

An Immaculate Blend of Art and Pedagogy

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Dante: Inferno to Paradise, Episodes 1 & 2.
PBS, 2024. Directed by Ric Burns.

IN THE OPENING SHOT OF THE OPENING EPISODE OF *DANTE: Inferno to Paradise*, a candle atop a leather-bound volume flickers as the words of Percy Bysshe Shelley scroll in a three-line stanza across the screen, closely followed by a second stanza made up of two lines.

Poets are the mirrors
of the gigantic shadows
which the future casts upon the present.

Poets are the unacknowledged
legislators of the world.

—Percy Bysshe Shelley, 1821

The choice of an author from the English Romantic tradition, who is best known for his fourteen-line sonnet *Ozymandias*, and composed the poem quoted above exactly five hundred years after Dante's death may seem an odd addition, particularly to the introduction of such an important and culturally important piece of art to both Italy and the U.S. Is Dante—who is portrayed moving in a shadowy hue across the background—the mirror of the giant shadow cast upon the present? Though one may at first think of Dante more as the illuminating candle than a reproducer of shadow, one understands that Shelley's prophetic words relate to Dante's enduring influence on the present, acknowledged or not.

The imagery of Dante's poem fits the imagery of the opening scene, where a candle in the reddish foreground fades from focus, and the background, green in hue, impressionistically takes on changing shapes, including a moving figure, ostensibly Dante, wandering through the *selva oscura* (dark forest) with which his text first opens. We are then treated to a sight that will often be repeated during the course of the documentary's first two episodes: Dante writing his *Commedia*, while Antonio Fazzini, the actor

portraying Dante, speaks his first seminal lines—the first lines of the poem in this case—and then translates them into English, while a pensive, harp-filled strumming accompanies the scene. This all serves to set the ambient mood of the entire endeavor, filled with shadow, flickering light, motion, gentle music, and foregrounds and backgrounds with shifting focuses.

It has now been over thirty years since Amilcare Iannucci first identified a major problem with adaptations of Dante's work: they are either too pedagogical, and therefore not entertaining, or they are too avant-garde or impressionistic and lose their connection to the source material. In this particular blend of the artistic and the educational, however, first conceived by the Italian scholar Riccardo Brusagli and the Emmy and Peabody Award-winning director Ric Burns, one finds an adaptation which features an impressive assortment of excellent acting, good camera shots of historical locations, the characters, and art, and some of the top Dante scholars from around the world giving expert and interesting commentary, which is seamlessly adhered to the adaptation itself.

This is a work far removed from the efforts of diametrically differing artists in the 1980s: Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips' 1985 work *A TV Dante*, made by the BBC and never finished, and the Italian *Dipartimento Scuola Educazione's* one-hundred-part 1988 series on Dante.¹ Whereas Phillips' and Greenaway's work has been described as "as local and self-reflective as the original text," the purpose of RAI Television's adaptation was explicitly educational, though the project did desire to reach a larger public.² Jump forward thirty-five years, and we have an effort that I think Iannucci (as critic), and Greenaway, Phillips', and RAI (as artists) would acknowledge as the clear heir to each of their efforts, as well as the innovator that improved on the artistic methods and purpose of its predecessors.

Part of the success of the first episode of *Dante: Inferno to Paradise* is surely the brilliant mix of media which enriches the artistic value and diversity offered by the production. For example, there are professional readings done of lines from the *Inferno*, full of pathos and agony—particularly when Francesca weeps out her narcissistic invective against love and God. These are accompanied by Brian Keane's tone-setting music, often featuring somber and sustained deep notes, and images of scenes from the *Comedy* from medieval illuminated manuscripts too. Add to these shots of Dante accompanied by Virgil actually moving throughout his narrative: up the dark forest mountain; then through the gate of hell; seeing Charon and Minos, and then weeping Francesca as well as state-of-the-art sound and effects, and one has an extremely immersive aesthetic experience.

