



Pre Congress

Where Horses Enter the Church

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Abstract: *It is common to believe that in Western societies mass processions recalling events, cyclical occurrences, feasts that used to exist before contemporary culture, should be categorised as 'folklore', meaning as a formal and superficial expression of some content that is no longer alive, having little or no impact on the life of the actors. A sort of shell that re-proposes beliefs and mythologies that no longer exist. The Palio is a festival that is held continuously from the Middle Ages, and in its final form from the 1600s, in the city of Siena, Italy. This event encompasses contamination between religious beliefs, indigenous references, community aggregation values, the coexistence of the sacred and the profane, passions that cross the social group in the form of cohesion and rivalry and contribute to structuring the life of the individual. The festival, which culminates in a horse race, is part of a solidly formalised social fabric. At the Palio numerous cultural levels intersect, some apparently folkloric / residual, others specific to religious rituals of Western culture. The actors easily switch from a register to another, from religious devotion to secular celebration, since the local historical fabric is flexibly imbued with both. An 'engine of meaning' is at work, allowing the continuous renewal of the emotional experience of the subjects in a common identity environment, in a coexistence between ancient and contemporary, between sacred images and profane passions.*

Keywords: Coexistence, Sacred, Profane, Identity, Cohesion And Rivalry, Emic/Etic.

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*As incredible as it may seem, I believe there is (or there was) another Aleph, I believe the Aleph on
Via Garay was a false Aleph.*

*[...] Does this Aleph exist inside a stone? Did I see it when I saw all things, and forgot it?
Our mind is porous to oblivion; I myself am deforming and losing, under the tragic
erosion of the years, the traits of Beatriz.*

Jorge Luis Borges, *The Aleph* (1952)

Where horses enter the church describes the Palio, a festival which has been held for many centuries in a city in central Italy. At first glance two aspects seem to emerge: the *folkloric* and the *ritual*. In his initial intervention, the historian decisively states that the Palio is not folklore. By doing this he is referring to the term folklore in a probably reductive but basically correct way, meant as cultural and expressive forms displayed by subordinate classes of complex societies that often play the *nostalgia* card or even that of reinvention of tradition; as cultural expressions lacking actual authenticity with little or no impact on the life of the actors and substantially subordinate to the contemporary. Indeed the Palio is not only about a horse race held in July and August among costumes and flags but rather, as some images in the documentary suggest, everyday life that takes place all year round in the *contrade* (districts). The individual goes through the main stages of the life cycle (birth, baptism, marriage, funeral) as *contradaio*, literally as a member of the *contrada*-district in which he was born.

While belonging to the districts takes on an element of sacredness – as a fact each district has its “sacred” spaces and its own “liturgy” marking the cycle of the year –, this kind of sacredness does not spring from a founding event, does not impose dogmas or absolute prohibitions even if it shares certain characteristics of intangibility with the sacred. When observing the inhabitants of Siena, it is pretty evident that their imprinting was received in the age of formation or even earlier (images of flags and drum rolls are to be found among the oldest recollections of childhood by Siena people).

These first comments make us turn away from the common but not completely correct idea suggested by the term “folkloric” as a cultural fact that on hand is collective and often expressively intense but on the other emotionally weakened and weak in rooting. The other aspect that leaps to the eye is that of the Palio as a collective ritual, or a collective event regulated by the succession of ritual moments. Indeed the ritual aspect is to be found in the Palio, both in the days of the race and in the life of the districts unfolding throughout the year. Likewise, both secular and religious rites are always present.

Lévi-Strauss claimed that the ritual element is necessary for every society to survive and perpetuate in an attempt to stem the incessant work of time. According to Ernesto De Martino religious life is born primarily as a recovery that stops the alienation of presence in a defined configuration (myth) and in an operational horizon that establishes a relationship with the alienation so arrested and configured (rite) (De Martino, 1995).

