



Shame on me... or Shame on you: The Connection Between Arts and Decision-making

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Abstract

Over time artists have grappled with the experiences of the soul, particularly the human struggle to be virtuous. In this research project, choreographic tools are used to examine expressionistic links between the movement of Auguste Rodin's sculpture *The Gates of Hell* and the narrative of Dante Alighieri's first book of *The Divine Comedy: Dante's Inferno*. These works were intended to persuade men to be righteous instead of committing sin. Rodin's attention to human anatomy centers the importance of the body's organic creation of movement in this struggle. Attention to the physique and emotion of the human body in motion has enabled Rodin's work to transcend "generations and nationalities with the utmost ease." The choreographic research aims to connect the links between emotion, expressions, and narrative of the souls to today. In contrast to sin simply being a conscious individual choice, an individual could be influenced by a group to engage in "unethical behavior." Dancers' interpretations of 'moral injustices' guide the motifs of the choreography. In real time, the group work entitled "Shame on Me... or Shame on You?" embodies the struggle of humanity to be good.

Introduction

One of the struggles of humanity is the confusion of morality concerning individual decision-making. At times it is difficult to make conscious in a group but often individuals find themselves abiding by the standard of their moral compass. The commentary of Dante's *Inferno* made use of religion's punishments against these "sins" or 'moral injustices' to sway the people of 14th century Italy to make virtuous choices because of the consequences of Hell. For the purpose of this paper, it was important to contrast those religious ideals to stray from the influence of religion in this paper to understand the human condition.

In the Rodin Museum in Paris, France, there is a magnificent structure, *The Gates of Hell*. The souls depicted in the structure are under the punishment of Hell for their sins. Many artists have created their own depictions of the religious ideals presented in *Dante's Divine Comedy: Dante's Inferno*, through artwork, sculpture, and books. Their different outlooks on the ownership of sin give rise to the question of whether or not people have complete and utter

control over the “unethical-decisions” (Sims, 1992, p. 651) they make. After seeing so many visual artists create work based on this narrative, another question arose: “Why hasn’t this work been entered into the field of movement art?” This work transforms the narrative and sculptural aspects of the topic into choreography that will lend itself to a modern view of moral injustice in today’s world.

Literature Review

The Delsarte System of Expressions is a theory created by François Delsarte to classify natural body gestures and attitudes to improve the expression in acting. To generate phrase-work, the *Delsarte System of Expressions* and *The Gates of Hell* sculpture were used for gestures to add on to a linear aesthetic quality of movement. For the narrative of the piece, relationships among dancers were played with. Dante’s *Inferno* and groupthink theory (Sims, 1992) were used as aids to create an environment in which the dancers struggle with parting from the group to make their own decisions and rely on their own moral compasses.

Dante’s Inferno

Dante’s Inferno from *The Divine Comedy* by Dante Alighieri is an allegory for the political climate in 13th century medieval Italy. At this time, there were two political parties, the Guelphs and the Ghibellines (Francom, 2017). The Guelphs had the support of the working class, held trust in the Pope, and also hoped for there to be a Constitution (Trotter, n.d.). On the other hand, the Ghibellines were backed by the aid of the higher-class and aristocracy. Having more power, the Ghibellines oppressed the Guelph party and demolished their buildings and architectural structures. Before Alighieri was born, the two parties went back and forth struggling for control of Italy. Later, as Dante became more involved in the political scene, he held several offices under the Guelphs. Years later, he was banished from Italy because of his alliance with the Guelphs. Alighieri then switched allegiance to the Ghillebine party, but after a failed attempt to take over Florence, he wrote without having to choose a side. (Britannica, n.d.). Medieval Florence, Italy did not have separation of church and state; hence, Alighieri’s conflation of political and religious views in his writing.

