

The Semiotics of the Battle

A Comparative Perspective

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Battle is an orgy of disorder.
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ABSTRACT: The article compares different ways of representing multitudes of peoples in visual media and arts. It focuses, in particular, on the theme of the battle, which is one of the most depicted by human visual cultures across the epochs. Starting from two unachieved Renaissance paintings of battles, the *Battle of Anghiari* by Leonardo and the *Battle of Cascina* by Michelangelo, the article investigates how the two artists wondered philosophically and graphically about the effect of battle violence on the bodies of humans and horses. It, then, focuses on a stereotypical way of representing battles in present-day visual media, which involves the cliché cinematic reference to the *testudo* (turtle formation). Although reference to this typical Roman battle strategy is often anachronistic, it conveys a contemporary imaginary of the battle that, unlike those of Leonardo and Michelangelo — for whom memory of real and gruesome fights was still fresh — manifests an unrealistic, disembodied, and whitewashed imaginary of war, unaware of and inattentive to its disruptive potential.

KEYWORD: Battles; Depiction; Cultural Semiotics; Visual Semiotics; Cross-Cultural Comparison

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2. M. BLUMENSON (ed.) (1972–4), *The Patton Papers*, 2 vols. Houghton Mifflin, Boston.

1. Two battles in Florence

La battaglia di Anghiari, “the battle of Anghiari”³, is one of Leonardo da Vinci’s most mysterious artworks⁴. Commissioned in October 18, 1503 by Florence’s Gonfalonier Pier Soderini to decorate the “Salone dei Cinquecento” (Van Veen, 1981; Cecchi, 1996), the hall of the great council in Palazzo Vecchio — the main civic building of the city — it was only partially executed with a technique that made its colors extremely perishable⁵. About sixty years later, Giorgio Vasari, the first modern art historian and biographer of Leonardo, redecorated the hall and, between 1558 and 1563, covered Leonardo’s mural painting (Lessing, 1935; Waldman, 2014). It is still intriguingly debated whether some remnants of Leonardo’s original mural painting may still exist behind the current plaster (Hatfield, 2007). According to Vasari, Leonardo’s *Battle* was meant to decorate the right wall of the hall⁶, whereas the left wall was to display another *Battle*, *La battaglia di Cascina*, entrusted to Michelangelo. Unfortunately, the cartoon of this second painting, commissioned in the second half of 1504 and probably completed by November 1506, was never transferred onto the wall, was subsequently fragmented, and eventually lost.

Two of the most important Western artists ever therefore competed in a sort of third, symbolical meta-battle (Listri, 2003): through the two mural paintings, opposing each other in the same Florentine hall, they struggled to best render, within a still image, the turmoil of a battle. Battles are an exceedingly challenging topic for a painter⁷, for three reasons: first, faces and bodies display extreme expressions and postures, which are normally not seen in times of peace and quiet; second, humans, animals, and objects move through the battle in a frantic

3. On the history of the battle, see Capponi, 2011.

4. On this aspect, see Melani, 2012.

5. Among the most relevant bibliography on this artwork, see Suter, 1937; Pedretti, 1968, 1992, 2006; Kemp, 2006 (1981), pp. 226–39; Arasse, 1997, pp. 428–43; Zöllner, 1998; Vecce 2011.

6. On the location of the painting, see Newton, Spencer, 1982.

7. Classics on the topic include Consigli Valente 1986 (in particular, the essay by Federico Zeri); Hale, 1990; Brown, 1998; Boillet, Piéjus, 2002; Cuneo, 2002; Sestieri, 2008; Bonanate, 2016.

way, chaotically superimposing, overlapping, and clashing their bodies; third, and most importantly, this tumult of furiously moving entities does not involve just two or three characters but, typically, an uncountable multitude of them (Leone 2006). The painter, therefore, faces two parallel challenges: rendering through the immobility of the image the extreme mobility of the scene; and recreating through a finite number of characters the impression of the combatants' multiplicity.

