

Transition between Life and Afterlife: Analyzing *The Triumph of Death* in the Camposanto of Pisa

Lorenzo Carletti, *CNR Pisa*

Francesca Polacci, *Università di Siena*

ABSTRACT

What is more vivid and earthly than death? A dead body does not involve problems of representation of transcendence. If death is meant not as an ending point but as a transition between life and afterlife, the theoretical problem is more complex. *The Triumph of Death* (1336–41), frescoed by Buffalmacco inside the Camposanto of Pisa, shows a personification of Death, half human and half devil, that connects two different semantic fields: /life/ and /nondeath/. Its terrible figure acts as an agent of transformation from the earthly life to the new life, hellish or heavenly. Several scrolls, mostly along the frame, underline this interpretation: words and images establish a new level of communication, acting as a guide to the beholder to look inside himself and get ready for the consequences of dying.

What is more vivid and earthly than death?¹ It is very easy to represent death as the landing place of a process, as we can see in many works of art of the Western world. One thinks of the *Death of Marat* painted by Jacques-Louis David in 1793 (fig. 1), where the wan body of the revolutionary man, with a visible wound on his chest, lies in his bathtub just after his murder. The bloody dagger, abandoned by the killer, Charlotte Cor-

This article is a result of a common research undertaken by the two authors in their respective fields of study. Lorenzo Carletti wrote “The Workyard of the Graveyard,” “The Vanishing of Earthly Times and the Eternal Consistence of Heavenly Life,” and “What Is Written Here?”; Francesca Polacci wrote “Introduction,” “The Other Narration of the ‘Figures of Framing,’” and “The Consequences of Death.”

1. The history of human attitudes toward death has been extensively investigated by Ariès (1977, 1983). For an anthropological point of view, see de Martino (1958), Thomas (1975), and Di Nola (1995). For a philosophical and sociological approach, see Morin (1970), Baudrillard (1976), Whaley (1981), and Elias (1982).

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Figure 1. Jacques-Louis David, *Death of Marat*, 1793, oil on canvas, Musées Royaux des Beaux-Arts, Brussels. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Death_of_Marat_by_David.jpg.

day, lies near the leaning arm of Marat. This is one of the most popular representations of a dead body, which is directly linked with the *Entombment of Christ* by Caravaggio (1602–3) for the position of the arm in the foreground (fig. 2). David introduces the quotation from Caravaggio to sublimate his political hero into an “alter Christus,” a new unreligious martyr. Nevertheless,



Figure 2. Michelangelo Merisi, called Caravaggio, *Entombment of Christ*, 1602–3, oil on canvas, Pinacoteca Vaticana, Rome. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Caravaggio_-_La_Deposizione_di_Cristo.jpg.

both artists painted the body of the two protagonists—Jean-Paul Marat and Jesus Christ—as seen soon after death.

We can see corpses in various works of art of different ages and different subjects, religious or not: battles, wars, depositions, entombments, Pietà, slaughters of the innocents, and many others. A dead body itself does not involve problems of representation of transcendence. If, however, death is meant not as an ending point but as a transformation, a transition between life and afterlife, the theoretical problem is more complex. The passing away of a human body clearly shows signs of death as a process: but the visual arts—except cinema—cannot represent the exact moment of expiring; they can only get very close to it.² This is a specific case of a general problem concerning the representation of time in “planar semiotics.”³

Literary art and visual art work in different ways, as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing recognized studying the *Laocoön* (1766): the narration of the former can follow the story in its process, while visual art must have a simultaneous narration, because its planar medium is, in some way, a limit to expression. Being a still medium, painting concerns spatial but not temporal dimensions; for instance, to correlate events happening in different times, the categories “before” and “after” are inferred by the beholder thanks to the logical relations between the places where static signs are arranged by the painter. But the artist who wants to represent a single action knows that it contains different phases, which can be schematized as “beginning,” “climax,” and “the end.” Climax is the moment of maximum tension—an instant infinitely short—and, concentrating on it, the artist summarizes the two extremities of the action, “before” and “after” (Calabrese 2006c). It is an excellent expedient to introduce the passing of time in the still medium of painting (Corrain 1987).

Even photography has the same semiotic problem. The famous picture *Loyalist Militiaman at the Moment of Death* (1936) by Robert Capa shows the effect of shooting on the body of an anarchist during the Spanish Civil War.⁴ Looking at this work in 1954, Louis Aragon admired the incredible ability of his friend “to capture *forever*, thanking his camera, the thin line between life and death” (Whelan 2001). Because of the exceptional nature of this picture, it

2. From a philosophical point of view, Jankélévitch (1966, 197–334) investigated the extreme difficulty of defining the exact moment of dying.

3. Planar semiotics indicates the field of visual semiotics that has a bidimensional signifier: on the plane of expression, it identifies visual categories correlated with categories of the plane of content (Greimas 1984). This essay will refer primarily to Greimasian semiotics.

4. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Falling_Soldier.

was supposed not to be a live shot but the result of a *mise-en-scène* sought after by the Hungarian photographer. Nowadays, after long research in local archives and interviews with veterans this interpretation has been demolished, and it has been confirmed that this picture was taken exactly in the instant of shooting.⁵ The militiaman did not pose for this photograph, and Capa came incredibly close to the point of no return, the climax of the action.

Getting back to painting, the iconography of Crucifixion is one of the most vivid examples of the challenge of representing the infinitely short instant of passing away. In different ages artists have tried to approach the final act (the climax), emphasizing some important signs of suffering, such as tension, contortion of the body, and pale skin tone (Calabrese 2006b), characteristics, among others, of the famous Grünewald *Crucifixion* (fig. 3). Indeed, the representation of the moment of death is a problem of passions, “because it involves a certain *aspectuality* of suffering (*inchoateness* of agony, *punctuality* of the act of dying, *durativeness* of being dead)” (Calabrese 2006a, 101). These linguistic categories, adopted by generative semiotics for the visual arts, could be used to refine the three phases of an action (“beginning,” “climax,” and “the end”).⁶ While the above-mentioned *Entombment of Christ* by Caravaggio and the *Death of Marat* by David concern the last phase—the *durativeness* of being dead—many Crucifixions focused on the *punctuality* of the act of dying. In general, this iconography stimulates the viewer to think about the suffering of Christ as a man, but also of his forthcoming resurrection.

Trying to capture the exact moment of expiring means that death is conceived of as the crucial point of transformation from life to afterlife. And in most Crucifixions this process is supposed to be seen in the body of the actor (the suffering Christ).⁷

5. The anarchist Federico Borrell Garcia, called “Taino,” was killed on September 5, 1936, during the battle of Cerro Muriano, near Cordoba (Dondero 2006, 2013).

6. “The term *aspectualization* refers to the process whereby the implied presence of an observer is established in the discourse. It involves the spatial, temporal and actorial coordinates set up by the utterance which characterize and position the observation. In spatial terms, for example, reference to objects placed on the left or on the right is only meaningful in relation to an implied point of observation. Temporal *aspectualization* makes itself felt in the stopping and starting of enunciative (or discursive) events; or in the duration of a process on the syntagmatic axis or the punctuality (lack of duration) of a process on the paradigmatic axis of the discourse” (“*Aspectualization ad vocem*,” in Greimas and Courtés 1979, 21–22).

7. “In semiotic analysis, actor has replaced the traditional terms of ‘character’ or ‘protagonist. . . . A more precise definition may be established by viewing the actor as the point of convergence and investment of both the syntactic and semantic components. . . . It should be further noted that the actor is not only the point of investment of these roles, but also of their transformations, since discourse consists essentially of the interplay of successive acquisition and loss of values” (“*Actor ad vocem*,” in Greimas and Courtés 1979, 7–8). This definition is also valid for visual semiotics.

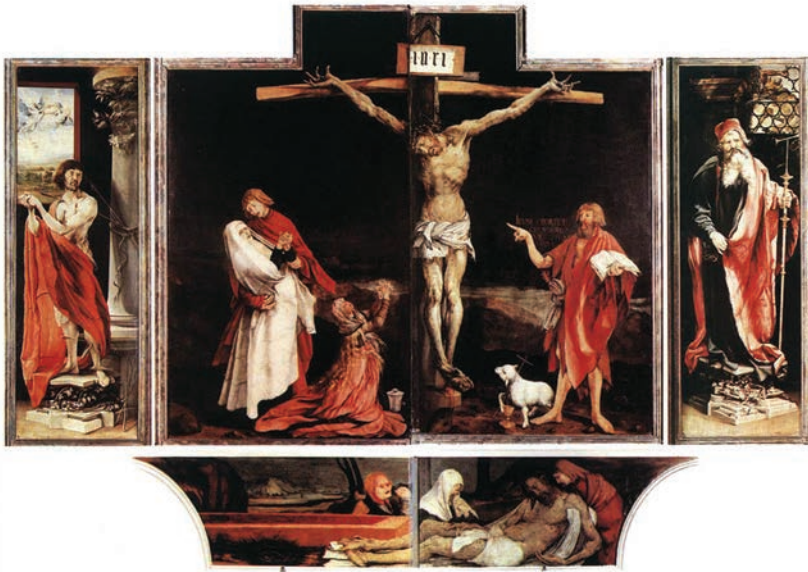


Figure 3. Matthias Grünewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece: The Crucifixion and Lamentation*, ca. 1510–15, oil on panel, Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar, France. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Mathis_Gothart_Gr%C3%BCnewald_019.jpg.

