

In what ways can we have positive responses to evil characters in film?

Xinxin Wei

School of Literatures, Languages and Cultures, The University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh, EH8 9JU, United Kingdom

Abstract: *This essay aims at investigating how evil characters could win the favour of audiences. The previous studies have focused mostly on deconstructing the audiences' favour towards rough hero and antihero in an effort to find a balance in their personalities. They believe that the reason why people admire villains is because they can see the traits outweigh the drawbacks and make villains the good people essentially. Based on the debate between Eaton and Carroll, unlike the rough heroes and antiheroes who are essentially morally good figures, evil characters are morally and legally unforgivable. However, through this essay's research on *Monsieur Verdoux* (Charles Chaplin, 1947), I believe films could make the evil characters more acceptable and even approvable through the cinematographic techniques and emotional manipulations. This essay tries to parse out and analyse a flexible formula which could guide the audiences have the positive responses towards evil characters.*

Keywords: *Evil character, positive response, rough hero, antihero, Chaplin*

1. Introduction

Chaplin adapted the French legend of Bluebeard's murder for the American screen as *Monsieur Verdoux* (Charles Chaplin, 1947) in order to satirise the world as a ruthless brutal murdering machine during the war. While the film portrays Verdoux (Charles Chaplin) as a murderer, it leaves us with the potential room for positive attitudes towards him. By analysing the film's form, content, and style, we will explore the ways in which we could feel positively about the evil character.

This essay will begin with a summary of the hypothesis and framework. The second part is going to analyse why we regard Verdoux as an evil character and what positive emotions we could have for him; the third section will examine how films use tactics to elicit positive emotions, employing *Monsieur Verdoux* as an example, and the fourth section would analyse how *Monsieur Verdoux* might entice us into alternate ethical experience and lead us to reevaluate the norms of living in a machine-dominated society. Finally, the essay's conclusion would provide a concise overview. This article claims that first, cinematic tactics may elicit positive responses about the evil character; secondly, and perhaps more crucially, films could transport us to a new moral space, allowing us to judge the character's behaviour with divergent standard autonomously.

2. What is evil character and how could we have positive responses towards them

To understand why we could harbour responses towards the evil character, we need first identify what is evil character. Neiman^[1] explains that the contemporary definition of evil is “absolutely wrongdoing that leaves no room for account or expiation” (2002, p.3), which indicates the evil characters are unforgivable and there is no justification for or tolerance for his misdeeds. Eaton's interpretation of the rough hero, on the other hand, clarifies the characteristics of the evil characters, as she argues that:

The rough hero is like the antihero in that he is also a flawed protagonist [...]second, the rough hero's flaws are an integral part of his personality [...]third, the rough hero often fully intends to do bad and is remorseless about his crimes. Fourth, the audience's forgiveness is not prescribed [...]finally, the rough hero's vices are not outweighed by some more redeeming virtues. (2012, p.284)^[2]

She believes that the rough hero is fundamentally antisocial and antihuman, like Verdoux, whose elegant appearance, prudence, and knowledge all serve for his murderous and plundering purposes. While many people perceive antiheroes as evil figures, they are, despite their moral defects, ultimately

good individuals. For instance, Schindler (Liam Neeson), the German industrialist in *Schindler's List* (Steven Spielberg, 1993) is an archetypal antihero. Although he is not morally pure, he is still a noble person for his humanitarian acts of saving Jews during the war. Compared to him, Verdoux is an undeniable evil character in essence, even if he had left mercy with the homeless girl (Marilyn Nash) when he was planning to kill her, it is fundamentally not out of the demand of societal morality, but for satisfying his own philosophy.

