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## **THEY SLAY DRAGONS, DON'T THEY? ON TAMING OF DRAGONS AND THE OBLIVION OF EVIL IN MODERN STORYTELLING**

### **Abstract**

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*I will attempt to analyse the process of transformation of mythological dragons from hellish, devil-like, horrible monsters into friendly companions and even pets in modern storytelling. While focusing on two important storytelling types – the serpentine European dragon of folk tales and the role of the Dragon ‘undragonly’ characters and beings play in stories derived from classical narratives, I will attempt to shed some light on the peculiar process of abandoning some of the most persistent narrative tropes in Western culture in favour of infantile and cartoonish storytelling that loses its edge and is noticeably decreasing the quality of contemporary films, cartoons, novels etc. This will be discussed in the context of the general trend of weakening and psychologising classical villains in modern popular culture, and a general watering-down of morality under the imperative of ‘rationality’ and ‘realism’. I will attempt to argue that this ‘oblivion of evil’ is not only destructive from a literary perspective but is also socially and politically dangerous.*

**Keywords:** dragons, storytelling, villain, evil, reduction.

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## IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF SAINT GEORGE

The dragon is probably one of the most ubiquitous, and yet most ambiguous mythological beings in modern storytelling.<sup>1</sup> It persists in its role of one of the most fascinating creatures of legend both historically, and geographically. We have dinosaur-sized lizard-like monsters in Northern Europe and aethereal, elemental deities in China, we have demonic, Mephistophelian serpents in the Christian tradition and shape-shifting heroes in Slavic folk stories; some are highly intelligent, some brutish beasts, some breathe fire, some breathe ice, some fly, some live under water.<sup>2</sup> Yet, for reasons that we will leave for the linguists and ethnologists to discuss,<sup>3</sup> they are all named “dragon”, at least in the West.

For example, in Serbian tradition only we have three different mythological creatures that have been traditionally translated into Western languages as “dragon”: – the *aždaja* (from Persian اژدها, meaning, yes, “dragon”, and depicting a huge, serpentine monster<sup>4</sup>), the *ala* (from Greek χαλάζι, meaning “hail”, depicting an elemental monster that changes weather and devours crops<sup>5</sup>), and the *zmaj* (from Old Slavic змиа, meaning “serpent”, used for a wide range of “draconic” creatures, including European dragons, but also Slavic shape-shifting supernatural heroes<sup>6</sup>). These names were mutually interchangeable, and each of them had different meanings and lore in different Serb communities along the Balkans.<sup>7</sup>

So, what do all these different creatures have in common? What is their shared story, that makes Europeans of different languages and cultures consistently name them with a single term? One might argue

<sup>1</sup> By ‘modern storytelling’ I will consider all forms of fictional narratives in all forms of art in the last two or so centuries, but I will try to focus on examples that exists in different arts (both in literature, graphic novels, cinema etc.), not influenced by the specific genres and tropes of that specific art form.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed overview of the variations of dragons in modern art, see page “Our Dragons are Different”, *TV Tropes*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Robert Blust (2000), “The Origin of Dragons”, *Anthropos* 95, no. 2 (2000), 519-536.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Ненад Гајић (2011), „Аждаја“, *Словенска митологија*, Belgrade: Laguna, 126-127; “Aždahā”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Љубинко Раденковић (2001), „Хала“, *Словенска митологија: енциклопедијски речник*, Belgrade: Zepter Book World, 559.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Љубинко Раденковић (2001), „Змај“, *ibid.*, 206.

<sup>7</sup> For example, the father of Serb ethnology and the reformer of Serbian alphabet Vuk Stefanović Karadžić in his *Serb Dictionary* from 1818 mentions all three names and translates them into Latin as *draco* (*serpens fictus*), and into German as *das Drache* and *lindwurm*, cf. Вук Стефановић Караџић (1818), *Српски рјечник*, Vienna, 3, 6, 234, via Библиотека матице Српске, *BMS.rs*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

that there is a certain “pool” of characteristics that constitute a “dragon”, none of which are essential, and though no single example holds all of them, the presence of *some* will be enough to name it a dragon.<sup>8</sup> Be that as it may, a far more important thing that constitutes a dragon is *the role they play in the story*. In European folklore, and we’ll be sticking to it, as it is the basis for contemporary global culture and its narratives, the dragon is usually the antagonist, a thing of evil which the hero of the story must defeat (either by physical force, or by cunning) in order to achieve their goal.<sup>9</sup> More so, it is often depicted as the gatekeeper or guardian of the treasure the hero of the story seeks, be it a hoard of gold, a mystical object, or a fair maiden.<sup>10</sup>

