

How One Identifies Villains in Films Based on Their Character Design
and Why One Can Relate to Them.

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Declaration of Originality

This dissertation is submitted by the undersigned to the Institute of Art Design & Technology, Dun Laoghaire in partial fulfilment of the examination for the BA (Honours) 3D Design, Model-making & Digital Art. It is entirely the author's own work except where noted and has not been submitted for an award from this or any other educational institution.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Anne Lee", is written over a horizontal line.

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Abstract

This thesis will discuss the topic of character design of villains in films across that last few decades. It will touch on topics such as shape language, costume design and over sexualisation of female villain characters. Examples from a multitude of films from varying categories including horror, animation and thrillers to name a few will be used to showcase the different characteristics purposely placed into the design of “the villain”. It will explore why the audience associate such shapes with certain personalities and why they relate to them more often than their better moral counterpart protagonist character. It will research into why humans are so intrigued by characters that commit acts that could only be classed as monstrous and often why they wish for them to be the champion of the story. Overall this thesis will discuss what makes a villain and villain in the audiences eyes.

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Introduction

Every story has a villain. To capture an audience's attention an antagonist must come along and disrupt the story for the protagonist. This thesis discusses the types of villains and how they were created in film over the last decade. Film villains in particular have a lasting impact on a general audience for example The Joker, Cruella and Patrick Bateman. It will explore the design of these characters and break down the core visual features which are associated with being negative and evil and where this pre-programmed way of thinking originates. This will include breaking down the character's facial features, costume design, silhouette of the character, and how the character moves and interacts with the environment it is in. It will also explore the reasons why the audience can relate to these "bad guy" characters. Through looking at the morals of the characters it is seen that a villain has more relatability to the average viewer than a heroic character. Heroic characters are at a point where there are almost too good that the average person just can not compare themselves to them without feeling lesser. The objective of this thesis is to show the distinct characteristics used in the design of a villain across three separate categories and how these simple things impact the view of the audience. It will also explain the reasoning behind why people associate more with an antagonist character.

Chapter one will explore the female villain. It will concentrate on the over-sexualisation of specific characters such as Cruella Devil, Maleficent, and Wanda Maximoff. Using sources such as Laura Mulvey's essay it will be discussing the male gaze and how that has translated over into the design process of these characters due to a lack of women in this profession. The chapter will look at numerous characters ranging from the 1960s to the present day. It will show how these women have extremely tragic backstories that are rarely actually addressed or brushed off for the sake of wanting them to just be crazy and psychotic when their actions, though still not good, have the same reasoning as to why this character has this behaviour. The chapter will talk about how anything that is not seen as a usual womanly trait will often be seen as something distasteful such as not liking children, being single or unmarried and not conforming to the normal rules that are usually expected of women.

Chapter two will focus on the grinning villain. A type of character who the audience remembers from their uncanny smile. It will intensively study three specific villains from three different genres of film such as horror, thriller and drama. The Joker, Patrick Bateman and the Smile entity. The examples will also be spaced quite a few years apart to show that villain design has not changed much in the last few decades. Looking at the examples and breaking down the character design of each will promote an understanding in the strange attraction they have towards these characters and maybe even some of the similarities they can associate with themselves. Sourcing important work like Dominique Lestel's "Why are we so Fond of Monsters" will help make clear connections why an audience often feels drawn to more monstrous characters as it dissects the history of humans and their obsession with things that are out of the ordinary. This section will finally show why the most creepy and strange characters can often be the most memorable.

Chapter three will centre around the topic of the unexpected villain. The type of character whom the audience does not know is the villain until further into the plot of the film. Pulling examples from three genres of film such as animation, horror and superheroes, this chapter will reveal the hidden clues in the character's design that signifies that they were the villain the entire time. These design choices will compare to the findings in the previous chapters and help discover the core elements of a villain design. This section will also look at the complicated emotions an audience has toward this type of character due to the hidden intentions of the character. Shape language will be a particularly important topic discussed in this section and the previous chapters, as it has a major role in character design. Important sources like Angela Wang's dissertation *An Approach to Design Visuals for Archetypes Based on Character Archetype Taxonomies* will help explain why shape language is used in the design process for a character.

The examples used in this entire body of research are going to prove that all of these characters from many genres from many decades all comply with the same design process and techniques regardless of what type of film it may be. It will also give research responding to why humans are curious about monstrous characters and why they relate to some of them. The themes under examination in this thesis are the elements that create a villainous character and how we identify them using these

features, the sexualisation of the female characters in this category of character design and the reasoning why the audience relates to the villain of these stories. A close examination of these film characters will show that the design process for a villain has not change much at all over the last couple of decades.

1.1 Sexualisation of Female Character Design

Female villains have been around for many generations and people have often found villains more relatable than their hero counterparts as stated in this journal article written by a number of professors in fields such as psychology, arts, English and behavioral sciences “some individuals may come to engage positively with villainous characters because *they are like them*, that is, because they share the villains’ immoral outlook to some degree.”¹ In recent years many traditional female villains are being given solo films with backstories and reasons as to how they became their classic characters. Many examples of this such as Cruella Devil *101 Dalmatians* (1961)², Maleficent from *Maleficent* (2014)³, Wanda Maximoff from *Multiverse of Madness* (2022)⁴, and Winifred from *Hocus Pocus* (1993)⁵.

To start this exploration into the relatability of the female villain through design begins with a classic Disney villain, Cruella Devil from *101 Dalmatians*. She is known for her insanity, cruelty towards canines and her classic cigarette holder. Taking a closer look, some of the classic characteristics often associated with a female antagonist can be seen in Cruella. It starts by looking at her proportions, Cruella is given this thin frail boney frail body but as frequently seen in female characters her waist is significantly smaller than the rest of her body.

¹ Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Jens, Anne Fiskaali, Henrik Høgh-Olesen, John A. Johnson, Murray Smith, Mathias Clasen. *Do dark personalities prefer dark characters? A personality psychological approach to positive engagement with fictional villainy*, *Poetics*, vol 85, April 2021.

² *101 Dalmatians*. Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman, Clyde Geronimi and Hamilton Lusk, Walt Disney Productions, 1961.

³ *Maleficent*. Directed by Robert Stromberg, Walt Disney Pictures, 2014.

⁴ *Multiverse of Madness*. Directed by Sam Raimi, Marvel Studios, 2022.

⁵ *Hocus Pocus*. Directed by Kenny Ortega, Walt Disney Pictures, 1993.



Fig 2. Cruellas unrealistic proportions.

This type of design choice is due to the lack of women working professionally in the film industry. As explained by Natalie Wellman a lecturer from Concordia University who studied forensics and communication analysis:

Not only are women underrepresented in film, but women are also often over-sexualized and portrayed in a negative light. Additionally, females are shown almost exclusively in stereotypical roles such as wives, homemakers, and nonprofessionals, which negatively impacts their viewers' ideas of women.⁶

⁶ Wellman, Natalie S. *Disney's Portrayal of Women: An Analysis of Female Villains and Princesses*. *Concordia Journal of Communication Research*, vol.7, no.4. 2020. pp.1-20.

