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MAESTÀ

THE PASSION OF CHRIST

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France - 2015 - 62' - 16/9 - 5:1

French artist Andy Guérif directs his first long feature, *Maestà, the Passion of Christ*, a live-action adaptation of the famous XIVth century polyptych by Italian painter Duccio di Buoninsegna. Thanks to the split-screen technic, the entirety of the cycle of Passion is played by actors, in a setting that stays true to primitive paintings' lack of perspective. First only the set is visible; it is slowly populated by actors, who then move from panel to panel to show what comes before and after the picture as it was fixed by Duccio. From the *Entry into Jerusalem* to the *Road to Emmaüs*, *Maestà* revives Duccio's narration in movement.

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Original title	<i>Maestà, la Passion du Christ</i>
Country	FRANCE
Length	62'
Shooting format	HD
Director	Andy GUERIF
Scenario	Andy GUERIF

TECHNICAL CREW

Color grading	Julien BISSCHOP
Sound	Gwenaël LABARTA
Sound editing	Mickaël BARRE
Setting	Andy GUERIF, Simon GROSSIN
Costumes	Maryvonne GUERIF, Andurey GOHAUX, Violaine PAUL-AZARD
Editing	Cécile PRADERE

PRODUCTION

Producer	Thierry LOUNAS
Executive producer	Claire BONNEFOY
Production assistants	Nora BARBIER, Johanna BOURSON, Camille CHANDELLIER, Gaëlle COT- TAIS, Véronique DURAND, Elsa MINI- SINI, Marie PERRONNET, Mathilde TRICHET

CAST

JESUS	Jérôme AUGER
JEAN	Mathieu BINEAU
MATHIEU	Jean-Gabriel GOHAUX
MATHIEU	Paul BENETEAU
PHILIPPE	Guillaume BOISSINOT
PIERRE	Pierre JOSSE
SIMON	François GUINDON
THOMAS	Gregory MARKOVIC
JUDE	Louis BOUDET
BARTHELEMY	Lionel DA ROSA
ANDRE	Claude COLAS
JUDAS	Emmanuel RODRIGUEZ
JACQUES LE MAJEUR	Sébastien RAUD
JACQUES LE MINEUR	Xavier BARBARIT
PONCE PILATE	Gautier PALLANCHER
MARIE-MADELEINE	Clémence HENRY
MARIE	Emmanuelle COSSET

La Maestà di Duccio

In 1308, the administrators of the Cathedral of Sienna ordered the famous painter Duccio di Buoninsegna to create a monumental painting of the Madonna in glory (*maestà*), surrounded with Saints, with the complete story of the Passion of Christ on the back. The 9th of June 1311, the polyptych was completed and unveiled in the Dome of the Cathedral. Its dimensions (about 5m in both height and width) make it the largest polyptych preserved from the Trecento.

During the 18th century, the painting was cut, dispersed and lost some of its meaning; however the central cycle showing the Passion of Christ stayed intact and cohesive. Made of 26 panels, it is today one of the most emblematic and accomplished works of Italian primitives. The *Maestà* can be read like an open book, with distinct protagonists that reappear from chapter to chapter, and a meaning that comes from both each panel independently and the story as a whole.

Art historians insisted on the importance of the structure in Duccio’s work, even if they don’t necessarily agree on the order in which it should be read. Indeed, even though the painter gave a logical and rational frame to the story, it still remains open to all possible combinations and digressions...



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|--|---|-------------------------------|
| 01 - Entry into Jerusalem | 09 - Peter denying Jesus | 17 - Crown of thorns |
| 02 - Washing of the feet | 10 - Christ before Caiphas | 18 - Pilate washing his hands |
| 03 - Last Supper | 11 - Christ mocked | 19 - Way to calvary |
| 04 - Christ taking leave of the Apostles | 12 - Christ accused by the Pharisee | 20 - Crucifixion |
| 05 - Pact of Judas | 13 - Pilate’s first interrogation of Christ | 21 - Deposition |
| 06 - Prier on the Mount of Olives | 14 - Christ before Herod | 22 - Burial |
| 07 - Christ taken prisoner | 15 - Christ before Pilate again | 23 - Three Marys at the tomb |
| 08 - Christ before Annas | 16 - Flagellation | 24 - Descent into Hell |
| | | 25 - Road to Emmaüs |

Production notes

In 2007 Andy Guérif directed *Cène*, in which for 30 minutes actors built their own costumes and the setting of their play, before freezing in a pose. Thus they recreated the pre-Renaissance painting by Italian master Duccio di Bueninsegna that represents the Last Supper, in its polyptych of the Passion of Christ.

