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Razor-sharp Charms: Hugh Grant's Image Renegotiation and the Turn to Villains

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Abstract

In the last decade Hugh Grant has been going through something resembling a career revival. After retreating from his roles as English gentleman and romantic lead during the mid 2000s, Grant has recently re-emerged to garner critical acclaim in productions such as *Paddington 2* (2017), *The Gentlemen* (2019), and *The Undoing* (2020). What these roles have in common is that Grant has abandoned his days as prince charming in favour of a series of unlikeable characters and morally-complex villains. This article analyses how this turn to villain signifies a renegotiation of Hugh Grant's star image and how this career revival stands into contact with his previous persona. Combining a close reading of some of Grant's recent films, together with a discussion of press discourse and interviews, I account for how Grant's villain performances are shaped and mediated by different artistic, commercial, and discursive forces. As such, I elucidate how Grant's renegotiation of his image helps distance himself from his previous career phase, is utilised by filmmakers to subvert audience expectations, and invites us to question the patriarchal and English imperialist attitudes that lay embedded in his previous performances.

Keywords: Hugh Grant; celebrity; villains; Englishness; charm

Introduction

Hugh Grant is back. After having spent over a decade at the margins of stardom, Grant is affirming his comeback of recent years with a feverish promotional tour for his latest HBO series *The Undoing* (2020). His appearance on late night talk shows such as *Jimmy Kimmel Live!* and *The Graham Norton Show* was met with the air of celebration and acclaim specifically reserved for faded stars who once again resurface. That Grant's apparent comeback is not only a professional victory, but also something of a personal one, becomes apparent in interviews such as on *The Late Late Show with James Corden* (2021). Welcoming Grant back into the limelight, Corden states: 'Your career now is as great as it's ever been. I think your choices are brilliant. I think your performances are brilliant. Are you enjoying it as much as we are?'. Grant replies with self-effacement: 'It's almost odd to me because I almost do enjoy acting now. It's been such a relief to not be charming leading man. I gave that my best shot, and you know some of the films I did are lovely, and I love that they are popular [...] But it has been a lovely relief now that I'm allowed to be twisted, ugly, weird, misshapen'. Indeed, Grant's resurrection takes up unfamiliar new forms as the prince charming of years past now chooses far more sinister roles.

Looking at Grant's recent filmography and the promotional discourse he has helped to craft around his body of work, it is clear that the actor has overtly renounced the roles that made him famous. By playing a range of murderers, racists, narcissists, and other despicable characters, he has engineered a new position for himself as effective antagonist. His roles in *The Undoing* and *Operation Fortune: Ruse de Guerre* (2022) are only the latest incarnations of a series of vile character types Grant has been engaging with in films like *Cloud Atlas* (2012), *Paddington 2* (2017), *The Gentlemen* (2019). What makes this turn to villain-roles so remarkable is that it is seemingly antithetical to the core of Grant's familiar star image. Throughout the 1990s and

early 2000s, Grant was undeniably the chief representative of the British romcom, even in Hollywood (Spicer 2006), becoming the textbook example of the faithful union between film genre and star persona. How can we then read Grant's departure of these roles into previously uncharted if not contradictory territory?

This article discusses how different agents, including Grant himself, helped renegotiate his roles from romantic leading man to that of morally-complex villain. Simultaneously, I deconstruct how these roles interact with his previous star persona, and have textual and extra-textual implications within the context of the films in which he stars. Firstly, there is Grant himself using interviews to facilitate different distancing strategies towards his leading man performances. Here, Grant is overtly rejecting his charming persona and reinscribing his career through the persona of the 'reluctant actor'. Secondly, filmmakers rely on Grant's classical star image for their own ends. By reorienting the star persona of Grant towards specific narrative ends, artistic agents and storytellers have effectively weaponised his charms in a bid to subvert viewers' expectations. Lastly, I argue that Grant's specific incarnation of these villain characters allows the interrogation of certain silences in his previous performances, which help to politicise the power and privilege these roles have long implied. By triangulating these three mediative forces between Grant and his star image old and new, the ripple effect of this career reorientation can be put into focus, revealing the peculiar star capital that villain performances generate.

In order to do this, it is important to understand the changes Grant's career has undergone in last decades, together with wider socio-political and industrial developments that have reshaped appraisals of Grant's previous star image, since it helps us better understand the motivations and methods that lay at hand in Grant's image renegotiation. While Benoit (1997)

has previously offered a thorough analysis of the image restoration Grant engaged in after the sex worker scandal in 1995, Grant's turn to villains is neither built on a restoration nor a complete departure from his classical star persona (i.e. the persona tied to his previous career phase), but rather signifies an inversion of it. Working from the framework of the villain, Grant engages in a critical deconstruction of the roles he became synonymous with, as well as the discourses and identities his star image had come to represent. This is particularly applicable to notions of class and gender, and their entanglement with upper-class Englishness and male privilege, unified through Grant's characteristic charm — a concept I will later revisit. Before unpacking the performative labour Grant engages in through his villain roles, I will offer a theoretical framework to understand the position that villains occupy in relation to star capital and acting performances. I will then delve into Grant's classical star persona and the opaque network of association and meaning attached to it. The final section of this study builds on a sample of films, interviews, and press articles to situate Grant's career revival and foreground the conjunction between his villain performances, extra-textual articulations of self, and the ideological connotations entwined with both.

