

Media, Justice and Rhetoric: The Case of Christian Ranucci*

Media, sprawiedliwość i retoryka: sprawa Ranucciego

MARTA SOBIESZEWSKA

Maria Curie-Skłodowska University, Lublin

ORCID ID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2429-802>

e-mail: marta.sobieszewska@mail.umcs.pl

Abstract. This article examines the media coverage of the Christian Ranucci case (1974–1976) as an emblematic example of how journalistic discourse can shape judicial outcomes in France. Drawing on Lloyd Bitzer’s theory of the “rhetorical situation” and Chaim Perelman’s concept of the “universal audience,” the study highlights the ways in which the media constructed a climate of fear and vengeance that undermined judicial impartiality. Particular attention is given to the rhetorical mechanisms which transformed the trial into a media spectacle. The analysis demonstrates that while media reporting aims at transparency and public education, its sensationalism and urgency often collide with the rationality of legal proceedings.

Keywords: Christian Ranucci case, media, justice, rhetorical situation, universal audience

Abstrakt. Artykuł analizuje medialne przedstawienie sprawy Christiana Ranucciego (1974–1976) jako przykład wpływu dyskursu dziennikarskiego na przebieg i odbiór postępowań sądowych we Francji. W oparciu o teorię „sytuacji retorycznej” Lloyda Bitzera oraz koncepcję „audytorium uniwersalnego” Chaïma Perelmana ukazano, w jaki sposób media wykreowały klimat strachu i żądzy odwetu, który osłabił bezstronność sądu. Analizie poddano m.in. mechanizmy retoryczne obecne

* Druk tomu sfinansowano ze środków Instytutu Językoznawstwa i Literaturoznawstwa UMCS. Wydawca: Wydawnictwo UMCS. Dane teleadresowe autora: Instytut Językoznawstwa i Literaturoznawstwa Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, pl. Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 4, 20-031 Lublin; tel.: (+48) 81 537 26 61.

w przekazach medialnych, które przekształciły proces w spektakl medialny. Wskazano, że choć rolą mediów jest transparentność i edukacja obywatelska, poszukiwanie sensacji i presja czasu często wchodzi w konflikt z procedurami sądowymi. Sprawa Ranucciego pokazuje, że decyzje sądowe mogą być kształtowane pod wpływem mediów, co stwarza ryzyko nadużyć i błędów wymiaru sprawiedliwości.

Słowa kluczowe: sprawa Christiana Ranucci’ego, media, sprawiedliwość, sytuacja retoryczna, audytorium uniwersalne

INTRODUCTION

Major legal cases, such as the Christian Ranucci case, have raised questions in France about the way cases are handled by the media. Regarding justice, are the reports generated by journalists accurate? Does media coverage harm the smooth running of justice? Theoretically, media coverage of criminal cases has two main objectives: on the one hand, to guarantee transparency (an essential pillar of any free and democratic society); on the other hand, to offer an educational dimension (by allowing citizens to better understand the functioning of judicial institutions). These aims contribute to strengthening public confidence in the judicial system. However, the justice system, exposed to the growing influence of media revelations, finds itself obliged to react with increased speed in order not to let journalistic discourse gain the upper hand. This dynamic sometimes leads to the instrumentalization of trials, transformed into media platforms.

Little by little, the media system imposes its paradigms on the judicial field: the search for immediacy, a dichotomous approach to issues, the emphasis on the spectacular and the exacerbation of emotion. Thus, justice tends to become a privileged space for the expression of populism.

Christian Ranucci, a 22-year-old Frenchman convicted of child murder in 1974, provides a compelling case study for analyzing the “rhetorical situation” in media discourse. This article examines how mediatization shaped public opinion and judicial proceedings during the Ranucci affair (1974–1976). Extensively covered by the press and television, the trial became a crucial reference point in debates on the death penalty in France and a symbol of the struggle for its abolition. The analysis shows how media discourse fostered a climate of fear and indignation, thereby weakening judicial impartiality. The article aims to explore these dynamics from a rhetorical perspective, particularly through Lloyd Bitzer’s (1968) concept of the “rhetorical situation,” in order to clarify how media discourse can influence the administration of justice in democratic societies.

THE CHRISTIAN RANUCCI CASE

The case of Christian Ranucci remains one of the most controversial and high-profile trials in French judicial history. On June 3, 1974, eight-year-old Marie-Dolorès Rambla disappeared in Marseille. Two days later, Christian Ranucci, a 20-year-old man with no serious prior offences, was arrested on suspicion of kidnapping and murder. The prosecution presented as evidence a knife found in his car and a red sweater, which was later shown not to belong to him (cf. Perrault, 1980).

The trial took place in Aix-en-Provence before a Court of Assizes (French: *Cour d'assises*) in March 1976. The prosecutor's office accused him of the kidnapping and murder of Marie-Dolorès Rambla. Ranucci initially confessed to the murder, but later withdrew his confession, claiming it had been coerced during interrogations. A knife that could potentially have been used in committing the crime was found in his car, as well as a red sweater, which, as it later turned out, did not belong to Ranucci. The trial was conducted hastily in an atmosphere of media hysteria, and the defense argued that it lacked sufficient time to prepare and examine all the evidence. Despite many doubts, Christian Ranucci was found guilty of the crime and sentenced to death. On July 28, 1976, he was executed by guillotine (cf. Perrault et al., 1995).

