



Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 269–84

NICK HAVELY

'Hell on a Paying Basis'

Morality, the Market, and the Movies in Harry Lachman's *Dante's Inferno* (1935)

CITE AS:

Nick Havely, "Hell on a Paying Basis': Morality, the Market, and the Movies in Harry Lachman's *Dante's Inferno* (1935)"; in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 269–84 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_16>

RIGHTS STATEMENT:

© by the author(s)
This version is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

ABSTRACT: The 1935 Fox Films *Dante's Inferno* (directed by Harry Lachman) traces the rise and fall of an entrepreneur. Its protagonist, Jim Carter (played by Spencer Tracy), begins the story as a stoker on a cruise liner. The narrative opens with a burst of flames from the ship's boiler, and the ensuing scene goes on to show the protagonist competing at shovelling coal for a bet in the sweltering engine-room. Interspersed are shots of the superstructure directly above with a number of elegant and vapid passengers following the game below. This initial sequence thus concisely conveys the main features of the film's social agenda through imagery that anticipates that of two of its later 'infernal' sequences. / Having won the game but lost his job — and now in search of employment in an amusement park — Carter encounters 'Dante's Inferno' as an educational sideshow run by the idealistic but unbusinesslike 'Pop' McWade and his niece, Betty. He decides to 'put Hell on a paying basis', takes over Pop's ailing enterprise, marries Betty, drives another stall-operator out of business and into suicide, and continues to develop his grand new 'Inferno Concession'. From then on, his increasingly ambitious projects start to go disastrously and edifyingly wrong. For instance, his new hell concession contravenes building regulations (he has bribed the inspector) and its structure collapses, severely injuring Pop. From his hospital bed Pop shows his protégé a copy of *Inferno* with illustrations by Gustave [...]

‘HELL ON A PAYING BASIS’

Morality, the Market, and the Movies
in Harry Lachman’s *Dante’s Inferno* (1935)

Nick Havely

The 1935 Fox Films *Dante’s Inferno* (directed by Harry Lachman) traces the rise and fall of an entrepreneur. Its protagonist, Jim Carter (played by Spencer Tracy), begins the story as a stoker on a cruise liner. The narrative opens with a burst of flames from the ship’s boiler, and the ensuing scene goes on to show the protagonist competing at shovelling coal for a bet in the sweltering engine-room. Interspersed are shots of the superstructure directly above with a number of elegant and vapid passengers following the game below. This initial sequence thus concisely conveys the main features of the film’s social agenda through imagery that anticipates that of two of its later ‘infernal’ sequences.

Having won the game but lost his job – and now in search of employment in an amusement park – Carter encounters ‘Dante’s Inferno’ as an educational sideshow run by the idealistic but unbusinesslike ‘Pop’ McWade and his niece, Betty. He decides to ‘put Hell on a paying basis’, takes over Pop’s ailing enterprise, marries Betty, drives another stall-operator out of business and into suicide, and continues to develop his grand new ‘Inferno Concession’. From then on, his increasingly ambitious projects start to go disastrously and edifyingly wrong. For instance, his new hell concession contravenes building regulations (he has bribed the inspector) and its structure collapses, severely injuring Pop. From his hospital bed Pop shows his protégé a copy of *Inferno* with illustrations by Gustave Doré (first published in 1861–66), describing it as a ‘message’ to ‘those who live ruthlessly’ and warning him that ‘[l]ike you, Dante found himself on the wrong road’.

The following ten-minute vision of hell is experienced by Carter as a kind of dream and is the most ambitious and innovative feature of the film. It benefited from the cinematography of a celebrated cameraman, Rudolph Maté (who had worked with Carl Dreyer, René Clair, and Fritz Lang), and it has been described by a modern film critic as ‘one of the

most imaginative and striking pieces of cinema in Hollywood's history'.¹ However, the moral 'message' it conveys fails to give Carter any pause on his path of exploitation, deceit, and destruction, which ends only with a further mighty conflagration in another cruise liner, this one (the *SS Paradise*) owned and operated by him as a floating casino. He then redeems himself by heroically bringing the ship to shore and saving the passengers, finally concluding that he has 'been through a Hell of [his] own making'.

Spectacular admonition and concern about the ruthless pursuit of wealth are thus the main features which link this *Inferno* of the thirties to the one that had appeared some six hundred years earlier. Wealth and avarice were, of course, demonstrably serious concerns for Dante: as Peter Armour, for example, has shown, there is a recurrent and pervasive concern with money, its meaning, and its misuse throughout the *Commedia*.² So it is not surprising that the *Inferno* should also have been appropriated by social critics some hundred years before the 1935 Hollywood fable.

