

ENGL 114: Writing Seminars, Laughter  
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By submitting this essay, I attest that it is my own work, completed in accordance with University regulations. –Spencer R. Katz

Muahaha!: Defining Evil Laughter

by Spencer Katz

Peru, 1936. Black-market French archaeologist and Nazi-sympathizer Rene Belloq has just stolen a golden fertility idol from the hands of rival archaeologist Indiana Jones, manipulating the native Hovitos for his profit. After disarming Jones, Belloq gives the order for the Hovitos to murder the fleeing hero. As Indy desperately dodges trees in an effort to escape, Belloq's laughter echoes throughout the forest, nearly omnipresent.

*Ahahahahahahaha...!*

The opening sequence of *Raiders of the Lost Ark* is typical for entertainment depictions of evil, but in real life evil laughter is not nearly so well defined. Conflicts about how much pleasure is derived from the commission of evil make it difficult to determine exactly why evildoers laugh in the face of their evil actions, or even label what counts or does not count as evil laughter. This paper examines the scholarly discussion of evil, sadism, and laughter, and attempts to synthesize a theory to define the phenomenon of the evil laugh so that we may understand both why it is such a common cultural device and how it differs from big screen to city street. In real life, evil laughter can be defined as any laughter at any excessively immoral action under the evildoer's control.

## THE PHENOMENON DETAILED

Although most scholars have only given evil laughter a marginal analysis, the phenomenon has had a profound impact on popular culture representations of evil throughout history and literature. The “bad guys” from blockbuster movies to Saturday morning cartoons to comic books all share a characteristic “evil laugh.” As soon as these villains finalize their dastardly plans, or commit a heinous act of horror, they erupt in consuming laughter. It does not always sound or look the same, but frequently it does – a widely conserved stereotype of the evildoer. It is wild-eyed, immodest laughter, telegraphing to the watcher or reader that this character is truly bad. Despite its pervasiveness in modern culture, the phenomenon is not new. Indeed, many instances of the “evil laughter” of “mockers” appear throughout the Holy Bible, as chronicled by Roger Poudrier in a chapter devoted to biblical laughter (22). One passage he highlights could easily apply to the villains in a popular action movie, “They laugh at my fall, they organize against me... If I fall they surround me ...those who hate me for no reason. They open wide their mouth against me saying: Ha, ha!” (Ps 35:15-16.19.21, from Poudrier 23). The righteous narrator describes the mockers as people who attack him and his faith for no reason, and laugh in a particularly immodest way.

Roy Baumeister observes the same characteristic in cartoon programs of the 1980s, citing how “they derive pleasure from hurting others and they celebrate, rejoice, or laugh with pleasure when they hurt or kill someone, especially if the victim is a good person” (Baumeister 70). But throughout his thorough study of evil, Baumeister mostly finds that in reality “reactions to hurting others often involve...the very opposite of amused enjoyment” and that such representations “emphasize the myth of pure evil” (212). He claims a discrepancy between the “standard pattern in movies and other entertainments” (212) and concludes that laughter “doesn’t

prove that [evildoers] enjoy the harm” (216). Philosopher Lars Svendsen would likely agree, as he notes in his *Philosophy of Evil* that “figures who are purely good or purely evil abound in the history of literature, but in the real world, people are good and evil both” (92). But why, then, does the myth of pure evil laughter persist in culture?

## DEFINING EVIL

To continue the discussion, we must have a working definition of evil, which is more difficult to craft than it might seem because few of the many scholars who study the subject can agree on one definition. The principle disagreement between what constitutes evil is how much sadism, or pleasure felt from harming others, plays a role in evil actions. Baumeister and colleague W. Keith Campbell, in a study of “The Intrinsic Appeal of Evil,” take a moderate approach to the subject, claiming that “the initial reaction to hurting others...appears to be quite aversive” but this aversion can “subside over time,” replaced by “the pleasure in harming others [which] seems to emerge gradually over time and is described by some as comparable to an addiction,” although most people never develop the pleasure half (Baumeister and Campbell 212). In other words, true sadism only develops for a minority of evildoers, but for this minority, the normal feelings of horror and sickness in response to violent acts are replaced by compensatory feelings of pleasure.

