RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE OBSERVER AND RAPHAEL'S STANZA DELLA SEGNATURA IN A HISTORICAL, MUSEUM AND VIRTUAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: The subject of this paper is the relationship between the observer and space in a historical context, as well as in a contemporary one. What I also take into account is the experience and knowledge that the observer has when being confronted with a work of art applied in a historical interior. To be more precise, I investigate the difference between the perception of Raphael's frescoes in the Stanza dellaSegnatura in their original context (the papal library), and today's museum environment, as well as through the virtual reality model on the official website of the Vatican museums. The aim is to divide and classify different ways of interaction between the viewer and the paintings: the original viewer knowledgeable in Neoplatonism who could fully grasp the philosophical concept behind the frescoes, the contemporary viewer gazing at them in the Vatican museums; and the observer who accesses the virtual reality (VR) version of the Stanza through his or her computer/headset. The first part is dedicated to the overall introduction to the historical context of the Stanza dellaSegnatura and the people behind its philosophical conception, followed by a discussion on the Renaissance theory of painting from a Neoplatonic point of view. The last part is dedicated to the contemporary theory of the observer and the artwork explained through the prism of virtual reality.
Keywords: Neoplatonism, theory of art, virtual reality, observer, Raphael, Stanza dellaSegnatura

INTRODUCTION

Soon after arriving in Rome, in January 1509, Raphael was commissioned by Pope Julius II (of the della Rovere family) to decorate his private library, known today as the Stanza dellaSegnatura (Room of the Seals)[1], with four large-scale wall paintings. Each one represented a separate field of knowledge/ intellectual activity,

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1 It is the first out of four papal rooms that Raphael decorated. The other three are known as theRoom of Heliodorus, Room of the fire in the Borgo, and the room of Constantine.

Fig. 1

painted masterfully by the young Raphael. These faculties of knowledge were, traditionally, Theology, Philosophy, Jurisprudence, and Medicine. In the late 15th century, Medicine had been replaced by Poetry.[2] The paintings on the side walls included: the Triumph of Theology (or the Disputation of the Holy Sacrament, also known as the *Disputa* (Figure 1)); the so-called School of Athens (Figure 2), in which various philosophers are depicted; Parnassus (Figure 3), a pastoral vision of poets accompanied by muses and Apollo; and Jurisprudence (Figure 4) with three female figures[3], bellow which two scenes of lawgiving are depicted-Justinian presents the Pandects to Trebonianus and Gregory IX approving the Decretals.

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2 S. Buck and P. Hohenstatt, *Raphael,* Potsdam, 2013.p. 42

3 According to Edgar Wind (and generally accepted as such in other books which deal with the subject of the Stanza della Segnatura) the three female figures are interpreted as the three virtues – Prudence, Temperance, Fortitude – accompanied by Justice on the ceiling. However, Wind also adds that the point of that fresco as a whole, including also the lower scenes of law-giving, is to make peace between the opposite walls of Philosophy and Theology (School of Athens and the *Disputa*). He does so by identifying the symbols of each figure as having a dual meaning. Thus, the oak of the Fortitude (also a reference to the della Rovere family) becomes the symbol of Charity; Temperance becomes Hope; the flame of Prudence is also the Flame of Faith. (E. Wind, "Platonic Justice, Designed by Raphael", *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, Vol. 1, No. 1, 1937). Other authors like Joost-Gaugier suggest that the three figures are the Three Graces, daughters of Zeus (who is symbolized in the blue sky above them). They represent, according to Cicero, the "authority of supreme law over civil and religious law." Following Hesiod and Seneca, the Graces symbolize the consequences of Justice, also understood in that fresco as the Law. (C. L. Joost-Gaugier, "The Concord of Law in the Stanza della Segnatura", *Artibus et Historiae*, Vol. 15, No. 29, 1994, p. 94-95)

Fig. 2

Fig. 3

Fig. 4

The decoration of the ceiling follows that of the chamber's walls and has four large *tondi* painted on it (Figure 5). In each *tondo*, an elegant female figure is accompanied by putti holding tablets with texts in Latin. These female figures are personifications of Theology, Philosophy, Poetry, and Justice. They can be considered as symbols of the frescoes underneath them. Between the *tondi*, are four rectangular scenes, which serve as points of connection for the personifications. These include Adam and Eve, between Justice and Theology; Judgement of Solomon between Justice and Philosophy; Apollo and Marsyas between Theology and Poetry; and, the Prime

Fig. 5

Mover between Poetry and Philosophy. There are also eight small scenes painted in *grisaille* technique, located between the *tondi*.[4] In the very center on the ceiling is the coat-of-arms of Pope Nicholas V, who built the chamber, being held by putti. This detail was probably painted by Giovanni Antonio Bazzi, a painter from Siena, known as Il Sodoma.[5]

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4 Edgar Wind identified the scenes as representations of four elements-Water, Earth, Fire, and, Air. They are all symbolized by two small plates – one monochromatic, and the other one in color – showing historical (upper ones) and mythological scenes (lower ones). Water is represented by the Struggle of Mettius Curtius and *Amor vincit Aquam* between Philosophy and Justice; Earth is represented by the Judgement of Junius Brutus and the Vanquished Giants between Justice and Theology; Fire is represented by Mucius Scaevola and the Forge of Vulcan between Theology and Poetry; Air is represented by Pax Augustea and the Return of Amphitrite between Poetry and Philosophy. (E. Wind, "The Four Elements in Raphael's 'Stanza dellaSegnatura'", *Journal of the Warburg Institute*, Vol. 2, No. 1, 1938).

5 S. Buck and P. Hohenstatt, op. cit. p. 42

Even though Raphael was eager to learn and enjoyed reading philosophical texts it would be impossible to imagine him alone knowing all the thinkers and their respective schools of thought which are depicted in the Stanza. However, he was surrounded by people from the court of Pope Julius II, whose projects of decorating the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and the Stanze were intended for making Rome the most glorious city in the world. To achieve this ambitious goal, Julius employed several humanists and theologians who held orations on important occasions and were writing texts and commentaries. The most famous among these was the protonotary Paolo Cortese; Cardinal Marco Vigerio, a leading Franciscan theologian[6]; Cristoforo Marcello, a preacher; Tommaso de Vio, master general of the Dominicans; Tommaso FedraInghirami, the papal librarian, and, Egidio da Viterbo, prior general of the Augustinian order.[7]

Egidio da Viterbo, who was probably the main advisor for the decoration of the Stanza della Segnatura, studied the philosophy of St Augustine, Averroes, and St Thomas Aquinas in Padua, only to leave for Florence in 1493, where he refined his knowledge of Platonic theology against Averroistic Aristotelianism under the guidance of Marsilio Ficino.[8] His syncretism of ancient Greek and Roman philosophy with Christian theology was the main source of inspiration also for Egidio. Being Ficino's disciple, he adopted the concept of *prisca theologica* according to which Christian truths were anticipated by the ancients in Hermeticism, Neoplatonism, and the Chaldean Oracles.[9] Thanks to Ficino, he was acquainted with the ancient thinkers: Plato, Plotinus, Porphyry, Iamblichus, Proclus etc. Another famous Florentine humanist and also a friend of Ficino, Giovanni Pico della Mirandola, influenced Egidio with his Kabbalistic studies, thanks to which he learned Hebrew.[10] Aside from Kabbalah, he was probably introduced to the teachings of pseudo-Dionysius Areopagite. Egidio's understanding of the world is perhaps best exemplified in a sermon he held on December 21st, 1507 in St Peter's Basilica. In it, he expressed his understanding of the cosmos as being a tripartite entity, in which the elements are fully corporeal, divine intelligences are "completely unencumbered by bodies", and midway between them is man, who as such, consists of both.[11] The sermon, I would argue, can also be understood in another way – the elements, or rather matter itself, can be seen as the materials used for the painting; the divine intelligences as the content which is symbolized by the paintings, since an image is always an image of something ontologically higher; and the man who is in the middle might be the observer who, looking at the materials applied onto a wall sees the divine represented in the images. This allowed the contemporary observer to, through contemplation, reach the idea of Beauty.