Villain stardom

Apart from some notable examples (Juan and McDevitt 2013; Middlemost 2019), villain performances have been largely left disregarded in the field of celebrity studies. This sentiment is to some degree understandable because classical notions of stardom depart from the star as an object of desire set to elicit attraction, admiration, and awe (Keltner and Haidt 2003). Villain roles, in contrast, are mainly considered as something to escape from (Awwal 2018). Most prominently, playing the villain is associated with the threat of being definitively typecast (Wojcik 2003). While an occasional villain performance might be allowed, consistently playing

villain roles is believed to lead to the actor's image becoming tainted. Tensions between star power and villain persona help to understand that, in terms of stardom, villain roles function in their own peculiar way and render inadequate many traditional understandings of celebrity culture, symbolic capital, and acting performance. If we are to analyse the position that Grant's contemporary streak of villain roles occupies in the contemporary cultural context, as well as understand the performative labour actors engage in by playing villain roles, we need to go towards an approach that delineates a specific type of *villain stardom*.

Although villain actors might possess a similar degree of star power and symbolic capital, they function according to different properties. I take the concept villain stardom from Lu (2020), who employs it to refer to superstars that enjoyed great success and popularity in Communist China by performing the role of dastardly antagonist. Although Lu's analysis is one that fits a very specific historical, cultural, and political context, there are several aspects that are useful to recover for a more Hollywood/Western-centric understanding of the economies of villain capital. Villains are generally used as technologies of social undesirability. Going back to Klapp's (1954) reading of the villain as a social archetype, we can understand this role as a personification of norms, values, and identities that are deemed hegemonically undesirable (Kellner 2009; Beasley and Brook 2019). Villains sustain a negative pedagogy that circulates affects of disgusts, hate, and anger amongst audiences (Lu 2020). This evokes Carroll's (2010) understanding of socio-moral disgust as a gatekeeper emotion, which can be employed by filmmakers to steer audience interpretations in any given direction. In Hollywood cinema too, racist, sexist, heteronormative, and ableist standards are being affirmed through hate-eliciting performances that attempt to produce scorn and hatred for non-normative identities (Pomerance 2012). If according to Dyer (1986) star images manage and resolve (if not racially highlight) contradictions within and between ideologies, a critically theoretical reading of villain stardom

could read villains as a means through which a society discursively cements, harnesses, and commodifies its designated Others. The spectacle of the Other is here put on display, before symbolically and materially annihilating it and what they signify.

However, such readings would be politically reductionist as villain archetypes equally arise from a network of meaning-making established by cultural tradition, generic variations, and commercial imperatives. For example, while Hollywood's taste for British villains can be read through the lens of longstanding grudges that arose from America's emancipation from Imperial Britain, such characters are in equal measure a creation of Victorian melodrama's tradition of staging sophisticated, snobbish villains in contrast to folk heroes (Bratton 2017). This cultural stereotype appears also as something seductive and elusive (Spicer 2006). According to Dobrow and Gidney, speakers of British English 'are portrayed dichotomously as either the epitome of refinement and elegance or as the embodiment of effete evil' (1998, p. 117). It should be noted that the same characteristic of suave charm and colonial masculinity are shared by both the British villain and the gentleman spy-hero figure (Moffat and Bond 2010). Poore notes that 'villains are now big business in modern media fictions, often displacing the heroic figures for whom they were once a secondary foil' (2017, p. 68). As the Jaguar's ad campaign *It's Good to Be Bad* (2014) featuring actors Ben Kingsley, Tom Hiddleston and Mark Strong exemplifies, such British villains can be commodified and placed within nationalist frameworks. Boasting the tagline 'Our gents have the character, intelligence and sheer determination to turn the world upside-down', the British villain is here reframed as a prided export product. As Smith points out: 'Here the generic device of "villain" is able to act as a function to reimagine the subject, gentleman, in the ideological form of the Hollywood movie. That is, an enjoyable character of libidinal, ecstatic pleasure – letting us forget the histories behind "him"' (2014, p. 396).

Performing evil

It is precisely in this paradoxical position as both a subject of rejection and a narrative necessity that villain performers find themselves, sometimes even with considerable success. Villain stardom is another tool to meet or subvert audience expectations. Relying on actors with a large back catalogue of villain performances provides the audience with an easy shorthand to communicate a film's moral terms. Contrastingly, by deliberately casting an actor against type, filmmakers might also use an actor's star persona as a red herring to trick the spectator or generate uneasy ambivalences. In casting Patrick Stewart as a neo-Nazi crime lord in *Green Room* (2015), Jeremy Saulnier blended Stewart's distinguished calm, authority and class, with the psychopathological characteristics of a murderous bigot. Such forms of star-image subversion always build on something that is commonly associated with the actor. Here, Stewart is self-consciously evoking and subverting his well-familiar archetype of the British 'tribal elder', a trustworthy source of safety and experience (Spicer 2006). His British sophistication, old age, and kind demeanour make the uncharacteristic acts of hate speech so effectively disturbing. Such casting-against-type often gains critical praise and is heavily highlighted in a film's promotional discourse because of the contrast with the actor's persona. Headlines such as 'This was Patrick Stewart like we had never seen him before' (Gaughan 2022) highlight how Stewart's villain performance becomes akin to a unique selling point of the film and a sign of high-quality acting. This explains why many iconic villains are in fact prestigious character actors, such as Anthony Hopkins and Alan Rickman.

