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## LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

*The basic idea of having an undergraduate research publication had been floating around my head for a while, but there are many moments when I worried that this idea would never see the light of day. In the process of turning an idea into a reality, there are many who were necessary, if not individually sufficient.*

*My gratitude extends first to the original (and inaugural) Executive Committee of the Yale-NUS Society for Academic Research. Thanks to Rebecca Yuqi Huang, Coco Jinglu, Jerald Lim, Trang Nguyen, Tan Weiliang, Ng Sai Ying, and Tee Zhuo. It has been a pleasure to work alongside each of you; I cannot imagine the Journal's publication without your aid.*

*Secondly, Chris Mulvey, our first advisor, offered excellent counsel in how to engage the broader Yale-NUS College community in our endeavors. He never steered us wrongly, and although we did not always follow his advice, I am quite certain we have been the worse for it. In addition, Professor Nancy Gleason offered important early advice about the potential of an undergraduate publication, encouraging us to broaden our vision of the possible.*

*Once we started the Yale-NUS Undergraduate Journal, we needed peer editors and faculty members to provide some oversight. Tee Zhuo, our co-Editor-in-Chief, did a superb job in working with Abel Ang, Darrel Chang, and Le Vi Pham to edit the publication. My thanks, also, to all the faculty members who generously agreed to review submissions to the Journal; my thanks, therefore, to Rector Sarah Weiss, Professor Andrew Hui, Professor Tony Day, Professor Marvin Montefrio, Professor Elton Chan, Professor Antonio Montero, Professor William H. Piel, Professor Joe Alter, and Professor Guillem Riambau-Armet. In addition, Professor Terry Nardin, who serves as our faculty advisor, has helped to guide our path and ensure that we produce a work with meaningful and original research. My thanks to them all.*

*In printing and distributing the publication, I wish to additionally thank Elson Ong who, while joining late, offered considerable aid in actually producing the publication.*

*The list of people who have helped extends beyond the above. The Dean of Students' Office funded this publication; NUS Press offered further counsel about publishing; the list continues. I would be remiss, however, to leave out one final acknowledgement.*

*Professor Barney Bate encouraged our efforts, generously dispensing time and counsel alike. As YNSAR's inaugural faculty advisor, he had much to teach us, and although he left us too soon, we remain grateful for the lessons he was able to impart. My deepest gratitude for his kindness and faith in our endeavor.*

Patrick Wu

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# La Divina Mimesis

## Art in the Terrace of Pride in *Divina Commedia*

*Thu Truong, Yale-NUS College, Class of 2017*

*In Divina Commedia, the nature of art and the artist is discussed most thoroughly in the terrace of Pride (Purgatorio 10-12), as the pilgrim navigates through the divine art which is in turn portrayed by the human poet. In creating a mimesis that transcends reality, Dante complicates the roles of creator and imitator, and with that, the relationship between presentation and re-presentation. On the one hand, God—the ultimate Author—takes on the conceit of the artist, as humans, nature, and eventually reality are shown to be magnificent works of divine art. On the other hand, the human poet, who merely imitates, slowly assumes an auctoritas (“authority”) as he proves his own capacity for realism. The tension between Arachnean<sup>1</sup> and divine art leads to the discourse on the didactic nature of God’s creation, which is a teaching to the human artist as he goes through the terrace of Pride.*

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<sup>1</sup> Arachne: the weaver who challenges the goddess Minerva with her weaving skills, and who later becomes the symbol of human pride against the divine. For more on Arachne, please see Ovid (2008). *Metamorphoses*. (A. D. Melville, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008, 6.1-145.

The nature of art and the artist in the *Commedia* becomes the most prominent issue in the terrace of Pride, as Dante encounters the divine artwork which he reproduces by his own medium of art. In that re-presentation, we see the blurred boundary between the author and the artist, when God is described as the ultimate Artist and Dante, in a sense, strives for the supreme *auctoritas*. By looking at these complications—God as the Artist, Dante as the author, and the tension in this seeming reversal of roles—this paper will eventually show the didactic nature of divine art, which is both a teaching and a warning to the human imitator.

### Truth as Art

The status of God as the ultimate Artist is most overt in the terrace of Pride, even though Dante makes several allusions to it in *Inferno*. Most important in *Purgatorio* 10 is the introduction of God's art for the first time in the *Commedia*, and furthermore, the introduction of an art that violates the principle of mimesis. Instead of the human art that mimics Nature and stays within the boundary of representation, Dante strives to re-produce an art that already goes beyond the capacity of "verisimilitude" to become the *ver*—the divine art that would put even Nature to scorn.<sup>1,2</sup> Such transcendence is possible because the creator of divine art is the ultimate Author *and* Artist, whose creations are perfection, to the point where it is

impossible to draw the line between art and life.

As Dante and Vergil emerge from the gate of Purgatorio and look at the *relievo* on the marble walls, Dante is overwhelmed by a synesthetic experience: the figures that are shown to him in a visual medium slowly evoke his other senses, and, eventually, overcome them. The sensorial confusion increases as Dante travels along the engraved scenes; from the Annunciation, where he only has the perception of hearing, to the Ark of the Covenant, where his eyes and his nose communicate different impressions of the burning incense. Finally, even his sight succumbs to the magic of God's art, as he witnesses the *visibile parlare* ("visible speech") between Trajan and the widow:

The wretched woman, among all these, *seemed to be saying*: "Lord, avenge my son who has been killed, so that I am broken-hearted!"—

and he *to be replying*: "Now wait until I return"—

and she: "My lord," as a person speaks in whom sorrow is urgent,

"if you do not return?"—and he: "Whoever will be in my place will do it for you"—and she: "What will another's good be to you, if you forget your own?"—

then he:" Now be comforted; for it is fitting that I fulfil my duty before I move: justice demands it and compassion holds me here."<sup>3</sup>

The overcoming of the senses is the hallmark of realism, when the audience has to

<sup>1</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.33.

<sup>2</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 122.

<sup>3</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.82-93; emphasis mine.

employ not only one, but multiple means to interact with the work of art. In other words, God's sculpture is not a mere display that one finds in the museum, to be marvelled at by sight; rather, it is the re-installation of one's living experience with full engagement of the senses, mind, and intellect. To enjoy God's art, then, is to be immersed in it. As God creates a visual medium that is endowed with a verbal medium,<sup>4</sup> bringing figures to the verge of coming to life, one cannot help but notice the similarity between the creation of art and the creation of humans. Dante himself provides an account of the human birth in *Purgatorio* 25, where human beings are born from the union of the body and the soul. What separates them from animals is the rational spirit gifted by God, which unites the vegetative and appetitive parts into one single soul with one conscious ruling.<sup>5</sup> And if, as Aristotle argues, the ability to think begets the ability to speak,<sup>6</sup> then humans are also the sculptures of God imbued with a verbal medium.

The idea that humans are the artistic creation of God becomes the red thread running through the terrace of Pride, as the similarity between humans and art is addressed once more in *Purgatorio* 10. The sensorial confusion that Dante experiences does not stop at the three engravings. Rather, it lasts until the end of the canto. Whereas it

begins with art that reflects real life, it ends with life that reflects art: it is reality—the human penitents—that is compared to art and described in artistic terms: “As to support a ceiling or a roof we sometimes see for corbel a figure that touches knees to breast, . . . so I saw them to be, when I looked carefully.”<sup>7</sup> The principle of mimesis is again violated; art is no longer ‘lifelike’ but has become the point of reference for life. The line between presentation and re-presentation is blurred, the seeming and the being merged into one,<sup>8</sup> because both are the creation of God and capable of perfection.

The heart of God's realism, however, lies within the last four lines of the canto, when amidst the height of confusion, the pilgrim nevertheless finds clarity in his vision:

*It is true* that they were more and less  
compressed according as they had more and  
less upon their backs, and he whose bearing  
showed the most patience  
weeping seemed to say: “I can bear no  
more.”<sup>9</sup>

Far more than a simple statement of what is and what is not, “it is true” marks the culmination of Dante's journey thus far; it has the weight of the

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<sup>4</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Dethologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 124.

<sup>5</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio*. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 25.70-75.

<sup>6</sup> Aristotle. (1984). *Politics*. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volume 2*. J. Barnes (Ed.). (B. Jowett, Trans.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1253a5-15.

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<sup>7</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio*. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.130-135.

<sup>8</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Dethologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 130.

<sup>9</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio*. *The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.136-139; emphasis mine.

pilgrim's dawning realization as he beholds the truthfulness in divine art. A short detour back to *Inferno* could help us see the significance of this statement. The terrace of Pride, geographically, is the first proper realm Dante enters after *Inferno* where the greatest art is the greatest lie. The pilgrim surely remembers his encounter with Geryon, the "filthy image of fraud,"<sup>10</sup> who nevertheless with his face of truth could trick the pilgrim, even if for only a moment:

... by the notes of  
this comedy, reader, *I swear to you*, so may  
they not fail to find long favour,  
that I saw . . . [Geryon] come swimming  
upward.<sup>11</sup>

Every reader of the *Commedia* must have experienced some unease reading these two tercets. How should we believe in Dante's words when he stakes the truthfulness of his whole poem on this emblem of fraud? Yet we are to be reminded that the pilgrim, at any point, is still a fallible human; the self-authenticating "I swear to you," though full of personal conviction, speaks nothing of the objective truth. Geryon may trick the guileless Dante, but he holds no power over the worldly Vergil who, with his speech, shows the pilgrim the true nature of the beast: "Behold the one that makes the whole world

stink!"<sup>12</sup> In the terrace of Pride, however, Dante needs no such correction. His conviction is strengthened, his language firm—when he says "it is true," he is speaking the tongue of the Absolute. The fraud of Geryon becomes the testament of truth in divine art, as the pilgrim's faith will otherwise seem unwarranted has he not gone through the most dangerous trial. In other words, the greatest of doubt must necessarily precede the greatest of faith. In order to show readers the perfect truthful art, Dante must first show the perfect lying art that he himself has overcome.

As we approach the thinning distinction between art and reality, the representational language also takes on a double meaning to show God's identity as the Artist. The acrostic *segno* ("image") appears most prominently in *Purgatorio* 12, *Paradiso* 6 and *Paradiso* 19, and as the poem progresses, it moves from graphic representation to historical presentation. In *Purgatorio* 12, *segno* remains a likeness, something created after the original:

Rehoboam, your *image* there no longer  
seems menacing but full of terror: a chariot  
carries it off without anyone pursuing.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, the *segno* that appears in the heaven of Providential history is no longer an artistic creation; rather than an image, it becomes part of the historical events themselves. Posing as

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<sup>10</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17.7.

<sup>11</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 16.127-131.

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<sup>12</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 17.3.

<sup>13</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.46-48; emphasis mine.

the imperial eagle (“the sacrosanct emblem”),<sup>14</sup> *segno* is God’s messenger with great deeds that humans fail to emulate. The inanimate sign is given an agency, capable of making presentation instead of re-presentation. Finally, in the heaven of Justice, as *segno* is completely transformed into the sign of life, reality and art become one once more in the skywriting of God:

They showed themselves, then, in five times seven vowels and consonants, and I noted the parts as they were dictated to me.

“DILIGITE IUSTITIAM” were the first verb and noun of the whole depiction,

“QUI IUDICATIS TERRAM” were the last.

Then they remained arranged in the *M* of the fifth word, so that Jove appeared there silver adorned with gold.<sup>15</sup>

These are the letters made by human souls. *Segno*, quite literally, is still a sign of art, but this is art created from life—the collective artwork made from none other than the blessed spirits of *Paradiso*. They have been art in life and art after death; they are the messengers and also the message, or, as Teodolinda Barolini puts it, “When God chooses to write, the signs he uses are humans.”<sup>16</sup> This is also the final destination for, and transformation of, the

penitents in *Purgatorio* 10. At the same time, the journey from the terrace of Pride to the heaven of Justice is no mere linear progression. The truth about God’s realism is already fully conveyed in *Purgatorio* 12, when Dante professes: “one who saw the true event did not see better than I.”<sup>17</sup> The carvings in the terrace of Pride are not likened to reality; they *are* reality, and by taking part in witnessing them, Dante also makes himself a part of history.

The Artist, however, hardly limits his artistic expression to humans. If we were to say that reality is God’s art, then Nature is no exception. The concept of Nature as God’s art is prevalent in classical tradition, and Dante himself alludes to it prior to his depiction of divine art in *Purgatorio* 10. In *Inferno* 11, Dante introduces the principle of mimesis that he would engage with, and even challenge, in later canti, through the genealogy of human art, Nature, and God: “Nature takes its course from the divine intellect and art; . . . [and] your art follows Nature as much as it can, . . . so that your art is almost God’s grandchild.”<sup>18</sup> In other words, the imitator cannot surpass the imitated. Human art follows Nature “as much as it can,” and Nature, despite being the origin of human art, cannot surpass the divine art which it “takes its course” from. The argument leaves us with the implication that Nature itself is imperfect, and Dante, eventually, affirms the idea.<sup>19</sup> As the heavens of

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<sup>14</sup> Alighieri, D. (2013). *Paradiso. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6.32.

<sup>15</sup> Alighieri, D. (2013). *Paradiso. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 18.88-95; emphasis mine.

<sup>16</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Dethologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 129.

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<sup>17</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.67-69

<sup>18</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 11.97-105.

<sup>19</sup> Alighieri, D. (2013). *Paradiso. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford:

*Paradiso* follow a strict Aristotelian structure, it would be no surprise if the rest of the *Commedia* also follows the cosmology of *De Caelo*. Anything in the sublunar realm for Aristotle—that is, the terrestrial world—is imperfect for its lack of circular motions.<sup>20</sup> The Earth, in that sense, is the imperfect wax in which God places his seal, and the Nature that is born from her also suffers from defects. Just as all men are “children of God” but none has the perfection of Christ, earthly Nature, too, cannot claim the perfection that was once given to Eden.

The true divine art, though, is not subject to such limits. With the perfect wax, God can create something that surpasses Nature, for He is the imitator of none and Nature is but one creation of His. Such an art is put on glorious display in the very beginning of *Purgatorio* 10, to which Nature can only pale in comparison:

I saw that the inner bank, which, rising  
straight up, permitted no ascent,  
was of white marble and adorned with  
such carvings that not only Polyclitus but even  
Nature would be put to scorn there.<sup>21</sup>

Art, or *artificio*, it seems, is not always an imperfect conceit, something lacking substance. Through God, we find a kind of art that *is* perfection, which shows that art is perfectible in itself. The

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Oxford University Press, 13.76-78; Nature can only render the “imperfect wax,” like an artist who falls short because of a “trembling hand.”

<sup>20</sup> Aristotle. (1984). On the Heavens. *The Complete Works of Aristotle: Volume 1*. J. Barnes (Ed.). (J. L. Stocks, Trans.) Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 269a-269b15.

<sup>21</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.29-33.

nature of the artist decides the value of his creation, and unlike the Lord, fallible humans cannot produce the art that transcends. As the imperfect wax renders the imperfect imprint, human art, failing to find its perfect form in the human artist, remains the imitation and never the imitated.

### Art as Truth

As God assumes the identity of the Artist, Dante the poet instead takes the opposite direction: from the human imitator, he slowly establishes himself as the *creator*. When we blur the line between God’s art and reality, it is also increasingly hard to distinguish His art from the human art that represents it. In other words, as Dante re-produces God’s art, he in fact goes beyond the limits of an imitator and creates an art on the verge of becoming reality. In *Purgatorio* 10, Dante professes to be a teller of truth and not a maker of art,<sup>22</sup> whose words bear the *auctoritas* of the Author:

*It is true* that they were more and less  
compressed according as they had more and  
less upon their backs, and he whose bearing  
showed the most patience  
weeping seemed to say: “I can bear no  
more.”<sup>23</sup>

The conviction in the three words “it is true” compels many readings. First, as we have discussed, it testifies to the unparalleled realism of

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<sup>22</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 126.

<sup>23</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.136-139; emphasis mine.

God's art. Second, it speaks of the supposed veracity of Dante's creation—which we will address in due course. Third, and perhaps most apparent, it complicates the relationship between God's art and Dante's own, to the point where the two authors are almost interchangeable. Readers are reminded that it is Dante who delivers God's art in its entirety, who, with the *Commedia*, replicates the divine artwork with all its visual allure. This is the perfect mimesis that *is*, or even goes beyond, reality in our earthly senses.<sup>24</sup> If the pilgrim is confronted with sensorial confusion only once, the readers are confounded twice—with God's artistic realism and with Dante's rendering of it. In that rendering, Dante brings his authorship closer to that of God. Their arts are interwoven; the divine art is strangely textual<sup>25</sup> while Dante's becomes more and more visual, as though his art is *visibile parlare* itself. And indeed, as God creates a kind of living art, Dante also makes the conscious attempt to produce his own *visibile parlare*. The story of Trajan and the widow is not a mere overcoming of sight, for it is clear that Dante does not focus on the actions as they unfurl. Rather, he directs our attention to the speech that *seems* to be, one that can be seen by the eyes. From a story originally inscribed in marbles, the tale of Trajan becomes as much a verbal representation as it is visual.

There is another kind of story that Dante, posed as the author, wishes to tell—the verbal history that, with his words, is turned into visual art. The thirteen examples of pride in *Purgatorio* 12 are in fact less of God's carving than of Dante's

historical account. And that account is graphically displayed more than told: of the thirteen tercets, four begin with “V,” four with “O,” and four with “M,” together creating the VOM that is “human.”<sup>26</sup> Man's history of pride *appears* before the readers' eyes just as the carvings are *seen* by the pilgrim; that in itself is a work of art engraved in textual stones. In other words, Dante the poet is giving us exactly what God gives Dante the pilgrim: an account full of authenticity that evokes all our senses. To go further still, the V-O-M pattern is visual not only in form but also in content. “Vedeva” and “mostrava,” one standing for vision and the other for representation, remind readers that Dante is indeed *showing* the history of man. At this point, Dante is no longer just the human imitator who re-creates God's art. He has assumed an authorship while trying to build his own *artificio*.

Dante's authorship, however, lacks one thing still: the authority of the word. This is where the three words “it is true” return with their full resonance. As mentioned, they speak of the veracity in Dante's work—such a claim requires readers to believe in not only what Dante sees, but also what he says. The ontological difference between the pilgrim's experience and the words rendering it on page creates tension within the *Commedia*, and the only way for readers to resolve that tension is to willingly accept the poet's words as the truth. It is, however, not an easy acceptance. Language, much like human art, has the potential for perfection, but too often finds itself in the imperfect wax: while the Annunciation once “bridges the gap between

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<sup>24</sup> I owe this point to Professor Andrew Hui.

<sup>25</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Dethologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 126.

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<sup>26</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.25-63

Heaven and Earth,”<sup>27</sup> the tongues of Babel, failing to bridge the same gap, could only dissolve into chaos and confusion.<sup>28</sup> If that is the case, what makes Dante’s poetry closer to truth than the words of Nimrod? Dante himself must have had this question in mind at the start of the poem when he carefully delineates the language he will speak—that is, the language of the divine. The first invocation of the poem is dedicated to the Muses, a tribute to the classical epic tradition; at the same time, it is also the acknowledgement that his story needs both divine inspiration and the human “high wit.”<sup>29</sup> The poet can produce the form, but the substance, the breath of life, must come from God. *Fictio rhetorica musicae poita*<sup>30</sup>—poetry is ‘the fiction arranged through rhetoric and music,’ but the ‘fiction’ here is not one of fabricated lies. The ‘fiction’ of poetry is, instead, a *composition* of dual forces (*fictio* from *fictum*, ‘to have been composed’), a unity of truth and art, of the divine and the human. Conceived in

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<sup>27</sup> Mazzotta, G. (1979). *Rhetoric and History. Dante Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 73; Mazzotta refers to Virgin Mary’s words, “Ecce ancilla Dei,” when she accepts Gabriel’s message that she would become the mother of Jesus.

<sup>28</sup> Mazzotta, G. (1979). *Rhetoric and History. Dante Poet of the Desert: History and Allegory in the Divine Comedy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 73; when Nimrod and the inhabitants of Babel decide to build a tower tall enough to reach Heaven, God punishes them by making their speech unintelligible. See Genesis 11:1-9.

<sup>29</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2.7.

<sup>30</sup> Marchesi, S. (2011). *Poetics. Dante & Augustine: Linguistics, Poetics, Hermeneutics*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 81; Original Latin from Dante Alighieri’s *De vulgari eloquentia* 2.iv.2.

this way, Dante’s *Commedia* becomes the closest approximation to truth, and the poet could finally speak with the authority of a creator and not imitator.

We have arrived to the point where it is surprisingly, and perhaps dangerously, hard to separate Dante the author and God the Artist, and Dante himself playfully treads that thin line. This he resolves by building a dual authorship with the Lord. The greatest—and grandest—visible speech Dante has produced is not the story of Trajan nor the visual account of human history, but the whole *Commedia* itself. Each cantica has its own visible speech: the inscription on the gate of *Inferno*,<sup>31</sup> divine art in *Purgatorio*,<sup>32</sup> and the skywriting of *Paradiso* where the souls form the letters of God.<sup>33</sup> It is as though each realm is a sculpture of God just like each cantica is a sculpture of Dante, and the poem is at once a work of art and reality. But even though Dante is the author of the *Commedia*’s poetic world, he does not try to distance himself from the *auctoritas* of God at all. His choice is reflected in their mutual medium of art—sculpture. Unlike paintings which are created anew, sculptures are only the removal of excess. It is the closest kind of art to truth, one that is not a mimesis but a presentation. When the artist sculpts, he does not invent; he aims to only reveal the truth that already exists, which means the reality that Dante delivers is

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<sup>31</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 3.10-12

<sup>32</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.82-95

<sup>33</sup> Alighieri, D. (2013). *Paradiso. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 18.88-95

also the reality that God creates in the beginning. As the two authors converge in ideas, Dante also gains his own *auctoritas*, which allows his text to transcend imitation and exceed the limit of historical contingency.<sup>34</sup>

Once this dual authorship takes place, though, a paradox emerges: Dante becomes the greatest human creator by being the greatest emulator of all. Even though he is deeply aware of his own creation, he yields to the Lord and turns himself into a spokesperson, or, in other words, a *scribe*:

Now stay there, reader, on your bench,  
thinking back on your foretaste here, if your  
wish to rejoice long before you tire;

I have set before you: now feed yourself, for  
all my care is claimed by *that matter of which I  
have become the scribe*.<sup>35</sup>

Whereas in *Purgatorio* he was still walking on the tightrope between authority and deference, in *Paradiso*, Dante the author has become Dante the scribe. His artistic expression not only is sanctioned by God, but also is the literal *transcript* of the divine message; Dante is now the godly instrument that tells readers the truth as it is. His text is the Scripture made by him, the human scribe, and by God, the ultimate Author not only of the text, but

also of Dante and of the entire universe.<sup>36</sup> The *Commedia* is both a Scripture written anew and a reincarnation of the original—Dante is able to infer from the sculptures of *Purgatorio* 10 only because he is well-acquainted with the stories behind them.<sup>37</sup> What he shows readers, thus, is neither his imagination nor an event that he witnesses first-hand. It is a story retold which evokes the final *auctoritas* of God. For this imitation (and not creation), Dante enjoys a prestige that no other artist can lay claim to. As he re-presents the supreme art that equals reality, Dante also achieves a perfect realism in which human art, immaculately conceived, can surpass even Nature. The contradiction here is that the celebration of God's art leads to the celebration of his own mimesis. As he exalts divine art, the human artist, who perfectly imitates it, becomes the greatest of poets only by being a scribe.<sup>38</sup>

In the same way, Dante surpasses all other artists, including Vergil, whose only preoccupation is the re-presentation of Nature. Even though he inherits from the classical tradition—and he would later include himself in that canon<sup>39</sup>—Dante is, ultimately, going a step further. In the one step that he has beyond Vergil in *Purgatorio* 10, Dante leaves

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<sup>34</sup> Ascoli, A. R. (2008). The author in history. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 7.

<sup>35</sup> Alighieri, D. (2013). *Paradiso. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.22-27; emphasis mine.

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<sup>36</sup> Ascoli, A. R. (2008). The author in history. *Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 7.

<sup>37</sup> Heffernan, J. A. W. (1993). A Genealogy of Ekphrasis. *Museum of Words: The Poetics of Ekphrasis from Homer to Ashbery*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 44.

<sup>38</sup> Barolini, T. (1984). Dante: 'ritornero poeta.' *Dante's Poets: Textuality and Truth in the Comedy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 275.

<sup>39</sup> Hawkins, P. S. (1992). Self-Authenticating Artifact: Poetry and Theology in *Paradiso* 25. *Christianity and Literature*, 41(4), 388.

the classical tradition behind, moving only with his delight from the divine creation. That is because Vergil, though virtuous, lacks the vision of God, and as Winthrop Wetherbee argues, it has come to the point where his art is inadequate to express the new reality. Classical art, it seems, is inspiring but static.<sup>40</sup> It lacks depth and motion, while the art of Dante will continue to evolve. This is also the crucial point which foreshadows Vergil's disappearance at the end of *Purgatorio*. Though he is Dante's beloved and indispensable guide in *Inferno*, as they come closer to God in their ascent, Vergil's authority over Dante is slowly washed away. Enrico Mestica likewise emphasizes that Vergil's art is a tableau, but Dante's is a *relievo*: "Vergil paints descriptively, employing ample display of images and colours; Dante sculpts, using speech made visible."<sup>41</sup> Living art—*visibile parlare*—is beyond what the pagan poet could ever accomplish. And as Dante seeks an expression that goes beyond human capacity, he has to move past Vergil, who, while nudging Dante forward, can only remain in one place.

### Author, Scribe, Messenger

There is danger lurking, still, in Dante's presumption to be the divine scribe. Dante himself is not unaware of such danger: as he treads the fine line between being author and being imitator, one misstep is enough for him to become the second Arachne. That leads us to the didactic function of art, and the reason divine art appears, for the first time

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<sup>40</sup> Wetherbee, W. (2008). Ovid and Vergil in Purgatory. *The Ancient Flame: Dante and the Poets*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 134-135.

<sup>41</sup> Mestica, E. (1921-22). Commentary to *Inferno*, III. 82-99. (R. Hollander, Trans.). Firenze: R. Bemporad & figlio. Retrieved from <http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu>.

in the *Commedia*, in the terrace of Pride. God's art is placed in the terrace of Pride because that is the one vice Dante might be guilty of, once the pull from the fire of Ulysses becomes too great to resist. There is nothing to guarantee that the human artist, capable of creating an art that rivals reality, would not want to create for himself his own world. Such was the tragedy that befell Ulysses, who in his mad flight to find the *nova terra*<sup>42</sup> did not realize his transgression. The sculptures in *Purgatorio*, then, are a teaching and a warning—to teach the penitents the grace of humility and to warn the artist about his human limit. It is no coincidence that to look at the examples of pride, penitents have to walk with their eyes cast down; they have to assume a humble posture before learning about the fallen proud. This also reiterates the high moral position that Dante ascribes to divine art.<sup>43</sup> Art, as we have discussed, has no inherent moral value; it only takes on the character of the artist. And divine art, whose artist is the Lord, indeed has the supreme nature needed for such guidance. Just as Minerva tries to warn her emulator by her handiwork, God inscribes his warning and teaching in stone,<sup>44</sup> lest the human sculptor falls prey to Arachnean pride. Yet despite their similarities, Dante would not become the second Arachne. The figures of Arachne and Ulysses serve as the constant reminder for Dante, who,

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<sup>42</sup> Alighieri, D. (1997). *Inferno. The Divine Comedy of Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 26.124-137.

<sup>43</sup> Kelemen, J. (2008). Canto XII: Eyes Down. *Lectura Dantis: Purgatorio*. A. Mandelbaum, A. Oldcorn, & C. Ross (Ed.). Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: The University of California Press, 127.

<sup>44</sup> Barolini, T. (1992). Re-presenting what God presented: The Arachnean art in the terrace of Pride. *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 131.

having witnessed their *folle volo*, is able to gain his mental vision.<sup>45</sup> The poet is aware of his Ulyssean language and aim, but that awareness keeps him inside the boundary that should not be crossed. Arachne falls because she did not have the goddess in her vision, whereas Dante, in his creation, is always conscious of the real Author. The ship that brought Ulysses his demise in *Inferno* 26 returns in *Purgatorio* 12,<sup>46</sup> but this time with a positive ending: with its wings and oars, Dante will fly. That is because, freed from pride, Dante has transformed into the angelic butterfly who “flies to justice without a shield”;<sup>47</sup> he was walking out of the terrace of Pride with a straight posture but a humble mind. This is the flight that will eventually take him to God, unlike Icarus, whose flight to the Sun ends in failure.