With *Maestà*, Andy Guérif tries to find new ways to work on painting and films. This time he takes on the entirety of the polyptych: 26 panels that split the screen in small windows. They animate one by one, sometimes simultaneously, each character evolving according to the *historia*. At one point of each of these 26 sequences, the characters freeze: they strike a pose (the instant painted by Duccio), get back to their activities, then go off-camera to reappear in another panel. When all the scenes have been shown and the polyptych was « brought back to life », it appears in its entirety on the screen.

Between each shooting session, the director builds the new setting for the next take: the set is really narrow and can only contain one at a time. Thus each set (meticulously copying Duccio’s) is demolished just after it was used. The actors of the Passion physically experience these spaces



in an effort that may seem vain: it is indeed impossible to revive exactly the moment painted by Duccio, since the painter didn’t care about perspective (which would come much later). That’s how we realize of how little importance it is: the readability of the story takes over the mathematical and visual plausibility. The coherence of the finished picture vanishes in the movement: the « material absurdity » of the setting forces the director to find workarounds. This creative system, based on modest means, takes part in the author intention: to take up the challenge of recreating one of the most beautiful art piece of the Trecento on a shoestring budget. This cinematic and pictural adventure, started in the spring of 2008, ended in June 2015.



Interview with Andy Guérif

Born in 1977, Andy Guérif is a moviemaker and plastic artist who graduated from the fine arts of Angers in 2001. The same year he shoots *Portraits d'édudiants*, a series of five-minutes films. In 2002, he directed his first short, *Why are you running?...*, in which he revisits a cult scene from *Vertigo* as a sequence-shot, to question its making. In 2006, Cène announces *Maestà* by focusing on a single panel of the painting (the last Supper). Andy Guérif also published *Le code de l'art* (Palette, 2013), in which he has fun associating road signs with art masterpieces. *Maestà*, the Passion of the Christ is his first long feature.

What is the story behind *Maestà*? What was your first intention?

With Cène, I was working on the representation of space during Trecento, but apart from the dramaturgy of the *Last Supper*. Yet this panel, that I worked on autonomously, is originally part of a very large polyptych, painted on two sides, that relates on one side the life of the Virgin, and on the other one the life of Christ. The project behind *Maestà* was to stage and film each step of the Passion, while staying true to Duccio's project, by creating the setting, costumes and different accessories at a human scale, and by moving these characters according to the historia.

What challenges did you face?

Setting accuracy is necessary because it influences in part the story through the « absurd » constraints it creates; for instance it works like in Jacques Tati's *Mon oncle*, where the building forces the movement of the character and turns each move into an event in itself.

In Maestà the special effects are very obvious, we can clearly see the setting is made of cardboards. Why did you choose to make the tricks so visible?

Duccio creates space in a very empiric way, for him the visual credibility is undermined by the lisibility of the story. When Pilate washes his hands or during the *Flagellation*, Duccio chooses inaccuracy to give more space to a clear figuration of events. For instance the arm of Pilate is shown in front of a pillar, when he is supposed to be seating on a stage behind it. In the film, I wanted to experience the story physically, with no post-production effects. But depending on the difficulties of the action and the setting, it was more or less interesting or possible to hide the construction of the image. For Pilate I chose to show a flabby pillar because I think it both reveals the tricks in the image, and brings fun. On the contrary for the crucifixion, even if the ropes and the shadows of the crosses are visible, I worked with the actors to make sure the hanging machines and snap hooks were very discrete so that the spectator could stay focused on the action.

Duccio was a great colorist...

Duccio's *Maestà* is a work of incredible beauty. Re-creating it meticulously allows me to dispose of a quality of image that I could not compose myself. The drapery has such a chromatic harmony that you can move characters inside the frame without destabilizing the picture.

The film progresses from panel to panel, while respecting the order of the painting. Why preserve this linearity?

In a polyptych we are confronted with two ways of reading. The first one is to consider the painting as a whole; the second one is to examine each panel one by one. The film emphasizes this duality. It shows the formal limits of the static image, and the inconsistencies that it can bring into the narration and its rhythm. Duccio had no choice but to show the acts one after the other, while some of them happen at the same time (like the *Pact of Judas*, the *Last Supper* and *Christ taking leave of the apostles*). For the *Mount of the Olives*, the movement of Christ is shown through a double apparition that allows to condense the story. So each scene is not meant to be read as the same narrative unit.

Even if the film medium corrects some aberrations inherent to the static image, it still has its own limits that also deconstruct the story. In particular, the successive scenes that happen in the same place are, in Duccio's painting, understandable because we mentally place them on top of each other. In the movie, that forces us to move the characters from one panel to another, places cannot be perceived by superimposition but through juxtaposition. With this kind of linear editing I had, I think, two options: either I left a trace of the passage of the characters in each panel, or I left the setting empty. The first solution didn't seem convincing to me because it induced that the picture would become more and more crowded as the story unfolds, thus becoming less and less clear to read. The general composition would also have been greatly affected.

