Proceedings of the 34th World Congress of Art History

第34届世界艺术史大会文集

全三卷
Vols. I–III

邵大箴　范迪安　朱青生　主编
Shao Dazhen / Fan Di'an / LaoZhu

TERMS

概　念

不同历史和不同文化中的艺术和艺术史

Proceedings of the 34th World Congress of Art History

第34届世界艺术史大会文集

第一卷
Vol. I

邵大箴 范迪安 朱青生 主编
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Filming the Sistine Chapel: The Multiple Michelangelos

Tommaso Casini

IULM University, Milan

Before the invention of photography, Michelangelo's frescoes in the Sistine Chapel could be seen, studied and commented at a distance through printed engravings, overcoming the physical boundaries of the work. It may seem superfluous to emphasize this, but it was the large production of images after the 17th century that gave impulse to the ever-increasing process of the diffusion of Michelangelo's figures, either as an iconographic complex pattern or in the details, which were used for critical and popular publications (Fig. 1)[1].This paper moves from this survey aiming to investigate the transition from the still image translation to the moving images, by taking also into account some methodological implications. My purpose is to analyse the relationship between Michelangelo's work and its audience over the centuries, or what we call critical "fortune" and visual reception, a phenomenon that has few equals in Western art in length and quantity.[2] Copy, print reproduction, photographic image, and even kitsch fashion tourist souvenir, are forms of translation (Figs. 2–4). They shorten the distance, allowing the individual to possess a substitute of the original, but at the same time, they create a new distance and interpose a filter between us and the original. At the time, such a perceptual distance suggests a methodology of approach to the work, which can be analysed by retracing the many passages of a history of technical and visual products. Today we are more and more inclined to reflect on this point, as we deal with the multiplication of images and with the fact that "the image of an image is always an image"[3] (another image).

Fig. 1 Giulio Bonasone, *The Last Judgement from the Sistine Chapel*, 1564–1550. Engraving. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Photograph OASC

The emergence of photographic translations since 1869, when Adolphe Braun's photographic album appeared, gradually began to replace printed etchings by ensuring a more effective and faithful practice than the engraving translation (Fig. 5). The development of the relationship between the printed reproduction and the photographic one has been thoroughly investigated.[4] Alongside the use of photography, during the 20th century and up to today, the moving image and film editing have further developed the tools to learn about and make known the work of Michelangelo, in a reciprocal relationship which is not contradictory but osmotic for both techniques, thus fueling the omphalos myth of Western Christian art.

The media's interest in Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel—thanks particularly to the World Wide Web—appears nowadays and everywhere in the world as a growing flood that, over the past 50 years, has produced a huge amount of static and kinetic visual materials, probably incalculable in number, if you consider the phenomenon of artistic reproductions and quotations for commercial or whimsical purposes on a great variety of supports (Fig. 6).

The phenomenon can only compete with the one produced by Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*, which is nevertheless a single image, while the Sistine "icons" are manifold. Reflecting on this report, and about the technical reproducibility of the work of art, one could of course cite Walter Benjamin and his famous essay.[5] However, I find it fitting to proceed in the

Fig. 2 Gaspare Ruina-Girolamo de Grandi, *Creation of Adam from the Sistine Chapel*, 1530–1533. Xylograph (Author's Archive)

Fig. 3 Michelangelo Last Judgement Sublimation Sublimated Mens T-Shirt

Fig. 4 *Creation of Adam from the Sistine Chapel,* mobile hard cover case

wake of André Chastel's studies on the visual fortune of Leonardo's *Mona Lisa*[6], Eugenio Battisti on Michelangelo in the 20th century[7] and Leo Steinberg, who with great acumen has demonstrated that the flow of the original derivation of images are living cultural interpretations, the result of appropriation and re-use for a shared language that leads beyond the borders of historical work of art of the past.[8]

Based on these observations this contribution intends to offer some thoughts about film production and television, dedicated to Michelangelo's Sistine cycles, taking into account their previous history shown through engravings and photography.[9]

The first question about this issue is: when did a movie camera first get into the Sistine Chapel, and what did it film of Michelangelo's frescoes, and how? The answer concerning the exact date is still uncertain at the moment. If we consider the available filmography on Michelangelo and the Sistine Chapel (consisting of more than 100 titles of selected materials), the first sequence filmed the frescoes is a short one-minute documentary entitled *Michelangelo* and produced by the Istituto Luce sometime between 1932 and 1937 (Fig. 7).