However, while we acknowledge the unethical essence of evil persons, we might nevertheless have a positive perception towards them. Schellekens^[3] argues that “the relation between the morally reprehensible character of an artwork and that work's aesthetic or artistic value may be said to operate in two directions” (2008, p.78). That is, even when confronted with an evil character, one may still harbour positive responses towards the film and the evil characters as the aesthetic values of its form, style, and content. Some psychologists summarised the positive emotions that audiences frequently experience when engaged with an immoral figure, including “sympathy, identification, fascination, empathy, and enjoyment” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al., 2021, p.1)^[4]. This study indicates that we are prone to treat the evil characters positively despite their depravity, and we are willing to engage with their evil behaviours. To summarise, the aesthetic appeal of the film can undermine our condemnation of the character's immorality, through the film's techniques, in combination with Verdoux's persona and life experiences, we can recognise and admire his elegant and discreet image, perceive his sophisticated crimes as aesthetic pleasures, sympathise with his execution, empathise with his life experiences, and thus suspend our moral judgements towards him.

More importantly, apart from aesthetic excellence, researchers have investigated how film retains the capacity to subvert our pre-existing moral frameworks. According to Sinnerbrink^[5], film has “potential to evoke ethical experience and invite philosophical reflection” (2016, p.3). Thus, we are not only able to suspend our moral judgments, but enter the moral domain of cinema, and re-examine the standard of good or evil. Woolley also argues that “film creates an alternative world in which the rules of morality need not necessarily comply with the spectator's world” (2015, p.192). According to her, the moral principles of the films' world do not have to conform to the audience's societal norms of behaviour. For example, to win our positive response in other ethical spaces, *Monsieur Verdoux* first exposes the sympathetic reason of Verdoux's murdering as his assimilation into a machine under the tyranny of an indifferent society, rendering it difficult to criticise the misdeeds of Verdoux as an machine without autonomy; second, in an ethical realm where the society condemns Verdoux for killing a dozen people but upholds the war executioners who murdered millions, Verdoux's actions seriously question the principles by which society operates, attempting to prevent the sacrifice of more innocent people in his own way, and consequently, giving consideration of the ethical space of the film, Verdoux is admirable.

3. The techniques for shaping an adorable evil in Monsieur Verdoux

The film follows with the experience of Henri Verdoux, a dedicated clerk who has worked for a bank for thirty-five years but finally became unemployed owing to the recession. He decides to make profit by seducing and murdering wealthy middle-aged single ladies because he is unable to obtain a decent job while feed his family at his age. Although Verdoux appeared to be a decent man, he was genuinely a serial killer who had murdered over a dozen people. Verdoux refused to remorse in the courtroom before he was prosecuted, which cements the image of Verdoux as a merciless fiend.

Despite the fact that Verdoux is a vicious demon, he has still obtained audience's devotion. André Bazin^[6] endorses Verdoux with this comment, “the perfect precision he brought to his crimes made it impossible to put a finger on him” (1971, p.109). He argues that Chaplin's film *Monsieur Verdoux* is a myth, that his merits even preclude condemnation of his homicidal crimes. When analysing of our admiration for Verdoux, Bazin argues, “it is the character that we love, not his qualities or his defects” (1971, p.118). In this approach, we adore Verdoux for himself while filtering out his moral failings, which allows us to lay aside our moral judgments and focus exclusively on the character.

Carroll believes that films would employ a variety of tactics to emphasise the evil character's endearing characteristics, allowing us to set aside our moral judgement. To begin, when we have seen the world from evil character's perspective, we may identify with the character and hence condone them. Carroll argues that “one such strategy is narrating from the relevant character's point of view to the exclusion of rival viewpoint” (2013, p.374). That is, when the film follows with Verdoux's perspective, we witness more of Verdoux's efforts to survive and murder, and hence we concern more about Monsieur Verdoux's achievements than the deaths of these victims. Verdoux's assassination of Annabella (Martha

Raye) aboard the boat is the film's most amusing scene since Annabella would constantly disrupt Verdoux's plan. As we have been witnessing Verdoux's efforts in committing the murder, we are unable to laugh at Verdoux's failure. "Over the course of the diegesis the mentality of murder is displayed upon the screen and justified while the spectator is encouraged to view the film through the villain" (Woolley, 2015, p.200)^[7]. Thus, we solely feel sympathy and grief for the protagonist after Verdoux's murder attempt fails. In such a way, we become Verdoux's accomplices.

