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Lydia Jayaputra

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Voice of the Villains: The Attraction of and Response to Villain Retellings (Part 2)

Lydia Jayaputra

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Villain retellings (defined as popular modern movies which take a former antagonist character and turn them into a protagonist) have a variety of reasons for their success, including their relatability for those who feel outcast, their modern morality, and their aesthetics. Now that we are aware of the messages of villain retellings, we can discern what to take away from them.

Reaction 1: Christianity and Otherness

Otherness, in and of itself, is not something to feel ashamed by. Jesus interacted and ate with the cultural outsiders of his community (Mark 2:13-17, John 4:1-10, John 8:4-11, Luke 7:1-10). In this sense, villain retellings encourage us to “welcome all parties” to the table of Christianity, as Jesus invites all.¹ However, unlike Jesus, villain retellings make the character’s identity inseparable from their morally questionable actions. For some, even their names are evil: think of the meanings behind *Venom* (a poisonous substance), *Cruella De Vil* (Cruel Devil), and *Maleficent* (an adjective that means causing harm or destruction). Jesus separates one’s identity from their moral actions through the forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:47-48, John 8:11). Perhaps the phrase “hate the sin, love the sinner” comes to mind when making these distinctions, and indeed, the difference between accepting identity and accepting behaviors is the balancing act Christians must engage in when interacting with villain retellings.

Reaction 2: Christianity and Modern Morality

The morality of perspective has connections to empathy, an incredibly important trait for Christians, since it allows us to “love your neighbor as yourself.”² It also reminds us that we are fallible, as it asks us to understand how our actions can negatively impact others. These effects should be celebrated because they encourage deeply important Christian virtues, like humility and love for others. However, the morality of perspective can easily justify any behavior, no matter how heinous or destructive it is. In *Joker*, the Joker murders three men, but it’s perceived as okay because those men beat him up and abused him beforehand. Even the face of moral evil himself, Satan, can get rebranded through the morality of perspective (see Netflix’s TV show, *Lucifer*). While villain retellings show that perspective does indeed change our moral boundaries, theology begs us to remember that God’s perspective, being all-encompassing, cannot be wrong.

Reaction 3: Christianity and Aesthetics.

Our love for aesthetics is a good, God-given aspect of humanity's existence. But as with anything good, it becomes a problem when it is prioritized above everything else. Goudzwaard and Bartholomew liken the modern age to a "hurricane of desire," containing consumers easily swayed by what feels the most aesthetically pleasing.³ Combined with the modern age's emphasis on authenticity, this train of thought changes what people want at a rapid pace and then encourages them to follow whatever they desire all the time.⁴ In terms of villain retellings, this could lead people to incorrectly assign positive attributes to attractive people who do not actually display them—and by contrast, people we do not find attractive may be unfairly judged. It can also lead people to follow in the villain's footsteps as they "feel" their way forward, letting the hurricane of desire dictate their goals instead of a moral compass or outside authority.

Reaction 4: Christianity and Power

Every villain retelling listed had a wealthy and powerful organization behind it, whether it be Disney, Sony, or Warner Bros.⁵ While power was not necessarily a reason we like villain retellings, it is still an important aspect of the films to discern.

The most obvious emphasis of power within villain retellings is the sheer monetary force of the companies that make them. In 2020, Disney made over \$4.3 billion in revenue through their streaming service, Disney+. Sony and Warner Bros may look small in comparison, but they earned a modest \$493 and \$259 million in box office sales despite COVID-19 related setbacks. These companies are household names—it would be almost impossible to exaggerate the popularity of their products in the U.S.

Disney holds a surprising amount of influence over the average North American. In the 1990s, the general public of the U.S. started to blame violent entertainment outlets for creating violent children, fueled by incidents such as school shootings and other violent law-breaking behavior.⁶ The train of thought was "if bad media create bad kids, then surely good media will create good ones. If violent children...had grown up on a steady diet of Disney products, perhaps more than one tragedy might have been averted."⁷ Disney movies became the family-friendly staple, the entertainment company trusted to help every parent turn their child into a good citizen.⁸ Disney's cultural influence amongst families with children has persisted to the point where Disney-themed children's parties are entirely normal events. The company's family-friendly reputation protects them; who is going to a child's parents to address Disney's racism or classism within the movies their child adores?⁹ Disney's legacy protects their products, including their recent villain retellings.

To be perfectly clear, holding power in and of itself is not a sin. Power starts as a gift, as a God-given ability to achieve justice and beauty in the world around us.¹⁰ Its bad rap comes from the

ability to use it for injustice or idolatry. The practical repercussions of injustice are easy to define, whether as instances of racism, mistreatment of workers, or hoarding of wealth. The more difficult power play to notice is injustice as idolatry.

In Crouch's book *Playing God*, injustice and idolatry are defined as the same thing: "the introduction into God's very good world of false images, images that destroy the true images God has placed in the world."¹¹ These instances of power play are aptly called "playing God," as the party committing idolatry is attempting to grasp control away from God.¹² If a company is inflated to a status of utter control and authority, if they can do no wrong, they are playing God. Whenever we assign ethics or loyalty to an institution more than we assign them to God, we allow the institution to play God in our lives. Think of the expectation of consistently ethical and entertaining products from these companies as "having faith" in them; think of the fear of criticizing Disney as the fear of "committing heresy" within a social group. The good news is that breaking the power play of idolatry does not necessarily mean one has to stop consuming entertainment from these companies altogether. Instead, it requires agency that lets us admit the flaws of the company and product, and giving control to God, not to entertainment or to ourselves.¹³

Villain retellings, like their main characters, are a mixed bag of the wonderful and corrupt. Their popularity is due to their cultural resonance to many people—in many ways, the movies get something right in portraying what it means to be human. Yet, their downfalls require us to use a discerning eye when interacting with villain retellings. The only way a discerning examination can occur is if we take a "non-reductive, non-dismissive, and non-anxious" stance to each film.¹⁴ If any lesson is to be taken away from villain retellings, let it be that man-made works are complex and worth a discerning eye.

1. Bailey, 46.

2. Mathew 22:39.

3. Bob Goudzwaard, and Craig G. Bartholomew. *Beyond the Modern Age : An Archaeology of Contemporary Culture*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2017. <https://search-ebscohost-com.ezproxy.dordt.edu:8085/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1679740&site=ehost-live&scope=site>.

4. Goudzwaard and Batholemew, 166.
5. Bailey, 50.
6. Sammond, Nicholas. *Babes In Tomorrowland: Walt Disney and the Making of the American Child*, 1930-1960. Durham: Duke University Press,

2005. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822386834>
7. Sammond, 2.
8. Sammond, 8.
9. Kirker, 211.
10. Crouch, Andy, *Playing God : Redeeming the Gift of Power*, 2003. Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Books. <https://search-ebSCOhost-com.ezproxy.dordt.edu:8085/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=639790&site=ehost-live&scope=site>. 9.
11. Crouch, 71.
12. Crouch, 69.
13. Crouch, 73.
14. Bailey, 152.