



## Aurora and Romanticizing Evil

We may never know what was going through Aurora shooter James Holmes's mind when he committed his heinous mass murder. We don't know what kind of psychosis, or precisely what evil influences, he might have been subject to. What we do know is that, in wanting to be the Joker and not Batman, the villainous and not the virtuous, he reflects something prevalent today: The romanticizing of evil. And to whatever extent he was imitating art, this trend certainly is not art imitating life.



I remember when Panamanian leader Manuel Noriega was taken into custody by U.S. forces. Here was this fellow, who we'd seen giving fiery speeches from podiums and talking about killing political adversaries, now doing a perp walk in shackles. No longer the strongman, he looked neither strong nor like much of a man; it was as if he'd shrunk. He looked pathetic — like any dime-store thug in a mug shot. It was then that one understood what writer Hannah Arendt meant when, after observing Nazi war criminals, she coined the phrase “the banality of evil.”

Evil people aren't very interesting, but you wouldn't know it from our popular culture. It serves up fantastical fiction such as the all-seeing serial killer Hannibal Lector, the superhuman *Cape Fear* criminal Max Cady, and the philosophizing hit men in *Pulp Fiction*. It certainly titillates and triumphs at the box office, but what, ultimately, is triumphing in the hearts and minds of generations weaned on such fare? What is their conception of good and evil? Which is more *attractive* to them?

In reality, hit men aren't engaging conversationalists. They don't sit around in diners pondering life's meaning or quote Bible passages before dispatching victims. This is why even shows such as *The Sopranos* are wanting: They invariably romanticize the mobster milieu. They're not like FBI surveillance tapes in which you hear ugly, vulgar Mafiosi peppering every sentence with four-letter words. They don't reflect the aging Mafia moll who (in a documentary) said that mobsters are terrible lovers because, during romantic encounters, they “talk about who they're going to whack and how they're going to whack him.” You don't see a Richard Kuklinski, known as “The Iceman,” a prolific New Jersey contract killer, who as a young man had an unusual way of entertaining himself. He would take a cat and throw it in the intake chute of a building's furnace and then shut the grated metal hatch behind it. He'd then watch it pace back and forth — vainly trying to escape the searing heat — until the animal stopped moving. This is the true face of evil, sadistic but wholly banal.

Some may now say that the shows and films in question are just entertainment, that artistic license is always used to justify departure from reality. But “just” and “entertainment” are not two words that belong together. When Plato wrote, “When modes of music change, the fundamental laws of the state always change with them,” he was expressing something ancient Greeks knew well: The arts have the power to shake the very foundations of civilization. This should be obvious. If a “picture is worth a thousand words,” just ponder the value of moving footage. It's worth so many words that every modern



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regime, good or evil, has used propaganda films to shape public opinion. And what of shows such as *Amos & Andy*? Does anyone say, "Come on, it's just entertainment; everyone knows most blacks don't act that way, that's not reality"? Yet people who wouldn't dream of resurrecting that program use the same exact rationale to justify emotionally pleasing and fashionable cultural effluent. But while something may or may not be suitable for public consumption, if it is, it's never because it's *just* entertainment.

Of course, since entertainment has to be entertaining, it has always avoided being banal. Yet evil was at one time actually portrayed as, well, evil. Consider the mobster Johnny Rocco in the 1948 film *Key Largo*. While movies back then didn't, thankfully, contain the destructive realism of expletives (a legitimate use of artistic license), the character was played to distasteful perfection by Edward G. Robinson, and I don't think any little boys found him an appealing role model. The same could be said of the original *Star Trek*. Sure, entertainment had already deteriorated markedly by the late 1960s, as exemplified by Captain Kirk's loose sexual mores. Yet he was by and large virtuous, and while the Klingons and Romulans were unforgettable villains, neither I nor any of my sixth-grade agemates who watched the show wanted to be like them. That swashbuckling, heroic champion of the good Kirk was "the man."

But where are the heroes today? Where is the virtue? Just contrast and compare, for instance, the 1962 film *Cape Fear* and its 1991 remake. Both involve a criminal named Max Cady who went to prison for rape and has an axe to grind with lawyer Sam Bowden. In the original, however, Bowden (Gregory Peck) is a truly noble character with a happy family, and his only "sin" was interrupting Cady's sexual attack on a 14-year-old girl and then testifying against him. And while Robert Mitchum did steal the show as Cady, he is still no one to look up to. The lines between good and evil are clearly drawn.

Not so in the new version. It's not just that Bowden (Nick Nolte) was guilty of legal misconduct: Recast as Cady's defense lawyer, he withheld evidence that might have reduced his client's sentence because he wanted Cady punished harshly. It's that he is a thoroughly unappealing, sleazy character and a weak man. He is cheating on his wife, his marriage is in shambles, and he can't even manage his own family. In contrast, Cady (Robert DeNiro) said at the end of the film that his goal in prison was to become "more than human," and that is precisely how he is portrayed. He is self-educated to the point of erudition, possesses fantastic mental strength and a superhuman ability to withstand pain — he is larger than life. So the film's message is one common today: Who is really good? What is "good," anyway? I mean, everyone has got a game. It's just a matter of what side of the law you're on and how well you hide your skeletons.

So who would a teenage boy be more likely to identify with in the new film? On one side you have a slimy lawyer epitomized by a quality most unappealing to the male psyche: weakness. But the "bad" guy? Well, he's cool. He's exciting. He's strong. I don't know how many boys would want to be Cady, but I sure know how many would want to be Bowden.

Of course, many will complain that the heroes of the past — the I-cannot-tell-a-lie George Washington portrayal, the Lone Ranger, etc. — were unrealistic. But first note that larger-than-life villains are also unrealistic. Second, realize that if you want reality, that is not called the arts. It has a different name: news.

If the arts degrade and titillate but don't elevate, if they make us more animalistic and not more ethereal, why should they even exist? Would you knowingly expose your son to influences that would only deform his moral compass?



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One of the defining differences between Christianity and pagan religions is the conception of God's (or gods') nature. Often vengeful, envious, and covetous, Greek gods were more-than-human entities with very human vices; the more-than-human Aztec feathered serpent-god Quetzalcoatl demanded human blood. Christ, though, shed His blood for us. He sets the example of not just superhuman power but superhuman sacrifice and virtue, because He sacrificed His divine self and is virtue. And one doesn't have to be a believer to understand that a people's conception of what the omnipotent are, or would be, is a potent influence.

Thus, it isn't just that all of today's not-so-good guys are shades of dark gray; it's that we've forgotten that it's heroes who are supposed to be "more than human." For, fiction or fact, when most of the more-than-human are inhuman, society's people start to become something less than human.



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