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Jesuit & Spectacle

Jesuit Solemnities in the Southern Netherlands: Immersion and Experience¹

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DER Moyen Âge tardif et première Modernité)

A Religious Baroque Festival Culture in the Low Countries?

The research project “Baroque Festival Culture”, promoted by Ralph Dekoninck (UCL), Maarten Delbeke (Gent), Koen Vermeir (KUL) and myself (ULg) aims to study the mechanisms operating within the baroque spectacle and also to explore the links between Italy and the Low Countries in matters of spectacular events. We want to understand how (and if) the Baroque Festival Culture displayed in Italy (and especially the well-known Roman Baroque Festival Culture) reached the Low Countries and influenced them. It seems to us that the most obvious way to explore this link is via the religious. Indeed, since the very end of the 16th Century, Rome had established itself as the head of Catholicism on which she intended to impose her supervision and her uses. It is commonplace for those who work on post-tridentine topics: Rome set itself up as ‘the’ centre and asserted universal claims over local needs. The institutions of the Roman Church became stronger, as power was mainly concentrated in the hands of the pontiff, surrounded with his new congregations. The hyper centralized post-tridentine Church has exploited spectacular ways to celebrate and represent its new central majesty. Rome became in fact an important spectacular center where festivities almost became a daily routine: in this *Gran Teatro del Mondo*, the ephemeral events followed each other in an uninterrupted

¹ Part of this paper is included in the following article (which incorporates further a large part of the lecture given at the 2012 RSA annual meeting in Washington: *From universal to local: celebrating new saints in the Southern Netherlands*): “From Rome to the Southern Netherlands: Spectacular Sceneries to Celebrate the Canonization of Ignatius of Loyola and Francis Xavier”, in Jennifer DA SILVA (ed.), *The Sacralization of Space and Behavior in the Early Modern World*, Ashgate, forthcoming.

flow... As far as the Roman festive events are concerned, historians like Carandini speak of a "magmatic set".

So, we initially wanted to see how that Roman spectacular phenomenon, closely linked to the hyper-centralization of the Catholic Church, was exported, especially in the Low Countries that formed a confessional frontier between Catholic and Protestant areas. Our intention was to understand the spectacular links between the Roman "centre" and the Belgian "frontier", between the "head" and one "member" of the catholic body: we wanted to understand how the model circulated, how it was adapted, and finally whether the Roman festive model, once exported, continued to have impacts on the centralization process. Therefore, it was necessary to first conduct a survey of the religious spectacular demonstrations in the Low Countries for the post-tridentine period. We decided not to consider ordinary liturgy – even though it became more and more sumptuous for the period we are interested in – but to focus on the extraordinary ceremonies and, in particular, on the religious processions in the urban space. Indeed, the exacerbated theatricality of these extraordinary ceremonies, with their accentuated effects, offers a rich material of analysis for our interdisciplinary team. Up to now, this survey has led us to a double observation:

1/ First, the examination of the sources reveals that we can only detect a few spectacular religious feasts of "Roman" inspiration: a large series of these celebrations were not exported to the Low Countries. For example, the organisation of the spectacular Forty Hours is not locatable in this area. In this connection, the Italian Capuchin friar Giacinto di Casale Monferrato, who arrived in Brussels in 1623, tried to organise a Forty Hour procession for Palm Sunday³. According to the example of the Capuchin friar, numerous Spanish young men, present in Brussels, offered a very spectacular – and shocking – show, flagellating themselves during the procession. It provoked such a strong reaction that the Infanta Isabella had to ask father Giacinto to leave Brussels for a short period. Indeed, not only the practice of the collective self-flagellation

² S. CARANDINI, "L'Effimero spirituale. Feste e manifestazioni religiose", dans L. FIORANI & A. PROSPERI (eds), *Storia d'Italia. Annali*, vol. 16 (Roma, la città del papa), Einaudi, p. 5519-5553.

