CHAPTER 3

The Frozen Ones: Dantean Moments, Characters and Space in the films *Aliens*, *Amelie*, *Sunset Blvd*, *Batman* and others

As we pass through our lives we sometimes meet people who strike us as frozen in a specific moment in theirs. It might be a 40-something woman who reveals a certain childlike innocence or a 60-year-old school teacher who exhibits the mercurial mischievousness of an adolescent. It might be a frowning waiter who seems caught in teen anger, or perhaps a gentle friend whose defining moment came in college when he crashed his car and others were killed, or the aging revolutionary, our favorite college professor who even in her seventies still yearns to recapture that joyful moment and spirit of the spring of Paris in 1968, a passionate moment that in some ways she cannot (and never wants to) get beyond.

Sometimes their actual bodies seem frozen. My friend knew a man who, ten years before she'd met him, had been on a hiking trip with his father on a mountain. He had talked his father into taking the hiking trip for health reasons: his father was both an alcoholic and obese. Unfortunately, half-way up the trail the father had a heart attack and, though the son carried him down the mountainside, this took hours and his father died during the descent. When my friend met him years later, this man had a slouch in his body, an atlas-like tragic air that was there in his very posture and movements, as if still carrying his father's heavy weight. As this bowed man told his story, slouching at a bus-stop outside a bar, he was clearly also still struggling down that hot mountain trail.

There are certain intense experiences, actions and desires that have the power to freeze us, or anyway part of us, in that intense moment of time. It is as if the brain has such a flush of emotions—of fear or hope, hunger or

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yearning—that then whip into a storm in the brain, causing deep and permanent connections to form. A special romantic summer, that particularly-horrible Christmas, those weeks of blood on that tour in Iraq: these are storms of joy or pain that can then become our sensibility, our pivotal moment, and even the foundations of our ethics, our politics, our personality and bedrock character. By shaping the way we see all experiences, places and situations, it becomes our permanent subjectivity, a sensibility, a way of understanding and filtering everyone we meet and every place we ever inhabit from that moment forwards. That moment can make us into someone who maintains the hope and innocence of a child or alternatively it might craft the heart of a pathological child-molester. When such shades of death, love and hate settle in our bodies and our minds, they can be gifts or curses, causes or cages: they can define or destroy our lives. And we have little recourse: often only years of love, adversity or therapy can loosen their hold.

Thankfully life is not exactly full of such experiences: Dantean moments are a remarkable and very specific subset of our life's many emotional and passionate moments. Our emotional moments unfold continually and can range from a passing anger at a driver who cuts you off on the highway to the rich experience of falling in love. A couple has a romantic evening on a beach at sunset, a boy has his first sexual experience, or a woman has a short, intense but forgettable fight with a co-worker at work. These can be lived, intense, real emotional, even passionate experiences. They can and are often there even at the center of major dramatic turning-points in one's life, and we see this often in stories and films. But the subjective stamp of such emotional moments is momentary. They may endure in memory and in their effects on our choices and commitments, but they are not Dantean moments.

Defining Dantean Moments

Dantean moments are more than momentary because they are branded into the person, creating an afterimage, a history, enduring and echoing and shaping later experiences. Thus they are more defining and complete aesthetic experiences because they can inform so much of one's later life. Dantean moments are thus not simply an experience or a moment or a chapter of a life: rather, they include the afterglow of that very unusual emotional experience.

In short, no matter how dramatically important or fiercely intense a moment might be, this alone does not make it a Dantean moment: their

distinguishing characteristic is that they actually shape later moments, they can live on in memory (though they needn't) but more importantly they live beyond memory since they become a frame of experience itself. In fact, as all of our dramatic examples in this book will show, this is how they become so determinative of one's most dramatic struggles in life, and this is why they are so dangerous and also why they are so prevalent in drama. In essence, Dantean moments create a sensibility and thus shape a history in a character.

Let's move from Dantean moments, which are real, to the invention of Dantean characters and Dantean space, two forms of aesthetic representation that were largely invented by Dante. Consider for example the bloody-faced Ugolino, one of the more famous of Dante's characters, a clear victim of a dark Dantean moment which he recounts in sparse but harrowing detail.

Dantean Characters

We meet Ugolino deep in Dante's Hell, where he is trapped up to his neck in a twilit frozen lake, gripping his victim Archbishop Ruggieri and enthusiastically gnawing through his skull (Fig. 3.1). Ugolino sees Dante stops chewing and wipes his gore-covered mouth on Ruggieri's hair. He then tells in crisp vivid detail the trauma that binds him permanently to his victim here in the ice.

Back in life in the city of Pisa, Ruggieri the archbishop was once Ugolino's ally in political struggles. But then he betrayed Ugolino and boarded him up in an abandoned tower with two sons and two grandsons (Fig. 3.2). Soon the children died of starvation, but not before begging him to eat their bodies. Hunger was stronger than grief, and he ate their flesh before dying himself.[1]

Once he has told his brief story, Ugolino enacts its dramatic ending: he returns to obsessively dining on the archbishop's brains. Virgil and Dante walk on, leaving the pair frozen together like this for all eternity.

