

I PICCITI

Fashioning sins

I've always been fascinated with the idea of hell in the western catholic mindset to be a way of implementing fear in people to ensure they "behave". One could hypothesize that the true guiding force for people's actions is the aspiration to go to heaven, however what I aim to analyze is the fact that the fear of failing to get there is mainly founded on the horrible eternity one could experience in the afterlife. Looking at the Catholic 10 commandments as a basis to understand what is deemed punishable, it may seem morally right to want to follow the rules established in the Old Testament as they denounce acts that negatively affect the individual doing them, or anyone presented as collateral damage to that person. However, seeing as I am a queer artist, I've always had the tendency to use my voice to comment and criticize the oppressive aftermaths that came from the ties between church and politics regarding inequalities on human rights. This topic feels relevant to me mainly in response to Italy's current prime minister, Giorgia Meloni, a self-proclaimed Christian mother, who has been devoting her effort to create a system which disables queer individuals from existing, punishing them for the sin they committed. Now, what sin exactly would that be if no one is being harmed? A tale as old as time, yet still not old or irrelevant enough to discuss. This began my train of thought into the idea of understanding what else it can mean to sin in current culture. As much as this theme deserves attention, for once I decided to set aside the topic of queer injustice which I had already profusely covered in my previous works and took time to analyze the current fashion scene from a point of view of business reflected in commercial visual language. Besides the abundance of banal lackluster Vogue covers relying on media hype provided by celebrity cameos stuck in redundant narratives of wealth and luxury, I began analyzing the frenzy the industry has been in. Especially, the interchange of creative directors coming and going from fashion houses, and their duration in them being quite brief, felt to me like a clear indication of a crisis in fashion business, and at the same time a disregard towards the conceptual development that comes from a progression of creative directors interpreting the archives of a Maison. I began looking into fashion blogs like "Fashion Dive" stating in early 2025 how "the fashion industry has (had) entered the second quarter of 2025, and there have (had) already been more notable creative director changes than the fashion industry sees in some entire years." (2025) Essentially, viewing the fashion scene as an ongoing competition of "who makes more money", reflecting one of the most common themes in a capitalist system, greed. On a visual level, this translates in media through hectic campaigns such as the FW 25 D2Squared2 campaign by Mert Alas, in which models are seen indulging in careless partying, or most recently, a Valentino Beauty event for which Studio 54 had a one-night only reopening in New York. This tendency to party may come across as a way of contrasting the ongoing global conflicts which have been impacting

individuals globally, however their base is founded on media, placing influencers at the front row, indicating a thirst for divulgation and fame, founded mainly on the financial benefits that can come from it.

My fashion photography project explores sins that I developed from these contemporary settings. The framework that I applied as a guideline for this was Dante Alighieri's Divine comedy, which was the first introduction I personally had to a concretized vision of hell, using his "law of retribution" as a way of determining what the punishment for each of my sinners would be.



Figure 1 - DSquared2 FW 25 Campaign



Figure 2 – Influencer Meredith Duxbury photographed at the Valentino Studio 54 event

Journey through hell

In the Italian educational system, a fundamental part of literary culture is a deep analysis and comprehension of Dante Alighieri's poem, the "Divine Comedy" (1307-1321). This text is renowned for introducing the Italian language in literature rather than Latin, to narrate the journey of Dante through the circles of hell, purgatory, and heaven, providing concretized depictions of catholic values and punishments throughout. The "comedic" aspect to this text comes into play through the progression of events spanning from dramatism and desperation (hell), into a resolution (heaven), and the theatricality used to narrate the protagonist's journey, through which he is consistently voyeuristic and runs no true risk of harm. The part of this text which I chose to investigate guides the reader through the 9 circles of hell, in which each tainted soul experiences an afterlife of suffering. There will not be any need to dive into the specifics of these, however, as I chose not to reference the sins explored by Dante directly

to avoid any possible cliché. Instead, I chose to develop sins that I found in current culture and used the “Law of Contrapasso” (also known as law of retribution), a system that he followed to punish each sinner. This system implemented a logic of punishing each sinner either in a way that reflected or contrasted their sins in the afterlife. Examples from the text include:

Lust - no self-control - pushed around by endless winds
Gluttony - over indulgence - lie in slush under cold rain
Treachery - cold betrayal - frozen in ice

