

A TV Dante – Cantos I-VIII (1989) by Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips: A “symbolical translation” of Dante’s *Inferno* for television

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Riassunto

Nell'affrontare la loro versione filmata degli otto primi canti *dell'Inferno*, (*A TV Dante – Cantos I-VIII* del 1989), Peter Greenaway e Tom Phillips svilupparono una strategia di adattamento affatto nuova ed innovativa. Poggiando sulle precedenti traduzione e illustrazione dell'*Inferno* allestite da Tom Phillips, Greenaway e Phillips concepirono *A TV Dante* come un nuovo libro dell'artista. Così, trasferirono nel film strutture proprie di un libro, e in modo simile a quello sottostante la strategia simbolica delle illustrazioni dello stesso Phillips, ‘tradussero’ il testo dell'*Inferno* in un ‘linguaggio televisivo simbolico’. Nell'articolo si offre uno sguardo complessivo ai principi centrali dell'adattamento in *A TV Dante*

Parole chiave: Inferno; Peter Greenaway; Tom Phillips; Dante e il cinema; Dante e la TV; illustrazioni di Dante.

Abstract

For their film version of the first eight cantos from Dante's *Inferno*, *A TV Dante – Cantos I-VIII* (1989), Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips developed a completely new and highly innovative adaptation strategy: Based on an earlier illustration cycle and translation of Dante's *Inferno* by Tom Phillips, Greenaway and Phillips conceived *A TV Dante* as a ›new edition‹ of the artist book. For this, they transferred typical book structures in the film and, similar to Phillips' own symbolical illustration strategy, ›translated‹ the text of the *Inferno* in a ›symbolical TV language‹. In this article, I will give an overview over the central adaptation principles in *A TV Dante*

Keywords: Inferno; Peter Greenaway; Tom Phillips; Dante and film; Dante and TV; Dante illustrations

A TV Dante – Cantos I-VIII by Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips was first aired on British television in July 1990.¹ In their film version of the first eight cantos from Dante's *Inferno*, the artists did not transfer – as one might have expected – Dante's impressive linguistic pictures describing a journey through hell into a visually stunning motion picture version. Instead, Greenaway and Phillips developed a completely new and highly innovative adaptation strategy: based on an earlier illustration cycle and translation of Dante's *Inferno* by Tom Phillips, Greenaway and Phillips conceived *A TV Dante* as a "new edition" of his artist book. For this, they transferred typical book structures in the film and, similar to Phillips' own symbolical illustration strategy, "translated" the text of the *Inferno* in a "symbolical TV language". In this article, I will give an overview over the central adaptation principles in *A TV Dante*, which to date have not been summarised satisfyingly. With this, I hope to facilitate the access to this film version of Dante's *Inferno*, which due to its very special and complex aesthetics at a first glance might seem perplexing or even confusing (correspondingly, after having seen the first minutes of the film, a friend of mine asked me if the director had visualized a LSD trip) – but at second sight reveals its precise and fascinating conceptual structure.

I. GENESIS OF A TV DANTE

The *Inferno*-adaptation *A TV Dante* was commissioned by the British TV station Channel 4. This station is known for initiating many experimental film projects, especially during the first years after its foundation.

- * This essay is a revised version of a chapter from my PhD thesis as well as of an earlier article. In my PhD thesis I analysed for the first time in research the phenomenon that starting in the 1960s and becoming a "boom" since the 1980s internationally an amount of contemporary "reworkings" of the *Divina Commedia* has appeared, which by medial, linguistical, stylistical and/or contentual changes transform the original text in decidedly new versions: in "*Nuove Commedie*". In addition to a general overview over the phenomenon as a whole, I analysed selected reworkings in detail, including Peter Weiss' drama *Inferno* (1964/2003); the trilogy of dramas *Inferno*, *Purgatorio*, *Paradiso* by Edoardo Sanguineti, Mario Luzi and Giovanni Giudici (1989-1991); the director's theater trilogy by Tomaz Pandur *Inferno. The book of the soul*, *Purgatory. Anatomy of Melancholy*, and *Paradiso. Lux* (2001-2002); Peter Greenaway's and Tom Phillips' TV version *A TV Dante*; the radio drama *Radio Inferno* (1993) by Andreas Ammer and FM Einheit; Sean Meredith's "Americanised" paper puppet film *Dante's Inferno* (2007), which is based on the artist book *Dante's Divine Comedy* (2003-2005) by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders; as well as the musical *La Divina Commedia. L'opera. L'uomo che cerca l'Amore* (2007) by the Vatican priest Mons. Marco Frisina. The dissertation was published in 2012 with the title "*Höllenaschine / Wunschapparat*". *Analysen ausgewählter Neubearbeitungen von Dantes Divina Commedia* (Kretschmann 2012). An earlier version of this article in German based on the dissertation was published in *Deutsches Dante-Jahrbuch* (Kretschmann 2010-2011).
1. The film had already been aired the previous year on Italian, Dutch and German television. Shortly after the premier in Great Britain, the film was available on tape (Greenaway, Phillips 1995). Meanwhile, the film was also published on DVD; and it can be downloaded under www.digitalclassics.co.uk. The trailer can be found here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XkxkRpDeFyk> [24th August 2015].

In 1982, Channel 4 was launched by an *act of parliament* as the second private British broadcasting station to go alongside the state owned channels BBC1 and BBC2, and ITV, the only private television transmitter in Britain up to that point. As a private TV broadcasting transmitter, Channel 4 has to finance itself, mainly through advertisements. At the same time, however, it is subject to the public transmission order, to ensure a high quality of its programs. The preamble of the constitutive document accordingly states:²

The public service remit for Channel 4 is the provision of a broad range of high quality and diverse programming which, in particular:

- demonstrates innovation, experiment and creativity in the form and content of programmes;
- appeals to the tastes and interests of a culturally diverse society;
- makes a significant contribution to meeting the need for the licensed public service channels to include programmes of an educational nature and other programmes of educative value; and
- exhibits a distinctive character.

During the 1980s, Michael Kustow, who oversaw Channel 4's artistic department, approached Tom Phillips. Phillips had published an artist book on Dante's *Inferno* in 1983, which had received a lot of attention from the art scene and the interested public, and Michael Kustow was considering to adapt it for an art film (Phillips 1992: 238). After Peter Greenaway – for whom Channel 4 became a main producer for some of his films (Gras, Gras 2000: 53) – was recruited as a director, Phillips agreed to participate in the undertaking.

Tom Phillips (*1937, London) is an internationally acknowledged painter and graphic designer.³ Phillips, who also works as an author and composer, became known especially for his gaudily coloured and partly collaged screen prints.

Some of his characteristic working methods can be detected for example in his cycle *A Humument* (Fig. 1): according to his own declaration, Phillips one day decided to adapt the first book, which he would purchase for the price of three pence, in an artistic way. Thus, chance played a major role in the process of choosing a literary pretext to work with – an approach which was also characteristic for his later work on Dante. Phillips came across W. H. Mallock's Victorian novella *A Human Document*. Since the beginning of the 1970s, he published several illustration cycles for this novella. In these illustrations Phillips combined words and sentence fragments from the text, his own artwork and other collaged materials such as film excerpts, photos,

2. <http://www.channel4.com/about4/overview.html> [24th August 2015].

3. I.a., he was elected into the Royal Academy of Arts in 1989; he was chairman of the show commission of the Royal Academy from 1995 to 2007; in 1999, he became Honorary Member of the Royal Society of Portrait Painters, etc. See information on his homepage www.tomphillips.co.uk [24th August 2015].

fragmented bills and paintings by other painters or himself, which he cut up and reassembled (Phillips 1992: 255 ff.).