Rabiger states that, from an actor's perspective, villain roles can either be 'an interesting challenge, or a personal sacrifice' (2013, p. 222). But such performances can be career-defining because they could potentially rewrite an actor's star image. In these contexts, performing

villain roles become the pinnacle of character acting. In relation to audiences, villain stardom is a process that is intrinsically ambivalent. As the cultus around certain villain characters demonstrates, audiences react with a complex mix of attraction and aversion to these roles and the actors that perform them (Pomerance, 2012). Despite their position as object to be scorned, villains are still commodities that are constructed, consumed, and have entire fan cultures devoted to them. Whether such commitments are ways of resistant reading, forms of anti-fandom, or built on a straightforward dedication to the performing actors, villain roles are increasingly part of a hybrid and synergised marketing landscape, such as in the recent Disney films *Maleficent* (2014) and *Cruella* (2021), which propose recuperative narratives to reboot old stories. Nevertheless, this promotional power and star image recalibration have double standards tied to race and abled-body-ness. Since in popular film genres such hero/villain distinctions are racialised (Soberon 2021), they also relate to standards of socio-economic mobility in terms of racial prejudice and typecasting (Berg 2002). To non-white actors, for example, villain performers are often not an entry-point to success, or a possibility to re-negotiate their star image, but rather a type of career quicksand that can sentence them to stereotypical roles for years to come.

Re-reading Hugh Grant

A similar reorientation and ripple effect to and from his classical star image can be traced in Grant's career. His star image emerged at the generic conjunction of the romantic comedy and the heritage film. The leading man in the British romcom ur-text *Four Weddings and a Funeral* (1994), Grant subsequently specialised and exploited a specific type of character recycled in Hollywood productions such as *Nine Months* (1995) and *Mickey Blue Eyes* (1999). Grant's identity as a leading man relied on the revisitation of his character as the gentle, charming Englishman. With his distinctive hairstyle, stuttering speech, and bumbling mannerism, Grant

became famous as a force of wit and charm (Sweeney 2001), qualities that were further solidified by being part of a ‘celebrity couple’ with his then-partner, British actress and model Elizabeth Hurley (Burton and Chibnall 2013). As Higson (2011) clarifies, Grant’s success needs to be situated in a very specific market environment. In a bid to find further funding and commercial success overseas, English filmmakers started making films self-consciously about England, English history, and Englishness, albeit ones that could be marketed to American audiences as well. Grant’s persona would latch itself onto what Higson (2011) noticed to be the dominant iconographies of Englishness: the pre-industrial, pastoral version, mundane urban modernity, and monumental metropolitan modernity. These three categories represent his work in either the heritage film (*Sense and Sensibility* 1995) or the romantic comedy (*Notting Hill* 1999). The shared spirit of Englishness in these films is carried by Grant’s acting performance as courteous and charming love interest. Both genres became a brand of sorts, with Grant as the bright archetype of what American audiences would expect from the English gentleman.

Grant’s gentleman was part of a wider socio-cultural script that was performed in line with national and transnational fantasies of white, English, upper class masculinity. As partially targeting overseas audiences, Grant’s performance of the English gentleman centred on being chivalrous, whimsical, humorous, clumsy, and – above all— charming. Moreover, his star image was constructed in such a manner as to sustain an image of him which remained in line with the characters he often played. Burns (2011) notes how Grant’s popularity aligned with 1990s discourses of the New Man, a type of soft-spoken masculinity opposed to a contemporary strong-bodied and hard-willed model. Grant’s attractiveness was that of an endearing prince charming whose wit and etiquette provided audience pleasures. For example, much has been made about Grant’s inactivity as a hero character (Sweeney 2001), in stark contrast to more dominant leading men that pursue their objects of desire with a degree of

relentlessness. Much of the conflict in Grant's romantic comedies in terms of 'getting the girl' stems from his timid characters finding the courage to express their feelings. This aligns with what Spicer has termed the 'Repressed Englishman' or 'Brit twit'; 'a flustered, tongue-tied, bewildered, upper-class noodle' that is equally affable and self-deprecating (2006, p. 144). As Grant (2012) notes, the vulnerability that he displays borders on camp. His good looks, sad eyes, exaggerated gestures and clumsy mannerisms give him an almost childlike innocence. What binds these different characteristics together, however, are Grant's trademark charms. Not only is Grant often referred to as 'Prince Charming' in the press discourse of the early 2000s (Holden 2001; CNN 2003; Dailymail 2003), but, as Benoit (1997) remarks, his 'boyish domestic charm' is a characteristic that repeatedly resurfaces. Grant's brand of charms particularly derives from his talent for combining characters of certain wit and arrogance with a larger underlying vulnerability.

