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# A CARDBOARD DANTE

Hell's Metropolis Revisited

Ronald de Rooy

The subject of this paper is a recent comic movie version of Dante's *Comedy*: a 2007 puppet and toy theatre adaptation of the *Inferno* directed by Sean Meredith.<sup>1</sup> It is certainly not the first time that Dante and his theatre of hell appear in this kind of environment. Mickey Mouse has followed Dante's footsteps<sup>2</sup> and very recently a weird bunch of prehistoric animals went a similar path: in part three of the blockbuster *Ice Age* (2009), a new, lippy guide character named Buck uses several Dante quotes and the whole strange voyage can be described as a Dantesque descent into dinosaur hell. In the following pages I will argue that Meredith's version of Dante's *Inferno* is not only funny and entertaining, but that it is also surprisingly innovative if we compare it to other literature and movies which project Dante's hell or parts of it onto the modern metropolis.

To get a taste of the atmosphere in Meredith's all-American cardboard puppet *Inferno*, let's start with a short interlude, a dialogue between Dante and Virgil, as they have reached the subway's final stop, eloquently called Lake Cocytus. Not grasping the ancient mythological background of this name, however, dirty-minded Dante punningly asks himself: 'Lake "cockitus"... Who names these places?' This puppet Dante, throughout the journey a rather laid-back guy, is surprised to find the urban Californian landscape covered in ice and snow when the two travellers surface from the city's underground. 'Wasn't hell supposed to be hot with fires everywhere?', is his baffled question, to which his long-haired, rather shabby guide replies: 'Hell is a complicated and nuanced place. It transcends clichés.' 'Oh, you don't say', responds Dante, 'I was totally expecting to see demons and tortures and bondage stuff, and, don't know, like rubber and chicks in stiletto heels ...' Then moral guardian Virgil cuts him short: 'This is hell, Dante, not your personal fantasy.' [Fig. 5, p. 372]

Actually, this jocular movie adaptation seems to be exactly this: a personal, playful fantasy on the first canticle of Dante's *Comedy*. Although it is by no means a philological, scholarly, or literary reworking and although it consequently lacks the metanarrative qualities so frequently found in other modern and postmodern Dantesque metamorphoses, this American inferno does present several original elements within the tradition of modern Dante reception.

All of its action takes place in a contemporary everyday (sub)urban context, making this movie a unique example of a full-fledged urban *Comedy*. The words Peter Hawkins used to characterize Sandow Birk's illustrations from which the movie was born also apply to the movie itself: this truly is a 'vision of a postindustrial America that, like Dante's *Inferno*, is relentlessly urban and in decay. Looking for Hell? It's here and now.'<sup>3</sup> Other original elements within the tradition of modern Dante reception are its elaborateness and the level of detail with which Dante's journey through hell has been translated into a modern urban context.

As is well known, Dante's *Inferno* has been used many times to evoke and emphasize the negative and alienating qualities of modern cities. In modernism, hell and the city were to become almost synonyms. T.S. Eliot (*The Waste Land*, 1922), for example, saw the shades of Dante's hell in London. In *La pelle* (1948) Curzio Malaparte projected terrible Dantesque scenes onto the cities of Naples and Hamburg. In the short story *Viaggio agli inferni di questo secolo* (1966) Dino Buzzati discovered a Dantesque underworld in the Milanese subway system. In *Ragazzi di vita* and *Una vita violenta* Pier Paolo Pasolini saw Rome as the 'città di Dite' giving it the contours of a Dantesque 'bolgia'.

The same holds true for cinema. Pasolini continued 'dantifying' the city of Rome in his movies *Accattone* (1961) and *Mamma Roma* (1962). The asphyxiating Roman traffic jam in the opening scene of Federico Fellini's *Otto e mezzo* (1963) appears like a metropolitan version of Dante's dark wood. A similar transposition is found in the prologue of Peter Greenaway's *A TV Dante* (1990): the dark wood is again transformed into a dark, noisy metropolis filled with traffic chaos, ambulance sirens, screams, and evil laughter. Dantesque cities of hell return over and over in different genres of American post-war cinema: the mystery film *Blue Velvet* (directed by David Lynch, 1986), the crime film *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), and the horror thriller *The Devil's Advocate* (Taylor Hackford, 1997) are but a few examples of the ways

in which American cinema entwines several elements of Dante's hell in dark visions of the country's cities and suburbs.<sup>4</sup>