However, there is another aspect of dragon lore that is important for this specific role dragons play in traditional storytelling, and that is Christian mythology that permeates (or in the least influences) a large part of European folklore. In the Christian paradigm, the prime antagonist of any heroic story is the Devil, and dragons in this context are traditionally depicted as having strong connections to Satan and Hell.<sup>11</sup> Most notably, there is a strong mythological connection between the serpentine nature of dragons and the snake that has manipulated Adam and Eve and got them banished from Eden.<sup>12</sup> Much like the Devil, dragons are often depicted with goat horns and beards, bat wings, and a scaly tail.<sup>13</sup> The fire they breathe is often connected to hell fire.<sup>14</sup> That said, and all

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ruth M. Stein (1968), “The Changing Styles in Dragons—from Fáfnir to Smaug”, *Elementary English* 45, no. 2 (1968): 179-189.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Beth Daley (2015), “The story of dragons. Creatures of literature and folklore”, *Europeana*, published August 24, 2015.

<sup>10</sup> For extensive lists of examples, see entries “Dragons Versus Knights”, “Dragon Hoard”, and “Dragons Prefer Princesses” in *TV Tropes*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Carole Wilkinson (2013), “Biblical Dragons”, *Dragonology*, published October 30, 2024; also the entry “Devil Dragon” on *Monstrous*, retrieved January 2024.

<sup>12</sup> This snake is often considered to be a form Satan took in order to hurt God’s creation, though this is probably a later interpretation (cf. Shawna Dolanski /2023/, “How the Serpent in the Garden of Eden Became Satan”, *Biblical Archeology*, published September 30, 2023). Having in mind that dragons in Greek mythology also have a strong connection to snakes and serpents (for a list of dragons in Greek mythology cf. “Dragons”, *Theoi.com*, retrieved January 14, 2024), one might assume it was picked out of a whole menagerie of Greek mythological beings as the most suitable to fulfil the role of a hellish, demonic adversary for saints and knights by Christian storytellers. This may also be the reason the Beast from Revelation is often depicted as a draconic, serpentine monster, whereas Satan himself appears in the Revelation in the form of a dragon. Cf. Rev. 13-20, *The King James Bible*, XIII-XX, 491-497, via *Wikisource.org*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

<sup>13</sup> Once again, for an extensive list of dragons depicted as connected to the Devil and Hell, cf. “Dragons are Demonic”, *TV Tropes*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

ancient influences aside, the paradigm of dragons from European folklore, when cleansed of local pagan influences, can probably be traced to the miracle of St George and the Dragon. The dragon we see speared by St George in hundreds of icons, carvings, and painting gives us both a paradigm of a (European) dragon's visual appearance, as well as the role dragons play in traditional storytelling.<sup>15</sup> Without further delving into the intricacies of dragon lore, I will be following this paradigm for the remainder of this discussion.

## THE TWOFOLD DRAGON

We do, however, have to point out another thing – just as dragons in traditional storytelling were defined either by their appearance and powers, or by their role in the story, so can their place in modern storytelling – novels, screenplays, graphic novels etc. – be defined by either of these aspects. What makes modern stories essentially different is that the dragons in them may entertain both of these aspects – like Smaug in Tolkien's *The Hobbit*<sup>16</sup>, Maleficent in Disney's *The Sleeping Beauty*<sup>17</sup>, or the Dragon in DreamWorks' *Shrek*<sup>18</sup> – but they can also be completely separated. That means that we may get giant, serpentine, flying and fire-breathing monsters that don't have to be the antagonists in the story, just as we can get characters playing the role of a dragon in the story, without being an actual dragon.

In both of these situations we have *dragons being undragon-ly*, but in the first example actual dragons are not *acting* according to their nature, whereas in the second one characters don't *look the part*, yet they display *dragonly*<sup>19</sup> personality, and more importantly, fill their traditional role. This second category is so important from a storytellers perspective, that the entire category of villains and antagonists is

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. Lee Gordy (2020), "How Saint George's Dragon Got Its Wings", *JSTOR Daily*, published February 16, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. G. R. R. Tolkien (1937), *The Hobbit*, Chapters 13-14.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Robin Allan, *Walt Disney and Europe: European influences on the animated feature films of Walt Disney*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Stephen Cole (2004), *Shrek: The Essential Guide*, New York: DK, 26.

