Into the Video-Inferno:
Vertical Television, Experimental Seriality and the Moving Collage in *A TV Dante*

Massimo Fusillo and Mattia Petricola

Abstract

This paper focuses on one of the most unique experiments in the history of television: *A TV Dante,* a fourteen-episode mini-series which aired between 1990 and 1991, partly directed by Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway, and partly by Raúl Ruiz. We will analyze *A TV Dante* as an early attempt to explore the aesthetic potential of television seriality through the adoption of an avant-garde approach towards a fundamental work of the Western canon. We will begin by analyzing Phillips' illustrated *Inferno* as a work aimed at constructing a multi-layered and totalizing representation of the *Inferno*'s own reception, of the history of mediality and of Phillips' own identity as an artist. We will then show how the poetics of Phillips' and Greenaway's *A TV Dante* are shaped by what we may call the aesthetics of the moving collage. We will finally focus on Rúiz's *A TV Dante*, which dismantles all coherent narrative structures, transforming Dante's *Inferno* into a series of powerful images, symbols and visions.

Keywords

Dante Alighieri, Divine Comedy, adaptation, television, Peter Greenaway, Tom Phillips, Raoul Ruiz, Raúl Ruiz, intermediality, video

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Introduction

Commissioned by Channel 4 and ideated by British artist Tom Phillips, *A TV Dante* is one of the boldest and most unique experiments in the history of television. The original project for the series aimed at covering the entirety of Dante's *Inferno* — a 10-minute episode for each Canto — under the joint supervision of Phillips and British filmmaker Peter Greenaway. Pressured by commercial failure and financial difficulties, *A TV Dante* was later restructured and finally abandoned[1].

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[1] We can gain invaluable insight into the birth, development and failure of the *A TV Dante* project through a number of accounts provided by Michael Kustow. As the commissioning editor at Channel 4, Kustow proposed a television adaptation of the *Inferno* to Tom Phillips and firmly believed in the revolutionary potential of this project: «Peter [Greenaway] has promised to split his time each year between a feature film and Dante; we will transmit thirty-four episodes, one for each canto, in three annual blocks; by the third year, if they sustain the level of invention with which they have begun, we should have a work of television art which anticipates the high definition technology of the next decade. […] *A TV Dante* could be the type of a new generation of programme for people who want from television what they can get from music, poetry or painting, and especially for the young with an appetite for work that is contemporary and has substance. There is a sizeable worldwide audience of such people already, even if it's easier to measure by

The result of this troubled production is a fourteen-episode mini-series which aired between 1990 and 1991[2] and was divided into two parts. The first part includes Cantos 1-8 and was directed by Phillips and Peter Greenaway; the remaining six episodes (Cantos 9-14) were directed by Chilean experimental director Raúl Ruiz. Although it was the result of production problems and financial failure, the unfinished and heterogeneous character of *A TV Dante* could also be seen as carrying symbolic value, since the series was one of the first attempts to explore the expressive potential of TV seriality from an avant-garde perspective, a perspective which implied an open, processual and multi-layered vision of textuality. The idea of intermediality that structures the analyses that follow is inspired by this same vision, which was first formalized by the avant-garde group *Fluxus* and whose cultural genealogy can be traced back to the Wagnerian utopia of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

In the digital age, the notion of intermediality implies an idea of narration based on acceleration, simultaneity and hyper-mediation, and intermedial studies are allowing us to approach the relation between texts and media from an increasingly pluralistic, polycentric and anti-hierarchical perspective. The very notion of adaptation is becoming less and less dependent on concepts such as "primary text"

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attendances at exhibitions and performances, or sales of new music records, than from the rating figures and appreciation indexes of existing broadcast television» Kustow 1987: 213-4, quoted in Blum 2016: 356-7. Another fundamental source for retracing *A TV Dante*'s production is Jones (1990). On the financial difficulties that plagued the production, cfr. Blum 2016: 358.

[2] «Defining "the period" of *A TV Dante* requires some qualification: a pilot of canto *5* was completed by 1984; cantos 1-8 were completed for broadcast by 1988; they were broadcast in Britain in 1990» Vickers 1995: 273. The series had already been aired on Italian, Dutch and German television in 1989; in 1990 it was awarded the prize for Best Experimental Video at the Montreal International Film and Video Festival; in 1991, it was awarded the Prix Italia.

and "source". Texts, like software, can be endlessly rewritten and reused without the need to see them as "illustrations", "dramatizations" or "adaptations" of other texts. From this perspective, scholars in intermedial studies regard as particularly fascinating texts like *A TV Dante*, in which different codes and languages are allowed to flow in parallel, generating unpredictable convergences and dissonances.

