

A NEW EDITION OF DANTE'S *COMMEDIA*:  
PETER GREENAWAY AND  
TOM PHILLIPS' *A T.V. DANTE*

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In this century, film-makers were just as challenged as the fourteenth century miniaturists by the task of reinterpreting Dante's *Commedia*. At the beginning of the century, film-makers did not have the technology that exists today, but all the same, they managed to create masterpieces using colorless, soundless film. Film gave Dante's poem new life; it made it possible to animate the characters, something that the plastic arts could not offer. The cinema gave birth to a new medium of interpretation for Dante's work.

This study will analyze how the medieval text has been cinematographically transformed; how the verses have gone through the process of being visually conceptualized as images in the artist's mind, eventually being interpreted with actors, costumes and special effects. I will briefly examine the early silent versions of the *Commedia* for their literal interpretations; however, my main focus will be on *A T.V. Dante*, the Peter Greenaway/ Tom Phillips 1988 television version, because of its unique genre. Rather than being another interpretation of the *Commedia*, I would suggest that *A T.V. Dante* is a new edition of Dante's poem, a "text" that is viewed, rather than read.

Of the many Dante films produced at the beginning of the twentieth century, most critics agree that the earliest, the 1909 version of Dante's *Inferno*, directed by Francesco Bertolini and Adolfo Padovan, is the best. The film premiered in Naples at the Mercadante Theater on 1 March, 1911, and was reviewed by such notable figures as Roberto Bracco and Matilde Serao. Bracco felt that it was too beautiful for the mainstream; Serao wrote, in her critique of the film published in *Il Giorno*, that it was "un grande spettacolo...e se Gustavo Doré ha scritto con la matita del disegnatore il miglior commento grafico al divino poema, questa cinematografia ha fatto rivivere l'opera di Doré".<sup>1</sup>

Many film critics, including Aldo Bernardini agree that the setting, costumes, camera angles and lighting in Bertolini and Padovan's version of the *Inferno* significantly reflect Doré's interpretation. Bernardini feels that the similarities between the film and Doré's illustrations are comforting to the viewer because of their widespread popularity (98).

This "borrowing" of Doré's images could also be viewed as a lack of originality on the part of the directors; perhaps this would be the case if the film were merely a set of animated copies of Doré's

illustrations. However, it is not. The directors of the film produced a creative and original work, particularly through their creation of three "flashback" scenes. These scenes, complete enough in themselves to be autonomous films, add a new dimension of narration to three particular episodes of the *Commedia*: Francesca da Rimini's tale of deception, Pier delle Vigne's account of political morals, and count Ugolino's story of betrayal. When we read the *Commedia*, we are presented with the characters narrating their stories from their particular circle of hell; we are transported into the characters' worlds through their discourse. However, the film-makers, being readers themselves, have interpreted these words by transporting the viewers into the minds of the sinners through the three flashback scenes.

The Bertolini/Padovan film was the first of many directly dealing with the *Commedia*. Because of its great success at the beginning of the century, other film-makers produced their own versions of Dante's poem. The Helios-Film production company made a film version of the entire *Commedia* in 1912. In the same year, Mario Caserini came out with *Dante and Beatrice*. In 1922 another film highly inspired by the *Inferno* was made by director Valentino Soldati who called his version *Dante nella vita dei tempi suoi*.<sup>2</sup> However, none of these projects was well received.

Later, with the invention of sound movies, several other versions of the poem were created. Most of them, however, were thematic interpretations of the poem. Other than the silent films from the beginning of the twentieth century, no other direct adaptations were made until 1988 when Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips released their version.

*A T.V. Dante*, the Greenaway/Phillips version of Dante's *Inferno*, is a project made for the BBC, divided into eight episodes, each interpreting a canto. The videos appear similar to Greenaway's *Prospero's Books*, the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, in that screens appear in the middle of other screens to produce a "layered" look. As Greenaway stated in a 1990 interview, the collage of images serves to "[e]nluminer à la manière des moines qui enluminaient un manuscrit" (26). Greenaway and Phillips illuminate the text by amalgamating traditional iconography, popular art, media images, and the points of view of many twentieth century scholars.<sup>3</sup> While the infernal images and characters appear on the screen, smaller screens open in different positions, each containing an authority glossing the particular verse that is being pictorially represented at the time. Often, the main screen seems ready to explode with images, music, words, and colors.

