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MAGICAL MEDIA POWER
Identity masks in the revolutionary global public sphere

Ariel, I am that I am, your late and lonely master,
Who knows now what magic is: – the power to enchant
That comes from disillusion.
(W.H. Auden, The Sea and the Mirror: A Commentary on Shakespeare’s The Tempest)

Starting today, you can buy the magical and revolutionary iPad with Wi Fi + 3G at your favorite Apple Retail Store.
(Apple home page, Hot News Headlines, 30 April, 2010)

Per strada tante facce non hanno un bel colore,
Qui chi non terrorizza si ammala di terrore.
(Fabrizio de André, Il bombarolo, ‘Storia di un impiegato’)

1. INTRODUCTION

The title of this special issue is, to say the least, challenging. The media is one of the central institutions of contemporary mass democracy. Evoking the word ‘magical’ concerning its operations is a striking metaphor, but one might object that it risks undermining such a pillar of democracy as the rational exchange of arguments in the public sphere. Yet, this paper accepts this challenge by arguing that comparing the operation of the modern media to magic is not simply a metaphor, but captures the heart of contemporary reality.

It would seem that the magical effects of the media mostly concern the recent application of electronic technology. This article, however, will argue that they are to be traced back to the rise of the public ‘sphere’. Thus, the problem of media magic – as there can be no question that we have to do with a genuine problem here, the tremendous, unexpected, so far unexplained and largely uncontrolled impact increasingly exerted by the electronic medias over our very lives – must be situated within the broader problem of the modern public sphere. With such an idea, one enters uncharted waters. The ‘public sphere’ is a central idol of contemporary intellectual and political life; seemingly lying beyond reproach. This paper, however, and the project of which this is part, argues that the problem lies with our ideal of the public sphere; that this ideal has vital shortcomings; and that it is the actual move towards this ideal, and not the failure to realise a fully open and free public sphere, that produces genuinely ‘magical’ effects – which are by no means neutral or benevolent. The study of ‘media magic’ therefore
implies tackling the ‘public sphere’ and the entire modern revolutionary tradition of which it is an integral part.

The full substantiation of such a point goes beyond the limits of a paper. All that will be attempted here is to indicate how the problem of ‘media magic’ can be situated on the broader horizon of a ‘genealogy of the public sphere’. This starts by recognising that the modern public sphere is not simply the place for rational arguments, but is also highly theatrical; and that it did not emerge simply due to the discovery of printing and the eventual rise of the press, but was also sparked by the re-birth of comedy.

2. THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THEATRE AND COMEDY FOR MODERN LIFE

While the impact exerted by classical tragedy on the rise of Greek democracy is well known, the similarly crucial role played by the theatre in the formation of the modern public sphere was so far mostly ignored. Instead, following Habermas¹, the origins of the public sphere are searched exclusively in the printed media, in contrast to representation and theatre. Comedy in particular is usually considered as a form of harmless entertainment, pure clean fun, the rise of comedy being rarely discussed outside a small circle of experts interested in the history of popular culture. If its wider political and social implications are ever considered, these are seen as part of a healthy popular resistance to the powers that be.

However, the re-birth of comedy around the end of the Renaissance was by no means innocuous. Staged originally by mimes and jesters who escaped through Venice after the sack of Constantinople in 1453, and eventually crystallised in Commedia dell’Arte, the rise of comedy much contributed to the collapse of the Renaissance, by promoting the grotesque, and ridiculising the noble². The rise of comedy in this sense was the exact ‘schismogenic’³ counterpart to the rise of Puritanism. The infinite cynicism of Byzantine mimes, who attacked each and every form of authority – assuming that all of them were just as corrupt as the old Byzantine court – and made fun of every noble human striving – showing the supposedly naked truth that all human beings are only ever interested in eating, drinking, and making sex, and first of all in gaining money that procures them all these goodies of life – step by step poisoned the minds and lives of people, forcing secular and church authorities to set up measures against them, starting the infinite spiral of puritanical restrictions and ‘commedic’ loosening⁴. This led to the eventual ‘comedification’ of social and cultural life, where over the passing of decades and centuries more and more figures of authority actually came to behave – and think – in the way they were conjured up in comedy scenes.

