of disapproval in turn.

In the first instance, enjoyment of the villain's actions is regarded as worrisome because it is taken literally as either unmerited sympathy towards or moral support for an unsavoury character. Moreover, the complicity "generated" by cinematic fictions is thought to have the ability to cloud the viewer's moral rationality. Orrin E. Klapp is one such conservative critic who writes on the hero's "deterioration" – the twinned results of the modern preference for the alloy and the relegation of the protagonist to a purely actantial role. This apparent deterioration is evident in antiheroic characters: "bad people in the hero's role – who confuse the judgement of right and wrong because we identify with them, are more demoralizing than outright villains would be" (Klapp 1962, 145). The effect of such anti-heroism "is to carry a person who identifies with him *beyond the range of where he would normally go*" (ibid, 147). Marvelling at the cleverness of the intricate narrative that Virgil (Kevin Spacey) spins in order to avoid incarceration in *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995) would be appalling for Klapp. Criticism equating pleasure in immorality with complicity is just one short step away

from panic over the potential for real-life immoral imitation, and the cry for moral censure. Indeed, Klapp's "solution" is to turn away from the corrupting influence he attributes to "naturalism," and to return good, old-fashioned (melodramatically polarised) values to the cinema. "It may be that at the popular and juvenile levels, it would be better to keep the melodramatic formula rather than foster the trend toward mixed fictional characters that debauch and confuse values. A certain amount of melodrama is good for everybody" (ibid, 175).

Klapp's variety of conservative moralism is not limited to the early 1960's. Even ostensibly "objective," contemporary psychologists such as Dolf Zillman and Rhonda Gibson cannot avoid moralistic language in their assessment of viewers' enjoyment of horror. "We assume, with the likely exception of deviant subpopulations such as sadists, that horror is terrifying in the sense that it liberates empathetic distress with those victimized and evokes apprehensions about victimization" (Zillman and Gibson 1996, 28). Their reference to "deviant subpopulations" is a telling provision, as Zillman and Gibson cannot bring themselves to imagine that a well-adjusted, morally upright, socially responsible individual could possibly find pleasure in identifying with the *victimiser* – with an unequivocally evil subject position.

The tendency to moralize continues in contemporary philosophical writings as well. Gaut, for example, believes that works can only be successful aesthetically if they encourage an ethically positive response to the situations they represent: "If a work seeks to get us to pity some characters, but they are unworthy of pity because of their vicious actions, we have reason not to pity them, and hence the work is aesthetically flawed" (Gaut 1998, 196). In short: the promotion of sympathetic engagement with a character who is "undeserving" of a viewer's sympathy is regarded by Gaut as a formal error, and is only taken up by morally irresponsible viewers. "If we actually enjoy or are amused by some exhibition of sadistic cruelty in a novel, that shows us in a bad light, reflects ill on our ethical character, and we can properly be criticized for responding in this fashion" (ibid, 194). Like Carroll and Palmer's insistence on the humane comprehension of narrative events discussed in the Introduction, Gaut's position is staunchly moralistic: it effectively denies a situation in which a perverse emotional response is merited. His position would have been welcomed by Joseph Breen and the rest of the PCA, as we recall that the First General Principle of the Production Code was that "no picture shall be produced which will lower the moral

standards of those who see it. Hence the sympathy of the audience shall never be thrown to the side of crime, wrongdoing, evil, or sin" (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 361).

But just as the working practices of the PCA frequently proved to be notoriously arbitrary, so too is Gaut's criteria for moral evaluation. For instance, by whose authority does one designate a sympathetic response "merited" or "unmerited?" By whose leave does such a moralist provide the "official" evaluation of a character's actions? One might suppose that Gaut is implicitly referring to the authority of our "moral common sense," but his lack of specificity is rather worrying. For although it may be the case that certain ethical precepts (or "moral facts") are inarguable, considerations of an immoral individual's "deservedness" of sympathy remain, by nature, a matter of debate. One of the principal objectives of *Monster* (Patty Jenkins, 2003), for example, is to lead a viewer toward a sympathetic engagement with its subject, real-life serial killer, Aileen Wuornos (played here by Charlize Theron). We will, of course, recognise that Aileen's actions are, for the most part, morally indefensible (she is a prostitute who commits a series of mainly profit-motivated murders after an initial act of lethal self-defence), and yet, this recognition does *not* mean that the pity we may come to feel for her is indefensible as well. Naturally, some viewers may be unmoved by the film's representation of the abject circumstances of Aileen's life and may criticize the linkage established between circumstance and immoral action as naively deterministic. However, the failure of these viewers to sympathise with the character *should not (indeed, cannot) be taken as the final word on the question of sympathetic deservedness*; their unsympathetic condemnation of the character represents one possible viewing position only. The moral authority of an unsympathetic viewer is not unilateral; while Gaut might (hypothetically) find that Aileen's actions are too "monstrous" to warrant *his* sympathies, another viewer may find her an extremely pitiable character. Viewers are always open to (and sometimes should) question the moral "authority" of a work, but they should equally question the "authority" of those that would seek to dictate the moral terms of our engagement with characters to us.

Additionally, moralists such as Gaut do not provide an ethical apparatus by which to test the appropriateness of our responses. *When*, exactly, is a response merited or unmerited? How "bad" must a character be before she does not warrant our sympathies? How much devastation, for example, must King Kong cause in New York

before one regards his behaviour as malicious, rather than the actions of a frightened animal removed from his natural habitat? Does a viewer tally up the transgressions of the rampaging monster before deciding that the giant ape does not merit the pity that the film encourages us to feel for him following his plunge from the Empire State Building? Not only is a “merited-response” argument puritanical, it does not even supply us with the means by which to determine whether or not a certain case warrants our sympathy.

I am willing to suppose that Gaut may not be as crudely quantitative in his approach as I have suggested, but his approach still erroneously assumes that sympathy is a matter of measuring the degrees of a character’s morality. We recall from Chapter 3 that if sympathy truly was determined by weighing a character’s positive traits against her negative ones, it would be subject to the same interpretive indeterminacy as moral nomination. Moreover, to speak of “merit” is to appeal to consensus, and while it is true that the moral values that inform a viewer’s judgement of a character are broadly shared (evaluation is *not* totally subjective), a viewer’s feelings of sympathy are not determined by general agreement. Intersubjective values determine what is right and wrong, but they can tell us nothing about when it is or is not appropriate to extend our sympathies to an immoral individual. Therefore, it would appear that if the moralist personally considers a character to be beyond redemption, then the film’s attempt to cultivate the viewer’s pity is somehow tantamount to an aesthetic flaw. While Gaut may wish to suggest that some characters are completely despicable and that the works that ask us to pity them are morally defective, I wish to counter such Grundyism by suggesting that a villain may be beyond redemption, but she is never beyond our sympathy and it is a courageous work that reminds us of this fact.

The second position – that perverse allegiance is a form of wish-fulfilment – is not as explicitly critical of perverse pleasure as the first, and yet, it tacitly assumes that such pleasures are inherently unwholesome. Here, the cinema is regarded as an outlet for unrestricted emotional reactivity, in which we are licensed to respond positively to antisocial desires we are not able to act upon. Murray Smith indicates that perverse allegiances may be formed for the purposes of moral learning and in order to generate a sense of self-identity, but he also believes that these allegiances can be characterised as the vicarious experience of antisocial behaviour. Cinema satisfies our curiosity to witness various transgressions, and forming perverse allegiances can act as a means of opposition to the specious good of the moral majority (Smith 1999, 236).

Moreover, a viewer might decide to form an allegiance with a villainous character for its sheer shock value – the delight in antagonizing the puritan and those of timid dispositions. *Goodfellas* (Martin Scorsese, 1990) would be incomprehensible without an acknowledgement of the glee derived from an attempt to break the rules and get away with it – a primary constituent of the cinema's long history of romanticised criminality. "All my life, as far as I can remember, I wanted to be a gangster," Henry Hill (Ray Liotta) reminisces at the film's beginning, as he helps whack an unfortunate Billy Batts (Frank Vincent) while the soundtrack swings subversively into a Tony Bennett tune. Smith locates the pleasures to be found within films like *Goodfellas* and *Pulp Fiction* in their sheer irreverence toward the sanctity of human life and the oppositional attitude they strike in relation to moral conservatism. "This is a kind of perverse enjoyment – involving perverse allegiance with Jules and Vincent as they live out their gangster lives, rubbing out a victim here, accidentally killing an incidental character there – because the delight it evokes is partly founded on the disapproval of the strict moralist" (Smith 1999, 232). These playful representations of villainy are designed in the spirit of antagonizing easily offended, Whitehousian sensibilities.

A certain degree of rebelliousness is undeniable in forming perverse allegiances with characters. However, it is not entirely clear why such unruliness is intrinsically valuable in itself. Smith offers some reasons as to why certain works adopt a flagrantly oppositional stance to dominant moral values: such antagonism keeps the staunch moralists on their toes, prevents moral complacency, and offers the vicarious thrill of doing what is not permitted. But from whence does the desire to rebel issue in the first place? Could it be that acting morally, or more precisely, investing in generally moral characters is not rewarding enough in itself?

The implicit suggestion is not that the desire for moral variegation is a fundamental need, or that the pressures of virtue are tiresome, but that uprightness has little value without the presence of the lawbreaker. Therefore, the villain is valued not only for his dramatic energy, but because the evaluation of his actions is the necessary means of moral differentiation. According to Colin Radford, evil is necessary because it allows for a moral world and in fact, "we *need* the wrongdoer. Without him or her our lives would be much less, perhaps not even moral, and much less worth living" (Radford 1996, 138). In Radford's account, identifying moral value is an act of contradistinction: the primary means we have of determining positive and desirable

qualities is by describing them in relation to their opposites. “We sometimes genuinely do love the rogue, and not despite, but because of his or her naughtiness,” and because it is this “naughtiness” that apparently gives value to our virtuous actions (ibid, 138).¹¹ Villainy is a necessary evil in the name of moral differentiation, for “the existence of wrongdoing not only guarantees that both we and the wrongdoer can act well but ensures that our lives are rich, diverse, challenging, puzzling, anguished, worth living” (ibid, 139). Smith also sides with Radford in suggesting that life would be quite boring without “the existence of wrongdoing and immorality in the world,” and furthermore, postulates that moral behaviour would be impossible without them (Smith 1999, 238).

There are a few problems here, not the least of which is that Radford’s “genuine love” for the rogue comes across as merely a form of toleration, a token acknowledgement of wickedness as a requisite for moral variegation. The aim of immorality is rarely dialectical: just as the villain does not live simply to ruffle the hero’s feathers, he does not act merely in order to ensure that the moral majority lead “rich, diverse, challenging, puzzling” lives. Neither Radford nor Smith considers here the desirability of evil in and of itself – the desire to transgress for transgression’s sake, irrespective of the action’s relation to the general good. Moreover, it is even questionable to describe moral properties in relation to an apparent opposite, for while certain values may have correlatives, *good and evil are not integrally antipodal by nature*. It is as mistaken to suppose that the villain is reliant on the hero for self-definition (and vice-versa) as it would be to suppose that without the intervention of Agent Frank Horrigan (Clint Eastwood) in *In the Line of Fire* (Wolfgang Petersen, 1993), we would not recognise the values of the self-righteous assassin, Mitch Leary (John Malkovich), as being fundamentally perverse. His attempted murder does not require a “moral opposite” for us to recognise its wrongness.¹²

Does this apparently basic need for allegiance with a variety of individuals fully explain a viewer’s penchant for moral “slumming?” Although one might choose to root for the corrupt Detective-Sergeant, Alonzo Harris (Denzel Washington) in *Training Day* (Antoine Fuqua, 2001) on the grounds that his overblown scenery chewing is much

¹¹ Murray Smith has remarked in conversation on Radford’s telling choice of the “soft” words “rogue” and “naughtiness,” as if accrediting perverse allegiance with a thoroughly immoral villain would upend his argument.

¹² I will expound upon this assertion much more extensively in Chapter 6.

more “fun” compared to the timorousness of the green recruit, Officer Jake Hoyt (Ethan Hawke), one does not ally oneself with Harris on the basis of “variety” and “entertainment” *alone*. Were our sympathies for a villainous individual extended for no other reasons besides a need for a reprieve from the weight of virtue (*moral relief*, or “variety”) or for the potential for pleasurable returns (*comic relief*, or “entertainment”) such decisions would not speak well for our own moral integrity. One would hope, at least, that our intersubjective values are not so flimsy that we might sympathize with a truly abhorrent individual as a perverse act of “relief” from virtue, or *just* because she is more “exciting” than the nominal hero. An act of real-life immorality undertaken merely for the sake of variety or amusement is, after all, pathological in nature. Arguing that the “rebelliousness” of viewers and characters is of intrinsic value does not go far enough in interrogating the villain’s relation to the dominant morality.

Moreover, as immorality is often demonstratively self-destructive, the moral critic would probably argue that villainy rarely promises long-term rewards for a viewer. While Louis (Brad Pitt) spends most of his time bemoaning his fate and moping his way through *Interview With the Vampire* (Neil Jordan, 1994), Lestat (Tom Cruise) cuts a more dashing and charismatic figure who revels in his vampirism (“God kills indiscriminately,” he cheerfully blasphemes, “and so shall we”). But enjoying Lestat’s depravity does not necessitate the purchasing of prosthetic canines, and certainly Smith would not link the pleasure Lestat offers to a repressed desire to actually *be* a vampire. Additionally, if villains satisfy our moral curiosity, and allegiance with them signals vicarious moral rebelliousness, one must be prepared to admit that these pleasures point toward our longing for properties which run counter to our interests as moral beings. If engaging with the villain is wish-fulfilment, such engagement presupposes that the dispositions of both character and viewer are mutually antisocial.

The final pessimistic attitude towards perverse pleasure suggests that these pleasures are, to a certain degree, morally incoherent. If we respond favourably to a scene of villainy, the pleasure we experience is an unthinking or instinctive reaction to the film’s emotional and textual prompting, divorced from an accompanying evaluation of the circumstances that prompted such a response. For Joel Black, our response to the actions of villains “may range from horror to admiration, but whatever shock we experience will consist of aesthetic astonishment rather than of moral outrage” (Black 1991, 9). Here, it is said, we are merely reacting to the means by which an immoral

action is represented, rather than the action itself. An act of villainy is an astounding spectacle, rather than an outrageous affront to our intersubjective values.

Such a position is untenable as all emotional responses – even those that are seemingly more cerebral in nature (ie. cognitive shock) – are inseparable from ethical considerations. Indeed, the very adjectives we might use to describe a character's virtues are often aesthetic predicates. "Repulsive," for example, is an evaluative description that can refer to a painting as equally as it can to an individual. Under Colin McGinn's "aesthetic theory of virtue," a filmmaker's decision to employ a villain's physical repulsiveness as an indicator of character "reflect[s] our implicit commitment to the view that goodness and badness of character are allied to aesthetic qualities of the person (McGinn 1997, 93). The language one uses, then, to describe viewer response is inevitably caught up in evaluative discourse (to be "astonished" implies a *disruption of*, and not merely a challenge to, one's beliefs). To reference *Natural Born Killers* as an example again, is not merely to marvel at its formal bravura, but also to recognise the actual depravity of its characters. Even more importantly, one must link the film's unholy pyrotechnics to the subjectivities of the murderous Knoxes, and even further, to the nightmarish media landscape that informs these subjectivities. The film is fundamentally a moral critique and not just a purely "aesthetic" exercise. A moral response to a villain is not simply an "art-effect" – a reaction to a work's grim or gruesome aesthetics. Black mistakenly believes the pleasure that is derived from perverse allegiance to be an aesthetically-based rather than morally-based response.

More troubling, however, are critics who suggest that our moral responses to works of art are not just aesthetically based but are, in fact, inherently *irrational*. Usually, objections to moral (and emotional) engagement revolve around a proposed inability to be moved by situations one does not believe to be true. Radford writes, "I am left with the conclusion that our being moved in certain ways by works of art, though very 'natural to us' and in that way only too intelligible, involves us in inconsistency and so incoherence" (Radford 1996, 206). By Radford's account, to be outraged by, say, Max Cady's (Robert Mitchum) terrorization of the Bowden family in *Cape Fear* (J. Lee Thompson, 1962) is to be inconsistent, as we do not believe that either Cady, or the Bowdens actually exist. Therefore, to be appalled by Cady's poisoning of the family dog is to have an "incoherent" moral response. While Radford's ruminations occupy a central place in an ongoing debate regarding the

relationship between morality and belief in fiction, his conclusion that emotional responses (and moral responses by proxy) to fiction are “inconsistent” and “incoherent” is rather unconvincing. The problem may lie in the ambiguity of his language. To claim that a viewer is behaving “incoherently” or “inconsistently” is not much of a solution at all; such “resolutions” merely defer an answer to the problem they propose. Radford may just as well have substituted “inscrutable” for “inconsistency” and “incoherence.” Arguing that an emotional or moral response does not make sense is merely to admit that one simply does not understand the demonstrated behaviour. If, however, he is claiming that to be moved by a fiction is in some way *illogical*, then we have a much more formidable problem on our hands. I will deal with this dilemma more comprehensively in the next chapter, since its solution will also represent the first of my own three major solutions to the moral paradox of perverse allegiance.

For now, let it be said that the main negative critical connotations associated with the pleasures of perverse allegiance include complicity, wish-fulfilment and moral incoherence. I have demonstrated why each of these descriptions of a sympathetic engagement with a villain is unsatisfactory. Additionally, we have seen how a viewer’s nomination of a villain entails the examination and possible reconsideration of one’s own values through both empathetic and sympathetic engagement. Both of these relations to a villain are potentially moral in nature in that they can advance our feelings of kinship towards a wider range of individuals as well as help us develop our moral perception. Particularly, the empathic knowledge that engagement with a villain provides can help us clarify and concretise what a complex moral precept might mean for us. For these reasons, a film that promotes empathetic and sympathetic feelings toward a villain should not be considered morally (or aesthetically) flawed, nor should these feelings always be taken as signs of espousal, repressed desire, or confusion.

If the rewards of perverse allegiance are to be freed from the stigma of immorality, they must be demonstrated to be meritorious in some fashion. Indeed, aesthetics hardly benefits from a kind of moral criticism that routinely disallows or castigates perverse responses to equally perverse representations. To that end, the next chapter will be devoted to describing the first of three alternative frameworks that one might adopt in order to experience a potentially morally valuable allegiance with a villain. We shall see what it is to receive an invitation to a kind of Devil’s Ball, and partake in the unseemly delights of his decadent masquerade.

Chapter 5

Theatres of Cruelty: Immorality, Performance, and Perverse Allegiance

"You need people like me so you can point your fingers and say, 'Hey, there's the bad guy.' So what does that make you? Good guys? Don't kid yourselves. You're no better than me. You just know how to hide and how to lie. Me, I don't have that problem. I always tell the truth ... even when I lie."

- Tony Montana in *Scarface* (Brian DePalma, 1983)

Like the best of villains, Tony Montana knows how to make a spectacular exit. Whether taking on a roomful of "cock-a-roaches" with a rocket launcher and Uzi tucked lovingly under each arm, or scandalising a restaurant of mortified diners with his volcanic table manners, he reinforces the age-old theatrical dictum of leaving with a bang. In the wake of the Cuban drug tsar's explosive departure sits an audience shocked into silence by the violence of his critical bombshell. Although the target of Tony's diegetic wrath is the audience of diners who have watched his histrionics with wide-jawed disapproval, in one of those curious moments of cinematic metalepsis his rage is simultaneously directed at the real-life spectator whose curiosity is far from innocent. Tony exposes the potential hypocrisy that is latent in many forms of moral disapproval at instances of cinematic villainy. He interrogates the viewer's motives for watching and ferrets out the unvoiced pleasure at the villain's antics, holding fast the clucking tongue that hides the mounting salivation. Watching the rise and fall of *Scarface* is not an entirely moralistic enterprise; like its predecessor in 1932, the joys of the film are not limited to the assumed powers of holier-than-thou condemnation, or a delight in pointing fingers. It would be impossible to sit through an excruciating 170 minutes of chainsaw torture, mountainous cocaine snorting, and operatic fire-fights for the sole purpose of confirming that the titular character is, indeed, a bad guy.

Instead, a great degree of pleasure is to be located in the "rise" rather than the "fall" end of *Scarface*'s "cautionary" tale. Certainly this is a pleasure that must necessarily be hidden and lied about if we are to retain our self-image as moral individuals (recall my discussion in Chapter 4 of the "threat" to our moral integrity that empathy with villains seems to pose). However, Tony sniffs out the hypocrisy in our attempts at denial with all the precision of a bloodhound and demands that we own up to the illicit pleasures of spectatorship. Tony is a fictional construct – a "lie" – that "tells the truth" in his interrogation of the whitewashing of perversity. He is a performer who holds us accountable for pleasurably tapping into his villainy.

In the previous chapters, I have discussed the concept of naming as an evaluative procedure – an engagement with characters that must, at some level, incorporate our moral responses. Again, nomination has a pragmatic use-value that extends beyond textual engagement: “naming” the villain entails a corresponding act of moral self-evaluation. At this point in my analysis, then, I would like to more fully explore a facet of our moral responses to villainy that I had begun to develop in Chapter 4. Taking up Tony Montana’s challenge, I will discuss the villainous character’s potential to prompt *sympathetic responses* to his actions and how the pleasure we may derive from these responses can occur even against our “better” moral judgement.

Recall that perverse allegiance was defined in the Introduction as a sympathetic response toward an immoral character formed on the basis of (rather than in spite of) their villainous nature (condition 1), and that while one’s evaluation of a character may prompt emotional arousal that is experienced as pleasurable (condition 2), one does not necessarily find the evaluated traits in question personally desirable (condition 3). Remember too that a film’s narrative framework will support evaluations of a moral nature (condition 5), and that the pleasure one experiences during an allegiance with a villainous character does not preclude one from experiencing other conflicting emotions in response to their actions (condition 4). Lastly, such allegiance will either be intended or unintended by a work. *Intended perversity* is a viewer’s acceptance of a film’s directive invitation to extend their sympathies to a villainous character, while *unintended perversity* is the result of a resistant appraisal of the character – a “second-order evaluation” that resists the narration’s “first-order” signals, as we established in Chapter 1. In these final two chapters, then, I will argue for the ethical merit of perverse allegiance, and indicate why allegiance with a villain does not necessarily compromise our moral integrity, but rather, may contribute to our empathetic capabilities.

Breaking the moral paradox of perverse allegiance into three independently valid but collectively conflicting premises, it is understood: 1) *that a viewer feels sympathy for a character*; 2) *that the character in question is immoral*; and 3) *that the viewer ought not to sympathize with an immoral individual*. If we are to provide a solution to this paradox – that is, prove perverse allegiance to be a meritorious exercise in some way – we must demonstrate that one of the above assumptions is a fallacy. There are various ways of disproving each premise, and the remainder of my study will primarily be concerned with three solutions of my own devising. Perverse allegiance with a

villainous character can be a matter of 1) *moral simulation*, 2) *revaluation*, or, 3) *reconciliation*. Each of these solutions can be matched to a corresponding premise within the paradox. First, moral simulation shows that it is not *actual* sympathy that a viewer feels for a villain. Secondly, moral revaluation is a way of arguing that the villain's actions actually serve a higher principle and thus are not entirely immoral at all. Finally, moral reconciliation demonstrates that perverse allegiance actually contributes to a larger good – specifically, that it increases one's empathetic capacities and assists in the development of what I will call moral holism.

My main concern in this chapter is to outline the first solution, and I shall describe solutions two and three in greater detail in the following chapter. Specifically, I will argue that a viewer must be willing to subject her own values to the temporary transformation brought about through moral “simulation.” We shall find that one's engagement with the delusional villain of *Sunset Boulevard* must be *performative* if one is to enjoy her manipulations of the hero.

Acting Out: Morality and Simulation Theory

I will begin by positing a theory of *moral simulation* as a response to philosophers of Colin Radford's ilk – those who do not believe that our moral and emotional involvement in a work of fiction is genuine. In the previous Chapter, I briefly addressed the suggestion that morally-based character engagement is inherently *illogical*. The two major problems that present themselves to the moral critic can be summarized as follows: 1) how can we respond morally to events we know to be fictional? And 2) if our moral responses are, in fact, authentic, how does one account for the possibility of radical shifts in values and character allegiance within a single film? Theorists who wish to accurately define the nature of our imaginative engagement with fiction frequently contend with these problems. I have mentioned Radford's work in the previous paragraphs, but many other theorists have entered the debate surrounding emotional responses to fiction by grappling with this apparent paradox. Some of the more frequent contributors include Noël Carroll, Gregory Currie, Peter Lamarque, Richard Moran, and Kendall Walton. While not all of these critics would describe themselves as simulation theorists, their work shares similar preoccupations, and often arrives at similar conclusions. Generally, their positions are variations on the conclusions reached by Currie, who treats imagination “as a family of

states parasitic on other kinds of mental states,” namely belief, which it is functionally like (Currie 2001, 261). Such “parasitism” will become a central conceit in the discussions that follow, but let us first consider each of the above problems in turn.

In the first instance, we come across the same problems of belief as articulated by simulation theorists investigating emotion. Moral responses to characters seem to be paradoxical because they are directed towards subjects who do not exist in the proper sense of the word. Since I do not believe that aliens bent on world conquest are actually replacing the characters in *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (Don Siegel, 1956) with pod people, logically (it is said) I should not share in Dr. Bennell’s (Kevin McCarthy) panic and moral outrage. Authentic moral engagement, therefore, is thought to be conditional on one’s belief in the actuality of the scenario.

The second problem departs in a significant manner from the concerns of the first in that it is not so much preoccupied with belief as it is with the mobility of allegiance. Smith, for example, believes that the narrational process by which the film’s moral structure is revealed can be characterized by two primary types of orientation: 1) static – in which moral positions are obvious and fixed from the outset and; 2) dynamic – in which moral positions can be hidden from both characters and spectators, play on mistaken alignments or, most interestingly, are characterized by a degree of *fluidity* (Smith 1995, 216). Many films require us to shuttle our allegiance back and forth between the moral poles of hero and villain in much the same way that the narrative discourse will focalise drastically different characters. As Smith explains, “we may experience a variety of different kinds of emotional responses to characters, our sympathy moving among several characters rather than being directed only at a singular ‘identification figure’” (ibid, 230). However, simultaneous allegiances with characters who occupy opposite ends of an ethical spectrum appear to be contradictory, destabilizing the integrity of our identity as moral persons. A good example of this dilemma occurs with the slasher film, which supposedly asks us to form a synchronous allegiance with both the homicidal maniac and the heroine who opposes him. Theories of “mobile identification” have only hinted at the moral problems posed by a viewer’s shifting allegiance.

