Perspective as structured memory in the wake of the Great Plague of 1348

Michael Grillo

University of Maine

Introduction

Extolled for its narrative structuring, mimetic illusionism, and symbolic form, perspective stands out as the signature vision of the Renaissance, setting a normative standard of visualization encoded in optically-based technologies that ensued in later centuries. Modern Era historians have typically described a positivist story of perspective, looking for protean origins in the Late Dugento and Early Trecento that only later Quattrocento artists would finally perfect. For these authors, perspective presented a desirable, yet elusive goal, obtainable only through decades of experimentation[1]. A variation on this theme entails paralleling this development as part of a similarly difficult Classical revival, one likewise requiring generations of artists to achieve an ostensibly long-term goal of reduplication[2]. Developing more nuanced understanding of how perspective might articulate, explore, and make operative ideologies characteristic of the Renaissance, Erwin Panofsky and Hubert Damisch consider perspective beyond its mimetic illusions to ask how it serves to create a mythic Classical consciousness, which Samuel Y. Edgerton extends to looking to its link to mapmaking and navigation[3]. Looking to how core ideologies shape the way in which a culture interacts with its physical environment opens up for this study why interests in a compositional perspective emerged at the start of the Quattrocento.

In the deeply-seated positivist model, the Plague years and ensuing decades through the end of the Trecento represented a pause in this ostensibly linear development, derailing only temporally what

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[1] See **J. White**, *The Birth and Rebirth of Pictorial Space*, London 1957; **A. Parronchi**, *Studi su la dolce prospettiva*, Milano 1964; **G. Federici Vescovini**, *Studi sulla prospettiva medioevale*, Torino 1965; **A. Smart**, *The Assisi Problem and the Art of Giotto*, Oxford 1971.

[2] See **N. El-Bizri**, *Classical Optics and Perspectivae Traditions leading to the Renaissance*, [in:] *Renaissance Theories of Vision*, Ed. **J. Hendrix**, **C. Carman**, Farnham 2010, p. 11.

[3] **S. Edgerton**, *The Renaissance Rediscovery of Linear Perspective*, New York 1976; **E. Panofsky**, *Perspective as Symbolic Form (1927)*, Transl. C. Wood, New York 1991; **H. Damisch**, *The Origins of Perspective*, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 1995.

1. Nardo di Cione, *Inferno*, 1357, fresco, 8 × 14.5 m; Florence, Santa Maria Novella. Photo from: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Nardo_di_Cione_-_Hell_-_WGA16439.jpg (access date: 8.09.2020)

appeared as a staged eventuality of a cohesive perspective plan[4]. This essay will argue that the Plague era created the necessary social conditions that made organizational systems such as perspective highly desirable, as promising means of restoring order to social chaos and offering continuity across dire, cataclysmic times.

The Great Plague and memory

Particularly in an era of the global COVID pandemic, the relevancy the unsettling vision by Giovanni Boccaccio describing Florence during the Great Plague of 1348 in his *Introduction to the First Day* of *The Decameron* stands out as starkly current:

> But let us leave the countryside and return to the city. What more remains to be said, except that the cruelty of heaven (and possibly, in some measure, also that of man) was so immense and so devastating that between March and July of the year in question [1348], what with the fury of the pestilence and the fact that so many of the sick were inadequately cared for or abandoned in their hour of need because the healthy were too terrified to approach them, it is reliably thought that over a hundred thousand human lives were extinguished within the walls of Florence? Yet before this lethal catastrophe fell upon the city, it is doubtful whether anyone would have guessed it contained so many inhabitants.
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> Ah, how great a number of splendid palaces, fine houses, and noble dwellings, once filled with retainers, lords and with ladies, were bereft of all who had lived there, down to the tiniest child! How numerous were the famous families, the vast estates, the notable fortunes, that were seen to be left without a rightful successor! How many gallant gentlemen, fair ladies, and sprightly youths, who have been judged hale and hearty by Galen, Hippocrates, and Aesculapius (to say nothing of others), have breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, acquaintances, and friends, supped the same evening with their ancestors in the next world!
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> [...]
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> And if we return to our homes, what happens? I do not know whether your own experience is similar to mine, but my house was once full of servants, and now there is no one left apart from my maid and myself, I am filled with foreboding and feel as if every hair on my head is standing on end. Whenever I go into the house, whenever I pause to rest, I seem to be haunted by the shadows of the departed, whose faces no longer appear as I remember them but with strange and horribly twisted expressions that frighten me out of my senses.
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> Accordingly, whether I am here in church or out in the streets or sitting at home, I always feel ill at ease, the more so because it seems to me that no one possessing private means and a place to retreat is left here apart from ourselves[5].

Boccaccio notes the Plague in terms of several shifts, from the aethereal "cruelty of heaven" to the earthly pathos of victims abandoned by the healthy, from a city unconscious of its population to one painfully aware of its lost hundred thousand, and from lively, full homes to empty shells haunted by memories. Each of these pairings articulates how the Plague fomented a newly heightened consciousness, one forcefully awakened from the immersive routines of daily life to meet the realities of a changed world which through its palpable, somatic sensation demands deliberative reflection[6]. The unescapable malaise troubles readers in that familiar, old comforts are gone forever, necessitating new means of creating

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[4] **M. Meiss** (*Painting in Florence and Siena after the Black Death: The Arts, Religion, and Society in the Mid-Fourteenth Century*, Princeton [New Jersey] 1951) and **M. Boskovits** (*Pittura fiorentina alla viglia del rinascimento: 1370-1400*, Florence 1975) depict the second half of the Trecento as a hiatus in this ostensible progress. For an excellent summary focused on a representative Siena, see **J. Steinhoff**, *Sienese Painting after the Black Death: Artistic Pluralism, Politics, and the New Art Market*, New York 2006, particularly in the chapter *Meiss and Method: Historiography of Scholarship on Mid-Trecento Sienese Painting*.

[5] **G. Boccaccio**, *The Decameron*, Transl. G. McWilliam, New York 1972, pp. 57-60.