Just as it is necessary to consider the illustrations of Gustave Doré in order to fully understand the 1909 Bertolini/Padovan version, so must we look at pre-existing artistic interpretations in order to note relationships between these and the 1988 film. The Greenaway/Phillips version seems to resemble only one particular set of illustrations of the *Inferno*: Tom Phillips' own illustrations. Phillips acted not only as co-director of the series, but also as artistic director, in that many of the images seen in the video are from his own illustrated translation of the *Inferno*.

Although the images are abstract in appearance, they contain many ancient icons and symbols which give the pictures a timeless feel. Phillips was concerned with the issue of timelessness; he felt that "however remote in epoch and name" the characters were real people who could be recognized by the spectator as part of his/her everyday life (283).

Phillips introduces *A T.V. Dante* by referring to the *Inferno* as a "blank" because he sees so many possible interpretations; however, I would suggest that *A T.V. Dante* goes a step further: it is not merely a new interpretation of the *Commedia* but a vivification of Dante's masterpiece filled with images, recited poetry, and commentary. The screen becomes the text of the *Commedia*, offering a new edition of Dante's verses rather than simply a new interpretation.

We first see Dante as a gilded bust of the famous Florentine poet. This bust slowly metamorphoses into Dante, the narrator, played by Bob Peck, a large-nosed man of about thirty-five years. Although his aquiline features call to mind the commonly recognized physiognomy of Dante, we never see him in his traditional flowing robes and laurel crown. His face is the only part of his body shown on the screen and his only means of expression. At this point, Dante begins to narrate his journey through the underworld, reciting the familiar opening lines of the *Commedia*.

The allegory in the introductory canto of the *Inferno* is represented by images on the screen, and commented upon by the "authorities". The dark wood is represented as a city by night with many lights flashing and cars driving by. The three beasts are represented literally through photographic images superimposed upon one another, yet they are interpreted allegorically through sounds and words. While the leopard prances across the screen, David Attenborough appears in a small screen explaining the symbolic value of the animal. As he utters the words "sensual lust" we hear a woman laughing provocatively and libidinally. When the lion appears on the screen, marching music can be heard in the background. The she-wolf is represented as a

computerized image of the animal trotting. After hearing David Attenborough's interpretative comments, Tom Phillips reappears on the screen, this time to explain the allegorical value behind the three beasts.

Phillips is acting as a note on the video-text. Along with Attenborough and the other "authorities," Phillips adds his comments, just as all the great Dante commentators have done with the text of the *Commedia*. The "video notes" appear throughout the eight episodes, explaining not only the allegorical level, but also adding historical facts, and background information. They complement the video-text by adding an explanatory dimension not present in most visual adaptations of literary works.

Although the Greenaway/Phillips version of the *Inferno* contains many original images, it remains quite faithful to Dante's text. Greenaway and Phillips do not attempt to illuminate any of Dante's adumbrated verses. For example, the mysterious hound in the first canto is shown as a computerized reproduction of a dog with fire projected onto it. Phillips intervenes in a "video note" explaining that no one knows exactly what the hound was supposed to represent. He mentions how Italians have interpreted the hound over the years: "Napoleon, Mussolini, Gramsci, Garibaldi", but does not venture to define the hound for fear of being unfaithful to the text.

Another example of an unsolved mystery recreated by Greenaway and Phillips can be found in Canto II: the "gentle lady". This scene is composed of a triangle of flames with one figure at each vertex. The "gentle lady" is on the top of the triangle, while Lucy and Beatrice are on the bottom, one on each side. Curiously, in Greenaway and Phillips' interpretation, Susan Wooldridge plays the roles of both Lucy and the "gentle lady". The only apparent difference in the actress' portrayal of Lucy and the "gentle lady" is that as the "gentle lady" she stares straight into the camera, and when she is Lucy her eyes are closed.