On March 2nd 1939, the movie camera returned in the Sistine Chapel for the election of Pope Pius XII, but as the main purpose of the film documentation did not concern the frescoes, the shots were limited to showing the apparatus and furniture (probably rebuilt in a set). *Pastor Angelicus* (1942), the first film entirely devoted to the figure of a pope, was produced by Cines and directed by Romolo Marcellini, who decided to show long sequences of the frescoes of the Raphael Rooms rather than those of the Sistine Chapel. Instead, at the Venice Film Festival of 1938, the figure of Michelangelo officially appeared in the still young history of the cinema with a film entitled *Michelangelo. Das Leben eines Titanen* by the German film maker Curt Oertel (*Olympia* by Leni Riefenstal appeared there the same year).

The film on Michelangelo is a biographical documentary, a German-Swiss co-production boasting—as I quote—the "highly suggestive effect offered to art historians as an example of the new opportunity to provide expanded views for a better knowledge."[10] The film was awarded a prize, enjoyed remarkable critical success, was dubbed and was screened in various European countries: besides Germany, also in Italy, France and the Netherlands (Fig. 8). Immediately after the war, the filmed material was brought to the United States where it was reassembled and re-clocked by Robert Flaherty

Fig. 5 Adolphe Braun and Cie, *Creation of Man (Creation of Adam)*, 1869, detail. Carbon print from a wet collodion glass plate. Bibliothèque centrale des musées nationaux, Paris (Author's Archive)

Fig. 6 *Creation of Adam, Adam West from the Sistine Chapel*, http://images6.fanpop.com/image/photos/34700000/The-Creation-of-Adam-West-batman-34772038-960-540.jpg

(the father of documentaries and of the film *Nanook of the North*), with a new commentary by Norman Borisoff.[11] In this new shape it won in 1951 the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature, and widened its success in the following year thanks to an American TV channel. Flaherty became thereby one of the most celebrated authors of documentary films ever made until then. The 1950 version proved to be totally new for the sections devoted to Michelangelo's frescoes. The voice over described the images in great detail and gave information about the drama of the creation, while some theatrical voices interpreted the hypothetical dialogues between Pope Julius II and Michelangelo.

In 1947 the first Italian documentary entirely devoted to the Sistine Ceiling, directed by Pietro Francisci, was produced by LUX Film. It is a high-level example of popular work: beautiful images with beautiful close-ups of the frescoes, for which it is still uncertain whether there is a follower of Roberto Longhi or Valerio Mariani, famous Italian art historians, behind the drafting of the text, characterized by a refined rhetorical language (Fig. 9). Other films on the *Last Judgement* by LUX Film, as well as *Michelangelo Painter* by Raffaele Saitto between 1947 and 1949, are characterized by a narrative style that was affected by the still-current model of documentaries produced by the Istituto Luce before World War II, with emphatic voice overs and an intrusive symphonic score. The spoken commentary mostly used descriptions and biographical anecdotage from Giorgio Vasari and Ascanio Condivi.

In 1955, 380 years after the birth of Michelangelo, and one year after the official opening of RAI, an Italian broadcasting society, the movie camera returned to film the Sistine frescoes again. The project of three short films (*Storie della Creazione*, *Michelangelo: il Giudizio Universale*, and *La Volta della Sistina*) bore the paternity of the Vatican film library for the first time, involving the director of *The Vatican Museums* Deoclecio Redig de Campos, who edited the commentary. It was directed by Aurelia Attili, an extremely rare case of female director in a profession that was still predominantly male, who had produced several documentaries on behalf of the Istituto Luce. The novelty of these three works consisted of the first round of the frescoes in Technicolor (Fig. 10). The transition from black and white to color, providing extremely evocative images, also pointed out the state of great deterioration of the frescoes, obscured by black smoke and marked by numerous cracks of the painted surface.