The point can be seen through the life and works of William Shakespeare. Shake-

¹ J. Habermas, Storia e critica dell’opinione pubblica, Laterza, Bari 1974.
² A first appearance of the grotesque, well before it is traced with the discovery of the Domus Aurea in the 1490s, can be found in the works of Antonio Pollaiuolo, active from about the mid-1450s in Florence (for details, see A. Szakolczai, Sociology, Religion and Grace: A Quest for the Renaissance, Routledge, London 2007). On the powers of ridicule, see the famous saying by Nietzsche: «Not by wrath does one kill, but by laughter» (see Thus Spoke Zarathustra, Part I, ‘On Reading and Writing’).
⁴ The term ‘commedic’ was introduced by Martin Green (see M. Green, The Triumph of Pierrot: The Commedia dell’Arte and the Modern Imagination, Macmillan, New York 1986) in order to characterize a mode of existence that tries to imitate comedy figures in real life.
Shakespeare probably became a playwright due to having seen, in his childhood, vagrant theatrical troupes, and started his career as a comedy writer. However, within a few years he realised what critical theorists failed to do even after centuries: that they themselves helped to construct the phenomena they set out to criticise. In a series of masterpieces (in particular *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *The Merchant of Venice*) he performed a from inside problematisation of comedy as a genre, accepting in *Othello* that as a playwright he himself was personally responsible for ‘infecting’ people with spiralling and unquenchable envy and jealousy. This resulted, already with *Othello* and *Hamlet*, in a genuine re-birth of tragedy; and eventually, with *The Tempest*, led to Shakespeare’s premature, stunning, and still not understood farewell to theatre.

The modern public sphere therefore emerged not simply due to the discovery of the press and the eventual rise of the newspaper and the coffee house, but rather to the **effective coincidence** of the sack of Constantinople and the discovery of printing – itself having effects quite different from simply promoting rational discussion, each taking place in the early 1450s. A proper genealogy of the public sphere would therefore require the reconstruction of how the connection between printing and comedy created the public sphere.

This public sphere can be defined as a ‘semi-legal liminoid place’. It is semi-legal in the sense of being located half-way in between legal institutions and the processes characteristic of crowd behaviour. While champions of the public sphere pretend that it ‘ideally’ functions in a legal manner, this is far from being the full story. The public sphere is *impersonal* and *decontextualised*, which is the opposite of how a legal process works. The famous defence of democracy by Bertrand Russell through the principle of trial and error could hardly function in the sphere of the law, where real trials can hardly afford more than a tiny fraction of errors. It is due to such constitutive characteristics that the public sphere cannot help but oscillate between a legalistic and a crowd-like mode of operation, ever on the brink of degenerating into full-scale scape-goating, as it happened so often in the past century.

The in-between character of the public sphere evokes affinity with liminality. Yet, it cannot be considered as a ‘liminal’ phenomenon. It is permanent, and not temporary; it cannot be connected either to rituals, or to concrete events that exert a sudden and formative impact on social and political reality. It should thus be liminal-like, or ‘liminoid’; an expression coined by Victor Turner in order to characterise aspects of the modern world. Interestingly enough, Turner considered theatre as a par excellence modern ‘liminoid’ space, tying further together theatre and the public sphere.

3. THE PUBLIC SPHERE AS REALM OF THE MASK

The previous considerations help to understand that the public sphere is not merely the realm of free and open, rational and transparent communication, rather is ruled by the mask. In small-scale societies the wearing of masks was always associated with public

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7 Please note that Athenian tragedy was not re-born in the Italian Renaissance, and so in late medieval Europe the re-birth of comedy came before the re-birth of tragedy.
8 See the genuine civil war that came after the discovery of printing in the 16th century.
rituals, mostly with masked dances performed in the village ‘square’ – which was usually circular. Their wearing, as Pizzorno has emphasised\(^9\), was less connected to the ‘hiding’ of the individual than to the formation of identity, corresponding to the transformative aspects of liminal rituals. Yet, the collective character of such masked dances, and the almost universal prohibition of women to wear masks suggest a tight connection between wearing masks and appearing in public. The open character of a ‘public’ space requires that those who enter it have a way of defence. This is provided by the mask. The problem is that anybody can be hiding under a mask, so masked rituals can easily degenerate into something quite problematic – like scape-goating\(^10\).