Some drawings of Leonardo's *Battle*, some copies of Michelangelo's cartoon, and coeval descriptions of both are instructive about the way in which the two masters approached these challenges (Neufeld, 1949). A list of Leonardo's books compiled around the time of the painting of the *Battle of Anghiari* included «a book of horses sketched for the cartoon» (Hochstetler, 1984). Some of the drawings contained in the book are still extant. One of them, kept in the British Royal Collection, depicts *Expressions of Fury in Horses, a Lion and a Man* (Fig. 1). It was executed with pen and ink with wash and red chalk around 1503–1504.

Several features of the sketch would deserve attention but four of them are particularly relevant: first, Leonardo systematically compares



Figure 1. L. DA VINCI (c. 1503–4), *Expressions of Fury in Horses, a Lion and a Man*. Recto: Pen and ink with wash, and red chalk. Verso: Pen and ink with traces of black chalk, 19.6 x 30.8 cm (sheet of paper), RCIN 912326 (Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

the anatomy and the consequent expressions of fury in horses, lions, and humans, as though in order to pinpoint the main visual features conveying such extreme passion across animal nature. Second, he consistently dissects the expressive movements in their component stages, as though in order to isolate, among them, those that best evoke the peak of passion but also in order to be able to distribute, then, these different stages throughout the pictorial scene. Third, he analytically decomposes the elements that, within each expression, result in its overall composition, as though in order to visually emphasize those that most contribute to the gestalt of fury. Fourth, he graphically explores the combinatorics of these morphologies, chronologies, and mereologies, as though in order to come up with a personal but coherent visual language for the depiction of a battle.

Such a way of proceeding is even more evident in the 1517–18 pen and ink drawing representing *Horses, St George and the Dragon, and a Lion*, also kept in the British Royal Collection (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. L. DA VINCI (c. 1517–18), *Horses, St George and the Dragon, and a Lion*. Pen and ink, 29.8 x 21.0 cm (sheet of paper), RCIN 912331 (Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2019).

Here Leonardo inscribed the following comment: «The serpent-like movement is the principal action in animals» (Clark, 1968; Attenborough, 2007, pp. 64–5). Again, several traits of this drawing are fascinating, yet one of them is strikingly significant: Leonardo tackles the aesthetic and semiotic challenge of representing a battle neither impressionistically nor by adopting a perspective going from the global to the local, from the general to the particular, and from the overview to the detail, but rather analytically. He deconstructs the visual scene of a battle in its components, seeks for their distinctive formal principle, transforms this principle into a formula, and then deploys a combinatorics that must subsequently result in the final syntagmatic of the battle.

As is well attested by other sketches, however, Leonardo seems to be perfectly aware that the visual and, therefore, the pictorial effect of this combinatorics is not linear but subject to a complex effect of scale, whose inner principles the Italian master aims to grasp not formally but through an unceasing both visual and verbal probing of the passage from the individual to the multitude. That is evident, for instance, in the *Study of Battles on Horseback and on Foot for The Battle of Anghiari*, a pen and ink on paper drawing currently kept in the Galleries of the Academy in Venice (Fig. 3).

The figures, elements, and parts that, in the above-mentioned studies, were so clearly articulated in their abstract and isolated depiction, now conflict, conflagrate, and sometimes conflate in the sketches, that is, in the drawings where they are as though animated by the narrative flux of the visual story, used as paradigmatic elements in the pictorial syntax of the battle. Those figures, elements, and parts of humans, animals, objects, and landscape are still visible, yet they are subject to a morphological agency that, exactly because of the energy of their conflicting with each other, renders them inexorably bedimmed, befogged, and beclouded, as if at risk of losing their form in the frenzy of the battle. Leonardo realized that, at the core of each battle, there acts a terrible force that somehow intro-