From a moral psychological point of view, charm signifies a prosocial characteristic in which a given person can easily elicit sympathetic responses from others based on the positive moral evaluation and/or pleasurable affects that arise in interpersonal interaction (Sinnott-Armstrong and Miller 2017). Yet, as the verb 'to charm' hints at, charm is also tied to an activity: the ability to use rhetorical, comedic, and affective strategies in order to generate said sympathetic response from others. This highlights the often-paradoxical nature of charms. While appearing to be prosocial, they can be used to hide more antisocial attitudes and function to sustain power relations. A similar phenomenon applies to cinema and character engagement. Plantinga (2018) notes that a character's charming appearance and behaviour are essential aspects of how filmmakers involve audiences to empathically engage with characters. However, such superficial attraction to characters can often obscure the ideological connotations to this empathic connection as the negative characteristics or underlying power dynamics of these

characters are shrouded by their charming nature (Smith 2020). Similarly, the charms that Grant's characters often rely on are instrumentalised to obscure the power and privilege they are enveloped in. As clumsy and endearing as these characters might seem, they are still representative of patriarchal supremacy and white upper-class Englishness.

If, as Dyer states, 'stars are embodiments of the social categories in which people are placed and through which they have to make sense of their lives' (1986, p. 18), what does Grant embody? As the box-office flops of *Did You Hear About the Morgans?* (2009) and *The Rewrite* (2014) showed, Grant's star image as romantic leading man was no longer a force of bankability by the 2010s. Apart from voice-work for the Aardman Animations *Pirates!* series, Grant's acting career slowed down, while his role as activist became increasingly prominent. Grant was now framed as a political justice warrior first and actor second, at least until he started re-orientating his choice of films towards more explicitly villain roles and morally-ambiguous characters. By looking at Grant's performances and promotional discourses, it is possible to understand how Grant has used his turn to villains to successfully reinvent his image. To do so, I will analyse Grant's image renegotiation as tied to three dimensions: the rejection of his past image (rejecting charm), the use of this image by filmmakers (weaponising charm), and the invite to question the patriarchal and English imperialist attitudes intrinsic in his previous performances (politicising charm).

Rejecting Charm

Since the early 2010s, Grant has been trying to adjust his star image by distancing himself from his position as popular romcom leading man towards more ambivalent character studies, in a 'strategy of disavowal' (McDonald 2014). Having described himself as a 'reluctant actor' in the press, Grant has garnered a reputation of having a lack of enthusiasm for the acting

profession. ‘That’s always been my experience of filmmaking. It’s awful on a film set’ remarks Grant when asked about his experiences (*Smooth Radio* 2019). Interviews in which he notes being a ‘miserable human being on a film set’ and having recurring panic attacks during film shoots (SAG-AFTRA Foundation 2016) corroborate his position as an actor against his will. Interestingly enough, statements that stress his discontent with acting more often than not end up tying into his breakthrough as an actor. As Grant makes clear: ‘I never for a moment thought I was someone who would be a leading man, especially in romantic comedies. That was never a genre I had any particular affection for, but that’s where I ended up’ (Blake 2020). In doing so, Grant also constructs a narrative that encourages a reading of his absence from acting not as a fall from fame, but rather as self-conscious and professionally-sound manoeuvre: ‘I’ve always been a reluctant actor. So taking a break wasn’t a great hardship, especially as I was so bound up in this political campaign’ (Yoshida 2019).

What Grant is rejecting here is not necessarily his star status, but the roles he had traditionally accepted. Repeatedly referring to the 1990s and 2000s as his ‘lost years’, Grant has no problem in reframing himself as unworthy of the fame bestowed upon him. This kind of self-deprecation has been long part of his persona, and it continues to work retroactively as Grant rewrites the more challenging phases of his career. When asked about the 1995 scandal in a recent interview, he even claimed that it was seeing his own performance in *Nine Months* that drove him to approach a sex worker (Harrison 2021). Grant has recently distanced himself from both his previous career and lifestyle. At the same time, his political and activist renown have coincided with his career revival. While this may seem antithetical, this shift in careers is as a matter of fact complementary. His work as an activist makes him more authentic, more critical and more professionally competent according to the press and the wider public. Or as the

response of Youtube commenter R R (2022) to an interview of David Letterman with Grant summarises:

What I love about Hugh is his honesty, his sense of humour, intelligence and charm. [...] His career survived and thrived because he always owned up to it and never made excuses. I think this has made him fearless esp (sic) now with his work with HackedOff and protecting people's privacy from press scrutiny. When he wired himself to become a whistleblower, my respect went up for this man 1000×

Grant also ties his political career with some of his previous roles and star image to generate electoral following. In a bid for tactical voting against Brexit, he tweeted ‘Young people – today is your last chance. Register to vote or I will make another enchanting romantic comedy’ (Grant 2019). Such statements also imply that Grant’s refusal of the romantic comedy is a deliberate choice. Under the guise of more adult matters such as politics and fatherhood, Grant has found a worthy exit from a life of leisure, luxury, and Hollywood fame in exchange for more serious matters. In this sense, Grant’s strategies of disavowal also play within a larger paradigm of successful ageing. His fatherhood is often referred to as what definitively changed his life, influences how and where he spends his time (Dennett 2020), and saved him from becoming ‘a scary old bachelor’ (Johnson 2020).

