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CL 10 (Fall, 2016): Renaissance Europe Goes to the Movies

Viewing Questions for The Agony and the Ecstasy (1965) (dir. Carol Reed) -- Entire film, but esp. PART II

Overview Questions:

1. The “Prologue”: Although the opening 12-13 minutes of the film appear to simply give a biographical account of Michelangelo’s life and a kind of inventory of his work, please consider why this feature film bio-pic opens with a kind of documentary-type introduction to the man – and to his (sculptural) work. Who is the target audience of this opening sequence? Is there any kind of rivalry or tension between the story of Michelangelo the man and Michelangelo the artist mapped out here, and how does the opening sequence either anticipate or differ from the shape of the rest of the film in this respect? How does the film art / the film as art compete with the ‘real’ art that is showcased in the “Prologue”? How does Michelangelo’s art **in the film** (the Sistine Chapel frescoes) compare to Michelangelo’s art as it appears in the “Prologue”?

2. Charlton Heston and Rex Harrison were major mid-twentieth century actors. (Please note that they nevertheless appear not to have been the first casting choices for this film!). As it turns out, they did not get along during the making of the film. Think about the film as a star vehicle and the need for there to be (plot-driven) tension between the characters of Michelangelo and Pope Julius II, but also eventual resolution. Do you think the two men’s actual dislike for one another helped the character development in the film? How does Rex Harrison represent Julius II – as generous, as militaristic, as proud, as a believer? How does Charlton Heston portray Michelangelo – as proud, driven, a loner, a believer? How does the cinematography capture these traits in both cases? (HINT: Harrison as Julius II on his horse and the Papal throne vs. Heston as Michelangelo silhouetted against the sky in the mountains around Carrara (at 59 minutes). Finally: What do you make of the camera angle and sweeping view of the completed Sistine Chapel at 2 hours, 9 min.? Does the ceiling – rather than the actors – end up being the star of the show?

3. The post-“Prologue” parts of Reed’s film are elaborately ‘choreographed’; its two parts (before and after the “Intermission”) contain multiple parallel scenes that ask the viewer to assess what kinds of developments occur as the story unfolds. Please consider the following patterns:

 a. The opening sequence of Part I in the quarry (carving out the marble that is headed for Rome to become a sculpture by Michelangelo) that then erupts into a battle scene vs. / and the opening sequence of Part II as Michelangelo (the artist) bursting into Julius II’s camp. Has anything changed in the status of the art object? What about the sequence near the end of the film when Michelangelo seeks out the (defeated) Pope in a military camp to as to be able to finish the ceiling? Or the very brief scene of cannons firing just before the final scene of the crowds gathered in the completed Sistine Chapel (at 2 hours, 7 min.). What is the relation between war / military activity and art in this film?

 b. The two entries of the Pope into Rome in Parts I and II – once in triumph, the second time in defeat.

c. The multiple scenes when Pope Julius II is celebrating mass in the Sistine Chapel with negotiations about the ceiling / the actual painting of the ceiling interrupting the religious services. What is the relation between religious belief / faith, religious ritual, and art in this film?

 d. The multiple scenes between Michelangelo and the Contessina de Medici. Is there a development in their relationship? NB: Please note that it was and is well known that Michelangelo was homosexual. Why does Reed emphasize the relationship with the Contessina the way he does? Is there any subtle / indirect evidence of Michelangelo’s homosexuality in the film? (HINT: The scene in the brothel when the Pope’s men are searching for Michelangelo and the dark-haired young male apprentice who seems to be ever present in Part II…).

 e. The multiple scenes of direct conflict, but then also clever manipulation of Michelangelo by Julius II and vice versa. How does Julius II succeed in getting Michelangelo to go back to work after he has fallen from the scaffolding? How does Michelangelo provoke Julius II to recover from what appears to be his near death after his defeat in battle in Part II? Consider carefully the scene in Part II when the two of them meet up on the scaffolding and discuss the central fresco of the Creation of Adam (1 hour, 57 min. to 2 hours, 2 min.). What does Julius II see in Michelangelo’s depiction of God and Adam? Does he believe what Michelangelo believes? How does their final conversation in the Sistine Chapel relate to the conversation on the scaffolding? Is this some kind of buddy film?

4. There are two main locations of the action of this film: the city of Florence and the city of Rome. Who and what are the main focus of attention in the respective cities? Who (what classes and / or institutions) sponsor art in these two locations? There are of course other unnamed cities in the film, and the quarry at Carrara; what do these locations represent? Consider especially the class politics of the quarry and the workers’ support of Michelangelo vs. the skepticism – at least in Part I – of the people of Rome vis-à-vis the Pope.

5. Pay careful attention to the politics of the film – which are pretty accurate! What / against whom is Pope Julius II fighting and why? Who are his “enemies” (both locally in Italy and in the rest of Europe) and what countries / leaders are characterized as his friends. Why is he concerned to get the Papal States back under his control? NB: The clearest statement of the politics that Reed would have us think were at stake for Julius II are voiced by the Medici duke at 2 hours, 3 min. to 2 hours, 7 minutes.

5. We see three of Renaissance Italy’s most famous artists depicted in this film: Bramante, Michelangelo, and Raphael. What pieces / kinds of art is each man most clearly identified with in the film? Where does Michelangelo stand on the matter of the relation of ‘modern’ Renaissance art to the art of the ancient Greeks (at 1 hour, 20 minutes to 1 hour, 24 min.)? What about Raphael (please note that what we see Raphael painting is his famous “School of Athens” in the Vatican Stanze at 1 hour, 31 min.)? Are there rivalries between the various artists? Do we see these artists producing alone (as great geniuses) or are they part of a team? Consider Raphael’s speech about patronage at 1 hour, 45 min. Does he accurately describe the situations of patronage depicted in / referred to in the film? Consider the ways that Julius II and Michelangelo constantly bicker about money.

Some more specific questions:

 • What was the original design for the Sistine Chapel ceiling, and what is the overall story of the final design? Why does Michelangelo destroy the first version?

 • What is the difference between Bramante’s scaffolding and Michelangelo’s scaffolding?

 • Describe what is (more or less accurately) shown to be the way that frescoes are designed and painted (at 43 minutes and at 1 hour, 9 minutes).

 • Where is Michelangelo considering fleeing to – and to do what – after he destroys the first version of the Sistine frescos?

 • Why does Michelangelo fall from the scaffolding?

 • Why does Julius II order the scaffolding taken down at 1 hour, 40 min.?

 • How does Julius II eventually pay for Michelangelo to finish the Sistine Chapel ceiling (at 1 hour, 55 min.)?