³ Joris SNAET, « Isabel Clara Eugenia and the Capuchin Monastery at Tervuren », in Cordula VAN WYHE (ed.), *Isabel Clara Eugenia. Female sovereignty in the Courts of Madrid and Brussels*, CEEH, 2011, p. 361-362.

had firmly been condemned as heretic in the 14th Century, at the time of the big processions of Flagellants that took place in these regions to fight against the Black Death⁴, but also, since the end of the 16th Century, the Belgian synods worked energetically towards a radical disciplining of the processions: in order to restore worship, decency and method in the processions (in short, in order to spiritualise the processions even more), they tried to eliminate all sorts of “excess”. Amongst these, we can identify a varied range of realities: the flagellations are a good example but we can also, and especially, underline all the spectacular and theatrical aspects and notably the “*ludi teatrales*” (or theatrical plays). Since the Middle Ages, partially thanks to the success of the Chambers of Rhetoric, religious processions were indeed characterized by an important dramatisation by means of *tableaux vivants*⁵. The synods considered these processional elements as farcical and decided to eliminate them. Moreover, since 1600, this disciplining process had been coupled to a codification process: in 1600, the Congregation of Rites published the *Caeremoniale episcoporum* intended to accurately codify the way to organise processions, setting the standard for ordinary and extraordinary processions⁶.

2/ Nevertheless – and it is our second observation –, in spite of this very strong disciplining phenomenon and this codification process, we can identify some feasts that defied the imposed set of rules and norms. Some religious actors organised some spectacular processions a odds with the authorities’ orders: these actors were to say the least mainly – if not exclusively – the Jesuits who appeared as “the” Masters of spectacularity. From the 1610s onwards, we see them proposing some processional performances characterised by their intense spectacularity caused by a powerful convergence of diverse media: beatification and canonisation celebrations (Ignatius’s beatification in 1609, Francis Xavier’s beatification in 1619, Ignatius & Fr. Xavier’s canonisation in 1622, Francis Borgia’s beati-

⁴ Anne AUTISSIER, « Le sang des flagellants », in *Médiévales*, 27 (1994), p. 51-58.

⁵ Anne-Laure VAN BRUAENE, *Om beters wille. Rederijkerskamers en de stedelijke cultuur in de Zuidelijke Nederlanden (1400-1650)*, Amsterdam University Press, 2008.

⁶ About this codification process and the local (strong) reactions, see « Rome et les normes du culte. Les prescriptions de la Congrégation des Rites », dans B. DOMPNIER (dir.), *Les langages du culte aux XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles. Actes du colloque (28-30 octobre 2010)*, Clermont-Ferrand, Presses Universitaires Blaise Pascal, Collection « Histoires croisées », forthcoming.

fication in 1624...), triumphal arrival of Roman catacombs relics (from 1610), Jubilee of the Society (1640), ceremonies for the election of a patron saint in the war context (from 1630s) and all the intensely spectacularised processions, organised in the very stressful context of the wars which shook the Low Countries throughout the 17th Century.

When these spectacular Jesuit events appeared with the Ignatius's beatification feasts, they represented a real ceremonial strangeness in the Belgian Catholic landscape on which I would like to expand here below.

A ceremonial strangeness

It is striking that, by organizing these spectacular processions, the Jesuits transferred to them a lot of well-known components of civic festivities: we see them integrating triumphal arches (rather typical of Solemn Entries), allegorical chariots (that we rather associate with profane festivities like Carnival or civic parades), scaffolds with "*tableaux vivants*", very impressive fireworks, etc. They seemed to take advantage of the strong Belgian festive legacy to reinvent religious ceremonies and, in this way, to favour their pastoral project: in a rather obvious way, these processions pertained to a large collection of techniques of conversion and education, well mastered by the Society.