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6 H. B. Gutman, „The Medieval Content of Raphael's School of Athens", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1941, p. 429

7 B. Kempers, "Words, Images, and All the Pope's Men Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura and the Synthesis of Divine Wisdom", in: *History of Concepts,* ed. I. Hampsher-Monk and K. Tilmans, Amsterdam, 1998, p. 158

8 D. Nodes, Introduction, in: Giles of Viterbo. *The Commentary on the Sentences of Petrus Lombardus,* Studies in Medieval and Reformation Traditions, Volume 151, Leiden, 2010, p. 2-3

9 K. B. Wingfield, "Networks of Knowledge: Inventing Theology in the Stanza della Segnatura", *Studies in Iconography*, Vol. 38, 2017, p. 177

10 I. D. Rowland, "Raphael's Eminent Philosophers: *The School of Athens* and the Classical Work Almost No One Read", in: *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers,* Diogenes Laertius, trans. P. Mensch, ed. J. Miller, Oxford, 2018, p. 557

11 K. B. Wingfield, op. cit. p. 193

NEOPLATONISM IN THE STANZA DELLA SEGNATURA

Raphael's painting style, full of elegant figures and bright colors, made a perfect fit for the idea of depicting universal beauty. This type of beauty is reached by the intellect through love, according to Pietro Bembo.[12] From this world which is represented on the walls by four faculties of knowledge, the literal beauty of Raphael's frescoes and the beauty of the philosophical, theological, ethical, and poetic concepts, help the observer reach the divine beauty on the ceiling. The *tondi* serve as symbolic summaries of the lower images, and thus as universal symbols of Philosophy, Theology, Justice, and Poetry. One can then further contemplate these ideas and go beyond the Stanza itself. This is best expressed in Proclus' triad of Good-Beauty-Wisdom, in which the Good is the first hypostasis, and Beauty the second, located in the Mind of the World. "Beauty resides hiddenly in the intelligible prime elements, and openly in the ending of what was started in the divine Mind"[13], referring to the material world. Thus, the highest Good is reached through beauty; first, the material one, which serves as an image (in the case of the Stanza this is meant both as an image and a painting), and then the universal one, as addressed by Bembo. Returning to Proclus once again, he stated that we are united with Beauty (and with Good) through Love, in the presence of light's symbolic revelation.[14] Egidio da Viterbo, as a dedicated renaissance Neoplatonist, quite logically, substituted the goal of knowledge of God with the goal of receiving the revelation of the divine nature into the soul. This can be achieved using the heart rather than the mind.[15] It also follows the idea expressed by Areopagite in which one cannot know God, nor describe him, only love him.[16] Dante Alighieri, who is depicted twice by Raphael in the Stanza, in his *Convivio* said that the soul participates in the divine nature. He is describing the process of contemplation in which the soul "sees God solely through the inner mirror of the soul."[17] Thus the highest art form is the art of contemplation, which encompasses also the contemplation of universal beauty.

The tripartite division of the World, delivered by Egidio da Viterbo in his famous sermon, is the ideological basis of the Stanza. The material sphere that is reserved for humans is, of course, depicted on the walls as the four faculties of knowledge. But it is not any sort of knowledge, only the one that allows for a man to reach God. These are interconnected and inseparable from one another, forming a cycle of Sapientia. The vault is reserved for the celestial sphere, with its simpler forms being depicted as personifications. This illustrates the Neoplatonic ideal of contemplating the many in order to reach the few. The *tondi* are again themselves connected by rectangular scenes that this time make a celestial cycle. But they are also related to the paintings below them, not just as being their symbols or summaries, but literally having a connection with them.[18] This, yet again, creates a circular motif in

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12 P. Barolsky, "Raphael's 'Parnassus' Scaled by Bembo", *Notes in the History of Art,* Vol. 19, No. 2, 2000, p. 33.

13 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II,* Beograd, 2008, p. 380

14 Ibid. p. 383-384

15 D. Nodes, op. cit. p. 14

16 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike III*, Beograd, 2012, p. 239

17 K. E. Gilbert, i H. Kun, *Istorija estetike,* transl. D. Puhalo, Beograd, 1969, p. 138

18 These points of connection are depicted in this way: Theology points downwards to the Disputation; Apollo gazes towards Poetry above Parnassus; Justice gazes at the Virtues below her, and Plato points towards Philosophy.

the Stanza, forming a triad of circularity. As such it encompasses two immensely important aspects of Neoplatonic thought – the triad and the circle.

To finish with Egidio's tripartite division, the first and the highest sphere is that of divinity, which is not depicted in the Stanza. We catch a glimpse of it in the highest part of the *Disputa*, with its golden rays and clouds of electrum[19] (Figure 1). However, as a Neoplatonist and a person knowledgeable about patristic theology, Egidio must have known the Areopagite's understanding of God. According to his Christian understanding of Neoplatonism, God is not the same as the Trinity, but something even higher. He is not a being, and therefore cannot be either understood or described. This is described as the so-called negative or apophatic theology.[20] God is equated with Plotinus's One, which is also not a being, nor is ita non-being. It is at the same time movable and immovable, just as it is present and absent.[21] Thus, the third and the highest part of the Stanza is not depicted, for it cannot be.It can, however, be reached through the contemplation of divine truths depicted on the walls and the ceiling. This takes account of both the absence of God in the lack of his depiction, and his presence for He is in the Being, and thus in the paintings and the observer himself.

The complexity of the pictorial program in the Stanza made it hard for any viewer who was not familiar with Neoplatonism to grasp its deeper meaning. This lack of understanding was further emphasized when Julius II died, and when the works of the papal humanists started to fall into oblivion. The cultural and political climate in the second half of the 16th century changed completely, and the concept of the unity of all knowledge in theology was abandoned. Emerging scientists were seeking the truth outside of the religious doctrines.[22] Already for the people who lived later in the 16th century – Vasari, Ghisi, Veneriano-it was hard for them to fully understand the concept. With all of this happening, the political promotion of Julius II was lost along with the philosophical syncretism of Egidio da Viterbo, Marco Vigerio, Tommaso Inghirami, and others.[23] We were left with the marvelous art of Raphael, and some basic information regarding the Stanza della Segnatura provided by Giorgio Vasari.

RENAISSANCE THEORY OF PAINTING

Now I will do my best to reconstruct a Renaissance theory of painting based on the philosophy of Marsilio Ficino, and other ancient authors from whose works he drew ideas and concepts. Evidence suggests that Egidio da Viterbo, who had studied under Ficino, knew these concepts well and had them in mind when he conceived the pictorial program of the Stanza della Segnatura. Therefore, under this assumption I will present my hypothesis as to how Raphael's frescoes appeared to a 16th century observer knowledgeable in Neoplatonism. However, I must add that

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19 Ezekiel's text recounts the visionary appearance of the Godhead (Doxa) in a cloud that opens to reveal brilliant light "like a kind of electrum, that is, in the middle of the fire;" Gregory the Great explains that electrum, an alloy of silver and gold, "exceeds gold in *claritas*and exceeds silver in *fulgor*." Shearman proposed that Raphael denoted with great originality the composition of clouds and angelic bodies by vapor condensation, bathed in overwhelmingly brilliant Gregorian luminescence. (K. B. Wingfield, op. cit.p. 192)

20 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike III*, p. 239

21 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II,* p. 207

22 B. Kempers, op. cit. p. 164

23 Ibid. p. 166

I will focus solely on the relationship between the Renaissance Neoplatonism and theory of perception of a painting, and not on the Neoplatonic interpretation of the representations in Raphael's frescoes.

According to Panofsky's "Idea, a Concept in Art Theory",[24] the roots of modern art theory were established in the Renaissance. He discerns two different approaches: the mimetic one, described by Leon Battista Alberti, but also by other artists like Leonardo and Dürer; and the Neoplatonic one. The first one argues that the idea does not preexist in the mind of the artist, but is based on experiences from nature. It is perhaps, best summarized in the mimetic approach, in which observing nature is the key for creating a painting. The role of the artist is to create a balance between all the elements, making the object depicted most appealing to the eye. This is achieved based on his visual experience, from which the painter should select the best out of what is presented and then combine it, thus, creating an object which surpasses the reality of nature. Alberti adds that the painter should, in addition, add beauty.[25] According to him, beauty is based on the painter's talent to imitate nature, but even more so on the painter's literacy, because it is through knowledge that the artist can understand proportions, mathematical perspective, anatomy and the principles of harmony. The Renaissance theory of art tried to create a set of rules to objectively measure how successful a painting truly is.[26]

On the other hand, the revival of Platonism after Ficino's translations postulated a different approach. The idea that the painter has is not considered a rational conclusion based on his experiences of nature. Instead, his intellect compares the impression of the Form that is radiated from the object and received by the Spiritus of the body with the corresponding Idea.[27] Based on God's imprint of the Idea of a perfect object onto the soul of the artist, he then judges what is beautiful, and depicts it. Alberti's theory posed that the harmony of proportion, color and quality is the essence of a good painting. This is the complete opposite of what Plotinus (and Ficino) argued for, because it points only to outer or surface beauty, thereby completely neglecting what is ontologically higher.[28]

I would argue, however that the situation is not as black and white as it is presented by Panofsky. In his *Enneads*, Plotinus compliments the right proportions and harmony of the parts. "Harmonies perceived by the senses ought to be measured by numbers, not in any ratio, but in that which would serve in creating a shape that dominates the whole."[29] By stating that the parts are not as important as the whole, which is constituted by these same parts in a harmonious way, Plotinus affirms what Alberti would argue some 1200 years later. He ends his talk about "images which, like some lost shadows came into matter and adorned it", and proceeds to analyze the higher, so called "primary beauties" which lay beyond the sensory world[30] and are reached and perceived through one's soul. Therefore, the main difference is that Alberti's theory lacks a metaphysical dimension, whereas the part perceived by the

24 In this paper I use the translated version: E. Panofsky, *Idea – Prilog Povijesti Pojma Starije Teorije Umetnosti*, prev. Irena Martinovic i Boris Niksic, Zagreb, 2002.