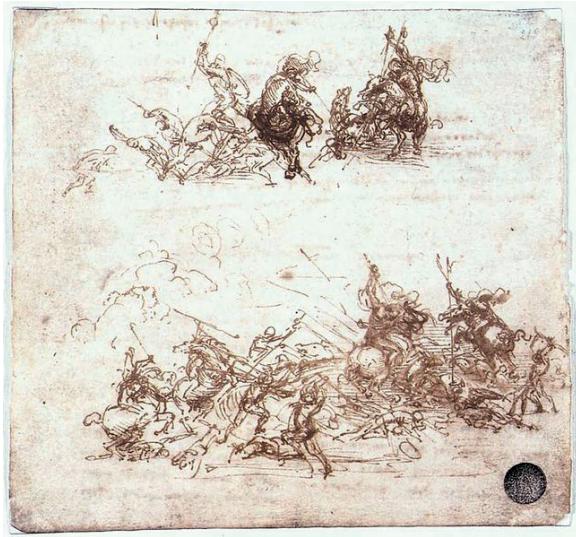


Figure 3. L. DA VINCI (1503–4), *The Battle of Anghiari, Study of Battles on Horseback and on Foot*. Pen and ink on paper. 5.70 x 5.98, Galleries of the Academy, Venice.

duces chaos in the order of nature, distorts its shapes, and brings about indistinctness instead of distinction (Lessing, 1934).

He, indeed, understood, indeed, the challenge of depicting a battle as the oxymoronic intent of representing both the articulation of details that give a battle its distinctive gestalt and their disarticulation in the turmoil resulting from their clash. That is precisely what Paul Valéry, a master of forms and their theory, detected in Leonardo's sketches:

Il adore les batailles, les tempêtes, le déluge. Il s'est élevé à les voir dans leur ensemble mécanique, et à les sentir dans l'indépendance apparente ou la vie de leurs fragments, dans une poignée de sable envolée éperdue, dans l'idée égarée de chaque combattant où se tord une passion et une douleur intime.⁸

[He adores the battles, the storms, the deluges. He has instructed himself to see them in their mechanical ensemble, and to feel them in the appa-

8. P. VALÉRY, *Introduction à la méthode de Léonard de Vinci* (1896), Gallimard, Paris 1957, pp. 39–40.

rent independence or life of their fragments, in a handful of fleeting frantic sand, in the stray idea of each combatant where passion and intimate pain undulate]. (trans. mine)

Leonardo's beautiful technical prose also conveys the intent of striking a balance within this dialectics. Folios 111r and 110v of the Ms. A of the Institut de France in Paris contain one of Leonardo's most famous and commented passages (Marinoni 1986–90), known under the title of "Modo di figurare una battaglia", *On the Way of Representing a Battle*⁹. Among the insightful precepts, Leonardo suggests to his ideal interlocutor, an apprentice painter:

Farai molte sorte d'arme infra i piedi de' combattitori, come scudi rotti, lancie, spade rotte e altri simili cose.
[You must scatter arms of all sorts among the feet of the combatants, such as broken shields, lances, broken swords and other such objects].¹⁰

This and similar advice is underpinned by a constant worry (Fargo, 1994): that of instilling an aesthetics of chaotic multitude into the representation of a clash.

As regards Michelangelo's painting of a battle that was supposed to rival that of Leonardo, the central section of the cartoon was accurately copied by Bastiano da Sangallo around 1542 in an oil on wood canvas currently kept at the Holkham Hall, Norfolk, UK (Fig. 4).

Although visibly more preoccupied than Leonardo with the artistic problem of rendering the distortion of naked bodies in the midst of a battle, Michelangelo too seems to devote keen pictorial attention to the aesthetic difficulty of visually transmitting, at the same time, the singularity of the bodies and their multitudinous intertwining. That is even more evident in Michelangelo's preparatory

9. First edited in Richter, Richter, 1939, pp. 301–3, n. 601–2 (Part IX, *The Practice of Painting*; sec. V, *Suggestions for Compositions*).

10. *Come si deve figurare una battaglia*, ch. 47.

