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A Paradise Without God: Psychosexual Analysis of Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights*

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Abstract

Through analyzing Hieronymus Bosch's *The Garden of Earthly Delights* using Freud's "Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" specifically focusing on the Sexual Aberrations, will give a deeper insight into the immense sexuality used throughout the triptych. Out of Freud's "Three Essays," the focus will be on essay one, Sexual Aberrations. Sexual Aberrations are sexual fantasies or kinks that society has deemed as wrong or indifferent. The Garden of Earthly Delights has been analyzed by many different art historians using religious or historical perspectives, however, some have taken a more psychological approach to deciphering the obscure work of H. Bosch. A few art historians like Laurinda S. Dixon, and Noah Charney have mentioned Freud's psychodynamic, and unheimlich approach and the implications it had on the painting, but none have taken a deeper look at how his psychosexual theories overlap on the religious scenes. Using Freud's ideas on Sexual Aberrations, specifically inversions, animals as sexual objects, and sexual utilization of the anal opening, will further explain the exaggerated use of sexuality in Bosch's triptych. Each panel has scenes of either full-blown sexual acts or scenes that indirectly imply sex. Freud's Theories on sexuality will give a different perspective to the very erotic scenes of the Garden of Eden, Paradise, and Hell, unraveling one of the big questions, is this a Paradise without God.

Keywords: Hieronymus Bosch, Renaissance, Sigmund Freud, Psychosexual, Art history, Psychology, Paradise, Hell, Garden of Eden, Garden of earthly Delights, Leviticus, Exodus, Deuteronomy

Hieronymus Bosch born as Jheronimus van Aken a Dutch painter in 1450 and died August 9th, 1519 at the age of sixty-nine. He studied at the Flemish School of Painting and in 1488 he joined the Brotherhood of Our Lady, which is a highly respected conservative religious group.¹ He produced around forty paintings, however, only seven are signed by him.² One of his more famous works *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a triptych that was originally located in the Nassau palace of Coudenberg in Brussels, before being moved to Museo Del Prado in Spain in 1939.³ It was moved to Spain for King Philip II who was a huge collector of Bosch.⁴ It was made around 1490-1500, however, there is still a large debate surrounding the actual date as Bosch never dated his work. The triptych is split into three scenes, the Garden of Eden, Earthly Paradise, and Hell (Figure 1). There is a wide range of debate surrounding the triptych, as art historians do not know when or why it was created, however, they believe the patron was either Henry III or Engelbert II who commissioned it for the Coudenberg Palace.⁵ There is practically no written text surrounding this triptych making it next to impossible to uncover information about the painting. For this reason it has been the main interest for art historians throughout the centuries, causing controversy and hundreds of articles to be written about the triptych dating

¹ Olga's Gallery, Bosch Biography, <https://www.freeart.com/gallery/b/bosch/boschbio.html>

² Wilcox, Gardens of Earthly Delights, Literary Life, <https://literarylif.org/2017/07/15/the-garden-of-earthly-delights-by-hieronymus-bosch-c-1500/>

³ Museo Del Prado, "The Garden of Earthly Delights Triptych"
<http://libguides.westsoundacademy.org/c.php?g=457482&p=3155644>

⁴ Hieronymus Bosch Biography, Biography, <https://www.biography.com/artist/hieronymus-bosch>

⁵ Bruyn, Review, The Land of Unlikeness,
https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/42712369.pdf?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

back to the seventeenth century.⁶ Art historians have taken approaches to analyzing the triptych from the historical perspective, biblical perspective, even to the symbolic perspective, trying to uncover the actual meaning behind the triptych. Historians like Laurinda S. Dixon and Noah Charney took a psychological approach to analyzing the triptych focusing on a Jungian perspective and even touching on a Freudian perspective. Noah Charney examined *The Garden of Earthly Delights* using Freud's *unheimlich* or *Uncanny* ideas to examine the depiction of Hell in Bosch's triptych.⁷ Freud gives deep insight to dreams, the theory of unconsciousness, personality development and sexuality. Freud wrote, "Three Essays on Sexuality" that examine the ideas of individuals sexual desires and wants. Using Freud's "Three Essays on Sexuality," I will analyze Bosch's triptych examining specific scenes of animals as sexual objects, anal sex and inversions, while scrutinizing the sexual acts in the triptych, and analyzing its religious scenes through a psychosexual perspective, to reveal that Bosch's Paradise and Hell, is a representation of a world without God.