Wellman solidifies this idea that women are brutally stereotyped to fit the male idea of a perfect woman. Although, her new redesign where she is portrayed through Emma stone in *Cruella* (2021)⁷ is a slightly more realistic shape that is more relatable, it still has the small waist to hips and shoulder ratio prominent.



Fig.3 Female Villain Waist Comparison.

A lot of examples of this misogynistic type of body shape can be seen through hundreds of characters in old and modern-day films. In Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* she states:

She is isolated, glamorous, on display, sexualised. But as the narrative progresses, she falls in love with the main male protagonist and becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalized sexuality, her show-girl connotations; her eroticism is subjected to the male star alone.⁸

⁷ *Cruella*. Directed by Craig Gillespie, Walt Disney Pictures, 2021.

⁸ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema, Film Theory and Criticisms*. vol 16 no.3, Autumn 1975, pp.6-18.

She confirms that these characters are created to be most sexually driven from the male point of view there is no point to her other than to be looked at or possessed by a male. She also says:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female form which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.⁹

Cruella's actions in the 1966 film seems to all be driven by this urgency to look and feel "beautiful" however in her tragic backstory this is not the case. She suffered mental and emotional distress from these animals and the people controlling them, and she cannot help but feel the need to get rid of them. This is mistaken for craziness and makes her a sociopath for simply acting on her emotions and trauma. As Mulvey describes "the silent image of a woman still tied to her place as the bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning."¹⁰ This statement from her essay is yet again pointing to the conclusion most men believe women should be seen and never heard, solidifying this. It is obvious in the new Cruella film there has been much more input from talented women in the industry.

They not only make the audience feel sorry for Cruella they make us relate to her and her trauma and the situations faced daily not to be called crazy. The use of her classic colour palette of reds, blacks, and whites, created by a male, created a beautiful story of loss and growth. They build her character so heartbreakingly well that it is hard to see her as just the cold heartless crazy woman seen in her first appearances, this is thanks to a much more diverse character design team.

⁹ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema, Film Theory and Criticisms*. vol 16 no.3, Autumn 1975, pp.6-18.

¹⁰ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema, Film Theory and Criticisms*. vol 16 no.3, Autumn 1975, pp.6-18.

1.2 Character Design Associated with Female Villains

Like Cruella Disney's *Maleficent and Sleeping Beauty* (1959)¹¹ have seen this same transformation. No longer just an evil witch that transforms into a dragon to just be simply evil, it is conveyed Maleficent's true nature of heartbreak and nurturing. Like a lot of women, a man brutally hurts her, a man she had trusted, and that same man was believed when he created the myth of her as a monster. Barbra Guerrero whom is a learning developer with a master of arts degree in comparative literature says "Virginia Allen states that many of the proto-femme Fatales are portrayed as revengeful women whose victim is often a male lover".¹² This is a statement made on the absolute first female villains such as Lilith and Medusas from popular mythologies. In Maleficent's design, the classic proportions in both renditions can be seen and it is also depicted as her straight hairline turns to a widow's peak after she becomes the monster she is told to be. As described by Kayla Meagher and Michele Neal both psychology majors "Villains had dark eyes, arched eyebrows big and pointed noses, straight hair, widow peaks, wrinkles...".¹³ This quote is from a study of over 40 Disney films and surveys done indicated that a widow's peak hairline was often a strong indication of a villain.

¹¹ *Sleeping Beauty*. Directed by Wolfgang Reitherman, Clyde Geronimi, Eric Larson and Les Clark, Walt Disney Productions, 1959.

¹² Guerrero, Barbara. *Representing Modern Female Villain: On Feminine Evil, Perverse Nationhood, and Opposition in Rómulo Gallegos' Doña Bárbara and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*. 2016. The University of Western Ontario, Masters Dissertation.

¹³ Meagher, Kayla and Michelle Neal. *The Influence of Disney: the effects of animated facial features on children's perceptions*. 2005. Hanover college, Bachelor dissertation.



Fig.4 Widows Peak Examples.

Grace Fussell, a graphic design, describes in her online article the importance of shape psychology and the difference between round and triangular being view by the audience she explains “round” as being the shape of nature and life giving elements like the sun and moon. While in contrast she describes the triangle as confrontational and aggressive and when inverted they can be seen as unstable and dangerous. Maleficent features also become sharper when transformed into the evil version of herself. This specific design can be seen in so many old and new films, specifically in the female antagonist. The harsh lines created in this triangular form, which is associated with villainous characters, it is often engrained into our minds as children.

As seen in the survey by Meagher and Neal “Participants who had viewed more Disney films gave more of a positive evaluation to the heroic faces and a more negative evaluation to the villainous faces than participates who had seen fewer films.”¹⁴ This study was done on children and their exposure to Disney villains in which it was discovered that they found the widow’s peak to be more villainous after watching so many cartoon faces with these sharp and angular shapes. Other examples of this also concluded with darker eyes and more arched eyebrows being seen as the antagonist's classic characteristics. This is also why female villains are often more relatable to women because they are constantly trying to achieve these types of shapes through makeup and surgery to achieve this impossible beauty standard of today’s society.

Maleficent is yet another example of a woman demonized for her experience with mental and emotional distress and for reacting to her trauma. This makes her all the more relatable to a woman and young girls of this generation. She uses her sadness and trauma to transform herself into a warrior but also keeps her soft side when she nurtures the young princess Aurora.

Another effect of having a male-dominated design team for these characters is that many of them are written to only want to be young and beautiful. As if that is all a woman could care about.

¹⁴ Meagher, Kayla and Michelle Neal. *The Influence of Disney: the effects of animated facial features on children’s perceptions*. 2005. Hanover college, Bachelor dissertation.

Examples of this can be seen clearly in Gothel from Disney's *Tangled* (2010)¹⁵ and the evil Queen from the classic *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs* (1937)¹⁶. Both these women are written by men who believe a woman only want in life is to be young, beautiful and sexually satisfying to the male eye. Laura Mulvey explains "Woman's desire is subjugated to her image (...) as the bearer, not maker, of meaning."¹⁷ Again she uses her study of the male gaze to yet prove the sexualization of female characters.

1.3 Character Design and Backstory Influence

Yet another example of a character becoming more relatable in recent film developments is Winifred Sanderson from *Hocus Pocus* and *Hocus Pocus 2* (2022)¹⁸. Originally Winnie is perceived as a cunning evil sarcastic woman who will stop at nothing to protect her youth even if that means consuming children's souls. But in the latest installment of Sanderson's sisters in *Hocus Pocus 2*, her life before turning into a witch is conveyed to the audience.

