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MAJA TABEA JERRENTRUP
University of Applied Sciences Landshut

I'm bad: The fascination of embodying the evil in a virtual world

ABSTRACT

Drawing on in-depth interviews, as well as digital and real-life participant observation, this article deals with the question of why many people are eager to embody something evil in the context of staged, digital photography – that is, to depict evil creatures and/or evil deeds. After looking at the general fascination for the evil and the way it is staged, the moment of embodiment is considered, a process of specific importance in times of digitalization: during the embodiment, the model can try out the evil quasi as a test without consequence and is able to physically express negative or socially undesired feelings such as not fitting in, disgust or anger and feel empowered while doing so. Furthermore, the resulting photographs offer the possibility to shape and form the evil and thus, to subject it to art, to aestheticize it and to make it presentable and manageable.

KEYWORDS

embodiment
staging
ambiguity
emotion management
digitalization
social media
photography

1. APPROACHING THE EMBODIED EVIL

'I want to be something evil' – this wish is expressed time and again by amateur models from the scene of staged photography. In this scene, models, photographers, make-up artists and stylists usually work for free, intrinsically motivated by the resulting photographs and their online presentation, but also by the event of the photo shoot itself. Based on in-depth interviews, this article explores the question of why people do not just want to treat the

subject of the evil that has always exerted fascination on people but even go one step further and want to embody something evil themselves. This aspect links virtuality and physical presence.

Acknowledging some kind of evil is a human universal and as shown by various sources, and 'in virtually every human culture, there has existed some word for "evil"' (Waller 2007: 10), which underlines the universal character. Yet, the term denotes quite different properties. Some are connected to ethics, such as 'immoral' or 'unrighteous', some to distastefulness, to the unaccepted or deviant, some to threat, to terror, anger, creepiness, melancholy and grief – as shown by Frey and Oberhänsli-Widmer, 'a multitude of aspects are united in the term, from evil to the imperfect, the negative and the terrible, to sin and guilt' (2012: VI). Consequently, there is also a huge variety of approaches to the evil.

In this work, the author takes an interdisciplinary perspective based on interpretative cultural anthropology, which uses a semiotic concept of culture (see Geertz 1987: 9): culture as a net of meanings. Human actions and products are seen 'as a kind of text that invites interpretation' (Holbrook and Hirschman 1993: 1), even if of course cultural homogeneity and statics should not be assumed.

1.1 An attempt at defining evil

Different disciplines have dealt with the evil, among them psychology, philosophy, theology, sociology and cultural anthropology, but at the same time, it is an everyday occurrence we read about, see on television news or witness ourselves (see Covington 2017: 1). Yet, it can also be seen as an antiquated concept – 'it is a relic heavy with archaic baggage' writes James E. Waller (2007: 12) referring to the associated notion of sin and proceeds pointing out that a precise scientific definition of the evil is often avoided, as it may appear too judgemental and moralistic and opposed to the principle of relativism that is especially important in cultural anthropology.

Thus, the focus is often on (individual) experience. Here, the evil can be understood 'as an uncanny experience of discomfort or anxiety […]. Evil is an experience of dread', writes Fred Alford (1997: 2) and refers to Paul Ricoeur's view of evil as dread ([1967] 1986). However, the focus can also be placed on the acting person. Intentionality plays the central role here (Zimbardo 2008: 22), and whenever the evil 'can be traced back to human actions and intentions […], the question of guilt can also be raised' (Frey and Oberhänsli-Widmer 2012: VI). Here, we see a distinction between the bad on the one hand, which interferes with life, which is destructive, without anyone being accountable for it and the evil on the other, which 'also entails choice' (Covington 2017: 4).

The social psychologist Philip Zimbardo starts his remarks on the evil by looking at M. C. Escher's graphic that – depending on one's point of view – can both show white angels flying about the dark heavens or black demons inhabiting the white space of hell. Zimbardo states three psychological truths emerging from the image:

> First, the world is filled with both good and evil – was, is, will always be. Second, the barrier between good and evil is permeable and nebulous. And third, it is possible for angels to become devils and, perhaps more difficult to conceive, for devils to become angels.
>
> (Zimbardo 2008: 11)

The tendency to conceive of good and evil as essential opposites facilitates pigeonholing and reduces one's own responsibility for evil in the world. In contrast to the preceding stands the conception of good and evil as possibilities for each of us, shaped by education, learning and our own choices in either direction, and may vary depending on the situation. For the present topic, it is important to keep in mind the permeability of the concepts of 'evil' and 'good', as well as the more or less conscious decision for or against the evil.

But where does evil come from? Some particularly well-known positions will be very briefly discussed. The Bible explains that original sin brought evil into the world. If God is omnipotent, however, he has accepted or even created evil himself, which leads to the theodicy problem. The seventeenth-century philosopher Thomas Hobbes believed that man is naturally evil and bent on harming others, while Jean-Jacques Rousseau, somewhat later, believed that man is actually good, and only becomes evil through the external influences of society. In classical psychoanalytic thought, the root of evil is described as the death drive or Thanatos, which serves to reconcile with the inevitable, death. It also includes the desire for aggression, destruction and cruelty. In his article 'Civilization and its discontents' (1929), Sigmund Freud sees narcissism as innate aggression towards the other, be it an individual or a group. In behaviourism, the focus lies on (social) environment, education and culture. For intercultural psychologists and cultural anthropologists, the problem of evaluation arises, which contradicts the principle of relativism – good and evil can accordingly only be described from the emic perspective. Based on this anthropological perspective, the article assumes that something evil is part of the *conditio humana* and that the study of popular and folklorist phenomena can help to better understand individuals and their cultures (see Gottlieb 1991: 40).