One could easily suppose that something that has been going on essentially unchanged for centuries has established a particular bond with time. But although Siena plays with ancient costumes and draws on the depth of time – perhaps to give itself depth and courage, and anchorage –, it does not exorcise this peculiar relationship with fireworks and programmed bacchanals. Instead it seems to face it with the sound of drums that echoes all year round in the streets of the city. For now let us refer to the ritual as a structure, not in the strictly leviStraussian sense, but at least as a backbone necessary for the unfolding of events, for their non-extemporaneousness, for the possibility that human intentions express themselves: a sort of language capable of conveying inner images through the known form-content of dialectic. The images in the video suggest that what is attached to the skeleton/ritual is not – or not only – the epiphenomenon of something underlying or forms animated by a completely different content with respect to its manifestation. On the contrary, a first attempt to grasp the meaning could go through the participated observation of the manifest surface. But, taking a step back, there is

an agent that in the first place seems to cross the dialectic between form and content and claims to represent its own synthesis, namely the religious content.

In fact, the Palio is dedicated to the Madonna. Each district has its church and its patron saint. There are innumerable moments in which the religious – or rather, the forms of the religious – define the time and space of events. Moreover it would be singular if the forms of the religious were not strongly present in an Italian city that has remained substantially unchanged within its walls since the late Middle Ages. In this regard the video raises – or rather suggests, given its necessary brevity – some thoughts: the “imprinting *contradaiolo*”, which is already present at an early age, does not spring from forms of religious initiation; the relationship with the Madonna and with the patron saints takes on an almost contractual form; there are no narratives of miracles happened or requested (in fact story goes that in 1260, before the imminent battle of Montaperti, a notary contract was stipulated with the Madonna in which she was asked, in exchange for the keys of the city, to help defeating the enemies in the battle); and again, the horse is brought into the church and blessed with a ritual that relates more to the magical pagan than to religious sacredness. And in this regard the interviewed priest, with an unrequired yet unequivocal *excusatio*, candidly declares that there is nothing magical in blessing the horse, since it is “normal” holy water, taking for granted the distinction between the true of the holy water and the false of any magical request.

The choral images of the film themselves suggest to look beyond the apparent sacred-religious composition. In Italy there is a wide range of religious festivals: from the processions of the Madonnas, to the *battenti* of penitential processions, to the miracle of the blood of San Gennaro, etc. But putting aside the specific differences and adopting a broader perspective, they are usually characterized by mass processions marked by pain rather than joy, by the subdued request to a divinity for a miracle rather than a fierce and ferocious claim for victory, by the pleading or stunned individual facing the numinous mystery rather than the whole of the bodies and hearts joining to weep or rejoice together.

The colors of the flags crossing the city of the Palio during the festival and on other occasions of the year recall the beautiful story by G. Bartocci, *The breath of intentions*, where a people of strange creatures living on a distant planet, the Peloti, communicate by coloring themselves in all sorts of hues according to the spirit-emotion that passes through them, creating an harmonious polychromy of the nuances of the single ones: «On the one hand the Peloti appeared very fragile: one should never encroach on their colors, any request, any premature or off-key question was like a theft, an offense, like throwing a bucket of black pitch on a Picasso painting. On the other hand, although so tender and helpless, they were not free from disputes or clashes resolved in battle. But theirs were very special battles. The winners were the ones who had more colors, who could keep the festive music of harmonious lights longer. Although there was no bloodshed or fallen, what was poured in the battle were the sad colors of the defeated ones» (Bartocci, 2014).

So, besides confirming the typical characteristics of all groups – claiming identity, defining a true internal space and an external false one, etc. – this “something” of the Palio may perhaps suggest some other thoughts. Recently the human sciences, anthropology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis and in particular the neurosciences have pushed the definition of the individual energetic motor, previously designated with terms such as soul or spirit, towards more mundane terms: State of Consciousness, I, Self, Person, Identity, Cultural Self, Evolutionary Self, Ethnic Self or, if you prefer a terminology rooted in neuroscience, a Neural Self characterized by a «Set of Qualia organized by the hoarding of perceptive stimuli» (Bartocci, 2017). Although the religious fact, or the faith, as we may call it, always gives itself as the holder of the ultimate meaning, it doesn’t come across here as the central element of identity, or as the substance, as the ultimate meaning that is used of the contingent historically given to be in time, turning into deeds and intentions.

