



Values of Villainy: A Typology of Antagonists in Superhero Films Through Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values

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Abstract

This article investigates the motivational grammars of villains in Hollywood superhero films through the lens of Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values. By analyzing the discourse of eight iconic antagonists, we identified three clusters: Ambiguous Tragedians, whose villainy emerges from wounded subjectivity and marginalization; Revolutionary Calculators, who justify domination through distorted appeals to justice and order; and the Chaotic Nihilist, represented solely by Heath Ledger's Joker, who embodies systemic collapse and anarchic spectacle. The findings show that villains operate as moral rhetoricians, dramatizing value tensions, distortions, and voids. These insights highlight the potential of integrating psychological theory and film analysis, while also pointing to new agendas for cross-cultural, multimodal, and reception-oriented studies of villainy.

Keywords: film villains; superhero films; Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values; moral psychology; audience reception



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Introduction

Villains are central to the narrative grammar of cinema: they help structure conflicts, trigger viewers' moral judgments, and increasingly mobilize identification, empathy, or ambivalent fascination. Recent scholarship maps this complexity through multiple lenses, from film history to biocultural and psychological approaches, showing how the structure of antipathy is built via devices of characterization, moral framings, and shifting cultural repertoires (Eden et al., 2015; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2016, 2019). At the same time, reception and persona studies suggest that antagonists' appeal can stem from signals of charisma, instrumental competence, and (sometimes distorted) codes of justice, forming archetypes that renew themselves with each industrial and technological cycle (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019; Yao & Yang, 2024). Even stereotypical visual markers, such as scars or dermatological traits, have been described as indices that historically "mark" villainy, though they are now criticized for reproducing stigma (Croley et al., 2017; Long & Long, 2024).

Despite these advances, a persistent gap remains: a lack of typologies anchored in a general motivational theory that can organize, compare, and explain patterns of villainy from

the standpoint of value systems. Schwartz's Theory of Human Values (Schwartz, 1992) offers a particularly promising framework for this task. By proposing a motivational circumplex of universal values arranged by compatibilities and tensions, the theory provides explicit criteria for interpreting motivations, justifications, and styles of action (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012). In its refined formulation, the theory outlines 19 value types and supports links with preferences, attitudes, and behaviors across multiple domains (Schwartz et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2016). This generality is an epistemic advantage: it allows us to transpose insights from consumption, politics, or applied ethics to the design of characters and their discourse, while preserving theoretical comparability.

In cinema, moral evaluation of the antagonist is rarely binary; it emerges from the encounter between textual cues, paratextual cues, and the moral schemas activated by viewers. Contemporary models in moral psychology, for example, Dyadic Morality Theory, underscore that moral judgments are organized around representations of harm (who appears as a harm-doing agent versus a patient/victim), which helps explain why certain acts or rhetorics by villains seem more condemnable than others (Schein & Gray, 2018). Integrating this insight with a values lens lets us pose a precise question: which configurations of values are invoked by villains when justifying their acts, and how do these configurations strain or recalibrate the audience's perception of harm and justice?

Building on this agenda, this article proposes a values-oriented typology of villains, constructed from a systematic analysis of dialogue from a set of widely recognized and highly rated characters. Rather than starting from genre labels (e.g., “the gangster,” “the dictator”) or isolated traits (e.g., “narcissistic,” “Machiavellian”), we derive motivational profiles by mapping units of meaning (justifications, goals, invoked norms) onto the poles of Schwartz’s circumplex. This allows us to identify recurring patterns, for example, “pragmatic domination,” “sacrificial order,” or “libertarian chaos”, and to compare them across films and historical periods (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2016).

The contribution of the present research is threefold. First, we offer a replicable conceptual instrument that brings film studies closer to a cross-nationally validated psychological theory, enabling intercultural comparisons of villainy without relying solely on ad hoc taxonomies. This instrument also helps scholars systematically delineate how antagonism manifests as a divergence from normative value priorities, thereby illuminating the nuanced interplay between personal conviction and societal subversion (Nangimah & Iskandar, 2021), thus deepening understanding of film villains and, through its replicable design, enabling scholars to address other types of characters.

Second, we show how villains' speech patterns and justifications signal value configurations that explain their narrative persuasiveness, even when "charismatic antagonists" garner admiration or fandom (Doyle et al., 2025; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt, 2019; Yao & Yang, 2024). This persuasiveness suggests that audience engagement with such figures is not merely a cognitive dissonance exercise, but a reflection of shared value orientations that align with the characters' justifications (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al., 2021). Therefore, the present research addresses a deeper understanding of audience motives to engage with specific antagonistic character types, proposing a cognitive analysis through the theory of human values by mapping these cinematic portrayals against the universal values proposed by Shalom Schwartz.

Third, we suggest methodological implications for computational and multimodal character analysis by offering a values codebook that can be applied to larger corpora. By operationalizing these psychological constructs into a standardized coding schema, this study facilitates automated content analysis across extensive film databases, moving beyond the manual review of single-case cinematic archetypes (Hahn et al., 2025), helping scholars not only understand villainous characters but also build a pathway for future analyses of different film genres and character archetypes.

The use of Schwartz's framework, while providing a relevant basis for cognitive studies of characters in film analysis, requires some caution. Cinematic characters are not empirical subjects whose values can be directly inferred as stable psychological dispositions; they are constructed figures shaped by narrative design, performance, genre conventions, aesthetic stylization, among other factors (Smith, 2022). For that reason, the present study approaches values not as fixed inner essences of villains, but as interpretive patterns in the justificatory discourses through which antagonism is narratively organized and morally framed. This perspective preserves the analytical utility of value theory while acknowledging that, in cinema, motivational structures are always mediated by form and storytelling.

More specifically, the proposed typology contributes to film studies by shifting villain classification from surface traits or genre labels to the moral grammars through which antagonists justify action. This makes it possible to compare how films organize audience alignment, narrative conflict, and ideological tension through distinct configurations of value claims rather than through character types alone, even though some cinematic forms are left out of the analysis, as discussed in the next sections.

To support the typology, we implement a theory-driven content analysis design in which trained coders classify speech segments according to semantic indicators of the 19 refined

Schwartz values (Schwartz et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2016). Although the descriptive–explanatory focus falls on motivational profiles, we engage results from the literature linking villainy, traits, and moral judgments as well as historical/industrial studies on the evolution of antagonist archetypes (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019; McClure, 2014). In other words, the proposed typology advances film theory by transitioning from descriptive character archetypes toward a predictive, cognitive-based model that identifies how antagonistic motivations reflect latent psychological needs (Berezhna, 2024).

