

Verity: An Allegory For Life

*Greg Lookerse**

ABSTRACT: Damien Hirst has proclaimed about his 2012 public sculpture, "Verity is an allegory for truth and justice." Yet there is no agreed-upon interpretation of this sculptural allegory. Through art historical research on Degas, the Old Bailey, and the genre of grotesques, this article posits an interpretation of the artwork. Verity is a pro-life sculpture that condemns the culture of injustice in the UK today.

* Greg Lookerse (USA, b. 1987) is an interdisciplinary artist, author and educator based in West Michigan. Lookerse makes mixed media drawings, installations, and performances that question the nature of sacred objects. "The studio is a wrestling ring. I see something holy, an icon, temple architecture, or religious practices, and I cannot understand why these things are sacred instead of mundane. In order to understand them, I have to dissect them, rearrange them, often finding something new."

Born and raised in Yucaipa, California, Lookerse received his BFA from Biola University (2009) and his MFA from The School of the Museum of Fine Arts Boston at Tufts University (2014). He has had solo exhibitions at A R E A Gallery in Boston; The Fruitlands Museum in Harvard, Massachusetts; The Piano Craft Gallery in Boston; and Kingston Gallery in Boston. His epistolary novel *Notes from Underwater*, which includes 180 drawings, was published by Scapegoat. He has received prestigious grants and awards including the Travel Fellowship at the Museum of Fine Arts Boston. His work is included in the exhibition Here After, at the Bridge Project in Los Angeles. His studio is at Hope College in Holland, Michigan.

A 66.43-FOOT SCULPTURE OF A NUDE WOMAN has been standing in the harbor of Ilfracombe, Devon, in the UK since October of 2012.

It is on loan from the artist Damien Hirst until 2032. Hirst is a living "blue chip" artist. His website is currently down, but using the "wayback machine" I was able to find this quote describing the work on his previous website:

"Verity is an allegory for truth and justice. Her stance is taken from Edgar Degas' "Little Dancer of Fourteen Years" (c. 1881). An anatomical cross-section of her head and torso reveals her skull and the developing fetus inside her womb. Verity stands on a base of scattered legal books and holds the traditional symbols of Justice—a sword and scales. The scales are hidden and off-balance behind her back, whilst her sword is held confidently in her upstretched [sic] arm."¹

I would add a few more details, specifically that the figure is facing east and that its style is anatomically correct insofar as a 66-foot-tall sculpture can be. Also, I will emphasize that the artist himself has called the piece an "allegory for truth and justice."

This year will be ten years since the sculpture was erected. It has produced commerce and controversy. As with most public art, very little attention has been given to this artwork beyond the initial controversy surrounding its erection. Here is a small sampling of public comments and reporting regarding the artwork:

¹ Hirst, Damien. *Verity*. 4 Nov. 2013, <https://web.archive.org/web/20211105083528/https://www.damienhirst.com/verity>

John Jones on the artist in *The Guardian*, October 15, 2013: "Once, Hirst had real wit, imagination and originality. But that has been eclipsed by his incredible financial career, which has turned him into something genuinely dangerous. Britain has writers and scientists of world standing, but art has become our contemporary cultural signature and Hirst our most renowned creative figure. As such, he sends out a very clear message that art is about making money from nothing."²

Devon, the village where the statue is standing, has its own online paper, Devonlive.com. Here are two comments they solicited from locals regarding the statue in 2012:

"I'm totally against it. I don't like it. I don't think it's going to benefit the people of Ilfracombe and I think it's ugly."³

Another said, "It's totally degrading towards women."⁴

Art critic David Lee similarly was not a fan, so much so that he went on *Sky News* in 2012 to say: "It's a monument to his ego, it's all about money and celebrity and absolutely nothing to do with art—but that's Damien Hirst for you, you expect that with him."⁵

Another critic, Jonathan Jones, said:

The sculpture as a sculpture has no merit at all. It's a figure of justice, its title is truth, and if there were really any justice or truth in the contemporary art world, then Hirst would have been exposed as a laughable charlatan ages ago.⁶

At least Mr. Jones attempted to interpret the allegory, unlike most.