The placement of divine art in the terrace of pride also shows Dante’s *officio commesso*—his duty as the enlightened one to provide guidance to others. As one who blurs the line between art and reality, author and imitator, Dante now assumes the role of learner and teacher as well. In his own acrostic there is a lesson. The “V” in “VOM”—human—has both the peaks of the blessed and the abyssal depth of the fallen;<sup>48</sup> it indicates

both the perfectibility of human soul and our tendency to stray from the right path. The collective of poets and artists in *Purgatorio* is the proof for that. With their eyes fixated on “supremacy” instead of God, they all suffer from the harm of pride despite their otherwise perfectible art and soul. The spiritual path after death, it seems, is not pre-destined. Rather, as Dante has stated in his *Epistle to Cangrande*, man deserves of reward or punishment according to his virtues and vices, exercised by his own free will.<sup>49</sup> As Dante’s greatest art, the *Commedia* is also his greatest sculpture for humankind—Dante is teaching man what he has learned from God. The didactic nature of the *Commedia* cannot be denied: as the pilgrim undertakes a journey that would eventually lead to salvation, he is also showing the correct path to take, or in other words, how to attain the state of the blessed souls.

Ultimately, this *officio commesso* is what separates Dante from Arachne. Arachne’s artistic vision is fraught with ills, and her craft, though flawless, in the end is nothing more than the deceptions she chooses to capture. Dante’s art, however, is not fraud, but guidance; not trickery, but truth. By submitting to the highest moral good of God’s creation, the poet could claim that moral transcendence for himself. It is in this deference to God that Dante resolves the tension between the author and the Artist, and in the process creates a mimesis that, though borne of a human, is in nature divine.

## Acknowledgements

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<sup>45</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.121-123.

<sup>46</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 12.4-6.

<sup>47</sup> Alighieri, D. (2004). *Purgatorio. The Divine Comedy of Dante Alighieri*. (R. M. Durling & R. L. Martinez, Trans.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, 10.124-126.

<sup>48</sup> Ascoli, A. R. (2008). *The author of the Commedia. Dante and the Making of a Modern Author*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 395.

<sup>49</sup> Alighieri, D. (1991). *Epistle to Cangrande. Critical Essays on Dante*. (G. Mazzotta, Trans.). London: MacMillan Publishing Company, 6.

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# Rime and Reason

## Conversion and Vergilian Poetics in Dante's *Commedia*

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*This essay discusses how the use of similes and metaphors from Vergil's Aeneid in Dante's Divina Commedia exemplifies both the poetics of conversion and the conversion of poetics, that is, that Dante borrows these figures of speech to illustrate how pre-Christian ideas are converted by Medieval Catholic thought, and to embody Dante's view on the nature and process of conversion. To argue this, I adapt Raymond Williams's terms for cultural analysis in Marxism and Literature, in order to untangle Vergilian figures of speech in the Commedia into their residual, dominant, and emergent parts. I analyse then how the parts compare between the Vergilian original and the Dantean copy. In this essay, I focus on the simile of the falling leaves (Inferno III) and the metaphor of the ancient fire (Purgatorio XXX). The essay concludes by connecting Dante's ability to imbue new meaning into figures of speech to God's power to create and convert. Dante thus exemplifies through his poetic methodology his own belief that the gift of the very best of poets is true imitation of God's method of creation.*

If, as Quintilian proposes, Homer is the Ocean from which all eloquence flows<sup>1</sup>, then it is little wonder that Vergil<sup>2</sup>, who is oft-treated as his literary successor in the epic genre, has been a source of poetic inspiration and cause for “creative imitation”<sup>3</sup> for generations of poets. Meeting the character of Virgil in the first canto of the *Divina Commedia*, Dante the pilgrim overflows with admiration, calling him “[his] master and [his] author” (*Inferno* I.85). In succeeding cantos, he attributes to Vergil both poetic and philosophical mentorship.

Seas of ink have been spilled by scholars of Dante to qualify the relationship between the *Aeneid* and the *Commedia* and, more specifically, to explain why Dante would choose Vergil-the-poet turned Virgil-the-character as his guide. Most analyses fall within two categories: either that allusion to Vergil adds literary depth or chthonic authority to the text or that inserting Virgil allows Dante the pilgrim to surpass him within the story, which represents how Dante the poet surpasses Vergil in real life. As we will discuss later, the focus of commentators in analysing this relationship between the poets has remained largely on the level of plot, and how the characters are representative of their respective philosophies.

This essay argues that there is a third reason for Dante’s use of Vergilian references in his poem: The *Aeneid* is incorporated into the *Commedia* to demonstrate the conversion of ideas and illustrate the nature of conversion. By “demonstrate the conversion of ideas,” I am

referring to how Dante shows us through reinterpretations of Vergilian literary devices that Christian theology gives new life to classical philosophy, and by “illustrate the nature of conversion,” I mean that the literary devices themselves, which weave the *Aeneid* into the *Commedia*, exemplify the process of conversion through a conversion of poetics. In demonstrating this claim, I will focus on the use of similes or metaphors that Dante inherited from the *Aeneid*.

As noted earlier, preceding studies on the relationship between Vergil and Dante have focused mostly on either the confluence or the clash between Christian and Classical cultures in the *Commedia*. Kevin Brownlee discusses how commentators note two key functions of Virgil in the text. First, as Vergil is the author of other key classical texts, references to his work imbue Dante’s poem with a historical richness and literary depth, which maintain Virgil’s presence in the text in spite of his departure from the plot. Such a move would be in-keeping with the culture of poetic lineage that dominates the epic genre, wherein new poets position themselves in a grand literary tradition of previous epics.<sup>4</sup> Second, as Dante’s guide, Virgil represents the pinnacle of classical culture, knowledge, and virtue, which allows him to lead Dante to the summit of earthly experience in Eden. Virgil then disappears near the end of *Purgatorio* while Dante journeys further into *Paradiso* -- an intra-poetic move which scholars claim dramatizes how Christianity philosophically supersedes Classical antiquity.<sup>5</sup> Colin Burrow similarly

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<sup>1</sup> Henderson, 2002, X.1.

<sup>2</sup> As is literary convention, in this paper, Vergil refers to the actual person of Publius Vergilius Maro and Virgil refers to the character within the *Commedia*.

<sup>3</sup> Hardie, 1992, xi.

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<sup>4</sup> Dante makes this desire to be part of the line of important epic poets particularly clear in *Inferno* IV when he is welcomed in Limbo into the great poetic circle of Homer, Ovid, Lucan, Horace.

<sup>5</sup> Kirkpatrick, 2014, Chapter 1. Robin Kirkpatrick notes:

suggests that most writers see Vergil as a proto-Christian figure whose works prefigured the Christian era, but who was himself a part of a secular, imperial power that Christian writers were to leave behind. For both scholars, the focus of commentators in analysing the relationship between Dante and Virgil has been on genre, plot or how the characters are representative of their respective philosophies.

Thus, to expand our understanding, it may help to consider other avenues for exploring Dante and Vergil's relationship, such as the close-reading of similes or metaphors that Dante borrows from Vergil. In his work on "Dante's Use of the Extended Simile in the Inferno," James Applewhite traces the shift in popular scholarship regarding Dantean similes. The focus, he claims, has moved from the descriptive power of these similes, a perspective which gave ideas a semblance of verisimilitude, to more contemporary readings which shift the focus of the analysis to the relationship between the tenor and the vehicle,<sup>6</sup> the simile and the surrounding context, or the simile and the entire poem. I contend that these need not be exclusive aims in analysing

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"Running through Dante's representation of [Vergil] in the *Commedia* is a profound concern over the limits as well as the virtues which characterize the literary, discursive, and ethical codes of the pagan world." Dante moving literally and literarily beyond Vergil *in* the text suggests that the same is true of the philosophies they each uphold outside the text -- that pagan antiquity has limits which Christianity surpasses.

<sup>6</sup> Baldick, 2008. In a simile or metaphor, the tenor is the 'subject to which a metaphorical expression is applied. In a metaphor like *the ship of state*, the *state* is the tenor, while the metaphorical term *ship* is called the 'vehicle'. This distinction between tenor and vehicle was formulated by the critic I.A. Richards in *The Philosophy of Rhetoric* (1936), where he argues that the total meaning of a metaphor is the product of a complex interaction between them.'

some of the similes and metaphors (i.e. those that Dante borrows from Vergil) if we consider how both the descriptive power of the content and the structure of the figures of speech can speak of the same thing: conversion.

To shed light on the mechanism behind the 'conversion' of these literary devices, I lean on Raymond Williams' terms for "'epochal' analysis".<sup>7</sup> According to Williams, there are four elements in the process of cultural transition: the dominant, the emergent, the residual, and the archaic. In this paper, I have adapted these terms as follows: the dominant is the mode of thought which has the greatest influence within a culture.<sup>8</sup> Residuals are elements from a preceding culture that remain "active in the cultural process."<sup>9</sup> These are unlike archaic elements, which have ceased to be "effective elements of the present".<sup>10</sup> Lastly, emergent elements are "new meanings and values, new practices, new relationships" that come out of the dominant.<sup>11</sup> In order to demonstrate how Williams's understanding of cultural shift contributes to our reading, let us first consider a well-known example of Dante's simile-borrowing: the simile of the birds and falling leaves.

As leaves that yield their hold on boughs and  
fall  
Through forests in the early frost of autumn,  
Or as migrating birds from the open sea  
That darken heaven when the cold season  
comes  
And drives them overseas to sunlit lands.

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<sup>7</sup> Williams, 1977, 121-35.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 121.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 122.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

There all stood begging to be first across  
And reached out longing hands to the far  
shore.  
(*Aeneid* VI.419-25)

As in autumn the leaves remove  
themselves one after the other, until the  
branch sees all its raiment on the ground:  
so the evil seed of Adam throw  
themselves from that shore one by one,  
when beckoned to, each like a falcon to its  
lure.  
(*Inferno* III.112-7)

In both similes, the tenor is the souls of the dead, while the vehicles are the images of falling leaves or flying birds. The shared tenor and vehicles form the residual element of the simile across the texts, i.e. that which stays the same and active from the *Aeneid* to the *Commedia*. The dominant element, I would suggest, is Medieval Catholic theology, which underpins the *Commedia*. What we are left to meditate on, then, is what is emergent, meaning that which changes due to the interaction between these residual and dominant elements.

The key difference between the similes is the impetus for the movement of the souls. It is implied that, by being compared to the image of falling autumn leaves or migrating birds, Vergil's souls cross the Cocytus because such a trajectory is as natural as seasonal change. The Underworld of pagan antiquity is an inevitable waiting place for the dead before they are reincarnated. In the *Commedia*, the picture presented is also of leaves falling in autumn and birds travelling, but Dante's souls either "remove" or "throw" *themselves* (note that he uses "*gittansi*" in *Inferno* III line 116, the reflexive form of the verb) across the river or are seemingly lured to cross just as falcons are by their masters

(III.61). These actions are both violent and wilful, suggesting that one enters Dante's *Inferno* wilfully and with violence. Additionally, Dante refers to the souls as the "evil seed of Adam" (III.115), whereas Vergil simply calls them "souls" (*Aeneid* VI.418). In so doing, Dante absorbs all the Vergilian souls into the Christian creation story with Adam as the progenitor of all humanity and casts moral judgement on these souls entering Hell. Through these emergent elements, emphasis is placed on the sense that this movement to Hell is both natural and yet a *choice*; even with the vehicle of falcons being lured, the falcon, representing the soul, must decide to take the bait - to give into temptation. The difference between the texts brings to mind St. Thomas Aquinas's ideas, which pervade the *Commedia*,<sup>12</sup> regarding free will: that in being freely given the grace to love God, humans are also free to choose sin and, therefore choose Hell.<sup>13</sup> Generalizing what has been observed from the simile of the falling leaves and flying birds, the movement of the culture of classical antiquity (represented by Vergil's literary devices) through the dominant lens of Catholic theology and Medieval Italian culture<sup>14</sup> creates Dante's simile, which is a

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<sup>12</sup> Iannucci, 2000, 811-3.

<sup>13</sup> Fathers of the English Dominican Province, 1920, I, q. 23, a. 3. In his reply to an objection that God does not predestine anyone to hell, St. Thomas Aquinas says: 'Reprobation, however, is not the cause of what is in the present--namely, sin; but it is the cause of abandonment by God. It is the cause, however, of what is assigned in the future--namely, eternal punishment. But guilt proceeds from the free-will of the person who is reprobated and deserted by grace. In this way, the word of the prophet is true--namely, "Destruction is thy own, O Israel.'" [emphasis mine]

<sup>14</sup> For further readings in Catholic theology and Medieval European culture, see Lennan, 1998; Cantor, 1995; and Blockmans & Hoppenbrouwers, 2014.

combination of residual elements from the original tenor and vehicle with an emergent twist.

What is striking about the above analysis is that this mechanism resembles the process of Christian conversion. The literary device enters the experience of Medieval Catholic theology or culture, which leads to a *conversio* (i.e. a turning) towards God. The integrity of the tenor and vehicle of the simile, like the uniqueness of a person, is largely preserved, but certain elements change to reflect the new 'cultural' orientation of the device with respect to the Divine.<sup>15</sup> Indeed, the simile of the falling leaves first informs the reader of the conversion of the idea that souls inevitably end up in the Underworld into the idea that the afterlife has divisions and it is our choices in life that determine where we go. Moreover, the simile, in and of itself, exemplifies the process of conversion because a new spirit is breathed into the Vergilian model.<sup>16</sup> Each utterance in the *Commedia* is beautifully and maximally indicative because the very form of the poem demonstrates its content. *Rime* and reason are one.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Reta, 1999, 239-42. Fr. Reta writes: 'The whole of Christian conversion is the return to God, the Supreme Good, from which the soul has distanced itself through sin.' St. Augustine, he adds, teaches that when converted, one is still oneself - man is still man - but there is a change of heart or a miracle in the soul. It is this 'interiorization of Christ as redeemer and helper' that enables conversion.

<sup>16</sup> Ezekiel 36:26 Vulg. '*et dabo vobis cor novum et spiritum novum ponam in medio vestri et auferam cor lapideum de carne vestra et dabo vobis cor carneum*'; [translation mine] I will give to you a new heart and I will put a new spirit at your centre. I will take out of your body a heart of stone and I will give to you a heart of flesh.

<sup>17</sup> My sincerest thanks go to Professor John Freccero for his beautiful essays in *The Poetics of Conversion* (MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), which inspired this view.

It must be acknowledged, however, that the use of the term 'emergent' in this case does depart somewhat from how Williams originally uses it, but even considering the original usage of the term allows us to consider other aspects of conversion. Williams clarifies that the emergent in the strictest sense is not simply a "new phase of the dominant culture", but something "substantially alternative or oppositional to it".<sup>18</sup> Indeed, what we called emergent in the earlier simile does not counter Medieval Catholic theology. If we take orthodox Christian philosophy as the dominant, then it is true that this process of converting literary devices (theoretically) creates emergent similes and metaphors that neither seek to be alternative nor in opposition to the dominant culture. This, however, assumes that Catholic theology is entirely homogenous, which is not true. Ideas continue to be refined in light of developments in ecclesiastical study and revelation. In the previous example, Dante could be responding to Augustinian ideas, which emphasized the element of God's will over human agency in explaining one's destiny after death. While Dante's simile is not alternative or oppositional to Medieval Catholicism as a whole, it does respond to particular strains of thought within the larger theological framework, just as Williams would envision emergent elements doing.<sup>19</sup> To better illustrate this, we can turn our attention towards the metaphor of fire, which is used to

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, 1977, 123.

<sup>19</sup> For a summary of differing medieval views on free will and their possible implications on moral responsibility and judgement in the afterlife, see McClusky, 2002. The piece includes the positions of Augustine, Anselm of Canterbury, Bernard of Clairvaux, Peter Lombard, Albert the Great, Thomas Aquinas, and John Duns Scotus, with a reference list for further reading.

describe both the relationships between Dante and Beatrice and between Dido and Aeneas.

This man alone had wrought upon me so  
and moved my soul to yield. I recognize  
The signs of the old flame, of old desire.  
(*Aeneid* IV.30-2)

I turned to the left . . .  
to say to Virgil: “Less than a dram of blood  
is left me that is not trembling: I recognize the  
signs of the ancient flame!”  
(*Purgatorio* XXX.43,46-8)

We can easily identify the residual elements of the metaphor: the vehicle of a remembered fire and the tenor of sexual desire. The dominant element again is medieval theology, which leaves us to discern what is emergent. Without an emergent difference between the two uses of the same metaphor, Dante’s use of Virgil’s image to represent his desire for Beatrice does not fit with what we know of Dante’s sinless state in Eden.

Returning to the *Aeneid*, sexual desire is connected to fire to highlight that it is insatiably destructive. Dido is “inflam[ed] . . . with lust / To the marrow of her bones”<sup>20</sup> and when Aeneas must leave her to fulfil his destiny, she is “all aflame / With rage, like a Bacchante driven wild”.<sup>21</sup> Having stabbed herself in a funeral pyre, the Sidonian queen curses Aeneas that he might “drink in this conflagration / And take with him the omen of [her] death.” Dido’s boundless desire for Aeneas consumes her first internally and then externally, leading to her death and the ruin of her queendom. If such a fire also exists between Dante and Beatrice,

which an “un-converted” reuse of the fire metaphor might suggest, then readers are left at an impasse. Dante, having just climbed out of the Terrace of the Lustful in *Purgatorio* XXVII, ought no longer to sin.

Fire must be imbued with a new meaning in *Purgatorio*. This understanding cues us to the emergent element: the tenor of sexual desire is converted from a want of continence in the *Aeneid* to a pleasure which “[leads] you to love the Good / beyond which there is nothing one can aspire to” (XXXI.23-4) in the *Commedia*. It is Dante’s “thousand desires hotter than flame” (XXXI.118) for Beatrice that leads him to look at the gryphon, which represents Christ. Like a flame, Dante’s desire for Beatrice melts “the ice that tightened around [Dante’s] heart” (XXX.97), which prevented his complete conversion. The resulting anguish from realizing how he had hurt the woman he desired and loved draws from Dante “such repentance as pours forth tears” (XXX.145). Thus, sexual desire in the *Commedia* is not the all-consuming passion of Dido, but rather, a fiery love that sanctifies the pilgrim who is drawn by his attraction to Beatrice to turn fully and finally away from sin towards God.

This conversion of the fire metaphor creates an emergent conception of sexual desire that comes closer to Williams’ use of the term “emergent”. Sexual desire in medieval, ecclesiastical culture was sometimes perceived as something dirty and to be strictly regulated within marriage,<sup>22</sup> Dante’s use, which is closer to the contemporary teachings of the Catholic Church, saw the possibility of taking one’s “own pleasure . . . as leader” (XXVII.131). As Dante’s conscience had been purified in Purgatory with its final wall of fire in Canto XXVII to pursue only good, that he retained sexual desire even in his sinless state suggests that sexual desire is

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<sup>20</sup> Fitzgerald, 1990, 27.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 106

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<sup>22</sup> Karras, 2005, 1-6.

not necessarily destructive or dirty, as one would expect from Vergil's depiction or medieval Catholic convention. Through Dante's on-going conversion as he journeys towards *Paradiso*, even his sexual desires have been purified such that they too could lead him to God.

This analysis of the simile of the leaves and the metaphor of ancient fire invites, one hopes, further study in Dante scholarship into how Dante infuses the idea of conversion into figures of speech that he borrows from Vergil. It is clear that Dante does not align himself with or depart from Vergil as a matter of taste, but of principle. Conversion, as we have come to understand in Dante's view and to use Williams' terms, requires an immersion by an idea or individual into a dominant culture in order to create something that carries with it the integrity of the original form (the residual), but also an internal turning towards the Divine (the emergent). Thus, we see even in a figure of speech occupying a single tercet the story of the entire *Commedia*: the gradual movement by the same figure from Hell to Heaven, turning away from despair to enlightenment by Classical antiquity, and finally, to the joyful completeness of Paradise.

This, perhaps, is a lesson that we can take from Dante: to be fair readers of those who journeyed before us, even if they may not have viewed the world exactly as we do, and to discern that which we will absorb and that which we can respectfully disagree with. Dante takes this a step further and weaves the *Commedia* in a way that preserves the artistic and philosophical excellence of antiquity while honouring the integrity of his own faith. This is to Dante's credit for, as he wrote in his *Letter to Cangrande*, he believes that emulation of God's way of creating is the gift of the very best of

poets.<sup>23</sup> Indeed, in the *Commedia*, Dante masterfully breathes into his similes and metaphors the same Spirit that was breathed into him, in perfect imitation of the Divine.

### Acknowledgements

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<sup>23</sup> Singleton, 1952, 205.

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# The I'Jaz in Plato's *Republic*

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*This paper compares Plato's aestheticism, as shown through the literary aspects of his dialogues, to Qur'anic aestheticism. In doing so, I argue that the philosophical attitude underlying Plato's works is as unquestioned as the imitability of the Qur'an.*

As with Plato's other philosophical dialogues, Plato's *Republic* represents a style of philosophy that is deeply tied to its literary medium. While Plato's vision of philosophy is inherently poetic, his understanding of poetry is inherently philosophical. In fact, to go one step further, Plato's aesthetic aspirations for philosophy made philosophy a kind of lifestyle, an active engagement on the part of the philosopher. This vision of aestheticism for philosophy has since fallen out of favour with the growing popularity of analytic philosophy, or a style of philosophy that prioritizes obtaining conceptual clarity via utilizing language tools such as predicate logic and very basic English. A comparison to a field in which aesthetics is still highly-prized—namely, the exegesis of the *Qur'an* as a framework of literary analysis—can suggest a new way of doing philosophy.

The *Qur'an* may seem like a strange choice of comparison, given its religious stance. It is based on the concept of *i'jaz*, or the inimitability of the *Qur'an*, as the spoken word of God. As the foundation of Islamic faith, the key to *i'jaz* is its unquestionable nature. Indeed, though Islam scholars such as al-Baqillani, al-Jurjani and Al-Rummani may take different approaches to understanding the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*, the foundation of this inimitability is something that is implicitly agreed upon. When applied to *Republic*, then, the idea of an unquestioned foundation—the *i'jaz* of *Republic*—is counter-intuitive, especially when going by a layman's understanding of Platonic philosophy as being modelled after the Socratic method of questioning, which challenges the grounds upon which all of our knowledge is built. In this essay, I challenge the notion that Platonic philosophy challenges all assumptions and general knowledge. I argue that the foundation of Plato's philosophy as exemplified in *Republic* is an aesthetic

aspiration that is as unquestioned and inimitable as the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*. In this manner, a reading of *Republic* is an encounter with the philosophical lifestyle Plato advocates just as the *Qur'an* is an encounter with God when taken in its entirety.

To begin, *i'jaz* signifies “the uniqueness and miraculous inimitability of the *Qur'an*, in form, language, style, and content as a revealed part of God's eternal speech” and is “the most miraculous proof of the Prophet Muhammad's mission”<sup>1</sup>. Simply, *i'jaz* arises due to it being God's word. It is the Truth (*haqiqah*), and this *haqiaa* marks the superiority of the *Qur'an* to all other Arabic literature in existence: “In its entirety the *Qur'an* constitutes the quintessence of beautiful rhetoric”<sup>2</sup>, expressing eloquence of the highest form which is “impossible to attain by either the Arabs or the non-Arabs, in the same manner that satirical poetry is impossible (that is, to the silenced poet)”<sup>3</sup>. As al-Rummani specifies, the *Qur'an* belongs to “that category of the highest level [which] is miraculously inimitable (*mu'jiz*)”<sup>4</sup>, while “the eloquence beneath that level lies in the realm of the (humanly) possible (*mumkin*) as does the eloquence of the people deemed notable for this attribute”<sup>5</sup>. Despite this unbridgeable gap between the eloquence of the *Qur'an* and human attempts at creating the same beautiful eloquence caused by *i'jaz*, *i'jaz* remains an ideal and a form of perfection that needs to be understood to obtain spiritual wealth. This drive to understand naturally encourages debate and discussion from Islamic scholars such as al-Rummani, al-Baqillani and al-Jurjani. These three

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<sup>1</sup> al-Rummani 1987, 102

<sup>2</sup> al-Rummani 1987, 105

<sup>3</sup> al-Rummani 1987, 105

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*

<sup>5</sup> *ibid*

came from different backgrounds: al-Rummani, for one, was primarily a grammarian and rhetorician who expounded on the effectiveness of the *Qur'an's* literary aestheticism. Similarly, al-Jurjani was a literary theorist and a grammarian, who also contributed greatly to the understanding of the literary merits of the *Qur'an*. al-Baqillani, on the other hand, was a theologian and a legal theorist, and chiefly propagated the argument that *i'jaz* was not dependent on but enhanced by *Qur'anic* rhetoric. As with most Arabic scholars of the day, however, they are all faced with the arduous task of understanding the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an*.

In other words, *i'jaz* becomes a call for intellectual debate. The engagement with the *Qur'an*, as inspired by its *i'jaz*, continues to stimulate scholarly inquiry in the Islamic world to this day, both in literature as well as other disciplines such as philosophy and theology.

*i'jaz* is thus an ideal understanding to strive towards, rather than a concept to define and put away. The very idea of the *i'jaz* is tied to its inimitability and mystic nature, a complexity beyond human understanding. Indeed, most scholarly discussions regarding *i'jaz* have to do with pinpointing its mystery by means of analysing its aesthetic form. This has resulted in *Qur'anic* exegesis being literary in nature, despite the other aims that Islamic scholars may have been pursuing, such as theological or philosophical ends. The jurist Al-Baqillani, for one, opens his exegesis of the *Qur'an* by asking a simple question: "Can the *i'jaz* of the *Qur'an* be recognised by the rhetorical figures (*badi'*) which it contains?"<sup>6</sup> *i'jaz* is here conceived as an experience which al-Baqillani argues comes from more than just the sum of the *Qur'an's* language-parts. In other words, al-Baqillani views

the *Qur'an* as a poetic experience to behold in its entirety. *Qur'anic* aesthetics, comprising of rhythm, meter, rhyme, metaphors, sound, imagery, irony, and other literary techniques which modern-readers commonly think of as 'embellishments of language' thus become fundamental to our understanding of the messages God conveys through the text of the *Qur'an*. "The *Qur'an* cannot be separated from any of the rhetorical sciences nor from any type of eloquence"<sup>7</sup>, though "we do not connect the *i'jaz* with these special aspects (of rhetorical excellence) nor base it on them"<sup>8</sup>. Emphasizing trope as an inherent part of God's Word demonstrates a larger understanding of 'truth', expanding 'truth' to encompass understanding beyond rationality.

The poetic experience of the *Qur'an* (its recitation in Arabic remains an important Islamic tradition to this day) is thus an encounter with God, while the text by itself is a simplification for human understanding—the truth of God cannot be reduced to the meaning of the text. Iranian Arabophone eleventh century rhetorician al-Jurjani furthers this train of thought by differentiating the rational (*'aqli*) from the fantastical (*takhyili*) rhetorical devices but blurring the lines between the two, with *takhyili* referring to "a certain type of figurative language in which it is not only the 'image' that is construed as fanciful or irrational but also the logic behind the placement of the image in the text"<sup>9</sup>. That is to say, "the best poetry is the most truthful"<sup>10</sup>. Good poetry which appears to be disconnected from the truth is merely poetry which displays "the utmost attention to craft and the kind of precision in meaning that requires keen intelligence, penetrating discernment

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<sup>6</sup> al-Baqillani 1950, 1

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<sup>7</sup> al-Baqillani 1950, 54

<sup>8</sup> al-Baqillani 1950, 55

<sup>9</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 29

<sup>10</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 35

and powerful insight”<sup>11</sup>.

As such, the unquestioned inimitability of the *Qur’an* functions as an imperative. It is a challenge of sorts to the Muslim scholars, motivating them to obtain greater heights of understanding based on an unquestioned foundation of inimitability and divinity. By using Qur’anic exegesis as a framework of literary analysis, namely the following three ideas: (1) aesthetics grounding Qur’anic inimitability; (2) *i’jaz* simulating intellectual discourse that can be beneficial to scholars from all intellectual backgrounds; and (3) *i’jaz* being the foundation of said intellectual discourse, I will argue that Plato’s *Republic* exemplifies an alternative engagement of philosophy that, like the *Qur’an*, cannot be reduced to its textual medium alone and must be read with equal consideration of its rhetorical form. *Republic* is an engagement with the kind of philosophical lifestyle that Plato advocates with words, serving as an imperative and a challenge of sorts motivating scholars to greater heights of understanding.

