Performing for the State: Censorship of the French Theatre under Napoleon

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During Napoleon's fifteen years of personal rule over France, social control was key to maintaining power. As part of his plan to reinstate the hierarchal social structure that was overthrown by the 1789 Revolution, Napoleon imposed strict state control over the French theatre industry. In addition to mandating the physical location of theatres, all potential plots and characters had to be approved by censors before production. This allowed for the removal of Revolutionary ideology from this form of mass culture in its entirety. Imperial control over entertainment helped to create a hierarchy similar to that of pre-revolutionary France, solidifying Napoleon's place as unquestioned, absolute ruler.

In the ten years prior to Napoleon's rule, French culture, including the performing arts, had gone through a major upheaval. The Bourbon monarchy had held a complete monopoly over the theatre and its production but, after the *Law of 17 January*, 1791 that emancipated and allowed for the liberalization of the theatres of France, the number of theatres in Paris alone rose from four to over fifty.[1] Censorship in France expanded rapidly as a result of the paranoia and conspiracy theories imagined by the members of the new revolutionary government, referred to as the National Convention. In 1792, the Convention enacted a law that tightened censorship, limiting which plays were allowed to be performed. After becoming First Consul in 1800, Napoleon continued to increase governmental control over the theatre industry, "most commonly in the shape of a pre-

[1] Emmet Kennedy and Marie-Laurence Netter, in *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences in Revolutionary Paris*, ed. Emmet Kennedy et al. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1996), 87.

emptive measure," legislating strict state control over the theatres of France and their productions.[2] In this paper I will discuss state control and censorship of French theatre under the Consulate and then the Napoleonic Empire.[3] Napoleon used the theatre as a means through which to control and influence the ideals and political affiliations of the French people by restructuring the theatre system and enacting and enforcing strict state control, reorganizing the theatre into a military-esque hierarchy with a chain of command intended to limit dissention.

Live theatre was one of the only large-scale sources of entertainment at the turn of the nineteenth century and was, therefore, an excellent medium through which to exert social control. Napoleon himself had a personal interest in theatre, having been introduced to the "accepted tastes and standards of the day" when he was a student in Brienne, which created for him an "enduring interest in the subject."[4] Indeed, his appreciation of theatre as a means of both entertainment and distraction was demonstrated by his decision to "send a troupe of comedians to Egypt" to entertain the French troops almost immediately after becoming First Consul in 1800.[5] Further, even before his reign, during his time as a general in the Italian campaign, "Bonaparte made a point of appearing regularly at the Opéra,"[6] and continued to attend throughout his emperorship, making more appearances

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[2] Donald Roy, *Romantic and Revolutionary Theatre,* ed. Donald Roy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 262.

[3] Although he did not become a monarch until 1804 and therefore would be referred to by his last name, Bonaparte, until that time, for the sake of consistency I will refer to the Consul/Emperor as Napoleon throughout this paper.

[4] F.G. Healey, *The Literary Culture of Napoleon* (Genève: E. Droz, 1959), 79.

[5] Robert B. Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1950), 156.

[6] James H. Johnson, *Listening in Paris: A Cultural History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 167.

at the Opéra during his rule than Louis XV or XVI did in their considerably longer reigns.[7]

Napoleon recognized the political value of theatre as an "oracle of public opinion," which he believed to be an important source of political power.[8] He was deliberate in his attempt to portray himself as a cultured patron of the arts, drawing attention to the theatre as a place to be seen for members of the upper classes. Moreover, Napoleon gauged his own popularity and the public's interest in him based upon their reaction to his arrival at the theatre: once in power, he made a point of arriving late to performances so he could see the reaction of the crowd.[9]

As described by James H. Johnson, the press was always notified when Napoleon would be attending the Opéra, and at the pinnacle of his reign, the audience tended to pay more attention to his empty box than to the performers on stage. On at least one occasion, the ballet corps who had been performing left the stage upon his arrival to recreate a dance that he had missed.[10] This guarantee of his arrival, however, came close to having mortal consequences when a bomb plot was arranged that hinged upon his attendance at the Opéra. The Consul escaped the blast physically unharmed, but news of his death circulated around the theatre: upon his arrival the crowd erupted with a standing

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[7] It is important to note difference between the theatre genre opera, and the Opéra of Paris, the physical theatre where operas and other types of theatre were performed. The Opéra's name changed numerous times during the Revolution, also being known as the Académie Royale de Musique, the Académie d'Opéra, and the Théâtre de l'Opéra, to name a few. To avoid confusion, in this paper I have used the more general term 'theatre,' to refer to the various genres of theatre, including opera, and used the term Opéra only when referring to the physical theatre and the theatre troupe attached to it.