25 E. Panofsky, *Idea – Prilog Povijesti Pojma Starije Teorije Umetnosti*, prev. Irena Martinovic i Boris Niksic, Zagreb, 2002, p. 53-54

26 Ibid. p. 57

27 M. Quinlan-McGrath, *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance*. Chicago, 2013, p. 78

28 E. Panofsky, *Idea – Prilog Povijesti Pojma Starije Teorije Umetnosti*, 2002, p. 59-60

29 Plotin. *Eneade*, ur. V. Marković, Beograd, 1982, p. 32

30 Ibid. p. 32

senses is the same. Both thinkers emphasize the harmony of the parts in creating an ideal object. For Plotinus, however, this is in order for it to become a symbol of divine truth; for Alberti it was to surpass nature – *natura naturans*.

Raphael was a perfect candidate for the decoration of the pope's rooms because of his education, which was required both for Alberti's principles, on the one hand, and for creating images imbued by Neoplatonism, on the other. In his letter written to Baldassare Castiglione in 1516, he said:

> "In order to paint a beautiful woman, I need to see more beautiful women and under condition that you help me make the choice; but since there are so few beautiful women and few credible judges, I will go with the certain idea which appears in my thoughts. Whether it has artistic value I know not, I cannot say; but I will surely try to have one."[31]

Even though the first sentence of the letter tempts to draw a conclusion that Raphael was inclined towards Alberti, the second part hints more at a trace of Neoplatonism.

Panofsky says that Raphael is reluctant to explain the origin of his idea, and that he would respond with "I do not know" if asked about it. He also adds that this image which the young artist would have in mind is probably a summary of his sensory experience.[32] For me, his sentence about a "certain idea which appears" in his thoughts is very Plotinian in its formulation. Even though it is based on a series of sensory experiences, it still follows Plotinus's advice that all that is beautiful should be unified into one unique, singular beauty.[33] Another reason why I think Panofsky is wrong in his interpretation of the letter is that it was written after the decoration of the Stanza had been completed. Also, Raphael was very well acquainted with Neoplatonic philosophy that was presented to him by Egidio da Viterbo, Tommaso Inghirami and other humanists of the papal court. I would ascribe his shyness in admitting that he does not know of the idea's artistic value to certain modesty, so common in the letters of his time, especially since this particular letter was written for a count, Baldassare Castiglione, whom Raphael had painted probably one year before.

Panofsky also says that Leonardo, in his treatise on painting does not comment on the meaning of the term "idea", and that he, in his beliefs, is a follower of Alberti.[34] However, Leonardo stated that the artist is always rethinking what he saw in nature. He said that "the painter is forced to align his spirit with the spirit of nature itself, and to serve as a medium between nature and art, using his art as a commentary on natural occurrences which are unavoidable consequences of its laws."[35] Even though this is far removed from Neoplatonic thought, and Leonardo truly was, as Panofsky says, more inclined towards Alberti's notion of art, it still leaves space for an interpretation which would be dear to Ficino, namely the alignment of the spirit.

The Spiritus has a vital role in our perception of the world around us, as it is both projected from our eyes, and compares the received image with the divine Idea in our mind. What can be drawn from Leonardo's statement is the alignment of our

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31 E. Panofsky, *Idea – Prilog Povijesti Pojma Starije Teorije Umetnosti*, 2002, p. 66-67
32 Ibid. p. 67
33 R. Đokić, *Istorijaestetike II,* p. 288
34 E. Panofsky, *Idea – Prilog Povijesti Pojma Starije Teorije Umetnosti*, 2002, p. 66
35 K. E. Gilbert, iH. Kun, op. cit. p. 149

spirit with that of nature. If the natural spirit is the same as the cosmic one, then we can follow Ficino in his statement that "by application of our spirit to the spirit of the cosmos, achieved by physical science and our affect, celestial goods pass to our soul and body."[36] This results in making our spirit, or in this case the spirit of the painter "more like celestial things." In *De Vita* Book III chapter 4, Ficino explains the parallel between our spirit and that of the cosmos. For him, the cosmic spirit is an intermediary between the "gross body of the World and its Soul", just as our spirit is an intermediary between our body and soul: "This is absorbed by man in particular through his own spirit which is by its own nature similar to it, especially if it is made more akin to it by art."[37] Ficino uses analogy, a valuable instrument of Neoplatonic logic, to explain the connection one can make with the Spiritus of the World. I should also explain that the spirit of the world is procreated by the World-Soul "as if pregnant by her own generative power",[38] so that everything is generated through it by the World-soul.

I cannot here go into a detailed explanation of the hierarchy of the world according to Ficino (and Plotinus), but in order to better understand the purpose of an image, I should describe how the World-Soul functions. This is because the purpose of the painting or of an image heavily depends on the dynamics of the cosmos. According to Plotinus (and Ficino) there are three hypostases: the One, the Nous and the Soul. In addition to them there is matter, which is passive and as such is nota being. The One (or God) is the most difficult to explain simply, for it is between existence and nonexistence, between action and non-action. It cannot be described, for every description of it implies the confinement of its perfection. It is positioned beyond this world and as such cannot be grasped by thinking; it can only be experienced by us. But to experience it one needs to attain a high level of knowledge, which culminates in ecstasy.[39]

The Nous or the Cosmic (Angelic) Mind is the first being, and is everything. It is immovable and incapable of action, only of thinking itself, through which it is aware of its existence. The Ideas reside in it. The next hypostasis is the Soul, which still belongs to the intelligible sphere. By contrast, she is capable of action, but is dependent on the Mind, for she is born out of it. Matter is the lowest in the sequence of the world's hierarchy; it is passive and has its being in non-being. Only when Form, which is capable of action, is given to it, a singular body is created. As such, matter is only an image of the upper world.[40]

We can already notice that the concept of an image being always an image of something ontologically higher has its roots here. Plotinus argues that the idea of beauty resides, as all ideas do, in the Mind. It is considered a plan, which is an archetype of beauty in the world below. From the Mind, the idea of beauty is transferred into the Soul, bestowing light upon it, becoming the creator of the beauty in the matter. In relation to the Mind, everything below successively declines in its beauty. Only God is more beautiful than the Mind.[41] The most important point in this description of the idea of beauty as such is in its creative power to shape matter.

36 M. Ficino, *Three books on life,* transl. C.V. Kaske and J.R. Clark, Arizona, 1998, p. 134

37 Ibid. p. 136

38 Ibid. p. 135

39 B. Bošnjak, *Filozofija od Aristotela do Renesanse i Odabrani Tekstovi Filozofa*, Zagreb, 1957.p. 60-61

40 Ibid. p. 59

41 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II,* p. 275

At the beginning of *De Vita* Book III, Ficino explains how the World-soul serves to connect the Mind and the Body of the world. She is the *Primum Mobile*, she connects everything and she is, thus, equally distant from all things, both divine and transient. She is also simultaneously everywhere. These are her main features needed for the shaping of matter, which she does through seminal reasons. She possesses as many of them as there are ideas in the Divine Mind, so that everything created in this world corresponds to its idea in the Mind.[42] "Therefore Zoroaster called such correspondences of forms to the reasons existing in the World-Soul "divine lures" and Synesius corroborated that they are magical baits."[43] One can manipulate these divine lures to absorb more divine influences from the World-Soul. The rest of *De Vita* Book III is dedicated to this, but I will comment only on the parts that are relevant for the art theory, and as such are applicable to the Stanza dellaSegnatura.

Ficino discusses celestial influences and how one can lure them or trap them in matter, and thus manipulate their power. This is done via various symbols which are related to the planets and their ruling deities, but can also be done through vault paintings depicting the sky. This then serves as a divine lure or a magical bait for the planetary influences and for the World-Soul itself. As Garin and Zambelli noticed, the "form of an image as such takes on itself something of a force or a soul from above."[44] It can be said that the paintings in the Stanza della Segnatura have magical properties and are suitable for celestial influences. I would also argue that the person who conceived them wanted them to serve as a connection between the observer and the divine. The philosophical concept which I reconstructed and presented in the previous paragraphs explains this clearly. If we accept that the tri-partite division of the world was depicted in the Stanza, then the vault serves as a symbol of the celestial sphere. This sphere of the heavens is intermediary between the material world and the intelligible one, as it is the least material of all material things. And "the heavens, being free from corruption, retain the "archetypal" form they received from the hand of the Creator executing his 'idea'."[45]

This fits perfectly with the concept of the *tondi* representing Justice, Poetry, Theology and Philosophy as they can be considered the archetypes of the paintings below them. By taking on themselves the "soul from above", they inspire the observer to engage in a debate. This "soul from above", but also the world spirit or *pneuma*, can be captured using analogy. So, an image that is analogous to the Idea it represents can become a bait for the Soul.[46] That is why I am deeply convinced that the *tondi* on the ceiling, since they represent the archetypes of the faculties of knowledge and poetry, can serve as lures for the Soul. She "can easily apply herself to materials since she has formed them to begin with through these same seminal reasons."[47] Thus, the *tondi* symbolize the seminal reasons of philosophy, poetry, theology and justice.

