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Cultural Heritage as a mass medium: The *cold case* of the gilt bronzes

Laura Appignanesi, Michele Paladini[1]

Starting from the material turn of cultural sociology, this paper focuses on the constructivist value of Cultural Heritage. The concept of iconic power is reinforced through a new interpretation of the artworks, within a theoretical framework that sees communication as the basic unit for the social system construction. In particular, in this study Cultural Heritage is considered not merely as artistic and historical objects, or as a tourist attraction, or a simple symbolic icon, but as a mass medium. In the short term, artworks can become a means of communication for political goals, whereas in the long term they may serve as a means of communication of social identity. To demonstrate this thesis, this article deals with a significant case study: the gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola. Their vicissitudes cover two thousand years but can be summarized as production, destruction by invaders, discovery, restoration, and the current administrative dispute. Each of these events, through comparative analysis and inductive demonstration, allows us to generalize our reflections to all of Cultural Heritage, to provide a synthesis between the traditional structuralist focus on discursive codes and the material turn of the cultural sociology.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Cultural Sociology, mass media, communication, social identity.

Introduction and theoretical background

The death of George Floyd, an Afro-American stifled by a white policeman on May 25th 2020 in Minneapolis, was the fuse of the anti-racist movement Black Lives Matter, which spread all over the world. During the protest, demonstrators systematically destroyed or vandalized statues of historical figures more or less involved with colonialism and racism. Thus, Floyd's death could be recognized as a "cultural trauma", an event that is considered deeply traumatic for civil society, not intrinsically devastating but rather constructed as such through cultural processes (Alexander 2004, 2012). In this way, social protest takes an iconic turn, with repercussions on iconographic consciousness, ant it becomes a dramatic social representation.

As a starting point, it is appropriate to consider Durkheim's theory. He observed the religious processes in tribal societies, with its rites and its material symbols. The group of people identifies itself in certain totems, selected thanks to a social process. The totems become relics and idols of a civil religion (Durkheim

[1] The paper arises from a fruitful discussion between Laura Appignanesi and Michele Paladini. However, it is possible to attribute the drafting of the section *The perfect case: The gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola* to Michele Paladini and the other sections to Laura Appignanesi.

1953). These objects strengthen the group and turn out to be sacred: by bringing together Art and History, they rise from everyday life and reach a higher level. Art becomes a new category represented by a set of objects that the group must preserve for the future.

As a further point, with Simmel we have the first aesthetic reflection in sociology. According to him, Art is contained within its limits but at the same time it is endowed with a force that transcends it, that is, that pushes itself out of it. In the essay *Brücke und Tür,* Simmel states that the artwork makes sensitive the flow of life that converges in it, "life is expressed in a form, but at the same time cannot be exhausted in it and breaks it every time" (Simmel 1909). "Our work, as soon as it exists, not only has an objective existence and its own life separated from us, but it contains in itself, as by the grace of the objective spirit, strengths and weaknesses, constitutive parts and significance, of which we are not responsible at all and often we are surprised about" (Simmel 1911). Furthermore, Simmel guesses a connection between artistic and cultural expressions and the central philosophical concept of an era. He uses the extraordinary metaphor of the "hidden king" to identify this concept and he describes a sort of bi-univocal relationship between the central conception of a historical era, the so-called hidden king, and the cultural expressions, which are at the same time output and inspiration of it (for a more detailed discussion see Appignanesi 2018).

Durkheim himself takes into consideration the symbolic relevance of the artwork. He says that States owing this type of heritage acquire a particular charisma. The artworks become an expression of unity for entire communities, they are able to transmit their transcendent spirit and culture.

According to Weber (1906), Cultural Heritage can be understood as a historical-social evidence. Evolution implies a process of rationalization, which involves "disenchantment" and secularization. The loss of importance of religion makes the original connection between art and religion disappear. "The more art presents itself as an autonomous sphere, as a product of secular culture - the more it tends to differentiate itself from orders of ethical-religious values, which are external and thus defined".

In the frame of General Systems Theory, art constitutes a closed partial system, that is autonomous and functionally differentiated. Namely, the Art System operates and reproduces itself by its own means, and it performs a specific social function (Luhmann 1998). Starting from the 18th century notion of aesthetics related to the "knowledge by senses", Luhmann says that all art, including literature, is rooted in perception and it is a special type of communication, which uses perception instead of language and operates on the boundary between the social system and consciousness. The pivotal point, here, is that, according to Luhmann, communication is the basic operation that makes the existence of the social structure possible.

Alexander shifts Durkheim's suggestion in modern societies. Regardless of whether modern societies believe themselves to be rational and secular, their civil life and processes, claims Alexander, are underpinned by collective representations, by strong emotional ties and by various narratives that, much like tribal societies, tell society what it believes it is and what values it holds sacred (Alexander *et al.* 2008). Weber's disenchantment was probably just a change in the form of the rite and the idolized object. According to Alexander, culture is not simply the glue that holds society together, nor is it just practical knowledge. Instead, shared and circulating patterns of meaning actively and inescapably penetrate the social. Through codes and myths, narratives and icons, rituals and representations, these culture structures drive human action, inspire social movements, direct and build institutions, and so come to shape history (ivi).