[8] Kennedy and Netter, *Theatre, Opera, and Audiences*, 90.

[9] Healey, *The Literary Culture of Napoleon*, 79, note 2.

[10] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 165.

ovation, relieved that he had escaped unscathed.[11] Even during the busiest part of his rule, at the high point of the Empire, the ruler's interest in theatre did not wane, although it did become more directly political, and his attendance at performances "were frequent and only interrupted by the necessities of war."[12] Attendance at the theatre helped to humanize Napoleon to his subjects as it presented "a moving setting in which the sovereign could show himself and let his reactions be seen."[13]

Under previous revolutionary governments, French theatre was adapted and manipulated numerous times. Changes ranged from the removal of royal patronage in 1791 to the re-establishment of censorship and control by the government under the National Convention in the fall of 1793. The Convention advocated for the rapid elimination of class distinctions in all areas of society, including the creation of an equitable theatre-going experience. One example of this was a failed experiment at the Odéon theatre where members of the Convention attempted to "abolish the distinction between the [people of the] *parterre* (plain benches) and the *loges* (tiered boxes)" by renovating the interior of the theatre with the goal of de-emphasizing social differences.[14] Ideally, if all of the spectators were on even ground on a single platform, all views of the production would be the same, and thus the people would all be put on an equal social level. After the fall of the National Convention, the harsher, hierarchical Directory government saw these measures as "carrying Republicanism to an intolerable extreme," but no

[11] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 165-167.
[12] Healey, *Literary Culture*, 81.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Martin Lyons, *France Under the Directory* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 134.

change was made to the codified state control of theatres.[15] Following the Coup of Brumaire in 1799, the Directory was replaced by a new three-man Consulate. This ultra-conservative government, with Napoleon at its helm, reversed many of the Convention's changes: architecture was restored to what it had been pre-revolution (with the addition of some Napoleonic imagery), private boxes were replaced, the Republican tricolour decorations were removed, and prices for seats were raised.[16]

One of the goals of the Consulate from its start was to unify society, so as to reduce and eventually eliminate civil unrest. One method of doing this was to normalize theatre audiences, between whom there had been frequent clashes due to class and ideological differences throughout the revolution. As the new leader of France, Napoleon appreciated the idea of class distinction and exclusivity, at least along the lines of designating the upper class notables, and had little interest in recalling the equality among all men touted during the Revolution, "since legitimacy no longer lay in the people but in the institutions of the new order [and the] dynastic character of the Empire."[17]

In lieu of attempting to prescribe equality for all men, Napoleon sought the unification of his new notables – the nobles of the *ancién regime* and former Revolutionaries, and demanded that they put aside their ideological differences to work for the common goal: security of the state.[18] To help facilitate this, changes were made to French theatre. By returning ticket prices to their pre-revolution level and eliminating state-sponsored

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[15] Lyons, *France Under the Directory,* 134.
[16] Ben Jones, *Napoleon: Man and Myth* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1977), 116-117.
[17] Alan Forrest, "Propaganda and Legitimation of Power in Napoleonic France," in *French History* 18, no.4 (2004): 434.
[18] Forrest, "Propaganda," 434.

performances made mandatory by the Convention, "attending the Opéra had again acquired an aura of wealth and prestige."[19]

Napoleon developed a two-part plan to finalize his control of French theatre: rearrange the theatres of the nation into an easily controlled hierarchical structure with clear lines of command, and then limit the repertoire of each of these theatres. First, on 8 June 1806, an Imperial Decree declared that the emperor's authorization was now required for any new theatre to be built in Paris, reversing the 1791 *Law of 19 January* that had liberalized the theatre profession. It was also announced that the Minister of the Interior was to be in charge of selecting which productions would be performed on Paris stages.[20] Less than one year later, on 25 April 1807, the remainder of Napoleon's controls over French theatre were codified in the *Directive Concerning Theatres*.[21]

The *Directive* reduced the number of theatres in Paris to eight - four major and four minor - and regulated what type of production could be put on at each theatre, cutting short the expanded freedoms and the sheer number of theatres present since the National Convention's 1791 liberation. The regulations of the four major theatres were:

> (1) *The Théâtre-Français (Théâtre de S.M. l'Empereur)* ...is to be devoted exclusively to tragedy and comedy...*The Théâtre de l'Impératrice* [Odéon] is to be regarded as an annexe of the *Théâtre-Français*, for comedy only. [...]
> (2) *The Théâtre de l'Opéra*...is devoted exclusively to singing and dance...

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[19] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 168.
[20] Victoria Johnson, *Backstage at the Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 194.
[21] Roy, *Romantic and Revolutionary*, 269.