These theoretical aspects are fundamental to the analysis of the medieval representation of death—expressly its personification—which, however, is very different from the above-mentioned iconographies. We are talking about the *Triumph of Death* (fig. 4) frescoed by Buonamico Buffalmacco in Pisa, probably between 1336 and 1341. Traditionally, the unusual presence of the evil figure, fluttering with its large scythe under groups of people, dead and alive, was supposed to be the main subject of the painting; so it was wrongly interpreted as a depiction of the terrible plague of 1348, and its dating has only recently been corrected.⁸ The aim of this article is to demonstrate that the real subject of this work of art is the representation of a nonrepresentable transcendence, the passage from life to afterlife: the meaning of Death does not lie properly in its feature but in its function, because it acts as an agent of transformation between two realms.⁹ Also, the *Crucifixion* leads to the hereafter, but it concerns

8. Following Vasari (1568), the *Triumph of Death* was traditionally attributed to Agnolo Gaddi and dated around 1348, just after the terrible plague that inspired Boccaccio's *Decameron*. On stylistic grounds, Bellosi was the first to indicate Buonamico Buffalmacco as the author of the fresco in 1336–41 (Bellosi 1974; Caleca 1979, 1996; Testi Cristiani 1993).

9. Referring to the Greimasian theory, Death is interpreted as an “actant” that realizes a narrative transformation between two realms: life and afterlife (see “Narrativity” and “Transformation ad vocem,” in Greimas



Figure 4. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Triumph of Death*, 1336–41, fresco, Camposanto monumentale, Pisa. Reproduced from Supino (1894, 7).

the life of the Son of God as an exemplum for everyone. In the Buffalmacco fresco, on the other hand, the transition acts from the life of humankind to its future salvation or damnation. In both cases death is meant as a transformation, but while the *Crucifixion* shows it in the climax of the suffering Christ, Buffalmacco shows it in a very complex arrangement of spaces and times.

The Workyard of the Graveyard

In order to understand the *Triumph of Death* it is necessary to be reminded of its original destination: the Camposanto of Pisa, the monumental cemetery built in the Piazza del Duomo after the Cathedral, the Baptistery, and the Leaning Tower (Baracchini and Castelnovo 1996). It was commissioned by the archbishop Federico Visconti and was begun in 1277 by the architect Giovanni di Simone. It is a roofed-over building, because it was conceived of not just as the burial place of important people but also as the storage for Roman sarcophagi gathered around the cathedral in the early Middle Ages (Carli and Arias 1937; Settis 1984). The Camposanto has a rectangular shape with a central courtyard and four galleries all around. As we can see from the map (fig. 5), along the inside walls of the galleries different artists realized the largest cycle of frescoes of the time: it is a well-structured program, composed of different subjects coming from the Old and the New Testaments, the lives of local saints, and two interesting “exceptions.”

and Courtés 1979, 247–50, 399–402). An “actant” is “someone or something who or which accomplishes or undergoes an act. It may be a person, anthropomorphic or zoomorphic agent, a thing or an abstract entity. Situated on the level of narrative syntax, the term describes a narrative function such as that of subject or object” (“Actant ad vocem,” in Greimas and Courtés 1979, 3–4).

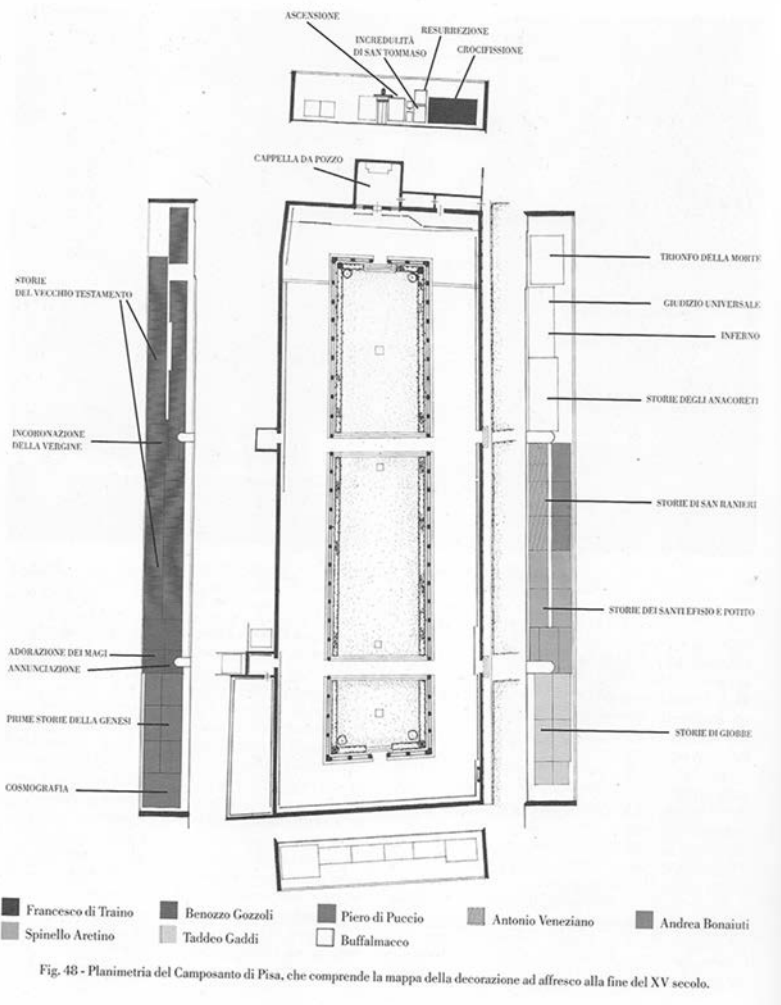


Figure 5. Map of the Camposanto of Pisa, realized by Vincenzo Letta and Lorenzo Carletti; taken from *Pisa nei secoli 2* (Pisa: Edizioni ETS, 2003), 200. Used with permission of the publisher.

The pictorial decoration of the Camposanto started with the local painter Francesco Traini (Caleca 1986). Around 1330 he was asked to fresco the great *Crucifixion* (fig. 6) behind the altar, where religious functions were celebrated at the beginning of the fourteenth century.¹⁰ Inside this building Traini did not

10. The altar is no longer preserved. Since 1299 several documents have attested the construction of the roof of the church of Holy Trinity inside the Camposanto ("copertura ecclesie Sancte Trinitatis de Camposanto"), where later religious functions are recorded (Caleca 1996, 16). In relation to these documents, some scholars

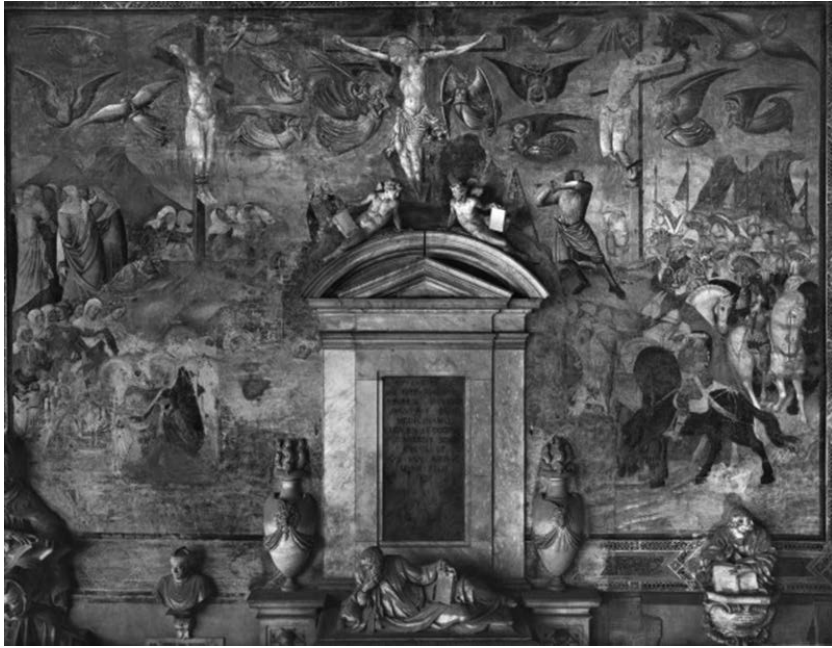


Figure 6. Francesco Traini, *Crucifixion*, ca. 1330, fresco, Camposanto monumentale, Pisa. Reproduced from Supino (1928, 110).

execute more than this fresco. In fact, the Florentine Buffalmacco, a friend of Giovanni Boccaccio and Franco Sacchetti and protagonist of some of their tales,¹¹ was probably invited to realize three stories of the life of Christ after death on the left side of Traini's painting: *Resurrection*, *Incredulity of Saint Thomas*, and *Ascension of Christ* (fig. 7). On the other side of the *Crucifixion*, on the southern gallery, Buffalmacco painted the most famous and largest cycle of frescoes of the Camposanto: the *Triumph of Death*, the *Last Judgment* (fig. 8), and the *Thebais* (fig. 9), showing several episodes from the lives of the Holy Fathers in the desert. The *Triumph of Death* and the *Thebais* are the iconographic "exceptions" of the whole program; in fact, these stories are taken neither from the Old and the New Testaments nor from the lives of saints.