Where it all began: Tom Phillips' *Inferno*

The *A TV Dante* project originated in 1983, seven years before it was actually aired on Channel 4. At that time, Tom Phillips was already regarded as one of the greatest visual artists of the second half of the XX century, and Krestow commissioned Phillips to create *A TV Dante* after reading his *livre d'artiste* devoted to Dante's *Inferno* (Phillips 1985 [1983]). Translated by Phillips himself and accompanied by 139 illustrations, *Dante's Inferno* is one of Phillips' most ambitious works, as well as the most prominent outcome of a long-standing project on Dante and the *Divine Comedy* that had developed parallel to the work on *A Humument* — Phillips' masterpiece — for at least seven years. This is where the intermedial process that led to *A TV Dante* really began.

Most of the interpretations of Phillips' *oeuvre* are constructed as elaborations on Phillips' own ideas about his works[3]. This can be seen less as the expression of a will to remain "true" to Phillips' intent as an artist and more as the result of the fact that Phillips has been an

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[3] As regards the *Inferno*, Blum (2016) provides a complete reconstruction of its creation process and a thorough investigation of its iconology. It also provides an invaluable anthology of the earliest critical reactions to Phillips' book (Blum 2016: 472-476). The studies by Woods (1989) and Barricelli (1992) construct a frame of reference that is still fundamental to any reading of the *Inferno*. From a different perspective, Bergeron (2001) highlights the meta-reflexive nature of several illustrations from the very first pages of Phillips' book.

incredibly prolific philologist and exegete of his own body of work, in an indefatigable effort to "explain" his *oeuvre* and reveal the processes, both mental and material, behind it. One of Phillips' statements, in particular, has worked as a fundamental starting point for a number of interpretations of his *Inferno* and, consequently, of *A TV Dante*:

> Far from trying to ‚update' Dante I attempted in my own pictures to head back towards the poet's own four-tiered system of representation (as outlined in the famous Letter to Can Grande) in order to illuminate some of the literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical layers that Dante's polysemous text contains. (Phillips 1985: 877, quoted in Blum 2016: 212)

Our study of Phillips' *Inferno* will take as its starting point another statement by the artist which has been apparently overlooked by the critics. This will shift the focus of our attention away from Phillips' desire to imitate or recreate Dante's polysemy in the contemporary world and towards the artist's quest for encyclopedism and totality. In his notes to the *Inferno*, Phillips affirms that

> [t]he range of imagery matches Dante in breadth encompassing everything from Greek mythology to the Berlin Wall, from scriptural reference to a scene in an abattoir, and from alchemical signs to lavatory graffiti. And the range of modes of expression is similarly wide, including as it does, early calligraphy, collage, golden section drawings, maps, dragons, doctored photographs, references to other past artworks and specially programmed computer-generated graphics. (Phillips, "Dante's Inferno. Notes on this work", web)

Such a desire to encompass everything leads Phillips to develop a style based on citations, allusions, emulations, homages and references. This choice, in turn, results in the creation of illustrations that establish a complex dialogue between the *Comedy* as a text, the *Comedy*'s Renaissance and modern illustrators, the world of contemporary art, Phillips' own biography and previous works — notably his *Humument*

— and the most disparate references to media both old and new. In this sense, Dante's text works primarily as a means to construct a totalizing representation of the text's own reception, of the history of mediality and of Phillips' own identity as an artist[4]. If it is true that every work of art necessarily interacts, in one way or another, with a certain tradition, Phillips' illustrations thematize these interactions in such a way as to make them the aesthetic core of the illustrations themselves. Each of Phillips' illustrations can thus be seen as a network of relationships that creates a space of encounter and mediation between different semiotic poles, whose contents and structure change with each new illustration. The network of interactions that the viewer is able to unravel from every illustration becomes the primary and most important element that shapes the aesthetic experience of each illustration.

One of the main aesthetic strategies through which Phillips achieves this dialogue between so many disparate elements is the collage. In one of the illustrations for Canto 23 — the Canto of the hypocrites — a figure from *Guernica* is extracted from Picasso's original painting and becomes part of a new work within a completely different frame of reference, thus producing new and original meaning. In an illustration for Canto 31, King Kong is employed to represent the giant Antaeus, who takes Dante and Virgil in his hands and carries them to the ninth circle. King Kong obviously carries with him a set of semiotic traits related to monstrosity and to the medium of cinema. Through this illustration, such traits can become part of the aesthetic experience of the *Comedy*. It is possible to observe another, more complex strategy at work in illustrations like the one created for Canto 22, which re-elaborates an engraving made by William Blake as an illustration for the *Comedy*, transforming it into a work of pop art (see fig. 1-2). In this

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[4] «[W]here Dante uses *Inferno* as a storage space for his cultural memory, so too does Phillips arrange his visual encounters and his visual autobiography in Dante's text, turning it into a generative mechanism for personal mythologies» Calè 2007: 181.

case, Phillips adds another "layer" of meaning by putting the *Comedy* in dialogue with contemporary art through a re-elaboration of a work of art that is already in itself a modern adaptation of the *Comedy*[5].