> (3) *The Théâtre de l'Opéra-Comique*...is intended exclusively for the presentation of all types of comedy or *drame* interspersed with songs, ariettas and ensembles.[22]

The *Directive* then went on to name and regulate minor theatres in a similar way, and prescribes a genre to each. As well, all theatres were required to seek permission from the Ministry of the Interior for each play they wanted to perform. Part II of the *Directive* regulates theatres and plays performed in the departments, Part III regulates *"itinerant"* (travelling) companies, and Part IV states that proprietors should not have to give out free tickets beyond those required for police and security workers.[23]

This new *Directive* organized French theatre into a strictly dictated hierarchical structure with set amounts of theatres in each city. An area's Prefect, with guidance from the Minister of the Interior, was in charge of granting permission to open a new theatre, as well as regulating which plays were to be produced. The Minister himself was charged with determining areas of operation for those theatre troops not connected with a specific theatre, as well as enforcing taxes on theatre production. And, of course, Napoleon had the right to veto or change any production as he saw fit.[24] This reorganization restored a modified version of the theatre of the *ancien régime*, "while infusing it with an almost military sense of strategic purpose."[25]

As First Consul and later Emperor of France, Napoleon sought to increase and centralize governmental power through the imposition of propaganda and censorship. Napoleon "subscribed

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[22] *Directive Concerning Theatres*, 25 April 1807, in Donald Roy, ed., *Romantic and Revolutionary Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 270.
[23] Roy, *Romantic and Revolutionary*, 270-272.
[24] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 174.
[25] Roy, *Romantic and Revolutionary*, 270.

to the view that the Revolution had begun in salons," and therefore felt the need to keep a close eye on intellectual organizations and social circles.[26] That being said, censorship as a method to control public opinion "was only one part of a multi-faceted and highly sophisticated propaganda offensive," and the act of censorship itself risked jeopardizing "Napoleon's rapport with the artistic and literary community on whom he depended."[27] He had to tread lightly, and impose restrictions slowly, to avoid alienating the people he was attempting control.[28]

Under Napoleon the content of the performances themselves changed from revolutionary ideology to that of contemporary relevance. In the state-designated 'major' theatres, changes were made to ensure that the audience was formed mostly of Napoleon's new notables, who were "hostile to revolutionary excesses but favourable to military glory,"[29] meaning that productions of contemporary relevance were well received.[30] In the minor theatres and those in the provinces, the potential of this new message was even more vital, as it "conveyed its message directly and unambiguously to the listening crowds – particularly when in these crowds there were so many who had never learned to read and were the more susceptible to the power of the spoken word."[31]

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[26] Jones, *Napoleon: Man and Myth*, 117.
[27] Forrest, "Propaganda," 429.
[28] Ibid.
[29] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 161.
[30] It is important here to emphasize the difference between contemporary *relevance* and contemporarily *written* plays. The Napoleonic administration was not overly fond of plays written about specific contemporary events, but did appreciate plays that predated the revolution that could be applied with contemporary relevance.
[31] F.W.J. Hemmings, *Culture and Society in France, 1789-1848* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1987), 38.

In addition to secret police monitoring of salons and essentially every other aspect of life (both public and private) in Napoleonic France, strict censorship was imposed on newspapers, journals, and all other published works which, combined with an overhaul of the organization of the civil service, removal of noble titles, and creation of new 'notable' titles bestowed by Napoleon, gave the ruler significant control over French society. At this time, the two art forms "with potentially the largest and most popular audience" were theatre and contemporary architecture.[32] Due to financial constraints under the Directory and the early years of Napoleon's reign, the government was forced to abandon major public works projects, and its architectural building projects were scrapped for the time being.[33] However, it did utilize theatre, the art form that remained financially accessible, to educate the French people in appropriate "morality and patriotism."[34] While suppressing and censoring viewpoints opposing his regime, Napoleon also actively promoted his own image through numerous methods, including but not limited to publications, the arts, and, where finances allowed, some architectural additions and changes, most notably the *Arc de Triomphe* (whose foundation was laid under Napoleon, but was not finished until the 1830s).[35]

Unlike the revolutionary regimes before him, in regard to literary content Napoleon generally "preferred realism to allegory or appeals to classical antiquity."[36] With this in mind, censors would generally encourage the creation of tragedies "because they afforded the best opportunity for the expression of elevated

[32] Lyons, *France Under the Directory*, 132.
[33] Ibid.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Jones, *Napoleon: Man and Myth*, 116-117.
[36] Forrest, "Propaganda," 439.

thoughts and tended to produce heroes"[37] and drama because of its "appeal to the emotions of popular patriotism and of a male-centred code of honour."[38]

