

The Spectacle of Clouds, 1439–1650: Italian Art and Theatre.

Alessandra Buccheri.

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Alessandra Buccheri's title suggests her very ambitious aim: to trace the origin and the development of Roman Baroque compositions of clouds from the late medieval up to the Baroque era. Relying on a vast array of sources — drawings and prints of past theatrical performances, eyewitness descriptions, letters, guild ledgers, perspective and stage designs, artists' biographies, paintings, frescoes, plays, and treatises on painting — the author makes the convincing claim that the type of cloud illusionism that reached its full development in Rome during the first half of the seventeenth century did not depend, as it has been usually argued, on a Correggesque revival, but rather on a richer and older visual tradition that started in Florence during the fourteenth century with the development of a stage device called "cloud machinery."

The book is divided into nine chapters that chronicle the development of cloud illusionism. Chapter 1 illustrates how "cloud machinery (*nuvola*) was a common theatrical device of the late Middle Ages in Italy and the rest of Europe" (29), and chapter 2 traces the development of the heaven machinery in Florence and the rest of Italy from 1439 to 1566. Through the analysis of Raphael and Correggio's work, chapter 3 makes two important claims: first, that both artists' depictions of clouds were grounded in the Florentine theatrical tradition discussed in the previous two chapters; second, that the two artists, despite some similarities, depicted clouds in two substantially different ways — Raphael's platform clouds and Correggio's bubble clouds — thus creating two different conceptions of space illusionism that were present together in Rome and in constant dialogue with theater, and contributed substantially to the development of Baroque ceiling decorations.

Chapter 4 is, from a methodological standpoint, the most interesting chapter: by tracing the development of cloud and heaven machinery in religious theater and its subsequent introduction into the court theater of the Medici family, the author shows how the borrowings, exchanges, and interactions among all the artists involved, between "the preparatory drawings, the *mise en scène* of the play, and the visual reports, was an evolving process in which new ideas were introduced at each stage" (88). Chapters 5 and 6 show the problem of reconciling *di sotto in sù* cloud compositions — i.e., clouds painted in locations such as the ceilings of naves, domes, or apses — with a clear representation of figures. Traditional scholarship, with a few exceptions, has seen Correggio's influence as the origin of Baroque representations of heaven. However, by cross-referencing a variety of sources, Buccheri convincingly shows that Correggio's legacy was only part of "a larger network of ideas, which also included a constant interaction with theatre" (109) and included artists from a variety of schools, such as Giovanni and Cherubino Alberti, Nicolò Circignani, Matteo Zaccolini, and Cristoforo Roncalli.

The last three chapters try to validate the author's belief that in early seventeenth-century Rome the Tuscan tradition played a major role in the development of cloud illusionism in the spheres of theater and fresco painting. Chapter 7 focuses on the fresco painted in Rome by Lodovico Cardi da Cigoli for the dome of the Pauline Chapel in S. Maria Maggiore, which is believed to be the first fresco *di sotto in sù* to present a heaven in which "the illusionism of space was entirely provided by different levels of platform-clouds floating without architectonic barriers" (127). Chapters 8 and 9 diverge from the most common opinion, which considers Giovanni Lanfranco "as the artist to whom the shift from proto-Baroque to full Baroque style may be attributed" (165), and focuses instead on the equal importance of the work of Giovanni da San Giovanni (*Glory of Saints*, Basilica dei Santi Quattro Coronati in Rome) and its influence on Gianlorenzo Bernini and Pietro da Cortona.

The methodology, as the author herself admits, is not completely new: the analysis of "the relationship between art and theatre in terms of mutual influence and parallel evolution" (3) was the subject of some pioneering studies in the 1940s and 1950s (George Kernodle and Pierre Francastel) and exceptional revivals in the 1970s (Ludovico Zorzi) and 1990s (Götz Pochat). However, comparative studies between art and theater have been relatively neglected by recent scholars, and the work of Buccheri is thus a welcome addition, especially when the scholar, despite a tendency to absolutize that relationship in one direction (from theater to art), strives to model the lesson of Francastel and Zorzi and shows how art always stems from a complexity of experiences and relationships.

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