Fig. 7 *Sistine Chapel,* frames from *Michelangelo*, 35mm film. Istituto Luce, 1932–1937, archivioluce.com

Fig. 8 Film poster, Curt Oertel, *Michelangelo, vita di un Titano*, 1938

Fig. 9 *Creation of Adam,* frame from Pietro Francisci, *La volta della Sistina*. Lux Film, 1947. Courtesy of Cineteca Nazionale

Fig. 10 *The Creation of Stars,* detail, frame from Aurelia Attili *Le storie della creazione*. Opus e Astra film, 1955 (Author's Archive)

Ever since this early relevant film, Italy's national broadcast network has been in charge of the official documentation for both the religious ceremonies held in the Sistine Chapel, and for a series of documentaries and programs starting in 1961, which culminated in 1964, coinciding with the fourth centenary of the painter's birth, with the production of a television series on Michelangelo's life, starring Gian Maria Volonté and directed by Silverio Blasi[12] (Fig. 11). In the following year, the blockbuster film *The Agony and the Ecstasy* appeared all over the world. The film was partly based on Irving Stone's biographical novel of the same name. The sequences fully devoted to the Sistine were filmed in the De Laurentis studios in Rome, where the scaffolding was set up and the frescoes re-created under the guidance of the Italian-born painter Niccolo d'Ardia Caracciolo (1941–1989) (Fig. 12).[13]

Hitherto, despite the growing concern for the Sistine film documentation, no important art historians, except the director of *The Vatican Museums* Redig de Campos, had contributed directly to a documentary project critically presenting Michelangelo's work.

Both the art historian Carlo Ludovico Ragghianti and the architect Luigi Moretti filled the gap by accepting a kind of cinematographic competition. Ragghianti had obtained wide attention, since the 1950s, with his "critofilm," a new and original form of art criticism through movies. On the occasion of the fourth centenary, Ragghianti was commissioned to

Fig. 11 Gian Maria Volonté with Antonio Crast, *Vita di Michelangelo*, 1964. Photo set. Courtesy of Fototeca RAI

Fig. 12 *Creation of Adam*, frame from *The Agony and Ecstasy by* Carol Reed with Charlton Heston, 1965, copies by Niccolò d'Ardia Caracciolo (1941–1989)

shoot a film in color on the entire artistic production of the master from Caprese. The black-and-white film by the architect Moretti devoted special care to a reading of Michelangelo's work as architect and sculptor, and criticized the painted architecture of the ceiling. Both documentaries were presented with great success at the Venice Film Festival. The Ragghianti Foundation in Lucca keeps folders of substantial documentation about the production of the film, including the original script, the drawings by Ragghianti himself, and extensive correspondence, containing two letters of appreciation by the film critic Georges Sadoul and by Rudolf Arnheim, addressed to Ragghianti after the Venice screening. Sadoul:

> J'ai été frappé particolièrement par les sequences consacrés à la Chapelle Sixtine, que je n'ai jamais pu voir aussi bien que dans votre film [...].[14]

The letter also suggested planning a specific movie on the frescoes. Arnheim:

> Quanto mi hanno impressionato certi passaggi del film, e specialmente dell'Ultimo Giudizio, davvero una sinfonia demoniaca. [...] I have been impressed by certain passages of the film, and especially by the Last Judgment, really a demoniac symphony.[15]

In 1965 Ragghianti thought fit to extrapolate from the film, lasting 70 minutes in the commercial version and 120 in the scientific one, two short 12-minute films, respectively devoted to the vault and the Judgment (Fig. 13).[16]

A few years after the creation of the critofilm on Michelangelo, he took care of the publication of two texts of testimonials about the production and theoretical-critical reflections about the conception

Fig. 13 *The Vault of the Sistine Chapel*, frame by the Critofilm *Michelangiolo*, 1964. Courtesy of Cineteca Nazionale

