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"L’épique en action": Fernand Cortez and the aesthetic of spectacle

Spontini’s Fernand Cortez premiered at the Paris Opéra on 28 November 1809. Commissioned the previous year by Napoleon to support his campaign in the Iberian peninsular, it was intended to encourage identification with Cortez and his soldiers in their conquest of Mexico in 1520. In the first act, Cortez fears for his brother, who has been captured by the savage Mexicans; he is offered peace if he will leave Mexico, but he sets fire to his fleet to demonstrate to his lacklustre soldiers and to the Mexicans – his commitment. In act 2, Cortez hopes to exchange a Mexican prisoner for his brother, but the Aztec priests demand instead his Mexican lover, Amazily – who makes the decision for him and sets off (swimming) to the city to sacrifice herself. In the final act, Cortez on horseback at the head of his troops burst into the temple in time to save Amazily and his brother, and Mexicans and Spanish are reconciled in a triumphant final chorus, celebrating the uniting of the two nations.¹

As a piece of propaganda, it was intended to highlight the enlightened leader’s heroic actions, drawing parallels between the liberal and humanitarian Cortez liberating a people from fanatical priests, and Napoleon and his troops fighting a brutal and unpopular war in Spain (which Napoleon also saw as a ‘liberation’, from the Inquisition). But in spite of high ticket sales and praise in the (albeit censored) press, the opera was ordered by the minister of police to be withdrawn after just thirteen performances; it seems to have inadvertently become a glorification of Mexican bravery and condemnation of Spanish (read French) brutality.

This paper sets the opera in the context of political events during 1808 and 1809 and Napoleon’s propaganda machine, paying particular attention to spectacle. Although it was found to be inadequate as a political tool, Fernand Cortez nevertheless helps to illuminate some of the continuities and disruptions concerning operatic spectacle through successive regimes in this volatile period, and the ways in which innovative musical and scenic effects built on the achievements of the previous decade but to quite different effect.

POLITICS

The librettist Etienne de Jouy wrote in his preface to the libretto [PPT]:

¹ ‘I thought it my primary duty to present the spectator with a natural exposition, and compel him to pity the fate of the Spanish prisoners, in order to
soften the odious aspects of their victory later on. That was my subject’s principal stumbling block. I was perhaps successful in avoiding it; I do not flatter myself that I surmounted it. Between the sympathy inspired by the temerity and audacity of the conquerors and that felt for the miserable fate of the conquered, the soul remains uncertain and, as it were, suspended.’

[anecdotal notes accompanying the text in his oeuvres completes]

Reviewers did pick out the unaccompanied prayer sung by three Spanish prisoners in the final act, ‘Createur de ce nouveau monde’ as a favourite item in the opera (it reminded them of a number by Gossec, ‘O salutaris hostia’, and in the opera was juxtaposed with a savage chorus and dance by the Meixcans), but by November 1809 the ‘odious aspects of [Cortez’s] victory’ were hard to ignore in a political climate in which Napoleon’s behaviour in Spain was drawing widespread condemnation.

The Peninsular War – or for the Spanish, the war of independence) – was a particularly bloody event. Exploiting dissensions between Spain’s King Charles IV and his son Ferdinand VII, Napoleon seized the throne at Bayonne in May 1808, and conferred it on his elder brother Joseph. This provoked an uprising in Spain that lasted for six years, conducted by guerrilla fighters on the one hand and by military campaigns launched by the regular Spanish army, British forces under the Duke of Wellington and the Portuguese army, on the other.

This intervention in Spain was almost universally condemned – by Napoleon’s contemporaries in France and across Europe and by subsequent historians. He believed Spain was a nation in ruins because of its weak regime; he was rescuing it from the abyss, as he had done for France (with the overthrow of the Directory at Brumaire and with the Bourbons in Naples). But public opinion was hostile, and many believed he was imposing a war on France out of pride and ambition, for his personal gain as emperor.

