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Memory and Performance.
Classical Reception in Early Modern Festivals

Edited by Francesca Bortoletti, Giovanna Di Martino,
and Eugenio Refini

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Introduction.

Ephemeral Renaissance. Memory, Myth and Drama in Early Modern Festivals

1. Prologue: the Time of the Festival

Attending a festival today, whether it is centred on theatre, art, literature, or tied to a civic or festive occasion, often evokes a surreal impression of both place and events: for a few days, one steps out of the daily routine, leaving behind the usual rhythm of life. It is a time of suspension, of extraordinariness, of exceptionality enacted in the ‘here and now’ of the present. Yet, it is also a time of immersion, experimentation, and participation, closely intertwined with the social, urban, and political fabric with which the festival engages, intercepting, amplifying, and generating tensions that, through performative events, activate various identity processes. The festival offers avenues for new modes of temporary imagining, where the ephemeral can acquire permanence, enduring over time. It is a time of disjunctions and memorability; a time that engenders collective memories to be shared by groups and communities, serving as an instrument to observe the surrounding reality, imbued – as Lucian’s *Saturnalia* aptly phrases it – with the sense of a utopia, in the past as in the present.¹

¹ For a definition of festival, we rely on the etymology outlined by the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, from the Latin *festum* (“public joy, merriment, revelry”) or *feria* (“abstinence from work in honour of the gods”), both terms used in the plural *festas* and *feriae* to signify that festivals lasted multiple days and included many and varied events. The Italian *festas*, the French *fête* and *festival*, the Spanish *fiesta*, the Portuguese *feita*, the Middle English *feste*, *festial* then *festival*, all come from the Latin *festas*. These terms refer to a variety of events, as indicated by the entry on “festas” in the *Enciclopedia dello Spettacolo*: starting from the original and indissoluble link between any kind of celebration – understood as participation in a ritual – and any form of performance, this pioneering discussion of the term emphasised the persistence, even in modern

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It is widely acknowledged that at the onset of the Renaissance, Italian city-states and European courts crafted a complex system of celebratory events and public and private ceremonies that played a pivotal role in the societal fabric of the time, particularly for their consistent reiteration of images, gestures, and languages inspired by antiquity. These festive occasions and political celebrations encapsulated intangible yet critical aspects of early modern memory, emerging as products of a highly performative context. Stemming from seminal studies by Jacob Burckhardt (*The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, 1860) and Aby Warburg (*The Renewal of Pagan Antiquity*, 1932) in history and art history, and by Alessandro D'Ancona (*Origini del teatro italiano*, 1891)² in theatre history, the study of festivals emerged as a distinct field, offering insights into Renaissance civilisation through art, symbols, collective practices, rituals, and theatre (Kernodle 1944; Seznec 1953). From seminal investigations such as those by Warburg, Renaissance Italy emerged as a 'laboratory' within the broader spectrum of European (and subsequently, extra-European) cultures. From Lorenzo de Medici's Florence to the intellectual circles of Pomponio Leto in Rome, Italy revived and reshaped the ancient language of festivals as a means of identity formation, social competition, and political discourse. Spanning the peninsula and adapting to specific historical-cultural contexts and political features, the Italian revival of classical festive models asserted itself as avant-garde vis-à-vis the burgeoning European monarchies and the new political entities in the colonial Americas.³

times, of the festive character of any performance, no matter whether public or private, occasional or aristocratic, including royal entries, births, weddings, coronations on the one hand, and games, processions, mock battles, on the other. As pointed out more recently by Keren Zaiontz, "the term festival is part of a lexicon, in which it is but one term jostling alongside fiesta, carnival, bacchanal, fair and feast . . ." (2018, 6).

² On the origins of theatre and the beginning of a systematic survey of information about "popular" and "collective" performances, which go beyond the purely literary component of theatrical expression and instead belong to that complex universe of representative practices that Paolo Toschi later identified as ritual-spectacle (Toschi 1976); see also De Bartholomaeus 1924, Apollonio 1943.

