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ANALYSING STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS THROUGH EARLY MODERN THEATRE

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Abstract

Historically, theatrical performances have often reflected power-related processes of communication and influence. Theatrical representations send messages and provide commentary on influential events and social change. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Italy dramatic upheaval in the political realm and dynamic innovations in all aspects of theatrical production resulted in new communication dynamics that can be seen as the precursors to many concepts and techniques used today. In this paper, three forms of early modern theatre—the 'Theatre of the Prince', entrepreneurial theatre, and street performance—are analysed through the theoretical framework of social representation put forward by Serge Moscovici to identify early modern trends in communication and influence that laid the groundwork for strategic communications.

Keywords—*strategic communications, social representations, early modern theatre, propaganda, propagation, diffusion, historical studies*

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Performance Practices and Strategic Communications

Throughout the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the Italian territories were a place of political and social upheaval and of experimentation and evolution in power relationships, social practices, and the arts. The Italian states explored different forms of administration and discursive practices of power; the exchange of information and news among citizens began to grow and take shape, gradually becoming 'public opinion' as we understand it today;[1] and it was at this time that innovations in theatrical practices led to the birth of modern theatrical and musical performances as we know them in the West today.

During this period, the Italian territories were troubled by wars that would redefine Europe's geopolitical balance of power. This confluence of political and artistic developments was fruitful and heralded a cross-pollination of ideas that became the seed stock for many practices we take for granted today. It can be argued that the representation of power and the engagement of a public sphere, newly reimagined as both an audience and a political force, were developed on Italian stages during the early modern period.[2] The spectacular and scenic culture of early modern Italy was among the main vehicles for creating and disseminating artistic ideas, collective imagery, and representations of political power.[3]

Today, sovereign bodies and institutions design campaigns daily that shape ideas, disseminate opinions, and propagandise favourable positions. In this paper, I explore the various ways representations of political power were expressed through the Italian scenic culture of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries,[4] and use social representation theory to tease out the relationship between theatrical representations and the practices the *ancien régime* used to communicate power.[5]

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1 Giovanni Ciappelli, Valentina Nider, Fulvio Ferrari, and Michele Sisto, *La invencíon de las noticias: las relaciones de sucesos entre la literatura y la informacíon (siglos XVI–XVIII)* (Trento: Università di Trento. Dipartimento di lettere e filosofia, 2017).

2 Jürgen Habermas, Thomas Burger, and Frederick Lawrence, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry Into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989); Mike S. Schäfer, 'Digital Public Sphere', in *The International Encyclopedia of Political Communication*, Mazzoleni Gianpietro (ed.), (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), pp. 322–28; Massimo Rospocher, *Beyond the Public Sphere: Opinions, Publics, Spaces in Early Modern Europe* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2012).

3 Roger Chartier, *Publishing Drama in Early Modern Europe* (London: British Library, 1999); Roger Chartier, *The Author's Hand and the Printer's Mind: Transformations of the Written Word in Early Modern Europe* (Oxford: Polity Press, 2013); Roger Chartier and Lydia G. Cochrane, *The Order of Books: Readers, Authors, and Libraries in Europe Between the Fourteenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (Stanford University Press, 2014).

4 Nathalie Rivère de Carles, *Early Modern Diplomacy, Theatre and Soft Power: The Making of Peace*, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016)

5 Serge Moscovici, 'The Phenomenon of Social Representations' in *Social Representations,* R. M. Farr & S. Moscovici (eds), (Cambridge University Press, 1984).

Social Representations and Strategic Communications

Social psychologist Serge Moscovici's *theory of social representation* states that a social representation is a:

> […] system of values, ideas and practices with a twofold function; first, to establish an order which will enable individuals to orient themselves in their material and social world and to master it; and secondly to enable communication to take place among the members of a community by providing them with a code for social exchange and a code for naming and classifying unambiguously the various aspects of their world and their individual and group history.[6]

Social representations 'shape what is loosely termed a social consciousness, the consciousness of a period, a class or a nation as a whole'.[7]

Moscovici identifies three macro-communicative needs within any social group: the need to make a foreign element familiar, the need to create a shared field of communication, and the need to form a common identity.[8] Social representations respond to these needs. Denise Jodelet observes that social representation 'is a form of knowledge, socially elaborated and shared, having a practical and concurrent purpose for the construction of a reality common to a social whole'.[9]

Moscovici theorises that meanings associated with the ideas we use to understand and interpret the world cannot be considered definitive acquisitions and describes the creation and transformation of ideas shared within any social group. Moscovici sees these shared practices, ideas, and values as being in a state of continuous change.[10] Subject to the communicative push of intrinsic and extrinsic mutations, this transformation of ideas occurs through the interrelated dynamics of *anchoring* and *objectification*.

6 Serge Moscovici, 'Foreword', in *Health and Illness: A Social Psychological Analysis*, C. Herzlich (ed.), (London: Academic Press, 1973), p. ix–xiv.
7 Moscovici, 'Notes Towards a Description of Social Representations', *European Journal of Social Psychology* Vol. 18, Issue 3 (1988): 211–50, p. 228.
8 Moscovici, 'Foreword', in *Health and Illness,* p. xiii.
9 Denise Jodelet, 'Connaître sans savoir et savoir prendre: un art populaire d'emprise sur la folie', in *L'espace therapeutique. Cadres et contextes*, Michele Grossen, Anne-Nelly Perret-Clermont (eds), (Paris: Delachaux et Niestlé, 1992), p. 48.
10 Moscovici, 'The history and actuality of social representations', in *The Psychology of the Social*, U. Flick (ed.), (Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 209–47; Serge Moscovici, *Le rappresentazioni sociali*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2005).

Anchoring refers to the way an unknown element is compared to a known element that belongs to the reference system of the receiving group (e.g. Daesh refers to its Western enemies as 'crusaders', locating current adversaries in the same frame of reference as known past aggressors). *Objectification* refers to the mental transformation of unfamiliar abstract concepts into familiar, concrete ideas (e.g. the Battle of Waterloo: using a single battle to symbolise an entire military campaign).[11] Anchoring and objectification are used constantly to recreate shared representations through a dialogic process, making unknown phenomena known.

Reasons to (strategically) communicate

The study of *social representations* concerns their function within the communicative process. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, political power actively engaged in creating and controlling shared representations within social groups through theatrical performance.[12] I argue that strategic communications in the modern, Western sense can trace its origins to these years of conflict and geopolitical tension among European sovereigns. This is not by chance. As Moscovici writes: 'there would be hardly any reason to communicate if there were no tensions, asymmetries or conflicts between interacting parties'.[13] Communication is intrinsic to achieving any of the political objectives of State action.[14] Communicative dynamics are, by definition, an attempt to influence. They, therefore, exploit the clash between 'partisans' and 'opponents':

> Many of the psychologists I know separate the phenomenon of communication from the phenomenon of influence [...] I consider the distinction between these two phenomena as artificial. Every message, every linguistic emission is based on a persuasive intention [...] My theory is a theory of influence; but by the same token it is a theory of the communicative process that normally takes place between the partisans and the opponents of different points of view.[15]

11 Moscovici, *Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), p. 51.
12 J. Ronnie Mulryne, Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly, and Margaret Shewring, *Europa Triumphans: Court and Civic Festivals in Early Modern Europe*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Lois Rosow, 'Power and Display: Music in Court Theatre', in *The Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Music*, Tim Carter, John Butt (eds), (Cambridge University Press, 2005), pp. 197–240.
13 Ivana Marková, 'Persuasion and Propaganda', *Diogenes* Vol. 55, № 1 (2008): 37–51, p. 43.
14 Moscovici, 'Silent Majorities and Loud Minorities', *Annals of the International Communication Association* Vol. 14, Issue 1 (1991): 298–308, p. 301. Themes explored also in Moscovici*, Social Representations: Explorations in Social Psychology*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).
15 Moscovici, *Social Representations*, p. 276.

The dynamics that guide discursive practices of power originate from conflict or asymmetry between parties and aim at an ideal *reductio ad unum*: namely, reconciliation between the actors involved. Therefore, when such communication takes place, it is strategic by its very nature: it aims to produce or influence shared social representations among its receivers.