She was being forced into a marriage she did not desire, all Winnie wanted was for her and her sister to be safe and together. Unfortunately, again due to being purged from their home by males in their village, Winnie and her sisters had to resort to evil and witchcraft. As stated in the study by Barbra Guerrero who has a Master of Arts degree in comparative literature, "The femme fatale articulates fears of subjection as well as the complete rejection of female traditional values."¹⁹ This article embodies all that Winnie and her sisters Sarah and Mary are about, they do not carry the traditional maternal instincts often associated with women protagonists.

They become these relatable characters that the audience almost feels guilty for admiring and rooting for because women are supposed to love and adore children and be disgusted by any sort of evil witchcraft.

¹⁵ *Tangled*. Directed by Nathan Greno and Byron Howard, Walt Disney Pictures, 2010.

¹⁶ *Snow White and The Seven Dwarfs*. Directed by David Hand, Perce Pearce, Larry Morey, Ben Sharpsteen, Wilfred Jackson, William Cottrell, Walt Disney Productions, 1937.

¹⁷ Mulvey, Laura. *Visual Pleasure in Narrative Cinema, Film Theory and Criticisms*. vol 16 no.3, Autumn 1975, pp.6-18.

¹⁸ *Hocus Pocus 2*. Directed by Anne Fletcher, Walt Disney Pictures, 2022.

¹⁹ Guerrero, Barbara. *Representing Modern Female Villain: On Feminine Evil, Perverse Nationhood, and Opposition in Rómulo Gallegos' Doña Bárbara and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children*. 2016. The University of Western Ontario, Masters Dissertation.

In contrast to this, Wanda Maximoff from Marvel's *Multiverse of Madness* is villainized because she loves her children too much. Going to murderous lengths to reach her children her character design uses a commonly feminine positive trait and morphs it into something sinister.

This undying love and rage are meant to make the audience feel rage and hatred towards Wanda but instead, it incites more compassion especially when the audience is mothers themselves. Both Winnie and Wanda fall victim to the unfortunate over-sexualization of their physical designs. Using layers of greens to display Winnie's jealousy for the youth of children and red for Wanda's relentless anger over losing hers. They are still stigmatized to the hip, waist and shoulder ratio, and both contain sharp angles and widow peaks, naturally or through costume.



Fig.5 Winifred Design Examples.

Fig.6 Wanda Design Examples

Within this research, the viewer can witness that the character design of these villains is what makes them so relatable to their audience, females. Seeing the pressures of society that are put on how women in everyday life are represented in these so-called "evil" protagonists, simply because they do not wish to conform to these "normal" standards, dictated majority by males dominated design teams

Chapter 2: The Grinning Villain

This chapter explores the world of the “Grinning Villain”. This is a type of villain that can cause unease even when appearing to be friendly and inviting, they create a false sense of safety to their victims with their over bearing facial expressions. It dissects the reasons why the audience resonates so much with these supposedly psychotic characters. Examples such as *The Joker* created by DC Comics, Patrick Bateman from *American Psycho* (2000)²⁰ and the evil entity from a more recent horror film *Smile* (2022)²¹ will be used to display this common villain stereotype. This section will be looking at how their silhouettes present them in a villainous light using the fundamentals of shape language. Also, how they are often a product of their surroundings yet still an outcast and why the audience resonates with them and sometimes admire them instead of their seemingly perfect and sane counterpart. Looking at Dominique Lestel, a French philosopher whose work is significant for the rethinking of animality and human-animal relations, 2012 study on “Why are we so fond of monsters?” the reasoning behind this strange feeling the audience often has will become clearer. This study will also be looking into the design aspect of these characters in-depth and how even the smallest design choice can impact the audience's view and feelings of the antagonist.



Fig.7 Grinning Villain Examples.

²⁰ *American Psycho*. Directed by Mary Harron, Edward R. Pressman Productions, 2000.

²¹ *Smile*. Directed by Parker Finn, Paramount Players, 2022.

2.1 Case Study of The Joker

The Joker from the *DC Comics* universe is the prime example of a grinning/smiling villain, this character has been around since his first debut in the *Batman* comics in issue #1, which was released in 1940. This means that the Joker has been a character on our pages and screens for the last eighty-two years. From comic books to tv series to video games and major motion pictures the Joker is a character whom the audience has had hundreds of hours to understand, relate to and connect with in many ways.



Fig.8 Many Iterations of the Joker.

The joker is often referred to as a monster more than a man due to the terrible crimes he commits but this is one of the reasons audiences adore him so much. As Dominique Lestel explains in his study, “Human attraction to monsters is such that we could almost characterize *Homo sapiens* as ‘the species that loves monsters’.”²² He is essentially explaining that humans were created to always be attracted to any sort of monstrous thing and have a fascination with it. People will always have that attraction and intrigue for the unknown and the things not understood because they do not conform to the rules of the society of the time.



Fig.9 Joker Evolution.

The classic joker design consists of quite common characteristics that are associated with villains. As presented in the evidence of Kayla and Michele’s research:

villainous characters were significantly ($p < .05$) more likely to have darker eyes, arched (v. rounded or straight) eyebrows, thin and pointed noses, a widow’s peak, straight (vs. wavy) hair, wrinkles, and appear to be over 30 years old.²³

²² Lestel, Dominique. *Why Are We So Fond of Monsters?* *Edinburgh University Press Journal Comparative Critical Studies*, vol 9 no.3, 2012, pp.259-269.

²³ Meagher, Kayla and Michelle Neal. *The Influence of Disney: the effects of animated facial features on children’s perceptions*. 2005. Hanover college, Bachelor dissertation.

The joker does indeed have all of these features. During his comic book years, a clearer projection of these characteristics can be seen.



Fig.10 Comic books era examples.

The comic book joker design uses many harsh angles in his face pushing all his features down on this very sharp arrow shape. Johnny Levanier whom has a bachelor's degree in creative writing and communications describes this in shape language:

Although they are not the only shape to contain points and corners, there is something that feels extra sharp about the triangle's edges. Triangles remind us of spearheads, and rows of them can feel like shark's teeth. As such, they inherently imply danger.²⁴

In some of these designs, the wrinkles that surround his classic smile as unsettling and add to the fearsomeness of his evil persona and signify that he fits the margin of being older than thirty which is associated most with being a bad guy. Between the widow's peak, lengthy nose and pointed chin, it creates this triangular sharp shape which is a very popular method in displaying someone as the villain of the story. This design technique stems from the world around us Just like his facial features his silhouette also carries this same impact of being very sharp and dangerous.

²⁴ Levanier, Johnny. *The Meaning of Shapes in Design*. 99Designs by Vista. 2020.