The use of this law created a space for Dante to play with theatricality and isolate the identity of these souls by defining their previous life solely by the sin they're punished for. In other words, the lack of context on their life is what created the surreal realm that enables Dante to use dramaticism to terrify the viewer, whilst keeping them engaged by maintaining a detachment from reality. Through the study of this framework, I developed a fashion photography project critiquing sins I extracted from contemporary social norms. The list I created was made up of trendsetters, provocateurs, alt guys, alpha males, hysterical women, party animals, and club girls. Seeing as these sins are all regarding the fashion industry and the toxic traits that come from an aspiration to consume, it would be quite evident that within the Divine Comedy, their placement would be in the 4th circle, greed. Although not directly inspired by the punishment for greed in the Divine Comedy, this project could be interpreted as a ramification of it, an addition which contextualizes it within what would be the outcome of a Fashion Photography Master's project at the end of 2025.

As a result of this, I chose to trap my characters in endless loops of boredom and superficiality, as a demonstration of how identity (especially critiquing the commodification of desire within the fashion industry and the “fashioning of character” such as partying and trendsetting), is now shaped by materialistic ideologies. The idea of using theatricality as a discussion on economy and the way media has responded to guiding forces of such, was mainly inspired by Guy Debord's analysis on the Spectacle as a commodification, which in this essay will be dissected in understanding the hypocrisy of human nature and provide a reason for why my characters would end up in hell in the first place. I will then transcend into a detailed explanation of my characters, which were a result of analyzing Roland Barthe's “Mythologies” to justify what punishments and art direction choices were used to make each individual mythical, attributing connotations that go beyond the literal definition of their sin, and the meaning of myth in contemporary culture.

Greedy bastards

1

“In societies where modern conditions of production prevail, life is presented as an immense accumulation of spectacles. Everything that was directly lived has receded into a representation”
(Debord, p.4)

Let us begin this process of theoretical contextualization through an understanding of why the characters I created reside in hell. As I explained prior, current western fashion image has been pushing ideologies of consumerism and greed, highlighting the thirst for abundance that comes with being a luxury customer. What happens within these images is a theatrical representation of such. For example, in the DSquared2 ad, the viewer is not spoon-fed the idea of greed though an overwhelming abundance of wealth in maximalist compositions, but is shown an aspirational world of rich, young, stupid models and influencers which they could only dream of partying with... if they wear the brand.

The idea of theatricality comes into play as what I believe creates this illusion of glory within those images. Guy Debord's "The Society of the Spectacle" illustrates this idea in the analysis of the spectacle as "a permanent opium war designed to force people to equate goods with commodities, and to equate satisfaction with a survival that expands according to its own laws" (p.17). Following this logic, the view of commodities in society become that which allows for survival in the hierarchy of society's own social norms. In a world where everything becomes a commodity, people 'depend on their greed' to survive. The spectacle becomes the commodification of goods, indicating the relevance to how the theatricality of fashion image can do the same.

This logic needs to be backed up by understanding the importance of an image before its own spectacle. Debord discusses the concept of "fetishism of commodity" within the spectacle, where the "perceptible world is replaced by a selection of images projected above it" (p.14). This implies that visual communication would be the dominating factor compelling society to adopt a selection of values that guide their everyday life. As a result of this, our subconscious would be driven by imagery, which we value above the 'real' world which we are unable to perceive, the reality we refuse to be contextualized in. Debord also comments on the way economy has infiltrated the subconscious to guide the development of human nature. He expresses how it has liberated human beings from poverty, yet no one seems to be free from the liberator, stating that "such labor remains forever in its service" (p. 15). We therefore understand that the phenomenon of the spectacle happens when commodification has overtaken all social life and infiltrated itself to the point where it is "not only visible, [but] we

no longer see anything else". At this point, are we not sinners? We conducted a life we founded on economy to escape our state of 'need for survival' yet find ourselves forced to follow a system we built as an attempt to liberate ourselves. Following this logic, is greed not a simple withdrawal reaction to the addictive commodifying forces which we constructed to survive? By Dante's logic, I argue the hypocrisy of this could land us all in hell.