[6] See **I. Albers**, *The Passions of the Body in Boccaccio's "Decameron"*, "Modern Language Notes" 2010, No. 1, p. 26.

a more sustainable future. The abject desperation of this passage resonating within Boccaccio's readers, as a disquieted world haunting for change, cannot but create a sense of void, one particularly purposeful for my thesis: that the clearing of city populations by the Plague revealed underlying urban structures that suggested to the survivors that foundational composition and not content could make the world more sensible. In other words, to understand the power of a rigorous compositional framework, such as perspective, one first had to clear the clutter of characters, settings, and vignettes.

This lengthy Boccaccio quotation provides a crucial foundation for this paper, in that it clearly correlates two definitions of a city: as the physical structures, of palaces, houses, dwellings, and churches, and their inhabitants, retainers, lords, ladies, servants, youths, and children. The first serves as the structuring, schematizing agent providing the physical organization for the second, the urban population. In abstracted pictorial terms, we could say that the first equals the organizing composition, and the second, the subject and its identity, namely, iconography. To provide a grounding for my argument as it unfolds, let us first turn to one of the principal conceptual devices that frames literature, sermons, and the arts of the Medieval era, into an idealized, clarified format: Memory Theatre.

In *The Art of Memory*, Francis Yates traces Memory Theatre back to its origins in ancient Greece, significantly drawing transcendent lucidity from dystopian chaos. According to Yates:

> At a banquet given by the nobleman of Thessaly named Scopas, the poet Simonides of Ceos chanted a lyric poem in honour of his host but including a passage in praise of Castor and Pollux. Scopas meanly told the poet he would pay him only half the sum agreed upon for the panegyric and that he must obtain the balance from the twin gods to whom he had devoted half the poem. A little later, a message was brought in to Simonides that two young men were waiting outside who wished to see him. He rose from the banquet and went out but could find no one. During his absence the roof of the banqueting hall fell in, crushing Scopas and all of the guests to death beneath the ruins; the corpses were so mangled that the relatives who came to take them away for burial were unable to identify them. But Simonides remembered the places at which they had been sitting at the table and was therefore able to indicate to the relatives which were their dead. [...] And this experience suggested to the poet the principals of the art of memory, [...] [for which] he realized that orderly arrangement is essential for good memory[7].

In Roman civilization, which so valued the art of rhetoric, Cicero, Quintilian and the anonymous author of the *Ad Herennium* codified this system, to recommend that one memorize a room interior or some other architectural place intimately, so that one could imagine walking around it and stopping at each notable facet[8]. With this framework indelibly in mind, to memorize a speech, one had to posit each phrase or idea progressively at a specific locus point, so that to deliver the oration, one only had to stroll around that so-familiar space in one's mind to pick up the lines or thoughts at each unforgettable facet. In this manner, one could walk through the speech backwards or forwards, or even pick up at any point merely by starting at the associated locus in the structuring architecture.

Chaos and order in the last judgement

Yates notes that the Fathers of the Church, later followed by the monastic and mendicant orders, most prominently the Dominicans, perfected this memory device for sermons, orations, and any other needs

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[7] **F. Yates**, *The Art of Memory*, London 1966, pp. 1–2.

[8] See **Quintilian**, *Institutio oratoria*, Transl. H. Butler, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 1963; **M. Cicero**, *De Oratore*, Transl. E. Sutton, H. Rackham, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 1977; **J. Penny Small**, *The Roman Contribution*, [in:] *Wax Tablets of the Mind: Cognitive Studies of Memory and Literacy in Classical Antiquity*, New York 1997; **Anon.**, *Rhetorica ad herennium*, III, xvi–xxiv, Transl. H. Caplan, Cambridge [Massachusetts] 1999, p. 204 ff.

of memory[9]. She also notes that secular authors, most notably Dante in his *Commedia Divina*, with its rigorous structure of Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven, exploited Memory Theatre effectively[10]. Clearly, Boccaccio had this device in mind when he wrote his *Introduction to the First Day*. Curiously, however, when Yates turns to the visual arts for an example, instead of looking at the works by the most well-known painters or sculptors of the Early Trecento, those typically associated with Dante, she instead cites the fresco of *The Wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas*, painted by Andrea di Bonaiuto around the decade of the Plague, in the Chapter House of Santa Maria Novella[11]. Nardo di Cione's *Inferno*, however, with its orderly compartmentalisations suitable for Yates' arguments
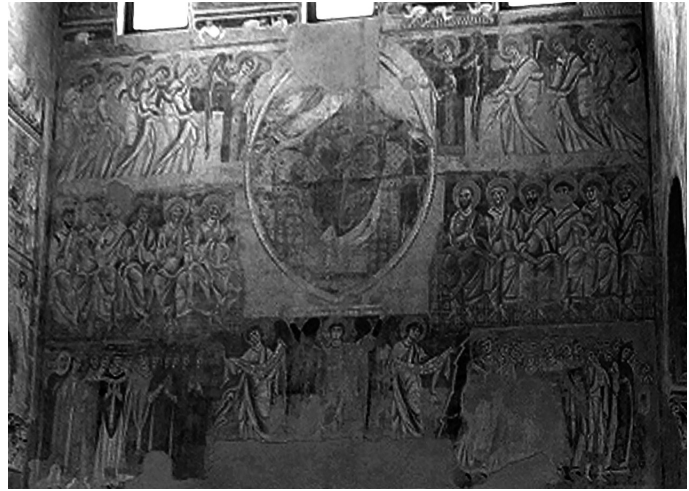
2. *Last Judgment*, c. 1074–1080, fresco, 15.8 × 22.2 m; Sant'Angelo in Formis, Capua. Photo: M. Grillo

in recalling the memorable structure of *The Divine Comedy*, runs counter to most other depictions before it, including a much earlier *Last Judgment*, painted c. 1072–1080 at Sant'Angelo in Formis, in Capua, which typifies the Medieval tradition of lining up the saved in godly order, as a neat congregation in the lower left, paralleling the distinctive arrangement of the tiers of saints and angels above that will also characterize Giotto's Arena Chapel depiction[12]. As the Florentine church of the Dominicans, the order which, as Yates points out fostered the study of Memory Theatre, Santa Maria Novella will play a central role in this article's argument because of the many relevant images situated there[13].