In order for a play to be approved, all plots and characters had to be mythological or historical, the idea being that focus on these stories would prevent regressing to the contemporary focus of revolutionary works.[39] Automatically banned by censors was any play whose plot was taken from the Bible, referred to Napoleon himself (after 1810), as well as "all plays referring to the Bourbons...usurpation of a throne, punishment of a tyrant, or victory over France."[40] To avoid further delays and conflict, plays were often altered in order to comply with the censorship rules before being presented to the censor himself. Robert B. Holtman discusses the example of the comedy *Carolin, ou le Tableau* wherein the phrase *"mille louis"*[41] had to be removed "because it might remind people of the King."[42] Another example is that of Jean-François Ducis, "a contemporary adaptor of Shakespeare," who rewrote *Othello* to have a happy ending for audiences who were weary of death.[43]

Within Paris, the police were charged with enforcing censorship of the theatre. Early in the Consulate the armed guards put in place at the Opéra by the National Convention had been removed, although surveillance was only removed overtly. Napoleon's undercover police surveillance replaced the visible guard-monitors of previous regimes, and were known to make the

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[37] Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, 153.
[38] Forrest, "Propaganda," 441.
[39] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 174.
[40] Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, 153.
[41] '*mille louis'* refers to 1,000 *louis*, a form of pre-revolutionary currency named after the Bourbon monarch.
[42] Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda,* 152.
[43] Lyons, *France Under the Directory*, 137.

occasional arbitrary arrest or interrogation to make its point: "someone was watching."[44]By monitoring both tensions between audience members and the reaction of the people to the productions, police agents working at the Opéra determined "that the sort of *esprit de parti* that divided audiences during the Revolution still existed," as it was common for spectators to cheer loudly when lines that were delivered could be interpreted in any way in opposition to their political counterparts, as many anti-Jacobins had done during the Directory.[45] Police agents were consistently present to monitor audience reactions and, "if a play created a disturbance, it was banned."[46] For example, during Napoleon's invasion of Russia in July 1812, "the Ministry banned three plays about Russia 'and any other work that might contain passages favourable to Russia or its rulers'."[47]

A far more pressing concern was the "anti-governmental sloganeering" that would interrupt performances from time to time.[48] Indeed, audiences tended to state their political opinions by calling out to heckle or agree with lines in the show, or through the more dignified method of applauding. This was evident in an 1809 performance of *Muhammed* in Bordeaux, where the police observed that the audience "showed far too much enthusiasm in applauding lines that could be construed as anti-regime" in the port city, that was hard-hit by the Napoleonic wars.[49] These banned plays were often ones based upon

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[44] Lyons, *France Under the Directory*, 137.
[45] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 171.
[46] Holtman, *Napoleonic Propaganda*, 151.
[47] Michael Sibalis, "The Napoleonic Police State," in *Napoleon and Europe*, ed. Philip G. Dwyer (Hockley: Pearson Education Limited, 2001), 88.
[48] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 171.
[49] Sibalis, "Police State," 88.

controversial subjects where the government was concerned about audience reactions.[50]

By combining state censorship and patronage, the Napoleonic regime managed to create a unique style of theatre that combined the excesses of aristocratic pleasures while appropriating revolutionary standards, resulting in "a unique combination of revolution and reaction."[51] This combination, in a theatrical setting, mirrored what Napoleon was trying to create society-wide: to combine radicals and reactionaries in order to prevent uprisings from both radical Jacobites and counter-revolutionaries.[52]

The France that Napoleon inherited from the Revolutionary governments was socially and ideologically fragmented, furthering dissention amongst the nobility and between the ranks of society. As an avid theatre-goer, Napoleon recognized the potential of theatre as a means through which to inculcate the public with the ideals of the Napoleonic society. In order to meet this goal, control over the industry had to be strengthened. Napoleon achieved this by reorganizing the French theatre industry into an organization with a hierarchy and command structure similar to his military, where theatre managers reported to prefects, who were in turn responsible to the Minister of the Interior. In addition, the Emperor regulated all aspects of the performing arts in France, including but not limited to the size and location of theatres, as well as which genres and specific works were to be performed. Adjusted ticket prices and the use of a seating plan reminiscent of the *ancient regime* created a hierarchy amongst theatre-goers and returned the elite status given to those who were able to attend. The newly structured

[50] Sibalis, "Police State," 88.
[51] J. Johnson, *Listening in Paris*, 173.
[52] Ibid.

society helped to alleviate infighting amongst the upper classes and aided in unifying 'the public' that mattered to Napoleon. In order to solidify his reign, Napoleon required both support of and control over the French elites. The Emperor's strict regulation of theatre helped him achieve this goal, partially by excluding the lower classes, and partially by influencing what the people were allowed to see.

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