Debord describes the spectacle as a powerful tool to determine the appearance of imagery and become an "indication of all human social life with appearances" (p.4). We've placed ourselves in a living hell guided by economic tendencies, so all we really know is to interpret imagery with a fetishistic approach towards the consumption of goods. Our lives become driven by the desire to obtain, to be worth it, whether that 'it' be a material good or a quality which allows us to climb the social ladder into a place that could feed our ego. The perfect house, the perfect marriage, the perfect clothes. Each of these qualities is disregarded from its practical contribution to life - shelter, romance, privacy – meaning the "survival needs", and becomes a saturation of these all leading down to implications of financial stability and material gain. The philosophy of ornamentation, explored by Femke De Vries in "Fashioning Value – Undressing Ornament", describes this phenomenon as a system of using iconography and image to sell a dream to the consumer. De Vries understands the ornament as something that has no "influence on the object's practical function. It can, however, have a connection to this function." (p. 8) De Vries also describes how "ornamentation, will cause a product to become obsolete sooner and therefore enforce the consumption of new products". The ideas expressed from these two extracts are applicable to this logic of greed within the fashion scene, understanding that image has now become saturated to the point of disregarding the attention to neither practicality in clothing, or the artistry of design, and has adopted a new functionality. Its aim is now to depict a mundane lifestyle, characterized by a void passion driven by careless aspirations which, to the consumer, could only be the result of financial comfortability. De Vries' text guided my view on fashion communication throughout this master's course and is relevant within my theoretical framework in this project as what launched my brainstorming for the elements of art direction that would make most sense to involve in each storyline. Now that I had judged that current society belongs in hell, it was time to understand what circles they'd fall into.

Beasts

My ambition in this project was to reference a literary piece so monumental to the development of Italian culture, with the delusion of being able to add onto it in a contemporary interpretation of societal discourse, through a modern 'contrapasso' (law of retribution). I approached this task guided by Roland Barthes' analysis on daily French life in "Mythologies". Why myths? Barthes describes the myth as a form of language, allowing for

societal connotations, or ornaments, associated to any object, to take place at the front row of their perception (p.217). Combining this logic and Debord's analysis on the contemporary abundance of commodification, one could deduct that anything could be interpreted as a myth. I found this analysis to tie in quite well with the ideologies I had developed and decided to study the various mythologies explored throughout his text.

I was initially thrown to know that Bath criticizes the mythical concept by stating that it "makes shapeless associations" (p. 229). However, this guided my project's contextual nature in the decision to omit each character's life before death. I thought that an interesting quality that would elevate my work would be the decision to use casting, and the societal connotations that are attributed to different categories of people, to give the viewer a base idea of what the sinner may have done in their life instead of showing it explicitly through image. For example, choosing to cast two skinny/muscly male heteronormative young adults to play the role of "alpha males", or a young girl as a careless "club girl". An older man as a "party animal", or an older woman as a "hysterical rich lady". This allowed me to feel comfortable to attribute all these sins to individuals who are commonly stereotyped into these roles, allowing for a layer of irony to create an underlining humoristic tone throughout my body of work.

The first character Barthes choses to uncover is that of the wrestler. Barthes describes the sport as an "open air spectacle" of excess (p.3). Once again, an idea of abundance is introduced, through the need to demonstrate great physical strength as a form of commodification of the human body. Within this observation, wrestling is described as a "sum of spectacles" (p.5) where the focus is not the outcome of the competition, but the competition itself. This theory alludes to the idea of a never-ending loop such as one that could be imagined in hell. If the wrestler's aim is not that of winning (which would conclude the fight) they will lack any desire that, once resolved, would absolve them of their sin. To reflect this character in current culture I decided to develop the "alpha male". A trope on the stereotype of males being obsessed with competition and strength, reduced to a superficial take on their primitive values. Barthes describes how wrestlers display an immediate reading of their interiority (p. 7), the same way society's alpha males display their arrogance through patronizing ideologies and violent behavior. I decided to shoot the photographic sequence in a space that isolated these characters. Seeing as they devoted their life to leading a spectacle, in the afterlife they'd be forced to fight each other, isolated in a crumbling building, surrounded by white bricks and sand (a color typically associated with peace), forced to eat one of the sweetest fruits on earth (figs). In this case the law or retribution applied to the philosophy of their performativity and transparency, forcing them to live a life of loneliness and dimension (the sweetness of the figs ensures their life can't be solely characterized by violence).