Subsequent publications, notably Gilles Perrault's *Le Pull-over rouge* (1978), questioned the verdict and presented Ranucci as a possible victim of miscarriage of justice. His case became a key reference point in the debate on police methods and the death penalty, which was abolished in France in 1981.

MEDIA AND JUSTICE

Crime and bloodshed have always dominated newspaper headlines. As a point of fact, as early as the 17th century, street vendors sold so-called "canards" that sensationalized the most gruesome or scandalous events of their day. From its very beginnings, crime reporting has played a crucial role in the press, establishing a close and often problematic relationship between justice and the media.

In reporting, the relevance of each article depends on its source: when information comes from the defence, leaks usually serve the interests of the client; when they come from the prosecutor, they aim to reinforce the prosecution's narrative. On the other hand, if they come from investigators, they aim to strengthen their version of the facts. In other words, a journalist who takes advantage of an indiscretion is, in reality, manipulated. He is aware of it, but, in general, it does not worry him much. Of course, one could argue that such manipulation is only an illusion, since

journalists are supposed to verify their information. Yet often the rule that continues to guide media behavior is that the end justifies the means. As Thierry Pfister (1995, p. 49) observes, “Judges and journalists find themselves in collusion to hunt down a game that is large enough to excite the reader, but not too big to limit the risks.”

The shock caused by a heinous crime can quite easily lead to the gathering of angry mobs that are either in favour of the defendant or his persecution. Hence, the atmosphere of the trial is not limited to what happens inside the courtroom. In the Ranucci case, the trial also took place outside, in the press and on television.

Such media trials often begin well before the judicial trials. It is therefore difficult for judges and especially for jurors (citizens chosen by drawing lots to participate in the jury of a criminal court) to remain impervious to this influence, despite the instructions asking them to base their decisions only on the facts and statements presented during the hearings. When the trial extends over several days, the jurors, by returning to their daily lives or by traveling around town, are continuously exposed to the pressures exerted by the media.

As for the accused, he finds himself propelled into the spotlight, becoming a media figure of ambiguous status. Often solicited and exploited, he suffers as a result, his image sometimes being reduced to that of a celebrity. At the same time, the media widely broadcast lurid photos of the victims, placing them in contexts either sympathetic to the victims or hostile to the accused.

Détective, a popular tabloid of the time of the Ranucci case, relied heavily on photographs and openly expressed its editorial stance, often assuming the guilt of the accused and defending the death penalty. It was also a newspaper that clearly displayed its commitments, whether it was the guilt of a particular accused, or the necessary punishment of the crime, if necessary by the death penalty, of which it was an avowed supporter.

Overall, the magazine considers that the accused are guilty and shows it without hesitation, especially in major cases, where it openly takes sides. The illustrations and their captions contribute greatly to this, in particular, a very frequent recourse to physiognomy via the publication, on the cover and in close-up, of the criminal’s face, as if to implicitly transmit the idea of a personality predestined to his misfortune¹ (Chassaigne, 2004, p. 271).

¹ Fr.: “Globalement, le magazine considère que les accusés sont coupables et le manifeste sans détour, notamment dans les grandes affaires, où il prend ouvertement parti. Les illustrations et leurs légendes y contribuent largement avec, notamment, un recours très fréquent à la physiognomonie via la publication, en couverture et en gros plan, du visage du criminel, comme pour transmettre implicitement l’idée d’une personnalité prédestinée à son infortune” (Chassaigne, 2004, p. 271).



Figure 1. *Détective*, 5 August 1976: “Les derniers instants de Ranucci le condamné à mort.” Reproduced from Philippe Chassaigne, “La justice mise en images par *Détective*,” *Société & Représentations* 18 (2004): 263–275.

The illustrations that accompanied the articles in *Détective* were intended to create a sense of proximity and familiarity with the events described, while simultaneously provoking instinctive emotional reactions in readers. For example, in the article “Les derniers instants de Ranucci, le condamné à mort” [“The last moments of Ranucci, the condemned man”], published the day after his execution for the murder of Marie-Dolorès Rambla, *Détective* used images in a way that clearly reinforced its editorial stance: the accused was guilty and justice had been served through his execution.

Within the broader debate on the death penalty that intensified in the early 1970s, the Christian Ranucci case perfectly illustrated the tabloid’s commitment to capital punishment, and his trial took on an emblematic value.

