

**Karen Crowder
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no Buffalo Bill,
and certainly no
Michael Corleone.
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sort requires a
man's touch.**



WHY MEN ARE BETTER
VILLAINS THAN WOMEN
BY GRAHAM DASELER

One of the curiosities of the 2016 United States presidential election was the ease with which Hillary Clinton was cast as a villain by the Press and the public as much as by Trump and the Russians. I state this, by the way, purely from a cinematic point of view.

Politically speaking, it was entirely predictable. The Clintons, both Bill and Hillary, have long been hijacked by conspiracy theorists who, for a quarter century now, have portrayed the pair as the Machiavellian masterminds behind dozens of devious deeds, including the suicide of Vince Foster, the plane crash that killed Ron Brown, and the assassination of scores of their political opponents.

And that's to say nothing of the sharply sloping curve upon which all female politicians (not just Clinton) are graded. Tears make them weak, stoicism makes them cold, anger makes them unattractive, ambition makes them threatening. If a female politician raises her voice she's accused of being shrill, if she makes a joke she's being callous, if her husband cheats on her she's blamed for that, too, for "enabling" him.¹

¹ Boburg

Granted, these aren't all diabolical traits, but it's a lot easier to paint your opponent as a threat to the republic if in the public's mind she's already a callous, grasping, cold-hearted bitch, unloved even by her spouse. Is it any wonder that currently less than a quarter of all House seats are held by women, or that women fill barely a fifth of the seats in the Senate? But that's politics.

From a cinematic perspective—that is, from the point of view of Hitchcock, Spielberg, Di Palma, Carpenter, and all the other masters of filmic horror and suspense—the casting of Hillary Clinton as a political supervillain was curious. Curious because of a simple fact about women in cinema: villainy has never been their strong suit.

When it comes to movie bad guys, the best bad guys—or should that be the "worst" bad guys?—are almost all, well, guys. Just look at the American Film Institute's list of the greatest screen villains of all time. Out of 51, including one animal (the shark in *Jaws* [1976]), two machines (HAL and the Terminator), and two extraterrestrial species (the Martians in *The War of the Worlds* [1953] and the alien in *Alien* [1979]), only 16 are women.² The other 30 are all men.

² "AFI's 100 Years...100 Heroes & Villains"

One may, of course, quibble with the AFI's choice of characters. Bonnie and Clyde, as portrayed in Arthur Penn's 1967 movie, are not really villains at all. That's largely the point of the film and a major reason for its success with the late-60s youth audience: when traditional authority figures can't be trusted, outlaws become heroes.

And one may argue with the AFI's method of selection, which involves polling 1500 "leaders across the film community", as the institute's website rather cryptically refers to their jurors.³ Though these "leaders" remain anonymous, it's reasonable to assume that if they represent a more or less random sampling of successful American filmmakers then their ranks almost certainly include more men than women, since the American film community as a whole is mostly men: male producers, male directors, male screenwriters, and male stars.

³ "AFI's 100 Years...100 Movies"

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That being said, I think the AFI gave women a fair shake. If anything, their list seems to have had the benefit of a dose of affirmative action. Thus the inclusion of Cruella De Vil, the canine-killing baddie in Disney's animated *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961). A case can be made for the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1937) because of the character's impact on the broader culture, which is one of the AFI's criteria for selection. But on a list that includes Hannibal Lecter, Nurse Ratched, and Amon Göth, the concentration camp commandant in *Schindler's List* (1993)—wretches, in other words, who really send a frisson of fear down your spine—Cruella De Vil is as out of place as a demitasse cup at a monster truck rally.