Communicative dynamics and the audience

Moscovici identifies three fundamental dynamics of communication, or modes of expression, that arise from this complex process of sharing, creating, and transforming ideas: *propaganda, propagation,* and *diffusion*. Each of these three dynamics is present to varying degrees in any exchange, originating in uneven relationships between participants expressing different objectives in the communicative process. Each has a specific communicative objective, message form, and type of recipient.

Moscovici defines *propaganda* as 'a mode of expression used by a group in a situation of conflict, and as the instrumental or action-oriented elaboration of that group's representation of the object of the conflict'.[16] Conflict is the essential reagent. The dominant group employs propaganda because: 'the assertion of the group's identity requires opposition and it gives rise to the elaboration of a representation of the object that creates it'.[17] Propaganda tends to unite interlocutors into a single position opposed to a third pole, which is the real target of communicative action, and so tends to create stereotypes.[18] This objective is pursued through identifying and representing an enemy outside the social group of reference. 'The group comes to define itself in terms of the enemy',[19] establishing a direct and circular relationship between a conflict the group is facing with the outside and the group's internal contradictions, considered to have arisen from conflict with the external enemy. In order to accomplish this, propaganda transforms disparate pieces of information relating to the conflict into a single representation, producing order in the world of meanings shared within the group.

16 Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis: Its Image and Its Public*, (Cambridge: Polity, 2008), p. 314.
17 *Ibid.*, p. 313.
18 Moscovici, *Social Influence and Social Change*, (London: Academic Press, 1976), p. 497; Markova, 'Amedee or How to Get Rid of It: Social Representations from a Dialogical Perspective', *Culture and Psychology* Vol. 6 (2000): 419–60.
19 *Ibid.*, p. 310.

A corollary of this function is the tendency for propaganda to use simplified messages. Complexity in the world is reduced, and conflict is resolved by accepting the unity of the new representation: this is the key feature of propaganda as a tool for strategic communications.

> 'The shaping of a representation transcends the real because the representation appears to be a duplicate of the real, but tends to lend it a certain permanence, to find something stable in a changing environment, and to find something constant in the initial fluidity of the links [...]'.[20]–

In short, propaganda uses simplified messages to unite the dominant group and its subordinates in opposition to a third party, considered to be the enemy from which conflict arises, in order to strengthen group cohesion.

Propagation describes a dynamic within the social group that strengthens the group's shared vision of a particular social representation. Propagation has two distinct functions: first, to organise and transform a shared theory into a set of ideas compatible with principles that identify the group; second, to integrate new themes that impose themselves on the group's attention by anticipating effects and reinforcing existing shared social representations. Propagation creates attitudes within a social group. Moscovici defines this effect as:

> […] a psychical organization with a negative or positive orientation with respect to an object [...]. An Attitude is not a collection of specific and heteronymous opinions or responses, but an organized arrangement of all those opinions and responses. It has a regulatory function: it has a selective effect on everything the subject does or thinks. […] The creation of an attitude is expressive of the subject's relationship with a socially pertinent object. The action that might ensue is only probable. But if it does take place, its context and value are preordained.[21]

In short, propagation refers to communication aimed at orienting the culture shared among the members of a group toward certain principles and at influencing their future attitudes through the attribution of meanings that are already recognised as legitimate and collective.[22]

20 *Ibid.*, p. 322.
21 *Ibid.,* p. 335.
22 Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis*, p. 325.

Finally, *diffusion* concerns the distribution and dissemination of information, resulting in the creation of opinions among different social groups. For Moscovici the first substantial difference in the diffusion of news, compared to propaganda and propagation, is the non-hierarchical nature of this form of communication. In diffusion, the prime agent of communication establishes an equal relationship with its audience—neither the hierarchy characteristic of propaganda nor the division characteristic of propagation separates communicator from public. Indeed, the communicator functions as an intermediary, transmitting or diffusing acquired knowledge to others. Stylistically, diffused messages are 'concrete, attractive and rapid', tending to adapt to the audience, rather than the reverse.[23]

The diffusion of information creates a complex landscape. As different value systems are bound to coexist in any heterogeneous audience, be it in a public square of the sixteenth century or the virtual arena of the twenty-first, a communicator employing diffusion of information does not explicitly seek to influence the behaviour of its recipients. Diffusion 'produces effects but does not try to get results [...]. Its goal is to get people talking and not to get them to take action'.[24] *Diffusion* of information creates opinions. Unlike stereotypes triggered by *propaganda* and re-signification produced by *propagation*, diffusion is not directed toward immediate goals, rather the dynamic is 'unstable, malleable and specific, or in other words contradictory'.[25]

Strategic communications: hybrid since the sixteenth century

The Italian Renaissance was a century of hybrid transformation. During this period, we witness the rediscovery and creation of theatrical and dramaturgical forms, accompanied by many different scenic genres.[26] Discourses of political power successfully exploited this new complexity of form and content. As Moscovici theorises, the result is a complex informational horizon where propaganda, propagation, and diffusion coexist, even within the same scenic event. Any artistic or political event of the early modern era might be examined to see how it creates, transforms, and spreads social representations through

23 *Ibid.,* p. 216.
24 *Ibid.,* p. 255.
25 *Ibid.,* p. 358.
26 On Early Modern dramaturgy poetics see: Renzo Cremante, 'L'elaborazione della grammatica tragica cinquecentesca: applicazioni intertestuali', in *Nascita della tragedia di poesia nei paesi europei […],* Maria Chiabò, Federico Doglio (eds), (Roma: Centro studi sul teatro medievale e rinascimentale—Vicenza, Accademia Olimpica, 1991), pp. 147–71; Pieri Marzia, *La nascita del teatro moderno in Italia tra XV e XVI secolo*, (Torino, Bollati Boringhieri, 1989).

complex processes of anchoring and objectification. This complexity closely resembles the contemporary information landscape of strategic communications where many different actors, pursuing divergent purposes and through a wide variety of communicative dynamics, genres, and messages, are projected into the arena of global communications. This article does not explore contemporary strategic communications, rather it describes the historical moment when these modern communications practices first appeared.

Performance Culture Between the 16Th and 17Th Centuries

Europe's scenic culture began to formalise and acquire the components we now recognise as modern theatre (actors, recited text, scenes, audience, organised stage representations) during the early sixteenth century in Italy.[27] This paper first considers the promoting agent (prince, impresario, street singer) in the communicative relationship involved in theatrical representations, then explores the dialogic nature of the relationship between the promoter of a 'spectacular action' and the social representations it evokes among the audience or recipients (courtiers & visiting dignitaries, theatre-goers, public in the street) of that action.[28] Within this perspective, the Italian performing panorama in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries offers several typologies of scenic productions to illustrate the process of social construction of shared representations.[29]

To simplify, I shall discuss only three types of theatrical performance or spectacle: *Teatro del Principe* [Theatre of the Prince]—shows organised by a State commissioner; *entrepreneurial theatre*—the private productions of profit-making enterprises; and *Commedia dell'Arte* or street performances by professional companies of wandering actors and acrobats, or *saltimbanchi*. Each of these forms of theatrical representation is staged or organised by a different entity with a particular social position and pursuing a particular purpose.

27 Antonia Tissoni Benvenuti, Maria Pia Mussini Sacchi, *Teatro del Quattrocento: le corti padane*, (Torino: Unione Tipografico Editrice Torinese, 1983).
28 Michail Bachtin, *Rabelais and His World*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2002.);
Bachtin and Michael Holquist, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011).
29 Fabrizio Cruciani, *Teatro del Rinascimento: Roma 1450–1550*, (Roma: Bulzoni, 1983);
Silvia Carandini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Seicento*, (Roma: Laterza, 1999).

