

# Real Visions of Imaginary Worlds in the Illustrations of Gustave Doré

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the visual motifs proposed by the illustrations of Gustave Doré, a well-known French illustrator of the 19th century, by making a twofold comparison: on the one hand with the previous iconography from which he broke away, and on the other hand with the subsequent interpretations, particularly in the field of cinema, which decreed the definitive imposition of his visions in the collective imagination. In particular, the analysis focuses on the illustration of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, of which Doré proposed a new interpretation, which takes the form of a powerful visual narrative with a strong scenic component. The changes with respect to Dante's traditional iconography concern many aspects: from the features of the characters to the description of the environments, but above all a different perspective with which the illustrations are constructed to create a visual path that gives life to a dynamic setting of the narration in the modern sense.

Keywords: illustration, iconography, imaginary, visual narrative, *Divine Comedy*.

## Introduction

Gustave Doré was one of the best-known and most prolific illustrators of the 19th century and linked his name to the visual transposition of a wide range of literary genres, from literary classics to children's stories. Over a period of thirty years, he illustrated more than a hundred works, leaving an indelible mark on the collective imagination. To give even a partial idea of his production, his main works include the illustration of Balzac's *Les Contes Drôlatiques* (1855), Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1860), Dante Alighieri's *Divina Commedia* (*Inferno* in 1861, *Purgatorio* and *Paradiso* in 1968), and Charles Perrault's fairy tales (1862), Cervantes' *Don Quixote* (1863), *Le Capitaine Fracasse* and *The Adventures of Baron Munchausen* by Théophile Gautier (1866), Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1866), *The Bible* (1866), Coleridge's *The Ballad of the*

*Old Mariner* (1870), Michaud's *Histoire des Croisades* (1875), Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso* (1877), Edgar Allan Poe's *The Raven* (1877) [Kaenel 2005].

The most interesting aspect of his artistic work lies in his ability to make realistic, i.e., endowed with a visual identity, environments and characters born from the literary imagination of authors, transforming textual descriptions into images with such expressive power that they have shaped the collective imagination to this day. In this sense, it corresponds to Focillon's definition of "visionaries", who "are not satisfied with our universe and, while the study of its forms satisfies most masters, it is for them no more than a provisional picture, or if you prefer, a starting point. They continually go beyond man" [Focillon 1998, p. 7].

This graphic translation of the literary description produced unprecedented representations, completely different from the iconographic tradition that had previously tackled the same motifs. His images quickly became points of reference and sources of inspiration for the artistic production of painting and sculpture, particularly on the themes of the *Bible* and the *Divine Comedy*, making certain visual motifs typical and replacing those previously used in compositions [La Salvia 2016]. The writer and friend Théophile Gautier, who reviewed the first edition of Hell, described his work as visionary, likening his drawings to the chimerical architectures of Radcliffe and Piranesi and the expressive power of Goya. "No artist could have illustrated Dante better than Gustave Doré. In addition to his talent for composition and graphics, he possesses that visionary eye the poet speaks about, capable of revealing the secret and singular aspect of nature. He recognises in things their bizarre, fantastic and mysterious side" [Gautier 2021, p. 8].

But the aesthetics of Doré's illustrations went even further in defining collective imagination. Several authors have acknowledged his innovative capacity for staging stories, to the point of configuring his drawings as modern stage sets, on which the cinema based a great deal of its early productions, helping to spread his visual interpretation of literary settings and characters to an ever-wider audience. The reason for this success lies in his ability to stage the story through vivid and eloquent representations, designed to be reproduced at different scales and on different supports, from paper to wood or glass, and to be understood by a heterogeneous audience. References to his illustrations can be found in various film genres and over a very wide period: from the biblical themes of *The Life and Passion of Christ* (Pathé 1902) and *Noah's Ark* (Curtiz, Zanuck 1928), (fig. 1) to *King Kong* (Cooper, Schoedsack 1933), (fig. 2); from the *Star Wars* saga, which takes up themes from the drawings of *The Orlando Furioso*, to Disney's animated films, up to recent films such as *Oliver Twist* (Polanski 2005), which recreates the atmosphere of 19th century London described by Doré in the drawings published in 1872 under the title *London: a pilgrimage* [Robert 2014]. To delimit the research field, the following notes focus on the illustration of the *Divine Comedy*, for which Doré can be considered the watershed between traditional iconography and the new interpretation transferred to the cinematographic field.

