HALLOWED GROUND:
DANTE’S COMMEDIA IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

By

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Dante’s influence or appropriation into popular culture is not new to either the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. Research on the reception of Dante demonstrates how the *Commedia* has been appropriated into different mediums ever since its completion. Amilcare A. Iannucci’s work on Dante’s influence in cinema and television has been groundbreaking. It has presented readers and scholars with newer ways of reading and interpreting Dante by focusing on the poet’s impact on other mediums; extending it to the world of cinema and television throughout the twentieth century. While Iannucci focused on Dante’s influence in the history of cinema and television culture, I expand upon his work by demonstrating how today, Dante’s poem, because of its moralistic character, is a catalyst for discussing society’s current moral and political issues, such as the “War on Terror” and its results. *Hallowed Ground: Dante’s Commedia in the New Millennium*, centers on Dante’s posthumous fame, specifically his reception in the twenty-first century in both Italy and the United States. In my study, I not only analyze works of popular culture that have adapted the *Commedia*, but I demonstrate how the tragic events of September 11, 2001 have given rise to a new, contemporary Dante. Focusing on the *Commedia*’s adaptation in theatre, television, and the technological arts (such as interactive media and video
games), I argue that the new hypertexts transform, modify, and extend the hypotext, creating original and newer texts, while showcasing different modes of reading and thinking about literature.
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For my nephew,

Se tu segui tua stella,
non puoi fallire a glorioso porto,
se ben m’accorsi ne la vita bella.
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INTRODUCTION

The neo-conservative critics of leftist critics of mass culture ridicule the protest against Bach as background music in the kitchen, against Plato and Hegel, Shelley and Baudelaire, Marx and Freud in the drugstore. Instead, they insist on recognition of the fact that the classics have left the mausoleum and come to life again, that people are just so much more educated. True, but coming to life as classics, they come to life as other than themselves: they are deprived of their antagonist force, of the estrangement, which was the very dimension of their fault. The intent and function of these works have thus fundamentally changed. If they once stood in contradiction to the status quo, this contradiction is now flattened out.

Theodore Adorno1

If Dante’s Inferno feels contemporary, this is […] because […] we are accustomed to thinking about the modern psyche, and the political and social economy, in katabatic terms.

Rachel Falconer2

I.1 Dantemania

Over the past ten years, Dante has experienced a resurgence that has been brought forth by the Commedia’s transposition into the theatrical, cinematographic, televsual, musical, and technological arts. However, to define this past decade as a “revival” of Dante would intimate that at a certain point the poet lost the attention of his readers. This is not the case, for even in the late 1990’s, Dante was as popular as ever. The Hollywood film thriller Seven (1995) and What Dreams May Come (1998) are but two examples of the many demonstrative of his “cross-over” into post-modern cinema. Today, he continues to remain a popular source for adapters. At this point, it is appropriate to

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characterize Dante’s resurgence in popular culture as *Dantemania*, definitive of the twenty-first century’s “excessive enthusiasm” for the poet and his *Commedia*.

The excessive enthusiasm towards Dante during the first decade of the new millennium encompasses a myriad of adaptations and appropriations of the poet’s work. In the summer of 2006, the Italian comedian Roberto Benigni continued the tradition of the *Lecturae Dantis* by performing the *Commedia* to a live audience in his one-man show, *TuttoDante*, which I will analyze in Chapter 2. The following year, the Italian singer Gianna Nannini debuted her new rock-opera, *Pia dei Tolomei*, at the Sanremo Music festival. Later that summer, she released a separate record, *Pia, come la canto io*. In November of 2007, Monsignor Marco Frisina debuted his adaptation of Dante’s poem in the form of a musical, *La Divina Commedia: l’uomo che cerca l’amore*, the subject of Chapter 1. Soon after its release, first in Rome and dedicated to Pope Benedict XVI, the musical received rave reviews and is now defined as “il primo collosal teatrale” by its production company, NOVA ARS.

Contemporary adaptations of Dante are not limited to Italy, but extend to the United States as well. In 2001, the Pittsburgh-based musical troupe Squonk Opera debuted its musical production *Burn*, later titled *Dante’s Inferno* (2003). This modern opera appropriated the medieval text by setting Dante’s hell in the small ghost town of Centralia, Pennsylvania. In 2003, the American artist Sandow Birk and author Marcus Sanders released their translation of Dante’s *Divine Comedy* as a graphic novel. Sanders and Birk updated the *Commedia* using modern English vernacular and slang, in addition to modernizing Gustave Doré’s nineteenth-century illustrations by placing Dante’s universe in contemporary urban America. In 2007, distributor TLA Releasing and the newly
founded Dante Film, LLC released *Dante’s Inferno*, an animated film based on Sanders and Birk’s adaptation. Similar to Frisina’s musical in Italy, the animated film was well received in the United States, winning awards at the 2007 San Francisco Indie Fest and the 2007 Boston Underground Film Festival.

Dante’s influence or appropriation into popular culture is not new to either the twentieth or twenty-first centuries. Research on the reception of Dante demonstrates how the *Commedia* has been appropriated into different mediums ever since its completion. Amilcare A. Iannucci’s work on Dante’s influence in cinema and television has been groundbreaking. It has presented readers and scholars with newer ways of reading and interpreting Dante by focusing on the poet’s impact on other mediums; extending it to the world of cinema and television throughout the twentieth century. While Iannucci focused on Dante’s influence in the history of cinema and television culture, I expand upon his work by demonstrating how today, Dante’s poem, because of its moralistic character, is a catalyst for discussing society’s current moral and political issues, such as the “War on Terror” and its results. *Hallowed Ground: Dante’s Commedia in the New Millennium*, centers on Dante’s posthumous fame, specifically his reception in the twenty-first century in both Italy and the United States. In my study, I not only analyze works of popular culture that have adapted the *Commedia*, but I demonstrate how the tragic events of September 11, 2001 have given rise to a new, contemporary Dante.

“Hallowed ground” is a phrase commonly invoked in discussions of the former site of the World Trade Center in New York City, characterizing the spot as the final resting place of the hundreds who perished there as a result of terrorist attacks. Just as those who protest construction on the site on the basis
that it is sacred, others decry the adaptation of Dante’s *Commedia*, the *sacro poema*. Due to the poem’s sanctity (i.e. its high cultural value), the translation of the text into other mediums may be detrimental, since the process of adaptation, parasitical in its nature, is capable of trivializing the work. Yet, adaptation can also contribute to and facilitate the raising of a new cultural medium to which the text has been adapted or appropriated, as I demonstrate in Chapter 3. I employ Gérard Genette’s five classifications of transtextuality as a framework for discussing the relationships between the original work and its adaptations.

According to Genette, transtextuality is to be utilized when referring to “all that which puts one text in relation […] with other texts.”³ Robert Stam defines hypertextuality as Genette’s most suggestive mode of transtextuality for “it refers to the relation between one text, […] the ‘hypertext’, to an interior text or ‘hypotext.’”⁴ Focusing on the *Commedia’s* adaptation in theatre, television, and the technological arts (such as interactive media and videogames), I argue that the new hypertexts transform, modify, and extend the hypotext, creating original and newer texts, while showcasing different modes of reading and thinking about literature.

Theodore Adorno’s discussion of the high- and low-culture polemic is also relevant to my methodological approach. On one side there is the neo-conservative argument that finds favor with the reuse of the classics, which have “come to life,” again. The reasoning behind the cultural renaissance of antiquity (Plato and Hegel) and modern “classical figures” (Shelley, Baudelaire, Marx, and Freud) is due to the comparable difference in contemporary society’s higher level

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of education, contrary to earlier generations. Cultural purists, opposing the neo-conservatives, protest the merging of the highbrow with lowbrow culture. Playing Bach’s exalted music in the humble setting of one’s kitchen, or finding copies of Plato or even Freud in a drug-store are but a few examples with which they find fault, for they believe such popularization devalues and trivializes the new pillars of high culture. Although Adorno agrees that today’s society is much more educated than before, he also disagrees with the integration of both cultures. Once these classics come to life again, he argues, they have lost “their antagonist force, of the estrangement which was the very dimension of their fault.” In other words, being misplaced and taken out of their historical context, they have not only lost power and strength but are also different in function and intent. While groundbreaking in their own epochs, today their thoughts have “now flattened out,” leading to a loss in originality. I agree with Adorno, for the classics have indeed left the mausoleum. I do not, however, believe that, in the case of Dante at least, his work has lost its originality or force. In fact, I have found that the recent adaptations of Dante have been true revivals, giving the medieval work fresh relevance.

I.2 The Commedia’s “Producerly Quality”

In the introduction to *Dante, Cinema & Television* (2003), Amilcare A. Iannucci addresses Dante’s role in popular culture, claiming that

Dante’s cultural predominance in the modern world is enormous. […] However, it is not only in a literary context that Dante’s influence continues to be felt. Rather, Dante has also a profound impact on the visual arts and on music. […] His influence has spread decisively into the
non-literary or para-literary world of the visual media unique to the twentieth century, namely cinema and television.⁵

Iannucci continues his discussion of Dante’s influence on cinema in his article “Dante and Hollywood.” Here, he highlights Dante’s “cross-over” from text to screen, “for he also migrated from these literary, cultural, and academic niches to the outside world and has deeply affected the educated and non-educated general public. Today, for example, he contributes greatly to all forms of popular entertainment.”⁶

The reason Dante “stands as an inexhaustible source for the dramatic arts,”⁷ lies in the notion that the Commedia in itself exhibits a so-called “producerly quality.”⁸ Dante’s Commedia is theatrical by its very nature, whether in its title alone, in which the term commedia “conjures up shades of Roman comedy”⁹ or through its array of various dialogic exchanges. The poem is not comedic by today’s standards, meaning that one should expect to find humor within its pages, but instead is defined as such according to its style. In the Epistle to Can Grande della Scala, the poem is defined as such:

E pertanto è evidente che la presente opera è detta Commedia. Infatti, se guardiamo all’argomento, all’inizio essa è orribile e fetida, dato che si tratta dell’Inferno, ma alla fine è prospera, desiderabile e gradita, dato che si tratta del Paradiso; se guardiamo al modo di esprimersi, questo è dimesso ed umile, poiché è linguaggio volgare, nel quale comunicano anche le donnette. Così dunque è chiaro il perché sia detta Commedia.¹⁰

According to the author of the letter, the decision to title the work Commedia is made evident by the work’s argument, which begins in a “horrible” and “foul”

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manner, the Inferno and concludes with a “pleasant” ending in the Paradiso. As the narrative progresses, the reader will discover a moving away from “moral chaos and conflict to one of peace and spiritual fulfillment,”11 sharing similarities to classical comedy. In addition, the title also alludes to the poet’s choice of style in composing the work rather than its level of style. According to Giovanni Boccaccio (1313-1375), the poem is low and humble because it was written in the Florentine vernacular rather than Latin. If we take into account Dante’s invocation to the Muses in Purgatorio and to Apollo in Paradiso I, one notes how the Commedia is far from comic, but rather “rises to the sublime as the subject matter changes.”12

Iannucci’s characterization of Dante’s poem as “producerly” derives from John Fiske’s description in Television Culture (2006), where the term is applied to express the popularity of television. Fiske defines the producerly text as that which:

Combines the televisual characteristics of a writerly text with the easy accessibility of the readerly. Unlike the writerly avant-garde text, television does not work with an authorial voice that uses unfamiliar discourse in order to draw attention to its discursivity. […] The producerly text […] relies on discursive competencies that the viewer already possesses, but requires that they are used in self-interested, productive ways: the producerly text can, therefore, be popular in a way that the writerly text cannot.13

According to this definition, the televisual text differs from its “writerly” and “readerly” counterparts. The writerly text is an “open text,” one that is often attributed to television because it is open to a “richness and complexity of

readings that can never be singular.”14 As such, Dante’s *Commedia* presents itself as an open text because it presents its readers with four modes of reading: literal, allegorical, moral, and analogical. Unlike the *Commedia*, however, television’s polysemous nature is not due to the numerous readings written into the text, but instead upon the variety of meanings that the viewer produces after watching the program. Because of its polysemous tendency, the writerly text, therefore, “requires us, its readers, to participate in the production of meaning and thus of our own subjectivities, it requires us to speak rather than to be spoken to and to subordinate the moment of production to the moment of reception.”15 The “closed text,” that which Fiske defines as the “readerly text,” does not allow for a myriad of interpretations, but offers a single reading. The closed text thus limits the diversity of audience responses and closes off any opportunity for resistive reading, hence prohibiting the text from becoming popular.16 While the *Commedia* exhibits similarities with the open text, Iannucci defines it as neither open nor closed, but producerly:

The *Comedy* is neither an open nor a closed text (Eco, *The Role of the Reader*); it is neither writerly nor readerly (Barthes). [...] Although the *Comedy* exhibits many of the qualities of an open or writerly text, it also ‘reads’ easily and succeeds in communicating meaning and giving pleasure even to those unable to appreciate the nature of its elaborate allegorical discourse. Because of this, Dante’s *Comedy* is more like what Fiske calls, with specific reference to television, a ‘producerly’ text. [...] The problem, of course, is that the ‘readerly’ aspect of Dante’s text has become less accessible, for the reasons listed above. Moreover, the text is presented to students in a quintessentially literate and academic form—the *lecturae Dantis*.17

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The reasons why Iannucci claims that the readerly aspect of the *Commedia* has been less accessible to readers is that in its presentation in its literate form, the *lecturae Dantis*, the poem has become limited to the elitism of academic circles, going against its producerly quality.

I.3 The *Commedia* as a Performative Text

To clarify Iannucci’s argument, one may turn to Peter Armour’s reading of the *Commedia* as a performative text. As such, the poem provides a basis not only for scholarly interpretation, but also popular reception of the *Commedia*. In “The *Comedy* as a Text for Performance,” Armour acknowledges that the poet occasionally mixes his recipients as both readers and listeners. In *Inferno* XXII, identified as the most theatrical episode of the poem, the poet recognizes both types of recipients, writing in verse 118, “O tu che leggi, udirai nuovo ludo.”

Scholars who focus on the reception of Dante have taken special interest in the *Commedia’s* oral tradition. John Ahern, in “Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante’s *Comedy,*” presents a history of the poet’s relationship with the theatrical arts. Ahern begins the historical account of the reception of Dante by utilizing Franco Sacchetti’s one hundred and fourteenth novella in which his fictional Dante reprimands those who sing his work: “You sing the book and not say it as I made it; this is my only craft and you ruin it.”

Thus Sacchetti’s Dante expresses concerns similar to one of the most important issues of adaptation theory, specifically faithfulness to the original text. Critics have so thoroughly

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explored the issue that recently it was considered “too narrow in range.”

Julie Sanders takes this notion one step further, arguing that “it is usually at the very point of infidelity that the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation take place.”

Though Sacchetti’s Dante rebukes the blacksmith, the poet’s concern is not the fact that he sang the poem, but instead, the poor quality of the blacksmith’s performance. Even though the blacksmith quoted the poem faithfully, Sacchetti’s Dante disapproves of the way in which it was performed; stating it was “not … as I made it.” The second reading of Sacchetti’s novella also contains a historical literary account of the popularity of the Commedia among the historical poet’s contemporary masses, the idiotae. Ahern also explains that Dante not only ignored all negative criticism based on oral performances of the poem, but seemed to welcome such recitations. In fact, Dante himself is said to have performed the Commedia in many of the piazzas in Italy. Peter Armour, once again focusing on the performative aspect of Dante’s work, claims that early receptions of the text were both oral and aural, claiming that “its recitation would have been public, indeed a social act.”

In addition to defining the Commedia as a producerly text, Iannucci argues that one should read it as a “hybrid genre.” As such, the poem presents itself in two distinct modes: it is an epic that is simultaneously dramatic. The Commedia’s multi-functionality can be seen in the Epistle to Can Grande della Scala, which addresses the various themes at play in the work:

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In section VII, 20, the author blatantly states that the meaning of the poem may be taken in various forms, it is not singular, but polysemous. It may be at once literal, allegorical, moral and analogous. If indeed the *Commedia* is a hybrid genre, then does its hybridity create its producerly quality for both stage and cinematic adaptations?

### I.4 Dante’s Reception in the Nineteenth Century

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, F.W.J. Schelling gave his own definition of the *Commedia*’s form. He, as did Iannucci, addressed the poem’s multiplicity, stating that, “this divine work is not plastic, not picturesque, not musical, but all of these at once and in accordant harmony.” Schelling’s definition is not only significant in defining the poem’s form, but as Antonella Braida and Luisa Calè point out in their introduction to *Dante on View*, is also a “critical response [to its] potential adaptations into other media.” Schelling’s classification is a contributing factor in relating the poem’s hybridity as a mechanism for its producerly quality.

Adaptations and appropriations of Dante’s poem are not limited to the fourteenth or the twentieth century; the nineteenth century also witnessed its share of performances of the *Commedia*. In the nineteenth century, performances based on the *Commedia* or on the array of infamous characters present in the

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work, including Dante, both pilgrim and poet, were considered fashionable for the stage. The poem’s popularity may be attributed to the fact that the *Commedia*, as stated by Antonella Braid, “is a reservoir of roles for actors,” but it may also have been fashionable, as Richard Cooper argues in “Dante on the Nineteenth-century Stage,” as “an inherently political act,” reflecting nationalistic pride of the newly unified Italy.

In May of 1865, Enrico Pazzi unveiled his famous monument of the medieval poet in Florence outside of Santa Croce. The monument, whose inscription reads, “A Dante Alighieri: L’Italia,” was dedicated to the poet both to showcase the newly united Italian state’s appropriation of Dante as a national hero and to celebrate his sexcentenary. Cooper recounts how three of Italy’s greatest stage actors, Tommaso Salvini (1829-1915), Ernesto Rossi (1827-1896), and Adelaide Ristori (1822-1906), who had come from Milan, Naples, and Paris, respectively, performed specific scenes from the *Commedia* free of charge at the inauguration of the monument. The recitations not only positioned Dante as “a forerunner and hero of the unification of Italy,” but reflected the continuing popularity of the *Dantate*, which originated and were made famous by the actor Gustavo Modena (1803-1861). During his performance at the Opera Concert Room of the Queen’s Theatre, in London, Modena dressed in a red Dantesque costume and performed selections from the first and second canticles. Included in his repertoire were readings of *Inferno* XIX, XXI, XXII, and *Purgatorio* IV. Their

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27 Braid, Antonella and Luisa Calè. 2007:8.
purpose was to utilize Dante as a mechanism to discuss Modena’s views on anti-clerical Italian politics and attacks on the papacy.\textsuperscript{33} While Modena’s \textit{Dantate} witnessed Dante as a mode to express one’s own political ideologies, the performances of 1865, particularly Salvini’s reading of \textit{Inferno I}, showcase the poet as Italy’s national hero.

In Canto I of the \textit{Commedia}, Dante is prohibited from climbing the mountain by three beasts—a leopard, a lion, and a she-wolf. As the pilgrim runs away from the she-wolf, Virgil appears to him, explaining why she will not let him pass:

\begin{quote}
“A te convien tenere altro viaggio,”
rispuose, poi che lagrimar mi vide,
“se vu’ campar d’esto loco selvaggio;

ché questa bestia, per la qual tu gride,
non lascia altrui passar per la sua via,
ma tanto lo ‘impedisce che l’uccide;

\textit{e ha natura si malvagia e ria,}
che mai non empie la bramosa voglia,
\textit{e dopo ’l pasto ha più fame che prìa.}
\textit{Molti son li animali a cui s’ammoglia,}
\textit{e più saranno ancora, infin che ’l veltro verrà, che la farà morir con doglia.}
\textit{Questi \textit{non ciberà terra né peltro,}
\textit{ma sapienza, amore e virtute,}
\textit{e sua nazion sarà tra feltro e feltro.”} \textsuperscript{34}
\end{quote}

Preceding Virgil’s explanation is one of the many cryptic prophecies and political allegories that Dante includes in his poem.\textsuperscript{35} Due to the passage’s obscurity, debates on its significance have taunted Dantists for years. Robert Pinsky

\textsuperscript{33} Cooper, Richard. 2007:24.
\textsuperscript{34} Alighieri, Dante. \textit{Inferno I}, 91-103.
presents two possible readings of the term *veltro*. One possibility may be attributed to the election of Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VII, if we are to translate the term *feltro* literally as “felt,” since during the Middle Ages, officeholders were elected by votes cast into felt-lined urns.\(^\text{36}\) Another possibility, perhaps the most agreed upon by Dante scholars, is that the *veltro*, the great hound, is none other than Can Grande della Scala, the dedicatee of the *Paradiso* who hosted the poet in Verona during his exile. In 1865, however, Salvini interpreted the *veltro* passage as indicative of Victor Emmanuel’s liberation and unification of the new Italian nation. Performed in the presence of the king, Salvini’s performance received “tumultuous applause from an audience conscious of their new-found nation status.”\(^\text{37}\) During the twentieth century, however, Italian adaptations of Dante lost their political resonance. Simply placed on stage, critics considered the productions irrelevant and characterized them as “*stupefacente mediocrità*.”\(^\text{38}\) Dante had been “adulterated” by actors and playwrights and, to use Adorno’s phrase, he had been “flattened out.”

Cesare Levi, who used “*stupefacente mediocrità*” in 1920 to criticize recent theatrical performances of Dante, addressed what he understood as the problem of targeting broad audiences in articles published in the *Marzocco*. According to Levi, performances of Dante before an audience he considered “*inbecille*” would be more detrimental to the poet than “all the *sventure* which had befallen Dante in his lifetime.”\(^\text{39}\) Levi also disparaged the portrayals of the poet-pilgrim, not as the statuesque hero represented by Enrico Pazzi, but instead as an almost

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\(^\text{37}\) Cooper, Richard. 2007:22.
\(^\text{38}\) Cooper, Richard. 2007:24.
\(^\text{39}\) Cooper, Richard. 2007:25.
comical representation of a man dressed in Trecento style garments with a “fake Dantesque nose.”\textsuperscript{40} Similar to Adorno’s stance against the mixing of high cultural forms with popular culture, Levi believed that early twentieth century performances of Dante, which were geared toward entertaining the masses, would be sacrilegious towards the \textit{sacro poema}, devaluing the text. While these nineteenth and early twentieth century stage productions sought to pander to audiences primed by Italian nationalistic sentiments, later adaptations in cinema and television emphasized the poem’s moralizing messages, as I demonstrate in the subsequent chapters.

1.5 Dante in the New Millennium

If in the early twentieth-century adaptations of Dante’s \textit{Commedia} were frowned upon as being mediocre and apolitical, in the new millennium Dante not only remains popular with adapters but, as my research demonstrates, he is more political than ever. It is interesting to note that this shift did not originate in Italy, but in the United States, shortly after the catastrophic events that took place on the morning of September 11, 2001.

On September 12, 2001, major newspapers such as \textit{The New York Times}, \textit{The Washington Post}, and \textit{La Repubblica} in Italy, directly or indirectly referenced Dante’s \textit{Inferno} to describe to the world the unimaginable and hellish landscape which was New York City. On September 13, 2001, the \textit{New York Times} published Michiko Kakutani’s “Struggling to Find Words for a Horror Beyond Words,” which noted how witnesses referred to Dante to describe the inconceivable horror that until that morning existed only as a product of the imagination.

\textsuperscript{40} Cooper, Richard. 2007:25.
Because “language failed this week,” there was a need to create metaphors and analogies, and refer to Dante in order to grasp the events that were “beyond comprehension, beyond our worst imaginings, beyond belief.” Kakutani’s article continues by quoting a witness who was interviewed by a local NBC news station that “described the World Trade Center collapse as ‘one more circle of Dante’s hell.’” The allusion of the World Trade Center attack as a scene from Dante’s *Inferno* was once again referenced during a television interview with Mayor Giuliani, filmed on the one-year anniversary of the attack. He remembered the scene as “Hell, what Dante must have meant when he described Hell.”

In *Hell in Contemporary Literature: Western Descent Narratives since 1945* (2005), Rachel Falconer attributes the invocation of ‘Hell’ and specifically Dante’s *Inferno* made by journalists, eyewitnesses, and even Giuliani, to “constitute something more than a literary allusion. The double invocation aims to seal off the events from others, to claim for it a unique status, to transform it from a historical occurrence into a mythic absolute.”

My study focuses on the reception of Dante after this historic event, a pivotal moment at which a modern and political Dante surfaces. Yet, our contemporary Dante differs greatly from the one presented on the pages of the world’s newspapers. If at the beginning of the new millennium Dante was used as a vehicle to describe the horrific and hellish events which befell our society, as well as to demonize the “Other,” as did Mayor Giuliani in Farkas Alessandra’s article, “Apocalisse a Manhattan, una metropolis in fuga,” the subsequent

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adaptations of Dante that I analyze make use of the Commedia as a catalyst to express anti-war sentiments by centering on the poem’s moralistic nature.

Chapter one, “‘L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle’: Marco Frisina’s La Divina Commedia and Dante’s Active Role in Contemporary Italian Culture” is a reading of Monsignor Frisina’s musical adaptation of the Commedia which premiered in Rome at Tor Vergata in November of 2007. While I analyze the musical through the theoretical lens of adaptation theory, I also place the musical in its historical context, the six years prior to its debut. Within this context, I have discovered that Dante is closely linked to contemporary Italy’s national identity as also being a way to counter the Americanization of Italy’s theatrical tradition. Dedicated to Pope Benedict XVI, Frisina’s Dante no longer exhibits the poet’s anti-clerical views, but instead was inspired by the pope’s first Encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, focusing on God’s eternal love and salvation. A musical adaptation dedicated to the pope and sponsored by the Vatican might at first seem as Catholic propaganda in a nation heading towards secularization and where Islam is the second largest religion. On the contrary, the musical is a pacifist attempt to calm the heated debates between the Italian Christian culture and the “newly arrived” Muslim one.

In chapter two, “‘Ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta’: A Defense of Roberto Benigni’s Comedy” I shift my focus from the theatrical adaptation of Dante’s work to television and Benigni’s successful readings in his one-man show TuttoDante. Although Benigni’s performance was well received by audience members, leading to a sold-out international tour, famous Italian actors, such as Giorgio Albertazzi and Vittorio Sermonti, strongly criticized the actor’s performance and reading of the poem. As a defense of his comedy, I
intend both his comedic repertoire and his reading of the Commedia. Within the chapter, I demonstrate how Benigni’s act is more than comedic, exhibiting high cultural value by employing Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. In addition to my Bakhtinian reading of Benigni’s Dante, I also demonstrate how in 2002, during his guest appearance at the Sanremo Music Festival, Benigni utilized Dante as a mechanism not only to discuss God’s eternal love, as did Frisina, but also to express his own political stance on the ongoing war in Afghanistan.

I conclude my study with chapter three, “‘Quella sozza imagine di froda’? Playing Dante’s Inferno.” This final chapter not only presents Dante’s presence in American culture, but also deals with the only adaptation to have received negative criticism from Dante scholars such as Teodolinda Barolini and Arielle Saiber. While most scholars have likened the videogame to being sacrilegious and a disgrace not only to Dante but to the literary canon, I argue that the video game not only is successful in making an inaccessible text accessible to today’s readers, but it may very well be a new and exciting way to teach Dante, visually. Like the previous chapters, this final one also focuses on the political ideology expressed by the video game’s producers, by presenting the player with the negative consequences which war brings to the human soul.
CHAPTER 1

“L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle”: Marco Frisina’s *La Divina Commedia* and Dante’s Active Role in Contemporary Italian Culture

1.1 Introduction

Over the past twelve years the Italian theatre has undergone a transformation, moving away from its traditional form. As a bi-product of cultural globalization or rather, Americanization, producers and audiences have demonstrated great interest in the genre of Broadway musicals. Since 1998, Italian lyricists such as Riccardo Cocciante, and the musical group I Pooh, have adapted numerous works of European literature for the stage. Victor Hugo’s *Notre Dame de Paris* (1998), Alessandro Manzoni’s *I Promessi Sposi* (2000), Carlo Collodi’s *Pinocchio* (2003), William Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (2007), and Dante Alighieri’s *La Divina Commedia* (2007) have each demonstrated immeasurable success with European audiences. In *Our Musicals, Ourselves: A Social History of the American Musical Theatre* (2003), John Bush Jones discusses how musical theatre is not only a form of popular entertainment, but in its ability to reach out to large audiences, dramatizes, mirrors, or challenges deeply-held cultural attitudes and beliefs as “to advocate a point of view [...] to move the audience to see things their way.”¹ Applying Jones’ theory to recent Italian theatrical productions, one will notice how within the Italian musical’s contemporary context, the works mentioned above pride themselves in not only

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a unified European culture (Victor Hugo and William Shakespeare), but Italian
cultural and national pride as well (Alessandro Manzoni, Carlo Collodi, Dante). While the
aforementioned musicals have each had enormous triumph and have completed their run on the stage, Marco Frisina’s *La Divina Commedia: L'uomo che cerca l'amore* has not only captured the hearts of its audience, igniting a spark in Italy’s cultural and national pride since its debut, but since its opening, has sold out performances entering its fourth theatrical season.