1.2 Fascination for the evil

If one looks at stories and fairy tales from different parts of the world and from age-old traditions up to postmodern times, they are almost always about the struggle of good against evil. The hunger for such stories even seems to be growing, as B. J. Bushman et al. noted with regard to films in which more and more violence and evil has been seen since 1950 (see Bushman et al. 2013). Already, if one looks at the zombie motif, it can be seen that they 'infected popular culture, however, now contribute an estimated $5 billion to the world economy per annum' (Platts 2013: n.pag.). However, even if one assumes that humans have a natural inclination (also) to evil, this does not explain the fascination that evil exerts and that is ever present in the photographs discussed in this article. Various explanations have been given for this fascination and it will go far beyond the scope of this article to look at all of them. Several interpretations that fit the statements from the interviews in this study are presented in the following.

Frequently, the evil is linked to the addressing of individual and social anxieties (see Dendle 2007: 45), including the often frightening fascination with the supernatural: 'What fascinates us about Satan is the way he expresses qualities that go beyond what we ordinarily recognize as human […] Evil, then, at its worst, seems to involve the supernatural' (Pagels 1995: xvii) such as the evil eye known in various cultures (Thomsen 1992: 19). Since it is inexplicable and irrational, it arouses our special interest (see Kruhöffer 2001: 4). At

the same time, evil is also a way to stabilize society by portraying the foreign, the other, as an enemy image – it is a way to 'portray subversive and destabilising subjects in a given society', to present them as deviant others whose behaviour and actions are 'regarded as the epitome of moral and social ills and corruption in society' (Subero 2016: 1). This includes the transgression of taboos regarding death, sexuality and religion respectively sacrilegious elements.

A different approach can be seen in the work on the 'sad film paradox', which – as its name suggests – is more concerned with the fascination for the sad but is nevertheless also applicable to the evil. The term was coined in the 1990s by Mary Beth Oliver, who wanted to explain why mentally healthy people enjoy sad movies. One hypothesis was catharsis, the feeling of purification after having gone through an emotionally challenging process. But as there is rather ambiguous empirical evidence of catharsis, the approach is not among the most favoured today (Vogel and Gleich 2008: 38). Another approach, known as 'terror management theory' assumes, that such media products enable the eventually necessary preoccupation with sad or frightening aspects in life from a safe distance. Thus, they convey to the recipients something that they consider important and that consequently must be interesting or even attractive, since the recipients know (unconsciously) that they should be prepared for such aspects in life. One more explanation looks at meta-emotions, which are understood as 'metaresponses or responses *to* emotional reactions' (original emphasis, Mayer and Gaschke 1988: 318). The direct emotion is for example sadness and fear, thus having a negative connotation, yet is perceived as positive on the meta-level: "It is nice to be sad and fearful", one can indulge in melancholy. Social desirability can also be linked to this phenomenon; individuals feel a sense of satisfaction when they experience themselves as empathic, as this would be socially desirable.

Another approach that may be of particular interest to this study examines the phenomenon in the opposite way, as chance for identification: 'Each individual holds a concept like evil in a unique way', yet, 'all have experienced terrible loss and a terrible desire to hurt, dominate, and control' (Alford 1997: 148). Consequently, the evil as a *conditio humana* connects us and allows us to experience this connection to others.

So, there are numerous reasons for the fascination of evil, but they mostly refer to the reception or experience of evil, not to the temporary embodying in the scene of staged photography that takes place without apparent benefit.

1.3 Embodiment as part of the image-making process

The relationship of humans to their bodies has also been frequently addressed in various sciences, and especially in the last decades, against the backdrop of increased virtuality, it has become a centre of interest in various scientific contexts (see van Wolputte 2004: 251). A key remark is that 'the body is not viewed as an object, entity, or vessel for the self, but as an active and mutating form that permits and restricts particular modes of being-in-the-world' (Gillies et al. 2004: 100) – even though the body is seen not necessarily as an entity but also in the context of fragmentation and vulnerability (see van Wolputte 2004: 262). The body is able to express and interact but at the same time is naturally limited in doing so. These limits can be overcome in staged photography through costuming, make-up and retouching respectively post-production.

Figure 1: Hybrid creatures seem creepy, but at the same time fascinating. Model: Nidolli. Photographer: Jooney.

Following Thomas Csordas, embodiment refers to lived experience that therefore can include the experience of evil as 'being out of control' (see Csordas 1994: 171–76). In staged photography, however, a safe space is offered to give expression to this uncontrolled, dreadful and eventually irrational in a rather controlled way: the shoot is usually prepared for a while, the team assembles props and costumes and plans the look of the image, mostly taking into account the opinions and ideas of everyone involved.

During the shoot itself, the acting performance is important, but unlike an actor, the model at best plays sequences or moves from one pose to another. All the more these very poses and facial expressions must condense the evil. Hence the body and the situation of the photo shoot make it possible to get in touch with evil in a unique way which may be of specific importance in times that often leave us communicate primarily in a virtual way. However, this should not hide the fact that digital retouching usually adds to the final picture. In this process, the body can be changed and evil, just as beautiful aspects enhanced.

