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Hommage to Bacchanalia

Andrea Alberto Dutto

In the shadow of institutions, in the darkness of underground passages and caves dug into the guts of the city, the dark side of classicism manifested itself.



fig. A: Peter Paul Rubens, 'Bacchanal', 1615

What do we know about 'Bacchanalia'? Actually, almost nothing outside the fact that it was a Roman festival of Hellenistic origin, and that it was banned in 186 BC with the famous 'Senatus consultum de Bacchanalibus'. Compared to other Roman festivals, 'Bacchanalia' brought everything to excess: orgies, inebriation and unconstrained euphoria alike. This kind of an extremely immoral attitude is widely acknowledged as the crucial factor behind its ban. Unfortunately, we have no precise information on this festival; Tito Livio describes an extremely violent scene, made of sex and alcoholic excess, which finds a valid pictorial description in the paintings that Rubens or Auguste Leveque dedicate to the subject of Bacchanalia (fig. A). However, this is not the whole story or, at least it is not as evident as it seems. This was not only due to the excessive nature of orgies, as orgiastic rituals were practiced at other festivals, like Saturnalia. Nor was it simply banned due to drunkenness as many other festivals whose Dionysian origin implied alcoholic inebriation. The reason for the ban was not the ritual itself but most probably the surprising level of popularity it reached. Tito Livio refers to at least 7000 members, including both plebeians and aristocrats, whose meetings gradually increased from three to five ceremonies per month. Evidently, this amount of participants could have appeared scary to the Roman Senate, for whom rather than simply a conventional festival, 'Bacchanalia' seemed a sort of secret organization that could threaten the institutional mechanics.

At first this festival finds a diffusion in the countryside and only later it extends to the city, namely the 'Urbs'¹. In the eyes of the 'Bacchanalia' members from the countryside, the most hidden corners of Republican Rome appeared as artificial caves where the rite could be sheltered from the 'panoptic' eye of the institutions. For this reason, several historians have associated the 'Bacchanalia' with the concept of 'mundus', or a dark place most probably sited underground, through which a connection between the earthly 'Urbs' and the frightening underground world was made possible.

Moreover, unlike other festivals, the Senate did not consider adapting the 'Bacchanalia' to other purposes. It was simply banned and blatantly eradicated. In the pragmatic mentality of the Romans, these exuberant orgiastic gatherings could not be translated into a useful purpose already performed by brothels where prostitution was legalized and taxed.

Therefore, the prohibition undertaken by the Senate was supposed to be exemplary so that further attempts to establish a non-legitimized organization would be nipped in the bud. In this



fig. B: Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, «A Dedication to Bacchus», 1889

sense, it is no surprise that there is a complete absence of architecture to sanctify the site of Bacchanalia (probably located in the area of the Aventine hill). In fact, it is widely known that Roman architecture had a public meaning which complied with their laws. The normative character of Roman architecture (praised by authors like Adolf Loos and Giorgio Grassi) essentially derived from the abstract character of law. Outside the law, there was no possibility of architecture and more generally there was no possibility of founding a system of conventions that could be as universal as classicism claimed to be. Outside the law, everything was thought to be an uncontrolled domain of useless things and unproductive immorality.

This is more or less what we know about the «Bacchanalia» festival from historical sources.

Therefore, rather than going deeper into the subject itself, I propose to examine the reason for which this phenomenon reappears later on in history, in relation to different and sometimes conflicting purposes. We outlined several essential components of the «Bacchanalia» among which are institutions, citizens, deities, places, and architecture. I will now take four different perspectives through which specific features of «Bacchanalia» emerge at different historic moments.

Fake classic

It is common knowledge that in ancient Rome festivals could be public or private, depending on who financed them. Although it is unclear to which category the «Bacchanalia» belonged, like all other festivals, it was

generally intended as an expression of the multitude of the «Urbs», therefore belonging to the public side of the city. However, almost two thousand years afterwards, the «publicness» of Roman festivals loses its importance. At least this is particularly evident in the domain of arts and, for this reason, I would like to refer to Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912) an English painter of the Victorian period. In his paintings he reconstructed settings, monuments, costumes, and poses of the ancients creating a consistent whole. The painter's technical abilities emerged in hyperrealism, through which Mediterranean lights and colors were accurately reproduced. However, even though this rendering of colors triggered surprise and aesthetic pleasure in the observer, Tadema's paintings were deeply anchored to the bourgeois ideology of his time. His obsessive

erudition and hyper-accurate reproduction of the archaeological discoveries of his time met with great acclaim in the bourgeois market. Simply put, this was due to the fact that the bourgeoisie reflected themselves in an ancient model that could act as an ideal type and Pompeii, the site that Tadema used most widely, appeared particularly suitable.