More recently I found this from Jonathan McAloon at elephant.art on Jan 6, 2019:

² Jones, Jonathan. "Is Damien Hirst the Right Person to Mentor Britain's Young?" *The Guardian*, 15 Oct. 2013, www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/jonathanjonesblog/2013/oct/15/damien-hirst-mentor-future-generation-art-prize

³ Joel Cooper, "Five years of *Verity*: How Damien Hirst's 'Marmite' statue put Ilfracombe on the map." Devonlive, 9 Oct, 2017, <https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/five-years-verity-how-damien-597690>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Quoted in <https://www.devonlive.com/news/devon-news/five-years-verity-how-damien-597690>. Accessed 5.10.23.

⁶ Ibid.

Meant to stand for rebirth and regeneration, which it certainly did for a time, it now could equally be seen as the false promise of gentrification. Standing as it does, looking out to sea with its sword up high, it could soon also symbolize the ugly insularity of Britain in a post-Brexit future, shafted by its own optimism. Damien Hirst has always liked his symbolism and allegory on a massive, almost impersonal scale. His best and worst works beg to be loaded with meaning: you can make them stand for whatever you like, as long as the themes are broad and unsubtle. *Verity* takes this to its furthest extreme.⁷

Few of these critics have even attempted to take the artist at his word and attempt to interpret the allegory. Their criticism is most often not of the work but of the artist and his antics. Why?

Damien Hirst, to say the least, is a polarizing figure in the art world. He is a businessman, a marketer, a jester, and perhaps an artist. His bombastic artwork often requires more capital to produce than any other artworks in existence, and his main tactic is that of the spectacle.

Hirst once described this method in an interview with Gordon Burn:

“It’s, like, if a tree falls down on your land, or in your street, it looks... bigger. You drive to work every day, everything’s the same, you know where you are. Then one day you drive to work, and a tree’s fallen down, and you go, ‘Fucking hell!’ You look at the tree and it’s massive. You never notice it until it falls down. Artists do that!”⁸

From a *Guardian* interview with John Jones, February 18, 2021:

“I much prefer it when you’ve got this neglected thing like a sheep, which is meat—you’re thinking why am I feeling empathy? That’s a great thing because you should. Because it’s not just meat.” That image of the ‘neglected’ carcass of a sheep recalls his 1994 work *Away from the Flock*, a sheep in a vitrine with

⁷ McAloon, Jonathan, “Damien Hirst’s *Verity* Is the Public Sculpture We Deserve.” *Elephant.art*, 6 Jan. 2019, <https://elephant.art/damien-hirst-verity-publicsculpture-brexit/>

⁸ Lubbock, Tom. “Hirst’s Thirst for Life.” *Evening Standard*, 11 Apr. 2012, <https://www.standard.co.uk/showbiz/hirst-s-thirst-for-life-6320005.html>

roots deep in Christian imagery. Catholicism, he confesses, pervades how he sees things.⁹

The antics of this artist raise the question: can and should this artist be taken seriously? I must confess I never took him seriously until Mike Rippy, Digital & Special Projects Manager at the Snite Museum at Notre Dame, asked me to discuss a recent exhibition of his work during a Scapegoat podcast. I found the conversation enlightening, but I was still not that interested in Hirst. Then Mike asked me to examine *Verity* for this conference.

I was reluctant, not because I was not interested in Hirst, but I too believed his work was trite. For Mike's sake I would offer up my humble interpretation of this artwork, but I would not be excited about it.

I started with what I knew about the artwork and the artist, in order to do as little work as possible.