Looking more closely at the digital world, there are some more facets to explore. Donna Haraway's epochal work 'A cyborg manifesto' (1991) may be considered as a starting point, in which she describes the overcoming of traditional dualisms like animal–human, organism–machine, man–woman. In our context, as will be shown later, we may add: good–evil. While the term 'cyborg' is not that much used in popular media, the term 'avatar', derived from the Sanskrit term 'coming down' and usually referring to embodiments of Gods, is quite common and denotes an artificial creation in the virtual world that can be an icon, a three-dimensional-figure, a human, an animal or a purely fantastic creature. However, it had been noted that the idea of incorporeality and immateriality in cyberspace has not been fully realized (Lackner 2014). In staged photography, the body may be virtual – clearly staged and retouched – but at the same time still refers to something real due to photography's indexicality.

In this context it is important to consider the connection of identity and photography. Photography has been associated with identity from its beginnings (see Barthes 1990: 89). The link between identity and social media and, particularly, the presentation of photography on social media is also often a focus in scholarly literature (see Gündüz 2017; Vincent 2021) and has been described as a discursive process (see Jakaza 2022: 3), in which users have the chance to work on and communicate their identity (see Dyer 2020: 28).

2. METHOD

The basis for this work is provided by many years of participant observation in various roles in the scene of staged people photography, which in German-speaking countries alone includes about 500,000 models, photographers, make-up artists, stylists and retouchers (see Jerrentrup 2020). For most of them, photography or being photographed is a hobby; fees are rarely paid, so it can be assumed that the models, mostly women between 16 and 45 years, are intrinsically motivated.

The scene organizes itself primarily through social media such as Facebook and Instagram and specialized online fora like Model-Kartei, so through 'highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content' (Kietzmann et al. 2011: 241). The digital world, thus, does not only play a role in the process of retouching the photographs but also for the organization of the shoots, as well as for the presentation and discussion of the pictures. Models and photographers often become micro-celebrities that are 'famous to a niche group of people' (Marwick 2018: 114). Unlike other celebrities, the popularity of micro-celebrities 'depends upon a connection to one's audience, rather than an enforced separation from them' (Senft 2008: 26) – the virtual is combined with

a carefully crafted 'real' that gives insights into or ideas about people's lives, passions, motivations, aims, etc.

While the first idea was to select a sample as large as possible, it was soon realized that this has its limits, because especially on Instagram, which is a very popular platform at the moment, there are often few image descriptions and, therefore, the judgement about which photograph represents something evil would have been just a personal assessment. Consequently, it was decided to conduct fifteen image-based in-depth interviews with female models from 21 to 38 years during the years 2020 and 2021. Again, it must be said that the models came from the author's own filter bubble (see Pariser 2011), and she had already worked with nearly all of them herself. Nevertheless, this way it is more successful to capture an emic perspective, since a relationship of trust has already been established. The basis for the interviews was informed consent – the subjects were informed about the aim of the research (see Thomson et al. 2013: 2) and had given their consent; furthermore, they were assured of anonymity.

Each interview initially concerned a selection of photographs in which the respective model can be seen and which she herself characterized as 'evil'. First, the visual characteristics of evil were addressed, after which the focus was on the model's motivations for and feelings while embodying something evil. An ethnographic content analysis (Altheide and Schneider 2013) was used to sort the answers according to fields of meanings. The interpretation was facilitated by semiotic concepts, thus, looking at single meanings of visual elements (semantics), at the arrangement of meaningful elements (syntax) and finally, at the tasks these arrangements should fulfil with regard to the recipient (pragmatics).

As mentioned, all models were female. Consistent with this, it may seem that most evil creatures embodied in the scene are female and there is some historical or cultural evidence of a feminine connoted evil. This already begins with the biblical Eve, who tempts Adam to eat from the apple, and finds further expression in the femme fatale in nineteenth century, a symptom of a deeply rooted misogyny common among male artists, who assumed that women would steal their energy and creativity (see Bade 1979: 6). However, it must also be noted that female models make up by far the largest part of the model scene, corresponding to the fact that female models usually gain far more attraction than their male counterparts (e.g. the top model shows exclusively focus on female or transgender models but there are no comparable shows for men, see also Ryan 2013: 2). It is striking that until recently, photographers were mostly men taking pictures of women. This was sometimes seen as an imbalance and as a forced passivity of women (see Beloff 1983: 171), but this interpretation fails to take into account that at least in the scene of staged photography, female models have a role that goes far beyond that of the photographic 'object'; they are 'subjects', actively involved in shaping the image. In addition, visibility plays a major role today, especially in social media: in this respect, female models may be more powerful than their male photographers who usually hide behind the camera – although this visibility also opens the potential for ridicule, hate and harassment (see Duffy and Hund 2019). Another reason for the significantly higher number of female models lies in gender conventions that make cross-dressing and posing typical for the other sex much easier for women than for men: '[T]his is because the taboo of the other sex does not have the same force in both cases: there is a social prohibition against the feminization of men, there is almost none against the masculinization of women' (Barthes 1990: 257).

Consequently, there are many more creative possibilities with female models, provided that the images are not intended to be too provocative. Yet, it is debateable whether a 'male gaze' (Lewin 2015: 294) is still established and promoted as norm: 'Feminists argue that media images of women are always directed at men and that women are encouraged to look at themselves and other women the way men do' (Crane 1999: 541). Such power dynamics would be an interesting topic for further investigation.

A short note on ethnicity or colour should be added as well: since the sample and the interviews were taken in German-speaking countries, where there are relatively few people of colour, specific aspects about their (self-) representation cannot be discussed here.[1] However, it would also be an interesting topic for future research, just as the (self-)representation of men and transgender people.