³ On the symbolic transparency of ritual practice and the direct and specific observation of symbolic actions that characterise European and non-European cultures, see the pioneering studies of Turner 1957 and 1967. "Symbol is the smallest unit of ritual which retains the formal properties of ritual behaviour. The symbols observed in the field were objects, activities, events, gestures and spatial units in a ritual situation" (Turner 1967, 19). The analysis of the ritual process led Turner to adopt and deepen, through his scholarly interaction with Richard Schechner and Performance Studies, the notion of cultural performance introduced by the American socio-anthropologist of Polish origin, Milton Singer, in his studies of cultural traditions and modernisation in postcolonial India (Singer 1955, 23-36).

Driven by methodologies indebted to *nouvelle histoire* (Bloch 1949), the study of the performative dimension of festivals experienced a resurgence in the mid-twentieth century through works by Jacques Jacquot (1956-1960; 1964) and Frances Yates (1959), contributing to the ‘new theatrical historiography’.⁴ This approach detached Renaissance theatre from a narrow definition of drama, encompassing and exploring the myriad forms of early modern performance. These studies transcended the reconstruction of institutional, civic, or religious ceremonies prevalent in earlier historiography, identifying festivals as conceptual and ideological spaces for the cultural and political self-legitimation of the elites. The court festival emerged as the most recognisable manifestation of such a process, epitomising a substantially homogeneous synthesis of organisational motives, tensions, values, and forms. Festivals, diverging from the ordinary rhythm of city life, became an ‘ideal’ realm – a catalyst for expression within various areas of artistic creation, including set design, ephemeral architecture, dramatic texts, recitation, and theatre. “It is the ideal time when society glimpses its ‘eternalized’ dimension, projecting itself into its own utopia . . . : it is the well-regulated city” (Cruciani 1987, 40).

Subsequent studies expanded the socio-political and geographical analysis of these events, exploring symbolic forms and the relationship between the civic contexts of festivals and the visual, musical, and performative cultures of the time. This broadened perspective enabled the consideration of models, processes, creative and productive systems overlooked in earlier research, which predominantly concentrated on the history of institutions.⁵

This approach was further enriched by innovative studies in art and literary history, focusing on visual culture and the strategies of the art of memory (Settis 1986; Strong 1987; Bolzoni 1995). Viewing theatrical representations through the lens of memorability found particularly fertile ground in the early modern period. The revival of classical texts and materials underpinned the creation of new collective, national, and transnational models, fostering the development of new cultural forms, theatrical practices, genres, and languages of performance.

In recent decades, scholarly interest in early modern festival studies has further increased, promoting an interdisciplinary focus on theatre studies, social history, art history, anthropology, dance, music, literature, and cultural heritage. This has transformed the early modern festival,

⁴ See among others: Zorzi 1977; Trexler 1980; Muir 1981; Cruciani 1983.

⁵ In addition to the studies mentioned previously, see among others: Ventrone 1992 e 2016; Decroisette 1993; Guarino 1995; Plaisance 2008; Mulryne and Goldring 2002; Mulryne, Watanabe-O’Kelly, and Shewring 2004; Mulryne, Aliverti, and Testaverde 2015.

from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, into a prominent research domain not only in European cultures but also in extra-European contexts.⁶ Concurrently, research on the reception of Greek and Roman material in the early modern period has led to a re-evaluation of those historiographical frameworks that have traditionally limited the engagement with classical antiquity. Studies on early modern translation, for instance, have emphasised the creative dimension of the receiving context, departing from a binary (non-creative) understanding of translation as a set of transactions involving texts and cultures (Burke and R.Po-chia Hsia 2007; Refini 2020; Di Martino and Dudouyt 2023).