THE RHETORICAL FRAMEWORK

In Europe, and particularly in France, rhetoric is defined by Olivier Reboul as discourse “when it combines, in order to persuade, its argumentative component with its oratorical component”² (1991, p. 110). In this sense, rhetoric is the art of persuasion, appealing both to reason and to emotion. In opposition to the “rhetoric

² Fr.: “quand il allie, pour persuader, sa composante argumentative à sa composante oratoire” (Reboul, 1991, p. 110).

of the catalogue and structure”³ (Plantin, 1990, p. 54) characteristic of the French-speaking world, the rhetoric developed in the United States is distinguished by its orientation towards action, communication and the “episteme” of the contemporary world. In this perspective, the work of Chaim Perelman (1958) has been further developed in the United States.

A comparison between Aristotle’s and Perelman’s definitions is instructive. Aristotle states: “Rhetoric may be defined as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (Aristotle, *The Art of Rhetoric*, I.2:10). Perelman defines the aim of argumentation as “to create or increase the adherence of minds to the theses presented for their assent” (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca, 1969, p. 45). It should be noted that, unlike Aristotle’s approach, truth is no longer a central notion for Perelman. For Perelman, the concept of truth is replaced by the idea of adhesion, which accounts for the progressive nature of assent: “I can adhere more or less to a thesis of which one wants to persuade me” (Goltzberg, 2013, p. 11). This marks a shift from truth as a central concept to persuasion and audience adherence as the main objectives of rhetoric. According to Perelman, by making adherence its primary goal, rhetoric does not exclude the element of truth, but it expands its field far beyond the simple identification of what is true or false.

American argumentative rhetoric, even before becoming an academic discipline, appears to be a historical, social and cultural phenomenon; “it is linked to social, moral and cultural structures, it is married to social discourses and mentalities”⁴ (Tutescu, 1998, p. 15). While the French tradition emphasizes moral ideals such as the “honest man” or the philosopher, the American tradition prioritizes rhetorical effectiveness in public life.

Christian Plantin observes: “if, in France, the classical ideal is that of the honest man in the 17th century, or of the philosopher in the 18th century, in the United States, the ideal type is closer to the tribune, the rhetorician or the politician, whose discourse and knowledge must have a social effectiveness. In political matters, pragmatism presupposes a theory”⁵ (Plantin, 1990, p. 58). In this sense, American argumentative rhetoric seems to be more a social phenomenon of communication and thought than a phenomenon of language. It is a form of rhetoric with a sociopolitical and national mission, one that neglects linguistic reflection

³ Fr. “rhétorique du catalogue et de la structure” (Plantini, 1990, p. 54).

⁴ Fr.: “elle y est liée aux structures sociales, morales et culturelles, elle y est mariée aux discours sociaux et aux mentalités” cf. Tutescu, 1998, p. 15).

⁵ Fr.: “si, en France, l’Idéal classique est celui de l’honnête homme au XVII^e, ou du philosophe au XVIII^e siècle, aux Etats-Unis, le type idéal est plus proche du tribun, du rhéteur ou du politique, dont le discours et les connaissances doivent avoir une efficacité sociale. En matière politique, le pragmatisme suppose une théorie” (Plantin, 1990, p. 58).

(Plantin, 1990, p. 81). Thus, while the French tradition emphasizes moral ideals and philosophical reflection, the American approach is more pragmatic, focusing on the social effectiveness of discourse.

American argumentative rhetoric is characterized by two major orientations. The first, inspired by neo-Aristotelian thought, offers analyses of the speaker's position in a given historical context. The second, centered on an epistemic approach (cf. McKeon, 1987), constitutes a fundamental pillar of rhetorical theory in the United States. Building on this, James L. Golden (1991) distinguishes two lines of research in American argumentative rhetoric: "a dramatist perspective" and "a movement putting ideology in the foreground." Among these orientations, the dramatist perspective is particularly relevant as it incorporates Lloyd Bitzer's influential concept of the "rhetorical situation."

Bitzer's study "La Situation rhétorique" ("The Rhetorical Situation"), published in the first issue of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric* in 1968, is considered "un prérequis pour tous les cours avancés et les séminaires de rhétorique" (translated as "a prerequisite for all advanced courses and seminars in rhetoric"⁶) (Golden, 1991, p. 58). According to Bitzer, a rhetorical situation is composed of three main components: (1) The rhetorical exigency – an urgent problem or deficiency that calls for an immediate decision; (2) The rhetorical audience – an audience consisting of listeners who are capable of taking action; (3) The rhetorical constraints – the set of social constraints that influence the nature of the required response.

This model emphasizes a mode of communication rooted in values. The changes Bitzer envisions are therefore oriented around principles that the audience is invited to adopt. Designed for situations that mature or persist (Tutescu, 1998), this model is not limited to an immediate audience, but also addresses future humanity, embodied by what Perelman⁷ calls an *auditoire universel* or universal audience (1979, p. 122). This universal audience, capable of understanding its heritage and grasping the impact of rhetorical discourse, becomes a key agent in the preservation and creation of knowledge and values that are crucial for the production of epistemic data. Perelman recognizes the superiority of arguments accepted by the universal audience: "we will then say that we are addressing an appeal to reason, that we are using convincing arguments, which should be accepted by any reasonable being" (Goltzberg, 2013, p. 40).

