

Underbelly Inferno: Interfaces between Television and the Internet in Australian Dramatic Production

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Abstract

This paper investigates the persistence of television media in Australia in the wake of Web 2.0 through the two free-to-air television series, *Guinevere Jones* (2002) and *Underbelly: Squizzy* (2013), as both case studies and textual analyses. The paper employs Margaret Wertheim’s comparison of Internet space to Dante Alighieri’s vision of the celestial realm and Amedeo D’Adamo’s analysis of Dantean space in television as a uniquely active space that collapses past, present, and future experiences. Through Wertheim’s analysis of Dante’s first cantica—*Inferno*—I consider the fracturing of mainstream televisual culture. By looking at the changing fan-celebrity interactions bookending the middle decade of Internet distribution waves, I attempt to shed light on Internet culture through the depictions of otherworldliness in *Guinevere* and *Underbelly*. Offering some concluding reflections on television’s Bazinian “window to the world,” the paper examines the transformations in online practice and how this affected television production in the years between 2002 and 2013.

Keywords: Celebrity, Dante Alighieri, Fandom, Internet, *Guinevere Jones*, Media, Television, *Underbelly: Squizzy*

Introduction

In her book, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (2000), Margaret Wertheim compares the evolving technology of the contemporary Internet to Dante Alighieri's vision of the celestial realm in *The Divine Comedy* (1320).¹ Our experience of the Internet, she argues, is underpinned by quasi-religious notions that lurk beneath our everyday secular reality. Building on her argument, I suggest that just as the Internet remediates Dante in this fashion, so contemporary television is bolstered by its mimicry of the Internet in terms of narrative space and structure. In this way, television now re-imbibes Internet technology for fan engagement in screen stories. In accordance with Wertheim's analysis, I argue this can be traced back to Dante's celestial otherworld paradigm. As such, I demonstrate how two modern Australian free-to-air television series—*Guinevere Jones* (2002) and *Underbelly: Squizzy* (2013)—show us how they re-engage Dante's *Inferno* "intertextually." This sets up a mutual feedback loop involving Dante's literature, television, and the Internet in ways that fracture mainstream culture through changing fan-celebrity interactions.² I therefore ask the question: what does Dante's *Inferno* have to tell us about the contemporary experience of watching television?

My argument is structured as follows. I first outline the two Australian productions in question—*Guinevere* and *Underbelly*—offering a description of their plots and production imperatives and highlighting the unique Internet/televsual issues the two series give rise to. I then introduce the theoretical apparatus which encompasses both Margaret Wertheim and Amedeo D'Adamo's Dantean analysis as well as Sheila C. Murphy's evaluation of the televsual form itself.³ Finally, I apply these theories to the two case studies to interrogate modern Internet usage and its implications for fragmenting televsual experience.

Guinevere and *Underbelly* bookend the middle decade of the Internet distribution waves that took place between 2002 and 2013 and are therefore perfectly placed to show the fracturing of mainstream culture through changing fan-celebrity interactions. While augmenting traditional scholarship, this inquiry is analytical, creative and draws on my practice-based experience as a professional actor within the

two productions studied. My presence on set, my direct engagement in fan commentary, and my conducting of interviews with the show's celebrities, writers and producers offer a unique perspective. While focussing on television and Internet studies, I believe this "emic" position goes beyond externalized scholarly observation and dovetails with the growing corpus of celebrity and fan research.⁴

The Productions: *Underbelly* and *Guinevere Jones*

In 2002, the Canadian-Australian young adult television co-production *Guinevere Jones* utilised chat rooms to engage its fans online. The show centers on the character of 'Gwen' Jones (Tamara Hope) who is a modern reincarnation of King Arthur's (Chris Hemsworth) intended spouse, Guinevere. In the narrative, Gwen must battle a host of supernatural beings intent on wreaking havoc throughout the universe, yet still faces the everyday realities of love, hope, and desire pertinent to many teenage girls. In the process of overcoming her personal problems under the mentorship of the wizard Merlin (Ted Hamilton), Gwen must realise her true identity, which, unbeknownst to her, is one that is centuries old. Gwen's adventures, like Wertheim's metaphor for the Internet metaphor—which evokes the fourteenth century experience of walking beside God—involve Gwen voyaging through both time and parallel realities to realise her love for Arthur. In this production, I played series regular Gadowain: a mischievous Scottish elf from the celestial realm who cajoles Gwen into travelling between intergalactic worlds.