After hearing Ugolino's story, we grasp an entirely new dimension of how and why he and Ruggieri are here in the ice like this. They are both trapped by and in their past actions, by and in their old lived selves, by and in the chilling horror of the events that took place in that tower's sealed room. But these two characters are not only trapped in that past Dantean moment of the cannibalism. It is crucial to notice that they are also both now trapped in a Dantean space, a dimly-lit

Fig. 3.1 Dante and Virgil on the frozen lake in the Ninth Circle of Hell where they meet Ugolino trapped in the ice (illustration by Gustave Doré)

space of nearly complete immobility, frozen together in ice up to their necks, bound in the endless tableau of this cannibalistic embrace. This ice-bound space is seen and felt by us through Ugolino's emotional perspective: it shows up through eyes shaped by those spirit-freezing moments alone with his children's bodies in that silent, dim-lit prison-room in that forgotten Pisan tower. The two imprisonments are joined: the icy lake is informed by, imbued with, and in a sense created by that Pisan cell and its terrible events. In a psychologically real sense, Ugolino can never escape that cannibalistic moment in his shuttered tower: that torturing tower sped him directly into this specific personal space in Hell, a space he will never leave because it is burned too deeply into him. And so this is a space of double vision, one linking Ugolino's constant present to the arresting actions within that past Dantean moment.

Fig. 3.2 Ugolino in the tower as his children die of starvation (illustration by Gustave Doré)

Ugolino's double-visioned space is not unique. Many of the characters in *The Divine Comedy* tell vivid tales of a specific past trauma, revealing themselves as still stuck like a fly in amber in that past Dantean moment while bound now in a specific and corresponding Dantean space. For example, in Canto 14 Dante meets Capaneus, a famously angry warrior from myth who was so overcome with fury in one battle that he directly attacked a god. Capaneus, still proud and unchanging, says "What I was in Life, I am now in Death", while sitting inert inside a cage of flaming bolts. He means that the raging anger that defined his character in life—a fury powering his fighting prowess and rebellious nature and finally directing his famous death—has now become the cage that surrounds him.

A similar extrusion of an inner emotional struggle comes in Canto 7, line 123, where a great swamp of the resentful lie trapped in muck. One of the imprisoned explains that "[In life] we … nursed in ourselves sullen

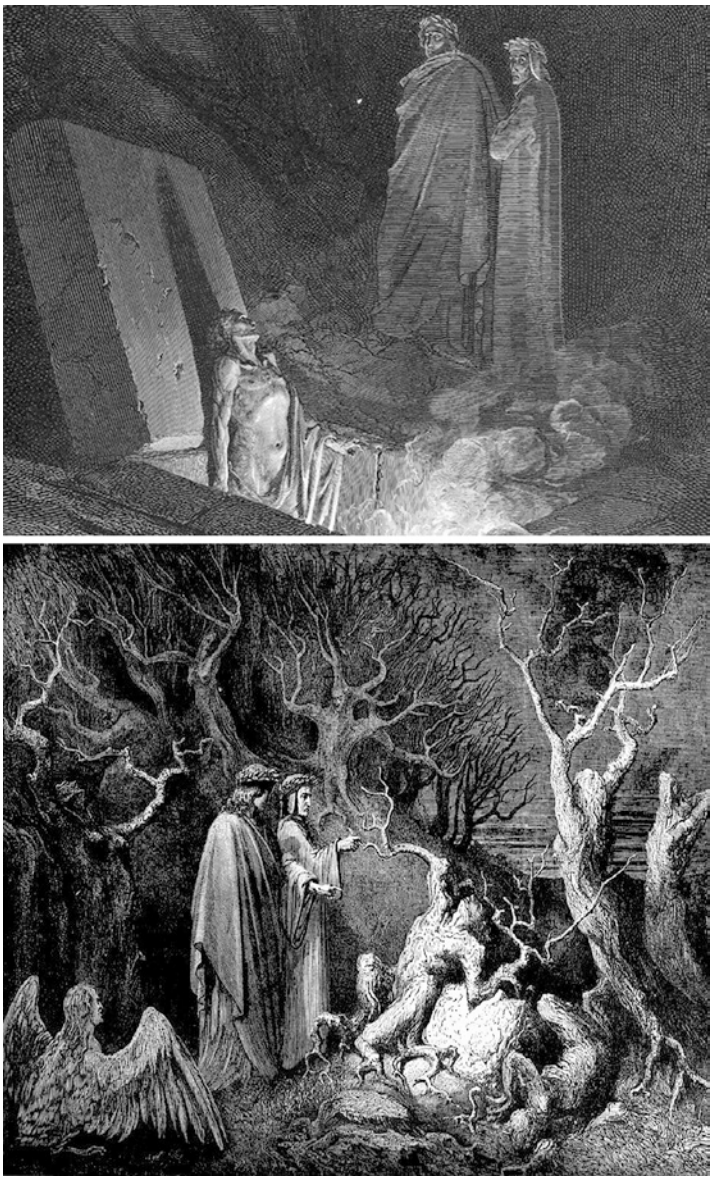
fumes, and (thus) come to misery in this black ooze." Again, an inner emotional pattern has become physicalized into a prison.

Many of Dante's prisoners exhibit such a sublime, special architectural beauty of setting that they have become fixtures of the Western imagination. Consider the embodied stories of figures such as Francesca. We meet her as she is buffeted about on winds with Paolo, her brother-in-law and lover in life. She tells us of how one day when she was alive she was reading a romance with Paolo: swept up by the romantic story, they kissed. When their affair was discovered by her famously cruel husband he murdered them both with a sword. Now she and Paolo are forever unable to forget or to consummate their adulterous love: unable to recover from her husband's severing sword that divided her from her lover and both of them from life, she drifts here forever with Paolo, unable to touch or to leave her lover.

Elsewhere in Hell Dante meets other suffering figures, such as Farinata, a heretic now ensconced in a fiery tomb, or Pier della Vigna, a suicide transformed into a bleeding tree. This remarkable parade of iconic sufferers provokes us to ask: what do the memorable Ugolino, Capaneus, Francesca, Farinata, and Pier della Vigna all have in common? In fact, like so many others in the *The Divine Comedy*, they all share one characteristic: whether trapped in burning crypts or suicide trees or in a cage of their own anger, their inner lives and past actions are reflected architecturally and physically in this new dramatic space that now encases them. And so as a group they come to define a new dramatic form: such characters, each entangled within a *Dantean space* of her own, tell their tales from within themselves (Figs. 3.3 and 3.4).