Towards the end of the 1970s, Phillips started – at the beginning also “by chance” – to concentrate on Dante. This was triggered when the *Folio Society* inquired with his main publisher *Alecto Editions*, whether he would be interested in illustrating a new translation of the *Divina Commedia*.⁴ When he handed in his first drafts, they were rejected by the publisher, saying that they were too “modern” – in his book *Works and Texts* Phillips spread Mr. Folio’s exclamation: “These aren’t illustrations at all” (Phillips 1992: 227). Folio’s edition then was published with the widely known neo-classical etchings by John Flaxman (1755-1826) – Phillips on the other hand continued his work on the *Divina Commedia* with the help of his publishing house and private funding. He focused on the *Inferno*, for which he worked on an illustration cycle. Parallel to his work on the *Inferno*, he created an own translation, for which he transferred Dante’s *endecasillabi* in interlaced rhymes to unrhymed blank verses with ten syllables. For the translation he transferred the old poem in modern English, but at the same time his version is close to the original text (i.e. without any actualizations of the content or else). The finished book then consisted of the translation, two illustrations for the whole book, four coloured screen printings for each of the thirty-four cantos of the *Inferno*, as well as extensive comments to the graphics in an appendix (Phillips 1985). Already shortly after the publication of the elaborately designed original and facsimile editions, the London based Thames & Hudson publishing house issued a fairly cheap paperback edition, which can be seen as an indication for the success of the artist book.

Designing his graphics, Phillips used a strategy that differed widely from previous illustrations of the *Divina Commedia*: many, if not even most artists drew sequences or waypoints of Dante’s travels through the afterlife almost in “picture stories” that visualise the original text (the famous graphics by Sandro Botticelli, William Blake or Gustave Doré may come to mind; see Fig. 2 and 3). Phillips instead decided to take a different approach. He transferred central parts of the text into a mainly “symbolical imagery” (compare Möller 2000: 168-182). Three examples may further illustrate this.

4. In his book *Works and Texts*, Tom Phillips points out that he first came in contact with Dante when he was six years old. While collecting books with his brother for a charitable war donation, they were given an edition of the *Divina Commedia*, illustrated by Gustave Doré, which they kept at home for a short period of time, before duly handing it in. Phillips commented himself: “It was strange to think that [...] my first brush with art, in a pictureless home, should occur at the same time as my first meeting with a work that would later dominate fifteen years of my life.” He later read excerpts from the *Commedia* in school, but thought them “disappointingly parochial; thus missing the point entirely, as I discovered later when reading the original with the aid of Singleton’s copiously annotated edition” (Phillips 1992: 228; for his reflections about Dante see 219-251).

The first illustration is taken from the first *canto* (Fig. 4). In this introductory canto to the *Divina Commedia*, the author Dante describes how his fictitious *alter ego* Dante is at the beginning of his journey, which will later lead him through the three worlds of afterlife, *Inferno*, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso*. In this canto Dante retells how he gets lost in a forest and encounters three wild beasts: a leopard, a lion and a she-wolf. In the tradition of interpretation of the *Divina Commedia*, these animals were seen as allegorical representatives for the three Aristotelian categories of sin, which according to Dante's classification are atoned for in the nine circles of hell: the milder sins of the *incontinentia* (excessiveness), the moderate sins of the *malitia* (active evilness) and the most serious sins of the *feritas / matta bestialitade* (animalistic bestiality). Phillips – unlike Botticelli and many others – does not actually show a Dante facing animals in his illustration. Instead, Phillips transferred the allegorical meaning of the three animals systematically into his rather “symbolical” illustration: three large arrowheads can be seen on the illustration. The first one is filled with leopard skin, the second one shows a lion's head and the third one a wolf's head. Just like in Dante's hell, where punishment is based on the severity of the committed sin and where the lost souls are placed in always deeper lying circles in the underworld, the arrowheads point downwards. In addition to the display level, Phillips uses his techniques to emphasize the allegorical meaning of the three animals, by using surface printing for the first arrow head; surface drypoint for the second one; and deep etching for the third one. The increasing severity of the sins and the depth of their punishment are therefore also reflected in the way he works. Above the first arrow is a smaller, yellow-brownish arrow, which seems to push down the bigger arrow. Attached to this arrow is a tail with a comic like speech bubble saying: “the restless advance of devil”. Already in the graphic for the first canto one can see how Phillips “translates” parts of the original text of the *Inferno* in mainly “symbolical illustrations”: he uses pictures as “symbolical signs”, of which the meaning can be reconstructed by the viewer. In contrast to “purely abstract” signs, where there is only an arbitrary connection between the thing and its meaning, there is a certain connection for symbols between its form and the meaning; this is comparable to the depiction of a stylized woman with a child on a blue background on German “symbolic” signs for footpaths, in contrast to “abstract” yellow and white right-of-way traffic signs. Just like in this first illustration, Phillips mimics the ambiguity which Dante explicitly intended in his allegoric poetry in some other illustrations of the *Inferno*-series.

Phillips' symbolical access to Dante's work can further be seen in the illustration of the second canto (Fig. 5). In this canto Dante's encounter with Virgil is described. Virgil was sent from hell by Beatrice, Dante's childhood sweetheart who died young, to guide Dante on his journey through the after-

life. Beatrice watches Dante's journey from paradise and eventually accompanies him at the end for a short part of his way. Phillips illustrates the sequence in the text where Beatrice appears before Virgil to commission him with the task. On the right side of the picture are several butterflies, which are slowly fading as they get higher; the background is a shade of light-blue and reminds of a clear sky-blue. The butterflies are specimens of the South-American *Catagramma Neglecta* (*Callicore Neglecta*), which is also called "89", due to its noticeable design. The image of the butterfly is not a coincidence: Phillips associated the NINE on the wings with Beatrice. In the *Divina Commedia*, as well as in the *Vita Nova* she is connected with the number nine in different ways. The number nine is the sum of three times three, and since the number three is a holy number in the Christian tradition (Holy Trinity), the number nine has an especially high symbolic worth, emphasizing Beatrice's exceptional position. Furthermore, according to the Bible 08/09 is the birthday of Mary – who partly initiates Beatrice's intervention in favour of Dante in the *Divina Commedia*. Aside from the symbolic number, which connects the butterflies to Beatrice, these also represent ascending souls in ancient sepulchral art. Furthermore, Dante compares the path of the faithful Christian to salvation in God in the *Purgatorio* with the metamorphosis from a caterpillar to an "Angel butterfly" ("[...] noi siamo vermi / Nati a formar l'angelica farfalla, / Che vola alla giustizia senza schermi"; Pg. X 124-126). All in all, the butterflies in Phillips' illustration can be understood as a symbolical representation of the appearance of Beatrice, a redeemed soul. The graphic is complemented by text fragments on the left side, which comment associatively and vaguely: "poet / my / poet / the soul / loves deeply / My feelings have wings, / and / I am urging / to my / love / in / hell / – a butterfly gives meaning to / brighten poetry [...]."

