

Jochen Achilles, Ina Bergmann (Eds.)

## **Representations of Evil in Fiction and Film**

Walter Göbel, Therese Fischer-Seidel, Klaus Stierstorfer (Hg.)

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Jochen Achilles and Ina Bergmann

## Introduction

To explain the existence of evil and its manifestations has occupied the human mind for ages. Philosophers, scholars, theologians, and artists, among others, have at all times been fascinated by evil and have tried to grasp its implications. Representations of evil are phenomena of evil filtered through aesthetic perception in the widest sense. Different from the immediate commitment or suffering of evil, its representations are controlled by form and structure. Evil is a provocation to a wide variety of epistemological, discursive, political, social, and cultural orthodoxies. In both textual and visual art forms from the Elizabethan revenge tragedy and the gothic novel to American yuppie fiction, from silent picture to *film noir* and horror movies, forms of femininity and masculinity, ethnic otherness, social oppression, and religious orientation are defined by attributions of evil. The function of such representations can be conservative or emancipatory, affirmative or subversive, pleasurable or defensive, cathartic or pathological. Edgar Allan Poe famously declared "that terror is not of Germany, but of the soul."<sup>1</sup> This volume, nevertheless, probes into evil's dissemination in the English-speaking world, including the United States where the concept has recently gained renewed topicality.

Two aspects of the contemporary debate of ethics and literature are of particular interest in this context. The first is a radical questioning of the rational character of postmodern societies and the concomitant poststructuralist interest in what might be called a re-metaphysicization of ethics with regard to questions of both goodness and evil. The second is the paramount importance attributed to literature, art, and film in this debate. The first question concerning the origin and manifestation of evil will be addressed in some detail by the first essay in this collection, immediately following this introduction. The second issue of the representation of evil and its manifold ramifications will be addressed by all the other essays in their entirety.

The very multiplicity of social subsystems, of the diverse roles of individuals in them, and of the conflicting ethical codes and choices pertaining to them raise doubts about the proclaimed rational character of social interrelations in the postmodern world. The impact on the individual of the manifold competing and allegedly rational demands of globalized societies produces suspicions as to the

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1 Edgar Allan Poe, "Preface (*Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque – 1840*)," *Poetry and Tales* (New York: Library of America, 1984) 129-130; 129.

failure of this rationalism. In this perspective, the creed of rationality, which characterizes modernity since the Enlightenment, seems to be proven inadequate by realities which are too polyvalent for rational control. By some theorists, such as Zygmunt Bauman, the postmodern and poststructuralist re-enchantment of the world by the return of repressed irrationalities, a renewed legitimacy of what defies both explanation and classification, is hailed as a new departure for a fuller understanding of humanity. Meanwhile, the flipside of this coin becomes also visible by the violent irrationalities and terrorist activities which have literally uprooted rational creeds by events like 9/11.

The problem with experimental fusions of immanence and transcendence, the human and the divine, suggested, for instance, by Emanuel Levinas, Jean Baudrillard, and Jacques Derrida in different accentuations, are the difficulties contingent upon their demonstrability. The problem of identifying the call from beyond as coming from beyond remains unresolved. Whether such a re-grounding of ethics on transcendence can therefore be considered a remedy for the shortcomings of rational compromises, or whether such an appeal to a higher order ushers in a both irresponsible and uncontrollable self-sufficiency, is open to an ongoing debate.

The conflict between alternative moral value systems and competing ethical norms manifests itself not only in modern literature, some of whose best-known characters such as Emma Bovary and Daisy Miller, Captain Ahab and Huck Finn, Marlow and Adrian Leverkühn are involved in such conflicts in complex ways. Theories of ethics and literature by Emmanuel Levinas, Jean Baudrillard, Jacques Derrida, Colin McGinn, J. Hillis Miller, and Karl Heinz Bohrer demonstrate chiefly with reference to the Bible or paradigmatic modern texts such as Charles Baudelaire's *Les Fleurs du Mal*, Gustave Flaubert's *Salammbô*, and Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* that narrative representation and storytelling are essential to the development of moral judgments. Literature and art are thus considered to be the reservoir of a normativity that differs from and potentially modifies the moral priorities of the societies which they reference. Literature and art are the yeast, as it were, that may ferment alternative value systems.

