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PATTERNS OF REDEMPTION
Parachronicity in the work of Piero della Francesca,
Frank Zappa and Stanley Spencer

Michael John Barwell
B.Ed (Hons.) (*Warwick*), M.A. (*Warwick*).

Submitted as fulfilment for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.)

The University of Warwick
Department of Arts Education

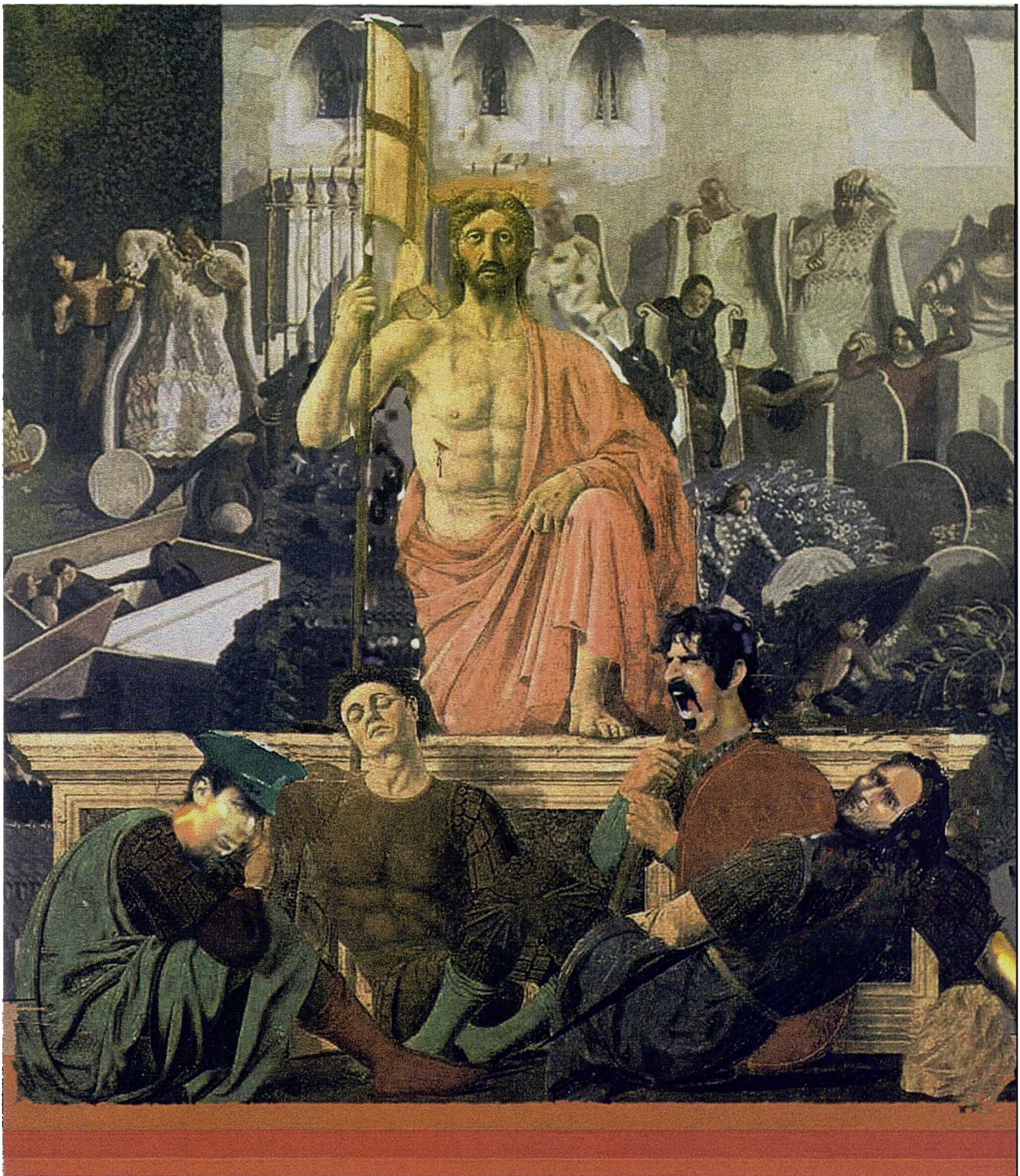
September 2002

For
John Baldacchino
Friend and Tutor

"Homo non intelligendo fit omnia."

"Man becomes all things by not understanding."

Giambattista Vico



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Preface

The Nature of the Research.

This work claims in part its own heritage as stemming directly from the M.A. methodology course within the *Unit for Research in Education, Culture and the Arts*, (URECA) once based in the *Institute of Education at The University of Warwick*. Times change and many of the tutors as well as students have moved on, but for a while this was a vibrant and enthusiastic arts-based enterprise. Amongst the topics up for discussion, the foray into ‘interpretation’ provoked a heartfelt response from fellow students and myself. Culminating in a weekend residential at Cambridge and the chance to hear Professor Quentin Skinner, the whole course was for me the most enjoyable adventure.

Therefore, properly situated in the lap of ‘Critical Studies’ and away from purist Art Historians or defensive Philosophers, this research is a continuation of a much older topic: ‘The History of Ideas’. Its methodology, if that is not too strong a term, consists of building upon what is already felt to be relevant and keeping a weather eye out for fresh ideas on the horizon. In practice, making the most of the chance remark, or an overheard snippet of conversation, taking up a suggestion to read a certain book or article and writing copiously at every lecture or seminar has been the rule of thumb. In conjunction with the serendipitous approach to following a hunch, having the tenacity and the audacity to approach leading authorities in their field of study has yielded rich rewards.

However, I must claim an earlier frame of reference to which this study truly belongs because to not do so would belie the whole of this work. My lifelong passion for art and music had brought me to question the purpose of artistic endeavour long before attending any courses upon the subject. It had seemed to me, that painting, making sculpture and learning to play a variety of musical instruments was my predestined course of life, and as most people look at the end product rather than the process, it seems an enviable one. Yet, to willingly undertake a discipline that might involve a certain amount of ‘suffering for one’s art’ (when it would be much easier not to bother) is the lot of the practitioner. It must be said that I am not complaining but that I know like any other artist that I am ‘driven’ — it is just that I have always been curious to know why.

Literature Review

Long before embarking upon the M.A. I deliberately set about using books as inspiration for paintings, (see appendix) and regular visits to the *Central Library, Coventry* allowed me to bring home a constant source of ideas. For years I enjoyed biographies and reading about painting technique. It was there that my interest in Stanley Spencer was rekindled, (I can still remember seeing *The Resurrection, Cookham* at the *Tate Gallery* for the first time as a schoolboy). Kenneth Pople’s and Duncan Robinson’s biographies on Spencer inspired me. Piero della Francesca was mysteriously presented to me on a small scale in several books and it would be years before I would find myself staring at the actual *Resurrection* in Sansepolcro, unable to tear myself away. For the time being, Marilyn Aronberg Lavin’s excellent work on Piero della Francesca would be regularly absent from the library shelves.

I borrowed the maximum amount of books allowed every month and I took books out on a whim — many of them incredibly heavy to carry home. I selected from pure interest and this was ever to be my *modus operandi*. I was determined to pursue my own lines of enquiry because I could not see any point in studying anything that I was not interested in. At that time there were no university courses available in my chosen area of study. In the light of this, I would seriously suggest that books have almost ‘leapt off the shelves’ and into my hands. As a dealer in imagery, I would also argue that a good book *might* be judged by its cover, after all. Amongst these ‘good’ books I found in the first year of M.A. study, *Danto and his Critics* edited by Mark Rollins, which in turn led me to read the seminal Arthur C. Danto’s *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. This book inspired my M.A. dissertation, *Is the Fender Stratocaster a Work of Art?* in which I attempted to blur the distinctions between what is and what is not regarded as art. I can honestly say (although it may be thought frivolous) that I picked *Danto and his Critics* partly because of its shiny new cover resplendent with Danto’s smiling face — the power of the image coupled with word association, as ‘Danto’ reminded me of ‘Dante’. Life, or at least ‘art’ after Danto, would never be the same because of his revelation that two identical images or objects could carry totally different interpretations according to how they are perceived. His account of the difference between a regular *Brillo* Box and a *Brillo* Box by Andy Warhol, the Ten Red Squares and Picasso’s *Tie*, would have a lasting effect upon me.

One evening at a seminar in the *Institute of Education* the two ‘Resurrections’ in question appeared as slides (although separately and in different contexts) and I simply had the idea that I might deviously switch interpretations. Piero’s *Resurrection of Christ* was shown as an aide-memoir to a reading and discussion around Michael Baxandall’s *Patterns of Intention*. When I suggested that perhaps both Piero and Stanley Spencer could have had the same intention, my

tutor, Dr. John Baldacchino, felt that this could be a suitable subject for doctoral study.

After preliminary research it was generally agreed that the topic needed more zest and as usual, I wanted to inject a musical theme if possible. Following on from my M.A. dissertation, *Is the Fender Stratocaster a Work of Art?* (along with the much earlier B.Ed Hons. essays: *Music and the Visual Arts*, *Modern Music - The Kings New Clothes?* and *Art and Music of the 1960's*) something approaching a musical nature was badly needed. I wondered about Philip Glass or Steve Reich, and of course, Jimi Hendrix was suggested as a possible third member, but none of these 'felt' right.

Quite simply, I wandered the library floor until *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* jumped out and 'bit' me — hard. Ben Watson's massive tome was a 'Godsend'. At the time I only possessed one Zappa album, *Hot Rats* from 1969; I had never seen him in concert and knew next to nothing about him or his music except that I had always admired Cal Shenkel's album covers and that controversy surrounded Frank Zappa.

Looking back one can see how the strands all intertwine: The subjects of my sculptures and paintings crept into the PhD proposal. One of my metal sculptures, *Don Quixote* (little more than a 'welded sketch') plus several frustrating attempts to finish the novel, led me indirectly to Jorge Luis Borges' *Ficciones* — the masterwork in parachronicity — and the story of Pierre Menard who wished to write *another Don Quixote*. The huge Crucifix, *The Cross of Thorns* that I constructed in metal for my M.A. (and that now hangs above the entrance to the Chapel at my school) had seemed to me at the time, the best prayer I would ever offer. Could it make me worthy of redemption?

And then there was Vico. I was introduced to Vico by Professor Fred Inglis who was obviously enjoying *The New Science* so much that his enthusiasm was contagious. I immediately read the whole book and everything else I could find about Vico. I was particularly astounded by Isaiah Berlin's account in his, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*.

Other Contacts

I knew that my gathering of data would require me to select information at source (to go straight to the horse's mouth whenever possible). As I was really introduced to the subject of interpretation by means of a visit to Cambridge, when Professor Quentin Skinner later visited *The University of Warwick* I asked him, after his lecture, if I might write to him with my proposal. He kindly agreed and his response (see appendix) was most encouraging. I decided then that I would seek the opinions of other known experts. On a visit to *The National Gallery*, London, in order to see Piero's *The Baptism*, *The Nativity*, and *St Michael* I made arrangements to write to Nicholas Penny, Keeper of Piero's works there. He obligingly agreed to read my first two chapters and made some valuable comments.

I wrote to Ben Watson, author of the highly respected, *Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* and later met him in Liverpool at an unforgettable Zappa extravaganza, *When Worlds Collide*. He most kindly read all of my work on Zappa and was critical and helpful in the extreme. I also met other Zappa fans in Liverpool and from then on kept regular contact with fellow 'Zappologists' in France, Didier Mervelet, editor of the Zappa fan club magazine, *Le Pinguin Ligoté*, and Nathalie Gatti, a fellow Zappa PhD student in Paris.

In my third year of study a huge retrospective Spencer exhibition took place at *Tate Britain*, in conjunction with this was a day devoted to discussion and the delivery of lectures by leading authorities. The conference was entitled *Stanley Spencer: Angels and Dirt*. I could not believe my luck, for the whole day was exhausting but really informative. I found myself talking with leading Spencerian authorities (see appendix). Everyone was very kind and showed great interest in my ideas, for I managed to corner each in turn and quiz them at length about Spencer. I was also privileged to meet Stanley Spencer's daughters, Unity and Shirin. When Unity saw that I was furiously writing notes she asked me to send her a commentary on the day's proceedings, which I did. Later, I also sent a copy to Timothy Hyman, major contributor to, and editor of the 2001 Stanley Spencer book that accompanied the exhibition. Tim, a renowned and well-respected authority on Spencer's life and work, has corresponded regularly and commented upon the Stanley Spencer section of the thesis.

Although I have mentioned them in my acknowledgements, I would like to doubly emphasise how valuable the contribution of Quentin Skinner, Nicholas Penny, Ben Watson, and Tim Hyman has been. I am deeply grateful to them all for their encouragement.

Visits

Roger Poole visited Warwick several times and his knowledge of Kierkegaard was to prove influential and enlightening. I had several conversations with him about my work and found his URECA seminars illuminating. I was fortunate to hear Habermas speak when he visited *The University of Warwick* but for me, the lecture and accompanying seminar by Zygmunt Bauman was truly inspirational.

My wife, Teresa, accompanied me on a visit to Tuscany with the express purpose of seeing the frescoes and panels of Piero della Francesca — an unforgettable experience. As I have said, I could hardly tear myself away from Piero's great *Resurrection* in Sansepolcro — her enthusiasm and understanding are much appreciated. This was not a 'holiday' as such, although the trip was undertaken in part to celebrate twenty-five years of marriage.

I prepared and delivered two seminars on my work, the first to M.A. students at *The University of Warwick*, the second to M.A. and Ph.D. students at *Gray's School of Art* in Aberdeen. The latter was particularly useful as it caused plenty of debate, and was very well received. Bearing this in mind, I have included a copy of the presentation as an appendix. I believe it serves as a useful overview to the whole project.

For the purpose of assessment I have also included, at the back of the thesis, a copy of *Watermelon in Easter Hay* by Frank Zappa.

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Ben Watson, author of *Frank Zappa: The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* and other well-respected articles about the life and work of Frank Zappa.

Timothy Hyman, Artist, and author of several major contributions about the life and work of Sir Stanley Spencer, including *Stanley Spencer* (Tate Gallery, 2001) and *Stanley Spencer - The Apotheosis of Love* (Barbican Art Gallery).

All of the staff at *The Institute of Education, University of Warwick* who have helped me in any way since I first became a student again in 1984.

Mauro Muntoni, Stuart Circe, Didier Mervelet and Nathalie Gatti for their encouragement with research into the music of Frank Zappa. Tony Lawlor for his help with illustrations. Jackie Singleton for photocopying. Steve Roe for his technical advice with computers and listening ability. Fellow students, Les, Andrius, Diarmuid and friends and colleagues, Pete, Nora, Lisa, Jim, Ian, Melanie for their interest and help with the presentation to *Gray's School of Art, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen* — my thanks also to the students who attended and participated, particularly to Zappa fan, Andy.

My parents, Geoff and Lucy and my children, Emma, Paul and John. Emma's partner, Ian and my beautiful granddaughter, Annabelle. Above all and most especially, my wonderful wife, Teresa. Without the love of my family, this work would have been impossible.

Arf said Ruby the Red Setter.

Declaration

*I hereby declare that this work, being submitted as fulfilment for the degree of
Doctorate of Philosophy, is all my own work, except where appropriately
indicated.*

Michael John Barwell

Summary

Works of art often refer to one another. Perhaps a closer examination of this relationship occurs if they are theoretically displaced from the sequence of events that contextualise them. Placed side-by-side, they may take on a fresh meaning that might identify artistic intention as universal — as a ‘redemptive’ statement of *Being*.

Both Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer painted ‘Resurrection’ pictures. The five hundred years that separate them notwithstanding, the reasons for their so doing must bear some comparison. Each made a statement of belief in their depiction of a metaphysical world created primarily in the imagination but housed in cultural milieus that would identify them as ‘visionary’ amongst their peers. Yet, in many ways, one picture is the antithesis to the other, the first deeply religious, the second highly personal. Regardless of their differences, each work might perpetually and simultaneously strive toward ‘the spiritual’ in an individual *and* universal sense.

As an artist whose work ostensibly denies any lofty ‘spiritual’ aspiration whatsoever, Frank Zappa’s dismissal of authority, whether couched in religious, musical or sociological terms, marks a valid juxtaposition to current acceptance of artistic form. Not only was it legitimate to invite a musician into the affray, for me it was a vital continuation of my earlier exploration. Zappa seriously challenges the notion of ‘feeling’ as little more than a pre-set conditioned response to music. I hoped to establish that Zappa’s own quest for musical perfection flew in the face of his notorious cynicism, proclaiming his output as ‘redemptive’ — alongside that of Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer.

It is the main contention here that as the human predicament requires that the artist should attempt to re-present his vision in order to redefine reality for himself and his peers, the role of artist as ‘visionary’ is worthy of perennial consideration.

Abbreviations

<i>NS</i>	Vico, <i>The New Science</i> .
<i>V&H</i>	Berlin, <i>Vico & Herder — Two studies in the History of Ideas</i>
<i>Poodle</i>	Watson, Frank Zappa <i>The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play</i>
<i>FZC</i>	Kostelanetz, <i>The Frank Zappa Companion</i>
<i>RFZ</i>	Zappa, <i>The Real Frank Zappa Book</i>

*for full bibliographical details see Bibliography

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INTRODUCTION

The hero in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court*,¹ by Mark Twain, is seen as a rival magician to Merlin who demands his death. In desperation, he saves his own life by commanding the sun to 'die' — only later to 'bring it back' much to the amazement of the assembled mob. As an informed time-traveller he has the benefit of hindsight *before* the event, and can predict a total eclipse of the sun. His superior knowledge comes from 'the future'. The subject of 'escaping time' is one recurrent in literature, in *The Divine Comedy* for example, Dante's vision of Beatrice in Paradise is preceded by his meeting the souls of the greatest people in history. Thomas Aquinas and St. Gregory are among the celestial host who float in stellar rings around them as Dante gazes into the sublime beauty of Beatrice's face. Within fiction, there is an assumption made frequently that a convergence of the great minds from the past could lead to a solution of the problems of today.

To resurrect a 'Socrates' or 'Einstein' (or to introduce a mysterious visitor from the future to a given situation) for the benefit of a narrative is acceptable as a fictional device. But, taken out of the fictional context such notions remain valid if one allows that they may be metaphors for human understanding and that

¹ See *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court, A Word of Explanation*, (University of California Press. 1979): "It was in Warwick Castle that I came across the curious stranger whom I am going to talk about. (...) Presently he turned to me and said, just as one might speak of the weather, or any other common matter — 'You know about the transmigration of souls; do you know about the transposition of epochs and bodies?'"

certain thinkers may be 'ahead of their time' or hold everlasting relevance. Secondly, it may be considered that such individuals contribute to a 'common sense' understanding to which people of all times and places have access.

It cannot be denied that we are a creative species and that we rely to a great extent upon works of art to define cultural, religious and social parameters — but can there be any connection whatsoever between art, its intention, or its interpretation, from one age to the next? Some may argue, what is art for if it is not the means by which we tap into the 'world-soul', or what Jung termed, the collective unconscious? Some may consider all art forms to be separate manifestations of a single creative urge. This essay seeks to examine the artistic contribution of the individual to the collective in terms of redemption and claims art as beneficial to the wider community simply because it is redemptive.

As individuals with the ability to imagine, we make up communities, which make up nations, which in turn, make up the world. Art or more correctly, *Poiesis*, is the vehicle for the imagination that helps people to have some understanding of reality by offering alternative versions, other glimpses — almost 'other realities.' Certainly, the world is made up from individuals and over the centuries some have been responsible for reshaping humanity's frame of reference for itself. But we are also reliably informed that important changes will occur with or without the individual because of the 'spirit of the age' — the *zeitgeist*.² For Vico, it is down to *Providence* whether or not, (and if so, when and where) these visions

² See Pompa, Leon, *Vico - A Study of The New Science*, Cambridge University Press, (1975) p.68, "It is misleading to talk as if the actions of any one individual are effective simply because they are his actions alone. Any ruler, for example, no matter how absolutist or dictatorial, must have support for his policies."

See also Jahanbegloo, Ramin, *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*, Phoenix Press (1992) p78, "The story of man is a story of people — communities not of individuals; Vico is not interested in individuals."

may be realised. Art in itself may well be redemptive, appertaining to a better life, but greed and selfishness abuse its noble purpose.

But men, because of their corrupted nature, are under the tyranny of self-love, which compels them to make private utility their chief guide. Seeking everything useful for themselves and nothing for their companions, they cannot bring their passions under control to direct them toward justice. We thereby establish the fact that man in the bestial state desires only his own welfare; having taken wife and begotten children, he desires his own welfare along with that of his family; having entered upon civil life, he desires his own welfare along with that of his city; when its rule is extended over several peoples, he desires his own welfare along with that of the nation; when the nations are united by wars, treaties of peace, alliances, and commerce, he desires his own welfare along with that of the entire human race. In all these circumstances man desires principally his own utility.³

One may consider the term, “man in the bestial state” as an anthropological descriptor for some ancient sub-species of humanity — but beyond doubt, it also identifies a recurrent state of mind in human affairs. Secondly, we are most comfortable when we believe we know what art is. But, having defined art as ‘redemptive’ one admits that it also often seems to cater for the selfish needs of the artist or musician, and especially so for the critic, agent, manager, patron, or promoter. Can art be *both* selfish and redemptive, and are these perennial considerations? In order to answer questions concerning art and eternity, two broad categories of research may be delineated:

1. What, if anything can be said to be ‘eternal’ about art? If it were possible to strip away the trappings of time and culture, would artistic creativity still be a universal aspect of the human condition? Surely, this is the best place to begin, but can we be sure that we can agree on what counts as art? Do works of art have to be created, or can we ‘find’ them? Do we identify art in retrospect — merely to serve our own purposes?

³ Vico (NS 341)

2. Does 'culture' depend upon individuals for its growth and renewal? Could the culture of today have been very different without influential individuals in the past?⁴ Although it is difficult to see how any kind of counter-factual claim can be substantiated, a larger, if 'intuitive' picture may emerge that sheds some light on current preoccupation: after all, who defines 'Art' — a set of individuals or culture itself?

PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA * FRANK ZAPPA * STANLEY SPENCER.

At first glance these three historical figures have little in common. In truth, after detailed study, I have found that in many ways they still have little in common — and as they were born in different ages and with different frames of reference, one could not expect otherwise. Piero's painting is deeply spiritual, evoking a sense of the infinite through religious subject matter and geometrical perfection in the composition. Zappa's music defies convention, pointing out the follies of the pop music circus. Spencer's earlier religious work later gives way to a sensuality which shocked his contemporaries and still raises an eyebrow today. What is the point of mentioning these people in the same breath?

Vico may have the answer, for his search entails the broadest vision of people as culture-making entities.⁵ He sees the rise of power and the eventual destruction of civilisations as an ongoing process repeated again and again at different times

⁴ See *Thomas Carlyle, On Great Men*, Penguin Classics (1971) p.1, Carlyle, for example, was primarily concerned with 'Hero-worship and the Heroic' in human affairs: "For as I take it, Universal History, the history of what man has accomplished in this world is at bottom the History of the Great Men who have worked here."

⁵ Giambattista Vico's *New Science* (1744) has proved invaluable. In the main, I have adopted three of his 'principles': (1) *Per caussas* — one can only say *what* something is if one knows how it came about; (2) *Corsi et ricorsi* — the pervasive pattern of growth and decay appertaining to cultural progression; and (3) *Fantasia* — the method for intuitively piercing an ever-changing reality in order to mentally 'enter into' other cultures from diverse times.

and in different places throughout the world. By the same process it may be possible to examine the wider issues associated with the value of art to society. Following on from this analysis the role of the individual within such a global enterprise as the furtherance of cultural development may be questioned.⁶

The idea that there was a time when people were able to communicate ideas by using signs and symbols rather than speech, and that this time also enabled visual signs, landmarks and trail markers, signposts of one kind or another, to act as cultural signifiers is intriguing. That such a system predates spoken language, and that verse predates prose — which is exactly what Vico maintains — requires a reappraisal of the value of symbols within any society. Contained within this reappraisal one is tempted, or rather compelled to state that art (or something like it) is the basis of culture itself.

Piero della Francesca tried to discover God in geometry — after all this was the preoccupation of his age. Stanley Spencer debunked the Christian mythology that had grown up around church-based worship by returning, via his own brand of honesty, to a paganism that openly embraced sexuality. Yet, particularly for the young Spencer, Christ was in Cookham High Street every day, if only one would look. Frank Zappa had the integrity to push his music beyond the commercial razzmatazz, to mock and parody the musical form that is the hallmark of a culture at odds with itself. Where mammon rules, Zappa as innovator, entrepreneur, and social critic is obliged to ‘cash in’ himself, nonetheless, his music at its best is awe-inspiring.

6

Although many would have us believe otherwise, the widespread acceptance that individuals within the arts embody national cultural identity persists: (That Shakespeare is English, or Beethoven is German cannot be disputed. However, as world-renowned figures their creative spirit soars above any comparatively parochial concern with nationality). Artists become representatives of human achievement.

For us to question the merits of each of these artists in respect to their own creations (but also with regard to each other) requires an intensity of vision that exceeds the demands of other, 'every day' considerations. To assume that their intentions were the same is ludicrous, but one suspects a similar preoccupation with the truth, or more precisely, the truth as they saw it. Much of this work is based upon a reading of Vico in the light of the three above-mentioned artists. In short, although time travel is still impossible, I intend to examine the implication that individual artists have always had the capacity for creating culture, and that to this extent they define reality — almost by a way of self-redemption.

I: Piero's Truth

“And then you must shape in your mind some people, people well known to you, to represent for you the people involved in the Passion.”

Zardino de Oration (The Garden of Prayer)

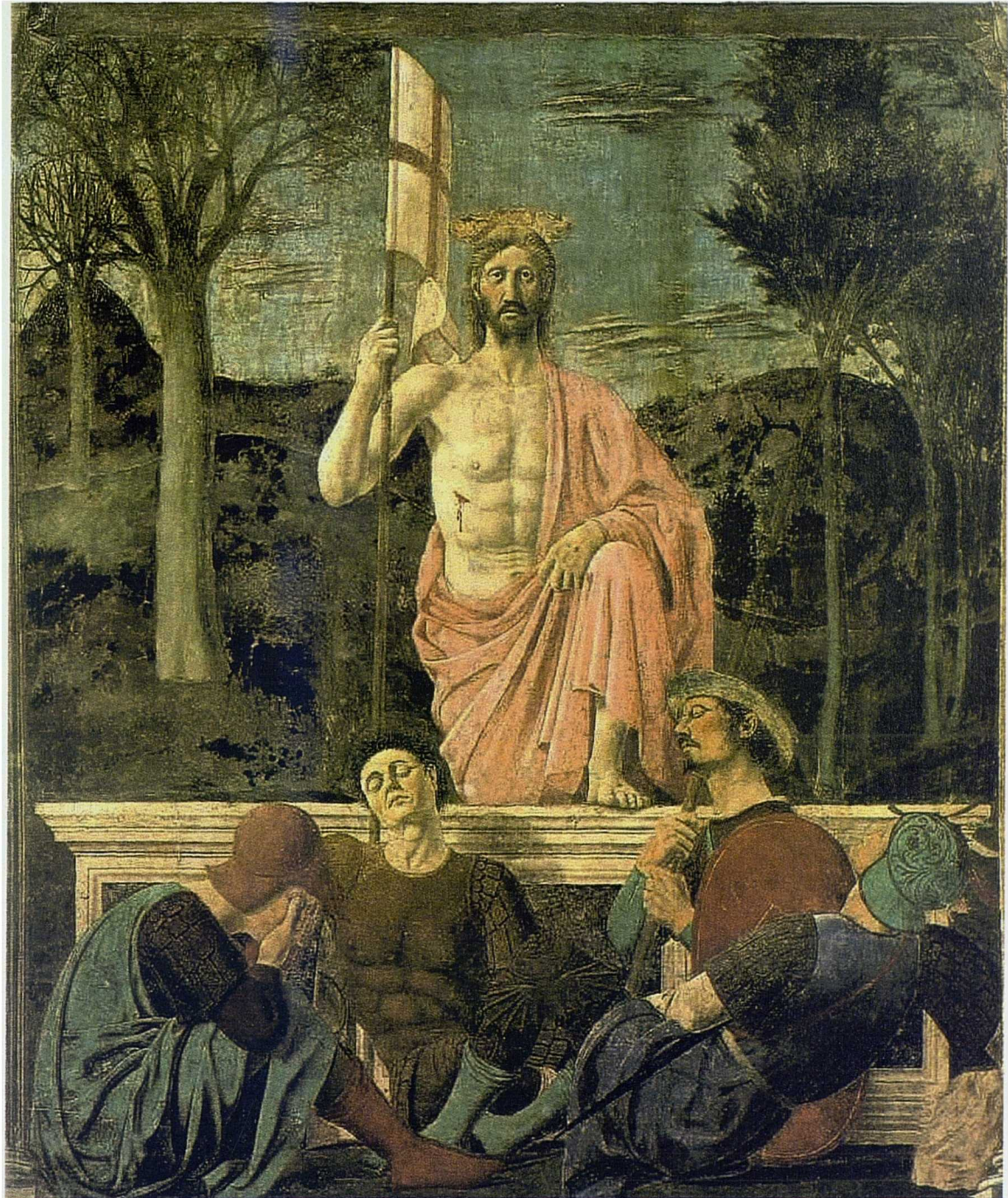


Fig. 1. The Resurrection of Christ
Piero della Francesca
(Fresco. 1463-65)
Pinacoteca, Palazzi dei Priori, Sansepolcro.

The Resurrection

Ion: Socrates, your words in some way touch my very soul, and it does seem to me that by dispensation from above good poets convey to us these utterances of the gods.

Socrates: Well, and you rhapsodists, again, interpret the utterances of the poets?

Ion: There also you are right.

Socrates: Accordingly, you are interpreters of interpreters?

Ion: Undeniably.

Plato: *Ion*.

I. Piero della Francesca's Resurrection

I.i. When it comes to the re-interpretation of images, resurrection seems to be the best place to start from — as it affords a second chance. Piero della Francesca depicts Christ stepping from his tomb and out into the Sansepolcro sunshine. He does not emerge from the humble cave bequeathed by Joseph of Arimathaea of the Gospel, but from a Renaissance stone sarcophagus, presumably

with a lid. It is uncertain whether Jesus is stepping right through the lid or if it has simply slipped out of sight (rather than ‘rolled away’ like the original ‘stone’).

We literally cannot see the area of the lid, which, while not represented, is still implied. In this way he suggests that the massive palpable figure of Christ steps forth miraculously from a sarcophagus that remains hermetically sealed.¹

A curious iconographical feature is the omission of its lid, usually shown in front or just beside it.²

It could also be said that the cold stone box from which, or through which he is stepping, appropriately resembles an altar. As Christ’s banner, a traditional red cross on a white background, represents victory over death, both ‘sacrifice’ and ‘glory’ are major themes. Certainly, this painting is not intended merely as an exact interpretation of the Gospel, particularly as this scene is not described in *The New Testament*. Therefore, the work acts primarily as a symbolic device for the benefit of the faithful. It contains a whole set of recognisable ingredients — signs and symbols which would have held meaning to his contemporaries, many of which he would have gleaned from other artists. However, it also expounds a new set of ideas for which Piero was the innovator.

Undeniably this was painted for the people of Sansepolcro. Although it is not immediately obvious, a point worth considering is that Piero possibly also makes use of *The Resurrection* for his own purpose too — one clearly distinguishable from any other religious or social motive. Yet this is only the case if one accepts the interpretation of reputable authorities.³ This fresco operates on a series of levels, and as there is plenty of speculation about his work in general, great care is needed in the extrapolation of theories about intention and purpose.

1 Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg *Piero della Francesca*, (Thames and Hudson, London 1992) p.108.

2 Lightbown, R. W, *Piero della Francesca* (Abbeville Press, London 1992), p.204.

Any account of meaning in Piero's paintings must be based, not on preconceptions, but on what is actually portrayed. From the standpoint of narrative Piero's language is a dialect which must be studied in its entirety if the facial expressions and gestures he employs are not to be misunderstood.⁴

Theories abound when it comes to the interpretation of works of art and often must be examined with care. The generally accepted theory is that Piero has portrayed himself here in the guise of one of the sleeping soldiers.⁵ This is important simply because it raises questions about reasons for his doing so. It is also relevant because in one sense — in a *visual* sense, Piero has contrived his own immortality:

The foreshortened head of the soldier beneath Christ's banner has already been mentioned as the traditional likeness of the artist, and if, as Leonardo and other Renaissance theorists maintained, when we draw an idea of man we are really drawing ourselves, this theory can be supported without reserve.⁶

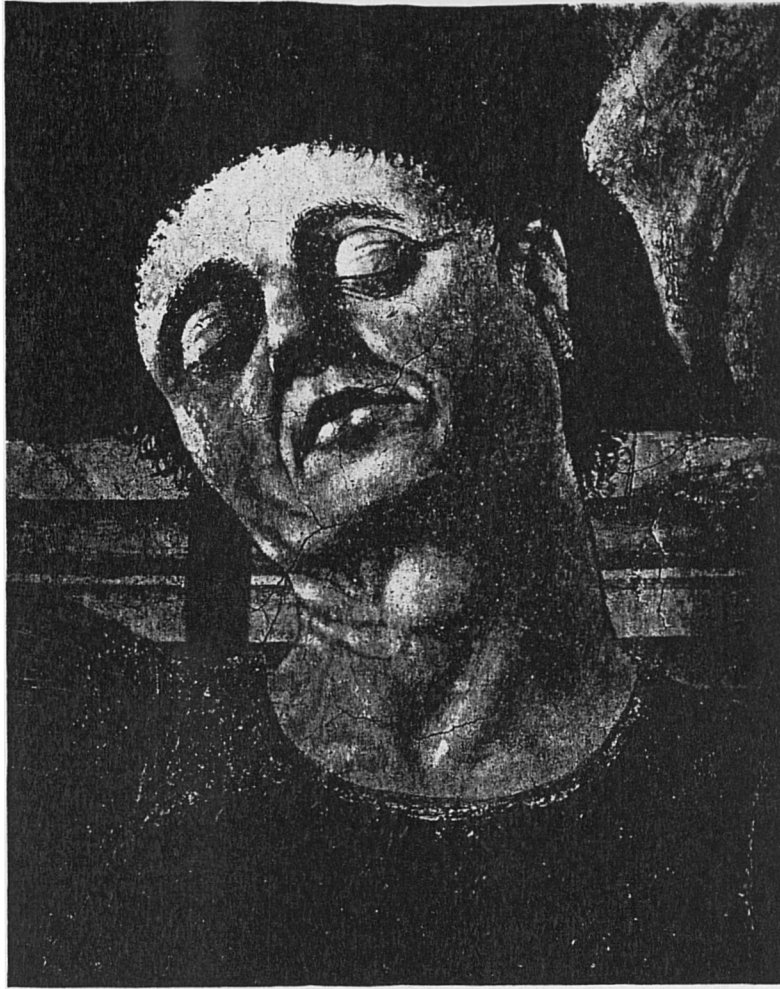
The Resurrection is an amazing work of art for many reasons, not least because it is a masterpiece proclaiming the artist as a sleeping witness to the salvation of humanity. It is open to speculation of course, but if only the *belief* is widely held that Piero himself features in the painting (that this is indeed a self-portrait) then the sleeping soldier facing the spectator, blissfully unaware of the momentous occurrence above, has 'become' Piero anyway. Images are indispensable. If we wish to 'know' something about Piero (or about anyone else, for that matter) surely it would be helpful to have an idea of their physical appearance?

3 Including Kenneth Clark.

4 Pope-Hennessy, John, *The Piero della Francesca Trail* (Thames and Hudson: London 1991) p.60.

5 Piero, it is claimed, is also to be seen as one of the Confraternity in the *Madonna della Misericordia* altarpiece (to the right of the hooded figure) and also as an attendant to the court of King Solomon in the *Legend of the True Cross*.

6 Clark, Kenneth, *Piero della Francesca*, (Phaidon Press 1969) p.2.



*Fig. 2. The Resurrection,
Detail: Head of a Sleeping Soldier.*

I.ii. Two interpretations for the inclusion of Piero's physiognomy in *The Resurrection* are immediately obvious. The first of these may be considered as an *imaginative* response only possible within the parameters of our perception today of the man as he may have been in his own time, together with his relationship to his work and culture and so forth. The second, a *historical* response based upon limited contemporary sources and observations made nearer the time by Vasari that describe the extent to which Piero's achievements once held meaning. Hence we are reliant upon a duality of chronological evidence; material obtained at

differing times that constitutes the detail that authenticates works of art — the difference between what they once meant and what they mean now. Moreover, we invest our belief and set great store by acknowledging a perpetual change of viewpoint as legitimate. New discoveries mean we are finding out more about the past as time progresses, (as we advance further from the event) and this ‘constant reinterpretation’ creates a ‘pedigree’ of truth as an eternal discourse.

A pertinent question arises at this point as to the exact location of ‘truth’ — and especially so if new discoveries about the past may enlighten us or alter opinion at any moment. Clearly, earlier interpretations help us to appreciate how *The Resurrection* may be regarded as meaningful to us today, but great care is needed. Michael Baxandall has pointed out the pitfalls of interpreting Piero at all:

Enquiry is often seen as consisting, again schematically, of two stages, discovery and justification. In the first it is licit to play all sorts of heuristic tricks, including imagining one is a fifteenth century Italian, even Piero himself (...) But a moment comes when the explanation must be offered as something which can be scrutinised and evaluated, and this moment must be in our terms (...) It is not to Piero we are explaining Piero, it must be to ourselves.⁷

The Piero we create for ourselves must be distinguished from the Piero who lived and breathed and walked the streets of Sansepolcro. These ‘two Pieros’: the *imaginative* and the *historical* are necessarily dissimilar; unlikely to be the same because the intervening time has altered the *idea* of this artist and his importance. An assumption is often made that artists are the product of their culture, but it is also recognised that they have the potential for delineating culture. If so, his relevance as an artist in his day is one thing, his recognition by Vasari, and much later by Berenson another, but to an extent, Piero (via his works of art) is ‘reborn’ continuously. Like so many long dead artists and composers of the past, he is compelled to act as a cultural agent in the present. Baxandall argues that it

7 Baxandall, Michael, *Patterns of Intention* (Yale University Press, London 1986), p110.

is only in the present that we can confront him, and on our own terms, for we do not know enough about the culture in which Piero lived:

Any burgher of Sansepolcro in 1450, if he heard what I just said about the culture of fifteenth-century Italy so far, would just laugh, or shake his hand with exasperation — itself a very cultural thing to do.⁸

For Baxandall to forcefully imagine that this is what “Any burgher of Sansepolcro” would do, his research and his intuition have combined to create a perception of the past, of which Vico would say, he has “entered into” sufficiently to *know* what may or may not be known. This combination necessitates an acceptance that the meeting of ‘the imaginative’ with ‘the historical’ makes for legitimate research, (along with an acceptance of the limitations of both). Here too is the case for defending the study of biographical detail as a clarification of artistic intention, as the events in a person’s life are most likely to influence their creative output. *his*

Art appreciation in the main, rests upon *given* knowledge, upon philosophical insight or the relevance of artistic form, and not so much upon imagining long-dead artists as living people engaged in their daily activity. This is not to say that the individual personality of the artist is irrelevant or that biographical detail is immaterial, but the general consensus is that when we look at a painting we can ‘do without’ both. Yet where a person, (for example, Piero della Francesca) has been recognised as having once been a ‘prime mover’ in his day, it is rather contentious to state that any worthwhile assessment revolves around the idea that what he *is now* is more important than what he *was*.

Written accounts could be notoriously unreliable, for biographers may not adhere strictly to the truth, whilst autobiographies are open to still greater elaboration. If

8 Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*, p110.

this particular sleeping soldier is indeed drawn from the artist himself, (and who can honestly know for certain?) it may be for any one of a variety of reasons.⁹ On the one hand, it may be assumed that Piero, in all faith and humility, is announcing his own unworthiness as a witness to Christ for all to see. On the other hand, he may simply have gained great personal satisfaction in portraying his own likeness successfully. Alternatively, he may have wished to promote his career, or he may have wished to be remembered by his friends and relatives in Sansepolcro as he grew in stature and his reputation blossomed. In short, there may be several explanations for Piero and the Risen Christ to appear in the same work of art.

What is clear, is that ‘Piero the man’ disappears inside his own painting, becoming instead a device for the expression of meaning. This meaning was initially related in a biographical sense to the actual life of Piero himself. Presumably, he knew exactly why he had painted himself as a sleeping soldier, but with the passing of time, it is difficult now to ascertain the true meaning with any real precision. One might hazard a guess. It may even be supposed that for him, on a deeper metaphysical level, a self-portrait might ‘personalise’ or ‘humanise’ this mystical, miraculous event beyond human understanding. Perhaps, by depicting himself as present at the Resurrection of The Saviour, he could be also suggesting the possibility for the spectator to be included too. One could say that by submissively closing his eyes he encourages the contemplative to prayer, or that perhaps Piero is simply warning us all to keep watch — for “we know not the hour in which He comes”. Surprisingly, the fresco plays a secular role in the

⁹ Useful comparisons may be made with several other Renaissance and Medieval Resurrection scenes. Firstly in the main church in Sansepolcro we find one rather ungainly sleeping soldier, in Mantegna’s Resurrection, two soldiers appear to have been woken by the Risen Lord. Again, in the fresco, *Life of Jesus* by Taddeo Gaddi, (Santa Croce, Florence) or in Jacopo di Cione’s version in the National Gallery, London, there is an ‘army’ of sleeping soldiers. However, these and many similar works lack the intensity of feeling one finds with Piero. Also, see Lavin 1992, p.39.

daily drama of Sansepolcro: *The Resurrection* was located — not in a church, but within the state chambers of the supreme magistrates.

Never before had the Risen Christ been given such a judgmental role. Normally in Resurrection scenes he appears as the fulfilment of prophetic statements, as the bringer of new life, as the promise of life eternal in both the personal and the cosmic sense (...) Man's ability to judge and punish is likewise a gift reflecting God's own judgement in the heavenly sphere... High on the wall of the entrance chamber, this image reminded both the judge and advocate, the guilty and the innocent, of eternal responsibilities as they entered the courtroom and took up their duties.¹⁰

The work exudes calm, it demands good grace, respect for the law and justice from and for the town's inhabitants, who like Piero, are 'asleep' to the next world. Indeed, Piero would not be the first or the last to consider the artist as a kind of mystic, and to believe like Ion, that with "dispensation from above" a work of art could act as mediator in something 'heavenly', something beyond his control as a mere painter. The location of the fresco suggests that this work of art is representative of a socio-religious ethos which prompted all in what was then called, 'Borgo San Sepolcro' to reflect upon their civic responsibilities and their relationship with God. This was a deliberate act that reinforced the power of imagery as a formidable weapon in the fight for salvation both in this world and the next. Furthermore, Piero would not be working in isolation, and although his approach and presentation may have been radically different, he fulfilled the traditional role expected of him by his peers and by those who paid for his work. He sought to proclaim the law of Sansepolcro and the law of God as reflective of one and the same thing:

Renaissance Platonists, like Aristotelians, saw contemplation as man's highest goal. Ficino, the founder of Florentine Neoplatonism, wrote in his *Argumentum de summo bono* that the supreme good consisted in the

10 Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg, *Piero della Francesca* (Thames & Hudson, London 1992) p.110.

contemplation not of any created good but of the highest good, that is God. The knowledge of God was therefore the soul's *summum bonum*. In an earlier work Ficino had stated that the supreme good was to become like God. The connection between these two positions is made clear in his *Theologica platonica*, where he explains that the intellect, when it understands objects, transforms itself into their image and becomes like them. So when our intellect understands God through contemplation, we become Godlike.¹¹

This fresco undeniably challenges the intellect, yet strangely it also inculcates an emotional response, and especially so if one takes the sleeping soldier *to be* Piero. Although the stylised figures are calm, neatly trapped in their web of geometricised construction lines, there is a feeling that they are animated — a suggestion of a fluttering eyelid, a nodding head perhaps — the other three soldiers look too uncomfortable to be soundly asleep. Christ looks tired, as if he has literally just woken up, and from his steady gaze we look next to the sleeping face of Piero della Francesca. Skilfully executed, yet painted with all humility, as if caught in contemplative pose he rests his head on Christ's staff. If one takes this to be a purposeful image of self-denial on the part of the painter it may be reminiscent of Michelangelo's depiction of his own flayed skin, draped loosely over the arm of St. Bartholomew in *The Last Judgement*, from the Sistine Chapel. In effect, the artist feels duty-bound to acknowledge his own worthlessness despite his skill; that as his paint is only a 'medium', (an imitation of reality) so too is his role: the artist as a 'poor' medium, as trusting messenger rather than visionary.

If this is the case, then it follows that those who attempt to interpret the artist are equally subject to Socrates' critical observation of the rhapsodist. The poet or artist acts as *interpreter* of the gods who is then re-interpreted by the rhapsodist, as typified by Plato's *Ion*. Such musings leave all spectators (and critics) at one

11 See Krave, Jill, 'Moral Philosophy' in Schmitt, C.B., Skinner, Q. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press 1988), p. 349.

further remove from the artist, placing them also in the position of *interpreting the interpreter*. Ironically, this fresh vantage-point may encourage the spectator to disregard the commentary and criticism of ‘authorities’ to some extent as second-hand revelation, rather to place greater trust in their own instinct or intuition. After all is said and done, one can only gaze at this fresco in awe, hardly daring to imagine the artist at work around five hundred years ago, let alone second-guessing what he may have meant while he was painting it.

This multi-layering of meaning is complicated and it makes imagery open to misinterpretation. It may be easier (but certainly wrong) to assert that Piero is simply ‘acting’ as a sleeping soldier as he might in a play and that the actor playing the part of Jesus is prodding him awake with his banner. Painting, like acting, facilitates the deliberate camouflaging of purpose — it forcibly encourages the use of hidden meaning as an almost ‘theatrical’ device. The actor creates an illusion by donning a false identity at will, gathering props and performing in front of a backdrop. In order to examine universal concepts, an artist may do likewise because his role demands that he presents more than one interpretation of the way things are. If in reality, peasants cannot quite be kings, harsh dictators may presume to appear saintly according to the artist’s brush. Art also operates outside the boundaries of time if aesthetic deliberation implies a continuously changing perception where successive layers of interpretation form one over the other. Our current understanding is simply seen as the most recent by comparison with earlier readings. Necessarily, those seeking precise interpretations will imaginatively revisit the uncertainty of the past in order to locate origins, the very moments of art’s conception.

I.iii. Just as art's practice may well be timeless its imaginative potential transfers identities as easily as it relocates its subjects in impossible surroundings. Of course, there is usually some good reason for the inclusion of 'living' people in works of art. Masaccio officially introduced portraiture into religious works of art in the church of *S. Maria Novella*, in Florence. He depicts his patrons in the fresco of the *Trinity* (probably in 1428) as humble and devout enough; they look like narrators either side of the stage where the Holy Trinity is the main act.

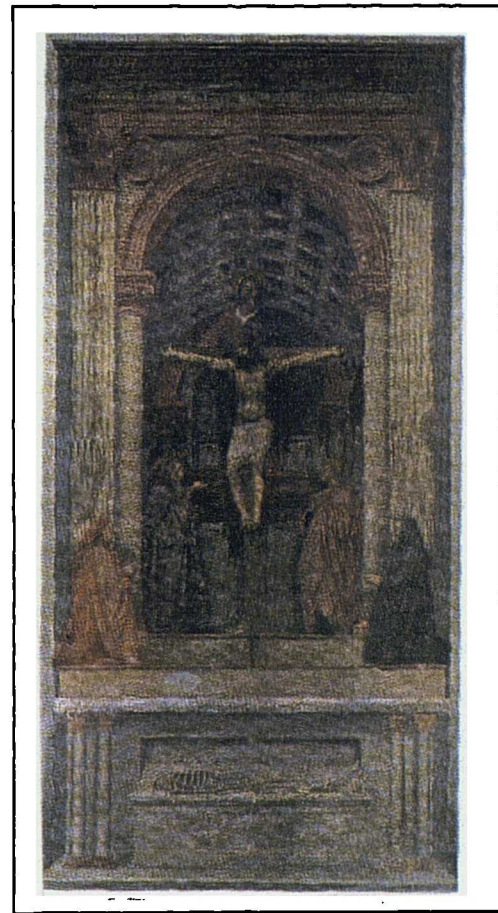
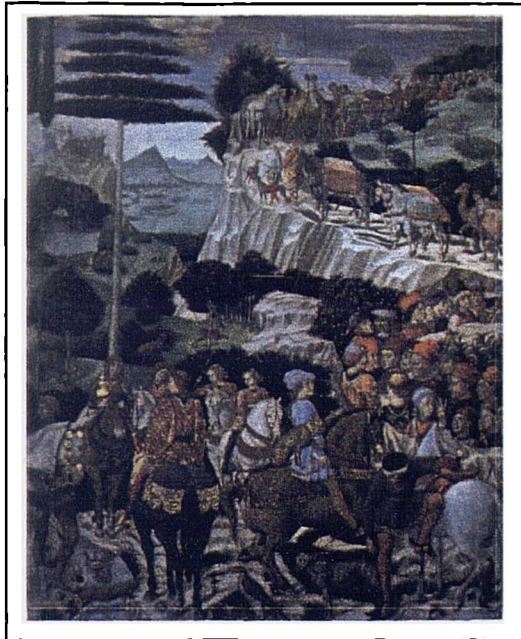


Fig. 3: The Trinity
Masaccio
(c.1425-28)

Fig. 4. The Journey of the Magi



On the other hand, Benozzo Gozzoli, for example, by painting the leading members of the Medici as Biblical kings in *The Journey of the Magi* (1459-61) was commenting more upon his patron's fabulous wealth, wisdom and power. Nonetheless, both works act as an affirmation of Christian belief for the benefit of the faithful.

Just as the humble patrons kneel below the Trinity, so too the glorious Medici display submission to the infant Jesus and so both parties pay homage in their way. Yet it is not difficult to see the artist as little more than the patron's propagandist, as accomplice to a much greater deception. Coerced by patrons, the artist fulfils that wish for them to be perceived by the populace as something other than what they are, and as present at a time different from their own.

Literally, at 'face value' (the pun is intentional), *quattrocento* portraits are remarkable instances of the *re-use* of borrowed imagery. Taking what is familiar, incorporating a built-in reliance upon the spectator's co-operation, knowing the significance of the profile view because of its association with past emperors or because of an instant recognition of those noble heads from the coins in their pocket, artists took their cue.¹² The people, no doubt, were well acquainted with the story of the 'original' Magi and would quickly see the connection between them and the Medici, as they too were 'kings' and 'wise men'. What we cannot know, despite historical documentation, is how this image compared with the reality of an everyday life lived under their rule. The lowliest peasant surely surmised that artists were only metaphorically suggesting that the kneeling patron was witness to *The Crucifixion*, or present at *The Court of the Virgin and Child*. Quite how that stood with regard to their opinion of those tyrants whom they knew to be hard and violent rulers, we can only guess (if they ever saw such masterpieces anyway). In any event, the implication naturally followed that this or that patron was immensely powerful, simply by their visual proximity to a saint, or to Christ, or to the Virgin. The spectator may have been attuned to the symbolism and easily surmised that these 'nobles' were only there 'in spirit' — but it must have also reinforced a generally held opinion of their own lowly status by comparison. In short, as we cannot assume any interpretation as certain, how

12 See Piero's double portrait in profile of Montefeltro and Battista Sforza.

can we even begin to guess what the people may have made of the appearance of ‘Piero the painter’ — a local figure, in the entrance chamber of the law courts? For, regardless of any historical fact, or its veracity, there is a huge world of difference between the depiction of one’s patron in public art and in portraying oneself.

The artist is perpetually charged by society with the role of stimulating intellectual response by utilising his mysterious ‘gift of vision’. As art is only partially dependent upon universal cognition, even more is required of him than a personal response if he is to be recognised as a ‘true visionary’. Clearly, we may ‘experience’ many things that we do not necessarily understand and poor interpreters though they may be, the artist, poet, or musician as ‘maker’: the exponent of *poiesis*, offers what appears to be the best means of explanation we can have. The artist uses a combination of intellect and imagination to ‘guess’ with. As Nicholas of Cusa (1485) explained: “Man’s intellectual vision is a *docta ignorantia*, an ignorance because it is cut off from a knowledge of the essences of things, but ‘learned’ because it attains certain knowledge by way of conjecture.”¹³ Artists have the ability to *visualise* intellectual conjecture in order to depict what they think someone else may mean and thus clarify it. Certainly, *The Resurrection* (1463-65) is cerebral, an optical illusion to rival Masaccio’s *Trinity* in *S. Maria Novella*, and for the inhabitants of a small town like Sansepolcro it must have been bewildering, disconcerting, and truly wonderful — probably ‘entirely convincing’ and generally taken as a *true* description of the actual event.

13 See Charles H. Lohr, ‘Metaphysics’ in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, p. 585.



Fig.5. The Resurrection
(Including painted Surround)

Even if we can never calculate what the initial reaction to *The Resurrection* might have been in the fifteenth century, its realism must have been just as impressive then as it is now. For without stepping right up to the fresco and near enough to touch it, the *trompe l'oeil* effect created by a surround of pilasters, base and lintel baffles the eye into believing that there could be a 'hole in the wall'. Remarkably, it is as if one can see through this to another reality — an eternal glimpse of the glorious Resurrection of Christ. We can only imagine the staggering effect such a fresco would have once had on people. Painted long before *Alice Through The Looking Glass*, before H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* — the implication of a conceptual shift in time and space is disconcerting. For just as easily as Christ is apparently capable of stepping through the closed lid of the tomb, he might step

through the wall, from his side to ours.¹⁴ Considered from this point of view, this was an awesome apparition of ‘The Second Coming’ to impact upon Piero’s peers, especially as noted earlier, to those with the dread responsibility of life and death. Whereas the criminal may well have been filled with terror by confronting such an image, the judge would be mindful of God’s eternal judgement upon him. In visual terms alone, Piero’s ability to paint this optical illusion would have enthralled the viewer. It may have been enough to lead him to question physically perceived reality as much as computer enhanced cinematic special effects do today.

What still remains unclear is the *specific* purpose, for if Piero deliberately painted a sleeping portrait of himself into this ‘other reality’ he must have had his reasons. His mathematical projections of lolling heads from various angles in *De Prospectiva Pingendi* only give us insight to method not purpose. Unquestionably, he was very clever, yet in the light of Neoplatonism he may have wished to humbly acknowledge that even with his great intellectual prowess, he was still subject to *docta ignorantia*. He was perhaps conscious that his learning, albeit immensely worthwhile, nonetheless amounted to mere conjecture in the light of God’s greater wisdom. This frame of reference confirms that he gained his mathematical or perspectival vision by default, at the expense of another world where he believed a very different Jesus from the one he painted actually rose from the dead. It was the painted world that he felt confident to enter, but one assumes that it was the next life that he aspired towards. In this work, it seems to me that he claims responsibility for knowledge whilst recognising his limitations equally. He is open and honest about it, for he must have known

14 It is difficult today to divest oneself of the dubious benefits of multifarious sci-fi time-travel sagas incorporating gates, tunnels, ‘wormholes’ and the like, through which heroes may slip at any moment to somewhere else. Yet, the origins this idea may be found in those massive statues of Egyptian Pharaohs who were carved with one foot forward, indicating how they might bridge the gap between this life and the next.

much better than anyone what the effect his fresco would have in the town he grew up in.

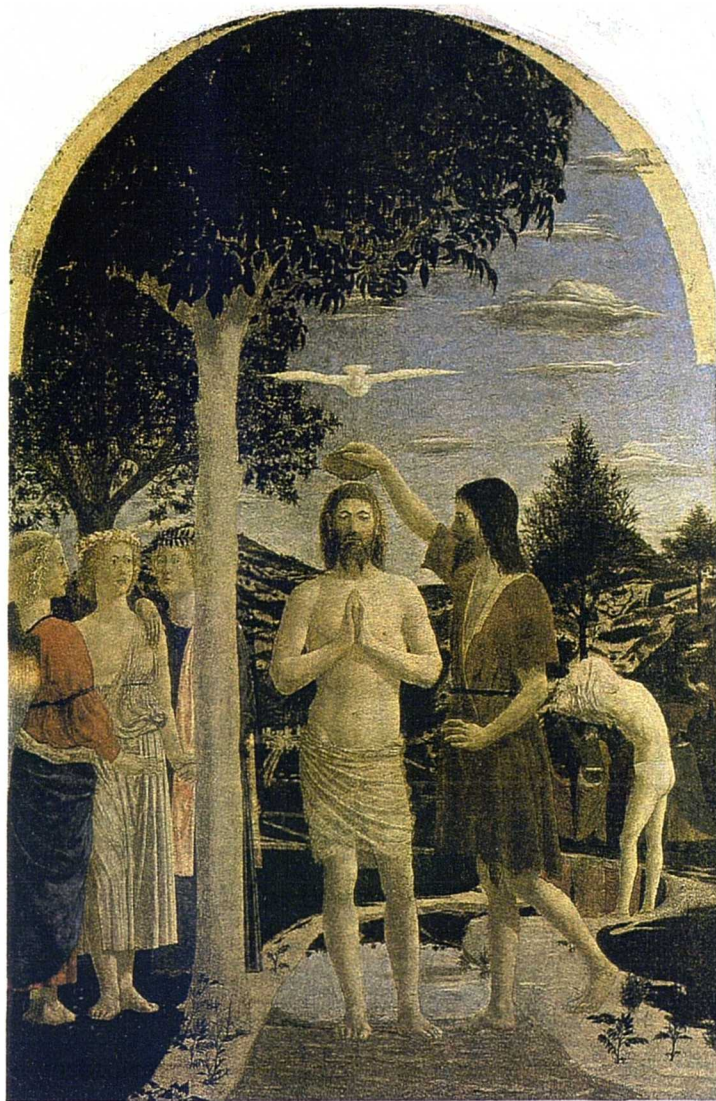
Piero's desire to appear in his own work was not unique. Several other Renaissance artists stare out from the past in our direction, often in an almost confrontational manner and usually from crowd scenes.¹⁵ Incidentally, the convention was that the profile view was always reserved for patrons and if the Renaissance artist wished to personally introduce his work to the spectator he would do this by staring back 'full face' through the fresco. This painterly device serves as an invitation from the painter to the spectator that persists to this day. Michael Baxandall reminds us that pose and gesture are loaded with meaning in Renaissance art, some of which we can only guess at. He describes Piero as, "the most notoriously reticent painter in these matters (...) he relied upon the beholders' disposition to read relationships into groups."¹⁶ Baxandall is here referring to Piero's *Baptism* but the observed 'reticence' and relationship of the group of figures is also relevant to our reading of *The Resurrection*.

In his *Baptism of Christ* there is a group of three angels on the left who are used for a device which Piero often exploited. We become aware that one of the figures is staring in a heavy-lidded way either directly at us or an inch or two above or beside our heads. This state institutes a relationship between us and it, and we become sensitive to this figure and its role.¹⁷

15 Benezzo Gozzoli, for example, looks at us from his fresco painting, *The Journey of the Magi* (1459 - 61) his name is on his hat.

16 Baxandall, M: *Painting & Experience in 15C Italy* (1972) p.75.

17 Baxandall, M: *Painting & Experience in 15C Italy* (1972) p.75.



*Fig. 6. The Baptism of Christ,
National Gallery, London.*

It is Christ who institutes a similar reciprocal relationship with the spectator in *The Resurrection*, as we rapidly look from him to the sleeping soldiers below. It is no accident that the descending vertical that is Christ's banner, leads us directly to Piero, emphasising the spiritual relationship between heaven and earth. The spectator is therefore invited to participate in the work, or more accurately in what the work *represents* via the sleeping form of Piero (although Baxandall

insists that as spectators today, we may only be observers, not participants).¹⁸ Piero has used his great knowledge of perspective to enable him to portray his own head in reclining pose, adopting a mannerism that is almost beckoning. But then again, art always demands a response — it needs ‘believers’ to consider (and accept) its interpretations; the artist wants us to co-operate, to collaborate in the illusion. Baxandall states that: “We become active accessories to the event” but he also adds that for us ‘moderns’ “... it is doubtful if we have the right predisposition to see such refined innuendo at all spontaneously.”¹⁹ Perhaps if we could, we may quite like to imagine, ‘what happens next’ — when the soldiers wake up?

It may never have occurred to Piero but to us, the closer we look at *The Resurrection*, a vague awareness slowly dawns, growing into the notion that there is something instinctively intrusive, almost voyeuristic in staring at someone who is deeply asleep. Piero’s self portrait does not confront us at all, it is powerless, he is vulnerable and unconscious. We empathise with this tender vulnerability. We cannot know for sure, but could it be that Piero wishes to act as witness to the redemption of the world, but he also wishes to hide behind his own eyes? He wants to introduce us to the scene — but this event is so cataclysmic that for him to even pretend to be there is simply too presumptive, too audacious. A prophet is never accepted in his own country, and we may imagine the discomfort of Piero, the ‘local boy made good’ well known amongst the inhabitants of Borgo San Sepolcro. If he cannot ‘look us in the eye’ the sincerity of his belief is maintained by his very presence and this is vital, for it actualises and *re*-presents an occurrence which, for fellow believers, changed the world forever.

18 Baxandall, M: *Patterns of Intention*, (1986) p.111.

19 Baxandall, M: *Painting & Experience in 15C Italy* (1972) p.76

I.iv. All Christians hope to be reunited when they 'wake' from this life. They are told to expect the resurrection of the body after death, meanwhile, all painters operate within the dimensions of an enforced 'sleep' brought about by exercising their skill with still figures on still canvas. The interplay between words such as 'sleep' and 'death', and 'waking' and 'eternal life' is well known. The Gospel assures the Christian that Jesus was seen after his death on the cross. He was awake, alive; he ate fish, he walked the road to Emmaus, he comforted the disciples in the upstairs room and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit — he silenced the doubts of Thomas.

And it came to pass, as he sat at meat with them, he took bread and blessed it, and brake, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened, and they knew him: and he vanished out of their sight. And they said to one another, did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?²⁰

As the biographical 'alive' Piero knew himself awake, and imagined himself asleep, this painting, first and foremost, is a symbol of hope for the salvation of mankind; redemption as a continuous, ontological event, but it is also a plea for personal salvation. Piero transfixes the spectator. For to have one's eyes opened is to wake to a new reality either in this world or the next. Centuries later Stanley Spencer, talking about *The Resurrection, Cookham* (1924 -27) was to come to just such a conclusion:

The *Resurrection* is meant to indicate the passing of the state of non-realisation of the possibilities of heaven in this life to the sudden awakening to this fact. This is what is inspiring to the people as they resurrect, namely the new meaning they find in what they had seen before.²¹

20 Luke 24: 30-32

21 Pople, Kenneth: *Stanley Spencer: A Biography* (London 1991) p.226

Piero hopes that his eyes may be opened too, for like Spencer's his is a vision firstly of an earthly paradise based on the locality, and an idealised aspect of Sansepolcro and the scenery around Arezzo fades to either side either side of the figure of Christ²². The fresco instils deep contemplation from the viewer as it aspires to induce something like the 'sudden' realisation Diotima speaks of in *The Symposium* {209e -211a} when that absolute and eternal beauty will be revealed "in a flash".²³ And so our hometown, whether it is Cookham or Sansepolcro, will be like a city in heaven and we shall see the dignity of man. Piero constructs a new cityscape that stems from Plato's *Republic* but he renews it with all of the idealism inherent within and expressed by the Neoplatonism of his own age. This bright new world, the painted paradise which art alone may offer is built as a labour of love as well as of intellect, and it will last for all eternity. Our *desire* to comprehend is enough, and although much of what may be described as 'religious art' aims to direct the spectator along the road to redemption, Piero takes us closer than most because of a subtle commitment which typifies this artist renowned for his implacable impersonality.²⁴

22 The large bare trees which climb the hill (to the left as we look) contrast with the younger leafy trees on the right. This may symbolise winter and spring - i.e., before and after the Crucifixion and Resurrection, or the hard and easy paths to salvation.

23 See Charles H. Lohr: *Metaphysics from The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. - Schmitt, C. B. & Skinner, Q. (Editors). p. 575: "The dignity of man is founded on his innate desire for this highest degree of contemplation. This desire is not purely intellectual, but also has a voluntary component. Turning to Augustine and the Christian tradition, Ficino went beyond the Platonic notion of eros. Just as the act of creation requires the union of the divine intellect with the divine liberality, so also man's desire to comprehend the One forms one act with his free choice of the One. The contemplation to which Ficino refers involves not only the thought which actively constitutes its objects, but also the love which actively binds them together."

24 Berenson, Bernhard: *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* 1930, p.138: But there is another reason, less artistic and more general, to account for the effect of impassiveness in art. Ardently as we love those beings who react to things by the measure and in the quality that we ourselves react to them, so, in other moods, in moments of spent sensibility, we no less eagerly love those other beings or objects which, though we endow them with a splendid and kindred personality, yet do not react at all to things that almost overpower us.

Piero's work calmly proclaims him as honest, devout, and humble, despite the intriguing mathematical compositions and a vast wealth of perspective. By comparison, an earlier work attributed to Jacopo di Cione (active 1362), *The Resurrection and the Maries at the Sepulchre*, (National Gallery, London) is a 'fussy' diptych. The first panel contains familiar elements to those found in Piero's *Resurrection*, for Christ holds the same victory banner, he 'hovers' above a similar sarcophagus that is surrounded by the familiar group of sleeping soldiers. It is a two-part story and the second panel illustrates the reaction of the women to the miracle of the empty tomb. Jacopo di Cione aims to reassure fellow Christians in the usual way with a message of hope but his work lacks the devotional intensity and serenity of the Piero della Francesca *Resurrection*. This is not primarily because the anonymous figures are denied distinctive features, as this was quite usual, but simply because too much is going on. The tranquillity that inspires Piero's *Resurrection* exerts psychological power through the stable, triangular composition and the contrast between the face of Christ with those of the sleeping men, particularly 'Piero.'²⁵ Therefore, although larger in scale, Christ is as much a part of a painted 'reality' as the soldiers, except that he is awake, and it is he who fixes us with his unwavering gaze. In explaining how a painting is made we are not explaining how it works its magic. Art notoriously familiarises the spectator with other worlds by giving form and features to deities, this is as true of Christianity as it is of Hinduism or the gods of Ancient Greece, but can it really help to redeem us?

25 Only two of the four soldiers would have been identifiable. If one of these is Piero, the other is not known but it is tempting to guess what his relationship to Piero may have been — perhaps a patron or friend.

II. Seeing As.

II.i. If Piero seems to get ‘nearer the mark’ in his depiction of Christ than Jacopo di Cione did, is it because *his* Jesus, regardless of the method of his personification, somehow manages to look like an individual rather than a composite made from stereotypes? Painting utilises tradition and so has the ability to immortalise an image, (Jesus had a beard, Mary wore blue, etc.). More importantly, artistic interpretation focuses upon and also enhances certain aspects of what may be thought of as the ‘hidden reality’ that lies behind the familiar. Works of art neatly illustrate how conceptual thought may change, enabling what Wittgenstein called, ‘seeing as’ to occur.²⁶ For, it is one thing to see a painting *as* a representation of a man, it is another to see the same work *as* a representation of Christ. Of course, Piero’s version of Jesus has all the outward signs we have learned to recognise, but (as with the *Madonna del Parto*) there is something mystical, unfathomable about the skill of his interpretation. It is as if he has achieved two images in one: Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, was considering the ambiguous figures in that famous psychological doodle, where first we see a duck and then a rabbit, but not both at the same time:

“What *has* changed?”

Like all cases of philosophical confusion, it is the question itself that misleads. ‘It makes no sense to ask: “What has changed?”’ Wittgenstein told his class. ‘And the answer: “the organisation has changed” makes no sense either.’

The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a new perception and at the same time of the perception’s being unchanged.

‘Seeing as’... is not part of perception. And for that reason it is like seeing and again not like.²⁷

26 Ray Monk: *Ludwig Wittgenstein - The Duty of Genius*, pub. J. Cape 1990 p.514

27 Monk, Ray: *Ibid*, p.514

There is a space in the twilight world of perception between the gestalt idea that an organised whole appears as more than the sum of its parts and the cultural persuasion that seeing is believing. ‘Seeing as’ I take to mean as a combination of ‘seeing’ in a visual sense with ‘seeing’ as in understanding — where “I see” has nothing to do with vision. The unknown model is seen *as* Jesus, Piero is seen *as* a soldier whilst simultaneously being seen (once one is in on the secret) in a biographical sense as Piero the Painter. On a further level, and with the spectators’ co-operation, he may be seen as a representation of ‘Everyman’ in search of redemption. Interestingly, it makes sense that ‘seeing as’ is not part of perception — for if we rely merely on our perception (which again, ‘to perceive’ translates both as seeing and understanding) we disallow the simultaneity of these various readings of a sleeping soldier. Wittgenstein points out that “a given picture represents what it does by virtue of *convention*.”²⁸ We now see how Piero transposed the traditional image of Christ to give it fresh meaning and how, in the search for redemptive elements in works of art, we note the duality of purpose in significant forms. This duality or more correctly, this multiplicity of meaning, contingent to art forms may be regarded as the observable fluctuation between constant change and permanence. In this case, Piero’s Jesus as part of a representational picture, belongs to what Wittgenstein calls: “an enveloping system of pictures governed by the same system of representation”.²⁹ Thus we see him first as paint on a wall, then as a man, then art transubstantiates ‘the man’ to the far higher realm of *Eternal Redeemer*. As with the rabbit/duck drawing, we may take one or more visual readings of any work of art, but it is difficult to ‘see’ them all at once as the persistence of one visual understanding demands the loss of another:

True, we can switch from one reading to another with increasing rapidity; we will also ‘remember’ the rabbit while we see the duck, but the more

28 See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 2.13.

29 See Wittgenstein, *Tractatus* 2.13.

closely we watch ourselves, the more certainly we will discover that we cannot experience alternative readings at the same time. Illusion, we find is hard to describe or analyse, for though we may be intellectually aware of the fact that any given experience *must* be an illusion, we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion.³⁰

The thought naturally follows that as visual perception flickers and plays tricks, perhaps our cognitive perception fluctuates also, leading to our seeing *and* believing. This analysis of *The Resurrection* by Piero della Francesca parallels Wittgenstein's 'seeing as' classification taken with Gombrich's notion of illusion, which here reinforces the idea that a change of aspect has occurred or may occur. We may like to think ourselves too sophisticated to be 'taken in' by Piero's illusion. Nevertheless, either as an individual or collectively (maybe with one foot in the tribal past?) we may desire to "watch ourselves having an illusion" in order to engage with that spiritual intensity undeniably found in works of art.³¹ Some clarification of terminology is now required: It is a much covered topic, but 'Art' and 'Idolatry' must not be confused with one another, they are patently not the same because the former only offers one aspect of spirituality whereas the latter makes claims for the housing of spirituality itself.³²

If there was any lingering doubt, a crude comparison between walking into a church to view a painting, or walking into a gallery to see the same work quickly confirms that the 'time' and 'location' of works of art is paramount to our

30 Gombrich, E. H. *Art and Illusion*. Phaidon (1960) p.5.

31 The romanticised 'Hollywood' versions of the lives of Michelangelo or Van Gogh are a case in point, where Charlton Heston and Kirk Douglas respectively, give magnificent performances which help us to empathise with the lives of these artists. Yet, if these roles are 'only' mimetic aspects of the people they depict, any spiritual intensity, if present at all, lies within the actors performance which we must penetrate: We take Heston out of Michelangelo, Douglas out of Vincent - what is left is a revelation.

