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THE DEPTH OF VISUAL FIELD

Abstract. The legacy of the Renaissance painting and visual arts upon the coagulation of the film language was enormous and the film makers took over an elaborated visual experience that resounded profoundly with the specific of the cinematographic picture based on the capture of reality by two dimensional optics.

Key words. Perspective, linear, aerial, painter, deep of field, filmmaker, film, point of view.

The fascination for the depth of space dominated the visual arts beginning with the period of great cultural and artistic effervescence of the Renaissance,¹ when the antique cultural values were resurrected together with the humanistic study methods and were bringing back in the highlights the human being, with all its personality qualities, self-assured but also capable of deep emotions, dominating with its presence all major themes approached by arts.

The Renaissance brings a fresh realistic vision, based on the values and dimensions of the human personality restoring knowledge through study and investigation of the nature and also knowledge from science, philosophy and art fields.

The architect Filippo Brunelleschi² (1377-1446) painted two panels in the

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1 *Renaissance* term introduced by the French historian Jules Michelet the 19th century, then taken over by the art historian Carl Jacob Christoph Bruckhardt in his book 'Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien', 1860.

2 *Fillipo di ser Brunellesco Lapi (1377-1446)*, architect and engineer in Florence, is one

course of an experiment that, according to Samuel Y. Edgerton “linear perspective for painters, was first conceived by the Italian Filippo de Ser Brunelleschi in Florence, and was one of the most decisive ideas in the history of Western technology and science, as well as art”³. These two panels (have not been preserved) are probably the first pictures to correctly embody linear perspective. He imposes at that time the geometrical method when rendering the linear perspective defining the transposition modality within a plane two-dimensional space of the real space depth.

Leonardo da Vinci considered thoroughly the studies about the human perception upon the space and rendering the perspective concerning nature by bringing into discussion the effect of desaturations and “cooling” the colors within the field of depth, thus setting down the basis of the *aerial perspective*.

This way, using the linear and aerial perspective was something that profoundly marked the whole Renaissance painting and fundamentally influenced the entire history of visual arts.

The optical formation of the image on a plane surface constituted a major object of study for the visionary personalities

of the Renaissance period. And later on the appearance of photography certified the intuitions and discoveries of the Renaissance scientist and artists.

One of the first results of this new vision upon the approaching of rendering the space was a different painters’ attitude when choosing the sets into which they placed the action. These are interior spaces or places in the middle of nature provided with very large profoundness that unfurls towards the horizon.

The Renaissance artists stress on the place the scene is seen from (also named in film production “*point of view*”) on defining the position of the horizon line that sometimes appears into the frame and on the vanishing points towards which the sets lines converge.

The visual exploration of the tridimensional space was a fascinating theme for painters and Renaissance led this obsession towards the creation of some thrilling masterpieces.

The composition of Piero della Francesca, “*Flagellazione di Cristo*”, (approx. 1470) where the main subject which represents Christ’s lashing by Romans is placed into the far-off plane while the foreground is dominated by three characters that are unresponsive to the drama behind them, reflects the way the author uses perspective for leading the eye through the visual and narrative labyrinth of the frame.

Besides the complicated mysteries that surround the subject of the painting, we perceive the fascinating clarity of the frame, which is rendered with an

of the foremost artist of the Italian Renaissance, designing the Santa Maria del Fiore Dome of the Florence Cathedral, Chapel of the Pazzi Family.

3 Samuel Y. Edgerton, *Brunelleschi’s mirror, Alberti’s window, and Galileo’s „Perspective Tube”*, Williams Colege, Massachusetts, 2006, p. 152.



Fig. 1. Piero della Francesca, „Flagellazione di Cristo”, (1470) Galleria Nazionale delle Marche, Urbino, Italy.

accentuated geometrical perspective represented by the to gate from the three men, Christ tied to a column in the front of the king and then beyond the palace's courtyard towards the clear sky behind the trees. The characters are also disposed into different plans for emphasizing the perspective. After a few moments the eye leaves the foreground characters that vex through their indifference and slides towards Christ face shaped on a column.