The film opens on the Crucifixion. Why?

First I wanted to respect what seemed to be the reading order of the altarpiece. Even though the story is told chronologically, the composition makes the eye start with the *Crucifixion*. In its original form, the stand of the Christ cross is certainly the center of the painting. And because of its dimension and spatial situation, the Calvary remains the entry point of the polyptych. I also wanted to isolate the *Crucifixion* and to affirm its special status. Indeed, except maybe for the *Last Supper*, which was painted a *fresco* in religious refectories, the crucifixion was the only subject from the Passion that could be read autonomously. Furthermore, its dramatic power was meant to exalt devotion and piety. Finally, it allowed to open the film on a narrowed and central shot that slowly reveal, through a de-zoom, the whole painting. There is something breathtaking in revealing all the panels this way.

The sound is mainly made of a dense brouhaha, from which sometimes emerges a voice. Why did you choose to have dialogs that are mostly unclear and mumbled?

At first I thought the story could be mainly told through work on picture and acting. La *Maestà* being full of characters, for me the main sound had to be the crowd. However, even though the contrast between the beauty of the image and the brutality of sound was interesting to me, it missed some audible bits and phrases to breathe life into the story and get out of the exhaustion caused by the noise. That's why with Mickaël Barre, who took care of sound mixing, we recorded new voices that could be heard loud and clear, that he added to the original track.

How did you approach the sacred aspect of primitive painting?

For centuries, the catholic Church has produced the main part of the pictural european production. Today these « sacred » works, taken out of their places of worship, fill one half of all fine arts or modern art Museum. Out of context they lose their cultural value; so just like we don't urinate in Duchamp's urinoir, we don't prey in front of an altarpiece in a museum. As Malraux said in *Le musée imaginaire*: « A Norman crucifix is not a sculpture in the first place, the Madonna of Duccio was not a painting in the first place... ». Today only art historians or theologians know how to read the iconographic meaning that undermines these works, which became « more » than simple images in other people's eyes. My goal was to take this work out of its past so that it can take life again, that its forms, textures and colors, put in a new context, could be part of a new signification logic and reveal what problems it has in common with modern art.



Bringing a painting to life - Andy Guérif looks back on the making of Maestà



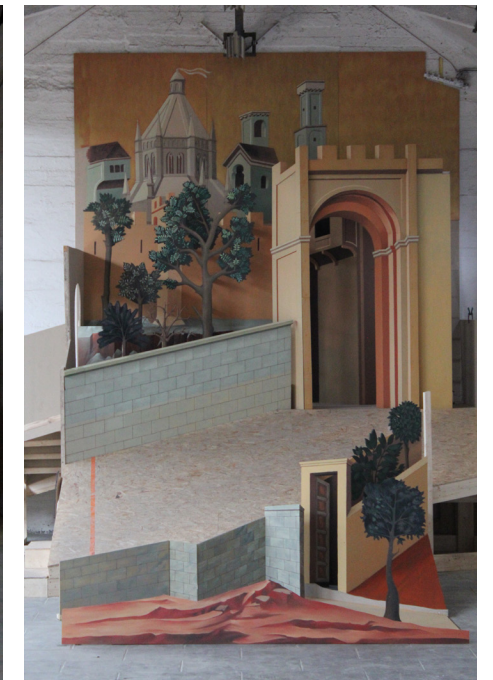
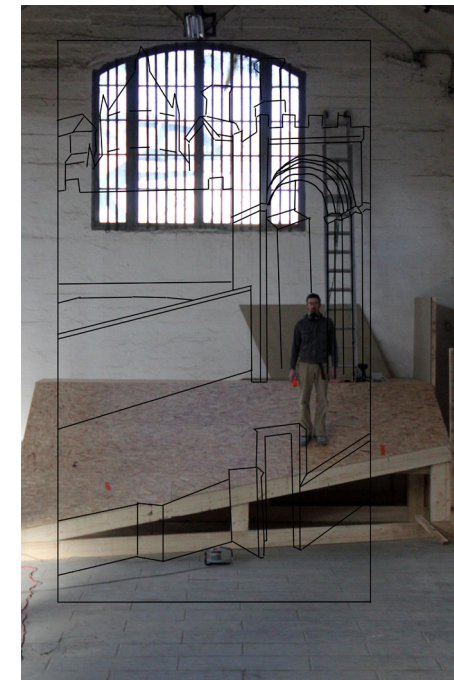
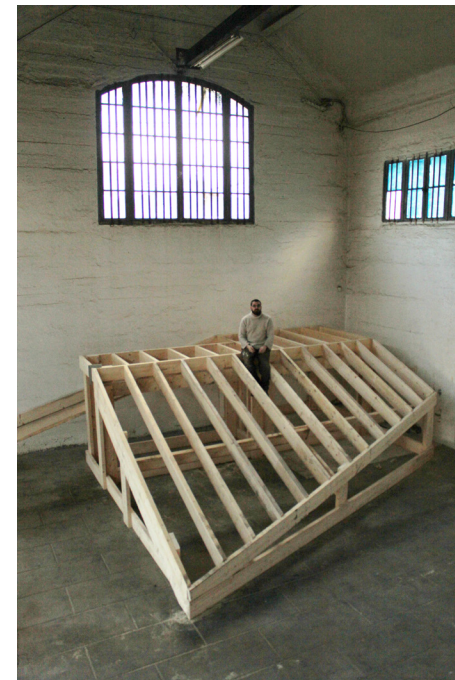
1 - « In primitive paintings, only the characters in the forefront are completely visible; those behind don't have bodies, one can only see their faces in the background. For the Christ before Anna, despite the several « hold closer! » shouted, David, Philippe and Fabien are still off-camera. We'll see 19 of the 22 characters, and 19 pairs of legs instead of 8. »