## A new representation of Dante's visions

The *Divine Comedy* is the vehicle of an enormous iconographic repertoire, starting with the visual themes already available, which inspired Dante himself when he wrote the work, and crossing the centuries with successive interpretations that have given rise to a figurative narration that, starting from traditional motifs, has been enriched over time with new visual elements [Battaglia Ricci 2008]. Scholars agree that the illustrations included in the various editions are not merely decorative elements dictated by aesthetic reasons, but exegetical tools with the role of interpreting and commenting the text, to the point of acting as a parallel and complementary narrative to the textual one, which simplifies and completes the reading adding visual explanations and further levels of meaning of more immediate comprehension [Brieger 1969].

Doré followed this tradition of visual commentary on Dante's poem, approaching the illustration in a completely different way from all his predecessors. His aim was not to illustrate the work faithfully and comprehensively, but rather to choose the episodes that most fired his imagination and to present a vision dictated by his inspiration. This choice is reflected in the different number of drawings accompanying the three canticles: 75 for the *Hell*, which corresponds to an average of two drawings for each canto that no previous illustrator had produced, 42 for the *Purgatory* and 18 for the *Paradise*. Moreover, his vision is not always completely faithful to Dante's description. "The sacrifice of fidelity, however, is often to the advantage of the effectiveness of the representation and offers a key to understanding the immortal success of Dante's masterpiece, which since the fourteenth century (as the most aristocratic of readers, Petrarch, testified with horror) has been loved even by the uncultured, passing from mouth to mouth and being necessarily misunderstood and mispronounced, while remaining extraordinarily alive" [Baldassarri 2021, p. 19].

The expressive style is variable and adapts to the tone of the scenes and characters: the dark and intricate landscapes of the first illustrations, the bloody horror of some scenes from Hell, the Michelangesque plasticity of characters such as Charon or Minos, the luminosity of the scenes in Paradise. His interpretation, together with that of Grandville, has been defined as "the place of fusion and synthesis of an artistic and literary tradition that are changing under the pressure of new communication needs,

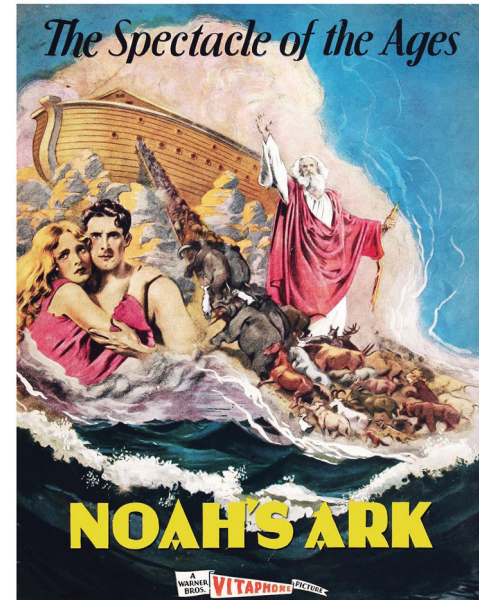


Fig. 1. G. Doré, Noé envoie une colombe sur la terre, illustration for the Bible, 1866. M. Curtiz and D.F. Zanuck, Noah's Ark, frame and poster of the film, 1928.





Fig. 2. G. Doré, illustration of Atala by Chateaubriand, 1863. M. Cooper and E. Shoedsack, King Kong, frame of the film, 1933.

new reproduction techniques, new distribution circuits" [Abruzzese 2007, p. 28]. In fact, his innovation is not only in the creation of the images, but in the whole process of production and presentation of the work.

