

FEATURE

Why the Villain Looks Like That

A structured count of Bond and Batman's villains, a decades-old visual habit, and the long gap between a stereotype being named in writing and meaningful change.

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By **Accibly Editorial Team** · ⌚ 27 min read

Executive Summary

For decades, popular film has used disability, disfigurement, and bodily nonconformity as part of the visual grammar of villainy, most concentrated in action and fantasy films. Structured counts of both James Bond and Batman, built independently, point the same way: between roughly a quarter and a little over a third of principal antagonists carry a visible bodily marker, not the near universal pattern popular belief assumes, and even within that minority, several of the most cited examples don't say what they're widely believed to say: three commonly named Batman villains never appear in a single live-action film, and Nolan's Two-Face carried his nickname before the injury that gave it a face. Mainstream film has had a working alternative since at least the 1940s; Harold Russell won two Academy Awards for a 1946 film, playing a disabled veteran whose body carried no moral verdict at all. Controlled research shows villain-framed exposure can measurably shift attitudes in the short term, with no evidence for

the stronger claim that decades of repetition compound into proven cumulative harm. The stereotype had been explicitly identified in writing by 1977, and the first formal institutional response this investigation identified came in 2018, covering one funding body in one country, with no equivalent industry-wide standard beyond it. The investigation's core finding is institutional, not psychological: an industry that has kept using the convention for decades after the stereotype was identified in writing, not from conspiracy, but from unexamined habit.

The first time you see Silva in *Skyfall*, he is a voice before he is a face, a story before he is a body. He walks the length of an abandoned corridor at a leisurely pace, delivers a monologue about rats eating each other on a starving island, and only then, almost as an afterthought, removes a prosthetic dental plate to reveal a jaw eaten away by a suicide attempt gone wrong. Nobody needed a diagram explaining that this man was dangerous. The audience had already decided, sometime in the previous ninety seconds, that something was wrong with him, and the reveal simply confirmed a verdict already delivered.

That is the mechanism worth investigating. Not whether disfigured villains exist in movies, which is obvious, but what work the disfigurement is actually doing. If you erase it and keep everything else, the dialogue, the plan, the grudge, the violence, does the character still register as a threat in the same way? Sometimes the answer is yes, almost nothing changes. Sometimes the answer is no, the entire scene collapses without it. The interesting part is that the answer changes from character to character, film to film, decade to decade, and the pattern has been named in writing for far longer than the industry has acted on it.

| The Franchise Everyone Remembers Wrong

James Bond is the reflexive example. Ask anyone to name a franchise that makes its villains look damaged and half the room will say Bond before you finish the question. Blofeld's scar, Silva's jaw, Safin's burned face. The assumption is that this is close to universal, that nearly every man Bond has ever fought has worn some visible mark of what makes him evil.

Actually counting changes the picture substantially. Across the whole official film series, from Dr. No's disfigured, mechanically-handed villain in 1962 through Safin's chemical burns six decades later, this investigation's own count finds just over a quarter, seven of twenty-five, of the franchise's principal villains carry a visible bodily marker the film treats as part of their villainy. Most do not. Goldfinger is coded through obsession and greed, not disfigurement. Jaws is closer to a monster-movie creature than a study in disability. Trevelyan and Greene commit their crimes with unmarked bodies; Le Chiffre does not. The eye that weeps blood through his poker scenes is one of the clearer marked examples once the actual films are checked rather than remembered. The folklore overstates the pattern inside the one franchise most associated with it, and that overstatement is itself worth noticing. A piece of cultural common knowledge turns out to be checkable, and once checked, smaller than everyone assumed, even accounting for a small number of genuinely close classification calls that could move the figure closer to a fifth or closer to two fifths depending on how they are drawn.

What survives the correction is narrower and more interesting than the folklore. Silva and Safin show a narrower version of the pattern. In both cases, facial difference is made visually prominent and tied to a history of harm done to the character by others: institutional betrayal in Silva's case and the murder of Safin's family in his. That is a more precise claim than "disfigurement makes you evil." It is closer to "a damaged face works as shorthand for a damaged history," which is its own problem, just a different one. A 2025 peer-reviewed analysis of 250 top-grossing American and Indian films found the same shape at a larger scale: visible facial difference in villains concentrates specifically in action and fantasy films, not across cinema generally, and

villains' markings are larger and more centrally placed than heroes'. Across the study period, the number of villains with facial differences remained stable, while heroes with facial differences increased. Bond is not an outlier. It is a clean instance of a pattern that shows up reliably once you know where to look, and much less reliably everywhere else.

