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Report on the International Conference: “Villains! Constructing Narratives of Evil”

Justus Liebig University Giessen, International Graduate Centre for the Study of Culture, February 6th - 8th, 2019

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Report on the International Conference: “Villains! Constructing Narratives of Evil”

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Villains have a spine-chilling performance and they are genuinely frightening. Despite their ability to induce literal revulsion, they are quirky and appealing due to their display of human nature. The international conference „Villains! Constructing Narratives of Evil“ portrayed how these multi-layered characters are assembled in different narrative forms and their impact in socio-cultural scenarios. It approached questions like: What are the roles, motivations, and functions of villains? What are the main narrative and discourse strategies employed to vilify others in the media? And how do socio-cultural narratives influence the perception we have of villains? The event took place at the GCSC in Giessen from February 6th to February 8th.

It was clear in the international conference that one contributing factor for successful evil narratives is certainly having a genuinely terrifying villain. Art and entertainment have produced some of them. However, they have also come into existence in real life, displaying no moral scruples whatsoever and provoking historical, socio-political, and cultural changes. The presentations attempted to have a general view of representative portrayals of villains in different scenarios.

Villains in the Arts

Evil characters in the arts are so fascinating that it is difficult to root for the good team. In the analysis of three animated films, *Megamind*, *Wreck-it Ralph*, and *Despicable Me*, TIMOTHY PETERS (Sunshine Coast) discussed ‘the paradigm of the office’ in which villains carry out the role of bad guys, but they are not bad guys. That means that villain characters are conscious of their existence and that they are expected to perform a role that is already established in the script. As Peters affirmed, “somebody is necessary to fulfill the job of the villain”. Conversely, in post-war cinema, Nazi doctors are true representative of evil. NINA PETER (Bern) refers to them as „agents of horror“. On the other hand, ISADORA COMPREGHER (Porto Alegre) observed portrayals of villains in Weimar cinema. In *Dr.*

Mabuse and *Nosferatu*, villains embody male anxieties and represent metaphorically the war and the State. However, in *Metropolis* and *Der Blaue Engel*, villains are women with a “sort of Madonna-whore complex employed to entice and dominate men”.

Female villains were also addressed by SONJA SCHILLINGS (Giessen/Berlin) and ELEONORA SERENI (Freiburg). Schillings affirms that female villainy is complicated to observe in TV series like *Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu*, which displays a misogynist dimension to the concept of evil. The presenters also analyzed the role of female villains in comic books and both meet the idea that comic books are pushing a gender equality agenda as female villains act with mannish features.

Other villains, famous in literature, have been taken to the big screen as fearful entities, like Patrick Bateman of the book *American Psycho* (Bret Easton Ellis) and the cannibalistic serial killer Dr. Hannibal Lecter of *The Silence of the Lambs* (Thomas Harris). MONA RAEISIAN (Marburg) spoke about these two famous serial killers as well as the one in *The Broken Window* (Jeffrey Deiver). LOOI VAN KESSEL (Leiden) examined James Purdy’s 1964 novel *Cabot Wright Begins* to observe narrative strategies used to construct criminals like pedophiles and rapists.

Villains in Socio-Political Settings

Narrative and discourse media strategies have always been used to vilify others. THIERRY VERBURGH (Amsterdam) illustrated a current tendency in different political scenarios: the use of hateful expressions to polarize people or to defame others in social media. SOFYA RAGOZINA (Moscow) exposed the ‘islamophobia’ established in Russian media as an institutionalized practice.

The construction of villains is also used in justice and legal settings. According to JOSHUA FOLKERTS (Rostock), a strong State is necessary to regulate people’s behavior since the human being is a villain by nature. SHAILESH KUMAR (London) examined how the State and juvenile justice in India has constructed a socio-cultural narrative of evil around groups of teenagers. Conversely, KRISTINE AVRAM (Marburg) and ZORAN VUCKOVAC (Giessen) presented the figure of the villain in criminal proceedings as spectacles where defendants play the role of villains.