<sup>19</sup> I choose the adjective "dragonly" instead of "dragonlike", as it doesn't imply a visual similarity to an actual dragon, but more of a moral and functional one. In Serbian, there is a similar distinction between terms "zmajevit" ("dragonly", usually used for heroes and fierce warriors) and "zmajolik" ("dragonlike", used for monsters visually similar to a dragon, or displaying some of the traits usually connected to dragons). Cf. Данијела Митровић (2022), „Змајевити јунаци у српској и староенглеској епизи“, *Књижевна историја*, год. 54, бр. 178 (2022), 221-241.

named *the Dragon* specifically for their position and role in the narrative, while disregarding their, so to say, 'biology'.<sup>20</sup> A classic example of this trope is Darth Vader from *Star Wars* – he the main guardian of Emperor's political power (seen here as the "treasure" that the heroes want to obtain) and the gatekeeper of his Hidden Fortress,<sup>21</sup> he is his main enforcer (pursuing the heroes and "burning down villages"), and he is the one the heroes have to defeat, outsmart, or at least avoid in order to succeed in their quests.<sup>22</sup> Other notable examples of these dragonly antagonists include Tatsu as the Shredder's dragon in *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*,<sup>23</sup> Bellatrix Lestrange to Voldemort in *Harry Potter*, The Mountain to Queen Cersei in *Game of Thrones*, Ishamael to the Dark One in *The Wheel of Time*, Princess Azula to Fire Lord Ozai in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, Colonel Vogel to Walter Donovan in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* etc.<sup>24</sup>

Why are these 'undragonlike dragons' important? Surely there are enough stories with *actual dragons being dragons* around, that we don't have to dilute the discussion with these additional types of character?! But that is just the point – *something happens* to dragons in modern storytelling that makes them lose the role they played in stories for centuries and eons. At some point in the retelling of all these old stories, 'real' dragons *stopped* being the epitome of evil and even antagonists, and their role was mostly taken over by these 'dragonly' characters, only for themselves to also be appropriated into the good guys and leaving global mythology gapingly deficient on villains. This is the topic I will be discussing further on.

## FROM THE SERPENT OF HELL TO AN ENDANGERED SPECIES

How exactly we got to a place where dragons are no longer terrifying monsters that need to be slain for civilisation to survive is an interesting question in itself, which we cannot discuss at length here.<sup>25</sup> The

<sup>20</sup> Cf. "The Dragon", *TV tropes*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Katelin McDougald (2022), "Star Wars and The Hidden Fortress: Similarities and Differences With Lucas' Influence", *Movie Web*, published June 1, 2022.

<sup>22</sup> It is not by chance that Darth Vader is used as the main illustration for the Dragon on *TV Tropes*, *op. cit.*

<sup>23</sup> As a play on this role, "Tatsu" is Japanese for "dragon". Cf. "The Dragon", *TV Tropes*, *op. cit.*

<sup>24</sup> Once again, for an extensive list of narrative "dragons", "The Dragon", *TV Tropes*, *op. cit.*

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Yvonne Shiao (2019), "The Evolution of Dragons in Western Literature: A History", *Re-actor*, published October 23, 2019.

general motif may be related to the nostalgia for the whimsy, enchantment and fantasy of old folk mythologies as compared to the grim technological determinism of modern society, much like it is represented in classical works of high fantasy like Tolkien's *The Hobbit* or *The Lord of the Rings*. The recurring theme in such works, as it is beautifully reiterated in the animated film *The Flight of Dragons* (1982), is that "the world of magic", with its supernatural metaphysics, forgotten abilities and powers, and, most notably, mythical creatures, is something akin to an endangered ecosystem that is being run over by civilisation, rationality, and technology. As the most majestic and awe-inspiring creatures of legend, dragons became the symbol of this dying world of fancy, and hence an object of romanticisation. Yet Tolkien himself, as sceptical towards technological progress as he was, never went out to de-ethicise symbols of good and evil. His Smaug is every bit as dangerous, predatory and evil as dragons in stories get.<sup>26</sup>