Figure 1. Engraving of a set designed for 'The Golden Age' (Piacenza, Bazachi, 1690), an opera commissioned by the Dukes of Farnese for the marriage between Odoardo Farnese and Dorotea Sofia of Neuburg. Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan

Three types of theatre, three audiences, and three dynamics of social representation

Theatre of the Prince refers to a complex performance culture including: recitation or singing, spectacular openings, simulated battles, tournaments and rides, and other hybrid genres.[30] This type of theatrical representation reached maturity in the heyday of the Italian courts of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The power of sovereigns and princes became well established, and the will of the Prince became the prime mover in the social, political, and cultural life of his state encompassing everything from the microcosm of the

30 For a definition of 'Teatro del Principe', see Carandini, *Teatro*, p. 94; A more specific description of Court theatrical culture can be found in Cesare Molinari, *Le nozze degli dei: saggio sul grande spettacolo italiano nel Seicento*, (Roma: Mario Bulzoni, 1968); Renzo Cremante, *Teatro del Cinquecento*, (Milano: R. Ricciardi, 1988). On European Court Festivities see: Helen Watanabe-O'Kelly and Anne Simon, *Festivals and Ceremonies: A Bibliography of Works Relating to Court, Civic, and Religious Festivals in Europe 1500–1800*, (London: Mansell, 2000) and J. Ronnie Mulryne and Elizabeth Goldring, *Court Festivals of the European Renaissance: Art, Politics, and Performance*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

individual[31] to the organisation of city space.[32]

Figure 2. Engraving for 'The Adoration of the Magi' by Alessandro Adimari (Florence, Papini, 1642). Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan

The Theatre of the Prince (see Figure 1) was usually performed on landmark occasions when a festive event was designed to shape and communicate a preferred understanding of extraordinary events, circumscribing potentially conflicting positions. Theatrical representations organised by the courts evolved over time.[33] At the outset, spectacular events were related to great public festivities and involved the whole city in celebrations. Over time, as princely power consolidated, spectacles were used to reaffirm the position of common citizens within the exercise of that power—that of the subject dazzled by the wonder of a power beyond his reach. Eventually, scenic events were hidden from the eyes of the people: theatrical performances no longer served a ludic function between sovereign and subjects. Scenic events became to all intents *instrumentum regni*—an exercise of the sovereign's power. The dynamics expressed by these events were many, but all were strongly conditioned by the communicative will of the sovereign to influence the audience.

We can say that the central dynamic of the *Theatre of the Prince* is *propaganda*. Through the medium of the spectacular event the State (Prince) purposely

31 Carlo Ossola, *Dal Cortegiano all'Uomo di mondo: storia di un libro e di un modello sociale*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1987.
32 Erwin Panofsky, *Perspective as Symbolic Form,* trans. Christopher Wand, (New York, N.Y. Zone Books, 1997); Guy Fitch Lytle and Stephen Orgel (eds), *Patronage in the Renaissance*, (Princeton: Princeton University, 2014.).
33 Giovanni Attolini, *Teatro e spettacolo nel Rinascimento*, (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1988), pp. 31–35.

represents an ideological vision—such as the prosperity of the kingdom, its foreign policy objectives, or the nobility of the sovereign—on the stage in an attempt to remove any difference of perspective between its interlocutors (population, nobles, ambassadors, and foreign states).

Entrepreneurial theatre involved shows organised by an *impresario* or entrepreneurial company in a private venue (see Figure 2). These theatrical representations were aimed at an audience of subscribers and occasional spectators. In the mid-sixteenth century, some families began to rent large properties where recited shows were presented. Such entrepreneurial families began receiving profits from ticket sales, seat and stage rentals, the sale of food, and gambling. Investment in rooms adapted specifically for such shows resulted in more opulent stage sets and improved conditions for spectators. Over a span of thirty years, between the 1580s and early 1600s, Venice became one of the first European centres for stage-shows, and among the first to establish a system of private theatrical performances.[34] In the seventeenth century, Venetian theatres had established theatre seasons and played to full houses. This system soon witnessed a further innovation. Operas, which had been the prerogative of a very small elite at court, began to be performed for the public. These were refined and grandiose performances created for select paying spectators. From this point on theatres multiplied and the opera became a fashionable and essential part of any successful theatre season. Venice would remain Europe's main production centre for musical plays until the end of the eighteenth century.[35]

Entrepreneurial theatre developed into a market for theatrical production that linked the survival of the enterprise to the success of its performances against a background of competing theatres. Crucially, this delicate balance between the pressures of artistic expression and profitable enterprise depended on the ability of those involved to read and interpret the taste of audiences. Ideas conveyed by operas dynamically played to and overlapped with public expectations. Moscovici's concept of *propagation* captures the main features of this communicative experience—an exchange of shared representations within an already defined social group (paying spectators enjoying the theatre season in Venice or elsewhere). Entrepreneurial theatre played to the tastes of its audience, reinforcing existing attitudes and increasing the public's overall resilience to external change. At times the propagation dynamic was accompanied by propagandistic attempts to influence the perceptions of the group.

34 Carandini, *Teatro.*
35 Ellen Rosand, *Opera in Seventeenth-Century Venice the Creation of a Genre*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007).

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Commedia dell'Arte was the most elusive culture of spectacle, including wandering street performers, troupes of professional actors, tumblers and acrobats, comedians, barkers, and street scammers (see Figure 3). Street performance in early modern Italy was a real subculture, with each sub-genre having its own characteristics. What unites this varied caravan of cultural operators and charlatans is its self-sufficiency and freedom to travel, gather information, and disseminate it.

Figure 3. 'A mountbank at a fair selling turbans captured at Buda in September 1686' by Bolognese engraver Giuseppe Maria Mitelli. The cartouche above reads: Who wants the turban to dress up? The sign on the left reads: The charlatan came from Buda conquered on September 2, 1686, referring to the war between the Hapsburg and the Ottoman Empire. British Museum

The performances moved from square to marketplace and from town to city, diffusing news and ideas among heterogeneous (by location and social background) social groups with the consequent effect of fostering and spreading new viewpoints. Diffusion is treated here only as a prevalent mode of communication. Actually, acrobats often zealously served kings and princes by spreading artificial news or gathering precious information in foreign countries. This was a complex and heterogeneous phenomenon: singers, actors, and composers of popular poems, but also scammers and street barkers, engaged in short organised or improvised stage events in the piazzas of the cities through which they travelled. What characterised these scenic productions was the irregular nature of their performances, the low quality of texts (often composed or adapted specifically for each new piazza), and the nomadic nature of their activity.[36]

36 Ezio Raimondi, *Un teatro delle idee,* (Milano: Bur, 2011), pp. 157–65.

Their most notable trait from a communications perspective was their formidable capacity to gather information and diffuse it to a large and heterogeneous public, given the diversity of these performances.[37]

Theatre of the Prince or Theatre of Propaganda

Figure 4. 'Entry of the prince of Tuscany as Hercules, in front of him a large procession of horsemen and foot soldiers, processing around the large statue of Atlas in center, the Duomo and the Pitti Palace to left in the background, spectators surrounding from all sides, from Il mondo festeggiante' by Stefano della Bella, Florence, 1661. Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collection

The court of the Medicis in Florence was an Italian Renaissance court *par excellence*. In 1589 a key event took place, not only for the small Italian duchy but for the geopolitical order of the continent. This was the marriage between Ferdinand I de' Medici and a French noblewoman, Christine of Lorraine, daughter of Charles III, duke of Lorraine, and his wife Claudia, princess of Valois. The union of the Medici and Valois-Lorraine families meant a switch in alliances for the Florentine kingdom, traditionally close to Spain, and an implicit

37 Siro Ferrone, *Attori mercanti corsari: la Commedia dell'Arte in Europa tra Cinque e Seicento*, (Torino: Einaudi, 2011); Siro Ferrone, *La Commedia dell'Arte attrici e attori italiani in Europa, XVI–XVIII secolo*, (Torino: G. Einaudi, 2014). This remains a contested topic among historians.

willingness to position the duchy as a relevant subject on the international chessboard.[38] Ferdinand I broadened the lines of foreign policy already set by his father, in particular with regard to power exercised along the coasts and routes of the Mediterranean. Almost 20 years earlier, his father Cosimo I had created a new Military-religious order: the Order of St. Stephen. Pragmatically, its existence allowed him to frame raids and piracy carried out against Ottoman ships in the Mediterranean within the narration of a 'holy war'.