Monsignor Marco Frisina’s rendition of Dante’s *sacro poema* premiered in November of 2007 at Tor Vergata. With a budget of five million euro and high production value, the NOVA ARS Production Company and critics hailed the musical as “*Il primo colossal teatrale.*” The theatrical crew consists of twenty-four actors and singers, twenty-four dancers, ten acrobats, and twenty extras. Two hundred technicians and an orchestra of one hundred elements were also employed, including five hundred costumes valued at one thousand euro each.

In addition, a new theatre was constructed at Tor Vergata to host the show, the Teatro Divina Commedia. The actors perform on a stage that is twenty-four meters square, which contains a rotating ring measuring in itself eighteen meters in diameter. Behind the stage lies a massive screen to project three-dimensional video images during the five hundred scene changes. The work, divided into two acts, adapts Dante’s *Inferno, Purgatorio,* and *Paradiso,* taking its audience on a musical journey of Dante’s “other world.” While the production company describes the project as an opera, recalling Italy’s cultural contribution and dominance over the historical genre, in actuality, *La Divina Commedia: L'uomo che cerca l'amore* is a mixture of the twentieth-century American model of the integrated musical, where the “sung word, the spoken word, vocal music,
orchestral music, stage movement, choreography and dance, sets, costumes, and light-expressing—all work collaboratively to give the musical play auditory and visual expression and thereby communicate it to the audience.”

The production also lacks the traditional narrative structure of the opera, instead characterized as a “fragmented musical” that forgoes “traditionally linear narrative plots in favor of a seemingly random structure of disjunct and isolated [i.e. fragmented] scenes and musical numbers.” Contrary to the claims made by producers that the production is the first colossal theatrical rendition of the *Commedia*, studies of Dante’s reception in the theatrical and cinematic arts demonstrate otherwise. Frisina’s representation is not the first production of its kind, nor will it be the last. However, unlike its predecessors it has been the most expensive Dantean adaptation, surpassing the 1911 film production by the Milano Films, *Inferno*.

Frisina’s musical transtextual representation of Dante’s *Commedia* incorporates qualities derived from previous lucrative Dantean adaptations on film and the stage. This is exemplified by the musical’s prologue, which utilizes a multitude of cinematic and theatrical texts to tell the story of the fall of Lucifer. Dancers perform Ashton’s ballet, *Dante Sonata*, and Gustave Dorè’s nineteenth-century illustrations form scenic backgrounds in the tradition of Milano Films’ 1911 *Inferno*. Roland Barthes once claimed that every text is in itself an inner text. If applied to Frisina’s production, the recipient of the musical is experiencing Dante via a multi lens: Frisina: Ashton: Padovan: Dorè: Dante.

To help aid the cost of the production, La Società Dante Alighieri, Camera dei Deputati, Senato della Repubblica, Ministeri degli Esteri e dell’Istruzione,

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Regioni Lazio e Toscana, Comune e Provincia di Roma, Comune e Provincia di Firenze, Pontificio Consiglio della Cultura, Conferenza Episcopale Italiana, and the Vicariato di Roma provided sponsorship. The varied interests of these sponsors reflect Jones’ claim regarding the ideologies which musical theatre expresses to an audience. In one aspect, the adaptation exhibits educational and instructional purposes (Società Dante Alighieri, Ministeri degli Esteri e dell’Istruzione). Take for example NOVA ARS’s statement regarding their intent to bring Dante’s work to the stage: “[Per] trasmettere alle nuove generazioni la conoscenza di grandi opere della cultura e dell’arte.” The production’s didactic purpose echoes that of Vittorio Gussman’s lecturae Dantis that premiered on the RAI television network in the 1990’s. While Amilcare A. Iannucci defines the RAI’s intent as “bookish television,” where its academic tone is seen through the program’s setting (the Biblioteca Vallicelliana in Rome), the Commedia’s transposition into a musical liberates the poem from its academic circle, presenting it as a popular form of entertainment. A regionalized cultural intent is also present (Regioni Lazio e Toscana, Comune e Provincia di Roma, Comune e Provincia di Firenze), as well as the nation’s cultural identification with the Catholic faith (Pontificio Consiglio della Culture, Conferenza Episcopale Italiana and the Vicariato di Roma).

Catholic sponsorship of Frisina’s musical is not only indicative of the metamorphosing process of adaptation and Dante’s “producerly quality,” but also informs how the new theatrical adaptation of the medieval text has done away with the poet’s anti-clerical views. Dedicated to Pope Benedict XVI and

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4 N/A. “Chi Siamo.” *Nova Ars - Musica Arte Cultura*. N.d.
sponsored by the Vatican, Frisina’s musical no longer represents Dante as “the Italian writer against the Pope” (as was the case in sixteenth-century England, demonstrated by Nick Havely), but presents the poet’s work as an exemplum of God’s eternal love and salvation.

Today, society is witness to a turbulent time plagued by war. The United States, Italy, and its European allies have united themselves in a fight against the “War on Terror” and Al-Qaeda in the Middle East, developing a schism between Western Christian and Middle Eastern Islamic cultures. Currently, Italy is experiencing cultural division within its national borders. An increasing number of immigrants, especially from North African countries, who seek asylum within the nation, have given Islam a visible presence in Italian cities. Although currently not recognized by the Italian government, it is the second largest religious community within the country. Catholicism, Italy’s national religion, is still ranked first, yet its followers are dwindling due to the nation’s movement towards secularization. According to the United States Central Intelligence Agency, only one third of Italian Catholics are practicing their religion. Italy’s main school union, the CGIL Scuola’s support in 2003 to remove crucifixes from classrooms is but one example of this shift.

The aim of this chapter is two fold. I begin my analysis by exploring the musical’s historical context, demonstrating how La Divina Commedia: L’uomo che cerca l’amore exhibits strong national ties to Italy’s cultural, religious, and political heritage. In addition, I will also focus my attention on the relationship between

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Dante’s *Commedia* and Marco Frisina’s transtextual representation, showcasing the metamorphosing process of adaptation.

### 1.2 Dante’s New Italian Audience

When Walter Veltroni, former mayor of Rome, first heard of Frisina’s intent to bring Dante’s *Commedia* to the stage he announced, “La sua idea mi è sembrata un grande sogno,” echoing Frisina’s own feelings towards his ambition, which he declared, “Una follia. Lo pensavo già nel momento in cui l’idea è cominciata a nascere nella mia mente. Lo dicevo tra me e me, è una cosa troppo grande.”

According to Veltroni, the idea that seemed only a dream evoked something new for the Italian public once it was realized. As he continued his praises of Frisina’s musical, he stated that *La Divina Commedia: L’uomo che cerca l’Amore*, “è una cosa nuova” and for this reason alone he wishes the production “in bocca al lupo” specifically because:


Veltroni’s words are rich in national and cultural pride and focus their attention on Italy’s younger generation, the country’s future. His declaration is highly significant because it spotlights prevailing concerns about preserving Italy’s native culture. In its contemporary context, Italy’s culture has been influenced by other nations through the numerous emigrants that enter the country daily, in

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8 N/A. “Tor Vergata ospita ‘La Divina Commedia’ da Monsignor Frisina.” *IGN (Italy Global Nation)*. 20 Sept. 2007.
the hopes of establishing a better life for themselves. Reading Veltroni’s
declaration one feels his enthusiasm for Frisina’s musical, which is not only the
biggest theatrical production in the history of Italian theatre but also penetrates
into Italian cultural history and culture, and at the center of it all is Dante
Alighieri and his Commedia. Although the praise demonstrates the mayor’s
patriotism, by mentioning the country’s fears of change, he also seems to be
insinuating that Italy’s culture is being threatened or is in decline. This sentiment
may relate to Veltroni’s political position and his campaign against Italy’s Prime
Minister, Silvio Berlusconi in the 2008 elections. His statement accentuates the
lack of more productions of Frisina’s caliber in contemporary Italian culture due
to the Americanization which dominates the Italian airwaves, most of which are
owned by the Premier. Therefore Veltroni declares and acknowledges that the
Italian audience is more aware of and attuned to Italian cultural history than the
one the Mediaset Corporation targets. It is an audience that demands culture, its
own national one. Who better than Dante, an icon of national pride since the
country’s unification in 1861, to provide the nation’s demand.

1.3 Dante and National Identity

Frisina’s musical shares a common element with the performances of the
Commedia that occurred in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, paying
homage to Dante as Italy’s national hero. Journalist Virgilio Celletti, of the
Vatican newspaper Avvenire, alludes to the presence of Dante Alighieri on
opening night of Frisina’s musical. Celletti states, “C’era anche Dante all’affollata
presentazione dell’opera sulla Divina Commedia di monsignor Marco Frisina. Era li
con una certa freddezza: ma solo perché il suo, nella sala della Protomeca in Campidoglio,
era un impassibile mezzobusto di marmo.”

Celletti alludes to the opera’s popularity by mentioning the audience’s turnout—the theatre was “affolato”—and at the same time humorously describes Dante’s cold reaction to the production, explained not by his disapproval but by his manifestation as a marble bust. The presence of Dante in monumental form is reminiscent of the early Dantate performances that took place in front of Santa Croce in 1865 to celebrate the sexcentenary of the poet. While the theatre is filled with its own cultural superstitions, the statue of Dante present at Frisina’s opera is more than a ritualistic tradition of Dante performances. It is also an acknowledgement of Dante as a national hero for Veltroni’s hopes for a new Italian audience.

Further support for the production’s nationalistic portrayal of Dante is the producers’ casting choice for the actor who would portray the medieval poet. According to producers, the lead in the musical had to be played by an Italian actor who filled specific prerequisites. In contrast to Cesare Levi’s description of a peculiar figure dressed up in Trecento style clothing with a false Dantesque nose, Frisina’s Dante had to have strong stage presence, strong vocal ability, and an athletic physique. Frisina’s Dante is no longer the meek pilgrim who wanders into the selva oscura, but instead a representative figure of idealistic national qualities. Florentine native Vittorio Matteucci won the starring role.

Matteucci’s costume represents the pilgrim as “everyman” as Frisina’s Dante no longer wears the romanticized red robe topped with a crown of laurel, but instead has a

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11 Prior to his role as Dante, Matteucci received high acclaim for his portrayal of Judge Frollo in the theatrical adaptation of Coccianè’s Notre Dame de Paris as well as the title role in Dracula 2000, the musical version of Bram Stoker’s novel. In 2010, Matteucci was cast as Manzoni’s Innominato in Michele Guardi’s I promessi sposi: Opera moderna.
beard and shoulder-length hair, and bears modern day clothing. Frisina’s Dante is a representation of man, lost in the *selva oscura* of contemporary issues that plague the modern world. In the 2007 performance, Matteucci’s costume also exemplified Dante’s role as a figure of patriotic pride, wearing a blue top. While traditionally the color blue is an archetypal referent that indicates purity, fidelity, and truth, the color choice for the costume was also indicative to the nation’s association with the color *azzurro*, made famous by Italy’s national soccer team and most recently with the *premier’s Forza Italia* political party.\(^{12}\)

The production’s strong connection to Italian national pride is not only witnessed through the musical’s version of Dante, nor his choice of costuming. In his interview with the television program *Retroscena 2000*, Michele Sciancalepore questioned Frisina about a recent performance of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), which had been translated into Italian. Sciancalepore, wondering if Frisina would take his production on an international tour, inquired about the possibility of translating the musical into other languages. Frisina was eager to release the *Divina Commedia* internationally, but denied the possibility of translating the musical. According to the composer, Dante and his *Commedia* are meant to be experienced in their original language. The unwillingness to translate the libretto into other languages not only limits the dissemination of the poet’s work to a larger audience, but it is also contrary to the poet’s literary success abroad. In addition, it also creates a clear distinction

\(^{12}\) According to Michael E. Shin and John A. Agnew, Berlusconi “named the political party he invented in 1994 to serve his political ambitions after the chant for the national team, Forza Italia, his supporters had also acquired the nickname *gli azzurri* (the blues) after the pet name for the players on the national soccer squad. Since 1994, the story of Italian politics has been dominated by the larger-than-life figure of Berlusconi.” *Berlusconi’s Italy: Mapping Contemporary Italian Politics*. 2008:1.
between the Italians and the “other,” with Italians claiming Dante as their own and only sharing him if he remains “Italian.”

Throughout the musical, Frisina’s Dante is the only character of the Commedia to break from the traditional romantic idea of the poet. Although Virgil, portrayed by Lalo Cibelli, is no longer endowed with laurel leaves and a white toga, he is still represented as a wise sage and throughout the musical has a strong stage presence. The role of Beatrice, played by Stefania Fratepietro, is inspired by the description in Canto XXIX of Purgatorio. In addition, the musical’s Beatrice, like Dante claims in the sonnet “Tanto gentile e tanto onesta pare,” is also an angelic being, sent by God:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ella si va, sentendosi laudare,} \\
\text{benignamente d’umilità vestuta;} \\
\text{e par che sia una cosa venuta} \\
\text{da cielo in terra a miracol mostrare.}^{13}
\end{align*}
\]

The casting directors require similar prerequisites for the actress who is to interpret the role of Beatrice: she must be between the ages of twenty and thirty, she must have a beautiful presence, a delicate physique, and her facial features must be sweet and expressive. Although the production maintains a traditional representation of Beatrice as described in the poet’s works, through the interpretation of Dante as a physically powerful figure, the adaptation of the Commedia has already metamorphosed, going against the claims made by Frisina and director of the musical Daniele Falleri.

During Frisina’s interview in Retroscena 2000, Falleri discusses his direction of the musical: “Abbiamo cercato al limite del possibile ovviamente sempre di rispettare quello che secondo noi era l’anima proprio della Commedia, della scrittura di

\[^{13}\text{Alighieri, Dante. La vita nuova e le rime. 1995:126.}\]
Falleri’s statements echo those of traditional adaptation theorists for whom an adaptation that remains faithful to the original text is nearly impossible. Crucial for Frisina and Falleri’s process is the idea that the spirit of the Commedia and Dante’s writings is faithfully translated. Robert Stam, however, states otherwise, arguing that attempting “l’anima propria” is also impossible:

The notion of ‘fidelity [...] assumes that a novel ‘contains’ an extractable ‘essence,’ a kind of ‘heart of the artichoke’ hidden ‘underneath’ the surface details of style. [...] But in fact there is no such transferable core: a single novelistic text compromises a series of verbal signals that can generate a plethora of possible readings, including even readings of the narrative itself.15

In the Epistle to Can Grande Della Scala, the author takes a similar view of this argument. After mentioning that the Commedia is polysemous, the letter addresses the various themes of the poem. The author argues:

Dunque soggetto dell’intera opera presa soltanto alla lettera è la condizione delle anime dopo la morte considerata in generale; infatti, il corso di tutta l’opera si svolge su di essa e intorno ad essa. Ma se l’opera è intesa allegoricamente, ne è soggetto l’uomo in quanto acquistando meriti e demeriti per effetto del libero arbitrio, è esposto alla giustizia del premio e del castigo.16

According to the letter, the Commedia may be read in the literal sense or in the allegorical sense, where first the poem discusses the condition of man’s soul after his death, while later discussing man and his exposure to God’s Divine Justice. Similar to Stam’s argument that a narrative is not capable of having a single essence, Dante’s Commedia also provides the reader with numerous possible readings. This openness and adaptability is one reason why the Commedia is popular with adapters. During the interview with Retroscena 2000, Frisina

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discusses his more synthetic reading of the poem, one that is more linear and simplified. His is the story of a man lost in the dark woods who goes on a journey through the three realms of the Other world, culminating in his vision of God, reachable only through Love.

As Frisina’s Dante enters the stage, he begins citing the famous opening lines of the *Inferno*, verses 1-6 before singing his first aria, “Notte.” While the musical begins with the poet’s original lines, a paratextual element claiming authenticity to the parent poem, the opening is altered to avoid the voice-over narration, distinguishable in the original with the distinction of Dante poet and pilgrim. However, the aria does incorporate the pilgrim’s state of being at the beginning of the work.

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Notte che dilaghi dentro me.
Notte che scuri la mia vita.
Notte che avvolgi la mia mente,
in un cammino senza strade.

Chiuso in un abisso senza uscita.
In un abbraccio gelido.
In questa angoscia io mi perdo.
In una selva tra le tenebre.

Cerco una speranza che m’illumini.
Cerco una strada oltre il buio.
Mentre mi perdo in questa notte.
Mentre smarrito cerco l’alba.

E grido al cielo!
Grido al dolore di ogni uomo!
La vita, che è dolore dentro me.

Tenebrosa selva che mi stringi.
In un abbraccio senza amore.
L’ascia che veda un po’ di cielo,
al di là di queste tenebre.

Cerco una speranza che m’illumini.
Cerco una strada oltre il buio.
Mentre mi perdo in questa notte.
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Mentre smarrito cerco l’alba.

Dante’s opening *aria* allows us to define Frisina’s musical as a “fragmented musical.” The genre, which became popular in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, not only demonstrates to the audience the internal psyche of the main protagonist, but it also leads them to look inward, to question and explore their own feelings and psyches. If Jones’ earlier argument, that musical theatre “advocate[s] a point of view […] to move the audience to see things their way,” holds, then showcasing Dante’s psyche to the audience should lead them not only to explore their own, but should also help them relate to his internal struggles as well, for he is representative of every man: “*Grido al dolor di ogni uomo.*”

As evidenced by the first three verses, *notte* is significant in describing Dante’s state of being. While the noun in Italian is translatable to the English equivalent of *night*, the term also describes the pilgrim’s soul. Darkness encompasses the pilgrim’s entire being, the leading cause of his aimless wonderings. Frisina’s Dante is already lost in the infernal abyss, as explained in *Inferno* XIX, 76-79. Alone and lost in the dark wood, much like the hypotext’s pilgrim, Frisina’s Dante makes his way towards the Mountain of Purgatory, lit by the sun, his source of hope and salvation. Dante’s quest toward the light is referenced twice, in the third and sixth stanzas of the aria. The *ritornello* of Dante’s aria not only alludes to the pilgrim’s attempt to remove himself from the darkness of the forest, but also relates to both Dante’s and everyman’s quest for salvation, as evidenced by the fourth verse. He seeks the light that illuminates the soul and frees it from the shadows of the abyss, guiding the pilgrim towards

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the brightness of the Heavenly spheres. Dante reprises his aria at the conclusion of the first act of the musical. After having climbed down the back of Lucifer, Dante once again alludes to his quest for light:

\begin{verbatim}
Cerco una speranza che m’illumini.
Cerco la luce sopra me.
In questo viaggio nell’abisso.
In questa fuga tra le tenebre.
Cerco la luce, che si nasconde oltre la vita.
Le ali per la mia libertà!
\end{verbatim}

At the conclusion of Act One, light is a metaphor for wings. God’s radiance and wisdom will now be the prime factor in liberating the pilgrim’s soul.

\subsection*{1.4 Theological Authority}

Marco Frisina’s theatrical adaptation of Dante’s \textit{Commedia} is inspired by two model texts: the encyclical by Pope Benedict XVI, \textit{Deus Caritas Est} (2005) and \textit{Purgatorio} XVII, Virgil’s explanation of love to Dante in the terrace of the slothful. Frisina’s approach to reading Dante’s \textit{Commedia} in order to adapt it for the stage is striking, for one of his sources of inspiration derives from that very institution which Dante claimed to be “\textit{una puttana sciolta.}”\textsuperscript{18} Frisina states:

\begin{verbatim}
Cercavo delle tante letture possibili della Commedia, trovare quella più sintetica, più semplice, più lineare. Il Papa, Benedetto XVI, proprio presentando la “Deus Caritas Est” allude proprio a Dante, e a quest’uomo che cercando l’Amore compie questo grande viaggio. È l’Amore è la chiave universale, lo dice Dante, lo dice S. Tommaso, e l’ha detto anche Papa Benedetto XVI, nella sua prima enciclica, e mi pareva questo veramente una possibilità concreta, e una specie d’incoraggiamento.\textsuperscript{19}
\end{verbatim}

The musical’s title consists of the main title of the hypotext, \textit{La Divina Commedia}, followed by its subtitle, “L’\textit{uomo che cerca l’Amore.”} If applied to Gérard Genette’s

\textsuperscript{18} Alighieri, Dante. \textit{Purgatorio} XXXII, 149.
five modes of transtextuality, Frisina’s extended title of Dante’s work can be
categorized under the mode of architextuality. Genette defines this fourth mode
as “an artist’s willingness or reluctance to characterize a text generically in its
title. [...] Yet in some cases a changed title signals the transformation operative in
the adaptation.” Frisina’s subtitle reflects Genette’s latter statement in that
*L’uomo che cerca l’Amore* alludes to Frisina’s intertextual claim to his inspiration
for the production of the musical, which is Pope Benedict XVI’s first encyclical
*Deus Caritas Est.*

The encyclical is divided into two sections: Part I focuses on “The Unity in
Creation and in Salvation History” while Part II is centered upon “The Practice of
Love By the Church As a ‘Community of Love’.” According to Pope Benedict
XVI, “Today, the term ‘love’ has become one of the most frequently used and
misused of words, a word to which we attach quite different meanings.” Pope
Benedict XVI distinguishes between two different modes of love, *eros* and *agape,*
which are often confused or conflated. *Eros* and *agape* derive from the ancient
Greek tradition; the first often associated with sexual or romantic love while the
latter is attributed to a self-sacrificing, spiritual love. Pope Benedict states:

> That love between man and woman which is neither planned nor willed,
> but somehow imposes itself upon human beings was called *eros* by the
> ancient Greeks. [...] The tendency to avoid the word *eros,* together with
> the new vision of love expressed through the word *agape,* clearly point to
> something new and distinct about the Christian understanding of love."

According to the pope, the Christian understanding of love differs greatly from
the *eros* of the ancient Greeks. The ancient Greeks viewed *eros* as a form of

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21 At the conclusion of its first season, however, the subtitle has been dropped from the title,
currently known as *La Divina Commedia.*
22 Benedictus, XVI, 2005:2.2.
23 Benedictus, XVI, 2005:3.4.
intoxication that led one to experience “supreme happiness.” It is important to note, however, that this type of intoxication is not one that leads man to ascend towards the Divine, but instead is a form of misguided love, a love that brings man to his fall and degradation. Instead, agape, or Christian Love, embraces:

[The] whole of existence in each of its dimensions, including the dimension of time. It could hardly be otherwise, since its promise looks towards its definitive goal: love looks to the eternal. Love is indeed “ecstasy,” not in the sense of a moment of intoxication, but rather as a journey, an ongoing exodus out of the closed inward-looking self towards its liberation through self-giving, and thus towards authentic self-discovery and indeed the discovery of God.

Love, according to Pope Benedict, is a journey of self-discovery that culminates in the discovery of the Divine. It is therefore this exact journey of inner-reflection that Frisina’s Dante will embark upon in order to be reborn. In Act One, before passing through the Gates of Hell, Frisina’s Dante hesitates and asks Virgil about the Gate’s inscription to “Lasciate ogne speranza voi ch’intrate.” Virgil reminds Dante that those words do not apply to him in that moment, because he, unlike the others, is still alive. Dante replies, “No, sono morto dentro.” To which Virgil answers that Love will be his speranza.

In Deus Caritas Est Pope Benedict XVI implicitly alludes to Dante in his discussion on eros and agape. The pope’s allusions to the Commedia stem from Purgatorio XVII (verses 70-139), the central point of the poem where Dante discusses the theme of Love. In Purgatorio XVII, Dante and Virgil reach the fourth terrace of the Mountain:

‘Dolce mio padre, dì, quale offensione
si purga qui nel giro dove semo?
Se i piè si stanno, non steta tuo sermone’.

24 Benedictus, XVI. 2005:3,4.
26 Benedictus, XVI. 2005:6,4.
Ed elli a me: ‘L’amor del bene, scemo
del suo dover, quiritta si ristora;
qui si ribatte il mal tardato remo.’

As Virgil explains, the souls of the slothful are placed in this terrace because of their choice of love. Although they thought that their love was destined towards a greater good, as stated in verse 85, it was not directed to its proper destination. Love must be “nel primo ben diretto,” directed towards God. Virgil continues his explanation:

‘Né creator né creatura mai,’
cominciò el, ‘figliuol, fu sanza amore,
o naturale o d’animo, e tu ’l sai.

Lo naturale è sempre sanza errore,
Ma l’altro puote errar per male obietto
o per troppo o per poco di vigore.’

Virgil’s argument begins with two distinct forms of love: the natural kind and the elective kind (love of the mind). Natural love is considered unerring, while elective love can lead man astray if he is not careful. According to Virgil, elective love is a safe pursuit as long it is directed towards God, however:

quando al mal si torce, o con più cura,
o con men che non dee corre nel bene,
contra ’l fattore adovra sua fattura.

Virgil’s division of love into two separate entities, mirrors the distinctions of love made by Pope Benedict XVI in Deus Caritas Est, where natural love is seen as agape and elective love, with its power to err and lead man astray, is suggestive to eros.

27 Alighieri, Dante. Purgatorio, XVII, 82-90.
28 Alighieri, Dante. Purgatorio, XVII, 97.
30 Alighieri, Dante. Purgatorio, XVII, 100-102.
While Dante’s name is never mentioned in the pope’s first encyclical, Benedict XVI’s address to the Pontifical Council “Cor Unum,” includes a statement that Dante’s *Commedia* is significant according to his definition of love. In the address, he also associates the idea of love as light, a direct reference to Dante’s *Paradiso* in the twenty-ninth paragraph of *Deus Caritas Est*. In January of 2006, Pope Benedict commented on his encyclical, and in doing so refers to Dante and his work:

> I wished to express to our time and to our existence something of what Dante audaciously recapitulated in his vision. He speaks of his ‘sight’ that ‘was enriched’ when looking at it, changing him interiorly (cfr. Paradise XXXIII, verses 112-114.) It is precisely this: that faith might become a vision-comprehension that transforms us. I wished to underline the centrality of faith in God, in that God who has assumed a human face and a human heart.  

The musical, though it may be seen as strictly Catholic propaganda, actually embodies the theme of God’s love as transcending the Christian faith, and relevant to all theistic religions. Frisina was perhaps inspired by Pope Benedict’s address to the commonality between the Catholic and Muslim faiths, where he reiterates his wishes to “continue establishing bridges of friendship with the adherents of all religions, showing particular appreciation for the growth of dialogue between Muslims and Christians.” As the pope states in his address, the Church looks upon Muslims with respect:

> They worship the one God living and subsistent, merciful and almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, who has spoken to humanity and to whose decrees, even the hidden ones, they seek to submit themselves wholeheartedly, just as Abraham, to whom the Islamic faith readily relates itself, submitted to God.

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31 Benedictus, XVI. “Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to the Participants at the Meeting Promoted by the Pontifical Council ‘Cor Unum’” *Vatican: the Holy See* 23 January 2006.


The pope’s decision to address the Church’s respect for the Muslim faith was precipitated by a controversial cartoon, published in the April 2006 issue of the monthly journal Studi Cattoloci. The cartoon depicted the figure of Mohammed in Inferno XXVIII with a caption with dialogue between Dante and Virgil. Dante asks, “Quello là diviso a metà dalla testa alle chiappe non è Maometto?” and Virgil responds, “Sì ed è diviso perché ha portato la divisione nella società. Mentre invece quella là con le brache calate è la politica italiana riguardo all’Islam.”

