

Visual Art, Society, Morality

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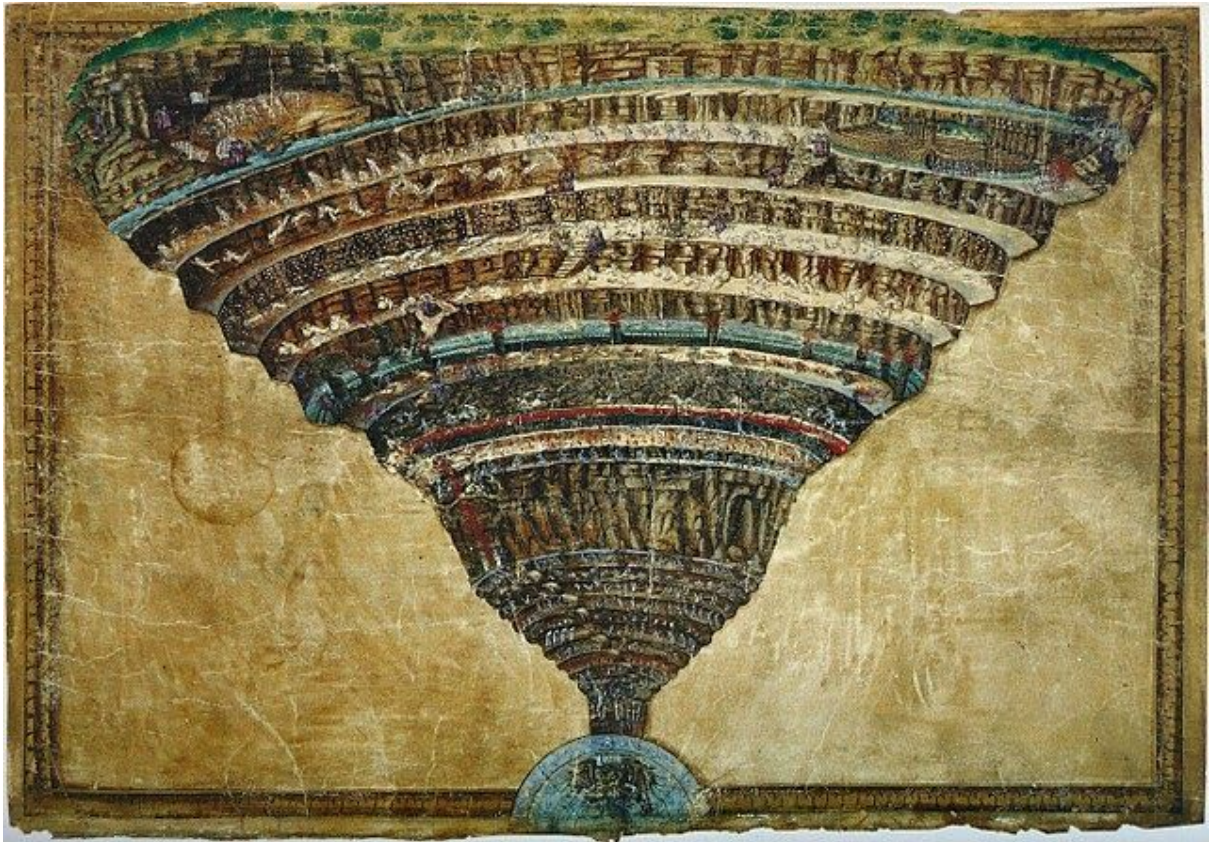
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In this proposal I am anticipating the examination of these three phrases or words: Visual Art, society, morality. These will be supported by practitioners of visual arts and literature. The primary visual arts focus will be Sandro Botticelli, Bong Joon-ho and Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux. However, I will also be looking at Dante Alighieri and Victor Hugo for examples shown in literature. With these points of investigation, I will be researching historical and contemporary contexts to form a question for my independent research.