In response to Yates' selection, art historians typically note that the *Wisdom of St. Thomas Aquinas*, as well as the nearby *Last Judgment* frescoes by Nardo di Cione in the Strozzi Chapel, also in Santa Maria Novella, stand out as exceptions to Trecento order, and do not reiterate the rule [Fig. 1]. The orderliness of Nardo's *Inferno* in particular, while recalling Dante's from the *Divine Comedy*, runs counter to all other depictions, both before and after. One only has to think of Michelangelo's *Last Judgment* in the Sistine Chapel with its evocative chaos as the normative image that springs most immediately to mind. A much earlier *Last Judgment*, from the second half of the 12th century, at Sant'Angelo in Formis, in Capua, typifies the Medieval tradition of lining up the saved in godly order, as a neat congregation in the lower left, which mimics the distinctive arrangement of the tiers of saints and angels above [Fig. 2]. The damned, in that fresco's lower right, contrast greatly as they flounder in dystopian chaos, lost not only in torment, but

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[9] See **F. Yates**, *op. cit.*, pp. 50–81. See also **J. Coleman**, *Medieval Readers and Writers: 1350–1400*, New York 1981, p. 157; **K. Rivers**, *Memory and Medieval Preaching: Mnemonic Advice in the "Ars praedicandi" of Francesc Eiximenis (ca. 1327–1409)*, "Viator" Vol. 30 (1999), p. 253; *The Medieval Craft of Memory: An Anthology of Texts and Pictures*, Ed. **M. Carruthers**, **J. Ziolkowski**, Philadelphia 2002; **N. Ben–Aryeh Debby**, *The Renaissance Pulpit: Art and Preaching in Tuscany, 1400–1550*, Turnhout 2007; **E. Corbari**, *Vernacular Theology: Dominican Sermons and Audience in Late Medieval Italy*, Berlin 2013.

[10] **F. Yates**, *op. cit.*, pp. 95–96.

[11] See *ibidem*, pp. 79–80, Fig. 1.

[12] Artists following the Nardo type: Taddeo di Bartolo, Fra Angelico, and Giovanni di Paolo. Artists adhering to the Giotto type: Nicolò and Giovanni Pisano, Lorenzo Maitani, Giusto de Menabuoi, Bicci di Lorenzo, Luca Signorelli, Michelangelo, and Giorgio Vasari with Federico Zuccari.

[13] See **J. Polzer**, *Andrea di Bonaiuto's Federico Zuccari "Via Veritas" and Dominican Thought in Late Medieval Italy*, "The Art Bulletin" 1995, No. 2, p. 262.

also in unsettling, sheer confusion. This pattern plays out almost continuously in other examples from the era, as in the *Last Judgment*, most likely created by Coppo di Marcovaldo in the 1290's, set within the slightly earlier dome mosaics in the Baptistery of Florence[14]. In the lower portions of the image, one can see the familiar divisions, of the well-behaved saved and the unruly damned. One of the most familiar depictions of the *Last Judgment*, painted by Giotto in the Arena Chapel in Padova around 1305–1306, makes this point most effectively, for it devotes a sizeable amount of wall space to both Heaven and Hell.

The rigorous order of the saved, as they line up, contrasts starkly with the jumble of the damned, writhing and suffering in eternal pain. This distinctive use of heavenly order and hellish chaos as foils to one another prevails in numerous other examples of the *Last Judgment*, such as in the panels on the pulpit of the Duomo of Siena, carved by Nicola Pisano from 1265 to 1268, or of the pulpit in the Duomo of Pisa, sculpted by his son Giovanni from 1302 to 1311. Even in Dante's otherwise orderly Inferno we find traces of dysfunctional dystopia in the shattered bridge over the sixth *bolgia*, a vestige of destruction left unrepaired from the Harrowing of Hell, and the unbridled demons lead by Malacoda, who operates freely as a rogue brigand claiming his own domain in Hell[15]. Uninfluenced by Dante's model, however, Trecento images typically depict Hell as tormenting all the damned jumbled together *en masse*, regardless of their individual sins. Why, then, does Nardo di Cione alone introduce such a strong sense of order into his, and why do so many of the other frescoes at Santa Maria Novella at this time exhibit such systemic arrangement [Fig. 1]?

The usual explanation reflects 19th- and 20th-century historiographic argues that Dante's text took a generation or so to filter into the visual arts. This explanation of course gives precedence to the text, and relegates the role of images to merely illustrating some already fully articulated idea in writing. It also suggests ideas come from single authors, only to then percolate across a society, rather than their existing in protean form first in society and only later becoming codified by an author. Needless to say, this approach underscores our logocentric, Post-Renaissance tradition in which texts explain images, provide primary sources for images, and ultimately always underlie images. Too rarely do we consider how images served as society's primary articulators of ideas, often before they appear in any verbal form[16].

While Yates noted that Nardo's ordering of Hell does look back to Dante, she did not take into account how the *Divine Comedy* and Nardo's *Last Judgment* frescoes serve very different purposes, a factor which begins to explain their appearances a generation apart. The *Divine Comedy* in many ways serves as an encyclopaedia, weaving theology, philosophy, history, morality, and most importantly, politics into one cohesive and comprehensive fabric. Readers considered it first and foremost in a secular context, as its *terza rime* form and vernacular language would suggest[17]. One can easily imagine its daily currency,

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[14] See **G. Corbett**, **H. Webb**, *Introduction*, [in:] *Vertical Readings in Dante's Comedy*, Ed. *iidem*, Vol. 2, Cambridge 2016, p. 1, in which the editors cite the Baptistery's mosaics of the Judaic Testament stories as a model for Dante's structuring his *Divine Comedy*. See also **A. DeWitt**, *I Mosaici del Battistero di Firenze*, Casa di Risparmio di Firenze, Florence 1954–1957; **I. Hueck**, *Das Programm der Kuppelmosaiken im florentiner Baptisterium*, Mondorf–Rhein 1962; **A. Garzelli**, *Per una lettura del Giudizio Universale nel Battistero di Firenze*, [in:] *Romanico padano, romanico Europeo. Convegno internazionale di studi, Modena–Parma, 26 ottobre – 1 novembre 1977*, Ed. **A. Quintivalle**, Parma 1982, p. 399; **A. Giusti**, *L'Opificio delle pietre dure e i mosaici del Battistero: un secolo di restauri*, [in:] *Atti del VII centenario del Duomo di Firenze*, Ed. **T. Verdon**, **A. Innocenti**, Florence 2001, Vol. 2: *La cattedrale come spazio sacro: saggi sul Duomo di Firenze*, p. 683; **M. Boskovits**, *Florentine Mosaics and Panel Paintings: Problems of Chronology*, "Studies in the History of Art" Vol. 61 (2002), p. 486.

