The Red Cross on White: Sovereignty, Community, and Visual Memory from Piero della Francesca’s Resurrection to 28 Years Later

This article examines the red cross on white banner as a recurring visual form deeply embedded in shifting contexts of power, identity, and affect. Originating as a protective emblem in medieval maritime and military traditions closely linked to Saint George’s cross, a symbol of chivalric defence and communal solidarity, the banner moves beyond fixed symbolism to function as a dynamic boundary marker. It mediates complex relationships between self and other, sacred and secular, order and chaos. Through its reappearance in both Piero della Francesca’s *Resurrection* and Danny Boyle’s *28 Years Later*, this study reveals how visual culture operates as lived environments, a shared space of meaning and feeling where historical experience and political authority are continually negotiated and reconfigured across time and media.

Piero della Francesca's *Resurrection* (circa 1463–1465) demands attention not only for its serene, monumental depiction of Christ rising from death but also for the vivid red cross on a white banner that Christ carries. This banner transcends traditional iconography to become a liminal object central to the painting's complex visual and symbolic architecture. It functions simultaneously as a sign of resurrection, a marker of sovereign authority, and a token of communal identity. Its formal presence is woven through the spatial and political dimensions of the work, inviting a deeper interrogation of its role as a boundary-defining membrane hovering at the threshold between life and death, sacred and civic, order and chaos.

The red cross on white has a history stretching back well before Piero's time. In the early medieval period, maritime republics such as Genoa and Pisa adopted it as an identifying banner for their ships. Flying this emblem across the Mediterranean was not simply an act of identification but a performative claim to protection and legitimacy. These maritime powers used the banner to signal their Christian affiliation while negotiating the precarious boundaries of trade and conflict. The red cross on white became a floating jurisdiction, a visual claim conferring both divine sanction and legal protection.

By the late twelfth century, the emblem had become closely linked with Saint George, whose legendary battle with the dragon enshrined a narrative of salvation through militant intervention. The banner known as Saint George's cross was adopted by England and the City of London and raised on ships entering the Mediterranean from around 1190 onwards. The flag signified Christian identity but also English claims to authority in contested political and commercial arenas. The story of Saint George and

the dragon embodies a complex relationship between violence and protection, sacrifice and sovereignty. The banner encapsulates this tension as both a symbol of deliverance and a marker of territorial and communal defence.

In Piero's *Resurrection*, this banner's visual and symbolic weight is central. Christ holds it aloft in a posture that is both active and contemplative, standing yet seated in a way that defies simple categorization as Baxandall points out in an essay in *Words for Pictures*. The banner functions as a vertical axis dividing the pictorial space, its stark red cross cutting through the calm landscape and the sleeping soldiers at Christ's feet. These soldiers lie in twisted, almost theatrical repose, evoking classical motifs where mortals fall into sleep in the divine presence. Their slumber is a suspension between life and death that mirrors the paradox of resurrection itself.

The painting's precise use of perspective places the event within a rational, measured space, reflecting Renaissance art's focus on order and control. Yet Christ's figure and the banner disrupt this order. The banner remains visually flat and iconic against the scene's depth, functioning as a sign that exists between representation and symbol. This creates a tension that casts the banner as a boundary object, both material and image, marking the intersection of divine and human realms.

The painting's original setting further deepens its layered meanings. It was made for the Palazzo della Residenza in Sansepolcro, a place of political governance rather than religious worship. The painted columns, which recall classical motifs, reflect the civic purpose of the space. In this context, the resurrection is not simply a religious event but a metaphor for political renewal and communal identity. The banner Christ carries thus serves as a symbol of sovereignty that unites theological and civic authority, affirming the community's claim to order and divine favour. A more fluid boundary between the sacred and the profane.

Piero's composition evokes classical mythology, particularly the story of Zeus, whose presence causes mortals to fall into sleep, blurring the lines between waking and dreaming, presence and absence. Christ's paradoxical posture, both standing and seated, captures this very tension. The interplay of light and shadow creates sharp contrasts on the tomb and figures, crafting a metaphysical stage where earthly and divine realms

meet. The banner's flatness stands out against the scene's three-dimensional depth, functioning like a herald's standard that conveys both representational and symbolic meaning.

The painting's placement within a civic building dedicated to governance adds a rich and multifaceted layer to its meaning. The architectural framing, including painted columns and classical motifs, deliberately evokes the language of political power and institutional authority. This setting transforms the resurrection from a solely religious event into one deeply embedded within the life and identity of the community's civic structure. By situating this sacred moment within the space where political decisions were made, the artwork suggests a profound fusion between spiritual and secular realms. Divine authority and civic governance are presented as mutually reinforcing forces, each lending legitimacy and order to the other.

