

# THROUGH A GLASS, DARKLY

*Jake, Dinos and Dante*

Ingrid Soren

If one of the challenges of great art is to express eternal truth – about love or death or beauty or goodness, then it's fortunate that our best writers and painters are unafraid to look at evil and call it by its name: the visions of Hieronymous Bosch, Dante's *Inferno*, Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, Goya's black paintings, Otto Dix's *Der Krieg*, Pablo Picasso's *Guernica* spring to mind. And in our time, the Chapman Brothers. We need our artists to 'run through creation like an open razor', as Büchner's *Woyzeck* has it, and Jake and Dinos do just that. Their *Disasters of War* took the imagery and horror of Francisco Goya and Otto Dix to a new level, a step deeper into the abyss of the human psyche. With volcanic force the Chapmans integrate the imaginative narratives of civilisation's theological museum with the genocides of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Hell*, according to the critic Brian Sewell, 'was the greatest work of art made in Britain at the end of the last century'<sup>1</sup> (second only to *Disasters of War*, then). It was destroyed in the Momart Warehouse fire of 2004: over thirty-thousand miniature figures made by hand and individually painted went up in smoke, a holocaust of the killing fields of man's psyche that had taken two painstaking years to make. The brothers set about making a replacement, retitled *Fucking Hell*, and just in case the same thing happened again, they made copies while they were at it. If *Hell* had become famous at its first showing, its immolation had canonised it, and there's money to be made in the art market. Unsurprisingly the remake doesn't quite capture the power of the original, the hand of a copyist less potent in transmitting feeling than the hand fired with passion: a reproduction is always a reproduction. But this is not to denigrate a major work: for the first-time viewer, *Fucking Hell* (despite its lame retitling) may well have the impact of *Hell*, and in any case Mayfair's White Cube pale walls located it differently, in what Brian Sewell calls a 'bleak and oppressive torture chamber policed by many guards'. This is where

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<sup>1</sup> Sewell, Brian, 'Hell is the first great work of the 21st century', Evening Standard 06/06/2008

*Fucking Hell* went on show in summer 2008, home not so long before to Damien Hirst's diamond-studded platinum skull. Conflating irony with cynicism Hirst had called his piece *For the Love of God*, demonstrating the void behind the glittering mask of celebrity, the vacuity it conceals, the valueless values it represents. Hell as a metaphor for what is inside our heads. 'Every human being is an abyss,' Büchner's *Woyzeck* again, 'one grows dizzy looking down.'

Jake and Dinos Chapman's original *Hell* showed at the landmark *Apocalypse* exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2000, surrounded by dark red walls consonant with human violence of aeons. The handout described it as 'a bloodbath...a gargantuan, monumental reminder of the horror of the last century'. It was disturbing and shocking, and meant to be. Nine vitrines were arranged in a swastika, with spaces between so the viewer could examine the horror from all sides. The swastika is appropriately a favourite device of the Chapman brothers, a symbol deformed by usage and connotation, its origins being in a Sanskrit word meaning well-being or luck. In a world deformed by pain and hatred, where crucifixion is a central theme, *Hell* - and now *Fucking Hell* - depict a world of sadism, unrelenting violence and pitiless evil-doing, of Hölderlin's 'suffering mortals falling for years into the vague abyss'. Here is Armageddon: blasted bodies, lakes of blood, figures hanging from trees, concentration camps, body-parts pierced through on razor-wire, crucifixions, flagellations, decapitations, and a catalogue of grotesque tortures. Ostensibly a narrative of the horrors of the Second World War, it is clearly much more than that. It is a trope for the darkest regions of the human psyche where the monstrous becomes normal. And all executed in figures the size of toy soldiers, most of them male apart from various Siamesed females acting out their narcissisms on the sidelines. The remake adds a few extras: Anne Frank in her attic, Stephen Hawking on a desert island surrounded by zygotic, bikini-clad women, Hitler at his easel painting all the clichés of a landscape at sunset. The Chapman brothers are quoted, in a series of unreadable essays written to accompany the remake (£30-worth of 'irrelevant cod-philosophical jabberwocky of contemporary art theory' - Brian Sewell's phrase) as saying that they may decide to make more vitrines: for, they believe, the possibilities of portraying evil are infinite. The museum of human atrocities has empty display-cabinets waiting to be filled with ongoing *Götterdämmerungs*, from generation to generation.