This formulation of Plato’s conception of philosophy is best understood within the context of ancient Athens. Poetry was then the main medium of most forms of communication ranging from theatrical entertainment to political debates. Words and in particular rhetoric were powerful tools for persuading the public, and often lent political power due to the nature of Athens’s democracy then: Mass political meetings were held in a fashion highly similar to theatrical performances. The audience, consisting of citizens who had a say in political decisions, listened and actively responded to the political discourse. As such, politicians would often employ the aid of trained orators and rhapsodes in order to garner support for their respective political

agendas, and these orators and rhapsodes would make use of dramatic elements in their political discourse. In a joint essay *Drama, Political Rhetoric, and the Discourse of Athenian Democracy*, Ober and Strauss suggest that the close relationship between rhetoric, politics and drama meant that an understanding of the political society must have been accompanied by an equal understanding of Athenian theatre, and vice versa. This was important as Athenian democracy was based on consensus (*homonoia*): Political agendas would be pushed forward only if a consensus was reached. This consensus was more often than not achieved through empty rhetoric. As such, the populist nature of the Athenian democracy resulted in many political decisions that were disagreed with by the elite of the society. Plato was one such member of this elite class, and consequently viewed poetry as an easy way of emotional manipulation.

In essence, the widespread prevalence of poetry, as well as its political consequences, resulted in Plato’s rejection of poetry. Plato argued that poetry was used as a tool to sway public opinion via emotions; the weakest and lowest ‘weapon’ of persuasion. This opinion is clearly elucidated in Plato’s construction of a tripartite soul: For Plato, the soul was understood to comprise three parts which could all influence our behaviour and decisions. An appeal to the emotional part of the soul, which is what rhetoric does, may result in bad decisions. In *Republic*, Plato describes the three parts to the soul as that “with which it calculates, the calculating”<sup>12</sup>, the part “with which it loves, hungers, thirsts and is agitated by the other desires, the irrational and desiring, companion of certain replenishments and pleasures”<sup>13</sup> and lastly, “the

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<sup>11</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 38

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<sup>12</sup> *Plato’s Republic*, 439d

<sup>13</sup> *ibid*

spirited, by nature an auxiliary to the calculating part, if it's not corrupted by bad rearing"<sup>14</sup>. The nature of the tripartite soul is such that the proper hierarchy of control falls with "the calculating part [ruling], since it is wise and has forethought about all of the soul"<sup>15</sup>; a harmonious organization of the soul is then one with a balance of the appetitive and the spirited as firmly guided by the calculating/deliberative, establishing a hierarchy that is "exactly like three notes in a harmonic scale, lowest, highest, and middle"<sup>16</sup>. As such, the appetitive—the part linked to emotions and desires—is both the lowest part and "the most vivid of them"<sup>17</sup>.

Plato's rejection of this emotive part of the soul is not a rejection of emotion, but rather an argument that one must not let one's emotions rule over one's decisions. Instead, there has to be a harmonious blending of the three soul-fractions. This suggests that, unlike the strong views regarding the censorship of certain kinds of poetry Plato puts forward in *Republic Book III*, Plato does consider the aesthetics an integral and necessary part of living a good life. The structure of *Republic's* text exemplifies this point as well: It is essentially a series of dialogues between characters with distinctive personalities, and as a narrative that reads well as a story, *Republic* incorporates different rhetorical devices such as powerful analogies and metaphors to aid in the assertion of a point. The Allegory of the Cave in *Republic Book VII*, for example, was used as a crutch in arguing for the importance of seeking the truth as a life-long endeavour. The powerful image of a

philosopher-king escaping from his cave (a symbol of the ignorant life) to seek reality (truth) instead of settling for the images (fabrications) that are actually shadows cast by puppeteers (arguably the sophists or rhapsodes who were the primary means of spreading stories and moral tales to the public) remains a powerful education metaphor today. It illustrates exactly what it preaches: Education is not a straightforward act of educators "[putting] into the soul knowledge that isn't in it, as though they were putting sight into blind eyes", but rather an act which "takes as a given that sight is there, but not rightly turned nor looking at what it ought to look at, and accomplishes this object [of looking at knowledge]"<sup>18</sup>.

Indeed, Plato himself recognizes that rhetoric and poetic devices are effective in communication, picking up on men's susceptibility to the poetic qualities of "meter, rhythm, and harmony"<sup>19</sup>. Al-Jurjani expounds this point even more lucidly when he characterizes comparisons in the Qur'an as having "a certain magical power which words cannot describe and which the art of exposition fails to match in elegance and beauty"<sup>20</sup>. This 'magical power', ironically, is both why Plato encourages poetics but rejects poetry: The magical quality that is so compelling has its negative and positive effects. Words have the power to distract men from the truth, given that the appetitive is the most overwhelming part of the soul and the one most likely to escape from the parental advice of the calculating part. This is the reason behind Plato's adversity towards poetry, as more often than not poets use the magic of poetry as an appeal to the emotional part of our human soul, thereby

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid* 441a

<sup>15</sup> *ibid* 441e

<sup>16</sup> *ibid* 443d

<sup>17</sup> *ibid* 437d

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid* 518d

<sup>19</sup> *ibid* 601a

<sup>20</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 44

“destroy[ing] the calculating part”<sup>21</sup> by indulging in the soul’s emotional and irrational portion. al-Jurjani’s distinction between poetry that is make-believe and rational—though both have “the same sort of semantic expansion and figurative language”<sup>22</sup>—clarifies Plato’s stance: Poetry that is “artfully crafted, elegantly rendered and exploited with subtlety and cleverness, such that, by virtue of its intriguing formulation and its adroit and appropriate use of analogy, a semblance of truth is given and a veneer of veracity is achieved”<sup>23</sup> would be considered as bad poetry as it is “deceptive to the intellect and a form of embellishment”<sup>24</sup>.

The resolution, then, as actualized by Plato with *Republic*, is to bring these seductive poetic qualities in line with the philosophical life such that “when you return to its base you find that its speaker is affirming something rational and sound and making an assertion rooted in reason”<sup>25</sup>. Essentially, Plato’s stance regarding aesthetics can be determined by how aesthetics is employed; this is definitely in line with the Islamic scholars such as al-Jurjani and al-Rummani, who consider the aesthetics in the *Qur’an* an important avenue for understanding its truths, but the same aesthetic ideals applied to other poetry pieces does not achieve the same effect as the Qur’anic miracle extends beyond its aesthetics.

What then is this fundamental sacred aspect of Plato’s *Republic*? What forms the basis of Plato’s distinction between the aesthetic work that is *Republic* and other poems that were wildly popular in Plato’s time, such as Euripides’s *Medea* or

Sophocles’ *The Oedipus Cycle*? An easy answer can be found with Plato’s theory of mimesis: In Book X of *Republic* where Plato expounds on the difference between levels of imitation, he distinguishes between the Ideal Form of the Couch, the craftsman who makes the couch, and the painter who merely captures the appearance of a couch. Likening Plato’s Ideal Form to the highest level of eloquence that is expressed by al-Rummani, the next level of eloquence, *mumkin*, will be that of the craftsman who imitates the Form to create a “particular form”<sup>26</sup> of a couch. What ranks the craftsman above the painter is his understanding of what a couch is *in being*, and what makes a good couch—namely, his understanding of what a couch functions as and his ability to create something that could be of use to the people.

Function is thus seen to be a very important consideration in Plato’s imitability standard, the reason which has to do with the inimitability of *Republic* in the sense that the very nature of poetry is unlike the nature of paintings and other visual forms of art: Poetry cannot truly resemble a physical object in life. What, then, is Plato aiming to accurately imitate in his idea of good poetry? The imitability of *Republic* thus becomes a puzzle about what is *being imitated*, and the solution this puzzle comes encased in Plato’s understanding of a good life. To briefly recount, Plato takes the good life with respect to “what is within”, i.e. an internal organization of one’s soul. In turn, one’s soul is constituted by an appetitive, a spirited, and a deliberative part; the good life is primarily about the soul’s ability to “really [set] his own house in good order and rules himself”<sup>27</sup>, that is, to organize the different parts of the soul in an

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<sup>21</sup> Plato’s *Republic*, 605b

<sup>22</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 38

<sup>23</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 32

<sup>24</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 37

<sup>25</sup> al-Jurjani 2009, 37

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<sup>26</sup> Plato’s *Republic* 596a

<sup>27</sup> *ibid* 443d

orderly fashion. The poet, while depicting the good life, is supposed to be a craftsman who both creates and uses this idea of a good life. Lear expresses this succinctly: “The beautiful human being *himself* [is] the standard with which beautiful poetry harmonizes”<sup>28</sup>, and poets “don’t just express the truth, but the truth as he sees it, and in a musical-poetic style that strikes him as worthy of his dignity”<sup>29</sup>. For Plato specifically, the good life is equated to a philosophical lifestyle, or the lifestyle of critical thinkers with questioning natures. As every poet expresses his understanding of a good life as exemplified by his own life, this actualizing element comes to constitute the *i’jaz* of *Republic*.

To examine/explore this, we return to the very structure of *Republic*, drawing clearer links to the *Qur’an*; specifically, the examples of *badi’* as listed by al-Rummani with special focus on *isti’ara* (metaphor), which is the “application of an expression to something other than what it is assigned to mean in the original vocabulary (*asl*) of the language by the way of transference (*naql*) for the sake of clarification”<sup>30</sup>. Beyond that, however, “every metaphor imposes an eloquent explanation for which literal expression is no substitute”<sup>31</sup>. This eloquence in explanation, as al-Rummani goes on to discuss with several cases, is mostly due to the relation of the divine to something more relatable to us as humans, something that we can access with greater ease so as to achieve a more thorough understanding. One striking example is the expression “Mother (*umm*) of the book”<sup>32</sup>. Though it literally refers to the book’s origin, the word ‘mother

(*umm*)’ is more relatable as it frames things within a human relationship, expressing the idea of origin and source together with an added dimension of a mother’s nurturing and compassionate nature. al-Rummani’s point can be applied directly to *Republic*, for the text uses *badi’* as an appeal to the appetitive part of the soul, gaining easy access to the minds of its readers via the most vivid form of impressions, before going on to challenge what the readers take from its literal meaning to foster a deeper, more complex understanding of the text. This deeper understanding includes extra-textual elements such as a literary understanding of Plato’s characters and plot structure, which results in understanding becoming a matter of interpretation. This interpretation thus allows readers to situate themselves within the discourse of *Republic*, participating in discussions both within and outside of the text regarding its content, what it means to live a good life.

Essentially, Plato’s philosophical lifestyle is a cultivation of questioning critical souls. This is actualized by means of structuring *Republic*’s aesthetics such that any reader who engages with *Republic*’s inherent poetry will, unknowingly, be participating in the good philosophical life. The text itself engages the audience of that time to “philosophize in a healthy way”<sup>33</sup> through its use of aesthetics in order to obtain “the knowledge to distinguish the good from the bad life...to choose the better from among those that are possible”<sup>34</sup>, which is the very essence of the philosophical lifestyle Plato calls a good life. Metaphors (*isti’arat*) thus act as an introduction for readers “to a truth which will later receive dialectical examination”<sup>35</sup>, to quote Smith.

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<sup>28</sup> Lear 2006, 114

<sup>29</sup> *ibid*

<sup>30</sup> al-Rummani 1987, 128

<sup>31</sup> al-Rummani 1987, 129

<sup>32</sup> al-Rummani 1987, 132

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<sup>33</sup> *Plato’s Republic*, 619d

<sup>34</sup> *ibid* 618c

<sup>35</sup> Smith 1986, 23

Examination to determine *Republic's* deeper meaning will allow all readers will join in a continuing conversation, and by the very act of doing so participate in a philosophical life. In other words, as Tate put it, for Plato “philosophy meant a life to be lived”<sup>36</sup>, and “Platonic poetry is not meant to be a text-book of information [...] nor is his [Plato’s] ideal poet meant to be a pedant but a man of genius.”<sup>37</sup> As such, like the *i’jaz* of the *Qur’an*, the aesthetics of Plato’s *Republic* lies at the foundation of its mystique, and functions as a call for interested readers to decipher its meaning and understand its truths, with the very act of deciphering a participation and an encounter with a greater truth beyond human understanding. Just as the *Qur’an* is an encounter with God—as demonstrated by the Islamic practice of reciting the *Qur’an* in Arabic even by Muslims who do not speak Arabic in their daily lives—Plato’s *Republic* is an encounter with the philosophical lifestyle, and by the very act of having read it, a reader experiences philosophy as Plato (and his Muslim counterparts) meant it to be lived.

In essence, as Segal wrote succinctly, “Plato’s myths, like his poetical language, form a bridge between the darker and the more rational parts of our nature”<sup>38</sup> by using the poetic qualities which appeal to the human yearning for aesthetics to “help the soul accept its passionate impulses and lead them into the service of philosophy”<sup>39</sup>. To restate this conclusion in the terminology of al-Baqillani, al-Rummani, and al-Jurjani, *Republic's* discussion of justice is merely its *ta’kid* (emphasis), while its *badi’* (poetic quality) and *nazm* (structure) merely provide the Greek readers of the time an

attractive way to participate in the philosophical life. What is most important, then, is the engagement of philosophical discourse that a reader is forced to partake in. In other words, the *i’jaz* of *Republic* is found in its provision of a philosophical discourse. It takes the axiom of a philosophical lifestyle to be life’s greatest good, and offers with its reading experience an engagement with the very philosophical lifestyle Plato preaches. Plato thus becomes the philosopher-poet, engaging with philosophical discourse aesthetically. Beyond just being a poetic demonstration of philosophy, however, what Plato offers with the *Republic* is an entry into a philosophical life.

### Acknowledgements

This paper owes its existence to many professors who have guided me along the way, notably Professors Christina Tarnopolsky and Rebecca Gould for their invaluable insight that allowed me to capture a fraction of their respective fields of expertise. In particular, I’d like to thank Professor Bernard Bate for his enthusiasm for and mind-blowing grasp of interdisciplinary exploration, as well as his unwavering belief in my abilities and encouraging support for the philosophical project presented in this paper

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<sup>36</sup> Tate 1928, 167

<sup>37</sup> *ibid*

<sup>38</sup> Segal 1978, 331

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# The Dislocation of Charisma

## A Case Study of New Creation Church, Singapore

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*This ethnographic research project explores the relationship between charisma, institutional structure, and physical space in New Creation non-denominational megachurch. New Creation was founded in Singapore in 1984, and currently boasts a registered congregation of 31,000.<sup>1</sup> It has since expanded from its original site into six different service venues around the country. All of these venues are public, commercial spaces such as concert halls, theatres, or ballrooms. The physical service is conducted by Senior Pastor Joseph Prince only at Star Vista Theatre (owned by New Creation), whilst being live-streamed to the other five venues for virtual services. Since his appointment in 1990, Pastor Prince has become a widely known figure in television ministry and Christian mass media.<sup>2</sup> He has authored several popular self-help books and routinely tours the global megachurch 'circuit'. As a result, New Creation services are largely grounded in his status as charismatic figurehead. Somewhat paradoxically, the use of mass commercial venues and virtual services accompanies this individual centrality. The study thus examines both charisma and organisational structure, particularly as they intersect with space and locality. Drawing on Marc Augé's formulation of the 'supermodern non-place', it considers how individual charisma is delocalised across the institution of the megachurch.<sup>3</sup> The study's methodology comprises ethnographic fieldwork at the weekly Star Vista services as well as the virtual 'satellite' services, engaging in both observation and casual interviews where possible. A comparative approach to 'home' and 'satellite' services pushes these issues of (dis)location to the fore.*

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<sup>1</sup> "About Us." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

<sup>2</sup> "Pastor Joseph and Wendy Prince." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995. Web.

## Introduction:

The anthropological study of Christian megachurches has so far focused primarily on single-site institutions within the United States. Although historically traceable to North America, a great majority of the world's largest megachurches are now located in non-Western settings.<sup>1</sup> As some studies have pointed out, however, this pattern is more directly related to global capitalism than any particular form of Christianity.<sup>2</sup> Using theories of spatial modernity and the 'non-place' as described by Marc Augé, these studies have explained the megachurch as "a direct effect of contemporary capitalism's incessant incursion into ever more areas of life."<sup>3</sup> The megachurch then becomes a translation of commercial bureaucracy into the religious sphere. It is rendered a 'non-place' in the sense of being removed from historical or cultural context, via distancing from 'traditional Christian churches' and re-alignment with "entertainment, self-help, and retail".<sup>4</sup> While commenting on the status of the physical place itself, existing literature has yet to examine how 'delocalisation' occurs for charismatic leadership within the institution of the megachurch.

In response, this ethnographic paper explores the relationship between charisma, institutional structure, and physical space in New Creation non-denominational megachurch. Now the

largest church in Singapore, New Creation Church (NCC) was founded in 1984 and currently boasts a registered congregation of 31,000.<sup>5</sup> It has since expanded from its original site into six different service venues around the country. All of these venues are public, commercial spaces such as concert halls, theatres, or ballrooms. The physical service is conducted by Senior Pastor Joseph Prince only at the Star Performing Arts Centre (Star PAC), whilst being live-streamed to the other five venues for virtual services. Since his appointment in 1990, Pastor Prince has become a widely known figure in television ministry and Christian mass media.<sup>6</sup> He has authored several popular self-help books and routinely tours the global megachurch 'circuit'. As a result, New Creation services are largely grounded in his status as charismatic figurehead. Somewhat paradoxically, the use of mass commercial venues and virtual services accompanies the individual as focal point. The study thus examines both charisma and institutional structure, particularly as they intersect with space and locality. Drawing on Marc Augé's formulation of the 'supermodern non-place', it considers how individual charisma is delocalised across the institution of the megachurch.<sup>7</sup> This benefits existing literature on religious charisma as much as theories of the 'non-place', by grounding both in a new framework of "charisma at a distance".<sup>8</sup> The study's methodology comprises

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<sup>1</sup> Adogame, Afo. "Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements in a Global Perspective." *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*. Chichester, West Sussex, U.K.: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010. 498. Web.

<sup>2</sup> Sanders, G. "Religious Non-Places: Corporate Megachurches and Their Contributions to Consumer Capitalism." *Critical Sociology*. Web. 2014.

<sup>3</sup> IBID. 1.

<sup>4</sup> IBID.

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<sup>5</sup> "About Us." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

<sup>6</sup> "Pastor Joseph and Wendy Prince." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Augé, Marc. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 1995. Web.

<sup>8</sup> Weller, Robert P. "Asia and the Global Economies of Charisma." *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. By Phatthanā Kiti'āsā. London: Routledge, 2008. 29. Web.

ethnographic fieldwork at the weekly Star Vista services as well as the virtual 'satellite' services. A comparative approach to 'home' and 'satellite' services then pushes these issues of (dis)location to the fore.

### **Theoretical Background:**

#### *Commodified Religion and the Economies of Charisma*

Existing anthropological literature has yet to reconcile ideas of religious 'supermodernity' with individual charisma. The collective rationality of bureaucratic structure manages to hold the unique forces of charisma - that much is evident from the astounding popularity of New Creation. It then becomes a question of the practices and logics which enable the institution to take on such charismatic 'charge'. How, in other words, does something as distinctive as individual charisma survive the rendering into generic, commercial institution? My approach to this problem involves first bringing the non-place into conversation with Max Weber's foundational work on capitalism and Protestant Christianity.<sup>9</sup> Rather than accepting the Weberian framework wholesale, however, the study works to negotiate new links between institutions and charismatic leadership. The relationship between modern capitalism and global Christianity is more than a simple "elective affinity".<sup>10</sup> Instead, the megachurch engages with numerous flows of capital - economic, social, and cultural - in different and sometimes contradictory ways. Robert Weller has identified the problem of 'global charisma' in similar questions as follows: "What happens... when video

becomes the primary carrier of charisma? What can hold such a religion together, and how do the structures and flows of religious world-systems relate to economic world-systems?"<sup>11</sup> That being said, Weller's relevant paper on the topic serves primarily as a statement of the issue rather than an attempt at its solution. This study aims to provide a set of possible responses.

Alongside its contributions to ideas of charismatic institutions and the 'non-place', the study enters into a larger field of the anthropology of globalisation and consumerism. New Creation represents one node in a growing, global network of Christian megachurches joined by flows of capital, media, and ideologies. Joseph Prince, for example, holds an international media presence through television ministry, books, and conference speeches. Megachurches themselves act as institutional mediators for increasingly global forms of Christianity. Globalisation is thus part and parcel of the construction of transient, ahistorical 'non-places'. A previous anthropological study of another megachurch in Singapore, City Harvest Church, relates these patterns to rampant, mass-market commercialisation: "...megachurches, despite operating in different kinds of marketplace [sic], have indeed displayed a striking similarity in their rationalization of production and consumption to those mass-production corporations...".<sup>12</sup> By relating the megachurch to the rising homogeneity of consumerism, this work on City Harvest gives

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<sup>9</sup> See: Weber, Max, Peter Baehr, and Gordon C. Wells. *The Protestant Ethic and the "Spirit" of Capitalism and Other Writings*. New York: Penguin, 2002. Print.

<sup>10</sup> IBID.

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<sup>11</sup> Weller, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, 24.

<sup>12</sup> Tong Kooi Chin, Joy. "McDonaldization and the Megachurches: A Case Study of City Harvest Church, Singapore." *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*. London: Routledge, 2008. Web.

further substance to the issues of globalisation raised above.

In discussing the relationship between globalisation and consumerism, my approach also draws on Arjun Appadurai's notion of the global cultural economy. Appadurai has defined this 'landscape' in terms of five 'scapes', including (most relevantly) the mediascape and ideoscape, to describe the new global relations between production and consumption.<sup>13</sup> This approach is thereby rooted in Karl Marx's original formulation of commodity fetishism in *Capital*.<sup>14</sup> Appadurai's contribution of 'production fetishism' is particularly helpful in the context of New Creation: "The locality [of the site of production, cultural or otherwise]... becomes a fetish which disguises the globally dispersed forces that actually drive the production process."<sup>15</sup> This 'production fetishism' is something of a temporary antidote to the non-place; it takes global forces of cultural/media production for being under "local control".<sup>16</sup> Following this vein, the study finally considers how such fetishization of locality plays out as a means of resisting 'unplacing' of the megachurch. Charisma at once follows and breaks from the gridlines of "global cultural flows" in order to achieve effective dislocation.<sup>17</sup> In some ways, this marks a return to Marc Augé's original theorising about the creation of non-place through global capitalism. The delocalisation of charisma

then becomes an extension of this process, entailed in the commodification that underpins the non-place.

Through this case study of New Creation Church, my argument will illustrate the structures and technologies that enable the dislocation of religious charisma. Beginning with the physical spaces of Star Vista Theatre and a satellite venue (Marina Bay Sands), the study first moves through the key features of the 'home' and virtual services. This allows for direct comparison of the physical and live-stream service environments, particularly with regard to audience reception and participation. It then explores several critical themes such as entertainment and retail, 'playback services' (services based on the viewing of previous service recordings), and virtual mass healings. In addition to ethnographic fieldwork, I also analyse New Creation's production of media. The delocalisation of charismatic leadership occurs not only through live-streams within Singapore, but also through global television networks, books, and websites. These sources are a key element of the construction of Pastor Prince. My analysis will thus consider the embedded charisma of virtual representations as much as physical performances. I believe the totality of New Creation necessarily calls for the integration of ethnographic fieldwork with the study of this 'mediascape'. The benefits of such an integrative approach carry over in both directions - analysis enabling richer ethnography and ethnography helping to ground the analysis.

### **Case Study: New Creation Church, Singapore**

#### *Background and History of New Creation Church*

Originally founded in 1984 in a public housing (HDB) estate, the congregation of New Creation grew slowly from 25 to 150 members in

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<sup>13</sup> Appadurai, Arjun. "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy." *Theory, Culture & Society* 7.2 (1990): 295-310. Web.

<sup>14</sup> Tucker, Robert C., Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels. "Capital." *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton, 1978. Print.

<sup>15</sup> Appadurai, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 307.

<sup>16</sup> IBID.

<sup>17</sup> IBID. 296.

1990.<sup>18</sup> Over the course of the following decade, NCC began an exponential rise to megachurch status, reaching 2,000 members by 1997 and 3,800 members by 1998.<sup>19</sup> Internal literature attributes this meteoric surge to the charismatic leadership of Pastor Prince: "...his unanimous appointment as senior pastor in 1990 marked a turning point in the history of the church, which started experiencing phenomenal growth."<sup>20</sup> The direction of NCC shifted dramatically in 1997, however, following Prince's receipt of a message from God while on holiday with his wife in the Swiss Alps.<sup>21</sup> This message is quoted below:

"If you don't preach pure, unadulterated grace, people's lives will never be gloriously blessed and gloriously transformed." This one statement that God made to Joseph Prince in 1997 completely transformed the way Joseph preached and taught the gospel. And thus began the Grace Revolution.<sup>22</sup>

Prince then returned to Singapore and founded Joseph Prince Ministries Ltd (JPM). JPM serves as a major media production and distribution channel, broadcasting Prince's daily TV program *Destined to Reign* to "millions of homes across North America, Europe, Africa, Australia and Israel on both secular

and Christian networks".<sup>23</sup> A year later, NCC opened its business arm - Rock Productions. Originally conceived as a "venue provider", Rock Productions built NCC's first dedicated service venue (a 1,400 seat auditorium at Suntec City Mall) in 1999. NCC services had till then been held in various hotel venues on a rotating basis. Rock Productions has since come to encompass three other corporate ventures including Rock Gifts and Book Centre, Daystar Child Development Centre, and Omega Tours & Travel (specialising in tours of historical religious sites in Israel).<sup>24</sup> NCC continued to expand rapidly in the midst of these developments. By 2004, the NCC congregation had surpassed 10,000.<sup>25</sup> The following six years would see a doubling of this figure.<sup>26</sup> In response to such immense growth, Rock Productions commissioned a new 5,000 seat auditorium in 2007. The result is the Star Performing Arts Centre (Star PAC), inaugurated with its first NCC service on December 23, 2012. As NCC states, "It [Star PAC] is available for secular bookings throughout the week but New Creation Church is its anchor tenant on Sundays."<sup>27</sup> As of 2015, NCC is the largest registered church in Singapore with a total congregation of 31,000.

### The Star

Before addressing charisma specifically, it benefits us to consider the physical structures and technologies that allow the 'unplugging' of NCC at the

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<sup>18</sup> "History." *New Creation Church*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

<sup>19</sup> "The Ministry". *Joseph Prince Ministries*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

<sup>20</sup> "About Us." *New Creation Church*. Web. 12 Oct. 2015.

<sup>21</sup> "The Ministry". *Joseph Prince Ministries*.

<sup>22</sup> IBID.

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<sup>23</sup> "Broadcast Listings". *Joseph Prince Ministries*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

<sup>24</sup> *Factsheet on New Creation Church's Business Entities*. Publication. New Creation Church, 1 June 2015. Web.

<sup>25</sup> "History." *New Creation Church*. Web. 3 Dec. 2015.

<sup>26</sup> IBID.

<sup>27</sup> *Factsheet on New Creation Church's Business Entities*, New Creation Church.

Star PAC itself. Again returning to Augé, this process involves a concerted distancing from historical and cultural reference. Such ‘unplacing’ is mediated first and foremost through the space and design of the Star PAC. Based within the futuristic Star Vista Shopping Centre, the Star PAC is perched above three floors of high-end commercial space. Restaurants, cafes, and electronics stores wrap around a sleek, stainless steel-and-glass outdoor space converging on a ground floor amphitheatre. There is a certain element of capitalism as spectacle at Star Vista. At the entrance to the Star PAC foyer, two sets of escalators allow for an open, elevated view across the entire atrium. The atrium then passes out of view as the escalators enter a tunnel layered in reflective surfaces and bland white lights. At the top of the escalators, a small outlet of the Rock Gifts and Book Centre retails ‘Joseph Prince Essentials’, healing resources, and recordings of recent sermons. On Sundays, these escalators mark a porous dividing line between the CapitalLand shopping centre and the space of NCC. Teams of volunteer ushers greet church members as they proceed from level to level, receiving a cheery but efficient “Welcome to church!” at each stage. Every usher I encountered always used exactly this phrase; not once did I hear a more specific “Welcome to New Creation!”. NCC pastors also use this generic, stand-alone ‘church’ to address the congregation as a whole during services. The actual name ‘New Creation’ is only seldom spoken. Whether or not coordinated by policy, this has the rhetorical effect of universalising NCC as the modern Christian experience. It is not only non-denominational but also implicitly *post*-denominational.