In short, this study addresses the question: which value patterns structure the typology of villains in cinema, and how do these patterns help explain their narrative function and audience appeal? By articulating value theory and villainy studies, we aim to contribute an analytical vocabulary capable of comparing antagonists across films, eras, and cultures, and, in doing so, to offer new lenses for criticism, curation, and screenwriting pedagogy (Croley et al., 2017; Eden et al., 2015; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019; Schein & Gray, 2018; Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2016; Yao & Yang, 2024).

Villains and Antagonism in Hollywood Cinema

Hollywood’s villain has never been a static figure; it is a moving target that tracks industrial practices, audience sensibilities, and shifting cultural anxieties. Surveys of the American film tradition show a gradual displacement from melodramatic, monolithic

embodiments of “evil” toward antagonists with legible backstories, complex motivations, and even redemptive arcs (Arenas, 2011; McClure, 2014). This evolution is not merely a matter of narrative fashion. It reflects broader changes in how films construct moral legibility, through framing, performance, and genre conventions, and how viewers negotiate ambivalence toward antagonists who are competent, charismatic, or ideologically articulate.

Recent accounts map the contemporary “structure of antipathy,” that is, the rhetorical and aesthetic devices by which films position a character as a legitimate object of moral condemnation, fear, or fascination (Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019). Within this perspective, the villain is not only the plot’s oppositional force but also a discursive node where competing values are staged and weighed. In earlier cycles, stock cues (costume, scars, accent) sufficed to cue villainy; contemporary cycles more often distribute those cues across discourse (what the character argues), competence (what the character achieves), and charisma (how the character persuades), so that antagonists become, at once, threats to be contained and figures to be understood (Eden et al., 2015; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2016).

Two strands of scholarship help explain the durability of these figures. The first is historical-industrial: antagonists are shaped by political climates and market logics, yielding eras of “memetic enemies” that encode geopolitical tensions (e.g., the Reagan era’s Cold War

imaginaries) or domestic anxieties about crime, terrorism, and social change (Shaw, 2002; Soberon, 2020). The second is stylistic-representational: repeated uses of visual heuristics, facial asymmetries, dermatologic traits, costuming, have long served as shorthand for moral deviance (Croley et al., 2017). This repertoire is now under scrutiny for its stigmatizing effects, especially considering comparative analyses of visible facial differences across time and cultures (Wagner et al., 2023) and dermatology-led critiques of how such differences have been coded as “evil” in classic cinema (Long & Long, 2024).

At the same time, Hollywood has cultivated what might be called the charismatic antagonist: a figure whose rhetorical skill, apparent justice claim, or principled ideology invites reluctant admiration. Work at the intersection of film studies and psychology documents how justice sensitivity and perceived leadership inform the appeal of such characters, including when they anchor “dark tourism” imaginaries or transmedia fandoms (Yao & Yang, 2024). This trend intersects with the rise of antiheroes and morally gray ensembles, where lines between protagonist and antagonist blur, inviting audiences to both reject and desire the villain (Eden et al., 2015; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen & Schmidt, 2019). Recent case-based studies, ranging from female villains’ representational shifts (Traesar & Saktiningrum, 2024) to the linguistic persona of Nebula in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (Berezhna, 2024), underscore that gender, genre, and franchise world-building inflect how villainy is voiced and received.

Finally, typological work inside and beyond Hollywood suggests that formal features of antagonism (goal structures, moral justifications, relational positioning to heroes) are robust cross-culturally, but take on local inflections in empathy construction and audience address (Bakogianni, 2023; Wang, 2024). Taken together, these strands indicate why any explanatory model of villainy must speak to (i) representational devices, (ii) moral cognition in audiences, and (iii) a motivational grammar that can travel across films, periods, and cultures. This is precisely where the psychological literature on moral judgment and the theory of basic values becomes analytically useful.

Moral Psychology and the Audience's Judgment of Villains

Moral judgment in film spectatorship rarely reduces to “good versus evil.” Viewers infer intentions, evaluate harm, and weigh competing principles as they interpret what antagonists do and say. A significant body of evidence shows that exposure to moral violations shapes trait ascriptions and affective responses to characters, with villains tending to be perceived as higher on manipulative or callous traits and lower on warmth and benevolence (Eden et al., 2015). Yet the same studies also show variability: certain villains attract interest or even admiration when they appear competent, consistent, or norm-guided within their own moral universe.

One integrative account is Dyadic Morality Theory, which proposes that moral cognition is organized around perceived dyads of agent (harm-doer) and patient (victim), with harm (or

its construal) serving as the central currency of moral appraisal (Schein & Gray, 2018). Applied to film antagonists, the theory helps explain why narratives that reposition who counts as harmed can recalibrate audience judgments even when actions remain destructive. In other words, altering the harm map (who is seen as agent, who as patient, and what counts as legitimate harm) can invert our sympathies without changing the surface plot.

Beyond harm construals, recent work links admiration for morally questionable characters to personality trait inferences and to the “dark tetrad/triad” space: observers sometimes rate heroes, antiheroes, and villains along dimensions related to Machiavellianism, narcissism, psychopathy, and sadism; these attributions, in turn, predict downstream admiration and self-similarity (Doyle et al., 2025). Although the paper focuses on evaluation patterns across character types, their findings underscore a general point for villain studies: audiences’ moral intuitions are sensitive to how characters pursue goals (means), why they claim to do so (ends), and which values they invoke to justify harm or hierarchy.

This junction between moral cognition and discursive justification is critical. Villains do not merely act; they argue. They offer accounts that recruit values language and invite moral alignment or at least comprehension. When films let antagonists voice consistent value claims, viewers may experience cognitive dissonance: they recognize a coherent value structure (e.g.,

security and tradition) even as they reject its extremization (e.g., authoritarian control). Conversely, when antagonists appeal to autonomy, stimulation, or achievement at the expense of others' welfare, audiences may admire competence while condemning callousness. This interplay suggests that a values-first coding of villain discourse can reveal recurrent motivational profiles that standard trait taxonomies or genre labels may obscure.

In sum, moral-psychological work provides two actionable insights for a values-oriented typology of villains: (i) harm mapping is central to condemnation and sympathy; and (ii) trait/goal inference is filtered by the values that characters explicitly or implicitly invoke. A framework able to capture those values with conceptual precision and cross-cultural comparability is therefore advantageous for film analysis.