32 Cf. Welch, Evelyn: *Art & Society in Italy*. p.138: Thomas Aquinas (c. 1226 - 74) was careful to insist that 'Religion does not offer worship to images considered as mere things in themselves, but as images drawing us to God incarnate. Motion to an image does not stop there at the image but goes on to the thing it represents.'

understanding them. The work of art does not physically change ‘in transit’ between the church and the gallery, but it has ‘changed’ focus nonetheless. We would not go to the cinema or the circus if we did not want to suspend belief — we *desire* illusion, but this is not the same as hoping to be deluded. One must always ‘see’ the reference: the parody in a ‘spoof’ cowboy film, the nostalgic element in slapstick, before making value judgements. Wittgenstein had said, “Now you try and say what is involved in seeing something as something. It is not easy. These thoughts I am working on now are as hard as granite”. Ray Monk describes Wittgenstein’s conclusions in the *Investigations* as “paradoxical” and “contradictory” but then again these are the qualities that inspire investigation in the first place. To assume that definite conclusions about art can ever be reached infers a prescriptive sense of perception by which all people may see the same thing in a single work of art. But surely this is an impossibility, as we are perpetually caught in a state of constant flux?

II.ii. Just as we ourselves are forever changing, over the passage of time the physical appearance and social significance of a work of art changes until in effect, its original meaning has practically disappeared. Artists learn from, borrow, or inherit visual symbols, (such as the flapping banner in the *Resurrection*, or the optical trick of overlapping one angel ‘behind’ another, as in consecutive *Madonna Altarpieces* by Duccio, Cimabue and Giotto). But over longer periods of time, having mastered shortcuts in technique, they may forget the origins of visual symbols such as banners and angels and include them merely to be in keeping with tradition. Furthermore, when a painting is reinterpreted in an alternative media, using the spoken or written word for example, something may well be lost ‘in translation.’ Not only is it impossible to assume a correct interpretation of intention regarding artists from the past (when we no longer have the capacity to ‘read’ cultural signs very different to our own) — it is also uncertain that ‘talking about art’ is valid at all.

Despite an exhilarating cultural legacy spanning the centuries, by and large, we have forgotten what art once could do for us in terms of redemption. Words fail to adequately express, for instance, what the great glimmering and golden Byzantine image of the Saviour meant to those who witnessed its conception. But that image once was, and still is, recognised everywhere — even on the ceilings of those churches, too dark and too high for it to be seen clearly. Depicting God was always a two-way contract — for not only might people begin to ‘shape their imagination’ to get a clearer vision of their creator, the point was certainly more to do with Him seeing them because God’s house was purpose-built for that reason. Christians believe that God will *know* them, and they die in the hope that they will *see* Jesus face to face. Therefore, Jesus was ‘recognised’ in Sansepolcro by Piero as surely as he would be later by a youthful Stanley Spencer in Cookham. Is this identification the Wittgenstinian ‘seeing as’: the agglomeration of looking (seeing), and understanding (seeing) which allows the vision of the glorified Christ to pierce through the wall and into the heart?

‘Why are you crying?’ Said Jesus to her. ‘Who are you looking for?’
She, supposing he was the gardener, said ‘Oh Sir, if you have carried him away, please tell me where you have laid him and I will take him away.’
Jesus said to her, ‘Mary!’
And she turned right around and said to him in Hebrew, ‘Master!’
No! said Jesus, do not hold me now, I have not yet gone up to the Father.

In the evening of that first day of the week, the disciples had met together with the doors locked for fear of the Jews. Jesus came and stood right in the middle of them and said, ‘Peace be with you!’³³

Neither Mary of Magdala, nor Cleopas and his friend who met the stranger on the road to Emmaus could recognise Jesus at first, although they could *see* him; “Happy are those who have not seen and yet believe” Jesus had said to Doubting

33 John 20: 16-19.

Thomas. Have we lost the ability to ‘recognise’ our redemption in ‘miraculous’ works of art, as once Piero and his contemporaries did?

III. Time and Truth.

III.i. Vasari speaks highly of Piero della Francesca and it is tempting to conjecture along with him, that as “Time is the father of Truth” at some point in time a *true reading* of Piero’s fresco may be possible.³⁴ It may not necessarily be the same ‘truth’ as when it was first painted, or again, perhaps the optimum time for appreciation has already passed. Either Piero’s creativity placed so many demands on the spectator that it took time for the world to realise his *true* worth, or we still have yet to see how important and influential Piero really is. Indisputably, the ‘reality’ of his imagery and the skill involved in its execution enabled his ‘vision’ of *The Resurrection* to reach millions of people beyond the outskirts of his home town, and beyond his own time too.

The attempt, therefore, to set forth what is past as something not real or not existing is very questionable. A super-venient psychical moment cannot make something non-real, or get rid of what presently exists. In fact, the whole sphere of primordial associations is a present and real lived experience. To this sphere belongs the whole series of ordinary temporal moments reduced by means of primordial associations together with other moments which belong to the temporal object.³⁵

Piero, the man, existed in the past, but his ‘vision’ of *The Resurrection* properly belongs outside of temporal distinction. Undoubtedly it was the original

34 See Vasari, *Lives of the Artists* (Penguin 1965) p.191, “Piero based the relationships in his paintings on the laws of Euclidian geometry. The regular bodies were theoretically perfect forms (...) through which art could reveal and reproduce the order of nature.”

35 Husserl: *The Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* (Edited by Heidegger. I.U.P. 1964)

‘product’ of a Renaissance man and in this sense is tied to the moment for eternity — but also, in that it is the manifestation of a dream it is ‘timeless’. Besides, his vision in some way accounts for and reinforces our contemporary interpretation of Christianity, of the Renaissance, of Italy and of the world today. It is part of a collective heritage; a small but significant aspect from a huge conglomeration of other dreams and significant occurrence that forever informs the present. Therefore *the vision*, of which the fresco is only a physical manifestation, is as ‘real’ now as it ever was. Metaphorically speaking, Piero ‘dreams on’ because sleep is the vehicle for timelessness. Time becomes less relevant when we sleep, for a whole night can seem to pass in the blink of an eye, or it may seem to drag like an eternity. If time is *Being*, then sleep requires the absence of identity — the loss of ego — a heightened sense of *non-Being*. And so the humble, ‘sleeping Piero’ reaches out to his latter-day audience, making the dream that is the past as ‘real’ to us as it was to his contemporaries. By the standards of any age, this work *becomes* more than mere paint on plaster as soon as one attempts to engage with it

Any artist who paints a self-portrait necessarily recreates themselves ‘in their own image’ — a less than godly activity that often produces merely a ‘static likeness’. Portraits reinvent personae for all the usual tired purposes in art: to capture beauty, to brag about possessions, to feign piety, and so on, but occasionally one will communicate the intangible. Piero once, around five hundred years ago significantly included his appearance in a public work of art for some reason we have yet to ascertain. However, ‘Piero the painter’ has been more recently, and most deliberately ‘recreated’ by others too. Cynics might say that the chief difference is that *now* he has successfully become a ‘tourist attraction.’ Whilst the original miracle of Christ’s resurrection was interpreted anew in pigment — its message of redemption ripe for his own generation — another message was being sent specifically through the ‘medium’ of fifteenth century Italian culture to

us today. The second, 'twenty-first century Piero' is very much (if not alive) a cultural icon, a saleable commodity, a man of 'substance.'



Fig. 7. The Battle, Detail: The Victory of Heraclius over Chosroes from The Legend of the True Cross c.1456. The Church of S. Francesco, Arezzo.

Italian officials announced yesterday that after fifteen years of restoration, a seminal cycle of frescoes by Piero della Francesca, the Renaissance master, has been “rescued from years of damage” and will be unveiled to the public in April. “This is the year of Piero della Francesca,” Giovanna Melandri, the Italian Minister of Culture, said after inspecting the restoration work in the Church of St. Francis at Arezzo, Tuscany.³⁶

36 Owen, Richard: *The Guardian*. 16. 2. 00

Newspapers, radio and television may help to keep works of art such as *The Legend of the True Cross*, 'alive' in the imagination as much as reproduced images in glossy art books, on posters and postcards may serve as substitutes for the real thing. But, what *is* the real thing? Was the fresco only 'real' when Piero first painted it, before or after it was 'restored' or some time in between? Or, more obliquely, has the postcard, poster or open access on the 'Web' made it 'more real' by assuring its immortality but twice removed? (The painting being the first mimetic 'interpretation' of the vision, or idea, further 'interpretations' necessarily the second, third and so on.)

Obviously, all painting exists because of, but also separately from its creator. Most perversely, painting also habituates anti-temporal space — what might be called a 'parachrony'³⁷ — so that it 'exists' separate even from itself, as an idea. For example, in terms of 'Art History' there is often mention of works, "now lost" (which implies that they still *exist* as a 'space' or gap within a continuum). Many of them are physically present somewhere on the black market perhaps, but regardless whether they are destroyed or not, acknowledging their very *negativity* assures their continued 'actuality' within a larger framework or pattern. This is important in painting but also when one considers the reliance upon 'rests' or the absence of sound in musical form. This theme will be developed later in this essay with special regard to Frank Zappa and his theories about time and music.³⁸ It is also relevant with respect to human relationships — the way a loved one (whether living or dead) may be framed in the 'mind's eye.'

³⁷ Parachrony, (parachronicity) is the central theme in this essay. Parachronicity as assumed by, amongst others, J. F. Lyotard, throws doubt upon the generally accepted consideration of time as a linear construct.

³⁸ It is worth mentioning that as a reader, one may turn several pages at once or refer back to previous pages with ease, whilst continuing to read the present page - the written word automatically also alludes to the passage of time. Hence 'later' here becomes meaningless.

III.ii. If the year 2000 was, according to the Italian Minister of Culture, “The Year of Piero della Francesca” — like other years, it came and went. Restoration has re-authenticated *The Legend of the True Cross* and now it has a new agenda. Having already established itself as a ‘relic’ worthy of the tourists’ pilgrimage long before its facelift, its restoration has caused it to be a ‘new’ sensation like a remake of an old movie. One has to book in advance to see this latest metamorphosis complete with audio commentary in several languages. Yet the inherent truth of the statement above: “The attempt, therefore, to set forth what is past as something not real or not existing is very questionable” forces us to question its status as ‘real’ *now*. Undeniably, works of art should be saved from damage and ignorance because ultimately we all gain, but if the past is considered *as real as the present*, where then do we locate art forms — within history or the present? Counter-arguments to restoration bewail the irretrievable loss that occurs the moment renovation ensues. What exactly are we looking at? When earlier ‘bad’ restoration needs to be removed, what were earlier spectators looking at? Once again, it seems that several genuinely alternative viewpoints allow that more than a single interpretation of the *true* identity of a given work of art is plausible. Taken *en masse*, they enable a variety of perceptions to co-exist legitimately with one another. In this respect, the history of Piero’s *Resurrection* is truly chequered:

Mentioned in Vasari, {ii 494} as the best work of Piero in Sansepolcro, but apparently covered in whitewash in the eighteenth century, and unknown to Lanzi. Recorded in Rosini’s *Storia della Pittura Italiana*, 1839, vol. iii.³⁹

Whitewashing in the eighteenth century had a devastating effect on the surface of the *Resurrection*. As always, removal of the lime based covering also removed surface refinements. Besides this direct assault, the greens of the landscape have oxidised and turned an almost uniform brown. Miraculously, the great psychological power of the work remains undiminished.⁴⁰

39 Clark, Kenneth: *Piero della Francesca* (1969) p.227

40 Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg, *Piero della Francesca* (1992). p.110

“Covered in whitewash” — that certainly was *not* the year of Piero della Francesca. Although, centuries later, his reputation was destined for a redemption of sorts by a change in public opinion, the story of Piero like the work itself, was given a ‘whitewash’ or a ‘cover-up.’ Piero the mathematician was well known but Piero the artist was yet to ‘rise again’ — in popularity at least. Vasari, in 1568, bemoans the fate of those who work and study hard for the benefit of others, and are then forgotten. Of Piero he says, “All too often he leaves behind him works that are nearly finished or shaping well, only to have them usurped by presumptuous donkeys trying to dress themselves up in the noble skin of a lion.”⁴¹ Vasari’s prophetic comment, “Time is said to be the father of truth” simply implies that Piero would hopefully be appreciated one day but that recognition when it finally came, had a sting in the tail. Although his painting was well known and appreciated by some, it was not until the beginning of the twentieth century that Piero was reconsidered as an artist with real ‘commercial potential’ by among others, Berenson.⁴² As a consultant to the dealer Duveen, Bernhard Berenson it may be argued and not unkindly, had a vested interest in proclaiming the importance of ‘forgotten’ artists to rich Americans. Almost one hundred years later, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, Piero has at last achieved ‘super-star status’ within the art world. One wonders what he might have made of this?

Questions such as: “Could Piero’s *Resurrection* have become increasingly relevant *because* it was effaced?” are not measurable in empirical terminology but

41 See Vasari: *Lives of the Artists*. p.191.

42 I am indebted to Nicholas Penny, Keeper of the Piero della Francesca paintings in The National Gallery, London: “It is not true though, that Piero was — as is often asserted — discovered in the twentieth century. Were this the case, The National Gallery would not have three examples of his work! One of them was an exceptionally expensive acquisition. Also the Arezzo Frescoes were all carefully copied in the 19th century for the Ecole de Beau Arts in Paris. But he was relatively neglected in the 17th and 18th centuries, certainly.” (January 2000.) See Appendix.

are worth the asking, nevertheless. Undoubtedly, the fresco *had* been forgotten. Deliberately obliterated, it was physically changed forever by the application of whitewash. Over time attitudes had sufficiently mellowed for it to be considered worthy of ‘redemption’— the ghost of an image worth saving. In effect, the original work of art was ‘killed’ forever by the iconoclast with the brush and whitewash tub, but there is some gratification in the perfect irony that *this* work of art may in a sense be regarded as reborn; subject to its own ‘resurrection’.⁴³ If nothing else, the renewed opportunity for popular appreciation of the decorative simplicity of the kind we find in Piero’s work is a bonus. After the extravagance of later styles and the prolonged quest for photographic realism this purity of artistic form, along with its underlying and unerring structural dimension and depth, is an aesthetic revitalisation. Whatever the interpretation, its popularity arises from its integrity, a vision painted with the intellect *and* from the heart.

And so there is a quirky parallel in the notion that this *Resurrection* should be literally shrouded by whitewash. It is also ironic that it has been subject to several other kinds of ‘resurrection’ since Vasari’s early attempt to reawaken interest. Whiteness once blanked-out Piero’s vision, but only temporarily; there are other ways of effecting change in the perception of a work of art.

In common parlance, “there is no such thing as bad publicity” and “imitation is the highest form of flattery” and so maybe it is fitting that Piero’s work has been alluded to and revisited several times. His statuesque figures famously copied by Seurat, his tumbledown Arezzo reputedly geometricised by Cezanne, (and thus subject to further reincarnation in the Cubism of Picasso) — more recently Michael Browne produced a ‘spoof’ *Resurrection* painting, *The Art of the Game*,

43 Witness the great interest today in the use of X-rays as part of the restoration process and how they sometimes reveal other paintings, or other versions below the surface. Incidentally, Stanley Spencer’s first *Resurrection* painting lies beneath the famous *Apple Gatherers* (1913)

(1997). Here French football star Eric Cantona replaces Christ whilst other players represent the sleeping soldiers.⁴⁴ Cantona of course, was ‘flavour of the month’ for a while; he was ‘everywhere’ until his fall from grace. This painting courts that brand of controversy Lennon once caused when he said, “The Beatles are bigger than Jesus.” Is this painting a tribute to football, to art or to both? *The Art of the Game* is more than a crude attempt to reckon football greater than art or religion because it once again positions Piero (and also incidentally, Mantegna) within a new relevance. It reminds us that great artists once relished celebrity as did the people they often depicted. In this, Browne may be somehow closer to the original intention of the work. Surely, the inhabitants of a small place like Borgo San Sepolcro would have instantly recognised the famous local artist, and probably the ‘soldier’ to his left as local celebrities, placed high on the wall of their newly restored *Palazzo dei Priori*?⁴⁵ Piero may have been subversive enough to intend to *shake the comfortable and the complacent awake* to their responsibilities — as much as Browne may have wished to shock the establishment by ‘hijacking’ religious iconography. Ultimately, as an example of how ‘borrowed’ imagery may be reused, it is the usurpation of the prominence held by one well-known icon to advance the status of another; thus it forms part of greater pattern.⁴⁶

44 This enquiry later deals with serendipity and providence. I feel it sufficiently worthy of mention that it was only by pure chance, in the dentist’s waiting room, that I found an article featuring Michael Browne’s painting, *The Art of the Game* which is a spoof of Piero’s Resurrection. (ref. *Adieu, Cantona, Farewell* Time Magazine June 2 1997.)

45 Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg, *Piero della Francesca* (Thames & Hudson, 1992) p.110.

46 Artists and musicians are often deemed plagiarists but this is not a serious accusation, rather an identification and perpetuation of form. Piero may well have been thought as equally audacious as Browne in his day, for his tampering with a formulaic set of imagery. Who knows, many of the older locals may have intensely disliked their new fresco once it was finished?

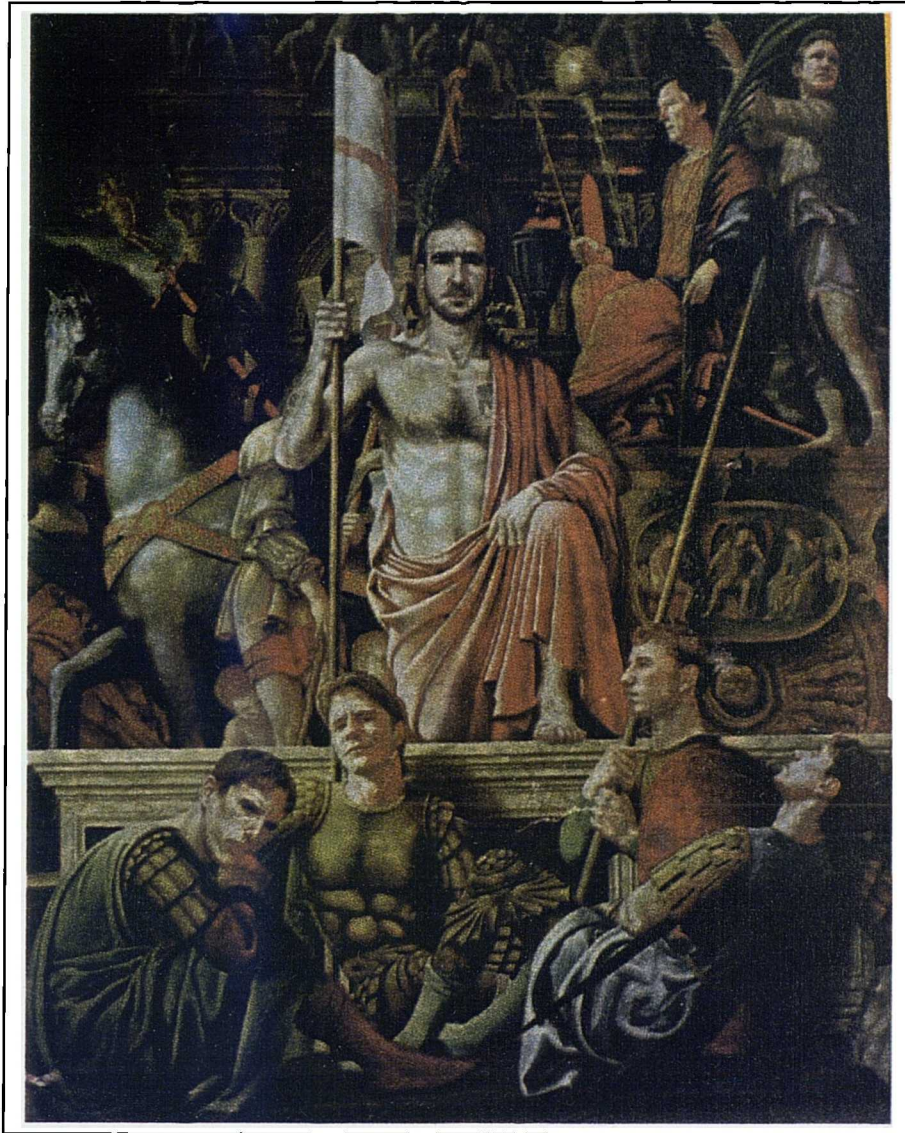


Fig. 8. The Art of The Game,
Michael Browne,
1997

Piero painted *The Resurrection* between 1463 and 1465⁴⁷ but by then it was a well-worn theme, and the subject has been tackled time and time again since.

47 See Lavin, *Ibid* p.110

Renaissance artists favoured an apocryphal rendition for the miraculous story that banishes death forever. Artistic interpretation persisted in taking liberties with *The New Testament* where there is only the briefest account given of finding the tomb empty. Above all, there is no scriptural reference to the cataclysmic moment when Jesus arises from the dead; there is no mention for example, of a blinding flash, a floating figure, a banner, or a sarcophagus. Needless to say, Piero worked within a tradition that demanded this type of response. His interpretation of the story bears resemblance to Andrea del Castagno's work of the same name, (1445-50) and to *The Life of Jesus* fresco by Taddeo Gaddi (c.1330) in *The Basilica of Santa Croce*. Less elaborate than these interpretations, Piero nonetheless operated on several levels because unlike any number of similar works his particular version also held local significance to the inhabitants of Sansepolcro.

This is one of the paintings that best exemplifies Piero's ability to use archaic iconographical elements, belonging to the repertory of popular sacred images (...) the traditional subject matter was probably inspired also by the 14th century polyptych of the Resurrection in the Cathedral of Borgo San Sepolcro.⁴⁸

It is curious that this work has such universal acclaim, for its content appertains toward the parochial. Yet this is its strength, for when we gaze upon it we become localised — we are relocated as fellow citizens. Piero's idea of the 'sleeping soldier' could have held such personal association because this figure was singularly significant in the Cathedral's polyptych where there is only *one* (rather large and uncomfortable looking) sleeping soldier. He lies horizontally, immediately below the sarcophagus where one might expect to see a *memento-mori* of some kind — a marble skeleton perhaps, or collection of carved skulls.⁴⁹

48 See Scala/River: *Piero della Francesca* (Florence 1985). p. 50:

49 In Masaccio's *The Trinity* (1425-7) the inscription above the skeleton reads "What you are, I once was; what I am you will become."

One might imagine a young Piero kneeling before the Cathedral altarpiece at Sansepolcro and identifying the single soldier with the more traditional skeleton, intuitively drawing comparisons between the *memento-mori* and himself. The soldier must have been part of a well known local iconography, as after all, the whole place was wrapped up in the idea of resurrection, largely because legend told that ‘someone’ had brought a rock⁵⁰ back from The Holy Land purporting to be from Christ’s tomb. The area was renamed Borgo San Sepolcro, ‘The Borough of the Holy Sepulchre’ — a place where the concept of resurrection must have been ingrained in the bones of every man, woman and child for centuries.

Nothing is ever straightforward, and in one final twist it must be added that in *The New Testament*, these sleeping soldiers were hardly heroic figures at all because the authorities bought their silence. Judas betrayed Christ and Peter denied Christ before the Crucifixion, but it was the sleeping soldiers who betrayed his *truth* by their refusal to speak out as witnesses to Christ’s Resurrection:

Now when they were going, behold, some of the watch came into the city and shewed unto the chief priests all the things that were done. And when they were assembled with the elders, and had taken counsel, they gave large money unto the soldiers. Saying, Say ye, His disciples came by night and stole him away while we slept. And if this comes to the governor’s ears we will persuade him and secure you. So they took the money and did as they were taught: and this saying is commonly reported among the Jews until this day.⁵¹

50 The soldier on the right of *The Resurrection* is leaning awkwardly on this rock. It can be seen in the far right of the fresco. Piero seems to have ‘caught’ the soldier just as he was ‘nodding off.’ In legend it could have been one of the original soldiers, a living witness to the Resurrection of Christ, who actually brought the rock from Jerusalem in the first place.

51 Matthew 28:11.

This must have been common knowledge in Sansepolcro, long before Piero painted his version of *The Resurrection* and it begs the question, “Why should Piero wish to be associated with these men if they were such vile deceivers?”

IV. Everyday People.

IV.i. It is of vital significance that Sansepolcro, “a small town in the Tuscan countryside, with no established local traditions, and so different from the large cities such as Florence and Siena”⁵² should be the setting for *The Resurrection*. By localising the greatest miracle of all in a small town, this fresco brings God ‘home’ to us all. As a reinterpretation of the New Testament it revitalises the role of pilgrim spectator. Michael Baxandall, in *Painting and Experience in 15th. Century Italy* (1972) mentions in detail a handbook written in 1454 which explains the need for internal representations as an aid to prayer. The book, *Zardino de Oration, The Garden of Prayer*, recommends that the people and places which are familiar in the every day sense, will make ideal substitutes for the people and places described in the New Testament.

It is helpful and necessary to fix the places and people in your mind: a city, for example, which will be the city of Jerusalem — taking for this purpose a city that is well known to you.

And then too you must shape in your mind some people, people well known to you, to represent for you people involved in the Passion — the person of Jesus Himself, of the Virgin, Saint Peter, Saint John the Evangelist, Saint Mary Magdalen, Anne, Caiphas, Pilate, Judas and the others, every one of whom you will fashion in your mind.⁵³

52 Angelini, Alessandro, *Piero della Francesca*, Florence: Scala/River (1989) p.3.

53 Baxandall, Michael, *Painting & Experience in 15th. Century Italy*, p.46

For Piero, Sansepolcro and the city and the hills of Arezzo would be his 'Holy Land'. Intended as an aid to prayer, this concept may be crucial to our understanding the 'garden' of Renaissance art, (as well as the magical childhood world of Stanley Spencer, as we shall see further on in this essay). It should not be assumed that as spectators, we all attach the *same* significance to either religion or to works of art, yet we often share in a sense of 'belonging' to our hometown and to our childhood. In dreams and in old age we are said to revisit our earliest days with greater clarity, seeking out half-forgotten places and retracing our steps.

Whilst there is no doubt that human beings have changed over the centuries, 'everyday people' once were to be found in the guise of saints and heroes *inside* works of art. (Stanley Spencer was to take this to the extreme and this is worthy of elaboration later). But when we look at pictures, perhaps these butchers, bakers and candlestick makers are still 'in there' somewhere. If so, the original artistic intention remains constant in that it persists in trying to 'improve' or 'redeem' the spectator by example, or by empathy perhaps. The viewer forever remains physically 'outside' works of art but those 'inside' are like us. This concept involves more than using art as a tool for preaching or moralising; a learning process is implicit in engaging with a work of art if it seems that the practitioner intends that spectators should *see* the possibility that they might change for the better. Paintings act as an intercession with God on behalf of the faithful, and we have come to expect that works of art may help humanity in a spiritual sense generally.

Apart from 'spiritual' matters, a secular 'realignment' of self with what can best be described as, inner *Being* is desirable and achievable via an interaction with works of art. As participants in aesthetic regeneration regard art forms as capable of ennobling the human condition, art brands all of us (religious and non-religious) as eligible for a kind of 'resurrection'. There is a corresponding notion

held in Arthur C. Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*⁵⁴ that states how everyday objects, Brillo boxes and clothespins, may *become* 'art' — perhaps this applies to people too. As everyday people, we hope for a kind of transfiguration — perhaps ultimately to become 'born again' via art forms.⁵⁵ Failing that, if nothing else we can come to accept that art and everyday people operate on different levels but somehow manage to maintain *meaningful* relationships:

He entered the café. There was the cat, asleep. He ordered a cup of coffee, slowly stirred the sugar, sipped it (this pleasure had been denied him in the clinic), and thought, as he smoothed the cat's black coat, that this contact was an illusion and that the two beings, man and cat, were as good as separated by a glass, for the man lives in time, in succession, while the magical animal lives in the present, in the eternity of the instant.⁵⁶

The cat is more than akin to the story about it, the art form that also 'lives' in the eternity of the instant. The cat needs the framework of the story — the *poiesis* — just as the message of Christianity (or any organised ideology) needs works of art. Art conveniently becomes a transformation device where paint and canvas, letters of the alphabet, dance or dramatic action, make possible another reality where living people represent deities, where monumental shifts in time occur. Art provides an infinite frame of reference on which we hang our allotted time-span, for how can we function without fashioning something tangible; without creating 'something' which helps us to relate to someone else? Now the parachronicity adopted by Borges in *Ficciones* is given extra credence to all intents and purposes, for now Piero *may as well have been* the sleeping soldier.

54 See Danto, Arthur C., *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (1981)

55 See *Hidden Hands* (Documentary for Channel 4 Television Corporation 'Fulmar Productions' 1995): There is a theory that Kandinsky and Mondrian, whose interest in Theosophy was well known, both believed that painting could serve as an intermediary to a higher plane.

56 Borges, Jorge Luis: *Ficciones* —(*The South*) Grove Press (1962) p.137

The greater significance of using real people as substitutes within an aesthetic framework has been overlooked up until now. Now we see artists and their models reckoned as sincere in their quest for an endless variety of ‘redemption’ via art forms that perpetuate a mythology of demons, gods, heroes, and saints. The idea that redemption supersedes both spiritual and secular persuasions reinstates the *redemptive* power of art that was largely forsaken during the later Renaissance in the quest for attaining visual reality in paint or marble. Artists of the Late Renaissance may well have wished to be redeemed by their skill, but centuries later, and as before, realism played second fiddle to an underlying expressionism.

The denial of the power of the image and its creation as a *mystically redemptive* act resulted in an obsession with the ‘figurative’ seen as ‘reality’ — but a reality of a kind, and very selective at that. Alberti, whose Neoplatonic humanism led him to change art’s precepts from faith to reason, in turn caused him to insist on ‘improving’ nature by being selective. From then on art required only the ‘best parts’ of the bodies of only beautiful people, so starting a trend which still continues today in advertising’s computer enhanced graphics. The pursuit of physical beauty may bring about redemption of a kind but unfortunately, ‘everyday people’ are not necessarily beautiful at all.⁵⁷

The early painter Demetrius failed to obtain the highest praise because he was more devoted to representing the likeness of things than to beauty. Therefore excellent parts should all be selected from the most beautiful bodies, and every effort should be made to perceive, understand and express beauty.⁵⁸

57 Frank Zappa’s song: What’s the ugliest part of your body? “... Some say your nose, some say your toes...but I think it’s your mind.” Socrates was famously ugly but, as we shall later see, within a Zappalogical framework — ugliness is vital.

58 Alberti, Leon Battista: *On Painting* (Routledge, London 1956)

It is apparent that some of Piero's figures were drawn in a generalised manner with no outstanding features: The Queen of Sheba and her entourage, for example in *The Legend of the True Cross* all look like no-one in particular. However, this is unusual for Piero, and certainly not the case with the figures in the *Resurrection*. There is an everyday gritty reality in the features of the *Madonna del Parto* but this feeling is magnified when one looks at the face of Jesus. The identity of the man is uncertain, if indeed he ever existed except as a mixture of "excellent parts" — but there is no doubting the sincerity in the challenge of his gaze.⁵⁹ As with any re-enactment, like participating in a Passion Play, it would have been an honour for the man chosen to represent Christ, but that concept does not fit with Alberti's treatise. In a painting whose aim was to honour Christ as the redeemer of humanity, some 'selection' was probably required, even if the pose was based on one person or a small plaster model draped in cloth.

He is at once man and God in an image, that in its combined naturalism and ideal beauty, reconciles orthodox theology in which man is the image of God and Christ has two natures — one human and one divine — with the fifteenth century conception of art as the imitation of nature and humanist reverence for classical sculpture as the perfection of human form.⁶⁰

This meaningful reinvention of imagery as both human and divine persists to the present day. Such metaphorical resurrection is recognised in culture as a constantly recurring feature throughout the three ages described by Vico as, of gods, of heroes and of men. In each era humankind had the ability to reinvent itself, and art always created the nearest thing to 'perfection'. By giving ideas form, art created the beautiful Aphrodite and the menacing Hermes out of

59 Scala / River *Piero della Francesca* (1985). p. 50: "The resurrected Christ, portrayed with solid, peasant features, is nonetheless a perfect representative of Piero's human ideal: concrete, restrained and hieratic as well."

60 Lightbown, *Piero della Francesca* (1992) p.202

everyday people — just as much as culture created the mythical history that went with them. Could this ‘re-creation’ of people and things be redemptive — an eternal aspect of art?

IV.ii. Perhaps a second glance at the *Resurrection* is now required. Now it must be acknowledged that the sleeping Piero is not grandiose like a Renaissance patron kissing the feet of the infant Jesus, or presenting gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh. He does not look directly at the spectator, in what may seem a confrontational pose, as other Renaissance artists do. His eyes are firmly shut and like us, he cannot see the glory above but he represents all sleeping humanity that will hopefully arise on the last day. Whilst one is aware that the ghost of Ion hovers close by, warning that this is yet another ‘interpretation of interpretation’ (and not necessarily a correct one at that) the helplessness of the image has something of the universal about it. If as soon as we speak about a work of art, we ‘lose’ rather than ‘find’ meaning, then none of us will be saved.

This fresco ‘speaks’ more than we can say. *The Resurrection* by Piero della Francesca is certainly a plea for the redemption of humanity, maybe a pledge of trust in the creator, or at the very least a fervent display of ‘some kind of faith’. In this sense, it *is* timeless, even if it were to be destroyed it would still exist as part of the human psyche. What is truly surprising is that although it was covered in whitewash it became apocryphal, ‘hidden’ in a divine sense. Whitewashing — the act of a second deconstructive artist — only served to illustrate a greater purpose, suggesting that perhaps what is ‘hidden’ now will later be revealed. Now tombstones and mosaics on the floors of Renaissance cathedrals are covered by hardboard to protect them from the feet of the ever-growing numbers of tourists. They are hidden because they are now thought important enough to be conserved forever — *The Resurrection* was hidden because it was not.

The phrase ‘some kind of faith’ is not meant to be taken quite in the same sense as religious faith, for the latter, like love or justice consists of an element of blindness, which is a necessary part of any belief system. Although Piero the subject has closed eyes, Piero the painter does not. It is not his religious faith which draws artists of later generations to him, but the honesty of the image — maybe what Clive Bell was to call *Significant Form* — but I would call it more than that. Simplicity and intensity of feeling override the complicated mathematical structures that are so admired by art historians. Berenson chose to call it the ‘impersonality’ of art, suggesting an economy of form, a truth to nature.⁶¹ It is all of these, but for me, it also commands a personal *Truth to Form* which has little to do with nature or geometry — it is the cultural expression of a self-realisation: the remains of Piero’s faith in himself.

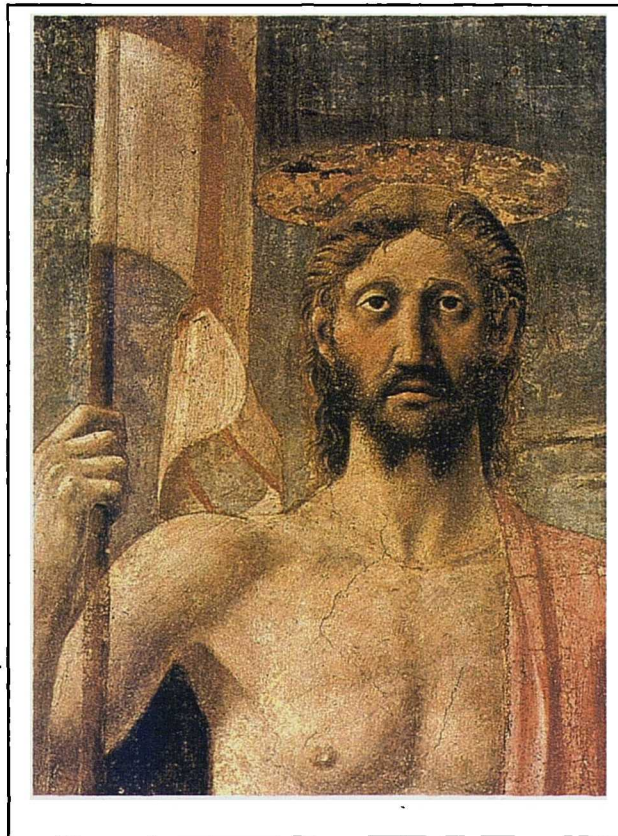
And so in his fresco of the *Resurrection*, Piero has not even thought of asking himself what type of person Christ was. He chose one of the manliest and most robust, and in the grey watered light of the morning, by the spreading cypresses and plain trees, you see this figure rising out of the tomb. You feel the solemnity, the importance of the moment, as in perhaps no other version of this subject; and, if you are a person sensitive to art, you will have felt all this before asking whether Christ looks appropriately Christ-like, or whether there is a fit expression on his face.⁶²

Although artists noticeably portray themselves, their lovers, or other family members and friends as mythical, heroic or religious figures, they do so with reference to other artists. In this they are creating forms of their own invention but also fulfilling what amounts to a spiritual ‘seeing as’ need that extends beyond themselves and into the wider regions of culture itself. The ‘sleeping Piero’ shares the same pictorial plane with the face of Christ which was once scrubbed from the golden ceilings of Byzantium in another earlier iconoclastic frenzy. The

61 Berenson, Bernhard: *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, OUP (1930) p.135

62 Berenson, Bernhard: *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance*, p.137.

same image of 'The Redeemer' which Piero, like Dante before him, would have seen on the ceiling of *The Baptistry* in Florence. This was the face of which the apocryphers told, the face once thought to have been imprinted on the sacred cloth held to wipe *The Face* of the suffering Jesus by 'Veronica' — whose name means *True Image*. The hidden is *now* 'suddenly' revealed.



*Fig. 9. The Face of Christ,
Detail: The Resurrection.*

Redemption

Just so the Turks, being Muhammadans, tolerate, as is well known, no pictures copied from men or the like; and when James Bruce, on his journey to Abyssinia showed paintings of a fish to a Turk, the man was amazed at first, but soon enough made the answer: 'If this fish shall rise up against you on the last day and say, "You have created for me a body but no living soul," how will you defend yourself against such an accusation?'¹

Hegel.

I. Common Sense.

I.i. The painting of a fish does not change the perception of what Plato might have described as the *Idea* of a fish, if anything, it reaffirms it.² No, it is not the 'painting' of the fish that will rise up on the last day to accuse the artist of mimetic deception: "You have created for me a body but no living soul," as this is

¹ Hegel, *Introductory lectures on Aesthetics*, p.128

² Cf. Plato, *The Timaeus*.

to give art *too* much credence. The painting only serves as a ‘reminder’ of what one, particular fish looked like, and as one fish looks similar to another, it simply celebrates the universality of the species as an ideal form, or *Idea*. Images *are* powerful nonetheless and that is why they may be easily reckoned blasphemous. Religious imagery has been systematically smashed or obliterated by iconoclasts throughout history simply because where one person might see a religious subject as devotional, another may view the same piece as idolatrous.

As James Bruce once painted a single fish, Piero painted one particular and highly individual ‘Jesus’ too, and by so doing reaffirms the *Idea* of Jesus. He also inadvertently re-examines the ability of every other painting of Christ to reflect upon, or to depict an aspect of the Christian message. Essentially, by his interpretation of the subject, he has given the spectator the means for a new understanding of resurrection.³ In portraiture in general, there is an undeniable difference between the painting and the person depicted. This fresco is no exception in that, although it highlights the relevant Christian message that Jesus defeated death, the artist interprets this in a way not seen previously. It is not a complete break with convention, for enough of the traditionally acceptable image remains to render Christ’s face as a *recognisable generalisation*. In plain speaking, this is a substitute for an ‘actual’ portrait. And so, Piero confirms what we all know — there is always more to ‘portraiture’ than the suggestion of mere physical appearance, a good portrait captures those psychological characteristics that reinforce the spectators’ knowledge of the sitter.

In *The Resurrection*, art’s mimesis is inseparably enmeshed into religious belief. The spectator must believe twice: firstly that this fresco *looks* real and this *is* a portrait of Jesus, and secondly that the event occurred pretty much as depicted.

³ See Collingwood, R.G., *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925) p.24: “One work of art does not imply another; in imagining one work of art we are not implicitly imagining all other works of art, we are ignoring them.”

Of the two, the latter is obviously more crucial. Piero was caught up in a tradition that dictated how imagery *should* portray divinity. His response is not merely a commendation of artistic accuracy — although he is skilful; his portrayal would admit and reflect new possibilities within an existent belief system. These are apparent if we acknowledge this work more as a *sign* for the Neoplatonist than a portrait as such. Put simply, we understand that in the quattrocento, whilst this fresco may or may not have been taken as a *true likeness* of ‘the man Jesus’ who lived centuries before Piero, it could not avoid being a *true representation* of Early Renaissance ideology. Whether based on direct observation of a model or drawn from a theoretical construct, it tells the story of the non-physical made physical. In legend, as Pygmalion kissed her marble lips, so his beautiful statue, ‘Galatea’ came to life. Similarly, in *The Resurrection* we are witness to a spiritual rebirth from plaster and pigment that ‘imagines’ Jesus *alive*. Art as imitation of life is denigrated as *mimesis* — this is art as imitation of afterlife and thus refers to the *eidos*, or ideal form.

I.ii. Of course, the artist, poet, or musician obligates or directs the spectator or listener as if from an ‘enlightened’ frame of reference. It is easy to be dismissive of this stance as illusory or heuristic, or as seeking to promote the *status quo*. But the most disingenuous critic must allow the work of art, in the majority of cases, as more than a ‘tool’ in the hands of the ruling class, (whether based on church or state). *The Resurrection* is diminished as a painting if labelled simply as propagandist, emblematic of ‘worldly’ authority. Art forms signify most effectively when connected with deeper, universal modes of feeling, hence the recurrence of themes such as ‘death,’ ‘suffering,’ ‘motherhood,’ ‘triumph’ and so forth. The analysis of emotion is always likely to provoke a heartfelt response, especially when both practitioner and spectator share the same visual language based on ‘common sense’.

Once again, by including himself in the composition, Piero invites the spectator to empathise as *fellow participant*. In this life lived in communal slumber, his evangelical message is, “Oh Sleepers Awake!” This fresco is primarily *spiritually redemptive* — and so we take this to be the intention of the artist. Nonetheless, we cannot be certain that this was the *sole* intention. Presumably, as he was commissioned to do this work, limits would have been set on what he should or should not paint, and so one assumes the work has a *morally redemptive* aspect too.

It is difficult to ascribe a *single* meaning to a work of art — it seems that a painting is never *just* a painting. We are rightly suspicious of any ‘duality of intention’ — that manipulative inclination of artists to indoctrinate or deceive us with hidden messages incorporated in certain art forms. Surely, the emphasis upon the ‘conceptual’ in art is a recent trend and Renaissance painters could never be as cynical about art as the so-called ‘Postmodernist’ appears to be? But no matter how deep-seated and firmly held Piero’s religious convictions may have been, without question, Piero’s fresco *is* didactic too. Hegel confirms that “Art was the first instructress of the peoples.”⁴

Every genuine work of art may have a good moral drawn from it, but, of course in doing so, much depends upon interpretation and on him who draws the moral. Thus one may hear the most immoral representations defended by saying that we must know evil, or sin, in order to act morally; and, conversely, it has been said that the portrayal of Mary Magdelene, the beautiful sinner who afterwards repented, has seduced many to sin, because art makes it look so beautiful to repent, and you must sin before you can repent.⁵

Interpretations of public art (or morality itself) are liable to change without warning. What was once good taste becomes bad, what was bad is good — the

⁴ Hegel, *Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. p. 56.

⁵ Hegel, *Ibid*, p.58.

moving picture of the past flickers constantly, making morality subject to conditioning and convention. Yet, if art makes the viewer believe that sin is desirable,⁶ it is common knowledge that art also has the capability of promoting idealism. Desire, truth, and virtue share some reliance upon the arts, resting easily in the imaginative realm filled with heroes and lovers. Regardless of historical fact, mythology exemplifies human traits and moral perspectives that are given form via works of art. In other words, one would be hard-pressed to form a subjective opinion about sinning and repenting without resort, by some means, to poetic illustration. Additionally, it would seem that humanity is destined forever to equate moral goodness with what looks or sounds ‘good’. In this it is art’s relationship with the imaginative realm that offers alternative glimpses of the future to which a society might aspire or shy away from.

Piero worked by the light of contemporary understanding to help advance physical perfection as one of the characteristics of a ‘perfect’ but very ‘humanist’ Jesus.⁷ The continuing search for physical perfection pervades cultural persuasions of the present era too. Definitions of beauty and truth constitute the mainstay of high-minded aesthetics but also filter down to daily preoccupation: the pictures in fashion magazines, public monuments, and television. Alberti’s legacy, the quest for the perfect image, continues to be persuasive as good-looking bodies are deliberately employed to inveigle the eye and affect the mind. But to be seduced by appearance without seeking ‘deeper truth’ makes for a shallow conviction — or so we are often and reliably informed.⁸

⁶ Alternatively, there is a theory that one may be seduced or led to do evil by music, for example, which is the theme of the next chapter with reference to the music of Frank Zappa.

⁷ Jesus depicted as a well-proportioned, semi-naked man wearing pink and waving a flag could be given an entirely different reading today. (It is thought that his garment was once a deep red).

⁸ See Graham-Dixon, Andrew, *Renaissance* (BBC publications 1999). Piero also painted a portrait, *Sigismondo Malatesta before St. Sigismond* (1451) where he is seen kneeling in prayer, portrayed as the essence of faith and nobility. Malatesta is described by Pope

The previous chapter defined two separate classifications of *The Resurrection* as apposite firstly to an historical interpretation and secondly, to an imaginative aesthetic.⁹ The implication follows that if indeed two distinct frescoes may be postulated the terminology that labels art as either good or bad may need to be applied twice — or discarded altogether. Only half of the problem is concerned with the idea that the historical mechanism for appreciation provokes a temporal judgement and as such, is subject to misinterpretation at a later date. The remainder of the dilemma sees the impossibility for *any* aesthetic viewpoint to be fixed or permanent because aesthetic deliberation as such requires a state of flux. Opinion on a given work of art may not be fixed because individual and collective taste reserve the right to change. Either way, one is tempted to enquire whether art *in itself* was ever necessarily ‘good’ or ‘bad’ — if we must accept that tastes change. For one reason or another, Piero’s *Resurrection* would become no longer needed and the decision was made that it should be whitewashed over. If art is *always* indicative of morality then a perpetually shifting ethical perspective may account for some of the changes in artistic style between Piero’s time and ours.

Presumably, public works of art are usually obliterated for reasons other than aesthetic judgement. *The Resurrection* possibly came to straddle an unbridgeable ethical, political, socio-religious space between the promotion of new values and respect for tradition. As recent history testifies, the destruction of any cultural edifice is potentially powerful propaganda in the establishment of new social order — it is also a highly controversial act. Less dramatically, art forms may simply be ignored or forgotten. ‘Time’ itself alters the significance of works of art, as we applaud forgotten skills and appreciate redundant working technique.

Pius II as “one of the worst men that have ever lived or will live, the shame of Italy and the disgrace of our generation.”

⁹ See also Collingwood: *Outlines of a Philosophy of Art* (1925) p.25. “To speak of looking at works of art from the aesthetic point of view and the historical point of view does not imply that what is seen from these points of view is the same thing.”

A much later generation was to remove frescoes from churches in order to sell them privately or place them in galleries. It is curious that an enduring aesthetic may be detected: an apparently ‘timeless’ quality resident in works of art long after their inception, regardless of their changing relevance.

I.iii. The hypothesis that ‘Eternal Aspects’ commensurate with any supposed intrinsic purpose to art may prevail despite the passing of time, is an intriguing one. Human reliance upon imagery as a manifestation of ‘culture’ is evident throughout the world, but clearly, cultural perceptions differ between societies, and from one generation to the next. If history does indeed repeat itself, it is not because time conveniently moves in straight lines or perfect circles. Patterns of events *may* be irregularly repeating, difficult to discern, but the predilection for one style or another in art, architecture, fashion, or whatever, *must* be taken in context as a reaction to current trends. Movements in art, or for that matter, movements within whole cultural episodes themselves are mostly nominated as such in retrospect. Piero and his contemporaries must have felt part of a new and exciting world, one imagines, but even they could not have dreamt about the enormity of impact that the Renaissance would have, and continues to have.

From a ‘Vichian’ point of view, one would search for beginnings, digging to the roots — pulling at the loose ends. If something resembling ‘patterns’ or ‘in-house references’ within the context of works of art are to be found at all, one must cautiously look to ‘the weave of history’ for any evidence of ‘eternal aspects’ from which they are made.¹⁰ Vico adduces the principle of *corsi et*

¹⁰ See Vico N.S. 349: “Our Science therefore comes to describe at the same time an ideal eternal history traversed in time by the history of every nation in its rise, development, maturity, decline and fall (...) this world of nations has been made by men, and its guise must therefore be found within the modifications of our own human mind.”

ricorsi as denoting a recurring (almost circular) pattern of events.¹¹ He suggests such repetition as probable in cultural development without exactly suggesting that, (to invoke the vernacular) ‘what comes around, goes around.’¹² This may have some bearing upon how one reads the disparate relationship between diverse periods from the past, how one reacts to art forms from another era, and how the past may effect the present. Above all, it may help us to relate to a ‘Renaissance frame of mind’.

Arguably the history with which we are left today, although useful, in itself is a fabricated illusion written in part, deliberately or otherwise, as a hidden agenda for the benefit of some ruling class or other, whatever their political colour: “He who creates the things also narrates them.”¹³ The truth of a story depends upon the teller of the tale. Hegemony denies access to ‘absolute truth’ — supposing it could ever be found. This raises the question of our being able to read images from the past with reference to how we read those of today. A referential grammar, if it exists at all, lies between the singularity of one art form and another and must be built upon a commonality founded outside historical bias. Ideally, its content would be rather apolitical (without being watered-down or noncommittal) and at its best, it would be expressive of that vitality basic to the overriding concept of what humanity is. This framework or pattern therefore has only one restriction in that it must appertain to ‘common sense’:

¹¹ See Hale, John, *The Civilisation of Europe in the Renaissance* (HarperCollins, London 1993) p.98: “Discussing the use of allegory, Karel von Mander in 1604 reminded artists of the common saying about the circular course of the world’s way: peace brings livelihood, livelihood wealth, wealth pride, pride strife, strife war, war poverty, poverty humility, humility peace.” This is a simplistic interpretation of the *ricorsi* principle.

¹² Vico’s *corsi et ricorsi* certainly rattles the cages of linearity which others have constructed. In a brief conversation with Zygmunt Bauman (after a seminar by him which I attended), he professed to prefer the ‘pendulum’ to the circle as a motif/descriptor of cultural change. He emphasised the cultural tendency of humanity to career headlong in one direction (as Germany did in the 1930’s) and then to swing in the opposite way. His optimistic hope that the pendulum might settle one day was indeed profound.

¹³ Vico *N.S.* 349

What is common to the history of all nations at all times is therefore a set of sociological conditions and a set of characteristics of mankind necessary for their operation. The common sense that is common to all nations at all times consists of those beliefs that lead men to maintain the institutions in question, i.e., the belief that there is a provident divinity, that the passions ought to be controlled and moderated (or that one should pursue a virtuous life) and that the human soul is immortal. It will be noted that these beliefs are stated very generally, to allow for the fact that the conception of a provident divinity can vary widely in different historical societies.¹⁴

Hypothetically, regardless of sociological conditioning, those telltale characteristics of an 'eternal aesthetic' — (the desire to create; belief in the 'quality' of form; vibrancy of colour and design, and so forth) — constitute a human 'institution' in the Vichian sense. Vico argues that "uniform ideas, born among people unknown to each other, must have a common ground of truth."¹⁵ Lines of influence necessitate from one artist to another and emerge to trace a vague pattern seen as a response to the human predicament — but influence is not prerequisite. A *new* aesthetic response springs up sporadically, it seems, only on reflection to echo the songs and stories from before, to rethread the swirling images from all times. What Vico calls the "mental language common to all nations" is warp and weft, the coloured fabric of human creativity.¹⁶ It is precisely because 'common sense' *is* common to all that we can have some understanding of Piero's work today, and this is the mental construct by which we relate to *The Resurrection*. A better understanding requires us to carefully

¹⁴ See Pompa, Leon: *Vico - A Study of The New Science* (1975) p.34.

¹⁵ See Bergin & Fisch, *Introduction to The New Science of Giambattista Vico* (Cornell University Press, London 1976) {144} D4. "Obviously Vico means to exclude the possibility of common sense having become common by communication."

¹⁶ Vico, *N.S.* 161: "There must in the nature of human institutions be a mental language common to all nations, which uniformly grabs the substance of things feasible in human social life and expresses it with as many diverse modifications as these same things may have diverse aspects."

strip-away the received wisdom of ‘historical evidence’ in order to question ‘fact’ and rather to concentrate upon an imaginative and intuitive deliberation.

Imagination and intuition are thus perceived as ‘reliable’ contributors, but great care is needed if an accurate assessment of a supposed timeless commonality is to be mooted. In the final analysis, it may be easier to talk of differences rather than similarities: I am very different from Piero, that much is certain, (but so am I different from you). Are these differences insurmountable in the quest for genuine aesthetic understanding? Notwithstanding ‘Time’, all three of us, (Piero, you and I) *must* share the same universal *intuition* of what it is like to be alive, to be here at all.

Significantly, Vichian *common sense* equates ‘providential’ with ‘rational’¹⁷ and so redefines common sense as an evolving state of mind, sometimes *beyond our control* as it is “against the designs of men”. Nevertheless, Vico sees it as an attribute we share with all people of all times. To dispense with ‘given’ rationality as a human construct implies that common sense is a *feeling* — in aesthetic terms, appreciation is therefore an emotional, rather than a purely intellectual, response. In this respect, the implication could be that fresco painting has much the same impact now for us as it did for Piero’s contemporaries — but how ‘rational’ can this be? Kant, in his *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*, gives account of the differences between judgements of taste:

In all judgements by which we describe anything as beautiful we allow no-one to be of another opinion, without, however, grounding our judgement on concepts, but only on our feeling, which we therefore place at its basis, not as a private, but as a common feeling. Now this *common sense* [my

¹⁷ Danto: *The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art* (1986) p. 60. “What Hegel speaks of as reason is close to what Vico speaks of as Providence, which exploits human intentions in order to subvert them and bring about states of affairs ironically opposite to what those who act on those intentions envisage.”

italics] cannot be grounded on experience, for it aims at justifying judgements that contains an *ought*. It does not say that everyone will agree with my opinion, but that he *ought*.¹⁸

Kant accounts common sense as an exemplar of common *feeling*, and this understanding is paramount. Initially, it is inconceivable that our feelings could be other than private and in the first instance special to us. It is later seen as incontrovertible that added to an innate sensibility, to an extent, we have also been taught *how* to feel by others. Therefore, we may reckon *our* emotional response to *The Resurrection* as ‘leftover feelings’ — part of a ‘Renaissance legacy’. As the subject matter considers eternity and resurrection, (the *embodiment* of life beyond death), all generations, all societies potentially may enjoin their ‘commonality’ to appreciate Piero too.¹⁹

I.iv. Commonality is distinct from culture. As ever, the word ‘culture’ is subject to interpretation: culture as growth, culture as society, culture as *being* cultured. Whether aesthetic taste is subjective or not, we tend to presuppose that there is a ‘common sense’ by which we judge.²⁰ One implication of Kant’s *ought* is that it encourages the idea that there may be a *higher* purpose to our acquiring universal ‘common sense meanings’ for beauty, truth and goodness in works of art. Powerful frescoes like those of Piero della Francesca transcend their original fixed-meaning, holding relevance regardless of context, overriding religion,

¹⁸ Kant: *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement* (Hafner Press, 1951) p.76

¹⁹ Imagine if the congregation at a funeral is made up from people of various religious faiths, each will be praying for a different kind of resurrection or reincarnation for their deceased friend. In the same way *The Resurrection* may be interpreted as universally relevant.

²⁰ It is by no means certain that Kant classified all people, everywhere and at every time, as those who ‘ought’ to recognise ‘beauty’ when they see it. It is difficult to ascertain his precise meaning other than the fact that he “signifies the possibility of arriving at this accord”. Whether it is necessary or even possible that all might share in a “confluence of feeling” – Kant deliberately leaves that question open: “we have neither the wish nor the power to investigate as yet.” (cf. Kant: *Critique of Aesthetic Judgement*. 1951) p.77

philosophy, and history to allocate art an ‘absolute’ dimension, (even if ‘absolutes’ are intangible, too remote to imagine). This has nothing to do with an idealised ‘world-view’ or *Weltanschauung* that allows an impossible concoction of cultures as a discernible phenomenon. Distance or time isolates cultural growth, and so cultures have emerged oblivious to each other. *Weltanschauung*, considered incorrectly, most ironically is too small a concept unless taken in conjunction with the Vichian notion of *nascimento* that sees the commonality which all cultures share coming to fruition at *differing* times and in *differing* locations:

The nature of institutions is nothing but their coming into being (*nascimento*) in certain times and in certain guises. Whenever the time and guise are thus and so, such and not otherwise are the institutions that come into being.²¹

Our affiliation with (and towards) Piero is ontologically unavoidable because we recognise our own aspirations in his work. We know or intuit that he is like us. He seeks ‘our kind of truth’ — he strives for understanding as we do.²² We ‘know’ this best without thinking, without close analysis of *The Resurrection*. We understand “without reflection”²³ because he has gone some way to defining a relationship between God and man that despite any appearance to the contrary, is *still being defined as valid* (often within the parameters of a negative dialectic). We may thus begin to see ‘now as then’ as the conceptualisation of an *a priori* commonality — but care is needed here. The ‘higher purpose’ of an aesthetic prefigures a meaningful understanding of humanity’s place in the universe, but this is not to say that this understanding remains the same for all eternity. In

²¹ Cf. Vico *N.S.* 147. It is interesting how *nascimento* (birth) is also used for awakening / reawakening and also in *Renascimento* (Renaissance).

²² Vico *N.S.* 144 Vico is certain that, “Uniform ideas, born among people unknown to each other, must have a common ground of truth.”

²³ Vico *N.S.* 142: “Common sense is a judgement without reflection, shared by an entire class, an entire people, an entire nation, an entire human race.”

seeking ‘the bigger picture’ it may be advisable for us now to take a few steps back from the immediacy of our temporal surroundings.²⁴

Any concept of time, it must be admitted, at best is unreliable.²⁵ It is only because it *seems* that human nature stays basically the same over relatively short periods that we can imagine Piero to have been something like us, nonetheless people *have* changed. By accepting that *there is no archetypal human being* we may surmise that over generations the species gradually developed into its present physical and mental state.²⁶ “People generally are now taller and better nourished than their ancestors” we are told, but this kind of tantalising information only stimulates an insatiable desire for further illumination, (especially if we believe Vico, when he insists there was once a race of giants).²⁷ The road we have come is only guessed at from the traces left behind, but one imagines that the trail is still warm if we may detect ‘life’ in art forms and artefacts. Through them we see our ancestors as *intrinsically* like us in many obvious respects: they worked and loved and raised families; they prayed and hoped for the best, just as we do. They also fought and killed, and tried to dominate over one another; and in ferocity and arrogance, ambitious soldiers, merchants and rulers were generated. The people feared death and prayed to God, and so they built temples and churches, painted pictures and raised monuments. Look again at *The Resurrection* and see Christ,

²⁴ This pertains to intuition as understood by Kant on the one hand (in terms of judgement) and by Croce in terms of art.

²⁵ The whole system needs redefining. Our calendar and clock rests upon a hotchpotch of confused leftovers: a mixture of leap-years, mythological gods and emperors, hours going backward and forward.

²⁶ Jahanbegloo, Ramin: *Conversations with Isaiah Berlin*. (Phoenix 1992) p.74. Isaiah Berlin sums up Vico’s position clearly in his comparison of Vico with the ideas of Edmund Burke: “Nature is growth, not a static, unchanging something, the same in all times and places, waiting to be liberated from the accumulation of unnatural integument with which men’s vices and foibles have covered it (...) Vico says the same thing. Vico denied that there was a general unvarying human nature.”

²⁷ See Vico *NS* 338 “... as gross and wild as the giants called ‘Big Feet’ who are said to be found near the Strait of Magellan; which is as much as to say from the cyclopes (*sic*) of Homer, in whom Plato recognises the first fathers in the state of the families.”

battle-weary but triumphant. The art of the past *belongs* to the past — but it reverberates in the present.

Vico found ‘a kind of truth’ by imaginatively visiting the past in *The New Science*; his lasting instruction to us is to “treat matters where they begin”.²⁸ Following this advice, a greater clarity of vision might ensue requiring the deconstruction of our ‘sophisticated’ imagery, to return to where art at its most violent, minimal and primitive proves elemental to an understanding of aesthetic precepts. The primitive response and its reappearance, albeit in an altered state, acts as thrust and counter-thrust in the continued development of form. This denounces the convenience of clear-cut division between one age and the next, (for example between the ‘Dark Ages’ and the Early Renaissance) as a later fabrication. Within the gradation of continuous change, *The Resurrection* cannot be denied its antecedents or the precedent it set.

Piero’s sensuality, tempered by his humanist outlook, is indicative of an aesthetic endeavour that allows *ideas* to persist long after the demise of the artist. Now we see that it is not ‘Piero’s Jesus’ whom we must face on the last day, but that this ‘larger than life’ figure is truly reflective of all human ignorance, including our own.²⁹ Yet, should we so wish, we may *believe* that through Piero’s *idea* of

²⁸ Vico, *NS* 314. Also, see Berlin, Isaiah: *Vico & Herder* p.13. Vico’s *corsi et ricorsi* intervenes due to Providence in an inexact and unpredictable fashion, and it is easy and over-simplistic to draw direct comparisons between one culture and another where each has the potential for developing in similar ways at some stage. Isaiah Berlin maintains that this cyclical pattern which was identified by Vico, is actually his least original idea. What is of far more interest to Berlin is Vico’s, per *caussas* principle: “We can be said to fully know a thing if, and only if, we know why it is as it is, or how it came to be, or was made to be, what it is, and not merely that it is what it is, and has the attributes it has.”

²⁹ Vico, *N.S.* 816: “The reason must be that the human mind, which is indefinite, being constructed by the vigour of the senses, cannot otherwise express its almost divine nature than by thus enlarging particulars in imagination. It is perhaps on this account that in both the Greek and Latin poets the images of gods and heroes appear larger than those of men, and that in the returned barbarian times the paintings particularly of the Eternal Father, of Jesus Christ, and of the Virgin Mary are exceedingly large.”

Jesus, Christians might forever seek redemption. Further reflection deduces that all people, Christian or not, may come eventually to consider art as a *redemptive* vehicle if it continuously renews and revitalises given perceptions of the human condition: commonality as distinct from culture.



Fig. 10. God the Father
Detail: The Legend of the True Cross

II. Space, Time and Imagery

II.i. The nature of symbolism in art *needs* elaboration if images or sounds are forever re-appropriated by certain, 'select' people for whom they hold a significance to which the 'uninitiated' are denied access. Regarded as the property of kings or priests and executed by artists, in time hieratic signs either disappear, are transformed or become common knowledge. If symbols are to carry meaning at all, for example, a wheel, a star, a cross, or the face of a bearded man, this 'meaning' is only acquired over ages from the *mythopoiesis* whose

origins have long gone. They stem from the metaphysical world of which people of all time 'know' a little but from which Renaissance artists drew heavily. In their turn these artists reaffirmed a so-called 'cosmic significance' to symbols accredited by earlier civilisations. The people of the past delighted in the numerical mysteries of their own invention, the mystical power of certain words and astrological divisions depicting animals, heroes and gods. This is our inheritance too.

In his depiction of the Risen Christ, Piero taps into a rich vein of traditional symbolism. The power of imagery is so pervasive as to be registered in the collective psyche where it promotes the idealisation of form, it legitimises the face of a single man or woman as universal — transforming them into god or goddess. From an age when few could read or write, such symbols induce an empathic understanding between cultures without the need for spoken language.³⁰ No matter how naïve a depiction of God may be, it is representative of God, even to the atheist. Works of art voice a silent prayer. And so Piero attempts to paint what cannot be wholly shared in the imagination *unless* it is depicted; placed high on the wall for communal acceptance, its purpose therefore hieroglyphic — 'the word' made *image*.³¹ Like a pagan fertility symbol, *The Resurrection* epitomises

³⁰ See Cook, Albert: *Temporalizing Space: The Triumphant Strategies of Piero della Francesca*. (Peter Lang Pub. New York, 1992), p.9: "We should not lose sight of the fact that, whether temporal or spatial, the references here are 'wordless,' with a corresponding partial, or even total sense of convergence and reference." The spectator first takes in the illusion and then builds the reality. It is also interesting to ponder upon how we respond to sound, (thus according to Vico, Thunder, *became* mighty Jove for poetic man) or i.e., how musicians invariably interpret 'rainfall', or 'morning' in musical 'language'.

³¹ See Culler, Jonathon, *Saussure*: (Fontana Press, London, 1976) p.58: "Unless one treats linguistic forms as signs one cannot define them." In a sense words *are* pictures, or more properly 'signs' usually assumed to function initially as meaningful sound before 'transcription' to a visual projection, as in the written image. Yet the reverse may be true, for is it not more likely that we 'learn' to recognise the *images* of an apple, a ball, or a cat before we learn to speak or say a, b and c? Once a basic image is learned, it makes little difference if the apple is a Granny Smith or a Cox's Pippin, whether the ball is red or blue, or if the cat is a Tabby or a Persian. Furthermore, if we tend to *learn* imagery we may know what things look like, what they are, *before* we know what they

new life: 'Jesus is the way the truth and the life'. If the physical appearance of Christ is now unmistakable, perhaps it is because of the cultural parameters within which the 'good news' was originally spread. But Piero's command of anatomy 'humanises' Christ more than any other painting had in the past, uncannily making his larger-than-life Christ appear 'Godlike' for all time.³²

As 'father-figures' from times when tribal elders were respected, Zeus and 'God the Father' share an almost exact resemblance engendered and maintained over generations. Belief in a visual (and therefore tangible) God is enhanced by *visualisation* and art may be simplistically taken as a 'redemptive' media if it teaches people to 'know' God. Conversely, it is this very aspect that paves the way for iconography to be eventually regarded as blasphemy. It is no accident that in his great fresco, *The Legend of the True Cross*, Piero gives God and the blasphemous King Chosroes, identical faces:

The star-studded canopy covering the throne alludes to the king's celestial pretensions. Even more penetrating is the visualisation of the substance of his blasphemy. Piero makes a physiognomical identification of Chosroes, as he awaits decapitation, with the lofty face of God the Father as he appears in the Annunciation scene just around the corner on the altar wall. The evil king is judged, moreover, not only by his seventh century captors, but by all ages to come.³³

are called. Also, new words are created *visually* by mixing and matching existing words i.e., 'spin-dry'.

³² It is the eternal nature of God as Alpha and Omega that is being represented. God is older than time but he is also seen as 'Father' (hence the long white hair and beard, as with Old *Father* Time and *Father* Christmas). It follows that 'common sense' suggests the 'Son of God,' like his father, would also have a beard and long hair, although darker in appearance. The bearded face of Christ became universally recognised, exemplifying the power of iconography. This is not to say that a beardless Christ would necessarily appear 'unrealistic' to some earlier Christian factions because Roman artists made visual connections between Jesus and the beardless Apollo. The image of Christ remains much as it was in Piero's time although, of course, he *may* be depicted as shaven headed, perhaps as a contemporary allusion to other prisoners of conscience.

³³ Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg *Piero della Francesca*. (Thames & Hudson London 1992) p.100.

This “physiognomical identification” occurs by means of repeated imagery: the same drawing of a face used twice, indicating the possibility that the image was pounced more than once through the same cartoon. In fresco painting as a matter of course, Piero re-used images: (for example, the two angels in the *Madonna del Parto* are a symmetrical reflection of each other created by turning the cartoon over).