The forms of exploitation and oppression that such appropriations addressed in the nineteenth century were often those generated by industrialization and urbanization. In England, Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin both pointed out uncomfortable parallels between the famous story of Ugolino and his children (*Inf.* XXXIII) and the evidence of starvation and atrocity closer to the Victorian reader's home.³ Thus, during the analysis of the condition of early industrial England in Carlyle's *Past and Present* (1843), the desolate social landscape, in which 'two million [...] workers sit enchanted in Workhouse Bastilles, five million more (according to some) in Ugolino Hunger-cellars', is at several points compared with Dante's hell. Twenty years or so later, George Eliot had Dante (and perhaps Carlyle) in mind when surveying the bleak Midland scene in the prologue to her most overtly political novel, *Felix Holt, the Radical* (1865–66).⁴

In America, the *Inferno* had also been invoked as part of a critique of exploitative industrial and mercantile capitalism. Examples from mid-nineteenth-century fiction include two short stories: Herman Melville's 'The Paradise of Bachelors and Tartarus of Maids' (1855) and Rebecca Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills' (1861). The Melville story opens a 'Dantean gateway' in a New England landscape which leads to a grim portrayal of 'the work practices of industrialism' and their female victims, whilst Harding Davis's plot begins with a group of well-to-do vis-

itors making idle comparisons between work in a Pennsylvania steel foundry and the imagery of the *Inferno* and then moves, just as grimly, towards ‘the reality of Dante’s vision’.⁵

During the later nineteenth century, the moral vision of Dante’s poem also proved congenial to American intellectuals concerned about the *subiti guadagni* of the nation’s ‘Gilded Age’. For example, in the preface to his Turnbull Lectures on Dante at Johns Hopkins in 1894, the Harvard critic and *dantista* (and former Boston merchant) Charles Eliot Norton repeatedly calls poetry to redress ‘the materialism of our existing state of civilization’.⁶ And by the Depression years of the thirties, Ezra Pound was finding in the *Inferno*’s representations of avarice and usury a discourse appropriate for some of the twentieth century’s most troubled times. When reviewing Laurence Binyon’s translation of the *Inferno* in 1934, Pound was struck by ‘how the whole hell reeks with money’, and this impression is also reflected in his *Fifth Decade of Cantos XLII–LI* (1937), which, as Steve Ellis has noted, shows ‘the most obvious unity of any section of the poem up till then in its concentration on financial good and evil [...]’.⁷

By the 1930s, when Pound was writing his *Fifth Decade*, financial good and evil had also been the main theme of an earlier American Dante movie: Henry Otto’s feature-length silent version of *Dante’s Inferno*, which had appeared in September 1924. It was not the first American film to deal with a Dantesque subject. The short Vitagraph *Francesca da Rimini* had appeared in 1907 (reissued as *The Two Brothers* in 1908), and Italian Dante films, such as the Milan *Inferno* of 1911, had been successfully screened in New York and Los Angeles.⁸ Otto’s version is, however, the first American cinematic *Inferno* to lay claim to the title, and the first attempt to embed the poem’s vision within a film about the contemporary socioeconomic scene. The vivid publicity for this version clearly reflected confidence in the text’s sensational box-office appeal as a ‘Spectacle of Drama and Beauty’, as well as in its educational value as a ‘Classic of Literature’.⁹ Its moralistic plot centres on a ruthless businessman, evocatively named Mortimer Judd, who looks set to sacrifice everything, including his family, to his obsession with wealth and power, until his neighbour, who is being (to quote the screenplay) ‘forced to the brink of ruin by Judd’s merciless business methods’, sends him a copy of the *Inferno* with the Doré illustrations – a device that, as we have seen, would be reproduced in the 1935 *Dante’s Inferno*. Judd, like Lachman’s later entrepreneur, then has

an extended vision of hell and the dire consequences of his actions after which he mends his exploitative ways and all turns out well in the end. This 'change of heart' narrative follows the time-honoured mode of Victorian social problem fiction. A British review of 1925 draws the obvious parallel with Dickens and dismisses the movie as 'crude melodrama [which] has merely introduced a few disjointed episodes into the modern story of a Scrooge-like New York millionaire, whose heart is turned from stone to gold by a warning dream'.¹⁰

Several other, less predictable, features of Otto's *Inferno* also deserve emphasis in this context. First, the imagery imported from Doré's illustrations (a visual vocabulary that had also been drawn upon by the 1911 Milano Films *Inferno*) reinforced its aspirations to 'classic' status, as at least one of the reviews pointed out (see below, note 12).¹¹ Secondly, its social spectrum included subordinate and stereotypical black characters, as innocent foils to white Anglo-Saxon profiteering: thus the ruthless Judd's son, whose opposition to his father is otherwise confined to seducing his mother's nurse and dancing with the family dog, is also a devotee of black jazz musicians, who appear in an inset shot in the horn of his gramophone; and eventually one of Judd's black servants has the last word of dialogue in the movie's screenplay as 'de only one [...] dat knows what dis is all about'.¹²

There thus exists a considerable degree of kinship between Otto's 1924 *Inferno* and Lachman's 1935 version, as films marketed by their makers and recognized by reviewers for their cultural ambitions, high production values, and claims to advance a social moral. The earliest review of Otto's version, in the *New York Times* (30 September 1924), describes its hell sequences as 'quite remarkable, unlike anything that has been seen on the screen', whilst the following day's *Variety* – whilst noting that 'the illustrations of Gustave Dor[é] have been faithfully followed' – greets the 'visualization of Dante's "Inferno" on the screen' as 'a dream idea'.¹³ Even the dismissive British notice which has already been quoted acknowledges its 'spectacular glimpses of the infernal regions'. Reviews of Lachman's later movie implicitly recognized such parallels in the portrayal of the 'modern transgressor', who 'pushes his way to wealth by a series of ruthless and cruel business coups'.¹⁴