3. EVIL MOTIFS

Before showing which evil motifs are staged and which characteristics are typical for this, we will very briefly look at the representation of evil in art: many great artists have dealt with evil and given it a form, whether ironically like George Grosz or surreally like Salvador Dalí (Wilson 2015). It is not only about drawing attention to evil and exposing it if necessary but also about a personal confrontation, as for example in the Black Paintings by Francisco Goya, or using art as a 'transformational power' (Mendez 2019). This potential of art to give expression to fear and the unspeakable and at the same time, put it in a manageable form, is also explored in art therapy (see Schneider 2015: 120), which usually evolves around sketches or paintings (see Kraus 2002).

In our case, we deal with photography, so it is important to mention some peculiarities. Similar to paintings, meanings can only be communicated visually and only via a frozen moment with a limited number of pictorial characters, e.g. pixels. Therefore, one may assume that the selection of signifiers is especially important – whether it takes place completely consciously or (in parts) unconsciously. If the artwork should be presented, it is particularly relevant to assume recognizability in the circle of recipients (see Schwärzler 2016: 52), which in our case refers to certain mythological or historical figures as well as to visual features more generally considered 'evil'. In this condensation to a spatially and temporally limited moment, however, also lies a recipe for the success of photography, 'its ability to transcribe the world in a form that is readily portable from one location to another' (Wright 1999: 6). As Wright states, it is about 'transcribing the *world*' – not a pure fantasy (1999: 6, emphasis added). A particularly important difference to painting is that photography always contains an indexical component, i.e. it always refers to something that existed in reality – even if this reality has been staged and modified in post-production. This has been defined as the 'epistemically special character of photographs' that 'is revealed by this fact: we are inclined to trust them in a way we are not inclined to trust even the most accurate drawings or paintings' (Cohen and Meskin 2010: 70).

When looking at evil motifs in staged people photography, one can distinguish between the portraiture of evil characters or creatures and evil actions. This distinction can already be found in the Bible, where there is on the one hand the infinite evil in form of the devil that can be found in various forms such as the serpent in the Garden of Eden, Lucifer or Satan – creatures that

1. This 2021 source quotes that there are more than 1 million Black people living in Germany, out of 83,129,285 inhabitants: https://www.deutschland.de/de/topic/leben/schwarze-menschen-in-deutschland-neues-forschungsprojekt (accessed 4 January 2023). However, it should be noted that due to structural inequalities, the number of Black people in the scene of staged photography may be even less.

are imagined to be fully evil. On the other hand, eminent human figures move between the poles of good and evil such as Mary-Magdalene, the sinner turned good, and Judas, the disciple who betrayed Jesus – so here, actions are evil. The interviewees confirmed this categorization into evil deeds and evil beings.

Yet, the two aspects of 'evil creature' and 'evil actions' often complement each other: a beast not only looks scary but also does evil, which can be staged in pictures. Further, it is striking that most photographs do not show creatures that are completely evil but usually also contain desirable aspects such as the ability to fly – staged with the help of wings or waving capes – a beautiful body, seductive power or great strength.

3.1 Evil creatures

When evil creatures are shown, in many cases, few signifiers are enough for the viewer sharing the same cultural context to know what is meant: snakes on a woman's head stand for Medusa, whose gaze kills the beholder; long fangs, white skin and a black and red coat for bloodthirsty count Dracula and his consorts. 'It's great to be a creature with a story and history', said a 37-year-old interviewee, 'it helps me to see myself as part of a story'.

But even if less specific characters are shown, some fundamental visual characteristics can be detected that stand for an evil creature. All interviewees particularly mentioned an 'evil gaze' or an 'evil eye', reminiscent of the widespread folk belief of the evil eye. The

> idea that a malign glance can do grievous harm to person and property is of great antiquity. It is mentioned in the Bible as well as in Sumerian and other ancient near-eastern texts, which would make it more than five thousand years old at the very least.
>
> (Dundes 1992: vii)

Here, strong similarities to motion pictures become obvious: 'Evil people in movies […] often have eyes that are all black, all white, or blood red. We rely on the eyes to give us the first information as to whether someone is "normal"' (Shaw 2019: 66; for an example, see Figure 2).

Further, in movies, villains often have dermatologic findings (see Croley et al. 2017), which corresponds with painted or modelled scars – a feature that can also be observed in the sample and was mentioned in about 50 per cent of the interviews as a typical characteristic of an evil character.

Wildness or the animalistic was also mentioned in 50 per cent of the interviews. As shown above, nature may produce bad outcomes for humans, but it cannot be evil in the strict sense. The association of the savage with evil may have its origin in an attempt to explain bad consequences of natural disasters or the like for human society as a whole or for individuals. According to the interviewees, the savage finds a concrete expression, for example, in what is portrayed as uncivilized and uncontrolled.

An impressive example of this are zombies, mentioned by 40 per cent. Zombies are dead and at the same time alive, human and animal, characterized by being 'speechless, gormless, without memory of prior life or attachments, sinking into an indifferent mass and growing exponentially' (Luckhurst 2015: 1, for the problem of definition see Platts 2013). They 'have a blunt affect, dull gaze, and almost stuporous behaviour' (Nasiruddin et al. 2013: 809), as they are either

Figure 2: The eyes seem to be among the most important features when it comes to the visualization of evil. Fully black or white eyes and bleeding eyes can be seen frequently. Model: Joanna van Darko. Make-up artist: Mika Ledies. Photographer: Anna Berkner.

controlled by somebody else or left without any impulse than to kill humans. Yet, besides the compulsion to destroy others, there is a 'profound melancholy of the outcast monster' (Gottlieb 1991: 40) that is also longing for its own death and salvation. Close to zombies are apocalyptic visions of people with gas masks, however, these also remind of fetish attires, thus, of 'deviant' sexuality.