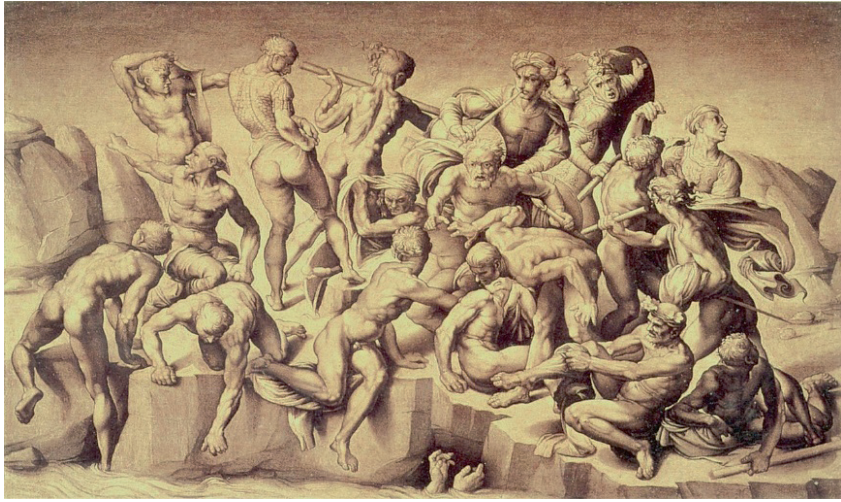


Figure 4. B. DA SANGALLO (c. 1542), *The Battle of Cascina*, 30.3 x 51.1 in. Copy of a section of Michelangelo's cartoon for a mural painting in the Salone dei Cinquecento, Palazzo Vecchio, Florence.



Figure 5. M. BUONARROTI (1505–6), *Study for the Battle of Cascina*. Chalk and silver rod on paper. 9.25 x 14.01. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

sketches, for instance the *Study for the battle of Cascina* currently kept in the Uffizi Gallery, Florence (Fig. 5).

The graphic emphasis here lies on the way the shape of the bodies is distorted by the explosive energy deflagrating in the battlefield; lines are less nervous and fragmented than in Leonardo, yet the idea of the battle as a human experience in which nature as it is known is completely revolutionized appears as powerful as in the studies for the *Battle of Anghiari*.

2. Eight Battles in Beijing

In January 2013 the Getty Research Institute acquired a series of eight Chinese battle prints dating from 1793–99. Known under the title of *Ping ding Kuoerke zhan tu* [平定廓爾喀戰圖], or *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas* (i.e., Nepalese), they visually represent the victory of the Qianlong Emperor (reigned 1736–1795) against Nepalese warriors (Fig. 6; Fuchs, 1939, p. 121).

As the meticulous observation of a detail of one of these prints reveals (Fig. 7), the unknown artist was preoccupied with a different declination of the problem of representing a fighting multitude.



Figure 6. *Ping ding Kuoerke zhan tu*, or *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas* (i.e., Nepalese), China ca. 1793. Copper engraving, 39.76 x 24.60 inches and smaller, the Getty Research Institute.

Whereas in Leonardo, at the core of the visual representation, lay the ambition of rendering the intimate grammar of the battling chaos, and whereas in Michelangelo such ambition was focused almost exclusively on the naked fragility of the human bodies, in these Chinese prints what strikes one the most is the way in which the destructive energy of the battle distorts the whole landscape, mingling humans, animals, and objects in its midst in a vortex that reminds one of the snake–curvilinear dynamic seized by Leonardo as the fundamental vector of battle commotion.

Although these Chinese prints were certainly inspired by previous and coeval European battle prints, brought by the Jesuits to China or sent there as gifts to the Chinese Emperors from the European courts, they nevertheless maintain a certain typically Chinese flavor. Indeed, whereas in 1765 the Chinese Emperor Qianlong, so as to commemorate his victory over Zhungar troops, had sent drawings made by Jesuit court artists, including Giuseppe Castiglione, to be engraved and printed in the royal workshops of Charles–Nicolas Cochin fils, in Paris, the same Emperor subsequently commissioned more celebratory series of engravings to Chinese artists, including



Figure 7. *Ping ding Kuoerke zhan tu*, or *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas* (i.e., Nepalese), detail, China ca. 1793. Copper engraving, the Getty Research Institute.

the abovementioned *Pictures of the Campaigns against the Gurkhas*, executed almost thirty years later. In these later engravings, at the core of the depiction lies not the representation of battling humans, animals, or objects, like in Leonardo and Michelangelo, but the typical Chinese depiction of a battle landscape.