2 - « Since actors can't move much due to the lack of space, their order of entry is hugely depending on the future position of characters at the moment painted by Duccio. The set being only 7m large, for larger settings the actors have to stick to the wall so they can enter and leave without appearing in the corners. »

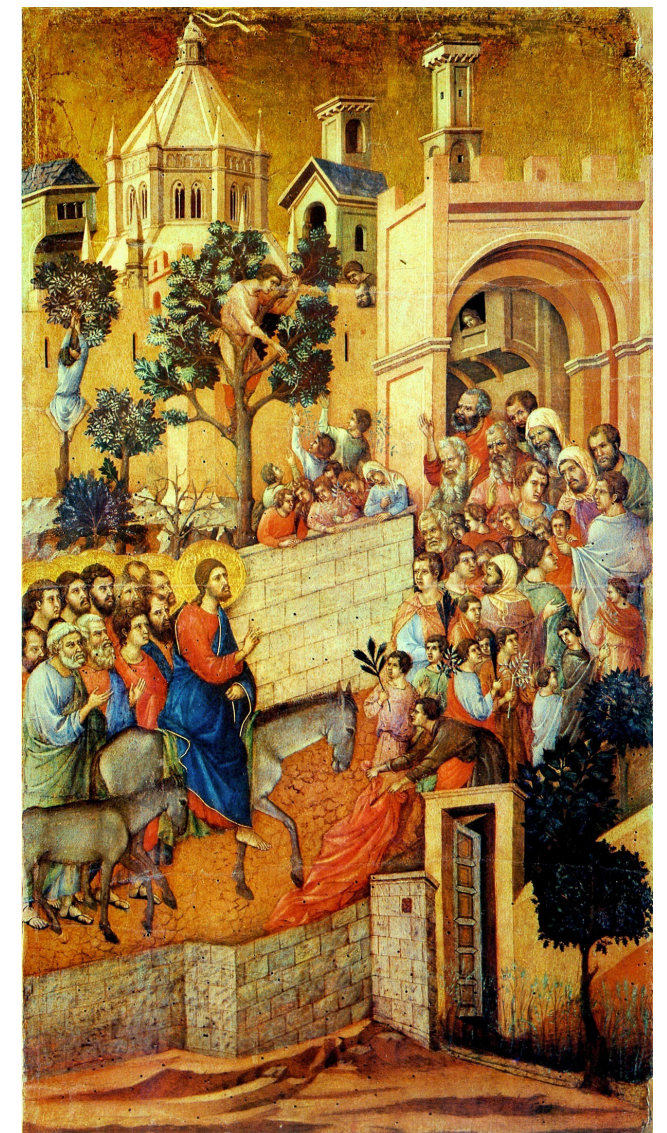


3 - « For the *Pact of Judas*, 34 persons need to stand... on only 8 usable m². For Emmanuel Rodriguez (Judas, in the center), who enters last in the shot, it's a real problem to find his way between the foreground characters and the limits of the shot, without falling in or outside the set. For this 7th panel, the synchronisation between noise and silences was accomplished with astonishing ease by the actors. »

4 - « In Duccio's painting there is an incredible liveliness and harmony between colors. By cropping on the drapery, we could easily think of the wonderful visitation by Jacopo Pontorno (located in the church of San Michele de Carmignano) or of a detail from the Le Perugin's Virgin (at Museum of Fine Arts in Caen). »



Up: The making of the set: Jerusalem from start to finish
Below: the scene from the film, as compared to Duccio's painting.





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