Many other painters followed, and the main decoration ended with Benozzo Gozzoli, who worked in Pisa for almost twenty years in the second half of the

think that the Camposanto was first a burial church and only during the fourteenth century became a monumental cemetery (Ronzani 2005).

11. Giovanni Boccaccio features Buonamico, along with his friends and fellow painter Calandrino, in several of his tales (Day 8, tales 3, 6, 9; Day 9, tales 3, 5).



Figure 7. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Resurrection, Incredulity of Saint Thomas, Ascension of Christ*, 1336–41, fresco, Camposanto monumentale, Pisa. Reproduced from Supino (1928, 110–11).

fifteenth century.¹² The high humidity of the place and the exhalations coming from the graves seriously damaged all the frescoes inside the Camposanto, which has been continuously restored and partially altered. Since the beginning, the graveyard has been a never-ending workyard.

Between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the Camposanto became a favorite place of travelers, and we have a large number of descriptions in literature and the figurative arts.¹³ In 1812 the scholar Carlo Lasinio (1759–1855) etched all the frescoes in forty plates,¹⁴ intending to record their status, but

12. Soon after Buffalmacco, Taddeo Gaddi painted six *Stories of Job* (1341–42) on the opposite side of the southern gallery, and then Andrea Bonaiuti and Antonio Veneziano frescoed six *Stories of Ranieri*, the patron saint of Pisa (1377–84), and Spinello Aretino completed the decoration of that wall with six *Stories of the Local Saints Efsio and Potito* (1390–91). Piero di Puccio started to paint the northern gallery, representing seven *Stories from the Book of Genesis* (1389–91), and Benozzo Gozzoli frescoed many other stories from the Old Testament between 1468 and 1485.

13. One of the most ancient description of the frescoes is a poem entitled *Le mirabili et inaldite bellezze e adornamenti del Camposanto di Pisa*, written by Michelagnolo di Cristofano da Volterra in 1488 (Supino 1896). For the literary and iconographic fortune of the Piazza del Duomo of Pisa during the ages, see http://piazza.opapisa.it/index_swf.asp?Mod=client&Lang=ENG.

14. There are forty etchings by Carlo Lasinio, while twenty years later his son Giovanni Paolo published forty-six colored etchings (C. Lasinio 1812; G. P. Lasinio 1832). Lasinio was appointed *conservatore* of the

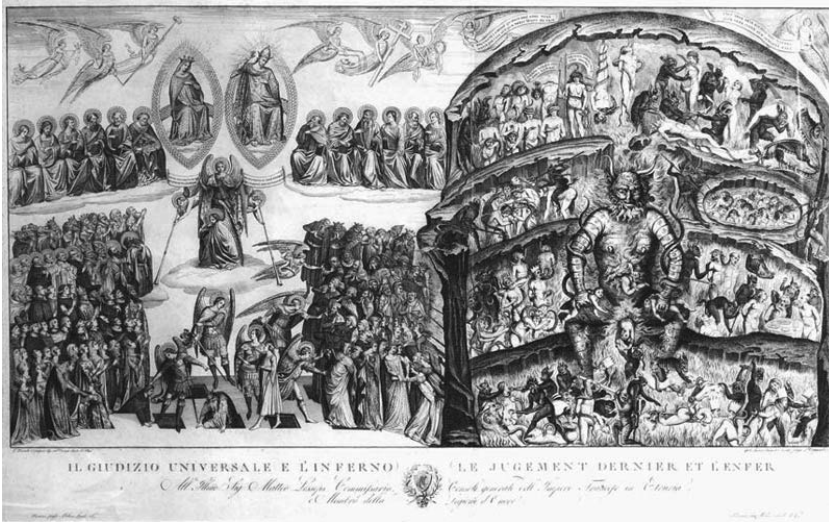


Figure 8. Carlo Lasinio, *Last Judgment by Buonamico Buffalmacco in the Camposanto*, 1812, engraving. Reproduced from Lasinio (1812, unpaginated).

obviously giving his own interpretation to these works of arts. Lasinio drew every single story, avoiding reproducing the frames painted around each one of them.

Lasinio's books of etchings were published in many languages, and travelers doing the Grand Tour arrived in larger numbers year after year, mostly to see the *Triumph of Death*, described by the Baedekers. At the end of the nineteenth century, a detailed photographic campaign of every story, illustrating also the painted frames, was realized with the same conservative purpose of the engravings. This is a fundamental documentation left to us, because on July 27, 1944, during the Second World War, a terrible fire destroyed the roof of the building, ruining many sarcophagi and most of the frescoes, some of which soon collapsed. These old pictures became the only sources available for restoring the image of the paintings and part of the architecture.

After the war, but still in a situation of emergency, the restorers first—because of its celebrity—detached the *Triumph of Death* from the wall, and afterward the *Last Judgment* and the *Thebais*, bringing them to their laboratories (Baracchini 1996). They forgot the painted frames, while the other frescoes were detached in the following years; and in the 1960s a special exhibition room

historical building in 1807; in this role he gathered together in its galleries the most important paintings and sculptures collected from the churches of the town, creating a magnificent open-air museum (Baracchini 1993).



Figure 9. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Thebais*, 1336–41, fresco, Camposanto monumentale, Pisa. Reproduced from Morpurgo (1899, 70).

was built next to the Camposanto in order to display these stories by Buffalmacco. Recently, a new restoration is bringing the frescoes back to their original place within the external galleries, as will also happen in the near future to the Buffalmacco cycle.¹⁵

The Vanishing of Earthly Times and the Eternal Consistence of Heavenly Life

Entering the Camposanto before July 27, 1944, we would have found the wide painted surface of the *Thebais* on our right hand (fig. 5). Walking along the gallery, seeing the *Crucifixion* in front of us, we would have reached first of all the *Hell with the Last Judgment*, and then the *Triumph of Death*. Apart from the *Crucifixion*, the narrow gallery did not allow a frontal general view of all the frescoes, and the viewer had to concentrate only on single episodes (Caleca 1996).

This cycle was conceived by Buffalmacco to be seen in this way because he decided to use all the space available, without dividing it in two stories as he did on the eastern gallery for the *Resurrection* and the *Incredulity of Saint*

15. The restoration is bringing back fragments of Buffalmacco's painted frames found in storage. Every phase of the restoration is documented by <http://www.opapisa.it/it/attivita/cantieri-e-restauri/affreschi-del-camposanto.html>.

Thomas. This interesting morphological choice invites us to examine the relation between the movement of the beholder and the architectural space of the gallery in connection with the medieval conception of time and space. Buffalmacco arranged the stories of Christ after death in order to let the beholder have a complete overview in spite of the narrowness of the gallery. But why did he not make the same choice for the cycle of the *Triumph of Death*?

Probably one of the answers is Buffalmacco's unusual subjects. The audience of that time was used to recognize the *Resurrection*, for example, as a singular scene with a specific iconography, isolated from the other episodes of the New Testament. The same audience was not equally familiar with the advent of death and its consequences, neither with the episodes of the Holy Fathers in the desert. At this point the movement of the beholder becomes crucial, because this part of the southern gallery was a sort of nave with the main altar underneath the *Crucifixion*. Several processions of Flagellants' brotherhoods are documented in the first half of the fourteenth century, and the faithful walked along the nave from the *Thebais* to the presbytery, thus having a partial view of singular episodes.¹⁶

The peculiar architectural space and its religious function suggested to Buffalmacco to set several stories in different places, where various groups of people play a single act of the whole drama. This arrangement reproduces the traditional setting of medieval theater called *loci deputati* (designated places) where single episodes of the story were staged (Molinari 1961; Mervyn 1983; Bernardi 1991). During Holy Week, for instance, a procession passed through the town, every square became the stage for a particular episode of the Passion, and the spectator could move from one place to another following a discontinuous temporal line; we can find visual translations of this theatrical conception in several paintings, as well as in later Northern European works such as *The Passion of Christ* by Memling (fig. 10).