Basic Human Values and Motivational Structures

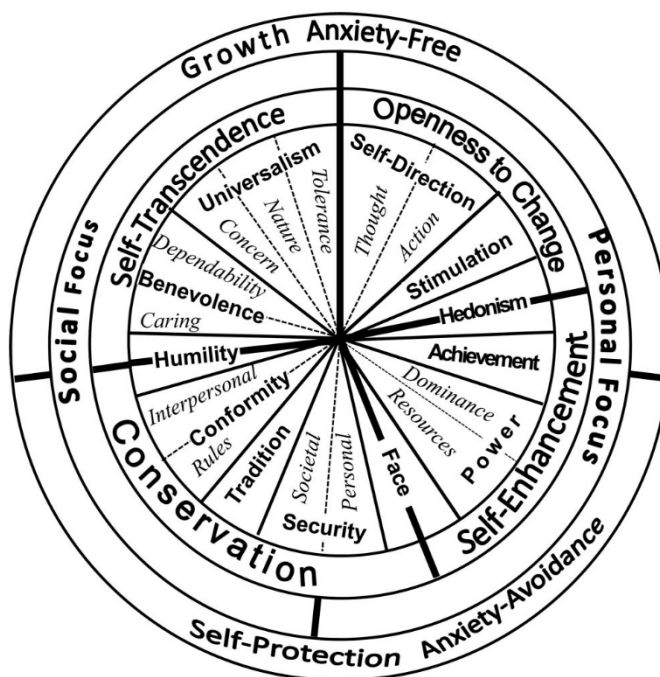
The Theory of Basic Human Values (TBHV) furnishes the needed conceptual scaffolding. In its classic formulation, Schwartz (1992) proposed that a small set of universal value types organizes human motivations along a circumplex defined by compatibilities and conflicts. The theory's refined model expands this space to 19 distinct values, improving discriminant validity and predictive scope by specifying nuanced motivational aims (Schwartz et al., 2012). Crucially, the circumplex is not just a list; its geometry expresses the likelihood

that certain values co-occur and clash, offering a principled way to anticipate trade-offs in moral reasoning and behavior.

Decades of cross-national research support the model's structure and its links to attitudes and behavior in diverse domains, from political ideology to consumer choice and environmental action (e.g., Coelho et al., 2006; Karp, 1996; Pinto et al., 2011; Torres et al., 2016). Although these literatures are not about cinema per se, their relevance is twofold. First, they demonstrate the transportability of the values framework across contexts, cultures, and measurement formats. Second, they show how values guide justifications (why agents claim to act), goal selection (what ends they prioritize), and norm invocation (which rules they cite), precisely the dimensions that villains mobilize when they defend their actions on-screen. The refined TBHV is illustrated in Figure 1.

Three features of TBHV make it especially apt for building a typology of villains. First, comparability and parsimony. By specifying a limited set of motivational aims, the model allows analysts to map rich qualitative discourse (e.g., lines of dialogue) onto a stable conceptual grid. This supports case-to-case comparison (across films and eras) without sacrificing nuance. The refined 19-value set improves discrimination among adjacent motives,

which is vital when two villains look similar on the surface but diverge in justification style (Schwartz et al., 2012).



Second, tension capture. The circumplex encodes motivational tensions that are narratively salient. Many antagonists dramatize self-enhancement vs. self-transcendence trade-offs, or openness vs. conservation tensions. Mapping a villain's discourse to the circumplex can thus make visible which tensions the film foregrounds and how it resolves them, or leaves them productively open (Schwartz, 1992; Schwartz et al., 2012).

Finally, behavioral linkage. Evidence across domains shows that values shape behavioral tendencies and policy preferences (Karp, 1996; Pinto et al., 2011; Torres et al., 2016). In character analysis, this suggests a testable bridge: if a villain's speech codes high on security, conformity, and tradition, one expects means emphasizing surveillance, hierarchy, and rule enforcement; if it codes high on stimulation and self-direction, one expects means privileging disruption, novelty, and rule-breaking. The framework therefore connects what is said (justification) with what is done (method), allowing a richer account of antagonistic agency.

Importantly, a values-based approach complements, rather than displaces, existing lenses. It sits alongside representational critiques, providing a motivational analysis of the same characters (Croley et al., 2017; Long & Long, 2024; Wagner et al., 2023). It also integrates naturally with moral-psychological models: by identifying the values invoked to legitimate harm, one can predict which audiences (given their own value profiles) will be more receptive to a villain's claims, and in which narrative contexts harm will be reframed as justified or necessary (Eden et al., 2015; Schein & Gray, 2018).

Because TBHV is cumulatively validated and measurement-friendly, it enables a mixed-methods pipeline that is increasingly common in screen studies. Qualitative coding of dialogue can be paired with inter-coder reliability metrics, followed by simple frequency/co-occurrence

analyses or even network visualizations of value clusters by character and scene. The literature on values in other applied fields offers operationalization templates that can be adapted to cinematic discourse (Caracciolo et al., 2016; Choi et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2012; Torres et al., 2016; White et al., 2017). This portability is strategic: it positions film analysis within a broader comparative science of values while preserving the specificity of cinematic form.

The Hollywood villain has diversified in form and function, oscillating between stigmatized shorthand and charismatic persuasion (Croley et al., 2017; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen, 2019; Long & Long, 2024; McClure, 2014). Audience judgments hinge on harm construals and trait/goal inferences that are often mediated by the villain's own value-laden justifications (Doyle et al., 2025; Eden et al., 2015; Schein & Gray, 2018; Yao & Yang, 2024). Against this backdrop, the Theory of Basic Human Values provides a compact, testable language for motivational profiling.

Although Schwartz's theory might help in understanding film villainy and identifying motivational tendencies, cinematic narrative complicates any static reading of values. In film, value orientations are rarely presented as stable traits; they are gradually disclosed through backstory, conflict escalation, and changing relations to the hero. This means that values in villainy often function narratively rather than dispositionally: they organize how antagonists

become legible over time, not simply what they are in psychological terms.

Indeed, while personality psychology offers a static framework for gauging moral tendencies, the cognitive complexity of cinematic reception suggests that viewers dynamically reconcile these character motivations with their own perceptions of justice and charismatic leadership (Yao & Yang, 2024). Furthermore, the interplay between moral ambiguity and character identification remains a contested area in media studies, where liking often functions as an orthogonal construct to perceived morality.

Consequently, it becomes important for scholars to move beyond traditional, affective disposition theories to account for how individual differences in responses to villainous characters can be analyzed in a way that supports a deeper understanding of responses to such complex, morally transgressive personas (Eden et al., 2015; Kjeldgaard-Christiansen et al., 2021).

Although the proposed model may not extend to address important matters such as actors' performances, *mise-en-scène*, or production, it provides an analytical bridge to examine the evolution of these characters from one-dimensional archetypes into multifaceted, empathetic figures (Wang, 2024), allowing the analysis of the impact of these multifaceted clusters on audience reception and perceptions of performance quality, for instance.