The theories above are the conceptual pillars for identifying the social reality of the artworks and the constructivist power of the Cultural Heritage. Starting from these theoretical bases, the paper develops a reasoning that extremes the concept of social meaning of the cultural object and aims to demonstrate its real value as mass media, able of communicating a specific message. The message can have different effects on the social system depending on its stage of life: the creation of the artwork is a tool to reproduce the system, the valorization is a way to strengthen it, the destruction or damage is a means to weak the system or to overturn the social order (for a more detailed discussion see Appignanesi, Paladini 2016).

The aesthetic value is a simple accessory, which may also be missing, as in primitive totems and in certain contemporary artworks. In this perspective, beauty is just an incidental accessory of art. Its social function is to communicate and transmit the social identity, essential for the construction and reproduction of the social system. The iconographic symbol is the text of the message, that is a kind of language with a specific alphabet, thus, when the message concerns the transmission of system's DNA, that is its identity characters, the artwork is the page on which the message is written.

This interpretation is evident when a piece of Cultural Heritage is damaged or destroyed. For example, as the cathedral of Notre-Dame burned on 15 April 2019, the Christians of Paris prayed, the Muslims of Isis exulted, an emotional President of France spoke to the nation, and the world watched with bated breath. These social reactions lead to the reflection that the value of Cultural Heritage cannot be limited to its artistic, historical, or archaeological qualities, nor to the economic potential it derives from tourism. Cultural Heritage has a sociological and political value that must be deepened.

The aim of this paper is to reflect on this aspect. From this perspective, cultural heritage is a means of mass communication and political propaganda, an instrument for transmitting social identity and for strengthening the cohesion of a community. To demonstrate this thesis, a particularly significant case study will be analyzed: that of the gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola. Scholars have dealt extensively with their aesthetic, technical, and historical aspects, providing information and hypotheses that allow us to trace their two-thousand-year history, while leaving some mysteries unsolved. However, this paper investigates the story in a different way: as a cold case. The result is that the story of the bronzes is entangled with historical events and gives us a sense of the sociocultural evolution in which the bronzes were unwitting protagonists. Their very long history allows us to relate the salient steps to a range of facts. This comparative analysis broadens our perspective on various historical and geographical contexts, and the recursions support the hypothesis that cultural assets constitute a means of communication in the short term and an instrument of transmission of cultural identity in the long term. If we assume that communication is the basic operation

in the reproduction of the social system (see Luhmann, for instance 1997), cultural assets constitute for the social system a strategic constructivist element.

The perfect case: The gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola

The sculptural group of the bronzes was found by chance in June 1946, as two peasants excavated a channel for water drainage in the Santa Lucia di Calamello area, near the hamlet of Cartoceto, Pergola municipality, Pesaro and Urbino province (De Marinis, Quiri 1999). Excavation assays ascertained the absence of an archaeological context: the bronzes had been deposited in an indefinable period in a rather shallow pit (Alfieri 1992). About seven tons of gilt bronze fragments emerged from this pit, depicting human and equine parts;[2] all the fragments showed evident signs of having being destroyed by violent blows in antiquity. Altogether, the sculptural group consists of four figures, two men on horseback and two women standing, in a symmetric composition and with a pyramidal arrangement: the knights are in the center and the women are at the sides (Fig. 1). Who were these depicted people? The first step of an investigation is to identify the victims. In this case, there are various hypotheses concerning the identity of people. The most widely accepted hypothesis (Pagano 2015) suggests that the statues represent the elder and younger Lucio Licinio Murena, a father and son who served as consuls of the late Republican era, with their wives. The study assigns the production of the artwork to the first century BC.

Several hypotheses have been formulated to explain the destruction and burial of this work: the most plausible is that this occurred in 552 AD, during the Gothic war (ivi), after about six centuries from their creation. From then until their discovery in 1946, there is a long period of oblivion, during which the remains waited buried under the fields of the Marche hills. When the gilt fragments resurfaced under the pickaxes of the two peasants, the bronzes began a new life (Paladini 2017). After the discovery, the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage undertook restoration work aiming at reconstructing the statues and restoring their cultural function in the contemporary social context. The first restoration was carried out by the Florentine restorer Bruno Bearzi between 1948 and 1959 but was considered questionable even at the time, due to the use of brass

[2] For a discussion of the discovery, which had a number of amusing and mysterious traits, see Paladini 2017.

brackets and fixing plates welded directly onto the original pieces; however, it did possess the great merit of making possible a first reading of the sculptures for the purposes of study. The bronzes were later preserved in the warehouses of the Florentine Archaeological Museum, which were flooded in 1966. From 1975 to 1986, the sculptures underwent a new conservative intervention at the Restoration Centre of the Archaeological Superintendence of Florence. At the end of the work, in 1987, the gilt bronzes were exhibited in the archaeological museum in Florence. This new intervention was carried out using modern technologies and employed chemical and physical analysis. At the end of the restoration, many previously neglected fragments were relocated, reconstructing the sculptural group in line with what the original compositional scheme was likely to have been.