Aside from the mainly symbolical strategy of illustrating, Phillips also opts for a "structural update" of Dante's *Inferno* in some instances. This for example can be seen in the illustration for *Inferno XXXI* (Fig. 6). This canto gives an account of how Dante and Virgil reach the ninth circle of hell, where they encounter the giants Nimrod, Ephialtes and Anteus. Dante, who perceives the giants inaccurately from the distance, compares them to the towers of a medieval city. In his illustration, Phillips superimposes the schematic outline of the city of San Gimignano onto the skyline of Manhattan in the middle of the picture, with the Hollywood-figure King Kong in the top right corner. The city outline corresponds with Dante's city comparison. King Kong, with a woman in his hand, corresponds with Anteus the giant, who lowered Dante and Virgil to the bottom of hell. The speech-bubble-like inscription "In the New World strange sort of parallel" hints towards the similarity between the

gigantic medieval towers of San Gimignano (nowadays also called “medieval Manhattan”)⁵ and the skyscrapers of Manhattan.

To recapitulate the first results: In his artist book Phillips does not show a narrative picture story, which would depict the verbally described action of the poetry in an illusionistic way. Instead, he translated certain excerpts from the text into mostly symbolical pictures, which he updated selectively by using structural analogies. In order to understand his way of illustrating, the viewer has to break down the meaning of the motives – which sometimes might only be possible by using the annotations in the appendix of the book (compare Taylor 2004: specifically 144).

Peter Greenaway (*1942, Newport, Wales) originally also had been trained as painter. Later, he acquired autodidactically the techniques of film production while he was employed as film editor and director of the Central Office of Information from 1965 to 1975. By now, he is well known to a vaster, cinematically interested audience beyond the mainstream cinema for his extravagant films such as *The Draughtsman's Contract* (1982), *A Zed & Two Noughts* (1985), *The Belly of an Architect* (1987), *The Cook, the Thief, his Wife & her Lover* (1989), the cinematic adaptation of Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, *Prospero's Books* (1991), *The Pillow Book* (1996), his homage to Federico Fellini, *8 ½ Women* (1999), and the Rembrandt-drama *Nightwatching* (2007). Today, Greenaway is seen as one of the most prominent representatives of the avant-garde New British Cinema.⁶

Greenaway (to whom an interviewer after a highly sophisticated conversation, which left him quite exhausted, once attributed a “demoniac cleverness”, Gras, Gras 2000: 87) consistently rejects commercial films, which are based on a hypothetical or alleged taste of the masses, as “banal, boring, trivial and irrelevant”.⁷ He confirms that he “never wanted to become a mainstream director” (Gras, Gras 2000: 87). Instead, Greenaway described in an interview as one of his guiding principles as director: “I am convinced that it is the duty of every creatively working person to try to push the boundaries of the art form he or she is working with [...]”.⁸ As in his opinion film aesthetics seemed to

5. E.g.: “San Gimignano wird auch ‚Mittelalterliches Manhattan‘ oder die ‚Stadt der Türme‘ genannt” (http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/San_Gimignano [24th August 2015]).

6. Recently, the director has experimented with VJ (‘Visual Jockey’, modelled after ‘Disc Jockey’)-projects, where – often in cooperation with DJs – visual performances are transferred in real time to display medias such as TV, monitor or screen. Greenaway presented the first VJ-performance on 17 June 2005 in cooperation with the DJ Serge Dodwell (aka Radar) in an art club in Amsterdam (*The Tulse Luper Suitcases*).

7. Retranslated from German into English: “banal, langweilig, trivial and irrelevant” (Lüdecke 1995: 223; see also 228).

8. Retranslated from German into English: “Ich bin der festen Überzeugung, dass es schon fast eine Pflicht eines jeden kreativ schaffenden Menschen ist zu versuchen, an die Grenzen

stagnate since the 1960s and seemed extremely conservative in Great Britain, since his early experiments with absurd collage films in the 1960s and 1970s Greenaway is continually searching for new opportunities to expand the way the film expresses itself.

One of the guiding principles which characterise Greenaway's film aesthetic is that he distances himself from the idea of films being an area for storytellers; he decidedly does not want to create one "of those psychological dramas" (Gras, Gras 2000: 52). He confirms that mostly "cinema narrows its concern down to its content, that is to its story. It should, instead, concern itself with form, structure." (Gras, Gras 2000: 52) This focus on form and structure instead of on the story is central for Greenaway – and perhaps one element which is uncommon for "normal" viewers and might contribute to a sense of non-understanding when one of Greenaway's films is seen for the first time.

Nevertheless, also Greenaway does "tell stories" in his (later) films. But, as he puts it: "for me the stories are only the hook on which to hang one's hat." He insists that "one should not tell stories as straight line narratives. There are so many other possibilities, and film would enrich them" (Gras, Gras 2000: 52).

This corresponds to what one might call Greenaway's more general "philosophy" (Gras, Gras 2000: 152):⁹

Let me make one statement, which people have a lot of difficulty understanding. I sincerely believe that, in all cultural activity, content atrophies very rapidly, and all you're left with is form and strategy. Then there is a way in which the form and the strategy themselves become the content. I don't think you can get away from the fact that anything that moves through time has some sort of narrative. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, is a narrative – beginning, middle, and end.

But I have a great distrust in narrative. [...] I have an antipathy to the psycho-drama, too, which I think is too easy, I do feel that we ought to look for other ways of explaining the human condition, apart from this sort of pocketbook Freud – it isn't even Freudian, because it's still stuck somewhere in the middle of the 19th century, or associated with Jane Austen, for God's sake –

In this sense, Greenaway also distances himself from a "realistic" film aesthetic. Instead, he underlines (Gras, Gras 2000: 98):¹⁰

der Kunstform, mit der er sich auseinandersetzt, zu gehen und sie zu verschieben [...]" (Lüdecke 1995: 228).

9. Compare also e.g.: "There's no such thing as a narrative in real life, because we all live in the present tense. But our minds and our memories are working overtime to make sense of that present tense. I would be fascinated to see if we could find an equivalent for that fragmentation in terms of cinema." (Gras, Gras 2000: 175)
10. Similar: "I'm in no way a neo-realist. Neo-realism and naturalism in cinema is a chimera anyway. You can't be real in cinema; you make a decision about form and artifice for every twenty-four frames per second of film. All those theoreticians who concern themselves

My cinema is deliberately artificial, and it's always self-reflexive. Everytime you watch a Greenaway movie, you know you are definitely and *only watching a movie*. It's not a slice of life, not a window on the world. It's by no means an exemplum of anything "natural" or "real". I do not think that naturalism or realism is even valid in the cinema.

Consequently, his films "foreground their artificial status as constructed aesthetic objects" (Gras, Gras 2000: x).

One element of Greenaway's non-realistic, explicitly artificial aesthetic are "organisational structures" in his films. As he declares, "movies are very much about [...] organizing. That's what art is about, isn't it? That's what civilization is about, some way to understand, contain this vast amount of data that's pushed on us all the time." (Gras, Gras 2000: 108) Therefore, he is "looking all the time for alternatives to storytelling" (Gras, Gras 2000: 174). His films "are very much based on horizontals and verticals. [...] Also lists, number counts, and alphabetical counts" (Gras, Gras 2000: 174), colours, and frames are used to build up these "organisational structures" in the films.¹¹

A result of this approach is that the aesthetic and structure of his films is generally very complex and, as one interviewer said, "density is [...] a hallmark" (Gras, Gras 2000: 107) of Greenaway's work. He works with allusions to the film history, as well as with symmetries, serial patterns, and recurring sequences of motives (especially bodies, writing, birds, frames, books and so on) so that "they can be watched infinitely often, you come back to them again and again, so that the viewer constantly notices new things, new layers can be seen, so that the multiple layers of the construct constantly offer new ideas".¹²

Due to his special conception, Greenaway's film aesthetic might not seem "familiar" or easily accessible to viewers. One might have to search for a "clue" to enter and perhaps also appreciate Greenaway's work: "Greenaway has always demanded that his audiences work as hard as he to question the artificial construct of cinema, to question what we name and take advantage of as truth, knowledge and reality" (Gras, Gras 2000: 130).