⁶ Fr.: "prérequis pour tous les cours avancés et les séminaires de rhétorique" (Golden, 1991, p. 58).

⁷ This audience "ne se définit pas comme l'ensemble de ceux qui écoutent un discours, mais plutôt comme l'ensemble de ceux que vise l'effort de persuasion" / "is not defined as the group of those who listen to a speech, but rather as the group of those targeted by the persuasion effort"] (Perelman, *La logique...*, p. 122). Fr.: "on dira alors que l'on adresse un appel à la raison, que l'on utilise des arguments convaincants, qui devraient être acceptés par tout être raisonnable."

THE “RHETORICAL SITUATION” AND THE RANUCCI CASE

The situation in which Ranucci found himself contains all the elements that allow us to establish, in Bitzer’s words, a “rhetorical situation”. “Prior to the creation and presentation of discourse, there are three constituents of any rhetorical situation: the first is the exigence; the second and third are elements of the complex, namely the audience to be constrained in decision and action, and the constraints which influence the rhetor and can be brought to bear upon the audience” (Bitzer [1968], 1992, p. 6). We find: (1) “the rhetorical exigency” – the urgency to change the situation,⁸ (2) “the rhetorical audience” – an audience capable of effecting the change, and (3) “the rhetorical constraints”⁹ – a series of external and internal constraints. The first of these is linked to the situation itself, while the second belongs to the discursive organisation (i.e. the development of a certain logic and relevance in the convincing arguments in the discourse that the media establish). In the Ranucci proceedings, the media’s discursive strategy was accompanied by a “game of truth”, because their activity allowed them to declare in broad daylight a double “engagement moral” (“moral commitment”) – the crucial “ethical bond” described by Lawrence Alloway (1975) – that links the media and the informed public. As far as the public was concerned, in the early 1970s, the atmosphere seemed favourable to the prospect of abolishing the death penalty. It should be noted that at that time, France was the last country in Western Europe where the death penalty was still in force and often applied.

Ranucci was attacked by the media not only for his alleged acts, but also for his personal integrity (*argumentum ad hominem*). In the *Provençal* of June 6, Paul-Claude Innocenzi wrote: “Neither excuse nor pity. If we consider that he is ‘sick,’ then let us make sure that he can never harm again.” Ranucci was called a “sadistic murderer” (*Le Méridional*, June 7, 1974), “a monster” who has “monstrous instincts” and a “sexually deranged person” (*Détective*, June 13, 1974). One article noted: “The analysis of this case, unfortunately, shows that in our modern society, however vigilant the search for and detection of abnormals may be, such crimes can be difficult to avoid.” Ranucci was described as “contemptuous” (*Le*

⁸ “Any *exigence* is an imperfection marked by urgency; it is a defect, an obstacle, something waiting to be done, a thing which is other than it should be” (Bitzer, [1968], 1992, p. 6).

⁹ “Besides exigence and audience, every rhetorical situation contains a set of *constraints* made up of persons, events, objects, and relations which are parts of the situation because they have the power to constrain decision and action needed to modify the exigence. [...] [W]hen the orator enters the situation, his discourse not only harnesses constraints given by situation but provides additional important constraints – for example, his personal character, his logical proof, and his style” (Bitzer, [1968], 1992, p. 8).

Soir, March 10, 1976), and his arrogance was highlighted; he appeared before the public “without a glance at the room where his mother is, attentive. Does he take us for imbeciles?”

To gain a greater share of the public’s interest (and increase its profits), *La Marseillaise* provided on June 4, 1974, a “precise description” of the accused: “He was a tall individual, young and well-dressed, who had arrived in a gray car.” *Le Méridional*,¹⁰ in turn, played its hand, by using identification as a means of persuasion. Its June 6, 1974 edition featured two headlines: “The most ignoble of crimes” and “Marie-Dolores was strangled (sic) and then finished off with stones. The alleged murderer arrested in Nice” (June 6, 1974). Ranucci’s name is mentioned.

Reading these quotes reveals the hate and fury provoked by the media of the time and how this created a vengeful atmosphere of fear and anger. It is in this climate of hatred and collective fury that Christian Ranucci was judged. Readers of the time identified with these words, aligning them with their own values, beliefs, experiences and personal histories. Fear is a common human emotion, and one of the instinctive reactions to fear is to seek self-defense. French society of the time was persuaded to get rid of “a monster.” “Death to Ranucci!” could be read on the walls.

The *Sud Ouest*’s¹¹ article “Ranucci: la mort” [“Ranucci: Death”], published on 12 March, 1976 (during Ranucci’s trial), was arranged in a classic three-column layout. The bold headline across the top declared: “Christian Ranucci s’est condamné mais nul ne connaîtra jamais ‘la’ vérité” (“Christian Ranucci has condemned himself, but no one will ever know ‘the’ truth”). A subtitle specified the location (Assises d’Aix-en-Provence), situating the report directly within the courtroom context. The article was signed by Patrick Berthomieu, identified as a special correspondent. It developed a narrative around Ranucci’s plea of not guilty, framing it as paradoxically “self-condemning.” The text suggested that the accused’s denial reinforces suspicion, while simultaneously acknowledging the impossibility of establishing absolute truth. The layout included a centrally placed black-and-white photograph of Ranucci, handcuffed and escorted by police officers, captioned as an AFP photo. The image reinforced the perception of guilt, as it visually presented the defendant under police control. The combination of a categorical headline, dramatic phrasing and incriminating imagery blurred the line between judicial reporting and moral judgment. In doing so, the press contributed to framing Ranucci as already guilty in the eyes of public opinion.