According to Iamblichus, divinity can be reached only through a symbol.[48] Thus, through symbols, they inspire the observer by radiating their form into space. Since

42 M. Ficino, op. cit. p. 128
43 Ibid. p. 129
44 Ibid. p. 26
45 Ibid. p. 27
46 Ibid. p. 30
47 Ibid. p. 202
48 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II*, p. 340

more Soul is embedded in them than in other images, their radiance is probably more influential on the observer, who needs not actively look at them, but is being constantly shone upon. This I derive from the theory of optics and radiation as explained by Ficino in *De Vita* and Quinlan-McGrath in her book *Influences: Art, Optics, and Astrology in the Italian Renaissance.* It can be said that there is a certain kind of intertwining between the subject of a painting and the viewer. This leads to the collapse of the boundary between the subject and the object, and consequently between the real and the imaginary.[49] The explanation can be found in the symbol itself, which serves as a point of connection between the otherworldly and of this world.[50] To do so, in the case of the Stanza, following Plotinus' ideal, one should be a highly knowledgeable person, and hence be able to reach ecstasy.

This process is described in Pico's *Oratio*, and Egidio da Viterbo was probably very familiar with it. According to Pico, who follows the celestial hierarchy of the Areopagite, there are three higher modes of life: active, contemplative and unitive, which are embodied in three groups of angels: the Thrones, Cherubim and Seraphim. The second one is "the angelic order of Pallas, the goddess of wisdom, and she is the guardian of contemplative philosophy."[51] It, thus, makes sense that Pallas or Minerva is depicted in the School of Athens (Figure 2). Moving upwards from the contemplative level, we reach the Seraphim, which are love. This proves what I stated before, following Proclus's triad, that love takes us towards the Good through beauty. Through the Seraphim or the seraphic way of life one reaches God. Indeed, Pico states that: "One who is a Seraph – a lover – is in God, and God is in him; or rather, he and God are one."[52] Then contemplation ends and ecstasy is achieved in unity with God or the One. Iamblichus explained his theurgy in a similar way. For him, the observer is first connected to certain parts of the cosmos and divine potencies which permeate them. I would equate these with the seminal reasons in the World-Soul. Then through them, he is led to the universal Creator, with whom he becomes linked, and being deprived of matter unites himself with the logos.[53]

But why would the heavens bestow their gifts upon us? The explanation can once again be found in Ficino's *De Vita*, to be precise in III. 20, where he says that "love and faith toward a celestial gift are often the cause of celestial aid."[54] In this passage love is introduced in the context of an image. I previously mentioned that love helps the observer to reach beauty (according to both Proclus and Pietro Bembo), so an artwork can then be understood as a metaphor for an infinite divine beauty. This was promoted after the Council of Nicaea in 787, when it was deemed permissible to worship God through the use of images.[55] To understand the metaphor of the image, the observer should not use his or her ratio, but rather their emotions. Only in that way can the observer be led to "see and touch the invisible reality."[56] There is, however, a risk of loving the symbol more than what it represents, as was stressed by St Augustine.

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49 Ibid. p. 188

50 Ibid. p. 340

51 B. P. Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's Oration: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy", in: *Midwest Studies in Philosophy,* Vol. 26, 2002, p. 62

52 Ibid. p. 63

53 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II,* p. 336

54 M. Ficino, op. cit. p. 183-184

55 O. Grau, *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion,* trans. G. Custance, London, 2003, p. 32

56 D. Iozzia, *Aesthetic Themes in Pagan and Christian Neoplatonism: From Plotinus to Gregory of Nyssa.* London, 2015, p. 21

The beauty can also be tied to the painting as well as to what the painting represents. If a person is in love with the World as an image of God, then he or she is well directed. On the other hand, if one loves the image for the material beauty of it, then "his eye is blurry as that of a bat or an owl."[57] Therefore, St Augustine employs the concept of a veil, which need not hide the truth, but rather can suggest it. It can thus be used to attract the consumers of the artwork. Continuing in Augustine's intellectual footsteps, Hugh of Saint-Victor confirms this and adds that the veil should stimulate the observer's activity and awaken his soul.[58]

The concept of the veil is precisely how Raphael's paintings in the Stanza dellaSegnatura should be understood. They should stimulate an intellectual debate within the observers who would then try and decipher them. Through these intellectual stimuli, the soul of the observers would be awoken, and thereby prepared to receive the celestial gifts which are affecting it by the constant radiation from the paintings' Form. Of course, only people who were highly educated could have understood these concepts and thus interpret the paintings of the Stanza in such a way. Porphyry stated that the images "can be useful only to those initiated in the mysteries",[59] or in this case only those who are educated in Neoplatonism. This is probably one of the main reasons why Raphael's frescoes soon became intellectually inaccessible to the viewers once the cultural climate changed.

Another important aspect of the *tondi* that supports their archetypal representation is their shape: the circle. For Proclus, the circle represents continuity and unity at the same time. This can be both the continuity and unity of a whole which can be understood as time, space, or movement. This continuity can be finite in that it lasts until the starting point is reached again, or infinite, i.e. continuing into infinity. Therefore, a circle unites both the finite and the infinite in itself. This allowed Proclus to equate it with time, which is infinite and stimulates the movement of other things. For him, time is eternal and exists before the second hypostasis, that of the Mind, and it is in the center of the intelligible circle representing the eternal being. One of the three parts of the noumenal sphere, according to Proclus, is the being-in-itself which he equates with Beauty. Since a circle is a representation of the eternity located in the Mind, it is also a representation of Beauty.[60] When his view was adapted to fit Christian theology, the generative power of the eternal cyclic movement was explained as God eternally creating. He does so by pouring light into the circle, which is by being both active and passive at the same time.[61] This was expressed by Proclus as the power of the circle to be both a fragment and a whole, both active and passive, finite and infinite, and which in itself unites all of this.

I gave this very complex explanation of the circle because I think that it has the potential to deepen our understanding of the vault in the Stanza (Figure 5). First of all, if the circle represents infinity and the highest level of Beauty attainable by the human mind, this can then be reached by the observer looking at the circular shape of the paintings on the ceiling. It also goes hand in hand with the understanding of an image as a symbol of something ontologically higher; in this case of the Angelic or Divine Mind. As I explained in the previous paragraph, by thinking about what is being seen in an image, the soul is awakened and yearns for the World-Soul. The

57 K. E. Gilbert, iH. Kun, op. cit. p. 131

58 Ibid. p. 134

59 D. Iozzia, op. cit. p. 46

60 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II,* p. 385-388

61 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike III*, p. 249

latter is attracted by the love of the viewer towards it and elevates his soul. Thus, using the logic of the Neoplatonic philosophers, in particular how Proclus understands the circular shape, I would argue that Raphael's *tondi* would thus have all the same qualities as other paintings, but with a heightened effect. The emphasis comes from the shape of a circle, which gives thereby more power to the representation. Given that the personifications of theology, philosophy, poetry and justice are already simplified versions of the paintings below, and as such closer to Beauty, with their circular shape they are elevated even higher than if they were rectangular.