Grant’s turn to villains is accommodated within this same frame of newfound maturity. Romcom stars do not fare a happily-ever-after. Since the possibilities to adhere to the standards of hegemonic masculinity diminish with age, actors are less likely to be considered as objects of desire, having to find other roles (Shivers 2012). For Grant, this corresponds with a coming-

of-age as a person and an actor looking for more serious challenges, and allowing himself to pursue his passions: 'It's certainly been a blessed relief after having to be Mr. Nice Guy for so many years, which is a thankless task for any actor' (Gross 2020). However, Grant also hints at some type of consistency with his past, arguably in contradiction with the overarching career revival discourse: 'What I've been doing recently, films like *Paddington* and *The Gentlemen* is going back to something way back at the beginning of my career, when really what I did for a living was silly voices and character acting' (Zucherman 2020). While Grant is belittling his choice of 'silly voices and character acting', his choice of villain roles is in equal measure designed as means to be taken seriously as a professional actor.

Following Geraghty's (2007) star image typology, it can be argued that choosing villain roles has become a transitory act in which Grant is no longer mere star, nor professional, but an actual *performer*. As such, Grant's newfound acting persona becomes part of a redemptive arc in which, after years of functioning in the rigid structure of the romcom, he is finally enjoying the roles he is playing and is evolving as an actor. Promotional interviews tied to his villain performances further confirm this. He consistently talks about his apprehension regarding a prospective role, before ultimately accepting the challenge. For the role of a post-apocalyptic cannibal in *Cloud Atlas*, Grant points out that he felt at first incapacitated without 'witty lines' (Schaefer 2012). Despite considering himself a reluctant actor, Grant feels the need to emphasise how his acting has improved in the last decade. Stating that he has 'learned from his mistakes' (Gross 2020), he has exchanged elaborate preparation and studying for playful improvisation. His refusal to follow traditional career choices and industry rules as well as his activist work have lent Grant a new type of authenticity, as he implies. This is juxtaposed with the gratitude he has publicly expressed for receiving these roles: 'I've almost enjoyed some of the acting that I've done in the last six or seven years, which is very unlike me. It's nice to

break free of having to be a leading man in love, so it's been a bit more fun' (Heilbronn, 2020). As such, Grant refashions villain performances as something akin to actor craftsmanship: 'The darker, the better, as far as I'm concerned with characters. All actors prefer playing darker and more complex characters' (Radish 2020).

Grant's transformative abilities are read by the press as the mark of an actor with 'range'. His performance as the treacherous private investigator Forge Fletcher in *The Gentlemen*, for example, was generally well received because this crude, cockney-accented figure is a far cry from Grant's classical charming roles. Headlines such as 'From a dancing PM to a cockney PI' (Wallace 2021), 'Hugh Grant Puts on a Ridiculously Fun Cockney Accent' (BBCAmerica 2019), 'You won't believe that's Hugh Grant' (Oleksinski 2020) exemplify how Grant's unrecognisability was the film's biggest draw. The role of a slimy journalist has additional meta-textual meaning considering Grant's difficult relationship with the tabloid press. Similarly, many of his villain roles play with parts of his persona. For example, his performance in *A Very English Scandal* (2018) is explicitly tied to his experience in British politics, while *Paddington 2* takes a stab at his own image as a washed-up actor. Such performances sustain the idea of Grant as an actor who does not take himself too seriously, nor let his own ego get in the way of delivering a powerful performance.

Weaponizing charm

The career reorientation that Grant orchestrates with the promotional discourse and performative labour described above is further cemented by different creative agents that utilise Grant's star image to negotiate audience expectations. *Cloud Atlas* is a foundational text as the wide array of characters Grant plays here end up providing a launching pad for personas he would rely upon for the years to come. In the film, Grant plays a multitude of villains, including

a colonial preacher in the 18th century, a greedy energy executive in 1970s California, and a cockney-accented business owner in contemporary UK that sharply contrast with his pre-existing star image. In his performance as a futuristic slaveowner in Neo-Soul or as the cannibal Kona chief, Grant is unrecognisable under thick layers of prosthetic make-up and costume design. However, Grant's casting is perhaps instrumentalised to an even greater effect with the roles that allow him to recycle characteristics and mannerisms of previous performances. His turn as the corrupt energy company owner Lloyd Hooks is simply a variation of his leading man persona, only now inverted to take a turn as the villain. By cracking jokes, being overtly flirtatious, and showing his pristine white smile, Hooks is a creation which uses his charms for nefarious purposes. To see Grant bring together the same elements that made his past performances so endearing with ruthless execution and large-scale corruption produces an uneasy tension which *Cloud Atlas* eagerly explores.