[15] **D. Alighieri**, *Inferno*, Transl. J. Sinclair, New York 1977, canto 21, p. 265.

[16] See numerous semiotic critiques of earlier iconographic readings which gave precedence to the text: **C. Hasenmueller**, *Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics*, "The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism" 1978, No. 3, p. 289; **D. Rosand**, *Semiotics and the Critical Sensibility: Observations on the Example of Meyer Schapiro*, "Artibus et Historiae" 1982, No. 5, p. 9; **C. Chazelle**, *Pictures, Books, and the Illiterate: Pope Gregory I's Letters to Serenus of Marseilles*, "Word and Image" 1990, 6, p. 138; **M. Bal**, **N. Bryson**, *Semiotics and Art History*, "The Art Bulletin" 1991, No. 2, p. 174; **M. Schapiro**, *Words, Script, and Pictures: Semiotics of Visual Language*, New York 1996.

[17] The literature abounds in Dante studies on his social relevance to a wide diversity of social issues: **J. Ferrante**, *The Political Vision of the "Divine Comedy"*, Princeton [New Jersey] 1984; **G. Mazzotta**, *Dante's Vision and the Circle of Knowledge*, Princeton [New Jersey] 1993. **J. Ferrante**, *Dante and Politics*, [in:] *Dante: Contemporary Perspectives*, Ed. **A. Iannucci**, Toronto 1997, pp. 181; **J. Ahern**, *Singing the Book: Orality in the Reception of Dante's Comedy*, [in:] *Dante: Contemporary…*, pp. 214.

with Florentines using it as a political tool in the streets. Certainly this political dimension enters into the religious sphere continually in Late Medieval Italy, as the presence in the Arena Chapel *Last Judgment* of Enrico Scrovegni offering up his chapel to the Virgin just above the doorway to the literally secular world on the saved side, in expiation for his family's usury, would suggest[18]. Still, religious frescoes bridge an exterior secular world into the religious domain, in contrast to the worldly text of Dante, which lives routinely outside in a civic community. In his *Inferno*, Nardo labels each layer of the damned, but he does not identify individuals, unlike Dante, who personifies each sin in a specific transgressor. If one were to argue that identifiable portraits fill the chambers of Nardo's *Inferno*, one would have to think just how futile and ineffective a gesture this strategy would be, given the wholesale death that Boccaccio so eloquently describes, which would make identifying specific people by sight rather difficult, particularly as they disappeared so quickly in their cataclysmic mass death of the Great Plague. The order of the *bolgie* in this painted *Inferno* fits categories of crimes, not the individual perpetrators, and so reflects more the structure for memory than the particular details or persons guilty of these sins. This difference between these modes of reference reiterates what I have described as Boccaccio's first definition of the city, namely, its schematic structures of palaces, halls, shops, etc., as opposed to the second sense, that is, of its inhabitants, with all of their individual personalities. Only through the more permanent, ordering first framework could the more ephemeral contents exist in memory; the openly receptive structure presents a stabilizing sense of legal order, in which the viewer must supply the more immediate specifics from the common world. Only in a utopic ideal could the Christian deity's law create such a conclusively bounded containment defining each crime, in which the specifics of each individual case would then find delineation.

Nardo's *Inferno* fresco in the Strozzi Chapel of Santa Maria Novella has one immediate antecedent that suggests this process of establishing a memorable ordering framework into which the specifics may then find definition. The *Last Judgment* in the Camposanto of Pisa, attributed variously to Francesco Traini, Bonamico Buffalmacco, or other anonymous painters typically dated from around the late 1340's does not structure Hell quite as definitively as the *Inferno* by Nardo does, but it grants it a level of order parallel to that of the group of saved souls across from it, deviating sharply from the traditional contrast between a Heaven ruled by order and a chaotic, confounding Hell, found in the earlier decades of the Trecento as well as the Dugento. While a 15th-century engraving records some of the depicted figures' identities, including Simon Magus, Nebuchadnezzar, Julian the Apostate, and Attila, the vast majority of figures simply serve to show the tortures coupled with their type of sin set within its *bolgia*[19]. Clearly, an idealizing, systematic arrangement dates from the Plague era, a period which increasingly demanded a sensible framework within which one could structure one's personal memories of the lost. Nardo's *Inferno* provides such a schema most effectively.

The ordering of space

This need for order as a frame for Memory Theater brought about in painting the adoption of one of the more historically valued, particularly from the Renaissance of the Quattrocento's point of view, systems of composition: mathematical perspective, which conforms the unruly world to a utopian clarity of

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[18] See *Giotto: The Arena Chapel Frescoes*, Ed. **J. Stubblebine**, New York 1969; **S. Mieth**, *Giotto: Das Mnemotechnische Programm der Arenaka–pelle in Padua*, Tübingen 1991; **A. Derbes**, **M. Sandona**, *The Usurer's Heart: Giotto, Enrico Scrovegni, and the Arena Chapel in Padua*, State College [Pennsylvania] 2008; **L. Jacobus**, *Giotto and the Arena Chapel: Art, Architecture and Experience*, Turnhout 2008.

[19] See **B. Dodge**, *Tradition, Innovation, and Technique in Trecento Mural Painting: The Frescoes and Sinopie Attributed to Francesco Traini in the Camposanto in Pisa*, PhD diss., The Johns Hopkins University 1978, p. 86.

mathematic order.[20] In *The Book of Memory*, Mary Carruthers explains that when St. Augustine, in Book 10 of the *Confessions*, writes: "Behold in those innumerable fields, and dens, and caves of my memory, innumerably full of innumerable kinds of things, first, either by images, as all bodies are: secondly, or by the presence of the things themselves, as the arts are: thirdly, or by certain notions and impressions, as the affections of the mind are", he uses archetypal metaphors, for, as she states: "one did not need to practice the architectural art to believe that memory was locative in nature"[21]. The possibilities for over-arching memory structures, then, should specifically include perspective, for it positions an image's subjects relative to one another within a pictorial surface mapped by regular, fixed reference *loci*, defined within a close-bordered picture frame.