This perspective also helps to come to terms with problems that emerged with public space in classical Athens. In the ‘golden age’ of Athens, the agora was not completely open for public talk. Only people of genuine authority dared to give speeches there; a combination of freedom, respect and authority was central for the rule of Pericles. However, as the seductive ideology of completely free speech took hold of Athenians, the agora became prey to demagogues and Sophists.

Technological invention, as we know it from Goethe’s *Faust*, and even more from his ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice’, is a very mixed blessing. The invention of printing immediately magnified some of the worst characteristics of public performance. In any technologically transmitted piece of information there is no difference between the original and the copy, severing the connections between experience and truth. The truth of what happened and that involved human beings who actually lived through events can only be transmitted as a convincing force by those who were participants or witnesses, or by those who were part of a chain of personal transmission. The source of validation in the case of technologically transmitted information shifts to the ‘middle’ or ‘in between’ liminal realm of the ‘public sphere’ – the realm where, in the terminology of Brueghel, the eyeless lead the blind. The very term ‘media’ bears witness to this phenomenon, as ‘medium’ means nothing else but being ‘in between’.

4. THE SPECIFICITY OF THE MODERN PUBLIC SPHERE

It is a central aspect of modern self-identity that the basic difference between modern and non-modern societies lies at the level of technology. Given that so much of the modern public sphere is dominated by technologically based communication, theorists of communication feel themselves thoroughly justified to disregard any reference to non-modern forms of ritual and communication. Yet, it is only in contrast to such examples that the singularity of the modern public space stands out. Beyond technological discoveries, the central issue concerns the formation of identity. Public space is the realm of masks: in tribal societies people physically wear masks, while in complex societies they

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perform roles and wear corresponding costumes. The modern public sphere, however, is supposed to be totally open and free. It does not tolerate the wearing of masks, and any rituals where individuals play a role, rather requiring that people in public show their ‘real selves’. Thus, constitutive of the modern public sphere is the misunderstanding that the public mask one wears reveals one’s true identity. This leads to a perpetual identity disturbance, surfacing in concerns like bad faith, bad conscience, or a permanent sense of guilt, as the difference between being oneself and having a public face is deeply felt by every human being, and yet, everyone is forced to believe that entering the public realm is identical with revealing one’s true identity.

The tension is inevitable, as the wearing of masks in public is as necessary as helmets on a building site. The German origins of the modern public sphere must be noted here, as the confusion might have to do with the term Öffentlichkeit, meaning ‘public sphere’, but also close to ‘revelation’ (Offenbarung). It can also be connected to the Germanic failure of understanding ‘liminality’, as Öffentlichkeit means opening up, thus uncertainty and liminality; yet, the Reformation identification of this opening with the fixity of the revealed word, and of the status of the self as saved or damned, renders a proper identification of liminal situations impossible. This led to the distinction between the ‘potential’ and actual public spheres. From this perspective the gap felt between ideal communication, based on the revealing of one’s true self, and the exchanges characteristic of the actual public sphere is due to a failure to conform to the ideal, intensifying the elusive game alongside a spiral.

**Reality deficit**

The main consequence of this confusion between personal identity and public mask was a permanent and acute reality deficit. Since the rise of the modern public sphere those participating in it perceive the gap between its pretences and actual effects. Yet, failing to realise that the reasons lie in the misperceived characteristics of the public as a free and open field, this vague sense of unease gave rise to a schismogenic process between the ever increasing urge to unmask those in the public sphere who fail to comply with the ideal and the call for realising, finally, a truly open public space where the wearing of ‘masks’ would be impossible.

The two imperatives are self-contradictory, as the more open the public sphere becomes, the more it forces people to wear masks, generating the uneasy feeling of a reality deficit, animating further calls for critical unmasking. The result is a kind of stasis, in the classical sense of being locked in a state of permanent conflict where there can be no winners, and where bad feeling, animated by the impression that it is always the other that is distorting the truth, is exponentially increasing, along a spiral, with public life dominated by hypocrisy, peopled by mere ‘talking heads’.