The idea to transfer Tom Phillips' translation and illustrations of Dante's *Inferno* into a film version met Peter Greenaway's expressed purpose for many of his films "to bring together the painting and the literature for which film

with realism in cinema seem to be barking up the wrong tree entirely. I think the most satisfactory movies are those which acknowledge their artificiality." (Gras, Gras 2000: 110).

11. See e.g. Gras, Gras 2000: 109, and also 107: "I've always had the desire to organize things".

12. Retranslated from German into English: "[...] so dass sie] in gewisser Hinsicht unendlich oft anschaulich sind, so dass man immer und immer wieder auf sie zurückkommt, so dass dem Betrachter ständig neue Dinge auffallen, sich neue Ebenen auftun, so dass die Vielschichtigkeit des Gebildes immer mehr Ideen anbietet" (Gras, Gras 2000: 231).

is the ideal medium” (Gras, Gras 2000: 11). For Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway, *A TV Dante* was the first joint project and also the first TV-project in which they could incorporate and further develop their own former artistic experiences and ideas.

In 1984, they produced a pilot film with the final goal to adapt all the 34 *canti* of the *Inferno* for a film. They chose the fifth *Inferno*-canto for their pilot film, which tells the tragic love story of Paolo and Francesca, who are tossed around in the hellish storm of the voluptuous (Phillips explained ironically and smugly in an interview that they expected the theme of love to play in their favour with the reviewers who decided about further financing; Phillips 1992: 238-239). For the rough draft which was almost completely incorporated later in the film, Phillips and Greenaway already developed all adaptation structures, which they used when they finished *A TV Dante*. Despite the mixed receptions regarding the pilot film – with critiques varying from “TV’s first masterpiece” to “terminally pretentious twaddle” (Phillips 1992: 239) –, three years later Channel 4 gave green light for the whole series.

Though, after Channel 4 had aired *A TV Dante – Cantos I-VII*, the adaptation of the *Inferno* remained an involuntary fragment, due to Michael Kustow’s departure as artistic leader of the channel and serious disagreements with the new leadership (Phillips 1992: 245). Paul Ruiz was asked to continue the filming – whose *A TV Dante: Cantos IX-XVI* (1991) then only had vague references to the original text by Dante –, before the project was completely abandoned.

2. ANALYSIS OF THE ADAPTATION STRUCTURES IN A TV DANTE

A TV Dante is governed by two main ideas. On the one hand, Tom Phillips pointed out in an interview that the film is “the equivalent of publishing a new edition of the book” (cited after Vickers 1995: 267). Just like with the continuous work on *A Humument*, *A TV Dante* was supposed to become – in accordance with Michael Kustow’s order – a “filmic new edition” of his artist book on Dante’s *Inferno*. On the other hand, with *A TV Dante* Greenaway and Phillips wanted to renew the existing television and video aesthetic of the time, which the artists felt were not adequate to the potential of these media. They highlighted in a postscript to a supplementary booklet to the broadcast (Phillips 1992: 246):

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.

The best way to comprehend how Phillips and Greenaway implemented their main ideas is to analyse two of the distinctive means of design in *A TV Dante*: the imitation of book-structures in the film, and the “translation” of Dante’s poem in a “symbolical film- or TV-language”, which has its roots in Phillips’ strategy of illustrating Dante’s *Inferno*.

Imitation of book-structures

One special adaptation element in *A TV Dante* is that Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway transfer typical structural characteristics of books to the film.¹³ They thereby underline the connection of the film to Dante’s *Inferno*, a written text published in form of a book, and to Phillips’ artist book, of which they planned a film adaptation. At the same time, they used this approach as a basis for a special film aesthetic, which was decidedly aware of the medium it was conceived for, i.e. television.

A TV Dante was, as described above, commissioned by Channel 4 and aired on television. Following Greenaway’s and Phillips’ conception, the film should actually be recorded on video: “[...] it is designed to be recorded on video and then watched by the audience at their own speed, stopping and starting at will like reading a book” (Vickers 1995: 267). This becomes necessary mainly because of the dense, complex and largely symbolical image composition, which – a lot like the *Inferno*-illustrations of Tom Phillips and other films by Peter Greenaway – requires the viewer to interpret it and focus on details while viewing.¹⁴

In addition to this “ideal book-like reception” of the film, further elements can be found, which imitate book-structures. *A TV Dante* starts with a short opening scene. Just like in a book, it functions as a “table of contents”. First, a computer image of a stylized stone tablet is shown, on which the inscription of Dante’s gate of hell can be read. Bob Peck reads the first three and the last of the famous verses (*If. III* 1-3, 9):

THROUGH ME YOU REACH THE CITY OF DESPAIR
THROUGH ME YOU REACH ETERNITY OF GRIEF.
THROUGH ME YOU REACH THE REGION OF THE LOST
[...]
YOU THAT ENTER HERE ABANDON HOPE.

13. On the media reflective dimension of the adaptation see e.g. Calè 2007. Books as well as the motif of writing play a major role in Greenaway’s films, especially in *Prospero’s Books* and *A Pillow Book*.
14. “[...] it is infinitely re-viewable as a video which allows a certain density of information, just as the TV screen allows a greater density of imagery because of its compactness. (The eye can concentrate on the corner while taking the whole). Its non-physical, all-electronic nature as a medium makes it fluid and capable of delicate and continuous elision. Perhaps, it is, to film, as modelling in clay is to carving in stone” (Phillips 1992: 245).

The viewer then sees nine boxes with Arabic numerals, which run vertically from the bottom to the top. These boxes are painted in different colours, depicting film scenes, in which actors portray the punishments in the nine circles of hell. The viewer thus gets a filmic overview over the structure of the *Inferno*.

A small box, which constantly stays in the middle, is superimposed on the running film of the opening scene. The background of the box is blue with a grid of white lines. It is a reference to the background of one of the earliest motion studies, conducted by Eadweard Muybridge (1830-1903).¹⁵ Inside the box – just like in the short film sequences – are naked people, who are turned 90 degrees by harsh cuts around their own axis and are scanned with bright, horizontal strips of light. The hair of these persons is moved by wind. They seem like souls, which are shown in the style of mugshots. They are depicted frontally, from the side and from the back, as screened for their sins, and are transported in a modern, prison-like elevator to hell.

At the end of the opening sequence, the name of the author and the title of the pretext are shown like on a book cover: “DANTE / THE INFERNO”. After a short break – the equivalent of a blank page – a small box with the head of Tom Phillips with a grey frame appears in front of a black background. He recites the programmatic motto: “A good old text always is a blank for new things.”

This is followed by the actual adaptation of the *Inferno*-text. The number of each canto in the film is written like above the corresponding canto in the book version. Comparable to the separation of the cantos in a book, Phillips and Greenaway do not show one full film, but separate their adaptation into “canto-chapters”, by showing “Canto I”, “Canto II” etc. written in computer font. The formal division of the original poem remains intact in the film.

Within the canti, Greenaway and Phillips worked on two separate text levels: on a first level, they transferred the poetic text of the *Inferno* into a film; on a second level, they faded in comments like little footnotes in small boxes over the main film. Before I analyse more in detail the film adaptation of the main text, I have a closer look on the footnote-boxes.