Fig.11 Jokers Silhouette Examples

Similarly, the film and tv character renditions of the joker carry on these traits but the severity of them is less than the original comic design. The sharpness is rendered down into a more rounded contour. Though some of the redesigns of the joker have less visible or sometimes no eyebrows at all, the impact is instead created in the harsh arches and lines in his makeup.



Fig.12 The Joker in his many film adaptations.

One of the main reasons that the Joker has been able to endure our screens is because he is a monster created by the society around him and even as society changes over the last eighty-two years society seems to repeat a lot of past mistakes. In the film *Joker*(2019)²⁵ the backstory of this misunderstood character and all the people who failed him and let him become this monster of a man.

The disturbing moral of the story is that I can voluntarily become a monster, and true monstrosity does not consist in whether I am a monster or not, but whether I expose my monstrosity to others and am confronted, in spite of myself, by the monstrosity of others.²⁶

²⁵ *Joker*. Directed by Todd Phillips, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2019.

²⁶ Lestel, Dominique. *Why Are We So Fond of Monsters?* *Edinburgh University Press Journal Comparative Critical Studies*, vol 9 no.3, 2012, pp.259-269.

Dominique Lestel's explanation of how monsters are created by the people around us is an excellent example to describe what happened to the character of the Joker. His physical aspects are so recognizable now it is hard to not know who the Joker is. The joker became a blueprint for a lot of antagonists to come after him as he was the perfect example of a villain to which audiences truly enjoyed and related.

2.2 American Psycho

The grinning villain appears again in the film *American Psycho* it is originally based on the 1991 novel *American Psycho* by Bret Easton Ellis. For this study, the main character of Patrick Bateman, played by Christian Bale, a successful businessman working on Wall Street, will be used as an example.



Fig.13 American Psycho film posters.

When not working or obsessing over his physical features Bateman murders homeless people, colleagues, animals and lots of women during his time onscreen. His actions are atrocious and inhuman thus creating the feeling that he is a monster. Although he is behaving like a monster there is a huge cult following for this particular character.

Şükrü Sim, a professor of social theory, communication and media at Istanbul university says “the audience likes this villain secretly for they can unchain their own hindrance through this character on an imaginary level and satisfy their own Id desires.”²⁷ Id, which is the primitive self, is one of Freuds three-part explanation on the neurotic conflict on how evil is determine by human behaviour. As explained in this piece of writing *Transformation Of The Villain In Hollywood*, the audience connects to Bateman on a very dark level, he moves with whatever intrusive thoughts enter his mind and has no accountability for his actions, very unlike the real life of the audience.

Bateman has no real reasonings for his actions, he was not treated terribly or had a bad childhood he simply just acted purely on impulse and emotion.

The character design of Bateman is more subtle. He blends into his surroundings often being mistaken for other men in his field. This also works to his advantage as people cannot seem to possibly believe that he could commit such crimes. However, Patrick still has the classic widow's peak and always wears sharp clean bespoke suits giving him a very clear sharp silhouette. Bateman's face is very angular and sharp, he keeps his body in the same condition. The scene where he peels off his face mask is a good visual image to show that he wears a mask to the people surrounding him.



Fig.14 Patrick peeling off his face mask.

²⁷ Sim, Şükrü. *Transformation Of the Villain in Hollywood. International Journal of Cultural and Social Studies*, vol 4 no.2. December 2018, pp.429-449.



Fig.15 Comparison between “good” Patrick and “evil”

“Guilty intentionality is at the core of villainy. It is, in fact, a necessary condition of villainy.”²⁸ From this quote by Jens Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, the audience knows that Bateman is aware of his actions and his intentions and the malicious intent of them from his inner thoughts but always how his character is displayed. The contrast between everyday Patrick and serial killer Patrick is very visual. He allows his face to contort more, allowing more wrinkles and depth to his face, this is also when his creepy or unsettling grinning and smiling takes place before he attacks his victims. The contrast between Bateman’s controlled smile and his murdering grin is unsettling and creates a feeling of fear in the audience. The most iconic scene from this film is when Patrick is smiling and chatting when talking to his boss Paul Allen in his apartment while also donning a plastic coat and an axe.

²⁸ Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, Jens. *A Structure of Antipathy: Constructing the Villain in Narrative Film*. *Evolutionary Literary Theory and Criticism Projections*, March 2019, pp.67-90.



Fig.16 Patrick Bateman is about to kill Paul Allen.

Patrick attacks mid-conversation while still smiling beheading his colleague. While this imagery is very disturbing and unsettling, it does make the audience relate to their hatred and jealousy of people they might see as “above” them in their own lives. The sheen of sweat that slicks over his face when he is about to switch is also an interesting visual cue. His character design as a whole completely changes when he lets his psychotic serial killer thoughts take over his normal persona.

Overall, it is believed that this low-budget cult favourite film became a raging success due to the brilliant character design of Bateman himself and Christian Bale for bringing this psychotic villain to life on our screens. Without this type of portrayal and acting of sinister smiles and crazy grins, the film might not have made the impact it has had over the last twenty years.

2.3 Smile Entity

Smile is a new horror film that takes a grinning villain to a whole new level. In this film, the main character Rose witnesses a girl killing herself. Unknown to the audience this is how an evil entity travels from person to person. The witness of the death becomes the new soul for it to torture to the brink of insanity. It feeds off of the fear it creates in its victims. Professor Dominique Lestel explains “human culture either responds to monsters with fear or feeds on them joyously.”²⁹ Similarly to the story, this also happens in real life. Like Lestel states as humans can never turn a blind eye or ignore a monster, humans must either find out why they fear or obsess over its existence. This is why the audience is very captured by this film as it is not often a demon entity that antagonises its victims with a grin or smile. Also, the fact that this entity can become anyone around you adds to the exhilarating feeling of fear. The character rose is tortured by this creature using the faces of her patients, friends and her sister whose head turns upside down.



Fig.17 People possessed by the Smile Entity.

²⁹ Lestel, Dominique. *Why Are We So Fond of Monsters? Edinburgh University Press Journal Comparative Critical Studies*, vol 9 no.3, 2012, pp.259-269.

Unlike some of the other examples, the audience can not simply point to the villain in this story with its many changing faces and bodies. Instead, its only consistent trait throughout almost the entire film is its unnerving grin. Until reaching the end and climax of the film where the entity reveals itself to the audience. Although the only available images are very short glimpses, the impact of this demon is very strong. You can see in its character design that it has these multiple layers of teeth and jaws in its mouth. This makes the thought of the grin throughout the film intensely more horrifying.



Fig.18 The smile entity reveals itself.

Although only released a short while ago, *Smile* has glowing reviews from both critics and fans alike. It is praised for its intense and unnerving story and character designs. Something as simple as an uncomfortable smile or grin can make a huge difference to a character.