Enabled by Giuliano de Marinis, first director of the Florence Restoration Center, and the then Superintendent Archaeologist of the Marche, the restorers made a copy of the originals, reconstructed identically to how the sculptural complex is supposed to have been in antiquity. Today, both works are kept at the National Archaeological Museum of the Marche of Ancona (De Marinis, Quiri 1999).

Yet the vicissitudes of the bronzes did not end there. After the public exhibition, the bronzes became the protagonists of another incredible story—an object of contention between the Municipalities of Pergola and Ancona, as both institutions wanted to preserve the precious statues in their own local museum[3].

Figure 1. The gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola. Photo by Michele Paladini

[3] For a deeper discussion see Appignanesi, Paladini 2016.

These facts seem to demonstrate the strength of the social value of Cultural Heritage: it can unleash real battles, including legal challenges, with the aim of seizing possession of it, not only for the tourism benefits, but more so to seal the identity-based link between the cultural asset and the society that protects it. Vast media resonance testifies precisely for the widespread and rooted awareness within society of an artwork's value—a genetic heritage for the reproduction of the social system.

The history of the gilt bronzes over two thousand years falls into three phases of sociological interest:

- the creation of the artwork,
- its destruction and consequent consignment to oblivion;
- its rebirth, in the form of its rediscovery, restoration, and exhibitions;
- the legal battle for its possession.

The following sections summarize these steps and provide an innovative sociological interpretation.

The creation of the artwork: mass media for political goals

In the 1st century BC, in a workshop in central Italy, some unknown Roman artists created the gilt bronzes. The bronzes represent two Roman consuls, father and son, seated on horseback with their wives standing by. The consuls were magistrates elected each year who together exercised supreme political and military power of the Republic. At this point, we can introduce the first topic of reflection: the artwork as mass media, a tool to communicate a political message to as many people as possible. Two conditions support this thesis: the historical period in which they were produced - late Republican era - and the characters they represent – political officers.

Let's analyze the sculpture. Only the faces and busts of one knight and one lady have been preserved. The knight is wearing a high-ranking military robe consisting of tunic and *paludamentum*—a short cloak fastened at the left shoulder that served as the parade dress of military commanders. The man seems to be middle-aged and has a broad, balding forehead. The gaze is forward and the face is slightly oriented to the right. The expression of the face does not seem to betray

any emotion, but communicates a feeling of composed pride. The posture is majestic and elegant. Only a few fragments of the second knight have come down to us: the right arm raised in the same pose as the other knight (who has not been restored) and the legs, with feet dressed in elegant shoes fastened with leather laces. The horses have robust bodies, decorated with rich trappings. The equine heads differ slightly from each another and are decked out with studs and medallions, with relief decorations depicting gods. On the one side, next to a horse, a statue of a female is almost complete, while on the other side only the lower half is preserved. The preserved statue depicts a middle-aged woman, dressed in the clothing of a high-ranking matrons: a stole and a draped cloak (De Marinis, Quiri 1999). Her expression appears absorbed and seems to reveal a calm and reflective character. The pose gives the woman a pensive attitude, as if she is must make serious decisions or express significant opinions. In addition, at about 1.8 m or 5 foot 11 inches, the statue is too tall for her husband, perhaps in order to avoid underemphasizing her importance next to the man on the horse.

Overall the four characters, as if in a choir, seem to suggest that they are rich and very powerful, though they do not communicate this verbally; instead, their strength is used in a thoughtful and rational way and their decisions derive from reflection and wisdom. Consequently, looking at the sculptural group we infer that whoever exercises power has won and basks in glory, is wise and balanced, and makes informed decisions; such a one also relies on counselors (the ladies), and so does not exercise power in a despotic way. In short, the consuls inspire confidence and popular support.

After these reflections, we can attribute a communicative function to the statues that was consciously intended by the sculptor or client. The political figures, holders of an elective office, needed to communicate to the people in order to obtain consensus and approval, just as happens today with politicians who monitor public support through surveys and try to increase it using mass media or social network posts. In the case of the gilt bronzes, as with mass media, the origin of the message is clearly identifiable, as is the message, while the recipient is broad and undetermined.

This media function shows us how the widespread production of copies of statues in antiquity and the Renaissance acted a tool for broadly diffusing a message and, in general, the culture (for example, the numerous Greek works that have survived only thanks to Roman copies).

In the short term, when the will of the artist or client constitutes the driving force behind the function of the artwork, which is never just aesthetic or decorative, a sociological interpretation should consider the bronzes to be a mass medium. In a context characterized by a large number of illiterate people, and long preceding the invention of printing, the exposure of gilt bronzes in a public place was a sort of electoral manifesto with the function of political propaganda. The message was entrusted to nonverbal communication: clothing, gesture, posture, and expression.