Obviously inspired by the tradition of critical editions of the *Divina Commedia*, Greenaway and Phillips inserted the little boxes with comments in the film to imitate the extensive annotations which are used to comment on the philological, cultural and literary history of the medieval text. In his documentary *Four American Composers* (1983), Greenaway had already expe-

15. Eadweard Muybridge gained fame for his early film recordings, i.e. a man walking up stairs or running animals. Phillips had already used these images in his *Inferno*-book and Greenaway and Phillips quote them on several occasions in the film.

rimented with layering pictures, which remind of the hypertext structure of CD ROMs; he used them again later e.g. in *Prospero's Books* and *A Pillow Book*.

The boxes with comments are framed in different colours and are equipped respectively with small Roman and Arabic numerals. The colours and numerals correspond with the nine circles of hell: from Canto I to Canto III, in which Dante's entrance to the underworld and his journey through limbo are described, the boxes are white with Roman numerals; starting with the first circle of hell, they are green with Arabic numerals from 101 (also: 101, 102, 103 etc.); for the second circle, blue with numbers from 201; yellow for the third (301ff.), light brown for the fourth (401ff.) and dark brown for the fifth, which also marks the end of the film (501ff.).¹⁶ The reason why the numbers, starting with the first circle of hell, begin with one hundred is obviously related to the wish to assign them without any doubt to the first, second, third, and so on, circle of hell; even though the amount is not fully used, up to 99 clearly assigned comments per canto could be inserted.¹⁷

Inside the footnote boxes, heads of commentators can be seen, who, just like television announcers, face the audience. Comparable to bibliographic details, their name and profession are put above and underneath the boxes (i.e. "Peter Attenborough / Naturalist"; "David Rudkin / Classicist"; "Olaf Pederssen / Astronomer"), which identifies them as real academic authorities. Hard film cuts mark reductions in the interviews with the commentators, similar to suspension points in meticulously precise, scientific quotes.¹⁸

Excerpts of the adaptation of the main text continuously run behind the experts; alternatively objects, to which the experts are referring to at that specific point, are shown. Just like footnotes are placed behind certain words and sentences, the reference objects are clearly identified and explained.

With the usage of footnotes the artists obviously tested an alternative mode of displaying the usually linear and one-dimensional way to tell a story in a film. Furthermore, it provides the film with a serial pattern of organization, which is quite typical for Greenaway. In my opinion, however, the footnotes in *A TV Dante* – unlike the footnotes in a critical text – are not meant to help the viewer to fully understand the main text by commenting it extensively; but they are first and foremost a structural reminder of the book edition of the *Divina Commedia* with comments. I therefore believe that the

16. The colours in the boxes, however, do not correspond with the 'circles of hell' in the opening sequence. In contrast to Dante, the directors combine limbo with the unbaptized in hell as the first circle of hell (*Inferno* IV) with the colour green.

17. Petra Missomelius' thesis, that Greenaway 'demasks the only ostensibly systematics of scientific order' ["dass mit den Kommentatoren-Kästchen 'Greenaway die nur scheinbare Systematik wissenschaftlicher Anordnung' demaskiere"], ignores the very specific adaptation logic of the film (Missomelius 2007: 167).

18. See also Phillips 1992: 243.

interpretation of the comments by Angela Krewani, calling them a “parody of the linguistic exegesis”¹⁹, may fall just as short as the critical assessment in an article by Andrew Taylor (2004: 148):

Unfortunately, the “visual commentary” provided by *A TV Dante* is unlikely to satisfy the fastidious tastes of the academic audience whom it addresses since, as Amilcare Iannucci notes, the televised *Lectura Dantis* produced by RAI in 1988 had not even been able to do that with its use of eminent Dantisti such as Nino Borsellino and Giorgio Petrocchi. [...] The arbitrary selection of these “talking heads” cannot fail to disappoint the academic viewer of *A TV Dante* since their expertise is less than that of the specialist audience they address.

In my opinion, 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.

Translation of the Inferno in a “symbolical TV-language”

Alongside the filmic imitation of elements usually found in books, Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway used a further means of design for the production of *A TV Dante*, with which they realised their main ideas in the film: they transferred the poetic text into a “symbolical TV-language”.

Phillips and Greenaway used Phillips’ artist book as a source of inspiration, when filming Dante’s *Inferno*. Just like in the book, where the English translation of Dante’s verses by Tom Phillips is printed on one side and his illustrations on the other, in *A TV Dante* the *Inferno*-text and its artistic audiovisual adaptation in film sequences are running next to each other, yet they belong together.

During the entire film, only interrupted by the footnote commentators, Bob Peck as Dante and Sir John Gielgud as Virgil, as well as a few other characters, recite the slightly shortened version of the *Inferno* translation by Tom Phillips.²⁰ The speakers are faded in for short sequences during the course of the film; their faces are in sharp contrast to a black background, speaking directly to the viewer just like news readers. During these sequences, the attention of the viewer is focused on the wording of the poetry; the original character of the *Inferno* as a form of spoken art remains present.

Before the speakers have their first appearance in Canto I, a golden bust of Dante Alighieri’s death mask is visible, slowly merging into Bob Peck’s face. It

19. Translated from German: “Parodie textwissenschaftlicher Exegese” (Krewani 1998: 257).

20. Phillips himself acted as speaker in the pilot film with exception of the voice of Beatrice; for the casting of the leading role in the subsequent film-project, stars such as Clint Eastwood and Max von Sydow were considered (Phillips 1992: 238, 240).

is possible that it is intended to suggest to the viewer that in the film Dante and with him the poem are revived to new life.

Phillips and Greenaway lay the filmic adaptation of the *Inferno*-text over the recitation of the text. For the filmic adaptation they used three main materials. First of all, the artists collected scattered pieces of film and audio material. They commissioned a staff member to search for audio and film documents in a Dutch archive, which would fit their fairly vague information – i.e. “eye surgery”; “military women” (Phillips 1992: 243).²¹ They used this material, which contained excerpts from nature films, documentaries, feature films, historic material and many more, to put together the pictures they needed. Secondly, they shot and edited sequences with naked actors representing the punishments of the souls in hell. E.g. the “greedy and the squanderers” of the fourth circle of hell walk like waves in a half circle towards each other and eventually bounce off each other; the circular movement of the bodies is triggered by mirroring the image. And thirdly, they used computer generated writing and images, for examples the letters “LOVE” or a yellow, shining triangle.

Phillips and Greenaway took these materials to create their artistic adaptation of the *Inferno*. The best way to describe their adaptation is to see it as a “symbolical translation” of the text.²² Greenaway himself often speaks of a specific film or even “television language” (Gras, Gras 2000: 122), which he tries to develop and use in the context of his non-realistic film aesthetic. This can be understood as a “semiotic” approach, pointing to Greenaway’s intention to “downplay the interest in the referent, the *what*, and to focus on the *how*, i.e. to pursue a semiotic interest in cinema as language” (Gras, Gras 2000: xi).