**Excess ‘reality’**

Reality deficit is only one side of a schismogenic process, the other being excess reality – of falsified reality. The same identity disturbance the produced the mistaking the

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11 All this has been extensively analysed by Nietzsche.
12 *Talking Heads* was a well-known rock band in the 1980s, led by David Byrne.
public face as the real person and the desperate search for the real person behind the public mask, also leads to a saturation with ‘reality’ – meaning the infinite series of masks intruding every segment of the public realm. Such a surplus of mask-reality leads to an acute will to escape this world through entertainment or divertissement. The coexistence of these two schismogenic sides is a central characteristic of modern culture at least since the joint appearance of realism and romanticism in the early 19th century.

5. THE ELECTRONIC MEDIATISATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Now we can assess the impact exerted on this public sphere by the technological innovation represented by the electronic media. The significance of this phenomenon is truly extraordinary, as – together with genetic engineering – it defines the character of technological innovation in the last few decades. These technological innovations not simply increase our power and freedom, but render the specific characteristics of the public space, liminality and the wearing of masks, ever more acute, extending this particular field at the expense of the personal, the existential and the experiential, beyond all limits. Electronic media allow a magnitudinal, almost limitless, escalation and proliferation of the schismogenic processes that jointly produce reality deficit and excess reality. Through cameras, cinema newsreels and TV news channels, the right of the public to see everything and be everywhere is raised to an utmost ethical imperative, combined with the critical exigency of unmasking power, and bring all this into the most intimate recesses of our homes and minds. The presence of cameras and journalists transforms reality, rendering communication about events a proliferation of masks. The more perfect and objective communication becomes, the more it effectively transforms the reality it supposedly merely represents.

In particular, technological developments lead to an ever more radical elimination of distance, magnifying processes that were in place since decades, but whose problematic character is still little understood.

Elimination of distance

A major consequence of this desperate attempt to get as close to the ‘real’ under the mask as possible is the elimination of distance, and especially the sense of distance. Such dangers were already identified by Aby Warburg in 1923: «The modern Prometheus and the modern Icarus, Franklin and the Wright brothers, inventors of the airplane: they are the sinister destroyers of the sense of distance that threatens to push the world back into chaos. The telegraph and the telephone destroy the cosmos. Mythic and symbolic thought, with its attempt to spiritualise the link between man and the surrounding world, create the space for prayer or for thought that instant electronic contact kills». Let’s try to map what Warburg foresaw.

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13 Honoré de Balzac (1799-1850) and Victor Hugo (1802-1885), the greatest representatives of French realism and romanticism, were exact contemporaries. About Jean-Paul, a central figure both in the attempts to escape reality through artificially induced dreaming, and in the modern obsession with breaking boundaries, see A. SZAKOLCZAI, Jean-Paul and the Modern Obsession with Breaking Boundaries: Reflections on Bernhard Giesen’s Paper, «International Political Anthropology», 2 (2009), 2, pp. 267-288.

A major demand of radical democracy is that everything must be transparent, performed in front of public eyes. This defines an impossible agenda, as the ‘public’ cannot be physically present at the same time at the same place. Still, it is this Herculean task that the electronic media seems to resolve. Through live transmission of images into every household, everyone can at least see what is going on. Keen supporters of the public sphere always enthusiastically proclaim the ‘communication revolution’.