His most famous work, *The Divine Comedy*, is an allegory for humanity itself. Alighieri writes himself as the main character with the goal for a “corrupt society to steer itself to the path of righteousness” (Editors, 2014). Under the idea of the Christian afterlife, with the influence of his first-person point-of-view, is the method in which he showcases the punishments received for

each severity of sin. By writing about himself, he humanizes himself and is like any person reading his works. He is able to persuade the reader they are just as worthy and capable of defeating the sins that tempt him. While the story is a warning, it also gives hope that others can reach heaven if they do not commit the sins described in the nine realms of hell. In the poems, he draws inspiration from political figures of the time and inserts them according to the level of sins committed (Barolini, 1979). Alighieri's ultimate goal was to explain to the people of Italy that their sins received punishments in the afterlife. With this, he also embodied the struggle for humanity to choose right from wrong. The relevance of this commentary today is similar to "recognizable gifs from movies or TV shows to make sense of what's happening in our world now" (Blauvelt, 2018).

The Gates of Hell

Following the publication of the book *The Divine Comedy*, many artists were inspired to recreate these ideas in their own form of visual arts. Through various platforms, they displayed the scenery of the experiences of Hell depicted in the poems. Auguste Rodin often favored working with moving models to create artwork to capture the beauty of the body swept in action. He was often inspired by dancers such as Isadora Duncan to create sculptures such a *Mouvement de danse E* and others as part of his *Mouvements de Danse* collection (Rodin, 1840-1917).

In 1880, Rodin was commissioned to create a sculpture for the entrance to *Musée des Arts Decoratifs* in Paris, France. He spent 37 years engaged with this work. He essentially "encompassed... the creative lifespan of its maker" (Alhadeff, 1966, p. 393). In the sculpture, there are many figures in despair and agony due to the punishments they are receiving for the sins they have committed. *The Thinker*, perched above the gate looks down upon the scene and depicts a self-portrait of Rodin himself (Alhadeff, 1966). A common relationship to how Rodin has depicted himself in the first-person creating the sculpture is what Alighieri wanted readers to question. The intention was to have each individual question their own actions in response to the standards upheld in the Catholic religion. The way the figure carries himself on top of the gate is emphatic towards the souls in torment. It is reflective as Rodin pictures himself as the role of Dante, he also feels pity for the people of 14th century Italy and their afflictions.

A Commentary on Modern Society

Alighieri's *Inferno* has inspired contemporary artists to examine the modern world and reinterpret the journey into the afterlife in settings other than Hell. In *Comedy*, author Marcus

Sanders, transposed Hell to a postmodern American landscape in Los Angeles. The urban point of view showcased “not only slang but also the consumerist jargon and forms of other languages” (Olson K. M., p. 144). The visual artist for the book, Sandow Birk, created several images in relation to the book and the history of the 14th-century Italian setting (Olson K. , 2017). In an interview, Birk states, “I’d simply look at his [work] and update it” (Cheverton, 2003).



Figure 1. Birk's depiction of Inferno in Post-Modern American Landscape. (*Birk*)

The ability to represent issues of sin from the 14th century while being present in the modern world, proves importance in the interpersonal corrupt moral injustices occurring in our world today. While considering the fact that the characters in both works of literature took ownership of sin, it poses the question as to whether or not all individuals have the ability to do so.

Groupthink is defined as “the process in which bad decisions are made by a group because its members do not want to express opinions, suggest new ideas, ... that others may disagree with” (Cambridge Business English Dictionary, n.d.). A problematic aspect of the modern business world is a hierarchy. Often individuals do not speak up about the most ethical alternative because of fear of disagreement from the group or their bosses’ disapproval. “Strong pressures for uniformity also characterized the process surrounding the flawed decision[s]” (Sims, 1992, p. 652). In contrast to the two pieces of literature discussed earlier, the action to commit sin could rather be an inability to make independent decisions because of a faulty mindset. Groupthink entails a certain unintentional deception of decision-making faults (Sims, 1992). An individual’s incapacity to truly make moral decisions for themselves can cause harm to other people as well

as themselves, which poses the question as to whether their sins were due solely for it was solely their fault.

Scope of Project

The goal was to effectively blend the works and commentary of Auguste Rodin and Dante Alighieri. In this process, the parallels of societal commentary across the multiple works of art became the most alluring to add on to. The choreographic work was presented in a way that still displayed the dancers' point of view about sin but would also explore the role of groupthink. That is the theory that humans may not always be individually responsible for their negative actions, rather that the influence of the group plays a strong role in the human behavior and action.