As a result, Dante's Hell is not just a bad place to be: unlike the generic burning pits of Old Testament Hell, the Inferno is a place where the traumatic memories of its inhabitants actually generate its architecture. This makes it a highly individualistic place, a zone peppered with memory-cages where sufferers exist in a singular space that is distinctly theirs, one that is architected and made manifest by their specific values, fears, traumas and actions back in life.

This is also why such characters stay with us so long after we forget the rest of the poem's complicated fourteenth-century agenda. We remember such characters so vividly because their space in Hell is a powerful evocation of their story in life. Their tales are psychologically realistic and their past trauma is alive and breathing all around them.



Figs. 3.3 and 3.4 Farinata the Heretic Pier della Vigna the suicide tree (illustration by Gustave Doré)

Dantean Space and Empathy

To appreciate Dante's brilliant narrative trick, consider how it perfectly meshes with our earlier list of empathetic machinery and our discussion of intimacy. When Dante invites us to consider the spectacular physical situations of Francesca and Ugolino, he is simultaneously drawing us directly and intimately into their inner emotional circumstances of deep regret or guilt or sacrifice, and into the intimate historical moments that they would normally never tell anyone about but which sped them here into their personalized Hell. We experience the Dantean moment they tell us about because that moment, that antagonist, that very *struggle* is right there before us: it is imprinted all around them and they are still wrestling with it. His aesthetic invention is a powerful technique for emotionally suturing us to these characters because their vulnerabilities and passions and hopes and fears are splayed all about them. Their inner selves are extruded like an exploded diagram of their emotional lives, their intimacies revealed to us as if we were their confessor. As a result these characters in their cages made of vulnerability, guilt and regret are each a kind of Venus fly-trap of compassionate empathy.

Dante's trick also opened a new box for storytellers and artists: now they could express how an environment can be both memorable and empathetic because it is a deep communicating medium of character. Soon Bernini, Poe, Dickens and others would take advantage of it, and today Dantean characters and their weird corresponding spaces represent a new, third form of emotional mimesis in the Western canon: in Dantean space the character has both an inner and an outer conflict, but—and this is Dante's new invention—the character is now found in a peculiar projective space in which *inner* struggle has become *outer* struggle. With Dante's help we make a great point-of-view jump, seeing through a character's pained eyes to find an architecture, a production design, a sensual sonorous space shaped and constituted by—even breathing with—her past actions, traumas, guilt, desires and memories.

The Dead Heart Beats on: Dantean Space in Poe, Dickens and Hitchcock

Arguably Dante was the first dramatist to truly understand the role of psychological trauma in freezing a person's life in a specific vivid moment of pain and anxiety, the first to notice how some people have certain

kinds of experiences that then travel along with them, coloring and shaping every perception, every moment, every drama of their lives. Today the deep psychological uses of Dantean space are seen across a wide spectrum of stories but the most powerful use is in dramatizing the backstory of a character, and usually one whose development has been frozen in a specific traumatic moment in the past.

How else can we understand Miss Havisham, that hostile, tragic, gothic figure in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations*? When we meet Miss Havisham we learn she has suffered a terrible event. As a young wealthy woman she met a handsome man who wooed her and promised to marry her. Then at twenty minutes to nine on her wedding day, in the midst of her excitement and euphoria, a letter arrives from her fiancé. It tells her that he has left and defrauded her.

This betrayal became her heart's fatal Dantean moment. We meet her as an old woman, (Fig. 3.5) still dressed in her wedding dress, trapped for decades now among the rotting remains of her wedding banquet with all the clocks stopped at twenty minutes to nine. Her Dantean

Fig. 3.5 Miss Havisham trapped in her own hellish Dantean space in Charles Dickens' *Great Expectations* (*Great Expectations*, 2012: Dir. Mike Newell)

moment, the emotionally violent abandonment, architects her Dantean space, this gloomy room with its wasting cake and tarnishing silverware which becomes her cage of memory. For decades afterwards she does not leave her house, never gets out of her wedding dress, never clears the table laid for the wedding feast, and never lets go of her plan to take her revenge against all men.

There are many other such examples in our story canon. How else can we describe Poe's narrators in two of his most famous short stories *The Tell-Tale Heart* and *The Black Cat*? Or Norman Bates of Hitchcock's *Psycho* in the moment shown below (Fig. 3.6), sweetly talking with Marion in his parlor as his stuffed birds loom above him, manifestations of the stuffed dead mother who sits in that basement room in the house above them on the hill, a stuffed murdered mother who also lives on in his head controlling his homicidal thoughts and deeds?

Aliens

And consider Ripley of the *Aliens* franchise. Ripley's Alien spaces are complex Dantean spaces that she actively fights her way through. At the start of *Aliens* (1986) she wakes from a decades-long sleep in cryogenic

Fig. 3.6 Norman's parlor, a hellish Dantean space, in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho* (*Psycho*, 1960: Dir. Alfred Hitchcock)

suspension in a drifting spaceship to discover that her daughter has grown old and died. While coping with this grief, Ripley increasingly struggles to master her own horrible memories of the deaths of her fellow crew and her flashback-like nightmares of being impregnated and having an alien burst out of her (a terrifying birth she witnessed in *Alien* (1979), the first film of the franchise). We see through her recurring nightmare, shown below in Fig. 3.7, that that memory now serves as a Dantean moment for her. This nightmare also reminds us that Ripley has just learned of the death of her daughter, whom we never see.

