

"How to Taste a Festival". Ekphrasis and Sensoriality around Urban Celebrations during the Early Modern Period¹

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A first playful but necessary question ("How to smell a painting"), will necessarily draw an ambivalent answer, depending on one's point of view: One might "feel/smell" a painting by "seeing" it or by "listening" carefully to its skillfully elaborated description.

Victor Stoichita, "How to Taste a Painting"

Introduction

Focusing on research into festivals during the Early Modern period, historians commonly agree that such events, encompassing a wide range of religious or secular celebrations, constituted a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk* where music, theater, fireworks, lighting, architecture, and visual arts all contributed to transforming the city for a brief period of time. However, the involvement of the senses in the staging of these events has not been studied sufficiently, especially from the perspective of the period itself. Despite the extensive bibliography on festivals today, it is necessary to investigate the multisensory reality that shaped the ephemeral city during these celebrations. In line with the so-called "sensory turn", the approach to the study of festivals proposed here aims to provide a new perspective that takes into account the sensory experience created by the reconfiguration of urban space during a festive event, as well as the type of stimuli and emotional responses that occurred during the celebration. The primary source for this study is the so-called festival books or accounts.

Assuming that the rhetorical strategies used in these types of literary sources often repeat themselves in most cases, the "festive ekphrases" reflect the value system of the society of their time, something that can be challenging to comprehend when viewed from a contemporary perspective.

Therefore, in line with Marc Fumaroli, what if we were to go back to the contemporaries of these works of art [festivals], those for whom they were created, and consider how they saw them, how they felt them, and how they engaged in conversation with them?

On this occasion, to apply a holistic perspective, we will take as a case study some extraordinary festivals, which have been scarcely studied, that took place in Spain in 1635 and 1636 as an act of reparation for the affront suffered by the Eucharist in the city of Tirlemont (modern-day Tienen, Belgium) during the Corpus Christi celebrations of 1635.

The siege of the Catholic town of Tirlemont was considered one of the bloodiest episodes of the Thirty Years' War.

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In Andalusia, the celebrations in reparation for the affront suffered by the Eucharistic sacrament on that occasion were particularly noteworthy. The degree of involvement of municipal councils, not only in the organization but also in the promotion of these extraordinary festivals, is made explicit even in the festival accounts themselves. For example, in the description of the festival held in Córdoba, it is noted on the frontispiece: “*a costa y por mandado de la ciudad*”² [1], and on the first page, the resolution of the council from August 8, 1636, is detailed: “*La ciudad, habiendo entendido que se ha escrito por el padre Fr. Bartolomé Pérez de Veas... una relación de la fiesta del Santísimo Sacramento que la ciudad celebró este año, de que resulta hacerse más público el afecto y devoción que tuvo, acordó se imprima a costa de la ciudad...*”³.



[1] Fr. Bartolomé Pérez de Veas. *Espirituales fiestas que la nobilísima ciudad de Córdoba hizo a desagravio de la Suprema Magestad Sacramentada*, Córdoba, por Andrés Carrillo, 1636. Biblioteca Digital Hispánica.

We have accounts of festivals, sermons, and poetic jousts that took place in Antequera, Sevilla, Córdoba, Granada, Écija, Sanlúcar de Barrameda, and Málaga. In this approach to the sensorial experience of the city during these festivals, we will identify the analogies or unique aspects of the most significant episodes of these Andalusian events.

Tasting the Festival

The sense of taste played an integral part in the urban festivals of the Ancien Regime. It can be assumed that the crowds attending processions and notable places in the city where bullfights, masquerades, or skirmishes were organized were attended to by water carriers and street vendors. However, during extraordinary events, there was a desire to delight the people, and for this purpose, the festival organizers would sometimes give away wine.