My own contribution to the debate surrounding fiction and morality will be to offer solutions to the problems posed by our non-belief in fictional characters and by mobile identification. Could it be that our moral responses to fiction are not always

really genuine? That they can be simulated – “put on” – somehow for the duration of a fiction? Is the pleasure we receive from a villain occasionally an act of creative role-playing? Let us consider the various possibilities.

The first problem implies that a viewer cannot have “true” moral responses to fictions because she does not believe in the “actual” existence of the situation she is viewing. The relative *closeness* between fiction and real life is a thoroughly mined topic amongst aestheticians interested in exploring the relationship between truth, fiction, and belief. For my part, however, I would like to suggest that this first problem of belief is not particularly troublesome. One solution is simply that like emotion, *moral responses are not necessarily conditional on belief*; indeed we usually do take an evaluative position on a situation regardless of its fictionality. For example, Peter Lamarque suggests “we can reflect on, and be moved by, a thought independently of accepting it as true” (Lamarque 1981, 302). These are thought-contents derived from fictional propositions, which in turn have real-life correlates. “Although, indeed, we do not react to the killing of Desdemona as we would to a killing before our eyes, we do react much as we would to the thought of a real killing” (ibid, 302). His solution has parallels with a proposal of Radford’s, in which one’s emotional response occurs through the imagining of an analogous real-life scenario. However, Lamarque’s account is disappointing because it denies that we can be upset at *that particular* (albeit fictional) killing – that we can actually be moved by fictional events, feel for fictional people or, by extension, morally evaluate fictional situations. For Lamarque, the object of our emotions during our engagement with a fiction is always actually *other-directed* and distinct from the object at hand.

Emphasising the inexistence of fictional subjects is unhelpful in solving the “paradox” of emotion. R. M. J. Damman takes a different approach by suggesting that the truth of our emotional responses is not so much in the narrative itself as it is in the telling. One is not moved by fictional situations *per se*, “but by the way these events are *related*, that is related to the whole of which they are a part (stories do not state, they relate)... It is not the *truth* of the story which moves me, but by the way I tell it to myself, or the way it is told to me” (Damman 1992, 18 and 20). For Damman, the equal parts sympathy and disgust one might feel for the lonely, middle aged killer, Hilditch (Bob Hoskins) in *Felicia’s Journey* (Atom Egoyan, 1999) would be inseparable from one’s interest in the filmmakers’ skilful storytelling. One is not so much horrified by

Hilditch's treatment of the girls he "befriends," nor does one feel pity for him directly in his last suicidal act of contrition, but rather, our moral and emotional engagement is directed toward the *means* by which these events are represented. We recognise the similarities here between Damman's account and Bordwell's problematic idea of "melodramatic identification" invoked in Chapter 3, as well as Black's erroneous "aesthetic response" theory in Chapter 4. In all three cases, our response is determined by the film's recounting of the situation itself, rather than by an individual character. The problem with Damman's account also remains the same as our problem with Lamarque's account: *why can't we respond morally to the fictional subjects in question?* Can we not be moved or appalled by the individuals themselves? For it seems to be the case that our sympathetic, empathetic, and moral faculties *do* override our cognitive belief judgements – that we do say to ourselves "I know this a fiction, but *even so...*"

Frank Palmer forwards a third (and more useful) solution that critiques this "belief fallacy" – the proposal that we are not really morally engaging in a work as we do not believe that the represented events are actually occurring. He circumvents the problem of characters' existence by positing that there are two modes of discourse we use to discuss fiction: modes that rely on *internal* and *external conventions*. In the former, characters are said to exist *within* a fictional world, while in the latter, they belong to an aesthetic construct of which they are components, and thus do not exist in the proper sense of the word (Palmer 1992, 20-21). Thus, we may speak of a Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) who *literally* menaces McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) and his fellow inmates in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (Milos Forman, 1975), and also a Nurse Ratched who *figuratively* stands as the drama's structural principal of repression.

The "problem" of emotional or moral engagement only arises when critics mix these two discursive modes. A theorist who relies too heavily on structuralist accounts of character would consider the moral appraisal of a character as the lunacy of liberal humanism. Barthes is one such a theorist, and while his approach to character has been of great import to my study so far, his allegiance to structuralist principles is often too one-sided. For Barthes, free choice is illusory in narratives; actions are dictated by the continuation of the narrative itself. The survival of the narrative thus necessitates the "*overdetermination*" of character: personal attributes are both conditions of "personality" and insurance for the perpetuation of story. In Barthes' terms, overdetermination "appears to refer to a freedom of the character and of the story, since

the action falls within a psychology of the person; and at the same time it masks by superposition the implacable constraint of the discourse" (Barthes 1974, 135). As I established in Chapter 1, villainous behaviour is often necessary for the perpetuation of the kinds of narrative on which it is reliant. Michael Weston mounts a similar aesthetic objection to moralism in his claim that characters are not agents. "We are not engaged with characters in our capacity as moral agents: we do not blame or praise characters for their actions, for there is no sense in which they can be said to be responsible for them" (Radford and Weston 1975, 92). To borrow another metaphor from Barthes, villains merely serve as the accomplice of the narrative discourse (Barthes 1974, 178).

However, according to the conditions of the "internal convention," characters *are* moral agents, and our moral approval or condemnation of their actions is made according to this convention, bringing our evaluation "within" the text (Palmer 1992, 89). Characters are thus "internally" conceived here as "authors" of their actions and "in this sense, they do not obey a plot. From the internal convention there is no plot, but only the contingencies of various outcomes from the interactions of persons in their entanglements with good and evil, better and worse possibilities of human existence" (ibid, 121). When Kathie Moffett (Jane Greer) – *Out of the Past*'s (Jacques Tourneur, 1947) treacherous *femme fatale* – embarks upon a path of multiple betrayals and homicides, she is not merely the structural means by which the narrative's dramatic conflicts arise; she is a "possible person" who "exists" within a fictional reality and is thus subject to the moral laws that govern that reality. Therefore, her actions may be evaluated as reprehensible as they bring harm to individuals within that same fictional world. In this sense, we can see the parallels between a text's internal and external conventions and James Phelan's distinction between mimetic and thematic components of character discussed in Chapter 1: both theorists are attempting to reconcile structuralist and humanist conceptions of character. As I have been arguing throughout my study, villains are both elements of a work with particular narrative functions as well as "possible persons" whose actions we may morally evaluate.

Furthermore, the internal convention is typically contingent on analogous real-world evaluative practices. As Martin Price indicates, "if character is an invention, its artistic effect depends on its reference – however abstract and formalized, celebrative or derisive – to persons as we know them in the world outside" (Price 1983, 62). Referring again to my comments in the first chapter, the evaluation of characters is a practice

requiring a viewer to treat these textual elements as *possible persons*: “in the text characters are nodes in the verbal design; in the story they are – by definition – non (or pre-) verbal abstractions, constructs. Although these constructs are by no means human beings in the literal sense of the word, they are partly modelled on the reader’s conception of people and in this they are person-like” (Rimmon-Kenan 1983, 33). In this sense, “to admit a notion of character at all is to acknowledge an element of narrative texts which is analogous to the human agent, and *it is thus in the positing of a notion of character that a mimetic relationship is assumed to obtain between fictional narratives and the world*” (Smith 1995, 34). This “mimetic relationship” underpins and sanctions the viewer’s approval/disapproval of a character’s actions. In *On the Waterfront* (Elia Kazan, 1954), for example, a viewer may recognize and denounce the actions of corrupt union boss, Johnny Friendly (Lee J. Cobb) as unacceptably ruthless according to the same principles as she would in an analogous real-life scenario.

Because moral evaluations are not conditional on belief, but are instead licensed by the internal conventions of the narrative that are usually analogous to our real-world moral experience, a viewer will respond morally to cinematic characters even though such characters do not, properly speaking, “exist.” In fact, our empathetic capacity may even be increased by a temporary disregard for the propriety or social niceties that police our statements of moral disapproval. In the previous chapter, I indicated that since there are no real-life ramifications of condemning or negatively assessing the behaviour of a fictional individual, we are free to evaluate characters with impunity. By equal measure, however, fiction also provides us with the opportunity for empathizing with an individual whose real-life analogue we might feel pressured to condemn. The entire premise of a film such as *Dead Man Walking* (Tim Robbins, 1995) is structured around the attempt to promote sympathy for Matthew Poncelet (Sean Penn), a convicted rapist and murderer who is subjected to unbearable psychological distress while on Death Row. While in reality we might feel pressured to condemn summarily an individual like Poncelet, the film requires the viewer to hold such nakedly retributive feelings in check in the service of a larger moral argument: that state-endorsed executions qualify as a form of cruel and unusual punishment and do not serve justice in any constructive way. Thus, a work of fiction may provide the valuable service of allowing an audience to extend their empathy toward individuals with whom they might be dissuaded from empathizing in a similar, real-life situation.

So, supported by the analogous value system a viewer holds in the real world, the distinction between internal and external conventions largely solves the belief problem. This solution, however, is not applicable to the second problem, which asks us to consider the mutability of our moral allegiances. To some extent this problem is slightly more worrisome. Although there seems to be a mimetic relationship between fictional and real worlds, it is difficult to imagine that our moral responses to fiction are completely identical to those we exhibit daily. To put the problem more plainly, it is apparent that *within every viewing process, there will be a "pull" of sorts between a mimetic consideration of characters and the requirements that the text places on us as mock viewers*. The narrative discourse, then, may ask us at times to ally ourselves with characters who we would normally condemn, even though it also seeks a more general allegiance with the morally-upright hero. Such conflicting allegiances seem to lead to moral contradiction, hence Radford's charges of "incoherency" in our emotional responses to fictional situations. Because moral allegiance is mobile – even moving between characters who occupy moral polar opposites – I am led to believe that there must be an extent to which our moral responses are "put on," or *fictional*.

There are precedents for such an argument. For example, one can refer to Kendall Walton's claim that in engaging with fiction, one, in a way, becomes fictional oneself. "Rather than somehow promoting fictions to the level of reality, we, as appreciators, descend to the level of fiction" (Walton 1978b, 21). Such an idea is taken up later by Currie, who believes that we do not simply receive an account of a fictional character's exploits, but rather, we imagine ourselves as fictional characters who are receiving a *factual* account of such situations (Currie 1997, 68-69). Could our moral engagement with characters occur at a fictional level?

Frequently, in order for the film's narrative to be enjoyable – if we do not wish to fight the attitudinal slant of its narrational discourse – we must align our own moral sensibilities with the moral schematic dictated by the film. These sensibilities and schematics will change from film to film and genre to genre. Correspondingly, Walton argues that the emotions we feel for characters are not like real-life emotions, but are instead *simulated*, in a game-like contract with the work in question. One "agrees" to have a particular "quasi"-emotional response when encountering a particular work, and the nature of our response is largely determined by the kind of work with which we are engaging, and the expectations we bring to the work (Walton 1978, 22-25). Similarly,

Bijoy Boruah considers the sentiment of the cinema to traffic in “second-order” emotions. In responding emotionally to a fictional event, we are experiencing “emotions without actions” (Boruah 1988, 106). As with Walton’s account of Charles and the Green Slime, there is no follow-up “action strategy” to a fictional emotion (ibid, 106). We do not flee the Green Slime, rescue the heroine from the oncoming train, or comfort the bereaved tragic hero (Walton 1978, 5-27). We are not moved to *do* anything, except *emote*. Likewise, then, if we were truly outraged by the villain’s actions, we would – like the yokel who leaps onto the stage and disrupts the performance – want to do something more than simply remain in our seats and helplessly observe his transgressions.¹

Our moral responses to fictions *are of a different degree and intensity* than they would be to analogous situations in real life. Not only do these responses often fail to move us to subsequent action, but they are also intermingled with an aesthetic appreciation for the means by which they are prompted by the drama. One does not grieve for a character as one would even for an acquaintance, “because [our reaction] is something *more than feeling*, just as it is something more than feeling to perceive, and therefore be in some measure affected by, the monstrous cruelty of [a villain]” (Palmer 1992, 86, italics mine). Responding to villainy with “something more than feeling” is the uniqueness of our moral engagement with fiction. Although the co-text of real-world principles is largely what informs our moral responses, we must also adhere to the principles and demands established by the fiction itself if we are to become the mock viewers that the film asks us to be. And again, as a mock viewer one may occasionally have to temporarily assume a virtual identity whose values are at dramatic variance with those values we hold on an everyday basis.

A solution to the dilemma of mobile allegiance, therefore, presents itself by discussing moral engagement within inverted commas. Our moral response becomes another imaginative agreement, a game we play with a fiction, something that is *mentally performed*. Currie suggests, “just as we react to fictions in ways that seem to depend on beliefs we do not really have...so we react to fictions in ways that seem to

¹ At the same time, however, I believe that it *is* possible for one’s moral response to a fiction to have a corresponding “action strategy.” The final chapter of my study will centre on these strategies.

depend on desires we do not have" (Currie 2001, 261). This imaginative playacting is a form of *simulation*: "to imagine is to simulate having beliefs, attitudes, emotions, etc, other than those one really possesses, running our normal sensory inputs and processes 'off-line,' disconnected from their normal sensory inputs and behavioural outputs" (Smith 1997, 413). Taking pleasure in villainy is to run one's "normal" moral judgements "off-line" in much the same way as one "adopts" an alien persona during the viewing process. Thus, the immoral desires that allegiance with a villain awakes are not actual, but are simulated for the duration of the fiction. Such a simulated morality is a kind of disinterestedness in a work, allowing one the freedom to condemn or condone immorality with impunity. "[I]n our engagement with a work of art we are left free to contemplate objects and occurrences and explore their meanings and significances, as represented, to a degree and in a manner neither possible nor appropriate (nor in some cases morally justifiable) were the objects or occurrences actual" (Palmer 1992, 53). Simulation's freedom of contemplation allows us to react to various art-effects without being troubled by the inhibitions of personal scruples or social rules.

In this spirit, Martin Price describes the game-like aspects of certain narratives, particularly the detective story in which "we do not really regard murders as murders: for we are interested in the problems that the convention of a murder creates" (Price 1983, 4). Moral transgressions committed by characters are, in this light, not as important as the chain of narrative events they set off. Borrowing from Hitchcock, we may construe ethics in the mystery film as a kind of "McGuffin" – a trifle whose importance pales next to that of the great to-do its violation causes. In *The Big Sleep* (Howard Hawks, 1946), Phillip Marlowe (Humphrey Bogart) matches wits with an unknown adversary in his search for the missing Sean Regan. The dead bodies that begin to surface along the way are not so troubling as murdered victims as they are as ciphers – breadcrumbs that eventually point the way towards a nightclub owner (John Ridgely) with some guilty secrets. We might compare Howard Hawks' preoccupation with fun and games with Robert Altman's equally revisionist take on the Marlowe character. In his adaptation of *The Long Goodbye* (Robert Altman, 1973), Marlowe's moral apathy masks a bitter misanthropy, which reveals itself in his execution of an old friend who turns out to be a murderer. While Altman indicts what he takes to be Marlowe's cynical judgementalism, Hawks emphasises the character's playful sexiness and the wolfish exuberance he takes in the hunt instead.

Consider also certain models of black humour brought on by the villain's lapse into pure convention, especially in the slasher film (a genre particularly adroit at generic manipulations). "The absurdity informing the conflict between monster and potential victim is effectively meaningless, and, operating purely on the terms, conditions, and outcomes of the 'chase,' has no terms of reference elsewhere. Its own conventions become the terms of engagement..." (Wells 2000, 97). A film such as *Scream* (Wes Craven, 1996), for example, grants its audience "license" to enjoy the extinguishing of victim's life because these are not "real" deaths. Rather, according to the unique internal convention of the genre, they often represent a *silencing* of a character constructed as abrasive, a nuisance, or deficient in some way to the respective narrative's conventions. Such pseudo-deaths have parallels with the many dead/not-dead characters populating fairytales, in which death is often merely a transitory state and "does not necessarily signify the end of life...Death is rather a symbol that this person is wished away" (Bettelheim 1976, 196). Only in art can the shock of murder be sublimated into the pleasures of generic conventionality, with the artist playing fast-and-loose with morality for aesthetic effect. The manipulation of familiar moral dictums within fictions is absolutely necessary; otherwise, entire genres (like the slasher film) become illegible. Under Palmer's scheme, then, a genre's conventions are structural elements that are included within a film's broader "external conventions."

And yet, our concept of moral simulation seems to be moving dangerously close to the kind of radical aestheticism invoked earlier by Joel Black. Even Wayne C. Booth claims that fiction seems to eject the viewer from the quotidian moral sphere. "Since we are not in a position to profit or be harmed by a fictional character," he observes, "our judgement is disinterested, even in a sense *irresponsible*" (Booth 1983, 130, italics mine). Loath as he would be to recognise it, Booth's brief, inadvertent admission shares affinities with Georges Bataille's anti-ethics. Bataille adopts the radical view that literature should not take upon itself the burden of collective moral instruction: "it should not conclude that 'what I have said commits us to a fundamental respect for the laws of the city' or, like Christianity, that 'what I have said (the tragedy of the Gospel) shows us the path of Good (which is really the path of reason).' Literature, like the infringement of moral laws, is dangerous" (Bataille 1972, 12). Is deriving pleasure from the villain equivalent to disregarding an intersubjective moral rationality? Can fiction, in some ways, be fundamentally reckless, morally speaking?

If we are to give credence to the simulation model, it would (at first) appear that popular films (like fairytales) may be a spurious form of moral education, or rather, they are not moral in the way Charles Perrault would have wished them to be. The punitive measures imposed on villainous characters are rarely persuasive behavioural inhibitions; “it is not even the fact that virtue wins out in the end which promotes morality, but that the hero is most attractive to the child, who identifies with the hero in all his struggles” (Bettelheim 1976, 9). We recall from Chapter 3 that it is this “attraction” – not necessarily predicated on the character’s virtues – that is at the heart of allegiance. “The question for the child is not ‘Do I want to be good?’ but ‘Whom do I want to be like?’” (ibid, 10). Indeed, as Smith points out, “our sympathies are determined...not simply by external factors – that is, by our real world attitudes...but by the internal ‘system of values’ of the text, in which such real-world attitudes are organized by the on-going placement of characters into *positions of relative desirability*” (Smith 1995, 194, italics mine). In this regard, simulating the values of a villain is the end result of asking oneself, “Whom do I want to be like?” rather than, “Do I want to be good?”

Consider the dual and contradictory allegiance at work in *Die Hard* (John McTiernan, 1988), in which the schemes of the nefarious Hans Gruber (Alan Rickman) are just as pleasurable for the viewer as John McLean’s (Bruce Willis) efforts to thwart them. I would argue that in action films such as these, *success* is the measure of these characters’ attractiveness – that one’s figure of identification offers a desirable model of achievement. Like fairytale protagonists, the heroes of goal-oriented films often succeed in their endeavours through means as morally suspect as the villains they encounter. Thus, “morality is not the issue in these tales, but rather, assurance that one can succeed” (Bettelheim 1976, 10). Or, to put it more mildly, morality still plays a part in narratives such as these, but it is relegated to a limited, background role while other, non-moral values take precedence in determining a character’s “attractiveness.” Allegiance in *Die Hard*, for example, can be allotted to the protagonist whose ambitions are on the verge of being realised, rather than forming an attachment to a protagonist along moralistic grounds. In this regard, admiring Hans’ well-conceived plan to storm the high-rise is akin to being a bandwagoning sports fan who favours whichever team leads the league. Such allegiance is always provisional, and the moment McLean seizes the reins of power signals a change in supportive allegiance. Within the hackneyed conventions of the classical action/adventure narrative, we know that the villain must

ultimately be defeated, and therefore, the perverse glee we may take in his small, brief victories over the hero are sanctioned because they are not decisive. We may “throw our lot in” with Hans in a playful fashion because his “successes” – while potentially impressive – are fleeting and will not amount to his ultimate triumph.

It is, therefore, important to recognise that moral imagination in fiction is not the literal equivalent of moral commitment in ordinary existence. One does not simply transpose one’s adopted “fictional” morals to real life. For example, Walton argues that it is not possible to imagine a fictional proposition one knows to be morally abhorrent to be *factually true*. That is, one could, for example, imagine that genocide is a morally acceptable practice in a certain fictional culture, but one does not believe that its acceptability is true – one does not *agree* with such a principle. Walton believes that there are limitations on what it is possible to imagine: “But can I imagine not only accepting or believing a moral principle which I actually disagree with and feeling appropriately – can I imagine being *justified* in accepting or believing it? Can I imagine its being *true*” (Walton 1994, 49)? One might approve of Hans’ resourcefulness in forcing John to walk barefoot across a floor of broken glass, insofar as one recognises the necessity of his ruthlessness. At the same time, because morality still plays a nominal role in the action film, the viewer does not imagine that she *actually* believes Han’s villainous measures to be morally justified, or that it is true even within the fictional world of *Die Hard* that such measures are acceptable.²

In sum, the mobility of allegiance necessary to most forms of popular cinema featuring a villain necessitates the simulation of moral responses for the duration of the film. By temporarily adjusting our real-world values to the demands of the fiction in question, we are able to respond pleasurably to situations we might otherwise deplore in actuality. Allegiances are often formed along the lines of a character’s attractiveness,

² At the same time, I think one *can* imagine a morally surreal fictional world in which conventionally moral dictums do not apply. Mary Mothersill’s attenuation of Walton’s claim is that one *should not* imagine a surreal moral proposition to be true, and that if one *cannot* do so, it is only because one has failed to take up the work’s position (Mothersill 2004, 91-94). *Pink Flamingos* (John Waters, 1972), for example, revolves around a competition between characters who are contending for the title of “Filthiest Person Alive.” While we might not believe this award to be worthy of esteem, we may still imagine what it might be like to adhere to such perverse principles – to believe that willing oneself to eat of dog faeces, for example, is a laudable and enviable act.

desirability, and situational status within the narrative, rather than being simply dependent on said character's moral values. Imagining sharing the values of an immoral character is not the equivalent of imagining being justified in holding their particular worldview; it is rather a form of pretend-play in which one is permitted to act out in the imagination whilst still recognising the unconscionable nature of the actions performed by the character with whom one is allied. Support for the villain entails a measure of *imaginative performance* on the viewer's part, and so, it is to the mechanics of such simulation that I will now turn my attention.

Hollywood's Götzendämmerung: Performance and Melodramatic Villainy

There is a particular variety of villainy that demands a substantial degree of imaginative performance from a viewer: this is the villain of the melodramatic tradition. Any melodramatic villain worth the upturn of his moustache will be adept in the art of trickery, disguise, and deception. In other words, he will be an actor. Indeed, in Victorian stage melodrama, the villain's frequent willingness to perform sets him apart from the virtuous characters, who avidly shun deceptive behaviour. By extension, a great part of the villain's entertainment value seems to lie in their ability to "trick" us out of our usual or learned moral responses to immoral situations. Our fascination with these villains is often located in our relation to them *as performers* and in their aptitude for coaxing performances from us as well. To that end, I would like to examine one of the ways in which villainy might be performed in film in the interests of conceptualizing villainy *as* a kind of performance. Specifically, I will consider how immorality might be performed by an actor – as offering sets of various signs that are interpreted and *pleasurably* reconstructed as villainous by a viewer. With reference to Gloria Swanson's reflexive performance in *Sunset Boulevard* as washed up film star, Norma Desmond, I will argue that the reception and re-activation of these signs entails a subsequent imaginative performance on the viewer's part in which a viewer may become the *appreciative* recipient of a villainous "transmission."

As the authors of the Production Code worried,

the enthusiasm for and interest in...*actors and actresses*, developed beyond anything of the sort in history, makes the audience sympathetic toward the characters they portray and the stories in which they figure. Hence they are more ready to confuse the actor and the character, and they are most receptive of the emotions and ideals portrayed and presented by their favourite stars (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 350).

Hollywood's moral reformists despaired of the stars – that their trails of glory blanketed all good, common moral sense. Journalist Eileen Percy's complaint concerning the charisma of the gangster in 1931 (played by electric heavies such as Cagney, Edward G. Robinson, and Paul Muni) is a typical example: "Our gunmen are presented to us in such a manner that we find ourselves pulling for them in spite of ourselves, due to the subtle persuasions of the drama" (qtd. in Maltby 2001, 131). Percy's fears that these "subtle persuasions" make unwilling monsters of men are not limited to the 1930's; Klapp writes in 1962 that "to cast a popular favourite as a criminal might be itself almost a crime against the public" (Klapp 1962, 156), and even as recently as 1993, prominent film reviewer Michael Medved decries violence's "attractiveness" in his book, *Hollywood vs. America*.

Historically, the villain is a close relative of the actor. Performers have long been marked as inherently deceitful and immoral individuals: Plato declared that the actor's penchant for falsification prohibited his entrance to his Republic; in France, actors were excommunicated from the Church from the Middle Ages until the early eighteenth century; and Puritan reformists sought the closure of theatres and the public censure of performers in Elizabethan England. A great deal of this suspicion of actors has to do with the way they seem to pull us out of our own learned moral responses. Or, at the very least, they are a source of anxiety because they seem to invite us to treat these responses as mere "dramatics." We are often required to abandon our usual moral prohibitions outside the theatre and assume the role of accomplices, or at the very least, appreciative spectators of the villain's immoral art. I have pointed out that our moral responses to fictions are of a different degree and intensity to their real-world analogues. By extension, these responses are not always "like" those we utilise in the real world; occasionally, they are characterised by a conspicuous degree of *theatricality*. In fact, "performing" a moral position allows for 1) the mobility of allegiance, 2) the reduction of inappropriate reactive states ("mock" rather than actual outrage) and thus, 3) pleasure in the villain free of perversity's stigma. Typically, it is the melodramatic tradition of villainy that encourages an appropriately theatrical moral response from viewers.