As Ripley grows stronger as a character on this journey, she also moves from the safer, sterile spaces to spaces that are darker, more organic, and more dangerous. Then finally she battles through her own fears of giving birth as she descends into the dripping, organic mother Alien's nest to kill this evil mother. An active protagonist who takes on the external goal of saving a child, Ripley also wrestles with internal conflicts that become clear as she finally faces her own Dantean space.

Fig. 3.7 Ripley's nightmare of giving birth to an Alien (*Aliens*, 1986)

As has been pointed out many times in film criticism, her journey in *Aliens* is from one distinct kind of architectural space into another. In the earlier parts of the film she is in rectangular, mechanical, well-lit, sterile white spaces that are safe (Fig. 3.8).

Increasingly, though, tension rises as Ripley must enter dark, rounded, organic, dripping, blackened intestine-like spaces that are controlled, occupied and ecologically transformed by the Aliens.

Finally, in the penultimate scene when she must descend into the heart of the black, dripping, living nest of the Alien mother to retrieve her own daughter-figure, she at last faces her own fears of birth, death and bodily violation.

Consider the space where Ripley fights the mother of the Alien as she also wrestles with her own fear and desire to be a mother. Here the Alien creatures and their lairs are vicious living emblems of Ripley's deepest fears about sex, motherhood and human bonds, and so here she finds the innocent little girl surrounded by intestines, gestating baby Aliens and even a birth canal. By the time she has entered the tunnels of the Aliens (Fig. 3.9) it is as if she has descended into her own body cavity.[2]

And why does Ripley go on this journey to face her deepest fear? She does it to rescue the knowing innocent girl, Newt: Ripley and her journey into her own fears is highly empathetic because she is doing

Fig. 3.8 *Aliens* (1986)

something good for someone else at very high cost to herself. Ripley's action and journey is communally empathetic.

Both *Amelie* and *Aliens* use Dantean space extensively. *Amelie* uses it from beginning to end, while *Aliens* highlights the power of its use in the second half of the film by starting with spaces that are realistic and all the exact opposite of the Aliens' lair and then descending into their nightmarish Dantean zone.

While these films use Dantean space for very extended sequences (in fact Amelie never leaves her sensibility), other films use Dantean space only in singular scenes. Consider for example *The Official Story* (1985). This powerful Oscar-winning drama revolves around a middle-class Argentinian couple raising a little girl they adopted some years before in

Fig. 3.9 *Aliens* (1986)

the middle of the worst years of the country's military dictatorship. At first all seems fine but then slowly the wife, Alicia, begins to ask herself if her adopted daughter Gaby might be a child of one of the murdered *desaparecidos*. This is a difficult suspicion for her since, if true, it means her husband may have been far more deeply involved in the crimes of those years than she thought. She, like most of the country's middle-class, is unsure just how brutal those years were.

And then the film's turning-point comes. The five-year-old Gaby is playing in a large walk-in playhouse in a bedroom while a party is going on downstairs in their house. Some young boys with plastic guns are playing on the stairs outside and the boys spontaneously charge into Gaby's playhouse while yelling and pretending to shoot. Gaby reacts in a completely surprising way by going into a screaming and sobbing fugue. Sucking her thumb, she has to be rocked to sleep by Alicia.

This incident is a scene of revelation for Alicia: in this moment we witness like her that a fundamental traumatic moment of Gaby's has accidentally been re-enacted and as a result a door has been thrown open onto the situation of one of the many Argentinian families that were tortured and killed. Gaby's own horrifying personal history, the junta's past history of crimes, and Alicia's own deepest fears of losing Gaby and facing her husband's fascist past are all triggered by the children's play.

Note, though, how our cinematic access remains limited to Alicia's point of view and to realism. Here we do not get any flashbacks or special sound effects to convey Gaby's experience: rather we stay entirely in the world of an incident observed by a concerned mother at a party. But note that though the boundaries of neorealist drama are observed, giving this moment its ordinariness and its force, at the same time the playhouse serves as a Dantean space on two levels. It is obviously vibrating with the imprinted, never-seen memory of a night years ago when Gaby's parents were arrested. But it also now emotionally and historically colors the actual house of Alicia, our film's protagonist. This house, which was until now just a dramatic backdrop is now imbued with the destroyed home of Gaby; its shade now falls on this actual house, haunting it and revealing the past violence and violations of her husband's friends and of the Junta. After this moment Alicia begins to question the official story and stumbles towards the truth, and simultaneously stumbles away from her house and her marriage. Her husband, trying to keep her from leaving, tries to turn their house into an actual prison, smashing her hand in a door and breaking it. But she escapes nonetheless and in the end is free, marching

unbowed in the public square with the mothers of the *desaparecidos*, mothers who have lost their own children, all stand-ins for their own disappeared as Alicia now chooses to be for Gaby's murdered parents.

This is a film where empathetic machinery is used to characterize the hidden history of a place. Gaby's playhouse is not just a vivid transference-object for her own traumatic memory, and is not just a metaphor foreshadowing Alicia's own household's future. This space also becomes a vivid emotionalized stand-in for the historical record: here the story's spaces vibrate not only with the shades of the story's dead characters but with the actual *desaparecidos*, the historical dead now thrust into the country's dark political unconscious. We will see this same use of empathetic Dantean spaces to rewrite and re-enliven actual history again in Chap. 6 when we examine the film *Hiroshima Mon Amour*.

The Hidden Cauldron: Dangerous Dantean Characters

As we see in the case of little innocent Gaby, a Dantean character can be a hidden danger to those around her. She is a secret emissary from another time and place and drama, concealing a bubbling emotional cauldron of the past that other characters do not suspect because they lack any cognitive, sensual or emotive access to the truth inside her. We viewers may be given none or some or all of this access ourselves, and the examples we explore in this book reflect many variations, different kind of glimpses of a Dantean character and his or her hidden cache of Dantean moments.