The Garden of Earthly Delights is a triptych composed of an image on the exterior and when open reveals three panels depicting The Garden of Eden, Paradise and Hell. When the triptych is closed the image presented is the what appears to be Earth in a glass globe (Figure 2). Inside the glass sphere is the Earth during either the third day of creation or the Great Flood.⁸ The world is dark and gloomy possibly indicating the darkness that is setting on the earth or representation of night. The Earth has plants, trees and some other vegetation that is unrecognizable. The sky is cloudy, and the clouds appear darkened and "scary" in a sense. The

⁶Olga's Gallery, Bosch Biography, <https://www.freeart.com/gallery/b/bosch/boschbio.html>

⁷Charney, Why Bosch Hell Feels so Real:, https://www.salon.com/2016/04/16/why_boschs_hell_feels_so_real_the_answers_lie_in_freud_jung_and_the_humble_cronut/

⁸Hickson, H. Bosch Gardens of Earthly Delights, (The outer panel), <https://smarthistory.org/bosch-the-garden-of-earthly-delights/>

world looks uninhabited by individuals and like a foreign planet. Outside the Earth's glass globe there is blackness, except for in the left-hand corner. God is sitting in the left corner, depicted in traditional Northern Europe features tying back to the medieval period. God is holding a book and wearing a crown, while sitting on what appears to be a cloud (Figure 3). Above the Earth and at the very top of the triptych, written in Latin is a bible verse from Psalms 33:9 "For he spoke and it was done; he commanded, and it stood fast." (Ipse dixit, et facta sunt: ipse mandavit, et creata sunt)⁹ Since the verse chosen has no real ties to the Third day of creation this could be the after mass of the Great Flood, like Dr. Hickson suggest. If this is the Great Flood, it could be concluded that the inside panels would be the results of an Earth without God before the flood, and the exterior panel shows the wrath of God because the world exists without him. This would mean that the triptych is inverted and instead of the story being told from the outside in, it is told from the inside out.

The interior of the triptych is sectioned into three different scenes. The left panel is the creation scene or the marriage between Adam and Eve (figure 4). There is controversy about which scene this panel may represent due to the fact that God is taking Eve's hand and giving it to Adam who is laying relaxed on the ground possibly waking from a deep sleep. In this scene Adam and Eve are both unclothed, and God is standing between the two wrapped in pinkish red garments with his left hand in the traditional blessing position and his right wrapped around Eve's arm. Adam is sitting to the left of God with one had on his leg and another on the ground. Adam looks at God with a wondering gaze as he notices God possibly gifting him Eve. Eve is standing or floating next to God, keeping her gaze down and away from ever meeting Gods or Adams eyes. Her face looks to be filled with sorrow; however, her body is being pushed out as if

⁹The Garden of Earthly Delights,
<https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/b6b8/75b3ac24cca4bd92f108466b6b54647cb890.pdf>

to seduce Adam. There are creatures all around that are hybrid animals, some examples are the three headed bird that is a representation of a phoenix, the platypus fish creature reading a book and the bird duck creature eating a frog.¹⁰ In the middle ground of the creation scene there is a fountain which could represent the female sexual anatomy, some sort of divine or the “fountain of knowledge.”¹¹ The fountain is surrounded by a pond, which is the water source for the hybrid creatures. We can see a group of mutated reptiles crawling out of the water on the right, and a unicorn and deer drinking water on the left side of the image. The background represents the heaven part of the garden bringing the divine into the Garden of Eden.¹²