The melodramatic realisation of a villainous role is a theatrical style that *externalises* immorality, rendering it recognisable, knowable, and essentially tolerable for audiences. Recall Peter Brooks' argument in the Introduction: melodrama is not so much concerned with the hero winning the day and the heroine proving her innocence,

but that the forces of good and evil remain recognizable and easily discernible (Brooks 1984, 42). In the interest of “moral legibility,” melodrama provides us with a series of performance cues through which the moral universe of the narrative is articulated. Richard Dyer concisely defines melodramatic performance as “the use of gestures principally in terms of their intense and immediate expressive, affective signification,” and points out that these cues are not merely emotional articulations, but more importantly, are interpreted as “moral categories” (Dyer 1998, 137). Thus, the stage villain employs a stock series of gestures and postures to clearly indicate a moral identity – physiognomic signals which cue our evaluation of their behaviour. Such codified signs survive throughout early silent cinema, especially in the silent actor’s reliance on pantomimic gesticulations. Indeed, it is the very muteness of early cinema that makes it so conducive to melodrama’s expressive articulation of unambiguous moral categories. In *Sunset Boulevard*, Norma Desmond expresses her contempt for the talkies, which she believes has destroyed this unique form of pantomimic expressivity of which she is a master. “We didn’t need words,” she declares, “We had *faces*.”

Interestingly, these standard melodramatic signals have outlived the dramatic style that prompted them. The villain can still be identified through gestural signification even though technological developments have prompted less “mannered” acting styles and have altered the melodramatic narrative structure to which these styles are essential. Contemporary realists such as David Mamet have articulated their contempt for the residual signs of melodrama in their prohibitions on mugging and the excesses of “characterization.” In his advice to actors, Mamet claims that attempts to physically manifest a particular moral identity are pointless as “the work of the characterization has or has not been done by the author... You don’t have to portray the hero or the villain. That’s been done for you by the script” (Mamet 1998, 114). In this light, Richard Widmark’s performance as the giggling, psychopathic Tommy Udo in *Kiss of Death* (Henry Hathaway, 1947) would be an example of a “dishonest,” or “untruthful” performance because it “overstates” the character’s villainy, which is already evident in his actions (such as pushing an old woman bound to her wheelchair down a flight of stairs). Norma, however, remains devoted to melodramatic indicators of character, thus making the process of nominating her as a villain relatively simple. She is almost always feral, even when indolent: her eyes blaze beneath raised, pencilled eyebrows; her hands arch like talons and have a tendency to flutter into the air when she

makes proclamations; her head often arches back majestically; nearly every line is delivered through bared teeth. In essence, Norma is a melodramatic grotesque.

The moral purpose of these physical cues, then, is to assist in a viewer's nomination of a character. Simply put, to be a villain is largely to look and act like one – what Michael Booth describes as an “instant character” (Booth 1965, 14–15). And I would argue that part of the pleasure we derive from engaging with these characters can be located in the moral clarity and certainty they provide. They allow us to put a face on evil. Transgressors in the real world could simply look like anyone at all. Michael Rooker's largely inexpressive psychopath in *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer* (John McNaughton, 1986) – a film disconcertingly free of attitudinal cues – is a notable example. Because of his “ordinariness” and lack of overt physiognomic signals of deviancy, Henry is a much more inscrutable (and thus disturbingly “realistic”) character.

Swanson's performance, then, is geared toward coaxing a more or less straightforward nomination of her as the film's villain. At the same time, though, this performance style functions in a highly complex way. I have chosen *Sunset Boulevard* for a case study here rather than a more straightforward melodrama because of what I take to be the richness of the film's attitudes toward and use of melodrama. Specifically, the film invites us to morally evaluate both Norma's actions *and* her means of expressing these actions – it prompts an evaluation of melodramatic behaviour itself. Within the diegetic realm, Norma's villainy lies in her commitment to performance above rationality, and in being thus committed, she places her desires above moral duties.

Norma *dramatises* each moment, turning everyday interactions into scenes in which she executes a star turn. Because she flits incessantly from role to role (from *belle dame sans merci*, to bored decadent, to scorned lover), she seems to lack a grounding sense of self. A husk without a centre, her emotions are merely grandiose, empty signs played out in an inhuman, Delsartian fashion. She cannot help but act out (that is, perform) her emotions, even when alone – as when she swoons onto a bedpost and recites a jealous, tortured soliloquy (“Why can't I ask you, Joe? *Why?*”). Each gesture is played out as if to an adoring audience from her heyday when she would have enjoyed the status of silent deity. Even the earthly incarnation of this deity becomes enraptured by its own glory. Consider Norma's urgent pursuit of Joe Gillis (William Holden) – her kept boy and the film's narrator – down a hallway in order to prevent him

from leaving, which is cut short when Norma becomes transfixed by her reflection in a mirror. She executes a brief series of poses in the glass before she storms his bedroom to play out one final scene. Such unnatural devotion to emotional affectation necessitates an equally unnatural system of personal morality: star ethics, if you will. "No one ever leaves a star," she hisses at one point, as her self-aggrandisement turns monomaniacal. In fact, she will eventually murder Joe because he exits the scene prematurely and for his blasphemous loss of faith in casting aside an idol.³

So, performance may be considered as the *textual* shaping of a viewer's *inwardly directed* moral response. Norma's behavioural cues prompt a concomitant evaluation of her character that adhere to the film's internal conventions. And yet, performance may also be considered as a textual element whose moral valence can be morally *outwardly directed* at an object that lies beyond the text. Although we are invited to evaluate Norma's performances in negative terms, the film is not as attitudinally straightforward regarding these performances as it seems. For a viewer may also regard Norma as a *victim*, recognising that it is not only her age, but her commitment to an archaic mode of performance that keeps her from re-entering the Kingdom of Hollywood. The extrinsic object of *Sunset Boulevard's* moral critique, then, is the film industry itself.

The film brilliantly employs Swanson's performance style as an element in its critique of an industrial art that is without a sense of reverence for its past. While Chatman believes that casting an "all too visible player" as a familiar character "seems unduly to circumscribe the character despite the brilliance of the performance," it is on Gloria Swanson's extreme visibility that the film is dependent (Chatman 1978, 119). Norma's performative excessiveness is a self-imposed critical response to a Hollywood that has lost its sense of grandeur: "I *am* big," she declares. "It's the pictures that got

³ Significantly, the scene of Norma's ultimate transgression is dramatically flat. Dimly lit and framed in long shot, Norma shoots Joe from the doorway, "weakly" positioned in the upper right corner of the frame. Joe barely lurches backward, and continues walking towards the left side of the screen until he is shot again from out of frame. This time, he crumples slightly, drops his bag and turns, only to be shot once more and thrown back into the swimming pool. The scene's lack of stagy qualities seems to be a refusal to provide a "theatrical" murder. This refusal (aesthetically) cheats Norma out of dramatically constructing a death scene, and thus, is a means of distancing us from the character.

small.” Correspondingly, the film employs Swanson’s faded star image to superbly ironic effect, melding biography with fiction to critique the fickle institution of Hollywood – a machine that systematically churns out stars, only eventually to discard them.⁴ Consider another moment of self-adulation, in which Norma pays homage to her own image by gazing spellbound at her on-screen incarnation, which blazes with youthful light from the darkness of her parlour-cum-cinema. The film she forces Joe to watch with her features a sequence taken from *Queen Kelly* – a shelved vehicle for Swanson from the late twenties (partially directed by Erich von Stroheim, no less) – and her silent radiance stands out in sharp contrast to the decay of her present condition.⁵ Swanson and the performance style she embodies are unwanted relics of a discarded era.

To that end, we can see how Norma’s performance is ethically motivated – that it is a reaction to the values of the modern cinema as embodied by Joe. Compare Swanson’s hyper-presence with that of William Holden’s, which is characterised by a kind of transparency and disappears within her shadow. Popular and critical acclaim for Holden had ebbed since his breakthrough role in *Golden Boy* (Rouben Mamoulian, 1939), and although he had appeared in leading roles in more than twenty films since then, his star had not yet assumed a fixed place within the Hollywood firmament. Moreover, his features are fairly indistinct (consider the faces of his contemporaries: Brando’s Romanesque profile, Mitchum’s reptilian slow-burn, Douglas’ heroic chin), especially compared to the heavily made-up Swanson.

Even his performance style is eclipsed – his cynical sensibilities are overwhelmed – by Norma’s theatre. Her predilection for melodrama actually bleeds into the scenes between Joe and his potential amour, Betty Schaefer (Nancy Olsen). Consider the “love scene” they play out with mock seriousness in the Rainbow Room at Artie’s (Jack Webb) New Year party, as well as the final dissolution of their relationship into theatrics: “I can’t even look at you, Joe,” Betty sobs as she shields her eyes; “Then try looking for the exit,” he replies, leading her towards the door. Joe is both

⁴ From 1918 to the early 1930’s, Swanson was one of Paramount’s major stars, but by 1950, she had not acted in a studio film for almost twenty years.

⁵ Interestingly, the silent film’s intertitle reads, “Cast out this wicked dream which has seized my heart”: a plea from a young Norma that goes unheeded by her older, embittered self.

figuratively and literally a ghost – dead before the film even begins – and as if to make up for his lack of presence, his *narration* is nearly incessant, filling the film with “talk, talk, *talk!*” Such a “stranglehold of words” justifies Norma’s complaint about the modern cinema for which Joe (as a screenwriter) is a synecdoche. He continually disparages his art, and his lack of devotion marks him as a nowhere man, as dollar-driven as the studios for which he hopelessly labours. His “flat and trite” dreams cannot match the grandeur of his mistress’ schemes for reclaimed glory, and he ends up as just another “nobody” screenwriter, facedown in a swimming pool. For her part, Norma – like her off-screen alter ego – is ground up in the machinery of a greater dream factory. Unsurprisingly, Norma Desmond was also Swanson’s final major Hollywood role.

So, performance is an element that can be used to evaluate a subject within the text, but can also be morally directed toward outwardly towards an external object. Swanson’s performance in *Sunset Boulevard* has a conspicuous moral valence, and the film couples this performance style with Swanson’s highly visible star image as a means of ethically critiquing the capriciousness of contemporary idolaters.

There is a third dimension to the villain’s melodramatic performance, however, which can be discussed in terms of the *pleasure* it evokes due to its sheer, excessive theatricality. In spite of both the internal and external ethics of the melodramatic villain’s performance, I believe that her theatrical nature tends to circumvent the genuineness of moral engagement. In fact, *the pleasure one takes in a villain’s melodramatic performance tends to override the moral reservations we might have vis a vis her actions and our willingness to condemn them accordingly*. It is not simply that Swanson’s high visibility as a former star disrupts an authentic moral engagement with the film. As Murray Smith claims, “when a star plays a role, our awareness of the fictional status of the character she plays may be heightened, and this may license our imaginative play with morally undesirable acts to an even greater extent” (Smith 1999, 227). Such may be the case, but I want to argue that it is the performance style itself that promotes this “imaginative play.”

That is to say, Norma invites both Joe and viewers to respond to her as a *performer* rather than as a subject. In this regard, Joe’s murder is just another scene in Norma’s self-constructed tragedy: she is an actor, rather than a killer. Moreover, for me, her incessant performativity represents a barrier to the formulation of genuine sympathy: she would be a piteous creature and the film could be a sympathetic study of

an aging, discarded celebrity, were it not for its subject's inability to cease playing for some unseen camera. One might still try to argue that this compulsion toward performance is integral to the film's pathos – that Norma's retreat into delirium in the final sequence (in which she believes herself to be on a Paramount soundstage as she descends her staircase to meet the police who have come to arrest her) is quite pitiable. I would counter by arguing that while her compulsion to perform is neurotic, it is also in keeping with the conventions of the mode of theatrics that she favours. Because her villainy is explicitly linked to the melodramatic tradition, she *must* perform, and again, she privileges this proclivity towards performance above an adherence to the moral law. In doing so, she sacrifices the authenticity of sympathy available to her from both characters and audience, and instead demands a suitable performance from her viewers to match her continual histrionics.

So, while melodramatic performance can have both inwardly and outwardly directed moral valences, there is a third property attributable to the villain that tends to override these first two: this is her *aesthetic* dimension. The sheer theatricality of the villain's immorality can evoke a pleasurable response that is at odds with moral critique. This pleasure is located not only in our delight at the high camp of Swanson's acting, but also in her character's ability to turn every moment into a potential scene to be played. More importantly, the ubiquity of Norma's performance demands that we become an audience that recognises and approves of the dramatic potential of her actions. Playing along with Norma's fantasy means that we *admire* rather than critique. We appreciate the murder she commits as a scenario that is well played by a brilliant performer, rather than think of it as a vindictive action committed by an emotionally unstable woman. Our conscious admiration for Swanson's performance represents one level of engagement, but our attendance to *Norma's* theatricality represents another level entirely – one that requires the simulation of a particular moral identity.

The melodramatic villain has a long history of playing to the audience. In the allegorical tradition of the mystery cycles, we remember that the Vice is, above all else, a *performer* – one who is conscious of his own performance and continually seeks out the audience's approval. Melodrama is a continuation of homiletic drama's construction of the villain as *bête noire* but also as *prima donna*: a creature of soliloquy and knowing asides, who seeks out the complicity of the footlights as often as she does the glory of the spotlight. Villainy always seeks to declare itself in melodrama not simply to make

moral categories clear, but also to establish a *collusive intimacy* with the audience. Sympathetic allegiance is the hero's domain; the villain would rather put on a show.

It is of paramount importance to recognise here that the melodramatic villain performs her schemes *for us* as much as herself. Because of her close proximity – her apparent yearning for our endorsement, her implicit desire to *entertain* – the villain becomes a source of pleasure for us. The emotional baggage that accompanies her rival, the hero, does not hamper our engagement with the villain – we do not have to *care* about her welfare. Indeed, “it is hard to feel anything for characters who are on such easy terms with us because they do not seem to be undergoing anything but a play” (States 1995, 30). In *Sunset Boulevard*, a faded starlet's dreams of returning to the screen turn murderous, but these yearnings are always played out as if on a soundstage.

If the melodramatic villain is to act as a source of pleasure, rather than as a morally distressing figure, then we must re-evaluate the performative signs of her villainy. I have indicated how the expressive and affective gestures of a performer are the articulations of moral categories, but it is the *apprehension* of these signs that affords a viewer a kind of pleasure as well. As I indicated earlier, part of the melodramatic villain's appeal is located in one's *recognition* of her villainous status as such. One of the reasons that melodrama continues to be an extremely popular dramatic form is due to the unambiguous nature of its actants. The pleasure a viewer may take in melodrama lies in the relative ease with which one can nominate the characters – an ease that is largely absent from a real-world context of moral confusion, contradictory values, and ambiguous actions. But at the same time, pleasure is also taken in the knowledge that this villainy is being performed *for our benefit*, and so, we must become mock viewers who are *appreciative* of this performance. The external signs of a character's villainy are therefore reappraised: they are no longer evaluated negatively as a codified immorality; instead, they are recognised as *invitations to share the energy of a dramatic scenario*. We can see how this invitation has some parallels with our “attraction” to Cody Jarrett's zeal for crime as discussed in Chapter 3: by entertaining us, the villain asks us to disengage from our moral grievances and imagine becoming a subject who appreciates her actions as a kind of fiendish art. As a measure of our thanks to the villain for her implicit desire to please, we sacrifice our inclination to condemn her outright and “perform” the role of enthusiastic accomplices.

To illustrate my position, I would like to provide an analysis of a shot in which

Norma fantasises about her return to the cinema, breaking down each of her movements into separate expressive signals. On the one hand, her movements encapsulate her obsessions and we are tempted to morally interpret her performance. On the other, her performance speaks to our role as mock viewers, and invites us to respond to her actions with aesthetically-oriented approval rather than morally-oriented disapproval. Norma's performative tendencies (especially those enacted when she is alone) are in many ways akin to the villain's acknowledgement of the camera as discussed in the previous chapter: both strategies deny our innocence as viewers. Their enacted villainy transforms us from moral critics to amoral enthusiasts.

Framed here in medium close-up to take advantage of her gestural expressivity, she begins by raging at Joe's suggestion that her pet project – a film about Salomé – is a “comeback” (**Figure 2.0**). Slamming her sunglasses onto a desk, she exclaims, “I *hate* that word,” through clenched teeth. Looking back up in defiance, she corrects him with



Figure 2.0

a grand proclamation: “It’s *return!*” Even within these two brief movements there is evidence of her twin defining attributes. The slamming down of the sunglasses is a gesture of *violence* – the aggressive denial of her diminished celebrity – while the snap of her head signifies a retreat back into *delusion*.



Figure 2.1

She qualifies her statement with magnificent egoism: “A return to the millions of people who have never forgiven me for deserting the screen.” Her eyes widen and her chin is driven forward, while her hands wave up around her face in what will be a familiar melodramatic gesture, and then extend outwards as she decrescendos (**Figure 2.1**). She plays the line to an invisible audience, gesturing “out there” (at us, of course), while her eyes fix on that precious negative space beyond her imagined footlights. Calming herself, she looks downward and begins to imagine her next performance.



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3

attempt at imagining being someone else and is put on merely for show; she can imagine being no one but herself. Her monstrous ego rips through the façade as she opens her eyes and looks downward and right (**Figure 2.3**). “What a *part*,” she rasps, and her wrists turn subtly while her fingers clench into talons in order to grasp hold of her phantom vehicle to celebrity.



Figure 2.4



Figure 2.5



Figure 2.6

“*Salomé*,” she breathes, “What a woman!”

Her eyes are closed in contemplation and *imagined* (not actual) respect (**Figure 2.2**). Both hands rise up as if to caress the woman in question and her head tilts back slightly, simulating ecstasy. But Norma’s art is really only to play perpetual variations on her favourite theme. This is a facile

She next makes the pretence of trying on the role. “A princess in love with a holy man,” she narrates, adopting an imperious and haughty posture (**Figure 2.4**). Her eyes close again, her chin is raised and her hands drop. But this royal pose contains an underlying derisiveness – the suggestion that the relationship is a mere trifle and is beneath the princess. Norma’s version of the Biblical story (which has more in common with Oscar Wilde’s play than Scripture) is interesting here. If we consider this version as an apt allegory for the relationship between herself and Joe, her attitude here takes on a troubling resonance and foreshadows disastrous tensions to come.

As “she dances the Dance of the Seven Veils,” her hands again butterfly up around her face and her eyes are excited by the performative possibilities (**Figure 2.5**). They become enraptured as she executes a brief, sultry twist. By impersonating the temptress, she is momentarily seduced by her own performance and the



Figure 2.7



Figure 2.8



Figure 2.9

compulsion to perform incessantly. But then, she enacts the outrage of the princess – eyes bulging and hands clutching towards her breast as “he rejects her...” (**Figure 2.6**). Her mimed incredulity at the Baptist’s gall will manifest itself again, as an equally murderous expression when Joe articulates his own rejection. The princess will avenge her outraged sensibilities and “...so, she demands his head on a golden tray.” Norma mimes the laying out of the saint’s head on a platter, and gazes down on it with triumphant satisfaction (**Figure 2.7**). No one ever leaves a star.

The final moment of horror arrives and Norma completes her narrational summary with Salomé “kissing his cold, dead lips.” She seizes the “head” and brings it towards her face, teeth bared as if to rend the flesh from the face and her eyes blaze one last time (**Figure 2.8**). But as this instant of violence reaches the completion of its arc (in which Salomé’s/Norma’s true savage nature emerges), her hands soften, her head arches back, and she closes her eyes in bliss (**Figure 2.9**).

Enacting revenge is sweet rapture and she becomes carried away by the delusion of triumph and a satisfying performance played to an adoring crowd. Although Joe shatters the illusion with one of his usual smarmy jibes (“They’ll love it in Pomona”), Norma is unruffled (“They’ll love it everywhere”). His lack of appreciation for the brief scene she has played is inconsequential, for he is not the intended recipient of her art; as always, Norma has been playing *to* us and *for* us.

By enacting their immortality in an intimately theatrical fashion, melodramatic villains interrupt and reroute the currents of our usual evaluative assessments of dramatic situations. While it is tempting to evaluate Norma’s performance in the sequence above at a moral level, its very nature *as* performance directed at a potentially appreciative spectator short-circuits the attempt. Just as the film’s moments of genuine

pathos are at odds with its grotesque elements (the dead monkey, the vermin-infested pool, the “wheezing” pipe organ), moral critique of the villain is at odds with the pleasures of performance. On the one hand, we might consider Norma repulsive in manner and her behaviour to be reprehensible by morally responding to the attitudinal cues of the text (Joe’s narration, the *mise-en-scène*, Swanson’s performance) and in adhering to the co-text of intersubjective principles (“murder is wrong”). On the other hand, these responses are suspended by the *aesthetic* dimensions of a melodramatic performance and are incorporated into a viewer’s *appreciative* relationship with the villain. We do not always condemn the melodramatic villain outright, because at some level, we are aware and appreciative of her willingness to entertain.

In sum, the moral evaluation of melodramatic villainy is invited by attitudinal cues and adherence to intersubjective principles. At the same time, however, the aesthetic dimensions of a melodramatic performance have the potential to override such an evaluation. Like the Bond villain who masterminds a scheme not simply for personal gain, but *for us* as a tribute to his own genius, Norma cannot help but perform her own iniquity. Therefore, her “repulsiveness” and “reprehensibility” are accordingly re-evaluated as signs of an aesthetically “good” performance. Her murderous “passion” is admired in the same way one admires the intricacies of the villain’s well-conceived plan. Stroheim’s presence in the film is an indicator of this melodramatic lineage: “the man you love to hate” was infamous for playing warped, aristocratic masterminds. His role as Field Marshal Rommel in another Wilder film, *Five Graves to Cairo* (1943) has relevance here. In this film, the infamous “Desert Fox” has captured three British officers, but instead of confining them to prison, Rommel (like any Saturday matinee baddie) cannot resist regaling them with details from his latest “brilliant” victory over the Allied forces in Egypt. Even the heroes attest to its genius, and following their lead, our moral critique gives way to aesthetically-based appreciation. It is not that this appreciation requires a mere “detachment” from the dramatic world – an attendance to the film’s external conventions only; I would argue that such engagement is a form of simulation because perverse allegiance with the melodramatic villain requires us to temporarily assume another set of values that drastically differ from our own.

Thus, most importantly, it is in our appreciative relationship with the character that *we enact a performance ourselves*, taking on the values of an amoral subject able to appreciate wickedness as a kind of artistry – not unlike another one of Wilde’s infamous

characters, Dorian Gray. Norma's performative alacrity explains why we might not condemn her actions outright, and why we might not engage in a sympathetic relationship with her. The moral reprehensibility of the villain's actions is diminished and in fact become valued for their dramatic potential. In the villain's theatre of cruelty, nothing could be more pleasing than a good murder and we are all actors whose moral noises are only ever the articulations of approval.

An apt description of the relationship between actor and audience might run as follows: "it is the actor's part to desire and be desired, playing out the half-remembered and half-understood vision of a sacred yet blasphemous entity. It is the audience's part to consume and be consumed, by the acting out of its own darkest fears and aspirations" (Harrop 1992, 103). Such a description seems to have been written with *Sunset Boulevard* specifically in mind. Norma is an actor whose need to be desired consumes her and whose obsession with playing Salomé – a "sacred, yet blasphemous" role – means the return to her "half-remembered and half-understood vision" of stardom. In turn, the audience revels in the spectacle of her neurosis and pleasurably succumbs to the raptures of her delirium. Although the "Sunset" of the film's title suggests a Golden Age in decline and dissolution, there are moments in which Norma's performance commands a reverence from her onlookers that recalls the idolatry of her former glory days. Not only her visit to Cecil B. DeMille, which draws a crowd of well-wishers and the nimbus of a spotlight, but her final, majestically tragicomic descent of the ornate staircase are transfiguring moments. The surrounding photographers and police are frozen like mannequins in a respectful tableau, and in the subsequent cut to a "gallery" of onlookers on the balcony, it is difficult to determine whether their gazes are enraptured or horrified. Norma undulates toward the camera and "all those wonderful people out there in the dark," and her final close-up is powerful enough to dissolve both the integrity of the screen and the integrity of our moral identity.

I have forwarded the idea of moral performance as one of the possible methods by which a viewer might enjoy a pleasurable response to scenes of immorality in the cinema. Pleasure is located at the level of a villain's performance, for although a character's affective and expressive articulations have certain inwardly and outwardly directed moral valences, their melodramatic deployment inspires pleasurable *appraisal* over critical *evaluation*. In particular, it is the villain's performance that invites the simulation of an appreciative role in which one admires the artistry of the villain's

wickedness that is largely enacted for an audience's benefit. My employment of simulation theory here is congruent with Currie's ideas about the reader – that fiction requires us to imagine being a person who is reading or seeing a factual account of the represented events. It is not simply that the melodramatic villain reflexively calls attention to our role as an audience; rather, perverse allegiance with her requires that we imagine ourselves to be individuals who are “descending to the level of fiction” and taking on a diegetic role as co-conspirators. Her performance is another instance of metalepsis, in which the boundaries between text and world dissolve. The playfulness of one's engagement with the melodramatic villain is one way around the “problem” of a pleasurable response to filmic representations of transgressive actions. In the next chapter, I will be forwarding two other solutions to the villain's paradox.

Small wonder that moralist critics assume that the cinema's encouragement of imaginative play is equivalent to the degradation of common values. If simulation is the only option available to the viewer who pleasurablely engages with the villain, perhaps these critics might have reason for concern. As a solution to the problem of the pleasure derived from villainy, simulation has some obvious shortcomings. The most serious of these might be a denial of the *authenticity* of a moral response. Like Walton, who does not believe that a viewer's emotional response to a film is an actual emotion, so might other moral simulationists argue against the construal of one's moral engagement with fiction as “real.” In defence of emotional authenticity, Carroll asks how one can differentiate between the symptoms of a simulated and actual emotion. If the two conditions manifest the same embodied response (tears, a scream, laughter), then they may as well be the same emotion, and discussions of a simulated, or meta-response, can only be the mythical, Platonic splitting of a concept (Carroll 1990, 83). *Mutatis mutandis*, it does not seem possible that we can speak of the simulated manifestation of disgust over a villain's actions as being symptomatically different than *actual* disgust.

