

CINEMA

DANTE AS POLITICAL VISIONARY IN CONTEMPORARY CINEMA:
SEAN MEREDITH'S *DANTE'S INFERNO* AND
JEAN-LUC GODARD'S *NOTRE MUSIQUE*

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A recent US video (2007), *Dante's Inferno*, a puppet show based on nineteenth-century paper puppetry, with the voices of Dermot Mulroney and James Cromwell, directed by Sean Meredith, screenplay by Paul Zaboom, Sandow Birk, and Sean Meredith¹, won the Staff Award for Best Feature Film in the 2007 San Francisco Independent Film Festival, and the Spirit of Underground Award at the Boston Underground Film Festival. Focusing on this US film version, with references also to Jean-Luc Godard's *Notre Musique*, this essay examines the ways in which Dante's poem has been used to launch political criticism and to contemplate war in the twentieth century. Dante's poem, here transformed into satire (US film) or meditation on history (Godard), provides the matrix for a detailed critique of contemporary politics and its relationship to personal ethics. These works represent a decided shift away from the use of Dante to provide a narrowly defined good versus evil moral analysis of events. In the case of the US video, Dante's poem offers a systematic matrix through which to satirize contemporary US politics. In the case of Godard's film, we have a concrete example of Gilles Deleuze's idea of the movement from representation to contemplation through cinema as the director leads us to confront the horror of war.

After the rediscovery of Dante in the late eighteenth century, there was an explosion of works inspired by Dante's *Vita Nuova* and *Commedia* in high or popular Italian literature and culture and in all the European literatures, as well as in American literature, and among Indian and Japanese writers. After three centuries in which Dante had been more or less ignored in favor of Renaissance and Neo-Classical notions of poetry and art, in the medievalizing context of the nineteenth century, European Romantic poets viewed Dante as a neo-gothic genius, imitating his work and adopting romanticized notions of lyric love poetry. In Italy, the new interest in Dante was primarily political, which is hardly surprising given the revolutionary

aspirations of the times, and Dante's own passionate civic commitments and prophetic mission in the *Commedia*. These aspects of Dante were perfectly suited to the aspirations of the Italian Risorgimento². Poetry and politics were tightly linked during the height of the Italian nationalist movement as poets became almost "guardians and even creators of national identity"³.

Outside of Italy, this political Dante is less notable, although Italy's nationalism in the nineteenth century and the urge for unification with Dante as the saint of a national civil religion certainly inspired Indian writers like Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824-1873), Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), and Aurobindo Ghose (1872-1950)⁴. Dante's literary reception outside Italy in this period led to translations of the *Commedia* into the European languages and to the transformation of his work into multiple genres, including the new cinematic genre⁵. In fact, one could argue that in Italy, while the cult of Dante in the nineteenth century had a political role in forging the national identity, in the twentieth century, cinematic productions of Dante's works or even of the life of Dante, supported a program of cultural unification⁶.

In twentieth-century Italy, the reception of Dante in film and television has not stalled and indeed the appropriation of his work to advertising, political programs, and educational missions, as well as to art, performance, film, and music represents shifts in social and political consciousness with the rise of fascism, modern industrialism, and urbanism⁷. The impact of Dante on film in the twentieth century exemplifies the idea Walter Benjamin articulated in his now famous essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Art produced since and through mechanization "brushes aside a number of outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery"⁸, the ideas that supported "L'art pour l'art", in the nineteenth-century, which was a reaction to the first wave of modern mechanical reproduction⁹. One consequence of this has been to politicize art. But, this is not out of keeping with Dante's legacy, one purpose of which was already intended as a polemical political argument. Also, because of mechanical reproduction, cinema has challenged realism, both in print and on screen because, as Gilles Deleuze writes, on screen it shatters the "old realism" and allows film to move "from representation of action to the representation of thought"¹⁰. This could also describe Dante's poem, where the mimetic elements, particularly in *Inferno*, are often superseded by their figural and contemplative meanings.