21. Compare Phillips on music (1992: 244): “Although the soundtrack was being prepared all the time we were editing, it inevitably became somewhat of a poor relation to the screen imagery. In what was an amazingly harmonious collaborative relationship between two opinionated artists we only had two running disputes. One concerned the presence of music. I maintained that it was axiomatic that Hell itself was devoid of music, although references to the outside world could of course have a musical content. Peter felt justifiably, that composed music would contribute to the atmosphere of the film. In the end we found a compromise by restricting ourselves to the use of sound from our source material, which with the odd tape-loop (and a tinny I made up on a synthesizer) gave us our sound world. As with the picture there are recurrent motifs; the noise of the cardiogram, a speeded up tape-loop of plainsong (a kind of nimbus for Beatrice and other heavenly agencies) etc. The use of words themselves as a concrete sound motif was another fruitful, if slightly underexplored device [...]”
22. Greenaway himself declared: “The whole purpose of my cinematic effort is to explore metaphor and symbol” (Gras, Gras 2000: 98); also: “I employ a cinema of metaphor, of fable, of symbolism” (Gras, Gras 2000: 155). Earlier interpreters, especially Tracy Biga and Nancy Vickers, have introduced the term “translation” in the interpretation of *A TV Dante*. With exception of Nancy Vickers, who opts for the idea by analysing the integration of Eadweard Muybridge’s pictures in the film, this idea has so far not been used as a basis for a thorough structural analysis of the film, missing many elements of the deeper structures of it (Biga 1994).

In their filmic adaptation of the *Inferno*, Phillips and Greenaway portray some of the main statements of the text in film and audio sequences. These schematic basic units can be perceived as picture-like, or rather acoustic “vocabulary”.²³ These elements are first and foremost “symbolic”, which allows to reconstruct their meaning. To mark the symbolic meaning of the pictures and film excerpts – meaning the things shown do not represent themselves but rather refer to something different – they are digitally alienated. This happens among other things by changing the natural colours, by enhancing details from pictures, by zoom, time lapse, slow motion, loops, duplication, mirroring, framing, and so on. Depending on the context, the film vocabulary is repeated identically or slightly changed, marking a different meaning. Speaking metaphorically, this could be seen as a “flexion” or rather “filmic grammar”.

Canto I for example starts – even before the recitation of the text begins – with collaged ultrasound pictures (Fig. 7). Phillips and Greenaway chose the frame of an ultrasound picture as their first picture. The name of the hospital (“Canisius Wilhelmina Zieckenhuis”), where the picture was taken, is written in white letters on a black background in the top left corner. The date (“05.08.87”) is in the top right corner, as well as abbreviations and numbers, which seem to have a technical or medical meaning. The name “ALIGHIERI D.” can be seen written in typescript underneath the original patient’s name. After a short moment, a black and white ultrasound circle appears to the left of the center with the words “THURSDAY / APRIL 7 18:00” written in capital letters. The writing disappears and is replaced by two quickly spinning clock hands. Where the numbers three, six and nine would normally be found on a clock, the numbers “0”, “35”, “>70” have taken their place. The slower of the two clock hands moves from 0 to 35. At the same time, a funnel-shaped ultrasound of an echocardiography appears on the right, with a lit-up heartbeat and the regular heartline of an ECG in the bottom left corner of the picture. The fast beeping of a heartbeat monitor, as well as traffic noise and the honking of a horn can be heard in the background.

All in all the first film sequence in Canto I visualises the opening line of the *Divina Commedia*: “Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita”. In this phrase Dante refers to the ideal biblical age of a person of seventy years (Gmelin 1988: 26). With the round, clock-like ultrasound picture and the clock hand on the “biological clock”, Phillips and Greenaway probably wanted to visualise the point in the middle of the fictitious Dante’s life with his thirty-five years. The circle shows the assumed day and time, when Dante embarks on his journey to the afterlife. The heartbeat in the echocardiography can be interpreted as a

23. Greenaway himself uses the term “vocabularies” to describe his ‘film language’ (Gras, Gras 2000: 151).

hint towards his psychological and physical condition; after the sequence with the ultrasound, the viewer learns that Dante is in a state of fear and confusion (*If. I 1-6*):

Just halfway through this journey of our life
I reawoke to find myself inside
a dark wood, way off course, the right way lost.
How difficult a task it is to tell
what this wild, harsh, forbidding wood was like
the merest thought of which brings back my fear [...].

Not only at the beginning of Canto I, but also on several other occasions during the film, Phillips and Greenaway make use of the circle, the cardiological funnel, the heartbeat line and the beeping of the heartbeat monitor. The heartrate is used when Dante's feelings are mentioned. Amongst other, the mirrored cardiological funnel is shown parallel to the last cited line of the quote above; it symbolises both Dante's experienced and current fear. Shortly after, when the text talks about Dante's encounter with the leopard, a peaking and irregular heartbeat runs along the bottom of the picture. At the beginning of Canto II, the enlarged funnel with an irregular heartline and the beeping of the machines recurs, while Dante fearfully ponders that he has to prepare alone in the night for his journey through hell, while all other beings are sleeping. Just like in Canto I, the circle is always a reference to time. It is for example used for the collaged sequence at the beginning of Canto II, alongside the ultrasound pictures containing a date ("GOOD FRIDAY / APRIL 8 18:00"), symbolizing the elapsed time the narrator is talking about in the text.

Certain signs in the film therefore symbolise similar contents in the text-adaptation, with new examples in almost every sequence. E.g. the representation of Charon and Phlegyas (*Inferno* III and VIII), who with their boats drive the souls over the rivers Acheron and Styx, two rivers of the underworld, Phillips and Greenaway twice insert the same looped and increasingly zoomed sequence of a black and white and turned into colour-negative film sequence of a bearded rower. They obviously did not focus on a diversifying representation of the two different mythological figures, but on the symbolic representation of the figures in their function as rowers.

Or they used radar images, which symbolise (mostly) divine elements with their five concentric circles and punctiform movements: "A Marconi radar film of aeroplanes circling about an airport gave us, with concentric circles and an aetherial blips of movement, the ideal image of medieval cosmology, complete with angels in flight" (Phillips 1992: 243). The radar circles therefore always occur when the text talks about God or the divine. They also serve as halos behind the faces of Beatrice, Maria and Lucia, who in the narrative of the *Divina Commedia* were sent from heaven to bring to pass Dante's salvation

(end of *Inferno* II). They also circle an actress, who in Dante's interpretation represents the allegorical figure of Fortuna.²⁴ With a different meaning, Greenaway and Phillips use radar images, which are not shown head-on anymore, but are introduced diagonally. This is a representation of the circles of hell created by God, or can also be seen as a "real" radar, when Phlegyas' boat approaches at the beginning of *Inferno* VIII.

Just like in the artist book, Phillips and Greenaway do not continuously transfer the polysemy of Dante's poetry in their adaptation, but at least in some instances. Phillips (1992: 246) explains in the postscript to the film, referring to Dante's famous letter of dedication for the *Paradiso* to his benefactor Cangrande della Scala:

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 combined with the directness and impact of a newspaper's front page. We also aimed to carry Dante's three levels of meaning (outlined in the same letter quoted above). The first level is the *Literal*, by means of the actors and the simple actions of events. The second [*sic*] is the *Allegorical*, by the addition of imagery that throws light on the text from different angles. The last level that Dante mentions is the *Anagogical* (meaning the mysterious resonance with existential truth). We hope that, when we've got things right, this unsayable essence inhabits the texture of the work itself. [The fourth, moral, sense is left apart by Phillips (TK).]

This method can clearly be seen in Canto I, when Dante's encounter with the three wild animals – leopard, lion and she-wolf – is described.²⁵ I have already analysed the corresponding illustration by Phillips above, a comparison of picture and film therefore is elucidating here.

While the text of Dante's *Inferno* is spoken, the film shows "an agile leopard moving at full speed" (*If*: I 32). The text continues saying, "and covered with a coat of spotted fur" (*If*: I 33), the following caption shows the close-up of a leopard skin, one of them in a small, the other one in a bigger box. Sequences of nature films about leopards are presented in a footnote box in the background, with the commentator Peter Attenborough explaining the allegoric meaning of the leopard: "The leopard was thought to be an offspring of the union of a lion and a panther. Sprung from two different parents, the animal leopard might be regarded as the specific symbol of sexual lust."