These ‘unplacing’ technologies continue into the Star’s main auditorium. Aside from the

communion kits (sealed, mass-produced kits of crackers and grape juice) handed out at the final doorway, the actual service space is unmarked by any physical symbols of Christianity. Throughout the entire space of the auditorium, images of Christ



The Star Vista atrium.

Source: *International Enterprise*

or crosses are conspicuously absent. The stage is set up with rock band equipment and the atmospheric blue glow of concert lighting. A series of large crystal-like structures jut up into the stage centre. On the mega-screen behind the stage, digital animations of colourful galaxies, space, and stars float around the main square of video. Each NCC service is recorded and streamed by an extensive videography system. On the main stage, this stream displays close-ups of the current speaker, individual audience members, or wide-pans of the entire congregation. These camera fixtures are often overt and occasionally dramatic - for example, a large swinging boom crane or portable rigs rolling through the aisles. The process of streaming and recording thereby becomes an independent spectacle, rendering the congregation into performance for both itself and posterity. Indeed, as will be expanded later, these recordings also serve as the basis for NCC’s ‘playback services’.



The Star Vista. Many of my informants described Star Vista as a 'spaceship'. Source: *Wikimedia*

Aside from these features of physical space, Star services also deploy a variety of entertainment and media technologies including, most importantly, music. Each service begins with a thump of the bass drum and ring of the electric guitar. The congregation then rises to its feet in response, hands raised or clapping. Two choir groups walk onto each side of the stage, followed by 5-6 'lead' singers out front all wearing concert-style clothing - slick leather jackets, vests, hair done up with gel or highlights. As the band gains momentum, a thundering sound system comes to life as glittering riffs reverberate through the aisles. This concert-like performance, called 'praise and worship' by one of my informants, constitutes the first half-hour of every NCC service. Most of the songs are produced by New Creation Worship Media, a division of the Rock Gifts and Book Centre. These songs are all accompanied by a professional lyrics video, which again reproduces the sleek, 'cosmic' ambiance of the stage background. A block of text flashes on screen to display each song's name, copyright information, and song ID number (if produced by NCC). The tithing (donation) period

is often also soundtracked by performance - once of a gospel song on ukulele, followed by a hard rock/pop dance performance in the K-pop style (e.g. tight black pants, white shoes, wide caps, baseball uniform T-shirts). Meanwhile, the stage screen depicts an image of a back alley full of graffiti. Once again, through this re-alignment with globalised forms of popular culture and "entertainment, self-help, and retail", NCC is effectively distanced from 'traditional' Christian church settings.<sup>28</sup>

### The Satellites

The charisma of Pastor Prince is mediated by virtuality; out of the six Sunday service venues, five are digital broadcasts of the 'real' home service at Star Vista. Moreover, only the first two services (out of four) every Sunday are live sermons by Pastor Prince himself. The final two services retain the live 'praise and worship' section, but generally use a playback of the second service for the sermon portion. The primary and most popular of the satellite venues is Marina Bay Sands Ballroom. This venue is located within the larger Marina Bay Sands casino and shopping complex, above floors of ultra-high-end shops to the likes of Gucci and Louis Vuitton. On the bottom floor, an artificial river flows through the entire complex. Small boats ferry shoppers along the river, each captained by a standing paddle-man in an attempt at Venice. As 'passengers' are conveyed along these crystal waters under the shopping complex, they are surrounded with towering structures of polished steel, glass, and luxury cafes. As with Star Vista, global capitalism is rendered into spectacle. This is all clearly visible from the escalator approaching the ballrooms on the third floor.

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<sup>28</sup> Sanders, *Critical Sociology*, 2014.

Entering the ballroom lobby, the space is outfitted for NCC with numerous banners, volunteer-staffed 'Connect Points', and another outlet of the Rock Gifts and Book Centre. But again, depictions of Christ or the cross are nowhere to be found. The ballroom itself is set up with three projector screens and several hundred chairs arranged in straight rows. Unadorned beyond its gold veneer and carpeting, this is an unspecialised commercial venue setup. During my visit for the third (2:30PM) service, the ballroom gradually filled to near full capacity. Significantly, no one at Marina Bay physically introduces the beginning of the service. The only NCC representatives present are the floor ushers. Shortly thereafter, the live-stream from Star begins with a brief word before transitioning into the 'praise and worship' concert. The entire congregation of the ballroom rises to their feet, and begin singing along, clapping, and their raising hands as actively as the congregation at the Star. Many of the live-stream shots are taken from a wide-pan audience camera behind the bottom floor of the auditorium. This allows the congregation at the Star PAC to indicate the 'proper' response to the service for audiences at the satellite venues. In the case of NCC, these physical structures of 'unplacement' run parallel with the distancing of the megachurch within the ideological sphere of Christianity.

### **Prosperity and the Ambiguity of Grace**

The core ideological position of NCC falls in line with a broader notion of the 'prosperity gospel'. Joseph Prince summarised the basic foundation of this 'gospel' in a recent sermon.

Jesus is not just about saving you from hell into heaven, that's what the concept a lot of people have about salvation. But

He is to bring heaven into your hell right now, to bring heaven into your earthly living... He has heavenly answers for your earthly ills. [sic]<sup>29</sup>

In the American context, the prosperity gospel is often linked directly with financial 'blessing' or 'favour'. At NCC, however, the idea appears to be somewhat more nebulous. Financial prosperity was not explicitly referenced in any of the sermons or media I viewed during my fieldwork. Most services concluded with a more general blessing of the week ahead, specifically that it be "your best week yet".<sup>30</sup> The American televangelist Marilyn Hickey reinforced this undefined 'prosperity' during her visiting sermon at NCC: "I know God wants you to be a success. I know God wants you to be prosperous."<sup>31</sup>

Perhaps more relevant for NCC than the prosperity gospel is their own notion of 'grace' and the 'Grace Revolution'. The JPM website describes this in the context of Prince's 1997 message from God, wherein "God told him that he had not been preaching grace, and gave him the mandate to preach grace—pure and unadulterated. This meant preaching about God's grace without attempting to balance, or mix, it with the law. [sic]"<sup>32</sup> As one of my informants elaborated, grace refers to the undeserved yet unconditional nature of salvation. A follower of the 'Grace Revolution' is "fed" by grace: "That's what Christ died to give you... just receive."<sup>33</sup> The language of receipt also pervades the sermons of NCC, especially in the context of the

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<sup>29</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

<sup>30</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 1, 2015.

<sup>31</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

<sup>32</sup> "The Ministry". *Joseph Prince Ministries*.

<sup>33</sup> Interview conducted on November 25, 2015.

tithing period. In the words of a junior pastor, “...you don't need to earn Christ's grace, it is given to you for free”.<sup>34</sup> This is sometimes embedded in catchphrases such as “dare to receive”. Of course, the receipt of grace is not without obligation of reciprocity. As once stated before tithing: “Don't give so that He will give to you, He has already given to you. Now you can give back.”<sup>35</sup> NCC then comes to stand in for the divine as the proper recipient of (now monetary) repayment.

While cast in separate terms from the prosperity gospel, NCC's conception of grace is certainly aligned to earthly well-being. The ‘Grace Revolution’ thereby works to establish rhetorical distance between NCC and more particular, denominational forms of Christianity. It is the ideological complement of NCC's ‘unplacement’ from historical and cultural context. The marked absence of conventional Christian symbols or rites - particularly baptism, which is not practiced in NCC - further emphasises such distance. In light of these general structures and technologies, let us turn to the specific problem of the dislocation of charisma.

### **Playback Services**

Every week, the sermons of the third and fourth Sunday services are playbacks of the video recording of the second service. The use of ‘playback services’ was further intensified during my period of fieldwork, as Joseph Prince was away on his Grace Revolution Tour of the United States. Importantly, the transition from the live ‘praise and worship’ section into these recordings is often unmarked by any introduction or context. The shift of the service from a physical event on stage to the virtual sermon on screen appears to be unremarkable. The singers

and junior pastors exit the side doors silently. They are soon replaced by a close-up shot of Pastor Prince, whose face fills the main screen while accompanied by a full body shot on two equally large side screens.

From time to time, the main screen switches to a slideshow of the sermon's relevant Bible verses. Meanwhile the two side screens remain focused on Prince, whose recorded image is now conveniently pointing up toward the main screen. This slideshow is in fact required, as hardcopy Bibles are almost completely obsolete in NCC (I never saw one). Some congregation members shuffle through their mobile phones' ‘Bible apps’ in efforts to save favourite verses or keep pace with the sermon. Notably, camera crews continue filming the audience during this playback portion of service - at this point only capturing the congregation's response. To be sure, the general response and engagement of the congregation with the recording is far from passive. The audience consistently responds to his calls for ‘amens’ (“Can I get a good amen?”), in addition to applause, laughter, and gestures of agreement. For the entire 90-minute duration of Prince's sermon, the stage itself is dark and empty, yet the atmosphere and energy of the service not only remains but perhaps even gains in intensity. The only NCC staff remaining are the security guards on the side aisles.

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<sup>34</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

<sup>35</sup> IBID.

Prince himself often caters for these playback services with direct addresses to the camera, wherein he emphasises the independence of



Joseph Prince gives a sermon at a ‘playback service’. October 25, 2015. 2:30PM service. Photo by the author.

his message from distance or time. This factors into Prince’s larger rhetoric of the omnipresence of his message, particularly in connection with his own direct revelations. Indeed, Prince’s message from God, reportedly received on holiday in 1997, is given in quote marks on the JPM website as a word-for-word transcription.<sup>36</sup> Prince thus self-describes as an “instrument” of ‘the Word’, implicitly identifying with the transcendence of the message he claims to communicate.<sup>37</sup> As a junior pastor reaffirmed:

A ‘Grace Revolution’ is when you meet Jesus - it could be sitting in this auditorium, it could be you listening to Pastor [Prince] preaching on a CD, you know, whilst you’re driving or whilst you’re on the train. You know if there’s a breakdown you can listen more. Or you know, I don’t know, it could be you

are just meditating on the Word or you are just taking the Holy Communion, and you suddenly encounter - you don’t just do something - you encounter, you listen, you meditate, you partake, you just have a revelation. You meet Jesus, right, and you encounter his Grace.<sup>38</sup>

By de-contextualising the sermon in time and space, Prince’s charismatic authority is diffused in parallel with ‘the Word’. The CD - the recording - is a conduit for Prince’s message, which itself appeals to the omnipresence of God’s Truth. Lim later refers to Prince’s latest book (*Grace Revolution*) as simply ‘the book’, appropriating this common term for the Bible. These commodified objects and media serve as modes of Prince’s transmission within Appadurai’s framework of the global cultural economy.<sup>39</sup> Their claim to the universal, timeless ‘Word’ is concomitant with the diffusion of the Senior Pastor as persona.

### **Mass Healings and the ‘Growth, Tumour, Wart Woman’**

In a sermon entitled ‘Keys to Healing in the Hebrew Language’ (October 25, 2015), Prince recounts his study of healing methods via the “original” Hebrew. Upon completing this study, Prince speaks of having experienced a pre-emptive “spiritual attack” by the Devil, designed to thwart his sharing of the methods: “On my receiving revelation from God in my study, all of a sudden I had this feeling of my whole body was hot and it’s like an allergic breakout, my face started getting red and there are patches of red all over my body. I’ve

<sup>36</sup> “The Ministry”. *Joseph Prince Ministries*.

<sup>37</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

<sup>38</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

<sup>39</sup> Appadurai, *Theory, Culture & Society*.

never experienced that before [sic].”<sup>40</sup> Prince goes on to describe how medical tests found nothing. His wife (Wendy Prince) had explained to him that “you’re on the verge of something powerful, a revelation on healing, that the Devil doesn’t want you to share.”<sup>41</sup> Prince then attempts to practice this healing method on the congregation at large. This sermon was recorded during the second Sunday service. For the 2:30PM playback service, then, the task of healing fell to the recording of Prince on screen. Invoking Christ, Prince commands (in English) that the congregation members’ bodies be rid of disease, that any cancer cells die, that tumours disappear, and that the previously immobile parts of any body be able to move again. After finishing, his recording asks the audience to raise and wave their arms as symbol of health, or to rotate the shoulders and bend the knees that had been locked. Many members of the playback congregation stand up in response, gesturing to indicate the effects of this healing. In other words, a pre-recorded video of Prince performs a real-time healing on the current audience, with some members responding positively. Others even turn in the directions Prince’s image points within the auditorium, where audience members of the recorded service had stretched their limbs or raised their hands. Prince’s charismatic authority was effectively removed from time whilst maintaining its distinctive force. This process was critically structured, however, by the space of the Star PAC. In being common to both the recording and the current (playback) service, the auditorium conveyed the social signals and spatial indicators of the recording into the present congregation.

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<sup>40</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

<sup>41</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on October 25, 2015.

Two weeks later, NCC hosted the prominent American televangelist Marilyn Hickey. As with the regular playback services, Hickey delivered a live sermon for only the first and second service timings. The third timing, which I attended, was again a playback. Following a brief live sermon by a junior pastor, the service ‘hands over’ to Hickey’s sermon without any indication that this will be a recording. The transition from physical stage presence to virtual image is again unacknowledged, as with Prince’s playback services. Hickey’s recording receives a round of applause and welcome. The congregation immediately begins responding to her words - whether calls for amen, directions to repeat certain words, or phrases and verses. As the service continues, Hickey’s image repeatedly asks the congregation to stand up and hold their hands across their hearts while repeating after her. By the fifth time out of their chairs, some awkward laughs have begun to circulate as some begin looking around for group consensus on whether to continue standing. But ultimately the congregation follows along without exception. Again, the use of recorded shots of the previous congregation (all standing) indicates that the present audience should respond likewise. Toward the end of the service, Hickey shifts her focus onto healing and her passion for ‘Word of Faith’ (though she did not use this term) healing methods. She begins with an invocation to pray for those with heart problems.

If you have a heart problem would you please stand up? Because God can give you a new heart. Just stand up! All over, upstairs, downstairs... and I’m thinking of these wonderful people that I ministry to not only at the Star but at Marina Bay Sands and the cinemas.

Stand up! Get your heart. New heart. Healed heart. Perfect heart. Amen? Spare parts in heaven, God is dropping a new heart on you. Yes He is! [sic]<sup>42</sup>

Many tens of people in the playback service stand up in response to Hickey's call. Once again, a real-time healing is performed by a pre-recorded image. Unlike Prince's healing, however, Hickey draws on the collective congregation as a medium of transmission. In the process of healing, she calls on the audience to raise their hands toward someone standing and repeat after her:

Father, in the name of Jesus, I send the Word into this heart, the word heals, and delivers from every destruction, this afternoon, new hearts are happening in our church, *all over, everyone watching this*, who has a problem with their heart, is getting a new heart, in Jesus' name. Amen! Amen! [sic; italics mine]<sup>43</sup>

The healing efficacy of these words is dislocated via recitation of 'the Word', before being relocated in the bodily conduit of the congregation's outstretched arms. Hickey soon performs this process again for those with other medical ailments. She explains her belief that she has a gift for one practice in particular: "I love to pray for those with growths and tumours and warts. And I believe I have a special ability for it. My husband said to me: You are a growth, tumour, wart woman... I'm telling you, you can get rid of growths and tumours and

warts."<sup>44</sup> As during the heart healing, Hickey's recording asks the congregation to participate in the healing process directly. The playback service follows suit.

So if you have growths or tumours or warts, stand up. This is your miracle afternoon, stand up, and all over - *whoever's watching* - get up, get your miracle! You could lose weight! ... So extend your hand toward someone who's standing. Pray with me. We're going to send the Word. [sic; italics mine]<sup>45</sup>

The congregation again repeats after Hickey in the healing prayer, with the addition that "they [the warts] are cursed in Jesus' name. They wither, dry up, disappear, in Jesus' name. Amen!"<sup>46</sup> Significantly, Hickey emphasises the immediacy of the healing process.

Now don't sit down if you're standing, don't sit down if you're standing! Check yourself. Always look for your miracle. Is the growth gone? Is it smaller? Is it turning colour? If you can tell a difference, wave at me. If you can tell a difference. You don't have it? Good, I see people waving. Amen! So just look for your miracle...[sic]<sup>47</sup>

Again, several in the current playback service wave at the screen. The congregation gives

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<sup>42</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

<sup>43</sup> IBID.

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<sup>44</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

<sup>45</sup> IBID.

<sup>46</sup> IBID

<sup>47</sup> IBID

Hickey's recording a round of applause. In the event that a miracle was not observed, Hickey adds that "if you don't see any change right now, you don't give up, right? The game is not over till we win. Right? I have to win. You have to win. [sic]"<sup>48</sup> This blatant expression of the 'prosperity gospel' appears recurrently in the mass healings conducted at NCC. Indeed, the 'Word of Faith' healing method is particularly amenable to mass distribution and marketization. Anyone, anywhere with access to the text of the relevant healing prayer can practice its tenets. As a junior pastor affirmed after Hickey's playback sermon:

And as you keep meditating on healing, on the living Word, I declare to every person *under the sound of my voice*, I declare you shall receive your abundant portion...I declare you shall possess your possessions... I declare you shall drink from wells you never dug, live in houses you didn't build, because you know what? Jesus caused your enemies to build them for you. [sic; italics mine]<sup>49</sup>

By imbuing the force or effective power of 'the Word' into the act of reciting the words themselves, the charismatic authority of the original speaker is transmitted in parallel - whether it be Hickey or the junior pastor. Prince achieves an equivalent effect through his own healing prayer, albeit without audience participation. The atemporality of these words is a key element of the transmission. There is a dislocation in time as much as space.

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<sup>48</sup> IBID

<sup>49</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 8, 2015.

## **Baptism Without Water:**

### *Media and Commodification*

Aside from playback and virtual services, the 'unplacing' of both Joseph Prince and NCC as an institution also occurs via media production. Here the concept of 'Word of Faith' extends beyond the context of healing, to act as a general technology for mediating dislocation. This is illustrated perhaps most effectively in the practice of baptism (or lack thereof) in NCC. The customary ritual of baptism into the Christian faith is generally marked by an immersion of the body in water, as presided over by an ordained pastor. NCC does not, however, conduct any physical ritual of baptism. The rite of acceptance into the Christian faith is instead comprised of verbal recitation. This occurs at the end of every Sunday NCC service, when the speaking pastor asks anyone who would like to "receive Jesus for the first time" to repeat after them in prayer.<sup>50</sup> The content and phrasing of the prayer itself is improvised. Once complete, the pastor invariably asks all new converts to collect a Joseph Prince CD pack and 31-day devotional plan from NCC's 'Connect Points' at the Star and Marina Bay.

That being said, physical presence at an NCC service (either 'real' or virtual) is not necessary to receive the induction by prayer. The back label of Joseph Prince CD recordings, for example, also offers the text of an induction prayer for recitation. This is prefaced by the brief direction: "If you would like to receive all that Jesus has done for you and make Him your Lord and Saviour, please say this prayer..."<sup>51</sup> The 'Word' is thereby rendered into a material commodity, becoming dislocated through a

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<sup>50</sup> Fieldnote from 2:30PM service on November 15, 2015.

<sup>51</sup> Joseph Prince. *Keys to Healing in the Hebrew Language*. Joseph Prince Ministries, 2015. CD.

process akin to George Ritzer's 'McDonaldization'.<sup>52</sup> Joy Tong has related this to City Harvest Church with the argument that "megachurches, despite operating in different kinds of marketplace [from McDonald's], have indeed displayed a striking similarity in their rationalisation of production and consumption...".<sup>53</sup> The commodification of NCC is transformed into a conduit for the 'Word', which is then repeated and re-materialised by the voice of the consumer. Under this schema, material products are only a conduit of charismatic authority. Charisma is, rather, dislocated through the 'Word' and then relocated in the bodily acts and utterances of its audience. The process then becomes twofold; first in the dislocation through digital or material commodity, and second through its reproduction in the physical world of the consumer. This invites the analogy with Appadurai's notion of "production fetishism". NCC's media production, though global and transnational, is rephrased in the "idiom and spectacle of local control".<sup>54</sup> As a result, NCC, its media, and its pastors are able to resist the total dislocation that would otherwise accompany the non-place.

### **The Structures and Technologies of Dislocation**

The dislocation of charisma occurs via a configuration of various structures - spatial, ideological, and rhetorical. These adaptable frameworks are not specific to Joseph Prince as individual, but rather are embedded across the institution of NCC. As observed in mass healings, Marilyn Hickey is dislocated via the same structures

and technologies as apply to Prince himself. The success of Hickey as recording is a result of NCC's endorsement and selective application of such technologies, almost regardless of pre-existing reputation or persona. Here I summarise and synthesise the major elements of this process.

First let us return to the 'unplacing' of NCC through the physical spaces and practices of global capitalism. The spatial environment of both the Star PAC and Marina Bay Sands is patterned by mass commercialism and entertainment technologies, which in turn divorce NCC from more traditional church settings. Stained glass, cathedrals, and the pews are replaced by global capitalism as spectacle. This is evidenced at all levels of the physical space, beginning with the racks of 'Joseph Prince Essentials', DVDs, CDs, books, and other NCC resources available through the Rock Gifts and Book Centre outside the Star PAC. Meanwhile inside the auditorium, dramatic setups of swinging boom rigs and broadcast cameras accompany the mega-screens, electric guitars, and cosmic blue lighting of the main stage. In the context of playback services, the auditorium also serves to convey the social signals and spatial indicators of recordings into the present congregation. As observed more poetically by Walter Benjamin, "...the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition."<sup>55</sup>

These physical structures of 'unplacement' mirror NCC's position within the ideological sphere of Christianity. Specifically, the concept of grace and the 'Grace Revolution' establish rhetorical distance between NCC and more historical, denominational forms of Christianity.

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<sup>52</sup> Ritzer, George. *The McDonaldization of Society*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge, 2004. Print.

<sup>53</sup> Tong Kooi Chin, Joy, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, 186.

<sup>54</sup> Appadurai, *Theory, Culture & Society*, 306.

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<sup>55</sup> Benjamin, Walter, and Hannah Arendt. "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." *Illuminations*. Trans. Harry Zorn. London: Pimlico, 1999. 215. Print.

This falls in line with the basic principle of the 'prosperity gospel' - to "bring heaven into your earthly living". Unlike the wealth-centric American interpretation of prosperity, however, NCC deploys a less well-defined mix of 'success' and health. The absence of conventional Christian symbols or rites including baptism, crosses, and Bibles, plays further into this ambiguity. In effect, NCC attempts to become post-denominational. The 'unplating' of NCC as an institution then leads to the problem of "charisma at a distance". How, in other words, does the charismatic authority of the megachurch and its pastors survive in the context of live-streams, playback services, and global media?

My response to this problem negotiates a new relationship between the 'Word of Faith' movement and forces of commodification. In brief review, the 'Word of Faith' doctrine holds that certain words and utterances are imbued with divine power. The acts of hearing and verbalising these utterances themselves contain the effective force of the 'Word'. 'Word of Faith' thereby comes to serve as a technology of dislocation, as demonstrated in the context of both mass healings and 'baptisms without water' or induction by prayer. Nonetheless, there is a marked difference in the modes of healing employed by Hickey, and Prince and the junior pastor respectively. Both Prince and the junior pastor use authoritative prayer cast to all 'under the sound' of their voice, which the audience then experiences through passive receipt. In contrast, Hickey relies on a collective recitation and sending of the 'Word' via the bodily acts and utterances of an actively involved congregation. Both modes are founded on the intrinsic power of the 'Word' and achieve similar shows of success. I propose, however, that Hickey's approach is in fact more reflective of NCC's structure as a whole. The dislocation of charismatic authority through the

commodified sound or text of the 'Word' must be accompanied by a relocation into the consumer. This is observed in NCC's inductions by prayer, playback services, and media more generally. Here I refute Robert Weller's dichotomy between centrifugal and centripetal models of charisma, namely that charisma either "flows out from the centre to its periphery" or vice-versa.<sup>56</sup> The dislocation of charisma is not a question of the intensity of point source individuals - in other words, of the authoritative 'signal' being strong enough to overcome geographic and temporal distance. But nor is it a centripetal case of "bringing followers to the centre".<sup>57</sup> Rather, charisma is dislocated in the moment of its relocation into a network of 'satellite' sources. Charisma is impotent without this relocation. It can move through the commodified conduits of 'Word of Faith' and media production, but must always be reproduced in the bodily acts and utterances of its audience.

## Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated Marc Augé's idea of the 'non-place' at New Creation Church, where forces of global capitalism and popular culture engender distance from historical and cultural context. Specifically, the transformation of NCC into 'non-place' occurs through a configuration of spatial, ideological, and rhetorical devices. The spectacles of capitalism that are Star Vista and Marina Bay Sands remove NCC from the line of 'tradition' in Christianity. Similarly, the prosperity gospel and 'Grace Revolution' create ideological ambiguity and a sense of the post-denominational. Yet in creating such distance, these configurations at

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<sup>56</sup> Weller, *Religious Commodifications in Asia: Marketing Gods*, 25.

<sup>57</sup> *IBID.* 26.

once challenge NCC's intimate dependence on charismatic authority. I have proposed a new relationship between commodification and the 'Word of Faith' movement as a potential means of reconciling this tension. The dislocation of charisma is neither 'centripetal' nor 'centrifugal' relative to a point source individual (e.g. Joseph Prince), but rather diffuse and networked across the body of followers. This process then becomes twofold; first in the transmission of charisma through digital or material commodity, and second through its reproduction in the acts and utterances of its consumer. If, as Benjamin writes, "[t]he presence of the original is the prerequisite to the concept of authenticity", what could be more authentic than the lived embodiment of one's own self?<sup>58</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 214.

# A Red Rebirth

## The Liminal Evolution of Cultural Revolution Red Guards

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*Much has been written about the quasi-religious nature of the Mao regime during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Comparatively little, however, has been done to explore the social effects of the revolution's youthful acolytes - the Red Guards. This paper will argue that the Cultural Revolution transformed the Red Guards into liminal figures in Chinese society. Events of the Revolution will be analysed based on Turner's<sup>1</sup> framework of liminality. Analysis of sociological trends focusing on the themes of spontaneous order, social influence and religion, reveal how state-initiated social forces fashioned spontaneous radicalism into an instrument of social upheaval, setting the red guards apart from the society they sought to destroy. The paper also examines exceptions to Turner's framework and explores how these potentially led to the excesses perpetrated by the Red Guards. This study will provide a unique sociological perspective of the Cultural Revolution, as well as a better understanding of extremist indoctrination among youth.*

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995.  
<http://www.myilibrary.com?id=620121>.

The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) has long captured the imagination of historical sociologists. Many have undertaken to study the religious aspects of the Mao regime, focusing on how state institutions paralleled those of religious or quasi-religious organisations. Few, however, have embarked upon a detailed study of the acolytes who supported this “religion” - the Red Guards. These were politically radicalised students, whose revolutionary zeal was exploited by Mao to purge the Communist Party of “revisionists”. This paper argues that the Red Guard Movement was partly designed as a rite of passage to prepare the post-war generation of youth to be loyal followers of Maoist dogma, though it ultimately failed in this aim due to chaos and disunity within the movement. It will also examine how the policies and activities of the guards led to their separation from Chinese society, transforming them into liminal figures.

Let us first establish how rites of passage relate to liminality. V.W. Turner defines liminality as the state where a person is “betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention and ceremon[y]”<sup>1</sup>. This tends to be a temporary state of affairs, occurring at the threshold between two different stages of a person’s life. Due to this unique social position, liminal figures usually undergo rites of passage to mark the social power they exert. During these rites, initiates are typically placed in a position of lowliness, humility and nothingness in order to remould them into their new social positions. Such a low position often results in the development of *communitas*, where initiates find solidarity in their collective identity as liminal figures and create a “micro-community” outside of it. The common separation and deprivation experienced by the initiates serves as a

source of common identity that transcends existing identities outside the *communitas*, building a sense of comradeship between initiates at least for the duration of the liminal period. The Red Guard movement possesses strong parallels with most of these aspects, suggesting that it was partially designed as a rite of passage.

Most historians propose that the Cultural Revolution was initiated in order for Mao to purify a Communist Party he felt had deviated from its original values; it was also, however, intended to give the youth of China an opportunity to experience revolutionary class struggle so as to breed a new generation of energised cadres loyal to Mao’s ideals. The students in 1966 were the first generation to be born after the foundation of the People’s Republic of China - even the oldest university Red Guards were no older than their early twenties. Mao was apparently concerned that “young people were unaware of the barbarities of Kuomintang rule; they had grown up in the People’s Republic and were not grateful for its achievements”<sup>2</sup>. Coupled with an increasingly bureaucratic Communist Party that seemed to be losing its revolutionary values<sup>3</sup>, Mao felt that traditional education would be insufficient to invigorate the youth with the revolutionary zeal of their forebears. It would be necessary to replicate the conditions of class struggle so that the youth of China could experience revolution for themselves, preparing them to become a revolutionary class that would forward Mao’s thought in a new society purged of old culture. Solomon is thus right to argue

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<sup>2</sup> Harris, Nigel. *The Mandate of Heaven: Marx and Mao in Modern China*, 2015.