The guerrilla soldiers were supported by the clergy, who promised remission from divine punishment for those who fought the French. But the excesses and atrocities of the war took many forms. Napoleon had decided he had to intervene personally following humiliating French defeats at Bailén and Vimeriro in the summer of 1808. In the three months he spent in Spain, he carried out brutal reprisals on the Anglo-Spanish armies. Following the sacking of Burgos and the march on Madrid in autumn 1808, a Spanish witness declared that [PTT] ‘we may date from this period the manifest moral change which took place in the French army … The soldiers … would
no longer do anything but fight and plunder; military discipline has vanished'. The historian David Bell has claimed that some of the worst urban combat ever seen in Europe before the twentieth century took place at the siege of Saragossa – the city finally surrendered in Feb 1809. A Spanish officer serving under the French wrote: "The French could only maintain themselves in Spain through terror. They were constantly facing the need to punish the innocent with the guilty, of revenging themselves on the weak instead of the powerful'. The inhuman character of the war – on both sides – was captured famously in Goya’s ‘Disaster of War’ series of prints.

Napoleon returned to Paris in January 1809 when the British retreated, believing – erroneously – that Spanish resistance had now been broken. Four months later, he was occupying Vienna, but the war was going badly on other fronts, and an economic crisis had been precipitated by bad harvests and by the consequences of Britain's Continental Blockade; he suffered his first real defeat by Archduke Charles at Essling. Two months later, he secured victory at Wagram, but lost almost as many men as the Austrians: this was a turning point in the Napoleonic wars. The Treat of Vienna was signed on 14 Oct 1809, and Napoleon reinstalled at the Tuileries on 15 November, two weeks before the premiere of Fernand Cortez.

PROPAGANDA 1

Jacques Ellul in his groundbreaking study of propaganda in the 1970s identified the central aim of modern propaganda as provoking action, ‘arousing an active and mythical belief’ – through the mass media: ‘propaganda uses public opinion to externalise inner opinions of the organisation to the masses that eventually produces conformity’. Napoleon understood the importance of public opinion and the means by which it might be shaped to gain control over the masses, in his words, to ‘put [the whole nation] into a kind of intoxication’. Inheriting the lessons of the French Revolution, he mobilised the bureaucratic state, creating and disseminating a favourable image of the leader, his civic administration and his military exploits through education, religion, the arts and other forms of entertainment.

The historian Robert Holtman has identified two key contributions to his development of the art of propaganda: he was the first sovereign to talk directly and frequently to his subjects, in part through daily bulletins, and he took a pioneering step towards the systematic official propaganda activity of the type we know today, by using the machinery of government. His early dispatches and bulletins, ostensibly to keep the
Directory informed of the actions of the army during his campaign in Italy in the late 1790s, had two ulterior motives: to contrast the superior military prowess of the French army with the inferior efforts of the Austrians and Italians, and to promote his own political interests. Already in these dispatches and bulletins he displayed a genius for capitalising on the accidents of war, exaggerating his successes and keeping his name associated with victorious and heroic action.

FESTIVALS

A key weapon in Napoleon’s arsenal was the public festival. Starting in 1805, the haphazard collection of French celebrations were reorganised into a new system of imperial festivals. These became the primary tool for disseminating messages about the legitimacy and goodwill of the government - neither of which had been take for granted since 1789. They were intended to spark enthusiasm and stimulate work for the good of the nation, and brought men and women from all classes into the public arena to observe staged manifestations of the virtues of their government, and to express their support for the regime. In the process, an opportunity to observe each other and experience a variety of possible responses was made available.

But while revolutionary festivals had focused on the sovereignty of the people, with participatory reenactments and events, Napoleonic festivals centred on the sovereign himself, and had an overt militaristic purpose. (Indeed, in addition to festivals to commemorate specific dates, there were celebrations of the formations of the grand armée that came back to France or were about to depart on campaigns, and army itself celebrated these festivals wherever it was.)

The most Napoleonic of the new festivals was the anniversary of St Napoleon: an imperial catechism was introduced that made a direct link between God and Napoleon, and 15 August – which coincided with Napoleon’s birthday and the Assumption – was declared a national holiday to celebrate the founding of a new saint. St Napoleon effectively replaces the virgin [PTT].iii Typically, these celebrations would begin with a Catholic mass, usually a Te Deum (Catholicism had in a Concordat with the Pope in 1802 been recognised as the religion of the majority of French citizens, and the clergy brought under the control of the regime), then military rituals and training exercises, and then food and drinks, perhaps a banquet, followed by games, balls and fireworks.
OPERA & SPECTACLE