Figure 3: This hybrid creature includes rabbit ears, cat eyes, some sort of gas mask and accessories that point in the steampunk direction. The goal was to use the uncanny valley – the feeling that arises when a creature does not quite fit into a category. Photographer: Dirk Ludwig. Model: Mia Shinda.

Hybrid beings (see e.g. Figures 1 and 3) were mentioned as a category of evil by all interviewees, often by giving specific examples. Even though hybrid beings intrigue us as and some are even considered as enchanting (see Akgün Comak and Pembecioglu 2018: 156), they can also make us feel uncomfortable, eventually, as they embody the uncanny (see MacDorman and Entezari 2015).

> Since the Renaissance, the most common cognate and eventual alternate for ugliness was 'grotesque'. The word derived from the Italian grottesche (itself from 'grotto', cave), a term that designated the fantastic decorative designs discovered in 1480 on the walls of underground, grottolike vaults of ancient Roman temples, baths, and palaces. In the eyes of classicists, these […] hybrids […] embodied the transgressive character of ugliness: […] Hybrid conflations resulting in monstrous, unnatural, indeed degenerate creations became one of the prime sites of ugliness.
>
> (Athanassoglou-Kallmyer 2018: 32)

The hybrid beings mentioned by the interviewees include sirens, sea witches, women with horns, sea creatures, vampires, monsters with humanoid features and dark or fallen angels.

The hybrids just mentioned tie in with the fact that the evil is occasionally portrayed in connection to the 'different', the 'foreign', thus in connection with other (even if only imagined) cultural contexts. This may suggest evidence of a kind of tension between xenophobic and xenophilic feelings – being fascinated and repelled at the same time – and can also be seen in other styles of staged photography, for example, when 'oriental' scenarios are staged.

Although this tendency had been recognizable from some of the photo motifs, it was not explicitly stated by the interviewees, eventually due to social desirability. However, several statements that referred to evil sorcerers, witches, shamans and aliens – and more or less implicitly described them as foreign – can be interpreted this way. In addition to the exotic, weird and uncanny other, these creatures also stand for the threatening and inexplicable and eventually contain a metaphysical dimension.

The emphasis on sexual aspects, such as scarce dresses made of tight latex or leather, which are typical for the BDSM scene (for the definition of the term see Call 2013: 1–3), was mentioned by 40 per cent of the interviewees, suggesting a problematization of sexuality, especially certain sexual practices such as sadomasochism, that are still often seen as '"deviant" and "naughty"' and 'still a taboo' (Wilkinson 2009: 183). Some interviewees mentioned 'dominatrixes' or 'women, who are into fetish'. None of them mentioned male or transgender fetishists which may be due to the very low number of men and transgender persons found among models. Literature, however, often assumes men to be dominant and following these accounts, the 'submission of women allows a re-enactment of their early identificatory relationship to the mother' (Benjamin 1988: 79), whereas here, female creatures are mostly portrayed as dominant. However, if we consider the actual situation of a dominatrix, the term 'dominant' can be contested as in commercial relationships, because the dominatrix submits to the wishes of the paying (usually male) client (see Lindemann 2012: 48). Personal S/M relationships rely on a mutual consent or even mutual satisfaction. Consequently, the victim, the masochist part, can be understood as triumphant as well (see Miller 2018) and that there is a mutual dependency, which actually questions the power of the sadistic woman (see Steele 2001: 74). Without diving any deeper into the subject, it can be stated that even if fetish actions are not shown in the photograph, it is about the practices associated with the leather-and-latex style, which exist within 'a context that officially privileges egalitarianism' (Martin 2011: iii) and therefore violate (at first sight) a broad social consensus about what kind of sexuality is acceptable.

Sadomasochism is sometimes also considered in connection with subcultures such as the latex or gothic scene. This leads to the aspect that several

characters often perceived as evil have subcultural connotations, so again they appear as foreign, but in a self-chosen way: in subcultures, one finds looks that have been deliberately designed to not fit into the mainstream of society. Through their looks, preferences or actions, some social groups are perceived as particularly 'evil', such as rockers, gothics, punks and metal fans (see Haenfler 2014: 113), but also people with extensive tattoos and numerous piercings are occasionally seen like this (see Atkinson 2003: 40). Subcultures were mentioned by nearly 40 per cent of the interviewees; however, none of them said she was strongly associated with a subculture in everyday life.

The visual characteristics of evil in the staged photographs, it can be concluded, are often related to what is not 'normal' or not 'well-known' in a cultural context, but what at the same time also has familiar features. It is striking that pure threat, pure ugliness, etc. is rarely depicted. Ugly or rather frightening aspects are often combined with what is commonly considered beautiful. Thus, vampires may have long canine teeth and snow-white skin, and perhaps completely white or completely black eyes, but they often have harmonious facial features and a figure that comes close to the ideal, an ambiguity, that will be discussed below.

3.2 Evil deeds

In addition to rather stable features such as piercing eyes, dermatologic findings, extensive body modifications or body parts of other species, there are also temporary characteristics as traces of actions that can be depicted and stand for something evil. Such features are often related to injuries, for example, one sees blood or bandages in photographs that were described as 'evil' by 60 per cent of the interviewees. However, this actually indicates that the depicted character is the victim, not the perpetrator (see Figure 4). When asked critically whether this did not transfer evil to the victim, everyone reacted with hesitation; three people answered that an evil fate was meant on a more general level, two others rather saw the situation as evil, one person said that some people attract evil and can therefore be considered part of evil themselves. Evil was thus more or less clearly transferred to the victim, which according to the Just World Hypothesis can be understood as a protective reaction, because people tend to have a cognitive bias assuming that 'one gets what one deserves' (Lerner and Montada 1998): if bad things happen to a person, it must be because there is something evil about her. This bias helps to imagine the world as a just place and thus provides security.