We must recall that *Della Pittura*, written by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435, rationalizes its discussions of the mechanics of composition, which present the first cogent mapping out of perspective, as a means to structure the narrative, or to use Alberti's term, *istoria*. To Alberti, stories manifested history, for the past uniquely offered ideal standards, utopian models for the present, in their noble themes and clear expressions[22]. The chaos of the Plague would have forefronted the need for a stabilizing cultural anchoring in the past, which the clear pictorial and narrative order articulated by Alberti three generations later would offer. Needless to say, this linking of Alberti to needs only made apparent in the Plague era runs counter to conventional, though finally waning, teleological understandings of history of art, which by terming the Early Trecento as Early Renaissance looks back to those decades as a period when painting ostensibly attempted order through an empirically derived and locally applied perspective, progressively struggling for the more unified compositional scheme that Alberti and his contemporaries in the Quattrocento achieve in a deterministic progression. This positivist model echoes the 16th-century writings of Giorgio Vasari, who through the chronological construct of his *Vite* tacitly suggests that Giotto would have hoped to paint the images that Masaccio did 100 years plus later, but somehow failed due to an undeveloped skill or knowledge, condemning him to create images solely important as historical stepping-stones to later generations of Renaissance artists[23].

Samuel K. Cohn Jr., in *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death*, inventoried commissions and endowments to note that while patronage fell slightly after the 1348 Plague, "[i]n the years of social and economic dislocation, 1364–1375, when several art historians have assumed that the demand for art after the plague had plummeted (as Henk van Os suggests), retreated to retrograde workshops in the provinces (Miklòs Boskovits's proposal), or even disappeared completely (according to Millard Meiss), demand as revealed by this testamentary documentation runs in the opposite direction"[24]. Instead of falling into any stagnation interrupting some mythic epochal progression, the art of the time explored new avenues of composition to re-contextualize both traditional iconographies and those recently introduced in the first half of the Trecento. Composition, as an abstract, transcendent frame, offered an effective means of structuring these established vocabularies of painting in an idealized order that could endow them with enhanced, contemporary meanings through a narrative voice. The very nature of the ruinously depopulated city refocused attention to those now egregiously clear structural elements of "splendid

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[20] Although the consideration of perspective as the driving focus of Renaissance arts has rightly waned in current scholarship, it remains a historically significant compositional element, apparent through in its strong influence on ensuing eras, making it well worth more nuanced attentions. See **M. Holly**, *Past Looking: Historical Imagination and the Rhetoric of the Image*, Ithaca [New York] 1996, p. 15.

[21] **M. Carruthers**, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, New York 1992, p. 146.

[22] **L. Alberti**, *On Painting (Della Pittura)*, Transl. J. Spencer, New Haven 1966, p. 72.

[23] **G. Vasari**, *Lives of the Artists* (*Le Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architetti*), New York 1965.

[24] **S. Cohn Jr.**, *The Cult of Remembrance and the Black Death: Six Renaissance Cities in Central Italy*, Baltimore [Maryland] 1992, p. 256.
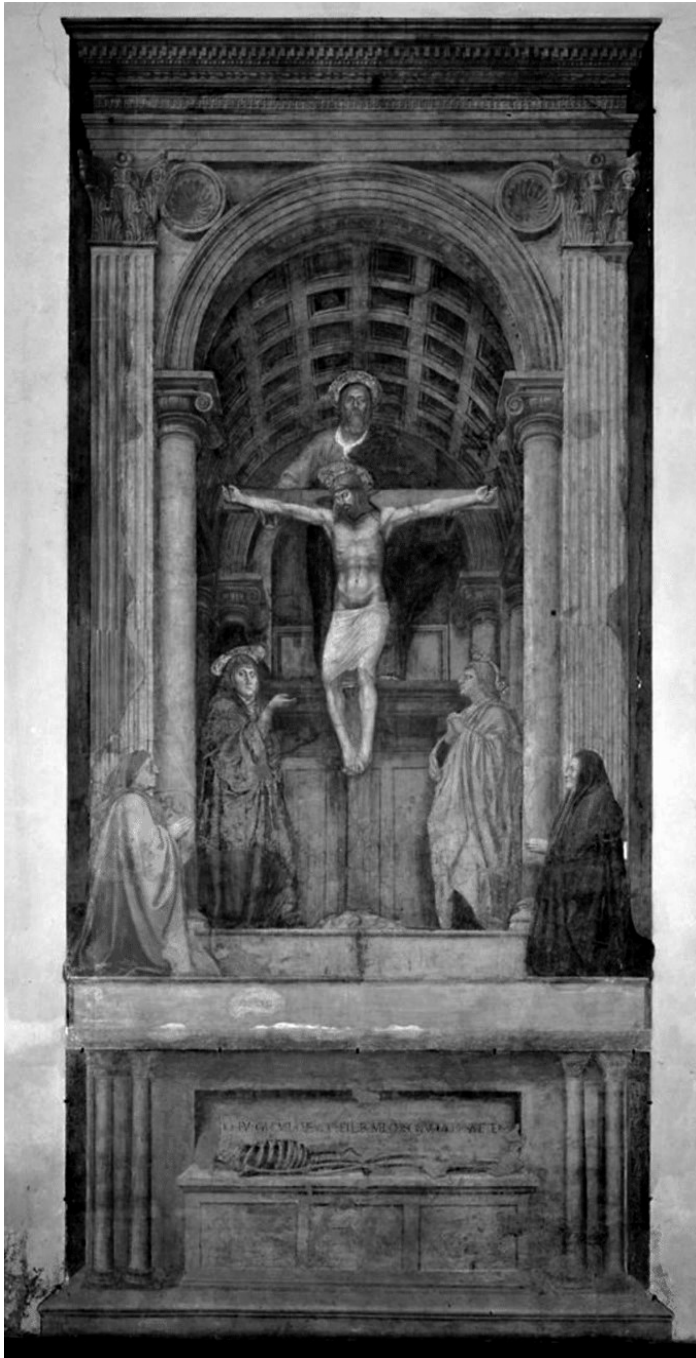
3. Masaccio, *The Trinity*, c. 1427, fresco, 667 × 317 cm, Florence, Santa Maria Novella. Photo from: http://commons.wikimedia.org/ wiki/Category:Trinity_(Masaccio)#/media/File:Masaccio,_trin– it%C3%A0.jpg (access date: 8.09.2020)

palaces, fine houses, and noble dwelling'', the only remaining reminders of the people who had lived there. In this cultural ambience, the potentials for universal underlying compositional structures for art would have received an attention unmatched in any time before. Only a culture recovering from such catastrophe would develop an ideal that could provide a secure schema in which to construct its memories.