Similar ambivalences between star image and type inversion are generated in *Paddington 2*. Here, Grant claims he was informally invited to play the antagonist Phoenix Buchanan with a letter by director Paul King, stating: 'We've come up with this role, of a kind of vain, washed-up old ham, whose best days are sort of behind him, his lips are sort of heading south along with his jawline, and we thought of you' (Yoshida 2019). The comic cruelty of this request aside, it is evident what King had in mind and why Grant's casting was essential to these aims. Buchanan is a faded star who has been doing dogfood commercials to provide his own subsistence. To claw his way back into the limelight, Buchanan resorts to a life of crime in search of a treasure stolen and buried by his magician grandfather. Grant directs his performance in such a manner that Buchanan blends both his leading-man persona and his updated star image as a downfallen celebrity. Both character and celebrity here become entangled and twisted in the direction of a figure whose charming performances are only

cloaking attention-hungry narcissism. While these elements conflate, the self-aware and self-effacing nature of this performance incorporates the different tics and traits that mostly define Grant as a celebrity, as seen performing in talk shows and other interviews. Grant's characteristic courteous modesty and wit are here on full display, yet separated from their charming nature or pushed to the limit.

What lays at the heart of Buchanan's villainhood is his feigned modesty. In his opening scene he is seen shunning applause as if undeserving of all this praise, only to encourage it again when the audience claps too little. Similarly, any attempt to seemingly diminish his own importance are an active effort to increase it. When stating 'Whatever I am, VIP, celebrity, hate all that stuff', Buchanan is ventriloquising the discourse of a reluctant actor unworthy of all this attention that Grant often performs as a celebrity himself. Meta-quiPs at his own expense here continuously function to coerce the audience into finding him charming. His apartment is riddled with pictures of his past roles and performances, directly referencing the very same 1990s persona that Grant himself attempts to steer away from. These strategies of inflating and deflating his star persona are hyperbolic variations of how Grant treats his own star image, or rather how he considers the world to do so. The clumsy confusion, nervous eyes coordination and long pauses in his depiction are archetypically Grant. The actions of Buchanan are eerie because we are never really sure when he is acting or not. Hence the film further thematises Grant's villainous nature in contrast to Paddington's heroism as a problem of authenticity. What makes Paddington as a children's film character so likeable is that he is devoid of any self-consciousness. Being kind-hearted and a bit simple, Paddington follows his instincts, but this selflessness and altruism often get him into trouble. Grant's character on the other hand is a creature built from the world in which Paddington has trouble fitting in. Being an actor,

Buchanan is all and only performance. Overly in touch with his persona, he uses his cutthroat mentality, charm, and charisma to put a spell on people.

The most effective use of the network of meaning attached to Grant's star image is his role as Jonathan Fraser in the HBO's miniseries *The Undoing*. During the first episode, Grant's character is presented as just another one of Grant's likeable leading men: a lifesaving child oncologist, a dedicated father, and a loving husband. For this role, Grant relies on several of his traditional strategies in eliciting charm. Quipping 'I don't know what kids these days have, get a vampire-bat' when his son asks for a dog, and trying to come up with motivational speeches in an endearingly-awkward manner, puts us in solid *About a Boy* (2002) territory. Similar to Grant's reluctant superstar status, Fraser is a successful and rich man that tries hard to convince his surroundings that he above all does not want to be the object of praise. These classical Grant-ish traits affectively reel in the audience to read Fraser as the hero of the story and a moral compass to use for the unfolding events. However, when the mother of one of Fraser's patients ends up brutally murdered, these empathic alliances are turned against the audience. For the remaining episodes, the suspicion placed on Fraser is something which follows a pendulum-like pattern as his kindness, calm, and remorse seem to increasingly clash with evidence of his guilt. Only in the final episode, when Fraser is unmasked as the murderer, we understand how his charms helped sustain a smokescreen that put him above suspicion. Similarly, Grant's romcom persona was channelled before being directed against the viewer in order to cultivate the uncertainty and narrative tension needed in the whodunnit genre.

Without Grant and the inter-textual connections to his past roles, the red herring of Fraser as a character would be less effective. As Grant notes himself: 'he is a lovely expensive cotton shirt you've worn many times, it's been well washed, it's very comfortable' (Zucherman 2020). As