Within its overwhelming richness and variety, this long tradition of Dantesque cities in literature and cinema also displays several recurrent elements. First of all, many of these art works share similar semantic and tonal traits. Logically, in these modern real-life variants of the city of hell almost everything is gloomy, dark, ominous, and tragic. Urban hell is often associated with war and crime. Typically, the slightest hint of irony is lacking. Secondly, there is a recurring unreal and hyperbolic quality in the urban hell. Often people and things in these cities are simply 'too bad to be true'. It is interesting to remember that in his descriptions of the 'real' hell, Dante frequently evokes earthly places – the Venetian arsenal, the dikes in Flanders, the Roman necropolis in Aigues Mortes to mention only a few – in order to make the hellish landscapes a little less surreal and more credible to his readers. The modern artists, on the other hand, invoke elements and atmospheres of Dante's afterlife to depict and emphasize precisely the surreal quality of their earthly cities.

A third recurrent element is the predominantly allusive and evocative modality that most narratives and movies employ to refer to Dante's description of hell. Because of the extreme recognizability and familiarity of the underlying model, it is sufficient for modern poets, writers, and directors to merely hint or allude to Dante's hell in order to evoke the full hellish force of the city they are narrating themselves. As Zygmunt Barański once said with respect to Dantesque traits in modern poetry, Dante's power 'is such that he does not need to announce himself'.<sup>5</sup> Thus, while allusions and incomplete reworkings of Dante's hell against the background of a contemporary city are quite normal, elaborate and extended reworkings are very uncommon. Presumably the original medieval text is simply too complex, its chronotopical rootedness too firm and profound to be reproduced and reworked in its entirety.

The most interesting elaborate metropolitan reworkings of Dante's hell in Italian post-war culture are probably Pier Paolo Pasolini's *La mortaccia* and especially his *La Divina Mimesis*.<sup>6</sup> Both texts are intentionally unfinished but truly unique attempts to rewrite Dante's hell with the Roman outskirts as setting and lowlife characters – in the first the prostitute Teresa, in the second a shabby former version of Pasolini himself – as protagonists.<sup>7</sup> Judging from the few cantos he did write and

from several of his own statements, Pasolini intended to closely follow the *Comedy's* original structure and plot line, while presenting modern equivalents for the original characters and situations. The idea behind *La Divina Mimesis* was a detailed adaptation of Dante's entire *Comedy* against the background of metropolitan and industrial Italy, a modern transposition of the medieval text in order to represent, and to judge, the social and political reality of postwar capitalist Italy.<sup>8</sup>

In a totally different key, then, but unique in its own right, we now have Meredith's American puppet movie adaptation. As mentioned before, it is based upon Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders' textual adaptation and illustrations of the entire *Comedy*,<sup>9</sup> and illustrator Sandow Birk also took part in the movie's art direction. In its extension – it covers all the circles and almost all episodes of Dante's *Inferno* – the movie is comparable only to the serious, although sometimes unintentionally funny, silent cinematic productions that retold Dante's *Inferno* at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> In its particular form of adaptation, however – a bold but also unusually detailed and extensive metropolitan 'modernization' – Meredith's movie also comes strangely close to Pasolini's unfinished *Divina Mimesis*.

At a first viewing, the cardboard characters and settings leave a very strange, almost uncomfortable impression, especially on someone familiar with the text of Dante's *Comedy*. It is 'Dante's story as it was', claims its director, but at the same time it is 'a contemporary version, urban, gritty, crude, ridiculous, silly paper giggling, but really beautiful'.<sup>11</sup> Not everyone will necessarily agree on all these raving qualifiers. Meredith's adaptive formula is in fact based on a contradictory combination of fidelity and liberty, and the movie does not always succeed in finding the right balance between elaboration and appropriation, in resolving the tension between, on the one hand, fidelity to the overall structure of Dante's *Comedy* and many of its details and, on the other, the total liberty to change or disregard many other details.<sup>12</sup>