24. See *If* VII 73-80: "Colui lo cui saper tutto trascende, / Fece li cieli e diè lor chi conduce / Sì, che ogni parte ad ogni parte splende, / Distribuendo egualmente la luce: / Similmente agli splendor mondani / Ordinò general ministra e duce / Che permutasse a tempo li ben vani / Di gente in gente e d'uno in altro sangue [...]."

25. Compare also the Veltro-prophecy at the end of the first canto in the *Inferno* (often paralleled with the DUX-prophecy in the last canto of the *Purgatorio*)

This commentary is followed by erotic female laughter. In the next verses, “It wouldn’t go from me but faced me out / and blocked my progress so insistently / I turned and turned in order to head back” (*If.* I 34-36), a looped recording of a leopard moving towards the viewer alternating between right and left is shown in a small box in the middle of the picture. A close-up of the leopard skin can still be seen in a bigger box behind it. At the end of the verses, the close-up of the leopard skin remains in the background. In the center of this image, a small box with the caption of a lion is shown, which seems to be running towards the viewer twice in a black and white caption, once fast and once slow (“He seemed to come straight at me”, *If.* I 45). The lion also remains as a screenshot, tinted in red in the background, while Peter Attenborough explains in a little commentary box that lions have been imported to Europe since the Roman times and that Dante had surely seen a lion once. Film sequences repeatedly run behind Attenborough, showing a lion jumping through a burning hoop. These two images – leopard and lion – are followed by a third box, containing the purple-greenish tinted pictures of a running dog by Muybridge. Attenborough points out that in the Middle Ages wolves were seen as wild dogs, which had left civilization.²⁶ The footnote-box contains excerpts from a nature film with wolves in the snow. In conclusion Tom Phillips explains in a commentary box in front of the “bestly trinity” (Fig. 8), a possible allegoric meaning of the scene: “The trinity of beasts represents the levels of sin: the leopard, the superficial sins of flesh and concupiscence; the lion, the sins of ambition and pride; and the she-wolf, the deep-seated sins of envy and malice.”

The transferred meaning of the animals – *incontinentia*, *malitia* and *feritas / matta bestialitade* – is therefore designed by the directors, by layering three different sized boxes, which correspond with the sequence of the sins in the *Inferno* and the funnel of hell. The selection of the nature-film sequences behind the commentators might also be in correspondence with the structure of hell: moderately severe sins are usually punished with fire in the *Inferno*, with the sinners starving in a boiling stream of blood, in a desert of fire, in burning graves or the soles of their feet burning; correspondingly the lions in the film jump through burning hoops. The most severe sins on the other hand have to be atoned for in the perpetual ice of Cocytus, the lake of hell where shadow images of the souls are frozen; and the wolves in the film are shown in an icy, snow-covered landscape.

Within the symbolical adaptation, Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway also updated the medieval *Inferno* in some areas. Just like in the artist book – I

26. Phillips points out himself (1992: 244): “The lion appears abruptly in a head-on leap to emphasise the confrontational aspect of aggression.”

have addressed the example of the towers of San Gimignano and the skyscrapers in New York – the updates are mostly used associatively.

Among others, Phillips and Greenaway transform the “wild forest” mentioned by Dante in the opening verses where he gets lost, into a street at night, high rise buildings, traffic noise and provocative female laughter; they can – according to the implicit poetry – cause similar confusion as the dark forest in the original version. At the beginning of Canto II, the face of Joanne Whalley is superimposed with the faces of Marilyn Monroe, Louise Brooks, Joan Crawford and Jean Harlow, drawing a comparison from Dante’s distant, adoring love for Beatrice, to the modern day idolizing of celebrities (Phillips 1992: 240). In the third canto, which talks about mediocre souls, meaning those which were neither good nor bad, Dante’s cryptic hint towards a “pope who committed a great refusal” is modernized. Dante refers, without using names, to Pope Celestine V (5th July - 13th December 1294), who had to leave his appointment shortly after his election and was replaced with Boniface VIII (1294-1303), whom Dante hates. By layering the pictures with film scenes of deported Jews in the background and captions of Pope Pius XII (1939-1958) in the first picture, the medieval pope is structurally put on the same level as his modern successor, who did not take an unequivocal stand with the Jews during the Second World War with his reserved attitude.

Just like in the illustrations by Tom Phillips, the film only has a few, isolated references to modern affairs. To update their work, Greenaway and Phillips chose highly symbolic and therefore recognizable pictures, which are based on structural similarities to the original text, and portray them as modern “signs”. Using these selective and associative updates, *A TV Dante* might have some references to modern facets of meaning, but it cannot be systematically interpreted with reference to the here and now, neither does it systematically criticize the modern society, using Dante’s system of sin and punishment (Krewani 1998: 259). The updates, in my opinion, serve an anti-illusionistic and focus on an outer aesthetics artistic approach, which Greenaway explains the following way:²⁷

My interest in cinema has a lot to do with aesthetics and definitely not much with politics. Making this statement, I am however aware that it is hardly possible to string together three words or to come up with a film

27. Retranslated from German into English: “Mein Interesse an Kino hat sehr viel mit Ästhetik zu tun und ganz sicher nicht mit Politik. Allerdings bin ich mir bei dieser Aussage natürlich bewusst, daß es kaum möglich ist, drei Wörter aneinanderzureihen oder eine Handlung zu entwerfen, ohne damit auf irgendeine Art und Weise implizit politisch zu sein. Was ich mache, sind Kunstprodukte. Es sind keine Ansichten über die Welt, keine Ausschnitte aus dem Leben, vielmehr künstliche Kreationen, und ich möchte, daß sich das Publikum beim Zuschauen immer der Tatsache bewußt ist, daß es ein Kunstprodukt vor Augen hat. [...] Ich hasse schon die bloße Andeutung, ich könnte didaktisch oder polemisch sein oder eine Botschaft haben” (Lüdecke 1995: 224-225, 228).

plot without being at least implicitly political. What I do is art. These are not views on the world, no extracts of a life, but rather artistic creations, and I want the audience to be aware that it is looking at art. [...] I hate the indication that I am being didactic or polemic, or that I have a specific message.

3. RECEPTION OF THE FILM

The reactions to *A TV Dante* were very variable.²⁸ A reviewer wrote on the one hand for the *London Times*: “Nothing quite like it has been seen on television before” (xy 1990). Robert Köhler called the adaptation in an article for the *Los Angeles Times* a milestone in the genre of literary screen adaptations: “*TV Dante* is a delirious celebration of video art and a genuinely post-modern examination of Dante’s *Inferno*. [...] It’s already a landmark in how video can interact with and enrich texts” (Köhler 1990). And the film was awarded with the first prize as best video-production of the year at the *Montreal International Film and Video Festival* 1990 and the Italian film festival in Urbino 1991, as well as a special award at the *Prix Italia*.

But there were also critical voices. In contrast to Robert Köhler, who valued the screen adaptation as a successful artistic adaptation of Dante’s *Inferno*, which “enriches” the original text, David Wallace (1993: 255) draws a different conclusion in a short paragraph on *A TV Dante* in *The Cambridge Companion to Dante*:

Dante has now entered the television and video age, but not with any great conviction: the *TV Dante* of Peter Greenaway and Tom Phillips [...] has some nice touches [...], but seems likely to collapse of its own bombast and inertia. What gets lost, or diminished in this orgy of flashing images is the word [...].