Dante's reception in cinema is a longstanding tradition both in Italy and outside Italy. Italian films that translated *Inferno* to the screen, that took up specific narratives, like Paolo and Francesca or Ugolino, the life of Dante, as well as echoing and allusion to the *Commedia*, most notably in Pier Paolo Pasolini and Federico Fellini¹¹, but also in Michelangelo Antonioni¹², find themselves in inventories of the cinematic reception of Dante¹³. However, although Dante functioned as a cultural instrument to build Italian national

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and political consciousness, in early twentieth century cinematic production, outside Italy, this was certainly not the case. In fact, in English-language culture, Dante's reception in film has been overwhelmingly didactic (in the sense that the *Inferno* comes to function as a series of *exempla* of bad behavior) as in Henry Otto's 1924 *Dante's Inferno* and Harry Lachman's 1935 *Dante's Inferno (Satan's Boat)*¹⁴. The same could be said of *Seven* (1995), the detective film patterned on the seven deadly sins and Dante's punishments for them. But films in the English-language context have also approached the poem as psychological drama as in Harry Lachman's 1935 *Dante's Inferno (Satan's Boat)*¹⁵. An exception to the tendency to turn Dante's *Inferno* into a series of moral *exempla* is the African-American Spencer Williams' 1944 *Go Down, Death!*, which launches a political and social analysis by using "Dante's allegory of good and evil to shed light on the daily existence of the Negro's segregated world in the first half of the twentieth century"¹⁶.

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, the reception of the *Divina Commedia* in multiple media and languages continues to expand. Transformed into a recent opera, Monsignor Marco Frisina's, *Lectura Dantis*, into popular American movies, onto the television screen, and even into a videogame, the *Commedia*, and specifically *Inferno*, continues to impress itself onto the contemporary cultural and moral imagination. In France, Jean-Luc Godard's 2005 film, *Notre Musique*¹⁷, explores Dante's three otherworld realms as the lens through which a European might see the horror of its wars in the twentieth century, and more particularly, the most recent one in Sarajevo, in which twelve thousand people were killed, fifty thousand wounded, and 85% of the casualties were civilians. Sarajevo's cultural wealth also became a victim as The National Library was destroyed along with a bridge built by the Ottomans in the sixteenth century.

It is not difficult to view Dante as a primary world source poet for a host of artistic and cultural innovations, as the challenge and prompt to poetic translation, and as providing a systematic template by which to criticize, satirize, and perhaps improve our contemporary world, as indeed Dante's own original also had as one purpose. What is particularly startling, however, about these two cinematic versions of Dante's major work on which this essay focuses is the swerve towards the dark political vision of the *Commedia*. In contrast to the heroic nationalism of earlier Italian films, to the romantic versions of the Paolo and Francesca story, or even to the dark, ultimately individualistic psychological dramas of early twentieth century American cinematic renditions, both these films examine historical and contemporary political failure and warmaking.

As in some Italian and American film versions that used Doré's nineteenth-century illustrations to stage Dante's *Inferno*¹⁸, Meredith's video uses

Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders' illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* (illustrated by Sandow Birk, and text adapted by Birk and Marcus Sanders)¹⁹. Setting the *Inferno* in a modern US megalopolis with all its contemporary dilapidation and degradation follows Dante's political commitment to expose urban corruption and civic disputes (most specifically those of Florence, *Inferno* 6, 16, 26, and *Paradiso* 15 and 16, for example). In the American puppet video, a skyscraper American city (perhaps Los Angeles) occupies the horizon, while below, Hell is the Fast-Food Nation, economic skulduggery in the halls of capitalism, and the world of political lies in the highest places that takes the US to war. Dante, meanwhile, after a night of drunken fraternity boy revelry, must confront this true underbelly of United States society. Dante's original complex moral, political, and theological encyclopaedia is transformed to a focused satire of the United States of the second Bush administration and twentieth century post-Second World War capitalism. Godard's film, on the other hand, after *L'Enfer*, makes the aftermath of Sarajevo's war the occasion for European self-examination in a twenty-first century "Purgatoire", the *scola* or Garden of Repose, transformed to a writer's conference in shattered Sarajevo. Godard's movie, unlike the American video, is not a satire; it is not vernacular art, but an intense philosophical meditation on Europe's wars, the legacy of its wars, and the visual or film history of recording and dramatizing warfare. The American video is a product of popular culture that appeals to the popular imagination of Dante's poem. Godard, on the other hand, is "high art", but the shared artistic feature of the two versions is the use of Dante's organizational structure, although Godard goes through the entire poem, *L'Enfer*, *Purgatoire*, and *Paradis*. In terms of focused criticism, the Middle East emerges as the center of the political concern, for they also both highlight the modern history of warfare and political and national engineering in that suffering region, although in Godard this does not come to the fore until *Purgatoire*.