Other scholars take a stronger approach either affirming or denouncing the concept of sadism. Fred Alford uses evil and sadism almost interchangeably when he defines evil as “not just about hurting. It is about the pleasures of absolute control inherent in the ability to harm another” (21). He goes on to say that evil is an “absence of humanity, the failure to understand or appreciate the humanity in the other” (23). Svendsen reacts to this view in his *Philosophy of Evil*, arguing the opposite point. He groups Alford’s definition of evil with the evil of horror movies,

“Demonic evil” or “evil purely for evil’s sake” (92), and then claims this evil does not exist because all acts of evil have another goal in mind, however sinister that may be. “The satisfaction of desire is good,” he writes, “as in the example of rape and murder satisfying a desire, and thus having, subjectively, a good side – though, obviously, rape and murder are certainly evil in and of themselves” (109). The ulterior goal in the case of rape may be sexual dominance, and for murder might be control of the victim, instead of the goal of simply doing something evil. According to Svendsen, this would fall under the category of “instrumental evil,” not sadism (85). John Kekes takes the idea of an ulterior goal further with his definition of evil, incorporating sadism and providing a universal characterization of evil acts. After stating that “what makes human actions evil...is that they cause serious harm and lack excuse” (1), he elaborates that “evildoers cause more harm than is needed for achieving their ends....Evil actions go beyond breaking some ordinary moral rule; they show contempt for and flaunt fundamental moral prohibitions” (2). In other words, an action is only evil if it is an excessively harmful means to the ulterior goal. It will be important for later to note that Kekes’s definition refers specifically to “human actions” that are evil as opposed to humans that are evil. Indeed, the word “evildoer” only implies a person who *does* evil, not *is* evil. For our purposes, evil is any action that is an excessively immoral means to achieving the evildoer’s goals.

#### “EXPERIMENTING WITH EVIL” (Alford 24): A SPECIFIC CASE

When there is scholarly discussion of evil laughter and sadism, one subject is frequently addressed: the psychology experiments of Stanley Milgram at Yale University in the early 1970s. Milgram set out to test the obedience of participants by fooling them into thinking they were teaching another participant (who was actually an actor and never received any real shocks)

using electric shock therapy pairs of words to memorize. When the “learner” (actor) gave a wrong answer, or no answer, the experimenter required the “teacher” (participant) to deliver a shock of increasingly higher voltage throughout the experiment, and the actor would respond with a corresponding cry of false pain. Although many of his colleagues predicted that the majority of subjects would end the procedure early, Milgram found that about 2/3 of the subjects gave the full set of shocks up to 450 V, although many were noticeably upset (62). In terms of the existence of evil, Milgram concludes in his paper reporting the results that “the most fundamental lesson of [his] study [is that] ordinary people, simply doing their jobs and without any particular hostility on their part, can become agents in a terrible destructive process” (75-76). But in terms of evil laughter, one of Milgram’s “peculiar reactions” stands out (66). “Morris Braverman,” noted by Milgram for his “serious demeanor” suddenly began breaking up with laughter after each shock he administered until he “[could not] contain his laughter at this point no matter what he [did]” (66). Braverman characterized the laughter in a post-experiment interview as “[his] sheer reaction to a totally impossible situation” (75). Braverman did not want to hurt the other man, and he does not seem to think this sort of situation is generally funny, so does his laughter count as evil laughter?

Most of the scholars who cite the experiment, with the exception of Alford, seem to say no. Baumeister and Campbell, for example, use Milgram’s experiments as a proof that sadism may not always be the cause of laughter in violent situations to examine how “victims take the perpetrator’s laughter as a compelling sign that the perpetrators were enjoying themselves and hence as a sign of evil, sadistic pleasure. As Milgram’s observations [make] clear, however, reluctant harmdoers may laugh out of discomfort” (212). The perpetrators may not have been sadistic, they argue, just nervous about their terrible tasks. Alford, however, claims that these

observations were not so clear. His own viewing of the films of the experiment causes him to ask the question, “What if these men are giggling in embarrassed pleasure at being given permission to inflict great pain and suffering on an innocent and vulnerable man? Milgram rejects this interpretation but offers no reason” (26). He goes on to claim that “the structure of the Milgram experiment protects [the subjects] from the knowledge of their own sadism, while allowing them to express it” (26). To Alford, the laughter is “grotesque” (26) and a failure of human empathy. The “absence of humanity” was a large part of how Alford elaborated his definition of evil (23), which essentially equated all evil with sadism, so therefore this laughter would count as evil. This puts these scholars at polar opposites when discussing Braverman’s laughter. On the one hand, the laughter is touted as the prime example of why nervous laughter is not pleasure derived from violence, but, on the other hand, the laughter is described as a manifestation of repressed sadism. To decide which of these views is correct, then, we must approach a theory of evil laughter.