Both Otto's and Lachman's versions were marketed by the same studio, the Fox Film Corporation, which by the 1930s was one of the so-called 'Big Five' Hollywood companies.¹⁵ The economic climate of 1935 was, however, far less favourable for the studio's second attempt

to put hell on a paying basis. Although the Great Depression had bottomed out in 1932, and Roosevelt's new administration had been in place for two years, times were still hard. As *Variety* had commented at the end of 1931: 'The outstanding market lesson of the year [...] is the exploding of the ancient dictum that low-priced amusements are depression-proof'.¹⁶ In 1935, output of features from the major studios was at about the same level as it had been five years earlier (around 350 films), but in line with the fall in national income, weekly attendance at the movies had slumped by over a third, and the number of cinemas had dropped correspondingly.¹⁷ Fox Films – which had been a pioneer in sound and camera technology and had invested heavily in ownership of cinemas and development of studios – had seen losses approach eleven and a half million dollars in 1931–32, 'which pushed it to the brink'.¹⁸ In 1935 Fox merged with the new and more dynamic Twentieth Century studio and was out of debt, whilst in July of that year the *Magazine of Wall Street* headlined an article: 'Movie Outlook Improving'.¹⁹ But the 1935 *Inferno* had been in production since February 1934, and its genre and content thus need to be viewed against a still relatively bleak commercial backdrop. The idea of working one's way up from the economic depths is one that would therefore have had considerable resonance at the time the film was released, since 1935 was still a difficult year for marketing movies, moral or otherwise.

This *Dante's Inferno* also reflects in several ways on the cultural, social, and moral concerns of contemporary cinema. The article in the *Magazine of Wall Street* went on to note that, following the League of Decency's 1934 campaign for cleaner pictures, 'the industry awoke to the fact that the public was much more interested in quality films'. This interest stimulated the output of the so-called 'prestige pictures': big budget films based on classics, popular novels, or stage successes. Examples of major classics screened in 1935 include MGM's *Anna Karenina* and *David Copperfield* (the latter among the top ten box office successes of the year) and Warner Brothers' *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (which won the Oscar for cinematography).²⁰ The Fox Films *Inferno* has some affinity with these in the scale of its production, its investment in special effects, and its promotion by the studio as an unprecedented cinematic spectacle, headlined thus a few months before release:

'Dante's Inferno'
'Greatest Spectacular Drama'
Cast of 4000
Impressive Fox Claims

'The greatest spectacle ever attempted in cinema history'. That is the description applied to 'Dante's Inferno' by Fox executives in Hollywood after they had viewed the completed version. The picture, due in London soon, is said to be magnificent entertainment. It is described as a gripping modern drama, combining romance and astounding spectacle. The picture creates, for the first time on the talking screen, the mythical journey of Dante through the Inferno, but that is not the principal burden of the story. The screenplay, prepared after four months' work by Philip Klein and Robert Yost, is the drama of a modern transgressor. The principal character is a ship's stoker who eventually rises to great wealth and power, but leaves behind him a trail of broken and ruined men [...].²¹

Yet, the major spectacle – the vision of hell, with its cast of thousands – represents a mere ten minutes out of the movie's running time of almost ninety, and several reviews noted that this sequence is (in the words of one) 'the only resemblance this picture has to the famous poem by Dante'.²² The *Cinema* article which had trumpeted the film's spectacular features also notes in the passage quoted above that adaptation of the *Inferno* is 'not the principal burden of the story'. Indeed the phrase it also uses to describe the plot – 'the drama of a modern transgressor' – suggests connections with another important genre of 1930s Hollywood: the 'social problem' movie.

Featuring prominently in this genre were the classic rise and fall narratives of the 'modern transgressor': the gangster movies of the early thirties, such as *Little Caesar*, *The Public Enemy*, and *Scarface*. But there were also films exploring the causes of crime and issues of rehabilitation and reform, such as Warner's *Mayor of Hell* (1933) and its semi-documentary *G-Men* (another of the top-grossing movies of 1935), in both of which James Cagney, who had starred in *The Public Enemy*, appears as a reformed character. It may be significant that Spencer Tracy, who stars as the entrepreneurial protagonist of *Dante's Inferno*, had made his name on Broadway in a gangster melodrama (*The Last Mile*), and in movies of the early thirties he, like Cagney, had, been 'typecast as a tough guy, playing racketeers and brutish convicts'.²³ Significant too, perhaps, was the fact that in the later thirties, after *Dante's Inferno*, he tended to appear in respectable roles, for instance as an innocent victim of the mob (Fritz Lang's *Fury*, 1936), a naval hero

(*Captains Courageous*, 1937), and even as a saintly Irish priest helping to reform delinquents (*Boys' Town*, 1938).

It is often pointed out that in the Hollywood social problem movies of the thirties, the problems tend to be resolved 'at the personal level of the protagonist rather than at the societal level'.²⁴ This tendency was identified as 'Burbanking' (referring to the studios of Warner Brothers, the most prolific producer of such movies). Its most notable and successful exponent in the period was Frank Capra, whose fable about the banking industry, *American Madness*, had been released in 1932 and who continued to explore the collisions of the 'egalitarian individualist' with the world of politics and big business through the 1930s in his 'Depression Trilogy'.²⁵ But Harry Lachman, director of the Fox *Dante's Inferno*, was no Frank Capra, and Andre Sennwald's *New York Times* review of the film shrewdly exposed a number of its inconsistencies as a 'Modern Morality Story':

It all adds up to a stirring if somewhat pointless spectacle in the great Roxy tradition [...].

Far from relying on the inferno for its spectacle, the photoplay goes on to a nerve-scraping climax in which Mr Tracy's floating pleasure palace, loaded down with sin and shameless revelry, burns at sea. All in all, 'Dante's Inferno' is a pretty blistering assortment of sound and fury, and the chances are that no picture of the season has beaten its audiences into quite so abject a state of self-conscious terror.