Furthermore, to deny that narrative film is actually able to provoke our moral outrage is to diminish its significant affective powers and the cinema's use-value in general. Consequently, Richard Moran also wants to argue for the “actuality” of our expressions of emotion towards a fictional situation, even if we might find these expressions disturbing in retrospect. An expression of pleasure towards a villainous action may well be one such disturbing response we would like to dismiss by arguing – like Walton – that such an emotion is only “fictionally true.” Unfortunately,

it would not be at all accurate to say that just as we do not really believe the fictional truths that make up the world of the story, so we do not really have the attitudes that are expressed in our responses...Such reactions would be hard to understand if what [we] felt was as remote from [our] real temperament as the events on the screen are remote from [our] real beliefs about the world (Moran 1994, 93).

However much one might wish to disavow the feelings of vicarious satisfaction one might take in a villain's actions, these feelings are not completely foreign to us. Indeed, the success of a film such as *High Plains Drifter* (Clint Eastwood, 1972) – in which a vengeful spirit orchestrates the mass murder of a town's cowardly citizens for their unwillingness to prevent a murder – hinges on the degree of pleasure we find in cruelty.

One often does engage morally with film characters in a very real way, and this kind of engagement carries with it a very forceful response to scenes of immorality. For “the sheer experience of narrating or witnessing stories can transform persons in ways they often cannot control. Indeed, the mere representation of an other, the translation of human ‘background’ into fictional form, is fraught with ethical tensions” (Newton 1995, 291). The theatricality of the melodramatic villain is not “fraught with ethical tensions”; it allows for safe, untroubled pleasure in an engagement with the villain because the values one adopts are artificial. Other villains, however, are much more troubling. However entertaining one might find, say, Annie Wilke (Kathy Bates) in *Misery* (Rob Reiner, 1990), one must also be prepared to admit that her application of a sledgehammer to Paul Sheldon's (James Caan) ankles can also effectively shatter our ability to simulate appreciation of her psychotic administrations. One must be prepared to look elsewhere for a sympathetic allegiance that occurs closer to the level of the real. In the next chapter, then, it will be necessary to forward an approach to villainy that would satisfy the moral realist by examining characters whose behaviour may prompt “actual” moral responses.

Chapter 6

A Cannibal's Sermon: Immorality, Revaluation, and Reconciliation

"If one does as God does enough times, one becomes as God is."

- Hannibal Lecter in *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986)

A woman sits in a rocking chair before a picture window, silhouetted by moonlight. She clutches a shotgun to her breast. Through the window, a man is visible, seated on a fence outside. He wears a wide-brimmed hat, which casts his face into shadow. Backed by a chorus of crickets, he is singing a Presbyterian hymn into the night, "Leaning on the Everlasting Arms." After a spell, the woman joins him, and her voice is a quavering contralto to his rich, countrified baritone, snaking a countermelody in and out of the regularity of his metre and three-tone pitch. Their performance ends in tremulous unison while an audience of dark, unseen things begin to undulate in hushed anticipation. She is the adoptive mother of a houseful of orphans. He is a murderous preacher, and if he enters the house, he will kill them.

That these two contending figures – almost totemic in their embodiment of the Christian polarity – are brought together in a moment of song is an unsettling convergence. In *The Night of the Hunter* both Rachel Cooper (Lillian Gish) and Harry Powell (Robert Mitchum) are tools wielded by the Everlasting Arms – perhaps they are even interchanging aspects of an unseen totality. Not simply pillars of strength, inscrutable behemoths who shoulder the impossible burden of a child's world, they are the twin visages of an amoral, Janus-faced deity. Amoral, because the film's universe vacillates between instances of hostility and gentleness in equal measure, but without a discernible pattern, suggesting a controlling power governed only by caprice. This is a god of the random, as equally predisposed to cruelty as he is to compassion, a god of whom John Stuart Mill thought "we ought not to ascribe any moral attributes...at all, inasmuch as no moral attributes known or conceivable by us are true of him, and we are condemned to absolute ignorance of him as a moral being" (Mill 1964, 45). This sequence from *The Night of the Hunter* does more than prove God a moral alien. The two voices entwined in the duet are terrifying, because they suggest only *one* voice, and the hymn is heard not as a song of praise, but a song of apocalyptic reconciliation: the sound of divinity at long last acknowledging a demonic prodigal.

This is not to restate the tired platitude regarding the interdependence of good and evil; the implications of the duet are much more intricate than simply suggesting

that the concepts are co-determinates. If villainy (and likewise its correlative) continues to be conceptualised as parasitical or antithetical and represented as such within cinematic fictions, then an audience's interaction with its respective agent will be a limited engagement. The richness of films like *The Night of the Hunter* is that they are prepared to offer representations of evil that are attractive not because they are reliant on an antagonistic relationship with an idealised morality, nor because they add variety and energy to a fictional world, but *in and of themselves*.

In the previous chapter, I have provided one possible solution to the "problem" presented by a pleasurable response to the villain. Rather than suggest that our delight in the villain's actions supports her values, is a kind of wish-fulfilment, or is marked by perversity, I have attempted to forward a solution with less negative connotations. That is, moral simulation allows for "immoral" pleasure as it is a kind of play-acting whereby one adopts, or performs, values one does not necessarily hold in real life. Moreover, the melodramatic villain encourages this "playful" response from viewers, whereby the character's iniquities are appreciated for their aesthetic value. And yet, this solution does not precisely confront the issue of immoral pleasure head-on, as moral simulation suggests that one's adoptive immorality is a matter of temporary "theatricality." While the cinema's capacity to move audiences emotionally is fundamental to its status as an art form, it is far less easy to inspire audiences to truly *act* in some way. I am speaking of those rare moments in which the actions of a character inspire an emotion that is actually accompanied by a corresponding "action strategy." In this case, being moved to act *well* is a powerful and rather infrequent instance of an actual moral response to a cinematic fiction. On occasion, the villain too may be disturbing enough to prompt various action strategies from us as a demonstration of our moral outrage. Some scenes of villainy are disquieting enough to cause 1) a *disengagement* from the film entirely, 2) a shift in our attention to *aesthetic* elements exclusively, or 3) our involvement at an *actual* rather than a simulated moral level. Therefore, in the interests of describing a moral engagement with villains that occurs at the level of the "actual," I would like to hypothesise two further solutions to the moral paradox of perverse allegiance.

Two interconnected concepts will be useful in explaining our allegiance with the villain: revaluation and sacred reconciliation. These approaches share affinities with the ethical and theological writings of Friedrich Nietzsche and Carl Jung respectively – two philosophers whose work often explicitly acknowledges the possibility of hedonic evil,

and more importantly, attributes moral worth to the pleasure one derives from directly sympathising with immoral individuals. I would like to argue that truly perverse identification implies an examination, even reconsideration, of our internalisation of the dominant ethic. Moreover, this revaluation is the means by which a viewer reintegrates an exiled moral element within her idea of self. Bataille provides a concise summation of the moral dynamic that I will forward: evil represented in art “has a sovereign value for us. But this concept does not exclude morality: on the contrary, it demands a ‘hypermorality’” (Bataille 1972, vii). This “hypermorality” is qualified as a “tendency towards divine intoxication” in which the absolutes of traditional morality are challenged (ibid, 9). The most challenging of villains sometimes demand from viewers a moral involvement that is not without traces of this strange metaphysic – a heady tumbling toward a reunion of opposites, in which conflicts are revealed to be reflections and the distinction between self and shadow is subjected to erasure.

Occasionally, a villain appears who captures the popular imagination because of their ability to move audiences in such a manner. Harry Powell is one such character, and Hannibal Lecter is another.¹ In the chapter’s first section, I will consider the popular figure of Lecter as a character whose charismatic villainy lends itself to *revaluation* – a term conceived by Friedrich Nietzsche to refer to the “hypermoral” reconfiguration of that which is consensually regarded as “good.” In both *The Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal*, the doctor’s psychopathic preoccupation with aesthetics is administered as a cure-all for ignorance, misplaced values, and rampant philistinism. Powell, on the other hand, is a much more difficult villain with which to engage, insofar as his evil does not immediately seem to signify more than a primal, almost animalistic negativity. And yet, Powell is no mere bogeyman; it is his identity as a Reverend that must be reconciled with his narrational function as a persecutor of children. Indeed, his devotion to religion is at the heart of his mania. Certainly, narrative fiction has had its fair share of villainous Christians (the hypocritical Malvolio of *Twelfth Night*, Molière’s scheming Tartuffe, and the repressive Theobald Pontifex of Samuel Butler’s *The Way of All Flesh* are prominent literary and dramaturgical models), but Powell’s religious zeal

¹ As an indication of their prominence within the pantheon of film heavies, the American Film Institute nominated both characters for inclusion in a list of great movie villains, compiled for their “AFI 100 Years of Cinema” television series. Powell charts in at number twenty-nine, while Lecter is an unsurprising number one (<http://www.afi.com/tvevents/100years/handv.aspx>).

is much more frightening than being a mere signifier for spiritual hypocrisy or repression. *The Night of the Hunter*'s real strength lies in its suggestion of the closeness between good and evil, and in the person of Harry Powell, audiences are presented with a terrifying convergence of opposites. That two ostensibly warring moral properties are embodied within a singular personality *without the expected tensions that arise from internalised struggle* is suggestive of a fraternity the dominant Judeo-Christian ethic would rather not acknowledge.

The Value(s) of Mass Murder: Villainy and Revaluation

My first solution to the moral paradox of perverse allegiance posits that one's simulated appreciation of the artistry of immorality is not an "actual" form of sympathy as we understand it, and therefore, allegiance with the villain is not morally contradictory. I would now like to attempt a second solution, by demonstrating that even the most reprehensible villain might not always be considered entirely immoral. Immoral pleasure is the acceptance of the villain on his own terms. It is the affirmation of Milton's Lucifer: in making evil one's good, one finds gratification in the villain *because of*, and *not* in spite of, her immorality. It is essential to note that such revaluation is not undertaken in order to minimise villainy's stature or explain it away. By that rationale, "the more compelling the motive for evil behaviour, the less evil the act. Ergo, evil isn't a discrete variable. There are degrees of evil, and these degrees can be negotiated. The more logical the reasons behind the act, the more likely that it's a 'necessary evil' – something done for larger purposes" (Stone 2000, 84). A villain's cruelty is not always an act of necessary evil, but it occasionally can be recognised as an important albeit neglected aspect of our conception of kindness.

In an enquiry into the potential "splendour" of evil, Daniel Lyons investigates whether or not a villain may have admirable traits and concludes that there are in fact occasions in which "aesthetic norms" ("the demands of honour" and "the code of achievement") might override moral norms ("the rules of decency" and "the code of beneficence") (Lyons 1989, 8). *Kill Bill* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003/4) provides a rather spectacular illustration of this argument: here, the resplendent former assassin, Beatrice Kiddo (Uma Thurman), visits a terrible vengeance upon her attempted murderers, even going so far as to murder a mother in front of her child, and to kill the father of her own daughter. In a perverse echo of Gaut's "merited response" argument, determining the

splendour of a villain (or in the case of *Kill Bill*, an anti-hero) becomes a matter of deciding whether or not a particular situation merits the prioritising of honour and/or achievement over decency and beneficence. And of course, while a text may prioritise aesthetic norms before moral norms, a viewer is certainly free to resist this assertion of priorities, or vice-versa.

Although Lyons does not make explicit reference to the moral philosophy of Nietzsche, his approach has definite affinities with Nietzsche's didactic assault on Christian values. Accusing Christian spirituality of a hopeless "decadence" – that is, of moral obsolescence in the present age – Nietzsche's ambition is to promote the revaluation of honour, pride, personal achievement, and self-prioritisation over the repressive values of Christian altruism, selflessness, and humility, which he regards as tantamount to self-denigration. Just as Lyons assesses whether or not the aesthetic norms of honour and achievement outweigh the moral norms of decency and beneficence in assessing the relative splendour of villainous action, so too does Nietzsche demand that his readers consider whether the latter should always be prized over the former. What is remarkable about Nietzsche's project is the means by which he strives to revalue these apparently "aesthetic" values in moral terms. As some of Nietzsche's role models include Julius Caesar, Napoleon, and Goethe – all figures who he valorises for their lack of pity – it is clear that the Christian doctrines of meekness and unconditional love are not to be unilaterally celebrated.

At the same time, however, it is important to stress that Nietzsche is not promoting an all-out ruthlessness. In *The Will to Power*, he posits "the Roman Caesar with the soul of Christ" as the ultimate (albeit impossible) ideal for mankind – a synthesis of the most drastically incompatible antitheses (Nietzsche 1967, 513). Before jumping to the easy conclusion that what Nietzsche is referring to is the need for the simultaneity of sympathy and hardness in individuals of power, and the sensible pursuit of "*Machtgefühl*" (the feeling of power that accompanies the prevailing over an obstacle), it must be remembered that Nietzsche describes Christ as an "idiot" (Nietzsche 1990, 153). This is not at all to say that Nietzsche deplores Christ; on the contrary, he accords Jesus a great (albeit qualified) measure of respect, especially in the martyr's absence of resentful hate for his persecutors – an exemplar of Nietzsche's idealised morality, which is self-affirming, and does not issue from a resentment of the powerful. Within its context, the term "idiot" is used as a reaction to Renan's claim of

Christ's "genius," and as part of Nietzsche's larger criticism of Pauline Christianity, which he regarded as a gross corruption of Christ's lack of resentment. Nevertheless, for Nietzsche, Christ's idiocy is equated with a fundamental *weakness*. Christ is made into a "veritable Ideal Type of weakness to whom not merely moralistic aggressiveness, but anything else indicating strength, was totally foreign" – hardly an ideal guide for the moral candidate who seeks an adequate and positive way to express her will to power (Bernstein 1987, 38). Is it possible, then, for the tyrant and the weakling to converge within a single, venerable figure? What might such a figure be like?

Adopting the voice of Zarathustra, Nietzsche proclaims that "what [a people] accounts as hard, it calls praiseworthy...and that which relieves the greatest need, the rare, the hardest of all – it glorifies as holy" (Nietzsche 1961, 84). And nothing can be more difficult than the rational and tempered realisation of the will to power. In a particularly concise aphorism, Nietzsche indicates the folly of equating goodness with a lack of ruthlessness: "I believe you capable of any evil: therefore I desire of you the good. In truth, I have often laughed at the weaklings who think themselves good because their claws are blunt" (ibid, 141). However, it also is an admonishment to those that wield power – a demand for kindness from the powerful as their "final self-conquest." For the noble, kindness is the greatest of difficulties as it involves the suppression of their will to power in the interests of mercy.

We have seen the failure to adopt such a principal in the figure of Amon Goeth (Ralph Fiennes) in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993). That Nazi ideology found justification for the programmatic mass murder of European Jews within Nietzsche's ruthless inegalitarianism – the division of the population into an elite group of intrinsically superior individuals and equally ignoble, inferior "subhumans" – is well-documented.² As the commandant of a concentration camp, Goeth has clearly internalised such a doctrine and is an exemplar of his regime's horrific misuse of Nietzschean principles. During an extended sequence, Oskar Schindler (Liam Neeson) attempts to convince Goeth that mercy is a form of strength – the "final self-conquest" of the noble's will to power. But after pragmatically experimenting with the adoption of this principle, Goeth only becomes more convinced of its untenable nature. In believing mercy to be a euphemism for weakness, Goeth remains committed to the

² For further details, see Weaver Santaniello's *Nietzsche, God and the Jews* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

misapprehension of Nietzschean thought – a narrative of failure that ends in the justification for systematic genocide. Nazi ideology's adoption of the myth of the *übermensch* should be regarded as a gross overwriting of Nietzsche's "Caesar/Christ" ideal, and indeed, its barbarism is demonstrative of the utter failure to realise this reunion of opposites.

Therefore, while it is certainly problematic and politically suspect to suggest that the villain is representative of the Nietzschean *übermensch*, it is possible to discuss one's immoral pleasure in terms of *revaluation* – the transformation of values typically regarded as morally laudable. My discussions of the villain as an oppugner, and the empathetic propensity for evaluative reconsideration have paved the ground for this chapter's investigations. But unlike the aforementioned concepts, revaluation is not simply moral interrogation, nor ethical revisionism; *it is a complete reordering of one's moral framework*. "One thing is needful," Nietzsche exclaims, "- To 'give style' to one's character – a great and rare art! It is practiced by those who survey all the strengths and weaknesses of their nature and then fit them into an artistic plan until every one of them appears as art and reason and even weakness delights the eye" (Nietzsche 1974, 232). Revaluation is conceived in this regard as a kind of aesthetic enterprise in which even repellent qualities are recognised as integral aspects of character. In Chapter 4, I presented Merteuil's villainy in *Dangerous Liaisons* as a kind of "moral immoralism" – the means by which one might come to a more comprehensive understanding of society's hypocritical attitudes towards sex and a greater conception of one's own moral stance as well. However, Nietzschean revaluation is a much more radical affair, for it is willing to accredit an immoralism that does not have a larger, *social* use-value but occupies a place within an intensely *personal* project. The ultimate goal of this "stylistic" self-recognition is inward reconciliation and self-contentment.³

Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins), whatever else he is, is a profoundly self-contented individual, for what better way to put one's own demons to rest than by becoming one? In doing so, he *does not* assume the mantle of his spiritual predecessor,

³ Christopher Hamilton adopts a similar idea in his essay on the relation between aesthetics and ethics. He believes that "one of the most important things [art] can do is allow us to see a person's concrete, enacted attempt to achieve his own style," and that this enacted example may provide a potential model for our own "stylistic" endeavours (Hamilton 2004, 54). "Style" is used here as a conflation of the character, quality and authenticity of one's ideals.

Milton's Lucifer, who explicitly rejects the good as an act of moral insurrection. For as Mary Midgley indicates, "[Lucifer's] phrase 'Evil be thou my good' is no sublime manifesto of creative immoralism, but a competitive political move to establish a private empire" (Midgley 1984, 151). Revaluation is not simply the adoption of rebellion for its own sake; it is a profoundly *creative* rather than merely destructive process. Unlike Nietzsche's ideal individual, the mere rebel "largely defines himself and forges his identity, not as some kind of triumphant affirmation of his talents and abilities, not as a grand a creative weaving together of disparate elements of his self, but rather he defines himself in opposition to authority" (Conrad 2001, 73-74). As a demented aesthete (to whom Dorian Gray pales in comparison), Lecter's *raison d'être* seems to be "to give style" to his character in the Nietzschean sense. His preoccupation with the finer things is reflective of this constructive process. Through the revaluation of virtue, he fashions himself into a figure in which the disparate qualities of "good" and "evil" are realigned and ultimately reintegrated – a process that *removes* him from the "normal" sphere of ethics, rather than placing him *in opposition* to the good. Unlike the "rebel-hero" discussed in Chapter 4 – whose heroism is predicated upon the defiance of a corrupt social order, but through *moral* means only – the "Nietzschean" villain transcends conventional morality altogether by restructuring the dominant value system itself.

What is at stake in forming an allegiance with such a character? If Hannibal's actions are not motivated by a kind of moral sedition, might the pleasure we take from this character be a sign of some kind of rebelliousness on our part? In *Hannibal*, we are invited to ally ourselves with the film's eponymous antihero as he attempts to evade both re-incarceration by the FBI, as well as kidnapping and execution by his only surviving victim. While the film's textual indicators often delineate him as monstrous, various other textual strategies mitigate against us desiring both his capture and demise. I would like to argue that although the film prompts an *intended* perverse allegiance with a mass murderer, one might also fashion an *unintended* allegiance with Lecter that is even more "perverse" than the film's ambitions. Although both *Silence* and *Hannibal* seek our allegiance with the character, there is a significant measure of interpretive indeterminacy at work in the narrative discourse that allows us to change the order of our sympathy for the character. An allegiance that does not comply with the general attitudinal thrust of each film's narrative discourse will involve responding with pleasure to the character's *reprehensible* rather than "gentlemanly" qualities.

Furthermore, I wish to argue that such a response is not a sign of mere “rebellion” – refusing the particular terms of the “perverse” mock viewership offered by both films – but actually involves a kind of radical moral revaluation on our own behalf.

To begin with, both *Silence* and *Hannibal* approach their representations of villainy through strategies of *immersion* – we are not kept at an ironic distance from the protagonists of these films. While it would be incorrect to assume that *Silence* and *Hannibal* intentionally share a wholly coherent moral vision (the films have different authors, separate circumstances of production and a decade spans their respective release dates), there is a certain amount of continuity between the two films. Principally, neither film shies away from the prospect of sympathetic allegiance with its principal sociopath. Indeed, *Hannibal*’s very aesthetic of presentation seem to be filtered through the twisted sensibilities of its antihero. At the beginning of the film, a close-up on Lecter’s infamous restraint mask – placed in a gift box and surrounded by tissue paper – announces a shift into his world. Throughout the opening credit montage, bizarre occurrences in Florence are captured by surveillance cameras: monuments appear out of thin air, pigeons appear to feast on flesh, and a flock of birds choreograph their amblings to form Lecter’s face in the middle of a palazzo. All of these occurrences are captured in a series of jump cuts and in jerky time-lapse photography. The suggestion here is that the force of the principal character will be potent enough to distort and overwrite the constraints of the moral law – allegorised as the all-seeing technological vision of the FBI. There is even a similar subtle clue as to where our allegiances should be placed at the beginning of *Silence of the Lambs* when the film’s hero, Clarice Starling (Jodi Foster), jogs past a series of signs on Quantico training grounds that read: “HURT AGONY PAIN LOVE IT.” Could these signs be a recognition of illicit desires in the audience that the film wishes to tap into and release? If so, why might we respond favourably to the value system of a mass murderer?

One way to approach this problem might be to consider whether or not the villain can stand for a “noble,” rather than “slave” morality. Is it possible to posit a figure such as Hannibal as character that stands for humanity’s reparations for the damage of life-denying Judeo-Christian morality? Again, while it would be naïve to suggest that the character is a perfect exemplar of Nietzsche’s Caesarean Christ, he does embody certain traits that have Nietzschean affinities, particularly the “noble” connotations of his cruelty.

According to Nietzsche, noble values were initially established to distinguish the “powerful, high-stationed and high-minded” from the “low-minded, common and plebeian” (Nietzsche 1996, 12). Interestingly, these values were also without moral connotation, as they were not attributed to the efforts of personal agency. Thus, the “low-minded” individual is not immoral; unlike the noble, he is merely denied the means to exercise his will to power. Nietzsche describes this mode of valuation as *master morality*, from which naturally sprang the resentment of the ignoble or, more precisely, the weak and powerless. In *The Gay Science*, he speaks both of the cruelty and innocence of this master morality (Nietzsche 1974, 295). However, “he did not tend to use the word *innocence* as the opposite of cruelty or as an incapacity of it, but as the absence of a bad conscience about it” (Bernstein 1987, 71). Indeed, a noble may look on the weak with contempt, but without hate, whereas slave morality is born of hatred as it is a product of the envy of the powerless towards the empowered. As the means of wresting power, the disenfranchised give birth to a new system of values in a gradual process of creative *ressentiment*. Thus, the origins of “slave morality” – which declares all that is proud, strong, and self-affirming to be “evil” – are inherently reactionary and hence, parasitical: “the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge” (Nietzsche 1996, 22). “Goodness” becomes just a euphemism for “weakness” and Christian values are exemplars of the slave morality Nietzsche has in mind (just as the values of Imperial Rome exemplify noble morality). “Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, ill-constituted, it has made an ideal out of *opposition* to the preservative instincts of strong life...” (Nietzsche 1990b, 129).

The value system in both *Silence of the Lambs* and *Hannibal* is often connotative of this noble/slave dichotomy, especially in its juxtaposition of Lecter with high-ranking officials in various institutions: Dr. Fredrick Chilton (Anthony Heald), Inspector Renaldo Pazzi (Giancarlo Giannini), and Paul Krendler (Ray Liotta) in particular. Each of these men hold prominent positions in publicly regarded organisations (the medical community, the Italian Police, and the FBI, respectively), but all of them are represented as ingratiating, overreaching charlatans to some extent. Not only are they incompetent or ineffectual in their positions, but their devotion to “illegitimate” institutions of power mark them off as servants to facile gods (consider Lecter’s derisive attitude towards the “Eff-Bee-Eye,” and his dismissal of psychiatry, which he “doesn’t consider...a

science”). Each of the men attempts to match wits with Lecter and suffer unspeakable consequences for their folly. And though their attitudes towards him are envy, fear, and ignorance respectively, Hannibal’s malice towards them is not borne of hate. The cruelty with which he dispatches them is “innocent” insofar as it is a product of contempt (as an indication of power), rather than spite and their murders are undertaken without a trace of remorse. Indeed, while each of them is killed in a spectacular and/or somewhat comic fashion, Hannibal undertakes their executions with a perfunctory attitude: he wears the same expression disembowelling Pazzi as he does whilst mincing parsley for Krendler’s Last Supper.⁴ In the films’ respective moral universes (particularly in *Hannibal*), the institutions of the specious “good” and their agents are clearly aligned with the “low-minded, common and plebeian.”

Nietzsche’s own prevocational writings are designed to elicit a charged affective response from readers in order to entice them into a consideration of the reasons that prompted such violent emotions. In doing so, we will ideally arrive at the realisation that our morality is based upon emotional affectivity – the mere by-product of received conventional values. By presenting the exploits of the tyrannical noble with gusto, Nietzsche hopes to awaken the reader’s feelings of admiration for this character, and to show that these feelings are the emotional residue of an earlier “aristocratic” value system that celebrated the will to power (Janaway 2004, 275). Naturally, the reader’s admiration of the noble will be tempered by horror at the character’s ruthless desire to assert himself, and this horror points to the reader’s investment in slavish Christian values. Ultimately, however, Nietzsche wants the reader to recognize that Christianity is driven by a similar but necessarily covert will to power.