Walking around the swastika, you are immediately aware of being a voyeur. Peering through the windows you can see the seething mass of humanity on its journey into eternal darkness. On the other side of the glass is a landscape of muted colours, a wasteland of dirty greens, charcoal and black relieved only by the purplish-

red of congealed blood and grey-tinged flesh tones. Bodies are heaped up in ravaged fields where pigs snout and roll in putrid mud. The damned tumble off the end of a truncated bridge suspended over the abyss. Charon's ship of souls is crowded with bloodied corpses, severed heads float in the viscous water. Helmeted skeletons inhabit a blasted land of leafless trees, a necklace of guillotined heads hangs like a washing line between lifeless branches. Vultures preen beside a dismembered corpse impaled on a tree, yellow eyed. There are men with two heads, the silent horror of a man being flayed alive, four arms of a swastika sprouting hands, a desolate Calvary under the shadow of a Parthenon, a concentration-camp with oversize industrial pipes and a pool of putrid water, a ruined church. There are tanks driven by skeletons, hybrid men with pigs' heads, eviscerated bodies in abandoned houses, buffalo-headed priests. There are men with four legs and heads growing from their shoulder-joints instead of arms, a pair of blood-filled trousers, a man with giant testicles scratching them with a hand that emanates from his own tailbone. And more. Evil imagined, evil remembered, evil chronicled.

Is this the 'objectification of violence' as the learned essays of the jabberwocky book suggest? Are we turned into voyeurs of this playroom, allowing the experience to create a void inside our beautiful skulls where evil can make a comfortable home? Evil 'out there', at one remove where we can safely detach ourselves from responsibility? 'Hell is other people', as Sartre preferred it. But we see through a glass, darkly, and it is part of the Chapman brothers' genius to put their spectacle behind glass. They invite us to be window-shoppers of human atrocity, but the glass mirrors us back to ourselves, we see our reflection imposed on the carnage of human folly reflected back to us. The diminutive scale of the figures, the size of toy soldiers we give our (usually male) children to play with, invite us to consider our conditioning, and also our complicity. Jake and Dinos Chapman have the ability to show us how violence has become naturalised, commodified even, in a culture deracinated from human values and seduced by the surface of things. How daily doses of news bulletins, war reportage and computer games immunise us to regard the monstrous as normal, but also as something that happens somewhere else, somewhere behind the screen, somewhere beyond the reach of our own responsibility. This is the real evil, the toy soldiers and games we play with and give our children to play with, the pornography of violence we collude with by making the choice to watch it on our screens and read about it in our newspapers. This is the voyeurism that perpetuates the endless human disposition to destruction (while the appetite for it lines the coffers of media moguls who are pleased to oblige). It becomes an unacknowledged addiction, and this

addiction, and this passivity, by which we unwittingly perpetrate its continuity, is the intelligence of evil.

'And so on' is a key phrase of Simon Baker's essay in the so-unreadable book put together to go with *Fucking Hell*. He takes as his subject the notorious tourist trips to the devastated landscapes of Verdun just after the end of World War 1, almost before the blood of the slaughtered soldiers had dried: voyeurism gone public. The essay consists of lengthy quotations from Kraus, Zizek, Foucault and de Sade padded with the jabberwocky of which Sewell complains, with footnotes to impress us upon us the academic provenance of his work. What does 'the disjuncture generated between multiple simultaneous episodes of manic action, and their compilation into single incomprehensible images, in representations of both war and Hell', actually mean? Equally opaquely, '*Fucking Hell* cannot be allowed to lapse into the condition of something that is made worthwhile by the fact that it permits a synthetic solution through the process of its own acculturation'... Baker has something to learn from the Viennese satirist and critic Karl Kraus from whom he quotes freely and whose masterpiece *The Last Days of Mankind* is one of the most powerful, searing and lucid expositions ever written of the truth about war. The aphorist who wrote that 'progress makes purses of human skins' also had much to say about language: 'An illusion of depth often occurs if a blockhead is a muddlehead at the same time.' Wittgenstein famously wrote that 'the limits of thought are determined by the limits of expression of thoughts.' Behind the high-flying phrases of language that avoids saying anything profound, we find ourselves in the shallows.