¹⁰ Quoted in Chavaribeyre, S., Lévy, A., Nicola, C., Perret, B. (2002). *Affaire Ranucci: pourquoi réviser?* Mémoire de Sciences Po, dir. P.-O. Sur, 39.

¹¹ Front page of *Sud Ouest*, 12 March 1976, with the headline “Christian Ranucci s’est condamné mais nul ne connaîtra jamais ‘la’ vérité” and an AFP photograph of the accused (*Sud Ouest*, 1976, p. 1).

At the same time, the newspaper *Le Petit Parisien* conducted a survey among its readers: more than 90% of them were in favor of the death penalty for child murderers. The article went on to state that during this time, “In the cell of the Baumettes prison, the young man was reading – without knowing it – his last book, *The Reveries of the Solitary Walker* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau” (Aron, 2010, p. 32). When the trial opened in March 1976, “public opinion was heated to white heat.” It demanded the death penalty. Ranucci’s lawyer, Paul Lombard, denounced this fevered atmosphere: “Le défenseur, contretoute évidence, tant les charges sontsolides, plaide sans succès l’acquittement.”¹² “Do not listen to the vile rumor, do not listen to the public opinion that is knocking at the door of this courtroom. She is a prostitute who pulls the judge by the sleeve. She must be chased out of our courtrooms.”¹³ Despite the media circus, the defense attorney still pleaded for acquittal, but without success.¹⁴

Christian Ranucci was sentenced to death by the Court of Assize of Aix-en-Provence, and his appeal was rejected by the Court of Appeal. Throughout his trial, he consistently maintained his innocence. “Rehabilitate me” – these were his last words to his lawyers. Paul Lombard said he was convinced of Ranucci’s innocence. However, Valéry Giscard d’Estaing, the President of the Republic, refused to grant clemency. He even overruled the recommendation of the presiding judge of the Court of Assize, who had advised a pardon because of the inadequacies of the defense. Apparently, the will of the crowd and the majority of newspapers held more sway in his decision. Thus, the Ranucci case demonstrates how rhetorical exigence, audience and constraints, as conceptualized by Bitzer, materialize in a legal context profoundly influenced by media discourse.

On 29 July 1976, *Sud Ouest*¹⁵ published a report in its “News in brief” section, presented in a two-column layout. The headline, printed in bold, read: “Exécuté hier matin à Marseille – Christian Ranucci est monté à l’échafaud sans dire un mot” (“Executed yesterday morning in Marseille – Christian Ranucci mounted the scaffold without saying a word”). This headline, striking and categorical, immediately framed the execution as both a factual report and a dramatic event. The text began with a short lead paragraph, recounting the execution that took place in

¹² *L’affaire Ranucci* (épisode 1–2) « Au cœur du crime » by Le Nouvel Obs, published on February 16, 2022.

¹³ Fr.: “N’écoutez pas la rumeur ignoble, n’écoutez pas l’opinion publique qui frappe à la porte de cette salle. Elle est une prostituée qui tire le juge par la manche. Il faut la chasser de nos prétoires. Le défenseur, contre toute évidence, tant les charges sont solides, plaide sans succès l’acquittement.”

¹⁴ *Op. cit.* *L’affaire Ranucci* (épisode 1–2).

¹⁵ Front page of *Sud Ouest*, 29 July 1976, “Christian Ranucci est monté à l’échafaud sans dire un mot” (Faits divers section).

the courtyard of Baumettes Prison in Marseille on the morning of 28 July 1976. It highlighted Ranucci's silence at the moment of his death, presenting this detail as a key interpretive element. The article's subheadings included phases such as "Without a word" and "Four other convicts," which structured the narrative. These sections emphasized Ranucci's silence and the solemnity of the moment, while also providing comparative information about other death row prisoners. The tone was factual yet emotionally charged, with attention given to gestures, silences and last moments. Overall, the article exemplified the sensationalist style typical of the *faits divers* section: it blended factual reporting with dramatic and moralizing undertones, shaping the public memory of Ranucci's execution as both a positive judicial act and a symbolic event.

These rhetorical strategies illustrate Bitzer's notion of "constraints": argudiscursive and social pressures that not only shaped the audience's response but also undermined judicial impartiality.

MEDIA INFLUENCE AND PUBLIC OPINION

The story of Christian Ranucci is a canonical example of the correlation between media influence and punishment. On February 18, 1976, just two weeks before Ranucci's trial, *TF1's 8 p.m.* news presenter Roger Gicquel opened the broadcast with the now-famous phrase "La France a peur" ["France is afraid"], announcing the murder of seven-year-old Philippe Bertrand, who had been abducted and killed by another offender, Patrick Henry.