Phillips achieves some of his most interesting results when this network of relationships becomes at the same time extremely complex and relatively loose, thus becoming more open to the reader's free interpretation. One of the illustrations for Canto 25 is a case in point (see fig. 3-4). This canto is set in the seventh Bolgia, where thieves are punished by being crushed and bitten by snakes[6]. The illustration represents a rather bizarre composition resembling a scrambled jigsaw puzzle. On a closer look, we can see that the figure is made up of little squares. Each square, in turn, is a small portion of an engraving of the Laocoön Group from the Vatican Museums, which adds an obvious and classic reference to ancient Greece[7].

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[5] For a detailed study of this illustration cfr. Calè 2007: 183.

[6] «Com' io tenea levate in lor le ciglia,/e un serpente con sei piè si lancia/dinanzi a l'uno, e tutto a lui s'appiglia./Co' piè di mezzo li avvinse la panci/e con li anterïor le braccia prese;/poi li addentò e l'una e l'altra guancia;/li diretani a le cosce distese,/e miseli la coda tra 'mbedue/e dietro per le ren sù la ritese./Ellera abbarbicata mai non fue/ad alber sì, come l'orribil fiera/per l'altrui membra avviticchiò le sue» [«As I kept my eyes fixed upon those sinners,/a serpent with six feet springs out against/one of the three, and clutches him completely./It gripped his belly with its middle feet,/and with its forefeet grappled his two arms;/and then it sank its teeth in both his cheeks;/it stretched its rear feet out along his thighs/and ran its tail along between the two,/then straightened it again behind his loins./No ivy ever gripped a tree so fast/as when that horrifying monster clasped/and intertwined the other's limbs with its»] *Inferno* 25, vv. 49-60 (the Italian text from the Petrocchi edition and the English translation by Allen Mandelbaum are retrieved from the Digital Dante platform: https://digitaldante.columbia.edu).

[7] «Phillips' visual equivalent [of this scene] involves a joint encounter with a game for children and a touchstone of classical art, a reproduction of a print of the Laocöon cut up into squares that are then reassembled into two

The image of the Laocoön, in turn, has been dissected and scrambled. The final result is evocative of both Boccioni's futurist sculpture (exemplified by *Forme uniche della continuità nello spazio* [*Unique Forms of Continuity in Space*], 1913) and Max Ernst's surrealist landscapes (see fig. 5). This interpretation shows Phillips' ability to superpose many semiotic levels, layer upon layer, in order to enrich our reading of a single episode of the *Comedy*.

As we will try to show in the next section, *A TV Dante* mirrors the multi-layered structure of Phillips' illustrations by literalizing it. In *A TV Dante*, there is literally a multi-layered frame constructed as a work of video art.

Vertical television and the aesthetics of video-collage: Phillips' and Greenaway's *A TV Dante*

When Phillips received the commission for *A TV Dante*, he had no experience whatsoever with moving images. An experienced filmmaker was needed, and Peter Greenaway was invited to join the project. Greenaway was regarded as a leading exponent of European avant-garde cinema and had recently directed his first narrative feature film: *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982). The idea of Phillips and Greenaway working together seemed like a match made in heaven and, in retrospect, it seems even more so today:

> [i]t is worth mentioning how ideal a collaborator Tom Phillips was; his practice had been running parallel with Greenaway's for years before they came together for *A TV Dante*. […] Both artists operate through systems, though one might distinguish them schematically. Phillips often uses systems to generate material in a series of open-ended projects. […] Greenaway generally uses systems to organise material, in a series of ironised closures. Both artists, however, have intricate oeuvres in which characters and

illustrations, exemplifying the dissemination of a classic by means of mechanical reproduction» Calè 2007: 146.

ideas repeat and echo through and across any individual work, creating a complex web of coincidence and association, with shadowy or fluid characters. […] Both are interested - and involved - in contemporary music, itself often system-based, and indeed both have been librettists of operas […]. Both are highly literary artists; much of Phillips's work includes language. Both are interested in postcards. (Woods 1996: 128)