Bond's producers have never pretended this is subtle, and they have not treated it as a closed chapter either. Asked in 2012 why the disfigured villain keeps recurring, producer Michael G. Wilson called it "very much a Fleming device... the idea that physical deformity and personality deformity goes hand in hand," tracing it to the novels rather than to any modern editorial decision. But he did not describe it as a habit the franchise had simply failed to notice. In the same answer he confirmed the producers still reach for it on purpose: "It's something we use from time to time... when it seems appropriate." That is a different claim than inherited residue nobody thought to question. It is a working tool the franchise's then-producers kept in their kit, by Wilson's own 2012 account, using it deliberately when it seemed appropriate. Wilson stepped back from producing, and his longtime co-producer Barbara Broccoli said it was time to focus on her other projects, as Amazon MGM Studios gained creative control of the Bond franchise in a deal that closed in March 2025. The new creative team is now identifiable: Amy Pascal and David Heyman are producing the next film, Denis Villeneuve is directing, and Steven Knight is writing. Whether the convention continues under that stewardship is not something Wilson's 2012 statement can settle, and this investigation found no comparable statement yet from Amazon MGM itself. Accibly Insights asked Amazon MGM Studios on September 14, 2026, for comment on its current approach to villain design and any related review practices, requesting a response by September 25, 2026; no response had been received as of October 6, 2026.

| A Different Shape of the Same Habit

Batman looks, at first glance, like it should tell the same story with more characters. Two-Face, Penguin, Mr. Freeze, Bane, Killer Croc, the Joker in most of his versions: a rogues' gallery that reads, from memory, like a catalogue of damaged bodies. Building an actual list, film by film, across every theatrical live-action Batman movie from 1966 to 2022, breaks that memory in a specific way. Killer Croc, Clayface, and Man-Bat, three of the characters people reach for first, have never appeared in a single live-action Batman film. The association exists in animation and comics, not in the movies people are picturing when they make the claim.

Counting the nineteen characters who function as principal antagonists across the nine films in that corpus, seven carry a clear visible bodily difference and twelve do not, including the lead villains of *Batman Begins*, *The Dark Knight Rises*, and *The Batman*. That count uses a strict definition of bodily difference: visible equipment alone does not qualify unless the film also establishes a visible alteration of the body itself. That ratio, just over a third, lands close enough to Bond's just over a quarter that the convergence is worth taking seriously on its own terms. Two franchises, counted independently, arrive at a similar minority.

The more useful finding is what happens when you check what each film actually says rather than what people remember it saying. Aaron Eckhart's Harvey Dent in *The Dark Knight* is the case people cite as the clean example, a good man an accident turns evil. The film complicates one part of that story: the name comes first. Before the accident, Dent jokes to Gordon that he has heard the officers in Gordon's unit, cops he once investigated at Internal Affairs, have a different nickname for him. After it, he makes Gordon say the name aloud: 'Two-Face. Harvey Two-Face.' The chemical burn gives the nickname a face. It does not create the nickname. On the film's own terms, the name predates the injury; the accident supplies its visual form and the persona built on top of it, not the name itself.

Batman also contains the sharpest available evidence that a marked body and a moral verdict are two separate things a film chooses to connect, not one

automatic consequence of the other. In *The Dark Knight Rises*, Bruce Wayne spends the film's opening stretch limping on a cane, and a doctor examining his X-rays tells him he has no cartilage left in his knee, scar tissue on his kidneys, and residual damage from old concussions. He only stops using the cane once he straps on a powered knee brace built to let him fight again. He and Bane, his opponent, carry versions of the same thing at different points in the same film: chronic pain, a mechanical aid, a body that has been broken and only partly repaired. One reads as a hero's endurance. The other reads as a monster's dependency. Nothing about either body decides that on its own. The film decides it, by which role each man is playing.