According to Cesare Cavallieri, director of the journal, the comic was not intended as an anti-Islamic message, but it was supposed to be “una denuncia della crisi di identità culturale dell’Occidente.” Amidst highly elevated tensions between Catholics and Muslims in Italy, the cartoon may have led to a terrorist threat in Bologna, at the basilica of San Petronio, where a fifteenth-century fresco by Giovanni da Modena depicts a similar scene of Muhammad in Inferno XXVIII. This course of events that threatened the peace of the nation prompted the pope, and later Frisina, to release the tensions between the two religions. Pope Benedict’s encyclical is suggestive of contemporary society’s turmoil with religion and its association with the war in Afghanistan. If we are to consider the war in the Middle East as a “Holy War,” then due to today’s views on religion and specifically on notions of God, who is “Sometimes associated with vengeance or even a duty of hatred and violence,” Pope Benedict XVI dedicates his first encyclical as leader of the Roman Catholic Church to speak to society as a whole about God’s love.

34 N/A. “Vignetta anti-Islam su studi cattolici ma l’Opus Dei prende le distanze.” La Repubblica.it. 15 Apr. 2006.


1.5 Intertextual Authority

In addition to Deus Caritas Est, Frisina’s second source of inspiration for the musical was the major underlying theme of Purgatorio XVII, pervasive throughout the first act, specifically in the prologue. It is also prominent in the final scene of Act One and the ensemble performance of Beatrice, Dante, Virgil, Francesca da Rimini, Pier Delle Vigne, Ulysses, and Count Ugolino.

In Purgatorio XII, continuing the journey through the first terrace of the Mountain, Dante describes the carved images within the stones he sees before him that exemplify the sins of pride. Amongst these he claims to have seen:

“Colui che fu nobil creato / più ch’altra creatura, giù dal cielo / folgoreggiando scender, / da l’un lato.”\(^{37}\) In Paradiso XIX, the poet alludes again to the fall of Satan, “E ciò fa certo che ’l primo superbo, / che fu la somma d’ogne creatura, per non aspettar lume, / cadde acerbo.”\(^{38}\) Dante’s references to the fall of Lucifer in Purgatorio and Paradiso derive from the Bible. In Luke 10:18, Christ, upon the return of the seventy-two who were sent “as lambs in the midst’s of wolves” exclaims to them, “I saw Satan fall like lightning from heaven.” Dante echoes Christ’s words in vv. 26 of Purgatorio XIX. The second biblical reference is from the Book of Revelation, 12:7-12:9:

Now war arose in heaven, Michael and his angels fighting against the dragon. And the dragon and his angels fought back, but he was defeated and there was no longer any place for them in heaven. And the great dragon was thrown down, the ancient serpent, who is called the devil, and Satan, the deceiver of the whole world—he was thrown down to the earth, and his angels were thrown down with him.

\(^{37}\) Alighieri, Dante. Purgatorio XII, 25-27.
\(^{38}\) Alighieri, Dante, Paradiso, XIX, 46-48.
Frisina’s prologue, “Lotta in cielo,” echoes not only the description of the fall in Revelation, but also Milton’s *Paradise Lost*.39

Frisina’s overture, specifically the dance of God’s angels versus Satan and his minions, is in itself an intertextual adaptation of not only Dante’s *Commedia* but also of the poet’s history on the stage. “Lotta in cielo” recalls Frederick Ashton’s ballet *Dante Sonata*, an adaptation of Franz Liszt’s piano sonata, *Après une lecture de Dante*. According to Antonella Braida, “music and ballet are an important dimension of the theatrical treatment of Dante.”40 Similar to Ashton’s ballet, Frisina’s opening does not recall Dante’s *Commedia*. Presenting itself like a ballet, no dialogue is exchanged. The story of Satan’s fall is told through dance that begins in Heaven, with angels dancing through the main instrumental theme of Frisina’s score, “L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle.” This initial composition is quite powerful, however after three minutes and six seconds the score changes suddenly, assuming darker tones and louder instruments. The somber shift in the score is effected to introduce the dark angels and to recreate the battle between good and evil. After Satan is defeated, Hell appears via the creation of the *selva oscura*. Frisina’s battle of the good and evil angels, told through ballet, recalls the children of light and children of darkness in Ashton’s *Dante Sonata*. In her study of Ashton’s ballet “From Dante to *Dante Sonata*,” Jane Everson analyzes the work in detail and concludes that it should not to be considered “a traditional ballet in the classical sense.”41 *Dante Sonata* is not traditional in that the dancers’ movements only involve the upper body.

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Furthermore, the female dancers “have their hair long and loose and Ashton uses their hair as part of the vocabulary of movement—tossing and swirling as the heads and bodies move.”  

Although Frisina’s angels wear costumes that cover their faces and heads, the angels in the Divina Commedia: L’uomo che cerca l’Amore, have long strands of tassels that function as wings on their arms. Due to the wings’ long fringes, when the arms of the dancers move, they amplify upper-body movement, like the dancers’ hair in Ashton’s ballet. Movement of course is central in Dante’s work, for especially in the Inferno, it conveys “the sense of hopeless anguish, whirling but pointless movements, fear, self-torment and despair.”

Frisina utilizes the fall of Lucifer as his point of departure for his musical adaptation although it is only mentioned briefly throughout the entire Commedia. In a similar fashion to Dante himself, Frisina begins the narrative with a dramatic prologue. As Robert Hollander once said:

It would be unlike Dante not to begin at the Beginning. His journey to God begins in memory of the beginning of the race’s journey—Adam cast forth from the Earthly Paradise, his offspring shortly after to be confronted by a flood—and all of this is present in and behind the first thirty lines of the poem.

However, if the central underlining reading of Frisina’s musical is Love, then one is prompted to ask, why begin with the fall of Lucifer? More importantly, how can the musical’s prologue reflect upon Virgil’s words to Dante in Purgatorio XVII?

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42 Everson, Jane E. 2007:55
As I mentioned in the previous section, in *Purgatorio* XVII, 94, Virgil explains the difference between two types of love: the natural and the elective. According to theological tradition, deriving from St. Augustine, while all of God’s creations are naturally inclined to love, it is only mankind and the angels who are capable of both kinds of love. Robert Durling explains how according to St. Augustine, “the angels’ moment of choice was in the instant after their creation.” Lucifer’s fall from grace, a result of his choice to direct love away from Good and towards pride, presents Frisina’s audience with the first example of a misguided love.

As Virgil instructs Dante on the two types of love, the Roman poet continues his argument by creating a subdivision of the various kinds of elective love gone badly: love that is distorted, defective, or excessive. He then explains to the pilgrim how each of these three types, “confusamente un bene apprende/ nel qual si queti l’animo, e disira, / per che di giugner lui ciascun contende.” Frisina’s first act follows in a similar fashion, culminating with the infernal souls Dante has met in his journey that repeat their fateful stories of misguided love in the final scene. As evidenced by Frisina’s finale of the first act, the characters Dante meets in Hell demonstrate the consequences of misguided elective love. It is only through *agape*, as argued by Pope Benedict XVI, that Dante, like any man, can reach the skies to be able to see the stars once more.

All the main characters appear in the final scene of the first act. The stage direction is represented in a hierarchical fashion: Beatrice placed high above the stage in Paradise, Dante and Virgil having reached the shore of Purgatory in the

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45 Durling, Robert. “Notes to *Purgatorio* XVII.” 2003:287.
middle, and below them Paolo and Francesca, Pier delle Vigne, Ulisse, and Count Ugolino, still in Hell.

Beatrice:  *Amore, amor che move 'l sole l’altre stelle.*
Dante:    *Amore, l’amore.*
Francesca: *L’amor che null’amato amar perdona,*  
          *condusse noi ad una morte.*
Pier:     *L’amor del mio signore*  
          *mi rifece ingiusto contro me.*
Francesca: *Amore.*
Ulisse:   *Amor per virtute e conoscenza,*
Coro:     *Condusse noi ad una morte,*
Ulisse:   *mi spinse ad inseguire il sole.*
Ugolino: *Amore di padre speziato volge il tempo del mio nemico.*
Dante:    *Amore, amore, amore cerco,*  
          *che sciolga le mie catene.*

Coro:     *Amore, amore…*
Beatrice: *Amore, amor*
Dante:    *Che io possa salire, salire al cielo.*
Virgil:   *Amor ci libera, verso un cielo nuovo.*
Dante:    *Amor ci libera, verso il cielo nuovo*
Coro:     *Per riveder le stelle.*
Dante and Virgil:  *Per riveder le stelle.*

The ensemble performance that concludes the first act requires all of the characters to sing their parts simultaneously. The final verse of *Paradiso* XXXIII introduces the ensemble begun by Beatrice. The central theme is presented by contrasting elective and natural love; the first represented by Francesca, Pier, Ulysses, and Count Ugolino, and the latter by Beatrice, Dante, and Virgil. The love of which Dante sings is now related to the light he was in search of at the beginning of the musical. Love will be the liberating wings that will lead him towards the heavenly sky. It is interesting to note that while Virgil is included in the trio of those who represent natural love, the libretto creates a clear distinction between his damned soul and that of the pilgrim. This distinction is marked by the use of the definite and indefinite article that introduce the noun *cielo,* which
can mean both “sky” and “heaven.” For Virgil, love will guide him and the pilgrim towards a sky, while for Dante it will guide him towards the Christian Paradise. The song also functions as a synopsis of the first act, bringing back to the stage the infamous characters of *Inferno* V, XIII, XXVI and XXXII.

### 1.6 Music as a Mechanism for Adaptation

In adapting Dante’s *Commedia* for the stage, Frisina adamantly claimed fidelity to Dante’s text. In an interview with *Il Giornale*, he expressed to journalist Francesca Scapinelli: “Ho cercato di rispettare il più possibile il capolavoro di Dante [...] I testi sono, infatti, originali, solo per alcuni brani è stato necessario un adattamento. [...] Grazie alla musica ho potuto seguire lo stesso impianto del poema.” Frisina’s claim of fidelity opens up his rendition of the *Commedia* to the discourse of musical adaptation. Music, according to Frisina, allowed him to maintain a faithful adaptation of Dante’s *Commedia*, as music is a mode to express the unimaginable aspects of the poet’s vision to a contemporary audience. To explain the function of music, Frisina argues that it is “un potere astratto, molto forte, evocativo. La musica suggerisce delle immagini, le immagini che noi vediamo, le suggeriscono altre.” Frisina’s explanation of the suggestive power that music has upon its listeners is closely related to Dante’s own use of music within the *Paradiso*. Validating the importance of Frisina’s musical approach to Dante is Maria Ann Roglieri who argues that, “A musical interpretation offers a further perception of Dante’s extraordinary vision of the heavens.”

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50 Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:70.
believed that music was central to the Christian Paradise, but he was also the first author to integrate music into his descriptions of both the heavenly spheres and the souls that inhabit them.\textsuperscript{51} In \textit{Paradiso} XXI, 59, Dante describes the heavenly music that he hears as “\textit{la dolce sinfonia di Paradiso},” which is not only “sweet” but also superior to earthly music (\textit{Paradiso} XII, 7-8) and ineffable to the human ear (\textit{Paradiso} I, 70-72).\textsuperscript{52} In an attempt to express both his vision of the paradisiacal journey and the perfection of God’s music, Dante utilizes analogies of musical instruments, song, and dance to allow his reader-listener the ability to imagine the unimaginable and the incomprehensible. This is evidenced for example in \textit{Paradiso}, XIV and XVIII where the soul’s movements are described as dances well known to the poet’s contemporary audience, as the caroles, courtly round dances and ballet.\textsuperscript{53} Ballet, in addition to music, is integral to Frisina’s production and permeates throughout the musical.

The staging of Dante’s \textit{Purgatorio}, and especially the \textit{Paradiso} has presented numerous challenges for adapters, despite Dante’s “cross-over”\textsuperscript{54} into the cinematic and theatrical arts. According to Roglieri, “only twenty-nine musical adaptations of the \textit{Paradiso} have been composed between the 16\textsuperscript{th} and 21\textsuperscript{st} centuries,” out of the two hundred adaptations that have been produced.\textsuperscript{55} This may be attributed to the lack of interaction between Dante and the characters of the \textit{Paradiso}.\textsuperscript{56} Frisina, however, overcomes the difficulty of representing these

\textsuperscript{52} Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:66.
\textsuperscript{53} Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:66.
\textsuperscript{54} Iannucci, Amilcare A. “Dante and Hollywood.” \textit{Dante, Cinema, and Television}. 2004:3
\textsuperscript{55} Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:67
\textsuperscript{56} Roglieri, Maria Anne. 2007:68.
last two canticles, and his adaptation brings to light the challenge inherent in the 
_Purgatorio_ and the _Paradiso_.

One reason why adapters have been reluctant in transposing Dante’s _Paradiso_ into a musical and theatrical medium could be that the music of paradise, as described by the poet, is not only incomprehensible to the human ear, but is also unprecedented, as God’s own music is perfect and new. As Roglieri states, the music of the _Paradiso_ is “the ultimate combination of sound, light and dance,”57 and as a consequence of this perfection, composers need to create music that is not only original but exquisite as well.58

Frisina’s musical composition for the _Purgatorio_ and the _Paradiso_ however, does not create new music, but uses liturgical Gregorian chants of the tenth and thirteenth centuries, and contemporary rock music for the _Inferno_. In his interview with _Retroscena 2000_, Frisina discusses his choice of rock and use of electric guitars for the first canticle. His choice of the contemporary music genre for the _Inferno_ was not meant to indicate rock and roll music as satanic or infernal. Rather, Frisina felt that rock music would be more relatable to the audience in the first act, because unlike _Paradiso_, the _Inferno_ is filled with human characters recognizable to the general Italian audience. As such, it would be better to incorporate a more contemporary music style to a canticle that is more familiar to the viewer than the _Purgatorio_ and the _Paradiso_. The Gregorian chants, associated with the Catholic Church, work well in the _Paradiso_ as the music is intensely spiritual, evoking a profound reaction from the listener.

58 Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:66.
Another reason why composers have been reluctant in their adaptation of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* could very well be that the last two canticles are more theological in nature and are less relatable to an audience because of the arcane content. Even Dante himself warns the reader of the difficulties of the poetry present in both. As the pilgrim comes closer to God in his journey, the poet elevates his style of writing to a more sublime stature, representative of his closeness to the Divine. In *Purgatorio* IX, after he has reached the gates of Purgatory, the poet remarks:

\[\text{Lettor, tu vedi ben com’io innalzo} \\
\text{la mia matera, e però con più arte} \\
\text{non ti maravigliar s’io la rincalzo.}\]  

In *Paradiso* II, Dante addresses the reader once more, warning him of the difficulty of the subject matter at hand in the third and final canticle:

\[\text{O voi che siete in piccioletta barca,} \\
\text{desiderosi d’ascoltar, seguiti} \\
\text{dietro al mio legno che cantando varca,} \\
\text{tornate a riveder li vostri liti:} \\
\text{non vi mettete in pelago, ché forse,} \\
\text{perdendo me, rimarreste smarriti.}\]

Jay Rudd argues that Dante’s *Paradiso* is not only the poet’s highest artistic achievement, but it is also his most difficult text. According to Rudd this difficulty is two-fold. The first difficulty is attributed to the theological subject matter the canticle represents. Unlike the *Inferno* and the *Purgatorio*, the third canticle “directly addresses difficult theological issues,” as, for example, in Canto VII, which explores the mysteries of Salvation and the Resurrection. The

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second difficulty of Dante’s *Paradiso* is based on the poet’s limits of poetic expression of the vision as evidenced in *Paradiso* I, 4-6 and again in verses 70-72. It is no surprise that adapters have turned away from recreating Dante’s *Purgatorio* and, even more often, the *Paradiso* for the theatrical and cinematic arts. The text is extremely difficult and is imbedded with not only a lofty theological and philosophical subject matter, but also with the poet’s own inability to express in detail his own divine vision.

Frisina has successfully adapted Dante’s *Commedia* through music. His *Divina Commedia: L’uomo che cerca l’Amore* is marketed as the first colossal Italian theatrical production and as “*lo spettacolare viaggio in musica dall’inferno al paradiso.*” Although the composer claims to have remained faithful to the medieval text, his musical adaptation demonstrates how strict fidelity is nearly impossible. Frisina’s adaptation has altered the hypotext due to the shift in medium from the literary to the multi-track medium, which accounts for “the unlikelihood […] of literal fidelity.”\(^6^2\) By setting Dante’s poem to music, composers have already been unfaithful to the text.

In Frisina’s musical all of the major scenes of the first act are very close in maintaining fidelity to the original text. It is not until the second act that Frisina’s adaptation process begins to diverge from the original. Although Frisina’s second act is unfaithful to Dante’s original, the composer’s re-ordering of various verses and scenes from the canticles produce an effect that renders the hypertext a perfect double of the hypotext. This is achieved through Frisina’s music and Dorè’s illustrations of *Purgatory* and *Paradiso*, which are projected on a screen in the background. Both music and images distract the receptor from the

misreading of Dante’s original text. Frisina’s adaptation of *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* requires the visual and auditory participation of the recipient as both music and images contribute to an added element to Dante’s poem. Having diverted from the original text through the adaptation process, the viewer must now participate in a game of “similarity and difference […] to appreciate fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken by the adaptive text.”

Similar to other literary works that have been adapted for the theatre and for the cinema, Frisina reduces the *Commedia* to specific scenes. Within the second act of the musical, Dante’s *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* have been altered and condensed so that both canticles could be incorporated into the opera. Act Two begins at the foot of the Mountain, *Purgatorio* II. After Virgil explains that Beatrice will meet Dante at the top of the mountain, the scene progresses with the arrival of the angel and the boat filled with souls who sing *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*. At the conclusion of the psalm, Dante asks the souls if they could guide him and Virgil to a path that leads up the Mountain, echoing verse 58, “Se voi sapete / mostratene la via di gire al monte.” One of the souls responds to Dante’s request, “Non lo sapete, non siete di qui?” echoing verse 59, “Voi credete forse / che siamo esperti d’esto loco.” Dante responds to the soul’s question, “Siamo venuti, da un’altra strada,” adapted from verse 64, “Dianzi venimmo, innanzi a voi un poco, / per altra via, che fu sì aspra e forte.” Dante’s remark leads the souls to notice the pilgrim’s shadow, as represented in canto III, 88-93:

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Come color dinanzi vider rossa
la luce in terra da mio destro canto,
si che l’ombra era di me a la grotta,
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restarо e trassero sé in dietro alquanto,
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Having discovered that Dante is still alive, the soul, soon identified as Pia de’ Tolomei, begins her request for prayers, joined by Bonconte and Manfredi.

The above description of the first scene of Act Two meshes together cantos II, III, and V, changing the order of specific actions original to Dantes’ second canticle. For example, Pia de’ Tolomei, who originally appears in the last seven verses of Purgatorio V, is confronted on stage by Dante when asking for guidance on climbing the Mountain. Dante’s plea for help is also rewritten and altered from the hypotext. While it is Dante in the hypertext who asks for information on how to continue his journey, in the hypotext it is the souls who have just arrived on the shores of Purgatory who ask the pilgrim and his guide about how to climb the sacred Mountain. Also, in Purgatorio II, it is Virgil who speaks of the “altra via” that was taken to reach the shores of Purgatory, not Dante as presented in the hypertext.

Frisina’s rendition incorporates only eleven of the thirty-three cantos that make up Dante’s Purgatorio. In addition to his use of cantos II, III, and V in Act II, he also includes Purgatorio VI, 47; VII, 82, the soul’s singing Salve, Regina; VIII, 1-6, Dante’s introduction to the evening prayers, shortly followed by the entrance of the serpent in verse 97-106. The next scene is based on Purgatorio IX: the gatekeeper and the gate of Purgatory, verses 49-51 and 106-145. Upon entering Purgatory proper, Dante sings his second aria in the opera, “O superbi cristian” from Purgatorio X, 121-126. Eliminated from Frisina’s adaptation are cantos I and XI-XXV. Due to the elimination of more than ten cantos, Dante and Virgil never make it through all seven terraces of Purgatory. The only terraces represented in
the second act are the seventh terrace, canto XXVI with Guido Guinizelli and Arnaut Daniel, and the Earthly Paradise, incorporating cantos XXVIII, XXIX, XXX and XXXI. Similar to Frisina’s adaptation of cantos II, III and V, the cantos in this second set are also loosely adapted and out of the specific order of Dante’s original text. For example, Frisina’s Virgil, after he crowned and mitred Dante in Purgatorio XXVII, 142 abandons the pilgrim before they reach the Garden of Eden and Matelda. Forbidden from entering the Earthly Paradise, Frisina’s Virgil returns to his “eterno silenzio” by the end of Purgatorio XXVII. However, in the hypotext Virgil remains with the pilgrim through Purgatorio XXIX, evidenced by verses 55-57, and finally leaves Dante in Purgatorio XXX.

Frisina’s second act concludes with Dante’s vision of Paradise, made up of selected cantos that introduce Piccarda Donati, St. Thomas, and St. Bernard, combining cantos III, X, and XXXIII. The composer’s decision to unite the three figures in order to underline his didactic interpretation of the Commedia as a demonstration of God’s eternal love and salvation is also supported by and demonstrative of Beatrice’s explanation of the soul’s true position in the heavenly spheres in canto IV:

\[
\text{Qui si mostraro, non perché sortita}
\]
\[
sia questa spera lor, ma per far segno
\]
\[
de la celestïal c’ha men salita.}^{64}
\]

Apart from utilizing the text to support the decision to combine the souls into one celestial sphere, Frisina altered Dante’s text, specifically the story of Piccarda and St. Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin Mary, to fit his needs. Frisina’s overall theme of Dante’s Commedia is still centered on Divine Love, as Frisina’s Piccarda exemplifies. Piccarda explains to the pilgrim how, even though her weak heart

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kept her from her vow to the cloister, God “mi donò il suo perdono.” Of the numerous souls that Dante has met during his journey, three of the poet’s contemporaries were women represented in each canticle: Francesca in Inferno, Pia in Purgatorio and Piccarda in Paradiso. In Frisina’s theatrical adaptation of the Commedia, only the first two women speak the exact words to a contemporary audience that the medieval poet bestowed upon them. Piccarda’s speech however, is changed to fit within the theme of divine love.

In the penultimate scene of Frisina’s opera, Piccarda speaks to the pilgrim, exclaiming:

M’innamorai del cielo,  
e lo cerchì nel chiostro  
promettendomi a lui.  

Ma conobbi un giorno,  
la debolezza del cuore.  
Ma il Signore,  
mi donò il Suo perdono.

Frisina’s Piccarda had not kept her vow to God because she experienced a weakness within her heart. She became a victim of eros. Yet due to her true love for God, she was forgiven. Dante’s Piccarda tells a different tale; the breaking of her vow is not due to her weak heart, but it is caused by violence. In Paradiso III, Piccarda says to the pilgrim:

Dal mondo, per seguirla, giovinetta  
fuggì’mi, e nel suo abito mi chiusi  
e promisi la via de la sua setta.  

Uomini poi, a mal più ch’a bene usi,  
fuor mi rapiron de la dolce chiostra:  
Iddio si sa qual poi mia vita fusì.  

Frisina’s account of Piccarda’s tale is problematic for it produces a different reading than the one Dante gives in *Paradiso* III. This reading strays from Dante’s original text and resembles instead Pope Benedict’s encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*.

The final scene of Frisina’s opera returns once more to previous adaptations of Dante’s text by adapting *Paradiso* XXXIII, and St. Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin Mary. Frisina’s opera also incorporates the use of iconic imagery of the Virgin Mary projected upon the screen, unlike his predecessors who merely added music to the final canto. The images are at first Doré’s illustrations of specific cantos of *Paradiso*, but as the prayer continues, more and more images of the Virgin Mary surrounded by angels appear on the background screens. The prayer is no longer St. Bernard’s alone, but Beatrice, Dante, Piccarda, and Matelda sing it as well.

The ensemble representation of canto XXXIII functions in a similar fashion as did the final scene of Act One. If the final ensemble of Act One demonstrated the many examples of misguided love, then the ensemble presented in Act Two represents *agape* at its full potential as expressed in verse 7-9 of *Paradiso* XXXIII:

“Nel ventre tuo si raccese l’amore, / per lo cui caldo ne l’eterna pace / così è germinato questo fiore.” Unlike the final ensemble of the first act that ends with the phrase “*a riveder le stelle,*” the finale of the Second Act diverges once more from its original source. The final scene which begins with Beatrice singing “*L’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle,*” echoing Dante’s final verse of *Paradiso* XXXIII, 145 does not end with the word “stars” as expected in an adaptation of Dante’s *Commedia.* Instead it ends with Amore, once again addressing Frisina’s pontifical reading of the text, *L’uomo che cerca l’Amore.*
1.7 Conclusion

Frisina’s opera is a transtextual adaptation of Dante’s *Commedia*. As such, *La Divina Commedia: L’uomo che cerca l’amore* integrates other cinematic and theatrical adaptations into its production, demonstrative of Dante’s popularity in the cultural arts. This is exemplified by the opera’s prologue, which incorporates numerous other texts to tell the story of the fall of Lucifer, including Ashton’s ballet, *Dante Sonata*. The entire musical recalls other textual representations of theatrical and cinematic adaptations, specifically Milano Films 1911 *Inferno* and the theatrical production company’s utilization of Gustave Dorè’s nineteenth-century illustrations functioning as the backgrounds for the production. This demonstrates how every text is in itself an inner text, where the recipient is reading Dante through several lenses simultaneously: Frisina: Padovan: Doré: Dante. Due to the poem’s performative qualities, Dante’s *Commedia*, in its cinematic and theatrical adaptations, continues to bring the audience of the new millennium to the stars.
CHAPTER 2

“Ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta”:
A Defense of Roberto Benigni’s Comedy

2.1 Introduction

On July 25, 2006, Roberto Benigni took center stage in Florence’s Piazza Santa Croce on the first evening of his one-man show TuttoDante, the comedian’s tribute to Dante Alighieri and his Commedia. Eagerly awaiting Benigni’s reading of the medieval poet’s masterpiece was a diverse audience of no fewer than five thousand spectators, from Italian politicians, whom the comedian jokingly criticized, to children, who were possibly experiencing Dante’s work for the very first time. In an article published shortly after the premiere, Concita De Gregorio referenced Benigni’s reading of Inferno V and chronicled how adolescents and children in the audience wondered if the tragic tale actually occurred, displaying great interest in the story of Paolo and Francesca’s murder by the jealous Gianciotto. These literary characters, along with Ulysses and Count Ugolino, became instant overnight sensations. They, along with Dante, were now rock-stars:

Qui a Firenze Dante è diventato come Springsteen, come i Rolling Stones, io ero trattato come un rockstar, per le strade mi urlavano: Benigni, facci Farinata! Facci Paolo e Francesca! Si son create proprio le fazioni: tipo calcio, una curva Sud di Dante… si sentiva la grandezza delle nostre radici.¹

Benigni’s enthusiastic description of his recitation of Dante in Florence exemplifies how well received it was by the audience. Not only was the poet

“sesto tra cotanto senno,”² but, he had now become a pop cultural icon, in the realm of Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stones. Similar to Walter Veltroni’s acknowledgement of a new Italian audience in Chapter 1, Benigni’s Dante sparked among Italians a sense of national pride. As the comedian explains in the Quotidiano Nazionale, one could feel the greatness of the country’s roots.

Benigni’s theatrical performance was also televised on Italy’s national television station, the RAI network, for thirteen consecutive nights, one for each canto.³ The show not only introduced Dante to a young audience, but it also re-enacted the lecturae Dantis as presented by the poet’s early promoters such as Giovanni Boccaccio. Boccaccio, as Benigni affirmed on the first evening, had also recited and commented on the Commedia in Piazza Santa Croce in 1373. In addition to his readings, each evening Benigni would begin his performance by giving a monologue in which he would discuss current political events. It is important to note that when aired on the RAI and released for sale in DVD format, the comedian’s political remarks were censored and did not make it into the edited program.