By choosing a *raccourci* point of view and choosing a low view position “photographed” like by a photo camera with short focal distance that amplifies the distance among characters, the frame leads the eye towards the middle ground where the group of the main characters is placed.

The painter seized to the maximum the effect of the set's lines based on the well marked slabs and on the columns that come into turn within the frame profoundness. The *raccourci* view allows the artist to render the ceiling in a well defined and rhythmic way, the black line on the upper left of the ceiling leads

the eye straight to the Christ's face, the interest point of the painting. Thus the eye explores without restraints the profoundness of the frame being invited by the very strong compositional lines to take part to a fascinating trip.

Many times the painters invited the eye to travel beyond the foreground characters through windows or roads that wind towards the horizon just as it happens into Jan van Eyck's “The Virgin of Chancellor Rolin” masterpiece.



Fig. 2. Jan van Eyck, “Madonna with Chancellor Rolin”, Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

When trying to understand the deep effect upon the contents of the field's depth, the filmmaker appeals to the profoundly innovating experience of the Renaissance about rendering the perspective.

The pictorial opera poses some kind of coherence that cannot be assigned neither to the objects disposed into space nor to the treated subjects. There is a formal coherence that is related to the

concatenation of pictorial elements within the pictorial space.

“The opera is represented as a complex of figures and tones that forms a intrinsic ordered ensemble and also balanced. The look goes over this ensemble so that the elements might call and relate to each other”⁴

The main characters Madonna, baby Jesus and Rolin equally share the viewer’s interest with the magnificent landscape behind the two columns that delimit the interior space. Painter’s sensitivity for landscape evidently appears into the extreme depth of the rendered space, with the terrace of the chancellor’s Palace and continues with a winding river towards the horizon flanked by the beautifully painted mountains through an effect of aerial perspective magnificent assimilated.

The control over the means of plastic expression makes possible the creation of an almost unreal atmosphere through the richness of the content, but in the meantime real through the multitude of tangible details that compose the frame. Starting with the embroidery on Madonna’s mantle in the foreground, the look crosses the space, following the meander of the lines on the expensive material towards Madonna’s serene face and then goes through the firm columns that edge the interior space towards a landscape that impresses us. The Divine and the Real coexist in a perfect harmony, this seems to be the theme of van Eick’s painting.

⁴ Noel Mouloud, *Painting and Space*, Ed. Meridiane, 1978, p. 27.

The details of Rolin’s costume and the well traced features on the charismatic Chancellor’s face with sharp look take our thought towards the expressive portraits of the beginning of the 20th century with Dorothea Lange’s⁵ photos.

The Renaissance painter was the first great explorer of the visual space who created a real obsession for the second plan, enriching the imagination and ennobling with unsuspected and profound significations the fundamental themes of the universal culture.

Few centuries later photography and then cinematography took over an audience sensitive to the visual expressivity of two dimensional space, capable of understanding and perceive the erudite alchemies of playing with the depth of the field.

The subtle suggestion generated by the erudite landscape conceived by Leonardo da Vinci behind the mysterious Mona Lisa, who sinks the magical face of Gioconda behind of a full-of-mystery feminine smile, is basen on hypnotizing the viewer’s eye and mind into the winding labyrinth of the meander river from which high cliffs rise sunk into the bluish mist of the distance.

⁵ *Dorothea Lange*, the American photographer of German origin who marked the photography history with her portraits and documentary photos which shaped a remarkable portrait of the America at the beginning of the 20th century. The portraits she realized become an emblem of the expressivity and drew the attention on some painful aspects of the great economic crisis, see photo “Florence Leona Christie – Immigrant Mother”, 1936.



Fig. 3. Leonardo da Vinci, "Mona Lisa",
Louvre Museum, Paris, France.

The strong contrast between the warm dominant of the portrait and the cold effect given by the aerial perspective upon the far off space of the background brings its contribution to the hallucinating profoundness of the picture. The visionary type of Leonardo created this chromatic contrast, which is similar to that created by the difference in color temperature: between the warm interior light and the cold exterior one into cinematographic frame.