such, Grant's legacy in performing a type of passive heroism give him more leeway to the knowledgeable viewer and allows Fraser to more convincingly victimise himself. Grant has a talent for evoking a type of helplessness in the face of difficult circumstances, struggling to verbalise his feelings in a bid to be understood. The sad boyish eyes, apologetic attitude, and sudden flairs of helplessness that give Grant an endearing presence are here magnified because of the charges put against him. However, director Susanne Bier complicates the familiarity of this performance. As she affirmed: 'When I was watching Hugh Grant in all the romantic comedies, I always thought there was a certain sadness to his light, charming performance. I thought there was a dark side to that performance' (Vanity Fair 2021). Not only does Bier use Grant's charms to such a degree that his guilt is neither obvious nor unpredictable, she also times the deployment of these charms in a manner that they are never a coercive defence mechanism, but rather a symptom of Fraser's narcissistic personality. What makes Fraser's guilt plausible is that the evidence of his narcissism was overtly present since the beginning, yet hard to spot because, as audiences, we have been socialised to positively evaluate Grant's charming persona. As a familiar image slightly out of focus, Fraser is a slightly distorted version of the characters we know and like. With a slower manner of speaking and deeper voice, Grant imbues Fraser with a greater authority than many of his previous characters. When Fraser loses his temper, or insinuates that his son might be the culprit, a hint is given that his charms might have sharp edges. The explode-and-conceal nature of Fraser's personality hints that his entire outward appearance might be but a performance, given his overly-sympathetic nature a slightly menacing quality. Whereas Grant's Prince Charming often seems too good to be true, he now effectively is.

Politicising charm

Grant does not simply let himself be cast against type, but has increasingly been going towards an inversion of the type he initially built his career on. This inversion allows for a politically-informed resistant reading of his past roles. In a way, Grant's performances have always hidden elements of the power structures he is embedded in. In contrast to Sweeney's (2001) reading of Grant's masculinity as reconciling the queer ambiguity of his presence with the hard body masculine standards of romantic leads, I argue that his star image should still be considered as a site of everyday power and privilege. While Grant's 1990s New Man masculinity was positively evaluated at the time (Burns 2011), the Prince Charming/English gentleman persona fits into a certain discourse of chivalry in which Grant's charm still works to reaffirm patriarchal standards. As such, the power relations Grant finds himself involved in are often left unacknowledged — most obviously present in the #MeToo-qualities of his romantic subplot in *Love Actually* (2003). As Benoit (1997) asserts, the same applies for Grant's star image. By his charming kindness and humility, Grant succeeded in salvaging his own reputation in the 1995 celebrity scandal. Burton and Chibnall detail how this 'career-threatening arrest [...] was thrust aside, and the notoriety was absorbed into the star's appealing set of traits' (2013, p. 187). Grant could simply continue to be 'every foreigner's favorite Englishman' (ibid).

His characteristically soft masculinity is moreover often transferred to the site of nationalist politics. By drawing on cultural stereotypes that aim to appeal to audiences in the USA and Britain alike, a type of English innocence is constructed. As Higson (2010) points out, the innocent, sophisticated English persona is often juxtaposed with American masculinity, typified by a certain rudeness and extroversion, be it in the shape of an emancipated American love interest (*Four Weddings*), or a more assertive American rival (*Love Actually*). The

nationalist connotations of Grant's persona become even more apparent when we take a look at the interconnection of race and class. In the context of Grant's heritage performances in films as *The Remains of a Day*, Grant functions as signifier for imperial Englishness, since the English wealth of these films was built and sustained by the nation's colonial histories (Hall and Rose 2006, Colls 2002). Following from Higson, the archetype of the upper-middle-class gentleman that Grant performs is a powerful cultural myth that has resonated since the 16th century in English popular culture. Tied to this is an understanding of Englishness that 'tends to draw on upper-class English traditions of aristocratic wealth, Establishment politics and private school education' (2010, p. 27). Whether the dandy Edward Ferrars in *Sense and Sensibility* or his prime minister persona of *Love Actually*, Grant's characters are often clothed in privilege and devoted to love and leisure. Even when Grant is supposed to be the 'everyman', he is still defined by those very same signifiers of aristocratic wealth and private school education.

Grant's charms are a key aspect in this process of neutralising power, both in relation to Grant as a performer sustaining his own star image and to his characters in their personal endeavours. Here, charm becomes a mode of address that can function as a type of affective strategy in which problems are dismantled and criticisms deflected. However, charm also works as a double-edged sword since it can direct attention to its own form. Grant's star image has always had something uncanny precisely because of his capacity to be equally kind, pleasant, and well-articulated. A degree of narcissism always underlies charm. The will to be seen and an eagerness to please generates uneasy tensions that makes unclear whether a given action is authentic, or simply the means to an end. In this sense, aspects of vanity, slickness, and arrogance have always inflected Grant's performances. During the early 2000s, Grant started taking more liberties with his character persona and became increasingly aware of these

sympathetic/antipathic tensions. In *Bridget Jones: Edge of Reason* (2004), and *American Dreamz* (2006), for example, Grant takes his first steps towards something resembling a villain by playing a more predatory version of his romantic leads. The charm the actor commonly displays has a toxic tinge to it as we see that his seductions aim to keep young women in his grasp. In *American Dreamz* particularly, Grant's warm, alluring smile, so often a central part of his performance becomes a means to entrap people in his charms. The England/US relationship is here inverted since the naive but well-hearted USA is a counterpoint for his showbiz cynicism.