In addition, there are also photographs that show people performing actions that are commonly evaluated as evil, for example, people who are about to violate someone, which was mentioned by 70 per cent of the interviewees. Here, too, cultural knowledge is central, since the action can usually only be understood against the cultural background. Depending on the situation in which the model is depicted and on cultural knowledge, a ferocious woman with a gun can be a good heroine – a protector or an avenger – or an evil villainess. Here, the question also arises as to what is appropriate for a woman in the respective context, which roles are possible for her at all and under which social conditions she is allowed to appear, for example, as a violent but righteous avenger (Neculäesei 2015; for the classic example of the Yanomami who particularly value aggressive behaviour see e.g. Sponsel 1998).

The people depicted performing evil deeds do not necessarily have to possess the above-mentioned evil visual characteristics; on the contrary, one

Figure 4: Even though this picture may show a victim, both such situations and embodied characters were frequently characterized as 'evil' by the interviewees. Model: Lisa Martin. Photographer: Dirk Ludwig.

often sees particularly attractive-looking women who appear as femme fatale, for example, mentioned by nearly 20 per cent. In addition, another 20 per cent of interviewees mentioned deeds that they described as distasteful, disgusting and provocative at the same time, which again shows the cultural dependence.

An important aspect is also that the evil deeds must be pictorially realizable; too refined actions may not be understood by the potential recipient. A widely recognized, popular photo theme is, for example, the implementation of the Seven Deadly Sins from the Bible or the Fall of Man. The vampire bite, which combines both categories of evil creatures and evil deeds and adds an erotic component that will be explored below, is also often staged. Killing or going to war are also motifs that are mostly shown in a very theatrical way. However, these images are not always intended to be perceived as 'evil' – they can, for example, simply be the staging of ancient times or fictional warriors (for the fascination of war see Beidler 2016).

3.3 Ambiguity

As mentioned above, there is almost always a combination of evil, but also attractive in the broadest sense. The ultimate evil, which is often condensed in the figure of Adolf Hitler (see Znamenski 2021: 166), or could be visualized in the form of massacres, is apparently not subject in staged photography. Thus, there remains ambiguity, a tension between good and evil, attractive and disgusting, wicked and admirable. Various ways to express this ambiguity can be distinguished, even though they often overlap: on the one hand,

Figure 5: The disgusting and provocative is also often associated with evil – here again in combination with the traditionally attractive characteristics of the model: beautiful facial features and even skin. Model: Anna Maria Böcher. Photographer: Pixelcoma.

it can be about a temporal sequence of good and evil – the good turned evil vice versa – or about simultaneity – good and evil traits that coexist (as in Figure 5, for example). Then, there are individual aspects that, depending on the perspective and context, can be evil as well as good or enjoyable, such as something sexually connotated or wild.

Let us look at some examples which make the combination of good and evil particularly clear. A popular option is to combine good and evil in the figure of the sinner and the saint, such in the dualism of the Madonna/whore complex. Since antiquity, disguise had erotic implications, 'because with anonymity came greater freedom […] and revellers sometimes dressed as monks and nuns. Casanova believed that there was nothing quite so provocative as a fair nun unmasked' (Steele 2001: 73). The popularity of the image of the sexy nun, mentioned by 60 per cent of the interviewees, has become even more popular since the famous Afri Cola's advertisements. It is not only intriguing because of the inherent prohibition that causes thrill, but can also be seen as a documentation of the status quo of being human, caught between evil and good. Moreover, the interpretation can point out to the double standards in our society, even more so when looking at recent scandals around child abuse in the Catholic Church. Thus, the sexy nun was understood by several interviewees as a critique of society's double standards.

When it comes to vampires (as in Figure 7), mentioned by all interviewees, it is widely known that in legends and movies innocent humans are