But the photoplay is always more impressive as holy-roller spectacle than as drama. Reworking the familiar theme of ruthless ambition and its inevitable defeat by conscience and pure love, it falls considerably short of being an effective morality play. Its chief contribution to ethics is the somewhat astonishing moral that anything goes if you can get away with it. Thus our man of power clears himself of responsibility for the collapse of the Inferno structure as well as the suicide of the building inspector whom he has bribed, by denying his guilt on the witness stand. His wife perjures herself in his defense and he goes free. During his career he is directly responsible for two suicides and enough additional mayhem to earn him an eternity of torment in Mr Lachman's purgatory [*sic*]. But the scenarists restore him to grace and respectability by letting him become the hero of the tragedy on the burning liner, and grant him final absolution by reason of his handsome admission that money isn't everything.²⁶

Yet such inconsistencies may themselves lead us to the most interesting feature of this strange mid-thirties metamorphosis of Dante: its representation of the infernal dynamics of the entertainment industry.

Another, slightly later review in the *Monthly Film Bulletin* points in this direction when it argues that the spectacular element in the film aligns the extravagant makers of the film themselves with its hubristic and exploitative protagonist:

[...] [T]he presentation of 'Dante's Inferno' graduates from a small-scale side-show to a gigantic business guaranteed, as Spencer Tracy remarks, 'to put hell on a paying basis.' Meanwhile Tracy's own ambitious and not too scrupulous life in the show business first brings him a vision of what Dante may have had in mind, and then a more tangible experience of an Inferno in the burning and wrecking of the colossal gambling-ship *Paradise*, which was the summit of his business achievement. Enormous sums have clearly been lavished on the visionary sequence (described in the synopsis as including a 'deluge of flaming splendour' and 'spectacular panoramas of awe-inspiring immensity'), but the tableaux are so unreal and unemotional, both in individual content and in their relations to each other, that the whole sequence serves only to build up an air of detachment in the spectator. The later scenes of panic in the ship are grandly done, but they are so barely related pictorially to the visions that their moral relation to them is not too clear either. It is quite evident that much more attention has been lavished on the visionary sequence than on any dozen other sequences (except the ship-board panic) and that it is calculated by the producers to put the film of 'Dante's Inferno' on a 'paying basis' analogous to that aimed at by Spencer Tracy in his circus show.²⁷

The implications of this 'analogy' are strikingly evident at points in Lachman's film. From its first explicit reference to the *Inferno* itself, as Pop's inefficiently if idealistically run sideshow in an amusement park, we are reminded of how Dante had been marketed as popular moral entertainment, for instance (as Dennis Looney has shown) in the Dante waxworks show at Cincinnati in 1829, or the several versions of the poet's work as popular tales or stories for children, or, as Peter Hawkins describes it, the spectacular unfulfilled 'Dante Theatre' project which had been planned to fill Madison Square Garden and other venues in 1921.²⁸ Further parallels could perhaps be drawn with much more recent cultural translations of Dante's text, such as the Californian urban puppet movie (2007), the 2008 picture-book for teenagers, and the issuing of *Dante's Inferno* as video-game crusader narrative in 2010.²⁹ But the 1935 version commands special attention, not only because of its spectacular features and its representation of the ambitious entrepreneur, but also because – unlike Henry Otto's *Inferno* or

indeed any subsequent versions of Dante on film – it foregrounds the entrepreneurialism of the entertainment industry itself.

The director of the Fox *Inferno*, Harry Lachman (1886–1975), could hardly have been unaware of some possible parallels between his entrepreneurial protagonist's skills and ambitions and the trajectory of his own career in and around the entertainment industry. From relatively humble origins in LaSalle, Illinois, Lachman had, by the age of nineteen, worked his way up from selling papers on the streets of Chicago, waiting tables at the University of Michigan, and designing labels for beer bottles and jam jars, to becoming an illustrator for national magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Collier's*, *Harper's*, and *McCall's*. In 1913 he went to Paris, becoming a distinguished painter of French landscapes and associate of Bonnard, Picasso, Matisse, Monet, and Renoir – all before turning to movies in 1925 and beginning a career as a Hollywood director in 1931.³⁰ It was a directorial career which was to last barely more than a decade but involved work with major stars, from Spencer Tracy and Shirley Temple to Laurel and Hardy.³¹ It also yielded a number of other moral melodramas: the shy-ster who comes good in the end (*Outsider*, 1931); the crook whose past catches up with him (*The Man who Lived Twice*, 1936); a cautionary tale about the dangers of drink (*The Devil Is Driving*, 1937). His experience of marketing, of marketing morality, and of the culture business thus gives him some affinity with the operators of the 'Inferno Concession' in his movie.

Lachman also showed some awareness of the cultural implications of this range of experience. As an interview of 1935 shows, he was interested in the relationships between the elite world of painting (to which he was to return in the 1950s) and the popular medium of the movies:

Painting as far as I was concerned was a dead art. And I turned to motion pictures, and found the best medium offered to an artist.

The only difference between composing for painting and composing for motion pictures is that in motion pictures there are hundreds of images to hold in composition continuously while in painting there is only one.

[...] One of the greatest difficulties of the motion picture is to keep the moving forms at all times in perfect balance. It should be possible to stop the films at any frame and find that particular frame is in perfect balance of form and tone values. The movement of the people must also be kept in perfect rhythm.

