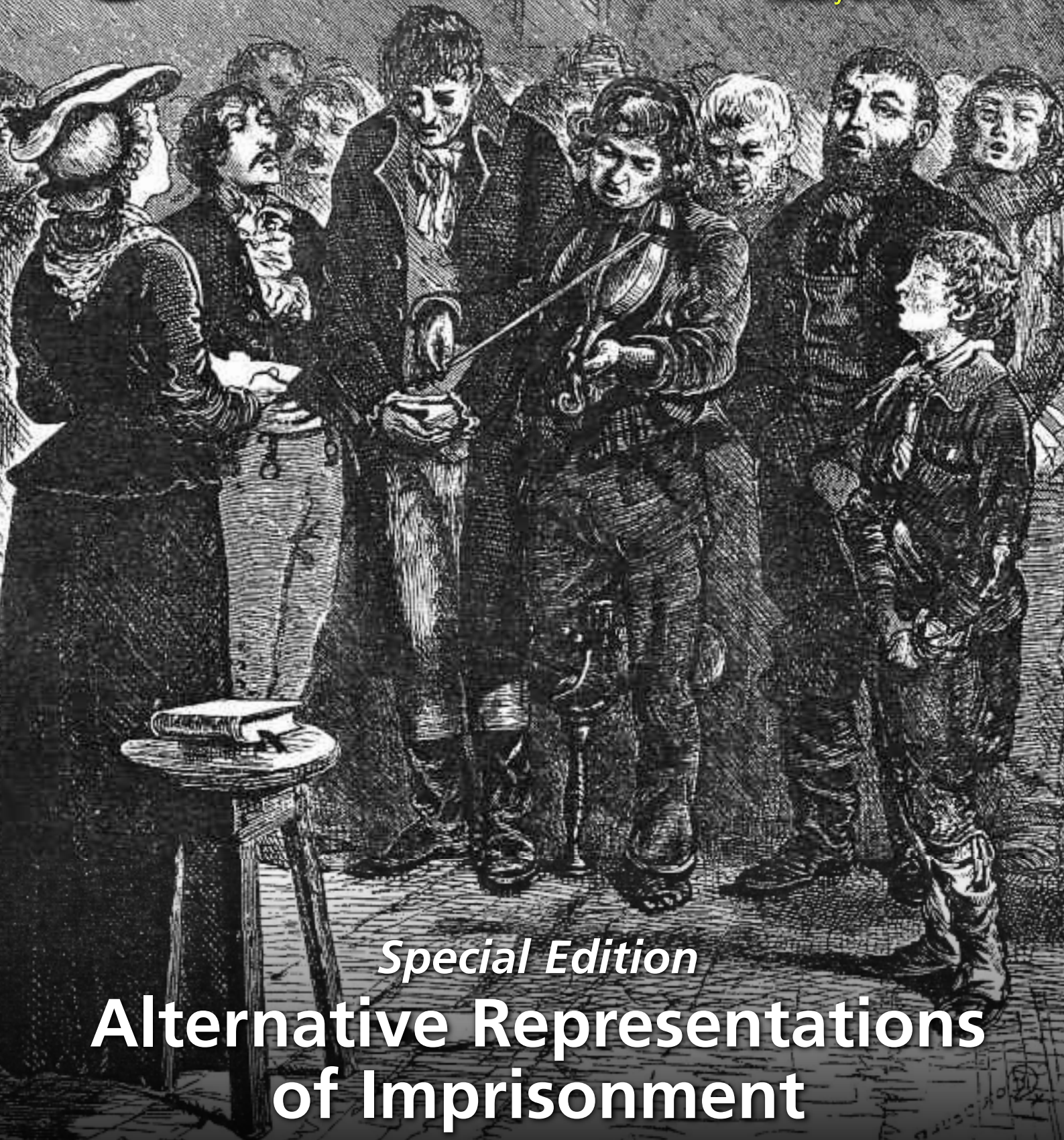


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**Alternative Representations
of Imprisonment**

Penal Hell-Holes and Dante's Inferno

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Introduction

'He's an evil monster... I hope he rots in hell' says sister of murder victim as killer gets life.¹

There are some prison administrators who stress the need to create small maximum security facilities for the most troublesome offenders — 'maxi-maxi' institutions. Their plans read like the design of the inner circles of hell.²

