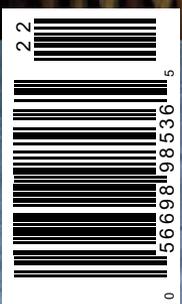


Cabinet

A QUARTERLY OF ART AND CULTURE
ISSUE 46 PUNISHMENT
US \$12 CANADA \$12 UK £7



HELL IS A FUNHOUSE MIRROR

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Dante's *Inferno* is a poem of thirty-four cantos composed in the early fourteenth century; it may be the supreme masterwork of European literature. *Dante's Inferno* is an eighty-nine-minute Fox film released in 1935 starring Spencer Tracy (and featuring a bit-part appearance by a pre-fame Rita Hayworth); it merits closer attention.

We meet Tracy's rough-and-ready character, Jim Carter, in the engine-room of an ocean steamer, where blazing furnaces rake the Stygian stokers with infernal light. He shovels coal into the flames. Fade to fire.

A drifter in the docklands, Jim eventually washes up as a carny barker in a Coney Island of the mind, rustling custom for a pasticcio attraction known as "Dante's Inferno," brainchild of a soulful psychopomp named Doc McQuade. This doctor aims to save sinners, and to that end, he has erected an instructive funhouse where the pedestrian pilgrim (after payment of a dime) may descend into the maw of moral instruction, touring Dante's hell very much in the spirit of Dante himself, whose journey was meant to harrow and edify. Problem is, the strolling men in trilbies and their gals won't pay to be perfected. A cabinet of eschatological curiosities cannot hold its own against roulette wheels and the opportunity to bean men in blackface with baseballs. The joint languishes. Doc sits at the gate, a wan prophet of the boardwalk, accorded no respect in his native land. His pretty daughter knits at the till.

Enter a bush-league Satan to animate this sleepy little underworld. Jim—silver-tongued, unscrupulous, in thrall to the gospel of success—marries the girl and sets to the task of, as he puts it, "putting hell on a paying basis." This means a showman's makeover for Dis: sinful chicks in gauzy pushup bras, beefy dark angels, and a panoply of the damned (well oiled) all stuffed into a soaring nine-story ziggurat of well-capitalized bad behavior. *Lasciate ogne speranza, voi ch'intrate...*

It's a hit, of course, this new concession. But, predictably, Jim has mortgaged his soul in the bargain, playing fast and loose with money, partners, and the law. So the devil gets his due, and in a scene worthy of Cecil B. DeMille, this satanic Xanadu comes crashing down on the heads of the revelers. Chaos ensues. Suicides. A trial. The end of the storybook marriage. Fatherless children. A music box tinkles out its tragic tune. Ruin and despair.

Cue an immortal play-within-the-play: bedside with Doc (spectral survivor of hell's collapse), Jim submits to a nine-minute hallucinatory encounter with the veritable torments of the damned. This *visio* comes in the form



Illustration by Bartolomeo di Fruosino of false counsellors burning in "tongues of fire" for their sins, ca. 1420.

of an extraordinary coming-to-life of Gustave Doré's cinematic nineteenth-century woodcut illustrations of the *Inferno*, the pages of which Doc turns before Jim's addled eyes.

Up to this point, *Dante's Inferno* mostly has the feel of a two-bit morality tale. And the picture dutifully takes this modest mantle back up by way of conclusion. But cupped between these flatpan exercises in Hollywood cant lies this improbable and spectacular nugget of must-see modernist *film noir*: screams of stone and fire twist open into vertiginous vistas, smoke-veiled, yawning; cliffs resolve into a Hieronymus Bosch-like tissue of tiny forms—less human than polyp—which wave synchronously, buffeted by a raging storm of pain and flame; bodies flail, hurled from precipices, or writhe in obscene states of alternating distention and attenuation. Everything melts into pools of searing high-contrast, then suddenly returns to focus. Neither vision offers the least relief. Now and again something indelible billows up from the formless darks—as in a perfect nightmare. The whole thing feels like *Flaming Creatures* filmed by John Martin with three thousand extras, and it is seriously weird.

No joke on the extras. A contemporary write-up in the *New York Times* reported that the makeup artist on the film (one Tom Karnagel), charged with making the writhing hoards suitably diaphanous and insubstantial, mixed up a special dematerializing sauce, which was applied in bulk, by hose: "each day of 'shooting' the entire company was lined up along miles of tarpaulin and sprayed into character."