In the United States, Variety magazine also devoted an article to Benigni’s performance. Cleverly titled “Divine Intervention,” it reported how the show, then halfway through its sold out Italian tour marked “a minor miracle in a land where 40% of the population didn’t read a book last year.”⁴ Such an outcome should not come as a surprise. In 2002, Benigni had made a guest appearance at

² Alighieri, Dante. Inferno, IV, 102.
³ Due to the spectacle’s success with audiences, Benigni continued his performance on a national tour. During the 2008-2009 season the comedian also began his international tour, traveling throughout Europe, the United States and Canada. Benigni’s TuttoDante is a selection of Dante’s Inferno and Paradiso XXXIII.
the Sanremo Music Festival, where he recited the first verses of Paradiso XXXIII. In the following months sales of Dante’s Commedia skyrocketed, making it the best selling book of that Christmas season. The effects of Benigni’s show prove Amilcare A. Iannucci’s claims that Dante not only “produces television,” but that he’s also “a big business.”

Yet reactions were not universally positive. While journalists and audience members praised the comedian for his rendition of Dante and his work, others, such as actors Giorgio Albertazzi and Vittorio Sermonti, and literary critic and author Edoardo Sanguineti, who had each performed their own lecturae Dantis, opposed the Tuscan comic’s performance. In an interview, Giorgio Albertazzi questioned whether or not Benigni was able to read Dante to an audience, stated: “Dante? Benigni quando lo spiega è sublime; ma quando lo dice…eh sì, un po’ meno.” The title of this chapter, “Ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta: A Defense of Roberto Benigni’s Comedy” alludes to the conflict that results from our society’s tendency to devalue the orality produced by television in favor of quiet contemplation of the written word. When we look at his performance through this prism, we see just how complex and rich Benigni’s repertoire truly is. Albertazzi’s sentiments, along with those expressed by Vittorio Sermonti, have not only brought controversy to Benigni’s performance, but also shed light upon questions concerning contemporary Italian culture and indeed the question of how one may define it. For example, although TuttoDante was a theatrical

performance, it was also televised, therefore exposing conflicting values about genre among its Italian audiences. According to John Fiske, television is deemed low culture because it “is essentially a domestic medium, the routines of viewing are part of the domestic routines by which home life is organized.” The decision to televise the event scandalously puts Dante’s near-divine status on the same level as television and its associations with low, mass culture.

The first part of the title, “Ed elli avea del cul fatto trombetta,” a direct quotation from Dante’s *Inferno* XXI, is an example of Dante’s own use of low style poetics in the first cantica and demonstrative of the grotesque imagery of the lower body. In conjunction with Benigni’s comedic art, this canto recalls the Bakhtinian theories of the carnivalesque, where the image of the body, a manifestation of grotesque realism, plays a dominant role in carnival celebrations. The body and its “parts through which the world enters […] or emerges from it,” the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly and the nose, is not individualized and therefore is not to be considered in its physiological modern sense. For Bakhtin, the concept of grotesque realism consists of a positive degradation of that which is high, spiritual, ideal, and abstract. The lowering of that which is high signifies a “contact with the earth as an element that swallows up and gives birth at the

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10 Mikhail Bakhtin develops his theory of the carnivalesque in *Rabelais and His World*, centering on the literary work of the Renaissance author Rabelais and his *Gargantua*. Within the work, Bakhtin classifies the carnivalesque as belonging to the realm of folk culture divided into three forms which are each closely linked; the ritual spectacle, comic verbal composition and the various genres of billingsgate. These three forms, comic shows of the market place, the oral and written parodies and the use of curses, profanities and popular blazons are believed to offer “a completely different, non official aspect of the world, of man and human relations.”
12 Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:19.
same time.”¹³ The concept of the grotesque as an idiom of carnival leads to a regeneration marked by change and renewal. Dante himself is renewed as the end result of his cathartic journey through each of the three realms of the afterlife.

Dante’s voyage through the afterlife is not merely a progressive movement away from the dark woods of sin towards the heavenly spheres, but as the pilgrim progresses through his journey, Dante enlightened by what he has witnessed, exhibits a transformation and growth. For example, the pilgrim felt pity for and questioned the punishments that Paolo and Francesca must endure in Canto V, but by Canto XXVIII the reader witnesses him inflicting pain on the damned. Keeping in mind Bakhtin’s concept of grotesque realism in conjunction with Sigmund Freud’s theories of the individual’s sexual development, Dante’s realms are relatable to images that recall the grotesque lower body, where Hell is equated to Freud’s pre-Oedipal sadistic anal stage. Take for example the funnel shape of Hell itself and the numerous descriptions of feces. Purgatory, shaped like a mountain, and the exact opposite of Hell’s topography, which tapers as it deepens, may be equated to the phallic stage. Lastly, paradise and the empyrean, described as a rose, recalls the clitoral stage. The correlation that I have made between Dante’s universe and Freud’s theory of sexual development is more than mere coincidence but permeates the entire Commedia.

If the system of Dante’s universe shares similarities with Freud’s pre-Oedipal stages, as the pilgrim progresses along his journey he also exhibits and overcomes the Oedipus complex. In using this term, I do not intend a literal incestuous relationship, but that which Terry Eagleton defines as the “structure

of relations by which we come to be the men and women that we are.” Such a reading demonstrates not only the regeneration and renewal of Dante pilgrim, but is applicable to Dante poet as well, recalling Harold Bloom’s *Anxiety of Influence* (1973) and *A Map of Misreading* (1975). Bloom maintains that “poetic strength comes only from a triumphant wrestling with the greatest of the dead,” and that “to the poet-in-a-poet, a poem is always the other man, the precursor, and so as a poem is always a person, always the father of one’s Second Birth. To live, the poem must misinterpret the father, by the crucial act of misprision, which is the re-writing of the father.” Throughout the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, Dante addresses Virgil not only as poeta, a term which Nick Havely states is an “illustrious one, reserved chiefly for classical authors,” but sometimes as dolce padre, as in *Inferno* VIII, 110 and *Purgatorio* IV, 44, XVIII, 7 and 13, and XXVII, 52. Virgil is not only Dante’s guide in the first and second canticle, but he is, as Dante writes in *Inferno* I, 81, “lo mio maestro e ’l mio autore.” The poet adapts and appropriates Virgil’s *Aeneid* throughout the *Inferno* and *Purgatorio*, going as far as even making mention of his use as can be seen in *Inferno* XIII. Having arrived at the forest of the suicides of the seventh circle, Virgil instructs the pilgrim to break off a branch from one of the trees. As the pilgrim follows his guide’s orders, “de la scheggia rotta usciva insieme / parole e sangue.” The soul that is within the tree is that of Pier delle Vigne. In anguish he asks the pilgrim why he inflicts so much pain upon him. Petrified, Dante is unable to answer, leading Virgil to respond, “‘S’elli avesse potuto creder prima,’ / rispuose ‘l savio mio, ‘anima

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17 Havely, Nick. *Dante*. 2007:131
18 Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno* XIII, 43-44.
lesa, / ciò c'ha veduto pur con la mia rima, / non avrebbe in te la man distesa.”¹⁹ Virgil’s response to Pier negates Dante’s reading of the Polydorus episode in Aeneid III only to accentuate his thorough knowledge of the classical poem. Yet, by the time Dante pilgrim and Dante poet reach the terrestrial paradise of Purgatorio, he is no longer in need of Virgil’s guidance. Having been born “sub Iulio, ancor che fosse tardi, / e vissi a Roma sotto ’l buono Augusto / nel tempo de li dèi falsi e bugiardì”²⁰ Virgil can no longer guide the pilgrim through the heavenly spheres, for as a pagan, he is unworthy and therefore he never wrote of the Christian paradise. Before leaving the pilgrim in Purgatorio XXVII, Virgil crowns Dante master of himself. Virgil’s crowning of Dante in canto XXVII is relatable to Freud’s “reality principle” where peace is made with the father. The son identifies with the father, “and is thus introduced into the symbolic role of manhood.”²¹ In the Commedia this theme emerges both literally and figuratively for both pilgrim and poet.

The second part of the chapter’s title, “A Defense of Roberto Benigni’s Comedy” is not only a mere defense of Benigni’s presentation of the Commedia, but it also concentrates on his comedic art that is in itself rich with its own cultural heritage. At this point it is wise to dismiss and consider Albertazzi’s position irrelevant. Instead, it may be wiser to question how the Tuscan comic can contribute to the field of Dante Studies for better or worse, in addition to the means by which Dante was employed in Benigni’s appropriation (the public reading).

¹⁹ Alighieri, Dante. Inferno XIII, 45-49.
²⁰ Alighieri, Dante. Inferno I, 70-72.
²¹ Eagleton, Terry, 1998:134
2.2 Benigni’s *TuttoDante*

On the evenings of *TuttoDante*, Benigni sets foot on a bare stage. There are no curtains that function as wings, no elaborate set decorations. The only items present on stage are wooden platforms utilized by the comedian so that he may run between and pop out from in order to produce laughter from the audience that is already anticipating such a clownish performance. Before Benigni appears on stage, the main theme of the show begins to play. The musical score, written by Nicola Piavani, (who received an Academy Award for composing the musical score for *La vita è bella*), also adds to the simplicity of the setting that Benigni seeks to create. The music, a triumphant march dominated by the sound of trumpets, not only recalls a music style pertinent to carnival festivities of the marketplace, but it is simplistic in form as well as in tune with the movements of the comedian. The dominant visual elements are the Basilica of Santa Croce and the towering figure of the medieval poet himself, in the form of Enrico Pazzi’s monument near the northwest corner of the church (1865).

Benigni begins the performance by addressing Pazzi’s statue:

*Su Dante si sa davvero poco. Di lui non è rimasta neanche una firma, un’orma, il numero di scarpe, la taglia del vestito…In ogni caso, non bisogna immaginarselo così come l’hanno raffigurato nelle statue e nei quadri, col cipiglio serio, la palandrina lunga e il cappuccio in testa: era un ragazzo di trentacinque anni quando scrisse la Divina Commedia, uno giovane, giovane, che portava perfino dei bei pantaloni allegri e colorati.*

Thus Benigni reveals his main objective for *TuttoDante*. Unlike Marco Frisina’s expensive production of the *Commedia* as a musical, Benigni has not only stripped his production down to bare essentials, but he has also subdued the audience’s perception of the divine poet, thus rendering the text accessible for

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the listener and eventual reader by pulling Dante himself into the spectacle. Benigni’s performance falls under the paradigm of Bakhtin’s comic shows of the marketplace,\textsuperscript{23} to “offer a completely different, non official aspect of the world, of man and human relations.”\textsuperscript{24} The comedian instructs his audience not to think of Dante as the figure represented in Enrico Pazzi’s imposing statue, holding his masterpiece in hand and presenting his brooding face to the people below. They are not to think of the iconic image of the poet crowned with laurel, but rather as a Florentine man of thirty-five. Dante’s costume of multi-colored clothing also brings to mind the image of the jester who frequented the princely courts of medieval Europe. By presenting the \textit{somma poeta} as a comical figure, in addition to using an informal language style (Benigni’s focus on the poet’s shoe size) and repetition of “\textit{uno giovane, giovane}” as a feature of comedic recitation once again follows Bakhtin’s theory, placing emphasis on the speech and gestures of the marketplace, which “permitted no distance between those who came in contact with each other and liberating from norms of etiquette and decency imposed at other times.”\textsuperscript{25} As such, Dante and his poem, no longer in an academic circle, but instead recited publicly in a market or festival style setting, broke down barriers created by differing education level, social class, and age in the audience.

Vittorio Sermonti, a one-time friend of Benigni who commented on and performed the medieval text numerous times between 1979 and August 31, 1997 when he recited \textit{Paradiso} XXIII for Pope John Paul, criticized the actor for his representation:

\textsuperscript{23} Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:5.
\textsuperscript{24} Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:5.
\textsuperscript{25} Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:10.
Il suo modo di attualizzare Dante è divertente ma non si possono dire spiritosaggini e cose un po’ ovvie per adescare il pubblico. Questo non è un buon servizio fatto al Poeta e nemmeno agli ascoltatori. Ho 78 anni e mi dispiace lasciare il campo a questo tipo di divulgazione allegra. Dante è duro e severo e ci vuole durezza e severità per capirlo. È un’operazione delicatissima, che non si può fare alla buona.  

Sermonti insists that Benigni is causing much disservice to the medieval poet.

According to the stage actor, Dante is meant to be difficult and severe. He insists that in order for an audience to understand fully the *Commedia*’s poetics, great effort and rigor are a necessity. But Sermonti’s Dante is precisely the one whom the Tuscan comic is attempting to liberate and make accessible to the public.

Mario Mauro, in the *Mascalzone*, characterizes the audience’s experience of Dante in different contexts, contrasting a pre-Benigni Dante to a post-Benigni one:

Una persona che commenta un classico? Richiama certamente i noiosi e tediosi ricordi di quando a sedici anni, chiusi in un’aula dietro ad un banco, la nostra professoressa di lettere ci costringeva a leggere e commentare opere antiche di scrittori che, per noi studenti, erano lettera morta e sepolta. […] Allora si (ri)scopre che lo stesso testo, che fine a qualche anno fa avremmo venduto a pochi euro alle matricole del ginnasio, diventa un’opera in grado di stupire per la sua actualità. Ed è proprio questa l’intenzione del Roberto nazionale nelle prossime serate: […] rendere la *Divina Commedia* un testo attuale in grado di parlare direttamente alla collettività e tradurla alle problematiche odierne, affinché tutti ne possano cogliere l’estrema profondità che in sé racchiude.  

For the Italians, Dante permeates a collective memory of high school, when, as adolescents, study of the poet was considered tedious and boring. In this context, students did not appreciate the classic text because it no longer seemed relevant or current. In lieu of this, one American Dante scholar, Robert Hollander, disagrees with Sermonti and Albertazzi altogether, defending Benigni’s approach.

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In an online article published in *Il Sussidiario* and reprinted in the *Osservatore Romano*, journalist Rossano Salini not only explains how Dante’s *Commedia* is a difficult text but it also acknowledges how its difficulty is primarily responsible for the text’s perceived dullness. The reason is not due to the poetics or stylistics of the text, but the methodology employed in its teaching. Robert Hollander concurs with Salini. Hollander claims that those at fault for the lack of popularity of the *Commedia* are university professors:

È colpa nostra: noi professori siamo i responsabili, io incluso. Siamo noiosi, e rubiamo la vita al poema dantesco. Non saprei dire bene il perché: forse perché è un poema molto complesso, e ha bisogno di uno studio serrato. Il modo principale con cui Dante è stato rubato della sua essenza, e di cui ho parlato nel mio primo libro, Allegory in Dante’s “Commedia” (1969), è il fatto che lo si è voluto ridurre a poeta allegorico, e sostanzialmente, per questa strada, a un poeta da bambini. È Dante stesso, invece, a darci la soluzione di questo problema: egli spiega, infatti, che esiste un’allegoria dei teologi e una dei poeti, e nell’epistola a Cangrande dice chiaramente di aver seguito nella sua poesia l’allegoria dei teologi. È una cosa ben diversa: non c’è allegoria poetica in Dante (a parte alcune immagini, come ad esempio le processioni nel Paradiso terrestre) e la *Commedia* è scritta esattamente come se fosse storia. Questa è la cosa più importante: bisogna leggere Dante come se tutto fosse accaduto. Virgilio non è la ragione, Beatrice non è la fede: Virgilio è Virgilio, Beatrice è Beatrice, e Dante è Dante. Sono persone storiche, e questo è tanto evidente quanto fondamentale.28

According to Hollander, the *Commedia* is dead. The culprits: professors, Hollander included, who with *Allegory in Dante’s Commedia* (1969) reduced the text to a single interpretation: Dante as an allegorical poet. The contemporary reader seems to have forgotten that the *Commedia* is a polysemous text, intended it to be read in different modes: literal, allegorical, moral and anagogical.29 The allegory of Dante’s text is not in question; what is of interest is which type of allegory Dante utilizes: that of the poets or that of the theologians? Dante makes use of the allegory of the theologians as opposed to that of the poets, or, in other

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words, that of interpreters instead of creators.\(^{30}\) The employment of the allegory of the theologians is imperative if one is to accept Dante’s cathartic voyage as having truly occurred. The *Commedia* is to be read on one level in its literal sense, similar to the way one interprets Holy Scripture as a historical account. As Hollander states, the poem must be read as a story, most importantly as one that actually occurred, in which the truth of the fiction is that it is not a fiction.\(^{31}\) Virgil is not an allegorical representation of Reason. Beatrice is not an allegorical representation of Faith. Dante, Virgil and Beatrice are historical figures within a story. Charles S. Singleton also highlights the importance of the literal reading of the *Commedia*. In order to clarify the difference between the allegory of the theologian as opposed to that of the poet, Singleton refers to Virgil in *Inferno*: “Vergil for instance, if he be taken statically, in isolation from the action of the poem, had and has, as the poem would see him, a real historical existence. He was a living man and he is now a soul dwelling in Limbus. Standing alone, he would have no other, no second meaning at all. It is by having a role in the action of the poem that Vergil takes on a second meaning.”\(^{32}\)

Benigni’s method of re-introducing Dante to a contemporary audience should not be considered a flippant vulgarization that brings disservice and disrespect to the poet and his work. Instead, Benigni’s reading presents the *Commedia* in its literal form, true to the poet’s intentions. In *Il mio Dante* (2008),

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\(^{30}\) Dante’s allegory of the poets and allegory of theologians has been the cause of much debate on whether or not one or the other was used by Dante in the writing of the *Commedia*. The debate centers upon Dante’s *Convivio* and the Epistle to Can Grande, which some argue cannot be attributed to the poet for its definition of allegory contradicts that which was written in the *Convivio*. For further reading on the debate see, Richard Green Hamilton’s “Dante’s ‘Allegory of Poets’ and the Medieval Theory of Poetic Fiction.” *Comparative Literature*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Spring, 1957) and Charles S. Singleton’s “Dante’s Allegory.” *Speculum*, Vol. 25, No. 1 (January, 1950).


\(^{32}\) Singleton, Charles S. 1950:81.
Benigni addresses the polysemy of Dante’s text and the ways in which it should be read:

Il capolavoro dantesco è uno dei racconti più cristallini, più semplici che siano stati scritti; bisogna avvicinarsi con l’innocenza di un bambino, e solo in seguito impegnarsi a capire le allegorie e le metafore, quando si faranno le seconde letture, le terze, le quarte, e così via. Ma all’inizio non dobbiamo privarci del piacere di leggere questo libro, di godere un racconto dove ci sono il canto, la musicalità, la narrazione e naturalmente, la poesia. E la poesia, come si sa, va letta ad alta voce, perché viene dalla tradizione orale.\(^{33}\)

Here one notices a distinct difference between Benigni’s Dante and Sermonti’s. The Tuscan comic stresses how the comedy is simple and clear in its story telling, more than any other literary work that has been written. Because of its clarity, the reader of the Commedia must approach it with the innocence of a child, reading the text in its simplest form, the literal. Furthermore, the pleasure of the Commedia derives from the act of reading aloud, as poetry is to be recited (it is oral and aural). Only after many readings should one begin to look at Dante’s allegory and his use of metaphors.

In the introduction to Beyond Life is Beautiful: Comedy and Tragedy in the Cinema of Roberto Benigni (2005), Celli remarks on the Tuscan comic’s maturation after La vita è bella, and his moving away from his comedic roots with his reading of Paradiso XXXIII at the 2002 Sanremo music festival. Contrary to Celli’s statement, I argue that Benigni has not abandoned his comedic roots, for they have been the cause of TuttoDante’s success while simultaneously provoking the negative criticism issued forth by actors such as Albertazzi and Sermonti.

2.3 Roberto Benigni, The Divine Comic

1999 was an important year for Roberto Benigni. His latest film *La vita è bella* was nominated for seven and won three Academy Awards, including Best Actor, Best Original Score and Best Picture. Sofia Loren presented Benigni with the Best Actor award. The audience cheered and was quickly enthralled by the Italian actor and his acceptance speech. In Italy, the actor became a national treasure, as well as a global superstar. *La vita è bella* not only led to international notoriety, but it also meant recognition of Benigni’s artistic achievement.34

The comedian’s career, however, had begun much earlier, spanning a period of more than twenty years. In an ironic turn of events, Benigni made his very first television debut in the ’70s, when Italian cinema was in decline and Italian audiences turned to television as the entertainment of choice.35 In a time when Italian television took precedence over Italian cinema, the conservative television network RAI decided that the comedian would be a great opportunity and means to experiment with their offerings. Benigni signed a contract with the network in 1975, allowing the comedian and his Cioni character to have his own television comedy show. Benigni’s Cioni is an archetypal country clown figure similar to the characters in the comedian’s future films. His characters live outside the dominant ideology and are utilized to highlight contrasts between social groups, for example the educated elite and the peasantry.36 As with carnival, Benigni’s characters create a second life that is founded upon laughter,

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35 Celli, Carlo. 2001:47.
36 Benigni’s challenge of the educated elite derives from the tradition of Angelo Beolco, better known as Ruzante (1502-1524) and other playwrights of the seventeenth century, such as Galileo Galilei, who with the *Dialogo di Cecco Rochetti* (1605) uses dialect to challenge authority. For further reading, see Giulio Peruzzi’s “A new Physics to Support the Copernican System. Gleanings from Galileo’s Works” in *Galileo’s Medicean Moons: Their impact on 400 years of Discovery. Proceedings IAU Symposium No. 269*, 2010. (Page 20-26).
resulting in the creation of a utopian realm of community, freedom, equality, and abundance.\textsuperscript{37} Benigni utilizes his image of the country bumpkin to challenge the intellectual elite where the villains become “the intellectual representatives of hostile hegemonic systems such as the mafia (\textit{Johnny Stecchino}), consumer society (\textit{The Monster}), or Nazi/fascism (\textit{Life is Beautiful}).”\textsuperscript{38} Celli notes how in the Tuscan comic’s nostalgia for the simplicity and solidarity of an agricultural lifestyle also echoes that of Pier Paolo Pasolini’s recognition of the disappearance of indigenous culture in the face of consumerism.\textsuperscript{39}

Upon Benigni’s television debut in the ’70s, critics quickly termed the network’s programming \textit{televisione selvaggia}.\textsuperscript{40} Heated debates between what Umberto Eco termed the \textit{apocalittici} and the \textit{integrati} soon arose, questioning whether television could promote or destroy Italian culture.\textsuperscript{41} Celli notes how a cultural homogenization began with the diffusion of television: “Instead of local dialects, traditions, and songs, Italians began to identify more with a national language, game shows, and song festivals geared to mass audiences. Benigni’s comedy is an expression of the cultural tensions and transformations of Italy in this period.”\textsuperscript{42} Benigni produced television that was classified as low culture by the \textit{appocalittici} due to the “low culture” qualities of the Cioni character. Nostalgia for a peasant culture and the challenge of the intellectual elite remains a theme in Benigni’s current oeuvre.\textsuperscript{43}

\textsuperscript{37} Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:8-9.
\textsuperscript{38} Celli, Carlo. 2008:52.
\textsuperscript{39} Celli, Carlo. 2008:37.
\textsuperscript{40} Celli, Carlo. 2008:33.
\textsuperscript{41} Celli, Carlo. 2008:33,38.
\textsuperscript{42} Celli, Carlo. 2008:2.
\textsuperscript{43} Celli, Carlo. 2008:x, 20.
Although Benigni has been over-shadowed by the creation and popularity of his Cioni persona that debuted on Italian television in the ’70s, his comedic art, a “postmodern storehouse of culture” is founded upon the Tuscan origins of the *poeti a braccio*. The group dates back to the ancient traditions of the Etruscan *fescennino*, “ancient rodeo clowns” who performed at gladiator events to distract the crowds while others removed the bodies of fallen men. In light of his Etruscan origins, critics have rendered Benigni’s repertoire nobler than that of his contemporaries. As noted earlier, after winning the Academy Award in 1999 for *La vita è bella*, Benigni not only became a mega-star with international notoriety, but also “a de facto ambassador of Italian culture, and by extention of European culture.”

In an interview, Benigni discusses his study of the *poeti a braccio*: “So my father, in order to understand this mystery of improvisation, started me on the hendecasyllable, Dante, and these poets, who called themselves the *Bernescanti*, taking their name from the poet Berni.” Benigni’s exceptional talent of improvisation is due to his training with the *poeti a braccio* who incorporate the oral tradition of the thirteenth century with the literary high culture of the fifteenth century, making references not only to Dante and the *Commedia* but also to the works of Boiardo, Ariosto, and Tasso. Performers also familiarize themselves with the hendecasyllable meter by studying the great Renaissance poets of the Este court. Victoria Kirkham references Benigni’s talents as a “guitar-strumming cantautore” who performed songs in the *ottava rima*, the prevalent

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45 Bullaro, Grace Russo. 2005:12.
metrical scheme present in Ariosto’s *Orlando Furioso* along with being the “metrical form of the minstrel in Tuscan ever since the Middle Ages.” Benigni’s repertoire as a comedian is not only to be considered a storehouse of culture, but it may also be classified as a treasure-cist filled with a variety of “intellectual artifacts” that have been utilized by the comedian to crash and collapse the boundaries of genre systems. Benigni’s unconventionality is similar to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque and is best seen in his description of the comic’s role in society where his main objective aims to upset the entire social establishment in order to have the audience partake in an ethical reflection.

### 2.4 Telepatria International, A Prelude to Benigni’s Dante

In 1981 Benigni appeared on television as Dante Alighieri in a comedic skit written by Italian television personality Renzo Arbore, Luciano De Crescenzo and Ugo Porcelli. The skit, which was performed on the show “Telepatria international,” has Arbore leading a séance in order to invoke the medieval poet. Benigni’s impersonation of Dante in “Telepatria international” is significant for the study of the comedian’s holistic tribute to the medieval poet, for it marks the beginning of not only Benigni’s maturation as a commentator of Dante but it also foreshadows elements of *TuttoDante*: political satire and the recitation of the *Commedia* from memory. The skit also employs Benigni’s bare stage design. The only thing present on set is a round table where the four protagonists sit before a black background, Benigni surrounded by smoke. The smoke not only insinuates Dante’s ghostly presence but also references the

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smoke of Hell, as described in Inferno IV: “Oscura e profonda era e nebulosa / tanto che, per ficcar lo viso a fondo, / io non vi discerne alcuna cosa.” Dressed as Dante, Benigni’s character brings to mind the image which led to Cesare Levi’s harsh criticism of nineteenth-century theatrical productions that costumed the actor playing Dante in Trecento style-clothing, complete with a fake Dantesque nose. At first glance, “Telepatria international” is nothing more than a brief comic sketch that takes as its theme the poor understanding between the medieval poet and his contemporary audience, despite their supposed familiarity with his work. Dante scarcely understands questions posed to him about even his own life and work.

Through the duration of the skit, Benigni’s Dante, as in Pazzi’s monument of the poet in Piazza Santa Croce, holds a large book. As the performance continues, one discovers that it is not the Commedia, but Manzoni’s I promessi sposi that the poet carries with him. When asked by Arbore’s character to read from his famous book, Dante begins by quoting the opening lines of the nineteenth-century novel: “Quel ramo di lago di Como.” The comedian makes other jokes; especially with the word play of evocazione and elezioni. The live audience, already familiar with his Cioni persona, understands Benigni’s

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50 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno, IV, 10-13.
51 The misunderstanding between Arbore and Benigni’s Dante would further develop in Benigni’s 1984 film Non ci resta che piangere. In one of the film’s most famous scenes, Benigni’s character Saverio encounters Leonardo da Vinci. Here, Saverio, like the Arbore character, “unsuccessfully attempts to explain commonplaces of twentieth-century culture to Leonardo. […] Saverio reduces the ideological and academic constructs (psychoanalysis, Marxism) of the twentieth-century to a few phrases that cannot be understood by the universal genius, Leonardo da Vinci. Saverio’s modern language and conception of identity and geography are meaningless in the local reality of fifteenth-century Frittole.” (Celli, 69).
52 Although the figure of Manzoni was used for an added comedic effect, in actuality the skit incorporates an intertextual reference, that is, the great admiration and debt that Manzoni attributed to Dante. Manzoni’s Promessi sposi is not only considered the first Italian novel, but in addition, it utilizes the Tuscan vernacular, leading to a unified language style by “sciacquare i panni in Arno.”
tendency to criticize the government, and laughter ensues during the following exchange between Arbore and Benigni:

Arbore: Che onore! Grazie! Per la riuscita di questa evocazione.
Benigni: Le votazioni?
Arbore: No, evocazione!
Benigni: Chi è che vota? Che io vi do consigli da poeta!
Arbore: Grazie, Dante.