Altogether, the essays included in this special issue contend that a better understanding of early modern festivals entails reconstructing them not only as discrete events but as complex systems of symbols, practices, and gestures in relation to their cultural, artistic, and political significance, along with the images and texts that shaped them and their preservation through memory. It also necessitates reconstructing, synchronically and diachronically, the 'backstage' of the festivals – the network of social communities that contributed to their creation and generated new memories. Finally, it involves viewing the festival as a site of both reflection and performative practice. In fact, early modern theatre was brought to life through the efforts of erudites and the promotion of collective rituals, always intertwined with the daily experience of the life of the city (both the tangible city and the ephemeral city of festival time), its spectacles, performance cultures, and shared memories (Bortoletti et al. 2018; Bortoletti et al. 2024).

The contributions gathered here delve into the complexity of the early modern festival through an interdisciplinary, expansive lens across time and space. They raise theoretical and methodological questions while examining case studies focused on specific contexts, geographies, and sites of poetic and visual invention; they also look at how the extant documentation allows us to appreciate the re-activation of classical models within the celebratory

⁶ The bibliography is extensive and heterogeneous. A still valuable survey of the state of the art are the following volumes: Bastinello and Zannoni 2018, Mulryne 2019 and Watanabe-O'Kelly and Simon 2000. See also the volumes edited by The Society for European Festivals in the Renaissance (SEFR); outcomes of the *PerformArt* project (directed by Anne-Madeleine Goulet), on the Performing Arts in Rome between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; those of the *RISK* project (directed by Alessandro Metlica), on festivals and celebrations in Italian and European Republics between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Also noteworthy is the seminar series *Times of Festival* (organised by Eckart Marchand at the Warburg Institute), in which scholars from different disciplinary fields discussed the temporal dimensions of the festival in the early modern age in Europe and beyond. See also Muir 2005, in which the scholar examines the impact on European understanding of ritual following the discoveries of the Americas and missionary efforts in China.

context of the festival as well as the promotion of ‘new’ dramaturgies. Also, these studies observe the impact of festivals on the imagination and collective memory of both the period and later eras.

2. The Event: Theatre and Festival as *instrumenta regni*

The occasions for festivals and public ceremonies were varied and frequent in the Italian and European courts of the early modern period. They ranged from the celebration of historical events and feasts to exceptional occasions, including civic and patronal rites, religious ceremonies, official visits of illustrious guests, weddings of important aristocratic families, often coinciding with Carnival, and other ritual or civic festivals. Thus, it is possible to identify different kinds of festivals, each assuming specific characteristics linked to the historical, political, and cultural context of the city. These festivals followed three main strands in constant dialogue with one another: religious and civic festivals, popular feasts, and festivals “all’antica” (in the style of classical antiquity).⁷ These festive moments provided an opportunity to showcase the entire city and its significant places, chosen and adapted for each celebratory event.

During festive times, the entire city underwent a transformation into a theatre, utilising existing buildings and altering the signs of urban and private festive customs. Sometimes, this involves interventions in the urban layout, creating new temporary machinery and ephemeral apparatuses like triumphal arches, stages, theatres, and firework platforms. On these occasions, the city presents itself as a *theatrum mundi*, drawing inspiration from textual, architectural and figurative works inherited from the ancients. These various components were brought back to life in the political and cultural context of the city, often reflecting an idealised image of the city itself created on purpose by architects and painters on the occasion of entries and processions.

This phenomenon lies at the core of some of the essays gathered here. If Daniela Sacco’s essay, by focusing on the case of Aby Warburg’s studies of early modern festivals, makes a compelling argument for the need to consider the Renaissance culture of the festive celebration as an object that mobilises not only art-historical categories but also intellectual and epistemological dynamics, the relevance of this methodology to the analysis of case studies comes to the fore in contributions that shed light on the multifaceted nature of specific events. For instance, Claudio Passera’s essay

⁷ See Fagiolo 1997; see also Fagiolo 2007 and Fagiolo Dell’Arco and Carandini 1977-1978.

describes the ephemeral architectural apparatus built for the triumphal entry of Elisabetta da Montefeltro and Roberto Malatesta during their wedding in 1455, illustrating how the ceremony transformed Rimini into a 'new' ancient Rome. The imagery evoked by archaeological remains of ancient theatres and temporary theatrical structures often serves to construct identities and politically and socially affirm rulers, as documented by Sergio Costola in his contribution on Lucrezia Borgia and her programmatic involvement in the festive and theatrical life of the Este court at the turn of the sixteenth century.