You do not see this kind of padding on the men's side of the ledger. Quite the opposite: many of the vilest men didn't make the cut, presumably because there simply wasn't room on the list. The scariest bad guy in *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991) is not Hannibal Lecter (Anthony Hopkins) who, delightfully macabre as he is, is really a bit of a dandy. Much more frightening is the film's other serial killer, Buffalo Bill (Ted Levine), a deviant with a very Cruella De Villesque sense of fashion—if, that is, Cruella decide to switch from puppy to human skins. Everything about Bill is creepy, from the dungeon-like basement where he keeps his victims to the death's-head moths he stuffs in their throats to the way he plucks his nipple ring before dancing naked in a human wig. Part of what makes Bill so scary is that he's so decidedly un-Lecterlike, so ordinary. His rings; his loose, hippyish clothing; his overgrown yet thinning hair—these are not the attributes one usually associates with a criminal mastermind. He looks like any number of slovenly, unstylish males we'll meet over the course of our lives—a bit weird, maybe, but harmless, or so we think.

And he's far from the only deserving man who fails to make the AFI's list. What about Joe Pesci in both *Goodfellas* (1990) and *Casino* (1995), John Malkovich in *In the Line of Fire* (1993), and Ben Kingsley in *Sexy Beast* (2000)? Those are just the most obvious omissions. I'll never look at a hardboiled egg the same way again after watching Robert De Niro peel one in *Angel Heart* (1987), nor will I drive so calmly past pig farms after hearing Alan Ford extol their lesser-known virtues in *Snatch* (2000). Tim Roth's fiendish fop in *Rob Roy* (1995) is as frightening (and fun to watch) as any character in the AFI's inventory, as, for that matter, is Brian Cox's sniveling sycophant in the same movie.

When it comes to movie villainy, men have women at a disadvantage.

One of my own favorite screen scumbags has long been Waingro, the trailer-trash police informant played by Kevin Gage in *Heat* (1995). Like Buffalo Bill, Waingro has a bad haircut and a penchant for slaying women. His record as an inmate in Pelican Bay State Prison and the swastika tattoo he sports on his sternum suggest that he's a white supremacist, though within the context of the movie this is more of a garnish to the character than the meat and potatoes of his motivation. He seems, rather, to enjoy hurting people purely for its own sake, like the time, early in the movie, he shoots a security guard simply because the guy's standing there, dazed and deafened from the blast that blew open his armored car. I love the quiet, magisterial way he sucks up his chest before beating a hooker to death in a dumpy motel room. He's really no more than a petty thug, but in that moment you see him as he sees himself. Clearly, he thinks he's Hannibal Lecter.

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I do not mean to belittle the AFI's rogues gallery too much but merely to offer it as evidence that, when it comes to movie villainy, men have women at a disadvantage. Sure the list is imperfect but, if anything, its imperfections rest on the female side of the scale. Iconic as the Evil Queen in *Snow White* and the Seven Dwarves may be, she's no Hannibal Lecter, no Amon Göth, no Waingro. She's not even a Gordon Gekko (Michael Douglas) or an Auric Goldfinger (Gert Fröbe).

I have a friend (well, to be strictly accurate, a friend of a friend) who finds this whole line of argument rather distasteful. His greatest-of-all-time lists—greatest authors, greatest actors, greatest movie directors—always contains at least as many women as men, often more. Though he would undoubtedly deny any forethought in this gender balance, I suspect he isn't so much trying to be politically correct as artistically open-minded. Since society so often overlooks talented women, he will be extra careful not to.

The problem with this method of accounting is that, rather than righting an inequity, it instead exacerbates it by pretending the inequity doesn't exist. Men outnumber women in the realm of movie villainy, at least in part, because men outnumber women in the realm of moviemaking. There are more male directors than female directors, more male screenwriters, more male producers, and, perhaps most important, more A-list male stars. This means that more parts are written for men, and because men's careers before the camera tend to last longer, male actors have more opportunities, over the course of their lengthy careers, to grab choice roles, including roles as terror-inducing scoundrels.

Anthony Hopkins was 53 when he first played Hannibal Lecter, Ben Kingsley 56 when he played Don Logan in *Sexy Beast*, and John Huston nearly 70 when he played Noah Cross, the water magnate in *Chinatown* (1974) whose heart is as twisted as the branches of his family tree.

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Any inventory of the greatest movie villains—or, for that matter, the greatest movie directors, or movie actors—that contains as many women as men is not being honest. Such lists whitewash the history of Hollywood, pretending that it has been more equitable to women than it has been, like those party-sanctioned histories of the Cultural Revolution that extol the triumphs of Maoism while glossing over the millions of murders.