From a technical point of view, Doré brought about a revolution in the conception of the picture book as a media tool. Compared to previous editions, which included small illustrations breaking the continuity of the text, his editorial choice was radically different. Doré inserted full-page illustrations with a size of 18 x 33 cm, introducing a significant change in the perception of the relationship between text and image. The full-page illustrations dominate the canto, assuming a principal role in the communication with the reader, while the text almost seems to recede into a secondary element (fig. 3). This reversal of roles was already recognised by contemporary critics, who wrote that "More than Dante illustrated by Doré, it is Doré illustrated by Dante" [Lachey 1869, p. 202]. To assign to the illustration a major narrative role, Doré composed the text in such a way to place the image exactly where he wanted it to occur; where it would arouse the greatest surprise, according to a modern and at the time unprecedented conception of the relationship between text and image. Small portions of text were instead reproduced on the protective veil of the illustrations, to increase the link between the linguistic and iconic code, superimposing the text related to the illustrated verses on the lower part of the image itself, with a transparent effect like a theatre curtain that opened to reveal the scene. He also gave particular importance to the technique of reproduction, to preserve in the prints the effects of volume, chiaroscuro and shades of grey of the original drawings, with the help of the best engravers of the time. In this way, he created a specific editorial genre, the luxury illustrated book, aimed at a specific target, the rich bourgeoisie for whom owning a personal library was indicative of their social status [Amendola, Tirino 2016]. From a stylistic point of view, the work of Doré, artist of the Romantic movement, is characterised by a marked use of chiaroscuro that emphasises the narration, contrasting the darkness of the infernal abyss with the triumph of light in the Paradise.

The sequence of drawings represents with extreme coherence, verisimilitude and richness of detail a mere imaginary world, attributing concrete features to places that no one has ever seen. The first drawings relate to real landscapes, but as soon as Dante immerses himself in the world of the afterlife, the representation takes on the fea-



er se possano uedere. Et quello naturalmente ad  
 pota esser. Ad solamente per dispendio di uana  
 summento loz corpo fantastico. **D**eualmente alla uita  
 di carni ouero poltoni corrisponde no questi pene. **I**  
 2 uidi son costoro non uestia di alcun ornamento de  
 uirni. o di buona reputatione che se habia di loro. **O**  
 Quanto al corpo anchora communemente son nudi o  
 per poverta o per negligencia. Da uespe et moschoi  
 conuenientemente son cruciatte queste anime di poltro  
 ni. et e ricolto el sangue suo da fastidiosi uermi. secun  
 to che muira marceito lozo in ocio el suo principal of  
 ficio era de combatter contra le mosche et altri uulsi  
 mi uermi scacciatoisse li da tomo. Et questo basti  
 ad nostro proposito



**E**t poi ch'io riguardar ultra mi uiedi  
 uiedi gente alla riva d'un gran fiume  
 per ch'io dissi maestro: or mi concedi  
 e' buo sapia qua' son et qual costume  
 le fa del trapassar parer si prompte  
 como discerno per lo fiesco lume.  
 Et ell' ad me le cosse te sien conte  
 quanto mi firmaremo i nostri passi  
 su la misa ruota d'acheron.  
 A lor: con li occhi uerigognosi et bassi



Fig. 3. Page with illustration of Charon in the illustrated manuscript with miniatures by Guiniforte Barzizza, 1430-1450 and in Doré's Hell, 1861.



Fig. 4. Doré, illustration of misers and prodigals in the VII canto of the Hell, 1861.

tures of a vision that undoubtedly does not belong to our world. In describing the settings and characters, Doré was in some ways forced to go beyond Dante's narrative. If the poet could omit the details of certain physical descriptions, the artist could not avoid depicting them. But in this case, Doré did not conform to the traditional iconography, and diverged even from the interpretation given by previous artists. For example, while traditionally the Hell had been imagined with flat bottomed circles, Doré drew landscapes of varying topography, with hills and rocky spurs, which exalted the drama of certain episodes (Fig. 04). The visual articulation of the scenes shows a personal interpretation, which some purists of Dante's text have judged to be beyond the task of an illustrator but are part of his way of conceiving the illustrated text as a living and continuous dialogue between words and images, in which it is up to the reader to express the final judgement [Cole 1994]. His personal style takes up the tradition of the Michelangelo's nude, blending it with the traits of Botticelli and the drama of the Northern European landscape painting, and inserting iconographic themes from popular culture. The visual motifs in many cases are original, like the vortex theme, which he depicted in several illustrations and was then adopted by various artists in their paintings [Marin 2015]. From a compositional point of view, Doré opposed asymmetrical and dynamic compositions to the symmetry and

centrality that characterised most of the scenes of the previous illustrators (fig. 5), placing the main characters in off-centre positions, and obtaining effects that were later applied in the dynamic images of the audio-visual media (fig. 6). Another characteristic is the different scale used to emphasise mythological characters as opposed to human figures and in particular to Dante and Virgil, who appear very small and lost in the infernal landscape (fig. 7). The dynamism of the composition induces the reader to observe it along a visual path culminating in the most important element in the scene. In such way, the illustration assumes the value of a visual narration that follows the course of the events.