The sources themselves which describe these spectacular processions are the best evidence of this phenomenon: they show how the Jesuits have taken advantage of a rich and fertile local ground to transform it into their own process: these descriptions were widely fed by a long tradition of public triumphs descriptions, in particular the descriptions of Solemn Entries which the Jesuits knew well, according to their library catalogues. And yet, there were major differences between the Jesuit descriptions and the public triumphs accounts. First, the Jesuit sources are not printed and illustrated documents like the festival books that we can find for the Solemn Entries for example. By contrast, they are mainly – apart from some exceptions⁷ – internal archives, intended to report the

⁷ *Sanctorum Ignati et Xaveri in divos relatorum triumphus Bruxellae ab Aula et Urbe celebratus*, Bruxelles, Pepermans, [1622]; Michel DE GHRYSE, *Honor S. Ignatio de Loiola Societatis Iesu Fundatori et S. Francisco Xaverio Indiarum Apostolo per Gregorium XV inter Divos relatis habitus a Patribus Domus Professae et Collegii Societatis Iesu Antuerpiae 24 Iulii 1622*, Anvers, Plantin, 1622; *Narratio eorum*

various local ministries to the authorities in Rome: their authors aimed to demonstrate how the feasts were integrated in a global pastoral conception. Besides, in these documents, the purpose of the Jesuits, unlike the one pursued by festival books, was more to show the *effects* than to describe the *programmes*, which often were only described very summarily (or very confusingly). In these documents, the fathers did not so much sought to describe the devices themselves, but rather the efficiency of these devices as the support of a pastoral project. The descriptions of spectacular and sumptuous processions found in the archives insist about the intention of their authors to show that all these “*mises-en-scène*” – I quote some extracts from the Jesuit accounts – “increase the devotion and the religion of the multitude” (Saint-Omer 1610), allow a “dense rush” towards the Jesuit church (*idem*), allow to considerably increase the communions and the confessions, make the whole city converge around a common event and also attract the benevolence of the authorities towards the Jesuit schools, characterised by their gifts and their donations.

However, with these spectacular choices, the Jesuits did not only work in their own interest: they also worked as the relay of the post-tridentine spectacular model in the Low Countries. They not only contributed to spread the culture of magnificence and solemnisation as displayed in Rome, but also clearly supported the multi-media offensive of the Hapsburgs in the region. In this Spanish satellite country, they helped to proclaim loudly and clearly the Hapsburg’s power and legitimacy, which coincided with Catholic power and legitimacy. Their spectacular exacerbation was therefore also a political tool.

But we have to keep in mind – and it will be my third and ultimate point – that these spectacular processions consisted in more than a representation, more than a demonstrative expression, more than the statement of the Catholic victory and the Hapsburg power. They were also – and above all – a time-space where something profound and fulfilling was being performed. They were not only a *language*, but also a *performance*.

quae Duaci pro celebranda sanctorum Ignatii et Francisci canonizatione gesta sunt, Douai, Pierre Telu, 1622.

Immersion and experience

These spectacular processions offered people the opportunity to live an intense physical experience. We only have to read the Jesuits' descriptions of materials, lights, sounds, perfumes, special effects, monumentality of the "machines" to understand how the participants were actually immersed in an ultra-sensory space with great effects. In this respect, some Jesuit accounts highlight the fact that the ephemeral sceneries had to inspire the mind of the spectators to *sacer horror* (or *sanctus horror* or *pius horror*). The Latin word *horror* refers first both to bristling hair and a cold shiver or feverous thrill. But the word also refers to all physical sensations that the Ancients felt in front of divinity: shudders of fear, thrill of delight, cold sweat, dry mouth, stomach tied in knots... The *sacer horror* is the bodily manifestation of religious awe⁸, the organic sensation of respect mixed with fear and wonder felt in the presence of gods or cosmic forces. Using this expression to describe the audience's reaction to early modern pomp could be a pedantic writing feature of a father whose Latin command is owed to a humanist literary education. But I would like to discuss this topic in another way. The ephemeral decorations also had a direct effect on the body. As just noted, the festive devices invited the audience to participate in an overwhelming visual experience: the splendour of the pageantry should delight or stun the eyes. This amazement, however, was not gratuitous. Indeed, the accounts abundantly recalled that to delight eyes meant also to move souls. Building a glowing *décor* that overwhelmed the senses aimed therefore to the overwhelming of the mind.