Villains in Historical and Religious Contexts

In other panels, antique sources were employed to understand how villains have been constructed. BIANCA VASSILEVA (Sofia) showed historical texts and compared them with contemporary works of art to describe how the depictions of evil of the Roman emperor Commodus were transferred to his mother. ANN ROMSICS (Budapest) stated that *The Conventum* is a unique eleventh-century text that portrays William V of Aquitaine as an evildoer. The same happened to the duke Heinrich of Brunswick-

Wolfenbüttel, as STEFAN BECKERT (Dresden) displayed antique pamphlets used to show him as a villain. Evil characters have been also used to influence people. STEFAN SCHUBERT (Freiburg), for instance, explained the processes of heroization and villainization of Philippe Pétain during the two world wars, but according to THILO TRESS (Freiburg) many narratives of evil made in antique texts were prone to be exaggerated due to the considerable aversion that people have had against villains.

Intimate Villains: A Villain Inside You!

Evil also hides in the most intimate thoughts of an individual, or even in the family. BLOSSON STEFANIW (Halle) refers to those villains as demons, evil thoughts, and temptations that attack a person. The presenter analyzed ascetic Christian texts to explain why the villain is seen as an adversary with a destructive influence. MIRIAM BRAUN (Mainz) explored those images of death created by terminally ill people in interviews and diaries. The vindictiveness of villains, like the ones found in family relations, originates from personal tragedies and a sociopath nature. MAARTEN GOOSKENS (Utrecht) made a presentation of a transgenerational study in which representations of perpetrators emerge from memories of personal stories.

Uncommon Villains

Audiovisual arts have introduced uncommon villains that come in all shapes and sizes. MAREN WALINSKI (Giessen) made a presentation in which villains are fat male characters in TV series. She concluded that 'masculinized fat' is seen as a positive feature of a villain, while 'feminized fat' attributes accentuate the portrayal of repulsive characters. LAURA VIKTORIA RICHTER (Giessen) explored the TV series *Lucifer* (2016) to analyze the narrative construction of Satan as a modern prototypical villain that tries to understand humanity.

RAHEL SCHMITZ (Giessen) explains how the player in the video game *Prey* (2017) can be either a hero or a villain throughout the game narrative structure. The dialects of villainy and heroism were also approached by SASCHA KLEIN (Cologne). He presented hacker-villains as complex characters that blur the concept of villain. In music scenarios, heavy metal bands have been accused of being profane and diabolical. According to PAVLA SAMOYLAVA (Giessen) this moral panic has to do not only with the lyrics of some songs, but also with the accessories used by these rockers.

Conclusion

The presentations in the international conference accomplished the goal of showing several representations of fictional and non-fictional villain characters in different narrative forms and genres like dramedies, transgressive fictions or autobiographies that have been used to create such complex characters. It was also important to see the different approaches such as film, literature, memory,

theological or political studies used to analyze the construction of a villain in different cultural fields.

The unifying result made by the presenters is that villains play a role that enriches diverse narratives of evil and that these multidimensional characters have permeated different socio-cultural scenarios: the arts, socio-political settings, historical and religious contexts, or private realms of an individual. The main conclusion that can be drawn is that a villain is constructed in narratives mainly to unnerve and worry the spectator. However, discourse and media strategies have been employed to portray underrepresented communities, minorities or those who are different as villains when they are just victims of unfair socio-political systems.

Program

Keynote Lectures:

- “You are a Bad Guy, but this does not mean you are a bad guy”: Guilt, Culpability and the Office of the Villain - Timothy D. Peters (USC Law School – University of the Sunshine Coast)
- “...and all because of a woman!’ Revenge and the Misogynist Dimensions of Villainy” - Sonja Schillings (JLU Giessen, Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt University of Berlin)
- “A brief Inventory of Early Christian Adversaries and their Ethical and Epistemic Functions” - Blosson Stefaniw (Martin Luther University of Halle)

Panel 1: “Constructing Villains in the Arts: Literature, Film and Theatre” (Chair: Gerlov van Engelenhoven)

- “Nazi Doctors in Cinema: Generic Functions and Stagings of a Modern Villain” - Nina Peter (Universität Bern)
- “Men and Women as Villains in Weimar Cinema: Variations on male Anxieties about Loss of Power” - Isadora Compregher Paiva (Universidade Federal do Rio Grande do Sul)
- “A Villain in the Family: Representations of Perpetrator-parents.” - Maarten Gooskens (Utrecht University)