Ferdinand I expanded his efforts to consolidate the position of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany as a maritime power throughout the Mediterranean.[39] The new course of maritime foreign policy discovered a key moment of *propaganda* within the spectacular programme that had been planned to celebrate the union between the houses of Medici and Valois.

The wedding became an occasion for a long and complex mythopoeic process for the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. It is perhaps one of the most studied events of spectacular history of the Renaissance:[40] an impressive stage programme lasting two months, worthy of a superpower eager to impose its renewed role on the international stage. Unified by the fresh ambitions of the family and the power of the Prince, a multitude of creative efforts—artistic, culinary, theatrical, spectacular, architectural—were directed toward this project. Many different public events—triumphal entries, tournaments, parades, performances, banquets, and celebrations—blended diverse communicative dynamics. However, the desire of the ruling family to create an impression of grandeur for its subjects and to spread a specific representation of privileged participants to the world recalls a form of political propaganda.[41] The *naumachia*, or staged naval battle, provides a topical example for exploration.

Historians have variously challenged and defended the possibility of applying the concept of propaganda to communications in an *ancien regime* society.[42] Nevertheless, given the historical context and political will of maritime expansion,

38 Harold Acton and Norman Douglas, *The Last of the Medici*, (Florence: privately printed for subscribers by G. Orioli, 1930).
39 Jan Glete, *Warfare at Sea, 1500–1650: Maritime Conflicts and the Transformation of Europe*, (London: UCL, 1999).
40 The literature here is broad. Among the most relevant are: Mulryne et al., *Europa triumphans*; Alois Maria Nagler, *Theatre Festivals of the Medici, 1539 to 1637*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1964); Zorzi Ludovico, *Il teatro e la citta: saggi sulla scena italiana*, (Torino: Einaudi, 1988).
41 Jacques Ellul, *Propaganda: The Formation of Men's Attitudes*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1973).
42 Massimo Rospocher, 'Propaganda e opinione pubblica: Giulio II nella comunicazione politica europea', *Annali Dell'Istituto Storico Italo-Germanico in Trento / Italienisch-Deutsches Historisches Institut Trento* Vol. 33 (2008): 59–99; Anastasia Sturaite, 'Propaganda figurata: geometrie di dominio e ideologie veneziane nelle carte di Vincenzo Coronelli', *Studi Veneziani,* № 44, (2002): 129–55; Michael Sherman, 'Political Propaganda and Renaissance Culture: French Reactions to the League of Cambrai, 1509–10', *Sixteenth Century Journal,* № 8-2 (1977): 96.

the genre of the naval battle should not be considered an unconscious choice of communication.[43] Propaganda is associated with any conflict portrayed in performance. Interpretations of two different naval battles were staged at court during the wedding festivities—one in Pisa and one in Florence.

The Naumachiae of Pisa and Florence: two uses of propaganda

Pisa

The first battle was staged prior to the main celebration. Christine of Lorraine arrived in Florence from France by ship, having travelled from Marseilles to the port of Livorno and on to Pisa.[44] In Pisa, on 25 April 1588, a series of events anticipated the spectacle that would accompany the future Grand Duchess of Tuscany to Florence. A naval battle was enacted between Christian knights (Knights of St. Stephen created by Cosimo I, father of the groom) and Turks. It was staged along the canals in the city. And the battle involved the whole city, not only occupying its physical space but involving all social classes.[45] From a dramaturgical perspective, it may be divided into two parts. At the beginning, after a brief parade of small ships, the first action was the arrival of two Turkish boats, followed by the landing of pirates and the simulated attack and looting of some Florentine villages and vessels.[46] The staging of the battle was realistic: pillage and piracy against Ottoman ships were in reality a daily occurrence barely kilometres away. Following these guerrilla attacks in Pisa's canals, the Turkish ships moved on the noble palace to stage the second part of the programme. Here a group of soldiers, sent by the legendary sovereign Prete Gianni (Preter John) to pay tribute to the future Grand Duchess, was attacked by Turkish ships. Eventually, the unexpected arrival of four boats of the Grand Duke of Tuscany put an end to the fighting and drove the pirates back towards the sea.

Due to the growing threat of piracy on the coasts of Tuscany, these wedding celebrations were a symbolic way for the Duchy to reassure the township of Pisa. Through this magnificent naumachia, dangerous events that used to take place every day not far from the city of Pisa on the shores of the Tuscan

43 Maria Alberti, 'Battaglie navali, scorrerie corsare e politica dello spettacolo le Naumachie medicee del 1589', *California Italian Studies*, № 1-1 (2010), p. 21.
44 Alberti, 'Battaglie navali'; James Saslow, *The Medici Wedding of 1589: Florentine Festival as Theatrum Mundi*, (New York: ACLS History E-Book Project, 2005).
45 Giovanni Cervoni, *Descrizzione de la felicissima entrata del Sereniss. Don Ferdinando de' Medici Cardinale, Gran Duca di Toscana nella città di Pisa*. (Firenze: Giorgio Marescotti, 1588), p. 14.
46 *Ibid.*

Mediterranean were convincingly reproduced by the Christian knights of St. Stephen themselves. They were fighting in defence of the city and framing their real actions within a mythical narration. This located the Grand Duke of Tuscany in one of the most enduring myths of Christianity. The arrival of Preter John's troops could almost be read as an objectification of the Christian myth. Troops fighting the pirates during the naumachia became an object immediately clear to the mixed social groups of spectators scattered along the river banks, framing real-world actions in defence of Pisa as victorious and God-blessed.

Within this narrative, propaganda emerges as conflictual in nature. A social representation is easily constructed and shared by a group in a powerful position identifying an enemy. Furthermore, this creation of ancient myths resonates with Jacques Ellul's analysis of propaganda. He describes it as a communicative dynamic that 'seizes what springs up spontaneously and gives it a new form, a structure, an effective channel and can eventually transform ideology into myth'.[47] While narrating events more complex in content and more hybrid in form, they seem consistent with his definition. Events taking place beyond the sovereign's control near Pisa's shores, were thus transfigured and transposed in a 'new form', with a new 'structure' and shared through an 'effective channel' before Pisans.

Florence

A few weeks later, during celebrations in Florence, a further sea battle occurred. On 11 May 1589, after having been the venue for a *sbarra*, or tournament between knights, one of the courtyards of Palazzo Pitti in Florence underwent a spectacular transformation (see Figures 5 and 6).[48]

The Pitti courtyard had been earlier prepared as a waterproofed space. Then, while the court was temporarily absent for dinner, the courtyard was flooded to host a naumachia.

During the next hours a furious battle was performed: Christian galleys with actors dressed in Roman costumes launched an assault on a Turkish fortress that had been constructed on one side of the courtyard and was defended by actors

47 Ellul, *Propaganda,* p. 117.
48 Mulryne, 'Arbitrary Reality: Fact and Fantasy in the Florentine "Naumachia", 1589', in *Waterborne Pageants and Festivities in the Renaissance,* Margaret Shewring, Linda Briggs, (eds.), (Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 143–75.