Key issues arising from the series showed that the remediation of romantic ideas and ideals from previous centuries could effectively engage its mainly female contemporary audience in extra-textual ways. With this production, the feedback loop between fans and stars found completion through the use of chat rooms and a fan-based website to engage online conversation. Indeed, some comments from fans were incorporated into the plot of the show, which demonstrated new possibilities for online creation communities.⁵

A decade later, I played "Squizzy" Taylor's arch-nemesis Ted Whiting in the popular Australian television series *Underbelly: Squizzy*.

The show dramatised the downfall of Melbourne's favourite interwar celebrity criminal Les "Squizzy" Taylor—a real historical figure who terrorised 1920s Little Lonsdale Street. This was a "rags to riches" punitive plot, which pitted "Squizzy" and his Richmond gang against a plethora of Melbourne-based ruffians as he staked his claim as king of the underworld before toppling over into ruination and death in 1927. *Underbelly: Squizzy* also defied the contemporary trend of enacting the "real" by moving from its "gritty" sexploitation formula (effective in previous instalments of the series) toward a mythopoeic, "classical" rendition of crime.⁶

Some issues arising from the production involved a tendency for cultural intermediaries—such as producers—to impede fan-production feedback loops under the guise of promoting the show online.⁷ This was partly reflected in the subject matter, tone, and the use of light and space in its televisual narrative. Consequently, fan frustrations festered, involving a variety of issues, including their apparently ignored commentary online; their misgivings as to the transformation of the usual gritty *Underbelly* fare of the previous five series into something glamourized and disengaging; their distaste for the ethical positioning of the show; and their complaints about the network's yearlong promise of broadcast dates, about which their vexations were registered online.

Both *Underbelly: Squizzy* and *Guinevere Jones* imaginatively exploited the contemporary audiences' "click and drag" mentality, which further enabled a narrative descent into the underworld.⁸ *Guinevere* enacted an Internet-inspired rupture in space-time, while *Underbelly* provided a journey into the seedy otherworld of crime in a bygone era. However, where the *Guinevere* promotion team positioned the show effectively online, *Underbelly*'s producers underestimated the conjoined voices of Internet punters in an era "transformed by digitization and media convergence" when Australian television production fell from 68 to 60 per cent.⁹ Given Wertheim's analysis of Dante's first cantica—*Inferno*—I consider these fluid fan-celebrity interactions through *Underbelly: Squizzy*, which exploits television's relationship to the Internet in serendipitous rather than premeditated fashion. In contrast to *Guinevere* a decade earlier, *Underbelly*'s dramatisations divided fans—fans who celebrated

them and those who protested against its images in multifarious ways.

The *Pearly Gates* of Dantean Screen Space

In *The Pearly Gates*, Margaret Wertheim argues that the Internet remediates texts such as Dante's *Inferno* to ensure the efficacy of the new medium. She states that changes to the production of ecclesiastical narratives through evolving artistic depictions of space and light were introduced to Europe in the fourteenth century. Such definitions of space, time, light, and story reappear with the emergence of the Internet in the 1990s. According to Wertheim, this remediation is inherited from fourteenth century religious depictions of space, which serve to buttress the appeal and relevance of contemporary secular media. Research does not, however, make the structuralist assumption that all media filters back to the totalising effect of Dante's "celestial realm."¹⁰ Indeed, Wertheim rejects such quasi-theological claims, asking instead why Internet usage is bolstered by the kind of "attendant techno-religious dreams" and "heavenly aspirations" provided by Dante.¹¹

In her monograph, Wertheim draws on the traditions of Gothic/Proto-Renaissance to High Renaissance religious art to expound upon her Dantean hypothesis, by examining works from Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337) to Raphael (1483-1520). Yet, at the very inception of second wave Internet distribution (2000-2013), Wertheim applies the traditions of Western visual art to the Web 2.0. Contemporaneous with *Guinevere Jones*, then, Wertheim's *Pearly Gates* draws parallels between Internet usage and Dante's *Inferno* as "the ultimate *map* of Christian soul-space."¹² Based on René Descartes' proposition that reality is divided into binary opposites—"the *res extensa*, or physically extended realm of matter in motion, and the *res cogitans*, an immaterial realm of thoughts, feelings, and religious experience"—Wertheim advances the hypothesis that in contemporary daily use, a culturally modified version of divinity "shines through" the Internet.¹³ Her reliance on this abstract binary division implicates the modern world for not having surpassed these binary forms: it is a world still divided between mind and body. Wertheim suggests that Dante's "spiritual compass" affirms the soul as the realm

of truth over the physical world.¹⁴ Just as the *Book of Revelation* promises heavenly reward in the afterlife, she argues, wave one of popular online Internet interactivity promises untold pleasures.¹⁵ Internet technology must therefore engage the latent desires of the viewer/inter-actor in order to attract his or her interest—a notion previously explained mostly in the relationship between psychoanalysis and cinema.¹⁶ For Wertheim, the paradox of cyberspace is that it repackages the discarded ideas of Heaven and Hell into a proto-logical and techno-fetishist format.¹⁷