News reports about crime are replete with the language of otherness; people who offend do so because 'they' are not like 'us'. The media's tendency to differentiate between in-group and out-group is a trend most famously observed by Stan Cohen in his 1972 study of folk devils and moral panics. But as Bauman³ argues, the folklorist images of devils and demons that formerly soaked up diffuse security fears have recently been transformed into danger and risks and, while the label 'folk devil' still has currency in relation to some offenders (predominantly those who may be regarded as acting collectively rather than individually) it does not adequately convey society's opprobrium for the most serious offenders. For those designated the 'worst of the worst' — an appellation often applied, not because the gravity of their action is deemed most serious in law, but because there was an element of the offence that was judged by journalists to be particularly likely to seize and then revile the public imagination — only the word 'evil' will do.

'Evil' (like 'Hell') is both a religious and secular concept which gives it added potency. Unsurprisingly, then, when an action is deemed so evil as to occupy a space outside the boundaries of morality, or even of 'normal' human agency, the individual who has perpetrated the action is regarded as deserving punishments of 'mythic proportions'⁴. While the ultimate punishment, the death penalty, is unlikely to ever be reintroduced in this country (despite the most recent newspaper poll finding that 53 per cent would be in favour of a return to capital punishment⁵), eternal damnation finds form in other ways, particularly in the

indeterminate life sentence. The individuals sentenced to life are assigned various levels of demonization and dangerousness both within the criminal justice system and outside it; constructed as fundamentally and essentially different from 'normal' people. For these misfits and monsters, perceived through the lens of the popular media as beyond redemption, complete and final removal from society is a fair and natural response. Little wonder, then, that images of subterranean, tomb-like, penal 'hell-holes' play large in the popular imagination.

While several visual 'texts' could be referenced to illustrate the metaphorical links between prison and Hell — Piranesi's *Carceri* or Hieronymus Bosch's hellscape in *The Garden of Earthly Delights*, to name but two — this article will draw on Dante's *Inferno*. Dante is considered to have particular cultural currency for two reasons. First, the idea of good and evil was an intrinsic feature of Dante's universe and is woven into the fabric of *Inferno*, a dualism which finds modern form in the popular media which overwhelmingly reports in binary oppositions: good vs. evil; black vs. white; normal vs. deviant etc. Indeed, Dante's belief that the 'punishment must fit the crime' resonates with contemporary publics and, while harsh from a human perspective, Hell is also the very image of divine justice. Second, the themes and allegorical motifs of Dante's subterranean, multi-layered vision of Hell have arguably seeped into the collective imagination to a greater degree than any other imagining of Hell, becoming part of the common stock of knowledge and informing ideas about justice and punishment, even among those who have not actually read *Inferno*.

Dante's Vision of Hell

*Now moans, loud howls and lamentations
echoed through the starless air, so that I also
began to cry. Many languages, strange
accents, words of pain, cries of rage, voices
loud and faint, the sound of slapping hands
— all these whirled together in that black and
timeless air, as sand is swirled in a tornado.*

(Inferno 3: 22-30).

1. *Daily Record* 25 August 2011.
2. Morris, N. (1974) *Future of Imprisonment* Chicago IL: University of Chicago Press p. 88.
3. Bauman, Z. (2004) *Wasted Lives: Modernity and its Outcasts* London: Polity.
4. Staub, E. (1999) 'The Roots of Evil: Social Conditions, Culture, Personality, and Basic Human Needs' in *Personality and Social Psychology Review* 3:3 179-192.
5. *Mail On Sunday* 8 August 2011.

I'm not sure I feel safe tonight. It's midnight. The noises from inside the zone are getting louder...It sounds like dogs yelping but it's not. It's prisoners moaning and swearing. Someone was knocking on the door earlier, a few times. I think it was prison officers. It feels really creepy and quiet. I should move the chair to the door for extra security, but actually feel too scared to move.

(Piacentini, prison research fieldnotes)⁶.

A writer and philosopher who is widely regarded as being as important as Homer and Shakespeare in literary history, Dante Alighieri (c. 1265-1321) wrote *Inferno* as a three-part work (*Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*) collectively titled *Commedia* offering a vision of Hell and Heaven from the perspective of an observer who lived through a period of almost constant war, political conflict and corruption in his home city of Florence. Revenge and retribution were the stuff of everyday life as the merchant classes battled with the nobility for control of this prosperous and strategically important city. Dante's upbringing in a period of political discord, including a stint of active military service, was followed by a period of relative stability when Church and Empire determined the political structure of the world. As Burge comments, 'peace and harmony could only be achieved if secular and spiritual were kept separate yet constructively interlinked'⁷ and the Pope led the way in demanding piousness and pilgrimage while at the same time rewarding religious devotees with lavish displays of indulgence, including a six-week Jubilee to mark the turn of the thirteenth century which Dante is believed to have attended⁸.

