

The town, the square and play

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Abstract

Two famous paintings by the Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder inspire us to define the square as a place which introduces and offers space and meaning to the play. The square, as it has been defined in the history of European culture - and Italian culture in particular -, expresses the identity of the urban space in both functional and symbolic terms. The play as an expression of creative vitality or competition, to use the categories of Roger Caillois, finds its own space in some famous historical squares of Italian cities, through ancient or new events that create forms of popular participation and widespread culture.

Key words : Town, Square, Play, Italy, Popular culture

The relationship between town spaces and play can be investigated from many points of view, as together all their elements make up a complex unit. Seeking to go beyond pure abstract discussion, we must ask which town we talk of and which spaces in the town...? In which historical period and in which social and cultural reality do we wish to place the town...? etc. The same goes for play: a human experience with different connotations when viewed from the point of view of childhood or adulthood, which play categories do we wish to refer to, which cultural environment determines the play we wish to talk of, etc. And if on top of these reflections we add the “scientific languages” we use to deal with the topic, we realise that many disciplines of human and social sciences can claim to include this subject.

With these premises, two considerations may follow: either we give up, because to investigate such a topic would require huge research efforts which could not be contained within a paper of this size; or choose some limited areas of reflection which can however offer room for interdisciplinary study and investigation. Thus, I have chosen the second option, considering it to be a kind of “incipit” open to other possible research works in the near future.

I would like to start with two historical-artistic references by the same author: Pieter Bruegel the Elder (1525-'30 circa – 1569). The Flemish painter had an unmistakable style, marked by his way of representing humanity in works portraying everyday life filled with a realism made of deformed, almost grotesque features, far from the diktats of “beauty” and “spatiality” of the European and above all Italian Renaissance currents of that time. He was certainly familiar with such aesthetics, having travelled to Italy from 1551 to 1554, visiting Rome, Naples and the South,

leaving visual testimonials of his journey. But it is very clear that his works were not influenced by that artistic culture, but rather by the visionary and surreal charm of his compatriot Hieronymus Bosch (1453-1516), a century earlier.

While the Italian Renaissance exalted the positive rationality of man, the artifice and unit of measure of that same rationality projected onto the environment and aiming to define a new aesthetic of the natural, urban and domestic landscape, the Flemish “Renaissance” of Bosch and Bruegel offer a reduced and deformed representation of man and humanity. Reality and imagination blend into each other, like joy and suffering; chaos prevails over order, the instinctive dimension over the rational; space is a place in which the eye is lost in an (at times paroxysmal) game of ambiguous references.

It is perhaps not by chance then that Bruegel offers two famous and exemplary representations of the relationship between the town and play. Between 1559 and 1560, Bruegel painted two works: *Children’s Games* [fig.1] and *The Fight between Carnival and Lent* [fig.2]. Both paintings are set in a crowded, bustling square, in which our gaze is lost amongst the chaos of grotesque, comic characters busy at play. In the first case, the whole space is filled with children; from a careful analysis of the represented elements, we may count 80 different games, but only children occupy the town, children whose features are not the typical ones of “childish beauty” but rather more popular, those of a premature adulthood that weigh down and deform their bodies. The



Fig.1, Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *Children’s Games*, 1560, Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum.



Fig.2. Pieter Bruegel the Elder, *The Fight between Carnival and Lent*, 1559, Wien, Kunsthistorisches Museum

expressions on their faces are not those of joyful children but rather masks from a Theatre of the Absurd. I wondered if Carlo Collodi, author of *Pinocchio*, when telling of the “Land of Toys” with such formidably descriptive power in chapter XXX of his famous novel, had seen Bruegel’s painting. We can find several references.

In the second painting, the square is the theatrical space of a representation: that enacted in many towns across Europe on the last day of Carnival. Carnival is the time of irreverent, festive freedom in which people were allowed to make fun of all forms of power, abolishing hierarchical relations through play, using masks and costumes, representing an “upside down world” and enjoying the pleasures of the table. Putting an end to the pagan, libertine fun of Carnival was Lent, the 40-day period in the Catholic calendar which precedes and prepares for Easter; a period marked by penitence, fasting, prayer and alms. In Bruegel’s painting, on the left we can see the procession of Carnival, represented by a fat, happy man riding a barrel of wine, accompanied by a cheerful crowd playing music and having fun, with a tavern in the background. On the right, we find Lent: a pale, thin figure represents fasting, leading her procession exiting a church, where all the figures represent aspects of this period of penitence and sacrifice. All around, and in the background, the square is crowded with people: adults in the midst of carnival, others already in Lent, and others

again watching the spectacle in the square, where children can also be seen playing.