The middle panel is where most of the action takes place and what gave the triptych the name *The Garden of Earthly Delights*¹³ (figure 5). This section depicts the idea of paradise, a paradise where anything is possible. This scene depicts an array of sexual actions, but no explicit sex scenes, it only insinuates and shows the foreplay of sexual scenes that may take place. This panel depicts scenes of food worship, groups of individuals bathing nude in bodies of water, individuals being fed and feeding each other food, and people involved in sexual aberration.¹⁴ The right panel, is the depiction of Hell (Figure 6). In this panel, Hell’s landscape is in the background, and in the middle ground is what looks to be some sort of purgatory.¹⁵ The middle ground is the idea of torture and the movement of man from Earth to Hell itself. The bottom part of Hell seems to be Earthier, possibly a representation of how Hell would be if it was on Earth. The torture and fetishes that are seen in this Hell seem to be somewhat tied to Earthly ideals and

¹⁰Dixon, Alchemical Imagery in Bosch, Ch. 1 P.17-18

¹¹Dixon, Alchemical Imagery in Bosch, Ch. 1 P.18

¹²Laer, Garden Of Earthly Delights Commentaries, <http://www.esotericbosch.com/Garden.htm>

¹³Hickson, H. Bosch Gardens of Earthly Delights, (The Central panel), <https://smarthistory.org/bosch-the-garden-of-earthly-delights/>

¹⁴Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” Sexual Aberrations

¹⁵Dr. Lee van Laer, Garden Of Earthly Delights Commentaries, <http://www.esotericbosch.com/Garden.htm>

not a completely made of fantasy. We can see this in the scenes of the pig dressed as a nun, the people in the bottom left hand corner fighting to the death in what could be a brothel fight, and the figures by the musical instruments. However, this idea of Hell on Earth is misguided when looking at the bird like figure eating a human figures and secreting them out through a liquid sack (figure 7). This ideal of Hell is also full of sexual aberrations that will be further analyzed through a psychosexual perspective.

Freud's "Three Essays on Sexuality" are "Sexual Aberrations," "Infantile Sexuality," and "The Transformation of Puberty." I will use the first essay "Sexual Aberrations" to analyze the triptych as this will give the most insight into the erotic scenes depicted in the triptych. Sexual aberrations are any sexual behavior deviating from the accepted norm such as sexual sadism, masochism, fetishism, inversion, zoophilia, coprophilia, and necrophilia.¹⁶ Freud further examines these sexual aberrations in his essay, describing how people enjoy and relish in the mentioned sexual acts. There are multiple areas in Bosch's triptych that sexual aberrations can be seen. I will be examining animals as sexual objects, anal sex, and inversions. Using animals as sexual objects is when an individual views an animal as something to fantasize about or uses the animal in a sexual act. Anal sex is the act of penetrating someone or being penetrated by either male genitals or an object that resembles something phallic, however, not all anal objects have to be phallic looking. Finally inversions are any persons who are attracted to the same sex or who cross dress. I have selected several areas in Bosch's triptych on the Paradise panel and the Hell panel that are excellent examples of these sexual aberrations. I have chosen to only examine two of the three panels, as the Garden of Eden does not have any sexual aberrations in the image.

¹⁶ Definition of Community dictionary by Farlex, "Sexual Aberrations" <https://www.definition-of.com/sexual+aberration>

Animals as sexual objects is defined as having intercourse with an animal or seeing an animal as a fantasy viewing but never touching. As we can see in *The Gardens of Earthly Delights* there are plenty of depiction of animals as sexual objects. Twenty-First century society calls the sexual aberration “animals as sexual object” bestiality. We can see bestiality throughout the triptych in both Paradise and Hell where the figures are having intercourse with a fish, rabbits “playing” with figures feet, cat/dog like animals “mauling” figures, and a pig dressed as a nun forcing herself on a figure (figure 8-11). Bestiality shown in Earthly paradise tells a lot about how Bosch viewed paradise. He either viewed paradise as a place that has been corrupted by human nature, or it is an “Earthly Paradise” as represented in the Bible in the books of Exodus and Leviticus¹⁷. I point out the relationship between “Earthly Paradise” and the paradise that the Israelites created at the bottom of Mount Sinai because in this paradise they were having orgies, sex with animals, same sex intercourse and worshipping a golden calf much like in the triptych. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* depicts almost all of these scenes except the scene of the golden calf is replaced by food (figure 12). The bestiality depicted in Bosch’s triptych could be misrepresented if this was a regular paradise scene, however, thinking that it could be the paradise where God does not exist would explain why bestiality is so prominent throughout paradise. God condemns bestiality in Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy.¹⁸ In each Book God forbids the act of having sex with an animal, which further supports that having bestiality present in paradise would be a paradise forbidden in God’s eyes and therefore without God. The presence of bestiality is seen in the Paradise panel through more images of a man riding a lion figure while eating out a fish, surrounded by other individuals kissing and committing other sexual sins, and/or in the scene with a man carrying a mussel and inside the muscle there are two