The franchise has, at points, argued with itself about this out loud. In *The Batman*, the film's most corrupt figure, the mob boss Falcone, dismisses Oz Cobblerpot in his final words as "just a gimp in an empty suit," a line the script itself frames as a public humiliation, delivered by a man moments from being shot dead. Batman does not present one uncomplicated version of the pattern this investigation is testing. It presents the pattern, and in the same films, occasionally the argument against it.

| The Other Side of the Ledger

Disability and disfigurement are one way film tells an audience how to feel about a body, not the only one. One careful test of this question, from research on what is often called the halo effect, found something the popular idea gets backwards. It is not that beauty reliably reads as good. It is that unattractiveness reads as bad more often than beauty reads as good: unattractiveness carries a heavier penalty than beauty carries reward. That finding comes from ratings of a small set of photographed faces, and it describes a different mechanism than "Hollywood rewards beautiful people."

Disability is one of several visual and narrative devices films can use to signal danger; it is not the whole explanation, and treating it as the whole explanation would be its own kind of oversimplification.

| Where the Idea Came From

None of this started with movies. In the late eighteenth century, a Swiss pastor named Johann Kaspar Lavater won a reputation across Europe with essays on physiognomy, the claim that a person's face revealed their inner character, and by the following century an Italian criminologist named Cesare Lombroso was arguing that a class of born criminals could be recognized by physical anomalies, views that were widely influential in Europe for a time and are now largely discredited. Literature ran through the same idea for a century before film existed. Mary Shelley's creature is rejected on sight before he does anything wrong. Robert Louis Stevenson makes Mr. Hyde's smaller, uglier body the visible proof of Dr. Jekyll's hidden evil. Notably, several of the same texts argue with the convention even as they use it. Oscar Wilde's Dorian Gray stays beautiful while his portrait rots, an explicit rebuke to the idea that a face tells the truth about a soul.

Film inherited this vocabulary early. This investigation did not independently verify a documented scholarly account of exactly how physiognomic assumptions moved from nineteenth-century pseudoscience and literature into early cinema; the historical sequence is suggestive, and a direct line of influence is plausible, but this piece cannot responsibly claim that transmission was established rather than inferred. By the time Fleming was writing his novels and the first Batman films were putting prosthetics on actors, the convention was already more than a century old in literature and the visual arts. Nobody working on these films invented the idea that a damaged face signals a damaged character. They inherited it, the way a house style gets inherited, and mostly kept using it.

| Taking the Mark Away

There is a simple test worth applying to any of these characters. Take the bodily marker away. Leave the dialogue, the plan, the motive, the violence

exactly as written. Ask whether the character still reads as a threat in the same way.

Sometimes the answer is close to yes. Take the scars off Heath Ledger's Joker and the character's actual menace, unstable, offering two contradictory stories about his own face and letting the audience trust neither, survives almost entirely intact. The scars make the lies possible to tell. They do not do the explaining. Take the mask off Tom Hardy's Bane and you lose a great deal of physical menace, but the ideology, the loyalty, and the twist that he is not actually the mastermind all remain exactly where they were.

Sometimes the answer is closer to no. Take away Danny DeVito's Penguin, his flippers and his birth-story rejection, and the entire plot, an abandoned man's revenge on Gotham for being thrown away at birth, has no engine left. The body is not decoration in that film. It is the motive.

The test does not prove anyone intended harm. Television offers a useful, concrete example of the opposite. When Doctor Who brought back its classic villain Davros in 2023, the production removed the character's facial scarring and the mobility device that had defined him for decades, with the show's writer explaining afterward that the team had grown uncomfortable with a scarred, disabled villain as shorthand for evil, and that attitudes had simply moved on since the character was created in the 1970s. Nobody at the BBC in the 1970s was accused of a plot. A production team decades later looked at an inherited design and decided it no longer wanted to make it. That is what the removal test is actually useful for: not assigning blame, but identifying exactly where a body is carrying weight a story could carry some other way.

| The Industry Already Knew Another Way

Since at least the 1940s, filmmakers have had a working alternative. In 1946, a real World War II veteran named Harold Russell, who had lost both hands in a training accident and had never acted professionally, was cast in *The Best*

Years of Our Lives as a returning soldier whose disability is central to the story, the fear it caused him, the adjustment it demanded of the people who loved him, without ever being treated as evidence of danger or moral corruption. The film gives him doubt, tenderness, and real difficulty, and lets his body carry all of it without turning that body into a verdict on his character. He left the following year's Academy Awards with two Oscars for the same performance, the competitive award for Best Supporting Actor, and a separate honorary award citing him "for bringing hope and courage to his fellow veterans through his appearance" in the film.