From this specific case, we can pass to general reflection: it is possible to compare different cases of a political, geographical, and historical context, and to find the same relationship between the artwork and communication from a source of political power to the common people. With reference to political propaganda of antiquity, we can consider Trajan's Column, built in Rome in the second century AD to celebrate the emperor Trajan's conquest of Dacia. A bas-relief wrapped around the column like a ribbon recounts the main steps of that territorial expansion. The column was located in Trajan's Forum, a place that was always crowded, and we can interpret it as a sort of newspaper article to celebrate a military and political success (Fig. 2). In the Middle Ages, we can find an example of political communication in the Republic of Siena where, from 1287 to 1355, the Government of the Nine (magistrates elected by the people) administered the city. It was a time of great political and economic splendor for Siena: many new buildings and places were constructed, including the cathedral (the seat of religious power) and the Palazzo Pubblico (the seat of political power); substantial parts of the walls were also erected. The cycle of frescoes in the Palazzo Pubblico, painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti in 1338, celebrated the good governance of the civic administration and communicated the principles and values on which the government was founded, as in a sort of constitutional charter (Fig. 3) that was could be understood everyone, even the illiterate. The icon is

away a particular kind of alphabet simple to be understood, as well as nowadays, for instance, windows icons on the computer desktop make the programming language simple to use for everyone.

Not only frescoes, statues, and monuments, but entire buildings can communicate a message to a general recipient—usually the entire community. If we remain in the middle Ages, religious buildings were media that served religious propaganda. Gothic cathedrals use lines to indicate the importance of the spiritual sphere with respect to the material one: the slender structure, the tall columns, the pinnacles, and the peaked arch all point to the sky like arrows that indicate the focus of our attention. The portal, often guarded by monstrous creatures, is an entrance into another world—a sort of *stargate* that transports us to another dimension—as becomes clear when we perceive the mystical atmosphere created by light filtering through the windows. The size of the nave by contrast emphasizes the smallness of the human condition. The beam of light entering from the rose window illuminates the altar, emphasizing its central role, like a spotlight on the stage.

Even until recently, there was no shortage of examples of monuments commissioned by political leaders and loaded with nonverbal messages, despite the existence of real mass media, such as newspapers, radio, and television, that were capable of conveying communication from the sources of political power to the people. In Ancona, for instance, the 1930 War Memorial can be interpreted as a sort of newspaper article that tells a broad and indeterminate public about victory in the First World War and celebrates the Fascist Party through the rich set of symbols and the entirely of the composition (Fig. 4).

Figure 2. Trajan's Column. Reconstruction of its original form. Detail. Source: https://www.romanoimpero.com/2016/10/colonna-traiana.html, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

Figure 3. Part of the cycle of frescoes entitled *Allegory of good and bad government* by Ambrogio Lorenzetti. Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. Source: https://www.informagiovani-italia.com/palazzo_pubblico_siena.htm, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

Figure 4. Inauguration of the monument to the fallen of the First World War, 1930, Ancona. Source: http://www.anconatoday.it/eventi/mostra-fotografica-monumento-passetto-ancona-compie-80-anni.html, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

The destruction of the gilt bronzes: artwork as the victims of war

In 552 AD, during the Gothic War, the gilt bronzes were destroyed by Gothic troops. Through an analysis similar to that used in forensics (Bozzi, Grassi 2009), we can consider these archaeological finds as the body of the crime—what is found after an act of violence. Our autopsy, comparable to a forensic medical report, shows numerous injuries, allowing us to hypothesize multiple blows from stabbing and cutting instruments (Fig.5). We thus have a typology of the weapons used to destroy the artwork. The number of different tools used indicate that it was probably not a single person but a group that damaged the bronzes. Furthermore, it is relevant to consider the level of force necessary both to disassembled and transport the bronze, which weighed more than seven and a half tons.

A common element to the damage caused to the legs of the riders and to the side of the horses is its height from the ground: most likely the attackers were medium-height men who initially attacked the statues *in situ*. We can then hypothesize that they continued the attack by smashing the statues, now lying on the ground, into multiple pieces, perhaps in order to facilitate transportation or division as booty. However, our autopsy shows another interesting detail: they reserved a special vehemence for the head of the knight (Coarelli 2000). It is plausible that the Goths attacked the head when the statue had already been torn down (Fig. 6). We can summarize the artwork's destruction as follows: first, a group of people struck the gilt bronzes on the most easily accessible parts—the riders' legs. Then, they took down the statues by breaking the supporting element—the horses' legs. Finally, they disassembled the statues, severing parts of the bronzes off as they lay on the ground. It is likely in this phase that the knight's face was severely damaged. To complete our study of the damage is appropriate to consider the parts of the bronzes that were not damaged—the horses' heads (Fig.7). Why this kind of destruction?

As for the horse's heads, even if it is not possible to demonstrate with certainty why these were spared, we can formulate a hypothesis: first, we can assume that the heads were placed too high, out of the reach of the weapons. However, they were later knocked down next to the other parts. We can thus

make a conclusion about the psychology of the destroyers: equine effigies, to some extent, may have touched their aesthetic sense of these last admirers of the ancient world; they were barbarian knights, accustomed to carrying out violent raids on horseback. They admired and respected these animals, and this may be the reason the heads remained undamaged.

As for the men's face, we can suppose the knight represented an enemy that could be annihilated. But seven centuries had passed since Licinio Murena father and son had been consuls. Probably the Goths had never even heard of them. The invaders attacked the face as a symbol of an entire civilization, with its history and its culture.