Jake and Dinos' *Fucking Hell* is as poorly served by this book as it is by the renaming of *Hell*: or maybe, by what is carelessly called irony, they are pointing out how a poor appreciation of language is impoverishing us, and how the 'F' word, devalued from overuse, has largely lost any meaning in a culture whose education system rewards a GCSE English student for using the 'F' word with a 75% score for spelling and conveying meaning, where he would have been awarded only 11% had he demonstrated punctuation skills (maybe even restraint, subtlety, humour) by using as exclamation mark. The worn-out 'F' word elbows out other four-letter words (love, care) that not so long ago were common currency but have now become objects of derision. There is a connection between language and morality as well as between language and thought.

'Hell is other people'... Maybe T.S.Eliot was closer to the truth when he gets a character in *The Cocktail Party* to say, 'Hell is oneself.' Seven hundred years earlier Dante – whom Eliot admired above all others – wrote the definitive work on hell in the first canticle of the *Divine Comedy*, indeed he practically invented Hell as we think of

it. His 14<sup>th</sup> century *Inferno*, a vortex of descending spirals and precipices where the damned roast in hellfire and boil in rivers of blood, implanted itself into the European imagination. But the English, largely, don't read much Dante. If Jake and Dinos haven't (maybe they have) it doesn't matter: they have created a 21st century equivalent in their installation of a contemporary *Inferno* where the swastika-arms of Hell sprout from the corolla of a mushroom cloud, Satan's latest bright idea. Just as the brothers create their cosmic narrative through imagery of actual events, Dante's dictionary of evil springs to life in word-pictures of events of his own time. He is the most graphic of poets, a Goya of the pen as he describes the experience of travelling through Hell and Purgatory to Paradise. He is also a great entertainer. Reading Dante is the experience of theatre: we hear, see, smell and feel what is being acted out in his *Inferno*, evoking a response as visceral as to the Chapman brothers' work.

Part of Dante's genius lies in perceiving that centuries of 'civilisation' will do little to improve the dynamics of the human psyche (his belief was that love is the only thing that would or could). Seven hundred years on, Jake and Dinos Chapman's *Fucking Hell* is a macrocosm and microcosm of self-destruction located under the dark threat of nuclear war. The difference between the two visions is that Dante's was a moral, ordered universe where justice and love can prevail, where evil-doers must undergo eternal, and horrible, punishments for transgression. In Jake and Dinos's world, a moral vacuum operates where anything goes, and punishments are inflicted on the innocent by the guilty who obey their own laws. Yet the liberals who object to zero-tolerance and adopt the creed of the politically-correct can hardly dismiss the man who wrote about *the love that moves the sun and other stars* as being the equivalent of a right-wing fascist *Daily Mail* reader. Dante chose to call a spade a spade: there is no poet more grounded in the vernacular than he, no poet more passionate about fairness, justice and morality.

The punishments meted out to wrongdoers in Dante's *Inferno* match their crimes. The neutrals wail as they are stung by wasps and hornets, faces streaming with blood which is sucked up by maggots at their feet. The promiscuous spiral in endless desire without hope, their thirst for lust unslaked. Gluttons sit in foul water under heavy rain, hail and snow, stuffing their mouths with fistfuls of earth. The avaricious roll weights, clashing against each other in unending circles. The angry wallow in blackish water, muddy in the bog, naked and angry-looking, hitting out at each other and tearing each other to bits with their teeth. Nearby, the slothful gorge themselves with the mire. Below them, heretics burn in flaming open-lidded tombs, usurers sit on burning sand, pain bursting from their eyes, flapping themselves with their hands against the flames erupting from the burning soil, like dogs plagued with

fleas. Fraudsters and seducers are lashed by horned demons, flatterers in stinking water hit themselves with their hands, dishonest clerics are stuffed head down inside stone holes, the soles of their feet roasting in flames. Diviners and soothsayers have their head turned backwards, hypocrites are cloaked in painted lead-lined robes, with cowls over their eyes. Corrupt officials boil in tar, the tyrants of the world cook in rivers of boiling blood, thieves metamorphose into serpents, dissolving into ashes and re-forming endlessly. Count Ugolino is so consumed with hate and tainted with treachery that he devours his own children. Makers of discord are split from crotch to neck, their entrails hanging out, faces cleft from chin to forelock. Some have pierced throats, others noses cut off or ears sliced or windpipes raw. One carries his own severed head, bemoaning his eternal fate. Counterfeiters and tricksters are heaped in a stinking ditch, crawling among lepers who itch furiously at their scabs. Traitors become one with the element that imprisons them, frozen into a prison of ice like scraps of straw sealed in glass. Only their faces show, silent, immobilised, their tears frozen into a crystal mask. Their bodies still live on earth, while their souls are frozen in ice: the ultimate punishment, a human heart stone-cold for eternity, unable to give or receive love.