In relation to the observer, their texts can then function both as a cause for an intellectual debate and awakening of the soul, stimulated by the former. Thus, the observer would be inspired by the divine, to know the causes, and to know the divine things which give to each its due (as is written on the tablets in the paintings).[62] According to Nicholas of Cusa, Giorgio Martini, Marsilio Ficino, and later Giordano Bruno, and similarly to Proclus, the circle is the perfect symbol of God himself, for in Him the "periphery and the center are exchangeable", and He is compared to "a sphere whose border is nowhere and center is everywhere."[63] Therefore, the *tondi* follow what was expressed by pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite: that every image is an image of God.[64]

Since all of the frescoes in the Stanza are united in a cycle, both literally and figuratively, they represent the image of God. As I have argued in the previous chapter, God, because he is not a being, cannot be directly represented but only symbolized or hinted. To confirm my theory that the Stanza follows the tripartite division of the World as expressed by Egidio, and that God is not depicted but is present in the room, I will use the understanding of the circle discussed above. For Proclus and the Areopagite, the circle is the image of the Divine Mind, but for the thinkers of the Renaissance, it is a symbol of God. Since all of Raphael's images are forming a cycle vertically, horizontally, and as a whole, they together form a symbolic sphere which is a three-dimensional circle. If this sphere is understood as God, according to Ficino, its center is everywhere. "Everywhere" meaning what-ever fresco the observer is looking at. Since they are all interconnected with one another, the one which is analyzed at the moment is the center, while the others are the periphery. And they are all interchangeable. This makes the center everywhere and the border nowhere, for none individually can be fully understood without understanding the others. Through this, God's presence is expressed in the room, without an explicit

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62 The inscriptions in each of the *tondi* representing Justice, Theology, Poetry and Philosophy are given here accordingly, with their translations: *Ius Suum Unicuique Tribuit* (I give to each his due); *Divinarum Rerum Notitia* (Knowledge of divine things); *Numine Afflatur* (Inspired by the Divine); *Causarum Cognitio* (Knowledge of the causes). All of the inscriptions held by the putti and the genii can be read together when connected by "et", in any of the directions. This allows for four different ways of reading and combining them, but all pointing to the same subject – divine permeation into this world. I find it quite fitting that these texts are on the ceiling, as it is from above, that is, from the celestial sphere, that we receive the divine influences. Another important aspect is that this was a sort of a cryptic message, understandable only to those with adequate knowledge and willing to contemplate it. It is exactly this kind of approach to the secrets of knowledge that was highly praised by Neoplatonic humanists of the Renaissance. One might recall Pico's statement in the Oration when he does not wish to cast the pearls before the swine. It is painted there for everyone to see, but not for everyone to understand.

63 E. Wind, *Paganske misterije u renesansi*, prev. Lj. Nikolić, Beograd, 2019, p. 298

64 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike III*, p. 247

depiction (which is also impossible), thus perfectly symbolizing his "omnipresence and absence"[65] at the same time.

The other crucial moment for Renaissance art theory is the use of perspective, and the Stanza dellaSegnatura offers abundant material for interpretating it through its frescoes on the walls. According to Panofsky, the evolution of mathematical perspective in art coincided with the evolution of epistemology and natural philosophy. Pictorial space, which now had an infinitely distant vanishing point, becomes a continuation of real space, with three dimensions, thereby imitating physical reality. Infinity is no longer just in God, as the scholastic philosophers thought, but was also empirically rooted in perspective.[66] It was placed in the *natura naturata*, or to be more precise, in the painted version of it – *natura naturans*:[67] "The result was a translation of psychophysiological space into mathematical space; in other words, an objectification of the subjective."[68] This meant that the medieval dogmatic understanding of a painting was substituted by the growing need of extending the real experience of the viewer into the pictorial space. In the Renaissance, the miraculous aspect of an image became visionary, in the sense that it is "a direct experience of the beholder" and "the supernatural events…erupt into his own, apparently, natural visual space."[69] The understanding of a painting and what is depicted in it as an objective reality (which was how it was perceived in the Middle Ages) is now replaced by the concept of it being only an appearance of the objective reality that lies beyond it i.e. the divine. In its relation to the observer, the painting's subject is now reduced in a certain sense, and needs to be penetrated by the beholder's consciousness, turning it "into a vessel for the divine."[70]

Panofsky distinguished two different approaches in the use of perspective: in the first one the image is adapted to the viewer; in the second, the viewer needs to adapt to the image. The example he provides for the former is a ceiling fresco which has a singular view point, the position of which is based on the viewer. This means that when creating a painting, the artist calculated the standing point from which the beholder should observe the artwork in order to have the fullest immersion in it. With portable paintings, it is quite the opposite situation. The observer needs to find the stand-point from which he will fully grasp the painted perspective.[71] L. Manovich concluded that when the painting is immovable, the freedom is then given to the observer, and when we give the freedom of movement to the painting (or rather the option of displacing a painting), the observer is locked in place. Of course, this depends on the subject and the purpose of the painting itself, but he derived a general rule: the wall paintings are immovable[72] while the panel or canvas paintings are movable.[73]

There is, however, one important feature that applies to the frescoes in the Stanza as well as to any other mural with mathematical perspective, and that is that the

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65 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 290

66 E. Panofsky, *Perspective as symbolic form*, New York, 1991, p. 65-66

67 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 37

68 E. Panofsky, *Perspective as symbolic form*, p. 66

69 Ibid. p. 72

70 Ibid. p. 72

71 Ibid. p. 68

72 Wall paintings can be moved by being taken down from a wall as part of a conservation process. This is nowadays done rarely, as they lose the connection with their original space.

73 L. Manovič, *Metamediji,* Beograd, 2001, p. 31

observer is still "locked" in one place. For if he or she moves, they will no longer perceive the illusion of perspective. Thus, Manovich offers a distilled conclusion which applies to murals and mosaics in general – both before and after the Renaissance. However, his conclusion can also be translated into the conceptual domain. By this I mean that the wall paintings are tied exclusively to their original spatial context for which they were created. Thus, they form the crucial part of an interior decoration, and as such can be considered as applied art (by today's standards). On the other hand, the portable paintings, such as panel or canvas ones, often change the context in which they are exhibited several times.[74]

What is common for every painting with the aim of realistic representation of the world after the Renaissance is that between the observer and what is represented is a screen. The screen intercepts the reality, serving as a window (according to Alberti) through which one can gaze beyond it. Manovich considers Alberti's theory as the first step towards the "imprisonment" of the observer,[75] for it is the first time in the history of art that the content of the painting can be fully grasped only from one point of view. Similar to Panofsky's extension of the real experience of the viewer into the pictorial space, J. Berger described the "screen" of the painting as "a safe into which the visible has been disposed."[76] The concept of "extension of reality" is amplified with the higher degree of similarity between the real and the painted. The wall paintings serve as a particularly useful tool for this as they can depict objects which are in one-to-one ratio with the reality. Having in mind Panofsky's description of a switch that happened in the 15th century, when the mathematical perspective in painting transformed "the *ousia* (reality) into the *phainomenon* (appearance)",[77] it is obvious that a step towards virtual reality was made.

To further explain this, two important concepts need to be introduced: simulation and representation. Simulation occurs when there is no emphatic border between the virtual and the real, and the proportions within the painting are the same as those outside it, leading to a blend of virtual and real. This is characteristic of wall paintings. On the other hand, representation is typical of Renaissance panel paintings, which demand the immobility of the observer, thereby imprisoning him. Manovich then concluded that in simulation art the viewer is both physically and mentally present in a unity between the real and the virtual. It can also be stated that the physical and mental aspects of the viewer are unified within a single space. On the other hand, there is a cleft between the physical and psychological parts of the observer in contact with representational art. While physically being in the same space with the material aspect of the artwork, he is mentally transported into the realm of the immaterial aspect of the painting.[78]

When applying the theory of the screen and of virtual space to Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura, the Neoplatonic concept of an image should also be kept in mind. I say this because it is the main reason that these frescoes are more representational than simulation-like, but only from a pictorial point of view. The virtuality is realized through the philosophical concepts they embody, i.e. the observer complements the

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74 The change of exhibition context unfortunately leads to a loss of some original aspects, since these images were also made at a particular point in time, and in a certain socio-cultural climate. The information loss is usually bigger for the older art, since it is more probable that the painting changed the space which it was meant for several times.

75 L. Manovič, op. cit. p. 22

76 Ibid. p. 23

77 E. Panofsky, *Perspective as symbolic form*, p. 72

78 L. Manovič, op. cit. p. 30-31

representational aspect with the virtual one, which he understands based on his knowledge and experience with Neoplatonism. To a common tourist, they would seem to be just as representational art, while to a Neoplatonic thinker they would serve as virtual (reality).

To support my hypothesis, the duality of perspective needs to be introduced. By "duality" I mean that it can be interpreted as both Panofsky and Manovich explain its relation to the observer. First of all, only two out of four paintings employ perspective: the School of Athens and the Disputation of the Holy Sacrament. Perspective is used to create a unified scenography for the depicted figures, without taking into account the pre-calculated position of the observer. This does not mean, however, that the observer is deprived of a view-point from which the depth of the fresco is fully experienced. Since something can be called an optimal view – or stand-point, it means that the observer is "locked" physically when viewing the frescoes. According to Panofsky's division of the use of perspective, Raphael's paintings would fit into the second category, that in which the observer needs to adapt himself to the image. This is an unusual case, since we are discussing wall paintings that employ perspective. Manovich, however, differentiates paintings based on their (and the observer's) mobility. Since he puts wall paintings and mosaics in the group that allow for the viewer to move around, it would seem logical to put the Segnatura frescoes in that group also. However, since the observer has a suggested, but unspecified viewpoint, the frescoes then fit the second category, that of portable images. This seems contradictory, but it can be resolved. Manovich offers a generalization in his theory, making a universal conclusion, without considering the case of an artist using mathematical perspective. When it is used, the fact that a painting is immovable or portable no longer plays the main role in its relationship with the subject. The primacy is now taken over by mathematical perspective, which, depending on how the artist uses it, dictates how the subject will view it.