In the description of the festival held in Córdoba, the author describes the design of a fountain that dispensed wine. It was set up on a platform shaped like a carpet made of rushes, ivy, and other branches, surrounded by a trellis of grape leaves. On this platform was placed a statue of the god Bacchus seated on a wine skin from which wine flowed. Bacchus held a cup in one hand and raised it to those around him. The description of this device, although simple, is particularly interesting as it serves as a testimony to the scenographic culture present in Baroque festivals. Pérez de Veas explains it as follows:

“dos cañerías de hoja de lata tenía el artificio, la una oculta traía el vino a la boca del pellejo que lleno de viento estaba, la otra guiaba el agua a los ojos y la boca del dios Baco, por cuyas partes arrojaba tres caños de agua”.

² “[...] at the expense and by order of the city”.

³ “The city, having learned that Father Fr. Bartolomé Pérez de Veas has written an account of the celebration of the Most Holy Sacrament by the city this year, which results in making the affection and devotion it had more public, decided to have it printed at the city's expense[...]”.

Such contraptions would gain more prominence in Córdoba from the second half of the 17th century [2]. Even so, the original and exuberant programme of emblems, arches and fountains built, which did not differ from the construction of forests, castles and platforms for the representation of *autos sacramentales*, was remarkable in these festivities of atonement for the Eucharist in 1636.



[2] *Autómatas para la fiesta del Corpus Christi*. Córdoba, 1677. Archivo Municipal de Córdoba.

Among the events organized by the parishes in Málaga during these same festivities, the one dedicated to the Saints Martyrs contributed to the construction of a burlesque stage in the courtyard of the home of the perpetual councilor don Íñigo Paniagua, which took place between January 26 and February 3, 1636. Once again, it was a wine fountain, but this time it featured several figures representing drunkenness and the need for moderation. Throughout all these days, wine from the councilor's property was given as a gift to those who came there.

“sobre un teatro de dieciséis varas de círculo hubo muchas figuras de hombres del arte de beber en trajes jocosos, y entre ellos Neptuno con su tridente, dios de las aguas, que con su airado semblante infundía miedo a los que dejaban el agua por el vino... derramóse mucho vino, todo en honor de la fiesta”

The construction of devices in which various characters would dispense liquid, water, or wine, was common in the Corpus Christi festivals in Málaga during the 17th century. We know that the sculptor Jerónimo Gómez, along with the painter Alonso de Morales, who had actively participated in the ephemeral decorations of the festivals in reparation for the Eucharist in 1635, carried out various commissions of this kind. For example, in 1662, they received an order for: “... una pirámide encima, de siete varas, con una Fama encima vestida de lienzo de pintura al temple... un risco con diferentes animales y aves, todos de escultura, echando agua; y ocho soldados tirando agua a otros ocho

Alongside mechanical contraptions, ephemeral gardens and forests were part of the urban scenography in the cities of the Ancien Régime. These natural artifices introduced surprising and unexpected elements into the festival discourse, stimulating not only the sense of sight but also the senses of smell and taste, in addition to hearing and touch. One of the most unique natural artifices created for the festivals in Córdoba in 1635 was a forest with various trees, a river, and a wide range of animals, which was set up in a section of the street called “*Calle de la Feria*”. The detailed description of this unique theater of nature lists the various plant and animal species intentionally brought there. Both the trees and the animals, including a bull, a deer, a wild boar, several roe deer, and various specimens from the nearby mountains, including a variety of birds, were all real, except for a lion, as the author clarifies: “*solo este animal se halló fingido en la estancia*”.

Particularly interesting is the way in which this Cordovan story explains how a section of the street, which had been overrun with remnants of an old wall and dilapidated houses that

had been attached to it, was transformed. Furthermore, the author takes the time to mention the source of the water used to irrigate the plants and simulate small fountains and springs:

“pues la pared del antiguo muro que he dicho [...] es cerca de los jardines de unas principales y solariegas casas que habita el noble y esclarecido renombre de los Saavedra”.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on how the changes made in the city during festivals did not always involve exclusively ephemeral interventions because, as described in this instance, the celebration led to the improvement of a deteriorated urban environment, even though the trees and animals were returned to their place of origin after the event.

