



The Seven Deadly Sins on Film:

Envy

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Thinking Faith's Lenten programme will offer a unique take on the 'Seven Deadly Sins' through the medium of film. Each week we will use an iconic film to illustrate how one of the sins is encountered in our world and our experience, even if we do not recognise the sin as a theological reality. To begin the series, Nathan Koblintz explores the envious relationship between Salieri and Mozart in Peter Shaffer's Oscar-winning *Amadeus*.

Envy has undergone a rebranding over the years. You are likely to hear it used interchangeably with jealousy – 'She was very jealous of his success' – or hiding in greed's large shadow – 'I am envious of your house'. It is as if envy is trying to disguise itself amongst the possessiveness of jealousy, or as the desire for the good things that other people have. But the true nature of envy is nastier than either of these and so ugly that it is no surprise that it seeks to hide itself away. Peter Shaffer's version of the relationship between Mozart and Antonio Salieri in *Amadeus* hauls envy back to the surface and forces it to explain itself. Envy does not just covet the things that others have; it seeks to destroy the good. It is malicious. As Salieri says, 'Your defeat is my success'.

Amadeus does not dally too much with historical accuracy, and the Salieri who sits down with a priest in a mental asylum to narrate the course of his life (Mozart has been dead for 32 years by the time Salieri begins to speak), bears no resemblance to the historical composer. Instead the film presents us with a monster who has spent the last decades feeding on his guilt at having driven Mozart towards his death. The Mozart we see is no less a Hollywood 'type', a very modern-day bohemian hero: exuberant, irreverent, playful, full of *joie de vivre* and financial incompetence. But in the relationship between these two



Amadeus (The Saul Zaentz Company, 1984)

archetypes we can see the unwinding of envy's disguise; the framing device of Salieri's flashback shows us the process of envy, its encroachment, contagion and consumption.

For Aquinas, the seven deadly sins, or capital vices 'participate in some way in some aspect of happiness'.¹ Watching the process of envy unfold on film allows us to confront this *good* in the sin, and to grapple with the love and the qualities which

have become perverted. Salieri begins his life as a young boy in love with music; he begins the film by stabbing himself in the throat. What has happened?

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Like all sins, envy resists being uncovered. Let us begin with our own flashback, to the root of its word. At envy's heart is the act of seeing. Indeed the word comes from the Latin '*invidia*' via the French '*envie*' and the root, Latin word is '*videre*' ('to see').² This surprises at first: why would 'seeing' be linked to envy more than any other sin? During its evolution, the word takes in the active sense of casting an evil eye on people; envy is not just about desiring what other people have, but about cursing them, too. When we compare this to jealousy, the difference becomes clearer: jealousy comes from the Greek '*zeal*', meaning amorous or possessive. Jealousy as we understand it is

no virtue, but its focus is on an inappropriate desire; envy has its initial focus on seeing the possessions or qualities of other people and then in bringing about their downfall (the curse of the evil eye). It is this dual role of the eyes – they see what others have, but they can also curse – that leads Dante to give the envious sinners of his *Purgatorio* the healing punishment of having their eyes sown shut with wire.

Our first encounter with the young Salieri finds him in a church, with his eyes turned upwards towards the singing choir that has enchanted him. In contrast, his parents have their heads bowed and their eyes screwed up tight behind their hands. Reluctantly Salieri looks at them, looks back at the choir, then bows his own head and closes his eyes. At this point he is an innocent, drawn in simple response towards what he finds beautiful; only a social fear prevents him from expressing this. He prays in silence.

The type of prayer that he makes is one that many of us will recognise. ‘Lord, let me celebrate your glory through music’, he begins; and then, ‘let me be celebrated myself ... make me famous ... make me immortal.’ In return he promises God his ‘chastity, industry, humility, every hour of my life.’ With its broad strokes, the film enlarges the small print of this contract to an unavoidable font size 16: Salieri is not making a prayer, he is making a deal, with himself at the centre. From here to being a successful composer with a sense of entitlement, of having earned his talent and success, it is a simple journey. As soon as the brilliant Mozart appears in court, with his effortless genius, Salieri cannot help but compare and find himself unworthy in the comparison. Next is the mix of resentment (God is unkind to him), injustice (God is unfair to him) and hatred (he will have his revenge on God). Why, after they had agreed such a deal in his youth, would God choose the unruly Mozart to bless with the gift of such music?

The mix of self-reproach (‘I am lesser than him’) and anger (‘Why should I be lesser than him?’) leads to that particularly unpleasant mix of emotions that envy brings about. Of course, all of the sins result in emotional and psychological discomfort; but there is something unique about envy in the way that it requires the sinner to see themselves as debased. ‘Yes Lord, I am a sinner’ becomes, ‘Yes, I am a sinner and that is why I am so worthless that all I can do is to

take others down with me.’ Salieri does this when, disguised, he witnesses Mozart parodying other composers at a party. Who shall he make fun of next? Salieri requests Salieri. He knows that he will see himself mocked, that he will come away feeling worse than he is, that he will feel justified in thinking that he is a worthless composer in comparison to Mozart. And if he is worthless, then why bother creating when he can lend his energies to destroying his enemy? Envy wants us to believe that the condition of being sinful will deflect any overtures of God’s love.