Sean Meredith's video is staged as a puppet show, thus beginning as the paper puppet audience seat themselves before an opulent, but paper, curtained stage. As the spectators seat themselves, the whispered comments of the arriving audience, polite as "Excuse me" and nasty as, "I don't mean to be a bitch, but I just want to have a good time tonight!" pass back and forth to create the distance between what we will see as a play within a play and the audience that watches. We are reminded that this is a spectral experience (in contrast to Dante's poem, one dimension of whose allegorical system makes the reader a participant in "our" common journey "intra nos"). Actual humans appear only twice, once as the hand of God when the Hebrews are removed from Limbo and finally as Lucifer himself.

Three curtains rise to the fourth that announces the title, "Dante's Inferno" that opens to a dilapidated corrugated fence with Canto 1 inscribed, graffiti, and a Tow Away sign, which also rises to disclose a dead-end alley-way, "Not a through street". The puppet Dante, a hung-over American college

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student, wakes to realize that his cell phone won't work and he's in a "stupor", with vague memories of the night of revelry that had landed him there. The freeway full of cars flows above and beyond him. The scene of contemporary America parallels Dante's symbolic "selva oscura" (dark forest) from which the fugitive cannot escape. We are in the dark underbelly of an American urban environment, replete with parked or abandoned cars, discarded tires, and garbage. Three cars, paralleling the three beasts of *Inferno* 1, almost run Dante over when Virgil, in ancient garb, as the wisdom of the ages, arrives and explains the role of Beatrice in the rescue, to conclude as the curtain falls and rises again.

From here on, after the "Abandon hope" sign and Virgil and Dante enter the domain of the infernal, the play satirizes contemporary American history, politics, and life-style – this is the United States of garbage, debris, ghettos, fast food, planned gated communities, consumerism, freeways, war-making, etc. The undecided become perpetual protestors since they couldn't take sides in life; Charon is a clichéd army sergeant with a police line of criminals who are to board the boat to their true end. Once in Hell, the systematic adaptation becomes evident. It follows Dante's organization, taking us through the circles of Hell, while the sins remain the same, and even many of the most famous characters reappear, like Paolo and Francesca, Cleopatra, Farinata, Brunetto Latini, Ulysses, etc., but the version always combines these *figura* with their modern exemplars, so in Limbo, we have the ancient poets, but also George Sand and George Eliot; with Paolo and Francesca, who sounds like a shallow California valley-girl, we also find John Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe, and Gauguin and his Tahitian concubines; with Judas and Brutus in the mouth of Satan, we find Heinrich Himmler.

That this is an American version of gross political depravity flows easily from the hung-over American fraternity boy, who can only remember that he got drunk the night before. As in Dante's poem, the exposure of human corruption intensifies the further into Hell one descends. Those who stand before Minos, a modern American judge, reveal the kinds of heinous violations for which the main players of the second Bush Administration became infamous – Condoleeza Rice goes straight to the treacherous as she opines, "They did have WMDS", and quoting a common complaint of the Republican party about the judiciary, she says, "I see you're an activist judge". The satire of American greed that is linked to the fast-food mania of the culture intensifies in the circle of Cerberus – Krispy Kreme, Taco Bell, and a grossly overweight image of "Lady Liberty" combine with the American love-affair with cars, as Chevron and McDonald signs occupy the background, along with sexy young women in bikinis wearing sashes inscribed with "GREED", who attempt to sell Dante a car. Mimicking American advertising that encourages the coveting of large cars, the video presents these nymphets using all their wiles to appeal to Dante including

simpering sexy voices, “Dante Alighieri, you want one of these, don’t you?...Think about how jealous your neighbors will be. Dante, come on, there’s lots of room in the back seat, you and me... you want one, don’t you?” The City of Dis is a “planned development”, a gated community, not unlike the “place my parents would live”, Dante, the child of suburbia says. This is the land of model homes, golf courses, and wives perpetually shopping.