When women do play villains, they tend to come in one of two types, as ogresses or femme fatales. The former category includes among its members The Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Mrs Danvers in *Rebecca* (1940), Jane Hudson (Bette Davis) in *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane* (1962), Nurse Ratched (Louise Fletcher) in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975), and Annie Wilkes (Kathy Bates) in *Misery* (1990), all of whom made it onto the AFI's docket of baddies. In each case, the ogress's unprepossessing features are paired with an equally unattractive heart. Men and little children are their most frequent victims, though occasionally an innocent young woman like Snow White will become the target of their wrath. When it's children, homicide is the most common motive, with little further explanation needed.

The Wicked Witch of the West, Cruella De Vil, Queen Bavmorda (Jean Marsh) in *Willow* (1988), the witches in *The Witches* (1990), and Benigna Escobeda (Montserrat Carulia), the creepy caretaker in *El Orfanato* (2007) are all child-killers or would-be child-killers. The main lesson they teach us is to be careful with whom we leave our little ones. Never hand them over to a hideous hag.

When an ogress turns her wrath on a man, it's usually because she's failed to seduce him. This was Norma Desmond's (Gloria Swanson) problem in *Sunset Boulevard* (1951). The only way she could possess her handsome, young boy-toy was by buying him, but when even that stopped working she shot him in the back. Ditto Annie Wilkes, who, lacking a man of her own, lives her life in the romance novels of Paul Sheldon (James Caan). After he's battered and bruised in a snowy car wreck, she rescues him, only to keep him caged in her home, writing the love story she wants.

And though it may not be obvious at first glance, Nurse Ratched is driven by a similar desire in *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest*. On the one hand, she'd be better off simply removing McMurphy (Jack Nicholson) from her mental ward. Nothing undermines the authority of a totalitarian state more than a prankster who pisses on the rulebook. But if that was all she wanted, she could do it at any time. After all, she decides who's cured and who isn't. Like Norma Desmond and Annie Wilkes, though, Nurse Ratched is determined to possess her man, which in her case means possessing him in the same way she possesses all the other patients in her care, as a mindless automaton, meek and broken.

The main threat that such women pose to men is, naturally, emasculation. Norma Desmond gives Joe Gilles (William Holden) camelhair coats and a mansion to live in, but she makes him her lapdog, forcing him to come begging for petty cash. Annie Wilkes's punishment for Paul Sheldon is "hobbling", an antebellum plantation practice, she explains, as she places a log between his ankles and then, with two hefty swings of a sledge hammer, bashes his bare feet inward. "God, I love you," she pants afterwards, like a black widow spider who's just finished devouring her mate.

Cillian Murphy, despite his male-model good looks, doesn't have to bed Katie Holmes in Batman Begins (2005) to ensnare her. His weapon of choice is poison gas.

And then there's Nurse Ratched. She doesn't cut off McMurphy's penis, exactly, but she removes an equally important part of his anatomy, and it stands to reason that, with his prefrontal cortex disabled, McMurphy won't be getting much use out of the other organ either. Talk about butchery! She's taken charm and sexual potency away from, of all men, Jack Nicholson.

The femme fatales, on the other hand, generally do get their man, and that (that is their sexuality) is precisely what makes them dangerous. They seduce men, forcing them to abandon all common sense. That's what Barbara Stanwyck does to Fred MacMurray in *Double Indemnity* (1944) and what Kathleen Turner does to both William Hurt and Richard Crenna in *Body Heat* (1981). "You trying to kill me?" Crenna asks, as Turner pleads for more sex. Meanwhile, her accomplice is slipping into the house downstairs. Glenn Close uses similar methods to hook Michael Douglas in *Fatal Attraction* (1987), as does Sharon Stone in *Basic Instinct* (1992), teaching Douglas's detective another meaning of the phrase "cross examination".