Even more importantly, the two artists share an encyclopedic impulse, that desire to encompass everything that Phillips recognizes as the driving force behind his illustrated *Inferno*. The series' first episode opens by clearly stating the main aesthetic principle upon which this project is based. We see Phillips himself, on a black background. Looking directly into the camera, he says: «A good old text always is a blank for new things». As with the case of Phillips' *Inferno*, critics have often drawn on a statement by Phillips in order to understand how these «new things» could be described:

A *TV Dante* tries to answer the question, *Is there such a thing as television*? Is television a medium in its own right with an individual grammar that would make it an art form as independent of cinema as opera is of drama? [...] The test here was to bring the medium in its present potential to a great multi-layered text and see if it could stand the strain. Dante, in a letter to his patron says, "The work I have made is not simple; rather it is polysemous, by which I mean that it has many levels of meaning." The intention here was to try to match Dante's claim in visual terms, to have the richness of an illuminated manuscript combine with the directness and impact of a newspaper's front page. (Phillips 1992: 246)

Taking Phillips' meta-reflexive affirmations as her starting point, Vickers (1995) defines *A TV Dante* as a "translation" rather than an "adaptation" of the *Comedy*. She affirms that «[t]he series […] seeks, first and foremost, to define its own medium and to situate that medium in relation to the creative capabilities of earlier media» (266)

and proceeds to describe both the grammar and syntax of the new language of video ideated by Phillips and Greenaway. This line of inquiry has been followed, among others, by Krewani (2001), Missomelius (2007), Calè (2007) — who effectively sums up her argument by affirming that «[i]nstead of familiarising Dante, Phillips and Greenaway defamiliarise television» (178) — and Kretschmann (2015), who sees *A TV Dante* as a "symbolical translation" of the *Comedy*[8].

Once again, we will try to investigate the aesthetics of *A TV Dante* by drawing on an overlooked statement by Phillips:

> Peter [Greenaway] and I are trying to make "vertical television" – a harmonic overlay of images. Now that people have video recorders, a more complex visual image on screen is possible, for people can save the image, flip back, as with a book, if they do not quite understand something. (Anonymous 1985: 105, quoted in Blum 2016: 221)

A TV Dante is the result of the interaction of filmed material shot by Greenaway for the occasion, an impressive quantity of film and audio material found by Greenaway and Phillips in a Dutch archive, abstract imagery, animations, drawings, and texts, all manipulated and edited with a Quantel paintbox (an early workstation for the creation of computer graphics for television programs). At the same time, «the good old text» of the *Comedy* translated by Phillips remains absolutely central both in written and spoken form. At the very start of each episode, the first thing we see is a text, more precisely the verses that are carved above the gates of Hell. The text of the *Comedy* is also frequently commented on by experts, who appear on screen in small squares. On the other hand, the commented text of the *Comedy*

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[8] For an anthology of early critical responses to *A TV Dante*, cfr. Blum 2016: 477-81. Among the early interpretations of the series, Iannucci (1993) and Wheale (1995) have been the most influential. For an interpretation of *A TV Dante* as a *volgarizzamento* of the *Comedy*, cfr. Taylor 2004.

participates in a work of experimental television that is as far removed from both the contents and the aesthetics of ordinary television as one can possibly imagine[9].

If collage was the key strategy for the construction of semiotic networks in Phillips' *Inferno*, the visuals of *A TV Dante* are primarily constructed through the technique of superimposition. The aesthetics of *A TV Dante* are thus shaped, first and foremost, by the presence of a twofold editing process. The video is not only edited as a series of shots; there is also a rigorous and complex editing *internal to each shot*. The resulting multi-layered image, which superposes different media, different styles and different levels of meaning, mirrors the multi-layered structure of Phillips' illustrations for the *Inferno*. Even more importantly, the ability to create a multi-layered image with the help of computer graphics allows Greenaway not only to embrace the aesthetics of collage that Phillips had deployed in his illustrations, but also to develop it to its full potential within the liquid realm of video.

In light of these observations, the idea of "vertical television" proposed by Phillips and, more importantly, its aesthetic effect on the viewer, could be described by interpreting "vertical television" as a form of "moving collage". In the analyses that follow, we will investigate how the moving collage (or video-collage) concretely works in the series, its semiotic implications and what kind of effects it achieves. In view of these analyses, the aesthetics of *A TV Dante* will be finally interpreted as the effect generated on the viewer by a field of semiotic tensions activated by the video-collage. We will take as examples the representations of Beatrice, of the souls of the damned, and of one of the monsters that populate Hell.