¹⁷The Holy Bible, Chapters Exodus 32:1-6 and Leviticus 18

¹⁸ The Bible, Book Exodus 22:19 Leviticus 18:23 / 20:15-16 Deuteronomy 27:21

individuals possibly having intercourse. (figure 13-14). The idea of bestiality in Hell is an easier concept to grasp as Hell is a person's worst nightmare and for some individuals bestiality *is* their worst nightmare. In Hell on the bottom right hand corner there is a pig dressed as a nun sexually assaulting a man. The pig wraps her limbs around the man and tries to place her snout in the man's ear. The man is attempting to push the pig off of him, his face has a look of disgust or uncertainty, while his hand appears to also be caressing the pig's face. There is a paper resting on the man's thighs with little hooks dangling off the piece of paper. This scene is being watched by a creature that is a hybrid of a bird, human, and frog, wearing a medieval knight helmet with what appears to be a pen and ink holder dangling off its beak, a severed foot off the back of the helmet and arrow in its right leg (figure 15). The nun as a pig could represent how the holiness of the Lord is viewed in Hell. In the Bible in the book of Deuteronomy it references that pigs are unclean.¹⁹ Using the thought process of a Catholic controlled country in the fifteenth century pigs could be seen as a symbol of uncleanness, this shows how nuns and holy individuals are viewed as unclean in Hell; an unclean animal sexually assaulting a nude figure would have been a representation of living Hell. Bestiality in this triptych seems more of a symbol than sexual aberrations, however, the fact that they are shown as aberrations is a clear depiction of how strongly Bosch wanted the symbolism to be perceived.

Anal sex can be used as an "inversions" way of having sex or used with males and females as a "fetish" of sexual desire. In *The Garden of Earthly Delights* we see inverted sex with the two males exploring their anal desires with the use of flowers, a man standing on a horse with one leg upside down while a bird anally penetrates him with his beak, and a man tied to a musical instrument with what appears to be a flute anally penetrating him (figure 16 -18).

¹⁹The Holy Bible, Chapter Deuteronomy 14:8

Freud describes anal sex as a loathing experience for all parties involved, however, those on the receiving end have a particularly self-loathing experience.²⁰ This may not always be the case, as seen in the middle panel where two men are exploring their sexual anal fantasy. On the bottom left hand corner of the middle panel there is a man on his knees with his head on the ground, buttocks up in the air and flowers protruding out of his anus. His head is peering out from behind one of his arms as he is looking directly at the viewer. Behind the male with the flowers protruding from his anus is another male on his knees holding flowers in his right hand and touching the anal penetrated man with his left. He is staring directly at the other male in what looks to be moments before he shoves the bunch of flowers into the male's anus (figure 19). He looks to be enjoying the anal sex, however, the male with the flowers in his anal opening seems to have no feelings at all which represents Freud's self-loathing experience. This could imply that sexual desires of pain and torture are seen as "ungodly" and deserve to be in Hell. Further explaining the idea that "Earthly Paradise" is really not a paradise but an idea of a paradise that is created by humans or Bosch's interpretation of the world. In the Bible it never explicitly states that anal sex is sinful, however, the technical term for anal sex is sodomy. One of the reasons God destroyed two cities named Sodom and Gomorrah is because of the towns people presumably raped two male angels.²¹ The term "the sin of Sodom" reference the raping of two males, which could be assumed of as anal sex. Sodom and Gomorrah were literally destroyed and everyone was turned into salt, which would mean having anal sex could be a sin and God would have destroyed the triptych's paradise. However, anal sex is also seen as psychoneurosis in the unconscious. This means all the anal sex in Paradise and Hell is an unconscious disorder that disturbs the mental state causing the individual to want what they desire. This would imply

²⁰Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality" page 45

²¹The Bible, Genesis Chapter 19

anal sex is an indulgent desire which could be a sin. Even in this case explained with Freud, anal sex is still an aberration and seen as “ungodly” in the Church’s eyes.