Demi Moore practically rapes Douglas in *Disclosure* (1994) before trying to ruin him, although by that point in Douglas's career one started to wonder why the poor fellow hadn't learned to be more cautious around gorgeous, horny women. And that's to say nothing of Mrs Robinson and the nice young college grad she sets her sights on.

You will notice that men are not condescended to in this way. A man may be extraordinarily handsome without this becoming his defining characteristic. Amon Göth, as played by the youthful Ralph Fiennes, is about as beautiful a Nazi as any who served the Fuhrer, and yet the danger he poses to the Jews is not that he will lure them into the sack. (Indeed, his sexual attraction to one Jewish woman is precisely what keeps her alive.) Cillian Murphy, despite his male-model good looks, doesn't have to bed Katie Holmes in *Batman Begins* (2005) to ensnare her. His weapon of choice is poison gas.

Burt Lancaster was ruggedly handsome, fit enough to continue doing his own stunts well into his 50s, and as skilled at playing scoundrels as anybody in his generation. He could be wild and intemperate, as he was in *Vera Cruz* (1954), or cold and calculating, as he was in *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), or just plain fascistic, as he was in *Seven Days in May* (1964). In none of those movies does he have to seduce his victims to get his way with them.

In studio-era Hollywood, femme fatales were invariably punished for their over-stimulated libidos. The Production Code, which effectively hobbled screen immorality from the mid-1930s until the mid-1960s, didn't let criminals go unpunished, even if, as in the case of a movie like *The Women* (1938), their only "crime" was sex with a married man. This is why Mary Astor in *The Maltese Falcon* (1941), Jane Greer in *Out of the Past* (1947), and Rita Hayworth in *The Lady from Shanghai* (1948) all end their respective films dead or on their way to the slammer.

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One of the pleasures of modern cinema is that villains, both male and female, can actually get away with their misdeeds. A favorite screen vamp of mine has long been Matty Tyler Walker (Kathleen Turner) in *Body Heat*. In many ways, she's the quintessential femme fatale, a near relative of Barbara Stanwyck's seductress in *Double Indemnity*, reeling a man in so she may, first, use him, and then kill him. Stanwyck, though, reeks of trouble the moment she appears at the top of the stairs, wearing only a towel and a gold anklet. Turner's Matty is much more subtle. At first sight, she's an angelic vision of beauty: elegant, poised, and clad in a spotless white dress. She lays her trap so cleverly, always playing hard-to-get, even when it comes to killing her husband, that, as a viewer, it's impossible not to be a little seduced by her. I haven't met a woman yet who, upon seeing the film's conclusion, hasn't grinned with admiration for the villainess. Not only is she beautiful, stylish, and sexy, but she's also twice as smart as all the men. When you see her in the final scene, sunbathing in a tropical paradise, part of you inwardly cheers, just as it does at the end of *Silence of the Lambs*, as Hannibal Lecter saunters off to get some dinner. Villains, contrary to anything the Production Code maintained, deserve happy endings, too.

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And so the question remains: are women as good at playing villains as men? If the film industry were more equitable would movie screens teem with as many dastardly dames as brutish bastards? The answer, I suspect, is no. Movies are, by their nature, a visual medium, and men, being generally taller and brawnier than women, are more physically (and thus visually) threatening. The terror in *Halloween* (1978) comes from the fact that an oversized brute is pursuing a slightly-built teenager. Were the situation reversed—if, that is, the hulking male was the hero, and the willowy young woman the knife-wielding psychopath—the terror would not be the same, no matter how impervious to bullets or falls from great heights the girl was. Just as important, the gender disparity we observe on the screen reflects a social reality: men commit the vast majority of violent crimes. In the United States, according to FBI data, men are responsible for 89 per cent of armed robberies, 90 per cent of homicides, and nearly 99 per cent of rapes.⁴ Women make a slightly better showing in the category of serial murder, where they manage to field a strong 20 per cent, but when it comes to recidivism, gang participation, and suicide bombing men easily rule the roost.⁵

⁴ Crime in the United States: 2011

⁵ Bonn

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Aside from these statistics, you are probably not unaware of the disproportionate physical threat posed to you by the male sex. Imagine, for instance, that you're alone at night in a decrepit part of an unfamiliar city. Now, ask yourself, would your anxiety level rise more if all the other people on the street at that time were men or if they were all women? Everyone who buys a movie ticket is primed to jump more at the sight of a man lurking in the shadows than a woman, and moviemakers play on this (not unjustified) bias. Men outnumber women in the field of movie villainy in large part because they outnumber women in the field of real-life villainy as well.