The influence of the new visual themes proposed by Doré's interpretation was immediate both in the field of painting and sculpture, which had traditionally dealt less with Dante's subjects. As well as giving shape to representations of Dante himself, many previously neglected subjects became part of the artists' themes (an example is the Suicide wood). Above all, Doré's influence is evident in the composition of the works, which began to be inspired by the theatrical staging of his hostile and tragic landscapes populated by Michelangelo's figures. The painting, on the other hand, took up his scenography where some figures are represented on a monumental scale compared to others, as well as the use of light and shadow effects to accentuate the drama of the scenes [Audeh 2009].

The definitive imposition of Doré's vision on the collective imagination occurred with the advent of cinema. Even before movies were produced, his drawings were used for screen projections with spoken commentary or musical accompaniment. These magic lantern projections became very popular at the end of the 19th century: Doré's pictures, which had already been conceived to be used on various media, were among the most widely used, giving new life and wide circulation to his imagination [Malan 1995]. It was therefore natural that his work should also serve as a model for the first films that attempted to reproduce Dante's comedy on movie. Among the many movies that dealt with the theme in its entirety or limited to single episodes, one of the most significant is *Inferno* (1911) directed by Francesco Bertolini, Giuseppe De Liguoro and Adolfo Padovan, the first full-length movie and the first colossal of Italian cinema, which inaugurated a genre linked to literary culture that had a great impact even on popular audiences [Bernardini 1985].





Fig. 5. Illustration of Minos (in central position) in the V canto of the Hell by Federico Zuccari, 1568-1588 and by William Blake, 1824-1827.



Fig. 6. Illustration of Minos (in an off-center position) in the V canto of Doré's Hell, 1861 and in a frame of the film *Inferno*, 1911.



Fig. 7. Illustration of Jerion in the XVII canto of Doré's *Inferno*, 1861.

The first to recognise the link between Bertolini-De Liguoro-Padovan's *Inferno* and Doré's illustrations was Matilde Serao, writing on *Il Giorno* after attending the projection of the movie at the Teatro Mercadante in Naples: "We saw nothing more artistic, more beautiful, more fascinating than the paintings in which the most salient visions of Hell appear in all their grandeur and power [...] If Gustave Doré is the author of the noblest graphic commentary on the Divine Comedy, this film, which rehabilitates the cinematograph, has made Doré's work revive" [Serao, 1911]. From these words emerges first the appreciation of the artistic work of illustration, which is defined as "graphic commentary" to underline the operation of graphic translation into images of the literary description.

Secondly, we note how the film work is interpreted as a re-proposition of Doré's graphic commentary using a new visual technique. Doré is fully recognised as the interpreter of Dante's poem, which through his graphic mediation from the 14th century verses becomes a visual narration for the 20th century audience. In this regard, it should be considered that in the cinema, from its origins to around 1915, the narrative instance used iconographic references external to the movie, inserting the component of the fourth dimension, the time, to animate the illustration of a visual material already present in the cultural system of the public. In this case, the reference to Doré's illustrations was explicit just to enable viewers to recognise his work and appreciate the new dynamic narrative instance proposed by the film [Burch 1994].

The analogies between Doré's illustrative apparatus and the cinematographic representation of Bertolini-De Liguoro-Padovan concern various aspects (fig. 8). First, the narrative modality that blends linguistic and iconic codes, recreated in the film through the addition of captions with explanations and comments that give rhythm to the sequence of scenes, in absence of spoken language [Brunetta 2001]. Secondly, the features and poses of the characters, from Dante and Virgil, whose actors were chosen for their physical similarity to Doré's illustrations, to the portrayal of the damned, which brought nudity onto the stage at a time when it was not permitted but was allowed here as a scenic device to increase the tragic nature of the representation. The same reference is made for the monstrous creatures, which follow both the physical appearance of the illustrations and the atmosphere and landscape that provide the scenery for their disturbing appearance on the stage. The third analogy is found in the choice of the viewpoint and the scenic composition, with long and very long shots, used by Doré to reproduce the effect of the sublime in the infernal landscape where the protagonists appear minuscule in the face of the majestic rawness of the spaces, and in the movie to achieve a realistic effect while at the same time not bringing the camera too close to the nude subjects [Braida 2007]. In some scenes, the analogy went so far as to reproduce exactly the point of view, perspective and composition used in the illustration. An emblematic example is the representation of Lucifer in the last canto of the *Hell*. The comparison between Dante's description, the traditional iconography, the modifications introduced by Doré's il-