<sup>3</sup> Solomon, Richard H. *Mao’s Revolution and the Chinese Political Culture*. Michigan Studies on China. Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1972.

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<sup>1</sup> *Ibid.*

that the Cultural Revolution was a “contrived *rite de passage*<sup>4</sup>” for a new generation of Communist youths. We could speculate that many of the Red Guards’ liminal qualities manifested by design, since these were necessary to make their initiation a success.

Such liminality was apparent from the Red Guards’ goal of purifying China of bourgeois influence, which simultaneously alienated them from their old identities. According to Marx, “the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class<sup>5</sup>.” This is the foundation of cultural Marxism - all ideas and practices reflect the epoch in which they arise, serving “particular socio-economic interests and carrying out important social functions.<sup>6</sup>” Since many existing aspects of Chinese culture arose during the capitalist era, Mao and the Red Guards believed that they were therefore inherently counterrevolutionary and a bad influence on society. The Red Guards thus implemented the “Destroy the Four Olds<sup>7</sup>” campaign, seeking to purify China of these influences<sup>8</sup>. For instance, street names were changed for having bourgeois connotations - Wang Fu Jing (王府井) Street in Beijing was renamed “People’s Street” (人民路) because its original name meant “Palace Well”,

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<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Marx, Karl, Friedrich Engels, Samuel Moore, and David McLellan. *The Communist Manifesto*. Oxford World’s Classics. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2008.

<sup>6</sup> Kellner, D. (n.d.). Cultural Marxism and Cultural Studies. UCLA GSEIS. Retrieved from [https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/cultural\\_marxism.pdf](https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/essays/cultural_marxism.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Old ideas, Old Culture, Old Customs and Old Habits

<sup>8</sup> Guo, Jian, Yongyi Song, and Yuan Zhou. *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Historical Dictionaries of War, Revolution, and Civil Unrest. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

which was considered monarchist. Religion, which was still somewhat tolerated before 1966, was now virulently attacked by Red Guards, who desecrated places of worship for being manifestations of old superstitions<sup>9</sup>. Many of these customs and spaces were important parts of the Red Guards’ identities. For example, street names were, as they are now, often associated with the memories of experiences that occurred at these places, creating a sense of nostalgia and attachment between space and memory. Some guards may even have originated from religious families; the condemnation of religion meant that they would have to surrender this key aspect of their lives. By destroying these things, the guards were destroying the old China where they had hitherto grown up in, replacing it with a new world of ideological purity. In the process, they were symbolically purging themselves of their old identities and memories. Alienating the Red Guards from their old identities and even the old world they grew up in turned them into *tabula rasa*, opening them up to Maoist indoctrination. The destruction of the “Four Olds” therefore turned the Red Guards into liminal figures by distancing them from their old lives in a tainted society; they could now be groomed to build Mao’s ideological utopia.

The formation of Red Guard units moreover led to the separation of the students from their typical roles within the prevailing social structure, converting them into liminal figures as professional revolutionaries. Even in purportedly classless society, social hierarchy and roles still remained within Mao’s China. Students were expected to study and submit to the authority of the

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<sup>9</sup> Huang, Lucy Jen. “The Role of Religion in Communist Chinese Society.” *Asian Survey* 11, no. 7 (1971): 693–708. doi:10.2307/2642975.

school administration. The Red Guard movement, however, turned such values completely on its head, as Mao declared to the students in a 1966 issue of the *People's Daily*, "To rebel is justified<sup>10</sup>." With this pronouncement, Mao had practically given his blessing for the Red Guards to make a break from the prevailing social order- their duty was no longer to conform to their roles as students, or even to maintain traditional social institutions such as respect for elders. Instead, they would now operate outside the social order as professional revolutionaries, with the expectation that they would destroy old social norms rather than uphold them. The students complied with gusto. Gao Yuan, a former Red Guard, recalls that schools "suspended classes altogether so we could make Cultural Revolution full time. Once again, posters about teachers proliferated. Their tone grew harsher."<sup>11</sup> The ability of the Red Guards to challenge the social order without restraint highlights their increasing liminality, since prevailing social mores could no longer exert social control over them due to their separation from society.

What was striking about the Red Guards was not just their rebellion against authority however, but their abandonment of familial ties in favour of loyalty to the Cultural Revolution. Chinese civilisation has long had a tradition of cherishing familial ties. In the *Analects* (13.18), Confucius himself even went so far as to support the notion of family members covering up for each other's crimes, in essence placing the interests of the family as

paramount over those of the state<sup>12</sup>. Even as reforms were enacted in the early Communist era to move familial institutions away from the Confucian model<sup>13</sup>, it seems unlikely that the longstanding tradition of clan loyalty would have been completely eroded from the average Chinese family. Yet, the Red Guards had no qualms about attacking even this key building block of Chinese society. For them, making revolution was a paramount endeavour and rooting out counterrevolutionaries was essential, even if it meant denouncing one's own family. Zhang Hong Bing, an ex-Red Guard, recalls denouncing his father in a *Dazibao*<sup>14</sup> and condemning his mother to death, saying, "I just wanted to follow Chairman Mao...For a child to criticise their parents wasn't just our household, the whole country was doing it<sup>15</sup>." Such a widespread deviation from longstanding culture suggests that even basic notions of familial loyalty had eroded among the Red Guards, cutting them off from their traditional source of identity and support. The vacuum left behind by the loss of family ties not only turned them into liminal entities, but also created the opportunity to breed *communitas* among the guards, paving the way for the formation of a liminal "micro-community" of Maoist youth.

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<sup>12</sup> Ivanhoe, P. J., and Bryan W. Van Norden, eds. *Readings in Classical Chinese Philosophy*. 2nd ed. Indianapolis: Hackett Pub, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> Huang, Lucy Jen. "Some Changing Patterns in the Communist Chinese Family." *Marriage and Family Living* 23, no. 2 (May 1961): 137. doi:10.2307/347728.

<sup>14</sup> Literally "Large Character Notice" - A type of political poster with slogans written in large Chinese Characters

<sup>15</sup> Branigan, Tania. "China's Cultural Revolution: Son's Guilt over the Mother He Sent to Her Death." *The Guardian*, March 27, 2013, sec. China.

<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/27/china-cultural-revolution-sons-guilt-zhang-hongping>.

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<sup>10</sup> Guo, Jian, Yongyi Song, and Yuan Zhou. *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Historical Dictionaries of War, Revolution, and Civil Unrest. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

<sup>11</sup> Gao, Yuan. *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1987.

In order to breed this *communitas*, a new source of common identity had to be found to create an imagined community among the Red Guards. This came about through the use of quasi-religious elements to venerate Mao's cult of personality. The Totemic Principle argues that social groups typically develop totems so as to establish group loyalty, making these sacred by investing them with the community's social force. This force, invested in objects and rituals, allows individuals to derive solidarity from the collective group, hence establishing a stronger sense of affiliation to it<sup>16</sup>. During rites of passage, associated ceremonies and practices (e.g. tattoos, body painting) often serve as totems for the initiates, establishing *communitas* within the group. In the case of the Red Guards, it was the cult of Mao that served to unite the movement. For instance, *Quotations of Chairman Mao Tse-tung*, better known as "Mao's Little Red Book", became a totem equivalent to sacred scripture. Guards would not only memorise and quote the sayings of Mao, they would also carry the physical books at all times and wave them as a show of devotion to him. Such practices appeared to establish an imagined community, defined as a socially constructed association of people formed without the need for face-to-face interaction (e.g. the nation state)<sup>17</sup>. In this case, *communitas* apparently unified millions of Red Guards nation-wide who would otherwise have little in common. Peasant contingents could theoretically feel a sense of unity with urban groups due to the

common identity of their similar uniforms and knowledge of Maoist tenets. On the flipside, the uniqueness of these practices also strengthened the exclusionary nature of the movement, since it was not difficult to distinguish and exclude non-guards through their lack of Red Guard uniforms and their inferior mastery of Mao's doctrine. Liminality was thus established through the visible totems and practices that defined Red Guard status, which seemed to build *communitas* among the students and isolate them from ordinary society.

This *communitas* was soon proved fragile, however, due to the class divide that still existed in Maoist China. For all the Marxist rhetoric about building a classless society and destroying bourgeoisie values, a quieter (and, arguably, more genuine) class conflict existed between the urban and the rural Red Guards. Gao Yuan recounts seeing Beijing Red Guards wearing "authentic looking military uniforms and brown leather belts with brass buckles" in contrast to the Red Guards from his rural hometown, who wore "rough and shapeless" clothing<sup>18</sup>. This appears to suggest that the *communitas* among the Red Guards was not as strong as one would expect, considering the very tangible signs of wealth differentials between city-dwellers and rural students. The unifying effect of the totems was thus weakened through the differences in socio-economic status between these two groups, since it became difficult for Red Guards from different backgrounds to relate to one another. Furthermore, the notion of class was reinforced through judging people based on their parent's political purity. Only those who were born into the

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<sup>16</sup> Durkheim, Emile, Carol Cosman, and Mark Sydney Cladis. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Oxford World's Classics. Oxford New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>17</sup> Anderson, Benedict R. O'G. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. Rev. and extended ed. London; New York: Verso, 1991.

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<sup>18</sup> Gao, Yuan. *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1987.

“Five Red Categories<sup>19</sup>” were allowed to join or remain in the guards; if a guard’s parents were in the “Five Black Categories<sup>20</sup>”, they would be deprived of their membership and tormented<sup>21</sup>. Considering the great political pressures of that time, parents could easily fall from the red categories to the black categories if denounced publicly. Such sudden and frequent changes in attitude towards individuals who were once fellow Red Guards may have caused doubt and mistrust to seep into the ranks. After all, not only did one have to fear reactionaries infiltrating the faithful, one could also question if their comrades, who could turn so swiftly upon their compatriots upon accusations of revisionism, were trustworthy after all. Cultural Revolution China was thus far from a classless society - it had merely abandoned old capitalist class categories and created new ones to divide the people. It was arguably these class distinctions, as well as the mistrust that grew among the Red Guards that potentiated a weakening of *communitas* between the students, reducing their collective solidarity as liminal entities.

More than the social rifts between the Red Guards (or perhaps because of them), the rise of factionalism among the students soon eroded any semblance of *communitas* that remained. Being a period of significant power struggle within the

Communist Party, different factions attempted to control the Red Guards in order to advance their political aims. Instead of the monolith envisioned by most observers, Heaslet proposes that the Red Guards were split into four categories, each with different objectives. For instance, Mao relied on one category of guards (Second Category) to spread revolution in the provinces, while the Beijing political elites (Third Category) and the army (Fourth Category) raised their own units to rein in the Second<sup>22</sup>. This difference in objectives hence resulted in clashes, undermining group unity. Political disagreements also often led to Red Guard groups breaking up and fighting each other. Walder notes that arguments over whether or not to support Communist Party work teams and disagreements over tactics often led to conflict<sup>23</sup>. These resulted in Red Guards turning on one another, denouncing opposing factions as revisionists for their opposing views. By the time the army was deployed to put down the Guards in 1967, the fragile *communitas* between the Red Guards had been shattered, to the extent that places like Tibet and Yunnan became “virtual battlefields...bloodshed was extensive and hundreds of youths were killed in serious combat<sup>24</sup>”. Though they remained liminal from civilian society, it was clear that the Red Guard movement had splintered to the point of no return;

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<sup>19</sup> Workers, Poor and Lower-middle Peasants, Revolutionary Cadres, Revolutionary Military personnel, Revolutionary Martyrs.

<sup>20</sup> Landlords, Rich Peasants, Counterrevolutionaries, Bad Elements, Rightists

<sup>21</sup> Guo, Jian, Yongyi Song, and Yuan Zhou. *Historical Dictionary of the Chinese Cultural Revolution*. Historical Dictionaries of War, Revolution, and Civil Unrest. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015.

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<sup>22</sup> Heaslet, Juliana Pennington. “The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution.” *Asian Survey* 12, no. 12 (December 1972): 1032–47. doi:10.2307/2643022.

<sup>23</sup> Walder, Andrew G. “Beijing Red Guard Factionalism: Social Interpretations Reconsidered.” *The Journal of Asian Studies* 61, no. 2 (May 2002): 437. doi:10.2307/2700297.

<sup>24</sup> Heaslet, Juliana Pennington. “The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution.” *Asian Survey* 12, no. 12 (December 1972): 1032–47. doi:10.2307/2643022.

it no longer possessed the *communitas* that defined Turner's conception of rites of passage.

Another significant exception to Turner's notion of liminality was in the raising of the Red Guards to a position of ideological superiority within Chinese society, resulting in arrogance rather than humility. Turner describes how rites of passage typically reduce initiates to a position of lowliness, such as with the Ndembu *Kanongesha*<sup>25</sup>, who is traditionally insulted and tormented before installation<sup>26</sup>. Such exercises serve to check emerging arrogance to the extent that initiates are able to execute their new roles with humility. Rather than being humbled, the Red Guards were placed on a pedestal of honour, lauded by Mao as the driving force of the revolution. The "press was ablaze with praise and commendation for the daring exploits of these 'revolutionary fighters' <sup>27</sup>", framing the Cultural Revolution as a war against bourgeois values and portraying the Guards as national heroes in this struggle. Jung Chang also notes that "the young were told that their role was to 'safeguard Mao'", thus making it appear that the Red Guards were performing a crucial task to protect the leader of the nation<sup>28</sup>. Considering the preferential rather than lowly treatment of the Red Guards, it appears that the humility instilled under Turner's conception of a rite of passage did not arise among their ranks.

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<sup>25</sup> Overall Chieftain

<sup>26</sup> <sup>26</sup> Turner, Victor W. *The Ritual Process Structure and Anti-Structure*. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1995.  
<http://www.myilibrary.com?id=620121>.

<sup>27</sup> Heaslet, Juliana Pennington. "The Red Guards: Instruments of Destruction in the Cultural Revolution." *Asian Survey* 12, no. 12 (December 1972): 1032-47.  
doi:10.2307/2643022.

<sup>28</sup> Chang, Jung, and Jon Halliday. *Mao: The Unknown Story*. London: Jonathan Cape, 2005.

We could even argue that the opposite happened - the Red Guards actually became more arrogant and brazen in their activities, daring to defy the traditional social norms and hierarchies that had long demanded their respect. Arguably, the liminality of the Red Guards therefore could have arisen out of their heightened arrogance rather than the humility Turner identified in a typical rite of passage.

This arrogance, combined with the framing of the Cultural Revolution as a violent struggle and the Red Guards' status as unchecked quasi-military entities, soon led to students committing violent excesses across China. The Stanford Prison Experiment suggests that people can be induced into committing horrific acts if influenced by one's social environment<sup>29</sup>. In the experiment, ordinary students designated as prison guards in a mock prison without sufficient checks and balances were negatively influenced by their social situation as prison guards, leading to the dehumanisation and sadistic treatment of prisoners<sup>30</sup>. Likewise, the Red Guards were also influenced by the state's perception of how they should act. Believing state propaganda that it was their duty as "revolutionary fighters" and the protectors of Chairman Mao to mercilessly destroy rightists, the Guards saw it as their duty to be violent and ruthless. Mao's public support for the Red Guards not only sanctioned their violent activities, but also made them virtually immune from censure, since any form of opposition could be construed as counterrevolutionary. As a result, confident that they would not be punished

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<sup>29</sup> Zimbardo, Philip. *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. London: Rider, 2007.

<sup>30</sup> Hanley, Craig, Banks Curtus, and Philip Zimbardo. "A Study of Prisoners and Guards in a Simulated Prison." *Naval Research Reviews*, September 1973, 1-17.

for their actions, the Red Guards went beyond the state-proliferated image of how they should make revolution, engaging in atrocities across the country against alleged class enemies. Gao Yuan recalls a Red Guard leader who raped a teacher and tortured a classmate to death after denouncing them as counterrevolutionaries<sup>31</sup>. This arose because the Red Guards dehumanised their victims, believing that the ends of saving the revolution justified the means of committing atrocities against “class enemies” to punish and deter insurgency. Furthermore, the fragile *communitas* within the Red Guard ranks was sufficient to enable the students de-individualise themselves and submit to group influence, relinquishing personal responsibility for their actions<sup>32</sup>. While the Red Guards were still liminal entities, social influence caused this liminality to manifest in wanton bloodlust rather than a responsible exercise of power.

In conclusion, while the Red Guards were liminal to the extent that they were isolated from society and shared a common fundamental ideology, their unity as a social movement was ultimately undermined by political rivalry and class conflict. Though initially successful in indoctrinating youths with Mao’s thought and personality cult, the Red Guard movement was unsuccessful as a rite of passage. It failed to sufficiently account for the inherent class and political divides in the country and the Communist Party respectively, resulting in a lack of *communitas* with which to build a genuinely united common identity among the students. The movement also did not prepare the students for

political disagreement and responsible struggle; instead, they knowingly conditioned impressionable youths to commit violent rebellion against any form of suspected dissent. Such incitement ultimately led to the commitment of atrocities and factional violence over ideological issues even among their own ranks, undermining Red Guard unity. This chaos and disunity made it nigh on impossible for a new Socialist generation to emerge, hindering the development of Mao’s new society. Though the Cultural Revolution successfully separated the Red Guards from ordinary society, early successes as a Socialist rite of passage were ultimately reversed by disunity and chaos within the movement.

The liminality of the Red Guard generation did not, however, end after the Cultural Revolution, for there appears a lack of post-liminal rites to reintegrate them back into society<sup>33</sup>. The Revolution was initiated to prepare the youth of China for reintegration into a new Maoist society devoid of old influences. Unfortunately, however, that China was never born - under Deng Xiaoping’s leadership, China relegated Maoist doctrine to ideological lip service. Instead, Deng embraced market reforms that eventually led China to develop into a global economic power. The Red Guard generation was, therefore, prepared for a world that did not exist - the new China seemed the very opposite of the one they had fought to build as youthful revolutionaries. Having had their education disrupted by revolutionary activities and having been sent down to the countryside by the state to cool off, the Red Guard generation lacked the skills necessary for a capitalist economy<sup>34</sup>. Moreover, the revolutionary

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<sup>31</sup> Gao, Yuan. *Born Red: A Chronicle of the Cultural Revolution*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press, 1987.

<sup>32</sup> Zimbardo, Philip. *The Lucifer Effect: How Good People Turn Evil*. London: Rider, 2007.

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<sup>33</sup> Gennep, Arnold van. *The Rites of Passage*. Repr., Transferred to digital printing. Religion, Rites and Ceremonies, in 5 volumes; 3. Abingdon: Routledge, 2006.

<sup>34</sup> Bonnin, Michel. “The ‘Lost Generation’: Its Definition and

experience was a poignant one for the impressionable youth; we may speculate that it caused radical changes in their attitudes towards authority, society and the world, sometimes at odds with the new China. Without a set of similarly poignant experiences to reintegrate the Red Guards into a society that had left them behind, ex-Red Guards may not feel fully integrated into their new surroundings and lack a sense of closure regarding the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution. While much has already been said regarding the economic effects of this disconnect, it would be interesting to investigate how the Red Guard generation remains a liminal generation in today's capitalist China.

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# Superheroes and the Pursuit of Justice

## A Study of Superhero Narratives in Comic Books and its Relevance to American society's views on Morality and Justice

*Dennis Chiang, Yale-NUS College, Class of 2017*

## **Introduction**

### 1.1 Purpose of The Study

The Superhero narrative has always been one of the mediums through which American society explores the notion of justice (Reynolds, 1994) because it has always been about an eternal struggle between good and evil, between a hero and a villain. It started out with extreme, absolutist caricatures of good versus evil, but this concept became more nuanced as the world evolved. Philosophical issues of violence - such as the necessary evil, utilitarianism, social responsibility, justice, and the social contract - have since been introduced and explored through stories, dialogue and visuals in Superhero comic books.

Since the turn of the millennium, the Superhero genre has had a renaissance of sorts, with countless Superhero television shows and films being released, thereby placing Superhero narratives at the forefront of society's consciousness (Douthat, 2010). This revival of the Superhero genre has shown no signs of waning, with more Superhero franchises being churned out every year. With the Superhero firmly established in the media landscape, understanding the relationship between Superhero narratives and society's struggle with justice and morality can provide us with some interesting insights.

There have been many books on the history of comic book Superheroes and the reasons for their popularity, as well as specific case studies on the psyches of Superheroes and the philosophical dimension of their narratives. There has been, however, a lack of research charting the changing aspects of the comic book Superhero and how this relates to societal changes and evolving perceptions of justice. This study shall hence chart the evolution of justice through comic book Superhero narratives, from Superman's first appearance in 1938 to modern day releases. In it, I will analyse the

characteristics of Superheroes through the ages, and the themes of their narratives. I will also examine the changing ideas of justice and morality in Superhero narratives and how these relate to society's own pursuit of justice.

This paper consists of 4 sections. Section 1 provides a basic introduction to the subject matter, and delineates the research design for the study. Section 2 examines various aspects of the Superhero character and narrative, and how they have been depicted throughout the years. Section 3 is an examination of how the changing societal views on justice and morality through the times are reflected and explored through Superhero narratives. Section 4 summarizes my conclusions as well as recommendations for future study.

### 1.2 Research Objectives

This study aims to:

1. Investigate the evolving characteristics of the Superhero and reconcile them with social changes through the eras
2. Identify and examine the themes of justice and morality in Superhero narratives
3. Compare and reconcile justice & morality in society with the themes and narratives found in Superhero narratives

### 1.3 Research Questions

RQ<sub>1</sub>: What are the common characteristics of the modern day Superhero and their stories?

RQ<sub>1a</sub>: How have these changed over the years?

RQ<sub>2</sub>: How are justice and morality explored in Superhero narratives?

RQ<sub>2a</sub>: Are there prevalent themes that can be found across all Superhero narratives?

RQ<sub>3</sub>: How does the portrayal of justice and morality in Superhero narratives compare to society's treatment of these issues?

RQ<sub>3a</sub>: How are the issues of justice and morality in Superhero narratives reflective of changes in society?

RQ<sub>3b</sub>: What can the evolution of Superhero narratives tell us about society's pursuit of justice?

1.4 Definition of Key Research Terms

**Superheroes:** In the context of this study, the Superheroes to be examined are comic book characters with fantastic abilities, skills, desires and motivations that allow them to perform extraordinary feats.

**Justice:** While there are many different interpretations of what justice is and what it should be, this project will be looking mainly at retributive, restorative and social justice.

**Morality:** Morality is defined as the code of ethics that govern the behaviours, actions, and choices of individuals.

1.5 Research Design

The study drew on qualitative research due to the nature of the subject matter. Apart from examining the comic books themselves, I examined primary literature on comic books and philosophy. I also conducted interviews with local experts in the relevant fields. This was necessary as justice and morality are multi-faceted, subjective, and highly nuanced concepts, and therefore require that I consult specialized, expert knowledge.

Finally, I analysed and examined the visual elements and dialogue of the characters in Superhero comic books, and the different attributes of Superhero protagonists and the stories that these Superheroes are involved in.

**Literature Review**

This research paper is an examination into the philosophical aspects of the Superhero narratives and its relevance, parallels, and correlation with society's own pursuit for justice. There is a rich existing literature consisting of works by psychologists, philosophers and historians that provide the insights required.

The main focus of my content analysis of Superhero narratives will be on its depiction in comic books and a few relevant broadcast media portrayals. Although there has been a proliferation of Superhero content in broadcast media, the defining characteristics of Superhero narratives are still derived from the source material. I shall hence afford greater attention to the latter.

**Interviews**

I interviewed two local experts in the fields of literature, philosophy, graphic art and/or popular culture via electronic mail:

- 1) Gwee Li Sui<sup>1</sup>, a literary critic, poet and graphic artist who in 1993, published Singapore's first graphic novel *Myth of the Stone*.
- 2) Lim Cheng Tje<sup>2</sup>, a writer and junior college teacher who has written extensively about history,

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<sup>1</sup> Refer to Appendix C for information and the full interview with Gwee Li Sui.

<sup>2</sup> Refer to Appendix D for information and the full interview with Lim Cheng Tje.

popular culture and the arts. His articles on comic art have appeared in the Southeast Asian Journal of Social Science, Teaching and Learning, Journal of Popular Culture, International Journal of Comic Art, and WittyWorld.

## SECTION 2: EXAMINING CHARACTERISTICS IN SUPERHERO NARRATIVES

In this section, I will be analysing the key characteristics of comic book Superheroes - their vigilantism, the issue of identities, their personal lives and their relationships with Supervillains.

### 2.1 Vigilantism

The way in which Superheroes carry out their vigilantism has undergone tremendous changes since the 1930's. In this section, I will be providing descriptive analysis on this general progression.

#### Working Class Hero

1938, with the pressures of the Great Depression in the background, was a time of great economic distress for the common man. The Depression era was characterized by an underlying hatred of corporations and bureaucracy in general. The working middle class began to see that the corporate bigwigs were gaining and hoarding wealth through greed and political corruption, whereas they were struggling just to make ends meet (Dickstein, 2009).

Correspondingly, the first wave of Superheroes in 1938 were powerful champions of the oppressed, accomplishing what the common man could not against the greedy and corrupt businessmen and politicians that were running the economy (Wright, 2001). In their exacting of justice, these Superheroes used swift, uncompromising violence to punish the antagonists.

The superhero genre then was essentially about the relationship between the working class and the ruling elite in society. This was on display as early as issue #1 of Action Comic, Superman's official debut. Superman, after saving Lois Lane from some kidnappers, viciously destroys their vehicle.

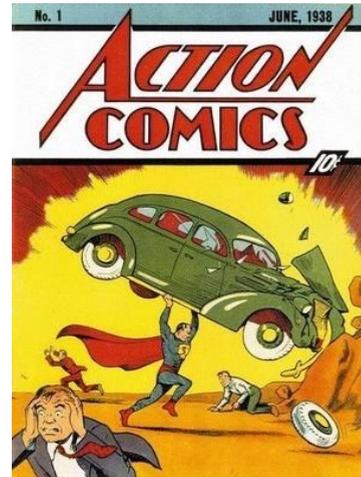


Figure 1. Action Comics #1

In the next issue of Action Comics (Issue #2), Superman forces a munitions magnate, who had been promoting the war effort in order to sell arms, to accompany him to ground zero by literally threatening his life, warning that he would “suffer consequences” if he did not comply with his request. This came off the back of Superman's ruthless deposing of two of the man's guards. Later in the story, he also deals with an enemy aircraft by jumping on it and causing it to crash. In later issues, (# 3 and #4), Superman makes use of deception and identity theft to trick a mining corporation and a high school football coach in order to exact justice.

Superman's was not the only example of such uncompromising methods at this time. In fact, a better-known example would be that of the Batman. First appearing in Issue #27 of Detective Comics in 1939, Batman's ruthless approach to crime fighting utilized shock-and-awe tactics to instil fear and intimidation in his enemies. Batman's first ever

issue ends with the caped crusader besting the criminal and subsequently toppling him into a vat of acid.

### War Heroes

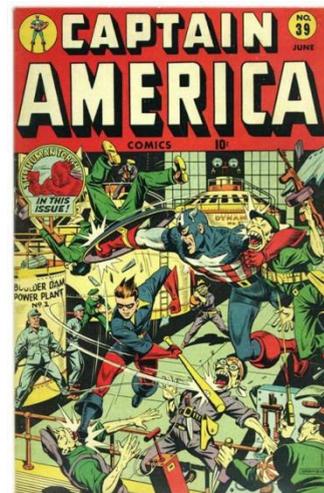
During World War II, the Superhero narrative shifted towards one of patriotism and service to the nation. America's enemies in the war - namely the Nazis and the Japanese - were consistently portrayed as evil, merciless killers and torturers (Holsinger, 1992). They were often represented by degrading, subhuman caricatures as part of a larger overall propaganda project by the American government to foster hatred for their enemies and garner support and recruits for their own army. This was especially so when America intervened in the Asia-Pacific theatre of war against the Japanese. The Japanese villains were depicted as horrid caricatures with exaggerated, stereotypical features like shortness, yellow skin, thin wispy facial hair, and small eyes (Holsinger, 1998).