A series of phrases that effectively show manipulative relationships and unhealthy group dynamics explored manipulation within a solo, duets, and group phrases (Arango, 2020). The three sections of the choreographic work included (1) a container for self-reflection, (2) the impact of another person's opinion on oneself, and finally, (3), a group dynamic undermining the individual's ability to properly form choices regarding their own morals.

Movement Invention

The first step was to start experimenting with the idea of improvising to tasks that related to the sins of Hell mentioned in Dante's *Inferno*, categorized as Lust, Gluttony, and Greed. These characteristics were the base for improvisational tasks since they were the typical sins performed by all humans, the lesser of all evils. The most relatable categories could be most effective for the dancers to recreate in their own bodies. After recording and videotaping for a few days, the movements were examined and several repeated motifs within improvisations that related to the *Delsarte System of Expressions* were determined. The dancers were taught the phrase-work and developed it further by changing facings and directions to imitate the chaos that the world of Hell embodies in *Dante's Inferno*. A specific intention was given to approach sin for the movement to resemble the features of the figures in the sculpture.

Table 1. Gesture Chart of the Sinful.

Motifs from Improvisations	<i>Delsarte System of Expressions:</i> Body Movement	<i>Delsarte System of Expressions:</i> Explanation to Expression	Relationship to the Dante's <i>Inferno/ The Gates of Hell/</i> The Human Condition
Contractions of the torso	"Contraction" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 208)	"indicating different degrees of timidity, effort, pain, or convulsion of will" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 208)	This gesture displays the pain and turmoil the souls experienced in Hell.
Open and closing of hands	"Closed hand opens... as if dropping something on the ground" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 174)	"To surrender" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 174)	A person does not want to be punished for the entirety of their next life, so they surrender to the truth (although under the terms of religion it is too late).
Release of the neck	"Head thrown back midway between shoulders" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 221)	"exaltation, explosion from self as a centre, a lifting to the universal" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 221)	This action shows the entering of one life into another. This action also shows the aggressive nature of the individual and Hell itself.
Excessive use of elbows/ manipulation of the arm	"Elbow turned in/ shoulder dropped" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 191)	"indicates suppression of self, poverty, insensibility, death" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 191)	The constant manipulation of arms displays death as most obviously pictured in Hell. More specifically, it could represent another person being controlled by groupthink theory to commit sin (the most powerful person asserts power over the others).

**Figure 2.** (dancers from left to right) Kaitlyn Brkaric, Hailey Weiss, Samantha Coplon, Olivia Reeths, Elise Gaudry, and Lauren Cadle performing three separate duets that contain manipulation of arms.

When trying to embody the character Virgil from Dante's *Inferno*, it was quite challenging since the above gestures simply related to the damned in Hell. This character was separate from the ensemble because of his prominent position leading Dante. Virgil was forever a part of Hell

because of the fact that he never knew the Catholic faith. He performed virtuous acts in his life; however, he could not be accepted into the realm of Heaven without the belief in the religion before his death. Therefore, Virgil protects and guides Dante through Hell. Even though Virgil is technically still a part of the circles of Hell, he does not carry the aggressive nature of the typical souls in Hell. He instead embodies the perfect Roman with all noble virtues and ideals (Alighieri, 1265-1321). Returning to the charts, key features of the character were identified and then related to gesture and body positioning.

Table 2. Gesture Chart for Virgil.

Motifs from Improvisations	<i>Delsarte System of Expressions:</i> Body Movement	<i>Delsarte System of Expressions:</i> Explanation to Expression	Relationship to the Dante's <i>Inferno/ The Gates of Hell/</i> The Human Condition
Bending and straightening of knees	"standing in breadths; both legs are string together; knees straight unbent" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 145)	"signifies a condition of feebleness, or sentiment of respect" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 145)	Shows the wisdom he models for Dante in the book.
Finger-pointing	"to define" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 174)	"first finger prominent; hand moves up and down, side to earth" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 174)	Related to 'defining' or explaining to Dante why the sinful should not be pitied for their current turmoil
Open chest	"expansion" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 208)	"indicating different degrees of excitement, vehemence, and power in the will" (Stebbins, 1902, p. 208)	Opposite from the above table to display his ability to control his action, hence ability to be virtuosic opposed to sinful.