It is my contention that a man cannot compose thousands of pictures until he can compose one.³²

The central hell sequence in Lachman's *Inferno* not only enforces the rather trite individual moral about 'those who live ruthlessly'; its actual composition of 'moving forms' also reflects features of the world of the entrepreneur. At the start of the whole sequence, the image of Charon's boat delivering souls to hell harks back to the cruise liner and its infernal engine room in which Carter's career begins, and it points forward to the floating casino (the SS *Paradise*) where his ambitions come to an end in flames.³³ The hell sequence's recurrent emphasis on verticality (canyons, crags, precipices, trenches) of course recalls landscapes and abysses in the Doré *Inferno* illustrations. But it also parallels the scenes aboard the two ships at the beginning and end of the film – both of which stress hierarchical patterns and images of steep descent, from the superstructure to the engine-room by way of galleries and companionways. A further striking descent – even a kind of Dantean contrapasso – also occurs at a crucial point in Carter's rise to fortune, when the side-show operator whom he has just driven out of business chooses to commit suicide by hurling himself down into the artificial abyss of Carter's own newly opened Inferno Concession.

All three of Lachman's main 'hell scenes' are visually linked not only by the flames that repeatedly erupt into them but also by recurrent passages of violent physical exertion. Damned souls in the hell sequence are shown crowding, stampeding, and falling from a height like the panic-stricken passengers in the SS *Paradise* (played presumably by many of the same extras). They are also, like the stokers in the opening scene, engaged in a good deal of heavy and repetitive labour – striving to raise gigantic slabs and linked by chains across a trench of fire. In this respect Lachman's hell and his world of work – in which Carter begins and ends his entrepreneurial career by toiling to serve the machine and keep the engines going – seems not that far removed from the industrial inferno of Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills'.³⁴

How deliberate such visual and narrative patterns in the 1935 *Dante's Inferno* are – and who might ultimately have been responsible for them – is, nonetheless, not entirely clear. It would be unwise to treat Lachman as if he were a directorial *auteur* with the freedom to pursue a distinctive artistic agenda. Most of the Hollywood studios in the thirties seem to have exercised tight central control over casting, production

schedules, and editing, and Fox Studios are known to have been particularly reluctant to allow their directors 'producer-director status'.³⁵ Sol M. Wurtzel (1890–1958), who was the producer of the 1935 *Dante's Inferno*, had begun his career as a bookkeeper and had a long history, during his twenty-five year career with Fox, of keeping costs, production, and directors under close supervision and firm discipline.³⁶ His claim to ownership of the 1935 film is acknowledged in some of the trade publicity that appeared in May of that year:

Sol M. Wurtzel, who was responsible for many of the big Fox box-office smashes, calls 'Dante's Inferno' his most spectacular screen achievement and the most costly; it has the finest story he has ever handled and is his biggest potential success.³⁷

However, some of the narrative and visual patterns in Wurtzel and Lachman's 'spectacular screen achievement' imply an uneasy underlying vision of the industry and its practices. Other productions, publicity, and journalism of the time reinforce suggestions of such a metafictional approach to movies, morality, and the market in the 1935 *Dante's Inferno*. In this context, it is significant that a film which more explicitly addressed the vicissitudes of life in the Hollywood movie industry was itself in the making both before and after the production of Lachman and Fox's fable. *A Star is Born* was later to be remade in 1954 as a musical vehicle for Judy Garland, but it had first appeared under the title of *What Price Hollywood?* as early as 1932. Its 1937 version is a striking portrayal of the servitude and grandeur of life in the world behind the silver screen. It presents this through, to quote a leading Hollywood historian, 'a melodrama, its characters subject to unseen forces apparently beyond their control in a world where whims of fashion and taste make careers and destroy lives', and it conveys an 'intensely contradictory image of Hollywood, playing off the mythology of a "beckoning Eldorado" where dreams come true against the suffering of the stars for whom fame proves both artificial and ephemeral'.³⁸ Such contradictions are themselves summarized in the question posed in a publicity poster for the 1937 United Artists version of *A Star is Born*: 'IS HOLLYWOOD HEAVEN OR HELL?'³⁹

For a final example of imagining the paradoxes of the Hollywood dream factory in Dantean terms, we can turn to the work of a European writer who visited the 'Mecca of the movies', as he called it, in the year following the release of the Fox *Dante's Inferno*. Blaise Cendrars was

not only a journalist for *Paris Soir*, reporting on the American scene early in 1936; he was also a poet, novelist, and film maker, an associate of Guillaume Apollinaire, Max Jacob, and Abel Gance. In the course of his train journey across the continent to the West Coast and his conversations with Harold Loeb (author of *The Chart of Plenty*), Cendrars comes to compare the ‘American bluff and its deception of ‘the sovereign populace’ with Prince Potemkin’s delusions ‘about the level of civilization and the prosperity of his immense empire’.⁴⁰ In this context, his Hollywood appears as (to quote his translator) ‘the heart of the great American Lie, a factory churning out visions of glamour and wealth in the midst of worldwide depression, but for that very reason, a “pole of attraction [...] a touchstone”’.⁴¹ In the chapter describing his actual encounter with the movie industry, Cendrars first imagines a ‘Chinese wall’ enclosing the allurements of this ‘Forbidden City’ (the title of this chapter). He then switches from an orientalist to a classical or medieval visionary discourse to describe the actual gates of the film studios guarded by ‘Cerberus’-like gatekeepers and thronged with ‘enthusiasts of the cinema keeping the faith; men, women, boys, girls, little children flock[ing] from every city in the world to wait in attendance at the gates to the underworld of this artificial paradise of the movies!’⁴²