None of this is to say that women can't be scary or menacing or convincingly vile.

None of this is to say that women can't be scary or menacing or convincingly vile. Nor is it meant to dismiss the genuinely stunning screen performances of any number of actresses simply because they were saddled with rather predictable feminine wiles. If you ever want to get a lesson in screen acting—in its range, in its subtlety, and in its ability to bare the human soul—there is a scene in *The Graduate* (1967) that you should see. Benjamin (Dustin Hoffman) and Mrs Robinson (Anne Bancroft) are lying in bed. Rather than simply diving into their usual emotionless sex, Ben insists that they first have a conversation, pushing Mrs Robinson to think of a topic. “How about art?” she snidely suggests, not bothering to conceal her contempt for the entire enterprise.

BEN
Art, that's a good subject!
You start it off.

MRS ROBINSON
You start it off. I don't know anything about it.

BEN
Well, what do you want to know about it? Are you more interested in modern art or classical art?

MRS ROBINSON
Neither.

BEN
You're not interested in art?

MRS ROBINSON
No.

BEN
Then why do you want to talk about it?

MRS ROBINSON
I don't.

Ben, however, persists. He asks her about her husband. How does she sneak out at night without him knowing? (They have separate bedrooms.) Why did she marry him if she didn't love him? (She got pregnant.) As Hoffman presses her with question after question, Bancroft changes. With each response, she becomes less scornful, more somber. She has, by this point, rolled over on her side so that we (though not Ben) can see that a look of pain has come over her face. Ben asks her about her college experiences. What was her major in college? She tries to duck the question but Ben asks it again. “Art,” she finally whispers. The written page cannot express the incredible sadness that Bancroft manages to pack into that single word, so that you can truly feel what a disappointment Mrs Robinson's life has been to her. We understand in that moment why she is what she is.

And then, like a light switch getting flipped, Bancroft's demeanor changes again. Ben is asking her about her first sexual experiences. (She and Mr Robinson used to do it in his car.) What kind of car was it, Ben wants to know, the make and model?

Mrs Robinson forces back a smile. So natural is that smile and so obvious is her attempt to conceal it that I almost wonder if something about Hoffman's line-reading caught Bancroft unawares, making her grin. Are we watching Bancroft trying not to laugh in the middle of the take or are we watching Mrs Robinson trying not to let Ben see the lighter side of her nature? In performative terms, it doesn't matter. Seconds before, Bancroft was suppressing tears. Now she's holding back giggles. And then, just as suddenly, another emotional switch flips, this time to anger. Before we (or Ben) know what's happening, Mrs Robinson has got him by the hair and is snarling at him to never, never think about taking her daughter out on a date. In a space of five minutes, Bancroft has moved from irritation to sadness to amusement to explosive rage, all of it so naturally that one can barely tell where the character ends and the actress begins.

Did I mention that during the entire sequence the camera only cuts once? On the surface, Mrs Robinson is a prototypical femme fatale, seducing a helpless young man and then trying to destroy him. But in Anne Bancroft's hands she becomes the most interesting character in the movie: manipulative, vindictive, cruel, intelligent, ironic, vulnerable, extremely sexy (much more so than her boring daughter), and wonderfully, thrillingly villainous.