The problem is that through electronic transmission a radical schism happens between participation, experience and action. If events take place in the presence of human beings – in which they participate or which they witness – ‘suffering’ them in the Greek sense of experience as *pathos*, then such experiences leave an indelible mark. Humans become ‘experienced’ and thus can act responsibly and properly. Instant electronic communication splinters the unity of experience and action, setting into motion another schismogenic process. Those present are not entrusted to reflect and do what they find best, but are rather forced to act in the sense of a theatre actor, behaving as they are ‘expected’ by the ‘public’, which turns them literally into hypocrites. The electronic media, instead of helping to promote the resolution of problems, are rather disempowering public officials, at the same time delegitimizing them by transforming the performance of public duties into a permanent criminal process. The result is a thorough counter-selection, promoting not excellence, but those who are willing to accept such a permanent ordeal. Still, no matter how many cameras are directed at actors and events, they only create an illusion of participation, as the spectators are evidently not there: they are only able to see the images selected for them. The more members of the ‘public’ are seduced by the illusion of participating in the events, the more their sense of judgment becomes confused. The illusion that they can see things for themselves and thus form opinion on the most disparate issues leads to a systematic discrediting of those who ‘institutionally’ are supposed to produce trusted opinions, whether intellectuals of public officials, who become forced to stick to white-washed official positions.

The end result is a travesty of democracy, quite similarly to classical Athens. The central idea behind democracy is to prevent the clotting up of the political system, with public decision-making posts being occupied by individuals who only got there due to private connections. It means to select people who can be trusted. The principle of permanent media scrutiny, however, is distrust and hostility; and the constitutional confusion between public roles and personal identities assures that the media always find what they are looking for: something under the mask; or a mask over somebody.

6. MAGICAL PUBLIC REALITY

The electronic mediatisation of the public and personal spheres also increasingly eliminates the distance between them, giving a spectacular boost both to reality deficit and excess ‘reality’. This is captured by the most characteristic developments in contemporary television and cinema: special effects and reality TV (including talk-shows).

*Special effects*

The development of cinema goes hand in hand with the development of special effects, and thus with ‘magic’. Already in their first films George Méliès or the Lumière brothers made abundant use of the possibilities offered by placing one image after the other on the
reel, creating the effect of a temporal sequence. Such ‘tricks’ were absolutely central for the first two classics of cinema, Griffiths and Eisenstein, who experimented with montage in unprecedented manners and great effect. They were American and Russian; their most important works were made just around and about WWI and the Bolshevik Revolution (The Birth of a Nation, 1915; Intolerance, 1916; Battleship Potemkin, 1925; October: Ten Days that Shook the World, 1927); and these were explicitly devoted to propagate the two most discredited ideologies of the 20th century, racism and Communism.

The singularity of the new genre, and its reliance on illusion, magic and special effects, has been captured on the spot by Thomas Mann, in one of the greatest novels of the 20th century, The Magic Mountain. It is contained in the penultimate section of Chapter V, entitled The Dance of Death, no doubt based on personal experiences. We have a truly extraordinary document in front of us, helping to face up to the radical novelty and problematicity of something which we came to take for granted: what did one of the greatest artists of modern Europe experience when he first encountered a movie theatre.

The experience can be resumed in four points. First, it makes us aware of the extraordinary condition which being part of a movie audience represents: one enters a dark room and is subjected to being bombarded with quickly changing images. Second, this experience produces utter absorption: one is glued to the glowing screen where the images unroll. Early films in particular were saturated with illusion-mongering, showing in quick sequence images from different times or spaces, geared to incite the senses; like a Moroccan dancer, shaking her half bared breasts, who was «suddenly brought so close to the camera as to be life-sized; one could see the dilated nostrils, the eyes full of animal life»15. Third, Mann managed to wave into his description the reactions of the audience. It had three crucial elements: a shocked silence in face of the appearance and vanishing of illusion, in which Mann found something «nerveless and repellent»16; the sense of powerlessness with respect to the force of illusion; and finally, the recognition that behind the magical images there lay nothing else but nothingness itself, confronting the viewers: this new form of entertainment has a central role in eliminating the boundaries and distinctions in space and time. The concluding point concerns the way in which the audience left the theatre, in stunned silence, as if dazed and confused; though a new audience was already there, looking towards the spectacle with «eager eyes»17.

The inference is clear: the cinema is not a neutral medium to please our senses by entertaining, rather an instrument of alchemic transformation. The episode is inserted at the end of a section entitled The Dance of Death, and strikes the tone for the carnival that is the main subject matter of the last section entitled Witches’ Sabbath.