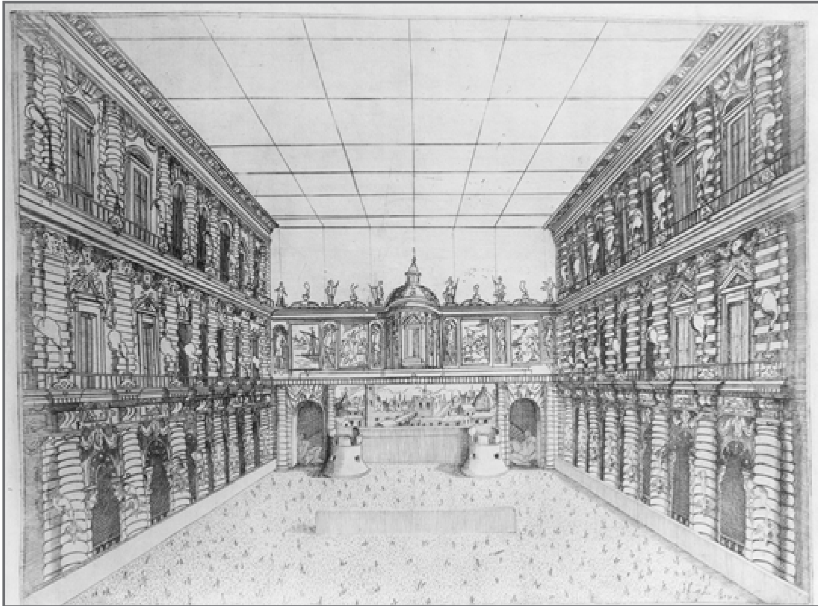

Figure 5. The courtyard of Palazzo Pitti prepared for the sbarra as portrayed by Orazio Scarabelli in The Naumachia of Palazzo Pitti by Bernardo Buontalenti. Engraving, 1589. Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collection

dressed in what was called 'Greek costume' (scenography shown in Figures 5 and 6). The Palazzo Pitti performance ended when Christian knights landed on the mainland, conquering the Turkish stronghold and delivering the enemy flag to the Grand Duchess.[49] As in the Pisan naumachia, at Palazzo Pitti ducal power projected itself to its guests: a communication intended to achieve an effect.

Through a strategic communications lens, the naumachia depicted more than a mythic transposition: not only did the naumachia portray the dominance of the in-group over an external enemy (embodied by the Greeks), it also anchored an unknown concept to known elements in the cognitive universe of the reference group. This is a basic principle of the generative dynamics of social representations. The performance evoked a precise social representation of a known element (a contemporary Mediterranean conflict), to introduce a new,

49 Alberti, *Battaglie navali*, pp. 21–22.

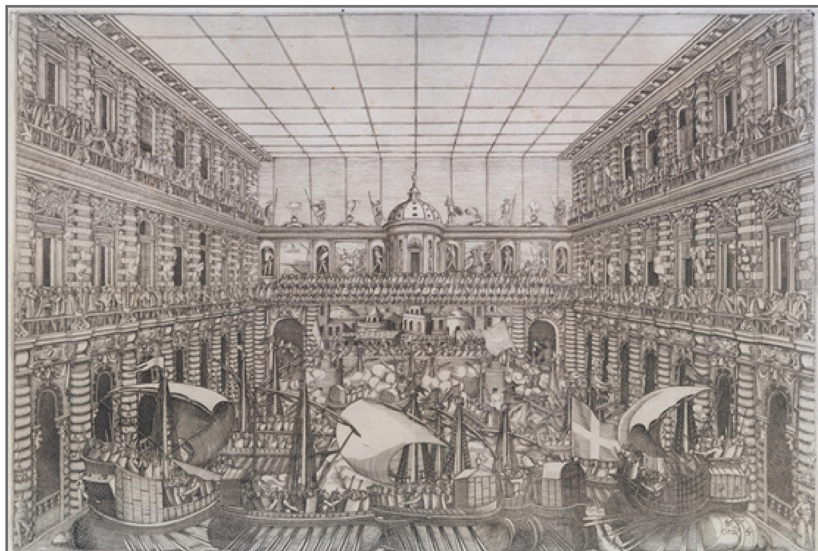

Figure 6. The courtyard of Palazzo Pitti prepared for the naumachia. Scarabelli, 1589. Metropolitan Museum of Art Digital Collection

unknown one. The performed battle did not reflect a past war. It was not part of the military history of the Grand Duchy of Tuscany. Instead, it prefigured one of the Grand Duchy's strategic objectives in the medium and long term: the conquest of Ottoman strongholds. It is no accident that Roman knights were mentioned in chronicles as dressed in 'Greek costume'. Research shows such accounts did not refer to costumes inspired by ancient Hellenic people, as in idealised scenic representations. The term was used in a more contemporary and 'geopolitical' sense, identifying a way of dressing actors in the Ottoman style.[50] Hence the 'verisimilitude' of representations is perceived as an element of value and repeated more than once by authors of the chronicles: the construction of a shared social representation cannot transcend the verisimilitude of its message, in this case the current political reality of ongoing conflict between the Italian states (in particular the Grand Duchy of Tuscany) and the Ottoman empire (in particular the strongholds it had succeeded in establishing on the European Mediterranean, notably on Corsica).[51]

50 *Ibid.*, p. 22
51 Alberti, *Battaglie navali,* p. 12.

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The Palazzo Pitti naumachia presented hybrid characters (the Romans/read Italians and the Greeks/read Turks) aimed at sending a message (the Grand Duchy will consolidate power by prevailing against the Turks) to a specific social group (the Florentine court, foreign dignitaries, and other wedding guests).[52] Thus it is a response to propagating concepts among spectators sharing a common cultural base. At the same time, it is set up by a dominant elite whose goals transcend simple communication between peers and aim instead at constructing a possible future. Such expectations and plans, do not focus on an existing world but are ambitions the powerful wish to pre-describe for their spectators:

> The conscious mind sees the representation as a unit, even though it has no immediate foundation and transcends the realms of the perceptible. It includes within a more stable system both what is present and what is absent, what exists and what is imagined to exist. Once this unified image has been established, it retroactively gives that same realty a meaning, and conditions the behaviours and attitudes of those who accept it.[53]

In a few years Ferdinand I would develop Tuscan naval power and expand its reach to the Mediterranean. The knights of St. Stephen would come to conquer the Ottoman Corsican strongholds, as in the naumachia of Palazzo Pitti, before becoming one of the most influential forces in the early seventeenth century Mediterranean.[54]

The two battles of Pisa and Florence can be better understood together. Naumachias are spectacular elaborations of conflict at sea where the narrated story is subordinate to the enactment of battles. It is evident that what is discussed here captures a mere part of the overall creative force of these spectacles. Nevertheless, each naumachia was presented so as to have the greatest effect on its public. They were designed to portray a realistic image of the enemy with whom the Grand Duchy of Tuscany is in conflict. The naumachia at Pisa portrayed a reassuring version of the conflict with the Ottoman pirates the Duke's subjects living along the coast experienced daily, announcing a promise of better days in the future. The political, economic, military, and religious decision-makers gathered at Palazzo Pitti enjoyed an equally reassuring message in familiar terms, a continuation and

52 *Ibid.,* p. 19.
53 Moscovici, *Psychoanalysis,* p. 322.
54 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II. 1,* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972).

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strengthening of their control of their part of the world, along with the necessity of recognising a greater role for Florence as one of their number. At the same time, the naumachias were more than just great shows. Through them the Prince could order and organise a world in the present and future before the eyes of the privileged spectators summoned to witness the wonder of his sovereignty.

Entrepreneurial Theatre: The Propagation of Ideas

Figure 7. A typical tragic scene engraved by Jacques Callot from Il Solimano by Prospero Bonarelli (Rome, Francesco Corbelletti, 1632). OPAL Turin University Library, Turin

Venice, since the early seventeenth century, had developed a strong awareness of its theatre.[55] In the same period, the notion of a specific 'local taste'—to be identified and satisfied—soon spread among entrepreneurs, and was even mentioned in the prefaces and letters written to introduce the operas by poets, impresarios, and printers.

55 Cristoforo Ivanovich, *Minerva al tavolino, lettere diverse di proposta e riposta a varij personaggi: nel fine le memorie teatrali di Venezia*, (Venezia: Niccolò Pezzana, 1681) .

The scholars Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker describe the characteristics of Venetian opera.[56] They argue that the success of an opera depended not so much on the style of music composition, but on 'local taste', which was satisfied by themes featured in the most successful booklets. The recurring dramaturgical structure of Venetian operas did not lack imagination.[57] The presence of 'local taste' indicated the presence of a particular audience, understood as a social group united by a shared cultural awareness with a common attitude to current events. For an opera to be appreciated, therefore, a complicated balance of novelty and predictability was needed.