I knew Hirst was interested in reality. I knew he often uses heavy-handed symbolism and imagery. I could see that the sculpture is a young female who has revealed, without room for doubt, that she is to be a mother, and that she is holding up the sword of justice in a triumphant manner. I decided I could read this sculpture as a very, "the future is female" message but with a curve ball bit of motherly bias and protection. In fact, the artwork could be interpreted as a call for a reformation of Western justice systems to embrace the qualities of a nurturing and protective mother in order to foster a culture of life.

That sounded nice, and honestly, I am still partially satisfied with that interpretation. I left it at that for months, but it was not sitting right with me. I was not giving the devil his due, and I knew that I was not giving this sculpture its due. While I was satisfied in part, I was confronted by my own ignorance while watching a movie of all things.

I would like to interject a note before I continue regarding my methods and philosophy of interpreting artworks.

⁹ Jones, Jonathan. "Damien Hirst: 'I flirted with the idea of pickling people.'" *The Guardian*, 8 Feb. 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2021/feb/18/damien-hirst-i-flirted-with-the-idea-of-pickling-people>

The artist is not the authority on what an artwork means. Artists often make without knowing what they are making, and they certainly cannot predict every interpretation the public will see in their work. Artworks take on their own meaning, which can change over time. On top of that, an artwork can be interpreted differently by different viewers in light of their personal histories. This multitude of interpretations is one of the positive consequences of postmodernity, and it is true to some extent. But Damien Hirst himself claims this artwork is an allegory. Allegories mean specific things, and not all artworks are allegories. When Orwell wrote *Animal Farm*, he had a specific interpretation in mind; otherwise, the allegory would not work. It would be a strange story of intelligent but corrupt farm animals.

I must ask, what is the meaning of this allegory? Is the artist lying? Is the cloak of “allegory” being laid over this statue in order to make a relatively uninteresting sculpture seem more meaningful than it really is?

To address this question, let me turn to the three direct art historical references that I have found as I dove deeper into the figurative waters surrounding this sculpture.

The first is Old Bailey in London. The second, mentioned by the artist himself, is the Degas sculpture. The third is a genre of art referred to as grotesques.



Photo: Tony Hisgett. CCA 2.0 Generic. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons

What movie was it that allowed me to see my ignorance? *V for Vendetta*. As we are introduced to the anti-authoritarian terrorist V, he performs a demolition of the Old Bailey. That is the first public court in London. Right before he demolishes the court, the film displays the inscription that is written above the door of the main entrance to the court which reads:

“Defend the children of the poor & punish the wrongdoer.”



Photo by Tony Hisgett. CCA 2.0 Generic. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

The overt reference to defending children caught me off guard. The need for a public justice system not beholden to a monarch had never quite dawned on me before. It was not the children of the rich, the royal, or the noble who needed justice; it was the children of the poor.

Specifically, they needed a Justice who is not blind, who stands in the shape of a cross, who carries impartial scales and holds a double-edged English longsword to punish wrongdoers.



Photo: M.T. Abraham Center, CCA 3.0. Public domain via Wikimedia Commons.

The second historical reference is Degas's little dancer. Being well studied in art history, I knew that Degas was a womanizing man who objectified young girls much like the clients who solicited the Parisian ballet dancers as prostitutes. Why else would a man of his age hang around the young girls' dressing rooms and bathrooms?

Then as I was walking through the library at Hope College, I saw a book with elegant pink lettering that said *Degas* on the spine. There I found that the original statue was never cast in bronze like the ones you see littered around the globe.

The original was wax, much like delicate religious statues. The wax was more flesh-like and would need to be protected, compared to the durable bronze of the replicas I have seen. The dancer is in what is called the fourth position, which is a position of rest. I found the views of historians Norma Broude and Ana Magalhaes illuminating.