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This volume takes its departure from the section "Representations of Evil in Anglophone Cultures," organized and chaired by the present editors at the Anglistentag 2007 in Münster (Westphalia). The response to our call for papers for this section was so strong that we decided to expand this project into an independent book. We are grateful to Deutscher Anglistenverband for giving us permission to do so. The contributors of this collection of essays try to elucidate the phenomenon of evil by approaching it from various angles and examining its representations, ranging from classic to popular cultural reflections in American, British,



and Postcolonial Literatures as well as in the visual art form of movies. Some articles also touch upon evil in poetry and drama. One contribution deals with the uses of evil in political discourse. It is the last essay in the book because it points in the direction of an intriguing field of the study of evil which lies beyond the confines of this volume. This is, of course, also true of the relationship of evil to painting and sculpture, music, TV, and other media.

The first text in this volume, Jochen Achilles's overview "Mapping Out (Post)modern Ethics: Heterotopias of Good and Evil," provides a survey of recent philosophical thought on the moral forces of good and evil. His essay juxtaposes readings of Zygmunt Bauman's *Postmodern Ethics* (1993) and Michel Foucault's "Of Other Spaces" (1976), Sigmund Freud's "Eine Teufelsneurose im siebzehnten Jahrhundert" (1923) and Niklas Luhmann's *Die Wissenschaft der Gesellschaft* (1990), as well as Emmanuel Levinas's *Basic Philosophical Writings* (1996), Jean Baudrillard's *The Transparency of Evil* (1990) and *The Intelligence of Evil or the Lucidity Pact* (2005), and Jacques Derrida's *The Gift of Death* (1992).

In "Representations of the Devil: Development in History and Destabilization in the American Renaissance" Jochen Achilles first traces the semantic diversification of satanic imagery in literatures in English from the Puritan beginnings of American literature through the eighteenth-century gothic tradition and the American Renaissance to twentieth-century fictions. Then he narrows down the focus of his essay to destabilizations of evil in the American Renaissance, specifically to Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (1850), "Young Goodman Brown" (1835), and "My Kinsman, Major Molineux" (1832).

David S. Reynolds's essay "Evil Propels Me, and Reform of Evil Propels Me": Literary and Social Versions of Evil in the American Renaissance" explores the preoccupation with three forms of evil in mid-nineteenth-century American literary culture. Reynolds focuses particularly on the ambiguous depiction of psychological evil, metaphysical evil, and social evil in the writings of American Renaissance authors Ralph Waldo Emerson, Walt Whitman, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Edgar Allan Poe, and Herman Melville, but also elucidates the political positions of John Brown and Abraham Lincoln with regard to the evil of slavery. In different ways both Achilles and Reynolds describe the emergence of evil in the American Renaissance as what Reynolds calls "an indeterminate signifier," a phenomenon open to various interpretations which anticipates the moral relativism of modernism.

In "The *Bourgeois* as a Villain: Representations of Evil in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction," Norbert Lennartz demonstrates how representations of evil are absorbed by the ideology of the *bourgeois* in the Victorian Age. His particular objects of analysis are central characters in major Victorian novels and one play. The essay provides interpretations of Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Thomas Hardy's *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of*

*Dorian Gray* (1891), and *Lady Windermere's Fan* (1893). These interpretations converge in the insight of a social reduction, democratization, and trivialization of evil, as evil loses both its aristocratic grandeur and demonic luster.

Beatrix Hesse's "Embodiments of Evil in the 'Entertainments' of Graham Greene" analyzes the depiction of the villain in twentieth-century British fiction. Her main focus is the character line-up of villain-hero-girl in Graham Greene's detective fictions *A Gun for Sale* (1936), *Brighton Rock* (1938), and *The Ministry of Fear* (1943). In Greene's novels the paradigm of crime fiction is used for a discussion of grace, forgiveness, and compassion in which the good-evil dichotomy seems to lose relevance.