The tradition did not stop there. The clearer counter-tradition sits elsewhere: Furiosa's amputated arm is a plain fact of her body in a story where it never explains or excuses anything about who she is. Hiccup's amputated leg in How to Train Your Dragon shapes how he moves and fights without the story ever treating it as something to apologize for or resolve. Regan, the deaf teenager at the center of A Quiet Place, is one of the film's protagonists, not its threat.

Two different clocks are running here, and they should not be confused. One clock measures capability: how long mainstream film has been able to portray disability and visible difference without turning either into moral evidence, which Russell's Oscars for a 1946 film set about as early as it could plausibly be set. That clock does not require believing 1940s Hollywood understood modern disability politics. It only requires noticing the industry has had a working alternative since at least the 1940s. The second clock measures notice, and it runs on a different, later schedule.

| What the Evidence Actually Says

Before turning to that second clock, it would be easy to move from the pattern already described to a stronger claim than the research supports, so it is worth being exact about where the evidence stops.

In a 2026 controlled experiment, a small group of adults, including university students, were shown images of well-known movie villains with visible facial differences, including the Joker and Voldemort, each paired with a caption describing the character's crimes. A comparable group saw real people with visible differences smiling, captioned the way visible-difference influencers describe themselves online. Self-reported stigma rose measurably in the group shown the villain images and did not shift significantly in the group shown the positive ones. The study's own authors flag an honest limitation worth keeping: the negative images were paired with descriptions of murder and violence, not descriptions of the visible difference itself, so the experiment cannot cleanly separate "a scarred face" from "a scarred face committing crimes." Voldemort is a useful reminder here of a distinction this investigation has tried to hold onto throughout: his snake-like face is an explicit, textual consequence of the dark magic he chooses to perform, not a disability or disfigurement in any sense that belongs in this piece, and the story states that causation directly, which is rarer than it sounds. What the experiment actually shows is narrower than "movies make people biased": a controlled exposure to villain-coded facial difference can measurably affect attitudes in the specific experimental setting studied. A much larger analysis of media portrayals of other social groups entirely found that negative portrayals increased prejudice and positive ones reduced it; the negative effect was numerically larger, but the difference between the two was not statistically significant. The two studies converge on the finding that negative portrayals can deepen stigma. They differ on the positive condition: the larger meta-analysis found positive portrayals reduced prejudice, while the smaller visible-difference experiment found no significant improvement.

What the evidence does not show matters just as much. This investigation found no study establishing that decades of villain-coded disfigurement have caused real-world discrimination against disabled people. The idea that repetition compounds harm the longer it continues, intuitive as it sounds, is not supported by the research reviewed here. A large meta-analysis of research on heavy television viewing finds only a small association with

viewers' beliefs, one that has stayed stable across five decades rather than growing. None of this is subliminal in any scientific sense. What the research supports is narrower, and still worth taking seriously: in that one experiment, negative framing produced a measurable shift in self-reported stigma that the positive comparison condition did not reverse, and decades of a recurring convention is a fact about how long an industry has kept a habit, not proof of how much cumulative effect it has actually had.

| The People the Shorthand Is About

Everything so far describes what happens to general audiences watching a screen. It says nothing about what it is like to be the person whose face the shorthand is borrowed from.

In 2021, the pollster Savanta ComRes interviewed 1,081 UK adults who described themselves as having a mark, scar, or condition that makes them look different, most commonly scarring, birthmarks, and skin conditions, for the charity Changing Faces. Asked whether they had ever seen a character with a visible difference portrayed in various ways on screen, 39 percent said villain, 33 percent said victim, 27 percent said positive role model, 20 percent said hero, and 15 percent said love interest. The villain figure is the one that circulates, but the full list matters more than the headline: negative and pitying portrayals cluster at the top of what people report seeing, heroic and romantic ones cluster nearer the bottom, and the gap is real without being as stark as "villain or nothing" suggests. This is self-reported recall from a charity-commissioned poll, not a count of what is actually on screen, and it should be read that way.