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[9] The role and effect of these commentators is much debated. We will follow Kretschmann's interpretation of this crucial aspect of *A TV Dante*, according to which «Greenaway and Phillips did not intend the use of commentators to impart extensive knowledge about the *Divina Commedia*. As footnotes inside the logic of the adaptation of a book structure in a film, they rather serve a plausible and mainly formal aesthetic purpose» Kretschmann 2015: 240.

Beatrice makes her appearance in Canto 2. She is interpreted by Joanne Whalley and filmed in colour. The three concentric circles that surround the close-up of her face were originally a film of a radar scan found in the Dutch archive, manipulated and repurposed as a perfect representation of the medieval cosmos[10]. We often see only the lower half of Whalley's face, since black and white photographs of the faces of Marilyn Monroe, Louise Brooks, Joan Crawford and Jean Harlow are superimposed on its upper half (see fig. 6). In representing Beatrice, superimposition and video manipulation give birth to a liminal character who inhabits a cosmic dimension suspended between different media and different technologies, halfway between black and white and colour, between photography and film. This visual hybridity, in turn, highlights Beatrice's complex ontological nature as a blessed spirit who has abandoned the terrestrial in favour of the celestial[11].

In order to get a clearer idea of how collage and video work together in the context of a longer scene, one could focus on the representation of the souls of the damned in Canto V, in which the viewer is presented with the hurricane that torments the soul of those who are punished for their lust. This scene's aesthetic effect is the result of very strong tension between realism and abstraction. The scene begins with images of a hurricane, probably extrapolated from a newscast, and ends with archival footage of birds, manipulated to such an extent as to almost completely lose its referential content and

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[10] «A Marconi radar film of aeroplanes circling about an airport gave us, with its concentric circles and aetherial blips of movement, the ideal image of mediaeval cosmology, complete with angels in flight» Phillips, "A TV Dante. Making the Series. Notes on this work", web.

[11] Phillips adopts a radically different perspective and sees Beatrice in *A TV Dante* as the medieval equivalent of a modern diva: «the nearest modern equivalent [of Dante's devotion to Beatrice] would be that unfulfillable devotion to a film star» (quoted in Jones 1990: 5). Calè (2007) and Kretschmann (2015), among others, have read the first appearance of Beatrice in light of Phillips' own interpretation of this scene.

transform into an abstract procession of irregular forms across the screen. This transition from the concrete to the abstract can be said to involve the soundtrack, too. First we hear the roar of the hurricane, then the calls of the starlings, then choral music inspired by the birds' calls. On the other end, this movement from documentary to abstract video art is counterweighted by the ethological and ornithological remarks of an expert who appears in a small square on the screen and brings the representation down to earth again with his technical and scientific realism.

The technique and the aesthetics of video-collage probably achieve their most impressive results in the representation of Cerberus, one of the monsters that populate Dante's Hell. Greenaway seems to be particularly fascinated by these creatures, as they allow him to experiment with bold and extreme visuals. The character of Cerberus is constructed through the interaction between a performer and the very medium of video. His movements seem to leave a trace in the liquid, viscous substance of video, and the accumulation of the traces on the screen gives birth to a monster (see fig. 7-8). This creature, then, is the result of the video manipulation of a performance, at the intersection of abstract painting, moving image, and contemporary dance.

In conclusion, the poetics of Phillips' and Greenaway's *A TV Dante* are shaped by what we may call the aesthetics of the moving collage. Its effect is made possible by the very medium of video, which provides an abstract space in which different media and technologies can not only interact, but develop their interactions through time. The use of moving collage, in turn, generates a complex semiotic field animated by a twofold tension. The first one presents documentary, history and realism on the one hand and pure abstraction on the other; the second one presents a strong presence of the text of the *Comedy* on the one hand and wild visual experimentalism on the other.

Surrealism and the dismantling of the Divine Comedy in Raúl Ruiz's *A TV Dante*

In his contribution to *A TV Dante* Raúl Ruiz did not want to follow Phillips' and Greenaway's intermedial contamination of words, images, frames and commentaries. Instead, he chose a stylistic approach that was much more in line with his own cinematic and videographic poetics[12]. Ruiz's immense, bulimic and chaotic production is characterized by the obsessive presence of recurring features, from his beginnings as an outsider director among the politically oriented Chilean filmmakers, through his avant-garde low budget films produced in France, to his high-budget international productions such as *Trois vies et une seule mort* (1996) or his fascinating adaptation of Proust's *Le Temps retrouvé* (1999). Ruiz's films can be said to be characterized by a non-linear, dreamlike structure strongly