Italian and European city streets thus served as the architectural stage for triumphant entries accompanied by solemn music. Buildings are transformed into the backdrop for court processions and historical reenactments, while squares become theatres for tournaments, jousts, and races. Palaces host the private entertainments of the nobility, including banquets and the staging of mythological tales and classical dramas, both in Latin and in the vernacular, as well as newly written plays. In this context, urban scenery projects the image of the city into the court hall through the urban perspective, an artistic device mastered by Bramante (1444-1514) during his time in Rome at the end of the Quattrocento. Bernini (1598-1690), well known as a set designer, stage technician, and festival organiser, but also as an actor-author and director of comedies, would later bring this technique to its fullest theatrical development at the peak of the Roman Baroque.⁸

According to a conception of the city as the *patrimonium principis*, the reconstitution of urban space for festivals has guided, since the early Renaissance, strategies of *renovatio urbis*. Similarly, the reinterpretation of urban scenography as part of the festival reinforces the humanistic idea of *ornamentum urbis*. Tight connections exist between the external rites of urban society and the internal rites of family society, as well as between the representative practices of civic celebration, popular festivals, and those of courtly festivities *all'antica* (Zorzi 1977 and Trexler 1980). These various forms of performance expose the relationship between collective behaviours and the functions of urban spaces, as well as between these and the organisation of a social model and a new kind of knowledge in terms of power dynamics.

This dialectical bond reflects an idea of organising the world that finds its metaphorical and material counterpart in the ancient architectural space of the theatre (Bolzoni 1984; Bortoletti and Sacchi 2018), unearthed and appropriated – albeit with some uncertainty – in the decades around 1500. The model of the ancient theatre paved the way for both the earliest permanent court

⁸ On theatrical scenography and stage design, we refer to Elena Povoledo's studies from the Renaissance to the eighteenth century, and specifically her foundational work, Povoledo 1975. On Bramante and the perspective stage cf. Neiiendam 1969 and Bruschi 1969. On Bernini as theatre artist cf. Tamburini 2012; Zammar 2015, 233-52.

theatres and the grandeur of the Baroque spectacle (Tafuri 1969 and 1992; Ruffini 2013). The 'simple' urban perspective of the Quattrocento gradually disappeared in favour of scenic metamorphosis and the mechanical wonders of the Baroque festival. These innovations, in addition to recovering myths, stories, and forms from antiquity, also revived Greco-Roman techniques in the invention of new scenic and theatrical machinery. Benedetta Colasanti's study focuses on one instructive instance of this material heritage, namely, the representation of *Mercurio e Marte*, staged in Parma in 1628 to inaugurate the Farnese Theatre on the occasion of the wedding between Odoardo Farnese and Margherita de' Medici. The theatre was built ten years earlier by Giovanni Battista Aleotti – a masterful synthesis of the model of the ancient theatre already revived by the first modern permanent theatre (the Palladian Olimpico in Vicenza, 1583-1585), and the elongated arena of the Medici theatre by Bernardo Buontalenti in Florence. Using literary, iconographic, and documentary sources, Colasanti traces the models that shaped the staging of the mythological tournament. She observes how these contributed to strengthening the poetic-visual dramaturgy of the work while ensuring its communicative effectiveness both for the court audience and for those citizens who were allowed into the city's new theatre.

Edmund Thomas also examines the Farnese tournament, offering a comparative analysis of how Francesco Guitti in Parma and Gian Lorenzo Bernini in Rome revived ancient forms of spectacle, in line with the experimental fervour they both joined. Guitti's machine, based on ancient treatises, recreated an ancient naval battle to conclude the representation of Mercury and Mars. In contrast, the machines built by Bernini for the Roman Carnival in the 1630s transformed classical naval battles into a dramatised simulation of the Tiber's flood, producing a spectacle that transformed the urban landscape during the celebratory time of Carnival.