A few days earlier, on January 30, 1976, in Troyes, Henry had kidnapped Philippe Bertrand. On February 17, 1976, the police arrested him in a hotel room, where they made a macabre discovery beneath the bed: the child's body, wrapped in a carpet.

As Delporte observed:

Yet the short phrase uttered by Roger Gicquel on *TF1's 8 p.m.* news, the day after Patrick Henry's arrest, belongs to that category. "France is afraid:" these four words were received live in their homes by more than ten million viewers on February 18, 1976, accompanied by the solemn – even dramatic – gaze of the most popular television news presenter.¹⁶ (Delporte, 1998, p. 127)

¹⁶ Fr.: "Pourant, la petite phrase prononcée par Roger Gicquel au journal de 20 heures sur TF1, le lendemain de l'arrestation de Patrick Henry, fait partie de celles-là. «*La France a peur*»: ces quatre mots, plus de dix millions de téléspectateurs les ont reçus chez eux, en direct, le 18 février 1976, en même temps que le regard grave, dramatique même, du plus populaire présentateur du journal télévisé" (Delporte, 1998, p. 127).

This climate of fear likely precluded any serious consideration of mitigating circumstances in Ranucci's trial. As Gicquel declared on air:

Good evening. France is afraid. I think we can say it just as clearly. France has been panicking since yesterday evening, about twenty minutes after this news report, we learned of the horror: a child is dead, a sweet child with a deep gaze, murdered, strangled or suffocated, we don't know yet, the autopsy has not completely revealed it, by the monster who had kidnapped him for money. France is afraid.¹⁷

Gicquel continued:

Yes, France is afraid and we are afraid, and it is a feeling that we must already fight, I believe. Because we can see that it leads to mad desires for summary justice, for immediate and direct vengeance. And how difficult it is not to give in to this temptation when we imagine the atrocious death of this child! It was probably to shield the murderer from the wrath of the inhabitants of Troyes that he was put in prison in another town, in Chaumont. France is afraid because the kidnapping of children has increased in a terrible way. (...) Yes, France is afraid because, like twelve years ago, it does not understand, exactly like the overwhelmed parents of Patrick Henry, the murderer of Philippe.¹⁸ (Roger Gicquel, February 18, 1976)

France hardly heard the rest of the message, which collective memory would soon forget.

The phrase "France is afraid" has since achieved cult status. In 1976, Michel Sardou released the song *Je suis pour* [*I Am For*], in which he sang: "Tu as tué l'enfant d'un amour. Je veux ta mort. Je suis pour" ["You killed a love child. I want your death. I am for"]. The song appeared at a time when France was shaken by first the Patrick Henry case and then that of Christian Ranucci. Via sensationalism, fear permeated the society at the time, and this fear probably prevented any consideration

¹⁷ Fr.: "Bonsoir. La France a peur. Je crois qu'on peut le dire aussi nettement. La France panique depuis qu'hier soir, une vingtaine de minutes après ce journal, on a appris l'horreur : un enfant est mort, un doux enfant au regard profond, assassiné, étranglé ou étouffé, on ne sait pas encore, l'autopsie ne l'a pas complètement révélé, par le monstre qui l'avait enlevé pour de l'argent. La France a peur".

¹⁸ Fr.: "Oui, la France a peur et nous avons peur, et c'est un sentiment qu'il faut déjà que nous combattions, je crois. Parce qu'on voit bien qu'il débouche sur des envies folles de justice expéditive, de vengeance immédiate et directe. Et comme c'est difficile de ne pas céder à cette tentation quand on imagine la mort atroce de cet enfant ! C'est d'ailleurs probablement pour soustraire l'assassin à la colère des habitants de Troyes qu'on l'a mis dans en prison dans une autre ville, à Chaumont. La France a peur parce que les rapt d'enfants se sont multipliés d'une manière épouvantable. (...) Oui, la France a peur parce que comme il y a douze ans, elle ne comprend pas, exactement comme les parents accablés de Patrick Henry, l'assassin de Philippe" (Roger Gicquel, 18 février 1976).

of mitigating circumstances in Ranucci's trial. The emotion of vengeance was palpable throughout the country. This song contributed to this.

In July 1976, the Patrick Henry affair therefore exerted a major influence – through the media – on the Ranucci case. It should be recalled that Henry's arrest took place only four days before the opening of Ranucci's trial. During the pleadings, Paul Lombard referred explicitly to the affair, mentioning "the recent events that have made everyone lose their minds." Ranucci himself declared that, in the lottery of life, he had "drawn the jackpot of misfortune" (Perrault et al., 1995). Ranucci was guillotined on July 28, 1976, in the courtyard of La Baumettes prison in Marseille. He was 22 years old and was the penultimate person executed in France.