With Americans' sense of justice closely tied to the destruction of their country's military enemies, this period saw a huge influx of patriotic pro-America heroes that were directly involved in fighting America's enemies in World War II. This was best captured by the first appearance of Captain America in March 1941. The first issue of Captain America wasted no time in realizing the American public's ideal sense of justice by depicting the hero slugging Adolf Hitler on the cover.



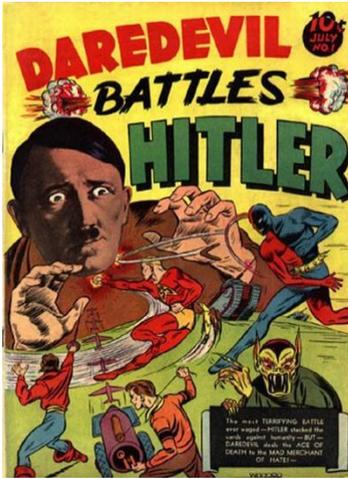
**Figure 2. Captain America #1**

This patriotic selflessness featured throughout the early issues of the Captain America series during World War II. This can be observed in the case of Captain America Issue #39, which had the Captain fighting off Japanese villains on its cover.



**Figure 3. Captain America #39**

The original Daredevil, as seen in the 1942 Daredevil Battles Hitler comic, is another good example of the patriotic American Superhero archetype from that time.



**Figure 4. Daredevil Battles Hitler #1**

The story depicts Daredevil as being heavily involved in the war effort, hopping around the world in a show of the Allied powers' might. The 64-page comic book had Daredevil traveling from the Mediterranean to fight the Italians, to the Far East to help Singapore stave off the Japanese, and to Africa to help the British empire protect its colonies.

The patriotism and anti-Axis sentiments of these Superheroes made them fictitious war heroes in the minds of the public; this trend continued well after World War II and into the Cold War period. This can be seen in the case of another Superhero – Iron Man. In the original appearance of Iron Man in Tales of Suspense #39 in 1963, weapons inventor Tony Stark helps the war effort in Vietnam by providing state-of-the-art weapons technology to the US military. He later gets kidnapped by the Vietnamese enemy and ends up fighting his way out of their base with his Iron Man suit.



**Figure 5. Tales of Suspense #39 Non-Violent Camp**

In 1954 things took a turn as, with the publication of the book *Seduction of the Innocent* by anti-comics crusader Dr Fredric Wertham, Superhero narratives became less violent. A renowned psychiatrist, Dr Wertham argued in his book that the strong themes of violence and gore in comics, not just in the Superhero genre, but across the board – horror, crime, western – had a corrupting influence on children (Decker, 1997) and led to an increase in crime and juvenile delinquency. He brought his objections to court, and subsequently won the court's favour with a new ruling – the Comics Code Authority – being implemented. The Code had strict restrictions on the more mature themes of comic books and forced comics to undergo a period of moderation in which its content became more child-friendly and light-hearted.

The ruling had a huge impact on Superhero characteristics and their narratives. The rough and violent Superheroes from before like Batman and Superman, whose earlier stories depicted them dispensing a gritty and uncompromising sense of justice, were now squaring off with cartoonish villains (Wright, 2001). These new Superhero stories took on a more light-hearted tone and accordingly, their Superheroes' sense of justice and

vigilantism was watered down.

For instance, Superman's backstory was featured more prominently, portraying him as having been brought up with traditional American 'farmboy' values. This led the Superman character to be more idealistic and law-abiding. Unnecessary violence and intimidation was no longer a part of his character. Superman also vowed to never take a human life and to ensure that his vigilante activities were in line with the law (Daniels, 1998).

Even the dark and brooding Batman started to take on a lighter disposition with the introduction of Robin to the Batman narrative. Batman's character took on paternal qualities as he groomed his sidekick Robin into an upstanding young man, teaching him respect for elders and having him do household chores – the quintessential American “good ol’ boy.” All the dramatic tension of his previous narratives disappeared as his nemesis, the Joker, went from being a maniacal terrorist into a clownish villain who committed gimmicky & unthreatening crimes (Daniels, 1999).

### The Anti-Hero Rises

In the midst of the Cold War, the counter-culture movement bloomed, espousing the rejection of mainstream values because of American society's disillusionment with their government and their invasions of Vietnam and Korea. This led to the popularity of the anti-authority, anti-hero Superhero character (Rozak, 1995). What was popularly moral during this time were the likes of freedom and liberty, as well as a rejection of the idealistic social values of model citizenry and blind trust in the authorities.

The effect on Superheroes and the way they were portrayed also changed in accordance to those values. Even the patriotic, model American

Superhero Captain America expressed doubts about his role in helping the establishment during this period.



Figure 6. Captain America #122

In Captain America Issue #122, Captain America expresses his doubts about blindly following the rule of law his entire life:

“In a world rife with injustice, greed and endless war – who’s to say the rebels are wrong? I’ve spent a lifetime defending the flag and the law! Perhaps I should have battled less and questioned more!”

Captain America was not alone in his questioning of authority. Other Superheroes started to display such a trait as well. Perhaps the most explicit example would be the Green Lantern/Green Arrow series that ran in the late '60s. Writer Dennis O’Neil used the series as social and political commentary

(Wright, 2001) and, as Wright stated in his book:

“O’Neil cast the Green Arrow as an impassioned leftist who engaged the moderate-conservative Green Lantern in one-sided debates laced with overstated rhetoric about the widening gulf between American ideals and realities.”

It was in this climate that the anti-hero was born. An anti-hero is a character that is morally ambiguous, and thus follows his own set of principles and values to complete personal quests (Malewitz, 2007). This often leads him to make questionable decisions and choices that can be traditionally considered as villainous.

A character that personified that characteristic and the sentiments of this time was Wolverine. First appearing in a 1974 edition of the Incredible Hulk, he went on to become a mainstay in the Marvel stable with his gruff, tough-as-nails exterior belying a heart-of-gold.



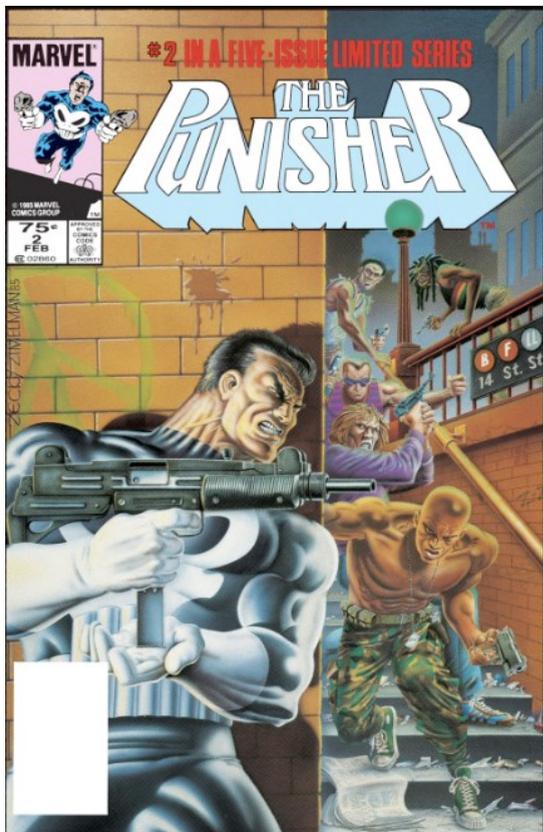
Figure 7. The Incredible Hulk #181

As a member of X-Men, Wolverine was acerbic and rude towards team leader Cyclops, and had a tendency to go off-book in the way he accomplished missions.



Figure 8. The X-Men #94

Another popular Superhero of that ilk was the Punisher, who gained prominence in the early 1970s and the '80s.



**Figure 9. The Punisher Volume 1 #2**

The Punisher waged a one-man war against crime, using brutish and often violent methods of doing so. From torture to kidnapping and murder, he did whatever it took to carry out vengeance on the criminal underworld. Although he was a mass murderer, he gained a lot of sympathy from readers because, like Batman, he was pushed into fighting crime as a result of his wife and children being killed by the mob. Viewers identified with and even cheered on the harsh vigilantism of the Punisher because in his world, the men running the criminal underworld were allowed to prosper in the face of weak or corrupt state institutions. The Punisher's ruthlessness at taking down corrupt criminals increasingly reflected their own lack of faith in the state's capability or willingness to protect them (Morris, 2005).

## **2.2 Identities**

Throughout history, the notion of identity has been depicted in various fashions, and has come to represent different things in Superhero narratives, as Lim<sup>3</sup> stated:

"Truth, Justice and the American Way" was personified by Superman and Capt. America. Batman offered a darker alternative while Spiderman offers the teenage dilemma (With Great Powers Come Great Responsibility - it's about growing up, isn't it?)"

In this section I will analyse the differences in the identities of Superheroes through the years and what they came to represent.

### **Instruments of Justice**

Initially, there was little separation between the Superhero and the person behind the Superhero costume. The Superhero persona was the character's identity. This was the case for the early Superheroes emerging during the late '30s and the early '40s, as seen in the examples of Superman and the original Green Lantern, Hal Jordan. Viewers only wanted to see the Superhero dispense justice upon those who had wronged them.

Both Superman and the Green Lantern led fictitious crusades against the greed and injustice of the period, with stories where Superman fights for better working conditions for miners and the Green Lantern fights political corruption finding plenty of willing readers (Wright, 2001).

As such, the Superheroes were one-dimensional

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Appendix D

characters defined by their quest for justice against the corrupt system of businesses, law enforcement, and politics that had oppressed and exploited the common man. They were thus driven to action not by who they were or by intrinsic personal motivations, but by only what society wanted them to fight at that time. These characters had no real personality or growth to speak of, they were blank instruments used to inflict justice unto the corrupt politicians and greedy industrialists of that time (Dickstein, 2009).

### **Immigrants**

One of the dominant characteristics of the Superhero personality was that of being an immigrant.

The earliest example would be that of Marvel's Namor the Sub-Mariner, the predecessor to DC's more popular Aquaman, who later adopted a lot of Namor's defining characteristics and stories. Being a member of the underwater kingdom of Atlantis and an entirely different species from humans, Namor's narratives often involved him defending his home and way of life. There were many conflicts between Namor and the surface world and he sometimes fought on the side of the villains to ensure the best for Atlantis (Fingerroth, 2004). This sense of divided loyalties resonated with the large influx of immigrants coming in America at the time.

Another strong example of an immigrant Superhero would be Superman. As his character was explored more in depth, there were often narratives of Superman struggling with his loneliness from being the only Kryptonian living on an alien planet.

Immigrants could also relate to that aspect of Superman's personality. Many immigrants had gone to the United States at a young age so that they could find education and a better life. It was natural to feel lonely, and to wish that they could have

brought their family along or return to their homeland (Daniels, 1991). With immigration quotas put in place to prevent the elderly from following them (Diner, 2008), many immigrants found themselves alone on American soil without their family members. This aspect of Superman's character resonated strongly with the immigrant identity in American society.

### **Representatives of Social Groups**

In time, other communities began to see themselves represented in Superhero comics, the X-Men being the most famous one. With narratives depicting these mutants as discriminated against and feared by society for being unnatural and different, this served as a strong parallel to the burgeoning homosexual rights movement that was sweeping America during the '60s counter-culture era (Fingerroth, 2004).

The X-Mens' struggle for acceptance in an unforgiving society was a direct reflection of what the homosexual community faced at the time. This theme was prevalent in the narratives of the X-Men, and the trials and tribulations of the teenage students at Professor Charles Xavier's school connected with young homosexuals coming to terms with their own non-traditional identities.

### **The Man Behind the Mask**

Another 60's trend saw increasingly more Superheroes depicted as having to deal with personal issues in their lives - they were shown juggling Superhero work and their own civilian lives, often unsuccessfully. Superhero narratives started to explore the real-life implications of being a Superhero and the effect that would have on an actual person.

Superheroes like Spiderman had to juggle university, work, fighting Supervillains, and maintaining

relationships with his girlfriend and his aunt. He had to dart from place to place, giving half-truths and lies to cover for his multiple absences or failures to discharge duties. There were times when he looked upon his gift as a curse, as he felt obligated to fight crime and use his powers responsibly for the betterment of society (Wright, 2001).

But some Superheroes were shown to believe extremely strongly in their mission and willingly chose to sacrifice personal relationships for the sake of justice. The best example in this regard would be Batman. His solution to juggling personal life and fighting crime was isolation. He never bothered to build any real life for Bruce Wayne. He threw himself into a life of crime fighting and had nothing to fall back on, apart from a few sidekicks and his trusty butler. He had no life beyond Batman, such as the devotion to his quest (Daniels, 1999). Many make the point that Bruce Wayne actually is the mask that Batman wears (White, 2008).

### **2.3 Supervillains**

The early Supervillains were not 'super' per se, but rather ordinary human beings who caused injustice in society. The likes of Superman and the Green Lantern were there to deliver punishment to those who had wronged the citizenry, such as the aforementioned corrupt politicians and greedy industrialists. This trend continued into the warring periods, when the Nazis, Japanese, and Communists were depicted as the biggest source of injustice in the world. Due to propaganda needs, more powerful villains like the Red Skull were created to pose a more credible threat to our war heroes and to drum depth, illuminating how the line between Superhero and Supervillain was closer than we would like;

up more support for the war effort. After the Comics Code Authority was passed, Supervillains were reduced to child-friendly, cartoonish bad guys. They were depicted as incompetent and were meant to serve as comic relief.

This only lasted until the post-war era, where more mature and grown-up Supervillain/Superhero relationships started becoming commonplace. While previous depictions of Supervillains depicted them as being inherently evil, with moral essentialism being questioned in the counter-culture era, the motivations and history of Supervillains were now being explored (Miller, 2008).

One good example of this would be the X-Men Supervillain Magneto and his relationship with Charles Xavier. Both were mutant rights activists who experienced the public discrimination and hatred of mutant kind, but while Charles saw hope in mankind, Magneto was more cynical due to his own personal experience in the Holocaust. He was unwilling to trust the world that had wronged him before, the world that had inflicted such suffering on him; in that sense, his plans for the liberation of mutant kind, though often violent, take on an almost heroic quality (Daniels, 1995). In many ways, their strained friendship and conflicting ideologies regarding civil rights reflected the real-life relationship between Malcom X and Martin Luther King, Jr.

This touches on one of the more interesting elements of the origin stories of Superheroes and Supervillains: that of the traumatic event. Alan Moore's *The Killing Joke* explored this concept in because all it takes is one day, one traumatic experience to inspire either heroism or villainy.



**Figure 10. Batman: The Killing Joke**

Over time, comic books started to humanize Supervillains, often showing them in the light of a tragic character (Daniels, 1999). A fantastic instance of this is Mr Freeze from the Batman series. Initially starting out as one of the many gimmicky Supervillains of the Comic Code era, the Batman Animated Series gave him a rich and poignant backstory by invoking the gothic romances of old: Dr Victor Fries is involved in an accident that requires him to live a life in sub-zero temperature, with a falling out with his boss over funding for his research into his cryogenically frozen wife's terminal illness driving him to a life of crime. His villainous acts were motivated simply by the desire to find a cure for the love of his life. Such

complex moral motivations redefined the nature of the Supervillain, thereby setting the course for the exploration of moral relativism in the narratives of comic book Superheroes.

### SECTION 3: IDENTIFYING AND EXAMINING THEMES OF JUSTICE AND MORALITY IN SUPERHERO NARRATIVES AND ITS RELEVANCE TO SOCIETY'S PURSUIT OF JUSTICE

In this section I will be analysing the evolution of justice in society and how the different themes of justice that come from that process have been explored through comic book Superheroes. I will be looking at the attitudes of society regarding vigilante values, criminal justice and issues of power and responsibility through the narratives of the comic book Superhero.

#### 3.1 Vigilante Values vs. the Law

##### History

Even before the explosion of the costumed Superhero genre in comic books, vigilante themes of justice were already being explored thoroughly in American comic books, such as with early Western cowboy comic strips, where gallant cowboys rode from town to town to dispense justice on corrupt sheriffs and bandits (Fingerroth, 2004).

As earlier mentioned, the first Superhero emerged during the period of the Great Depression, in a climate of industrial greed and political corruption. During such a time, it was easy for the Superhero character to slip into the old cowboys' brutal style of uncompromising justice.

The reason why these themes of justice were so palatable to society then was because of the lack of faith in the judicial system and law enforcement.

Eventually though, the steady modernization and improvement of law enforcement agencies that followed the public enemy era (Ruth, 1996) led to a moderation of these anti-establishment ‘cowboy’-centric views of justice.

There was increased acceptance of the state as the best arbiter of justice, with the Federal Bureau of Investigation revamped and equipped with better technology that allowed them to properly enforce the law. This led to better overall protection of society and a greater deterrence of crime. You could not have gotten away with a bank robbery as easily as the John Dillinger’s of the past (Ruth, 1996).

This acceptance and confidence in the state’s role as chief arbiter of justice was further compounded during World War II as nationalism and patriotism ran high.

However, with the backdrop of the Cold War in the 60s, the masses became increasingly more educated and discerning of the media and state propaganda (Jowett, 2009). With military confrontations causing so much suffering, were they really justified? This anti-establishment sentiment was a key component of the counter-culture movement then (Roszak, 1995), and this reflection carried on from justice in the theatre of war into the domestic criminal justice system.

### **Justice in the Legal System**

When we examine the legal systems of any developed country in the world today, we see that our laws are formulated on the basis of restorative and retributive justice (Reichel, 2002). Restorative justice is where the law aims to restore the victims in a criminal case to the position that they were in before the offense was committed (Marshall, 1999). On the other hand, with retributive justice, the idea is that because the offender has unfairly benefitted

through their bad behaviour, they will be punished in proportion to their unfair gains (Malese, 2004).

In both concepts, justice, if given at all, is delivered reactively, after the offense has been committed. However, it goes without saying that the victims who have been harmed would have preferred prevention rather than compensation.

The mere existence of the law, and the threat of punishment, serves as a deterrent to crime, but even then, not everyone will comply. In many places and with regards to specific criminal activity, some individuals remain undeterred as they think they can get away with it (Keel, 2005). This is because law enforcement has plenty of bureaucratic procedures that lead to inefficiencies.

Trusting in vigilante values is thus a vote of no confidence in the state’s enforcement of justice (Taslitz, 2004). Vigilante violence is rooted in an ideology of popular sovereignty - the people are the real sovereigns and whenever those to whom they have delegated authority fail, they have the right to turn to vigilantes and confer their sovereign authority onto them.

A recent example can be found in Darlington, in the United Kingdom, where a former boxer, Francis Jones has been making a name for himself as a freelance vigilante. Shopkeepers call him to disperse rowdy troublemakers as he immediately responds to their need, unlike the local law enforcement agencies that can take hours to arrive (Allen, 2009).

### **Superheroes and the Law**

We see the relationship between Superheroes and the law explored through the narratives of Batman and the Punisher. Both exist in societies where crime is rampant and law enforcement is lacking. In both of these mythologies, Superheroes act as enforcers of justice for the community and society and deliver punishment as they see fit. They, like

Francis Jones, can be called upon to prevent the occurrence or escalation of harm done to people in society. In both these characters' narratives, they act in lieu of the justice system.

The main difference between the Punisher and Batman, however, is the proactivity of the former. The Punisher's form of vigilantism sees him go out looking for trouble and trying to destroy the entire criminal underworld, killing indiscriminately. Unlike local law enforcement, he is not bound by due process or a fair trial and dispenses his own justice prematurely, killing criminals before they inevitably harm society, thereby essentially punishing them for crimes that they have yet to commit. It's the ultimate preventive measure, ensuring that harm does not occur by pre-emptively eradicating those who would do harm.

But there also exists another form of justice, as observed in Superman's narratives. After his character was moderated to become more of a goody two-shoes boy-scout character, Superman compliance to government authority was often shown to cause tension with other Superheroes in the DC universe (Daniels, 1998).

The trend that can be observed in the exploration of justice in Superhero narratives is that vigilante values have great acceptance in society. As such, it is not surprising that they play such a significant part in comic book Superhero narratives. As criminologist Franklin Zimrig examined - in America, there are strong modern indicators of support for vigilante values, such as high distrust of the government's ability to do the right thing for the community, especially regarding protection from predatory criminals (Zimrig, 2003). In his study, the

never took the dispensation of justice into his own hands. He was but a glorified policeman, merely catching and delivering criminals to the relevant authorities. Scott Vollum (2003) analysed:

"There would (also) be numerous instances where Superman would put a stop to vigilantism even though the victim was a known criminal. When confronting a lynch mob about to attack a criminal, Superman simply proclaims "this prisoner's fate will be decided in a court of justice" (National Periodical Comics, 1971, p. 23) and in another instance "even this rat deserves a fair trial" (National Periodical Comics, 1971, p. 345) and puts a stop to the violence."

This shows Superman being complimentary to the justice system and presupposes that the system in general can be trusted and that its laws should be upheld as far as possible. In fact, his strict data shows that Americans, particularly those in the south, respond positively to vigilante assaults on criminals.

With society's fondness of vigilante fantasies and the proliferation of Superhero narratives in comic books that continually reaffirm this demand, some comic book writers and artists started questioning the vigilante fantasy, engaging the grim, hypothetical real-life impact of Superheroes and their relationship to justice in society.

We see these themes explored in the graphic novel *Watchmen*, which has the government issuing a Superhero registration act to ensure the accountability of costumed vigilantes.

### A Case Study: Who Watches the Watchmen?



### Figure 11. Watchmen

Watchmen, a graphic novel written by Alan Moore from 1986-1987, explored a world whereby Superheroes were commonplace. The novel examined the effects such a scenario would have on society. The phrase “who watches the watchmen” appears in the novel and is a good representation of a major theme that is examined in the novel, that of accountability.

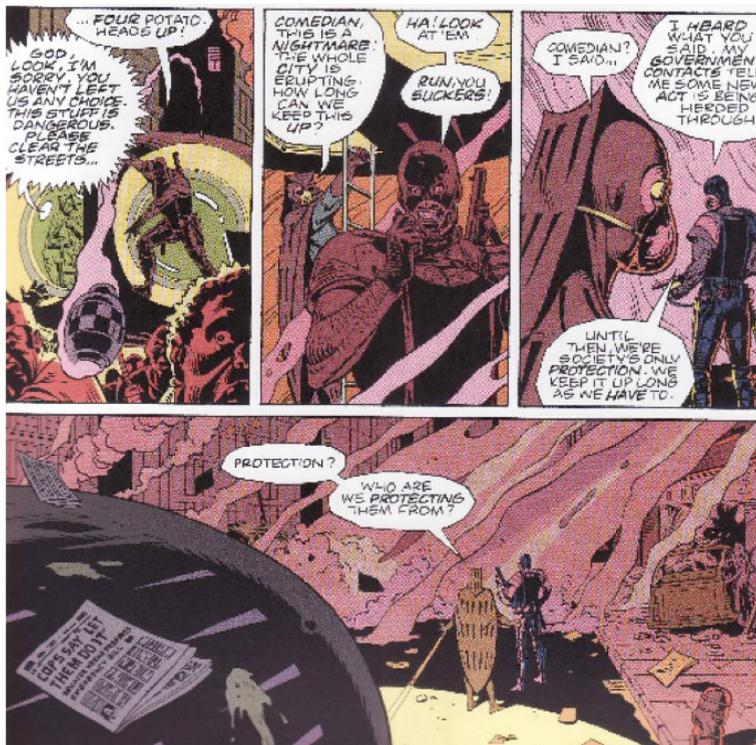
In the novel, Superheroes are depicted as having the power to abide by their own rules and dispense their own justice in society even though they were supposed to be representing the collective interests and safety of the public. As the novel questions, who ‘watches’ them and prevents them from stepping across the line?

The character of Ozymandias, through his intelligence and resources, takes it upon himself to decide what is best for the fate of the world. He simulates a gruesome alien attack on New York that kills millions in order to unite the entire world against a common enemy, instead of fighting amongst themselves. The acceptance and adulation of Ozymandias as a Superhero by society and the

government granted him the entitlement and authority to perform whatever actions he deemed fit. With his role as a protector of society who could operate by his own rules and still remain actively endorsed by society, he felt justified and empowered to take the fate of the world into his own hands, even if it meant killing

millions of people. Vigilantism shows its harms in this case. The story of Ozymandias shows that by supporting or championing vigilante values, society allows individuals to justify whatever actions they so choose as long as they believe it is right for them to do so for the sake of society.

Another interesting idea that Watchmen brings up is society’s rejection of Superheroes. In the world of Watchmen, the vigilante superheroes often think they have the mandate of the people in protecting them from harm. But the public’s refusal to recognize the authority of Superheroes and their rioting against their ‘chosen’ protectors - who eventually have to beat them back down - leads superhero Nite Owl to question: “Who are we protecting them from?”



## **Figure 12. Watchmen Superheroes engaging the Rioters**

This illuminates the flaw with vigilantes - they presume they have a moral mandate from the people to do as they see fit. Without any adherence to the law of the land, they are accountable to no one, and this absolute power is something that no society will want to grant any individual no matter how good or virtuous they may appear to be.

### **A Case Study: Daredevil**

But let's move away from Watchmen for now and observe another example of how vigilante values are explored in Superhero narratives - specifically that of Daredevil. The character perhaps best represents the struggle between vigilantism and the law of the land. Matt Murdock, as a criminal lawyer by day and a Superhero at night, experiences the benefits and drawbacks of both approaches to justice.

The benefits of vigilantism are that it allows Matt Murdock to go after the criminals that escape conviction through legal loopholes, and allows him to deal with those cases that don't make it to the courtroom. However, in one case, he viciously attacks an abusive father who was beating his daughter. The daughter, further traumatized by the brutality, screams and begs him to stop. Matt realizes then that he was inadvertently hurting the very people he sought to protect (Taslitz, 2004).

The problem was that there was no due process, fair trial, or any of the normal legal proceedings to ascertain what was best for the victim and the criminal - Daredevil just delivered the punishment he thought was appropriate, believing that justice as seen from his lens is sufficient. With courts of law, you eliminate the subjectivity of various random arbiters of justice by having objective analysis on what is the best justice for all parties involved.

### **Conclusion**

Ultimately, through comic book Superhero stories, we can observe the changes in modern society's pursuit of justice. Looking back through the times, we can see that there's been a constant struggle for the definition of what ideal justice truly is. From the vigilante-rich history of American culture to the end of the public enemy era, the various wars, the counter-culture movement, this pursuit is still in flux and as comic book Superheroes continue to thrive, so too will these themes in their narratives. The contest between vigilante values and rule-of-law will continue to exist in society, and will continue to be explored in Superhero and their narratives.

## **3.2 Attitudes Towards Criminals**

### **Initial Attitudes & Practices**

In Section 2 I talked about the characterization and evolution of the Supervillain character in Superhero narratives. In this section I will analyse how the attitudes towards criminals in society can be seen with the changes in the Supervillain character.

As mentioned before, the initial characterization of Supervillains and Superheroes was that they were inherently bad and inherently good respectively. How did this reflect the societal attitudes towards criminals of that time? During the early years of Superheroes, the culture of that time regarding criminal justice was to just lock criminals away for some time and hope they learn their lessons (Walker, 1980). There was little to no rehabilitation and the prison wardens were known to disparage and look down on the inmates. Once you became a convicted criminal, society would mark you as a bad seed; this sentiment was all-too-prevalent throughout America.

### **Changes in Attitudes & Practices**

But these attitudes as well as the character of the Supervillain changed as time went by. As Gwee

stated: “Their (Superheroes and Supervillains) differences have become less essentialist: i.e. they are more a matter of choice or circumstance than of nature.”

I analysed that particular trend earlier in Section 2, but this once again begs the question: how did this trend in comic books come about?

It started once again during the Cold War period, when society started examining the area of circumstance-facilitated crime. In the aftermath of the brutal war crimes that American soldiers committed in Vietnam (Russell, 1967), people started seeing that committing an evil act of injustice can be borne out of circumstances such as the environment and obedience to authority (Kelman, 1989). And in the year 1961, one of the most controversial social experiments – the Milgram experiment - was carried out to examine whether authority could be a motivating factor to facilitate criminal acts such as torture and murder (Milgram, 2001). The results of the experiment showed that many people, under the right circumstances, such as under the order of authority, would commit the heinous acts that society had previously thought only people of unsavoury character would do.

Since then, society has taken a progressive role in reintegrating former criminals back into their communities (Walker, 1980). The perception that all criminals are naturally bad characters no longer holds true. Society recognizes that every individual is capable of good or evil, depending on the circumstances. As the Joker quips in the Killing Joke, “All it takes is one bad day.”<sup>1</sup>

### **3.3 Moral Responsibilities**

#### **Initial Expectations**

In Section 2, we saw that what society had initially expected of Superheroes was for them to be

champions of the oppressed, using their powers or skills to do what the common man could not to dispense justice on the oppressor class.