Opera in war

Figure 8. A triumphant chariot in Roman setting inspired by those used in public tournaments and for theatrical performances from Sigismondo Primo al diadema, drama for music, Venezia, Nicolini, 1696. Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan

56 Lorenzo Bianconi and Thomas Walker, 'Production, Consumption and Political Function of Seventeenth-Century Opera', *Early Music History* Vol. 4 (1984): 209–96.
57 *Ibid.*, pp. 248–49.

Between 1645 and 1669 Venice waged war on the Turks: the war of Candia. This was a long and arduous conflict fought on land and by sea for the defence of the island of Crete and its capital Heraklion (Iraklion). In 1669 Candia was conquered by the Turkish army. Two years later Venice signed the Treaty of Peace with the loss of all Crete.

The genre of sung opera was created to satisfy the self-image of its audience: a deeply and consciously Venetian public. Titles published in this period are affected by this new phase of the Republic. 'During the 1650s and 1660s, when legendary Roman heroes began to be featured with increasing frequency in opera librettos, their exploits invited comparison with those of Venetian military heroes in the War of Candia.'[58] The figurative representation of Venice as the last bastion of freedom against the pressure of the barbarians from the East was adapted to the current war situation. With the outbreak of hostilities, images became explicitly linked to wars in which Venetian armies were engaged. As the clouds of war darkened the skies over the lagoon, the Roman theme was resumed in response to a change in political conditions and with tangible effects for all Venetian citizens (see Figure 8). The study of operas staged during these crisis years helps us understand how social representations changed in reaction to the threat to the state. The most enduring elements reflecting such changes were the prologues to operas. These sections were intrinsically subject to change as they were adapted for each new theatre, occasion, and dedication. The prologues evolved along with the progression of war, describing the most triumphant episodes and the blackest crises. The consolidation of this trend is noteworthy: the figurative, mythological allusions presented at the outset became, as the years passed, increasingly explicit allusions to places, episodes, and characters of the Venetian army.[59]

Witness the prologue to *Il Tolomeo*[60] (Ptolemy) recited by the deities Victoria, Vulcan, Venus, Athena, Mars (see Figure 9 for the title page published in Venice in 1658, and Figure 10 for the original translation).

> Vulcan: *Forward! Fly to the Adriatic Sea to favour a positive outcome of the war; and upon your arrival the hideous moon will have to cry its bad fortune in an eclipse of blood.*
>
> Victoria: *It quickly takes me obediently in flight towards the army of Venice, towards the Aegean Sea, towards Asia and Crete.*[61]

58 Rosand, *Opera*, p. 144.
59 *Ibid.*
60 *Il Tolomeo drama de gl'Academici Imperturbabili. Rappresentato nel theatro di S. Apollinare di Venezia, l'anno 1658. Consacrato all'illustriss.mo ... sign. Vettore Pesaro*, (Venezia: Appresso il Valuasense, 1658), [trans. by the author].
61 *Ibid.,* p. 18.-

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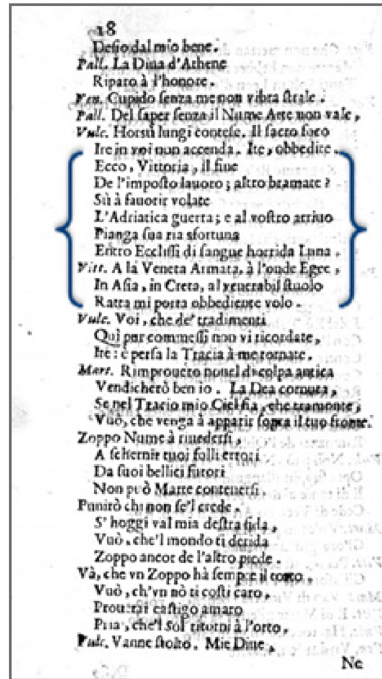
IL TOLOMEO
Drama de gl'Academici
IMPERTVRBABILI.
Rappreſentato nel Theatro
DI S. APOLLINARE
Di Venetia, L'Anno 1658.

Conſacrato
ALL'ILLVSTRISS.mo SIGN.re IL SIGN.
VETTORE
PESARO.

In Venetia, Appreſſo il Valuaſenſe. 1658.
Con licenza, e Priuilegio.

Figure 9. *Title page of Il Tolomeo, Dramma de gl'Academici Imperturbabili. Rappresentato nel Theatro di S. Apollinare di Venezia, l'anno 1658 [Ptolemy. Drama by the Imperturbable Academics. Presented in the theatre of S. Apollinare di Venezia, in the year 1658]. Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan*



18
Deſio dal mio bene.
Pall. La Diua d'Athene
Riparo à l'honore.
Ven. Cupido ſenza me non vibra ſtrale.
Pall. Del ſaper ſenza il Nume Arte non vale,
Vulc. Horsù lungi conteſe. Il ſacro foco
Ire in voi non accenda. Ite, obbedite.
Ecco, Vittoria, il fine
De l'impoſto lauoro; altro bramate?
Sù à fauorir volate
L'Adriatica guerra; e al voſtro arriuo
Pianga ſua ria sfortuna
Entro Ecliſſi di ſangue horrida Luna.
Vitt. A la Veneta Armata, à l'onde Egee,
In Aſia, in Creta, al venerabil ſtuolo
Ratta mi porta obbediente volo.
Vulc. Voi, che de' tradimenti
Qui pur commeſſi non vi ricordate,
Ite: è perſa la Tracia à me tornate.
Mart. Rimprouero non el di colpa antica
Vendicherò ben io. La Dea cornuta,
Se nel Tracio mio Ciel ſia, che tramonte,
Vuò, che venga à apparir ſopra il tuo fronte.
Zoppo Nume à rimederſi,
A ſchernir tuoi folli errori
Da ſuoi bellici furori
Non può Marte contenerſi.
Punirò chi non ſe'l crede.
S' hoggi val mia deſtra fida,
Vuò, che'l mondo ti derida
Zoppo ancor de l'altro piede.
Và, che vn Zoppo hà ſempre il torto.
Vuò, ch'vn nò ti coſti caro,
Prouerai caſtigo amaro
Pria, che'l Sol ritorni à l'orto.
Vulc. Vanne ſtolto. Mie Diue,
Ne

Figure 10. P. 18 from Il Tolomeo. Raccolta Drammatica, Braidense National Library, Milan

These deities invoke a generic reference to the war, but this prologue to the battle scene where the goddess of Victory flies in support of Venetian troops explicitly mentions 'takes me obediently in flight towards the army of Venice, towards the Aegean Sea, towards Asia and Crete.'

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Propagating shared ideas

Venetian opera, discussed so far, is based on two pillars: 'local taste' and the ability of operas to adapt to evolving politics of the nation. 'Local taste' is a dense concept capable of evoking a specific social group, as well as the expectations of that group. Artistic operas, in fact, derive from the spontaneous demand within social groups of spectators combined with the communicative drive of the dominant social group, aligned with the perspective (or propaganda) of the sovereign state. In wartime, social representations shared in public theatre by a significant part of the population inevitably became an integral part of political action.

'Generation after generation, Venetians never seem to have got tired of hearing the mythology of their origins repeated on stage [...]. Generally, Venetian opera conveyed its political message by suggestion, by implicating the knowing audience in its world of allusion as well as illusion. Its political message, the shared celebration of Venice, was imparted with the willing collusion of the spectators.'[62] It is from this 'willing collusion' that an analysis of strategic communications can be drafted: it sits at the heart of the dynamics Moscovici defines as *propagation*.

In the examples cited, spectators would recognise a traditional correspondence between Venice and ancient Rome.[63] A simple change guaranteed continuity of the metaphor but added new meaning: Venice, as the new Rome, would be the bulwark against the advance of the contemporary barbarian gods in the war of Candia.