Fig. 11. The Madonna del Parto
Piero della Francesca

However, there is a conceptual difference between Piero's 'God' and his 'King Chosroes' — this is not merely a decorative device. The Old Testament idea of God as a burning bush, for example, reinforced the notion that 'No man could see the face of God and live' — but prior to Piero, Masaccio had clearly established that it was acceptable to depict the deity residing in full majesty. In *The Trinity*, *S. Maria Novella*, Florence, we see a truly noble God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. By comparison, an 'alternative' reading of *The Legend of the True Cross* might claim that according to Piero, God looks more like the blasphemous king than vice-versa: broken-nosed and battered, the apotheosis of a brutalised humanity. This 'evil king blasphemer' (the believer may note) *is* made in *His* likeness, as are we all. Therefore, in response to Lavin, (above), *He* will judge Chosroes — not us, in the seventh, fifteenth, or twenty-first centuries. We understand that Chosroes' physical appearance only *represents* his offence and he is not being decapitated for his looks.

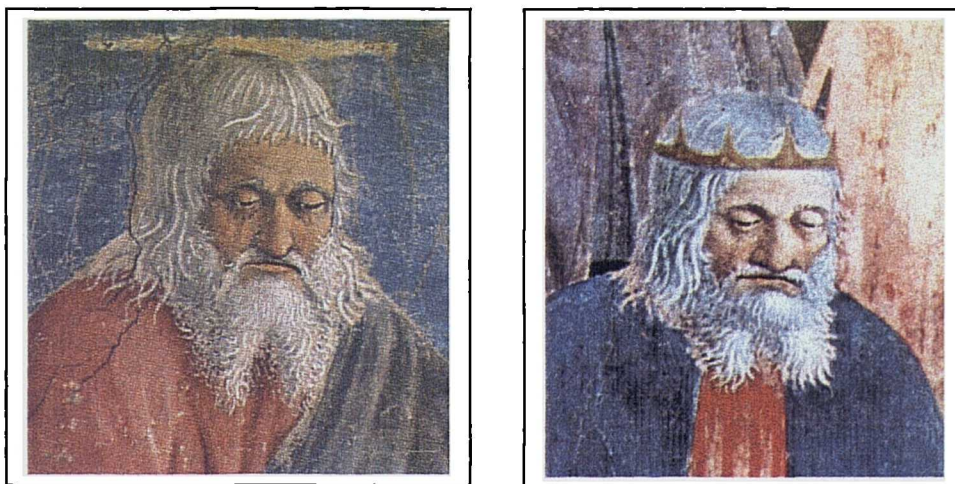


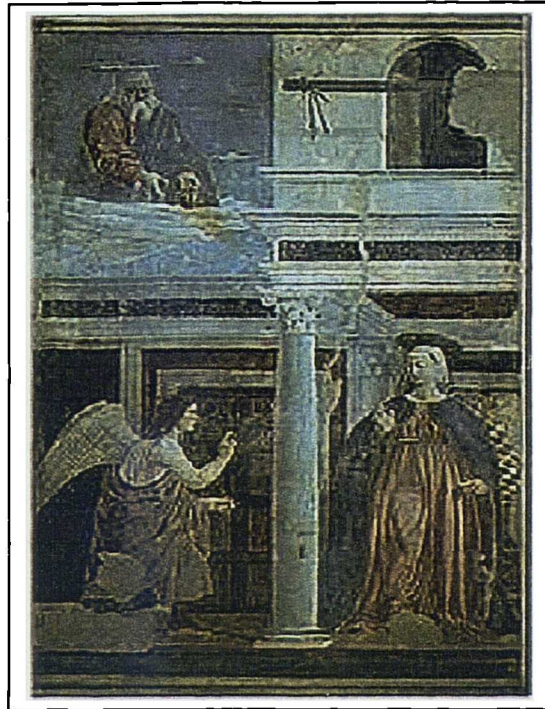
Fig 12. God the Father and King Chosroes
The legend of the True Cross S. Francesco Church, Arezzo

How does one begin to paint a portrait of God? To us, it is almost as if Piero could be acknowledging his own painterly interpretation, or the personification of the unimaginable face of God within the church itself, as unworthy.³⁴ By placing Chosroes on the same picture plane as God, Piero is able to deconstruct his own imagery. This is only my reading, another mere ‘interpretation of interpretation’ and by no means definitive. To claim that this is precisely what Piero meant one runs the risk of being accused of over-interpretation: that gross act of ‘seeing too much’. Ironically, the fate that befell Chosroes parallels that of Jesus himself, who was also executed for blasphemy largely because of the deliberate misinterpretation by others of his definition of ‘kingdom’. If it is true that the simplified and stylised form of Piero della Francesca suggests only a single layer of interpretation is possible, and that, “what you see is what you get” with Piero, then the danger of ‘seeing too much’ is very real. His was simply an honest account because everyone at the time thought of God as an old man with a long white beard. What may be seen from a twenty-first century viewpoint, with all the hindsight and interpretative paraphernalia gained over five hundred years, may amount to nothing less than ‘blasphemy’ against artistic intention.

II.ii. *The Annunciation* section of the fresco is where (the Chosroes-like) God watches over (a decorative) Angel Gabriel and (oversized) Virgin Mary. God’s love for humanity is represented by the rays of golden beams that emit from His right hand as the angel announces the future birth of the saviour to Mary. As such, this scene visualises the heavenly conception of Jesus. This allegorical depiction of the sexual act between the immortal and the mortal is the antithesis of hopelessness. Ironically, it is made even more poignant when placed immediately adjacent to the execution of the wretched King Chosroes, whose own son, (to make matters worse), has also just been killed in battle. The death

³⁴ See also the painting of Luca Signorelli, *The Stories of the Antichrist* (1499-1502) in which a false Jesus is depicted as ‘an evil identical twin.’

of a 'false god' *and* his son in Christian art automatically encourages secondary layers of interpretation.³⁵



*Fig.13. The Annunciation
Legend of the True Cross*

There are atemporal implications in *The Annunciation* too. Specifically as God, the Virgin Mary, and the Angel Gabriel are each compartmentalised by the use of vertical and horizontal divisions. This is partly for practical reasons but probably denotes and enforces the division between the different heavenly spheres from which they come. Most curiously, *The Legend of the True Cross* is wholly

³⁵ Authorities generally regard the fresco as part of a recruitment drive in Piero's time to raise an army against the Turks. Chosroes 'Son' is clearly seen stabbed in the throat – compositionally situated directly below *The True Cross* stolen by the King. In another section, Solomon's dishevelled labourers (now thought to be painted by assistant Giovanni da Piamonte) bury the wood of the cross. The labourer's 'halo' in the wood-grain is curiously open to a variety of interpretations: a premonition of Calvary is likely.

arranged in an atemporal block-like manner, and this is well documented.³⁶ If the reason for this was ever once easily understood the transient nature of interpretation should warn us that any current definitive reading is vain and pretentious. Clearly, if all images are open to misrepresentation, *any* current interpretation may be seen as rash and probably delusory. This in turn leads one to question whether a preoccupation with ‘hidden’ meaning in art is simply a contrivance that Piero himself as a Renaissance painter might never have contemplated as we do. But according to any interpretation, *The Legend of the True Cross* illustrates God’s great scheme of things in atemporal terms.

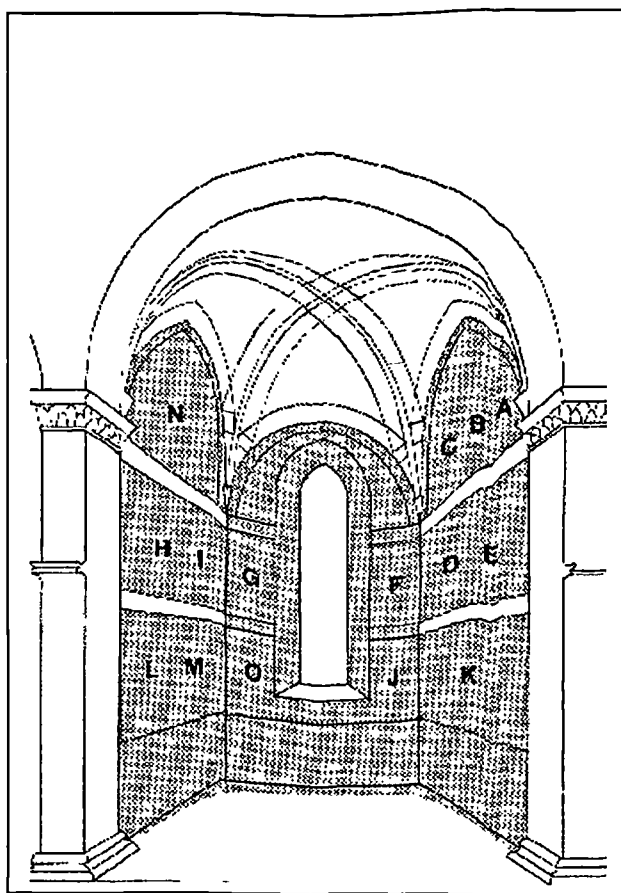


Fig. 14.
Diagram of the
Cycle of the True
Cross,
S. Francesco church,
Arezzo.

³⁶ See Cook, Albert, *Temporalizing Space: The Triumphant Strategies of Piero della Francesca*, p.10: The ‘Cat’s Cradle’ effect achieved by drawing a time-line from one episode to the next, propounded by Lavin, supported and built upon by Cook, needs serious consideration, particularly as it mystically represents Christ’s presence at the consecration of the bread. “The subjects of the panels sweep through a long sequence of time (...) the ideal position for viewing them all would place the spectator almost exactly at the very point of the cross on the altar that he would (otherwise) be contemplating.”

The Legend of the True Cross 'begins' with the death of Adam and the seed placed in his mouth at his burial. It describes how the wood that grew from this seed became instrumental in the redemption of the world. Following traditional methods found in other frescoes and altarpieces,³⁷ Piero's depiction of the death of Adam places three stages of the story in one scene: Adam sending Seth to the Archangel Michael, the meeting between Seth and the Archangel Michael, and Seth in attendance at Adam's burial. This means of representation implied that the spectator would assume that there was only *one* Seth, not three, just as a child will read a picture cartoon strip as a sequence of events, and not as one scene. This repetition of form as a means of narrating a sequence of events is another means by which temporality is suggested in painting and has particular relevance when we look at the work of the twentieth century painter, Stanley Spencer.

Piero was not first nor last to tackle the epic legend spanning the centuries but undoubtedly he revitalises it, automatically investing the story with new relevance.³⁸ He may have been using his artistic and mathematical skills in order that through his work, the congregation might more fully *participate* in the celebration of the Mass — art seen as intervention between man and God, and as an aid to ritual.³⁹ To this end, in his frescoes and altarpieces, Piero felt confident to divide the picture plane into series of spatial and temporal realities, in the first instance with nothing more than straight lines, but he also employed geometry, where triangles and circles act as symbolic compositional devices.

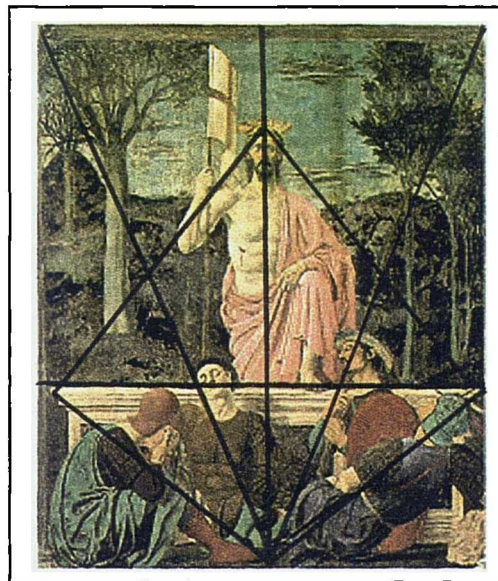
³⁷ Cf. Massaccio's *The Tribute Money* c.1427, in which St. Peter appears three times.

³⁸ Cf. Agnolo Gaddi, *The Beheading of Chosroes, Heraclius returning the Cross to Jerusalem* c.1388-93, Santa Croce, Florence.

³⁹ See Cook, Albert, *Temporalizing Space: The Triumphant Strategies of Piero della Francesca*. 1992. "There is an analogue to the placement of the communion wafer in the mouth of the communicant when Seth places in Adam's mouth, the seeded branch that will become the wood of the Cross." (p.20). Also, the notion of art as an embodiment of ritual associated with time and place is plausible if one also considers that paintings were made and statues carved specifically for street processions on holy days.

Whether he held great respect for the Legend, or dismissed it as superstition — either way, his inventiveness with subject matter presents the narrative out of sequence. Composition here takes precedence over temporal considerations and the resultant illogical order of Piero's presentation of the *Legend of the True Cross* is an anachronism. Some of Piero's other hidden constructions deserve further elucidation:

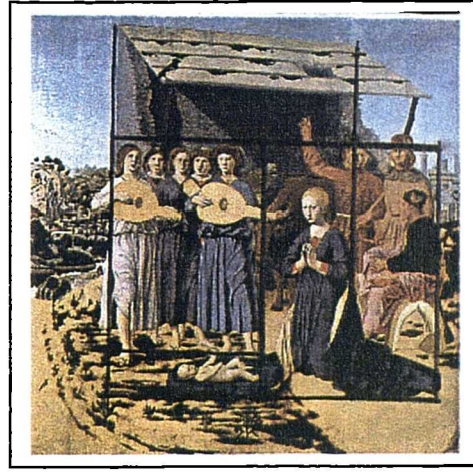
1. To the right of his banner in *The Resurrection*, spring has returned because Jesus has risen. The seasons become metaphors for timelessness. As the landscape is rejuvenated uphill and downhill are found to represent the difficult and easy path to heaven, (or before and after Christ's Resurrection). Below the horizontal division (around the top of the sarcophagus) all are asleep and so essentially, two 'realities' are created. Triangles and symmetry abound in this well-balanced composition. Was this simply for the visual effect of creating perfection or was the work invested with meaning, astrological or otherwise, in its construction?



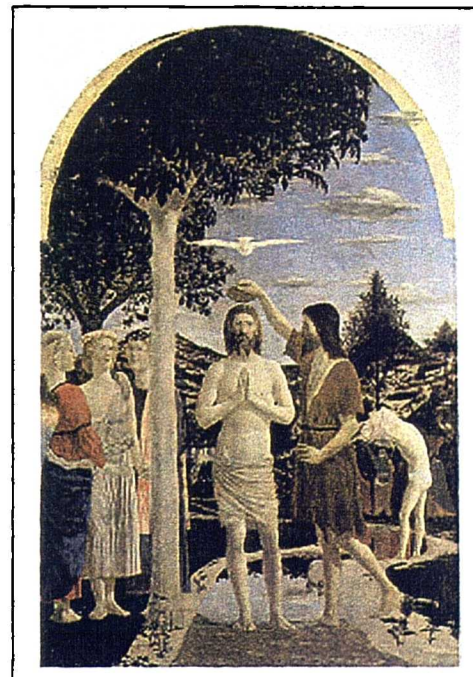
2. In *The Adoration of the Child* 1478-80, the Nativity takes place high on a hill above an idealised Sansepolcro where the figures and ruined building form a rectangle within the composition, and where the close group of angels form another rectangle within the first.⁴⁰ Rather like a box puzzle,

⁴⁰ Cf. Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg *Piero della Francesca*. (1992)

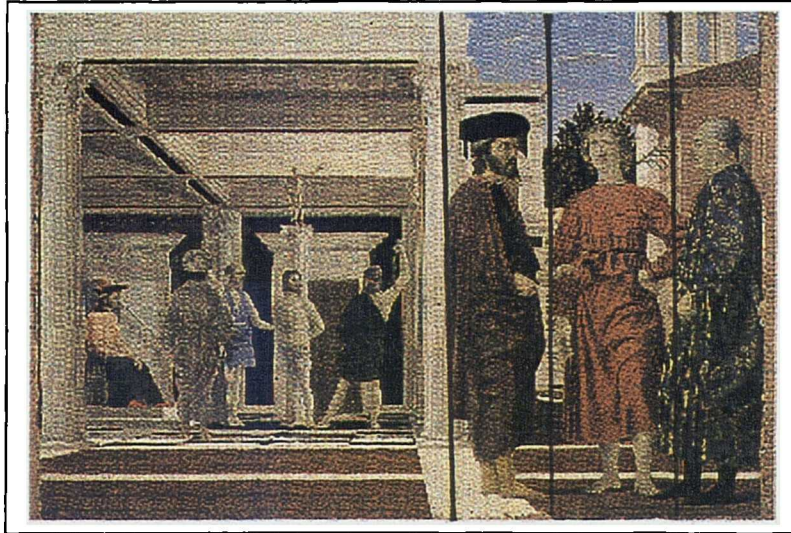
it may be assumed that one 'reality' occurs inside the other in separate 'blocks'. Therefore, the world, the hill, the animals, the angels and people, although synchronised, hail from independent regions and only co-exist on the picture-plane.



3. The angels in *The Baptism* to the left of the tree are there for the benefit of the spectator, and cannot be 'seen' by those waiting to be baptised in the 'Sansepolcro' Jordan, who, in their turn are part of yet another 'reality' to the right of John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is placed at the exact centre of the circle drawn as a continuation of the arched top of the panel.



4. In *The Flagellation*, the three mysterious figures in contemporary dress (about whom there is so much speculation) if nothing else is certain, are not witnessing the flagellation, (to the left of the column) as it happens because they do not react to it in any way whatsoever. M. A. Lavin details further vertical divisions for each of the three portraits within a “spatial no-man’s land” where “Having its own personality, each backdrop acts as a foil and a character witness for the figure standing before it.”⁴¹



Piero demands sophistication from the spectator, his narrative is elaborate and would facilitate storytelling because his painting could skilfully represent sequences of events on one plane. An oral or written tradition could not compete when painting made it possible to ‘view’ the past, present, and future all at once.

Piero utilises his gift for creating two-dimensional illusion as illustrative of ‘common sense’ reality because such divisions relate to actual physical experience. We note the change when we pass from one room to another. We observe the difference between above and below water. Immersion below the water line in baptism, and the subsequent emergence into the air represents a new life lived in Christ. In much the same way the resurrected Christ is depicted traditionally ‘above’ the tomb as he conquers death forever — in geometrical

⁴¹ Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg. *The Flagellation* (1972) p.51

terminology, ‘the victory of the vertical over the horizontal’. Without doubt, Piero deliberately used verticals and horizontals to episodically block the *Legend of the True Cross*, and this serves more than the practical purpose of separating one incident from the next.

In summary, *The Baptism*, *The Annunciation*, and *The Flagellation*, each utilise strong verticals to divide the space inhabited by entities from different times, or from ‘other places’. Time and space are represented via the medium of paint on plaster or on panel — a concept that is staggering when put so simply.

III. Divine Geometry?

If in a seemingly uninhabited country a man perceived a geometrical figure, say a regular hexagon inscribed on the sand, his reflection busied with such a concept would attribute, although obscurely, the unity in the principle of its genesis to reason, and consequently would not regard as ground of the possibility of such a shape the sand, or the neighbouring sea, or the winds, or beasts with familiar footprints, or any other irrational cause.⁴²

III.i. Hexagons are found in beehives and rock formations, spirals in shells and in the growing patterns of plants, hence, it is easy to assume an image or create a concept of a Divine Creator as founder of the great geometry. But to find a hexagon “inscribed on the sand” would indicate the presence of another human being, not God; it would indicate a ‘trace’ of humanity, more mysterious than the fossilised footprint of a long-dead dinosaur: it would be evidence of existence — a mark of intelligence. This is an example of *objectification* which, (like a

⁴² Kant: *Critique of Judgement* p.216

handshake) fully corresponds to a speech act as communication.⁴³ The re-invented shape has become an object which holds meaning, it shares the properties appertaining to a work of art. However, it would make no ‘sense’ — it would be a sign that signified nothing, and could not be ‘recognised’ if one did not know beforehand what it meant. In other words, the hexagon holds *true* meaning for a bee (who has no need to call it a hexagon) for whom it exists *a priori*, whereas for us it is something perceived.⁴⁴

Followed to logical conclusions, geometry makes no sense at all.⁴⁵ As a species we are intent on developing theories beyond our understanding, always believing that we have glimpsed the truth; that all we need to do next is to develop the idea further. Geometry enabled Piero to calculate the foreshortened self-portrait, noted in his *De Prospettiva Pingendi*, and its precepts are still with us, deeply embedded within a culture that accepts two-dimensional optical illusion as ‘truth’. This is evidenced every time one looks at a photograph or watches television, but especially when we study a painting. If there is another ‘reality’ apart from this every day reality, it surely has nothing to do with man-made illusions created with

⁴³ Cf., Ricoeur: *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences* p. 203

⁴⁴ See Hegel *The Logic of Hegel* p.370. (Translated by W. Wallace 1873): “Geometry works with the sensuous but abstract perception of space; and in space it experiences no difficulty in isolating and defining simple analytic modes. To geometry alone therefore belongs in its perfection the synthetical method of finite cognition. In its course however (and this is the remarkable point), it finally stumbles upon what are termed irrational and incommensurable quantities; and in their case any attempt at further specification drives it beyond the principle of understanding.” Hegel claims that geometry is only one amongst many instances of human understanding where “The title ‘rational’ is perversely applied.”

⁴⁵ See Bergin & Fisch: *Introduction to The New Science* p. xxxi: “Vico had developed a theory of knowledge according to which we can know or have a *scienza* of, only what we ourselves make or do. Thus, we can have *scienza* in mathematics, because we are there deducing the consequences of our own definitions, axioms, and postulates; and we can have *scienza* in physics to the extent of our capacity for experiment. But mathematics and physics fall short of perfect *scienza*. Mathematics falls short because its objects are fictions. Physics falls short because the scope of our experiments can never encompass nature as a whole.”

scratchy lines on paper. The humanist definition of the world was created by a handful of albeit talented, but nevertheless, mere men.

Giotto, Alberti, Brunelleschi and their contemporaries, including Piero, perhaps glimpsed a version of heaven, but it was by the means of their own skill. Their work was so convincing that it helped to construct a mental framework by which not only painting, but also the world itself, might be perceived. We remain gripped in a hermeneutic circle that demands that the past can only be understood in the light of the present (and the present in light of the past) unless of course, we have the ability to *imagine* an alternative perception. After all, before the Renaissance, halos were depicted as circular — it was only when they became elliptical in works of art, as in *The Resurrection*, that perception noticeably changed. This must have puzzled the viewer at first, until by demonstrating with a coin or a dinner plate, the artist would explain: this is what a circle looks like from a certain angle. This would, in turn, and almost by default, explain how a halo might hover above the head rather than sit behind it and so painting acquired an *imagined* third dimension.

Once Brunelleschi and Ghiberti cast the Baptistry Doors, visual perception was changed and it has never changed back or significantly altered since. We now experience this world ‘in perspective’ whether we are aware of it or not and whether we wish to or not — and probably more so than Piero.⁴⁶ Thus, we have learned *how* to see, and this conditioning is indicative of how we have learned to understand. This does not mean that this is the *only* way to see or to know: Vico’s proposition of *verum factum*, that the true and the made are the same,

⁴⁶ See Cook, Albert, *Temporalizing Space: The Triumphant Strategies of Piero della Francesca*. 1992 p.8 “Piero (...) to the end of painterly vision, often subverts the mathematical perspective of which he was so peerless a theoretician in his time.” Cook, from a reading of Lavin’s intensive study of Piero, of Kant’s notion of ‘mathematically sublime’ “as a phrase” and from Panofsky’s: *Perspective as Symbolic Form* (1940) refers to the connection between number and spirit and the variety of perspectival approaches evidenced in Piero’s *Legend of the True Cross*.

comes into play now — for we have made and continue to make the world we live in.⁴⁷

This universal judgement, by which we say how the world *is*, is the product of *poiesis* — that is art as the ‘making’ of truth.⁴⁸ It is now apparent that Alberti, Brunelleschi and Piero della Francesca not only changed the visual perceptions of their own time, they changed perception for all time. If it strikes us as impossible that we might be deluded by our own limited vision, we cannot deny the Renaissance legacy. Because of their practical and aesthetically pleasing designs, the concept of building changed irrevocably, and thereby altered the appearance of Italy, of Europe and elsewhere in the world. In a very *real* sense then, by changing reality they made their own truth:

The laborious constructions of Uccello and Piero della Francesca soon ceased to be necessary for the suggestion of space and solidity when the public was prepared to ‘take them as read.’⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Vico. (NS. 331) “But in the light of thick darkness enveloping the earliest antiquity, so remote from ourselves, there shines the eternal and never failing light of a truth beyond all question; that the world of civil society has certainly been made by men, and that its principles are therefore to be found within the modifications of our own human mind.” Vico’s *verum factum* insists that the true and the made are the same.

⁴⁸ See Collingwood: *The Idea of History*. p.24: Collingwood reminds us that according to Aristotle’s *Poetics*, “poetry is more scientific than history, for history is a mere collection of empirical facts, whereas poetry extracts from such facts, a universal judgement.”

⁴⁹ See Gombrich, Ernst: *Art and Illusion* p.281. Incidentally, anyone with any art education at all may be consciously aware of their attempts to depict reality in terms of perspective, (a process which may involve guessing where vanishing points may lurk, or seeing the world ahead as narrowing rapidly before their eyes). By now, because of mass-produced images, surely we have *all* been affected to some extent? Yet perspective is only an approximation. See also Baxandall (1972) pp.104-108, Peter of Limoges’ *De oculo morali et spirituali (On the Moral and Spiritual Eye)* — The book translated into Italian in 1496 saw understanding vision as a useful way of understanding divine wisdom. Perspective is described as “the eleventh marvel of vision” and straight lines are equated with ‘seeing things straight’ i.e., although it is speculative, Baxandall allows that “Some Quattrocento minds brought a moral and spiritual eye of this kind to their paintings.”

In learning to draw, artists may have learned how to 'see' in two dimensional terms, but by sharing their ideas, as Gombrich suggests, they have taught us all to see. Gombrich states elsewhere that Piero himself noticed paradoxes in the theory,⁵⁰ for perspective only *inaccurately* represents reality. Paul's edict that, "now we see through a glass, darkly" only confirms Plato's fear that all perception is mimesis. As for art, we only need to imagine an age prior to perspective where saints stood happily in their gold backgrounds, to realise that the current technological obsession with 'virtual reality' monopolises upon the ancient desire to manufacture simulacra.

III.ii. Any projection of three dimensions in two, *must* be an alteration of perception, a change of 'mind-set'. This leads to a conceptualisation of the world whose effects reach beyond painting, photography, cinema, television, computer games and into reality itself, for it simulates a reality for us all to inhabit. Piero *knew* perspective to be a mere convention and *not* truly representative of the world he lived in. Now, it seems we no longer share that luxury because when it comes to visual perception we no longer need to believe, we *know* that perspective is true. In this we are deluded, or at best, we are willing to participate in the illusion. Yet if reality is a simulacrum, where does that leave history, geometry, mathematics, physics, or indeed, art itself? This *aporia* leads to further fanciful musings and may lead one to suspect the artist was always aware of his complicity in the furtherance of delusion. Following this train of thought, perhaps this is another reason why (almost as if he acknowledged some doubt about the world humanism was helping to create) in *the Resurrection* Piero has his eyes closed?

⁵⁰ Gombrich, Ernst *Ibid* p.215

Certainly, Piero was a mathematical wonder: “His two treatises on perspective and the five regular bodies, the *De Prospettiva Pigendi* and the *De Quinque Corporibus Regularibus* are milestones in the history of geometry and mathematics.”⁵¹ This is important to remember. Although one might claim that Piero lived by a geometrical code which allowed him to make sense of the world he lived in, we too can still ‘read’ his work because he was, and *is*, a part of what we have become. Space and time inhabit the separate sections of his picture plane and these adjoining ‘realities’ in turn rely upon perspective, and overlapping figures for the illusion of depth and distance. In effect, he operates what may be regarded as one of the first temporal ‘split screens’ in history. As with the familiar cinematic device of ‘flashback’ used by film directors, Piero’s depicted scene *deliberately* extends beyond a chronological framework. This is emphasised by the fact that his subject is a representation of the ‘timeless’ to begin with. In a nutshell, Piero authenticates the concept of eternity in his composition by using his knowledge of mathematics, geometry and art.

What the revolutionary aspects of Renaissance ultimately allowed, was that art does not have to be religious in content to symbolise the eternal. As the human soul is immortal, art took on the responsibility to recognise its immortality from a human perspective. One could say that Piero’s *Resurrection* almost makes one believe that it is possible to defeat death.⁵² In line with the humanist vision one may assume that Piero actually lived by a geometrical code which included a comprehensive knowledge of astrology and the cosmos.⁵³ This enabled him to

⁵¹ See. Pope-Hennessy, *The Piero della Francesca Trail*, (1991) p.52.

⁵² As Francis Bacon said to Melvyn Bragg in the famous television interview which will outlive them both: “You might say we are always defeating death by making images.” Who knows? Piero may have said something similar but, “he was prevented by blindness and then by death, from making known his brilliant researches and the many books he had written.” (Vasari. p.191) Vasari might be amazed by Piero’s popularity today, but I suspect not.

⁵³ Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg. *The Flagellation* (1972) p.51: “In the Renaissance, astrology was a highly respected science. Late in the Middle Ages chairs of astrology were introduced in Italian universities under the Faculty of Medicine. Then and throughout

make sense of a world he shared with his patrons and other members of the well-educated and affluent minority. The imagery produced in a world without technology, as we know it, was a means of communication, a codification.⁵⁴ Apparently Piero was by no means alone in this desire to paint 'hidden' significance into his work, and it was probably demanded of him to do so in a society where people may have held geometry in such esteem to have thought it to be the 'hidden language of reality'. Because the vast majority of the population would struggle to see anything else underneath the imagery the significance of hidden constructs would be all the greater. That cosmology and geometry formed part of the same study reinforces those humanist assurances that man could understand the universe, so as to become enlightened, but *not* that this opportunity was available to everyone.

IV Fantasia

IV.i. It would seem likely that specific patterns of development should be discernible in a variety of cultures over periods of time. Repetitions of episodes (rather than exact replications of historical events) are inevitable, not because as human beings, we always act 'in such and such a way' rationally — but that we often act *intuitively*, and this is also how we respond to Piero.⁵⁵ Without

the Renaissance, those who held the chairs were venerated scholars, competent, not only in astrology proper, but also in astronomy, geography, mathematics and optics. We may add that the study of perspective fell under the study of optics and was thus a branch of astrology.

⁵⁴ Cf. Lavin p.40 1992 Witness the six-pointed star on the floor of the *Montefeltro Altarpiece*. Incidentally, the same device may be found in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*.

⁵⁵ Initially, it may take the kind of 'painterly' intuition of Seurat, or Cezanne or perhaps, Picasso to empathise with the style of an artist like Piero. But on another level, the entrepreneurial skills of a man like Berenson, the intuition of buyers and dealers in

‘recognition’ an artist lacks credibility but if the ‘truth’ of art lies in the intention, the ‘true’ work of art is finished before it is even started and the intention is all. *Intention as form* instigates an aesthetic response; it defines for us what we may hopefully become as individual painters, poets, spectators, — above all, it paves the way for an imaginative insight of the eternal:

‘If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence...and in this single moment of affirmation, all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified and affirmed.’⁵⁶

In order to reach the vaguest notion of Piero’s intention we are required to pierce the simulacra of generations, not forgetting that he has helped to erect many of those “apparently eternal values” mentioned above, that need pushing aside. Paired with this, we are reminded of Vico’s denial of the existence of the unchanging human being, for when we affirm Piero’s worth, we also accept that he was *not* like us. This is most important: for Vico, *there is no archetype*; the notion of the ‘same person’ existing throughout time, merely dressed with the paraphernalia of circumstance, is false. If that is the case, it may seem at first glance that we have surely lost our strongest connections with the past, for these fifteenth century people were not the same as us at all. Yet, as in any other situation, by reconciling differences our understanding increases. In any

general, also allow an artist such as Piero to attain renewed status in order to become ‘an eternal commodity’.

⁵⁶ Rose, Gillian: *The Melancholy Science* (1978) p.24 : Nietzsche and Adorno each found a way to assert alternative values, by demonstrating that apparently eternal values have been erected in a way which hides their formation. Adorno sometimes expresses his position by dissenting vigorously from the one to which Nietzsche adhered. At the end of his essay on form he quotes a passage from Nietzsche, ‘If we affirm one single moment, we thus affirm not only ourselves but all existence...and in this single moment of affirmation, all eternity was called good, redeemed, justified and affirmed.’ Nietzsche’s ‘message’ is to live each instant of life, of becoming as if it were eternal, ‘...beyond terror and pity, to realise in oneself the eternal joy of becoming...’ ‘that the will to life may assert itself eternally’.

circumstance it needs a great stretch of imagination to see others dressed in their 'true colours'.

His (Vico's) position as I see it is roughly as follows. First of all, he bids us to do our best to enter the minds of the persons, whether past or present, whose activities we propose to investigate. In many, indeed most, cases this will not be a simple matter of putting ourselves in their shoes, since in order to fulfil the injunction properly, we need to divest ourselves of many assumptions which are entirely natural to us but which would not be seen in that way by those with whom we are concerned.⁵⁷

Once bereft of anything but the skeleton of traditionally constructed history, with all that its hidden agenda implies, the Vichian 'seeker' may be resolved to re-enter modes of consciousness which no longer exist at all. For, in recognising our ignorance of the past, we are instantly the wiser. Although we need the constructs which empirical data can supply, we would adopt a new stance in different historical moments. The removal of automatic presumption or prejudice admits that one *cannot* know how like us the people of the past were. Once this limitation of our understanding is accepted we may allow imagination full reign and, (provided we can dispense with some of the 'temporal paraphernalia' which we rely upon so much) engender an uncluttered intuition of the past. After Vico, we could argue the possibility of engagement with the lives of our ancestors if we wish to truly come to terms with, for example, a Renaissance frame of mind. Thus, we *become to know* another world simply because people made it — and we are people too.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Cf. Walsh, W.H. *The logical status of Vico's Eternal History* p.145 *Vico's Science of Humanity*

⁵⁸ Mali, Joseph, *The Rehabilitation of Myth*. (1992). p.53. "In short, what Vico sought to do was not to explain history by human nature, but human nature by history." In other words, when it comes to 'relative' notions of truth, Vico expects all societies to have the capacity for similar development (although at various times), because of the 'principles of humanity' which he has established. The principles are eternal nevertheless people are constantly changing.

And so Piero's Christ, caught in a web of geometrical construction lines and the idealisation of form, emerges from the tomb as an individual: one who has suffered the trauma of death and the bewilderment of resurrection. By the continued recognition of this achievement today, the artist himself inescapably maintains his continued individuality too. If we relate to Piero at all, it is not because of any universal or absolute human *nature* that we might share, but more likely because of perceived relative similarities between the culture which created the Renaissance in comparison with, say, the culture in which we now find ourselves.

Which brings one to the question, "Can we ever fully know what life was like for Piero della Francesca, and why did he paint as he did?" The immediate response is that if we cannot say why artists today do what they do with any certainty, then why should we expect to understand artists of the past with any greater clarity? We cannot easily abandon the life-world (or *lebenswelt*, as Husserl would put it) which we have built around ourselves and so, a negative response therefore would be most likely. However, if the question were to be re-phrased as, "Can we, if only in our mind's eye, glimpse Piero at work on his fresco, on an ordinary day, around five hundred years ago?" — Then, the answer may be in the affirmative, acceptable as a realistic possibility. This idea receives some support from Dilthey's notion of rational self-projection into the world of others, *Verstehen*, in which human activities are understood from within by means opposing objective observations.⁵⁹ Our understanding of Piero della Francesca is incomplete if we place our faith solely in a network of empirical regularities.

⁵⁹ Cf. *Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*: Weber, Max, "Remembered for his philosophical distinction between fact and value (...) and his adherence to Dilthey's *Verstehen* tradition. Weber argued that scientific, historical, and philosophical analysis of a period could never by itself provide the criteria necessary for a definitive solution to evaluative questions (...) The social scientist must distinguish between that which exists and that which ought to be (...) the sociologist should be able to place himself in the mind of those he studies."

Early Renaissance art indeed once reinforced particular institutions within society. In order to ‘connect with the past’ we must employ our innate and unique ability to mentally reconstruct events from long ago by using intuition and imagination:

In principle, given adequate powers of *fantasia*, plus the ‘laws’ which Vico supposes himself to have discovered — the laws of his ‘ideal, eternal history of the nations’ — any stage of human history can be mentally resurrected. Men ‘make themselves’, and men can therefore re-experience the process in imagination. The *fantasia* which creates myths and rites in which primitive conceptions of the world are acted out, is the faculty that generates our sense of the past. ⁶⁰

IV.ii. If we have a religious view of the world an interaction with specific words, images and music appertaining to our religion is expected, but we do not *have* to be religious in order to respond to art. As *The Resurrection* deals with death and burial it is part of the ‘absolute’ sensibility of nations that applies to all people, at all times. Our true response is to Piero is as to an instrument of *poiesis* ⁶¹ — the artist as irrefutable ‘maker’ — *he makes the absolute relative* and in that sense we ‘relate’ to him. Mythology is realised through its imagery. Society specifically appoints the image-maker as responsible for creating a frame of reference between the unseen and seen. By presenting the spectator with the Risen Christ, Piero defines a relationship between God and the people which is relevant to those in pursuit of redemption — whatever they might perceive that to be.

⁶⁰ Berlin, Isaiah *Vico & Herder* p.112

⁶¹ Vico *N.S.* p.117: Now this is the three-fold labour of great poetry: 1) to invent sublime fables suitable to the popular understanding, 2) to perturb to excess, with a view to the end proposed: 3) to teach the vulgar to act virtuously, as the poets have taught themselves; as will be presently shown {379}. Of this nature of human institutions it remained an eternal property, expressed in a noble phrase of Tacitus, that frightened men vainly “no sooner imagine than they believe” (*fingunt simul creduntque*) {A 6.5.10}

The assumption that there is only *one* truth, in works of art (as in life) is only superseded by the arrogance of humanity in thinking that one day it will be discovered. So we take another look at the fresco and forget what we have read.⁶² Undeniably, with plenty of background reading one is better equipped to comment, but the discomfiting, disconcerting truth about academic interpretation is that it leaves one empty. In the pursuit for ‘truth’ it seems the art forms have been forgotten, lost in interpretation that interferes with ‘real meaning’ that needs no interpretation anyway. The old adage: “there would be no need to paint, if what is ‘said’ in paint could be said in words” rings true. It reaffirms painting’s special quality, placing art as ‘something else’ far different from mere ‘language’ to which it is often compared. However, the reinforcement given by written sentiments⁶³ should not be underestimated, words give painting noble aspirations, and help form common sense: “The common sense that is common to all nations at all times.” Words paint pictures as certainly as pictures tell stories. Piero’s stylistic simplicity, purity, or “grandeur”⁶⁴ of form enables him in a sense, to ‘speak’ to us today *as* a painter. But to call this form simply ‘speech’ or ‘language’ is a convenience, a turn of phrase which does Piero a great disservice. Although painting is the means by which he ‘relates’ to us — the relative mode is only the beginning of this communication. His intention is to lead *us*, along with his peers, to “the other side of the piazza” — to the absolute.

⁶² Cf. Pope-Hennessy, John p.10: “(...) a brilliant and poetical volume by Roberto Longhi; an inadequately probing monograph by Kenneth Clark; a fat holdall of a book by Battisti; and a mythomaniacal study, filled with imaginary history by Carlo Ginzburg. (...) Wittkower’s and Carter’s account of the perspectival structure of *The Dream of St Jerome*, or Carter’s of *The Baptism* in the National Gallery, London, or Elkins’s of the passage on perspective in Piero della Francesca’s *De Prospittiva Pingendi*. But I want here to take all those as read and, instead, to concentrate on the pictures themselves.”

⁶³ Cf. Lavin Marilyn Aronberg *The Flagellation* (1972). A similar textual erasure befell the inscription on *The Flagellation* - “In 1839 the German art historian Passavant records having seen a Latin phrase *convenerunt in unum* (Psalm ii, 2) nearby the figures in the foreground. This too had disappeared by 1864.”

⁶⁴ Cf. Berenson. *The Italian Painters of the Renaissance* 1930 p.218

A genuine polarity thus exists between the two sides of the piazza, and this polarity functions to differentiate them as two separate realms. The buildings on the left represent a divine world with supernatural attributes, structured with immutable values. The buildings on the right represent the real world, unpredictable and incomplete, its values shifting, its order elusive and masked.⁶⁵



Fig. 19. The Flagellation
Piero della Francesca

Finally, it is worth reiterating that art acts as an atemporal redemptive media firstly because those (relative) aspects particular to one culture will dominate over rationality (common sense) and so we may relate to Piero's intentions. Secondly, because art enables imaginative aspects (absolutes) common to all cultures, but

⁶⁵ Lavin, Marilyn Aronberg, *The Flagellation* 1972 p. 50

present throughout time, to surface in the world beyond our senses we share in Piero's sense of wonder. In short, *this* is how we experience the world. Art therefore gives 'new meaning' — and our striving for redemption via art forms brings about new beginnings whilst putting the past into a context. This analysis firmly places Piero as an historical agent for change. It parachronistically positions Piero's *Resurrection* in a time-slot in history and simultaneously allows it to be part of a larger common sense framework — the pattern of redemption.

II: Zappa's Truth

"Time is the thing. Time is everything. How to spend time. We all want something to do with our minds."

Frank Zappa

The Central Scrutinizer.

Everywhere, we live in a universe strangely similar to the original — things are doubled by their own scenario. But this doubling does not signify, as it did traditionally, the imminence of their death — they are already purged of their death, and better than when they were alive; more cheerful, more authentic, in the light of their model, like the faces in funeral homes.

Jean Baudrillard.¹

I. Simulacra

I.i. Piero della Francesca, as a man of the Renaissance, was (to use Baudrillard's apt phrase) amongst the "theatrical and clock-like"² wearing the costume of, and reliant upon, the "counterfeit" culture he was helping to create. The same

¹ Baudrillard, Jean, *Simulacra & Simulation* p.11 (translated by S.F. Glaser, Published by The University of Michigan 1994 and originally published in French 1985). An earlier translation reads: "*We too* live in a universe strangely similar to the original — here things are *duplicated* by their own scenario" [my italics]. This translation misses out the word "Everywhere" and replaces the word 'doubled' with "duplicated". The sense remains exactly the same but minor changes have occurred. Baudrillard identifies the difference between how the American Indians *actually* lived and how they are conveniently *portrayed as having* lived. It is significant for the purpose of this enquiry that 'Translation' itself may be identified as a means of duplication.

² Baudrillard. Again, this phrase is omitted from the later (1994) translation of *Simulacra & Simulation*.

accusation may well hold true of any other classification of culture, including this one. Defining culture as counterfeit holds it up to close scrutiny, whilst denying the possibility of duplicity in human affairs would be rash because of past experience. In his music, Frank Zappa deconstructs and exploits the counterfeit modernist perspective as surely as Piero helped to create the Renaissance's humanist re-narration of history. Their separate discourse rendered the accepted and prevalent mythology of their times, each causing a disruption in the pre-existing referential framework in which they grew. For the purpose of this enquiry, Piero della Francesca and Frank Zappa could be considered reflective of one another.

In order to legitimise such a proposal I would suggest that we suspend their historical context, arguing that regardless of the centuries that lie between them and their work, they share a common ground — that of human nature. In this way we will be celebrating their achievements as events; as figures in the portents of narrative, and equally, as individual narratives within a larger framework or pattern by which we would note their singularity. However, we also recognise (in line with Vico's reading of history), that although history *makes* people, and not vice-versa, each was 'right' for his time, and if they did not 'make' history, they each left a mark on it. Piero della Francesca may have had less scientific knowledge than the artist or mathematician of the twenty-first century, yet the prowess prevalent throughout his work is no less outstanding by contemporary measure. Similarly, by reading within the context of suspended time, Zappa's importance as a composer, musician and social commentator may be articulated by a 'reverse reading' of his historical placement. Such a reading would be in keeping with what one might describe as a 'Zappalogical dimension':

Lumpy Gravy also introduced Zappa's theory of the big note. He maintains that everything in the universe is made from one element, which is a note — atoms are really vibrations and are all part of the big note. Frank is working on the theory even now, using his ARP synthesizer as audio test equipment. Another theory of his holds that any one time, like any one

wave, is equal to any other time. Music marks time too, and he has said that all of his music is actually one piece of music.³

To say that Zappa follows the Renaissance matrix of a popular composer whose work is humanistically universal would be to proclaim him as a contemporary troubadour who rises beyond style and time-trapped conventions. To an extent I believe this to be the case, for certainly, since his death his popularity has remained undiminished. On the other hand, to imagine Frank Zappa at the court of the Medici could be construed as trying to ‘out-Twain’ Twain’s Arthurian American. Zappa’s ‘popularity’ or the fantasy of time-travel, are not major concerns here. Neither is it enough to suggest merely a reversal of roles, for although like Piero, Zappa communicates the universal praxis of his art form, his is a genuinely free self-conscious activity. However, if I *were* suggesting such an exchange of role-play (extemporated by dint of their ability to enhance a *perennial* human nature) one might first have to accept that human nature is indeed perennial. On closer inspection, by allowing for possible changes in the development and recognition of what human nature has become, the theoretical ex-temporal ‘mind swap’ may be fine-tuned.

A distinction has been made in the last chapter between perceptions of what human nature was *once* thought to be what human nature is *now* thought to be. This difference, (noted by also taking into account the time elapsed between these perceptions) is an *intuitive* feeling acknowledging that elemental traces of universal ‘human nature’ inevitably remain despite centuries of change. This is not to say that traces may be observed as constant — as the last chapter went to great lengths to state, *perception itself is in flux*. Such precision is essential to

³ David Whalley *Only in it for the Money* 1972 (found in *The Frank Zappa Companion*, from now on abbreviated to FZC, Omnibus Press 1997) p.55. Also, the hum of the universe represented in Yogic tradition as the word OM for purposes of meditation is loosely connected to this theory. Reference to the big chord or Big Note at the end of *A Day In The Life* from The Beatles’ *Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band* is relevant too.

clarify the intuitive response required if Zappa and Piero are to help us de-cipher the deceptive ‘timelessness’ of the Culture Industry’s manufactured simulacra. That Vichian analysis, which concludes that human nature undoubtedly changes over a period of time, (for better or worse) is implicit in this study, for without the capacity for change there can be no possibility of redemption. Clearly, confined as we are to our own powers of imagination and intuition in the present era, it is not an easy thing to ‘step’ (Vico-like) from one time to another in our desire to empathise with the past.

The identification of *Disneyland* as a simulacrum prompts Baudrillard to write: “We too live in a universe strangely similar to the original — here things are duplicated by their own scenario.” Baudrillard also claims that we have learned to trust in “the proof of art through anti-art” where, “everything is metamorphosed into its opposite.”⁴ This ridicules our current preoccupation with culture and renders our dealings with post-modernity as questionable. Zappa also penetrates and duplicates the cultural predilection of the West, *The American Dream* in particular; he describes cultural plight as ironically funny, nothing short of cartoon simulacra, (which was eventually to excel on television as Matt Groening’s *The Simpsons*.⁵) Nonetheless, Zappa’s is a sad indictment:

Don’t need to do no thinkin’
Just keep on with your drinkin’
Have your fun, you old son of a gun,
And drive home in your Lincoln. ⁶

Just as Vico demolished the personification of the great Homer (hitherto assumed to be a single man, the poet solely responsible for *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) by

⁴ Baudrillard, *Simulacra & Simulation*. p. 19

⁵ Matt Groening, creator of *The Simpsons* is well known to be a ‘No.1 Zappa Freak’ and many of the characters and story lines could be described as ‘Zappalogical.’

⁶ Zappa, *Bow-Tie Daddy* from the album, *We’re Only In It For The Money* (1968)

declaring him a community of writers, so too is Matt Groening's *Homer Simpson* — the reincarnation of *Bow-Tie Daddy* meets *Andy Capp* — a community of all middle-aged men caught in 'timeless' cartoon form. In a sense, *The Simpsons* as a visual social critique⁷ is the epitome of Zappalogical characterisation. Zappa draws humanity as a cartoon version of itself in many of his own musical creations, which include *Disco Boy*, *Valley Girl*, *Jumbo*, *Dina Moe Humm*, *Thing-Fish*,⁸ and legions of others. His barb and humour may soften the blow, nonetheless, his own criticism of society is part of a genuine discourse in value and meaning: It is by comparison of one form, the imagined, with another: the observed, that we may know what *form* is.

Zappa's characters are mere extensions within the duplicity of a 'reality' wherein Zappa himself might well be initially taken for *The Electric Don Quixote*⁹ tilting

⁷ It is interesting that Zappa regales against the social acceptance of alcohol (i.e., in *America Drinks and goes Home*, or *Titties n' Beer*). This theme is developed in Groening's continuous critique of social dependence upon alcohol in *The Simpsons* — (the innumerable references to 'Duff Beer' utilised as a control mechanism over the citizens of 'Springfield'). Coincidentally, Stanley Spencer also makes the same point in his last completed work, *The Crucifixion* (1958) where brewers crucify Christ.

⁸ *Disco Boy*, deals with teenage sexual incompetence and masturbation, *Valley Girl* with pseudo mannerisms and the trivial conception of life that 'shallow' people have. *Jumbo*, *Go Away* deals with female obesity and lack of self-esteem and *Dina Moe Humm* with the psychological mysteries of female orgasm. *Thing-Fish* is an anti-racist satire clothed as a grim prophecy for the future of black Americans. It is about alleged scientific experimentation upon black people, as part of the deliberate annihilation of a race. All of these subjects are normally considered 'taboo' as themes for 'popular' music.

With regard to *Thing-Fish*, (1984) – a monstrous musical about potato-headed mammie-nuns, ref. also Louis Farrakhan, (The Daily Express Aug 1st 2001, *Race fear as ban is lifted on America's bow-tied bigot*). "He [Farrakhan] once gave a speech in which he claimed 'the white boys' whom he also described as 'the enemy', had invented Aids, injected thousands of black people with cancer, created inner city street gangs and secretly added chemicals to beef in an effort to control black birth rates."

⁹ *The Electric Don Quixote*: The title of Neil Slaven's book about Zappa, which is appropriate in respect of his disregard for all authority. See also Santayana, *The Birth Of Reason & Other Essays* (1968 Columbia U.P.) p.117 "Now, Don Quixote who was mad, could confuse this Christian charity with honour, and could sally forth to right wrongs everywhere."

his lance at everything — but re-written, like Borges' *Pierre Menard*¹⁰ — and re-played by Ringo Starr in *200 Motels*. The cartoon simulacrum as an art form permits this duplicity (and anything else) as possible. Zappa, as all pervasive *Central Scrutinizer*, hides behind several layers of meaning, from where he manipulates the proceedings. His characters act as hooks on which he hangs some wonderful music, which in its variety forbids any preconception of what music should be.

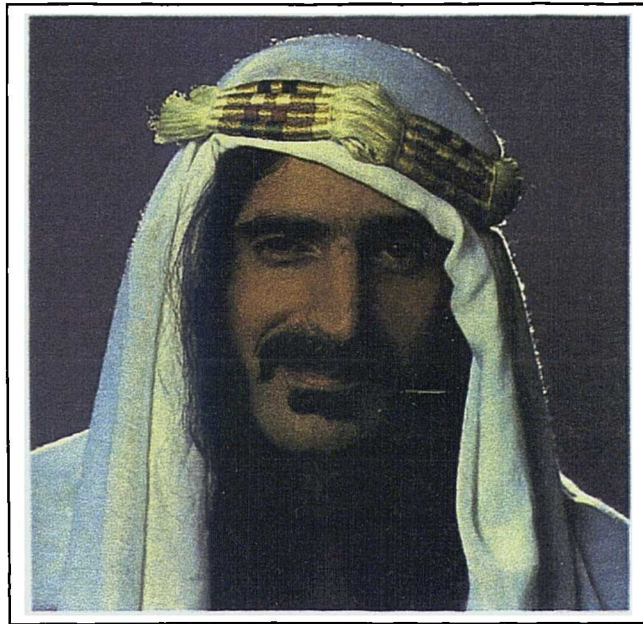


Fig 20. Frank Zappa as 'Sheik Yerbouti'

I.ii. It follows that those today who seek moral guidance, 'enlightenment', or redemption are as likely to look to television, to *Disneyland* or to *Hollywood*, — each rife with its own beautifully packaged, computer enhanced, perfectly ethical

¹⁰ Borges, Jorge Luis, 'Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote' from *Ficciones*, (Grove Press, 1962) p.29.

stance¹¹ — rather than to religion. Vichian word play, if nothing else, connects *Hollywood* cinematography with the *Holy Wood* of the legendary *One True Cross* — the worshipful relic with which Piero's fresco demonstrates the power of life over death. The 'all new' fresco was deliberately reconstituted for the 'silver screen'. Once reborn for the 1950's and 1960's film-going generation as the Biblical Epic, now it seems that miracles occur in every studio-enhanced, tear-jerking, heroic tale of self-sacrifice meant to inspire that has been churned out ever since.

In musical terms, Zappa identifies the shallowness of 'Tinsel-Town' as archetypal and perennial, only to be re-enacted, re-enlivened and reborn as *Tinsel-Town Rebellion*¹² — the 're-visit' which is anything but an antidote. The music industry emanates from a world seen as a microcosm, a *City of Tiny Lites*¹³ and as such, is merely 'yet another' version in a sequence. Reminiscent of *The Simpsons'* small-town mentality, it seems we inhabit another atemporal 'Springfield' where everyone is either 'on the make' or stupid — or alternatively, both.

The only remaining chance, our last 'saving grace' lies in our power to imagine, to accept that the simulacra *is* 'out there' but (as citizens of Springfield ourselves) we have to see through it. Imagination in art may be hackneyed, indeed, distinctly *unimaginative* and repetitive, the victim of consumerist predilection.

11 See *The Lion King* or, *E.T.* for example, or countless other 'moving' film score clichés or heart-wrenching television shows that are calculated to induce an emotional response. For example, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* (1965) is a wonderful film in many respects but it is also 'corny' and an obvious vehicle for bit parts. John Wayne is truly unforgettable as the Roman Centurion — "Surely this was the Son of God," he drawls.

12 Cf. Watson, Ben, *The Complete Guide To the music of Frank Zappa*, (1998 Omnibus Press, London), p.105, "*Tinsel-Town Rebellion* was the boast of a band leader who refused to let commercial viability become a brake on musical innovation"

13 The song, *City of Tiny Lites* can be found on various compilations including the album, *Sheik Yerbouti* (1979). The human condition is Lilliputian, "Tiny is as tiny do."

But then again — the ‘thrill’ of ‘anti-art’ is wearing pretty thin too. Imagination, even when simplistically taken as contrary to perception and reason, does not deny the debt which perception and reason owe to it. In return for a small sacrifice of our precious rationality, we allow ourselves to be informed by imagination, which in turn enables us to glimpse that which we may reasonably become.¹⁴

In a musical recreation and re-enactment of the world at large, Zappa de-ritualises and de-sanctifies the familiar matrix of religiosity. As he does so, he questions the common-sense acceptance of the ‘value’ of religion in society. Pre-Christian temples were often re-consecrated as churches, and in recent times certain old churches have been transformed into non-Christian temples, (or into Night-clubs and Bingo Halls). In much the same way, Zappa *re-uses* familiar imagery and sound to relocate his ideology with maximum effect: he re-aligns the concert hall, the long playing record and the compact disc to a new setting of his own precondition wherein all antinomies are built in. This uncertainty revitalises his music, for when we ‘buy Zappa’ we are never quite sure what we have bought — we tentatively learn how to listen again.

On the level of public consumption, far from the throes of academia, this uncertainty also prevails in that relatively new industry called ‘The Renaissance’ which is *nowadays* mostly for the tourist — the travelling consumer. The implication is that as long as we buy into something, we do not have to worry too much about what it means. Meanwhile, contemporary works of art conveniently illustrate how one mythological horizon may easily be exchanged for another as we head off into the sunset. Challenging the accepted formats of painting and sculpture with conceptual anti-art is often distinctly boring, yet the theme reappears again and again. It is limited as a ‘shock tactic’ with which to engage

¹⁴ Art might almost feasibly be considered as a *redemptive* medium performed or executed for the good of the people as once it may have been in, so-called, ‘primitive’ times.

‘the public’ — most of whom (if ever they were bothered) lost interest years ago. This is quite worrying and suggests the possibility that those people we see wandering the galleries and concert halls may be content to go along with *whatever* is on offer. Zappa’s remedy deliberately antagonises the unwary ‘Zappa fan’ not paying attention:

Since I write music, I know what the techniques are. If I wanted to write something that would make you weep, I could do it. It’s a cheap shot.¹⁵

Zappa claims that it is the music industry’s obsession with low-price consumerism and its manipulation of market forces that devalue the quality of aesthetic experience. This is emblematic of recent cultural development, a phenomenon he labels *Cheepniss*. We are constantly reminded, and most often by television, that today, more than ever, images ‘sell’ us products, ideas, and cultural *significance* in general. We now occupy a place where what was once thought ‘beautiful’ art or music is not only *used* to wrench an emotional response, it is also used to promote the sale of goods. But there is no need to worry as it seems we are all ‘in on this’ and accept that we are part of the sales pitch too.¹⁶ Accompanying the sale of music is an ideology to which many people are compelled to the extent that they glorify in tackiness without realising it.

This devaluation has wider implications: religious institutions may have lost their monopoly on ‘saving souls’ just as it seems they have lost their long-held monopoly on great music and imagery. The latter never die but are simply ridiculed into obscurity. It is this ability to penetrate convention which has been so frequently lacking in the music industry (except as pastiche calculated to engender further sales) but also in the world at large. In the ‘real’ world, Zappa

15 Zappa Interview: *Revolt Against Mediocrity* (1986). Friedman & Lyons p.211 FZC

16 See Jeff Koons’ sickly sentimental *Puppy* made from flowers or his huge ceramic kitten. Koons elaborates his ironic perception of ‘bad’ taste as ‘good’ art.

sees that people are stupid, politicians are corrupt, religion is manipulative, sex is funny, — and so on. I take this to be the ‘Zappalogical dimension’ of which one might say, Frank Zappa has figuratively speaking, borrowed Ockham’s Razor to define his distinctive moustache and lower-lip ‘imperial’.¹⁷

Only an awareness of the *power* that music and imagery have to create culture at large can establish that questioning what is ‘good’ in art may alert us to identify falsehood. In effect, Zappa outlines an alternative, one might say a ‘negative redemptive doctrine’ that slowly emerges in his work, that is reprimanded as misappropriate, or out of synchronisation with the government, with the church, or with religion itself. Although he relies upon a parody of musical form that allows him to ridicule convention and so subvert accepted custom, his intention is arguably constructive. The positive outcome of his approach to music is promoted by his recognition of the need for changes in society. Despite his condemnation and trivialisation of the music industry he acknowledges his own reliance upon it for sales. However, by operating from ‘within’ he is able to inflict the most damage. He finds media to be “vile and pernicious — the slime oozin’ out from your TV set”¹⁸ but is inextricably caught up in it nonetheless in order to promote himself. In this respect he is no different from anyone else trapped by the political circumstance of ‘promoting’ themselves. The difference between ‘selling yourself’ and ‘selling your principles’ implies that we admit ourselves to be victims of our own showmanship, to a greater or lesser extent.¹⁹

17 See *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. Ockham’s Razor: The principle of *Entia non sunt multiplicanda praeter necessitatem* — Entities are not to be multiplied beyond necessity. In line with Reductionalist and Nominalist philosophy, he was engaged in the denial of the reality of universals. (In 1328, William of Ockham defended, on behalf of the Franciscans and against the papacy, the doctrine that Jesus and the disciples owned no property.)

18 Zappa: *I’m The Slime* from the album *Over-Nite Sensation* (1973).

19 Zappa sardonically notes that when it comes to contributing towards church funds there is a difference between kneeling down and bending over.” Cf. The song, *The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing*, from the album, *You Are What You Is* (1981).

It is only by means of *imagination* that we may meet the trouble arriving daily head on; only by counterattacking complacency that we may demand the best of ourselves so that we will never be satisfied with ‘drudgery’ in any artistic form.²⁰

II. The Zappalogical dimension

II.i. The Zappalogical dimension sees the annihilation of pretension and the importance of economic considerations within an aesthetic framework as worthwhile. It serves as a counterbalance to Piero della Francesca’s legacy, (as read in its historically reversed portents) and as an introduction to what I would regard as the justifiable ‘paganism’ of Stanley Spencer which will be discussed later. Piero della Francesca and Frank Zappa each employed their art for the specific purpose of participation in the moral dialectic — that which presents universal and eternal aspects of human relations for perennial consideration. Apart from their undoubted success as practitioners, they each accept responsibility for challenging convention. Moreover, they *continue* to act as agents responsible for change occurring long past their own demise. Both figures are arguably more popular today than ever before, and so the slogan: “Dying is the privilege of the weary. The present-day composer refuses to die!” is an apt one. This proclamation of Edgard Varèse²¹ facilitates our return to the earlier theme of aesthetic resurrection wherein a creative output ensures ‘eternal aspects’

²⁰ See *Mojo Magazine*. Issue No 4. (March 1994). *The Antichrist* article by D. Rimmer p.91, “Zappa was being post-modern long before anyone came up with the word”. If the analysis above hints at ‘postmodernism’ it should come as no surprise — but great care is needed in the attempt to pigeonhole Zappa. By persisting in pointing out the folly of a whole generation, both in his music and in what he said, he was being true to himself.

²¹ Edgard Varèse created some of the first works for percussion alone to be performed in the western world: *Intégrales* (1924-5), *Ionisation* (1929-31), *Déserts* (1949-54). Other works include *Amériques* and *Hyperprism*. Varèse proved to be a very important influence on the musical development of Frank Zappa.

of art may qualify for recognition.²² Thus we may be led to conclude that ‘art is what people do’ and that it is a purposeful act not only contingent outside consumerism, but outside temporality itself.

Watson, in the light of his reference to Adorno, in his book: *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle-Play*, claims Zappa’s position as an instigator for change whose argument resides as a negative dialectic undermining convention and defying the culturally acceptable. The same cannot exactly be said for Piero della Francesca, although as an historical agent for change, (as defined by the changes he helped to bring to history itself) — his interpretation of *The Resurrection* was unusually personal. Fresco painters were originally thought of as artisans, — tradesmen, rather than visionaries. Certainly, there is a great difference between the two ‘redemptive’ perspectives of Piero and Zappa, (if they may be described as such) and more precisely, between the variety of ways in which these perspectives may be interpreted.²³

This is where there is a need for the bigger picture that Vico provides and which states that a recurring similarity of intent throughout time (encompassed by his *corsi et ricorsi* principle) may not be at all surprising. The Renaissance and twentieth century cultural mechanisms present totally different scenarios. Unless one reckons that its underlying purpose only *seems* to have changed, the argument for art as an eternal prospect apparently crumbles. Alternatively, by accepting the proposal that the purpose of art remains intact despite change and because of fixed cultural and temporal parameters, one simultaneously concurs

²² See Ben Watson: *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle-Play*, (1994) p.46: the above, which was one sentence taken from the manifesto of the ‘International Composers Guild,’ written in 1921, by Edgard Varèse, as “composers” — but later re-identified by Zappa in the singular as ‘composer’.

²³ Any English football fan looking at Piero’s *Resurrection* would immediately be struck by the fact that the Risen Christ seems to be supporting the national team by waving the flag.

with the denial of any ‘post-modern’ appraisal, or of the validity of categorisation in retrospect. Nowadays, aesthetics may describe art as an ‘event’ which distinguishes art forms, one from the other, one movement from the next — but art also exists as a ‘perpetual encounter’, necessarily present both in religious and secular aspects. This, (I suggest) is an interpretation of art (and music too) which depends upon the clarity of thought required to questions all preconceived notions. “Treat matters where they begin,” as Vico admirably said, and so we may eventually get down to ‘the roots of art’ in order to understand what it *is*, rather than what it is *about*.



Fig. 21. The Album Cover for Joe's Garage (1979).

III. Joe's Garage (1979).

III.i. Pursuit of art, wonder at nature, or the love of knowledge, may individually or collectively construct a golden calf to replace the common-sense belief in a creator-God. More easily, any of the above may present an enticing alternative to participation in organised religious observance. This is because those who promote religion as worthwhile usually have a vested interest in doing so, in that they seek their own redemption first, if nothing else. On the other hand, self-interest may promulgate a desire for self-improvement — but it does not automatically follow. Although contemplation and belief in God has occupied and driven humanity for centuries, it is only in recent times that religion has been openly condemned by some as irrelevant. One imagines that it is impossible to verify what another believes, no matter what they may say. Certainly, atheism is more acceptable today than it once was, except in certain parts of the world where narrow-minded regimes might still sentence the blasphemer to death.

Non-belief is not synonymous with selfishness: *vita activa* compares favourably with the *vita contemplativa* in which philosophy and indeed, the desire to 'know' God via contemplation, (rather than by good deeds) may be thought merely as inactive.²⁴ Aside from any religio-philosophical persuasion, for practitioners, artistic pursuits are more *tangible*, and the overwhelming sense of purpose which art affords, ensures that for Zappa, music is simply the highest tangible form to which human beings may aspire:

²⁴ See Krays, Jill, in 'Moral Philosophy' in Schmitt, C.B., and Skinner, Q. (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, (Cambridge University Press 1988) pp. 334-8, with reference to Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* x.7-8 concerning the *summum bonum* and whether it resides in action or contemplation: "Salutati maintained in his treatise *De nobilitate* that Aristotle was mistaken in describing the contemplative search for truth as man's supreme good, for man's desire for truth could never be fulfilled. (...) It was Bruni's opinion that both the active and contemplative lives had certain things to recommend them. For while the latter was more divine and exquisite, the former contributed more to the common good."

Information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, wisdom is not truth, truth is not beauty, beauty is not love, love is not music, music is the best.²⁵

On the album *Joe's Garage* (and, hypothetically, on every other album too, for that matter) Zappa is the self-appointed "Central Scrutinizer". This is a role that he relishes, for it is essential that his oeuvre be understood as a social critique from his first recording to his last. What many might consider as his battle cry: "Music is the Best" appertains toward an ideology that transforms itself manifestly as a philosophical standpoint permeating stage performance and record production. The implication is that although music *really* is the best, the statement is made with great irony chiefly because music is usually the last concern in recording studios or on stage, firstly because of commercial considerations, but secondly because of the hegemony that such institutions perpetuate. Following this train of thought leads to questioning the sincerity of works of art and the relationship between time, money, and quality and to reflect upon the nature of audience expectancy: whether people really do know what they want. Finally, it begs the question: is what is 'best' for the performer also what is best for the audience? Zappa has no delusion of grandeur, he does not consciously pretend to be the next redeemer — he is not naively trying to save the world, but his message, that one should question everything, is clear nonetheless.

III.ii. Zappa's unpredictability is epitomised by the obvious musical influences upon him. He drew from the widest range possible: from 1950's Doo-Wop, Pop and Disco, through Rock N' Roll and to Heavy Rock with screaming guitars, and all interspersed with the percussive modernism of Edgard Varèse. Furthermore,

²⁵ Frank Zappa, *Joe's Garage* (1979)

as he delights in anachronism, any of these styles may be found on any album throughout his extensive career. Well known for his disrespect for the conventional approach to making records, Frank Zappa was famously irreligious about everything (especially religion), but he found a voice for his deeply held criticism in both his work on stage and in the recording studio. He attempted to bypass the music industry as much as possible and was successful, becoming virtually self-sufficient in writing, performing, promoting, and selling his work.

Indeed, Zappa was suspicious of what Vico had once called “the designs of men” and voiced his ambiguity toward human institutions in the tradition of critical theorists such as Adorno and Walter Benjamin. But Zappa gained accessibility and notoriety in an ‘underground’ context that until his death remained largely outside the perimeters of academia, (and many would argue that it still does). In a Dadaist tendency towards subversion he made his mark with the aid of the ‘showbiz razzamatazz’ of performance art. His aim, it seems, was to alert his audience to what he perceived as the *stupidity* of human beings as a species.

Scientists tell us that the universe is built from hydrogen, but the universe is made out of stupidity, which is much more plentiful than hydrogen.²⁶

Quite rightly, we should be suspicious of received wisdom and most fearful of the spirit of the age when it tends towards destruction.²⁷ Zappa, as archetypal *Central Scrutinizer*, argues that things *are* in a bad way, and that although humanity may have the potential to improve, people are foolish and easily swayed by theories and convention. We see that by the quality of his art form, Zappa’s judgement does not reside in mere conjecture, rather it moves toward universality

²⁶ Frank Zappa: *The Late Show* (BBC 2 interview) 1993.

²⁷ See Karl Popper *All Life is Problem Solving* (1999), p.111: Popper warns of: “The Zeitgeist-inspired movement that will not be easy for anyone to stop”. He concludes by quoting Hugo von Hofmannsthal: “Philosophy must be a *judge* of her times; things are in a bad way when she becomes an *expression* of the spirit of her times”.

beyond the contemporary. As with Piero's mathematically assumed pictorial narratives, Zappa outdistances his peers, his music seeks out the dizzy heights reserved for the absolute. In either case, the contemporaries of Piero or Zappa as seriously critical surveyors of their time would simply have placed their judgement on their present predilection. Art is seen here as 'the higher calling' although no claims for Frank Zappa or Piero della Francesca as being unique in undertaking this venture can be made. For example, Berg and Webern composed music that cut across the ramifications of early twentieth century society in Austria whilst Kierkegaard's isolation points to a life lived (at times) as if in *imitatio Christi*. Picasso disembowelled art as surely as he did the Guernican horse whilst Matisse 're-invented' colour and lifted the scales from our eyes. If these and countless others are deemed genuine in their pursuits, which they must be, the disruptive flow and transcendent arcs of their art forms infiltrate the notion of worldly successes and rename them as redemptive acts. The world *is* a better place for their passing. We may only surmise how the young Piero's work was received in the bigger cities and in his hometown of Sansepolcro; we can only guess the sacrifices he made. Certainly, Zappa persisted in battling against well-intentioned, but ultimately misguided factions of twentieth century American society.