Upon further analysis, “Telepatria international” is a rich text that recalls numerous scenes of Dante’s encounter with the ghostly spirits of the Inferno. Canto X, in recounting the pilgrim’s encounter with Farinata and Cavalcanti, is a dominant intertextual reference in the Arbore-Benigni skit. Inferno X is one of the most studied and commented cantos of the cantica, along with Cantos V (Paolo and Francesca), XXVI (Ulysses) and XXXIII (Count Ugolino). By Canto X Dante and Virgil have progressed on their voyage through the hellish rings, entering the sixth circle of Hell. It is here where one finds the heretics who are punished for not believing in the immortality of the soul. As Virgil instructs the pilgrim, it is here that the souls of the dead will be entombed forever at the Final Judgment, because they, as well as Epicurus, “l’anima col corpo morta fanno.” Among the open graves, the reader, along with the pilgrim and his guide, are confronted with the two main protagonists of this canto: Cavalcanti, father of the poet and friend of Dante, Guido, and Farinata degli Umberti, a leading Ghibelline in the mid-thirteenth century. Central to the canto are Dante’s political beliefs, as well as heresy. The entire canto, plagued by misunderstanding between all four

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54 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno X, 15
characters,\textsuperscript{55} reaches its climax during the exchanges between Dante and Cavalcanti:

\begin{quote}
Allor surse alla vista scoperchiata
un’ombra, lungo questa, infino al mento:
credo che s’era in ginocchie levata.

Dintorno mi guardò, come talento
avesse di veder s’altri era meco;
e poi che ‘l sospecciar fu tutto spento,
piangendo disse: ‘Se per questo cieco
carcere vai per altezza d’ingegno,
mio figlio ov’è? perché non è ei teco?’

E io a lui: ‘Da me stesso non vegno:
colui ch’attende là, per qui mi mena,
forse cui Guido vostro ebbe a disdegno.’

Le sue parole e’ l modo de la pena
m’avean di costui già letto il nome;
però fu la risposta così piena.

Di sùbito drizzato gridò: ‘Come
dicesti? elli ebbe? non viv’elli ancora?
Non fiere li occhi suoi lo dolce lume?’

Quando s’accorse d’alcuna dimora
ch’io facèa dinanzi a la risposta,
supin ricadde e più non parve fora.\textsuperscript{56}
\end{quote}

The misunderstanding is due to Dante’s use of the verb essere in the remote past tense. In order to answer Cavalcanti’s question about his son, Dante utilizes this tense referencing Guido’s disdain for the Roman poet Virgil. Hollander’s remarks on the allegory in Dante’s Commedia are similar to Charles S. Singleton’s argument in “Inferno X: Guido’s Disdain.” While both scholars agree that Dante’s text must be read literally as a story from start to finish, Singleton expands on this claim even further. He defines the reading process of the Commedia as one

\textsuperscript{56} Alighieri, Dante. Inferno X, 52-66.
that is “to be experienced as revelation through form, an unfolding form in which
poetry is operating at poetry’s highest power of strategy and presentation.” As
such, it is probable that the reader might not clearly understand what is
occurring within the present scene but, like Dante, will discover the true
meaning of the scene as it unfolds.

Verses 100-105 may be used as an example to clarify Singleton’s theory
of the unfolding. Dante and the reader will not understand the reasoning behind
Cavalcanti’s fears brought forth by the misinterpretation of Dante’s ebbe until
Farinata continues his discussion with the pilgrim. It is here that both pilgrim
and reader discover how the damned are unable to see the present:

“Noi veggiam, come quei c’ha mala luce,
le cose,” disse, “che ne son lontano:
cotanto ancor ne splende il sommo duce.

Quando s’appressano o son, tutto è vano
nostro intelletto; e s’altri non ci apporta,
nulla sapem di vostro stato umano.”

The intertextual references within the Arbore-Benigni skit of 1981 stem
from the first misunderstanding between Arbore and Dante, and Arbore’s
gratitude to the poet for having answered his invocations. Similar to Cavalcanti,
Benigni’s Dante misunderstands and interprets the word as “elections.” Dante’s
politically centered misinterpretation returns at the conclusion of the skit. After
questioning the poet’s status in the after life, Arbore comes to the conclusion that
Dante is condemned to Hell and orders him to return from whence he came. Dante rebukes Arbore, claiming that he is in fact in Paradise. Once again, taking

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58 Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno* X: 100-105.
59 Another allusion to Dante’s place in Hell is the heavy smoke that surrounds the poet earlier in the skit.
elezioni for evocazione Dante damns all those present to Hell with his final line:

“Dopo queste elezioni ci andrete voi all’Inferno!”

The word play of evocazione/elezioni is not the only occurrence of misunderstanding relatable to Inferno X. A second example is seen in Arbore’s address to Dante as “il sommo poeta.” Instead of taking the remark as a compliment, Dante mistakes it as criticism, having heard “in somma, poeta.” A third example of misunderstanding that occurs within the skit that evokes Canto X is Arbore’s grammatical lesson addressed to the poet:

Benigni: Io vengo dall’aldilà, certo, che scherziamo? Basta fumo. Mi mometti di là per venire di qua.
Arbore: Mi mossi.
Benigni: Piacere, chi è ‘sto Mimossi?
Arbore: No, mi mossi, si dice mi mossi.
Benigni: Si dice: “Caro Mimossi?”
Arbore: No, si dice mi mossi, non mi mometti.
Benigni: Ahh, in italiano, dice.
Arbore: Si, in Italiano!

Within this scene Dante returns once more to Abore’s earlier question of “which of the three realms of the after life” he inhabits. The poet’s answer, that he comes from “over there,” is unclear. Utilizing the expression “Mi mometti di là,” Benigni as Dante comedically mimics the language style of the Trecento. In an ironic twist, the notion of Dante as father of the Italian language is now demolished by his own grammatical error. For added comedic effect, Benigni’s character wonders about the identity of the Mimossi that Arbore refers to. At the conclusion of the dialogue and in a frustrated tone, Arbore explains the proper conjugation of the verb to the poet, bringing about Dante’s understanding of contemporary Italian.
A fourth example of the misinterpretation of language occurs when Dante is asked once more which of the three realms he inhabits that he poetically spoke of in the *Commedia*:

Arbore: *Eh. Caro Dante, dicevo, da dove viene? Da quale dei tre posti dell’aldilà che Lei ha cantato ‘si bene?’*

Benigni: *Che io ho cantato si bene? Io cantavo moltissimo. La cosa che mi piaceva di più signora, era cantare in vita mia, a me.*

Arbore: *Scusi signor Dante, non venga così vicino, che ci spaventa.*

Benigni: *La signora, vedo che si impaurisce della somiglia di Dante, ma non si deve avere paura perchè Dante è un cantante.*

Arbore: *No, io dicevo ha cantato, in senso poetico; ‘si bene.*

Benigni: *Ho cantato si, bene! Eh. Mica ho cantato non bene. Ho cantato si bene.*


Benigni: *Ma l’Italiano antico? Io sono un poeta moderno!*

If in the previous dialogic exchange the comedic effect was based on Dante’s inability to express himself in grammatically correct Italian, this exchange mocks the poet’s inability to recognize Arbore’s poetic style of speech. Once again, the poet’s error is due to the phonetics of the expression ‘*sì bene,* (i.e. *così bene,* “so well”) and Dante’s affirmation, *Si, bene,* (i.e. “yes, well.”) This set of dialogical exchanges marks the beginning of the model that Benigni will seek to present his audiences twenty-six years later with *TuttoDante.*

The skit consists of the participation of four characters forming a chain to summon the spirit of the medieval poet. Among the participants is an elderly woman dressed in black, to whom Arbore offers his condolences for her loss, setting up the premise of the skit as a séance. The elderly woman will become a prop for yet another joke during the skit. As Dante becomes animated in his speech due to his defensive tones as a consequence to the ‘*sì bene/ sì, bene* instance, he begins to close in on the woman. Fearful of the spirit, Dante assures her that he is not to be feared for he was a *cantante,* which he rhymes with Dante,
to reaffirm his poetic abilities and his rhyme scheme. Dante’s assurance of not being feared by his audience, (in this instance the audience during the séance) is reminiscent of Benigni’s introduction on the first evening of TuttoDante as well as in his opening pages of his commentary, Il mio Dante. Also, Arbore’s explanation of his use of the expression ‘sì bene as not only aulic, but also antiquated, leading to Dante’s rejection of his classification as a classic poet and insistence instead on his modernity. In his foreword to Benigni’s Il mio Dante, Umberto Eco asserts Dante’s modernity, focusing on the poet’s still current language style: “Sarà che parlare ancora l’italiano del Trecento non sia un buon segno, ma come consolazione ecco Benigni, il quale ci può leggere Dante perché Dante è linguisticamente attuale.”

Dante has of course taken his place among the moderns. Benigni’s ability to adapt the text into contemporary political discourse and Italian society in TuttoDante has also established Dante’s current relevance. As Mario Mauro argues in “TuttoDante a Santa Croce,” Benigni’s intent is to make the Commedia a text that is current to issues faced by contemporary society and fashioning Dante as a cronista. The poet’s place among the moderns is also due to Albertazzi’s claims that Dante is a poet that is not only embedded in the DNA of the Italian people but is their DNA. Albertazzi states, “In Dante c’era più universalità. Un po’ come a dire che Dante è il nostro DNA. Quello di tutti.” Such claims make Albertazzi the classic example of hypocrisy, since it is the same Albertazzi that is against Benigni’s reading of the medieval poet. However, Albertazzi is correct in claiming that Dante is in the DNA of the Italian people, specifically in Benigni’s.

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In an interview with Celli, Benigni references Dante’s role in the everyday life of all Italians. According to the comedian, Dante is a popular figure utilized in Tuscany as an anecdotal figure. Brought down to a popular level, the anecdotes center on the poet’s love of women and or about sex; as for example Dante’s visit to Bologna and the composition of the sonnet, “No me poriano giamai fare menda.” As Benigni has explained during his numerous appearances at Italian universities, “Dante Alighieri, guardando la Garisenda che non aveva mai vista, dice che vorrebbe accecare i suoi occhi e proprio fracassarli perché mentre guardava la Garisenda dietro di lui gli è passata, gli hanno detto, la più bella donna di Bologna.” On a more personal level, Benigni recounts how both his parents were familiar with Dante and the Commedia. In his interview with Celli, Benigni speaks about his father’s literary preferences for Dante and Petrarch:

The only poet my father knows is Dante. He also liked Petrarch, because he is the poet from our city, Arezzo, along with Guido d’Arezzo. […] But anyway, he only knew Petrarch and Dante. You know that Petrarch was jealous of Dante’s popularity. Petrarch said, ‘I leave Dante to the tavern keepers and the market place.’ […] He was terrified of Dante’s popularity because Dante is a bit overbearing, always so pissed off, mad at everybody, but these are such heights that one has to enjoy them.

The comedian’s account of his father’s knowledge of Petrarch and Dante are quite remarkable because they draw a relationship between Dante’s popularity within the Benigni household and among broad audiences during the Middle Ages. In Benigni’s discussion of both poets, he also references one of the letters from the Familiares, where Petrarch argued that the “ignorant (idiotae)… in shops and the market place” were familiar with Dante’s work. Petrarch’s

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64 Celli, Carlo. 2001:128.
65 Petrarca, Francesco. Le Familiari, 21.5
utilization of the term ignorant or idiotae denotes a certain member of society whose daily life “required no access to written information.”

During the Middle Ages four groups of a literate culture could be identified: illiterates, semi-literates, vernacular literates, and Latin literates. According to John Ahern, “the idioate or illitterati cut across class divisions.” Members of this group consisted of aristocrats, specifically noble women, laborers, and craftsmen. In 1339, 40% of Florence’s population belonged to this group. The second group, the semi-illiterates, or indocti, consisted of unschooled artisans, such as Sacchetti’s blacksmith in the fourteenth novella of the Trecentonovelle. During the Middle Ages, members of all four groups, the illiterates, semi-literates, vernacular literates, and Latin literates attended oral performances of various kinds. However it would have been the idiotae and the indocti, like Boccaccio’s women of Verona in the Tratatello in laude di Dante, Sacchetti’s blacksmith, or those in the taverns and markets described by Petrarch, who would have been the “natural public of such performances.” In other words, Dante’s poem was a “best-seller,” known to both the literate and the illiterate.

Benigni’s comparisons between Dante and Petrach are also striking because his claims that Dante is an overbearing and severe poet recall Sermonti’s own definition of the sommo poeta. An understanding of Dante’s severity is necessary for the comprehension of the Commedia. A closer analysis reveals how Benigni’s severity and overbearingness is quite different from Sermonti’s. While Sermonti focuses on readers’ reception of the Commedia, Benigni applies the two

characteristics to the poet’s personality instead of the poem itself. For Benigni, Dante was popular with his audience due to his severity and overbearing attributes. These two traits are also responsible for the poet’s growth in popularity during the period of Italian unification. Marginalized during the Renaissance, Dante and the Commedia once again took center stage both in the literary arena as well as the theater, where he became a “fore-runner and hero of the unification of Italy.” If Dante was overshadowed by the dominating presence of Petrarch and his Canzoniere, then during the Risorgimento, Dante’s Commedia offered the Italians a literary work that inspired action instead of contemplations about the past, common in the Canzoniere.

2.5 Benigni’s Performance at the 2002 Sanremo Music Festival

After La vita è bella and the international release of Pinocchio (2002), Benigni returned once more to Italian television programming presenting himself as the classical jester to whom the Italian audience had grown accustomed and come to love. As a result of his growing popularity, Benigni was invited to perform at the 2002 Sanremo music festival. The appearance was groundbreaking for the comedian. Benigni’s monologue poked fun at the festival’s host, television personality Pippo Baudo. As in his previous

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70 Dante’s Commedia served as a call to action because the pilgrim expresses how one must make changes within himself in order to achieve greater things. As Virgil instructs Dante in the dark woods of the Inferno, in order for the pilgrim to reach Paradise, he must first go through the miseries and punishments of Hell. Unlike the Commedia, Petrarch’s Canzoniere no longer was applicable for the cause of unification. If Dante’s Commedia offered examples of action in order to bring change to man, Petrarch’s Canzoniere focused its attention more on the contemplation of the past instead of focusing on the present or, better yet, the future.
appearances at the Sanremo music festival that were often hosted by Baudo,

Benigni began by addressing the host’s penis:

*Ora, dico io: i capelli di Baudo e il suo pisello sono l’argomento principe del festival. Una volta, solo io ero adibito a mettere le mani in quella zona. E la signora Ricciarelli, che me ne scuso naturalmente, non vorrei, però…ma io credo di esser stato PRIMA della signora Ricciarelli. No, io sono il primo che ha osato, e ne sapevo tutte le qualità. Ora io, siccome sono stato il primo, Pippo, e l’argomento sono i tuoi capelli e il tuo pisello, vorrei vedere come sta la situazione.*

Suspecting that the audience already knew which way the monologue would go, the comedian explained to Baudo and the audience that in addition to his appearance, the main theme of the program would focus on Baudo’s alleged hair transplant and penis. Once again, Benigni is heavily indebted to Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque. While Baudo is a respected television personality, the fact that Benigni was on stage for a festival allows the comedian to partake in the use of abusive language and to make references to the lower body. Due to the festive atmosphere, the comedian’s remarks are not to be deemed offensive, because the spirit of carnival and of the festival are representative of a shift into the inside out: the *à l’envers*. The speech and gesture of the marketplace are not to be thought of as abusive but affectionate, and “verbal etiquette and discipline are relaxed and indecent words and expressions may be used.”

Although Benigni conformed to the audience’s expectations by mocking an authority figure, he then turned to the more serious matters of the Augustinian definition of love, relating it to the work of comedians, and concluded with a reading of *Paradiso* XXXIII.

Benigni’s definition of the comedian is of one who is filled with God’s Love. One should not expect him to be a wise sage, because the comedian

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71 Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:16.
himself is in a state that makes him act foolishly. Similar to a child, the comedian is uninhibited and willing to risk everything, even death, in order to love—a theme that is ever present in La vita è bella between Guido and his son Giosuè. The role of the comedian is to make one simultaneously laugh and cry, combining comedy and tragedy. As he states in his interview with Celli, “A comedian’s material always has a tragic base.”\textsuperscript{72} Roberto Benigni is “an artist who has been able to treat the most daunting and tragic themes of the contemporary world.”\textsuperscript{73} His films have dealt with a myriad of tragic and evil themes, such as the mafia in Johnny Stecchino (1991), serial killers in Il mostro (1994) and the Holocaust in La vita è bella (1999). Benigni concludes his discussion on the role of the comedian by citing St. Augustine:

\textit{Ora io dico: ‘Vi ho dato tanti insegnamenti’ dice Dio, ‘ma ce n’è solo uno che proprio li racchiude tutti,’ e che è quello di Sant’Agostino, ‘Ama e fai ciò che vuoi’. Oh. Quando si ama, si può peccare, si può saltare addosso alle delizie del mondo, che quando sorridono s’improfuma l’aria di viole intorno a noi.}

Benigni’s opening monologue at the Sanremo music festival may be seen as the comedian’s response to the criticism which accompanied the success of La vita è bella, where the actor combined laughter and Chaplin-like comedy in a film set during the twentieth century’s darkest moment.

The intertwining of laughter and tears is a recurring theme in the comedic art of Roberto Benigni, for he considers them to be two sides of human existence. In addition, the juxtaposition of laughter and tears and of tragedy and comedy is precisely what correlates Benigni’s comedic art to Dante’s Commedia. Dante’s Commedia conforms to the traditional definition of the comic genre, “the happy ending.” One of the underlying readings present in the work is the literal mode

\textsuperscript{72} Celli, Carlo. 2001:137.  
\textsuperscript{73} Celli, Carlo. 2001:125.
of the *Commedia*, as explained in the *Epistle to Can Grande della Scala*, and the salvation of the human soul. Beginning in the dark forest and venturing into the depths of Hell, the pilgrim witnesses the suffering and anguish that occurs in the afterlife. Consequently, the endeavor leads the hero to his cathartic transformation, which culminates in his vision of God in the Empyrean. Benigni likens the role of the comedian to that of the pilgrim. Like Dante, the comedian must also be a witness to suffering and must know how to suffer in order to “laugh and find at least a moment of serenity, beatitude, and joy.”

As Montemaggi explains in his study of comedy and tragedy within the comedic art of Benigni, the purpose of laughter, therefore, is not to neglect the reality of human suffering but to prevent suffering from having the last word. Once more, Benigni likens his strategy to Bakhtin’s interpretation of laughter: “fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter.” In addition, the comedian’s performance enriches and enlivens the audience through laughter. Montemaggi further explains how both joy and love of life intersect and “are the basis for an ethical attitude antithetical to the violence that would have people killed.”

Benigni and Dante also share in their works the intertwining of ethics and theology. Montemaggi considers the comic’s guest appearance at the Sanremo music festival an exhibition of the main features of the ethical and theological dynamics of both authors. Within his reading of *Paradiso* XXXIII in 2002, Benigni also offers commentary that directs the audience to focus on the theme of Love:

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74 Montemaggi, Vittorio. “Perché non ho scritto *La divina commedia*? Perché non c’ho pensato: Dante’s *Commedia* and the Comic Art of Roberto Benigni.” *Beyond Life is Beautiful: Comedy and Tragedy in the Cinema of Roberto Benigni*. 2005:117.
75 Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:47.
76 Montemaggi, Vittorio. 2005:118.
Sono qua proprio per un atto d’Amore. Chiedo scusa se comincio con questa parola grossa-grossa, perché i comici sono zuppi d’amore. Non si gli può chiedere, ai comici, di essere anche saggi — ’ché quando si è innamorati, si è mezzi scemi. Innamorati e saggi è concesso solo a Dio. E allora si sbaglia solo per amore. Bisogna proteggere i comici perché sono come i santi, sono delle cose…un regalo del cielo. […] I comici fanno piangere e ridere, che è il potere più grosso del mondo. […] Quando si ama, si può fare quello che ci pare: perché l’amore è la mano di Dio sulla spalla dell’uomo. Quando amano anche i cani, abbaiano in rima. E non si deve amare ’un po’ così un po’ così,’ ma continuamente: l’amore che s’accende e si spegne, si fulmina. Bisogna amare con grandezza! […] L’amore è […] l’unica limitazione della libertà che ci rende più liberi. È una cosa meravigliosa, proprio con la A.77

Thus Benigni reiterates that the work of the comedian is to make the audience laugh, and most importantly, love. The comedian is not just a jester, but like saints they too are a gift from heaven. Comedians have the power to make one laugh and cry, an ability that Benigni considers to be the greatest power any man could have on earth. Since laughter is able to conquer human suffering, it is related to love, since both set people free. For both Dante and Benigni, ultimate truth is not unattainable through human experience; therefore, it can only be understood in terms of the love that is shared from one person to another.

Montemaggi maintains that La vita è bella is a primary example of Benigni’s appropriation of the medieval text, specifically as the comedian’s response to Inferno XXXIII, 61-3 and 69, the episode of Count Ugolino and his children:

Padre, assai ci fia men doglia
se tu mangi di noi: tu ne vestisti
queste misere carni, e tu le spoglia.

[...]

Padre mio, ché non m’aiuti?

77 Benigni, Roberto. 52° Festival di Sanremo. RAI. Sanremo, Mar. 2002.
According to Montemaggi, Benigni uses comedy to foster the recognition that “death is not the only side of human existence.”\textsuperscript{78} As Ugolino recounts to the pilgrim, Ruggieri made his children prisoners and forced them to suffer and die of starvation during their captivity. Montemaggi draws a parallel between the tale of Ugolino and his children to Auschwitz and Benigni’s portrayal of the concentration camps in \textit{La vita è bella}, specifically the relationship between Guido and Giosuè as reminiscent to vv. 61-3 and 69 of \textit{Inferno} XXXIII. He states:

In other words, precisely because human beings were capable of creating camps with children who were systematically killed and in which actions like Guido’s would clearly have been unthinkable, one ought, according to Benigni, to recognize that death is not the only side of human existence; that this is so because one human being may be ready to suffer for another; and that comedy which is in line with this should not be seen as disrespectful to the memory of suffering as it aims to foster an ethical attitude antithetical to that which makes concentration camps possible.\textsuperscript{79}

It is important to note, however, that while Montemaggi argues that \textit{La vita è bella} is reminiscent of \textit{Inferno} XXXIII, Benigni’s version has reversed the role of father and child. In Dante’s text it is not Ugolino who offers his body to his children, but it is his children, specifically Gaddo, who offers himself and his flesh to his father. As Gaddo states, it is Ugolino who has clothed them with their wretched flesh, and therefore it would be less painful for them if he too relinquishes them of their pain and anguish by feasting on them. Verse 69 not only questions Ugolino’s role as liberator of his children by freeing them from this life so that they may move on into the next, but it is also a direct reference to Christ’s final moments upon the Cross where He questions his Father: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”\textsuperscript{80}

\textsuperscript{78} Montemaggi, Vittorio. 2005:128.  
\textsuperscript{79} Montemaggi, Vittorio. 2005:128.  
\textsuperscript{80} Matthew, 27:46.
Benigni’s ethical and theological dynamics are prevalent in his guest appearance in 2002 at Sanremo. Here, as he had done once before in the film *Pope in Your Eye* (1980) and again in the updated version of *TuttoBenigni* (1996), the comedian parodies God’s Final Judgment after noticing the present conditions on Earth. Although in the earlier versions of this bit Benigni centered on the Old Testament deity,\(^\text{81}\) in his 2002 appearance, the focus is strictly on the God of the New Testament, as evidenced by the references Benigni makes to St. Peter:

\[
Ma, dico, ma... Ma se tornasse il nostro Signore, come ci giudicherebbe? Arriva Dio improvvisamente e vede la Terra così, un casino, un inferno, guerre di qua, guerre di là, 'Pietro, guarda laggiù! Oh mamma, che casino! Le guerre...tutte a nome mio, poi, che sono sempre lo stesso dappertutto. Guarda che casino! Quante trasfigurazioni genetiche! E quello che è? Il mandarancio? Quello mica l'ho fatto io! [...] Giudizio Universale!' (Addirittura?) 'Giudizio Universale!'... perché s'arrabbierebbe. Tutti di qua: gli arabi, i palestinesi, i faraoni, i cinesi che non ci entrano nulla sulla collina. 'Cinesi! Tutti di là!' 'Non si sente!' 'Madonna, quanti ce n'è! Vi sistemo dopo: aspettate un momentino... Voi di là, voi di qua... Politici: tutti di là! Sarete tutti sottoposti al giudizio mio e di Pietro!' Berlusconi: 'Mo' c'è di Pietro anche qua? È una tortura proprio, eccheccazz...!' 'Sì, andrete nelle fiamme dell’inferno, e quelli più cattivi sotto, divorati dalle iene.'
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Benigni’s parody of the Final Judgment spotlights a major element of the comedian’s repertoire, Italian politics and his spoofs of the Italian Prime Minister (2001-2006). At the same time, it is reminiscent of the ancient comic cults who, with their use of abusive language, would mock and insult the deity.\(^\text{82}\) Within the mass hysteria of the Judgment one finds Silvio Berlusconi, who Emilio Fede mistakes for God himself. This may be seen as Benigni’s own commentary on the role that the Prime Minister had assumed in contemporary Italy and his political monopoly over television media and newspapers. “Sgarbi appena sente nominare ‘Le iene’, è una cosa tremenda. E uno dice: ‘Silvio! Silvio!’ ‘Chi è che mi chiamo Silvio?’ ‘Emilio Fede!’ È lui: ‘No io mi chiamo Dio, no Silvio!’...che lo vede proprio come Dio.”

\(^{81}\) Celli, Carlo. 2001:58.
\(^{82}\) Bakhtin, Mikhail. 2007:16.
Aired live on Italian television, Benigni was able to mock Berlusconi uncensored. The comic’s parody of the Final Judgement shows Benigni’s background as a *poeta a braccio*. The comedian combines his comedic talents with the traditions of medieval carnivalesque humor that permitted laughter even within the churches.⁸³ In this performance, as well as in *Pope in Your Eye* and *TuttoBenigni*, religious parody is a central theme. Such parodies have been present within the comedian’s art since the ’70s, perhaps attributed to his short stay in 1966 in a Florentine seminary.⁸⁴

With the use of comedy, Benigni has not only “managed to follow the specific currents in lay traditions,”⁸⁵ but he has also alluded to a world familiar to his audience. As depicted by Benigni, the Last Judgment is filled with a tremendous amount of confusion that prohibits those who witness the wrath of God to hear what is commanded of them. Today’s world is plagued with war. It is a holy war where all are fighting for a God, that is equal to all faiths. Referring to the war in Iraq and ethical issues of genetic cloning, Benigni characterizes the modern world as an inferno. Everything that God has made in his likeness has now been tainted with the corruption of modern man.

Benigni uses his comedic Final Judgment to demonstrate to his audience the importance of love. Although laughter ensues, eventually that laughter will dwindle away to silence; a silence of the audience’s reflection on the matters they have witnessed, in addition to a silence in veneration of Benigni’s reading of *Paradiso* XXXIII, 1-19, St. Bernard’s prayer to the Virgin Mary. Performing Dante’s *Commedia* at Sanremo Music Festival was seen as bold for the comedian.