To understand this 'change of heart' concerning the role dragons play in contemporary stories, we should consider a Disney animated classic from 1941 – *The Reluctant Dragon*. In this animated short, the age-old trope about the brave and valiant knight getting rid of the dragon that has been terrorising the village (so, literally the story of St George) is played for laughs, making both the dragon and the knight mild-mannered, good-hearted, gentle souls that prefer to have a picnic and discuss poetry, rather than fight it out. What makes this cartoon so funny is context – in the time it was made, both dragons and knights knew their respective places in stories,<sup>27</sup> as well as the audience, so the plot twist was genuinely unexpected and fresh. *The Reluctant Dragon* was just good *comedy*, and the time it didn't influence the way dragons were portrayed in stories and film. In Disney's 1959 *Sleeping Beauty*, Prince Phillip slays Maleficent transformed into a dragon wielding an enchanted sword and a shield with a cross, completely faithful to the Christian origins of the trope. Four years later, Madam Mim in Disney's *The Sword in the Stone* similarly transforms into a dragon (thus breaking the rules of her wizard duel with Merlin) and is then outsmarted by her opponent, once again true to the classical narrative.

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<sup>26</sup> Cf. Camilo Peralta (2021), "Tolkien's Dragons: Sources, Symbols, and Significance", *Symbolism*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2021), 2-15.

<sup>27</sup> In fact, Sir Giles and the Dragon in *this* story know their place, (they are, as *TV Tropes* would put it, "genre savvy") and are deliberately playing it out for the audience in order to get out of the spot the story put them in. Cf. "Genre Savvy", *TV Tropes*, retrieved January 14, 2024.

But as time went by, mostly in cartoons and children's stories, and then, slowly, in live-action films and adult novels dragons started to lose their edge and turn into neutral, enchanted beings which are just as likely to help the heroes out, as to hinder them in their quest. This went so far, that in children's programs you simply cannot find a classic story with an evil and dangerous dragon. In the popular animated film *How to Train Your Dragon* (2010) dragons are reduced from pests to pets, but at least the story *considers* and subverts the trope of dragons being dangerous and deadly – most other children's programs simply take 'good-natured dragons', be it pets and mounts (*Pete's Dragon*, 1977), allies and friends (*The Railway Dragon*, 1988; *The Quest for Camelot*, 1998), or even protagonists (*Tabaluga*, 1994-2004; *Zog* 2018), as a given. While this is understandable to an extent in case of children's stories (though problematic from a pedagogical perspective<sup>28</sup>), this kind of infantile re-inventing of old lore started to bleed into storytelling for adults.

*The Reluctant Dragon* became a curse. *DragonHeart* (1996) plays the same trope straight – the knight and the dragon become friends and simulate fights in order to convince scared villagers the 'beast' was defeated. In *Eragon* (2006), a farm boy hatches a dragon egg and 'bonds' the dragon for life. In the *Harry Potter* series, dragons, though undoubtedly dangerous, are treated as an endangered species (and sometimes as a semi-tame guardian animal), but at least, when Hagrid attempts to bring one home, everyone has the common sense to thing him crazy for it. This infantilisation of dragon lore probably reached its height with *Game of Thrones*, where the general audience took Daenerys' "pet dragons" for granted, and openly mourned the slaying of Rhaegal by Euron Greyjoy.<sup>29</sup> The producers actually managed to perform an 'inversed subversion' and 'play the trope straight' in the show's finale, completely taking the audience – expecting dragons to be docile, tame, and civilised – by surprise.<sup>30</sup>

How did this upside-down view of dragons come about? We have seen the history behind the process, but what exactly happened to our

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Christian Poole (2022), "The Importance of Fairy Tales for Children", *Thinking West*, published April 25, 2022.

<sup>29</sup> It is amusing to note that the episode of *Game of Thrones* where this happens appeared online early morning on May 6, 2019, which is celebrated as St George's Day by the Orthodox according to the Julian calendar. At the time, Serbian audience celebrated Greyjoy's feat as an "accidental Easter Egg". A meme depicting Greyjoy under the title "St George slays the dragon" became viral in Serbia in the following days. Cf. Никола Танасић (2019a), „Финале „Игре престола“ – крвава теленовела, политичка драма и повратак епици“, *NSPM.rs*, published June 22, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> Никола Танасић (2019, 1), *ibid*.