In the Children's Games painting, the square is the space which allows all games to take shape, it is a free space, free also from adults, occupied by children everywhere. It is play in its essence of freedom, which childhood expresses in an emblematic and, in some ways, disconcerting manner. It invades and occupies a space which, precisely because it is empty, is open to the "possible". In the painting representing the meeting/conflict between Carnival and Lent, the square is a theatre, a space of representation where the people are both actors and spectators of a play made of rituals and traditions, figures and masks, drama and everyday life where the sense of life and death are interwoven. Here the square is the territory of the *Pathos* which destroys the *Logos*.

Mikhail Michajlovič Bakhtin's studies on Rabelais's work *Gargantua and Pantagruel* offer the most important contribution to the analysis of comedy and playfulness, as languages of a sarcastic and irreverent popular culture, based on an instinctive and bodily dimension in which Carnival represented its greatest expression, and the square its place of choice. Bakhtin reminds us that «all the acts of the drama of world history were performed before a chorus of laughing people» (Bakhtin, 1968). Laughter as a liberating act, just as play is a liberating act. In addition, it is to Dario Fo (Nobel Prize for Literature in 1997) and his fundamental work of dramaturgical analysis, of which "Mistero Buffo" remains his unsurpassed masterpiece, that we owe the enhancement of an expressive language of body and word that took the form of the theatre¹⁾. It was the theatre of jesters and popular storytellers, of masks and *Commedia dell'arte*, which filled the squares and attracted audiences of common people, the poor, children, offering representations of the imagination of those very people.

In both Bruegel's paintings, the town is the theatre of play, but which form of play is it? In his book *Les Jeux et les Hommes. Le masque et le vertige*, Roger Caillois (1958) defines two antagonist poles of play, as two categories identifying not individual games but profoundly different ways of playing. On one hand, play as turbulence and disorder, free fun, restless exuberance, vitality and imagination, which Caillois identifies with the term *Paidia*, a word referring to the Greek root of childhood, the original dimension of free play. On the other hand, we find play which bows to conventions and rules, which gives order and purpose, which keeps exuberance in check with objectives to be achieved, requiring effort and commitment, even when freely chosen. Caillois uses the term *ludus*, which in Latin means play in the sense of match, competition, for this type of play.

Obviously between the two degrees of *paidia* and *ludus*, whatever their theoretical description in the form of strictly separated categories, in practice we have means of play in which we can recognise both as a *maior* or *minor* form. The same game can be played in the free and spontaneous form of *paidia* or take on the connotations of *ludus*. Finally, both means of play belong to different ages of life, and this is what we see in Bruegel's two paintings, infused with a sense of *paidia* in the forms of children's and adults' play, all marked by exuberance and celebration, the body which itself becomes play, and the mask.

These two paintings by Bruegel inspire us to define the square as a place which welcomes and offers space and meaning to what we have seen. The square, as it has been defined in the history of European culture - and Italian culture in particular -, expresses the identity of the urban space in both functional and symbolic terms, and not by chance lies in the centre of the town. Many Italian and European towns are instantly recognisable from the picture of their main square.

The town is lived in its square. The Italian word “piazza” (the French *place*, the Spanish *plaza*) derives from the Latin word *platĕa* and the Greek *plateia* the meaning of which purely indicates a wide, open space. In connotative terms, the meaning given to the square by our culture refers more to the Greek term *agorà* which identified the main place of the *polis*, the square where the largest number of people could meet for trade, religious rites, political events, celebrations and performances. An authentic innovation in urban planning terms, the square becomes the space which symbolically expresses *democracy* in its meaning of the participation of the people in all that is the life of the community, not only politics which is the expression of power but also the market and therefore the economy, religion, festivals and thus play.