Figure 5. Some injuries on the bronzes due to blows from stabbing and cutting instruments. Photo and graphic elaboration by Michele Paladini

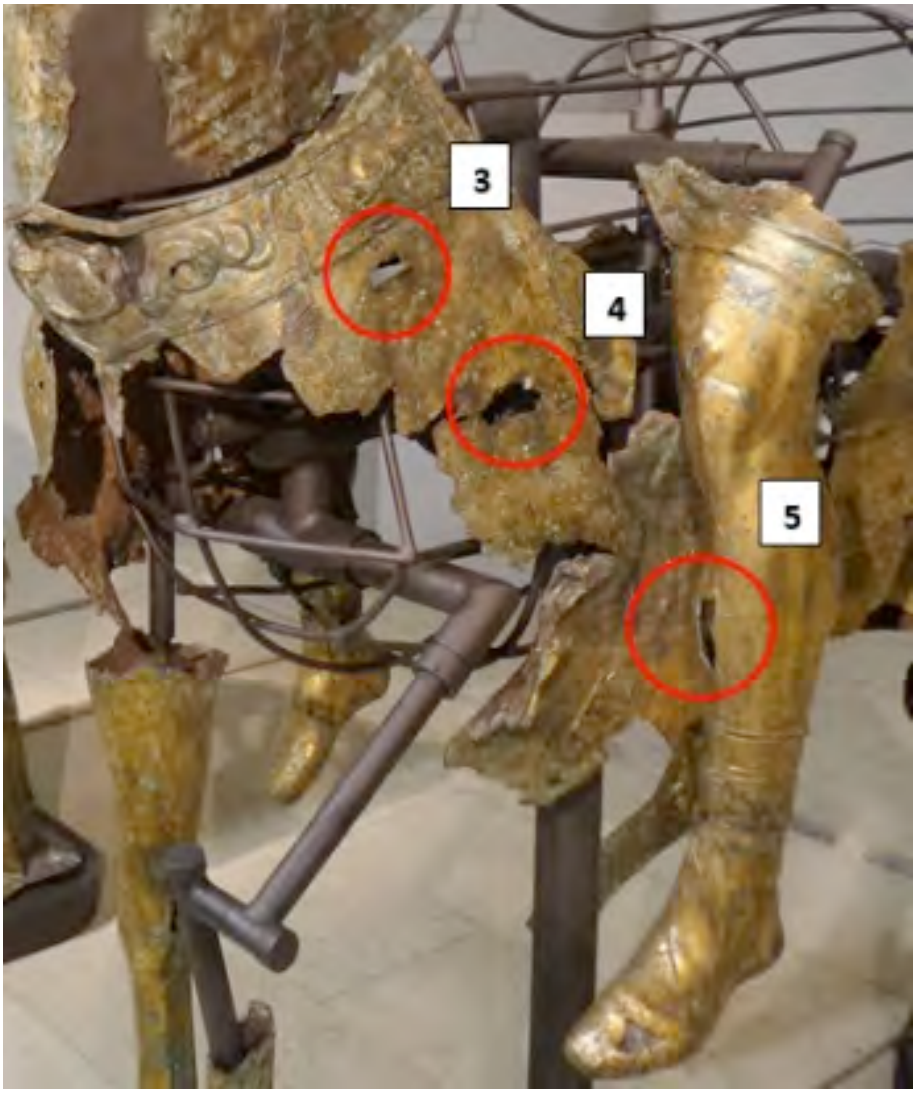

Figure 6. The knight's head prior to restoration. Source: (various authors), *I bronzi dorati da Cartoceto di Pergola a Montréal, Musée des Beaux Arts*, 2007

Figure 7. The horse's head. Source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/turismomarche, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

Cultural Heritage as means of communicating social identity

In all times and places, wars have caused irreparable losses to Cultural Heritage alongside human victims and economic damage. In such situations, the cultural assets in fact passed from testimony to victims of the history.

A quick examination of historical events reveals that the systematic destruction of historical and artistic artifacts repeats throughout geopolitical eras and contexts. According to Luciano Canfora, the custom of destroying or decapitating statues spread during modern revolutions. The Louvre archives are full of mutilated and decapitated statues, of marble heads detached from their trunks by phenomenon that historians of the French Revolution, and before them Grégoire, an abbot and member of the National Convention, called "revolutionary vandalism" (Canfora 2016). The main victims include statues of kings and saints. Alessandro Manzoni, in Chapter XII of *Promessi Sposi*, recounts this story about the statue of Philip II in Jacobin Milan of 1797:

> un giorno le fu levata la testa, le fu levato di mano lo scettro, e sostituito a questo un pugnale; e alla statua fu messo nome Marco Bruto. Così accomodata stette forse un par d'anni; ma, una mattina, certuni che non avevan simpatia con Marco Bruto, anzi dovevano avere con lui una ruggine segreta, gettarono una fune intorno alla statua, la tiraron giù, le fecero cento angherie; e, mutilata e ridotta a un torso informe, la strascicarono, con gli occhi in fuori, e con le lingue fuori, per le strade, e, quando furon stracchi bene, la ruzzolarono non so dove.