While special effects mark the cinema since its invention, even filmmakers a few decades ago could not have imagined how the identity between cinema and special effects could become literally true. Today, through progress in computer technology, every single frame in a film might be a ‘special effect’ – with 3D films representing a new leap ‘forward’. The impact is truly devastating, as contemporary films no longer even play with the illusion that what they show have anything to do with reality – fully satisfying their audience’s urge to escape the surrounding pseudo-reality. Contemporary film is just as shamelessly identical with special effects as modern dance music through discos is identical with techno music. Filmmakers no longer have pangs of conscience about this – after all, everyone just tries to ‘make money’ (overlooking the alchemical

16 Ibi, p. 317.
17 Ibi, p. 318.
implications); and if somebody reflects upon such a state of affairs, using special effects in order to unmask the culture of special effects, as Peter Jackson did it with *King Kong*, the result is complete commercial (or public: the two are all but identical) and critical (which is just another side of the public) failure.

**Reality television**

Yet, special effects only represent one side of the coin, the other being ‘reality television’. The more films in the cinema – out there in the public space – are marked by special effects, the more television in our homes becomes dominated by ‘reality’, in the sense of public masks, or ‘talking heads’ invading our homes through news headlines, parliamentary performances, talk-shows, or judge-shows, and in particular by reality TV started with *Big Brother* in 1999. Participants in these shows are previously unknown figures, pretending to be ‘people from the street’, somebody ‘just like you’. However, they do possess a singular characteristic: though not born actors in the sense of artistic gifts, they have a particular talent in fusing and confusing their personal selves and public faces. They are the heroes of our not post but super-modern times; archetypal fakes in a world falsified by the ‘public scene’.

Let us try to make sense of what is going on here, with the help of Foucault’s *Panopticon*.

7. PANOPTICON MEDIA CIRCUS

While the image of the *Panopticon*, through Foucault’s work, is well known today, it is much less clear what it exactly represents. Already in Bentham, there was a conflation of its socio-political and techno-architectural aspects – was it the solution to the problem of social order, through a simple technological trick of visibility? Was it just a model prison, or a blueprint for any social institution? Foucault played a lot with this ambiguity, and the rhetorical style of *Discipline and Punish* does not help sorting of what is going on.

At a first level, the *Panopticon* is a model of totalitarianism. This, however, only scratches the surface, as – far from being intended as a critique of Soviet Bolshevism – the metaphor aims at capturing the similarities between ‘them’ and ‘us’; the totalitarian systems and liberal democracies. In fact, as Tom Boland argues, already Orwell’s 1984 played on both levels. Beyond unmasking totalitarianism, the book problematises a critique that aspires for total transparency. The main target of Orwell’s work was arguably the eternal critic, the ‘totalitarian intellectual’, who – in the name of political critique – was always ready to «unmask the ‘ideology’ of their opponents, disfigure those opponents, and transfigure themselves, prompting the return of critique in an imitative cycle».

Seeing from this light, the *Panopticon* is a metaphor not simply for the state or the free market, but for the public sphere itself, epitomised in particular by the media. This

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implies a game of reflexivity, with the central tower being replaced by a gigantic moving prism that reflects everything, rendering everyone visible to everybody else. But we can make a further step, closing the circle on the ‘circle’, and argue that the edifice it most resembles is the *circus*. The similarities in spatial arrangements are striking. The *Panopticon*, just as the circus, is perfectly circular. They both have a centre, to which every attention is directed; and this centre is vacuous, not filled by either real authority or a normative model, rather the opposite: someone who has no positive properties, only acting *as if* he had authority, miming others. In terms of purpose, the difference could not be greater: one promises entertainment and pleasure; the other threatens with punishment and pain. Still, it is here that the circle is closed. Jeremy Bentham was the theorists separating pleasure from pain, but the vacuity of their complete separation can be shown by the ease by which an institution for total pleasure can be transmogrified into one of total pain, and vice versa. The more modern politics approaches the ideals of the public sphere, total visibility and transparency, the more it becomes a comedy that can switch, almost in a nick of time, into horrifying terror, and back again to slapstick burlesque. That this is the very essence of Soviet Bolshevism, we know from Mihail Bulgakov’s *Master and Margarita*; the question now is rather the following: what will be the end of the panoptical media circus under conditions of formal democracy and never-ending magical revolution in communication technology?