In the medieval conception, space and time are phenomenal categories in strict correspondence with transcendence (Schlosser 1923). Any episode of the *Triumph of Death* works as an *exemplum* (moral example), a warning to the faithful to look within and to think about our fleeting nature: this is the general theme that brings all the episodes together, although they do not necessarily have a narrative consequence. Some of the episodes, instead, are connected with other frescoes that Buffalmacco realized in the southern gallery

16. The presbytery was at the bottom of the *Crucifixion* and to the left side of the *Triumph of Death*. One of the documents describes in detail a procession that occurred in 1343 (Caleca 1996, 24–25).



Figure 10. Hans Memling, *Scenes from the Passion of Christ*, 1470–71, oil on panel, Galleria Sabauda, Turin. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Hans_Memling_Passione.jpg.

(*Last Judgment, Hell, and Thebais*), summarizing or anticipating their iconographies.

Present time echoes metaphysical time; and the *Triumph of Death* represents both, arranging the external world in the lower level and the transcendent world in the higher level. This is very clear from looking at the historical photograph, because it is the only way to get a general overview, otherwise impossible. In fact, the faithful, just as the modern visitor, could only get a view of groups of characters or “squares,” starting from the so-called *Three Dead and Three Living* (fig. 11), on the very left side of the *Triumph*. Here is depicted the *durativeness* of death: a group of twelve young noblemen, riding horses during a hawking expedition, meet three corpses in different stages of decomposition.¹⁷ The corpses lie in superimposed coffins showing the ravages of time: the first corpse, most recently dead, shows a fresh-skin face and is smartly dressed with an elegant hat and footwear; the second wears a crown, being probably a king, and its appearance looks very deteriorated; the third is

17. Starting from the thirteenth century, *The Encounter between the Three Dead and the Three Living* becomes a quite successful theme in literature and art, especially in Italy and France (Mâle [1905] 1969, 355–58; Huizinga [1919] 1996, 156–72). A famous dispute or *Contrasto* between a living and a dead man was written by Jacopone da Todi (ca. 1236–1306) in the vulgar tongue (D’Ancona 1884, 43; Vovelle 1983, 113–15). The theme of the Encounter between the Three Dead and the Three Living survives into the Renaissance (Tenenti 1957).



Figure 11. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *The Three Dead and Three Living*, detail from the *Triumph of Death*.

already a skeleton and lies very close to the beholder, turning the gaze toward him.

In the central scene a group of beggars (fig. 12) invokes the personification of Death, hanging in the air not so far from them. They turn their back on the preceding scene (*Three Dead and Three Living*) and orient their gestures, gazes, and a long scroll to the right side,¹⁸ with the following rhymes in early Italian: “Because prosperity has left us / Death, cure for every pain, / Come and give us the last supper!”¹⁹ This part of the fresco acts as a turning point, and it is marked also by a rocky landscape (fig. 13). At the foot of the triangular cliff of the mountain various corpses are amassed. They are not anonymous, because we can recognize their genders and social status: men and women, a doctor, a

18. Vasari does not appreciate the choice of inserting writings inside the painting, an invention he attributed to Buffalmacco for the cycle that he had previously realized in Pisa in the church of San Paolo a Ripa d’Arno (Vasari 1568, 1:183).

19. “Poi che prosperitate ci à lasciati / O Morte, medicina d’ogni pena, / Dè vienci a dare ormai l’ultima cena!” (Morpurgo 1899, 61). This inscription often appears with minimal variations in two other later Tuscan Triumphs of Death: in the church of San Francesco in Lucignano (Arezzo) the scroll contains the following verses: “Poi che prosperità / cia lasciati omorte / medicina aogni pena venci / adare omai l’ultima cena.” In the fragmentary fresco in the church of Santa Croce in Florence and attributed to Orcagna, we can read: “Da che prosperitate . . . / O morte medicina . . . / . . . ci adare omai l’ultima.”



Figure 12. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *The Beggars*, detail from the *Triumph of Death*

monk, a merchant, and a bishop, among others.²⁰ Some of their souls, represented in the shape of a baby, are drawn from their mouths by two devils and one angel, who fly right underneath the personification of death.

On the very right side of the fresco, seven young women and three men (a strange similarity with the *Decameron* brigade) enjoy themselves in a delightful garden of orange trees;²¹ an elegant tapestry of flowers is placed at their feet. They wear fashionable clothing; they talk to each other and play music, while the horrible figure of Death arrives on their left side with an unmerciful scythe. This is a complex figure, half human and half devil, not a skeleton: she looks like an old woman with long white hair, bat wings on her back, and claws on both feet and hands.²² We are not allowed to know whom she is going to cut down among the group of young people. Two cupids fly over their heads

20. In poetry, a famous *Triumph of Death* by Francesco Petrarca (1304–74) describes the vanity of earthly glory: “Ivi eran quei che fur detti felici, / pontefici, regnanti, imperadori; / or sono ignudi, miseri e mendici. / U’ sono or le ricchezze? u’ son gli onori / e le gemme e gli scettri e le corone / e le mitre e i purpurei colori?” (Petrarca 1958, 506–11).

21. This coincidence probably testifies that the Buffalmacco painting inspired the Boccaccio masterpiece (Battaglia Ricci 1987).

22. During the Middle Ages in art and literature the personification of Death embodies a common fear (Vovelle 1983, 108). It recurs as a knight (cavalier) running upon heaps of corpses, or as an old woman with bat wings; since the beginning of the fifteenth century, it appears as a skeleton with a scythe or a bow and arrows (Huizinga [1919] 1996, 164; Ariès 1974, 1975, 1983).



Figure 13. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Death*, detail from the *Triumph of Death*

carrying a torch of love upside down, and this is a certain presage of misfortune. The whole brigade is unaware and happy; none is suffering at all, because the scythe is still waving in the air: it is near but has yet not arrived. Here is represented not the *punctuality* of the act of dying—as, for example, in most Crucifixions—but the *inchoateness* of the act of cutting down, which the old woman is just about to do.

The horrible lady of Death creates a sort of corridor between the lower and the higher level of the fresco, and she acts as a bridge between them. In this space, delimited by the mountain cliff and the garden with the young brigade, devils are hunting down souls, and some of them climb up again with their prey: they bring them to the burning mountain on the left side. This is a visual synecdoche for Hell, painted in the following scene.²³ In fact, on the upper level

23. On the translation of the figures of speech in visual arts, see Groupe μ (1992).

of the corridor angels and devils fight against each other, trying to take possession of every single soul; and sinuous angels, above the orange trees, are protecting their saved souls moving toward the right margin of the fresco. Thinking that the following story is the *Last Judgment*, this dispute of souls is a *prolepsis* (flash forward) or another way to represent a similar theological concept (Le Goff and Baschet 1991; Le Goff 2003; Schmitt 2011).²⁴

Getting back to the other side of the fresco, we find a peculiar extension of the earthly world: above the three coffins, along the path that leads up, we find some anchorites in different daytime moments (praying, meditating, tending to animals). This is another *prolepsis* of the *Thebais*, the last story of this Buffalmacco cycle. The anchorite in the foreground—traditionally misunderstood as San Macario²⁵—holds a long scroll with the following rhymes, once again in the vernacular: “If your mind is wide open / And you look hard here / Your vainglory will be defeated / And you’ll see the pride dead / And you will find the same end! / Now observe the law that is written here.”²⁶

What Is Written Here?

The *Triumph of Death* is a complex combination of images and words (in early Italian and in Latin). Scholars think that this composite system was meant to build mental images able to influence and shape the faculties of the soul, re-elaborating an Augustinian conceptual scheme (Bolzoni 1996).²⁷ For this reason, the theoretical plan of the fresco was attributed primarily to the Dominican theologian Cavalca (1270–1342), the author of important sermons in the vernacular (Bolzoni 1988, 1996; Frugoni 1988).²⁸ Buffalmacco, together with Cavalca and the other Dominicans who planned the cycle, addressed a differentiated audience composed of three categories: illiterates, learned men who could read early Italian, and those who could also read Latin (Bolzoni 1996).

24. It is interesting to note that later on, at the end of the fifteenth century, some prints called *artes moriendi* (the arts of dying) appear. They show a moribund person surrounded by relatives and friends, but also by supernatural beings seen only by the protagonist: usually, the Holy Trinity appears on one side—sometimes together with the Virgin and some angels—confronted on the other side by Satan and a multitude of devils. It can be considered a translation of the cosmic space of the Last Judgment to a private space (Ariès 1974; 1983, 153–62).

25. Vasari first identified this anchorite as San Macario, and on his authority scholars accepted this wrong interpretation. The misunderstanding was first recognized by Frugoni (1988, 1564).

26. “Se vostra mente serrà bene accorta / Tenendo qui la vostra vista fitta / La vanagloria ci sarà sconfitta / Et la superbia vederete morta. / Et voi serrete ancor di questa sorta! / Or osservate la legge che v’è scripta” (Morpurgo 1899, 59).