Andrew Taylor, lecturer at the University of Oxford, gives an account of the negative feedback from his students on the first part of the film, which they saw during their holidays, at the beginning of his essay “Television, Translation, and Vulgarization: Reflections on Phillips’ and Greenaway’s *A TV Dante*” (Taylor 2004: 145):

When the term recommenced at Oxford the following October [1990], I remember that the four episodes were the subject of some comment in tutorials and not much of it was favourable! Of course, this negative reaction was the result of expectations of “textual fidelity” engendered by the long tradition of BBC literary adaptations, such as the recent productions of *Sense and Sensibility* and *Middlemarch* [...]. In other words, viewers expected a dramatization of the *Inferno* complete with medieval costumes

28. Further statements in Taylor 2004: 145.

and macabre stage sets that would accurately reflect the images they first conceived when they read Dante in high school.

He himself is of the opinion that this adaptation is too unusual and complicated for “normal” television audience: “[...] the directors presume too much from a mass audience, which [...] is accustomed to a quite different emphasis on character and plot in BBC literary adaptations” (Taylor 2004: 147). Andrew Taylor therefore concludes (2004: 151):

I have still not escaped the preference for BBC-style literary adaptations that are faithful to the spirit of the original. In my defence, I should explain that those painstakingly accurate BBC costume dramas are viewed in a very particular cultural context: usually at five o'clock on Sundays, to coincide with teatime, and just before the six o'clock religious service broadcasts, typically from a picturesque Anglican church in the countryside.

Whether Tom Phillips and Peter Greenaway actually “enrich” (Robert Köhler) the text of Dante’s *Inferno* with their screen adaptation, or whether it “diminishes” its significance (David Wallace) is up to each individual viewer to decide. In my opinion it is important to point out and even understand that the artists in *A TV Dante – Cantos I-VIII* convincingly managed to implement their own ideas: they realised a new TV edition of Phillips’ artist book for Dante’s *Inferno*, which has a noticeable connection to its previous edition. Based on Phillips’ cycle of illustrations, they also developed a new strategy of adaptation for a literary text, for which they did not turn the literary plot into a motion picture (as seen in the BBC-adaptations of *Middlemarch* or *Sense and Sensibility*), but transferred the text from a formalistic orientated point of view into a symbolical film language. In the course of this, Phillips and Greenaway also expanded the popular forms of expression on television at that time, especially by using hypertext structures.

All in all, the choice of Dante’s *Inferno* as the text template, similar to the novella *A Humument*, can be seen as mostly coincidental. Phillips’ illustrations, as well as the TV adaptation, were originally commissioned works. The “random element” as part of this adaptation, however, corresponds with the artistic ideas of Phillips and Greenaway, who mainly concentrated on a structural level in their work. The underlying basic assumption can therefore be summed up with Greenaway’s personally chosen maxim: “In my opinion, what matters most for every type of art is form and structure, not the content.”²⁹

29. Retranslated from German into English: “Meiner Ansicht nach ist letzten Endes das einzig Bedeutsame jeder Art von Kunst ihre Form und Struktur und nicht ihr Inhalt” (Taylor 2004: 242).

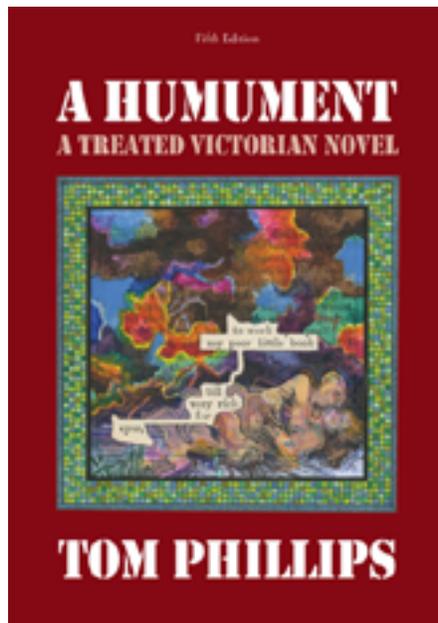


Fig. 1: Tom Phillips, *A Humument*



Fig. 2: William Blake, *Inferno I*



Fig. 3: Gustave Doré, *Inferno* I



Fig. 4: Tom Phillips, *Inferno* I

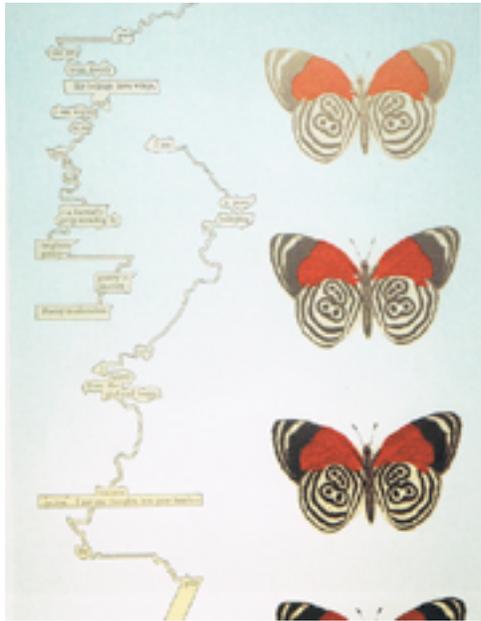


Fig. 5: Tom Phillips, *Inferno* II



Fig. 6: Tom Phillips, *Inferno* XXXI



Fig. 7: screenshot from *A TV Dante* (Canto I)

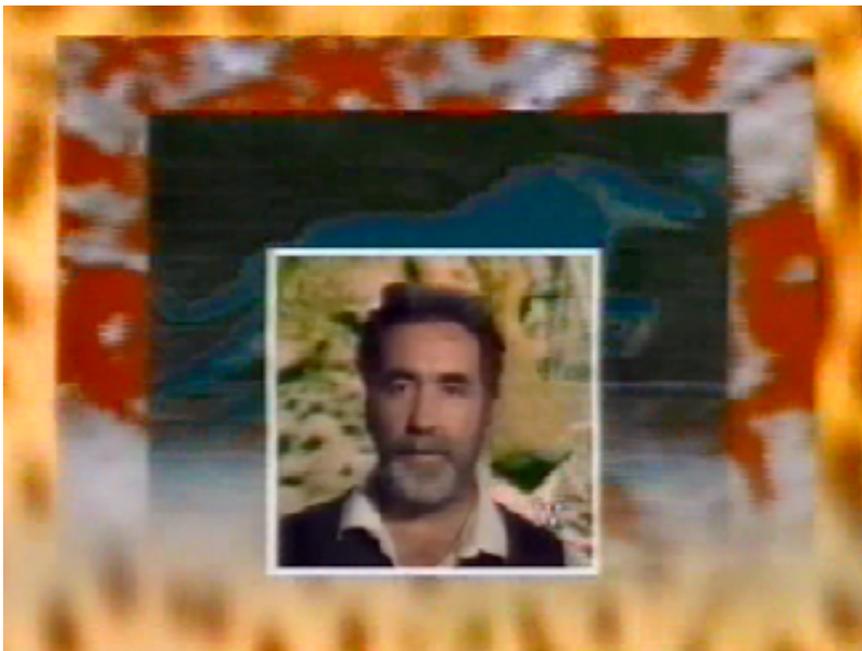


Fig. 8: screenshot from *A TV Dante* (Canto I)

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