It could rather be the opposite: the religious, historically given, could in some way be using a substance that does not own because the “energy engine” resides elsewhere, it pertains more to fantasy than to spirituality, perhaps more to the so-called “concrete enigma” than to the ghost and the mystery. The “energy engine” recalls in some way, even if it does not correspond to it, the demartinian “ethos

of transcendence”, understood as an intersubjective enhancement of life, a passage from the order of vitality to that of humanity, a continuous work of cultural reintegration in the face of the always possible crisis of presence. If the concept of crisis of presence weighs on the socio-cultural level like that of dissociation weighs on the individual level, the ethos of transcendence is understood as overflowing energy, or “as a transcendence of situations in value”, that is as a continuous integrative collective cultural operation.

In this case, however, we do not mean the concept of an energy engine, or even of presence, as an absolute entity mirrored in the absolute of the sacred-religious. This is because one refers to a completely different psychic configuration from that identified by the other. And, always taking advantage of our figurative language, the final image of the woman who kisses the horse, together with others, helps us distinguish between levels that are certainly interconnecting but not overlapping.

Keeping this in mind, we should be cautious in considering the Palio as the mere manifestation of a cultural delusion, as an atavistic kernel permanently nestling over time as if it were an incorrigible dynamic nucleus. In our images the prize appears as a producer of meaning that redeems the subjects from the bonds imposed by medieval sacredness. On the day of the Palio, in some ways, the divine retreats before the power of a horse. In the race, that is furious and at the same time as light as the image and scent of a rose, a people’s festival overrides the obligation of combining the sacred and the profane.

La rosa,
la inmarcesible rosa que no canto,
la que es peso y fragancia,
la del negro jardín en la alta noche,
la de cualquier jardín y cualquier tarde,
la rosa que resurge de la tenue
ceniza por el arte de la alquimia,
la rosa de los persas y de Ariosto,
la que siempre está sola,
la que siempre es la rosa de las rosas,
la joven flor platónica,
la ardiente y ciega rosa que no canto,
la rosa inalcanzable.

Jorge Luis Borges (1975)

It is worth dwelling briefly on the documentary’s heuristic ability. Like the traditional ethnographic report, the cinematographic one also owes its descriptive and communicative capacity to the concrete mediation of the author. The important difference is that in the latter the viewer is requested to collaborate in the interpretation of the described event by putting in place interpretative codes involving at least two senses – sight and hearing – that are on the contrary not so actively involved in the act of reading an essay. This extra sensorial approach, namely the aesthetic fact upon which cinema is based – be it fictional or non-fictional –, is what makes the vision of the film primarily an “immediate experience”, both for the common viewer and the scholar. In fact even the latter, before accessing an interpretative reading, goes through the same experience – after all a complex cognitive act – of the former. Moreover, the ethnographic value of the image does not lie in the image itself, but depends on how the author is deploying and interpreting it. Therefore the ethnographic film is the result of a joined effort coming from both the artist and the scientist, a combination of techniques and sensitivity aimed at penetrating into the meaning and nature of human behavior (Gardner, 1967).

Using the aesthetic and expressive ability of cinema to propose an interpretation of a social fact implies giving up the neutrality and distance demanded by the early visual ethnography, which wanted to minimize the impact of the camera by reducing it to a recording tool. On the opposite, it is

based on the idea that reality cannot be read on the surface of the observable details, but rather in the relationships in which the facts unfold. Which leads us to the definition of culture proposed by Clifford Geertz as the complex web of meanings shared by the members of a society (Geertz, 1973).

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