Not only does the first episode tell the story of Dante's *Inferno*, it tells the story of his early life, fascination with Beatrice, entrance into political affairs, and his subsequent exile at the hands of Charles of Valois, Pope Boniface VIII, and the Black Guelphs they had thrown their civic and ecclesiastical force behind. These deepen and darken the already somber mood of Dante's *Inferno*, itself an artistic representation of a place of eternal

1 Amilcare Iannucci, "Dante, Television, and Education," *Quaderni d'Italianistica* 10 (1989): 1-2.

2 Andrew Taylor, "Television, Translation, and Vulgarization: Reflections on Phillip's and Greenaway's *A TV Dante*," In *Dante, Cinema, and Television*. Edited by Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 146, and Iannucci, *ibid.*

punishment. The punishment Dante endures in this world, however, is drawn parallel to his *Inferno* in order to enhance the reader's understanding of Dante's motivation to write such a work, and to include so many contemporary and near contemporary individuals in it. A case in point would be Filippo Argenti, a nobleman who once struck Dante in the street. As Dante crosses the River Styx on board a vessel piloted by Phlegyas, Argenti attempts to board the vessel with vicious anger, and he is appropriately scorned by Dante. The implication is that Argenti earned his place among the wrathful in hell for the pain he inflicted on Dante outside of the text.

The scholars who have speaking roles in this project are all influential in the field of Dante studies and most come from top universities in the United States and Europe.³ Rather than dominate the audio-visual space, as in a university lecture, each scholar's perspective is smoothly integrated into the narrative and serves to contextualize and revivify the significance of each of Dante's scenes.

The most difficult task of any educator or entertainer teaching or adapting Dante's work is this: how to make his medieval, Catholic world relevant to contemporary secular Europeans and Americans, at least. Roberto Bruscaqli offers the best summation of how to bridge the gap between Dante's 14th century religious poem and our 21st century.

You don't go into a retreat.
You forget about yourself.
You accept the challenge of the world.
You relate it to any sort of human experience,
and that friction will save you.
That confrontation will reveal what you are
and what you should be.
It's actually opening up to the world that you
save yourself, and you find a path of salvation.

(1:05:02-1:05:36)

Bruscaqli claims that the world will challenge one, and that if one meets the challenge of the world, whether Christian or otherwise, the confrontation will reveal to one's self what one is and what one should be. In this way, Bruscaqli claims that Dante's poem can serve to reorient one and to help find one's place in the *selva oscura* (dark forest) of life, and that in any age and at any age, this experience is of insurmountable (tropological) value.

Episode II, Resurrection: Continuing from Heaven to Hell

In juxtaposition and slight contrast to the opening of Episode One, the opening shot of the second episode, *Resurrection*, features a clear Dante in the foreground of a dark, candlelit room which is blurrily represented in the background. Rather than rely on the words of another poet, *Resurrection* begins with Dante powerfully addressing the reader in an act of literary

3 They are: Riccardo Bruscaqli, Teodolinda Barolini, Lino Pertile, Elena Lombardi, Heather Webb, Catherine Adoyo, Claudio Giunta, Theodore Cachey, Manuele Gragnolati, Giuseppe Ledda, Timothy Verdon and Guy Raffa. Edited by Amilcare A. Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press), p. 146, and Iannucci, *ibid.*

apostrophe. Dante describes the experience of witnessing the deep abyss of the final infernal and frozen river of hell, Cocytus, with dread Lucifer at its center. In an act that will conclude both his *Inferno* and *Paradiso*, Dante hedges this claim by suggesting that his words fall short of the matter they seek to describe, invoking what Dante scholars call the ineffability *topos*. From this final moment in Hell, the documentary quickly follows Dante and Virgil, for the topic of the second episode is Dante's *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. As Dante and Virgil exit the infernal region, they make their way to the island and mountain of Purgatory, where Cato awaits them.

The second episode carries the weight of two-thirds of Dante's poem, and the second two of the three canticles that comprise the poem. This itself reflects a critical judgment concerning the public accessibility and public assessment of the second and third places of the afterlife. The *Purgatorio* is very human: there time elapses; physical effort is expended and exhaustion gives rise to rest and dreams. Suffering is present in Purgatory, but it is expiatory in nature and therefore partakes of the nature of a progressive training rather than a perpetual torment, like hell.

It is hard to say why a world so akin to our own is less interesting to the public than is the *Inferno*. This is perhaps due to the enduring Romantic influence on how the American public, in particular, receives Dante. The Romantics read *Inferno*, and loved its vivid imagery and visualizations of torment. The work became something like a macabrely fascinating exposé on the sexually repressed and therefore overly creative medieval mind. This reception, however, is missing not only two-thirds of the poem, but the correct triptych-style understanding which a complete reading and rendering of the poem affords. The PBS adaptation, however, does a good job of integrating the two remaining canticles, regardless of their lesser popularity, maintaining a consistency of style but also adding unique elements to the representation of each canticle.