It is possible to recognise two implicit functions of this communicative dynamic in the simplicity of this metaphor, passed from one prologue to another over the course of the opera seasons. The first: the ability to respond to the Republic's changing geopolitical situation through familiar characters within a set of expectations shared among spectators. Characters in opera prologues more or less mirrored classical personifications and metonymies (the goddess of Victory, the Mediterranean Sea, minor deities). What changed over time as the crisis of war grew, was how explicitly characters from the operas themselves were identified with the Venetian state. The second concerns the circular dynamics

62 Rosand, *Opera*, p. 150.
63 *Ibid.*, p. 124.

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established by the reception of these operas: the presence of a paying public introduced active feedback into the communicative dynamic—orienting the discussion, but also limiting it. In this way, new elements were absorbed into social representation while the group consolidated its identity and strengthened its resilience.

Street Performers And Information Professionals

Figure 11. 'A street vendor offering prints for sale of the Turkish defeats, to the horror of two passers-by who have had enough of news' by Mitelli. The cartouche above reads: Those who wish can buy here the latest news on the war. They are cheap, just two bolognini. The exhausted passers-by reply: I do not want to hear any more news, no! no! no! and We've had enough, go away! British Museum

During the sixteenth century, Italy determined the balance of power in Europe. Between 1494 and 1559, the entire Italian territory was devastated by wars and by dramatic changes in the relationship between the Italian states and the great continental actors. This was a critical period of great uncertainty and transformation. Italy went from being the home of a flourishing merchant

economy at the centre of European politics to being a battlefield ravaged by ambition, where discursive practices of theatres and plays were created in recurring exchanges among a heterogeneous public.[64] The birth of this new type of communication through street performance was strongly linked to the quality of the messages, the available media, and the communication practices adopted in the transmission of the message (oral compositions, handwritten and/or poor-quality printed texts intended for immediate consumption). Street entertainers mastered the complexity of this form of communication, bending it to their advantage for success and survival. It was not only a simple form of street theatre; it was also a strong means of political communication. The wars of Italy served as a catalyst. The wandering performers, such as acrobats and comedians, responded to the new need for information by adapting to the way in which they produced and disseminated social representations across different publics, eager to discover the latest events. Squares and arcades became meeting places for large audiences where the latest news was discussed.[65] Communication took place at multiple levels: the extemporising of the acrobats, the manuscript sheets sold alongside with the latest news, and compositions, booklets, and low-quality prints produced almost in the moment and intended for immediate consumption.[66] Not unlike the way we consume news today, the stories of the wandering performers and the hunger of the public for the latest news triggered a flood of low-cost informative materials.[67]

Italian wars by word of mouth

On 14 May 1509, following skirmishes between the opposing armies of Louis XII and Venice, not far from Milan, the vanguard of the French army caught up with the rear of the Venetian army at a small village called Agnadello. Unprepared for battle, the Venetian army was defeated by the French. This bloody defeat marked a significant moment in Venetian history, leaving a lasting memory. Girolamo Priuli, a leading Venetian voice of the period, wrote:

64 Rospocher, *Beyond the Public Sphere*.
65 Rospocher and Rosa Salzberg, *'"El vulgo zanza": spazi, pubblici, voci a Venezia durante le guerre d'Italia'*, *Storica* Vol. 48 (2010): 83–120; Brendan Maurice Dooley and Sabrina Baron, *The Politics of Information in Early Modern Europe*, (London: Routledge, 2011).
66 Laura Carnelos, 'Words on the Street: Selling Small Printed "Things"', in *News Networks in Early Modern Europe*, Raymond Joad, Noah Moxham (eds) (Leiden: Brill, 2016), pp. 739–55; Salzberg, '"Selling stories and many other things in and through the city": peddling print in Renaissance Florence and Venice', *The Sixteenth Century Journal* Vol. 42, № 3 (2011): 737–59.
67 Salzberg, 'In the Mouths of Charlatans: Street Performers and the Dissemination of Pamphlets in Renaissance Italy', *Renaissance Studies,* № 24-5 (2010): 638–53.

> So many words, so many opinions, so many different languages, so many voices and so many intentions and so many arguments were made in these days in the Venetian city ... as for the nobles, as for the citizens, as for the mob, in every square, in every lodge, in Rivoalto, in the banks, in the churches, in the streets, in the dumps and in the taverns, everyone, in the end, wanted to say his opinion.[68]

Massimo Rospocher studies the 'Songs of War' written during the 'Horrendous Italian Wars' (1494–1559).[69] These songs are among the few surviving examples of the literary and oral work of street performers. His study of these texts has revealed two key characteristics specific to these songs: 'immediacy' and 'truthfulness'. Both of these elements are typical of communications in times of crisis.

Immediacy refers to the newsworthiness of the information reported in recited works. This is often emphasised by the authors of the songs—both in their titles and compositions. To give an example of the productive abilities of these professional artists, a performer from Ferrara named Bighignol was able to compose, print, and distribute a song within two weeks of the event it described —a naval battle between the Duke of Ferrara and the Venetians at the end of December 1509.[70] The same productive urgency can be seen in the titles of many compositions, which frequently highlighted the novelty or unprecedented quality of information they were providing. Perhaps, the most interesting aspect of this immediacy concerns the drive to communicate, responding to a thirst for the latest available news. Rospocher writes:

> […] through the widespread broadcast and distribution of these compositions, a collective consciousness of current events and of the historical moment was emerging, a perception that distinguished itself from a generic sense of history bound to a distant past [...]. These street singers' activities were an important component of the phenomenon that has been recently described as the emergence of contemporaneity—"the perception, shared by a number of human beings, of experiencing a particular event at more or less the same time".[71]

68 Girolamo Priuli, 'I Diarii', *Rerum Italicarum Scriptores,* № 24/3, Vol. 4, (1938–41): p. 246.
69 Marco Mondini and Rospocher, *Narrating War: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives*, (Bologna: Il Mulino, 2013), pp. 79–99.
70 *Ibid.*, p. 82.
71 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

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There was a sense of urgency on the part of spectators as they observed a changing historical landscape.

The second element, truthfulness, was also crucial for war reports. Authors expressed their adherence to the facts using a variety of methods. For example, the introduction to the anonymous text *Rotta facta per li signori francexi contra li ispani* (Ferrara, 1512, see Figure 12), states that the songs were composed not for the pleasure of the performer, but to fulfil his duty to inform the audience about current events.

Rotta facta p li signori fráceri cótra li ispani.

Superno padre che per il peccato
qual fece adamo com poca prudentia
dignasti el figliol tuo hauer mandato
a reuocar quella mortal sententia
per cui ogniun de gloria era priuato
salui li festi per la tua clementia
prestame gratia che de paso in paso
de ispani dica la rota el fracaso

Qual lingua mai poria narando in uersi
dir questa istoria che non fese pianto
sentendo de cristian quanti son persi
de francia italia spagna dogni canto
p cui le moglie e figli andran dispersi
io recordando ne romagno afranto
e tanto forte me bate ogni uena
che a gran fatica in man tengo la pena

Sforciato alquanto dal mio gran uolere
disposi in tuto de donar principio
non gia per che ne prendiati piacere
ma per che habiati di tal cosa in dicio
e che per ponto possiati sapere
li homen ualenti che có gran suplicio
quel di deuita son tuti defonti
e chil fiume pasorno de acheronte

E doueti saper senza chel dica
come de liga se tolse el pastore
limperio e frantia sa fata nemica
non le uolendo da ueneti distore
col re di spagna ancor se meso in licha
al fin uedrale al squasar delestore
chi meglio adoprara sua spada o lanza
del papa el cápo o quel del re de franza

Per parere che non uada uacilando
e che neluno fuor non sia di mente
tuto per ponto eue uero contando
le cose con son ite chiaramente
el giorno el mese e lhora el che e quádo
di bologna e di brecia or stati atente
fato el tracorso con la uoglia al mene
diro poi de romagna con rauena

Uedendo iulio papa pien dorgoglio
che bologna da lui fu separata
e che anibal de casa bentiuoglio
dentro dimora con la sua brigata
dise non uoglio star con sto cordoglio
che ognion terebe mia mente insensata
e uno meso suo mando al aluo ferante
che a lui uenga sue gente tute quante

a i

Figure 12. Page from Rotta facta per li signori francexi contra li ispani, Ferrara, 1512 [Defeat of the Spaniards by the French lords]. Sforciato alquanto dal mio gran volere / disposi tutto de donar principio / non già per che ne prendiati piacere / ma per che habiati di tal cosa in dicio [I was forced against my will / and then I prepare to start / not to have fun with my stories / but to make sure you can know how things went]. British Library Collection

The public in the marketplace expected accurate information, so these works had to confront the issue of truthfulness regarding the events narrated by the street singers. The surviving works show a variety of techniques and platitudes used to certify the reliability of the information.[72] Song titles frequently referred to the truth. In some cases, authors claimed to have been eye witnesses or first-hand participants in the events they described. In others, they boasted of their diligent search for reliable sources (official dispatches, the testimonies of ambassadors, soldiers' tales). The street performer was a mediator of information: like his audience, he was the recipient of someone else's knowledge, which he would then pass on through his performances. Historians have called attention to accusations by intellectuals and scholars of the day reproving acrobats and street

72 *Ibid.*

performers for using false information or for mixing fantastic inventions with news to make their works more palatable.