Broude argued in 1977 that Degas was not a misogynist but was in fact heartbroken by the ways the girls of the Opera de Paris were treated. Hence, he could not portray the ballerina in a stereotypical manner; rather, “he

wanted to show her as she was: fragile, semi-translucent, and conforming to the will of a predator.”¹⁰ Magalhaes writes:

The prostitution of ballerinas from the backstage of the Opera de Paris marked the end of the romantic ballet era and the period of decline that followed... Little Dancer Aged Fourteen is, therefore, a symptom of its time, in which budding ballerinas entered an environment of deprivation and were expected to use their bodies for the delight of rich Parisian men, both on stage and in bed.¹¹

Magalhaes goes so far to respond to a sonnet that Degas wrote about the wax work by saying that Degas felt this new being, “[was], therefore, clearly a degenerate girl destined to damnation and prostitution.”¹²

It is possible that Degas died a virgin and was actually trying to shine a light on the lies of the Opera de Paris, which promised to lift poor girls up socially and economically via their studies and skills in elegance. In reality, it preyed upon those girls, just as we have recently seen Hollywood prey upon young women.

Finally, there is the grotesque genre of art which is an inverse of the beloved and famed cabinets of curiosities. Within the genre we find the sideshow horrors of birth defects, two-headed sheep, and organs submerged in formaldehyde. Hirst is the most famous contemporary star of this genre today, where he confronts viewers with the disgusting biological truth of reality. Like a fallen tree that demands you notice its size.

What do all of these references add up to?

The poor fourteen-year-old victim of sexual abuse has grown up. She now faces the natural consequences of her abuse, pregnancy. She stands atop the law and has seemingly flayed her own skin to reveal the absolute reality of the evil she has suffered. Behind her back the scales are tipped. In her left hand she raises an English longsword. She is not blind, but her skinned eye is closed. Yet, her skinless eye is open. She is at rest, her child is flipped

¹⁰ “Degas’s Misogyny,” *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 59 (1977), 95-107. Accessed at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3049600>. 8 June 2022.

¹¹ *Degas: Dance, Politics and Society*. Eds. Adriano Pedrosa and Fernando Oliva (Sao Paulo: DelMonico Books/Museu de Arte de São Paulo, 2021).

¹² *Ibid.*

upside down, primed for birth. What action will she take next as she looks east?

Well, actually, she doesn't look due east. She is looking in an easterly direction as can be observed in this screen capture from Google Earth:



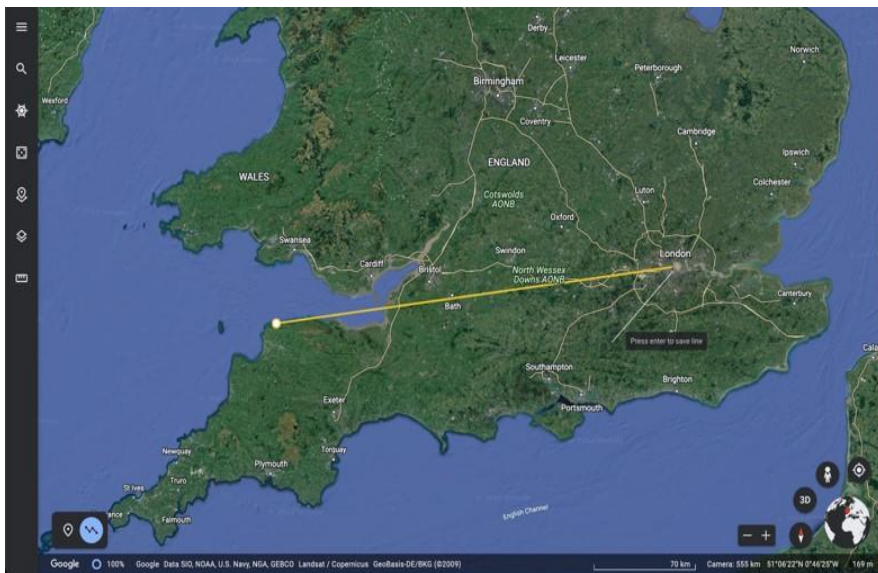
Source: "Ilfracombe, Devon." 51° 12'37" N and 4° 06'87" W. **Google Earth.** 5.31.20. Accessed 4.20.22.