This, however, does not explain why Greenaway and Phillips would choose the same actress to play both the "gentle lady" and Lucy. Greenaway and Phillips were certainly not trying to persuade the viewers that these two persons were one and the same. Instead, I would suggest that their intention was to leave unexplained an issue that has never been explained. For centuries, critics have been proposing many possible theories as to the exact identity of the "donna gentile". However, no one can be completely certain. The most common theory in Dante scholarship regarding the identity of the "donna gentile" is that she was the Virgin Mary. Greenaway and

Phillips suggest this as a possibility by inserting a note by theologian Malcom Wren in which he discusses the role of the Virgin Mary in the Catholic faith. He does not disclose the identity of the "gentle lady"; however, while Wren is speaking, the words "AVE AVE" are projected onto the background. This suggests that Greenaway and Phillips believe that the "gentle lady" is the Virgin Mary. However, towards the end of Wren's note, the letters of the words "AVE AVE" reverse to form "EVA EVA". This device undermines the validity of the "gentle lady's" identity as the Virgin Mary. Seeing "EVA" flashed on the screen reminds us of Eve, the first woman. However, the film-makers were not suggesting that Dante had Eve in mind when he wrote of the "donna gentile"; this is one of the great cruces of the *Commedia* and it remains so in Greenaway and Phillips' edition. The directors are deliberately elusive in dealing with these enigmas. Neither Greenaway nor Phillips could possibly know the answer to the mysteries of the *Commedia*, and being aware of this, they offer a few suggestive images in their version and leave the interpretation to the viewer.

The quality of Dante's verses is skillfully captured by the directors in striking and thought provoking images. In the third episode of *A T.V. Dante*, Greenaway and Phillips visually interpret the scene in which Charon ferries the souls across the Acheron into hell "proper". In *Inferno* Canto III, when Dante asks Virgil about the identity and sins of the souls waiting by the bank, Virgil answers "non ragioniam di lor, ma guarda e passa" (*Inf.* III, v.51). Virgil stresses to Dante the insignificance of these people because of their lack of motivation in life. In *A T.V. Dante*, this scene is represented by a large volume full of names being blotted out. Slowly this image fades and figures of marching people are superimposed onto other scenes of crowds and multitudes. Greenaway and Phillips suggest in this scene the incredibly large number of people who live their lives without commitment and without contributing anything to mankind. These are the names being blotted out of the "volume of life", the people who will be forgotten.

The image at the end of this canto is also visually suggestive of Dante's words. The famous simile of the autumn leaves: "Come d'autunno si levan le foglie" is beautifully reenacted, not with a tree losing its leaves, but rather with the souls moving like leaves falling from a tree. At the beginning of the simile the screen is full of naked bodies: the souls. As Dante, the narrator, makes the comparison between the soul's movement and that of the leaves falling, the souls begin to "fall" slowly towards the boat: towards their destiny.

The last scene that I would like to discuss is the Paolo and Francesca scene, not only because of its popularity among readers over

the centuries, but also because of the skillful illuminating techniques used in *A T.V. Dante*. Greenaway and Phillips produce a scene faithful to the text. Every time Francesca utters the word "love", the word ignites on the screen in vibrant red flames. Slowly the flames extinguish only to reignite every time she repeats the word. This physical manifestation of the word "love" reflects its stress in the text by Dante. The fire suggests the type of love to which Francesca is referring: her reason for being doomed. It was because of her "flaming" passions that she ended up in hell. As Francesca continues telling her story, red birds (the other souls) fly throughout the screen, and the background is very dark (this was the circle described by Dante "d'ogne luce muto"). When Francesca finishes her tale, the word "EVE" is shown on the screen in red letters, obviously a reference to the story of Adam and Eve, and their falling from grace. Even without the word "EVE" flashing on the screen, Francesca's strength is reminiscent of Eve's presumptuous attitude towards God. Paolo reminds us of Adam: he is shown here as a weak man who "surrendered" to sin. These parallels between Francesca's story and that of Adam and Eve -or humanity- is another example of how Greenaway and Phillips take Dante's text and stress the universal truths within it.

The task of transforming Dante's poem into a film or video is not a simple one. Complications arise easily because of the poem's polysemous quality. However, this is not a problem that only film-makers have faced. If we consult the earliest Dante commentaries we will find no uniformity in their interpretations of the verses. However, editions continue to be produced over the centuries, each offering new insights into Dante's text. *A T.V. Dante* uses a new medium for presenting the divine poem to the public; it is a faithful audio-visual edition of the text complete with notes, commentaries and suggestive images.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Gian Piero Brunetta, *Storia del cinema italiano 1895-1945*, (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 1979) 144.

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed list of film versions of the *Commedia*, see Alfredo Barbina, "Cinema," *Enciclopedia Dantesca*, 1970.

<sup>3</sup> The "authorities" are a group of scholars who appear in the film giving their points of view on particular words and ideas that may be unclear to the "reader-viewer". The "authorities" include a theologian, a naturalist, a cosmologist, a classicist, etc.

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