3. A Battle in Russia

This cursory comparison indicates that depictions of battles are interesting to the semiotics of cultures from several points of view. First, they result from the human and especially artistic struggle to represent multitudes, movement, and the chaos that results from their tumultuous encounter. This challenge bears not only on aesthetics but also on politics: constructing a vivid visual memory of a past battle often serves purposes of identity, ideology, and propaganda. Second, this struggle is not even throughout history and geography. It is influenced and determined by a number of factors. Artists who depict battles must comply with the semiotic framework of their medium. Thus, in the series of lessons on *Cinema and Literariness* that Sergei Mikhailovich Eisenstein delivered at the State Institute of Cinematography in 1933, he mentioned Leonardo's *Modo di figurare una battaglia* as an example of a pre-cinematic text containing "cinematographisms", that is, ways of conceiving the visual rendering of reality — and especially the frantic moving reality of a battle — that foreran the invention of cinema and montage¹¹.

When, in 1938, the Russian director shot the historical drama *Alexander Nevsky*, he filmed the famous sequence of the battle on ice between Teutonic Knights and Russians, with the equally famous soundtrack of Sergei Prokofiev, following some of Leonardo's suggestions about the depiction of fog, bodily fragments, and especially clashing multitudes (Fig. 8).

11. See Ėjzenštejn, 1993, pp. 354–5; for a commentary, see Marshall, 1990. See also Nanni, Podzemskaia, 2012.

On the one hand, it is evident that Eisenstein's cinematic montage of this battling scene owes a lot to Leonardo's pictorial montage technically described in his *Modo di figurare una battaglia*. On the other hand, though, it is quite uncontroversial that the Russian director could render the aesthetics of a clashing multitude with an efficacy that was precluded to his Italian predecessor, and that was due to the adoption of a different medium.

4. Battling order

The first Chinese movie ever made also represents a battle. In 1905, Ren Qingtai (任庆泰) aka Ren Jingfeng (任景丰) directed *The Battle of Dingjunshan* (Fig. 9).

It would be interesting to carry out a comparative study of “first movies”, in order to reveal that which each culture in the world considered it urgent to represent as content of its first movie. In China, the relation between the cinematic representation of the battle and those offered by previous media immediately stood out. *The Battle of Dingjunshan*, indeed, was nothing but the recording of an opera with the same title staged at the Beijing opera in 1905. The opera, in



Figure 8. S. ĚJZENŠTEJN (1938), *Alexander Nevsky*; “The Battle on Ice”, Mosfilm, Soviet Union.

its turn, was based on 14th century historical novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, attributed to Luo Guanzhong (Fig. 10). Unfortu-



Figure 9. Ren Qingtai (任庆泰) aka Ren Jingfeng (任景丰) (1905), *The Battle of Dingjunshan*, Fengtai Photography, Beijing.



Figure 10. ANONYMOUS (1591), *Sacrificing to heaven and earth, the oath at the peach garden*, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, from a Ming Dynasty edition of the *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (金陵萬卷樓刊本), Chapter 1, Peking University Library, Beijing.

nately, the only print of the first Chinese movie was lost in a fire, but the story became then the object of countless adaptations in the course of the 20th century.

The latest of them is *Red Cliff* or *Chibi* (Chinese: 赤壁), a 2008–9 two-part epic war movie by internationally acclaimed director John Woo (Fig. 11).