Kevin Salatino suggests the fireworks staged for the imperial *coronation* of Napoleon in Paris in 1804 had been the consummation of the political sublime. The spectacle echoed in many ways the firework displays in 1782 that had commemorated the birth of the dauphin, and in 1794 celebrating the revolutionary Fete de la Federation. [PPT] On this occasion the rocky foundation of the 1782 scene becomes a replication of the Mont Saint Bernard (the pass through which Napoleon had crossed the Alps in 1800 to defeat the Austrians at Marengo). The whole edifice, Salatino suggests, is a monumental realisation of David’s official 1801 portrait of Napoleon crossing the pass (*a reminder bottom left*), mingled with conventions of the natural sublime (mountains, volcano-like eruption of fireworks) and the cumulative force of the traditional languages of festival (rites and customs drawn from royal, revolutionary, religious ceremonies). The natural sublime thereby merges with the sublimity of revolution, conquest, predestined empire. In representations of the festival such as this, the grandiosity is exaggerated, and our response conditioned by the response of the internal spectators: hands raised in astonishment, gestures of awe, wonder in the face of imperial massiveness. Our sympathy with the spectators functions as a bridge to the experience of the sublime being represented. (And similar format for his marriage festivities in 1810 – after he divorced Josephine – a few days after the premiere of *Fernand Cortez*, and married Marie-Louise of Austria PTT)

But what happens in the theatre? And what happened at *Fernand Cortez* in November 1809? In many ways the magnificent spectacle produced at the Opéra echoed the official festivals celebrations. An unprecedented 180,000 francs was spent on the opera: a large part of the budget was blown on 17 horses – provided by Franconi; opposing choruses of Spanish and Mexicans were central to the work; ambitious offstage choral and instrumental effects were deployed and ‘Mexican’ and military instruments added to the orchestra; unprecedented attention was paid to visual realism, with the scene painters visiting the botanical gardens to draw authentic plants and the libraries to research Mexican monuments, sixteenth-century ships and costumes. (PTT – costumes – no sets available) (I’d like to say thanks you to Annelies Andries, who has done some detailed work into the nature of this historical realism – and shared some of her source material with me.)
A critic describing of Act I was particularly impressed by Cortez’s appearance at the beginning of the opera, amongst his mutinous soldiers, who want to go home: his eloquence disarms them, and the intended parallels with Napoleon are clear. The action-packed ballet that concludes the act offers further clear parallels with the emperor: a cortege of Mexicans offer gifts from Montezuma (birds, golden fruits); Cortez accepts them and in turn offers the Mexicans amour and swords. When some voluptuous dancing Mexican women threaten to seduce the soldiers, Cortez interrupts with a series of military exercises and warlike dances to dazzle his enemy; his horsemen appear and a cavalry charge strikes terror into the Mexicans. Their leader Telasco alone remains unmoved, and offers presents and peace, telling the Spanish to get some rest on their ships. Cortez however, gives an order: his fleet is set alight, committing the Spanish to the campaign, and they set off to attack the capital. The parallels with the displays of Napoleonic festivals, and their mix of military bravado and pleasure to impress, are clear.

But did audiences really sympathise with the onstage Spanish soldiers and see the parallels with the situation in contemporary Spain? Were their hearts really ‘transported by a drunkenness of the senses’ as nineteenth-century opera historian Théodore de Lajarte has suggested? Were they swept up by the visual realism to the extent that they condoned the brutal conquest – what librettist Jouy had identified as the subject’s ‘principal stumbling block’?

There is a tension in the reviews between the alienating and absorbing effects of this realism. On the one hand, a critic draws attention to the more naturalistic style of singing than was usual – a blurred relationship between recitative and aria draws one into the drama. On the other hand, the realistic visual details seemed to draw attention to themselves at close quarters and militate against absorption (one critic is particularly exercised about the destruction of the fleet and the smoke; and – as Annelies has identified – many were irritated by the overwhelming authentic details in the scenery). And others were disoriented by the aural chaos (strange instruments and modulations) and the relentless violence of the orchestra rather than pleasingly overpowered. Indeed, it is far from clear that audiences at the Opéra were willing the spectacle to merge with reality – something that was more common (for some at least) during the revolution, when there were repeated reports of audiences feeling part of the onstage action.