It is through our ‘democratic’ present that we can see what is actually formed through the circus-like *Panopticon*. It is not simply *homo economicus* or *homo Sovieticus*, but *homo publicus* itself: not the promoter of the *res publica*, rather the type of human being that exists as correlate of a free and open, thus depersonalised and decontextualised public sphere; not so far from Heidegger’s *das man*, or Musil’s ‘man without qualities’. In the terms introduced by Agnes Horvath, the modern public scene is the stage of Pulcinella, the embodiment of non-Being, or the *nulla*. And where the *nulla* once appears and is given space to breath and breed, it inexorably starts to multiply and spread, gobbling up virtue, valour and excellence, just as in a closed system the appearance of a zero eventually transforms every other number into zero. The *modus operandi* of a fully transparent and homogenous public sphere is terror.

8. **THE DISILLUSIONED ILLUSIONIST**

Of all the modern myths, the myth of the free and open public sphere is the single most central, most elusive, most widely shared, and perhaps the most vicious. It is central, as it connects with all others, revealing the liminoid features of the ‘public’. The myth is fundamental to modern democracy, as it is the space where not just opinions are formed, but where political leaders are tested in terms of their performance – increasingly not so much in their actual qualities, but through comedy-like presentations of self. It is just as fundamental for the modern market economy, reflecting the interpenetration of agora and marketplace in modern civil society, reflected in expressions like ‘publicity’. The series can be continued with culture, society, public education, or telecommunication.

The public sphere as an ideal field of communication is an extremely powerful myth, as it manages to combine the two central values of the modern world, freedom

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and equality, much more than either economics or politics. In the market and in state institutions the formal equality of rights is compromised by monetary or political power. In the public sphere, however, all one needs is to read, write, and talk. The idea is irrepressible: freedom and equality, after all, might work together!

Yet, the public sphere is also most elusive. It is there, invitingly, open to everyone; all you evidently have to do is to take up courage and act, and then wait for the others to respond. But it is here that the elusiveness of the public sphere becomes visible: who is responding? Why and how? Who decides about what gets printed and published? The realm of freedom suddenly becomes a Kafkaesque realm of bewildering facelessness and threatening anonymity.

If the 19th century was marked, after the French Revolution, by the victorious rise of the ‘public’, accompanied by scientific discoveries and technological innovation, it was also the century of misunderstanding at the realm of culture. The most important thinkers of the 19th century were Kierkegaard, Marx and Nietzsche, yet they hardly enjoyed any public recognition during their lifetime. A similar misrecognition was omnipresent in the field of visual arts where the greatest painters of the century were laughing stocks for the public, with saloons exhibiting works of art that nobody looks at today. As a result, the 19th century was not simply the century of the Romantic cult of genius, but of the unrecognised and eventually mad genius, like Hölderlin, van Gogh and Nietzsche – the greatest poet, painter and philosopher of the century. Not something to take lightly.

Here we are already moving from the elusive to the vicious, but the real problems of the ‘free and open’ public sphere would only become visible in the 20th century, where the totalitarian potentials of the Panopticon were fully realised, and in the most unexpected manners – not in the last instance in the ‘totalitarian intellectuals’. It is here that the Auden motto greatly helps us in our conclusive search: why is it that modern radical intellectuals fail to face their complete failure?

W.H. Auden is a truly extraordinary poet, writing at a time when poetry was still read. He was also a disillusioned leftist (turned an anti-modern Christian), so it is well worth considering what he had to say about magic, especially in the context of a sustained interpretation of Shakespeare’s last, most ‘magical’ or ‘enchanting’ work.