## APPROACHING A THEORY

Crafting a definition of evil laughter depends on addressing two key issues that separate evil laughter from other laughter that could potentially occur in the presence of evil acts. First, evil laughter depends heavily on who is in control of the act considered evil. Evil itself depends a lot on control, as Alford noted in his definition of evil above (21). Milgram even acknowledges the influence of control on responsibility for harmful actions in a follow-up experiment to the one described. In the modified experiment, the “teachers” were in charge of telling another actor to flip the switch on the shocking machine, and nearly all (37 out of 40) of the participants completed the full set of shocks (77). To apply this issue to evil laughter, we may synthesize two

theories from separate areas of study. On the one hand, Kekes defines evil as “beyond breaking some ordinary moral rule” (2). Extrapolating, evil laughter must not only be inappropriate laughter, but far beyond what makes it inappropriate. On the other hand, we can define what makes laughter inappropriate through Jure Gantar’s analysis of Dryden, a comic poet who addressed the issue of ridicule in a preface to one of his pieces. Gantar explains that if objects of ridicule cannot be changed, “society should...respond to them with sympathy” rather than laughter (89). In other words, it is morally inappropriate to laugh at something that the object of ridicule cannot help having or doing. If such laughter is wrong, it is therefore beyond wrong to laugh at harm that you are inflicting on another person. Because you are in control of the situation, it is implicit that the victim is not in control, and since you have the power to stop the harm at which you are laughing, it is not the simple immoral ridicule described by Gantar, but a “contempt for...fundamental moral prohibitions” (Kekes 2). The imbalance of power also separates evil laughter fundamentally from “schadenfreude,” the term for taking amusement from another person’s misfortune, which is not usually applied to misfortune controlled by the amused party. Indeed, Svendsen dismisses it from his analysis of evil because “schadenfreude is usually motivated by the feeling that suffering has been earned – because the person has done something evil, has done something stupid, etc.” (105). In order for laughter to be evil laughter and not schadenfreude, the laugher must also be the evildoer for the particular evil act in question.

The second issue that must be considered is, for all the debate about sadism in evil, how much does pleasure matter for the evil laughter? Considering that the evildoer is laughing at the situation at hand, and not, for example, a joke he heard the day before, many scholars argue that this may still not indicate that the evildoer is taking pleasure from the situation. We have seen

this with Milgram's conclusions about Braverman and the citation of that episode in other works on sadism and evil. Let us consider for the sake of argument that Milgram is right, and Braverman and others in similar situations are laughing out of "discomfort" (Baumeister and Campbell 212) or nervousness. Does it matter that they are not taking direct pleasure from their evil act? If the evil act can exist on its own without an inherently evil perpetrator, the answer is no. Baumeister argues that for every incident of evil, there are two points of view, that of the victim and that of the perpetrator, and that "to reach an understanding, it is necessary to hear what the perpetrators have to say" (Baumeister 39). But he also admits that with cases of laughter, it all looks the same to the victims: "Victims tend to focus on perpetrator laughter, whereas perpetrator accounts hardly ever mention laughter. Moreover, victims take the perpetrators' laughter as a compelling sign that the perpetrators were enjoying themselves and hence as a sign of evil, sadistic pleasure" (Baumeister and Campbell 212). To a victim of an evil act, either nervous laughter or sadistic laughter will always just look like evil laughter. Any laughter, no matter the pleasure it gives the laugher, adds to the original act of evil. Therefore, for the case of laughter, to reach an understanding it is necessary to look at things from the perspective of the victim because it defines the evil act.

## A THEORY OF EVIL LAUGHTER

With these two issues addressed, we can state a final definition of evil laughter. Evil laughter, an evil act in itself, consists of laughter in the face of an evil action under the control of the laugher. It doesn't really matter if the evildoer is sadistic or not, taking pleasure from the act or not, because they always have the choice to stop the evil action inspiring the laughter, as was true for the Milgram experiment. This definition does not require the evildoer to be inherently



evil, just for a situation in which the evildoer is committing an evil act. We may now also answer the question of whether Braverman's laughter during the Milgram experiment counts as evil laughter. Given the fact that the shocking lever was under his control, and considering that purposefully electrocuting another human being against his will is an evil act, Braverman satisfies all of the conditions for this definition. Therefore, although he was likely not an evil person, Braverman's laughter should be considered evil laughter.

In *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, Belloq's laughter clearly marks his evil character. Because we view evil characters on screen from the point of view of potential victims, evil laughter is used here and frequently in popular culture and entertainment representations of evil characters to add on to whatever evil acts they commit, creating darker, less human villains. In real life, however, it is much harder to tell the good guys from the bad guys, so we must distinguish between purely evil people (of questionable existence) and individual evil acts. When the latter are accompanied by laughter, no matter its intention, the laughter becomes an evil act in itself, telegraphing a sadistic nature that may or may not exist, and compounding the evil acts.

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