Drawing in a similar fashion on the *The Divine Comedy*, Amedeo D'Adamo's *Empathetic Space on Screen* positions Dante as exploiting an "aesthetic model of memory" for moral and allegorical purposes.¹⁸ D'Adamo's analysis of Dantean space in television highlights the collapsing of past, present, and future experience for both characters and audience. D'Adamo observes, "[w]hile dispassionate and dramatic spaces can both work on different levels of narrative time, revealing the past, playing a role in the present or foreshadowing the future, a Dantean space serves all three at once."¹⁹ D'Adamo sees Dantean space as representing a "frozen" Hell in the afterlife: an understanding cognate with modern television such as *Underbelly: Squizzy*, which condemns and paradoxically aggrandises the otherwise glamour-less lives of Melbourne's small time crooks. In this way, D'Adamo notes, "the historical dead [are] now thrust into the country's dark political unconscious" (a notion *Guinevere Jones* directly engages).²⁰ While Wertheim and D'Adamo's visions of the purgatorial nature of modern media are notably contrasting, they nonetheless both contribute to my argument for the resurfacing of Dante's Circles of Hell in contemporary television, providing a significant means to reading the particular power of such remediation.

In her book, *How Television Invented the Internet*, Sheila C. Murphy analyses television as a "middletext": a medium situated technologically and chronologically between cinema and the Internet, a means to glue together the old and the new, a technical and cultural bridge from film to Web 2.0.²¹ As such, television is influenced by the earlier technology of cinema and helps form the later medium, thus conjoining the Internet to its predecessors in media, including those that predate cinema,

such as visual art. In this way, according to Murphy, it is our popular understanding of television that spawns the Internet just as the Internet derives from fourteenth century religious depictions in Wertheim's account. While these interpretations are certainly debatable, they offer rich and promising approaches to the study of the Internet. Murphy echoes the argument of Henry Jenkins and David Thornburn that "medium-specific approaches"—i.e. theories that isolate the individual media of cinema, television, and Renaissance religious art into separate categories—"risk simplifying technological change to a zero-sum game."²² This implies that, in any medium-specific analysis, one medium gains while the others lose in significance, which denies the evolution of technological media as part of an ongoing continuum.²³ For this reason, I argue that the Internet is part of a trajectory of media where each new iteration is not fully distinguishable from its predecessors—Dantean Christian space being a major contributor to it. Television changes partly because of the Internet's influence even though it was television that originally spawned the Internet—or at least sparked that moment in its chain of remediation. In this way, Murphy, like both Wertheim and D'Adamo, sees a metaphor operating below the surface of the media. As she suggests:

"new media" should actually be understood as an historical term... [that] carries with it the baggage of a utopian, emancipatory set of beliefs about reconfiguration of the Self, the Social and the Real through simulation and virtuality.²⁴

Television is also, Murphy argues, a correlative of the "contemporary cultural imagination," just as Wertheim argues religious art was in past centuries.²⁵ For Murphy, the imaginary worlds of William Gibson, Philip K. Dick, and *World of Warcraft* offer a "balm for the Real." My point is that these imaginary worlds are structured much like Dante's Seven Layers of Hell.²⁶ Indeed, Murphy quotes Bruce Sterling's statement in *Mirrorshades: The Cyberpunk Anthology* that technology is "visceral, pervasive, utterly intimate. Not outside us, but next to us."²⁷ The statement echoes Wertheim's metaphor, which suggests that the fourteenth

century populace was keenly aware of God walking beside them in the constructed spaces of the church as well as in their everyday lives. Similarly, Marshall McLuhan's statement that television programming both "mirrors and creates a daily rhythm and structure for experience" echoes the church's materialization of the celestial realm.²⁸ Seen in this way, the structured manipulations of television operate like a religion on the viewer, inscribing its views and reiterating its commercial opinions. In this sense, a television set represents the physical space magnifying the *res cogitans* of the afterlife, which stands as the key metaphor for the Internet in the work of Wertheim for the religiosity of celebrity worship in the work of Chris Rojek.²⁹ The pervasive intimacy of television (and in turn the Internet's recoding of this intimacy) trains the viewer to adopt a certain attitude toward the televised image. In the age of the Internet, the possibility of immediate online interactions during a broadcast might be seen as providing the audience with deeper access to the essence of the broadcast material itself.