Second, the juxtaposition with the worse characters could undermines the evil character's immorality, so we instead empathise with those who have to confront with worse people. Carroll also mentions that "another strategy is to portray the rough hero's nemeses as so much worse than she is" (2013, p.374). In the film, Annabella is the representative of the worse characters, by emphasising her vulgarity, opportunism, and laziness, the film shapes Verdoux as a decent man with elegance, rigour, and diligence. According to Bazin, "it is Martha Raye who vindicates Verdoux in the viewer's mind [...] our sensibilities, skilfully manipulated, feel no sense of repugnance over Verdoux's activities" (1971, p.121). Martha Raye is the actress of Annabella, when Verdoux first returns to Annabella's house and kisses her neck, he gets an expression of misery on his face, as if he has eaten something vile or is suffocating from Annabella's body odour, and he darts his head up for fresh air and hastily twists the dirt off his lips with his hands – which reinforces Annabella's revoltingly untidy image. By contrasting her with the decent Verdoux, our favour towards Verdoux would be strengthened.



Figure 1: Verdoux kisses Annabella's neck, becomes miserable and twists the dirt away.

We can empathise with the evil character when the character is forced to commit a crime in attempt to settle an issue that society is incapable of resolving. "The film can depict the rough hero as operating on a terrain where the institutions that should be meting out justice have failed" (Carroll^[8], 2013, p.374). Given consideration of Verdoux's situation, he loses his job in this film after thirty-five years of loyal devotion. In an industrial era when machines have largely displaced human labour, he is unable to find a decent job at his age. Moreover, his intelligence, which he has employed for more than thirty years, became useless due to the accuracy of the machines. As a result, he decided to murder and pillage, as his family with a disabled wife and a young child cannot survive if they continue to live under the moral society norms, thus, we will identify with a demon who take risks for his family out of desperation.

Evil figures' characteristics which are unrelated to ethics are also significant determinants in our positive attitudes towards them, which results in our admiration and affection. "Invest them with positive non moral traits, like intelligence or courage, or give them morally positive traits" (Carroll, 2013, p.374) are also strategies to evoke our positive dispositions towards the devil. In terms of form, Verdoux's behaviour appears peaceful and graceful as a result of the film's smooth, fluid camera movements. The film presents very few close-ups or panoramas, which includes everything in a gentle order. As for the plotting, it has not even displayed us the brutality of Verdoux's murders in a way that would make us condemn him; on the contrary, the film always portrays Verdoux's murders in an elegantly poetic manner. In the plot of murdering the detective, Verdoux still completes every detail with grace like completing a performance. When Verdoux sees the detective arriving at his house, he spins backwards like a waltz, the camera pans softly in rhythm with his steps, the compositions are always in three quarters, both

Verdoux's behaviours and the cinematography is smooth and controlled. “Villains make things happen—that they tend to be driven and competent social agents—and that this quality can make them powerfully alluring” (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al., 2021, p.6). In this sense, Verdoux's competence to commit crimes precisely, as well as the intellect, rigour and grace displayed in them, might earn the audience's affection and admiration.

Simultaneously, the actors also play a significant role in affecting the audience's emotions. “The little fellow with the ridiculous cut-away coat, the little trapezoid moustache, the cane, and the bowler hat, had become part of the consciousness of mankind” (Bazin, 1971, p.111). According to Bazin, when we are witnessing Verdoux's behaviours, Chaplin's ingrained image in human awareness would drive audiences to recall previous figures Chaplin has portrayed from Verdoux's image. While Verdoux is shown as an elegant and collected figure throughout most of the film's storyline, the classic comedic image reappears during his assassination of Annabella on the boat. As he tries to conceal his intention murder of murdering, he clutches his knees and cocks his head, while winking at Annabella, the iconic gesture transports us from Verdoux's world to Chaplin's; we see the worker trapped in the gigantic gears of contemporary industrial civilization in *Morden Times* (Charles Chapin, 1936); we see the tramp who wears the ill-fitting garments in *City Lights* (Charles Chapin, 1931). Bazin argues that “the audience's sympathy for Verdoux is focused on the myth, not on what he stands for morally” (1971, p118). Thus, our sympathy and positivity towards Verdoux stem from our admiration for Chaplin and the figures he portrays previously, we are willing to endorse Verdoux since we endorse Chaplin.