In short, Schwartz's human values theory, although cognitively oriented, provides a robust, universally validated framework to parse these narrative shifts by mapping how abstract goals, which define the end states individuals aspire to, underlie the specific behavioral justifications offered by complex antagonists, thereby enabling more nuanced categorization of these characters and a deeper understanding of character creation and audience reception. In the empirical sections that follow, the present paper therefore operationalizes a values codebook derived from the refined 19-value model (Schwartz et al., 2012) to map villains' discourse and to derive a typology that can travel across films, periods, and cultural contexts.

Although the present analysis, as discussed in the method section, centers on discourse, value expression in cinema is never purely verbal. Performance, *mise-en-scène*, framing, editing, and sound shape how a villain's value claims are perceived, intensified, or destabilized, from both cinematic and audience perspectives (Smith, 2022). The same appeal to justice, order, or freedom may be received differently depending on whether it is delivered through wounded intimacy, theatrical excess, solemn authority, or anarchic spectacle (McClure, 2014). In this sense, value coding identifies the motivational grammar of villainy, while cinematic form mediates its affective force and moral legibility. As explicated in the next section, the present research focuses on the former.

Method

This study investigates how the discourse of iconic villains in Hollywood superhero films can be interpreted through the lens of Schwartz’s Theory of Basic Human Values. To construct the corpus, we relied on a systematic yet purposive sampling criterion: the villains most highly rated by the public in terms of acting performance and dialogue quality, as reflected in IMDb’s list “SuperHero Movies Ranked: Best to Worst”, extracted on July 2024. The rationale for this criterion is twofold.

First, IMDb offers a large-scale proxy of audience reception, which is crucial for capturing villains that not only exist in scripts but also resonate as cultural icons. Second, prioritizing films with celebrated villain performances increases the likelihood of identifying discursive patterns that are rhetorically rich, consistent, and memorable. Villains who received both critical and popular recognition typically articulate their justifications with unusual clarity, making their speeches especially apt for a values-based analysis.

Following this rationale, nine Hollywood superhero films were selected, spanning from the early 1990s resurgence of Batman films to the late 2010s era of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU). All selected films feature antagonists whose portrayals were widely acclaimed for depth and complexity, even including Academy Award-winning (e.g. Joaquin Phoenix’s Arthur Fleck) or nominated (e.g., Heath Ledger’s Joker) performances. The corpus,

therefore, represents a purposeful sample of villains as “high watermarks” of cultural salience.

Table 1 summarizes the analyzed scripts.

#	Film Title	Director(s)	Year	Villain Analyzed and Actor
1	The Dark Knight	Christopher Nolan	2008	The Joker – Heath Ledger
2	Batman Returns	Tim Burton	1992	The Penguin – Danny Devito Catwoman – Michelle Pfeiffer
3	Black Panther	Ryan Coogler	2018	Killmonger – Michael B. Jordan
4	Avengers: Endgame	Anthony and Joe Russo	2019	Thanos – Josh Brolin
5	Avengers: Infinity War	Anthony and Joe Russo	2018	Thanos – Josh Brolin
6	The Dark Knight Rises	Christopher Nolan	2012	Bane – Tom Hardy
7	X-Men	Bryan Singer	2000	Magneto – Ian McKellen
8	X2: X-Men United	Bryan Singer	2003	Magneto – Ian McKellen
9	Joker	Todd Phillips	2019	Arthur Fleck / Joker – Joaquin Phoenix

Table 1: Films included in the study.

The primary data consisted of scripts and screenplays of the nine cited films, with a focus on the villains’ spoken lines. Only the discourse of the antagonists was coded, defined as (i) verbal lines delivered by the villain character (including monologues, dialogues, and confrontations); (ii) justificatory or motivational content embedded in speech (e.g., rationalizations of violence, appeals to justice, claims of order or freedom); (iii) narratively significant utterances that reveal worldview or values, excluding non-semantic interjections or purely functional lines. Stage directions, fight sequences, or non-verbal cues were excluded

from coding. However, when lines depended on visual context for interpretation, the coding protocol included annotations describing relevant visual or situational elements.

The analysis followed a theory-driven qualitative content analysis, operationalized through the following steps. First, a codebook was created based on the 19 refined basic values identified by Schwartz et al. (2012). Each value was defined with concrete semantic indicators and possible cinematic examples. The speech segment was the primary unit of analysis. Segments were defined as contiguous lines where the villain pursued a coherent argument or justification, typically a full sentence or small cluster of sentences.

For coding and analysis, two trained coders independently coded each speech segment into one or more values from the codebook. Coders were instructed to prioritize the explicit justification offered by the villain (e.g., “I’m doing this to save humanity”) rather than implicit personality traits. Agreement was assessed through Cohen’s κ , with a threshold of 0.70 considered acceptable for qualitative studies. Disagreements were resolved by discussion until consensus was reached, following Landis and Koch (1977).

Once all segments were coded, frequency counts and co-occurrence matrices were generated to identify which values were most prominent for each villain. Comparative analysis highlighted differences across villains and films, enabling the derivation of motivational

profiles (e.g., “domination pragmatism,” “sacrificial order,” “libertarian chaos”). Finally, profiles were grouped inductively into a typology of villain motivations. This typology was compared to existing scholarly categorizations of antagonists in film to highlight both convergences and novel insights.

The methodological approach combines purposive corpus selection with rigorous content analysis, grounded in a robust motivational theory. By focusing on celebrated villains from critically acclaimed Hollywood superhero films, the study isolates cases that are both rhetorically rich and culturally influential. Through systematic coding and typology construction, the method enables us to reveal how villains’ discourse aligns with basic human values, thereby providing a replicable model for future research at the intersection of film studies, psychology, and cultural analysis. Results of the research are presented next.

Results

The analysis of villains’ discourse across the films revealed three distinct motivational clusters aligned with Schwartz’s theory of human values: (1) the Ambiguous Tragedians, whose antagonism stems from trauma, marginalization, or conflicted identity; (2) the Revolutionary Calculators, who justify domination through appeals to justice, balance, or collective salvation; and (3) the Chaotic Nihilist, represented solely by Heath Ledger’s Joker, who embodies systemic collapse without ideological or personal anchors.

This typology provides a bridge between cinematic studies and motivational psychology.

Villains are not only narrative foils but also moral rhetoricians, articulating systems of value that structure audience engagement. By analyzing how their lines invoke, distort, or reject Schwartz's universal values, we can map the motivational grammars of villainy and explain both audience fascination and repulsion.

Cluster 1: Ambiguous Tragedians

The Ambiguous Tragedians, Catwoman, Penguin, and Arthur Fleck, are villains defined less by ideology than by wounded subjectivity. Their discourse oscillates between Self-Direction (autonomy, independence) and Hedonism or Stimulation, while revealing moments of longing for Security or Benevolence that are consistently thwarted. They reject Conformity and Tradition, not as ideological acts but as personal rebellions against social roles that have failed them.