Raphael's frescoes are not just an exception in the duality of perspective, but also in the duality of being representational and virtual at the same time. I am arguing that from a pictorial point of view, their basis is representational, to use Manovich's terminology. This is because they are not literal continuations of the real space in which the viewer stands. He is split, since his body remains in the Stanza, while his mind is in the space behind the screen. As Alberti would have put it: he is gazing through a window. This is where the Neoplatonic conception enters the discussion. Since the image is an image of something ontologically higher, and serves to represent the hypostasis, there is no need to create a realistically unified space. The virtual aspect of these frescoes is achieved (in the mind of the observer) through the philosophy behind them, when the scenes are understood as symbols of divinity. This, of course, applies only to those viewers who are familiar with Neoplatonic concepts. The connection between the observer's mind/gaze and the virtual reality is achieved by certain pictorial tools which Raphael exploits wisely and subtly.

These tools belong to Manovich's first group of paintings, namely the simulation/virtual ones. Each of the four scenes on the walls has something which, more or less explicitly, lures the observer's gaze into it. The Parnassus has two figures of Sappho and her male counterpart painted in *trompe l'œil* so that they seem to be sitting in front of the window opening. This method creates a sense of spatiality and a third dimension that is amplified by the horizontal scaling of the figural groups, which leads the eye towards the top part of the painting with Apollo and the Muses. On the opposite side, in Jurisprudence, the sense of three-dimensionality is perhaps

less noticeable. But it is still present in two details. The first one that applies to other paintings as well is the frame that serves as a window into the virtual, "where", to quote Panofsky, "the miraculous becomes a direct experience of the beholder."[79] These frames introduce a semi-virtual moment into the frescoes. The second is the upper part with an architrave topping the real window opening that serves as a base for the top part of the painting where the Virtues reside. There, the clear blue sky is visible, and the 3D effect is achieved with the oak tree and one of the putti who does not fully fit into the frame of the fresco. For the two main frescoes, Raphael used mathematical perspective, again in a dual mode, serving as a construction point for the stage as well as a symbol. In the School of Athens (Figure 2), the vanishing point is hidden "in the graceful folds of Plato and Aristotle's classical robes",[80] since they, along with the other people in the scene, are "unaffected by Christian revelation."[81] In the Disputation of the Holy Sacrament (Figure 1), the vanishing point is set precisely in the Host, symbolizing resurrected Christ as the center of the World.[82]

My theory of the lack of full spatial continuity between the real and the painted space is supported by the fact that all of the frescoes serve as windows into the virtual through Neoplatonism alone. For, the observer who was a contemporary of Raphael did not require a literal optical illusion because his mind was not supposed to continue wandering through physical space, but rather through an immaterial one. This was attained by contemplating the ideas embedded in Raphael's frescoes, which would then activate the soul through knowledge gained by vision, and thereby attract the World-Soul bearing the divine gifts. The observer's spirit would be lifted up by the beauty of the paintings into the highest, universal Beauty located in the Divine Mind. This was accomplished by means of Love, which would make someone resemble a Seraph, as Pico had described it in his Oration.

Another important feature which contributes further to my argument lies in comparing Manovich's theory of a "representational" type of painting with those in the Stanza. He states that the physical and psychical parts of the viewer are split when engaging with the representational part, leaving the former in objective reality, while the latter wanders beyond the screen. For the Neoplatonic philosophy which had a low opinion of the body as it belongs primarily to lifeless and passive matter, it is irrelevant that it cannot go beyond the screen. The focus, or rather the aim of a Renaissance painting belonging to Neoplatonic discourse is the soul or the mind of the beholder which needs to penetrate it, thereby entering the virtual. Therefore, the existence of a cleavage between the mental and the physical is insignificant.

To conclude, the Stanza della Segnatura with its complex theoretical background served as a sort of virtual reality for a contemporary (knowledgeable) viewer who was willing to discover and contemplate its secrets. It is a perfect example of a combination of two main postulates in the Renaissance theory of art, as it combines the mimetic one that is based on Alberti's understanding of nature and reality, and the metaphysical one based on Ficino's Neoplatonism. All of this was masterfully assembled by the young Raphael, who, in my opinion reached the peak of his creativity in the Stanza della Segnatura.

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79 E. Panofsky, *Perspective as symbolic form*, p. 72

80 Rowland, Ingrid D. "Representing the World", in: *The Making of Humanities Volume 1 Early Modern Europe,* ed. R. Bod, J. Maat, and T. Weststeijn, Amsterdam, 2010, p. 78

81 Ibid. p. 79

82 Ibid. p. 79

VIRTUAL REALITY AND THE STANZA DELLA SEGNATURA

Before describing the relationship between the observer and VR (virtual reality), I would like to briefly explain the evolution of the screen as understood by Manovich. He discerns two types of screen: a classic and a dynamic one. What is common for every screen is that it is always described as a rectangular framed surface that physically exists in the same space as the viewer, but reveals another, virtual (representational) dimension. The classical screen can be considered as any painting that serves as a window into another dimension. The dynamic screen, on the other hand, is time dependent, as its content is moving, incorporating in itself the fourth dimension. Its aim is to fully captivate the observer, so that the cleavage between the physical and mental appears, thereby demanding the presence of the mental in the virtual. As a consequence, the real space around the screen is fully neglected.[83] In the virtual reality, the screen completely disappears. It now covers the entire field of vision, and the virtual space completely coincides with the real one. The observer no longer gazes through a window, but is fully integrated within the dimension behind the window itself. Grau calls this phenomenon telepresence.[84] The rectangular frontal surface with its inner proportions different than those of the real world has now disappeared.[85] For a painting to become as close as possible to virtual reality, it needs to be constructed and painted to look exactly like the real space, extending it beyond the screen. To do so, the proportions within both the physical and virtual need to be equal. VR avoids this problem by covering the whole field of vision with a screen, thereby obviating the need for a pictorial illusion. The simulation of the real beyond the screen is fully abandoned in VR because of its different functional logic. In VR, the connection between the two spaces: the real and the virtual, either does not exist, or it corresponds perfectly. Physical reality is thus completely neglected,[86] and a symbiosis between the observer and the illusion is achieved.[87]

The imprisonment of the observer discussed in the previous chapter now shifts into a different form. The observer is granted the freedom to move as aconsequence ofsynchronization between the virtual and the physical space. It is now necessary to move in order to have the full experience of the VR. Where is the imprisonment then? Since VR cannot be realized without the headset that the viewer needs to wear, the person becomes a slave to the machine.[88] Through telepresence, this dependence allows him or her to see the object, or in this case the artworks, which are physically very distant: "The classic position of an observer directly in front of a material work of art was replaced by a participatory relationship that surmounts great distances but still appears to be immediately present in the work."[89] He no longer needs to go to a museum, church or gallery, but can access them from his home, provided that all of the technological requirements have been met. This opens up new epistemological possibilities and aesthetical paradoxes.

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83 L. Manovič, op. cit. p. 12-13

84 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 271

85 L. Manovič, op. cit. p. 14

86 Ibid. p. 16

87 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 202

88 L. Manovič, op. cit. p. 13-14

89 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 271

"The ontological character of the work of art as defined by Heidegger and others no longer obtains in the aesthetics of the computer-aided virtual reality."[90] The paintings which were made "for eternity" so to say, have now become ephemeral. Unlike the Renaissance theory of art and vision, in which the painting continuously and punctiformally radiates its form and matter out into the space (similar to what pixels do from a computer screen), the digital image is turned off once the viewer is finished observing it. The deep layers of analysis and history of the original material artwork are compressed in a 2D flat screen which can be dismissed in one click. The first destroys the ontological dimension, the second destroys the eternal. So, the eternal is now substituted with temporality, or rather it becomes ephemeral, thereby creating an aesthetic paradox.

The other "aesthetic paradox" means that, with VR, it is possible to experience a painting "like in reality", but also to switch between objects and rooms at lightning speed. On the official website of the Vatican museums, one can find the VR versions of several halls and rooms.[91] Among them is the Stanza della Segnatura, along with other *stanze* that Raphael painted. The observer can then switch between them and analyze each separately. One problem with observing a work of art through VR is the lack of the so-called aesthetic distance which is crucial for critical reflection. "Aesthetic distance always comprises the possibility of attaining an overall view, of understanding organization, structure, and function, and achieving a critical appraisal."[92] Increasing the level of symbiosis between the observer and the illusion decreases this distance proportionately. As a result, a feeling of real presence within the virtual is achieved, but the critical understanding of the artwork is diminished.