Panel 2: “Constructing Villains in the Media Discourses: Extremists and Radicals” (Chair: Hannes Kaufmann)

- “Blaming the Gutmensch and the Fascist: Anne Fleur Dekker, polarization, and the demonization of the left-wing extremist or right-wing populist evil Other” - Thierry Verburgh (Amsterdam University of Applied Sciences)
- “‘Banality of Islamic Evil’: Routinization of Islamophobic Practices in Russian media and Society” - Sofya Ragozina (National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow)

- “The risk of the stigma of radicalness, the stake in receiving media attention: How some forms of protest provoke debates between radicals and moderates about what actually that word radicalness means.” Thomas Bragdon (Leiden University)

Panel 3: “Constructing Political Villains from Antiquity to Modern Times” (Chair: Philipp Brockkötter)

- “Mother & Monster: depictions of Faustina the Younger and Commodus in Ancient and Late Antique sources” - Bianca Vassileva (St. Kliment Ohridski University, Sofia)
- “Deligitimizing a Villain: William V of Aquitaine” - Anna Romsics (Central European University, Budapest)
- “Of Child Murderers and Monstrosities: Narratives of Evil in Petrus de Ebulo’s *Lieber ad honorem Augusti*” - Thilo Tress (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg)
- “The downfall of a hero: The Villainization of Philippe Pétain” - Stefan Schubert (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität, Freiburg)

Panel 4: “Self-Vilification: Modes and Functions” (Chair: Jeff Coons)

- “Heavy metal warriors. Villains or alternatives heroes?” - Pavla Samoylava (JLU - Giessen)
- “Being in/out of Control: Playing the Hero-Villain in *Prey*” - Rahel Schmitz (JLU - Giessen)
- “‘When I’m Bad, I’m better’: Female Villains in Super-hero comics” - Eleonora Sereni (Albert-Ludwigs-Universität)

Panel 5: “Constructing Villains in Religion” (Chair: Trajkovic-Filipovic)

- “How Duke Heinrich of Brunsvick-Wolfenbüttel became Heintz Mordbrenner: Employing Invectivity to Construct an Early Modern Villain” - Stefan Beckert - (Technische Universität, Dresden)
- “The Priest as Villain in the Early Enlightenment” - Raphael Päbst (Philipps-Universität, Marburg)
- “Thou shalt not kill consumers: Capitalism as a pseudo-religion in American serial killer fiction” - Mona Raesian (Philipps-Universität, Marburg)

Panel 6: “Demonic Villains: Evil Spirits, Devils and Death” (Chair: Elisabeth Engler-Starck)

- “Death as a Villain in Biographical Narrations of Terminally ill people” - Miriam Braun (Johannes-Gutenberg-Universität)
- “Transforming evil across time: from seduction to redemption” - Laura Viktoria Richter (JLU - Giessen)

Panel 7: „Villains and the Law” (Chair: Petya Koseva & Mina Ibrahim)

- “Villain State and Juvenile (In)justice: Deconstructing the Demonisation of Children” - Shailesh Kumar (Birkbeck, University of London)
- “Of Evil Men and Zealous State Agents: The Villain in Criminal Trials for Past Human Rights Violations in Post-Communist Romania” - Kristine Avram (Phillips-Universität, Marburg)
- “The Father of the Leviathan. Perspectives on Thomas Hobbes’ Political Theory Through Time: From Monarchist to Totalitarian to Harbinger of Liberalism” - Joshua Folkerts (Universität Rostock)
- “The Unbearable Lightness of Guilt: The Hague Convicts and their Heoris Afterlife in National Contexts” - Zoran Vuckovac (JLU - Giessen)

Panel 8: „Lateral Villains” (Chair: Frans-Willem Korsten)

- “The Hacker: The Evolution of a Character between Villainy and Heroism in late 20th and early 21st Century in American Films” - Sascha Klein (University of Cologne)
- “Fat and Evil: Portrayals of the ‚Fat’ Villain in Contemporary US American Television Series” - Maren Walinski (JLU - Giessen)
- “On the Narrative Production of Villainous sexual Identities” - Looi van Kessel (Leiden University)

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