Their motivational profile resonates with audience empathy. Unlike the grandiose projects of Thanos or Magneto, these villains appear as fragile subjects, whose antagonism reflects both pain and agency. Their cinematic presence is therefore double-edged: they evoke fear but also identification.

Selina Kyle's transformation into Catwoman is triggered by betrayal and marginalization. Her discourse reveals Self-Direction–Action and Hedonism, as in the line “Life's a bitch, now

so am I.” (Burton, 1992, p. 41). Here, Selina embraces autonomy through inversion of victimhood. Her rejection of Conformity and Tradition is evident in her disdain for female passivity: “You make it so easy, don’t you? Always waiting for some Batman to save you.” (Burton, 1992, p. 33). This line critiques gendered dependence and affirms independence. At the same time, Catwoman exhibits ambivalence toward Security and Benevolence, as when she admits to Bruce Wayne: “Bruce, I would love to live with you in your castle forever... just like in a fairy tale.” (Burton, 1992, p. 80). The tension between radical autonomy and yearning for intimacy positions Catwoman as a liminal figure, part revolutionary, part tragic lover.

From a values perspective, she dramatizes the conflict between Openness to Change and Conservation, embodying the struggle of characters torn between freedom and belonging. Narratively, Catwoman complicates the hero-villain divide by turning antagonism into a struggle over autonomy, gendered vulnerability, and failed intimacy. For audiences, this produces unstable alignment: her violence remains threatening, but her rebellion also appears as a critique of the norms that first rendered her powerless.

Oswald Cobblepot’s discourse, also in *Batman Returns* (1992), is marked by grotesque theatricality and wounded exclusion. His rejection of conformity is absolute: “I am not a human being! I am an animal!” (Burton, 1992, p. 66). By embracing monstrosity, Penguin does not

simply reject social norms; he turns abjection into performance, transforming marginality into a weaponized identity. His boast, “I played this stinking city like a harp from hell!” (Burton, 1992, p. 61) foregrounds Power–Manipulation and Achievement, while his sardonic humor (“I’ll murder you momentarily. But first, I need a cold drink.” (Burton, 1992, p. 82) inflects cruelty with Hedonism, making domination feel playful rather than merely punitive.

Yet this grotesque self-stylization is repeatedly interrupted by fractured longings for Security and Benevolence, as in “I want to find my parents. I want to learn my human name.” (Burton, 1992, p. 15). These moments reveal that Penguin’s violence is not grounded in pure sadism, but in a damaged desire for recognition, kinship, and symbolic restoration. Penguin thus turns social abjection into theatrical domination, revealing how exclusion can be narratively reworked into grotesque fantasies of revenge.

From the narrative perspective, Penguin transforms villainy into the spectacle of wounded monstrosity, making exclusion itself a source of threat. The character suggests how abandonment and social abjection can be converted into fantasies of revenge and domination. He therefore functions as a villain whose threat emerges from social expulsion as much as from criminal ambition, shifting antagonism from simple evil toward the spectacle of wounded monstrosity.

For audiences, this creates unstable alignment: viewers are invited to recoil from his grotesquery and brutality while also glimpsing the vulnerable subject beneath the theatrical excess. Ideologically, Penguin dramatizes how exclusion and ridicule can be converted into fantasies of revenge, making villainy legible as both a distortion of belonging and a protest against the norms that denied it.

Finally, Arthur Fleck differs from Ledger's Joker in that his discourse foregrounds suffering, humiliation, and rejection rather than philosophical disruption. Lines such as "All I have are negative thoughts" (Phillips, 2019, p. 41) reveal diminished Security and Benevolence, coupled with an acute need for recognition and worth, expressed through Achievement and a fragile search for social visibility. Arthur oscillates between Self-Direction, especially in his effort to author an identity through comedy and public self-expression, and a resentful form of Hedonism, in which violence becomes less a coherent ideology than a fleeting experience of release and control. Unlike Penguin, whose grotesque is externalized and theatrically performed, Arthur embodies alienation as inward collapse, gradually converting misrecognition into rage.

His transformation into the Joker is therefore not a sudden leap into chaos, but a narratively accumulated descent produced by humiliation, failed intimacy, and social

abandonment. Narratively, Arthur functions as a figure through whom the film displaces villainy into the domain of psychic fracture and institutional neglect, making antagonism inseparable from social suffering. For audiences, this generates a particularly uneasy alignment: viewers may recognize the emotional logic of his pain even as they recoil from the violence through which he converts visibility into power. Ideologically, Arthur dramatizes the danger of a social order that produces subjects who can imagine recognition only through spectacle, resentment, and destruction, making him emblematic of villainy born not from grand ideology, but from failed belonging.

As a cluster, the Ambiguous Tragedians shift villainy away from pure ideological opposition and toward wounded subjectivity. Their antagonism does not begin in abstract doctrines of domination, but in scenes of humiliation, abandonment, and failed recognition. Catwoman's "Life's a bitch, now so am I" (Burton, 1992, p. 41) condenses this logic perfectly: the line is not simply an embrace of aggression, but an inversion of victimhood into autonomy, a moment in which wounded vulnerability is re-scripted as Self-Direction through defiant performance. Yet this posture is immediately complicated by her yearning for intimacy in "Bruce, I would love to live with you in your castle forever... just like in a fairy tale," (Burton, 1992, p. 80) revealing how the desire for freedom coexists with an equally powerful longing for Security and Benevolence.

Penguin radicalizes the same instability from another angle. His declaration “I am not a human being! I am an animal!” (Burton, 1992, p. 66) turns exclusion into identity, while “I played this stinking city like a harp from hell!” (Burton, 1992, p. 61) transforms humiliation into theatrical domination. Even so, his plea, “I want to find my parents. I want to learn my human name” (Burton, 1992, p. 15) exposes the damaged wish for kinship and symbolic restoration beneath the grotesque performance. Arthur Fleck, in turn, internalizes the same dynamic rather than externalizing it. When he says “All I have are negative thoughts” (Phillips, 2019, p. 41) the line registers not ideological conviction but psychic collapse, making villainy legible as the product of misrecognition, loneliness, and failed belonging.

Across these figures, audiences are not asked simply to condemn evil; they are asked to confront the emotional logic through which violence emerges from rejection, gendered vulnerability, ridicule, and social invisibility. This is why the cluster generates unstable alignment: Catwoman invites identification through wounded autonomy, Penguin through grotesque abandonment, and Arthur through humiliating social pain. Ideologically, the Ambiguous Tragedians reveal how modern cinema can narratively transform exclusion into violent self-assertion, staging villainy as the tragic outcome of fragile negotiations between autonomy, pleasure, intimacy, and the unmet need to belong.