From the 12th century, when the so-called “Age of the Communes” began in Italy, and up until the 14th century in some regions of Germany, France, Flanders, England and Spain, if in different forms, the town began to become the beating heart of a new social system. Free from feudal constraints and governed by their own administrative bodies, the modern town began to take shape with the Communes, giving itself an image through the architecture of its spaces, signs of prestige, wealth and power.

For many centuries, until the late 19th century but also in times closer to our own depending on the places, collective and often transgressive entertainment, festivals and fairs animated by many games for children and adults, sports events and popular performances were held in squares or open spaces which could hold many people. These took place during the year at religious or secular ritual intervals. Events marked by play, understood as the irrepressible need to enjoy illusory moments of another existence, free and freed from everyday burdens, involving subaltern social classes, the world of the governed and not the governors (Cardini 1987).

The games and feasts in the square were not the games and feasts of the courts and palaces of power. While the square is a place of social inclusion, open to all (not by chance in many Italian towns the main square is called the “Piazza del popolo”, the “Square of the People”), the courts were exclusive places. Closed away in the elegant rooms of courtly palaces, or outdoors in courtyards and gardens bordered by attractive architectures, the games played here were part of a strict pedagogy that can be seen in some Renaissance works such as *The Book of the Courtier* by Baldesar Castiglione (1528) and *Galateo* by Giovanni Della Casa (1559).

Giovanni Della Casa and his *Galateo* take us to Venice, a city where the sense of play lives off the intriguing, picturesque beauty of its masks, Carnival, its gallant festivals and which, two centuries later, would meet Giacomo Casanova, the character symbolising a life style marked by play and adventure. Castiglione and his *Book of the Courtier* take us to Urbino, the court of the

Montefeltro dynasty, a town and lordship that was one of Renaissance Italy's most important centres of artistic and urban culture. As regards play, Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, had a space set up in the Ducal Palace devoted to a ball game called "pallacorda", the forerunner of modern tennis as an individual sport and of volleyball as a team sport. This play space, considered one of the first "tennis courts", was not a random event or the result of one of the Duke's bizarre schemes. As a child, Federico has spent time in Mantua at the "Casa Giocosa" directed by Vittorino da Feltre, which we may consider an experimental school: the first in which play, which gave the school its name and was based above all on physical activity and movement, was considered a fundamental part of education. Duke Federico was educated to the value of play.

Now let's look at three significant examples of great games which historically took shape in three Italian cities, all very famous in cultural terms, which lie in the region of Tuscany: Florence, Siena and Arezzo.

From the second half of the 15th century in Florence, young people began to play a game in the squares around the city called *Calcio fiorentino* (Florentine football), but which has no reference to football as we know it today, and was closer perhaps to rugby. Two teams of 27 players fought for the possession of a ball which, with no holds barred, had to be taken to the back of the opponent's field. A tough, often violent game which caused problems of public order, so much so that it had to be regulated and its practice limited. With the regulation of the game in 1580, it saw its period of maximum popularity between the 15th and 16th century, and indeed was so popular that it was played in any open space in the city of Florence. Over time the matches were played above all during Carnival, in Piazza Santa Croce where, still today, a match is played in costume. The atmosphere of the match is filled with spectacle and tension, and indeed in the 2014 and 2017 editions the match had to be suspended due to episodes of violence and aggression towards the referees [fig. 3-4].

The second example, and historically the most famous game in a square is the *Palio di Siena*. This horse race covers three laps of the splendid Piazza del Campo. The horses represent the city's *contrade* (wards) and the Palio won by the winning horse is a banner with an image of the Madonna. Founded in the 13th century when Siena was one of the richest and most developed cities in Europe, the Palio represented the entertaining event concluding the annual festivals held in honour of the Madonna of the Assumption, patron saint of the city. In the early 17th century the Palio took on its current form of a great popular festival, set up in Piazza del Campo. Although the "rules of the game" are well defined, the race is in any case hectic, packed with tension and often accidents involving both horses and jockeys occur [figs. 5-6].