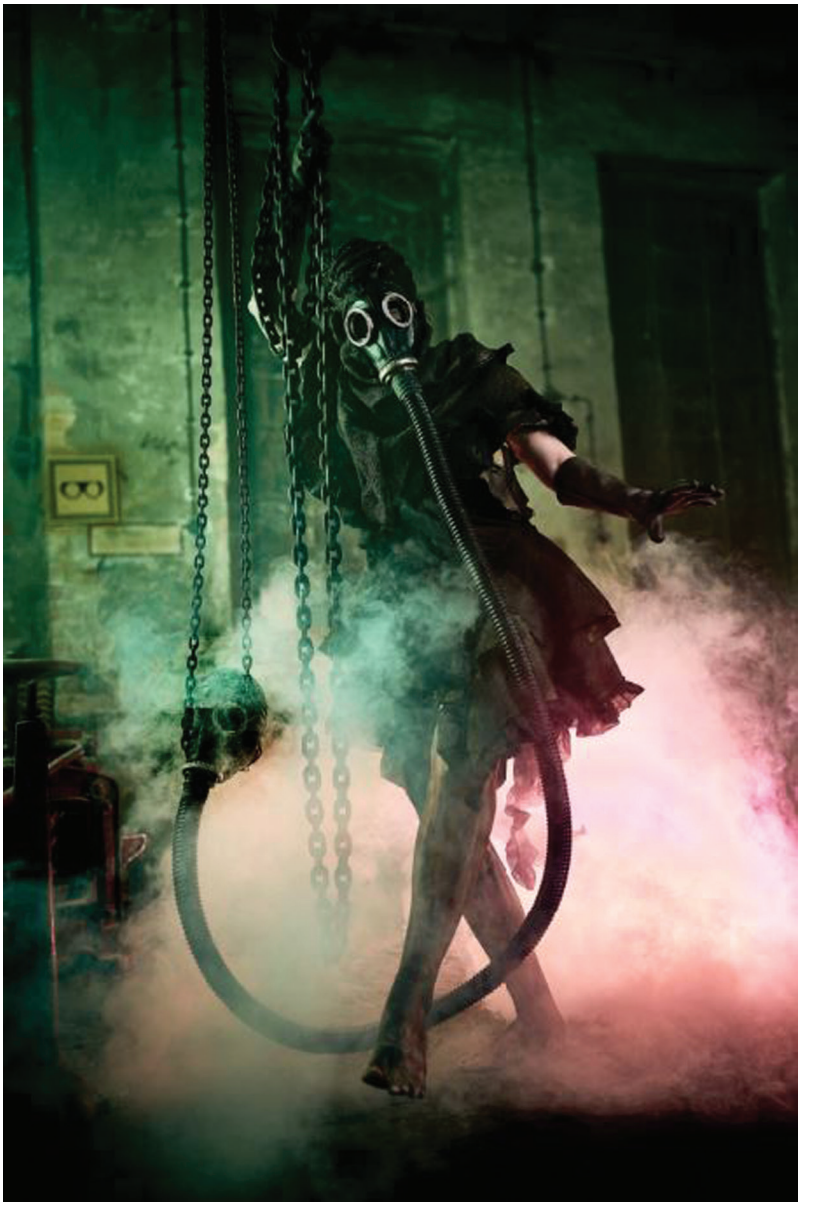

Figure 6: This motif combines the apocalyptic with a touch of fetish. Model: Nidolli. Styling: Aziz Harbak. Photographer: Jooney.

usually unwillingly turned into ferocious and powerful vampires. Vampires had been subject to psychoanalytic discussion (e.g. Henry 2014), since they are portrayed as seductive, which indicates a masochistic tendency in the recipients. In the fixation on the bite, one can also see a regression to the oral phase in Freud's theory of development, further elaborated by Leitch (1948) or Yorke and Kennedy (1987).

Figure 7: Embodying tragedy and melancholy appealed to model Maya Lou. In the figure of the vampire she sees a generally human situation, caught between good and evil. Model: Maya Lou. Photographer: Dorothea Lichte.

Moreover, vampires embody the desire to overcome death, thus, to overcome God's law, but they have to pay for their rebellion by never being allowed to see daylight again. Therefore, vampires were described as undead – being no more alive but not decayed or decomposed. As with the sexy nun, there is also something erotic about the vampire:

> Described frequently as a 'kiss' but carrying with it pain and blood analogous to those of defloration or violent intercourse, the vampire's bite is at once oral and yet penetrative […]. As such, it blurs the boundaries between foreplay and coitus, between the violent and the erotic, between the prelude and the consummation.
>
> (Hughes 2012: 199)

Another figure mentioned by 40 per cent of the interviewees, which expresses the ambivalent particularly clearly, is the dominatrix (see Figure 6), who has been discussed above. Her transgression of norms through openly expression her fetish offers the 'basis of erotic efficacy' (Martin 2011: 11). In postmodern conditions, 'fetish becomes a celebration of the gap between what is known and what is believed' (Lunning 2013: 74), in which the boundaries of fiction and reality blur just as in the digital world. The typical elaborate fetish clothing style, relying on leather and latex and in a way being highly controlled and culturally transformed, clearly influenced the respected realm of high fashion (e.g. Alexander McQueen's 2011 collection, see Lunning 2013: 123), yet, is considered at 'deviant' and stigmatized (see Steele 2001: 74).

In summary, evil is conveyed in different ways, but often through ambivalent figures or situations – even in evil, there is usually something beautiful, admirable, interesting or otherwise desirable. This can be explained by the fact that this way, people may feel more connection to the depicted evil. Such connection refers to both models, photographers and recipients.

4. EMBODYING THE EVIL

However, a confrontation with evil, which as shown above may represent an urge immanent in human beings, could also take place purely through contemplation and analysis – one's own embodiment of evil would not be necessary for this. The particular question that arises here, then, concerns embodiment. With regard to staged photography, an obvious explanation is that evil excites the recipient and that consequently, the photograph attracts extra attention. However, this can also be achieved with other motifs, such as particularly attractive, erotic or surprising motifs. This suggests that one's own embodiment of evil entails other aspects, as was also confirmed by all interview partners.

First of all, it can be stated here that staged photography offers a test without consequences, 'made possible by photography's indiscriminating data ratio' (Pinney 2008: 145), or, in the words of an interviewee: 'I can just try something without anyone drawing their conclusions right away'. Modelling enables to experience feelings with one's own body without it having any influence on the everyday life. Even those who look at the photograph cannot judge whether it is something real or a symbol of something existing in reality, or if the model is just playing a role like an actor.