This early characterization was due to what the changes in society at that time. In the thick of the Great Depression, people had no money and lived in an environment where the common man was being exploited by the corruption and greed of politicians and businessmen, leading to an overwhelming feeling of fear and hopelessness on the ground. Correspondingly, what they expected of the early day Superhero was a defender of the weak, and it was fitting to expect these people to be one-dimensional instruments of justice and exist solely for the sake of distributing justice. That was the moral responsibility of Superheroes then.

#### **Changing Views**

In the 60’s, with the explosion of freedom of expression and the critical questioning of what formerly seemed obvious truths, society extended this sentiment to the area of Superheroes in comic books. Superheroes began to have personal missions, and did not exist solely to address society’s problems. As mentioned in Section 2, the issue of motivation became much more important, and the stories began exploring the non-Superhero persona behind the mask. That was one of the fundamental differences between the early comic book Superheroes and their more modern incarnations. They were ordinary citizens with their own lives in society first and foremost, and heroic protectors of the weak, implementers of justice second. Their moral responsibility was to their own self-actualization first, and then to society second.

This moral issue of identity thus became important. Who were these people, what did they represent? As discussed in Section 2, Superheroes started representing social issues in society, such as the immigrant identity in America and the LGBT movement. The moral responsibility of Superhero

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<sup>1</sup> See Fig 10.

characters thus depended on them being representative of that cause through their similar identities (immigrants, mutants etc.) and championing it for those groups of people through which selves should come first. This was explored along with the question of whether people with the aptitude and ability to protect society should always prioritize being Superheroes over living their own lives.

### A Case Study: Spiderman

their stories.

But there were also further issues that developed with this culture, foremost of which was the ambiguity of who Superheroes should be first - brought up the example Section 2 of Spiderman, who often struggles to balance with his Superhero life with his personal life. This can be seen in an exchange between him and Mary Jane in Issue #428 of The Amazing Spiderman.



Figure 13. The Amazing Spiderman #428

In this, we see the fallout of Spiderman's fight with a

returning Doctor Octopus, with society being less than happy with Spiderman's involvement in the incident, even going so far as to accuse Spiderman of provoking Doctor Octopus. Peter Parker's refusal to go to a Toga party with Mary Jane because he could not envision himself partying and having fun while such a menace was out on the streets shows the moral dilemma Peter Parker faces between his might not be grateful all the time whereas you always felt you had a responsibility to them. Knowing the personal costs Superheroes took on made audiences more sympathetic towards

life as an individual and his role as Spiderman, protector of the weak in society.

Characters like Spiderman started exploring those issues - what it meant to be a Superhero and whether people with the power to do so have to assume the responsibility of protecting society. They showed that having a Superhero life was not easy as the people you were trying to protect

Superheroes, who continue to sacrifice their time and personal lives for the sake of unappreciative societies. This can be seen in The Amazing Spiderman Issue #4.



Figure 14. The Amazing Spiderman #4

As Peter Parker walks through New York city, he

overhears the comments of several citizens:

“Jonah Jameson writes that Spider-Man has no business trying to catch criminals by himself!

“If you ask me, that’s right, who knows when Spider-man may turn against society?”

“What would make a guy wear a goofy costume and run around chasin’ crooks?

“I dunno, he must be a neurotic of some sort! Probably has delusions of grandeur!”

This leads Spiderman to question his role, asking himself whether he really is helping society, whether society really wants him to be Spiderman, and whether it was even moral to do so.

This was a defining aspect of the Spiderman character. He often had a love-hate relationship with society, and Parker's employer, Jonah Jameson, vehemently opposed Spiderman, calling him a public menace and sometimes even going as far as to plot against him (Daniels, 1995). It was not without cause however, as Spiderman’s rogue gallery consisted of many Supervillains who only existed because of him, such as Venom and Carnage. There were many innocent bystanders who were either maimed or killed as a result of their conflict and this made Spiderman question if he should just stop being a Superhero.

Throughout the series, these questions are juxtaposed with Spiderman’s own idea of power and responsibility - that with great power came great responsibility. Throughout the series, even though society repeatedly turns its back on him, Spiderman holds on to the belief that, having been granted this power, he had to use it to help society. He felt that the people in society with the aptitude and power to protect it had a moral responsibility to do so. Peter Parker’s selfish desires should thus come second to Spiderman’s societal duty.

What can be observed from Spiderman is the trend by which Superheroes were now depicted as uncertain moral actors. Was the character’s motivation behind being a Superhero right and moral? It no longer was as clear-cut as it was in the past that the choice to be a Superhero was a heroic and noble choice. Vanity and fame-seeking motivations were as conceivable as purely altruistic ones.

As Spiderman states:

“Can they be right? Am I really some sort of crackpot wasting my time seeking fame and glory? Am I more interested in the adventure of being Spider-man than I am helping people?”

## **Section 4: CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **4.1 Conclusion**

From this study, it can be observed that Superhero narratives in comic books indeed share a symbiotic relationship with society’s interpretation of justice and has consistently been used as a medium to explore society’s questions and doubts about justice.

### **Section 2: Characteristics and its changes**

In Section 2, I analysed the characteristics of Superheroes in comics and how they evolved through the times to reflect changing social dynamics. But that begs the question: why has the Superhero medium in particular been used to express the changing views of society on themes of justice and morality?

Gwee puts it as follows: “The Superhero genre relies primarily on the mode of fantasy. Its initial American popularity as stories for kids tied it to an excessive imagination of power, responsibilities, and

heroism that came with growing into adulthood. But, as the medium matured, this relation between child and adult naturally developed into something deeper, and more fundamental, in social dynamics. It took on the form of the relation between the weak and the powerful.”

In the maturation of the medium, newer and more interesting questions were developed - such as what should be expected of the powerful in society, whether we should allow such power to run uncontrolled, whether we need such power in the first place, whether it is more harmful to allow such power to exist, and whether the Superhero character, as the ultimate avatar of power in society, could be the reason why society chose them to express its changing valuations of justice and morality.

### **Section 3: Themes of justice in society and comic books**

In this Section 1 I analysed three issues: vigilante values versus the law, attitudes toward criminals, and the moral responsibility present in Superhero narratives.

For the first issue, we saw how the inefficiency of the justice system lies in the state’s inability to properly enforce the law because of delays caused by bureaucracy and due process.

But vigilantism also causes problems as the vigilante dispenses justice according to his own subjective idea of what justice should entail, and fails to take into consideration all sides of the story.

The two ideas can never be reconciled, because the benefits that both provide are mutually exclusive (Bloom, 1999). The benefit of vigilantism is that it circumvents the delays in due process and inefficiencies of law enforcement and stops criminals from exploiting these inadequacies. The harm, however, is that there are certain nuances in criminal cases and a more thorough process is required to best resolve the issue for all parties and

in that, the ‘harms’ of the bureaucratic process are actually beneficial to the people involved in the crime. Given these realities, which direction will society’s pursuit of justice likely take?

Some might argue that more localized law enforcement and justice is on the cards, as seen in groups like the citizen-led neighbourhood watch (Helmut & Hawkes, 2007). With the pursuit of justice possibly taking such a direction, how could this be explored in Superhero narratives? Perhaps with society being more empowered and self-reliant, the Superhero may become more and more anachronistic. Future comic books might depict Superheroes struggling to remain relevant. Or perhaps Superheroes will always remain the ultimate avatar of power – maybe society will always feel incapable of achieving justice on their own, and will have to depend on a greater power to fight the battles that they deem themselves unable to. It will be interesting to note how society’s view on Superheroes may change as the ongoing pursuit for the ideal form of justice continues.

On the second issue, of attitudes towards criminals, I found that as society became more accepting of criminals due to the blurring of the line between good and evil, more morally ambiguous characters appeared in the Superhero genre. This trend shows no sign of stopping and I would expect more conflicted and nuanced Supervillains in comic books.

On the third issue, of morality, I discussed how society viewed a character’s choice to be a Superhero in the context of morality. Should it be expected of people with great power to use it for societal good? Or is the existence of such power posing a danger to society? We are seeing more and more people fearful of the existence of power in their society today, even if it is under governmental control. With calls for nuclear disarmament (Lawrence, 2003), it is clear that the world is leaning towards the idea that it is immoral for such

great power to even exist, much less be used. We might see this play out in the Superhero genre, in the form of more 'self-doubting' Superheroes who abstain from using their powers.

#### **4.2 Recommendations**

My first recommendation for further research would be an analysis into the myriad non-comic book mediums that Superhero narratives are now dominating. Movies, cartoons, TV shows and video games are telling more and more original stories about these characters, with many great creative minds in those mediums putting their own spin on Superheroes and their narratives.

My second recommendation would be that of analysing the art direction of comic book Superheroes. The artistic themes in comic books play an important part in depicting the worlds in which the themes of justice and morality are actually explored. For instance, the Batman series utilized film noir elements, with unusual angles, distorted perspectives, and heavy shadows to create a dramatic air of tension and suspense throughout the story right from the onset (Wright, 2001). It lent an air of gravity and grittiness to the world of Batman, which is essential in exploring the themes of vigilantism. This can be analysed in conjunction with the evolution of modern art movements and their respective influences on the artistic style of comic books. The psyche of the artists and writers behind Superhero stories could also provide insight into the different themes and visual aspects across comic books, throughout the ages.

The last recommendation I would make would be that of expanding the scope of research to beyond American comic book Superheroes. Although America can be considered the home of the modern-day comic book Superhero and the birthplace of the Superhero genre, it might be worthwhile to look at the superhero equivalents of other countries, and how the themes of justice and

morality are explored in those mediums. Heroic characters in Japanese anime, from the early Astroboy to the more modern Samurai X, for instance, could be an interesting area of analysis and could yield significant insights about Japan's own pursuit of justice and morality through the years, as well as how it has been expressed through a uniquely Japanese medium.

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# New Urbanism

## An Approach to Solve the Problem of Ghost Towns in China

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*Besides facing increasing international pressure for sustainability, China is gradually heading towards a more sustainable framework of urban development due to the negative externalities produced by its own urbanization strategies. Coined as an urban pathology, ghost towns are one of the manifestations of such externalities that can no longer be ignored. Constructed on an unprecedented scale in terms of spatial size and quantity, these ghost towns remain extremely underutilized and contribute significantly towards China's generation of waste products. Through the case study of Chenggong New Town in Kunming, I will seek to uncover crucial factors underlying the formation of such ghost towns and consequently, elucidate the pitfalls in China's post-socialist urbanization strategies. I will proceed to examine China's recent attempts of adapting New Urbanism, a popular Western urban design approach with a human-centric focus, to prevent the formation of ghost towns. This paper ultimately argues that although New Urbanism manages to introduce some features that promote liveability in urban spaces, its effectiveness in preventing the formation of ghost towns remains limited. For China to effectively address this predicament of ghost towns, New Urbanism must instead be complemented with strategic urban planning policies that take into account the heterogeneity of communities and the feasibility of implementation across various stakeholders.*

## Introduction

In recent years, one of the key questions that has occupied many urban planners, both international and local alike, is how should the formation of ghost towns in China be prevented<sup>1</sup>. Although multiple solutions have been put forth through serious attempts at reforming urban policies, decreasing housing prices and improving infrastructure, questions of socio-spatial urban design have remained relatively unexamined<sup>2</sup>. This is due in part to the lack of attention paid to the community aspect of ghost towns in relation to other factors such as affordability and infrastructure developments, which have largely dominated the discourse of ghost towns.

Using the case study of Chenggong New Town, I seek to highlight that social community is an underrated cause that is intricately connected with formation of ghost towns, and thus deserves more attention. I will proceed to examine the attempts of New Urbanism, a popular urban planning and development approach, in addressing the root cause concerning the formation of ghost towns. With its focus on designing human-scaled urban features that are suitable for an average person, New Urbanism is a model that essentially promotes concepts such as walkability of streets, accessibility of public spaces, as well as sustainability of infrastructures.

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<sup>1</sup>“New Ghost Cities Typify out-of-Control Planning.”

Chinadialogue. Oct 15, 2015. Accessed Oct 22, 2015.

<https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/8239-New-ghost-cities-typify-out-of-control-planning>

<sup>2</sup> Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein. “Creating Common Spaces, Urban Planning, Local Media and Technology.” In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008.

232.

Ultimately, my overall aim of writing this paper is to investigate the potential of New Urbanism in rebuilding social capital and reviving the currently deserted Chenggong New Town. My analysis is by no means discounting the importance of dominant factors as solutions to the problem of ghost towns, but to rethink the importance accorded to tangible physical structures in creating an intangible sense of community.

## Ghost Towns

Any attempt to describe or encapsulate China’s urban transformation seem to inevitably fall short of its actual magnitude. Words like “revolutionary”, “explosion” or “unprecedented” can only hint at what China is currently experiencing following its economic developmental policies<sup>3</sup>. One of the most common barometers used to gauge China’s development is through the use of statistics. For example, the amount of land space devoted to urban development in China has increased from 8,800 km<sup>2</sup> in 1984 to 41,000 km<sup>2</sup> in 2010<sup>4</sup>. Some find a comparative approach better; China has used more concrete for urban development between 2011 and 2013 than what the United States of America has used in the entire 20th century<sup>5</sup>. A third measure of China’s transformation is through looking at the extent of negative externalities. As China’s urban development contains many loopholes in terms of resource

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<sup>3</sup> Wade Shepard. *Ghost Cities of China*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

<sup>4</sup> “Data Mining Reveals the Extent of China’s Ghost Cities.” Accessed November 28, 2015. MIT Technology Review. <http://www.technologyreview.com/view/543121/data-mining-reveals-the-extent-of-chinas-ghost-cities/>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

management and sustainability, it is not difficult to identify massive wastage of resources and manifestations of various urban pathologies<sup>6</sup>.

The formation of ghost towns is one such pathology that has come to be a visual manifestation of the nation's unregulated urban planning alongside its frantic economic developments.<sup>7</sup> Typically ranging from 50 to 350 km<sup>2</sup>, most ghost towns occupy areas that are larger than cities such as Manhattan, Paris or Las Vegas<sup>8</sup>. There is also currently a surplus of 2 billion housing units in China, which suggests that there are huge amounts of new urban compounds that remain unused<sup>9</sup>. Situated in Kunming, Yunnan, Chenggong New Town is a typical example of such new towns in China that have been categorized as a ghost town. Planned for 1.5 million inhabitants, it similarly contains many unused spaces, such as 100,000 uninhabited new apartments, a huge empty stadium, and

abandoned shopping malls<sup>10</sup>.

Despite countless discourses surrounding ghost towns, the definition of such towns remains elusive. A group of researchers from the Big Data Lab at Baidu has recently attempted to provide a qualitative definition to ghost towns through location data tracking services through machine-learning algorithms and predictive analytical applications<sup>11</sup>. By collecting the locations of hundreds of millions of Baidu users across different towns throughout the nation, the researchers are gradually starting to comprehend the scale of such ghost towns<sup>12</sup>. Some universal characteristics of ghost towns include scores of inhabited apartments, deserted mega malls and regions with incomplete infrastructure developments, such as those found in Dongguan district in Guangdong and the Kangbashi district of Inner Mongolia<sup>13</sup>. Despite these similarities, China's ghost towns differ in how they come into being. While ghost towns have been traditionally and generally understood as places that have died by becoming economically defunct and unsuitable for living, ghost towns in China take on a

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<sup>6</sup> Journeyman Pictures. "China's Empty Cities House 64 Million Empty Apartments." Online video clip. YouTube. Apr 18, 2011. Accessed Oct 22, 2015.

<sup>7</sup> Christian Sorace, and William Hurst. "China's Phantom Urbanization and The Pathology of Ghost Cities." 2015. Accessed Oct 22, 2015. [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2557626](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2557626)

<sup>8</sup> Wade Shepard. "During Its Long Boom, Chinese Cities Demolished an Area the Size of Mauritius Every Year." CityMetric. Sept 22, 2015. Accessed Oct 22, 2015. <http://www.citymetric.com/skylines/during-its-long-boom-chinese-cities-demolished-area-size-mauritius-every-year-1414>

<sup>9</sup> "New Ghost Cities Typify out-of-Control Planning." Chinadialogue. Oct 15, 2015. Accessed Oct 22, 2015. <https://www.chinadialogue.net/article/show/single/en/8239-New-ghost-cities-typify-out-of-control-planning>

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<sup>10</sup> Peter Calthorpe. "The Real Problem with China's Ghost Towns." Last modified Sep 1, 2013. Accessed 15 Oct 2015. <http://www.metropolismag.com/Point-of-View/August-2013/The-Real-Problem-with-Chinas-Ghost-Towns/Congress-of-the-New-Urbanism>.

<sup>11</sup> Data Mining Reveals the Extent of China's Ghost Cities." Accessed November 28, 2015. MIT Technology Review. <http://www.technologyreview.com/view/543121/data-mining-reveals-the-extent-of-chinas-ghost-cities/>

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Courtney Subramanian. March 4, 2013. 'How the World's Biggest Mall Became a Chinese "Ghost Town"'. Time. Accessed May 27, 2016. <http://newsfeed.time.com/2013/03/04/how-the-worlds-biggest-mall-became-a-chinese-ghost-town/>.

somewhat opposite meaning as *unborn cities*<sup>14</sup>. This means that ghost towns in China, instead of being deserted places that were once alive with activities, ghost towns in China are places that have yet to come alive and most of them are still in the process of being built<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, both the conventional and China's concepts of ghost towns similarly point to places that are lacking in population and economic vitality.

Although factors such as prices, regulations surrounding hukou - the national Chinese household registration policy - and the availability of infrastructures have been attributed as causes of the formation of ghost towns, I argue that they are merely superficial factors of a deep-rooted problem. To determine the truthfulness of this argument, it is useful to examine the significance of such factors in reviving the ghost town of Chenggong. First, although it has scores of high rise buildings, mega malls, highways and other infrastructures, there is still a lack of incentive for people to move in. Secondly, despite costing approximately SGD 3233-7500/m<sup>2</sup>, a rate that is far more attractive than that of Kunming city ( $\geq$  SGD 6000/m<sup>2</sup>), many of the apartments in Chenggong New Town remain unsellable and hence unoccupied<sup>16</sup>. The recent move in relaxing urban hukou regulations also do not seem to be a major pull factor for

people to move in to Chenggong New Town<sup>17</sup>. At the very least, these three examples show that housing affordability, hukou policies and the availability of infrastructures are not necessarily the determinant factors in solving the problem of ghost town in Chenggong New Town. Hence, the question that must be asked is: Given the affordability, hukou reforms and infrastructures in such towns, why is Chenggong New Town still unattractive to people?

I argue that there are two main reasons. First, people are unwilling to leave their living communities. Secondly, even if there are, they are unable to see the prospects of establishing similar living communities in the ghost towns. The first cause suggests that people perceive ghost towns as less attractive than their current residential compounds. Lin- a 21-year-old businessman, who once owned a travel inn in Chenggong New Town, expresses his personal reluctance for moving in to the town<sup>18</sup>. He asserts that he will not find it enjoyable to live there, as he will not experience the sense of belonging that he has in his hometown. His opinions are shared by many other businessmen who are put off by the notion of living in such isolated towns<sup>19</sup>. When asked if he were to consider living there for free, he reveals his immediate reservations by defending the intangible and priceless merits of his current living spaces. Satisfied with his established social

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<sup>14</sup> Wade Shepard. *Ghost Cities of China*. London: Zed Books, 2015. 39.

<sup>15</sup> Geoff Manaugh. "How Technology Reveals the Ghost Cities in China and the West | New Scientist." *New Scientist*. Nov 26, 2015. Accessed Nov 28, 2015. <https://www.newscientist.com/article/2066897-how-technology-reveals-the-ghost-cities-in-china-and-the-west/>

<sup>16</sup> Huang. "Re: Changing Landscapes of Kunming." Message. 2015. E-mail.

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<sup>17</sup> Peter Calthorpe. "The Real Problem with China's Ghost Towns." Last modified Sep 1, 2013. Accessed 15 Oct 2015. <http://www.metropolismag.com/Point-of-View/August-2013/The-Real-Problem-with-Chinas-Ghost-Towns/Congress-of-the-New-Urbanism>.

<sup>18</sup> Lin. Personal interview. 16 October 2015.

<sup>19</sup> Wade Shepard. *Ghost Cities of China*. London: Zed Books, 2015.

networks of friends and family, he does not see a reason to move into a new compound when he is happily living in his current one. His account highlights the importance of a shared identity within a certain socio-spatial landscape, in which its members have a mutual sense of familiarity and ownership of each other and the place. It is thus not surprising to observe that people are less inclined to move to new towns. Not only will they lose their social networks, they will also feel a sense of cultural alienation due to the newer developments in ghost towns. This is because such newer developments lack the familiar traditional architectural elements that have been associated with the individuals' notion of identity<sup>20</sup>.

Secondly, they do not see a vibrant future for community building in these ghost towns. In my interview with Lin, he mentioned that people living in Chenggong New Town are currently only university students, government officials and workers who are building the infrastructures of the town. His account is unsurprising as it echoes prevalent observations from other sources regarding Chenggong New Town and other ghost towns in general<sup>21</sup>. The implicit suggestion underlying his statement is that although the town has basic functions such as education, administrative purposes and transportation facilities, there is no real coherent sense of social belonging. Members of this town are not perceived to be residents, friends or family members but merely as functional entities with detached

interpersonal interactions. This account shows that a community goes beyond the simple combination of people and space; other elements are needed for concocting a healthy social-spatial tapestry. Cohabitants of a particular space must be able to contribute to something larger than the sum of their respective private worlds<sup>22</sup>. In other words, they have to be integrated through various forms of interaction to create an authentic culture and community of diversity.

Based on these two reasons, what is striking here is that the formation of ghost towns is not primarily caused by issues such as housing affordability or the lack of infrastructures. On the contrary, this problem is fundamentally engendered by a lack of social capital; I draw upon Leyden and Michelbach's notion of "social capital", defined as the "social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them"<sup>23</sup>. Thus, to transform and transfer the potential energy of these empty spaces to pragmatic use, threads of social capital have to be interlaced into the spaces such that a rich and diverse communal tapestry can be created.

### **New Urbanism: A Human-scaled Urban Design**

In the year 2010, Chenggong New Town

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<sup>20</sup> Robin Visser. *Cities Surround the Countryside: Urban Aesthetics in Postsocialist China*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010.

<sup>21</sup> Robin Banerji, and Patrick Jackson BBC News. 2016. 'Five Ghost Projects of China'. BBC News. Accessed May 27, 2016. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-19049254>.

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<sup>22</sup> Douglas Kelbaugh. "Three Urbanisms, New, Everyday, and Post." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 42.

<sup>23</sup> Kevin Leyden, and Philip Michelbach. "Democracy and Neighborly Communities: Some Theoretical Considerations on the Built Environment." In *New Urbanism and Beyond New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 238.

welcomed the framework of New Urbanism through a collaboration between by Energy Foundation China, a grant-making charity organization registered under the Ministry of Civil Affairs, Calthorpe Associates and Gehl Architects in the hope that such a framework will revive its dead town<sup>24</sup>. Having originated in America, New Urbanism is an organised movement within the Congress for the New Urbanism to promote and defend its tenets<sup>25</sup>. Some of its tenets are to create a diverse community by including people of all races, age and ethnicity from a myriad of socio-economic backgrounds; to create a public space in which the citizens have a sense of belonging and pride; and to weave an intricate urban network that is based on mixed-use communities<sup>26</sup>. Such tenets are essentially an amalgamation of ideas that champion a human-centric approach, and the power of physical designs in effecting positive changes to the built environment and the social community<sup>27</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> China Sustainable Cities Program of the Energy Foundation, China Sustainable Transportation Center, Calthorpe Associates, and Gehl Architects. "Building China's Sustainable Cities Future." 2015. Accessed November 28, 2015.

[http://www.efchina.org/Attachments/Publication/CSCPint\\_r02013zh/构建中国可持续城市发展的未来\(英文\).pdf](http://www.efchina.org/Attachments/Publication/CSCPint_r02013zh/构建中国可持续城市发展的未来(英文).pdf)

<sup>25</sup> Douglas Kelbaugh. "Three Urbanisms, New, Everyday, and Post." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 42.

<sup>26</sup> "Charter of the New Urbanism." *Bulletin of Science, Technology & Society*, Vol. 20, No.4 (2000): 339-341. Sage Publications, Inc. Accessed May 23, 2016. doi:10.1177/027046760002000417

<sup>27</sup> Tigran Haas. *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, Inc., 2008.2

Based on New Urbanism, Chenggong New Town has thus been designed with principles, such as a hierarchy of mixed-use centres, human-scaled blocks designed with features suitable for the average person, transit-oriented developments and common spaces (Appendix A). On this note, to determine the success of New Urbanism in achieving its aim, it is essential to assess the effectiveness of such principles in increasing the social capital of Chenggong New Town.

The transit-oriented development system fundamentally acts as a safety net that ensures the maintenance and promotion of social ties by establishing physical modes of interactions. As a whole, Chenggong New Town is designed on the basis of this system that entails the construction of compact residential and commercial hubs based on transport opportunities<sup>28</sup>. Such hubs are strategically located according to the ease of access by both automobiles and public transit for efficient mobility. This system is complemented with a robust public transit network, which consists of a Bus Rapid Transit, an underground Metro as well as a High Speed Rail hub<sup>29</sup>. As these public transportations have an estimated daily capacity of 200,000 passengers, dependence on automobiles

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<sup>28</sup> China Sustainable Cities Program of the Energy Foundation, China Sustainable Transportation Center, Calthorpe Associates, and Gehl Architects. "Building China's Sustainable Cities Future." 2015. Accessed November 28, 2015.

[http://www.efchina.org/Attachments/Publication/CSCPint\\_r02013zh/构建中国可持续城市发展的未来\(英文\).pdf](http://www.efchina.org/Attachments/Publication/CSCPint_r02013zh/构建中国可持续城市发展的未来(英文).pdf)

<sup>29</sup> Peter Calthorpe. "The Real Problem with China's Ghost Towns." Last modified Sep 1, 2013. Accessed 15 Oct 2015. <http://www.metropolismag.com/Point-of-View/August-2013/The-Real-Problem-with-Chinas-Ghost-Towns/Congress-of-the-New-Urbanism>.

is significantly reduced<sup>30</sup>. Besides promoting a low-carbon the environment, they also improve access and mobility throughout the entire region of Chenggong and Kunming. According to Huang<sup>31</sup>, the commuting time from the first station of Chenggong to Kunming takes only about an hour via the railway system. Due to this convenience, he appreciates the usefulness of such a public transit in facilitating physical mobility, both within and outside of Chenggong New Town. Besides highlighting the importance of transportation in decreasing the spatial distances of individuals, this example also illustrates how integral a robust transit network is in contributing to the building of a social community. By increasing the convenience of commuting, face-to-face interactions are enhanced, be it between the inhabitants within Chenggong or between them and individuals outside of Chenggong. Such personal interactions contribute to building a community as the socio-spatial distance between the inhabitants of Chenggong and their family and friends is greatly reduced. Therefore, the possibility of losing contact with networks outside of Chenggong is also reduced. In other words, people will be more incentivized to move into Chenggong New Town, knowing that they can conveniently return to their original community anytime.

Besides that, features such as human-scaled blocks, a hierarchy of mixed-use

centres and open spaces promote the inhabitants' sense of belonging. Instead of giant road networks and the standard Superblock System, human-scaled streets and blocks have been implemented to create a more intimate and approachable living condition (Appendix B). As the larger scale infrastructures diminish the role of the human being in the urban environment, the human-centric urban design that is integral in promoting a more inclusive sense of belonging that motivates the human to be a co- curator of the environment that he is in. As a result, inhabitants of Chenggong New Town will feel more empowered to create meaning out of the space that they occupy, thereby strengthening their sense of ownership for the living environment. The replacement of highways and superblocks with narrower streets and smaller blocks does not only increases the efficiency of land management, it also puts the traditional essence of Chinese cities and villagers back into the living environment<sup>32</sup>. Such human-scaled streets and spaces are important in serving as visual markers of the common past and establishing a feeling of shared history amongst its inhabitants, which undoubtedly creates their sense of belonging to this new town. However, critics have argued that such a reconstruction heavily emphasizes urban aesthetic and staging, which are more performative in nature rather than serving

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<sup>30</sup> Climate Works Foundation, The China Sustainable Energy Program, and Calthorpe Associates. "China Design Manual Pamphlet." 2015. Accessed November 28, 2015. <http://www.calthorpe.com/publications/china-designmanual>.