Within this framework, the banner Christ carries assumes a dual role that is both theological and political. On the one hand, it proclaims the divine victory over death, embodying the promise of resurrection and eternal life central to Christian faith. On the other hand, it acts as a powerful symbol of communal sovereignty and social cohesion. The banner asserts the community's claim to stability and order, signalling a collective identity forged through shared beliefs and governance. It functions as a visible marker of political legitimacy grounded not only in faith but also in the practical necessities of maintaining civic order and solidarity.

This dual significance reveals how power was conceived during the Renaissance as a complex interplay between spiritual sanction and temporal authority. The banner mediates this relationship by bridging theological concepts of salvation with the concrete realities of political life. It stands as a tangible symbol through which divine mandate and social institution converge, reinforcing the idea that civic authority is inseparable from the sacred. In doing so, the banner becomes more than an emblem; it embodies the intertwined nature of sovereignty, community, and transcendence within Renaissance culture, reminding viewers that political power is always underwritten by deeper metaphysical claims.

This emblem's persistence resonates powerfully in Danny Boyle's 2025 film *28 Years Later*, where the red cross on white flies above a fortified English enclave set within a barren, post-apocalyptic world. While

removed from its original sacred and civic contexts, the banner retains its core associations with sovereignty, protection, communal identity, and traditional Christian resurrection. In the film, it functions as a complex symbol of resurrection, exclusion, and survival, a fragile claim to authority amid the breakdown of social order and the constant threat of contagion.

In this dystopian environment, the banner continues to signify resurrection and divine sanction in the traditional sense. At the same time, it marks a clear boundary between the enclave's survivors and the hostile, chaotic world beyond, a world devastated by viral plague and inhabited by the infected. The banner acts as a membrane that both protects those within and excludes those outside, drawing lines of inclusion and exclusion that are political, social, and existential. It defines fragile limits of safety and belonging in a reality where trust is scarce and order has collapsed.

The emotional power of the banner remains strong, recalling the protective logic embedded in its medieval Mediterranean origins and the militant saint whose legend shaped the symbol's meaning. This connection reveals how visual signs are adapted to new contexts, expressing ongoing human struggles with survival, identity, authority, and hope. In *28 Years Later*, the banner suggests a desperate effort to reclaim legitimacy, sovereignty, and the promise of renewal amidst the ruins of political and social structures.

Further complexity arises in the banner's symbolism within this post-apocalyptic narrative. It simultaneously gestures toward the resurrection of humanity, as a hope for survival and renewal, and the grim return of the undead, virus-made zombies embodying chaos, death, and uncontrollable rage. This dual meaning complicates the banner's message, making it a marker of both life and death, order and dissolution. It captures the paradox of a community striving to maintain control and meaning while facing overwhelming forces.

Boyle's use of this emblem creates tension between nostalgia for a lost social order and the urgent, precarious conditions of life in the present. The banner stands not simply as a nationalist or territorial flag but as a symbol charged with the emotional weight of memory, loss, faith, and the human will to endure. Its survival across centuries and media demonstrates the capacity of visual culture to carry historical memory and

political theology into new realms, adapting as a dynamic site where past and present, sacred and secular, life and death converge.

The ongoing transformation of the red cross on white reveals how visual symbols carry complex histories while responding to new political and emotional demands. Both Piero's fresco and Boyle's film use the banner as a visual device that shapes space, defines identity, and mobilizes affect. Its clarity and legibility allow it to function as a boundary or sphere, separating life from death, inclusion from exclusion, and order from chaos. Its persistence across time and media underlines its role not as a fixed meaning but as a contingent, evolving instrument of power.

This approach avoids reductive allegory or oversimplification. Instead, it highlights how images like the red cross on white operate as vessels for political theology, visual culture, and affective experience. As the banner travels from the frescoed walls of a Tuscan civic palace to the dystopian landscapes of contemporary cinema, it carries a history of sovereignty and community that remains both ancient and urgently relevant. Its migration and transformation teach us how visual forms negotiate power, identity, and survival across moments of historical rupture.

In addition to the other Baxandall mentioned in the text, here are the works that are behind my thinking:

Baxandall, Michael. Painting and Experience in Fifteenth-Century Italy: A Primer in the Social History of Pictorial Style. Oxford University Press, 1972.

Freedberg, David. The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response. University of Chicago Press, 1989.

Panofsky, Erwin. Renaissance and Renascences in Western Art. Harper & Row, 1960.

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