If Dante depicts a moral universe, Jake and Dinos's is stillborn of moral vacuity, a world where a Josef Fritzl can act out his fantasies not inside his head, but on his victims. At about the same time as Damien Hirst's platinum skull was being packed up and the Chapman brothers' *Fucking Hell* installed at White Cube Mason's Yard, news broke of a discovery in Amstetten, Austria where the seventy-three year old Josef Fritzl had confessed that for nearly a quarter of a century years he had held his daughter in captivity, raped her regularly and had seven children by her. For those twenty-four years she never once saw daylight. He had created a dungeon underneath his respectable middle-class suburban house where he lived his respectable middle-class suburban life with his unwitting wife. It was a subterranean maze of soundproofed corridors and windowless rooms locked by electronic devices, reached through a 1000 lb door hidden behind a bookcase in Fritzl's study. Concrete corridors and five further locked doors led to his daughter's subterranean prison. At the age of eighteen Elizabeth innocently followed her father into his basement workshop, lured there on the pretext of helping him put up a door. They dragged 600 lb of concrete and steel three feet high and two feet wide into position, and he locked her in behind it. She was kept in semi-darkness on a dog leash for the first nine months, tethered in a cell fifteen feet by five, with a makeshift toilet in the corner. For twenty-four years she never knew when, or if, she would ever be released. Her father

visited his 'bunker' as he called it every three days and raped her regularly. Three of the subsequent seven children were taken upstairs, as supposed 'foundlings', to be looked after by his wife. One died three days after birth and was incinerated by Fritzl. The remaining three lived out their childhood – and the elder ones their adolescence – in this windowless concrete world, prisoners of their incestuous grandfather. When the dungeon was finally discovered, the air was so stifling that holes had to be drilled in the walls and ceilings before the investigators could safely breathe it.

The media covers this story as if it were a freak show. It isn't. Fritzl is a human being and all human beings have equal potential to good and evil, and Free Will to exercise restraint. Fritzl confronts us with the truth about the darkness of our own psyches, and the reflection in the glass is too terrible to contemplate. We deny it, look away, and call it a freak show. We recoil from it because it undermines our view of ourselves. We prefer our false utopias. But Fritzl is the man next door, a normal man who turned himself into a monster: he himself has said, 'I am probably a monster'. In the 'probably', read a further evil, an escape clause to open the way to blaming his parents or his life experiences, so that evil can be cloaked in psychiatric terminology.

This is the 21<sup>st</sup> century hell we have created, where not only can such a thing be conceived, it can be acted out in quiet, respectable suburban streets and called by another name. Even Dante's imagination didn't stretch to this: he had Count Ugolino eat his own children rather than starve to death, but not imprison and rape them and put it down to his potty training. If Fritzl's dungeon is a metaphor for what is inside our heads, there is indeed, it would seem, the possibility of portraying darker, deeper evil than the Chapman brothers dreamed up for *Fucking Hell*. If the monstrous had become normal in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the normal risks becoming monstrous in the 21<sup>st</sup>.

*The limits of thought are determined by the limits of expression of thoughts.* The problem of evil partly stems from what we call it – or what we don't call it. Political correctness is part of its game. The word 'evil' has the taint of taboo, due in no small part to the blame-culture sprouting from the fertile lands of Freudian psychology. John Berger, in his latest book of masterly essays entitled 'Hold Everything Dear', supports the notion that *to live and die properly, things have to be named properly. Let us reclaim our words.*

Fritzl pleaded insanity. To get away with evil by pleading you are insane while leading an otherwise 'normal' life, is the entropy of evil. As the normal becomes monstrous, we do well to take arms against it. The possibilities of portraying evil, as

the Chapman brothers have said, are infinite: let us hope that they will keep up the good work.

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