concept of a dragon, that we (literally) *lost the plot* so much and genuinely expected a person that calls herself *The Mother of Dragons* to be ‘the good guy’ up until she burns down a whole city on a whim? Essentially, what we have here is a form of a rationalisation, a typically modern reductionist approach to dragon lore. Fusing the magic/technology dialectic with the nature/civilisation dialectic, we reduced (*sic!*) magic to a natural, or at least naturally occurring phenomenon, thus making dragons – *animals*. This can be seen in the way dragons are depicted in modern visual arts – more often than not they “conform to laws of physics and anatomy”,<sup>31</sup> with front limbs developed into bat-like wings with an unwieldy wings span – all in order to “look believable” for “modern audiences”.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, if dragons are “just animals” (albeit extraordinary), then there can be no morality to them. They are dangerous in the same way a lion or a crocodile is dangerous, but there is nothing demonic or sinister in that danger. Ironically, by “naturalising” dragons in such a way, we are, in fact, appropriating them into our rational worldview and destroying everything that makes them what they are, while reducing them to nothing more than “a dinosaur with wings” – just an animal that has an iconic look.<sup>33</sup>

## BIG BAD WOLF WITH A THORN IN ITS PAW

While the monstrous and beastly form classic dragons have prohibits them from appearing in a significant number of redemption stories, the ‘undragonlike dragon’, the one fulfilling the *role* of the arch-nemesis, guardian of the treasure, and the near-unstoppable foe, suffers heavily from this moralist white-washing. The archetypical example that we have chosen for this category of character – Darth Vader from *Star Wars* – is an excellent (and fairly early) example of this. Instead of simply defeating him, Luke Skywalker proves that “there was always good in him” and pushes him toward a final act of redemption, that enables him to reunite with the Force and wash away all the crimes that he has committed

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Isabelle V. Busch (2019), “Theoretical Dragon Anatomy: Structure & Function”, Neptune, NJ: Grandisbooks; also “Dragon Anatomy and Physiology”, *Dragonsinn.net*, Published February 20, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> On the topic of how the myth of “modern audiences” is ruining contemporary cinema see the video “Why Modern Movies Suck - The Myth Of The “Modern Audience” (2022) by *The Critical Drinker*, Youtube, published November 3, 2022. Cf. Connor Smith (2023), “Why Modern Movies Are Dreadful and Modern Audiences Don’t Exist”, *LHistory*, published March 6, 2023.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. „Dinosaurs are Dragons”, *TV Tropes*, retrieved January 14, 2024.



up to that point. In the original *Star Wars* trilogy there is a satisfying, deeply Christian tone to this story,<sup>34</sup> and to George Lucas' credit, while filming the prequel trilogy he did not downplay Vader's crimes in order to make him more sympathetic. Instead, he portrayed him as an ancient hero, driven by his own hybris (and the will of the Gods) into tragedy.<sup>35</sup> And just like with *The Reluctant Dragon*, this subversion of the role of "the Dragon" didn't bother anyone, because it was an exception, rather than a rule. In the last decades, however, this kind of relativisation became so common that it became nearly impossible for Hollywood to portray actual villains. What used to be a seldom used redemption arc<sup>36</sup> became an *origin story*, having iconic villains basically substitute heroes in storytelling in order to satisfy "modern audiences'" need for morally ambiguous protagonists and "grittier" stories.<sup>37</sup>

The process remains connected to a pedagogical paradigm, which proclaims that we should teach children that 'no one is truly evil', and that there are always 'reasons and causes', 'mitigating circumstances', and 'backstory' that explains why a certain villain is acting the way they are. Remove the cause, or simply make the villain reflect on it, and 'all the bad things go away', showing that the character was 'actually good all along'. This obsessive bleaching of villains was 'lampshaded' early in the series *Desperate Housewives* (2004-2012), where one of the mothers organising a school play insists that it is "cruel" to kill the Big Bad Wolf at the end of *Little Red Riding Hood*, suggesting, instead, that the wolf was merely "mean" because "it had a thorn in its paw". Remove the thorn, and one of the most demonic creatures from European folk tales<sup>38</sup> turns into, essentially, a puppy. If only it were that simple!<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Tim Redfield (2019), "Vader's Redemption", *Bread for Beggars*, published December 7, 2019.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Zoe Hinton (2021), "Anakin Skywalker and the Classic Tragedy Narrative", *Star Wars Geek Girl*, published May 6, 2021.