There is little point in repeating the work of others who have already written excellent analyses of Zappa's albums, (like Slaven or especially, the excellent work of Ben Watson)²⁸ and which are indispensable points of reference for this enquiry. More importantly, there is no substitute for listening to the albums themselves. However, for the purpose of reinforcing what is identified in this essay as the idea that art may be considered redemptive, (even in the unlikeliest of circumstances) some illustration is necessary. Furthermore, in the hope that 'the

²⁸ See Ben Watson, *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play*. Slaven's *The Electric Don Quixote* is useful. Zappa's interviews on television and radio and other interviews and

good, the bad, the ugly — and the stupid’ may possibly see some sense via music, I now propose a brief outline of the plot of *Joe’s Garage*.²⁹

III.iii. Like many others, the young Frank Zappa had rehearsed his high-school band, *The Boogie Men*, in the garage at home,³⁰ and their photograph featured in a local newspaper. Hence the title of the song and the subsequent album *Joe’s Garage*, has an autobiographical basis. The inner sleeve notes describe it as “a stupid story done in the manner of a high-school play”. The story is a parody of a nativity play which essentially outlines the birth of ‘Innocent Music’ (whose massacre is assured) and how it will only survive until the time is right for it to be recognised. The spoken introduction to the album, *Joe’s Garage* (rather than the introduction to the song of the same name) gives considerable insight to Zappa’s ironic humour but also to his genuine fear of the consequences of an Orwellian, if not Kafkesque future:

This is the Central Scrutinizer, it is my responsibility to enforce all the laws which haven’t been passed yet. It is also my responsibility to alert each and every one of you to the potential consequences of various ordinary every day activities (...) Our criminal institutions are full of little creeps like you who were driven to do evil things by music.

reviews in magazines, i.e., *Record Collector*, or *Mojo Magazine* have also proved to be invaluable.

29 For a complete description of individual tracks see Ben Watson, *Poodle* pp 365-379

30 Zappa was in several bands, *The Blackouts* being the first, but Watson mentions in particular that *The Boogie Men* rehearsed in the garage. Of course playing in the garage was common practice. By coincidence, although never a drummer, I remember myself at around the age of eleven, arranging cardboard box drums in the garage at home, and inviting friends to join me and play their guitars. I drew a tiger’s head on a large sheet of paper, and wrote *The Tigers* beneath it, and then taped it to the biggest box. Sadly, *The Tigers* disbanded after two weeks.

Joe's Garage is where Zappa's teenage alter-ego learned to play guitar in an amateurish rock band, accompanied by the constant cry from the mother of 'neighbour' Cy Borg: "Turn it down!" It is a metaphor for the birth of his music. In much the same way that the humble stable at Bethlehem would later adopt the mantle of classical antiquity during the Renaissance, *Joe's Garage* is about transformation. Renaissance artists were compelled to include a classical column and idealised crumbling masonry with which to surround the birth of the Son of God — as if the event alone was not enough. It is no accident that the major characters, 'Mary and Joe' have Biblical antecedents — with Zappa, nothing is accidental. The ominous whispering narration between the tracks begins each time with "This is the Central Scrutinizer" which makes him sound like an evil control-freak mastermind from a 1940's 'B'- Movie. Zappa as *Central Scrutinizer* oversees a sinister regime in which music is banned.³¹ This is humorously presented as a science-fiction fantasy, a paranoid state which nevertheless parallels this one, where music has become 'illegal' because it is decreed immoral. Zappa is the evil, *Central Scrutinizer* of a civilisation 'plooked'³² by the machine. He is synonymous with 'King Herod' and 'Big Brother' at once.

The album, which may be interpreted at various levels, shares a theme with Hogarth's *The Harlot's Progress* in that it deals with the moral degeneration, (but here because of music) of a sweet, innocent girl. She is called Mary, and her transformation into a *Crew Slut* or 'groupie' begins with a 'visit' backstage to the

31 See Ruhlmann, William, *FZC* p.33: Simultaneously, in the 'real' world, it is Zappa who 'pulls the plug' on the pretensions of those institutions which lay any claim to social superiority. His confrontation with the B'nai B'rith (the Jewish anti-defamation league) which had tried to ban his songs, because of one called: *Jewish Princess* did not stop him from further possible trouble elsewhere by releasing the 'outrageous' *Catholic Girls* from *Joe's Garage*. Also (cf. p.370 *Poodle*) as the sleeve notes remind us it is significant that music was declared illegal in Iran.

32 According to Slaven, *The Electric Don Quixote*, p.227, "Ike Willis' mother was responsible for the word 'plook'."

road-crew from a famous rock group, in order to get a free pass into the show. Eventually, sick of travelling on the road (and all that that entails), she seeks an about-turn. Her ‘display’ on *Wet T-shirt Nite* — “ain’t this what living is all about?” — drools Zappa as the sleazy presenter, earns her the fifty dollars she needs, “To get back home.” It is Mary, “the girl from the bus” who, finally (the double-entendre is necessary) ‘reveals all’: “Information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, wisdom is not truth, truth is not beauty, beauty is not love, love is not music, music is the best.”

Yet this revelation about beauty and love, music and truth, sounds far too grandiloquent for Zappa (or us) to be comfortable with. Finally, Mary continues the monologue by completely undoing the sentiment with a second round of what sounds like Dadaist nonsense: “Beauty is a French phonetic corruption of a short cloth neck ornament.”³³ Watson describes this as, “A kind of self-cancelling hierarchy, until word play and free association trashes the whole speech (...) where any attempt at transcendence is immediately rubbished in a welter of trivial Americana”. However, it could equally be regarded as a ruse, that negative dialectical means of burying a treasured point of view. I find that it is very easy for me to believe that Zappa really did hold that “Music *is* the best” but again, this must be taken in the context of the music he heard around him, and what he saw as the often shallow reasons for its production.

It is possible to hear the whole extract as deliberate nonsense but one cannot be sure: “Music is the best” — the phrase now becomes BOTH a fundamental truth AND a bitter sarcasm. If nothing else, Zappa liked to keep people guessing. He hated reviews of his work and he set ‘traps’ everywhere for the music critic: he knew that the trouble with interpretation is that it often allows for equal and opposite readings of works of art. One is left disconcerted, it is not safe to

assume anything, but it seems that he deliberately straddles the line between two opposing forces.

Meanwhile, Joe's story is one of sleaze and sexually transmitted disease; a life corrupted by music that finally leads him to pursue sexual pleasure with a small robot — “Give me deep chromium!” His reflection that all he really wanted to do was play the guitar, but was constantly “plooked” by musical executives is Zappa's backlash at the record industry. The ‘operetta’ style of *Joe's Garage* (which is an assortment of themes pasted together in the studio) is a pastiche of the ‘concept album’ in itself. The story ends with poor Joe resorting to playing imaginary guitar solos, his mind is “messed up” by the trouble caused by music, and so he gives music up for good to take a repetitive job in the *Utility Muffin Research Factory* instead. Joe decides that “Imaginary guitar solos exist in the imagination of the imaginer” — a statement that introduces Frank Zappa's ‘sizzling’ guitar solo: *Watermelon in Easter Hay*.



Fig. 22. Zappa on Guitar

Zappa is not one for happy endings, and the album cannot end on such a ‘high’. *Watermelon in Easter Hay* is followed by the Dada anti-climax of *A Little Green Rosetta*, with its a boring, predictable chant, “la-la-la” — “They’re pretty good

³³ See *Poodle* p.377: It is worth considering that ‘Beau - ty’ and ‘Bow-tie’ — in etymology at least, may be rightly identified as the same thing.

musicians” — but who cares? The relationship between these two pieces of music warrants further probing, but for now, the bizarre story may be viewed as the microcosm of human ignorance; the plight of a misinformed species, in which stupidity leads eventually to a painful enlightenment. Its sleazy realisations are, in many ways, the reworking of a morality tale or miracle play.³⁴ Once an imaginative *redemption* is accomplished during the climax of *Watermelon in Easter Hay*, like Joe and Mary, it seems we are ‘lifted’ — we are saved. But not for long! It is as if the realisation of the power of music is too much, and Zappa leads us literally from the sublime to the ridiculous; from the sensual glory of *Watermelon in Easter Hay* only to fizzle into the banality of a truly stupid song: *A Little Green Rosetta*. As Neil Slaven argues:

If there is a musical reason for *Joe’s Garage* to exist, it has to be for the random creativity of its instrumental passages. The one exception, *Watermelon in Easter Hay*, is atypical Zappa, a simple soaring melody that belies its creator. When we talked about the album I told Frank it was the highlight of the entire album. “Well, it is, he replied.”

Slaven’s conversation with Zappa instigates an incredible argument about the interpretation of musical form that is of vital interest to this enquiry. The egg-like form of a watermelon, associated with the word ‘Easter’, signifies rebirth and redemption in terms of imagery as much as a newborn baby in a manger might, but it is the music, it is that “last imaginary guitar solo” that really ‘speaks’ to us. For Slaven to state that Zappa’s solo was “atypical” and literally a cut above the other (cut and paste) tracks on this ‘operetta’ conceived as a wry comment on both religion and the birth of his own music is significant. It might well indicate that Zappa has created more than he bargained for. This is because, depending upon how you interpret it, *Watermelon in Easter Hay* is *either* a truly wonderful

³⁴ This view is reinforced by the cover of the album depicting Zappa wearing *Blackface*, which apart from any association with garage mechanics or minstrels, is a disguise often used by Mummers in their redemption plays. *The Central Scrutinizer* bears some analogy with the role of foolish knave, or a new ‘Tom Fool’ charged with bringing music back to life.

example within the oeuvre or it may be taken as nothing but pure cynicism: “The most excruciating insult, the best laid trap of all.”³⁵ This is a ‘live recording’ of a guitar solo ‘in one take’ that sounds ‘beautiful’ — but *only* if the listener believes that music is capable of expressing emotion. This leaves us to ponder upon the exact nature of Zappa’s intention. Was it, (a) to create a ‘beautiful’ piece of music, (b) to parody and ironically belittle the notion of beauty in musical form, or, (c) both of these at the same time?

As Zappa was a lover of the music of Stravinsky there is just cause for us to ponder upon his intention. In 1935 Stravinsky said, “I consider that music is, by its very nature essentially powerless to express anything at all, whether a feeling, an attitude of mind, a psychological mood, a phenomenon of nature.”³⁶ Yet Stravinsky’s own neo-classical works belie this statement to a large extent, for they are powerful, they *are* moving. Zappa may well have intended this guitar solo as a cruel joke, a satirical investigation into the shallowness of the industry and a savage commentary about the ease with which people may be deluded by certain arrangements of notes. If that is what he meant, perhaps he may have eventually succeeded in deluding himself. In the final analysis this gargantuan *Watermelon in Easter Hay*, the musical Frankenstein’s monster to which he has given birth, may be reckoned at one and the same time both ugly and a thing of beauty. Whether he deliberately intended to manipulate the emotions of the listener or not, this music is powerful:

35 Thanks to correspondence from ‘Zappologist’, Stuart Circe for pointing this out to me, (see appendix). Prior to his explanation I had simply heard ‘beautiful’ music. This allows the idea of sublation: *Aufheben* – (cf. Inwood’s commentary on *Hegel’s Introductory Lectures on Aesthetics*. p.193): “*Aufheben*, used by Hegel to mean both cancel, annul *and* preserve, fix in mind, idealise. The negation of space is an attribute of music (...) ‘sublate’ from the irregular past participle, *sublatus*, of the Latin verb *tollere* which has a similar ambiguity (raise up, elevate *and* uproot, destroy).”

36 See Griffiths, Paul, *Modern Music — A Concise History from Debussy to Boulez* Thames & Hudson, London, 1978 p.66.

Watermelon in Easter Hay was one of three guitar pieces — along with *Black Napkins* and *Zoot Allures* — to which the *Zappa Family Trust* retained the rights as constituting the ‘soul’ of Frank Zappa. In January 1997 Dweezil Zappa released them on CD.³⁷

‘Selling the soul’ is a well-known Zappalogical theme³⁸ and it is ironical indeed, if figuratively speaking at least, his ‘soul’ was sold after he died. But to return to the story: Joe and Mary do not become what they set out to be, nonetheless they are temporarily *redeemed*, for Mary gets to go home and Joe finds some kind of contentment. Yet, this is redemption at a price, and as Ben Watson rightly says, “Get real! Mary winds up going home to sexual abuse (her father is waiting for her in the tool-shed) and Joe is reduced to being a wage slave — some redemption!”³⁹

Once again, it seems that happy endings are for Hollywood and Disneyland and reality and imagination are never the same, but as this is only an operetta, as a work of art its very negativity is instructive, it claims the antithesis of redemption as *redemptive*. Finally, *The Central Scrutinizer* advises us to be like Joe, “Hock your imaginary guitar and get a good job” — but of course, this is the character’s advice not Zappa’s. *The Central Scrutinizer* then informs the listener that he is going to dispense with the plastic megaphone and introduce the last song, *A Little Green Rosetta* in his “regular voice.” The listener may now assume that Zappa himself is speaking ‘out of character’ for the first time on the album. This leads to the conclusion that although the deliberately stupid and repetitive, *A Little Green Rosetta*, shares the physical space of the operetta on vinyl or C.D., it exists

37 Watson: *The Complete Guide to the Music of Frank Zappa* p.105 (The rights to all of his music, apart from these instrumental solos, was sold to *Rykodisc* before he died.)

38 Ref. the album, *Zappa in New York* (1976) *Titties n’ Beer* (what men sell their souls for) parallels Marlowe’s *Dr Faustus* and is also credited musically by Watson as a reworking of Stravinsky’s *The Soldiers Tale*.

39 Thanks to correspondence from Ben Watson, see appendix.

separately. It is performed ‘outside’ and apart from the rest of the music on the album — rather like the painted architectural border around Piero’s *Resurrection*.

A Little Green Rosetta as last song on the album taunts the listener with its banality, urging the fingers towards the ‘off button’, questioning taste itself. Meanwhile the first song, *Joe’s Garage* only suggests playing “the same old song — ONE MORE TIME” (because it is easy) all day long. *Joe’s Garage* smacks of the desire for the endlessly repetitive, whilst *A Little Green Rosetta* actually delivers, “One more time!” again and again, *ad nauseam*. As mentioned earlier, the renascent sentiment of *Joe’s Garage* is counteracted and punctuated with regular interjections of “Turn it down!” and so the interpretative cycle is complete, for what is ‘moving’ *for me* is too harsh, too loud, or over sentimental *for you*.

Therefore the contrast between the soaring *Watermelon in Easter Hay* and the ‘sing along’ song, *Joe’s Garage* marks yet another antithesis. The latter describes the teenage band’s growth from obscurity as an idyll, like the first flowering of youth. It is a reminiscence of ‘a time before’ — a lost pubescence, but only registered as such when the band broke up, and a reminder that now, “they will never get the chance to play again.” Simultaneously, the current band are playing the song ‘now’ but singing about the ‘event’ in the past tense, “It *was* down in Joe’s Garage” that further delineates music itself as an anachronism: the event that cannot be appreciated until it is over, by which time — it is too late.

The song *Joe’s Garage* comes across as an ironic yet wistful reflection. In reality, Zappa’s band, *The Mothers of Invention* enjoyed several reincarnations over the years with amazing musicians demonstrating all kinds of instrumental and vocal skill. Zappa creates a theoretical space where time is frozen, where the band might be forever terrible, the equipment always pathetic, where he is playing

a “beat-up *Stratocaster* with a whammy bar” — his own skills limited in those days to simple note-bending — yet this was a kind of heaven.

IV. Irony and Pastiche.

Irony could not have begun until the period of reflection, because it is fashioned of falsehood by dint of a reflection which wears the mask of truth. Here emerges the great principle of human institutions, confirming the origin of poetry in this work: that since the first men of the gentile world had the simplicity of children, who are truthful by nature, the first fables could not feign anything false; they must therefore have been, as they have been defined above, true narrations.⁴⁰

IV.i. Now it is pertinent to draw particular attention to that ironic observation which was ever Zappa’s trademark. Of course, it is necessary to contextualise Zappa’s irony within political, religious, social, and other contexts; after all, many of the songs were wrapped in topical issues of the day. Yet the political intrigues and scandals on which he sardonically preys are illustrative of the universal complexities of humanity. As Zappa’s collective work exists as a lasting memorial to his achievements, its significance will change, but he seems to have anticipated this — partly because it was *always* changing at all stages of its development. He constantly insisted on referring back to previous incarnations of songs, to snippets of conversation and earlier ideas. His characters, usually based on real people, take on almost Chaucerian overtones of timelessness, just as we imagine the original ‘Wife of Bath’ or the ‘Miller’ may have once walked in the world as real people *before* they were immortalised in print. His output

40 Vico *NS* p.408.

constantly challenged the certainty of form, for try as they might Zappa's fans could never anticipate the contents of the next album, (or the band line-up).

The music of the past generally recalls an incomprehensible rite of passage for a band or an orchestra, but Zappa was forever dipping into the back catalogue so that all of his ideas resurfaced and could be presented as one continuous concept. He stirred up the mixture of musical possibilities, cherry-picking at will, exploring the virtuosity of those on stage with him. As diverse as they were, the albums contained a series of running jokes and a continuance of narrative whilst inhabiting separate status. Zappa as composer, performer, and producer was a force to be reckoned with — a veritable *Central Scrutinizer* at the hub of the aesthetic that he wished to propose. Vico maintains that the earliest people were as open minded as children, reliant upon the truth of fable. Like Zappa's fans, they must have realised eventually that the storyteller could easily manipulate them.

His audience witnessed Zappa's delight in being in control on stage. Literally, he only had to raise an eyebrow to set a predetermined routine in motion. Zappa's music was certainly not 'religious'⁴¹ but his performance was ritualistic in several ways. Firstly, it was encompassed within the self-imposed commitment to avant-garde performance art, with himself as chief celebrant preaching to a society which at the time needed cult figures to question authority. Secondly, the social ritual of the record buying youth culture, as ever, desperately seeking identity, framed his *raison d'être*.

Those familiar with the Vichian pattern of *corsi et ricorsi*, (that eternal and universal ever-repeating 'avant-garde' of cultural possibility) might agree that

⁴¹ Religion for Vico meant 'ties' or ligatures - re – *ligato*. Also, ref. Zappa's French fan club: *des Fils Del'Invention* who name their magazine after one of his most famous songs, *Le Pinguin Ligoté (Penguin in Bondage)*.

once religious ritual seemingly disappeared in any era, the art, the music and the ‘paraphernalia’ that went with it were also subject to a series of changes. Firstly art became secularised, then it became subject to derision, and then finally it fell victim to iconoclasm. In other words, before it was smashed to bits it was laughed at. This state of affairs recalls Adorno’s comments on how music comes to reflect and form further instances of comical degeneration.

Music has become comic in the present phase primarily because something so completely useless is carried on with all the visible signs of the strain of serious work. By being alien to solid people, music reveals their alienation from one another, and the consciousness of alienation vents itself in laughter. In music — or similarly in lyric poetry — the society which judged them comic becomes comic. But involved in this laughter is the decay of the sacral spirit of reconciliation. All music today can easily sound as *Parsifal* did to Nietzsche’s ear. It recalls incomprehensible rites and surviving masks from an earlier time and is provocative nonsense.⁴²

Once our deprivation of music as a serious form is realised we run the risk of seeing ourselves naked and outside Eden. To be accused of being unable to listen to music except in terms of social prestige, regardless whether a composition is categorised as ‘high class’, as ‘underground’ or whatever, *is* shameful and comical. Adorno cites the glorious example where Harpo Marx smashes the piano to reclaim the harp inside. Music is “alien to solid people” and that is comical in itself. What purpose can it have for “solid people” other than as reinforcement for existent values, or as a utilitarian predisposition to societal development — a precursor to mating perhaps, or as an accompaniment to the

⁴² Cf. Adorno: *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* from *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, (New York 1982). Adorno basically accuses the music fan of not listening to music itself for its own worth but rather of being caught up in it and ‘wearing it’ as one might a fetish. “The terror which Schoenberg and Webern spread, today as in the past, comes not from their incomprehensibility but from the fact that they are all too correctly understood. Their music gives form to that anxiety, that terror, that insight into the catastrophic situation which others merely evade by regressing. They are called individualists, and yet their work is nothing but a single dialogue with the powers that destroy individuality — powers whose ‘formless shadows’ fall gigantically on their music.”

purchase of the weekly groceries from the superstore. Now, that *is* funny, but care is needed in being so judgmental, for to condemn music as purely cerebral is also to miss out on something pretty basic. The musician may truly delight in his ability to cause discomfort to those who have the audacity to say that ‘they know what they think’ his music is about. On the other hand, surely ‘good’ music speaks for itself?

Zappa detested hype, particularly in the music business, but it is noticeable that he genuinely appreciated many examples of musical form. Adorno may rightly speak of laughter initiated as a safety device to prevent societal delusion instigating social division, for the old music ritual never really went away, it merely changed appearance. Style emboldens form and Zappa deliberately redressed and reused *form* to upset the audience’s perception. He played with style as he relied upon pseudonym⁴³ — a multiplicity of personae, to ensure that the last laugh is on anyone that may judge music, or a society that judges itself *with any certainty*. Music is not Christian, Jewish, Black or White, Feminist, Gay — except by association. That musical style could be adapted to represent factions within society simply made those factions easy pickings.

Hence for Zappa, white men singing the Blues is embarrassing.⁴⁴ The album *Ruben & The Jets* establishes that Zappa loves recreating the wonderful sound but not the sloppy sentiment of fifties music, as apparently he cannot stand love

43 He adopted personae in the Kierkegaardian manner — as if to argue a point, not in the manner of David Bowie who deliberately recreated himself (it seems) at every opportunity.

44 Zappa’s song, *You Are What You Is*, acts as a commentary upon the strange ‘whiteness’ that befell Michael Jackson. It advocates the necessity of self-respect regardless of ethnic persuasion: “You know what you are, you is what you am, a cow don’t make ham.” With reference to this matter, Zappa also stated elsewhere: “What is embarrassing about white men singing the Blues — is that *they* are not embarrassed.”

songs but enjoys *a-capella* singing and *Du-Wop*.⁴⁵ He hates Evangelism but enthuses over the power of Gospel singing.⁴⁶ One could see how a philosophical stance might emerge via Zappa's songs in terms of their lyrical content but there is another wealth of musical language (one much more expressive) where musical form is all. Zappa's strength is in selectivity — the ironic separation of form from content, content from style. This concept prevails throughout his career ensuring that nothing is sacred and all is reusable.

The reason for the existence of such Dadaist 'anti-music' as *A Little Green Rosetta* is complex but may be neatly summed up by Adorno as the following contradiction: "The reaction of the listeners seems to have no relation to the playing of the music".⁴⁷ By continually contrasting the inspirational with the tedious, the comical with the serious, a blanket acceptance of 'everything' as 'good' may be avoided. The trick is simply *to listen* in order not to be 'taken' unaware. The sarcasm is evident in Zappa: "If you like our music and you like what we do, we want you to know that we like you all too"⁴⁸ as *obviously* tongue-in-cheek. It simply questions the expectations of a performer/audience relationship.

Detecting sarcasm, or humour, or indeed, fear for the future of humanity, is one thing, but recognising it in musical form is something different. Wittgenstein had

45 Cf. Zappa's song, *Charva*: "Charva I love you, I love you more and more. I swear its not because your Daddy owns a liquor store."

46 Cf. Zappa's song, *The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing*. The Gospel style of singing runs counter-wise to the message Zappa associates with Television Evangelism: " He's got twenty million dollars in his heavenly bank account — and you suckers ain't got nothing."

47 Cf. Adorno: *On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening* from *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, (New York 1982). Incidentally, one of Zappa's albums is entitled, *Does Humor belong in Music?*

48 Cf. Packard Goose from the album, *Does Humor Belong in Music?* (1986)

asked a similar question, “How can one tell what ‘expressive playing’ is?”⁴⁹ Music is not necessarily ‘good’ or enjoyable to listen to. Obviously a requiem for the dead is not meant to sound ‘funny’ but a funeral march easily becomes comical when it is heard out of context. Therefore, one must not presume to ‘know’ how to interpret music any more than how to interpret fresco painting. Wittgenstein concludes that we are *taught* how to react to music because it is part of a cultural definition. Hence, music described as ‘a nocturne’ or ‘pastoral’ — or the criticism once freely made that Serialism was evocative of concentration camps or machine shops — epitomises conditioning, judgement made by association.⁵⁰ Zappa seeks to catch his audience unaware, but his bitterest contempt is for the music reviewers of his work, whom he advises to “squat on the cosmic utensil.”

IV.ii. It would be wrong to overstate Zappa’s work as a *philosophy* in itself — it is nearer to comical satire, nevertheless, a philosophical questioning gradually proposes itself. One might tentatively suggest that a Zappalogical critique of societal delusion gradually forms as it does with a reading of Kierkegaard.⁵¹ Both men, in their day, were found to be similarly ill at ease with the church, with social order, with politicians, with journalists and the like. What is described here as a ‘redemptive philosophy’ is seen to evolve by the *means* of writing, performing and creating icons, in part as the continuance of *mythopoiesis* yet also

⁴⁹ Ray Monk, *Wittgenstein: The Duty Of Genius*, p.538

⁵⁰ Eimert, Herbert. (1957). “To hear political totalitarianism in a systematic order of notes is as witless as mistaking textbook harmony for nature.” See Griffiths, Paul, *Modern Music — A Concise History from Debussy to Boulez*, Thames & Hudson, London, 1978.

⁵¹ See Roger Poole: *Kierkegaard - The Indirect Communication*. p.10. Poole makes a similar observation: “I must at this point distance myself from the theological tradition that believes (...) that Kierkegaard’s aesthetic works were written to propose a clear and coherent philosophical doctrine.” Kierkegaard’s abuse at the hands of critics and also his response to that abuse informed his content.

in part, as the deconstruction of the same. Zappa performed with a foot in each camp, simultaneously creating and destroying his own mythology as he went. In manoeuvres, sometimes cynical, but always critical, he pierced the fabric of accepted social simulacrum by exposing the absurdity of it all.⁵² Our suspicion that all is not as it should be in what we take to be the real world may be aroused by reading novels, or by the creative urge expressed in sound or in paint, or by watching an actor play out a role.

As a serious composer and musician, and a man of integrity, Zappa became and still remains open to misinterpretation. Towards the end of his life he became briefly, a political figure, “I tell you I’m considering running for President in the next election” he said,⁵³ but that integrity is not synonymous with success in any field should come as no surprise. And by this time, he was already very ill with cancer. In the political arena, as in everything, he was as much a victim of ironic circumstance as well as perpetrator.

For Zappa, it was highly ironic that his most successful single, *Valley Girl*, was largely unappreciated as a social commentary about an empty headed individual with a ridiculous affected accent, whose chief concerns were “to buy some jeans to fit her butt, and where to get her toenails cut.” He points and pokes fun at American society but creates an audience that responds by ‘lapping it up’ — because although they identify with his observations, they fail to see *themselves*

52 See Roger Poole, *The Indirect Communication* (Introduction) p.1. “It is my contention that Kierkegaard remains a mystery to this day (...) I shall suggest that the mystery is impenetrable to the end, and that is because Kierkegaard’s writing has made all solutions impossible.”

50. Cf. *FZC*, p.228. See also *FZC* pp. 246/247. Vaclav Havel, poet, playwright, and President of Czechoslovakia, (1993) writes, “Frank Zappa was one of the gods of the Czech underground during the nineteen-seventies and eighties. It was an era of complete isolation. Local rock musicians and audiences were hounded by the police (...) I never dreamed that I might meet him one day, but shortly after the revolution when I was already president, Zappa turned up in Prague. (...) What fascinated and excited him was the fact that the artist had a role to play in active politics.”

as stupid. The song was catchy, amusing and right for the market, therefore 'units' were 'shifted' and in the meantime the social message was mislaid. The dichotomy between aesthetic judgement and hard cash requires elucidation not justification: money allowed for new opportunities to arise and Zappa needed money in order to create. Incidentally, Vico, who spent twenty years writing *The New Science* and had little commercial success himself, might say that it was ever thus, or that success was simply down to 'providence':

For though this world has been created in time and particular, the institutions established therein by providence are universal and eternal.⁵⁴

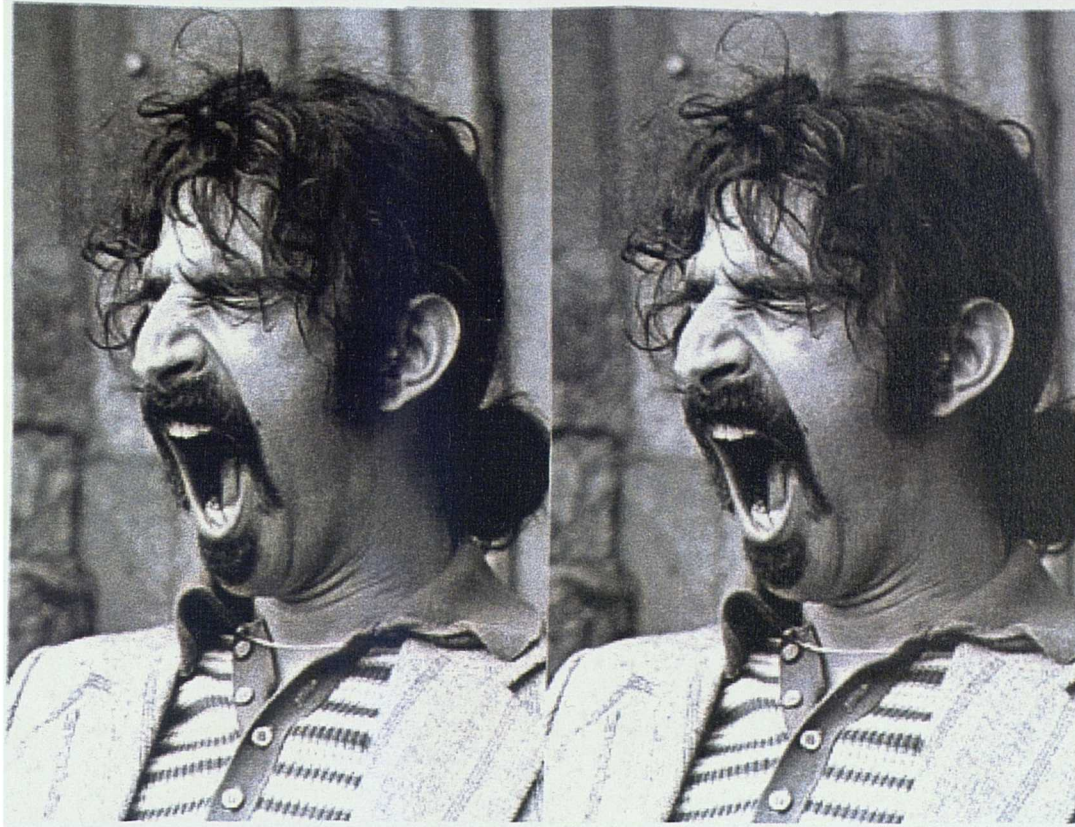
V. Duplication and Blasphemy

Let's be realistic about this, the guitar can be the single most blasphemous device on the face of the earth. That's why I like it ...The disgusting stink of a too-loud electric guitar, now that's my idea of a good time.⁵⁵

V.i. In the last chapter I made great play with the idea that impersonation could be considered blasphemous and I wish to return to that theme before moving on. In the fresco dedicated to the *Legend of the True Cross*, Piero della Francesca graphically depicts the execution of the evil king, Chosroes. The king's sin is made apparent by his audacity to assume the same physical features as God the Father, (who also appears in a cloud in the same fresco). Conversely, imitation is often considered the most sincere form of flattery and much is made on television of those 'look-alike wannabes' who emulate celebrity figures.

54 Vico: *NS* 342.

55 See *The Ultimate Guitar Book* p.6 attributed to Frank Zappa in an interview for *Sound International* (1979).



Zappa's first love was percussion, hence his early teenage admiration for the percussive music of Edgard Varèse. In fact, Zappa played drums before taking up guitar. So, what a coup it must have been for him to persuade the drummer of the most famous band in the world — Ringo Starr — to disguise himself as Frank Zappa! It was nothing short of the deconstruction of a cultural icon. In the film, *200 Motels* there are three 'Zappas' — Frank himself, mostly in the background directing, a look-alike dummy, and Ringo Starr made up to look something like Zappa. All are dressed in identical clothing. After the break-up of *The Beatles*, Ringo's move to the big screen was less than auspicious anyway but many were shocked at his ready compliance in Zappa's low-budget fiasco.⁵⁶

⁵⁶ See Watson, *FZC — In Respect of Rubbish* (1982) p.103. The film *200 Motels* also features another famous drummer and notorious hotel room wrecker, Keith Moon, (drummer with *The Who*).

Just as there is a need for a considered interpretation of the devotion needed to paint an altarpiece or to create an icon, there is also the possibility that one might see merit in the deconstruction of the same. At this juncture in their career, it must be appreciated that *The Beatles* were sick of their god-like status. It was obvious to them that they *needed* demystifying. Any preliminary investigation into demystification would quickly ascertain that *being* a Beatle (or Frank Zappa) is not the same as *playing the role* of a Beatle (or Frank Zappa) but the difference between playing music and *playing at* music is not so obvious. Evidently, from what has been said here about communicating feelings, there is a gulf between Zappa's playing *Watermelon in Easter Hay* and how his audience may listen to it. This guitar solo reminds us that playing and listening are not the same thing at all, and this has further connotations.

For a guitar to be 'blasphemous' one must believe that there is something for it to blaspheme against. As a subversive implement within the music itself Zappa's guitar playing is frequently innovative and expressive, basically he used his guitar as a weapon. Zappa's blasphemy, however, does not stop short with his guitar playing. His manner was often self-effacing but he was never the person others wanted him to be. He saw the concept of ugliness as an attack against the thin façade covering the hypocrisy of the so-called 'Beautiful People'. Taking his cue from Stravinsky and Varèse he utilised musical form in his arsenal. Again, he was by no means alone in this pursuit, but unusually, he remained largely but not exclusively outside avant-garde activities, (whose own 'tradition' was earmarked as a paradox) preferring to wallow near the mainstream, from where he could inflict most damage.

More than most, his assured place within twentieth century music acknowledges that as much as two World Wars disrupted the flow of artistic activity, they were equally responsible for its redirection too. Although by 1908 Schoenberg had composed without theme or tonality and Stravinsky had evolved a new concept

of rhythm their legacy was largely disregarded until much later. Bartok, Berg and Webern were all departing from what was known as music, ideologues like Andrei Zhdanov and Joseph Goebbles ultimately decreed that certain types of music and painting were *illegal* and so forced many artists to run for their lives. The political correctness of music annoyed the young Zappa and fuelled a sincere admiration for Varèse and Stravinsky. His analysis and development of musical language made him a very unusual ‘Rock Star’. Nonetheless, to tear at the common fabric of contemporary ‘culture’ he needed the Rock idiom as the podium from where a rebellious response to musical inheritance as a continuing ideology might be credibly delivered (without, like so many others, being ‘rebellious’ merely for the sake of it).

This kind of subversion demanded some re-education on the part of the public: “Forgetting extermination is part of extermination, because it is also the extermination of memory, of history, of the social, etc.”⁵⁷ It is in the interest of certain parties *to* forget: Watson notes that “Zappa’s recognition of the Nazi tendencies within bourgeois society is exemplary”.⁵⁸ His anticipation that his own brand of musical ‘blasphemy’ would attack bourgeois principles and undermine the monopoly held by the music business and culture industry at large was well founded. Furthermore, he simply enriched musical form itself by creating a discourse in which twentieth century music was not swept under the carpet.

The social restrictions imposed by tradition and commerce that encourage the further imposition of value-laden attributes upon music are rightly perceived as divisive and delusory. The music industry enforces the false perception that certain styles of music are made for certain types or classes of people. Frank

57 Cf. Baudrillard, *Holocaust from Simulacra & Simulation*. p.49.

58 Cf. correspondence with Ben Watson, see appendix

Zappa denied his output as being particularly commercial or avant-garde as it claimed *both* traditions and indeed, it promulgated and practised both grammars. In this way he upheld a ‘catholic’ approach to music reflected by a general disapproval of the deliberate machinations of cultural dominance that attempts to dictate the type of music people should have access to.

Zappa’s critique of musical snobbery led him to dip into a deep pool of musical style. However, whilst his humour enabled him to create a pastiche of what he found, he also respected musical form beyond its multifarious social connotations. If what we hear with Zappa is an ironic delivery, the next logical step would be to search for an underlying truth (if there is any?) behind the irony, beneath the pastiche. We may be forever disappointed if our quest amounts to an attempt to rationalise what is not rational. As Zappa highlights cultural pretension he legitimately questions dogma in any form, musical, religious, social or otherwise. Zappa may be accused of not pointing us in the right direction but he makes no hesitation when it comes to showing us where we are going wrong. This immediately prompts the re-thinking of one’s entrenched (identitarian) position.

To this end, the artistic process of Zappa’s making comes to share the universal platform on whose grounds Piero della Francesca’s art purported the same human quest — that of redemption.

V.ii. To shed further light on the atemporal nature of this relationship, one could refer to Gillian Rose’s discussion of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism. Rose’s reading of Marx’s theory is that it describes the transactions of sets of value from one object to the next, where one set of concrete social relations is transformed into another.⁵⁹ *We’re Only in it for the Money*, the album which is

⁵⁹ Rose, Gillian, *The Melancholy Science*, pp.143/144

Zappa's and Cal Shenkel's distorted reflection of *The Beatles* and Peter Blake's *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, is reborn as a nightmare of ugly men in drag surrounded by vegetables. Furthermore, the arrangement of life-size cut outs, dummies, and band members (on both album covers) presented as a series of overlapping figures is vaguely reminiscent of Piero's overlapping angels in *The Nativity* or the selection of saints and heroes with which Renaissance artists peopled their altarpieces. (The link is less tenuous when one considers the esteem with which record covers were once held, so much so that they counted as works of art).⁶⁰

IS ART A PASTICHE OF ITSELF?

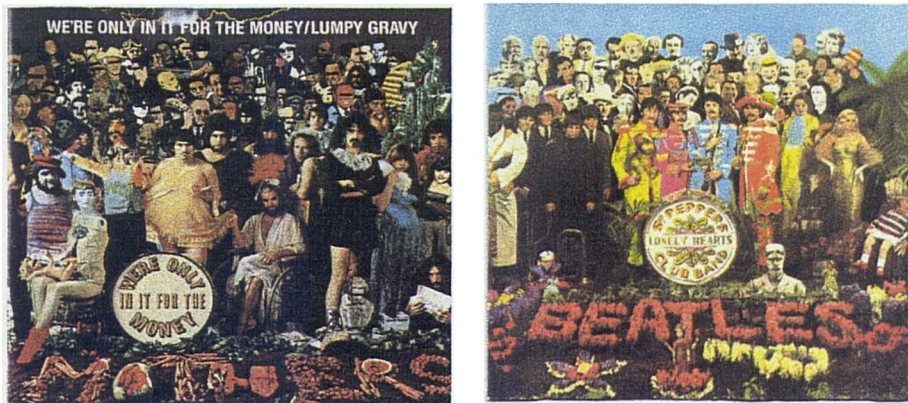


Fig. 24. Two Album Covers.

⁶⁰ It is worth noting that the cover for *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band* was conceived as a work of art by Peter Blake and accepted as such by the public. Carried with pride under the arm and often 'on display' — it was a visually desirable object. American artist, Cal Shenkel was responsible for its deconstruction, but *We're only in it for the Money* was similarly appreciated. Richard Hamilton designed the next Beatles' album cover, *The White Album* as a minimalist antidote to its predecessor. It was simply white and shiny with 'Beatles' in small letters and a serial number embossed the surface.

The song, *Call Any Vegetable*⁶¹ (from the previous album) was aimed at ‘Flower People’ redefined as ‘Vegetable People’ — effectively, Zappa’s audience. It was addressed to those who expect everything (the reinforcement of their own values) and give nothing (except applause and money for what they imagine is that reinforcement). “Call any vegetable and the chances are good that the vegetable will respond to you” is deliberately insulting. The derision implies the deepest condemnation of reification where is something taken by many as ‘real’ (i.e., the exploding plastic phenomenon, which was ‘Flower Power’) which only *later* becomes transparent and false. The baby in the manger has been substituted by a watermelon — now what is the difference? This is not a denial of Christian value but an attack against complacency. The simulacrum imposed by church and state is exposed. By these means, the sudden realisation that art forms act as duly considered intellectual prescriptions for a desired social reality, which in turn aims to give rise to new versions of that reality, is emergent and constant.

It seems that there is little ‘new’ to be found if this ‘timeless’ concept merely categorises music as forever accessible, to be revisited and filched from at will. But this is not the case; Zappa himself makes an intuitive (one might say, Vichian) leap into the past, in order to ‘redeem’ (that is pay back) a certain fellow musician to whom he felt some affinity. There is something suspicious about the eighteenth century composer, long forgotten, and rediscovered by chance — Frank’s namesake, Francesco Zappa. Francesco’s music, originally written for two violins and an upright bass, was ‘discovered’ and recorded by Frank Zappa on synclavier and released as a C.D. If one were to depict — *à la* Stanley Spencer — a resurrection, this kind of resurrection of ‘dead’ music as a generous gesture would be most suitable. It would be fair to say that this is not the most popular of his C.D. releases and that it seems to offend musically self-righteous

61 From the album, *Freak Out*. (1966). Cf. Ruhlmann, *FZC* p.19, “While still satiric, the lyrics tended toward the humorous and absurdist, a timely tenor given that the album was released one week before *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*”

purists of every persuasion.⁶² Nonetheless, whether ‘Francesco’ is a *nom de plume* for ‘Frank’, or not, Zappa’s gesture to the past marks respect for the *loss* of meaning within musical form. It also questions the validity of the populist approach towards the selection of art from the past, where certain composers and painters find favour in a ready market — and are milked dry. Over time, the dichotomy surrounding value brings about a necessary revolution in the arts but in the short term, anachronism may inspire a desperately needed re-evaluation of what is currently on offer.⁶³

62 By contrast, the highly commercialised, *Switched on Bach. Vols. I & II.* and *Clockwork Orange*, (Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony) as played by Walter/Wendy Carlos were a success.

63 See Watson. *The Complete Guide to Music of Frank Zappa*, p.8: “Zappa’s cleverest trick — and one which still provokes frenzied speculation among Zappologists — was his ability to parody trends and music biz absurdities before they appeared!”

Parachronicity

A *self* does not amount to much, but no self is an island; each exists in a fabric of relations that is now more complex and mobile than ever before. Young or old, man or woman, rich or poor, a person is always located at 'nodal' points of specific communication circuits no matter how tiny these may be. Or better, one is always located at a post through which various kinds of messages pass. No one, not even the least privileged among us, is ever entirely powerless over the messages that traverse and position him at the post of sender, addressee or referent.¹

Jean François Lyotard

I. Zappa's Theoretical Space.

I.i. So far, we have seen that Piero della Francesca investigates the atemporal in various works including *The Legend of the True Cross*, *The Flagellation* and *The Resurrection*. His composition explores anachronism via spatial arrangement; his subject pertains to the incongruity of mixing past with present on the painted surface. His work admits the dislocation of time and events by means of the painted representation of himself and people he knew as key characters in impossible settings. Secondly, it has been noted that Frank Zappa doubted the

¹ Lyotard. *The Postmodern Condition* p.15

linear perception of temporality and that certain of his musical constructions also deliberately explore xenochrony.²

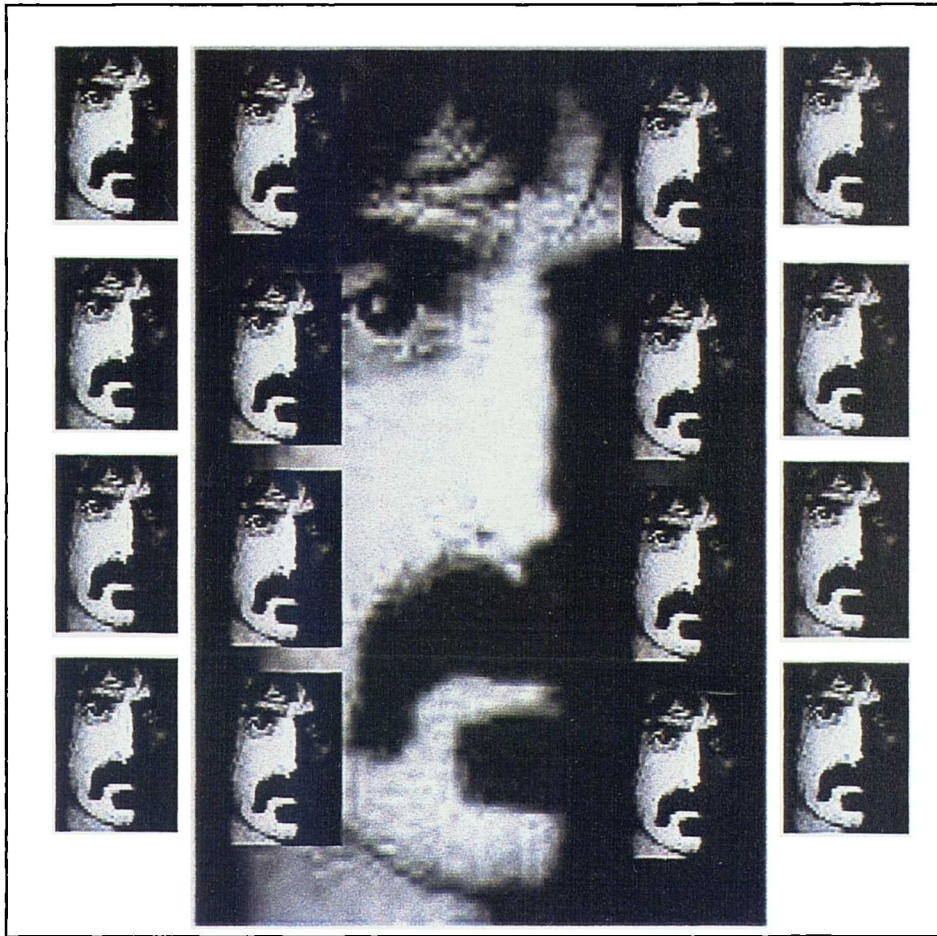


Fig. 25. Multiple Zappa Images

² See Watson, *The Complete Guide to F.Z.* p.78: “*Friendly Little Finger* (On the album, *Zoot Allures* 1976) was recorded using ‘experimental re-synchronization’, which meant combining tracks recorded at different times and by musicians who weren’t listening to each other. Back then multi-tracking was a means of achieving a ‘perfect’ real group emulation, not a tool for experiment. Zappa had to fight his engineers to do it. Zappa used the technique on *Joe’s Garage*, when he called it ‘xenochrony’ (alien time) floating his guitar solos over rhythm tracks that aren’t playing in the same time zone.”

A composer's job involves the decoration of fragments of time. Without music to decorate it, time is just a bunch of boring production deadlines or dates by which bills must be paid.³

It's all about random sequencing (...) Well, I think that everything is happening all of the time, and the only reason why we think linearly is because we are conditioned to do it. That's because the human idea of stuff is that it has a beginning and it has an end. I don't think that's necessarily true. I think of time as a constant, a spherical constant (...) What something is depends more on when it is than anything else. You can't define something accurately until you understand when it is.⁴

If one were to accept Zappa's account that "everything is happening all of the time" then surely he shares with Piero della Francesca in the joint denial of time consciousness. It has also been argued in this essay that Zappa recreated a 'Mary, Joseph and Jesus' to whom he felt he could sincerely (and on the surface, somewhat negatively) relate. This marks a useful comparison to Piero's vision of the Holy Family and as we shall see later, provides a contrast in an interpretation of the same subject by Stanley Spencer. The purpose of this chapter is to bring these three individuals together in some meaningful way.

'Time' as a mental construct expressed by means of art forms may allow the hypothesis that creative intention or purpose persists within a theoretical or intuitive parachrony. The construct could then be analysed without temporal restriction. This pursuit is legitimate in the present analysis because *in their work, Piero, Zappa and Spencer have separately sought to abandon the linear temporality to which people are conditioned. Zappa's stance is different only in preferring music (rather than painting) over and above the perceived inadequacy of chronology. Before proceeding further, this requires some elaboration.*

3 Frank Zappa, RFZ. p. 193

4 See Watson: FZC, p.48. / *The Complete Guide to FZ.*, p.7.

Although the distinction between writing, playing, performing and listening must be made, in the most general of terms, music is plausibly less 'restrictive' than visual art because of its very nature. Music as an 'amorphous' or 'intangible' finished product — especially when disconnected from its written form — is subject only to the aural sense, it occupies 'the ether', it unequivocally uses 'time' as a vehicle for expressing sound. It is self-defeating and probably unnecessary to argue, but music could be deemed more *immediate* and therefore, more *relevant* to the senses than visual art; as a means of worship it may even be considered better than prayer.⁵ Conversely, as we have seen, music is often sadly abused, exploited for its ability to affect an emotional response, utilised commercially. Zappa's apparent 'negativity' is vital to this enquiry for it necessitates the discernment of truth at the very heart of myth. His music is largely devoid of sentimentality but nonetheless driven by the perpetual striving for excellence. Zappa demanded absolute control over every aspect of production, from band line-up to graphics and cover design, his autonomy permitting the listener a disavowal of usual pre-set limitations — the expectations engendered by conditioning. We hear exactly what he intends us to hear.

Frank was truly a Renaissance man: as a writer of classical and jazz, as a conductor, as a director of feature films. He didn't wait to for people to like it or review it; the minute we finished one thing we were on to something else.⁶

5 See Robinson, Duncan, *Stanley Spencer*, (Arts Council of Great Britain 1976) p.14, "Stanley himself was able to play Bach on the piano by ear. In 1929 he wrote to his wife Hilda that the 'big Bach organ prelude and fugues ... are the most convincing religious expressions I know.' "

6 See *Mojo Magazine* (March issue 1994): Mark Volman *Ex-Turtle* and *Mother's* lead vocalist early 70's.

I.ii. Music has never been more accessible. At its best, its contribution to what may be termed, ‘the collective imagination’⁷ is inspirational, but because of cultural conditioning, some people hardly dare to dip in a toe into this deep pool. Zappa’s identification of stupidity and greed in the music marketplace re-establishes once more the Vichian principle that insists ‘man in his *ignorance* makes himself the rule of the universe’.⁸ Vico says this ignorance leads to two types of conceit, one of nations and another of scholars, and as cynic and satirist, inevitably Zappa would deconstruct both conceits. This overview stems from a growing unease (shared by both Vico and Zappa) with academic, religious, political, and any other establishment — but it also leads to a mistrust of society at large.

If you have a nation of people who refuse to face reality about themselves; about the rest of the world, about anything, they want reinforcement for the fantasy they are living in.⁹

The Zappalogical message hinges upon an ever-growing awareness of cultural manipulation within the *Artworld* per se.¹⁰ The argument that Zappa never

7 See Isaiah Berlin, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment, Vico: Philosophical Ideas*, pp. 103/104. “When Vico speaks of ‘our human mind’, ‘our understanding’, ‘a certain human mind of nations’, ‘our human thought’, ‘our spirit’ and so on, do such phrases refer to what is common to all individual minds, or to some ‘collective’ mind, like Jung’s collective unconscious, but with pantheistic implications?” Berlin notes that, “Vico is a rich, suggestive and original but scarcely a clear, or coherent thinker.”

8 Cf. Popkin, R.H, *Theories of Knowledge, Neoplatonism in The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*. p. 673, (cf., also Chapter One, above). We see that Vico is also in line with at least one branch of Neoplatonist thought: Nicholas of Cusa had said pretty much the same thing in his *De docta ignorantia* of 1440, that all human knowledge is uncertain. “Nothing could be more beneficial for even the most zealous searcher for knowledge than his being in fact most learned in that very ignorance which is peculiarly his own, and the better a man will have known his own ignorance, the greater his learning will be.”

9 Zappa *FZC*, p.214

10 See Danto, Arthur. C, *Transfiguration of the Commonplace*, (Harvard University Press 1981) p.5: *Artworld* is a term for the institutional framework of art. Zappa basically attacked this framework throughout his career, whilst championing the cause of art itself, (See *The Real Frank Zappa Book*, p.193): “Living composers are entitled to proper

ceased to weave throughout his career is that by *cynically* assessing what is on offer in the arts, or anywhere else for that matter, people may arrive eventually at a balanced viewpoint if they *want* to. And so the conviction that a society may easily be deluded by its own complacency with regard to religion, art, or music, is easy to arrive at. One may not be able to affect the passage of time but one may choose *how to* pass the time, (and of course, to choose what music to listen to). Similarly, to question contemporary notions of what is ‘acceptable’ in art and to debate the validation of new works of art by ‘institutions’ is a healthy response.

Zappa’s critique often took the form of performance art. On the album *Roxy & Elsewhere* (1979) there is one track called *Dummy up* that features the character of the ‘evil dope-pusher’ who encourages a member of the band to “smoke a high-school diploma” containing one of Carl Zappa’s smelly socks. Zappa humorously belittles both drug culture and academia simultaneously. He next takes the joke further and to greater effect by claiming that a ‘joint’ made from a college degree — *but without the sock* — will be especially beneficial because, “*with it, you will get, absolutely nothing*”.... “Nothing! Man, *that’s* what I want!”

As many in the audience would have been college students, perhaps Zappa is urging them to question their motivation for study. He concludes the sketch tongue-in-cheek, “A true *Zen* saying: ‘Nothing is what I want’” and in this he ironically suggests two meanings, firstly the precept found within Buddhism (and tirelessly expounded by Hippies), that to dispel desire by means of eliminating ego (hence ‘wanting nothing’) is beneficial to the soul.¹¹ Secondly, and by contrast,

compensation for the use of their works. (Dead guys don’t collect — one reason their music is chosen for performance). There is another reason for the popularity of Dead Person Music. Conductors prefer it because they need more than anything else to look good.”

¹¹ Zappa’s, *The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing* is a pseudo-Christian satirical reappraisal of Christ’s words, “The meek shall inherit the earth”. Interestingly, he did find Zen useful, “I thought, now look, this makes sense. This is real. Why didn’t someone tell me about this before?” (See. *FZC* p.163.)

he denigrates the nihilism of those who 'want nothing' because they lack worthwhile goals. Zappa mocks drug taking as a means of escapism, unnecessary to the rock-concert experience, and generally valueless.¹² A closer *listening* leads to a re-evaluation of the performance itself, for he is also questioning audience expectation. The band members try to act out the parts in the sketch as instructed, but they do not aspire to be actors and the result is painfully and often hilariously amateurish. Watson reminds us that Zappa *deliberately* leaves in "slips of the tongue and mistakes" where other record producers would edit them out. Zappa slashes at the simulacrum (subsequently identified by Borges and Baudrillard) with the sharp knife of his *poiesis* and so deconstructs the concert-going experience. Within this new context, his aesthetic is seen as homage to a less idealised or impure form. Now, (and realistically for once) the ideals of 'Beauty and Truth' are no longer perceived as ennobled or ennobling. This accounts for different levels of 'meaning' to an object or a piece of music as not only possible, but inevitable. Talking about these levels of perception Danto also picks up this thread:

Instead of seeing paint they saw a girl in the window, the rape of the Sabine women, the Agony in the garden, the Ascension of the Virgin.¹³

12 Bearing in mind the attitude taken by 'underground' magazines and the 'rock culture' generally whereby 'soft' drugs were often viewed with ambivalence, Zappa's anti-drug / anti-alcohol stance was unexpected. The monstrous Mr. Hyde character in Zappa's movie, *200 Motels* whose personality degenerates along with his appearance as he imbibes beakers of foamy liquid in his laboratory, is a warning to us all. The Monster (like 'Barney' in *The Simpsons*) is funny, as is any good drunk, but is also seen as another victim of excess, lulled into apathy, prone to soporific forgetfulness, and finally left without ambition, hence 'wanting nothing'.

13 I feel that the Zappalogical connection with Zen identifies his means of deconstruction as similar to that of other American composers, John Cage for example. See Danto, Arthur, C, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* p.134. Danto quotes a passage from Ch'ing Yuan: "Before I had studied Zen for thirty years, I saw mountains as mountains and waters as waters. When I arrived at more intimate knowledge, I came to the point where I saw that mountains are not mountains, and waters are not waters. But now that I have got the very substance, I am at rest. For it is just that I see mountains once again as mountains, and waters once again as waters."

Instead of ‘hearing’ music, concert-goers and record buyers, who “expect reinforcement for the fantasy they are living in”, hear what they choose to hear.

The idea that music has emotional impact, although common to a number of cultures, is far from universal. The Navajo consider the impact of music to be medicinal, not emotional. Music is good if it cures the patient, bad if it does not. The Western idea that music is an object of aesthetic contemplation is not extended to all sorts of music in the West, (...) Jazz is an obvious example of music that most Westerners take to be participatory. Another is rock ‘n’ roll. (...) Rock is not primarily seen as a phenomenon for contemplation (hence the oddity of rock magazines, which Frank Zappa describes as interviews with those who can’t talk by those who can’t write for those who can’t read).¹⁴

To overstate the obvious, there is a whole world of difference between going to a concert and listening to a recording. The former may be described in the main as ‘participatory’ the latter, if not as tending toward contemplation, certainly tends toward a personal reinforcement of perceived values or individual reflection. So much depends on what the individual brings to the music. Curiously, by recording music one engages immediately in the creation of a ‘historical record’ that seemingly has the potential to return the individual to the ‘event’. As much of Zappa’s work was recorded ‘live’ and then subject to radical editing and re-mixing, he deliberately exposed ‘recording’ as a metaphor for performance.¹⁵ Although something of the ‘event’ remains inherent within the work — the event is not synonymous with the work.

The synaesthesia of ‘performance’ as a sensual occurrence pales on record, but provokes (to a greater or lesser degree, and according to the listener’s

¹⁴ See Higgins, K.M. *The Music of Our Lives* in *Oxford Readers: Aesthetics* (OUP Editors, Feagin & Maynard, 1997)

¹⁵ See William Ruhlmann (1994) *FZC*, p.48, also see *FZC*, with reference to the album, *You Can’t Do That On Stage Anymore. Vol. 1.*, p.41: “THIS COLLECTION IS NOT CHRONOLOGICAL.” The notes announced in bold face capital letters state: “The performance from any band from any one year can be (and often is) edited to the performance of any other band from any other year, sometimes in the middle of a song.”

perception), an imaginative sequence in the mind's eye.¹⁶ Music is reminiscent of situations, it encourages 'imagination' — that is, human beings may *make images* to evocative music, make associations with other times and places and 'visualise' in time to the sounds. This is thought to be an *emotional* response but it could also describe music as a parachronistic vehicle whereby the listener is transported.

By blending recordings of past performance with overdub or meticulous orchestration (or any other studio effects) the 'performance' may be enhanced, but in the process, the 'original' is lost forever. But then, perhaps it was already 'lost' — as a unique and unrepeatable moment. The listener adjusts preconceived limitations of cultural parameters in order to reinterpret the concept of 'performance' on disc or tape as a simulacrum. In any musical genre, *performance* and the *recording of that performance* is often presented as one and the same — when clearly it is not. Zappa deliberately demystifies the act of 'recording' music so that the record is no longer 'art at one remove' rather it becomes the 'event' itself.

Zappa's music *is* the best, (however vital his social criticism). His music transcends any attempt to enlighten his audience. Indeed, it is as if he sees *enlightenment as mythopoiesis* (and vice-versa) and so extols the virtue that is 'truth' as indefinite: negotiable but worthwhile.¹⁷ The 'Enlightenment', as a

16 Ever conscious of how the audience may 'visualise and listen' to music simultaneously, on the inner sleeve of *Hot Rats* (1969) he writes, "This *movie for your ears* [my Italics] was produced and directed by Frank Zappa".

17 See Jürgen Habermas. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (12 Lectures) from *The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Horkheimer and Adorno*. Horkheimer and Adorno put forward the thesis of a secret complicity to challenge the opposition to mythology, of which enlightened thinking is so certain: "Myth is already enlightenment; and enlightenment reverts to mythology." Vico had prefigured their argument by ascertaining that myth and enlightenment are one and the same in perpetuity. Exposing *mythopoiesis* is enlightening, but 'enlightenment' is only a ruse to contradict myth in order to escape its violence (just as for Vico, religion only *temporarily* brings about order).

historical period emphasising reason and individualism cleared the way for the persistent arrogance of the species, but it also refers to that 'higher state of mind' to which the ascetic aspires. By drawing our attention to the stupidity and greed that surround us, Zappa seriously questions the possibility of human enlightenment. Despite all of the cynicism, he *is* concerned with truth after all — but not from that 'high moral ground' occupied by certain politicians and television evangelists. The implication is that (unlike many of them) he *is* sincere but deeply suspicious of human motives, for all too often, those in high places have been found wanting. Zappa 'on record', languishes with commonality, delights in using 'bad' language,¹⁸ in demystifying sexual proclivities, celebrating detritus, in questioning the acceptability of 'acceptable' social conduct.

If one acquiesces to Zappology as a form of critique one concludes that Zappa's work subscribes to a Renaissance *insight* equivalent to the perceptiveness and industry of Piero della Francesca. Naturally, the same claim may be attributed to other artists — but not many. The simulacrum that is art prevails because of its religious, mythological and mystical antecedence regardless of appearances to the contrary.¹⁹ However, this insight at times operates at a 'fundamental' level, for example, Watson states that Zappa's film *200 Motels* is "a load of rubbish" and should be acknowledged as such, for it determines art as a mode of

18 Ref. *The Nicky Campbell Interview*, (BBC Radio One) "I don't believe in lyrical obscenity. I think that the English language is a wonderful thing and you can do a lot of interesting things with it, and there's no word in it that should be barred from usage. The whole idea that reading or hearing any word might cause your brain to explode or your soul to go plunging into the depths of Hades as soon as the word is uttered — that's ridiculous."

19 See Solomon, R, & Higgins, K. M., *Danto's Hegelian Turn in Danto & his Critics* (Edited by M. Rollins' Blackwell, USA, 1993) p.117, Danto has noted that 'religion' and 'art' engender the same sense of purpose: "The title *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* suggests the centrality of religious images in Danto's account of art. Theory has quasi-religious roles in the cases of contemporary art that most interest Danto, for theory 'transfigures' everyday objects, as Christ is transfigured before three of his disciples."

deconstruction.²⁰ Cutting through pretension, Zappa is convinced that delusion is widespread, in particular he is dubious about ‘the power of love’ and especially how it may be expressed in popular music. At a time when “All you need is love” was almost an anthem, he was sceptical; accusing those who say that love can change “all of the fools, all of the hate” of being “probably out to lunch” — a euphemism for being crazy.²¹ This was a swipe at the Hippies and Jesus-Freaks certainly, but it also reproaches the naiveté of Christian belief. It was acceptable for him to chastise Hippie mentality (as far as Middle America was concerned), but his attack on the ‘stupidity’ of ‘Middle America’ would find few advocates — especially amongst those of a religious persuasion.

That’s what they say every night, every day:
Hey, we can’t really be dumb if we are just following God’s orders
Let’s get serious, God knows what he’s doin’ — he wrote this book here
And the book says he made us all to be just like him, so if we’re dumb
Then maybe God is dumb, and just a little ugly on the side. ²²

Zappa’s lewdness and disrespect is much commented upon, and often thought to isolate him from a serious point of view, but beneath the abrasive exterior a greater inclusiveness may be detected. That a Renaissance ‘frame of mind’ may be severed from its contextual mooring marks historical consciousness as a myth, “the myth of the civilised” ²³ that is very much in keeping with the vision of

20 Spencer’s love of rubbish is also well documented. See his paintings: *The Dustmen or The Lovers*, (1934). *The Blacksmith’s Yard* (1932). *The Scrapheap* (1944). (cf. *Stanley Spencer* 2001, p.30.): “Nothing I love is rubbish and so I resurrect the tea-pot and the empty jamtin and cabbage stalk, and, as there is a mystery in the Trinity, so there is in these three objects and many others of no apparent consequence.”

21 Ref. Zappa’s song *Oh No, I Don’t Believe It*. Incidentally, ‘Out To Lunch’ is the title of an Eric Dolphy album of (extremely way-out) avant-garde jazz from the 1960’s.

22 Zappa: ‘Dumb all over’ from the album, *You Are What You Is*. (1981)

23 See Berlin, I, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, p.136. Vico’s ‘ideal eternal history’ — “is not a hypothesis which could be falsified or weakened, or an inductive generalisation, resting on empirical evidence which is never perfectly known and could be interpreted in different ways. The structure of the *storia ideale*, fashioned and guided

Stanley Spencer. Coincidentally, Zappa and Spencer meet in their joint respect for detritus²⁴ and in their mutual disrespect for the ‘machinations of academia’.²⁵ Each proclaims an aesthetic enlivened with ‘missionary’ zeal, and most importantly — both employ their sense of humour as part of the work ethic. Zappa’s ‘paganism’ if one may describe it thus, (and as the term is defined by Lyotard) is akin to Spencer’s as we shall shortly see, and at its best, it is admirable. He sneers at the ‘officialdom’ of those traditional cultural codes of practice, the shibboleths of music that harbour corruption, and rightly dispels hegemony to evidence social manipulation of the aesthetic instituted for personal gain — a very Vichian observation.

But men, because of their corrupted nature, are under the tyranny of self-love, which compels them to make private utility their chief guide. Seeking everything useful for themselves and nothing for their companions, they cannot bring their passions under control to direct them toward justice.²⁶

by Providence, is an eternal truth, a major discovery, and Vico’s claim to immortality as the founder of a new science based on the uncovering of the true theodicy.”

24 See Ben Watson. *In Respect of Rubbish, The FZ Companion*. p.104, “Zappa is aware that all sound is sociology: everything we hear has become totally humanised, hums with the grand (class) conflict of the epoch. All human products are charged with meaning: meaninglessness is hence strictly impossible (...) RUBBISH must occupy a paradoxical position. Rubbish is value denied, it is rendered universally meaningless, but since this is impossible its meaning returns in an INVERTED or REPRESSED form, to haunt us in disguise, in the form of daydreams, faint odours, noxious pollution.” Watson points to Zappa’s ‘found’ sounds (samples) as the raw material for his Dadaism: “Zappa’s sidemen have frequently complained that he stole their ideas. In a Borges-like hall of mirrors, Zappa even “stole” such complaints themselves.”

25 See Duncan Robinson, *Stanley Spencer*, (Arts Council of Great Britain 1976) p.5, “I never wanted to become an associate, I do not approve of the Academy, but I thought the best way to change it was to join it” Spencer said when he resigned from the Royal Academy in 1935.

26 See Vico *NS* 341.



Fig. 26. The Dustmen or The Lovers, (1934)

II. Spencer's Time.

II.i. *Joe's Garage* brands Frank Zappa's 'Joe and Mary' as the antithesis to their Christian counterparts, yet their role within a cynical framework nonetheless leads to redemption via the *dual interpretation* of the art form, *Watermelon in Easter Hay*. 'Joe and Mary' negatively re-enact one alleged episode from the past as a simulation as surely as Piero della Francesca's sleeping soldiers positively reinforce another. Zappa's 'watermelon' does not constitute a denial of the actual birth of Christ any more than Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* claims to witness Christ's actual resurrection. Rather, Zappa's 'nativity' is powerful as an ironic, apocryphal counterclaim toward an equal and simultaneous mythological status for self-awareness via the aesthetic. Therefore, we have

journeyed to a position of accepting equal and opposite interpretations of the Renaissance image of Christ as feasible, thus conceiving the simultaneity of birth and death (the creation and deconstruction of an icon, the universalisation and particularisation, the *Aufhebung*) as coexistent within a single work of art.²⁷

Nativity or nascence embodies Christian religious celebration but it is also evoked by society as a secular redemptive episode every year, (as a sociological and economical rejuvenation). Necessarily, it partakes of an earlier, pre-Christian *mythopoiesis* from which it is formed as a synchronic pagan/Christian/commercial venture whose very act of repetition enforces its perpetuation as its social function ensures its popularity. If it is not a true story — it may as well be.

By way of a simplifying fiction, we can hypothesise that, against all expectations, a collectivity that takes narrative as its key form of competence has no need to remember its past. It finds the raw material for its social bond not only in the meaning of the narratives it recounts but also in the act of reciting them. The narratives' reference may seem to belong to the past, but in reality is always contemporaneous with the act of recitation.²⁸

As a continuance of the Christmas narrative, the 'new' Joe and Mary may be said to take up their positions as part of an atemporal 'Negative Dialectic'²⁹ that

27 I am referring to both Frank Zappa's *Watermelon in Easter Hay* (heard as both what it is and as how it may be interpreted) and to the spatial and atemporal quality in the work of Piero della Francesca. (Cf. Cook, Albert, *Temporalizing Space*, p.57 — with reference to the True Cross sequence): "And in fact there is an invisibility to the narrative core of almost all these panels, something that is not there, wherein a normal iconographic presentation what you see is what you get." The 'lyrical' quality in Piero's continuity is synonymous with the reliance upon negative spaces in musical form — the Hegelian idealisation of space concentrated into a point (*Aufheben*).

28 See Lyotard, J.F., *The Postmodern Condition*, p.22:

29 Watson, *Poodle* p. 291: "As defined by Theodor Adorno, negative dialectics implies continual refutation of the tendency to think that the concept exhausts the thing conceived. It is also aware that denial of the concept does not abolish its power. This was termed 'negative capability' by the romantics who discovered that to deny something in poetry was still to evoke it.

(despite its cynicism) instigates a reappraisal of the human condition. Although 'The Watermelon' is a derisory motif calculated to ridicule — it is also *positively* construed as emblematic of eternal hope, that is, if it signifies that a reappraisal of human ignorance is possible. After all, as 'The Watermelon' rests in *Easter Hay*, there is hope for redemption.³⁰ Its position within *this* 'nativity' — like any other— is analogous to its nativeness or sense of belonging.