For example, let's compare two films of strikingly different tone and genre but that offer two quite similar Dantean characters. In both films a Dantean character tries her best to pull others into her cauldron.

The first example is the comedy *Young Adult* (2011) a drama with a Dantean character that nevertheless remains always in dramatic space (we do not go inside her subjectivity), while the second example is *Sunset Boulevard* (1950), where a similar Dantean character brings us and the protagonist remorselessly into her Dantean space, with fatal results.

Young Adult

Young Adult is a sharp-eyed character study of Mavis Gary, someone who was unable to mature and is stuck in her own adolescence, a fact

announced in the poster's tagline "Everybody gets old. Not everybody grows up." Mavis, the 36-year-old protagonist of this dramedy is a divorced, alcoholic, and deeply bitter writer of a failing series of Young Adult novels. She returns to her hometown when she gets an invite to the baby shower of Buddy, her old flame from high school, who is about to become a father. We soon see that while all of Mavis's old classmates have matured and changed since high school, she has not; the fiercely jealous and spiteful Mavis is stuck in the emotional zone of high school and tries to break up Buddy's marriage and get him back. In the end she fails and is humiliated in the process, which finally forces her to face her own spiteful ugliness, loneliness and alcoholism. Only a last-minute, deeply misguided pep-talk from Sandra, a fan of her fiction who is also hopelessly trapped in her own mid-teen emotions, gives Mavis the false strength to cling to her old bitter dysfunctional self and return to her delusion.

At first the reason for Mavis's overall conflict with her mature and compassionate peers seems clear in the film. Initially it seems that, unlike everyone else in the film, high school was a wonderful period for Mavis, a time of glory days when she was beautiful and popular and socially powerful and felt loved by Buddy, and that she has kept this world alive for herself by continually re-envisioning it in her failing Young Adult series. A distinction in styles of dialogue also backdates her sensibility: the screenwriter Cody reserves a clever cutting sharpness of tone for Mavis's dialogue, and this fixation with a bitter, teen-like sarcasm helps place her character back in high school where the art of wounding words had such a large role. By contrast, the film grants the other characters a grounded sensibility, a patient niceness and a lack of sarcasm in their dialogue, and this gap further isolates the protagonist, throwing her into emotional relief and staring alone across a bitter gulf at the world of the present.[3]

For all these reasons we know that Mavis badly misses high school and is in real ways still anchored there. But late in the story we learn something else: at the baby shower for Buddy's new child, Mavis reveals that in high school she too was pregnant from Buddy but then lost the baby in a miscarriage. Now it becomes clear to Buddy and his compassionate wife that Mavis has never recovered from this: she is stuck in 19-year-old events, social relations, joys and loss, and now the news about him having a baby, the news that drew her here to begin this extended comic psychodrama, takes on an entirely new and far more empathetic tone.

They are filled with a compassionate and communal empathy for her, an emotional offer which she quickly rejects.

Young Adult makes clear how dangerous a Dantean character can be. Though it stays within the confines of a drama and never enters Mavis's own perceptions directly—it never gives us a sense of Dantean space and stays largely within dramatic space—it does show how Mavis is a vortex into the past. Led by her own immaturity, she threatens to drag Buddy and others out of their own happy lives and back into the sick, socially-infectious emotions and relations of high school, trying to get everyone to dance to her own tune, to act in her own outdated social scripts. She is a modern-day Miss Havisham, only Mavis's frozen decaying room of mental furniture lies not in an aging mansion that the other characters can enter but remains hidden from their view in the scenes of a series of Young Adult novels mouldering off-screen in a bookstore's remainder bin. The film shows a Dantean character but stays largely outside of her inner life to remain in Dramatic space.

In this way Mavis's story differs from that of Norma Desmond in *Sunset Boulevard*, who in so many other ways she resembles.

Sunset Boulevard

When we meet Norma Desmond, the protagonist of the film *Sunset Boulevard*, she is an aging former film star hiding in her aging mansion. Like Mavis only "real big", Norma was once very popular, once at the top of a social hierarchy, once the most beautiful and famous woman in her world. A former silent-film star, she, like Mavis, still lives in a glowing construction of her own past: hers is not a series of novels but the old silent films she continually projects in which she is the star (Fig. 3.10). And she too threatens to suck everyone else, and particularly the man she loves, out of a happy healthier life and into her withering fantasy, into a past that is long gone.

Sunset Boulevard is an interesting Dantean space film. Its protagonist is an out-of-work screenwriter named Gillis. He is down on his luck and needs a bed to sleep in. The film is structured in five sequences and each sequence opens with a different bed, with each bed a stepping-stone leading closer to the Dantean heart of Norma Desmond. After a final desperate bid to escape, he finds himself floating face-down in her pool, his final resting-place.

Fig. 3.10 Norma in her private cinema showing Gillis her life as a silent cinema star

When we first see Norma's house with him we are already meeting her: Gillis actually describes it as feeling just like Miss Havisham's room, as if a person was frozen in the past, only here the past is the fabulously wealthy Hollywood of the 1920s. And then he enters the house itself: like Miss Havisham's wedding banquet room, this mansion is both frozen in time and falling apart. Its gothic airs—the organ wheezing in the corner in the wind, the dead monkey in the coffin (a foreshadowing of Gillis's gothic future), the silent butler—all refer back to the expressionistic silent-film era where Norma is frozen. An air of unreality is created by the grotesqueness but also by a technique that is a common hallmark of Dantean space: in a small moody metalyptic break of realism, we hear a wavering bed of notes as score for twelve full seconds before it is revealed by Norma as coming from an old organ. Apparently the wind is continually blowing backwards through it.