In 1889 Tadema dedicated a painting to the «Bacchanalia». This painting has nothing to do with what we might nowadays think of as the ancient narratives of this festival on the excess of obscenity and excitement described there (fig. B). Excess is literally «domesticated», in the sense that it is reduced to a domestic fact, namely to a dwelling-like condition. Nevertheless, it is also pretty evident that in a painting like this, the 19th century bourgeoisie could finally

represent themselves, without undermining their orthodox moral dogmas. Tadema's artistic moves were twofold; on the one hand, he transformed an obscene festival into a choreography for good-looking girls; on the other hand, he transformed the background of the crowded Roman «Urbs» into a Victorian theatre set. Briefly, rather than a «Bacchanalia», Tadema represented a sort of Toga Party (a theme he actually devoted himself to), namely a fake classic, complete with good-looking red-haired models dancing in the foreground of an idyllic landscape. This picture shows us very well what painting meant for Tadema, namely to domesticate by means of adapting the public to the private, and thus the savage spirit of the city to the calm bourgeois apartment. At the time of the «Bacchanalia» painting, Tadema had already applied his painting strategy to architecture, in the form of his own house in Grove End Road. The interior of this house was arranged according to an imaginative classicist idea, with Pompeian-style decorations, and openings that reproduced the Mediterranean light. To the extent that everything, even the wicked «Bacchanalia», could finally be domesticated, the problem for Tadema was purely quantitative: his main task became to domesticate as much as he could. Therefore, in order to re-enact ancient references he first had to dismantle their disturbing «publicness»; then, it had to exalt the vices (and not the virtues) of the bourgeoisie, its thirst for self-representation through accumulation. Briefly, he had to reawaken the savage side of Victorian morality, the bulimic side of production and consumption.

Grotto

Which place better than a grotto could represent the event of «Bacchanalia»? As previously mentioned, historians have proposed the concept of «mundus», that is not necessarily related to a physical place but to a mysterious condition that stands for an antithesis of the «Urbs» rational layout; however, it could also have the meaning of an underground site, like a grotto. Surely, to a Grand Tour traveler, the discovery of Rome's underground subverted the pureness of the eternal city together with its laws and monuments. In the shadow of institutions, in the darkness of underground passages and caves dug into the guts of the city, the dark side of classicism manifested itself. In particular, these places must have exercised particular influence over Sir Francis Dashwood (1708–1781) who, once returned to his home country England, became one of the founders of the Hellfire Clubs.

This denomination stood for clubs made up of prestigious personalities of enlightened England, soaked in classicist ideology (in the sense that being drunk in Rome was an essential requirement to be invited to the club), gathering, in secret caves and basements, for evening parties of pure «libertinage érudite», which often resulted in alcoholic excess and orgies. Though it may seem absurd, these secret festivals took place at the sum of British neoclassical revival,

in which the erudition hid a darker side based on blasphemous rituals undertaken in the true fashion of «Bacchanalia» festivals.

In 1748 Dashwood began renovating the old Cistercian abbey of Medmenham. Here, once through the entrance threshold (portraying a famous Rabelais quotation «Do what you will»), guests abandoned their institutional role and became libertines. The gatherings took place at night in a grotto, under the hill of West Wycombe, which Dashwood had restored and expanded. Here, in a state of drunkenness, participants undertook orgies and initiation rites which, without their knowledge, put them at the risk of being accused of scandal by the owner, namely Sir Dashwood. Hence these gatherings hid a misleading political strategy thanks to which Dashwood finally achieved an outstanding political position, and finally succeeded in appointing himself as Chancellor of the Exchequer. The contrast between grotto and house, thus between the legal and illegal, brilliantly represents the contradiction of Dashwood, who, not surprisingly, is portrayed in a painting by William Hogart as dressed like St. Francis while reading an erotic book. Similarly, in the eyes of the people Sir Dashwood was a benefactor, employing architectural refurbishments as an instrument to provide temporary employment to poor people. By digging caves and paving roads, he was apparently an ideal classicist, voted for and by the public. In this sense, the grotto had a paradigmatic role of conjunction; it established a connection between the ethic of the good politician above the ground, with the underground politics of manipulation and libertinage.

Arcadia

Narratives on the origins of «Bacchanalia» are particularly intriguing. It is generally agreed that their diffusion in Republican Rome were enhanced by the Hellenistic cult of Dionysus in the 2nd century BC. Hence the origin is not generally acknowledged as a historical event but rather as a mythological narrative. This kind of mythology was inevitably instrumental for artists who throughout the centuries pursued the idea that classical heritage could be put at stake for different purposes. An interesting example is provided by the rococo painter par excellence Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), inventor of the pictorial theme of the «fête galante». This theme stood for a scene, set in a garden where young, stylish comedy characters, stood in unequivocal poses and postures. The matrices of these works were Rubens and Poussin's paintings of mythological subjects; however, what distinguished Watteau's from them, was a detachment from the historical events themselves and the choice to translate them into the present condition in order to confer to the aristocrats a sort of cultural legitimacy of their idleness, inspired by mythology.