The history of festivals intertwines with that of architecture and urban development, often coinciding with significant urban renovations tied to celebratory and ritual events. Two emblematic cases include Biagio Rossetti's Erculean Addition in late fifteenth-century Ferrara and Bernini's renovation of Saint Peter's square in seventeenth-century Rome. Bernini's colonnade is not only shaped to embrace all faithful as a symbol of Mater Ecclesia's ecumenism, but also serves processional and liturgical purposes, protecting pilgrims' routes and facilitating the *Corpus Christi* papal procession circuit (Fagiolo 1997, 2). This creates a continuum not only between urban space and the theatrical representation, but also between urban representation and scenography, with repercussions on the staging of performative events built on shared notions of the city's landscape.

In Rome, Florence, Venice, Parma, and the capitals of the emerging European monarchies and the colonial Americas, the transient essence of festivals

generates compelling imagery, following the classical paradigm. It leverages diverse city locations and symbolic, communicative languages within the festivals' institutional frameworks, reflecting political strategies – whether propagandistic or oppositional – in a dialectical interplay between tradition, experimentation, and transnational exchange. These communication systems not only foster processes of identity affirmation, but also serve as social tools for artists and patrons to influence sovereigns on foreign and domestic policy matters or, alternatively, to oppose perceived adversaries, whether Muslim, Turkish, Jewish, or Protestant. Borja Franco Llopis's essay explores these themes, analysing, over an extended chronological range (from the conquest of Granada and the European arrival in America to the ascent of the House of Bourbon to the Spanish throne, 1492-1700), how ancient mythology, via standardised classical *topoi*, was employed to represent the enemies of the Spanish Habsburgs during early modern public celebrations. Similarly, as detailed in Jan Bažant's essay, classical mythology was used as a tool of political allegory during the visit of emperor Ferdinand I to Prague in 1558, when an elaborate ceremony involving Jupiter's fight against the Giants was staged in the garden of the palace: the representation of Mount Aetna and the defeat of the Giants were meant to impress the audience, which, being familiar with the political undertones of the spectacle, would be able to seize its allegorical content.

Viewed through this lens, the festival emerges as a mobile and ever-renewing 'living archive', where social and cultural groups, artists, and poets continuously revisit and refresh images, gestures, words, and rituals. These elements, recognisable, eloquent, and memorable, play a pivotal role in shaping new political actions and visions. Festivals, by moulding collective, civil, and ethical identities, foster a rich landscape of imagination. Through performances and representative practices, they trigger new forms of poetry, art, and theatre.

3. Backstage: the Community of the Festival

The fascination with early modern festivals as objects of interdisciplinary investigation certainly does not limit itself to the reconstruction of performances, even if done with philological detail. The fascination lies in recognising the 'essence' of a complex civilisation in the festival, one that groups and communities enact, discerning its patterns to tailor them to a particular vision that, during the festival, transforms into a tangible reality. Delving into theatrical events alone offers only a fragmentary history of this intricate culture, which instead materialises through the endeavours

of individuals – poets, intellectuals, artists, artisans, and patrons.⁹ These individuals draw inspiration from the ancient ideas of theatre so as to re-enact them within the modern city. It involves a select ‘handful of men’, varying each time in response to evolving historical, social, and political contexts. They strive to relive the ancient past, emerging from secluded realms of recreation and study, to share their intent and vision as part of collective, participatory festivities, adapting to the nuances of local politics according to specific plans.