When looking at satellite images, one can notice that she doesn't look due east, and she does not line up with the pier that juts out in front of her. Where is she looking?

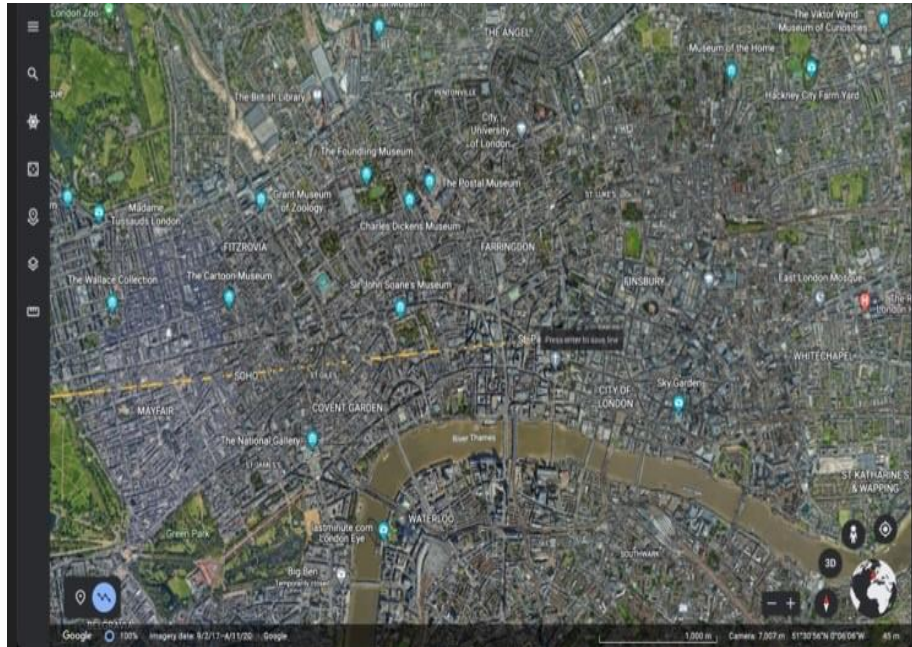
One of Google Earth's features is the ability to draw lines between landmarks. On a hunch I decided to draw a line from Verity to Justice atop Old Bailey.



Source: "Harbor, Ilfracombe, Devon." 51°12'38" N and 4° 6'39" W. **Google Earth**. 5.30.20. Accessed 4.20.22.



Source: "Southern England." 51°06'22" N and 4° 46'35" W. **Google Earth**. Data: SIO NOAA U.S. Navy NGA GEBCO Landsat/Copernicus GeoBasis-DE/BKG. (© 2009). Accessed 4.20.22.



Source: "London." 51° 30' 56" N and 0° 06' 06" W. **Google Earth.** 9.2.17. Accessed 4.11.20.



Source: "Central London." 51° 30' 54" N and 0° 06' 12" W. **Google Earth.** 9.2.17. 5.22.20.

It appears that Verity faces the Old Bailey.

This victim of abuse looks to justice, who has given up her punishing sword and scales. Now from the foundation of the books of the law she has a choice. Will the children of the poor be defended?

True justice, God's justice, cannot be blind. Perhaps we should prefer that human justice be blind. But the truth of Verity is that a victim of abuse hides tipped scales behind her back while wielding power to punish, and the only possible victim is the baby she is about to deliver.

I believe Hirst knew exactly what he was doing, but no one has taken him at his word because he comes off like a fool.

On November 2, 2012, Hirst's website noted that, "Without the perfect equilibrium enacted by the scales, the sword becomes a dangerous instrument of power, rather than justice."¹³

The scales are tipped in the hands of the victim who stands atop the law and wields power, not justice. The victim becomes the victimizer.

¹³ Hirst, Damien. "Fabrication." Damienhirst.com, 2 Nov. 2012, <https://web.archive.org/web/20190602130803/http://www.damienhirst.com/news/2012/fabrication>. Accessed 14 July 2022.