What that survey cannot capture, other research fills in with more precision. A study of 185 Americans aged 11 to 18 with facial differences, matched against their mothers' independent answers, found that more than a third had noticed people staring at their face in the past week, and one in five had been teased about it in the past month. A separate field experiment sent matched job

applications, identical except for a disclosed facial difference or wheelchair use, to real vacancies, and found applicants with a facial difference were turned down more often specifically for jobs involving high levels of customer contact. Neither of these studies is about movies. They establish that the stakes this investigation keeps circling, being stared at, avoided, judged less capable, are not hypothetical.

Whether the movies contribute to that is a harder question than either side of the debate usually admits. Researchers who study this describe it as a form of structural stigma: media representation can draw on existing stigma while also helping keep familiar stereotypes culturally available, without needing to be where the stigma originated. That is a claim about a stereotype staying available and unremarkable, not a claim that a specific film caused a specific act of discrimination, and no study in this investigation, including the strongest one, closes that gap. What exists instead is testimony. The actor Adam Pearson, who has neurofibromatosis, put it plainly in 2014: using facial difference as shorthand for evil is "always used very lazily." He also criticized casting actors without facial differences and giving them prosthetic scars, contrasting that practice with the uproar blackface would cause: "with scars and stuff, it seems like people are cool with that." A decade later, discussing *A Different Man*, he made the more careful version of the same point: "In order to challenge stereotypes they first need to establish they exist." The writer Tess Buckley, who has facial paralysis, frames the ask in terms this investigation's own findings support better than a blanket objection would: "This doesn't mean never depicting a villain with a facial difference, but rather ensuring a diversity of roles for characters with facial differences and avoiding simplistic visual coding of morality." Nobody making these arguments is asking for disabled characters to be limited to being liked.

That last distinction is the one worth holding onto through everything that follows.

The pattern has been named and criticized in writing for a long time.

In 1977, an article in the Interracial Books for Children Bulletin explicitly named "sinister and/or evil" as a recurring stereotype in the portrayal of disabled people, drawing on classic literature as well as films and television, including the limping villains of Dirty Harry and The Sting. In 1985, the disabled historian Paul Longmore published "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People" in Social Policy. In 1992, the British Council of Organisations of Disabled People, an organization run by and for disabled people, published media-specific guidance naming villain-coding as a stereotype to avoid, setting out principles for how books, film, television and the press represent disabled people.

The first formal industry action this investigation identified was narrow. In 2018, the British Film Institute committed to not funding films with negative representations depicted through scars or facial difference, following a campaign by the charity Changing Faces. As far as this investigation could establish, no other film funding body anywhere adopted an equivalent funding-conditioned policy naming this specific convention. BFI's current Diversity Standards resources explicitly preserve the pledge not to have negative characters depicted through scars or facial difference in the films it funds. The formal criteria do not name scar-based villain coding as a standalone criterion, but the commitment now sits inside BFI's current Diversity Standards guidance.

None of this requires believing any individual filmmaker set out to harm disabled people. What it establishes is that disability-led scholarship and guidance identified this exact pattern in media specifically, in writing, by 1992 at the latest, and that the first formal film-industry action this investigation identified came twenty-six years later. Intent was never really the interesting question here. Responsibility after the pattern was named is.

| An Old Habit, Not a Plan

The most honest explanation for why this convention persists is also the least dramatic one. A visible marker is a fast way to identify a threat in a crowded scene, faster than dialogue, and genre filmmaking has relied on that kind of shorthand for decades. Franchises inherit designs from earlier source material, prosthetic and makeup departments have their own craft traditions that reward dramatic transformation, and a risk-averse studio system tends to repeat whatever worked last time rather than reconsidering it. None of these are excuses. They are also not evidence of a coordinated industry conspiracy, and this investigation found none. What it found instead looks like institutional inertia: a fragmented industry in which one funding body made one narrow, funding-conditioned commitment, and, as far as this investigation could establish, no other funding body adopted an equivalent policy.

| What Would Actually Change It

The evidence points toward a few specific, workable changes rather than a general call for more sensitivity.