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⁸³ Celli, Carlo. 2001:55.
⁸⁴ Celli, Carlo. 2001:55.
⁸⁵ Celli, Carlo. 2001:59.
Benigni declares: “Quella...è stata la cosa più vertiginosa, più folle: Dante al Festival di Sanremo. È il luogo che lo trasforma, lo fa esplodere. Dante scoppia in un posto così, che sembra il suo contrario.”\(^{86}\)

Benigni’s fears of bringing Dante to the Sanremo Music Festival were not due to his own insecurities of whether or not he could perform the verses of the sommo poeta, but instead because of the location or medium in which Dante would be performed; a nationally televised concert celebrating Italian music. The medium, thought to be contradictory to the typical academic context of the medieval text, made the popularity of the medieval poet and his poem explode among the audience members. This singular recitation of merely nineteen verses transformed the reception of the Commedia, liberating the poem from academic circles and bringing it to the people.

### 2.6 Dante and Television

In “Dante, Television, and Education” and “Dante Produces Television” Amilcare A. Iannucci focuses on the successes and failures of Dante’s appropriation on television. Although he questions whether or not it is appropriate to utilize such a medium to teach a literary text, he also sheds light on why Dante has been so popular with television producers and why he has become a “big business” that “produces television.” One of the leading causes of Dante’s success is the Commedia’s polysemous nature “which allows it to speak to audiences that are different socially and culturally, as well as historically, from the illiterate to the most educated and pedantic.”\(^{87}\) In the Epistle to Can Grande

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\(^{87}\) Iannucci, Amilcare A. “Dante, Television and Education.” 1989:3.
della Scala, the author makes mention of the various ways to read the poem. The author writes, “Il senso di quest’opera non è unico, anzi può essere definito polisemo, ossia di più significati.”88 As Dante explains, the multitude of meanings lie in the various ways that the poem could be read, the first being in the literal sense, the second in its allegorical mode and finally in its moral or anagogical sense.

Television, like the Commedia, is also polysemous, attracting the attention of a variety of audiences from different social structures. The television text is made accessible and becomes popular with audiences due to five major textual devices that allow for polysemic readings to occur within the text. John Fiske identifies these textual characteristics as: irony, metaphor, jokes, contradictions, and excess. Each of these five characteristics contributes to the openness of the text “which enable its variety of viewers to negotiate and appropriate variety of meanings.”89

The Commedia’s polysemous nature has been the focus of many studies and to discuss it further would seem superfluous. Instead, I switch my focus from the text to the reader/listener of Dante’s Commedia to demonstrate examples of the poem’s polysemous nature utilizing Giovanni Boccaccio’s Tratatello in laude di Dante as a point of departure. Boccaccio’s description of Dante, specifically the encounter that the poet has with the women of Verona, gives an account of the poet’s star-popularity during his own time and claims that Dante’s poem was not addressed only to a singular audience: the aristocratic intellectual male.

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89 Fiske, John. 2006: 84.
d’onestissimi panni sempre vestito in quell’abito che era all sua maturità convenevole. Il suo volto fu lungo, e il naso aquilino, e gli occhi anzi grossi che piccoli, le mascelle grandi, e dal labbro di sotto era quel di sopra avanzato; e il colore era bruno, e i capelli e la barba spessi, neri e crespi, e sempre nella faccia malinconico e pensoso. Per la qual cosa avvenne un giorno in Verona, essendo già divulgata per tutto la fama delle sue opere, e massimamente quella parte della sua Commedia, la quale egli intitola Inferno, e esso conosciuto da molti e uomini e donne, che passando egli davanti a una porta dove più donne sedevano, una di quelle pianoamente, non però tanto che bene da lui e da chi con lui era non fosse udito, disse all’altra: ‘Donne, vedete colui che va nell’inferno, e torna quando gli piace, e qua su reca novelle di coloro che là giù sono?’ Alla quale una dell’altra rispose semplicemente: ‘In verità tu dèi dir vero: non vedi tu com’egli ha la barba crespa e il color bruno per lo caldo e per lo fummo ch’è là giù?’ Le quali parole udendo egli dietro a sé, e conoscendo che da pura credenza delle donne venivano, piacendogli, e quasi contento ch’esse in cotale opinione fossero, sorridendo alquanto, passò avanti.

Boccaccio stresses the fact that Dante was known by many “uomini e donne,” but what is striking is that in this specific episode, Dante is surrounded by women, a marginalized group of his day, “… che passando egli davanti a una porta dove più donne sedevano.” The women Dante passes begin to speak among themselves about how he is the man who is able to walk through the depths of Hell and returns unscathed to speak of the people that he found there. Overhearing the women discussing his adventures, Dante is quite pleased because they have believed his story to be true: “e conoscendo che da pura credenza delle donne venivano, piacendogli, e quasi contento ch’esse in cotale opinione fossero, sorridendo alquanto, passò avanti.” The women of Verona are an excellent example of the Commedia’s polysemous nature in that they only understand the literal sense of the poem of which Dante explains further in the Letter to Can Grande della Scala: “Dunque soggetto dell’intera opera presa soltanto alla lettera è la condizione delle anime dopo la morte considerata in generale.”

conjunction with Fiske, who argues that, “the polysemy of the text is necessary if it is to be popular amongst viewers who occupy a variety of situations within the social structure.” Boccaccio’s portrayal of the Veronese women shows that within the social structure of medieval Italy, women, for the most part, were uneducated. Only those from the nobility had a certain form of education, generally unable to rival that of their male counterparts. Boccaccio’s account also demonstrates more clearly the popularity of Dante’s work. The Commedia’s polysemous nature was able to attract the attention of everyone who read or heard the poem recited in public squares or princely courts. As Iannucci confirms, “within the context of an oral performance of the Comedy, they [i.e. the women of Verona] would bring to the poem a knowledge of the imagery with which it is constructed as an understanding of its textual conventions sufficient to make sense of it and derive pleasure from the experience.”

Evidence of Dante and the Commedia’s popularity during the medieval period can also be found in Franco Sacchetti’s one hundred and fourteenth novella of the Trecentonovelle (c. 1392-1397):

Battendo ferro […] su la ‘ncudine, cantava il Dante come si canta uno cantare, e tramestava i versi suoi, smozzicando e appiccando, che parea a Dante ricever di quello grandissima ingiuria. Non dice altro, se non che s’accosta alla bottega del fabbro, là dove avea di molti ferri con che facea l’arte; piglia Dante il Martello e gettalo per la via, piglia le tanaglie e getta per la via, piglia le bilance e getta per la via, e così gittò molti ferramenti. Il fabbro, voltosi con uno atto bestiale, dice:
--Che diavol fate voi? sete voi impazzato?
[...] Disse Dante:
--Tu canti il libro e non lo di com’io lo feci; io non ho altr’arte, e tu me la guasti.
Il fabbro gonfiato, non sapendo rispondere, raccoglie le cose e torna al suo lavoro; e se volle cantare, cantò di Tristano e di Lancelotto e lasciò stare il Dante.

Sacchetti’s novella, with Dante as protagonist, presents two very important features about the *Commedia*’s popularity with its audience. Dante, upon hearing a blacksmith reciting a canto of the *Commedia*, becomes angry, enters the shop, picks up the blacksmith’s tools and throws them into the street. Both punishment and object lesson, Dante also destroys the blacksmith’s art by damaging his tools just as the blacksmith destroyed his poem through his clumsy recitation. It is important to note that the fictional Dante’s anger in this specific novella demonstrates Sacchetti’s own opinion on how the poem should be performed, not who should be able to read it. The novella foreshadows of Sermonti’s criticisms of Benigni’s performance. However, like Boccaccio’s women of Verona, Sacchetti’s story gives the reader an account of the poem’s universal appeal in that the blacksmith, a member of the indecti, was familiar with the *Commedia* because of its oral/aural nature.

One question remains: can a medieval “best-seller” be televised and maintain its popularity with a contemporary audience? Such a question may be answered fully in two ways: first by focusing on television as a medium and then by considering television’s audiences. Dante’s *Commedia* and television are both polysemous and both oral modes of communication. Iannucci expresses how the *Commedia* possesses many of the qualities that John Fiske and John Hartley list in *Reading Television*: dramatic, episodic, mosaic, dynamic, active, concrete, social, metaphorical, rhetorical, and dialectical. However, Fiske and Hartley do not contend that television is an oral culture per se. For them, television’s popularity is due “to the ease with which its programs can be inserted into those forms of
oral culture which have survived in a mass, industrialized society.” An example of this are children’s games inspired by the programs that they watch, or the discussion with colleagues of a specific scene of a program. Although the television text shares similarities with the Commedia, contemporary society treats and values these two mediums differently: Television is treated as an inferior medium with inferior textual characteristics. We live in a society that devalues oral culture and validates the literate.

Due to contemporary society’s way of valuing the literary and the oral, the reader or listener of Dante’s poem has also gone through a sort of transformation. If the Commedia was hailed a ‘best-seller’ in its day, today it is classified as a classic text that is read by students at either the high school or university level. According to Iannucci, the poem is no longer read for pleasure but instead to fulfill a curriculum requirement. Interestingly enough, the medieval poet’s modern reader is not as far-removed from Boccaccio’s women of Verona, Sacchetti’s blacksmith, or Petrarch’s idiotae as one might believe. The poet’s new reader is a member of an “electronic environment”: television. It is within this electronic environment, which thrives on its technological oral culture, that “Dante is reclaiming his traditional audience of ‘listeners.’”

2.7 Conclusion

Dante’s success on television can be attributed to the polysemous nature of both texts, but in addition they also stem from an oral tradition. Benigni is restoring the poet’s original audience of listeners by reciting Dante orally. In

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95 Fiske, John. 2006:106.
addition, Dante, along with his characters, have once again become popular figures of the Italian mainstream, equated to the likes of Bruce Springsteen and the Rolling Stones, by focusing on the literal reading of the *Commedia*. Benigni’s reading has not only led to the rediscovery of a classic, making it contemporary, but he has also succeeded in lighting a spark of Italian national pride. The comedian’s challenge of intellectuals, a repeated theme in his works, is made manifest in his holistic tribute to the divine poet. Characterizing him as an unwelcome amateur, Vittorio Sermonti and Giorgio Albertazzi have criticized Benigni harshly. Despite such criticism, Benigni has not only freed the text from its academic circles, but has also brought his audience to experience the love which moves the sun and the other stars.
CHAPTER 3

“Quella sozza imagine di froda”?
Playing Dante’s Inferno

3.1 Introduction

On February 9, 2010, Visceral Games, in partnership with Electronic Arts, debuted the heavily anticipated video game Dante’s Inferno. Although adapting a classic literary work into a different medium is not new, specifically in cinema, Visceral Games reinvented the concept and changed the ways in which new video games are created. Despite the fact that many video games based on works of literature, for example J.R.R. Tolkien’s The Lord of the Rings and J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, were released in the last decade, it is important to note that they were not directly adapted from or inspired by the literary texts which preceded them, but rather, from the cinematic adaptations of the original texts. Visceral’s Dante’s Inferno differs greatly from its predecessors in that the work had not already been adapted for film. It was not until the production of Dante’s Inferno was completed that an animated film and comic book were released and distributed simultaneously by Visceral Games and Electronic Arts in partnership with Film Roman Productions and Starz! Productions. Therefore, since no previous adaptations have inspired the making of Dante’s Inferno, the relationship between the poem and its digital reincarnation is simply between the hypotext and its hypertext. Since its completion, Dante’s poem has influenced its audiences’ perception of what is to be expected in the afterlife through a
detailed description of Hell’s topography. His work has inspired painters, sculptors, poets, composers, directors, and now, video game producers.

Before the game’s worldwide release, promotional online trailers allowed viewers a sneak peek into what the production companies had in store.¹ The original trailer is only one minute and eight seconds in length and begins with titles detailing the history of Dante’s Commedia, focusing on the Inferno itself:

In 1300, Dante Alighieri wrote ‘The Divine Comedy.’ Part one, called, ‘Dante’s Inferno,’ described Hell in 9 circles. It forever changed people’s view of the Afterlife. And its readers feared Judgment. Appearing as four separate transitions, the titles create a sense of authenticity and faithfulness to the original text. Although the first title contains the minor inaccuracy of the Commedia having been written in the year 1300,² the rest of the claims based on the text are truthful and significant. Subsequent titles include a list of all the circles that comprise Dante’s system of Hell: Limbo, Lust, Gluttony, Greed, Anger, Heresy, Violence, Fraud, and Treachery. As paratextual elements, the naming of each circle is a mechanism utilized to create a sense of fidelity to the original text. Gérard Genette defines paratextuality as that which “refers to the relation…between the text proper and its ‘paratext’—titles, prefaces, postfaces, epigraphs…illustrations…all the necessary messages and commentaries that come to surround the text and at the time become virtually indistinguishable from it.”³ In addition, fleeting images appear between the transitions of one title to the next. Most show demonic beings one should not be surprised to find in the infernal abyss. Others quickly glimpse into the landscape

¹ Prior to its distribution in the United States, a new trailer was released by Visceral Games that aired on television on January 26, 2010 during the Super Bowl.
² While Dante did set his poem during Good Friday in the year 1300, the poet actually began writing the first cantica circa 1308.
of Hell and game level designs. Inclusion of the famous painting of the ghosts of Paolo and Francesca by Ary Scheffer (original version, 1835, London, Wallace Collection) among the images creates a stronger level of authenticity for the video game. Within the history of numerous Dante adaptations, the story of Francesca da Rimini has become the most recognizable, and she the most frequently adapted character of the entire poem. It may be argued further that Francesca has become a signifier of the text who has captured the imagination of other artists, and with such a specific intertextual reference, the first forty-two seconds of the trailer would make anyone who is enthralled with Dante enthusiastic about a video game that promises to be a faithful adaptation of the original. Unfortunately, the trailer could be described in the same manner in which Dante depicted Geryon in Inferno XVII, 7, “quella sozza imagine di froda.”

The trailer, as an emblem of fraud becomes apparent at its forty-third second mark. Here, before transitioning into the video game’s title, the screen turns black. To break the darkness is fraud’s “coda aguzza,” in this instance the pointed edge of a warrior’s scythe. At this precise moment the video game’s title materializes, and the viewer is told to “Go To Hell.” The final remaining seconds of the trailer give a glimpse of the protagonist, a muscular warrior who, in addition to carrying a scythe, punishes the damned by prodding them with a pointed edged cross.

The narrative related in the game itself deviates from Dante’s text even further than the trailer. The narrative opens in 1191, during the Third Crusade’s battle for Jerusalem. Upon his return home, Dante the crusader arrives to find his

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5 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno XVII, 1.
family and his betrothed (i.e. Beatrice) murdered. As he drastically searches for his beloved Beatrice, hoping that she has escaped such wrath, he finally finds her lying outside, her clothing torn, her breasts exposed, stabbed by a sword, which pierces her entire abdomen. As Dante touches the lifeless body, the spirit of Beatrice appears before him. Suddenly, however, she is whisked away by Satan himself to the infernal abyss, where she is to become his concubine. This story sets up the objective of Dante’s Inferno: in order to win the game, the player, identified as Dante, must now venture past the Gates of Hell and traverse all nine levels of the Inferno to save his beloved.

The video game’s objective, where the player must save Beatrice in order to win the game, is but one of the reasons why Dante’s Inferno has been ill-received by Dante scholars, specifically Teodolinda Barolini, Arielle Saiber and Frank Ambrosio. On February 26, 2010, Entertainment Weekly published a brief article in which Barolini, professor of Italian at Columbia University, gave her critique of the video game. Barolini wrote that her initial interest in the concept of turning Dante’s seven-hundred-year-old poem into an interactive game vanished after just a few minutes of play: “It’s not impressive. This is nothing like Dante. […] Beatrice […] has become the prototypical damsel in distress. […] It’s just totally bogus.” Professor Barolini points out one of the central inaccuracies of the adaptation, one that also provokes a gendered reading of the game. It is “bogus” that Beatrice needs to be rescued by Dante, when in reality she is the one who rescues him—in his speech to Dante in Inferno II, 58-73, Virgil references Beatrice’s request to aid the lost pilgrim. The video game’s sexualization of Beatrice is an absurdity in itself. Although in the Vita Nova she

was described as an angelic being who has come down from Heaven "a miracol mostrare" and later in the *Commedia* as "donna beata," in Visceral’s adaptation she is no longer a representation of purity. She had premarital sexual relations with Dante, bore his stillborn child, and also attracts the sexual desire of Dante’s father and, later, of Lucifer. In addition, every major scene in which she is present she is naked. It is true that this is “nothing like Dante.” However, I do not find Barolini’s argument to be convincing because this is not the first instance in adaptation in which Beatrice is sexualized. Take for example the 1991 Fred Curchack musical theatre production, *Sexual Mythology Part 3: Heaven or the Big Talk Show*. According to Maria Ann Roglieri in “‘La dolce sinfonia di Paradiso’: Can Mere Mortals Compose It?” (2007), Curchack’s production was “the most outlandish adaptation of *Paradiso* ever composed." Sexual Mythology was inspired by the American cultural phenomenon of the talk show and reversed the action of *Paradiso*, casting Dante as a “host” who is visited by five “guests,” three male angels, one female angel, and Beatrice. Instead of discussing theology or philosophy as in the poem, the characters focus on pornography, sex, and love. Similar to Visceral’s Beatrice, Curchack’s is also sexualized, represented on stage as having “giant multi-rainbow lips shown slurping on the video screen.” Taking Curchack’s adaptation into consideration, can one dismiss the Visceral video game simply as “bogus?” Is there in fact more that could be said?

Although the narrative setup conforms to many of the tropes of the medium—hyper-masculine heroes, sexualized female characters, and violent

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8 Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno* II, 53.
10 Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:69.
11 Roglieri, Maria Ann. 2007:69.
I argue that Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* is valuable in that it takes its player into Dante’s system of Hell, allowing for a visual interpretation of the poet’s universe. Dante is best learned visually, according to Guy Raffa, who created the *Danteworlds* website, a multimedia companion to the literary text which students can access: “Teaching Dante, you learn quickly that students need to visualize what’s happening.” According to the observations made by Raffa in regards to *Danteworlds*, “The classes who used the website had higher quiz scores and the discussion in class got to a higher level much faster.” Can the same hold true for Visceral Games’ *Dante’s Inferno*? Can the video game be utilized as a teaching tool to lead or further classroom discussions? Even though video games are generally regarded as entertainment, not platforms for intellectual investigations of literature, a careful examination of the hypertext presents surprising and startling results in regards to the relationship between literature and popular culture. One needs to descend into the world of video games and new media to seek out the answer.

### 3.2 Adaptation and Appropriations of Dante

In *Dante, Cinema, and Television* (2003), Amilcare A. Iannucci collected articles in which the central argument lay on the adaptation process of Dante’s *Commedia* and the influence his poem has brought to the world of cinema and television. In the article “Dante and Hollywood,” Iannucci lists four reasons why Dante attracts so much attention and discusses which aspects of his work are commonly appropriated. The poet’s popularity rests heavily upon the

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13 Popper, Benajamin. *The Atlantic*. 
polysemous nature of the *Commedia*, which, as the letter to Can Grande della Scala indicates, allows the poem to be read and interpreted in numerous ways, whether they are literal, moral, allegorical or anagogical. Dante’s continued readership is due to the timelessness and universal nature of his work:

Just as Dante created his world out of the dialogue with all of the voices which had preceded him, so Dante continues to engage in dialogue with the whole of human culture. [...] As such, Dante’s work possesses incredible potential to generate new meanings. [Thirdly], there is a moral or ethical dimension to Dante’s works which allows readers, in ongoing dialogues, to grasp principles of morality, that is, a sense of the enterprise of being human. [Forthly,] what makes the preceding qualities possible is the dynamic nature of Dante’s work. For the *Commedia* is polysemous in nature, and the polysemy allows it to be read in a host of different ways and to speak to audiences that differ socially, culturally, and historically—from the illiterate to the most educated and pedantic.\(^\text{14}\)

Iannucci continues by referencing the three modes in which the text is appropriated into film, “to drive a film’s plot, theme or structure; to lend an overall mood to a particular film; for comedic affect.”\(^\text{15}\)

Visceral Games’ *Dante’s Inferno* employs the first two modes, which Jonathan Knight, Associate Producer of the game, highlights when discussing his attraction to the adaptation of the medieval text for his incentive purposes. Knight’s team took special interest in the medieval conception of Hell and its topography as described in the poem, instead of the narrative *per se*. Knight openly admits to taking artistic license when discussing his project. In researching the history of Hell, Knight discovered how “Dante Alighieri basically took all the thinking and synthesized it to a very imaginative vision, something allegorical, but personalized it so that it was a real place...He mapped out


\(^{15}\) Iannucci, Amilcare. 2003:11, 15, and 16.
Hell...We’d just do a videogame based around what he wrote.”

Knight’s statement clearly addresses the reasons why he found inspiration in Dante’s poem; it is both a springboard setting the mood and providing a systematic structure for the video game. Today, the original intent is still present within the Visceral plotline, but what has troubled professors of Dante Studies such as Barolini, Ambrosio, and Saliber, is that *Dante’s Inferno* is not *Dante’s Inferno*. Knight suggests that the game’s title may be responsible for arousing some criticism: “I think people know when they see the product is called *Dante’s Inferno*—it’s not called *The Divine Comedy*—that it is a populated version of it,” which is a “tradition that’s been around for a long, long time.”

Adjacent to the negative commentary the game has attracted, Knight’s statement signals the possibility of a misunderstanding between the designers and the game’s critics. This may be due in part to the emphasis given to the author’s name in the videogame’s title. Comparable to Coleridge’s cursed albatross that weighed heavily upon the ancient mariner, so does the author’s name burden the videogame.

Like the naming of Dante’s nine circles and the image of Paolo and Francesca that permeated Visceral’s trailer for *Dante’s Inferno*, the author’s name is also paratextual in its function. It can both emphasize the faithfulness of the adaptation, but also limit the reading of the new text. According to numerous theoretical debates that have focused on authorship, the name of the work’s creator plays a crucial role. Michel Foucault, for example, like Roland Barthes and Paul De Man, argued that the author not only limited the interpretation of

the text, but marked its closure as well. In “What is an Author?” (1969), Foucault associates the role of the author as that which “constitutes the privileged moment of individualization”\textsuperscript{18} and that:

> An author’s name is not simply an element in a discourse. [...] It performs a certain role with regard to narrative discourse, assuring a classificatory function [...] The author’s name serves to characterize a certain mode of being of discourse: the fact that the discourse has an author’s name, that one can say ‘this was written by ‘so-and-so’ or ‘so-and-so is its author,’ shows that this discourse is not ordinary speech that merely comes and goes, not something that is immediately consumable. On the contrary, it is a speech that must be received in a certain mode and that, in a given culture, must receive a certain status.\textsuperscript{19}

Once the author is removed, the text will be open to numerous interpretations. According to Jason Holt’s “The Marginal Life of the Author,” (2002) the single message produced by Barthe’s “Death of the Author” (1967) is that the text will become polysemous. Knight is correct in his claim that Dante’s \textit{Inferno} is a “populated version” unlike the \textit{Divine Comedy}. Today, Dante’s \textit{Inferno} has become the signified image of Hell. But Knight and his team go one step further to liberate their project away from the authorial albatross. They kill Dante.\textsuperscript{20}

> As the actual gaming experience begins, Dante is in Jerusalem fighting Saladin’s army. After having slain numerous enemies, he is stabbed in the back by a member of the Muslim army and killed. At this point the first boss-battle takes place with Death himself. The player advances by fighting off and eventually killing his opponent; he then takes possession of his scythe. Believing he has won the battle, Dante leaves the battlefield and journeys back home to Florence. Upon his arrival, he discovers that Beatrice is dead and that Satan has

\textsuperscript{18} Foucault, Michel. “What is An Author?” \textit{The Death and Resurrection of the Author?} 2002:9.
\textsuperscript{19} Foucault, Michel. 2002:13.
\textsuperscript{20} Dante’s death in Visceral’s adaptation creates further divergence from the original. As discussed in my Introduction, Dante’s \textit{Commedia} is a polysemous text, and continues to be even while its author remains “alive,” i.e. as pilgrim and poet.
kidnapped her soul. Venturing past the Gates of Hell themselves, Dante travels through all of the Inferno’s nine circles until his final confrontation with Lucifer. Here, before the game concludes, Lucifer exclaims, “You’re dead, Dante!” This leads to a flashback that reminds both crusader and player that he has been dead since the outset of the video game.

The death of Dante at the beginning is symbolic, not just for the liberation of the text from its author, but in a Bloomian way as well. In *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973) Harold Bloom presented his theory of poetry by de-idealizing “our accepted accounts of how one poet helps to form another” by comparing poetry and “poetic influence” to Freud’s Family Romance.\(^{21}\) Bloom concerned himself with “strong poets” who maintained the “persistence to wrestle with their strong precursors, even to the death.”\(^{22}\) Dante’s early death in the Visceral adaptation marks a clear and necessary deviation from the original text. In the *Commedia*, Dante pilgrim is lost in the dark wood. He is not dead, as one learns through Charon’s address to the pilgrim in *Inferno III*, 88-89, “E tu che se’ costì, anima viva / pàrtiti da cotesti che son morti.” The removal of the author in the game not only further expresses the text’s polysemy, but it also swerves the text into a corrective revisionist reading of the prior text, what Bloom refers to as *clinamen*,\(^ {23}\) resulting in an original story. According to Harold Bloom, reading is always an


\(^{23}\) Bloom’s *clinamen* is the first of six revisionary rations that comprise his theory of *The Anxiety of Influence*. In his introduction, he defines the term as “poetic misreading or misprision proper; I take the word from Lucretius, where it means a ‘swerve’ of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe. A poet swerves away from his precursor, by so reading his precursor’s poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved precisely in the direction that the new poem moves” (1997:14).
act of misreading, and is utilized as a mechanism with which to “clear imaginative space.” In addition, the reminder of Dante’s death near the conclusion of the game recalls Knight’s original intention to simply create a game in which the action takes place within Dante’s system of Hell. Of the three ends in which Iannucci classifies Dante’s appropriation in film, Knight and his team at Visceral Games have utilized the first two in order to drive the plot, theme, and structure, and to lend an overall mood to the game, continuing a long-standing tradition of adaptations.

Although the title plays a role in the reception of the videogame, its medium is a clear source of criticism leveled against Visceral’s adaptation of the story. Visceral’s video game is not the only adaptation to carry the poet’s name in its title; Henry Otto’s 1924 film and Harry Lachman’s 1935 film are also named Dante’s Inferno. Neither film maintained a faithful adaptation of the original text, but instead appropriated the text for specific purposes. In “Dante and Hollywood,” Iannucci explains how Otto’s film was “not so much interested in the Dantean material for its own sake, but rather in employing it as a frame to contain the unfolding of the film and to lend a moralistic purpose to the storyline.” The same scope pertains to Lachman’s film, leading Iannucci to classify it as “modern morality story,” where the “the Dantean material is not pursued here for its intrinsic high poetry, but for its significance as a popular moral inculcator.” Although these three productions share the same title, only Visceral Games’ Dante’s Inferno has received negative criticism from video game

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critics and academics alike. Although the originality in Dante’s Inferno may be found in being the first video game solely inspired by a work of literature, video game critics and players have expressed strong criticism towards it, claiming that the actual gameplay is a direct copy of the series God of War. Scholars, as we have seen, also expressed animosity towards the video game for not being a “faithful” adaptation of the poem. However, it is my belief that these criticisms stem from the view that video games are not yet deemed a legitimate cultural expression, a characterization that also plagued cinema in its early history. Due to the similarities that both mediums share, I will utilize cinematic adaptations as a mechanism to further discuss the use of literature in the production of today’s video games.