We can draw several useful parallels with the sympathetic representation of Lecter in the two Hannibal films. Again, the FBI is a frequent target of Lecter’s ire, and in some sense, the films’ criticisms of its restrictive powers can be compared with Nietzsche’s attack on the repressions of the Church. The Bureau is accorded the status of false god within the narrative, especially in the importance Clarice places in her “legitimation” by this institution – both as a recruit in *Silence* and as a Special Agent in *Hannibal*. Certainly, both films are at pains to depict the FBI as an institution that

⁴ Lecter is not always so blasé about his killings, and the different faces he wears (sometimes literally) during such moments will be discussed shortly.

will not ever credit her achievements, and moreover, exacts punitive measures against her in the interest of securing the Bureau's own infallibility. Such criticism is of a feminist nature in *Silence*, as the film establishes the Bureau as a glorified Boy's School (witness the shot which places her in an elevator surrounded by towering male cadets, as well as her patronisation by Section Chief Jack Crawford (Scott Glen) during the autopsy sequence). Subsequently, her suspension from active duty in *Hannibal* is not merely a result of Krendler's explicit misogyny, but is a decision that originates from a more fundamental hatred. Nietzsche argues that Christianity affects a diminishment of "militaristic" values, which even now maintain barbarous connotations: "Being a soldier, being a judge, being a patriot; defending oneself; preserving one's honour; desiring to seek one's advantage; being *proud*... The practice of every hour, every instinct, every valuation which leads to *action* is today anti-Christian" (Nietzsche 1990b, 162). Clarice's desperate act of self-defence against Evelda Drumgo (she shoots the armed drug dealer who uses a baby for a shield), for example, becomes ammunition for her eventual censure and public disgrace. The film suggests that it is her fierce dedication to her vocation, her brilliance, and her success as a woman within a "man's" profession that has secured the envy of her "superiors." As with the fealty she accords to the memory of her father, the *pride* she would otherwise take in her work is suspended as she waits for words of accreditation that will never come.

Thus, like the individual who pays fealty to the Judeo-Christian ethic, Clarice suffers from the "seminal No" that "has become foundational to the economy of the contemporary psyche" (Berrios and Ridley 2001, 81). This "seminal No" is a way of describing the dominant values that discourage the individual from aspiring to self-satisfaction, perfection, even greatness: a Judeo-Christian update on the myth of Icarus. However, is it feasible to place Lecter as the legitimate usurper of this restrictive economy? Such a perverse idealisation requires further investigation, and therefore, we must consider other reasons we might look upon the character favourably.

It is not simply that villains such as Lecter stand in as the embodiments of "noble" values, but their villainy may be revaluated as actions that serve other alternative aspects of a greater good (albeit in an extremely aberrant fashion). In this sense, intended perverse allegiance with the villain is often effected by a "softening" of the character's reprehensible qualities. One method of "softening" villainy is to demonstrate it to be a form of dark *poetic justice*. As I have established, both *The*

Silence of the Lambs and *Hannibal* perpetuate a curious “moral” logic by suggesting that Lecter’s “ignoble” victims are frequently in some way “deserving” of their fate. The assertion of his will to power over these individuals is made even more palatable by the blackly comic tone adopted during scenes of murderous *grand guignol*. Towards the film’s conclusion, the good doctor scoops portions of Paul Krendler’s lobotomised brain from his exposed skull, sautés them in a caper berry sauce, and serves them to his anaesthetised victim. “That *does* taste good,” Krendler says, munching happily. Despite the horrific subject matter, the humour is not out of place in the scene as, again, Krendler is depicted as an opportunistic and sexist ingrate who continually sabotages Clarice’s career. Krendler’s murder may remind us of the unfortunate inmate, Miggs (Stuart Rudin) in *Silence*, whom Lecter convinces to swallow his own tongue as castigation for hurling semen at Clarice as she passed by his cell. In dispatching these two cretins, Hannibal acts as Clarice’s avenging angel.

So, while a film can invite our allegiance with an antihero who eliminates characters that embody ignoble values, a second reason that an intended allegiance with a murderous character might be formed is on the basis of *his indirect support of an unimpeachable protagonist*. The violence Lecter visits upon Krendler on Clarice’s behalf, then, is doubly pleasurable insofar as Clarice does not have to accept responsibility for such violent wish-fulfilment, while at the same time, a viewer may potentially receive moral satisfaction from observing an unpleasant character receive his comeuppance. As Dolf Zillman indicates, “negative affective dispositions...set us free to thoroughly enjoy punitive violence,” even when said violence is excessive and especially when the hero’s (or, in this case, the antihero’s) deeds receive the “moral sanction” of the audience (Zillman 1998, 202). Of course, Zillman only considers morally sanctioned violence and does not discuss the enjoyment of *random* violence, a crucial distinction I shall discuss momentarily.

Moreover, it might also be said that his murders are often committed as acts of revaluative counter-art, as matters of *style*. The doctor is the consummate aesthete, and those whose philistinism affronts his sensibilities often find their way to his dinner plate. As Barney (Frankey Faison), his jailer claims in *Hannibal*, “Whenever feasible, he preferred to eat the rude.” *Taste* is everything, and the film promotes an alliance with a sophisticate whose aesthetic refinement actually *informs* his unusual morals. As I have suggested, the malignity of his aesthetic sensibilities seems to determine *Hannibal*’s

formal logic and certain moments in the film overtly acknowledge a viewer's propensity for appreciating perversion. As Clarice listens to a recording of her interviews with Lecter, the camera pans rapidly across a grisly photo-collage of mutilated corpses from various crime scenes. "Don't you feel eyes moving over your body," Lecter inquires in voiceover, "and don't your eyes move over the things you want?" As viewers are caught in the process of moving their eyes over a series of disfigured bodies, his commentary suggests that the observance of murder is the "thing" viewers secretly most want. When it comes to Lecter, it is, after all, just what the doctor ordered.

But although Lecter kills and provokes others to kill, both films still attempt to *temper* his villainy by ensuring that the most disturbing element of his psychosis – his cannibalism – is never graphically represented. More importantly, the potential for revaluation is further buttressed by narrative strategies that place his tasteful villainy in contradistinction with two rather tasteless psychopaths: Jame Gumb, a would-be transsexual who fashions himself a "woman suit" from the skin of his victims, and Mason Verger, a disfigured and crippled paedophile. Neither of these "faceless" villains possesses the charisma or icy charm of Lecter, which might otherwise offer a more "balanced" mania.⁵ In fact, we only catch glimpses of Gumb throughout the first two thirds of *Silence* – no sign of an engaging subjectivity here. Smith has commented that comparative strategies are essential to forming allegiances with characters (Smith 1995, 188), and we also recall from Chapter 1 that one particular attitudinal aspect of a film's narrative discourse is moral structuration. Films often present a kind of ethical scale whereby the behaviour of the characters is measured in degrees of propriety. The key here is relativity: what is the character like *in relation* to other characters?

I believe such comparative moral logic to be flawed if it is being used to mitigate against the abhorrence of a character's actions, for morality is not always a quantifiable property. Can the "comparable evil" of other characters always negate, or minimise the evil of the villain in question? On the one hand, films *do* occasionally employ such a

⁵ I am deliberately ignoring Lecter's appearance in *Manhunter* (Michael Mann, 1986), as well as the remake, *Red Dragon* (Brett Anderson, 2002). It is not that the character's role in both versions is minimal enough to be almost unnecessary, but because the films do not "use" the psychosis of the central villain, Francis Dollarhyde (Tom Noonan/Ralph Fiennes), to offset Lecter's. Indeed, the gradually sympathetic representation of Dollarhyde benefits from the relative detachment the films employ in depicting Lecter's megalomania.

tactic – often to comedic effect. In *Arsenic and Old Lace* (Frank Capra, 1944), for example, the homicidal tendencies of two doddering, old spinsters are played for laughs, especially when compared to the sadism of their psychotic and murderous nephew. On the other hand, however, once a certain degree of depravity is reached, such a graduated moral range is rendered irrelevant. How might one go about formulating an ethical scale in which, say, flaying women alive or paedophilia are somehow “worse” than cannibalism? If we are to have a sympathetic response towards Lecter and an antipathetic response towards Gumb and Verger, we must agree with the films’ representation of the latter two characters’ villainy as the more repugnant – an agreement that is ultimately illogical. There is a sense in *Silence* especially, that the psychosis of Gumb is overdetermined – even his bedsheets, with their prominent swastika patterns, are used as an alienating device. Although the judicial system is responsible for quantifying the seriousness of a legal transgression for the purposes of sentencing, viewers are in a less authoritative position to compare the “wrongness” of characters’ immorality. While *Silence* and *Hannibal* both encourage a (qualifiedly) positive response to Lecter, they do so according to a spurious moral comparison between characters.

Again, the only way it might make sense to compare degrees of villainy for the purposes of allegiance would be to assess the object to which their actions are being put to use. Recall that in the goal-oriented narrative structure, one does not only factor in a character’s level of repulsiveness in isolation, but in the context of his motivations. For example, one may accredit a certain degree of perverse altruism in the doctor’s murders.⁶ In *Hannibal*, Clarice remarks that Lecter believes he is performing a “public service” by wiping the uncultivated from existence. In *Red Dragon*’s pre-credit sequence, he turns a flautist from a Philharmonic orchestra into sweetbreads with ragout for performing slightly off-pitch, and serves the dish to the unsuspecting leading members of the orchestra at a dinner party. While the doctor’s murderous obsession with cultural refinement is taken to absurd lengths, his actions are not indicative of the petty selfishness that motivates Gumb and Verger. The suffering they cause to their victims is Epicurean – in the interest of their own personal benefit – compared to the paradoxically “philanthropic” violence Lecter utilises.

⁶ Similarly, in *Arsenic and Old Lace*, the two elderly aunties perform acts of poisonous “charity” on lonely, old men “who have nothing left to live for.”

But this psychotic snobbery is admittedly a rather flimsy foundation upon which to build a perverse allegiance. It is not simply that Lecter's intellectualism and theatricality transcends the "baseness" and carnality of Gumb and Verger. Such mind/body distinctions remain culturally prominent and may influence the films' *preferred* evaluations of their various perversities, but this dualism is ultimately facile. Lecter's murderous proclivities are just as sensuously based as Gumb's and Verger's (recall the infamous "thff-ff-ff" sound he utters after reminiscing on the census taker's liver he ate "with fava beans and a nice Chianti"). Moreover, the explicitly sexual nature of Gumb and Verger's crimes are implicitly sublimated within Lecter's cannibalism. Verger and Lecter especially are linked through their sadism, which in both cases amounts to the defiling of innocence. We may smile knowingly when Lecter feeds a portion of Krendler's brain to a curious child on an airplane ("It's always important that we try new things"), until we recognise the manner in which it chimes with Verger's means of entrapping his young victims by offering them chocolate.

To put it simply, we cannot deny the fact that Lecter is, first and foremost, a sadist. As Verger himself remarks, "Lecter's object...has always been degradation and suffering," and in this observation, he is quite accurate. As a way of distinguishing acts of true evil from those of mere immoral self-interest, Bataille offers the example of the sadist, for whom "the abyss of Evil is attractive independently of the profit to be gained by wicked actions – or at least by some of them" (Bataille 1972, 47). That is, unlike his spiritual predecessor, the criminal mastermind, Dr. Mabuse (Rudolph Klein-Rogge), who profits financially from his manipulation of others in *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (Fritz Lang, 1922), Lecter manipulates and debases others simply because he can. The object of the sadist's attacks is a fundamentally ingrained value-structure: the desire to live. "What the sadist is primarily aiming at is the desire system of the victim – he wants to alter it from being pro-life to being anti-life. He does not primarily seek the death of the victim, only the victim's desire for his *own* death" (McGinn 1997, 81). Verger certainly has firsthand experience of this desire: in a flashback sequence, Lecter persuades a narcotised Verger to slice off his own face with broken glass and feed it to his dogs.

Moreover, the relationship between Lecter and Clarice is marked by a certain degree of sadism. Without question, the doctor's continued correspondence with Clarice is undertaken because he is fully aware of the distress he causes her. What is interesting about Lecter's sadism, however, is that in Clarice's case, it is employed in a

paradoxically *constructive* fashion. Unlike the pure carnality of Verger's sadism towards his young victims, Hannibal's sadism towards Clarice is actually performed as an *induction*. It is true that sadists bring about an alteration of their victim's value systems to that of anti-life, but the revaluation Lecter seeks from Clarice is that she bring about the virtual "death" of her commitment to her old ways of living.

To elaborate, we may identify here Lecter's disguised role as an oppugner – the villain who encourages us to question the merit of the hero's values. While he does enjoy the psychological anguish he causes to nearly everyone he comes in contact with (including Clarice), Lecter's sadism is also a method by which to eradicate naiveté, crudity, and/or investment in a limited/limiting system of values. In a way, he *does* relish appropriating the role of God (as indicated in this chapter's epigraph) – not through murder, but rather in his separation of the wheat from the chaff. Richard Dyer claims that viewers are invited to admire Lecter's *power* and that "his whole persona, not the least his ineffable sarcasm, is founded on the supremacy of the powerful and the expendability of the weak, a glorification that sits easily with notions of masculinity" (Dyer 149, 2000).⁷ The glorification of power does seem to be part of the text's operation, but this power also rests in his distinctions between the "irredeemable," whom he eats, and the individuals he grants a modicum of respect through a "re-education" (or, "revaluation"). One might cite as examples his efforts to help Barney obtain a B.A., and his assumption of the role of Clarice's "mentor." In cases such as these, he undoubtedly aids those individuals who cannot recognise their own potential. Even if certain viewers prefer to ally themselves with Clarice, at the very least, they must still concede that it is Lecter who provides her with the means to acknowledge her misplaced investment in various authority figures. Their relationship has as much to do with a mentor/pupil dynamic as it does with the degrading hierarchy of sadist/victim.

That the two characters are more closely related than is immediately apparent is also suggested by the "twinning" strategy evident in *Silence*'s first interview sequence, in which the characters meet. Parallels are immediately established between the two through a subtle formal symmetry: shots alternate between their respective point of

⁷ Alternatively, Daniel Shaw claims that we respond *ambivalently* to the power of the monstrous figures in horror films: "on the one hand, we vicariously enjoy the immense power of the terrifying force, taking delight in its mayhem. Our ambivalence [however] is grounded in our moral qualms at this devastation, which leads us to identify with the humans who seek to destroy its perpetrator" (Shaw 2001, 7).

views, and the characters perform strikingly similar actions whilst placed in the same positions within the frame. Curiously, the two are *never* framed in a two-shot together throughout the entire film (with the exception of that brief touch of fingers in their last scene), thus underlining the potentially *reflective* nature of their relationship. The unsettling suggestion is that some unnamed quality belonging to Clarice is brought out by and mirrored within the image of her mentor-nemesis. Villains, as we established in Chapter 4, possess a tremendous capacity for potential self-reflection, if nothing else.⁸

So, one may be tempted to argue that perverse allegiances are formed when we decide that a character “really isn’t such a bad guy after all,” or, when we are able to overlook the more unsavoury aspects of their personality. Smith, for example, claims that our pleasurable engagement with Lecter does not have to do with the doctor’s cannibalistic tendencies, but revolves around his more attractive qualities instead: “any allegiance we form with Lecter is one that develops in spite of rather than because of his perversity” (Smith 1999, 227). We are attracted to the gentleman, Smith claims, and overlook the monster.

But is Lecter’s charm and sophistication enough to transcend the truly fearsome aspects of his explicitly presented violence? Does his status as an alloy somehow lessen the degree of his villainy in a manner not enjoyed by the other “less rounded” villains? Smith implies that our allegiance with an alloy will depend on whether or not the sum of the character’s positive qualities outweighs the sum of the negative ones. Several other theorists and philosophers propose this sort of moral scale as a basis for sympathy. In Chapter 2, for example, I mentioned Wayne C. Booth’s proposition that a character must demonstrate the capacity for virtuous action in order to gain our compassion. We might also cite Daniel Haybron’s “consistency view” of evil referenced in Chapter 3, which argues that many wicked individuals may still be sympathetic if they can be moved or motivated positively by the good to some extent. Gaut’s misguided “merited-response” theory referenced in Chapter 4 also has relevance here as it implies a similar “tallying up” of immoral deeds. But it must be asked *at what point does a villain’s attractive qualities override their repugnant ones?* The crucial deciding factor in the

⁸ It is also worth mentioning the denouement of *Hannibal*’s original literary source. Notoriously, the novel ends with Clarice’s decision to become Hannibal’s lover following her “re-education,” which includes the exhumation of her father’s corpse in order that she make a conclusive symbolic break from the past.

placement of our allegiance remains fuzzy at best and subjective at worst. Even if it were possible to gauge a character's level of iniquity in this fashion, the conclusion reached is perhaps inaccurate. It is not that the two other aforementioned villains deflate Lecter's unpleasantness; rather, *they pale in comparison to the doctor's wickedness*. Instead of accepting them as "worse" than Lecter, a truly mutinous viewer would claim that they do not measure up to his standards of villainy. I have indicated that weighing degrees of depravity is fallacious, but if we change the nature of the scale, we can establish a transgressive hierarchy of a different order. That is to say, one might find Lecter's villainy attractive because it possesses a *grandeur* that cannot be located in the respective perversities of Gumb and Verger. The cannibalism and sadism of Lecter is of a different (im)moral order than the "lesser" crimes of his comparatives.

If one is to respond in a truly perverse fashion to Lecter's evaluation by both films, one must reject the notion that our allegiance will be sought *in spite* of his murderous appetites. I would argue that the strategies of moral graduation, the emphasis on "rounding" Lecter's character, and the establishment of his oppugnancy attempt to weaken, or water down his villainous status. Describing his actions as a form of "moral immoralism" as I have done is one possible perverse evaluation of Lecter's villainy, but again, it still *reduces* the ferocity the doctor displays during moments of violence. To ally oneself with Lecter in a truly perverse fashion, it is necessary to *re-vilify* him – to use his status as an alloy against the attitudinal grain of the narrative. We recall from Chapter 2 that a combination of contradictory traits may be enough to confuse a film's attempt to posit a rounded character – an alloy – as evil. But although a villain might hold both repellent and attractive qualities, a perverse viewer would find him engaging not because the latter qualities mitigate against the former, but because *they amplify the splendour of his evil*. As a final move, I would like to shift the evaluative emphasis to Lecter's more feral qualities, for it is these traits that promote rather than repel our allegiance. During moments of violence – especially random violence – he achieves a kind of magnificence that is awe-inspiring because it suggests that his evil is not containable.

How can one conceive of the representation of unmotivated violence as "awe-inspiring" without incurring the wrathful objection of moralists? One might turn again to Nietzsche for a solution. Throughout his work, Nietzsche argues for a need to retain certain aspects of what might be considered "evil" within one's notion of the holy.

Indeed, the notion of “cruelty” is integral to Nietzsche’s idealised value system. In *The Anti-Christ*, he argues that Christianity has watered down divinity by claiming God as the God of the good (naturally, read: weak). Such a reduction of the divine occurs “when everything strong, brave, masterful, proud is eliminated from the concept of God” (Nietzsche 1990b, 139). An all-loving God is both incomprehensible and useless for Nietzsche; the god of a people who believe in themselves “must be able to be both useful and harmful, both friend and foe – he is admired in good and bad alike” (ibid, 138).⁹ Again, this is John Stuart Mill’s morally inscrutable God, whose power evokes fear and trembling as well as love. God’s fearsome nobility is reconceived as cruelty by Christians, and thrust far away from their conception of Him.

At the same time, Christianity’s “diluted” spirituality brings about the devaluation of evil. It is not even precise to say that their reinvention of Satan was the means to conceptually house God’s displaced “cruelty,” for even the Antichrist is stripped of majestic properties. Although Nietzsche does not explicitly reference Satan in *The Anti-Christ* (his appropriation of one of Satan’s titles is in the spirit of revaluation), he indirectly alludes to the reduction of evil. Under Christianity, evil is equated with shame (in the form of sin) and weakness (of one’s moral resolve). Before the ascendancy of Good, evil’s suffering could be borne with pride. “Here the word ‘Devil’ was a blessing: one had an overwhelming and fearful enemy – one did not need to be ashamed of suffering at the hands of such an enemy” (Nietzsche 1990b, 144). With the minimisation of evil (under Christianity, Evil becomes merely “evil”), good actions are no longer morally difficult (recall that for Nietzsche, that which is the most difficult is to be regarded as holy), and thus, no longer meritorious in any meaningful way nor cause for pride (which in itself is regarded as sinful). Moreover, the idea of divinity is excised of any “immoral” connotations, and being godly is now equated with mere “selflessness.”

Hannibal’s demonstrations of violence are a diabolical return of this repressed godliness: murder as the wilful imposition of the Self on another in the most brutal form. Hannibal’s violence is pre-Christian in a sense, and evocative of the ancient world. His cannibalism is not the sign of a subject who consumes his god (like the Catholic receiving communion), but of a god who devours his subject (like Cronos

⁹ Later, I will contrast this conception of the God of Israel with Jung’s negative portrait of an Old Testament God who is “unconscious of Himself.”

eating his children). There are only four instances in both films in which the doctor's murderous actions are explicitly represented, and each of them are the most ferocious and chilling moments of onscreen violence: his bludgeoning of Sergeant Pembrey (Alex Coleman), allowing his escape in *Silence*; his dramatic disembowelment of Inspector Pazzi, his near-decapitation of Matteo Deogracias (Fabrizio Gifuni), and his unmotivated attack on a nurse in *Hannibal*. The dramatic weight of these scenes, the graphic force by which they are depicted, and the fact that viewers are confronted with a character who kills without compunction, without necessity and *without provocation* is enough to short-circuit any allegiance we might form on the basis of his "positive" traits. In fact, it may be that *these sequences* are the pivotal ones in evoking our sympathetic engagement with the character. It is worth looking at one of these instances in detail in order to outline briefly the formal mechanics that incite our engagement.

The second of the four represented attacks occurs in *Hannibal*, in which Clarice watches surveillance camera footage of Lecter mutilating a nurse in the Baltimore State Forensic Hospital. On the monitor, Clarice observes a black and white video image of a straitjacketed Hannibal standing next to a wall. The overhead medium shot captures the nurse as she walks into the frame, and passes by the prisoner. Abruptly, the non-diegetic scores strikes a violent *sforzando* and an inhuman roar is heard on the soundtrack, as Lecter lunges at the nurse and pushes her out of the frame. Animalistic growls and gibbering continue throughout the sequence, and the lack of a diegetic source indicates that these can only be the psychic noises attributed to the violence of the event itself. A cut to Clarice depicts her staring at the monitor transfixed, her face illuminated by the glow of the screen – a double for our own viewing position. An eyeline match back to the previous video image reveals Hannibal pushing the nurse to the floor, straddling her, and then brutally savaging her face with his teeth.

Interestingly, at this point, the remainder of the brief sequence begins to be eclipsed by an *imaginative reconstruction* of the event. That is, the dispassionate eye of the surveillance camera (the clinical instrument of security and law enforcement) is displaced by the subjective eye of an "agent" who occupies a position *outside* the story world (within the narrational discourse), and whose *evaluative* observation of the event colours its representation. Lecter's violence is no longer rendered in objective terms by the security camera, but instead, is focalised in moralistic terms by an extradiegetic narrator, who manipulates the film's mode of representation to amplify the ferocity of

this violence. As the orderlies rush in to pull him off of the nurse, the camera suddenly tracks in to a close-up and pans upwards. Colour creeps into the image, and there is a subtle dissolve in the film stock from video to 35 mm. Hannibal is yanked up in jerky slow motion, and the violent movement traces motion trails across the screen. His bloodied mouth is agape and his tongue waggles. Most awful of all are his eyes, which are absolutely savage. This hellish expression is caught in a freeze frame, and the image is drained of colour and abruptly flares to an apocalyptic white. We cut back to a visibly shaken Clarice who pauses the video, and the image on the monitor has been reframed back to its original overhead medium shot.

It is debatable whether or not we should attribute this reflexive moment of overt stylisation to the narrational agency of Clarice. On the one hand, this formal manipulation might be an attempt to represent her imaginative reconstruction of the event, in which case, the final reaction shot of her troubled face cues our analogous response. On the other, it is more interesting to entertain the possibility that these strategies issue from a much more disturbingly ambiguous position within the narrational discourse. It is as if an unnamed narrator who sought to *glorify* the represented actions briefly directed the narration. The narration of violence is remarkable here because it seems to transcend the rules of the game in two important regards: 1) like the beating of Sgt. Pembrey in *Silence*, Lecter's expression suggests a demented pleasure in his actions; and 2) it is the only sequence in the entire series that does not provide or imply a motive behind Lecter's assault. Certainly, his victims have done nothing to warrant the savageries to which they are subjected, and the violence visited upon them seems to exceed the bounds of the perverse moral "logic" discussed above. And yet, these sequences are somehow not forceful enough to guarantee the effective disruption of any allegiance we may have formed with the character. Therefore, the narrational strategies employed here are not undertaken in the interest of problematizing our allegiance with Lecter, *but actually seek to strengthen it*.

This imaginative reconstruction of the attack attributes to his violence an archetypal, almost mythic dimension. However suave and attractive he appears, such moments suggest that he is a figure that we must look upon with some measure of *awe*. And if we are to find a kind of dark majesty in Hannibal's unfettered savagery (as these sequences suggest), then our typical moral attitudes towards murder are subjected to a revaluation. Lecter commands fear, and fear is too primal an emotion to be assuaged by

dress up the bogeyman in gentleman's clothes. In fact, such a strategy can only make a monster more terrifying as it crawls from beneath the bed, straightening its mask of civility. The attraction of monsters is mesmeric – they draw energy from the language-denying emotion that grips their victims upon their revelation. Such a moment is akin to staring into a solar eclipse, or being drawn into the orbit of a black hole. Etymologically, *monstrum* is “that which reveals, or warns,” and when Lecter's true face emerges in moments of violence, it is the revelation of a terrifying godhead.