That insult also serves to justify Salieri’s intentions: he can seek to destroy Mozart because Mozart has hurt him. This justification, again common to all sins, is very necessary to envy, simply because it makes so little rational sense. At least greed has a surface logic to it – this object is good, I like it, I want it, why do I not have more of it? Envy does not even have that. To visualize how illogical envy is, imagine building a town where the dominant social relation between people is envy (*Sims* meets Kant’s categorical imperative). Nothing would get done! As soon as anyone came up with an idea for a new road, or a swimming pool, or building a school, everyone else would seek to undermine them and ruin it. They’d rather have nothing at all than to see someone else achieve something good.

There is a remarkable moment in Shakespeare’s *Othello*, when Iago, the envious manipulator, soliloquises about his motivation for destroying Othello:

I hate the Moor:
And it is thought abroad, that 'twixt my sheets
He has done my office: I know not if't be true;
But I, for mere suspicion in that kind,
Will do as if for surety.

(I.iii.386-390)

It is a neat piece of sophistry. The argument could have run as follows: ‘There are rumours that Othello has slept with my wife. I don’t know if it is true but it could well be. Therefore I hate him.’ But instead we have this: ‘I hate Othello. There are rumours that he has slept with my wife. I don’t know if this is true, but from now on, I will behave as if it were true.’ For Iago the hate comes first (what Coleridge called his ‘motiveless malignity’), and *then* a reason is found to justify it. Just so for Salieri and his envy.

Amadeus shows us in unambiguous terms the process of Salieri's destruction – once he has given himself up to envy, it infects all aspects of his personality. The logical endpoint of envy is to seek, as Salieri proclaims, 'the ruin of [God's] incarnation'. What begins as wishing ill on someone spreads to wishing ill on God and all that he has created; this culminates in Salieri himself: his attempted suicide with which the film began. Because of this, envy is the smallest minded of all the sins. It certainly is one of the hardest to make look attractive: the other seven deadly sins can be portrayed in a glamorous or stylish light by films or adverts, songs, books or newspaper articles. Pride and wrath bring good narrative energy; lust, sloth, and gluttony are easily dressed up to sell ideals and objects; and greed, despite contemporary consensus over big bonuses, will soon be 'good' again. It is no surprise that in the film *Seven* (1995), in which Kevin Spacey's serial killer plans his killings on the seven sins, his sixth and climactic murder is that based on envy.³

Where then is the good at the heart of envy? *Amadeus* suggests that at its core is a half-formed sensitivity to goodness.

Salieri would not be envious of Mozart if he was not aware just how beautiful his music was in comparison to his own. Before being envious, you must first spot a blessing in the other person: the blessing of happiness, or talent, or youth, or wealth. In fact the fully envious person would go around seeing blessings in everyone! The fall comes with the kind of inaccurate understandings that human beings make a speciality: X has more blessings than me, therefore it is unfair. The inaccuracy comes in the perception of where these blessings come from and how they are 'given out': envy tells us that we can earn blessings from God, that he has favourites, that material success should in some way be tied to moral goodness, preferably in a scale that decides in favour of myself. It is good that Salieri is sensitive to the beauty of Mozart's music; his mistake is his image of God handing out blessings to those who deserve (or do not deserve) them. The root word for envy comes from 'seeing into' ('in' + *videre*) but the prefix 'in' can also act as a negative, i.e., 'not seeing'. This captures the double nature of the sin: the envious see the good given to others, but they do not see the source of it, the nature of it, nor the good that they themselves have been given.

The majority of us do not embrace envy consciously in the way that Salieri does. By doing so he becomes a monster. Envy works best by remaining hidden from us, through justifications or by flitting below the surface of our consciousness. The thought, 'It is so unfair that X has so much more than me', can, unchecked, lead to 'X does not deserve all those things', and thus to 'X deserves to be taken down a peg or two.' The truth of envy is so unattractive that when we see it clearly in our own hearts, it is a shock. Envy works by distorting our vision, but it rarely survives a clear-sighted appraisal.

There is an eye-opening comparison here with *Paradise Lost*, where Milton's Satan arrives at the gates of Eden for the first time and sees the beauty of Adam and Eve.⁴ He sees immediately what God has created far clearer than any of the other angels perceive it and begins to cry. Adam and Eve are so beautiful that Satan regards them 'With wonder, and could love, so lively shines / In them Divine resemblance'. It is an extraordinary event: a weeping Satan seeing deeply into the wonder that is God's creation. He sees, but rather than rejoice his eyes turn wet with grief and he fails to see this last invitation to rejoin God. This is envy, conscious of itself, at work: Satan sees the beauty all around him, sees only a hell inside himself. The contrast cannot exist in stasis; either beauty must be brought towards hell or hell brought towards beauty. Salieri and Satan choose hell. This is envy's true demand: that we screw up our eyes to the illuminating reality of God's grace and see sinfulness as the only option.

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¹ *Summa Theologiae*, I-II, q. 84, a. 4, see http://www.thinkingfaith.org/articles/20120220_1.htm

² In the root languages of Slavic, Lithuanian and Iranian, the same twinning between envy and seeing also occurs.

³ Although the final death is that of Spacey's serial killer by the detective (the sin of wrath), it is the murder of the detective's wife (based on envy towards their happy marriage), that the film uses as the true climax of evil.

⁴ *Paradise Lost*, Book IV (in particular lines 358-508)