<sup>36</sup> For example, among more notable Sith lords of *Star Wars* lore, we have this kind of redemption only in the case of Ulic Qel-Droma – most Sith lords cling to the Dark Side of the Force even after death. Cf. Kevin J. Anderson (1998), Chris Gosset, *Star Wars: Tales of the Jedi – Redemption*, Dark Horse Comics.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. Keith Phipps (2021), "How Everything Became a Gritty Reboot", *GQ*, published March 12, 2021.

<sup>38</sup> In Old Slavic and Serbian stories, for example, the Wolf is an almost supernatural being, very close in its nature to the Dragon. Cf. Ненад Гајић (2011), „Бук“, *op. cit.*, 156-157.

<sup>39</sup> It is not, as it is repeatedly shown in the children's book series *The Bad Guys* (and the *Dream-works* 2022 animated film based on them). Though the story here plays into the same redemption trope, at least it has acknowledged that there is something inherently 'bad' in the very *nature* of iconic 'bad guys' (and the Big Bad Wolf in particular), which makes their redeeming more difficult than simply 'admitting one was wrong and apologising'. The series also acknowledges that

Hollywood, however, thinks it is. During the last couple of decades, we have literally been overrun by ‘villain backstories’ that strive to show us that “the world is not black and white”, and that there are always ‘reasons and causes’ why someone is behaving badly. We have seen it in practically every Disney villain after *Princess and the Frog* (2009), most notable examples being, of course, whole films dedicated to ‘difficult pasts’ of iconic baddies like *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cruella* (2021). Villains of most new animated stories follow the same approach – Hook in *Peter Pan & Wendy* (2023) was betrayed by Peter as a child, the demon bear Mor’du in *Brave* (2012) is simply cursed, Lotso in *Toy Story 3* (2010) was abandoned and discarded by his owner, Bruno in *Encanto* (2021) is “just misunderstood”, *Wreck-it-Ralph* (2012) doesn’t even want to be a villain (just like the cast of Dreamwork’s *The Bad Guys*, 2022), whereas *Te Fiti* in *Moana* (2016) also has “a torn in her paw” (of sorts) and is instantly transformed into a loving goddess of nature the moment the problem is settled.<sup>40</sup> The scene that was played for irony in Frank Miller’s graphic novel *The Dark Knight Returns* (1986), when a psychiatrist declares the Joker “cured” after a series of “heartfelt confessions” only to have him murder both the psychiatrist and the entire audience of a live show he was appearing in, repeats unironically in *Joker* (2019), only this time the entire global audience of the film does not get the message, taking the villain’s “sad origin story” for granted, and feeling empathy for him.<sup>41</sup>

## THE GREATEST TRICK THE DEVIL EVER PULLED

Once again, we have reductionism at work here, analysing and deconstructing age-old narratives on good and evil to the level of ‘social background’ and ‘developmental psychology’. One of the immediately visible consequences of this approach is the degrading of Hollywood villains, once the epitomes of evil, either into psychopaths (who are, by

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there is a certain kind of stereotype about certain creatures and characters that is based in the collective experience of the society, and that can’t simply be ‘wished away’.

<sup>40</sup> An good example of this is the Grinch from the 2000 Jim Carey version of *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*, where the reason he is mean and grouchy is because he was teased and bullied as a child, as opposed to the classic Dr Seuss tale where he is “simply mean”. The 2018 animated film *The Grinch* does the same thing, tracing the titular character bad behaviour to a dreary childhood spent in an orphanage. Cf. Cecilia Martinez (2018), Ricky Hernandez, and Halle Buttafuso, “The Grinch: Old vs New”, *The Roar*, published November 27, 2018.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Никола Танасић (2019b), „Џокер — Роршахова мрља за друштво „постистине“, *NSPM.rs*, published October 12, 2019.

definition, not answerable for moral choices they make), or into weaklings and whiners who “had a tough childhood” (Megamind in *Mega-mind*, 2010), “never knew their parents” (Bruce the great white shark<sup>42</sup> in *Finding Nemo*, 2003), or simply “had a bad day” (the Joker in Alan Moore’s *The Killing Joke*<sup>43</sup>). Hence, we get a whole gallery of villains who are more suited for the therapist’s couch, than a prison cell.