Diffusion: spreading information and opinion-making

Figure 13. 'Dedicated to war enthusiasts' by Mitelli. The cartouche reads: Men avidly follow the news in papers while figures representing France and Spain brawl on the ground. British Museum

The communicative dynamics set in motion by the activities of wandering performers and street singers are as uncertain as the nature of their work and the reliability of their testimonies. Street entertainers were information operators who spread news in an irregular way, with uncertain aims and with unpredictable results. Coming up with clear definitions of the public, the literary genre, and the type of theatrical representation or artistic production for such communication is problematic. The performer maintains a horizontal relationship to his spectators: I have briefly discussed singers who proclaimed their status as witnesses to important events, mere intermediaries serving their audience. Their artistic product was ephemeral compositions for immediate consumption from which they could earn a living. Its value lay in the immediacy, palatability, and novelty of the reported information, in the rapidity of composition, and the

truthfulness and quality of the artistic product. The communications landscape created by the activities of these information professionals is perhaps the most complex and hybrid of those discussed here. The dynamism of the *diffusion* process allowed for adaptability in the moment, it was also an opportunity to serve the Power elite[73] (or to be a rabble rouser), to propagate preferred content among various publics,[74] and to spread rumours and news of uncertain origin.

Between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, street actors could fill the squares and streets of cities with their flyers[75] to influence city speeches with their own representations.[76] They also contributed to creating a sphere of public opinion.

Conclusion

'All the world's a stage, or so it had become in the already intensely baroque atmosphere around 1600— a *Theatrum Mundi, Theatrum Naturae, Theatrum Europeum, Theatrum Belli, Theatrum Fori*',[77] wrote Carl Schmitt reflecting on the dramatisation process marking society and shared ideas during the European seventeenth century. Public discourses of power cross spectacular forms of communication and transform the tragic history of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries into a script: 'when [...] history becomes part of the setting, it does so as script'.[78] At the heart of this study is the observation of dynamics that connect the strategic communications of power to citizens through the creation of shared social representations in Early Modern Europe. Serge Moscovici identifies three fundamental dynamics to the construction and dissemination of ideas among social groups: propaganda, propagation and diffusion. Each of these dynamics has specific characteristics regarding the composition of the recipients, the form of the message, the objectives of communication. All are always present, in different proportions, in the public communication of power. Spectacles as stage events have been analysed here through the prism of these three communication dynamics.

The Theatre of the Prince represents the direct extension of the will of the State. Communication is strategic, confronting a situation by strengthening the

73 Rospocher, 'Songs of War. Historical and Literary Narratives of the «Horrendous Italian Wars»', in *Narrating War: Early Modern and Contemporary Perspectives,* Marco Mondini, Massimo Rospocher (eds) (Bologna: Il Mulino, Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 2013), p. 87.
74 Rospocher et al., *El vulgo zanza*, p. 95.
75 Ezio Raimondi, *Anatomie secentesche,* (Pisa: Nistri-Lischi, 1966), pp. 87–99.
76 Rospocher et al., *El vulgo zanza*, p. 117.
77 Paul Kottman, *Philosophers on Shakespeare*, (Stanford University Press, 2009), p. 148.
78 Walter Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels,* trans. John Osborne, (London: NLB, 1977), p. 203.

unity of the social body and identifying an external enemy within a discourse of power. Propaganda emerges as the primary communicative drive whenever a dominant group or established power is faced with a threat or conflict (real or figurative). In the dramatic spectacles illustrated above, power communicates strategically with different intentions. In Pisa, the Duchy was eager to undertake military actions that conformed to a tradition recognised by its proponents, and to provide reassurance about its sovereign capacity. In Florence, one objective was to anticipate future events in the present, and so shape a 'Florentine frame' for the (target) audience, the nobility supporting the prince. Each of these cases is comparable with contemporary communications campaigns. Any power group will seek to reassure its reference group about a threat. A sovereign entity will strive to frame its own actions within the cultural tradition understood by its interlocutors. By laying out a narrative, the field for avoiding or winning a future conflict can be prepared. This ensures that power will retain its strategic and tactical advantages in determining the narrative of future events. Whenever power seeks to depict a conflict through a favourable lens, the communication campaign will be driven by the dynamics of propaganda.

For the Venetian audience, shared values expressed through opera played out before a self-reflexive community, and so captured the communicative dynamic Serge Moscovici refers to as *propagation*. As Venetian foreign policy changed over the course of the seventeenth century, opera performances adapted to the changing context. What emerges from the relationship between early modern opera productions and their paying audiences, is the ability of the performed message to adapt to the changing conditions within that context and improve the resilience of the social group engaging with it. Viewed through Moscovici's theoretical lens, two dimensions emerge in which Venetian opera-goers propagated social representations. In the first, an external idea—Rome's war against the barbarians—was translated into familiar, shared principles. Operas with a Roman imperial theme were staged with greater and greater frequency, and through them passionate spectators came to recognise themselves as citizens of Venice, developing their ability to face new challenges on the cultural horizon as a unified group. In the second, the group reinforced its existing value system, rather than welcome change. Contemporary strategic communications shares similarities whenever a broad social group anchors and objectifies in order to absorb external change and reinforce its identity. The propagation of ideas within a group is not absolute but is subject to pressures, both from outside or from within.

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Finally, the most heterogeneous form of public performance is street performance and information professionals. In this setting, communication becomes a field of temporary exchange, able to stimulate momentary social gatherings around a shared need for information. The communications of charlatans and street actors live on the margins of society, bringing together temporary groups of citizens in improvised meeting places, promising immediacy, truthfulness and freshness of the information.

Diffusion as a communicative dynamic has proven beneficial in reorganizing and analytically outlining the main components of this changing horizon. The street actors serve as intermediaries between facts and audiences. It occurs in informal and irregular ways free of recurring location or audience; the informational horizon, instead, is created *ex novo,* periodically, in response to performance. Acrobats become operators invested with a social function. But the products of this communication are transient, conditioned by the need for novelty, reliability and speed. They are products of poor quality and immediate consumption. The irregular and hybrid aspects of this genre echo the complexity of our contemporary communications landscape. Whenever events and news are scattered across the digital informational landscape by users and accounts improvised as information professionals, we see similar effects in the news arena: uncertainty, disorder, poor reliability, fast-paced conclusions, potential misinformation and incorrect narratives.

These three genres of public spectacle in early modern Italy resonate with contemporary strategic communications. The Shakespearian metaphor of the 'great theatre of the world' also illuminates today's 'great theatre of words'. Surprisingly, the complex political landscape of a sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe in ruins[79] seems to reflect from a historical distance our contemporary communications horizon, made up not so much of remnants but of communicative fragments. Future research should explore the social influence and representational dynamics underlying the latest, even spectacular, acts of strategic communications. This means that the study of the ecosystem of communications should be approached from a strategic, not tactical point of view: a study of a 'theatre of ideas' that goes beyond the spectacular tirade of a few characters to deal with the wider genre and common characteristics of ideas shared between the opera and the public.

79 Benjamin, *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*.

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