In the twentieth century, after the collapse of fascism in Italy, hundreds of effigies of Mussolini were destroyed, such as the bronze head crushed in a vise in Rome in the euphoria following 25 July 1943 (ivi). In 1956, during the Hungarian uprising against Soviet oppression, revolutionaries demolished a statue of Stalin near the National Theater in Budapest. A statue of Felix Dzerzhinsky, founder of the Cheka, a predecessor of the KGB, was destroyed after Yeltsin assumed power in Moscow in December 1991. In 2003, Americans and Iraqis destroyed dozens of statues of Saddam Hussein, and in 2011, television showed images of Libyans celebrating after beheading a statue of Gaddafi (ivi).

The destruction of statues is not only a prerogative of modern revolutions, it is associated with all moments of reversal of the social order. Moreover, hatred

and destruction do not only focus on statues of political figures. All artistic heritage, as an expression of culture and social identity, seems to constantly be in the sights of forces aiming to overthrow of society. From the bombing of Dresden in 1945 to the destruction of Shiite temples in Iraq, indelible scars are constantly inflicted on Cultural Heritage. Such devastation goes well beyond artifacts, affecting instead the future viability of the Cultural Heritage of the existing social system. Robert Bevan says that historic buildings and monuments destroyed by bombs are not mere "side effects", but calculated and strategic acts aimed at the cultural annihilation of the enemy, at real "cultural genocide" (Bevan 2006). We can say that damage to Cultural Heritage takes aim not at a society's body, but at its very DNA, breaking the chain of its inheritance. Some examples: on 15 February 1944, the US air force bombed the abbey of Monte Cassino which, contrary to Allied claims, was not occupied by Germans. Between 13 and 15 February 1945, having already won the war, the Americans razed Dresden to the ground, leaving the survivors to rebuild the city piece by piece.

Finally, we can list some examples in which a cultural good becomes a strategic goal in the context of enemy action. Just 25 years ago, on 8 November 1993, the Croatian Catholic general Slobodan Praljak bombed the Stari Most bridge in Mostar, a stronghold of the Muslim community in Bosnia. The inhabitants were able to rebuild the bridge by recovering pieces from the river, demonstrating how strongly the Mostar community desired the restoration of their bridge, a symbol of identity for the town. In 2001 in Afghanistan, the Taliban destroyed the Buddhas of Bamiyan. Then on the morning of 11 September 2001, two hijacked planes crashed into the twin towers of the World Trade Center, a symbol of New York City, in an attack planned and carried out by Islamic terrorists affiliated with Al-Qaeda. Moving to Iraq in 2015, Isis destroyed several artworks of the Mosul museum (Fig.8). The scene was recorded by the terrorists themselves and spread through social networks, and seems to resemble our reconstruction of the destruction of gilt bronzes: a group of people use various tools, to knock the statues from their pedestals; one down, they continue to attack them furiously. Finally, between 2016 and 2017 in Syria, Isis destroyed many artifacts at the archaeological site of Palmyra (Fig. 9).

Figure 8. In Mosul, Iraq, Isis jihadists destroy artifacts and ancient statues in a museum. Source: https://www.ilfattoquotidiano.it/2015/02/26, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

Figure 9. Isis militants destroy the facade of the Roman theater and the Tetrapile in Tadmu, the ancient Syrian city of Palmyra.
Source: http://www.corriere.it/esteri/15_agosto_30, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

This tracking, though merely illustrative, of crimes against Cultural Heritage in very different contexts allows us to trace a common denominator that represents the immanent cause of the destructive strategy and, as in a negative of a frame, brings to light the specifically sociological value of Cultural Heritage as a means of communication of cultural identity.

Territories, historical contexts, and war events all differ. Both the parties responsible for the destruction and the local population who suffer from it change. However, it is possible to identify similar reasons and strategic goals. It might also be possible to reconstruct the history of a war on the basis of events affecting Cultural Heritage, from war spoils to collateral effects, up to strategic objectives for the overthrow of the social system. In this perspective, the artworks are the victims of the violence inflicted on the cultural identity of the enemy or, borrowing the terminology of by the Hague and UNESCO Conventions, victims of “crimes against Cultural Heritage”.

In summary, in all ages and in every geopolitical context, there are examples of crimes against Cultural Heritage during wars and attempts at violent transformation of the sociopolitical system. At this point, our question becomes *why*?

To provide a taxonomy of cultural destruction, we can identify a range of reasons behind the damaging or destruction of artworks during political upheavals and war:

- Emotional reaction *(damnatio memoriae*)
- Looting (rather than destruction)
- Collateral damage
- Strategic objective

This paper suggests that cultural assets are strategically destroyed in order to damage the mechanism of reproduction and consolidation of the social system, when the ultimate intent is to annihilate it. Returning to our case study, in 552 AD the Goths destroyed the gilt bronzes not to damn the memory of the people they represented who, six centuries after the production of the bronzes, had most likely been forgotten. They probably did not only destroy the statues in order to claim

the precious materials: the brutality of their blows and the particular vehemence reserved for the knight's face leaves room for a last hypothesis: the Roman sculptural group was a strategic objective. It was the expression of a particular social system that the Goths wanted to overthrow. The artwork served as a medium that could communicate in the present and transmit in the future the cultural identity of the enemy. The Goths desired to annihilate not only a single political representative, but an entire consolidated system, with all its operating rules and its mechanisms of reproduction and stabilization of the social system.