27. See also Yates (1966) and Bolzoni (2001).

28. The Pisan Domenico Cavalca, among others, translated into the vernacular the Acts of the Apostles, Gregory’s *Dialogues*, and the *Vitae patrum* (Cavalca 1992, 2010). For a general overview of his contribution to fourteenth-century theology, see Corbari (2013).

That being said, it is interesting to examine the montage of words and images from a semiotic point of view.²⁹ It is well known that language has a different status compared to visual images, and in this respect these two semiotic systems interact in a very prolific way. So we must investigate the relation between painting and writing, with particular attention to both levels of writing: its visual aspect or the form of the sign (signifier) and its content (signified).³⁰

Unlike the above-mentioned painted scrolls, held by characters in some episodes of the fresco (the anchorite and the beggars), a long inscription is shown by two angels, looking like cupids floating in the air. They are “inside” the painting, but they are not part of any episode of the fresco. Also, they are inserted in a very significant place, in the corridor where Death and her companions descend to the corpses and rise up with the damned souls.

If we look at the anchorite, his long scroll has an important function inside the painting, not only for the inscription that it bears: the diagonal scroll creates a kind of extension of the footpath, but it also plays an active role in the visual narration, connecting two different *loci*; and the direction of writing from left to right marks the same aspect. It is a signal for the noblemen on their elegant horses, but at the same time it attracts the curiosity of the beholder who tries to read the verses; whoever can decipher the inscriptions and understand their content is encouraged to think about the transience of earthly things.

Similarly, the scroll held by the beggars follows the direction of their gestures toward Death, looking like an extension of their bodies and hands. Moreover, the scroll works as a sort of speech bubble or thought bubble, in which they beg Death to end their pain. The shape and the position of the scroll—and again the direction of writing, slightly oblique from left to right—embody the invocation “Because prosperity has left us.” In this case the signifier mirrors the signified—expressly it conveys the deepest level of the signified.³¹

29. Starting from the original idea of S. M. Ājzenštejn (Montani 1981, 2004), Careri (1990, 2007) developed the conception of montage in traditional visual arts (painting and sculpture), analyzing the interaction of different elements inside the works of art through this theoretical instrument.

30. About both sides of the linguistic sign, see de Saussure (1916). For the linguistic interpretation of the graphic sign, see Pulgram (1951, 1965). For the anthropological consideration of the graphic value of language, see Cardona (1981) and Ong (1982). For the visual value of literary compositions as *carmina figurata* (visual poetry), see Pozzi (1981). On the relation between words and images in semiotic terms, see Schapiro (1996).

31. Starting from comparative studies on different cultures, Jakobson (1970) focused on the connection between the gestural category of /directionality/ (/vertical/ vs. /horizontal/) and the semantic category of /affirmativeness/ (/affirmation/ vs. /negation/): /yes/ and /no/ become homologous, respectively, with /verticality/ and /horizontality/, creating effects of motivation inside that specific system. Greimas and Courtés (1979) used this proposal to formulate the concept of “semi-symbolic,” later examined in depth in the visual arts (Floch 1984, 1986; Greimas 1984; Calabrese 1999).

While these inscriptions speak to the beholder, they first of all give voice to the anchorite and the beggars; the central scroll held by the cupids is completely released from narration. Its rhymes in the vernacular exclusively talk to the viewer, obviously with regard to Death: “Shields of knowledge and richness / Nobility and also gentleness / They are not able to parry her blows. / Oh, is it possible that you don’t find / Any argument against her, reader? / Now your intellect doesn’t have to be off / You must be always set, so / She will not arrive in your mortal sin.”³² These words offer an interpretation of the whole fresco realized by Buffalmacco. Furthermore, from a visual point of view, this scroll is very different from the others and appears to function like a book cover or, better, an epigraph. This aspect is also marked by the explicit appeal to the reader, which can also be found in other inscriptions.³³

The historical pictures show all around the *Triumph of Death* several figures with scrolls peeping out from the frame.³⁴ These figures are inserted in a framed rhombus on each horizontal side: nine angels on the lower margin and seven figures on the higher margin; but at this level we can only recognize a skeleton and three men, two of them probably sacred characters. Unfortunately, as we have already said, after the fire of 1944 the fresco was detached from the wall without its frame, and today only small fragments of it remain. These writings vanished at a very early stage because they were exposed to open air, but in 1899 the philologist Morpurgo tried to reconstitute them, thanks to a fifteenth-century transcription.³⁵ Morpurgo also compared the Renaissance text with the faint traces still readable on the wall of the Camposanto.

On this basis, scholars have recently reconstructed the verses and their arrangement inside the scrolls of both frames (Frugoni 1988; Bolzoni 1996). Until now we generally thought that the inscriptions on the higher margin were all in Latin, while the ones in the lower margin were all in the vernacular.

32. “Schermo di sapere o de ricchezza / Di nobiltà et ancor di gentilezza / Vaglian niente a’ colpi di costei. / Dè, che non trovi dumque contra lei, / O tu lector, niuno argomento? / Or non haver il tuo intellecto spento / Di starci sempre [si] apparecchiato / Che non ti giunga nel mortal peccato” (Morpurgo 1899, 54–55). At the time of Vasari this inscription was hardly readable (Vasari 1568, 1:183–84).

33. Frugoni (1988, 1574) underlines the use of the terms “reader” and “book” in several inscriptions of this cycle, and she explains it by the familiarity of the audience with the expressive medium of the book, sacred or not.

34. Vasari does not appreciate the insertion of vernacular and Latin writings, not even in the frames (Vasari 1568, 1:183–84).

35. Salomone Morpurgo (1860–1942) compared the transcriptions in the codex Marciano-italiano 204, classe IX, with the writings that he could read on the wall (Morpurgo 1899). A few years before, Igino Benvenuto Supino (1858–1940) noted that the Buffalmacco cycle was restored several times starting from 1379 and that the writings were repainted once in 1420 (Supino 1894, 8). Anyway, Battaglia Ricci (1995) thinks that the restorers of the writings had no reason to change the verses.

Another important source—unknown to Morpurgo and never quoted in the essays about the Buffalmacco's *Triumph of Death*—suggests a revision to this interpretation. In a letter dated 1561 Cosimo Bartoli made a transcription of those verses at the request of his friend Giorgio Vasari, who was working on the second edition of the *Vite*.³⁶ Bartoli spent several hours trying to decipher all the writings of the fresco,³⁷ and his version shows many variants compared to the fifteenth-century tradition, starting from the coexistence of early Italian and Latin in the lower frame.

On the opposite side, the inscriptions were probably all in Latin, although Bartoli could not read them and Morpurgo could only read the two strophes at the end of the nineteenth century. Each strophe was held by the first two figures on the left side: a skeleton (which says the words “Primus natus Abel et primus mortuus”) and a young man, probably an angel (who responds “Primus natus Kain, primus homicida”).³⁸

As we have already said, the lower frame contains writings in the vernacular and in Latin.³⁹ Primarily, this fact forces us to get back to the audience of the fresco, because language here did not necessarily select two distinct audiences: vernacular and Latin are complementary, not alternative to each other. Subsequently, these writings are not captions but rather are voice-overs, that is, they give voice to different characters of the fresco, establishing a dialogue with the learned beholders. The strophes are long, the verses refined, and their meanings need a high level of attention. Thus they have a complex literary and theoretical structure.

The long life of the fresco, its continuous restoration, and the insertion of several sepulchral monuments or memorial tablets in the lower part of the wall make the reading of these inscriptions very difficult. The following reconstruction, based on our comparison between Bartoli's and Morpurgo's transcriptions, offers a new interpretation of the writings. In particular, proceeding from left to right, the first three scrolls were not visible to both scholars,⁴⁰ and Morpurgo extracted them from the fifteenth-century codex.⁴¹ The first one

36. This letter is the subject of an essay by Lorenzo Carletti, still in process.

37. “Voi mi avete quasi che fatto perdere la vista a fatto; che Vi giuro a Dio, che sono stato in Campo Santo forse sei ore et ho cacato il sangue a leggere quelle cosacce che Voi mi chiedete; e quelle che si son possute leggere” (letter of Cosimo Bartoli to Giorgio Vasari, April 17, 1561, in Frey [1923, letter 340]).

38. The translation of these writings reads as follows: “First-born Abel, first dead man” and “First-born Cain, first homicide.”

39. Although Vasari does not relate the Bartoli transcriptions, he mentions that there were mottoes in vernacular and Latin in the lower frame of the *Triumph*, but scholars generally have ignored this observation.

40. “Gli angeli, che tengon dette scritte, son 9, de' quali i primi 3 sono scancellati del tutto” (Frey 1923, letter 340).