‘Before me nothing but eternal things were made, and I shall last eternally. Abandon every hope, all you who enter.’ (Alighieri, 2003, page 89, lines 7-9)

The Divine Comedy by Dante Alighieri is one of the most influential literary texts to come from the Italian Renaissance. This quote is part of the inscription seen by Dante in Canto III, Dante the pilgrim (separate to Dante the narrator and Dante the Poet) is already being forced to contemplate his own morality and mortality before he even steps into the first circle of Hell. This is a warning to both Dante the Pilgrim as well as to the reader of the poem, as it also intends for them to reflect what could prevent them from reaching a pleasant afterlife and what fate could befall them if they don't act morally correct. The use of gates is to be a symbolic inversion of Saint Peter's gates which are often associated with the entrance to Heaven. This rhetoric of inverting the divine to fit with hell's needs is a common theme throughout the epic poem but especially in the first section, the inferno. This poem was the first to bring imagination to ideas of what happens to one's soul in hell. Art based on religious ideology and morality had existed throughout history from the funerary decorations in ancient tombs to frescos on pre 13th century European churches. Due to the near non-existent literacy rate and the inability to understand Latin which was the language of the Roman Catholic Church and was used during services. Most Churches or other non-secular buildings in Christian Countries were covered in depictions of hell and heaven so that the lay congregation would understand why they must obey Christian doctrine and ideology. However, these images seem a lot shallower, less developed and more repetitive in nature when compared to art created after the Divine Comedy was written. This also coincided with the beginning of the Renaissance which radically changed the way art was created and viewed.

Throughout the progress to the centre of hell where the worst sinners and betrayers are held, the reader is given graphic details and descriptions of the horrors of hell. In Canto III, Dante witnesses the punishment of individuals who didn't abandon the Judeo-Christian God but didn't follow his doctrine. Therefore, they weren't to be punished in hell as they did not choose a side. Dante describes their punishment as chasing a banner aimlessly while being 'stung and stung again by the hornets and the wasps that circled them and made their faces run with blood in streaks; their blood, mixed with their tears, dripped to their feet.' (Alighieri, 2003, page 91, lines 65 – 68) This is the first noticeable use of the law of contrapasso, the relationship between sin and the justification of the punishment faced in Dante's hell. The reader is reminded that this is just the entrance to hell, from here on it will get progressively grimmer and nightmarish.



Abyss Of Hell by Sandro Botticelli (1485)

The Florentine artist Sandro Botticelli created several illustrations from the Divine Comedy, but his most notable work based around this text is the Abyss of Hell. In this illustration you can see the funnel shape to the core of hell which is the devil himself. You can also see some of the sufferings that sinners endure, the area in which the virtuous pagans reside and some noticeable characters from the Inferno. Dante's guide through hell is the Roman poet Virgil who is regarded as one of the best Latin poets from the Roman Empire and wrote the epic Aeneid. There was much debate whether those who were born before Christ would be placed in heaven or hell as they would have no hope of redemption until the apocalypse. Dante agreed

that they should not be allowed to heaven but should live in a lesser circle of hell and their punishment to know that they are in a hopeless state of no redemption.

Botticelli was living in Florence during the time of fervent religious and political disturbance. Italy was not a unified country until the 19th century and was a collection of city states ruled by powerful families during the renaissance. These families such as the Medici, the Borgia and Sforza helped fund the renaissance and were patrons to reform and the arts. Botticelli was also an ardent supporter of the radical preacher Girolamo Savonarola. Much like Dante, Savonarola was critical of the papacy and the church. Savonarola had been initially invited to Florence to work by Lorenzo de Medici, who had also requested the illustrations of the Divine Comedy from Botticelli. These illustrations alongside the Inferno give a cross section of Florentine and Italian society in the early renaissance. The preacher later publicly accused the Medici as well as other families of nobility including the Borgia, whose patriarch at that time was Pope Alexander VI that they were all sinners and that they were corrupting the church with luxury. It is argued by art historian Giorgio Vasari that Botticelli burned some of his works on the Falò delle vanità, bonfire of vanities in 1497. This was an event where Savonarola encouraged followers to burn any items of vanity such as mirrors, certain books, clothing made with expensive materials. Vasari then went on to state in his book *The Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* that 'He [Botticelli] was so ardent a partisan that he was thereby induced to desert his painting, and, having no income to live on, fell into very

great distress.’ (Vasari. *The Lives of the Artists*. Translated.Ox, 1991 .) However, it cannot be proved indisputably if Botticelli did take part in the event.



