

Worthy Adversaries: Villains Take Center Stage

From the Big Screen to Reality TV, the Bad Guys Are Stealing the Spotlight

By Sona Charaipotra August 7, 2008 ABC News

Who doesn't love a good villain?

Now more than ever, it seems showbiz is all about the bad guys, from Heath Ledger's deliciously devilish turn as The Joker in "The Dark Knight" to Spencer Pratt's train wreck tantrums on MTV's reality soap "The Hills."

In fact, the Hollywood Reporter recently speculated the next film in the "Spider-Man" saga may well focus instead on Spidey's nemesis Venom. And there have been reports that Oscar-nominated actor Johnny Depp may step up to play The Riddler in the next installment of "Batman."

"The bottom line is, it's fun to be bad on screen," said Tim Kring, the creator and executive producer of "Heroes," which will be all about villains this season. "There's a kind of deliciousness to playing a character who is not bound by the same rules that the rest of us have to live with. It's fun to play -- and it's certainly fun to write. We're doing those big scene-stealing kind of bad guys. For us, it's all about iconic storytelling, every character has to decide whether they're a good guy or a bad guy. It's a cultural shorthand."

The rise of the villains can be attributed to the dark times we're facing, said professor Jonathan Young, director of the Center for Story and Symbol.

"On a social level, the rise of unusually virulent adversaries reflects collective fears," Young said. "We now have horrific dangers such as terrorism, a sinking economy and environmental devastation. As chaos swells in the political world, the viciousness of movie villains intensifies. These film images mirror our stresses and provide an artificial but satisfying temporary focus for our emotions. We can walk out of the show chanting, 'It's only a movie,' when, in fact, such characters signify tangible dangers in the real world."

And it seems Hollywood history is repeating itself.

"This has happened before," Young said. "Back in the 1950s, at the height of the nuclear threat of the Cold War, there was a rash of monster, horror and disaster movies. The creatures from outer space

that threatened to destroy Earth were metaphors for the fear of annihilation. Now our terrors show up as the creepiest villains in film history."

But Hollywood's penchant for bad guys is nothing new.

"It goes all the way back to Shakespeare and Richard III," said Adam B. Vary, staff writer at Entertainment Weekly. "You cannot have a hero unless you have a villain -- and your hero is only as interesting as the villain. In classic storytelling, you wouldn't have someone to root for unless you had someone to root against."

These days, though, Hollywood's all about exploring the bad guys' baggage.

"Villains have always been important, but now they're definitely more complex and nuanced than ever before. So when you create more interesting characters, naturally, the trend feeds on itself," said The Hollywood Reporter's Steve Zeitchik.

In regards to the "Batman" nemeses, "If the Nolan brothers are writing these ambitious, meaty parts, then the talent is going to be there to meet the challenge. So when you have someone of Heath Ledger's caliber putting out an Oscar-worthy turn in 'Dark Knight,' you'll have interest from other high-caliber actors in the next one."

Similarly, Vary added, "Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince," due Nov. 21, explores the origins of Voldemort's negative behavior.

"It turns out he was abandoned as a child," explained Vary, who notes that the character is played by Oscar winner Ralph Fiennes. "So he carries all that baggage with him into adulthood. No wonder he's a villain."

And a lot of "reel life" villains don't want to hide at all -- so they're showing their stripes on reality TV, said Damian Holbrook, a senior writer for TV Guide.

"Reality villains just pop," he said. "Look at Omorosa or Heidi and Spencer. I mean, really, what do they do? Nothing. But people can't get enough of them. They really know how to milk it." Holbrook, who penned TV Guide's Top Reality Villains list, said he'd be keeping an eye on "The Hills'" Stephanie Pratt this season. Another recent character to follow is Ed Westwick's troublemaker Chuck Bass of

"Gossip Girl."

"She stole Lauren's boyfriend, and she sold out her brother for screen time in a heartbeat. But she learned from the best with Spencer," Holbrook said. "I mean, you have to be really smart and really calculating to stay in the spotlight as long as he and Heidi have without really doing anything."