In this wonderfully unforeseen manner, the chaos of the Plague era underscored the value of Memory Theatre, which in a pictorial language could manifest itself effectively in the measurable, fixed rete of perspective. One other factor comes into play, one that would also have focused the culture's attention on the structural frame instead of its contents: the realm of architecture. Cohn summarizes:

> As we have seen, testators from early Quattrocento Florence not only feared an encroachment of others' commissioned works of art and coats of arms in their private sacred spaces, they also demanded that their ecclesiastical hosts keep their passages leading to their enclaves of private devotion and memory clear from the clutter of others' commissioned works. The propagation and reception of new classical notions of ecclesiastical design and space associated with [Filippo] Brunelleschi and later Alberti – "the fashion of whitewashing muralled church interiors in order to give them a neat, clean, look" – appear at the very moment when patrician families became intent on dominating those temples for their own political and social purposes[25].

One only has to call to mind the ordered interiors of Brunelleschi's San Lorenzo and Santo Spirito in Florence. Now that the Plague had forced the clarifying structure

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[25] *Ibidem*, p. 278.
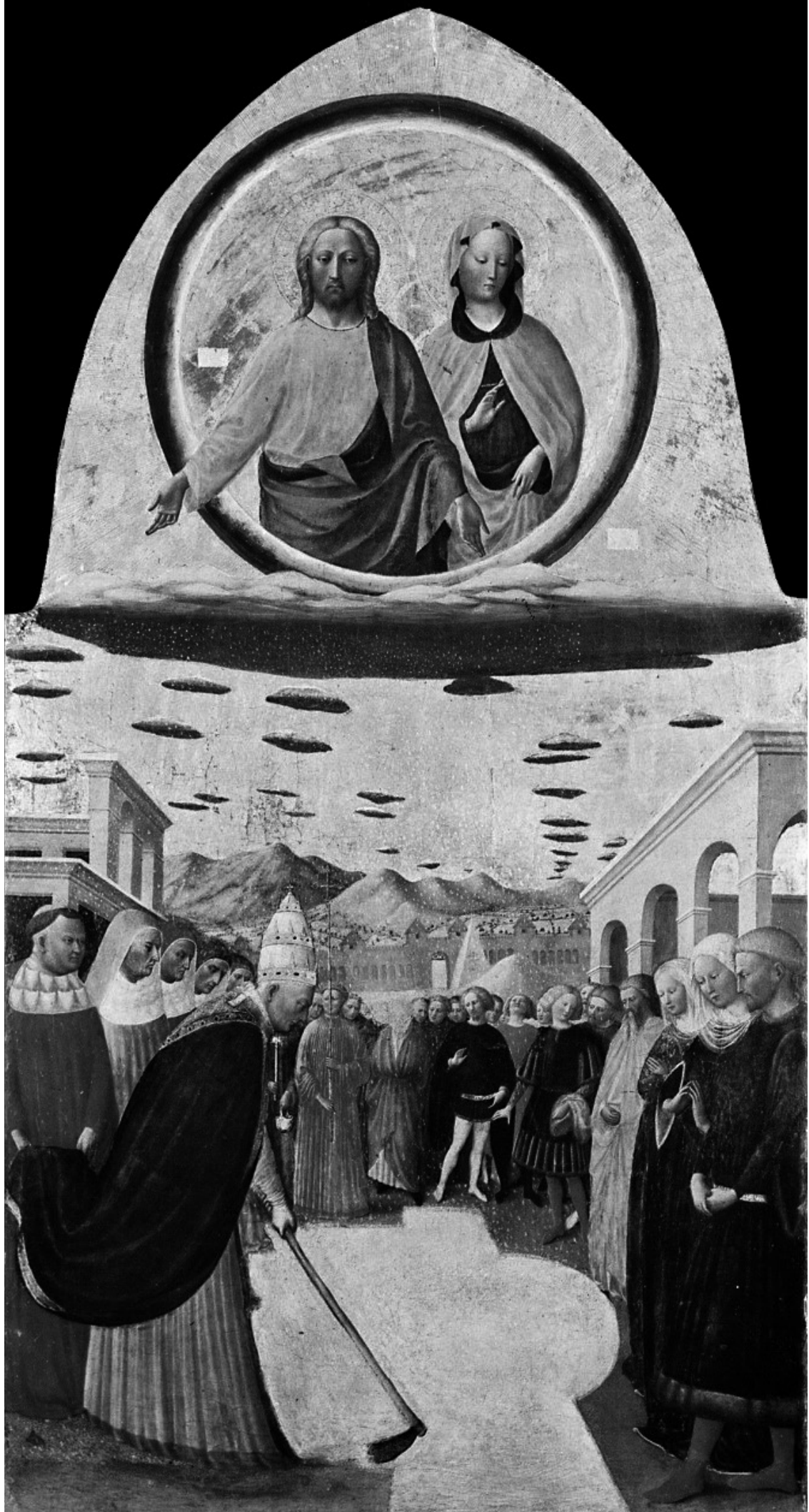
of memory into the foreground, it could either hold memory, or through like manipulations, if so desired, eradicate it. In its ability to articulate the narrative voice, *istoria*, perspective became a vital tool to those rising families positioning themselves as cultural leaders in a recovering Italy. Paintings following the ideals of perspective became the primary pictorial voice of the wealthiest patronage class, helping create the impression that they represent the dominant artistic vision of the Quattrocento[26].