The movie depicts one of the key episodes of *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, based on a real historical event otherwise known as the “Battle of Chibi”, which took place on the Yangtze river in the winter of AD 208–9 during the end of the Han dynasty, twelve years before the beginning of the Three Kingdoms period. Woo’s movie is full of scenes of battle, each deserving a detailed commentary. One of them, though, is particularly worthy of consideration, that is, the long sequence that represents the allied forces launching an offensive on Cao Cao’s ground army. On the one hand, John Woo’s representation of the battle is clearly anachronistic. At one crucial moment, in particular, Zhou Yu and Zhuge Liang’s allied forces form



Figure 11. J. Woo (2008–2009), *Red Cliff* or *Chibi* (chinese: 赤壁), Beijing Film Studio, China Film Group, Lion Rock Productions.

what is explicitly shown as a “testudo” military formation, through a visual reference to the turtle (Fig. 12).

In ancient Roman warfare, the *testudo* or tortoise formation was a type of shield wall formation commonly used by the Legions during battles, and particularly during sieges. *Testudo* is the Latin word for “tortoise”. This formation is mentioned in several ancient Roman sources and visually represented, for instance, in the reliefs of the famous Trajan Column in Rome (Fig. 13).

It is very unlikely, though, that a formation of this kind was actually in use in Chinese warfare at the time of the battle of Red Cliff. Sun Bin’s *Art of War* is a 4th century ancient Chinese classic work on military strategy written by Sun Bin (1996, 2001, and specially 2003), allegedly a descendant of Sun Tzu who served as a military strategist in the Qi state during the Warring States period. Chapter 17 lists ten soldier formations used at the time: the square formation, the circle formation, the spike formation, the goose formation, the hook formation, the loose formation, the numbered formation, the

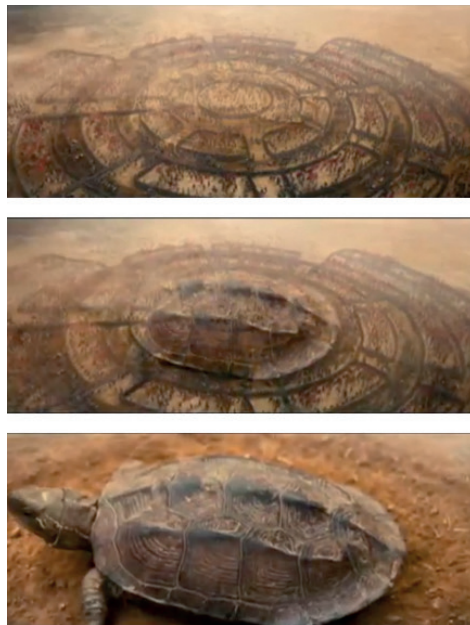


Figure 12. The testudo taking shape during the Battle of Chibi in John Woo’s *Red Cliff* (2008–9).

fire formation, the water formation, and the “Xuanxiang” (玄襄阵) formation. No mention is made, however, of the *testudo* formation.

John Woo’s, however, is not the only anachronistic use of the tortoise military formation in present-day cinematography. *The Last Kingdom* is a British historical fiction television series based on *The Saxon Stories*, a series of novels by Bernard Cornwell (Fig. 14).



Figure 13. *Testudo* military formation as represented in the reliefs of the Trajan column in Rome (113 AD).



Figure 14. *The Last Kingdom*, 2015, BBC 2.

It depicts many fictionalized epical battles between local Anglo-Saxons and Viking invaders. In the first episode, three Northumbrian eldermen lead their troops against the invading Vikings. At the battlefield, the Vikings form a *testudo* and wait in position while the Anglo-Saxons chaotically charge across the field (Fig. 15).

In the case of the Norse too, there is no historical evidence that they might have known what the *testudo* was. Only one medieval source, Abbo of Saint-Germaine, a French monk who was present at the Viking Siege of Paris in 886, describes the Vikings as battling in the formation of a *testudo*. In the *De bellis Parisiacæ urbis* or *Bella Parisiacæ urbis* (“Wars of the City of Paris”), a verse description of the siege, Abbo of Saint-Germaine mentions the soldier formation twice: «Et tanta miraretur testudine picta»; «Arma trucum terris fixa testudine giro» (MPL 132: 732). Most historians, however, agree that this author, for ideological reasons, was attributing to the Vikings a military cohesion and training that they would not actually have possessed.