41. The first and the third inscriptions were covered by two different memorial tablets. For a detailed reconstruction of this complicated story of overlapping, see Baracchini (1993).

praises the hermitical life, and it refers to the episode of the anchorites.⁴² The second and the third give voice to one of the three corpses inside the coffins, and they talk to the noblemen and also to the beholder.⁴³ The fourth scroll, under the greyhound, recalls the transience of life and warns everybody about the fleeting nature of richness.⁴⁴ The fifth, under the beggars, is in Latin, but even Bartoli could read these fragments of verses that can be interpreted as a supplication to death,⁴⁵ echoing the longer inscription held by the same beggars inside the fresco. The sixth scroll is just under the heap of corpses, and its writing alludes to death as a leveler of different classes;⁴⁶ however, it speaks without distinction to rich and poor, because death concerns everyone who was born.⁴⁷ The seventh scroll is once again in Latin, and the three verses that Bartoli copied sound like a parable about the unpredictable arrival of Death.⁴⁸ The eighth scroll addresses a woman in the orchard as well as every woman in the audience, inviting her to shun vanity and hedonism.⁴⁹ The ninth and last

42. “*Quieta sancta et pura solitudine, / Quanto se’ dolce ad quei che ti conoscono! / Di carne o di demon’ sollicitudine, / Tanto più servono quanto più s’imboscano, / Privi della mondana amaritudine*” (Morpurgo 1899, 61).

43. “*Tu che mi guardi et si fiso mi miri / Vedi quanto io sono ladio al tuo conspecto, / Quantunque che tu sii chiaro giovanecto, / Pensalo ora prima che Morte ti tiri. / Nel mondo io hebi molti vani desiri / Et non pensai nel presente difecto: / Per dio, tua volta tollila dal dilecto, / Per via la passa de affanni et di sospiri. / Si come hora se’ dei ben pensare che io fui; / Ma il mondo amico ad ciascheduno è poco, / Venir pur dèi a questo punto et luoco. Or fà che in prima adoperi Cului / Il qual ti chiama sempre al summo bene. / Se campar vòi dell’aspre et eternal pene*” (Morpurgo 1899, 60).

44. Bartoli read the first six verses: “*O tu, che porti la fronte e ’l ciglio / alto, elevato, mirando intorno, / pon cura, poni mente al periglio. / Tu stai sempre, di notte e di giorno, / che morte non ti porga suo artiglio: / Dunque t’umilia; pensa, che sei quel forno*” (Frey 1923, letter 340). Looking at the fifteenth-century codex, Morpurgo’s transcription presents substantial differences in the sixth verse and adds two more verses: “*Dunque t’haumilia et pensa chi tu se’ / Chè via più vale uno solo granel de miglio / Che ’l corpo tuo quando vita non v’è*” (Morpurgo 1899, 57).

45. “*O Mors, bonum est iudicium tuum / non indigenti cur . . . / . . . capite*” (Frey 1923, letter 340). These verses come from the Ecclesiastes: “*O mors, bonum est iudicium tuum homini indigenti et, qui minoratur viribus, defecto aetate et, cui de omnibus cura est, qui fiduciam amisit et perdidit patientiam!*” (Eccles. 41:3).

46. “*Nota qui tu, che di che sei gentile, / poi che Dio vuole, che sia comunale / il nascere e ’l morire fra la gente. / Non aver dunque l’altra gente a vile! / E pensa spesso, che tu sei mortale*” (Frey 1923, letter 340). In the fifteenth-century codex’s transcription there are orthographic variants, and the last verse sounds a little bit different: “*Chè come l’altri così tu se’ mortale.*” Morpurgo, as Bartoli, read: “*Pensa spesso che tu se’ mortale*” (Morpurgo 1899, 57).

47. An earlier theologian, the Dominican Giordano da Pisa (1260–1311), justified the existence of the poor as instruments of salvation for the rich, who can erase sin through charity (Frugoni 1988, 1582).

48. “*Nescit homo finem suum; sed, sicut pisces capiuntur amo, et sicut aves comprehenduntur [l]aqueo, ita homines capiuntur in tempore malo*” (Frey 1923, letter 340). These verses are taken from Ecclesiastes: “*nescit homo finem suum sed sicut pisces capiuntur hamo et sicut aves comprehenduntur laqueo sic capiuntur homines tempore malo cum eis extemplo supervenerit*” (Eccles. 9:12). At the time of Morpurgo, this inscription was no longer visible, so he took it from the fifteenth-century codex: “*Io non attendo [ad altro] che a spegner vita / Menando la mia falce si attondo / In fino a che nessun ci rimarrà: / è tale che teme forte mia ferita, / Che, suscitato poi nell’altro mundo, / Dopo mia fine ad [Morte] me richiamarà*” (Morpurgo 1899, 56). Unlike the inscription that Bartoli saw, these words would be pronounced by Death.

49. It is very likely that Bartoli was confused, inverting the last two inscriptions. While he wrote that the eighth scroll was removed (“*Lo 8 è scancelatissimo*”), he ascribed its verses to the ninth scroll: “*Femina vana,*

scroll—already not readable in Bartoli’s time and drawn from the fifteenth-century codex—exhorts everybody to avoid carnal sin because Death could arrive at any moment.⁵⁰ We are talking about a literary treasure of at least fifty verses entrusted to the lower frame.

The Other Narration of the “Figures of Framing”

In the Vasari description of the *Triumph of Death* the frame is called *ornamento* (decoration), and this term indiscriminately appears in the *Vite* indicating architectural motifs or frames (mostly in wood or oils on canvas). This linguistic use, widespread in Renaissance times, combines in the same function elements that are apparently different: the frame is meant to be not just a material object but also a theoretical value.

Within such a perspective, the frame involves aesthetic reception in different ways. The perceptive level comes in: when not being viewed, the frame allows the gaze to concentrate on the representation without dissipating.⁵¹ Contemporary art theory hardly considers the aesthetic and epistemic role of the frame, a border that divides in a very complex way the space of representation from everything that does not concern it.⁵² The frame is a dense *limen* (threshold), whose task is to be gazed upon without being seen; it is a limit of aesthetic character, embodying the problematic distinction between the space of the work and the space external to the work.

In which terms is this distinction problematic? Following Louis Marin’s theories, the frame connects two different spaces: the represented one (mimetic) and the one of the self-presentation of the image.⁵³ In order to understand this concept, one of the first definitions of the verb “to represent” is “to

perché ti diletta / d’andar così dipinta et adorna? / Che vuoi piacere al mondo più che a Dio? / Ai, lassa, che sentenza tu aspetti, / se incontanente lo tuo cor non torna, / a confessarsi spesso” (Frey 1923, letter 340). Morpurgo corrects the last verse: “Ad confessarsi spesso d’ogni rio!” (Morpurgo 1899, 56).

50. “O anima, perché perché non pensi / Che Morte di torrà quel vestimento / In che tu senti corporal dilecto / per la virtù de’ suoi cinque sensi, / col quale haverai eternal tormento / Se qui lo lassi con mortal dilecto?” (Morpurgo 1899, 56).

51. Some artists are aware of this potentiality, as shown by the famous letter Nicolas Poussin wrote to the commissioner of the painting *The Israelites Gathering Manna* (1637–39): “When you receive [your picture], I beg of you, if you like it, to provide it with a small frame [*l’orner d’un peu de corniche*]; it needs one so that, in considering it in all its parts, the [rays of the] eye shall remain concentrated, and not dispersed beyond the limits of the picture by receiving impressions of objects which, seen pell-mell with the painted objects, confuse the light” (Marin [1994] 2001, 356).

52. For in-depth analysis of the role of the frame, see Schapiro (1969), Goodman (1984, 108–88), Lebensztein (1988, 1999), and Stoichita (1993).

53. “With the frame, the painting inscribes its own theory in itself, that is, the fact of presenting itself theoretically so as to represent something. That condition of possibility of ‘aesthetic’ contemplation of representation is thus an element of the metalanguage of pictorial representation” (Marin [1994] 2001, 324).

substitute something present for something absent (which is of course the most general structure of signs)” (Marin [1994] 2001, 352),⁵⁴ this substitution is ruled by a mimetic *ratio*. The other side of this definition is “to *show*, to *exhibit* something present” (352, emphasis added), and this process is an act of self-presentation by the image identifying the thing represented as such: “In other words, to *represent* means to present oneself representing something. Every representation, every representational sign, every signifying process thus includes two dimensions, which I am in the habit of calling, in the first case, reflexive—to present oneself—and, in the second case, transitive—to represent something” (Marin [1994] 2001, 352, emphasis added).

The frame facilitates the mimetic or transitive dimension of representation; at the same time it takes charge of its reflexive dimension. Because every frame completes the picture in its finality, as it is to be seen, shown, and exhibited, it concerns a process of communication or, better, a relation with the beholder.⁵⁵ So the frame activates a process of “presentation” and “putting on stage” the work, indicating what to look at.