Thus, in order to draw general conclusions, we assume the imaginary to have a communicative function. Artworks always represent social identity in a given epoch and a given place. In different contexts, it is possible to identify the process leading the artistic object to become autonomous, separate from the will of the artist and client. Over a long period, the artwork acquires a constructive role in the system, taking concrete form in the historical process. When the social order violently changes, this constructivist value finds a striking manifestation in acts of damage or destruction. Our review of crimes against Cultural Heritage, artifacts, and cultural sites describes a will to strategically interrupt the enemy's transmission of sociocultural identity. The targeting of Cultural Heritage thus leads to a breakdown in the social system's process of reproduction. Luhmann (for instance 1997) by his general systems theory provides the logical articulation necessary to attribute a precise constructivist role to art[4]. When two social systems that differ culturally come into conflict, the suppression of objects that represent cultural mass media is an act of war, similar to sabotaging an individual's genetic chain. Such destruction thus reveals, as in a mirror, the construction or consolidation of social identity, which makes use of the creation and conservation of artworks.

The angels of the mud and the legal battle

The importance of Cultural Heritage, not only for the construction but also for the conservation and consolidation of the social system, is repeatedly demonstrated by history. After their discovery, the gilt bronzes underwent

[4] For more details see Appignanesi, Paladini 2016.

restoration in Florence. In 1966, the bronzes saw both floods and the youth mobilization that was a prelude to the movements of 1968. Many students, referred to as “mud angels”, came from different countries to save a number of artworks from the mud. They joined forces around the artworks to be saved. This fact demonstrates that Cultural Heritage in danger can awaken social conscience and can assemble individuals who are geographically distant (Fig.10). To understand the importance of objects of Cultural Heritage as symbols to be preserved, we need to take into account Émile Durkheim, who indicates that states possessing such heritage acquire a particular charisma. Artifacts become an expression of the unity of entire communities, capable of transmitting an authentic spirit: they perpetuate a legacy that transcends the community itself. The group is personified in totems, which become relics and idols of a civil religion (Durkheim 1953). These objects reinforce the group and become sacred: the group must preserve its art for the future (Strina 2015), because handing it down mean to collectively intervene in history, to build a “collective memory” (Halbwachs 1950).

Figure 10. Volunteers from different countries bring works of art to safety, Florence, 1966. Source: https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Angeli_del_fango#/media, retrieved, December 6, 2020.

The saga of the bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola in recent decades seems to strongly reinforce this thesis. Since 1989, there has been a dispute over their custody and display, leading to a legal conflict between two municipalities, Ancona and Pergola, and legal judgments play the role of weapons.

In 1988, the bronzes arrived at the Civic Museum of Pergola for a temporary exhibition, at the end of which they were to return to the National Archaeological Museum of Ancona. However, when the exhibition was over, the local population did not want the bronzes to be returned. They attacked Superintendent Delia Lollini, who was to remove the bronzes, with spits and insults. Two deputies of Pergola's municipal government from opposed political parties led the revolt and walled the statues up with using cement in the civic museum of Pergola, preventing them from being removed.

A long administrative legal proceeding then arose between the two municipalities. The Ministry of Cultural Heritage initially favored Ancona, but later backed Pergola in line with a localist vision.

Today, after three different legal conclusions from the Regional Administrative Court and two from the Council of State, issued between 1994 and 2011, the dispute has still not ended. The judges left the matter to agreements between the two municipalities, who absurdly settled on a sort of a system of commuter bronzes, with each municipality having custody of the bronzes for six months a year. It was impossible to achieve, and the statues remain in Pergola.

A public debate developed alongside the judicial dispute. Politics played a role: both local authorities and regional institutions particularly attended on the case. In fact, the Regional Council of Marche has discussed a number of motions regarding the location of the statues. The story also reached Parliament, where some senators discussed it with the Minister in 2014, in an attempt to solicit a position from the government.

The public opinion also considered the issue deeply, as shown by the attention paid it in the national and local press. Research at the municipal library of Ancona, shows that from 1988 to 2018 there were over a hundred articles on the bronzes in the main local newspapers (*Il Corriere Adriatico*, *Il Messaggero*, and *Il Resto del Carlino*). For instance, in the *Corriere Adriatico* on 3 November

1988, page 19, Franco Foschi mentions that Leopardi supports his position in favor of Pergola, identifying a growing sensitivity on the part of "the population of small towns and villages to a presence that gives new vitality and new reasons for social cohesion". An article in *Il Resto del Carlino* of December 24, 1999, page 3, was titled "Ancona has recovered its gilt bronzes" holds the opposite opinion. In *Il Corriere Adriatico* of February 14, 2002 we read on page 3 "A legal framework for the gilt bronzes: Bovino has a right to appeal"[5].