3.3. Literature, Cinema, and Video Games

In Filmmaking by the Book: Italian Cinema and Literary Adaptations (1993), Millicent Marcus discusses how adaptation has been at the center of the “most explosive theoretical battles” that have been fought within “the larger context of literature-film relations.” What early film discovered with literature was that through the adaptation of the great books, cinema would be able to elevate itself “above the vulgarity of its birth in the penny arcade.” Others, however, viewed the use of literature as a means of halting the creative process of the new medium and therefore “conspired to discourage adaptation.” Visceral Games and its artistic team were also criticized for having dipped their creative minds into the literature pool to find their source of inspiration. Discussing the repercussions of

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29 Marcus, Millicent. 1993:3.
30 Marcus, Millicent. 1993:11.
having turned a seven-hundred-year-old poem into an action video game, Jonathan Knight explains, “We’re definitely taking arrows in the back. In the hardcore specialty gaming press, they’re trying to protect original stories and they think we shouldn’t be borrowing.”

The opinions of the “hardcore specialty gaming press” echo the harsh criticisms of cinematic purists. If the video game genre is undergoing similar scrutiny to that experienced by early cinema, is it possible that Knight’s team has sought out inspiration from Dante so that this new medium could rise above “the vulgarity of its birth”? Gian Piero Brunetta in “Padre Dante che sei nel cinema” (1996) argues that filmmakers have long used Dante as a source of inspiration, either directly, indirectly, or metaphorically based on the circumstances in which he was needed. Is it mere coincidence that one hundred years earlier in 1910, in seeking to establish the grandeur of an Italian cinema, producers sought inspiration from Dante? Brunetta’s claims are startling and insightful:

_Invece che invocare la Musa, il primo cinema italiano nel momento in cui pensa ‘alla maniera grande’ si mette sotto la protezione del Padre Dante e chiede a lui ispirazione e protezione per affermare una propria identità sul piano internazionale. […] Dante aiuta ad aprire il tempo del racconto cinematografico, a immaginare nuovi standard, nuove misure di scala e nuove misure temporali. […] Si tratta […] di elevare al massimo il livello del prodotto cinematografico, di dimostrare, mediante la durata e un’invenzione visiva con trucchi di grande suggestione e vietare ‘l’opera d’arte totale’ per eccellenza._

If in 1910 Italian filmmakers had looked to Dante to create not only a grandiose Italian cinema, but to achieve “total art”—addressing “all the senses through a combination of drama, painting, text, and music”—it is probable that Knight and his team attempted to achieve the same ends. Not only would

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Visceral create a video game that would liberate the art form from being simply classified as popular entertainment, it would achieve total art in and of itself. While in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century the ideal closest to total art was the opera, today in the new millennium, video games and their “aspirations toward virtual reality […] continue this tradition. […] Games add the element of interactivity to this total art, so that the correspondences between aspects of the game can be integrated into actions that players perform rather than merely observing.”

Any adaptation of Dante’s *Commedia*, whether in film, theatre, television, or video games, will always be in conflict with the highbrow status of its original source. In *Television Culture* (2006), John Fiske highlights how our culture values the literary and devalues television, considered to be a domestic medium. Even if the intention of adapting from a literary source lies in the ideology that its incorporation into another medium will result in the medium’s elevation, its infidelity to the original text is inevitable. As is often the case, the degree of the adaptation’s fidelity plays a very important role in the reception of Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno*.

### 3.3.1 The Issues and Resolutions of Literary and “Trash” Culture

Ever since the birth of cinema, the use of literature as source material has provoked heated debates about the relationship between new and traditional media. On the one side of the theoretical debate sit literary activists who ascribe to literature a high cultural value. As proponents of high literature they have taught students to read the classics carefully. Consequently they consider trash

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34 Howard, Jeff. 2008:33.
culture, i.e. popular culture, as escapist entertainment, irrelevant and unworthy of thought. Conversely, filmmakers who find themselves intrigued and influenced by the classics consider adaptation as a mechanism that raises cinema’s classification within a hierarchy of cultural forms. For Millicent Marcus, by “striving for aesthetic legitimacy,” the nascent film industry, “equated literature with high culture, prestige, respectability, tradition.” Furthermore, by producing cinematic versions of great works of literature, filmmakers believed that they would be able to educate their audience, making an inaccessible text accessible. “By bringing literary culture to the masses, cinema could perform a didactic service,” continues Marcus.

Despite filmmakers who saw benefit in the incorporation of literature into new media, there were also those who were against cinema’s use of canonical books. Known as the “practitioners of pure cinema,” they believed that “the contamination of other art forms” should be avoided so as to allow cinematic art “its own unique mode of expression.” Also, those at higher education institutions, who were responsible for policing and disciplining high culture, theorized that it would be trivialized by popular cultural appropriations. Revealing the divisions caused by the adaptation process, Hannah Arendt claims that, “those who produce for the mass media ransack the entire range of past and present culture in the hope of finding suitable material.” As Richard Keller Simon points out in his study, Trash Culture: Popular Culture and the Great Tradition (1999), Arendt is correct in stating that adapters seek out all forms of

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36 Marcus, Millicent. 1997: 3.
literature from past and present. However, describing the practice of adaptation as “ransacking” only reveals her prejudices against popular forms of literature.\textsuperscript{40}

As video games continue to evolve, similar disputes are beginning to arise between those who value literary high culture, and those who see potential in making literature accessible in other forms of media.

When Visceral Games marketed \textit{Dante’s Inferno}, debates between lowbrow and highbrow culture became the focal point of discussion. According to the videogame’s producer, \textit{Dante’s Inferno} is a celebration of Dante and his work that “breaks the gap between very inaccessible literature and exposes it to a wider audience that’s playing videogames.”\textsuperscript{41} In an interview with \textit{USA Today} Knight explained how Visceral’s team wants gamers to “go beyond the game and read it, because it’s a very sophisticated and nuanced piece of literature.”\textsuperscript{42} Both of Knight’s statements echo those of the nascent film industries’ ideals that equated literature to a longstanding, respectable tradition and valued its didactic ability for an audience. Arielle Saiber suggests that the video game could attract gamers to return to the original text. In an interview for the online version of the \textit{Atlantic}, Saiber states, “I wouldn’t say this project is damned from the get go. The hope is that the game will lead people back to the poem.”\textsuperscript{43} Teodolinda Barolini, however, envisions a different scenario. Comparable to cultural critics like Pierre Bourdieu, who link cultural practice to one’s level of education and social origin, Barolini expresses in \textit{Entertainment Weekly} how she “can’t imagine somebody

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\textsuperscript{40}Simon, Richard Keller. 1999:16.
\textsuperscript{41}Spawnkill blog. 30 Jan. 2010.
\textsuperscript{43}“From Hot Sauce to Xbox, Dante Still Rocks.” Academic Spotlight, Bowdoin.edu. 9 Feb. 2010.
\end{flushleft}
who love’s this would pick the original up. They wouldn’t understand a thing.”

Similar to Barolini’s viewpoint that gamers who play and enjoy Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* would not understand the original *polysemous* text is Robert Becken, editor of the online blog, *ToplessRobot.com*, who claims that the game is not only a “gross misrepresentation of the original work,” but that contrary to Knight’s claims and Saiber’s hopes, “they’re not interested in getting kids into literature—they’re not looking to do anything except sell some books to dumb kids.”

Like Harendt, Becken reveals his prejudice against popular forms of culture, assuming that gamers do not have the intellectual curiosity or ability to read Dante. Despite Becken’s and Barolini’s criticisms, during the month of the video game’s release, 242,500 and 224,700 copies of *Dante’s Inferno* were sold for the PlayStation 3 and the Microsoft Xbox 360 game consoles, respectively. At a sum total of 467,200 copies, there may be hope that the video game would lead people back to the poem as Saiber stated. In order to expose their players to Dante and his world, Visceral and Electronic Arts created substantive resources to promote and disseminate the reading of the *Commedia* by adding information about the author and the poem to the game’s features and their promotional website. Each has a detailed biography of the historical Dante and a summary of each canticle. In addition, the game has a virtual copy of the *Inferno* that players can access and read. The website also allows visitors to explore detailed maps of each circle, and identifies and describes each sinner. On January 19, 2010, one month prior to the distribution of the game, Visceral, in partnership with Del Rey publishing,

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released Henry W. Longfellow’s translation of Dante’s *Inferno* (first published in 1867) to commemorate the video game. Similar to works of literature that have been adapted for cinema, the cover for Longfellow’s translation depicts the video game’s muscular crusader and features the tag line, “The literary classic that inspired the epic video game from Electronic Arts” above the title. Whether players of the videogame decide to read the entire *Commedia* or take a course on Dante because of the game is not yet known.

In response to the criticism the game has received, Knight has attempted to resolve the issue by defining the game as “a highbrow/lowbrow project by design,” adding that if one is familiar with Dante’s original text, then it has plenty to offer beyond being a game where the player simply “mashes buttons and kills demons.” In order to come to terms with Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* one must relinquish the tendency to contrast the video game with its original adapted text—for a faithful adaptation of a text can never truly exist; the change in medium will differentiate it from its original source. As Rober Stam argues regarding the adaption of literature into film,

> The shift from a single-track, uniquely verbal medium such as the novel, that ‘has only words to play with,’ to a multitrack medium such as film, which can play not only with words (written and spoken), but also with theatrical performance, music, sound effects, and moving photographic images, explains the unlikelihood—and I would suggest even the undesirability—of literal fidelity.

For an audience who has read the original, adaptation will always seem unfaithful to its source. Wolfgang Iser argues that the reader “is able to visualize the hero virtually for himself, and so his imagination senses the vast number of possibilities; the moment these possibilities are narrowed down to one complete

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and immutable picture, the imagination is put out of action, and we feel we have somehow been cheated.”49 According to Iser’s theory, the reading process is based on the unique relationship between the reader and the text. It is through this bond that the reader is then able to envision and create an image of the hero or of the scenes that are narrated within the text. These images are original to the reader’s psyche, and will therefore inevitably diverge from what is portrayed on the screen. The viewer’s dissatisfaction is based on his or her feeling that the work is unfaithful to the “original.”

Although illuminating differences between the original and the adapted texts are inevitable when employing adaptation theory, focusing on such dissimilarities as a mechanism to devalue the adaptation is not only superfluous, but limits interpretation. In *Adaptation and Appropriation* (2006), Julie Sanders combines Iser’s theory of reception with Bloom’s theory of influence. According to Sanders, infidelity to the original text is not only inevitable, but it is necessary for “the most creative acts of adaptation and appropriation to take place.”50 Placing emphasis strictly on the texts’ differences only serves to widen an artificial divide between “high” and “low” culture. It therefore becomes necessary and recommended to focus on the similarities as well. Simon argues in *Trash Culture* that in order to avoid “the great divide,” a return to the tradition of storytelling is necessary. It is through this tradition that the continuity and similarities that are shared between the hypotext and its hypertext are made explicit. Simon’s idealistic theory fails to account for the necessity of infidelity and therefore the need to look at both difference and similarity when analyzing

adaptations. In doing so, the spectator or reader becomes involved in a participatory act. By participating in “the play of similarity and difference perceived by the original, source, or inspiration” one will “appreciate fully the reshaping or rewriting undertaken by the adaptive text.” Simon and Sanders do agree that we must be aware that although “many differences between trash culture and high culture” exist, they “show only that storytelling adapts to changing economic, social and political conditions.” Simon’s argument finds echoes in Barolini’s and Saiber’s reviews of Dante’s Inferno. For Barolini the game is “a mishmash of current popular ideas, projected back into the Middle Ages,” while Saiber states that, “these Dante references reveal a great deal about the user/interpreters, and about the current culture in which they live.” Both Barolini’s and Saiber’s statements present an interesting springboard for a discussion on culture and society.

With the onset of the so-called Information Age and the ever-expanding use of personal electronic devices for home entertainment, many works of literature have been made available on Internet sites and, as we have seen in one case, adapted for a video game to allow players the opportunity to interact with the text. Writing in 1990 and focusing his attention on media studies and television, Alvin Kernan questioned whether new media had caused the death of literature. Kernan argued that television, “is not just a new way of doing old things but a radically different way of seeing and interpreting the world,” where “visual images not words, simple open meanings not complex and hidden,

51 Sanders, Julie. 2006:46.
transience not permanence, episodes not structures, theater not truth” dominate. While perhaps his classification reigns true, the visual images produced by new media do not need to be “impoverished versions of words.” By combining a literary text with a mélange of contemporary ideas, and projecting it back to the Middle Ages, Visceral has created a text rich in meaning and cultural ideology in addition to taking an essentially passive medium (the act of reading) into one that is interactive (the act of playing).

3.4 Possible Interpretations

The premise of Visceral’s Dante’s Inferno is set in 1191, near the end of the Third Crusade. Dante is a member of King Richard the Lionheart’s crusaders, fighting for the liberation of Jerusalem, against Saladin’s army of Muslim soldiers. At first glance, this may be viewed as a reflection of the West’s tensions with the Islamic world. As a crusader, the player in the beginning of the videogame must combat and kill as many Muslim soldiers as possible. Dante’s physique is the embodiment of the American ideal of masculinity. He is over six feet tall, he has broad shoulders, is brave, muscular, and agile, and as the final scene of the videogame demonstrates, virile and anatomically proportioned.

The rendering of Dante as a “Conan the Barbarian with a conscience” is yet another example responsible for the negative criticisms that the video game has attracted from scholars. However, re-envisioning a Dante that contrasts the features the Renaissance painter Sandro Botticelli made familiar with his profile

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55 Kernan, Alvin. The Death of Literature. 1990:151.
57 Snider, Mike. “‘Dante’s Inferno’ Represents One Hell of a Video-game Concept.” USA Today. 9 Feb. 2010.
portrait (ca. 1495), Visceral has returned to the medieval tradition of Dante as an “Everyman,” common in the illustrations that accompanied early manuscripts. In “The Image of Dante, Poet and Pilgrim,” Rachel Owen demonstrates how medieval illuminations of the Commedia would represent Dante as an allegorical figure, “representing mankind itself as ‘the personification of Christian endeavor, after whom the reader should mold himself in mind and heart.” Like early readers of the Commedia, the player will soon discover how the video game goes beyond the superficial premise of Western culture’s attempted dominance over Middle Eastern culture, an idea emphasized in the new millennium by the ‘War on Terror.’

Like Otto’s and Lachman’s films (1924 and 1935, respectively), Visceral’s Dante’s Inferno takes players into a moralistic journey of discovery. Dante’s journey through all nine circles of Hell reveals the hero’s sinful past participating in the slaughter of thousands of innocent Muslims and in a war that was far from “Holy,” as well as how the warrior must repent and atone for his sins. The videogame’s objective, therefore, like that of early illustrators of the Commedia, encourages the player, through Dante’s revelation, to mold himself in mind and heart to the anti-war message the video game exhibits. If Visceral’s intent was to contemplate society’s present state of turmoil between two cultures, then this new image of Dante is central to their aims.

The digital reincarnation of the poet is not only representative of an ‘Everyman’ but Visceral’s artists found inspiration in the late-nineteenth-century image of Dante Alighieri as well, Rodin’s Thinker. Rodin’s Gates of Hell make an

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intertextual appearance within Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno*, for they have been virtually reproduced, serving their function as the threshold to the infernal abyss. In 1880, Rodin was commissioned to create the entrance to the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, France. Although the museum was never built and the project was therefore never fully realized, the *Gates of Hell* commission marked the beginning of the artist’s acclaim and helped make him the most influential sculptor of his lifetime, comparable to Michelangelo. The monumental bronze doors, in composition loosely based on Lorenzo Ghiberti’s *Gates of Paradise* (Florence Baptistery, 1425-52) feature two vertical bronze panels, an upper horizontal register, and an elaborate architectural framework, all cast in high relief, and three statues crowning the doorway. At the center of the upper register sits a nude man, whom Rodin described as “seated upon a rock, his feet drawn under him, his fist against his teeth, he dreams.” Writing to Marcel Adam, on July 7, 1904, Rodin wrote:

*En des jours lointain déjà, je concevais l’idée de la Porte de l’enfer. Devant cette porte, assis sur un rocher, Dante absorbé dans sa profonde méditation, concevait le plan de son poème. Derrière lui c’étaient Ugolin, Francesca, Paolo, tous les personnages de La Divine Comédie… Ce projet n’aboutit pas. Maigre, ascétique dans sa robe droite, mon Dante, séparé de l’ensemble, eût été sans signification. Guidé par ma première inspiration, je conçus un autre ‘Penseur’.*

Although Rodin never realized *The Thinker*, as the figure is commonly called, as an interpretation of Dante, Alhadeff points to striking similarities between Rodin’s sculpture and Stefano Ricci’s portrait statue of Dante for the poet’s cenotaph in Santa Croce in Florence (1829). Alhadeff claims that Rodin, visiting

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60 Rodin’s original plaster model is preserved at the Musée Rodin, Paris; three bronzes cast in 1917 belong to the Musée Rodin, Paris, the Rodin Museum, Philadelphia, and the National Museum of Western Art, Tokyo.
61 Rodin to Marcel Adam, *Gil Blas*, July 7, 1904, p. 1
Florence in 1875, found inspiration in Ricci’s “figure, set high on a plinth and gazing down on the spectator with meditative pose and a bared, heavy, muscular torso.” In the high placement of *The Thinker* within the scheme, his pose, and the muscular physique Rodin clearly styled the heroic nude after Ricci’s version of the poet, the contents of his thoughts revealed in the panels below.

Life-size replicas of Rodin’s *Gates* were placed in every doorway of Visceral’s studio so that artists would be inspired by them.\(^{62}\) Since we can therefore point to Rodin’s *Thinker* as a source for the crusader of the game, it is probable that Visceral’s Dante could be interpreted not only as an “Everyman” but as a philosophical figure as well, who not only contemplates “his creation” but also his morality. *The Thinker’s* dream state pushes this idea further, since early illustrators of the *Commedia* represented the pilgrim sleeping in the opening *cantica*. According to Owen, “The significance of […] sleep from which Dante wakes to find himself in the wood is discussed by the various commentators, where it is most often interpreted as a moral or mental ‘sleep’ during which Dante falls into sin and becomes lost.”\(^{63}\) Embodying a strong similarity not only in his physical attributes to Rodin’s *Thinker*, Visceral’s Dante also refers back to the contemplative and philosophical significance ascribed to the pilgrim in medieval illuminations.

Barolini’s and Saiber’s statements are correct in arguing that *Dante’s Inferno* combines popular ideas and integrates them into medieval culture. What they failed to mention, however, was that in the tradition of adaptation, *Dante’s*
Inferno is a transtextual text that Gérard Genette defines as “that which puts one text in relation, whether manifest or secret, with other texts.” The videogame’s transtextuality not only consists of references to Rodin and/or earlier artistic representations of the Commedia, but in its narrative also makes references to other literary works such as Orpheus and Eurydice. Ovid’s tenth book of the Metamorphoses, in a similar fashion, has Orpheus venturing into the depths of Hell to rescue his beloved. The reference to Orpheus is intertextual in itself and relatable to yet another appropriation of Dante’s Commedia in the 1999 film What Dreams May Come, starring Robin Williams. In the film, Williams’s character needs to venture into Dante’s infernal woods of suicide to rescue his wife, and have her join him in Paradise. A third example of the videogame’s intertextuality also occurs within the previously mentioned woods. Here, upon breaking “qualche fraschetta d’una d’este piante,” Dante discovers the spirit of his mother, whose contrapasso echoes that of Pier della Vigna, in Inferno XIII. Having replaced the figure of Pier with the fictional character’s mother, the videogame has reproduced the Renaissance mode of imitatio, defined by Simon as “the adaptation of important work or works of earlier writers,” recalling Ludovico Ariosto’s encounter between Ruggiero and Astolfo in Canto VI of the Orlando Furioso (1532) and Torquato Tasso’s Gerusalemme Liberata (1581), where the spirit of Clorinda is discovered by Tancredi in the enchanted wood of Canto XIII. With such hidden references to prior texts, Visceral has taken the adaptation and appropriation of Dante full circle, encompassing a myriad of prior readings.

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65 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno XIII, 29.
3.5 Monomyth and Quests: Bridging the Gap between Games and Narratives

Common to each of the subtle references within the narrative of Dante’s *Inferno* is the tradition of storytelling. In *Trash Culture*, Simon argues how “literary genres endure over time, adapted by different authors to different historical circumstances but with their essential natures relatively unchanged.”

The problem, however, is that over time, the endurance of literary genres seems to have disappeared in new media because no one has “looked to find it.”

The reason why they have gone unnoticed is that with influential sources, the adapter revises the original text to fit his needs. Applying Bloom’s anxiety of influence, Simon reasons that trash culture is a revisionist one: “Strong poets revise and correct the work of other strong poets.”

The one constant that Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* shares with Dante’s *Inferno* is the narrative of the journey, the call to adventure: the monomyth. Focusing on the cathartic journey that both texts share serves to demonstrate how the video game could be a useful tool in teaching Dante, and how quests can bridge together games and narratives, lowbrow culture and highbrow culture. In order for Visceral Games’ *Dante’s Inferno* to be utilized as a visual tool to enrich the learning experience of students reading Dante’s epic poem, and as a way of making an inaccessible text accessible, one must look to their similarities.

At first, *Dante’s Inferno* appears as a misrepresentation of the original, its title the only remaining artifact left unscathed by the process of adaptation. Accusations of infidelity not only come from scholars of Dante, Teodolinda Barolini, Arielle Saiber, and Frank Ambrosio, but the videogame’s producer,

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Jonathan Knight, also differentiates the adaptation from its original source, defining the videogame as a “bastardization.” Although the adjective is strong in its connotation, he elaborates upon the reasons why Visceral had to diverge from the parent poem, culminating in the transformation of Dante from poet to warrior. In an interview with The New York Times, Knight indicates how Dante needed to undergo a transformation in order to be believable as an action hero. Knight is not alone in finding the pilgrim’s passiveness to be problematic for his role as a protagonist.

T. K. Seung, in “The Epic Character of the Divina Commedia and the Function of Dante’s Three Guides” (1979), defines the protagonist as an “awkward epic hero,” whose function in the Commedia is to report what he has seen on his journey, rendering the pilgrim “too powerless and too helpless a creature to assume a heroic role.” For Knight’s audience, the figure of a fainting pilgrim would not be conducive to the action of the game and its narrative. In order to make the character believable, a digital reincarnation as an action hero is necessary. Knight also claims that although the avatar is extreme and perhaps a “gross misrepresentation” as Robert Bricken stated, it is not contrary to the literary and historical Dantean traditions, if the battle of Campaldino is taken into account.

Dante’s involvement at Campaldino is not a recent addition to the creation of a Dante myth. For example, Leonardo Bruni in the Life of Dante (1436)

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70 In an interview with Mike Snider of The New York Times, Knight addresses Visceral’s interpretation, reiterating how his version does not differ much from the historical figure. In a similar fashion to Bruni’s Life of Dante, Dante’s great-grandfather, Cacciaguida, himself a Florentine knight, is also acknowledged for further emphasis. Unlike Bruni who describes Dante to have actually fought in battle, Knight stresses the fact that Dante “was embroiled in [...] war, more as a politician than a warrior.”
references the poet’s participation in battle, describing him as valiant and
courageous, mirroring attributes often associated with the chivalric knights of
medieval and renaissance romances:

Courteous, spirited, and full of courage, he took part in every youthful
exercise; and in the great and memorable battle of Campaldino, Dante,
young, but well esteemed, fought vigorously, mounted and in the front
rank. Here he incurred the utmost peril, for the first engagement was
between the cavalry, in which the horse of the Aretines defeated and
overthrew with such violence the horse of the Florentines that the latter,
repulsed and routed, were obliged to fall back upon their infantry. […]
Dante gives a description of the battle in one of his letters. He states that
he was in the fight, and draws a plan of the field. […] I repeat that Dante
fought valiantly for his country on this occasion. And I could wish that
our Boccaccio had made mention of this virtue rather than of love at nine,
and the like trivialities which he tells of this great man.71

According to Bruni’s description, Dante’s valiant fight in a battle where the
opposing sides clashed with each other only to be thrown violently off of their
horses further emphasizes the poet’s courage in the front ranks.

Although Bruni’s intentions for depicting a courageous Dante differ
greatly from Knight’s, the objective of having the poet appear believable as
human is ever present. As the former demonstrates, unlike Petrarch who
confined himself in his solitude, Dante did not “renounce the world and shut
himself up to ease” but instead “devoted […] fervently to his studies, yet omitted
naught of polite and social intercourse.” By focusing on the medieval poet’s
active participation in social, political, and family events, Bruni related not only a
personable reincarnation of the poet, but made him believable to his audience as
Knight wanted to make Dante’s actions believable to his.

Bruni’s proem mentions that before beginning his work, the author had
read Boccaccio’s Tratatello in laude di Dante in which he noticed certain

discrepancies between Boccaccio’s portrayal of the poet and his own understanding of Dante’s life and personality, a criticism that he later returns to when concluding his description of Campaldino. The Renaissance author views Boccaccio’s depiction of Dante as reminiscent of the “love and sighs and burning tears” of the Filocolo, Filostrato, or the Elegia di Madonna Fiammetta and pays little attention to the “substantial portions of Dante’s career.”

In his attempt to diverge from Boccaccio’s romantic representation of the swooning poet who falls in love at the age of nine, Bruni centers his attention on a heroic political figure representative of his own politics. The rejection of Dante as a passive and fainting pilgrim/poet leads to the reinvention of an active one, worthy of the title “epic hero” for Bruni and Knight.

A key component in Dante’s digital reincarnation as an epic hero by bridging together the video game with the parent poem is that they both feature a katabatic journey. Traditional katabasis entails that the hero descend and cross a threshold that will lead to another worldly realm. Here, like Ulysses or Aeneas, he will become enlightened by what he witnesses. Rachel Falconer defines katabasis as a descent whose outcome:

[Is] about coming to know the self, regaining something or someone lost, or acquiring super-human powers or knowledge. The descent requires the hero to undergo a series of tests and degradations, culminating in the collapse of dissolution of the hero’s sense of self-hood. In the midst of this dissolution comes the infernal revelation, or the sought after power, or the specter of the beloved. The hero then returns to the overworld, in some cases succeeding in other cases failing to bring back this buried wisdom, love or power from the underworld.

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72 Bruni, Leonardo. 1901:83.
In her study of descent narratives, Falconer defines Dante as the quintessential katabatic writer who has had the most influence on Western literature.\textsuperscript{74} The Commedia’s katabatic nature, however, “differs from the innumerable visions of the Middle Ages, and from ancient katabasis literature.”\textsuperscript{75} In “Dante’s Firm Foot and the Journey Without a Guide” (1959), John Freccero distinguishes between the earlier katabasis and the Inferno, which combines classic and Christian traditions of katabatic narratives. Dante referenced the difference in Inferno II, 32 where he claims to be neither Aeneas nor Saint Paul, but a mixture of both, combining Aeneas’s descent into the Underworld and Saint Paul’s vision of the Divine. Visceral’s Dante’s Inferno is in essence a katabatic journey, for the hero descends into the underworld. The only difference between the hypotext and its hypertext, however, is that the digital Dante is not a hybrid of Aeneas and Saint Paul; he is merely Aeneas. While his descent concludes safely, he never witnesses a clear vision of the Divine. It is only anticipated by the final title, which reads, “to be continued.” At best, the game player’s potential vision of the Divine is merely speculative.

To clarify, it is important to distinguish the journey from the quest. Quests are not journeys for the latter is “the movement and temporal duration entailed by a quest.”\textsuperscript{76} Susana Tosca characterizes quests as a way to “play” literature and as a tool that may be used to teach both literature and new media. As a “conceptual tool” the quest joins the “binary pairs,” often considered separate,

\begin{footnotes}
\item[74] Falconer, Rachel. 2005:2.
\item[76] Howard, Jeff. 2008:6.
\end{footnotes}
bringing them together as a complimentary unit. In order to differentiate one hero’s journey from another, the quest must be original. Focusing on the individuality of the hero’s quest, which Joseph Campbell likens to Western medieval romances, games will be as original as the players themselves. In the digitalization of Dante’s Inferno, however, one will find that both quests are somewhat alike and that both protagonists embark on a similar journey that concludes in the reawakening of the heroes’ spiritual selves, rendering Dante’s Inferno, at least in this aspect, a faithful adaptation of the parent poem. The argument is reinforced further by applying Campbell’s nuclear unit of the monomyth, which consists of three rites of passage applicable to katabatic narratives: separation, initiation, and return. Because all mythological journeys consist of the nuclear unit, they offer a useful formula for creators of video games. However, due to the fact that all mythological journeys are similar to each other, quests must differ for each journey to be original, especially for video games. If “applied unimaginatively” every game will follow the same pattern. Dante’s Inferno being the first video game adapted from a classical work of literature is the exception to the rule, as the comparison of both texts demonstrates.