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[12] «On a more general formal plane, the entirety of *A TV Dante* is a remarkably unstable mass on the level of its text-image relations. As in *India Song*, where Marguerite Duras intended the image and sound tracks to continually approach, touch one another and then take divergent paths, the global montage plan of Ruiz's work, across all six cantos, resembles an elaborate game of hide-and-seek between fragments of Dante's text and the images that nominally illustrate it. Ruiz orchestrates an audiovisual polyphony where, momentarily, an element of text will anchor an image, or vice versa; but, more often, there are many image-clusters and sound sources (such as two pieces of music at once, plus the spoken text) to contend with» Martin 2004. Drawing on Martin's analysis, Goddard observes that «the combination of the spoken texts of Dante with images of Chile, both stylised and real, allowed for a more extreme form of disjunction between sound and image than characterised Ruiz's previous films, however complex their audiovisual construction. The soundtrack, which is often composed of more than one musical layer, the narrators' voices but also shouting and singing crowds, sound effects and voices with varying relationships to what is currently being seen on the screen, allows for a rhythm of divergence and convergence between sound and image» Goddard 2013: 93.

influenced by surrealism; a purely associative editing, very similar to that of Soviet avant-garde movies; the massive use of grotesque imagery, often related to the primary drives of eating and defecating; a combinatory, hermetic logic; and an intrinsic intermedial nature, which exploits the connections between film, theater, video and installation, as he explains in his two theoretical volumes *Poetics of Cinema* (1995 and 2006)[13].

Ruiz chose to set his *A TV Dante* in contemporary Chile, following a common joke about Santiago as a quintessential modern form of hell. There are some allusions to the political situation and to the dictatorship, but Ruiz «completely rejects the rhetorics of militant cinema and indeed parodies them within the work» (Goddard 2013: 93)[14]. His episodes combine cheap horror effects with avant-garde associative editing, and classical narration with surrealistic visions. Their most striking feature is the drastic dissociation between sound and image, even more extreme than in Greenaway and in the rest of his

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[13] The last few years have seen the arrival of a wealth of new publications on a number of aspects of Ruiz's cinema: cfr., among others, Lopez-Vicuna-Marinescu 2017, Havenne 2018, de los Ríos 2019, and Navarro Mayorga 2019. These recent works contribute to a critical ecosystem shaped by the now classic works by Goddard (2013), Begin (2009), Cortínez and Engelbert (2011), de los Ríos and Pinto (2010), and Sánchez (2011). For interesting blends of critical reflections about and interviews of Ruiz, cfr. Bruno 2007 and Peeters 2015. For Ruiz's experimental television works before *A TV Dante*, cfr. Allen et al. 2009.

[14] At the same time, Goddard argues against Richardson (2006: 162) that *A TV Dante* is a strongly political work: «This is not […] a purely aestheticised Chile devoid of political referents and critique, but rather a deeply political engagement with the problematics of exile and the role of images in relation to a remembered place of origin. […] [*A TV Dante*] is very much about the political unconscious of Chile as expressed through cinematic images, and its presentation of the country as a latter day hell is as redolent with critical implications for the Chilean political situation as was *Memory of Appearances*» Goddard 2013: 93.

own *oeuvre*. Dante's text interacts with a complex soundtrack made of music, diegetic and extradiegetic sound effects (voices, songs, shouting crowds), in a continuous counterpoint of convergence and divergence which is scarcely narrative or totally anti-narrative. The main features of Ruiz's rewriting of the *Inferno* can be exemplified by analyzing the most didactic Canto of the section, the eleventh, in which a pause in the action allows Virgil to make a detailed explanation of the *Inferno*'s overall structure. Ruiz begins his episode with the two main characters at an entrance. We hear Virgil's speech as voice over. After a while, we watch a surrealistic representation of the categories of sinners Virgil is talking about — particularly homicides and suicides—through a long tracking shot. With an abrupt change from medieval music to a popular Chilean song, this vision mutates into the image of a group of men cleaning knives covered in blood — an image devoid of any direct reference to Dante. We find then a complex alternation between visions of hell (represented as an interior with hanging dead bodies—see fig. 9-10), quotations from Virgil's speech, mysterious objects, and landscape shots, enhanced by a rich and complex soundtrack[15].