Figure 2: The classic Chaplinian gesture appears on Verdoux.

4. The excusable evil within Monsieur Verdoux's moral system

Furthermore, the film not only invites us to endorse Verdoux evilness within the audiences' moral norm, but also challenges their ethical norms, drawing them into *Monsieur Verdoux's* ethical experience, thus the evilness could be excusable. Woolly believes, “there is no singular good, and no one conception of right [...] a potentially divergent ethical space may exist when accepting the alternative moral values and conduct of characters” (2015, p.193). That is, when we allow the existence of different moral norms, the criteria for judging what is good or evil are not predetermined. Verdoux's serial murders are unforgivable in our moral system but might be excusable in the societal norm of his world. Additionally, Sinnerbrink argues, “cinema, in other words, is a medium capable of evoking transformative ethical experience, experimenting with philosophical situations in order to reveal forms of moral meaning that we might otherwise fail to see” (2016, p.22). For example, *Monsieur Verdoux* transports us to a new moral space in which we could observe an apathetic society that good and evil are reversed, with society endorsing mass killing but prohibiting individual murderous behaviour. Verdoux destiny of death under

the guise of so-called morality in that civilization demonstrates the distorted value among other so-called decent people. In this way Verdoux's murderous behaviours not only satirise the moral code of this ill society, but also contributes to awaken some people to the inhuman reality. Thus, his evilness could function as a form of humanism in a harsh world, which is why we may empathise with and adore Verdoux.

On the one hand, the ruthless society modifies Verdoux into an apathetic murdering machine which is incapable of choosing its own fate. Thus, without considering of the harsh reality, the solely condemnation for Verdoux's actions itself might be unethical. Bazin believes that the moral system of Monsieur Verdoux is not the same as our universal value regulates, “the myth is self-sufficient, it convinces by its own inner logic” (1971, p.118). We cannot comprehend Verdoux's world by conventional logic of thinking, as he told the homeless girl, “This is a ruthless world, and one must be ruthless to cope with it”. “Verdoux [...] could not act differently since his response to his problems was determined by the morally corrupt capitalist system in which the character was living” (Bláhová^[9], 2009, p.330). Verdoux loses his autonomy as a machine; the desperate need to survive in this harsh environment numbs him to morality; his behaviour conformed to the rhythm and trajectory of the social machine; the world is a mass murderer; thus, he should also be a murderer.

The film demonstrates how society assimilates Verdoux into a machine in two ways. First, the film intercuts repeatedly by the spinning wheels of a train. According to Deleuze^[10]:

The moments of the train – its speed, its acceleration, its catastrophe – are inseparable from the states of the mechanic [...] the kinetic union of man and machine was to define a new Human Beast. (2013, p.48)

The film assimilates Verdoux as the train since Verdoux relies on the train to travel around and commit his crimes. He is the same as a train wheel in motion, once they start to revolve, they cannot stop autonomously. Second, in terms of actor performance, when we observe Verdoux's deft money counting, we could recognise how thirty-five years of day-in, day-out work has modified him into a mechanical counting machine. In this ruthless industrial era, man is no longer a man, but a profit-seeking machine, a murdering machine, every action of these machines serves to propel the progression of the society. Hence, Verdoux's murder has contributed to adhere to the society's code of operation.