A character does not arrive on screen fully formed. It passes through a script draft, then concept art, then decisions about costume, prosthetics, and makeup, then casting, then whatever review a studio runs before greenlighting a design, sometimes marketing after that. The removal test can be applied at any of those points, not only by a critic afterward. The question at each stage is the same one this investigation kept asking: does the story need this marker to do the work it is doing, or is the marker standing in for work the story has not actually done. If a production can answer that, the marker survives on its own terms. If the honest answer is closer to "it makes the character look more threatening," the production has simply rediscovered the convention this investigation has been tracing since Bond, without ever deciding whether to keep it. The Davros redesign, already discussed, is one recorded instance of a production reaching exactly that fork and choosing differently.

Authentic disability casting is one area where measurable change has been documented. Ruderman Family Foundation research found authentic casting rising from 5% in its 2016 top-show sample to 12% in the comparable 2018 top-show sample. Its broader 2018 census of 284 shows found 21.6% of disabled characters were portrayed authentically across network and streaming television. This investigation cannot establish what caused the increase. That change concerned who gets cast. This investigation found no comparably measured intervention aimed at how characters are written and designed, and that gap, not a lack of goodwill, looks like the real opening.

None of this means disabled or visibly different characters should be barred from villainy. Disabled people are entitled to the same full range of fictional behavior as anyone else, heroic, mediocre, funny, cruel, ordinary. The distinction worth holding onto is between a villain who happens to be disabled and a villain whose disability is doing the explaining. The harder and more valuable goal is not more positive representation as a category. It is representation in which a character's body simply does not carry moral information at all, the kind Harold Russell got to have in 1946. In the survey evidence available, heroic and romantic portrayals were recalled less often than villainous ones.

| The Final Question

Silva's jaw, the moment that opens this piece, is not proof of anything on its own. It is one choice, in one film, in a tradition that started long before movies existed and has never been uniform even within it. What the choice reveals, once you go looking for the pattern behind it, is smaller than the folklore claims and more stubborn than a single bad decision. The stereotype was identified in writing more than four decades before the first formal industry commitment this investigation identified, and even that commitment covers one country, one funding body, and no equivalent standard anywhere else in the industry. Meanwhile, by its own producers' account, the Bond franchise kept the device in use, not out of ignorance but, in its producer's words,

"when it seems appropriate." The next time a villain's face tells you who to fear before he has said a word, the more interesting question is not whether the filmmakers meant it. It is why an industry still keeps reaching for a shorthand that has been named and criticized in writing for decades.

Analysis

The strongest evidence in this investigation is not psychological, it is institutional. The audience-effects research is real but bounded: a single controlled experiment shows villain-framed exposure to visible difference can measurably shift self-reported stigma, and a larger, separate meta-analysis finds negative mediated portrayals of other groups increase prejudice while positive ones reduce it, with no significant difference between the two effects. Neither result, nor anything else gathered here, establishes that decades of film exposure have caused real-world discrimination. What is far better evidenced, because it rests on primary documents rather than experimental inference, is a timeline: education-sector scholarship naming the stereotype by 1977, Paul Longmore's 1985 essay "Screening Stereotypes: Images of Disabled People," media-specific guidance from a disabled-led British organization naming villain-coding specifically by 1992, and a 2018 funding pledge from the British Film Institute that, as far as this investigation could establish, is not matched by an equivalent funding-conditioned policy at any other film body; BFI's current Diversity Standards guidance preserves that pledge, though its formal criteria do not name scar-based villain coding as a standalone criterion. Two case

studies, examined at the level of a full population rather than a handful of famous examples, both found the popular version of the claim smaller than believed: just over a quarter of Bond's principal antagonists and just over a third of Batman's carry a visible bodily marker, not most, and several of the specific examples people reach for first don't hold up against the actual films: three well known Batman villains never appear in them, and Two-Face's nickname predates the injury that gave it a face. None of this supports a claim of coordinated industry intent. It supports a narrower and more durable one: an inherited convention, openly continued by its own practitioners as recently as 2012, that has been identified in writing for over four decades, and named in media-specific guidance since 1992, without the industry building any equivalent industry-wide standard beyond one funding body's commitment.