Section of the Abyss of Hell painting by Botticelli

The environment of religious upheaval and radical ideology gives an understanding to the context of the Abyss of hell and the Illustrations of the Divine Comedy. The 9 concentric layers resemble an amphitheatre but also could be seen to resemble the tower of Babylon but inverted, a biblical story that Botticelli would have been aware of and follows the style of inverting symbols of Christian doctrine that is consistent in the Inferno. Alongside the religious discourse, Renaissance Europe was also a hotbed of war, famine and disease. Less than 60 years after the Divine Comedy was written Europe lost around 30 to 60 percent of its population (25 to 50 million people) to The Black Death, the first global epidemic of the Bubonic and Pneumonic

Plagues. Botticelli was a young child during this epidemic, and this was thought to be an apocalypse brought on by the vengeance of God by the society he was living in. This event would have shaped him into becoming the religious person he was in his adult life; it explains some of his attachment to Savonarola's fanatic teachings and his interest in the Divine Comedy. Dante writes in the Inferno "At grief so deep the tongue must wag in vain; the language of our sense and memory lacks the vocabulary of such pain." This piece of literature allowed Botticelli to explore the horrors that may await him if he isn't moral in his time on Earth. It gave him an allegory to create visual art to carry the conversation where language cannot provide the power to convey.



Ugolino and his Sons by Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux (1870)

One of the most impacting scenes from Dante's *Inferno* is when Dante the Pilgrim is in Canto XXXII near the end of his pilgrimage through Hell. The second subdivide of the ring of betrayers is Antenora, those who betray guests, country and benefactors is where we see one of the most infamous characters of the poem. The individual Dante focuses on is Count Ugolino della Gherardesca. This character is based on an

Italian Nobleman and Politician with the same name and has committed a sin great enough to be tortured in the deepest pits of hell according to Dante. Count Ugolino in both reality and the *Inferno* was imprisoned in the Muda Tower and condemned to starve with his sons after being accused of treason. This was famously depicted in Jean-Baptiste Carpeaux's sculpture where we see the starving Ugolino contemplate cannibalising his own children. This supposed act of cannibalism is used to create an afterlife fitting with the law of contrapasso that Dante uses throughout the *Inferno*. This leads to Ugolino's eternal punishment of gnawing at the skull of Bishop Ruggieri, his jailer.

The idea of punishing Ugolino for supposed cannibalism is a moral dilemma that Dante doesn't question in the *Inferno*. The french illustrator Gustave Doré made a series of illustrations showing Dante's *inferno* and *Les Misérables* in the late 19th century. Both sets of illustrations fit with the gothic style of illustration he uses in his work and fits aptly with the dark world people were living in both Dante's *inferno* and in Victor Hugo's *Les Misérables*. In the illustration of Count Ugolino's imprisonment and the gamine's congregating, Doreé shows the suffering had not disappeared in society in the 542 years separating the publishing of each piece of literature. The protagonist of Hugo's book, Jean Valjean, was sent to prison for stealing bread in order to feed his sister's starving children. Hugo questions is it right to punish a man for living in poverty and for also being failed by his society. While Ugolino was a man that had done immoral acts for his own gain and should be punished for his crimes before imprisonment. He should not be punished for being immoral while in the Muda Tower, on the basis it was done for survival therefore necessary. Meaning that Dante's law of Contrapasso doesn't fit in this case. As the law of contrapasso means

the punishment stems from the sin. Also, it is not the moral implications that make Ugolino seem so monstrous, it is society's expectation that cannibalism is an act that is monstrous as it is a reminder that we are still animals.