In conclusion, this dissection of these characters proves that their design and portrayal are critical in producing a good and relatable villain for the audience. From widow's peaks and arched eyebrows to sharp silhouettes and wrinkles and angular faces, all of these are the ingredients used to create that visually capturing villain. The grinning villain has always been a classic in old and new films, from the birth of the Joker to the demon entity in *Smile* and will grow in future films to continue to make us feel uncanny and confused as to why viewers sometimes support the bad guy of the story.

Chapter 3: The Unexpected Villain

This chapter will explore the topic of the unexpected villain plot in films. This type of villain disguises themselves a good natured character until it is time for their evil plans to begin to unfold. It will look at the character design and how the audience can be misled purposely by not assigning these characters with the classic villain traits while also hiding others until the reveal of the character's true intentions. It will also look at how an audience will sympathise or understand the point of view and reasoning the villains have. To study this topic, three different film genres have been chosen and for each genre one to two film examples will be used. The genres will consist of Animated *Disney/Pixar*, Horror and Superhero films. Examples such as *Frozen* (2013)³⁰, *Scream* (1996)³¹ and *Spiderman: Far from Home* (2019)³² will be used in this study. These genres have been chosen to depict that the unexpected villain plot exists across all areas of cinematic media.

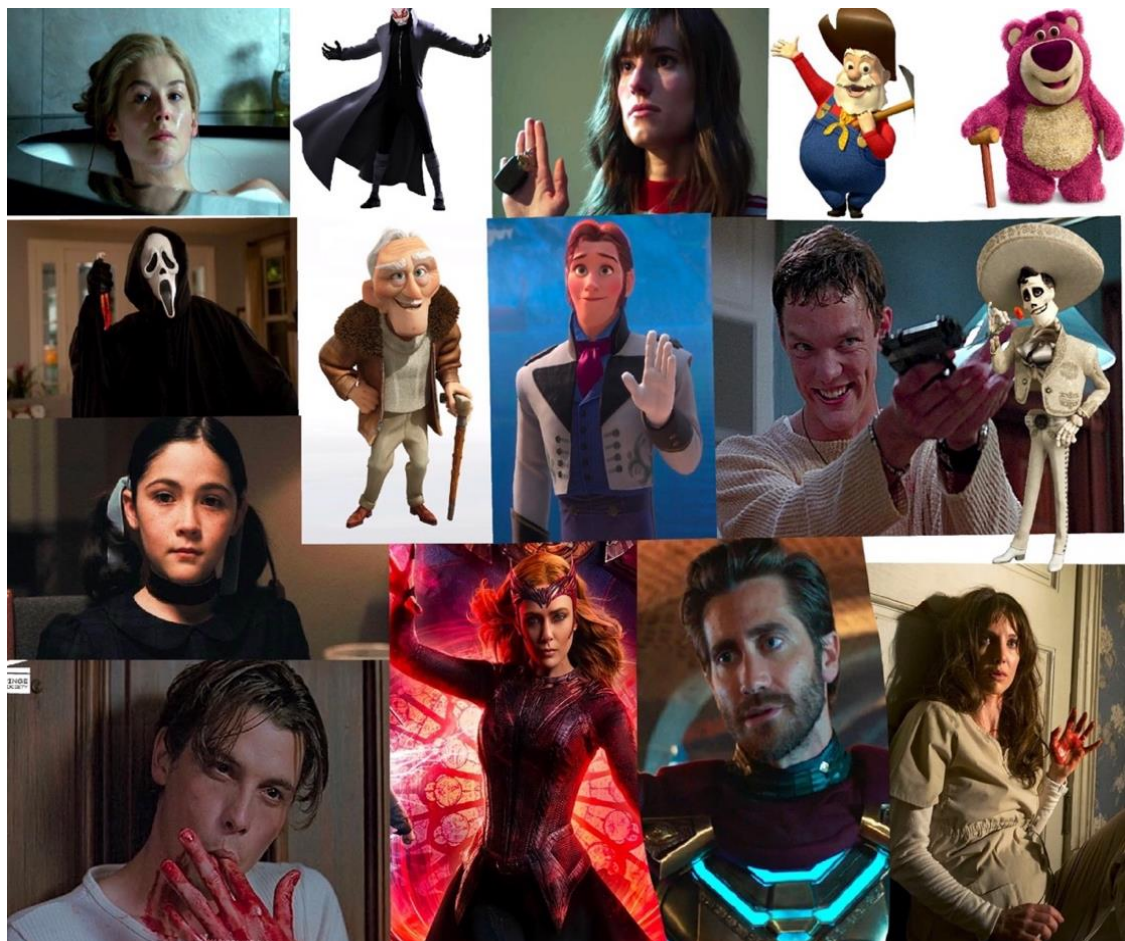


Fig.19 Unexpected Villain Examples.

³⁰ *Frozen*. Directed by Chris Buck and Jennifer Lee, Walt Disney Pictures, 2013.

³¹ *Scream*. Directed by Wes Craven, Woods Entertainment, 1996.

³² *Spiderman: Far from Home*. Directed by Jon Watts, Marvel Studios, 2019.

3.1 Animated Films

In this genre of films, two characters from two animated children's films will be explored. These examples will consist of *Frozen* and *Coco* (2017)³³. These films have been chosen as they contain a plot twist about the identity of the villain of each story. The first character in this study will be Prince Hans from *Frozen*. Prince Hans is introduced to us very early in the film. He is the youngest of twelve sons from another kingdom and it is his marriage proposal to Anna that starts the sequence of events of the film. Later it is seen Hans's true intentions of just wanting a kingdom of his own as he is the last born and has no right to anything in his land. Hans then tries to leave Anna to die and attempts to murder Elsa. Hans's character design when he is first introduced is a very soft round figure that does not have any sharp edges or indication of any danger about him. As Brooke Eggleston, a character designer of fifteen years states in his video about shape language "circles and general rounded shapes give a feeling of "a warm, cheerful character"³⁴ hence the designers of this character succeeded in disguising this villain by tricking the audience who are very used to the normal shape language often use to portray villains.

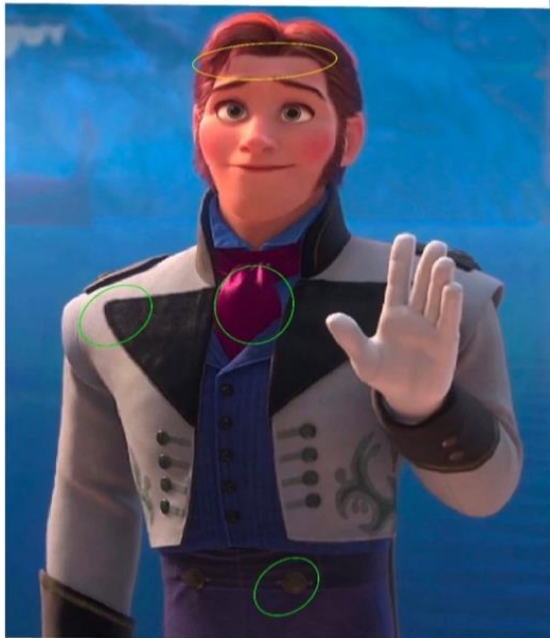


Fig.20 Good Hans.