*The obvious, and much more problematic consequence of all this is that we lose the very concept of evil*, which has always been much clearer and more paradigmatic in fiction, than in real life. Every evil deed has an explanation and a backstory, and evil behaviour can be analysed and reduced to psychological, sociological, or political context, providing an *ad hoc* explanation and “instant empathy” for practically anything and anyone. And this is a far bigger problem from just spoiling and destroying centuries of mythology and lore. The virtues, axiologies, and value systems of every society are mirrored in their stories, and we are living in a global culture which has successfully (and perhaps deliberately) undermined its very foundations – its distinction of good and evil. Because when you are unable to point out obvious evil in stories you are told as a child, you essentially grow up without a moral compass, no matter how compassionate, tolerant, and humane your society strives to be. And make no mistake, this *is* a matter of political manipulation! A society that is unable to perceive something as evil is a society that can, on the one hand, be persuaded that *anything* is evil, and on the other (which is much more sinister), it can be persuaded *that evil as such does not even exist*.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Bruce is a very good example of the absurdity of the trope, as he is a ‘mindless killing machine’ by his nature and having him ‘go vegetarian’ is simply silly. This is, of course, deliberately played for laughs by the screenwriters, but the joke loses its irony by the end of the film, where Bruce and his friends are continuing to pursue their ‘nice shark’ pledge. Of course, this kind of plot twist works in a comedy made primarily for children, but if you lose any notion that certain creatures are aggressive, dangerous, and, yes, even evil *by nature*, you also lose the opportunity to play with these types of subversion – which is exactly what is happening to dragons.

<sup>43</sup> In this influential graphic novel, Alan Moore uses this ‘psychological background’ for Joker to take a jab at Batman’s origin story, which is also often considered to be enough of a grounding for the Dark Knights antisocial behaviour. However, and unlike the 2019 Todd Phillips film, Alan Moore’s Joker is admitting himself that he possibly (more like probably) made his sad story up (just like Christopher Nolan’s Joker, who is always telling a different story about “how he got his scars”). Moore also proves that outside heteronomy does not necessarily make a person evil, as the Joker’s attempt to drive commissioner Gordon crazy by making him watch photos of his daughter Barbara’s torture fails completely. Cf. Никола Танасић (2019b), *ibid*.

<sup>44</sup> Indeed, we live in a civilisation which is increasingly incapable to process true acts of evil as anything more than ‘mental illness’ or at least ‘ideological indoctrination’. The latter is less socially destructive, because at least it presumes that we can determine *what kind* of ‘ideological

“The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he did not exist”, Kevin Spacey’s Verbal repeats after Charles Baudelaire in *The Usual Suspects* (1995).<sup>45</sup> Now, one does not have to believe in the existence of the Devil (or demons, or dragons for that matter) to still be able to recognise evil as a distinct moral phenomenon. When one doesn’t believe in *evil*, though, things get complicated. One is easily manipulated into dismissing criminal behaviour as “a product of society” as well as into shunning social behaviour as “criminal”. One may believe political actions of one ethnic group or another to be “genocide”, while other, quantifiably almost identical actions to be “legitimate self-defence”. One may be inclined to deride a politician as a “dictator, tyrant, and a murderer”, all the while considering another, in all relevant respects similar politician to be “a peacemaker and a distinguished statesman”. It is a trick, a sleight of hand and, believe it or not, it has quite a lot to do with global audiences cheering for Daenerys Targaryen and her dragons up until the moment they burn King’s Landing to the ground.<sup>46</sup> To put it differently, not believing in the Devil is fine, provided the Devil doesn’t exist. *Mutatis mutandis*, it may seem that there is no harm in believing all dragons are ordinary, harmless animals, as long as there are no dragons around to prove us wrong. But the stories of dragons have been around for millennia, and – for a reason. They were teaching generations of human beings from the Atlantic to the Chinese Sea important things about the world that surrounds them. And that world, more often than not, has a great deal of ‘dragon types’ in the need of (metaphorical or literal) – slaying.