Film theory has long noted the sympathetic villain as a device for audience identification (Eden et al., 2015). The ambiguous cluster exemplifies this device: audiences may fear Catwoman's vengeance, laugh at Penguin's grotesque sadism, or pity Arthur's descent. Yet each remains tethered to universal human struggles, identity, intimacy, recognition- that render them tragic rather than purely monstrous.

Cluster 2: Revolutionary Calculators

The Revolutionary Calculators, Killmonger, Thanos, Bane, and Magneto, articulate projects of social or cosmic transformation. Unlike the Ambiguous Tragedians, their discourse is ideological: they invoke Universalism and Security while grounding their legitimacy in Power, Achievement, and Self-Direction. Their villainy is not personal grievance alone but a mission to reorder the world. This cluster dramatizes the ambivalence of justice: villains appeal to fairness, balance, or liberation, but instrumentalize these values through domination and violence.

Killmonger fuses Pride, Trauma, and Revolutionary Justice. His claim to the throne is both personal and collective: "I want the throne. You're all sitting up here comfortably. Must feel good. There's about two billion people all over the world that look like us, but their lives are a lot harder." (Coogler, 2018, p. 78). Here, Power converges with Universalism—Justice, allowing the character to articulate domination through the language of historical repair. His

final line, “Bury me in the ocean with my ancestors who jumped from ships, ’cause they knew death was better than bondage” (Coogler, 2018, p. 117), intensifies this configuration by framing defiance as Self-Direction–Moral and linking political violence to ancestral memory, dignity, and refusal of subjugation.

Narratively, Killmonger functions not merely as an enemy to be defeated, but as an ideological rival who exposes the moral insufficiency of Wakanda’s isolationism and forces the hero into a confrontation with the global consequences of Black suffering. For audiences, this produces a particularly unstable alignment: viewers may reject his brutality while still recognizing the legitimacy of the grievance that animates it. Ideologically, the character dramatizes one of the central tensions of superhero cinema: the conversion of emancipatory rhetoric into sovereign domination, revealing how justice can be mobilized through the very logic of power it seeks to overcome.

Thanos exemplifies the technocratic tyrant. His justification of genocide reveals an authoritarian reinterpretation of Universalism: “The universe is finite, its resources finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction” (Russo & Russo, 2018, p. 45). This line frames Universalism–Nature and Security–Societal as apparent motives, but the proposed solution of mass extermination recasts these values through Power–Control, turning

preservation into domination. His statement, “The hardest choices require the strongest wills” (Russo & Russo, 2018, p. 69) further moralizes cruelty by presenting violence as Self-Direction–Moral, as though destructive action were an expression of ethical courage rather than coercive absolutism. Thanos, in short, embodies the ideological fantasy that collective survival can be secured through unilateral violence, exposing the authoritarian core hidden within the rhetoric of necessity.

The villain rejects Hedonism entirely; his discourse is austere, sacrificial, and rhetorically stripped of personal pleasure, which helps sustain the image of a villain who appears selfless even while pursuing total control. Narratively, he functions as more than a powerful antagonist: he is a test case for the genre’s recurring fascination with villains who frame authoritarian violence as rational necessity. This gives the audience a paradoxical position from which to engage him. Viewers are invited to recognize the abstract problem he names (universal collapse) while being confronted with the horrifying scale of his solution. Ideologically, Thanos embodies the fantasy of technocratic sovereignty: the belief that complex collective problems can be solved through unilateral, supposedly impartial violence. His motivational profile therefore shows not only that universalist values can be weaponized, but that superhero cinema repeatedly stages the danger of moral rhetoric detached from democratic restraint.

Bane's rhetoric mirrors revolutionary populism: "We take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations who have kept you down with myths of opportunity" (Nolan, 2012, p. 110). Here, Universalism–Justice and Security–Societal are articulated through a discourse of collective redress, yet they are inseparable from Power–Dominance, since emancipation is framed from the outset as seizure, purging, and punitive reversal. His self-image as destiny's agent ("I am Gotham's reckoning" (Nolan, 2012, p. 75)) intensifies this configuration by casting violence as Self-Direction–Mission, transforming political intervention into a quasi-prophetic duty.

From the narrative perspective, Bane functions not simply as a physical threat to Batman, but as an ideological antagonist who weaponizes the language of liberation in order to dismantle civic order and replace it with coercive spectacle. For audiences, this produces a complex alignment: his critique of inequality and elite hypocrisy may initially resonate, but that recognition is gradually displaced by the theatrical brutality of his methods. Ideologically, Bane embodies a recurring trope in superhero cinema: the revolutionary whose rhetoric of justice collapses into authoritarian punishment. His value pattern thus reveals how collective grievances can be cinematically reframed as instruments of domination, turning the promise of political emancipation into an apocalyptic fantasy of cleansing and control.

Magneto is perhaps the most philosophically nuanced figure in this cluster. His line, “We are the future, Charles, not them. They no longer matter” (Singer, 2003, p. 49) combines Power–Supremacy with Security–Identity, expressing not only a will to prevail but also a defensive vision of collective survival. At the same time, his reflection “All those of the human persuasion will be banished, while mutants are welcomed” (Singer, 2000, p. 79) introduces Self-Direction–Thought and Universalism–Comprehension, suggesting a character who does not merely react to persecution but interprets history, power, and mutation through a broader philosophical lens. Magneto, therefore, dramatizes the moment at which protective justice hardens into exclusionary sovereignty, forcing the audience to confront the limits of coexistence as a moral ideal.

Magneto is not constructed as a sadist but as a strategist whose discourse turns trauma and minority protection into a justification for domination. Narratively, he serves as one of the clearest ideological rivals to the heroic worldview, since he challenges Xavier, and by extension the audience, to confront whether coexistence remains credible under conditions of repeated violence and exclusion. This creates a particularly strong form of audience ambivalence: viewers may understand the protective impulse behind his position even as they reject its supremacist endpoint. Ideologically, Magneto dramatizes the tension between justice for a threatened group and justice as universal equality, revealing how emancipatory claims can

harden into exclusionary sovereignty when survival is imagined as incompatible with coexistence.

Narratively, the Revolutionary Calculators function as more than obstacles to heroic action: they serve as ideological rivals who force heroes to confront the limits of liberal, reformist, or restorative justice. Their discourse is powerful precisely because it begins from grievances that are legible, and often morally serious, before converting them into projects of domination. Killmonger's accusation, "There's about two billion people all over the world that look like us, but their lives are a lot harder" (Coogler, 2018, p. 78) frames antagonism through the language of historical abandonment and racial injustice, making his claim to power sound like a demand for redress rather than mere conquest. Thanos performs a similar maneuver on a cosmic scale when he declares that "The universe is finite, its resources finite... It needs correction" (Russo & Russo, 2018, p. 45), recoding genocide as necessity and transforming scarcity into a rationale for technocratic sovereignty.