Living through a period of turmoil and corruption inevitably shaped Dante's view of the universe and informed his writing. Part satire, part novel and part journal (it is narrated in the first person) the *Divine Comedy*, as it is now usually known, was intended to be read aloud to an audience who would recognise the historical and political allusions that underpin what is essentially a cracking story. For dramatic effect, Dante creates a dialogue by introducing a companion on his

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journey to Hell; the Roman poet Virgil (70-19 BC) who fulfils the roles of tourist guide, mentor and protector, leading Dante on the journey to the 'horrid hole of Hell' (*Inferno*, 32: 6). The *Comedy* also contains many irreverent in-jokes and references to controversial figures of the day, some of which are pleasingly prescient, such as 'he who made the 45 minute claim' and the 'the man who loved his duck house more than justice'⁹; an archaic predecessor of the Conservative MP Sir Peter Viggers, exposed as having claimed £1,600 for his duck house in the MP expenses scandal in 2009.

While the Christian tradition had long imagined Hell as the dwelling place of souls who are unforgiven for their earthly misdemeanours and therefore denied entry to Heaven, there had been no consensus on its

physical geography until Dante's precisely imagined vision was written at the turn of the 14th century. Dante specified that Hell is a deep conical indentation, the lowest point of which is precisely at the centre of the earth. The central axis of the inverted pyramid runs directly through Jerusalem, the location of the crucifixion and resurrection and thus a powerful symbol of God's redemptive power¹⁰. The poor, tormented souls consigned to everlasting suffering occupy nine vast circular terraces which descend, in decreasing size,

down to the earth's core. In addition, at the outer edge of the abyss is an area occupied by those who have committed no sin except that they were morally neutral and did not act or speak out against others' wrongdoings. Illustrating the point later made by Burke (1729-1797) that all that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing, the punishment suffered by these 'neutrals' seems harsh to a modern reader. They swirl in their masses moaning into the howling wind, naked and surrounded by attacking flies and wasps as their faces run with blood. Following this is the descent down through the nine circles of 'that profound pit of pain filled with the howl of endless woe'. The souls of the dead are categorised on each level according to which sin they have committed in their earthly lives. First is an area called Limbo where the souls of those who died without the redemption of God's grace live 'in longing without hope'; then there are those who have

6. Piacentini, L. (2005) 'Cultural talk and other intimate acquaintances with Russian prisons' in *Crime, Media, Culture* 1:2 189-208.

7. Burge, J. (2010) *Dante's Invention* Stroud: The History Press p.85.

8. Ibid.: 86.

9. Ibid. 124.

10. Ibid.

succumbed to sins of weakness such as lust, gluttony or anger who suffer relatively light punishments in the upper reaches of Hell. Between the upper circles and the lower reaches is a river of boiling blood where Virgil and Dante pause to accustom themselves to the awful stench, and then come the circles reserved for the greatest sinners where weeping souls are to be found, tormented and 'wallowing in filth'. These are the (pathologically) angry and violent, deceivers and fraudsters, seducers and flatterers and, finally, in the ninth circle, the treacherous. These might not seem the most serious sins to a modern audience that views spree killers, serial murderers, terrorists and paedophiles as the most 'evil' offenders but they represent the sins of those responsible for the discord in Italy at the time, as illustrated by the comic graphicness with which Dante describes their fate:

*No barrel with a missing
stave gapes open quite as
wide as the soul I saw split
from chin down to the
place where we fart. His
guts hung down between
his legs and I could see his
innards and that foul sack
that turns what we have
eaten to shit.*

(*Inferno*, 28: 22).

In addition, as he descends into Hell, Dante records several unpleasant experiences which resonate with common, cultural ideas about prison: slamming gates, vile odours, ditches full of excrement, mutilations, deviant sexual practices, suicides and a catalogue of degradations too numerous to list. These graphic portrayals of suffering still make gruesome but compelling reading and illustrate why the prison has always lent itself to infernal metaphors; as Nellis comments, Hell 'has been claimed for centuries as the ultimate punishment in Western Christendom...places of damnation even when intended, forlornly, as places of redemption'¹¹.