The freedom from Dante's text manifests itself first of all in the irony and humour that generously covers all characters, situations, and events. Because of this light-hearted perspective, this movie stands out against the predominantly gloomy tradition of Dantesque city visions. Over and over the movie produces comical clashes between the original subject matter and its 'light' and ironic reworking. Jesus's apocryphal descent into hell, to cite one example, is playfully visualized as the action of a huge human hand hesitatingly picking out some of the tiny

cardboard puppets from Limbo and transporting them to heaven with jolly comments like ‘Ehm, let’s see, ah Noah, you’re not gonna need that rain slicker where you’re going ...’ For this particular scene, the film-makers might have found their inspiration in another episode of the original text, i.e. the last part of *Inferno* XXXI, where Antaeus’s giant hand transports the two pilgrims to the bottom of the traitors’ pit. Incidentally, Jesus and Lucifer are the only human characters in this otherwise cardboard universe. Lucifer, at the end of the movie, is played by a mute actor covered in red body paint who is dipping cardboard sinners in fondue.

Spectators will also be struck by the remarkable language in this movie. Birk and Sanders’s textual adaptation already used a kind of ‘California-inflected youth-speak’,<sup>13</sup> closely and realistically linked to the squalid (sub)urban environment depicted in the illustrations. According to one critic, Dante had been translated into ‘the vernacular of guy inarticulateness, with a little slang, which is to say its frequent awfulness must be intentional’. The same critic argued, regrettably with good reason, that ‘Birk’s book is better looked at than read’.<sup>14</sup> Although Birk and Sanders did succeed in ingeniously modernizing many of Dante’s similes,<sup>15</sup> there was actually a persistent and awkward tension between their casual street language and the otherwise often unaltered Dantesque scenes of the afterlife. Simply because Meredith’s puppet movie treats Dante’s original hell with much more liberty, adapting and modernizing it more boldly, this awkwardness is greatly reduced.

The proud Trecento Tuscan poet-protagonist metamorphoses into a twenty-first-century Los Angeles citizen. In his city, hell is everywhere and the sinners he meets are for the most part contemporary personalities. Moreover, the identities and lives of the remaining ‘original’ sinners have been adapted to fit into the life of this new LA-Dante. Filippo Argenti, for example, is his sadistic swimming coach, and ‘Mister’ Latini a former high school teacher. The encounter with Mr Latini takes place outside a gay night club, where the poor teacher will be dancing forever and ever to loathed house music. The famous opening line of the episode has taken a rather gayish turn: ‘Dante Alighieri, what a miracle to see you here, too! Looking good! Have you been working out?’ Dante in return asks his old teacher who else is with him on the dance floor. [Fig. 6, p. 372]

Meredith certainly inherited this liberal approach from Birk’s illustrations with their ‘brash irreverence [...] for the sage and serious Dante

who had been constructed over the centuries'.<sup>16</sup> Various of Birk's illustrations engage in a playful but sometimes also demeaning interaction with the austere gothic etchings by Gustave Doré.<sup>17</sup> In this respect we might hazard a comparison with another area of modern Dante metamorphoses, the rich tradition of what has been called the poets' Dante. In this context an important turning point was Osip Mandelstam's (1891–1938) fascinating *Conversation about Dante* (1933), in which the Russian poet daringly and surprisingly highlighted the *Comedy's* musical and synaesthetic aspects, its 'beautiful childlike quality', its 'closeness to infant babbling, to some kind of eternal Dadaism'.<sup>18</sup> This essay had a profound and lasting influence on other modern poets who liberally rooted Dante's text deeply into their own world: it plays a pivotal role, for example, in Seamus Heaney's 1985 essay about Dante, 'Envy and Identifications', where Heaney took Mandelstam as a sublime example of how the modern poet in his dialogue with Dante needs to liberate himself from the austere, modernist Dante of Eliot and Pound.<sup>19</sup> To this anti-austere, more liberal line of Dante reception applies what Peter Hawkins has written about Birk's illustrations: 'there is something Dantesque about taking this liberty with a source'.<sup>20</sup>

In comparison with Birk and Sanders's illustrated and textual adaptation, Meredith's movie reworks Dante's *Inferno* in a more profound way, starting from the very art form: 'toy theater [...] had the advantage of being almost unlimited in what we could create and unleash on an unsuspecting audience. And the form presented a three dimensional way to bring Sandow's prints and paintings to life.'<sup>21</sup> This art form is in fact realistic enough to create the theatrical illusion of a real world, but without the technical difficulties and drawbacks of cinematic realism. Because of its small scale it allows spectacular scenes to remain manageable, and it is flexible enough to exploit the full comical potential of the cartoonish scenes and the characters' actions and facial expressions.