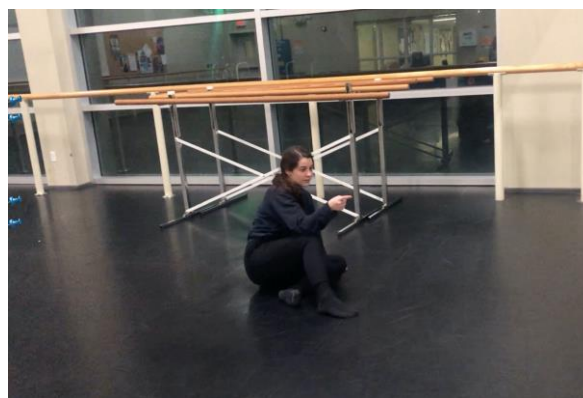


Figure 3. Lauren Cadle using 'Finger-pointing' gesture.



Figure 4. Kaitlyn Brkaric and Elise Gaudry embodying the guidance of Virgil in *Dante's Inferno*.

Later in the process of movement creation, it was critical to incorporate the individual dancers' points of view to explore the true human condition relating to sin. Exploring what it was like if the dancers were to create their own movement, they created their own phrase based on a specific sin. To do this, each task was written down on a paper, shuffled, and arranged into an order in which the phrase would follow. The dancers responded with their bodies to the task of how the sin would feel in their bodies and if they had not experienced the sin before, it would be acted out however interpreted.

Setting the Phrase-work

After investigating each of the phrases individually, the common theme was a sense of hand-to-body manipulation. All the dancers performed hand gestures that initiated a forceful body part to react in response. It supported the idea that regardless of whether a sin was consciously decided or pressured to perform there was still a sense of force to initiate and complete the action. Furthermore, the duets reinforce that sin could be partly the fault of societal/group pressures because of the manipulation of the body by the other partner. The dancers were paired and create a phrase with each other that contained mostly gestures that interacted with one another in close proximity. The results of this exercise proved that the manipulation that was first responded to by their own bodies was now a cause for the reaction of their partner's body. The partnership displayed a sense of pressure faced in certain group environments. It emphasized the possibility for individuals to follow the unethical or sinful acts of the group instead of their own individual choice led by their own moral compass.

The phrase-work set on the floor was particularly set to depict the chaotic energy and suffering of the moving figures in the sections of *The Gates of Hell*. The floorwork was created

by taking several positions out of some figures and made into a moving phrase that was performed in different facings. The suffering is embodied by the rush and disorganized quality of the movement. It also depicts the inner turmoil of the individuals after the sin is committed and the punishment is enacted on them. Whether fair or unfair, their despair is the same.

Conclusion and Future Applications

Near the end of creating this work, each of the dancers were able to identify the relationship between the duets and that the idea of sin is not necessarily the ownership of only one person. An interesting topic for further research would be to study whether individuals that performed a higher caliber of sin would respond to these tasks, given that they were non-dancers. It would be interesting to see the contrasts and similarities between the movements they made to the figures depicted in *The Gates of Hell*. Most of Rodin's artwork was made from moving figures that were dancers; however, there is curiosity to explore whether the same gestures are produced. This future study would need many test subjects to study the movements produced by each individual then grouped to see the certain sequence of movement produced. The human experience is universal and so, it would be interesting to analyze whether multiple people's interpretations of the same sin are represented by similar gestures or physical body movements.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank my mentor, for guiding me through this multilayered creative, and scholarly, process. I would also like to thank my dancers for their support and creativity along my first choreographic process and everyone who watched and gave feedback and support related to my research. Lastly, I would like to thank the University Scholars Program for this amazing opportunity.

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