The Canto of the suicides, which features a particularly distorted expressiveness in order to visualize the sinners' profane act, offers

[15] «What is to be made of these alternations between the real and irreal, the cosmological and the social? Despite Ruiz's refusal of any militant rhetoric, there is a strong allegorical reference in *A TV Dante* between the punishments of the 'lost souls' of the inferno and the punishment and suffering endured by the Chilean people. The frequent scenes of book burning, of flaming crosses, of crowds of people beating against fences and doorways, beyond their kitsch and surreal aspects are also expressive of both real suffering and the desire to escape from an infernal period of history. Similarly the scenes and descriptions of torture and death, while fully in keeping with the textual descriptions of the *Inferno*, cannot but evoke the recent Chilean history of disappeared people, subject to brutal forms of torture and execution which both in reality and imagination were no less monstrous than those tortures imagined by Dante» Goddard 2013: 95.

another example of Ruiz's stylistic strategies: a radical disjunction between word and image and a general dismantling of any textual and narrative coherence. In the first part of the episode we hear the voice-over describing an extremely dense wood while watching a recurrent image of trees shot from an observation point close to the ground. At the same time, the Chilean Dante begins to read a long passage from the Chilean law on wills. This strange dissonance lasts quite long, until we see an effective visual transcription of Pier delle Vigne's first appearance, embodied here by a girl who sings and is then disfigured by bleeding cuts (see fig. 11). From the rest of Canto 13, Ruiz takes only a few fragments, especially those regarding the appearance of two new figures and their dismemberment by a pack of dogs, visualized here as an episode during a popular feast.

In conclusion, Ruiz's approach to Dante can be said to be epitomized by Canto 11's final scene, in which we see human skulls immersed in a green liquid and hear Dante asking Virgil two questions in voice-over:

«Bright sun that cures confusion at the sight,/your explanations gladden me so much/ that questioning brings no less joy than truth./But go back, just a point or two,/ to where you hold that usury offends/divine benevolence. Untie that knot for me» (*A TV Dante*, Canto 11) [16].

Detached by the dialogue, and left without any answer, these last elements sound ominous and preserve the sense of suspension typical of Ruiz's oneiric cinema. «Untie that knot for me» remains an unanswered request, and could be symbolic of an adaptation which

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[16] «"O sol che sani ogni vista turbata,/tu mi contenti sì quando tu solvi,/che, non men che saver, dubbiar m'aggrata./Ancora in dietro un poco ti rivolvi",/diss' io, "là dove di' ch'usura offende/la divina bontade, e 'l groppo solvi"» Inf. 11, vv. 91-96.

dismantles all coherent narrative structures, transforming Dante's *Inferno* into a series of powerful images, symbols and visions.

Conclusion: a (post)modern approach to adaptation and intermediality

While being radically different from each other, Phillips-Greenaway's and Ruiz's approaches to the *Inferno* share a few significant features. On the one hand, both rewritings tend to cut direct political references to Dante's political milieu, as well as the narrative aspects of the *Comedy* that are more strictly dependent on medieval culture. On the other hand, both works highlight symbolic elements and grotesque imagery, with a special focus on bodily and multisensorial language. *A TV Dante* thus becomes a unique and somehow disturbing mixture of realism and symbolism, metaphysical reflections and surrealistic inventions, archetypal figures and comical disfiguring. Not unsurprisingly, the project failed. The reactions from the audience, which predictably expected a more traditional adaptation of a canonical masterpiece, were far from enthusiastic. For Phillips, *A TV Dante* is the culmination of a seven-year artistic project; for Greenaway, it represents an occasion for experimenting freely with video editing and inaugurating a new phase in his production focused on the exploration of hypermediacy and the semiotic resonance of books as opposed to that of the natural world (Petricola 2017).

In conclusion, *A TV Dante* seems to tell us less about Dante and more about its three directors. This is due to the fact that *A TV Dante* is not an adaptation "at the service" of a "primary" text, but rather an intermedial work of video art in which the *Comedy*'s main function is that of legitimizing, through its canonical status, an explorative and experimental attitude towards television as a medium for the creation of art. In this postmodern mediascape, canonical texts do not need to be treated with care and reverence; on the contrary, they can become part of new and wider networks of meaning, thus catalyzing newer and newer aesthetic experiences.
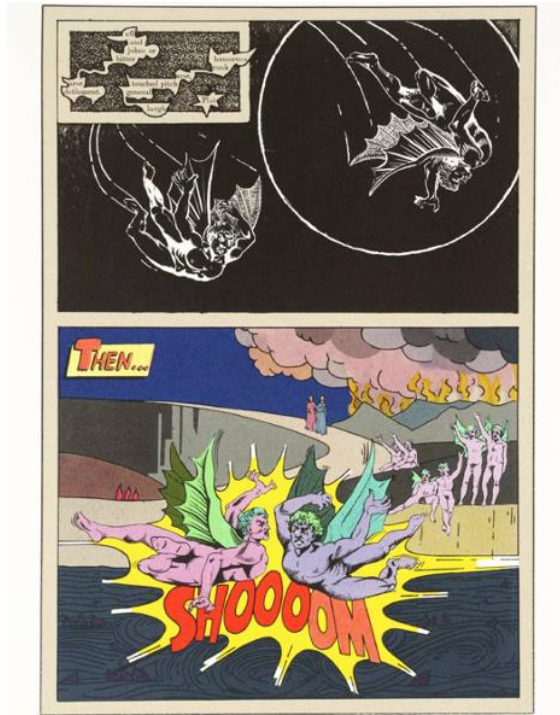
Fig. 1, Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno, Canto XXII/4: Fighting Devils*, 1979-1983.