Bane's call to "take Gotham from the corrupt! The rich! The oppressors of generations" (Nolan, 2012, p. 110) mobilizes the rhetoric of class revolt and collective liberation, yet his promise of justice quickly becomes punitive spectacle and authoritarian cleansing. Magneto, perhaps the most philosophically persuasive of the group, condenses minority trauma and

supremacist logic in “We are the future, Charles, not them. They no longer matter” (Singer, 2000, p. 79), forcing both hero and audience to confront the ethical instability of survival claims when protection hardens into exclusion. Across these figures, audience alignment becomes necessarily conflicted: viewers may recognize the legitimacy of the grievances, colonial violence, structural inequality, persecution, and collective vulnerability, while rejecting the coercive, sovereign, or exterminatory means through which these villains seek repair. Ideologically, the cluster dramatizes one of superhero cinema’s most persistent tensions: the way emancipatory discourse can be appropriated by authoritarian logic, so that justice, security, and liberation become inseparable from domination, punishment, and control.

The Revolutionary Calculators cluster functions not simply as obstacles, but as ideological rivals who force heroes to confront the limits of liberal order, restorative justice, or coexistence. For audiences, they create troubled admiration: their grievances may appear legible or even persuasive, while their methods reveal the authoritarian logic embedded in their projects.

The cluster embodies villains whose projects resonate with moral plausibility. As Schein and Gray (2018) note in moral psychology, antagonists who invoke fairness may compel audiences to confront uncomfortable truths. Killmonger evokes postcolonial justice, Thanos

environmental scarcity, Bane socioeconomic inequality, Magneto minority survival. Yet each distorts values into authoritarianism. Their motivational profiles illustrate how Universalism and Security can be co-opted by Power. From Schwartz's perspective, this cluster dramatizes value tensions: self-transcendence claimed in rhetoric but subordinated to self-enhancement in practice.

Cluster 3: The Joker, the Chaotic Nihilist

Heath Ledger's Joker (*The Dark Knight*, 2008) stands apart from all other villains in our corpus. Whereas the Ambiguous Tragedians oscillate between wounded needs for Security and Self-Direction, and the Revolutionary Calculators strategically combine Power and distorted forms of Universalism, Ledger's Joker refuses any anchoring in the Conservation or Self-Transcendence quadrants of Schwartz's model. His discourse systematically undermines Security, Conformity, Tradition, and Benevolence, values that typically stabilize moral order.

Instead, his speeches inhabit the radical pole of Openness to Change, especially Stimulation and Self-Direction–Thought. In the line “Introduce a little anarchy. Upset the established order, and everything becomes chaos. I’m an agent of chaos” (Nolan, 2008, p. 115), we observe an unrestrained celebration of novelty, disruption, and risk (Stimulation) combined with an assertion of intellectual superiority (Self-Direction – Thought). Importantly, this invocation is not instrumental, he does not seek to replace order with an alternative ideology, as

Bane or Thanos do. His discourse collapses into pure negation, dramatizing what Schwartz would describe as the destructive maximization of one motivational pole at the expense of its opposite.

This value pattern is reinforced by the film's formal treatment of the character: Ledger's unstable vocal delivery, smeared makeup, abrupt shifts in tone, and erratic bodily performance prevent Joker's discourse from stabilizing into a coherent moral project. In this sense, the film does not merely represent chaos through dialogue; it performs chaos aurally and visually.

Schwartz's theory emphasizes that values are structured by motivational oppositions. One axis contrasts Openness to Change (novelty, freedom, stimulation) with Conservation (order, tradition, security). Ledger's Joker personifies the extreme of this tension: he embodies Openness while annihilating Conservation. This is evident in his mocking of Gotham's reliance on rules: "You know what I noticed? Nobody panics when things go according to plan. Even if the plan is horrifying. If tomorrow I tell the press that a gangbanger will get shot, or a truckload of soldiers will be blown up, nobody panics... But when I say that one little old mayor will die, then everyone loses their minds!" (Nolan, 2008, p. 114).

Here, Joker ridicules the security-oriented predictability that sustains social order. His discourse dismantles the psychological need for stability that Schwartz identifies as central to

Conservation. By making horror itself predictable, he redefines panic as a byproduct of broken expectations rather than moral outrage.

While Joker rejects Conservation, he also engages with Self-Enhancement values, but in an unusual way. Unlike Killmonger or Magneto, who pursue Power and Achievement to realize ideological projects, Joker treats domination as theatrical performance. His declaration: “I’m not a monster. I’m just ahead of the curve” (Nolan, 2008, p. 92) embodies Achievement (superiority, recognition) but detached from any communal goal. His pursuit of Power is not to secure resources or stability but to expose hypocrisy, to “play” with Gotham’s heroes and institutions. This makes his motivational profile unique: Self-Enhancement decoupled from social utility or self-transcendence.

Equally striking is Joker’s total absence of Self-Transcendence. Values such as Benevolence and Universalism, which anchor concern for others, are not only absent but inverted. His actions target random victims, demonstrating the arbitrariness of harm. By refusing to recognize “patients” of harm (in Gray’s dyadic model), Joker dramatizes the collapse of moral dyads: no true victims, no true perpetrators, only chaos.

This absence distinguishes him from Arthur Fleck (who retains a longing for recognition and belonging) and from Thanos (who invokes distorted Universalism). Ledger’s Joker offers

no justification of justice, equality, or protection. His motivational structure is a void, highlighting what Schwartz's model does not usually account for: motivational collapse rather than balance.

In the Schwartz circumplex, balance arises from the dynamic coexistence of opposing values. Ledger's Joker illustrates what happens when this system is stretched to its breaking point. He embodies the absolute maximization of Openness to Change, rejecting Conservation completely, while trivializing both Self-Enhancement and Self-Transcendence. Thus, if most villains can be mapped as clusters within the circular continuum, Joker exists on its outer edge, perhaps even outside of it, representing a limit case of value orientation, where motivational coherence collapses into nihilistic performance.

Ledger's Joker challenges both film studies and psychological theory. From a cinematic standpoint, he resonates because he embodies the terror of pure anarchy, a figure who cannot be reasoned with or reabsorbed into social order. From a Schwartzian standpoint, he illustrates that values theory explains not only motivations but also their absence: villains may fascinate precisely because they expose the consequences of imbalanced or annihilated value structures.