II.ii. If one accepts Zappa's statement "You can't define something accurately until you understand *when* it is" at face value, the 'when' which helps to define what things are becomes part of the "everything" which is "happening all of the time." The Cookham of 1912, was the time *when* — in the barn at 'Ovey's Farm', (most appropriately adopted as a deliberate substitute for the stable in Bethlehem) — Stanley Spencer began work on a *Nativity* of his own:

The couple occupy the centre of the picture, Joseph who is to the extreme right doing something to the chestnut tree and Mary who stands by the manger; they appear in their relationships with the elements generally, so that Mary to the couple in contact with one another seems like some preponderating element of life, just another big fact of nature such as a tree or a waterfall or a field or a river.³¹ Joseph is only related to Mary by some sacramental ordinance (...) This relationship has always interested me and in those early works I contemplated a lot of those unbearable relationships between men and women.³²

30 See Coomaraswamy, *The Dance of Siva* in *Aesthetics: The Classic Readings* (Blackwell 1997) p199, "Religion and art are thus names for one and the same experience — an intuition of reality and identity. This is not of course, exclusively a Hindu view, it has been expounded by many others, such as the Neo-platonists, Hseih Ho, Goethe, Blake, Schopenhauer and Schiller. Nor is it refuted by Croce."

31 Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia* also envisions the Virgin Mary as a "big fact of nature" looming over the members of the confraternity embraced by her cape, but elsewhere she is reduced to human proportions, (as in his version of *The Nativity* where she humbly worships the infant Jesus). Relative size, clothing and associated imagery personifies various aspects of deity in art.

32 See *Stanley Spencer*, (Tate Gallery Publications, London, 2001). Editors: Hyman & Wright. p.83. (Taken from Spencer's writing in 1941).

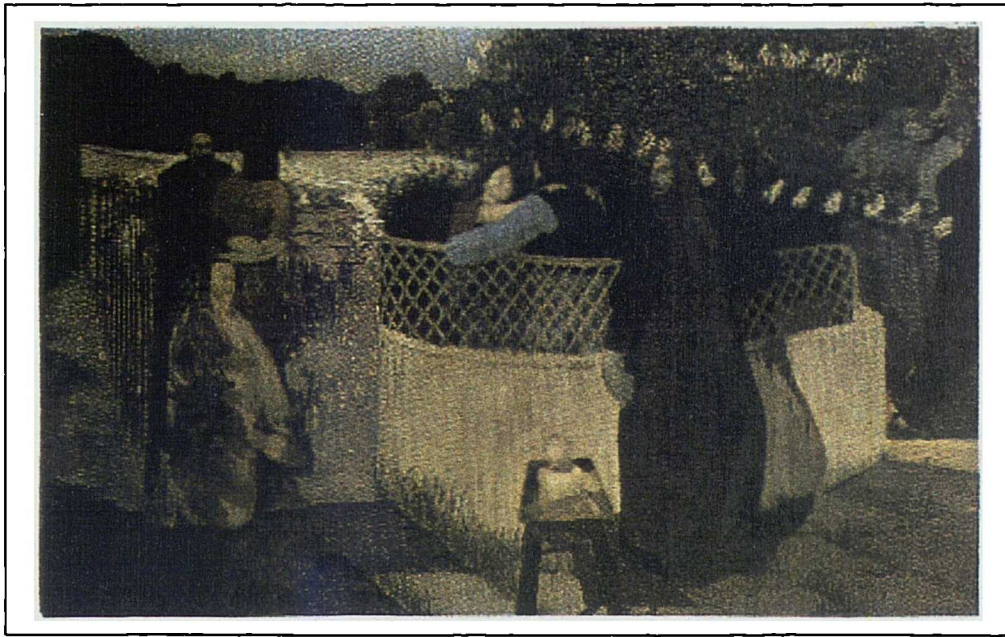


Fig. 27. The Nativity.
Stanley Spencer.
1912

We see in Spencer's *Nativity*: "The same round-headed palings lead steeply in from the left, the centre dominated by an enfolding trellis-fence. Two embracing couples, perhaps magi or shepherds, seem extensions of this weather beaten construction."³³ The baby, almost forgotten, sits safe and content within the confines of the manger,³⁴ disregarded except by the kneeling figure on the left (reminiscent of Piero's kneeling Madonna). But if the kneeling figure *represents* the Madonna, so does the large iconic figure to the right of the infant, and this painting now has (at least in the first instance) *two* depictions of the Virgin Mary.

33 Timothy Hyman, *Stanley Spencer*, (Tate Gallery Publications, London, 2001) p.14.

34 One of Spencer's earliest memories was of sitting in his pram, safe and secure. See *Stanley Spencer - A Sort of Heaven* (Tate Gallery Publications, Liverpool 1992) p. 48. *The Port Glasgow Resurrection: Reunion* "Also although the people are adult or any age, I think of them in cribs or prams or mangers. Grownups in prams would perhaps express what I was after — the sense of security and peace that a babe has as it gazes over the rim of its pram and out into the world around it." It is curious that he chose to convey his landscape painting equipment around Cookham in a pram in later life.

The humble, kneeling Virgin of Renaissance tradition is present *as well as* the Gauguin-like, primal-deity form of Mary in the foreground.³⁵ This explanation is not as unlikely as it may first seem. Neither is the proposition that the imaginative and unconventional Spencer may have equated ‘nativity’ (that is *nascence* or birth) with its precursor (the sexual act) so that symbiotic magi and shepherdesses meet as ‘embracing couples’ in a Cookham inhabited by angels and mortals.³⁶

This synopsis has a ring of truth, especially if one contemplates, as Spencer did, the practicalities of a relationship between the mortal Joseph and ‘his betrothed’ Mary as both human and divine mother. In any event, the identity of some of the participants in Stanley Spencer’s version of *The Nativity* is unclear. What is certain is that Spencer often inserted multiple representations of a single person, especially himself, (as in *The Centurion’s Servant* of 1914) or his first wife Hilda, into a single composition.

Spencer’s remark that “the couple occupy the centre of the picture” is interesting because Mary and Joseph do not. Instead it is the passionately embracing, rapt couple which he must mean are the picture’s ‘centre’.³⁷

35 See Leder, C, *Stanley Spencer* (Arts Council of Great Britain 1976), p.16, “Of the French Post-Impressionists, Gauguin had the most to offer Spencer. Not only was Gauguin interested in primitive art, he was also a painter of visionary religious subjects. Spencer had several opportunities to get to know his work.”

36 See Robert Upstone: *Stanley Spencer*, (Tate Publications 2001) p.84. “The embracing couples appear partly derived from the pairs of angels and men, the divine and temporal in Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* (National Gallery).” One might add that the relationship between Dante and Virgil in Botticelli’s illustration of the *Divine Comedy* is explored via multiple representation.

37 Robert Upstone: *Stanley Spencer*. p.83. “Piero della Francesca’s *Nativity* in the National Gallery may have inspired both Spencer’s outdoor setting and the treatment of the infant Christ and the flowers growing between the flagstones.”

The loving couple personifies one aspect of the relationship between Joseph and Mary — or if they do not, this is how they may be interpreted. Clearly, all the figures are most deliberately arranged in set poses. Here we must remember how important music was to Spencer, and how he thought “the *big* Bach organ prelude and fugues (...) the most convincing religious expressions I know.”³⁸ The couples stand in formation, relative to each other in such a way that in musical terms could be described as the beginnings of a dance or *fugue*.³⁹ If the embracing couple mark the emotional, possibly spiritual centre of the painting,⁴⁰ then secondly, they interact with all of the others figures on the canvas. The ‘players’ therefore create a spatial pattern of implied relationships. As a short melody is played on one instrument, then taken up by others, so the theme develops by means of interweaving. In terms of musical arrangement, the *fugue* may also be translated as a *flight* from an earthly environment — although ‘compartmentalised’ and static, one intuitively sees that these couples inter-relate, gradually becoming *fugitive* from their temporal or spatial restrictions.

Leading authorities note the significance of linear division in much of Spencer’s work and as compositional devices, walls and fences herald the central couple as the focal point. The rhythmical linear quality is reinforced by tree blossom and plant life that both *connects* them to, and *separates* them from the other characters. Initially, it seems the figures ‘belong’ to the fences, to the trellis or

38 See footnote 5.

39 Hyman: *Stanley Spencer*. p.14. Timothy Hyman notes the importance of ‘Walls and Fugues’ – quoting Spencer’s older sister Florence, who taught both Stanley and Gilbert. “Neither is it strange that the grandchildren of a builder who is also a fine musician should have been consciously or subconsciously interested in the structural significance of walls and fugues.” Spencer had said in a lecture in the early 1920’s (Cf. Carline 1978 p.37) “I have always had a longing when I have come to a place where there has been a high wall, to want to see over it, to find out what was on the other side.”

40 Cf., Collis, L, *A Private View of Stanley Spencer* (Heinemann, London 1972) p.21. Patricia speaking: “Dorothy and I both admired it, (*The Nativity*). It seemed new and original that that the picture should centre emotionally on the couple in the background about to embrace, rather than on the Virgin and Child”

iron railings subdividing the compositional space.⁴¹ As the spectator looks from one figure to the next, something like a ‘spiritual harmony’ occurs. The overall effect is similar to ‘time-lapse photography’ where everything is sped up and presented in one scene. Already conceived and born, the infant is old enough to sit up; awake to his surroundings, he reaches out to us from the confines of his own little box of hay, the manger, and waggles his fingers in the Cookham air.

Even allowing for Spencer’s imagination, it is only reasonable to assume some kind of traditional narrative in this work. Because it is a *Nativity*, surely these couples must be shepherds, angels, or magi, and the baby is obviously, Jesus? However, there are precious few clues that suggest this to be the case. We find no gifts, no angel wings, there are no sheep, crowns or halos. Spencer’s figures are each apportioned within their allotted space, not quite isolated but content to be in their designated place as representatives from all times.⁴² In other paintings, Spencer’s figures interconnect, overlap, or appear to multiply at will, as if caught in a blur of movement they are united forever.⁴³ In these pictures, repeated form indicates the passing of time as fragmentary — temporality caught in a series of busy ‘instants’. But here, one is reminded of how Piero della Francesca might coolly present single figures, like stone saints aloof in stone niches, revelling in the statuesque singularity of the frozen moment.

41 They are enclosed within their adjacent spaces just as Piero uses the same device in *The Annunciation*. (The wall in Spencer’s *Zacharias and Elizabeth* of 1914 serves a similar purpose).

42 Much as later *Shipbuilders on the Clyde* (1940) work in cubicles or in confined spaces, or the newly resurrected in the *Port Glasgow Resurrection: Reunion* (1945) would be content to relax in their individual plots, they are seen as isolated yet also as part of something bigger. In the *Christ in the Wilderness* series (1939 –1943) Spencer truly deals with isolation.

43 See Spencer: *Apple Gatherers* (1912-13), *The Bridge* (1920), *The Last Supper* (1920). It is easy to connect these works to pictures of many-headed or many-limbed Hindu deities.

Spencer must have felt himself to be ‘one of a series’ at times and familial ties *may* have some bearing upon his developing such attuned ahistorical discourse. Born into a large family of highly creative and talented people, Stanley, as one of the youngest was presented with a variety of role models to choose from. He may have felt that but for circumstance, his closest brother, and fellow artist, Gilbert and himself might have almost traded places.⁴⁴ To think time figurally⁴⁵ rather than as a linear sequence of events is tantamount to questioning one’s own sense of identity. The figures in *The Nativity* stand around like numbers on a surreal clock, almost as if they are ‘cellular’ and likely to split from ones into twos (or vice-versa). They witness the nascent ‘event’ but also actively participate, for like an extended family they form part of a bigger organism into which a baby Jesus / baby Stanley has arrived. This deliberate displacement of temporality gives new relevance to the *ongoing* Nativity, presenting a confrontation with modernist perception not dissimilar to that of Lyotard:

As you know, one can debate a lot about what is contemporary and what is not. As far as I’m concerned paganism can be extended to include even time: there is no one single time; a society, (or a soul) is not synchronous with itself (...) There are only parachronisms all around; it is the observer’s timepiece that judges what is present day, just as in the universe, except that one wonders what in human history, and especially in the history of the arts, functions as the speed of light.⁴⁶

44 See the foreword to *Stanley Spencer by his Brother Gilbert*, (1991 Redcliffe Press) “My brother Stanley was born at ‘Fernley’ Cookham, on June 30th 1891, one year, one month and one day before I was. We remained together until (...) 1915.” ‘Fernley’ was changed later to ‘Fernlea’.

45 Readings, Bill. *Introducing Lyotard: Postmodernity and Narrative*. p.53. “What does it mean to think time figurally rather than as an ordered sequence of moments, to think time otherwise than by means of historical discourse? For Lyotard the postmodern marks a temporal aporia — a gap in the thinking of time which is constitutive of the modernist concept of time as succession or progress. This temporal aporia is characterised by Lyotard as the time of the ‘event’ which functions figurally for the modernist discourses of epistemology, historiography, politics and art”.

46 The Lyotard Reader, *Contribution to an Idea of Postmodernity*. (1989) p.186

Spencer's 'paganism' enlivens, gives new meaning, and thereby recovers relevance. This is legitimate because in their interpretation of *The New Testament*, the artists of the Early Renaissance did exactly the same thing — they rewrote history.⁴⁷ Pondering upon the interpretative anachronism of Spencer's *Nativity*, if anything, a *loss* of identity descends on the figures to the extent that their individuality becomes almost irrelevant — they could be doppelgangers, they could be anyone, they could be *us* — although rewritten.⁴⁸

Within the indeterminacy of the moment, (or the stain on the canvas) a metaphorical 'Piero della Francesca' may be glimpsed out of the corner of 'the mind's eye' — perhaps as one of the smaller figures in the background, or in the guise of the kneeling Madonna. Indeed to the fanciful — those able to embark upon the Vichian vessel of *fantasia* this is nothing new, for 'Piero' has previously been a soldier at the *Resurrection of Christ* and a humble member of the confraternity beneath the protective mantle of the *Madonna della Misericordia*.⁴⁹ Some say that 'Piero' also appears in *The Legend of the True Cross*, as one of King Solomon's servants, as ever, an attendant to the wise. To understand *when* something is — is to accept the principle of *fantasia*, and to recognise Piero's continuing presence.

47 Readings, Bill. *Introducing Lyotard: Postmodernity and Narrative* (1991) p.59: "History is always already rewritten because Lyotard thinks the anachronistic temporality of history by analogy with Freud's *Nachtraglichkeit*, or deferred action, in which the event occurs both too soon and too late. It occurs too soon to be understood, too late to be recovered."

48 See Borges, *Ficciones — Pierre Menard, Author of Don Quixote*, p. 33 He did not want to compose another Don Quixote - which would be so easy - but the Don Quixote... 'My intent is merely astonishing,' he wrote me from Bayonne on 30th. December, 1934. 'The ultimate goal of a theological or metaphysical demonstration - the external world, God, chance, universal forms - is no less anterior or common than this novel which I am now developing. The only difference is that philosophers publish in pleasant volumes the intermediary stages of their work and that I have decided to lose them.' And, in fact, not one page of a rough draft remains to bear witness to this work of years."

49 See Kenneth Clark, *Piero della Francesca* (Phaidon, London, 1969) p.223. "The local tradition that the man with his head thrown back is a self-portrait of Piero seems to be of considerable antiquity (Cf. L. Coleschi. *Storia di San Sepolcro* 1886)."

Within the context of this analysis, *Piero has already arrived in Cookham*. As stated earlier, in Renaissance painting it is not that extraordinary to find the artist or anyone of his acquaintance reassigned a new role as a historical figure. Neither is it unusual to see multiple representations of one person on a single picture plane.⁵⁰ Deeply influenced by Early Renaissance artists, Spencer indeed illustrates the complicated relationship between Joseph and Mary as a simultaneity of several temporalities, as seen partly through ‘Renaissance eyes’. Spencer possibly imagines how their feelings altered toward one another by depicting them at different times during their lives, and perhaps after Mary’s Ascension and Joseph’s death. This multiplicity of form suggests a spiritual interaction housed in one xenochronous zone delineated as the eternal Nativity.⁵¹ Mary and Joseph participate *as* the embracing couple *and* the struggling couple but they also represent us all.

Piero della Francesca had painted a ‘Joseph’ lost in thought, a very human and ‘down to earth’ character appearing somewhat isolated, unaware of angels or magi. Zappa’s ‘Joe’ resorted to playing imaginary tunes and eventually disillusioned, acquired a boring, repetitive job. By contrast, Spencer’s ‘Joseph’ as devoted partner (and confused lover?) coexists with the archaic ‘Joseph’ (The

50 See Chapter Two: As in Piero’s chronology of Seth in *The Death of Adam*. Masaccio’s, *The Tribute Money* is another good example of multiple representation and one which Spencer knew and used in his *Study for the Visitation* (1912) (cf. *Stanley Spencer* 2001, p.88). Peter features three times, he is with the disciples in the centre, he catches a fish and takes the coin from its mouth, he also pays the tribute money.

51 Robert Upstone: *Stanley Spencer*. p.84. Upstone refers to Botticelli’s *Mystic Nativity* and Rosetti’s *Blessed Demozel* as possible sources of inspiration for Spencer. The latter concerns the separation by death between Dante and Beatrice where the frame is constructed to keep the earthbound lover (seen in the predella) from the deceased object of his desire above ‘in heaven’. The struggling couple on the left of Spencer’s *Nativity* may represent the unwillingness to separate physicality from spirituality. Elsewhere, away from Renaissance art, there are numerous examples in paintings (and within cinema genre) where the subject appears more than once in the picture frame, Van Dyck’s *Triple Portrait of Charles I*, or *The Travelling Companions* by Augustus Leopold Egg being notable amongst them.

Worker) tending to the tree. And so *this* painting examines the nature of faith and of adoration and *this* Joseph evokes all that is dependable, a reassuring father figure in the background.⁵²



*Fig. 28. The Nativity, or Adoration of the Child,
Piero della Francesca,
(1478-80)*

⁵² See Robert Upstone: *Stanley Spencer*. p.84. Upstone notes a comparison between Stanley Spencer's Joseph with that of Dante Gabriel Rossetti in *The Girlhood of Mary Virgin* where Joseph symbolically tends to a vine. It is worth reiterating that Piero della Francesca is renowned for the grandeur which makes his work timeless. Piero's Joseph strikes a significantly formal pose that is later reworked by Georges Seurat in *Les Poseus* (1888). Seurat also 'borrowed' one of Piero's sleeping soldiers for his *Bathing at Asnieres* (1883-4).

Piero's Joseph sits sideways on a saddle with the sole of his foot facing us — perhaps he is resting, tired from his long journey, his work complete. His profile marks an odd symmetry to the opposite profile of the gallows bird, the magpie, ominously perched on the roof.⁵³ At the birth of Jesus, he is brought up sharply to face his own mortality. He seems quiet, calm, and resolute. Unaffected by the surreal carnival that surrounds him, it is as if he dreams about the heavenly host but all he hears is the braying ass. By contrast, Spencer confidently turns Joseph the Worker away from us, a 'fellow mortal' leading the way.⁵⁴

As Spencer suggested that the various couples may be representative of "those unbearable relationships between men and women" it would be true to form if they were in some way based on people he knew. His symbolism suggests that where the course of true love does not always run smoothly, the iron railings, cold and hard, act as a 'barricade' behind which the man and woman struggle with one another. The woodwork proves less of a barrier, more like a cosy enclosure, or love-nest for the embracing couple. Each material empathises; each construction is emotionally charged with the couple's feelings. Regardless of interpretation, whether they are seen as distinctly separate couples, or taken to be one couple, depicted at various times, the painting explores the power of human relationship.⁵⁵ The relationship is re-enacted again and again, for further in the

53 See Lavin (1992) p.47. "To understand the magpie's meaning, we must remember that throughout history, birds have been taken as symbols of the soul, free to soar far and wide and finally ascend to heaven. (...) The ancients say that the magpie was the very opposite of Calliope, the muse of music, (...) In Piero's hand, the magpie is not a thief of worthless objects but the bringer of sudden knowledge. He is the hieroglyphic grosbeak whose new-found silence (stifling the false words of the Old Law) recognises the arrival of the new, 'true' Word."

54 Spencer also invites the spectator along in much the same way in *Self Portrait with Patricia Preece* (1936). Incidentally, in traditional church services the celebrant rarely faced the congregation.

55 To clarify my point: If one considers implied movement in art, a painting like Degas' *Before the Race* is useful. The painting may be considered as depicting various riders and horses getting into position, or equally taken as a series of frozen moments that capture one rider and his horse moving toward the starting line (like a Muybridge

distance, behind a long wall, the tiny figures in the background form ‘couples’ caught up with each other too.

The landscape and the wild flowers are important, Spencer said of this work: “It celebrates my marriage to the Cookham wild flowers. It is our way of not only joining in the creation, but in a way sharing in the creation, because we re-create.”⁵⁶ Undoubtedly, this ‘English Nativity’ hopes to provide a new eternal context for creation, Spencer is making love with a location by the association of ideas. Because the constituent components within a given Stanley Spencer composition rarely emanate from a single source but from a mixture of ‘events’ he celebrates the diversification of temporality:

Although it was only a few moments ago, while I counted ten sometimes, between the moments when the black-bird retired below and the owls began, yet in that moment the transition of one life to the other, of the evening and the verge and beginning of night, seems as great as the passing from this life into the next (...) While two circumstances of my experience may be wide apart in their physical relationship and joined closely together in my mind, so I see in physical life examples where two moments in nature suggest to my mind a remoteness in their spiritual relationship.⁵⁷

Spencer sees the possibility of two distinct yet consecutive moments as remotely connected, hence he is aware of the changing universe. Conversely, he notes the spiritual relationship between disconnected, isolated experiences. The latter applies to the similarity of purpose or intention between Spencerian, Early Renaissance, Pre-Raphaelite or Primitive sensibility. By

photograph). A dual interpretation is valid, as with Spencer, figures move through time as well as space. (Cf. Robert Upstone: *Stanley Spencer*. p.93 — *Zacharias and Elizabeth* (1914) “As with early Italian pictures, the same characters appear more than once.” There are two depictions of Zacharias and two of Elizabeth. The second pair is to be found behind a wall topped with wire trelliswork.

⁵⁶ See Richard Carline: *Stanley Spencer at War*. (Faber and Faber, London 1978) p. 33

⁵⁷ Richard Carline, *Stanley Spencer at War*, pp. 34, 36. Spencer, speaking in 1936 was reflecting upon the view of nature that he held in 1912.

inference, he considers painting atemporal and therefore its plausibility as a future 'event' is recognised. The artist often expects his work to outlive him and so aesthetic purpose is 'redemptive' whenever 'Time' is interpreted as that self-inflicted mental construct that one desires to be rid of, hence Spencer's *paganism* meets with Lyotard's definition of the same.

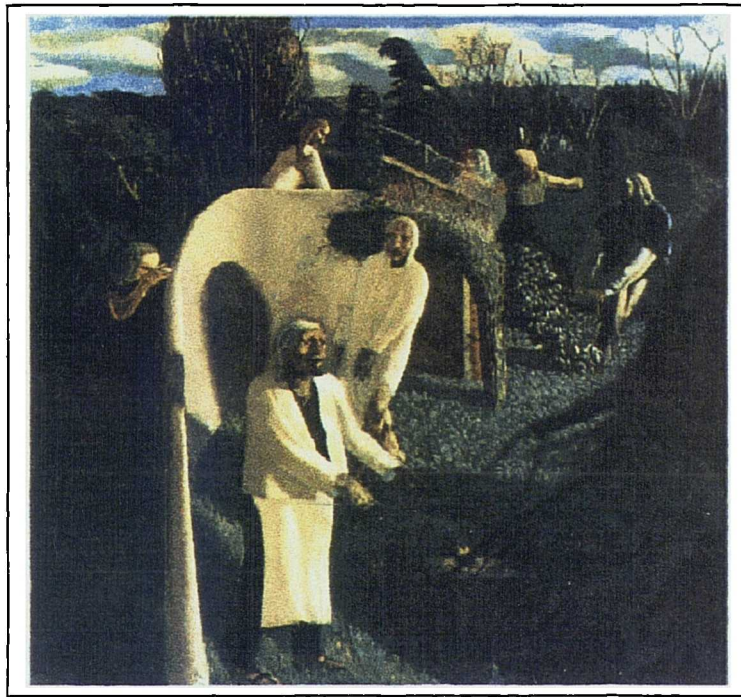


Fig. 29. Zacharias and Elizabeth.
Stanley Spencer.
1914

To dismiss the validity of time is as problematic as it is to deconstruct visual awareness or to redefine what we see everyday as an apparition built upon inherited mental constructs.⁵⁸ The world and our image of it *cannot* be exactly the same but (like the famous, Borges' map that grew to be the same size as reality) we lay our image over the top of the original. Perspectival vision was

⁵⁸ Cf. Panofsky, Erwin, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Zone Books, New York (1991)

claimed earlier as the humanist creation of Piero and his contemporaries: a sensory conditioning to which we are still subject.⁵⁹ This somewhat irrational but ‘imaginative’ view of the world encourages the possibility that there might be ‘another way of seeing’ whereas total submission to the ‘rational’ deprives the spectator of the possibility of redemption:

Erfjord, in the third appendix to the *Christilige Dogmatik*, (...) writes that the crucifying of God has not ceased, for anything which has happened once in time is repeated ceaselessly through all eternity. Judas, now, continues to receive the pieces of silver; he continues to hurl the pieces of silver in the temple; he continues to knot the hangman’s noose on the field of blood.⁶⁰

This recalls Spencer’s own reflections, equally xenochronic:

But what overjoyed me was that when I got down from the bus and walked along by the same wall, I found that my previous supposition was true and I could still enjoy the feeling of wonder at what was on the other side.⁶¹

The ‘imagined’ scene on the ‘other side of the wall’ floods back into his mind, quickly replacing perceived reality. Spencer had enough faith in his own vision to think that the imaginative would override the empirical. It is therefore highly significant in *The Betrayal* (1923) that Stanley and Gilbert Spencer as young boys, are *standing on a wall* (and not behind it). They bear witness to Christ’s capture, the scattering disciples, and Peter’s cutting off the ear of the High Priest’s servant. From such a high vantage Spencer peers ‘over the top’ of one ‘imagined’ temporality and into another.

59 Ref. Hockney, writing in *The Daily Telegraph*, September 22nd 2001: “We went to Florence (...) and stood on the exact spot that Brunelleschi is supposed to have stood when according to Vasari, he made one of the first perspective paintings – of the baptistery from the cathedral. And onto a panel, the precise size of his panel, which is described, we projected the baptistery, perfectly though upside down with a mirror that cost us six pounds.”

60 See Borges, *Three Versions of Judas*, in *Ficciones* (Grove Press, New York, 1962) p.124

61 See Richard Carline: *Stanley Spencer at War*. p. 37

The pews at Cookham Church had high backs, so Mother told us. This would imply that they had high fronts as well, since one pew's back would be another pew's front. They were entered by doors, and to all intents and purposes were like little rooms with no ceilings. The grown-ups alone could see over the tops and then only when they stood up. The little ones must have had a very dull time of it.⁶²

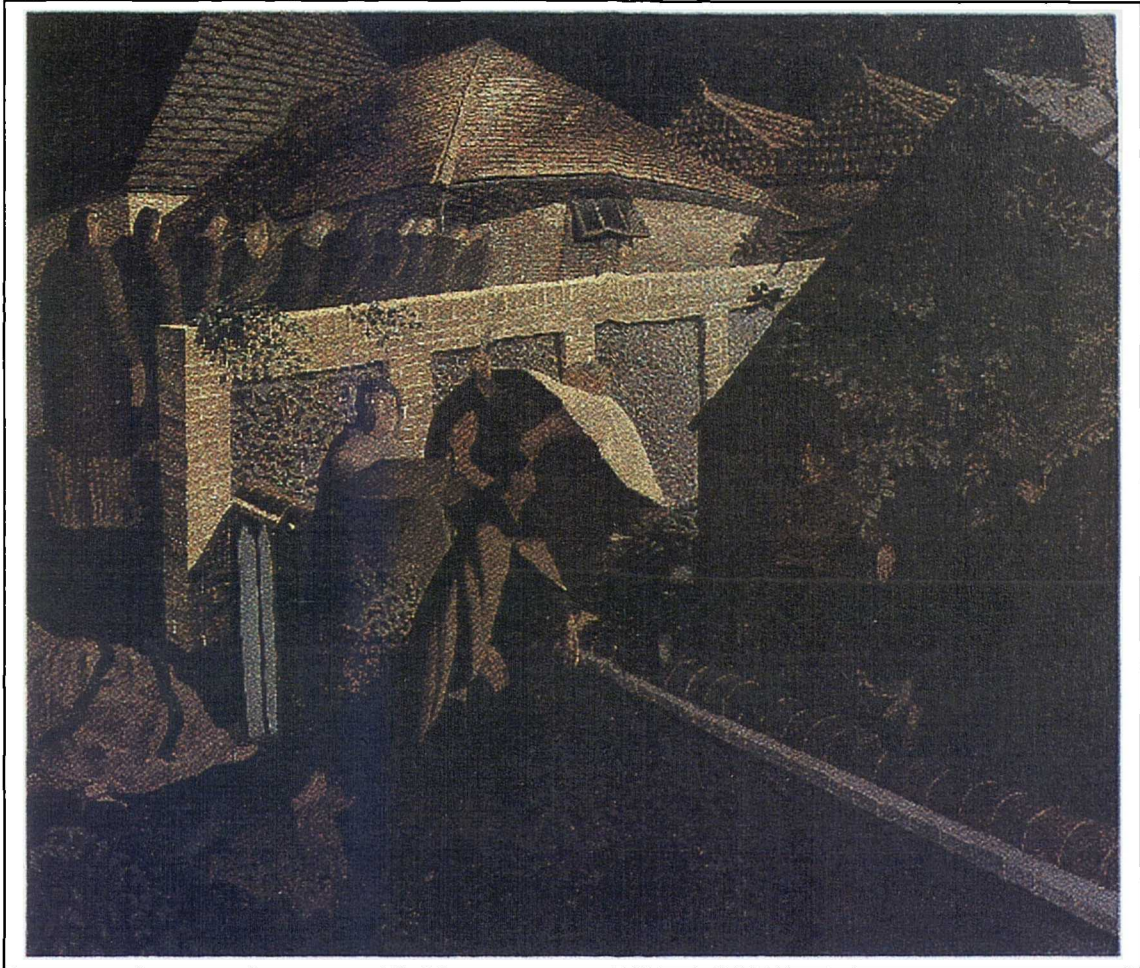


Fig. 30. The Betrayal
Stanley Spencer.
1923

⁶² *Stanley Spencer - by his brother Gilbert*. P.22. This suggests the possibility that in the painting, *Zacharias and Elizabeth* (1914) the little girl who is about to look over the wall could be emblematic of Spencer's mother. The high box pews are also synonymous with the family tombs in the famous, *Resurrection, Cookham*. (1924-27).

II.ii. Therefore, in this (absolutely theoretical) coexistent space, which has been labelled as ‘parachronicity’ there operates a *different* ‘Frank Zappa,’ ‘Piero della Francesca’ and ‘Stanley Spencer’ — not to be confused with the originals. As poetic re-creations, they float like the heroes and saints in heaven waiting for Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*. And if rationality proclaims this as ludicrous it must be pointed out again that *they* were initially responsible for their own re-creation of themselves, for we did not, and do not *know* them at all. Conceptual beings evade rationality with ease, claiming natural knowledge and imagination as their Vichian forbears. All historical figures are (necessarily) replicas born of intuition, interpretations of the originals, reliant upon the powers of *fantasia* used to recreate them. If art *is* redemptive, such an irrational proposition gains some authenticity in the instant that living, breathing artists are consigned to the past because they *live on* in their work. As we only ever knew them via their output they are ‘resurrected’ in the simplistic sense that they continue to *live on* in our imagination when we *revisit* their work. However, it must be established once more, that the *act* of creating is redemptive in itself, and if they are aesthetically resurrected it is because their work has already redeemed them:

When the real is no longer what it was, nostalgia assumes its full meaning. There is a plethora of myths of origin and of signs of reality — a plethora of truth, of secondary objectivity, and authenticity. Escalation of the true, of lived experience, resurrection of the figurative where the object and substance have disappeared. Panic-stricken production of the real and of the referential, parallel to and greater than the panic of material production: this is how simulation appears in the phase that concerns us — a strategy of the real, of the neoreal and the hyperreal that everywhere is the double of a strategy of deterrence.⁶³

⁶³ Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation, The Precession of Simulacra*, p.6

Baudrillard asks of the image: Is it a reflection of a profound reality or does it mask and denature a profound reality — does it mask the *absence* of a profound reality, or does it bear no relation to any reality whatsoever?

III. Piero in Cookham

III.i. Since Piero's time, Renaissance imagery 'itself' would slowly supersede its illustrative purpose as the importance of religious content became overshadowed by the skill required producing it. Piero's *Resurrection* is taken as having a 'spiritual' element, yet this may have been largely bestowed upon it by others. Really, Piero's was 'a job of work' commissioned by the town leaders and therefore a statement of polity as much as a spiritual one. When later generations tied on the 'art tag' (and the price tag) the contribution that Piero's art once made to the community was reinvented. Art is analogous to its own ritual, (the reinforcement of cultural value) and as there is no certain way back, we look to 'the spiritual' consolation that images give. In essence, the 'visionary' painter describes art as a spiritual encounter easily because 'visions' are an anachronism in the first place. In the light of Vico's precepts the spirit is defined as 'immortal' and so is naturally 'out of time' with the physiological body. If we dub art as spiritual, it complies with the 'immortal' classification too. On the other hand, if one considers that within the complexity of human development, things are happening all of the time as reflective of one another, there is less need for mystical explanations. In the work of art, the past collides with the present to be interpreted as a 'now' which unifies itself ontologically: hence our identification of *what is* rests upon the combination of 'what was' with 'what is'.⁶⁴

⁶⁴ Cf. Husserl: *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness*: p.36 "Duration, succession, and alterations appear. What is involved in this appearing? In a succession

Unfortunately, as Zappa has indicated, we are not 'enlightened' sufficiently to separate them.

Piero's *Madonna Del Parto* is, as we can now see a highly complex, multilevel work; yet, it presents its message through forms that are simple and direct. There is a remarkable clarity about this fresco that makes it memorable: it is in fact, an icon that still works its supernatural power (when it was suggested that the fresco be moved from its chapel to a museum, the women of nearby Monterchi objected. For them it was a potent talisman of fertility and birth, a living presence. The awe and respect that these women had for the *Madonna Del Parto* was, in truth, much closer to fifteenth century veneration of the fresco than is our more distant, archaeological view).⁶⁵

For an image to be imbued with such psychological power that people, centuries later, still feel it to be a living presence, one supposes that this must have occurred at the time of its creation. If art is truly redemptive then paintings may be thought of as psychologically powerful, magical ideas rather than physical objects. In this respect, art's practice is the same now, as it was then — a continuous cycle alternating between the mythopoetic and deconstructive. And so we hear the music of *both* angels and asses, and failing to comprehend, we sit back like (the painted) Joseph in Piero's *Nativity*.⁶⁶ The hidden *power* within a

a "now" appears and, in unity therewith, a "past." The unity of the consciousness, which encompasses the present and the past, is a phenomenological datum. The question now is whether, as Brentano asserted, the past really appears in this consciousness in the mode of phantasy." Husserl wrote his *Phenomenology of Internal Time Consciousness* and Heidegger composed his *Being and Time* (1927) based on it. Both relate indirectly to Kant's theory of time as the 'form of inner sense'.

65 Bruce Cole, *Piero della Francesca* (1985) p.79

66 *The Nativity or Adoration of the Child* (1478-80) The ass is seen braying along (in time?) with the angels' heavenly choir. The ass 'singing' possibly represents the joy of Judaism at the birth of the Messiah. Such a theory would be in keeping with traditional interpretations of Nativity scenes — but it is only a theory. Instead, one might like to imagine the sound made by angels and ass singing together. As 'implied sound' it is as relevant, or as incongruous, and certainly as loud as ever, even if the exact purpose is hard to define, it is as much a part of a 'depicted' world as it always was. Therefore we are just as close as ever.

given work of art is precisely that: it *is* hidden. Therefore we can only *imagine* that we know what Piero means. This makes for a legitimation of parachrony that paves the way for a ‘Piero’ of sorts to reside in an ‘Eternal Cookham’ of the imagination — in fact, one aspect of the ‘Cookham’ that Spencer has already invented.

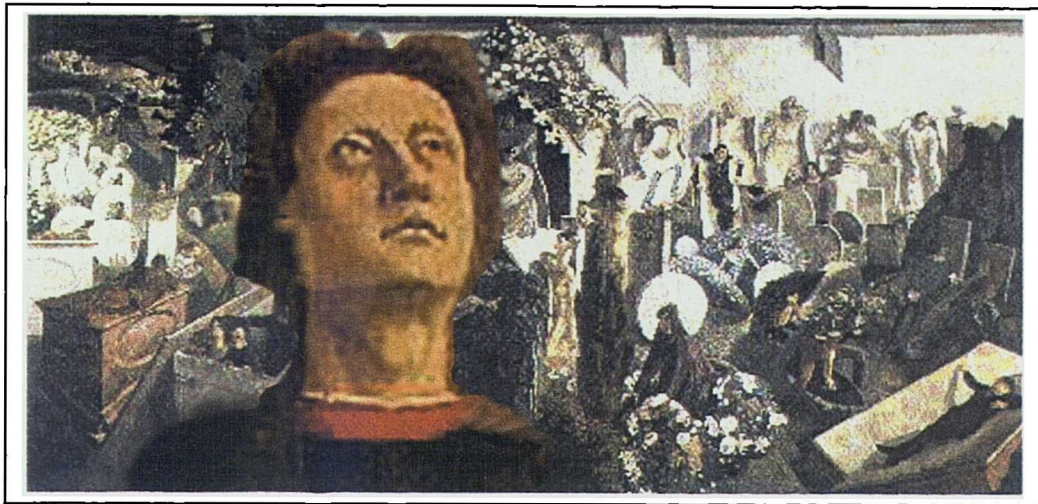


Fig. 31. Piero della Francesca in Cookham.

III: Spencer's Truth

“It would be nice if I could write a kind of miniature *Divine Comedy* of my picture... It would be a picture of the joys of the new real life.”

Stanley Spencer

Other Resurrections.

Oh that I could write only and solely of this moment in this room this afternoon. It would suit me if I were never able to stir from what I am feeling now. All that I have been and done before I came to live here, would be an intrusion. I love to contemplate the possibility of a theme being born out of the air in this room. A 'birth' of me taking place this afternoon in here. There have been many births of me and this is one of them.¹

Stanley Spencer

I. The Resurrection, Cookham.

I.i. The extent to which Spencer re-articulated the Christian message of salvation is indicated by a brief comparison between two of his major works: the *Resurrection, Cookham* (1924-27) and the *Resurrection of Soldiers* at The Sandham Memorial Chapel, Burghclere, (1927-32). The dates are significant

¹ Stanley Spencer: *A Sort of Heaven*. (Tate Archive. 733.3.22 December 1938, Tate Gallery, Liverpool Publications. 1992.) p.14

because each painting informs the other. There are excellent accounts of these well-known works elsewhere and only the briefest description will suffice here.²

Following some preliminary work for the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere (from which he concluded that the technique of fresco painting was beyond him) he decided to work on canvas. He filled the canvases along the sides of the chapel with his memories of active service, personal observations that describe the universal lot of the soldier. Patricia Preece noted that Burghclere contained “a hundred khaki Stanleys” dressed as soldiers, unified in their sense of duty, performing a variety of tasks.³ The soldiers seem to be partly ‘Spencer clones’ and partly individuals, the overall effect conducive to a feeling of team-effort or brotherhood. *The Resurrection of Soldiers* is the altarpiece that fills the entire end wall depicting the aftermath of battle where the dead soldiers rise again. This enormous painting, remarkably dissimilar in both mood and content to the others, is a sombre tribute to the huge loss of life in The First World War. Each man offers a white cross, (the symbol of burden and sacrifice) to Christ who gathers them up in his arms.⁴ The initial drawing c.1926/27 varies a little from the final version, but by and large, Spencer kept faithfully to his preliminary squared up sketches throughout.

The Chapel was finally dedicated as the *Oratory of All Souls* on the 25th March 1927 — the feast of the Annunciation, and in commemoration of the day that the *Arena Chapel* in Padua had been consecrated six hundred years earlier.⁵

² See Hyman, Timothy, *Stanley Spencer* (Tate Gallery Publishing, London, 2001) pp.19-23

³ See Collis, L., *A Private View of Stanley Spencer* p.36. Patricia Preece was Spencer’s second wife.

⁴ A central character, apparently oblivious to Christ collecting crosses stares intently at a crucifix (that is a cross with the figure of Christ on as distinct from the other plain white crosses) — close by, there is a wheel, a major hieratic symbol in Buddhism.

⁵ See Robinson, Duncan, *Stanley Spencer* (Phaidon Press, Oxford. 1990) p.37.



*Fig. 32. The Resurrection of Soldiers,
Sandham Memorial Chapel,
Burghclere
1927-32*

Whilst building was underway for the Chapel, Spencer acknowledged 'resurrection' yet again as a major theme⁶ on a huge canvas (nine feet by eighteen). *The Resurrection, Cookham* was painted in remembrance of another significant moment in time: "2.45 p.m. on a Tuesday in May"⁷ and apparently the time of Spencer's first complete sexual encounter. *The Resurrection, Cookham* is far removed from conventional religious belief. This masterpiece has indubitably become a lasting monument to the genius of Spencer, more so than any other painting he did. It would become a landmark on the map of his own creative individuality to which he would return throughout the rest of his life. Ironically, this most personal of statements enjoys universal acclaim. The scene is set in a graveyard, it shows people climbing out of the ground, but curiously, it is not specifically concerned with the after-life.

The *Resurrection* is meant to indicate the passing of the state of non-realisation of the possibilities of heaven in this life to the sudden awakening to this fact. This is what is inspiring to the people as they resurrect, namely the new meaning they find in what they had seen before.⁸

This desire to promote "heaven in this life" may be taken as a 'redemptive' intention suggesting that although the living are metaphorically buried in 'a graveyard' of illusion, they have the wherewithal to rise above it. *The Resurrection, Cookham* is a green and pleasant 'paradise' by comparison with the

⁶ The first Resurrection painting was abandoned and *Apple Gatherers* was painted over it. (1913 - 14) The second was called: *The Resurrection of the Good and the Bad*, (1914 - 15) ref. p.118 Hyman & Wright (2001). Apart from The Port Glasgow Resurrection series, many other works are described as 'Resurrections' i.e., *The Dustmen or Lovers* (1934) and *Love on the Moor* (1937-55)

⁷ See Hyman & Wright *Stanley Spencer* (2001) p.125 (Taken from Hassall, *Edward Marsh*, 1959, p.505)

⁸ Pople, Kenneth, *Stanley Spencer; A Biography*, (1991) p.226, originally quoted from the Tate Gallery Archive, also see *Stanley Spencer* by Hyman & Wright (2001) p.20: "From reading Donne, Spencer began to distinguish between the 'particular Resurrection' which was the biblical Day of Judgement and 'a general Resurrection', an intensely blissful experience attainable on earth which seemed to touch the heavenly."

muddy *Resurrection of Soldiers* at Burghclere (which followed chronologically).⁹ It is also vastly different from its predecessors. The earlier paintings (i.e., *The Last Supper*, 1920; *Christ Carrying The Cross*, 1920; *Christ's Entry Into Jerusalem*, 1921; *The Betrayal*, 1922 - 23), had each simply featured Christ as out of time and place. The Biblical Jesus became juxtaposed in Stanley Spencer's childhood Cookham, at a period before the Great War. The story told in *The New Testament* was always firmly realigned with somewhere local, a set of 'special' places which held lasting Spencerian significance. By enlisting emotionally charged childhood responses to Bible stories and systematically linking his favourite haunts to events in the life of Christ, he embarked upon a rather hazardous career as an artist. He remained consistent, for the momentous narrative of *The New Testament* gradually unfolds in paint on canvas over the course of his life. Effectively, he personalised Christianity for himself.

What the places in Cookham had to tell me was nothing remotely connected with landscape (...) I wanted to absorb and finally express the atmosphere and meaning the place had for me (...) It was to be a painting characterising and exactly expressing the life I was, at the time, living and seeing about me.¹⁰

Just as Piero had reclaimed Sansepolcro as a reflection of the glory of heaven with Christ at its centre, the earlier Spencer paintings evoked visions of the life, passion and death of Jesus in Cookham.¹¹ Basically, he relied upon his own inner

⁹ Although it is not blatantly obvious, there are sexually suggestive images at Burghclere — if one wishes to look for them. The crosses may be interpreted as phallic symbols in some instances, see for example, the sprawling, ecstatic figure, (taken from the initial sketch but turned and moved further back). The beardless 'Christ' who collects the crosses is androgynous, (a soldier's arm covers the chin) and is reminiscent of the Hilda/Christ in the *Cookham Resurrection*. To question the sexuality of Christ is a taboo subject (cf. Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus*). Presumably, Spencer knew that any overt sexual emphasis he gave to this, more 'public' work would be seen as a shortcoming in religious zeal.

¹⁰ See R. Carline. *Stanley Spencer at War*.p.37

¹¹ Cf. Chapter 1, above: The book, *Zardino de Oration, The Garden of Prayer*, (1454) recommends that the people and places which are familiar in the every day sense will

experience, the places he knew well, and the people around him. He always drew from the deepest waters of his own creativity but following what is generally taken as his emergent sexuality, he apparently struggled to regain that once easily accessible 'other world' of childhood innocence from which he could sketch and paint. Over a period of time, his elaboration of 'Christ-with-us' as an ethical/aesthetic construct may have crumbled because of his war experiences¹² or possibly, as he was no longer celibate, he *felt* 'changed'. The Christian faith underlying his previous work was challenged by the mood of his new painting. Now he wished to ascribe fresh layers of sexual meaning over and above the original intentions sufficient for his earlier work.¹³ Spencer himself reports *The Resurrection, Cookham*, as the first of his 'sex pictures'. His curious concept of resurrection was reformulated there and then and acted out by a string of 'alter egos' set out on canvas — a variety of 'Stanleys' (and 'Hildas' too) become the main protagonists in his all-embracing vision.

make ideal substitutes for the people and places described in the New Testament. "It is helpful and necessary to fix the places and people in your mind: a city, for example, which will be the city of Jerusalem — taking for this purpose a city that is well known to you." This was a conscious act in which Spencer followed Renaissance practice.

¹² See Hyman (2001) p.32 & Collis, M, (1962) pp.138/139, originally taken from the Tate Gallery Archive: "During the war when I contemplated the horror of my life and the lives of those around me, I felt the only way to end the ghastly experience would be if everyone suddenly decided to indulge in every degree and form of sexual love, carnal love, bestiality anything you like to call it. These are the joyful inheritances of mankind."

¹³ See Upstone, Robert, *Stanley Spencer* (2001): "The liberation brought by sexual love was a revelation to him, and Spencer evidently thought of it in religious, sacramental terms, as a kind of resurrection into a new world."



*Fig. 33. The Resurrection, Cookham
1924-27*

- It is a picture showing conversion to a new view of the world: Stanley had just discovered the heavenly delights of love with Hilda, his first wife, and first lover. Sex was to be the great preoccupation of his life and work, the base on which he laboured to construct a philosophy to justify thoughts and actions he could not help, but sometimes felt were wicked. Why would one wish to invent a religion of sex and particularly its deviations unless one were trying to stifle certain uncomfortable arguments in oneself? Yet this man remained ignorant of his true nature a great while. He was thirty-two and still a virgin when he became Hilda's lover in 1923.¹⁴

Spencer had remarked that he would never be the 'same old Stan' ever again, and to a large extent this painting explores identity as a changing/non-changing

¹⁴ See Collis, L, *A Private View of Stanley Spencer* p.30: Patricia's commentary is not particularly kind. She continues: "It is not overtly sexual, but the awakening of a new vision of paradise on earth, a symbolic resurrection would be a most natural feeling in one suddenly exploring the long delayed pleasures of manhood. This must be the divine mystery he had sensed for so many years. He became more and more convinced of it as he got older. But, from time to time, he would experience a strong revulsion, due to the strain in him of the puritan recluse and also, it may be, to physical weakness. Then he would declare that the earlier, sexless; vision was the true one, the other a misfortune of the human condition."

phenomenon.¹⁵ Although eternally youthful ‘Stanleys’ would occasionally feature in his visionary work (perhaps as atemporal representatives of Spencer’s *Being*) it seems that with this painting, he had come of age — once and for all.¹⁶ It was as if Spencer had come to terms with and accepted the inevitability of physical transience, but had found contentment, purpose, and a meaningful identity expressed in a single moment. Unfortunately, it would not last — except on canvas. Much as he may have wished to have never stirred from what he called a “birth of me” — (whether that ‘birth’ referred to an idyllic moment in childhood, or the state of bliss experienced when he first made love to Hilda) — he could not stop time, nor escape a rude awakening from the real world.

It has been established that although Piero’s *Resurrection* is predominantly an enforcement of Christian values, as a municipal rather than ecclesiastical work of art, it is also a warning to ‘the powers that be’ to be vigilant, to be mindful of their own redemption. The ‘personality’ of the artist infiltrates the conscience of the spectator as the ‘intention’ surreptitiously invades the composition. *The Resurrection, Cookham* reverses this polarity by emphasising firstly a personal view of resurrection that secondly, only vaguely alludes to Christianity. But in both works, the hope for universal salvation remains. This is far removed from Spencer’s overtly Christian approach to the Burghclere Chapel (to which many who survived the war *could* relate) for it is wider in scope. The viewer might infer that even if it is not Christian (or even ‘religious’) in anything like an

15 See Hauser, Kitty, *Stanley Spencer* (Tate, London 2001) p.46, quoting from the Tate Gallery Archive: “What I had always understood as being Stan Spencer was now no longer so — a whole heap of stuff lust or whatever was sweeping me along helpless.”

16 As with J. M. Barrie’s ‘Wendy’ at the closing of the story of *Peter Pan*, Spencer’s childhood dream was over. He had to return to the real world where people grow old and die — this fact is implicit as the negative dialectic in the painter’s vision of heavenly Cookham. He had had his fill of war; his brother Sydney had been killed in action in 1918. His mother died in May 1922 and Spencer was to say of her, “I wish all my life I could have been tied to my mother’s apron strings. It would have suited me mostly in the kitchen or the bedroom, or just a visit in the locality, a long talk and plenty of cups of tea.” (cf. Collis, M, *Stanley Spencer*, p.28.)

institutional sense, there are underlying themes of hope, and world redemption that prevent the work from being entirely self-centred.

As with Piero's *Resurrection* the autobiographical likeness of the artist introduces the spectator to the vision. It is the snoozing 'Stanley' — squeezed like a bookmark in the bottom right corner, (Spencer refers to this figure as his 'signature') who points the way, and so leads us into the composition.¹⁷ Once again the connection between sleep and death, waking and life is established. 'Piero' leans against the sarcophagus, sound asleep, with Christ's banner flapping above his head, whilst this figure conceives the totality of the enormous painting as if in a waking dream. Spencer's concept of resurrection equates with universal rebirth therefore his vision of a second 'Renaissance' includes "The long row of saints or holy men (...) meant to express different levels or states of spiritual thinking (...) they represent the resurrection of thought and reason."¹⁸ Here is another chance for the world, and as the gigantic canvas slowly comes to life, a 'New Morning' dawns on an empty stage set resembling a Cookham Churchyard peopled with the newly risen, with new ideas. The overcrowded scene entices the spectator heavenward,¹⁹ (from right to left, as we look) along the path, over the stile, and onto the waiting boats, no doubt bound for higher states of bliss. All

17 See MacCarthy, Fiona, *Stanley Spencer: An English Vision*, ref. Plate 13, Spencer describing the work: "In the bottom right hand corner is another 'me' (...) The collapsing pages interlock like the pages of a book. I love the pages of a book, an open book, and so I am where I love to be." The open-book tomb, or the symbolic device of sarcophagi, could be considered emblematic of the womb in Freudian terms, but to go down the road of psychoanalysis would be fraught with greater risks of misinterpretation. (See Judith Whittet, *Stanley Spencer*, on the Art Website, Newcastle University, Australia) Whittet sees the shadow of Spencer's arm on the tomb as a phallic symbol, which is feasible — but she also spies a devil in the crook of his other arm and claims that the composition contains 'hidden fish'. These observations may or may not be valid — there is enough resemblance for a Vichian perspective between the etymology of 'womb' and 'tomb' without the need for Freud.

18 See MacCarthy, Fiona *Stanley Spencer an English Vision* 13.

19 See *Stanley Spencer - A Sort of Heaven*, (1992) p.38. Spencer saw Cookham as "a holy suburb of heaven" and this was a phrase of John Donne's which gave him the idea.

this is on a joyous ‘last day,’ light years away from the melancholy vision of Jesus collecting white crosses offered by the poor dead soldiers at Burghclere.

I.ii. *The Resurrection, Cookham* delves into ancient paganism in its renascent anticipation; ‘ritualistically’ strewn with flowers it is a graveyard procession to honour the potential of ‘the living’. It echoes the regenerative power of nature but above all cries out as a blessed thanksgiving. If it is meant as a celebration of one moment, it simultaneously epitomises the overarching *eternal* relationship of ‘Stanley-with-Hilda’. The implication being that there could be a million other recurrences of this relationship. Spencer’s intention was that in the grand scheme of his ‘Church of Me’ this painting should serve as the altarpiece.²⁰

Thinking about you and all you really mean to me has gradually led me to this desire, which at last, is a real one, but what has made me so happy that I want to do nothing but shout for joy is this: Right up until only a few days back I was feeling that all my ideas for pictures were dead, as they had no centre (...). They were no real part of my life, (...) then I suddenly felt that if I did a picture about you, it would not just be an incident; it would be an actual living part of my life put in the picture.²¹

For Spencer’s *Resurrection, Cookham* to contain ‘real’ meaning, the *poiesis*, or creative ‘making’ invokes a ‘spiritual quality’ in the mind of the artist that is transferred to others via the materials he uses, “an actual living part of my life put in the picture” as Spencer says. In this he approaches the mystical, and the end-result is a charismatic fertility symbol encapsulating ‘everything’ that was important to him at the time. As with the collective splendours of Pharaoh’s tomb, ‘Cookham’ Spencer (his nickname from *The Slade* days) has gathered all he needs for ‘the next life’ — that is, his life from now on. Through this work we

20 See Hyman & Wright (Eds.) *Stanley Spencer* (2001): *Sketch for the Chancel of Church-House* c. 1926. Fig. 61, p.245. The sketch includes an altar beneath the painting.

21 Carline, R, *Stanley Spencer at War*. p.162.

are familiarised once more with the raw and primal, the talisman, the mandala, and the healing power of the icon.

Seeking out the 'miraculous' in the twentieth century, *The Resurrection, Cookham* also makes a clear gesture toward contemporary interests in African art (instigated in Britain by Roger Fry) in the resurrection of black people near the church doorway.²² Spencer's naivety excuses any political incorrectness in his attributing pure sensuality to the resurrection of the 'Black Cookhamites' and in admiration he assigns them as simplistic devotees of form. On another level, the whole work redefines artistic pursuit, painterly intention, and appreciation of 'form' as a sensuous parallel to religious belief. Spencer packs it all in, his multi-faceted nature, his appreciation of others, his love for humanity and finally a list of the different ways in which he loves Hilda, ranging from the earthly to the celestial.

An elevated perception of creative purpose recognises that dimension where individual works of art are truly believed to act as eternal 'receptacles' or 'tabernacles' for 'life force' or spiritual energy.²³ Spencer wished to encapsulate

22 Cf. Carline, R, *Stanley Spencer at War* p.173, from the Tate Gallery Archive, "And I feel that these African people have a wonderful sense of the beauty of this life, especially in regard of the simple objects in nature, I have shown them in the act of appreciating various things." Before the First World War many European artists, including Picasso, had changed artistic direction because of the influx of tribal art from Africa. Spencer himself had visited Fry's exhibition in London and had been moved by Gauguin's primitivism

See also, Fry, Roger, *Vision & Design* (Chatto & Windus, first published 1920), *The Art of the Bushmen*, p.67. "It would not seem impossible that the very perfection of vision, and presumably of the other senses with which the Bushmen and Palaeolithic man were endowed, fitted them so perfectly to their surroundings that there was no necessity to develop the mechanical arts beyond the elementary instruments of the chase".

23 The concept of 'Tabernacle' as shelter or tent is vital here. After *The Transfiguration*, Peter the disciple of Jesus, offered to build three tabernacles, one each for Christ, Elijah and Moses (Luke: 9). Of course, Navajo sand paintings (supposedly a big influence on Jackson Pollock) are created as medicinal remedies. They are 'performed' inside a tent and the patient must sit on the finished work whilst the doctor chants and casts spells. Elsewhere, fetishes and dolls are firstly manufactured and then *hidden* for healing

and enshrine forever those aspects of his relationship with Hilda that pleased him most. He placed the painting high above an altar dedicated to her in a building that would only ever exist in the imagination of Stanley Spencer. At the same time he may have seen the last of his idealised Cookham as a 'New Jerusalem' for the wanderers amongst the tombstones are without the bearded Christ of his earlier (and of his somewhat jaded) later work.²⁴ This painting is not about the historical/religious Jesus of Nazareth at all, except in the quasi re-enactment of his defeat of death represented by the semi-cruciform stance of the relaxed, naked Stanley who calmly surveys the scene from the centre/right of the composition. If this painting is compared to Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection*, this 'self' most resembles the Neoplatonist Resurrected Christ.²⁵ It is curious that considering how many of Spencer's paintings are about 'Resurrection,' (including *The Centurion's Servant* and *The Raising of Jairus's Daughter*) and, considering his knowledge of the Early Renaissance, that he did not tackle the big subject of the Resurrection of Jesus. Anyway, from his position the 'Christ-like' Spencer figure looks to his left and past the other 'Stanley' on the broken tombstone. To his right a youthful Hilda, sniffing a flower, enraptures a third more earthly 'Stanley' who is captivated by her. The flower she smells is a sunflower, symbolising sexuality, and the promise of new life. Spencer looks to the mystical notion of

purposes in many cultures throughout the world. In ecclesiastical tradition, the Tabernacle houses the bread that is hidden from view. Historically, a tabernacle was a tent used for sanctuary by the Israelites during the Exodus. It is hardly surprising that mysterious regenerative qualities have been attributed by the women of Monterchi to *The Madonna Del Parto* by Piero della Francesca — the Madonna stands in an *opened* tabernacle as a sign of revelation. Also, *The Dream of Constantine* from *The Legend of the True Cross* occurs in a tabernacle or tent as he is visited by an angel.

24 See MacCarthy, Fiona, *Stanley Spencer - An English Vision*. Plate 55. *The Baptism* (1952) set in the bathing pool at Odney Club, Cookham.

25 Cf. Upstone, Robert, *Stanley Spencer*, (Tate Publications 2001) p. 90, "Spencer may have had Renaissance portraits in mind, and he said [of the self-portrait of 1914] that he was specifically 'inspired by seeing a reproduction of a head of Christ by Laini'. He probably meant Bernadino Luini, as Spencer's self-portrait is close to Luini's in his *Christ Among the Doctors* c.1515-30. Spencer's lighting effects partly follow Luini's and also recall the pronounced chiaroscuro of Caravaggio's *Supper at Emmaus* (National Gallery)."

union whereby the sexual act is analogous to *co-knowing* as exemplified in *Plato's Symposium*:

The object of love, Socrates is not as you think, beauty. (...) Its object is to procreate and bring forth in Beauty. (...) Now, why is procreation the object of love? Because procreation is the nearest thing to perpetuity and immortality that a human being can attain. ²⁶



Fig. 34. The Resurrection, Cookham, Detail: Left-hand side.

²⁶ Plato, *The Symposium*, 207b. See also, Isaiah Berlin *Three Critics of the Enlightenment (Vico – Philosophical Ideas)* p.34, “There is a mystical play here on the notion of union – *coitus* – in *cognoscere* – ‘co-knowing’ is being made one with the thing known. This stems perhaps from the ancient metaphysical (and mystical) doctrine, of which Plato’s *Symposium* contains the most memorable version, that in the beginning subject and object, man and nature were all one; then a great catastrophe divided them; since when they everlastingly seek reunion – re-integration – which can be achieved in recognition.”

Although the figures in the doorway are hardly discernible, they are thought to represent Stanley as 'God the Father' and Hilda as 'Christ' or 'God the Mother' seen holding three infants — at least one of them certain to be another 'Stanley', (the birth of yet another self).²⁷ The doorway resembles an opened 'tabernacle' — its revelation is deliberately placed in the exact centre of the massive composition. In this, he proclaims his own loving relationship as an aspect of the paradigm of 'divinity' emerging from the church doorway of his vivid imagination. The figures are in shadow; their faces partially hidden are lacking identifiable features but as Spencer's iconography is unremittingly spiritual physical resemblance is hardly relevant at all.²⁸ The multifarious Stanley and Hilda portraits and the inclusion of relatives and friends mark this work as totemic; as a statement of 'belonging' or permanence: the authenticity given by paint on canvas and held up for all to acknowledge. As with Piero's masterpiece, "the best work he did in Borgo or anywhere else" as Vasari says, this is the very best of Spencer. *The Resurrection, Cookham* also sees transubstantiation, the creative human predisposition toward heavenly metamorphoses as initiated by the desire to change for the better. The embodiment of the spiritual in the physical once again brings the art form to life.

²⁷ See Collis, L, *A Private View of Stanley Spencer*, Hienemann, London, (1972) p.29, Patricia says that 'God' was based on "An old drawing of himself leaning over a basket chair in which his wife was reading Christian Science manuals" In his depiction of three babies in the arms of Hilda, Spencer may well be hinting at the sanctity of family life, one might say, or perhaps he was projecting a vision of an idealised future family. The image has been convincingly compared to similar images of 'primitive' deities to which he may have had access. Alternatively, the three babies could easily represent The Holy Trinity and one could take this to mean that, as God is in us so too, are we in God. A precise interpretation is unnecessary, as I have gone to great pains to demonstrate throughout this study. Also, see Carline p 173: "Under the roses and sitting in the porch is Christ with babies in His arms. God is behind the seat and affectionately holds His hand in Christ's hair. I feel the nude babe In Christ's arm will be content to lie there for ever (*sic*)" Stanley Spencer

²⁸ Cf. Vico, *NS* 342. As Vico defines 'divinari' as *hidden from men* Spencer's placing of the mystical family in shadow within a 'tabernacle' like entrance/exit is most appropriate for an altarpiece.



Fig. 35. The Resurrection, Cookham,
Detail: Central section.

I.iii. Buddhism, or more likely, a generalised philosophy based upon fragments of religious ideology, inspires the Spencerian expression of timelessness. Most importantly, he considers the idea of 'self' as ever changing.²⁹ The appeal of reincarnation is that a fresh start suggests a new life without the "intrusion" of the

²⁹ Iyengar, B.K.S, *Light on Yoga* (1966) p. 38, "Sva means self and *adhyaya* means study or education (...) The person practising *svadhyaya* reads his own book of life at the same time as he writes and revises it. There is a change in his outlook on life. He starts to realise that all creation is meant for *bhakti* (adoration) rather than for *bhoga*

past so that previous lives might be dispelled with a clear conscience. Spencer's contentment to go with the flow of events, to admire the innate sense of animals, his willingness to attend to domestic tasks and the connections he continuously makes with God in his writing, mark him as austere and monastic. But as Kitty Hauser has stressed:

To claim Spencer simply as a visionary prophet of love, as some have, is to be forced to ignore or underplay aspects of his behaviour and his art that do not conform to this description, colluding with the artist's own anxieties about keeping and losing his vision.³⁰

This is a very easy thing to do, but once one is aware of the danger it is also apparent that 'the artist' and 'the man' may seek a different kind of 'truth':

All good art has to do with truth in a sense, but great art has to do with it in a deeper, if not easily expressible, sense: great art is concerned with a truth under the appearances, or truth transcendent. The great artist then, is a man with genius to recognise the truth as immutable in this sense and to embody it with most perfect integrity in an art form. To differentiate it from purely imaginative art I shall designate it by a term already in use, intuitive art.³¹

Spencer's 'perfect integrity' was to be found on canvas if not in life. It certainly *seems* that all the characters in the painting are interchangeable agents of birth and rebirth, used to intuit a deeper or metaphysical truth. Spencer's regard for *Being* captures the movement from life to death and back again (Being to Nothingness — Nothingness to Being) for here in painted form he has 'risen' to a state of acceptance. He is resigned to what he was, happy with what he is and

(enjoyment), that all creation is divine, that there is divinity within himself and that the energy which moves him, moves the entire universe."

30 Hauser, Kitty, *Stanley Spencer* (Tate Publishing 2001) p.76. She continues, "Seeing Spencer in this way implies that the human cost of his achievement was either irrelevant or worth paying; and it puritanically requires that his obsession with sex be understated or excused as a brief and embarrassing lapse." I would argue that opposing views of Spencer are not mutually exclusive and concur with *both* Hauser and E. Rothenstein.

hopeful for what he may become as he looks about the celestial cemetery. As a definition of 'selfhood' *Being* and *Becoming* are intertwined, but the next logical step is to see the 'death' of self in order to abandon desire so that *Being* and *Nothingness* may be also judged the same.³² Spencer honestly evaluates himself and his relationships within the parachronistic framework that a painting offers, but to abandon desire in reality, as we all know, is not so easy.

His concept of 'self' was somewhat complicated some years later, by his longing to have sexual relationships with two women at the same time. Although deliberately ensnared by Patricia Preece, his second marriage a complete sham, eventually his desire deprived him of the company of both of them.³³ Yet in one respect he was right when he said that there had been "several births of me" for the Spencer as 'boy-visionary', the Spencer of the 1920's and the Spencer of the 1950's were not the same:

I did not, and still do not, question his skill as a painter, though I tend to be repelled by the mixture of eroticism and religiosity that appears in much of his work, but he remains in my memory as the most self centred man I have ever met. His gnome-like appearance was not unappealing and I could bear with his minor eccentricities, such as taking pains to look dishevelled and wearing his pyjamas as underclothes. It was his conversation that wore me

31 Rothenstein, Elizabeth, *Stanley Spencer* (1945) p.12.

32 See Lyotard, *The Lyotard Reader: Speculative Discourse as Language Game*, p.270, "If you say 'Being and nothingness are the same thing', taking this statement as a judgement, then you get stuck in empty identity because of the form of the attributive proposition. However, it conceals something else, which is not a signified, but an effectuation which transverses it: the movement of the disappearance of being into nothingness and nothingness into being (...) This movement is the 'content proper to' the proposition on being and nothingness. It is already becoming, but we ought not to say so yet."

33 In brief, Patricia needed money to keep up with the lifestyle to which she had become accustomed and by all accounts was a confidence trickster who beguiled Spencer. The marriage was a hoax and sexual relations a farce, for Patricia was a lesbian. Her lover, Dorothy Hepworth, was a talented painter who encouraged Patricia to exhibit and pass off her work as if it she had done it. This relationship accounts in part for the psychological impact of Spencer's *Self Portrait with Patricia Preece* (1936) and *Double Nude Portrait: The Artist With His Second Wife – The Leg Of Mutton Nude* (1937).

down. He lived at Cookham, a small town on the Thames, which was the locus of many of his paintings, and he had served in Mesopotamia (*sic*) in the First World War, and he could hardly utter a sentence without referring to one or the other. He also had the habit, which I found maddening, of assuming that we were familiar with all the details of his private life, referring to various women by their Christian names and recounting episodes in his biography as if we had taken part in them.³⁴

Clearly, throughout his life and to varying degrees, Spencer believed in and lived out his own mythology and this is evident in his writing, especially in the parallels he makes between his earlier life and that of Jesus. The Cookham of his youth would mirror *The New Testament* as his later separation from 'homeliness' resulted in his mirroring the physical isolation that Christ in the wilderness shared with scorpions and foxes. No doubt he *was* open to criticism levelled by religious, philosophical and artistic authorities (the scorpions and foxes?) but he thought many of them quite probably deserved to have their own tables overturned. Nevertheless, when looking at *The Resurrection, Cookham* all this falls away as meaningless because it is as true a reflection of 'inner *Being*' that this man can muster.

Ultimately, each of us enters and leaves this world on our own and the painting speaks of transition: movement from nothing to life, from life to death, and from death to resurrection. Yet, nothing moves. Naturally, the subjects in a painting cannot move, but as with the earlier definitions of Piero's and Zappa's 'time and space', we may surmise or *intuit* movement between one figure and the next — from one spatial zone to the other. 'Reading' Spencer's portrayals of himself in *The Resurrection, Cookham* one cannot easily retell a chronological tale as with

³⁴ Cf. Ayer, A. J., *More of My Life*, W. Collins Sons & Co. Ltd. London, (1984) p. 101: In the summer of 1954 Stanley Spencer was to visit China and Russia as part of a cultural delegation with, amongst others, Hugh Casson and A. J. Ayer. In the second part of his (modestly titled?) autobiography, A. J. Ayer describes his stormy relationship with Stanley on the trip.

Piero's *Death of Adam* or Masaccio's *The Tribute Money*. The multiple images partake of only one event it seems — for these 'Spencers' coexist. It might be further implied that there are other 'unseen' Spencers, just as (with reference to Chapter One, above) a parachronistic interpretation claims the supposed distance between the 'two Pieros' of 'History' and 'Imagination' as a continuous narrative. The implied or unseen 'Stanley Spencers' exist only as an extension of the ideas on the canvas in the way that the "many births of me" complete the picture of the man.³⁵

If *The Resurrection, Cookham* concerns the reawakening to a new physicality — that 'rebirth' which banishes mortality forever, it is a benign vision of Paradise far removed from the Glory of Heaven and the terrors of Hell that enraptured so many Early Renaissance artists that Spencer admired. And, if by seeking "heaven in this life" Spencer implies the possibility that one may be 'reborn' *without* death — a concept both Western and Eastern in origin — he magnificently celebrates the ordinary to effect this. It is the *discovery* of 'new meaning' itself that brings about a 'redemption' where little things matter, (what Borges called "the eternity of the instant"): "A girl smells a flower to see if it still has the same scent. I remember at home my mother always gave my father's coat a brush down before he left to go teaching."³⁶ Spencer reinstates that much earlier magical poiesis by which humans profess to 'make' themselves, and then to remake themselves again

³⁵ See Carline, R, *Stanley Spencer at War*, p. 97, who quotes Spencer: "There is no such thing as 'individuality', 'personality', 'originality'. Every man has the same 'Name'. His Name is the Resurrection and the Life."