The Renaissance mysterious magician combined the most subtle fine sensations uniting the expressive form of two cinema extreme plans: touching expressivity of the Close Up shot and astounding vertigo sensation of the Ansamble shoti. Visual space complexity imagined by the artist reveals unsuspected volences to Gioconda, the foreground character.

This brief foray among Renaissance visual masterpieces suggests a consistent

experience when exploring the depth of the space accumulated by visual arts before photography and film.

The science of choosing the point of view of the apparent distance between subjects' plans and the use of linear and aerial perspective when rendering depth created a solid visual culture on which were based the esthetical principles of film art. The expansion of three dimensional movie is part of the film's destiny to enter the play space and will prove if it is indeed a viable option only when the spectator will guarantee this desire to perceive the magical features of the amage. The future of the visual exploration belongs to the modern creators that perpetuated the viewer's wish to enter the secret universe of the image.

The process of visualizing the characters' visual choreography into the cinematographic frame and the camera into the play space paradoxically has deep roots in the Renaissance fine art which explored with fervor the depth of field.

Based on optical capture of moving reality and having the possibility to move the camera into the play space, the film leads the spectator in a dictatorial through the space it explores not leaving too much space for the imagination as painting.

Joining frames and mobility that goes near or away the subject creates an own visual dynamism that enriches it with unique visual qualities.

The filmmaker having a solid visual culture and based on a native creator instinct may see with his mind's eyes the stamp of the frame before being filmed.

On these qualities all decisive options are based starting with the first preparation phase of a film, the phase when determinative choices regarding sets, characters or costumes in the film are made.

Just like in the painting field, the selection of elements that compose the final frame is initially based on the significance of the filmed sequence.

Composing the frame elements in space is an eminently creative process that finally defines the expressivity of the respective creation.

That is the reason why during the film preparation period of time, all those responsible for the film visual aspect: director, director of photography, set designer, costume designer prepare very minutely the constitutive elements of the future film.

Choosing the filming place and the perspective point of view represents a very important process that solicits to the maximum the capacity of the filmmaker to visualize the frame. There are locations that offer a deep perspective and a very rich visual essence, which may lend an unique atmosphere to a scene.

Finding these locations is a team activity that needs a very good documentation and a lot of patience. The chosen locations must be seen at the moment in accordance with the filming moment, the part of the natural light in that place being determinative for the image aspect. That is the moment when work photos can be taken, which are about to point out the characteristics of the chosen space.

The filmmaker establishes the shooting direction and realizes the characters' cho-

reography within the definite space of the frame where characters and sets coexist in a directive and suggestive relationship. The DOP lighting the scene, positions and moves the camera trying to explore this choreography and it generates to the eye of the viewer an intense esthetic satisfaction.

Positioning the camera for the shoot is decisive for the angle from which the spectator sees the action and confers upon the stylistic stamp into the sequence construction.

In case of a real set locations there is to be chosen the most interesting direction from scenography point of view that takes into consideration the main illumination direction. The volumetry interesting from the visual point of view and space's depth are arguments for choosing a certain area for the setting. The progress into profoundness of this one confers a powerful sensation of tridimensional and it creates the possibility of accomplishing a separation of plans through distinct illumination.

The plans of the setting elements also allow masking possible light sources phased into depth. In case there are some windows we must take into consideration the effect produced by their light upon the entire frame, the influence upon the illumination level and upon the color temperature.

The photos taken from the location inspections outline the potential of the setting, taking into consideration the location light conditions, define the possible camera angles and generate possible characters and camera movement.

The film creator visualizes almost instinctively the contents and the aspect of the two dimensional wanted frame and he outlines the modality of disposal of the frame elements into space. The importance of the frame look is overwhelming and it emphasizes the personality of those who contribute to its creation.

The possibility of exploiting the deep perspective of space empowers a setting with the real cinematographic value and this is the reason why it is chosen to be organized on stage following sketches of the set designer so that it might sustain the entire visual theme of the whole.

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