The press reacted in its own way: "The sadistic killer of Marie-Dolores executed" (Le Quotidien de Paris, July 29, 1976), "The horror, in Aix, was on both sides: in the courtroom, with the murderer of an eight-year-old child, and in the crowd, where a verdict awaited with obscene pleasure was applauded," "A head, finally!" (Le Nouvel Observateur,¹⁹ March 15, 1976). Over time, thanks to Gilles Perrault's 1978 book *Le Pull-over rouge* [*The Red Sweater*], his name has begun to be symbolic of the miscarriage of justice. Over time, in light of this, public opinion has shifted and some newspapers have come to condemn the execution as a "crime of the state" (*Libération*, 29 July 1976).

In Ranucci's trial, emotional framing and journalistic rhetoric created a climate hostile to judicial impartiality. The affair demonstrates how media and justice, though ostensibly serving democracy, can become deeply antagonistic.

Research confirms that media coverage can influence sentencing severity. The cross-analysis of criminal convictions and the content of French television news (8pm on TF1 and France2), carried out by Aurélie Oussand Philippe Arnaud (2016), demonstrates that the impact of the media on court decisions is obvious. Indeed, research reveals that sentences are higher the day after reports devoted to criminal news items. This effect is due to a reaction to media news. This influence is particularly evident in assize courts, where professional magistrates sit alongside jurors drawn from the public (courts composed solely of professionals are less affected).

Chris Greer and Robert Reiner note that: "The insecure borderline between purportedly factual and fictional narratives is eroding. A growing variety of criminal justice lobbies and pressure groups seek to influence, if not construct, the news" (Greer and Reiner, 2012, p. 32). This observation highlights how the distinction between objective reporting and dramatized storytelling has become increasingly

¹⁹ *Le Nouvel Observateur*. (1976, 15 mars). L'horreur, à Aix, était des deux côtés... Une tête, enfin ! cited in Chavaribeyre, S., Lévy, A., Nicola, C., Perret, B. (2002). *Affaire Ranucci : pourquoi réviser ?* Mémoire, IEP Paris, dir. P.-O. Sur.

blurred, particularly in the field of crime and justice. The authors emphasize that the media no longer merely reflect events, but often participate in shaping them, under the influence of diverse lobbying groups and societal pressures.

As John B. Thompson observes, “the development of communication media has not only rendered power visible in new ways, it has also rendered it visible on an unprecedented scale” (Thompson, 1995, *Introduction*). This expansion of mediated visibility profoundly reshapes the relationship between institutions and the public. In the case of Christian Ranucci, these dynamics become evident: the media amplified the trial far beyond the courtroom, exposing judicial actors to public pressure and moral judgment. What was intended as transparency and accountability instead transformed the trial into a spectacle where legal authority was undermined by the very visibility meant to reinforce it.

It can therefore be argued that justice and the media do not always coexist harmoniously. Certain trials are deliberately sensationalized to elicit strong emotions from audiences and, in turn, to increase circulation and maximize profits for the news outlet. In such contexts, emotions become the true stakes of the trial – the focus of a relentless contest in which opposing parties strive to sway jurors and secure a desired outcome.

CONCLUSIONS

The Ranucci case reveals the dangers of trials conducted under media pressure. By applying rhetorical theory, we see how discourse not only reports on but also shapes judicial outcomes. Although justice and media share the mission of informing citizens, their logics – legal rationality versus journalistic spectacle – can collide. In this trial, the rhetorical situation constructed by French media in the 1970s fostered fear and vengeance, undermining due process. Strengthening awareness of rhetorical mechanisms is therefore essential for preserving judicial integrity in democratic societies.

The Ranucci verdict shows that justice and the media are not parties to the same cause. Certain events are melodramatized, with reportage intended to elicit strong emotions in readers and viewers, not necessarily to enable justice to be served, but rather to increase the profitability of news outlets. In such circumstances, the trial becomes less a matter of law than of spectacle, with verdicts shaped more by public sentiment than by judicial reasoning.

REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAFIA

- Aristotle. (2008). *The Art of Rhetoric*. Book I, Part 2. Megaphone eBooks.
- Aron, Matthieu. (2010). *Les grandes plaidoiries des ténors du barreau. Quand les mots peuvent tout change*. Paris: Pocket.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. ([1968], 1992). The Rhetorical Situation. *Philosophy & Rhetoric*, 25(1), pp. 1–14.
- Chassaigne, Philippe. (2004). La justice mise en images par Détective. *Société & Représentations*, 18, pp. 263–275, <https://shs.cairn.info/revue-societes-et-representations-2004-2-page-263?lang=fr> (access: 13.10.2024).
- Delporte, Christian. (1998). De l’affaire Philippe Bertrand à l’affaire Patrick Henry. Un fait-divers dans l’engrenage médiatique. In: *Vingtième Siècle, revue d’histoire*, n° 58, pp. 127–143. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/xxs.1998.3749>
- Golden, James L. (1991). Rhetorique et production du savoir : les grands courants de la theorie rhetorique americaine. *L’argumentation*. Paris: Coll. « Philosophie et langage ».
- Goltzberg, Stefan. 2013. *Chaim Perelman. L’argumentation juridique*. Paris: Michalon.
- Greer, Chris, Reiner, Robert. (2012). Mediated Mayhem: Media, Crime and Criminal Justice. In: Mike Maguire, Rod Morgan, Robert Reiner (Eds.), *Oxford Handbook of Criminology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/he/9780199590278.003.0009>.
- Lawrence, Alloway. (1975). *The Uses and Limits of Art Criticism. Topics in American Art Since 1945*. New York: W.W. Norton.
- Le Nouvel Observateur*. (1976, 15 mars). L’horreur, à Aix, était des deux côtés : au tribunal, avec le meurtrier d’une enfant de huit ans, et dans la foule, où le verdict attendu avec un plaisir obscène fut applaudi. Une tête, enfin ! *Le Nouvel Observateur*.
- McKeon, Richard. (1987). *Rhetoric. Essays in Invention & Discovery*. Douglas: Ox Bow Pr.
- Ouss, Aurélie, Philippe, Arnaud, Philippe. (2016). L’impact des medias sur les decisions de justice. *Note IPP*, 22. <https://shs.hal.science/halshs-02522865v1> (access: 25.10.2024).
- Perrault, Gilles. ([1978], 1980). *Le pull-over rouge*. Paris: Ramsay.
- Perrault, Gilles, Mathon, Heloise, Le Forsonney, Jean-Francois, Soulez Larivière, Daniel, Bredin Jean-Denis. (1995). *Christian Ranucci vingt ans après*. Paris: Juillard.
- Perelman, Chaïm, Olbrecht-Tyteca, Lucie. ([1958], 2000). *Traité de l’argumentation. La nouvelle rhétorique*, Bruxelles: Éd. de l’Université de Bruxelles.
- Perelman, Chaïm, Olbrechts-Tyteca, Lucie. (1969). *The New Rhetoric: A Treatise on Argumentation*. Translated by John Wilkinson and Purcell Weaver. University of Notre Dame Press.
- Perelman, Chaïm. ([1976], 1979). *Logique juridique. Nouvelle Rhetorique*. Paris: Dalloz.
- Pfister, Thierry. (1995). La justice et les médias : la fin justifie-t-elle les moyens ?. *Raison présente*, 116, pp. 39–49. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3406/raipr.1995.3305>.
- Plantin, Christian. (1990). *Essai sur argumentation*. Paris: Kimé.
- Reboul, Olivier. (1991). *Introduction à la rhétorique*. Paris: PUF, Premier Cycle.
- Sur, Pierre-Olivier. (2001). (dir.) *Affaire Ranucci: pourquoi réviser ?* Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris. http://www.associationranucci.org/notre_action/memoire_ranucci.pdf, (access: 4.11.2024).
- Thompson, John B. (1995). *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media*. Stanford University Press.
- Tutescu, Mariana. (1998). *L’Argumentation. Introduction à l’étude du discours*. București: Editura Universității din București. (Édition mise en ligne : Université de Bucarest, ebooks.unibuc.ro).
- Electronic sources
- Affaire Christian Ranucci: le procès qui enflamme la France*, “Ça m’intéresse”. (July 2020). <https://www.caminteresse.fr/societe/affaire-christian-ranucci-le-proces-qui-enflamme-la-france-11123162/> (access: 12.10.2024).

- Archives Sud Ouest* “Ranucci: la mort”, the front page of *Sud Ouest* (March 12, 1976). <https://www.sudouest.fr/justice/christian-ranucci-l-affaire-qui-a-relance-le-debat-sur-la-peine-de-mort-3773982.php> (access: 12.10.2024).
- Chavaribeyre, Sylvain, Lévy, Antonin, Nicola, Clément, Perret, Benjamin. (2001). (dir.) *Affaire Ranucci: pourquoi réviser?* Sur, Pierre-Olivier. (dir.) Institut d’Études Politiques de Paris. http://www.associationranucci.org/notre_action/memoire_ranucci.pdf (access: 4.11.2024).
- Interview Patrick Henry*, TF1 *Actualités 20H* – 18.02.1976. <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/video/caa7600247801/interview-patrick-henry> (access: 4.11.2024).
- February 18, 1976: Roger Gicquel “France is afraid” / *La France a peur*. <https://www.ina.fr/ina-eclair-actu/18-fevrier-1976-roger-gicquel-declare-la-france-a-peur> (access: 4.11.2024).
- L’affaire Ranucci* (épisode 1–2), “Au cœur du crime” by *Le Nouvel Obs*, (February 16, 2022). <https://www.nouvelobs.com/au-coeur-du-crime/20220216.OBS54579/l-affaire-ranucci-un-podcast-de-notre-serie-au-c-ur-du-crime.html> (access: 12.10.2024).
- Sardou, Michel. *Je suis pour*. L’album *La Vieille*. 1976. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eX04446tk_g (access: 4.11.2024).

Data zgłoszenia artykułu: 04.02.2025

Data zakwalifikowania do druku: 20.10.2025