The fresco of the Trinity, painted by Masaccio around 1427 in Santa Maria Novella, just down from the chapel where Nardo di Cione's *Last Judgment* with its *Inferno* resides, unifies the threads discussed so far [Fig. 3][27]. A commemorative altar for the Lenzi family, it depicts in perfect mathematical perspective the illusion of a funerary chapel behind theatrically arranged presences of the Holy Trinity, the Virgin and Saint John, and the Donors. Below the space for the altar table appears a skeleton with the written *memento mori*: "*IO FU GIA QUEL CHE VOI SIETE E QUEL CHIO SON VOI ANCO SARETE*" ("I was once that which you are, and what I am you also shall be"). This quotation, repeated across town in Santa Croce in a surviving fragment of a mostly lost *Last Judgment* and also in *The Triumph of Death* in the *Camposanto* in Pisa, directly evokes the sentiment voiced by Boccaccio:

> How many gallant gentlemen, fair ladies, and sprightly youths [...] [...] have breakfasted in the morning with their kinsfolk, acquaintances, and friends, supped the same evening with their ancestors in the next world![28].

The principal figures of the Trinity create a defining triangle, which suspends them against an illusion of a deep but empty Classical chapel, which emphasizes its structural framework in a strong, uncluttered presence. Like the city defined by its buildings structuring the memory of its inhabitants in *The Decameron*, the chapel stands as an emphatic guiding structure that forcefully draws the audience from the frontal slab marking in its confined vision the limited mortality of the skeleton, to the illusion of the profound chapel opening up above it, leading one through ascending hierarchies of devotion, from those Donor figures, to the Virgin and St. John, and ultimately, to the transcendence of the Christian mystery of the Trinity, marked by perspective's vanishing point. As Joanne Snow-Smith and several other historians have noted, the fresco uses perspective as a means of giving presence to the spiritual, depicted not through direct representation, but rather, through the voided space containing the otherwise invisible[29].

The Founding of Santa Maria Maggiore, painted by Masolino around 1428 best exemplifies this use of illusionary space free from chaotic clutter as a suggestion of ideal Christian possibilities [Fig. 4]. Although lacking as mathematically precise a perspective as the *Trinity*, its near contemporary, the Masolino panel depicts a voided space for not what was, but what will come to be. Once perspective developed as a universal ideal making specific content comprehendible, in its stripped form, its conscious void could signal prophetically awaiting. According to legend, deciding that she wanted a church dedicated to her in Rome, the Virgin, through Christ, made it snow one summer day in the form of the desired ground-plan

[26] Any encompassing inventory of 15th-century paintings in Florence, let alone Tuscany, reveals that these seemingly definitive paintings favoring perspective represent in fact a minority voice of the time.

[27] See **R. Lieberman**, *Brunelleschi and Masaccio in Santa Maria Novella*, "Memorie Domenicane" Vol. 12 (1981), p. 127; **F. Huber**, *Das Trinitäts-fresko von Masaccio und Filippo Brunelleschi in Santa Maria Novella zu Florenz*, München 1990.

[28] **G. Boccaccio**, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

[29] **J. Snow-Smith**, *Masaccio's Fresco in Santa Maria Novella: A Symbolic Representation of the Eucharistic Sacrifice*, "Arte Lombarda. Nuova Serie" 1988, No. 1/2, p. 47.

to mark the specific site of her request, to be built under Pope Sixtus III in 432–440[30]. In creating a cleared, pristine, architected space, it eradicates the earlier Roman Macellum Liviae and domestic inhabitation on the Esquiline through a wash of white in the same manner as the Classical-revival architecture noted by Cohn eradicated the past to focus on how structure promises enduring continuity[31]. While this apocryphal story would have had strong appeal to first millennium Christians, in promising a Christian future for Rome saved from polytheism, it would have had particularly resonated with 15th-century audiences for several reasons, including its promise of a renewed, papal seat and states of Rome, emerging from the demoralizing struggles of the Great Schism, which had divided Western Europe from 1378 to 1417, ending with the installation of Martin V in Rome. But more significant to my argument here, the legend describes an adapted, transmuted form of Memory Theatre, one in which the divine provision of a conspicuously voided, idealizing framework, ensures that the earthly presence of the Virgin will come to be. In the modern popular culture parlance of the 1989 Hollywood film, *Field of Dreams*: "If you build it, they will come"[32]. The structuring skeleton would prompt the attachment of ideas, as an expectant, fertile ground: a city charged with potentiality renewed, awaiting prophetic inhabitation. Just as perspective had emerged as a compositional structure that offered an underlying stability for otherwise volatile histories, giving hope to a devastated post-plague era, in Masolino's panel, it also offered in its suggestion of underlying order a means of revealing fore-ordained, divine promise.

The liminal transition between ideal promise and physical realization finds voice most clearly in the works of Paolo Uccello. His three *Battle of San Romano* panels from around 1438, including the *Bernardino della Ciarda Unhorsed*, in the Uffizi Gallery, presents an active stage clearly mapped out by lines of perspective delineated by immediately past actions of battle [Fig. 5]. Broken lances and downed dying horses form the framework of memory of the just lapsing combat; in other words, the painting conflates the idealized structure with the realized contents, as an orator would in the process of reciting a speech set to a locus of points in applied Memory Theatre.

In his *Deluge and Recession of the Flood*, from around 1445–1447, in the Green Cloister of that Dominican seat of Memory Theater, Santa Maria Novella, Uccello uses perspective in a radically different manner, yet one, to my mind, that stems from the utopian promise that we have seen emerge from the chaos of the Plague [Fig. 6]. Uccello has structured a perspective so radical that it commands the viewers' attention to the point where it displaces the figures of the lost souls and Noah. The structural framework of memory presents itself so strongly that it comes into tension with its subjects, to clearly divide them into hermetic realms, the catastrophic Flood, and the promise after Noah's Salvation[33]. The vanishing point, usually subdued by the principal subject around which it focuses the composition, such as Christ of the Trinity in Masaccio's fresco in Santa Maria Novella, appears here unmasked, as raw command transcending form[34]. Only so openly could it work as the cathartic point of historical discontinuity. As a fo-

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[30] The origins of this apocryphal story remain unknown, only appearing in written reference in the early 13th century, but certainly suggesting older origins that had spread beyond Italy before this notation, given the story's written documentation shortly after in Spain as well. See **R. Mairead–O'Foghluda**, *Roma Nova: The Santa Maria Maggiore Altarpiece and the Rome of Martin V*, PhD diss., Columbia University 1998, p. 131; **A. Cameron**, *The Cult of the Virgin in Late Antiquity: Religious Development and Myth–Making*, "Studies in Church History" Vol. 39 (2004), p. 1; **L. Donkin**, *Sta. Maria Maggiore and the Depiction of Holy Ground Plans in Late Medieval Italy*, "Gesta" 2018, No. 2, p. 225.