Fig.21 Evil Hans.

³³ *Coco*. Directed by Lee Unkrich, Walt Disney Pictures, 2017.

³⁴ Eggleston, Brookes, Director. *Shape language 1: Intro and round shapes*. YouTube, uploaded by Brookes Eggleston - Character Design Forge, 7th August 2015.

As Angela Wang, who has a master's degree in science and visualisation, describes in her study of design visuals "The reason why shape language is so emphasized among character designers is that the foundation "shape" that a successful character design is built upon is the clearest indicator of what feeling the design is supposed to invoke."³⁵ Shapes essentially determine how the audience interprets characters they meet for the first time.

Here Hans can be seen when he is introduced in contrast to when he is at the height of his evilness. As can be observed comparing figure 20 and figure 21 the change in his hair go from a straight hairline to a pointed v shape often associated with evil. Veronica Jensen, a woman with a bachelors degree in media arts, aesthetics and narration, explains in her study of shape language "that sharp edges and features did indicate to some degree that a figure has bad intentions when compared to a softer figure."³⁶ Also in the clothing, all the rounded shapes such as his buttons, belt buckle and general shapes are turned into harsher and sharper lines which convey to the audience that he is now the villain.

Similarly, his colour palette also switches from warm and vibrant colours often associated with happiness to very cool cold colours associated with bleakness and evil. The audience can however still sympathise with this cruel character. Though it is a work of fiction it still can be related to situations for some people in everyday life. Being the youngest of a lot of siblings can be extremely hard as life has mostly consisted of used objects and nothing ever new or belonging truly to you. A life like this truly resonates with the audience making this unexpected villain more likeable despite his obvious moral flaws. As Rebecca Krause, a doctor in marketing and Derek Rucker, a psychologist in marketing, discovered in their study "people have a preference for villains—unambiguously negative individuals—who are similar to themselves".³⁷

³⁵ Wang, Angela. *An Approach to Design Visuals for Archetypes Based on Character Archetype Taxonomies*. 2019. Texas A & M University, Masters Dissertation.

³⁶ Jensen, Veronica. *Character Shape and Visceral Response Can a figure's shape alone generate a reaction regarding its nature?* 2015. University of Skövde, Bachelors Dissertation.

³⁷ Krause, Rebecca J. and Derek. D. Rucker. *Can Bad Be Good? The Attraction of a Darker Self*. *Psychological Science*, vol 31 no.5, 21st April. 2020, pp.518-530.

The next character to look at is Ernesto De La Cruz from *Disney's Coco*. Ernesto was a beloved celebrity that died soon into his career. Ernesto becomes the main protagonist Miguel's muse to bring music back into his life. Ernesto turned out to have stolen music from Miguel's great-grandfather and murdered him. Ernesto's first introduction to the audience is similar to Hans, he is very warm-toned, and his shapes are very rounded and put together. The use of shape language is very important in this character design process as Angela Wang states "Pixar animation expands on the reason why shape language is effective through the adoption of the concept of simplicity—the principle of "less is more".³⁸ When Ernesto is revealed as the villain of this plot, he becomes more dishevelled and unhinged looking. His hair transforms and his colour scheme becomes dull.

Similarly to Hans, his physical features become a lot sharper and more prominent like his cheek bones and the markings on his face become triangular as he expresses his anger. Audiences will find it harder to relate to Ernesto as he shows traits of a very true villain. As Michael Biggs states in his study of villains "The character who truly enjoys doing evil acts just for the sake of the pain, misery, or potential gain is the truly classic villain." Ernesto commits all his acts just for potential gain himself.



Fig.22 Good Ernesto.



Fig.23 Bad Ernesto.

³⁸ Wang, Angela. *An Approach to Design Visuals for Archetypes Based on Character Archetype Taxonomies*. 2019. Texas A & M University, Masters Dissertation.

It is noticed that both these characters follow the same pattern of design choices that allows them to be disguised in their stories. It can also be seen from the posters in figure 24 for these films that the villain is displayed right before the eyes of the audience, they are shown in non-threatening stances and usually very close to the protagonists of the film, this is another tactic in the design process to disguise the true desires of the villains.



Fig.24 Film poster examples.

3.2 Horror Films

Horror films are more known for the plot of an unexpected villain as they reveal often what happens at the end of the story when the killer or killers are revealed. The unexpected villain is a character whom The films which will be looked at are *Scream* and *Orphan* (2009)³⁹. Both of these films have great examples of very unexpected villains which are disguised throughout the plot until the climax of the story.

Beginning with *Scream*, the birth of the famous serial killer Ghost Face whom the audience later find out in a twist of events is the protagonist's boyfriend Billy Loomis and his friend Stu. These boys are portrayed as innocent through the plot until their dark intentions are truly revealed thus showing us how truly evil, they are, as Micheal Biggs, a professor of music, states "A villain is also and most truly defined by his or her character alignment. The truly evil enjoy their work."⁴⁰ These characters relish their atrocious acts of violence. They use the design of a Ghost Face to throw off the audience as to whom the killer is. Ghost face has a very triangular mask a shape used to often display a villain this is an important feature to note as it constitutes the importance of shape language in design Angela Wang describes here

The reason why shape language is so emphasized among character designers is that the foundation "shape" that a successful character design is built upon is the clearest indicator of what feeling the design is supposed to invoke.⁴¹



Fig.25 Triangular Shape of Ghostface Mask.

³⁹ *Orphan*. Directed by Jaume Collet-Serra, Dark Castle Entertainment, 2009.

⁴⁰ Biggs, Michael. *The Dark Side of The Tune: A Study of Villains*. 2008. University of Central Florida, Masters Dissertation.

⁴¹ Wang, Angela. *An Approach to Design Visuals for Archetypes Based on Character Archetype Taxonomies*.2019. Texas A & M University, Masters Dissertation.



Fig.26 Comparisons of Stu and Billy before and after being revealed as the killer.

Similarly, some classic villain design such as a widow's peak was a small indication of Billy's involvement as a villain in this piece as it influenced how his emotions came across which is addressed in a study by Angela Wang "Especially with a strong widow's peak, this can make a character look angrier"⁴².

Stu on the other hand gave no hints in his character's design that he would be involved in the murders. He is a truly unexpected villain in this story. Stu transforms his whole design in the way his facial expressions drastically change him into this manic crazy serial killer.

⁴² Wang, Angela. *An Approach to Design Visuals for Archetypes Based on Character Archetype Taxonomies*. 2019. Texas A & M University, Masters Dissertation.