We seem here to be close to the entrance of Carter’s ‘Inferno Concession’, to the kind of hell he aimed to put on a paying basis. And with what looks very much like a harking-back to the entrepreneurial underworld of the Fox film that had been released only a few months before his visit, Cendrars goes on to conjure up an explicit comparison between a warning sign at the gate of Universal Studios and the ‘dark’ words over the entrance to Dante’s *Inferno*:

Dante placed above the gate that descends into the regions of hell the famous inscription: “*Abandon all hope, ye who enter here...*”

In Hollywood they’re a lot more brief, a lot more direct, a lot more cynical [...] They post above the door, for the benefit of those who insist on wanting to come in, a placard: *Do not enter*. That’s it, period. So much the worse for those who don’t understand, [...] and so much the worse, or so much the better, for those who finally succeed in getting through. We’ll see soon enough what will happen to them then! [...]

So it is that at the entrance to Universal Films, beneath the window occupied by a dummy representative of Cerberus [...], a sign is nailed up that reads: *It’s useless to wait. – It’s useless to insist. – You’re wasting your time. – Recommendations won’t get you anywhere. – This place was not meant for you. – Do not enter.*⁴³

NOTES

- 1 John Walker, *Halliwel's Film & Video Guide 2002* (London: HarperCollins, 2001), p. 199, col. 4. On Rudolph Maté's career in Europe and Hollywood, see Herbert G. Luft, 'Rudolph Maté', *Films in Review*, 15.8 (1964), pp. 480–90.
- 2 Peter Armour, 'Gold, Silver and True Treasure: Economic Imagery in Dante', *Romance Studies*, 23 (1994), pp. 7–30. On avarice in the *Inferno*, see also Nick Havely, *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Papacy in the 'Commedia'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 44–50.
- 3 Paget Toynbee, *Dante in English Literature, from Chaucer to Cary (c. 1380–1844)*, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1909), II, pp. 510–11; Frances Yates, 'Transformations of Dante's Ugolino', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14 (1951), pp. 100–101.
- 4 See Andrew Thompson, 'George Eliot, Dante and Moral Choice, in *Felix Holt, the Radical*', *Modern Language Review*, 86 (1991), pp. 553–66.
- 5 Herman Melville, 'Billy Budd, Sailor' and *Other Stories*, ed. by A. Robert Lee (London: Everyman, 1993), pp. xxxv and 195; *Nineteenth-Century American Short Stories*, ed. by Christopher Bigsby (London: Everyman, 1995), p. 155.
- 6 See James Turner, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), pp. 335–36, 354 and 358–59. The notes for Norton's Turnbull Lectures are Harvard University, Houghton Library, bMS Am 1088.5, Box 13; and I am grateful to Christian Dupont for providing a transcription of the notes for Lecture 1 (p. 1 is quoted here).
- 7 Ezra Pound, 'Hell', in *Literary Essays*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), p. 201–13 (p. 211) (the text is a review of Binyon's *Inferno* from 1933, first published in *The Criterion*, April 1934); Steve Ellis, *Dante and English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 187–89 (p. 187). See also *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber, 1975), especially pp. 229–35 and 250–52. Pound's litanies against *Usura* are in Cantos XLV and LI, and there are several allusions to the connection between usury and Dante's Geryon in Cantos XLVI and LI (*The Cantos*, pp. 235 and 251), as also in the 'Hell' essay (*Literary Essays*, p. 211).
- 8 *Dante nel cinema*, ed. by Gianfranco Casadio (Ravenna: Longo, 1996), p. 123. For evidence about the American screenings of the Milano Films *Inferno*, see *Los Angeles Times*, 22 August 1911 and *New York Times*, 11 December 1911.
- 9 The terms are used in a vivid publicity poster produced for Otto's film; a colour reproduction of this is in Casadio's *Dante nel cinema*, plate 15.
- 10 *The Bioscope*, 22 January 1925, pp. 40–41.
- 11 See note thirteen below.
- 12 The complete screenplay and intertitles are in *The Silent Film Newsletter*, 2.7 (1994), pp. 113–16.
- 13 *Variety Film Reviews*, 16 vols (New York: Garland, 1983–85), II, 1 October 1924.
- 14 *The Cinema*, 15 May 1935, p. 30; *Variety Film Reviews*, IV, 7 August 1935.
- 15 The other four major studios were MGM, Paramount, RKO, and Warner.