Verdoux's presence, on the other hand, pierced the veil of so-called humanism in a brutal society, and he therefore became an activist who retains the only humanism in the inhuman world. “Chaplin represented humanism in a deeply inhuman culture, individualism in an oppressive system, progressivity in a degenerate society” (Bláhová, 2009, p.337). By challenging society's preconceived beliefs of morality, Verdoux's murder appears to be an act of justice designed to awaken society's humanitarian conscience by revealing society's brutal image as a killing machine. In *Monsieur Verdoux*, people praise mass killers like Hitler and Mussolini, lifting their arms in adoration for them, while demanding an execution for Verdoux and ask him to repent for his murder. Verdoux's actions, on the other hand, reveal that the essence of what he and society did is murder, whether in the name of feeding his family or contributing to the future of their nation; whether they kill fifteen people or a million, the essence of their behaviour is murder. In this way, his act of murder ironically reflects the society's so-called morality. By contrast to the socially sanctioned act of war, Verdoux's murder elicits a reconsideration of moral norms; as a result, his murder becomes a humanitarian act capable of saving more lives, and therefore we may appreciate Verdoux.



Figure 3: People cheers for war criminals and Hitler is preaching the war.

5. Conclusion

This essay begins with an overview of *Monsieur Verdoux's* background and the article's format, claiming that the film is capable of evoking positive responses among the audiences towards the evil character through cinematic techniques and by bringing the audience into a new moral space. The third section of the essay discusses how film technically convince an audience to set aside their moral judgments about the protagonist, with the example of *Monsieur Verdoux*; the fourth section discusses how Monsieur Verdoux creates a new moral space in which we can accept and understand Verdoux's actions and thus respond positively towards him. Finally, this essay ends up with a concise summary.

This article suggests that films may enable us to identify with, sympathise with, and even adore an evil. On the one hand, we are able to set aside our moral judgments about the evil character temporarily and become infatuated with other aspects of the evil characters due to the film's aesthetic treatment of form, style and content, while remaining aware that the character is morally flawed. On the other hand, the film transports us into the moral space of the society in which the character lives, allowing us to consider the character's immoral behaviour through the lens of alternative moral standards. Thus, traditionally immoral behaviours may be able to become moral in a different moral system. As a consequence, we may forsake our critique of the evil character and begin to positively understand and accept him.

References

- [1] Neiman, S. (2002). *Evil in Modern Thought, An Alternative History of Philosophy*, Oxford & Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- [2] Eaton, A.W. (2012). Robust Immoralism. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 70(3), 281–292.
- [3] Schellekens, E. (2008). *Aesthetics and Morality*. London & New York, NY: Continuum.
- [4] Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, J., Fiskaali, A., Høgh-Olesen, H., Johnson, J. A., Smith, M., & Clasen, M. (2021). Do dark personalities prefer dark characters? A personality psychological approach to positive engagement with fictional villainy. *Poetics*, 85, 101511.
- [5] Sinnerbrink, R. (2016). *Cinematic Ethics: Exploring Ethical Experience Through Film*. London & New York, NY: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.
- [6] Bazin, A. (1971). *The Myth of Monsieur Verdoux*. In H. Gray (Ed.) *What Is Cinema? Volume II* (H. Gray, Trans.). Berkley, Los Angeles, CA & London: University of California Press.
- [7] Woolley, E. (2015). The Battle for Moral Supremacy in *There Will Be Blood* and *Unforgiven*. *Film-Philosophy*, 19(1), 190–207.
- [8] Carroll, N. (2013). Rough Heroes: A Response to A.W. Eaton. *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 71(4), 371–376.
- [9] Bláhová, J. (2009). No Place for Peace-Mongers: Charles Chaplin, *Monsieur Verdoux* (1947) and Czechoslovak Communist Propaganda. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 29(3), 321–342.
- [10] Deleuze, G. (2013). *Cinema. I, The Movement-Image* (H. Tomlinson & B. Habberjam, Trans.). London & New York, NY: Bloomsbury.