We have seen this face before. In the delineation of his early metaphysics in *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche understood the pleasure gleaned from tragedy to be an embodiment of the Dionysian: a condition in which the boundaries between the self and the world are broken down. During this moment of primordial unity in which the principal of individuation is dissolved, one may experience sensations of co-mingled ecstasy and terror because it is a state in which the familiar and grounding principles of form, rules, and order (“the Apollonian”) disappear. In these regards, to experience the calamity brought about by a villain's actions is to experience a state of Dionysian intoxication. The Dionysian experience of tragedy shares affinities with the terrifying and elevating experience of the Kantian sublime, as Nietzsche treats the sublime experience of tragedy “as the artistic taming of the horrible” (Nietzsche 1967, 60). While neither *Silence* nor *Hannibal* can be regarded as tragedies proper, what seems clear is that in order to experience Lecter as a pleasurable character, and in order to form an allegiance with him on moral grounds (albeit a perverse one), we must evaluate the aforementioned representational strategies as such an “artistic taming.” We may locate pleasure in the very act of Lecter's “illegitimate” murders by allying our sensibilities with the narrational strategies that *amplify* (rather than “soften”) the character's evil, for in moments such as these, he is elevated to a Nietzschean god of the cruel. An allegiance that issues forth from a “glimpse of the horrible truth of the world” is not idle demonolatry, but is an re-embrace of an older, discarded conceptualisation of evil as a potent, and awesome force. Therefore, a radically perverse allegiance with certain villains is a relationship that is akin to *the worship of an ineffable force*. Such an act can be perceived as “good” (or at least beneficial) in ways that do not immediately seem to be “moral” as the term is understood.

I have argued that an intended perverse allegiance with a villain such as Lecter can be formed by revaluing his actions as serving a greater good – whether it be noble

morality, poetic justice, or the principles of aesthetics and high culture. But I am also suggesting that a perverse allegiance with a villain such as Lecter can amount to allying oneself with the potential sublimity of an unfettered evil, rather than indulging in the safer pleasures of appreciating a murderous wit. Furthermore, I would argue that the evil, monstrous characteristics of the alloy occasionally *amplify* rather than diminish the appeal of villainy. One's moral response to an alloy will depend on the weight one respectively places on the sympathetic and antipathetic traits represented, and in one's motivations for privileging one set of values over another. At the very least, such characters invite viewers to believe that the stigmatisation of arrogance, vanity, and selfishness as villainous qualities is effected at the expense of self-confidence, pride, and a productive egoism. At their most radical, the brutal murders represented in the Hannibal Lecter films are not only revalued as perversely altruistic, but are also regarded as signs of an aspect of the sacred (or, simply the good) that has long been exiled from popular theological and ethical fashion.

Shadowplay: Reconciliation and the Sacred

My analysis of Lecter ends with a conceptualisation of art that allows one to imagine a terrifying Godhead. If this sublimity – the *ne plus ultra* of Evil, as it were – is to be regarded as pleasurable *in and of itself*, it is necessary to forward one last solution to the moral paradox of perverse allegiance. So far, I have argued that one's engagement with certain villains is not “actually” sympathetic (*moral simulation*), and also, that a viewer might come to reject the conventional standards by which the actions of certain villains are assessed as “immoral” (*moral revaluation*). As a final resolution of the moral contradictions involved in allying oneself with a villain, I would like to suggest some potential reasons why one actually *ought* to sympathise with such characters. Discussing the villain in these terms goes beyond simulating moral states and revaluing qualities generally characterized as “evil”; in Jungian terms, a viewer's engagement with the villain might allow access to a metaphysic that has been expelled from our understanding of the sacred and the good.

I have been purposefully describing the villain as an outsider, or morally “alien” throughout my study. There is a fruitful connection that can be drawn here between the standard representation of the villain as some kind of “other” and the ideological processes that transform subjects into “Others.” We recall that for Marxist critics,

ethics universalises the dominant ideologies of the ruling class into a binary system of moral oppositions. In this manner, the characteristics of those who oppose or do not serve the interests of the hegemony are described as “immoral,” or, at the most extreme, “evil.”¹⁰ However, these strategies do not just serve expedient political ends; the motives behind the ideological construction of the immoral Other are concomitant with those behind the expulsion of evil from popular ideas about personal morality.

Simply stated, *evil is externalised and disowned* in both of these practices. As Daniel Haybron indicates, “labelling persons as evil...serves to distance them from ourselves, to impose a kind of moral exile” (Haybron 2002, 73). We recall from Chapter 1 that the narrational strategies by which the villain is represented in film typically uphold the practice of emphasising the “foreignness” of evil. However, by highlighting the viewer’s ability to resist such attitudinal positioning in Chapter 3, I have been working towards a conception of pleasure that may potentially *embrace* villainy, rather than comfortably rejecting it as an alien subjectivity. What I wish to return to now is the proposal made in Chapter 4: that pleasure in villainy may lie in recognising its relative *closeness* – as an essential constituent of one’s moral self. Indeed, *The Night of the Hunter* is a memorable film largely due to its representation of a manic preacher for whom immorality is not irreconcilable with moral zeal.

To begin with, Harry Powell is no mere persecutor of children – another forgettable religious nutcase. His villainy is much more complex than that of, say, John Doe (Kevin Spacey) in *Seven* (David Fincher, 1995) whose murderous inclinations are simply a sign of psychotic self-righteousness. Instead, it is crucial to note that Powell considers himself to be working within a *moral* framework. But unlike Jonas Nightengale (Steve Martin), a fraudulent faith healer who manipulates the religious zeal of devout Christians for personal profit in *Leap of Faith* (Richard Pearce, 1992), Powell truly believes that the exploitation and murder of widows is *God’s* will. Tipping his hat

¹⁰ For a pertinent analogy, see Robin Wood’s much-discussed essay, “An Introduction to the American Horror Film.” Wood takes up Herbert Marcuse’s and Gad Horowitz’s arguments that within a capitalist society, normality is configured by discourses largely defined as white, patriarchal, and heterosexist. The social norms erected by these discourses are dependent on a degree of basic repression. Conversely, surplus repression – that which exceeds the functional purpose of efficiency (ie. sexuality) – is used to “Otherise” and thus subjugate those whose values run contrary to the status quo. However, that which is repressed always “returns,” and in the horror film, its re-emergence is in monstrous (because ideologically threatening) form.

to the Almighty as he drives along in his stolen touring car, Powell is pleased that God “doesn’t mind the killings,” so long as it is only “perfume smellin’ things, lacy things, and things with curly hair” that suffer. In other words, he does not place his iniquities outside the moral order; perversely enough, his actions are motivated by the conviction that he is an agent of God.

Rachel Cooper – a guardian of orphans and the film’s primary moral authority figure – does her best to disenchant others of this notion (“He ain’t no preacher,” she asserts fiercely). From the film’s outset, she attempts to position Powell as Other. Superimposed over a starry expanse of infinity, she reads her “children” an instructive passage from the Bible – an *a priori* condemnation of the Hunter: “Beware of false prophets which come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly, they are ravening wolves. Ye shall know them by their fruit.” The passage becomes a sound bridge to an overhead extreme long-shot of a children’s hide and seek game, followed by a track in on the dead legs of one of Powell’s victims discovered in a storm cellar. We have immediately been given a glimpse of the “fruit” of this “false prophet.”

At times Robert Mitchum’s performance also seems to provide glimpses of his character’s nascent inhumanity – his “wolfishness.” He occasionally demonstrates pantomimic overtures, especially during the sequences in which Powell actively pursues the children (recall the flight from the cellar, with Powell in pursuit, his arms extended like something from a nightmarish cartoon). When thwarted on these occasions, he is reduced to animalistic noises: growling like a mad thing when locked in the cellar, roaring like a monster when John and Pearl escape downriver on the skiff, screeching like a wounded animal when fleeing Cooper’s shotgun. It is noteworthy that Cooper tells the police, “I’ve got something trapped in my barn,” after Powell’s flight. Dave Robinson remarks on the popular tendency to describe mass murderers as “non-human” – aberrations from outside the moral categories that constitute us as human beings – since they violate what an absolutist would describe as a universal moral dictum (Robinson 1999, 8). Powell’s crimes are of such magnitude that characters question his very humanity.

Nonetheless, this monster successfully woos the recently widowed Willa Harper (Shelley Winters), befriends her daughter, Pearl (Sally Jane Bruce), and charms the local busybody, Icey Spoon (Evelyn Varden) in his efforts to find the stolen money that Willa’s husband, Ben, has hidden. The Harper’s son, John (Billy Chapin), twigs onto

the wolf's sheepish disguise immediately. And although John is unable to convince the moral majority of Powell's depravity, the film's attitudinal strategies support his labours to prove him a monster. In addition to the unsettling pantomimic qualities of Mitchum's performance, other techniques often mark Powell as a creature from outside the natural order. His bombastic *leitmotif* (a ghoulish revision of the haunting "Pretty Fly" melody sung by Pearl) is one such example. But it is the film's expressionistic lighting style that is the most overt of textual indicators, especially its associative alignment of Powell with shadow. His disruptive arrival is presaged ominously during John's bedtime story to Pearl: the line, "Before long, the bad men came," seems to cue Powell's enormous silhouette to cast itself suddenly upon the bedroom wall.

What does it mean, though, to represent the villain as an outsider, a repugnant Other, a *shadow*? In psychoanalytic theory, the use of the term *shadow* originated from the work of Carl Gustav Jung. The shadow is the shameful or embarrassing portion of one's whole self, stigmatised as "bad" by the ego, and either suppressed or repressed – hidden away within the unconscious (Jung 1959, 10). In most scenarios, the shadow is cast away from one's self and unconsciously projected onto another person – usually a troublesome or troubling individual. For Jung, recognising and becoming conscious of one's shadow is essential to the healthy psyche and requires considerable moral effort. Projection is always damaging because it "isolate[s] the subject from his environment, since instead of a real relation to it there is now only an illusory one. Projections change the world into the replica of one's unknown face. In the last analysis, therefore, they lead to an autoerotic or autistic condition in which one dreams a world whose reality remains forever unattainable" (ibid, 11).

Jung's analytical psychoanalysis is of considerable significance here, for in cinematic fictions the "autistic" world in which the projecting subject is isolated typically assumes two forms. In the first, the shadow assumes incorporeal status: "evil" is represented as *internal negativity*. Rather than recognise the shadow as an integrated element of one's moral self, an internal schism is effected. The *doppelganger* is a manifestation of this schism: "this is effectively a 'double,' in which humankind confronts its nemesis...by the exposure of the two competing sides of an individual – normally, one rational and civilised, the other uncontrolled and irrational, often more primal and atavistic" (Wells 2000, 8). Robert Mamoulian's adaptation of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (Robert Mamoulian, 1935) offers one such cinematic example of the

doppelganger – the wicked Edward Hyde (Fredric Marsh), whom the film suggests is the manifestation of Henry Jekyll's repressed "primal," often sexual, urges.

This schizoid doubling of identity is defined as "negativity" because the appearance of the shadow does not portend the creation of *two* individuals, but the *eradication* of one instead. By projecting his shadow away from himself, Jekyll becomes a nowhere man, effectively ceasing to exist. As Midgely remarks, "Jekyll has not so much 'become two people' as ceased to be anybody. He has become hollow, losing his centre, from refusing to acknowledge his shadow-side" (Midgley 1984, 130). By rejecting the existence of an internalised shadow, the projecting subject ultimately becomes alienated from the sense of a holistic self-identity (and their moral identity as well). An interesting scene in *Face/Off* (John Woo, 1997) illustrates this thesis. Agent Sean Archer (John Travolta) literally undergoes a face transplant with the incarcerated arch-criminal, Castor Troy (Nicholas Cage), in order to infiltrate Troy's criminal organisation. Now literally wearing the face of his nemesis, Archer suffers a brief psychotic episode in front of a mirror, brought about by the fear that his ability to distinguish between himself and his shadow is beginning to erode, and with it, his own wholesome moral (self-) identity. Unfortunately, films that make use of the doppelganger typically do not explicitly demonstrate the shadow's threat to the unified sense of self. They are content to posit the double as evidence of a moral duality, rather than make the more disturbing suggestion that he is one end of a continuum – another integral part of the self. The division of the villain into distinct and conflicting personae – innocent Harry Osborne (William Dafoe) versus malignant alter-ego, the Green Goblin – in *Spider-Man* (Sam Raimi, 2002) is one such example.

The majority of the villainous types that I have been discussing, however, are figures inhabiting the second form of "shadow worlds." Here, the shadow is *externally* projected onto another separate individual altogether, rather than internally projected as an alter-ego. Rather than own up to the possibility of one's own moral shortcomings, they are displaced and incorporated within the person of an (immoral) Other who bears the burden of an exorcised evil – a moral scapegoat, if you will. An enormously popular representation of this type of projected evil appears in the *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy (Peter Jackson, 2001-2003). Not only are good and evil represented in both polarised and absolute terms, but the moral schematic of the films perpetuates the "delusional" moral logic discussed by Jung. A figure of absolute evil, Lord Sauron, threatens to

overwhelm and conquer Middle Earth. Significantly, Sauron has no corporeal presence for most of the narrative, but instead, is represented as an enormous, fiery, disembodied eye. His minions, the terrifying Ring Wraiths, are little more than figures of living void, housed within black cloaks. These villains are literally walking shadows. Moreover, Sauron is able to extend his will over weaker individuals, and we see the gradually corrupting influence of his powerful Ring on Frodo (Elijah Wood), the innocent hobbit who seeks its destruction, but is nonetheless drawn to its potency. Here, then, is a fiction demonstrating the crux of Jung's argument regarding the shadow and the problem with projecting evil onto a villainous Other: *immorality is disavowed and disowned as "not-I," and as a result, the moral subject is saddled with the burden of an impossible inherent goodness.* In a manner similar to Jung, I am suggesting that the adoption of this attitude towards immorality is problematic, both logically and morally.

Firstly, it is important to note that in cinematic fictions, villainy is not always regarded as a mere sign of moral weakness. While Nietzsche might bemoan the Christian reduction of evil, the cinema frequently figures the villain as an *imposing* force. The protagonists in such fictions are often completely overwhelmed by forces that disintegrate any prospect for heroic, moral response. Consider the way immorality is popularly considered to *eradicate* the self, evident in the guilty expression, "something *came over me.*" Evil's sublimity lies in its ability to surpass rational and moral safeguards in seeking the dissolution of the self. There are good examples of such sublimity in horror cinema, such as the moral erasure of Jack Torrance (Jack Nicholson) in *The Shining* (Stanley Kubrick, 1980), and the literal engulfment and subsequent replacement of individuals by the formless entity in *The Thing* (John Carpenter, 1982). Such "sublime" evil is not merely the province of the horror film either. For example, in allying ourselves with Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) in *The Godfather* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1974), we may empathise with an individual who succumbs to an overwhelming and inexorable evil: in this case, the force of his obligations to his family's magisterial criminal empire. Our pleasure in Michael's villainy might be found in imagining that in similar circumstances, we might actually resist a seemingly inescapable descent into evil, whilst simultaneously recognising that such a decline would be inevitable. While we test our moral resolve by picturing circumstances in which we refuse to damn ourselves, we recognise that the force of the commitment to which Michael is bound does not brook refusal.

Evil, then, can be an almost preternaturally fearsome force. Far from believing evil to be a negative – like Midgley’s argument cited in the Introduction, or the modern Christian doctrine of evil as *privatio boni* (the absence of good) – Jung considered it to be both present in the world and *as significant a force as good*. “If the power of the Evil One had been as feeble as certain persons would wish it to appear, either the world would not have needed God to come down to it or it would have lain within the power of man to set the world to rights, which has certainly not happened so far” (Jung 1995, 54). Thus, not only does Jung’s idea give credence to the possibility of evil’s “sublimity,” but he recognises evil’s potential *attractiveness* as well. More importantly, because immorality is an aspect of one’s holistic moral self – and *not* an attribute belonging to the Other – the individual’s propensity for evil can be quite potent. It is not that we are to revalue this imposing evil as “good” in some way (as Nietzsche does), but simply to recognise that immorality is neither a lack nor something that is alien to one’s self. To be sure, the discovery of and capitulation to one’s own overwhelming propensities for wickedness informs some of the best examples of *film noir* – from the aptly titled *Force of Evil* to *Blue Velvet* (David Lynch, 1986). A relentless force of nature that pursues the children down the entire length of the Ohio River, Mitchum’s dreadful Hunter undoubtedly belongs to this tradition.

A second reason one might have for regarding evil as both substantial and *actual* (as opposed to virtual) is that good is typically regarded in this same manner. “The opposite of a seeming evil can only be a seeming good, and an evil that lacks substance can only be contrasted with a good that is equally non-substantial...If evil has no substance good must remain shadowy, for there is no substantial opponent for it to defend itself against, but only a shadow, a mere privation of good” (Jung 1995, 52). Moral philosophers interested in retaining a dualistic conception of ethics frequently are unwilling to concede to the prospect of evil’s insubstantiality. Radford, as we recall, believes that the villain is necessary to moral variegation, and furthermore, that a “wholly moral” world – that is a world without villainy – is impossible. “The only ‘evils’ would be natural ones; the closest things to moral evils in such a world would be man’s physical imperfections, and perhaps especially his mental ones” (Radford 1996, 141). Again, a real, cogent evil must exist in order to give meaning to moral action. Characters in *Night of the Hunter*, for example, make moral judgements according to this belief in ethical dualism. Bart, the reluctant Hangman (Paul Bryar), is one such

figure: upset at the lack of moral clarity in hanging Ben Harper (a clear victim of the Depression), Powell's more obvious evil will renew Bart's zest for capital punishment. As a convicted Powell is driven off to the gallows, the Hangman smiles delightedly: "This time, it'll be a privilege." Evil's use-value is again a matter of moral pragmatism: belief in Rightness is conditional on the premise of a cogent Wrongness.

However, it is of vital importance for our purposes to recognise that *such a binary is not an end in itself*. While residually dualist in thinking, Jung actively resisted the polarisation of good and evil and instead insisted on the *alchemical union* of the two. Within this monistic union (the *coniunctio*), each category dissolves into its opposite, for "without the experience of opposites there is no experience of wholeness and hence no inner approach to the sacred figures" (Jung 1968, 28). What exactly is meant by the union, or "conjunction" of moral opposites? Why privilege such a conception over those that favour a polarized morality? How might this reconciliation between the two poles of a moral dualism be experienced as more gratifying and ultimately, more logical than construing villainy as Other?

Like Jung, I have been arguing towards the consideration of evil as a self-sufficient condition. Bataille also laments the derivativeness of evil, insofar as "the deliberate creation of Evil – that is to say, wrong – is acceptance and recognition of Good. It pays homage to it and, by calling itself wicked, it admits that it is relative and derivative – that it could not exist without good" (Bataille 1972, 22). But there is an alternative to this dualistic, "contrastive" tradition, one that claims that *it is logically fallacious to claim that good and evil are correlative*, or even mutually contingent. Dualists conceive of good and evil as "necessary counterparts in the same way as any quality and its logical opposite: redness can occur, it is suggested, only if nonredness also occurs. *But unless evil is merely the privation of good, they are not logical opposites* and some further argument would be needed to show that they are counterparts in the same way as genuine logical opposites" (Mackie 1964, 50). As I have been suggesting, evil *cannot* be the mere privation of good. Like colour, it is not *necessarily* dependent upon an antithetical category for its definition.

Dualists of Radford's ilk might fall back on aesthetic analogies as a defence, arguing that "contrasts heighten beauty...[I]n a musical work, for example, there may occur discords which somehow add to the beauty of the work as a whole" (Mackie 1964, 53). And yet, even these analogies are inapt. By considering discordance in

contrastive terms, one does not appreciate the merits of the discord *independently* of its relation to a melodious whole. A musician who intentionally substitutes an augmented subdominant (F#) for the usual major third (E) instead of playing a “normal” C chord still creates a sound that has aural interest irrespective of its relation to the “normal” chord as a whole. Indeed, an entire composition could be intentionally “discordant” in nature. In spite of the misleading adjective used to describe it, discordant or atonal music is possible without an aural comparison to harmonious tonality. With regards to the cinema, a character can easily be recognized as evil without the benefit of contradistinction. That is, it is not *necessary* to compare the thrill-seeking murderers, Brandon Shaw (John Dall) and Phillip Morgan (Farley Granger) in *Rope* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1948) with their former schoolteacher – the upright Rupert Cadell (Jimmy Stewart) – to recognise the wickedness of their actions. So too do we recognise (and appreciate) the colossal bitchiness of Crystal Allen (Joan Crawford) in *The Women* (George Cukor, 1939) independently of Mary Haines’ (Norma Shearer) unfailing wholesomeness. Crystal’s devious attempts at husband-snatching, after all, have no moral correlate. Like the murder that is committed by Philip and Brandon, comprehending the significance of her actions is not contingent upon contradistinction. Most immoral actions *have no moral opposite*; their “wrongness” is comprehended irrespective of any possible relation to “the good.”

Yet the majority of classical Hollywood narratives – especially goal-oriented narratives – make use of just this sort of moral comparison in the interests of character delineation and sympathetic invitation. We remember from earlier chapters that the classical melodrama’s moral system is residually Manichean, albeit in graduated form. *The Iron Mask* (Allan Dwan, 1929) is a familiar example, in which every protagonist has an actantial opposant: the virtuous Constance (Marguerite De La Motte) is menaced by the criminal Milady de Winter (Dorothy Revier); the good King Louis XIV is opposed by his evil twin brother (both William Blakewell); D’Artagnan (Douglas Fairbanks) not only foils the scheming Count de Rochefort (Ullrich Haupt), but ascends into paradise at the film’s conclusion. Again, the object of this “doubling” is to promote support for “heroic” values through contradistinction. Recall Peter Brooks’ argument regarding the origins of melodrama following the French Revolution – that a “legible” moral landscape is reconstituted by the melodrama in humanistic terms. So too does the classical Hollywood melodrama strive to reinforce “moral legibility” in the light of

Judeo-Christianity's decline as the dominant ethic, as well as the perceived onset of postmodern relativity.

And yet, if Hollywood Manicheanism is based on a flawed moral logic, as I have been arguing, evil is not so readily rendered Other and exorcised. At first glance, *The Night of the Hunter* seems to adopt the classic, melodramatic moral structure. Rachel Cooper acts as the children's guardian angel and her unquestionable wholesomeness is set in direct opposition to Powell's menace. She is first introduced after the conclusion of John and Pearl's dream-like voyage down a river draped in night. Daybreak lights upon the riverbank, and from a child's-eye-view, we pan up from her toes to her stern, but loving face. More than anyone in the film, Cooper seems to speak out beyond the boundaries of the narrative discourse, looking almost directly into the camera's lens and declaring, "I'm a strong tree with branches for many birds." She looks out at us with the rhapsodic intensity evident in Gish's previous silent performances. Clearly, this is the transfiguring love of another True Heart Susie.¹¹

And yet, the opposition between characters is *not* that of the classical melodrama's muted clash of good versus evil. What we are witnessing is a struggle between *two conflicting aspects of God*, or (for the agnostic viewer), a representation of the tension between *two seemingly contradictory facets of a singular morality*. Attempting to externalise and posit immorality as Other is a misguided enterprise because a polarity *is never stable*, and to this state of perpetual flux we can attribute a name: *enantiodromia*. The term originates from the fragments of Heraclitus, in which he famously claims, "the way up and the way down are one" (qtd. in Wheelwright 1966, 78). More than actually complementing each other, Heraclitus argues, the extremes of a binary actually have a tendency to converge into their opposites. Jung borrows this term as a name for the psychological condition in which an extreme personality abruptly acquires opposing characteristics in order to make the unconscious, "or unlive" aspect of the self conscious: "the more extreme a position is, the more easily may we expect an enantiodromia, a conversion of something into its opposite. The best is the most threatened with some devilish perversion just because it has done

¹¹ Indeed, at times, the film seems to recall a cinema of another age: its style is a feverish marriage between the psychodrama of the Weimar expressionists (angular and minimalist sets, fields of shadow, canted framing) and the melodrama of D. W. Griffith (emphatic irises in and out, associative editing, Lillian Gish's performative connotations).

the most to suppress evil" (Jung 1956, 375). The representation of this process is the subject of the occasional cinematic morality play: *Insomnia* (Christopher Nolan, 2002), is a character study of a self-righteous homicide detective (Al Pacino) who discovers to his increasing discomfort just how easy and attractive murder might be under the right circumstances. Another illustration can be found in the classical Western, *Red River* (Howard Hawks, 1948), in which the ambition of a single-minded cattle baron (John Wayne) gradually moves towards tyranny during the blazing of the Chisolm trail.

This is not to argue that the Reverend's villainy is the resultant condition of repressed desires. The film invites such easy, ultimately fatuous psychoanalysis, especially given that Powell's switchblade frequently pops out of his trouser pocket whenever a woman makes sexual advances towards him. Powell's hatred towards female sexuality might incite salivation among Freudians, but for Jungian analysts and moral philosophers, it is a symptom of a larger (moral) problem: how can the combination of misogyny and a penchant for immorality remain contiguous with a religious sensibility? From this point of view, our interest in Powell does not rest in his oppositional relation to Cooper, but in the suggestion that his personality is *actually contiguous with hers*. *The Night of the Hunter* does not restage the age-old conflict between Christ and Satan dramatized in medieval Mystery plays; instead, the film can be read as a theological rumination on the tension between Old Testament and New Testament conceptions of God, or, in more secular terms, a debate concerning two related – but warring – interpretations of ideal moral behaviour.

Jung's ideas on the subject are articulated in his desire *to reconcile evil with a divine good*. Crucially, he believes that God's earthly incarnation (as the *Summum Bonum*) is a step towards acknowledging his shadow, a movement towards a greater self-awareness. The summation of his thinking on the union of opposites occurs in "Answer to Job" (1958), in which Jung characterises a God who is both supremely good, and yet supremely destructive. "Such a condition is only conceivable either when no reflecting consciousness is present at all, or when the capacity for reflection is very feeble and a more or less adventitious phenomenon. A condition of this sort can only be described as *amoral*" (Jung 1995, 123). Here we recognize the original God of Israel, the "jealous God," the God who inspires awe and is not above the practice of frequent and indiscriminate smiting. This is Mill's morally inscrutable God and the Nietzschean God capable of kindness and cruelty in equal measure.