Fig. 14 *Graphic Rendering of the Sistine Ceiling by Paolo Donati*, C. L. Ragghianti, *La Volta multipla della Sistina*, in *Arte, fare* e vedere, 1986 (Author's Archive)

of the film. I summarize the purpose of the film—as Ragghianti wrote—"which was completed in 40 days of live work, took a month more to"—as I quote—"conceive of and do the filming, that is, the criteria by which the formal progress of Michelangelo had to be reconstructed in detail."[17]

We may glean in this sentence the full significance of the critical cinematography by Ragghianti, unique in 20th-century art criticism. *Michelangelo*, the first feature film by the Italian art historian, was also his last critofilm, and the "summa" of his critical thinking. The underlying idea of the film is the direct approach to the artworks, mediated by the only technical device of the movie camera. The working method of Ragghianti involved beginning with the images and then adapting the spoken text to them, without forcing, that is, and respecting the principle that the images are not illustrations of a written text. On the contrary, the film sequences themselves already possess self-contained subjects and forms of speech.[18]

The starting point of Ragghianti's critical reflection is the central role—he says—of the "architecture of the Ceiling, not only consisting of the architectural framework represented as such (and even imitated with rich ornaments of figural elements grafted on it), but also taking form in drawings and figures. The divide between architecture and figures is ultimately fatal to understanding."

Ragghianti adds that the architectural-compositional design value of the vault painting is well expressed by Michelangelo's preparatory drawings, which show the "skeleton" where the figures inhabit spatially.[19]

Through the architectural composition Michelangelo wished to show and dictate to the visitor/observer the perceptions of "unity" and "progress."[20] A further clarifying remark is worth quoting:

> It would be a wonderful educational study (and a nice movie) to film people (intellectuals, tourists, priests, and monks and even—alas—critics and art historians) trying to look upwards at the Vault of the Sistine with sincere application. By drawing the viewers' movements on the floor—which is unrelated to the spatial composition like in the compulsive paths of the floor of the Medici Chapels—as if they were a snail's trail, a random effect of countless doodles and uncertainties, comings and goings would result; overlapping these visual/moving doodles with the Ceiling, you would immediately get the impression that, in general, people are unable to know and see, that they look at certain points here and there, stop and keep going with symptomatic randomness. In fact, if you don't have the key or the clue to the riddle, the Ceiling seems to be an aggregate of episodes to be observed separately or in detail as much as possible. At best, a guide is sought in the architectural frame, taken as a series of neutral interposed zones in order to separate or isolate independent figures or scenes among themselves. I have often wondered, looking at the frequent evidence of confusion that even those who try to focus on the images through binoculars cannot escape, the reason that, on days of public admission, the trustees do not bother to lay a carpet on the floor in order to show visitors which path to follow [...] possibly with authorized stops. But perhaps this happens because this path, although really existing and clear in some essential parts, has not yet been identified as a connection of the whole.[21]

In this long passage, Ragghianti suggests studying and filming visitors as they look up at the Vault of the Sistine Chapel, because they are unable to understand what they are observing. He even suggests that the

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Fig. 15 *The Village Voice*, August 3, 1976, Leo Steinberg collection. Photograph Tommaso Casini

Fig. 16 *Cloning Humans*, Time cover, November 8, 1993, http://content.time.com/time/covers/0,16641,19931108,00.html

museum could consider laying down a carpet to suggest which path to follow, possibly with authorized stopping points. Ragghianti writes—as I quote—that "as an urban planner Michelangelo traced the roads to a comprehensive as well as to an analytical vision."[22] (Fig. 14) Therefore, the architectural frame and the painted members of the vault make a "living organism" of the whole. The documentary's endeavor consists of highlighting the architectural framework and plastic muscles characteristic of Michelangelo's work, by means of a dialogue with the deep vital inspiration of the artist. Ragghianti was convinced that through the film shooting he had been able to contribute to this awareness.