Similarly, the villain coding of Grant's persona opens a discursive space to politicise and problematise the power relations that are intimately entwined with the position of the English gentleman. Although it predates his romcom performances, *Bitter Moon* (1992), for example, interestingly subverts many of the roles Grant would continue playing. With Nigel, Polanski launches an assault against the myth of the English gentleman in which the sophistication and politeness become symptomatic of the lustful gazes of the voyeur. The stiff upper lip and courteous behaviour reveal a psychosexual form of repression. Although Nigel acts in a polite, bourgeois manner to his wife, he gravitates towards the American Oscar's crude stories of sexual addiction. The English upper-class society Nigel represents thus becomes a symbol of hollow appearance and internal hypocrisy. While Nigel at first appears as a civilised dandy disgusted by the primal urges Oscar stands for, he displays the same type of dark desires and acts accordingly. Grant's villainous performance in *Cloud Atlas* as a colonial preacher or the *Undoing's* psychopath murderer debunk similar myths vested in upper-class privilege and moral authority. During an opening dinner conversation, his *Cloud Atlas* preacher is at first a sympathetic authority figure, both generous and welcoming. Once the conversation lands on equal rights for slaves and women, the appalling nature of his colonial and misogynist views

clash with the charming tone of his delivery. Here, Grant is both a creature of pleasing sociability and violent dehumanisation. In line with his other roles in *Cloud Atlas*, Grant's performance highlights that a pleasant and charming demeanour is not antithetical to such attitudes. In fact, they are the guise under which true villainy and power abuse often take form.

However, in contrast to a British national villainhood which has become synonymous with refinement and masculine charisma, as displayed in the Jaguar campaign, Grant's villains are despicable and sad figures that clutch at straws to keep the waning British empire together. In a more oblique manner, Grant's persona in Charlie Brooker's *Death to 2020* (2020) offers a successful antithesis to the English gentleman in the shape of Tennyson Foss, a history professor being interviewed about the historical developments of the previous year. Here, Grant performs the Oxford-type expert, an emblem of English upper-class authority. Donning classic signifiers of the English professor, such as the tweed suit, mild manners, a feigned humility, Foss is the embodiment of a long-standing archetype with great cultural authority. However, the position such characters often play in talking head style end-of-the-year overviews as arbiters of truth and fact is subverted by highlighting the bigotry, bias, and incompetence of the character. Being smug, Foss consistently emphasises his own expertise ('those who have closely studied the history books, such as myself') and smiles at his own intelligence and wit. Yet, when looking beyond the authority the documentary genre traditionally bestows on him, it becomes clear that his facts are entirely distorted or just made up. Mistaking the likes of *Game of Thrones* and *Star Wars* for actual history, he is clearly not in a position to offer historical elucidation, but simply there because of the privileges he was born with. While these counter-truths are partially comedic, the interview takes a darker turn when his own political judgements start to shine through. Stating in his characteristic calm that he is critical of the Black Lives Matter movement because he believes 'all lives matter' and that young people

tearing down statues are ‘tearing down history’, it becomes apparent that the guise of expert gives a platform to his racist views as knowledge. This is further made clear by Foss’s awareness that the form of the program gives him this power. When being contradicted, he violently insists to ‘shut up and move on’ and ‘cut to a map or something’, showing how he relies on the formal affordances of the documentary to elude contradiction. This Oxford professor is not the noble keeper of expertise, but a dangerous anachronism clothed in white privilege.

Conclusion

While being type-casted as the villain is commonly considered a risk in the film industry, this article has argued that villain stardom is a far more complex phenomenon, which offers actors the opportunity to renegotiate their public persona and help to recalibrate their career trajectory. Grant’s turn to villains is an exemplary case study of how star images can be revived and attributed new meanings through type inversion. In this sense, Grant’s career re-orientation should be understood as a conscious and well-managed bid at disavowing his pre-existing star image as the romantic leading (gentle)man in favour of a more talented and professional performer. By branding himself a reluctant actor, Grant inscribes his years of fame and his disappearance from acting alike in a new narrative of personal and professional redemption. While Grant contributed to engineer this new positionality through promotional discourses, directors, casting agents, and screenwriters alike have further aided him in this reorientation by setting up an arena in which Grant could interact with the star image commonly associated with him. Lastly, I have argued that this type-inversion can be considered an invitation to subvert some of the discursive positions Grant’s acting roles were previously embedded within.

Refusing to simply play the part of the suave and sophisticated British bad guy, Grant's distinct villain performances offer critical readings of the upper-class, patriarchal, and nationalist sentiments that he often embodied during the earlier parts of his career. The villain archetype is a means to rework the social acceptability of the gentleman-archetype. During Brexit-era UK and amidst a resurgence of English-exceptionalism in popular cinema (Archer 2020), this discursive work should be seen of particular importance. Nevertheless, as is common in the negative pedagogies of villain performances, not all these roles can be seen as equally progressive. Queer-phobic sentiments can, for example, be spotted in his performance in *The Gentleman*. While built on a similar type-inversion of other roles, this also displays the limitations that such morally ambiguous character work can do. One wonders whether Grant's performances distance audiences from his villains' values, or if his charisma overpowers these characters' negative aspects. As with his vain villain characters, Grant seems to be cemented in those very charms he claims to be so eager to escape from.

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