Gradually we learn with Gillis that Norma's Dantean moment is not a trauma exactly, but it is also not exactly a moment of joy. Norma's crucible was her silent-film stardom, a cage made of klieg lights, billboards and fan letters, a sickness of the overfed ego and of a kind of false, isolating and ephemeral love. As a now-forgotten former cinema star, she is a pronounced morbid example of the actors' desire for applause and attention. We meet Norma twenty years after the end of silent films still watching her own old silent films, still seeking out that lost joy, still racing after that lost adulatory crowd, and maintained in her Dantean space by fan mail and by the ministrations and support of her butler. In what may be the finest slow emotional revelation in cinema history, we then learn with Gillis that the butler was actually her director and then, most startling of all, that he has been writing all her fan letters, thus feeding her sense of fame and her delusion that she can make a comeback.

This revelation makes everyone more tragically empathetic. While the butler maintains the atmosphere, keeping Norma safe in her delusion out of love and concern for her, Gillis slowly joins this duet, stepping one-by-one through the circles of intimacy, from stranger to manipulative, deceitful screenwriter-for-hire, to friend, to confidant and member of her social circle, someone worthy of sharing a deep secret in order to be a confederate, to becoming a lover and a kind of co-conspirator in maintaining her delusion. She changes too; at first ordering him around and dressing him like a minion in her own play, she then shows her vulnerability to Gillis, finally opening to him sexually in a way that he cannot in good conscience extract himself from. The glue of intimacy grows stronger and stronger, giving a sense of a closing web, until when he tries to wake her from her delusion, to yank her out from her Dantean space into reality, Norma has to shoot him to prevent him from leaving her intimate circle, to prevent this supporting player from walking out of her play, escaping her desires and tearing the sfumato penumbra of her fame. In the film's last shot and surrounded by cops and reporters, Norma descends into madness: echoing Narcissus she walks into her final close-up, walking into fame, into her past, and into a complete psychic break with reality (Fig. 3.11).

And now we can see more parallels and difference between *Young Adult* and *Sunset Boulevard*. Both Mavis and Norma attempt to impose their own two-decades-old personal reality onto the world. While Mavis has her own novels to imagine and browse through, Norma has her own old films, finally disappearing into them in her last gauzy moment.

Fig. 3.11 Norma descends into madness as she walks into her final close-up

And while Mavis has her Buddy to pull into her world and shore it up, Norma has her Gillis. But while Mavis is poor, Norma is rich: Norma can build her own mansion and fill it with a silent-cinema aesthetic which she maintains by shutting out anyone who might not agree with her frozen world. She can pull Gillis into her world and hold financial power over him, while Mavis has no such power over her Buddy. Norma is a modern version of the rich and powerful Miss Havisham, the would-be failed puppeteer of Pip and Estella.

Roles of Narrative Space

It may be useful now to recap by listing some of the roles space plays in a narrative:

Existing in one or more of the following dimensions, a space can:

1. Serve as simply a non-obtrusive backdrop imbued with a sense of place.

2. Reveal a character's or an antagonist's past.
3. Reveal a character's or an antagonist's inner hopes, desires, guilt, or fear.
4. Reveal a character's or an antagonist's external objective in the present.
5. Foreshadow the future.
6. Entertain or engage, usually by being beautiful or sublimely spectacular.
7. Reflect clear genre tropes and cues.

We will return to this list of roles in our later chapters, but for now we can apply it to spaces in our examples. We suggest that *dispassionate* spaces (i.e., those spaces created to surround and support the roles of dispassionate protagonists) tend to play mainly roles 6 and 7. Such spaces accompany shallowly-drawn characters and generic locations, as in films featuring Thor, most early Bond films and many Marvel Universe films.

By contrast, *dramatic* spaces are not spectacular and can often be a backdropped place that does not markedly intrude on, comment on or inform the foregrounded drama, as we can see from the settings in *50/50* and *Young Adult*. *Little Miss Sunshine* also generally confines its spaces to backdrops, though as we pointed out in our description of the opening sequence, they often carry markers of the poverty, alienation and personal failure that are the film's antagonists. Dramatic spaces can play a number of the listed roles at once but tend to remain unintrusive while most dimensions of meaning play out in emotional beats in the dialogue and action between the characters.

In contrast to both, *Dantean* spaces tend to overtly play the listed roles 2 through 7 at once, which is part of the secret of their cinematic and emotional power. We discussed the examples of Amelie's Paris, Miss Havisham's rotting banquet in *Great Expectations*, Poe's rooms of horror, and Norman's parlour with its looming stuffed birds in *Psycho*. These spaces are vivid and memorable because they provide such a rich empathetic layering of dramatic meanings. *The Official Story*'s playhouse starts as a background space but then bursts into a kind of bright emotional fire as it suddenly stands in for both Gaby's past violated home and Alicia's future violated home. Here the playhouse simultaneously works on the first six levels, creating an intensely empathetic scene of revelation and care between Gaby and Alicia that will then become a central turning-point in both of their lives. As emblems of

Figs. 3.12 and 3.13 The Batman Franchise, anchored in the Purgatorial Dantean space of Bruce's parents' death (*Top*—The Dark Knight Returns, graphic novel by Frank Miller. *Bottom*—Batman: The Dark Knight, 2008: Dir. Christopher Nolan)

character-forming memories, Dantean spaces vividly link past, present and future time. We will explore this phenomenon, which we call the *Characterological Manifold*, in Chap. 4.

Batman

We see this layered effect of Dantean space in many genres. For example, consider the Dantean characters and Dantean moments of *Batman*.