We gradually descend into Hell with constant reminders, achieved through the number of Americans condemned, that this Hell is in the United States. These include J. Edgar Hoover, Liberace, Diocese of Boston, Spiro Agnew, Ronald Reagan, and Dick Cheney, who is “so evil he’s condemned during life” for mishandling “whole nations.” Geryon appears as a helicopter with the FOX News logo, city ghetto streets flow with prostitutes and pimps, accompanied by “boom bap” urban hip hop sounds, Ronald Reagan and Hitler are side by side with US Post Boxes, freeways and skyscrapers in the background, while Lady Liberty on the Capitol Building watches the lobbyists below accompanied by a Broadwaysque show tune vibe. The skyscraper for the falsifiers in the Malebolge, a billion square feet, contains a cornucopia of international capitalism’s corporate scandals with floors for the Teapot Dome, Enron, Parmalat, WorldCom, Adelphia Cable Co., Banco Ambrosiano, Credit Lyonnais, and so on. Meredith provides an overview of violence and fraud to match Dante’s circle seven and eight with a snapshot review of the war-making demons of the twentieth century, Stalin, Mussolini, Emperor Hirohito, and U.S. General Curtis Le May (with a few conquistadors and Attila the Hun thrown in to remind us that these people have parallels in history). American popular music accompanies the puppetry to fit the circle of hell: thus hip-hop for urban scenes with pimps and whores; James Bond-type classic cinematic to accompany the chase scene with the devils after Dante and Virgil; Broadwaysque for Capitol Hill flatterers; hard rock distorted guitars for corrupt politicians; carousel music for the Ulysses episode, and ice-skating rink music for Cocytus.

As in *Inferno* 28, a topic that these modern versions of Dante’s poem share with the original, *Notre Musique* and *Dante’s Inferno* focus on “war” and “warmaking”. Here we see Dante’s own meditation on Europe’s and specifically Italy’s bellicose history continued into our own times through the lens of the other world. In a rhetorical display, startling even for Dante, the opening to *Inferno* 28 (1-21) begins with a rhetorical question, “Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolte/ dicer del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno/ ch’i’ ora vidi, per narrar più volte?” Then, in an eighteen line periphrasis beginning with expressions of poetic inadequacy and affected modesty, that includes a fifteen line sentence, Dante speaks out in an *accumulatio* to expose the horror of war:

Chi poria mai pur con parole sciolte
dicer del sangue e de le piaghe a pieno

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ch'i' ora vidi, per narrar più volte?
Ogne lingua per certo verria meno
per lo nostro sermone e per la mente
c'hanno a tanto comprender poco seno.
S'el s'aunasse ancor tutta la gente
che già, in su la fortunata terra
di Puglia, fu del suo sangue dolente
per li Troiani e per la lunga guerra
che de l'anella fé sì alte spoglie,
come Livio scrive, che non erra,
con quella che sentio di colpi doglie
per contastare a Ruberto Guiscardo
e l'altra il cui ossame ancor s'accoglie
a Ceperan, là dove fu bugiardo
ciascun Pugliese, e là da Tagliacozzo,
dove sanz'arme vinse il vecchio Alardo;
e qual forato suo membro e qual mozzo
mostrasse, d'aequar sarebbe nulla
il modo de la nona bolgia sozzo. (*Inferno* 28, 1-21)

(Who could ever – even with words set loose in prose –
tell in full – though he told it many times –
of all the blood and wounds I witnessed now?
Certainly every tongue would fall too short
on account of our language and our minds
which lack the capacity to contain so much.
If you assembled all who ever fell
in the fortune-battered fields of Puglia
and found the sorrow of bloodshed at the hands
Of Trojans or of Hannibal, who piled
a giant heap of rings from dead men's fingers
in the long Punic War, as Livy writes,
Who does not stray – and added all who felt
the grievous blows of Robert Guiscard's March,
with all the men whose bones lie heaped up still
At Ceperan, where every Pugliese chief
turned traitor – and the bones near Tagliacozzo,
where old Alardo triumphed weaponless,
And had one show his limbs lopped off, and one
his members gored, it would be nothing to
the fashion of the filth in the ninth ditch)²⁰.