[31] See **L. Richardson**, *A New Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome*, Baltimore [Maryland] 1992, p. 241; *Lexicon topographicum Urbis Romae*, Ed. **E. Steinby**, Vol. 3, Rome 1996, p. 203, 217.

[32] *Field of Dreams*, dir. **P. Robinson**, USA 1989.

[33] See **A. McAlister**, *Narrative and Allegory in the Genesis Fresco Cycle in the Chiostro Verde, Santa Maria Novella, Florence*, PhD diss., University of Georgia 2003.

[34] Other elements as well in the painting, such as the grand figure of Noah, likewise call attention as to themselves as compositional devices to the reveal how the design and aesthetics of an image shape its subjects, serving as a "meta–narrative device" (**W. Wallace**, *Between Flood and Fire*, "Source" 2012, No. 2, p. 24).

5. P. Uccello, *The Battle of San Romano*, c.1445, tempera and oil on panel, 182 × 320 cm, Florence, Uffizi. Photo from: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:San_Romano_Battle_(Paolo_Uccello,_Florence)#/media/File:Batalla_San_Romano_01.JPG (access date: 8.09.2020)

6. P. Uccello, *Deluge and Recession of the Flood*, c. 1445–1447, fresco, 215 × 510 cm, Florence, Santa Maria Novella. Photo from: http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Deluge,_Waters_Subsiding_and_Noah_Stories_by_Paolo_Uccello_01.jpg (access date: 8.09.2020)

cused, single point it remains ultimately impenetrable: a dizzying infinity, having no physical dimension, yet providing the pivotal locus for mapping all Judaic-Christian history before and after it.

The composition uniquely exposes the governing framework of Memory Theatre in its applied form of pictorial perspective form to denote a promise of a Christian fulfillment. Like the City of Florence in the Plague era, the pictorial structure of memory alone survives the transition from a lost past to a promising future: those "splendid palaces, fine houses, and noble dwellings", once populated by the "retainers, lords, and [...] ladies", eventually becoming occupied by the progeny of the survivors who came to claim them, as Cohn notes, paralleling the foundational order of idealized perspective linking times before and after the Flood[35]. Had *The Deluge and Recession* stood alone, instead of as part of a narrative sequence progressing left to right spanning *The Creation* through the *Drunkenness of Noah*, one could have hoped that Uccello would have considered further linking the image to the Last Judgment through the conventions of Memory Theatre, which would have entailed reversing the placement of the lost souls and the saved to match images of Last Judgment, which place the Paradise on Christ's right and Inferno on his left. The story of the Deluge would have had great poignancy for the survivors of the Plague, especially with the pestilence's frequent reoccurrences across the later Trecento and Quattrocento. As Florentines were continually structuring memories of past generations around the physical armature of the city, they would have found Uccello's depiction incredibly effective[36].

Conclusion

The catharsis of the Great Plague of 1348 made possible a totally unforeseeable future, granting rise from the ashes of one of the most purgative moments in history an idealizing conceptual basis for the art that opened up a definitive compositional element that crystallized Renaissance vision. The precipitous need for mechanisms of remembrance that the Plague demanded counter-intuitively from a Modernist model lay the ground fertile for Quattrocento visions in which an abstract compositional order could triumph over the disintegrative chaos of the world. Depiction shifted from a tradition of loosely juxtaposed content that had proved ephemeral to a more robust syntactic system that could transcend whatever vicissitudes the Fates dealt out. The catastrophic losses of populations in the Great Plague had turned the definition of city from its vivacious inhabitants to the emptied structures that had once housed them. As the sole reminders of the past, in accord with the process of Memory Theatre, the structural elements became forced to the forefront, ever present, as the repositories and tropes for memory, promising a utopian future that would transcend any threat of discontinuity with the past. This shift fostered the desire for a systematic, unifying compositional structure, perspective, which served not necessarily the mimetic depiction that later generations would value it for, but instead, as the promise of a clarified Albertian *istoria*, a pictorial memory unbounded by cathartic disturbances.

Słowa kluczowe
wielka zaraza 1348 roku, źródła perspektywy, włoski renesans, Teatr Pamięci, *istoria*

Keywords
Great Plague of 1348, perspective origins, Italian Renaissance, Memory Theatre, *istoria*

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[35] See **G. Boccaccio**, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

[36] See **L. Martines**, *Power and Imagination: City States in Renaissance Italy*, Baltimore [Maryland] 1988, p. 166.

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PhD Michael Grillo, grillo@maine.edu, ORCID: 0000-0001-7120-2679

He received his PhD at Cornell University in 1991, under the guidance of Dr Creighton Gilbert and Dr Esther Dotson. He has worked as an art historian at the University of Maine since 1992. His primary area of research is in Italian late mediaeval history of art, with a primary interest in visual semiotics. He has published several articles, including *David's Other: Creation by the Gaze*, (2004), *Illuminated Architecture: The Influence of Manuscripts on the Palatine Chapel* (2015), and *Dissolving the Frame: Phenomenology and Index in Trecento Painting* (2019).

Summary

MICHAEL GRILLO (University of Maine) / Perspective as structured memory in the wake of the Great Plague of 1348

The Great Plague of 1348 prompted a cathartic shift in thinking about cities, from organic social networks of individuals, to the remaining buildings indexing the memory of their lost residents. The profound impact of such population loss forced survivors to engage the Classical device of Memory Theater, remembering people by their spatial locations rather than their bodily presence. Engaging this public sensibility, the Trecento reconceptualized how pictorial structure, from one centered around protagonists to a standardized compositional system placing each figure in clearly mapped relationships, serving what Leon Battista Alberti would later deem the primary purpose of painting: clear narration, *istoria*. Displacing subjects for their spatial relations, this new compositional scheme of perspective offered a mimetic form in which painters of the Quattrocento could then explore how to articulate the capacities of historical memory itself. From the chaos of pestilence emerged one of the definitive design elements, one of rationalized narrative space, core to Renaissance vision.