Michael Szczekalla juxtaposes in-depth analyses of Aldous Huxley's *Eyeless in Gaza* (1936) and Anthony Burgess's *Earthly Powers* (1980). His essay "'Radical Evil' in Huxley and Burgess" discusses these highly philosophical novels – set apart by almost half a century – as serious attempts to confront the major conflicts of the twentieth century without losing contact with traditional concepts of philosophy and theology. Both novels engage the inscrutability of what Richard J. Bernstein calls radical evil. The complex life stories of their respective protagonists are tentative as well as performative responses to totalitarian ideologies – responses which have to take on the interiority, contingency, and demetaphysicization of evil.

Barbara Puschmann-Nalenz's "The Evil Empire: Representations of Evil in Contemporary British and Postcolonial Fiction" draws on important recent concepts of ethics and evil in literature, such as Jean Baudrillard's notion of the intelligence of evil, to give informed readings of four late-twentieth-century novels, J.M. Coetzee's *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), Ian McEwan's *Black Dogs* (1992), Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997), and Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000). These books, covering territory that was once known as the Commonwealth of Nations, present a variety of manifestations of evil which is as wide as the geographical terrain they are grounded in. Emotionally, politically, and metaphysically motivated forms of evil are shown to be genre-dependent in their aesthetic representations. Seemingly paradoxically, evil comes to the fore in fantastic rather than realistic literary modes, although it is also undeniably real. Representations of evil thus call into question concepts of realism.

Ina Bergmann's "Jack the Ripper's American Cousins: Representations of Good and Evil in Historical Crime Fiction" explores the cultural and literary origins of historical serial killer fiction. Three examples of this genre, Caleb Carr's *The Alienist* (1994), Matthew Pearl's *The Dante Club* (2003), and Erik Larson's *The Devil in the White City* (2003), are closely analyzed with regard to their dichotomous structures and their explanations for both the genesis of serial killers and the existence of evil. Historical serial killer fiction debates evil primarily as a social phenomenon which bridges the gap between past and present. It

discusses topical *gravamina* in the guise of past events. By numerous and often confusing dualisms and parallels between good and evil characters it also makes clear how thin, and sometimes spurious, the line is between morality and its absence.

In "The Ultimate Evil in Contemporary US Fiction," Lutz Schowalter investigates a recent cultural phenomenon in the United States, the wide success of Christian fundamentalist literature. His paper centers in particular on analyses of Hal Lindsey's *Blood Moon* (1996), Robert Van Kampen's *The Fourth Reich* (1997), and Tim LaHaye's and Jerry Jenkins's *Left Behind* novels (1995-2007) – especially the last in the series, *Kingdom Come* (2007). Finally, Schowalter compares the representation of evil presented in these texts with that of Norman Mailer's *The Castle in the Forest* (2007), a fictional account of Adolf Hitler's childhood. Schowalter scrutinizes the authoritarian and autocratic tendencies of Christian fundamentalist literature against the background of Mailer's reliance on a more democratic reader involvement.

Jutta Ernst's "Ethics and Ethnicity: Narrating Evil in Contemporary Native American Literature" discusses depictions of evil, ranging from evil as otherness to evil as the unspeakable in N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn* (1968) and Greg Sarris's *Grand Avenue* (1994). In these Native American fictions, evil appears as a transcultural paradigm, which facilitates sense making for characters and readers alike. Culturally determined normative systems both clash and coalesce, which provides them with the potential to generate both interethnic conflict and reconciliation.

Kathleen Starck's "'The Black Super-Stud. On the Loose. After our Women': Black Masculinity in *The Birth of a Nation* and *Native Son*" both explores and compares the depiction of the stereotype of the black beast in D.W. Griffith's silent picture (1915) and Richard Wright's novel (1940). Starck unravels how the film reinscribes this notion while the novel appropriates it to elucidate its becoming. The black beast functions both as discriminatory hetero- and self-accusatory auto-stereotype.