The citation selected as the motto of this paper centres on the difference between ‘magic’ and ‘enchantment’. In order to become disillusioned, one had to be genuinely enchanted and enchanting; but once disillusioned, the former charm turns into a mere trick; passionate belief is transmogrified into resort to black magic. Our totalitarian intellectual starts with genuine enthusiasm for his ideals, most of all the realisation of freedom and equality through the public sphere. The ideal is further justified by the genuineness of problems – poverty, excessive inequality, oppression, or any other form of human suffering: a combination that justifies radical means. As the ideal is chimerical, however, any attempt at realisation necessarily fails. This, however, does not make the original problem go away; thus, the more the gap between the ideal and its actual putting into practice is revealed, the more desperate is the need to reinforce belief in the mission and justify ever more dirty tricks. The moment when the breakpoint is reached and the illusion can no longer be maintained, cynicism replaces belief,

and conscious, deliberate use is made of the instruments that previously were conjured up by enthusiastic belief in the ideals. Selecting a singular but by no means unique example, the former student revolutionary becomes a millionaire entrepreneur in Silicon Valley, and – by promoting global computerised electronic communication – can even maintain face by arguing that he is just as revolutionary now as he was before. In a certain way, he is even right.

Is there a way out of the ideal of the ‘public sphere’ and other extraordinary intellectual delusions, at least in sociology? There is, though some hard choices must be made concerning iconic figures as Habermas, Bourdieu and Goffman. Theories about the public sphere and communicative action, against distinction and the elitist character of the French educational system, and concerning the presentation of the self where everyday living and public life are conflated constitute the horizon of contemporary social theory which must be overcome so that the ambivalent nature of the ‘public’ could become visible. Italian sociology could play a major role in such an effort, as one of the most important efforts in overcoming such shortcomings is contained in the works of Alessandro Pizzorno, who in his recent book states that «‘public’ is a term that immediately gives an image of vagueness»23. His life-work, from his first essay on the mask through his articles on identity and recognition, up to the most recent pieces on rationality and reputation, offers an entire arsenal of concepts to rethink the formation of identity, individual and collective, collective and personal, through concrete circles of recognition, not an abstract and universal, faceless and terrorising ‘public sphere’24. With the work of Pizzorno, one moves away from a genealogy of the public space towards reconstructing personal integrity and meaningful social life, the only solid foundations of a ‘good society’.

RÉSUMÉ

Une sphère publique entièrement libre, à l’échange rationnel d’arguments qu’elle est censé de permettre, est considérée comme un pilier de la démocratie, et représente une idole central de la vie intellectuelle et politique contemporaine, en apparence s’étendant au-delà de tout reproche. Ce document propose toutefois une approche critique de ce pilier, discutant non seulement les implémentations historiques perfectibles de la sphère publique, mais l’idéal de la sphère publique elle-même. Une telle approche critique s’appuie sur une comparaison du fonctionnement de la sphère publique des médias modernes à la magie, et étend son argumentation situant le problème de la magie des médias dans le problème plus large de la sphère publique moderne. En ce sens, la magie des médias implique l’étude de la lutte contre la ‘sphère publique’ et toute la tradition révolutionnaire moderne dont elle est partie intégrante, s’adressant à l’horizon plus large d’une ‘généalogie de la sphère publique’. Cela commence par reconnaître que la sphère publique moderne n’est pas tout simplement la place pour des arguments rationnels, mais elle est aussi très théâtrale, et qu’elle ne ressort pas tout simplement à cause de la découverte de l’imprimerie et de la hausse éventuelle de la presse, mais a également été déclenché par la renaissance de la comédie.

SUMMARY

A fully open and free public sphere, with the rational exchange of arguments it is supposed to allow, is considered to be a pillar of democracy, and represents a central idol of contemporary intellectual and political life, seemingly lying beyond reproach. This paper however proposes a critical approach to such a pillar, discussing not only the historically imperfect implementations of the public sphere, but the ideal of the public sphere itself. Such a critical approach draws on a comparison of the operation of the modern mediated public sphere to magic, and extends its argument situating the problem of media magic within the broader problem of the modern public sphere. In this sense, the study of ‘media magic’ implies tackling the ‘public sphere’ and the entire modern revolutionary tradition of which it is an integral part, addressing the broader horizon of a ‘genealogy of the public sphere’. This starts by recognising that the modern public sphere is not simply the place for rational arguments, but is also highly theatrical; and that it did not emerge simply due to the discovery of printing and the eventual rise of the press, but was also sparked by the re-birth of comedy.