Meredith's movie joyfully frees itself not only from Dante but also from the illustrated Dante adaptation. Several of Birk's drawings have been respectfully re-used in the movie, often at the start of a new canto. One example is the beautiful panoramic, eye-catching shot of the Los Angeles valley of hell corresponding to Dante's didactic Canto XI. In the movie the camera slowly zooms out, showing us the hellish valley in its entire extension and underlining the minuteness of the two travelers.<sup>22</sup> [Fig. 7, p. 373]

But on many other occasions Birk's images become a mere starting point for modernizing interpretations. Take for example *Inferno* XIII, the episode of the suicides. The image of the protagonist tree is practically the same in both adaptations, but while the textual adaptation of Birk and Sanders sticks closely to the original episode, Meredith tells us a totally different story: the famous suicide hidden in the tree from which Dante plucks a twig is no longer Pier delle Vigne, chancellor to the Emperor Frederick II, but twentieth-century actor George Henry Sanders (1906–72) who at the age of sixty-five committed suicide, leaving a sarcastic note. Sanders is in the company of two suicidal colleague-trees, actresses Barbara Bates (1925–69) and Marilyn Monroe (1926–62). By changing the personnel in this and other episodes Meredith clearly and explicitly puts a Los Angeles-Hollywood signature on his work.

Other images undergo a similar but more generic modernization. Take the example of Geryon. Birk had already transformed Dante's compound creature of fraud into a transport helicopter. In the puppet movie, however, this transformation is taken one interesting step further and Geryon is turned into a cable network's press helicopter, thus connecting it closely to modern icons of fraud, gossip, and deceitfulness. On his arrival at the edge of the precipice, Dante is chased by news reporters assailing him with all kinds of questions about his journey through the afterlife and his supposedly questionable moral standards. A similar modernization runs through the episode of the falsifiers. Here Meredith focuses significantly on Dante's 'falsatori di persona', whose modern counterparts become 'identity thieves'. In Meredith's hell these are punished by a strikingly appropriate contrapasso: they literally have to become every person that happens to pass by, which results in a confusing scene with dozens of Dante and Virgil clones. [Fig. 8, p. 373]

Just as in Birk's illustrations, the setting of Meredith's movie adaptation is almost always (sub)urban California.<sup>23</sup> More than any previous urban adaptation of Dante's hell, Meredith's movie transposes and metamorphoses Dante's journey into a recognizable and realistic post-industrial (sub)urban environment, completing and perfecting Birk's urban illustrations. While former writers and artists used only some specific parts of modern cities to evoke Dante's hell,<sup>24</sup> both Birk and Meredith use almost the whole city of Los Angeles in their adaptation of Dante's medieval vision of hell. For practically every fictional space in Dante's hell the movie proposes some kind of (sub)urban equivalent. The dark wood has turned into a Los Angeles slum, its savageness and



remoteness demonstrated by the cruel absence of cell phone service. In the harbour lies the Acheron Ferry and on the docks the agitated policeman Charon tries to control the forced uprising of the pusillanimous. Limbo is placed under a bridge; its inhabitants are homeless drunks. A lazy judge Minos is sitting behind a desk, controlling a futuristic pipeline system that sucks sinners to their final destinations. The lustful are found in a red-light district with erotic theatres, Paolo and Francesca trapped inside a kind of erotic jukebox. The gluttons lie in the mud of a guarded construction site. The city of Dis is a planned community, a 'Hades corporation development'. The heretics are boiling inside jacuzzis. The sodomites are queuing up to enter a gay discotheque. A part of Malebolge is a huge office building. Pimps must prostitute themselves on sleazy sidewalks. Corrupt politicians are being body searched, very thoroughly, in the LA airport. The only group of sinners living outside LA are the flatterers, who significantly dwell in the Capitol building in Washington, DC. Lake Cocytus, finally, is the frozen lake in the city park we've seen before at the end of the line of the city's subway.