Fig. 2, William Blake, *The Circle of Corrupt Officials: The Devils Mauling Each Other*, from *Dante's Inferno, Canto XXII*, ca. 1825–27.

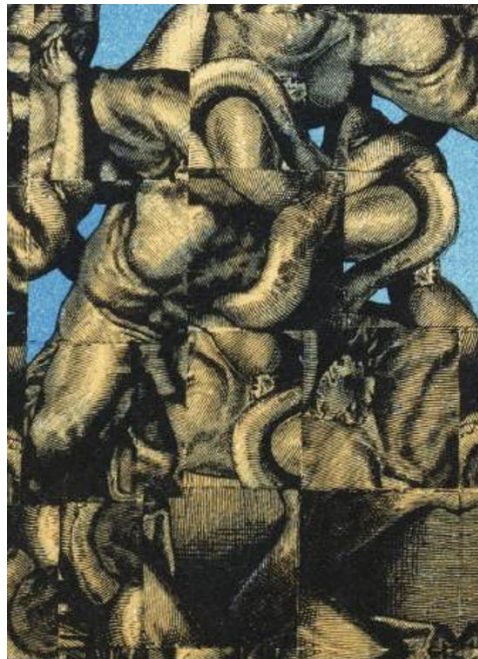Fig. 3 Tom Phillips, *Dante's Inferno, Canto XXV/4*, 1979-1983.

Fig. 4 Tom Phillips, Dante's Inferno, Canto XXV/4, 1979-1983, detail.

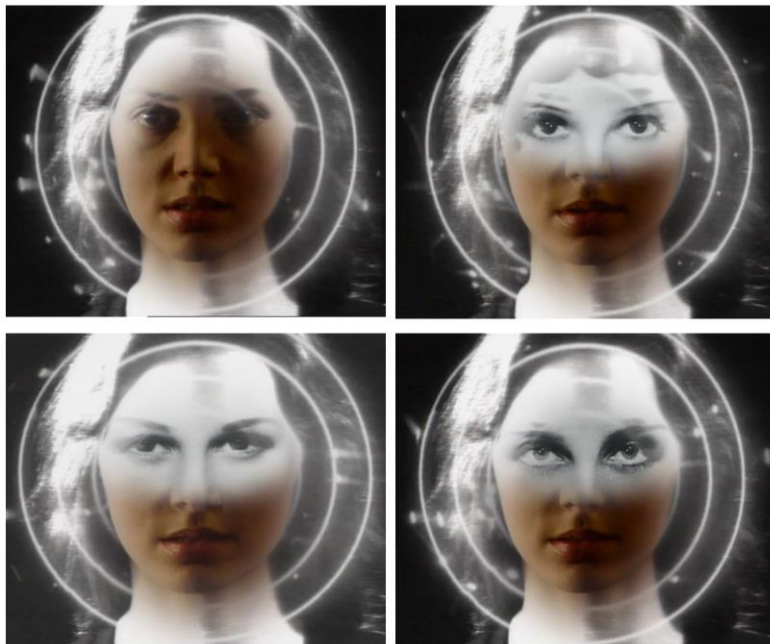Fig. 5 Max Ernst, *Solitary and Conjugal Trees*, 1940.

Fig. 6. Four stills from *A TV Dante, Canto 2*, showing The appearance of Beatrice (Digital Classics Distribution).

Fig. 7 A still from *A TV Dante, Canto 6*, representing Cerberus (Digital Classics Distribution).

Fig. 8 Francis Bacon, *Head VI*, 1948.

and suffer greater pain.

Fig. 9-10 Two still frames from *A TV Dante, Canto 11*.

Fig. 11 Pier Delle Vigne in *A TV Dante, Canto 13*.

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