## OFF THE THERAPIST’S COUCH AND INTO THE WOODS

For me, the question of how we depict traditional mythological beings in our stories is primarily a question of aesthetics, culture, and good education. Yet, both as a scholar coming from the field of ancient

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indoctrination’ is morally wrong, but the first is making our whole civilisation incapable to cope with any kind of evil it encounters in an increasingly amoral world. On the other hand, whenever we *do* find clear normative judgments about something being *evil*, we almost certainly *are* looking at a piece of political propaganda – propaganda that a generation raised on stories about “the Big Bad Wolf with a thorn in his paw” simply is not capable of seeing through. Cf. Andrew Delbanco (1995), *The Death of Satan: How Americans Have Lost the Sense of Evil*, New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

<sup>45</sup> *La plus belle des ruses du diable est de vous persuader qu’il n’existe pas*, cf. Henri Quantin (2021), “Baudelaire et la plus belle des ruses du diable”, *Alenteia*, published July 22, 2021.

<sup>46</sup> Cf. Никола Танасић (2019a), *op. cit.*

philosophy, and as a Serb who grew up on old Slavic and European folk tales, I strongly believe that there are good reasons why “the beautiful” and “the good”, τὸ καλὸν καὶ ἀγαθόν, „лепо и добро“, serve as one and the same, and seldom go one without the other. And I believe there is no reason to deprive future generations of Serbs, Slavs, Europeans, or any other people for that matter, of the mythological heritage that has been meticulously preserved for centuries and millennia by generations before ours.

Fortunately, global audiences seem to agree. Weak, traumatised and psychologically damaged dragons with Freudian issues simply cannot compare to their more famous predecessors, much like Daenerys’ dragons cannot be compared Vhagar, Meraxes, or Balerion the Black Dread. Mature audiences simply *want their villains evil, and their dragons dangerous, malicious, and sinister*, and critics worth their salt constantly bash films, novels, and stories, that pander to the infantile Miss Universe need for “everyone to be friends”. Hollywood’s own sense of καλοκαγαθία also works against this trend – it is one thing to show that Darth Vader, Loki, or Severus Snape were “good all along”, quite another to imply kindness in a serpentine, reptilian creature, whose monstrous looks sets all our evolutionary instincts flaring. That is why in adult storytelling (at least when it is *good* storytelling) we still have dragons fulfilling their traditional role – be it the Dragon in Brandon Sanderson’s *Tress of the Emerald Sea*, the Hungarian Hornback in *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*, the apocalyptic flight of dragons in *The Legend of Vox Machina*, or Drogon setting King’s Landing aflame in the best tradition of Tolkien’s Smaug.

We have reached a point when traditional storytelling becomes subversive compared to the new, ‘modern’ narratives. “Some people just want to see the world burn”, says Alfred to Bruce Wayne in *The Dark Knight*, yet audience does not quite want to believe it. They want the Joker’s actions to be ‘rational’ on some level (cue “Joker was right all along” memes), they want them to *make sense*. This obsession with rationality and explanation is a civilisational trait of our society, and it is the primary reason why creatures like vampires, werewolves, satyrs, demons, and, yes, dragons have been living in *stories* instead of the dark corners of our woods, basements and caves for a while now. Yet, the curse of rationalising does not stop with the cleansing of our world of wonders, impossibilities, and supernatural forces – now it is going after our stories as well. And caught in this rational, reductionist crossfire is

our morality. Our global society is churning out culture that has *forgotten what evil means*. Worse – it is a culture that believes evil can be rationalised, deconstructed, and “put to good use”, much like Daenerys’ dragons. At the same time, we have actual evil, unseen for generations, on the rise all over the world, including dark corners of our own woods and basements. Coincidence? Hardly.

Most people, however, are aware of this, at least on an intuitive, or purely aesthetic level. In all forms of storytelling, the stories that create the biggest splash and generate a cult following are almost always the ones following classic, age-old tropes. It is, perhaps, most visible in the one form of art that we have mostly ignored so far, but which relies heavily on popular worldviews and classic heroic narratives – *video games*. Gamers are an audience that likes to participate in the story of its heroes, and they are much less pliable to experiments with classic mythological tropes. When you encounter a dragon in a game, you either kill it, outsmart it, or run away from it. Just as it always was in those kinds of stories. Game developers rely heavily on mass popularity of their work and are therefore much more conservative with their storytelling. That is the reason games are among the most vivid, morally engaging, and at the same time classical art forms of our time. Other arts are catching up though. And that is good news for lovers of classic fairy tales and old mythology. And good news for dragons as well. They may get slain now and then, but at least they will get to get up from the therapist’s couch and go burn some cities, pillage some gold, and kidnap some fair maidens. It is a much healthier lifestyle for them. And much healthier for society in general.

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