The second horror film which contains an unexpected villain in the plot is the 2009 film, *Orphan*. This film follows the story of a family who lose a baby and turn to adoption to fill a void. They come across a child named Esther and are immediately drawn to her. After taking her home suspicious events start taking place. It is then revealed Esther is no child, she is a thirty-three-year-old woman with a rare genetic disorder, whose evil plan is to seduce the husband of the family. Esther first appears very soft and rounded from her bouncy black hair to the rounded edges of her collar. In contrast to this, the audience sees her true intentions through the change in her design.

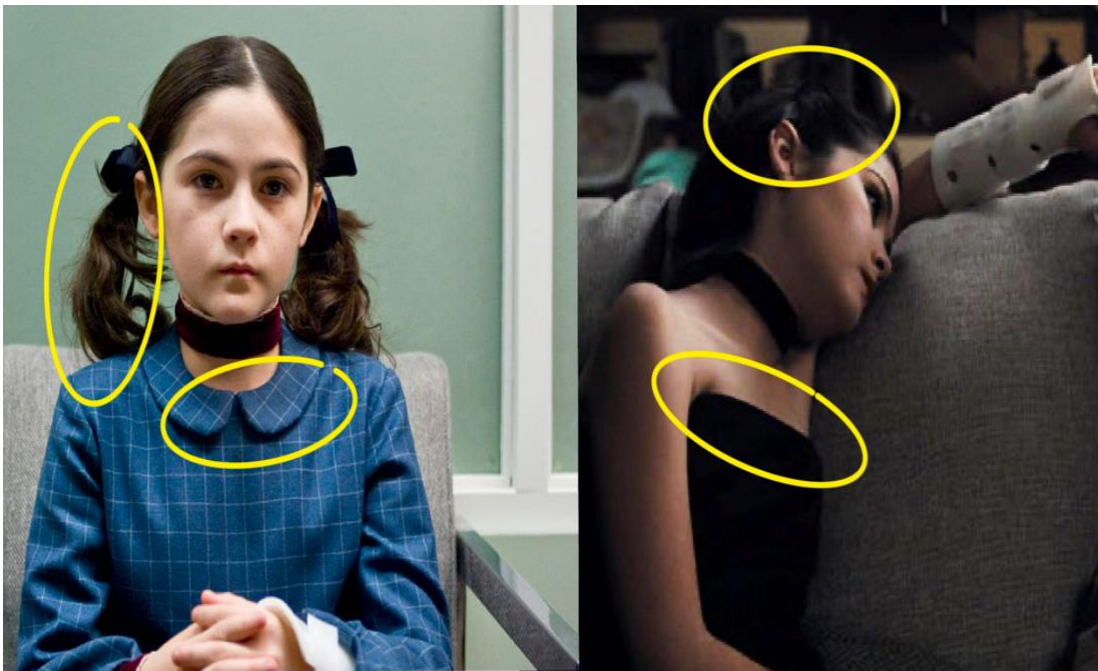


Fig.27 Comparison of Esther's character design throughout the film.

Her hair is pushed up high and her clothes become very sharp and revealing. This is a very disturbing plot as it subverts the typical views of the innocence of a child. Instead, the watcher is given a villain that covered all three aspects associated with evil as described in the book by Colin cooper:

The Dark Triad of personality traits consists of Machiavellianism (manipulating others for one's benefit), Narcissism (grandiose pride; grossly over-valuing one's abilities or personal qualities) and Psychopathy (remorseless aggression).⁴³

⁴³ Cooper, Colin. *Individual Differences and Personality*. Routledge, 2020.

Creating this monster from a seemingly harmless child truly tricks the audience's brain into rethinking all traits and designs that they have associated with previous villains. In addition to the previous examples, the posters for both these films in figure 28 depict the unexpected villains in a non-threatening manner.



Fig.28 Film poster examples.

3.3 Superhero Films

In the film *Spiderman: Far from Home* the unexpected villain plot can be seen when Mysterio turns out to be the villain the entire time. Mysterio's fake superhero costume is designed to throw off the audience as it is full of rounded-off shapes that give him a more warming impression as expressed in this study published in the *European Association of Research on Learning and Instruction* "In the case of multimedia learning, the use of warm colours and round shapes induced positive emotions".⁴⁴

It is an indication of his transformation into villainy when his seemingly perfect hair becomes dishevelled as he reveals himself similarly to Hans who was discussed earlier in the text. The markings on his suit he uses to control the stark robots consist of harsh multiple triangular shapes, this was most likely a design choice purposely chosen to indicate his true intentions. As explained by Bruce Block, a film producer and visual consultant with over thirty years experience:

"Most of the other basic visual components don't have pre-existing emotional characteristics associated with them, but straight and curved lines do. Generally speaking, a straight line is associated with these qualities: direct, aggressive, blame, honest, industrial, ordered, strong, unnatural, adult and rigid."⁴⁵

Although Mysterio seems like a very classic case of a villain it does not stop the audience from finding him appealing and almost sympathising with his plight of being used by a company.

⁴⁴ Plass, Jan. L, Bruce D. Homer, Andrew MacNamara, Teresa Ober, Maya C. Rose, Shashank Pawar, Chris M. Hovey, Alvaro Olsen. *Emotional design for digital games for learning: The effect of expression, color, shape, and dimensionality on the affective quality of game characters. Learning and Instruction*, vol 7. December 2020, pp.

⁴⁵ Block, Bruce. *The Visual Story: Seeing the Structure of Film, TV and New Media*. Focal Press, 2020.