³⁶ See MacCarthy, Fiona, quoting from the Tate Archive. (colour-plate 13) "...people tracing their own names out on the stones, and above wandering off towards the river. There is a white hedge of May and some Cow Parsley. As it is Heaven there is no hurrying to be off, and I have expressed their being content to remain where they are by the reclining man on the tombs, bottom left. A girl smells a flower to see if it still has the same scent. I remember at home my mother used always to give my father's coat a 'brush down' before he left to go teaching. So by the tower wives brush the earth off their husband's coats, adjust their collars and button their coats, etc."

and again. This is not so mystical really, for in order to face a harsh world, many people 'remake' themselves daily to survive at all.



*Fig. 36. The Resurrection, Cookham,
Detail: Right-hand side.*

II. Painterly Freedom via Serendipity.

II.i. Spencer himself was 'selective' in his explanations of the characters in the painting and this has led to a great deal of speculation, some of it fairly wild.³⁷

³⁷ See Whittet, Judith, (*Art Website* Newcastle University, Australia). "The figure lying on the tomb with his back to us on the left-hand side of the painting is Richard Carline. Below him, with a rather sly look on her face is Hilda again. She is smelling a sunflower..." Judith Whittet implies there may be a hint of incest here, whereas others assume the figure to be Spencer. She also claims that one of Spencer's pencil drawings,

The figure in the black dress, for example, lounging against a tombstone is sometimes thought to be a ‘female Stanley Spencer’.³⁸ As the picture is reinterpreted again and again by successive commentators the uncertainty mounts because of the assumption, by no means apparent, that there is one true reading that only the artist himself could know. Once again, the dubious nature of interpretation is brought into question, but Cookham Churchyard *was* where Spencer was aesthetically reborn, he wrote of lying down in the graveyard one night and then arising with a different frame of mind. Finally, it is his resting-place, where his physical body is buried. Spencer thus proclaims Cookham Churchyard firstly as a personal microcosm of the world. Secondly, although some of the characters are discernible, it is birth, sexual reproduction and death — the absolute basics — that concern him most, and here he would explore all three.³⁹ Therefore, faithful to Renaissance practice, this is also an archaic vision where the characters are archetypes merely represented by people he knew. This recalls Berlin’s comments on Vico:

Vico speaks of the need to make the appalling effort of trying to adjust one’s vision to the archaic world — the need to see it through deeply unfamiliar spectacles — but this is very different from the quasi-mystical act of literal self-identification with another mind and age of which Collingwood evidently thought himself capable.⁴⁰

Isaiah Berlin accuses the admirers of “rich and profound but inexact and obscure thinkers” like Vico, of reading too much into them. The same may be said of those who interpret works of art, or of those who use art to “adjust one’s vision”.

Hilda with her Hair Down looks like her brother Richard in drag. This article makes several claims that could be construed as far-fetched.

38 See Carline, p. 173, quoting Spencer, “Especially I love the girl in the black velvet dress with the black velvet rose gathered in at the knees. Hilda had a dress like this.”

39 See Vico *NS* 360, Vico sought archetypal cultural descriptors and labelled three major principles of his *New Science*: 1). Divine providence. 2). Marriage and therewith moderation of the passions. 3). Burial and therewith immortality of human souls

40 Berlin, Isaiah, *Three Critics Of The Enlightenment* p.119

Vico took world history as an orderly procession guided by *Providence* working through men's capacities. Spencer taps into this procession en-route as a premeditated ahistorical act (much as the first *Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood* had done by rejecting everything since, and including Raphael, as "slosh"). Using a re-constructive imagination (what Vico called *fantasia*)⁴¹ Spencer enters into both Early Renaissance and pre-Christian states of mind in the quasi-mystical sense mentioned above. Art History simply authenticates art's practice and so Spencer is at liberty to draw from works such as Luca Signorelli's six frescos illustrating *The End of the World* and the *Last Judgement*.⁴² Importantly, although it may owe something in style or layout, his work in no way replicates Renaissance or Pre-Raphaelite 'sensibility' for his drawing and painterly reaction is as 'modern' or as individual as Otto Dix, George Grosz or Edward Burra.



Fig. 37. Resurrection of the
Flesh,
Luca Signorelli,
1409-1504
Orvieto Cathedral

- ⁴¹ Berlin, Isaiah, *Vico & Herder*, (1976) p.11, "It is a method of arriving not, as hitherto, at an unchanging reality via its changing appearance, but at a changing reality – men's history – through its systematically changing modes of expression." *Fantasia* is identified by Isaiah Berlin as separate from *a priori*/deductive and *a posteriori*/empirical knowledge.
- ⁴² See Carline, Richard, *Stanley Spencer at War*, p.39: "He indicated his intimacy with the great masters, when he told me one occasion that he had once dreamt that he was walking on Cookham Moor where he met Signorelli standing like his figure of 'Anti-Christ' in Orvieto Cathedral. Signorelli greeted him with a smile saying: Good evening, Spencer; I liked your picture in the New English." Also, see Vasari: "Another of his [Piero's] followers was Luca Signorelli of Cortona, who did him more credit than all the others." Signorelli's Anti-Christ is frightening, his vision of the dead climbing out of the ground a clear influence on Spencer's resurrection work.

Unmistakably, Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* exudes confidence in the power of Christ the Redeemer much more than the frightening, bony skeletons that force their way to the surface in Signorelli's *Last Judgement*. Spencer is reluctant to scare the spectator into redemption.⁴³ Although the scene is set in a churchyard and reuses familiar imagery, *The Resurrection, Cookham* distances itself from the dogma and orthodoxy normally associated with religion — for there is not a cross or crucifix in sight.

The Cookham Churchyard location is vital in terms of anchoring associated feelings — but in the painting, this is a *different* church and a *very different* churchyard.⁴⁴ It may be compared to the ethical construct described earlier as the Zappalogical *Joe's Garage* in that it expresses a *sublative* state of mind that both supports and disowns an earlier one. Without his religious instruction he would know nothing of God, from this foundation Spencer attempts to go beyond the seen to the unseen, where the trappings of the world, of buildings and places and of people and things are illusory. After harnessing the location, utilising his knowledge of art history, Spencer's vision is strengthened by the *uncertainty* of religious knowledge. The resultant painted church is far from 'ecclesiastical' — it could represent another manifestation of the 'Church of Me' but viewed from the outside. This is not surprising, for he *feels* the whole of Cookham to be his 'Church of Me' — with the High Street representing the nave, the river an outer

⁴³ See Carline, R, *Stanley Spencer at War*, p.174, quoting Spencer: "I had in the box shaped tombs some wicked people being prevented from getting out of their graves. Apart from the fact that I did not think there were any wicked people at all, I felt the idea disturbed the general tranquillity of the main outlook."

⁴⁴ In other words, Spencer *uses* Christianity for his own ends but is not in accord with dogma. Curiously, as this study claims to be 'Vichian' there is an interesting parallel to be observed on this matter. See Pompa, Leon, *Vico, A Study of The New Science*, 1975, p.61: "What I have tried to show is that while it would not be impossible to accept that Vico's personal beliefs were Christian, it is impossible to construe his doctrines to be in accordance with the orthodox theology of his time." Leon Pompa, amongst others, has drawn attention to the inconsistency between Vico's interpretation of divine Providence with that of the Catholic Church of his day, "his enthusiasm for Christianity led him to overlay his philosophy with a set of fairly empty claims."

wall — he needs to feel ‘located’.⁴⁵ And so, Spencer makes the connection between inner and outer *Being* as a serendipitous response,⁴⁶ or in other words — a ‘gut reaction’ to the human predicament. One *infers* that this is to completely trust in *Providence*, to recognise oneself in one’s own creation as symbolic of something absolute — surely this is what Piero meant too? The concept that lies beneath *The Resurrection of Christ* is all but identical to Spencer’s *Resurrection, Cookham* in that it seeks to define the relationship between the self and the absolute. Spencer would only achieve this once, he knew he had “struck gold” when he painted *The Resurrection, Cookham*. Both paintings are equally difficult for the spectator to participate in, but as ‘participant’, surely the spectator suspects that Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer may have felt the same?

Why should one go to this much effort only to half-retrieve a participant’s category of visual interest? It would be bad to revert to the ambition to reproduce the intentional workings of Piero’s mind in a narrative mode. In fact the inferential critic’s taste in using participant’s terms is often misunderstood in this sense: people insist on reminding us again that it is not possible to enter into other-cultural minds and indeed that if we go on trying we may do ourselves harm.⁴⁷

Baxandall finally notes the relationship between *concepts* and *pictures* as reciprocal, (especially alien concepts like *commensurazione* — a mixture of mathematics, proportion, and perspective). “We use the concept to point in a

45 See Carline, R, *Stanley Spencer at War*, p.172, quoting Spencer, “All the time you will notice a wish to emphasise the meaning in the resurrected life by giving it some link with this life, showing some sort of familiarity. For instance, what about the stone recumbent figure forming part of the table tomb by the porch? That figure was always there (...) and now in the resurrection he comes into his own and joins in with the other men reclining on the table tombs.”

46 The Oxford Dictionary: ‘Serendipity’ is the faculty of making happy and unexpected discoveries by accident. {Coined by Horace Walpole (1754) after *The Three Princes of Serendip*, a fairy tale}.

47 Baxandall, M, *Patterns of Intention: On the Historical Explanation of Pictures* New Haven: Yale University Press (1985) p.115.

differentiating way at a picture, and its meaning is sharpened for us by the relation between it and the painting we perceive. This process is good for us.” In short, what we bring to a work of art is as important as what we take from it.

II.ii.

“That bloody woman!” he burst out, “asking me if I believe in the resurrection of the body!”⁴⁸

Spoken only a year before his own death, the above posits *uncertainty* as an overarching principle in any reading of Spencerian subject matter. It must be remembered that a considerable proportion of Spencer’s life had already been dedicated to the subject of resurrection, both in his painting and in what he said about his painting. What could such an explosive reaction signify? That obviously, he *did* believe in the resurrection of the body, and was therefore insulted that anyone could ask? That he *did not* believe? That the question was not worth asking? That he was embarrassed by the question? John Rothenstein continues, “Why he was so furious I did not know. I think it was primarily anger at the introduction of a clear concept into his imagination and of an invitation to commit himself.” Yet, the overriding ‘theme of resurrection’ haunts his paintings as if they were pagan edifices, and what may be termed, Spencer’s *Paganism*⁴⁹

48 Cf. Rothenstein, John, *Stanley Spencer, The Man: Correspondence and Reminiscences* Paul Elek, London (1979) p. 109. Elizabeth Rothenstein relates the conversation of Penelope Betjamin with Spencer in 1958: “During lunch the talk was of his religious paintings and his *Resurrections*, and it turned to religious belief. “Do you,” asked Penelope, “believe in the resurrection of the body?” Stanley turned the question by a joke of some sort and I had no idea that her perfectly legitimate query had upset him. But when the Betjamins had gone, “That bloody woman!” he burst out, “asking me if I believe in the resurrection of the body!” He was so inflamed that we dropped the subject. Why he was so furious I did not know. I think it was primarily anger at the introduction of a clear concept into his imagination and of an invitation to commit himself. What was abundantly clear was the depth of his feeling and his lack of detachment from religious beliefs. If he became an agnostic as he sometimes said he was, he was uncomfortable with it.”

49 See Lyotard & Thébaud, *Just Gaming*, p. 16 “When I speak of paganism I am not using a concept. It is a name, neither better nor worse than others, for the denomination of a

manifests itself in *Love on the Moor*, *The Worship of Sunflowers and Dogs* and in many other paintings. As the stone cross war memorial, the pivotal centre of Cookham Moor in Spencer's mind, is transformed into a phallic symbol, love, death and sex are reflected all around:

Without belief, without utter faith and confidence, there is impotence. A man raises a woman's dress with the same passionate admiration as the priest raises the host on the altar.⁵⁰

Piety tells us that the truth shall make you free, that the weak shall be strong. Paganism consists of giving up the opposition of truth to illusion, no longer trying to seize the high ground, to wield power in the name of destroying it (...) Whereas the pious philosopher aims to speak the truth, the pagan uses ruses and trickery in order not to redefine the truth, but to displace the rule of truth.⁵¹

If as Lyotard claims, "The pagan uses ruses and trickery in order not to redefine the truth, but to displace the rule of truth" then Spencer's *truth* is pagan in intent. His use and understanding of imagery supports this view. The British attitude towards sex has changed dramatically since his day but although his imagery may have shocked some, it was only ever 'rude' or suggestive — and as ever, open to interpretation. An example may be found in *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta: Punts Meeting* (1953), "in which a group of well-to-do revellers lounge, arrested from their pleasures by the sermon on the Thames".⁵² The subject of Christ's sermon is 'sex': "I believe that Christ talking is really me love-making to everybody".⁵³ Here the hats are held in such a way as to symbolise sexually

situation in which one judges without criteria. And one judges not only in matters of truth, but also in matters of beauty (of aesthetic efficacy) and in matters of justice, that is, of politics and ethics, and all without criteria. That is what I mean by paganism"

50 Alison, Jane, (Ed) *The Apotheosis of Love* Barbican Art Gallery, (1991) p.74, *Stanley Spencer — On the Morality of Sexual Desire* c.1938, from the Tate Gallery Archive.

51 Readings, Bill, *Introducing Lyotard, Art & Politics*, p.73.

52 Cf. Robinson, Duncan, *Stanley Spencer* p.120

53 Robinson, Duncan, *Stanley Spencer* p. 123

explicit activity — but only if one is observant enough to notice it. The crowd adjusts cushions and settles in punts in anticipation. The pseudo-Freudian imagery is mixed once more with boyhood memories and associations, (and probably with rhyming slang and wordplay).⁵⁴ In the unfinished companion piece, *Christ Preaching at Cookham Regatta*, while his disciples doze, (one seems to have his fingers in his ears) Christ seems to be staring malevolently at a group of tiny children, most of whom have become distracted. Their distraction is ours — for we stand accused of not listening to Christ. The punts may serve as ‘comfy enclosures’ like the graves in *The Port Glasgow* series, the pews in Cookham Church, as receptacles for the deep security, or the bliss of ignorance a very young child feels in his pram. Christ, in the centre of the picture — like the baby in *The Nativity* — is almost unnoticed, for everyone else is preoccupied.



Fig. 38. Detail: The Nativity
1912
Stanley Spencer

54

Apart from the Renaissance tradition of using birds as symbols, i.e., the magpie, or the pelican, ‘bird’ is British slang for a young woman and the phrase, ‘Love a duck’ is the milder equivalent of the rhyming alternative. This may have inspired Spencer’s *St. Francis and the Birds* — for the saint does seem to be ‘making love’ to a bird. Another bird is seen hidden in the woman’s wrap, in *The Meeting* (1934). *Separating Fighting Swans* was selected for the jacket for Patricia Preece and ghost-writer, Louise Collis’s *Private View of Stanley Spencer* (1972). In this painting, three angels bear witness as Spencer tries to separate the swan’s entwined necks. The birds may symbolise Hilda and Patricia. Also (cf. *In the Picture* Andrew Graham Dixon’s series in the *Sunday Telegraph Magazine*, 2002) — François Boucher (1703-60). Boucher’s *Girl Plucking a Goose*, for example, is deliberately sexually suggestive. All the symbolism and associated words serve as visual and verbal double-entendres and this was the whole purpose of such paintings.

Undeniably, many of his ideas were born as a reaction against the remnants of Victorian sanctimony and hark back to other times when local superstition and ritual was absorbed into Christianity. His notion of the erotic in art and religion is often likened to the explicit carvings found on the Hindu Temple at Kajuraho. This painter was driven by inner conviction birthed in religious instruction that later grew to be the rumblings of a Spencerian paganism of immense proportion. This was not primarily a denial of Christianity, but a synchronised perception of ‘Christ-with-us’ as acceptable sexual beings: the acknowledgement of sexuality in a no-holds-barred confrontation (reminiscent in some ways of Zappa’s stance). Christ is crucified on a daily basis by the refusal of society to change its attitude towards itself. Spencer is scornful of ‘small-town’ morality⁵⁵ but draws consolation by leaning towards more sexually enlightened religions — and away from scare mongering.

When the revivalist settled himself in all the miseries of his campaign were upon us (...) At the services there were repeated supplications from the altar to come and be “saved”. There was no movement from our pew. Repeated invitation to “Come along, Brother” (or Sister) did not leave us cold, but rather in a cold sweat lest our resistance should break down. We were not in favour of this kind of salvation; we mistrusted the whole set-up. The black banner with letters of gold, “Where will you spend eternity?”

55 Ref. MacCarthy (plate 62) & Rothenstein, J., p.131. In 1958 he was to say of his painting of *The Crucifixion*, whilst presenting the painting to the boys and teachers of Aldenham School. “I have given the men who are nailing Christ to the cross — and making sure that they do a good job of it — Brewers caps, because it is your Governors, and you who are still nailing Christ to the cross.” Apparently, the school was funded by, and its governors had connections with, the local brewery. Significantly, Spencer’s vision allowed the image of the Crucifixion to be *re-used* in a personal campaign. (Coincidentally, cf. Chapter 3 above, Zappology attacks the automatic acceptance of alcohol in society in *America Drinks and Goes Home, Titties n’ Beer*, etc.) This reuse of *The Crucifixion* is by no means unique to Stanley Spencer, he would have seen Gauguin’s *Yellow Christ* for example, and his brother Gilbert had depicted their father William as the crucified Christ, as early as 1915. (See Robinson, *Visions from a Berkshire Village*, p.18) ‘Pa’ is steadily raised up on a cross by the Spencer boys, symbolising how they steadily broke his heart, one by one, as they went to war

covering as it did our more homely and familiar one, (How amiable are thy tabernacles, Oh Lord of Hosts").⁵⁶

Generally speaking, one tends not to hear so much about hell as a fiery cauldron full of demons with pitchforks these days, except in terms of a negative dialectic, a subject humorously presented in cartoons or quirky movies as an antidote to terror. Today 'Hell' is more usually thought of, as the absence of God's love and adults are less inclined to put 'the fear of God' into their children. This is not to say that it has entirely gone away — for demons and devils are art forms too, and as mythopoetic creations harboured deep within the human psyche, they can never leave. There are two of them in Spencer's painting preventing 'the wicked' from resurrecting from the large white tombs on the left. Much as Spencer may have later wished them away for disrupting the harmony — they remain.

Religious art, alternately highly decorative, then puritanical and plain, (according to religious persuasion or custom) continues to operate within a context of its own making. It persists by reinventing past images and reapplying them to 'now' just as Hollywood remakes a classic film and updates it. A Vichian perspective might allow that these selections, or themes, are perpetually interwoven, not necessarily following in strict sequences, but intertwining enough to ensure that the fabric or pattern of art has relevance to itself. Their order is not predictable, but their occurrence is. Spencer sees his visionary work as an antidote to religiosity yet it cannot help but reaffirm the lessons learned in his youth.⁵⁷

56 Cf. Spencer, G, *Stanley Spencer by his brother Gilbert*, p.79

57 Cf. Ruhlmann, W, *FZ Companion*, p.11: The Zappas were Catholic, and there was some attempt to put Frank into parochial school, but it was short-lived. "When the penguin came after me with a ruler," Zappa said of a nun, "I was out of there." Nevertheless, he continued to attend church until he was 18. "Then suddenly the light-bulb went on over my head," he said. "All the mindless morbidity and discipline was pretty sick — bleeding this, painful that and no meat on Friday. What is this shit?"

Incidentally, Zappa had a distinct advantage over Vico who operated within severely repressed surroundings where to be branded heretic could be dangerous. Vico's originality lies in his claim that the 'civil world' (or what we nowadays call culture) was

The Resurrection, Cookham anticipates rebirth as renewal of values characteristic of the desire for improvement. Spencer thus asks the same kind of question that is seamlessly stitched into the Vichian *ricorsi*: Indeed, if ‘we are what we are becoming’ — are we becoming better, and what part can *divine* providence possibly play in this development?⁵⁸ Spencer’s serendipity springs from a similar impulse that runs through his subject matter in both theme and content. Arguably the same serendipity soaks into the individual act of drawing; permeates the intuitive act of painting. The magical quality of hope resides in the naiveté of form as expressed in Spencer’s oeuvre from the honesty of *The Beatitudes*⁵⁹ to the loneliness of *The Wilderness*.

Spencer, like anyone else, was a product of his time even if his work flies in the face of contemporary trends in British Art. ‘World Religion’⁶⁰ had caught the attention of many in the artistic community during the first part of the twentieth century. It was a panegyric not unlike the cure-all ‘Love and Peace’ ethos of the nineteen-sixties and early seventies optimistically seen as the answer to pointless war and to the disillusionment many had felt in respect of organised religion. Although Spencer’s deliberate ‘resurrection’ of Renaissance form allowed for

not only created by the poetic fictions of the first men, but that it *still* consists in them. Whatever opinion one may have about corporal punishment, to administer it is *not* Christ-like, and it is not redemptive according to Christ: “suffer little children to come unto me” as Jesus said.

58 Vico talks almost endlessly about *Providence*. One surmises that if Providence is not ‘divine’ it may be serendipitous, especially if one considers that Vico’s ‘naturalistic’ *New Science* actually leaves God out of the historical development of the species by placing humanity in charge of its own destiny.

59 See McCarthy, p.46, “In the *Beatitudes* Spencer has returned to his belief that the ugly is redeemable. His distortion of technique was instrumental to this process. In an essay in *Sermons by Artists*, he analysed the painter’s creative generosity of vision: ‘Distortion arrives from the effort to see something in a way that will enable him to love it.’ In Spencer’s *Beatitudes* the flabby and ungainly and visibly ageing human couples, ecstatic in their mutual sexual awareness, are redeemed and rendered beautiful

60 For example, the ‘Theosophy’ of Madame Blavatsky, which incorporates elements from several religions into Spiritualism, is thought to have influenced Kandinsky and Mondrian.

multiple representations of one person on the picture plane and was the overriding construct behind his master plan or 'Church of Me' it was combined with his intuitive self-awareness, or Cookham feelings, and his growing sexual preoccupation. This mixture ferments a heady brew whose liberal quantities induce an intoxicated double vision: either his religiosity is baffling and pretentious or he is a 'true visionary' and the spectator must choose which.⁶¹ In the light of this study, *both* positions are equally defensible as the serendipity of Spencerian style.

III. Two or *More* Stanleys?

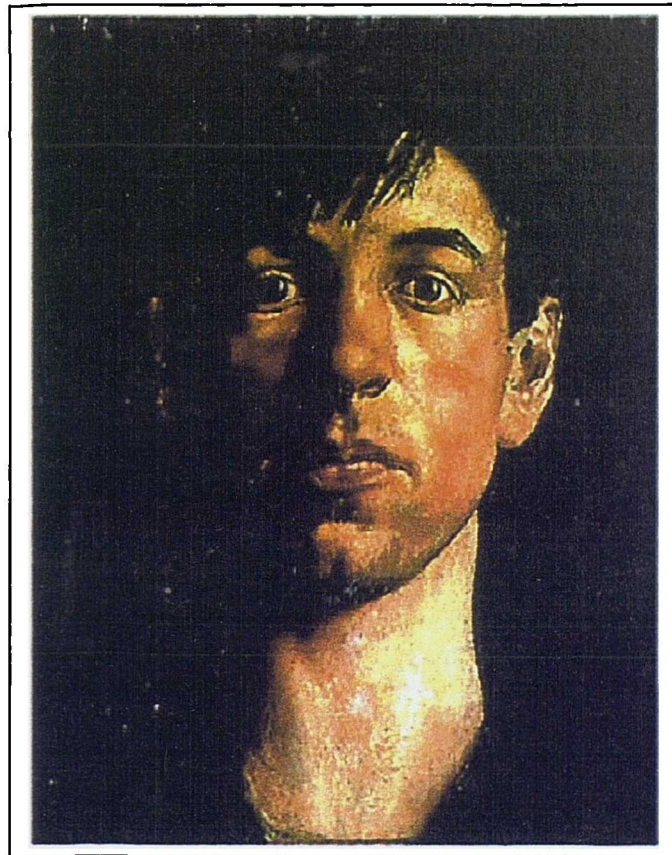


Fig. 39. Self-portrait
1914
Stanley Spencer

⁶¹ Cf. Baldacchino, J. *Easels of Utopia* (1998). p.150 "The observer of Spencer's work has no choice but one: devotion. In devoting his gaze to Spencer's makings, the observer has to make a further choice: accept the narrative with faith, or reject its outcome with the sincerity of the sceptic."

III.i.

For me Spencer *is* the 1913⁶² portrait — at one and a half times life size, it has the intimate yet epic quality of his best work — so like Palmer or Durer, looking at himself as his world, his material — this oil rich painting (the paint would soon dry out) of a boy absorbed in looking yet self-absorbed — as if creating the world and being created at the same time: a boy filled with God, his chin prominent and slightly raised, a boy filled with possibility and faith in Art and himself.⁶³

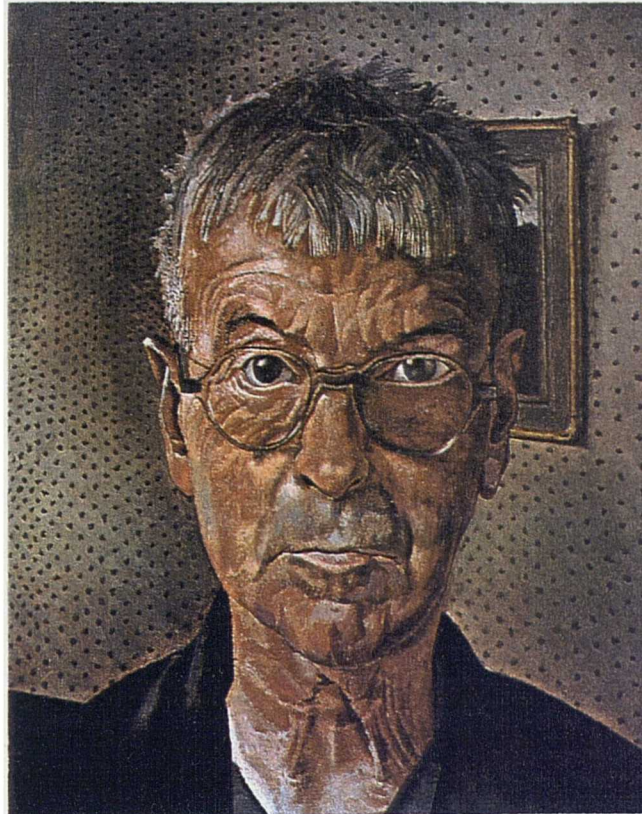


Fig. 40. Self-portrait
1959
Stanley Spencer

In December 1958 the artist had been diagnosed as suffering from cancer, and had undergone a colostomy operation. Spencer stayed with Mrs Smith and her family, buying a canvas for this picture in an artists' material shop in Leeds. He first of all made a red conte-crayon drawing similar in size to the painting using a mirror he had brought downstairs from his bedroom. The picture was worked from the eyes outwards. (...) The strain of terminal illness is kept at bay by the candour of his gaze.⁶⁴

⁶² Upstone, in *Stanley Spencer* (2001) clearly states Spencer brought it to completion in the opening phase of the Great War (1914). It is variously dated 1913 and 1914.

⁶³ Gormley, Anthony, in *Stanley Spencer — A Sort of Heaven*, p.7. Tate Gallery (1992)

⁶⁴ Nesbitt, Judith, *Stanley Spencer — A Sort of Heaven*, p.54

He had been operated on for cancer earlier that year and probably knew he was dying. Certainly the picture has an air of testament about it (perhaps consciously intended as a counterpart to his similarly close up and frontal portrait of 1914). (...) The total effect is of a fierce, almost defiant courage and truthfulness.⁶⁵

The artist desires his own creative welfare first, his work purgative in the sense that it acts as a means of relief from the burden of ideas. Before attempting to redeem others, he has to *believe* in the possibility of redemption for himself (of one kind or another). And so in *The Resurrection*, Cookham Spencer had depicted himself several times and in various incarnations simultaneously as if in denial of self and as a statement of belief. These smaller portraits within the large canvas allude to aspects of personality, whereas a 'series' of self-portraits (like those of Rembrandt) record physical changes, or (like those of Van Gogh) might reveal a changing mental state. Spencer painted several self-portraits throughout his life, some better than others. If one compares his two most famous self-portraits of 1914 and 1959 respectively, it is remarkable how psychologically similar they are. Indeed, one could go so far as to consider them as *a single deliberate atemporal act*. They illustrate for me, what we all know to be true: that in spite of changes, human beings remain pretty much the same throughout their lives.

Separated by almost half a century, these portraits provide an affirmation of continuous painterly intention; each is a graphic demonstration of quiet determination. The nature of such work, of course, demands concentration and both paintings confront the spectator head on. Therefore, the *modus operandi* may well explain the intensity of the gaze but not the latent power these images possess. Intuitively, one sees that Spencer both *is* and *is not* the same person knowingly about to embark on an unknown journey of sorts. Taken together, the

⁶⁵ Hyman, Timothy, *Stanley Spencer* (2001) p.238

two paintings map out Spencer's declaration of *Being* — the physical space between them emblematic of the time elapsed between their conception. Reproduced in books, they are separated by a thick wedge of pages, they act as bookends —the alpha and omega.

Spencer's visionary work is full of hope but his quest for truth is also ingrained in that last self-portrait, strictly speaking a 'non-visionary piece' that transfixes us as much as the first portrait. Analytical in the extreme, the older Stanley is as searching as the youthful student, his scrutiny residing between the cloudy eye and the unflinching eye. There is a hint of the inevitable but no sense of disappointment. Painted the year of his death, it seems he was making ready for the end and was also challenging eternity into the bargain.⁶⁶

These two works exert a psychological power that is unfathomable. There are two more self-portraits from 1939 in which Spencer depicts himself brush in hand, the *Self-portrait, Adelaide Road* being the better, (he appears to be conducting a powerful piece of music with his sable brush) — but neither of these have the spiritual dimension of the 1914 and 1959 paintings. There is an excellent study from 1951. Then there is the unforgettable 'startled' Spencer in the *Self-portrait with Patricia Preece* of 1936 and the uncompromising *Leg of Mutton* painting, the *Double Nude Portrait: The Artist and his Second Wife*, painted between 1936-37. Again, they challenge the spectator but somehow seem to lack spiritual dimension. Apart from these, Spencer features in many other paintings throughout his entire career, too numerous to mention. His work was a conscious and constant autobiography — a mixture of inner feelings expressed by outward appearance.

⁶⁶ Cf. Kant, I, *The End Of All Things (Religion within the Bounds of Mere Reason)* p.195, "It is a common expression, used chiefly in pious language, to speak of a person who is dying as going out of time into eternity." Kant points out that eternity as an extension of time, from one point to infinity is a meaningless concept and that eternity actually means the end of time itself.

After his first wife, Hilda, died in 1950, he continued to write to her and he went on to paint several reminiscences of their time together, *Love Letters* (1950) *Hilda and I at Pond Street* (1954) and *Hilda and I at Burghclere* (1955). Each serves as an expression of undying love. He had written to Hilda in 1943:

It gave me a wonderful joy when I used to imagine you and I at some distant future and through all the years ahead as I *was* able to feel about you and me. (...) I can only feel that oneness that I love with you. I could identify myself with you utterly so that I felt like a single being that was me and you. (...) Nothing has ever compensated me for the loss of you.⁶⁷

However, not even these heartfelt acts of contrition, these painted tributes to his very idea of *Being* would get near to the powerful self-portraits of 1914 and 1959.

III.ii. Stanley Spencer had often claimed that he painted in at least *two* separate capacities: that in order to make a living he *worked* as a landscape artist, but his other, mystical or ‘spiritual’ work was more personal. It is only this *devotional* work which may be regarded as redemptive — the ‘upstairs’ painting. By investing works of art with ‘life’ we acknowledge that paintings and musical compositions become as ‘children’ to their creators. It is through our children, (and theirs) that we hope to live forever, and indeed Spencer’s legacy continues both in the regular exhibition of his own work and in the influence he has had on other artists. His need to disconnect physical appearance from *Being* sees painting as an embodiment of the soul. I believe it may be most noticeably detected in the self-portraits, but for him, he would reach his zenith in the *Beatitudes of Love* (1937-38).

⁶⁷ Rothenstein, J, *Stanley Spencer, The Man: Correspondence and Reminiscences* (1979) p.72

Each of the pictures shows the twinned and unified soul of two persons. The composition turns the two into one person and becomes a single organism. (...) I can do without all my pictures except these. They are more genuine than any religious painting I have ever done. (...) I have never seen any paintings which *more truly* reveal the individual. (...) I am convinced that the physical urge in me is the very substance and core of the spiritual essence I am seeking. (...) I saw — and this interested me most — that the religious quality, which I had been looking for and never found in my work hitherto, now in my sex pictures showed itself for the first time, though not easy for people to recognise what it was.⁶⁸

Apparently based on various people, these figures reveal the animus of ‘huge Female (Hilda) and tiny Male (Stanley) figures as an absolute idealised coexistence, the merging of male and female that in the real world prove impossible due to incompatibility. He embarked upon a journey of painterly serendipity to the exclusion of other figurative concerns made by those who placed demands on his time, urging him to present a saleable commodity. The dismissal of the importance of figurative ‘accuracy’ in his visual perception, to some (including Rothenstein), marked ineptness evinced by rather clumsy drawing and painting. These wobbly people, buck-toothed and bog-eyed gave apparent justification for what the Slade, the critics, and his peers were bound to consider ‘bad workmanship’ rather than ‘visionary’ work. In an age when psychology and psychoanalysis were relatively in their infancy, these grotesque illustrations are almost of a ‘psychic’ nature — the inference being that it is only the soul that may be truly beautiful. The *Beatitudes of Love* series is unusual by anyone’s standards but through them Spencer became stronger.⁶⁹ He saw that if beauty existed at all — it lay in the recognition of ugliness as an expression of

⁶⁸ See M. Collis, *Stanley Spencer*. (Harvill Press London 1962) pp. 141/142

⁶⁹ A connection is made here with the famously ugly Socrates, or Frank Zappa who celebrated ugliness. To paraphrase Zappa’s criticism of the ‘Beautiful People’ — they should be careful because there are more of us ugly f***ers about.

inner beauty. The ugliness evident in the distorted figures in the *Beatitudes of Love* series dispenses with physical appearance entirely.

The perfection of an idealised conjunction habituates the vital distortion in this series. Art, to be 'genuine' must be reaffirmed as a human institution, an activity that satisfies social aims, a redefinition of humanity created in the interest of society at large. It requires the grandiosity of ridicule, the vitality of irony, the self-effacement of caricature. Art speaks of our poor perception of the divine through the creativity of the individual. The briefness of Lilliputian lives; the close-up shot in sharp focus of Brobdignagian faces — warts and all. Art is good for us even when it is bad for us. Imagination as the making of images 'mirrors' the artist's inner being if it is to be of any worth at all — *but it is little wonder* that Spencer's purpose in creating ugliness was largely misunderstood.

III.iii. Spencer's style and subject matter flew in the face of those around him. It is highly significant that he only received genuine recognition as an artist of real import very late in life. By rejecting much that was conventional around him, he most obviously fought against the popular tide, yet his was a *true* narrative. His paintings, based on conviction, put forward a plan to persuade others to comply with his view of a better world. Thus his aim is redemptive.

Most of his ideas were first drawn into sketchbooks or notebooks and on occasion, onto toilet roll, prior to painting. The sketches were grid-lined and enlarged, but the content remained quite often totally unchanged. As canvases they mark the difference, defined by Lyotard, between the *lexis*, the mode of presentation, and the *logos* or content. The sketchbooks would never have the power to shock, to amaze or to command interest as the huge canvases would. Spencer, more than most relied completely on his preliminary work, but hardly recognised it as a redemptive motif in its own right. Therefore the space between

the content and the work existed before the paintings were executed. In other words his faith, although a complicated matter, was the *raison d'être* for his work. He was bursting with ideas that he would never have enough time to paint in full. And so his 'output' extends beyond the physical remains — the canvases and sketchbooks, the words collected from the recesses of tea chests filled with notes and ideas, from half-remembered snippets of garrulous conversation, and all the arguments and discussions he had about his painting, about God, Hilda Patricia and Cookham. It is apparent that he talked of little else.

The miracle of resurrection is so wonderful that it must be told and retold. After all, keeping a story alive is in itself cultural reaffirmation. Continuity in the unbroken narrative places the daughter of Jairus, for example, like Lazarus, beyond death forever. The paintbrush of Stanley Spencer brings her to life in, *The Resurrection, with the Raising of Jairus's Daughter*, (1947). Here he demonstrates that our past is still with us for Cookham's ancestors have risen and 'come to visit' on the last day. Like friendly zombies, they neatly and easily remove the paving slabs to emerge in the land of the living. Spencer also 'enlivened' his work as he painted it, breathing life into paintings worked up from his meticulously squared up drawings. The ideas did not emerge from the canvas but were themselves a second telling, a 're-enactment' of the drawings, which in turn were only representations of the first held 'inner vision'. The contrast between the 'resurrections' and the antiseptic normality of the suburban garden 'pot-boilers' is alarming. Spencer's 'Dr. Jeckyll' paints neat rows of flowers and trim hedges whilst 'Mr. Hyde' lurks in the cemetery — it seems 'visionaries' require inspiration whilst landscape painters can work from direct observation. As such, he considered his landscape paintings mimetic mechanical representations of little interest. Nonetheless, many of them are incredibly skilful and truly wonderful. They powerfully illustrate and record a way of life that no longer exists, and they provided him with locations for him to house his mysterious vision.

III.iv. Spencer ‘belongs’ in ‘Eternal Cookham’ because he constantly reworks the parochial small-town ‘mind-set’ of those who know each other well and share in the familiar mythopoiesis of local legend. The story of Sarah Tubb who got down on her knees on Cookham High Street when she saw the tail of Halley’s Comet — for she thought the end of the world was imminent, is one example. The diversity of his production which most evidently distinguished landscape from visionary work, was brought about by his conscious deliberation over what could and what could not be seen. His perception of another ‘reality’ where Sarah Tubb not only sees the comet but receives ‘Heavenly Visitors’ is not that far removed from a painting like *The Flagellation* by Piero della Francesca.⁷⁰ At times in conversation, he would disseminate the purpose of his output, praising his imaginative paintings whilst being entirely dismissive of his landscape paintings. At other times it seemed the divide was less important, but the visionary work always held greater significance.

One may reflect that Spencer was preoccupied with Christianity throughout his life, even if at times he may have been, or may have seemed to be, in denial. His last great heavenly vision would come to him in Scotland. *The Port Glasgow Resurrection* is supremely important for it marks the final contrast to *The Resurrection, Cookham*. In his own words he recalls the moment of inspiration for the piece. Spencer describes leaving his hotel room “unable to write due to a jazz band playing in the drawing room below” — he felt the need to get away:

I walked up along the road past the gas works to where I saw the cemetery on a gently rising slope...I seemed then to see that it rose in the midst of a great plain and that all in the plain were resurrecting and moving towards it...I knew that the resurrection would be directed from this hill,... there is

⁷⁰ Cf. Spencer’s painting, *Sarah Tubb and the Heavenly Visitors* (1933).

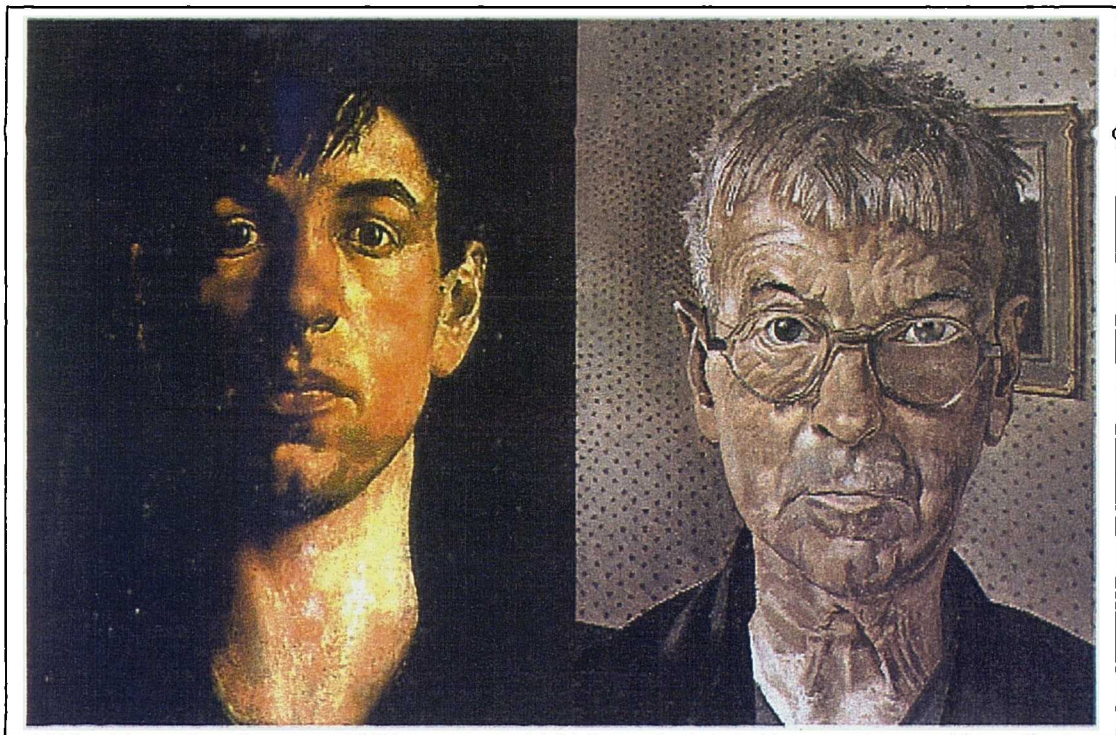
an undefined not-yet-come-to-earth-Port-Glasgow-epitomising something which I hope to find and arrive at.⁷¹

It is easy to imagine that Spencer could have felt full of the success of *The Welders* and the *Burners* from the *Shipbuilding on the Clyde* series. The War Commission had put him back on the map, out of the wilderness. He was a great hit with the locals in the shipyards, the subject of television documentaries — a celebrity. Yet he was absorbed by bigger things, an almost Blakean vision of the last judgement that disabled pretension or the disillusionment brought by self-aggrandisement. Hilda had a mental breakdown around this time and the events in his life must have seemed surreal. This resurrection needed to be more of a redemptive act than *The Resurrection, Cookham*, — less selfish, and nearer in spirit perhaps to atonement — but it is not.

Is art's history a 'linear' development in the same sense that we think of time, or of history itself as linear, or do individuals operate intuitively, disregarding their previous work? *The Port Glasgow Resurrection* is humanitarian, demonstrating tenderness, noble in intent but ironically, it is lacking in spiritual content. This is surprising as the main theme of the work compares well with and contrasts to *The Resurrection, Cookham* painted by a self-absorbed and sexually motivated younger man. It seems, as Diotima claimed, the only saving grace of selfish desire is that it may be utilised (via the arts) for the benefit of the visionary (and ultimately, the redemption) of others. One might say that the artist desires his own creative welfare first before attempting to enlighten others, but by so doing he effects as well as reflects cultural change. In a sense, artists may bypass linearity of art forms with ease and appear to work in a vacuum — nevertheless they occasionally touch deep-rooted feelings common to most, if not all of us. However they are mistaken if they think they can call upon this power at will.

⁷¹ Cf. Alison, Jane, (Ed) *Apotheosis of Love* Barbican Art Gallery, (1991) p.84 (originally from *Stanley Spencer: Resurrection Pictures*, Wilenski, Faber & Faber 1951)

Spencer's truth lies in his style of painting as much as his choice of subject matter. Nonetheless, the immediacy or 'friendliness' of his rotund tubular forms belies a deeper significance. Their appeal stems from a natural intuitive response by Spencer to paint and canvas, to colour, shape, and pattern. This appeal grows in the heart of the spectators' recognition of themselves as awkward and somewhat disjointed — out of time themselves. Spencer hopes for redemption for all those gravity-defying chubby angels, the check-suited men and flowery draped women, the backward handed boy, the baby in the pram, the distorted couple, — indeed, all of the badly posed villagers are bound for heaven.



*Fig. 41. The Two Self-portraits
1914 & 1959*

Memento Mori

One cannot generate a timeless universal symbolism, any more than one can invent a timeless, universal way of life which a rational being could pursue whenever and wherever he happened to be. One is what one is, in a specified historical context; no one can escape the particular categories, social and psychological, mental and emotional, that obtain in given times and places, and are subject to the laws of development.¹

Isaiah Berlin

I. Redemption —at last!

I.i. Redemption implies that we exchange the current fantasy for a better one. Incredibly, after firstly stating the merits of recognising one's own ignorance, the next step is to proclaim imagination and intuition as of inestimable value in

¹ Berlin, I, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment* p.125

comparison to simply accepting, without question, general historical fact.² An exposé of 'aesthetic redemption' is usefully reconfigured here via three atemporal aspects of creativity that form part of a loop or pattern of action and interaction of human predisposition. In Spencer's terminology, although they sit in different *pews*, 'Piero', 'Zappa' and 'Spencer' share redemptive purpose in an ontological sense. Their *Being* continues because of their work: I am not conceited enough to claim that this *is* how things are, but this is how they may be intuitively perceived in order to claim art's purpose as universally redemptive. Hence Piero, Zappa and Spencer *may* be mentioned in one breath. The anachronism in the order in which they are presented here is deliberate, placing xenochronic time formulation as *advantageous in the desire for clarity of interpretation*. Logically, as creative people we see things afresh by turning them upside down; the role of the artist as active mediator enables art to dwell within a more tangible arena than religion. It is convenient but also unavoidable to blend religious precepts with doubt, to accept or reject dogma according to personal taste. Spencer is right to acknowledge faith in the afterlife as useful, but only if it effects change in this life — it is the physicality of paint on canvas that tells us so. The painted area demarcates the redemptive nature of *The Resurrection*, (whether in Cookham or Sansepolcro) *as* tangible. The desire for change also pervades *Joe's Garage* when considered as a timeless ethical space proclaiming art as more than imitative (*One more time*). To denude religious art of its religious content is impossible, but Zappa comes close by substituting one image for another, the watermelon for the baby. He reminds us of the danger in not seeing the (holy) wood for the (religious) trees and that should prompt a re-examination of values. If one is honest, it is also convenient to apply the same degree of logic to belief in art as to

² Cf. Collingwood, R. G., *The Principles of Art*. p.138. There is precedence here, for Collingwood credits Vico as the first to account the philosophical theory of art as imagination: "The habit of calling aesthetic experience 'the pleasure of the imagination' dates back, I think, to Addison; the philosophical theory of art as imagination to his contemporary, Vico."

religious belief and to sew the seeds of doubt in the same ground as the roots of faith: "I believe — help Thou, my unbelief."

If we are inclined to believe that art's practitioners are prepared to go out on a limb for us; that the world they inhabit is indicative of the universality of human kind, where is the evidence? The pedant may say that as much as it lifts our spirits, in the final analysis art is undoubtedly useless. Vico himself stated: "The arts are nothing but imitations of nature, and in a certain way 'real' poems made not of words but of things,"³ but he also said: "He who is not a poet by nature can never become one by art."⁴ Art is not synonymous with skill: the mirror held up to nature by the late Renaissance artists, but neither must it be thought so frivolous as to be of no use.⁵ Vico installs art as the first component in the circuit diagram of world culture but not as the circuit board itself:

Thus the first people who were the children of the human race founded the first world of the arts; then the philosophers, who came by a long time afterward and so may be regarded as the old men of the nations, founded the world of the sciences, thereby making humanity complete.⁶

³ Vico *NS*. 217. "All of the arts of the necessary, the useful, the convenient, and even in large part those of human pleasure, were invented in the poetic centuries before the philosophers came; for the arts are nothing but the imitations of nature, and in a certain way, "real" poems made not of words but of things."

⁴ Cf. Vico *NS*. 213. "In every other pursuit men without natural aptitude succeed by obstinate study of technique, but he who is not a poet by nature can never become one by art." Cf. also: "The world in its infancy was composed of poetic nations, poetry is nothing but imitation." (*NS* 216). And again, "It follows that the founders of the gentile nations, having wandered about in the wild state of dumb beasts and being therefore sluggish, were inexpressive save under the impulse of violent passions, and formed their first languages by singing." (*N.S.* 230).

⁵ Cf. Vico *NS*. 241: Typically, Vico identifies a cyclical pattern for human needs: "Men first feel necessity then look for utility, next attend to comfort, still later amuse themselves with pleasure {217} thence grow dissolute in luxury, and finally go mad and waste their substance."

⁶ Vico *NS*. 498.

A new question asserts itself that if, in our complacency, we are not sure what we want, what is it that we want to know? The search for knowledge presupposes a desire to understand, but for Vico, mankind comes to greater knowledge, and man *becomes* all things, by *not* understanding: *Homo non intelligendo fit omnia*. Vico's axiom 120 declares, "Because of the indefinite nature of the human mind, wherever it is lost in ignorance man makes himself the measure of all things." This scores a direct hit on the ship of fools which first hoisted the flags of humanism, for it defies the vain proposal by Protagoras, that, "Man *is* the measure of all things." The idle boast which had driven Renaissance ideology for centuries, and which still drives us today may be seen as heuristic, for eventually we *are* what we find ourselves to be. We are no nearer to being the centre of the universe any more than when the ancients placed our world there. The rule runs that when we understand we develop and see the world for what it is, but when we misunderstand, we invent and delude ourselves and become what we imagine we are by the means of slow transformation.⁷ In other words, at best, individuals *are* the result of humanity's collective imagination. Secure in this knowledge, with the help of *Providence* and the intuition of artists we may yet find the road to redemption.

I.ii. The first aim of this study is to ascertain whether a similarity of intention, (in as much as one can discern intention) might exist between the two great 'Resurrections' of Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer, separated by five hundred years. The argument *for* the proposal rests upon the validation of an innate sense of intuition (common to all people at all times) as a legitimate vehicle

⁷ Cf. Panofsky, Erwin, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Zone Books, New York (1991) p.68. "Thus the history of perspective may be understood with equal justice as a triumph of the distancing and objectifying sense of the real, and as a triumph of the distance-defying human struggle for control; it is as much a consolidation and systematisation of the external world, as an extension of the domain of the self."

for ideas; the case *against* claims historical and sociological development as a linear pattern comprising a set of irretrievable events. There is an element of truth on both sides, but the proposal is acceptable if we reckon that by failing to intuitively connect⁸ with art from the past, (as well as history in its entire humanity) much of the art currently on offer is also 'dead'. Devoid of its apparent origins, art would 'lose meaning' but as its purpose is forever entwined in the form of a continuous narrative, its beginnings are accessible. This is *not* to say that a work of art is 'timeless' or that the purpose of art never changes.⁹ Nor does it mean that purpose or an understanding of context may be wholly retrieved from other times and places. If anything, it means the opposite, and questions the arrogance of those who define precise patterns of linear development by tying works of art to historical 'events'. (Thus in Vico's analysis because Homer did not exist, a statue of 'Homer' would be preposterous — except as a memorial to an idea or cultural concept).

The Resurrection by Piero della Francesca is the product of a specific chronology and geographical location but as it speaks of the relationship between self and the absolute, it partakes of an eternal relevance. Because it presents the seen and the unseen on one plane, it questions human perception. Because it dismisses fifteen centuries in order to bring Christ to Sansepolcro, it dispenses with the construct of time. Spencer's *Resurrection, Cookham* falls within these same parameters, except that for him, Christ's resurrection is implied by *seeing* Christ in the people

⁸ See *Vico and Contemporary Thought* (Ed. Tagliacozzo, Mooney, Verene., Macmillan Press. 1980.) p.167, "If, in order to arrive at 'truth value,' one would have recourse to the self-evidence of original premises, intuition would become the ultimate valid criterion. This would mean, as is pointed out by logicians, that scientific thought would be deprived of all its rigour and that its terminology, under the influence of the imagination, would be studied with metaphor and analogy. It would be the end of strictly scientific reasoning."

⁹ Cf. Lucian Freud in the *Sunday Telegraph*, May 19 2002, "I think the most boring thing you can say about a work of art is that it is 'timeless'. That induces a kind of panic in me. Its almost like political speech — it doesn't apply to anyone. The idea that something's wrong if the work gives off a feeling of being tied to the moment, is crazy."

around him, in Hilda and in himself. As such, both works are statements of belief. We find ourselves back with Wittgenstein's analysis of 'seeing as' — as definitive, for both artists depend upon the spectator to read more into their works than the obvious pictorial narrative. There is an inferred or implied sense of shared understanding that is referential as both paintings *refer* to salvation, to the afterlife and to personal redemption. Practitioners must, on occasion, believe art capable of inducing change firstly in themselves, and secondly in others, and from this perspective it is found inseparable from religion: a work of art indistinguishable from a prayer.

I.iii. This brings us to the second aim of this study, which is to probe the gap between those areas of 'understanding', (as opposed to branches of knowledge) labelled 'art' and 'religion'. Zappa's *Watermelon in Easter Hay* is the 'blunt instrument' specifically selected for the purpose. The first step to take if one wishes to disseminate 'understandings' of either art or religion is to discriminate between levels, or types of 'understanding'. Consider, for example, the huge difference between *scholarly understanding* and *compassionate understanding*. Ultimately, one cannot intellectualise faith because it cannot be rationalised. This is where De Cusa's concept of *docta ignorantia*, endorsed and enhanced by Vico is vital as it deflates the humanist concept of enlightenment.¹⁰ Zappa's remit in illuminating ignorance (or stupidity) is the same. The work of art becomes simultaneously the highest of human aspiration but also a pastiche of itself. (It is one thing to create a statement of belief — it is quite another to have to live with it, or to expect others to). In this, it is not that common sense belief has necessarily changed the purpose of art but that its means of expression has '(be)come to be' considered misappropriate and so changed direction. Eventually, the deciding factor that deems human *insight* of divinity as

¹⁰ Cf. Chapter One / Chapter Four, above.

inseparable from *misunderstanding* is aligned with that which makes religious iconography both redemptive and blasphemous.

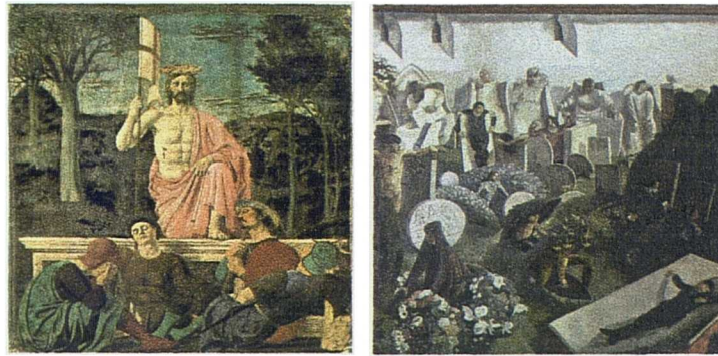
The synchronisation of the redemptive and the blasphemous is easily identifiable within the parameters of art and music as described in this essay: the simultaneous creation and destruction of cultural form — the *aufhebung* identified earlier in *Joe's Garage* also penetrates the iconography of both church and gallery. Now it becomes apparent that both Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer have redefined the concept of resurrection to suit their individual needs. Clearly, their work expresses a *sublative* state of mind that both supports and disowns earlier frames of reference held by their contemporaries. The acceptance/rejection of a perspectival view of the world, for example, with its ability to transform perception, is only the beginning:

Perspective, in transforming the *ousia* (reality into the *phainomenon* (appearance), seems to reduce the divine to mere subject matter for human consciousness; but for that very reason, conversely, it expands human consciousness into a vessel for the divine. It is thus no accident if this perspectival view of space has already succeeded twice in the course of the evolution of art: the first time as the sign of an ending, when antique theocracy crumbled; the second time as the sign of a beginning, when modern “anthropocracy” first reared itself.¹¹

The acceptance/rejection of aesthetic form: what is to be considered *as art*, and what purpose might it serve in shaping current or future understanding is of lasting concern. Perhaps these two ‘Resurrections’ may be emblematic of *corsi et ricorsi* — and that as mythology fosters enlightenment (and vice-versa) we may take it that one image defines the other?

¹¹ Panofsky, Erwin, *Perspective as Symbolic Form*, Zone Books, New York (1991).p.72.

Two Resurrections - Aufhebung



Vico believed that a man *could* understand himself and therefore might find empathy with others, regardless of when they lived — but he was also keen for us to acknowledge that there are things that simply cannot be known. He claimed that the latter category falls to *Providence*. Now, whether people approach God as a compassionate deity, (Divine Providence), or simply as encompassing that which falls outside scholarly understanding, the result is the same — it is only the interpretation that is different. It follows that ‘good’ art (like ‘good’ religion) might be compassionate, that is, if it is built upon the uncertainty of human feelings.

II. Death in the gallery?

II.i. Art is ‘instructive’ certainly, and on occasion it may be ‘magical’ or ‘miraculous’ for the true believer. We should not be cynical, but caution is

required when it is apparent that amongst artists of integrity there are still plenty of tricksters peddling their fake 'relics'. Then again, fakes are important too, as they tend to deconstruct the prevailing culture industry. Meanwhile, the most sincerely creative of devotees may sense that their muse has departed, their vision faded, or that they are out of step with everyone else. This is acceptable and inevitable, but it does not follow that their sincerity should be doubted — far worse is our fate if ever we place all our faith in the ramblings of critics or philosophers:

We must certainly be careful to avoid the vulgarity — which philosophers of art are much more prone to than practising critics — of supposing that we can ever hope to arrive at 'the correct reading' of a text, such that we may speak of having finally determined its meaning and thereby ruled out any alternative interpretations.¹²

Integrity makes its own demands, and rather than attempt to paint the infinite or to second-guess God's plan, — or indeed history — an artist can only be true to himself. Specifically 'the best' of art, is that described as being *truthful*, and although 'opinions' may vary as to what truth may be — as I have earlier explained — *common sense* decrees what this *might* mean. The implication is that "a correct reading" of anything, an artefact or an idea, is difficult to establish.

Premature anticipations of the ideas of one age in another happen seldom, but they happen. A thinker whose most original ideas are misunderstood or ignored by his contemporaries is not a mere romantic myth.¹³

Vico was largely misunderstood or ignored by his contemporaries. Rather like Vico, Piero was 'ahead of his time' in many respects, but most particularly in the

12 Skinner, Quentin, *Motives, Intentions and Interpretations*, p.68.

13 Berlin, I, *Three Critics of the Enlightenment*, p.119.

way that he ‘personalised’ the Neoplatonist understanding of *The Resurrection*.¹⁴ Art may avoid becoming a curiosity, or being forgotten altogether, if a *new* meaning may represent, revive or reassess an earlier mode of thought as relevant. However, Piero *was already relevant* long before being ‘rediscovered’ — indeed, Vasari says as much.¹⁵ The same foresight may be attributed to Spencer or Zappa, in that to the best of their ability, they remained autonomous from cultural predisposition.

The understanding of art forms often implies longevity — a kind of historical incubation, and so one may assume that it *takes time* for art to be appreciated. Yet, if the ‘present’ is a combination of what we term *the past* and *the present*, by logically extending this notion, ‘the present’ also automatically appertains toward a forthcoming combination of *the present* and *the future*. Therefore, regardless of understanding, the *creation* of an art form is evidently a deliberate act occurring in the present but also deemed worthwhile for a ‘posterity’ — no matter how brief. Despite the cries of ‘immediacy’, or the manifesto of Abstract Expressionists, this applies equally to the deconstructive, or the avant-garde that is continuously assimilated into the larger aesthetic, and so, the ‘modern’ and ‘postmodern’ share in their historical identity. ‘Completed’ works are only

14 Piero della Francesca, (Piero dei Franchesci, c.1410/20-1492) painted the *Resurrection* between 1463-65. Andrea Mantegna (1430/1-1506) painted a *Resurrection* similar, in some ways to Piero’s — as did Andrea del Castagno (1423-57) between 1445 and 1450 which was similarly rediscovered in 1890 beneath a layer of whitewash. Although neither of these match the intensity of Piero’s *Resurrection of Christ*, they are worth looking at for contemporary comparison.

15 Cf. Chapter One, above. Also, see Vasari, *Lives of the Artists*, Penguin Books, 1965) p.191. “One of the worst things that can happen to a man is to work and study hard in order to benefit others and make his own name and then be prevented by sickness, or perhaps death itself, from finally completing what he has begun. All too often he leaves behind him works that are nearly finished or are shaping well, only to have them usurped by presumptuous donkeys trying to dress themselves up in the noble skin of a lion. Admittedly, time is said to be the father of truth, and sooner or later it reveals the truth, nevertheless it can happen that for some while the one who has done the work is cheated of the honour due to him. And this is what happened to Piero della Francesca of Borgo San Sepolcro.”

‘dead’ or finished in the sense that as soon as a mark is made on the page, *the mark itself* belongs to history — but only the *immediacy* has gone. Forever tied to the moment, nonetheless the work of art is born into the world to take its chances; it is ‘performed’ in remembrance of itself as an ongoing, evolving ritual: newly interpreted by a new audience each time the painting is seen, each time the music is heard. *There is no death in the gallery.*

Metaphorically speaking, exemplary works of art are arranged in a parachronistic ‘gallery’ of the imagination. At each ‘visit’ an individual’s understanding changes, his intention is to contextualise and simultaneously re-contextualise the work before his eyes or the music in his ears. I have simply selected three of the exhibits from the ‘gallery’ on their merit, and hope that others may find them worthy of personal selection too. Inescapably trapped within a time span, in which they were originally produced, each reflects the history of ideas. In themselves they are not ‘timeless’ or ‘universal’ symbols but as ideologies they may be construed as common to all people of all time.

Piero della Francesca, as a representative of the Italian Early Renaissance, Frank Zappa the legendary guitarist and controversial ‘Rock Star’ of the late twentieth century, and Stanley Spencer the eccentric quintessentially ‘English’ painter, each left an indelible legacy. The suggestion here is that the materials they selected embody their ideas and have been used to the extent that each unique sense of *Being* remains — we recognise them through their art. But as their work was created in response to the work of others, “to treat matters where they begin”, we must imaginatively journey to a time before Piero. Those early Christians who splashed red paint (symbolising the redemptive Blood of Christ) on the (painted) skulls at the foot of the (painted) cross sought to simulate *transubstantiation*. As the bread becomes the Body of Christ in the Mass, the blood of Christ brings the dead back to life. Perhaps we are inclined to think there was nothing ‘personal’ about it, yet the early Christian artists expected Christ’s imminent/*immanent*

return (as Christ-with-us) and this idea was kept alive in the minds of the people.¹⁶ Therefore, the re-enactment of the death of Christ in paint was intended both as a reaffirmation of the faith of the artist, (a concrete declaration of that faith) and as a contribution to the community, (a communal prayer). These people were painting for their eternal salvation.

It is the contention here that a purposeful 'redemptive' act underlies artistic intent whether the subject is religious or not, whether the artist believes in an afterlife or not, and regardless of temporal restrictions. A 'work' of art *is* work and as such, demands some kind of sacrifice. It appears easy to those who lack sufficient insight of the creative process or are blinkered by cultural conditioning. For when 'things' always *mean something* whether we want them to or not — artists are the most proficient in noticing this. Although it may not always be easy to detect, a work tends to embody some sense of universal feeling, even if it may appear as a negative response.¹⁷ The claim (that art may be redemptive) is substantiated because a fresh look demands that we rethink, it urges us to ask questions of ourselves.

16 See Merton, Thomas, *Zen And The Birds of Appetite* (1968) p.18: "The first Christians experienced themselves as men 'of the last days,' newly created by Christ as members of his new kingdom, expecting his imminent return: they were men entirely delivered from the 'old aeon' and from all its concerns. They experienced a new life of liberation 'in the spirit' and the perfect freedom of men who received all from God as pure gift."

Metaphorically, red paint *visually* re-presents (brings again) the Blood of Christ firstly in the mind of the artist-devotee, secondly it inspires the spectator with the possibility of his own personal and private salvation. Christ as 'sacrificial lamb' was a common theme for early Christian artists — the work of art acts as a replication of the other barbarism: human sacrifice for the good of the people.

17 Hence the twentieth century respect for detritus, noted by Duchamp, by Dadaists and Surrealists, and also epitomised by both Spencer and Zappa, reflects a world in which everything, including people, becomes increasingly disposable. This is a valid, positive response.

Piero's *Resurrection* is above all else, a *memento mori* — a reminder of death, not only addressed by the artist to the people but also primarily addressed to the artist himself. As a 'relocation of self' it shares in the contemplative persuasion of *The Resurrection, Cookham* as outlined in the last chapter. *Watermelon in Easter Hay* acts also as a *memento mori* because it accurately presents musical interpretation as transient, purposeful evidence of that cultural conditioning Wittgenstein alluded to. Taken here almost in isolation from the body of his work it serves as a representative for Zappa's *continuous concept*, his awareness that all of his music is one piece. As such it stands alongside the altarpiece in Spencer's 'Church of Me' within a larger referential context. One intuitively feels that these three works of art are 'the best' as they retain the lively passion that brought them about, because they are bursting with life and not because scholarly interpretation or critical acclamation proclaims them best.

II.ii. The instructive nature of *memento mori* presents death as inevitable — death, the great leveller. A carved or painted skull or skeleton is more than a spooky reminder of the frailty of humanity; the similitude of all poor mortals bound to die. Its real aim is to inspire the spectator (or listener) to make the most of their lives. Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer both fall asleep in the (painted) graveyard that they share, they deliberately and willingly take on the role of *memento mori* so that each brushstroke becomes sequential in the Gnostic prayer of all time, the prayer of *Being*. This marks their intention, if not the same, as quite similar.

The act of *Being* demands a belief in or an awareness of 'this life' now. Its immediacy rebukes the Cartesian 'Evil Demon' that presents the world to the individual as a duplicate of itself, a copied world that one seeks in vain to rationalise. The symbolism of Spencer differs from that of Piero only because "a timeless universal symbolism" turns out to be as impossible as jumping into the

same stream twice. The recognition of the Renaissance as an individual, an unrepeatable episode at which Spencer or Zappa could not be present, does not prevent them from being (for want of a better word), 'renaissance' men. The title simply endows art's practice as 'timelessly and universally resurgent' — and as such it is part of our *Being*. Although we cannot break the simulacrum that is before and about us, if we cannot peer through to the painted skulls and shrunken heads from hastily named 'primitive' cultures and fail to see the clearest reflections of ourselves, we are deluded.¹⁸ Vico was saying much the same to his contemporaries who were too arrogant or complacent to listen. The Cartesian cogito had befuddled their brains with its egocentricity: "I think therefore I am" is the pitiful wail of insularity, 'the befuddlement' not 'the enlightenment' and the dismissal of the universal concept of a human being as part of a collective consciousness, comprising countless 'churches of me'. '*We are therefore we think*' or, '*We feel, therefore we become*' might be a better slogan — if one is needed at all.

In the intuitive search for 'truth value' the conventions and preconceptions of any single era stand as obstacles in the path of a more complete realisation of what such a truth may constitute. It is reasonable therefore, to optimistically consider the *lebenswelt* as a 'simulation' of what with incredible effort, could gravitate toward a 'better life' — or at least towards a clearer perception of the world as is. As a tangible paralogical and parachronistic act, the work of art facilitates such transcendence and is justly deemed redemptive.

18 See Pompa, Leon: *Imagination in Vico, Past and Present*. p.169, "It is not essential on the view I have propounded, that to understand this imaginative universal we should ourselves be able to form poetic man's image of Jove. It is essential, however, and herein lies the difference between human and natural knowledge, that we are able to perform acts of imagination and to know what it is to be able to form an image (...) to understand how poetic man saw his world we do not ourselves need to see it in the same way."

II.iii. Amongst 'the redeemed' surely there is no room for smug self-satisfaction or complacency? Art's infinite *Danse Macabre* sounds a distinctly hollow footstep through those galleries built on ideologies, empires, industrialisation, capitalism, religious indoctrination, and throughout all the metanarratives whose persistent propaganda and media hype doggedly remain. It takes an esoteric and pragmatic frame of reference (like the one Zappa fabricated) to create a systematic agenda which would divulge and bypass the workings of the system. He remains vibrant; his critique still valid, but in the large arena, predictably destined to be ignored for some time to come.¹⁹ Zappa points to the inevitability of 'an alternative collection' of almost forgotten and unnoticed works of art lying in cultural basements produced by 'unheard-of' people like the elusive 'Francesco Zappa'.

The implication is that 'Francesco'²⁰ may yet prove part of a viable addition to the current array — but who cares? Like the impoverished Vico, long-forgotten Piero²¹ and other-worldly Spencer, the ever-cynical Zappa provokes an alternative 'History of Ideas' from beyond the outreach of consumerist machinations or academic interest. The ongoing narrative recaptures the hopes and aspirations of earlier generations, older religions — the ones that got away. Art tells the tales of ancient gods and gruesome human immolation, of God the giver of the Decalogue, of spiritual enlightenment, of the tribulations of the early Christians, the birth of the nations. Each in turn witnessed anew in paint and

19 It should be noted how *The Simpsons* and *Futurama* by Matt Groening represent an ironic cultural stance to be reckoned with, the wit and social criticism is distinctly and deliberately Zappalogical. This is worth mentioning to illustrate the point that ideas permeate and change culture rather than specific individuals.

