Lesson Plan: *Inferno* 17-22: Dante and Sandow Birk on Political Corruption

**Objective:** Introduce students to the *Malebolge* and the transition to circles of fraud; discuss fraud, relationship to poetry, to politics; significance of political corruption to Dante and to his era, equivalents/analogies/comparisons in the 21st century.

**Materials:** *Inferno* 17-22; *Dante’s Inferno* film (Sandow Birk and Sean Meredith, 2007); Peter Hawkins, “Moderno Uso” (*Arion* 13.1, 2005).

**Program:**

I. *Malebolge:* “evil pockets”
   a. Small group discussion. What is different about fraud? Why is fraud worse than violence? Heresy? Sins of incontinence?
   b. Preoccupation of these cantos: relationship of fraud to poetry and politics
   c. 10 different kinds of fraud: which have we seen so far? Which surprised you the most? **Try to elicit a discussion of why flattery, barratry might be such grievous sins (worse than murder!)**

II. Close Reading: the Fifth Bolgia: Battle with the Malebranche
   a. What is barratry? *Inferno* 21. 42
   b. Medieval passion plays
   c. Comedy and the comic tradition
      i. “Low” style
      ii. Everyday content
   d. The verse most beloved by Italian middle-school students
   e. Mock heroic opening of *Inferno* 22
   f. Why do barratry and other forms of political corruption matter to Dante so much? How might we think of “barratry” in the 21st century? What does it look like?

III. Sandow Birk: Introduction
   a. Biography, awards, other projects
   b. *Dante’s Divine Comedy*
      i. Lithographs
      ii. Updated textual adaptation (with Marcus Sanders)
      iii. Toy theater film (with Sean Meredith)
   c. Analysis of argument: Peter Hawkins’ “Moderno Uso”

IV. Screening: *Dante’s Inferno:* scene selections
   a. Violent against others
   b. Violent against selves
   c. Violent against God
   d. Geryon
V. Discussion: Birk’s take on flattery: The Lobbyists
   a. How does Birk re-interpret flattery for the 21st century?
   b. Do you think this is a fair comparison?
   c. What does this comparison do for your understanding of these cantos? How does it change your view of flattery as a vice?

VI. Discussion: Sample Questions
   a. What are some of the other ways the film updates Dante’s poem for a contemporary audience? Which are the most convincing?
   b. How does Birk use the film as political commentary? What political statements does he make? Why do you think he chose Dante’s Inferno as the vehicle for these statements?
   c. How does the film adapt Dante’s value system to ours? In what ways does it change Dante’s system altogether?


- How does Birk re-interpret flattery for the 21st century?
- Do you think this is a fair comparison? Why or why not?
- What does this comparison do for our understanding of these cantos? How does it change your view of flattery as a vice?

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