In imagining all the people with their mangled and dismembered bodies felled in war in the fields of Puglia from the Trojans to his present, which Dante likens to the *bolgia* of the schismatics, the poet provides a visual metaphor for the horror of Italy's wars, understood by him as civil war because they are among Italians and on Italian soil. This is one of the best examples of the visual, one could even say cinematic technique Dante himself deploys²¹. Godard, in his contemporary version of *L'Enfer* presents seven minutes of movie and news clips of warfare that like Dante's portrayal of war uses *accumulatio* to collect all twentieth-century wars together, whether in cinema or newsreel. The bellicose contemporary history of the Middle East links Godard and Meredith's versions of Dante. Like Dante's crisis of the overlapping powers (Church and civil authorities) – for our times, it's the tinderbox of the Middle East, created as a crisis by the western powers – the legacy of the colonial period for which the Arab world has paid – and Europe's bigotry and genocide of the Jews – that occupies these filmmakers. The movement from Dante's poetic but visible battle scene to Godard's movie and Meredith's video demonstrates the *Commedia's* ability to produce not just new readings and interpretations and new visual illustrations, but to actually provide a resource for generating new cultural expressions in new genres that deliberate on what is unfortunately a timeless reality, the human affection for warfare, what Benjamin refers to as the result of "self-alienation" that "can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure"²².

In Meredith, the Ulysses segment goes straight to the American blundering and plundering Middle East policy that led to war-making and political engineering in the region. In a puppet play within the puppet show that is the video, Ulysses is a character in a puppet play, who after his success at Troy decides, "Let's liberate [that is civilize] the rest" – and "remake the region in our own image." Here before us is a map of the entire Middle East, as Ulysses sails towards Iraq, and the whole Middle Eastern project of the United States and Britain (chapter 10 of the video) plays out before us. Ulysses, and one assumes by implication, the United States, is condemned to repetition. The United States' Middle East project thus is likened to Ulysses' plundering and civilizing adventurism, for his transgression of boundaries leads to his demise. Here the video becomes not only satire, but like Dante's poem, prophecy, as Ulysses' boat, laden with booty, sinks to the ocean floor. Making the Ulysses' segment a play within a play has the startling effect of presenting the US foreign policy as a period on the stage of history, yet, having it performed perpetually forecasts that the consequences of United States' imperialism have perpetual consequences. Repetition, of course, also implies recursiveness, and the constant re-enactment of a failed politics based on warmaking becomes a puppet show that never ends, for Ulysses' punishment is to repeat this story for eternity.

Godard, like Dante, collapses the distinction between history and fiction, in his film and news clip montage of warfare in the twentieth century, in other

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words, in the history of film. Because he uses clips from movies, Godard can produce a universal overview of warfare in which some forty clips of war scenes flow into each other, beginning with the announcement, "Ainsi dans les temps du fable après les inondations et les déluges, il sortit de la terre des hommes armés d'exterminer" (Thus during the time of the fable, after the inundations and floods, men armed for extermination came out of the earth.) In fact in those scant seven minutes, with the resources of film and news clips, Godard goes through a nineteenth-century battle at sea, scenes from the Second World War, Russian corsairs, Hiroshima, trench warfare, United States/Indian wars, French/British warfare, medieval crusade wars, ancient Roman chariot warfare, the United States in Iraq and Vietnam, the US Civil War, Sarajevo, Palestine and Israel, scenes from the concentration camps, submarine, air, tank, helicopter warfare, and street war. We see the shock and awe of thousands of bombs descending from US planes onto darkened cities below, as the dead are pulled from bomb sites, holocaust bodies are shoved into mass graves, the destitute flee, homeless women and children sit on the roadsides, a napalmed hand appears, children die in battle, and the victims of Sarajevo walk to find safety. Thus Godard combines the perpetrators of warfare with the millions of victims of the darkest enterprises of the twentieth century. Like Dante's *accumulatio* in Canto 28, Godard's seven-minute series of clips brings all history into one temporal and spatial frame to expose the carnage of war, its brutal excess, as well as the spectral obsession with the destruction and energy of warmaking.

