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Slow roast: The casting of the business person as the villain

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During Hollywood's Golden Age (between the 1930s and the 1940s), businessmen, more often than not, were portrayed as heroes, sympathetic characters and ordinary Joes that people could relate to. The era may have been a lot of things, but innocent was not one of them. Film Noir – a style renowned for its hard-boiled characters and harsh storylines came of age in the 1940s, and the era saw early shockers like King Kong and Hitchcock hit the silver screen. As an era it was not averse to social commentary, and many of the movies at the time addressed difficult and complicated issues with nuance and sensitivity.

It was not an age for suckers or fools – two world wars were within recent memory – and social change was rapid and dramatic.

So it wasn't naivete that saw the archetype of businessman portrayed positively. The age was familiar with the excesses of the 1920s and the robber barons. It was just understood that people pursued better lives for themselves and their families through business. The business person was – outmoded gender roles aside – the regular person. Someone who put in work, made money, took care of their household and contributed to their community.

There was inherent nobility in pursuing fulfillment, value and contribution to the world this way. Not just the small business types either, 1941's Citizen Kane was a publishing mogul. In Dinner At Eight, Lionel Barrymore is a dignified, decent shipping magnate. In It's A Wonderful Life, Jimmy Stewart plays an empathetic, likeable banker.

Never mind the Golden Age – prior to 1965, television shows portrayed business people as 'good guys' twice as often as 'bad guys'. The person engaged in business was an entrepreneur, and employer, a pioneer, a trailblazer, a brave explorer, a fighter, a trier, a never-give-upper. Families – already familiar with the hippie movement and anti-war sentiments – flocked around their television sets to watch regular people – just like themselves – working to carve out a future for them and their families.

Looking at the data, this trend reversed in the 1970s. After that, audiences were shown two evil businessmen for each good one. The reverse happened gradually at first, and then sped up as the decade drew to a close.

Suddenly we found the archetype very much intact, but completely reversed. Today, it is hard to think of a single positive portrayal (a handful of exceptions). In the imagination of popular movies, television shows and novels, business people – at least successful ones – are most likely villains – destroying the environment, exploiting the poor, and worshipping only greed. Suddenly very rich, ultra-capitalist Hollywood – for some reason – bent over backwards to deliver anti-capitalist messages as widely as it could (see Businessmen are always the villains, the Economist, 16 October 2015).

The portrayals go beyond classic villains, like Gordon Gecko in Wall Street. Businessmen are always eligible to be the bad guys, and sometimes the portrayals are so laughably one sided they become caricatures. Now, when people think of business, they immediately land on 'Greed is Good' or the Wolf of Wall Street – as if there is no dividing line between Don Vito Corleone and your employer. In the TV-series Mr Robot, for example, there is even a company called 'Evil Corp'. Subtle much, guys?

No genre is immune. From Avatar to Aliens, Tron: Legacy to Inception, space is infected with evil businesspeople, hell bent to hurt, plunder and destroy, left, right, center, up above and down below. The Geeks need to know, too.

From entertainment for the kids with Despicable Me to the horror and gore of Resident Evil, evil business is everywhere and consistent. High budget or low budget, good acting or bad acting, it is of no consequence: The International, The Constant Gardener, Michael Clayton, Syriana, Erin Brokovich, Fire Down Below, Spiderman, Boiler Room, Tomorrow Never

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Dies, Mission: Impossible 2 – if they are mining, processing, manufacturing, financing, flying, building, moving, medicating, representing or inventing, they are more likely than not out to get you.

Sociologists Robert Lichter, Linda Lichter and Stanley Rothman conducted an exhaustive study of prime time TV shows and found that business is the only occupation portrayed on television disproportionately involved in crime.

The Media Research Center's researchers in Alexandria, Virginia, subjected themselves to 863 sitcoms, dramas and TV movies, broadcast by ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox and this is how they phrased their conclusion: "Businesspeople tend to be portrayed as venal and unscrupulous. They engage in criminal behavior." For example, they found that as a group, corporate types commit more murders on TV than career criminals.

The late Christopher Hitchens noticed the trend and declared: "In the movies, the instant the camera pans up the towering and glittering skyscraper, you just know that there is a corporate villain lurking on the top floor."

It would seem that formulaic Hollywood discovered an evergreen class of nefarious archetypes they can recycle over and over again.

What does the trend reveal?

Well, in this realm it is harder to find the data – and one must necessarily begin to speculate on causes, implications and cures. We move from undeniable trends that can be observed, and move into the field of opinion and value judgements. It would seem that audiences – and perhaps that is but another word for society – have settled for accepting the message that business itself has no decency or dignity.

Interestingly, very few people will declare that they themselves work for an evil corporation. It is hard to demonize the people that pay you that cushy paycheck every month. And my own colleagues are always relatively nice people (even Old Marge in the small office five doors down, on the left).

My employer, my company and my business are basically decent – but business as a whole is evil.
This is part of that lazy trend where categories become so widely inclusive that they exclude any personal responsibility.
It is also the kind of lazy observation that lead to such fallacious oversimplifications as 'bad guys win'. The truth is, the bad guys only win in movies
.
If you exploit people, cheat, lie, steal, backstab, rip off and victimize – in the real world, your business has zero percent chance of being successful in the long run.

Think about the last plumber or mechanic that ripped you off and consider what you said about them to those who asked if you knew anyone who could help them.

Likewise, if you've ever been treated fairly and you've been given a good deal – cold, hard, heartless rationality alone dictates that you became a walking advertisement for the business that handled you that well.

Gangsters and exploiters may make fine cannon fodder for the silver screen, but in the real world, where reputation matters, the good guys may not always win – but they are the only ones with a fighting chance.

Reputation matters. Integrity matters. Responsibility matters.

Perhaps it is time for audiences – and entertainers – to reconsider their choice of villain, and the message they send to the next generation by portraying reality in the way they do. After all, we wouldn't want to create a future that is more gullible than the 1930s.