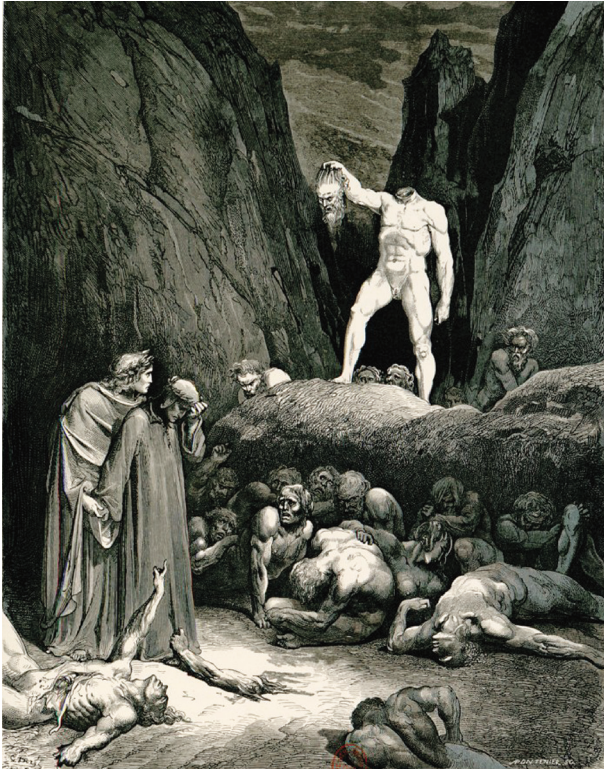


illustration and their cinematic proposition, which could be extended with a similar methodology to other scenes, supports the considerations expressed about Doré's role in the transition to new visual motifs.

### The staging of Lucifer

The *Divine Comedy* reports the version of the fall of Lucifer imposed since around the 4th-5th century, according to which the sin of pride due to the desire to equal God resulted in the expulsion from the heavenly world and the condemnation to eternal nothingness [Russel 1987]. In his literary description, Dante eliminated the grotesque elements of the medieval iconography of demons with horns and tails, to give Lucifer the sad and solemn majesty of an angel deprived of his beauty and condemned to horror. He is in fact an enormous and horrible creature, but he also has a character of grandeur. He is alone and unmovable at the farthest point from God, buried in the depths of Hell, from which only the upper part of his body emerges. By flapping its immense bat-like wings, two on each side, he causes a cold wind that freezes the lake of Cocytus. He has three faces of three different colours, and with each of his three mouths he tears apart one of three sinners, Judas, Brutus and Cassius, eternally tearing them apart with a cold, almost mechanical execution as an instrument of the divine justice [Pasquini 2013].

In the graphic transposition of this description, Doré diverged from the previous artistic iconography in favour of a greater descriptive realism and in certain aspects even a greater adherence to Dante's description, despite not respecting the perhaps most evident characteristic of the three faces. For the purposes of comparison, the example of Giotto's depiction of Lucifer in the *Last Judgement* in the Scrovegni Chapel (fig. 9), completed in 1306, therefore in the same years as Dante was working on the writing of the *Comedy*, is used here as a visual theme for the traditional iconography of Lucifer. It is believed that Dante had the opportunity to see it, or that the artist and the poet discussed the characteristics of the Devil [Link 2001]. Moreover, this representation was used as a model

Fig. 8. Illustration of Bertran de Born in canto XXVIII of Doré's Hell, 1861 and in a frame of the film *Inferno*, 1911.