Several art historians, or even artists, writers and philosophers between the 1970s and 1990s have grappled with the audiovisual commentary on Michelangelo's frescoes: Kenneth Clark, George Segal, Anthony Burgess, Giuliano Briganti, Ernst Gombrich, Giulio C. Argan, Federico Zeri; artists like Toti Scialoia and Pietro Consagra, and most recently Antonio Paolucci, the last director of *The Vatican Museums*. This is a large choir of voices and different critical languages belonging to a "spoken" form of the history of art criticism of the 20th century that has not always gained the esteem it deserved, as is instead the case with the written word.

While the centenary celebrations have been opportunities for the growing interest in filmed communication, the peak of attention coincided with the restoration work between the 1980s and 1990s. New documentaries appeared in which, after a long wait, the sense of surprise dominates, strengthened by the direct contact, by the intensity of the dialogue with art historians and by the power of filmed images. A new criticism was stimulated by the unveiling of the restoration work, as in the case of the extraordinary, I would say excited and exciting comment by Federico Zeri. All previous filmed production, compared to that subsequent to the restoration, inevitably proved to be a historical testimony of the poor visibility the frescoes suffered before. Another *Michelangelo* was presented to the eyes of a worldwide public by the cameras sweeping over the entire painted surface, focusing on the figures, through the cross-fades and the editing (Fig. 15).

In the history of film documentation of the Sistine Chapel frescoes, this marked a unique and unrepeatable experience, something never done before for any other work of art.[23] This achievement goes far beyond the production of any popular or scientific documentary: that is, thanks to the permission to shoot every single stage of the long enterprise. Even during the 15 years of the restoration, many television programs brought to the attention of the global public several stages of the restoration, thus arousing bitter controversies on the work itself, before a serious examination on-site of the job status.

The impressive documentation of more than 45,000 meters of 16 mm film (100 reels dedicated to the lunette and 70 to the ceiling, images taken with cold lighting to prevent damage to the frescoes) was only partially used for various productions by the NTV (Nippon Television Network) who financed the restoration, and was made in collaboration with the BBC concerning the restoration story.

This great photo-film undertaking had a very remarkable impact also on the growth and spread of Sistine icons by the media all around the world during the restoration years. This may be proved by the original collection on the re-use of the image of the Creation of Adam in advertising, satirical and journalistic contexts, which was patiently put together by the art historian Leo Steinberg, a great

Michelangelo scholar, from the late 1960s up to 2011, the year of his death. In the Steinberg Archive over 200 graphic design images are preserved, mostly from the 1980s and 1990s. Steinberg used these "lampoons" only partially for some of his lectures on the observer's point of view, the reception issue and the forms of popular appropriation of Michelangelo's work, current in internet studies where re-elaboration, mashup, remix, and visual design have become measuring instruments of the liquid creativity and perpetual dynamism of the internet (Fig. 16).[24]

The printed and photographic "fortune" of the Sistine Chapel has been studied by considering the remarkable consequences of the evolving reception of this masterpiece for centuries. In the same way we ought to consider in depth today the effects that cinema and the new media have produced and are still producing on our present or future way of looking at the Sistine, a pillar of Western art. More generally we should think about the new ways to learn, translate and represent the art of the past.

We may add that the growing reception of the Sistine paintings during the last century, thanks to photography and film, shows how Michelangelo has been able to work—even totally unconsciously—on behalf of our 21st-century machines, and to stimulate thereby our contemporary communication and graphic creativity.

NOTES

1 Alida Moltedo, ed., *La Sistina riprodotta: gli affreschi di Michelangelo dalle stampe del Cinquecento alle campagne fotografiche Anderson,* Catalogo della mostra Roma Istituto Nazionale per la Grafica, Calcografia, Roma, May 28–July 14, 1991 (Roma: Fratelli Palombi, 1991).

2 Monica Mafioli and Silvestra Bietoletti, eds., *Ri-conoscere Michelangelo. La scultura del Buonarroti nella fotografia e nella pittura dall'Ottocento ad oggi*, Galleria dell'Accademia, Firenze, February 18–May 18 (Firenze: Giunti, 2014).

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