It must also be noted that the concept of polysemy in celebrity theory denotes film and television reception where the "star image" obscures the ideological contradictions contained within the text and allows such paradoxes to coexist.³⁰ These images are uniquely received through the Bazinian window to the world. French cineaste André Bazin depicted the cinema screen as a portal through which to view reality, while seeing its relation to reality as different from that of the painting. While a painting is wholly separate from reality, the cinema frame implies the areas of reality not captured within the frame. More recently, Deleuze reignited Bazin's theory of the screen in relation to digital technology "as interface to the world of information." Space, insists Bazin, "is radically destroyed by the screen."³¹

Why Now?

In 2019, we are no longer looking at the Internet in wonderment: we are looking through the screen to a reality owned by those on this side of the digital divide, which further fragments our world, and—like the Kuleshov effect where the second cinematic image impels its immediate

predecessor to generate new meaning—we can never look at television again without the bias our Internet experience has given us. What is seen through the Internet, however, is not reality, but remediation. It is a window, an ideological construction, a portal to somewhere else we might rather be. We can “click and drag” it into our present lives anywhere, anytime.

Our search for meaning in the cultural moment of 2019 does not end with the televisual image. Indeed, with the advent of smart TVs, we can continue clicking from television to the Internet and back again, in a seamless manner. Because we can download television content from the Internet, these previously fragmented technologies now form a continuum, a convergence, a whole completed in immersion and agency. But what is the nature of this continuum? What is the panacea to all our isolated frustrations? While Murphy suggests it is a “balm for the real,” Wertheim reaches deeper into the theory of pictorial historicism to suggest a version of the celestial realm, which our present-day convergence confirms: a fundamental understanding of the world as both liquid and accessible. Why Wertheim now? Because we live in the post-truth era where attendant realities compete for legitimacy, we must either reside in solipsistic interpretations or reach out for preconceived forms: the quasi-religious dreams of Internet punters and TV indulgers—received through celestial imagery repeated throughout the centuries.³²

In my analysis of *Guinevere* and *Underbelly* I extrapolate from Wertheim’s premise to suggest television’s further evolution and fragmentation. Why do I choose these two programs? This is firstly because my involvement in the shows afforded me an “emic” position to carry out my research. Secondly, because contemporary television—bolstered by the greater usage of Internet technology in storytelling—strove for more effective fan engagement and heralded an evolving televisual future. Further, during the period in question, interesting changes occurred in the fan-production interface that still affect television consumers today. As mentioned above, outlining the theoretical apparatus for this paper and positioning the research within present day concerns, I ask again: what does Dante’s *Inferno* have to tell us about the contemporary experience of watching television?

The Dantean Effect in *Underbelly: Squizzy*

The Australian productions in question both feature Dantean worlds: *Guinevere* in the playful interpretation of “past lives”; and *Underbelly* in the violent, rapacious, enacted “imaginary” of crime, which attracts its audience to an Other-ated living Hell. Indeed, apart from the online fan commentary surrounding the two series, they both make “an attempt to construct a technological substitute for the Christian space of Heaven.”³³ This implicates an ongoing and remediated Christian understanding of the world and affects television media in the wake of contemporary Internet developments. Furthermore, while fans augment the televisual experience by the use of online social media, so an Internet-like narrative space in television broadcast remediates Dante. What then do we see in *Underbelly: Squizzy* and *Guinevere Jones* under the influence of Dantean Internet space? What does Dante’s *Inferno* have to tell us about the contemporary experience of watching television?

Underbelly: Squizzy producers invited their fans into Squizzy’s living Hell through such themes as assassination, infant mortality, vengefulness, and rape. However, the online fan commentary showed that these dramatisations frequently disengaged the audience. Two examples from *Underbelly* demonstrate these divisive readings: the rape of Dolly Grey (Camille Keenan) and the Taylor child’s “cot death.” Such “hellish” topics and their implicit mimicry of Internet culture exploited the Internet as promotional tool—in ways that backfired on their producers.