Barthes' next describes "The Harcourt Actor". A celebrity actor, who has affirmed their fame by being photographed by Harcourt Studios (p.15). In this case, the character is compared to a god. Barthes states that "gods never do anything; they're caught in repose" and exist only in the context of "festivities and love affairs". This aspiration to continuously mask one's truth with superficial entertainment disguised as a 'dream life', demonstrates a lack of authentic contentment which I thought really suited what we could nowadays call the "party animal". A reference that I felt drawn to for the development of this character was Paolo Sorrentino's *the Great Beauty*, in which the main character is a journalist who has integrated himself with Rome's mundane party scene and become the 'king' of it. Nonetheless, the movie depicts his constant boredom and internal void, highlighting this redundant leniency towards dissatisfaction and greed. I decided to reference this character mainly in my casting choice, a tanned Italian man in his 60s, including items I personally valued to be 'flashy', such as a Versace baroque floral print robe (which by word of mouth has been associated in Italy to extreme tackiness and delusions of wealth), lit tikki lamps, and a huge "surfer dude" style painting behind him. All these objects were then progressively removed from the image, indicating the perpetual state of seeing the party that made the character a 'god' disappear.

Barthes' idea of performativity ranges from stereotyped demonstrations of masculinity to provocative displays of feminine sensuality, as noted in the segment "Striptease" (165). The author poses a contradiction to the general act of stripping, stating that the woman is desexualized at the very moment she is denuded. (p. 165) This phenomenon could, once again, only be explained by the spectacle. When performance is involved with denudation, what would in other contexts seem provocative becomes expected. Barthes also describes how striptease is a mystifying procedure which consists of "vaccinating the public with a touch of evil" (165). With this information I began shaping the idea for two characters. First came the "provocateur", someone who, during their life, relied on provocative acts to obtain reactions from the media. I then developed an analysis around another female trope, that of the "club girl", who would seduce men without an interest to discover any aspects of their identity, accidentally missing the wedding ring they're wearing. In both cases, their punishment would respond to the carelessness they carried. This made me understand that they both needed to somehow feel caged for eternity. Barthes discusses the point of the striptease, highlighting the irony of covering the body with excessive ornamentation in a desperate attempt to denude it (166). The idea of this perpetual need for liberation began inspiring my train of thought, which was supported by the analysis of the body as pure, which is only pure when clothes are shed from it (166). These punished sinners needed to have something which physically encaged them, trapping them in a state which highlights their thirst for seduction. The provocateur was therefore trapped in a cage of checkered tattoos all over her body. The significance of the checkerboard is a reference I have investigated throughout the master's course as a stylized geometric cage. As for the club girl, I decided to

drown her in the tears of the wife she betrayed by seducing her husband, wearing the husband's office shirt which, becoming heavy under water, would keep her in a perpetual state of drowning.

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"STRIPTease" – provocateur and club girl

Contradiction – desexualize a woman at the very moment she is denuded – "spectacle of fear" – eroticism as a "delicious terror".

Striptease relies on Operation Astra, a mystifying procedure consisting of "vaccinating the public with a touch of evil".

166

In striptease, the woman's body is full of coverings, even as she attempts to denude it
Exoticism – body is placed in realms of legend or romance

Shedding of clothes reverts a woman to purity ("chaste state of the flesh") – my character had tattoos on their body – unable to revert back to purity as their flesh is never truly "naked"

167

Dance – not an erotic factor. Implies fear of immobility – attributes to spectacle the label of "art" and "smothers the spectacle under a layer of meaningless and yet principal gestures"

MAYBE PLASTIC – hysterical lady

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At one end – raw telluric substance, and at the other the perfect human object

Can form "pails as well as jewels" – insignificance of value – lack of authenticity

Plastic fails to exist as a substance – impotence to attain the triumphant sleekness of Nature

Only displays concepts of colors (What I made into a 'plastic look')

"Even life itself, can be plasticized since, we are told, plastic aortas are beginning to be manufactured" (Humans are reducing themselves to their own plasticization)

MARTIANS – alt guy (attempts to be a Martian to society)

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Martians have had a Christ

Religion and technological advancements are equal indicator of civilization progress

Even Martians must have their own god – myth of the identical (to us) – myth of the double

No sooner formed in the heavens, Mars is thereby aligned by the most powerful of appropriations, that of identity.

JOHNSTON

Intersection of religion, politics and culture is one of the most discussed areas in theory today. It also has the deepest and most wide-ranging impact on the world.

228 COUNTER

What is invested in the concept is less reality than a certain knowledge of reality; in passing from the meaning to the form, the image loses some knowledge: the better to receive the knowledge in the concept. – for example, my use of the checkerboard pattern for Jodie inspired by the checkered background of Vidal Portman's photos. I omit the true meaning behind this choice.

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Mythical concept makes shapeless associations.