The rediscovery of antiquity sparked a profound and transformative renewal across disciplines. In the early modern era, it engendered a sort of ‘collective dialogue’ between written works and convivial and recreational practices during gatherings of intellectuals. Similarly, it fostered forms of interaction across educational institutions and secular brotherhoods, wherein dense networks of relationships were often intertwined with lived experiences and specific environments. It was from these encounters and networks of friendships, writings, and their capacity to establish cultural hegemony that the very organisation of festivals often emerged.¹⁰

In Rome, for instance, this phenomenon began in the mid-fifteenth century within the cultural project of the Pomponian Academy. It seized its validation within the domains of official culture and power, adapting to existing structures and traditions while also asserting the demands of new cultural milieus. As argued in Raimondo Guarino’s contribution, the portrayal of classical dramas and the delivery of orations in Rome and among the humanist circles of the Pomponians produced a full immersion in antiquity and its upholding as a model for life. This project entailed educating the youth and society at large, akin to the ancient practice, in the arts of acting, rhetoric, and music. Latin recitation transcended the confines of schools or secluded cultural spaces; it swiftly became a fixture in both elitist and public ceremonies and festivities. It is within the interplay of entertainment and celebration that the words and endeavours of the humanists found resonance, as did their philological inquiries and archaeological investigations. However, the Pomponians’ multifaceted and routine involvement in entertainment and official celebrations was not mere spectacle; rather, it presented itself as a dissemination of ideas, practices, and customs, constituting the formative essence of the humanist endeavour and an ethical/behavioural prototype, in fact, a model emblematically captured

⁹ “The Italian Renaissance theatre is the work of a group of men, not many, and often in relation to each other. The restoration of ancient theatre, which is at its origins, is part of a utopian project in a real society, the proactive dream that a group of men in a hegemonic position has of a noble and harmonious way of life” (Cruciani 1980, 356).

¹⁰ On festivals’ ‘social actors’ and the performance of micro-communities during the temporal dimensions of festivals see Meldolesi 1984 and Zaiantz 2018.

by the very image of the theatre. Sulpicio da Veroli's entreaty to Cardinal Raffaele Riario in the prefatory epistle to Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, seeking a theatre – a public edifice suitable for his students' performances and for the benefit of the Roman citizens – not only underscores the connection between the ancient and modern city in the name of theatre, but also exposes the deliberate and active engagement of the Roman academy in the political, economic, cultural, and performative fabric of the city.

Needless to say, this dynamic between the academy, the court, and the city is not exclusive to Rome. From Florence and Venice to Naples and the courts of northern Europe, humanist schools and circles serve as crucial community hubs for the integration of classical culture and drama into civic and festive contexts. This role of the humanistic school is shared with other environments and collaborative institutions, whose endeavours within and beyond the festival profoundly influence the nature of the spectacle itself.

However, the diversity of patronage systems and the network of 'social actors' involved in festive events, belonging to various forms of associations, whether religious or secular, have not always been emphasised enough. Similarly, the array of specialisations and skills that shape festival programmes, as well as the interconnections between the different stakeholders – writers, artists, dancers, promoters, organisers – and the urban spaces (both private and public), along with the types and forms of ceremonies, their models, circulation, and followers, still await full acknowledgement and appreciation. By tracing the paths of the protagonists of this narrative, it becomes possible to reconstruct the social, artistic, and politico-cultural network of a vibrant micro-community of social subjects and their respective skills, practices, and performative techniques. Moreover, the significant expenses – increasingly documented in detail during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries – that the state, municipality, or religious orders had to manage for the realisation of festive programs and ephemeral apparatuses, provide not only a glimpse into the splendour and luxury of the spectacular event (and its political significance) but also into the economic impact that these events had on the social 'actors' involved at various times. From this perspective, the festival – especially its Baroque instantiation – serves not only as a platform for social affirmation but also as an economic engine and a means of wealth redistribution. It offers opportunities for employment and income, more or less consistent, to artists, artisans, organisers, poets, and writers.

The city of the festival is a realm of collectivity, a space that fosters communal experiences and the active participation of its people, another crucial social 'actor' contributing to the festival's success. It is to the people and their involvement that the preservation of the festival's memory and the understanding of a system composed of symbols, expressive and relational codes, are entrusted. These elements engage the mind, cultivate perception,

and evoke emotions according to ways in which they are expressed and experienced. The stage set by each festival forms a structure that, by transforming life into art, presents enduring concepts, experiences, and ideas that manifest in various forms over time.