Currently, there's a fascination with the dark side, Kring said. "For a lot of us, there's a sense that the world is in a very dire place. The economy, global warming, diminishing resources, terrorism and the economy. There's a very palpable fear, and that naturally translates to pop culture. So the idea of good triumphing over evil is very reassuring."

But is good triumphing over evil? Consultant Pamela Jaye Smith isn't so sure.

"We are inundated these days by reports from around the globe and close to home that all is not well with the world," said Smith, author of the book "The Power of the Dark Side: Creating Great Villains and Dangerous Situations."

She said, "The individual these days has very little power against giant companies and giant governments, both typically either corrupt and/or callous. Goliath has gotten so huge that David has simply shrugged, folded up the sling and tossed down the stone. Depending on your perspective, it can at times look as though the dark side is winning the war for the world and for humanity, and it's simply a natural animal tendency to side with the winners, hence our increasing fascination with villains."

Plus, said the Center for Story and Symbol's Young, it's all about catharsis, at least temporarily.

"Watching a movie is simultaneously an escape from everyday life and a safe way to encounter these terrors," he said. "It provides a ritual of entering the perilous saga to gain a sense of control and mastery. We may emerge from the theater less afraid, feeling more capable and with a renewed optimism about ourselves and the world."

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P.S. As is usually the case, they only used a few ideas from the interview. Journalists tend to limit the psychological discussion. Here,

from the cutting room floor, are some of my other comments on the theme...

In movies, the good guys finally defeat the sinister characters. This might signify our wishful thinking that all will be well. The hero usually has extraordinary levels of effectiveness. This suggests a longing that we still had protective parent figures that could make everything safe. The shared theme song of all these movies could be *Someone to Watch Over Me*.

Deeper psychological implications might include anxiety about some quality within ourselves. For example, fear of our own unexpressed aggression can show up as monsters in nightmares. If we reject a part of our inner selves, the shadow aspects within will seem especially threatening. We are drawn to movies that mirror this inner tension out of a hidden need to face our demons. Even those who think they have no inner shadow might have secrets they are keeping from themselves.

So, watching a fierce enemy in a movie can be an exercise in confronting the threats within. Constructive encounters with primal urges may be an unconscious process, but can still result in increased personal stability.

Working out our collective demons through stories and drama, is not new. Mythology is full of malicious villains. The Cyclops, Medusa, Seth, and Grendel were all blood-curdling in their wickedness. The wisdom stories tell us that the possibilities of corruption are always with us. The Joker and Venom come from a long tradition of villainy. Such characters teach us by bad example. Mythic tales constantly warned against the dangers of arrogance. If one indulged in grandiosity, the tragic consequences were awesome.

The mythic imagination has always provided images that constellate vague or ineffable feelings. A villain is evil itself in a highly simplified form. In ordinary life, sprawling troubles and major changes are hard to grasp. They involve so many interwoven elements, understanding is elusive and the search for strategies to deal with them seems endless.

An exaggerated villain is easy to comprehend. The challenge may be daunting, but the task is obvious. We know who to blame and what action should be taken. In an ever more complex world, such clarity is appealing. Even in our personal lives, we can be baffled by daunting problems. For the two hours we are watching a movie, the crisis is enormous, but facing one evil person will solve everything.

We are specifically drawn to thrillers in order to visit the sinister. The crime-fighter pales in comparison with the transgressor. We love to watch those who do the dreadful things we would never admit wanting to do. It excites us to watch them kill and rob. Of course, it is crucial to have heroic characters nearby. We safely identify with the protagonist's noble qualities while observing evil with rapt attention. In short, we buy tickets to see the Joker. Batman is just a supporting character.

P.P.S. During the interview, my esteemed colleague Anne Bach made suggestions that expanded the discussion. These included the quote that concluded the piece, about emerging from the theater with renewed optimism. Here is one of Anne's other reflections that was not used...

Because uncontrollable dangers in the real world make us feel powerless, we tend to push away distressing feelings. In so doing we can also suppress vital energies. It is important to reclaim these lost aspects and face our fears. Watching a film is perfect for this project. Through an engaging drama we can encounter anxieties at a safe distance. Pondering the emotions that the movie evokes can then help us regain disowned parts of our selves, and become aware of our core effectiveness.

- Jonathan Young -