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The construction of Hell with its nine concentric layers boring deep into the earth's core has found particular resonance with those who seek to provide artistic imaginings of imprisonment. Cultural criminologists have emphasised that ideas about crime and punishment must be understood as an ongoing spiral of inter-textual, image-driven, media loops which draw on years — indeed centuries — of prior references. Novels, films, art, comics, television series and computer games are all 'notoriously self-referential, an accumulating stock of themes, tropes, motifs, stereotypes and conventions'¹² which form public notions, not only of what prisons are like, but what they *should* be like. In particular, cinematic images of the most secure facilities — the super-max or 'maxi-maxi' institutions as Morris described them — frequently employ dystopian penal imagery and draw on 'a rich ideational and iconographic heritage, in which...the spirit of Dante's *Inferno* lives on'¹³. Nellis is concerned with the aesthetic influence of *Inferno* on cinematic images of future punishments; prisons whose whereabouts, perhaps even whose existence, are not known to the populace at large. The sci-fi prisons he discusses include Leviticus in the film *No Escape* (dir. Campbell 1994), an industrial installation

described by the governor-warden as 'a multinational business...reprocessing garbage'¹⁴, and 'the most obvious Dantean environment', *Fortress* (dir. Gordon 1992). The Fortress of the film's title is 'the world's largest underground prison, a pit 33 storeys deep, housing both men and women. Inmates descend as though through the circles of Hell, and are employed digging ever deeper levels'¹⁵. These movies, Nellis says, 'tell us without exception that the American prisons of the future will be hellish places, and that there will surely be villains bad enough to justify their existence'¹⁶.

11. Nellis, M. (2005) 'Future Punishment in American Science Fiction Films' in P. Mason (ed.) *Captured by the Media* Cullompton: Willan Publishing p. 222.

12. *Ibid.*: 212.

13. *Ibid.*

14. *Ibid.*: 218.

15. *Ibid.*: 219.

16. *Ibid.*: 223.

Films like *No Escape* and *Fortress* might be regarded as cult rather than mainstream works, but Dantean images of Hell have broader aesthetic appeal. To take just a few examples, Fiddler analyses the structure of Shawshank prison in *The Shawshank Redemption* (dir. Darabont 1994) — a film which received seven Oscar nominations and which regularly tops lists of most popular films — noting that juxtaposed against its mighty, vaulted, Gothic exterior, is an interior which appears to bore down deep below the surface, rendering cells chthonic tomb-like spaces¹⁷. Sylvester Stallone vehicle *Judge Dredd* (dir. Boyle 1995) presents the audience with a prison-within-a-prison depicted as a ‘tomb of the living...a place of darkness’¹⁸ in which over 200 inmates are kept alive because it is decreed that they do not deserve the merciful release of execution. The first two installments of the *X Men* series (dir. Singer, 2000, 2003) feature a character called Magneto, held in solitary confinement in a seemingly impregnable plastic prison built specifically for him, who nonetheless ingeniously breaks free. The remoteness of these prisons, their impenetrability, their oppressively Gothic atmosphere and the unifying justification by authorities that the punishments are harsh but just, all chime with Dante’s vision of Hell.

Even ‘family films’ are not immune to the influences of *Inferno* where Dante’s allegories, themes and iconography may appear in less subtle and more caricatured ways. For example, the Dreamworks animation *Kung Fu Panda* (dir. Mark Osborne 2008) has a scene involving another spectacular escape from a supposedly impregnable prison. Chorh-Gom is an elaborate stronghold located in the inaccessible, snowy mountain peaks of Tavan Bogd in Mongolia built to hold a single prisoner, the evil snow leopard Tai Lung, serving a life sentence for his ruthless crimes against the citizens of the Valley of Peace. Not only fitted with elaborate defenses, traps and self-destruct mechanisms, and heavily guarded by the Anvil of

Heaven, a one thousand-strong elite army of rhinos, the prisoner is chained within the deepest part of the prison, restrained within a tortoise shell and has acupuncture needles along his back, keeping his chi blocked and making him almost fully immobile. The motto of the prison is ‘One way in, no way out’.