4. Memory: Festivals and Performing Archives

The memory of festivals was preserved and renewed by reports of poets, ambassadors, or other witnesses, as documented in chronicles, letters, and poems. These accounts amplify the political and ideological messages conveyed by the poetic and visual elements of the festival itself, as well as by its promoters, who envisioned it, as recalled earlier in this introduction, as the 'great theatre of the world'. The descriptive rhetoric of this literature bears a strongly humanistic imprint, as suggested by the use of the lexicon of ancient theatre and the stylistic devices of classical ekphrasis. Therefore, verbal depictions of the festivals warrant further exploration in relation to the political, literary, and artistic milieu of the period.

The reference text, in this regard, was Flavio Biondo's *Roma Triumphans*, written between 1456-1459, in which contemporary celebrations, including tournaments, religious processions, and grand pageants in Florence and Rome, were compared to the triumphs and spectacles of ancient Rome. However, the descriptions provided by chroniclers and other sources from this period often lack completeness, making it challenging to reconstruct the festivals' complexity, their programmes, their models, and the creative processes involved in re-activating classical material. Despite some valuable documentary summaries,¹¹ absence of direct visual testimonies underscores the need for a more flexible and nuanced approach to this chronological phase (Passera 2020). Such an approach aims to piece together an 'iconography of the festival', interpreting the figurative and poetic aspects of festive ceremonies within their historical and cultural contexts and in relation to a rich tapestry of textual sources and images. This includes narratives ranging from biblical stories to ancient history, as well as works such as Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Petrarch's *Triumphs*, and classical dramas.

These texts serve as extraordinary thematic and iconographic prompts, utilised in both the figurative arts and the festivals themselves. They are adapted for triumphal entries, procession, and ceremonies, or transformed into new dramas for the stage, constituting a repository of images and

¹¹ Cf. Codex Vaticano Urbinate Latino 899, which includes a detailed description and 32 miniatures depicting the sequence of mythological entrances, and related verses, set up for the banquet organised for the wedding of Costanzo Sforza-Camilla d'Aragona in Pesaro 1475. Cf. Guidobaldi 1993; Bridgeman 2013.

words, as well as a warehouse of new inventions. Within this multifaceted universe of the festival, diverse dramaturgical materials emerge, each serving different functions. From mythological shows, enriched by the expertise of choreographers and dance masters (Sparti 1993; Casini Ropa and Bortoletti 2007; Pontremoli 2011), to forms of recitative poetry (Bortoletti 2008 and 2021), and the inheritance of ancient fables and classical comic and tragic texts (Stäuble 1968; Tisconi Benvenuti and Mussini Sacchi 1983; Torello Hill and Turner 2020; Pieri 2023), all circulate in illustrated editions and are staged in convent schools or humanist circles for pedagogical purposes from the latter half of the fifteenth century. These are then transferred to the venues of hegemonic culture, of which the festival embodies the utmost expression. Throughout the following century, festive programmes, whether occasional or set by the calendar, continue to showcase such dramaturgical variety, which many contributions in the second volume of this double special issue focus on (especially those contributions that delve into the processes of translation, adaptation, and rewriting of the classical repertoire in the modern festival from the Renaissance to the end of the eighteenth century). At this juncture, it is noteworthy to observe that reconstructing textual and iconographic paths around the festival entails reassembling the network of texts and images directly or indirectly linked to the festive occasion and its dramaturgical writings (Zorzi 1977-2023; Torello-Hill 2022 and 2023). This enables a better understanding of the processes of selection, adaptation, and reinterpretation of the ancient repertoire based on the values and knowledge specific to the early modern context. Maria Czepiel, for instance, argues for this case in her analysis of *El divino Orfeo* by Calderón de la Barca in 1634, where the ancient myth of Orpheus and Eurydice is reinterpreted through a Christian lens, privileging biblical sources over pagan ones.

The poetic text, as well as its figurative counterpart, frequently serves as a means to discern the creative mechanisms inherent not only in the production of poetry and art but also in the performative and festive dimension. This helps to partly overcome the documentary fragmentation characteristic of the early modern era.