There is, however, an important difference between virtualizing preexisting artwork, such as the paintings by Raphael, and artwork created virtually. The problem of aesthetic distance applies more to the latter, for the observer is only focused on the feelings and impressions awakened in him by the simulation itself. The former is a reproduction of an already existing object digitized for an educational purpose,which opens up a new problem. According to W. Benjamin, (mass) reproduction disperses the artistic aura of the original, which is exclusively tied to its ritual purpose.[93] It severs the aura from its original context, thereby making the artwork itself more accessible to a much wider audience. This also allows it to be placed in contexts that would otherwise have been impossible for the original.[94] To illustrate this in the case of a VR version of the Stanza della Segnatura, the room itself has been recorded by photogrammetry, and posted on the official website. Even though the observer looking at the virtual content is aware that the Stanza itself is still tied to its original museum setting, he is probably unaware that this setting is not a real one, but is rather an idealized one. By this I mean that it has been recorded at a particular time during the day, without visitors, with optimal lighting etc. These circumstances are already predetermined when one observes the Stanza, and their aim is to capture the ideal moment, so that the viewer can have the best possible experience. The original "ritual" aspect of the Stanza had been gone through the ev-

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90 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 207

91 https://www.museivaticani.va/content/museivaticani/en/collezioni/musei/stan-ze-di-raffaello/tour-virtuale.html

92 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 202

93 V. Benjamin, „Umetničko Delo u Veku Svoje Tehničke Reprodukcije", u: *Studije Kulture,* ur. J. Đorđević, Beograd, 2008. p. 7

94 Ibid. p. 5

er-changing cultural context, and was in the end transformed into a museum space. Although offering the possibility of creating a simulation of the primary context, the VR further contributed to its loss by mass accessibility. Three main problems resulting now are the decrease of aesthetic distance, the extrapolation of the artwork from its original context, and the inconsistency between the real and virtual experience. Since the first has already been explained, I will comment on the other two.

In this case, the original context does not refer to the actual historical moment and original furnishing of the Stanza when it was made in the 16th century. Rather, it refers to "a spatio-temporal coordinate" of the artwork now. The reproduction, even a virtual one, cannot accurately capture the "unrepeatable existence in a place where" the original "is located."[95] The location of the reproduction is, in this case, in the domain of the digital,i.e. it is being stored as digital data. The paradox of mass reproduction by means of digitalization is the fact that anyone can reach it even though there is only one link for the website. Unlike a newspaper or a print, for which every person has a different material object (albeit with the same content), in the case of VR on a webpage the whole world can access it through the same link. The artwork has thereby become de-materialized.

However, the point is not just to digitize something and put it on the internet, but to create "a parallel testimony" between the material original and the virtual copy. This goes hand in hand with digital preservation of Raphael's frescoes as part of cultural heritage. The frescoes are stored together with additional information and their descriptions on the same website. A problem can occur when this information starts to drift apart from the material reality, thus creating its own virtual one.[96] If this goes too far, the parallel testimony will be lost since a simulacrum[97] of the original, material reality, will occur. As a consequence of the parallelism between the material and the virtual artwork, the gap in experience appears (as explained in the next paragraph). Thus, one can conclude that "computers may be the best repository of all time for information, but they are unable to record or reproduce the sensual presence of a material work of art."[98]

Here I would like to demonstrate the differences (and similarities) between the real-time observer in a museum and one accessing a VR version from home. The inability of VR to reproduce all aspects of the original leads to a problem of inconsistency between the real and the virtual experience. This is obvious since the virtual version on the website of the Vatican museums shows the Stanza in "an idealized" museum setting. As described earlier, the situation within the digital version is predetermined. It is also constant and unchanging, and as such not a faithful reproduction. The person watching it from home (whether through a computer or a headset) will have a hard time enjoying it the same way in real life due to it being overcrowded with tourists.

A deeper divergence between the virtual and the real experience lies in the dispersion of the artistic aura. The "original" setting has its own atmosphere and provokes certain emotions in the viewer thanks to its aura. The viewer is also allowed to move through the room creating a more personal interaction with each of the paintings.

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95 Ibid. p. 4

96 M. Popadić, *Čiji je Mikelanđelov David? Baština u Svakodnevnom Životu*, ur. D. Bulato- vić, Beograd, 2012, p. 49-50

97 For more information about a simulacrum I suggest reading Ž. Bodrijar, *Simulakrumii- Simulacija*, tran. F. Filipović, Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1991.

98 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 207

On the other hand, the reproduced digital version disperses the aura with its "idealism" and predetermined situation. The interface between the real and the virtual is the key point for optimal VR experience. Through it the "character and dimension of interaction is determined as well as the degree of observer psychological involvement with the work of art."[99] In the VR version of the Stanza, unlike in real life, the observer is given a spot from which all the frescoes can be seen. He can zoom in on each of them, which of course is impossible in real life, but the quality of the zoom, at this point, is far from optimal. At magnification the frescoes become somewhat blurry. Therefore, one can say that through mass reproduction the focus on the artistic quality of the original artwork shifts to a focus on its exposure (its ability to be publicly exhibited and accessible).[100]

In addition to all of the issues with VR and the Stanza della Segnatura that I have already presented, one should also keep in mind that there is the original intention of the room and its frescoes. Two further problems with this are the vast knowledge needed to fully understand (and appreciate) their complexity and the lack of a historical reconstruction. What is common for both observers is the fact that neither one of them will be able to experience the Stanza as it was in its original context. This is obvious since the room has changed its purpose several times throughout its history, and the original library furnishingsare long gone. To put it in Benjamin's words: "In the age of technical reproducibility of an artwork its aura has been stunted."[101] But here I am referring to a possible reconstruction that could have been made in the virtual domain. Just like Loeffler created a reconstruction of an Egyptian temple of Horus and the viewer could enter it and explore[102], so too, could the curators of the Vatican museums have made a reconstruction of the Stanza. This way, the observer would be offered two different experiences, and the educational purposes of VR could be elevated to a new level. The observer would be allowed to pick (or switch) between the two, choosing to focus just on the physical/visual aspect of the frescoes, or to analyze them in relation to a reconstruction of the original interior decoration, and thus, as a more applied type of art. He or she would also be closer to an original experience, although never quite reaching it.

Regarding the original experience, it was fully comprehensible and literally accessible only to closest contemporaries of Raphael when the room served as a papal library and a workroom. The ambassadors who came to meet the Pope would have to wait in the Stanza di Eliodoro, while the Pope's advisors would have used the Stanza dell'Incendio as the antechamber. Thus, the three famous stanze of Raphael would have been interconnected. This way, the Segnatura was a link between the public and the private rooms of Julius II.[103] Today's visitor of the Vatican museums would take the exact same route as that of a 16th century ambassador, but almost certainly without knowing it.

Referring again to Raphael's frescoes as more representational than virtual, for a common tourist, the intellectual immersion in them is almost completely impossible. Even those knowledgeable in Neoplatonism today cannot fully grasp the original concept or cannot fully experience it in the way Egidio da Viterbo might have done. This contextual-temporal gap between the historical observer and a contemporary

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99 Ibid. p. 344
100 V. Benjamin, op. cit. p. 9
101 Ibid, p. 5
102 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 174
103 B. Kempers, op. cit. p. 151

one is best described by Grau, who says that "a contemporary observer would have been gripped far more by Masaccio's fresco of the Holy Trinity… than we are today by a film such as *Terminator II*."[104] A major reason for this is our previous visual experience that we bring with us when observing an object in the visual domain, in this case a painting. If we have seen something which is better at creating an illusion of real space, it is then far less likely that we will be struck by the skill of an artist who passed away 500 years ago. Raphael adapted his skill and artistic vision to the taste and ideas of his time. The moment the cultural climate changed, his original artistic expression was no longer adapted to the viewer. On the contrary, now the viewer must adapt to Raphael's art. Thus, the audience can enjoy Raphael only as much as it can through its own knowledge and personal experience/taste. In the real museum, the viewer does this more easily since he/she is in direct contact with the original artwork. Hence, the focus is on the artistic aspect. On the other hand, in the VR the observer's attention is directed towards the accessibility and mass exposure of the Stanza. The fact that he/she is bound to one stand-point in the room, means that he/she takes on the role of the camera scanning the walls with the gaze. "This is not a relationship to which the cult values can be exposed."[105] With this sentence Benjamin stressed the key difference between the original artwork with its historical aura, its "magical" and "occult" properties, and the mass-reproduced one. Paradoxically, in the case of the Stanza dellaSegnatura, by immersing into the virtual, onedrifts away from the transcendental.

Raphael's frescoes are nowadays also observed as fine art. A common tourist might be struck, not by their virtuality secluded in deep layers of Neoplatonism, but by the opulence of colors, expensive materials, and a vast number of figures represented. On the contrary, the observer for whom the room was decorated would have understood it, in today's terminology, more as applied art. This I would argue from two points of view. The first one is the decoration of an interior of a library. The paintings serve as a summary of faculties of knowledge, or, to express it more explicitly, as illustrations. In the case of the Disputation, in which books are scattered around the monstrance (image 1), their material aspect "would have been reinforced by the link to the actual texts that were displayed on wooden bookshelves in the real space below."[106] The other point of view from which the decoration of the Stanza serves as applied art is, again the illustration, that of Neoplatonic philosophy of the Renaissance. Although the frescoes on the walls do not serve as literal depictions of this philosophical school, rather being deeply imbued in it[107], the concept as a whole does so. And it is this aspect which evades the common viewer of today. In Porphyry's words: "Those who are uninitiated, in fact, can capture only the material aspect."[108] In this case, the "fine art" of Raphael.