Piazza Grande in Arezzo is home to the feast of the *Saracen Joust*. Another tournament founded in the Middle Ages, this competition was linked to the military training of knights, who galloping on horseback with a lance have to hit a dummy (in the image of their enemy, not by chance portrayed with dark skin and Arab features) who holds in one arm a shield, the target to be

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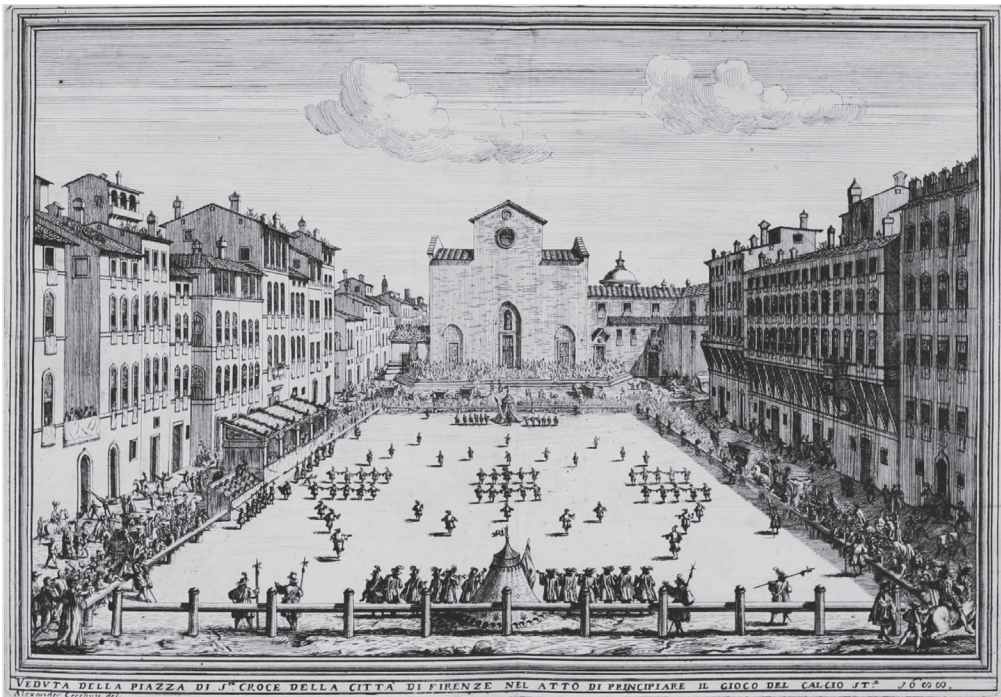


Fig.3. The Florentine football in an ancient print: Pietro di Lorenzo Bini (ed.), *Memorie del calcio fiorentino tratte da diverse scritture e dedicate all'altzze serenissime di Ferdinando Principe di Toscana e Violante Beatrice di Baviera*, Florence, Stamperia di S.A.S. alla Condotta, 1688.



Fig.4. The Florentine football, today. Photo: Giuseppe Sabella.



Fig.5. The Palio di Siena in an ancient print: Bernardino Capitelli, *Palio «alla tonda»*, 1632.



Fig.6. The Palio di Siena Today. Photo: Sauro Pucci
<https://www.lifegate.it/app/uploads/palio-siena.1.jpg>

hit, and in the other a club. When the shield is hit with the lance, the dummy rotates and the horseman's skill consists in avoiding being hit in the back by the Saracen's club. This tournament, with the competing riders representing the four quarters of the city, became a popular festival between the 16th and 17th centuries [fig.7].

Although representing different types of games, these three festivals share some characteristics: the first is that they were all born in the Middle Ages, but only between the 17th and 18th century they took the form of a large game with the enjoyment and participation of the people of the city. Today, in a globalised society of mass tourism, these events are above all a huge tourist attraction, coated in folkloristic spectacle that offers an enthralling background for the preparation of the game as the ultimate moment of emotional tension.

The second characteristic is the space that acts as both container and spectacular backdrop for these games: the central square of famous cities with a strong historical and cultural identity in the civilisation of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. Piazza Santa Croce in Florence, Piazza del Campo in Siena, Piazza Grande in Arezzo: these are emblematic spaces representing the history of the town, in which play and celebration offer moments of collective emotion and exaltation.