The efforts to preserve the memory of these transient ceremonial and festive events intensified in the ensuing centuries. Whether sponsored by the court, municipalities, or other entities, the transmission of the events relied on rich documentation. While the ephemeral nature of the apparatuses in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries boosted the marvel of the festival – and, correspondingly, the political and social influence of those entities directly involved with the planning of the celebrations – there was also a concerted effort to prevent these events from fading into obscurity. This led to a more systematic production of printed reports meticulously describing the ceremonies, apparatuses, and poetic and iconographic programs.

Additionally, printed librettos of theatrical works became more common, often accompanied by splendid engravings of the settings or occasional settings and machines featured in processions. These visual depictions, alongside the words of authors and poets, captured the luxury, splendour, and opulence of the events, contributing to the creation of highly memorable imagery long after the festivals concluded. In this imagery, the concept of wonder counterbalanced the ephemeral yet stately nature of the shows.

Indeed, from the early Renaissance, the memory of the festivals operated at the intersection of *ars memorandi* and the materiality of the scene, serving as both a metaphor and a tangible experience of the *theatrum mundi*. In this light, the festival and its apparatuses emerge as privileged spaces and moments where ideas are transformed into living images, sounds, and narratives, making memory itself visible. Through the essays collected in this special issue, we observe how in these ‘memorial machines’, images not only preserve the memory of the events but also, through their repetition and rejuvenation, activate models from the past and inspire new artistic creations – tapestries, everyday decorations, paintings, as well as engravings, drawings, and prints – and new poetry, thus asserting their mnemonic power. This understanding of memory also facilitates the exchange across cultures, transcending rigid boundaries. Particularly in colonial settings, the concept of ‘memory’ enables the exploration of conscious and unconscious acts of recollection that challenge the cultural dominance of Greek and Roman material undergoing adaptation.

5. Epilogue: Festivals as an Interactive Repository of Antiquity

Considering the modern festival not so much an ephemeral event as an ‘interactive repository’ of antiquity, this double issue aims to compile research offering a plurality of transdisciplinary perspectives and an extended temporal and spatial dimension around the festival as an object. The goal is to illuminate the relationships between forms and subjects, cultural materials and expressive tools, associative and institutional contexts that shape early modern festival culture. These represent specific relational strategies, each requiring continual redefinition. Such redefinition is possible by studying the festival – its interludes, triumphal entries, civic and religious ceremonies, theatrical representations, and choreutic-musical performances – as a series of living actions, “intermediary forms between art and life” (Burchardt 1860 and Warburg 1932), wherein humanists reactivate, with varying interpretations, classical models. This transfiguration occurs within the artistic, social, and political sphere, serving as an effective mnemonic vehicle for the transmission and creation of new knowledge.

Crucial to this field of research is the effort to explore not only the events as witnessed by the relevant sources, but also the ‘ritual groups’ as collective entities that promote celebratory activities. These groups are creators of an experiential time and space – the festival – that incorporates canonised models of theatre and society. The festival serves as a formalising ground for hybridisations, experiments, irreverent forms of expression, censorship, conflicts, and affirmations, fostering the development of new forms, practices, genres, and languages of performance. These events provided visibility to artistic and social communities, which come to light when we endeavour to reconstruct interconnections, exchanges, and networks of people involved in various capacities in the realisation of the events themselves. Their importance, compared, for example, to literary and figurative languages, lies in the syncretic coexistence of different cultural traditions (classical, romance, chivalric, and religious) within the festival project, which turned to theatre as a political tool for constructing identity and fostering a sense of ethical and civic responsibility.

Hence, the festival should be seen not as a self-contained object of study, but as a complex and nuanced field of investigation. It is characterised by diverse expressive forms and functions, varied projects and practices, as well as situations, languages, and mechanisms of production. Understanding its significance requires exploring relationships that need to be continuously redefined and reshaped within their specific contexts. Adopting this perspective allows for the constant scrutiny of established certainties in previous historiography, challenging them, discarding formulas and categorisations, while also offering new analytical tools and expanding documentary and historiographical knowledge.

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