But Godard's version of hell combines this visual representation with a philosophical meditation on war, so he briefly interrupts the *accumulatio* with a quote from the Lord's Prayer, "Pardonnez nous nos offenses" (Forgive us our sins), which then becomes "comme nous les pardonnons à ce qui nous avons offensé" (as we forgive those who have sinned against us). Here, like Dante, Godard emphasizes the betrayal of the highest calling of humans to behave justly towards others, which he combines with an essentially religious idea synthesized in the Lord's Prayer, that our own forgiveness is intimately linked with our own capacity to forgive.

Godard's understanding of this intimate relation of the self to the other has been most powerfully expounded by Emmanuel Lévinas' notion that to transcend our selves, to be other than we have been or are, we must become the other. To suppress the Other results in nothing but "limit and menace". Thus becoming the other opens the possibility of the infinite, the realm of transcendence (for Lévinas "crossing over and ascent"²³) where ethical responsibility resides and within which we can overcome our historic and continuing failures:

[...] to see the infinite in the suppression of the *Other* or in reconciliation with him assumes that the Other is, for the Same, nothing but limit and

menace. Who would dispute that it is so, for the most part, in a human society subjected, like all finite reality, to the formal principle according to which the other limits or cramps the *same*; the wars and violence of the world, of all ages, is sufficient proof of that²⁴.

Godard confronts this reality explicitly at the end of the seven minutes of visual warfare with, “Or je est un autre” (Now, I is an other). Here, Godard seems to specifically adopt Lévinas’ idea that to encounter transcendence or the infinite, the “I” must go outside the self, and also beyond human subjectivity and indeed must find itself outside the self, where it becomes ethically responsible for the Other²⁵. As Lévinas says in the interview on “The Proximity of the Other”, “The other involves us in a situation in which we are obligated without guilt, but our obligation is not less for that. At the same time it is a burden. It is heavy, and if you like, that is what goodness is. The trace of the infinite is inscribed in my obligation toward the other [...]”²⁶. When Godard has the voiceover state “Or je est un autre” (Now, I is an other) in response to 2000 years of warfare, he is making the “I” the one who has both experienced and perpetrated this horror, whether as a participant in the suffering, the inflicter of the suffering, or the watcher of the suffering.

L’Enfer ends with “Do you remember Sarajevo?” at the time the most recent European war which was witness to the worst ethnic violence since the Second World War. Sarajevo, thus, becomes a synecdoche for war, for human brutality, for schism, and hatred, and the necessity of memory of tragic historic failure as central to any human restoration. Godard’s film covers all three of Dante’s otherworld realms, and given that Sarajevo is the site of “Purgatoire” where a group of writers have gathered for a writers’ conference, hope may be elusive. But *L’Enfer* had opened with the overhead wires of the tram in Sarajevo and the tram appears as *Purgatoire* begins. Since Sarajevo was the first city in Europe to have a public tram system (the only other city in the world at that time was San Francisco), it seems likely that the tram is meant to signify some sort of utopian possibility for people to live in harmony in the urban environment, that dreams can come true, that trams can move forward, and perhaps that Sarajevo can restore its former peaceful cultural pluralism.

Ending with a Dantesque hopefulness, escaping Hell in the Meredith version presents Dante and Virgil before something akin to the Mount of Purgatory on the horizon. The sun is shining in that direction, and the darkness in the foreground over a modern city replete with high rises, freeways, and endless cars, is overcome by the brightness ahead, although the above ground city, as we know from what we have just experienced in Hell, only covers the reality that lies beneath, just as it obscures all the political and social misdeeds that create Hell.