20 That Piero della Francesca is synonymous with *Piero dei Franchesci* is worth bearing in mind.

21 Despite assurance to the contrary from Nicholas Penny, Curator for Piero's paintings at The National Gallery, London, I think Piero's entry in *The Oxford Dictionary of Art* (1993) remains significant. The first line reads, "Italian painter, virtually forgotten for centuries after his death."

wood, in verse and prose, in metal, in stone or clay splutters back to life again and again.

The 'religious cupboard' would have been pretty bare without images, and if there are such things as 'Eternal Aspects of Art' by definition they predate religion, or more specifically, organised religions as perceived today. In this it is important to establish that art precedes philosophy too, at least in the Platonic sense that it allows for comparisons to be made with what we take to be 'reality'. It is only by creating a work of art that we may *sense* what is real — comparing like with like. Piero, Zappa, and Spencer each entertained this double vision with vigour. They are not alone because miraculously brutal/sensitive, beautiful/ugly forms persist, perhaps lodged in the psyche, worshipped in the temple, hung in the gallery, or scribbled on the toilet wall. In other words, art and religion cohabit in *this* narrative and are mutually supportive in the relationship between ethics and aesthetics. This is prevalent and easy to witness under the auspices of creeds like Buddhism, Christianity, or Hinduism, from whose rich and diverse pools of visual reinforcement examples are easily drawn. However, it is also evident in denial, and where a political regime, religious persuasion, or general philosophy decides that art is a worthless distraction — its very 'worthlessness' becomes relevant.

Philosophy has no answers, only relevant questions. Religion makes no claim to be 'eternal' it only *speaks* of the eternal, and as for art, so much depends upon interpretation. If worthlessness is relevant, how can any artefact be determined as 'otherworldly' — fabricated without selfish desire, a true icon? In this, I think that Spencer was right, and that to find any answers one must journey through the wilderness.



Fig. 43. Christ in the Wilderness: The Scorpion
1939
Stanley Spencer

Except for the last days when he was tempted, I don't know of any statements which refer directly to his life during this period except the reference to his fasting. But there is evidence of an appreciation of nature and of nature's way in all his sayings. That being so I have tried to visualise the being he is, and the life he lived from day to day using the sayings etc. as a clue and guide.²²

If those who wish to 'gain their life' only succeed in losing it, gathering material possessions (such as precious works of art) might be seen as a pointless exercise, causing one to wonder why religious institutions or art galleries bother? It is generally argued on the other hand, that without 'organised collections' one would be deprived of the opportunity to share visions. In the hubbub of the

²² MacCarthy, Fiona, *Stanley Spencer — An English Vision*, Yale University Press, (1997) cf. colour-plate 42, quoting Spencer from the Tate Archive

*Artworld*²³ there has to be one or two quiet contemplative moments, after all, one needs time to reflect upon and select new works, new directions. If spiritual and eternal aspects are to be credited as the initial driving force behind artistic endeavour, art could be taken as the ignition key for the larger engines of philosophy, religion, and culture. Thus, the role of the artist may be identified with a kind of monasticism whether his work appears in the gallery or in church.

One of the main motives that impelled men to embrace the ‘angelic life’ (*bios angelikos*) of solitude and poverty in the desert was precisely the hope that by doing so, they might return to paradise. Paradise belongs more properly to the present than to the future life. In some sense it belongs to both²⁴

III. The Eternal *Impossibility* of Truth

III.i. The Ancient Greeks hailed the Muses as the daughters of ‘Memory’ — *Mnemosyne*. The arts apparently come down to us from the song of the Muses, enabling us to have glimpses of ‘other worlds’ through *world memory*.²⁵ Therefore art, music, poetry, drama — collectively known as *Poiesis* (making) — created the immortal gods and simultaneously created the means by which to pay them homage. Society persists in the selective use of any mythology that reinforces those aspects of the collective memory that it deems appropriate. And so, although the individual has little choice in the promulgation of institutions, he may ‘wake up and look around’ and see them for what they are.

23 Cf. Danto.

24 Merton, Thomas, *Zen And The Birds Of Appetite* (1968) p.116.

25 Cf. Plato, *The Timaeus*.

Man, in his proper being as man, consists of mind and spirit, or, if we prefer, of intellect and will. It is the function of wisdom to fulfil both these parts in man, the second by way of the first, to the end that by a mind illuminated by knowledge of the highest institutions, the spirit may be led to choose the best. The highest institutions in this universe are those turned toward and conversant with God; the best are those which look to the good of all mankind.²⁶

And so if one expects Vico to place art or music as ‘institutions’ on a pedestal one may be forever disappointed. It would be difficult to argue that they are *always* “turned toward and conversant with God” — but the same may be said of religion. Although art helps us to develop our sensual faculties and this lays the foundation for a much bigger perception of human creativity in society, this is not the whole story. We look to “the good of all mankind” as part of our poetic interpretation of the world in which we find ourselves, but we know this is but a beautiful dream that up to the present time, at least, has eluded us.²⁷ However, we are not without hope and not yet beyond redemption. Art is a creative fiction, reliant upon the senses but plausibly speaking from the heart, and as such, it has the capacity to deconstruct all other fictions.

Although Piero della Francesca, Stanley Spencer and Frank Zappa are poles apart in almost every respect, each by necessity was a product of their time and thus externalised thoughts and improvised specific brands of creativity within those contemporaneous situations peculiar to themselves. This enquiry into the displacement of temporality and the recognition of time as ‘misunderstood’ at

26 See Vico *NS* 364, Vico claims that logic, morals, economics and politics are all *poetic* creations, as are, “physics, the mother of cosmography and astronomy, the latter of which gives their certainty to its two daughters, chronology and geography — all likewise poetic.” In Vichian context, human beings are incapable of understanding God’s truth, for it falls beyond their sphere of knowledge, but, trusting in Providence, they may aspire towards *Redemption*.

27 See Vico *NS* 374 / *NS* 367. “This world of nations has certainly been made by men (...) the senses the sole way of knowing things.”

best, renders any temporal terminology: 'classical', 'romantic', 'modern' and 'post-modern' as merely divisive. It claims each as a re-enactment of, or, as a counteraction to, the other. Therefore a diachronic succession of 'movements' in art, for example, as a definitive narrative becomes nonsense, merely a ruse for the authentication of a single view of history. Inclusive in the foolish notion that sees history as a sequence of events separated by spaces of nothingness, one art movement *replaces* another. Art would be better described, (I would argue) as a series of eternally inter-relating narratives — that relationship which I have elected to name, 'patterns of redemption'. There is no denying the 'relative' common sense identified by Vico, Hegel and Kant, as that which Piero, Spencer and Zappa *are* able to share in, simply because they were engaged in artistic endeavours — simply because they shared the same planet, albeit at different times. If there is indeed an *eternal* 'truth', (or, for that matter, the eternal *impossibility* of truth) — by definition, one feels that it must exist throughout time and beyond constraints imposed by intellect.

When art is 'great art', when it does give us a conviction of truth the outcome rarely qualifies as an intellectual insight but rather as an emotional experience which leaves us changed in our relationship to the world instead of adding to our knowledge of it.²⁸

Problems and disagreements over interpretation arise only in attempts to state the consequences of art in mere words. If 'mistakes' or false readings are made, it is because of the basic misapprehension that there is only *one* correct reading possible in a given work of art. It has been claimed here that as we are reliant upon the senses, our first reaction to art is one of 'wordless meaning' — the immediacy that is always given credence in paint, in music, in mime, on film. It is only when we attempt to discuss our feelings that the problem arises. Hence, the initial response to a first hearing of much of Zappa's invigorating music, or in coming face to face with Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection of Christ*, or in

28 Fernandez-Armesto, *Truth*, Bantam Press (1997) p. 174.

seeing Spencer's work for the first time is important, but any subsequent response is important too.²⁹ We may *learn* to appreciate, given time to reflect, given the opportunity to reassess our understanding.

The values of the people who consume music are so perverted and corrupted by ad men and that sort of crap that they have no real criteria for what is good or real. *The Mothers* didn't sound like the stuff they heard on the radio, so we weren't accepted as music.³⁰

The *Artworld*³¹ and *Music Biz* go to great lengths to give us what they think we need and one has to tread carefully in order to remain critical. One cannot dismiss everything as 'hype' but neither can one accept the whole package. Our reliance upon evocative imagery and exciting music was psychologically imbued as a subjective procedure from the start; always sensual and irrational, art's theatricality was the province of witchdoctors and high priests or their equivalents (while the rest just said nothing and went along). Piero, Zappa, and Spencer are practitioners of what may be designated an inclusive 'visionary' art. Their visions are immensely different from one another, but not absolutely contradictory as they personalise reality, and to an extent, epitomise the desire for societal improvement. Cultural progression implies that although we are moving forward we are not necessarily getting better, as Adorno affirms in his *Negative Dialectics*.³² Progression (rather than advancement) undoubtedly ensures that art

29 Zappa took on an almost 'Machiavellian' proportions by writing songs such as *The Meek Shall Inherit Nothing* or *Jesus Thinks You're A Jerk*. If his aim was to awaken 'the congregation' from its slumbers, he succeeded. He offended moral and religious sensibility with songs like, *Jewish Princess* and *Catholic Girls*, as manifestations of sexual fantasy. By doing so he questioned his own religious inheritance and exposed it as mere social practice. "It's pretty easy to hate me for whatever reason you choose to hate me for, because I am virtually unrepentant, I just don't care, and my insensitivity is pretty evenly spread" — he was to say in one of his last interviews. Inevitably he was much maligned, but his chief target might ever be described as the unimaginative, those set in their ways.

30 See Levin, Robert, *FZC* p.66, — *Zappa Interviewed* (1969).

31 Cf. Danto

32 Cf. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 300 ff.

is forever adapted to 'common sense' in order to communicate ideas to those who need time to assimilate new conceptual awareness. In short, art opens up new potential spaces for a pre-conditioned 'reality' to fill, with all the advantages and dangers that that implies.

III.ii. For the practitioner, the vitality of aesthetic pursuit as an emotional response to the human condition is formed by the duality of self-belief and selflessness ensconced in the deepest desire to create. Art forms are intrinsically essential landmarks on the map of human history as a macrocosm but also in the mind of the individual — the microcosm of a single existence. In the previous two chapters I have attempted to suggest two things, firstly that art functions most effectively in its own absence (despite iconoclasm) and secondly, that it may therefore be considered 'redemptive' without being religious at all. Sophistication may hide the brute force of our beginnings, the rawness of (what I prefer to term as) our spirituality, but art insists on voicing the relationship between the artist and his mortality. This is not to say that non-artistic pursuits are worthless, because there are other ways of 'building monuments' too. In this world the sheer act of survival is praiseworthy at times.

Devout artists who have interpreted and depicted miraculous events as if they were witnesses to them in person have reinforced religious belief throughout the centuries for the glory of God. In the *Finding and Providing of the Cross*, Piero highlights the miracle where a young man is resuscitated when the cross is held over him. This is a test that proves the validity of the holy wood that, for Piero, takes place on the streets of Sansepolcro. This is good because it localises — but not so 'good' if it reinforces a religious and political agenda that at heart is anything but Christian.³³ Nonetheless, the story of Christ and the story of

³³ Cf. *Piero della Francesca* Dorling Kindersley Books (1999), p.48, Agnolo Gaddi c.1388-93 had painted the first cycle of frescoes at *Cappella Maggiore*, Santa Croce,

resurrection *is* kept alive in the minds and hearts of the people, and to the believer and non-believer alike, it is the narrative that is brought back to life.³⁴

The fifteenth century *Resurrection* today may look to us like a stage-managed photograph: props, costumes, backdrop, carefully posed actors, geometrical illusion, and all (A Zappalogical 'High-School' play). Its relevance is renewed and made apparent by comparison with other artistic offerings that similarly attempt to define the metaphysical. Finally, one concedes that Piero's humanity somehow manages to shine through his humanism — the shifting of relevance from one age to another bypasses mediocre concerns. People obviously will only see what they want to see, but the 'small-town' perspective helps, for the polemics paradoxically claim Piero as a 'local' but on a global, if not cosmic scale. For me, this counts him — and Frank Zappa — as true 'Cookhamites' of Spencerian proportion. If humanist thought were not so overpowering in Renaissance painting (and one might add, even more prevalent today in the production of images and sounds for a ready market) one might suggest that we look yet again at *The Resurrection* to seek out a possible spiritual revelation. The first people of Christ did not need anything more than the 'spirit' that was with them — certainly they did not want what they saw as the misguided format of institutionalised religion or anything that might represent a political regime.

It may seem contradictory, but regardless of creed, sect, or denomination, because the 'church' or 'temple' took centuries to evolve, the role that both art, and art's denial alternatively played in its furtherance, remains vital to its

Florence in the Giottesque tradition. "The political and religious events in the frescoes were still valid in the mid-15th century at a time when the church was considering a crusade against the Turks to confirm its strength and unity."

³⁴ The Poster for the 2001 Spencer Exhibition at *Tate Britain* features *The Resurrection, Cookham*. It shows a young man looking at the painting and below is written "Stanley Spencer's Resurrection. It'll make you want to come back." The message is that the organisers hope you will visit the exhibition more than once — but the notion of resurrection is publicly reinforced too.

continuation. We create and we pray, remembering always that our feeble questioning of the nature of God has no bearing on God's existence. The argument throughout this essay supports the views of others that have acknowledged ignorance as the cornerstone of faith: Socrates, Paul, De Cusa and Vico.³⁵ But it also supports the view that the role of the artist is often one of *interpreter of faith*, be it religiously based, scientific, mathematical or otherwise — images and sounds are used to sell ideas.

Within a parachronistic framework, there is no “old aeon” and Christ’s “imminent return” is just as imminent today as it ever was. Spirituality one imagines, cannot be confined by doctrine, contained in a book, hung on the wall or played on a musical instrument, yet these may just possibly be the vehicles it chooses to express itself by. Battling with convention enabled (Zappa, Spencer, and Piero) to face up to a personal *redemption* of individual design: a mixture of the unique, the universal, and the spiritual housed in a single body of work. As a ‘new’ art form was established an old truth may have been lost but any new sense of purpose heralds a sharpened awareness that provokes (Piero, Spencer, Zappa) into action.

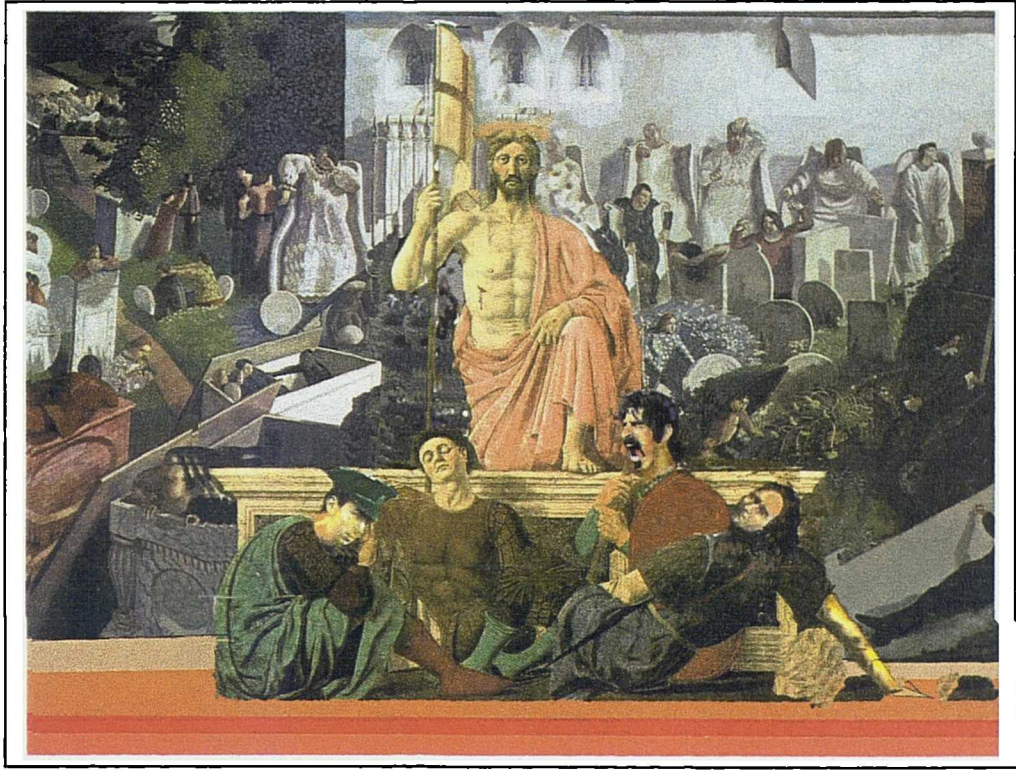
The genuine artistic response is to denude egoism, to strip creativity to the bone by depriving it of the ritual dressing-up associated with the church, the gallery, the music industry, or whatever. De-ritualise culture and eventually one generates an iconoclasm where churches, temples (and ultimately galleries too) are each systematically deconstructed, whitewashed over. Meanwhile, music approaches its nadir in minimal rather than grandiloquent status. To some this all makes for a forlorn and hopeless situation taken to its logical conclusion, but the death of ostentation and frivolously decorative art leads to a simplicity that, for

³⁵ See Vico *NS* {405} “For when a man understands he extends his mind and takes in the things, but when he does not understand he makes the things out of himself and becomes them by transforming himself into them.”

others, seems to embrace purity of form. But in either scenario, we are no nearer to God than before — and art cannot ‘die’ forever, it simply needs a *rest* once in a while. Also, by definition, the ‘absolute’ must include a reflection of art’s purpose as well as its lack of the same.

III.iii. I began by saying that within fiction, there is an assumption made frequently that a convergence of the great minds from the past could lead to a solution of the problems of today. I now believe that the everyday life we lead is largely supported by a deliberately created and purposeful simulacrum — a work of fiction over which it seems the individual has little control. Works of art remain as metaphors for human understanding but they rarely pierce the simulacrum sufficiently to indicate other possibilities. Certain thinkers such as Piero, Zappa and Spencer — and of course, Vico, were ‘ahead of their time’ to the extent that they made a positive contribution to the ‘common sense’ understanding to which we all lay claim — *by seeing right through it.*

Our reliance upon works of art therefore defines cultural, religious and social parameters as basic needs and not as mere decoration to an otherwise drab existence. I hope that I have indicated that there is indeed a connection between art, its intention, and its interpretation, from one age to the next. I believe that art is the means by which we tap into the ‘collective unconscious’ and I consider art forms to be separate manifestations of a single creative urge. The artistic contribution made by the individual to the collective constitutes the pattern of redemption as an eternal matrix.



***Fig.44. The Parachronicity of Piero della Francesca,
Stanley Spencer and Frank Zappa,
(with special guest appearance by Giambattista Vico)***

Epilogue

I had that dream again — and they were all there, you were there too.

Forever praised be Providence, which, when the weak sight of mortals sees in it nothing but stern justice, then most of all is at work on a crowning mercy! For by this work I feel myself clothed upon with a new man; I no longer wince at the things that once goaded me to bewail my hard lot and to denounce the corruption of letters that has caused that lot; for this corruption and this lot have strengthened me and enabled me to perfect this work. Moreover (if it be not true, I like to think it is) this work has filled me with a certain heroic spirit, so that I am no longer troubled by any fear of death, nor do I have in mind to speak of rivals. Finally the judgement of God has set me on as a rock of adamant, for He renders justice to works of the mind by the esteem of the wise, who are always and everywhere few.

Giambattista Vico¹



Giambattista Vico.
1755

Fig. 45. Giambattista Vico
(1668-1744)

¹ *Vico: The Autobiography* (Translated by Bergin & Fisch) p. 15.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Correspondence from Quentin Skinner.

Appendix 2: Correspondence from Nicholas Penny.

Appendix 3: Correspondence with Ben Watson.

Appendix 4: Correspondence with Timothy Hyman.

Appendix 5: Parachronistic Connections.

Appendix 6: The Presentation to Gray's School of Art, Aberdeen.

A letter of encouragement from
Professor Quentin Skinner.

Christ's College
11 March 1998

Dear Michael

Many thanks for your kind letter, and for sending me the outline of your proposed research (incl.), which I've read with the greatest interest. The choice of Vico as a guide emerges, in the course of your argument, as a very good one. I really like your questions, of course! I really do think and I maintain this in the intro I've written on your text — that someone whose work you would find not just relevant but inspiring is Michael Baxandall, especially his *Painting and Experience* book (which focuses on C15 Italy and has much to say about Piero) and his *Patterns of Intention* (which includes an excellent bibliography, in his notes on this theme). The questions you ask could hardly be more interesting and important, and I wish you very well as you set about giving your answers.

for a... (incl.) ...
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Yours best
Quentin


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All the best,
Quentin.

Correspondence from Nicholas Penny


THE NATIONAL GALLERY
 8 October 77

Dear Mr Barwell,

Your letter to Anthea Peppin has just been forwarded to me, as the curator in charge of Piero's work here. Unfortunately, I will not be present on the day course on 5 November — in fact I may not even be in the country — but you can of course address any questions you may have concerning these pictures to me in a letter. It might also be possible to speak about them on the telephone if not in person. My direct line is 0171 267 2167. I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely
 Nicholas Penny

80 from The National Gallery
 WC2N 5DN
 28 January 2000

Dear Mr Barwell,

Thank you — finally — for the two Chryseis which I have had with interest and (I hope) joy and which I believe I don't display with anything else. I have had two bits in a good deal which — if I place it coming — I don't really agree with either by which I mean that the dialogue or paragraph there is more with that which makes to me. For example I am an impressionist — I think that the impulsive and many paintings — from the time when you were becoming artists — (and I understand that the reason was being at sea has been observed that always is very well) have been made on and of some one else (or to me)! When I am (I think) most true to you & so I do not disagree with any of your highest paintings. I have I have kept them for a long time but the thing which has been the thing I have been most & most of the time I can make a lot of sense of them. But I don't expect people to believe this. And I am sure that some of the drawings are very good and some of the drawings are very good. I have been most & most of the time I can make a lot of sense of them. But I don't expect people to believe this. And I am sure that some of the drawings are very good and some of the drawings are very good.

Yours sincerely
 Nicholas Penny

8th October 1999

Dear Mr Barwell

Your letter to Anthea Peppin has just been forwarded to me, as the curator in charge of Piero's work here. Unfortunately, I will not be present on the day course on the 5th November — in fact I may not even be in the country — but you can of course address any questions you may have concerning these pictures to me in a letter. It might also be possible to speak about them on the telephone if not in person. My direct line is (etc.) I look forward to hearing from you.

Yours sincerely.

Nicholas Penny.

Reply 2

The National Gallery
28th January 2000

Dear Mr Barwell,

Thank you — finally — for the two chapters, which I have read with interest and I (hope) profit and which I return. I don't disagree with anything {significant*} that I have read, but there is a good deal which — if I follow it correctly, I don't exactly agree with either by which I mean that the theological or philosophical ideas are ones which don't mean much to me. For example, I am not imaginative enough to imagine how “an imaginative seer may envisage a future age when writing once more becomes obsolete” (nor do I understand what this means since surely it has never been obsolete before although it may have once not have been needed and of course was once not in use). . What I think will matter most to you is that I do not disagree with any of your highlit passages. I know I have kept these for a long time and I am sorry about that but there are things that I have been sent six months ago which I even asked to see but have not had time to study. But I don't expect people to believe this and I wouldn't want to discourage anyone from approaching me who is working on the paintings in my care.

Yours Sincerely

Nicholas Penny

* It isn't true though that Piero was — as is often asserted — discovered in this century. Were this the case, the NG would not have three examples of his work. One of them was an exceptionally expensive acquisition. Also the Arezzo frescoes were all carefully copied in the last century for the Ecole de Beaux Arts in Paris. But he was relatively neglected in the 17th and 18th Centuries certainly.

Appendix 3

31. 12. 2000

Dear Ben Watson,

I recently received my copy of *The Complete Guide to the Music of Frank Zappa* and the *Uncle Meat* C.D., which I had ordered. A Christmas present to myself. Both are great, but I was struck by your comment about *The Negative Dialectics of Poodle Play* being ignored by academics. I have been meaning to write to you for years and I took this statement as an invitation to correspond. I had imagined that you would be inundated with questions from spotty students all over the globe after publishing 'Poodle' and this is partly why I didn't write sooner. I am now slightly past the spotty stage, in fact rapidly (or rabidly?) approaching 50. I had not heard *Uncle Meat* since I borrowed it (and *We're only in it for the Money*) when I was about fifteen - I recorded both on my *Fidelity*, reel-to-reel tape recorder, and listened again and again.

I became interested in other kinds of music. I learnt to play harmonica, guitar and fiddle and listened mainly to Dylan and The Incredible String Band, and apart from buying *Hot Rats* and *Touch Me There*, I had no connections with FZ at all.

Arthur C Danto, whom I discovered by randomly picking one of his books from the library shelf inspired much of my written work for M.A. I had already decided that my Ph.D. would be about the redemptive nature of art, parachronicity, and a kind of comparison between two resurrections: the first a fresco, *The Resurrection*, by Piero della Francesca, the second, *The Resurrection at Cookham*, by Sir Stanley Spencer. My tutor suggested that a third ingredient might spice things up a bit.

My interest in Zappa has been well received amongst my contacts in the world of 'Academia' and as your book is the only real authority - I was amazed by your comment. I would like your permission to use extracts from the book, and some of the other things you have written i.e. in the *FZ Companion* - your work is inspirational (and essential) for me. More importantly, I now have an ever-increasing collection of *FZ* CD's which I really enjoy listening to.

I am particularly interested in Zappa's conception of time (also with reference to Husserl), his thoughts on religion (with reference to Kierkegaard) but my general thrust is reliant upon my main man: Giambattista Vico.

I look forward to your reply. I hope soon to be wired up to that dreadful web thing as my tutor has migrated to Scotland with a new job, so it will be a lifeline. (If you show me your e-mail I'll show you mine). If all goes to plan, I still hope to finish "Patterns of Redemption - The Search for Eternal Art?" by next Christmas.

All the best, with kind regards
Michael Barwell

Reply

12 January 2001

Dear Michael Barwell

Thanks for your letter and your kind words, much appreciated. 'Ignored by academia' ... I suppose I meant that *Poodle Play* doesn't appear on bibliographies devoted to Pop Studies rather than that no-one with a college degree has ever got in touch. Still, if it spurred you to write, it was worth the exaggeration. I still wince when I think of that bibliography because I got the publication date of *Finnegan Wake Wrong* (it's 1939, not 1949, though I don't think the world had such opportunity to read in that decade).

Resurrection and Hendrix ... have you seen the Dave video of 'Are You Experienced?' where Jimi leaps from his coffin?

Of course you can 'use extracts'. I'd be flattered. Although Neil Zappa is asking me pay 25% of my royalties from *Poodle Play* into the 'build the peace in Malibu to entertain Democrat bigwigs' fund for the extracts from PZ lyrics I used (I've consulted the MW lawyers, I can't do anything in an American court since I'm not a millionaire).

I'm interested in Giambattista Vico too - not least because he's the link between the structure of *Finnegan Wake* and *Benedetto Croce*, Gramsci's teacher ('Vico.. Gramsci. Zappa.. Joyce' might be an interesting essay title). I'd love to read something on Vico, Zappa, eternity and Divisible Fractions thereof. I'm a bit dodgy in that area, actually. I was writing in *The Wire* about the *Ambrosia Ensemble* from Finland, who perform 'medieval aroma' versions of Zappa tunes, and concluded:

Interestingly enough, given this authenticist context, Francesco Zappa (who 'flourished 1763-1799' according to Grove) could never have composed these pieces: the musical flow is chrome-plated, electrical, TV-advert-paced. Cosmic time may be a spherical constant, but modern history is too short a segment thereof to be anything but unbendingly linear.

I'm not quite happy with the formulation - the opposites aren't exactly hinterpenetrating are they? - but PZ is to me a fiercely linear composer. At least, while you're listening to the music rather than pondering it.

Time passes, bright moments are whisked away, mortality looms - there's no Stockhausen/Craterful Dead hippie transcendence evasion. I was reading some retard in *Avant* recently who attempted to diss Zappa by calling his music mechanical & Ja Cim Miller. He called it 'chromium-plated' too! I liked the bit in Stewart Home's novel where the proletarian materialist takes someone into a bookshop to show how one can 'converse with spirits': I'm reading this book by a dead person, therefore I am conversing with the dead!! Maybe it's actually the human imagination which is the spherical constant, we don't need confirmation from astro-cosmologists at all.

I believe the correct 'Dummy Up' reference is getting nothing at all with your college degree rather than it containing absolutely nothing. In fact, the something it contains that does not suit conventional images of a trajectory towards a cosy future may well be the whole point, aint wair?

I can do e-mail - via my Esther - but I'd much rather send actual pieces of paper flying about the country. I've just read an essay (in French) on PZ by a mad Lacanian named Nathalie Gatti, hoping to do a PhD on Zappa's defiance of language: the Parisian Zappologist Rami Rosackere has sent me a detailed account of Zappa's politico-aesthetic (also in French): Régis Daniol in Toulouse has written a wonderful *édifice* on Zappa's scores (again in French!); in Rome, Marco Maurizi - who has just completed a PhD on Adorno - writes amazing analyses of Zappa's critique of prog rock (in bizarre Italian/English) ... so it'd be nice to read a text in something approaching English. By the way, all these matters are planned on attending 'Poetry &/in Music Conference' at the University of Liège 2-4 April 2001 - it has a Zappa/Beeftaert strand and I'm speaking there with the delicious base viol accompaniment of Simon H. Fall. Michael Deville can supply details on ed@villeulij.ac.be - I know these things can be impossibly expensive, but if you could raise some grant money, I think it should be pretty worthwhile (everything'll be conducted in English, so don't worry about that).

Did you know that the Muffin Men and the Liverpool Saffrony Orch are performing in Liverpool on 25 February at Paul McCartney's Institute of Performing Poodles? I hear they may do some *Thing-Fish*. Some Film de l'Invention from Paris are threatening to visit. Perhaps we could meet up there?

Anyway, I hope to get some pages of philostophy from you soonish.

Philogiston Phoraver,

Ben Watson 

Reply (extracts)

12th January 2001

Dear Michael Barwell,

Thanks for your letter and kind words, much appreciated. 'Ignored by academia' ... I suppose I meant that *Poodle Play* doesn't appear on bibliographies devoted to Pop Studies rather than no one with a college degree has ever got in touch. Still if it spurred you write, it was worth the exaggeration. (...)

Of course you can use extracts, I'd be flattered. (...)

I'm interested in Giambattista Vico too — not least because he's the link between the structure of *Finnegan's Wake* and *Benedetto Croce*, Gramsci's teacher ('Vico.. Gramsci. Zappa.. Joyce/ might be an interesting essay title). I'd love to read something on Vico, Zappa, eternity and Divisible Fractions thereof. I'm a bit dodgy in that area, actually I was writing in *The Wire* about the *Ambrosia Ensemble* from Finland, who perform 'medieval aroma' versions of Zappa tunes, and concluded:

Interestingly enough, given the authenticist context, Francesco Zappa (who flourished 1763 – 1799' according to Grove) could never have composed these pieces: the musical flow is chrome-plated, electrical, TV-advert paced.

Cosmic time may be a spherical constant, but modern history is too short a segment thereof to be anything but unbendingly linear.

(...)I believe the correct 'Dummy-Up' reference is getting nothing at all with your college degree rather than it containing absolutely nothing. In fact the something it contains that does not suit conventional images of a trajectory towards a cosy future may well be the Whole Point, *nicht wahr?*

(...) Did you know that the Muffin Men and the Liverpool Sniffony Orch are performing on 25 February at Paul McCartney's Institute of Performing Poodles? I hear they may do some *Thing-Fish*. Some Fils de l'Invention from Paris are threatening to visit. Perhaps we could meet up there?

Anyway, I hope to get some pages of Philostophy from you soonish.

Phlogiston phorever,

Ben Watson

Reply 2

20 January 2001

Dear Michael

I hope you can read this (my ink cartridge is running out). Thanks for your piece, which I enjoyed, even though it arrived in a plastic bag from the Royal Mail looking like the manuscript of *The German Ideology* which Marx and Engels abandoned to the 'criticism of the skies'. I fear we're too far apart philosophically to help each other much: I dismiss the Phlogos, you use it as an epigraph: I reject structuralism and postmodernism as the Neo-Kantianism of disappointed errors, you don't (though on page 48 you quote Jonathan Culler's structuralist dogma that meanings may only be judged by reference to each other - and then contradict it by saying you cast meanings against 'the observed', evincing a practical hands-on materialism/empiricism any strict structuralist would damn as 'metaphysical'); I find the idea of obtaining dialectics off a mystic Nazi-sympathiser like Jung (as Richard Tarnas does on p. 48) quite preposterous: I think the mother-child relation is reprehensible in our physical biology, not our mysterious race-unconscious 'psyche' (p. 50). Oh I know, I'm such an unimaginative materialist ...

Oh, maybe I'd better get ALL my disagreements off my chest: I find the footnote on page 31 disturbing. 'Work indicates us All' is a translation of the Nazis' 'Arbeit macht Frei'. I think Zappa's recognition of the Nazi tendencies within bourgeois society is exemplary, no I find it rather insensitive and cavalier to use the phrase to characterise his aesthetic (your 'here, if anything, only "work" is *crucial*'). Zappa certainly believed in human creativity as central (maybe call it *labour power* - the natural force before commodification), but confusing that with the slave-driving or Auschwitz - or even wage-labour - would be a terrible mistake. By the way, if your intention is not to mislead (p. 53), why begin with Plato on 'misleading'? Isn't the epigraph itself rather misleading?

It's funny, all the essays I've read on rx recently focus on Mary's 'mistake' (as you do, pp. 54-55), as if the verbal materialism which follows ('beauty is a French phonetic corruption of a short cloth neck ornament' etc.) is irrelevant. Zappa cannot be understood by citing his texts as if they are scripture, they impute themselves:

process, the emphasis on the material sign - the music - is the message.

Karl Kopper vs Bertrand Russell: two blind men up shit creek feeling each other with antique paddles: what does H.G. Collingwood. Because Zappa agreed with Neil Slaven that 'Kaiser Melon in Kaiser Hay' is the 'nightmare of the album' (du I have to swallow its rationally-ambiguous, pink Floyd-style 'rock sublime'? Since when was gonzo criticism the whole kitsch episode makes as long for the degradation-or-all-known-values that is 'A Little Green Koratta', personally. Listen to the percussion overtones, the sizzling overlayers, the critique of cosmic and status-seeking and commodity-relations: it's like a side one of 'An Evening With Wild Man Fischer, a Marx Manifesto! The greatly-praised (by 'dimitri' 'heezel') guitar solo is just a mass-produced ornament, seen, poked out on a plastic coffee-muffin by some hapless Joe in a factory. Get MARY winds up going home to sexual abuse (her father's a waiting for her 'in the too shed') and Joe's reduced to a wage-slave. How 'redemption'!!!

no much for differences of opinion, doubtless of negligible import. Zappology is about farting about in our own dog doo, after all. Errors, though, do unleash abuse from the tank narcocon which can be quite depressing. Mary's two I found: 'Turn It Down!' is not known by Joe's a duo (p. 47), not by's (Mrs Bone), who 'lives next door'. 'Get T-shirt Night', not 'Was T-shirt Night' ('Present in A Wet T-shirt' on the CD).

I liked the art-historical view of the nativity scene in Joe's Garage. 'One more time' (p. 50) - *Phlogos* Waxes! And I enjoyed the feeling that you were going complete *Y* insane occasionally (eg p. 52, footnote 7). No, in conclusion, I must disagree with you about Joe's Garage (I find it odd - since we disagree about such important matters, that you're so glib about *Phlogos* *Play* throughout - why don't you sink your teeth into my ankle instead!), but 'I have to admit yours is a "strong reading" (by fuck, don't I sound like an academic!). Perhaps which way one falls in the 'redemption vs rubbish' stakes doesn't matter. Zappa fine tunes the contradiction to create just such a tenuous case: 'IS he asking us to do all this shit?' etc).

Your manuscript is too painfully damaged to return. It might make you think I've done voodoo on it. I'm sending it - with my outrageous, drunken comments in scrawchy red felt tip - to you direct at Middle Class Revue. He will either ask you to release a concept album based on it, or send you a threatening letter through the mail.

Slaven Francis tells me this Liverpool extravaganza on 25 February is by invitation-only. I've sent him a list of names already, and I've just forwarded yours. We'll see what happens, but I cannot promise anything. If you have any more of this literary stuff - and can stand my incoherence and inadequate riposte - do send more. As I say, I enjoy

Dear Michael,

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Hm, maybe I'd better get all my disagreements off my chest! I find the footnote on page 51 disturbing, 'work liberates us all' is a translation of the Nazis' "Arbeit Macht Frei". I think Zappa's recognition of the Nazi tendencies within bourgeois society is exemplary, so I find it rather sensitive and cavalier to use the phrase to characterise his aesthetic (your, 'here if anything only "work" is 'truth'). Zappa certainly believed in human creativity as central (maybe call it *labour power* – the natural force before commodification) but confusing that with the slave-driving of Auschwitz – or even with wage-labour - would be a terrible mistake. (...) [I think Ben misinterprets here and I am falsely accused, but the footnote was scrapped]

It's funny, all the essays I've read on FZ recently focus on Mary's 'music is the best' as you do as if the verbal materialism which follows ('beauty is a French phonetic corruption of a short cloth neck ornament' etc) is irrelevant. Zappa cannot be understood by citing his texts as if they were scripture, they implode themselves: the process, the emphasis on the material sign — the music — is the message.

(...) Because Zappa agreed with Neil Slaven that *Watermelon in Easter Hay* is the highlight of the album do I have to swallow its rhythmically-imbecile Pink Floyd- style 'rock-sublime'? Since when was gossip, criticism? The whole kitsch episode makes me long for the degradation-of-all-known-values that is *A Little Green Rosetta*, personally. (...) The greatly prized (by 'dimwit' Dweezil) guitar solo is just a mass-produced ornament, man, pooted out on a plastic CD muffin by some hapless Joe in a factory. Get Real!!! Mary winds up going home to sexual abuse (her father's waiting for her 'in the tool shed') and Joe's reduced to a wage slave. Some 'redemption' !!!

So much for differences of opinion, doubtless of negligible import. Zappology is about farting about in our doo-doo after all. (...)

I liked the art-historical view of the nativity scene in *Joe's Garage*. 'One more time' = *Finnegan's Wake*? And I enjoyed the feeling that you were going

completely insane occasionally (p. 60) [Ben is referring to my description of the English football fan on seeing Piero's *Resurrection* and taking Jesus to be an England supporter]. So in conclusion, I must disagree with you about *Joe's Garage*. (I find it odd since we disagree about such important matters that you're so gracious about *Poodle Play* throughout — why don't you sink your teeth into my ankle instead?), but I'll have to agree that yours is a strong reading (by fuck, don't I sound like an academic!) Perhaps the way one falls into the 'redemption vs. rubbish' stakes doesn't matter. Zappa fine-tunes the contradiction to create such a tussle (cue: *HE* is making us do all this shit etc.)

(...) this Liverpool extravaganza is by invitation only. I've sent a list of names already, and I've just forwarded yours. We'll see what happens, but I can't promise anything. If you have any more of this literary stuff — and can stand my intemperate and inadequate ripostes — do send more. As I say, I enjoy reading it, even if I take umbrage at your Transcendental Idealism.

Cheers, Ben.

2nd. Reply (Postcard)

Jan 31st 2001

Michael,

If you want a ticket for this "When Worlds Collide" Muffin Men & L'pool S.O. play Zappa, Stravinsky, Varèse on Sunday 25 February at L.I.P.A. The phone No. is, (etc.)

We're all going ... See you there? Ben.

A postcard from Stuart Circe:

January 2001

Hello Mike,

I think FZ knew exactly what he was creating when he recorded ..*watermelon*..., he was creating the most excruciating insult, the best laid trap, perhaps the sourest skewer in his entire oeuvre. *Watermelon* is a cruel portrait of the human interior (...) It is precisely during this interior mono-solo that the listener realises that Zappa's music has taken on the characteristics of the outside world, the characteristics of other people's records.

(...) *Watermelon* should be constructed from Dave Gilmour [of *Pink Floyd*] samples, at least then we could avoid Slavenite banalities that this represents 'Zappa the Man' unaffected and genuine. On the contrary, it is on the factory line in... *Rosetta* that the musical innovation takes place and that 'Zappa' appears from behind his plastic megaphone, that the music world is suddenly alive to reflections & cul-de-sacs, that the sombre blankness of the Rothko *Watermelon* erupts in a Schwitterstorm of verbal fizz. The *Watermelon* interior is formulaic, conventional, it is guided by it's relation to externals (traditions of guitar soloing) which is why this 'interior' solo is so highly prized among Zappa faint-heart circles because it is here in the 'music-music' soul that FZ sounds like someone else. I'm still thinking about the rest....

See you in Liverpool 25. 02. 01.
Best wishes,

Stuart Circe.

My Reply: February 16th.2001

Dear Stuart,

Thanks very much for your card. It is helpful, and it is very good of you to show an interest in my work. I realise that I am suddenly surrounded by a serious group of Zappologists - A Zappological society. I tried to explain in my last letter to Ben that I came late to Zappa's music. My reading therefore could well be inexact or *plain* wrong - but it *is* my reading. I am always willing to listen and I accept the advice of others readily. However, 'I am testing the waters' in my correspondence - I need feedback. Ben has been extremely kind and so have you. If my argument is naïve or contradictory to what you believe, don't hesitate in telling me, and forgive my ignorance.

In the meantime, here is some work that Ben has not seen. Pass it on if you wish. It is all in what I call "embryonic" state, but I will try to answer your criticism.

[Incidentally: My view on *Watermelon in Easter Hay* has not changed — as I hope I have made clear. I do accept Ben's account and I know exactly what Stuart means, but I take it that this music is somehow 'spiritual' despite Zappa's own cynical intention — (I am *fairly* sure he intended to be cynical). However, I also think it worth considering Zappa as a 'double agent' — after all, the people he wished to fool most of all — was his own fans! Besides which, the notion of *Aufhebung* allows that it is possible to hold two clearly conflicting viewpoints at once.]

Stanley Spencer: Angels and Dirt		TATE
Friday 18 May 2001 Clare Auditorium, Tate Britain, Millbank, London SW1		
10.00	Introduction and welcome	
10.10	Stanley Spencer: An English Painter from Cookham to Beijing Patrick Wright (cultural historian and curator)	
10.40	Old Worlds and New: English Rural Society Between the Wars Alun Howkins (University of Sussex)	
11.20 -11.40	Coffee	
11.40	Revising the Revisions: A Closer Look at Stanley Spencer and Twentieth-Century British Art David Mellor (University of Sussex)	
12.20	Stanley Spencer: The Sacred Self Timothy Hyman (artist and curator)	
12.40	Spencer and the Uses of Writing Kitty Hauser (Ruskin School of Drawing, Oxford)	
13.15 -14.00	Lunch	
14.00	Stanley Spencer and the Modern English Woman Jane Beckett (University of East Anglia)	
14.40	Patricia Preece: A Secret Life Michael Dickens (author and historian)	
15.10 -15.30	Tea	
15.30	Panel discussion	
16.10	Burghdene and Spencer's Allegories of Redemption Sue Malvern (University of Reading)	
17.10	'He who knows his own nature, knows heaven': Stanley Spencer and Eastern Philosophy Adrian Glew (curator and author)	
17.30	Drinks reception and private view of the exhibition	

Michael Barwell,
Wednesday 30th May 2001

Dear Timothy,

I wrote recently to Unity & Shirin Spencer to tell them how thrilled I was to meet them at the conference 'Angels & Dirt'. I thought that I might include some of the comments that I made about the day for your files. In short, I thought it was great! It was refreshing and reassuring that so many people seemed to be as preoccupied with Spencer as I am.

I gave up painting and sculpture in 1996 to do this PhD work. I was just completing my M.A. (part-time) at The University of Warwick. In one of the seminars I had the idea that Piero & Stanley were saying virtually 'the same thing' about resurrection - only 500 years apart - and I wondered what the cultural implications of such a concept might be. I now feel I am close to finalising my thoughts and ideas on this topic, although it is nowhere near finished in a physical sense. The main thrust of the argument is that I guess that art is often 'redemptive' without necessarily being religious at all. I am very happy that I now have the opportunity to send you some of my work to read. Any comment you make, either good or bad would be very much appreciated. I have read your work in *The Apotheosis of Love*, and I have read about half of the current Tate Britain's exhibition's catalogue.

At the outset I received encouragement from Professor Quentin Skinner at Cambridge. I would be really grateful if you might be interested enough in my work perhaps to read the Spencer section (2 Chapters) prior to submission.

The current Spencer exhibition could not have come at a better time (I had already been to see it, prior to the conference, but intend to go again if possible). Furthermore, the conference was 'the icing on the cake' and a vital component to add to my four year study. Unity had mentioned that my opinion on the various speakers and their subjects would be of interest. I made copious notes and sent the sisters a copy. I do not know if you saw them:

1. Patrick Wright - overflowing with enthusiasm, tried to fit the whole book (exhibition catalogue) into half an hour, but he was good! I especially liked his reference to the village which died (where was it again? N.Yorks?) It came to be resurrected by tourists looking for it. "Cookham as an anti-modern mode of retreat" a kind of Brigadoon I suppose, that Stanley brought to life. I like his reference to the stones and the river-bed - Joshua & Jericho etc. Although Patrick did not put it thus, it struck me that 'carrying a stone' is like 'carrying a cross' both are used as grave markers and both imply burden — a bit like Jacob Marley with his chains & cash boxes but in a nice way. Much of Patrick's stuff is in the book and as yet, I have only read half of it. I think it is well expressed but the bit about 'Metal' was a bit tricky. I sensed that you thought so too? I know what he means, but Stanley's delight in rubbish included a delight in metal, molten and glowing as well as rusty and discarded. I don't think he thought of metal as a bad thing. Besides, it is documented in the New Testament that Jesus was nailed and the good & bad thief were tied to their crosses. (Incidentally, I have seen a picture of the Spencer boys hoisting their father up on a cross as a metaphor for breaking his heart when, one by one, they went to war - I think it is by Gilbert, but I cannot find reference to it now). I especially liked what he said about the early landscape work - I love some of Stanley's (sorry if I sound over-familiar in using first name, but it seems right) landscapes anyway - it is a pity that he, himself was so disparaging about all of them.
2. Alun Howkins, was pretty good in setting the scene, and I complimented him on that, but there was little of Stanley in it - as Alun said himself. I liked him, knowledgeable in a matter of fact way. However I think of absolute and eternal qualities when I look at Spencer's Visionary Work which transcends 'English Rural Society between the Wars' to a large extent - although no-one can escape their given time slot. Art exists in a context but has the capacity to transcend it, I feel.
3. David Mellor was the bees-knees, fantastic thought-provoking content with bags of reference to other artists. (I consider Spencer's FORM to be of paramount importance too because it has a timeless kind of cross-referencing

with other artists but also because it is intuitive /instinctive - like 'flying by the seat of your pants' - Stanley simply 'lets go' & paints via serendipity or providence, but he has a wealth of knowledge behind him.) David left me wanting more (not so the last speaker who was very good but left me wanting less!) he tempted us with mouth-watering titbits and quickly snatched them away, one -by-one. I told him he was naughty! I think he is right when he says Stanley is still marginalised & he sticks out like a sore thumb in the Slade line-up. Stigmatised as (naife ?) or naïve / neo pagan / natural - David is right. I especially liked the Hockney connection with the *California 1964* kind of Nativity scene (at least it reminded me of Piero's Nativity at the National Gallery - incidentally that is 'all wall' too) the one with "Bogey" faces which reminded me of the Beatitudes- what a great expression: "Bogey Face" is! I also liked the "textualise + texturise" bit about the letters & clothing patterns, and of course, the great link between ripped up newspaper for use in the toilet in comparison with loving letters - the body as intimate space - body imprint (remember, Veronica wipes the face of Jesus and is rewarded with his image - David didn't say that but he showed the slide.) Hilda in the Burghclere model & welders in their cubicles ties together nicely, but Stanley always compartmentalised like a Renaissance painter - putting saints in niches & sarcophagi, putting clothes in boxes & pulling them out. I think it goes back to Gilbert's description of the security of the cubicles in the Wesleyan Chapel & when the congregation were asked to come out & be saved by the visiting Preacher, "Come out & be saved, brother!" Gil & Stan hid.

4. Kitty Hauser was concise, well researched textual stuff - 23 page meditations on a burning candle must take some reading! I don't know the music of Nick Cave but I will now listen. I think Stanley connects to musical themes throughout his work anyway. (I play guitar, fiddle, harmonica, bazouki, sitar etc. sounds like I am blowing my own trumpet, but I don't play one). I have always felt painting and music to be essentially the same thing but I will expand upon this elsewhere! She was good, although she confided in me afterwards; saying that Spencer was not really her subject at all but she had researched him especially for the day. However, she was relevant. She made good general points about writing as an 'embodied practice': confessional/erotic/functional. I would have liked more about the letters written to Hilda after she died, because that is important. Kitty, questioned whether that particular kind of letter writing was love or cruelty (If I have that right). She says they are therefore not easy to translate, and that letters as 'material objects' are tricky concepts to deal with - After all, was he writing to your Mother as if she was still alive to ease his own pain? If so, I think I can understand that. I liked Kitty's talk
5. Timothy Hyman's unpretentious delivery and obvious sincerity was heart-warming. I was very impressed by his manner and his knowledge. I too am concerned with the multiplicity of Stanley personae - it forms a main theme for

my work, and so I liked the Family tree of Stanleys (which I must have missed in the exhibition) The tiger eyes reference & the ever-important role of comedy was well put. "20th century as century of self-portrait" was ok but I would go further and say that all works of art are self-portraits in a way! I liked the German stuff, and admit to knowing little about Kirchener & Beckmann that was relevant. I had seen the Tate Modern's comparison of Schad & his lady with the scar & narcissus) with the leg of mutton nude - I pointed out to Timothy that it was not a duelling scar but apparently inflicted by her lover to make her less attractive to other men - a supreme act of vanity by the male. I was not sure about the carnivalesque bit (My fault I am sure), but I did not see what Timothy meant although I would love to get some connection of Stanley with Peter Blake. Stanley's work does not strike me as carnivalesque - multi-patterned and over-populated perhaps, but I feel the German stuff to be a parody of society in a critical sense whereas, Stanley's vision is optimistic. I do agree that there is an uncanny resemblance between the Palmer & Spencer self-portraits, but whether it is coincidence or not, whether Stanley saw the Palmer or not, in my reading it makes no difference because *he may as well* have. This is another theme of mine, which I expand on in my work. The Leg of Mutton Pond where your Father & Mother used to meet, was a curious bit of extra information, which proves the danger of interpretation! If correct it adds a completely new dimension to this psychologically charged work of art. I had always made a direct visual reference to Patricia's leg, which echoes the mutton-leg shape. I thought of sacrifice as a theme, sacrificial lamb, mutton being 'old' sheep, mutton dressed as lamb, meat & death (and that they are cooking in front of the fire!) etc. all of which is interesting but it ain't necessarily so. I am also unsure about Timothy's "Disciple" - I took him to be God the Father, loosely based on Stanley's father; still I am always ready to re-think. Interpretation is a tricky business, which needs the application of huge pinches of salt. I liked the analogy of the Goose Run slide & Chicken Run quotation where Stanley says he scratches & pecks his way through life. I have more to say but in short, I was very interested by Timothy's talk

6. Michael Dickens' revelations about 'Ruby' Preece were astonishing (my red setter is called Ruby!). Was he implying that she was 'cavorting' with the great Gilbert from Gilbert & Sullivan fame in the lake when the poor old boy had a heart attack and shuffled off his mortal thingamajig? Wow! I knew about her passing Dorothy's work off as her own from the newspaper article "We could have been happy" by Martin Gayford Daily Telegraph March 20th. (In which you both shine, if I may say so.) Michael showed some great slides and I think his book will go some way to set the record straight. Very interesting. If this helps to vindicate Stanley in some way it is worthwhile as long as it is treated sensitively. The best bit was when he called the kids, cubs!

7. Jane Beckett's 'Modern English Woman' was a little confusing I thought, although she seems a nice person! This was really another scene setter. Useful but not Stanleyish really. (a shortage of notes on my part)
8. Sue Malvern was a bit heavy going I felt. In fact she was the speaker whose topic most approaches my own but I suppose I was flagging a bit myself by then. She knows her stuff but I thought it a bit clinical.
9. Adrian Glew was really good. I am in danger of going on too long here but at least you can put this down & come back to it later. (After WW1 there was a loss of faith in Europe - not surprising after the horrors & lots of people turned to Spiritualism ref. Kandinsky & Mondrian, and to World Religion or Theosophy) Adrian didn't mention this, but he should have. His descriptions of the intricacies and (difficult to pronounce) aspects of Eastern philosophy and slow delivery when I was already tired made it hard to keep up. His talk took us from the sublime to the ridiculous and in that sense it was truly Spencerian! Basically, he was right and the Eastern influences are there to be seen. I think of Stanley as a Christian/Pagan straddling the two cultures with ease. Disaffected by parochial concerns (Stanley was not too kind in depicting his fellow parishioners as 'crucifiers' - undoubtedly he was right - we crucify Christ every day in this world of ours.

I could not criticise any of the speakers for lack of enthusiasm. It really was a marvellous day, which I shall remember. I was sincerely pleased to meet Unity & Shirin too - some kind of connection with Stanley Spencer was tangible in their presence and they both display great interest in their father's life and work. I hope you will not think me over-critical in the above section. I found myself completely exhausted by the end of the day and unable to devote as much attention to the last speakers as I had the first. I would be interested in the 'Carnavalesque' - particularly with regard to linking Peter Blake's *Sgt. Peppers* with Spencer. If I may, I will send you now the beginning of my first Chapter on Spencer. I realise it comes at you from a void, without the Introduction, Piero & Zappa stuff, but make of it what you will.

You will be pleased to see that, that is enough for now. As you can tell, some of this is garbled. It needs stretching, expanding - further explanation & smaller quotations. It may well have put you off entirely, but I hope it may have grabbed your interest. Please write and let me know which. I think of this section as still in its infancy it has a long way to go yet. I hope that we may meet again one day. Thanks again for a wonderful conference.

Kind regards, yours sincerely,

Michael Barwell.

Reply 2: A Postcard: Il Presepio by Pietro di Giovanni d' Ambrogio (1445)

A bad postcard, but the strangest Nativity I know — with its owl on the roof, its mysterious landscape etc. I'm now in the throes of my book on Sieneese Painting — to be published next year by Thames and Hudson, if all goes well.

Please forgive my failure to respond to your Zappa/Piero/Spencer. I have, even at a third reading, great difficulty in following your train of thought. (I don't really know Zappa well enough.) But the idea of overlapping and multiplying identities is surely right.

I think Lyotard and 'Theory' in general may be a rather opaque framework through which to talk about these things. Can we have more Barwell and less citation? I'm sure you're familiar with the pre-Renaissance convention of 'continuous narrative'? This is usually linear but of course could be read by us differently!

Timothy.

Reply 3: A Postcard: Purgatorio xxxi Sandro Botticelli (c.1480-95)

Dear Michael,

- please forgive delay – I had an operation last week and a few days in hospital. Each time I've read your essay I've been uncertain how to comment. Could there be more about the specific paintings? Although I like the notion of Spencer as an Anthony figure [Tim is here commenting upon my reference to the *Temptation of St. Anthony*] (joining with all those by Beckmann, Ensor, Cézanne, Bosch, Grunewald, etc.) I wonder if it's misleading – i.e., it was really a response to a Hollywood stunt rather than a fully inward image?

{Of course quote anything you want} my feeling about the *Cookham Resurrection* is that despite all the interesting and challenging iconography – including God-the-Hilda and the raft of Africans — it is OLD SOUP WARMED UP and not his most urgent gospel.

I am perfectly willing to read your two chapters when they are more or less ready for submission (I should be more at liberty by then).

Is your long quote too rambling - ("As...it") - I hardly know what he is saying & lose my way! Could you break it up a bit, take us through it, if you feel it is so important? / In general is there a danger that you (like recent Ken Pople) may write your own book of Genesis and lose sight of Spencer as a painter — not a metaphysician?

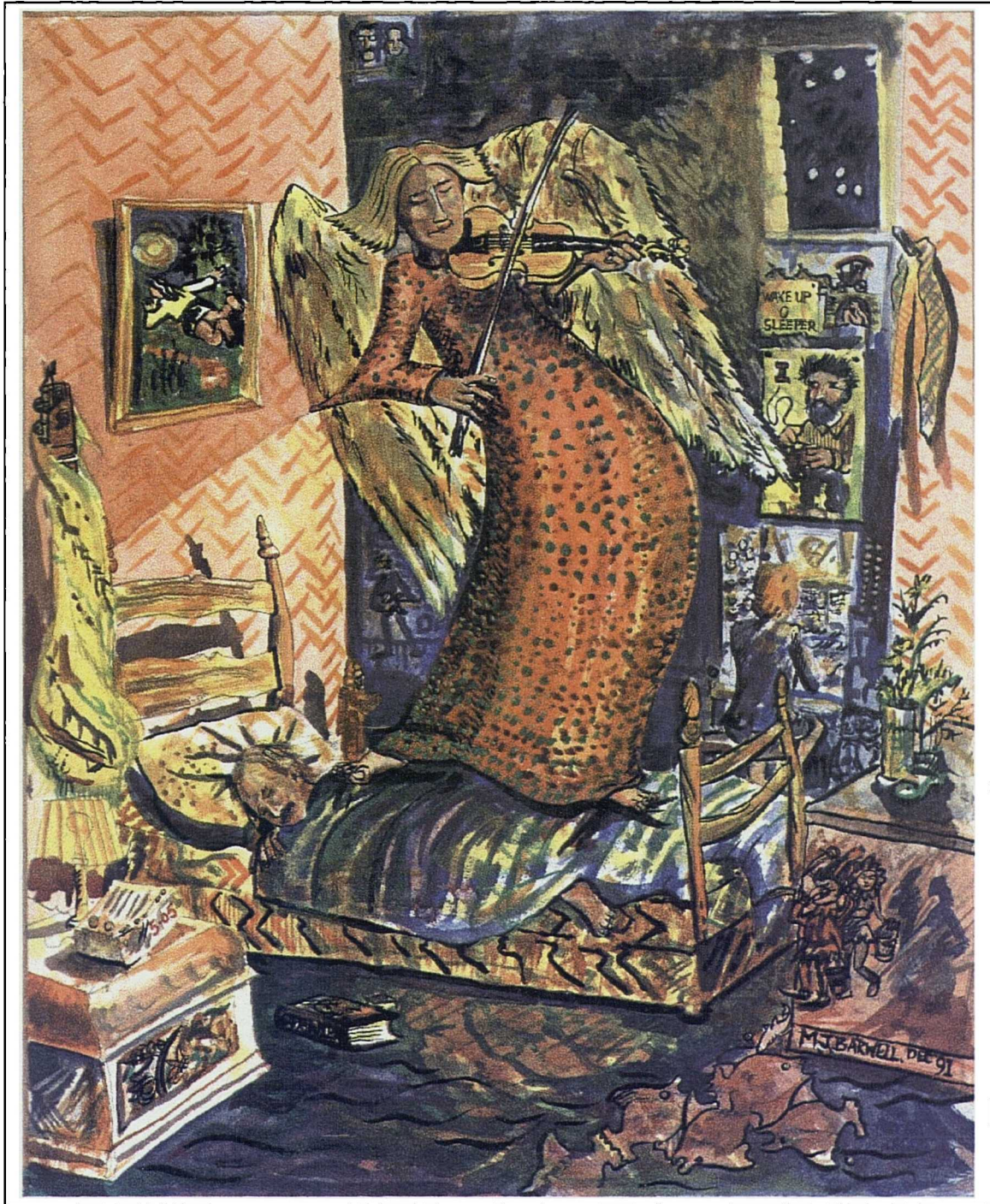
Timothy

Parachronistic Connections

The following few pages make visual reference to the idea that according to how one perceives it, coincidence (or providence?) played its part in the production of this work



The Centurion's Servant 1914



Angel of Music 1991

This painting was based on a reading of Kenneth Pople's book about the life and work of Stanley Spencer. (The book is on the floor.) At the time I was exhibiting with a local group of artists, The Dream Illustrators. The painting, produced long before the thesis, features various dreams and nightmares.

Both of the paintings from November / December 1991 were based on my reading about Piero della Francesca and Stanley Spencer. I had taken several books out of the library about them. In *The Angel of Music*, the Angel playing the violin was based on an early photograph of myself at school and the idea of a double image (the figure in the bed is also myself) is basic to the composition. I especially like Spencer's paintings that feature angels. As part of my M.A. work I produced a large metal sculpture based on *The Angel of Music* that now resides in the Music Department at my school.

Aswasis — as the title suggests, was intended to indicate that certain things might remain the same. I wanted to get the idea that the *One True Cross* was still a relevant legend — even if the reliance of the faithful upon relics was open to accusations of superstition.

HERACLIUS RESTORES THE CROSS TO JERUSALEM. Arezzo, San Francesco





Aswasis 1991

Another painting from The Dream Illustrators Exhibition but this is based on the spandrel section of the Arezzo fresco, *Heraclius Restores the Cross to Jerusalem*, by Piero della Francesca. The background was altered to represent my own locality.

Adieu, Cantona, Farewell

Manchester United's infamous captain says there is more to life than football and the fans' adulation

By WENDELL STEVENSON

ERIC CANTONA'S FAMOUS OVERRIANGING brow and sledgehammer nose were absent from a press conference called last week to announce his resignation from Manchester United Football Club—and from the game of football itself. Only a terse writer's statement stood in for him: "I have played professional football for 13 years, which is a long time. I now wish to do other things." It was left to Manchester United manager Alex Ferguson, flush with victory after winning his fourth English Championship in five years, to lament his captain's decision. "It's a sad day for United that he has decided to retire," said Ferguson, with more warmth than his Scots Scots manner usually allows. "He has been a fantastic player."

That and more The French hero of Manchester's incredibly successful team has been a god to his fans—who show their devotion by wearing replicas of his number 7 shirt with the word "Dieu" in place of a name. The crowds sing about him to the tune of the *Marseillaise*. He writes poetry. He dabbles in philosophy. And from time to time he quits, as he did in 1991, only to come back. His devoted fans are wondering if he will stay gone this time. His contract with Manchester United still has a year to run, and he is strong enough at age 31 for at least three or four more seasons of top football.

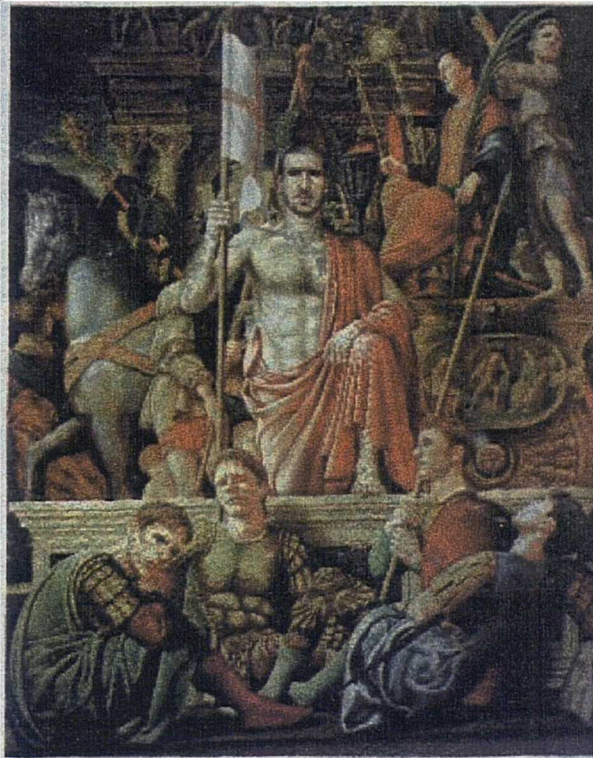
But guessing what Cantona carries in his head is never an easy task. His footballing career has been erratic, sometimes brutal, always puzzling and routinely spotted with discipline problems. In France he changed clubs seven times in eight years,

marring his record by attacking his own teammates on the pitch. In interviews he confounded fans and journalists alike with his philosophical meanderings and was widely mocked in the press for writing bad poetry, dabbling in painting and visiting speech therapists and psychologists. In 1991 he threw the ball at a referee in a huff while playing for Nîmes, earning himself a

Although Lewk won the French Championship that season, Cantona moved to Manchester United for a mid-sized \$1 million transfer fee, and there he found a club that tolerated his brooding arrogance as an exotic backdrop for blindingly left backheeled passes to set up goals and for his hard volleys into the back of the net. The performances earned an impressive array of silverware for Manchester United: four championships and two F.A. Cups. And if the French remained skeptical of his talents, he didn't seem to care. In 1993, he was dropped from the French national team but the English Footballer of the Year trophy—voted for by his fellow players, was already on his mantelpiece.

The adulation soon became continued bad behavior. In 1995, Cantona lunged to kicked a heckling Crystal Palace fan, resulting in an eight-month playing ban, a fine and a sentence of 120 hours' community service. At a press conference after the incident he told reporters, without apparent irony, "When the seagulls follow the trawler, it is because they think sardines will be thrown into the sea," and then left the room.

Cantona renounced himself in during the two seasons since the ban but the Cantona cult was unstoppable. He appeared in a Eurostar commercial with a copy of Rimbaud perched on his lap and had a small part in a French film as a love-horn rugby player. He has avoided the press and his only menacing act was to shove his head to matten the stubble of his chin. His behavior on the pitch was also toned down this season he has been noticeably less dominant in midfield—but he nevertheless captained Manchester United to another championship win, and the crowds still waved giant Tricolore flags. When the news of his retirement broke last week



MANCHESTER'S MESSIAH: Artist Michael Browne's *The Art of the Game*, a spoof of Piero della Francesca's *The Resurrection*, depicts Cantona as Christ

two-month ban for calling each member of the disciplinary committee "idiot" at his hearing. He had earned the nickname "Le Bruit" and a few tears were shed when he announced his first retirement because of the incident, still fewer when he eventually signed for the English club Leeds United.

many fans despised of finding a player anywhere to take his place. But the more sunny folk in the City of London thought better. Manchester United shares have wobbled on the stock market. Even a goal it seems, is remarkable.

—With reporting by Jonathan Murgatroyd, London

The Art of the Game Michael Browne

In the dentist's waiting room, one day in 1997, I came across this article.
(I had already started my thesis at this point.)

Parachronicity

Patterns of Redemption -
Piero della Francesca,
Frank Zappa
and
Stanley Spencer

The accompanying notes to the presentation given at

Gray's School of Art,

Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

(Easter 2002)

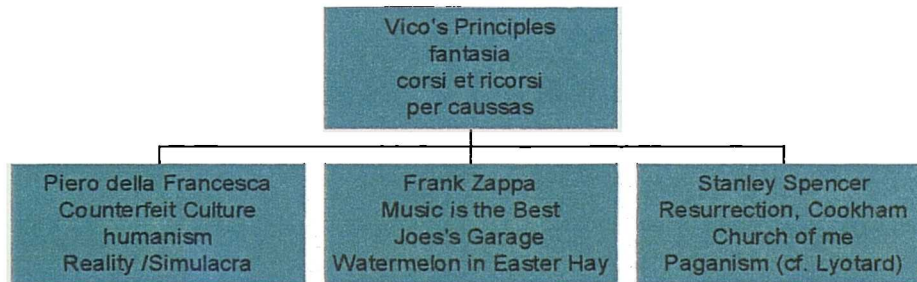
Parachronicity

Patterns of Redemption -
Piero della Francesca,
Frank Zappa
and
Stanley Spencer

Any projection of three dimensions in two, *must* be an alteration of perception, a change of 'mind-set'. This leads to a conceptualisation whose effects reach beyond painting, photography, cinema, television, computer games and into reality itself, for it re-creates a simulation of reality for us all to inhabit. Piero *knew* perspective to be a mere convention and *not* truly representative of the world he lived in. Now, it seems we no longer share that luxury. Yet if reality is a simulacrum, where does that leave history, geometry, mathematics, physics, or indeed, art itself?

Patterns of Redemption

Giambattista Vico The New Science 1744



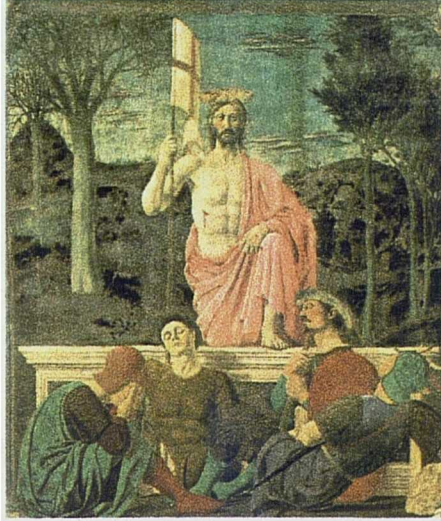
In order to reach the vaguest notion of Piero's intention we are required to pierce the simulacra of generations, not forgetting that he has helped to erect those "apparently eternal values" mentioned above. Paired with this, we are reminded of Vico's denial of the existence of the unchanging human being, and when we affirm Piero's worth, we also accept that he was *not* like us. This is important: for Vico, there is no archetype; the notion of the 'same person' existing throughout time, merely dressed with the paraphernalia of circumstance, is false. If that is the case, it may seem at first glance that we have surely lost our strongest connections with the past, for these fifteenth century people were not the same as us at all. Yet, as in any other situation, by reconciling differences our understanding increases

If we relate to Piero today at all, it is not because of any universal or absolute human *nature* that we might share, but more likely because of perceived relative similarities between the culture which created the Renaissance in comparison with, say, the culture in which we now find ourselves.

Vico's, *per caussas* principle:

"We can be said to fully know a thing if, and only if, we know why it is as it is, or how it came to be, or was made to be, what it is, and not merely that it is what it is, and has the attributes it has." (Berlin, Isaiah: *Vico & Herder* p.13)

Two Pieros?