- 16 Quoted in Tino Balio, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930–1939* (New York: Scribner, 1993), p. 13.
- 17 For numbers of theatres and attendance figures, see Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003), pp. 115 and 124.
- 18 Balio, *Grand Design*, pp. 16–17.
- 19 Balio, *Grand Design*, p. 30.
- 20 Balio, *Grand Design*, p. 405.
- 21 *The Cinema* (UK), 15 May 1935, p. 30.
- 22 *Harrison's Reports and Film Reviews*, ed. by D. Richard Baer, 15 vols (Hollywood: Hollywood Film Archive, 1992–95), vi, p. 123.
- 23 Balio, *Grand Design*, p. 151; see also pp. 285–86 and 293–94 on Tracy's subsequent screen roles.
- 24 Balio, *Grand Design*, p. 281.
- 25 Charles Lindholm and John A. Hall, 'Frank Capra Meets John Doe: Anti-Politics in American National Identity', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 32–44 (p. 41).
- 26 *The New York Times Film Reviews (1913–68)*, ed. by Abram Abramson, 7 vols (New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1970), II, 1 August 1935, 15:1.
- 27 *Monthly Film Bulletin*, 2.20 (September 1935), pp. 122–23.
- 28 On the Cincinnati waxworks, see Dennis Looney, "'Flame-coloured Letters and Bugaboo Phraseology": Hiram Powers, Frances Trollope and Dante in Frontier Cincinnati', in *Hiram Powers a Firenze: Atti del Convegno di studi nel Binario della nascita (1805–2005)*, ed. by Caterina del Vivo (Florence: Olschki, 2007), pp. 135–52. Two collections of Dante stories for children were Elizabeth Harrison, *The Vision of Dante, A Story for Little Children and a Talk to Their Mothers* (Chicago: Chicago Kindergarten College, 1892), and Mary MacGregor, *Stories from Dante, Told to the Children* (London: T.C. & E.C. Jack, 1909; repr. London: Indypublish.com, 2008). On the former, and on other popular Dante merchandise (including calendars) of around the same period, see Angelina La Piana, *Dante's American Pilgrimage: A Historical Survey of Dante Studies in the United States, 1800–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), p. 149 n. 28. The 'Dante Theatre' spectacle of 1921 was planned by the director Norman Bel Geddes as a project 'that would regularly produce the entire poem' with 'a company of over 500 persons' in Madison Square Gardens 'as well as various university auditoriums and open air amphitheatres'; see Peter Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 152–53.
- 29 The puppet movie *Dante's Inferno* (2007) was directed by Sean Meredith, produced by Paul Zaloom, with production design by Sandow Birk and starred Dermot Mulroney (Dante) and James Cromwell (Virgil). See the essay by Ronald de Rooy in this volume. For an account of Birk's earlier work, see Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History*, pp. 154–59; also Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders's illustrated edition/interpretation, *The Divine Comedy*, 3 vols (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2003–5). The thirteen cantos of *The Young Inferno*, designed for a teenage readership, were written by John Agard and illustrated by Satoshi Kitamura (London: Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2008). The video game

- Dante's Inferno* was produced by Electronic Arts Studio (Redwood, CA) in 2010; its executive producer was quoted in 2009 as saying: 'The time is right for the world of interactive entertainment to adapt this literary masterpiece. [...] It's the perfect opportunity to fuse great gameplay with great story.' <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/ea-confirms-dantes-inferno-game>> [accessed 21 January 2009]. The resulting game was reviewed by Ralph Pite in *The Guardian*, 3 February 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/03/videogame-dantes-inferno>> [accessed 6 February 2010].
- 30 For basic information about Lachman's early career, see *Chicago Evening Post*, 29 November 1921; *International Studio*, 64, pp. 107–10; the catalogue of his exhibition at the Dalzell Hatfield Galleries, Los Angeles, 1960; and his obituaries in *Technicien du Film*, 225 (April 1975), p. 27, *Cinéma*, 198 (May 1975), p. 8, and *Films in Review*, 27.1 (January 1976), pp. 62–63. A Fox Films publicity release mentions that he was orphaned at the age of ten, sold newspapers on the streets of Chicago, waited tables at the University of Michigan, and produced designs for beer-bottles and jam-jars (microfiche at the British Film Institute Library, London).
 - 31 Lachman gave Shirley Temple her first lead role (*Baby Take a Bow*, 1934) and directed Laurel and Hardy in *Our Relations* (1936). *Dante's Inferno* also features Rita Hayworth's screen début (as Rita Cansino) in a dance routine on the *SS Paradise*.
 - 32 Frank Scully, 'Arty Directing', in *The Screen Guilds' Magazine*, 2.1 (March 1935), p. 19.
 - 33 Interestingly, the title under which the film subsequently appeared in Italy was *La nave di Satana*; see Casadio, *Dante nel cinema*, pp. 37 and 148.
 - 34 In his perceptive account of the film, Christopher Wagstaff notes that 'Da un punto di vista formale, il film si apre e si chiude nella sala macchine di una nave, sorta di inferno umano, dove gli uomini contravvengono le regole su cui è fondata la vita sociale'; see Christopher Wagstaff, 'Dante nell'immaginario cinematografico anglosassone', in *Dante nel cinema*, ed. by Casadio, pp. 35–43 (p. 38). On Harding Davis's 'Life in the Iron Mills', see above, p. 270.
 - 35 On the status of the Hollywood director in this period (and some exceptional cases), see Balio, *Grand Design*, pp. 77–82, and David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style & Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985), pp. 320–27.
 - 36 Wurtzel's early career is outlined in *William Fox, Sol M. Wurtzel and the Early Fox Film Corporation: Letters, 1917–23*, ed. by Lilian Wurtzel Semenov and Carla Winter (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001), p. 7, and his mission statement for Fox's West Coast Studios is outlined in a letter to William Fox (16 December 1921), in *ibid.*, pp. 161–66.
 - 37 *The Cinema* (UK), 15 May 1935, p. 30.
 - 38 Richard Maltby, *Hollywood Cinema*, pp. 146–54.
 - 39 Reproduced on p. 144 of Balio, *Grand Design*.
 - 40 Blaise Cendrars, *Hollywood, Mecca of the Movies*, trans. by Garrett White (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995), pp. 68 and 72.