Inversions comprise of any sexual act with the same sex. *The Gardens of Earthly Delights* is a religious painting depicting some inversion scenes. The scenes do not explicitly show the same sex having intercourse, but they are showing the same sex touching and lingering with one another. As this painting was created in the late fifteenth, early sixteenth century same sex relations were not deemed “appropriate” in Gods and societies eyes, however, in today’s society we do not have the same views. The same sex scenes are located in the center panel, which according to some scholars, is a representation of “Earthly Paradise.” The inversion scenes are only shown with the figures’ backs to the viewer and their hands either in front of their body (out of the viewers sight). For example, in the middle ground of the paradise panel there are four women figures all lined in a row at the edge of a pond with apples on their heads and their backs facing the viewer. Each of these women figures have their hands hidden and are interlocked with one another giving the viewer the illusion that their hands are somewhere the church and God would have deemed a sexual aberration (Figure 20). These women figures would be an example of an absolute inversion where there sexual object would always be the same sex.²² The idea that same sex relations is a sin stems from misinterpretation and manipulation of some of the Bible’s verses and parables by an early catholic controlled society. Freud never condemns same sex relations, he only says that it implies independence from its object and does not depend on the stimuli of the origin.²³ This would mean that the idea of sexual inversions or having sex with the same person is seen as a sin in the churches eyes and a representation of one the ultimate sins. As stated in the King James Version of the Bible

²²Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” page 2

²³Freud, Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality” page 5, Conclusion

Leviticus 20:13 “If a man also lie with mankind, as he lieth with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination: they shall surely be put to death; their blood shall be upon them.” In KJV Deuteronomy 22:5 “The woman shall not wear that which pertaineth unto a man, neither shall a man put on a woman's garment: for all that do so are abomination unto the Lord thy God.” These are specific cherry-picked examples of how inversions are seen in the Churches of the Lords eyes. If this is the case then why are they depicted in the Paradise that is supposed to be a “holy paradise,” unless paradise is not holy at all. Freud never states that inversions are sins or a mental disorder which means that it is not necessarily wrong in societies eyes, only the eyes of the church. Since inversions were looked down upon, and this is a holy triptych, the thought process behind inversions as an abomination would represent the idea this Paradise has removed all ideals of God. Inverted sex was happening in the Bible at Mount Sinai and in Sodom and Gomorrah, which means that the outside of the triptych could be the destruction and flood wiping away all sins and actions that were acted upon in the Paradise without God.

Bosch triptych has sex, bestiality, anal, fantasy, inversions and many more “ungodly” sexual acts. This triptych was made to be viewed in a church as a conversational piece for nobility.²⁴ Since the high standard of the church was to show what to do to become godlier, showing a triptych with sin is the complete opposite, thus we could assume it shows how not to sin. The triptych starts off with the Garden of Eden and the creation of Adam and Eve and ends in Hell with pigs dressed as nuns sexually assaulting men. The exterior panel is possibly the Great Flood which God made to wash away all the sinful people on Earth and start new again. The idea of God starting over is exactly what the triptych is inadvertently depicting, which is the start of the world and how badly the world collapsed upon itself once the morals of God were

²⁴Bruyn, Review, he Land of Unlikeness, https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/42712369.pdf?seq=1#page_scan_tab_contents

removed. Thus, this would be Paradise as seen without the belief in God. This triptych is filled with sex and desires of all types, however the sexual desires that were once seen as sinful are now seen as normal kinks that everyday individuals enjoy. Now our 21st century perceptions have shifted the thought process that “sinful” sexual acts like inversions, and anal sex are the everyday norm. We now call inversions the LGBTQ+ community, anal sex is an act we sell products for and our world is actively teaching individuals about STI’s. *The Garden of Earthly Delights* is a triptych with 15th century beliefs of the Catholic Church, and even though today we would not see what is happening in the painting as a world without God, the old fashioned concepts of sex and marriage, made what was happening in the triptych viewed as taboo. Our world has changed and these concepts and beliefs have changed with them.