The first canto of Dante’s Inferno, the prologue to the Commedia, presents the reader with two journeys, one that is never completed by the pilgrim and one that leads him to conclude his quest toward salvation. John Freccero argues that the beginning of Dante’s failed journey may be found in line ten of Canto I, when the pilgrim, who is lost in the dark woods of sin, sees the mountain of Purgatory.

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77 Howard, Jeff. 2008.ix.
78 Howard, Jeff. 2008.7.
79 Howard, Jeff. 2008.7.
“vestite già de’ raggi del pianeta.”

It is at this moment that Dante’s journey “begins with a conversion.” Yet, this does not constitute the pilgrim’s spiritual rebirth that leads to the vision of “l’amor che move il sole e l’altre stelle,” it leads, rather, to the awakening of his intellect, which Freccero attributes to Plato’s Republic.

Standing between the pilgrim and the light of truth is the mountain of Purgatory, representative of a middle ground to remind Dante “of the great gap that remains to be traversed.” Try as he might, the pilgrim attempts to reach the mountain three times, but he is prohibited by the beasts he encounters. Not until line 61 does the pilgrim learn another way from Virgil who, the reader will discover in Inferno II, 49-126, was sent by Beatrice to aid his journey. According to Freccero, Dante’s first attempt at his conversion failed, as did Ulysses before him, for it was not willed by God that he should succeed on the journey on his own. The poem, Freccero argues, is a “dramatization of a gradual illumination,” and therefore God’s guidance is needed, so that the pilgrim “may climb slowly and gradually.” Through God’s guidance, represented by the pilgrim’s three guides, Virgil, Beatrice, and Saint Bernard, (who T. K. Seung claims to be representative of the Holy Trinity), Dante will embark on his second journey through the three realms of the otherworld to achieve his quest for salvation.

Applying Joseph Cambpell’s nuclear unit of the monomyth to the opening canto of the Inferno sheds a clearer light upon Freccero’s reading. The Inferno

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80 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno I, 17.
81 Freccero, John. 1959:245.
82 Alighieri, Dante. Paradiso, XXXIII, 145.
85 Freccero, John. 1959:249.
does present two journeys upon which the pilgrim embarks. The first failed for the pilgrim. Although he is witness to salvation by seeing the “raggi del pianeta / che mena dritto altrui per ogne calle,” he is still tainted with sin, as _Inferno_ I, 30 demonstrates. Freccero focuses his argument on the line about Dante’s left foot, presenting a literal and allegorical reading of the pilgrim’s “piè fermo.” In its literal sense, contrary to most readings that attribute the left foot as being firm upon the ground because of the pilgrim’s movement towards the mountain, he argues that in actuality, Dante’s foot is demonstrative of the effects of the fear that he feels and claims to have pierced his heart in line 16. Dante is unable to climb the mountain not because it is not willed from God, but because he is physically prohibited, “limping on one leg.” It is here that Dante’s journey towards the divine begins. As Dante attempts to limp towards his objective, the figure of Virgil appears. Both Freccero and Singleton view the apparition of the Roman poet as the “vision made flesh” allowing the pilgrim to venture upon a different journey. The new endeavor will prove to be more difficult, but not impossible, if the “left foot is made ‘libero, diritto e sano.’” Freccero then turns his attention to Beatrice’s explanation in _Paradiso_ V, 1-6, where she says, “chè cio procede /da perfetto veder, che, come apprende, / così nel bene appreso move il piede.” Freccero argues that if one foot or the other is defective, as Dante’s is in _Inferno_ I, then “the journey cannot end in success, for we have it on the authority of St. Thomas that the mind must move to God _et per intellectum et per affectum._” According to Saint Ambrose, the feet house the _intellectus_ and the _affectus_, two

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88 _Inferno_ I, 17-18.  
90 Freccero, John. 1959:266.  
91 Freccero, John. 1959:266.  
92 Freccero, John. 1959:266.
elements that comprise man’s soul. Therefore, even though the pilgrim has converted, his soul is still tarnished by sin, represented by his defective foot. In order to be liberated, he must venture into the depths of Hell, be cleansed of his sins in the Terrestrial paradise, before reaching the Empyrean. In Campbell’s “hero’s journey” the appearance of the guide signals a new period for the hero, a subconscious awakening of the self, where that which is known becomes unknown and vice versa. This awakening is similar to Freccero and Singleton’s vision made flesh, where the renaissance of the self is attributed to the hero’s “call to adventure.” If the journey and quest in Visceral’s Dante’s Inferno mirror those of the original, a similar reading should be sufficient to demonstrate the commonality between both texts.

Like the hypotext, the hypertext exhibits two journeys for the hero to embark upon. The first, as in the original, fails, while the second succeeds. As in the poem, the opening scene of the video game begins with a panoramic view of a forest. It is night as the camera pans in on Dante. The player first sees him through the flames of a fire, which he had built, foreshadowing his sinful existence and burning damnation. Next to Dante is a small wooden bowl holding a mixture of water and blood, that he utilized to disinfect the needle used to stitch what at first appears to be an open wound, a casualty of war. On the contrary, Dante is sowing a cross of velvet upon his chest, representative of his sins. As he screams in anguish, the frame zooms in on the cross and its emblems, which become animated, presenting a glimpse of Dante’s past in Jerusalem. The images are of violence and war. Before introducing Dante in the midst of such violence, focus is placed on the character’s left foot. As the image pans out, the full figure of Dante is shown as he takes hold of a weapon before other images of
war, women and children as victims of his wrath, are projected onto the screen. From here, the game play begins.

The second video sequence presents Dante’s return to Florence. As the scene opens, once again focus is placed on Dante’s left foot as it passes next to the head of a decomposing animal carcass with flies swarming around it. The image foreshadows sin and death like the scene of Dante fighting, as well as representing an omen of death for Dante’s family, his servants, and Beatrice. At this point, Dante finds the lifeless body of Beatrice, who will later appear to him in spirit form only to be kidnapped by Satan. As the narrative continues, the player learns that Beatrice has made a wager with Lucifer to have Dante return safely from the crusades. Lucifer agrees, but if Dante returns having been unfaithful to her, her soul would be dragged to Hell and she would be made Satan’s wife. Lucifer dares Dante to journey into Hell, and so begins his first, unsuccessful journey. The lack of success on the journey is due to the fact that his initial quest was not willed by God, but rather by Satan.

As the game continues, Virgil confronts Dante and tells him that he will be his guide into the infernal abyss. The Roman poet’s role in Visceral’s adaptation functions in much the same way as Virgil’s role in the original text, to guide him safely into the abyss, describing what he will encounter; Virgil speaks verbatim from Longfellow’s translation of the original text. Through the descriptions told to him by Virgil during his voyage into Hell, the pilgrim begins to realize how his actions have led him away from the “diritta via.” This is exemplified at the beginning of every circle, where once Virgil speaks of the sins and the contrapassi that are exhibited there, focus is placed on Dante’s velvet cross, initiating a series of flashbacks.
The underlying difference between Visceral’s dual journey and the pilgrim’s journey in *Inferno* I is that in the original text, the unsuccessful journey comes to an end once Virgil appears, while in the digitalized version, the successful journey is a continuation of the first. In the game this is represented as the failed liberation of Beatrice from Lucifer. As he enters the city of Dis, Beatrice makes Dante aware of his unfaithfulness to her by having succumbed to the sins of the flesh. Evoking the myth of Persephone and Hades, Lucifer presents Beatrice with a pomegranate, and when she eats it, it transforms the “incorruptible into the corrupted” as he states, making her his wife. According to legend, Persephone did not eat while she was in the Underworld for the Fates ruled that whoever would eat or drink in the realm of Hades would remain there for eternity. Hades tricks Persephone by presenting her with six pomegranate seeds, which she eats, condemning herself to spend six months in the Underworld. Having lost Beatrice to the Devil, Dante’s first quest has failed. His second journey to salvation culminates as he enters the final circle of Hell.

In the circle of Fraud, Dante is left to confront the demonic Beatrice and attempts to convince her to return home with him. He claims to have taken the long journey and faced all of his sins. Beatrice counters his statement; she tells him that he did not confront *all* of them, for in her eyes he is guilty of the worst sins, betrayal and fraud. Looking into the ninth circle, Dante’s final sin is made manifest to the player as well as the knight. Not only had he not kept his faithful promise of not giving in to carnal lust, he also failed to keep Beatrice’s brother Francesco safe, and allowed him to take the blame for the slaughter of thousands of innocent prisoners detained in Richard the Lionheart’s prison. Taking responsibility for Dante’s massacre of the innocents, Francesco was sentenced to
death by hanging. Forced to confront his fraudulent sin, Dante asks for her forgiveness. He then presents Beatrice with her talisman that contains a relic of the True Cross she had given to him before leaving and which he promised to bring back to her upon his return from the Crusades. By presenting her the cross, the sole object that allowed Dante to absolve the souls that he encountered in Hell, he is able to free her from Satan’s power. As soon as Beatrice is liberated from Lucifer, an angel descends down into the abyss and takes her to Heaven. Dante, not wanting to part with his beloved, asks the angel why he cannot be with his love after having come so far to save her. The angel replies that although he has been brave and freed one of God’s creatures from Lucifer, he still needs to face his own redemption; he must confront the Devil himself in Cocytus.

Venturing into the final circle, Dante begins his second quest for his redemption. As mentioned earlier, Dante fights Lucifer in Cocytus, where his body is frozen into a lake of ice. As he fights the imprisoned monster, he liberates his shadow, which becomes flesh. It is here, when Dante looks down into the pool that stands between him and his salvation in Purgatory, that he realizes that he is dead. As Lucifer revels in his victory, Dante begins to pray and take responsibility for his sins. Accepting his fate, Dante prays to God to give him the strength to keep Satan prisoner in Hell with him. God answers his prayer and Dante, holding once more Beatrice’s cross, imprisons Satan again with the aid of the souls that he has absolved during his journey.

Having taken responsibility for all of his sins, Dante has made his full conversion. This is then represented in the digitalized version as Dante’s one hundred and eighty degree turn at the conclusion of the Inferno. Once more, during the conversion, importance is given to Dante’s feet—first, clothed in his
armor, and later, at the completion of the turn, naked. As he makes his way towards the shore of Mount Purgatory, Dante is nude, the cross that is sown on his chest having been burned, a mere residue. As he stares at the mountain of salvation, he rips off the cross, no longer a symbol of his sins. He makes his way towards the mount—his nakedness now the image of his purity, his salvation.

3.6 Hope and Divine Justice in the *Inferno*?

Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* is problematic if we consider Dante’s ability to absolve the souls of the damned, liberate Beatrice, and make his way towards Mount Purgatory. If the video game is faithful to the original text, these actions are detrimental to the argument because Dante lacks these capabilities in the *Commedia*. Professor Barolini’s claim that *Dante’s Inferno* is “bogus” would therefore be correct. Yet, closer analyses of the videogame and the text will demonstrate otherwise.

Returning to the trailer released by Visceral Games and Electronic Arts prior to the release of the videogame, one will recall how it informs the audience that Dante’s original readers feared judgment in the afterlife. Judgment is one of the major underlying themes of the first cantica. In the *Inferno* (as well as in the *Purgatorio*) each sinner encountered by the pilgrim is punished according to his *contrapasso*, that very principle “which establishes that every soul must suffer in the afterlife according to the sin he or she has committed on Earth.”

*Dante’s Inferno* references the state of suffering in the afterlife from its very beginning. Take for example *Inferno* III, 1-9, the inscription on the Gates of Hell, which reads:

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Per me si va ne la città dolente,
per me si va ne l’eterno dolore,
per me si va tra la perduta gente.

Giustizia mosse il mio alto fattore;
fecemi la divina podestate,
la somma sapienza e ’l primo amore.

Dinanzi a me non fuor cose create
se non etterne, e io eterno duro.
Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch’intrate.

Upon reading these words the pilgrim asks Virgil to clarify their meaning, for he finds them too difficult to comprehend, “il senso lor m’è duro.” Their meaning becomes clear by focusing on each tercet. The first three lines describe what lies beyond the threshold: the city of woe where eternal pain is inflicted upon and endured by those who have lost “the good of the intellect.” The second tercet, the creation of the Gates themselves, are described as a product of God’s totality, as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit: “Divine Power,” “Supreme Wisdom,” and “Primal Love.” Lastly, as the Gates are eternal so too are its laws. All hope must be abandoned for those who venture past the gates. Divine Justice and the Gate’s inscription are referenced once more in Inferno XI, 40-45; Virgil’s description of the circles of Hell reads:

Puote omo avere in sé man violenta
E ne’ suoi beni; e però nel secondo
giron convien che sanza pro si penta

qualunque priva sé del vostro mondo,
biscazza e fonde la sua facultade,
e piange là dov’esser de’ giocondo.

94 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno, III, 12.
95 Alighieri, Dante. Inferno, III, 18.
Once more, as in *Inferno* III, Virgil’s description educates the pilgrim on the eternal punishments endured by the lost souls. In the circle that harbors those who have committed crimes of violence, whether they were inflicted upon themselves or on others, repentance is impossible. Virgil also mentions loss of hope in *Inferno* IV in regards to those who reside in Limbo:

\[
\begin{align*}
&\text{Or vo' che sappi, innanzi che più andi,} \\
&\text{ch'ei non peccaro; e s'elli hanno mercedi,} \\
&\text{non basta, perché non ebber battesmo,} \\
&\text{ch'è porta de la fede che tu credi;} \\
&\text{e s'e' furono dinanzi al cristianesimo,} \\
&\text{non adora debitamente a Dio:} \\
&\text{e di questi cotai son io medesmo.}\quad (96)
\end{align*}
\]

Likewise, as in *Inferno* III and XI, here Divine Justice remains eternal. As Virgil explains to the pilgrim, those who are placed in Limbo are not condemned because they lived in sin, but because they were without Baptism. Only because of this are they to spend eternity “*che sanza speme vivemo in disio.*”\(^{97}\) Having not fully comprehended God’s laws, the pilgrim questions his guide further, wondering if anyone has ever escaped the torments of Hell. Virgil replies that only once, during Christ’s descent into Hell, were the Patriarchs and Prophets of the Old Testament joined with the souls of the blessed. The Roman poet concludes with one further affirmation: “*E vo' che sappi che, dinanzi ad essi, / spiriti umani non eran salvati.*”\(^{98}\) *Inferno* III, IV and XI explicitly reveal that salvation in the Inferno is impossible. Therefore, while Dante in both the video game and in the poem can inflict pain upon the lost souls, according to the poem, he cannot

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\(^{96}\) Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno* IV, 33-39.

\(^{97}\) Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno* IV, 41.

\(^{98}\) Alighieri, Dante. *Inferno* IV, 62-63.
save any of them from the infernal abyss. However, discrepancies within the text prove otherwise.

### 3.6.1 Son le leggi d’abisso così rotte?

In “*Inferno X: Guido’s Disdain*” (1962), Charles S. Singleton defines the experience of reading the *Commedia* as a “revelation through form, an unfolding form in which poetry is operating at poetry’s highest power of strategy and presentation.” If this is true, the descriptions of Divine Justice in *Inferno* III, IV, and IX are problematic if we consider Beatrice’s words in *Inferno* II, 70-74:

\[
\begin{align*}
&'l’ son Beatrice che ti faccio andare; \\
&\quad vegno del loco ove tornar disio; \\
&\quad amor mi mosse, che mi fa parlare. \\
&Quando sarò dinanzi al segnor mio, \\
&\quad di te mi loderò sovente a lui.'
\end{align*}
\]

Beatrice’s words to Virgil have prompted many questions regarding Virgil’s potential for salvation. If we are to read the *Commedia* as a revelation, then these lines question Beatrice’s purity and holiness. Is she lying to Virgil? Are her words filled with empty promises? Is she herself fraudulent in her speech? Other such discrepancies appear throughout the poem, especially in places where we would not think we should find them. Take for example *Purgatorio* I, the appearance of Cato of Utica. According to Robert L. Martinez and Robert M. Durling, Cato’s presence as a pagan, suicide, and enemy of Caesar “was probably intended to surprise.” He is of course not the only element of surprise within the *Commedia*. Take for example Ripheus and Trajan in *Paradiso* XX. Like Cato, they...

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100 Durling, Robert M. and Martinez, Robert L. Dante’s *Purgatorio*. 2003:591.
too are pagans who are redeemed by God. The reader is not sure how to interpret this. To quote Cato in *Purgatorio* I, “*Son le leggi d’abisso così rotte? / o è mutato in ciel novo consiglio?*”\(^{101}\) The pilgrim wonders about the nature of salvation in *Paradiso* XIX as well. As Dante reaches the Sixth Heaven, the Sphere of Jupiter, the central argument centers upon God’s Justice. Here the Eagle, the emblem of Divine Justice invokes Dante’s question on how it may be possible that one who knew not of Christ, but was just and moral could forever be damned:

\[
\begin{align*}
‘\text{Un uom nasce a la riva} \\
\text{de l’Indo, e quivi non è che ragioni} \\
\text{di Cristo né chi legga né chi scriva;}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
e \text{tutti suoi voler e atti buoni} \\
\text{sono, quanto ragione umana vede,} \\
\text{sanza peccato in vita o in sermoni.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\text{Muore non battezzato e sanza fede:} \\
\text{Ov’è questa giustizia che ‘l condanna?} \\
\text{Ov’è colpa sua, se ei non crede?}^{102}\]

*Paradiso* XIX and XX have been at the center of much debate within Dante studies leading scholars such as Mowbray Allan to question whether or not Dante has hope for Virgil’s salvation.\(^{103}\) If Allan’s reading is correct, and Dante did intend for Virgil to be liberated from Limbo in the *Commedia*, then Dante’s ability in the video game to absolve and free tormented souls is not an absurdity. Discrepancies within *Paradiso* XIX and XX are prominent and permeate the entire *Commedia*. While Charles S. Singleton argues that the Eagle’s response to the pilgrim may not be taken as one argument, for line 103-104 of *Paradiso* XIX

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\(^{102}\) Alighieri, Dante. *Paradiso* XIX, 70-78.
provides the pilgrim with a negative answer, “A queso regno / non salì mai chi non credette ‘n Christo,” Allan believes that in actuality, because of the inclusion of Trajan and Ripheus among the souls that make up the emblem, Paradiso XIX and XX are to be read as one coherent discourse. As Allan argues, the Eagle in Paradiso XX is “still responding with precise relevance and in good faith to Dante’s question.” These cantos show that the power of prayer has led to the salvation of the two pagans.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{D’i corpi suoi non uscir, come credi,} \\
\text{Gentili, ma Cristiani, in ferma fede} \\
\text{quel d’i passuri e quel d’i passi piedi.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Ché luna de lo ‘nferno, u’ non si riede} \\
\text{già mai a buon voler, tornò a l’ossa;} \\
\text{e ciò di viva spene fu mercede:}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{di viva spene, che mise la possa} \\
\text{ne’ preghì fatti a Dio per suscitarla,} \\
\text{si che potesse sua voglia esser mossa.}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{L’anima gloriosa onde si parla,} \\
\text{tornata ne la carne, in che fu poco,} \\
\text{credette in lui che potëa aiutarla;}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{e credendo s’accese in tanto foco} \\
\text{di vero amor, ch’a la morte seconda} \\
\text{fu degna di venire a questo gioco.}
\end{align*}
\]

Similar to St. Thomas’ belief in the salvation of lost souls via the influence of a Mediator so too was Dante’s Trajan liberated from Hell through the prayers of


\[106\] Alighieri, Dante. Paradiso XX, 103-117.

\[107\] St. Thomas Aquinas discusses the possible salvation of pagans in the Summa Theologica: “If, however, some were saved without receiving any revelation, they were not saved without faith in a Mediator, for, though they did not believe in Him explicitly, they did, nevertheless, have implicit faith through believing in Divine Providence, since they believed that God would deliver mankind in whatever way was pleasing to Him, and according to the revelation of the Spirit to those who knew the truth” (Mandelbaum, Allen. Paradiso, 1986:383).
St. Gregory the Great which recalled him briefly into life so that he could be
converted as Christian: “L’anima gloriosa onde si parla, / tornata ne la carne.” Allan
furthers his argument, attributing prayer to a participatory act, where the
knowledge of God’s final judgment “on the virtuous pagans is withheld so that
we might participate in it.” Allan poses yet one more question before
concluding his argument regarding the hope of Virgil’s salvation. Why would
the poet return to Virgil in Paradiso XIX if he had left the pilgrim in Purgatorio
XXX to return to Limbo? Why remind the reader of the poet’s eternal damnation
once he has witnessed the salvation of pagans such as Cato, Trajan, and Ripheus?
Will Beatrice act as Virgil’s mediator at the conclusion of the Commedia as she
promised in Inferno II? If the poem is read as an unfolding revelation, then
Paradiso XX, 133-138 may lead to a possible answer:

E vai, mortali, tenetevi stretti
a giudicar: ché noi, che Dio vedemo,
non conosciamo ancor tutti li eletti;

ed ènne dolce così fatto scemo,
perché il ben nostro in questo ben s’affina,
che quel che vole Iddio, e noi volemo.

Because God’s intentions are a mystery and not known to anyone, including
those who reside in His Kingdom, Virgil’s fate remains unknown. Yet, there
remains hope for his salvation. Perhaps through Beatrice’s and Dante’s prayers
he too will reside in Paradise. One further question remains. How do we
interpret Visceral’s interpretation of Divine Justice?

Throughout the video game, as a virtual enactment of Free Will, Dante is
able to punish or absolve sins. The player is able to complete this action once
he/she learns of the soul’s prior existence. In a similar fashion to Peter

Greenaway’s *A TV Dante* (1989), where the action stops so that virtual notes may be presented for the viewer, so too does the video game. For example, encountering the spirit of Francesca and learning about her and Paolo’s fate, he might feel pity and compassion for her soul, absolving her. The same holds true for encountering the soul of Filippo Argenti, where the player is able to partake in inflicting punishment upon his soul. Whether players decide to punish sinners is speculative; the more important factor lies in Dante’s ability to free his mother (from the woods of suicide), Beatrice, and later himself at the conclusion of the game. These three moments differ from the other moments in the video game, since the player has no option for liberating their souls. What is striking is that they are liberated through Dante’s prayer as is mentioned in *Inferno* II and *Paradiso* XX. Therefore, it is argued that although not completely faithful to the *Commedia*, the power to absolve souls from Hell becomes a participatory act, as Allen claims in “Does Dante Hope for Virgil’s Salvation?”

3.7. Conclusion

The katabatic journey in Dante’s *Commedia* and Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* culminate in the salvation and transformation of the hero. Dante, however, in both the poem and the video game, is not the only one to be saved or transformed by the journey. The final element of classical katabasis concludes with the hero’s return in which, now illuminated by his experience, he is to share his story with the world at large so that they too can be enlightened by that knowledge. Video games, like cinema in its early days, may also look to the canonical texts not only to raise their classification as a lowbrow medium to a highbrow one, but also for their didactic function. As Amilcare A. Iannucci
discussed in “Dante and Hollywood,” cinematic adaptations of Dante’s *Inferno* may be associated under this classification. Analyzing Otto and Lachman’s films, Iannucci reminds the reader that Dante’s text was appropriated because of the moralistic message that both filmmakers wanted to convey to their audiences. Like previous adaptations, Visceral’s *Dante’s Inferno* expresses a moralistic ideology relatable to present day society. With the classification of the videogame as total art, the player no longer observes but is immersed in the work—completing the actions and exploring the setting. Like the hero, the player goes through a catharsis realizing that war is unjust and that true love is that which makes one ready to rise to the stars.
CONCLUSION

As I have shown, the past decade witnessed a resurgence of Dante and the *Commedia* in theatre, television, cinema, and the technological arts. Today, the medieval poet is as popular as ever, and the successful adaptations into which his work has been transposed have proven Amilcare A. Iannucci’s claims that Dante not only produces television, but he is a big business. While twentieth-century filmmakers adapted Dante’s *Inferno* to raise the cultural level of a nascent film industry (as with Milano Films’ 1911 production, *Inferno*), and later as a mechanism to drive a film’s plot and structure (as in Henry Otto’s 1924 and Harry Lachman’s 1935 films), in the first decade of the new millennium Dante was a catalyst for discussion on current issues such as the “War on Terror” and its consequences. As such, Dante and the *Inferno* were first appropriated in order to express sentiments and eyewitness accounts of the horrific events that befell the United States on September 11, 2001. Dante soon became a signifier of Western Culture against the Middle East, creating a schism between “us” the victims and the “others” who had become demonized in relationship to the inferno created by Al-Qaeda. The comic strip that appeared in the April 2006 issue of *Studi Cattolici* (as discussed in Chapter 1) is a telling example of this phenomenon. By demonizing the Middle East through associations with Dante’s *Inferno*, the media had in turn misappropriated Dante. As the millennium progressed and war ensued without positive outcomes, adapters once again turned to the medieval poet as a catalyst for discussion, this time focusing on the
poem’s moralistic nature. Monsignor Marco Frisina’s *La Divina Commedia: L’uomo che cerca l’amore*, Roberto Benigni’s *TuttoDante* and Visceral Game’s *Dante’s Inferno* are not only examples of current adaptations of Dante’s *Commedia* but are demonstrative of our society’s new reading of the medieval poet.

“How the classics have left the mausoleum and come to life again,” argued Theodore Adorno in “The Schema of Mass Culture” (1991). This is most definitely true. As we have seen with Chapter 3, technology has introduced a whole new method of teaching Dante. Academically sponsored websites such as *Danteworlds* and *Dante Today* contribute to the dissemination of the poem to new readers. Visceral Games and Electronic Arts however, by popularizing Dante through “total art” have given us the opportunity to virtually explore his system of Hell. The adaptations of Dante and the *Commedia* go beyond musicals, cinema, video games, and interactive websites. The poet has been transposed into comic books and children’s books as well. Arielle Saiber’s website, *Dante Today*, is a testament of Adorno’s claims. Dante has indeed become a pop-cultural phenomenon no longer restricted to academic circles. Therefore, Frisina, Benigni, and Visceral Games are but a sampling of the numerous current adaptations of the *Commedia*, but they have been the most popular and attracted the most attention, whether positive or negative, from critics and viewers alike, making them, through the lens of popular culture, the most significant examples.

In *A Theory of Adaptation* (2006) Linda Hutcheon associates the process of adaptation to Darwin’s theory of evolution:

I was struck […] by Darwin’s theory of evolution, where genetic adaptation is presented as the biological process by which something is fitted to a given environment. To think of narrative adaptation in terms of a story’s fit and its process of mutation or adjustment, through adaptation, to a particular cultural environment is something I find suggestive. Stories
also evolve by adaptation and are not immutable over time. Sometimes, like biological adaptation, cultural adaptation involves migration to favorable conditions: stories travel to different cultures and different media. In short, stories adapt just as they are adapted.¹

It seems, then, that in order for a classical text to remain relevant, it needs to be able to evolve and adapt. The adaptations based on Dante’s *Commedia* that I have discussed have not only demonstrated how the text metamorphosed into its new and various forms, but showcases Dante’s relevance today. Hutcheon’s association with adaptation and Darwin is reminiscent of Bloom’s theory of influence. According to Bloom, only the strong poets can clear imaginative space for themselves. Shakespeare and Dante, he argues, are such poets, and as Darwin’s theory of evolution states, only the strong survive. Dante continues to evolve and remains our contemporary because his poetry is able to adapt.

This study has only begun to chip away at the surface of Dante’s reception in the new millennium. However, what is certain is not only that he continues to permeate our imaginations, but also, as demonstrated in my analyses that we recognize ourselves within the pilgrim. The *Commedia* is not only an adaptable text into new media, but it is an applicable text to our society.

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