The presentative role of the frame could also be played by other elements, very different from a visual point of view, like painted curtains or figures that indicate something in the scene or look at the beholder. They can be inside the space of the narration and not necessarily inside the large space of the painted frame (as in the Buffalmacco fresco), but their function is the same. These elements are what Marin calls “figures of framing”: “This is also how the frame (by this I mean the processes and procedures of framing, the dynamics and power of positioning) will delegate some of its functions to a particular figure, who, even as he participates in the action, in the story that is ‘told,’ ‘represented,’ will utter by his gestures, his posture, his gaze, not so much what is to be seen, what the viewer *must* see, as *the way to see it*: these are pathetic figures of framing” (Marin [1994] 2001, 358).⁵⁶

54. Marin ([1994] 2001) examines the French definition of the verb *représenter* (to represent) in the Furetière’s *Dictionnaire universel* (1690). In his opinion this definition shows the theoretical mechanism of representation, so he extends it to other centuries, not only for the Baroque era.

55. “When the viewer’s gaze is substituted for the painter’s eye, a frame is necessary, because the painting considered in the process of its presentation, its spectacularization, is substituted for the *artifact* considered in the process of its production” (Marin [1994] 2001, 323).

56. Marin also reminds us of some of Alberti’s precepts concerning the figures placed in the position of commentator, *admonitor* and *advocator* of the work of art. Inside the visual narration, Alberti appreciates figures that suggest the emotional reaction or the beholder’s moral response: “E piaciemi sia nella storia chi ammonisca e insegni a noi quello che ivi si facci, o chiami con la mano a vedere, o con viso crucciioso e con gli occhi turbati minacci che gnuno verso loro vada, o dimostri qualche pericolo o cosa ivi maravigliosa, o te inviti a piagnere con loro insieme o a ridere” (Alberti [1436] 1973, 72).

If the mimetic dimension prevails, the work of art seems to be able to speak by itself, creating an “effect of objectivity.” On the contrary, if the presentative dimension prevails, the work of art shows the mechanism that makes the representation happen and there is an “effect of subjectivity.”⁵⁷ These concepts recall the theory of “visual enunciation” that Marin elaborated based on Benveniste’s “written enunciation” (Benveniste 1966, 1974): in language, the effects of objectivity (“narrative enunciation”) and subjectivity (“discursive enunciation”) depend, among others, on the personal forms of the word “he” (effect of objectivity) as well as “I/you” (effect of subjectivity) and on the circumstantial demonstrative adverbs linked with them (“that” for “he,” “this” for “I/you”).⁵⁸ Inside a work of art, for example, characters looking at us or pointing out something establish a relationship “I/you,” creating an effect of subjectivity. They also appear in the *Triumph of Death*, inside the space of the narration and inside the rhombus within the horizontal frames.

These “figures of framing” build a second level of narration, guiding us to a deeper comprehension of the painting. First, the nine angels with scrolls inside the lower frame are painted at the height of the viewers’ gaze, establishing a dialogue with them. In particular, the one under the greyhound glances up, pointing out what to look at; his inscription builds a communication with the pronominal “you,” referring to the beholder and to the group of the hunters; one of the hunters is looking at us.⁵⁹ The result of this connection is a visual and written communicative circuit.

The same circuit, realized in different ways, concerns the three central angels of the lower frame. They gaze in our direction, but every mark of enunciation of their inscriptions is strikingly different. In fact, the verses on the scroll of the angel under the beggars echo the content of the one immediately above inside the narration, but in the frame the angel uses the sacred words of

57. In some way, Marin’s formulation is very close to the idea of “theoretical object” introduced by Hubert Damisch with reference to works of art: “A theoretical object is something that obliges one to do theory; we could start there. Second, it’s an object that obliges you to do theory but also furnishes you with the means of doing it. . . . Third, it’s a theoretical object because it forces us to ask ourselves what theory is. It is posed in theoretical terms; it produces theory; and it necessitates a reflection on theory” (Bois, Hollier, and Krauss 1998, 8).

58. Obviously there is a correspondence between the “mimetic (or transitive) dimension of the representation” and the “narrative enunciation”; on the other hand, the “reflexive (or presentative) dimension of representation” corresponds to the “discursive enunciation.”

59. “Oh You, with the forehead and the eyelash / Raised high, while You’re seeking around, / Take care and mind that danger / All the time, night and day, / That Death could take You with its claw / It humiliates You. So, think of who You are, / Because a single grain of millet has more worth / Than your body when there is no life.” We must notice the explicit reference to the external gaze (“mirandoti intorno”) and the inner gaze (“pon cura et poni mente” and “pensa chi tu se”): these words evidence a passage from the view as a spectator (to see) to the cognitive process (to think). For the original version in the vernacular, see n. 43.

the Old Testament in Latin.⁶⁰ While his eyes establish a discursive enunciation (I/you) with the viewer, his scroll realizes a narrative enunciation (he), and his inscription brings to life a voice outside the narration. Looking directly at us, the following angel admonishes the beholder producing a discursive enunciation.⁶¹ Also, the third angel in the middle of the lower frame, just under Death, stares at us while holding a short inscription in Latin taken from the Old Testament: “Nobody knows when his hour will come.”⁶² Once again his voice is from outside the narration, and it properly refers to the indeterminable advent of Death, painted above. On a visual level “not knowing” the exact moment of its arrival, it corresponds to the representation of Death “getting on the point of using its scythe”: it is what we have called the *inchoateness* of the act of cutting down.

The scroll of the eighth angel, under the group of people in the orchard, talks directly to one of the young ladies and to every woman of the audience (you), warning against earthly sins.⁶³ Unlike the three previous angels, this one is represented in profile, and the direction of his eyes, underlining the content of the inscription, guides us to the next fresco (*Last Judgment*). This angel, like the one under the greyhound, has the same visual function as the demonstrative pronouns (*this* and *that*), because—just like the frame—he indicates to us what to look at. But the eighth angel guides us outside the framed scene of the *Triumph of Death*, and this unusual aspect finds explanation in the entire Buffalmacco cycle inside the Camposanto, that could be read just following a determined itinerary.

We must remember here that the huge dimension of these scenes never permits an overall view.⁶⁴ The painted frame by itself is not a guide to the eyes.

60. “O death, how acceptable is thy sentence unto a man that is needy and that faileth in strength, that is in extreme old age, and is distracted in all things, and that looks for no better lot, nor waiteth on better days!” (Eccles. 41:3). For the original inscriptions, see n. 44.

61. “Look here You, saying that You’re gentle: / because God wants that to be born and die / it is common to every people / do not despise the other people / and often think that you have to die.” Once again we find the passage from the view as observing (“Nota qui”) to the cognitive process (“think”). For the original inscription, see n. 45.

62. “Nobody knows when his hour will come: as fishes are caught in a cruel net, and birds are taken in a snare, so men are trapped by evil times [that fall unexpectedly upon them].” For the original inscription, see n. 47.

63. “Vanity lady, why do You take pleasure / in going out so made up and adorned? / Do You want to delight the world more than God? / Ah, You can only wait for a judgment, / If your incontinent heart doesn’t go back / to confess everything very often.” For the original inscription of this scroll, see n. 48. A woman with a mirror, traditionally called the “Vanitosa” (Vanity lady), is represented in Hell’s flames, on the right side of the *Last Judgment*. In fifteenth-century art and literature, the “shallowness and brevity of human beauty” will be one of the most popular themes revealing the “absurdity of human existence haunted by death” (Bauman 1992, 95–96).

64. Buffalmacco painted three sides of the frame, because on the left side he used the *Crucifixion*’s frame, already painted by Traini on the eastern wall. Although it would be extremely interesting to investigate the

In fact, in this cycle several “figures of framing,” play the same role as, for instance, the group of two cupids bringing a roll with a long inscription in the middle of the fresco, above the three central angels under the beggars and the heap of corpses. This group is another “figure of framing,” and just like the angels these cupids look at us: they are external to the mimetic dimension of the representation and they have a *presentative* function.

The Consequences of Death

The frame is a borderline between the representation and everything that does not concern it: denying the space of the outside it affirms the one of the inside. Nevertheless, looking at the frame by itself, it clearly appears like a composite space, neither internal nor external to the representation.⁶⁵ Therefore, it has a *neutral* status,⁶⁶ which derives from the double negation inscribed in the mechanism itself: occupying the limit of representation, the frame articulates the spaces that prove its being (Marin 1982). The neutral status immediately refers to the perceptive dimension of the frame because it has to be gazed upon without being seen; but it also refers to an immanent dimension that concerns the logical relations activated by the frame itself.⁶⁷

Buffalmacco’s frame explains very well the neutral status of the margin. It is a geometric squaring of the space of representation, so it has a different nature, but it was realized on the same wall and with the same technique. Its ambiguous status, neither internal nor external, is very evident. But today we can talk about it only on the basis of historical pictures, because most of the frames of the entire cycle got lost; indeed, it is interesting to note that the detachment saved just the privileged space of representation.

whole frames of the cycle, here we can only analyze the horizontal sides, which are the only ones referred to in the *Triumph of Death*. For a general overview of the inscriptions of the other frames of the cycle, see Frugoni (1988) and Bolzoni (1996).