<sup>31</sup> Huang. "Re: Changing Landscapes of Kunming." Message. 2015. E-mail.

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<sup>32</sup> China Sustainable Cities Program of the Energy Foundation, China Sustainable Transportation Center, Calthorpe Associates, and Gehl Architects. "Building China's Sustainable Cities Future." 2015. Accessed November 28, 2015. [http://www.efchina.org/Attachments/Publication/CSCPintor2013zh/构建中国可持续城市发展的未来\(英文\).pdf](http://www.efchina.org/Attachments/Publication/CSCPintor2013zh/构建中国可持续城市发展的未来(英文).pdf)

any real function<sup>33</sup>. Nevertheless, research has shown that given time, aesthetic appreciation towards the living environment will eventually contribute to fostering one's sense of belonging towards it<sup>34</sup>.

This sense of belonging is further perpetuated and amplified through a comprehensive open space system that connects common spaces like prominent green belts, parks and playground, with residential and commercial areas<sup>35</sup>. Such common spaces are integral in fostering commonplace encounters and conversations, forming intersecting networks and overlapping social circles that reinforce a sense of reciprocal obligation and broaden the boundaries of empathy<sup>36</sup>. As privatization of life and the desiccation of public sphere have produced alienation within communities, there is a pressing

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<sup>33</sup> Christian Sorace, and William Hurst. "China's Phantom Urbanization and The Pathology of Ghost Cities." 2015. Accessed Oct 22, 2015.

[http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=2557626](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2557626)

<sup>34</sup> Christopher Alexander., Schmidt, R., Alexander MM., Hanson, B and Michael Mehaffy. "Generative Codes, The Path to Building Welcoming, Beautiful, Sustainable Neighborhoods." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Climate Works Foundation, The China Sustainable Energy Program, and Calthorpe Associates. "China Design Manual Pamphlet." 2015. Accessed November 28, 2015. <http://www.calthorpe.com/publications/china-designmanual>.

<sup>36</sup> Robert Putnam, and Lewis Feldstein. "Creating Common Spaces, Urban Planning, Local Media and Technology." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 232.

need for such places in actualizing a sense of community, in which people meet to relax, converse and enjoy one other's company<sup>37</sup>. Such spaces that provide opportunities for social interaction and discourse without formal pressure, are thus essential for the health of a community. As Jane Jacobs notes, spaces like these that promote spontaneous contacts between neighbours lead to social trust<sup>38</sup>. This feeling of trust is hence catalysed through these common spaces, as they provide opportunities for the entire community to share the responsibility of ensuring collective security<sup>39</sup>. The hierarchy of mixed-use urban, town and village centres also reinforces such a sense of camaraderie, as different aspects of the community are spatially integrated into a coherent whole. The physical decrease in the displacement between residential and commercial centres translates to an increase in social interaction between people of different lifestyles.

However, while mixing creates venues for social interaction that promotes mutual understanding and appreciation for each other's diversity<sup>40</sup>, it assumes that the shaping of spatial

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<sup>37</sup> Douglas Kelbaugh. "Three Urbanisms, New, Everyday, and Post." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 42.

<sup>38</sup> Kevin Leyden, and Philip Michelbach. "Democracy and Neighborly Communities: Some Theoretical Considerations on the Built Environment." In *New Urbanism and Beyond New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 238.

<sup>39</sup> Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. "The Traditional Neighborhood and Urban Sprawl." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 64.

<sup>40</sup> Jill Grant. *Planning the Good Community: New*

order will take care of the different social inequalities that pressure the livelihoods of each inhabitant<sup>41</sup>. On this note, it is crucial to bear in mind that there are process and inherent difficulties involved in applying the general concepts of New Urbanism in successfully planning for community. Thus, there is a crucial necessity of systematic and meticulous planning when adopting features of New Urbanism into designing a neighbourhood as each community has its own distinct elements of social diversity and unique set of demographics<sup>42</sup>. For example, while New Urbanist neighbourhoods aim for social diversity, most of them fail to stay diverse due to gentrification pressures. As a matter of fact, despite bringing about many pragmatic outcomes in countering suburban sprawl in America over the past sixty years, the charter of New Urbanism has been challenged to have almost utopian aspirations<sup>43</sup>. The universality of New Urbanism, specifically the claim that this movement is good for all, has similarly been charged to be overly idealistic.

## Conclusion

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[https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/S\\_Sultana\\_Planning\\_2009.pdf](https://libres.uncg.edu/ir/uncg/f/S_Sultana_Planning_2009.pdf)

<sup>41</sup> Tigran Haas. *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, Inc., 2008. 2.

<sup>42</sup> Kristen Day. "New Urbanism and the Challenges of Designing for Diversity." *Journal of Planning Education and Research* 23.1 (2003): 83-95.

<sup>43</sup> Douglas Kelbaugh. "Three Urbanisms, New, Everyday, and Post." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 42.

Therefore, while New Urbanism might solve the dysfunctional automobile-oriented and super-grid developmental patterns, it still has a long way to go in realising its ideal of building a human-oriented, liveable and sustainable community. New Urbanism can support these noble goals and work towards providing a good quality of life for all-but it alone is not and cannot be concerned with devising the means to do so. As a resolution, what is paramount is the cultural, political and structural conduits set in place by local governments, which serve to facilitate and catalyst the implementation of New Urbanism<sup>44</sup>. In essence, a healthy community within the framework of New Urbanism requires a localised, proactive and pragmatic response, which can only be achieved through merging good design with good policy<sup>45</sup>.

In this regard, Shepard's belief that Chenggong New Town will revive from its current state as a ghost town into a vibrant liveable and multi-functional hub, remains questionable<sup>46</sup>. Although New Urbanism has served as an arena that fosters a plethora of contemporary and future ideas to discourage the formation of ghost towns

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<sup>44</sup> Peter Katz. Blog. "New Urbanism at 20: A Critical Assessment." *Better Cities & Towns*. May 23, 2013. Accessed Oct 22, 2015.

<http://bettercities.net/news-opinion/blogs/peter-katz/2012/new-urbanism-20-critical-assessment>

<sup>45</sup> Emily Talen. "The Unbearable Lightness of New Urbanism." In *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, 2008. 77.

<sup>46</sup> Wade Shepard. "Ghost Cities of China: A discussion with Wade Shepard." Interview by Chengdu Living. *Chengdu Living*. Chengdu Living, 2015. Accessed Oct 22, 2015. <http://www.chengduliving.com/ghost-cities-with-wade-shepard/>

in the future, what is certain for now is that New Urbanism is neither an immediate solution nor panacea<sup>47</sup>. As Lin<sup>48</sup> rightly puts it, notwithstanding the aspirations of New Urbanism in moulding Chenggong into a promising future hub of social, economic and political life in Kunming, only time can determine its results. At the very least, New Urbanism can be said to have spearheaded a methodological way that takes into account socio-spatial elements in tackling this predicament of ghost towns.

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<sup>47</sup> Tigran Haas. *New Urbanism and Beyond, Designing Cities for the Future*. New York and London: Rizzoli Publishers, Inc., 2008. 2.

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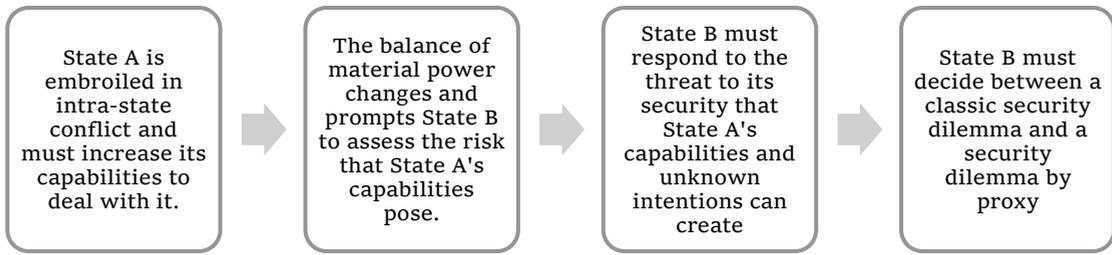
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# The Security Dilemma by Proxy

## Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC

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*There exists, beyond what international relations scholarship has defined as the security dilemma, a more complex interrelation of security competition: the security dilemma by proxy (SDBP). The SDBP logic poses that, to undermine a security threat against it, a state can fund or support another state's pre-existing domestic conflict rather than directly engage in security competition. Intra-state conflict creates the conditions for a security dilemma between states but also provides a proxy through which the threatened state can limit the threatening state's power without putting itself directly at risk—the proxy being the domestic security threat itself. Beyond the theoretical approach, this paper examines the complex relationship between Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC (Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia, a left-wing guerrilla group), and argues that a security dilemma by proxy has been generated between the three actors.*



## I. Introduction

There exists, beyond what international relations scholarship has defined as the security dilemma, a more complex interrelation of security competition: the security dilemma by proxy (SDBP). The SDBP logic poses that, to undermine a security threat against it, a state can fund or support another state's pre-existing domestic conflict rather than directly engage in security competition. Specifically, I argue that intra-state conflict (1) creates the conditions for a security dilemma between states but also (2) provides a proxy through which the threatened state can limit the threatening state's power without putting itself directly at risk—the proxy being the domestic security threat itself. First, I briefly outline how intra-state conflict in State A can significantly alter neighbouring State B's assessment of State A's capabilities and intentions, inadvertently generating the conditions for a security dilemma. Second, I explore how the existence of intra-state conflict and a subversive third party can influence and incentivize a threatened state to veer away from classic security dilemma dynamics. Third, I present the argument that there is a security dilemma by proxy between Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC (The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Incidentally, it is worth noting at this juncture that this approach inevitably steps away from third image, structural analysis typical of security dilemma scholarship, and looks at how security dilemmas can be generated, affected or developed by domestic circumstances within

countries.

*Fig. 1. Intra-state conflict and the creation of security dilemma conditions*

## II. The Security Dilemma Through Intra-State Conflict: Logic

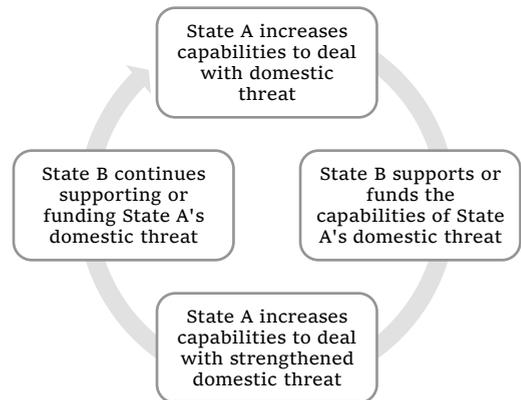
First, consider a state that is suffering from ethnic rebellions, guerrilla warfare, narcoterrorism (or any other form of critical insecurity conditions within its territory), but is located in an otherwise peaceful region. To fight this domestic insurgency, said state must develop its military capabilities to provide its armed forces with an offensive advantage over its adversary (e.g., tanks, machine guns, bombs, etc.). Though the state is developing these capabilities for the protection of its citizens from domestic problems, the material reality of these capabilities is their use for offensive purposes, whoever the adversary may be. The issue, therefore, is that by acquiring these materially offensive capabilities, the state in question can no longer signal, or communicate appropriately, a legitimately defensive intent. Because of the nature of intra-state conflict, the country must go on the offensive within its borders to maintain control of its territory and protect order, a stance that is also simultaneously defensive. The state suffering from insurgency is defending itself against domestic aggression through the growth of its offensive power. This creates a dichotomy between the message that its capabilities send to other states and the intentions it may harbour when facing the international community.

Though the conflictual state may harbour no bellicose objectives against neighbouring countries, a large standing army and the acquisition of tanks and military jets do not necessarily scream “defence” when considered in the context of an international balance of power.

What this generates, then, is a shift in the risk and security assessments done by neighbouring states, and the emergence of potential security dilemma conditions. If we assume that inherent distrust of future intentions is fundamentally built into an anarchic world, balance of power logic would tell us that State A’s territorial neighbours would feel threatened by the increase in offensive capabilities that it acquires. Put very simply, if State A begins developing its offensive military capabilities for domestic protection, States B, C, D or E are forced to assess State A as a potentially dangerous power and a destabilizer in the region. Any increase in State A’s military capabilities signifies a shift in the balance of power, regardless of who those weapons might have originally been purchased for. Communicating peaceful intentions when the material difference is too blatant becomes particularly complicated. Ultimately, though State A amasses offensive capabilities for the defence of its sovereignty within its borders, the neighbouring states can never know whether these “defence” weapons will be transformed into offensive weapons in a future where the domestic threat does not exist. The matter, therefore, becomes one of assessing risk through an appraisal of capabilities and intentions, and neither metric generates a positive outcome in a self-help system. Consider State B, for instance, and presume it has a relatively peaceful domestic sphere without any extreme offense advantage. How does State A pose a significant security threat? Its capabilities are significantly offensive in material terms, and though intentions in the present may be

defensive, an anarchic system precludes any guarantee that such will be the case forever. Thus, what we encounter here are the conditions for a potential security dilemma.

Fig. 2. Diagram of Security Dilemma by Proxy



On this note, it is worth revising some of the theoretical frameworks that construct security dilemma scholarship. Robert Jervis defines the security dilemma as the vicious cycle of security competition born from the nature of an anarchic international system. Jervis argues that the dilemma arises when “the means by which a state tries to increase its security (i.e., capabilities to defend its territorial integrity, the autonomy of its domestic political order and the dignity of its citizens from military threat) decrease the security of others.”<sup>1</sup> In *The Security Dilemma and Ethnic Conflict*, Barry Posen pinpoints the origin of the dilemma and places it in conversation with situations of national struggle: “what seems sufficient to one state’s defence will seem, and often be, offensive to its neighbours. Because neighbours wish to remain autonomous and secure, they will react by trying to strengthen their own positions. States can trigger these reactions even if they have no expansionist inclinations, [and the effect can go on until one state

<sup>1</sup> Jervis, 1978

gives]. This is the security dilemma: what one does to enhance one's security causes reactions that, in the end, can make one less secure."<sup>2</sup> Put in the specific terms of this paper: the fact that State A increases its military power to improve its national security, decreases the relative power of State B. Therefore, its security is also reduced, which can lead the threatened state to react in ways unfavourable to State A.

Accordingly, both Jervis and Posen make the argument that particular circumstances intensify a security dilemma, identifying specifically what they call offense-defence indistinguishability. Posen argues that "when offensive and defensive military forces are more or less identical, states cannot signal their defensive intent—that is, their limited objectives—by the kinds of military forces they choose to deploy."<sup>3</sup> When thinking in terms of inter-state relations for this particular case, intra-state conflict creates that same effect of blurring the boundary between perceptions of offensive and defensive forces, complicating signalling of limited objectives. The capabilities of State A could be considered to be materially offensive, but defensive in the context of defending the mandate of the state from a non-state actor. Thus, the same weapons that are used today for offense and defence in a domestic context could be used tomorrow for offense in an inter-state context. Indeed, as was mentioned above, it is very difficult for State B to perceive State A's "defensive intent" when jets and tanks are being stocked in hangars just across the border. Intra-state conflict makes the already-nearly-impossible task of successfully communicating defensive intentions, in the present and future, exponentially more difficult by creating

a structural image of offensive intentions.

### III. The Adversary as Proxy

All in all, the domestic nature of intra-state conflict, and the material capabilities required to deal with it, complicate the communication of non-threatening intentions by creating that operational capacity for offensive power. Under many other circumstances, this could lead into a classical security dilemma where State B resorts to developing its capabilities, thereby compelling State A to increase its military capabilities again to fight not only its domestic problems but the possible conflict with a distrusting neighbour, too. Thus, the typical spiral toward escalated conflict or war would ensue. However, the nature of intra-state conflict provides the threatened state with another, slightly less risky option within the scheme of inevitable competition.

Rather than fully engaging in security competition, State B can avoid the complications of blatant power maximization by choosing instead to support, clandestinely, State A's first adversary. Or, using the term I have coined, to engage in the security dilemma by proxy. This can be done in a variety of ways: State B could provide funding or weapons to the original aggressor, it could harbour and train some of the militants, or it could facilitate operations by letting the non-state actor pass through its territory or use it as an avenue for trade. The possibilities are extensive, but they are not without danger. Depending on the type of non-state actor that State A's initial adversary is, State B runs the risk of welcoming and supporting a threat that could take hold within its land. In this way, State B would open itself up to an even more unfavourable situation than the original threat posed by State A as an actor. Strategies for supporting the development of the proxy must, therefore, be carefully calculated

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<sup>2</sup> Posen, 1993

<sup>3</sup> Posen, 1993

to prevent the spillover of transnational criminal networks or revolutionary ideological insurrections, for example.

On a positive note, the more hands-off approach to the security competition of using the adversary to undermine State A's balance of power can protect State B in two different ways: (1) by maintaining the status quo of its other regional relationships, and (2) by allowing it to manipulate the balance of power between itself and the threatening state without having to confront the international community.

First, if State B were to develop its capabilities and pursue the regular security dilemma, States C, D, E and/or F might begin to feel threatened too. Feelings of insecurity, perpetuated by the impossibility of defining intentions, can thus begin to spread in the region and destabilize conditions towards undesirable multilateral war. Regional alliances or not, any shift in the balance of power within an anarchic system will inevitably change each state's assessment of risk and their response—though each state may perceive its development as defensive, observing countries will always see those changes as threats. In seeking to increase power relative to each other, states could spiral into a dangerous arms race or war. As such, to prevent a domino effect/worst-case scenario, State B would need to act in a way that both stabilizes its security and maintains the regional or international status quo: keeping State A in check by perpetuating the problem that keeps it embroiled in its domestic affairs in the first place. However, this is still, of course, a security dilemma: State A would have to continue growing its capabilities to fight the strengthened adversary, tipping further the material balance of power and increasing its chances of winning a future international conflict against State B or any other neighbouring country. Altogether,

the security dilemma by proxy, clandestinely executed, allows the threatened state to deal with one threat without creating new ones, i.e., keeping the original intra-state conflict contained and preventing the escalation of an intra-state conflict into an interstate conflict. State B's sponsoring of the proxy, however, is not a solution but a deviation within the self-help system.

Moreover, using the third party adversary as a proxy allows the threatened state to take action without losing face in the international community. At this juncture, it is worth noting that security dilemmas by proxy should always be done covertly, avoiding the involvement of other parties and maintaining the visible structure of regional stability. This is critical. The SDBP only works to maintain regional balance if no one can authoritatively determine whether State B is interfering with State A's sovereignty or not. If this fails and doubts spread, regional balance will fall to shambles as State B begins to be perceived as a supporter of insurgency with bellicose intentions. Because the security dilemma (as generated by intra-state conflict) deals with a particularly contradictory interplay of intentions and capabilities, trust and validation from the international community are critical for effectively communicating peaceful inter-state intentions. In other words, the security dilemma by proxy will keep State B safe from other security dilemmas, and from actual offensive aggression from State A, as long as other states and organizations are unaware that the SDBP is happening. If or when the use of the scapegoat becomes public knowledge, all bets are off—the threatened state will be perceived as a threatening state, too, and all other countries will ramp up their security measures.

#### **IV. Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC: State A,**

## State B, and the Proxy

Lastly, it is worth investigating how the logic outlined in the two preceding sections comes to fruition in reality. In this section, I will examine the complex relationship between Colombia, Venezuela, and FARC, arguing that a security dilemma by proxy has been generated between the three actors. For a start, Colombia has been entangled in a deadly armed conflict since the 1960s. The factions have been multiple and have included different permutations of alliances between Marxist-Leninist terrorist guerrillas (including FARC, the proxy in question for this paper), autodefensas, paramilitary groups, drug trafficking cartels and the formal military. It is no surprise, therefore, that Colombia has been consistently increasing its defence budget over the years and comes in second after Brazil for the largest defence budget in South America—2013 figures showcase a solid 11.9% of total government spending going into military expenses.<sup>4</sup> Venezuela, on the other hand, has been relatively peaceful in comparison, even if politically unstable and dubiously democratic in absolute terms. Its defence budget comes in fifth in South America and has not shown a particularly significant increase over the years. The political ideology that has governed Venezuela for the past 16 years, however, is worth mentioning: 21st-century socialism, established in the 1990s with the aim of consolidating a Bolivarian republic that is anti-imperialist, anti-bourgeois and anti-neoliberal. As a result, the Venezuelan government has created a highly polarized and divided nation, with millions believing the socialist creed and millions deriding it and fleeing from the country. Moreover, it is useful to know that the historical relationship between Colombia and Venezuela has been rocky, to say the

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<sup>4</sup> Elizabeth Gonzalez, 2014

least—constantly oscillating between cooperation and bilateral conflict.

Accordingly, the 21st century has witnessed the increase of substantial connections between FARC, Colombia's oldest guerrilla of self-proclaimed communist origin, and Venezuela's populist government. More specifically, the connections came about ever since Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's former leftist president, came into power in 1999 and FARC lost, in 2002, the haven the Colombian government had granted them for a potential peace dialogue.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, FARC-Venezuela relations became noteworthy between 2002 and 2010 under former Colombian president, Alvaro Uribe's "democratic security" policy of strong military persecution of terrorist organizations like FARC and ELN.<sup>6</sup> During this decade, Venezuela became a haven for FARC, with three of its seven blocks having a significant presence within the borders of the neighbouring country. Moreover, there were numerous accusations during this decade against high-level officers of the Venezuelan government for facilitating the trafficking of cocaine for FARC, and for exchanging large shipments of the narcotic for weapons. What is more, after a raid that resulted in the death of a chief commander, Raul Reyes, evidence surfaced that Chavez had directly promised loans to FARC for the acquisition of even more weapons.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, it is worth noting that this issue of FARC settlements and freeloading in Venezuela led to diplomatic crises in 2008 and 2010, the latter occurring after the Colombian government presented evidence of FARC and ELN presence in Venezuela to the Organization of American States.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Insight Crime – Centro de Investigación de Crimen Organizado, 2016

<sup>6</sup> Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2003

<sup>7</sup> Ministerio de Defensa Nacional, 2003

<sup>8</sup> Primera & Alandete, 2010

Perhaps unsurprisingly, it was during this same decade that Colombia's armed forces (including military and police forces) grew from 300,000 to 446,000 troops, and acquired, among others: 24 fighter aircrafts (SU-30); 53 transport and attack helicopters, an anti-aircraft system of

during this period of tightening FARC-Venezuela relationships that Colombia's military active and reserve troops grew to be three times the size of its neighbour. The disparity, to this day, is massive (See Figure 3 for details).

Fig. 3. Accounts of Armed Forces Strengths for Colombia,

## La situación en la zona

### • Ejército de Colombia

Fuerzas en activo	208.600	Reserva	61.900
• Tierra	178.000	• Tierra	55.900
• Mar	22.000	• Mar	4.800
• Aire	8.600	• Aire	1.200
• Aviones	120	• Buques	115
• Helicópteros	282	• Submarinos	4

### • Ejército de Ecuador

Fuerzas en activo	56.500	Reserva	118.000
• Tierra	47.000	Los reservistas tienen entre 18 y 55 años.	
• Mar	5.500		
• Aire	4.000		
• Aviones	141	• Buques	39
• Helicópteros	45	• Submarinos	2

### • Ejército de Venezuela

Fuerzas en activo	82.300	Reserva	8.000
• Tierra	34.000	• Aviones	158
• Mar	18.300	• Helicópteros	66
• Aire	7.000	• Buques	87
• Guardia Nacional	23.000	• Submarinos	2

FUENTE: 'The Military Balance 2007' y agencias.



EL MUNDO

short to medium-range (Tor-M1); long-range Russian anti-aircraft missiles (SS-300); 100,000 assault rifles (7.62 AK103); 24 Russian aircrafts (SU-30MKV); and 25 Super Tucano aircrafts (AT-29B).<sup>9</sup> It should be mentioned, at this juncture, that Colombia has benefitted greatly from US diplomatic and military aid ever since the turn of the century through the Plan Colombia initiative against drug cartels and terrorist groups. Even more, it was

### Ecuador, and Venezuela

It would be naïve—and most likely a “chicken and egg” conundrum—to argue that this phenomenon, the increased connection between FARC and Venezuela, happened as a direct result of the increasing threat that Colombia's growing capabilities posed to Venezuela. It would overlook the fact that there appears to be an ideological convergence between the Venezuelan political project and the self-proclaimed communist ideology of FARC, and a variety of other interests Chavez and

<sup>9</sup> “Medición de fuerzas militares entre Colombia y Venezuela,” 2008

his officials might have had when getting involved with the guerrilla. FARC is, after all, not only one of the richest terrorist groups in the world given its very active drug trafficking pursuits, but also one of the oldest and most capable insurgent groups in the region and the world. In other words, this security dilemma by proxy perspective is still relatively third image, so it is possible that it leaves a lot of other domestic factors unaccounted for.

Nonetheless, if we look at Colombia and Venezuela as unitary actors within an anarchic world, security dilemma conditions can be recognized. As Colombia has increased its military capabilities to deal with the various threats to its sovereignty that have arisen since the 60s, it has been slowly tipping the balance of power in its favour. By increasing the number of troops, aircrafts, helicopters, missile defence mechanisms, etc., and the proportion of government spending in defence, Colombia has climbed its way to a solid second spot behind the largest military power in the region, Brazil. In the meantime, Venezuela has grown its capabilities at a much slower, less pronounced pace. The threat of Colombia's military strength is palpable for Venezuela—considering the high levels of terrorist activities that occur close to the frontier, and the public demonstrations of power that these entail, it is no secret that Colombia's armed forces are superior regarding numbers and experience. 60 years of civil conflict do not come in vain. In a system where there is an inherent distrust of future intentions, Venezuela cannot be sure that those 446,000 troops and hundreds of aircrafts will never turn its way.

However, Venezuela is also not in a position to build up its capabilities. Beyond the chaos of the Venezuelan economy, which is a whole topic of its own that I will not delve into now, this would be an unwise move considering the

geopolitics of Venezuela's neighbourhood. Brazil, South America's biggest economic and military power, shares a long border with the Bolivarian state, and any significant attempt by the latter to ramp up its security might be misinterpreted by the Brazilians. Indeed, Venezuela has a less than ideal track record when it comes to clear communication of intentions—there have been too many diplomatic crises between Colombia and Venezuela over the years, and many politicians argue that the two states have come infinitesimally close to war through a purely rhetorical escalation of conflict. Venezuelan leadership, particularly Chavez and now Maduro, traps itself in convoluted rhetoric that hinders more than it helps. Brazil, which has managed to remain somewhat removed from the complicated personality politics between nations in South America, would most likely react adversely to a challenge to its regional military superiority.

As such, it is with these mechanisms in mind that the logic behind the Venezuela-Colombia-FARC security dilemma by proxy falls into place. Though Colombia has developed its capabilities to fight the insurgencies within its borders, defending itself from non-state actors and domestic aggressors, it has done so by increasing both its offensive and defensive capabilities. As such, the message it sends to Venezuela is complicated: they are fraternal nations at heart and in culture, but the structural operational capacities of its armed forces hint that this might not always be the case. As such, for the reasons outlined in the preceding paragraph, it behoves Venezuela to keep Colombia tangled up in its dealings with FARC and others for as long as possible—as long as civil conflict in Colombia keeps going, it is extremely unlikely that both the Colombian government and the Colombian people will even consider going to war (pre-emptively or

preventively) with Venezuela, for there are simply not enough resources for both conflicts. One could therefore argue that Venezuela has taken advantage of its potential ideological links with FARC (and the significant profit the organization may bring to its officials), to set up a proxy that seeks to limit Colombia's relative power without generating monumental uproar in the international community or unbalancing its relationship with the rest of its South American friends. This has come, of course, not without cost for Venezuela. The most recent crisis with Colombia occurred just a couple of months ago when President Maduro exiled hundreds of Colombian residents from his country for bringing in contraband, paramilitaries, and violence from across the border. However, these phenomena are unsurprising for anyone who has studied Colombian history. If there is anything one should know about the Colombian conflict, is that the guerrillas, the paramilitaries, and the drug traffickers are always somehow interlinked in abominable marriages of convenience—with one tend to come the others. The fact that Venezuela has established close links with FARC can only mean it has opened the door for all other kinds of criminals and has thereby undermined its own security. Indeed, another expression of the challenge of security dilemmas.

## V. Conclusion

In the preceding paragraphs, I argued that intra-state conflict creates the conditions for a security dilemma between states but also provides a channel or proxy through which the threatened state can attempt to limit the threatening state's power without putting itself at risk: the domestic security threat itself. I engaged with Robert Jervis and Barry Posen's work on the security dilemma and investigated the relations between Colombia,

Venezuela, and FARC to demonstrate a possible case study of this phenomenon, the security dilemma by proxy.

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