The conclusion of episode two depicted Squizzy’s sex worker girlfriend Dolly Grey being gang raped in a wrestling ring. The location itself took extreme poetic license because the historical Whiting brothers (two gang members opposing Les Taylor) were actually boxers in the 1920s—not wrestlers—living in squalor rather than grandeur. This was *Underbelly: Squizzy*’s contrivance and is wedded to the auratic elevation of this seedy world of crime: the show’s decision to sacrifice authenticity for showmanship. The conceit of theatricality in the glamorised setting for Dolly’s abuse proved contradictory and ineffective—indeed, despite their traditional lasciviousness, online fans and reviewers indicated that the enactment was in poor taste.³⁴ Indeed, Dolly’s rape had no basis

in historical fact. Apart from this hagiographic interpretation and its offensive content, the symbolic proportions of the event were lessened by an invasive *mis-en-scene*. The depiction might have held more in common with Dante's *Inferno* than just inaccurate 1920s historicism. As D'Adamo points out, such a descent into sin might have emulated "the bloody-faced Ugolino," the cannibalistic character bound up in a frozen lake eating his nemesis, the Pope, in Dante's Ninth Circle of Hell. Both Ugolino and his enemy are "trapped by and in their past actions, by and in their old lived selves."³⁵ However, any reference that might have been successful was obscured in hagiographic glamour. The signs were embedded in the remediating, but not taken up.

Nor was the dramatisation cinematically successful. The use of line-crossing hand-held cameras, lens diopters to distort the image, the metonymic and diegetic melancholy guitar music, and David Caesar's directorial decision to involve the crime boss "Long Harry" Slater (Richard Cawthorne) as mastermind rather than participant in the heinous act all contributed to the drama's ineffectual rendering. In this scene, cinematic trickery overshadowed the authenticity of the moment. Any Dantean potential was handicapped where it might have been an asset.

Nevertheless, the immediacy of the Internet offered *Underbelly* fans a more effective path to their disavowed and "untold pleasures," as the "passionate, opinionated" comments of fans became occasions for "opportunistic abuse."³⁶ Fans seeking their version of divinity to "shine through" the Internet were disappointed: the television failed to enthrall. Comments were registered on the fan-site bewailing the lack of sexualised material and, paradoxically, resisting the show's "descent" into "sin" as exploitative—such as this sexual assault implied.³⁷ In this instance then, television was not merely a "monolithic voice" of social control and conservative ideology. Rather, it represented a "highly conflictual mass medium in which competing economic political, social and cultural forces intersect."³⁸

In this way, religion and secularism coexist within the polysemic whole of *Underbelly: Squizzy*, and might have been extended by a more effective online positioning of the show. Further, as demonstrated in the reviews and online commentary, the fans of *Underbelly* were divided:

some sought a panacea for their frustrations, while others registered their distaste for the morality of the broadcast text.³⁹ Wertheim's recognition of a celestial realm perceived as operating behind the Internet can be seen as a component of this conflict. However, these manifest choices on screen came nowhere near the *Inferno* of self-disgust expressed by the actors cast as rapists on the day of shooting. A collective sense of misery silently descended on us as we wandered back to the actors' vans. Men had yet again agreed to enact sexual violence against women in exchange for a pay cheque. While such feelings were aroused on the shoot day, the eventual scene broadcast on free-to-air television became, in D'Adamo's sense, an example of an unintentionally dispassionate space: few viewers cared for the dramatisation. It was as if the physical *res extensa* of the shoot was not effective in the *res cogitans* of the show's dissociated *mis en scene*.⁴⁰ Despite the real dismay of the cast—both male and female—the celestial imaginary had not been effectively engaged. In this instance, the refusal of the producers to embrace Dantean space fully ignored the parallels available to modern television by virtue of the Internet's influence.

Far more effective for *Underbelly* fans was the depiction of the death of Les Taylor's infant daughter—a scene performed with consummate skill by Jared Daperis and Elise Jansen as Les and Lorna Taylor. Indeed, the death of their child trapped both characters in the Dantean horror of the nursery—a diegetic location Squizzy could not bring himself to dismantle after his child's demise. In D'Adamo's perspective, empathetic space resides in the viewer's morality by virtue of the vocalised concerns of fans rather than in the Dantean space of *Underbelly*. Because Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) is still part of lived reality, because the tragedy of Les Taylor is never better dramatised than in this scene, and because it was based on credible historical fact (June, the real life daughter of Squizzy and Lorna, died on 9 January 1921, aged just seven months), the scene appeared to engage the audience's past, present, and future fears for their children.⁴¹ Online commentary supported this hypothesis.