65. A similar concept was formulated by Derrida (1978, 14).

66. In terms of the value of “neutral” we draw principally on the reflections of Marin: “Neither yes or no, true or false, one or the other: this is the neutral. Of course this is not the neutral as neutrality. . . . Rather, this neutral is the span between true and false, opening within discourse a space discourse cannot receive. This is a third term, but a supplementary third term, not synthetic” (Marin 1984, 7).

67. The meaning of “neutral” as double negation is found in the elementary structure of signification formulated by Greimas (1970). The semiotic square is a means of refining oppositional analyses by increasing the number of analytical classes for a given opposition from two (for instance, A/B) to four: /A/, /B/, /nonA/, /nonB/. This is possible for three types of relations between such semes: opposition, contradiction, and presupposition. The complex term is seen as the joining of the terms of the axis of the contraries (A + B), whereas the neutral term results from the combination of the terms on the axis of the subcontraries (nonA + nonB). Marsciani (1990) deeply studied the concept of “neutral” and noticed, among other things, several points of convergence between the “neutral” term of the semiotic square and the empty box theorized by Deleuze. See also Barthes ([2002] 2005).

This loss is still heavier if we think that inside the margin we could find “figures of framing” that gave us a metatheoretical interpretation of the fresco, disclosing to us the moral and theological explanation of the scene. The comprehension of the whole meaning would not have been otherwise impossible without these elements, but the “figures of framing” and, in particular, their inscriptions permit a true exegesis of what was painted on this wall.

Every inscription talks about the transcendence meant as a passage to a new life, hellish or heavenly, places of eternal salvation or damnation. But how did Buffalmacco translate this theological concept in painting? Looking at the fresco as it appears today (fig. 14), we are impressed by the figure of Death not just for its horrendous aspect, but first of all because of its central role in the middle of the scene. The main subject is not Death that inevitably cuts off every life, but the afterlife opened by the intervention of Death. This metaphysical space is displayed in the higher part, while episodes of the earthly world, with different phenomenal times, stay closer to the beholder. There is a very significant area that corresponds to the corridor created by the arrival of the woman with the scythe, connecting two semantic fields: /life/ and /nondeath/.⁶⁸ This is the real meaning of the fresco, not the *Triumph of Death* but its consequences, not the act of dying but the process of transformation from /life/ to /non-death/, from /low/ to /high/.

Also, the personification of Death—half human and half devil—connects these worlds. Compared to other Italian Triumphs of Death, the Buffalmacco fresco highlights the role of the old woman as a go-between toward a new life. In a later fresco, today in the Museo di Palazzo Abatellis in Palermo (ca. 1446), this personification is a skeleton riding a haggard horse (fig. 15): it is not flying and its earthly nature prevails.⁶⁹

Remaining in Tuscany in the second half of the fourteenth century, in the church of San Francesco in Lucignano (Arezzo) there is another fresco representing a similar iconography, but Death here is an old woman with claws and long white hair, riding a black horse (fig. 16).⁷⁰ She does not stay in midair, as in Pisa, because her horse brings her to the earth, and she pronounces

68. In this case the semiotic square is /life/, /death/, /nonlife/, /nondeath/.

69. The personification of Death as a skeleton will spread over Northern Europe in the iconography of *dance macabre* or the Dance of the Dead. From this point of view, the *Triumph of Death* of Palermo is a novelty, because in Italy since the end of the fourteenth century we can only find representations of Death with the features of an old woman (Vovelle 1983, 119–20).

70. This fresco is attributed to the Sienese painter Bartolo di Fredi (ca. 1330–1410), and scholars have dated it around 1380 (Pantani 1997). The horrible woman of Lucignano draws a bow, but has a scythe too, as in Palermo.



Figure 14. Buonamico Buffalmacco, *Triumph of Death*, 1336–41, fresco, Camposanto monumentale, Pisa. http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Buonamico_Buffalmacco_001.jpg.



Figure 15. Maestro del Trionfo della morte, *Triumph of Death*, 1446, fresco, Galleria Regionale di Palazzo Abatellis, Palermo. http://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Trionfo_della_morte,_gi%C3%A0_a_palazzo_sclafani,_galleria_regionale_di_Palazzo_Abatellis,_palermo_%281446%29_-_affresco_staccato.jpg.

terrible words.⁷¹ This fresco has several elements in common with the Bufalmacco painting—the beggars with their invocation to Death, the heap of corpses, two hunters—but we find a very important difference: Christ appears in the sky under the horrible woman. Pointing to her, Christ talks to the beholder in the vernacular and in rhyme: “Oh You, reader, pay attention to the blows of / This Lady that killed me / Since I am the Lord / Of her.”⁷²

In the Pinacoteca of Siena there is a similar iconography of Death represented together with Christ, traditionally entitled *Allegory of Redemption* (fig. 17). It is

71. A long inscription inside the space of narration comes out of the mouth of the old woman: “Io non bramo se non di spegner vita / e chi mi chiama le piuvolte schivo / giungendo spesso a chi mi torcie il grifo” (Pantani 1997, 151). This text runs parallel with her arm and opposite to the direction of her hair.

72. “O tu che leggi ponchura ai colpi di / chostei chocise me / cheso signior di / lei” (Pantani 1997, 153). Every inscription of this fresco is inside the space of narration, not even framed by a scroll.



Figure 16. Bartolo di Fredi, *Triumph of Death*, ca. 1380, fresco, church of San Francesco, Lucignano (Arezzo). With kind permission of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (MiBACT), Soprintendenza per i Beni Architettonici, Paesaggistici, Storici, Artistici ed Etnoantropologici di Arezzo.

a tempera on wood panel attributed to Ambrogio Lorenzetti, and scholars are convinced that the author of this little painting drew inspiration from the Buffalmacco fresco in Pisa, dating it at the middle of the fourteenth century (Frugoni 2002). Christ crucified above a heap of corpses dominates the scene, but over his head flies Death, represented as a black devil with bat wings. This is a very unusual composition: the devil overlooks the Son of God, and its scythe hovers just above his head. Moreover, Death appears at another time: the same devil with the scythe accompanies the first two sinners on the very left side of the background, under the Creation of Adam and Eve and the Original Sin. In the foreground we can recognize Cain and Abel (the first homicide) and two anchorites with a long scroll at the feet of the Cross. On the very right side Christ Judge, surrounded by angels, overlooks the Cross, between the Virgin and St. John, and, at the bottom, other angels are driving back the damned.

Apparently the Lorenzetti narration is very different from that by Buffalmacco, above all for the presence of Christ. In Siena, the death of Christ is followed by his Ascension (his “triumph *over* death”), the allegory of redemption that is possible to everyone who erases their sins. So the painting must be read from left to right: from the first sinners (prehistoric time) to the saved and the damned (metaphysical time), passing through the sacrifice of Christ on



Figure 17. Allegoria Lorenzetti, *Allegory of Redemption*, ca. 1343, tempera with gold on panel, Pinacoteca di Siena. With kind permission of the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism (MiBACT), Foto Soprintendenza B.S.A.E. di Siena e Grosseto.

the Cross (historical time).⁷³ In this sense the *Crucifixion* functions as a go-between from life to afterlife, the same role played in Pisa by Death.

The monumental fresco in the Camposanto was adjacent to the *Crucifixion* and to the stories of Christ after death on the eastern wall (fig. 6). This sequence could hardly allow the faithful an interpretation of the whole cycle as an allegory of redemption. Moreover, our fresco can be freely read, or better, there is no direction from left to right but a leap in time in every episode, from phenomenal (low) to metaphysical (high). And in Pisa, inside the space of narration, apart from the angels disputing the souls, divinities are not represented. Why?

The answer remains in the frame: as related by Cosimo Bartoli, in the lower margin two inscriptions come from the Old Testament (Ecclesiastes) while in the higher margin two other verses refer to Abel and Cain: Cain was the first human born and Abel the first human to die, Cain committed the first murder by killing his brother, and Abel is often compared to Christ as being the first martyr.⁷⁴ If we look more closely at the historical picture of the *Triumph of Death*, the third character with a scroll in the higher frame stands out from the others and seems to be the Redeemer, young and bearded, holding the palm of martyrdom. Also, the next character, older and with a longer beard, looks like a sacred figure, possibly God or a prophet.

Confining the sacred to the “neutral” space of the higher margin, the Camposanto fresco privileges an earthly point of view. For this reason it is traditionally called *Triumph of Death*, but it would be more appropriate to rename it—in comparison with the Lorenzetti painting—*Allegory of Redemption*.

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73. Within the Old Testament, St. Augustine traces the pre-Christian history of redemption: the patriarchs did not merit salvation by their own deeds, for the grace that saved them was the grace that Christ brought (Schmitt 1995).

74. It is interesting to find, at the beginning of the northern gallery of the Camposanto, the scene of *Cain and Abel*, just after *Adam and Eve*, frescoed by Cecco di Pietro at the end of the fourteenth century.

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