Despite its predominantly jocular and apparently superficial character, I believe this puppet movie offers various interesting innovations in the history of modern and postmodern Dante metamorphoses. First of all, it is one of the truly rare detailed reworkings of the entire *Inferno*. It is also unique in transposing all details of Dante's hell into a recognizable, here and now metropolis. And in doing so, it paradoxically combines structural fidelity with a bold and utterly 'Dantesque' treatment of its revered source.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Dante's Inferno*, directed by Sean Meredith, produced by Paul Zaloom and Sandow Birk, art directed by Elyse Pignolet, 2007. More information on this movie can be found on the website <<http://www.dantefilm.com>> [accessed 23 May 2010].
- 2 'L'inferno del topolino', *Topolino*, 2.7 (October 1949); an English version of *Mickey's Inferno* appeared only in March 2006, as part of *Walt Disney's Comics and Stories*, no. 666.
- 3 Peter S. Hawkins, 'Moderno Uso', in *Dante's Paradiso*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005), pp. vi–xiv (p. vii).
- 4 More examples of twentieth-century city visions and other movies inspired by Dante can be found in Nick Havely, *Dante* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), pp. 154–

- 57 and also in Amilcare Iannucci, 'Dante and Hollywood', in *Dante, Cinema & Television*, ed. by Amilcare Iannucci (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004), pp. 3–20.
- 5 Zygmunt Barański, 'The Power of Influence: Aspects of Dante's Presence in Twentieth-Century Italian Culture', *Strumenti Critici*, 1 (1986), pp. 343–76 (p. 376).
  - 6 Both *La mortaccia* and *La Divina Mimesis* have been reprinted in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Romanzi e racconti*, ed. by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude, 2 vols (Milano: Mondadori, 1998), II, pp. 591–96 and pp. 1071–1158.
  - 7 Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti claimed that *La Divina Mimesis* was the only authentic attempt to rewrite the *Commedia* in postwar Italian culture. It should not be seen as parodic or ironic, but it did show, according to this same critic, the impossibility of actually remaking the illustrious source, 'di riprodurlo come ideologia oltre che come meccanismo letterario, costruzione poetica'. Giorgio Bàrberi Squarotti, 'L'ultimo trentennio', in *Dante nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, ed. by Silvio Zennaro (Roma: Bonacci, 1979), pp. 245–77 (p. 275).
  - 8 'Quello che a me interessa soprattutto è usare l'*Inferno* dantesco per dare un giudizio, storicamente oggettivo, e una diagnosi, marxisticamente esatta, della nostra società.' 'Dialoghi con Pasolini', in Pier Paolo Pasolini, *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, ed. by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude (Milan: Mondadori, 1999), p. 921. For similar Dantesque adaptations in urban contexts in the Anglo-American culture we might quote a novel like Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985), but here the distance to the source tends to prevail over the creative interaction with it, although the *Comedy* might still be seen as the structural backbone of Naylor's novel.
  - 9 *Dante's Inferno*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2004); *Dante's Purgatorio*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005); *Dante's Paradiso*, illustrated by Sandow Birk, text adapted by Sandow Birk and Marcus Sanders (San Francisco: Chronicle Books, 2005).
  - 10 For a discussion of these early cinematic productions see John P. Welle, 'Early Cinema, Dante's Inferno of 1911, and the Origins of Italian Film Culture', in *Dante, Cinema & Television*, pp. 21–50, and Antonella Braidà, 'Dante's Inferno in the 1900s: From Drama to Film', in *Dante on View: The Reception of Dante in the Visual and Performing Arts*, ed. by Antonella Braidà and Luisa Calè (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007), pp. 39–51.
  - 11 The interview can be found on <<http://www.independentfilm.com/festivals/video-gallery/fest/dantes-inferno-movie-sean-meredith.shtml>> [accessed 23 May 2010].
  - 12 This improper balance between textual fidelity and liberty is also one of the reasons behind several critical reviews of Tom Phillips' and Peter Greenaway's *A TV Dante*. See, for example, Nancy J. Vickers, 'Dante in the Video Decade', in *Dante Now: Current Trends in Dante Studies*, ed. by J. Cachey Theodore (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), pp. 263–76, and also Andrew