For *Underbelly*'s producers, this scene represents a deeper use of cinematic construction derived from Dantean Internet space: a “click and

drag” descent into hidden windows on Squizzy’s televised soul, serving all three levels of narrative time concurrently.⁴² Clicking into such an intense experience read on screen like a Google search for an unassailable category of horror, rather than languishing in a more passive cinematic experience. How then does this engage the fans’ sense of a divine presence acting behind the Internet? The significance of a presence beyond the technological practicality of the Internet augments the fan’s personal experience of the Dantean Web. *Underbelly*’s fascination with crime suggests (even by the show’s title) that a seedy, clandestine world can be accessed under the surface of the “safe space” that television viewing gives to the middle class.⁴³ As seen in the dissent *Underbelly* caused in splitting its fan-base, the opposite may also be true. In this way, the Internet not only magnifies television’s effects, but, as Murphy argues, it also builds upon television’s seventy years of modelling.

Re-contextualising Television’s Derivations

In similar phantasmic vein, *Underbelly*’s producers exploited fan responses during broadcast time by re-tweeting their online comments. The historical depiction of Les Taylor reached back into time as it leaped forward in narrative space to embrace the Internet, effectively positioning television as a fluid “middletext.” *Underbelly*’s particular “balm for the Real” enabled fans to indulge their anti-social fantasies in a televisual “safe space,” in imitating Dante’s journey in *Inferno*.⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Celia Lam’s concerns for the ethical treatment of fans in this Internet “safe space” often resembles Wertheim’s warnings about the pernicious zone the Internet can become.⁴⁵ The Internet’s reliance on television as middletext is therefore only part of a chain of significations, in which each new iteration is indistinguishable from its predecessor and ultimately reaches back to Dante.

While Azeroth and Dick’s books may be a more obvious example of Internet “clickability,” television shows like *Underbelly* and *Guinevere* nevertheless demonstrate a newer conception of what is “out there” facilitated by the new technology of the Internet, but nonetheless underpinned by the kind of “attendant techno-religious dreams” and

“heavenly aspirations” provided by Dante.⁴⁶ Curiously, the scholarly, televisual, and online texts Murphy uses point to the influence of the pre-Renaissance imagination: light signifying, as Wertheim notes, the presence of another world. I argue that the unique attractiveness of *Underbelly: Squizzy* and the mystical openings of *Guinevere* promise otherworldliness in a post-Internet format, but that the earlier production utilises digitextualisation more effectively.

Contrasting Heaven and Hell

Both *Guinevere Jones* at the inception of wave two and *Underbelly: Squizzy* at the conclusion of wave three of Internet distribution reflect a significant change in the era. The 2002 chat rooms of *Guinevere* in which fans were invited to exchange their thoughts with each other and with cast members were met with interest by the young cast—actors with a similar embrace of the potential of the Internet as young Australian producers were noted for. This engaged a Wertheimian celestial space where actors and fans were imaginatively united, even if divided by real-space limitations.

However, just as heaven and hell remain polar opposites in popular consciousness, so Internet remarks can be divided into ethical and non-ethical components. There is the risk that Internet commentators such as Logan Paul’s *Japanese Suicide Forest* or PewDiePie’s infamous ideological stance might adopt unethical positioning, which reflects contemporary privilege on the Western side of the digital divide. In this sense, where television’s Bazinian “window to the world” might bastardise cinema, it also allows the Internet to exert influence as a space where ethical behaviour is not mandatory. The irony of constructing such a technological substitute for the celestial realm is that it reverses the morality of a Christian reward in Heaven. In this sense, engagement in the Internet may be seen as discouraging empathic relations online by mirroring Wertheim’s warning concerning the pernicious zones of the Internet.⁴⁷

Where *Guinevere Jones* encouraged moral allegories derived from King Arthur’s court, *Underbelly* evoked a darker space brimming with

viewer frustrations. While the demographic of *Guinevere* was teen-aged females and the *Underbelly* audience was assumed primarily to be hedonistic adult males, the gap between these expectations, ethical or not, must still be noted. Curiously, while time travel remained a constant theme for *Guinevere*, the show was significantly altered from its original, darker vision of insanity and evil to lighter themes such as romance and comedy. This was the direct result of Internet feedback loops emerging from fan engagement in the show's chat rooms. Internet culture had contributed to the ongoing proliferation of television as a particular celestial imaginary: the world of the teen fan, which rejected disturbing themes in favour of lighter ones. Where it might have looked as if television was losing ground to the Internet, television can be argued to have re-imbibed the influence of the Internet as early as 2002, imitating the Internet as an aspect of its unique persistence.