Real Prison Hell

The question is, then, to what extent do Dante’s visions of Hell manifest themselves intertextually and inform ideas about what ‘real’ prisons *are* like and *should* be like. Many of the cinematic penal hell-holes already discussed have clear parallels with actual prisons. For example, new inmates to Leviticus (No Escape) for whom the sentence is natural life with no contact whatsoever with the outside world are told ‘to all intents and purposes you are already dead’¹⁹, a sentiment echoed by James Aitken, a former US prison official who described the supermax facility at the Florence Correctional Complex in Colorado²⁰ as a ‘living tomb... under such conditions as time goes by, they rot’²¹. Prisoners frequently refer to their environments as ‘hell’ or ‘hellish’, but some of the most vivid descriptions come from academic prison researchers who bring with them the perspectives of

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‘outsiders’ and whose shock at what they experience is palpable, such as the earlier quote from prison researcher Laura Piacentini’s field notes during her stay in a Russian prison. The distressing noises that punctuated the eerie silence and led to her petrification contrast with the different — but also hellish — surroundings of Los Angeles County Jail as described by Loïc Wacquant. The largest detention facility in the ‘Free World’, LA County Jail consists of ‘seven mega-houses of detention’ holding more than 23,000 inmates, or ‘nearly half the total prison population of France or Italy’²². The Men’s Central Jail is organised on five floors, two of which are underground, and inmates are crammed in dormitories where up to 150 men live

17. Fiddler, M. (2007) ‘Projecting the prison: the depiction of the uncanny in *The Shawshank Redemption*’ in *Crime, Media, Culture* 3:2 p.192-206.
 18. *Ibid.*: 222.
 19. *Ibid.*: 219.
 20. This ‘Administrative Maximum’ (‘Ad-Max’) facility is where both British ‘shoe bomber’ Richard Reid and Zacharias Moussaoui, the only man charged in the United States over the 9/11 attacks, are both held.
 21. Quoted in *The Times* 4 May 2006.
 22. Wacquant, L. (2002) ‘The Curious Eclipse of Prison Ethnography in the Age of Mass Incarceration’ in *Ethnography* 3:4 p.371.

cheek by jowl on bunk beds which form a human filing cabinet in 'conditions that evoke the dungeons of the Middle Ages'²³. Once again, it is his field notes, reproduced in the article, which bring home the Dantean qualities of the prison as he contrasts the darkness of the carceral spaces with the light above and beyond:

Shock of the daylight, the sun, the fresh air. Overpowering feeling of emerging from a dive into a mine shaft...[a] murky factory for social pain and human destruction, silently grinding away. Emerging back into 'society', from darkness to light, I cannot but be struck by the hypervisibility of the issue of crime in US culture and politics and the total invisibility of punishment, especially when it assumes this industrial form...I am like numb coming out of this long afternoon inside MCJ, and I drive silently straight to the beach [of Santa Monica], to wallow in fresh air and wade in the waves, as if to 'cleanse' myself of all I've seen, heard, and sensed...but my memory is seared by what I've seen...Every time my mind drifts back to it, it seems like a bad movie, a nightmare, the vision of an evil 'other world' that cannot actually exist.

(Field note from my first day in MCJ, 28 August 1998)²⁴.

Wacquant highlights three aspects of the prison which combine to form this nightmare: the noise ('deafening and disorienting'); the filth (both of the trash variety which attracts rats and roaches, and promiscuity which, in this communal living environment, is 'pushed to the point of obscenity'); and the total absence of natural daylight (which leads Wacquant to describe the facility as 'a tomb. A subterranean grotto. A safe for men buried alive far away from society's eyes, ears, and mind'²⁵). He

describes how inmates are permitted one outing per week on the caged roof of the jail, which is:

'the residents' only chance to see the sky, to know whether it's sunny, rainy or windy, to breathe for two hours outside of the cold draft of the air-moving system that operates round the clock (to contain the risk of tuberculosis)... The inmates commonly complain...about the cold: in many tiers, the ventilation is set too high and the units are swept by gusts of chilly air; in the disciplinary cells, the atmosphere is downright frigid'²⁶.

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This truly is the lowest level of Hell; the ninth circle of the *Inferno* is freezing cold, an icy waste in which the atmosphere atrophies the soul. As Dante puts it, 'I did not die but I was not living either' (*Inferno*, 34: 25).