Les Miserables Illustration by Gustave Doré



Count Ugolino Illustration by Gustave Doré

"It is a terrible place, the pit of darkness, the stronghold of the blind. It is the threshold of the abyss." (Hugo, *Les Misérables*, 2015)

This quote from *Les Misérables* shows the way Victor Hugo sees poverty as a black hole that is nearly impossible to escape, especially if using only moral means. Contemporary society has not changed that much from Dante's and Hugo's time regarding the expected upkeep of morality by an individual or group. A contemporary example of morality and society is Bong Joon-ho's 2019 film, *Parasite*. This film is an exploration of the cross sections of contemporary society and class revolution. It shows the class divide by depicting the extravagantly rich Park family and the incredibly poor Kim family interact with each other. Everything in this piece of visual art enforces the differences in each family's life. The Kim family live in a subterranean dwelling, with limited natural light and small windows that would remind

the viewer of a prison. The lighting within the dwelling is technical, fluorescent and harsh to the eyes. Reminding the viewer that this family does not live an easy or pleasant existence. This contrasts with Park's home that's on top of a hill, with large windows allowing plenty of natural light. When artificial lighting is used it is soft and aesthetically pleasing to the viewer. Lighting and separating of social class are also seen when the Kim family head back to their home during a heavy rainstorm that causes destruction to their and other poor family's homes. The clear LED lights of the rich neighbourhood are a sharp juxtaposition of the murky red lights of the poorer neighbourhood.



Flooding scene in Bong Joon-Ho's Parasite (2019)

Height is an important tool also used in the cinematography of Parasite; it shows the statuses of each respective family. The poor family leaving a home that is subterranean to then walk further upwards to the Park's residence shows that they aren't even seen as people to the society they live in. The Park families home has no privacy, strangers could see into the home at any point and a man is seen urinating near the windows of their home. Again, showing the fact that the Kim family is 9) physically and metaphorically looked down upon by society. While the Park family's

home seems to be a citadel on a hill with complete privacy from tall walls. The height of the homes is also seen to be a symbol of class divide during the rainstorm. The Kim family loses nearly everything as the water flows directly into their home. The only inconvenience that occurs to the Park family in this instance is that they must return home from camping. This scene shows how the lower classes are often the hardest hit in any catastrophe. This parallels Hugo's description of the poor of France in the 18th century being so destitute from famine and improper leadership from the Bourgeoisie and Monarch. In both *Parasite* and *Les Miserable*, the dehumanisation and poor treatment of the lower classes lead to a bloody outcome. In Hugo's book there is a failed revolution and in *Parasite* there is a bloodbath at a child's birthday party.

The use of the staircases within the Park family home also enforces the idea of the class system within *Parasite*. This is most poignantly brought across when Ki-Taek, the patriarch of the Kim's family has to flee down the stairs to the Park families cellar. This occurs after he kills the head of the Park family out of rage of being made to feel ashamed of his status in society and the Park family prioritising their son who had fainted to go to the hospital over Ki-Taek's daughter who was bleeding to death. Him hiding in a cellar that is completely underground and with no natural light shows his fall further down the class system. The misfortune that occurs to the Kim family does not excuse their actions but allows the viewer to sympathise with them.



The Kim children, Ki-woo and Ki-jung in the basement apartment in Bong Joon-Ho's Parasite (2019)

From the renaissance, the 1900s and to our contemporary times we still have strict codes of morality in our societies, which govern how we act as individuals and as groups. While these ideas of what is morally correct varies between countries, time periods and religions, we often have individuals at the top and individuals at the bottom, creating the hierarchy of the class systems. This exploration of morality and society allows us to question how the Visual arts and literature represent these changes within culture, politics and religion throughout human history.

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