This does not mean that the Dantean space in Australian television was dampened by the development of Internet-based media. To the contrary, televisual trickery, such as when Gwen crawls on her hands and knees to escape her foster parents' shop, but finds her direction magically reversed so that she constantly ends up where she starts from, or the time that an enchanted talisman of iron separated the character Michael (Yani Gellman) from his minder Gadowain, still traded on the Internet-like Dantean past, present, and future of the diegesis. This was despite the fact that imagery such as black blood pouring down the screen as a metaphor for insanity was discouraged later in the series. *Guinevere* therefore changed as a result of commentary, but the celestial space remained intact. In this way, by eschewing "medium specific approaches," Murphy's analysis offers a compelling explanation of the younger technology's influence on the older.⁴⁸ In Murphy's account, television spawned the Internet, but an analysis of *Guinevere* suggests that by 2002, the child (Internet) has become the father of the (hu)man (television).

By contrast, *Underbelly*'s resistance to fan agency was produced by active decision-making on the part of the producers. While the influence of Dante's *Inferno* is apparent in both productions, the earlier show appears to have retained more of the epic poem's influence than

the latter. The former more closely mimics the fourteenth century experience of walking beside God, in Wertheim's sense.⁴⁹ Indeed, the visual experiments of Giotto di Bondone, as Wertheim illustrates, have been playfully retained in the diegetic space of *Guinevere*, although only cursorily referenced in *Underbelly*. In this show, the traditional television producer is perhaps less competent at applying dramatic acumen to Internet-based creativity than his or her younger counterparts.

Indeed, *Guinevere's* narrative is entirely constituted by an immaterial *res cogitans*, which is imaginatively inscribed in the story. The *Book of Revelation's* promise of a heavenly reward in the afterlife is not only enacted in the televisual realm, but a new communication between fan and producer is enabled by its presence on the Internet. By contrast, *Underbelly*, even in the enactment of Les Taylor's death, represents a "frozen" Hell in the afterlife, further augmented perhaps by the influence of the Internet. The technology is possible: the willingness to embrace it remains with the producers. In this sense, as Murphy argues, "the baggage of a utopian, emancipatory set of beliefs" is refused and the "reconfiguration of the Self, the Social and the Real through simulation and virtuality" is retarded.⁵⁰

I do not suggest that Murphy's view of television/Internet connectivity is the only interpretation. Nor do I insist that there is an absolute truth in her statements: it is merely a way of thinking about television in the current era that helps illuminate fan responses to television shows such as *Guinevere* and *Underbelly*. In accordance with her approach, it is important not to reduce analysis to a "zero sum game" viewed only through the isolation of a single medium. Indeed, fans reaching into the diegetic world of television through Internet chat rooms and Twitter responses can currently change those images at the producer's discretion. This is equivalent to outmoded wishes to "know God," in the sense of metaphor rather than as a glib truth claim.

Of course, on the other side of the digital divide, the dreams of the populace are not contained in such techno-fetishism, even if ours are married to it. We can love it, hate it and/or debate it, but our dreams have been hijacked by television and the Internet, and the remediation of religion can be seen as binding together the fabric of the secular world

where no totalising vision actually exists. Again, I do not make the post-structuralist assumption that there is no absolutist other realm out there, but that our remediated images suggest that somewhere in the universe there *might* be, which is enough to orient our pleasure-seeking indulgence in television/Internet convergence. The seamless interactions of audience, television, and Internet further engage this underbelly.

Murphy's scholarship sees the Internet as arising from its televisual predecessor, which, in turn, stands on the shoulders of cinema, literature, and pictorial art. Murphy asks how this is different to the use of a TV remote. How estranged from Internet surfing is channel zapping or gallery hopping? I suggest that, while this introduces the idea of a continuum between television and the Internet, it does not go far enough. Why not the conceit of religious dreams? After all, the dominance of religious images precedes all of the above technological developments and art forms except Renaissance visual art—referenced in *Underbelly* with Squizzy depicted as an auratic demi-god in the visual design. This research therefore positions the condensed Internet/television fans as inter-(actors) in Hell space. In this way, the Internet highlights the failingadroitness of television, yet according to Murphy, television production rises to combat the Internet as its own demon-spawn.