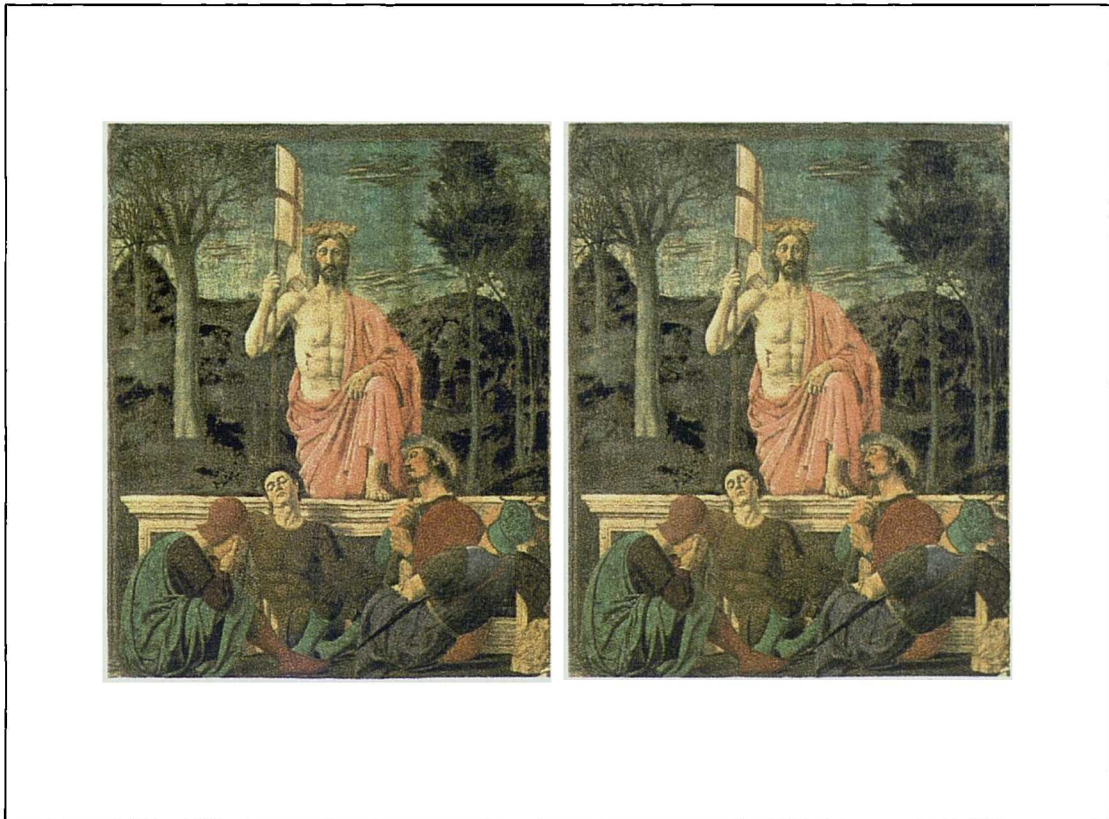


- Painted in Sansepolcro in the fifteenth century it held specific meaning then.
- The work of art exists today as part of a distinctly different culture.
- Hence the work has two 'meanings'.

To the right of his banner in *The Resurrection*, spring has returned because Jesus has risen. The seasons become metaphors for timelessness. As the landscape is rejuvenated uphill and downhill are found to represent the difficult and easy path to heaven. Also, below the horizontal division around the top of the sarcophagus all are asleep. Two 'realities' are created. Triangles and symmetry abound - is this simply for the visual effect of creating a well-balanced composition, or was the work invested with meaning, astrological or otherwise, in its construction?

The tranquillity that inspires Piero's *Resurrection* exerts psychological power via the stable, triangular composition and through the contrast between the face of Christ with those of the sleeping men, particularly 'Piero.' Therefore, although larger in scale, Christ is as much a part of a painted 'reality' as the soldiers, except that he is awake, and it is he who fixes us with his unwavering gaze. In explaining how a painting is made we are not explaining how it works its magic. Art notoriously familiarises the spectator with other worlds by giving form and features to deities, this is as true of Christianity as it is of Hinduism or the gods of Ancient Greece, but can it really help to redeem us?

The Piero we create for ourselves must be distinguished from the Piero who lived and breathed and walked the streets of Sansepolcro. These *Two Pieros*: the *imaginative* and the *historical* are necessarily dissimilar; unlikely to be the same because the intervening time has altered the *idea* of this artist and his importance.



This is not the humble cave bequeathed by Joseph of Arimathaea of the Gospel, but a Renaissance stone sarcophagus, presumably with a lid. It is uncertain whether Jesus is stepping right through the lid or if it has simply slipped out of sight rather than 'rolled away' like the original 'stone'.

Piero possibly uses *The Resurrection* for his own purpose too - one which is clearly distinguishable from any other religious or social motive. However this is only the case if one accepts the interpretation of reputable authorities (Including Kenneth Clark). This fresco operates on a series of levels, and as there is plenty of speculation about his work in general, great care is needed in the extrapolation of theories about intention and purpose.

“Any account of meaning in Piero’s paintings must be based, not on preconceptions, but on what is actually portrayed. From the standpoint of narrative Piero’s language is a dialect which must be studied in its entirety if the facial expressions and gestures he employs are not to be misunderstood.”

(J.Pope Hennessey)

True Image :
Veronica wipes
the face of Jesus.

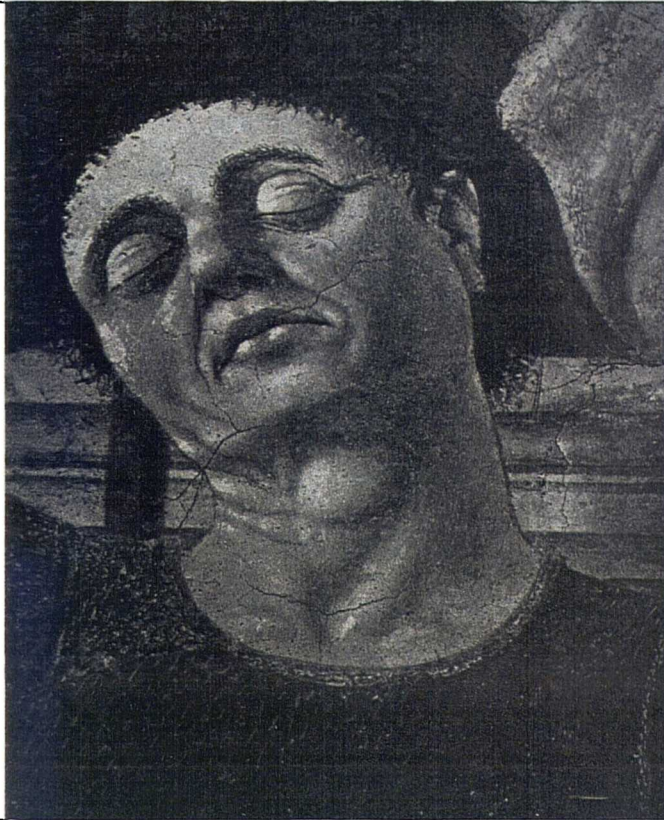


The Gospel assures the Christian that Jesus was seen after his death on the cross. He was awake, alive; he ate fish, he walked the road to Emmaus, he comforted the disciples in the upstairs room and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit - he silenced the doubts of Thomas.

Of course, Piero's version of Jesus has all the outward signs we have learned to recognise, but (as with the *Madonna del Parto*) there is something mystical, unfathomable about the skill of his interpretation. It is as if he has achieved two images in one: Wittgenstein, in his *Philosophical Investigations*, was considering the ambiguous figures in that famous psychological doodle, where first we see a duck and then a rabbit, but not both at the same time:

“What *has* changed?” Like all cases of philosophical confusion, it is the question itself that misleads. ‘It makes no sense to ask: “What has changed”’ Wittgenstein told his class. ‘And the answer: “the organisation has changed” makes no sense either.’ The expression of a change of aspect is the expression of a new perception and at the same time of the perception's being unchanged. ‘Seeing as’... is not part of perception. And for that reason it is like seeing and again not like.”

P
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?



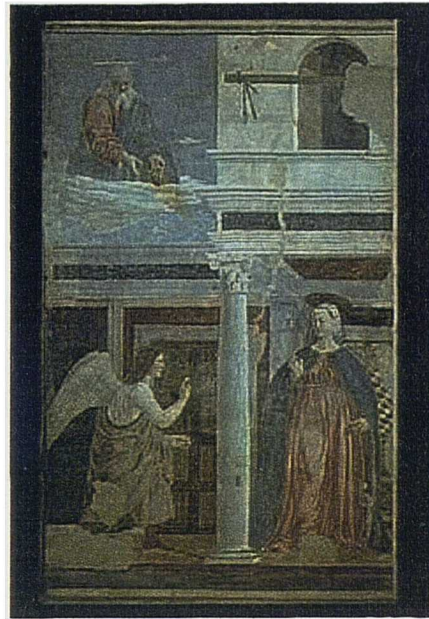
“The foreshortened head of the soldier beneath Christ’s banner has already been mentioned as the traditional likeness of the artist, and if, as Leonardo and other Renaissance theorists maintained, when we draw an idea of man we are really drawing ourselves, this theory can be supported without reserve.”

Clark, Kenneth: *Piero della Francesca* (1969) p.2

The Resurrection is an amazing work of art for many reasons, not least because this masterpiece, taken at face value, proclaims Piero as a sleeping witness awaiting the salvation of humanity.

The closer we look at *The Resurrection*, a vague awareness slowly dawns upon us, growing into the notion that there is something instinctively intrusive, almost voyeuristic in staring at someone who is deeply asleep. Piero’s self portrait does not confront us at all, it is powerless, he is vulnerable and unconscious.

Division of Space & Time?



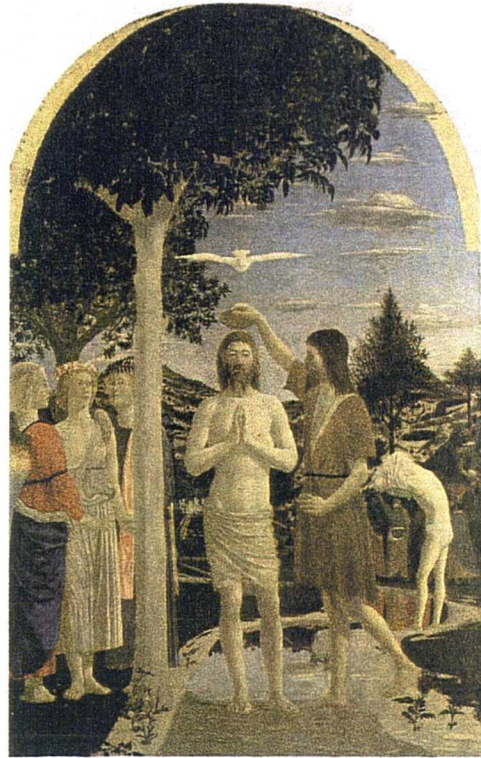
Specifically, in *The Annunciation*, God, the Virgin Mary, and the Angel Gabriel are each compartmentalised by the use of vertical and horizontal divisions, this is partly for practical reasons but probably denotes and enforces the division between the different heavenly spheres from which they come.

“He entered the café. There was the cat, asleep. He ordered a cup of coffee, slowly stirred the sugar, sipped it (this pleasure had been denied him in the clinic), and thought, as he smoothed the cat’s black coat, that this contact was an illusion and that the two beings, man and cat, were as good as separated by a glass, for the man lives in time, in succession, while the magical animal lives in the present, in the eternity of the instant.”

(Borges, *The South* from *Ficciones*).

The cat is more than akin to the story about it which also ‘lives’ in the eternity of the instant. The cat needs the framework of the story - the *poiesis* - just as the message of Christianity or any other organised ideology needs works of art.

Three
Angels in
a separate
space to
the left of
the tree.

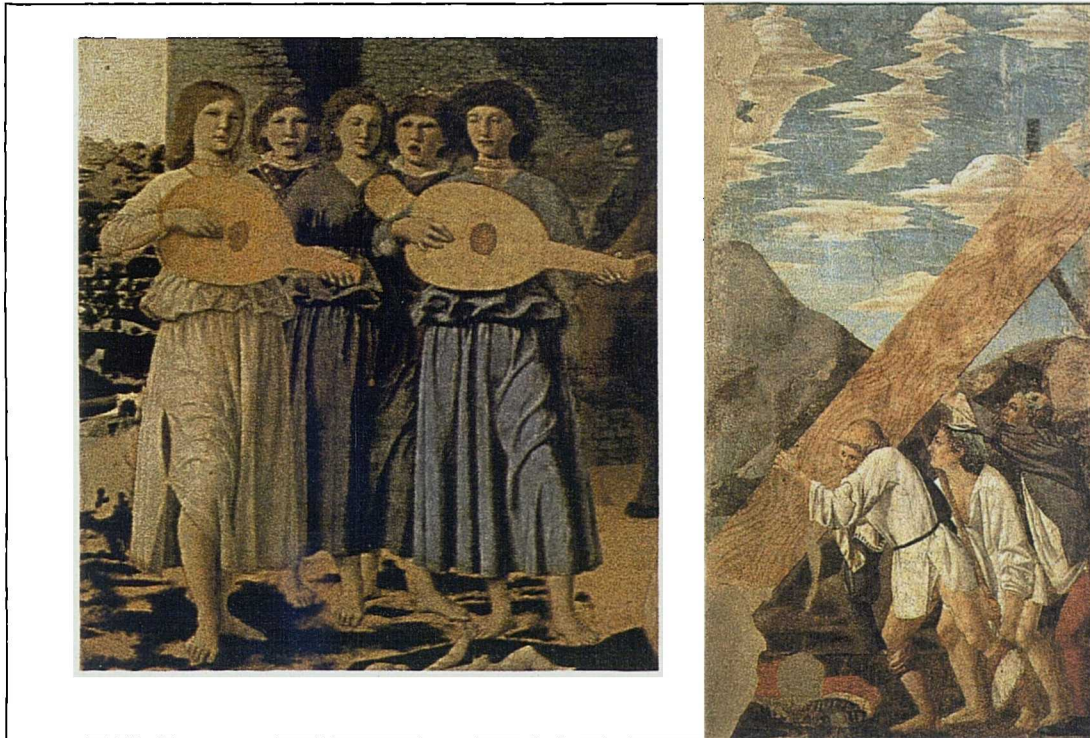


The angels in *The Baptism*, to the left of the tree are there for the benefit of the spectator, and cannot be 'seen' by those waiting to be baptised in the 'Sansepolcro' Jordan, who, in their turn are part of yet another 'reality' to the right of John the Baptist. The Holy Spirit in the form of a dove is placed at the exact centre of the circle drawn as a continuation of the arched top.

"In his *Baptism of Christ* there is a group of three angels on the left who are used for a device which Piero often exploited. We become aware that one of the figures is staring in a heavy-lidded way either directly at us or an inch or two above or beside our heads. This state institutes a relationship between us and it, and we become sensitive to this figure and its role."

(Michael Baxandall)

Baxandall refers to Piero's *Baptism* but the observed 'reticence' and relationship of the group of figures is also relevant to our reading of *The Resurrection*. The nature of the relationship between the soldiers and the Risen Christ



In *The Adoration of the Child* 1478-80, the Nativity takes place high on a hill (above Sansepolcro?) where the figures and ruined building form a rectangle within the composition, and where the close group of angels form another rectangle within the first. Rather like a Chinese box puzzle, it may be assumed that one 'reality' occurs inside the other in separate 'blocks'. Therefore, the world, the hill, the animals, the angels and people, although synchronised, hail from independent regions and only co-exist on the picture-plane.

The same may be said of the Legend of the True Cross fresco at Arezzo - centuries are compartmentalised - the Cross appears in each scene (like the Obelisk in *2001- A Space Odyssey*). The scenes form a 'cats cradle' of interrelations as a time line is drawn from one scene to the next.

There is a corresponding notion held in Arthur C. Danto's *Transfiguration of the Commonplace* that states how everyday objects, Brillo boxes and clothes-pegs, may become 'art' – and perhaps this applies to people, wood-grain and halos too. As everyday people, we hope for a kind of transfiguration - perhaps ultimately to become 'born again' via art forms. Failing that, if nothing else we can come to accept that art and everyday people operate on different levels but somehow maintain *meaningful* relationships:

God the Father



And so Piero attempts to paint what cannot be wholly shared in the imagination *unless* it is depicted, placed high on the wall for communal acceptance, its purpose therefore hieroglyphic – ‘the word’ made *image*. Almost like a fertility symbol, *The Resurrection* embraces new life: the ‘Son of God,’ would ‘take after’ his father and would also have a beard and long hair.

Also, as ‘father-figures’ from times when tribal elders were respected, Zeus and ‘God the Father’ share an almost exact resemblance. To engender and maintain belief in a visual, therefore tangible God, art must be reckoned as a redemptive media. Conversely, it is this very aspect that paves the way for iconography to be eventually regarded as blasphemy. It is no accident that in his great fresco, *The Legend of the True Cross*, Piero gives God and the blasphemous King Chosroes, identical faces:

The self portrait in art.



- Piero features as a humble member of the confraternity.
- He appears as a servant to King Solomon.
- He is the sleeping soldier facing us at the Resurrection of Christ.

Piero della Francesca, as a man of the Renaissance, was (to use Baudrillard's apt phrase) amongst the "theatrical and clock-like" wearing the costume of, and reliant upon, the "counterfeit" culture he was helping to create. The same accusation may well hold true of any other classification of culture, including this one. Defining culture as counterfeit holds it up to close scrutiny, whilst denying the possibility of duplicity in human affairs would be rash because of past experience.

"This relationship has always interested me and in those early works I contemplated a lot of those unbearable relationships between men and women."
(Stanley Spencer sees the Virgin as "a big fact of nature" in his *Nativity*)

Piero della Francesca's *Madonna della Misericordia* also envisions the Virgin Mary as a "big fact of nature" looming over the members of the confraternity embraced by her cape, but elsewhere as in his *Nativity*, reduced to human proportions, she humbly worships the infant Jesus. Relative size, clothing and associated imagery personifies aspects of deity in art.

Watermelon in Easter Hay

- How can one tell what expressive playing is?
- Stravinsky thought music powerless to express anything
- Zappa presents an ironic interpretation as meaningful.
- Two modes of 'listening' possible



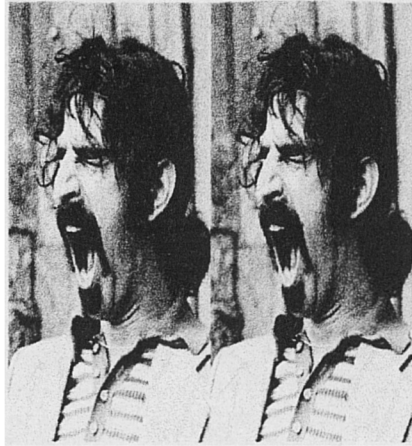
“It’s all about random sequencing (...) Well, I think that everything is happening all of the time, and the only reason why we think linearly is because we are conditioned to do it. That’s because the human idea of stuff is that it has a beginning and it has an end. I don’t think that’s necessarily true. I think of time as a constant, a spherical constant (...) What something is depends more on when it is than anything else. You can’t define something accurately until you understand *when* it is.” Zappa’s importance as a composer, musician and social commentator may be articulated by a ‘reverse reading’ of his historical placement. Such a reading would be in keeping with what one might describe as a ‘Zappalogical dimension’:

Zappa’s antidote deliberately exploits the unwary ‘Zappa fan’ who is not paying attention:

“Since I write music, I know what the techniques are. If I wanted to write something that would make you weep, I could do it. Its a cheap shot.”

Quite rightly, we should be suspicious of received wisdom and most fearful of the spirit of the age when it tends towards destruction. Zappa, as archetypal *Central Scrutinizer*, argues that things *are* in a bad way, and that although humanity may have the potential to improve, people are stupid, easily swayed by theories and convention. We see that by the quality of his art form, Zappa’s judgement does not reside in mere conjecture, rather it moves toward universality beyond the contemporary. *Lumpy Gravy* also introduced Zappa’s theory of the big note. He maintains that everything in the universe is made from one element, which is a note - atoms are really vibrations and are all part of the big note. Music marks time too, and he has said that all of his music is actually one piece of music.

Two Zappas



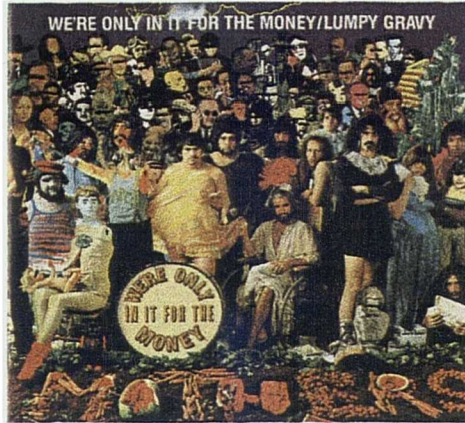
- Aufhebung (sublation): The synchronisation of deconstruction and its simultaneous construction.
- 3 Zappas in 200 Motels (one played by Ringo Starr)
- Whither Francesco Zappa?

In his music, Frank Zappa deconstructs and exploits the counterfeit modernist perspective as surely as Piero helped to create the Renaissance's humanist re-narration of history. Their separate discourse rendered the accepted and prevalent mythology of their times, each causing a disruption in the pre-existing referential framework in which they grew.

To say that Zappa follows the Renaissance matrix of a popular composer whose work is humanistically universal would be to proclaim him as a contemporary troubadour who rises beyond style and time-trapped conventions. To an extent I believe this to be the case, for certainly, since his death his popularity remains undiminished. On the other hand, to imagine Frank Zappa at the court of the Medici could be construed as trying to 'out-Twain' Twain's Arthurian American. Nonetheless, here I am not talking about his popularity or the fantasy of time-travel.

One eighteenth century composer, long forgotten, and rediscovered by chance, was Frank's namesake: Francesco Zappa. Francesco's music, originally written for two violins and an upright bass, was recorded by Frank Zappa on synclavier and released as a C.D.

IS ART A PASTICHE OF ITSELF?



Just as Vico demolished the personification of the great Homer (hitherto assumed to be a single man, the poet solely responsible for *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*) by declaring him a community of writers, so too is Matt Groening's *Homer Simpson* - (as the reincarnation of *Bow-Tie Daddy* meets *Andy Capp*) - a community of all middle-aged men caught in 'timeless' cartoon form. In a sense, *The Simpsons* as a visual social critique is the epitome of Zappalogical characterisation. Zappa draws humanity as a cartoon version of itself in many of his own musical creations, which include: *Disco Boy*, *Valley Girl*, *Jumbo*, *Dina Moe Humm*, *Thing-Fish*, and legions of others. His barb and humour may soften the blow, nonetheless, his own criticism of society is part of a genuine discourse in value and meaning: It is by comparison of one form, the imagined, with another: the observed, that we may know what *form* is.

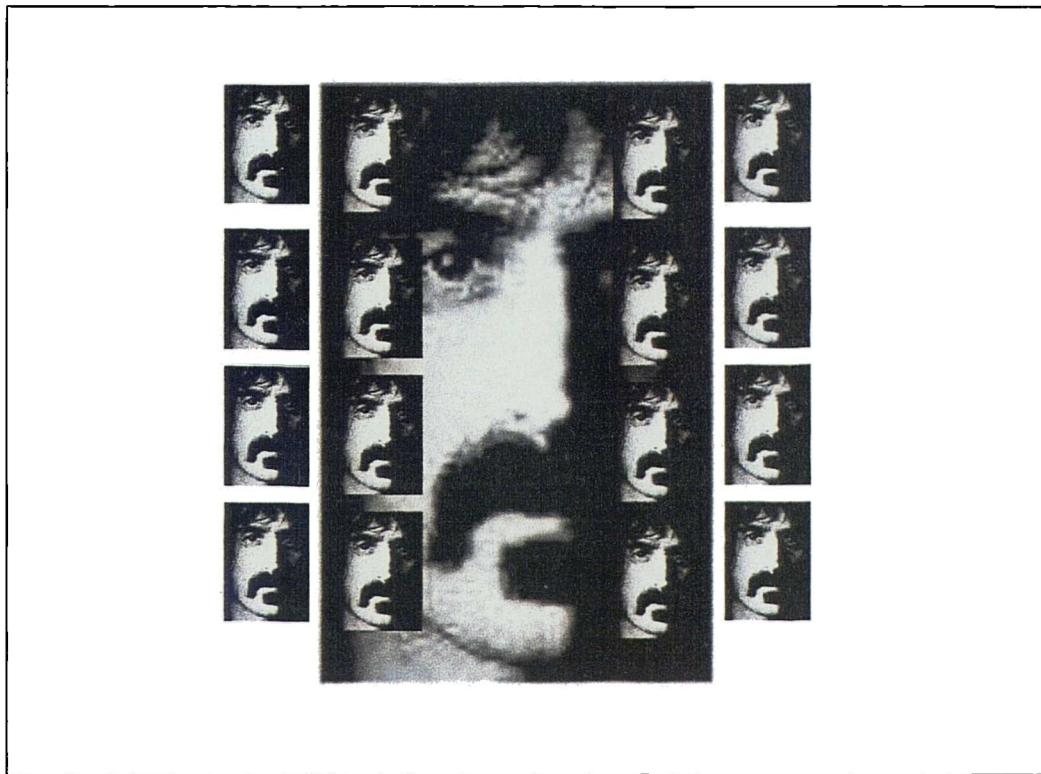
"Let's be realistic about this, the guitar can be the single most blasphemous device on the face of the earth. That's why I like it ...The disgusting stink of a too-loud electric guitar, now that's my idea of a good time."

Zappa's critique of musical snobbery led him to dip into a deep pool of musical style. However, whilst his humour enabled him to create a pastiche of what he found, he also respected musical form beyond its multifarious social connotations. If what we hear with Zappa is an ironic delivery, the next logical step would be to search for an underlying truth (if there is any?) behind the irony, beneath the pastiche. We may be forever disappointed if our quest amounts to an attempt to rationalise what is not rational. As Zappa highlights cultural pretension he enables the logical questioning of dogma in any form, musical, religious, social or otherwise.



“This is the Central Scrutinizer, it is my responsibility to enforce all the laws which haven’t been passed yet. It is also my responsibility to alert each and every one of you to the potential consequences of various ordinary every day activities ... Our criminal institutions are full of little creeps like you who were driven to do evil things by music”.

Joe's Garage is where Zappa's teenage alter-ego learned to play guitar in his first rock band, accompanied by 'neighbour' Cy Borg's mother's constant cry of “Turn it down!” It is a metaphor for the birth of his music, in much the same way as the humble stable at Bethlehem would later, during the Renaissance, adopt the mantle of classical antiquity, because artists were compelled to include a classical column and idealised crumbling masonry with which to surround the birth of the Son of God. It is no accident that the major characters, Mary and Joe have Biblical antecedents. The album, which may be interpreted at various levels, shares a theme with Hogarth's *Harlots Progress* in that it deals with the moral degeneration, (but here because of music) of a sweet, innocent girl. She is called Mary, and her transformation into a *Crew Slut* or 'groupie' begins with a 'visit' backstage to the road-crew from a famous rock group in order to get a free pass into the show. Eventually, she seeks an about-turn and her display on *Wet T-shirt Nite* - (“ain't this what living is all about?” drools Zappa as the sleazy presenter) - earns her the fifty dollars she needs, “To get back home.” It is Mary, “the girl from the bus” who, finally (the double-entendre is necessary) 'reveals all': “Information is not knowledge, knowledge is not wisdom, wisdom is not truth, truth is not beauty, beauty is not love, love is not music, music is the best.”



It is very easy for me to believe that Zappa really did hold that “Music *is* the best.” Again, this must be taken in the context of the music he heard around him, and what he saw as the often shallow reasons for its production

The egg-like form of a watermelon, associated with the word ‘Easter’, signifies redemption in terms of imagery as much as a new born baby in a manger might, but it is the music, it is that “last imaginary guitar solo” that really ‘speaks’ to us. For Slaven to state that Zappa’s solo was “atypical” - literally a cut above the other (cut and paste) tracks on this ‘operetta’ conceived as a wry comment on both religion and the birth of his own music would imply that Zappa may have created more than he bargained for.

Zappa may be accused of not pointing us in the right direction but he makes no hesitation when it comes to showing us where we are going wrong. This immediately prompts the re-thinking of one’s entrenched (identitarian) position.

To this end, the artistic process of Zappa’s making comes to share the universal platform on whose grounds Piero della Francesca’s art purported the same human quest - that of redemption.



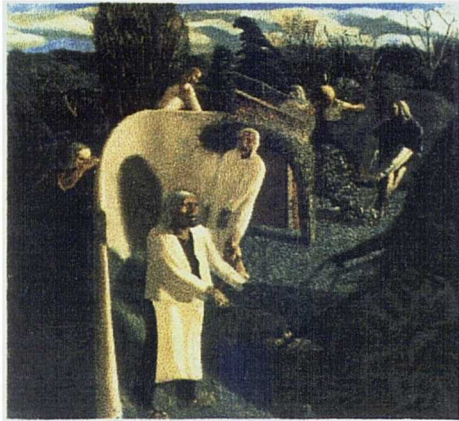
To shed further light and context on this atemporal relationship, I would refer to Gillian Rose's discussion of Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Rose's reading of Marx's theory is that it describes the transactions of sets of value from one object to the next, where one set of concrete social relations is transformed into another. *We're Only in it for the Money*, the album which is Zappa's & Cal Shenkel's distorted reflection of *The Beatles & Peter Blake's Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, is reborn as a nightmare of ugly men in drag surrounded by vegetables. Furthermore, the arrangement of life-size cut-outs, dummies and band members (on both album covers) as a series of overlapping figures is vaguely reminiscent of Piero's angels in *The Nativity*. The link is less tenuous when one considers the esteem with which record covers were once held, so much so that they counted as works of art.

The song, *Call Any Vegetable* (from the previous album *Freak Out* (1966) released one week before *Sgt. Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*) was aimed at 'Flower People redefined as Vegetable People' – effectively, Zappa's audience. "Call any vegetable and the chances are good that the vegetable will respond to you" is deliberately insulting. The derision implies the deepest condemnation of that use of reification wherein something taken by many as 'real' (i.e., the exploding plastic phenomenon, which was 'Flower Power') - The baby in the manger has been substituted by a watermelon - now what is the difference? This is not a denial of value but simulacrum exposed. By these means, the sudden realisation of art forms as duly considered intellectual prescriptions for a desired social reality, which in turn give rise to new versions of that reality, is emergent and constant.



Zappa's characters are mere extensions within the duplicity of a 'reality' wherein Zappa himself might well be initially taken for *The Electric Don Quixote* tilting his lance at everything but re-written by Borges' *Pierre Menard* - and as played by Ringo Starr in *200 Motels*. The cartoon simulacra as an art form permits this (and anything else) as possible. This is a picture of Zappa as *Sheik Yerbouti* - (another character and an inventive play on words, *Sheik Yerbouti*: an invitation to dance and to rattle one's jewellery). Zappa, as all pervasive *Central Scrutinizer*, hides behind several layers of meaning, from where he manipulates the proceedings. His characters act as hooks on which he hangs some wonderful music, which in its variety forbids any preconception of what music should be.

Peering over the Wall



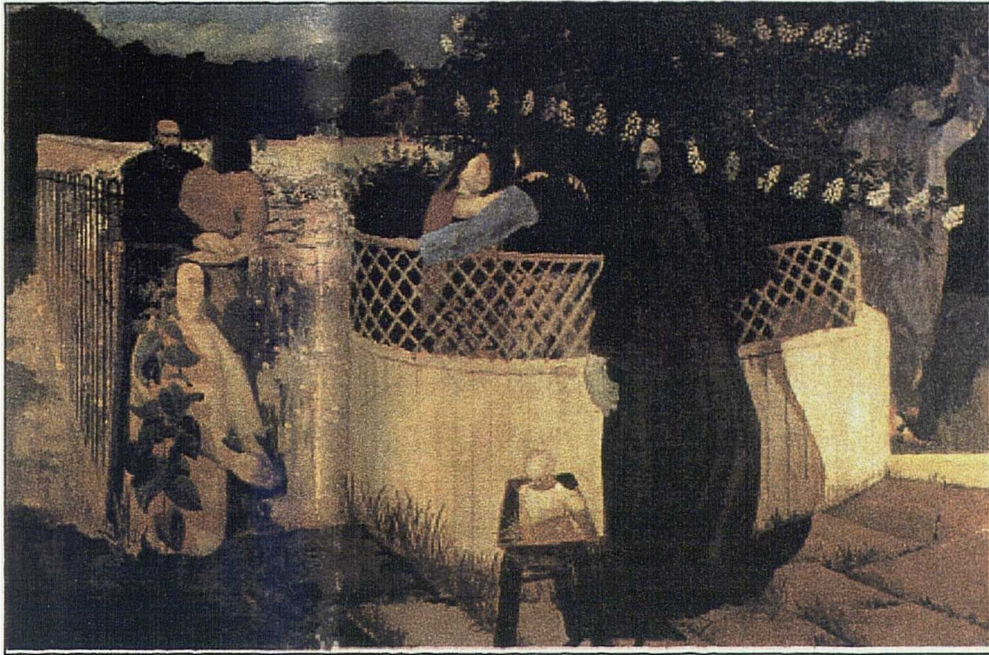
- The pews in Cookham Church
- Two copies of Zacharias and Elizabeth on one canvas.

“Oh that I could write only and solely of this moment in this room this afternoon. It would suit me if I were never able to stir from what I am feeling now. All that I have been and done before I came to live here, would be an intrusion. I love to contemplate the possibility of a theme being born out of the air in this room. A ‘birth’ of me taking place this afternoon in here. There have been many births of me and this is one of them...”

(Stanley Spencer)

Buddhism or Eastern philosophy in general, informs those sentiments where Spencer tries to express the strange sense of timelessness that the conscious self is occasionally prone to. Importantly, Spencer considers the notion of ‘self’ as ever changing and this is characteristically associated with those who are unusually aware of how time is perceived.

Whereas Vico thought of history as “an orderly procession guided by providence working through men’s capacities,” Spencer taps into this procession en-route as a premeditated ahistorical act (much as the Pre-Raphaelites had done). History authenticates art’s practice and so Spencer is at liberty to draw from the Renaissance, but his painterly reaction is as individual as Otto Dix, George Grosz or Edward Burra.



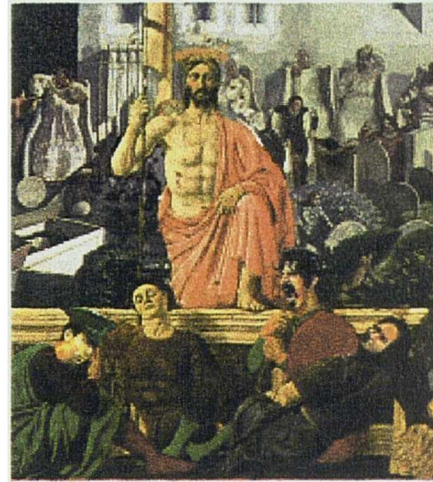
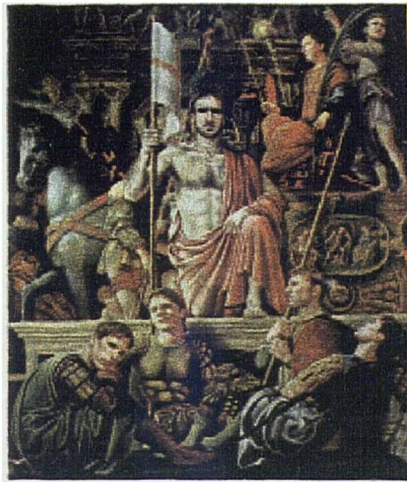
The Nativity

We see in Spencer's *Nativity*: "The same round-headed palings lead steeply in from the left, the centre dominated by an enfolding trellis-fence. Two embracing couples, perhaps magi or shepherds, seem extensions of this weather beaten construction." The baby; almost forgotten, sits safe and content within the confines of the manger, disregarded except by the kneeling figure on the left who is reminiscent of Piero's kneeling Madonna. Yet, if the kneeling figure *is* the Madonna this painting now has, (in the first instance) *two* depictions of the Virgin Mary in one painting.

One of Spencer's earliest memories was of sitting in his pram, secure. (*Stanley Spencer - A Sort of Heaven* p. 48.). Talking about *The Port Glasgow Resurrection: Reunion*, he says "Also although the people are adult or any age, I think of them in cribs or prams or mangers. Grownups in prams would perhaps express what I was after the sense of security and peace that a babe has as it gazes over the rim of its pram and out into the world around it." It is curious that he chose to convey his landscape painting equipment around Cookham in a pram in later life.

The mystical blurring of time, events and people dominate many other of his 'visionary' works too. Spencer investigates the idea that 'self' is an illusion, that there is no *constant* being that moves through successive experiences in the guise of a person called Stanley Spencer.

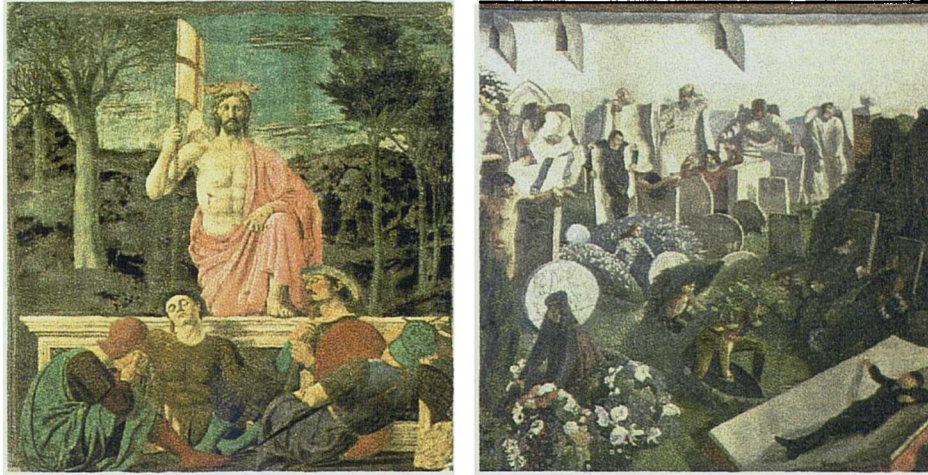
The re-use of Imagery



The artist utilises the same *fantasia* recommended by Vico to attain a greater awareness of the episodes that make up the lives of others. Within Spencer's consciousness, Early Renaissance Italy and episodes from the New Testament were to meld with an everyday experience of the world. This meld enables the artist to summon the historical past as intrinsically linked with flights of fancy and his actual existence. We may seek to 'return' to fifteenth century Sansepolcro, where to say how much Piero's work was understood by his patron, the upper echelons of his society, or the congregation who worshipped at his altarpieces, could remain as difficult to assess then as it is now. It is beyond doubt that he refers to legends (now unfamiliar) and modes of behaviour (i.e. posture, gesture, fashionable dress) which may only be interpreted by those today with sufficient *knowledge* of the intricacies of Renaissance art. But how many people of his day had access to such knowledge? As ever, the more experts one consults, the likelihood is that opinion and interpretation may vary - we must learn to trust ourselves.

Michael Browne, *The Art of the Game* features Cantona, Fergusson and Beckham - amongst others, in a reworking of two Renaissance masterpieces. The second image, *The Parachronicity of Piero, Zappa and Spencer*, includes a yawning Frank Zappa and a guest appearance by an uncomfortable looking Giambattista Vico.

Two Resurrections - Aufhebung



In this (absolutely theoretical) coexistent space, which has been labelled as 'parachronicity' there operates a *different* 'Frank Zappa,' 'Piero della Francesca' and 'Stanley Spencer' – not to be confused with the originals. As poetic re-creations, they float like the heroes and saints in heaven waiting for Beatrice in *The Divine Comedy*. And if rationality proclaims this as ludicrous it must be pointed out that *they* were initially responsible for their own re-creation of themselves, for we did not, and do not know them, except as concepts. Conceptual beings evade rationality with ease, claiming natural knowledge and imagination as their Vichian forbears. All historical figures are (necessarily) replicas born of intuition, interpretations of the originals, reliant upon the powers of *fantasia* used to recreate them. If art *is* redemptive, such an irrational proposition gains some authenticity in the instant that living, breathing artists are consigned to the past because they *live on* in their work. As we only ever knew them via their work, indeed they are 'resurrected' but only in the simplistic sense that they continue to live in our imagination. But it must be established once more, that the *act* of creating is redemptive in itself, and they are resurrected because their work has already redeemed them.



The Last Supper, 1920

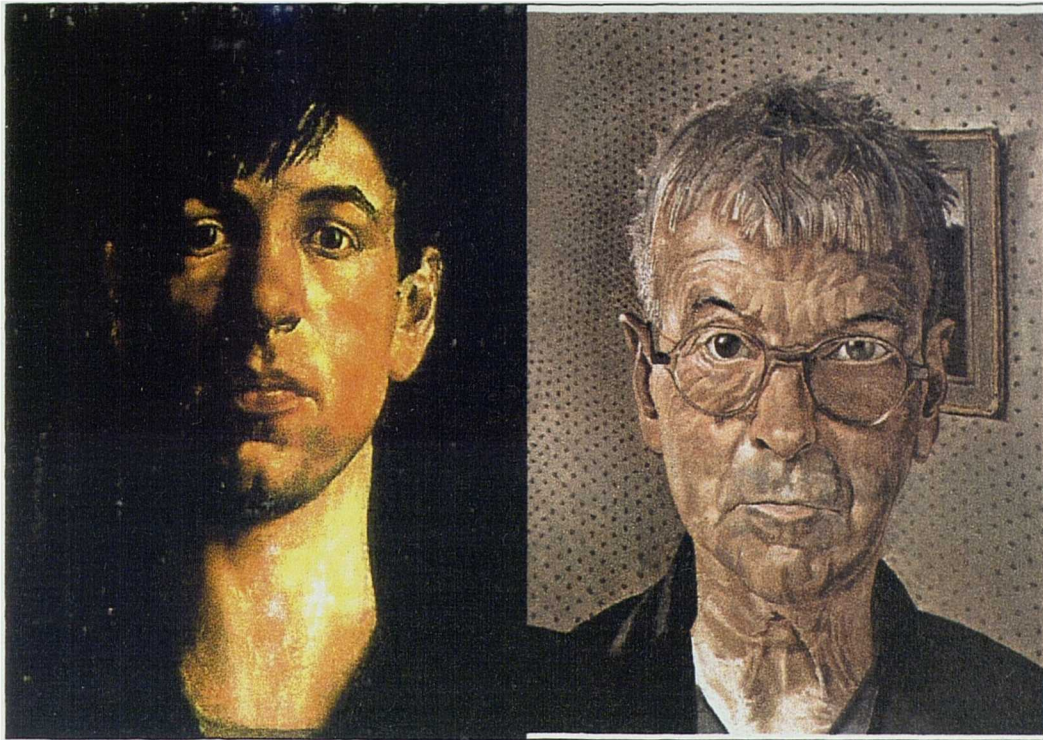
The Resurrection, Cookham is very different from Burghclere and from its predecessors. The earlier paintings (i.e., *The Last Supper*, 1920; *Christ Carrying The Cross*, 1920; *Christ's Entry Into Jerusalem*, 1921; *The Betrayal*, 1922 - 23), had each featured Christ, out of time and place. Jesus became relocated in Stanley Spencer's childhood remembrance of Cookham, at a period before the Great War, often acknowledged by him as the best time in his life. The story told in *The New Testament* was firmly realigned with somewhere local, a set of 'special' places which held lasting significance for him. By enlisting his earlier, emotionally charged childhood responses and linking them to the life of Christ he embarked upon a hazardous career as an artist. Furthermore, by re-siting these dreams of redemption in familiar Cookham surroundings, the momentous narrative of *The New Testament* was re-enacted in paint on canvas. Effectively, he personalised Christianity for himself.



We have now journeyed from a position of accepting equal and opposite interpretations of the Renaissance image of Christ as feasible, to allowing the simultaneity of birth and death as coexistent creative and deconstructive possibilities, (*Aufhebung*) within a single work of art. *Joe's Garage* brands Frank Zappa's 'Joe and Mary' as the antithesis to their Christian counterparts, yet their role within a cynical framework nonetheless leads to redemption via the *dual interpretation* of the art form, *Watermelon in Easter Hay*. 'Joe and Mary' negatively re-enact one alleged episode from the past as a simulation as surely as Piero della Francesca's sleeping soldiers positively reinforce another. Zappa's 'watermelon' does not constitute a denial of the actual birth of Christ any more than Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* claims to witness Christ's actual resurrection. *If it is not a true story - it may as well be.*

As a continuance of the Christmas narrative, the 'new' Joe and Mary may be said to take up their positions as part of an atemporal 'Negative Dialectic'. Watson, *Poodle* p. 291: "As defined by Theodor Adorno, negative dialectics implies continual refutation of the tendency to think that the concept exhausts the thing conceived. It is also aware that denial of the concept does not abolish its power. This was termed 'negative capability' by the romantics who discovered that to deny something in poetry was still to evoke it."

Despite Zappa's cynicism his aim nonetheless implies a reappraisal of the human situation. Although the watermelon is a derisory motif calculated to ridicule – it may also be construed as emblematic of eternal hope, *if* it signifies that such a reappraisal is possible. Its position within *this* 'nativity' - like any other - is analogous to its nativeness or sense of belonging. (The Slide exemplifies *dual-interpretation* as logical and positive - both 'sets' of Beatles are *equally* accessible in Blake's design)



Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* exudes confidence in the power of Christ the Redeemer. By comparison, although set in a churchyard, Spencer's *Resurrection, Cookham* is hardly Christian at all. He distances himself from the dogma and orthodoxy associated with religion but reuses familiar imagery as formulae to make his point, for here is a *different* church and a *very different* churchyard.

"Thinking about you and all you really mean to me has gradually led me to this desire, which at last, is a real one, but what has made me so happy that I want to do nothing but shout for joy is this: Right up until only a few days back I was feeling that all my ideas for pictures were dead, as they had no centre (...). They were no real part of my life, (...) then *I suddenly felt that if I did a picture about you, it would not just be an incident; it would be an actual living part of my life put in the picture.*"

(R. Carline: *Stanley Spencer at War*. p.162.)

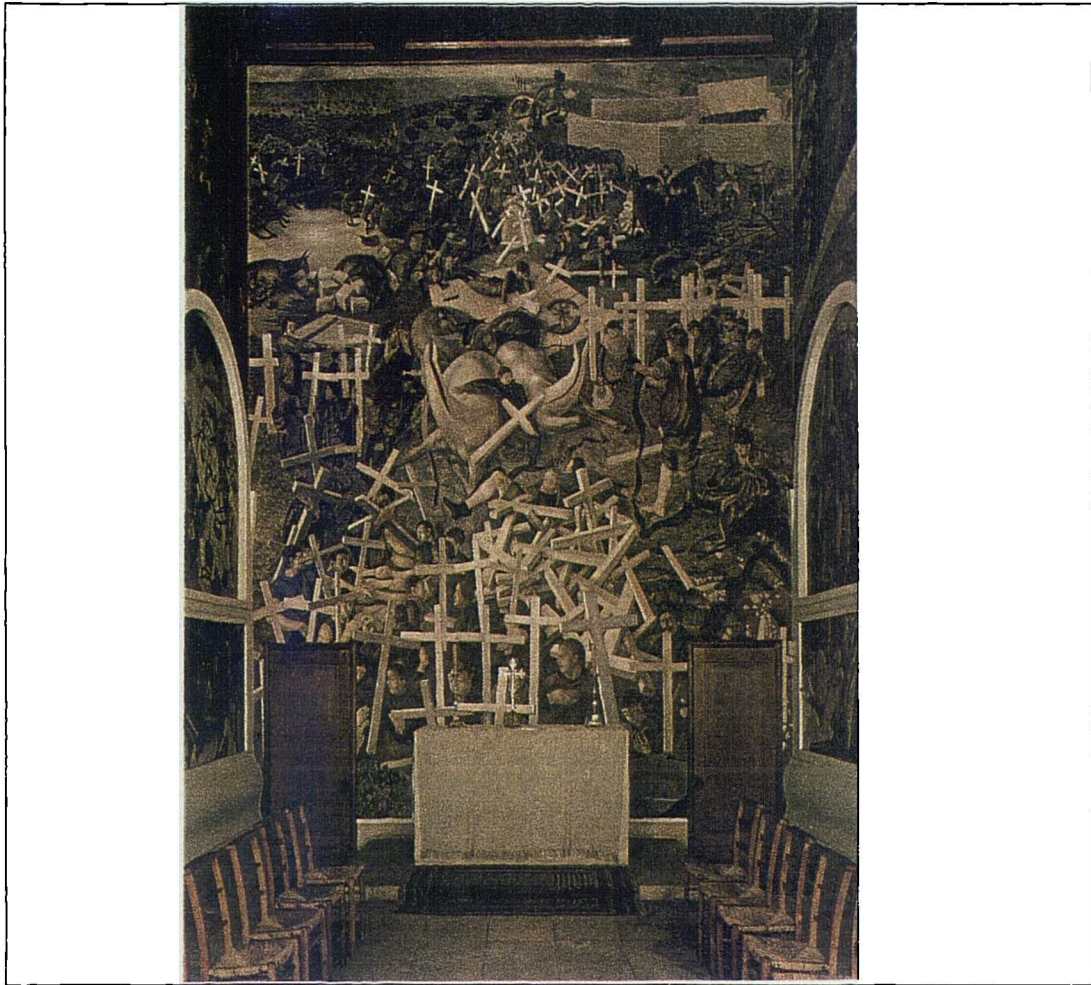
In plain speaking, a painting may be invested with essential or spiritual 'life' - at least in the mind of the artist, "an actual living part of my life put in the picture" as Spencer said. In this respect, Spencer's intention is mystical and the desired end result comparable to what the women of Monterchi reportedly say, that mystical regenerative qualities have been attributed *The Madonna Del Parto*. I think that these two self-portraits qualify to be placed in a similar category.



This was painted long after Hilda died. Spencer continued to write to Hilda as if she were alive. The letters are the redemptive element in their relationship in that they *represent* communication as a symbolic act.

Much as Sansepolcro was for Piero della Francesca, or Joe's Garage was for Frank Zappa, 'Cookham' became an invention, an ethical / social / political and physical state within the imagination. The work of art is therefore re-formed into a well-honed receptacle for everything, yet *it is not real*. Neither is it identical with its own existence, being placed somewhere between the canvas and the imagination, between the subject and the spectator. It inhabits this world as a twilight-meaning difficult to grasp - even for the artist himself, and is a part of a no-mans-land of a million other images and lost sounds created throughout eternity. One may wish to deny the significance of a work of art, yet ironically, its significance does not lie with its creator or with itself. This uncertainty posits any work of art as potentially beyond reality.

The Resurrection, Cookham is a better example than most. It is reminiscent of that dream-like state of bliss where the sleeper is appreciated at last for their true worth; that particular dream where the dreamer attends a lavish party in those *Elysian Fields* of their own choosing, only to find everyone there that they had ever met, and knew, mingling among those yet to meet and know, and all are wallowing in a sense of love and well-being; ecstatic in the joy to be there.



Following some preliminary work for his concept at Burghclere (from which he concluded that the actual technique of fresco painting was beyond him) he decided to work on canvas. He filled his canvases with memories of active service, personal meaning and introspection, all of which describe the universal lot of the soldier. *The Resurrection of Soldiers*, in the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere was a resounding success as a tribute to the huge loss of life in The First World War. Each man offers a white cross, the symbol of his own life and death, to Christ, who collects them in his arms.



Leading authorities note the significance of walls and fences in much of Spencer's work and these compositional devices herald the central couple in *The Nativity* as the focal point. If they are not a second representation of the relationship between Joseph and Mary they could be interpreted as such. Compositionally, the rhythmical line of walls and fences, tree blossom and plant life both *connects* them to, and *separates* them from the other characters enclosed within their adjacent spaces (as the wall does in the painting above, *Zacharias and Elizabeth* of 1914).

As a short melody is played on one instrument, then taken up by others, so the theme develops by means of interweaving. The 'players' here also create a spatial pattern - something like a set dance or a musical arrangement. The word, *fugue* may be translated as *flight* from a 'normal' environment - the implication is that although compartmentalised these couples do interact, becoming *fugitive* from temporal or spatial restriction as they do so. There are two depictions of *Zacharias and Elizabeth*.

Liotard: "As you know, one can debate a lot about what is contemporary and what is not. As far as I'm concerned paganism can be extended to include even time: there is no one single time; a society, (or a soul) is not synchronous with itself (...) There are only parachronisms all around; it is the observer's timepiece that judges what is present day, just as in the universe, except that one wonders what in human history, and especially in the history of the arts, functions as the speed of light."

Spencer's *paganism* attempts to enliven the 'event' of nativity (the birth of Christ, the conception of St. John the Baptist) with new meaning and thereby recover it. In effect, he *rewrites* history (working at his own 'speed of light) just as artists of the Early Renaissance did, just as artists today may attempt the same.

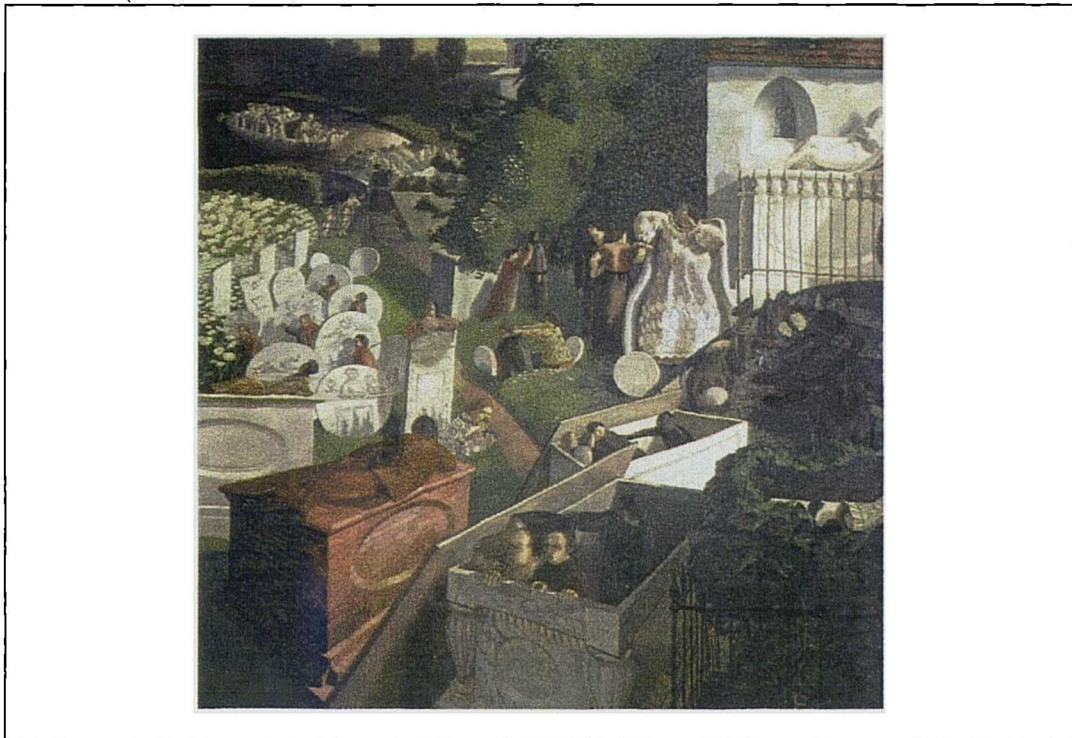
The Resurrection , Cookham.



The chapel, complete with *The Resurrection of Soldiers*, was to be dedicated as the *Oratory of All Souls* on the 25th March 1927. This was the feast of the Annunciation and the same day that the *Arena Chapel* in Padua had been consecrated six hundred years earlier.

However, *The Resurrection, Cookham* was far removed from any traditional reinforcement of cultural values, such as the conventional religious belief in the possibility of an after-life. *The Resurrection, Cookham* also commemorated a significant moment in time: “2.45 p.m. on a Tuesday in May” which is thought to be in remembrance of Spencer’s first sexual encounter.

This painter was driven by inner conviction birthed during the religious instruction of childhood that later grew to be the rumblings of a Spencerian paganism of immense proportion. This was not primarily a denial of Christianity, but a synchronised perception of ‘Christ-with-us’ as acceptable sexual beings: the acknowledgement of sexuality in a no-holds-barred confrontation.

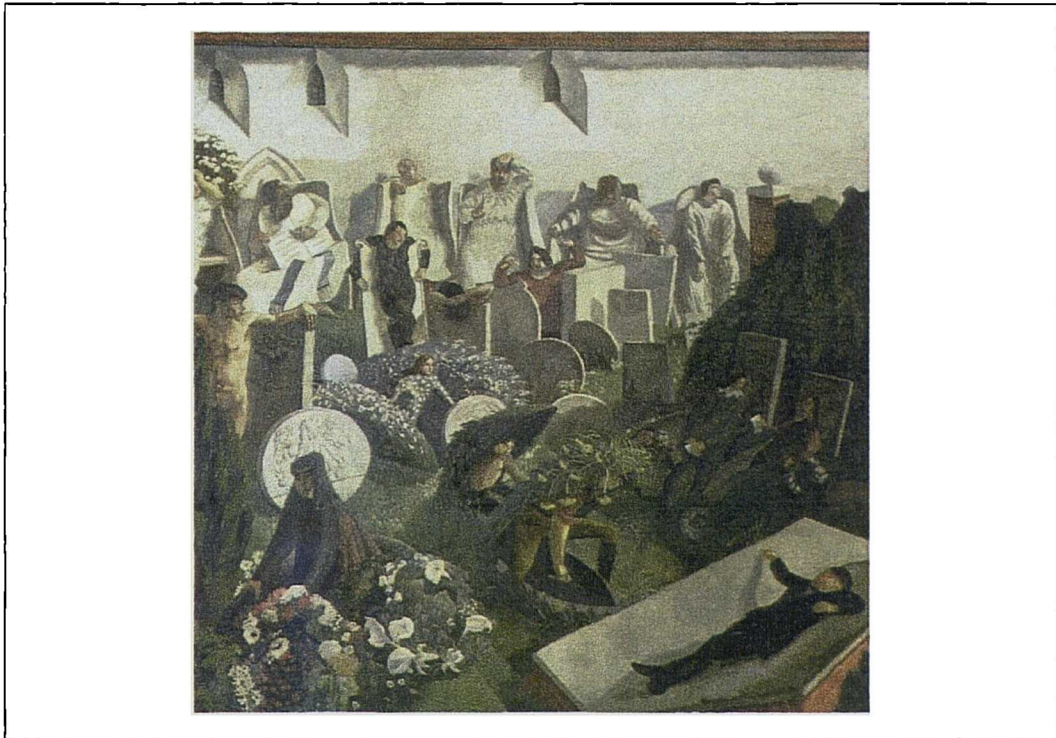


If as Lyotard claims, “The pagan uses ruses and trickery in order not to redefine the truth, but to displace the rule of truth” then Spencer’s truth is pagan in origin.

“Without belief, without utter faith and confidence, there is impotence. A man raises a woman’s dress with the same passionate admiration as the priest raises the host on the altar.”

Stanley Spencer. *On the Morality of Sexual Desire* c1938 Tate Gallery Archive 733.3.3 (*Apotheosis of Love*)

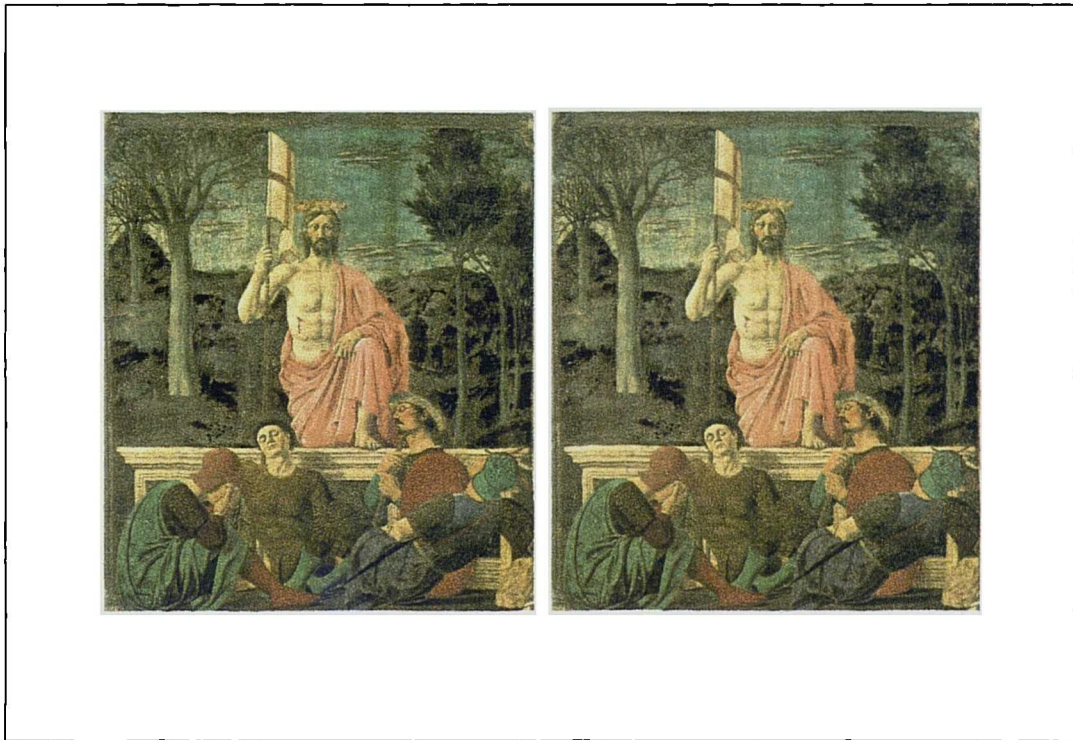
His splitting or denial of ‘self’ emerges predominantly as a running theme throughout *The Resurrection, Cookham* (1924-27) where we find Spencer depicted as himself, as generic man, as woman, as a baby, as a Christ-like figure and as a god. The mystical blurring of time, events and people dominate many other of his ‘visionary’ works too. Spencer investigates the idea that ‘self’ is an illusion, that there is no *constant* being that moves through successive experiences in the guise of a person called Stanley Spencer.



Christ is crucified on a daily basis by the refusal of society to change its attitude towards itself. Spencer is scornful of small-town morality but draws consolation by leaning towards more sexually enlightened religions. *The Resurrection, Cookham* delves into ancient paganism, it anticipates rebirth but above all it is a joyous celebration of the moment.

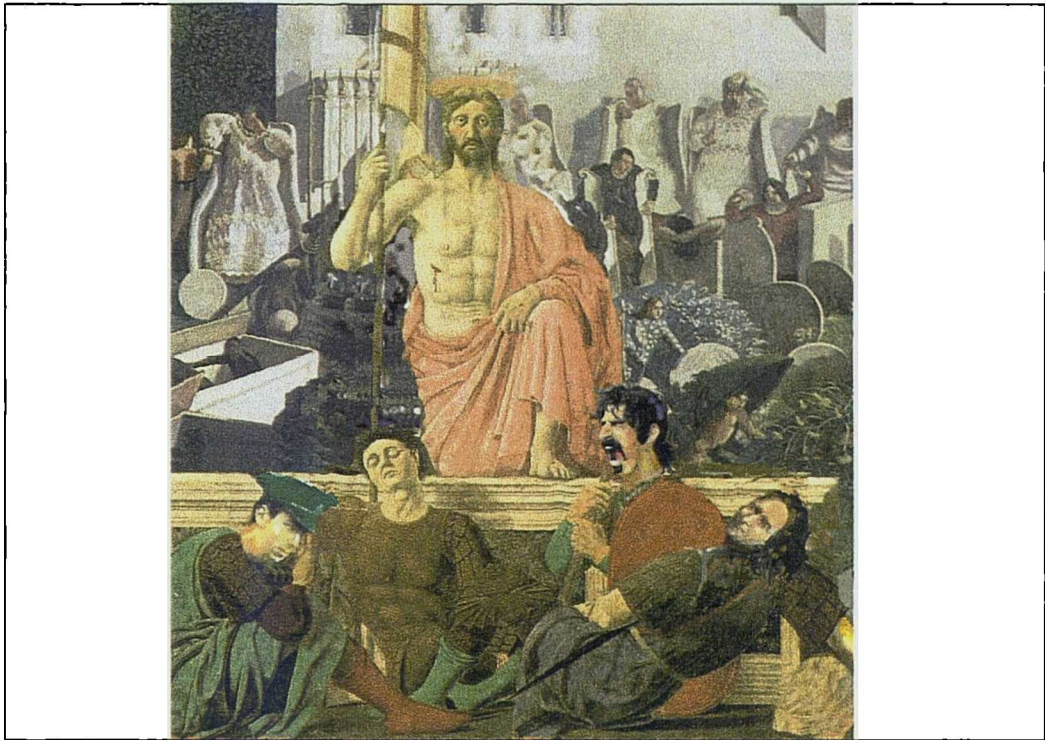
'Adoration' of women, sunflowers, dogs, old men and worship of the discarded, in general, is entirely different to the 'enjoyment' of the same. To distinguish between the two clarifies Spencer's attitude to life, his work and his relationships with others. Spencer himself reported, in detail, how his own 'resurrection' occurred one night in Cookham Churchyard. The denial of the body is not far removed from Pauline Christian thought: that one should be 'dead' to the world in order to 'live in Christ' - for if we are incapable of change we are denied resurrection.

The snoozing 'Stanley' is the signature for this work - he is between the pages of a book which he says is where he loves to be. The naked 'Stanley', in a pose reminiscent of the resurrected Christ, surveys this new world of his own creation.



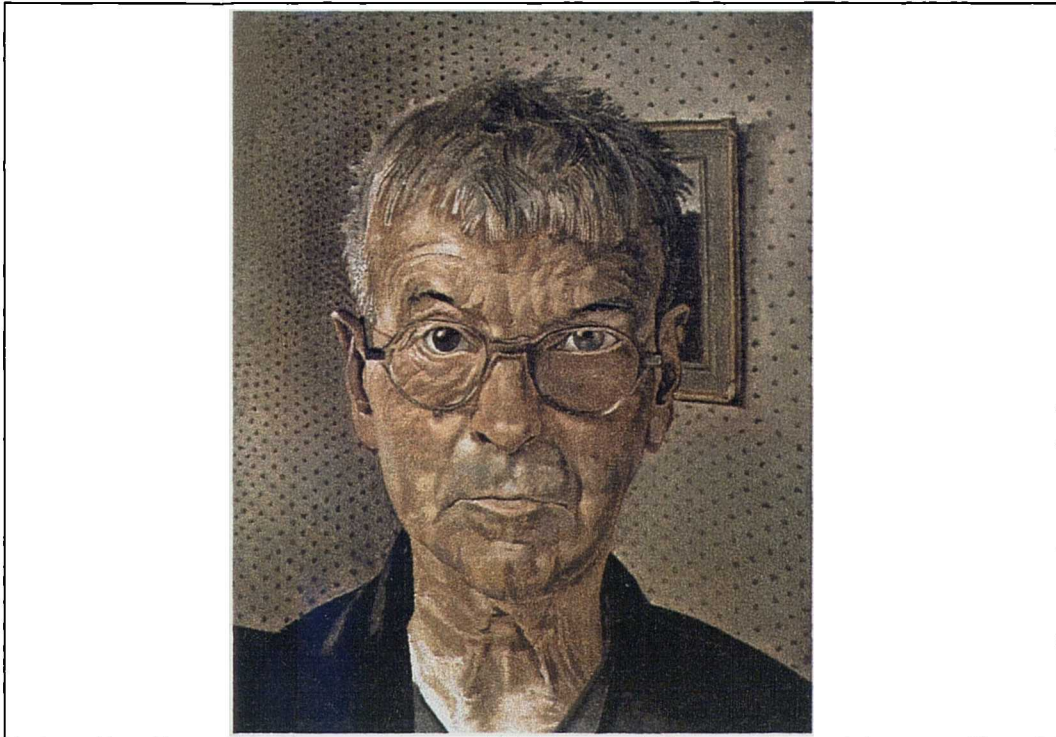
Despite its theatricality, when we turn again to Piero's *Resurrection of Christ* to look to the unconscious soldiers it is important to underline the most obvious fact, that *they do not know* that Christ is there any more than we do. We cannot 'judge' them irresponsible as their superiors might but we can 'judge' them as part of an aesthetic reaction to the fresco. Perhaps their posture suggests something about them, even though in sleep, they are not quite 'themselves'. We may now perceive that disposing with 'self' is a pre-requisite for sleep.

Much as Sansepolcro was for Piero della Francesca, or Joe's Garage was for Frank Zappa, Cookham became an invention, an ethical / social / political and physical state within the imagination. The work of art is therefore re-formed into a well-honed receptacle for everything, yet *it is not real*. Neither is it identical with its own existence, being placed somewhere between the canvas and the imagination, between the subject and the spectator. It inhabits this world as a twilight-meaning difficult to grasp - even for the artist himself, and is a part of a no-mans-land of a millions other images and lost sounds created throughout eternity.



I hope that I have succeeded in bringing Frank Zappa and Piero della Francesca to a 'Cookham' of the imagination as defined by Spencer and by means of an intuitive reading taken within the elements of *fantasia* as part of the everlasting *ideal eternal history* as described by Vico.

This work does not deny the existence of time, but questions the human aspiration to understand it as a human construct. This work questions perception and identifies it as a conditioned response. This work allows that the human predicament requires that the artist should attempt to contextualise and re-present his vision in order to demarcate future possibilities of what reality may become. This work sees that hopes for redemption in this life form an eternal dream bound to be repeated again and again by 'visionaries' of every generation.



Art as a 'Redemptive' media

Why do people paint?

Is art's purpose constant despite the passage of time?

What part does imagery play in cultural definition?

Is music the best?

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