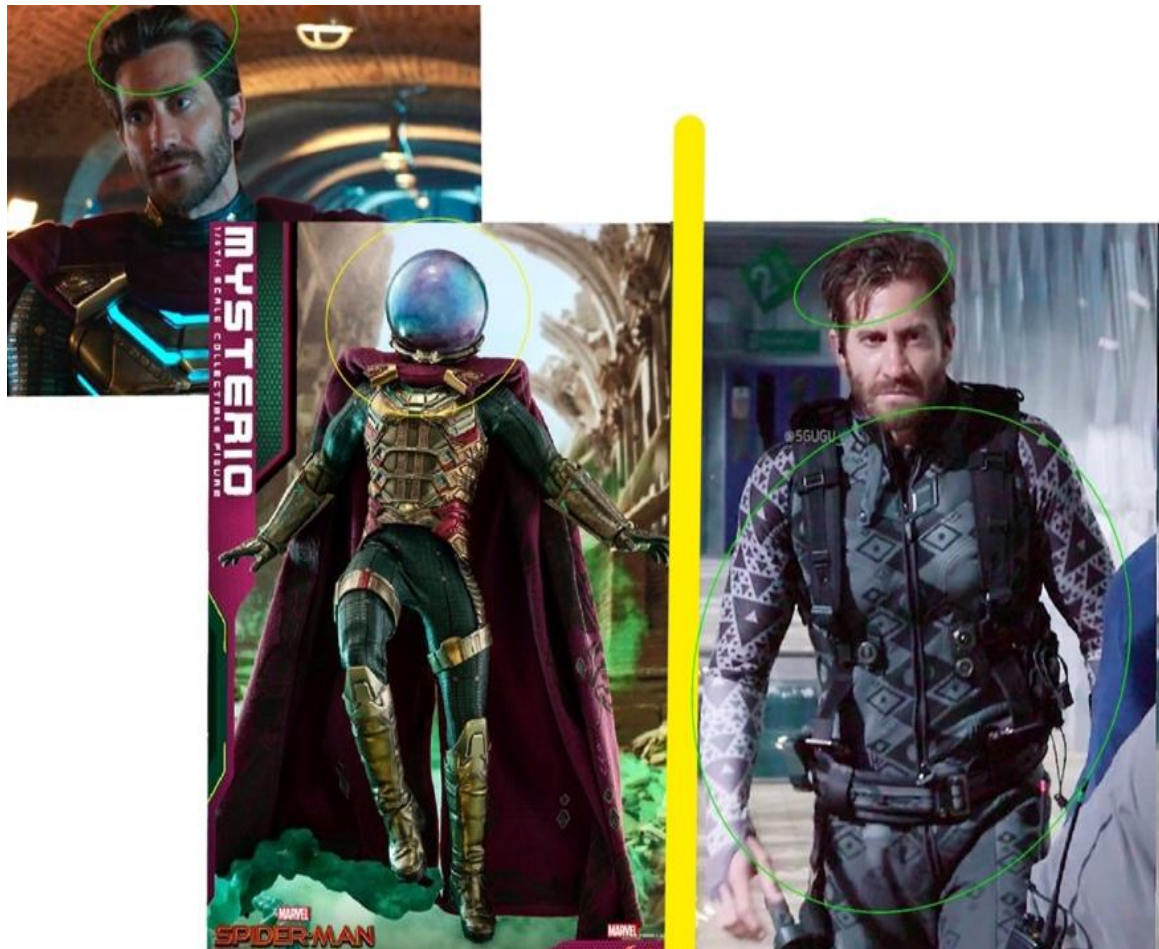


Fig.29 Mysterios contrasting character design.

Reasonings for this are described in the article by Elly Konijn, a professor in media psychology and John Hoorn a professor in Humanities focusing on fictional characters, “Fascination towards an evil FC may arise from a need to explore moral boundaries and to learn how to decide between friends and enemies.”⁴⁶ Also, like the other examples shown, Mysterio appears front and centre of the poster for this film.

⁴⁶ Hoorn, John. F and Elly A. Konijn. *Perceiving and experiencing fictional characters: An integrative account. The Japanese Psychological Research*, vol 45 no. 4, November 2003, pp. 250-268.



Fig.30 Spider-Man Film Poster.

Overall, the examples in this chapter prove that the plot of the unexpected villain exists across all genres of cinema. It proves that character design plays a crucial role in how the audience perceives certain characters. It shows that shape language is critical in the design process in relaying information to the viewer. This research also supports the reasonings as to why humans relate and often root for these monstrous villains.

Conclusion

Villain character design can be seen to stem from considerably basic foundations that automatically trick our brains into seeing these characters as villains. Whether it be children's films or classic horror movies this research has shown all the similarities that link the design process of each. Attributes such as widow peaks, arched eyebrows, harsh angular shape language and dark colour schemes have been the backbone of designing a villain. These techniques are also what communicates to the audience that this specific character does not have good intentions. This study has also shown why humans can relate and bond more with characters that have more questionable morals than their counterpart heroes.

Chapter one has discussed that there is an element of sexism involved in the design process of many female villains by looking at their unrealistic hips to waist proportions and how these characters are skewed into conforming to the male gaze as talked about in Laura Mulvey's essay *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. The examples in this section like Cruella, Winifred and Wanda all feed into this terrible stereotyping through their character design. These unrealistic expectations of women even though fictional are harmful and not good for connecting with the audience. Although, in terms of relatability, it can be seen through their backstories why an audience would support this type of villain. Not complying with society's standards of marriage and children is one of the many reasons why the audiences connect with these fictional women so much. The use of shape language is very evident in their design using a lot of angular and inverted shapes to convey that they are the antagonist of their stories. The drastic hourglass proportions and widow peaks convey their evil intentions to the viewer.

Chapter two introduced a close case study of the Joker which solidified a lot of the research about how shape language and silhouette shape help convey the type of character that the Joker is at just a glimpse of his character. With him being such a loved classic villain, it was important to show that all the iterations of this character still carried the same basic design foundations and followed the same formula. Arched eyebrows, a widow's peak and very angular silhouettes were shown to be very important in how the Joker is perceived.

This has paved the way for these features to be hallmarks of what the audience recognises as villainous as the joker in a statement character throughout many decades of history. Similarly, the examples of Patrick Bateman display these attributes in a non-animated film. Bateman has all of these design choices just in a more subtle fashion in comparison to an exaggerated animation. This section also explains why audiences are so invested in these types of characters through their sheer curiosity that humans have had for monstrous things since the beginning of time. The entity in *Smile* was also discussed briefly to portray the evolution of these design choices in film in the present day. This entity portrays itself in many bodies but still carries the same attributes.

This chapter as a whole confidently conveys the consistency of the basic formula that has been discovered in this thesis of villain character design throughout the topic of grinning villains.

The third chapter then concluded that the attributes spoken about in previous chapters could also be applied to the topic of the unexpected villain film plot. Again, showing through shape language that angular harsh shapes are mostly associated with villainous characters as majority of the designs linking these characters contain many triangles and inverted shapes within their costume or facial construction. In this chapter the importance of this is seen best as the transformation or unveiling of characters like Hans or Mysterio in how the smallest most subtle things change such as the positioning of hair and shapes displayed on clothing can change if they are viewed as good or evil. The ability to relate to these characters was also discussed and proved that some audience members can relate to the back stories of these characters such as struggling in a big family as the youngest sibling or having a boss that does not treat you with respect. Chapter three also gives us a broad range of movies to prove that these ideas can be seen throughout the many genres of film.

Overall, this study conveys that the research has proven that the villain's character follows a basic formula in their design process. Features such as arched eyebrows, widow's peak hairlines, silhouette shapes and dark colour schemes are all crucial elements when it comes to creating a villain character for a film. The research also provides reasoning as to why audiences can relate so much more to these antagonist characters rather than their hero counterparts.

Being referred to as monsters these characters then create the dangerous curiosity humans instinctively have that make them want to know and see more of this monstrous thing. Even the characters who are less vicious and not so much monsters are admired by the viewer as they have these tragic back stories that make them more human than the hero.

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