Remember that unlike most superheroes, Batman's origin story is a clear Dantean moment. When the protagonist Bruce Wayne is eight and is walking home in the city at night with his parents they are confronted by a mugger. As we see in the illustration from Miller's graphic novel (Fig. 3.12), the child is a helpless witness to his parents' murder.

Brooding along in his room that night, Bruce swears to a life fighting crime and meditates: "Criminals are a superstitious, cowardly lot, so my disguise must be able to strike terror into their hearts. I must be a creature of the night, black, terrible …"[4] By coincidence a bat suddenly flies through the window, and the young traumatized Bruce is inspired to develop the persona of Batman, a persona that shows he is trapped forever in the traumatic night when his parents were killed. For the rest of his life he will fight crime, endlessly trying to unwork his dreadful origin story; as the poster for one of Nolan's films shows (Fig. 3.13), every action Batman takes and every subway overpass and skyscraper of Gotham will relate back to the violence of that alleyway where he lost his parents. In this world Batman never really does face his demons; his Gotham is an overtly hellish place where the character is forced to forever fight against his past, striking out against many aspects of their original trauma but with no appreciable progress or chance of escape. Like the hero of *Aliens* and the secret antagonist of *Psycho*, like Ugolino endlessly and obsessively gnawing on the archbishop's skull, Miller's Batman will skulk these streets forever.[5]

The Tripled Lens of Character: The Three Layers of Time in Dantean Space

Note the layers to such empathetic spaces. Such spaces are not just double-lensed, i.e., they don't simply reveal the past and play a role in the narrative present. These spaces *also* reveal and are constituted by

fundamental events in the life of the sufferer that reveal and reflect the sufferer's character itself. And, following Aristotle, we understand that character is constituted by the tendencies of behavior of a person, by the ways she tends to act or refuse to act in life's important situations.[6]

There is a real difference in a Dantean space, as we see when we consider either Amelie (with her animating, contact-improvisational dance through her adult enchanted Paris) or Ripley (with her determined penetration of the Aliens' dripping, nightmarish lair) what is being revealed in the character's past is also being experienced by the viewer as the narrative proceeds in the present, while simultaneously being entangled with the future of the protagonist. By virtue of wordlessly, sensually communicating the past, present and future goals yet staying within the character's sensual point of view, a Dantean space brings us into a unique, close and highly empathetic identification with the character's intimate guilts, fears or desires. This phenomenon (often felt as in these examples via an atmosphere of quiet enchantment or living nightmare) distinguishes them from both disPassionate and dramatic characters and spaces.

Dantean Space, Rated G

We often have children as the *subjects* of Dantean space in stories made for adults (think of *Batman*'s 8-year-old Bruce, Gaby in *The Official Story*, Mary the heroine of *The Secret Garden* or Amelie). It is harder, though, to find Dantean space in films or TV shows that are made *for* children. Of course, the vivid power of Dantean space can be dangerous for children: it would be traumatic to show this audience a vivid story about a trauma. Anyone who has tried to read the novel *The Secret Garden* to their children immediately realizes that it is written in another century. Opening on the crippling Dantean moments of its eight-year-old protagonist, the story begins with a realistic scene in which the main character's parents die of disease and all other caregivers run away and abandon the little girl Mary to die of hunger and neglect: she is threatened by poisonous snakes while starving alone in an abandoned house of the dead. Today's children's stories simply do not have this level of harrowing realism.

But even in children's films there are exceptions. For example, the film *Up* (2009) uses compassionate empathetic space by beginning with a highly empathetic opening sequence that shows a couple's romance, marriage and struggles and then ends with the death of the wife. The

Fig. 3.14 The moment of release and ascension, of past and present, in *Up* (2009)

surviving husband, the film's main character, comes into the main story with his heart plunged into winter, a grumpy social isolate feeling terribly guilty that he was never able to take his wife on the exotic trips of exploration that she dreamt of. What's worse, he is soon falsely accused of a crime and is about to be forced from his home by a large corporation. Thanks to the machinery of empathy working in all of these story elements, our allegiances are now empathetically aligned with this mean old man. The film then launches into its main action when he unfurls his secret scheme: he floats the house from its moorings with thousands of tethered party balloons (Fig. 3.14).

This emotionally spectacular moment is highly empathetic because of the history of balloons in the relationship (the husband and wife first met thanks to a balloon) and because his action so strongly evokes and embodies the dreams of his dead wife. In this explosion of color and flight in the frame, we are plunged into an empathetic experience of her joy and his release from guiltas his old memories come alive with a new ending.

Toy Story

Another use of Dantean space comes as the third act starts in the film *Toy Story* (1995). Buzz Lightyear, the co-protagonist in the film, has been

for the last two acts in conflict with the main protagonist Woody over many things, but a central comic tension has been that Buzz is convinced he is not a toy like Woody but rather a real astronaut, a hero who can fly. Now as the third act begins Buzz happens to see a TV commercial for Buzz Lightyear toys. He is shocked. To refute the evidence of this commercial, Buzz then jumps from a railing trying to fly up to an open window high above the house's stairwell. When he falls hard, detaching his plastic arm, the revelation of being a toy that cannot actually fly hits him with the force of the hard tile floor.

Woody later finds a shattered Buzz raving deliriously while drunk on imaginary Darjeeling tea at a dolls' tea-party (Fig. 3.15): Woody pulls him away and then for the next ten minutes of the film has to take care of this mentally injured, utterly demoralized Buzz. But Woody never gives up on Buzz, and by the film's end with Woody's help Buzz has integrated this shock into his old character, his bravery and sunny outlook now married to a more mature self-understanding and a new bond of deep friendship with and appreciation for Woody. From this moment forwards Buzz stops being a dispassionate action hero and becomes a dramatic character with an inner life.