Notes

¹Margaret Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000).

²*Guinevere Jones*, directed by Peter Sharp et al. 2002, Australia: Network Ten and *Underbelly: Squizzy*, directed by David Caesar et al. 2013, Australia: Network Nine.

³Sheila C. Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2011).

⁴See Ian Dixon, "The Producer/Fan Online Interface in Australian Television—Case Study," in *Aussie Fans: Uniquely Placed in Global Popular Culture*, eds. Celia Lam and Jackie Raphael, forthcoming 2019.

⁵See Henry Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

⁶Gemma Blackwood and Rory Jeffs, "Whose Real? Encountering New Frontiers in Westworld," *Medianz* 12, no. 2 (2016): 95; Peter Gawler, email message to Ian Dixon,

May 10, 2017.

⁷ Dixon, "The Producer/Fan Online Interface."

⁸ See Janet H. Murray, *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (New York: Simon and Schuster/Free Press, 1997).

⁹ Mark David Ryan et al., "The Australian Screen Producer in Transition," in *Beyond the Bottom-Line: The Producer in Film and Television Studies*, eds. Andrew Spicer et al. (London & New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 125.

¹⁰ Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates*, 45, 55.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁶ See Christian Metz, *The Imaginary Signifier: Psychoanalysis and the Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977).

¹⁷ Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates*, 24.

¹⁸ Amedeo D'Adamo, *Empathetic Space on Screen: Constructing Powerful Place and Setting* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 22.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 69.

²¹ Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 9.

²² Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, quoted in Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 9.

²³ This is not technological determinism as there is no guarantee that any one medium will surface as a logical outcome of the past.

²⁴ Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 4.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 6.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 16.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 13.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 23.

²⁹ See Chris Rojek, "Celebrity and Religion," in *Stardom and Celebrity: A Reader*, eds. Sean Redmond and Sue Holmes (London: SAGE Publications, 2007), 171-80.

³⁰ See Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: BFI Publishing, 1986).

³¹ Andreas Treske, "Frames within Frames: Windows and Doors," in *Video Vortex Reader II* (Amsterdam: INC, 2010).

³² Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates*, 18.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18-19.

³⁴ I acknowledge that positioning fans pejoratively is problematic for fan studies scholars. My research suggests, however, that a select group of *Underbelly* fans publically celebrate the ongoing pornification of the show in commentary. See Matt

Hills, "Michael Jackson Fans on Trial? Documenting Emotivism and Fandom in Whacko About Jacko," *Social Semiotics* 14, no. 4 (2007): 459-77.

³⁵ D'Adamo, *Empathetic Space on Screen*, 57-58.

³⁶ Celia Lam, "Breaking the Fourth Wall: When Fanfic Object Meets Fanfic Product," in *Living in the Limelight: Dynamics of the Celebrity Experience*, ed. K.P. Hart (Oxford: The Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2014), 76.

³⁷ Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates*, 55.

³⁸ Douglas Kellner, *Television and the Crisis of Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2018), 11, 14.

³⁹ See Nicholas R. W. Henning, "Worth More than a Squiz," *Underbelly: Squizzly (Uncut)*, February 4, 2014, <https://www.amazon.com/Underbelly-Squizzly-Blu-ray-Susie-Porter/product-reviews/B00F6Y3EEE>.

⁴⁰ Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates*, 36.

⁴¹ According to the death registration (no. 2138, 1921), "the diagnosis of Dr Sutherland, the cause of death was 'indigestion' and not Spanish influenza, and she did not die in hospital, as depicted in *Underbelly Squizzly*." <http://www.cchg.asn.au/squizzly.html>.

⁴² D'Adamo, *Empathetic Space on Screen*, 19, 56.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Lam, "Breaking the Fourth Wall," 78; Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 16.

⁴⁵ Lam, "Breaking the Fourth Wall," 78.

⁴⁶ See Anna Everett, "Digitextuality and Click Theory," in *New Media: Theories and Practices of Digitextuality*, eds. Anna Everett and John T. Caldwell (New York: Routledge, 2003), 5-11.

⁴⁷ Lam, "Breaking the Fourth Wall," 78.

⁴⁸ Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 86.

⁴⁹ Wertheim, *The Pearly Gates*, 55.

⁵⁰ Murphy, *How Television Invented New Media*, 4.