In conclusion, we might ask, why Dante? Such obvious comments as his unique poetic and linguistic contribution cannot provide the satisfactory

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answer. Perhaps the remarks of the producer of the Dante video game produced in 2009 give us the clue as to why popular culture looks to Dante as a moral compass, rather than to the commentaries of Boccaccio, Jacopo Alighieri, Benvenuto da Imola, or Jacopo della Lana, or even to the visual responses of Giotto, Nardo di Cione, and Michelangelo. "There is no poet besides Dante", Jonathan Knight, the head of the video game project suggests, "who has so profoundly affected our imagination of the other world, for Dante's mode of narrating is more vivid and detailed than any other poet". Of course, Knight is thinking in terms of the popular imagination, and to some degree it is not Dante's poem that inspires so much as the conceptual framework itself that has been absorbed by the vernacular imagination far outside the world of Dante's Tuscan origins. But although Dante's transparent schema of good and evil may inform the popular imagination that yearns for moral certainty, in fact, in our times what brings him together with Benjamin, Lévinas, Godard, and even Meredith, is his apocalyptic and utopian yearning for an elusive justice in a world bereft of moral certainty. For Meredith and Godard, Dante, as prophet and critic of his times, provides a model whereby they can expose the failures of our own historic experience in their very different modes. But Beatrice's assurance about Dante to St. James when he is interrogated on the theological virtue Hope that "La Chiesa militante alcun figliuolo/ non ha con più speranza, com'è scritto/ nel Sol che raggia tutto nostro stuolo (The Church militant has not any child possessed of more hope, as is written in the Sun which irradiates all our host [*Par.* 25, 52-54]) is not what inspires our contemporary imagination of Dante's vision. Rather, it is Dante's doubts about the human capacity to collectively overcome our material craving and violent ambitions that have taken possession of our imagination and given us a means for calling ourselves to account. Seamus Heaney, another contemporary poet who has been deeply influenced by Dante, and who has in common with these two film receptions of Dante the same compulsion to express his political engagement in his poetry, wrote in his Nobel prize acceptance speech,

As writers and readers, as sinners and citizens, our realism and our aesthetic sense make us wary of crediting the positive note. The very gunfire braces us and the atrocious confers a worth upon the effort which it calls forth to confront it. We are rightly in awe of the torsions in the poetry of Paul Celan and rightly enamoured of the suspiring voice in Samuel Beckett because these are evidence that art can rise to the occasion and somehow be the corollary of Celan's stricken destiny as Holocaust survivor and Beckett's demure heroism as a member of the French Resistance. Likewise, we are rightly suspicious of that which gives too much consolation in these circumstances; the very extremity of our late twentieth century knowledge puts much of our cultural heritage to

an extreme test. Only the very stupid or the very deprived can any longer help knowing that the documents of civilization have been written in blood and tears, blood and tears no less real for being very remote. And when this intellectual predisposition co-exists with the actualities of Ulster and Israel and Bosnia and Rwanda and a host of other wounded spots on the face of the earth, the inclination is not only not to credit human nature with much constructive potential but not to credit anything too positive in the work of art²⁷.

Shocking as it may appear to lovers of Dante's poem, he too shared this insight, particularly and graphically displayed throughout *Inferno*, where we witness the debris of human failure. It is this world of Dante that we see in these visual receptions of his major work, and in this respect, contemporary receptions of the poem radically differ from those that dominated in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.

NOTES

¹ Dermot Mulroney and James Cromwell, *Dante's Inferno* (Ricochet: TLA Releasing, 2008), written by Paul Zaldom, Sandow Birk, and Sean Meredith and directed by Sean Meredith.

² See the forthcoming, **Dante in the "Long" 19th century (1789-1914)**, ed. Aida Audeh and Nick Havely, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.

³ See Adrian Lyttelton, "The National Question in Italy", in **The National Question in Europe in Historical Context**, eds. Mikulás Teich and Roy Porter, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 72.

⁴ See my forthcoming essay, "Reception of Dante in Nineteenth-Century India", in **Dante in the "Long" 19th century**, *op. cit.*

⁵ See **Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts**, ed. Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè, Alderhot, Hampshire: Ashgate, 2007, for an overview of Dante in performance (stage, music, opera), visual arts, cinema, and multimedia.