- 41 Garrett White's introduction to Cendrars, *Hollywood, Mecca of the Movies*, p. liii.
- 42 Cendrars, *Hollywood, Mecca of the Movies*, pp. 78 and 80–82.
- 43 *Ibid.*, pp. 82–83.

Nick Havely, "Hell on a Paying Basis': Morality, the Market, and the Movies in Harry Lachman's *Dante's Inferno* (1935)', in *Metamorphosing Dante: Appropriations, Manipulations, and Rewritings in the Twentieth and Twenty-First Centuries*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Fabio Camilletti, and Fabian Lampart, *Cultural Inquiry*, 2 (Vienna: Turia + Kant, 2011), pp. 269–84 <https://doi.org/10.25620/ci-02_16>

REFERENCES

- Variety Film Reviews*, 16 vols (New York and London: Garland, 1983–85)
- Abramson, Abram, ed., *The New York Times Film Reviews (1913–68)*, 7 vols (New York: New York Times and Arno Press, 1970)
- Agard, John, *The Young Inferno*, illustrated by Satoshi Kitamura (London: Frances Lincoln Children's Books, 2008)
- Armour, Peter, 'Gold, Silver and True Treasure: Economic Imagery in Dante', *Romance Studies*, 23 (1994), pp. 7–30
- Baer, Richard D., ed., *Harrison's Reports and Film Reviews*, 15 vols (Hollywood: Hollywood Film Archive, 1992–95)
- Balio, Tino, *Grand Design: Hollywood as a Modern Business Enterprise 1930–1939* (New York: Scribner, 1993)
- Bigsby, Christopher, ed., *Nineteenth-Century American Short Stories* (London: Everyman, 1995)
- Birk, Sandow, and Marcus Sanders, *Dante's Inferno*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004)
- *Dante's Paradiso*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005)
- *Dante's Purgatorio*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005)
- Bordwell, David, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema: Film Style and Mode of Production to 1960* (London: Routledge, 1985)
- Bramwell, Tom, 'EA confirms Dante's Inferno game', electronic article at <<http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/ea-confirms-dantes-inferno-game>> [accessed 21 January 2009]
- Casadio, Gianfranco, *Dante nel cinema* (Ravenna: Longo, 1996)
- Cendrars, Blaise, *Hollywood, Mecca of the Movies*, trans. by Garrett White (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995)
- Ellis, Steve, *The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (London: Faber and Faber, 1975)
- *Dante and English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983)
- Havely, Nick, *Dante and the Franciscans: Poverty and the Papacy in the 'Commedia'* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004)
- Hawkins, Peter S., *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006)
- La Piana, Angelina, *Dante's American Pilgrimage: A Historical Survey of Dante Studies in the United States, 1800–1944* (New Haven: Yale University Press for Wellesley College, 1948)
- Lindholm, Charles, and John A. Hall, 'Frank Capra Meets John Doe: Anti-Politics in American National Identity', in *Cinema and Nation*, ed. by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie (London: Routledge, 2000), pp. 32–44
- Looney, Dennis, "'Flame-coloured Letters and Bugaboo Phraseology": Hiram Powers, Frances Trollope and Dante in Frontier Cincinnati', in *Hiram Powers a Firenze: Atti del Conve-*

- gno di studi nel Binario della nascita (1805–2005)*, ed. by Caterina del Vivo (Florence: Olschki, 2007), pp. 135–52
- Luft, Herbert G., 'Rudolph Maté', *Films in Review*, 15.8 (1964), pp. 480–90
- MacGregor, , *Stories from Dante, Told to the Children* (London: T.C. and E.C.. Jack, 1909; repr. New York: Indypublish.com, 2008)
- Maltby, Richard, *Hollywood Cinema*, 2nd edn (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003)
- Melville, Herman, '*Billy Budd, Sailor*' and *Other Stories*, ed. by A. Robert Lee (London: Everyman, 1993)
- Meredith, Sean (director), *Dante's Inferno*, film produced by Paul Zaloom and Sandow Birk, art directed by Elyse Pignolet, 2007
- Pite, Ralf, 'What can we learn from a video game based on Dante's Inferno?', *The Guardian*, 3 February 2010, available online at <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2010/feb/03/videogame-dantes-inferno>> [accessed 6 February 2010]
- Pound, Ezra, *The Cantos* (London: Faber and Faber, 1964)
- 'Hell', in *Literary Essays*, ed. by T.S. Eliot (London: Faber and Faber, 1954), pp. 201–13
- Thompson, Andrew, 'George Eliot, Dante and Moral Choice in *Felix Holt, the Radical*', *Modern Language Review*, 86 (1991), pp. 553–66
- Toynbee, Paget, *Dante in English Literature, from Chaucer to Cary (c. 1380–1844)*, 2 vols (London: Methuen, 1909)
- Turner, James, *The Liberal Education of Charles Eliot Norton* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999)
- Walker, John, *Halliwel's Film and Video Guide 2002* (London: HarperCollins, 2001)
- Wurtzel Semenov, Lilian, and Carla Winter, *William Fox, Sol M. Wurtzel and the Early Fox Film Corporation: Letters, 1917–23* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2001)
- Yates, Frances, 'Transformations of Dante's Ugolino', *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 14 (1951), pp. 92–117