- Taylor, 'Television, Translation, and Vulgarization: Reflections on Phillips' and Greenaway's *A TV Dante*', in *Dante, Cinema & Television*, pp. 145–52.
- 13 Peter S. Hawkins, *Dante: A Brief History* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), p. 154.
  - 14 The translation is 'too literal to be a real reinvention and too reinvented to be a functional translation. [...] The text is too weighed down by the power and the particulars of the original.' Rebecca Solnit, 'Check out the Parking Lot', *London Review of Books*, 8 July 2004, also on <[http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n13/soln01\\_.html](http://www.lrb.co.uk/v26/n13/soln01_.html)> [accessed 23 May 2010]. A pendant of these aberrant linguistic choices is found in various recent translations of the *Comedy* that rely heavily on urban dialects or specific variants of English, for example Ciaran Carson's creative transformation of Dante's hell, *The Inferno of Dante Alighieri*, trans. by Ciaran Carson (London: Granta Books, 2002).
  - 15 Hawkins, 'Moderno uso', p. x, quotes the beautiful example of the Ovidian satir Marsias, recalled by Dante in *Paradiso* I, who gets a country and Western counterpart in the young fiddler Johnny who challenges the Devil to a fiddle contest in Georgia: 'Apollo, I'm calling on your help to finish off this part. [...] I'll need your music to flow through me, like I when Johnny won the golden fiddle in that *Devil Went Down to Georgia* country-western song.'
  - 16 Hawkins, 'Moderno Uso', p. vii.
  - 17 This connection with Doré is mentioned in all three introductory essays to the volumes of the Birk-Sanders edition, authored by Michael F. Meister ('Introduction', in *Dante's Inferno*, pp. xi–xxi), Marcia Tanner ('Sandow Birk's *Commedia Urbana*', in *Dante's Purgatorio*, pp. vi–xi) and, Peter S. Hawkins ('Moderno Uso'). See also Hawkins, *Dante*, pp. 154–59.
  - 18 Osip Mandelstam, *Conversation About Dante*, repr. in *The Poets' Dante*, ed. by Peter S. Hawkins and Peter and Rachel Jacoff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), pp. 40–93 (p. 43). Mandelstam discovered a profoundly synaesthetic Dante. Ugolino's story, for example, to him is an aria, 'enveloped in the dense and heavy timbre of a cello like rancid, poisoned honey' (pp. 75–76), everywhere he hears 'the human gait', the footsteps of the poem in its rhythm, in *Paradise* he sees 'a genuine kinetic ballet' (p. 83). Mandelstam's objective was to 'wrest Dante from the grip of schoolroom rhetoric' (p. 90), to emphasize what he calls 'the creation of impulses' more than 'the creation of forms', 'impulses pertaining to textiles, sailing, scholasticism, meteorology, engineering, municipal concerns, handicrafts and industry, as well as other things; the list could be extended to infinity' (p. 93).
  - 19 Seamus Heaney, 'Envy and Identifications: Dante and the Modern Poet', *Irish University Review: A Journal of Irish Studies*, 15.1 (1985), pp. 5–19.
  - 20 'Moderno Uso', p. xiv.
  - 21 <<http://www.dantefilm.com/filmnotes.html#toytheater>> [accessed 23 May 2010].
  - 22 Unlike the illustrations which parody a Doré incision, this cover drawing of the valley of hell shows a rather complicated pictorial background: 'It remodels Frederick Church's gargantuan 1862 luminist painting *Cotopaxi*, Ecuador into a vision of all California as Hell. The same belching volcano is there on the hori-

zon filling the sky with sun-reddened smoke, the same vast gorge in the central foreground. But Birk has turned the gorge's sublime waterfalls into a sort of terraced lava-bottomed mining pit around which emblems of all California gather. There are palm trees and oil derricks and power lines in the foreground, along with signs for chain stores and, rather in the mode of Poussin's *Et in Arcadia Ego*, a skull sitting on a plinth inscribed 'Inferno'. In the middle distance a shattered Golden Gate Bridge reaches toward the gorge then breaks off, and birds, black against the backlight, fly through the ruddy scene and perch on the power lines. Freeways snake throughout this vision of Hell, the red tail-lights of departing traffic balanced with the yellow-white of approaching headlights in what looks like California's most frequent invocation of Hell: the rush-hour traffic jam' (Solnit, 'Check out the Parking Lot').

- 23 Hell is situated in Los Angeles. It is surprising and significant, however, that in Birk's illustrations not only this 'earthly' part of the afterlife but also the two heavenly ones remained firmly 'here and now, in mundane America' (Hawkins, 'Moderno Uso', p. xi): purgatory is in San Francisco, paradise (mainly) in New York.
- 24 For example London Bridge, the outskirts or the ring road of Rome, the Rebibbia prison, a Roman cinema, the Milanese subway, etc.

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