Elisabeth Bronfen's "Nocturnal Battles Between Good and Evil: A Cross-Mapping of *Macbeth* and *The Night of the Hunter*" reads William Shakespeare's tragedy and Charles Laughton's *film noir* of 1955 as theatricalizations of the dynamic dualism of good and evil, light and darkness. The night in both drama and film emerges as both a stage and a state of mind. After the nocturnal battle against evil has successfully been fought, evil has not been totally obliterated, but a hope for the persistence of moral probity remains. Scenes of light and darkness are shown to underscore chronotopologically the battle of good and evil in highly divergent genres and media.

Rüdiger Heinze explores the "Charm and Persuasion of Evil Characters in Contemporary American Fiction and Film," as the title of his essay reads, by fore-

grounding the unreliability of narration in Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie* (1995), Chuck Palahniuk's *Fight Club* (1996), and Stewart O'Nan's *The Speed Queen* (1997). He rounds his discussion off by extending his theory of unreliability to Bryan Singer's film *The Usual Suspects* (1995). Narratological unreliability and ethical inacceptability appear to be interrelated in often precarious ways. In any case, these interrelations lay emphasis on the fundamental and structural connections of ethics and aesthetics.

Hans-Ulrich Mohr focuses on filmic representations of evil in his essay "Neo-Noir Film: Evil and Postmodernism." While providing close analyses of David Lynch's *Lost Highway* (1997) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Mohr also traces the neo-noir genre's historical development from *Beowulf* to the tradition of the hard-boiled detective, popularized by Dashiell Hammett and Raymond Chandler in their classic detective novels of the 1920s and 30s, and, finally, to the *film noir*. Especially Mohr's analysis of David Lynch's *oeuvre* makes clear that post-modern evil resides largely in the eye of the beholder. It can be considered an expression of limited modes of perception.

Kai Hebel's and Christiane Mathes's "The Subversion of Evil in the Films of David Lynch" elucidates how dualistic concepts of good and evil are blurred and subverted in David Lynch's films *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Lost Highway* (1997). The *doppelgänger* motif, with regard to the protagonists and other main characters, lends itself especially to this purpose. Both the social and the psychological realities constructed in conventional movies are undermined by Lynch. His films demonstrate the inseparability of evil from what is perceived as good and thereby subvert the widespread belief in the possibility of restoring unadulterated goodness. In Lynch's universe, evil remains ineluctable and ambivalence rules.

Frank Austermühl turns to the use of evil in contemporary political speech in "The Strategic Use of 'Evil' in Political Discourse." He examines the political diction of US President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair following the terrorist attacks on the Twin Towers on September 11, 2001. Austermühl scrutinizes Bush's and Blair's rhetoric against the background of the long tradition in public discourse of the representation of the opposing other as evil. His comparative analysis reveals the language of evil as a key component in the justification of political decisions. The use of the term "evil" in political rhetoric is shown to lead to a distinctive definition of American identity, to the legitimization of unilateral presidential action, and the use of military power.

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With regard to its topic this collection is obviously less than exhaustive. It centers mainly upon the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and is highly selective. Yet it does cover a wide variety of phenomena, countries, genres, and media and may therefore hopefully be able to provide an introductory survey of the phenomenon

of evil in Anglophone literatures and cultures. The arrangement of the essays progresses chronologically from the nineteenth to the twentieth and twenty-first century; territorially from nineteenth-century American to British, Postcolonial, and, again, more recent American artworks; aesthetically from fiction on its own, to fiction compared to film, to film on its own. As many of these essays demonstrate, basic structures of contrast and doubling, the return of the repressed, and the convergence of opposites persist in representations of evil over the centuries and across genres. The majority of contributions shed light on both these common aesthetics of evil and on the transcendent, systemic, or psychological origins of evil. For all these attempts at elucidation, representations of evil seem to be as much a veil as they are an expression of what they signify. Which is, perhaps, a way of saying that the perennial allure of evil remains unaffected by either aesthetic representation or intellectual penetration.