In short, we can say that the vicissitudes of the gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola constitute a case study of considerable sociological interest. From their destruction in ancient times to the present day, the story of the statues themselves has been entangled with the larger history and, many centuries after their creation, they have returned to being social mass media: they are not merely objects exhibited at a museum, but instead are identity symbols disputed by political institutions and capable to moving the collective awareness.

Conclusions: a cold case and its sociological interpretation

The paper has considered the vicissitudes of the gilt bronzes from Cartoceto di Pergola, which can be summarized as follows:

1) *At the scene of the crime*: In June 1946, two peasants found the statues in pieces in a shallow pit at a farmyard in Cartoceto di Pergola.

2) *Identification of the victims:* The statues were produced in the first century BC and depict two elected consuls on horseback, accompanied by their wives. The general reflection is that cultural assets can be considered as mass media for political purposes. Before the advent of the press and social networks, the presence of such statues in public places acted like election posters to strengthen consensus.

3) *Postmortem examination:* The examination of the blows inflicted on the bronzes suggests that they were destroyed in 552 AD by a group of Goths. The perpetrators attacked the face of one of the men with particular violence, put did not attack the horse heads.

[5] Traslation by the author.

4) *Psychological criminal's profile:* destroyers were barbarian knights who admired and respected these horses, while the man represented an enemy that could be annihilated, a symbol of the society they wanted to overturn.

5) *Searching for motive:* The general reflection is that cultural assets can be damaged or destroyed for various reasons:

• through an emotional reaction, such as *damnatio memoriae*;

• for loot;

• as a side effect of war actions;

• as a strategic objective.

In this *cold case* it is appropriate to hypothesize the last motive: a war crime, where the cultural good becomes a strategic goal—an element of the enemy's transmission of identity that needs to be destroyed (comparative cases range from these Goths to ISIS today): destruction is part of a plan to overturn the political and social order.

6) *Further tests:*

• The mud angels*:* During the restoration of the bronzes in Florence in 1966, floods threatened the destruction of many artworks. The youth mobilization known as "angels of the mud" leads to the general reflection that a Cultural Heritage in danger awakens social conscience and can bring people individual together.

• The legal battle*:* since the mid-1980s, the municipalities of Ancona and Pergola have fought an administrative war that employed legal judgments and decrees, over the right to display the artifacts in their own museums. Both communities have gathered around the artwork, in spite of the varying political orientations of the participants. The general reflection here is that the administrative dispute highlights the importance of the Cultural Heritage as a sort of glue for community cohesion: it is the "totem" that can generate and consolidate collective consciousness, like a flag or a relic.

The vicissitudes of the gilt bronzes thus demonstrate their communicative function - at the time of their creation as a form of mass media that communicated from the sources of political power to a broad public of electors - and later as mass media communicating from the social system to future generations. In short,

Cultural Heritage is a means of communication. If we consider the reality of communications (Luhmann 2002) and the power of the mass media, we can hypothesize that Cultural Heritage plays a systemic sociological role.

In conclusion, cultural goods are the bearers of a powerful added value: they can constitute a means of political communication, a tool for transmitting social identity, a generator, and a catalyst of collective consciousness. These potentialities usually remain latent, but persist over time, like an aquifer that lies silently beneath the earth. When a traumatic event, accidental or intentional, destroys the everyday situation, the flow bursts its confines with all its power. This is what happens when a flood, a fire, an administrative dispute or, more explosively, an attack, befall the cultural good. In particular, crimes against artistic heritage highlight its importance, just as a blackout suddenly reveals the function of electricity. By focusing on empirical cases and taking a broad view of historical perspective, it is possible to understand that artworks represent the objectification of social contingency and its support. The aquifer of history lies under several generations; sometimes the water bursts to the surface and changes its course. This is the case with wars and revolutions. People and civilizations leave indelible traces, imprinted in artworks that survive profound changes, whether abrupt or slow, in the world. They are not simply vestiges of the past, or beautiful objects for museum visitors; they are the living spirit that flows like blood in the veins of the present. Less poetically, the artworks of Cultural Heritage are a particular type of mass media. Drawing on the systems theory by Luhmann (1997), communication producing further communication is the main operation that constructs and reproduces the social system; communicating identity thus means building and preserving the system itself.

In this perspective, it is possible to integrate the traditional structuralist focus on discursive codes and the consequent communication-centred framework and the recent development of cultural sociology towards patterns of material signification. Webb Keane says that such signifiers are “not just the garb of meaning”, the significatory patterns and their material and sensuous entanglements co-constitute meanings that inform social action (Alexander, Bartmanski 2012).

In summer, the traditional linguistic theory and the new material sociology are not alternative approaches but two sides of the same medal: the artwork is the material support, a sort of paper sheet; the iconic power is the signifier, the form of the meaning as well as the phonetic alphabet or an ideogram; the message is the basic operation for the construction and reproduction of the social system, that is the social identity or, in other words, its genetic code. This could be a further interpretative turn in the long-term social evolution that, following the Simmel's insights and thanks to material sociology, tries to develop the historic materialism into a cultural materialism.

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