Then, it can help the model to act out the feeling of 'not fitting in' (see Mussies 2016: 8) and criticizing mainstream society, which is particularly obvious when staging hybrids, for example, in modern vampire literature: 'In a pluralistic world, the vampire is simply a minority like any other minority, defining self as well as being defined – often with prejudice – by others' (Hughes 2012: 207). Unlike the portrayal of, for example, the little mermaid, evil creatures like the vampire or the sea monster are characterized by the fact that they are powerful and do not silently endure their fate. The evil does

not submit to the existing power relations and is thus also related to the own exercise of power, as the evil 'requires the force of decision' (Covington 2017: 4). Since 'bodily states in the self produce affective states' (Barsalou et al. 2003: 43), it can be assumed that the models really feel powerful when being staged as evil. A 26-year-old interviewee put it this way: 'I feel good when I'm being photographed, but when I'm embodying something evil, even better: I'm not then the girl who wants to please others and be pretty, but am in that moment wild and powerful myself'. Thus, it can be stated through embodying the evil, rendering themselves outsiders, people paradoxically can feel empowered. This may be of specific importance and could even bear a therapeutic potential for people suffering because of marginalized social positions.

As described, this power sometimes arises in the context of sexuality. The embodiment of a figure like a dominatrix can help to understand one's own sexuality as potentially powerful without having to act it out. For example, one of the interviewees reported that she lets herself be staged as a sexy dominatrix without feeling this inclination herself, but that she does feel its power. According to her, the special thing about this was that this power arose of the fact of being a woman, while in everyday life she often felt powerless for this very reason: 'Here, I am sexy, because I am a strong woman. In everyday life, people find me sexy when I am cute and girlish and accentuate my weak side'.

Another motivation can be found in the intense processing of grief and anger, which was mentioned several times as a reason for the desire to embody something evil – consistent with assessments from the literature: vampire fantasies, for example, are considered a 'consequence of the experience of […] loss' (Gottlieb 1991: 52), connected to fantasies of oral incorporation. In the embodiment, the emotion gains form and can eventually be articulated more easily. 'I hate talking about feelings, especially negative ones. I find it easier in pictures', explained one interviewee.

The last aspect is rebellion, which again is in the context of anger, but also of power. 'Being non-conformist and pretty for once feels liberating', explained a 37-year-old model, 'and it shows how narrow social guidelines actually are'. For a long time, the affiliation with evil has been understood as (political) rebellion:

> From a political perspective, as we have seen, the nineteenth-century poets singing paeans to Satan were almost invariably 'Leftist' or 'Radical', combining a progressive belief in social and political reform with strongly anti-Christian or anticlerical attitudes. The devil, in the most important of their myths, became strongly associated with the emancipating and liberating tendencies of the Western Revolution.
>
> (van Lujik 2016: 114; see also Young 1999: 79)

Many creatures with evil connotations such as various hybrids are 'naturally transgressive and so potentially revolutionary nature' (Wisker 2012: 236). For Zombies, Todd Platts notices that 'most academics read them as leftist and subversive texts' (2013: 555). Subcultural aesthetics and intense body design such as facial tattoos and split tongues are often considered as deliberate provocation and rebellion, for example against petty-bourgeois conservatism. Presenting such features – even if they are achieved only by special make-up or retouching – can also serve as such. Consequently, the model is not only a recipient or fan of rebellion, but actively articulates it with her own body.

5. CONCLUSION: SUBMISSION TO ART

'Carnival is like a medicine', states Siggi Sawall (2020: 14). Dressing up and being able to act out different character traits or inclinations, maybe representing something completely different that one is simply curious about, being able to experience oneself in a completely different way for once – the positive effects of masquerade on the psychological well-being have been described frequently (see e.g. Coleman 2009: 110). However, in general, scientific literature paid little attention to the embodiment and presentation of evil that, nevertheless, can be particularly valuable to the psyche.

Whether it is to express the feeling of not fitting in, to experience power or to deal with negative feelings such as fear, grief or anger – staged photography offers special support in two ways: while embodying, the model can experience and act out feelings in a very intense way, without having to fear consequences. She can be out of control but actually stay in a very controlled environment. In addition, she receives a pictorial product that makes emotions communicable, manageable and interpretable. This means that the process of handling the motif does not have to be completed with the photo shoot and the embodiment itself. It also extends into the editing and the subsequent viewing of and engagement with the pictures, as the photographs allow the subject 'opportunities for repeated viewing and, in particular, opportunities for editing, changing, and a renewed re-viewing' (Mechler-Schönach 2005: 16) and negotiating their meanings with others because of their online presentation – thus facilitate engagement simply through the manageability and condensation that are characteristic of photographs. Pointedly, one can state: evil is transformed to art. The photograph constitutes an aesthetic over-forming of the evil, which starts during the shooting process, when there are indeed the moments in which the acting performance is called off, but fundamentally, the atmosphere of such a photo shoot is not characterized by any evil. The evil look of the resulting picture is often enhanced by digital processing, which also frees the photo to a certain extent from the boundaries of reality without giving up its indexicality. For all people involved, the creative-artistic activity itself is usually a particularly important motivation – the feeling of creating art. The final picture is therefore characterized by a degree of artistry, however highly valued. Hence, the evil is tamed: it submits to art.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Maja Tabea Jerrentrup is professor and programme leader for new media and intercultural communication at the University of Applied Sciences Landshut, Germany. She regularly lectures at the Indian Institute of Photography, works with the University of Nigeria Nsukka and has been associate professor at Ajeenkya DY Patil University (India). Her current research focus is on visual media, popular arts, embodiment and participation.

Contact: University of Applied Sciences Landshut, Am Lurzenhof 1, Landshut, Germany.
E-mail: maja.jerrentrup@adypu.edu.in

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3615-7507