This was of a piece with the gargantuan ambitions of the director, Harry Lachman, a minor post-impressionist painter then using the hot sun of southern California to air and exorcise his years in a Parisian garret. Lachman gave himself to architecting hell with Faustian urgency. A team of his set designers spent weeks in the Sierras, taking actual castings from desert escarpments, while “in the laboratory, chemists and special effects men were at work attempting to achieve a sea of boiling pitch, a rain of fire, a sea of ice, suicide trees with human beings growing into them ... a lake of fire and other minor tortures.” The studio would eventually claim that more than five thousand technicians, artists, electricians, masons, and grunts labored for more than a year in order to produce more than three hundred thousand feet of original footage of what lay beyond Lethe.

The suits would have loved to forget the whole thing. They keened, bereaved to see this extravagant exercise in art-house auteurship pared down to a tidy nine minutes of German expressionist-flavored interlude—which superfluity was then obliged to nest incongruously in the middle of a movie-house bon-bon that flamed out as a total flop. Fiasco. Spencer Tracy reportedly declared it the worst film of his life.

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Students of Dante’s *Inferno* promptly encounter the concept of *contrapasso*, the weighty principle of punishment that structures the whole poem. Grossly speaking, it means something like, “the punishment fits the crime.” So, if in life you connived to set a father against his son, then in Dante’s hell you are consigned to carry your own head in your hands. In this way, your act—the decapitation of a family—is revisited on your person as recompense. Hence Bertran de Born, plotter in a paricidal unpleasantness involving Henry II, announces to Dante at the end of canto twenty-four (from lips on a head he holds lantern-like by the hair), “*Così s’osserva in me lo contrapasso.*” Which gets translated different ways. Longfellow gave it as “Thus is observed in me the counterpoise.” Singleton settles on “Thus is the retribution observed in me.” The James Brown version? “So here you’ve got the *big payback.*”

A nuanced unfolding of the meanings of *contrapasso* (it emerged first in Latin translations of Aristotle, and achieved its dominant formulation in the work of Aquinas) would come very close to a full-dress history of the idea of justice in Christendom, since what is ultimately at issue is the very notion of the proper measure—the suitability, the appropriateness—of any given act of judicial (or divine) violence. The earliest notions

of an authorizing adequation between crime and desert tended to privilege simple symmetry, as in the Mosaic *lex talionis* (“an eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth”). But mirroring entangles one in inversions, and much of the complexity of the evolving notion of *contrapasso* lies in the tension between punishments that simply punch back (doing unto the doer what the doer did unto another) and those that properly *counterpunch* (doing unto the doer something smart, something that puts a satisfying twist on the whole situation). Enter various contrastive and ironizing tropes. Enter, thereby, the possibility of a specifically *poetic* justice. Enter, just behind, the notion of punishment as itself a species of rough-handed poetry—a way of writing with (and sometimes on) the body of those who do wrong. Enter, finally, the *poetry of punishment*. Which is to say, Dante’s *Inferno*, where those who were unable to commit—the waf-fers, the foot-draggers, the fence-sitters—must march behind banners for all eternity in vast army-like formations. Or where those who succumbed to the tantalizing pleasures of illegitimate carnal desire find themselves forever locked in lurid embraces, windswept in the void created by their monomania. These punishments mirror the crimes—but in a funhouse speculation called art.

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Back to the funhouse. The minds behind *Dante’s Inferno* appear to have had some sense of the *contrapasso*. The film ends back in the engine-room of that same ocean steamer, where a penitent Jim Carter battles *water* in an overwrought expiation of his days of flame. The moral of the story? There is no great allegory that cannot be converted into treacle on the silver screen. But, on further reflection, this may be the specific *contrapasso* of Hollywood ambition as such.

Take Harry Lachman as exhibit *a*. His Jim Carter (spoiler alert) gets a happy ending. Which means this “inferno” was only really ever a purgatorial passage. But Lachman, at least, appears actually to have learned that hell doesn’t pay. As *Dante’s Inferno* came crashing down around him, he slipped out a side exit, and we find him after the war in, of all places, a roadside anti-Eden: as the proprietor of a respectable patio supply shop in Beverly Hills, where, we are told, he made “decorative objects from junk.”

His fate suggests a special circle of Dante’s infernal realm—a ring for those who aspire to fame and fortune by means of the depiction of hell. And their punishment? Endlessly to tend the gardens of paradise.

Which leaves only one question: Would Dante have put himself there?