for illustrations of the *Comedy* prior to Doré's. In Giotto's fresco, Lucifer dominates the scene in a central position in an almost symmetrical composition between the miniscule figures of the damned placed at his sides and at his feet. He has three faces, but also medieval horns, open arms and barely visible wings, but bat-like and not feathered like those of the angels. He is painted in cyan blue, the colour attributed to all demons in the Middle Ages. Similar characteristics can be found in the illustration of the *Comedy* by Sandro Botticelli (1497). Here too the composition is structured according to a central symmetry of the figure with physical features very similar to Giotto's, except for the arms which are symmetrical but folded in the act of bringing sinners to the mouths, while the much larger and more visible wings reproduce the form of the bat. In both representations, the figure is completely covered with fur and has claws. Again, William Blake, in his illustration of the *Comedy* (1824-27), reinterpreted this iconography with a modern taste with the same type of composition and visual weight of the elements, re-proposing similar physical characteristics and position in the description of the three faces, with arms like those painted by Giotto, and larger wings like those of Botticelli (fig. 10). His figure is humanised by the lack of fur, horns and claws [Schütze, Terzoli 2014]. It should be noted that in the three representations the composition is visually balanced by the central position of the demon and the symmetry of the elements, while the landscape in which the scene takes place is barely suggested. These are in fact the elements that were radically rethought in Doré's work.

Doré proposed a completely different composition for the illustration of the same canto of the *Hell*. First, he included for the first time an accurate landscape description of the infernal environment. The sharp rocks, positioned as a scenic background, form a sort of frame that encloses the scene. The figure of Lucifer stands out against the background, off-centre to the left, as a culmination of the visual path that starts at the bottom with the damned and ascends to the right over the miniscule figures of Dante and Virgil, finally focusing on his gigantic figure. Lucifer has only one face but is still depicted in the act of devouring sinners. Only his upper part is visible, emerging from the lake on whose frozen surface he rests his elbows. As in Dante's description, he has four gigantic bat-like wings, which occupy the entire background of the scene. The abandonment of symmetric composition



Fig. 9. Giotto, detail of the representation of Lucifer in the Last Judgement in the Scrovegni Chapel, 1306.

Fig. 10. Illustration of Lucifer in canto XXXIV of Hell by Botticelli, 1497 and Blake, 1824-1827.



in favour of the off-centre position of the main visual and narrative element gives dynamism to the scene, making it suitable for cinematographic transposition. Padovan-Bertolini-De Liguoro's *Inferno*, in fact, reproduced all Doré's visual elements, borrowing the entire iconographic structure, from the setting of the lake surrounded by sharp rocks and populated by the figures of the naked damned to the scenic composition with the figure of Lucifer off-centre on the left. The point of view is the same, as it is the difference in scale between the figures of the damned and the demon, which accentuates the sense of horror at his appearance. Lucifer is in the same pose with his elbows resting on the frozen surface of the lake, intent on devouring sinners, and he is again depicted with large bat-like wings closing off the background of the scene. Moreover, in both images, Lucifer does not look at Dante, but at the spectator, thus increasing his involvement (fig. 11). Movement, which in Doré's figurative representation was only expressed in power, is here activated thanks to a new dynamic medium, carrying a new and engaging mode of communication.

## Conclusions

The comparison between Doré's representations and similar scenes in the artistic and illustrative fields, together with the study of literary sources, has confirmed the hypotheses concerning the visual innovations he made on subjects widely used for several centuries, as demonstrated by the example of Lucifer. The re-proposition of his subjects and, above all, of his settings and scenography in the field of cinema has also confirmed his role in the transition from the previous iconographic tradition to a new visual imagination closer to the modern taste.

The success of the film *Inferno* and its use as a model for subsequent film versions of the *Comedy* have revived Doré's imaginary work in further reinterpretations, with new communication techniques and new media. In this way it has come up to date and is still alive today, when it has been the subject of contemporary graphic experiments such as the graphic novel *Dante's Inferno: The Graphic Novel* in 2012 and the movie *The Mystery of*

Fig. 11. Illustration of Lucifer in Canto XXXIV of Doré's *Hell*, 1861 and in a frame of the film *Inferno*, 1911.

Fig. 12. Lucifer in a frame of the film *The Mystery of Dante*, 2014.



*Dante* directed by Louis Nero in 2014. [Amendola, Tirino 2016]. The movie can be considered as a re-proposal of the magic lantern projections realised with the new possibilities offered by digital technology. Through the technique of animation, in fact, Doré's illustrations come

to life on the screen with an operation of iconographic transposition into the digital era (fig. 12), proposing a visual narration that once again updates Dante's work filtered through Doré's visionary eye and returns it to the collective imagination of our times.

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