⁶ For inventories, see John P. Welle, "Dante in the Cinematic Mode: Historical Survey of Dante Movies", in **Dante's Inferno. The Indiana Critical Edition**, trans. and ed. Mark Musa, Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995, pp. 381-95; see also, for a list of the films and details, Guy Borlèe, Ginafranco Casadio, Gian Luca Farinelli, Vittorio Martinelli, "Schede dei Film", **Dante nel Cinema**, ed. Gianfranco Casadio, Ravenna: Longo, 1996, pp. 121-56.

⁷ For an overview of Dante on film in the twentieth century, see Amilcare A. Iannucci, "Introduction", **Dante, Cinema & Television**, ed. Amilcare A. Iannucci, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004, pp. ix-xviii, which

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summarizes the essays in the volume that deal with these issues on film and how Dante is deployed.

⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", in **Illuminations: Essays and Reflections**, ed. with an intro. Hannah Arendt, New York: Schocken Books, 1988, p. 218.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 217-51.

¹⁰ Marguerite R. Waller, "Dante and the Languages of Post-war Italian Film", where she is quoting Deleuze, in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, p. 76. The Deleuze reference comes from **Cinema 1: The Movement Image**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986, pp. 121, 212 and **Cinema 2, The Time Image**, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989, pp. 1-3.

¹¹ For Dante's influence on Pasolini and Fellini, see Gian Piero Brunetta, "Padre Dante che Sei nel Cinema", in **Dante nel Cinema**, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-28; see also Gabrielle Lesperance, "Beginning to Think about *Salò*", in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, pp. 97-105; Waller, "Dante and the Languages of Post-war Italian Film", in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, pp. 74-96.

¹² Victoria Kirkham, "The Off-Screen Landscape: Dante's Ravenna and Antonioni's *Red Desert*", in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, pp. 106-28.

¹³ See Welle, "Dante in Cinematic Mode"; "Schede dei Film", in **Dante nel Cinema**, *op. cit.*, pp. 121-56.

¹⁴ Christopher Wagstaff, "Dante nell'immaginario cinematografico anglosassone", in **Dante nel Cinema**, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-43.

¹⁵ Wagstaff, "Dante nell'immaginario cinematografico anglosassone", in **Dante nel Cinema**, *op. cit.*, pp. 37-41.

¹⁶ Dennis Looney, "Spencer Williams and Dante: An African-American Filmmaker at the Gates of Hell", in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, pp. 129-44.

¹⁷ Jean-Luc Godard, **Notre Musique**, New York: Wellspring, 2005.

¹⁸ See Amilcare A Iannucci, "Dante and Hollywood", where he describes Henry Otto's 1924 *Dante's Inferno*, a silent film in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, p. 6. Also, see John P. Welle, "Early Cinema, *Dante's Inferno* of 1911, and the Origins of Italian Film Culture", in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*, pp. 21-50.

¹⁹ **Dante's Divine Comedy**, in 3 Vols., illustrated by Sandow Birk. Text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sander, San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005.

²⁰ **Inferno**, Vol. 1 in **The Divine Comedy**, trans. and commentary Charles S. Singleton, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970-76.

²¹ Iannucci, "Dante and Hollywood", in **Dante, Cinema & Television**, *op. cit.*

- ²² Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”, in **Illuminations: Essays and Reflections**, *op. cit.*, p. 242.
- ²³ Pierre Hayat, “Preface: Philosophy Between Totality and Transcendence”, Emmanuel Lévinas, **Alterity and Transcendence**, trans. Michael B. Smith, New York: Columbia University Press, 1999, p. ix.
- ²⁴ Lévinas, **Alterity and Transcendence**, *op. cit.*, p. 56.
- ²⁵ Pierre Hayat, “Preface: Philosophy Between Totality and Transcendence”, **Alterity and Transcendence**, *op. cit.*, pp. ix-xxiv.
- ²⁶ “The Proximity of the Other”, **Alterity and Transcendence**, *op. cit.*, p. 106.
- ²⁷ Seamus Heaney, “Nobel Prize in Literature, 1995”, http://nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/1995

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