Not only was the architecture ephemeral during the festivals, but so were the perfumes. The urban environment during the days of these celebrations was filled with unusual odors. The gunpowder burned in artillery salutes and fireworks, the scent of wax from candles, torches, wax lights, and candelabras, incense, or small containers with aromatic powders placed on altars all created an atmosphere in which the sense of smell joined the other senses in a wide range of sensations. The use of flowers and various vegetation placed in the streets and squares helped stimulate the sense of smell, sometimes even serving to mask nearby unpleasant odors. This happened, for example, in the Cordovan festival, where the account explains how to avoid the smell and sight of the butchers near San Salvador Square, a trellis of myrtle and ivy about twenty yards long was constructed.

When the account is written in verse, the information is less precise, but the same olfactory strategy used in the city can be inferred: “*Un jardín la ciudad era oloroso,/ Porque talado el bosque de doña Ana/ Fueron sus troncos verdes honor del Mayo*”⁴ [Vázquez de Prada 1635, 35].

The soundscape and lighting landscape were also more varied and intense during the festivals. The cathedral was a privileged location for the placement of illuminations and fireworks, as can be seen in the festivals of Granada, Córdoba, and Málaga. As an example, consider one of the contraptions used in the festivities in Granada, which concluded by burning the painted figures of four heretics placed on the tower:

“Estaban en lo supremo de la grandiosa torre dispuestas varias invenciones de fuego. Cuatro de los condenados heresiarcas de pintura se veían en los cuatro compartimentos que servían de cubierta a casi infinitas bombas y cohetes de todas suertes que los abrasaron y consumieron, y en los ángulos de la torre otras invenciones”⁵ [Araujo Salgado 1636, 3].

Pérez de Veas provides precise information about the number of fireworks that were placed on the cathedral of Córdoba: “... mil doscientos cohetes, sin otras invenciones curiosas de fuego que se arrojaron desde una sola torre”⁶ [Pérez de Veas 1636, 1]. Likewise, artillery salutes added to the soundscape and olfactory landscape during these events. In the “calle Nueva” Street of Córdoba and in the skirmishes that were simulated near the river, the noise

⁴ “The city was a fragrant garden,/ For when the forest of Doña Ana was felled,/ Its green trunks became the honor of May”.

⁵ “On the top of the great tower were arranged various inventions of fire. Four of the damned painted heresiarchs were to be seen in the four compartments which served as cover for almost infinite bombs and rockets of all sorts which burnt and consumed them, and in the corners of the tower other inventions”.

⁶ “[...] Twelve hundred rockets, not counting other curious fire inventions that were launched from a single tower”.

must have been deafening, especially, as described by the narrator, when the processional custodia approached [Pérez de Veas 1636, 31].

Given the limitations of this space, we will conclude by mentioning one of the many metaphors alluding to the usual lighting and olfactory resources in this type of celebration: the comparison of the city to a bonfire, which conveyed the abundance of illuminations placed in the city. This peculiar image is poetically condensed in several verses alluding to the festivities in reparation for the Eucharist that we have discussed. As an example, consider the one from Sanlúcar de Barrameda festival: “en incendios las calles se abrasaron/dando en hogueras mil tales indicios [...] que era todo el lugar solo una hoguera”⁷ [Vázquez de Prada 1635, 3].



[3] Atilano Vázquez de Prada, *Relacion del irreuerente vltirage [...] al desagrauio deste inefable misterio el duque de Medina Sidonia en su ciudad de Sanlucar de Barrameda*, Jerez de la Frontera, Fernando Rey, 1635. Biblioteca Nacional de España.

⁷ “The streets burned in fires/giving a thousand such signs [...] so that the entire place was just a bonfire”.