Figure 15. Testudo formed by the Norse in *The Last Kingdom*.

Conclusion: Battling chaos

The anachronism of *The Last Kingdom* is, therefore, akin to that of *Red Cliff*. In both cases, the necessity of cinematographically imagining a battle resorts to a visual stereotype that is part of the present-day global grammar of the movie, essentially shaped by Hollywood but then adopted and adapted locally. According to this grammar, whenever a contemporary filmmaker has to stage an epic battle set in a remote past, he or she has one of the battling armies fight in the formation of a *testudo*, although this tortoise arrangement was historically confined to a precise military culture in space and time, that is, the Ancient Roman one. The Chinese army of John Woo, the Norse army of *The Last Kingdom*, etc. all move across the battlefield according to the Ancient Roman model.

On the one hand, this is the case because of the major role the ancient Roman and Christian epic, from *Ben Hur* to *The Gladiator*, has played in shaping the Hollywood battle imaginary. On the other hand, the anachronistic adoption of the figure of the *testudo* also entails an ideological value. Whereas Leonardo and Michelangelo were mainly interested in the artistic, phenomenological, and existential exploration of that which Leonardo would call “il groppo”, that is, “the group”¹², or, better, the entanglement of humans, animals, and things resulting from the tremendously disruptive energy exerted by war on human life and history, the *testudo*, on the contrary, conveys an idea of war and battle that has expelled everything chaotic, disorderly, disruptive, or confines it in the enemy camp. Through the adoption of the *testudo*, in line with Jurij M. Lotman’s understanding of how cultures self-define in opposition to what they see as non-culture and chaos, war epics stage the ideology of a civilization that defends itself in the clash against the barbaric hordes of the unruly, the uncivilized, the beast-like.

Michelangelo and, above all, Leonardo, meant to convey a deeply humanistic idea of the war, especially since waging battle, as a con-

12. See Vecce, 2011, p. 27, especially in relation to the classical notion of “symplegma”.

sequence of the systematic adoption of fire weapons — whose destructive power Leonardo knew so well in his quality of military engineer (Marani, 1984; Fara, 1997) — was turning into an increasingly catastrophic human experience. Florentine representatives sitting in the Salone dei Cinquecento were meant to admire Leonardo's and Michelangelo's mural paintings and understand how important it had been to fight for the freedom and democracy of Florence, but also how terrible war was. As Leonardo wrote in one of his manuscripts, «esser cosa nefandissima il torre la vita all'omo» (Windsor, f. 19001r; Keele–Pedretti, f. 136r); «it is a nefarious think to take the life of a human being». This conviction was not only moral but also aesthetic: that magnificent body that Renaissance painters strove to depict in all its beauty was also extremely fragile, and subject to the tremendous disfiguring power of war.

This awareness of how terrible a battle is, is completely lacking in present-day popular fictionalizations of ancient or mythical battles and turns into a spectacle of the military ruse of good against evil, as in the case of *The Last Kingdom*, or, as in the case of *Red Cliff*, absorbs a typically Chinese aesthetics of the multitude in order to transform the battlefield into a gigantic choreography, similar to those that inaugurate the Olympic games. The representation of battling multitudes, indeed, is transformed with the availability of new media, but deeply changes also in relation to how “embedded” the point of view of the storyteller is. Leonardo's point of view on Anghiari or Michelangelo's perspective on Cascina were more similar to those of Spielberg in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Hugo's *Les Misérables*, or even Spielberg's *Save Private Ryan* than to those of John Woo in *Red Cliff* or the directors of *The Last Kingdom*. Both Renaissance painters had witnessed the tragedy of wars during their lifetime, and the stories that they were artistically depicting were still fresh historical events in their memories and in those of their fellow citizens. War, indeed, is a terrible chaos in which humanity loses its shape completely; it is only in relation to a mythical and distant past that it can be seen as an orderly testudo, separating bodies and values across the battlefield.

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