In this way, the Jesuit Juan de Mariana wrote in his *De spectaculis* (1609)⁹ that if somebody wanted to "increase religion or devotion in

⁸ The first and most famous study about "religious awe" is Rudolf Otto's work about the "Numinous" and its terrifying manifestation (*mysterium tremendum*); Rudolf OTTO, *Das Heilige*, 1917. The concept was used a lot by all the obsolete emotionalist/psychological theories to explain the origin of the religions. Here I use the term only as an expression of a personal experience and feelings, not as a starting point for religious phenomenon.

⁹ In 1599, Juan de Mariana dedicated the fifteenth chapter of the third book of his very famous *De Rege* to the spectacles. Ten years later, he developed his arguments in a separate treatise entitled *De spectaculis*, released with six other treatises: Juan DE MARIANA, *Tractatus VII* (Cologne: Hieratus, 1609). In this treatise, Mariana – like Tertullian before him – firmly fought against the

the hearts of the mortals”, he should remember that “these ones, since they were led by their senses, were particularly seized by the external splendour of things, ornament and pomp¹⁰”. Juan de Mariana then echoed what the fathers gathered at the twenty-second session of the Council of Trent already decreed: “such is the nature of man, that, without external helps, he cannot easily be raised to the meditation of divine things¹¹”. The fathers continued by underlining that the Church had chosen for that reason to institute rites and ceremonies, defining the last ones as

mystic benedictions, lights, incense, vestments, and many other things of this kind [...] whereby both the majesty of so great a sacrifice might be recommended, and the minds of the faithful be excited, by those visible signs of religion and piety, to the contemplation of those most sublime things which are hidden in the sacrifice [of the Mass]¹².

This conception of liturgy has something to do with the “sacer horror”. Indeed, if we follow the author of a scholarly essay on the liturgical ceremonial of Mainz at the end of the 18th Century, “All these rules and ceremonies inspire a *sacrum horrorem* and proclaim the holy majesty we should pay tribute to¹³”. In other words, all the “visible signs of religion” delivered by the liturgy have to unveil the majesty of God, to the extent of inspiring a “sacer horror”.

The same logic was implemented in the Jesuit processions. We obviously cannot confuse the Sacrifice of the Mass with the Jesuit processions. However, we can still consider that the logic of divine unveiling which governs the conception of Tridentine Mass can also be found in hyper-spectacularised processions. By inviting the faithful into a church saturated with colours, materials, and shapes, i.e. in a hyper-stimulating sensorial environment where the “visible signs”

theater, its indecency, its ignominy, particularly when the “*histriones*” performed sacred plays.

¹⁰ “[N]ihilque omnino praemittere earum quae religionem et pietatem in animis mortalium augent: qui quoniam sensibus ducuntur, externo rerum apparatu, ornatu, pompa capiuntur maxime”; Juan DE MARIANA, *De spectaculis*, 1609, XVI.

¹¹ *The canons and decrees of the sacred and oecumenical Council of Trent*, ed. and trans. J. Waterworth (London: Dolman, 1848), Session XII, chap. V.

¹² *The canons and decrees*, Session XII, chap. V.

¹³ “*omnes dispositiones caeremoniaequae sacrum horrorem inspirant, sanctam Majestatem, cui homagium praestatur, venerabileque Sacramentum proclamant*”, *Ordo et argumentum agendarum Moguntinensium ab ineunte saeculo XVI. Dissertatio liturgica*.

dominate, the organisers aimed to excite the minds, to seize the faithful and to provoke a reaction of *sacer horror* among the audience. The *décor* became an immersion device, inviting the faithful to a meeting with holiness – and in particular with the Jesuit version of holiness as represented by the two new saints –, which caused a physical reaction of fear or delight. Here is the key feature: all the spectacular devices settled by the Society were designed to seize, to capture, to rapt the soul of the faithful-spectator “who is led by his senses”. Much more than stimulation of the senses, this overflow of sensory stimuli that characterized the processional apparatus caused such confusion, such a devastation that it pushed the spectator “beside himself” (*hors de lui*) and made a deep religious experience possible.

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