Yet, although Nietzsche might venerate such a God for embodying the noble qualities he idealizes, Jung describes such a God as morally unconscious.¹² God therefore needs man in order to become *aware* in His grace – to become a completely moral being. While Satan is the instigator of this movement by causing God to doubt Job's devotion, it is Job himself who suffers and is in fact saddled with God's own Satanic, shadow-nature. "Yahweh projects onto Job a sceptic's face which is hateful to him because it is his own, and which gazes at him with an uncanny and critical eye" (Jung 1995, 133). Thus, villainy can be a shadowy projection of one's own self-doubt, much like the evil Ahriman was born out of one of Ohrmazd's doubting thoughts in Zoroastrian theogony. By becoming Christ, Yahweh "creates a durable basis for a later assimilation of the other side" (Jung 1995, 166). That is, in order to appreciate the moral law to which he subjects his creations and yet from which he exempts himself, he must become man, and thus achieve greater awareness of his own nature.

In similar theological terms, *The Night of the Hunter* deals with the Christian problem of reconciling two apparently contrasting aspects of God. While the film ostensibly seems to place Powell and Cooper in opposition, it is more accurate to describe their relationship as an antinomy – a conflict between two manifestations of the same authority: Powell embodying an Old Testament wrathfulness; Cooper embodying a New Testament beneficence. More importantly, an engagement with Powell can be experienced as enjoyable and beneficial, rather than simply disturbing, because of his relation to a divine totality, or, a moral whole. Indeed, the film often complicates a straightforward moral polarisation at the level of both narrative and style. For example, Powell is occasionally overtly linked with Ben Harper, forming a kind of curious, good father/bad father position for John. The most telling and emotionally powerful example of this paternal unification occurs during Powell's final arrest. The sequence precisely mirrors the scene of Ben's arrest, right down to figure movement, the child's-eye-view of the scene, and the crosscutting between the police officer's brutality and John's horrified protests. That John should cry out, "Don't!" during both acts of authoritarian violence, that both he and the film's narration should make an associative link between

¹² It is worth noting briefly that Nietzsche's theological ruminations had a strong impact on Jung. From May 1936 to February 1939, Jung gave a series of seminars on *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* in which (among other things) he attempted to reconcile Nietzsche's early Christian upbringing with the philosopher's later infamous atheism.

these arrests is an incredibly effective demonstration of the convergence of opposites. In spite of all that has transpired, John's strange filial devotion to Powell is strong enough to prevent him from identifying him at the trial as "the man who killed [his] mother," even when directed by the pointing finger of an anonymous prosecutor. John may be heeding Cooper's advice, ("Judge not, lest ye be judged"), but it is more likely that he recognizes an unseen aspect of the Father.

Other subtleties link Powell not just to Ben, but to Cooper as well. During his first day at Cooper's farmhouse sanctuary, John is driven outside by the sight of Rachel producing her Bible to read to her flock of orphans. Understandably, he's had quite enough of religion by now – enough of poor Willa's tent revival Jeremiads, of his stepfather's righteous tyrannies, of an arbitrary and bullying God. Rachel has a difficult task ahead of her in convincing John of God's supposedly all-loving nature, since experience has proven this identity to be a fallacy. To add to John's uncertainty, Rachel identifies the Old Testament patriarch Moses as a "king" – albeit a king who serves a God who is both Law-Giver and Plague-Bringer according to the book of Exodus. When Rachel names Christ as the "one true King" in a subsequent reading, John is caught between moral authorities. "You said there were *two* kings," he insists, in confusion. Rachel pauses for a beat, then reluctantly admits, "I guess there was." It is a shattering acknowledgment, for if Powell does represent a kind of cruel, Old Testament authority, then he must somehow be integrated within the larger (Judeo-Christian) moral order that the film evokes. The "Everlasting Arms" duet referenced at the chapter's beginning is one such attempt to represent such reconciliation in allegorical terms. That the film never conclusively achieves this convergence, nor *overtly* suggests that Powell could be anything other than (in director Laughton's terms) "a diabolical shit" in the final equation, is evidence of the magnitude of this moral dilemma. Powell's villainy could test the patience of a saint, and even Rachel finds it difficult to extend her "many branches" toward him. This is exactly the kind of spiritual difficulty that Nietzsche would identify as the "most holy." "You were so mad, you shot him," a love-stricken Ruby sobs as Rachel drags her away from the lynch mob that howls for Powell's blood. Biting her lips determinedly, Rachel does not answer, and her silence proves that there are limits to her "all-embracing" Christian tolerance.

If God can be both divinely kind and divinely cruel in equal measure, Jung suggests that the holy Trinity should therefore be regarded as a *Quaternary*, with Satan

squaring the Christian triangle (Jung 1968, 30). In a kind of Nietzschean turn, Satan is not “Otherized” as an embodiment of pure evil, but is recognised as the figure that houses God’s displaced cruelty and is thus welcomed back within the folds of a singular divine personage. By helping God become conscious of himself as a moral being, Lucifer fulfils the role of his original namesake – as the Light-Bringer – rather than being regarded as an exiled shadow-brother, an Anti-Christ. Likewise, an allegiance with Powell might come from the recognition of one’s own shadow, and the formation of an alliance with him is as potentially morally instructive as empathetically aligning oneself with Cooper. For, if the self is truly an internalised union of opposites, then “evil needs to be pondered just as much as good, for good and evil are ultimately nothing but ideal extensions and abstractions of doing, and both belong to the chiaroscuro of life. In the last resort there is no good that cannot produce evil and no evil that cannot produce good” (Jung 1968, 35).¹³ In *The Night of the Hunter*, the distance between good and evil is just as close as the indistinguishable space between the interlocking fingers of “Right Hand/Left Hand.” The “LOVE” and “HATE” tattoos on Powell’s knuckles cease to have any real oppositional significance when he wields his switchblade between both hands indiscriminately.

So, why might the identification of one’s shadow and the re-integration of the Other be experienced as gratifying? It is possible to draw similar conclusions to Jung using ordinary ethical language, and without reference to sacred figures, scripture, or other transcendental discourses. Wood, we recall, characterises monstrosity in the progressive horror film as the return of a repressed Other. Most importantly, he too conceives of the pleasure of the monster-villain as apocalyptic, and that the audience’s enjoyment of its transgressions articulates “the sense of a civilization condemning itself” – that is, its own foundational ideological structures (Wood 1984, 191). What the villain brings to focus is “a spirit of negativity, an undifferentiated lust for destruction, that seems to lie not far below the surface of the modern collective unconscious” (ibid, 191). Why else might we celebrate Leatherface’s (Gunnar Hansen) atrocities in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Tobe Hooper, 1974) if we did not recognise in him certain elements of our own repressed violent and sexual (potentially Dionysian) energies?

¹³ Similarly, Adam Morton’s central thesis in *On Evil* (2004) is that evil individuals are not remarkably different than “normal” individuals and that some of the greatest acts of atrocity are committed within the “acceptable” routines of everyday life.

Historically, various authoritative bodies have attempted to legislate against works that represent and cater to these “debased” qualities. In particular, the Production Code’s provisions were explicitly designed to steer filmmakers away from positive representations of immorality in order to promote moral clarity in the movies. Indeed, one of its primary dictates was that “*evil and good are never confused* and...evil is always recognised clearly as evil” (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 351). Absolutely no confusion of moral categories would be permitted, and furthermore, “in the end, the audience [must] feel that *evil is wrong* and *good is right*” (ibid, 351). In adherence to the Code’s “compensating values,” then, the murderously ambitious Rico (Edward G. Robinson) in *Little Caesar* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1931) gets his just desserts for circumventing the breadline in seizing his own piece of American pie. The Code’s “Otherization” of the gangster was necessary in order to dispel the “myth” that evil might be attractive. Particular sections in the Code emphasised the “inherent” repulsiveness of certain kinds of immorality. If a narrative treated on sin, “it must distinguish between *sin* which by its very nature *repels*, and *sin* which by its nature *attracts*” (ibid, 352). The first class included such “unattractive” iniquities as murder, theft and cruelty, while the second class included “crimes of apparent heroism” and (of course) “sex sins,” which were perceived as being more “appealing,” and therefore, “dangerous” (ibid, 352-353).

Thus, during the height of the Code’s influence, it was a general rule that evil could not be represented sympathetically; it had to belong to some repugnant Other from outside the moral order. Even a film as (relatively) morally complex as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* (John Huston, 1948) was ultimately forced to position an initially attractive character outside the bounds of the audience’s sympathies. The film charts the moral decay of Fred C. Dobbs (Humphrey Bogart), a gold prospector who succumbs to greed and attempts to murder his partners during an expedition, and in the process of this downward spiral, he is transformed from a charismatic adventurer into an irredeemable lunatic. Despite the initial camaraderie characterizing their auriferous enterprise, teamwork gives way to selfishness in what could have been a classic example of enantiodromia. However, due to the Code’s restrictions, the film cannot suggest that the process is inevitable; instead, Dobbs is the bad apple that spoils the whole bunch. Even in performance terms, Bogart’s status as a leading man is still shadowed by his early history as a dour-faced heavy in such Warner crime classics as *The Petrified Forest* (Archie Mayo, 1936) and *The Roaring Twenties* (Raoul Walsh,

1939). By the year of its production in 1955, *The Night of the Hunter* was able to take advantage of the Code's declining authority in its representation of a murderous Preacher, and yet the force of the Code's restrictions were still stringent enough to prevent an explicit linkage between Powell and Cooper.

Nevertheless, despite the Code's insistence, the polarisation of good and evil was no guarantee that audiences would "feel" evil to be "wrong." I have established that there are several fissures within a text through which one might glimpse the reconciliation between apparently polar opposites. The highly ambiguous, non-diegetic fanfare at the conclusion of *Night of the Hunter* is certainly evocative of evil's closeness: the peaceful, Yuletide tranquillity established in the final exterior shot of Rachel's snow blanketed house is undermined by the unsettling return of the Hunter leitmotif. Such a sinister reprise is a reminder of the importance of keeping one's enemies close, rather than alienating evil. Filmic representations of villainy that reclaim evil as an aspect of the self are both gratifying and commendable because they acknowledge that acts of immorality are not inherently repulsive. *The cinema can manipulate our expected attitudinal evaluations of morally charged actions, or likewise we can respond perversely to a film's intended evaluation of a character because there is no moral condition that is ultimately unfamiliar or alien to us.* Even a classic melodrama as ostensibly morally polarized as *Sunrise* (F. W. Murnau, 1927) is subject to such a condition. Here, the loving Wife (Janet Gaynor) and the sensual Woman from the City (Margaret Livingston) represent twin poles of a modern psychomachia, while the (Every)Man (George O'Brien) is the corporeal battleground over which these forces war. Crucially, however, he is drawn to *both* extremes and "in fact, the entire narrative of the film can be seen as charting the male protagonist's vacillation between the two" (Fischer 1998, 41). *Sunrise* is subtitled *A Song of Two Humans* because it transcends the sentimentality of melodrama and explores "the limits of human emotion" – including the frightening but very real potential for malevolence (Fischer 1998, 51).

Even more crucially, a viewer's experience of pleasure in a villain such as Henry Powell potentially "opens up" the viewer's "closed" way of regarding other individuals. For our cultural tendency to use ethics as the means to transform individuals into Others can ultimately only promote a fundamental estrangement between individuals, an unbridgeable gulf between "I" and "Thou." This breach is at the heart of the Marxist's critique of ethics. We recall that conventional morality is merely an ideological tool that

serves bourgeois interests, according to the more radical Marxists. For Fredric Jameson:

the judgmental habit of ethical thinking, of ranging everything in the antagonistic categories of good and evil (or their binary equivalents), is not merely an error, but is objectively rooted in the inevitable and inescapable centeredness of every individual consciousness or individual subject: what is good is what belongs to me, what is bad is what belongs to the Other (Jameson 1981, 234).

And yet, representations of villainy that do not suggest that immorality belongs to the Other posit an *alternative form of intersubjective ethics: the sense of a common, shared moral identity*. This form of “intersubjectivity” opens up a new ethical space beyond moral judgmentalism, and allows for a process of self-determination that is not founded on exclusionary tactics. The viewer’s arrival at a more comprehensive self-knowledge through perverse allegiance with the villain is similar to the protagonist’s arrival at a new state of awareness through the experience of “otherness,” as outlined in Chapter 2. In fact, as David Parker suggests, “there is a way of recollecting our own subjective lives which is also, by implication, a way of understanding someone else – not simply as an Other, a ‘she,’ but as another subjectivity not altogether discontinuous from our own” (Parker 1994, 47). As I suggested in Chapter 4, *sympathetic engagement with villains is a project that seeks to bring us into closer proximity to other individuals*. Radically speaking, the moral pragmatics behind perverse allegiance might be to construct a sense of the “I” that does not ultimately end in loneliness.

In sum, the dominance of the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition within Western culture has segregated evil from its necessary place within our conception of morality. Evil is externalised somewhere “out there,” rendered Other, and ultimately, disowned. However, the philosophical principle of enantiodromia allows for a reunion of the moral and immoral since each end of this polarity contains the roots of its relative – even in the most oppositional value system. Thus, acknowledging and “owning” the pleasure gleaned from representations of villainous actions and our sympathetic allegiance with the villain is the reintegration of the Satanic – the recognition of one’s immoral “shadow” in the interest of forming a holistic self-awareness. In doing so, our own sense of moral self-identity is formulated *in relation to others* rather than *in opposition to an Other*. The villain is no longer “that which is not me,” and the cinema can occasionally set the stage for a glorious and diabolical homecoming, in which we apperceive the magnificent umbrage of a familiar evil.

Conclusion

The Moral of the Story: Villainy and Its Merits

"Sometimes I have wondered whether life wouldn't be much more amusing if we were all devils, and no nonsense about angels and being good."

- Dr. Pretorious in *The Bride of Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1935)

Luke Plummer (Tom Tyler) is not the most memorable of villains. In fact, he does not appear until the final ten minutes of *Stagecoach* (John Ford, 1939), and even then, he looks fairly *de rigueur* by Hollywood Western standards. Batwing chaps, black hat, scowling countenance, unfashionable stubble: all present and accounted for. Clearly, he isn't anything that the Ringo Kid (John Wayne) couldn't mop up in a few seconds flat. And indeed, he does meet his maker in a rather summary fashion, care of a shotgun blast to the belly during the film's climactic showdown sequence. What *is* impressive about Luke is the shadow his prolonged absence casts over the entire narrative. Characters speak about him in awed, hushed tones and the predestined confrontation between Luke and Ringo is an eventuality that makes *everyone* nervous – even the unflappable John Wayne. At one point, Ringo actually attempts to avoid his destiny – avenging Luke's murder of his family – by escaping his police escort and riding off into the night. He is only prevented from chickening out by an approaching party of marauding Comanche. Even if we are slightly disappointed by Luke's appearance when he is at last introduced (we expect a monster; we get a pretty-boy strongman straight out of a Monogram oater), at least the saloon crowd find him impressively fearsome: after hearing the news that Ringo has arrived in Lordsburg, Luke shocks them into frightened silence with his murderous glare. In many ways, Luke's villainous stature is just as ominous as the dreaded Geronimo (Chief Whitehorse), whose presence is likewise withheld from the narrative until the spectacular charge on the stagecoach that constitutes the first of the film's twin climaxes. In short, it may be that an understated representation of villainy – even one based on little more than reputation – can inspire fear and trembling, even if the actual manifestation of evil is less than impressive.

The validity of my study rests on the assumption that viewers can and do respond to representations of villainy with an admixture of repulsion and other more positive emotions, including awe, adulation and fascination. At the very least, villains are a source of gratifying entertainment; at the most, they prompt a valuable

reconsideration of our own moral identity. In commanding our sympathy and respect, Booth argues that “characters earn our moral approval whenever they choose to do something we think they should do, even if their deed is conventionally judged to be *immoral*. Indeed, we love them especially if they act against the conventionally moral, so long as we approve of their reasons. The effect is even stronger if they pursue their ‘immorality’ at great cost to themselves” (Booth 1983, 417). But what if the actions they choose defy our moral expectations? Moreover, what if we *disapprove* of their reasons, but find ourselves loving them regardless? William Munny’s (Clint Eastwood) murder of Little Bill Daggett (Gene Hackman) in *Unforgiven* (Clint Eastwood, 1992) is unequivocally terrible because it destroys the little humanity still remaining in the gunslinger, *and yet* one might still experience a surge of sympathy for Munny *because* he has knowingly committed himself to self-destruction and *even though* we recognise the wrongness of his actions. Thus, at the core of my arguments is the claim that the gratification we obtain from villainy and the benefits of perverse allegiance are occasionally attributable to a character’s very identity as an immoral individual.

In fact, it is the very nature of moral precepts that makes possible a viewer’s pleasurable emotional response to scenes of moral outrage. Moral precepts are *non-coercive*; they suggest only what we *ought* to do. They cannot cause us to obey their imperatives and they cannot cause us to form particular beliefs about them either. These moral “facts” and events differ from physical facts and events insofar as the former “*cause* us to form beliefs about them, but moral facts and events do not cause beliefs about them – since they cannot cause anything” (McGinn 1997, 37). The proof required to demonstrate that “murder is wrong,” for example, is of a qualitatively different kind than the proof required to demonstrate that “every action prompts an equal and opposite reaction”: the latter is empirically demonstrable and observable, while the former is not.¹ While the factual content of a term such as murder exists against the background of social value judgements, it does not inherently arise from the event itself and one cannot use logic or reason to “prove” the truth of its moral factuality.

¹ For an even more radical claim about moral value, refer to Book III (section 1) of David Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, in which he concludes that one cannot locate moral truth within an event itself. “The vice entirely escapes you,” he claims, “as long as you consider the object. You can never find it, till you turn your reflection into your own breast, and find a sentiment of disapprobation, which arises in you, towards this action” (Hume 1978, 468-469).

Not only is it beyond the capacity of a moral fact to *cause* a subject to form a belief about it, and thus adhere to its imperative (many individuals commit murder despite the factuality of its wrongness), it cannot cause a subject to *feel* a certain way towards it. While one might come to adopt the belief that murder is wrong, the adoption of this belief does not inherently result in a commensurable emotionally coloured attitude toward the belief. As I argued in the Introduction, adhering to the imperatives of a particular moral principle *may* be accompanied by impassioned feelings about said principle, but these feelings are obviously not *automatic*. I might believe that murder is wrong, but my belief in the prohibition against murder is not necessarily complemented by a display of emotion when I articulate this belief. Nor, for that matter, is my disgust towards those who do not share my belief in any way autogenetic. A film may desire a particular emotional response in the *application* of our beliefs as we engage in a fictional scenario, but other circumstances may either attenuate the desired emotion or mitigate against its manifestation. I may recognise that the outrageously gluttonous and execrable habits of Albert Spica (Michael Gambon) in *The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989) are intended to prompt corresponding feelings of loathing and disgust for the character. And yet, for whatever reason, I might find myself quite unmoved by the scene in which he forces a hapless member of the kitchen staff to eat dog faeces before urinating on his victim. Just as our “insensitive” hypothetical viewer of *Chinatown* might not find Noah Cross upsetting, the moral fact that Spica’s behaviour is “disgusting” does not *necessarily* bring about actual symptoms of disgust in a viewer who observes his behaviour.

This lack of coercive causality in moral statements partly explains why the moral evaluation of cinematic villains does not necessarily *cause* an “appropriate” emotion. I believe that filmmakers are cognizant of the potentially wide range of responses their work can evoke from viewers, and therefore, filmic narratives operate based on the assumption that viewers will *not* necessarily manifest a uniform emotion to the behaviour of a character. Such variability largely accounts for why filmmakers typically attempt to *position* viewers in order to coax a desired response to the character’s actions. Furthermore, this is why a viewer may find that agreeing with the emotional terms set by a film can be conducive to her own moral development: *the empathic knowledge that film can provide allows a viewer to “feel” a particular way towards a moral belief in a way that the belief itself does not make possible*. A viewer

can either cheer on or hiss Bruno Anthony (Robert Walker) as he struggles to reclaim the cigarette lighter that he plans on using to frame Guy Haines (Farley Granger) for a murder in *Strangers on a Train* (Alfred Hitchcock, 1951). Crucially, the variability of these emotional responses hinges on the flexibility of a viewer's attitudes towards immoral actions. Should I feel sympathetic towards Bruno's predicament, it is partially because I do not have an intractable emotional attitude towards murder. More importantly, my sympathy is also attributable to my identity as a holistic moral individual. Perverse allegiance is the recognition of our own potential for immorality, but is also a possible means of expanding our empathy towards others.

By what means and for what purposes, then, might a film construct a villainous character? In Chapter 1, I considered the villain's structural function within a work and described the textual elements used to construct a villainous character. The larger interest of this chapter was to account for the means by which a film's representational strategies might persuade a viewer to adopt a particular attitude towards a character. I argued that three primary textual factors are involved in the cinematic construction of characters: 1) representation, 2) function, and 3) evaluation. Villainy is regarded as a particular character trait that must be initiated through strategies of filmic representation. Since all characters may be understood as narrative units with certain structural roles, villainy also has a specific narrative function. Finally, to recognise a character as villainous is to make a corresponding evaluative claim about their disposition, which is in turn guided by aspects of a film's narrational strategies, including *mise-en-scène*, moral structuration, and narrative "voice," and POV.

Subsequently, in Chapter 2, I discussed the kinds of narrative structures that make use of villains and determined the villain's functions within these narratives. In goal-oriented narratives, the narrational role of the villain is actantial and both influences and limits the types of possible movements of other characters in the narrative. Here, the villain's actantial function can be of equal structural importance as the hero's in the narrative's process of amelioration. In turn, this process underscores the influence of narrational alignment and focalisation on the shaping of a viewer's sympathies. The most important way in which she relates to the hero is through her textual role as an oppugner: a figure who not only tests the merits of a protagonist's values and ambitions, but whose desires a viewer might believe to have greater structural authority than those belonging to the hero.

Meanwhile, in character-oriented narratives, the morality of the character is the subject of the narrative's investigation and simultaneously directs the film's formal structure. In these films, the villain often appears in the guise of the anti-hero – a character-function that renders the role of hero purely actantial by disassociating the protagonist from the traditional realm of virtue. In such an instance, a film's narrational strategies are potentially revelatory and are employed in order to investigate a villain's "wicked" disposition. Within an anti-heroic text, narrative structure, narration and subjective access are subjected to meta-narrational techniques that typically ask us to critique the behaviour of a protagonist. These anti-heroic character studies are usually quite baroque in form, emulating the villain's morally skewed perception of the world, and typically seek to encourage an ironic relationship between viewers and protagonists.

Moving away from the structural concerns of cinematic narratology in Chapter 3, I considered the means by which a *viewer* might nominate a villain and what such an evaluation could mean for that viewer's own system of values. It is to be understood that just as some works require us to take on the role of a morally indefensible "mock viewer," so too may we adopt viewing positions that contradict the morally preferred evaluation of particular characters. To a large extent, the reasons for this "rebellious" position are cognitive. That is, we have found that a film's efforts at moral nomination are surprisingly imprecise due to the nature of the reconstructive process by which viewers synthesize a collection of traits into the idea of a possible person. In addition, this person's values may influence our nomination of their moral identity, but they will not necessarily guarantee our sympathies. Indeed, she may possess qualities that we find attractive, but for non-moral reasons. The dialectical process of character synthesis and the unreliability of sympathy result in a kind of interpretive indeterminacy, which can effectively destabilise straightforward attempts at nomination.

To that end, any act of moral evaluation should more accurately be understood as a tacit form of self-analysis. In Chapter 4, I argued that cinema allows for the potential reflection upon one's moral self, in which the evaluation of character provides a valuable means of self-discovery. Villains may provide two differing evaluative measures: 1) that which is provided by the Other; and 2) that which is provided by an act of recognition. By regarding the villain in the first sense – as "that-which-is-not-me" – a viewer typically shores up her own "virtuosity." On the other hand, the more explorative viewer might consider the character as a reflection (and potential revelation)

of her own perversities. In empathising with the villain, one may discover a hitherto unrecognised aspect of one's self, or come to appreciate the unordinary values held by a morally alien individual. This acquisition of empathic (and not propositional) knowledge is gained in the interest of moral clarification – a truer understanding of what a complex ethical precept might mean for us, and a more realistic, *holistic* conception of our own moral identity. Moving beyond empathetic feelings for the villain towards a sympathetic appreciation for her immorality can also be instructive in these regards, but should not necessarily be regarded as complicity with their values, virtual wish-fulfilment, nor a morally incoherent response.

However, this “appreciation” may be considered a troubling prospect for some viewers. Allegiance with a villain seems to present us with a kind of moral paradox: how might we come to form an allegiance with an immoral individual, especially given the prohibitions against condoning behaviour one knows to be despicable? Confronted with the challenge that perverse allegiance seems to present to their moral integrity, viewers have various potential means of responding to this apparent “compromising” of their values. One must show that 1) one does not really feel sympathy for the character, 2) the character is not immoral, or, 3) that it is not reprehensible to sympathise with an immoral character. In the final two chapters of my study, I forwarded my own possible solutions to the apparent paradox presented by a positive response to villainy.

To begin with, I suggested in Chapter 5 that our moral responses are sometimes simulated and are not like those we apply to analogous real-life scenarios. This solution differs from other related explanations offered by moral critics, who have suggested 1) that our reactions are *aesthetically* based (they are responses to a text's formal means of representation), or, 2) that we do not sympathise with the villain on the basis of her immorality, but according to other factors instead. I am suggesting, however, that we occasionally must adjust our real-world values to suit the demands of the fiction, and that sometimes, one's feelings towards the villain are not “actually” sympathy; instead, engagement with the villain is a form of appreciative role-playing. Moreover, this kind of “moral simulation” is a particularly apt way of describing our allegiance with the melodramatic villain. Pleasure in these instances takes place at the level of performance, for although a character's affective and expressive articulations have certain inwardly and outwardly directed moral valences, their melodramatic deployment inspires aesthetic appraisal over moral evaluation. As the melodramatic villain seems to

compulsively perform her immorality for the sheer entertainment value of such a spectacle, the viewer correspondingly responds with gratitude to the character's "illicit" endeavours by simulating the role of collusive appreciator.