The last thing I would like to stress is the similarity between VR and Neoplatonism. According to Manovich, in VR, the physical and virtual world have nothing in common.[109] This is the final stage of separation between these two entities, roots of which are found in the Renaissance. Starting with Alberti, according to whom the painting serves as a window through which an observer gazes beyond, and comple-

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104 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 341
105 V. Benjamin, op. cit. p. 12
106 K. B. Wingfield, op. cit. p. 20
107 P. Barolsky, op. cit. p. 33
108 D. Iozzia, op. cit. p. 46
109 L. Manovič, op. cit. p. 29

menting him with the Neoplatonists for whom the domain behind the window was a virtual one, the total separation of the spaces was achieved only with VR when the screen itself had been canceled. This accomplishment managed to finalize the understanding of Neoplatonism. "In the intertwining" between the observer and the image "a unity between the subject and the object occurs, deleting the boundary between the real and the imaginary."[110] This kind of Neoplatonic understanding of the purpose of an image was exploited in the VR by some theorists, stressing the dualism between the body and the soul. "According to this notion mind is understood as entirely incorporeal, tending increasingly toward simulation, and the body, in its function of the sensory appropriation of the external world…is repressed."[111] Thus, the observer is telepresent in another reality, a digital one.

According to Grau, telepresence combines three "long-term projects in the history of ideas": artificial life, virtual reality and telecommunication. The last two are most important for drawing a parallel between VR and Neoplatonism. Through them, the image was historically understood as a means of communication with the gods or superior beings belonging to levels which are ontologically higher than our own. This mystical character can also be traced in the virtual reality because of the propagation of the idea of transcending the material, while the "body is being repressed." Following the logic of the Neoplatonic school of thought the image serves as a veil for what lies beyond. Contemplating the Divine ideas, and connecting to the World-Soul, the observer achieves the telepresence in the intelligible sphere. Utopian thinkers of the 20th century like McLuhan and Pierre Levy envisioned something called "infosphere" or "noosphere". These are described by Levy as "a transcendental collective intelligence", and by McLuhan before him as a "smart sphere that engenders the collective soul."[112] Whether intentionally or not, both use terminology dear to philosophers of Neoplatonism, mainly the Noos (or the mind) and the collective soul, which can be equated with the World-Soul of Plotinus and Ficino. For Plotinus especially, the essence of the world is beyond it and needs to be reached through mystical contemplation.[113]

The purpose of the VR can also be understood as a means of redirecting the observer outside of the material, towards the incorporeal. According to pseudo-Dionysious Areopagite's notion of God, one of His key traits is the so-called *manentia*, referring to remaining, leaving and returning. This is employed in the description of God creating the World from Himself.[114] But it can also be applied to an observer in the VR, for he physically remains in the material space, his mind leaves into the virtual, only to return back into the material being enriched after the VR experience.

CONCLUSION

In this paper, I presented the comparison between the Neoplatonic understanding of painting in the Renaissance and the VR of the 21st century. This was applied to the case of Raphael's Stanza della Segnatura.

Through vision, knowledge of the World is gained. This process is also the basis of the aesthetic experience, connecting the mind of the observer with the enti-

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110 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike II*, p. 188
111 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 278
112 O. Grau, op. cit. p. 283
113 B. Bosnjak, op. cit. p. 61
114 R. Đokić, *Istorija estetike III*, p. 239

ties which are positioned higher in the ontological scale. I concluded this from the Neoplatonic explanation of an image being always an image of something ontologically higher. Therefore, by viewing the painting the viewer is mentally present in another, virtual realm behind the screen.

The main part of this paper is dedicated to the explanation of the relationship between the observer and the wall painting, and the function of the painting as the window into the otherworldly. Here I expressed the understanding of the painting in the Renaissance and the historical overview of the screen. This allowed me to conclude that in the case of the Stanza dellaSegnatura, the frescoes did indeed serve as virtual reality even though they do not represent the illusionistic continuation of the real space. This is because of their original purpose which aimed at embedding Neoplatonism in the frescoes and as such making them mentally accessible only to the intellectuals of that period. Thus, they did not need to be painted in the *trompe l'œil*, since the lack of illusionism was overcome by the mind of the observer who is knowledgeable in Neoplatonism. Through this knowledge and beauty of the frescoes, the viewer would attract the World-Soul with its divine gifts, lifting his spirit to the highest universal Beauty located in the Divine Mind. This is accomplished through Love, which would make the viewer resemble a Seraph, as Pico had described it in his Oration.

The main conclusion is that the basic logic behind the Neoplatonic understanding of the painting and the frescoes in the Stanza della Segnatura is similar to that of the VR. By canceling the screen, meaning that the screen covers the whole field of view of the observer, the gap between the mind and the body is formed. While the body remains in the real space, the mind is transported into the virtual and immaterial domain. In the Renaissance, this had to be done through mental labor while having a large background of knowledge, while in the 21st century this is easily achieved with a headset. Thus, the original 16th-century observer had to be knowledgeable in Neoplatonism in order to fully grasp the concept of Raphael's frescoes and the virtuality behind them. On the other hand, the contemporary visitor of the Vatican Museums observes them as masterpieces of fine art, in most cases neglecting their original purpose and interpretation. Lastly, the virtual visitor has to deal with a special case of a digital copy positioned in a predetermined virtual setting.

Therefore, VR technologies allowed us to succeed in what has always been a deep desire of human kind: to go beyond the material. A full circle has been done, achieving what the Renaissance started both in theory and practice.

ILLUSTRATIONS

1. Raffaello Sanzio, Disputation of the Holy Sacrament, 1508/1509, fresco, 770 cm wide, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Museums
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/6/61/Disputa_del_
Sacramento_%28Rafael%29.jpg/640px-Disputa_del_Sacramento_%28Rafael%29.jpg) [1.6.2021]
2. Raffaello Sanzio, School of Athens, 1509, fresco, 770 cm wide, Stanza della Segantura, Vatican Museums
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/4/49/%22The_School_of_
Athens%22_by_Raffaello_Sanzio_da_Urbino.jpg/619px-%22The_School_of_Athens%22_by_
Raffaello_Sanzio_da_Urbino.jpg) [1.6.2021]
3. Raffaello Sanzio, Parnassus, 1509-1510, fresco, 670 cm wide, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Museums
(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/b/b6/Rafael_-_El_
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4. Raffaello Sanzio, Jurisprudence, 1511, fresco, 660 cm wide, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Museums

(https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/2/2f/Virt%C3%B9_e_due_scene_02.jpg/615px-Virt%C3%B9_e_due_scene_02.jpg) [1.6.2021]

5. Raffaello Sanzio and Antonio Bazzi known as Il Sodoma, Vault, 1509-1511, fresco, c. 770 × 670 cm, Stanza della Segnatura, Vatican Museums
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Јован Д. ЂОРЂЕВИЋ
ОДНОС ПОСМАТРАЧА И РАФАЕЛОВЕ 'СОБЕ ПЕЧАТА' У ИСТОРИЈСКОМ, МУЗЕЈСКОМ И ВИРТУЕЛНОМ КОНТЕКСТУ РЕЗИМЕ

Овај рад представља три различита приступа која посматрач може да има у односу према Рафаеловим фрескама у Соби печата. Први се тиче неоплатонистичког схватања слика, с обзиром да су Рафаела саветовали хуманисти са папског двора који су припадали неоплатонистичкој групи ренесансних филозофа. Овде је реконструисана ренесансна теорија уметности и схватање слике као прозора у онострано. Други део рада је посвећен проблему савременог посматрача који није упућен у филозофске концепте, али сагледава фреске у њиховом музејском или виртуелном контексту. У зависности који од ова два контекста је у питању, јављају се другачији проблеми. Док туриста у музеју може да се креће по просторији и директно је изложен уметничкој аури предмета, посматрач у виртуелном домену види само дигиталну копију са ограниченим кретањем у оквиру ње. Са друге стране, туриста ће бити приморан да простор дели са другим људима, док виртуелни посматрач има целу просторију за себе и није временски ограничен. У последњем делу рада изложено је поређење одређених аспеката филозофије слике у неоплатонизму са теоријом виртуелне реалности (ВР). Пошто је слика увек схватана као слика нечега што је онтолошки више, онда она као таква служи као прозор у онострано. Управо је ВР омогућила посматрачу да проникне у домен иза слике, и на тај начин довршила идеју која је започета у ренесанси.
Кључне речи: неоплатонизам, теорија уметности, виртуелна реалност, посматрач, Рафаело, Соба печата