One might draw parallels with the nature of festival spectacle: While the overwhelming of the senses and absorption into the action may (perhaps) have been
a feature of the battlefield, that revolutionary festivals sought to replicate, to make the people feel as if they owned the revolution, Napoleon’s festivals were more controlled affairs, designed to fill one with awe, but not to collapse the distance between spectator and object.

One might conclude that the Act I ballet replicated the Napoleonic festival, with its military displays, cavalry charge and glorification of the leader, in a manner that would have been familiar to audiences, but the strings of military marches and military rhythms threaded through the score, and the final arrival of the Spanish soldiers at the end of the opera, and their overpowering of the Mexicans, if it triggered any recognition at all among audiences, would probably have provoked comparisons with Napoleon’s brutal breaking of the Saragossa siege and other violent acts in Spain.

PROPAGANDA 2

Indeed there is a striking disconnect between the tone and apparent message of the opera, and that suggest by other propaganda in 1809.

Napoleon’s popularity had taken a battering; the Spanish campaign intensified the crisis in public opinion as it became impossible to hide the degree to which the French army was in trouble on the one hand, and the odious nature of its actions. A concerted effort was made to transform Napoleon’s image. A painting competition was held to depict the day after the battle at Eylau, when Napoleon had visited the wounded, to present him as a clement ruler, a generous conqueror (the battle in February 1807-8, a bloody and inconclusive battle with an army of the Russian Empire in East Prussia). The winning painting by Antoine Jean Gros presents Napoleon as a Christ-like saviour (PTT). It was displayed at the 1808 Salon, where a number of other paintings promoted the theme of clemency and pardon to try to quell the rumours about the extent of carnage on the battlefields.

Although victory followed at Wagram in July 1809, with the breakup of the fifth coalition, it nevertheless formed a turning point in the wars: Napoleon had for the first time encountered – in Archduke Charles of Austria – an enemy who had his measure, and it was particularly bloody, with extensive use of artillery. He did not attempt to exploit his victory for political purposes; the artistic focus was on the death of Jean Lannes, Napoleon’s personal friend and an able commander who had been
fatally wounded at Essling. Equally, there were no celebrations when Napoleon
returned to Paris.

Perhaps the most obvious conclusion to draw from all this is the unsuitability of opera
as a tool for propaganda: it was unwieldy – Cortez was more than a year in the
making – and political events changing rapidly and unpredictably. And its meanings
notoriously unstable – its music and visual spectacle were as important (sometimes
more so) than the libretto in suggesting meaning.

Although the opera was withdrawn after 13 performances, it was brought back into
the repertoire in 1817, in a revised version, and continued to be a popular work
during the Restoration: an early critic noted how it served as a cautionary tale: such
tales of tyranny and usurpation only take place in the theatres these days; we have
learned to get along with each other…
O jour de gloire et d'espérance!
Tout est changé dans ces remparts;
Et le temple de la vengeance
Reçoit les plaisirs et les arts

(Fête générale des deux nations.)

Jacques Ellu has claimed that the French revolution brought a transformation in propaganda. The value of tradition was forced to yield to that of progress: traditional morality was rejected, the Christian religion questioned, and the values of king and fidelity replaced by patrie, liberty, equality. In the midst of these upheavals, individuals felt lost and needed guidance; propaganda allowed a person to recognise him/herself and act amid these changes. A technique used by the revolutionaries to promote cohesion was the naming of official enemies of the people. This enabled a crystallisation of public opinion, the removal of a feeling of inferiority and injustice, and compensation for certain difficulties, such as shortcomings in state leadership.

The clergy became increasingly disillusioned with Napoleon, especially after his arrest of the Pope in July 1809, following his excommunication of Napoleon. (He had united the Papal States with the French Empire in May and on 10 June the French flag replaced the papal flag at Sant'Angelo Castle in Rome. He declared ‘If the Pope preaches revolt, we must place him under arrest.’) Napoleonic propaganda also paid particular interest to Catholicism: the Concordat signed by Napoleon and the Pope in 1802 recognised Catholicism as the religion of the majority of French citizens; it also brought the clergy under the control of the regime, effectively turning the Church into a branch of the civil service.

The finale of the opera: the besieging Spanish army is heard gradually approaching, with what Anselm Gerhard has called ‘dubbed on’ reiterations of a triumphal march. The disruption of a one-dimensional musical course of events, he suggests, is justified by the chaos and destruction enacted on stage.