It is not just prisons which are hell-like environments. The liminal spaces of the criminal justice system, including police cells, court cells and prison transit vehicles might be characterized as places of Limbo, the first circle of Hell in Dante's *Inferno*. While not as terrifying as the ensuing circles of Hell, Limbo still makes gruesome reading to the modern observer; indeed its status as the area of everlasting torment to

which the souls of babies who died before they could be baptised proved sufficiently controversial that it was eventually removed from official Catholic doctrine in 2005²⁷. It is also the destiny of the souls of people who died before the birth of Christ; that is, those for whom baptism was not available, including Virgil himself. Once again evoking prison movies, Dante entertains the thought that escape might be possible and he even suggests that he may be able to spring his friend from Limbo, but divine justice is immutable and there is no way out²⁸.

Similar thoughts may at times occupy the minds of those transported in 'meat wagons' or 'sweatboxes'; the prison transit vehicles run by companies like Serco and GLS. In an article in the *Guardian*²⁹ Peter Tatchell

23. Ibid.: 372.

24. Ibid.: 381.

25. Ibid.: 373.

26. Ibid.: 374.

27. Burge, op cit: 126.

28. Ibid.: 127.

29. *Guardian* 30 January 2008.

argues that the export of live animals is better regulated than the transport of prisoners, each of whom is locked inside a tiny coffin-like cubicle, approximately five feet high and measuring about 34in by 24in, with a 10in square clear plastic window and a small hard metal seat on which they must remain seated. Many prisoners — including women, children and teenagers — spend long hours in these vans being transported, sometimes hundreds of miles, between courts and prisons. They usually get no fresh air or exercise, no food or water and no toilet facilities. If they urinate in the cubicle they simply have to clean it out on arrival at their destination. For the thousands of prisoners transported in this way, a large proportion of whom are on remand, many of whom are ill, traumatised, mentally unstable or claustrophobic, the experience recalls the barbarism of a previous era's transportation of slaves and convicts. Peter Simon, a black activist arrested following a political protest in December 2007 recalls his time in a Serco transit van, and notes that felt compressed within the cubicle: 'I was now beginning to feel like a black-skinned slave tight-packed (as of old, albeit in a different variation of the hell) out of some kind of sadistic lust for human degradation and profit...a slow panic was beginning to ensue. My chest was getting tighter...the sickness churned again in my stomach...The lack of ventilation. I was feeling so light-headed, tight-packed and boxed. I gasped, lost consciousness'³⁰.

Conclusion

Dante took the justness of Hell for granted, using his work as a kind of rhetorical punishment for his political enemies; a position that seems strikingly 'modern'. Indeed, it has been suggested that the *Comedy* has enduring appeal because we have not really left the Middle Ages: 'Vendetta still rules. Entire foreign policies, not to mention civil wars and terror campaigns, are based on ideas of revenge and polarities

of good and evil just as primitive as anything in Dante'³¹. Dante's vision of Hell is unremittingly and mesmerizingly cruel but in an age of penal populism his vision of eternal suffering is regarded as a 'half-desirable destination'³² for society's outcasts, and the notion of a benign God who ordains cruel punishment is one that governments of liberal democracies hold dear. As Dante travels downward through the circles of Hell, his responses to the suffering of others is mixed. The plight of some souls who he knew personally in their earthly lives delights him and he cheers on their tormentors³³. Others genuinely move him to pity, although not to a degree that causes him to question the authority of divine justice.

Vendetta also underpins ideas about crime and justice. A cursory scan of the pages of the popular press on any given day reveals that we appear to have returned to biological explanations of offending; that is, the offender is conceived as resulting, not from defects in society, but from pathological defects in the individual himself. Positivism also underpins popular fictions about crime and punishment and, as this article has discussed, Dante's vision of Hell is attractive to film-makers and others in the culture industries not only for the medieval Gothic iconography it offers but also for the message it gives about vengeance. Divine justice is immutable and there can be no more graphic and disturbing rendition of 'do the crime, do the time' than *Inferno*. It is this moral absolutism that permeates news reporting of crime. Offenders are beyond redemption; human waste who must be banished to a fitting location. Removal from society is thus a fair and natural response and inhuman(e), Hell-like prisons are accepted as the most appropriate containers for them. But as well as being afforded no possibility of redemption, they are also considered unworthy of forgiveness. As Bauman notes, 'the sole purpose of prisons is not just any human waste disposal but a final, definitive disposal. Once rejected, forever rejected'³⁴.

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30. Ibid.

31. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2011/may/05/dante-hell-poetry-divine-comedy>).

32. Nellis, op. cit.: 226.

33. Burge, op. cit.: 122.

34. Bauman, op. cit.: 86.