Industry Impact

For film funders, studios, and awards bodies, the clearest actionable gap this investigation found is structural rather than attitudinal: the industry responses to disability representation verified here, inclusion standards and funding commitments, address who gets cast, how many disabled characters appear, or stereotypes generally, and, apart from BFI's funding commitment, none explicitly addresses how a character's bodily difference is written to signal danger or corruption. Authentic disability casting is one area where measurable change has been documented: Ruderman Family Foundation research found authentic casting rising from 5% in its 2016 top-show sample to 12% in the comparable 2018 top-show sample, and its broader 2018 census of 284 shows found 21.6% of disabled characters portrayed authentically. This investigation cannot establish what caused the increase, and it concerned casting, not portrayal. No comparable,

measured effort targeting character design or writing was found anywhere in this investigation. Existing enforceable inclusion standards can address stereotypes generally, as BFI's Standard A does by requiring casting choices that challenge tropes and stereotypes, but none of the standards reviewed by this investigation explicitly names bodily difference used as villain shorthand.

| Practical Takeaways

Next time a villain's visible difference registers as a threat before he speaks, ask what the removal test would show: does the story actually need that marker, or is it borrowing it as a shortcut.

The strongest psychological finding here is not that beauty signals goodness, it is that unattractiveness more often carries the penalty in how real people are judged than beauty carries a reward.

Positive representation and ordinary representation are different goals; the harder, more valuable one is a character whose body simply does not carry moral information either way.

| Recommended Actions

RECOMMENDED ACTIONS

Apply the removal test at the script and character-design stage, before a look is locked, and require a stated justification when a bodily marker survives that test.

Bring the kind of measurement now applied to authentic disability casting to how characters are written and designed, since this investigation found no comparably measured effort focused on writing and design.

Where funding or awards bodies already maintain enforceable inclusion standards, add a provision explicitly addressing bodily difference used as villain shorthand, since none of the standards reviewed by this investigation names it, even where, as in BFI's Standard A, stereotypes are addressed generally.

Original Research

Accibly's full census of official Eon theatrical James Bond films finds that just over a quarter, 28% (7 of 25), of principal antagonists carry a visible bodily marker tied to villainy, based on the strongest defensible classification of two genuinely close cases; a wider, less selective reading that counted every close case regardless of strength would span a theoretical range of one fifth to two fifths.

Original Accibly analysis, not drawn from any external published source. Corpus: official Eon theatrical James Bond films, Dr. No (1962) through No Time to Die (2021), 25 films. Five characters required close classification calls (Largo, Scaramanga, Stromberg, Renard, Le Chiffre); each was evaluated individually rather than bucketed together. Two (Largo's permanent eye injury, Le Chiffre's repeatedly shown bleeding-eye scar) have strong, principled cases for counting as marked and are included in the primary result. Three (Scaramanga's unshown supernumerary nipple, Stromberg's unemphasized webbed fingers, Renard's externally invisible pain insensitivity) have weak cases and remain unmarked. Primary result: 7 of 25 (28%). Theoretical outer bounds, disclosed as sensitivity only: 5 of 25 (20%) if none of the five close cases are counted, 10 of 25 (40%) if all five are counted regardless of individual strength. An earlier version of this statistic incorrectly described this range as 'roughly a quarter to a third,' which does not follow mathematically from 20% and 40%; that error has been corrected. Full methodology, the complete character-level table, and the per-case reasoning are preserved internally in this article's research brief (Accibly Bond Villain Corpus).

Accibly's census of 19 principal antagonists across nine theatrical live-action Batman films, 1966 through The Batman (2022), finds 7, or 36.8%, carry a visible bodily difference under the article's strict classification rule.

Original Accibly analysis, not drawn from any external published source. Corpus: nine Batman-titled theatrical live-action films, 1966-2022. Result: 19 principal antagonists, 7 marked, 12 unmarked, 36.8%. The strict rule excludes visible equipment alone (e.g. a mask) unless the film also establishes a visible alteration of the character's body; a broader treatment of Bane's pain-management apparatus in The Dark Knight Rises, read the way Mr. Freeze's life-support suit is read elsewhere in this corpus, instead yields 8 of 19 (42.1%). Full methodology, the complete character-level table, and this sensitivity analysis are preserved internally in this article's research brief (Accibly Live-Action Batman Villain Corpus).

Key Findings

8 findings

Evidence

41 records

Source Appendix

43 sources

UPDATE HISTORY

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HOW THIS ARTICLE WAS BUILT

43 sources reviewed.

3 source categories represented (Advocacy, Government, Research).

Evidence last reviewed October 7, 2026.

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