The myth was not supposed to be simply acknowledged by the aristocracy; it had to be newly experienced. For this reason, Watteau acted like an



fig. C: Jean-Antoine Watteau, 'The Embarkation for Cythera', 1717

illusionist, so that it was not really crucial to understand what he was doing (i.e. which was precisely the meaning of his paintings) but rather how the spectator perceived the effect and identified himself with it. The famous painting entitled 'Pilgrimage to the Isle of Cythera' (1717) is particularly significant from this point of view (fig. C). The composition is inspired by the theme of the Bacchus festival painted by Poussin, but it is further declined in a natural and non-historical manner. Instead of Bacchus, Watteau shifted the viewer's attention to an actually existing place, namely the Isle of Cythera, also known as a legendary place of the birth of Aphrodite (the goddess of love). The scene is that of an aristocratic party in which several couples entertain amorous encounters under the shadow of trees. Setting and costumes were painted resembling the conventional dressing codex of the time; yet all of it was simultaneously portrayed in the form of an anachronistic and mythical model. In this way, the tragic was replaced by the delightful and so the aristocrat's idleness finally came into mythology. The festival climate transferred reality and the ordinary to a kind of anachronistic and self-referential limbo. With this move, Watteau joined two goals; on the one hand, he was accredited as a cultured artist, legitimizing himself with classicist erudition; on the other hand, he filled the ideological void of the aristocracy, by misleading them with the idea that everything was good, thus supporting their lazy and inevitable suicidal choice. Nevertheless, we should not be disappointed that all this simply concerns rococo and stops there.

Indeed, after more than two centuries after the decline of rococo aristocracy, the attitude of Watteau is still pretty alive and fully operating in the contemporary intellectual milieu. Let us not deceive ourselves.

Prophecy

If we now return back to Tito Livio's passage, we see that the fear of the Roman Senate was that the 'Bacchanalia' could establish itself as a conspiratorial social order, with subjects and rules that differed from institutional ones. In a way, it forecasted the broadly diffused tendency of the subsequent centuries, to deploy antagonistic social formations in opposition to religious and political orders. Among these, a particularly original theory of an alternative social order is outlined by Charles Fourier (1772–1837) in 'Le Nouveau Monde amoureux' (1816). In this book he outlined a new society based on the concept of love, meant as a search for bodily pleasure (hence as a sexual and non-platonic relationship). In his theory nothing was really utopian, nor divine, or eschatological. Fourier proposed an extremely accurate time schedule for this society so that desire would become the highest achievement of a new civilization, called Harmony. All members of this society should be able to express their desire of love, at all ages, and at its highest degree of development, in Harmony there would be sexual freedom and only very little frustration. Indeed, engagement in sexual activity would put into the background the weight of work, essentially reduced to

agricultural activities. To start this process, Fourier had devised a typology of living: the «Phalanstère», in which a wide range of festive celebrations was planned, including the «Bacchanalia» itself.

Actually, the «Phalanstère» was nothing really new from an architectural point of view. Its plan was arranged on the baroque typology of the Palace (i.e. the Palace of Versailles) with the innovative addition of a system of distributional galleries, inspired by the Passages of Paris; in particular, these galleries were heated and sized in order to allow gatherings and collective social events. Nevertheless, we are motivated to think that the strong point of Fourier's theory was not the invention of the «Phalanstère», but rather the reconfiguration of an already existing world, together with its institutions and buildings. The social order of the loving world was intrinsically based on a correction of the moral values of both the aristocracy and the bourgeoisie, respectively hence of the Palace and the Passage. Without this conscious intellectual distinction, the «Phalanstère» as a typology was not enough to provide an interface for change. Several American communities (i.e. The Brook Farm in Massachusetts) who had the illusion that the «Phalanstère» was a sufficient device for their collective utopia to take place, even without a draft revision of their moral values, miserably failed. In this sense, Fourier's theory needed the city as a starting point, from which it was possible to retrieve those gradually marginalized values that could be ultimately promoted. In his view, Harmony should look like the illegitimate son of the capitalist society, and not merely a utopian alternative to it, as we have been made to believe.

Concluding note

The examples of «Bacchanalia» revival we could cite, far exceed the four case studies chosen for this essay. Nevertheless all the examples that might be mentioned display a common matrix: «Bacchanalia» represents a side of Roman culture that was kept outside the law. In other words, it represents an excess of freedom and pleasure that cannot be regulated or restricted to social conventions, both in terms of ethics and economics. In this sense, «Bacchanalia» cannot be considered right or wrong, neither good nor bad; it expresses the dark side of institutions and the exalted expression of vices and delights: the deeper instincts of the body. Hence a serious judgment of «Bacchanalia» would inevitably imply judgement of the human nature and this is certainly not the goal of this essay. Instead it is crucial and seemingly more purposeful to understand the true spirit of «Bacchanalia» with a good sense of humour and its cultural representations, towards science, social and political conventions. Indeed, as Bertolt Brecht once said, «it is all because we have decided that humour belongs in hell, whereas we should not doubt that, in fact, it reigns in heaven. [...] Humour is a sense of distance. [...] Humourless people are ridiculous».²

¹ *urbs lat.* – die Stadt.

² Bertolt Brecht, «Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic» (third edition), London, 2014.