Some villainous characters, however, can be so depraved that they short-circuit our desire to simulate moral states, and we must respond to them at the level of the actual (rather than the virtual). As the summation of my study, I offered two further solutions to our apparent moral dilemma in which I forwarded reasons why a villain might *not* be regarded as immoral (despite all appearances), and further, located pragmatic moral value in perverse allegiance. As a first possibility, I suggested that allegiance with the villain is possible as her apparent immorality actually represents a revaluation of accepted moral norms whereby evil transcends a specious good. This Nietzschean solution does not simply claim that a character has been misjudged and that it is not immoral to violate the principle in question. Nor does it maintain that the criteria according to which a character has been nominated as immoral are unjust. Rather, revaluation implies a complete *reworking* of a conventionally moral framework by an individual who seems to transcend those limited (and limiting) ethical strictures. The figures of the oppugner and the alloy introduced earlier are of particular significance here: occasionally, an emphasis on the alloy's *negative* traits (as opposed to her positive ones) can actually amplify one's sympathetic alignment with a villain. More importantly, the oppugner's apparent "evil" can be reconceived as a necessary, and much needed good. Rather than being conceived of as antithetical to the good, the villain's cruelty may in fact be recognised as an important albeit neglected aspect of our conception of kindness.

Not only can the immoral actions of the villain "perversely" be revaluated, but they can also be regarded as a viewer's means of access to reconciliation with a banished foundational principle. In trying to demonstrate that allegiance with villainous characters is not an immoral form of engagement, other moral critics have argued that perverse allegiance 1) provides a safe opportunity to vicariously experience antisocial desires, or, 2) fills a need for variety in our engagement with characters and actively helps to prevent moral complacency. I believe, however, that the final (and probably most important) reasons why perverse allegiance should not be construed as morally contradictory, is that the empathic knowledge it can provide allows viewers the opportunity (1) to consider their own moral identity in a more holistic – rather than

merely wholesome – sense, and (2) to conceive of that identity in continuity with (rather than in opposition to) other individuals. Although the dominant ethical tradition has segregated, displaced, and disowned evil – conceiving of immorality as Other – films that demonstrate the principle of enantiodromia allow viewers to recognise that even the most oppositional value systems contain within each end of its polarity the roots of its relative. Acknowledging and “owning” the pleasure gleaned from representations of villainous actions means recognising one’s immoral “shadow” and is undertaken in the interest of forming a more holistic and communally-oriented self-awareness.

I hope that my study of this character-type and the pleasures she evokes has complicated the rather summary treatment the villain has received in the past. At the very least, I hope that I have demonstrated that representations of immorality are not always self-evident, nor always repugnant. After a short sequence at the beginning of *Greed* (Erich von Stroheim, 1925), in which the central protagonist, McTeague (Gibson Gowland) first cradles a wounded bird, then hurls a scornful co-labourer into a ravine, we are presented with the summative intertitle: “Thus was McTeague.” The conceit of such a summary – that all we need to know about a character can be summed up in the course of fifty seconds and eighteen shots – is largely what I have been arguing against. Moreover, even the most seemingly economic of representations can be ambiguous enough to yield incredibly complex evaluations. What, exactly, have we learned about McTeague from this sequence? That he is a man equally disposed to acts of compassion as he is to mindless violence? Is one predilection more likely than another? More importantly, what relevance does our evaluation of his character have for the idea we hold of our own character? Might our evaluation of the character prompt a concomitant self-evaluation? As David Parker claims, our understanding of fictional works is necessarily dialogic: “they have the power *to read us* as we perform our various moves in reading them” (Parker 1994, 41). *Greed*’s evaluative intertitle is thus both simultaneously informative and interrogative.

The pragmatic function of forming an allegiance with a villain can be moral in character. A villain has his uses in that he may bring one closer to a more complete understanding of one’s moral self, and often, he can do so much more readily than a virtuous hero. Finding virtue in acts of immorality is not to stretch the idea of villainy beyond all recognition. The villain still remains the defiant wrongdoer, but we are able to recognise that an extremely wide array of immoral types can be conceived of as

villainous, and more importantly, that the representation of these types can serve an important moral function. As I have indicated in the Introduction, our moral engagement with characters is an integral aspect of our aesthetic experience of a film. A viewer's consideration of cinematic aesthetics is invariably imbricated with her moral evaluation of the fictional scenario. Our experience of filmic villainy is always-already a reflection on morality and evil.

I have composed my study in the interests of evaluating films from the oft-neglected position of moral critic. As Booth argues, "when human actions are formed to make an artwork, the form that is made can never be divorced from the human meanings, including the moral judgements, that are implicit whenever human beings act" (Booth 1983, 397). Not only is moral criticism an integral part of formal analysis, it is an essential element of one's day-to-day living. In responding to those who deny the act of moral criticism as self-righteous, I would side with Mary Midgley in arguing that evaluation of others is necessary in fashioning our own moral conduct. "Without opinions of this sort, we would have no framework or comparison for our own policy, no chance of profiting by other people's insights or mistakes" (Midgley 1981, 72). And certainly, we have much to profit from the villain's insights and not just her mistakes.

I firmly believe that moral criticism of narrative film can be edifying, but one must be cautious in promoting certain conceptions of film's moral use-value. Smith argues that "unlike the agitational film, the 'Manichean Hollywood' film does not typically map its dualistic value system on to a particular doctrine...The narrative therefore does not function as an exemplum, furnishing a rule of action" (Smith 1995, 206). But if Hollywood films are not purported to be explicitly "agitational," why do they so often rely on a residually Manichean moral structure? Remember that for the homiletic allegorist, the moral trajectory of cinematic narratives follows and promotes the Aristotelean ethical dictum of "how one ought to live." In such cases, the villain is a figure of contradistinction to be used by prescriptivists in the interest of (corrective) moral education. The continued investment in conceiving of art as parable is what lead the authors of the Production Code to perpetuate moral polarisation in film narratives and to conclude that the sympathetic representation of immoral characters was unacceptable. "Art can be *morally evil* in its effects," they claimed (qtd. in Doherty 1999, 348). "[It] is the *product* of some person's mind, and that mind was either good or bad morally when it produced the thing. And the thing has its *effect* upon those who

come into contact with it. In both these ways, as a product and the cause of definite effects, it has a deep moral significance and an unmistakable moral quality" (ibid, 349). With the implementation of the Code, we see the long-lasting and systematic results of a mistaken belief in the *coercive* power of the cinema's representations of moral precepts. I have been arguing instead that the "dangerousness" of cinematic fictions – *their inability to cause uniform feelings about moral precepts and the individuals who violate them* – actually plays a large role in the enduring vitality of the movies.

Films have unmistakable "moral significance" and "quality," but they should not always nor necessarily be prescriptive. Allegiance with certain characters will not teach "correct emotional responses," nor will they "pervert and confuse" our moral understanding. My contentions against censorship, the conflation of ethics and aesthetics that rests on questionable assumptions of "merited" responses, and moral judgementalism represent a rejection of such narrow-mindedness. Instead, I have been arguing that perverse allegiance is conducted in the interest of moral clarification – the acquisition of empathic knowledge that not only allows us to broaden our sympathetic faculties for a wide spectrum of individuals, but also assists in perceiving one's life "as a connected whole." In short, the imaginative experience of villainy supports one's efforts to regard oneself as a complete moral being.

Film is not necessarily about answer giving. To perpetually force movies into an Aesopian mould is to do both them and their viewers a grave injustice. For Parker, "those works that most sustain interest in the long run are the ones that present both interference and dynamic interrelationship between different ethical systems of conceptions" (Parker 1994, 197). The moral multivalence of the movies is ultimately what accounts for their richness and value. D. H. Lawrence argues that the moral value of art lies in its potential to destabilize rigid and authoritative discursive modes (Lawrence 1936, 528). In this respect, the responsibility of the artist does not have to be the education of her audience – to bring them around to this or that moral view; it is to help them see the truth of their own respective situations. In this respect, an artist's moral obligation is to partake in "this rigorous, restless dynamic attempt to weigh and to balance the truths, values, senses of obligation and so on realised in the creative process" (Parker 1994, 61). Her villain will not be the imposition of stasis on this process or the distortion of this balance; the immoral individual will be an element integral to a work's multivalent dynamism. Of course a great deal of popular

filmmaking *does not* rest on this multivalence and *is* used as a forum for messages and point-making. And yet, in my estimation, the most interesting of these educative popular works are not those that are little more than disguised rhetorical documentaries, nor oblique sermons, but those whose ultimate aim is to deepen our capacity to imagine and ultimately, to sympathise with others.

The villain's perspective is one we so often ignore. Consider how frequently he is excluded from rational discourse in filmic narratives. He is rarely reasoned or argued with, converted or persuaded; most often, he is merely eradicated by a holier-than-thou hero. After all, it is much easier to represent the villain as radically "Other" and disregard the position of this individual who we find challenging. Think of the monstrous being in *Alien* (Ridley Scott, 1979) as the quintessential movie villain in these regards. It is the embodiment of all that we find repellent, inhuman, and irredeemably wicked – Evil horrifically made flesh. Such a monster is our fantasy of immorality: the absence of reason; the singularity of malice; the denial of empathy; the majesty of fear. How does one negotiate with that which seems to utterly repudiate our engagement – a being that represents the extinction of imagination? *Alien's* affective power remains undiminished largely because it represents the evolutionary apex of symbolic xenophobia. It offers a creature that does not simply resist empathetic gestures; it *annihilates* them by rendering ridiculous one of the most fundamental characteristics that define the human. And yet, it is also a reflection of the subjugation – the "alienation" – that is the ultimate fate of difference. What moralists fail to recognise in their insistence on wholesome, morally simplistic narratives is that our lack of empathy for a "difficult" individual is often what makes acts of villainy possible in the first place. It is the sleep of imagination – not reason – that breeds monsters.

The first murderer received a mark upon his brow and was condemned to walk the earth forever as an outsider. He could not be touched, but he also could not be accepted as a brother, or indeed, loved. In Cain, one finds an exemplar of popular attitudes towards evil, supported by the considerable weight of Biblical disapproval and ostracism: the immoral individual is a pariah, eternally marginalized as untouchable. Perverse allegiance with the villain rejects the expulsion of immorality; indeed, it is an invitation to bring about a kind of homecoming. The equation of "raising Cain" with "raising Hell" is an unfortunate and destructive conflation. Perhaps our acts of imaginative engagement with cinematic villains are not unlike recognising the linguistic

ambiguity of the above expression and reading it against the grain. For the transitive verb “raising” has a few intriguing alternative implications. “Raising” can connote *resurrection*, as if Cain has expired or disappeared during his wanderings, and acts of wrongdoing invoke the spirit of the exiled sinner. But associative connections can also be drawn between resurrection and revivification, and thus, “raising” might also be used to signify *exaltation*. In this regard, the movie theatre becomes primitive temple, and the villain is elevated to a higher status than reviled and exiled transgressor – from demon to demigod – in an act of forgiving transubstantiation.

Filmography

- 101 Dalmatians. Stephen Herek, dir. USA: Buena Vista Pictures, 1996. 103 min.
- 21 Grams. Alejandro González Iñárritu, dir. USA: Focus Features, 2003. 124 min.
- À bout de souffle. Jean-Luc Godard, dir. France: SNC, 1960. 90 min.
- The Adventures of Robin Hood. Michael Curtiz, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1938. 102 min.
- Alien. Ridley Scott, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1979. 117 min.
- All About Eve. Joseph L. Mankiewicz, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1950. 138 min.
- American Psycho. Mary Harron, dir. USA: Lion's Gate Films, 2000. 101 min.
- Apt Pupil. Bryan Singer, dir. USA: TriStar Pictures, 1998. 111 min.
- Arsenic and Old Lace. Frank Capra, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1944. 118 min.
- Badlands. Terence Malick, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1973. 95 min.
- Batman Returns. Tim Burton, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1992. 126 min.
- The Big Red One. Samuel Fuller, dir. USA: United Artists, 1980. 158 min.
- The Big Sleep. Howard Hawks, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1946. 114 min.
- The Birth of a Nation. D. W. Griffith, dir. USA: Epoch, 1915. 185 min.
- Blade Runner. Ridley Scott, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1982. 117 min.
- Blue Velvet. David Lynch, dir. USA: De Laurentis, 1986. 120 min.
- Bonnie and Clyde. Arthur Penn, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1967. 111 min.
- Bride of Frankenstein. James Whale, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1935. 75 min.
- Brighton Rock. John Boulting, dir. UK: Pathé Pictures, 1947. 92 min.
- Broken Blossoms. D. W. Griffith, dir. USA: United Artists, 1919. 90 min.
- Cabaret. Bob Fosse, dir. USA: ABC Pictures / Allied Artists, 1972. 123 min.
- Cape Fear. J. Lee Thompson, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1962. 105 min.
- The Cell. Tarsem Singh, dir. USA: New Line Cinema, 2000. 107 min.

- Chinatown. Roman Polanski, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1974. 131 min.
- Cidade de Deus. Kátia Lund and Fernando Meirelles, dirs. Brazil: Miramax Films, 2002. 130 min.
- A Clockwork Orange. Stanley Kubrick, dir. UK: Warner Brothers, 1971. 136 min.
- Cold Mountain. Anthony Minghella, dir. USA: Miramax Films, 2003. 152 min.
- The Contender. Rod Lurie, dir. USA: DreamWorks, 2000. 126 min.
- The Cook, the Thief, His Wife and Her Lover. Peter Greenaway, dir. France/Netherlands/UK: Miramax Pictures, 1988. 124 min.
- Cool Hand Luke. Stuart Rosenberg, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1967. 126 min.
- A Corner in Wheat. D. W. Griffith, dir. USA: Biograph, 1909. 14 min.
- Crash. David Cronenberg, dir. Canada/France/UK: Fine Line Features, 1996. 100 min.
- Dangerous Liaisons. Stephen Frears, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1988. 120 min.
- Dead Man Walking. Tim Robbins, dir. USA: Gramercy Pictures, 1995. 122 min.
- Death Wish. Michael Winner, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1974. 93 min.
- Die Hard. John McTiernan, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1988. 131.
- Dirty Harry. Don Siegel, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1971. 103 min.
- Donnie Brasco. Mike Newell, dir. USA: Mandalay, 1997. 126 min.
- Double Indemnity. Billy Wilder, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1944. 107 min.
- Dracula. Tod Browning, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1931. 84 min.
- Dracula. Francis Ford Coppola, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 130 min.
- Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. Robert Mamoulian, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1931. 98 min.
- Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler. Fritz Lang, dir. Germany: UFA, 1922. 297 min.
- Duel. Steven Spielberg, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1971. 90 min.
- Enter the Dragon. Robert Clouse, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1973. 110 min.
- The Exorcist. William Friedkin, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1973. 132 min.

- Face/Off. John Woo, dir. USA: Paramount / Touchstone Pictures, 1997. 138 min.
- Faster, Pussycat! Kill! Kill! Russ Meyer, dir. USA: Eve Productions, 1965. 83 min.
- Fatal Attraction. Adrian Lyne, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1987. 123 min.
- Felicia's Journey. Atom Egoyan, dir. Canada/UK: Alliance Atlantis, 1999. 116 min.
- The Fifth Element. Luc Besson, dir. France: Columbia Pictures / Gaumont, 1997. 127 min.
- Fight Club. David Fincher, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1999. 139 min.
- Five Graves to Cairo. Billy Wilder, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1943. 96 min.
- Force of Evil. Abraham Polonsky, dir. USA: MGM, 1948. 78 min.
- Frankenstein. James Whale, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1931. 71 min.
- From Here to Eternity. Fred Zinnemann, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1953. 118 min.
- The Glass Key. Stuart Heisler, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1942. 85 min.
- The Godfather. Francis Ford Coppola, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1972. 175 min.
- Goldfinger. Guy Hamilton, dir. UK: United Artists / Eon, 1964. 112 min.
- Goodfellas. Martin Scorsese, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1990. 146 min.
- The Great Train Robbery. Edwin S. Porter, dir. USA: Edison, 1903. 10 min.
- Greed. Erich von Stroheim, dir. USA: Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, 1925. 250 min.
- Gun Crazy. Joseph Lewis, dir. USA: United Artists, 1950. 86 min.
- Halloween. John Carpenter, dir. USA: Falcon International, 1978. 91 min.
- Hannibal. Ridley Scott, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 2001. 126 min.
- Happiness. Todd Solondz, dir. USA: Good Machine, 1998. 134 min.
- Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone. Chris Columbus, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 2001. 152 min.
- Hell's Hinges. Charles Swickard, dir. USA: Triangle Distributing 1916. 64 min.
- Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer. John McNaughton, dir. USA: Greycat Films, 1986. 83 min.

- High Plains Drifter. Clint Eastwood, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1972. 105 min.
- Insomnia. Christopher Nolan, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 2002. 118 min.
- Interview with the Vampire. Neil Jordan, dir. USA: Geffen Pictures, 1994. 123 min.
- In the Company of Men. Neil LaBute, dir. USA: Sony Pictures Classics, 1997. 97 min.
- In the Line of Fire. Wolfgang Petersen, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1993. 128 min.
- Invasion of the Body Snatchers. Don Siegel, dir. USA: Allied Artists Pictures, 1956. 80 min.
- The Iron Mask. Allan Dwan, dir. USA: United Artists, 1929. 103 min.
- It's a Wonderful Life. Frank Capra, dir. USA: RKO Radio Pictures, 1946. 130 min.
- Jaws. Steven Spielberg, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1975. 124 min.
- Johnny Guitar. Nicholas Ray, dir. USA: Republic Pictures, 1954. 110 min.
- Kalifornia. Dominic Sena, dir. USA: Gramercy Pictures, 1993. 118 min.
- Kill Bill. Quentin Tarantino, dir. USA: Miramax, 2003/4. 247 min.
- The Killers. Robert Siodmak, dir. USA: Universal, 1946. 105 min.
- The Killing. Stanley Kubrick, dir. USA: United Artists, 1956. 85 min.
- King Kong. Merian C. Cooper and Ernest B. Schoedsack, dir. USA: RKO, 1933. 100 min.
- Kiss of Death. Henry Hathaway, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1947. 98 min.
- The Lady from Shanghai. Orson Welles, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1947. 87 min.
- L'Arroseur arrosé. Louis Lumière, dir. France: Gaumont, 1895. 1 min.
- Leap of Faith. Richard Pearce, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1992. 108 min.
- The Limey. Steven Soderbergh, dir. USA: Artisan Entertainment, 1997. 89 min.
- Little Caesar. Mervyn LeRoy, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1931. 79 min.
- The Little Foxes. William Wyler, dir. USA: RKO, 1941. 115 min.
- Lolita. Stanley Kubrick, dir. USA/France: MGM / Seven Arts, 1962. 152 min.
- The Lonedale Operator. D. W. Griffith, dir. USA: Biograph, 1911. 17 min.

The Lonely Villa. D. W. Griffith, dir. USA: Biograph, 1909. 8 min.

The Long Goodbye. Robert Altman, dir. USA: United Artists, 1973. 112 min.

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Lost Highway. David Lynch, dir. USA: CiBy 2000, 1997. 135 min.

The Maltese Falcon. John Huston, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1941. 101 min.

The Manchurian Candidate. John Frankenheimer, dir. USA: United Artists, 1962. 126 min.

Manhunter. Michael Mann, dir. USA: De Laurentiis Entertainment, 1986. 120 min.

The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance. John Ford, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures 1962. 122 min.

Mary Shelley's Frankenstein. Kenneth Branagh, dir. USA: Columbia TriStar, 1994. 123 min.

Mildred Pierce. Michael Curtiz, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1945. 111 min.

Misery. Rob Reiner, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1990. 107 min.

Mission: Impossible. Brian DePalma, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1996. 110 min.

Mission: Impossible 2. John Woo, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 2000. 123 min.

Monster. Patty Jenkins, dir. USA/Germany: Newmarket Film Group, 2003. 109 min.

Mr. Smith Goes to Washington. Frank Capra, dir. USA: Columbia, 1939. 125 min.

Natural Born Killers. Olivier Stone, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1994. 122 min.

Night and the City. Jules Dassin, dir. USA/UK: 20th Century Fox, 1950. 96 min.

The Night of the Hunter. Charles Laughton, dir. USA: United Artists, 1955. 93 min.

Nosferatu. F. W. Murnau, dir. Germany: Prana, 1921. 72 min.

Notorious. Alfred Hitchcock, dir. USA: RKO, 1946. 101 min.

- Oliver Twist. David Lean, dir. UK: General Film Distributors, 1948. 116 min.
- One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest. Milos Forman, dir. USA: United Artists, 1975. 133 min.
- On the Waterfront. Elia Kazan, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1954. 108 min.
- Out of the Past. Jacques Tourneur, dir. USA: RKO, 1947. 97 min.
- Paris Trout. Stephen Gyllenhaal, dir. USA: Palace Pictures, 1991. 93 min.
- Payback. Brian Helgeland, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1999. 100 min.
- Peeping Tom. Michael Powell, dir. UK: Anglo-American Film, 1960. 101 min.
- Per un pugno di dollari. Sergio Leone, dir. Italy/Germany/Spain: United Artists, 1964. 100 min.
- The Petrified Forest. Archie Mayo, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1936. 83 min.
- The Pianist. Roman Polanski, dir. UK/France/Germany/Netherlands/Poland: Canal, 2002. 148 min.
- Pink Flamingos. John Waters, dir. USA: New Line Cinema, 1972. 108 min.
- Pirates of the Caribbean. Gore Verbinski, dir. USA: Buena Vista, 2003. 143 min.
- Point Blank. John Boorman, dir. USA: MGM, 1967. 92 min.
- The Portrait of a Lady. Jane Campion, dir. UK/USA: Polygram / Propaganda, 1996. 144 min.
- The Postman Always Rings Twice. Tay Garnett, dir. USA: MGM, 1946. 113 min.
- Predator. John McTiernan, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1987. 107 min.
- Psycho. Alfred Hitchcock, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1960. 109 min.
- The Public Enemy. William Wellman, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1931. 83 min.
- Pulp Fiction. Quentin Tarantion, dir. USA: Buena Vista / Miramax, 1994. 153 min.
- The Punisher. Michael Hensleigh, dir. USA/Germany: Lions Gate, 2004. 124 min.
- Raging Bull. Martin Scorsese, dir. USA: United Artists, 1980. 129 min.
- Raiders of the Lost Ark. Steven Spielberg, dir. USA: Paramount, 1981. 115 min.
- Red Dragon. Brett Anderson, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 2002. 124 min.

- Red River. Howard Hawks, dir. USA: United Artists, 1948. 133 min.
- Reservoir Dogs. Quentin Tarantino, dir. USA: Rank Pictures, 1991. 99 min.
- The Roaring Twenties. Raoul Walsh, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1939. 104 min.
- Rope. Alfred Hitchcock, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1948. 80 min.
- Scarface. Howard Hawks, dir. USA: United Artists, 1932. 99 min.
- Scarface. Brian DePalma, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1983. 170 min.
- Scarlet Street. Fritz Lang, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1945. 103 min.
- Schindler's List. Steven Spielberg, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1993. 197 min.
- Scorpio Rising. Kenneth Anger, dir. USA: Puck Film Productions, 1964. 30 min.
- Scream. Wes Craven, dir. USA: Dimension Films, 1996. 111 min.
- The Searchers. John Ford, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1956. 119 min.
- Secret Window. David Koepp, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 2004. 96 min.
- Seven. David Fincher, dir. USA: New Line Cinema, 1995. 127 min.
- Shadow of a Doubt. Alfred Hitchcock, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1943. 108 min.
- Shadow of the Vampire. E. Elias Merhige, dir. UK/USA: Lions Gate, 2000. 92 min.
- Shane. George Stevens, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1953. 118 min.
- The Shining. Stanley Kubrick, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1980. 119 min.
- The Silence of the Lambs. Jonathan Demme, dir. USA: Orion, 1991. 118 min.
- Spider-Man. Sam Raimi, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures, 2002. 121 min.
- Spider-Man 2. Sam Raimi, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures/Sony Pictures, 2004. 127 min.
- Stagecoach. John Ford, dir. USA: United Artists, 1939. 96 min.
- Star Wars. George Lucas, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1977. 121 min.
- Strangers on a Train. Alfred Hitchcock, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1951. 101 min.
- Sunrise. F. W. Murnau, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1927. 95 min.
- Sunset Boulevard. Bill Wilder, dir. USA: Paramount Pictures, 1950. 110 min.

- Superman. Richard Donner, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1978. 151 min.
- Suspicion. Alfred Hitchcock, dir. USA: RKO, 1941. 99 min.
- Taxi Driver. Martin Scorsese, dir. USA: Columbia Pictures, 1976. 113 min.
- The Terminal. Steven Spielberg, dir. USA: Dreamworks, 2004. 128 min.
- The Texas Chainsaw Massacre. Tobe Hooper, dir. USA: Vortex, 1974. 83 min.
- The Thing. John Carpenter, dir. USA: Universal Pictures, 1982. 109 min.
- The Third Man. Carol Reed, dir. UK: British Lion Films Ltd., 1949. 104 min.
- Touch of Evil. Orson Welles, dir. USA: United International Pictures, 1958. 114 min.
- Traffic in Souls. George Loan Tucker, dir. USA: Universal Film Manufacturing, 1913. 74 min.
- Training Day. Antoine Fuqua, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 2001. 120 min.
- The Treasure of the Sierra Madre. John Huston, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1948. 126 min.
- Twister. Jan de Bont, dir. USA: Warner / Universal Pictures, 1996. 113 min.
- Un Chien Andalou. Luis Buñuel, dir. France: 1929. 16 min.
- Unforgiven. Clint Eastwood, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1992. 131 min.
- The Usual Suspects. Bryan Singer, dir. USA: Gramercy Pictures, 1995. 106 min.
- Wall Street. Oliver Stone, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1987. 125 min.
- The Whispering Chorus. Cecil B. DeMille, dir. USA: Famous Players-Lasky, 1918. 86 min.
- White Heat. Raoul Walsh, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1949. 114 min.
- The Wild Bunch. Sam Peckinpah, dir. USA: Warner Brothers, 1969. 145 min.
- The Wizard of Oz. Victor Fleming, dir. USA: MGM, 1939. 102 min.
- The Women. George Cukor, dir. USA: MGM, 1939. 133 min.
- The Woodsman. Nicole Kassell, dir. USA: Newmarket Films, 2004. 87 min.
- Working Girl. Mike Nichols, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 1988. 113 min.

X-Men. Bryan Singer, dir. USA: Twentieth Century Fox, 2000. 104 min.

You Only Live Once. Fritz Lang, dir. USA: United Artists, 1937. 86 min.

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