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Figure 1 – “The Garden of Earthly Delight” open



Figure 2 – When the triptych is closed depicting either the third day of creation or the Great Flood



Figure 3 God in the left-hand corner of the closed panels

Figure 4 – The Garden of Eden (left panel when triptych is open)

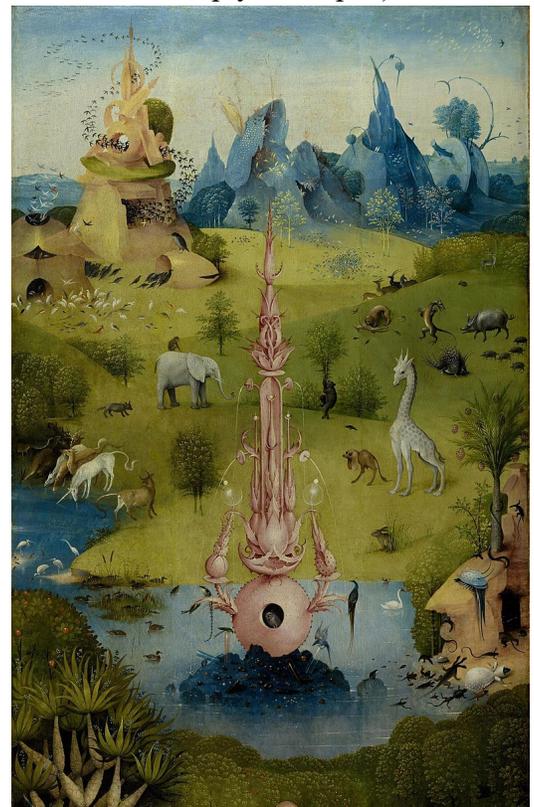


Figure 5 – Earthly Paradise (middle panel when triptych is open)



Figure 6 – Hell (right panel when triptych is open)



Figure 7- bird like figure in the Hell's panel



Figure 8 Beastility in the middle panel - figures are having intercourse with a fish

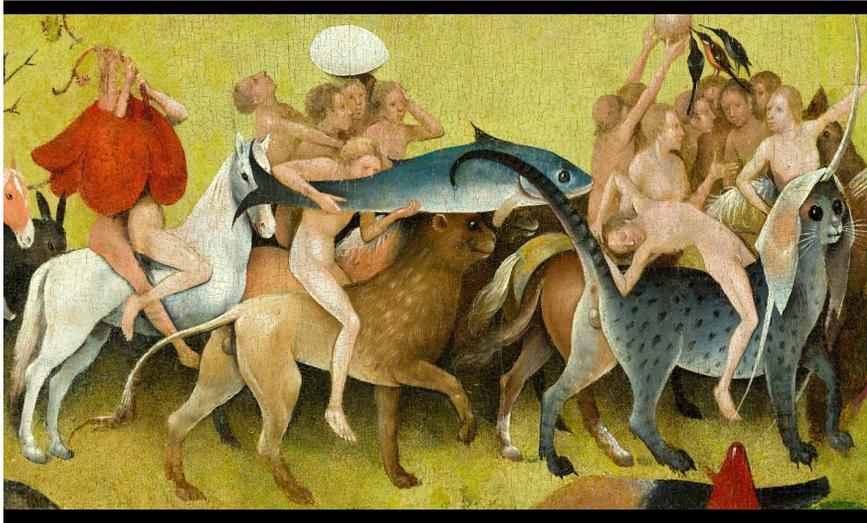


Figure 9 - Beastility in the middle rabbits “playing” with figures feet



Figure 10 - Beastility in the middle - cat/dog like animals “malling” figures



Figure 11 - Beastility in the middle - a pig dressed as a nun forcing herself on a figure