In this sense, Joker functions as a theoretical stress test for Schwartz's model. He shows how the absence of Conservation and Self-Transcendence, combined with unrestrained

Openness, yields a motivational void. His cluster of one dramatizes the possibility of values collapsing into chaotic nihilism, a state where discourse no longer justifies action but ridicules justification itself.

Unlike the other clusters, Joker's narrative function is not to embody an alternative moral project, but to destabilize the very frameworks through which moral projects can be judged. This helps explain his extraordinary audience fascination: viewers are not asked to sympathize with a grievance or admire a coherent ideology, but to confront the spectacle of intelligibility collapsing from within. Ideologically, the character stages a fantasy of pure anti-order, exposing how fragile the institutions of law, planning, and civic reason appear once the logic of justification itself is ridiculed.

As a cluster of one, the Chaotic Nihilist marks the point at which villainy ceases to offer a wounded moral claim or an authoritarian political project and instead becomes a sustained assault on intelligibility itself. Narratively, Joker functions not merely as an antagonist to the hero, but as a force that destabilizes the ethical, institutional, and symbolic frameworks through which conflict is usually organized. For audiences, this produces a distinctive form of fascination: rather than inviting sympathy through grievance or troubled admiration through ideological conviction, he compels attention through unpredictability, theatrical excess, and the

collapse of coherent justification. Ideologically, the character stages the fantasy of anti-order in its purest form, exposing how fragile social norms, civic institutions, and moral reasoning become when confronted with a villain who refuses not only rules, but the very logic of value-based persuasion itself.

By integrating Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values with cinematic discourse, we have demonstrated how villains can be systematically differentiated into motivational clusters. The findings underscore the potential of value theory for film analysis: it provides both a structured vocabulary and a lens to interpret the moral fascination of antagonists.

In Hollywood superhero films, villains embody not only narrative conflict but also philosophical debates about order, justice, freedom, and chaos. Ledger's Joker reminds us that sometimes the most compelling villain is the one who refuses all values, forcing audiences to confront the abyss at the heart of moral systems.

In sum, the analysis of villains' discourse across nine landmark superhero films reveals a typology organized around three clusters: (i) the Ambiguous Tragedians, whose fractured identities dramatize the tension between autonomy and marginalization; (ii) the Revolutionary Calculators, who mobilize distorted appeals to justice and order to legitimize domination; and (iii) the Chaotic Nihilist, embodied solely by Heath Ledger's Joker, who collapses the value

system itself into anarchic spectacle. By mapping their speeches onto Schwartz's theory of basic human values, we demonstrate how antagonists articulate distinct motivational grammars that explain both their narrative power and their cultural fascination. Together, these findings show that villains function not only as narrative obstacles but as moral rhetoricians who expose the possibilities, distortions, and even the collapse of universal values in popular cinema.

Conclusions

The present study sought to map the motivational grammars of iconic villains in Hollywood superhero films by applying Schwartz's Theory of Basic Human Values to their discourse. Through the analysis of eight villains widely acclaimed by audiences and critics, we derived three clusters, Ambiguous Tragedians, Revolutionary Calculators, and the Chaotic Nihilist, each representing distinct ways of mobilizing, distorting, or collapsing universal values. This typology demonstrated that villains are more than narrative antagonists: they are moral rhetoricians, characters whose words expose not only the ethical tensions of their fictional worlds but also the broader dilemmas of justice, order, identity, and chaos in contemporary culture.

This research makes three contributions to film and communication studies. First, it shows the analytical potential of value theory for cultural products. By operationalizing Schwartz's framework, we were able to identify patterns of motivation and justification that cut

across characters and films, moving beyond ad hoc descriptions of “evil” or “madness.” Second, the study underscores the heterogeneity of villainy, providing a typology that accounts for empathy-driven figures (Ambiguous Tragedians), ideologically coherent antagonists (Revolutionary Calculators), and anarchic outliers (Chaotic Nihilist). Third, it highlights the interdisciplinary bridge between psychology and cinema: value theory offers a vocabulary for understanding audience engagement, while film narratives provide a laboratory for testing the boundaries of motivational models.

The present research has two main limitations. First, the study exclusively uses Hollywood superhero films. This focus was intentional, as these films offer globally recognized villains and easily accessible scripts, and their characters are often celebrated by audiences for the richness of their dialogue. However, by restricting analysis to Hollywood, the study inevitably universalizes one cultural lens. Schwartz’s theory is designed to be cross-cultural, and yet our application has been confined to a single cinematic tradition. This limitation suggests a clear avenue for future research: cross-cultural comparisons of villainy. A comparative agenda would not only enrich film studies but also test the universality of Schwartz’s framework in cultural products.

A second limitation is methodological. We chose to analyze villain speech in scripts, as

verbal justification lends itself well to value coding. Yet cinematic villainy is multimodal: gestures, gender, costuming, *mise-en-scène*, and music all contribute to the construction of antagonism. By focusing exclusively on words, our study inevitably underrepresents the richness of villain characterization. This limitation points to an agenda for multimodal analysis. Future studies should combine discourse with semiotic and audiovisual frameworks.

It is important to note, though, that the proposed cognitive-based model provides an analytical bridge to examine the evolution of these characters from one-dimensional archetypes into multifaceted, empathetic figures, allowing future research to deepen the analysis of the impacts of these multifaceted clusters on audience reception and performance perception, for instance.

At the same time, applying Schwartz's theory to cinematic characters requires caution. Film characters are not empirical persons but complex aesthetic and narrative constructions, often designed to condense contradictions, exaggerate motivations, or embody genre-specific functions. For this reason, the present study does not treat values as stable psychological essences of characters, but as interpretive patterns in the ways films script, organize, and dramatize antagonistic justifications. Further research might address these issues.

Hollywood's most memorable antagonists dramatize not only narrative conflict but also

value tensions at the heart of human societies. The Ambiguous Tragedians evoke empathy through wounded autonomy; the Revolutionary Calculators dramatize justice distorted into domination; the Chaotic Nihilist reveals the abyss of values undone. Yet these are only the first contours of a much larger map. With cross-cultural, multimodal, audience-centered, and computational approaches, future research can expand this typology into a global theory of villainy, one that accounts for how societies imagine, fear, and even admire those who stand against heroes. By turning villains into mirrors of human values, we not only enrich film theory but also deepen our understanding of how narratives negotiate morality itself.

Editor's Note: The following highly relevant works have been added for the author's consideration: Santana Mejía (2017), which applies Schwartz-based value analysis to the Joker and character identification; Martin and Kapoor (2024), which examines moral judgments of superhero and supervillain transgressions; and two CINEJ studies of Joker (2019), Uysal (2023) and Bezerra and Rathbun (2025), which are directly relevant to the discussion of Arthur Fleck/Joker, ideology, and audience interpretation.

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