The third characteristic, concerning these and other similar events held in many towns across Italy, is the mixture of the sacred and the profane. In other words, there is nothing at all "sacred" above these games; they express even highly aggressive forms of competition, fighting and



Fig.7. The *Saracen Joust*

<https://www.charmingtuscany.com/it/blog/arezzo-la-giostra-del-saracino-2015>

duelling skills. In modern times, as they become games representing a community, they have adopted official rules and appearances, charged with symbolic and ritual values referring to the identity of the town they are held in. In the Catholic cultural tradition, this identity is represented by the Patron saint of the town, to which the games are dedicated, held in the month, if not on the very day, in which the saint is celebrated: in June, St. John the Baptist in Florence and St. Donatus in Arezzo, in August the Madonna of the Assumption in Siena.

What I have described with these examples represents the rituality of play as an exceptional, public event held on a special occasion during the year, in a special place in the town, its most important square, but which has reflections and roots in the local culture and history. These are game-events, they are not part of habitual game practices, but have survived their own history and become part of the memory of a playful culture that is an integral part of the culture of which these towns are extraordinary testimonials. In particular for the Palio di Siena, we may use the anthropological concept of “Deep play”, as defined by Clifford and Hildred Geertz in their famous ethnographical research in Bali in the 1950s; when play extends beyond the game itself, influencing the life of a community through its vocabulary, symbolism and rituals. In other words, play becomes a “metaphor” of the life of a community (Geertz, 1973).

What remains today of this culture of play and representation which has animated the squares of Italian towns for centuries? Is it only the survival of a “playful souvenir” used by enchanted tourists? Partly yes, but a dimension of play is instilled in the culture and history of our towns, understood as popular participation, a sense of belonging and identity which takes the form of new events, but which has deep roots in the past. Since 2003, in September in Verona the *Tocati* (It’s your turn) event is held: four days of ancient, popular games invading the squares and streets of the city. Considered one of the world’s great game festivals (over 200,000 people took part in the most recent editions), it has the patronage of UNESCO and hosts groups from many countries, organising meetings and seminars on the culture of play [fig.8].

Another example is the *Buskers Festival* held for the past thirty years in August in Ferrara, that ideal city of the Renaissance period, which becomes filled with musicians in its streets and squares. Music, singing and dance which in centuries past animated the great theatre of the squares of our towns, today take on new identities and new forms, yet find their space in the same places [fig.9].

Sant’Arcangelo di Romagna, a small, charming ancient town near Rimini, hosts the *International street theatre festival* in July. Founded in 1971, it has become one of the most important international events, based on the centrality of the square and the public space as a place of representation and sharing. As in the past, when these were the spaces of “another” theatre, as opposed to the educated, bourgeois theatre, today “another” theatre is expressed in the same spaces: avant-garde and experimental theatre [fig.10].

I would like to conclude with my city, Bologna. Piazza Maggiore, which took on its current form in the 15th century, is the heart of the city history, and for over twenty years, for two months

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Fig.8, Verona, *Tocati*. Photo: Roberto Farné.



Fig.9, Ferrara, *Buskers Festival*

<https://www.weekendpremium.it/wp/28-ferrara-buskers-festival/>



Fig.10, Santarcangelo di Romagna, *International street theatre festival*,
©diane-Ilaria Scarpa, Luca Telleschi, *Lumen*.



Fig.11, Bologna, *Under the Stars of the Cinema*
<https://zero.eu/news/sotto-le-stelle-del-cinema-2017-programma-completo/>

during the summer it becomes the world's largest open-air cinema, with the Festivals *Cinema ritrovato* (Cinema Rediscovered) and *Sotto le stelle del cinema* (Under the stars of the cinema) [fig.11]. Here it is the cinema which is restored to its original dimension as a popular performance in the square, that great game of illusion which lights up on a screen at night. It is an amazing experience to see crowds of young people enjoying films like *The Gold Rush*, *The Easy Life*, *Casablanca*... Films so very far from their own culture and imagination.

"That's the square, baby...!" we might say, paraphrasing the words of Humphrey Bogart at the end of the film *Deadline* by Richard Brooks. The square which, in the time of its own history, reinvents the game of its own suggestions.

Notes

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- 1) Presented for the first time in 1969, *Mistero buffo* belongs to the genre of narrative theater; it is a collection of monologues that describe some episodes with a biblical theme, inspired by apocryphal gospels or popular tales on the life of Jesus (Fo, 2006).

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