Figure 12 – Middle panel - In circle in top part of image are individuals worshipping fruit much like the Golden Calf



Figure 13 - Beastility in the middle panel - figures are having intercourse with a fish

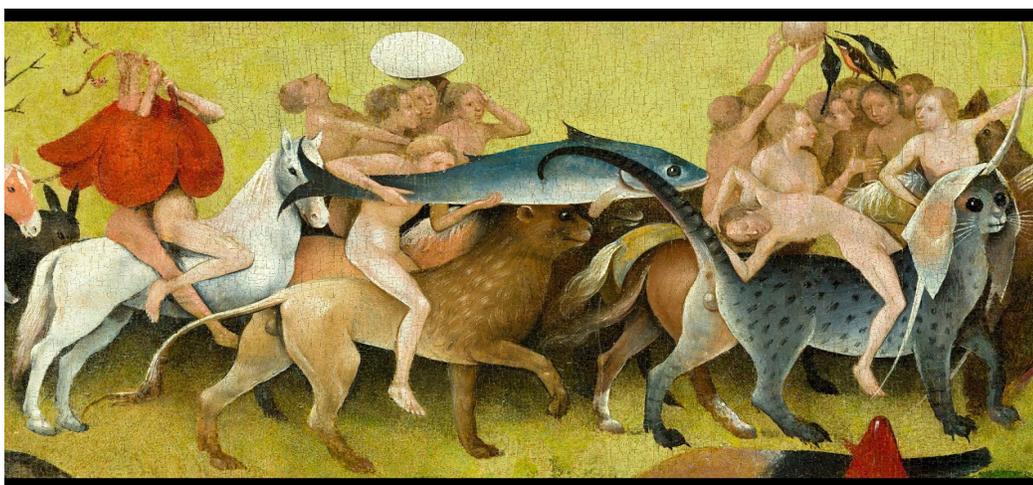


Figure 14 - Beastility in the middle panel - figures are having intercourse inside a mussel

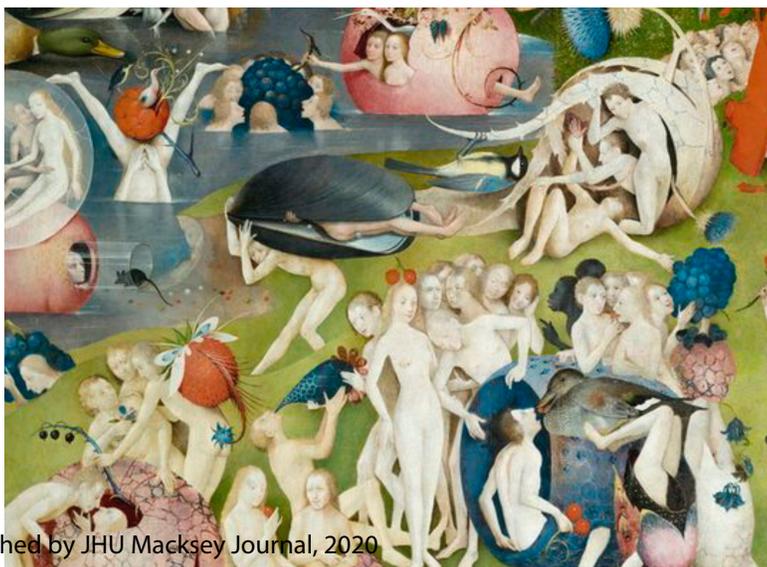


Figure 15 – Animals as sexual objects in Hell's Panel - Nun forcing herself on a male figure while a hybrid creature in a metal helmet watches



Figure 16 – Anal sex in the middle panel – two men exploring their sexual desires with flowers



Figure 17 – Anal Sex in the middle panel – Man standing on horse being penetrated



Figure 18- Anal sex in Hell's panel – man tied to a flute being penetrated



Figure 19 – Anal sex in the middle panel – two men exploring their sexual desires with flowers penetrating one man



Figure 20 – inversions Middle panel – nude women hiding their hands from the viewer