When asked why he didn't separate his characters into categories of good guys and bad guys, Jean Renoir replied, "Because everyone has his reasons."⁶ That has a nice, fair-minded ring to it, and yet, equitable as it sounds, it's really rather self-limiting. If Buffalo Bill, Waingro, and Nurse Ratched aren't villains then the word "villain" has no meaning. Now, I don't know about you, but that's a word I would rather not do without. One, after all, may have one's reasons without those reasons being either humane or justifiable. Saddam Hussein had his reasons, too, as did Pol Pot, Stalin, Mao, Franco, Eichmann, and Idi Amin. Were he a real person, rather than simply a character in a movie, Buffalo Bill would be just as evil as the men named above. (And notice they are all men. Would anyone, I wonder, if asked to list the greatest tyrants of the twentieth century, name as many women as men?) One may grant Buffalo Bill his reasons, accepting that he, like everyone else, is a victim (and a prisoner) of his own psyche, and still see him as a bad guy, responsible for terribly brutal deeds.

⁶ Fulton, p.87

That being said, some of the very best characters in cinema—not to mention the rest of drama and literature—defy moral categorization. Is Michael Corleone (Al Pacino) a villain? The American Film Institute thinks he is, placing him 11th on their greatest-villains list, right behind the Evil Queen in *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*. Since his place on the list is awarded specifically for his role in *The Godfather Part II* (1974), the classification, if not the ranking, makes a certain amount of sense. By the end of that movie, Michael's thirst for power and instinct for isolation will have led him to tear apart his own family, whose lives, remember, he originally sought to protect. His wickedness reaches its apogee when he orders the assassination of his own brother, but his frigid fury when his wife tells him she's had an abortion, is, in its own way, much more frightening, as well as one of the great performative moments in cinema history.

And yet Michael Corleone is hardly a one-dimensional thug. The first two *Godfather* films chart his evolution from heroism to villainy, beginning as a principled youth, admirably uninterested in joining the family business, to ending up as the most vicious, cold-hearted gangster of them all. The same sangfroid that he displays in rescuing his father from assassination in the first film will later become the deadliest tool in his arsenal, allowing him to eliminate his enemies with icy efficiency. In other words, Michael Corleone is a villain whose evil arc is paved with the most heroic of intentions.

A more recent example of this kind of moral ambiguity can be observed in the character of Karen Crowder, the corporate counsel played by Tilda Swinton in *Michael Clayton* (2007). Though she has one man murdered and tries to off another, Karen doesn't come across as a horrible person. If anything, she's really rather sympathetic, so tightly wound and desperate for success (or terrified of failure) that she has to hide in the bathroom before big meetings, and so unversed in criminality that she can't bring herself to tell the hit man she's hired what she wants him to do for her. When she's finally caught at the end of the film, her legs buckle beneath her, as though the weight of the realization is too much for her strength to bear.

When Hillary Clinton's legs folded (or, rather, started to fold) last September, during a mid-campaign bout of pneumonia, this is the scene I thought of, not because I suspect Clinton of hiring hit men to knock off her enemies, but because Karen's fatal flaw in the film is the same one most often attributed to Clinton by her critics: ruthless ambition. Karen Crowder is singular in cinema in that she's a villainess who's neither an ogress nor a femme fatale. She's a beast of a different color. She's a careerist.

And yet, on the spectrum of screen wickedness, she barely registers as evil. The very qualities that make Karen a fascinating, complex character—her trepidation, her vulnerability, her eagerness to please—are the qualities that make her an underwhelming villain. She's not a monster. She's just an ordinary person pushed by circumstances to do very bad things. In other words, she's no Waingro, no Buffalo Bill, and certainly no Michael Corleone. Villainy of that sort requires a man's touch.

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Think, for a moment, of the meanest, the scariest, the most intimidating movie villains you can summon to your mind. Have you got them? Now, let me ask you, how many of them are women?

The American Film Institute reckons the ratio is about one woman for every two men. But that can't be right, can it? Are the Wicked Witch of the West from *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and Cruella de Vil from *One Hundred and One Dalmatians* (1961) really as scary as Hannibal Lecter and Amon Göth, the concentration commandant in *Schindler's List* (1993)? Be your gender what it may, you will certainly have to admit that, when it comes to movie bad guys, the best bad guys are almost all, well, guys.

But why is this? Are men just better at playing villains than women? Or has Hollywood stacked the deck against the fairer sex? These are some of the questions I tackle in this essay.

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