Purgatory has a physical existence in Dante's world: it is located on an island mountain in the southern hemisphere, which was created due to the physical fall of Lucifer into the middle of the earth. Purgatory as a realm is a place of hope, change, transformation, and earthly time where both discipline and the prayers of those close to one can help expiate and expurgate one's sins. Manuele Gragnoloti describes Purgatory in the following way:

One can understand the process of Purgatory
as that which allows the soul precisely
to go out of its own obsessions.
One can think of Hell as the rigidity of identity.
It's like continuing to be stuck
in one's own obsessions, in the past.
Purgatory is the therapy that allows the soul
to abandon all that rigidity.

(19:27-19:56)

Dante's poem is a poem for every person, and was written to show each person that they matter and should take care of themselves because of this.

Purgatory also allows the documentarians to illustrate the seeming unfairness of Dante's vision of the afterlife. Figures like Cato of Utica and Manfred, son of Frederick II, cause one to question what the justice of Purgatory truly is. Cato was a contemporary of Virgil and committed suicide following Pompey the Great's defeat to Julius Caesar at the Battle of Pharsalia (48 BCE). Because he was both a pagan and a suicide, many readers are led to question "the justice of God" which allows for him to guard Purgatory, while pagan Virgil, who did not commit suicide, remains condemned to hell. Add to this the vicious actions of Manfred, who died by violence, and himself was excommunicated not once, but twice, and one realizes that Dante is representing God's justice as far more complicated than may at first meet the eye.

Besides focusing on the structure and philosophical underpinnings of Purgatory, the second episode also details Dante's exile following the year 1301, his stays in both Verona and Ravenna, and the deeply moving and crushing blow to the Italian spirit in 1309 when the Pope moved the seat of the papacy from Rome to Avignon, as is figured by the "giant" and the "harlot" he first assaults and then absconds with in *Purgatorio* 32.151-160. It is also in the final locale of Purgatory, the Earthly Paradise, that Virgil leaves Dante and is replaced by the *antica fiamma* (ancient flame), Beatrice, for whom he has been searching his entire journey.

Just under one hour into the second episode, Dante and Beatrice ascend to Celestial Paradise which is itself "accommodated" to the perceptions of humans, though the nature of its existence surpasses human perception. All souls in Celestial Paradise exist in the Empyrean, the tenth heaven beyond space and time, but they have organized themselves in order to accommodate themselves to human perception, for Dante, and for us. This allows Beatrice to guide Dante through the Ptolemaic cosmos (the Moon, Mercury, Venus, the Sun, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, the Fixed Stars, the *Primum Mobile*, and the Empyrean). The spirits in Dante's *Paradiso* are less embodied than those in Purgatory and Hell and take on the form often of sparks and lights which descend to illuminate Dante's understanding on metaphysical issues like predestination and the justice of God.

Additionally, the latter half of the second episode focuses on the drama of finding the final thirteen cantos of Dante's *Paradiso* after his death and the search for them by two of Dante's sons, Jacopo and Pietro. Boccaccio, the great poet of the Italian vernacular from the generation

following Dante, tells us an extraordinary story concerning the year following Dante's death and how his final cantos were discovered. Just eight months after Dante's death, his son Jacopo revealed that he had had a vision of his father at night, in a dream. And in the dream, Dante showed his son a place, a small cavity, on the wall, in which they find the mildewed and nearly rotten papers of Dante's final thirteen cantos. Jacopo went to that same place in reality following his dream, and he found the same nearly rotten papers and immediately copied them down and joined them to the rest of the poem. Though the final canticle of Dante's poem is often considered the least dramatic of the three, the history surrounding its final discovery and completion provides what the text itself may lack.

What is the importance of Dante on the modern viewer, ultimately? Why should one spend the time to watch a documentary on a 14th century Florentine poet? What message could he possibly have to communicate to both believers and secular individuals in the Anglophone world today? Roberto Bruscaagli answers this question tersely and poignantly. Dante's poem is a poem for every person and was written to show each person that they matter and should take care of themselves because of this. In his final lines of the documentary, Bruscaagli says:

Take care of it.
Take care of it.
Your life matters.

(1:53:04-1:53:14)

And so does Dante's relevance and influence continue to this day because at least one of his messages is absolutely universal: even a single human life has value, so treasure it if it is yours, and care for it as something of infinite value. *A*