Fig. 3.15 Woody rescuing Buzz from the revelation of his vulnerability in *Toy Story* (1995)

Dantean space is present here only as a threat in this film, but its crippling nature is clear. If Woody had not intervened, had not ministered to Buzz's psychic shock, the astronaut would still be trapped in that moment, like Ugolino or Miss Havisham, drinking Darjeeling tea and raving about the Star Academy for the rest of his toy days.[7]

Notes

1. Ugolino's story, including the death with his children and grandchildren, is based on real events.
2. Creed, 1990.
3. Note that *Juno* (2007), Cody's earlier elaboration with Director Jason Reitman, is marked by a blanket use of this form of dialogue: all the characters speak with the same cleaver archness, granting the entire film a kind of overall sensibility that seems to originate in the young protagonist. This relentless wall-to-wall cleverness of dialogic tone does suggest convincingly that you are in Juno's world, as if every relationship was filtered through her fun sly sensibility.
4. Bill Finger (w), Bob Kane (p). "The Batman Wars against the Dirigible of Doom", *Detective Comics*, 33 (November 1939), DC Comics.
5. This origin is stressed in different ways in different versions of the Batman story, creating quite different versions of empathetic space. Consider the versions of the Batman myth in, for example, Tim Burton's breakout superhero film, in Frank Miller's version in the Dark Knight graphic novels, in Nolan's film trilogy, and finally in the TV show *Gotham*. Neither the campy original television show nor the franchise-birthing 1989 version directed by Tim Burton dwell on Batman's powerful origin: not surprisingly, those Gothams are characterized by dispassionate space, display of quaint and campy gothic production design, with Burton's city made up of gothic and noir tropes deployed in his signature caricaturish style. By contrast, Miller's version is a rich and powerful Dantean space. Miller's convincing neoFascist Batman is prone to grief and guilt over the death of Robin and then experiences a transforming flashback to his parents' death that is presented as a Dantean moment in harrowing detail (Miller 1986, pp. 21–26). This Batman is a frightening and psychologically grounded character. Deeply bitter, cynically sure of his rightness and of the world's blackness, hating the liberals who have destroyed his city, Miller's Bruce Wayne is brother to Mickey Spillane's Mike Hammer: both authors create an anger-torn, death-dealing hero whose mental pathology finds its mirror in his world's social pathology and both heroes are right-wing authoritarians ready to cleanse this fallen world in blood to set it right.

By contrast, Nolan's *Batman Begins* opens the trilogy by deepening the emotional realism and the trauma of young Bruce's origin story while also granting it an operatic dimension. Young Bruce falls down a well and is attacked by bats, and his father, silhouetted against the sky must drop down to him to rescue him. This kindly father than takes him to the opera with his mother, but the Wagnerian figures on stage, who wear batlike costumes and flit about on ropes, trigger Bruce's anxiety and so he asks to leave. The parents then exit the opera house by an alleyside door and the murderous confrontation with the mugger unfurls as dictated by the Batman canon, only in this version little Bruce actually does bear some responsibility for the death of his parents. Black bats now subtly present everywhere in little Bruce's world, but never as caricatures or as theatrical devices as they do in Tim Burton's world: drooping wet black umbrellas at the funeral, the broken shadow of a jutting faucet on a wall, the distant cracking of a glacier's ice are all realistic graphic and acoustic elements that are never heightened enough to interrupt the emotional realism of the story. (These cracking sounds will remind a cineaste of the thunderclaps that accompany the shattering of the walls behind Catherine Deneuve in Roman Polanski's *Repulsion* (1965).

In the rest of the film Bruce must go through all sorts of tests and training in order to overcome and properly integrate his ghosts and fears and memories. It is an overt therapy arc which is then married to the time-tested plot of a kung-fu acolyte in training, but it never quite eliminates Bruce's need to both fight and to be the darkness: it never eliminates his lust for revenge, for violence, which return in shaded suppressed form to power the later two films of Nolan's trilogy.

The success of Nolan's Batman films not only imitated the dramatic innovation of *Spider Man*, bringing a dramatic arc and an inner emotional struggle to a character who had been dispassionate in earlier cinematic versions. Nolan's Batman went further, following Miller's graphic novel in anchoring his persona in the Dantean moment of his parents' death, and then characterizing the space of Bruce Wayne's Gotham as a Dantean space. Nolan's *Batman* trilogy is also a Dantean world, but here the past is present in more subtle and sublime form because Bruce is embarked here on his own therapy arc: Bruce Wayne must first struggle to master his fears and his emotions before becoming *Batman*.

In contrast to these examples of a dispassionate and a Dantean Gotham, the pilot of the television series *Gotham* (Fox 2014–) opens with a dramatic killing of Bruce's parents. The effects of this on the boy is largely to make him serious and stern, but oddly enough the series does not show young Bruce melding this trauma with the bat-in-the-room episode the

same night, as in the original origin story. Pushing off young Bruce's fetish with bats and darkness to later seasons of the show, the series remains a dramatic show that instead focuses on police detective Jim Gordon; and its dank 1970s version of Gotham (oddly supplemented by cell phones) is a noir city, a largely dramatic backdrop for Gordon's own moral struggles. (Though the show sees the city dramatically, like a moody cop-show, it too tends towards grotesque casting of secondary characters ala *Barfly* and *Dick Tracy*.)

6. At this point one can argue that a dispassionate or a dramatic space can also reveal the past. Think of how Thor has flashbacks to his relationship with his brother Loki, or how Bilbo thinks in certain moments about his comfy Hobbit hole while dueling with Gollum or fighting Spiders in Mirkwood: obviously these moments can show contrasts and the progress of the story
7. Dedicated to Anna Thomas, with Resolution.

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